

TIPPING ON THE FRINGE

BY

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Abstract

This is a creative collection of work asking questions and exploring themes of boundary and category. The work attempts to blend and challenge assumed binaries. The first half of this collection explores the historical story of the February Sisters in a fictional retelling of their experience, from the varying perspectives of multiple fictional characters. The second half of this collection is exploring connections between food, desire, romantic, and familial relationships.

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The February Sisters

This story is based on true events, but is a work of fiction.

Richard

Richard liked a clean shave. Liked the feeling of the warm, white towel Edith prepared for him—the steam opening up the pores in his ribboned cheeks, tiny peppered hairs standing to attention. The bowl and blade were steady, patiently waiting for a man well versed in this ancient art. His favorite brush was part of a set, a gift from his father, with a wooden handle and sturdy bristles. He circled twice to lather, pulling down his skin to smooth the blade's canvas, finding his way to the neck, chin, and finishing about the lip.

While rinsing the blade he nicked his pointer finger—an unusual occurrence for a man who prided himself on a smooth finish. Instinctually, he brought his broken skin to mouth,

sucking gently, a salty taste met his tongue. Looking into the mirror he could only see the lines moving out from his eyes, the feet of an ancient bird growing long.

Edith

Edith situated today's Times with the front page headlines parallel to the line of the dining room table, next to Richard's breakfast plate. She tried not to read them—he preferred the pages clean and smooth. Wednesday had been the first day in a long time she had broken this unspoken rule—the lottery had been worth the potential discussion. No matter what was happening overseas, she tended to side with the protesters on sending boys so young, or sending them at all. Normally she had her coffee with the paper in the window seat after he left for the office. She liked to glance out to see the students, bundled against the cold, walking between classes. Yesterday she had seen a wonderful blue scarf on a girl with a long braid down her right side. She couldn't resist plaiting her own wispy brown strands into one this morning.

She went back to the stove, the soles of her feet sticking softly to the wood floors. Finding a glass mixing bowl, cupping cold eggs in her hands, she made a swift motion and cracked the first egg through the center and then rocked the yellow yolk back and forth between the two halves. She liked watching the red counter disappear underneath, as the glass bowl clouded with the egg. Richard didn't know she'd been removing at least one yellow yolk from his breakfast for years. Edith was worried about his heart. If it skipped or stopped or sped up, it would not be because of her.

The red had been his choice when they moved in, one of his many decorating preferences. He had the porch repainted; chose some stiff chairs. She had been allowed to choose some art from the University's collection to hang in her dressing room. An art professor helped her find a portrait of a woman in a green dress that became her favorite. The woman's face was permanently tilted to the left, and she she held a small, gilded mirror in one hand. The woman in the green dress greeted Edith in the mornings—the only one to see her before she painted her face. Sometimes Edith thought about the professor who had helped her—she had always meant to send her a note. To say thank you or to inquire for further information on the artist. She didn't want to go through Richard, however. And she was still trying to locate the professor's name without alerting him.

The house the university gave them was on the east side of campus, just on the edge of the hill. In a strong wind, Edith felt they were so close to a slope, the house might decide to let go, and start sliding away. Set in a semi-circle of large evergreens, it felt foreboding or picturesque depending on the weather. Out of place in the hot, Kansas summer, but now they were dripping with snow. A lovely view, she liked to repeat to Richard, as he continued a chorus of snow complaints.

She left the eggs in the frying pan until they were just beginning to brown, found the glass salt shaker (she had just filled it yesterday). Footsteps on the stairs were her cue to pour cream in his coffee. A quiet hum escaped her lips; she waited.

Carol Jean

Sometimes I feel like I can tell if someone is on our side by the way they walk past me on campus. They walk a little closer or look a little longer. After Wednesday, I wished for a secret wave or fist or scarf color. I needed my people, my kin. I almost understood joining a fraternity.

My eyelids were slow and heavy behind glasses that fogged up whenever I stepped inside from the cold. I kept wiping them on my wool scarf which wasn't helping anything. Danny liked to wear it as a tail or cape when he was playing monster games; I knew it had a close relationship with the kitchen floor (or worse), but I liked to wear it anyway. The bright blue reminded me of him while he was at school all day, and I liked the feeling of wrapping him up in it when I got home.

Last night there had been talk about the KBI so I kept looking around for them too. This felt alternately stupid and terrifying. When Morgan brought them up at the meeting she laughed, but it fell short in the room and everyone pretended not to glance toward the door. I wondered if they knew about the commune; I needed to check on Danny. I didn't exactly know what I was looking for. A man in a long coat? A tipped hat? Really, they could be anyone.

Carol Jean

It wasn't my night to make dinner, and that meant more time with Danny. He had learned how to make paper airplanes and his latest found my forehead as I walked into the kitchen. Mom, Mom, Mom, Mom, he said. It's spaghetti night and I like spaghetti but not tomatoes. Mom, Mom, he said. Can we have no tomatoes just the noodles? Kelly let me throw them, and they stuck on the wall, so it's done.

I glanced at a small water stain on the burnt orange wallpaper. An airplane caught in the pan rack hanging above the stove and a few tomato sauce stains on the wood paneling. Really, it almost looked better with the red juice covering it up. Everything smelled like garlic—Kelly's new favorite ingredient.

Did you help her clean up afterwards?

We can't clean it up before we eat it.

Good point.

Kelly glanced up from the pounds of steaming pasta, enough for the 12 people upstairs she was in charge of feeding tonight. Collapsing my books onto the table covered in handprints and penciled animal sketches, she asked if there was any word about Angela before I could sit down.

I was about to ask you the same thing, I said.

Who's Angela, said Danny.

Thanks for watching him, I remembered to say.

She's the very brave lady we told you about, Kelly reminded him. Some people were being mean to her.

But why, he asked.

Kelly and I looked at each other. Well, I said. They thought she did something bad, but really she didn't.

Danny paused for a minute before he responded. That's sad, he said. I had to sit in the corner once because Mike kept rolling my pencils across the room and said it was me. Mrs. Pincher didn't listen.

Kelly laughed, but it was abbreviated, like a cough stuck in the back of your throat. Yeah, it's like that. Only where Angela has to sit is a lot worse than the corner.

I looked over the scheduling board—trying to avoid spreading the chalk dust. I didn't have to make dinner for two days, but I was on my own for childcare until the weekend. Danny had moved on. He made a sound like a screeching bird as one of his planes took a dive into the marinara. He grabbed for the crumpled, dripping white paper and held it up to me, as if I should fix it, the wings folding over the edges of his small hands.

Carol Jean

We had returned to the topic of spaghetti minus the sauce for Danny when the phone rang. I always assumed someone else would get it, but it was one of the rare times it was for me. I picked up the phone to Chris already saying, It's on. And when, I asked, Tonight? She just said it again, It's on, and recited hushed numbers I formed into an address. When I said them back to her she yelled, Don't repeat it! Bring clothes. And food. Enough for a week or so.

Kelly understood faster than I could say it, and said she'd meet us there. I hesitated in the kitchen, would we really be there for a week? I looked for favorites-bananas, cheese, peanut butter. I made Danny sit and eat his plain noodles while I ran upstairs.

Our room was in its usual disarray. Both of our beds unmade. Danny had some models on his bed, and I shoved them aside to grab his pillow. What else? Gloves, a book, the pocket knife I hid in my night stand. It was one of the only things I kept from dad. It was always a conscious effort to not think about him when I used it, but it was a solid knife. He had only met Danny once—at the hospital after I had him. Then I refused to listen to all of the lectures about giving him up, and they gave us both up instead.

They would hate that I was doing this.

I tucked Danny's coat around his full tummy and cupped his ears under my hands. We're going to go on a little adventure, okay Danny O, I said.

I thought we were going to go skating tonight?

Shit. I stopped. I had promised skating and he had never been.

We can go skating when this is done, alright? It's a really important adventure.

When is it going to be done?

I'm not sure.

Where are we going?

Well, I'm not exactly sure.

I want to go skating.

Outside the sky was snow grey, an authoritative color that was frowning at me when my mother wasn't there to. It seems like Mother Nature would be on our side, but maybe not in Kansas.

Sherry drove the commune's junker Beetle quickly, talking in a circle of questions, Are you really going to be gone for a week? Who else is going to be there? You really can't get in trouble again. Did you bring enough to wear? Are you sure about this? In between Danny in the backseat saying, Where are we going? I'm still kinda hungry. Will Angela be there?

I had convinced him we could skate two days in a row if we did this adventure first. I hoped the building was warm enough for him. I knew Joan was bringing baby Michael with her, and I knew it was important to act as a family, and I knew it would probably be completely safe and over in a few hours. But really I didn't know shit. Sherry's questions might be right. I *really* didn't want my parents to be right.

Danny had been at home when I was suspended for the football stadium sit-in. I decided he was too young to understand that one. I kept flipping the radio between stations. I was so close to being done this time. Graduation was just three months away; I could see my breath when I exhaled into my hands.

When Sherry pulled up to the side of the building, I saw two girls that looked familiar holding hands as they walked in. Last night, we had yelled, complained, plotted, and yelled some more. Finally, Morgan made us join hands and asked, What are you doing to help yourselves? What are you doing to make public the grievances you have? I reached to the back seat and spread out my fingers for Danny to press his palm into mine.

We went into the building.

The Sisters

As an expression of our frustration with the continuing sex-based inequities perpetrated by this university, this building is being occupied.

Richard

Richard loved when it was his turn to shuffle the deck. The rhythm and slap of the 52 cards bending to his hands was therapeutic on a Friday night. A good bridge game, gin in a sweating highball glass, and the twist of cigar smoke released the week. Today hadn't been his worst day, but he was sick of campus. On his walk home he passed a young man and girl kissing

against a barren tree and couldn't stop thinking about it. It was under 20 degrees out and they just kept kissing. He supposed Edith and him had done that at some point, but he just didn't like being cold. He didn't see the point. However, he could almost still hear them. It made him sweat a little between his thighs, and he finished his drink. He needed the steady faces of the queen and king. The expected red and black colors. The joy of finding the ace.

