

**"WE COULD NOT NEED THIS BOOK MORE RIGHT NOW."** —Merritt Tierce, author of *Love Me Back*

# I KNOW WHAT'S BEST FOR YOU

*Stories on Reproductive Freedom*



*Edited by*

# SHELLY ORIA

**"AN URGENT, VITAL COLLECTION"** —Peter Ho Davies, author of *A Lie Someone Told You About Yourself*

PRAISE FOR *I KNOW WHAT'S BEST FOR YOU*

“Reproductive freedom is a terrain vastly underexplored in contemporary literature, an exclusion we can’t help but understand as deliberate, given its essential relevance for every single human’s life. That we have so few collections of writing on the subject is itself an instance of oppression: our experiences have been controlled, and then our stories about our experiences have been controlled and left out. This book does the critical, groundbreaking work of bringing so many disparate visions of reproductive freedom together that you actually begin to see what it is: a struggle for autonomy that reaches far beyond the decision to have or not have children, to parent them in some ways or others, to claim sexual pleasure without shame. To let embodiment and family be about love and safety, rather than fear and broken connections. You can’t get at these truths through fiction or essay alone; reproductive freedom is a multi-genre topic if ever there was one. Here are many powerful voices grappling with a powerful matter, and getting somewhere, with humor, wisdom, anger, and so much vital honesty. We could not need this book more right now, and many more modeled after it.”

—Merritt Tierce, author of *Love Me Back*

“This book is for anyone whose body has been distrusted, coerced, policed, or violated; and for everyone who cares about the grave threats to bodily autonomy in the twenty-first century. The writers in this collection approach reproductive justice from a range of identities, beliefs, and experiences, and what emerges is a thrillingly personal and political response to the emergency we’re in.”

—Leni Zumas, author of *Red Clocks*

“An urgent, vital collection of essays and fiction, by turns frank and fierce, beautiful and brave. Such voices, and stories are too often silenced or unspoken; it’s a gift to hear them now, and a duty to listen.”

—Peter Ho Davies, author of *A Lie Someone Told You About Yourself*

I KNOW WHAT’S  
BEST FOR YOU



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# I KNOW WHAT'S BEST FOR YOU

## STORIES ON REPRODUCTIVE FREEDOM

*Edited by*

## SHELLY ORIA

*With support from The Brigid Alliance*



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SAN FRANCISCO

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# FOREWORD

BY SHELLY ORIA

BOOKS ARE SOULFUL BEINGS that come into our fast world slowly. While they're being written, revised, edited, copyedited, and published, the world around them shape-shifts.

When I began to curate this book at the end of 2019, I would often calm myself down by watching videos of Ruth Bader Ginsburg performing TRX push-ups. *She's well*, the videos would whisper to me, *She's strong. Breathe*. The world, since then, has changed its shape.

A few months earlier, on a sunny Saturday, I met Carol

Davis and Lenore Davis for lunch in Manhattan's West Village. Carol and Lenore cofounded The Brigid Alliance—a nonprofit that arranges and pays the way for individuals across the country forced to travel for abortion care—and now they were discussing with McSweeney's a potential collaboration: an anthology that would respond to our urgent reproductive freedom crisis. I'd just curated and edited another anthology for McSweeney's, *Indelible in the Hippocampus: Writings from the Me Too Movement*, and Amanda Uhle, McSweeney's executive director, asked if I'd take on this new project, a book she hoped would be similar in format and spirit. I arrived at that lunch thinking I was versed in the topic of reproductive freedom, that I understood our crisis and its circumstances. But as I listened to Carol and Lenore, I realized the situation was far more dire than I knew.

According to the Center for Reproductive Rights, if *Roe v. Wade* were overturned, twenty-four states could immediately prohibit abortion. When you consider that laws restricting abortion are being enacted at an alarming rate—forty-six laws in eighteen states in the first nine months of 2019 alone—the terror intensifies. And have

you heard of fake clinics? According to US reproductive rights organization Reproaction, there are currently about 2,700 anti-abortion centers across the country—more than three times the number of clinics that provide abortion care—many of which masquerade as abortion clinics, so they may promote their agenda in all kinds of effective ways, such as suggesting a woman take time to consider her options and scheduling her next appointment for a date when her pregnancy would be too advanced to terminate legally.

One could put together a powerful book—ten powerful books—filled with stories of abortion or the lack of access to one in today's America. But I felt drawn to a broader approach and invited writers and artists to respond to any aspect of reproductive freedom with which they connected: miscarriages, fertility, contraception, surrogacy, childfreeness ... and, of course, abortion. My experience with *Indelible in the Hippocampus* offered insight that made this wide lens feel essential.

When I started curating *Indelible* for McSweeney's, in the very early days of Me Too, I sought to make a book that would elevate that movement's message but also wanted to address its lack of inclusivity; at the time, the stories of

white, straight, beautiful actresses dominated our cultural conversation to the point of distortion. Making an inclusive anthology—with voices that spanned backgrounds, races, genders, and ages—became even more important to everyone involved. And when *Indelible* came out, when I discussed it or read from it alongside other writers and activists in different cities around the country, it was, in fact, the book's intersectionality that seemed to draw in most readers.

It was at those same events, listening to womxn share their stories, witnessing mothers and daughters who showed up together—so many mothers and daughters, and seeing them wrecked me like nothing else on that tour—that an even bigger narrative began to crystallize. It seemed clear that every aggression they described lived within a context of oppression. That sexual violence against womxn is one of innumerable mechanisms that ensure womxn hold less power than men.

And yet I operated—and the movement seemed to operate—as though there were a finite number of abusers and, if our society exposed and punished them all, our work would be done.

There is a dotted line connecting the powerful

Hollywood producer in his robe to every other man who's abused his power and harmed womxn and their bodies. This isn't to say that these men and their stories are the same. It's to suggest that you can follow that dotted line of oppression to Texas, where a six-week abortion ban just went into effect, forcing any Texas resident who needs an abortion to travel for one—or give birth. And you can follow the line to One First Street in DC, where the heavily conservative Supreme Court will soon be hearing what many view as a test case to overturn *Roe*.

As we continue our cultural conversation on reproductive health, as it perhaps heightens over the coming months and years, my hope is that we fight the terrible symptom while keeping in mind the larger illness that produces it, a system in which certain bodies hold inherent power over other bodies.

It is understandable, of course, that we tend to focus on symptoms of societal illnesses more than we focus on the connections among them; seeing those connections can cause paralyzing despair. But if the goal is to see and insist on that larger context without despairing, then that is where art becomes essential.

The stories in this book—by which I mean the short



fiction and personal essays, the poems and the plays, the comic and the photographs—have not only deepened and changed my understanding of reproductive freedom but managed to do so while making me laugh and making me, somehow, against all odds, optimistic. And no matter what shape the world has taken by the time you hold these stories in your hands, I hope they do the same for you.

## I KNOW WHAT'S BEST FOR YOU ALL OVER THE WORLD

THIS BOOK WAS COMPILED in response to the American reproductive freedom crisis, and the voices in it speak to the American experience. To explore aspects of reproductive freedom around the world, an international segment will launch on the McSweeney's website in April. As I write these words, I'm editing a short story by a Brazilian writer and personal essays from Poland and China. I hope you visit [mcsweeneys.net](http://mcsweeneys.net) and search for "I Know What's Best for You All Over the World" to read these pieces and others from around the globe.

## HYMN

BY DESIREE COOPER

WITH NOTHING ELSE TO feed him, she pushed the last slice of bread into his baby bird mouth. “Take this, eat.” She taught him how to pray as he trembled in the bathtub where the bullets couldn’t find him. They said it together every night as they practiced living on their knees: *If I should die before I wake*. He didn’t die, such was the shield of her love. She willed it and he thrived, a rose in the desert.

Day by day, she reminded him: “I love you with all my heart, all my mind, all my strength.” Blessed are those who are another’s joy.

But in the Valley of Shadows, the serpents slithered. Samaritans never stopped to help. Fishes and loaves did not multiply. Suffer, little children. A table was always set for the privilege of the enemy. In the house of many mansions, the rich hoarded their manna.

He wore his coat of color, a gift from his mother. He looked good. *This is my body*. In his pride, he was a target for the rulers of the fish, the fowl, and all other living creatures. They burst into his front door: Render to Caesar, the things that are Caesar's.

They threw her begotten son into the yard, a pig in the dirt. In the doorsill, his mother wept. Giving his last breath back to her, he despaired: "*Why hast thou forsaken me?*"

## LET'S JUST BE NORMAL AND HAVE A BABY

BY ALISON ESPACH

MY HUSBAND, TIM, HAS nine months to live, which doesn't upset him as much as you might think. Tim has been dying for years now, and he's become quite good at it. He journals in the morning and then takes long, meaningful walks along the beach. He collects seashells for our kitchen vase and makes elaborate dinners for me when I come home from work, the kind of recipe with over twenty ingredients. He doesn't even want to travel the world anymore—we've already done that. He just wants to be at home with his wife, eating a good meal. And the

food Tim cooks is so good—overwhelming, really—that it makes me sleepy. I sit back in my chair and say, “Jesus. What are you trying to do, kill me?”

Tim laughs. “I’ll clean,” he says. “You go get ready for bed. I’ll be up in a minute.”

My husband is sweet—too sweet. After being the perfect person all day, he still has the energy to admire me from the bedroom doorway. He stands there longer than he should, just looking at me, and I can’t take it anymore, how he tilts his head as if he is trying to get one last look. It makes me feel as if he is already a ghost, watching me get dressed for bed alone.

But of course, he’s not a ghost. He’s still very much alive, and I don’t know why I have to keep reminding myself of this. He walks toward me, puts his hands on my waist. He has nine months to live, which sounds like no time at all when I say it in my head, but like a lot of time when Tim says it. He always says it with such enthusiasm, as if these last nine months will be our finest. As if we’ll eat such good food and have such great sex, I won’t even notice that he’s dying. And for the most part, that is how it’s been. We’ve eaten so much good food and had so much sex that he’s actually starting to become a little predictable about it, walking into

the bedroom, moving the hair off my shoulder. Saying, “Oh, Lisa,” and then kissing me slowly up the spine.

But tonight, I don’t feel like it. Tonight, I am not wearing my I-want-to-have-sex-with-my-husband-before-bed outfit. It was a long day at work, and I’m very tired. Not to mention a bit cold. It’s January. Every day there’s a dry freeze upon our roof, which is why I put on my I-am-very-tired-and-a-bit-cold outfit when dinner is over. Flannels and my old oversized college sweatshirt and the headband I always forget to remove after washing my face.

But my husband doesn’t care about my outfit. He probably doesn’t even notice. My husband was not raised like me—trained to believe that there are certain blouses that will make men fall in love with you, certain shoes that will help you win cases in the courtroom. My husband does not look for his own power in places outside of himself, in clothing stores and in the dark of our closet, which is something I’ve always loved about him. How he sat down at the bar on our very first date knowing exactly what he wanted to drink. A gin and tonic. My husband, he’s reliable, consistent. The same wonderful man every day. And, time has proven, he will have sex with me in any outfit.

“You look beautiful,” he says.

My husband thinks everything is beautiful, even my headband. He's been complimenting me a lot since we got back from the doctor's, for the same reason he's started staring out the window a lot, admiring the trees. He's been investing meaning in meaningless things, like the snow that falls on his open palm and the new calendar he bought from CVS, each month a different Labrador, the kind of dog he always wanted but traveled too much to keep. Normally we spread our calendar flat on the butcher block—but Tim hung this one up. He said he wanted to see each one of his final months on the wall. He wanted to look each day square in the eye.

My husband is all about meaningful eye contact these days. In our bedroom, he turns me around, looks me in the eye, and begins to take off the clothes I just put on, one article at a time, like people do in the movies. I've always liked this, too, how slowly and seriously Tim takes sex, but when I undress him, it doesn't feel the same anymore. It feels cryptic. As if I'm stripping Tim of important layers of Tim, and after, when he's standing before me naked, he keeps looking me in the eye as if he's not undressed, as if I can somehow help him out of his I-am-going-to-die-soon outfit, a long flesh fault running alongside his ear.

"Let's have a baby," Tim says.

"A baby?"

"You know," he says. "The miniature people with no teeth."

I laugh, but only because I'm confused.

"Why would we want to take care of a miniature person with no teeth?"

"Isn't that what married people do?" he asks, smiling. "Or is that just a nasty rumor?"

"Definitely a rumor," I say. "Besides, we don't want that."

"We don't?"

Lately, the cancer in Tim's brain has been messing with his memory. Gives him seizures in the night sometimes. I spend a lot of time holding Tim's hand as he shakes, reminding him of who we are. This is what we do on the nights that we aren't having sex.

"No," I say. "We've never wanted that."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," I say. "I'm very sure."

Not wanting children was what bonded us on our very first date, when I confessed right away that I didn't want

to get married or have kids. That's what it started to feel like in my mid-thirties, a confession, a terrible thing I had to reveal before the drinks arrived, because if I didn't, men would look at me over the perfectly lovely tiramisu and say, "Well, that's too bad," as if I had poisoned it. Sometimes, they got curious. Asked me about my parents and then my ovaries—were they good? Some even tried to argue me out of it—strangers who didn't know me, now suddenly very worried about my being alone one day in a nursing home, dribbling oatmeal down my chin. "Why didn't you tell me this before our date?" one of them even asked, as if I were an imposter. And I was getting very tired of this—these men were wasting my time too. They were never the men I expected them to be. And so when I sat down at the table on my next date, I told Tim right away.

"Just so you know, I don't want to get married, and I don't want kids," I said, and then our margaritas arrived.

Tim leaned forward.

"Good," Tim said. "Because I'm dying, and I can't do any of that."

At first, I didn't believe him. At first, I was just as bad as those men. Tim looked healthy across the table,

fresh-faced and flushed, like a man who just walked off of his boat. A man who would live forever. He looked like all he wanted to do was drink his margarita, which was comically large.

"Are you joking?" I asked.

"That's what *I* asked," Tim said. "But the doctor was not joking. Says he's got proof and everything. Scans. X-rays. Blood tests."

I laughed. I knew even then that I would fall in love. That maybe I already was in love. Here was a man who wanted to make me laugh about his own death. A man who accepted us both as we were. A man who wanted to make the best out of the time he had left, which was how I often felt about my life, even though I wasn't sick.

"I've got two years," Tim said. "Maybe three, if I'm good."

I felt I should say something more. Like, *I'm sorry*. Like, *If you're dying, then why on earth are you online dating?* But I held my tongue. I didn't know what it meant to be dying. I hardly even knew what it meant to be online dating. And I hoped that when I died, I could do it like Tim. Go to fine restaurants with strangers and hold up my drink and feel grateful for the margarita.

"To three more beautiful years," he said, raising his glass.

And they really were three beautiful years—the best years of my life. We ate a lot of food. We went on a lot of vacations. And my boss was very understanding. Sentimental ever since a city bus nearly swiped him out of existence, and so when I asked for time off, he said, "Go. Go to France. Go to California. Live your life." And there, wherever we were, it was like something out of a movie, except better, because it was my life, and I got to be the woman standing on the balcony overlooking the ocean with a man I loved. We ate oysters and went bungee jumping. We stayed up all night and talked about who we used to be. He woke me up on the hottest nights, asked me to come swimming with him. Tim was fun. Tim was always standing in a beautiful body of water, asking me to come join him. And I knew that the movies were right: dying really did make people better—something we joked about all the time.

"You would *not* have liked me before I was dying," Tim said in the pool. "Trust me. I was kind of an asshole."

And I believed him. I have finally learned to believe what people tell me about themselves, and over the three

years, Tim has told me a lot—those months in college when he maniacally tried to become a professional punter for the Patriots and those women he dated just because they had long blond hair or those jobs he took because they made him a shit ton of money. His last job was his worst—in sales—so why continue? He quit as soon as he was given his death sentence, and he said it felt good, living off his retirement.

"All of a sudden, I'm rich!" he said. "Dying has given me my life back."

I wasn't dying, but I knew what he meant. Work didn't seem that important now that I was in love for the first time in my life, finally and wholly connected to another human being in the way I had always dreamed, and maybe—a therapist suggested—it was *because* he was dying. Because you *know* you can't be together forever.

"Or maybe," I argued, "I'm just in love."

"That's always a possibility," the therapist said, and that was the last time I saw her, because why did I pay some woman to tell me the truth about myself? I already knew the truth about myself. I was in love.

I did not hesitate when Tim proposed in the middle of the night after only a year. I rested my head on his chest. His

heartbeat was fine. Loud in my ear. I thought, *Maybe we'll both live forever*. I confess, this is what I secretly believed, as we bought a house near the sea, as we boarded planes for far-off places, as we giggled inside the fancy restaurant after the waiter profusely shamed himself for “accidentally omitting the palate cleanser.” We said this to each other for months after, whenever one of us started to get mad at the other: “Is it because I accidentally omitted the palate cleanser?” And we cracked up. And it was nice how the worst of our fights always turned into our favorite jokes. Life was not meant to be taken so seriously. Life was funny. Life was *good*.

This is what I had believed, even as I dressed for the doctor's office in January, as I combed my hair and put on my everybody-is-going-to-be-fine blouse, a bright red thing I wore on days I went to court. I held Tim's sweaty hand, sliding my dry, coarse fingers through his. I was quiet as he was quiet. I put my other hand on his back and made tiny circles like, *It's OK, it's OK. It's OK?*

No.

The oncogene amplification is much greater than previously believed, the doctor said.

At least that's what he sounded like. Then he pushed his glasses further up his nose.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Nine months,” he said. “Maybe a year.”

And I did feel as if it were my fault, like I should be able to do or say something more, the whole way home. But I couldn't. I looked down at my blouse and thought, *My husband is dying. No matter what I wear, my husband is dying. My husband is dying*. That was when I first understood it for real, and now that I understand it, I can't stop seeing it all over his body and his face and in the red scar along his skull. Each night feels like his last, and I'm exhausted by this, all the grief I'm going to feel forever.

“We can't have a baby,” I say. “You're dying.”

He pulls away from me. He laughs a little.

“Thanks for reminding me,” he says.

I am guilty, though I don't know of what. I cover myself at night in old sweatshirts and blankets. I cry sometimes, and this upsets Tim, because Tim just wants to live. Tim just wants to do crazy, miraculous things like be a father.

“At the doctor's, it occurred to me that if you got pregnant now, I could actually *meet* our child before I died,” he says. “I just keep thinking about that. Actually getting to hold our baby before I go.”

“But I don't understand,” I say. I can feel my heart speed



up, the way it does in court when the defense brings out a piece of evidence I'd never reviewed before. When the other side breaks the rules and nobody seems to care but me. "You never wanted to be a father before."

"Death changed me, I guess," he says.

He is joking, but I don't laugh. I am getting tired of joking about his death. At night, when I close my eyes, I can feel all that is about to happen to us, and it feels real. It feels like he is actually changing, like he wants more now than ever before, and he's hurt because I don't. He resents that I am still the same person, getting into bed under sheaths of fabric that signify nothing other than it's bedtime, sleep-time, not sex-with-cancer-husband time.

"Come on," he says. "Let's just have a baby. It'll be fun. The baby will be cute. That's what I always hear about babies."

"It's not that simple."

"People do it all the time," he says. "My father did it, and he was a moron."

"This isn't a joke," I say. "It's my *life*."

"I know," he says. "But it's my life too."

His fingers graze my belly button, the most naked part of my stomach. A hole without a covering. He measures its

circumference with his tongue: "A perfect circle," he says. The size of a marble.

"Stop that," I say.

I swat him because I don't like it when he does this. Lately, he's been looking at my body like it's an open field, a place where he can imagine great things for himself. He's been entering me and pulling out later and later, coming all over my chest. After, he looks up at the ceiling. He cries. He goes into the bathroom, takes his medicine for the seizures and the painkillers for the pain, which make him unable to control his speech. He slurs his words, replaces his *t*'s with *p*'s. He asks me what I think it will be like when he's gone, and I don't know what to say.

"Like you're gone, I guess," I say.

And I know this must sound cruel. But I really don't know how else to answer. I can't imagine what something like that will feel like.

In February, there is snow all over the ground, all over the evergreens. On good days, Tim stands tall in the kitchen with a mop in hand and makes jokes I try to appreciate: *dead man mopping*. He writes important things on the new dog calendar, mutual events, things we are going to share together. Brunch at the Potters', Logan's birthday

party, Mother coming for dinner. He says, "Why don't we go somewhere warm for a few weeks?"

But I can't. "I have work," I say. I've got meetings. Appointments. Things I must do if I want to continue living for years and years and years. I buy a separate calendar, just for me, a small one with no pictures of anything, just empty pages for all the things that I don't feel right putting on the dog calendar. My dentist appointment, my driver's license renewal. A family reunion a year from now, when I know Tim will be dead. I hide it under the nighttime reading books, the ones with predictable endings that I now have difficulty understanding.

On bad days, his gums bleed on his toothbrush. He has seizures without warning. Drops to the floor and begins to shake, and yet he claims that I am the one who is changing. I am the one who takes B6 supplements, folic acid, and buys aluminum-free deodorant. I am the one who worries about things that are meaningless to Tim now, like tartar buildup. One night, he watches me save a Word document titled "Ten-year Financial Plan" on the computer and looks like he's about to throw up right there on the monitor. I shut down the computer, go into the bathroom, put on my headband, and scrub my face with

a coarse washcloth, and he just watches from behind as I scrub and scrub and scrub the dead skin off my face, and I can finally breathe again.

"Stop," he says.

"Stop *what?*"

He holds up my secret calendar.

"Stop hiding things from me," Tim says. "What *is* this?"

"A calendar."

"We already have a calendar."

"But this one is for different stuff."

"For your secret life."

"My appointments. My boring life."

"Your continuing life."

"Yes, to help manage my continuing life," I say. "God, Tim, be reasonable. It's just a calendar."

"No, *you* be reasonable," he says. "You don't have to hide this from me. You need to treat me like the man I always was."

So I say, "Fine, why are you snooping in my things?"

And he says, "I didn't realize you had your things and I had my things. I thought this was *our* bedroom."

He goes to take a shower, which is rare for him. Showers are tiring. He can't even hold his hands up over his head

long enough to wash his hair before they go numb. But he needs to cool off, he says. And after, he has cooled off.

"Lithsen," Tim says. "Listen. The point is, I'm running out of pime."

"I know."

He turns to me, caresses my face.

"You're so beautiful," he says.

This is when I start to cry.

At breakfast, Tim's speech is restored, like someone hit him in the head and shook him back into being himself.

Tim likes his tea with cream and his eggs undercooked. I get out the frying pan, rub the butter over the surface, and say "Mm-hmm?" every time I think he has spoken. But he's not speaking. He says, "I didn't say anything."

Tim sits back in his wooden chair, barely sips his tea.

"It's funny to think that my cancer cells are killing me right now," he says. "As I sit here sipping tea, they're killing me."

"Maybe not," I say.

The doctor said it was important to visualize things. Good things. And maybe that's what the baby is all about. Maybe the baby is just a fantasy, a carrot in the distance that will keep Tim walking.

"What do you think they are doing then?" he asks.

"Could be watching a film," I say.

"Maybe," he says. "But it's a little early in the morning for a movie."

"You think our cells know that it's early in the morning?"

"Of course they do," Tim says.

I go to work. I don't know what Tim does all day. For weeks, I don't ask.

In March, the snow melts and Tim is still full of energy. Tim is planting violas all around our yard. They make our house look so alive that I question the doctor's specific knowledge.

"Did he make any sense to you?" I ask. "I'm thinking now that he made no sense. Do you think he knows everything there is to know?"

"Irrelevant," Tim says. "There's no point to the experimental surgery."

"Are you sure there's no point to it though?"

"Yes," he says. "A million times, over and over again, I'm uncomfortable with the idea that, in order to continue living, I'd have to do it as a guinea pig."

"Well, I'm uncomfortable with the idea that, in order for you to continue dying, you will have to die."

"We've been over this, Lisa. This is my decision."

It was true. We had gone over this. Just like we had gone over the decision about the baby.

"Don't expect me to change my decisions then," I said.

"I'm tired," he says. "I'm getting tired. I don't want to fight."

"Of course."

We stir our tea. Rather, I stir the tea because Tim doesn't want tea, but I know he wants a mug with a spoonful of sugar and a drip of cream in case he changes his mind about wanting tea. Though he doesn't. He has reached a certain irreversible point, reclined in his chair. Steadfast about dying the way he wants to die.

I can't help myself.

"The point of living longer is to stay with me," I say.

"You won't want me like that," he says.

"Of course I will."

He laughs.

"You don't even want me now."

"That's not true," I say.

But it must be true, because we haven't had sex for nearly three weeks. I look at the dog calendar, as if the dogs somehow know this too. But the black dog of March

is silent, sitting in a wicker box surrounded by daisies.

In April, Tim's mother comes for dinner often. She is surprisingly pleasant until she has three glasses of wine and starts saying terrible things to me in the kitchen as we clean. She says, "A baby might be nice." She says, "Won't it be a little piece of him?" She says, "This is my only son." She says, "You know, I didn't even want Tim, but now look at me. Now look at how upset I am."

I can see how upset she is. There are tears running down her face, ruining her face, every time she leaves our house.

"We agreed we didn't want kids," I say.

"What's *wrong* with you?" she asks. "You sound like a lawyer."

"I am a lawyer," I say.

His mother always forgets this, a fact her brain won't process, the way I always forget when she's coming over for dinner. But I won't explain myself. There is nothing wrong with me. I am perfectly healthy. That's what the doctor told me at my last physical.

"You're cold," Tim's mother says. "I told Tim that years ago. I said, 'That woman is cold.'"

"Good thing I'm not a blanket then," I say.

After she leaves, we usually talk about her, go through a highlight reel of all the tiny ways she offended us. This used to be one of Tim's favorite things to do after she left—"I can't believe she said that to you," he would say—because he has always struggled with his mother. She was tough. But one night, after she leaves, we don't talk about her. He turns from me in bed. He brings the covers up to his chin.

"I'm cold," he says, shivering. He becomes so quiet, I can't tell if he's sleeping.

"Tim," I say. "Tim, Tim, Tim?"

But he doesn't answer. And I know that this is what it will feel like once he's dead.

In May, I start thinking about Tim's death so much, I'm sometimes surprised he's still here, underneath our bedspread, something I can still collect in my hands. It's surprising to see the muscles in his forearm, the blood pulsating at his neck.

"There are just so many things left to do," Tim says.

"Like what?"

"I still have to climb Mount Everest," he says.

"Of course. I mean, most people still have to do that."

"I still have to run a marathon."

"Overrated," I say.

"I still have to have a son and teach him how to throw a baseball."

"But what if your son hates baseball?"

"Then I'd teach him how to hold a tennis racket," he says. "And if he didn't want to do that, I'd buy him a dictionary and we'd start memorizing all the words from A to Z. And he would say, Dad, why is the bogeyman in the dictionary, you swore he wasn't weal. And I would pat his head, and say, Goodnight, I wove you, I wove you, I wove you. I would wove him so much."

This is what happens when we don't fall asleep before midnight.

In June, the dog sits next to a bike, curiously sniffing a black rubber tire. Tim is slowly sagging in his chair, and I'm unable to discern whether the wooden legs are the chair's or Tim's. I'm making eggs on the stove, trying to decide if this is the beginning of my life or the end of my life, when Tim clears his throat. Tim has an important announcement.

"This is my last calendar," Tim says.

Tim speaks like the last of something is just as noteworthy as the first. That all moments in life deserve their own cataloging: baby's last step, baby's last outfit, baby's last word, baby's last breath.

"Isn't that weird?" he says. "You never think you'd know something so stupid so concretely. This is the last calendar I will ever own."

"Tim, please," I say.

"I will never own another calendar."

"It's breakfast," I say. "It's too early to be macabre."

He picks up his fork, stabs it in the yellow egg. "What if it were dinner?"

"I don't know."

"What's the difference between dinner and breakfast?"

"Is this another joke?"

"No."

"Then, I guess, the amount of marinara sauce."

"Let's go for a walk," he says.

"Are you feeling OK?"

"Yes. It's only breakfast. I'm fine."

"But it's raining. Don't you want to stay inside?"

"Lisa, I'm the one who is dying; don't you forget that."

"Like I'd forget."

"Got to keep my figure," he says. "How else will I pick up women poolside in heaven? There will be a pool; you know that, right?"

I know. I know all about this magical place that I dreamt up for him in the late hours when Tim got scared.

"It will be clean without chlorine, and you won't have to take a shower first," I say.

"So warm, I won't even have to dry off after," he says.

But now it's not a joke. Now, I know he is punishing me, letting me know that there will be women in heaven who will want to have his baby. He does not smile anymore, and his collarbone sits starkly across his neck like a thick, metal chain. I throw the runny egg in the garbage and do what my friends and family suggested: whatever he wants.

"Let's go for a walk," I say.

I take his hands, and his knuckles are sharp blades against my skin. And maybe it's really true. Maybe there will be women in heaven, just waiting to have his baby. Maybe these are things he believes now.

*What will you name your baby?* I want to ask, but I don't.

I put on my fun-outdoors-activity outfit and am silent

at the risk of making too many jokes that are not mine to make so early in the beautiful day.

In July, the dog is brown, upright, a broad chest on a pedestal. At dinner, Tim is hunched over like a defeated human, slurping in a single spaghetti noodle. I am in my work-to-dinner outfit: a red camisole with pearl buttons and chapped lips that are so inarticulate, everything they do and say feels like a stale performance of someone's past.

"What do you think the problem is?" he asks, wiping the marinara sauce off his chin.

"I think it's the sauce," I say. "Too much onion powder."

"I mean, why don't you want kids?"

"Oh, this again," I say. He says nothing. "I just don't."

Never once did he ask me to explain it before. He just understood it was something I didn't want. He understood that not having a baby was sort of like never coloring my hair red. There's nothing wrong with anybody coloring their hair red. It looks really nice on some people. But it's just not my hair color, and nobody ever expects it to be. Nobody comes up to me and says, "Why don't you want

your hair to be red, what is wrong with you?" as if that were the only suitable option.

"Maybe we could go to a therapist," he says. "Figure it out."

"I think we have bigger problems," I say.

These are some of our recent problems: the seizures Tim is having in the middle of the day. The medicine he takes that makes him go to the bathroom several times during the night and the way he looks at me after he wets himself in bed. The way he begs me not to feel sorry for him: "Please, I am nobody's victim. Please just treat me like the man I always was." So I put a bucket by our bed. I say, "OK, fine." I say, "Maybe if you start making it to the bucket, we can sell all your urine to science and go on a nice vacation."

"That'd be nice," he says. "Maybe Paris."

But we don't go anywhere. We are patient inside. We are still and complacent inside. We eat when we need food, we nod our heads when we seek affirmation, and we say things we swear we both mean.

"Cremate me," Tim says.

"You want to be turned into ash?" I ask.

"I want you to roll me up and smoke me like a joint."

"That's seriously what you want?"

"I don't know. I'm too relaxed to know anything for sure," Tim says.

Yet, he draws conclusions anyway. He says things like, "Dying now is probably just like dying later." And "What do you think it will feel like? Like going to take your next breath and you just can't find it, or are you already so dead by the time you die, you can only watch it from above the ceiling fan of the hospital room?"

I'm not sure.

"I don't think there are ceiling fans in hospitals," I say, and he laughs so hard. He turns to me.

"Thank you for making me laugh." He runs his hands along my body, to show me how grateful he is.

"Lisa," he says.

These days, Tim is more dead than alive, and it feels cruel and unusual to refuse him things he wants. But I am still tired, the way I used to always be tired before, when I didn't get a good night's sleep. It felt OK not to have sex with Tim then. Tim had a few more years. But now that Tim has weeks—a month maybe—he looks at me like all he needs is my body, and I feel more and more obliged to give it to him, as if it is a life raft. We kiss until he pulls away. He always has to pee, just before sex.

"I'll be right back," he says.

He gets up and out of the bed, runs to the toilet, and flushes every time.

"You don't have to flush every time you pee," I say.

"It's rude not to," he says and climbs back under the covers. "I may be dying, but I still have manners."

"I guess that's something."

He holds my face. "Look at me," he says. "You're never looking at me anymore."

"What?" I ask. "What do you want?"

"I really want a baby," he says.

He clarifies. "Let's just make a baby," he says. "Let's just be normal and have a baby."

I do not look at him. I stare past his face like the bedpost will do something miraculous any minute now. I close my eyes. I am going to scream, and then I remember: he'll be dead soon.

"Tim," I say. "You're *dying*."

"Exactly," he says. "And aren't you scared you'll be alone?"

"I'll be alone," I say. "Even with a child."

But Tim doesn't understand this. Tim says, "But you won't be. You'll have the child."



"The child will make it worse."

"How could the child make it worse? It's a child."

Exactly. It's a child. And the child will need things. And I do not want daily reminders of Tim that need to regularly eat. I do not want to look at something that is almost Tim, once-was Tim, who stands two feet tall at my knees and asks me to cut the crusts off the turkey sandwich, because I'll say, "Tim, I don't understand. You always liked the crust."

"You're so beautiful," he says.

Tim strips off my I-am-not-ready-for-this outfit, and my skin is tight against his flesh. He sweats, and, with every drop of perspiration, I sink into the bed. I feel farther and farther from him, as if he is evaporating above me. With every drop of his head against my shoulder, he says, "It's like my body is yours," and I say, "No, no, my body is yours." And doesn't that make you angry? Sometimes, my body feels just like your body. But I know it's not. Because, Tim, at your funeral, I will stand out in the rain just looking for you. I will feel the droplets against my skin. I will wonder: Tim, do you still know what water is? I will return home, and there, the dogs will be asking for you. Wondering where you went. And it will feel as if time

has stopped, and yet the dogs will look at me each month, with their little noses. They will say, Tim, Tim, Tim, why don't you come outside and throw the ball for us?

"Tim!" I yell, as he collapses over me.

"I'm sorry," Tim says.

Tim couldn't control himself. Tim doesn't understand what just happened. Tim didn't mean to.

I run to the bathroom. I feel my husband leaking out of me, down my leg. And sometimes, even though he's dying, I hate him. Sometimes, I think, *It will be just fine if he dies. I will be just fine.*

"Did you do that on purpose?" I ask.

"No," he says. "That was an accident. You really think I would do that on purpose?"

But I don't know. I just don't know.

The next day, I go to the pharmacy alone. I swallow the pill in the parking lot of CVS without water. It sticks in my throat, and I wonder if all the choices I have ever made have been a mistake. I wonder if I am a terrible person for denying my husband his only dying wish. I wonder what we would name our baby. Would it be Karl, like his father? Susan, like his mother? And then I turn on the car and I swallow again, because there will be no Karl or Susan.

There will be only me, and I will be a new woman, the kind who has buried her husband.

After, I don't go home right away. I feel an urge to meet this woman. I am intrigued by her and all that she will suddenly know and feel. So I go to the mall and search for a black dress because that is what she will need to wear when her husband is dead. I need only one, but I end up buying five of them because I can't bring myself to try them on at the store. The mall is too cold. I watch in disbelief as the cashier scans them like they are regular dresses.

"My husband is dead," I say, to try out the words.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," she says, and it is disappointing, how anticlimactic it all will be.

At home, Tim is watching TV, but he is unimpressed by drama too. He says watching people on TV is like watching aliens complain about life on earth. He shuts the TV off, and I consider trying on the dresses for him because that is what he would have asked me to do when he first started dying. He would have wanted a private funeral fashion show just for him. He would have said, "*That's* what you're wearing to my funeral?" and we would have laughed. But he is different now, slowly sinking into the earth with each passing day, and I am not. I hide the dresses deep in the

closet, and we don't speak for days. I worry that we'll never speak again, that maybe this is how he will die—quietly, alone in the corner, both of us angry. Until one night at dinner, Tim looks up over his plate and says, "Is it because I omitted the palate cleanser?"

I laugh. But I don't know what to say.

"You know, they say lack of communication is the number one reason for the death of a marriage," Tim says, and I say, "Are you joking?"

Tim doesn't know. He rubs his chin.

"My mouth feels funny," Tim says.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Something is not right," he says. "My mouth is not right."

He stands up. But then he is on the floor again, seizing. I hold his hand, as he says, "Just talk me through this," and I do. His eyelids flutter, and he goes somewhere I cannot follow. I tell him things I've been meaning to tell him. The dinner was delicious, I say. The shrimp were just right. And the violas you planted. They look beautiful. Finally, when he comes to, he says, "I'm OK, I'm OK."

I keep looking at him all night, expecting him not to be OK.

"Stop looking at me like that," he says.

"I can't," I say.

"Then get into bed with me," he says. "And stare at the wall. Pity that instead."

Tim is OK, Tim is OK. Tim is in our bed. I press my ear to his heart for evidence, and there it is. The drum-beat of his life. He runs his hands through my hair. He can't believe how long it's gotten. He can't believe how my hair will continue to grow for years after he's gone, like the violas outside the window. Sometimes, he confesses, the thought makes him angry. But that night, the thought makes him happy. It makes him want to plant more things before he goes.

"Maybe we can plant a few trees this weekend," I say.

"Yes, let's do that this weekend," he says.

I fall asleep quickly thinking about our trees and the nice weekend ahead of us. But later, I dream about Tim dying. I dream about the paramedics breaking into our bedroom like a SWAT team, searching for his body, and I'm confused, because Tim is not dead yet. I point to my husband in bed as proof, but they say, "Nobody is there." They say, "Mrs., Ma'am, excuse me," like this is a formal occasion. They say, "Your husband is already in the bag."

And I just look at them, as if they are the ones betraying me. I say, "This is my house! This is my husband. This is my life." But they don't care. They don't apologize. They are just doing their jobs. They pick up the bag. They are a distant chorus of "Mrs., Ma'am, excuse me, please step away from the body," and so I wake.

After, I don't know what to do with myself. Tim is still alive, still asleep. I walk into our closet, and I run my hand along the seams of all the my-husband-is-dead dresses. I try each one of them on, stare at myself in the mirror until I see that my husband is right—my hair really has gotten long, and I wonder how long it will become by the time I am old. I close my eyes and imagine my hair all the way down past my feet and into the ground. I imagine it hardening and thickening like a root, keeping me sturdy and strong, the way I felt at the very beginning, when I was lifting up my glass to toast to something.

POETRY

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BY KIM GEK LIN SHORT

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SOCIAL MAINTENANCE FEE,  
ONE CHILD CHINA, 1987

THE PEOPLE DON'T ASK Real Momma when she expects. In Zhōngguó she won't straddle her bike with corpse. The crud on her ankles the fat footprints in the road. It's a long walk to not be a momma. The people don't ask Real Momma *do you need the toilet*. Corpse pose in her draw-string pants. Over-quota oozing a just-born mud. The people don't pick the river bottom from her hair. The two banana-shaped bends with feet: the people don't pick the toes tied with tubers. It is invisible. The people don't give Real Momma a barf bag. When the second is born a girl when the third is born a girl. She barfs where the bank was cut. The people don't ask Real Momma what sex she sank in the pond. Hēiháizi sex: a black weed. The people don't throw a party. The sound of the people not throwing a party. She hears it the whole walk back.

\$360

COST OF ABORTION, PRO-X AMERICA, 1987

THE PEOPLE ASK AMERICAN Momma when she expects. In the parking lot a one-piece population plugs the path. The dirt on those not-orthopedic boots. It's a long walk to not be a momma. The people prod American Momma *where do you kneel*. Buckle up tight in that forgiveness-asking spot. Kudos on your elastic pants. The people pour American Momma bona fide wash. A cleanup gush for grand old constipation. Kudos on squeaking your shit. The people rate American Momma her top two names. Blur of boots on *Nothing But*. Stirrups chafing *If I Did*. The people chide American Momma a chant to make war of. Kudos on your super crampy curse. The people taunt American Momma *what will you wipe*. 1) A high hide pastel paint. 2) A menstrual pang. The people wipe her body. The squeak of the people wiping her body. She hears it the whole walk there.

## PROGRESSION

BY SAÏD SAYRAFIEZADEH

THE NEWS THAT THE State of Virginia has, as of January 2020, finally become the thirty-eighth state to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment unfortunately arrives—at least for my mother and me—far too late. No doubt my mother, who is eighty-six years old and suffering from dementia, will be unable to recall that cold winter morning in 1976, when the two of us woke before dawn to travel to Richmond, Virginia, by Greyhound bus, along with fellow members of the Pittsburgh branch of the Socialist Workers Party. I was seven years old then and en route to yet

another demonstration for the ERA, which, by this time, had been thoroughly impressed upon me by my mother as one of the great and attainable social changes that could actually happen in my lifetime (workers revolution being another).

The ride from Pittsburgh to Richmond took nearly six hours, and the combination of the cold winter air, the stale heat blowing through the vents, the uncomfortable seats, and the incessant forward motion along highways caused me, midway through our journey, to vomit into an empty soda cup held in front of my mouth by my mother. But once in Richmond, my health and mood lifted, and we were joined by more protesters—mostly women—including members from other Socialist Workers Party branches around the country. Together, we listened optimistically to speaker after speaker—also mostly women—as they exhorted Virginia to join the thirty-five states that had already ratified the ERA. There was no time to waste, of course, since a deadline—seemingly arbitrary—had been established: if thirty-eight states had not ratified the ERA by March 22, 1979 (thus making it a constitutional amendment), everything would be lost, and we would revert back to zero with nothing to show for our efforts.

Richmond was as cold as Pittsburgh and got colder as the day went on, and when the last speaker had finished, all five hundred of us marched through the frigid air toward the statehouse, chanting and holding our banners aloft, passing shoppers and office workers who stopped to stare at us as if we were a circus come to town. I felt the familiar sensation that I always felt when I was at a protest, that of being on display, like a monkey led through the streets for townspeople to gape at. There was a woman leading the throng and chanting through her bullhorn, “Hey, hey, what do you say? Ratify the ERA!” Hopeful voices rose up in unison, and my mother joined the chorus, her voice sounding exceptionally slight and frail in the wide open air of the city. I shouted along, because to remain silent would have made me conspicuous in the eyes of both the bystanders and the people with whom I was marching.

“What do we want?” the bullhorn asked.

“The ERA!” I screamed.

“When do we want it?” the bullhorn asked.

“Now!” I screamed.

There was comfort in being among five hundred other like-minded people who were able to see the problem outlined before us and understand that there was a clear

remedy for it. And as I marched and shouted, I began to feel that we were the ones who were inside, and those who stood idly on the sidewalks with their bags and their briefcases were lost on the outside. They were the circus and I had come to watch *them*.

When we finally arrived at the Virginia statehouse, a few more women took the microphone to again make our demands known to anyone who might be listening. Behind them was a well-scrubbed flight of stairs ascending toward a gigantic white building surrounded by impassive columns. “The seat of ruling-class power,” my mother told me. Its grand, imperial architecture had a sobering effect on the day’s events, putting into perspective what the odds really were. By late afternoon the protest was over, and with the winter sun beginning to set, my mother and I boarded the Greyhound bus and rode the six hours back to Pittsburgh where—amid childlike thoughts of having, through our efforts that day, actually won the ERA—I fell asleep in mother’s lap.

## ANTI-FAIRY TALES FROM THE FEMININE BOOK OF FUCK THIS

BY KATE TARKER

### CASTING NOTE:

IMAGINE THE CHARACTERS LOOK JUST LIKE YOU.  
THEN READ AGAIN AND IMAGINE THEY DON’T.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN.

*A new Wife, late twenties, rummages frantically in her tote bag. Her Husband, same age, is under the covers trying to block out the light.*

WIFE

Honey? You asleep?



HUSBAND

Mmm.

WIFE

Can you help me? I can't find my rights.

HUSBAND

Huh?

