



Missouri State
UNIVERSITY

BearWorks

[MSU Graduate Theses](#)


Spring 2016

The Terrible Women I've Been

Meagan Rose Stoops

As with any intellectual project, the content and views expressed in this thesis may be considered objectionable by some readers. However, this student-scholar's work has been judged to have academic value by the student's thesis committee members trained in the discipline. 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.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://bearworks.missouristate.edu/theses>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stoops, Meagan Rose, "The Terrible Women I've Been" (2016). *MSU Graduate Theses*. 2370.
<https://bearworks.missouristate.edu/theses/2370>

This article or document was made available through BearWorks, the institutional repository of Missouri State University. The work contained in it may be protected by copyright and require permission of the copyright holder for reuse or redistribution.

For more information, please contact BearWorks@library.missouristate.edu.

THE TERRIBLE WOMEN I'VE BEEN

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in English

By

Meagan Rose Stoops

May 2016

Copyright 2016 by Meagan Rose Stoops

THE TERRIBLE WOMEN I'VE BEEN

English

Missouri State University, May 2016

Master of Arts

Meagan Rose Stoops

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a collection of eight short fictions exploring the characterization of unlikable women in fiction. Each work herein incorporates the themes of romantic relationships and denial of traditional female gender roles. The female characters within embody traits of bitterness, passion, perseverance, rage, cunning, and pursuits of self-preservation and love as motivating forces. Through these characters' actions and choices, the narratives dissolve and reject the commonly accepted portrayals of women in fiction in an attempt to grasp at a greater, more complex truth of human nature and the female psyche.

KEYWORDS: unlikable female characters, romantic relationships, gender roles, heartbreak, control

This abstract is approved as to form and content

Jennifer Murvin, MFA
Chairperson, Advisory Committee
Missouri State University

THE TERRIBLE WOMEN I'VE BEEN

By

Meagan Rose Stoops

A Masters Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College
Of Missouri State University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts, English

May 2016

Approved:

Jennifer Murvin, MFA

Michael Czyzniejewski, MFA

Matthew Calihman, PhD

Julie Masterson, PhD: Dean, Graduate College

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee first and foremost for their time, patience, and instruction. To Jen Murvin for taking a chance on me even though our acquaintanceship was short at the outset of this endeavor and who continues to serve as an inspiration; to Mike Czyzniejewski for his instructive workshops which fostered and shaped nearly all of the works found within these pages; and to Dr. Matt Calihman, who provided me the opportunity to pursue my graduate studies and has given me three years of wonderful conversations and sagely advice. I am truly grateful for their encouragement and the imprints they have left on my fiction. I would also like to thank my fellow graduate assistants who in the last two years have served as my friends and mentors. Though there are too many to list, I truly hope each of you know the gratitude I have for your involvement and solidarity in this insane and marvelous academic pursuit.

I would also like to thank my family; especially my sisters, Rachel and Jenny. Without opening your homes and your ears for those three hour phone calls, I truly do not know where I would be today.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
L'Amoureux.....	19
Bindings	30
Arrhythmias	41
Association Fallacy	44
An Encyclopedia of Breakups	47
Slipping	51
The Puppet Master	61
Baby of Mine	68
Works Cited	75

INTRODUCTION

To say I am an old soul when it comes to writing is both true and misleading. In practice, I have called myself writer since the age of six, when I first pecked out five pages of fiction fervidly on a 1980s typewriter at my parents' kitchen table. Now twenty-three years of prose stretch behind me, telling a tale of a writer who has tested her metal throughout not only her personal life, but her long-running academic life as well. But the little known secret is this: in all of my study, until reaching my time here at Missouri State University, I have never been exposed to fiction theory or craft within a classroom. For all the positive feedback from classmates and professors alike, I have ever felt an imposter in the writing community. Somehow over the last three years of my academic life, I have carefully disguised myself as a writer who is either meticulously applying the rules, or strategically breaking them.

This confession comes as little surprise to those who know me well, who have likely heard it before in the quiet recesses of their offices or the corners of our social lives when I am certain no one judgmental is listening. Coming to terms internally with my untrained hand was at first stressful, feeling deficient in comparison to my peers, every workshop creating wracking anxiety. Then the realization I was gliding through unnoticed washed over me like a calm. Having succeeded in my masquerade for this long, why out myself here in the final moments of my academic career? Like all of the works in *The Terrible Women I've Been*, the answer lies in a basic dedication to the truth; not a universal truth, amorphous and arguably fictitious itself, but rather a truth of character: unadulterated, raw, and often dark. In *Burning Down the House*, Charles

Baxter describes this as “expos[ing] elements that are kept secret in a personality, so that the mask over that personality... falls either temporarily or permanently.... What emerges is a precious thing, precious because buried or lost or repressed” (113). This version of truth as I have come to understand, even celebrate, within my fiction lies in my history as an ever growing writer and therefor warrants a closer examination.

The adage “To write well, you must write what you know” hardly applied to a six-year-old whose range of experiences went barely beyond the backyard. Instead, in true age-appropriate development, it was an endeavor in mirroring the behaviors (or in my case, the plots and characters) of others. My first short story was a strange hybrid of the themes from Beverly Cleary’s *Dear Mr. Henshaw* and *Nick-at-Night* reruns of *The Wonder Years*. My crowning younger self’s achievement was an assigned fanfiction, incorporating the characters of Elvira Woodruff’s *George Washington’s Socks* into a historical moment of my own choosing. Whether it was my execution of language or my unwillingness to shy away from themes perhaps too mature for an eleven-year-old, my teacher read aloud my story to the class, solidifying my need to be a writer. I invited critique early on, not initially realizing the praise of family and teachers did not count as critique. Lucky, too, as a true workshop is likely to crush the spirit of most elementary-aged children. I was fostered in these moments, then later fueled by happy coincidence in my teenage years when I met a fellow writer willing to forge a friendship in our craft.

It was here my focus first shifted. Up until the age of fourteen, my work was a smattering of short fiction and “novels” (in my young brain) that reached around 100 to 150 pages at their greatest. These were mostly stories of girls in love, the complicated romances an inexperienced youth, reared on Hollywood ideals and gender stereotypes,

was able to envision. This friend then exposed me to the fantasy genre through the young adult novel *Sabriel* by Garth Nix, something entirely foreign and untested, yet fascinating. After all, the fairytales from which my immature romances derived, as well as my collection of medieval and Renaissance themed artwork, had clearly pointed in the direction of this unexplored world all along. A *Disney*-fed child returning to the mothership. From this seemingly fated meeting until my return to academia in 2013, my goal was clear. Like many others on the same bandwagon—a bandwagon I still intend to ride one day—I wanted to create an entire universe filled with magic, possibility, and a general disregard for the laws of physics and other concrete realities.

I was accepted to Missouri State University's Master of Arts program on the back of the beginnings of my fantasy novel, entitled *The Son of Avarice*. Even in 2013, my intentions had not changed. To find myself now, three years later, with a short story collection grounded entirely in our everyday world that reflects my first forays into writing (albeit more nuanced), initially seemed strange to me. But it is through careful examination and guidance that I have found the central thread of my writing life, the primary artery that has kept my passion alive through the many bruised egos and fears that I am little more than an imposter in this craft: the creation of complex, engaging characters.

I knew early on in my fantasy genre endeavors that we do not live in a world of dragons, spells, and swordfights. How could I connect to those reading my work if my content was entirely divorced from anything they might relate to? A conjuring of the elements, a sharp line between good and evil: these do not evoke the emotions that kept me returning to familiar books and films time and again. To expect *my* piecing together

of words to do so would have been a delusion of grandeur, not to mention somewhat pretentious, and would likely leave me in the realm of the unpublished. What could I bring into magical worlds to make them comfortable and desirable to inhabit? How could I make the unreal familiar?

The answer lay then, as it does now, in the characters and the complexity of both themselves and their connections to the varying elements around them: be it their world or the characters alongside them. Interaction, depth of emotion, flaw and virtue—the things that forge our own friendships, romances, conflicts, and self-perceptions. The dragon is less compelling than the infallible hero, true. But the infallible hero is likewise far less compelling than his intricately woven counterpart, whose moves and countermoves within the narrative are subject to flaws that we see in ourselves. Suddenly the hero is no longer a concept, but a kindred spirit; one whose journey is deeply important and personal to a very human, fallible audience. This idea in itself is certainly not novel. John Gardner notes this in *The Art of Fiction*:

“...the writer who denies that human beings have free will (the writer who really denies it, not jokingly or ironically pretends to deny it) is one who can write nothing of interest... Stripped of free will—robbed of all capacity to fight for those things they aspire to and avoid those things they fear—human beings cease to be of anything more than scientific and sentimental interest” (43).

These ideas have provided the foundation for my fiction at large and especially in the works that comprise *The Terrible Women I've Been*.

Having little knowledge of craft or theory, as I have confessed, the themes for this collection came to me largely by accident. “L’Amoureux,” first written in 2013 and the oldest piece in the collection, was an entirely personal exploration in what Dolezel calls a “possible world” within my own life. In moving through my own divorce, I was

presented with a host of theories and rumors regarding its circumstances, some naturally not altogether flattering. “L’Amoureux” then served as the actualization of the choices not taken in my own life, of a possible world others believed to be valid. Like so many before me and around me, I used this short story to process my own situation, the raw emotion I was feeling, and my interpretation of the emotions around me. And it was my imposed relegation to the role of a pariah, no matter how misguided, that inspired me to create and even tout the unapologetic character of Lily. Her motivations seem both to us and to Adrian entirely self-serving and devoid of remorse. She appears at once cold and detached, unrepentantly burning her wedding mementos, while still demonstrating great passion and resolve in her socially unacceptable decisions.

Lily acts as the precursor, or prototype if you will, for the binding thread of this collection. *The Terrible Women I’ve Been* evolved over the course of the last year from a simplistic but arguably powerful overview of the damages and resulting motivations of heartbreak into something altogether greater and arguably less examined: the portrayal and celebration of unlikable female characters in fiction.

Unlikable women in fiction is a debate that has been occurring for some time, analyzing notable characters such as Edith Wharton’s Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* and Kate Chopin’s Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*. In recent years the conversation has circled around a discussion of Claire Messud’s 2013 novel, *The Woman Upstairs*, and her interview regarding the character of Nora Eldridge with *Publisher’s Weekly*. The question “I wouldn’t want to be friends with Nora, would you?” posited to Messud prompted the sharp response: “For heaven’s sake, what kind of question is that? Would you want to be friends with Humbert Humbert?” Messud’s full response included the

names of several other widely known, and widely disliked, male characters from classic literature. Though not explicitly stated by Messud, her reply has been interpreted by many to be drawing the line between the acceptance of unlikable male characters and the unacceptance of her unlikable female Nora, conjuring up this sexist differentiation once more. Not only does the female character shirk the social notions of self-sacrifice, nurturing, and demureness with her actions in the text, but the female author is also knowingly doing this; essentially, compounding the denial of these norms. Both female writer and female character are expected to seek approval from the readership. For both to overtly refrain from doing so challenges our commonly held conceptions.

In response to this interview, *The New Yorker* surveyed novelists Donald Antrim, Margaret Atwood, Jonathan Franzen, Rivka Galchen, and Tessa Hadley regarding the subject of likability of their own characters in this seeming double-standard within literature. Atwood's response confirmed that these questions still surface, asserting both that "Intelligent readers do not confuse the quality of a book with the moral rectitude of the characters" and that "We love to watch bad people do awful things in fictions... The energy that drives any fictional plot comes from the darker forces..." ("Would You Want to Be Friends..."). Franzen confessed he "hate[s] the concept of likeability" and that we would "unfriend a lot of people if [we] knew them as intimately and unsparingly as a good novel would" (*ibid.*).

But it was Tessa Hadley's response to *The New Yorker* that I feel best grasps the idea of truth to which I earlier referred: "... it's so obvious to a writer that they need the grit of bad behavior, or recklessness, or sheer cruelty, or suffering in order to write something true and vivid. No one would want dreary novels full of people behaving

considerately, would they? We wouldn't recognize ourselves" (*ibid.*). This is an echo of Mary Troy's statements in her 2007 article "Why We Need Unlikable Characters":

"Perhaps for literary writers the creation of so-called unlovable characters is the ultimate narcissism: We see ourselves in most, if not all, of them. And the truth is, most lives are hidden under many layers, and people like those we create do in fact marry our sisters and move in next door. We just don't know it" (Troy). We resist these concepts in female characters, though, because it challenges the common gender stereotypes of our society.

The idea that a woman must conform to stages of moral development that value and foster nurturing and caring falls apart when we see her behaving in ways that defy these traits. In the past, this defiance made a female character purely villainous. But in fact, these complex and questionable decisions simply reinforce their humanity. When constructing the characters in *The Terrible Women I've Been*, I felt compelled to represent female characters who are guided by motives of self-preservation, attainment of their desires, control over their often uncontrollable situations, and adherence to codes of their own design (the morality of said codes neither here nor there, being a central node of debate over their unlikability); to articulate, as Messud said, "unseemly, unacceptable experiences and emotions."

