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## How to Water the Body

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# **HOW TO WATER THE BODY**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master's of Arts, English

By

Taylor Lorenzo

May 2019

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# **HOW TO WATER THE BODY**

English

Missouri State University, May 2019

Master of Arts

Taylor Lorenzo

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis begins with a critical introduction about metamorphosis, both literal and figural, in short fiction. I analyze essays on metamorphosis by Marc Chenetier and Stanley Corngold and apply them to my work as well as other works which are influential to my own writing style and form, including Lydia Davis. Metamorphosis in literature is a reaction of the human condition of resistance to an end. In utilizing transformation, writers can explore the longing humans experience to continue themselves while revealing deeper truths about written subjects. After the critical introduction, you will find flash fiction and poetry. My work is especially concerned with how an initial observation of the transformation of an object moves my narrators into a state of daydream and, ultimately, places my characters into a transformation of their own. My work experiments with form and voice and explores themes of heartbreak and loss, especially those of female narrators.

**KEYWORDS:** metamorphosis, daydream, transformation, observation, flash fiction, poetry, feminism

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A Master's Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate College  
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May 2019

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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## TRUTH THROUGH METAMORPHOSIS AND IMAGINATION

I have always been fascinated with the wandering mind, with those moments throughout the day when our cognizance drifts off into the unknown, many times without our realizing. These daydreams lie at the center of many of my pieces, and are bookended by first, an initial observation (by the protagonist) of an act by another character: a man stirring red dye into milk, a lover's body shattering to pieces, an ex leaving town and changing their name; and second, by a physical reaction by the protagonist: the narrator grabbing her own breast, the narrator in a state of inaction—frozen from helping her broken lover, the narrator killing her ex's plant. In my work, the interaction between imagination and metamorphosis acts as a catalyst by which a deeper truth is revealed.

In his essay, "Metamorphoses of the Metamorphoses: Patricia Eakins, Wendy Walker, Don Webb," Marc Chenetier discusses the existential crises humans experience by merely existing, observing that, as a coping mechanism to the inevitable thought of our own deaths, "...each day we dream of being something else, for a nanosecond or an entire day..." (384). Chenetier posits that metamorphoses in literature are a result or reaction to the human condition—the condition by which we, as humans, "resist the idea of an absolute end and, in transformations that would continue us, we continue to find a charm capable of counterbalancing death" (384). In my poem, "Pink Milk," the fear of death is implied as the narrator's initial observation of a Breast Cancer Awareness ad leads to a brief daydream. The poem begins with the line, "a man stirs red dye into milk for a breast cancer awareness ad" and the narrator observes the color transformation of the physical glass of milk from white to pink. The observation leads to a daydream in which the narrator imagines how this experience would be



more meaningful, both for the narrator and for the performer, if the performer acting in the Breast Cancer Awareness ad was a woman. In the narrator's mind, the man transforms into a woman, and the narrator is able to fantasize what the female performer could experience during the act of stirring the dye—a meditation that could only be had by a woman. As the daydream becomes focused on the imagined female's performance, the narrator ruminates on the effect breast cancer may have had on her imagined performer:

*A meditation  
She experiences because  
She has breast cancer  
Or she doesn't  
But she knows someone who does  
Or she doesn't  
But at least she has the ability  
To note the milk's stages  
As they turn from the color of  
Her fair skin to the color of  
Her nipples*

As Chenetier connects the act of daydreaming to transformation, or metamorphosis, he claims that we act out against the reality of an unavoidable end by transforming ourselves in the mind. He posits that literal (vs. figural or metamorphical)—texts which have characters who undergo a physical metamorphosis, like Kafka's Gregor Samsa—facilitate a space in which “wishes, imaginations, and desires can unfold themselves” (384). Arguably, the narrator's imagined woman in “Pink Milk” is a stand-in for herself, and when we view the narrator and the woman in her mind as one in the same, the metamorphosis is established. The narrator is able to play out her anxieties in her reverie and mediate her own fear of breast cancer through the transformation from observer to imagined performer. The end of the daydream is signified by the narrator's physical reaction of grabbing her own breast, signifying the truth in the scenario her mind has entertained, and then moving her through time to a childhood memory:

*And I realize  
I am grabbing my own breast  
I let go and am a child  
I am outside eating strawberries  
On the steps of the porch  
Watching my mother  
Hunched over  
In the yard  
Picking tomatoes  
From their coarse green vines*

Chenetier points out in his essay that while realization and clarity may be found through metamorphosis, the result of the metamorphosis may not leave the character with a fixed conclusion, and that unresolvedness is true to the human condition. Chenetier writes, “At the same time, it seems, at the close of these readings, that a fundamental question finds in them but a set of rather sobering answers. In literature as in life, it may well be that metamorphosis is no solution at all” (397-98). That is, the metamorphosis does not lend itself to fix any aspect of the original question or problem, but rather, returns the metamorphed character back into herself, illuminated with a new insight or realization but no necessary resolution.