WIFE

My reproductive—they've gotta be here somewhere.

HUSBAND

They're not with the essential documents?

WIFE

You didn't see 'em, did you? Lying around?

HUSBAND

Honestly, I don't think about them all that much, since you're on the ring.

WIFE

Shit.

HUSBAND

I'm sure they're here somewhere. Don't freak out.

*She empties out drawers. Pulls heavy coats and boxes out of the closet. He sits up, more awake.*

HUSBAND

Sweetie?

*She stubs her toe. Screams.**She turns on all the lights in the apartment and walks to the front door. She opens the door and tests the lock. He walks over to her.*

WIFE

Does this look broken? The door?

HUSBAND

Nothing else is missing. Why would someone break in just

to take this from you?

WIFE

I don't know, man, you tell me.

*She walks to the center of the living room and puts her hands on her hips. She pulls off all her clothes, piece by piece. After each one, she pats her soft flesh down.*

*Pat pat pat pat pat pat pat.*

*Pat pat pat pat pat pat pat.*

*Nothing there.*

*Nothing.*

*He walks up to her. Reaches out. Gently touches her shoulder blade. She swings around, furious.*

HUSBAND

Honey?

WIFE

WHERE ARE MY RIGHTS.

HUSBAND

I don't know! OK? I'm sorry! But also, it's two in the morning— and we both have work tomorrow— and neither one of us is much of a rock star without sleep—

WIFE

I had them last month, swear to God.

HUSBAND

You're not pregnant. Right? We can look again after breakfast.

WIFE

If I can't say no, how can I ever mean yes? I'm so young. I want my career to launch. I want to go to Istanbul. I want to learn how to fly a plane. I want to do amazing things ... for people I'm not related to. I want my whole life to unfold.

## HUSBAND

Honey. Deep breath. It can't all disappear overnight.

*She closes her eyes. Breathes.*

## WIFE

I hate having to worry how to hold on to more agency than a toddler gets.

## HUSBAND

We're safe here. It's not like this is Texas. Or Ohio / Georgia / Missouri / Alabama / Iowa / Kansas / Kentucky / Pennsylvania / Illinois / Rhode Island / Louisiana / Oregon / Utah / Florida / Delaware / West Virginia / Oklahoma / Tennessee / Utah / Montana / North Carolina / Michigan / North Dakota / Mississippi / Indiana / South Dakota / Wisconsin / Massachusetts / Maryland / New Jersey / New Mexico / New York. There's a reason we left the Lone Star State.

## WIFE

Did you just say New York?

## HUSBAND

Yeah. Why?

... Oh.

## WIFE

No. No no no no no no NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO.

*She sits down on the floor, at a total loss.*

*He sits down, too.*

## HUSBAND

We'll figure this out.

## WIFE

With what? Magic?

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE.

*Inside a beat-up minivan. Mom drums lightly on her steering wheel to some punk rock.*

*Daughter, restless and speckled in mud, bops around in the back seat.*

MOM

How was practice?

DAUGHTER

Good. I kicked total ass.

MOM

Of course you did. That's 'cause you're awesome. Don't kick the back seat.

*Daughter keeps kicking the back seat, like a metronome. Mom ignores this. Eventually, Daughter gets bored and looks out the window. They pass by strip malls, endless strip malls.*

DAUGHTER

Mom. Are you sure you're thirty-five?

MOM

Pretty sure. Why?

DAUGHTER

'Cause I'm seven.

MOM

You working on your math?

DAUGHTER

Didn't you have me at twenty-six?

MOM

Mm-hmm. Same age Nana was when she had me.

DAUGHTER

Twenty-six plus seven is thirty-three.

MOM

That's right! And that makes you seven.

DAUGHTER

Um. Mom? That makes me *nine*.

MOM

This discussion's over.

DAUGHTER

Are you really that bad at math?

MOM

I froze you at seven.

DAUGHTER

You did *what*?

MOM

For me, life got rough after seven. So I try to cap you around that age.

*Mom looks at her kid through the rearview mirror. At her joyfully messy hair. At her half-painted rainbow nails. At her intelligence.*

MOM

I hate this. But I think the time has come. For the talk.

*Daughter locks deeply skeptical eyes with her.*

MOM

Honey. You know how you had an imaginary friend when you were three?

DAUGHTER

Yeah ...

MOM

Well, sweetie. You're *Mommy's* imaginary friend.

DAUGHTER

What the FUCK?

MOM

You love soccer and french fries and the names of presidents. You're active and lots of fun. You love bad words and so do I.

DAUGHTER

So the other girls on the soccer team ... ?

MOM

Ah ...

DAUGHTER

Madison? Taylor? REAGAN??

MOM

Figments, decorative flair. Total bullshit.

DAUGHTER

What about the minivan?! Don't tell me you made up the Toyota?!

MOM

I'm so bad at imagining what this life would be like, all I can conjure up is this stale midwestern fantasy ... Ooh look, an Arby's!

DAUGHTER

BUT I LOVE THIS MINIVAN. THIS MINIVAN IS

COVERED IN MY MUD AND FOOD AND SWEAT.

*Mom sees an animal on the road and panics. She swerves. Misses it, just barely.*

DAUGHTER

Omigod.

MOM

I don't actually know how to drive. Never got my license. But don't worry.

*They continue on, in tense silence.*

*The landscape gets more rural. They pass by cows and rolling fields.*

DAUGHTER

This is so humiliating. You're never gonna have me, are you?

MOM

Yeah ... I love kids ... but realistically, I don't know how that

would be possible.

DAUGHTER

Oh come on!

MOM

I'm not exactly rolling in dough. At some point, you have to cut your losses. For sanity's sake.

DAUGHTER

If you really wanted me, you'd find a way to pay for me.

MOM

With what? Magic?

*Daughter covers her ears and screams.*

MOM

Look. This is not that big of a deal. You *might* still happen. And even if you don't ... you know, it's really cool and unprecedented that I get to be an ordinary person, passing through. Nothing more, nothing less. Enjoying my brief time out here.

DAUGHTER

I hate you and I hope you die.

*Mom lights a cigarette. Inhales the harshness. Breathes it out.*

MOM

Do you want a puff?

I'm a nonsmoker. But my mom smokes. Your Nana.

DAUGHTER

Yeah, I *know*.

*Mom takes one more drag.*

MOM

Pretty sure she smoked when she was pregnant with me.

*She flicks the cigarette out her window.*

MOM

The real bumner is, your dad would be a truly awesome—

*Daughter swings the car door open. Mom slams on the breaks.*

MOM

*Hey. Stop.*

DAUGHTER

Give me one good reason to stay.

MOM

You don't know what it's like. Being childless.

MOM

Sometimes ... I can really psych myself up. Convince myself I'm a person. But other times ... I don't actually believe I'm worth anything. Or deserve anything.

Unless I have *you*.

There are some shit days, where the only way I can make myself brush my hair or go outside or do my work is by imagining I'm doing it for you. It's fucked up, I know, but ...

Please.

DAUGHTER

Pussy.

MOM

Cunt.

DAUGHTER

Bitch.

MOM

Pootang.

*Daughter scowls, but pulls the door shut and snaps her seat belt back in place.*

MOM

We can stop for a milk shake, 'k? On the way home.

DAUGHTER

Where do you actually live?

MOM

In a big, big city.



DAUGHTER

I wanna know about your real life.

MOM

I'll tell you. When you're older.

DAUGHTER

Bitch.

*Mom laughs. Daughter smiles.*

*Mom drives deeper into the dark and cranks up the music.*

## CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT.

*A beautiful blue-sky day. Tourists huddle around their Guide, a woman in her late sixties.*

GUIDE

Thank you all for signing up for this nature walk through the Norman Bird Sanctuary! I am a retiree, and a volunteer, and I love birds. Together, we'll pass through diverse habitats and sumptuous ridge vistas, overlooking the gorgeous ocean. Then we'll meander through my pain, exasperation, and rage, and finish up right back here at 583 Third Beach Road in Middletown, Rhode Island.

A TOURIST

How long is the tour?

GUIDE

Estimated round-trip walking time, twenty minutes.

*They begin their walk.*

GUIDE

I'm your guide, or, if you prefer, your guide-ess. I used to

think it was dumb to mark gender with the ending of a word. *Especially* when talking about professions. Actor. Actress. President. Vice-Presidentress. But the older I get, the more I understand feminine endings and their purpose. It's to help women understand their career will likely start out strong, but over time, mysteriously arc back down, whimper, and disintegrate.

*She pulls out her binoculars and scans the treetops.*

## GUIDE

I think it's a heads-up, and a heads-up is an act of kindness. Now, the secret to birding is simple and plain. Use a mnemonic.

## THE INDIGO BUNTING

Fire, fire! Where, where? Here, here! See it, see it!

## GUIDE

Hear that? That's the indigo bunting. Reminding you that the elemental safeguards of your selfhood are disappearing all around you. Sex ed. Birth control. Abortion. All roasting in the blinding flames of a pseudo-religious barbecue.

## THE BARRED OWL

Who cooks for you, who cooks for you all?

## GUIDE

Mmm. That's the barred owl. Demanding money and respect, after centuries of underpaid and unpaid labor. Labor forced, and labor stolen. Scrubbing and stirring, all for someone else's gain.

## WHITE-EYED VIREO

Spit, and see if I care, spit.

## GUIDE

I love that sweet songbird! The white-eyed vireo doesn't give a rat's ass. Remember her call, ladies, when someone labels you a slut online. In my case, it's usually when I disagree with people, politely, about horticulture.

## BROWN THRASHER

Drop it, drop it, cover it up.

## GUIDE

That's the brown thrasher, singing a song for the worst

of days. She reminds us of the self-obliterating but essential tactics that many people are forced to employ, just to survive.

## THE MEADOWLARK

But I do love you. But I do love you.

## GUIDE

Ah. The lovely meadowlark. Voicing a painful truth. I love you, but I need you to stop killing me. This one's *such* a popular tune. Sung by all genders, races, ages, and up and down the income ladder. In my family, the women tend to sing it to their men. It was passed down from my grandmother, to my mother, to my child.

*They keep walking, for a beat.*

## GUIDE

He only threw me down the stairs once. My dad. But that was enough to make me miscarry.

## A TOURIST

Why didn't you stop him?

## GUIDE

With what? Magic?

*The Guide looks sharply at the Tourist, then turns back to scanning the trees.*

## GUIDE

I think that's why I love the great outdoors. I can't stand being inside a house.

*A minute or so passes. Then she hears it.*

## THE HERMIT THRUSH

Where are you? And here I am. Why don't you come to me? Here I am, right near you.

## GUIDE

Oh! That's my favorite! The hermit—

*She turns to her crowd but realizes they've disappeared.*

*A beat.*

GUIDE

Where are you? And here I am. Why don't you come to me? Here I am, right near you.

*She waits for her tourists to reappear.*

Where are you? And here I am. Why don't you come to me? Here I am, right near you.

*She walks off-path and sits down by the seesawing waves.*

GUIDE

Keep singing. Keep singing ...

PROTEST

BY R.O. KWON

JOHN LEAL TOLD US we'd have to attend a protest in Manhattan, a pro-life march. It's taking place this Saturday morning, he said. I know it's not much notice, but Christ is asking us to be with Him. John Leal outlined a plan he'd established, with local churches, to drive to New York with people, supplies, and then he swept into one of his wild soliloquies, telling us again about the time he'd helped a desperate girl in the North Korean gulag abort a half-foreign child. Though he saved the girl's life, he still wept if he thought about the fetus he pulled out, its recognizable fist.

It was close to midnight when I walked home with Phoebe. The night was mild. She was quiet; I held her hand. I'd fallen behind with studying, and I was tired. I hadn't slept; I wished to be home. I'd have proposed calling a taxi, but, the previous evening, I'd discovered I didn't have my half of the month's rent. I was still working a partial load at Michelangelo's, a few night shifts each week. I'd been offered a follow-up research position, a role extending the last project; I turned it down, since I had no time. I suggested a fellow Phi Epsilon. Short of options, I had to activate a credit card I'd once received, unsolicited, in the mail. I didn't want the debt. I'd learned what harm a credit habit might inflict. I'd kept the card just in case, for emergencies, positive I wouldn't use it. But then, last night, I'd pulled a label off the plastic, the adhesive giving up its hold with sickening ease: like mother, like son.

What's more, if I went to the march, I'd have to switch Saturday's shift for a less profitable slot. More cash lost. The trip would involve spending, too. I wanted to quiz Phoebe as to what she thought of it. By the time I joined Jejah, John Leal's group, they'd stopped picketing Phipps clinic; why, she hadn't known. She'd never protested the

clinic, she'd said, but she believed, as I did, that abortions should remain legal. I didn't think she could have changed her mind. We waited at the light. Instead, while a flesh-pink neon sign, Tivoli, fizzed behind us, I asked about the first gulag story he'd told. The pregnant girl, I said. Lina. Mina. She was kicked in the stomach. You told me about it: she died, then trailed him. Is this one girl?

I saw a taxi turning, its sign lit. No, they couldn't be, Phoebe said, at last.

I flagged down the cab. In silence, we rode home. I've examined this night, Phoebe. I've rethought what I said to you, and I'm still sure of this much: I kept quiet a long time, then I asked a single question.

\* \* \*

We followed him as he pushed a path into the waiting crowd. The protest hadn't started yet, but wind rippled plastic-sheathed signs. Sunlit fetuses swung up, down, while flags flicked like striped tongues. John Leal halted; he spun, abrupt, and doubled back. I thought he'd tell us we'd taken a wrong turn. Instead, he butted his face up to mine, so close I felt his breath.

Will, he said. Oh, Will. He'd learned, he said, that I was full of questions. So, I was confused about his time in the gulag—which, all right, it had been a bewildering time for him, as well. Given I hadn't lived through it, how much more so for me. But why hadn't I brought my questions to him? It grieved him that I could still be this prideful. Think, he said, of John the Baptist telling us he couldn't touch the latchet of his Lord's shoes. I still hadn't learned how to be a disciple. It was high time I did. If, that is, I had it in me. I should kneel, he said.

He handed me a thin rag; he told me to wipe the others' shoes, then his feet. I cleaned each muddied shoe. Melted ice soaked cold into my jeans. I held his foot, working the rag through his toes. Flecks of tissue gleamed, like nacre, in the cracked skin. I was trying to think. His time in the gulag, he'd said. It was what I'd asked Phoebe. The question about Mina, but we'd been walking home. We'd left John Leal at his house. If he hadn't, how'd he—

I glanced at Phoebe, but she looked down. She'd turned red. Phoebe didn't blush often. If she did, the cause tended to be physical. She'd had too much alcohol, or it was hot. Phoebe hadn't been drinking, though. It was a cold morning. Each breath showed white. I wouldn't

have believed it possible, but she still couldn't look at me. She'd gone to him with what I'd said.

\*   \*   \*

It was past the time the march should have begun, and people were losing patience. I'll give it five minutes, then I'm calling it quits, a man said. Placards leaned against a building wall. I saw John Leal talking to people I didn't recognize. With a nod, he stepped on an upended crate. His mouth moved. In that hubbub, I couldn't pick out his words. Phoebe apologized again, tearful. It's all right, I said, but she had more she wanted to explain. It's fine, I said. Hoping she'd calm down, I kissed Phoebe's head. I was intent on listening to John Leal's speech: I was curious what his effect would be with this large an audience, if they'd respond as we did. He lifted his head, pitching his voice.

... hands splashed with blood, he said. We're all here this Saturday morning, and I know I don't need to tell you the truth that an unborn child has a heartbeat before it's a month old. I don't have to tell you that, within the first three months of fetal life, a human infant's strong enough

to grip a hand. But I'm not sure if it's done much good, all this truth. What point it's had, if you and I aren't saving lives.

Wind gusted, flapping nylon jackets. Instead of trying to talk across the noise, he held up his palm, indicating he'd wait. More people turned in his direction.

The Lord is calling us, he said. But we've failed, you and I, in following Him. We're living in a time of great evil. Rivers of blood, replenished with children's bodies, are flooding this nation, and we've let the blood spill. If we are lukewarm, the Lord has said, He will spit us out of His mouth. I'll ask you what I've asked myself, late at night, as I wait upon His Spirit: if the likes of you and I won't be radical for God, who will?

While he talked, his voice had risen. He finished with a shout, then he fell silent. The crowd around us was hushed, listening. Raising his head, he asked if he could get an amen. Several people replied; he asked again. This time, the amens belled toward him. I felt my ears ring. Yes, Lord, he said. Oh, Lord, I beg, be here with us. He called out the opening line of a hymn, one I recognized, and the crowd sang it back to him. Phoebe joined in, hands folded. She rocked back and forth, eyes closed, and I thought of

the night we'd met, how she'd danced until she gasped for breath, holding the thick hair in a ponytail. It was damp at the tips. Sweat trickled down her slim throat. Phoebe's rolling hips parodied that night; so, too, the rapt, upheld face. The other night, she'd told me, as she apologized, that he'd asked how I was doing with Jejah. He'd spoken with love, she said, and she'd responded in kind, without thinking. I'm not upset with you, I said. I wasn't: she didn't have to apologize. I felt a long confusion lifting. If anything, I should be grateful. For some time, I'd also failed to think.

The crowd kept singing. I watched, alone. It was a horde, and they all had what I lacked. In what He's credited to have said, the Lord is explicit. He insists on full, absolute devotion, nothing less. John Leal had that part right. But from the start, I'd obeyed His call. I'd pledged my life to Him, intending to serve Him with all I had, if to no avail, which left me believing God had to be nothing, a fiction; that, or He didn't want me.

Fifteen minutes, a man said. The crowd shifted forward. I put a hand in my pocket, and I felt a twist of plastic wrap I'd forgotten bringing. It was a small bundle of prescribed sedatives, pills I'd grabbed at the last minute

because Phoebe and I planned to stay in the city that night. I had enough trouble sleeping that I relied on these pills, the bottle's festive castanet rattle a promise, preludial to rest. Though I hadn't tried taking them except at night, before I went to bed, the pills also tranquilized. I could use a little extra calm, I thought. I opened the cellophane. To rush the effect, I chewed the pills.

\* \* \*

The march began. We'd been asked to walk in silence. Phoebe stayed close to me, a light hand at my back. The first time we showered in a shared stall, she'd pointed out the indent of my spine. This, she said. Here. She'd traced the rill, following the line down to my ass. I hadn't conceived, before then, of having a back worth noticing: now I did, the skin gilded with Phoebe's sight.

This situation, well, it was a crisis. The girl I loved was in a cult—and that's what it is, I thought, a cult. It was a problem, but I'd solve it, because I was intelligent. The sun's heat intensified. Disquiet thawed until, tranquil, awash, I almost sympathized with these people. If I were convinced that abortion killed, I, too, might think

I had to stop the licit holocaust. It wasn't so long ago that I'd believed as they did. In fact, I pitied them. Goodwill toward all, I thought. While driving down from Noxhurst, I'd asked Phoebe, at last, if she agreed with the protest's object, having abortions outlawed. It isn't what I want to think, she'd said, but a fetus has a pulse within a month of fertilization. It's alive.

We marched awhile before the pill's effect changed shape. I'd been watching protest signs bob past, marveling at bloodied photos, when a fetus jumped down. Others followed, flailing. Infant fists lifted; placentas writhed like tails, trailing dots of blood. One fell inches from my foot. I squatted, and I picked it up to prevent its being trampled. It was small, not quite spanning my hand, so I retrieved a second twisting fetus, then a third. Phoebe crouched down with me. What's wrong? she whispered.

I asked if she'd give me the handbag; instead, she asked what I was doing. With my chin, I motioned toward my little charges, but I'd lost them. I looked around. White orthopedic shoes flitted past. She nudged me, repeating what she'd said. But they'd vanished. I'd imagined the field of fetal children. The first time I filled the sleeping pill prescription, a pharmacist had cautioned me about potential



side effects. Mild hallucinations, he'd said. This wasn't mild, though. I'd have to tell the pharmacist. Phoebe asked if I was hurt, so attentive it brought tears to my eyes. I'd taken a sedative, I explained. It was the pill I used to sleep, except, this time, I'd stayed awake. It had, perhaps, gotten a bit strong.

Stand up, she said, rising.

I tried; I couldn't. She helped me to my feet. The flesh of my arm bulged around Phoebe's tight grip. She released me, and kept marching. I focused on each step: left, then right. The next time I glanced up, John Leal was walking next to Phoebe. His hip grazed her side, so I tapped his arm. I have a question, I told him.

Not now, Will.

I—

We'll talk after this.

No, I said. This isn't a request. I want to talk.

His head tilted, as if to see me in a different light. He glinted at the edges, protean, slipping. I had to grab him while I still could. Pin him down until he'd admit to his shape-shifting lies. He rubbed his face. I can't help you, Will, he said. I've tried, but I don't have the time. To be honest, I've lost interest.

Before I could think of how I'd respond, Phoebe pulled me back. Soon, we'd left the protest behind. We stood out on the street, hailing taxis. Lines of cars sped past, cutting long scars in the slush. The cabs were all occupied. I'd forgotten where I'd parked. I watched the sidewalk flecks, blotted gum. The harsh dazzle of pitted ice. Wind stirred the trash. In a lost, past life, I'd fancied these to be coded messages, dispatches from a loving Lord. Each detail flashed with divine relevance, but it was a false hope. What I had instead was this: salted bitumen, an oil-stained plastic bag. I should give it more attention, not less. I swayed, trying to understand.

With a brush of kidskin, Phoebe put my hand to a lamp-post. Hold this, she said. I'll be back in an instant. She crossed the plain of ice until I couldn't be sure which of the distant backs was hers. Folios of newsprint drifted. Close by, a girl in bright lipstick fiddled with a bike's chain. She jumped on its seat; she lurched left, raincoat flaring out. The thin form grew a sail, a pale nephilim wing. I thought she'd fall, but she pinged the bike bell, then swept down the street.

Will, Phoebe called, leaning out from an idling cab. She took me to the station, waiting until the first train

that would go north to Noxhurst. Once it pulled in, she talked the attendant into letting her on without a ticket. He doesn't feel well, and I'm not staying, she explained, giving him her smile.

Here, she said, pushing my seat into a recline. I tried to apologize, but she said she had to get back to the protest. She set my phone's alarm to ring before my stop.

What about the apartment? I asked, remembering. Your friend's place.

Oh, that, she said.

She took out her phone. I was about to say I could wait in the apartment until the protest finished, but she said, still looking at the phone, I'm staying the night. From the train, I watched Phoebe go, striding fast, horizontal. I'd have left the train, chased Phoebe down, if I'd been less to blame. The train slid into the afternoon, and I slept until the Noxhurst station.

\* \* \*

Up through the next morning, in spite of what she'd said, I still thought Phoebe would come back Saturday night. But I woke Sunday to find she wasn't home. She also hadn't

returned my calls. I should have studied; I opened a book, stared at it as long as I could, then poured a drink. I sat in the apartment through morning: I took a bus to Michelangelo's. Though I didn't have a shift, I helped at the front until I noticed a five-top littered with used plates. I carried them back to the kitchen, spilling pesto on my shirt. I dropped a knife. I took the table's busboy out back, and I yelled at him. I asked what the fuck he'd been thinking. Looking down, he muttered that it wasn't his table. It's Gil's, he said, his childish face bagged with fatigue. I excused him. I left, riding the bus home again.

The sun went down, and I called Phoebe. I left a short message asking if she'd let me know she was all right. Relying on the principle that almost nothing happens as I think it will, I started ticking through possible disasters. What I predicted, I'd forestall. I sat at the kitchen table. Each time I emptied a glass, I poured the next drink. It was 3:10 in the morning when the front door swung open. She stood in the hall, half-dissolved in porch light. Easing the lock into its slot, she set down a bag. She turned. Oh, she said, startled. It's you. What are you doing?

I closed the laptop, and, with it, all the light I'd had. I'd been searching traffic-accident reports. She flicked on

the hall lamp. I saw Phoebe take in the gin bottle, the knit hat I still hadn't removed. Will, she said. I told you I was staying the night.

I didn't know when you'd be home. I kept calling.

My phone died, she said. I didn't notice it until a minute ago.

Hope rose, then fell. While she hung her coat and pashmina, I took a long, sustaining swig of tonic-splashed gin. The plaid skirt twitched on Phoebe's thighs, brass buttons gleaming. The phone had tolled through its full five rings before it prompted me to leave a message, which meant it had been on. If it hadn't, the phone would have shunted me to Phoebe's voicemail with just one ring. No, each time I called, the phone had vibrated. She'd pulled it out, seen *Will*, and put it back in the bag. I was able to see what she'd done, in such detail that I knew it had to be true. When I could, I asked how she'd gotten home.

I drove, she said. I, well, John Leal did. I was too tired. I'll make tea. Do you want anything?

Getting up, I went to the sink. I'll do it, she said, but she hesitated, then sat. I filled the kettle. From the cupboard, I took down the aged puerh I'd bought in Beijing's tea bazaar, a labyrinth I'd spent hours roving, intent on

finding what she'd like best. It's the king of teas, the merchant had explained, pouring me a sample cup. Unable to decide, I'd tried so much tea I'd had to piss outside, behind the building. I broke off a piece. I crumbled it into the mesh basket. Puerh leaves unfurled, like relaxing fists.

You should have something, she said.

I don't want tea.

I'll bet you haven't eaten.

I hadn't, I realized. In a panic, I'd failed to eat since morning. She could tell, by looking at me, if I needed to eat. I took Phoebe the cup. She leaned into my side. With an arm swathed in cashmere, the soft fibers prickling, she pulled me close. My breathing slowed. Once, not long ago, she'd pointed to a picture on a friend's wall, a child with his arms flung out. Posed like a kite, she'd said. A kite, I repeated, the word unrolling a tableau of blanched sand. Heat. Light. Surfboards gliding, iridescent; swimmers beaded with sea foam. Harlequin kites spooled high, lolloping toward the sun. In that childhood photo, I couldn't avoid noticing a crucifixion pose, while she saw—a kite. I'd loved Phoebe's pagan mind, unpolluted with His blood. Phoebe, forgive me, I should have said, help me, but then she shifted to drink the puerh. Let go, I moved to sit at the

table, a tall vase of white phlox dividing us. She inhaled steam. Wire hangers, I said.

What?

Bleach, I said. For millennia, women have tried to induce home abortions. They've drunk bleach, hot lye—even the Bible gives tips about this. Quinine. Hippocrates advises a prostitute to jump up and down. I told Phoebe about a high-school friend, Stu, who'd punched his knocked-up girlfriend in the stomach until she fainted. She asked to be kicked down the stairs. He'd done it, blinded with tears. The abortion she wanted was too expensive, and she had Baptist parents she couldn't tell. Once, a local wit, calling in to a radio show, was asked to explain what people did for fun in Carmenita, California. Get pregnant, he said. The kind of people she, Phoebe, knew would always be able to obtain abortions, while fifteen-year-old children in towns like mine spewed—*what?*

Phoebe shook, laughing. No, it's just, Will, you researched this. The quinine. You looked it up, getting all these points in line.

Tell me why you picked Christians, I said.

Excuse me?

You chose the one set of beliefs I wasn't going to be

able to stand. I'm asking if it was on purpose, if it's something I did.

I can't fight tonight, she said. She pushed away the tea. It sloshed in the cup, without spilling. I'm so tired. I don't know what's happened, why you've turned against Jejah, but please, let's go to bed. We'll argue in the morning, if you like.

I looked in the news, I said. From the spring before last, in Yanji, China. I searched headlines. John Leal's a U.S. citizen. If he'd been abducted by North Korean agents, his organization would have reported it. It would be a big fucking deal. "Edwards student missing, presumed kidnapped." But there's nothing, Phoebe. I couldn't find a single mention of him.

Will—

I think he's lying.

Well, I don't.

If you were taking up, oh, Buddhism, I wouldn't mind. If you'd decided to collect old coins—

Oh, she said, leaning back. Old coins. Will, if that's what you want, I'll be less of a hobbyist. I have to stop living in sin. No, let me finish. I've waited for God to hand me a revelation, but I don't think that's how He loves us. Hold on.

This isn't about you, Will. I've given it a lot of thought. If I did what people here do—if I chased high-paid jobs, and I wrote fifteen-page papers on Milton, I have no idea who that would help. But if I could find out what I am. If I have a soul. I've thought about what St. Augustine said, that we have to beg the Lord to know Him. It wasn't until the 18th century that the Church established belief as a precondition of Christian faith—if I act as though I believe, maybe I'll also experience the divine. If I don't, I'll have tried. Isn't that what you did?

She reached across the table, waiting for me to admit that yes, I had. But I was also picturing the two of them in the car's claustal space: a private, long drive, the partial curtain of Phoebe's hair swinging. She laughed, ignoring phone calls. He'd have instructed Phoebe about what to tell me, tonight. It was central to his appeal that he liked giving orders. Is this his idea? I asked.

No.

Did he stay with you last night?

It wasn't, she said. He did, but it's not—

So, let's be honest. This isn't about being a born-again virgin for Christ. It's about you, the wide-eyed acolyte, fucking the guru.

Will, you don't mean this.

Sure, I do. It's what people do in cults like Jejah. You do realize, of course, that it's a cult. That's what's changed, if you're wondering. I wasn't sure, at first, but it's the truth. He's a low-rent Jesus freak with Franciscan affectations. So, how does it work: do you take turns, fucking him, or is it one big orgy, just a giant Christ-loving pile? I wish you'd told me, though. I'd have joined you—

She pushed the cup off the table. A wet stain swelled across the floorboards, broken glass glittering. I'll get it, I said.

Don't, she said, crying. I went to find the broom. When I returned, she was still at the table. I brushed glass into the dustpan, but the bristles proved too coarse. I wetted paper towels. I daubed up what I could. With each pass, I folded the towels in half until the square was too small to use. A glint caught my eye: a piece had fallen on Phoebe's foot, between the fine-boned toes. I picked it off; she shied.

It was glass, I said.

I don't care.

She went into the bedroom. The slam rattled the toaster oven; its lid fell open. I thought of the short-lived ruckus, years ago, when a Carmenita high-school kid, Jim,

had sighted Christ's face in a slice of burned toast. Local papers published photos of the miracle bread, His face almost visible. While, at the time, I credited the apparition, I'd also felt the insult. I believed, of course, that household theophanies took place, visions of the Son of Man spotted in pieces of foil, paint blotches. Spitz dogs' assholes. Crocks of jam. Burned-toast Jesus, though, had shown up less than a mile from where I lived. So, what had moved the Lord to neglect me? Instead, He'd picked this kid, a once-a-month Christian: Jim Struth, who didn't love Him, not as I did. A twinge alerted me to a piece of glass in my thumb. I finished wiping the spill, then I went to the sink to pinch it out.

## THERE IS NOTHING VERY WRONG WITH ME

BY ONNESHA ROYCHOUDHURI

THERE ARE BOXES OF medications and syringes beside me—evidence of the hormones I paid over \$2,000 for that I will begin injecting myself with in a few days. The goal is to have a batch of my thirty-seven-year-old eggs harvested from my ovaries so that they can be frozen in time as I continue to age. All this so that, someday in the near future, I might choose to thaw and fertilize one, implanting a youthful-ish embryo in my wizened uterus.

I did not anticipate going through such a procedure. A year ago, I was planning on having children with my

partner. “This is the kind of day we’ll tell our grandchildren about,” he once told me over a romantic dinner—a dinner we shared after spending the day hiking together with our dog. It was the kind of wholesome scene I had spent most of my life feeling on the outside of. Finally, I thought, I had arrived.

But a few weeks after that dinner, he decided he was no longer interested in having grandchildren, children—or anything, really—with me. After collecting his belongings from our shared home, here is one thing he was still interested in: the toll money he said I owed him from that time he drove me to the airport to visit my dying grandmother.

This happened suddenly enough that, two weeks after the change in household (and, for the record, my repayment in full for those E-ZPass tolls), I found myself in a paper gown at my gynecologist’s office, keeping an appointment I’d scheduled months prior to verify that my parts were in good working order. I had a history of suspicious ovarian cysts, and the plan was for me to get the green light before my partner and I could move forward with making a baby.

Now, of course, the conversation had shifted. I matter-of-factly asked what my options were when it came to my

fertility. “You do not have a partner?” my doctor asked, a hint of confusion in her voice as she looked down at my chart.

\*   \*   \*

Sometimes, I make a joke. It goes like this: “I forgot I had a body!” I say this upon remembering to move my limbs after spending too many hours staring at a computer screen or reading a book on the couch, my dog a furry barnacle at my side.

“I forgot I had a body!” I say it when someone asks what happened to my knee, my shin, my arm—the bruises or cuts evidence of how easily I lose awareness of my body as it sideswipes bookcases, tables, air-conditioning units.

*I forgot I had a body* is probably also what I thought when I was twenty-two and had just started working as a journalist in an office where our fifty-something-year-old boss liked to dole out backrubs and tried to get the younger female employees to talk about our sex lives. Back then, I hid my body by wearing—I still cringe to recall it—baggy, drawstring pants to the office, often paired with shirts pulled from the leisure and pajama racks of stores.

*I like to be comfortable*, I rationalized. I don't remember how I squared that with the fact that I would duck into the bathroom at the end of the workday, changing into a more formfitting set of clothes before going to my second job.

\* \* \*

Midday, the pastel-colored truck is parked at the corner of 24th and Broadway. Given the crowd, it would be easy to mistake it for an optimally positioned ice cream truck, except the phrases "Your fertility, understood" and "Own your future" are emblazoned on its side. As is an image of a blond woman in her twenties, looking self-assured in sunglasses. Huddled around the truck is a crowd of women who look like variations on this theme.

I am clearly the oldest—and brownest—woman in this gaggle. We've all signed up to get a free blood test done to measure our levels of anti-Müllerian hormone (AMH)—a shorthand for understanding how many eggs we have left on tap.

I contemplate leaving before it's my turn. I feel out of place and not just for the obvious reasons. The reality is:

I have never been dead set on having children—even less so, my own biological children. I'd always figured that if I ever got the hankering and was too old to crank out one of my own, I'd adopt. In fact, I thought this might be preferable. *Less wear and tear! There are so many children who need homes!*

That was before I watched friends go through the adoption process. Suddenly that helium-light *I'll just adopt!* mentality got weighed down with details: up to \$40 thousand in costs, the training sessions, the home visits—all part of the exhausting process of being scrutinized and assessed. How to convince bureaucratic entities that I would make a suitable parent, even as I work to convince myself?

As a single woman and freelance writer in her late thirties, I cannot afford the process and likely wouldn't be a top choice for adoption agencies. The more I explored my options, the more I realized how limited they were—limited by my relationship status, limited by my socioeconomic status, and increasingly limited by the banal yet merciless progression of time.

The fertility truck experience is over quickly. A woman collects a vial of blood, and I duck out with a wad of cotton



taped in the crook of my right elbow. A week later, I get the news that I have the AMH of a twenty-seven-year-old. I celebrate by drinking a margarita and smoking a cigarette on my stoop.

\* \* \*

It strikes me only now—a year later—that, at the same time that I was nursing a decimated heart, barely capable of eating or sleeping, I was also proactively and efficiently shuttling myself to a variety of doctors' appointments and a mobile clinic in order to assess my fertility.

Maybe a better way to put it is this: I knew I had a body, but it felt separate from me. Its realities and potential composed a *situation*, and I was trying to manage it.

"Own your future," while a phrase clearly targeted more for high-achieving millennials, hit home: The future I thought I had been building, one I even had the gall to believe I'd arrived at, was suddenly in shambles. The prospect that I might have any control at all appealed to me with the same seduction an infomercial offers an insomniac.

\* \* \*

In truth, my body has long felt like an unmanageable situation. When I grew breasts, I became two people: the one who was me and the one to whom men responded. It was as though my new flesh-suit came delivered to me without the requisite script for flirtation and harassment that I seemed to need. I was often left wondering what my line was.

My first period ushered in my introduction to some of the worst pain of my life. As a teenager, while on a jog, I was immobilized by it, throwing up in a grassy island in the middle of a parking lot near my house. Enough time passed that my mother wondered what had happened to me. Her car pulled up next to where I was curled in a ball—less than a quarter mile from home.

When she learned what was going on, her panic quickly transitioned into compassionate camaraderie. It was time to swap war stories, and my mother filled me in on the debilitating pain she experienced like clockwork during her early fertile years.

I had entered the sisterhood, a welcoming coven that stretches back to Eve. There, in its muscular embrace,

I was made to understand that a woman in pain was, well, a woman.

Think of a toddler who falls but only starts to cry when they see concern in their parents' eyes. Which is to say: we calibrate our experiences of pain or danger to what we see reflected back to us.

There was nothing wrong with me. What I was experiencing was, apparently, normal.

\* \* \*

I was in high school when my best friend took me to our local Planned Parenthood. I told the doctor I didn't want to use hormonal birth control if I could help it. That I was in a monogamous relationship and wanted to learn about my options. The doctor nodded along as though listening, checked her watch, and then immediately wrote me a prescription for hormonal birth control.

The story I told myself was that the doctor was the expert. What she gave me must be the best choice for me. It was easier to accept this story than the alternative: That what I wanted didn't matter.

It took nearly a decade for me to try again. This time, my

gynecologist listened. I got a copper IUD—the only highly effective, nonhormonal, and non-barrier contraceptive on the market. I tried to adjust—popping ibuprofen like candy and bleeding through my pants everywhere from the lawn of McCarren Park to the produce aisle of Associated Foods.

I was told to give it time. Many women experience increased pain and bleeding. *But how much pain is too much pain?* I searched for data to compare. I sought an expert's response that could tell me how I was supposed to feel. It didn't seem like enough to simply say: *This is too much pain for my body.*

When I finally gave in and had the IUD removed a year later, I felt immediate physical relief, combined with a sense of disappointment in myself.

\* \* \*

The *actual* worst pain of my life comes later. At first, the gynecologist I see after an episode of collapsing and throwing up on a sidewalk in Manhattan seems unconcerned. "Maybe you just have gas," she suggests. "But to set your mind at ease," she tells me, "I'll send you to get an ultrasound."

I get a call a few hours after the ultrasound. The

gynecologist tells me to avoid exercising or “you know, making any sudden movements.” I have an eleven-centimeter cyst engulfing my ovary, the weight of it periodically twisting the ovary inside my body.

I see a series of specialists. I lose count of the number of vials of blood drawn. There is evidence the cyst could be cancerous, yet the panoply of doctors I visit seems fixated on a different concern. “Don’t worry,” I’m told again and again. “You can still have a baby with one ovary.” I had never once said anything to any of them about wanting to have a baby.

*Should I be more concerned about wanting a baby?* I wondered.

I’m slated to have surgery in a week, but I’m told to go to the ER if I experience serious pain again. The surgery might not be able to wait. A couple days later, I get out of bed in the morning and fall on all fours. I do not know what to do. *Is the pain even that bad?* I can’t move or think, but I also do not want to be dramatic. I call my mother. “On a scale from one to ten, how much pain are you in?” she asks. “Eleven,” I say without pausing. This comes as news to me. “Go to the ER,” my mother tells me.

In the ER, the admitting doctor asks me, “How many

children do you have?” The pain that periodically robs me of language subsides long enough for me to ask, “Don’t you mean ‘Do you have any children?’” “Yes,” he says impatiently.

Thankfully, I do not have cancer. After the surgery, still drugged but mercifully pain-free for the first time in weeks, I am a font of strange phrases. “Thank you for your fine craftsmanship,” I tell my surgeon. He laughs and tells me I have one ovary left.

I can still have a baby.

\* \* \*

The truth is that I’ve never been one to ooh and aah over tiny humans. The word “fascinating” comes more quickly to my tongue than “adorable”—watching them take in the world, wondering what they make of it, how they navigate all the stimuli.

The clearest awareness that I wanted a child came not after spending time with a friend’s baby or daydreaming with past partners about the children we might have together. It was after teaching a storytelling workshop to teenage girls in a Brooklyn high school.

Over the course of eight weeks, I worked with them as they crafted stories from their lives—stories of heart-break and navigating family traumas. They were—as all stories from teenage girls are—about coming into your own. Learning who you are and aren't, what you're willing and unwilling to accept.

Watching my students navigate their strength and vulnerability awakened something fierce in me. I was watching them teeter as they walked that tricky line: demanding the world see them for who they were, while, at the same time, desperately seeking approval.

Perhaps a simpler way of putting it: I saw myself in their stories and in that teetering. I wanted to hold them close to protect them; I wanted to push them out into the world armed with a kind of confidence I've only been able to achieve through messy grappling, struggle, and failure—the kind of confidence I continue to perform in the hopes that it will someday come more naturally.

\* \* \*

By the time I'm ready to pull the trigger on freezing my eggs, I live in a new city and need a new gynecologist. I've

learned a few things from my past medical mishaps and insensitive doctors, so I send an email to a few new friends: "Who knows a good gynecologist?"

The doctor is kind without being patronizing. She asks why I'm freezing my eggs, and I tell her I know, at my age, the quality of my eggs is rapidly declining, and I don't have a partner. I don't tell her the rest because I don't yet have words for it: How my partner's sudden departure gave me clarity. How, in as much as could be possible, I no longer wanted my desire for a child to be dependent on someone else. How I was starting to realize that I was not only strong enough to take care of myself but had enough love and fortitude to take care of someone else too.

*I don't need to have children. I'm not sure I want children.* The language of wants and needs here is tricky. As a writer who came of age in an industry that obligates you to work at least two jobs at a time, often without health insurance, I never had the consistent resources and support it takes to truly envision a sustainable reality with a child.

Now that I'm at a point in my career where I *can* start to envision such a thing, I realize that many of the stories I told myself about my own wants and needs were

restricted by what was actually feasible given my socio-economic realities. In a country marked by massive individual debt, inequality, and a profound lack of support and safety nets for women, what does “choice” actually mean?

For too long, I let these limitations masquerade in the language of my own desires.

“You’ve still got time,” the gynecologist says, raising her eyebrows. “You could meet someone tomorrow.” “I could meet someone never,” I reply, laughing, though it doesn’t feel much like a joke. She continues with her rundown of questions. “Any history of sexual assault or abuse?” “No,” I reply.

She speaks to me like an equal, though she’s wearing proper clothes, while I float in an oversized paper gown that crinkles raucously as I scoot myself to the end of the exam table. My heels—I know the routine by now—find their way into the hard, plastic stirrups. The doctor narrates what she will be doing. “You’re going to feel my hand on your inner thigh,” she says, as I feel her hand on my inner thigh.

Then she pauses. “And there’s nothing I should know about your history—sexual assault or abuse or anything

else—before we keep going?” I can feel the “no” rising in me like a reflex.

Only, the way she’s asked me twice—broadening it to “anything else” throws me. There’s a silence in the room.

“No,” I tell her. But back in my car in the parking lot, I sit there, gripping the wheel and staring at my hands.

\*       \*       \*

Here’s an anything else: The last time my ex-partner ever touched me. It was after an argument, over the course of which I felt so profoundly misunderstood, I had stopped speaking and started crying. I hated that I was crying, so I went into the bedroom and put my face in a pillow.

A little while later, he came into the room and tried to hold me. “I don’t even know why I’m still crying,” I said to him. “You just needed to let it out,” he said dismissively, though not unkindly.

I was on my stomach, and he began to massage my shoulders, my back. Then, his hand was in my pants. It felt all wrong, but I wanted it to be right. “This feels wrong,” I said. The words sounded too severe to me. I tried to

soften them. “We haven’t even kissed,” I offered. What I meant was: “Why won’t you look at me?”

He found my face, briefly kissed me, then went back to what he was doing to my body. The whole time he fucked me with his hand, he was leaning over me while I was on my stomach, face against the bed. “Your poor body,” he said, now pressing himself against me. “It needed that.”