This need to create raw women acting in ways many readers would easily condemn came about only recently. This point of recognition draws a definitive line between the works in this thesis. Stories created during and post-Fall of 2015 ("Association Fallacy," "An Encyclopedia of Breakups," "Slipping," "The Puppet Master," and "Baby of Mine") are not only stronger due to my growth as a writer and the

benefits of my continued study, but also due to finally having a clear focus in mind to complete this collection.

Examining each of the works within *The Terrible Women I've Been* serves primarily as an overview of my education throughout the last three years; beginning first with my raw, unguided ideas and ending with fiction whose origins can be traced to specific inspirations and theories. What follows is a proverbial roadmap meant to introduce my fiction as well as outline the path I have traveled as an ever growing writer.

I have discussed the opening story of this collection, “L’Amoureux,” in brief already. Though its early nature lends itself to a lack of intentional theoretical applications on my part, Baxter’s section on “Counterpointed Characterization” still provides a lens for its design: “With counterpointed characterization, certain kinds of people are pushed together, people who bring out a crucial response to each other. A latent energy rises to the surface, the desire or secret previously forced down into psychic obscurity” (112). Perhaps one of the most interesting and revealing comments provided to me in workshop was that Adrian and Lily’s relationship reminded my peers of an addiction narrative. These characters bring out this crucial response in one another, and have throughout the history conveyed within the text. While I do not claim to have used Baxter’s knowledge in the story’s inception, I am able to identify now an element I unconsciously began to work with, and could now apply more intentionally during revision.

As the oldest work, “L’Amoureux” has likewise become the most heavily revised story of the eight. In its initial draft, the narrative was originally in third-person present, with the psychic distance being heavily centered on Adrian. I have made no secrets here

of my personal investment in this work—I, too, was a divorced woman trying to navigate the emotions and circumstances of said event; and no matter how dissimilar I made Lily’s story from my own, it felt at first impossible to inhabit her psyche out of my sheer closeness to the matter at hand. So Adrian, naturally, was the choice for the point of view.

These initial drafts opened a critique regarding the false tension of the opening scenes at the bonfire, and general remarks regarding confusion about the overall plot. This story perhaps has been my greatest realization as a writer that the story I intended to tell was somehow not the one that made it to the page, and no amount of small editing would solve this problem. “L’Amoureux” was meant to be an exercise in viewing a character (Lily) through the eyes of another contained within the same situation (Adrian). But, in truth, the story was always hers. This simple truth demanded a rewrite in its entirety, recasting the narrator and adding in elements vital to Lily as a character in order to allow the reader to better understand the emotional decision making and the anguish of the narrative’s conclusion.

Lily’s unlikability does not need to be asserted. Her choices are those that our society has condemned for as long as my existence in it, and far before that. Chopin’s Edna Pontellier is a notable predecessor. Like Edna, Lily has entered her marriage dutifully and tied herself to a common female role; and like Edna, Lily finds herself detaching from this role in search of a greater sense of self. The result of which is the deterioration of her marriage. The reaction from an audience to Lily’s affair is almost predictable. I sought only to complicate that by creating very human reasons and fears for her involvement in it. Baxter asserts that “passion knocks decency right off the stage” (130). This is true for Lily’s character on many levels: not just her pursuit of Adrian as a

lover, but her determined pursuit of herself despite the unforgivable path she takes in search of this.

“Bindings” I believe serves as the outlier of the collection. One could argue that Elle is judgmental, obsessive, distant, and perhaps a master of self-deception (asserting she cares nothing for finding her father but pursues him anyway), primarily because these were traits I intended to ascribe to her. But these are traits we all possess at some time or another, sometimes more circumstantial than integrated parts of our personalities. Like much of my early work found within this collection, “Bindings” served as an experiment in my writing. Inspired by the lines “No more curses you can’t undo/ Left by fathers you never knew” from Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Into the Woods*, I wanted to create a narrative where a loose end was finally tied, years after its initial unraveling.

Elle is not undone by her father’s absence; in fact, she asserts that “he had never mattered before, and he didn’t need to matter now.” Rather, she is seeking closure for the one mystery remaining of her mother’s life, acting almost unwittingly as a transport for the book to come full circle. But this is yet another site for revision; a moment where my intent only came across so well in the first rounds of revision. It is not enough for Elle to act as mere agent—and, in truth, she does not. Her denial of her own investment is merely an attempt at self-preservation from her own deeper emotions. She is perhaps the most sympathetic character in the collection, and as such “Bindings” warrants further examination on my part in future drafts still to be fully realized.

“Arrhythmias” is the first of three flash fiction pieces in the collection. This work was an entirely new endeavor for me. Not only had I never written a flash piece before, but I had also never worked with fabulism. Initially this narrative was triggered by the

artwork of Chiara Bautista. Her artwork often depicts heartbreak through women using their hearts as mediums—either knitting sweaters with their heart as the ball of yarn, or fashioning harps out of the arrows in their chests to create music. These images were so novel and poetic to me that I wanted to translate similar concepts to the page.

In his short story “The Ceiling,” Kevin Brockmeier’s use of the object descending from the sky and slowing crushing the town runs parallel to the narrator’s failing marriage. This “grand metaphor” provided me with a method of delivery for “Arrhythmias.” The object (or ceiling) in Brockmeier’s narrative is inescapable and defies explanation. Characters are able to interact with it only through touch; in the case of the narrator, he is able to see himself reflected in the ceiling’s surface while accepting his fate beneath it. This scene and the narrator’s inability (or arguably, apathy) to manipulate the object in any way prompted the question: what if the fabulist element was not mere reflection of the character or scenario, but an intimate part of the character? This literary method, which I knew of but had little exposure to prior to reading “The Ceiling,” solidified the concepts for “Arrhythmias.” The grand metaphor is that of a heart predisposed to vulnerability due to the opening in Marcie’s chest; one that becomes larger, and her heart more exposed, as the parallel between the physical abuse in the story and the emotional abuse of heartbreak is drawn.

The decision to keep this piece as flash fiction was purely strategic. To extend the metaphor to a lengthy story would have been, in my opinion, too heavy handed and belabored. I choose instead to create something more poignant and simplistic through a series of brief vignettes that shaped the opening of Marcie’s heart the most profoundly, eventually leading to her choosing to remove it from herself. Marcie’s unlikability is far

less overt than her counterparts in the collection; in fact, she is, to some, highly sympathetic. Her unlikability lies, I believe, in a more recent trend within pop culture regarding female characters and heartbreak. We have grown over the last ten years, primarily due to Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series, to despise females who crumble irreparably under the weight of lost love. We do not admire them for their weakness or complete lack of self-preservation, which Marcie displays in her final act. She gives in to her victimization—a trait an audience of popular culture has come to loathe.

Written in the fall of 2015, “Association Fallacy” was part of a series of shorts. The great debate to arise from this short was whether or not the character Jane merely feels detached from Michelle's death due to their lack of interaction (and feels guilty about her detachment), or if Jane is somehow sociopathic. I do not pretend that I purposely created this question, but I willingly admit to choosing not to fully answer it in the current draft within this thesis. Jane's role as an unlikable female within the collection feels solidified in either case, as does the unlikability of her supporting cast members, Tina and Summer. These girls are bitter, overly dramatic, and rash in their actions. By comparison, Jane appears level headed, which seems to only add to her unsettling distance from Michelle's suicide. While not inspired by any particular work or theory, this piece was the first written with the idea of unlikable female characters in mind as a vehicle for the storytelling.

Also written in the fall of 2015 as part of a series of shorts for a graduate fiction workshop, “An Encyclopedia of Breakups” is perhaps the collection's sole attempt at humor. The voice of the unnamed female narrator is meant to be biting and sarcastic, and at times unnervingly detailed. This piece was inspired by Susan Minot's “Lust,”

borrowing partially both from the story's structure and content. "Lust" is likewise narrated by an unnamed female who relates her sexual encounters in a series of vignettes, presumably from her teenage years to her early 20's. Throughout the narrative, Minot also interjects moments of reflection: "You wonder how long you can keep it up. You begin to feel as if you're showing through, like a bathroom window that only lets in grey light, the kind you can't see out of" (14). This use of vignettes hinging on a common theme or experience helped shape the initial concept for "An Encyclopedia of Breakups." Minot's character is raw and honest, the language powerful as she conveys her loss of self within her sexual encounters, feeling less and less the agent of her actions and more like "a piece of pounded veal" (16).

I wanted to take Minot's concept of the variation of a single experience, one that is often repeated throughout a lifetime, and its effects on a character. "An Encyclopedia of Breakups" on the surface conveys relationships (or rather, their endings) that are absurd, humorous, petty, and even abusive. And like Minot's character's inability to break her own cycles in "Lust," my female narrator continues patterns of choosing abusive or neglectful partners. However, she is hardly victimized. Her fixation on genitalia and sexual misadventures paint her as slightly superficial. Burning Andy's collectibles in 'Kryptonite' reveals her to be vindictive to an extreme, 'Quiet' demonstrates her tendency to be emotionally abusive, and 'Xerox' points to a much deeper level of use—viewing her partner as a place holder, in effect dehumanizing him. The revelation in 'Voicemail' that one of her partners is married asserts a more common example of socially unacceptable choices. Her level of unlikability may be debatable due

to its less overt nature (due primarily to the narrative structure), but she is by no means blameless. Rather, she represents very real actions on a broad spectrum.

Baxter's concepts in "Counterpointed Characterization" were applied more intentionally in "Slipping." He posits that "stories often arise when two characters who hardly belong together are forced to inhabit the same frame of reference" (114). Baxter cites Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" as an example, and Raymond Carver's "Cathedral" is another version of this concept. The characters of Joanna and Matt have two very different goals in mind when agreeing to venture on this road trip together, literally trapping them in a car and then in a town where they are familiar with only each other. Joanna wishes to escape her circumstances: the breakup, the impending miscarriage. Matt is dragging both his questionable and unseemly past *and* his intentions regarding a relationship (sexual or otherwise) with Joanna into the same frame. This creates both tension and an exploitation of these characters' darkest traits.

Joanna is not only bitter about her failed relationship with Paul, which consumes most of her thoughts for the story, but she has also used this bitterness to remove her emotions regarding the miscarriage. She has detached herself to a point that using Matt as a means of completing the process results in a scene that creates a level of horror and discomfort. Though Matt is not meant to be liked, Joanna's use of him (whether for the trip or the sex) is likewise deplorable.

One of the two newest pieces in the collection, "The Puppet Master" borrows heavily from Pam Houston's "How to Talk to a Hunter." Not only was I influenced by Houston's use of the second person perspective in "How to Talk to a Hunter," but I found

when I sat down to write “The Puppet Master” it demanded to be written this way—in that strange, not fully understood way fiction sometimes writes itself.

“How to Talk to a Hunter” opens Pam Houston’s story collection *Cowboys Are My Weakness*. Her second-person narrator struggles throughout the narrative with her knowledge that the hunter, her lover, is uncommitted and even unfaithful to her and her continued desire to pursue the romance. The scenario Houston outlines is almost too familiar, I would argue, for many who have found themselves in similar situations and certainly struck a deep, almost too real chord for me. The narrator finds herself losing her identity in this exchange: “He will have lured you here out of a careful independence that you spent months cultivating” (Houston 14); yet she continues seeking the advice of her “best female friend” and “best male friend,” who question her attachment and understanding of the hunter’s persona, then suggest she “let him sleep alone a few nights” (15).

It was within the attempted power play that the narrator tries so hard to execute, as a means of making the hunter realize and commit to his attachment to her, that I found an element I wanted to use within my own fiction. In “How to Talk to a Hunter,” the second-person narrator is attempting to, as the cliché goes, play the game. I wanted to create a character who more than played the game (winning or losing notwithstanding), where her will is merely in conflict with another player’s. Rather, I wanted her to control the pieces like a chess master, one who is able to anticipate another’s moves and even force them into the corners of the board through strategic planning. It is this manipulation, of course, that creates her element of unlikability.

But it is too simplistic, I argue, to simply write off the second person protagonist of “The Puppet Master” as seeking revenge against her ex-boyfriend. She is exacting retribution, to be sure. But if this were her only motivation, would we see her at the narrative’s conclusion in the arms of her rekindled lover? It is a need for revenge coupled with her desire to reenter the romance on her terms, terms that allow her to feel secure and protected from the previous romance’s injuries. She wants what she wants, is willing to manipulate to attain it, and finds comfort and resolution in her own mastery of controlling the situation. My hope was to create someone both slightly reprehensible for her actions, but somehow fearfully admired for them as well. *The Awakening*’s Edna Pontellier figures here again. Though many of her actions in the novel often amount to selfishness, her rebellion conveys power and independence. We admire her motivations and her will, even if the manifestations of these challenge her likability.

“Baby of Mine” came about after reading Antonya Nelson’s “The Unified Front.” Nelson’s story, though told from the perspective of the male character Jacob, focuses heavily on his wife Cece’s characterization. Cece is consumed with her desire to conceive, the lack of which has left Cece bitter and resentful. She is often judgmental of other mothers around her, unkind in her treatment of her husband, and neglectful of the needs of their marriage (quite often leeching the romance out of it). Naturally the lack of sympathy comes from the fact that we are seeing these events through Jacob’s lens, which may be reason enough to examine her character more closely. But the reveal that Jacob convinced her to abort their only successful pregnancy years before gives her a profound potential for empathy and understanding. To me, this reveal somewhat dismissed her unlikability, though the story remained very powerful. I wanted to create a

character who would willingly deny her role of motherhood in favor of her marriage, which brought Violet's narrative to fruition.