An example can be found in Robert Olen Butler’s short story, “Jealous Husband Returns in form of Parrot.” In the story, the main character, a jealous husband who died while trying to spy on his wife to prove she was cheating on him, is reincarnated as a parrot. Fatefully, his wife buys him and takes him home where he is punished for his past life’s insistent jealousy by having to watch his wife bring home various men. The metamorphosis in this story is literal, and Butler’s choice of using a parrot (a bird who repeats the same things over and over again with the limitation of a minimum-word vocabulary) cleverly mimics the consistent jealous suspicions the jealous husband had of his wife. By the end of the poem, the husband realizes that the issues within his marriage may not have been his suspicions of her cheating, but issues of communication. In his realizations, he thinks, “For a moment I still think I’ve been eloquent.

What I've said only needs repeating for it to have its transforming effect. "Hello," I say. "Hello. Pretty bird. Pretty. Bad bird. Bad. Open. Up. Poor baby. Bad bird." And I am beginning to hear myself as I really sound to her. "Peanut." I can never say what is in my heart to her. Never" (108).

Chenetier questions the effects metamorphoses should have on the resolution of conflict. He writes, "Should we see here a real advance, a point in a cycle, or a kind of comfortable return to a proven narrative whose problems are more or less the same as those from which we want to move away? In other words, is it necessary to have recourse to a thematics and a literary practice of metamorphosis in order to attain one's end?" (398). This question is answered at the end of Butler's story when we realize the narrator is stuck in a cycle of repetition for eternity as the parrot with no transformation back to human, and all he is left with is clarity to what the real problem was in the first place: "Even though I know there is something between me and that place where I can be free of all these feelings, I will fly. I will throw myself there again and again. Pretty bird. Bad bird. Good night" (108).

While Chenetier focuses on physical metamorphoses, in *Franz Kafka: The Necessity of Form*, Stanley Corngold discusses the nature of the figurative metaphor becoming a literal metamorphosis in Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," in which Gregor Samsa—an artist who is viewed by the industrial world as someone with their head in the clouds—wakes up as an actual bug. Corngold explores the reader's understanding of a text by analyzing the figurative metaphor which informs the literal metamorphosis. Corngold states: "*The Metamorphosis* originates in the transformation of a familiar metaphor into a fictional being having the literal attributes of this figure. The story develops as aspects of the metaphor are enacted in minute detail" (49). The figurative nature of Gregor Samsa's identity of an artist underlies the textualized literal identity

of Samsa as a cockroach—that is, Kafka uses the transformation of Gregor Samsa into the cockroach as a literal display of the high class working world’s view of artists as “nasty bug[s]” at the time (49).

An example of this can be found in Milan Kundera’s novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. On page 16, Tereza dreams that she is in the corner of a room watching her lover, Tomas, making love to his mistress, Sabina. Kundera writes, “The sight of it caused Tereza intolerable suffering. Hoping to alleviate the pain in her heart by pains of the flesh, she jabbed needles under her fingernails.” In this scene, Tereza’s dream manifests her emotional pain into a physical pain, and even though both of these pains occur in her dream, she wakes up still feeling pain in her fingers, heartbroken. Tomas attempts to comfort her, and upon hearing her dream, realizes that Tereza copes with her emotional pain by counteracting it with an act of self-inflicted pain. This is proven true days later when Tereza overhears Tomas making plans with another woman, and he finds her in the bathroom swallowing a bottle of pills (17). Tereza’s identity in the novel is constituted by her tragic love for Tomas—a man who cannot be faithful to her, and the pain he causes her emotionally affects her in both her waking life and subconscious, exhibiting itself first as heartache and then, as physical injury.

Corngold’s essay discusses Kafka’s technique of using figures of speech as a foundation for metamorphosis. He writes, “The opening recounts the transformation of a man into a monstrous, verminous bug; in the process, it appears to accomplish still another change: it metamorphoses a common figure of speech” (49). In a similar manner, my poem, “The Body Breaks Itself” utilizes this technique, bringing the figurative act of breaking a loved one’s heart into a literal sense. The piece begins with the narrator remembering the moment her lover’s body shattered into a million pieces in front of her. She watches as the fragments flutter around like

“confetti skin / confetti hair / confetti genitals.” However, in this moment when the narrator should rationally help her lover, instead, she moves into a daydream:

*And I thought  
I should grab the  
Precious modicum  
Mix the particles  
With water and glue  
Mummify my lover into a  
Paper mache person  
Crack it in half  
Press it against my ear  
Call out  
Hellooo  
Listen  
For the  
Ocean*

In this scene, the narrator tries to reconcile her lover’s broken state by imagining herself piecing them back together. However, even in the fantasy, she cannot avoid breaking her lover again. As the daydream phases back to reality, the narrator is observant in her inability to act:

*But instead  
All I could do  
Was think about  
How the stranges thing  
The body can do  
Is become a stranger to itself  
And the most  
Horrific thing I could do  
Would be to interrupt  
The intimate moment  
My lover’s body was having  
Without mine*

The last 6 lines unveil the narrator’s revelation: her lover must go through this alone. However, the piece also implies deeper truths about the narrator. The moment she breaks her lover in half, she calls out, yet nobody answers. This represents the narrator’s fear of being alone. Like Chenetier said in his theory on metamorphosis, we act in rebellion against an inevitable end

by allowing our minds to wander, to wish, to imagine. However, in both “Pink Milk” and “The Body Breaks Itself,” daydreams are used as magnifying glasses which locate a truth the characters may have been avoiding. Furthermore, the truths revealed in both pieces find commonality in that they are grounded by fear.