Jack and Harry had been over for a while—always sure comrades for a drink. Ray and Norman were both late, but brought the cigars. Bert had canceled on account of the snow.

Nobody talked much during the game. Ray sometimes chimed in with a curse or a ya'll better get ready for this, but they pretty much kept to their thoughts. Richard liked it this way. He didn't need more people asking him questions about students numbers or rebuilding costs. These guys read the papers. They knew the world in the right way, and that was what mattered.

Richard was waiting his turn to play his ace when Edith approached the table. The boys nodded in her direction as Richard impatiently hid his cards. What is it, he quipped. There's a messenger here from the office, she said.

Tell him I'm busy.

He says it's urgent.

Richard made a sound somewhere between a groan and an exhale, excused himself, and pushed away from the table.

Danny

Mom brought lots of cheese for me to eat, but says I can't eat it all at once because she doesn't know how long we'll be here. I say, Does that mean no school tomorrow? And mom says, We'll see.

The cheese tastes better after I bite the edges into a horse. Or a tiger. Sometimes a Jayhawk like the blue one close to her office, but my mom says they're not real. I say, Then why would they make it a statue?

I like orange cheese best, slices that are rubbery smooth and flop back and forth. Except for the time I flopped too much before I started shaping my hippo. It was going to be one of my most greatest animal creations. Animalmations. But it flopped, flopped to the kitchen floor. Mom swooped in, and my hippo was dead in the trash before it began. No 5 second rule, she said. Germs, she said.

Germs is one of her capital letter words. Mom says capital letter words differently. At school I learned that proper nouns are capital. My mom is very proper. Germs is one of these words. So is Respect. But I don't think she Respects the hippo.

After she left the kitchen I peered into the bin to see my orange hippo drowning next to old piles of my mom's coffee. I'm not old enough to have it, but in her special morning mug it always smells really good. She says it helps her stay awake, but I am awake enough without it.

Now it is helping kill the hippo. Kevin the hippo. I think I probably won't drink the stuff even when I'm old enough. Bye Kevin.

The Sisters

We feel it is a means of obtaining resources to meet the pressing needs of women such as a Department of Women's Studies, an adequate women's center entailing a university-funded day care facility, and this is only the beginning.

Edith

This is the kind of night that makes Edith want children. A night with snow and with quiet. A night when Richard is gone—out of town or just not coming upstairs. These gones are the same. Most of the time she thinks it is easier—they will never have to know about the wars, will never get drafted, will never marry a man that hurts, will never have a father that hurts. More of the time she doesn't think about it at all. Her mother would say, What a waste of time, followed by a distracting command like peeling potatoes. She touches her lower stomach. What was in there that was broken? She wished she could reach in to hold it, to touch it gently, and say, It is alright.

She slipped off her house shoes and her feet found first position. Bending in a deep pli  , she thought about not standing back up. About falling grandly to the floor and taking a lovely rest. However, her childhood training won, and she swooped back up. Hips aligned, knees above her toes, her heels down as soon as possible. An offbeat swan in a dressing room full of waiting laundry. Twisting her hair into a bun, she decided to go see if they had any chocolate.

Carol Jean

Silver chains on the door make it real. I'm actually not sure who has the key. Or ever if there is one. They don't really scare me, I'm just impressed that some of the women in the room had found chains so quickly. And managed to secure them. I told Danny, Two yards away from the chains at all times. He said, What is a yard?

Richard

Just cut off the electricity, he said. Just do it. Just cut it off. Fuck. It's five degrees out, they're not going to last. How did this happen? How did they get keys? Who exactly is in there? I want names.

He paced around his third floor office, wanting to call the police, wanting to go break into the building himself, wanting someone else to deal with this, wanting to get back to his lost card game. Various assistants quietly darted in and out. One was getting the women's dean, one looking for the building's blue prints. The Vice Dean was already here, offering unhelpful information.

Chancellor Throckmorton, we only know that there are female students, and possibly some children, chained in.

What kind of mother drags her child into a chained up building in the middle of the night, to protest God knows what? They're probably all on drugs. How do we access the building's water supply?

We can look into it, but I'm not sure that is the best way to go. Let's wait to discuss this with Taylor, maybe she can talk them down.

Hell, she probably helped organize it. Somebody make some damn coffee. It's freezing.

The Sisters

There is no intention to damage property or violate laws other than those few central to our act.

We do not intend to “substantially obstruct the operations of the University” in any way.

Danny

We aren't at home tonight. We are in the East Asias building because of the occupation. Mom said it was very important. Mom said, Best Behavior. Mom said this was about civil rights.

What are sivilrights, I asked?

Mom said, civil rights are Freedom. And mom said, don't ever forget that. Civil rights are Freedom.

Freedom was a capital letter.

The Sisters

We demand that a woman be designated to fill the currently vacated position of Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs.

We demand an end to grossly unfair employment practices which not only use Civil Service as a means of keeping women's wages frozen (as responsibilities are raised), but also foster massive disparities between wages for women faculty and male counterparts on the basis of sex alone.

Danny

The phone keeps ringing and when it does everyone gets really quiet and says ssshhh. Papers shuffle everywhere and I know Mom is nervous because she touches the ends of her hair and comes over to smooth mine but it is already smooth. She says, Go ahead and lie down, and tucks my coat underneath my head. But it is still a little wet from outside and it makes my right ear cold. I try to move, but mom says, Just rest Danny. I listen for sounds of snow. On the way here it was almost taller than me.

I ask who keeps calling, and Mom says it is people who are trying to control our civil rights.

I ask why, and Mom says because they're scared.

I ask if she's scared, and Mom says, No because I have you.

I ask what animals are in East Asias.

Mom says monkeys and snakes and birds and fish and insects in big trees.

I ask if she has ever been there and can we go there please?

Mom says, We'll see.

I say, I need more cheese.

The Sisters

We demand an Affirmative Action Program planned and directed by a group of women appointed through the February Sisters.

We demand a free Day Care Center financed by the University and directed exclusively by a steering board of women who will initially be appointed by the February Sisters.

Danny

The women by the phone say Throck-more will fold but they say it like a question. Their voices are muffled together. He has to fold. The old boy of old boys will fold and snap like the cards in his bridge game.

I ask Mom if they mean fold like paper folds.

Mom says, fold means give up but that can't be right because I thought we should never give up. I hope someone tells this to Throck-more. I could tell him.

Mom says she didn't mean give up she meant compromise. She says sometimes people in the world are wrong and sometimes it's the people in charge.

I say, why am I the only boy here?

Mom says, You are a special boy and she hopes what they're doing will help find more special boys like me. Plus you're not the only boy, she says. Michael is a boy too.

Michael is a baby, I say. He doesn't count yet. He just sleeps.

The Sisters

We demand an autonomous Department of Women's Studies to be controlled and chiefly taught
by women.

We demand a Women's Health Program. Through this program the following services would be
available: free Pap smears, pelvic examinations, and ready access to birth control devices
without charge, all given by a competent gynecologist. A counseling service must be established
to disseminate information on birth control, venereal disease, and special women's problems.

Danny

I wake up when someone knocks on the door and mom says, Stay here and Don't move. She gathers with the women by the phone. They whisper and look at each other and say loudly to the outside, We are not leaving until our demands are met.

I don't hear what the people on the outside say, but I hear the phone women say a loud word I'm not allowed to say that Tim Becker said at recess once. Then they say, Are you kidding? But not like it was funny. More like it was bad. They say, The asshole wants his flies. I'm also not supposed to say asshole. They repeat it again. His flies.

They say, He heard we were going to burn the building down. Someone says, Well at least he'd heard of us.

Mom says, Try to keep it down.

She comes to find me. She says, Don't worry nothing is wrong.

I say, what did they want and she says, Oh he just wanted his research.

What is research, I ask?

He is studying flies.

Flies like bugs?

Yes, flies like bugs.

Cool! Can I see?

Richard

As morning drew nearer, more people seemed to gather in the chancellor's office. Steve wanted to know what kind of statement they would make to the press. John wanted to discuss the possibility of canceling classes. When Richard didn't respond, they both just began to draft statements anyway.

They had brought Marilyn in as a negotiator—someone who spoke the same language as these women. She was sympathetic toward them, but tough. Although so far all she had succeeded in doing was getting them on the phone.

He wondered how long they could survive in the building, but someone said they had people bringing them food through the windows. Richard had decided against sending officers in through the window. Everyone generally agree the KBI would be too extreme at this point. No one wanted another version of the union burning.

He finally loosened his tie. In general he had a rule about bowties—don't put one on unless you are going to have it on until you're home. However, today in particular it seemed to be too tight.

Seeing it small and wrinkled on his desk made him want a cup of coffee. Edith momentarily crossed his mind.

Danny

Mom thinks I'm sleeping, but really I wake up when she goes back near the phone. All the women are still talking. Mom says, Yeah, did you hear what that doctor said to Kelly? She tells them without waiting for an answer. He said I've done so many pap smears I feel like I've been working in a whore house.

The women around her simmer and I hear the noise raise up like it does in school right before recess. Everyone knows something is coming. That's exactly why we're doing this, someone says too loud. Asshole, someone says louder.

There are lots of assholes on the outside.

The phone rings again and I go back to sleep. I tell myself to remember to ask mom what a whore house is, and if she's ever been to one, but I forget.

Richard

Do they realize this can't happen in a day? Do they realize there are more people in control of this than just me? Do they realize I'm not the bad guy? Do they realize this will cost money? Do they realize just how much money? There will be paperwork, and petitions, and taxes. Do they realize this isn't San Francisco or New York. We are in Kansas.

Richard moved from incredulousness to fury to complacency and back again. He kept most of the worst opinions under his breath, but knew Marylyn had still been catching most of them. She was an art history professor, but kept meticulous notes on a variety of subjects.

Richard, she said. This is the right thing. These students and this city will recognize that. The rest of the state will have follow.

He wasn't sure what other options they had. He wasn't sure if he wanted other options. But he was sure he hated to lose.

Danny

In the morning we get to go home and I'm glad because I'm not sure how much cheese is left but not glad because this might mean I have to go to school. Walking out the door Mom says, We'll see and Don't let go of my hand. I listen.