Violet's primary motivation, as many of the females within this collection, is self-preservation. She does not believe another pregnancy will be any kinder to her or her family (especially her husband Ken); however, she also believes to openly discuss the abortion will also result in dissolution of her marriage. This conflict demands a choice. In many classic examples of literature, a female character such as Violet is often punished in some way—made to drink poison or left in utter ruin. It is not only Violet's decision to deceptively terminate her pregnancy that challenges her likability and the tropes of females in fiction, it is also her success. Whether we wish to see her as pure villain or some form of antihero, depending on readers' opinions regarding abortion and the level of acceptance of her convictions to have one, the lack of traditional literary justice allows the narrative a deeper sense of reality: a closer reflection of our own universe where punishment is undefinable and often unexecuted.

In truth, the most difficult part of examining one's work under a critical lens such as those I have employed here is that I see, more often than not, the many opportunities for revision. I doubt I am alone in this. Explaining the stories, the intents, what we hoped to convey with our writing demonstrates to me that this process is ever circling—that writing is a series of endless transformations. George Saunders describes a story as “a thing that is full of dozens of crossroads moments,” and that we as writers are “trying to develop... the ability to see, at a given moment in a story... all the inherent possibilities...” This is true both of the microcosm of the single author and the macrocosm of literature as a whole. An article published by *The Atlantic* outlined that the

publishing industry saw a rise in “ill-natured, brilliantly flawed female protagonists” in 2015 (Beck). So while unlikable female protagonists continue to be a central node for an unfair critique, the trend seems to be that authors are asserting them into our literary culture more as time progresses. My goal in creating these stories was always to represent darker truths we all know to be real, without casting the woman as purely an archetypal villain. While actions may create feelings of reprehension in the readership, the motivations which govern said actions are at their most basic level highly universal and undeniably human. It is an exploration in the capabilities, no matter how devious, of the woman to seize control and exercise her own agency.

My desire is that the themes and characters found within my work incite visceral reaction beyond mere shock value, as well as provide opportunities for discussion and critical thought to those who encounter them. It has been a constant pursuit and learning process for me to translate the complexity of human nature into the humans I have tried to create within my work. To say I am a champion in the growing acceptance of unlikable women in fiction is merely a hope that I may in some way, time and fortune willing, provide a greater contribution to this vein of fiction at large, which I believe to be a pursuit of a vital truth to the human experience.

L'AMOUREUX

Lily holds her breath beside Drew, trying to keep the effort concealed, a thousand irrational fears racing through her brain while the filing clerk eyes their divorce paperwork closely. One misplaced decimal point might keep them married. Drew might take it as a sign. A golden chain dangles from the clerk's thin-rimmed glasses, swaying with every squinted look, and Lily feels a swirling sickness rising up with every motion as though the floor is moving and not the chain. She half expects the clerk to ask "Is this really what you want?" but then remembers the judge had already asked them that. And Drew, in his final act of chivalry, had said yes. She feels the need to grab his hand, waiting for a hitch to prevent the rubber seal from finalizing it forever. But then, who grabs the hand of her soon-to-be ex-husband?

Lily knows the clerk no doubt saw a hundred divorces a day, yet somehow she still looks judgmental. If every single one phased her, this lady was in for worse than wrinkles. But the stamp falls, loud and purposeful, just like everything in this place. Elevator doors that close too insistently, gavels on podiums. Everything punctuated like the end of a sentence. The ink is more gray than black and it leaves Lily with a sense of something unfinished, needing a sharper line.

She and Drew had parked side by side when they arrived, a fact Lily regrets now that it's time to leave. There's a linger in his step, the tension of two people who an hour ago would have kissed and gone back to work or home. But the severance of a rubber stamp has stripped away the commonplace and replaced it with dead air. He eyes her too closely, maybe tracing her face for the mirror of his own regret, she supposes. She can't

be sure if he finds it there in the end, only able to give a slow head nod that conveys little more than “well, that’s that.” He tells her he’ll send her leftover things within the week, and she at least has the courtesy to wait for him to drive away before pulling her phone out.

It’s done, she texts to Adrian, *I’ll be back in two hours. Meet me at the campsite behind Carrie’s old house. Get a fire going.* Adrian’s response is a short *OK* and she starts the ignition.

Lily resists the urge, barreling down the interstate, to release the affidavits sheet by sheet out the window, letting them go like ink-etched doves. Instead she crams them in the glove box, hoping to forget them there like the bank pens she’s stolen and that extra just-in-case tampon. A necessary thing often wiped from her thoughts until the necessity is negated with disuse. Through choruses of female power anthems, she envisions her box of wedding mementos awaiting her just inside the apartment door, SCRAPBOOK scrawled across the flaps. She’s been planning this little ceremony for months, and between her bouts of relief she slips into a giddy longing to see Adrian’s mop of hair. The thought of finally kissing him in public causing her to press down hard on the gas pedal.

It isn’t until nearly three hours later that she reaches the edge of the small ravine leading down into the woods. Adrian had never called to ask where she was, and she can only assume he is still there, dutifully waiting on her by the creek bed. She ties back her dark curls before starting her descent, the earth and rock beneath her slick with last night’s rain. The smell of the bonfire in the autumn air reaches her nostrils, heady and hanging in the chill. Smoke tendrils guide her forward, invoking cartoonish images of

beckoning pies cooling on windowsills. And in an effort to keep her eyes on the rising gray cloud in the near distance, she slips and streaks her ass with mud, box flying out from the crook of her arm. She hasn't walked this ravine in ten years, yet she is certain she'd slipped in the same spot before.

Adrian, lanky, cigarette chomped between his teeth, breaks through the small line of brush and scoops the box up. "You all right there, Lils?"

Lily grunts at the nickname, mostly to herself, and slaps the dirt from her ruined jeans. "Grand." She pulls the box from his grip and flashes it at him with an odd sort of flourish. "Ready?"

Adrian's grin is more Cheshire cat than sincere, teeth too wide and too white like Chicklets gum from a 50-cent dispenser. He bows with a sweep of his hand, gesturing to the direction he had come from, ushering her forward with a "m'lady."

Pebbles crunch underneath her feet, scents of pine and fishy water mixing with the smoke. The bonfire is much smaller than the ones she remembers, the ones that came up to Adrian's head, roaring with too much firewood and stinking of kerosene. When Carrie used to invite them all out into the hot nights of high school summers to swim in the creek in their underwear, hollering the way only kids of southern Missouri knew how to, passing around an old cowboy hat between long pulls of Boone's Farm strawberry wine. Lily would never wear white panties because her teenaged butt wasn't firm enough and she wasn't good at shaving her crotch the way the older girls were; her white cotton bralette was swept downriver the last time she came. And in ten years, all the campsite (though she's not sure anyone ever actually camped there) had to show for the passage of time was the creek shrunk back closer to the pines.

Sixteen-year-old Lily, someone she prefers to forget. When she would have looked at Adrian over thick black glasses, firelight glinting off a mouth full of braces and her regrettably oily skin. She tries to make herself out at the water's edge, her own ghost, and can only see Adrian in his old swim trunks and the spiked hair of his youth. Beside her, he tosses another few tree limbs into the flames. He reaches over to her and pulls a stray leaf from her hair, drawing her into a kiss. She lets the box fall to the ground, pebbles displacing with a rattle.

“Well hey there.” Her voice is languid, breathy, skin pricking underneath his thin fingers.

“Hey back.” She feels his fingers twitch against her before he pulls away, grabbing the box at her feet with chatty hands. Little ticks he's developed since the head trauma three years ago, when they nearly lost him. Leave it to Adrian to rush in half-cocked and challenge some thug on the street. She's grown used to his erratic movements, the way he forgets most faces that aren't hers now. “Let's get this show on the road,” he says.

Lily sits cross-legged in front of the fire, picking at spare bits of mud ground into her denim as Adrian sets the box between them. She asks for his pocket knife, which he doesn't have, and one of his cigarettes. Holding the filter between her teeth, she slices the clear packing tape with her newly manicured nail, the first one she's ever had, red and glossy in the dwindling light. As she bends back the cardboard flaps, tobacco falls loose into the box.

“You never could roll these damn things right,” she says.

The few leftover things from her and Drew's wedding stare up at her in an array of pastels and sentiments from people who were only half hers, but had paid for her honeymoon anyway. The box had come with her when it was just a separation, moving her into her brother's spare bedroom; a time to think things over that she had agreed to insincerely. She'd written SCRAPBOOK across it in front of Drew, as a meager attempt to make him happy, to assert some devotion she was never sure she had. But she'd left it taped shut, un-catalogued and preserved only for the sake of pretending she didn't want to let it all go. And it's only her driving need for symbolism that spares it all from being tossed in unceremoniously. She pulls out a thin crown of ivory roses tied together with a silk ribbon and with barely a pause tosses it into the flames. The paper and ribbon catch and burn quickly until only the coiling wire frame remains to blacken. The pop of the twine reminds her of the gavel that morning. A period. Final.

The bonfire christened, Adrian then reaches his hand into the box, snagging a brochure in a palette of ocean blues with a thatch roofed swim-up bar, pictured under white letters: *Cancun*. She watches him give it a short, indifferent once-over before flicking it away.

"Why here?" he asks her after a minute of silence and a few more small items between them: tickets for parasailing, a commemorative postcard of an elaborate multistoried hotel.

"What do you mean?" She pauses, a card in the shape of a tiered cake floating between her thumb and forefinger.

"I just mean why did you want to do this here? I don't think I've been here since I was in college."

Lily tosses the card into the bonfire.

“I like the water,” she leans back, gripping her ankles, “and the smell. I’ve thought about it a lot in the last few years. I remember standing over there,” she nods with her head towards the creek, “the whole place lit up with fireflies. You coming up behind me and wrapping your arms around my waist.”

“That didn’t happen,” he says, in a rare moment of certainty that he’s remembering correctly for once. And he is, though she doesn’t want to admit it, but she hardly has the heart to convince him otherwise.

“I like to think it did.” She grabs another handful of cards, sacrificing them one at a time. “Anyway, it’s a good place to be alone. And the only memories I have tied to it are good ones. And the only person I have tied to it is you.” The airline tickets go next. “It seems like a good place for starting over.”

The chirping cicadas grow louder as darkness creeps over them. Lily finds a stack of wedding photos and divides them in half with Adrian. Freeze frames of smiling guests laughing, dancing, and talking over glasses of wine. Close-ups of centerpieces decked with tea lights and color-coordinated napkins. Shots in vivid color, black-and-white, vignettes in matte black or blurred edges, hazy overlays as though it was all bathed in candlelight. No sepia. Lily hates sepia. They toss them all without hesitation. Even the ones of Lily in her wedding dress. She flops onto her back against the cool stones, the heat from the fire making her forehead sweat. She watches as Adrian stares at a photo, rhythmically pressing his thumb on and off the glossy surface.

Her phone buzzes off and on, texts from her mother and brother, old co-workers who knew what today was. She answers each in turn as is expected: *I’m doing okay. Just*

trying to get through it, while rubbing Adrian's thigh. Drew even asks if she made it back into town safely. Her mother asks her what she's going to do now that she has no financial support, thinly disguising her disapproval as concern. She looks at Adrian, knowing he will likely amount to little between his faulty memory and the degree it took him seven years and three universities to earn. Maybe if she went back to school for her Master's, maybe then they'd have a shot at some kind of life.

Life with Drew had been all manners of safe. The quiet monotony of Sunday night dinners with his wealthy friends, predictable in the way putting on a seatbelt is, locking her in as a passenger in an existence she didn't remember consciously signing up for. Dinners planned out a week in advance, buying the meat and produce weekly to avoid it spoiling in fridge. The way he chanted "love of my life, soon-to-be wife" for the entire six months they were engaged.

She'd become a hygiene assistant for an oral surgeon as a means to pay the bills, spending hours rinsing blood off of sharp points, emptying sterilization chambers until the repetitive motion gave her tendonitis. On her feet all day yet somehow thirty pounds heavier, living the majority of her time in dirty scrubs. It seemed no small wonder to her that the dentist suicide rate was so high the few times she assisted in surgery, staring into gaping maws and seeing how many people were so willing to part with their appearances. "Just take it out," they'd say, "it's rotten anyway." Coming home, not sure which fluids were hers anymore, and silently curling up on the couch with Drew constantly touching her. As though seeing her wasn't enough to prove she was still there.

Her first time on the Country Club Plaza found her busking with her violin near the fountains, swooning "Oh Danny Boy" out against the fading daylight. They threw

spare change into her green velvet-lined case and gave her spare cigarettes, even though she could afford her own. They asked what her name was and where she had come from. They wanted to know her story. Three years afterward, sitting where she used to play, she listened as Drew told her their story as though she didn't know it. Childhood sweethearts, the fairytale of chance. How he'd told all his friends about her before she moved there. How he'd said "Don't get too excited, fellas. This one's mine." How he'd condemned her from the start, relayed to her in the sweet sentiments of a proposal.