In “Pink Milk,” the narrator’s truth is a fear of breast cancer. The narrator transforms into another woman—a woman who either has breast cancer or a woman who knows someone who has breast cancer. This isn’t just a transformation of the narrator into another woman—this is a transformation into *every* woman. In “The Body Breaks Itself,” the fear is loneliness after heartbreak. These fears are as inevitable as they are true, and holding to Chenetier’s question of the results of metamorphoses, both “Pink Milk” and “The Body Breaks Itself” do not end in a resolution—the fears of breast cancer in the former poem’s narrator are not resolved, but rather, more fully realized, and the narrator in the latter poem is only able to *imagine* fixing her broken lover.

The use of imagination to reveal a truth about a character can also be found in Lydia Davis’ work. In “The Fears of Mrs. Orlando,” the titular protagonist is prepared for any dangerous situation she may find herself in. Mrs. Orlando’s fears start out as rational fears: falling down stairs, slipping in the tub, a gas leak (7). However, as the story lists more of her fears, we realize Mrs. Orlando is imagining things (footprints in the dirt, an obscene telephone call, prowlers below her window) that aren’t there. On page 11, Mrs. Orlando comes home and, upon noticing many of her items are misplaced, fears an intruder was in her home. However, she later finds those things in odd places around, and we realize that Mrs. Orlando shows signs of Alzheimer’s. Finally, at the end, Mrs. Orlando believes there are men outside her house. She cannot sleep because of this fear and goes outside to circle the house all night long. She never

finds anyone. While the use of Mrs. Orlando's imagination in this story is not voluntary, but rather an effect of a disease, it functions as a way to tell the story of her fears and to reveal a truth about her that even she may not know. By the end of the poem, readers realize that these fears will never subside, but continue on for her for the rest of her life. What my work aims to do is to view a moment (sometimes mundane, like watching an advertisement in "Pink Milk"; sometimes fantastic, like a body breaking in "The Body Breaks Itself") and examine what these situations can evoke through our imagination. In my work, I attempt to explore and portray the mind's capabilities at understanding more about ourselves and the world around us through mental interaction rather than physical. I am concerned especially with pushing the boundaries of how literature can portray thought, and how, through the focus of daydreams in writing, my work can reveal truths and fears which resonate with readers in thought over plot.

## POETRY

### Summer in the Boiling Thermometer

*After Daisy Fried*

Here's the refrigerator I dragged from the wall, empty and more hollow than the summer hungry cave. A retrace; a quick once-over for casualties: three thumbtacks, a five-item grocery list, a single napkin origami swan stained with au jus, and then this, here behind the ice box: a photograph c. eight years ago, the missing half of the set we took on our way to Eureka Springs, our summer in the boiling thermometer

our Midwestern flick, our hot n' heavy picture show. The summer I rolled my shorts up higher than normal, placed a naked polaroid on your dash, then fell asleep passenger side. A week before, you drove me out to the house you grew up in, peeked through the windows into your old room—now an office for good country people who don't have children. I dreamt of your late father, the preacher, walking the halls of your good country home, blasting good Christian radio every morning after your mom walked out. I woke to you listening to NPR, asked you about your politics—your response: strong and rambling. If I could go back, I'd tell you this secret: *I don't even know where to begin to understand your beliefs, let alone my own.* And now, still, I am the structured geometry of chaotic impulses, feeling the guilt of myself unchanged, the guilt of being caught, buzzed in the afternoon act: the cleanout of my kitchen at 80 proof. I bend the photograph between my fingers, lick off the dust, and there you are, summed up in the snapshot, caught mid-turn below an abandoned church sign, unlit and calling out like a dead Las Vegas chapel: *to be almost saved is to be totally lost.*



## **fingers in the mouth**

i was thirteen  
when i read about it  
in a book

a teenage boy did it  
after he removed  
his fingers

from Jocelyn  
on the country  
club lawn chair

and sometimes  
i do it  
but only because

i like how  
easy it is for  
my fingers to slip

anywhere within me

i am in i am out  
i do not require  
man's form

i require only  
that i take off my shoes  
before stepping on  
the welcome mat  
of my body

## **Why I Didn't Water Your Plant While You Were in Oregon**

You have more than one plant and that's more than I can say for myself

I am a flower who needs watering

I am a flower crushed under your size 9 foot

You are wearing heels now instead of work boots

You complain about how hard it is to find a woman's shoe in your size

I always want to tell you to cut off your toes, not because I want to hurt you but because without them you would forget all of the times I had them in my mouth

That was my move

I know because I've seen your feet in those stilettos and they are covered in dirt

You've probably forgotten my move already

Sometimes you stick your fingers in your mouth and I can't tell if it's a signal

I used to be able to pick up on your signals

You used to be a blinking Las Vegas chapel

I would've gotten married inside of you any day

You go by Ariel now instead of Aaron

Someone asked me what that means for 'us'