Edith

Edith fell asleep on the divan, only waking up to the chill of a dead fire and morning's early blue light hitting fresh snow. Sitting up, she knew he hadn't come home. Today's paper was already on the porch.

Wondering if the whole morning would be hers to keep for herself, she quickly went to make coffee. Her first taste was bitter and unfriendly. She stared into the dark liquid, waiting for something. She thought about diving in to the china bowl, letting the heat engulf her, and curling up, impossibly tiny, on the ocean floor of the coffee cup, next to some burnt dredges. Instead, she stood up and reached for the ceiling, an awkward relevé, a good morning stretch, rising and rocking on the tips of her toes.

Her heels finding the ground again, she imagined his footsteps contaminating the fresh snowfall in the yard. She went to the icebox, and found Richard's cream. Slowly, she tipped the container so it began a steady white steam into her drink. Not stopping, she watched the black-brown disappear until there was a flowing, flowing, flowing puddle on the table.

She left the mess.

The Sisters

Someone finds the key and we all agree to take the chains off. Outside the building the 9 am sun seems too bright, and no one is sure if we should believe that change is going to happen. Has happened. Is happening. We focus on blending together. Braiding the occupiers with the friends who have come to disguise us. No one will know who was in and who was out. No one will be expelled. No one will be identified.

Eager, hungry journalists shout questions as we emerge and make a final statement for the morning.

The February Sisters will move again.



Ahuacatl Agovago Avocado: The Corrupt Alligator Pear

Hot water pelts her back in a circle, steam loosening the edges of her skin, pulling her body, sinking like drops to the tile. Bored, she sharply pushes the lines of her thumb cuticles back and back, her nails clipping like little workers until her skin puffs up in excess. She rotates each finger until there is a line of matter and skin on each nail, waiting to be washed off. Instead, she sucks each miniscule skin mountain off of her fingers. Letting it rest on her tongue to see if she could taste it. She swallows.

Eat it, he says. It's good for you. You stare at the lump on your plate and imagine swallowing. The soft, muddled clump sliding down the back of your throat. Touching your chords, slim like the strings of teabags. It will taste lukewarm, with the lingering of last night's bath water seeping out from the center. Too much earth is left inside it. It will probably get stuck, turn sour, and rot before it reaches the stomach. Eat it, he says. It's good for you.

He picks it up and slides it toward your mouth like an infant's airplane and you feel small, but there is no plastic high chair barrier. His breath finds your ear and circles in. You should really clean your plate like a good girl.

Eat it, he says. It's good for you. The airplane is moving and he blows air through his lips to make the sound of an engine, increasing pressure as they vibrate. The mush slides a little and touches your mouth. You salivate. It's moist and you can't help it.

Eat it, he says. It's good for you.

Did we steal this like everything else? Did we steal it and call it ours? Did we steal it and Ellis Island the name, and trust the OED like it's legitimate? Did we mash it up for sport and forget it on the table next to cold filmed-over liquid cheese and plastic chips in a bag? Did we cut up your insides and throw them away, sucking out only the good parts. We are colonialists, anti-local, no fair trade fruit eaters. But we can't stop.

The we should be I.

Education

Dine

The night before: count, polish, assemble. Rest easier.

Cover the dining table with freshly starched, ironed smooth table linens. White preferably. This is appropriate for the most formal of occasions. Make Grandmother Emily proud.

A basic thought: move from the outside in. Each tool with a specific purpose.

Begin with the charger plates, equidistant from one another. They wait patiently for battle, serving us patiently, willing to be the first to perish, holding steady. Steady.

Bread and butter to the left; a tradition. No one will actually eat these—maybe a wholesome man who appreciates these things as reminiscent of a time when the men ate first while the women kept things warm in the kitchen. He spreads it on thick to leave tooth marks in the yellow cream at the edge of his roll.

Now we sit at the same time, but are afraid of the food.

Settle a freshly starched, ironed smooth cloth into the center of each dinner plate. An excellent tool for hiding unwanted soufflés, dabbing drips, and snatching secrets.

Knife blades face inward: a serrated frame. Avoid pointing at other diners.

The Place Fork, largest of the forks, is found to the left of the plate. All others follow.

No soup tonight. Possibly coffee to stir. Proceed with caution. Spoons can be deceiving.
Wine glasses like soldiers top the knives. Always serve all the wine. In order: red, white, sherry,
champagne.

Possibly a water goblet. Rinse. Repeat.

Primp

What separates the women mornings from the men mornings. What a great advantage. To look chipper, bright. Fresh as a daisy. Fresh as a fucking daisy.

Segment your canvas. Skin. Eyes. Cheeks. Lips.

One.

Wash, dry, apply. A light basecoat that matches your natural skin will even out discoloration you hadn't noticed until right now. Test on wrist for blending. (Proceed with caution as wrists are also used for breast milk temperature testing. Do not confuse). Our bodies are so versatile.

The baggage of the earth is found in the purple half moon beneath a woman's eye. Cover it up. Use the tip of your ring finger to dot concealer into place. Never rub. Pausing to wipe any excess smudges off the pad of your finger can serve as a reminder of why we're doing this. To find the ring, or keep it there.

Two.

Apply pink all over. Stay inside the lines for instant brightness. Use your eye shadow brush-wand-finger-tool number 047 to cover the lid. Watch the crease. Be modest with your darkest color. If you find yourself looking like a hungover, lower-class raccoon at this point, do not worry. You just have blending problems.

How much difference the space between lash line and brow can make. Wipe smudges. Find your steady hand for a straight line. Do not skim corners, but finish the job completely.

Trust me.

A black wand completes this quadrant. Center lashes are most important. Do not attempt while driving unless it is an emergency.

Three.

Dip the blush brush and blow. This is very important. Make a fish face with your lips and sweep in a downward diagonal motion. Puff back up. When you are without powder, quickly pinch the upper cheek between two fingers. It's natural.

Four.

Avoid lip stain evidence on rims of coffee mugs. Tinted balm is most appropriate for day. For a special treat to yourself, use a product with SPF. Taking care of your body in this way will make you feel good physically and mentally. Plus, you don't want to end up with dark spotting. (If this already applies to you, add an extra concealing step under segment one).

Smooth. Blot. Blink.

There. Much better.

As a daily routine, you will perfect this to under six minutes. Practice.

As a last tip, maximize the lighting in your home setting. Nothing worse than walking out into the day with a complete face and realizing you have to start over.

You missed a spot.

Taste

You press your thumb into the ridges of the deep, dark green skin. It's almost black, but not the kind that matches you. Slightly soft, it passes the selection process you've been trying to teach me, but for now it seems I will never be able to choose like you do. Instead, I watch the mountain of them roll, and cause problems at the market. The small white stickers slip off, ridges too good for a barcode.

At home, one hand resting on the red kitchen counter, you say, This is how you cut the avocado. Grip the fruit gently with one hand., Open the two halves to expose the pit. Own your knife, it should be large, crisp, and sharp. Circle the incision slowly, but like you mean it. Move lengthwise around the seed. Rotate the oval halves away from each other and feel the short intake of breath as you birth two halves of a whole. Once you expose the inside to the air, you are fighting an inevitable deadline, but for now do not worry about the browning decay of death. You can always splash some lime juice on it.

Knife the pit. This method is the most popular way to proceed. Tap the seed with enough force to break the surface. Repeat a few times to insure penetration, while increasing pressure to sufficiently twist out. For a gentler option, try scooping out the seed with a spoon. However, this is not always effective.

Find the bowl open and waiting. Find a green that doesn't belong here. Find a fruit not sweet, but fatty. Touch the creamy texture. Eat it raw. The slice looks good on your tongue, and I try to take it. Instead, I lick the edge of the silver blade. Scrape the empty shell for more and find green under my fingernails. I leave it there.

I want to save the pit, the pierced heart of my alligator pear. It is round and perfect, with a single knife wound, the color of all the wood floors it has been dropped to. Rolling across a great ship, Grandma's kitchen, my Midwestern backyard's deck.

We can plant it in the yard, and see the babies grow green. But it probably won't work, you say. This is the wrong climate for growing avocados.

Pray

Say this when she is born. Say this because your father said it for you. Say this so the pouring of the water will work. Say this so the water will save her. Say this before you eat cake. Say this when you take her on the boat. Say this when she goes to stay with someone that is not you. Say this when you look over her crib. Say this when you put your hand in front of her nose to make sure she is breathing. Say this so she learns it.

Hail Mary, full of grace.

The Lord is with thee.

Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb,

Jesus

Holy Mary, Mother of God,

pray for us sinners,

now and at the hour of our death.

Amen.

Say this in school. Say this in the morning. When you are in the shower. When you get out of the shower. When you put your blue underwear on. Say this when you fall down at recess. When you are bleeding. Say this after the announcements. Say this when Calvin Clark makes fun of you in front of everyone. Say this in fitting rooms when you can't fit into the next size. Say

this when your mom can't fix it. Say this when an ambulance goes by. Say this when you did something wrong. Say this because I said so.

Say this when someone dies. Say this when you don't know what else to say. Say this when you have a crush on someone older than you. Say this in the girl's bathroom. Say this in Spanish. Say this when you can't get a song out of your head. Say this when you are in a fender bender. Say this at church when you're not listening. In math class when you're not listening. At a baseball game when you're not listening.

Say this when you read about something sad on the news. Say this as you forget the sad thing you saw on the news. Say this when you graduate. Say this. Say this before you think about having sex. When you are thinking about having sex. When you decide not to have sex. When you feel bad after sex.

Say this when you move from that house to this house. Say this to make you feel safe. Say this when no one else is awake. Say this in yoga class. Say this when you fart and hope no one heard it. Say this when during takeoff when you are on an airplane. After oxygen instructions, before peanuts. Say this when he won't put on his seatbelt. Say this when the sun is out. Say this when someone snores. Say this after strangers sneeze. Say it climbing stairs, in parking lots, elevators, and on treadmills. Say this when you put on makeup. Say this before and after dancing. Say this when you are opening avocados. Say this halfway through your margarita.

Say this with beads. Say this nicely. Say it like you mean it. Say it in muscle memory. Say it to Her. Say it so she'll talk to Him for you. Say it for free. Say it even when you don't believe it anymore. Say it when you forget the words. Hum it a little. Say it in capital letters. Say it on a Wednesday. Say it in May. Say it kneeling.