Six weeks before the wedding, Adrian called. The invitation in the mail had come as a surprise. He and Drew had never got on well and Lily knew it. Drew never trusted another man with her, let alone Adrian who had always lurked in the background, eternally enamored with her. Lily had told him she would be in town soon for a dress fitting, asking if he wanted to get coffee and he'd agreed.

"Oh Lily, Lily," Adrian had said, scooping her up on the stoop of his apartment, "I was afraid I wouldn't recognize you." He'd run her fingertips along the scar, buried under his hairline, where they'd hit him with a baseball bat. He showed her the only picture of her he had, when she played a concert with the St. Louis Philharmonic.

Maybe she could have blamed the alcohol that night if she hadn't mixed the drinks herself. Or the way his bowtie fell across her collarbone, except that she'd put it there, drawing her breaths deeper than usual. With her voice heavy in her throat, she'd asked him if he wanted to kiss her, knowing he would give in as he had every other time before. She traced fire across his back with a single fingernail, his skin a blank page. They became slick and primeval, rocking to an internal rhythm that felt as familiar as

breathing. She followed his every move as if she knew it before he did. He turned her, changed her, posed her with heavy motions that she somehow made delicate and sinuous.

Drew never knew. Not even when Lily started visiting her brother, her unwitting accomplice, more frequently. She went to cake tastings, catering meetings, wedding expos during the week. With so little time left, guests with plane tickets booked, a \$2000 dress already altered to her frame—the event felt more like a speeding train than a choice. On the weekends she drove the two hours to Adrian with her violin in the passenger’s seat and a bottle of Jack Daniels. Adrian came to the wedding as planned and danced with her to a song called “16, Maybe Less” that she’d requested especially for them. He’d worn the bowtie from that first night for the occasion. Maybe she would have told the truth, to Drew or at least some fringe third (or fourth) party, if she could look them straight in the face with the remorse they would have expected. But whenever she’d tried to end it, to put Adrian back in her past and out of her marriage, she felt only a fearsome thing pulling at her, like a black hole she had only just escaped threatening to consume her again.

The fire cracks at her feet and Lily realizes she’s been staring at constellations longer than she meant to. Rolling her head to the side, she sees Adrian still staring at the photo before he chucks his glasses to the ground, pinching the bridge of his nose. She sits up and collects the thick frames, cleaning the spots away with her shirt.

“What’s the matter?” she says. Adrian shoves the picture at her. Lily is locked in his arms behind the glossy print, his lankly legs enveloped by her gown. She knows “16, Maybe Less” was playing the background by the look on her face, something just shy of longing, forever fixed on Adrian as they were caught mid-spin on the lacquered floor.

The figure in the background is almost unnoticeable. But there was Drew, his tuxedo unbuttoned, Cabernet in his glass, watching from the corner as his wife of barely an hour danced with Adrian; his face now obscured by a handful of thumbprints.

“You don’t even care, do you?” Adrian says, scrambling to his feet, glasses snatched from Lily’s hands. “You know, I thought all this time that you at least felt bad. Felt something. But you don’t, do you?”

“We’ve talked about this. I’ve told you a hundred times. I was unhappy. He and I weren’t right.” She rises to meet him, crossing her arms.

“So what’s once more?” He knows she is angry when she starts talking with her hands, she can tell by the way he’s flinched. Big, swooping gestures that always threatened to end in a quick slap. “How am I supposed to know this isn’t just what you are?”

“What I am? What the hell does that even mean? How long am I gonna have to do this, Adrian? Prove myself to you over a relationship you weren’t even a part of?”

“You call that not a part of it?” he says, jabbing his finger at the photo still in her hands. She tosses it into the bonfire.

“What’s done is done. I’m not going to justify it, but I’m not going to let it control my life. I’m ready to move on. I thought,” she gestures between the box and the fire, “that would be a bit obvious. How, after all this time, are you still freaking out? We’re happy, aren’t we? What are you so damn afraid of?”

“Did you even love him? Hell, do you even love me?” Adrian says.

Her hands are quiet at her sides. “I did what I had to do to save myself.”

“And you don’t give a good goddamn who gets hurt. You do bad things to good people and act like some goddamn martyr” he says, rubbing his temples.

A growl erupts from her throat, her hands waving through the air in front of her, fingers bent like claws. The few words Adrian can make out are enough to start him howling back. Nothing is discernible in the din of yelling, their voices echoing across the open space, sending tiny rustles through the trees as anything nearby runs for cover. She grows hoarse faster than him, having to project more just to be heard over the deep booming coming from his chest. All of it is unforgivable. All of it is devastating. He calls her a bitch. She hurls a stone at him, sending a thin crack through his left lens. The silence that falls pulsates with the cicada calls. Her slap lands fast and stinging on his cheek.

Adrian gathers up his things, refusing to say another word to her despite her pleas. She paws at him, desperate to make him stay, even though she admits to herself it’s only to save face. She couldn’t end a marriage with nothing to show for it, no matter how mediocre it might be. He passes through the brush, banging a dying flashlight against his palm. She tries calling out to him, forcing tears into her voice until she can no longer hear the shuffling of his feet.

What remains in the box are a few spare invitations and the potpourri packets they’d used in place of rice so as not to kill the birds. Lily upturns it into the fire, wishing it would catch onto the pine trees and take the whole place down with it. She hums “Oh Danny Boy” into the darkness, burying her toes into the creek until morning.

BINDINGS

There's a book on my mother's shelf that doesn't open.

To look at it, you would think its placement there was a mistake. The only paperback in a section of hardcovers, wedged between first editions of *Jamaica Inn* and *The Moon is Down*, otherwise lost in a row of classics and canon if it weren't for the garish yellow cover. Displaced by its make and model—a tacky Smart car mistakenly driven into a parade of Corvettes, stuck there now for lack of side streets. When I was a young girl, I imagined the authors gathered around it, laughing, taunting the poor thing. Of course, the authors all at that time resembled versions of Poe and Dickinson I'd recreated from cartoons. Prior to the age of twelve, all authors hailed from the 1800s.

I can't remember when I first noticed the book. I've always known it was different. But that moment of “noticing” escapes me. My mother's books have been a presence in the house my entire life, the only constant companions given our poor history with pets. Every room has at least one shelf, all full, organized in a system I've never understood. I learned early on, as with many things, that every book must go back where it came from. She could pick and read through three to four books at a time and they rarely strayed from the rooms of their respective shelves, apart from in summer when she ventured out to the patio. I've leafed through a few over the years, but I have a shelf of my own that we've been filling since my first picture book. I was ten when I discovered this particular book, the one with the yellow cover, had been glued entirely shut.

In the thirty minutes between the bus dropping me off and her return from work, I did chores. Wednesdays I dusted, and dusting included bookshelves—eight of them, at

the time. I'd thought the lemony cover was a dust jacket. I knew where she kept the dust jackets—her closet, in a box, top shelf on the left—and in one of those concerted childhood efforts to impress, I pulled it from the shelf to correct the problem. The moment my fingers felt the slick spine, I realized my mistake.

I like to suppose now, in hindsight, that my preteen senses tipped me off to something that prevented me from returning the book to its spot without another thought. I tried to open the cover to read the title page. I tried to open in the middle, thinking that I'd found one of her book vaults, hollowed out in the middle to store her jewelry. I grabbed a corner to fan it out, page by page, but it thumped into my other palm without so much as a whisper of its paper. To open it meant tearing it. To tear it meant explaining to her that my childish curiosity got the better of me. Even though I knew better, it wasn't the fear of punishment that made me slide the book back into place and carry on with my Swiffer. The book and I shared a secret.

I was fifteen when I first suspected the book was my father's. A suspicion that has now led me to a small mom & pop coffee shop in the heart of Portland.

“What can I get you?”

My head snaps up. The gap between me and the coffee shop counter is enough to hold the person who just vacated the spot, and enough to embarrass me. I feel the heat rising to my cheeks. The cashier smiles at me, recognizing me, but she's still impatient. I overanalyze how many steps to take to bridge the distance. One giant one conveys humor: 'oh hi, haha, off in my own world,' a witty brush-off. A couple small ones seem apologetic, but mousy. It ends up being a poorly executed combination of the two and the

heat from my face spreads into my gut. I have suddenly forgotten every go-to latte I've ever ordered.

"The usual?" Her trademark purple streak of hair hangs down from her logoed hat. Never mind that it's obvious she's taken every effort to pull the rest—an average brown—away from her face. She starts typing in whatever 'the usual' is. I can't tell if she's trying to help me or trying to move me along. The temptation to say 'no, something different,' and ho-hum over the menu for five minutes is suddenly overwhelming.

"Yes, please," I say.

She hands me a table number, depicted by a cup of coffee with steam that curls into the number 23. My normal table is occupied by students, judging by the top knots and black leggings, chatting without looking up from their cellphones. The screens as I pass show some variation of Scrabble. I eye the shop's bookshelf packed with board games, three of them Scrabble, and find the next best spot along the picture windows in view of the door.

I've been in Portland just over a week. My first big city, and I still can't decide if I like it or not. Since I know I'm not staying, deciding this seems irrelevant. Today is the first day it's rained. A barista comes by with my drink, sloshing some over the side despite how carefully she slides it onto the table. She curses in apology, then apologizes for cursing. I take a sip. Apparently my 'usual' involves cinnamon. It doesn't matter. I hate the coffee here. My phone chirps in my bag: a text from Aunt Val, *Please check in!*

I dip my hand into my bag and run my finger over the book's unmoving pages. Over the last twelve years it's weaved in and out of my life. One year frequently, the next not. Breakups and varying forms of public humiliation drove me again and again into my

mother's study, crumpling me at the foot of the bookshelf, asking it to tell me something. The night of my junior prom, I stayed in there until morning, cradling the book in a sea of taffeta in a regrettable shade of olive. I'd lost my virginity in the back of my boyfriend's car, and I couldn't tell what bothered me more: the thought of Corey's body invading mine or that I'd done something so cliché. Our meetings in the study were known only to the desk lamp until I showed up at my aunt Val's three weeks ago.

Val's apartment preceded the book: a spacious three-bedroom in which one room belonged to her cats. She'd never married, and I have no notable memories of the apartment before my teen years. Val isn't fond of children. She only tolerated me, prior to puberty, because she loved my mother. But unlike my blood-related aunts, Val hated many of my mother's decisions and had no reservations saying as much.

Three weeks ago, I'd thumped the book down on the kitchen table between us like it was my trump card, even though she had no idea why I was visiting her yet. She looked more confused than shocked before sighing ripples across the steaming surface of her tea. I waited for her to reach out to the book, but it seemed its gravity only affected me. I calculated in my head what to say first, something I should have done before ringing the bell, but there was no rewinding. Assuming she knew everything seemed the safest route.

"It's his, isn't it?" No one talked about my father. Not even me. For no better reason than it had never mattered. The outburst made my hands shake and I was too worried of scalding myself to take a sip of my own tea even though I wanted to look poised. Val brushed her dyed red bangs away from her forehead.

"Yep."

“Do you know his name?” Her response was slower this time, paused to fuss at the cat for climbing onto the table. But I saw the wheels turning in her eyes.

“I do.” She gripped her mug, staring intently as though the tea would answer for her. “I think you should have known years ago. But that’s just me. Elle, are you sure you want to get into this?” My nod barely finished before she continued. She’d been holding it in for twenty-two years. “Charles Archer. What do you want to know about him?”

“Where I can find him.” A splash of refusal flitted across her face.

“He doesn’t know about you. And I mean that. Really.” I attempted to make my face look stony and resolved. I doubt I pulled it off. “I’m the only person your mother ever admitted the truth to. Your aunts think you’re a one-night-stand baby.” I narrowed my eyes. She sighed again. “Oregon, last time I checked. I’ve kept tabs just in case. Your mother isn’t exactly the most practical. I haven’t dug around for a while, but I doubt much has changed. Let me grab my laptop.”

We spent the afternoon sifting through any social media site we could find. Charles Archer kept most of his information private, but the city of Portland had him listed as an engineer. His business address was the best we could come up with. It took an hour of convincing and pleading, but Val eventually passed me her credit card to book the flight and hotel. So even though I have no desire to check in right now, the obligation remains.

I call and tell her the same lies I’ve told all week from my spot by the window. The hotel is nice. I’ve been seeing the sights during business hours. I keep missing him when he leaves the office, apparently, or maybe he doesn’t work there anymore. He’s hard to pin down. She reminds me my return flight is tomorrow. I make excuses for why

I won't go in during his office hours. Yes, I'll be fine if I never speak to him. At least I tried.

When I got on the plane to Portland from St. Louis, I had romanticized that the search would be fruitless. Some long, drawn out process that would make me feel like I had tried. But in the end I could go back to the study, put the book back in its place, satisfied that my theory about its origins was at least correct. He had never mattered before, and he didn't need to matter now.

I found him the day after I landed. The address was still correct. My first contact was with his name engraved on a plaque in an office lobby, his face smiling above it. On principle I denied any resemblance between us, studying the photo like a dissected lab animal. From the street corner I watched him enter the coffee shop every day after his shift. He always wore a jacket even though it wasn't jacket weather. Thin but broad shouldered. I didn't like his walk; his gate always felt like he was overcompensating.