I was still crying. It still felt wrong. But he was telling me with a tone of certainty what my body needed. After a lifetime of experience in just that, I was inclined to believe him.

\* \* \*

In many ways, he seemed kind. He talked about nonviolent communication and came to political protests with me. Most mornings, he cooked me breakfast. Still, I experienced my first panic attack after an argument we had about our future together. I had located a problem: His actions didn’t seem to be aligning with his words. He located a different problem: Why was I so untrusting?

Later, I talked to him about the panic attack. How strange it was to experience what felt like my body telling

my mind something, when I was so used to my brain running the show. He nodded compassionately and said, “Are you sure that was your *first* panic attack? Are you sure it’s never happened before?”

And even though I was sure, I thought maybe he knew something I didn’t. About my own life and my own body.

“Are you sure?” he asked again a few days later.

And again.

Until I wasn’t so sure.

\* \* \*

I’ve had a number of interactions with obviously unkind men, but they have been easier for me to navigate. It’s the seemingly kind ones that disarm me and haunt me most.

When I started dating again, I told the kind man I went home with after a few dates—a man who had expressed appreciation for what a clear communicator I was—that I wanted to be physical with him but did not yet want to have sex. He kissed me, thanked me for being direct, and said that sounded just fine. That did not stop him from, less than an hour later, reaching for a condom as though it was inevitable that we would have sex. “Oh, damn,” he

said, groping around the drawer of his nightstand. “The condoms are in the bathroom.”

For a moment, I wondered whether I had said I didn’t want to have sex out loud. *Had I just meant to say it but forgotten to?* For a moment, I was about to just go along with it, by which I mean his version of reality and what should come next.

What I’m trying to say is that it is sometimes easier to pretend that what someone else presumes to know about your body, wants with or for your body, is exactly what you want.

It can be easier than having to reckon with the reality that you live in a world where what you say about your own body does not matter.

You pretend their stories are yours until you end up in the parking lot of your new gynecologist, weeping into your steering wheel. You weep because you realize that the phrase “sexual assault” has always sounded cartoonish and utterly inapplicable to your life experiences. But maybe only because, at some point, you stopped believing your body was truly your own.

You need a different phrase. One that captures the things you have done with and to your body—the things

that you have allowed to be done to it—because you assumed someone else probably knew better.

The space between what others desired for your body and what you desired for your own became ambiguous enough that, if asked to draw a line, you would try and fail and have to try again.

And then you realize you’re talking about yourself in the second person.

\* \* \*

To allow a child to grow inside of my body terrifies me. I am not afraid of the biology of it. I am not afraid of the pain. What I worry about most is that the autonomy that I have struggled to achieve—the quiet battles waged every day over my sense of ownership of my own body—will suddenly be erased. I worry that the fragile boundaries I have erected will come tumbling down in an instant.

Will there be room for me to experience being a parent in a way that feels like I’m starting a conversation instead of entering a centuries-old argument? Will I even be aware of the ways in which I make my desires and needs

smaller—not simply to accommodate my child but to accommodate society’s script for motherhood?

I want to trust that merely going about *being* on one’s own terms is not a position that must be defended. I want to trust that I won’t have to make myself any smaller than I already have.

I do not trust this.

\* \* \*

During the heyday of the #MeToo movement, I was one of a group of women who came forward about our old boss’s inappropriate behavior.

In a *This American Life* episode, we shared our stories of minimizing, denying, avoiding, or pushing back against his systematic harassment. It was only through being interviewed by the reporter and reconnecting with my coworkers—some of whom I hadn’t seen in almost fifteen years—that I recognized how systematic the harassment was. It was only after hearing another coworker tell me she tried to wear baggy clothes to avoid attention from our boss that I recognized I had been doing the very same thing.

A few months after the episode aired, a well-respected film director expressed interest in producing a TV series inspired by our stories. We were offered a modest sum in exchange for the rights to use these stories.

And that is how I am able to almost-just-barely cover the cost of the fertility drugs that I will soon inject into my body and the procedure I will undergo to extract and freeze some of my eggs.

Which is to say that enduring an abusive and sexist workplace is what made it possible for me to bring a child into this world.

Win?

\* \* \*

As I stare at this armada of fertility drugs and the syringes I will use to deliver them, I realize I can no longer glibly say, “I forgot I had a body.” It has been through too much for that. I want to stay in it. I want to own everything I am choosing to do with it. I want to listen better to what it tries to tell me—through its panic attacks and restlessness, its aches and premonitions.

When I imagine my child, I imagine the art and work



of seeing them as they are and as they are becoming. In other words: the art and work of stripping myself of the expectations and projections the world has drummed into me and would have me drum into my child.

I want to throw elbows and stomp earth to create space for them to learn themselves and their mind without the demands and assumptions of others weighing so heavily.

What I want is—simply, impossibly—for my child to know their body by their own measure.

I realize that this is likely what my own mother hoped for too—a knowledge that humbles in its inevitability: I will fail. But I still want to try.

I'm trying.

## LABOR AND OTHER POEMS

BY AMA CODJOE

LABOR  
*MANHATTAN, NY*

The Upper West Side brims  
with Black women heaving Bugaboo  
strollers as if maneuvering horseless plows.  
I'm walking up Broadway with a white friend  
whose mother's food stamps we used,  
as kids, to buy sour straws, barbecue  
chips, and frosted pints of Cherry Garcia.  
While we zigzag between pedestrians,

she argues that there may be as many  
white working-class nannies steering  
double-wide strollers as Black.

It's hard to tell, she insists,  
whether the white women caring  
for white babies are laborers  
or mothers. I know we use  
the same word to describe work  
and the work of giving birth.

Still, I'm tempted to call her bluff.

Today, I do not want children.

I recall instances when I've been mistaken  
for mother. Like last May, when a man  
clutching a fistful of blush roses  
wished me Happy Mother's Day.

Or in a muggy subway car,  
as the child beside me rested his head  
on my arm. A nearby passenger's eyes  
softened at our portrait.

I claimed the sleeping child then,  
briefly, I claimed him.

More than once, I've held tightly  
the hands of my twin nephews,

who could be confused  
for each other—or as mine.  
Together, we've waited near  
the chasm of the street—gust of cars  
stealing their reflections. I've spent hours,  
brief minutes, tending to children

I in no way labored for—and then,  
with some relief, I have let them go.

## MY NOTHINGS

You, who have bowed your head, shed  
another season of antlers at my feet, for years

you fall asleep to the lullabies of dolls,  
cotton-stuffed and frayed, ears damp with sleep

and saliva, scalps knotted with yarn, milk-breath,  
and yawns. Birth is a torn ticket stub, a sugar

cone wrapped in a paper sleeve, the blackest  
ice. It has been called irretrievable, a foreign

coin, the moon's slip, showing, a pair  
of new shoes rubbing raw your heel.

I lose the back of my earring and bend  
the metal in such a way as to keep it

fastened to me. In the universe where we are  
strangers, you kick with fury, impatient

as grass. I have eaten all your names.  
In this garden, you are blue ink, baseball cap,

wishbone, pulled teeth, wet sand, hourglass.  
There are locks of your hair in the robin's nest

and clogging the shower drain. You, who are  
covered in feathers, who have witnessed birth

give birth to death and watched death suck  
her purple nipple. You long for a mother

like death's mother, want to nurse until drunk  
you dream of minnows swimming

through your ears—their iridescence causing  
you to blink, your arms twitching.

Even while you sleep I feed you.

## MY NOTHINGS

You don't dress your mouth  
in my blouse. My body crinkled

like a denim dress pinned  
to a clothesline. I'd be lying if I said

there's no wind here, no sun shaping  
me 'til I'm filled by a body or falling

from a hanger. There's nothing tragic  
except what you know of light.

What you might show of sadness.  
You want to be folded: for two long sleeves

to meet kissing-like. To be finished  
with me in this particular way.

You want to be caught like birthday cake  
scooped from the linoleum floor

and spilled like a bank of pennies  
or silt. This is the part where you

have to say it because  
I'm a coward—though I'd kill

the daddy longlegs and let you  
sleep on my pillow for hours, my hair

in your mouth, could my voice soothe  
all I can't say.

## MY NOTHINGS

1.

Son and daughter peer through the mirror  
not above my bed, trying to find  
a language. What look is on their faces,

one asks. Terror, says one. Pleasure,  
the other answers. Look at him move  
as if inside her there's something

he can barely touch. Look how he tries  
over and over. How he becomes  
a horse beneath her: his eyes large

marbles on the sides of his face.  
Only now does she strip completely.  
Our father is a racehorse. Our mother possesses

the spine of a fish. Look at her swim  
though nowhere is water. Her nipples  
are coins the size of our mouths.

2.

When we move as if underwater,  
a scent rises off our bodies as steam.  
Our bodies are bodies  
of water. Look how we spill over  
and again.

3.

Some children wear the birthmark  
of never being conceived. Call it  
a single thorn in a bramble or the shape  
of a torn leaf or the triangular beak  
of a mistle thrush snatching  
a blackberry from a tangle of thorns.

4.

Dear children, go along  
skipping stones and asking for more.  
Go ahead nursing and dying,  
arguing over who gets  
the front seat. Do you have

to be born to die? The promises  
I make falter in the current  
between us. Is there a ship  
besides the body to lull you?

5.  
I have tried to strike  
the dampest match.

6.  
A horse's height is measured in hands.  
The body is smudged by a thousand fingerprints.

Sons and daughters,  
show me your hands.

I'll scrub them with a sliver of silver soap.  
We'll wash our hands of it good.

## CURSE OF THE SPIDER WOMAN

BY RIVA LEHRER

WHEN I WAS BORN, IN 1958, doctors were just beginning to learn how to close the neural tube defect known as spina bifida, in which the casing around the spinal cord does not fuse all the way. I spent the first two years of my life at Children's Hospital and then returned again and again for more surgeries and an endless whirlwind of tests, infections, and emergencies. The doctor who saved my life all those dozens of times was a young, soap-opera-handsome surgeon named Lester Martin.

He was my hero — actually, one of my two heroes. The

other was Carole Sue Horwitz Lehrer, otherwise known as Mom. Carole had worked as a medical researcher (for Dr. Warkany, whose specialization was fetal birth defects!), an experience that gave her the determination not to institutionalize me, as parents were told to when I was a child.

How lucky I was to have two heroes.

\* \* \*

When you grow up disabled, you are acutely aware that you are different. Normal is a mysterious *something* that you are not. Still, it's not until puberty that you discover just how different you are. Perhaps you grew up assuming that you were indeed a girl or a boy, told that you're a girl or a boy, but as you swing toward adulthood, disability claims your gender too. Many of the things that entitle you to masculinity (strength, speed, sportiness, the credible determination to be an astronaut) or femininity (bodily attractiveness, the aspiration to be a movie star, the desire to have children) might be denied to you if your body/mind doesn't do those things or your society won't let you. When you don't fit the mold of Man or Woman, neither do you fit as Mother or Father. We imagine children as little

copies of their parents; society makes it perfectly, lucidly, spectacularly clear that it does not welcome reproduction if it results in even more undesirable bodies.

For me, gender training abruptly stopped. Dolls and dresses didn't mean anything; my cousins and friends began their preparation for their female futures, for marriage and children. It was no mystery that I was being left behind.

At least, that's what it was like to be a crip kid in 1972.

\* \* \*

I was fourteen, and most of the girls I knew had already begun their periods, but not me. I was beginning to doubt it would ever happen. Then, the summer before I started high school, I was babysitting, and as my charges paddled around the JCC kiddie pool, I glanced down at my swimsuit bottom and saw a crimson stream snaking down my leg. I thought I was having a medical emergency, so of course I screamed, which meant that the entire pool now noticed the deranged and bleeding girl. A nice woman lent me her beach towel and asked if it was my first time, then put a quarter in the Kotex machine on the bathroom wall

and went to call my mother. I spent the weekend curled up in Crampville under rotating heating pads.

Still, I was ecstatic. I would start high school as an Official Girl. If pain was the price to pay for Girlhood, fine. I was fertile. My body had a future. It had a purpose.

Within months, menstruation began to mow me down like a bright-red Sherman tank.

The pain stopped letting up between cycles. My aunts said that some women just had really bad periods and to get used to it. I should have been taken to a gynecologist; instead, my pediatrician sent me to a psychiatrist who asked if I had those cramps when I fought with my mother. “No,” I said, “I have them during *my period*.” (*You idiot.*)

I didn’t understand. Mom had always taken my smallest pains straight to the doctor. Her level of over-reaction tended toward the positively operatic. Why was *this* pain being treated like a figment of my imagination?

\* \* \*

November of my sophomore year, I was doodling lions in the margin of my American History textbook when a grenade went off in my belly. I lurched out to the hallway and

fell over on the carpet, cheek pressed against a thousand muddy sneaker prints. Two teachers hoisted me to the nurse’s office, called an ambulance, and then called my mother.

Sirens. Curious faces. A bitter wind sliding around the stretcher. Mom and Grandma met me in the Children’s Hospital ER, where I was given a whomp-load of painkillers. I dimly registered the X-rays, the excruciating pelvic exam, the doctors mumbling in the hall.

Mom roused me at five a.m.—had she ever left?—and said I had a hemorrhaging uterine cyst the size of a grapefruit. (Universal law decrees that tumors and cysts must be golf balls or grapefruit.) Orderlies were on their way to take me to the OR, where Dr. Martin would perform an emergency hysterectomy. Not the usual surgery for a fifteen-year-old; even the nurses were a little nonplussed when they came in my room. When I asked them to explain what was about to happen, their eyes slid away.

I woke up with a wide, flat smile of an incision just above my pubic bone, and the sensation that I’d been set upon by sadistic plumbers.

Eventually the anesthesia receded, and the questions began to arrive. I knew what a hysterectomy was and what



it meant for normal women. I had no idea what it meant for me.

I would discover what my hysterectomy meant for Mom.

A couple days after surgery, we were sitting around my hospital room waiting for the lunch trays, when she asked, “Are you glad you won’t have periods anymore?”

I hadn’t thought that far ahead. There were bandages on my abdomen and giant pads between my legs. I was still the Vesuvius of menstruation. “Yeah, I guess. But Dr. Martin said that I kept my ovaries. Won’t I feel something?”

“You might get a little moody. But you’re a teenager, so moody is pretty much your job description. A lot of women would give big money not to have cramps every month.”

“An operation isn’t a whole lot easier, Mom.”

“Maybe not.” She sighed and covered my hand. This was her sign that she was about to be Deeply Serious. Hoo boy.

“I know this was scary, honey, but it was all for the best. If you hadn’t had your uterus out now, you’d be stuck doing it down the line. Your spine isn’t able to withstand

a full-term pregnancy. If you ever did get pregnant, you’d have to make a terrible decision. Now it’s out of your hands. This was a blessing in disguise.”

Fury shrapneled my brain. What. The. Hell. I’d *had* to have that fucking *emergency* operation because nobody—including *her*—believed that my period was more painful than it should have been! And she’d always said that men wouldn’t be interested in me. Was she saying I would have gotten—jeez!—*offers*?

Mom had been told to abort her last pregnancy—the baby that would become my little brother—in order to save her spine following botched disc surgery. Mom had toughed it out, hadn’t she? She’d carried Markie to term, and she was still alive. Still walking. Was I that much worse off?

No one had ever asked me if I wanted to have children. Our relatives asked my girl cousins if they had crushes on boys. Did Diane and Leah and Ellen and Betsy want to go shopping for dresses? Who was taking them to prom? Oh, a boyfriend! How nice!

But no one asked me.

Mom went on, unaware of my rage. “I’ve been so worried that you’d meet a boy one day, and he’d put you in

terrible danger. Even though most men aren't attracted to handicapped girls. I was afraid you'd be forced to make some terrible decisions. Now, though, I think we're in the clear."

It wasn't like this was the first time she'd delivered her "Don't get your hopes up" speech. I'd always thought, secretly, that I *would* find someone someday who would want to marry me—though I'd have settled for someone to take me to the prom. But now, it seemed, she was right: I was a null set. A nothing.

And at the end of all this "kindness," she *smiled*. My mother smiled.

My last morning in the hospital, I caught Dr. Martin's sleeve as he turned to go.

"Could you wait a minute? There's stuff I don't understand." There was no one else I could ask, and it wasn't as if a question about surgery would bother him. He was a *doctor*.

I took a shaky breath. "Um, Dr. Martin. Does having a hysterectomy mean ... that ... I can never have sex? Does it mean I'll never feel anything if I do?" I had a creeping notion that the hysterectomy had paralyzed my orgasm nerves—whatever they were called.

He froze. My idol, my hero—my own Rabbi Loew—said, "Riva, I thought you were a *nice* girl. I cannot believe my ears! Promise me I'll never hear anything like that from you ever again." He stood balanced on the balls of his feet, a granite slab from his back-combed hairline to the soles of his polished shoes.

Or maybe it was me who froze, as Dr. Lester Martin walked out.

\* \* \*

I had never talked to anyone about sex. For cripp kids, *sex* was the forbidden word, as unmentionable as a demon's name in a Black Forest fairy tale. What little I knew had been gleaned from illicit peeks at the sexually dimorphic pages of my father's *Playboy* magazines and my mother's *True Confessions*. Mom had explained the biomechanics during a hideously embarrassing talk years ago, but I understood little about desire itself, how it fed the fires of adulthood.

At fifteen, I had no idea that there was history and context to my surgery. That there was a history of involuntary sterilization of disabled women. I didn't know of Carrie

Buck, the most famous example, plaintiff in the Supreme Court case *Buck v. Bell*. Carrie Elizabeth Buck was a poor girl from Charlottesville, Virginia, who was raped and impregnated by a member of her foster family when she was seventeen. That family avoided prosecution by committing Carrie Buck to the Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and the Feebleminded, where she was declared incompetent to raise her baby.

While in the Virginia State Colony, Buck was sterilized against her will under the Racial Integrity Law of 1924, a eugenics program carried out by the state of Virginia. Buck's mother, Emma, had already been committed to the colony for "feeble-mindedness" and being "sexually promiscuous," often a code word for denoting an "uncontrollable" female. Later, Carrie's younger sister Doris was also sterilized using similar justifications. Carrie's daughter, Vivian, was labeled feeble-minded and died at age eight.

There is evidence that none of the Bucks qualified for these spurious "diagnoses"; researchers have cited sources indicating that the Bucks were all of normal intelligence. This is *not* to say that, if they'd had intellectual disabilities, any of this would have been morally or ethically justified. Nevertheless, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. in ruling

against Carrie in *Buck v. Bell*, pronounced the famous verdict: "Three generations of imbeciles are enough."

The Buck case may be the most infamous, but it is only one of thousands of stories of disabled women being sterilized against their will—and often without their knowledge—throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Most were—or are—poor; many were women of color; but any woman was at risk of being committed by her family and subjected to this atrocity. This included women who went to public health clinics or were considered "inappropriate" mothers—for any reason whatsoever.

These days, debate continues over whether to sterilize people born with developmental disabilities on the assumption that they'd be incompetent parents. Deaf, blind, and paraplegic people are frequently treated as having no right to reproduction.

Few Americans realize that the eugenics movement began in the United States and not in Germany. The Nazis ran with it, but eugenics began as a lethal export from the Home of the Free. If you can prevent disabled people from having children, it's step two in making sure we cease to exist—right after aborting us to make sure we never exist in the first place.

I do not equate my situation with that of Carrie Buck's—but it's not unconnected either. If my fertility had been valued, perhaps I would have been taken seriously when I complained of pelvic pain. Instead, I had to begin hemorrhaging before anyone examined me. Mom and my doctors thought—not without reason—that pregnancy could lead to severe pain, increased impairment, even death. They'd never given me a choice regarding any surgery I'd ever had, so I suppose it didn't even occur to them to consider the existence of choice, especially once the catastrophe began.

I don't know whether anything could have been done to preserve my fertility, or whether pregnancy would have been as dangerous as my mother claimed, but I do know that her reaction, and that of Dr. Martin, speaks to a long-held societal dread of disabled people making more disabled people. I know that no one, back then, expressed a single word of sorrow at the loss of my ability to procreate.

Carrie Buck's family was trying to hide a rape and subsequent "illegitimate" child by arranging for her to be institutionalized. They were able to do so because people of her time—and for decades since—believed

that institutions were the appropriate places for disabled people, and especially disabled women. The Bucks hid behind the warped beliefs of a hundred years ago. No doubt that many families who similarly "put away" their members saw confinement as a kindness, a way to protect parents, siblings, spouses from a world that hated and feared them. Yet who among us would call those families "heroic" for their actions?

The 1970s saw the nascent rise of Disability Rights, but these concepts had yet to filter down to Cincinnati, Ohio. For most of my life, I have borne a hot stone of rage against my mother and Dr. Martin, but now I consider that they were also entombed in a society that tried to prevent disabled children from making more disabled children. They chose to treat me like a child so as to keep me a child, in order that I remain unwounded by rejection. Ignorant of the labyrinth of love. Can I fault them for not being the visionaries I required?

My heroes carved me with their words and their knives. I am a Golem, a living, if incomplete, being. I am still learning how to cut and sew myself into my own shape of monster.

# MONSTERS WE CREATE

A SCI-FI FRONTERA FEMMETASIA FABLE

BY GEORGINA ESCOBAR

*An excerpt from a play co-created with students at the  
University of Texas at El Paso in the fall semester of 2019.*

THE YEAR IS 2030, and the world has been turned upside down. “The Big Sink”—a climate event in which the sea-water levels rose to cover parts of the US (New York, Florida, Delaware, California, parts of Louisiana, Texas, and Alabama)—has forced millions of people to seek refuge in the deserts of the Southwest. The scarcity of resources quickly leads to a war that targets migrant women and their reproductive freedoms.

The repression of reproductive freedom has focused on places along the border; one such place is called Sun

Town. The implementation of the Malthusian law, a new legislation for population control, leads to the creation of Sterilization Camps (“Stamps”) for immigrants along the border—constructed to process the population-control-driven sterilization of migrant women. Among other things, the law has launched the New Armed Forces Unit (NAFU), a division set to protect the Stamps.

*Darkness.*

*An eerie sound, like dripping water.*

*Lights rise on Old Radford House.*

*FERNANDEZ, J. / FJ (F) 20–30s. A Mexican immigrant. Recently escaped the Stamps where she’s been detained for two years. Born to the name Jimena, she has decided to adopt the name reflected on her camp uniform. She recounts a story to ROMAN.*

*Figures of DOCTORS in plague doctor masks enter and surround her.*

*ROMAN, (M) 20–30s. Born and raised in the high deserts, he has an honest connection to nature and the natural world but finds comfort in routine. Recently served as an employee for the Stamps. He watches the following, silently.*

FERNANDEZ, J.

Once upon a time, there was a prominent border town that was the only one to survive years of scarcity-driven wars. Driven out of the coasts by the Big Sink, millions of people sought refuge in the high deserts. Passage City, or Sun Town, became the hub for Sacrificial Camps. Scamps.

ROMAN SCOFFS.

*(defending her story)*

I’ll have to change the name of course. Make it a metaphor. People don’t actually have the ear for truth anymore. They just want stories ... just fake-ass stories ...

*FJ wears a vacant expression. She’s taken away by a distant memory and into:*

INTERCOM (VO)

Fernandez, J.— Lot 26. Report to room 99 to begin the gifting process.

FERNANDEZ, J.

*(touches her stomach; to herself)*

Maybe it won't work ... maybe there's still hope ...  
*Suddenly: NONAME appears behind FJ. It is a creature bigger than a human, daunting, haunting, and grotesque. It looks like the desert wilderness—prickly, dry, and unforgiving—and it uses the language of symbols, which sounds, to humans, like the phrase: "Why?"*

FERNANDEZ, J.

... and then you think the unthinkable.  
 Is that a—(*monster?*)  
*She calls him over, he responds with:*

NONAME

Why ... ?  
*NONAME runs menacingly to FJ with a scalpel.*

FERNANDEZ, J.

Please, don't.  
*NONAME stands behind FJ and takes her hand to the scalpel. It teaches her how to aim to kill, where to slice—NONAME represents the wilderness in all women whose reproductive freedom is threatened.*

FERNANDEZ, J. (CONT'D)

I ... I can't.

NONAME

Why ... ?  
*They share a moment. FJ studies NONAME with care. It roughly pushes her away.*

INTERCOM (VO)

Fernandez, J.—Lot 26. Room 99 to begin the gifting process.

*Suddenly we launch into—The Sterilization Dance—DOCTORS in plague masks engage in a highly stylized sterilization/hysterectomy procedure.*

*They RETRIEVE something. The sounds are disturbing. They expand, colonizing what little remains of the untainted air.*

*What the doctors REMOVE suddenly transforms into a person, a "could-have-been."*

*This is MAYBEE (F)—one whose language is akin to musical notation, one whose body and movements are elevated to the dignity of signs, the mysterious, and the unconquerable wild.*

*MAYBEE gasps for air, as if she's been underwater for too long. She is confused and out of sorts, then turns around slowly to see the scene. She sees what could have been her mother, FJ, defeated.*

*NONAME enters, unseen; it slides the scalpel toward MAYBEE. She picks it up, and, as if given permission to engage her inner truth, she stabs the DOCTORS, sinking the scalpel straight into each of their jugulars. Her killing is satisfying; she slices through centuries of reproductive inequities and other abuses against women. It is guttural but beautiful, vicious but choreographed. MAYBEE's attack is every woman's release.*

*Suddenly—*

*Lights shift, and we are back at the Old Radford House. ROMAN stands behind FJ as she finishes reenacting the*

*story, then:*

ROMAN

Really?

FERNANDEZ, J.

What “really”?

ROMAN

Suddenly this girl just ... slays the doctors?

FERNANDEZ, J.

That's the part that pulls you out of it? Not the actual sterilization? Typical.

ROMAN

I think there's a danger in fantasizing the—

FERNANDEZ, J.

It's all in the telling. It's how we *say* certain things. It's how we *word them*. Stories are wild things, once they are free, no one knows what they will do.



ROMAN

But naming her “Maybee”?

FERNANDEZ, J.

*Maybee* takes a scalpel from a monster in order to destroy what separated her from her mother? It’s perfect.

ROMAN

It’s on the nose.

FERNANDEZ, J.

Roman, look, just. Look. Just. Worry about transmitting the story, OK? We’re all depending on this transmission. If the Last Call doesn’t go out, and we’re trapped here, or if it does, and we’re trapped here—

ROMAN

We’ll be caught by NAFU. I got it.

FERNANDEZ, J.

Exactly.

ROMAN

*(a bit of a mumble)*

Story’s a bit ...

FERNANDEZ, J.

Fix that radio. Leave the writing to me. We’re transmitting the Last Call, for god’s sake. It’s gotta mean something.

ROMAN

Yes, yes.

FERNANDEZ, J.

Are you with me on this?

ROMAN

Sure. But. It’s just.

FERNANDEZ, J.

Say it.

ROMAN

A new episode? Ten years later?

FERNANDEZ, J.

It's never too late to do what's right.

ROMAN

We need to leave. Now.

FERNANDEZ, J.

We need to give others hope.

ROMAN

The story just doesn't make sense. What's the point?  
Everyone knows what's happening around here—

FERNANDEZ, J.

And yet they look away. Why?

ROMAN

I just don't get it.

FERNANDEZ, J.

It's not for you to get. The ones who get it will get it. It's  
a metaphor and—

ROMAN

It's predictable.

FERNANDEZ, J.

Predicta—you want to know what's predictable? Men.  
Afraid of women. Controlling our bodies. Sterilization  
camps. People treating—who treat the—people who treat  
*migrants* like the goddamn plague. People who, like you,  
do *nothing* ... in the face of—

ROMAN

FERNANDEZ, J.

*I* do nothing “in the face of”? Nothing!

Now wait a minute,  
that's not fair

Because it was more  
comfortable to

I didn't do *nothing*!

—NO, you did nothing!

FERNANDEZ, J.

Predictable!

ROMAN

(*correcting her*)

Immigrant.

FERNANDEZ, J.

What?

ROMAN

The word you're looking for is "immigrant," not "migrant."

FERNANDEZ, J.

Are you fucking kidding me right now?

ROMAN

(*shrugs*)

FERNANDEZ, J.

Migrant. Migrants move. Like birds. To find better conditions for survival. You think I wanted to come to this piece of shit country? I didn't have a choice.

ROMAN

But you stayed in this piece of shit country, that's the difference: migrants keep moving; immigrants stay—

FERNANDEZ, J.

Fuck you, Roman.

ROMAN

It's just a fact, not an attack. Immigrant's not a dirty word—it's natural. Migrant and immigrant species have meant the survival of *many* of those species. Take tumbleweeds.

FERNANDEZ, J.

Whatever ...

ROMAN

I'm not negating your experience, Jimena.

FERNANDEZ, J.

Don't call me that.

ROMAN

That's your name.

FERNANDEZ, J.

Not anymore. (*She signals to the patch on her jumpsuit, which spells her last name. Below it, a mountain range and a yellow five-point star: the emblem of El Paso, Texas.*) Jimena is dead. Jimena was taken from me. Did you know a woman's name is born in the womb? My mother named

me while I was still connected to her. That was my name. Fed to me by her, like nutrients.... I don't have that name anymore. I don't have that right. And maybe, if you call me by my new name, you'll remember that. (*beat*) It's Fernandez, J. Get it right. It's who they made me. This is who I am now.

## STEEL WOMB

BY CARRIE BORNSTEIN

I USED TO JOKE that I should have someone else's baby.

Pregnancy just seemed to *work* for me. I was lucky to conceive on the first try with each of my three kids and never had a miscarriage. I liked birth and hospitals and the way I'd take extra good care of myself throughout the process. Despite (or maybe *because of*?) my insecurities in just about every area of life, I knew pregnancy was my strong suit. The thing about babies, though, is that they grow into kids. The very last thing I wanted was another kid.

One day on a long car trip to visit family, I joked again and decided to look it up online. Do people really do that, I wondered? At 37 I figured I was probably too old. It turned out that, yes, people really do that. And that no, I was not too old.

Something inside me clicked.

Two days later I called my obstetrician. She explained the process and said I'd make an excellent candidate for surrogacy. We'd just need to make sure I wasn't matched with a couple who had the same antibodies I developed upon giving birth to my second child, since that would lead to a toxic environment for the baby. It's rare but could happen if I was matched with the wrong couple. Thankfully, it was something we could easily screen for.

My husband wasn't enthusiastic about the idea. To Jamie, pregnancy meant me lying on the couch surrendered to first-trimester nausea and exhaustion while he put the kids to bed. It was the inevitable spill I'd take on the sidewalk, landing me in the hospital under observation for twenty-four hours just to make sure the baby was OK. It was all those doctor appointments on top of the overload of running a nonprofit, and how my body would get torn apart by it all.

Sure, he was right, but pregnancy ... pregnancy also meant poking the elbow of a fetus inside only to feel it jab right back at me as if to say hello. It meant unlimited milkshakes, second dinner, and cute maternity clothes with the greatest accessory ever sitting right there at my midsection. And while my own path to parenthood couldn't have been easier, I knew there were single people of all genders and gay couples desperate to have a baby who couldn't produce one on their own. I knew couples who struggled for years trying to become pregnant only to have blood slay their budding hope again and again and again. I thought about the woman who carried an uncomplicated pregnancy for months before delivering a baby who had already died inside her. My heart hurt for them all. How could I *not* have someone else's baby?

People sometimes assume that surrogates are just after money. Though it wasn't my primary motivation, the thought of boosting our bank account certainly didn't hurt. With Jamie and I working in nonprofits and trying to send our kids to private school, we didn't exactly have much savings. With a little extra cash, maybe we could put some money away for college. Or even take a vacation.

I had never known anyone who had been, or had even

used, a surrogate, so I sought out someone with firsthand experience. Shira and I met in a bar one night, and she shared, teary-eyed, the medical condition that meant she'd never carry a pregnancy to term. She told me about how badly she wanted to become a mom and the gestational carrier who delivered her three sons. I cried with this stranger over white wine sangria and became even more resolute in my decision. I went home and poured my heart out in an application to the agency she used. Two days later, I was rejected.

The agency said they appreciated my time and attention to detail in completing the application, but they would not be able to proceed due to my Factor V Leiden gene mutation, which could lead to an elevated risk of blood clotting following delivery. I protested, letting them know that I'd never had a blood clot and that mine was actually one of the more minor versions of the mutation, but they were unconvinced. Later that day I got my period. I felt like I had a shadow of a glimpse into the painful world of infertility from which I'd been sheltered.

Researching more, I learned that others with my exact condition had gone on to successful surrogacy. I found a new agency, asked upfront about the issue, and after an

application, reference checks, and multiple interviews with their staff, including an in-home screening, they told me about a couple who might be a match. Five months after that first Google search, I opened my email to find the subject line: "Introducing Hannah and Michael!"

I stared at my inbox. There they were. Real people with photos and a story and a message saying they couldn't put into words how lucky they felt to have found me.

The agency arranged a video introduction among the four of us—an awkward supervised double date of sorts, where we tried to determine in the course of an hour whether or not to intertwine our lives forever. Hannah followed up by email, gushing with gratitude. "I feel so happy and hopeful again," she said. "I will never be able to thank you enough for giving us the baby we dreamed of." My husband looked at me and said, "I love you." The hypothetical "someone else's baby" was now "Hannah and Michael's baby," and he was hooked.

We both underwent psychological screenings, and I obtained medical clearance after going over the details of my case with the fertility clinic. I had weekly phone calls with lawyers. We signed a sixty-four-page contract that outlined everything from how many embryos we'd transfer

to who would be in the delivery room to how much extra compensation I'd receive should my reproductive organs not survive the ride. I told my children, my parents, and my community that there was a couple across the ocean who'd tried for seven years to have a baby but couldn't. I have a uterus sitting within me, I said, collecting dust.

Our nine-year-old tried to wrap her head around me birthing a baby who wouldn't be related to us. We talked about embryos and gestation. She was fascinated but confused. I bought a children's book about surrogacy, which, in her words, "cleared up a lot of things." We shared the news with our seven-year-old son who replied, "Cool," and walked away. Our four-year-old just wanted to know how the baby would get into me, how it would come out of me, and whether he could see the little hole in my body where all that magic happened. (Nope.)

For three and a half months, I stuck myself with needles the length of a yardstick. In the belly. In the ass. I injected myself with hormones 129 times over the course of 104 days.

In January 2017, Jamie and I took the day off from work. We traveled from Massachusetts to an office building in Connecticut, where, up the stairs and down the hall,

I entered a fertility clinic to get knocked up with someone else's baby. We sat in the waiting room across from two men giddy with chatter next to their surrogate. I deduced from their small talk that she had traveled in from Florida. I was dying to make conversation but restrained myself. Who was this woman, and what was her story? Were we in the same surrogate Facebook group? Maybe if I listened closer, I could catch her name? The doctor came out to let us know there was some kind of trouble thawing the frozen embryo, so we should go out to lunch and come back in an hour. We returned to find the giddy men and Florida woman in the parking lot, now frenzied with excitement, waving ultrasound photos in the air. "Good luck!" we shouted at one another.

Out in the world, the term "pussy grabbing" was suddenly everywhere, with women's lives and bodies dismissed and denigrated at nearly every turn. I recalled the teenaged boy who told eight-year-old me to call him when I turned eighteen. I remembered the high school physics teacher who stood over us girls during tests, left hand on right shoulder, looking down (our shirts?) as he suggested we try again on questions we had gotten wrong. Going along with it stamped my ticket to a good grade for

the year. On social media, women everywhere displayed their courage. Too scared to muster anything but a simple #MeToo, I found agency in the power of my uterus.

Bladder full and intended parents on Skype, I listened to Hannah chitchat through nervous tension as Michael silently tapped his leg. I asked for a moment of privacy to collect my thoughts and move forward with intention. Alone with Jamie as we held each other, I swore I'd nurture that embryo's growth for the nine months it would be in my care, after which I'd return it to its parents in the form of a baby. I prayed for patience throughout my journey and blessings that I'd help create a healthy child who would go on to join a family. We gathered around the ultrasound screen as a fertilized embryo traveled through a long white catheter to find a comfortable spot in my womb.

Two days later, our country inaugurated the pussy grabber in chief.

We wouldn't know for another twelve days that, in fact, the transfer had worked. Through the heartbreak of Hillary Clinton's defeat, the Women's March on Washington, and an all-encompassing fear for the future, I thought, If this pregnancy can survive the stress and toxicity around me, this kid is destined for greatness.

Another month went by before I learned that something had gone terribly wrong. The fertility clinic originally told me that the antibody screens were all clear; they were not. In fact, they had never even reviewed my medical records. They ordered the wrong tests and misread the results. And the only reason I discovered this is because I reviewed the charts myself before passing them back to my doctor. I was ten weeks pregnant when my newly assigned maternal fetal medicine specialist confirmed that this fetus living inside me should never have been put there in the first place.

My doctors verified the antibodies in question were present in both egg and sperm. I went from the magic of a perfect beating heart on the ultrasound screen to the dread of carrying a "very high-risk" pregnancy. My blood could attack the baby's, leading to it becoming so anemic that it could require blood transfusions. In utero. Under epidural. Every two weeks.

I should prepare myself, the doctors said, for the possibility of an emergency C-section at as early as thirty-three weeks, after which the baby would likely require another blood transfusion. Or two. Hopefully it wouldn't sustain brain damage as a result.



I was scared. Scared about the impact on my body and my life. I was scared of trying to run an organization and mother three children while potentially needing to drop everything every two weeks without notice, month after month. I was scared of epidurals. And I was disgusted by my selfish worrying; after all, Hannah and Michael were the ones whose baby was in danger.

I agonized that my experience would turn people off to surrogacy when I'd wanted to destigmatize the process. Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut about it all.

I was also furious, because the clinic whose job it was to ensure safety failed to do so and because the agency coordinating the surrogacy went into legal mode to protect itself, abandoning the support it'd promised me. And I was irate watching Hannah and Michael ecstatic at the news that their baby could survive, never seeming to consider the quality of her future life, or what it meant for me and my body and my emotional well-being. I felt like a robot uterus at the whim of others' mercy. I felt like a woman subject to others' control and power.

All the joy vanished. My pregnancy felt—and became—toxic.

Weeks passed as the baby grew from the size of a fig

to a plum to a mango; that cutesy way to describe fetal growth now also tracked my growing anxiety. Was this all really worth it to two people trying to become parents? Plenty of people would terminate with this level of risk. Didn't they even want to consider the possibility?

In Massachusetts, a pregnancy can be ended until twenty-three weeks and six days' gestation. Every doctor I faced asked whether I planned to exercise my right to choose. I told them about page twenty of my Gestational Carrier Agreement, where I'd initialed a paragraph attesting to comply with the intended parents' decision regarding termination. No matter that these private contracts had never been tested in court; I'd agreed to waive my right.

The high-risk doctor called me a saint. Would he have done so if he knew I sat on the toilet wondering why so many miscarry easily while my uterus resembled steel? I prayed that the bleeding might begin soon.

\* \* \*

That embryo is a healthy toddler now. My potentially devastating pregnancy turned out to be uneventful—the double-edged sword of accessing top medical care means

that, like Eve and Adam, our eyes were opened to a world we never would have known existed otherwise.

Eleanor arrived in the world just shy of thirty-nine weeks' gestation after I labored through the night, pushing for a total of ten minutes. I got to watch a woman become a mother. Hannah moved from cutting the umbilical cord to gently kiss my head. I got to watch a man become a father, a floppy newborn resting on his naked chest.

When I had been ready to give up, they persisted with optimism. I'd almost forgotten about the strength they knew I had within me the whole time.

I get pictures of Eleanor from time to time, mostly around holidays and birthdays. I helped to create a family. I helped to create a child who in no way resembles me, but who would not have existed without me. Staring at her soft skin I see a little girl who, against the odds, kept on going to make her way into the world. I know that, just by the simple fact of being alive, she's developing her own steel core.

Four years later, I still can't feel my upper thighs from the needles that grazed the sciatic nerve leading from the injection sites. I'm told the numbness will go away eventually, but it's the numbness that helps me remember. I'd still do it all over again, if I could choose.

## MAHEOV

BY TOMMY ORANGE

MARTIN WAS A MIRACLE baby like Jesus. His parents named him god but they hid it in the middle with purposeful inexactitude. Also he was a twin and they both would have had the middle name god, but Martin's brother died when their mom was having them. All he ended up being called was: the one they lost. They had medically sterilized Martin's mom, which means they tied her tubes was how she told him. Which was how he was a miracle baby, and maybe even twice over because of what happened to the one they lost.

Martin's family is Cheyenne, Cheyenne and Arapaho enrolled, but Southern Cheyenne through and through. To further keep Martin from the embarrassment of having god as a middle name, his parents named him Maheov instead of Maheo—the Cheyenne word for god. *Maheov* was the Cheyenne word for the color orange, which was different from the Cheyenne word for the fruit. *Maheov* was really just the Cheyenne words *red* and *yellow* put together into one word, just like the colors red and yellow together made orange. The secret about them meaning god for him and not the color orange was kept like the secret about his mom being medically sterilized to stop the spread of their kind, their kind of people, that's actually what the Cheyenne word for themselves meant, going way back, according to Martin's dad and a book he made Martin read over and over, written by their relative Henrietta Mann about the history of Cheyenne experience in education systems which was really just about the only history book about their kind of people written by one of them. Martin homeschooled his whole life on account of his parents not believing in what they were doing in the schools, what they were teaching and how they were teaching it, especially regarding the history of

Native people in this country, and most especially regarding Cheyennes.

Homeschooling was hard, and meant Martin didn't have friends like he could only imagine he would have had being in school together all the time and having private jokes and games between classes and knowing just how other kids ran when they were scared of being tagged or what they smelled like at the end of the day or how they might make fun of any of his names the way he'd seen in movies kids make fun of names so much in school. The only time his parents ever used Maheov was if he was in trouble and when that was the case it was Martin Maheov, his first and middle names together calling him into the kitchen or the living room whenever he did something they said he shouldn't or didn't do something they said he should.

The only way Martin had friends was from going to Native American Church meetings on the weekends, which meant driving up north an hour and staying up late with kids he might never see again while their parents ate peyote and prayed all night to Maheo or whatever other names for god they might have used depending on where they came from. Actually there tended to be a lot of Jewish

hippies and in that case it was *haShem*, which wasn't their name for god but just meant the Name; and then of course there was Jesus or whomever non-Jewish white hippies prayed to, the Universe or whatever. Mostly playing with the kids he played with meant playing video games or telling scary stories or listening to the big boom of the kettle drum from inside the house wondering how their parents could stay up and sing and pray for so long when they were kids and could barely make it past 2:00 a.m. with soda and video games and on this one night a joint. This was the first time Martin smoked anything more than a cigarette, and while he was nervous, it felt natural, to be trying drugs out, like the beginning, because knowing your parents did drugs regularly, and having it be a part of their religion, did something to the way Martin thought about that joint when it was passed to him. All of which ended up making what ended up happening this one night even crazier than it already was.

They were asking one another about their respective middle names because they were bored and it was super late and there was nothing else to talk about. These kids' names were Seth and Micah, with middle names like Jacob and maybe Esau, which seemed normal enough, but not

more normal than Martin. When it came to his middle name, he could have stopped at it being the color orange in Cheyenne or the colors red and orange put together in Cheyenne but it was late and they'd smoked that joint and you want to have something to talk about in these kinds of situations so he told them his mom wasn't supposed to be able to have babies after being medically sterilized, and that he was a miracle baby like Jesus.

"What's *sterilized* mean? I thought it was like, for strength, like for muscles and sports or whatever," Micah said.