Say this when you're dying. Say it so you can go home. Say it so you can stop.

Hail Mary. Hail Mary. Hail Mary.

Hail Mary.

avocado, n.

Pronunciation: (/ɑ:vəʊ'kɑ:dəʊ/ , now /æv-/)

Forms: Also 16 avogato, 17 avocado, 18 avigato.

Etymology: < Spanish avocado advocate, substituted by 'popular etymology' for the Aztec ...

a. The fruit of a West Indian tree (*Persea gratissima*); a large pear-shaped fruit, called also alligator pear n. at alligator

Some avocado facts. How interesting.

1. Avocados are grown from pits indoors. This is often done by removing the pit from a ripe, unrefrigerated avocado. The pit is then stabbed with three or four toothpicks and placed in a jar or vase with tepid water. In four to six weeks, it should split and out should come roots and a sprout. If there is no change by this time, the avocado pit is discarded.

2. The avocado is very popular in vegetarian cuisine, as substitute for meats in sandwiches and salads because of its high fat content. One guy called it a superfruit. Some people believe him so much they check out his book from the library. They wish avocados wore capes, but that is not what the book meant.

3. Until I met her, I had never had an avocado.

4. Avocado trees are vulnerable to bacterial, viral, fungal and nutritional diseases. Disease can affect all parts of the avocado, causing spotting, rotting, cankers, pitting and discoloration. No one wants a cankered avocado.

5. Fallbrook, California is the Avocado Capital of the World. An avocado festival is held there every year. Upon entering the festival, you are greeted with a giant, inflatable avocado.
6. Feeding avocados or guacamole to a non-human animal should be completely avoided.
7. Avocados have been known to successfully help women reach orgasm.
8. Cortez the god took the Aztec's ahuatlmole to increase his virility. Ahuatlmole means testicle sauce, so named for the distinctive dangle from the tree and its use as an aphrodisiac.
9. 8 million pounds of guacamole is consumed on Super Bowl Sunday.
10. A great explorer's food commandeered from the Aztecs, it was called midshipmen's butter and survived at sea mixed with salted-rodent, gunpowder, and/or albatross.
11. Avocados have gone through an identity crisis. George Washington helped with this.
12. Dinosaurs could eat the whole avocado and poop out the seed to help the avocados continue to grow. Even though humans couldn't do this, we found a way to keep it going because it tasted so good.

13. The Hass mother tree died last year. You missed it.

Grandmas

Little Baby Adekemi was born with a strong jaw, a purpose, and ringlets that hook into one another like soft anchors. Kehinde, The Last to Come, sent her out on a life errand to see what all the fuss was about. Adekemi cried back in affirmation, it was okay to follow. She said, their life would be good. Adekemi was also Taiwo. The First to Breathe the Air.

Adekemi grew up tall. Grew up to the sound of her mom frying okra for the four kids. Grew up eating moi moi and puff puff—her favorites.

We're both grown up or pretending, and she asks me if I made tripe would you eat it? I don't answer quickly. If my mom made Nigerian stew would you eat it? I don't answer quickly.

Her mom mails spices across states shaped liked rectangles, but Kemi is not sure what to do with them. The white and blue post office package sits in the third cabinet waiting. I introduce her to a poet I know who writes about Lagos, and knows how to say her name correctly on the first try.

He finds out quickly he speaks more Yoruba than she does. Some other graduate students think we should have an Africa Night, where they make us Nigerian food. I think this is a good idea, and then hear it differently later. Africa Night.

Caitlin Frances grew up going to her grandma's in Stockton, Missouri. She ate barbeque potato chips and grapes on the boat, and then back to the house for chicken and noodles. She says these are her favorite, and Grandma Neta says she will make them whenever she wants. She tells the story of when Caitlin was little and called them noonles. She tells this story every time she cooks them, even when Caitlin finishes the story for her. Even when Caitlin has heard the story too many times. Caitlin knows someday she will have to tell the story for her. She will need to learn how to cook them on her own.

She tries to learn one summer, on the kitchen counter she used to help make biscuits on. She likes the feeling of the soft dough and how it does what she wants it to. She puts too much flour on it so it stops sticking to her hands. Grandma cracks eggs and eggs and eggs and pours in all of the flour. That's it, she says, revealing her magic. Just eggs and flour. Eggs and flour. She stirs with a spoon first, but then just uses her hands, leaving her rings on a glass dish by the sink. When all the yellow from the eggs is gone, and it looks like one big lump, she lets Caitlin arrange the parchment, putting jars and containers on the four corners of the mat to keep it from rolling up. The dough is rolled out flat like a white pancake, and cut into long crooked strips like witch's fingers. Caitlin always sneaks off the edges to taste. Grandma lets these sit, and the air does the rest. Then she does something with a good ole' hen that Caitlin doesn't watch.

Grown up, she brings some leftover chicken and noodles back to their shared city, and offers to share some with Kemi. She doesn't ask if she would eat it. These noodles rarely cross state borders, and are normally carefully rationed out. Her family eats so much of them. They eat so much of them that they are full, and they say, We can chew, but we just can't swallow.

Kemi says she doesn't really get chicken and noodles. It's a white person food, she says.

Number Three

I had never had an avocado until I met her, and now I can't stop. The best is when she brings me two or three at one time, and likes it when I eat until I'm too full. Until I can feel them in my stomach, in my gut, like an empty bowl now stuffed and overflowing. I get so excited I forget to use utensils, and just dig in with my thumb, puncturing the dark fruit's flesh, and licking off the leftovers. Most of the time I eat them barefoot at the kitchen counter, but sometimes I take them to bed and try not to get anything on the sheets.

Some like it _____

She likes the big ones best. More bang for your big buck. More flavor to suck and savor.

I like darkest ones. They've had more time to grow.

He can't get them sweet enough—he puts a little honey in the hole.

We all lick the seed for leftovers. Quick! Before it goes bad.

As Boats

When we were babies, we let the big river carry us down south, floating in the hollowed out shell of an avocado. In the morning, when we were the most hungry, we licked the side of our boat to taste the fruit. Birds looking down saw our tiny pink tongues, and dropped a worm for us to suck on. Our ship was a deep green in the daylight, and we liked this better. Naps came with the sunshine; we scrunched up our knees and rested our foreheads on one another. We were the first avocado twins. Sometimes we capsize on purpose and hide underwater. Above, we look like the shell of a slow swimming turtle.

a. Slowly our bodies outgrew the shell, and it began to splinter. Eventually, we slowly slid into the water and drowned.

b. We reached the end of the river where all the nice people live. The birds alerted them to our presence and we were safe.

c. We were lost and got split up. We spent the rest of our lives opening avocados, searching the empty green wombs for one another.

Collected Works

Nonfiction

1. The Dock
2. Space Between Cloth and Skin
3. Tilapia
4. Infinity Story
5. Men Named Michael
6. William in Atlanta
7. Everyone Gets Hungry Around Noon

Fiction

7. Quick Visit

The Dock

He says, dock or bridge?

You say, both.

You drive out to the lake because that is where you go when you live in Kansas and you need to feel big and grown and deep.

Sometimes you can feel this on the back porch, run down deck of the bar named after music you feel like you should listen to, but really don't that often. On the deck, you're smoking a risky cigarette you took from the lips of a friend you sometimes wish was more than a friend. And sometimes when you look at this friend's bottom lip you think he knows this, and his lips want to be yours as much as this cigarette does. For distraction, you look at the high, high heels getting stuck in the deck cracks and watch the skinny kneed girls falter. You like it.

However. Sometimes the lake makes these feelings truer, and sometimes the bar is closed and sometimes you don't feel like the smell of cigarettes will do you any good. Night makes the blue lake black, and appealing to the young hearts in need of mystery. They need mystery like they need to get out of this place, but they don't know this for sure yet. They sit on the edge of the dock and think of metaphors for the ripples of the water moving toward them, but you don't say them out loud, because the loud out on the dock is louder than in the city. You also don't say them because they are cliché. You know, like ribbons.

This is the dock, he says. He's been here about ten times. But this is the first time with you.

Is this how you get girls, you joke. But really you might mean this is a way you can have me.

You are both quiet for a long time because this is how you respect the night and the lake and the seriousness of the change that is coming. He is moving and you are staying and you realize that this is everyone's story, but it is yours right, right now.

He breaks first and says, What are you thinking?

You are thinking lots of things, but you tell him about the pre-wedding question:

Bren got married, and you got appropriately drunk at a different Kansas lake at her pre-wedding, important girls-only party. She was the first of the important friends to do this, and it was a Big Deal. Someone had to ask, so you had waited for the alcohol and the lateness of the hour to make the question appropriate.

So.

Are you sure you want to get married? You ask nicely, and slur the sure an appropriate amount. All the girls laughed, and you added, I mean, it is, you know, forever.

Bren did want to get married. She said so. And then she did it. You stood in blue dresses and held orange flowers and lifted the lace train of a large, catholic wedding. The chicken was good, but you were nervous for your toast so you didn't really eat it. Cheers.

Louise was next. She remembered your question, and wanted to know if you are going to ask her as well at her very own pre-wedding, important girls-only party that would be different but the same. You waited for the appropriate amount of lateness and alcohol. Compared to the lake, you thought the hotel room made for a less dramatic, but wedding appropriate setting.

Louise has the same answer as Bren. You look around and hope the beige walls and curtains and sheets and carpet won't match your life.

You wore dresses a different shade of blue and held flowers that were more yellow than orange. The girl next to you lifted the lace train of the large, catholic wedding. You had clear alcohol with a lime wedge in a sweating bar glass. You do not remember any chicken. Your toast was alright. Cheers.

You are thinking about this pre-wedding question because it happens before big decisions, and this boy- almost-man sitting next to you with feet dangling toward water is going to make a big decision. You feel like these big decisions should be for later; thirty still seems old. You want to ask him his own version of this question. Are you sure you want to do this? This big decision. But you don't ask. You hope your wedding story does it for you. You hope you will not end up asking this before his wedding. You hope there will not be a wedding.