It means I've learned I'm still thirsty every time you come around me

I had a dream you called me a popsicle and I literally melted

I had a dream we were in a beauty pageant against each other and you won

I handed you a bouquet and fell to the floor and you wrapped the sash around my neck and we still got it on

I won't water your plant because it's old and done for

I won't water your plant because I don't want you to know that it's already dead, and that it sheds its expired pieces as easily as you do

## **Pink Milk**

*a man stirs red dye into milk for a breast cancer awareness ad*

and i imagine he is a woman  
slowly circling the metal stick  
gently so as not to interrupt  
neither dye nor milk

i imagine the observation  
of black dye changing to red  
red changing to pink  
the liquids working together  
to transform into the nipple shade

a meditation  
she experiences because

she has breast cancer  
or she doesn't

but she knows someone who does  
or she doesn't

but at least she has the ability  
to note the milk's stages  
as they turn from the color of  
her fair skin to the color of  
her nipples

and i realize  
i am grabbing my own breast

i let go and am a child  
i am outside  
eating strawberries  
on the steps of the porch

watching my mother  
hunched over  
in the yard  
picking tomatoes  
from their coarse green vines

## the body breaks itself

when the body breaks itself  
the tiny fragments do one of two things:

1) they dissipate into  
the fragile space  
that broke the body  
in the first place

2) they dart off  
in all different directions  
and in seconds  
coalesce back together  
as a separate, new entity

I remember a lover's body  
breaking in front of me  
the fragments  
fluttering around like  
                    confetti skin  
                    confetti hair  
                    confetti genitals

and I thought  
I should grab the  
precious modicum  
mix the particles  
with water and glue  
mummify my lover into a  
paper mache person  
crack it in half  
press it against my ear

                    call out  
                    hellooo  
                    listen  
                    for the  
ocean

but instead  
all I could do  
was think about  
how the strangest thing  
the body can do  
is become a stranger to itself

and the most  
horrific thing I could do  
would be to interrupt  
the intimate moment  
my lover's body was having  
without mine

## Leopard

If we lie outside long enough, under this tree, in this park, on this blanket, maybe we will say *this place is ours*.

Or maybe one of us will realize we want it to be our own with someone else.

We both wonder if the other thinks this.

During the getting to know you stage, I imagine how I will remember the conversations in a year.

We are blotted like leopards from the sun through the canopy of the tree above.

If we had tails, they'd be still and serious.

Getting to know someone requires a study of past relationships.

When I talk about my cowboy poet, I begin to wish he were here.

We were never leopards, never lying outside on sunny days.

We were zebras with the blinds half drawn in my room, yet still so exotic.

I tell you that during the first week we started sleeping together, he romanced the hell out of me each night.

He read me a poem at 2am after we fucked hard on the couch in the den- "First Turn to Me" by Bernadette Mayer.

When I tell you about the poem you ask why I haven't read it to you.

My tail whips and I tell you I don't know why, that maybe I intend to.

Read it, you demand, and I do.

Your tail begins to wag casually and rhythmically.

You're turned on, but I can't tell if it's by sex or romance.

You press your hand on my lower back, and I coil into you like healthy fruit to a rind.

You place your hand on my stomach underneath my shirt and I know later we'll sleep together, but at your place, not mine.

I get a sick feeling, knowing there are no blinds on your windows, just cool open light.

I shudder at the idea that you and I are only animals outside, and that when we fuck later, you'll never put me on all fours.

## **a little gravity**

it is happening  
somewhere, someone  
is on all fours, chair-like

and I am  
here, coalescing  
with the weight  
of you like a  
sturdy workout bench

both palms in dirt and  
arms bent like  
cartoon dumbbells

tangled legs like  
intimate wrestlers  
smashed together like  
naked football

doing a dance  
I taught you but  
you've always been  
two left feet

and I am bruised in the  
reality that  
a little gravity  
can hurt a lot

## **In Fragments**

*after Ocean Vuong*

Separated into continents, my body: liquid and pulp  
spilled across a glass coffee table.  
That's all I wanted to be.

I am still as an unheard voicemail  
a blinking red dot, repeating myself

over and alone in your hollow apartment.

Found a vase of flowers at my doorstep.  
Knocked it over on my way out.

A stubbed toe is a lesson in romance.

I read somewhere that it's better for your house plants to be watered with rain,  
How precipitation from the sky is like a mother's breast milk.

A Styrofoam cup left on the balcony through winter,  
the collection of stale snow melted down by spring  
then by summer, hot and swallowed stale down the throat:

This is how you water the body.