"He said *sterilized*, not *steroidized*," Seth said, glaring. The glow from his phone on Micah's face meant he was looking up what *sterilized* meant.

"Wait, so they gave you the middle name god because your mom got sterilized but then had you anyway, even though she wasn't supposed to be able to have babies?" Seth asked.

"It's stupid. I don't actually know what the chances are that sterilization doesn't work. Anyway, doesn't Jesus mean like a whole different thing for you guys, like for Jewish people?"

"Jesus is cool," Seth said, "but he's not like, our guy."

“You know all those ideas about genocide and sterilization Nazis used on Jews they got from what the US did to Native Americans?” Micah said, looking at his phone.

“I homeschooled and both my parents are Native, so like, yeah,” Martin said.

“Who do you think the American version of Hitler would be if you had to name one guy?” Seth asked. Martin was about to say Andrew Jackson when he heard yelling outside the window. It was the first time he’d gotten high, and the first time his middle name being god came up with anyone outside of his family, but what made the night memorable was what they watched below—one of the hippies came running out fully on fire and screaming. Martin’s dad was trying to put him out with a blanket but he kept yelling that it was god. That it was all god. And it went on like that for he doesn’t remember how long, but it seemed like forever, the hippie yelling that all of it was god, Martin’s dad trying to put him out with the blanket.

On the way home the next day his dad told him they found out the guy had taken acid before the meeting. That he wouldn’t be welcomed back into ceremony. When Martin asked if he’d be OK, neither of his parents answered. So he asked his mom how they could do that

kind of medical procedure on her without her saying it was OK. There was a long silence, at first probably because it seemed to have come out of nowhere, and then because it was the kind of question that required more than an answer could give. The sound of the road seemed like it was blaring, like music Martin wanted to be able to turn down, like sometimes how they’d play peyote music too loud in the car on the way back from meetings. Martin wondered if the loudness had something to do with the joint, with being high, with having been high, which made him wonder how long it lasted, its possible residual effects, and then he wondered if different kinds of drugs reacted to each other so like the high of being high from weed and the high of being high or having been high from peyote would those two things together do something else? There clearly was something more still happening to his thinking, he was thinking when his mom finally answered his question.

“White people been thinking they were the better people all along and that progress and civilization means making more of themselves in the world, and making sure less like us make it through. You can see it in movies and books and in every way we never get to be seen the way we

really are. And then what little of us gets allowed through is always the same dumb thing,” his mom said.

“But they really didn’t tell you they were doing it, the sterilization?”

“You found a way through. That’s what matters. That we keep making our way through.”

“Are Jewish people white?” Martin asked. His mom looked at his dad, then back at him in the rearview mirror with a kind of pained squint Martin couldn’t decipher, then back to his dad in this like “aren’t you gonna say something” kind of way.

“It’s not that all white people are bad,” his dad said.

“But are they white?” Martin asked.

“Jesus wasn’t white, and he was Jewish,” his mom said.

“Why was that guy on fire saying it’s all god?” Martin asked. And then, before they could answer, he thought about if he was high and also maybe their highs were reacting to his high. What did any of that mean and was it OK? He knew he was acting different, asking more than he normally did, this time in the car would usually have meant them singing along to their peyote tapes, Martin staring out the window at the way back home, but he couldn’t help the way he was thinking and especially help that he

kept wanting to ask these questions. “Why are drugs like acid bad and peyote’s like, spiritual, or like medicine or whatever?”

“Most drugs aren’t inherently bad, it’s the way people use them. The kinds of people they already are can come out on drugs in ways that can be bad, can hurt people,” his dad said.

“I smoked weed last night,” Martin said, not right away feeling nervous about it, which felt weird, and then when no one said anything for a while he did get nervous, and the loud road blared again. Martin knew his question was being weighed against their use of peyote, and what happened with the crazy hippie on fire, and his confession about smoking weed. He also knew that now they knew about him acting different than normal, asking these questions, and he wished he hadn’t told them about getting high, because it might diminish their sincerity, make them act like oh this is just a part of the kid getting high for the first time, instead of taking his questions seriously, which, he felt, he didn’t have more serious questions than these.

“Did you like it?” his mom asked.

“It was OK, until that guy came out of the teepee on fire. I mean we laughed hella hard together, me and Seth

and Micah, we cracked up pretty hard for a while because it was so crazy. Then after seeing dad trying to calm him down and put him out, it stopped being funny and got hella sad. I had told them about being named Maheov and, like, the miracle baby thing, you being medically sterilized, we'd just started talking about it all before the guy came out of the teepee on fire, so then that was like, hanging over me, and they both said they were going to bed kind of suddenly, and I was high and couldn't sleep and felt really scared about a lot of things I can't remember anymore. I'm not trying to smoke weed again any time soon if that's what you're worried about."

Martin's mom and dad both laughed. And he laughed with them. But then it was just like that night when Micah and Seth went to bed. It didn't feel like there was anything to say, or like nothing more could be said about what they were talking about. The road got loud again. Then his parents turned their peyote music up too loud. And the years after that felt blurry to him, like that was the beginning of the end of something in him that he can't remember. They didn't bring him to meetings anymore after that. Then they divorced and his dad moved back to Oklahoma. It was pretty sudden but afterward and especially

looking back somehow felt inevitable. About a year after the divorce his mom had a meeting for him, for the family, and Martin ended up at that same house with Seth and Micah in the meeting with them. He was pretty scared to take the medicine. To do drugs like that. But he was with his mom and it felt like she really needed him to be doing that with her. Martin caught eyes with Micah and Seth when the effects of the medicine first started coming on. He almost lost it, almost laughed about the hippie on fire. Later in the night he heard his mom praying about their kind of people, about his dad back in Oklahoma; she was asking god to do what needed to be done to make things as they should be, which to Martin felt almost like saying nothing to god, like saying god do your thing.

But later that night, or early the next morning, he got it. Even about what that hippie could have been thinking, staring into that fire, everything god, and he thanked everything he felt god to be in that moment like he'd never said thank you to anyone. He got way down in his prayer, bent over on his knees. He thanked the journey through tubal ligation and twin sibling death to get to where he could be alive thinking about it all, thanking it all. Martin understood the wisdom that made it medicine, and how

stupid he'd probably always be after moving away from that singular moment of understanding and gratitude, which created something in him that he would chase the rest of his life, which wasn't a bad thing to chase, but it sure did end up hurting to hunger for.

## WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU?

Yael R. Shinar

A scary, hard thing—  
try to make sense of it—  
Like knitting a life preserver  
from wool  
under a wave—  
Who can do that?  
An anesthetic numbs the senses,  
slows the brain signals  
until there's no perceivable  
or conceivable sense—



This I offer  
 to displace pain, for a moment,  
 —suffering, too.  
 If making sense  
 of things  
 is how you deal,  
 What can I do  
 for you?

~

Let me, rather than torment you with significance, just  
 tell you the story.

~

She thought she had a dead baby.  
 The ob-gyns saw an ultrasound  
 showing “intrauterine products of conception, consist-  
 ent with ten weeks of growth,”  
 but without a “fetal pole,” a bright white stripe  
 on the screen, suggesting ongoing development, visible  
 before a heartbeat  
 flickers. The suggestion was absent.  
 After her baby died, she waited a while before coming  
 in for a D&C, dilation and curettage,  
 which sometimes terminates a pregnancy

and sometimes clears an already dead one.

It’s therapeutic.

She did come, eventually. She was interviewed and  
 examined by the nurses and ob-gyns, who consulted  
 Anesthesiology for procedural sedation. That was me,  
 Anesthesiology.

~

She sits sideways in a yellow recliner, shoulder buried in  
 the seat back, knees curled to her chest, feet flexed against  
 the armrest. A grown woman, not tall, and a little thinner  
 than anyone would want to be. The chair is too big for her,  
 it holds her like a cave holds a cub without its mama bear.

She stares at a man’s face on her phone screen. She  
 doesn’t look up when I enter; she doesn’t look up when  
 I sit. Their gazes knit some intimacy, preserved from my  
 sense in their silence. Her skin is the color of milky coffee,  
 her nails are filed and smooth. Her braids are bound in  
 a tight, low bun. She’s radiant, like a Dove beauty ad.

~

*When was the last time you had anything to eat?*

*I don’t know, she says.*

*Are you allergic to anything?*

*Why are you wasting my time with these questions,*

*I just want to get this done.*

She's still video chatting with the man.

*Who is that?*

*I want him on the phone. Why are you  
wasting my time?*

*We like to have privacy during some portions of the  
interview.*

She hangs up.

*OK, when was the last time you had something to eat?*

*Monday.*

*It's Thursday today.*

*You're not buying my lunch, are you?*

*I'm sorry.* I cough into my elbow to hide the tears in  
my eyes.

It was December 2019,

when a cough was less threatening  
than a white woman's pity.

*With sedation, you'll be asleep and you won't feel pain.*

*You'll be conscious, but you won't remember anything.*

*Most people choose sedation. The other option is  
a spinal.*

*We inject numbing medication through a small needle  
in your low back.*

*You'll be numb from the waist down, but you'll be  
awake,*

*and you'll remember everything. Most people want to  
be asleep.*

*I don't want any of that.*

*Why don't we sign the consent for sedation anyway, in  
case you change your mind?*

*Why are you wasting my time?* She signs.

~

Pain relief often means loss of agency for the person  
being relieved. Many analgesics blunt the cognition nec-  
essary for reliable decision making, safe operation of  
machinery. Spinal injections of numbing medications  
make it impossible to jump and to run.

~

She walks back to the OR with an IV in her wrist, a bag  
of crystalloid fluid in her hand, connecting tubing slack  
at her side.

At the OR door she stops and bends her head to the  
nurse,

who covers her hair in a polypropylene blue bouffant  
and swings open the door.

She sits on the table,

lies back on the table,  
like a blanket unfurling inside a wave.

I guide her head to a pillow, center her shoulders and hips on the table. I hang the fluid on a pole. I Velcro a blood pressure cuff around her bicep. I wrap a sticker around her nail bed to monitor oxygen in her blood. I stick EKG stickers to her chest and snap the EKG wires in place, laying them around her head, framing her face, like a disposable halo. My vials are spiked and locked, my syringes labeled and capped. No anesthesia, no analgesia, no friend in sight.

The ob-gyns position her legs like fine fibers through a great loom.

~

*How are you?*

*I'm fine.*

They begin. She speaks.

*There's something in my hole!*

*A speculum, I say.*

*There's something in my hole!*

*Do you want pain medication?*

*No!*

*Ow! What is that pressure in my hole?!*

*A speculum and forceps. Do you want to hold my hand?*

She squeezes my gloved hand.

*Ow!*

I remove my blue nitrile gloves and hold her bare hand in my bare hand.

Her grip softens, like I've been a guardrail transformed into a friend.

The more it hurts, the more she talks.

~

She says,

*Will I be able to eat after this?*

*Do you order from the cafeteria directly to your room?*

*Can my friend come into my room after?*

*Will I be able to hold my baby?*

I see blank stares from the ob-gyns.

They look to the nurse.

*I can do that,* the nurse says.

I say,

*Yes,*

*you will be able to hold your baby.*

*Ow! There's something in my hole!*

*Is that why you want to be awake, to make sure you get a chance to hold your baby?*

Yes.

*If I can promise that you will get to hold your baby,  
would you want some pain medicine and some medicine  
to make you sleepy?*

Yes.

*I promise.*

*Put me to sleep.*

Propofol 150 micrograms per kilogram per minute.

~

In a *dilation and curettage*, ob-gyns dilate the cervix, scrape tissue from the uterus, suction it into a specimen cup through a woven filter in the center. Sometimes the tissue is sent to pathology for analysis, other times it goes to medical waste. Today the nurse scrapes it from the filter with a sterile spoon, transfers it into a simple sterile cup. Ten-week products of conception look like a handful of blood mixed with frayed cotton and fat. We have told her to expect this.

The nurse swaddles the plastic cup in a baby blanket and tucks it under our sleeping patient's arm. I turn off sedation.

~

*Where's my baby?*

*In your arms, I say.*

She closes her eyes,  
and we wheel her to recovery.

~

Her friend is there. He looks up from the menu, nods to me, turns to her. She is sleeping. He watches her sleep, holds her bare hand in his bare hand, says nothing.

~

What is the difference, while the heart beats, between sadness and injury?

Once the heart stops, there is this difference

Sadness pulses

and we have stillness

How we wish for sadness—

How we wish to hold

a baby

and that hope is stronger

than pain

Pain

is sometimes

so strong,

you take a risk,

rely on others—

God they better come through  
God they better come through  
God they better come through

## PANDEMIC

The abortionist from the coast  
flew inland once a week  
to offer care  
where no one else  
cared.  
When the pandemic hit, she  
cut maternity leave short and drove  
8 hours each way  
with the nursling.  
Lives, she said,  
are at stake.

*Details regarding time, place, medical care, and patient characteristics have been changed to protect patient privacy.*

# JOURNAL OF MY BIRTH

RACHEL ELIZA GRIFFITHS

I

I HAVE THE RIGHT to make all potential and impossible images of myself.

In spite of this truth, there are voices beneath my skin that say otherwise.

2

*Journal of My Birth* confronts ubiquitous voices that silently assert privilege against women: through law, by negligence and dismissal. How a woman's body is policed

with the agendas of everyone but the woman herself. And, of course, what happens when a woman explicitly, by implication, accepts that agenda.

The ways through which language and image collaborate on these ideas is ever complicated by the politics of—and, perhaps, shame in—the reader.

3

To feel unsafe in a photograph reveals a self-policing that is dangerous.

4

As a Black Queer survivor, and fluent as both a writer and a visual artist, I am wrecked by the process of these photographs.

I am challenging established languages and institutional narratives, mythologies, whether in text or imagery, that make me feel that these portraits—and thus, my body—are *wrong*.

I am reminded of the physicality of each portrait and that it was never “easy” for me to spread, to open my body.

*Show and Tell Them Nothing*, a voice said.

5

During college, I remember escorting several friends to clinics to have abortions. I remember getting money out of my checking account. I remember that sometimes a friend accepted the money but then never spoke to me again. I remember how a friend tried to continue our friendship after the visit to the clinic but confessed that the sight of me reminded her of what she had done. None of those girls are my friends now, yet they remain vivid to me. I think of them and hope they are safe and living lives they have chosen for themselves.

I remember how those times felt for us—forbidden and fatal.

No matter how much solidarity I offered, things were complicated for each of us. Womanhood was not a monolithic landscape. Our choices lived in a nuanced language that did not speak to, or for, us equally. In spite of our shared experiences, we also confronted issues that often tangled strands of desire and violence. There was power and danger in speaking out or saying nothing.

I was aware of the intricate system that engulfed us before birth. We were overpowered psychologically, physically, and socially by America's brute lineage of shame, racism, classism, and economic control. I was too young and powerless to articulate how fully our bodies were enslaved to ideologies that robbed our right to freedom.

This control of our bodies extended to laws created by men and even—as those men claimed—by God.

## 6

Before my mother gave birth to me, she was pregnant with a girl she would have named Ashley. In Washington, DC, in the 1970s, my mother's Black body was irrelevant to nearly everyone.

When my mother told her white, male doctor, over and over, that something was wrong, he refused to listen and forced her to carry the child. My mother would go on to birth a dead infant. Her grief over the loss of this baby girl never healed. Her suspicions against medical doctors—and their dismissal of her existence—would prove true time and time again. She spoke bitterly to me about the

history of modern-day eugenics and its relationship to Black women.

When I was old enough to understand medical prejudice against Black women's bodies, I watched doctors and nurses handle my mother's body roughly in my presence, or worse, refuse to touch or treat her.

Years later, after my mother's death, my own health exploded, in part due to depression, grief, trauma, and my struggle to gain some kind of footing in a world that discouraged my complex identity.

This struggle also happened in the examining room of my gynecologist. One rainy afternoon as I waited to have a sonogram, I looked over at the screen and noticed that my name was misspelled and my birth date wrong.

According to the "facts" of my own medical records, I was an entirely different woman.

When my doctor, a youngish white woman, came to examine me, I asked her whether there was anything I could do—without endangering my body—to keep the option of pregnancy. She snorted involuntarily and tried to apologize as she giggled. Staring at her, my legs open, I asked her why she thought my question was funny.

To excuse her laughter, she asked me if I was still alone



(I had recently divorced). She glanced at my file, then asked if I was also still an artist. As she indicated that I could close my legs and sit up, the paper crinkled loudly beneath me.

## 7

In 2015, I created one of the first images of *Journal of My Birth* during a stay at a well-known colony for artists and writers in upstate New York. The residency coincided with the one-year anniversary of my mother's death.

The feeling of my motherlessness haunted my language, and I turned, for strength and counsel, to a lineage of women artists, living and dead, some of whom were non-mothers, some of whom refused the binary argument that choosing to have children threatened the integrity of art making.

Meanwhile, lucid dreams invaded my body. My body was altered, literally, and I experienced intense sensitivity to everything, including my past. I found myself returning to the mental state of the much younger girl I had been when I survived multiple sexual assaults.

During different sessions of the project, I realized that

the voice that afflicted me the most was the voice of my mother, who would have hated these photographs. She would have called them out immediately as nasty or worse: *weird white girl shit*.

Though I was alone while I made the self-portraits, there was always an invisible theater, an unseen jury. It took time for me to confront the voices of shame that insisted I had no right to expose myself, to be vulnerable, to question the highly complex relationships between women, labor, and reproduction.

What became clear was my inherent self-love and my defiance. My refusal to accept fear or to back down from seeing a new aspect of myself. The freedom we collectively deserve as women and creators. Our existence—as creative and maternal forces—is never illegitimate, is never wrong or powerless, and is certainly something we ourselves *must* own and defend.

## 8

I hope that I have left enough space in *Journal of My Birth* for myself—as artist—and for you—as audience—to breathe. I have faith that we will both look and be seen.

Thus, it is possible for us to reject and to resist any effort—by our government or ourselves—to take away our right to love our bodies and to create whatever forms of life we choose to live.

*Journal of My Birth* offers an elemental frame and perspective of who I am becoming as much as how I came to be. These self-portraits I have created for myself, of my body, live in me like new life. \*



\* To find photos online, visit [URL TK](#)













EPISTOLARY

## IT BEGAN IN ANOTHER LAND

BY HANNAH LILLITH ASSADI AND SHELLY ORIA

MAY 2020

MY DEAR HANNAH,

I just returned from my daily walk—which I took earlier than usual, since the heavy rains have rendered all breaks between pours opportunities to be seized—and midwalk, the gentle drizzle grew stronger, and before I knew it, I was soaked, and my mask was soaked too. My mask is a thin beanie hat that I rescued from the back of my closet where it shared box space with too-tight jeans and skirts, items intended for Goodwill. I connect the beanie to my face



with rubber bands each time, giving it a new life I doubt it expected. I did order a pretty one online—a fancy mask, I almost wrote—but it's not yet arrived. For now the gray little hat is a loyal friend, and the time we spend together in the outside world—air, Hannah! I've never had such strong feelings about air!—is in many ways the highlight of my day in this quarantined time.

Remember I wrote to you from my upstate retreat in early March, trying to finalize our wine date? And you had to say you weren't going to socialize for a while now? Of course you weren't. Of course we weren't. But I did not yet understand. And in that exchange you told me you were pregnant! So I'm writing, perhaps it's obvious, because I want you to write back.

My days are filled with stories of abortion. Poems about the often-hushed trials of motherhood, plays about the complexities of childfreeness, essays about the fight for reproductive freedom in 2020 America land in my inbox, which then marks them with a star. I try to engage with a few stars every day. To compile this type of anthology, I learned with *Indelible*, one must submerge in pain, learn to breathe in its waters. You hope to emerge with some insight. To be honest, some days you hope simply

to emerge. And as I work on this book, you've been on my mind so often since you shared your news. What on planet Earth has it been like to grow a human inside you in this time of a global plague? I cannot imagine. I want to hear about your experience, and not the way I might in a text message, but the way we wrote to each other for two years not that long ago, a book's worth of letters, which is to say the way we write to each other when we take the time and care.

This memory has been persistent: at the little wine bar on Smith Street, after long hours of writing at the café across the street, we drank and drank because the lovely Frenchman who owns the place kept pouring, and the Gouda wasn't absorbing the liquid fast enough, and so we were pretty buzzed when you asked if I'd made a choice to not be a mother. I think I just nodded; language is so often inadequate. I think I stared at the whiskey bottles on the shelf behind the bar, their distorted reflection in that cloudy mirror. Was there one moment, you asked, when you ... knew?

The way I remember that night: I never answered your question. We talked about the ambiguousness you felt at the idea of motherhood, at the notion of bringing

life into our troubled world. Now I want to ask you the same question: Was there a moment in which your uncertainty lifted? A moment when you knew you wanted to be a mother? But this letter is also my way of responding to that question, or at least searching for a response.

About four years ago, back home in Tel Aviv for the summer, I went to a party and ran into someone I disliked in high school. Like so many other Israeli women, she was a mother of three. Like most Israelis, when she encountered adults who weren't parents, she could only understand their existence through the frame of problem or tragedy. And so in her way, when she asked when I was planning to have kids—unaware of the bluntness of her question, blind to her own aggression in a way that sadly, tragically, defines my homeland—she was practicing kindness. She offered a view of me as a woman who's decided to wait until the last biologically possible moment to become a mother: a woman making a peculiar, risky, or ill-advised choice but not a tragic figure. And when she asked me this question, I smiled and said: Never. We all have teenagers hiding inside us, don't we, waiting for the right combination to unlock their spite, their taste for shock. At least I do. In that crowded apartment in the south of Tel Aviv, I

didn't mean what I said; I might as well have slapped her or flashed her; the moment was nothing more than an effort to stun and express rage. But in the days that followed, my body felt light. And so when I was asked again—as you well know, I come from a culture that reveres procreation and disregards boundaries, so the question is common—I again said, Never. I still thought I was lying.

The answer to your question may be that there was never one moment in which I chose childfreeness but rather a near-infinite assembly of moments in which I learned time and again what I'd known for many years.

Another such moment—now dreamlike in texture, shrouded in psyche-fog—happened months after my ex-husband and I moved to New York. A condom broke. Naively, we went to the Rite Aid at the end of our block in Hell's Kitchen. This was 2003, and I remember my shock when I learned that in America I couldn't buy a morning-after pill over the counter. We had no health insurance. When my period was late—my period had never been late—I called my Israeli gynecologist back home as if he could perform an abortion over the phone, or confirm that I needed one. A missing piece in my memory: I don't remember buying or taking a pregnancy test. What



I remember is that my husband did some research and told me about an organization called Planned Parenthood. I remember thinking it was a funny name, imagining large conference rooms where people gathered to debate, perhaps drawing graphs or making vision boards, planning their parenthood. And I remember heading to a clinic in Chelsea with my husband, and that it was so cold that day; I remember what it felt like to live in a body that grew up in Middle East weather and had not yet adjusted to East Coast winters. The line was long—we could see it from a distance, snaking around part of the block—and we looked at each other in terror; my husband was even more sensitive to the sting of Manhattan's cold winds. I'm almost positive that in the end we waited less than five minutes, but I'm not sure why or how. And I'm almost positive the waiting room walls were green and that my husband made a joke about it, because waiting rooms in Tel Aviv were never green. Everything was new back then. I don't think I laughed.

The next piece in this memory is a nurse telling me my period was likely late because of my anxiety over the broken condom; I was not pregnant. Does it make sense, Hannah, that I found this out right away? It seems that

back in the early aughts, so little ever happened right away. (Lately—perhaps this is evident—I've been questioning the stories my memory tells me; most of us see ourselves as reliable narrators of our own past, but isn't that just a choice we make because the alternative is too scary?)

This memory, accurate or flawed, is another moment I think of when I consider my choice to be childfree: the nurse's soft voice, a pause in which I took in her words, and then something, maybe relief, moving through me fast, its very end the tip of a knife. It is a painful thing, learning that you don't want the thing you've been told your whole life defines womanhood, even humanity.

Here's one more: a few years ago I got a bad Pap smear and needed a colposcopy. Many years a New York resident at that point, I still felt so overwhelmed by the American healthcare system, which I found not only insanely expensive but also impossibly unnavigable; I decided to get the procedure done in Tel Aviv. My girlfriend at the time, facing childhood trauma that had resurfaced, was in bad shape, and we ended up talking on Skype the whole night before my appointment—her from our Bed-Stuy apartment, me whispering from a tiny room adjacent to my parents' bedroom. For long hours I tried and failed

to help her hold memories of violence and violation. When I arrived at my gynecologist's clinic early the next morning—the same doctor I called all those years ago and many times since, a man who'd been my gynecologist since I was a teenager—I was exhausted, and he seemed no less exhausted, and angry. I didn't know why he was angry, and I still don't, but as he inserted into me something that looked and pinched like tweezers and began to manipulate the tool inside me, as the pain worsened and I looked away, trying to leave my body, he told me this was my fault. I thought I'd misheard him at first, but the pain made speech impossible so I didn't ask or say anything, and he went on: this was my fault because years before I'd refused to take the HPV vaccine. Now I could be sick, and it could have been prevented. Did I think I knew better than him? Didn't I regret now that I discounted his advice? I finally managed a Stop talking please. He did. Minutes later I was sobbing in my mother's arms in the elevator. When she said, That painful, hah? I think I said, He yelled at me. I was a child again in that moment.

Writing to you now, I thought this memory came up since it's a gynecological intervention that felt emotionally unsafe, or perhaps because I retreated to a childlike

state in response. But in fact I think the emotional core of this memory, its connection to my childfreeness, is rooted in the night before. Part of me believes I took in my girlfriend's trauma in a way that I shouldn't have—a way that certainly didn't help her, and left me exposed. I do not mean to absolve my doctor's behavior or blame myself, but I know the energetic force field within which I walk this world, and I know it was missing that morning. It disappeared in my attempt to disappear my girlfriend's horrific pain. I do that sometimes in love, and not only in romantic love; I have done this multiple times with my sister, whom I helped raise. Which is to say, I see now that this story came up because it's an extreme example of what I always feared when I imagined motherhood: a loss of self both inevitable and dangerous.

There are so many other such moments I could tell you about, Hannah, each highlighting different aspects of my choice. Some involve other painful experiences, sure, but not all: I have memories of happiness and achievement and lightness that feel tied to the freedom I've decided not to forgo. It's this part of the answer that seems to attract the most vitriol, isn't it? If a woman decides to not become a mother, the very least she can do for society is apologize

for her decision and suffer as a result. So absurd, considering that, in the way we are currently living, our planet has about six billion people more than it can support.

I could say much more about childfreeness in the context of climate change, of course, but I won't: I know we share this concern for the future, but I also imagine it's the last thing pregnant you wants to contemplate. I will say that climate concerns don't make me self-righteous: I don't presume my choice in any way morally superior to anyone else's. We all know so little in the end. I want everyone to make the procreative choices they deem right, or the ones to which they feel drawn. And I want to live in a world that shows me the same generosity.

As I imagine you reading this letter, I want to say one more thing: I think this pandemic is our little planet's way of fighting for its life. This isn't a "silver lining" for me; it isn't an attempt to make meaning of the unfathomable suffering.... It's simply what I believe is happening, and it was one of my first thoughts when the virus began to spread. My attachment to this narrative isn't profound; this narrative, at its core, is the story of the future, of the next generation. While calamity can certainly arrive in our lifetime—and arguably already has—the question of its

timeline, its progression to the point of no return, is the one that would keep me up at night as a parent. And if the planet succeeds, even in just a tiny, tiny way, that could mean additional years of life, of quality life. I'm rooting for the earth, for the possibility of this catastrophe teaching us to live more sustainably, for new and renewed horizons.

LOVE,  
SHELLY

JUNE 2020

DEAR SHELLY,

It is almost painful now to recall that night at Big Tiny with you—any night in a bar with anyone for that matter—and despite however many glasses of wine we had had at that point, I do now vividly remember asking you about motherhood (a question to which at that point I had no answer myself). We didn't linger on it, as you've recalled, and I've since wanted to know what was happening beneath your eyes. It is a question I ask often lately of other women as I stare down the prospect of motherhood myself. Having read your letter, I am grateful to be privy to your years' long epiphany on the subject. But before I respond to your moving account of abstaining from it, I just want to pause for a second on this pandemic, on all that we have lost, on New York City bars for one: the beating heart of life here, their noise, their coziness, the way their windows would fog up in stormy weather. We took them for granted, didn't we? Now that natural New Yorkese—"Let's meet for a drink"—will never sound as simple.

It was all so terrifyingly quiet for months around here. During the peak of the virus's passage through the city,

I would stand before my bedroom shutters and watch the traffic lights cycle between red and yellow and green, a drama staged for only me. There were no cars, no passersby. On one night only, a stranger in a building across the street blasted Nina Simone until five or six in the morning. And in the middle of this concert, playing seemingly for no one, I began to wonder if I was only hallucinating this wild violation of sound. If I in fact desired it and manifested it. The city had otherwise been taken by ghosts. In front of that same building now, for the past few nights, rosary candles have been lit. I know many of my neighbors. I've lived on this block for seven years. But I don't know a single soul, living or dead, in that building.

Now as I write to you, mere weeks later, the city has recovered its capacity for making noise, and with a vengeance. That cemetery quiet that characterized the city's spring has unfolded into a summer of protest, police sirens, circling helicopters, and explosions of defiant fireworks, which surround our building in a soundtrack reminiscent of both war and celebration. All of this quiet, and then all of this uproar, have been somewhat more difficult to abide in the absence of my usual coping mechanisms—cigarettes and wine. Every night I go to sleep, praying for

my baby girl's safe arrival in the face of all the tumult that has characterized her journey in. I speak to her already as someone in the room with me. But is she? It feels, sometimes, as if she is no more real than a ghost. I can feel her crawling against my skin, learning the limits of the little planet she has lived in these last seven months, and yet I cannot see her.

The experts say that by now my daughter should be dreaming her own dreams, and I have to wonder what her brain makes of this mad world so far. The helicopters now are perched just overhead. If some tragic flaw were to befall their machinery, they would fall into my apartment, this one I love so much, this one I can't seem to bring myself to want to leave despite all that has befallen the city of late (the one abandoned daily by more and more friends). The one in which she was conjured into this world and in which, inshallah, she will be born. Through me, has she already seen all these fireworks exploding over our sleeping heads?

To answer your question directly, the truth is, I think I only really "knew" I wanted to be a mother very recently, and it is a knowledge that still does not come untethered from doubt. My first pregnancy, a year ago, ended in miscarriage. And it was only in its wake, tragically, that I knew

I had actually wanted that fetus to become a baby, that I wanted to be its mother.

So, the story begins there, in that small death I suffered on hands and knees on the floor of my parents' bathroom while visiting for a lamb dinner. My cousin was in New York to visit. I had not seen him since my grandmother's funeral two decades earlier. In fact, I had no memory of him. Instead, as we passed the rice, I kept recalling my tayta's face postmortem, there in that room where the women of the family washed her body in the Muslim fashion. She seemed to be smiling. Just after we had finished dinner, I excused myself to the bathroom. The blood began as a trickle.

It's interesting you remember the green of the Planned Parenthood waiting room, because ever since this particular night, the wallpaper in my parents' bathroom is pink in my memory. But I fact checked myself recently, and no, the wallpaper is white.

Anyhow, there was no pain, only blood, and then all there was, was pain. After not smoking for an entire month, I thought a cigarette might save my life. It wouldn't. Locked in that bathroom wailing, I asked for a book to read. My mother brought me *Salt Houses* by my friend, the Palestinian author, Hala Alyan. Later, it struck me

as not a little ironic that her gorgeous opening pages, in a book generally about our people's exile, were also about a character's fertility and frequent miscarriages. But there in that not pink, pink bathroom, reading was not possible; neither was thought. All I could hope for was that time might remain passing. And I confess, there was a sliver of a moment between the blood, the contractions, when I felt as you had in that Planned Parenthood waiting room—simple relief.

The next day, my midwife sent me to the closest (and cheapest) clinic she could find. It was in Bay Ridge, and the medical staff were all Arabs. The nurse—who performed the ultrasound and found no heartbeat where there had been one only a week earlier, who found nothing on the screen but blood—said simply: *You passed it, habibti*. The confirmation of my loss followed by that word, *habibti*, that word in my father's tongue, both broke my heart and saved it. We went to the ocean after we left that office. The rest of whoever that baby of mine might have been passed into the Atlantic. That night, I had a glass of wine and a cigarette. The wine tasted like rubbing alcohol. The cigarette

was just fine. Whatever relief I might have temporarily felt in having averted the prospect of motherhood morphed quickly and violently into a wave of unimaginable loss that no amount of substance could deaden.

The story began there but did not end there. In Paris, days after a countrywide strike was announced in December (an almost adorable premonition to the chaos that would envelop the rest of the world months later), there was a pregnancy test tucked in my purse, reading *enceinte*, which I had taken just before being caught in a subway tunnel in a car so packed it made the New York City rush hour (of old) look idyllic. People were screaming in French. The lights turned off. Finally, when the train began to move again, at the next station, there was a stampede of incoming passengers. I felt I might forget how to breathe, and if I forgot how to breathe, my fetus, all too soon, would meet the fate of my last.

In New York City, shortly thereafter, out of the precarious first trimester and into the safer second, our hometown,

our streets, became the world's epicenter of COVID-19. When I walked outside, it was with a debilitating fear of every passerby. There were times, too, beneath my mask, I felt I could not breathe, that I was not breathing correctly, that if I did not remove it for a gasp of oxygen, I would pass out, and if I did remove it for a gasp of oxygen, I would fall ill. And either way, my baby would never dream as I pray she dreams right now, quietly in her sea.

And then, at the onset of my third trimester, at the end of May, George Floyd was murdered by asphyxiation.

I could breathe the whole time.

Shelly, it's a fucked, fucked world. Logically, it makes more sense to me to not want motherhood than to want it. So why do we keep bringing life here? Why am I? I don't know if I can answer. Is it the mammal in me that unconsciously desires the line to go on? The Palestinian in me who feels the weight of the broken generations that preceded me, their lost home and shattered dreams? By the woman in me who lost her virginity in rape and wants my maidenhood over and done for good? Or is it the writer in me who just wants my story to live on? Children cannot

forget their parents. Children are cursed by their parents. And the curse goes on. We call this curse love, when perhaps it is only a story of survival.

How is it I can long for her to join me in this ugly, sad climate bereaved world of injustice and poverty and pillage and plague? In your letter, I hear you justifying your decision because, at least historically, it is the road less taken. And yet, lately I feel that I will need to spend all the days for the rest of my life justifying my decision to bring my baby, this innocent soul, *here*.

But maybe the real answer, for me, is also one just simply of wanting to know the outer reaches of love. The world is fucked, but this gentle sway in the breeze, the music even of this summer, helicopters and rage and sirens, the superficial breath beneath the fabric of a mask, a sudden sun shower are also laced with love. Perhaps the answer is that I can still see the beauty in us, and all around us, and I want it to go on and on and on.

As I get closer to motherhood, there is nothing I fear more than that which troubled you so in taking on your girlfriend's trauma, in loving too hard—self-effacement. But will I want to trade whatever disappears of me for what was? I won't know the answer, Shelly, until I'm on

the other side of this strangest and most sacrificial exercise in love.

Last night I dreamt I was engaged in a strange game, one I kept losing. Part of the reason I could not win was that I was so distracted by a rainbow in the near distance. I wonder if, though by now my daughter dreams her own dreams, she could also see that rainbow.

I think you are in Israel already. Lately, I've been thinking to myself, I just want to go home. But where is that? Is it waiting for me in a town in the hills overlooking the Galilee? The one my father left so long ago? Or is it here, beneath these helicopters, these fireworks, these turbulent, rainbow-colored dreams?

YOURS WITH LOVE,  
HANNAH

## NOT ANYONE'S HERO

BY KHADIJAH QUEEN

WHEN I FOUND OUT I was pregnant, I didn't want to tell anyone. Not my mother, not my sister, not any of my friends, and certainly not anyone at my command. I'd taken the test in my boyfriend's bathroom. He didn't come home from the club that night. He didn't answer any of my pages. At dawn I finally had to leave his place to report to the ship for duty, and, as I started my car, he pulled up to the house in the passenger side of a nondescript green coupe that wasn't his; some girl in a ratty weave was driving. He got out as I drove off, cursing him out while he



laughed and said she was his friend Mario's girl, that he'd been with Mario and them all night. I wasn't hearing it. He chased my car as I drove away, but he was still drunk enough and his pants were baggy enough to trip him up. I don't know how I got through the day—probably as quietly as I could and as snippily as I could get away with. What the hell was I going to do? I went to talk to the elder sailor in our berthing, a first-class we called by her rank—EN1, short for first-class engineman.

She could read the emotions on my face when I said I needed to talk. There was zero privacy on the ship; she had to kick Garcia out of her little office and shut the port-hole, not leave it open like we were supposed to. I sat down in the metal chair bolted to the deck in front of her desk, and she looked at me with those red-rimmed, hawklike eyes of hers that reminded me of my uncles in Michigan who drank from flasks all day. She was a mother figure to us, but her hardness was undeniable, too, with that deep smoker's voice that carried through the berthing when she was ordering us to make our racks. "So what you wanna do, Queen," she stated more than asked. I looked at my hands, at the bulkhead, the overhead—anywhere but directly at her face. "I know a place you can go to take care of it, if you

want to stay in," she said matter-of-factly. I knew I could do that if I wanted, that I probably should—if I wanted to stay in the Navy. "Nobody would have to know. You could do it on a Friday when you don't have duty and be back to work on Monday. I could go with you," she offered, unsmiling. I don't think EN1 ever smiled, even when she was laughing. "We would sure hate to see you go."

I was quiet for a while, weighing my options. I hated to disappoint her, and I wanted her to know that I was listening. I wished she (or anyone) would give me a reason to think I could continue on in the service, to have any hope that things would get better for me. As one of only thirty women on board a ship of 330 personnel, I endured daily harassment about what I wore, guys I dated, where I spent my time off-duty, the novels I read. I witnessed secondhand the comments made about other female sailors, gossip about who was sleeping with whom, who *would* sleep with whom. The guys liked to complain about women sailors, but they gossiped more than any gaggle of housewives I'd ever seen. And their behavior? Consistently heinous.

On our last underway port visit, one of the officers got in trouble for having sex onstage with a stripper. That

was the talk of the boat, and led my direct superiors to a confession about a “souvenir” they’d kept from the last overseas deployment—one of them reached into an old leather backpack that hung on a hook in Sonar 1 and pulled out a pink lace thong. Raucous laughter, salacious hooting, and a game of catch ensued. The guys tossed that stripper’s panties back and forth over our heads—the only three women in the division, who happened to be on duty—while we sat at our workstations. “You’re not gonna tell on us, are ya, Queen?” one of the southern STG2s drawled. I just rolled my eyes and tried to keep my head down, study the maintenance manuals, mind my own business. But all the bullshit and ignorance and attempts at control wore on me. When I wouldn’t date the Puerto Rican sonarman my supervisors had approved for me, they gave me the shit jobs, like tying the ship to the pier and tossing the tobacco slop bucket—I did not smoke or chew—and assigned me the worst middle-of-the-night watch every single underway. I felt harried, sleep deprived, and unsupported. “I hate to leave the ship too,” I said to EN1 quietly, “but I think I have to.”

Just the other day, the first-class in our division told me I’d have to wait for the next cycle of surface warfare

equals, which would set me back for promotion—no reason given. That felt like the last straw, and the more I thought about it, the more convinced I became there was no place in the Navy for me, despite EN1’s comment that they’d hate to lose me.

“You got anybody to help you, your mom or somebody?” She already knew who the father was—all the Black people on the boat did. There weren’t that many of us, so we kept few secrets. Resisting the urge to touch my fluttering belly, I looked her in the eye. “My mother.”

I took a deep breath, pondering abortion. “I can’t kill it, EN1,” I said softly. That was the truth too—more than I wanted to admit. I could feel this growing life and held on to it like it would save me.

EN1 looked at me for what felt like a long time. She let out a weary sigh. “Well,” she said, rising from her chair, “good luck. I can’t say I’m not surprised, and I can’t say I’m not disappointed. I’ll do my best to keep you off the hard jobs in the meantime.”

I thanked her and went about my day. I still didn’t know what to tell my boyfriend. I didn’t want anything to do with him anymore. Could I raise a child on my own? I had no idea. I felt like I didn’t know anything, like

I was slipping away. I left the ship that night after working hours, threw a few things into my duffel bag, put on my civvies, and drove around base until I couldn't stand the motion. I drove until I reached the Atlantic, as close as I could get without driving into it; the reflected lights from the city shimmered in waves that failed to lull me, so I started to count them. I kept the car running, thinking that maybe I actually *could* drive into it, gun the gas until the pier disappeared under the wheels and gravity made descent fast, inevitable. I could disappear into the black, and no one would know. Except, right at that moment, someone on watch pulled up, shining their lights into my Ford Escort.

"Hey, how's it going?" the guard asked, feigning nonchalance. I can't remember if he stood next to my window with a flashlight or if his vehicle's headlights formed the harsh, bright circles invading the darkness.

I kept quiet. I think I managed to lift one corner of my lips in acknowledgment, but all of my effort was focused on not crying, on counting those infinite waves, each moonlit curve racing toward the shoreline with the night breeze.

"You're not thinking of going out there, are you?" he asked gently, with a smile. I still couldn't speak. He asked

me what my command was. I managed to name a carrier on the opposite end of the pier, far away from where my actual ship was moored. He asked for my ID, but I shook my head. His mouth set in a straight line, but he didn't get belligerent. His voice was gentle, his manner oddly comforting for a man in camos armed with a 9mm.

"Stay right there, OK?"

I nodded. "I'm all right," I managed. As soon as he got back into his car to call for assistance and closed the door, I panicked. If he saw my license plate, he would be able to find my name and figure out my real command, then tell them I was a suicide risk, and I'd be *fucked*. Panic gave me some energy. Shaking, I backed away from the pier and raced toward the gate leading off base. This was before security got ridiculous—before the war started. I got out of there without any trouble and found the nearest motel. I paid for a night with my last forty dollars, took my mostly empty duffel into the room, and stripped down to my T-shirt and skivvies. I drank water and ate Cheez-Its and watched TV and wept. Then something funny and classic came on—*The Golden Girls* or *Good Times*, I think—and I started laughing so loudly that my motel room wall got a few pounds from next door. I turned it down from cackle

to giggle, still munching stale snacks. I didn't know what else to do; I didn't know what I *wanted* to do. But I knew I needed to ask for leave, so I could figure things out. I had something like three weeks on the books, but I wouldn't get that. No one got more than a week unless somebody was dead or dying. Instead, I asked for three days. We weren't going underway, and it wasn't that busy.

My supervisors gave me a hard fucking time, of course. They wanted to know why I wanted leave, where I planned to go, tried to make me justify the trip by telling them my personal business. But I told them to mind their own; I knew the official rules said no specifics were required, so I used the language of those rules in my replies. I evaded their prying, and finally the leave got approved late in the week. I drove north, all the way from Virginia to Michigan in one day, to see my mother.

When I got there, I did what I usually did on leave: slept for twelve hours after the grace of eating my mom's food. She'd made all my favorites: richly seasoned baked chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, greens, cornbread, fresh lemonade with lemons she'd squeezed by hand on that old plastic juicer. The next morning, Mom woke me before dawn and sat on my bed in her housecoat and

headscarf, the smell of turkey bacon wafting in from the kitchen turning my stomach a little.

"I had a dream," she said. "You pregnant, ain't you." A statement, just like EN1. I nodded, my face buried in the pillow, trying not to burst into tears. I could feel my body expanding. I felt out of control. I sat up, ran my hands through my super-short curls, and let out an impatient breath, willing myself to get it together.