At the dock you talk about regret because it gets lost into the night and into the water and that makes it okay.

His is:

He wasn't around for his mom when she had the biggest sickness of all the sicknesses. He was just a kid. Just in high-school. And you like knowing this about him. You do not think this makes him a bad person. He loves his mom, and you know this because she is better now, they read the paper together, and you tease him about how she still does his laundry sometimes.

Yours is:

That time with Viola Muzetta and the hula dancers. You went to Hawaii with her, with Great Grandma Whister, fearless and strong with countertops full of cheese-balls and thin wafer cookies in pink, yellow, and brown. She wanted to go and this would probably be her last

chance, but no one mentions this but your mom once before you leave. She loved the smell of brightness and plumeria and you watch her climb down the stairs to ride in a submarine. The top of her head covered in fuzzy white hair gets lower and lower as the crew crowds around to supervise. She disappears into the ship, ready to look out the portal windows at clear, ocean water. Now you realize this was the most amazing part of the trip. She walked in the rainforest and in the mouth of a volcano and across a boat deck of war. At dinner they asked for volunteers to come up on stage and learn to hula dance. There is a whole pig spinning over a fire a few tables away. You are horrified but it smells good. Viola wants to dance, but she would have a hard time making it up to the stage. She wants to watch you, if she was young she would definitely volunteer. But you are too scared, and too young to know better. Your mom ends up being right. This is Viola's last chance to go to Hawaii. Or go to a place that is not Kansas, that is not home. You will always wish you had danced for her. You will live trying to become the kind of woman that would always volunteer to hula dance at dinner.

This story is okay to tell him. This regret is an appropriate kind of regret that makes him think about you as young and think about you dancing and think about taking chances. We choose the stories we tell.

Neither of you tell the story about the almost kiss in the snow. This story is your collective regret, a shared what- if of an almost kiss. The world is full of these almost kisses, and you know that, but you feel yours when you walk in the park and when you are sitting close to him, like you are right, right now, here on the dock. Later you will regret not saying this story and giving it to the night and to the lake. You will regret not letting it drift away, will regret spending more time with it.

You think about resting your head and giving all of this weight to his shoulder, but you don't know if it is strong enough to take it, so you don't. More likely, his shoulder probably just doesn't feel like it. More realistically, his shoulder is not for you it is for Her.

Fish keep jumping, and the water keeps lapping. He is with her and you are with a different her at home in your bed, which will feel so safe after the dock. You will whisper this to believe it, So safe.

He tells the Say Juan story to bring a little light to the air:

He grew up less than an hour from here, in a capital that cares about wheat and family farms and uterus control. In high school he told the cops that pulled him over he didn't know anything about what was in his car, except that he got it from a guy named Juan.

Then he wrote a song about it with his band, The Bears, because that is what you do when something happens to you and you have a band. The song was called Say Juan, and it was a good song because it was about drugs. They finally got their first gig, and they high fived in a garage like all bands should. The drummer was the most excited, and was the one that had to tell them the gig was at his Uncle Steve's church. Pastor Steve said they would have to make their lyrics church appropriate. The audience would sing along to Say No instead of Say Juan. Poor Juan.

The dock is nice because there is a choice built in. Keep going—to jump, or turn around. You want him to decide to jump in because then you could decide this too, without having to think about it. But the night is too big and too dark to jump this time. You drive home over the mile long bridge and pretend you are taking off into the dark abyss. The lights on both sides

make you feel like you are about to be free falling or rising or somehow magically swallowed up into the air, and you both think you wish you could stay forever in this perpetual state of about to fly, but he is the one that says it out loud.

The Space between Cloth and Skin

She jolts up; I flinch and a flat palm slams the radio. In the dark space between comforter and mattress, her body comes back to wrap around mine. The top of her toes press into the bottom of my feet, her knees bend into mine, hips to hips, long arm underneath loose shirt, her warm breath on my neck. Lips touch my hair line. She hums and I make a sound of protest. “I don’t want to go to work,” she whispers the whisper that comes with the alarm clock. Her breath is full of must and morning, a sticky heat in her yawns that lingers.

We turn into each other, our bodies flushed with sleep. We know each other’s hollows; I touch her left collar bone, and think of Audre’s angel wings.

We are unripe fruit wrapped tightly by its skin, too early to be exposed. She peels away from me slowly, starting with her toes, one limb at a time, taking warmth with her. She pulls the dangling cord closest to us once and the fan slows in warning. The second chain brings a wall of unnatural light, and my first thought of day: I need to get her a lamp. I think this everyday she works early, and pull the patterned blue and maroon comforter over my head. She doesn’t have a top sheet. This used to feel strange, however, easier to get used to than her snoring.

Lamps are rocking back and forth. We are trying to join the Black Lady, White Lady Club. Two conga lines are forming. Black ladies on the left, white ladies on the right. All the women are wearing burnt orange and red dresses. When they reach the end of the line they find their partner to dance down the middle. We join the lines, but can’t be in the center yet—we search for a membership paper to sign.

The suction pop of her deodorant lid finds me, and I hear the soft brushing back and forth, three times for each arm. I slowly peek out, and the world is blurry. She showered while the ladies were dancing, and now is dripping. Her breasts droop a little, unsupported in their unwired bra. Her ceramics pieces watch; a clay woman admires with me. Throwing clothes, clean and dirty in opposite directions she finds one of her blue picks in the bottom of a laundry basket. She plunges it into her hair, close to the scalp, and thrusts it upward sending tiny, black hair circles onto the carpet. A trail of these follow her feet, like afro fairy dust full of wishes. The sound of plastic tongs struggling through tangles is painful. She dips her fingers into a tub full of white cream. You can watch the hair grow, springs reaching out; it is biggest in the morning.

Examining herself in the mirror she pats down small patches of hair that are sticking up too high, raising her eyebrows slightly. I love when she hands me her pick to fix the back. These mornings, I try to pull gently, remembering to keep it even. I like when I can tell she's proud of her hair. Today she wears her skin with power.

She rolls her shoulders slightly; her skin is darkest here. I wonder if she knows I'm watching. Her curve is slightly covered by the white flap from the shirt she just buttoned. I blush an Irish girl's blush, even though I know I'm allowed to look. I watch her long legs disappear into boxers and then black jeans, see her stomach pull in just a little as she buttons them. There is a red florist's knife tucked in the back pocket.

She gets back into bed, and the warmth returns to my neck. It spreads. Her morning smell of soft skin and body, sometimes sweat, sometimes sex, is covered up with cologne and cotton shirt. She lies on her stomach to avoid flattening her hair. Five minutes before she has to peel away again. I wish to be small enough to hide all-day in her space between cloth and skin.

Offering an apologetic, tired but happy smile, “Good morning.”

“When are we going to get our paper signed?” I ask.

Kissing the top of my eyelids, she ignores me.

“Go back to sleep.”

She doesn't turn to look at me before she shuts the door.

Tilapia

When I was nineteen I sat next to this guy in an empty room, waiting all day for students to sell their textbooks back to us. I had such a crush on him. We worked for an off-campus bookstore that sent us to an on-campus location in the hopes of attracting more business. However, this particular residence hall was devoid of any business and any hope.

The guy's name was forgettable, but I thought he was cool and cultured and cute. I got all of these qualities from the fact that he was older, taking a modern art class, and had a little scruff on his chin. This combination meant he knew everything. We talked about his art class; I learned he was going to be an architect. I told him I wanted to go to the Lightning Field, and he knew what it was so that gave him extra points. He said he wanted to go there to, and we talked about the Spiral Jetty and Claude and Christo. I decided we were both romantics, and felt full of the mystery that was our young selves. I felt like he would never be the kind of guy who would think I was cool, but he had to sit here with me for the next seven hours, so that was a little special. He liked to cook, something I never did, but burnt grilled cheese. A quality I think is charming but that I pretend to find slightly embarrassing and something I want to rectify. Kind of like my middle name. But really I don't mind it. Really I don't burn it that often.

He was making tilapia for dinner, something that was foreign and exotic to my Midwestern roast and potatoes. When he said it I heard every syllable of the beautiful word. Tilap-ia. The lap rolled off his tongue in a way that made me think of a lovely, light pinkness as opposed to a decapitated, smelling filet with one eye staring up at me from a plate of fish juice.

He ended up as one of many older guys I thought were cool. We didn't really talk after that day. The first girl I fell in love with ended up being the one to cook tilapia for me, and making me feel a lovely, light pinkness. I went to the Lightning Field with her, and didn't think about him while I was there.

He married another girl named Caitlin, in another city far away from Kansas, and actually did become a grown up architect. I sort of like her for spelling her name the right way. They had a baby together. I saw this on facebook.

I'm still waiting to know what my version of architect is. Waiting to know if I will become it. Waiting to know if I will feel fulfilled when I do.

An Infinity Story

Name: _____

Score _____

Teacher: _____

Date _____

Matching Worksheet

Instructions: Draw a line from each name on the left to the matching answer on the right.

Grandma Baker

fell off a parking garage

The girl on the rugby team

cancer

Army Major Culver or Uncle Wayne

cancer

Kemi's older sister

before you were here

Dan's mom

suicide

That guy who went to high school with us

bomb

Grandpa John

concussion

Mindy's dad

no one will say it out loud

Grandma Whistler

not yet

Your dad's dad

cancer

Grandma Sherry

in her sleep

Uncle Mike

cancer

Gigi

you can't remember

Grandma Fuesner

car crash

Uncle Danny

Alzheimer's

I call Dan every April.

∞

I read a book about visualizing a desire, and then believing you will find it. You close your eyes before you get out of bed in the morning, think about what you want to see, and then believe you will see it by the end of the day. My friend said she read it in Arizona, and then tested this by visualizing a green lizard. She was beginning to doubt the theory when she saw a green lizard pen at the airport. My friend bought the pen and told me to be very specific when visualizing. I read the book. How do you decide what to visualize?

∞

When you are born into a world with 13 grandparents you are loved. You are little, and you reap the benefits of divorce, remarriages, and sturdy genetics. Generations blend together; certain great aunts and uncles are placed in the grandparent category. Each one is the same kind of old and wrinkles. You get to go on lots of visits, hear lots of stories about when you were a baby, and receive lots of cards on your birthday. You eat lots of pie. You develop a complicated relationship with your red, curly hair because they all love it too much.