## **when i tell you**

it wasn't what you said  
it was the way you said it,  
you tell me  
either way  
there is no room for me  
in your space  
no room for me  
between  
the crack of the bed  
and the wall  
where i'd gather dust  
and choke on  
your skin your hair  
i tell you  
i would be comfortable  
down there  
choking on any part of you  
and i wonder why  
i always opened my  
jungle gym legs for you  
and wonder why you  
won't come over to play  
even when I have  
already devoted  
my summer body  
to be your playground  
so you can feel  
like a kid again

## **daydream limousine**

can't you see  
i want you  
the same way  
you want me

in a textbook daydream  
we wear matching clothes  
stitch initials  
into each other's

tags, into  
underwear  
we parade around like  
little kids, see

i don't have fantasies  
just memories not yet spent  
and if they remain that way  
then know that

you loved every minute  
licked every toe  
and know that in both scenarios  
i loved you exactly the same

## **Hands Grasp**

Each morning after  
you've left me in sheets,  
I will grab you  
by the hand and pull  
you into me before you are off to work  
and hope that you  
think about that pull  
while you tape boxes and  
cart baby grands  
the way I think about that pull  
when I'm home alone  
running fingers through my bed hair;  
when I'm smoking a bowl  
with my neighbor;  
while I'm sitting in class  
daydreaming of the way  
my hand grasped yours so tightly.  
even when I try to hide it from myself  
I seem to grasp your hand  
tighter each morning  
hoping that just once you might  
choose to fall on top of me  
or grasp mine as tightly as  
I yours  
and pull me out of bed  
and press bodies like a pair  
of clutched palms.

**the whole truth**

you and i  
slipped in the space  
between the washer and dryer

the next day  
on the bus  
I recorded our dialogue

*help me / help you*

i couldn't remember  
who said what

and now I know  
it doesn't matter

because  
you always refer to it

as the night  
you put it  
in the wrong hole

yesterday  
I went back and annotated it:

I am whole when any part of you hurts me

I am whole when any part of you is in me

I am  
forever  
a hole

## close enough

the woman in front of me  
is angry at the butcher.

she asked for a specific quantity  
of sugar cured ham: 0.75 lbs of it

thickly sliced  
only cuts with the  
roasted red skin still  
clinging to the meat.

he grabbed a handful  
dropped the feast of it on the scale  
rung her up for .82 lbs  
said *close enough*

my ex husband did this to me many times  
once, i sent him  
with a list of things:  
paper towels, oatmeal, detergent

what he came back with:  
toilet paper, cereal, fabric softener

*close enough* he said  
while unbagging  
avoiding my face from what he is most afraid of  
what we are all afraid of.

once, as a young mother  
when my son was 6 years old,  
i drove him out

past the highway  
past the orchard  
past the only grocery store

into the small town outside of ours

to his schoolmate's birthday party  
an hour too late.

the yellow balloon tied to the mailbox hung  
wrinkled, half deflated

## **superstitious**

count the number of times you've slept with another  
and I'll count how many thrusts it takes before you cum in this empty glass by the bed

when you've left, I'll spit the same number of times in that glass and cast a spell for bad karma  
to hinge around you for the rest of the day

when you come over two nights later, we'll lay on couches catty corner from one another  
and watch a Christmas movie that makes you fall asleep

I'll wake you up doing a voodoo dance wearing only a string of popcorn I stole from the tree

after eating me and the popcorn, you'll drift back off  
and I'll poke tiny holes in your arm with the needle

a week later when you come over to spend the night  
I'll be sitting in the middle of my room with 20 movies I picked out hoping one of these will  
make you cry

I'll tell you to choose one and you'll bend down and spread them across the floor and fuck me on  
them

afterwards you'll hold me  
and I'll pull a single hair from your head for a spell I'll never cast

## **insignificant marks**

all the running we do  
to wherever the hell we're going  
to hell we're going

and only when I'm alone  
do I look at my reflection  
in the windows I pass

wishing my face was specked with  
freckles like a leopard or the  
tarp beneath your painting in the den

like too many insignificant marks  
to count would be beautiful  
and pointless and

easy and endless  
and right before  
we're over

when you tell me  
we had a good run  
I think

our kind  
would've survived  
had we  
only walked



## FICTION

### **Broken Apology**

You aren't seventeen anymore. Look into your black coffee. Your skin is white enough to create a reflection, and your face forms new creases that you must introduce yourself to. Every day you wake up singing the same song, and every day that song becomes a year older on the Billboard list. Think about your childhood and realize you don't remember the excruciating detail, only the vague relation to a seven-year-old girl who memorized every country's name on a world map. You can't recall the names of these countries, and you can't remember your first kiss. You can, however, remember two nights ago at the bar when a bearded man bought you a beer. You remember how bitter it tasted. Get up. Walk to your car in twelve strides and drive to your friend's house. She will be there making a tomato basil stew with one hand and throwing a seventy-two-inch vase with the other. Stare at the curve of the vase. Stare at the curve of your waist to your hip. See how smooth the vase is. See the hillsides of your stomach. When she focuses two eyes on the stew, walk over to the wheel and knock over the vase. As she screams, apologize, not to her, but to your body: a soft, broken apology.