Four days in, I started arriving to the coffee shop before him, waiting for him to show up. I kept to tables on the far side of the café, where I could be out of the way but still see the door. He always came in with someone, a coworker or two. He always paid. The artificial light showed the hints of dark hair still streaked through the white. Once he rolled his sleeve up higher than usual and I caught a glimpse of a tattoo, black but faded, the edges feathering. He looked sullen when listening to others, but his laugh sounded genuine even though he always covered his mouth. Yesterday I had to admit this eyes were my eyes. More gray than blue, as though someone had drained the color out of them with a thin needle.

Over the days I came to fancy myself as a great spy, keeping tabs on his every move while I oh-so casually sipped a macchiato. Or whatever the hell my usual is. Actually styling my hair and putting on makeup, which took me nearly three hours, compounded my feelings of superiority. The rain today has effectively taken care of that. I watch as the strings of dark brown hair dry into their usual unmanageable frizz. I've forgotten to check for streaked mascara. He's fifteen minutes later than usual. It's just as well. One look in my compact confirms today is not the day; I look melted. There's coffee still left in my mug but I can't justify abusing my stomach any further.

The cashier begins her adage of "thanks for coming" when she sees me nearing the door. He's reaching for the handle when I look up, his collar turned up against the rain. The heat explodes in my stomach again, like I've been caught in a lie. I redirect, smarting my shin on an empty chair, bolting for the ladies' room. In my head I'm flailing, some grandiose display of panic. Though chances are it probably just looks like the sudden urge to go has hit me. I'm not sure which is worse. I barely get the door locked before I hit my knees.

I think about the millions of bacteria Portland has just bestowed upon my jeans. Then about the noises coming from my gut, threatening to add to the proverbial petri dish. I steal another look in my compact. Today is not the day. My back presses against the door, I set the book against my thighs. I'm not willing to share our secrets yet. Or ever. I came here thinking it was what I had to do. Just like in the back of Corey's car.

Only now I don't have until morning. And I don't have my mother's study with its mute desk lamp. And I don't have my mother.

This is the part where the heroine always splashes water on her face with resolve. I get to my feet and look in the mirror. More water might wash off what's left of my face. I take care of the black rivulets on my cheeks and pull my hair back. I look more like my mother than ever. Except my eyes. I crack the bathroom door and peer out. He's alone today.

The walk to his table reminds me of the final, fateful stumble that comes before being reintroduced to the six stiff margaritas you just downed. You hope to pass out on the way, but no such luck. Every day in this café I've imagined the scenarios: casually bumping into him on the way out the door, slamming the book front and center between him and his buddies, him stopping me with clarity at my face. Never this. This feels like throwing myself at his mercy.

"Are you?" I pause for breath. He looks up at my face, with my eyes. I struggle to remember his name. "Are you Charles Archer?"

"I am." He's bemused. "Can I help you?" I take the seat across from him without asking. He leans back into his chair.

I stare at him for longer than I should. I like his cheekbones and the light freckling around his eyes. I curse genetics when I see the moles on his forearms that transferred to me. The book is my only card to play as I seem to have forgotten the entire English language. I place it on the table. It barely touches the wood before he picks it up, his Adam's apple rolling in his throat. He tries to open it. He can't seem to remember English either.

"You knew Margaret Rutledge?" It's not really a question, even though I ask it.

“Where did you get this?” He grips it in both hands, knuckles white. The din of coffee shop noises carries on around us, unaware the world is shifting.

“I’m Elle. I’m a friend of the family. Valerie Jones thought it might belong to you. I live nearest to Portland so I offered to return it. Is it yours?” The lies roll off as easy as they did to Aunt Val half an hour ago.

“It’s Margaret’s.” There’s a hint of stubbornness in his tone. “It was a gift. Years ago. Why is she giving it back now?” He takes one hand off the book to sip his coffee.

“They’re dividing up her possessions.” A half-lie; they would be, if her possessions didn’t already belong to me. His face sinks. “Val thought you might want it. Though in the condition it’s in, I can’t imagine why anyone would.” I look at the book in apology. He turns it over in his hands, thumbing at the front cover in vain.

“She tore it apart. After I left. Ripped the spine and everything. She,” his voice catches, “mailed me the pieces then sent Val a week later to get them back. Told me she wanted to burn it. I never thought she’d glue it back together. She hated me too much for that.” He thumbs at the cover again. I let the silence spread out. “It was the first present I ever gave her. When did she...” He finally puts the book down and runs his hands over his face.

“Nearly a year ago.”

“What did you say your name was?” He runs his hand through his whitening hair. No wedding ring, I can’t help but notice. I pull the book back towards me.

“Elle.” He mumbles it back to me. Val’s claims that he never knew about me come flooding back. Even so, I have to ask. “Why did you leave?” I expect him to be defensive. I’m a stranger. But he looks nothing short of defeated.

He rubs at his temples, looking into his coffee cup that he won't pick back up. "I could say I was young, or stupid, or looking out for her. But it's all bull shit. And it doesn't matter, in the end. I never really left her."

In the wake of losing her, I don't have to ask what he means. I eye the book, trying to think of how I can slip it back into my bag without causing him harm. I didn't plot out my lies far enough ahead to avoid backpedaling. I look out the picture window at the rain drizzling across the parking lot, hoping he'll follow my gaze long enough for me to tuck it away. But he doesn't. I'm ready to pack up and leave. I know why the book doesn't open.

"Well, I'm sorry to bring bad news. When we tracked you down, I assumed you knew." My one truth.

"Did she ever marry?" It takes me by surprise. I hold the book in my hand, hovering over my bag.

"No."

"Was she happy?"

"Yes. I think so." I drop the book into my bag. I know next he'll ask how she died, they all do. And it's not something I'm willing to talk about, covered in washed-out hair product and floor germs in a Portland café. Not even with my father. I jump in before he can speak again. "I really am sorry." He grabs my forearm as I move past him.

"Is your name Eleanor?" I swallow. I don't have a lie because I didn't know I'd need one. So I nod. His cheeks flush. "She never told me." I grip his forearm in return.

"I know."

He begs to buy me dinner so we can talk. I worry he'll cry if I don't agree. He tells me they named me within six months of dating each other, even though they agreed to wait a few years before having children. He dreamt of me, he says. We don't hug, but I let him touch my face once, like Mom used to. His fingers feel like crepe, weathered, as if there's not much left beneath his skin. But the way he cradles my cheekbone, thumb sweeping gently, tells me she learned it from him. We make empty promises to keep in touch.

I leave the book with him.

ARRYTHMIAS

Marcie was born with a nick in her chest. A tiny slit along her sternum. They kept it hidden under overalls and cheap dresses with high, frilled necklines. People would stare. The neighbors would talk. But you're so perfect, honey, they'd tell her, so perfect. You'll just wear a T-shirt when you swim in the creek.

Her first friend was the boy next door. Held back a year, bigger than she, a bad bowl cut of beautiful, wheat-hued yellow. In winter, his dad would tether a sled to the back of his riding mower and drag them around the front lawn. The red plastic split when they rode over rocks. Marcie liked his lisp. She stretched out the neckline of her T-shirt to show him her secret. He blabbed it to everyone on the school bus.

For the first few years, the kids at recess offered her games of kickball, bubblegum, compliments on her light-up sneakers. Then the question, is it true, can we see it? One boy even gave her a kiss behind the sports equipment shed and offered a *Like you* with a capital L. She showed him. And even with his coke bottle glasses, he was dubbed king for weeks by everyone in their grade.

She was the first in her class to have breasts, and the other girls were jealous. But she wasn't their new god. She didn't get her bra unsnapped in their single-file lines or watch the boys shove their fists under their dingy shirts, grabbing at each other's knuckles. She got dragged to a far corner of the playground by the class queen bee, where her hive waited. They were careful not to rip her shirt. Less careful about the dirt they got in her mouth. Not careful as they picked at her edges, the skin tattering like fabric, prying her open to see what was inside.

She covered her blood with one-ply paper towels held in place by her bra. The neighbors would talk.

Marcie sat on a wooden picnic table on her school's nature trail while her first boyfriend took a leak in the woods. Even in the sunlight his hair was so dishwater that it looked more gray than blond. When he came back, his hands ran along her thighs, up the edges of her skirt, nails brown with dirt he never seemed to wash off. He told her to take off her clothes. Either we take off our clothes or we might as well go home. Beneath her blouse, the nick had been widened to a gap. The pink flesh like a vignette around the clean white bone of her sternum. She fiddled with her buttons and said no for the fourth time.

He pinned her against the planks and ripped her blouse open. He ran his fingers along the scarring. How could you lie to me? I thought you were pretty. He didn't even take her panties off. He pressed down on her chest for balance. The bone cracked and cracked and cracked beneath his hands. She caught the splinters in her hands and tucked them into her shirt pocket.

Marcie's bones gave way as she grew, spreading open. Nothing remained but a few filed smooth ridges of white. Nothing but a window frame. She kept it covered. But the pumping of her blood was impossible to quiet. Everywhere she went there was a rhythm. Every kiss a cacophony.

His eyes were bright and piercing, rimmed in laugh lines and pale lashes. He loved that Marcie's heart gave her away every time he was nearby, addicted to her racing beat. He put a ring on her finger.

One day he rested his hand on her knee and the sound remained steady. Is something wrong? You seem distant. Here, let me help. His slender fingers entered her chest and wrapped around the red muscle, massaging back and forth until the cadence rose. Marcie held his wrist without knowing why. He reached into her on bad days when she cried, keeping it steady. He caressed when he wanted her to please him, gripped too tightly when he climaxed.

Marcie called him at work. It wasn't beating, she couldn't breathe, could he come quickly? Once a week, then twice. Then every other day. Could he stay over again, just in case? He moved out his things and left her the key.

Marcie woke to silence. The hole in her chest felt purple and clammy. Aching and still. Sometimes she bled on the bedspread. Another 3:00 a.m. alarm to remind her that anxiety was the only thing keeping her going. She fell asleep with a vice around her chest, nails dug into her pillows. It didn't work right anymore.

The bedside lamp spread a yellow glow across room, enough to see herself in the vanity. The edges of the frame were clean and stark, the muscle speckled with lesions of disuse. Every breath was a gasp through her thin, gaunt mouth. She reached inside herself and wrapped her fingers around the dying muscle and pulled.

ASSOCIATION FALLACY

They pull me out of third period on a Thursday, take me down the salmon-tiled halls to the counselor's office. I am guided to a faux leather armchair behind frosted glass, thick black letters: GUIDANCE.

The secretary slides a box of tissues to the edge of the desk before leaving me with Mr. Ellis. I look around his office before landing on his splotchy, earnest face, eyes bugged out by thick glasses. He leans back in his chair, then forward over the desk, fingers knit together. Michelle O'Neil is dead, he tells me. Michelle O'Neil hanged herself. I hear a sound in my chest like wind through dead grass.

He says my name again and again. Jane, I'm very sorry... Jane, what you have to understand... We know you spent a lot of your time with Summer and that group, Jane. He tips the tissue box towards me and I take a square out of turn. Crumple it in my hand. Shove it in my pocket, dry.

I've known Summer since fourth grade. Everyone in town knows that, including Mr. Ellis. I've been kissing Tina behind her closed bedroom door for six months. No one knows that. Not even Summer, who was molested, who hates gays.

But Michelle and I were in the same room once. Summer's seventeenth birthday, nearly a year ago. Michelle liked the black lace camisole that I'd lifted from a Kmart. I stripped it off to give to her in exchange for a cigarette. It was the first time Tina saw my breasts and the reason she tongued me in the girls' bathroom a week later. I remember the camisole didn't fit Michelle. The scalloped edges of her bra, two cups bigger than mine,

rising up like twin fuchsia suns. The lace stretched thin over her paunch, fish-belly white. Now I see her in it, swinging.

Mr. Ellis asks me if I want to go home early. Tina and Summer did. They'll call my parents for me. I only consider it because I'll get out of gym, and figure that's wrong somehow. My teachers keep asking if I'm okay. How ya doin', Jane? Too many A's in my name, every time. I don't know how to tell them it doesn't matter to me.

Tina texts. They're sneaking wine coolers to drink to Michelle in the fields behind the trailer park. I tell her I've got family dinner and wonder if I'll get my camisole back, if I even want it back. She asks me to meet her in our usual stall by the lunchroom Monday morning.

When Monday comes, I lean against the air conditioning vent in the handicapped stall and by the time she gets there, the bell for first period is ringing. Head to toe black, a fishnet shirt that makes her boobs too perky to be mourning. Her bleached platinum hair hangs down to her hips, eyes puffed and ringed with blue-black circles. They won't give Michelle an empty memorial chair at graduation, she says. Why? Michelle O'Neil hanged herself. I kiss her hard on her begonia lips. She shoves me against the vent and calls me a sick bitch. I imagine the inky mascara trails sliding down her round cheeks and out through the soles of her feet, black-brown rivers.

Summer protests throughout the week. Pictures of the dead girl in black and white line the halls: *Suicide is NOT a Sin. Remember Michelle*. The administration doesn't budge. Mr. Ellis calls me in. Jane, what you have to understand... The dry tissue is still in the pocket of my unwashed jeans. Be reasonable, talk them down. Now Tina's on a hunger strike. Summer's threatening to make a scene.