When you grow up you realize 13 grandparents means you will be attending lots of funerals. Each type of old begins to smell different. Your parents' relationships to the divorce, remarriages, and sturdy genetics begin to complicate yours. Visits are now to the doctor, you hear lots of stories about medication, the handwriting is shaky and slanted on birthday cards.

14 becomes 3 very quickly.

∞

I walk past blue lockers in sophomore hall and Evan turns to see me in the black outfit I have chosen. In a sea of khakied teenagers I am sophisticated. The slit in my skirt is significant. He likes this, and says so out loud. This is the first time I will remember seeing a boy hungry.

We were the type of young that believes 18 years is old. My boyfriend, my skinniness, and all the people watching me dance at the Friday night football games in navy blue spandex made me vapid. But the theater kids kept me nice, and this is where I met Dan. A senior beautiful enough for my 15-year-old heart to fall in love with, and sweet enough for him to be nice about it. He had a girlfriend. Maureen was also a beautiful senior, a fellow forensics nerd, and his duet acting partner. Our teacher said, the Dan O and Mo Show.

Dan's mom died in between their prom and graduation. Everyone in school who knew him was excused from morning classes to attend the funeral. Everyone who did not attend the funeral would pray for him at school after the morning announcements.

∞

Great Grandmother Viola Muzetta Whislter was Grandma. She was soft hands and porch-swings; mandarin oranges and peppery deviled eggs. She drank black, black coffee and told stories about growing up on a Kansas farm, playing house in a giant lavender bush. She taught me to talk to strangers; Grandma only saw the good.

When I turned ten she took me to Chicago. My curls, wild in the biggest city. I knew my Grandma was tall when she found her way through all of the buildings to the women's department at Bloomingdales. On the street I heard a man say, "God is good. God is great. God makes no mistake. Can you help me buy a sandwich?"

Bloomingdales was important, and big, and smelled like perfume the entire time. The name was said with reverence. Later, Grandma bought me a green, beaded bracelet, and wasn't upset when I was scared of the ferris wheel.

∞

I had never met Dan's mom, but was careful not to say this out loud. I really liked Dan. I learned her name at the funeral. Susan.

The six of us sat together in a back pew. A debate coach sat directly in front of us, alone. It was sad that he was not married, and we felt sorry for him. On the alter, Dan's older sister held up a furry stuffed animal her mother had given her and tried to talk about it. A sacrificial white bunny among priest robes, funeral flowers, and Jesus wafers. This made me think of my own mom, and of my own stuffed animals, and what it would mean if I was the one standing where Dan's sister was. Even though it is selfish to think of your own mom at someone else's mom's funeral, this is what made me cry. I wonder if Susan would understand?

Evan held my hand.

We missed school lunch, and this gave us permission to slurp milkshakes after it was over. We decided to be life affirming, and went around the circle to say what we liked about each other. My boyfriend's answer about me was not adequate—he was using light words when I wanted heavy ones, pretty instead of beautiful.

Back at school, Beth and I get in trouble for not having proper gym attire. Coach Taylor says, take off your fancy getups, and walk around the perimeter of the gym. We place our black pumps in the corner, and they become the beginning and the end.

We talk about how we could never do what Dan had to do today. We talk about how we liked his guitar playing, and how he feels like a big brother we both don't have. But when we say big brother we both mean we want him. This was a test.

∞

When I am 16, I visit Viola in the Shawnee suburbs and eat cheese-balls from a glass jar while I tell her about Steve. I am going to a dance with him, and this makes her feel young. She tells me a story about a man named Ed she played poker with. When she was 15, they decided to drive over to the next county and get married. This is the first time I heard her talk about her husband. I know not to ask any questions, because he is dead now, and before he was dead they were divorced. She only tells me the good things.

I realize someday I will be thinking back to what I was doing when I was young, and I hope I have someone to tell. She pauses in her remembering. Wheel of fortune will be on soon.

∞

I am getting ready for our performance at the half time of the basketball game. We are playing the all-boy Catholic school. When we see their name on the schedule this means a longer game due to more fouls, this mean we will wear our new black, fishnet outfit the captains picked out. My dad calls me in the parking lot and uses his work voice. He tell me what happened and says, it is okay if you still dance. She would want you to, he says. I sit in the car for a while and think about stupid things like what I am wearing, and if I should tell my friends. I feel nauseous and I cry, but won't feel a real empty until later. I go inside and don't tell anyone. Captain Megan gives me a drill team demerit for leaving early.

∞

As told by Grandma Neta or Waneta Carol Griffith:

One evening you and Grandpa were out on the front porch. He held your hand to help you balance as you tiptoed back and forth across the wood railing. He was trying to get you to count all the stars. You were just so little. Maybe 3? Or 4? Anyway, he started, “One... two, three.” And you told him, “Oh Grandpa... Infinity!” Well, he came in the house and told me to please remind him to never talk down to you again.

∞

I meet Dan for a coffee and feel grown up. He is visiting from college, and he still remembers me. I sit in a chair that is too big for me, and call him Danny. His family and oldest friends call him this. Saying Danny to him makes me feel desperate, and brave, and fierce, and in love.

He asks what I have been up to, and I tell appropriately funny, slightly gossipy stories about Evan, Beth, Jenny, John, Steve, me. These are the people he knows, and I want him to feel in on it, to keep our lives our connected.

He says, I heard a story about Beth you haven't heard yet.

I lean in interested, and tuck loose hairs into place.

We started dating, he says.

I sip my adult coffee, and it is disgusting.

When I don't respond he says, are you okay? I feel like his concern is genuine.

Yes, I say, feeling brave, and rightfully broken when I look up.

Your eyes changed, he says.

∞

When Grandpa John's arm became too weak for his watch we had to tell him what time it was every 30 minutes. It is 1:30. Grandma Neta peeled orange slices for the hummingbirds so he could watch them; I cut peonies from the garden so he could smell them.

∞

I visit Dan, and see his parent's house for the first time. I comment on the amount of white daisy art. On the mantle, staircase walls, next to the toilet. He says, yes, they were her favorite. She carried them at their wedding.

∞

It is snowing while Viola Muzetta Whistler is buried with a stuffed animal cat that my cousin from Arkansas picked out. During the ceremony, a pastor mentions her childlike spirit in reference to this. I do not understand when this cousin was allowed to select this particular cat. They just got here.

I gave her this cat, and feel like its position next to her body is uncomfortable. Outrageous. The tiny plastic whiskers will survive longer than her skin under the earth. The plastic refusing to decay in a box of grandma bones and dust.

∞

The summer after I graduated from college became the summer I learned people with cancer can still be happy and eat vanilla ice-cream cones. The summer the American flag became more than ignorant patriotism; the summer I learned it takes 9 hours to get from El Dorado, Arkansas to Stockton, Missouri and that there are mountains there. The summer of three

southern funerals. Uncle Wayne. Grandpa John Grandma Baker. El Dorado. Stockton Stockton.

One. Two. Three. Just like that.

The Men Named Michael

Mikey was the first “I love you” I said without meaning I love you. The first “I love you” I said to a man who was not my Dad or my brother or my Grandpas.

Mikey was senior year of high school, shirt off in mom’s car, feet pressed against the radio accidentally pressing a button that changed the temperature from Fahrenheit to Celsius. It would not change back.

I liked Mikey when it was cold out and he held my hand inside his coat pocket. I thought this was romantic. The next boy would think this was suffocating while walking past Christmas lights, my hand rejected from his pocket.

Sometimes Michaels are men that come with contagious trouble, beginning to spread with a simple kiss on the cheek.

Mikey became the first man to touch me when I didn’t want him to.

Michael Francis was born into a family with 22 previous generations of first-born sons named Francis Michael. He switched it; everyone called him Mike. I call him Grandpa. In middle school I pretend sharing his middle name is embarrassing, but really it makes me feel special. I am his.

Grandpa married a beautiful woman of the fifties who could fly planes, bake chocolate cakes, and make gravy the right way. They had a son named Michael. When he died young she went blind and flightless. These symptoms were not related to his death. Her depression was.

This is the part of her I remember.

She stopped coming to holidays, talking to her daughters, and letting Grandpa into her house. She stopped being married to Michael Francis.

He left his Irish cap in the house after he was not allowed to go back. I snuck in through his old, hand painted blue door and stole it. I wore it on the ride home when I couldn't find a song that would fit my mood.

Grandpa is my favorite Michael.

To me, his son Michael is a photograph sitting on the basement's bookshelf. He is all my grandmother remembers and what makes my mother cry on February 3. He is the catalyst for current family problems. He held me as a baby. He was the last first-born son. The generational tradition come to an abrupt halt. No one talks about this Michael.

The only Michael that I actually call Michael is the Michael I want to introduce to my Grandpa. They would shake hands and all would be right in my world of Michaels.

Sometimes I think *Michael* so much in a day it stops sounding like a word.

Michael.

Of Hebrew origin.

But my Michaels are Catholic or lapsed or both.

Michael is the archangel who defeats the dragon. A good name for kings, saints, emperors.

One of the Michaels teaches me the army alphabet even though he is not in the army.

Mike. India. Charlie. Hotel. Alfa. Echo. Lima.

Michaels follow me, popping up while sacking my yogurt at the grocery store, handing me dollar bills at the bank. I tell the story about all the Michaels to a friend at a bar. She says, "My brother's name is Michael."

Later at the bar I meet a guy who says, "You can call me Tim." I think about how Michael is a much better name than Tim. Tim buys me a drink, and tells stories about his trip to Europe the same way everyone tells stories about their trip to Europe. The only thing I remember later is that he saw Michaelangelo's Sistine Chapel.

Michael Jackson dies. Then everyone says the word Michael.

My English teacher is Teacher Michael so as not to be confused with any other Michael when telling stories. As in the different versions of Barbie, and how there is always a profession before her name: Flight Attendant Barbie, Stay At Home Mom Barbie, Nurse Barbie.