## **How to Climb the Rope in Gym Class**

When you reach the top, *do not ring the bell*. Keep climbing. Don't stop until you have broken through the roof. The air will be cool when you take your first gasp of breath on the other side. You will notice you have not broken through the shingles of the roof. Instead, you'll find yourself in clean-shaven grass. In front of you, there will be a golf ball tee. Place your chin on the tee and let go of the rope. Let your muscles relax as your body dangles in the gym. The students below will form a line to take their turn at ringing the bell of your body. When someone has finally climbed high enough to reach the tip of your toes, you can do one of two things: 1) Measure the tenderness of their touch; if it is delicate, let them climb the stillness of your anatomy; they will cling to you as long as you remain still. 2) If their first grasp is tight around the ankles, kick and thrust your body, violently, until they have lost their grip; until they have fallen 20 ft. onto the hard, waxed floor; until your shoes fly off your feet; until your head slides off the tee. Let your body slip back down into the hands of the students in the gymnasium below. *Before* they cheer your name, *before* they plead to take photos with you, in your barefoot landing, you will hear what I have been meaning to tell you: *Always ask others to remove their shoes before letting them step on the welcome mat of your body.*

**a stream (or “tap”)**

a clink of my glass and I'm looking into the clear fresh *tastes like tap* she says from across the table and I tap my shoe twice on the ground *tap tap* and she says aloud *tap tap* to remind me she is here and I'm not alone, and I remember the cover of a book I never bought: a woman sprawled on blue velvet fabric; only her arms in view, both arms, and her hands with long nails, unpainted beautiful nailbeds, the moon on her thumbnail rising up the pink. I like to think that this photo was taken in a dark room, and outside the room, the sun was peaking to a hot-wad heat furnace; people walking, sweltering and sweaty; the crack of a sunshine egg on hundred-year-old pavement, melting shoes and melting cat calls. I like to think the photographer and the woman connected to the arms on the cover share something beyond the chance to photograph and be photographed. I imagine the woman was naked, and at some point during the creation of this book cover, he got naked too, because the white sand moons on her nailbeds rising up the midnight velvet convinced him it was night when it was really 3pm, and when someone can convince you that something in this world is different than what it actually is, then you become intimate whether you like it or not. Like when the weather is 60 degrees in December and it feels like spring, and you convince yourself for a moment that *it is* spring, and the world can astound you in those small discrepancies-- and when someone else can do that to you just by being naked, in that moment, you are wrapped in a secret together, which feels a lot like love, even if it's just a one-night-stand and the next day, you feel a little gravity of regret pulling heavy at your ear lobes as your belt buckle clinks to a conclusion because it turns out it wasn't love, but *it was worth it*, the photographer thinks while looking through the photos he took of her while she's next to him, wrapped in the blue velvet, and together, they are compelled. He shares his vision, lets her know that her nakedness is too much to handle, so he'll crop out everything but

her arms, because *it's what they don't see, you see? it's what they don't see that evokes something*, the way the moonbeds on her nails rise high into the blue velvet; the way the image of only her two long arms imply that an off-screen lover has caused her to throw them up in ecstasy, and she nods and says *yes, I see* and she feels fluid with him, the blue velvet falling off her shoulders. The sun is out, but they don't see it, so it doesn't exist to them in this dark room, and as I imagine him reaching his arm out to touch her shoulder, I knock my glass off the table in the restaurant, and the woman I'm with darts down to pick up the glass. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry* she says as she picks up broken glass, sharp as a casual diamond and painfully unapologetic. Because there's always another glass knocked over by a person, and there's always another person apologizing for the klutz who knocked it over, and you never want to be the klutz, you want to be the person who calls first to apologize-- even if it's on the telephone and you're a little drunk because you've been drinking since noon, and the argument you had the night before caused her to sleep at her apartment, caused her to walk home drunk and angry, and when you let her stumble out the front door, you wonder why she is with you in the first place. You wonder what it sounds like to say *I'm sorry* first, and you are compelled to do it now. You want to know what saying *I'm sorry* sounds like when it's followed with *I am too*, and in this moment in her absence, you feel like you could go out into the world and tell an imperfect stranger you love them, hand them your phone and tell them to call their mother just to say *I'm fine, I'm fine, I love you, I'm fine*, and you reach for the phone because this is all that matters to you now, and you knock over the bottle of rum the two of you were drinking, and the glass doesn't break but the mess is a continental body on the floor, and you travel a finger through, wondering if you were as small as an ant, if this would be the Atlantic, if this would be your threshold, and you wonder if ants can swim, and if they could, would they make it across this spill, and you pull your finger

through the rum and pull the liquid out into little peninsulas from the continent of rum on the floor like fingers or points of a star, and when you remove your finger you remember this is rum and an ant would die in the rum, couldn't swim in the rum the way you can, lying here on the floor, and you tell yourself *I could do it, I could swim in this rum*, now calculating and realizing that half of a bottle of the rum is still 80 proof, but you know you couldn't swim alone anyway.

## **Backstory**

The end of the story is that they all looked out, beyond their place on a porch, and each person is saddened in some way. Before this ending, when you feel each character's shade of pain, thick and gray on your tongue, the characters were having a fine time.

Before the ending – and before the beginning even – the characters spent all day on the rich man's yacht. Before the first line, you should know that they all care a lot about each other, and that some of them are married and that one of them is already unhappy with her life. However, they were out for, say, eight hours, from around 11am to about 6:45pm, and the beaming hot sun played a part in their irritability, so it isn't purely their fault.