And she does. She chains herself to the football goal post before the homecoming game and knifes the first player dumb enough to touch her. Tina's down ten pounds.

They lock them both girls up in the youth center at Lakeland.

They pull me out of second period on a Monday. There's an assembly on Wednesday, Mr. Ellis tells me. To honor Ms. O'Neil. No one else knew her well enough to say a few words, unless I'm too beside myself. He scoots the tissues towards me again, like a dare. I write the speech in our usual bathroom stall by the lunchroom. I try to say the words a better person would have wept into the tissues.

The microphone five feet away still amplifies every step I take towards the podium. And beneath my own choking I hear the soft sweep of sneakers and black lace, swinging back and forth across the boards.

AN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF BREAKUPS

AVERAGE: Research states the average penile length for an American man is 5.6 inches (14.2 centimeters). Chris was well below that, and his former-football-player gut only got in the way. Her friends told her there was always one you didn't have to count. She doubted that was still true after two months. But no one ever got off, so she never mentions him.

BONES: They used to take walks along the train tracks behind his parents' house, disappearing into the trees for the fumbling sex of first-timers. Fifteen, stupid, and all limbs, stumbling home with hickies and dirt on their asses. He liked to argue and threaten suicide. Once he threw her onto the rails and stomped on her back. Her ribs still hurt when it's cold out.

CLICHÉ: Black push-up bra under his bed. Not hers.

DISEASE: Joe gave himself epilepsy. He stopped using his insulin because he was lazy and wanted to die slowly, cowardly. She watched his head crane sideways as he seized on their bedroom floor. By the fifth seizure, they went looking for reasons besides low blood sugar. A shadow on a brain scan, but she knew he'd put it there. When he ran out of meds, he asked his mommy to refill them. She packed a bag.

EGGS: He scrambled them with cheddar the way she liked, then casually admitted he fucked her best friend.

FURNITURE: Tony liked whiskey, at least three nights a week. The coffee table met an untimely end.

GIRLFRIEND: Ruth was wearing the dress they'd bought for her birthday. Pale blue with buttons down the front. She fidgeted with them as she said it was just a phase after all.

HARDEE'S: A normal body-mass index is between 18.5 and 24.9. Drew bought half-pound burgers and curly fries on his way home for their movie night-in. While she sipped her Coke in the crook of his arm, he told her she wasn't as fit as he wanted her to be. She needed to cut back on the burgers. Her BMI was 19.5.

IN-LAWS: The jabs came soft at first. Just a case of mistaken identity—she did have the same name as an old friend of his. But Mama Dot, her round Italian face flushed with Manhattans, always asked how that nice girl from high school was doing. Raved how she always loved *that girl, that nice girl from his high school* from the head of the Thanksgiving table, inviting her son to bring her for Christmas.

JESUS: A copy of *The New Testament* sat on the center console between them because “a *Bible* should always be between unwed couples.” He wouldn't kiss with his mouth open.

KRYPTONITE: Andy's car got a flat tire at mid-semester. It took her a month to realize he'd stopped going to school because he took the bus sometimes, to work or MetaGames. He spent hours organizing his comic books and *Magic* cards, meticulously wrapping each with love in clean plastic, while the garbage piled up in the kitchen and he stopped flushing toilets. One afternoon she burned it all in the bathtub.

LATE: The Wal-Mart clinic was the only place that could see her that day. \$25 to pee in a cup, same-day results. She listened to the paper crinkle underneath her on the

table, straining to hear if the nurse practitioner's shoes were coming closer. He wouldn't come because he already had tickets to a movie.

MASTURBATION: He told her there was no reason she should want to touch herself while he was away.

NAKED: After the fourth double whiskey neat, he was the naked man in socks, vomiting and crying on their bathroom floor. And after that, he could never be anything else.

O: Entry not found.

PORNO: *Google* auto-fills web addresses based on Internet history. She systematically typed in each letter of the alphabet. *Absoluteanal. Barelylegal. CreampiesRus. Dickgirls. Exgirlfriends.* They hadn't had sex in four months.

QUIET: Constant parties with Paul's friends had left her bitter, reminded systematically that they disliked her. She'd start a fight on the way over. Threaten to leave him. Complain about their sex life. Say he was neglecting her. Then tell him at the door "shut up and pretend to be happy."

RAISIN BRAN: Three years of living together, and they still split all the bills down the middle. Rent, utilities, groceries, cartons of cigarettes. She ran out of microwaveable egg sandwiches one morning before work and opened his family-size box of cereal. He had the bowl sitting on the counter for her when she got home with a note: *Stop eating my food.*

SIGNAL: He didn't want to move to a place where there was no 4G network.

TOP-HEAVY: Somehow the base of Jack's penis was actually narrower than the head. Like he had glued it on backwards as a party trick.

UNDERWEAR: Mitch couldn't fuck without his boxers on. He hated it when pubic hairs touched.

VOICEMAIL: *Hi, it's David. Yeah, so... yeah... Look, I wanted to tell you that Cindy and I decided to work things out. Y'know, for the kids. That's good, right? I've already got my stuff from your place and I left the spare key under the mat. Just... I dunno. Try and be happy for me, okay? Aren't you happy for me?*

WARCRAFT: Raids were every Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday. He'd stay up well past 3:00, even though he had to work at 6:30. She'd fall asleep to the glow of his desktop screen and incessant humming, jolt awake when he yelled obscenities at his teammates. Too tired. He was always too tired. For sex, for dates, for washing dishes and folding laundry. Was it his fault her birthday happened to fall on a Thursday?

XEROX: His eyes were carbon-copies of the one that got away, even if nothing else was. She called him the same nicknames and recreated dates down to the food she'd ordered. But it was never enough. She called him the wrong name during arguments.

YOU: She chalks it up to timing. Bad timing. The universe's fault that it ended that way. That it ended at all. And she waits.

SLIPPING

It would have been better if Laney had come along. Joanna repeated this to herself, watching the dried patches of summer grass out of the car window whiz by in yellow blurs. Whenever Matt lost himself in the music enough to forget he was driving, the patches would form one continuous line just long enough to make her forget the lit cigarette in between her fingers. How many cigarettes did it take for yellow stained fingers? Yellow-stained teeth? Months? Years? How many stains before she'd let herself go?

Yes. It would have been better if Laney were here. Then Joanna could take long drags and keep a running tally of roadkill in her head without anyone noticing. No one would notice she wasn't talking as much. Imagining the lines in her hands becoming embedded with yellow, spreading its way over her wrist, creeping in the wrong direction up her arteries. She wouldn't have to react to Matt's over-exaggerated singing and pantomiming to the punk rock he'd had on CD since he was 18. A three-hour stretch where she wasn't the only thing for him to direct his attention at. But Laney had bailed that morning. A sudden bout of stomach cramps that she blamed on an anxiety attack, conveniently an hour before Matt showed up with the car.

It was too late then to back out. So Joanna'd shoved her duffel into the now - empty back seat, offering to bring her something back. But Laney had only been going for the food anyway. Joanna threw the brown filter out the window.

"So Josers," Matt said with his wide teeth, drumming on the steering wheel.
"Where do you want to go first?"

“Don’t people typically go to the hotel first?”

“I guess. But who wants to be typical? This is an adventure!”

Joanna huffed through her nostrils. But the sound was drowned out by The Stooges. “Did you even book a room?”

“Of course I did!”

Liar. She crossed her arms and watched the lines on the road slip under the edge of the hood. It reminded her of Hungry Hippos—little white dots swallowed by a chomping maw. One mile upon the next. She could have called him on it, but that was too easy.

“Good. It’ll be nice to have the two beds now that Laney’s gone. I’ll have one all to myself” she said.

He didn’t flinch, but she saw his massive Adam’s apple bob once in his throat. She left it at that. Just enough to make him sweat beneath his caterwauling for the rest of the drive. But she supposed she was only being the pot to his kettle. She hadn’t planned this, hadn’t planned much of anything. She’d only decided to go with him two days ago during a run-in at the Radio Shack where he worked. He’d already told her once, when they crossed the city line, how grateful he was that she came along. He couldn’t do this by himself. She’d patted his knee to play along. Of course that’s why she was here.

She looked at her phone for the fifth time, thumb hovering over the keyboard.

“You’re not texting him, are you?” He said it with the tone of an affectionate mother. An affectionate mother who thought you were an idiot.

“No.” She shut it off. Her gut winced.

She knew Matt hadn't been to his alma mater since his move back to their hometown a year ago. After his four years that ended in no degree, he'd tried to make the most of it. She'd met his fiancé, Ashley—the girl they all knew he'd dumped Joanna for when they were freshman, but no one had said it. Joanna had been to their little house in the trashy part of town. Joanna counted up the years in her head since then. Only three. And now they were lurching back to it, all because he had something to prove. Maybe just that he could face it. No psycho woman and no domestic violence charge was going to send him away in shame. Joanna didn't know, and she didn't ask. They never talked about it because she believed he was innocent. They never talked about it because neither of them wanted her to believe otherwise.

“Pull off at the next town. I gotta piss like a racehorse.”

Joanna remembered the sprawling Stuckey's just off the highway. She'd driven this stretch of road enough times when Laney was at school. Joanna liked to pity them both for having to move back after college, even though she'd only gone one town over. She grabbed her duffel from the backseat.

“You need that whole thing? You gonna shower in there or something?” He popped the gas cover.

“I don't want to dig my wallet out.”

The scuffed beige tile and soft rock music coming through the speakers was strangely comforting, and she was grateful the bathroom was a single holder. The thought of a pair of dirty Keds in a stall beside hers, belonging to some overweight woman who huffed a lot while she relieved herself, made Joanna queasy. Her belt clanked on the floor as her jeans pooled around her ankles.

The blood wasn't as bad as she'd thought. Spotty, light. Hued like watercolors. The doctor had told her this might happen, that the chances of the fetus surviving were slim, and she still didn't have the foresight to use a panty liner. Not a mistake she'd make twice. She fished a new pair of panties from her bag to change into and wondered if this was some culminating life moment. Shuffling around a Stuckey's bathroom in flip-flops, bare assed and needing a wet-nap. Surely it would be more poetic than that. She worried her lip between her teeth, turning the stained underwear over in her hands. She'd needed to get out, to go somewhere, to run. Matt was just a lucky coincidence. The ache in her pelvis pulsed and she balled the splotched underwear up in the wastebasket.

"I was thinking we could go out to dinner tonight. Like, somewhere nice," Matt said as she plopped in next to him. "I've got a great place I want to take you." She heaved her bag into the back.

"Yeah, sure."

An hour later, they pulled into the parking lot of the Royal Hotel. He faked a reservation, telling her to just wait in the car. Judging by the place's chipping paint, he'd have no trouble getting a room. It was the kind of place with the room doors on the outside of the building. She wrinkled her nose. All threadbare carpets and comforters that felt like stuffed tarps. Tap water that tasted old. She pulled out her phone and went to her messages. A thump on the roof of the car made her drop it into her lap.

"Texting your ex is a sign of weakness." She glared at him through the open window. "Come on. We're in 206."

Matt's first reaction was to jump on the bed. He'd been smart enough to remember Joanna's comment about having two. Though she suspected he would have

changed that if he could have lied about it successfully. She downed four Advil and buried her face in the musty pillows. He wanted to go for a swim. He wanted to go to the old ice cream parlor he used to work at during college. He wanted to drag Joanna all over town, to his old haunts, to his old reputation. He used to be something, come and see. She didn't have the heart to tell him it didn't matter, didn't work that way. Or that he only found her beautiful because she was the one leftover from a better time.

"I should let Laney know we made it. Toss me my phone." He started to oblige but held her cell a moment longer.

"Now Josers, I promised Laney there would be zero wallowing this weekend. No desperate attempts at contacting whatshisnuts. Can I trust you with this?" He waggled the phone in her direction.

"Jesus, Matt, give it a rest. I'm not five." The phone hit the bed next to her face.

Joanna frowned at her fingertips as she swiped over the keyboard. When Paul had left, she'd taken up smoking. A habit she'd started when Matt ended things. As soon as someone bailed, she filled their absence with filters and green glass ashtrays. Some weak attempt at seeming broken, but hard and stern. Mother courage. No one ever seemed to notice that she didn't even inhale. The only thing she got out of it was her nails grew, for once. But she'd bitten them all down to nubs on the drive up.

Matt pulled his swim trunks on over his boxers and asked if she was coming. She waved him on. The click of the door signaled her all clear. She dug through her bag and counted how many liners she had brought. Not enough. Did hotels with doors on the outside even have toiletries at the desk? Let alone ones that didn't carry a risk of a rash? Matt spotted her from the pool as she crossed to the lobby. The bars of the iron gate cut

him down the center, hiding the sizeable nose that fit with the rest of his face so long as you didn't focus on it too long. Like those magic eye pictures in her dad's newspapers when she was kid. Look too intently and something else will appear. He splashed around to get her attention. She pointed towards the lobby doors.

"I forgot my toothbrush."