"You gon' need some help, girl," my mom said. I nodded.

"You would have to come to Virginia," I said.

"All right," she said, without even a hint of pause. And that was that. I drove back to base the next day, eleven hours straight on the open road to think and scream and cry and laugh, to sip vanilla shakes from Rally's, to listen to mixtapes—rapping and singing along with Method Man and Redman and Mary J. Blige—and to wonder what the fuck I was going to do with a baby.

The day after I made the decision to continue my pregnancy, my supervisor—let's call him STG2, for second-class sonar technician—pulled me from watch. The

way he did it was secretive; I thought I was in trouble again or that he'd found out somehow. But as we leaned against the bulkhead in the passageway, he said I was finally going to get off of the torpedo magazine station and join *his* workstation group, the coveted Sonar 1.

Ha! Decent working hours and actually getting to do what we trained for in A school. He also said that he would support me in going to officer school, if I still wanted to go. After a shocked silence, I laughed bitterly in an attempt not to cry, my heart racing. I took a few breaths, then, inexplicably, laughed again. I laughed so hard, holding my stomach, that he had to ask me what was wrong. All these months, I thought, I'd been hazed and treated like trash. Was all the shit I went through some twisted kind of test? I looked at him again and howled until I lost my breath. What a waste of time and energy. I felt like I'd escaped some kind of funhouse made of inverted perceptions and fake obstacles. In hindsight, it could also just be that Navy life didn't suit me, and the fates decided to take one more dig before I left. The first classes also could've recognized that I'd checked out and were making a last-ditch effort to pull me back on board. But, at the time, it felt like cruel irony—that I'd gotten in my own way by getting pregnant.

In the split second between the end of my laughter and the start of my confession—and it did feel like a confession, like I had done something wrong—I considered what it might be like to take the route offered to me by STG2. I saw EN1's face, remembered her voice offering advice. She'd had a kid when she was younger, too, and didn't think she'd make more than chief because of it, if that. She believed it had set her back on the timeline and in the eyes of the men in charge of promotion. Did I want a career in the military? Or did I want to take my chances on education and motherhood?

Every now and then I think about how quickly my world shifted in that split second. I think about the strength of my desire to live, to nurture life—mine and the one growing inside me. What kind of life I wanted for myself. I didn't want to kill anything, and I didn't want to die young. If that makes me a coward, so be it. In that moment, though, it took courage to look STG2 in the eye and say I was pregnant, that I was keeping the baby. I wanted to join the other two pregnant women leaving the ship. I told him the father was a civilian and that I was engaged; I wanted them to leave me the hell alone, so I couldn't name the real father.

I would need all the tenacity I had to spend the two

months it took to process me over to shore duty and endure the hostility, scorn, bullying, and gleeful disappointment of my shipboard colleagues. I performed my daily work routines and didn't kill myself or anybody else. I ate well and did my job; I refused harmful assignments; I kept up with my watch duties and cleaning rotation. I wore the untucked shirt of the pregnancy uniform they forced me to wear even when I didn't show, but I kept the same walk, my head up and stride tight, and refused to wear the shame they heaped on me. I'd recognized the double standard early on. I'd noticed the men being encouraged to fuck and flirt and the women being locked down by doubt and harm and constant harassment. I didn't know until later, though—until October 12, 2000, when the ship was bombed in Yemen—that my decision saved my life.

The rules say that women serving on board ships can stay until their twentieth week. I don't remember exactly how far along I was, but I found out about my pregnancy and was off the ship before I even started to show. I remember one woman from the *Cole*, a third-class petty officer I ran into at chow during a mess cranking break, long before I left. I tried to make small talk, but she didn't like me either, and barely maintained a sense of politeness.

She was the other beautiful one aboard ship, light-skinned and large-breasted with “good hair,” as the men liked to describe her, and they also liked to compare us. During that lunch I learned she'd had an infant two weeks before she'd gotten to the *Cole*. She petitioned for longer leave, since the rules say a woman can extend her PRD—projected rotation date—if she takes the full year of leave from deployment postpartum, but was refused, and she couldn't afford not to deploy. She was a boatswain's mate, and they live at sea. Not to mention the needs of the Navy and all. The rules say neither retention nor separation are guarantees once you fall pregnant; the rules say the needs of the Navy determine your fate. Perhaps *fate* is too strong a word. The needs of the Navy determine whether or not you continue in service, whether or not your request to stay on or to leave is granted.

Stay or leave. It does indeed feel like a very fated choice in the moment, even if you *are* sure about your decision, and I certainly don't want to diminish the importance or intensity of that choice-making. But I wish I could've told myself then that life would eventually be so much more than that choice, or the Navy's decision. I wish I could tell myself: the odds against me, and other servicewomen,

existed in fact, not in any paranoid fantasy stoked by gaslighting. I did tell myself, over and over, not to let the disdain of others define me. That defiance helped me and my child manage to survive. Not without scars, pain, hardship—and perhaps our lives as a result are not noteworthy in any public sense, because our difficulties were so private, even when externally imposed. We do have our lives, however. Perhaps it is selfish to believe they are worth having, whether the Navy believes that or not.

The BM3 looked at me in the eye that day, as my time on the ship drew to a close, her face screwed up with disgust. “I left my son when he was two weeks old,” she said. “He’s with my mother back home. Good luck with *your* decision.”

A couple of months after I left the ship, about six months into the pregnancy, my son’s father drove us to New York. I’d had morning sickness all day for most of those first two trimesters. He drove fast, did not slow into turns, did not care when I told him he was making me sick. I was trapped in speed, the freeway’s bumps and curves, my body forcibly whipped along with the machine as my insides resisted. I craved gentleness, needed soothing, but received only more aggression. Did he turn the music

up, smile as I kept one arm on the tan leather dash of his souped-up green Nissan, the other arm gripping the door, desperate for stasis? Yes, and the music vibrated, deep bass—reggae always—his window down to add freeway noise to the mix. I held it all in my body. Nausea and discomfort accumulated in my muscles. He didn’t stop until we arrived at our destination, ignoring my shock and distress. Still—as I discovered that day, and again two years later when I finally left him—the protective impulse I felt for my child remained fiercely intact. When doubt, insecurity, or shame interfered, I returned to and relied on that fierce protectiveness to sustain us.

When I got out of the Navy, when people asked if I was married, I learned to say yes, I had been married and divorced, and I didn’t give a year for my discharge. I learned to evade because people would do calculations and see that I got pregnant while on the ship, and that led to a slew of other personal questions, investigative probing that led to shit I didn’t want to talk about. Not only that, they would have personal information that was none of their business, so I just started saying I was in for five years during the ’90s and left it at that.

I learned especially never to reveal to fellow veterans

that I'd had a child on active duty, because they were the worst, but even strangers curled their lips and made *hmph* sounds: couldn't help themselves. People think they know something about you with that revelation. They make nasty judgments that haven't a damn thing to do with who you are. Even though I always fought back, it still made me judge myself for a long time, made me feel disappointed that I didn't "hold out," whatever the fuck that meant, that I didn't choose a military career—or, perhaps, my country?—over my own flesh and blood. A simple question—Are/Were you married?—led to a cascade of revelation that left me feeling more like Hester Prynne than a veteran, however undistinguished my service. While I knew I did the best I could, the looks on people's faces—pity, disdain, dismissal—filled me alternately with grief and rage, feelings I did not have time for. I had a kid to raise and a degree to finish, and I felt determined that nobody's prejudices would stop me.

I didn't really start telling people that I'd had a child on active duty until he was nearly grown. I am not ashamed of myself as a solo parent, nor am I ashamed of my son—think of it! A child as shame? Ridiculous—and I am not ashamed that I raised him on my own. In fact, I am proud

that I kept him fed, housed, nurtured, alive, and thriving creatively all this time. I kept myself alive, too, and I did not need a man to do that. I learned to draw strength from the very thing I was taught by social response that I should hide—my own self, as a woman, a working mother. Now that my son is grown, I know how much fortitude it took to accomplish what I have in this life so far. I am definitely scarred, but not anywhere close to broken. My home, likewise, is not broken, either—never was. It is whole. We are a family.



## THE BABIES

BY KRISTEN ARNETT

SHAUNA HID THE PREGNANCY test in a jar of peanut butter. She'd thought all afternoon about the perfect place to stash it and had already considered and rejected other likely locations: taped inside a pizza box (pepperoni spelling out BABY in the oily cheese), stuffed into the base of a succulent they'd picked up a few weeks ago at the farmer's market. She had even briefly contemplated shoving it inside Julie's pillowcase before deciding she probably shouldn't put something she'd peed on where her wife rested her face each night.

And then she'd seen the jar of Jif in the pantry.

It was an inspired choice. Julie loved scarfing down a piece of peanut butter toast when she came home from work; she ate it after stopping at the gym most days, miles on the treadmill even though they had one in their own house, sitting dusty in the back bedroom. And Shauna would say, *Don't eat that, I'm making dinner*, and Julie would reply, *I'll still be hungry, it's an appetizer*, and then they'd both sigh but smile, too, because it was comfortable and nice to truly understand another person.

She knew it was a little gross to put pee inside food, but the idea felt inspired, so she wrapped the pregnancy test in a plastic baggie before shoving it inside the jar. Then she'd set it back inside the cabinet and poured herself a glass of Gatorade, watching the hands of the clock move, slowly, slowly, slower; the hands crept along, waiting for her wife to come home.

They had been trying to conceive for almost three years. They'd tried things the traditional way (well, the "traditional way" when it came to lesbians) and turkey basted Shauna with their good friend Roger's sperm. When that hadn't worked, they began fertility treatments. Julie was eight years older than Shauna, so it was the natural choice

to have Shauna carry the baby. Shauna hadn't been sure how she felt about adding a kid to the mix, but she loved her wife, and she thought it would probably all work out just fine.

She sipped her Gatorade and grimaced. Shauna hated sports drinks and really wanted a Diet Coke, but they'd cut out caffeine six months earlier after the doctor said maybe it was preventing her from getting pregnant. Julie had done her part; the egg retrieval, which hadn't been exactly a cakewalk, and Shauna knew she needed to kick it into high gear. So, no more coffee. No ibuprofen. No alcohol. And, worst of all, no Diet Coke, which Shauna loved, a drink she'd been obsessed with since middle school.

"You're disgusting," Shauna told the blue liquid, but she chugged it anyway because she was thirsty and babies needed hydration. Dandelion, their overweight tabby, jumped up on the counter and begged for scratches while she choked it down. Sometimes it felt like she was trying to grow a plant in her belly. Though it wasn't even that easy to keep a plant alive, Shauna knew. So far, every succulent they'd brought home had turned yellow and gooey. *You're smothering them*, Julie told her, over and over again, but Shauna just wanted to make sure they got the proper amount of care.

Julie got home an hour later, and Shauna could not figure out what to do with her hands. They were flapping around like restless birds. She was bad at lying. Julie always knew when she was hiding something. She put a pot of water on the stove and acted like she was trying to cook spaghetti. How big is the baby at this moment, she wondered. Bigger than a pencil eraser? A lima bean? Her wife threw her gym bag onto the counter, and Shauna picked it up and took out the sweaty socks and shorts and sports bra and threw them into the hamper in the laundry room.

“Let’s go out to eat, I’m starving,” Julie said. She ran her hands through her short, dark hair. Her cheeks were all pink from the heat. Her wife had never looked better than she did in that three-second span, flicking up her hair until she looked like a goofy little porcupine. That is the mother of my child, Shauna thought. The parent of our kid. We’re going to have a baby with spiky porcupine hair. A Julie-Shauna baby.

“Why don’t you have a quick snack,” Shauna replied.

Julie got out the peanut butter and slapped a loaf of bread on the counter. She was aggravated, Shauna could tell, but her wife wouldn’t ever say anything about it. She pushed conflict down until it rested like an ulcer in her

guts. Her wife was a marketing manager for a chain of local coffee shops. She spent most of her time being “on” for her clients and for her coworkers. When she got home, she deflated, got soft or testy, depending on the day and her mood, and most of the time needed at least an hour before she could hold a conversation. Shauna’s father had been that way too. It had been especially bad when her mother had been going through her miscarriages. There had been multiple. Stop thinking about that, this is a happy day, she reminded herself.

Julie was hunting around for something to spread the peanut butter. Shauna handed her a butter knife and a small plate. “Just a paper towel,” Julie said, and then she unscrewed the lid to the jar and saw the pregnancy test.

When she pulled it free, it made a wild suction sound, obscene like flatulence, and they both laughed hysterically. “Oh my god,” Julie said. They screamed, and then they hugged. Julie put her hands on Shauna’s belly, as if she could maybe feel something in there, and they laughed again because there was peanut butter on everything, peanut butter on their hands and clothes, peanut butter on the counter, peanut butter all over the pregnancy test. Dandelion began licking peanut butter off of the counter

top. The peanut butter dotted above her lip and gave her a mustache, which made them laugh even harder.

They washed their hands, changed, and went out for a celebratory dinner. It was a beautiful night, an inky sky full of bright stars, and Shauna felt full with love. The wind whipped through the palm trees outside their house, and on the drive over to the restaurant, Shauna held her wife's hand and let the other one flip through the air outside the car window.

"I think, if it's a boy, we should name them Cameron," Julie said.

"If it's a girl, we should name them Cameron," Shauna replied, and then they both smiled at how easy it was to please each other. At the restaurant they shared two plates—chicken parm for Julie and the scallops for Shauna—and the bread rolls were hot, and they both kept looking at Shauna's belly like it held all the answers to every mystery in the universe.

Shauna felt a bubble pop in her stomach. Too much food, she thought, and then: This is what it will be like when I'm finally able to feel the baby. She grabbed one of her wife's hands. Wiped a bit of sauce from Julie's chin with the other. Our baby, she amended in her head.

They set up appointments with the obstetrician and went to all of them together. Three months in, and they'd done all the things they were supposed to do: taking the prenatal vitamins, drinking plenty of water, keeping up routine exercise with nightly walks around the neighborhood. They joined Facebook mommy groups that offered up time-saving tips and tricks and looked up the best crib to buy, found the top-rated strollers. They sat down with both sets of parents and told them. Everyone was excited. Thrilled. Something to look forward to: the first little one in either of their families since the cousins had moved into their cranky teen years. Shauna's mom bought a tiny floral swimsuit that came with a pink hula skirt. "We don't know it's a girl," Shauna said, but her mother said it didn't matter, she was just so excited that she couldn't help herself. She had to buy it.

"It's so important to enjoy these things," her mother said, and she looked so unbearably sad that Shauna hugged her and changed the subject. She knew her mother had struggled with fertility issues. It wasn't something they had to discuss.

Who cares about a hula skirt anyway, she thought. A boy baby could wear it just as easily as a girl.

Shauna looked at herself naked every day and marveled at the changes. The swollen breasts, full of blue veins, milky light under the skin. Nipples darkened. Her hair grew long—from the vitamins and all the water—but also from the baby. It didn't feel like feeding another life; it was sharing an energy source. She felt charged up, a living battery pack placed inside her. It was like a grow light had been aimed at her; she was the plant: flourishing, thriving, blooming.

Julie told her she looked beautiful, and for once, she actually believed it. They had sex morning and night, sometimes even in the afternoons, if her wife could catch a long enough lunch break. They hadn't had so much sex since before they were married.

I am in love, and I am alive, Shauna thought, her wife's tongue flicking warm between her legs, her skin smooth and on fire, the whole of her burning from the inside out.

Julie painted the baby's room. Shauna worried about the fumes, so she watched from the backyard while her wife coated the wall in the palest green. "Green is soothing," Julie said, and they wanted the baby to be soothed. Shauna could have told her that if a baby didn't want to

be soothed it wouldn't matter—that if a baby wanted to cry, it would cry all it wanted, paint color be damned—but her wife was determined to do everything exactly right. Shauna had grown up around babies: a younger sister and a bunch of cousins dumped at her parents' house on the weekends, but Julie had been an only child. Julie's parents hadn't wanted to have a bunch of kids. Not like her mother, who'd envisioned a houseful of them, and tried and tried and failed until she'd finally had her hysterectomy. Six or seven, at least, she always said, but there had only been Shauna and her sister.

They assembled the crib: white. Put together the mobile: tiny blue elephants. Read books about pregnancy, about the first year of life postpartum, about what to do with a whiny toddler, about how to talk to your kids about gun violence and strangers and the mechanics of sex.

"What if we can't explain how to use a urinal?" Julie asked. They were lying in bed, each of them reading a copy of a different parenting book. There were stacks of them around the house. Shauna used to read entertainment magazines; now she read articles about the importance of making your own organic baby food.

"We'll be fine," Shauna said. "My little cousin didn't

even want to use the urinal, and he had a dad to show him. Let kids decide what they want.”

She thought it was cute that her wife would be so nervous about a child standing up to pee when they didn’t even have legs that could support them yet. Couldn’t walk or talk. Couldn’t even breathe or see or hear. Babies didn’t even have kneecaps, they’d learned; babies grow them later on. And when Shauna read that, she realized she knew absolutely nothing about the human body, aside from living inside one for thirty years. She’d had a nightmare afterward: a vision of a lifeless baby inside her, swirling around with no legs.

Julie set down her book and then turned off the lights. She placed a soft hand on Shauna’s breast. Everything felt more tender and alive. Budding.

“Touch me more,” Shauna said, and Julie did.

They drove in together for their first ultrasound, Julie calling out of work for the morning. They kept calling the pregnancy “theirs,” even though Shauna was the one carrying the baby. It would normally have bothered her to hear a husband say something like that, but Shauna liked the combination of the two of them as a single “they.” It made her feel like Julie was carrying the baby too. The

baby was Julie’s egg, after all. Shauna’s body was housing it, helping it grow, keeping it safe. Her body wasn’t just her own; it was a cocoon. It was an Easy-Bake Oven.

Shauna got onto the table and sat with her elastic-waisted pants pulled down over her stomach. The paper gown crinkled over her top. She held hands with her wife while they waited for the technician to come in and start the ultrasound machine.

“I’m going to ask if they’ll give us two printouts,” Julie said, smoothing her palm over the paper. It separated, showing a sliver of pale belly. “That way I can take a copy to work for my desk.”

“Don’t make me cry,” Shauna said.

“Everything makes you cry now,” Julie replied. That was true enough; Shauna was already tearing up. She used a corner of the paper gown to swipe at her eyes. It ripped a little in her hands, the wet part disintegrating.

The technician came in, said good morning, and booted up the machine. Shauna made sure the gown was smoothed down again and then smiled at Julie, who was nervously plucking at the strap of her purse.

“What’s wrong?” Shauna whispered, and Julie told her that she was worried she wouldn’t recognize her kid,

which made Shauna laugh until she almost peed herself. That was the thing about her body now; it was home to somebody else, too, which meant that she could never predict what would happen with it.

“This will be a little cold,” the technician said and squeezed a glob of clear gunk onto Shauna’s belly. It *was* cold, actually almost freezing, and she jumped a little, especially when the woman smeared the wand around in it. It felt weird and tickly, and she bit her lip to keep from laughing again. All of a sudden, everything seemed hysterical.

The technician poked more. Julie asked if they could get a second printout of the sonogram. “For my work desk,” she explained, but Shauna saw that the technician wasn’t paying attention. Her face scared Shauna, so instead of the woman’s face, she looked at the part in her hair. It was severe, dark, and lined with silver, sprinkled with a bit of dandruff.

Like snow settling on an evening field, Shauna thought, though she had never seen snow before in person, because she’d grown up in Orlando, only on TV and in movies and pictures, and then the technician set down the wand and told them that she was going to go grab the doctor.

Everything happened too fast after that. Or it was too slow. Shauna couldn’t be sure. Her internal clock was winding in extraordinary ways, and there was no way to tell what anyone was saying or doing or how much time had actually passed. There they were in the room with the technician, and then with the doctor, and then all of them crying; wait, except her wife and the technician; wait, was the doctor crying? Maybe it had only been Shauna, though that couldn’t have been right—they’d passed the receptionist on their way out, and her wife had gone up to make their follow-up appointment to plan what to do next (but what could they even do, what was there to do when everything had stopped)—and the receptionist had looked at Shauna with such pity in her eyes, hadn’t there been tears there too? It was so hard to see. A room full of lights blinding her, smeary with water, like rain on a windshield at night hit by the force of oncoming headlights. Then they were outside, they were in their car. Julie was driving them. Julie always drove them. Home then, but they just sat in the car. Sat with the car ticking and hissing as it cooled down in the driveway.

“What ...” Julie said, and then she just stopped. Her hands clutched the steering wheel. Both of them were

still buckled into their seats. The garage door hadn't been opened. There was a potato vine growing up the side, disappearing into the crack at the top.

Shauna studiously avoided putting her hands anywhere near her belly. She didn't know what would happen if she touched herself there, but she worried that it might break her. Nothing good can come from touching because there is nothing in there at all, she thought, and then she was crying again.

The tears roused Julie, who helped her out of the car and inside. Shauna didn't want to be home—didn't want to be anywhere near the room they'd prepared. The life they now lived was out of sync with everything they'd carefully planned. *This life is a parallel universe*, she decided. Her real life was back in the doctor's office with that technician; she was getting a scan—two scans printed out after, one for her wife's desk at her job—and watching her baby's heart beat quick as a hummingbird's.

Shauna sat on the couch, and Julie brought her a glass filled with water and crushed ice, topped with a lemon wedge. Shauna stared at it, not able to bring it to her lips. This was a thing that her wife had done for her since the pregnancy—try to get her to drink more water, hydrate

herself better, by bringing her a special kind. But she wasn't pregnant anymore, was she? So Julie wouldn't need to bring her fancy drinks. She wouldn't need any special treatment.

"I still want to take care of you," Julie said, and Shauna realized she'd verbalized all those thoughts aloud.

"I want a Diet Coke. I can have one now," Shauna said, and then she put a hand to her belly, finally, and burst into tears again.

She lay down on the couch, and her wife left the room, something to do with work, although Shauna had stopped listening. How could your life be doubled for months and then suddenly halved without your consent?

She spent the next few days lying on that same couch in a variety of positions as time crawled toward whatever came next. Because there would have to be a next, and it would not be anything good. The pregnancy had been far enough along that her body wouldn't naturally expel anything in a timely manner; she would need assistance, a professional. That much she remembered from that horrible day at the doctor's office.

Julie set up the appointment. Before they'd gotten married, she'd been in a long-term relationship with her



college boyfriend, and she'd gotten pregnant with him once, and they'd had it "taken care of." That's what Julie had said, the exact language she used when she'd told Shauna about it, but that wasn't the language she used now. Not with their situation. Julie talked around it: said she would "look into it," that she'd "handle everything," that there was "nothing to worry about." Julie claimed, "We will get through it together."

And even though Shauna hadn't disliked that "we" before—had loved it, really—she now found herself bristling every time it was used. Because it wasn't really the same, was it? Julie wasn't the one who had to go through a procedure. She wasn't the one who'd have to let a stranger invade her body. To let that person excavate the life she'd been growing. It was only Shauna, and she would go through it alone, regardless of how many times her wife talked about their shared grief. The physical pain of it would be hers alone to bear.

On the morning of the appointment, they climbed into the car. It sat in the same spot they'd left it after the ultrasound, baking out in the middle of the driveway. It was hot inside the car, even though it was still morning. Early enough that the sun was still climbing melon-coral

over the brushy heads of the oaks. Shauna was sweating profusely from the heat and from anxiety; a drip of it slid down her cheek and landed on the front of her sleep shirt. She hadn't bothered changing. The doctor had told her to "wear something comfortable," and what Shauna had wanted to say was that nothing felt comfortable, that the only comfortable thing would be to go to sleep for a while.

Julie leaned over and wiped the sweaty residue from her upper lip with her thumb. It was a thing she'd done a million times before, a sweet touch from her wife who loved every part of her occasionally messy body, but now the touch felt offensive. She managed to sit through it without wincing, but her skin crawled. It wasn't just her wife, she understood that. Julie was going through her own grieving process. The baby had been hers too. It had been her egg. Her child. But Shauna couldn't get herself to hold her wife's grief as well as her own; there just wasn't room for it. She didn't want to be touched by anyone. Because the only person she wanted to be able to touch her was the one who could not, would not ever. The one who would be taken.

It isn't fair, she thought. It isn't goddamn fair. But fair didn't matter when it came to bodies or anything in life, she knew; it was something that she'd told her younger

sister all the time. Growing up, she'd been the one to have to tell her about things. All the bad shit of life that happened whether you wanted it or not. When their family dog had to be put to sleep, who'd had to hold her sister as she wept? Shauna, of course. Shauna smoothing back her little sister's tangled hair as she wept and called for Muffin, the golden retriever who'd slept in her bed every night. There was no Shauna to sweep back her own hair in this scenario. She was regressing, curling up into herself, wanting to be inside her own belly. If she were inside her own stomach, in her own womb, she could still hold that snuffed light.

The trip was farther than Shauna had anticipated. A forty-minute drive to get to a clinic. There were fewer places that operated locally now, Julie told her after she'd made the call. It was harder and harder for anyone to even get to a Planned Parenthood, much less one of these particular places that dealt with later-stage pregnancies. Shauna tuned out the rest of the conversation. She didn't care where they were going. She just wanted it over. Done.

They turned the corner and saw a crowd of people collected outside a squat concrete building.

"Oh no," her wife said, and Shauna was about to ask

what was wrong, but then she saw the signs. There were about twenty people milling around outside the clinic. What shocked Shauna the most was how wildly they varied in age. Some of them were around her and Julie's age, sure, but there were others who were much older. Grandmother types who looked like they should be at a church bake sale. And kids. There were little kids weaving between the adults' legs. One little girl with a fountain of hair sprouting from the top of her head couldn't have been more than three years old. She toddled around like she'd just recently learned to walk.

"They'll have people to help us," Julie said, and Shauna realized they were going to have to go inside past all these people. The people looked angry, even from far away. They were going to yell at her, and she was going to have to hear them. On this day, she would be forced to deal with people who didn't care that she was in pain.

"Let's get it over with," she said, because she couldn't bear to think of leaving and coming back, not again, even though her wife said they absolutely could if she was worried about their safety.

They strode across the parking lot, fingers laced together, and then came the droning hum of all those

voices raised at once. “Don’t look at them,” her wife said, but Shauna couldn’t help herself. There were all those signs, the ones with pictures of dead babies on them. Bloody, some of them. Others just piles of what looked like loose meat. Red and sticky.

That’s what is inside of me, Shauna thought, and then a couple of women from the clinic bracketed them and moved them through the tunnel of protesters. It’s a blessing I can’t make out what most of them are saying, she decided. They were so loud, all at once, that it just became a swell like the buzz of hornets. There were a few individual words that came through, though: murderer, killer. But otherwise, the shouts were only noise.

They’d almost reached the door when someone shoved a child into their path. It was the little girl with the ponytail. Her eyes were opened wide and full of tears. She looks petrified, Shauna decided. The kind of fear that little kids always get on their faces when something is happening with adults that they can’t understand. A woman, possibly her mother, grasped her under her arms and shoved her forcefully in Shauna’s face.

“How could you do this to a child?” The woman held the girl up higher. Shauna saw that she was wearing

a T-shirt with a little spray of tulips over the pocket. It read “funshine” in cursive script. She remembered the little swimsuit her mother had bought her unborn child, the one with the tiny hula skirt. She realized her child would never get to wear it.

The woman shook her daughter a little for emphasis, and the girl’s ponytail bobbed, a little spray of hair, that silky toddler stuff that lasts only the first few years of life.

“My baby is already dead,” Shauna replied, and the woman reeled back, snatching her child to her chest. As if Shauna might infect her.

Then the helpers opened the doors, and they swept inside the lobby. The door closed behind them and the sound vacuumed out. No noise. Barely a hum. So quiet, it was like there was no one there at all.

“I’m ready,” Shauna announced, and they took her to the back.

## THE FIG QUEEN

BY SALLY WEN MAO

A WOMAN WANTED TO become small. So she shrank, smaller and smaller still, until she was small enough to fit into the calyx of the foxglove she'd planted last winter. Her garden was now a jungle, a hemisphere, and the bees had transformed into helicopters overnight. They welcomed her as her neighbors; they offered her honey. The neighbor's fig tree grew wild over her fence, and soon figs were falling from the branches, their purpled flesh an endless feast.

The woman was finally living a life of abundance,

because she was small, because she did not take up space. She missed nothing from her old life. She did not miss the drudgery, the neuroses, the loneliness of the past. She settled into her newfound wonder, feeding on nectar that tasted like marzipan apples, relaxing from the perch of her foxglove, taking in the view of the garden that was her kingdom—all that she'd planted, all that blossomed from tiny seeds she'd once held in her hands.

Eventually she realized that someone else was now living her life. Someone else was making appointments, going to work, going on dates, going to therapy, picking up groceries, cooking, making calls for her. Someone else was watering the plants and flowers in her garden, someone with her exact physical appearance. A doppelganger—or a replacement? At first, she felt indignant, pacing around in her calyx. She was anxious that this imposter would ruin the life that was hers, the life that she'd grown from the ground up. She paced and paced and waited every night for this alien version of her to come home, at first afraid that this replacement's personality change would render her unrecognizable to her friends, her coworkers, and her family. Lurking beneath this fear, she was also worried that none of them would recognize

her transformation at all, and her disappearance would go unnoticed.

Months went by, and she realized that this imposter was not ruining her life. In fact, this imposter was living her life much better than she had. This imposter was getting a promotion and arguing for a salary she would've never thought to ask for. This imposter was booking a trip to Lisbon, where she'd wanted to go since she read Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet* in college. This imposter was making new friends and reconnecting with old ones and hosting dinner parties where she successfully mixed these two groups. This imposter was always the brightest person in the room, cracking jokes that made everyone laugh. This imposter was always laughing off the "nihao"s and "konichiwa"s from men on the street because she didn't take things so *seriously*. This imposter was going out until 4:00 a.m. on the weekends, plopping down on the bed wearing short skirts and leather jackets she could never afford, that she believed she could never pull off. This imposter found a lover who took her on ski trips and to family functions, and the imposter would be gone for days at a time, busy with her newfound life.

She'd never hosted dinner parties. She'd never taken

trips. She'd never had a boyfriend. Suddenly, she was getting anxious again, anxious that she had not adequately lived her life, and now she had given it up to a doppelganger who was going to enjoy all the things she hadn't, that she'd always wanted. One day, the imposter brought home the lover, and she watched them from the perch of her petal—herself, on her bed, making love to a stranger. Hold on, though—she looked closer, and realized it wasn't a stranger at all, but the man who, just the year before, had broken her heart. Left her by the curbside in front of a bodega, left her crying into her iced coffee, the ashes of her cigarette dusting her bare knees. The man had said he wasn't looking for a relationship, that he didn't like her like that, even though they slept together a few times; he wanted her for sex; he was sorry. This man had never taken her outside of his apartment, let alone to Thanksgiving with his family upstate. She had not met a single one of his friends.

And now there he was, not just making love to this imposter but also whispering sweet words, whispering how much he wanted to show her off to his friends, to go to Europe with her, all the words she'd fantasized before, uncannily—eerily—coming to life. She watched them for the rest of the night. For the first time since her

transformation, she wanted to be noticed—she shouted for them, she waved at them, but they could not see or hear her. She was a voyeur spying on her own existence. She began to understand that this was her worst fear coming true. That perhaps, just perhaps something essential inside her was rotten—something that was primevally hers, fixed and unsalvageable. It caused people like this lover, and all her former lovers, to abandon her. But when somebody else occupied her body, this didn't happen. And just like that, she heard herself climax. A hot hiss of breath escaping from a throat that looked just like hers.

Last year when she was still “seeing” that man on and off, they had been careless and drunk one night, and the next morning she was so hungover that she forgot to buy Plan B. Soon after, he ghosted her. It was incremental: at first, he would not respond to her texts until two or three in the morning. Then he stopped responding at all. This should have been the first sign that she was better off without him, but in those weeks of silence, the woman felt as if her body was decomposing. It must have been the oxytocin, she rationalized—it was just chemicals tying her to this man, nothing more.

When she missed her period that month, she was still in

a haze, barely eating or sleeping, and didn't notice at first. But after several more weeks passed, she decided to go to her gynecologist, who administered a pregnancy test. *Positive.* Before she imagined an actual child, she imagined the child's potential trauma: born into a world where even the love between one's parents could not exist. She thought back to her own parents, who were silent for most of their marriage; she couldn't tell if it was out of habit or bottled-up resentment. She felt as if her own body was mocking her with its fertility. If this love was going to be barren, then why didn't her uterus get the memo?

She went home and watered her foxgloves, her dahlias, her camellias. Then she sat on her plastic chair and wept. She suddenly craved bruised fruit. The tree from the neighbor's yard dangled its branches over the fence, swarming with black stony figs, fat and ripe.

For the first time, she noticed the swarm of insects by the fig tree. They were tiny fig wasps, though she didn't know it at the time—she thought they looked like gnats or mosquitoes. Concerned, she consulted her hardcover book about gardening and insects and came across the entry on fig wasps. A fig, it turns out, is not a fruit but an inflorescence, a cluster of tiny flowers that needed special

wasp pollination. The pregnant female wasp finds the tiny ostiole, or hole, at the bottom of the fig and crawls inside with the intention of laying eggs. As she lays her eggs, she also pollinates the florets.

She learned two facts about fig wasps that stunned her so much she underlined them in her book. The first was that, in the process of trying to squeeze through that impossibly narrow portal of the fig, the pregnant female wasp loses her antennae and her wings. The second was that, once she crawls inside, she lays her eggs and dies. The fig's enzymes slowly consume her, digesting her body until she becomes a part of its seeds and flesh.

The woman had eaten so many of these figs, and it had never occurred to her that tiny wasps could be living and dying inside them. In the summer, she would sometimes go for days without eating anything else. They reminded her also of her lover, who loved figs.

Later that night, she called him, wanting to inform him about the test. She had never called him before. When he answered, they had a casual yet flirtatious conversation that gave her hope, and she could not bring herself to tell him and ruin the mood. "How have you been?" he asked, finally. "Sorry I lost touch; I've been so busy, you know."

After hanging up, she made an appointment at the clinic for the following Tuesday. She thought about asking him to go with her, but she didn't want to put pressure on him or inconvenience him. He didn't want anything serious, he had told her; her pregnancy was definitely a serious matter.

Nevertheless, when he started texting her again, her body felt light, the lightest it'd been in weeks, and she felt herself sucked back into this airtight ostiole of romantic desire. They started talking more regularly and met up a few more times over the course of a few months before the incident at the curb by the bodega. By then, she had already gone to the clinic, where her doctor informed her that she was seven weeks along and gave her a box containing two pills.

After taking the first pill, she bled profusely, her body cramping. She spent hours on the toilet every day, passively bleeding, and wondered if this was just all life was, all she was meant to do: bleed, bleed, bleed. Blood would flow out of her until she ran out. No pads, tampons, or diva cups stanching the flow. A gloom like a decomposing wasp rustled inside of her, and the rot felt familiar, the rot felt true. She imagined herself suspended in a fig's red flesh, bleeding all over its flowers.

The next evening, he came over and as usual she fed him the figs from her neighbor's tree. His favorite thing about figs, he told her, was that they had no pits. How easy it was to just swallow them whole.

They sat together in silence, watching the sunset from her street-level window. When he reached for her, a small noise escaped her throat, a yelp. She hid her body from him, suddenly protective of it. Nausea and lightheadedness wracked her, and she made up an excuse to go to the bathroom and vomit.

He didn't ask her what was wrong. Instead, he turned on the television and flipped through the channels, pretending like nothing was happening. She actually felt relieved at his lack of curiosity, because she wouldn't know how to explain without telling him the truth. Finding nothing of interest on TV, he left soon after.

Summer molted into fall, and she grew bored of her smallness. Around this time, the imposter was on her vacation to Europe. Imagining the terracotta rooftops of that city she'd never seen, Lisbon, the deep blue of the Tagus River, she felt an intense longing.

The woman wished to take back what she had said about wanting to be small. She grew bored of the smell of



flowers and the taste of nectar, figs, and honey and began wanting human pleasures again. The view from the foxglove began to madden her, fill her with despair. All she did with her time was survey the fig tree. The female wasps kept digging and dying, digging and dying. She witnessed one female after another attempt to wrangle their bodies through the tiny holes at the bottoms of figs. The ones who succeeded sawed their own wings off. Like cellophane or parachutes, pieces of wing fell from the sky.

Then she noticed that there were new tenants living in the figs. Newborn female wasps were leaving—the daughters of the wasps that had died. They'd hatched inside the fig, already orphaned, already ready to embark on the journey of finding another fig tree. The skin of the figs on the branches began to break, and the newly minted female wasps were liberated.

That's when the woman considered: perhaps she, too, could leave? Perhaps she could also journey to an unknown fig tree, escape this life once and for all. By this point, she had learned to communicate with the bees and other insects that frequented this garden. She asked them to relay her message to the fig queen, who had just emerged from the plumpest fig on the farthest corner of the branch.

Word got back to her that the queen had agreed. The woman found herself swooning: *Oh*. Emerging from her fig womb, the queen was unrivaled in her majesty, wearing a gown of pollen that resembled intricate lace. The queen's brown body was decked in a sleek armor resembling patent leather, and her silky wings fanned out, a holographic vision catching every errant ray.

Soon the queen descended down onto her foxglove, and the woman climbed on, holding on to her thorax. The queen's body was sticky with nectar, and the pollen felt fluffy, like hairy flesh—the woman grew drowsy, but she didn't want to sleep. They were flying up in the air, and she saw her garden grow smaller and smaller, and yet it was very much unlike being on a plane—no glass or metal separated her from the wind, which could not hurt her. From her vantage point, she saw the corner store. She saw her neighbors sitting on the stoop eating their figs. She saw the park where she used to lie out in the grassy knoll alone. She saw the botanical garden where the peonies and wisteria still budded, their petals all sprayed with rat repellent. She saw the statue of the weeping girl near the algae-green pond. She saw the fish market, with its display of striped sea bass, golden pompano, red snapper. She even saw the

bodega where she got dumped, and it looked marvelous with its display of bounties.

She was amazed. The journey to another fig tree felt like the farthest she'd ever traveled in her life, even though it had to be no more than a few hundred yards. When they eventually reached their destination, she almost threw up, her wonder mutating into dread. As she was dropped onto the branch of a new tree, she pleaded to the queen not to let her go. She didn't want her majesty to die so young. When she saw that the ostiole of the new fig was already open, she screamed at the queen not to rip off her wings. Instead of waiting on the branch witnessing the horror, she found herself running, climbing over onto the queen's antenna, lunging herself into the red fragrant flesh of the fig. She would use her own body as a shield to save the queen. She would pollinate the fig herself.

Then, as if the fig was listening to her, the hole closed up once she climbed inside. Whole gardens of florets, pale and vulnerable, waited for her. In this red fig womb, suddenly she was more exhausted than she had been all her life. Too tired to remember anything about herself, too tired to save herself from being digested. Deeper and deeper she crawled into the fig, following its perfumed

trail. It turned out that the fig, ever the hospitable host, was expecting her and had already made a bed for her. She climbed as far as she could, the pollen falling off of her, and curled into a ball on the soft pink bed.

In the red fig womb, she became an amorphous thing, a zygote, a fetus; she was breaking down. A fugue state, where life and death had no language, the ending was a beginning was an ending, and she felt her own nonexistence like a warm airless room, a sauna. Her naked flesh in that air of fever vapor. Her lovely bloodless flesh in a sauna and then a clinic room, bent against the metal speculum. Her bathroom where she took that pill. The blood stains on the toilet seat, on the bathroom floor. In her bleeding, she had spared someone from existence. She thought of her mother, who mentioned once off handedly that she had three abortions before finally choosing to have her. The one-child act in China made her mother anxious about her body, its fickle patterns of creation. In the end, she finally had her daughter and the trouble with daughters was that they, too, would eventually bleed. Without bleeding, who was she? Who was her mother?

In the kingdom of fig wasps, there were no queens. Every female wasp who made the journey of breaking

her body was a queen—their coronation was death and decomposition. The imposter living her life was not an imposter but just another version of herself, a self that was not broken, a self that did not believe she was broken—this woman had been sleeping inside her, underneath her pain, all this time, but she did not recognize her. In her fig womb, the city of Lisbon materialized. A chill fall breeze blew through the open door leading to the balcony. The suitcases were packed. A note taped on top. *Goodbye. We'll meet again soon.*

Underneath the handwriting was a printed quote from Pessoa: “In everything I judge to be sleep there is always another noise heralding the end of everything, the wind in the dark and, if I listen harder, the sound of my own lungs and heart.”

Even if it meant death, the woman couldn't think of a better way to go—the juices and the fragrance of inflorescence lulled her, and somehow, she heard music. When she was ready to die, she fell asleep.

She opened her eyes, and she was back in her bed, covered in sweat. The alarm rang next to her. With wonder and relief, she felt a foreign yet familiar heaviness in every limb—how much effort was required just to arch the

spine, to reach her arm out and hit the snooze button! The unsung effort the neck expended just to hold her head up! Every part of her, from her soles to her scalp, felt sore with muscle and bone. Even so, she had a newfound respect for this body, its dance with gravity. An hour went by before she could will herself to get up.

She cautiously stepped onto her kitchen tile, afraid that she would crack it with the weight of her foot. Then she walked outside onto her patio, her garden. She watered her foxglove, her oxalis, her camellias. She picked up some figs that had fallen onto the ground.

Then she opened her laptop and checked her inbox and noticed it was full of emails from people she didn't know. Strangers, new friends, some whose names she recognized from the dinner parties. And many, many emails from that ex-lover. His latest email was sent at 11:00 a.m. “Where are you??” was the subject line. The message was blank. She rolled her eyes. Oh, so *now* he was looking for her? She clicked through the rest of the increasingly frantic emails he had sent, and gathered that she—no, her imposter—had been in Lisbon with him and disappeared from their room that morning while he was out for a run. She checked the inbox history: according to the receipts

from Tripadvisor, they had booked a beautiful hotel with a balcony overlooking the river. It dawned on her that now that she was back in her full-sized body, the imposter might have vanished. She wondered if she should reply, if she should book a flight. She could arrive at their hotel by the next bright morning, and he would be so relieved to see her again he wouldn't even notice that she was different—if she was even different at all.

It had been her dream—to travel with this man. It had been her dream that he'd come back. For so many nights last year, the moment she closed her eyes, she relived the way he touched her, where he put his hands, what he whispered as she slept—surprisingly tender things that had confused her; she relived the nightmare of iced coffee and cigarettes and the bodega. Sometimes she imagined an alternative fantasy where she chose not to take the pill. What then? Perhaps they would have been a family. She knew full well the impossibility of these fantasies, and yet there was safety in that certainty, in knowing it would never happen.

But that moment had passed, and now she found herself feeling something she didn't expect: amusement, even satisfaction, that she was not going to Lisbon, not for this

man, no. She was amused that he was so confused about her whereabouts, that he probably at that moment felt abandoned by her, disoriented in a foreign country and suddenly alone. But she owed him no explanations about where or who she was. Today, tomorrow, she would go to the botanical gardens, a ten-minute walk, smell the rat-repellent fragrance of wisteria and peonies, record their names. She would revisit the places she saw from the air on her journey—the neighbor's stoop, the corner store, the pond, the weeping girl, the fish market, and maybe even the bodega.

Before she left her apartment, she gathered and washed some figs in a bowl. Then she drew a bath and soaked for a while, eating the figs one by one, swallowing even the hard stems. The steam and water loosened her tense muscles, and her aches started to vanish. She scrubbed herself until the dead skin fell off, and underneath, she was new.