## **How to Water the Body**

*After "Deer Dancer" by Joy Harjo*

Nearly everyone had gone home for Christmas except us. We were stuck in the Midwest cold, accumulating the snow into Styrofoam cups and letting it melt down to take home later to pour into our dying plants. Downtown, we were the only ones in the bar, all women. We grew heavy and drunk on the bar stools while the beginning of a winter that would be remembered for the worst ice storm in decades blew white magic outside. Days from now it would impress us with a delicate ferocity that would break off the shingles on houses; the storm would leave at least one of us widowed, another with a fractured wrist, another pregnant. We were a cult who shared an unknown longing that drew us to this solitary place, igniting an unspoken promise to our relatives on the coast that we would never come back to them.

Gabby stumbled into the joint last. She was the drunkest of us all. She gave us each a turn, wrapping her pink scarf around our necks and pulling us in to her. "What's love to you, sugar?" We came to learn how to become intimate within our space, hoping, together, someone could teach us how to manage our bodies: flat-chested, curved, top-heavy, ankle-less. The first step to romance we already knew: loosen the body and mouth. This was self-taught.

Jenny said she'd been loved before, but not in that romantic sort of way. "I just want a man to look at me from across a room—right through other people, right through the person he's making small talk with—and stare. I guess that's really what I'm here for. I want to learn how to be stared at." Gabby laughed. Her husband had gone on a three-day business trip for two weeks so far, though she was still counting.

"What's the use of being stared at?" Gabby asked. "I'll tell you how romantic being stared at is. My husband pulled me aside at a convention of over 300 people. He said he saw me across the ballroom floor and couldn't *not* come over to read my name tag. We slept together that

night in his hotel room, and I scrawled my number down before giving it to him. Hell, I didn't think I'd ever see him again, but a year later, we were married. Telling that story never got old until he came home from a seminar last month and I found a name tag stuck to the bottom of his suitcase. *Hello, my name is Charlene.* Charlene. Now, our story makes me sick. Isn't that romantic?"

Tina put a quarter in the jukebox and played Black Velvet. Her hands gripped the jukebox like a steering wheel in a car out of control. Gabby went to wrap her scarf around my neck, then lost her balance and fell to the floor. Her heel jabbed into my shin and drew blood. I took to slow dancing with Tina who gripped me tight, our heads smashed together like intimate wrestlers. Jenny's ass fell half asleep on the floor as she held Gabby's head in her lap, cooing the lyrics softly into her ear. Tina's divorce papers had been hung on the fridge in her apartment for almost two months now, unsigned. Some of us were really here to learn how to let go.

When she finally did, I left the women, the pink scarf wrapped around my bleeding leg. Managing the walk up to my apartment, I drifted drunk inside. The Styrofoam cup I left full of snow next to my dying plant on my way out was now melted down to a cup half empty. I picked it up and drank it down, singing a prayer for my dying plant.



## Every Living Thing

Once, on a drive to the country outside of the suburbs where they lived, her son had asked her about a dead rabbit he had seen at the edge of the playground fence. She had asked him to describe it to her so that she could decide how much of the idea of death she would relay to him.

“Its fur was mostly gone and its eyes were red. It was dead. It was stiff.”

“You didn’t touch it did you?”

“Yes.”

She glanced at him in the rearview mirror and told him, “It happens to every living thing.” She paused. “Are you sad?”

“No. It happens to every living thing.”

She was startled to hear him repeat her. She turned her head back to him and smiled, and he did too, mirroring her once again. She wondered now how it would’ve played out if her son had asked her husband about the rabbit. She figured he would’ve said something like, *There’s a place animals go when they pass, and they get to play with all of the other animals and pets that have passed.* Wholesome, she thought, and it irked her to think about this.

## How to Shoot a Cereal Commercial

A staff member pours as much glue from a gallon into a glass milk jug. We use glass because the director says it reminds the viewers of home. Even if you didn't grow up on a farm, like little Abner, the director says, parents will be reminded of the good old days when the milk man came by in a baby blue truck and skipped all the way up to the door in a white jumpsuit and crisp hat and delivered glass milk jugs to the parents of the parents whose kids watch the commercial— and that's who's buying the cereal after all, isn't it? Then we get a big-named kid to eat it on the commercial, the director says, and kids will declare loudly to their parents at the grocery store that they *gotta have it!* and that's the tag line right there on the box!

\*

The kid from the commercial is from that movie where the burnout's ex-girlfriend comes to his door with the son he didn't know he had because she left him right there at that same doorstep the day she found out she was pregnant. The drug dealer takes the kid in and turns his life around while the ex-girlfriend, who has already turned her life around, goes on a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Africa. The commercial kid and the drug dealer both won Oscars for their performances, but not the ex-girlfriend because what did she overcome, really? The performances were stellar and the kid is only thirteen years old, but the movie is rated R and is about overcoming addiction and his parents want to get him as far away from that scene as possible, so they tell his agent and the agent books him a commercial for Chunky-O's cereal. The parents want him to be in the next Disney Teen Vacation Movie so they are trying to re-brand their son.