By the time they reached the restaurant, it was late enough that the staff was just beginning to get annoyed by newcomers. Joanna had managed to quiet her aching insides just enough to put herself together for the nice place Matt had promised. Packed with college students, the place had little to offer in the way of food. Cheese plates and dips. Trying so hard to be a classy cocktail bar but up to its ass in Aftershock and frat boys. But you could see the university library's bell tower from the roof. Joanna had been here before, back when it was a Noodles & Co. One of those doomed buildings where nothing ever lasted, and half of the business was thanks to a good patio. The clock started ticking as soon as the "Now Open" sign went up.

Matt insisted on bringing his guitar, walking all through downtown with it strapped to his back. A conversation starter, a chance for him to be noticed. He ordered a bottle of wine—a bad one—with a flourish. He asked the waitress what was good here without even looking at a menu. Try everything, even if it's terrible, he'd told her once. Some people admired that air of adventure. She could only focus on how he reminded her of Vince Vaughn, teeth clenched as she asked for the crab dip and if they could smoke out here.

“You know what I realized?” Matt checked that his guitar was secure on the back of his chair. “You and I,” he leaned across the table at her, “have never really had a proper date.” The waitress poured their first two glasses. Joanna gulped down half and refilled.

“We went to prom together.”

“Yeah but we didn’t even do that right. No corsage, no dinner, no limo. I didn’t even have my driver’s license yet. Hey, why didn’t you drive us?” He fidgeted with his thick black glasses.

“Probably because I didn’t want my dad to shoot you on sight.” Across the cityscape, the bell tower glowed with color. Shifting blue, pink, purple, blue again. At Christmas time they changed it to red and green, or so she’d been told. A homing beacon for the wayward of a drunken Saturday night. Find the bell tower, find home.

“I guess that’s fair.” He slid his hand towards hers. She pretended not to notice, pulling away in favor of another drink. Matt slumped back in his seat. “All I’m saying is,” Adjusting his vest. Fidgeting. “What I’m trying to say is, things are different now. We’re older. We never had a real shot at it.”

Her phone buzzed in her purse. She made a motion to pull it out.

“Jesus, Jo!” Matt’s fist slammed against the table, making the glasses hop in place. His drink spilled onto his jeans. She flung her napkin at him. “Fuck. I just... I mean, I’m trying to tell you something here and all your care about is fucking Paul. He left you, don’t you get that? And all you ever do is stare at your phone.” The friction between the napkin and the denim was audible. Maybe it would catch fire. Some bro would try to put it out with a whiskey and up they would go, like wicker men.

“It’s Laney, jackass.” The waitress overhead and brought a new glass, mopping up the table. Her eyes shifted from Joanna to Matt, back to Joanna, before she asked if everything was all right.

“We’re fine, thanks,” he said. All his righteous anger deflated out of him, as though the waitress had tripped a valve. “I want to make this happen, Joanna. You and me.” Her arms were crossed. She watched the bell tower to her right.

“I’m pregnant,” she said. His Adam’s apple bobbed.

“Paul’s? I mean, who else could it be? Sorry.” He took his new glass of wine like a shot. “Have you told him?” She shook her head. “Are you gonna?”

“I don’t know. I don’t see the point.” Purple, blue, pink, purple. Return to the mothership. E.T. phone home.

“Because you’re not keeping it?” She floundered for her cigarettes. They could throw her out if they wanted to.

“Because I don’t get to choose. They told me it probably wouldn’t survive.” She shifted in her chair, crossing her legs tighter. “They were right.” She grabbed the waitress by the arm as she passed. “Can we get six shots of Patrón, please? Salt and lime, if you’ve got it.”

He didn’t ask her if that’s really what she wanted to do. He knew better. His job was to buy the next round and drop the subject. To help her stumble back to the hotel. To keep the cherries of her cigs from burning holes in her dress. To be drunk enough to not care as much that the inside of her was occupied. To help her end it.

On the way back, she skinned her knee on the sidewalk stepping off the curb. Traded her last four Marlboro's to some bums on a bench in exchange for thick brown moonshine in a glass jug that tasted like bathroom cleaner and cinnamon.

Matt couldn't figure out whether her dress went up over her head or down around her hips. It stayed bunched around her waist, sleeves swishing against her thighs. He didn't take off her bra, just lifted her breasts out of it when he wanted to nip at them with his teeth. All she could think was it smashed them and made her nipples point in awkward directions. Kisses that were little more than teeth clacking into each other like bumper cars. Could you knock a tooth loose from a bad kiss? How many dentists saw the results of shitty one night stands in their chairs?

They kissed, awkward and forced, when he slid her panties down her legs, tossing them in a corner without looking. Neither of them could look. Pretending the warm and the wet around his penis was the tequila and her arousal. Only the two of them in the room. Not the dead thing in the middle. She would feel him start to press against her and then recoil, arching over her to pull his stomach in. No tequila was powerful enough to keep her from sobering up midway, and the dark and his myopia kept him from seeing her face. Tears pooled at the corners of her eyes. But that he would have understood. It was the look of disinterest she wanted to hide. He grunted over her, muscles contracting against her and inside her. He slipped and hit her cervix, bile rising in her chest. The last of his semen dripped onto her thigh.

"Get me a towel," he said.

Joanna pulled a towel from the rack, the kind that always felt too dry. She hunted for her underwear with her foot, flinging the towel at Matt's face. She grabbed a change

of underwear and her maxipads, careful not to turn on the bathroom light until the door was completely shut. The overly white lights washed out what little color was left in her face. The hollows of her cheeks carved out, stark against the dark circles beneath her eyes. Yellowed fingers, blanched skin, dark red thighs. Tiny rivulets slowly traveled down to her knees, dripping on the cheap linoleum. The rumble of the shower pipes shook the faucet, possibly the whole room. She stood in the scalding water, bobby pins pulling at her mussed hair, watching the water grow red as it circled the drain. Ebbing away at her own will, vanishing completely.

THE PUPPET MASTER

When he comes calling, after six months, after some epiphany, you find yourself faced with a choice. Send him back into that black world of not-together or slice off a piece of dignity in exchange for another go. When you're alone, talking to the bland white walls of a 600-square-foot apartment with a furnace that drowns you out every time it kicks on, shout to his ghost that he can't do this to you. Tell him how it felt when he carried box after box out through your door, how it felt sitting alone at the holidays that year. Use words like *bleeding*, *agony*, *ruined*. Count the pounds you lost in the first three months after he left aloud to him. One, two, ten, twenty-five, forty. Each one punctuated with the unspoken "Your fault. Your fault. Your fault."

Recite this speech to your sister. Say at first that you're just testing it out. Avoid using his name in fear of feeling something from its syllables. After you see him again, tell her you tore him apart. Even though you didn't. Even though you knew you wouldn't. The anger stays in the 600 square feet, away from him, away from the risk of him changing his mind again.

He will invite you for coffee just to talk. Smudge your blade-thin cheekbones with highlighter, bring them out, tug his guilt. Wear the sweater from the first night you met. Remind him of you before he had you.

The thermal shirt under his blazer is identical to the one you bought together at JC Penny's, only cobalt blue to bring out his eyes and compliment the gray hounds tooth. There are five more like it in his closet. You really picked out a good one, he tells you, grinning like he's missed you. And you are willing to believe this shirt some sign of his

ongoing affection, his inability to let you go. His thin fingers look eager around his paper cup, his tongue still meets the spout before his lips. In the moment, he's like a photograph of himself from a distance. He's what you remember, what you idealized. And the feeling that washes through the room is little better than fear.

Her name surfaces over the grinding of the beans behind the counter, the one you know he left you for, mingled with the tendrils of dark roast. It's you who says it. Stacy. Of course it would be something like Stacy. Something generic and bland. Off-brand. A poor substitution. Read between his lines, note when he avoids answering a question directly so he can go home claiming he hasn't lied. Nod and accept his answer. Believe him in the moment and feel the belief leaking out from the undercarriage onto the roads between the coffee shop and the walls where you'll shout some more. Go hoarse. Cry. Lie to your sister and your best friend about how the conversation went. Tell them you're not even considering getting back together, make jokes about Taylor Swift being your anthem.

Stacy Brewer. Her face reminds you of pudding. Her breasts are too close to her bellybutton for someone eight years younger than you. T-shirts that stretch over a tiny paunch, Chuck Taylors in three colors, she's worn a skirt maybe once. She doesn't clean up good. In the passing weeks he's called her a just-a-friend, a nuisance, nothing, out-of-his-life. You send her a private message, hitting two social media sites just to be sure she gets it. Tell her he's come back around, that he's saying you're "the one," that he swears he was never involved with her (true). Tell her you've slept together already to get her to trust you (lie). Hit send. Text him that you love him (unknown).

Let him chase you for a few days while you await her response. Let it escalate because you know you might not allow it after you read her reply. Let him kiss you behind the stacks in the used book store, inhaling yellowed pages and broken spines. Insist he read *East of Eden* to gain some perspective.

“I love you,” he says with the book in his hands. Pay for it. Don’t respond. Let it hurt for five minutes before you apologize and admit you only wanted to cut him.

The life you’ve painstakingly built in his absence surfaces in the form of Lance. His prowess is nil and his penis is unimpressive. But his hair looks like fire, even over his broad, firm chest. He makes you feel small, delicate. His freckled biceps remind you of what a man is supposed to be but rarely is. You dive in, send him your address, ask him to bring Fireball whiskey and wear a shirt with buttons. His tongue reminds you this is good enough, that making all the wrong choices asserts your martyrdom. Poor skinny thing with too much dopamine firing through synapses, coming too close to orgasm and hating yourself for it. But Lance is a barrier, bricks as red as his lumberjack beard. Safe. Disconnected.

“I missed you,” Lance says, rubbing the small of your back. Giggle and hear the wind in your chest.

Text him afterwards while Lance snores beside you. Feel vindicated beneath the bile in your throat.

It will take Stacy a week to respond, and when she does she will confirm the obvious. Four months of six she was in his bed. He told her he loved her, that he wanted to take her to his family’s ski condo in the Rockies, that he would move to New York with her after graduation. Smell the day-old words like rotting meat, suddenly insincere,

suddenly recitation. Call him a sociopath. He's still texting her, Stacy says. Sexting. Asking for pictures. See it for what it is. A stagnant play in which the female lead is recast until she's grown stale and warbled.

Don't decide if you care or not yet. Don't tell anyone. Coo to Stacy that she's a victim here, sooth her, draw her in. Tell her you don't blame her (half-true). Tell her there's no point in confronting him, he'll only lie.

Weigh the options. Decide if he never knows Stacy cracked, he'll keep sexting her no matter what answer you give him. Decide if Stacy confronts him, she might win his affection. Do everything you can to separate them and come out ahead.

Ask him to come over and tell him you know everything. Ambush him. Omit that you started it. Let him think it was her. Take him into your bed. Tell him he's done with her. He listens. He goes radio silent. Stacy will tell you three days later and ask if he's done the same to you. Tell her no and feign irritation. She will tell you she wanted to take him out for his birthday, even though he's refused to see her for two months. Casually drop in that he asked you to get coffee for his birthday. Tell her how sorry you are (lie).

Text Lance for angry sex.

The weeks will go by and you'll check in with Stacy ever so often. Tell her the things he's said to you, say you hate him, wait for her to offer up any information. But he's cut her off. Offer to buy her coffee if ever she needs to talk because she won't take you up on it. If she ever does, contemplate seducing her to keep her loyal. You've marked her out as desperate and lonely. Heartbroken, but that inspires no sympathy. She lied the same as him. Made a fool of you.

He talks to you about how much he hates her, how wrong it was of her to go meddling in things and trying to ruin your chances together. He admits her breasts were unappealing and claims he slept with her out of pity. Pretend you believe him and scratch his back open when he thinks you're making love.

After a month, you will message Stacy on her birthday and ask her how she's holding up.

"I keep thinking he'll text me or drop by like he used to," she says. "But I think he knows if he did, I'd just tell you anyway." The words fall over you like a rag quilt with iron seams.

Tell her how much you hate the way he's treating her, how you defend her when he calls her unattractive, simpering, psychotic. Tell him how stupid you think he is for choosing such a frog-faced little girl over you in the afterglow. Accept her gratitude and his shame in tandem. If you ever feel guilty, which you never do, remember the time five months back when you spoke to Stacy in the hallway and she insisted they were only friends. Remember how he bought you lunch right after that and parroted the story. Remember how they laughed at you when you weren't looking.

Lance's black T-shirt will be draped over your pale breasts as you sit cross-legged on the carpet, fibers digging into your bare ass. You'll grip the neck of the wine bottle resting against your crotch and tell him it's over. And you won't be surprised when he doesn't care, when he admits there were others, when he doesn't even wait to get the shirt off you before leaving. You'll miss his red chest hair and Celtic knot tattoo but little else. Only the grim satisfaction of hiding them from each other.

Stacy compares more notes with you. Let slip all the things he did for you that he refused to do for her, all the sentiments he didn't share. Know she's crumbling as her replies come slower and slower. He's sitting beside you on the couch, watching your favorite stand-up comedian, hand on your knee. Tell him it's your sister needing advice on something innocuous and bite his lower lip a little too hard.