## TWO POEMS

BY MARY JO BANG

### A QUESTION

What if it's true, that we only live once,  
and if so, who are you to tell me how.  
I've let you live freely, let you be yourself.  
Not once did I say *stupid-ass prick hypocrite*

and yet, you, you would take from me  
what you want, try to control everything  
about me. Take the accidents of nature,  
a weed gone wild in the night, take that

and use it to say you are better at seeing  
 what is good for me and for the wide world.  
 Oh, please, we are animals and only if you  
 can agree on that can we actually speak.

I do not need you and yet you seem to need  
 to harness me to matters I cannot fathom  
 being mother to. See how that works out.  
 You won't notice the outcome. You'll be

thinking of yourself and admiring the ass  
 of another woman while your wife's knitting  
 a gift for your throat. That tool you use to  
 tell us who you are and what we have to be.

## A SET SKETCHED BY LIGHT AND SOUND

Outside, there's barking. The radio's on  
 loud but no one is talking. The long day  
 is darkening. Two silver stars are parking  
 at the curb, a long silent line. Reading

Charles Lamb, on the truth: *They do not so  
 properly affirm, as announce it.* Like an angel,  
 I wondered? Like a Gabriel telling a girl  
 the facts of life: You spread your legs

and yes, just like that— A sudden baby  
 crying behind the face of a girl staring  
 at the treetops outside the clerestory  
 windows of a church of one. The rain

comes in around the frames, a thin trickle  
 that makes the concrete go gray. A bell  
 sounding, fine-tuned to a storm. A bell, or  
 even better, a siren. An alarm that tells

of the need to absent yourself, to lie down  
and behave as if you have no agency,  
snug against the wall. The path formed  
by the water is a line that holds the brain

hostage as it goes on being one detail,  
becoming one more in a body of minutiae,  
one end ending then, another years later  
in a new now: listening to the outside

come in through the window. Between  
time one and time two, a chasm opens:  
into that, you sweep the sounds. That,  
in turn, turns off the harsh light falling on

the event. The curtain over who you were.  
You, as everything that happened to you.  
You, that time, being told what to do.

## WOMEN LIKE ME

BY ERIN WILLIAMS WITH KATE NOVOTNY

My doula had short, curly hair the color of soil, doughy skin, and a backpack full of worksheets and contracts for me to sign. We sat at the kitchen table.

WE DON'T CALL IT A BIRTH PLAN, BECAUSE PLANS OFTEN CHANGE. SO LET'S TALK ABOUT YOUR BIRTH WISHES.



A vaginal birth. Soft music, maybe classical. I could become the kind of person who appreciated that. I'd labor in water but give birth on land, specifically inside a hospital, just in case. My partner would be there. He'd grown a mustache for the occasion of the first few pictures. I wanted to be able to walk around while I labored, not lie in bed surrounded by machines. I'd bring a birthing ball. When it was all over, I wanted a large cheese pizza.

DO YOU WANT AN EPIDURAL?

PROBABLY. MAYBE NOT. I DON'T KNOW. I MIGHT.

A LOT OF WOMEN ASK FOR EPIDURALS IN THE MOMENT BUT DON'T ACTUALLY WANT THEM. MANY OF MY CLIENTS DEVELOP CODE WORDS THAT ARE USED ONLY WHEN THEY'RE REALLY SERIOUS ABOUT GETTING THE EPIDURAL.

OK.

DO YOU WANT TO PICK A CODE WORD?

SURE. HOW ABOUT "SPAGHETTI."

GREAT. SO IF YOU SAY, "I WANT AN EPIDURAL," I'LL ASK THEM NOT TO GIVE IT TO YOU. BUT IF YOU SAY, "I WANT AN EPIDURAL SPAGHETTI," THEN YOU'LL GET THE EPIDURAL. DOES THAT MAKE SENSE?

YES.





She made a list in her notebook. She explained more about what her role would be as my doula. She'd be available anytime by phone or email. I could ask questions as my pregnancy continued. She'd help me labor virtually, and then in-person when the contractions got close enough. She'd be there at the hospital: advocate, masseuse, cheerleader, expert, ice chip aficionado, spaghetti whisperer.

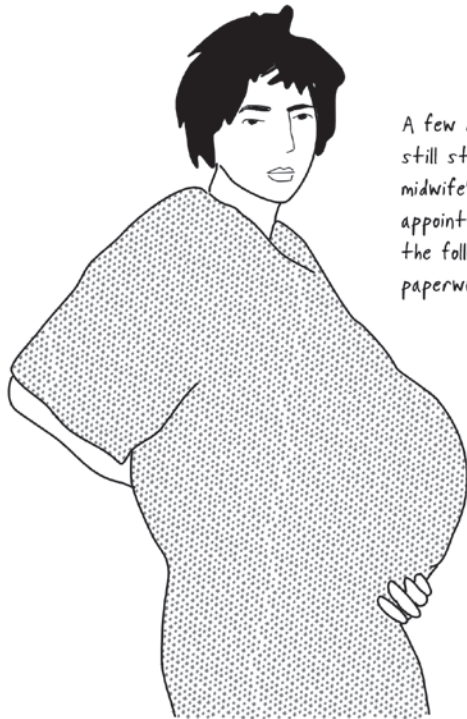


She took a thick stack of contracts out of her backpack. \$1,000 now, \$1,000 after the birth. Without hesitation, I signed.



A full week after my due date, the landscape outside thick with snow, I drove to a local mall to walk the retail legs that stretched from the fountain at its center. I called my midwife crying.





A few days later, the baby was still stubbornly in place. With my midwife's blessing, I made an appointment at the hospital for the following evening. I signed the paperwork and donned the gown.

They put medicine in my cervix to ripen it, a white speck smaller than the head of a pin. I labored in a bathtub in the corner of my private room. I labored in the bed. I watched a Keira Knightley movie. I played Candy Crush. I got more medicine. I listened to classical music. I said "spaghetti." I got Pitocin to speed up my lagging contractions. The epidural wore off. I screamed. I got more spaghetti. 51 hours after my arrival at the hospital, they wheeled me into the operating room. My arms were splayed out on either side of me, shaking. They put a curtain up so I couldn't watch them saw me in half like a magician's assistant. They held her gunky, red cheek up to mine.

It wasn't until my belly was sliced open that I understood that, despite my wishes and plans and classical music and doula and midwife, I was completely out of control. Swirling inside of complicated organ and hormonal systems that prestigious specialists only vaguely understand, the soup of neurotransmitter and substance and structure (ovary, fallopian tube, uterus, cervix, vagina), the false promise of control breaks down.

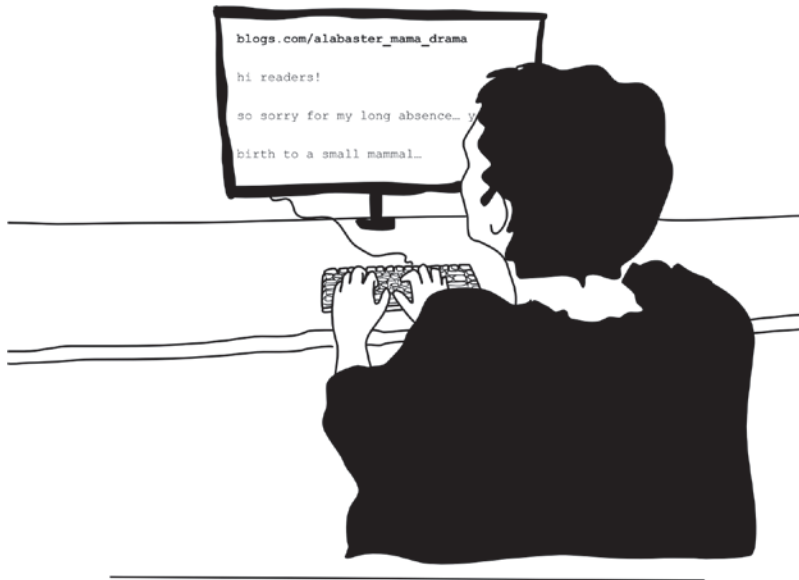


It was only then that I realized I was at the complete mercy of this hospital, these tired nurses and doctors and the relentless beeping apparatus that promised I was okay.

For many Women Like Me\*, this is the first time our fate rests in the hands of an institution. We do not have control. Lucky for us, it's a system that's been fundamentally designed and funded to protect our lives.

## That is power.

I was scared of losing control, and I did lose it, but I was safe. I had my giant purple plastic birthing ball, my iPad, my little jacuzzi to labor in. Eventually I went home (with a fat, healthy baby) and wrote a blog post about how traumatizing it all was.



\*I am excluding non-binary and trans birthing people from this call-out, though some participate in and enjoy varying degrees of privilege. When I say "Women Like Me," I am referring to gendernormative white women, particularly the ones who have a purchase history at goop.com (guilty).

Women Like Me- we love our control. When coronavirus hit and some state governors began denying birth doulas "essential worker" status, petitions sprang up, flooding with the signatures of thousands of women demanding reproductive justice.\* Politicians responded swiftly, backtracking bans. We needed our comfort, the gentle reassurance of an experienced person hired to assuage every fear and massage every ache.

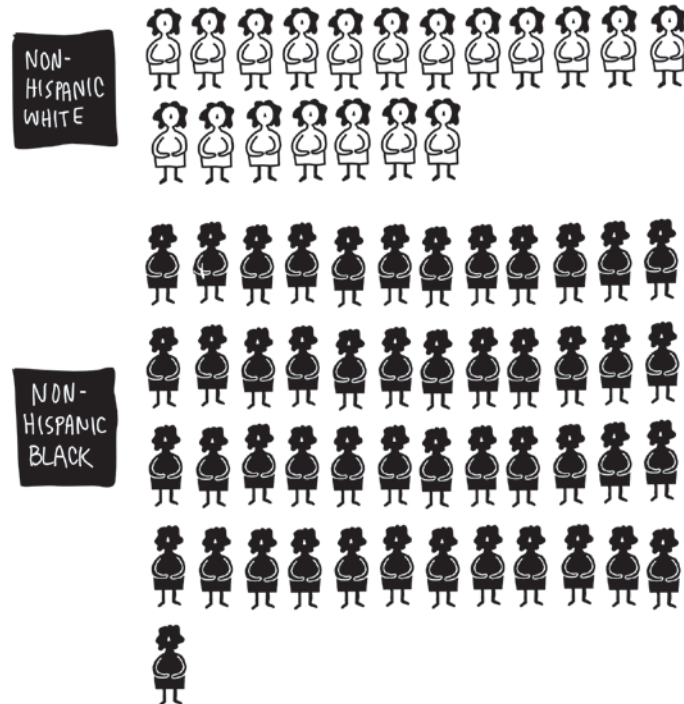


\*During the height of the coronavirus outbreak in NYC, Efe Osaren spoke out on social media about the problem of a Black doula traveling through a city during a pandemic to support her white birth client without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE).

The grease that makes all these wheels turn is white supremacy. It's the power that made governors change their mandates. It's what all but guaranteed the safety of me and my baby.

Research shows that Black birthing people are 3-4 times more likely to die, and in certain geographic areas 12 times more likely to die, than white birthing people. Most of these deaths are considered preventable.

### MATERNAL DEATHS PER 100,000 LIVE BIRTHS IN 2016



Confronting the abysmal statistics about Black maternal mortality requires that Women Like Me think a little harder about what reproductive justice means. Many Women Like Me have never been denied access to birth control. We live in places where abortion access is not hindered by complicated state laws or geography. We might have health insurance. We've never been arrested (okay except that one time- spring break!- but there were almost no consequences).

Women Like Me might be aware of their white privilege, but not the grave depths of it. We go swimming in the ocean but stick to the shore. We tend to ignore the fact that even if we suited up and went out far enough, rented one of those submarine pods that can withstand metric tons of pressure, we would never reach the bottom.

**BUT WE CANNOT  
CLAIM TO CARE  
ABOUT  
REPRODUCTIVE  
JUSTICE UNTIL WE  
UNDERSTAND AND  
TAKE ACTION  
AGAINST OUR  
COMPLICITY IN  
WHITE SUPREMACY.**

When birth control became legal in the United States with the 1965 ruling of *Griswold vs. Connecticut*, it did not impact all women equally. While white reproduction was and is considered by many to be an act of individual fulfillment and happiness, Black reproduction is plagued with stereotypes of Black degeneracy, from Reagan's "welfare queens" to crack babies. As Black activist and academic Angela Davis wrote about birth control, "What was demanded as a 'right' for the privileged came to be interpreted as a 'duty' for the poor."\* She's referring to the racist and neo-Malthusian ideas that have spawned the nonconsensual sterilization of Black women since the Civil War.

In North Carolina in the 1930's and 1940's, nearly 8,000 "mentally deficient" people were forcibly sterilized. About 65% were Black, though Blacks comprised around 1/3 of the state population. These attempts curb "illegitimate" Black births and trim the welfare rolls also prevented more Black children from entering desegregated schools in the 1950s.\*



It did not end there. In 1973, Mary Alice and Minnie Relf, poor, Black, mentally-disabled sisters living in Alabama, were sterilized. They were 12 and 14 years old.

Their mother, who was illiterate, signed an "X" on a piece of paper she thought authorized birth control shots. They were both wheeled into the operating room and surgically sterilized.\*



\*See Angela Davis, "Racism, Birth Control, and Reproductive Rights"

In white minds, Black reproductive choices are choices. In white minds, risky prenatal behaviors stereotypically associated with Black mothers, like crack-smoking or landing a prison sentence, are their own fault. They have little to do with who we are: the privileged majority, who are bolstered by a foundation of history, policy, and invented notions of racial supremacy. Just 30 years ago, Charleston, South Carolina, started jailing pregnant women who tested positive for smoking crack. Some women were forced to finish out their last weeks of pregnancy inside a prison cell, others had their legs and arms shackled to hospital beds with iron cuffs. All of their babies were taken. Of the nearly 50 women arrested, chained, and imprisoned, all were Black but one.\* We called that a choice.



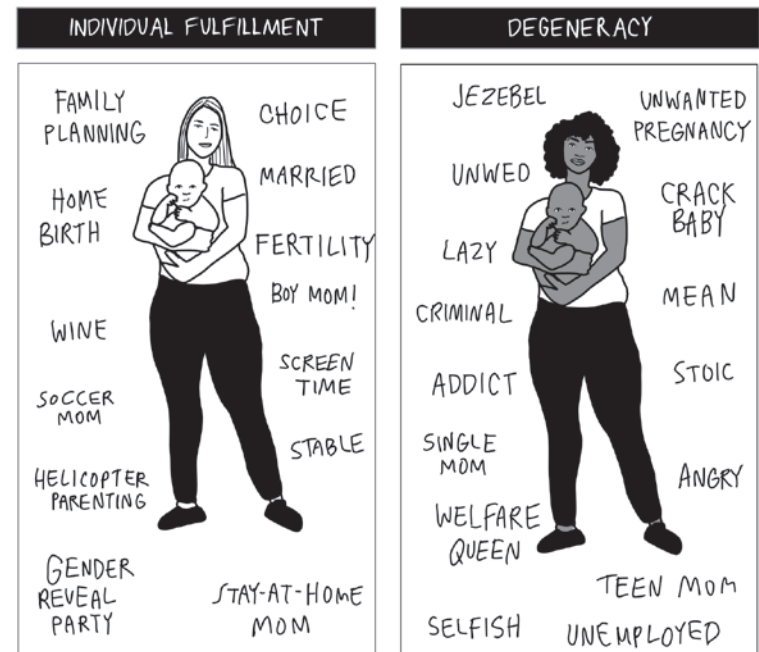
\* See *Killing the Black Body* by Dorothy Roberts



While mainstream reproductive rights agendas have focused mainly on abortion access, they have largely ignored other harmful racist policies that mainly impact Black, Indigenous, and people of color. There's not one reproductive "choice"—to have or not have an abortion. Reproductive health policy operates along a spectrum and spans an entire human life.



In *Reproductive Justice in the Twenty-First Century*, Loretta J Ross and Rickie Solinger argue that "choice" implies that reproduction is an individual decision outside of social structures, which doesn't recognize the complexity of these decisions. Disadvantaged people who get pregnant are labeled bad choice makers. Good choice makers embody popular notions of femininity: they are white, financially secure, partnered.\*



\* See "Reproductive Justice in the Twenty-First Century" by Loretta J Ross and Rickie Solinger

Racism impacts the scope of choices people are allowed to make at all points throughout their lives, from where they live and what they do all the way up to and beyond birth. There is no reproductive justice without social justice. The reproductive privileges that Women Like Me enjoy depend on the reproductive castigation of other women. We celebrate the small wins that exacerbate their oppression.\*

For example, pro-choice white women have fought to make voluntary sterilization procedures like tubal ligation or hysterectomies easier to obtain, viewing barriers to access as anti-choice. These measures are in direct opposition to the interests of Black and Indigenous women, who have long suffered involuntary sterilization by a structurally-racist healthcare system that makes these procedures too easy to perform and too difficult to litigate.\*\*



\*2005 Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice via Loretta J Ross

\*\* Dorothy Roberts, Killing the Black Body

**IT IS MY SPECIFIC  
NEED FOR ACCESS  
AND CONTROL  
THAT ENDANGERS  
BLACK LIVES.**

**THE  
WEAPONIZATION  
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FEMININITY IS A  
DAILY THREAT TO  
BLACK,  
INDIGENOUS, AND  
PEOPLE OF COLOR.\***

\*See Rachel Cargle's, "Dear White Women" available at [www.rachelcargle.com](http://www.rachelcargle.com)

Reproductive justice is fundamentally a question of human rights. It's a function of geography, class, gender, ability, race, sexuality, and immigration status, all of which are built on the foundation of white supremacy.



The 50 years following the legalization of abortion have been characterized by prohibitive legislation and continued social stigma. Racist and classist ideas and harmful stereotypes have helped to decimate the social programs that support reproductive labor.

**The rate at which Black mothers and babies die preventable deaths is not a curiosity or an anomaly. It's the result of a culture that ruthlessly and systematically devalues Black lives.**

The medicalization of birth and the field of gynecology owe themselves to the Black women whose bodies were sliced open without their consent so that white women and babies could live.\*

There is no reproductive justice without recognition of and reparations to the Black women who have suffered and died for generations within the arms of the American healthcare system.

The reproductive choices I've made throughout my life—occasionally so privileged that they're goofily code-named after Italian specialty dishes—must be understood for what they are and have always been: white supremacy.



Reproductive advantages for white women continue to occur at the expense of Black lives. Women Like Me must reconcile the truth of our past and our present. We must honor the Black women whose lives were taken so that our babies could be born, pink and screaming. We must devote our continuing fight for reproductive justice to the sanctity and safety of Black lives.

\*See *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* by Deirdre Cooper Owens





THEIR LIVES WERE SACRIFICED SO THAT  
WE COULD SURVIVE.

## MY NIECES

BY DEB OLIN UNFERTH

I LOVE MY NIECES. I have three in descending size, each radiant and perfect in their unique ways: one throwing the blankets over the railing, another running down the hallway in a mad glee, the eldest playing “cat.” Look at them out in the backyard, flipping around on the various apparatuses their father banged together for them. Of course I feel fiercely protective of them. I tape their scrawled drawings to my refrigerator with satisfaction. I will buy them some piece of plastic if they want it, buy them all the crappy pieces of plastic there are! They must go to the best

schools, have the best tutors, travel the world. Just getting a niece into a good kindergarten is such a battle these days. My sister must fight, fight, fight—I'll help, leave them my money when I die—must lift them, walk in her gym shoes over whatever is beneath. The nieces want a rainbow Jell-O? Grind up the bones so that my nieces may get their cool colorful treat. Look at these videos of their school performances—singing songs, leaping around a wooden stage. I watch with pride, joy! Other kids are there, too, but I barely see them. Other kids are mere decorative streamers beside the stars of the show, my blood, *my nieces*.

It's so weird. I become *literally blind* to other children when my nieces are there. Only if another kid topples off the stage or vomits or performs an extraordinary feat will I be dragged away. I am transfixed by the powerful pull of relation: I, who decided early on that I never wanted children, partly for the very reason that I did not want to be indifferent to all but what I called my own.

If there are no nieces on the stage? Just strangers' children on, say, YouTube? Then I do see them. I linger on this one's awkward dance, this one waving to the audience, that one's pout. Each child is fragile, funny, shining. My mind builds their stories. They all become my nieces.

That woman in a mask in the post office, that man moving a cart down the street, they are my nieces. And the nonhuman animals, they are my nieces. The fish are my nieces, and they do feel pain. The animals in the zoo, nieces. And the massive shrinking insect population. I have so many nieces. The old, old trees are my nieces, and they talk to one another through their secret underground pathways. I sit on my porch and feel the press and pull, the pulse of my nieces, in the air and the damp ground, the lizards and squirrels, the waving weeds, the plants I planted and the ones I did not. I feel their familiar ways, their link to me, the connection between us (not so far away on the tree). But the most destructive nieces of all, the ones who will suck it all up, trample it all down, throw it in the garbage to float out to sea? My nieces. And me, of course.

I think about terms like “selfless motherhood” and “parental sacrifice.” I understand what it is to love a child so much that you feel yourself becoming a better person just by looking at them. You'll forgo any pleasure, any need. To release ego for love—what a relief, what a revelation. It's a miracle. You can finally look away from yourself and *love*. I understand the temptation to interpret this as selflessness.

And yet, we know how sticky the ego is. It doesn't evaporate that easily. It *transfers*. Parenthood can be a brilliant, incontestable excuse for capitalist conquest, dynastic rule, for taking more than our share and believing it is an act of selfless love. As far as I'm concerned, the burden of proof is on the child bearer.

Sure, I know I'm not perfect either. I'm not fooling anyone with my vegan entrée, my rescue dog, my reusable bags, my Prius—but, hey, at least I don't have *kids*.

Ah, humans. We root for them, but should we? Look at all we've done. If only we didn't exist as individuals, it would be easy to dismiss us as a blight to scour out. If only we didn't exist as masses, it would be easy to love us one by one. We are an endless contradiction, two things at once at all times. Infestation. Miracle. (Especially my nieces.)

I write this in April 2020, in the early days of the pandemic. I've been watching clips of the empty cities, of elephants emerging from the forests of Thailand, of the smog lifting and revealing ancient green mountains in the distance. There are more birds out this spring, more crickets, because humans have finally *shut the fuck up*. A planet

with less us. A portent of the future, perhaps. A promise, a warning, a window, a door? I hope so. But by the time this essay appears, it will likely be nostalgia, a pause before we went back to the churning destruction in the name of our nieces.

# THEY JUST MIGHT BE SEEN

BY DONNETTA LAVINIA GRAYS

*THEY SIT ON THE edge of the stage. Pregnant belly peeking through an open Carhartt jacket.*

*They speak directly to the audience. The others (their parents, their coach, and their lover) take up space in isolated light behind them.*

*Time: They are here in the present. Their parents, their coach, and their lover are in a time before and a time after.*

*Place: Just outside of a shotgun house. A rural town. Too far away for anyone to care.*

## PART ONE: THEN

THEM

A boy's body ain't supposed to feel full like this.

### ***Their Parents***

MA

That sound like a name that do something?

PA

Autumn? If you mean like fall, then, yeah. Fall do something. Spring a season and a verb too.

MA

Autumn Janeé Crowder. I wanna see it in stone. On a building. Does it sound like it would be on a building?

PA

Like a courthouse?

MA

Library. Research wing of a hospital. Some college somewhere.

PA

Maybe she get a first word in. Get her to crawling real good. Walk a little bit. Then we'll see.

THEM

A boy's words supposed to say things that ain't got feelings in 'em. His walk supposed to tell other folks *how* to feel. A little scared maybe.

### ***Their Coach***

COACH

Decrease the carbs. Six months and we get five seconds off your time. I want you fast. I want you lean.

THEM

A boy's body ain't supposed to whip through the air like nothing.

## PART TWO: NOW

*Their Lover*

LOVER

You—you put words in my mouth, and they live in there like bar soap. How is it you punishing me, and you the one spit razors? Make me out to be the enemy all you want. But this ain't some "It's not you, it's me" shit. This is all you, baby. ALL you.

THEM

A boy's heart ain't supposed to break.

(*Pause*) A boy's body ain't supposed to feel full like this. I press my hands down the sides of my hips. I press my hands down the sides of my hips. Sand them down. My hands are rough now. I've been working out. Made my own gym out back when I was fifteen. Cinder blocks. Bags of feed. Now I have free weights in the carport. Makes my hands rough, so I take 'em and sand them hips down with 'em. Breasts. They get sanded too. Sand down that full. Blow the sawdust from the palms of my hands into folks' eyes so they have to squint.

Like looking into light.

*Their Parents*

MA

That sound like a name that do something?

PA

Cyrus. If you mean like the sun, then, yeah. Sun do something. Got a whole mess of stuff in the sky do some shining.

MA

Cyrus Janeé ... Cyrus James. Cyrus *James* Crowder. I wanna see it in stone. On a building. Does it sound like it would be on a building?

PA

Like a courthouse?

MA

Library. Research wing of a hospital. Some college somewhere.

PA

Maybe they get a word in. See what walking is ... then we'll see.

THEM

A boy's walk supposed to have a way 'bout it that nobody questions.

### ***Their Coach***

COACH

Increase the protein. Six months and we get ten more pounds on you. I want you to take a hit, but I want you to give one too.

THEM

A boy's body supposed to be able to take a hit.

### ***Their Lover***

LOVER

You—you put words in my ear, and they live in there like music. How is it that I thought I was singing to you, and you the one hit the high note? Make me out to be a partner. 'Cause this ain't some "It's not you, it's me" shit. If you

push me away, it's all you, baby. ALL you.

THEM

A boy's mouth could pour poetry down his lover's neck. Stroke the back of a head while looking into his eyes. See the face of God.

(*Pause*) Make a boy's body get full ... like this. (*Caresses their belly*) With life.

(*Smiles*) And, not after a life. But, within a life continued. Full.

Fingertips run down the sides of my hips. Fingertips run down the sides of my hips. Graze them. Praise them a little. My hands are rough. I've been working out. Made my own gym out back when I was fifteen. Cinder blocks. Bags of feed. Now we have free weights outside on the carport. Makes a boy's hands rough. So, I take my fingertips and graze them hips like a box full of sepia-toned photographs reclaimed from a high shelf. Memories resting like daydreams on broad shoulders. Memories etching shadowed definition into biceps. And I praise them all. Scars across my chest. Each one an affirmation. They get praised too. Make a joyful keloid noise!

I run my fingers across 'em as a sculptor would a fine

piece of wood. Blow the shavings from the palms of my  
hands into folks' eyes so they have to squint.

Like looking into light.

## COMPLIANCE: A GUIDE

BY CADE LEEBRON

1. When I was sixteen, I was having sex with my then-boy-friend and the condom broke. I remember hearing a noise, like a popped balloon, but I was a teenager and new to sex and didn't know what had happened until after. He called his mom, she was out of town; she told us to find a pharmacy the next morning and get the morning-after pill. It sounded like a simple thing to do.
2. The next morning, I left early, nobody else in my house was awake. I left a note on the kitchen table, saying



I'd gone out for breakfast with a friend. First we went to a pharmacy, where they told us that they couldn't do anything for us. Then we went to a hospital, where they said the same thing. I don't remember how we found the clinic with the disapproving male doctor, only that by the time we got there, it felt like we'd been walking around our city all day.

3. The doctor said we had to have a parent present, not my boyfriend's mom, my mom. I called her and asked her to come to the clinic. She met us there.
4. I didn't want to tell her, not because she wasn't *cool* but because she was *my mother*, and sex is complicated and because above all else, I felt that my sex life was private and not her business, not anyone's business but mine. I still feel that way—not just about myself but about the sex lives of young women, that young women are entitled to our bodies and our pleasure. That we, too, are entitled to our protection and our reproductive rights.
5. Before the disapproving doctor gave me the pill, he

asked me in front of both my boyfriend and my mom if really, no really, the condom had actually broken or if there had been no condom at all. He could have asked me alone or before my mother arrived. He chose to wait for the moment when he had the largest audience.

6. When he finally handed over the pill, he told me to eat carbs with it. I went to my boyfriend's house and took the pill and ate an entire sleeve of Chips Ahoy.
1. When I was in my early twenties and in my creative writing MFA program, people would occasionally say things to me about how my work was too political and not quite nonfiction. They would say the typical things: *You cannot write the universal; you cannot write for other people; you have to only write your specific story, other people will connect to that story, and that is how you will achieve universality.*
2. I then parroted these lessons to my undergraduate students because I thought they were correct, because I thought this was nonfiction craft.

3. I think now that this is a form of oppression. People in power don't want stories of groups of marginalized people. For example, they would rather that women did not write about what it is to be a woman in a country that is hostile to women. They would rather that we wrote individual stories that feel anecdotal and dismissible. You start to notice this in things like Title IX cases on university campuses. They act like every rape is a completely unique situation instead of acknowledging that rape is a huge problem on college campuses, instead of creating a viable system to deal with another existing system—the system of violence. They act shocked to hear that every single rape has occurred. And then, with every single rape, they want to reinvent the wheel of response.
4. But in my MFA program I thought, OK, yes, if I try to speak to a group experience, I am perhaps appropriating from others in my group. If, as a disabled bisexual woman, as a queer woman who has survived rape, I try to write about being a part of any of these groups or intersections of groups—disabled people, queer people, women, queer women, disabled women,

survivors of rape, disabled survivors of rape, queer survivors of rape, queer disabled people—I will be telling a story I do not fully know. I cannot hope to speak for anyone else because I cannot see inside their brains. Stories I have been told by friends or acquaintances are the nonfiction equivalent of hearsay. They can't enter the room. I have to speak as though my story is happening inside a bubble, untouched by the experiences of others and unrelated to those experiences, no matter how similar they might be.

5. I cannot see inside anyone else's brain. It is important to not appropriate. What is also important is that we have to speak truth to power and that we are allowed to extrapolate from our own experiences and the experiences of our friends. We are allowed to notice the trends we are experiencing—rape culture, misogyny, etc.—the trends that we are a part of. Being alive is a kind of research. We don't have to wait for the scholars and the scientific studies to say something about what it's like to live in certain kinds of bodies in the world.

1. When I was sixteen, after the incident with the condom and the disapproving doctor, my mom took me to a gynecologist to get birth control. I don't remember the conversations we had prior to this appointment, but I do remember that my mom was trying to be both supportive and protective.
2. In the exam room, just me and a doctor, the doctor brandished the wand for a transvaginal ultrasound. It looked huge. I didn't want her to touch me with it. She told me she needed to perform the ultrasound in order to prescribe birth control. (False.) She told me if I said no, she would go into the waiting room and tell my mom I wasn't cooperating. (Humiliating.) She said if I'd had sex before, the ultrasound wouldn't hurt at all. (False.)
3. The pressure to be a compliant patient is like nothing else I know in this world. In no other situation in my personal life does *compliance* sound like the thing I should be aiming for.
4. I allowed her to perform the transvaginal ultrasound,

and then she prescribed birth control pills, and then I took those pills, unquestioningly or something close to it, compliantly, for six years.

1. As an adult person, I have two packs of the morning-after pill in my desk drawer. I ordered them online, where they are much cheaper than in pharmacies. Of course, most people who need the morning-after pill can't wait days for an online delivery.
2. Once, at a friend's wedding in my early twenties, I had sex with a man whom I'd met that night and the condom broke and I wasn't on birth control at the time so I found a pharmacy the next day and then texted with my friends about it, laughing.
3. Then he and I went on a few dates and had sex again, and again the condom broke and when he offered to pay for morning-after pill round two, I said yes.
4. I texted my friends about it again and we thought it was funny. Like, how does that happen twice with one

person? This man and I laughed about it, too, like we laughed together about writers on the internet and the bottle of Fireball he had in his apartment. Acquiring the morning-after pill as an adult in a different city could be no big deal because nobody was saying no, telling me to call my mom. The thing that worried me the most was letting a man pay for my contraception—I prefer to give a man, any man, no reason to feel like I owe him.

1. I get so tired of women who need to express that they are *on their grown woman shit*. I get so tired of women who put other women below them based on age or experience or aesthetic or sexuality. I love my Glossier stickers on my cheap laptop, my thrift store clothes, my millennial pink, my emojis, my Instagram persona, and my Urban Decay eye shadow. Babe, I am still on my teenage girl shit. You know what is glorious? Teenage girl shit. What makes a grown woman different from a teenage girl? Not much. We have so many of the same concerns, we as grown women just have slightly fewer limitations, slightly fewer people saying they are allowed to know our business by law.

2. Not: fewer people trying to say they deserve to know our business. Just: slightly fewer people who are legally allowed into our private lives.
3. How many times have I tried to write about teenage girl shit? Oh, and don't I know the things that are said about it. *This is melodrama. You're a teenage girl and nobody will want to know about your life. The stories you want to tell are not important. Grow up.*
4. And then: *You're not a teenage girl anymore and so you can no longer tell these stories. You have found a way to appropriate your own story! Congratulations. Find something new to talk about.* Babe, I am still on my teenage girl shit, and these are still the stories I want to tell. When we are teenage girls, we are told to shut up because we are kids and our stories aren't important. Meanwhile, we are going through many of the same trials grown women go through, just with even less agency. When we grow up and are no longer teenage girls, we are told that we can no longer tell those stories, we have aged out of them.

5. And so who is telling the stories of teenage girl shit?
1. For a few years, in my early and then mid-twenties, I took a break from the pill. It was increasing the frequency of my migraines, and various doctors didn't listen to me when I said that to them.
2. So I just stopped taking it and used other methods of contraception.
3. Then I missed the ease and control of the pill and found a doctor who listened to me about my migraines and prescribed a different pill, which I started taking, and which did not cause additional migraines.
4. Then yet another doctor told me I was being irresponsible by taking the pill that didn't give me migraines, because it was slightly less effective than other birth control pills. So I made another appointment with, yes, another brand-new doctor to discuss options.
5. This doctor was puzzled. She sat me down in a little exam

room and listened to the story of me and birth control pills. She said, "So this pill works for you, and you like it, but another doctor made you feel bad for taking it?"

6. Yes.
7. Almost every story I know about contraception is a story about shame, a story about compromise and compliance.
8. Many of these stories are stories in which I am made to do something unnecessarily unpleasant in order to acquire necessary contraception. Make my mom hear about a broken condom or make me undergo an unnecessary transvaginal ultrasound or make me pay \$50 for a morning-after pill at a pharmacy or make me take a daily pill that gives me migraines even though there's a better option.
9. It is in situations like this where the phrase *pink tax* comes to mind because I don't know what else to call this because *pink tax* is not quite what I mean and feels inadequate.

10. *Misogyny* but let's not argue.

1. At a certain point in my life, many of my doctors stopped talking to me about how to prevent a pregnancy and instead started talking about how to cultivate one. This wasn't based on anything I said about wanting or not wanting to have kids. If they asked me about kids, I mostly expressed ambivalence or said things like *Not in the next ten years. Not in the next five years. Not right now.*
2. It seemed to be based on a mental timetable they had laid out for female patients and neglected to confirm with the specific person sitting in front of them. Perhaps a switch flips when a patient hits age twenty-four and *pregnancy* comes out of the *to prevent* category and lands on the *to do* list. Less consequence or source of shame and more biological imperative.
3. At one appointment with a neurologist, he spent most of our time together discussing how I would be able to safely get pregnant, given my disability and long list

of medications. We would need to make sure I was off of X medication for a certain amount of time, and Y medication as well, whereas Z medication might be safe for a hypothetical baby. We were negotiating the health of a fantasy—not mine, his. And yet the health of the fantasy was prioritized over the health of me, my health; I was the patient he was supposed to be seeing.

4. This was not a plan I'd asked him to help me make. There were other questions, unrelated to babies or pregnancy, that I'd wanted to address and which we simply did not get to.
5. After, my primary care doctor was looking at the neurologist's notes in my chart and seemed surprised—she knew I was on birth control and not planning on having children anytime in the near future, yet all of his notes regarded planning for a pregnancy. Why was that? I couldn't explain it to her.
6. Of course, many disabled women have the opposite problem. Doctors with all their bad ideas—eugenics

masquerading as genetics—often discourage disabled people from having children.

7. I have lost track of the number of times I have wound up in the ER with symptoms of my disability that could overlap with symptoms of a pregnancy; I have lost track of the number of time that ER doctors have insisted it could be a pregnancy instead, despite my existing diagnoses and my existing birth control pills; I have lost track of the number of times these doctors have said, *Let's run some tests*, and then used my blood to run a pregnancy test without my knowledge or consent. I do know that every time, the test has come back negative, and they have told me the result as though it was an answer to a question I asked.
8. I haven't ever asked a doctor in an ER, *Am I pregnant?* I haven't ever asked a doctor outside of an ER, *Can you help me plan for a pregnancy?*
9. My disability is invisible and so my doctors sometimes tell me that I am *very healthy*, even while staring directly at test results and diagnoses that suggest

the opposite. My doctors sometimes spend our limited time together talking about a pregnancy plan that I don't need instead of the symptoms that affect me daily. My doctors can be quite concerned about which of my necessary medications would harm a fetus that does not yet exist.

1. When I was seventeen I had a friend who was assaulted and needed the morning-after pill. We went to the pharmacy and she used her fake ID to get the morning-after pill so they didn't call her mom.
2. I remember thinking, *Oh, that's very smart, I should have done that*. My personal instruction manual had missed a step.
3. We as a group of teenage girls sat around trying to puzzle through the directions. Mostly what we wanted to know was if she could have a beer with her pill. I remember that we were horrified by what had happened, that we were trying to be supportive, that we sat around and laughed with her about the fake ID and

the pill and the beer and about how bullshit the whole thing was.

4. Do you get me when I tell you that this is not a story about shame? This is not a story that requires contraception to be a learning moment.
5. But maybe this is also not my story to tell or maybe she would tell it differently. Let me try again.
6. Any instruction manual or guide ends when you either complete the task or choose to do something different.
7. When I was eighteen and in college, I was the friend who was assaulted and I don't even remember if I got the morning-after pill. I was mostly alone. People had started saying things like *Get over it* and *Grow up*.
8. When I was twenty-two and in my MFA program, I was again the friend who was assaulted and I did get the morning-after pill and I had some friends who were supportive, don't get me wrong, but again

people—other women, mostly—said things to me like *Get over it* and *Grow up* and *Well, what he said was—*

9. If this is grown woman shit, you can keep it.
1. I want to stay in the space where we are seventeen and sitting at a table together, drinking beer and puzzling over the instructions for the morning-after pill, and we have no desire to grow up or to be older because why would we want that.
2. Or: in bed with my then-boyfriend the night of the popped balloon condom. I remember the room being gray and his bed being gray and the light being gray and how he held me was warm and close and I remember the worry in his face. The worry he probably saw reflected back at him. The way that many stories of contraception, the ones that end in shame and pain, started with pleasure.
3. Can we stay there?



4. Oh, and don't I know what someone could say, online or in an MFA program or when reading this at home. *Your question is naive. Grow up.* Hold on. I don't want to grow up, if by *Grow up* you mean *Accept this bullshit*. I want to imagine something different. I don't think sex between men and women and its linked fear of pregnancy—danger of pregnancy, potential consequence or joy or accident of pregnancy, prevention of pregnancy—I don't think these things must necessarily lead us to shame.
1. I am trying to imagine a future without it. I wonder if you can come there with me. I think what a lot of us want from sex is pleasure and we accept the shame as a consequence of getting something that we wanted. I am not supposed to say *we*, I know. I am supposed to tell a single story of *I* and I am not supposed to extrapolate.
1. Any instruction manual or guide ends when you either complete the task or choose to do something different.

1. Sometimes extrapolation is a way of connecting. I imagine that sometimes we are alike, you and I. We want pleasure. We take shame in trade. We accept that birth control requires prescriptions and that prescriptions require obedience and compliance and behaving a certain way for doctors. We accept that seeing a doctor requires health insurance and that health insurance comes from private companies and costs money and that not all of us are eligible for it. We accept a system of life because we stumbled into it; it was fully grown and we were just teenage girls and who were we to argue. We talked back but we got shouted down and then we became, instead, compliant. Or anyway: that was me. After a lot of shame and shouting I became, for a while, quiet and compliant. If you would like me to tell a single and unconnected personal story without extrapolation, here is part of it.
1. But remember how it was, when we were *we* and when we were young and daring? Before we got divide-and-conquered out into single stories. When we talked back. When we were on our teenage girl shit, when we

took the morning-after pill with whole sleeves of Chips Ahoy, with plastic cups of beer, with friends. When we put glitter on our eyelids and pulled fake IDs out of our purses, when we walked into the darkness of a weekend night in an excited way instead of afraid all the time, when the risk of our own little crimes didn't even enter our calculations. Oh, and don't I know, how the young are naive and how sometimes their consequences catch up with them. But don't I also know the willingness to dream, and to imagine, and to defy.

## DIVORCEDLY

BY TIPHANIE YANIQUE

1.

### WANT

Now

This thing is about desire. I know because I've had a worry of want all my life. I'm a feast of want. I wanted a professorship. I wanted marriage. I wanted children. The want wouldn't let up. I had a kid but wanted another. I had a husband but wanted a better one. I became a professor but was on contract. I wanted tenure. Inside of my want was already an "I can get." There is a privilege to my desire. I've been privileged in this way.

It's disgusting. But I don't want the boy to feel ashamed of his desire.

So, I'm sitting here on this donut with my butt sinking into the hole. This is the opposite of sexy. Or maybe it's a little sexy because my nether regions are just hanging out there feeling unencumbered. But who knows this? No one. Who is looking? Josie is looking. That's me. I'm Josie. I'm the only one looking.

What I am looking at is this white woman, her mouth opens and closes and opens and opens. She makes delicious sounds, like she has just been given a German chocolate cake, and there is nothing she has ever wanted more than a slice of chocolate cake. Her mouth is wet and opens and closes and opens like she's getting a forkful of that so sweet dark cake every second. And yes, she is beautiful. And sexy. The sexy part is clear for all to see, because the woman is indeed having sex. She is beautiful while having sex, which is a sign that she is a professional.

Josie, think something academic and smart. This is what I tell myself, because I'm a professor, and when needed I can get professorial with myself. But nothing smart is alighting. I try to think about what I am thinking, because being meta is usually some kind of smart. I am

thinking that this, what I am watching, is not acting. It's faking. There's a difference. My ex-husband always said I thought too much, even though he was also a professor. I would say, "Thinking is what adults *do*." But right now all this adulating is making my mouth taste nasty.

How did the boy understand these things he saw? I can go an entire session of sex with my eyes closed, and that's how I prefer it. Oh, Josie, I think. And then I think, When will I ever have sex again?

The boy doesn't understand that porn is basically Disney for sex. Because the woman's legs are really shiny. The boy was probably thinking that those legs could hold him in an octopus grip, so that now the boy will never eat calamari again without getting a woody.

There goes the woman's mouth opening. And the man? He is all appendages. Now the man puts his brown thumb into the woman's open, red mouth. And the woman sucks the man's thumb like she is a baby and his thumb was her own mama's nipple. It's an artful hunger, or it's a hunger of artifice. I can see the woman's whole body—her beautiful, made-up face. Her ass is taut, but she's not tense, she's just twenty-something and she's taut because of that twenty-something-ness. Her breasts make no sense. They

are too large and hard to be comfortable. My own set are small and soft—I've breastfed four children. But this woman's look so sturdy they must be uncomfortable to carry around, discomfoting to touch. The man, actually, hasn't yet touched them at all. Touching or not touching; this is the kind of thing that gets put into a legal contract.