The love for the last Michael is unspoken. He is Drummer Michael, Writer Michael, Dances Funny After Two Beers Michael, Makes Me Laugh Michael.

He sits at the computer next to me at work where I talk too much. I email him articles I think he will like, and don't ask him about women.

Michael.

Michaels.

Michael.

I wonder about my own name and yours. It's probably just as good as Michael. I like the way Caitlin sounds when Michael says it.

William in Atlanta

The summer after he graduated from high school became the summer his mom died. The color of Atlanta was sucked into the sidewalk, while steam boiled up in replacement; his grief rising with the heat

He was not the kind of person who wanted to sit in a room full of sympathetic and curious faces, with his hands folded gently in his lap. He did not feel sweat on his palms as he stared down, down into an elaborate announcement. He did not need their affirmations and hugs, their understanding or dissent. He did not need their potato casseroles, and baked chicken dishes. He did not need their prayers, and their Bible verse suggestions.

It was finally Saturday. William was gay and black and young in Atlanta, and leaving the leftovers of his mother's house to work at the rally. He found a new kind of Family in these boys. Nestled in a lonely patch of green grass, he found a plastic table covered in red and black descriptions of a disease; William didn't know he would spend the next decade winding in consecutively smaller circles around evading, advocating, analyzing, and fearing this infamous acronym.

The rally simmered in the Southern sun. Its boiling water spilling over curves and under the feet of Georgians so they couldn't ignore it. They resisted and pulled their shoes up slowly like mud was sucking their soles back to the earth. William watched, and knew it was important. Knew it was important when the white woman in a straight, gray skirt and collared jacket chose him out of the crowd.

She rubbed melting lipstick over her puffed lips, smoothed the fabric down to her skinny knees, touched her 05 Medium Neutral Blonde hair to make sure she was still in place, flicked a spec of dirt from underneath a nail.

William did not smooth his proud t-shirt, he matched his brothers behind him. This spoke louder than the red on her mouth.

Flipping through sheets of white printer paper covered in neat block letters, she glanced up at William. At the dark shadow on his chin, the strength in his beautiful shoulders, and the earnestness he held in his hands. William packed the power of his punch in his eyes. He wondered if she saw him or not, as she bent two fingers, motioning for the camera to move forward. What else did she command; what else moved to the will of her hands?

A microphone bloomed up to his lips; he thought about stretching out slightly to kiss it. Don't worry, she asked the question for the audience, "So what is it like?" To be gay and black and young and a man in Atlanta.

Everyone Gets Hungry Around Noon

1. J. Lo Doing Yoga

I could hear a steady stream of water in the kitchen; my dad was doing the dishes. He was steady and patient, scrubbing pans in scalding hot water, my mom would have just thrown away. The same way he would slowly, gently comb the tangles in my naturally curly, naturally infuriating hair when I was little.

He had left the television on a sports channel. The remote missing, I went to sit directly in front of the television, my legs folded under me, holding my arm up to flip the channels. I stopped on J. Lo doing yoga.

Gigli came out in 2003; I was 14. Since then, it has been called one of the worst movies ever made. After seeing it, the *New York Times* reviewer said baroque martial-arts torture entailing, “gouging out the eyes and also removing that part of the brain that stores visual information, so that the victim will not only be blind, but will also lose all memory of what he has seen” sounded appealing. However, I am so thankful that someone thought spending 54 million dollars on hit-man Ben chasing around bad-girl Jennifer was a good idea. Eight years later, I have never seen the whole thing (with no future plans to). Despite the fact that it might be a gross misrepresentation of what being a lesbian is, (I’ve heard Affleck “converts” her in the movie), it meant something just to see *any* representation. Five minutes of Jennifer slowly pressing her bare toes into a moon lit yoga mat, softly and seductively explaining to mouth open,

dumbfounded, straight guy Ben Affleck, why women are truly and unarguably the most desirable form, was more than enough for me.

So, in review...you're saying...that it's men that are at the top of the must-fuck pyramid?

That's all I'm telling you.

Macho Ben leans against the wall.

Loving, caring...sensitive, giving men.

That's right.

You're entitled to your opinion. But let us reconsider women for a minute. Shall we.

Sure.

Their form: Neck. Shoulders .Legs. Hips. I think pretty cool.

As I'm sure the director intended, this dialogue paired with the small amount of tight material hugging Jennifer's hips allowed you to explore her shape. Her skin the color of hot honey. I did think they were pretty cool.

Now, as far as your famous....penis goes...The penis is like some sort of...bizarre sea slug...or like a really long toe. I mean, it's handy, important even. But the pinnacle of sexual design? The top of the list of erotic destinations? I don't think so.

At this point I had never seen a penis, but Mrs. Dvorske, my 6th grade science teacher, told all the girls, during the Catholic version of sex ed., that penises “felt like jello.” So the sea slug description seemed to fit.

One's first impulse is to kiss what? To kiss the lips. Firm...delicious lips. Sweet lips.

Surrounding a warm, moist...dizzyingly scented mouth. That's what everyone wants to kiss. Not a toe. Not a sea slug. A mouth.

It would be three more years before my first kiss (In true Midwestern fairytale fashion, Peter kissed me in a white gazebo at the park after holding a glowing fire fly between his hands for me). And six more years before my first girl kiss (In true lesbian fairytale fashion, the director of the *Vagina Monologues* kissed me backstage).

And why do you think that is, stupid? Because the mouth is the twin sister...the almost exact look-alike of the what? Not the toe.

I wiggled mine a little. I needed to take off my chipping blue nail polish.

The mouth is the twin sister...of the vagina.

The word vagina was never used around me. It was a “private part.” Not to be talked about, touched, or displayed, a secret that should probably still have a chastity belt around it.

And all creatures big and small seek the orifice. The opening. To be taken in, engulfed. To be squeezed and lovingly crushed by what is truly...the all-powerful, all-encompassing. Now, if it's design you're concerned with... hidden meanings, symbolism and power... forget the top of Mount Everest. Forget the bottom of the sea, the moon, the stars. There is no place, nowhere, that has been the object...of more ambitions, more battles, than the sweet, sacred mystery...between a woman's legs that I am proud to call...my pussy.

I had turned the volume down, and moved as close to the staticy glass screen as possible, leaving a fingerprint in the dust.

So I guess this is just my roundabout way of saying... that it is women who are, in fact, the most desirable form. Wouldn't you agree?

Mouth open, dumbfounded, straight guy Ben Affleck and I agreed.

I nodded.

I so agreed.

That made *perfect* sense to me.

My I could hear the water stop pouring as my dad finished the dishes.

I changed the channel.

2. What Every Guy Wants to Hear

It was senior year of high-school, shirt off in the front seat of my boyfriend's car, parked in darkness by trees and a railroad track. He was nice enough, from the rival all boy's Catholic school; he took me to see *Rent* for our first date. It was several dates later that despite our Catholic upbringing I was quickly losing items of clothing. The only other guy I had dated had been chess club (and scholar's bowl and debate team) shy; this was the first time I had seen anyone naked. I could hear a train approaching, tracks beginning to murmur and then rumble; I was nervous about being caught with my fleshy, 18-year-old breasts exposed, and kept looking toward the manufactured yellow light in the distance, waiting for a car to appear. After looking at all of him, I inwardly shrugged my bare shoulders, and said "Um... so now what?"

He took this question as my innocent Catholic school girl naiveté (only encouraging his high school testosterone level), but my inherent disinterest in the place of hormonal curiosity now seems to me unmistakably gay. I feel sorry for this young girl, vulnerable and still so far away from beginning to figure anything out.

In high-school being anything other than straight only existed as a sin in religion class and a secret in the hallway. Being "straight" was the expected norm to the point that it didn't need a name. Just like people who eat lunch aren't labeled "lunch eaters", marrying someone of the opposite sex was a given. Everyone gets hungry around noon.

As it would turn out, I had a different kind of appetite.

3. Corrine

When you start dating someone of the same sex for the first time, you get asked a lot of questions. Straight people questions: Are you just going through a phase? How are you going to have kids? Could I be gay? Do you think you're just confused? Gay questions: Do you want to be on our rugby team? Who do you think is hot on the L Word? Butch or Femme? But one question repeated in different ways by everyone gay, straight, and in-between is: Who was your first girl crush?

For me this was especially hard to answer, because it's hard for me pin down exactly when I knew. I could say J. Lo was my first girl crush, but I knew from the start it never would have worked out between us. When my first girlfriend and I had the "how many people have you slept with" conversation (a whole new experience once you are considering both men and women, as well as a continuously evolving definition of what exactly "counts" as sex), she asked me if I had ever liked a girl in high-school.

My immediate reaction was to say no. I was on dance team and around girls who liked to roll up their uniform skirts daily, but I can honestly say I wasn't interested in them. However, there was one girl slightly outside my friend group, but nice enough that she still said hi in the hallways. Corrine looked disheveled and unique even though we all had to wear khakis and polos. She was mysterious, obviously too cool for the Midwest, but still Kansas nice. Guys wanted her and girls thought she was *chill*. In the first writing class I took in college, I wrote a long, "fictional" paragraph about her butterscotch hair she twirled around a BIC pen.

I was trying to explain this out loud, and thankfully, my more experienced girlfriend smiled and found the words I could not: “You just *really* wanted to be her friend.”

And that was exactly it. I didn’t want to see what was underneath her pleated skirt (not yet), I just wanted to be around her. Nothing ever happened between us, (Corrine was always in a passionate on-again, off-again relationship with a guy named Nate), but I think the paragraph about her hair turned out pretty well.

4. Backstage

My junior year of college, I tried out for, and was cast in the *Vagina Monologues* (of course an indicator on its own), and spent rehearsals wondering about the sexual orientation of the other cast members. My only actual college boyfriend had broken up with me four months ago, (a boyfriend I had asked, “What would you think if I dated a girl?”). Finally, at one of the first dress rehearsals, an aggressive, Jewish girl with red glasses started an informal, “Are you gay?” inquisition of everyone in the theatre. Not wanting to say no, and not ready to say yes, I conveniently went to the bathroom.