She will go off about how badly she wants to make him pay. With a joking tone, elaborate your "fantasy" of contacting all the female friends on his social profiles and telling them everything. See how many of them were told the same, how many women were meant to see that ski condo in the Rockies, how many heard him say, "I've never looked anyone in the eyes during sex before." Give her as much detail as you can peppered with serves-him-right. Grin when she says she has nothing to lose.

Never ask her how she pulled it off.

Study his face every time he comes in the door now, fallen a little further. He never drinks but asks for a little something, huddling against your kitchen table. You find the remnants of Lance's Fireball in the cabinet and feed him shot after shot. He's wearing another JC Penny thermal shirt in heather gray and you know it means nothing. He buys everything in bulk. He croaks through the whiskey that it feels like everyone is against him lately. He will lie about the details—of course he will—and outwardly you pat his knee and tell him you love him, inwardly mocking him. You watch his Facebook friend count drop by twelve, all women. Ignore how similar you all look to each other: glasses, soft faces, curvy hips. Vow to dye your hair.

Take him into your bed as he tells you you're the only one who truly cares for him. Watch his loyalty solidify as the avenues close off. He will bury his face in your

chest and the scent of cinnamon and alcohol will waft up in resignation. Hold him. Feel safe.

BABY OF MINE

The rain holds out until Violet is halfway down the interstate, the wheels beneath her picking up the slick, sticking sound of water-filled tire treads. She holds out turning on the wipers as long as she can so they don't drag across a half-dry windshield. The chord from her phone to the auxiliary port rocks gently, draped over the gearshift, pulsing a handful of Indie bands through the wires until her texting tone drowns it out for a split second. The babysitter, checking in, asking how Ken's conference is treating them. Bon Iver answers and Violet does not.

She clicks on the seat-warmer to the passenger's side where Ken isn't sitting. His convention took him up the opposite interstate, and she envisions the distance stretching out like a tether between them, scratchy yarn now getting soaked in the downpour outside her car. She touches the leather, now a soft glow of heat, sending a shot of warmth through her palm she knows is colder than the familiar feeling of his muscled thigh. The broadness of his shoulders stretches out across the seat beside her and fades into the thought of the wide backseat, longing for fogged windows and his mentholated breath on her neck. Thunder pulls her back to her body. She thinks about how the smell that rises up from the earth during rain only lasts until the soil is soaked through. An hour left to drive. She'll arrive to the clinic early.

She leaves the phone plugged in and calls him, knowing he's likely at lunch at this hour, imagining him with his tuna salad on a bench somewhere outside the convention center. The rain, after all, was following her. His legs crossed ankle-to-knee in his dark wash denim, Timex quietly ticking at his wrist.

“There’s my girl.” He’s smiling, freckling in the sun. Like he always used to on their trips to the lake before Jacklyn was born. “Been missing you, beautiful. How’s all the mother-daughter time treating you?”

“Just fine.” She wills her tone to be even, tempered, and worries how obvious it is she’s in a car. “Sorry, I’ve got you on speaker while I’m puttering around the house. Jackie’s sleeping.” Maybe she was. Violet had yet to think of a convincing lie for why Jackie was at the sitter’s that day.

“Oh she is? So does that mean I can tell you all the things I’m planning on doing when I get you alone tomorrow night? In detail?” His laugh reminds her of homemade bread. Warm and dense and sincere.

“I bet I can hazard a guess. I was just thinking something similar myself.” Without meaning to, she smiles genuinely, blushing softly across her cheeks and running her hand over the warmed leather. A poor substitute for the longing she felt rising up across her lap. His mutter of satisfaction sends a shot through her spine.

“So how’s that baby doing?” Her gut goes cold and she rubs her heated palm across her midsection.

“Oh, still in there.”

“Yeah? Vi,” the apples of his cheeks are at full flourish, “I think it’s a boy. I’ll bet you anything.” She hmms through the receiver. “I should get back in there. I love you. All three. Can’t wait to see you, babe.” His voice fades out into the storm.

Violet fights for the thoughts of a backseat romp, of the few sacred nights they shut off the baby monitor for just an hour, falling into the life with him she loved where they were alone and whole and drowning out the one where Jackie clung to them like an

extra limb. A life of sweat mixing until they were soaked through, slick and satisfied and unburdened. But all she manages are the tears and warbles of Jackie's plump, red face when she dropped her off at the sitter's that morning. Dragging her up the stairs by her chubby forearms as she peed her big girl panties in protest, laced bobby socks soaking up yellow. Rinsing her off in the babysitter's tub, muttering *goddamn it, for Christ's sake*.

They told her in the first few weeks following Jackie's birth that Violet was suffering from postpartum depression. She went through the motions as if she believed them, because Ken *couldn't stand to see her like this*. But she couldn't think of any woman who wouldn't get irritated at lactating through their T-shirts or those liquid shits that poured out of diapers no matter how tight you made them. And had she thought motherhood would treat her so callously, she would have thought twice. But Ken, her mountain-man, wept into his beard and she crumbled into antidepressants, landsliding into a musty therapist's office.

Dr. Shultz assured her it would all pass after a few months. She and Jackie would bond. Picturesque Madonna and child after a few more helpings of shrunken head and weaning from one med to the other.

Violet slams her fist against the steering wheel thinking of Jackie wailing in the tub, feeling like the months of laborious toilet training had amounted to nothing. Like training cats. *Why can't you just do what you're supposed to?* Water lapping from cupped hand to soiled thighs rhythmically, mimicked in the thud of the windshield wipers.

She pulls straight into the parking lot of the clinic, blocky and white, like a Spanish pueblo against a constant rolling gray. Thirty minutes to spare. The engine dies and she disconnects the music, drumming rain flooding her ears as she stares at Ken's

contact photo. Cinco de Mayo nearly three years ago, straw sombrero hiding his red hair, save for his chin stubble. A jaw line she would envision when he buried his face between her legs, even after the beard. Back when she still gripped his hair and bucked wildly, when they had hours to kill. She remembers the tequila of that night seeping out of her body and onto his stomach. She remembers they decided to start trying to conceive the next morning. How gladly she threw out her birth control, how deep and full she felt when he would cradle her belly in hope. The love they made when the test strip finally turned blue.

Flash forward to Jackie in her high chair when she refused to wean, pureed green beans smeared over her face like she had sprouted mold. The snot bubble in her left nostril keeping time with her ragged, purple-faced screams. Violet hunched over the kitchen sink with a shard of the food jar wedged in her palm, deep red running down the chrome basin. Her breasts swayed beneath her like heavy bags, nipples leaking like an overworked Guernsey. She pressed the shard further into her hand and waited out the thirty-six minutes it took Ken to arrive. She remembers him saying *Christ, Vi* over and over as he scrubbed Jackie's face clean and rushed to change the soiled diaper that resulted in a week's worth of painful rash. She remembers him spinning her around from the sink and pulling the shard from her hand without pause.

"What the hell happened?" He doused her with peroxide, the bubbling white foam tinged pink.

"I'm not cut out for this, Kenny." Her tone left no room for debate. She said it as though she were asking to be let out of a deal. It wasn't the first time.

"Well, I am. And if I have to take Jackie away from here, I will."

It was the last. For a year she pumped her breasts, played peek-a-boo, kept steady. She wondered if malice could pass through milk, turn it sour. Her expressions became tested like bathwater, then tepid. At night she enfolded herself closer and closer to Ken's softening belly, fingers pressing into the long muscles of his back.

But it worked too well. He hadn't even flinched two weeks ago while she gaped at another blue strip. He'd gripped her tight and laughed softly in her ear. Her body went rigid save for her hand on his forearm. With Jackie she'd felt like a caged wildcat, shadowed slits rippling over her dark skin as she paced. Now muzzled and chained. And the reflex that would stop a suicide from drowning herself pitched in her gut, beating against her womb. They made love and she called the clinic from their bathroom while afterglow plunged him into sleep.

She checks in at the desk and takes her paperwork, checks in with the babysitter, reads the message from Ken that says he likes David for a boy. *Sounds great!* she replies all before finding a chair. *Family Planning* and *Home* litter the tables, some as old as four months, tattering at the edges. Generic as every other medical office she's ever been to. Posters line the walls with white-toothed middle agers, some with overly clean children that seem determined to say not all of them end past the double doors. Maybe if Jackie looked more like her father, maybe then Violet would love her better. She counts the number of times *You will be given pain medication* appears on the information sheet.

You will be given pain medication. Your cervix will be prepared for the procedure. You will be given antibiotics. You will be given pain medication. You will be injected with numbing solution. Your cervix will be stretched by dilators. You will be injected with numbing solution. You will drive the three hours home. You will pick up

your daughter and resent her for the hug she wants. You will bleed into a maxipad while your husband sends you baby names. You will feel the cold wash over in your solitary bed. You will resume.

Fifteen minutes. That's all it takes. Like snaking the shower drain after Jackie clogs it with cotton balls. Violet waits on the table an extra fifteen, even though she refused sedation. They wait for her to cry. When she realizes she won't see them again, she doesn't hesitate to savor her only opportunity to admit that she's fine. She texts the babysitter that she'll be there on time as planned. She texts Ken that she loves him and drops in that she's feeling a bit under the weather, but nothing serious, and sends him a stock picture of Jackie taken before she left.

The throbbing in her womb is tolerable and warm, pulsing with the intermittent wiper blades as the only thing that separates asphalt from sky is a dotted yellow line. She leaves the radio off and remembers how the drives for their once-annual float trip were always shorter on the way back.

Jackie is licking Cheeto dust from her fingertips when Violet arrives. Sticky orange prints mark up her right shoulder. Bile rises in Violet's throat when Jackie's fingers touch her hair. Inside, she paces. She carries Jackie, now dozing, from car seat to crib in the closest gesture she could call affection, when the girl was little more than warm, dead weight. What started as faint pink on the interstate is now scarlet, leaking onto her inner thighs. *Going to bed early, hon. Stomach is still queasy. Probably all our junk food today!* The baby monitor turns off with barking radio static.

In the morning, Violet will dress them both haphazardly in little more than pajamas and call an emergency sitter. After dropping Jackie off, she will call Ken in a

panic on her way to the emergency room. She's bleeding, she'll tell him. Hurry home. She'll use her individual insurance and feign ignorance about the cramping in her gut. Does it always hurt this much afterwards?

By the time Ken arrives, four hours at breakneck pace, she will already be home curling up in their bed. She will leave Jackie at the sitter's just this once, when no one could blame her. *I lost it*, she'll whisper into his dark wash denim. *Please forgive me*. With one hand, he'll hold her shoulders, with the other wipe his face long like pulling taffy from his wet cheeks. He'll believe she's in shock as she presses her fingers into his thigh.

They'll return to Dr. Shultz and Zoloft. In a month, Violet will insist he's not meeting her needs as a therapist. *He doesn't understand*. But he does. He will eye her sideways. In six months, she will say that she can't bring herself to try again, and Ken will agree, pressing mentholated kisses on her neck. She will play her devastated, better self while carrying the truth like air in her chest, tie her tubes, and resume.

WORKS CITED

- Baxter, Charles. *Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction*. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1997. Print.
- Beck, Koa. "Female Characters Don't Have to Be Likable." *The Atlantic*. The Atlantic Monthly Group, 31 Dec. 2015. Web. 10 Mar. 2016.
- Brockmeier, Kevin. "The Ceiling." *Things That Fall from the Sky: Stories*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2003. 101-117. Print.
- Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. New York: Penguin Books, 1986. Print.
- Cleary, Beverly. *Dear Mr. Henshaw*. New York: Scholastic Inc., 1998. Print.
- Dolezel, Lubomir. *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. Print.
- Gardner, John. *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991. Print.
- Houston, Pam. "How to Talk to a Hunter." *Cowboys Are My Weakness: Stories*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992. 13-20. Print.
- Messud, Claire. Interviewed by Annasue McCleave Wilson. "An Unseemly Emotional: PW Talks with Claire Messud." *Publisher's Weekly*. PWxyz, LLC, 29 Apr. 2013. Web. 10 Mar. 2016.
- Messud, Claire. *The Woman Upstairs*. New York: Vintage Books, 2014. Print.
- Meyer, Stephanie. *Twilight*. New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2005. Print.
- Minot, Susan. "Lust." *Lust & Other Stories*. New York: Vintage Books, 2000. 3-17. Print.
- Nelson, Antonya. "The Unified Front." *Female Trouble*. New York: Scribner, 2003. 161-175. Print.
- Nix, Garth. *Sabriel*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995. Print.
- Saunders, George. Interviewed by Patrick Dacy. "The George Saunders Interview, Part 1." *BOMB*. BOMB Magazine, 26 Apr. 2011. Web. 10 Apr. 2016.

Troy, Mary. "Why We Need Unlikable Characters: Tired of Simplistic Good-Guy-Vs.-Bad-Guy Stories, One Writer Makes a Case for Complex, Fascinating Characters that are True to Life." *Writer (Kalmbach Publishing Co.)* 120.7 (2007): 44-45. Print.

Wharton, Edith. *The House of Mirth*. New York: Scribner, 1961. Print.

Woodruff, Elvira. *George Washington's Socks*. New York: Scholastic, 1991. Print.

"Would You Want to be Friends With Humbert Humbert?: A Forum on Likeability." *The New Yorker*. The New Yorker, 16 May 2013. Web. 10 Mar. 2016.