Instead of touching her breasts, the man grabs the woman's waist and pulls her body right onto his body. The camera goes in close, and it looks like the woman's vagina is a ravenous, unlipsticked mouth sucking the man's penis. The camera pulls back out and the woman's actual face looks—what the hell—like she might cry. Like she'd been crying already. The good kind of crying. Like, the-sex-is-so-good-I'm-falling-in-love-right-now kind of crying. Which makes no sense. Because that would mean that this woman is really acting, or that she is maybe even feeling something real. Like emotion. Which is particularly disturbing because another man ends up in the middle of them. I know this because the video was at the threesome when I caught it.

This is my child's laptop. My youngest. The only boy. I have no idea how to wipe his computer clean. I have no idea how to make sure that tomorrow at 9:00 a.m., when

he logs into his Google classroom, this video won't pop up, like it did this morning. I'm watching it now because I want to know what he knows. It's 11:57 p.m., and I am so tired that I start to cry, but I keep watching the two people doing so many things, and they are doing them so hard and so well.

2.

## That Morning

OK, Josie. You remember how your mother used to tell you she had a sixth sense? Or that she had eyes in the back of her head? And remember how, when you were a kid, you thought that it might be fucking true, because *how on earth* did she know all that she knew. Right, Josie? You remember when you got wise and realized that it wasn't magic Mom had, just wisdom, just her own memory of childhood? And then you knew your mother was no better, no different than you. Just older. Remember? Josie?

Well, get yourself, together Professor Baker. Fact is, you had no clue. Because something completely unconsidered—let's call it what it is, a mother's intuition—led

you to your son's room this morning. He's in the middle of a school homeroom meetup/hangout/whatever, which means you have a break from him, and there is no reason at all for you to go into his damn room. The email the teacher sent even said something like that—that this is independent work. You read that email. You read all the damn emails. Because that is how you are, Josie. You have integrity, and as an educator yourself, you respect his teacher. He is being teacher supervised right then, albeit through a screen.

But when you walk into that boy's room, you stand over him and you notice first that he has muted himself. Because anyone, the teacher and all the students, can clearly hear, or *would have* been able to clearly hear, the sounds coming from the video in the pop-up window that emphatically is *not* part of your son's homeroom meetup/hangout/whatever session. The boy—your boy—is not engaged with the larger part of his screen, now featuring a video on Representative John Lewis; his teacher and his fellow students' faces in little squares to the right—some kids looking at their screens, some eating, some intermittently punching away a younger sibling, some nothing more than an empty chair; the teacher smiling as though her face is frozen,

which maybe it is. And there is your son's face, looking as though he is looking at the screen, but not blinking, and with his eyes averted just a little. Your son is so transfixed by the actions in the small video, small though it may be, that he doesn't even slam his laptop closed when you enter his room. He just looks up slowly when you stand over him, your own mouth covered, his own mouth open and his eyes dry. This is your son, remember. With eyes red like he hasn't blinked in twenty-two minutes, which is how long the video has been going. You, his mother, simply lift the laptop off of his lap, where his pants are tented.

To anyone looking at you, you are totally calm; you are calmness itself. But inside, your heart is literally hurting, it's beating so damn hard. Each of your other three children have computers too. You turn out of your children's room and walk up quietly behind the girls, huddled at the dining table. Your daughters don't turn to look at you. They are doing the same homework, even though they are not triplets and are not, any of them, in the same grade. The middle school has just one curriculum for sixth and seventh and eighth—which is bullshit, but you are so grateful for this bullshit. All of their laptops are open, but they are crowded around the middle of them, as they

do. The computer is reading to them, like they are preschoolers. It is the story of a princess who wants badly to sleep but can't because of pee underneath her bed. Or a pea underneath her bed. You suddenly don't know the difference.

You don't speak to the baby—who is not a baby, the boy—until hours later, after the girls have set the table for dinner.

You'd wanted to stop at the girls.

You'd wanted to stop at two, to be honest. But your husband had wanted a third. That one broke you. And then your husband had wanted a son. Your *ex*-husband. And that boy broke you for good, in all the ways.

When your boy comes to the dining table this evening, his face, brown as it is, is aflame. His eyes are narrowed and his jaw is clenched. "What is your problem?" asks one of the girls—the middle one who feels some kinship to her brother because she is sure she is the only one of you who wanted him. "*You* are my problem," he yells back. "You, all of you!" Which you gather he'd been wanting to say for a while, because this is the kind of elegant retort your son can't normally muster off the cuff. You alone are his mother and so you alone know that he is embarrassed,

maybe scared that he might be in trouble because of the video. Or maybe scared that his sisters might know about the video. Well, it's not fear exactly but something more refined: shame. But your baby boy has one of those faces Black boys too often have in this country, one that looks more grown up than it should. He doesn't look scared. He looks scary.

3.

Back to Now

I had picked up the laptops three weeks ago when the schools in Atlanta went virtual. Then, the computers had seemed like lifelines. Thank God I'd chosen the good school district over my ex's demands that the kids and I move to a more affordable area. He didn't want his child support payment going up. He never said that exactly, but I was married to him for over a decade. And now? Oh, vindication, because since the pandemic canceled school, every single child in our district had the tech they needed by the end of week one of online schooling. New York, where the kids' dad lived, had still been *in* school then. But

Atlanta was already good to go. “You are taking my Black son to the racist deep South?!” my ex had shouted on the phone. But Atlanta was more prepared than anywhere for a health pandemic, perhaps because they’d been having a racial one for a century. Well, whatever it takes.

But this? Porn on a school-issued laptop? Didn’t they put protections on these things? Shouldn’t this never ever happen? Even if my boy had looked up “sex with a woman,” the computer should have known to decline! Forbid! But instead, this school-issued device served my boy a threesome with a white woman and two Black men. My Black boy. My boy, who is ten and tall and strong for his age. Ten! And Black boys are always being made to think that their sexual prowess is what they have to offer. Even the overattention given to them for sports and dance is about sex, all about the idea that Black men were made for studding, as they had been during slavery. I have my doctorate in exactly this sort of thing. And here is the local elementary school making it too easy for my boy to slide right into the stud-slave stereotype. And ten! He is only ten.

His father is back in New York, probably watching porn all day and night, now that he’s in quarantine. He lives in

New Rochelle, which is the center of it all, it seems. He’d probably seen this exact video. He’d watched so much ugly porn when we were going through the divorce, like how people bury their sorrows in drink.

4.

Back in the Day

Let’s go back. Back to when Josie was a married woman. When she had it all, everything she wanted. A tenure-track job, three beautiful, healthy brown children. A husband who was six foot two and recently named Professor of the Year for Excellent Teaching—which for Josie translated into a husband with whom she could wear stilettos and talk nerdy. A dream. But let’s go to a room. A small sterile room.

The room was not Dr. Josephine Baker’s office. It was not her classroom. Either of those rooms would have made her an authority. Her office had her degrees in wood on the wall, and her awards in glass on the shelves, and a stack of playing cards featuring Black feminist icons in varnished card-stock paper on her desk. There was always

an orchid on her filing cabinet. Sometimes it was yellow, sometimes it was purple—her sorority colors. Whenever an orchid stopped blooming, she would throw it away and get another. Her office smelled like the spray she used—something citrus or coconut to remind her of home. Even though the island where she was from didn't smell like oranges, and coconuts don't really have a smell until they are in your mouth. It was only that Josie had been trained by colonialism to think that the Caribbean smelled like fruit. In reality, her island smelled like the sea, but that couldn't be replicated.

If the room had been her classroom, it would have smelled of chalk. And of student sweat. And of Dr. Baker's perfume, which was a scent her husband had picked out for her when they were just married and had only a bit of money—mostly her money, which is how it had been then when he was in graduate school, but it was theirs because they were married. Her last name was also their name—because they were married—even though Josephine Baker was a peculiar name for a Black feminist literary scholar. Her husband, who was a sociologist, loved it, adored it, thought it was awesome and said so often. And Josie wanted to be the best wife. And so, she had taken

Baker on with gusto. I'm Josephine Baker, she would say. Josephine Baker, PhD. In her classroom, she wrote it on the board at the start of every single class.

In those rooms, Dr. Baker might say, "Stop. Take a second and think through what you are saying. Are you really making an argument *against* Dionne Brand here in Intro to Feminist Literary Studies? Are you really trying to be against being against language? You might consider that you are using this language, and it is failing you right now." Or she might say, "Just spit it out. I'm not going to change your grade, kid. I have a line of students outside for office hours. I don't keep tissues in my office for these kinds of emotions." Yes, student sweat was the smell.

But this room was not those rooms. This room was a medical examination room, and Josie was not the authority here.

"Just tell me what I need to do. Please." That was Josie in this room.

Josie was using words like "please," and also, she was asking someone else to tell her what to do. She was thinking about her thinking, which was her go-to meta thing when she couldn't think straight. So in her head now she was all: Why did they call this thing she was lying on



a table? Why don't they call it a desk? Was the patient there to be eaten like food? Was medicine really about consumption? But out loud, she was: "Please, help me."

It was just Josie and this white woman in the room. The white woman wasn't wearing a white coat. The woman wasn't even a doctor exactly, but a nurse practitioner, which is always what Josie chose if she had the choice. Josie believed any woman's medical provider should be as witchy as possible, and that meant an NP would do. Her daughters—and she had three of them—saw this same woman. The woman, Nurse Misty, knew Josie. Knew Josie literally inside and out.

"Well. We caught it early. So you have lots of options." The nurse practitioner looked at Josephine and waited for a response. Josie looked back. The NP's face was unmoving. There was a game here. The nurse was a white woman. In America at that time—and before that time and now and perhaps forever more—a white woman knew when to whisper and when to holler, when to get her way and how. This white woman was using her white woman power for good: she knew what Josie wanted. And she knew she had to give it to Josie in a way that Josie could accept.

"Well. Dr. Baker. There is Mifeprex and Misoprostol.

That's the abortion pill. You have another week or so if that is how we decide to go. After that, the options narrow." The nurse practitioner looked at Josie straight between the eyes, like she was taking aim. "After that, we are looking at a D and E. Surgery. They'll put you under, so you won't feel it. We don't do that here."

Josie became more still and more quiet. Nurse Misty proffered a box of tissue, which at least got our girl Josie to move. Josie wiped her eyes, she wiped her nose. She felt great sympathy for her students now. After this day, she'll go out and buy a six-pack of tissues to keep under her desk. She's had so many white women cry in her office. Cry because Christina Sharpe made them cry. Because Hadiya Sewer made them cry. Because Claudia Rankine made them cry. Because the C- that Dr. Baker gave them made them cry. In a college classroom, Black women just seemed to make white women cry. But out in the real world, it was the other way around. Such as in this room, the real world of a medical office. Nurse Misty was making Dr. Baker cry.

"Dr. Baker?" said the nurse, insisting, Josie knew, on Josie's title because she wanted to remind Josie, remind this woman on her table, that this was *her* decision to

make. And that she, Josie, was fully capable of making such a decision.

“The morning-after pill?” Josie asked now, because that was the only thing she knew about it. She was beyond the shame of admitting that she—who professed over such things as women’s bodies as metaphor for landscape, and illness in girl characters as existential trial—did not know what in the hell Misoprostol was. But every twelve-year-old female American had heard of the morning-after pill. In college, Josie had marched for the right to whisper “morning-after pill” into the huge rubbery ear of a kind but grumpy pharmacist. Josie had marched in a NOW parade to fight for—what legislation? No one who was there could remember, years later. But everyone who was there remembered Josie’s T-shirt; some of them even imagined they’d worn the same T-shirt, but we know that it had only been Josie. “I have had an abortion,” it read. Big and bright and red like period blood on a white T-shirt, even though it wasn’t true. Josie had never had an abortion, then or since. At this point in the story, she’d had three pregnancies, never had a miscarriage. She’d wanted every baby she ever had.

She’d had every baby she ever wanted.

“You’re too far along for the morning-after pill,” said the nurse.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck ... fuck. Josie didn’t have language, and language was her thing. Josie was feeling things that made no sense, in that they all made sense but were contradictory. She felt things such as, You can’t have another baby, Josie. And, But wouldn’t it be nice for you to meet this person, since he or she is already on the way? Out loud Josie said something that had no place for doubt: “I already have three children.”

“You already have three children,” Nurse Misty said flatly. Nurse Misty, Josie noted again, was white. And Josie was thankful for the ignorance and bliss of that whiteness. An older Black nurse here in Westchester, New York, may have called Josie “ma’am.” An older Black nurse in Westchester, New York, might have made clear the thing that Josie also knew: that a married, educated woman like Dr. Baker was just the kind of Black woman Black people in America needed to be procreating. This nurse, for her part, had never forgotten that Josie was Black, which is why she kept calling her Dr.

“I’m a professor,” Josie said.

“You are a professor,” said the nurse, because she knew.

"I need to finish my book and get tenure."

"You need to finish your book and get tenure."

"And the last pregnancy nearly broke me."

"*Did* break you," corrected the nurse.

5.

#### Back Before That Even

Nurse Practitioner Misty had been there. Had held Josie's hand, had told Josie that, yes, it was going to hurt more than the previous two deliveries combined. That the epidural wouldn't get to the bone, that the anesthesia was unfortunate because now it meant Josie's legs were numb and so Josie couldn't even use them to brace herself. "Dr. Baker, the pain is going to define pain from here on," the NP had said. "But you will live." And then, "And the baby will live." The two MDs and Josie's own husband were down between Josie's legs. The nurse was up by Josie's head.

Within minutes, her husband was grinning and taking photos and cutting the cord. But first, before all that, Josie's pelvic bone had snapped in two. Stars had burst in her head like fireworks, and blood filled her mouth like

she had gulped it from a lake of blood. She didn't hear her daughter's screaming, because that newborn girl didn't scream. Josie wouldn't have known either way; her own shrieks came from her chest and had nothing to do with her, except that they were all she could hear. Her husband had looked at her like she was evil, something straight from hell. Something he had to protect himself and his baby daughter from. Then he had turned from her to cut the cord.

Three months later Josie was sitting on a panty full of ice and in front of a divorce lawyer, the newborn baby nursing at her breast. Josie kept that attorney a secret between her and the baby. "I just want to get information," Josie had said to the woman across the desk. "You'll be back," said the attorney. "Most men ain't shit. And they only get worse when their wives have children."

6.

#### Back to: Back in the Day

Let's get back to that room. The room of nightmares. The room that Josie will return to again in her mind, in her

sleep, in her prayers. “My body can’t do that again,” Josie said now to Nurse Misty. Josie realized she was crying again because the nurse was offering her the tissue again. This tissue wasn’t the tough hospital kind. It was thick and unsanitary in its plushness. Josie took note. She would always and forever have the plush kind in her own office, for her own students.

The nurse pursed her lips. The nurse had an opinion that she herself didn’t approve of, but she was a good nurse and so did not keep the information back: “Your body actually can do it again, Dr. Baker. But I would not recommend it. It is not recommended.”

Which was unfortunate, we know. Because that equivocation would make it too hard and too easy for Josie. Nurse Misty could see it in Dr. Baker’s face. The nurse tried again. She smiled now, which meant things were getting serious.

“Dr. Baker, how long were you in the wheelchair?”

“Just a month or so.” The “just” was so ridiculous, even Josie smiled.

She’d had two small children and a newborn. Her husband, who was already senior faculty, was on paternity leave too. Their university was generous and progressive.

He was working on an article for the *Journal of the Association of Sociology Scholars (Journal of ASS)*. Josephine was working on learning how to walk again. She would interrupt her husband’s writing and thinking to ask him to put something on a plate for her, so she could eat. It was hard to make a sandwich from the wheelchair. When her favorite cousin, Denise, called to check on her, Josie said, “He is always so helpful. He makes me lunch. He brings the baby to me so I can nurse.” Josie would smile at her husband with the phone in the crook of her shoulder. The baby in her arms. He would meet her eyes and smile back, as if he believed what she was saying. Then, one day when she got off the phone, he’d asked: “Do you really think you need that wheelchair? Or do you just like being able to tell your friends that I serve you?” And he hadn’t been smiling.

“Dr. Baker. How long did you use the walker?” asked the nurse now. The nurse practitioner and the PhD had only been together in this room for minutes, but it felt like hours, hours, hours. Josie’s new life would begin in this room. And end. The walker? The walker was still in their apartment two years later, in the closet where her husband wouldn’t have to see it. Often, when he left before her, she

would call her eldest daughter to pull the walker out so Josie could navigate the apartment more easily. The eldest was only nine then, but the child never told her father that she did this for her mother. Now, in this room, Josie did not answer the nurse.

“Misty. Just tell me, please. What would it be like this time?”

“Dr. Baker. Your recovery time would be longer. You would have trouble walking, maybe for years. Maybe for always. You’ll be needing cortisone shots when you hit your fifties and your natural estrogen starts to drop—”

“Shots in my pussy?”

“Yes, Dr. Baker. Shots in your pubic symphysis. They help.”

“Until they don’t,” said Josie, because Josie’s mother had taken cortisone before the cancer. It helped until it didn’t. And then, well, there was her mother’s cancer.

“Correct, Dr. Baker. The cortisone shots won’t keep the pain away forever.”

“I don’t want another baby.” Which was the most true reason, and the one that Josie had to wait until the end to get to.

“You don’t have to have another baby.”

“But I have to talk with my husband.”

Nurse Misty faltered for the first time. Her brows went up, and her back went straight. The nurse nodded. It was over.

7.

Back in the Day, a few weeks later

Here’s the thing. Josie’s husband had wanted a boy so badly. The man, let’s recall, was smart and charming—won a teaching award for how besotted his students could be. His campaign for the baby was clever and cruel: He picked up his nephew “for hoops,” even though he had never done that before. He went over to a male grad student’s apartment to watch a sports event. Again, something he had never done. “Just guy time.” That was Tuesday and Wednesday. On Thursday, during family dinner, he asked the girls if they wanted another sibling. “A brother would be cool,” their second daughter said and looked at her father for approval. “Gross,” said their eldest. “A brother *would* be cool,” her husband said and looked at his wife. The littlest girl was little and said nothing. On Friday,

Josie's husband reinstated date night, though they'd given that up since the most recent baby was born, and walking out and about had been an uneasy thing.

Over unagi and edamame, the man made his case clear: "I know this is your decision, but it's also *our* decision," and "We can do this," though they knew, and the waiter knew, and anyone of us who has ever made it to adulthood knew, that the "we" actually meant just Josie and that no one, not even the witch Nurse Misty, really knew what might happen. They didn't know if this was even the hoped-for boy. On Saturday, Josie's husband took the girls out for ice cream with the littlest—and he never took the littlest—"Giving you some *you* time." Though all Josie did in the empty house was clean and cry. Then on Sunday, they all went to church. As they always did.

The pastor was gifted and obscenely handsome. His wife was the choir director, but the pastor controlled the all-woman choir as though they were each his own woman and they knew him intimately. The women stood and shouted and trilled and moaned based entirely on the movement of the pastor's fingers. His sermon was called "Black Life Matters," which he announced at the start, making everyone, Dr. Baker included, nod. Some of the

more Pentecostal among them made loud affirming noises. Some waved their hands. The pastor repeated the phrase again and again, "Black Life Matters," winding through police brutality and school justice and prison reform, and then, finally, he began to manipulate the phrase. "Black Men Matter. Black Boys Matter. Black Babies Matter."

Dr. Baker is a literature professor, after all, so she could see where the language was going. She looked over at her husband, his guilty face locked onto the pastor. Before the pastor could say, "All Black Life Matters," Josie was getting second person with herself. Stand up, Josie, she commanded herself. Walk out, Josie. She walked out of the sanctuary as the pastor shouted to her back, "We know how hard this is for our Black mothers, we respect your choice as a woman ... but as a church community, we need our Black boys to come into this world. *They* take them out, *we* can't take them out too."

When Josie stood, her daughters followed her instinctually, but her husband stayed in the pew. "Black Unborn Life Matters!" yelled the pastor, and the choir started screaming. Josie stayed downstairs in the church's fellowship hall until it was time for church to let out. The girls ran circles around the huge open space, while Josie waited

and stared into another space inside of herself. It never dawned on Josie to command herself to leave her husband there at church. That would come later.

The next day was Monday, and Josie went back to the doctor. She hadn't made an appointment, and so Nurse Misty wasn't available. "I just want to know the gender," she said, her professor voice stern. "Probably too soon to tell if it's wiener or bun," but they let a tech hook her up anyway. "Hot dog," said the tech. Josie didn't tell her husband that she would keep the baby. But he knew. He'd known all along.

Josie was in the wheelchair, again, before the baby was even born. She had the boy. And then she rolled herself into the divorce attorney's office three months after he was born. She'd left him with a nanny, because she couldn't maneuver the wheelchair and nurse him at the same time.

She would never make tenure because she would never finish her book. She would never be rid of her ex's stupid name because it was on all of her published papers—which is all she would ever have to show she earned her profession. Josephine Baker, PhD.

8.

Back to Now

So I'm still here now waiting for the part where the woman has a big Black dick in her mouth and another big Black dick in her ass. But the other man hasn't even arrived on the scene yet, and it is already fourteen minutes in. It is a long video. The boy, my boy, must have thought of the first man as a big, muscular version of himself. I wonder if it scared him when another man entered. Who would he imagine that man to be? The beautiful, sexy woman never seems to de-slick, even when she gets two dicks going at her. This is why men don't understand that it takes actual creativity to keep a woman going. I'm watching this and I'm embarrassed. But not for the reason another version of me would think. I'm embarrassed because I've never been in a threesome. Never even seen one. I'm waiting for that part because that is where the video was when I walked in on my boy.

My ex-husband had suggested that—a threesome. "As a way," he said, "to save our marriage." I mean. Men. I told him I didn't know a Black man who would do that, even though I knew my husband wasn't suggesting a threesome

with another man. That would mean something for *me*, and my ex-husband never thought that way, never thought about what I might want.

And so here we are now. My own son, my baby, has discovered his own simple, stupid, selfish dick. And that women's bodies are there to selflessly take said dick. Or dicks.

And now my bedroom door is opening. "Mom," says my son's baby voice from the shadows. He is speaking numbly and flatly because that is how he gets when he is overtired. "I'm sorry, Mom," he says. "The video just popped up and I couldn't look away." He is awake even though it's tomorrow. I can't see him, but I've heard his voice begin to change, and I've been seeing him learn to change it, to manipulate his voice in order to manipulate other people. Me, especially. "Mom?"

I look at the time on the screen again and then realize that my screen is still open, and the video is still on. It hasn't gotten to the point where the second man joins them. I realize, shamefully, wantingly, that this is what I have been waiting for. I close my computer slowly so it seems like there is nothing there to see. "It's OK," I finally say to this boy, who is my boy, even though nothing is OK. The world is being sickened with a virus. My children

haven't spoken to their father in weeks. They haven't seen him in months. The boy steps into my room, as if my OK is consent. And here he is. My son. The baby. "Baby" is what I used to call my husband before this boy was born.

My ten-year-old's little muscled chest is bare. He has a towel around his waist. His whole body is wet; his hair, which is fluffy because barbers are closed since covid, is dripping. He's been in the shower. I've been watching this video so intently that I hadn't even heard the shower going. The one shower in this house of six. No, not six. Five. "Fuck," I say. Which I have never before said in front of my children. I am an English professor, an adjunct, but still. I tell my children that language matters. "Fuck, fuck, fuck," I say again. My son's face is alarmed, which makes him look scared, and—to someone else, someone not his mother—scary. The medical donut I'm sitting on shifts and makes a farting noise, which makes my son smile. His face relaxes now.

"Mommy," he says, less babyish now. "I keep seeing it in my head. And now"—he points to his crotch—"my penis is so hard, it hurts."

"Stop touching it!" I say, like a curse. I look down at my computer again to make sure it's closed.



“But I’m not touching it. It’s doing it all by itself.” He is whining manipulatively again. Or maybe this is all just really awful and worth the whine. None of us has been within six feet of a person who doesn’t live in this house for almost a month now. It’s been lonely, and maybe sex is the most opposite of lonely.

Right now, I wish I was still married. I could have checked out on this long ago. Told his father that this was some boy business, so the two of you take care of it. But I am a single mother. And COVID-19 is killing people. And my family, every family in America, is quarantined for their own safety. And there is no man to come over and have a face-to-face, man-to-man with my boy. I can’t even call my ex-husband; he would blame the school district and me for choosing it. And here is my son, who is only ten, discovering desire for the first time. And he is scared and ashamed. And I am too.

And it is just us here in this room.

“Let’s get you a glass of milk,” I say. “And then you can read a book out loud to me.” I ease myself out of the bed. The donut farts and farts, and we snicker together. I take my tiny geisha steps to the kitchen.

My son pours us each a glass, because, yes, he is ten, but

he is thoughtful. I look through the freezer for the frozen chocolate cake I bought weeks ago. I push aside frozen fish fingers and frozen peas and frozen broccoli. I can’t find that chocolate cake, or any chocolate cake, though I can see the rich, black color in my mind. I give up looking for it but can’t stop wanting it. Instead, I find us something to read.

My son and I meet back in my bedroom. I’ve found a graphic novel for ages eight to twelve. Pictures, but not porn—perfect. We’ve read it before, but the jokes still land. My son laughs until he forgets his near-pubescent body. He snorts milk through his nose. His body is a boy’s body, and at this moment, his body has nothing to do with sex. His body is about laughter and milk snort. I yelp, but I don’t care that he gets milk all over my sheets. “Sshhh!” we both say to each other and then cover our mouths. We hear one of the girls tossing in the room next door. I take over the reading, and we read the book until the book is almost done. I don’t finish because he’s fallen asleep, his warm body against mine, a milk mustache on his innocent face. I look at him for a while. I feel in love.

The donut beneath my butt is flaccid, the air gone from it. I tug myself off the bed. I put my arms beneath my boy’s body. I brace myself. Then I lift him.

My physiatrist says I should not be carrying anything heavier than a textbook, and my son—my baby—he is tall and strong for his age. But I am still taller and stronger. When I lift him, I feel the lightning of pain from my groin to my ass and hips, like someone scraped a knife from one crack to the other. I lurch but I don't drop my boy. My mouth fills with spit, and it tastes thick with milk. I think of the chocolate cake, and I remember that I had never bought a chocolate cake at all. I say in my mind, Josie, this is the last time you will carry your boy. He is too old for this. You are too broken for this. I want to cry, commanding myself this way. But instead, I say, "Don't cry, Josie," out loud, though in a whisper. I think of the ice on my pubic bone.

I carry my boy down the hallway, taking my steps easy so the pain doesn't shoot, just sits. He is so limp and so heavy in sleep. The bedroom door is open. In the darkness of his room, I stand over his bed and wonder how I am going to lower him down. How am I going to lean over and not drop him and not break myself? It's me or him.

But I'm a mother, and so of course I choose to not wake him. Ice after, I say into the room of my mind. The image of the ice is delicious. I slowly lean over the bed.

I am doing this so slowly; so slowly I can feel my muscles shivering. I feel hot. I feel sweat. I bend my knees, lean my butt back—but still the pain.

When my boy's head finally kisses the pillow, my legs buckle, but I manage to get him gently onto the mattress before I sink to my knees. The pain in my pubis is now also in my armpits, and in my ass crack, and in that little dip at the back of my skull, but I don't make a sound. I stay there, kneeling, for a few minutes, waiting for the floor to stop spinning. Waiting for the feeling that I just broke my body to stop being the primary feeling. I listen to the girls' sleeping breaths from around the room, because they all four share this room. Because I can't afford a three bedroom in this school district. I try to still the space between my legs, the space where I made these children, but it feels like someone touched a torch to me there, and I am still on fire. I think of the walker in my closet. I need it, but it's where I need to go, back in my bedroom. I think of ice, and my mouth wets.

"Josie," I have asked myself many times before, "do you regret your boy?" No, I don't regret my child. I would die for this boy, easily. This boy has almost killed me already, and still, I would choose him over me again and again. "But,

Josie,” I have asked myself, “do you regret keeping the pregnancy that turned out to bear this boy?” Yes. Absolutely. “Do you regret marrying his father?” Yes, Josie, I do. Every day. The regret is even in my dreams. “And, Josie, if you could go back in time and choose to never marry their father, would you have chosen against that man, even though it would mean never having had *these* children, Josie, your children?” Yes, Josie. I want another version of my life. One where I have just two children. Or maybe just three. I want tenure at a respectable institution. I want my dissertation turned into a book. Don’t we all know, girl. “We know that what you really want, Josie, is a husband who loved you enough to choose your body over this boy’s body.” Yes. And also, I want ice.

My mouth waters. Yes, I want ice so badly. And so I start to stand. Carefully, so carefully. When I stand, I look down at my baby boy, and I see that he is awake. Wide awake. He’d never been asleep at all. His eyes are open, staring, wanting all of me just for himself. Josie? Josie?

## CLIMATE PRIMER FOR BABIES

BY DEBORAH LANDAU

### 1. *A melt in the cryosphere*

Reincarnation appeals to babies.

They might come back thousands of years after  
the trash and plunder

(such *tristesse*!)

to feel our great regret.

The babies are singing to keep it from happening.

They think there’s a way outta here.

Evening comes on.

2. *Acid oceans*

Dear babies, we're sorry.  
 Some curse we brought upon yourselves.  
 The lake dried up we find less and less shade  
 for your days yet still sperm forth.  
 Fish in shortish supply plums in short supply—air.  
 From womb to tomb to womb in loop-the-loop, and how  
     we clung to it.  
 Milk for everyone meat for everyone gas for everyone  
     water and heat and air  
 the planet grown dystopian crepuscular—  
 and why did we prick forth a child.

3. *Wildfires*

If we'd known the fate of babies would we have moth-  
     ered them?  
 It's cringeworthy.  
 Babies, we're ashamed. What the fuck.  
 Day then night, then another blazing irradiated day.  
 The roly-poly babies grow frantic.  
 In their eyes you can see they might be giving up.  
 They're writing our postscript.  
 This is not what they'd been promised.

Ah! They start to cry.

4. *Smog*

Another smoky morning. Are we all that matters?  
 This has gone too far.  
 We fucked up the curriculum  
 and now the babies will pay  
     *damned the planet they'll inherit*  
     *damned the planet they'll*  
     *damned the planet*  
     *damned*  
 They wait in our apocalypse box.  
 There's no way out.

5. *Hostile habitats*

What good are father and mother now?  
 We can mr and mrs all night but the comfort is slight.  
 We try to sleep but don't have much expertise at it,  
 crushed in bed we search each other  
 for some alternative, swelling for a while  
 with the plumpest most syrupy distraction  
 until there's some marveling at the world, the stroke and  
     colors of it.

Such flush intensifies the reddened place we make our  
days.

In our blazing hands break all the apple trees.

#### 6. *Weeds, diseases, pests*

These are the babies of mourning.

Levity as a liquor of sorts a songbird in the hedge  
blooming

calm of vanilla entering the bloodstream lithing down  
the ribs.

A boom on the skyline and the babies are in a rhythmic  
kind

of extinction—above the city an illumination.

Meanwhile at crib level at the height of their height they  
are still

amusing themselves with a groove and a hoot  
their bodies a sampling a song more and more unfun  
yet with a spunk for living still they are hungry  
and we are three times a day.

#### 7. *Mass extinctions*

We couldn't master ourselves.

We kept asking for it, asking for it—

the climate emergent and feral following its own  
chemistry

our chemistry was anxiety our prison self-inflicted  
the city stops the day fills with cups and cups of smoke  
we knew it was coming knew it would come  
a library of irradiated air flooding aglow  
and strolling velvets us all onward into summer fire.

\*\* Note: *Heading titles are taken from* “How Climate Change Plunders the Planet,” Environmental Defense Fund, <https://www.edf.org/climate/how-climate-change-plunders-planet>.

## SCARLET LETTER

BY SARAH GERARD

MY HUSBAND WAS UNEMPLOYED, and I'd been working for two months at a magazine where I stared into a computer screen all day for a near-minimum-wage salary. I confirmed I was pregnant in the bathroom of The Grey Dog on Mulberry Street, the day after I found out my first book would be published, after months of rejection. I was twenty-eight.

I'd been married three tumultuous years. I was dreaming of an exit I wouldn't find for another three. Our marriage from the start was ill conceived—we were young and

impulsive. We were living in a tiny studio apartment the size of a prison cell. We called my parents from my husband's car, parked across the street from our marriage counselor's office, to ask them for five hundred dollars.

I called in sick the day I took the second pill. I'd taken the first one the day before and had carried my dead fetus for twenty-four hours. I lay crying in the bathtub with my husband, blood snaking through the water around us, dying it pink, waves breaking through my abdomen.

My grief seemed to stand in opposition to my politics. It was dark and overwhelming, my uterus a cavern. I bled for weeks. I was alone in my body, preoccupied with my perceived debt to my mother's generation for the sacrifices and stands they'd made that had won me freedom from unplanned parenthood. Admitting I was in pain was an unspeakable secret, something I could never reveal, even to myself.

The persistent cultural stigma around reproductive freedom denied me the right to grieve properly, so my anger and sorrow spilled out everywhere. Each successive failure to write about it only underlined its banality. I shoe-horned it into the first paragraph of a book review, only to have the editor who had solicited me turn it down. "I

had an abortion too," she told me, "but it's really nobody's business."

I'd hoped to give my trauma at least some use. I grappled with the undramatic nature of it: I had not been raped, I was not a teenager, I was not homeless, I was not even single. At the time, I believed that I needed a justification. I don't. Neither do you. I was forced to admit that my story was unremarkable—as it should be.

I have never wanted to be pregnant. Some women find the experience of bodily transformation fascinating; I do not. I felt as if my body had been stolen from me. I've had a conflicted relationship with my body since childhood; I struggle with gender and food. It's taken me a long time to learn to nourish rather than to punish, to understand my body's needs and prioritize them. For these reasons, and others ethical and political, I would prefer to, and I will, become a parent through other means.

It's my choice. I don't need to tell you an abortion was right for me; it's right for one in four American women. I don't need to tell you what happens to women who are denied the right to a safe abortion, or what happens to their children—how often they fall through the cracks of a fractured system, how they suffer—how we, spiritually,

as a human race, suffer with them—or how easy it is to find the data of desperation that follows unplanned pregnancies in the public costs of unemployment, government assistance, emergency room visits, domestic violence, hunger, and foster care. I don't need to tell you that the rate of abortions drops with greater access to contraception. That, if I'd had access years ago, I wouldn't be writing this. I don't need to convince you.

## CHRISTIANS IN THE CATACOMBS

BY KIRSTIN VALDEZ QUADE

SOMETIMES, EVEN FIVE YEARS later, after all that happened, Lauren dreams that she is back in Cavalry Youth Group, playing Bible games. Regardless of how uneventful these dreams are—and they're almost always uneventful, with an intense dream-focus on logistics and turn-taking—Lauren wakes in the dark with her heart pounding. Tonight, in the dream, they are playing Biblical Charades, and Lauren is watching Shannon Williams enact something incomprehensible, waving her arms like an octopus. Lauren is trying to concentrate, when her eyes fly open.



Terror courses through her, and she listens in the dark, wondering if whatever woke her was inside or outside the dream. The apartment is quiet. In the vents, the air conditioner labors. Lauren switches on the bedside lamp, listens hard for a noise from the hall, switches off the lamp. Still, she has a sense of a malicious presence breathing in the room. She wraps the blanket tightly around her, despite the fact that it is too hot. Her heart thrashes, the blood loud in her ear.

In life, the games were an embarrassing affair. There was the self-conscious reluctance to participate, countered by the reluctance to let down sad, goofy, enthusiastic Pastor Kevin, and then there was always the moment at the end, when Pastor Kevin gave his earnest, long-winded explanation of the lesson behind whatever stupid game they'd been forced to play. Christians in the Catacombs, for example, was just Sardines, but it was a lesson in Christian persecution, which was a big thing even today. They had to learn about how in the olden times the Christians all crammed into the grave niches in the catacombs to hide from the Romans and, what, slept there? Like Japanese businessmen in those capsule hotels? Lauren thought it was gross, pretending to sleep among dead people, but

she did enjoy folding herself into the utility closet beside Chris Macomb. They barely had a chance to whisper *hello* before geeky Sam Pinto found them and squeezed in, too, plucking at his braces in the dark. Lauren could smell Chris Macomb's powerful deodorant, and she felt his leg against her own.

Bible Verse Pictograms, Balloons of Faith, sometimes just plain old tag. The game Lauren liked best was Guess the Baby, which wasn't actually a game and just happened once, when everyone brought in a baby picture, and Pastor Kevin stuck them on the wall, and you had to guess who was who. The lesson was about how a person can grow closer to Jesus over time. Lauren enjoyed these glimpses into people's pasts, into their home lives, liked seeing whose mothers dressed them like little Edwardian lords and whose mothers photographed them drool-bellied in saggy diapers. Lauren had chosen the picture her mother kept on her bureau, when she was a fat-cheeked one-year-old gazing seriously out from under the big bow stuck atop her bald head.

"You're cute," Chris Macomb said, tapping the bow.

"Thanks," said Lauren. She pointed to the big-headed blond toddler in a baseball jersey. "You too." Even as

a baby, his dimples were as deep as the tufting on a couch.

She didn't have a crush on Chris Macomb per se—all things considered, she was more into Patrick Diaz at school, who was a senior on the soccer team and whose calves she couldn't help staring at. But she thought Chris Macomb might like her, and she liked that. Pastor Kevin, hovering, cast Lauren a warm smile, telegraphing his approval, and Lauren blushed.

Back then, at sixteen, Lauren was a good girl. A good enough girl. She went to church with her parents and little sisters, attended youth group each Wednesday night. At the snack table, she almost always skipped the Safeway cookies and stuck to Diet Coke and carrot sticks. If temptation was especially strong, she had her cinnamon gum. Her grades were high, she ran track—she was especially good at the 400 meter—she volunteered every Tuesday afternoon to read with third graders at a poor school in South Tucson. She loved her tutoring job, loved little Jackson, who, every few minutes would stand and announce, “Time for the wiggle dance!” and shake himself vigorously, then sit, ready once again to frown at the words. She planned to go to community college first, then transfer to the U of A. She'd major in elementary education and help

other little kids find strategies to make their way through the school day.

She definitely had her crap together, but that didn't mean she was uptight. She posted sexy selfies, blowing kisses at the mirror, one tank top strap slipping down a shoulder; she went to parties in the foothills and demurred when offered weed or cigarettes. She'd had a boyfriend the year before, and she'd given him hand jobs and let herself be fingered.

One evening, after a rousing game of In the Lion's Den, Chris Macomb placed a plastic cup of Diet Coke on Lauren's desk, then nudged her, indicating her journaling Bible with his chin. “Nice,” he said. She shrugged. She was proud of her work: her tidy, cheerful handwriting, which could be its own font, her doodles and painstakingly drawn borders. She never used a highlighter, but instead underlined passages with a ruler and a gel pen, according to a color-coded system. Chris's own Bible was filled with blank margins, except for a few notes scrawled in ballpoint when Pastor Kevin put things on the board to copy down.

Chris tapped the page, where she'd written Psalm 119:105 in an outline of a lightbulb, with gold wavering lines emanating from the words. *Your word is a lamp to*

*guide my feet and a light for my path.* She loved those words, had also copied them out on a piece of cardstock she stuck over her desk. It filled her with calm, the idea that a word could be a lamp guiding her on, and all she had to do was attend and follow that bobbing light through the dark. She'd thought, then, that that lamp would always be there, urging her along. "That must've taken a long time," Chris Macomb said. "What do you do if you mess up? Like, do you ever spell something wrong?"

Lauren's face heated with the pleasure of his attention. "Usually I trace it in pencil first, but not always."

She set her mouth carefully. Lauren was the kind of person for whom looking hot was within the realm of possibility but also a major effort. She had to watch how she smiled, because if she smiled big, too much of her gums showed. Her hair was thin and not blond enough. She rinsed it with lemon juice and chamomile, blew it out, sprayed it to give it volume and shine. She almost wished she was less attractive, like Shannon Williams, because then she could just give up and not worry about it.

"Do you want to go see *Frozen IV* with me?" he asked then, and she said yes, even though she wasn't that interested in him, because she thought it was cute. After all, he

was a good guy, liked by teachers and parents and Pastor Kevin. His voice wavered when it was his turn to say what made him blessed, and he always said something sweet, like, "I'm blessed to have such a loving cat." And how many guys wanted to see *Frozen IV*? He paid for her ticket and her Diet Coke and her popcorn (no butter).

After, in the movie theater parking lot, the lights of the mall dim behind them, he'd opened the back door. "Get in," he urged, with those deep dimples, and she'd tipped her head, giggled uncertainly, aware of how she must look to him. She wished she'd reapplied gloss; her lips were dry and stinging a bit from the salt in the popcorn.

She'd been fine with the kissing—into it, even—and didn't mind when he unhooked her bra beneath her shirt. She didn't love when he kneaded her breasts so hard and was almost relieved when he left them alone to work his hand into the waistband of her jeans. She was more surprised when he yanked them down without unzipping them, the denim scraping her hips.

"Thank you for the movie," she said after, when he pulled up in front of her house, and she slid out of the car with relief. She wished he'd drive away, but he waited for her to unlock her front door and go inside.

Lauren watched herself in the mirror on the bathroom door from her perch on the toilet as she gently dabbed between her legs. Her mascara had blurred around her eyes. Her face looked patchy and pale. The pimple on her chin had swelled instead of settling, and foundation was caked around it, dry and cracked. If she held her own gaze, though, she steadied herself, and she didn't think about the thin, bright blood between her legs, which was less than she'd expected. It hurt down there, and so did her throat. "You like this," Chris Macomb had said, and though she kicked and wriggled at first, once he leaned into her windpipe, she stopped struggling and just began to pray.

On television, girls went to the police, and then an investigation began, and the girls were ridiculed at school and online and more often than not they killed themselves, leaving behind a note that broke everyone's hearts.

The missed period wasn't a concern, not at first. She was never regular, and even less during track season. But three weeks passed, then six, and once the fear popped into her mind, the knowledge was lodged in its entirety.

There were no legal abortions anymore, not in Arizona, a change that Lauren herself played a part in, with all her

Right to Life campaigning, the picketing outside clinics. Her signs are still in her parents' basement, with the pictures of bloodied babies ripped with hooks from wombs.

She'd heard, of course, about coat hangers. But the coat hangers in her house were plastic, except two, which were wood. She took a wooden spoon from the snowman canister on the counter that her mother made in a tole-painting class, and, back in her bedroom, inserted it experimentally into her vagina. But the handle was only an inch or so deep before she stopped, heart pounding. She was afraid of Hell, yes, but also afraid of the pain and blood. And what if the baby came out mangled and crying? What would Lauren do then? She extracted the spoon, dragged up her underwear and yoga pants, lay panting on the carpet. The spoon was discolored, stained from some long-ago tomato sauce, and it smelled like garlic. Lauren sat up and vomited into the trash can by her desk.

The pregnancy was hard: she was nauseated well into the third trimester. She remembered her biology class, learning that the baby functions as a kind of parasite, leaching the nutrients from the bloodstream, the minerals from the bone. Soon she felt him move in her, this baby, this person, this soul rammed into her by Chris Macomb.

When she told Chris Macomb, in the parking lot after the last youth group meeting she'd ever attend, he said, "Sucks," but he looked so entirely blanched and terrified that she almost pitied him. She'd been afraid that he might apologize and beg her forgiveness. She'd been afraid he'd insist on marrying her. But his terror calmed her, and she turned away, feeling competent, adult, superior.

"How could you do this to yourself?" her mother asked, her eyes shining with tears. "What about college? Marriage? You had so much going for you." Seeing her mother's distress, Lauren couldn't tell her how it had happened. She said simply that the father wasn't going to be involved, and her mother swallowed and nodded. Her parents helped her, though, helped her find an apartment and to arrange for day care, and Lauren graduated from high school and found a job as a receptionist at a day spa on Speedway.