A couple days later, it was opening night, and I was sitting on a counter down the hall from everyone whispering memorized lines from my monologue: “Turned out that Bob loved vaginas. He was a connoisseur. He loved the way they felt, the way they tasted, the way they smelled, but most importantly he loved the way they looked.” Deb and her red glasses walked up to me.

“I’m really glad you were cast for that monologue. It really seems to fit you.”

I blushed, said thank you, and curiously watched her check me out. I was flattered and nervous. She had a low, soft voice, and was the first girl I knew of that wanted me. She kept talking, but I had stopped listening. I “let her” put her hands on my knees, and leaned in for my first girl kiss.

We would kiss again backstage. We would keep kissing in the bathroom, at the cast party, in the car, in the bathroom at the cast party. But for now she left me alone to finish practicing my monologue. I whispered to myself, “In the light I watched him looking at me and he was so genuinely excited, so peaceful and euphoric, I began to get wet and turned on. I began to see myself the way he saw me. I began to feel beautiful and delicious — like a great painting, or a waterfall. Bob wasn't afraid. He wasn't grossed out. I began to swell, began to feel proud. Began to love my vagina.”

5. Queer Kids

On a campus sidewalk as familiar as my kitchen floor, I walked past flat, academic buildings and green, Kansas trees that had been shading me between classes the past four years. I was sharing the sidewalk with a gay boy named Kevin, who was excited to show me the new black peace sign tattooed on his wrist. He had a plump, endearing stomach, noticeably blonde hair, and lavender TOMS that made his feet ballerina slim. We were in the same place at the same time friends; not seeking each other out, but circumstantially talkative. Our conversations stayed in undemanding territory, we had both taken *History of LGBT people in America*, a class I

was both nervous and excited about. A class I kept waiting for our teacher, Milton, to ask for a show of hands: “How many people are gay?” Of course, this never occurred. Something I was both grateful and disappointed in, considering at the time I wasn’t sure which label I would have raised my hand for.

He asked me about my girlfriend (whom I had met in our class). When I told him people always thought it was funny in a clichéd kind of way that we met in a women’s studies class, he was surprised. To him, it made perfect sense: “Of course the queer kids would take the queer class.”

As a speed walking, ponytailed girl with identical triangles branded in curvy embroidery across her chest cut me off, it clicked. The thing is, I was one of the queer kids who took the class, because I needed to know how to be gay (or whatever version of gay I was). I needed the class like accountants need people to talk about taxable income, like journalists need people to talk about why social media is important, like teachers need other people who understand exactly how much change our education system needs. Before I had known how to say it out loud, I was instinctively searching for a community. I wanted someone to invite me to a gay bar, to lean in and kiss me, to say, “Hey, you’re a part of this.” I wanted to figure out what the “this” was. To know other lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender people. To know that even though I was in Kansas, and had dated guys, and had gone through a passionate I-love-Jesus-And-He’s-My-Friend phase, that I could come out, be my version of the acronym, and walk down the street holding hands with a girl.

Quick Visit

The man next to her in the waiting room pressed his lips to the metal top of a can; the sick, sweet smell of caffeine juice reminded her of the mountainous funeral drive she took with her brother two summers ago. On the highways connecting Arkansas to Missouri, connecting mom's family to dad's family, they stopped to refill; there was one death for each state, the borderlines separating sorrow. She chose a shocking pink bottle with a time limit. After six sips it made her hands feel the softness of the steering wheel in a new way.

The man's drink was a disagreeable green color, but it still reminded her of death.

She crossed her legs, and shifted her hand to cover up the hairs on her pale ankle. It had been a few weeks, and she did not anticipate taking off her pants. She would try to say no if they told her to.

The offending bumps were far away from her legs: under her shirt, under her arm, under her skin. They were lurking, quiet bumps, still trying to decide to grow or give up. In preparation she had worn a black bra and a shirt with thin straps underneath her sweater. Just in case. Already hating the stranger she dressed up for.

She wanted to pick a different seat, but worried the man would stare at her rudeness. The room was too small to escape him completely. He would wonder why she was here, and peruse her legs. He would say I like your scarf and, when she was polite, What are you in for? He would think this was hilarious, and she would think about shooting him in his left shoulder. She would

pour the rest of his drink out to watch it mix with his blood. It would smell better. She didn't change seats.

Sitting in a room of sickness is uncomfortable when you feel fine, a wallflower at a dance—everyone else having all the fun. She debated the distraction potential of coffee table magazines: parenting, celebrities, and outdated *New Yorkers*. Not in the mood for the attitude, she chose second best.

Tips for better sex during pregnancy: 1. Act sexier than you feel. Social scientists have shown that acting can affect feeling. 2. Give yourself a sexy look. Buy yourself a new nightgown that reveals what is appealing. 3. Do not set yourself up for a sexual slow down. Get past the yucky early months. 4. Have a sex talk. Avoid projecting your sexual uneasiness onto your mate. He will probably find you more attractive than ever. 5. Share your body. Your new breasts will be all his for the rest of the pregnancy—what a turn on without resorting to silicone! 6. Avoid sex as service. Don't let your mate feel you are always servicing him (or her!), even though sometimes you are. 7. Think round, think big. Your new roundness provides more surface area for your lover to touch.

Her hand moved to rest on her stomach behind the magazine. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting. Her body trying to protect itself and speak at the same time. She wished to live in a time that allowed her to know her body in a different way. She would be able to feel her blood coming as the moon changed, and squeeze developing cells out if she didn't want them there. If she had to choose positive on pregnancy vs cancer, she might choose cancer. Everyone would be on her side of the fight.

Magazines love putting the word sex on the cover. Guaranteed audience. She gave up, and swapped for the fiction section. A woman was cooking in a country house in Maine. The food sounded lovely, but unfulfilling. She wanted to cook like the woman in the story, but the best food she had ever eaten was made by her grandma in Missouri. This grandma didn't know what chutney was, and would never go to Maine. This grandma did live in a country house, but Missouri country is different from Maine country. She liked her finger to turn the page. Something bad happened to the woman in the story, and something bad would probably happen to her as well. She hoped nothing bad would happen to her grandma, but when you are old, your people keep dying. All your hope is in your grandkids, and then your grandkids are gay or smoking pot or democrats or not getting jobs or dating a black person. This grandma will admit these things in whispers with emphasis on each syllable. Gay becomes homosexual, pot becomes marijuana, and black becomes the quietest disclosure with the most meaning. But then this grandma says, Bless her heart. The other grandmas nod, and talk about the president and what big cities do to people. Their pie crusts warm to gold, and they end up being mostly right about the cities.

She drank some of her coffee, breathing in to try to block out other smells, and gently kissed the white paper to see what the details of her lip print looked like.

A man mispronounced her name, and she walked across the room to him. He said, I'm Travis and turned expecting her to follow. We should already know what to do. If you could just step up, Travis said. She wanted to take off her shoes before she was on the scale. And her sunglasses and her sweater. Set down her coffee. It was only fair. Travis held his clipboard.

She examined the black thread near her toes, and did not look at the three digital numbers. They were loud enough. Travis wrote on his clipboard. She wanted her own clipboard to take her own notes about Travis, but she already knew his three numbers would be lower and better than hers. He put a thermometer in her left ear. She felt the cool plastic point slide in, and stop. Two nurses walked by, but she did not turn to look. He would do it again if she moved. They said hi to Travis. He nodded, and the thermometer beeped. Travis wrote on his clipboard.

In room two, Travis abandoned his clipboard. That's all I need from you, he said.

Disinfectant was trying to cover up the smell of sick, but it was failing and she was out of coffee. Sitting on the paper, her feet dangling, she reached to her wrist for a hairband, but was rejected by bare skin, like reaching out for your glass of water and realizing you left it in the kitchen—grabbing nothing but air.

A white coat entered, and said hello I am the doctor. He looked at Travis' clipboard. When did you first notice them, he said. He said them instead of bumps. She said, I don't know, and he touched her throat with thick fingers. A thumb touched her chin, and light spilled into her mouth; he checked to see how deep her red was. He told her what to say. Aaahhh. Again he said. Again. He stuck a different instrument into her left and right ear. In his pauses she heard what hollow sounds like. He stretched her left and right nostril. Two fingers touched the folds hiding the bumps, and pressed down. Searching. They made several quick circles. He placed one hand on her back beneath her shirt; her bra clasps did not intimidate him. Deep breath he said. Deeper he said. And again. His stethoscope searched toward the top. He pulled away quickly. Her space between cloth and skin felt empty.

It is probably nothing, he said. Let me know if you feel any different in several days. He took Travis' clipboard, and she was alone in the room.

Annie the receptionist was full of alrighlys, and handed her a fake flower with a pen on it. The flower said, I am Annie's, and she will know if you put me in your purse full of gum wrappers and trashy lipstick. I will refuse to bloom for anyone else. She wanted to pick apart the fake petals one by one, and she wanted to tell Annie that really it's bad karma to keep fake flowers. Instead she complacently signed her name and left.

A.

At home she asked Dee if she could touch her armpit to compare. Maybe they were just there because she had more fat on her arm. Dee's skin was warm, and smelled like breeze. She put one of Dee's fingers in her mouth to taste it. Not like chocolate or espresso or hazelnut. These are the foods they say Dee's skin resembles. Dee returned the gesture. She did not taste like strawberries or cream or peaches. These are the foods they say her skin resembles.

B.

At home Mike is waiting. He does not ask, but tells. He is waiting to tell her about endangered birds from Christmas island off the coast of Indonesia. He hands her a press release,

and tells her to read about the exact number of frigate birds that are now at risk in Jakarta Bay. Most people in Jakarta are completely unaware that one of the world's rarest seabirds is living at their doorstep, Mike said. He wants to go help team member Fransisca Noni with her project. The project team will work with local people. Including fisherman, fish trap owners, wildlife management, harbor management, and boat operators. The project will develop a detailed picture of the threats, Mike said.

How do you say their name, she asked. Like latte?

No, more like cricket, Mike said.

She wonders if Mike would like to borrow Travis' clipboard. It might help with this project.

She wanted to take a frigate bird to the doctor, and hand it to him dead. Its long forked tail would droop over the sides of her cupped hands, and Travis would wonder what that black thing was when she walked by. Later he would ask, what is that smell?