\*

Farmer John wakes up every day at 4am and leaves waking the kids to his wife. She gets up an hour after him to brew the coffee and sing *O' what a beautiful morning* throughout the house and the sun isn't even out yet. The kids aren't allowed to eat cereal for breakfast—only hearty helpings of eggs, bacon, sausage, and milk—and they sometimes crave the sugar because they never get to eat it. On mornings when the kids beg for it, the farmer and his wife tell them that it's too processed and unhealthy and the kids tell their parents it's made of corn and wheat and corn and wheat is healthy, right? It's basically right there in their backyard so why can't they have any? So the parents let the kids watch cartoons that morning before going out on the farm to do their chores.

\*

The commercial kid was on set for almost a year during the filming of the drug movie so he had to be home-schooled in his trailer in the parking lot. His tutor was this gorgeous brunette twenty-something with a short bob and freckles. She wore this little blueberry beret and on test days, if the commercial kid passed, she'd let him wear it. It smelled like her strawberry shampoo and would linger around his headspace. After she'd leave the session, the commercial kid would find her hair on his head or shoulder and he'd save it in the drawer right below the television in his trailer. It didn't smell like strawberries anymore and sometimes he'd purse his mouth and slide the hair through his tight lips because even though it didn't smell like strawberries anymore, it was so smooth—the way he imagined her skin would feel if she'd ever let him touch it.

\*

There were cast and crew parties on the weekends that the kid was invited to and he begged his parents to let him go. They said yes only once because the movie had come out and was a

success and their son won an Oscar and because the party was at the director's house. The director knew the kid was only thirteen and that the adults would be drinking alcohol so he bought bags of candy for the kid to eat and put them in large, colorful bowls on a separate table on the opposite side of the kitchen. But around 10:30 everyone was loose and the lead actor and director offered the kid a beer because they felt like it would give them a bonding experience and because they said he deserved it and because the lead actor and director don't have kids.

\*

A staff member pours as much glue from a gallon into a glass milk jug while another has three boxes of Chunky-O's and pours them all into one big glass bowl. The staff member with the three boxes of cereal has to pick out the biggest cereal chunks and, with a little paintbrush, sweep the cereal dust off each piece. This staff member is a woman with small hands and filed down nails and is very delicate with the pieces. She also works as a hand model.

\*

The hand model sometimes comes in late to work because she has to wash and lotion her hands constantly. She can't prepare her own meals and she can't scrape ice off her car and she definitely can't do her own dishes. She is almost always wearing gloves and she gets attention at bars from guys because of it. When they crack a joke about the gloves, she tells them why she's wearing them and they ask her to take them off so they can see those god damn glorious hands, and when she does, they get hard almost immediately. The hand model isn't the prettiest girl in the bar but those hands, those long, slender fingers are all it takes for her to make connections in the industry.

\*

The commercial kid is like a son to him, the lead actor tells the director at the party, both drunk. When they clink their glasses they decide it's in their best interest to let the kid know. They grab a beer each and one more and find the commercial kid sitting with his feet in the pool, watching some of the drunk cast and crew swim around. He's smiling, and the lead actor observes how pure this kid's smile is. He thinks the kid looks just like a young Leonardo DiCaprio or River Phoenix, and he tells the director. Well which is it, the director asks. Does it make a difference? The lead actor asks, and the director tells him it definitely does—one won an Oscar and the other overdosed.

\*

When shooting a cereal commercial, we have to make sure the lighting is just right. Two tall men stand around the center table, each with a giant foil palm leaf; each directing the fluorescent light to either the kid or the bowl of cereal. The set looks nothing like a kitchen from *Country Living Magazine*. It is not intricate or ornate, it is simple and uncluttered without anything besides the table, the bowl of cereal, and the glass milk jug. Minimal is the new black, the director says, and the tablecloth is a solid baby blue and the backdrop is a baby pink. These colors are chosen because they are innocent, the director says. Mothers who watch this commercial will subconsciously trust these colors and, therefore, trust the brand. This color is appealing to really any woman, the director says, and I know women.

\*

Sometimes when we film these commercials, the hired kid doesn't make it through. We used to go through the headshots looking for a kid with the "it" factor, but it turns out, a beautiful

pageant kid doesn't always mean the kid is going to be a good actor, even for a thirty second commercial bit. That's why it's important to get a kid with acting chops and why we lucked out with the commercial kid who won an Oscar. Some kids throw crying fits, some kids freeze up, some throw tantrums, so we have standby kids whose parents, with their fingers crossed, whisper curses under their breath that the hired kid blows his chance so theirs can make their debut. Haley Joel Osment's career launched after Robert Zemeckis saw him starring in a Pizza Hut commercial, and that story is told and retold amongst the wannabe child star parents as if it were scripture. All you need is one good commercial, and your kid could be the next Haley Joel Osment.

\*

A staff member pours as much glue from a gallon into a glass milk jug. We never know how long it'll take to shoot one of these commercials. It depends on the kid's acting abilities and whether or not the kid is in a good mood, so real milk can't be used. We use glue because it's thick and creamy, unlike real milk, and allows for us to arrange the cereal into the bowl, and even if the shoot takes hours and the glue dries because the kid's parents are there coaching or because the kid isn't in a good mood, the bowl of cereal looks exactly the same.

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