Now Nathan is four years old. His face has narrowed from the face of a baby into the face of a child. Nathan resembles the picture on the classroom wall when they played Guess the Baby: the same curly sandy hair and brown eyes, the same deep dimples, but he doesn't smile much.

Lauren has, mostly, grown out of the little cruelties. When he was a baby, for example, she might take away the bottle before he was done. Or scrub his bottom too harshly. Or wait to pick him up when he cried for her, distressed. *Go away, go away*, she'd chant quietly as she held him, and he sucked industriously at his bottle, gazing calmly up into her face.

She no longer fantasizes about leaving him—in the car on the hot day, behind a scalding dumpster—but in the beginning, the fantasies were so constant that she, in essence, inoculated herself from ever actually accidentally leaving him. She cannot love this child, but she loves him anyway.

At school, apparently, Nathan has antics: impersonations of elephants, funny voices he pulls out. "Oh, he's a real ham," one of the preschool teachers tells her, and Lauren doesn't know what she means. He's not a ham at home. At home he's serious and considerate, bringing her pictures he's drawn of the two of them standing together outside various structures: houses and castles and tree forts. Always, the two of them are holding hands and Lauren is smiling hugely. He must have heard about breakfast in bed at school—from a picture book?—because for

a week he brings her crackers and apples on a tray in the morning, until she tells him not to.

Each time he performs one of these little services, she thanks him and makes herself hug him, but it's creepy, isn't it? A kid being so solicitous? She can't help but think of Chris Macomb bringing her cups of soda at youth group. "You like Diet, right?"

Yesterday, when she went to pick up Nathan from day care, she watched him chase a girl across the playground. The girl fell, and Nathan skidded to a stop beside her, lunged down. He stretched over the girl, their bodies close, and bile rose in Lauren's throat.

Then he extended his hand, pulled the girl up. "It's OK," he said, inspecting the sand pressed into her knees, brushing them off gently. He peered at the sand that came off into his hand.

Lauren gripped the monkey bars. How could she think she could pursue elementary education? She thought sourly of little Jackson and his wiggle dance.

Sometimes, in the dream, Nathan is there with her at Cavalry Youth Group. They are playing Christians in the Catacombs. She and Nathan are hiding in the utility closet, which is also the linen closet at her parents' house.

Outside, steps are coming closer, and the smell of death is thick around them. She tries to push him beneath the pillows to save him from the Romans, and she knows she is pushing the pillow too hard into his face. But each time Nathan slips out and eyes her grimly. "Here I am," he says.

But this is not the dream that woke her tonight. Tonight, the dream that woke her was Biblical Charades. Nothing scary happened, nothing happened at all, just Shannon Williams waving her arms wildly around her head. Burning bush?

Lauren plumps her pillow, moves to the cooler side of the bed, and arranges herself beneath the sheet. She closes her eyes and breathes slowly, counting in and out.

Her mind is still alert; if there was a sound to hear, she'd hear it. But there is nothing, except, perhaps, the faintest shift in the pressure of the air. She opens her eyes.

Her son is standing above her, his pale face looming over her in the dark.

Lauren opens her mouth to scream but can't, as if a hand were on her windpipe, and the scream dilates inside her.

"Mommy," he whispers. "I need you."

## WE BLED ALL WINTER

BY SHELLY ORIA

### I

WE BLED THAT WHOLE winter. I fell in the snow once, carrying groceries, and when I rose I watched the white beneath me swallow up some red, making a light pink stain. You could see sprinkles of street dirt if you looked hard. It was beautiful in the way anything can be beautiful.

My girlfriend hacked the neighbors' internet searching for answers. How much bleeding was normal when terminating a pregnancy—I didn't listen well when we left the clinic, but more than a few days seemed excessive—and was there any precedent to her sympathy bleeding?

“Sympathy bleeding” was what we called it, what we guessed was happening. The internet said what the internet always said: most likely we both had cancer. When Jasmin returned from the backyard—leaning against the fence, we could often catch the stolen signal—she seemed exhausted. *It’s over*, she said, *we’re dying*. She was joking, but I could see the fear. I chuckled, to remind her we were fierce. *Oh*, she said, *also we should see our doctor right away*. The internet always assumed everyone had a doctor.

I appreciated my girlfriend’s blood at first, this physical proof of her worry, then resented it because it felt like her body was mimicking mine. Maybe I just wanted sole ownership of my one trauma; back home, where my girlfriend’s people are oppressed by mine, my girlfriend suffered multiple unfathomable traumas. She watched military bulldozers mangle her Nablus childhood home, then grind the parts down to dust and debris, and she told that story like it was nothing, because there was so much worse. She didn’t share those horrors with me often, but sometimes she tried. I never knew how to love her right in those moments.

Some days that winter, the blood felt contained, subtle, an afterthought. On those days we pretended nothing was

wrong. Other days we’d wake to soaked bedsheets, color anything that hosted our lower bodies for more than a moment. I’d put a soft hand over my girlfriend’s because her face looked like she was ready to take some sort of action; I feared the moment when she’d try and fail. She felt protective, and responsible for getting me here—she came first, found a restaurant that would hire us both off books, asked me to join—so I knew she’d do anything. A willingness to do anything when nothing is possible can be dangerous. This was a country preoccupied with the notion of citizenship, a country in which health was costly and the cost of money high. I knew these things only from watching movies and the news, but my girlfriend had lived here before; she warned me that we would be on the wrong side of so much, on the wrong side of safety. I heard what she never said too: she was used to hardship, but I might crumble. My hand on her hand was saying I wasn’t crumbling. It was saying, “Let’s wait it out. The bleeding may still get better. It may one day pass.”

Despite the freezing cold, my girlfriend would spend stretches of time in the backyard asking the internet all our questions, because our phones were shit and hardly worked inside. Or our plan was shit, because we were



broke, and reception was shit, because we had to leave the city when we quit our job; here in the boonies we could crash for free, but there weren't many cell towers. (*We're not in the boonies*, my girlfriend would say, half amused, half annoyed; *there are houses on both sides of this house*. My girlfriend often corrected me about terms people used in this country. *Then what do you call it when there's more trees than people and you can't get online?* I'd ask. *A sign that you've taken some wrong turns*, my girlfriend would say.) She'd come back to me with answers to random questions, with guesses as to what might be going on with our bodies, with tips for our situation. *Meat!* she declared once; *balancing our hemoglobin levels is key*.

One thing I learned that winter is that everything I'd thought about blood was wrong. Bleeding is strength. A bleeding body is a strong body: it is unafraid to give itself to the earth. It is unafraid to grow frail. There is no greater strength than the lack of fear at the prospect of weakness.

Before that winter, I never considered myself strong. I considered my girlfriend strong, maybe the strongest person I'd ever met. And when, soon after I arrived in this country, things got tense at the restaurant where we worked, because she and Ohad, the owner, openly disliked

each other, I thought the tension could be explained by their shared exceptional strength; in my experience, remarkably strong people rarely got along. *You don't mean strong, you mean charismatic*, Jasmin said when I tried to sell her on this theory. *No no no*, I said, mostly because the conversation suddenly felt like a trap; if I admitted I found Ohad charismatic, some questions might follow. It took me a while, likely longer than it should have, to face the real reason for this trouble: the attention Ohad was paying me.

When my girlfriend's cousin—whose basement we were staying in—learned about our situation, he began checking on us every few days, though we all knew that really he was only checking up on Jasmin. He wouldn't come in, always talked to us from the doorstep; I suspected he wanted to keep his distance from me. So when Jasmin was out getting his car oil changed and he knocked on our door, I assumed it was some kind of mix-up. But when I opened, he came in, sat down at the kitchen table—our basement was its own small apartment—and gestured for me to do the same. When he mentioned Ohad's name my face must have lost some of its color, which had a yellow hue these days to begin with; he moved a glass of water

that was on the table in my direction. When I did nothing he said *Drink* in a way that told me no matter how bad or frail I looked, we were having this conversation. Apparently, because we were hard to reach, Ohad had been writing to me and getting no response; he ended up tracking down and calling my girlfriend's cousin, who, because he was smart and knew he should update me on this in private, was tasked with curating a situation in which my girlfriend would be absent. We sold sandwiches at a local shop in the mornings, but other than that we rarely left the house.

*This Ohad is your boss*, he said, *yours and Sabrin's*? No one ever called my girlfriend Sabrin except her family. *Yes*, I said, *former boss. He thinks you are carrying his child*, he said. *Yes*, I said. *He is married?* he said, and I couldn't tell if it was in fact another question, but I nodded. *You must tell him*, he said, and I was quiet, because I didn't want to tell Ohad anything. I'd told him too much already. But I never said I was keeping the baby; that assumption was a choice he made. There's a difference between lying to someone and letting them believe a lie. *Does Sabrin know about this ... connection?* the cousin asked. *Yes*, I said. (And no, I thought.) Anyone in the history of people

talking to each other who gave a straightforward answer to a loaded question was lying. *OK*, he said, *good*. I looked at the floor to avoid his eyes because I didn't agree that anything about this was good. I could feel him searching for my eyes. Finally he said, *You know we can't have trouble, yes?* And here I looked up because he was our host and he was trying to make sure I wouldn't put him at risk. I said, *Of course*. He said, *This man, I know this kind of man*. I understood what he meant: Ohad was someone used to getting his way in life. Whatever he needed that made him call, he wouldn't go away until his need was satisfied.

What my girlfriend's cousin meant by *trouble* was that he faced imprisonment or even death on the other side of the ocean; he could never risk giving someone like Ohad reason to make a call and report us. And while for me and my girlfriend, something like, say, a trip to the emergency room could end in a detention center, the real danger in that for us was losing each other. Back home, politics and our families and decades of conflict and oppression meant that we could never be together. I was the most likely to avoid deportation—I had the fairest skin and better paperwork—and maybe that's why I thought the loss of our love was the greatest danger, because I was advantaged

not only in this way but also in terms of the reality that awaited me overseas. My girlfriend and I both repeated our line many times—our greatest risk was losing our relationship—but perhaps this was a half-truth. Perhaps she never wanted to name her misfortune or my privilege. Perhaps we both clung, each for her reasons, to this semblance of equality afforded us as foreigners in this country. In the kitchen, when my girlfriend's cousin held my eye, he was forcing me to admit this half-truth. *I understand*, I said. *I will talk to him*. I looked at my feet. *You can use the landline upstairs*, he said. I felt my eyes welling up at this kindness, though it's possible this was his way of making sure I called. Still, he was the only family member of my girlfriend's who I'd ever met, maybe the only one I'd ever meet, and I felt in that moment that he was choosing to see me as his own blood instead of someone whose people oppressed his people. *Thank you*, I said, and heard the emotion in my own voice, which embarrassed me. Neither of us moved or said anything for a moment, and it suddenly occurred to me he might mean for us to head upstairs now. *I'll talk to Jas first*, I said. He nodded but I still corrected myself. *Sabrin*.

\*

When my girlfriend returned, she made some joke about her cousin babying his car—the last oil change hadn't been too long ago—and when I said *yeah* she squinted her whole face at me, because my girlfriend's intuition was her superpower. *Something happen?* she asked. I needed a minute—a day, a week, a lifetime—to think things through before we talked, but I wasn't going to get that time. I felt scared, the kind of fear that alters your body temperature. My fear was: I'd mention Ohad's name and my girlfriend's blood would boil and she wouldn't listen, wouldn't hear me. My fear was: I'd mention Ohad's name and my girlfriend would listen too well, would hear and see not so much what I was sharing, but what I was hiding. My fear was that my girlfriend would leave me.

You could say that I slept with my boss; in most ways that matter, you'd not be wrong. You could say that I flirted with him first—teased him, as he said that night, *You've been teasing me for months, now suddenly you're a deer in headlights?*—and you could say that I let my attraction to him live in me and that at times it showed. It drove Jasmin mad, but she never confronted me. A cultural difference? I'd have yelled, thrown plates at the walls of our city apartment. But she did nothing; “you mean he's

charismatic” was as close as she got to a confrontation that whole time. You could say that I cheated on my girlfriend; you could say to me: whatever happened the night you got pregnant, whatever you claim Ohad did to you, you still cheated on Jasmin with him, several times, weeks before that night. You’d not be wrong, or not exactly wrong, by which I mean that’s what Jasmin would’ve said if she’d known everything. But all she knew was the night of the assault, not the nights that came before, and anyway I’d never dare say to her face that those nights hadn’t been sex, because that is some straight-people bullshit. One thing about lesbian sex is that it redefines pleasure, and in redefining pleasure, it robs you of the simplistic hetero line between touch and sex. So if you described the closeness during shifts—soft palm lingering on a shoulder, just making sure the other person heard that table five asked for their check; fingers touching fingers, just pointing to an appetizer’s code on a screen—and how those touches between Ohad and me intensified slowly but also fast, if you described how he shoved his tongue into my mouth one night and I nearly gagged, the smell of sardines in my nose and my butt pushed against the spare fridge in the back, and if you then described how I did the same to him

the next night, pushed something into his face that you could call my tongue but I would call violence, and he let me, and he was soft with me then while I remained hard. If you described how I came that night, how Ohad made me come—or maybe it’s more accurate to say I used a man’s knee to make myself come and it just so happened his name was Ohad and he was my boss—if you described it, and how the smell of sardines felt different then, the way a strong orgasm can alter your sensory field. If you described all that a hundred times, if you yelled and screamed, if you looked at me with pain, disappointment, disgust—do you really imagine you’d be doing anything to me that I’ve not been doing to myself? What I’ve realized is that I don’t know how to measure betrayal. I meant for less of it and ended up with more. In men’s brains there’s a chronology of progression to touch; Ohad came to work that night—our first overlap since I rubbed myself against his knee—knowing what would happen at the end of the shift. And because there was no question in his mind, he asked me nothing. He pulled up my skirt, pulled down my panties, put himself into me, somehow all in one shocking motion. It didn’t feel like another body had entered mine; it felt like a brick was shoved into me and broke my insides. I

don't think I said no or stop; I didn't say anything, I don't think, and I didn't move.

I shook him off of me in the end, after he was done. That moment haunts me, the motion my muscles proved capable of after all.

This was all on my face now, which I knew because I could see Jasmin's angst, a particular kind of worry she'd developed for me in recent weeks. We were sitting on the bed but far enough from each other that she could lean in my direction and still not reach me. *Hey*, she said, her upper body bent toward me, her eyes trying to meet mine. *Flashbacks?* I nodded. *He called*, I said, and her face froze. *Who called?* she asked though she knew, and I didn't want to say his name so I just waited. *Why would he*—she started to ask and I said, *Jas, before we left the city I told him I was pregnant. I'm sorry I kept this from you.* I felt very light, saying these nothing words, and I could feel my body wanting to leave my body, to levitate and watch these two women from above. Are they going to have the kind of fight that changes what they see when they look at each other? I moved to the edge of the bed so I could feel the floor under my feet. Jasmin was asking questions like When did this happen? and I told her the truth—when I

went to get our last paychecks, which I was supposed to get from our friend a block away from the restaurant, but our friend was late. Or maybe I was early. Jasmin frowned at this. But how could I explain to her: back then my brain kept suggesting that in fact nothing bad had happened, that the way I described that night to Jasmin had been an exaggeration, a lie I told so my girlfriend wouldn't say I cheated. What's the big deal, to that girl, in going to the restaurant? If he'd be there, then he'd be there. And he was there, of course. His eyes widened at the sight of me at the door; immediately he gave a quick look around and signaled for me to follow him to the back. And I did. I followed him to that small room. I followed him although my legs started shaking, making their point that this was a bad idea. I think he asked why we quit and I made a face. He said something like *She pissed?* because what he thought had happened was that I told Jasmin he and I hooked up and she flipped. My life through his eyes was a whole other life. And maybe that's why I needed to say that none of this was chill, to say You harmed me, to say Harm has consequences, motherfucker. So I said, *Ohad, I'm pregnant.*

On the bed now, I could see my girlfriend's face working to accept my choices, to swallow her anger. *I'm going to*

*call from upstairs tomorrow*, I said. *You don't owe him an update*, she said, her jaw so clenched the air of her words was struggling to come out, *you don't owe him shit. It's what your cousin wants me to do*, I said, which was the truth but still felt like a lie. *Fine*, Jasmin said and got up, about to leave the room. I grabbed her hand. *Jas*, I said. *I just need a minute*, she said.

On the phone Ohad's voice sounded familiar but warm, concerned, an uncle version of the man I knew. I didn't focus on my feet; I didn't will my body to stay in my body. It took me a while to tell him I was no longer pregnant and in that time I learned the reason for the call. The reason for the call was that Ohad wanted me to give him the child—instead of giving it up for adoption, which is what he believed I was doing. *Is that crazy*, he asked, *am I crazy?* He never waited for me to answer. He talked about his wife a lot—she was an activist, an environmentalist. I vaguely knew these things but said nothing; I'm not sure I even hummed, but Ohad was never the kind of man who needed the sound of his own voice reinforced. Bringing a child into our ailing world, he explained, stood against everything his wife believed in—the surplus of human life was already

in the billions, more than our planet could withstand, all that. *But this*, he said, *this is different. This baby is already on its way. It's my only chance at a biological child in this life*. He actually thought I'd feel bad for him—I could hear the expectation in his voice. And maybe I did feel bad, guilty, even. I've known men like him my whole life; they believe so honestly in their entitlement, it's near impossible to talk to them without believing it too. Eventually I couldn't handle the sales pitch—he and his wife would take care of all expenses, set us back up in the city, Jasmin and I could be involved in the child's life if we wished—and I said, *There's no baby, Ohad*. The silence that followed felt explosive. I heard myself say *I lost it* and another silence followed. Then he began to cry.

When I came back down Jasmin was in the kitchen and everything smelled like fried onion and sumac. *How'd it go?* she asked with her back to me, cooking. *Fine?* I said. *Tell me*, she said. Her voice was cheerful. Everything felt wrong but I understood we were pretending this was no big deal and I wanted to contribute. *Not much to tell*, I said. *Now he knows*. I shrugged, though she couldn't see. *Took a while, though*, my girlfriend said. I shrugged again. *I got*

*into the whole fake clinic story*, I said, which was true—at the end of our call I told Ohad the story of how Jasmin and I made an appointment first with an abortion clinic that turned out to be a creepy anti-abortion center. They read to us from the bible and kept referring to us as friends no matter what we said. It probably took us longer than it should have to realize we were in the wrong place—across the street from the actual clinic, in a building that looked identical. I'd told Ohad this story like a funny anecdote. I mentioned their sign, which read "Plan Your Parenthood." *Why would you tell him that story?* Jasmin asked, and she turned around then with such sharpness that she knocked a jar of olive oil off the counter. It shattered with a spectacular sound, the promise of tiny shards for weeks. I got up to help her clean but Jasmin's arm stretched out to stop me, and I paused, still by the table. *What's the point of you getting in this mess*, she said, but she didn't move. We looked at each other. *He was crying*, I said. *I didn't know how to get him to stop crying. Also I accidentally said it was a miscarriage, sort of, and didn't know how to correct myself.* My girlfriend's face asked if I was joking and my face said nope, totally serious. She shook her head, and now I couldn't read her face; in a way, it was

all so ridiculous and Jasmin often found absurdity hilarious. A part of me imagined she might laugh now, that we might laugh together. But she said, *So you lied to him before you told him the truth.* I said, *Not exactly.* I don't think she heard me. She said, *And that horrible place ... we lost a crucial week thanks to them, we were both so upset. How's that a joke?* I said, *We made it in time.* I tried to smile. Yes, everything could have been much worse only a day later, the second trimester cutoff, but I was trying to remind Jasmin that didn't happen. *Not the point*, she said. She looked at me and her eyes welled up; I walked into the puddle of oil and I didn't slip and I hugged her and she let me.

About a week later, Jasmin pulled me to her one morning when I was barely awake. I remember this moment well, the careful sun in the window, the lavender smell of Jasmin's skin, her eyes shining the way they did when she wanted me. But soon she froze, pulled her hand from inside me and I felt my confusion physically, acutely. *You've stopped bleeding too*, she said, and I realized she was right, I hadn't bled in maybe a few days, but her tone and her face made me want to deny it. *I hadn't noticed but yeah*, I said, *I guess you're right*, and I sounded like I was



lying though why would I? *It's so weird*, Jasmin said, shaking her head gently, *I haven't bled since ... last week. OK*, I said. *Since he first called*, she said. *OK*, I said again. *I don't see the connection?* I said. *Yeah*, she said and rolled onto her back. We lay there like that for some moments; I was looking at her and she was looking at the ceiling. *Did he really assault you?* she asked after a while. *What?* I said. A thousand needles poked my skin. She looked at me. *I have to ask*, she said. *He did*, I said. *OK*, she said, *OK. I'm sorry*. We looked at each other and I know we both saw it, that fork in the road. One path was our future, as silly or sentimental as it might sound—I saw in that moment the future Jasmin and I could have, a future in which maybe the world was burning but we escaped all the fires together. *It wasn't the first time, though*, she said, *that night*. I felt my eyes blinking more than they should. *Right*, I said. *Right*, she said, and her voice sounded different. *You know I knew, right?* she said, *You must have known. I didn't know*, I said. She went back to looking at the ceiling. *I feel like I've known from the start and also like I haven't believed it until this moment*, she said. Then she said, *Or maybe until he called*. We kept lying there for what seemed like a couple of years. I tried to speak many times—to explain,

to apologize—but whenever my breathing changed, organized itself toward speech, Jasmin said, *Don't. Please don't. Not now*. I wanted to pee, wanted to get us both some water, but I was scared to leave the bed. I was guarding us somehow, guarding her state of mind. *I've never lost it on you this whole time*, she said, *never showed you real anger. And I appreciate that*, I said, which sounded both dumb and condescending. Jasmin gave a bitter chuckle. *I'm saying ... it's a problem*, she said. I didn't know what to say. She sat up then, one sudden movement, and it made me dizzy. I sat up too. She said, *I've been talking to someone. A ... healer, sort of. A shaman, you could say, but Muslim*. I asked, *How? When?* The least relevant questions, but my brain wanted the practical details in that moment—how Jasmin could hide conversations from me in these tight quarters we shared. *Outside*, she said, and I understood this to mean when she was out there in the cold getting online, or rather sometimes when I thought that's what she was doing. *My cousin wanted someone to help me*, she said, *he worried*. I waited for more until she said, *The shaman told me to watch the blood. He said I'd stop bleeding when my soul got strong enough*. I couldn't name what it was in her words that felt ominous. *So we're*



*stronger now*, I said, *that's good*. Jasmin looked at me. *You feel stronger?* she asked. She didn't say "strong enough to be on your own" but that's what I saw in her eyes. *I don't know*, I said, *maybe not*. She leaned over and kissed my forehead. Then she held my face. *I could kill him with my bare hands for what he did to you*, she said, *but who's going to kill you for what you did to me?* She let go of my face. I started to say those things are not the same but I stopped mid-sentence. *I can't force myself to forgive*, Jasmin said, *I think that's what my body has been showing me*. I said, *I don't see how the blood*—but Jasmin interrupted. *You keep thinking of us as one*, she said, *but we are two separate bodies*. I wanted to ask if this was more wisdom from the shaman—I couldn't bear this moment, couldn't bear my own need—but I kept my words in my mouth. *We are*, I said instead. *We are two separate bodies*.

## II

In the dream I come clean and Katerin laughs. I say *I slept with someone*, or I say *I need to tell you something* and right away she knows. We jump in the ocean and swim

or sometimes we're at a birthday party and she feeds me cake. It is silly to her, my confession. Katerin's mother is French—Katerin herself grew up outside Paris until age nine—and I don't think it's bad to say the French are more open as a people, sexually speaking. The two times I met Katerin's mother she touched my face in a way that felt more oomph than mother-in-law, looked me up and down, said, *Ah, Ohad*, in a way that let the sound of the *D* linger and circle, *Ohadddu*. No one had ever pronounced my name this way. So is it crazy to think the daughter of this woman might consider extramarital sex part of life? I brought it up once or twice—monogamy, fidelity—around the time we got engaged, but Katerin pretended not to hear. This is a skill she has, a necessary skill if one works at trying to save the earth; my wife never gets bogged down by the prospect of future disasters.

My own mother, who I support but don't talk to much, is Israeli, and I only mention it because so is the girl—the one who seduced me. Years ago I dealt with severe depression and while therapy never helped, I've done enough of it to know that if I had a therapist that's where he'd go: *Ah, Israeli, didn't you say your mother was Israeli?* I can see Katerin raising one eyebrow, the way her face calls bullshit.

*She seduced you?* And I'm not an idiot, I wouldn't put it this way to my wife, but it is the truth. So what does this Israeli connection mean—that I let myself get seduced because of the girl's hard Rs, her aggressive nature, her mannerisms that felt familiar? I don't think so. I've never fetishized my mother's homeland like some Jews I know. Perhaps—and I'm not usually a spiritual person—that night was fated.

The only bad versions of my dream are the ones in which I reveal the reason for my confession, the ones in which I ask Katerin if she'd be open to us raising this child. *Ah, she is pregnant, the girl*, she says, and suddenly her eyes are vacant. Then she usually shoots me or stabs me. She still laughs first—in all the versions of this dream she laughs at the news—but sometimes the next thing she does is inflict violence on me. I look at my sternum where the bullet hit or the knife turned and I wait for the blood. There's often a pause, a moment when I wonder if I misunderstood; maybe she didn't really fire the gun, maybe the tip of the knife never broke skin, because where's the blood? And then I wake up.

Katerin gets out of bed every morning to fight what is arguably a lost cause, though you wouldn't get her to

admit this truth, the inevitability of ecological collapse—not without putting some hard liquor in her. She fights with spreadsheets and slides, apps and softwares that synthesize information, an infinite number of index cards; the organization she works for coordinates the efforts of climate activists worldwide. It is offensive to my wife that people still procreate.

I've begun to work late and then later; when I get home, no matter the time, I grab my gym bag and head out. *I'm going to cancel your membership*, Katerin says one night when I get into bed in the almost-morning, *sign you up someplace that isn't open around the clock*. She smiles when she says this, pulls me to her, half asleep; the threat is my wife's way of flirting, of saying she misses me. And I want to let my muscles relax into her, I want to cancel the gym membership myself, cancel it a million times. I want to come home earlier, I want to be able to look at my wife without looking away, which is all to say I want to forget that I ever fucked up. And I know I can do that, if only I let go of this fantasy of becoming a father. Let the girl raise the child or, more likely, give it up for adoption, which is what she hinted when she told me she was pregnant. I don't judge her; she's undocumented, no money,

no family here. I get the impression her family back home isn't the kind that embraces a knocked-up girl. And maybe she wouldn't want to go home anyway; I've known a lot of undocumented workers over the years, as anyone does in my field, and most of them would never leave this country. I don't judge them, either—after all, my own mother was an immigrant, my wife was an immigrant, both of them legal and lucky, but still, I have compassion for that type of hardship. Yet it's the truth: the ones who aren't so lucky, who aren't so legal, like the girl—in most cases you'd have to point a weapon to their skull to get these folks to board a plane headed the wrong way. And you could say it's a beautiful thing, that tenacity. Or you could call them all parasites. By nature, I tend to see both points of view in most situations.

For long weeks now, that's what I've been trying to do: force my brain to see the other point of view in my personal situation. It's best for everyone involved—certainly Katerin, but also the girl, maybe even the kid—that I let this go. And the girl, she's sensible. If she feels she can raise the child, I'm sure she will. If she'll need money, she'll reach out, and I'll help. For moments here and there, I think: nothing more to it. Why complicate everything?

Then I imagine a tiny infant, and when I say "imagine" what I mean is that I see him, the baby, my son. He has the girl's blue eyes but the rest of his face—the forehead that takes up just a bit too much space, the strong cheekbones—looks like me, or really, like my father. Whenever I try to let this whole thing go, I see him, and my body heats up. How can I abandon my child? But I'd not only be telling my wife that I cheated; I'd be making a request that feels like a bigger betrayal than my night with the girl—which wasn't a full night, of course, barely an hour, pressed against the bar after closing, an exchange so fast and undignified it's astonishing that it managed to originate a life.

Tuesday after the gym, I hit the shower, it's probably three in the morning, and I don't hear the bathroom door open, so when Katerin moves the shower curtain to join me, I jump. *Scoot*, she says, her usually mild accent sexier, thicker, as it always is when she's not fully awake. Under the stream of water my wife looks at me, her eyes big and full of feeling—so much so that I wonder if I'd misjudged, perhaps she hadn't been asleep. *What's been going on, Ohad?* I bite my lip not to cry and she touches that lip

with her thumb. *What is it?* I look at the tile, look at my wife, the tile, her face. *You'll leave me*, I say. *You slept with someone*, she says. She keeps her eyes on me; somehow she knows to expect more. And somehow when I tell her—the pregnancy, my fantasy—she seems relieved. *You are not in love with this woman?* she asks, and I make a strange sound, a hybrid of a laugh and a snort, perhaps mixed with water drops, and Katerin can see, and I can see that she sees, how little this part of the story matters. She straddles me, my wife, and again I almost cry, this time in relief, but I've never been good that way in water and eventually we move to the bedroom, both of us dripping. Katerin throws her large towel on top of the sheets, then pushes me onto the towel. It's been a while since our sex has been aggressive like that—I realize while it's happening just how polite we've been with each other's bodies lately—and it feels at once hopeful and ominous. Throughout, she avoids my mouth. I spoon her afterward, looking for the right way to ask, but no good words exist for this question, and Katerin's breathing starts to slow into sleep, so I just say it. *Are you open, then? To the baby thing?* I can feel my wife's body freeze in my arms, her breathing jolted, but she doesn't say no. She doesn't say anything. *It would be*

*like adopting*, I say, *no human added to planet earth who wasn't coming anyway*. Katerin is still silent, and I start to say something about what it would mean to me, having a biological child, but she interrupts me. *Talk to her*, she says. *And if she agrees?* I say. I see the back of my wife's head move ever so slightly, a weak, hesitant nod.

On the phone the girl sounds like a different person from the Israeli server I remember, and this new person is pissed. It occurs to me that she might have feelings for me, that she may have been disappointed that I wasn't interested in more, which never crossed my mind before; she had a girlfriend, a Palestinian who also worked for me, and the two of them seemed in love, or at least absorbed in the kind of tension and drama most lesbians who ever worked for me seemed to favor. I assumed she flirted with me to make her girlfriend jealous, which certainly worked—the way that Palestinian used to look at me made me understand that sometimes “death stare” isn't a metaphor; I could see my mortality reflected in her eyes. And it was a shame, too, because she and I used to be buddies before she asked me to hire her “partner.” I remember telling her not to use that word with me; *partner is the person who co-owns your business with you*, I said. *Is that who she is*

*to you?* I could tell she wanted to punch me right then, but she was asking for a favor so what was she going to do? And there was something about this moment—I didn't tell her I was joking, that I'd meant to be playful. *It can mean romantic partner*, she said, because that's how she was—she wouldn't punch me, but she wouldn't take bullshit, either—and I said, *After twenty years maybe*. We stared at each other and she could tell what was coming. *How long you two been together?* I asked. She kept staring at me, said nothing. *You got a year?* I asked. She nodded, said, *Almost*. *Sure*, I said, *I'll hire your girlfriend*. I winked at her but she didn't wink back. What the hell was her name?

I recalibrate, on the phone, realizing I may have broken the girl's heart, or at least her pride. *It feels good to hear your voice*, I say. *Yeah*, she says. *Are you ... mad at me?* I ask. *How did you even find me here?* she asks in response. She sounds truly bewildered by this, so I say *I have my ways*. I suppose she forgot she gave this relative's number to several servers at the restaurant. *How've you been feeling?* I ask her and then add, *physically*. *Not great, actually*, she says, and while I know it's common for women to feel crummy during pregnancy, there's something about the way she says it that gets my digestive tract going the

wrong way, sending acid all the way up. Part of this is audible, so I say, *Excuse me*, pause for a beat to get my bearings—or perhaps it's courage I'm waiting for—and get to it, plunge into a long monologue, a speech in which I beg her to trust me with our child instead of some stranger. I don't totally know what I'm saying—she gives so little in return, it's hard to know what might be working or when to course-correct. I make promises I'm not sure I can keep—I'll buy them a house—and say she can be as involved or not as she'd wish, a prospect I have no idea if Katerin would consider reasonable or a dealbreaker. This goes on for a while, and I'm exhausted, and the sound of my own voice is unbearable, but I know, somehow I know, that what's truly unbearable is yet to come, that what's truly unbearable will enter this space the moment I finally shut up, so I don't, I keep going, keep talking, and finally she interrupts me, saying my name more than once just to stop the word flood, saying, *Ohad ohad ohad, stop. There's no baby*, she says.

What matters after that? That I think for a split second she means there was never a baby, that she lied, then realize my mistake? That after long minutes of comforting her for miscarrying, when she tells me a strange and elaborate

story about her and Jasmine—that’s the Palestinian’s name, of course—finding themselves in a clinic that wasn’t a real clinic, and that word, clinic, reverberates, I finally get what actually happened? Does that matter? For a moment I’m so hot with rage that I start to sweat—that she killed my unborn child, that she didn’t think to talk to me—but my anger dies down as fast as it rose, giving room for what I truly feel, this dense dark sadness. So little matters. I say something ridiculous to the girl before we get off the phone; though she ruined everything, in this moment I feel she is the only person who shares my grief, and I tell her to let me know if she ever needs money, if she ever needs anything. And instead of thanking me she says a ridiculous thing back. *Trying to pay off your guilt?* she says. It’s a crazy thing to suggest, of course—neither of us meant for her to get pregnant, and she’s the one who intervened instead of letting our mistake turn into something beautiful. *My guilt?* I say, and wonder if she’s faulting me for not pulling out early enough, but does it matter? *Be well*, I say.

It is absurd that my wife holds me in her arms when I hang up the phone with the girl I cheated on her with, but she does: she sees the look on my face and she comes

over to the couch, sits by my side, and hugs me. *I don’t deserve your sympathy*, I say into Katerin’s neck, *I’m such an asshole. What does it say about me that I married an asshole?* Katerin asks.

Later I try to tell her more, though she’s asked no questions. I feel the need to hear myself say the word *abortion*, relay everything I just learned, so my brain can begin to accept this new reality. My wife is on her laptop, working, but she nods at me. *I’m listening*, she says when I pause. But the only moment she really listens is when I mention that place that masqueraded as a clinic. Katerin stops typing. *It’s a huge issue, these fake clinics*, she says in her activist voice. *Do you know about this? These “Crisis Pregnancy Centers” are popping up all over the place, misleading women into believing they have more time than they do to get an abortion, scaring women with false medical information ...* I tune out while Katerin goes on like that for a while, as she does about anything she deems an injustice. *They mostly go after uneducated women and women with no means—you said your friend’s an immigrant? My friend.* I’m not sure how to respond to this question. *Well, in this case nothing happened*, I say. *They figured it out, she and her girlfriend, and they left. Caused a scene on*

*their way out from what I understand.* I know I'm being foolish but it feels like Katerin is taking their side over mine. *Good for them,* she says. *Good for them for not letting those assholes get away with their bullshit.*

In bed that night I kiss my wife's shoulder, let my hand slide down. Her ass is cold though the room is warm. *I just started bleeding,* Katerin says, as if we haven't fucked a million times before when she was on her period. I pull my hand out of her underwear. *I love you,* I say.

When I wake up in the morning everything is foggy and my temples are throbbing. I recognize the sensations right away though I haven't felt them in years. There's no getting out of this bed. My first thought is that Katerin has never seen me like that; hearing about depression and seeing someone in this state are two very different things. I send some emails and make a few calls while my voice is recognizable—my chef, a bartender I've been meaning to make my AGM for a while now, my former office manager who could take over payroll for a stretch as a favor.

For days, there's a fresh cup of tea by my bed whenever I open my eyes, sometimes a tray of food, and occasionally Katerin herself, looking at me with what seems a mix of pity and rage. *I'm not dying,* I tell her. *Could have fooled*

*me,* she says. *I'll be OK,* I tell her another time, *it'll pass.* I pull the blanket and it hits the mug by my side; the sound of it breaking is ten times louder in my head than it probably is outside of it. *Sorry,* I mutter, and Katerin picks up the big pieces with her hands, places them back on my nightstand. I want to tell her she shouldn't do that, she could cut herself, but instead I close my eyes. *What are you taking,* she asks, *that you can sleep this much?* When I don't answer, she says, *Don't give into this, Ohad. I know what I can handle in life,* I tell my wife, *and I know what I can't handle.* It's a nonanswer meant to convey that she should let me weather this the only way I know how, but that's not what she hears. I see her chest rise, then fall. *And not getting to be a dad, that's more than you can handle in this life,* she says, *that's what you're saying.* My brain is the weight of my whole body and Katerin's voice is muffled. I manage to say, *That's not what I said,* and I can't tell if I'm lying. I also can't tell what my wife is thinking, where the conversation is going. She nods a few times, keeps nodding, seems in conversation with herself; it's dizzying and I have to look away. *You're suffering,* my wife says. I look at her again now and her eyes are wet. She leans over, kisses my cheek. *I don't want you to suffer,* she says, *no, of course*



*I don't want you to suffer.* I squint, a habitual response to confusion, but it hurts now. *What are you saying?* I ask my wife. If I didn't know better, I'd think she's hinting she might change her mind about children. *I'm saying we have some work to do as a couple,* she says, *and maybe we need some help.* I wait for more because I can see there is more. *I want to make this marriage work,* Katerin says, *and clearly that would require compromise from both of us. Some adjustments. Of expectations.* I stare at her. *That's all I've got,* she says. *But are you saying,* I start to ask, and she puts a finger to my mouth. Her finger smells nice, a mix of her aloe body lotion and some fruit she must have just sliced—a pear, I think. My mouth, on the other hand, probably smells like death; it tastes like cement. But still I open it to suck on her finger, a fast movement that surprises her and surprises me too. Perhaps something is shifting in me. I let go of my wife's finger. *How did I get so lucky?* I ask her. She shakes her head. *I'm not making any assumptions,* I say, *I'm really not, I get it. But I'm the luckiest guy, that's all.* My wife smiles at me, but her smile seems a bit sad, or maybe I'm imagining. *Yeah,* she says. *Some people are born lucky.*

## III

I'm bad at quoting scripture like I am bad at quoting anything, because the letters dance for me when I most need them to be still. Marjorie tells me to memorize, tells me not reading well is no excuse, she's not very good at reading either, she says, but she doesn't let it get in the way of the Work, does she? All due respect to Marjorie, I don't think I let anything get in the way of anything else; there is more than one and also more than two ways of doing our Work. Also Marjorie is lying: she has a master's degree. She got this master's degree by being bad at reading? I don't think so. But I don't say any of this to Marjorie, because she runs the Center and I'm just a volunteer. I am part of a program where if I'm good at my job, I'm supposed to get hired in the end, but how do you prove you're good at your job if your Center manager says otherwise? Also, there's no point in arguing. I know the Bible says not to argue for nothing; I don't need to quote anything to know what's right. So instead of talking back I make my voice small and say to Marjorie, *Unfortunately my brain won't do that either,* meaning memorize. Maybe it's not that I make my voice small so much as it is my voice making itself small. This is a



thing that happens in my throat sometimes. It's pitiful but also effective; Marjorie feels bad for me when I get like that, says, *It's OK, just find other ways to Connect*. Connecting is our goal: when you Connect, you just see in the eyes of the woman that the baby will be safe. Quoting scripture is just one way we're taught to Connect, and of course it's only effective with women of faith, but the thing about people like Marjorie is that they imagine faith in every pair of eyes. Marjorie grew up in the South, where, from what I understand, most people hold the Lord in their heart, and she only moved here when the Center opened last summer, so in my opinion she just doesn't get it: majority of women around here, you quote scripture to them, they sprint for the door. Or they stare at you and *Is this a real clinic?* is suddenly all over their face, and you better say something quick before they ask a question that's tricky to answer. It's all so delicate. If they ask, I never say yes, because that would be illegal and here at the Center, we never break the law; I just nod and say, "You're in the right place, honey," or I say, "You are exactly where you should be."

Marjorie and I have had a version of our exchange more times than I can count; the problem is that I don't Connect

to enough women, and ironically, this is because I *do* connect—I listen to their stories and I feel their pain and sometimes I forget the protocols. I just tell them I can see their heart is good, that I know they'll make the right decision. By right decision of course I mean keep the baby, but how would they know what I mean is Marjorie's point, are they mind readers? If a woman leaves without signing her Pregnancy Verification Form and without making a future appointment with us, then we have failed to Connect. Today's talking-to starts the same as always, but then it turns, or maybe it's different all along and it just takes me a moment to notice. Marjorie says the same things, I say the same things, but when my voice gets small she doesn't tell me to try better next time; instead, she gives me a look that I would describe as hard. A hard look. We're at the staff kitchenette, which is such a narrow space that we're forced to stand closer than we otherwise would, so Marjorie might as well be holding a magnifying glass; there's no way I'd be able to hide the emotion I feel in my stomach once it makes its way to my face. I nod at her, maybe too many times, mumble, *Got it, no problem*, and sneak out, beeline to the bathroom so I can let the tears out. *Stop by my office at the end of your shift*, Marjorie says to my back.

Whatever our disagreements, until today I always felt like Marjorie rooted for me to improve. I told her more than once she reminds me of my sister Alice—Alice who I call my older sister when talking to other people because blood shouldn't dictate who you call family, Alice who's often so hard on me that it can seem cruel. But it's a compliment to Marjorie when I say this, because I know, have always known with Alice, that everything she does and says to me comes from love. I moved in with Alice to save money when I joined the volunteer program and overall I would say it was a very good decision. But more often than not I come home to Alice telling me I didn't do this or that: if I cleaned the dishes good enough, I forgot to pick up radishes at the store like she asked, or maybe I made fish for dinner and how could I forget she's allergic? She's right most the time—my mind just isn't home these days. The thing about the Center is you never really finish a shift; the shift finishes you. It stays with you. The women that seek our help—and the men that sometimes accompany them, the occasional children, those sweet innocent faces—how can those interactions just ... evaporate? How can anyone hold all this pain and helplessness and then let it all go when they exit the Center's front door? Not dream about

it at night? I guess some people pull that off, all in a day's work, and if you ask Marjorie, they have it right, they will last longer. The headshakers—whatever a woman shares with them, they shake their head, say *that's too bad*—the ones always calling the women “lost sheep” and “misguided souls,” especially the women that don't Connect. I shouldn't speak ill; everyone at the Center means to offer solace. But let's just say it's not been easy to make friends. And the person waiting for me when I come out of the bathroom, she's one of the headshakers, one of many Advocates and Counselors who I know roll their eyes behind my back. I take too much time with each case, lose too many, a sappy, not-too-bright volunteer. And coming out of the bathroom with a wet face plays right into that story; I'd have taken better care at the sink if I anticipated this moment. *Hey*, Talma says, *I saw you talked to Marjorie?* If she saw, why is she here asking me about it, I think but don't say. Instead I nod. We start walking the long corridor that leads to the exam rooms but Talma is being very slow. *What did you tell her?* she asks, and I search her face for the parts I must be missing, because why on earth is it Talma's business? *It's my neck on the line here as much as yours*, she says, and I say, *Talma, I have no clue what you're*

*talking about*, and she says, *So she hasn't told you? I'm so confused. I'm confused too*, I say, and for a moment we stop our slow walk and stare at each other. *You remember those women that attacked me*, she says and looks in the general direction of the waiting area where one day earlier this winter a woman—Iranian, I think she was—pushed Talma away from her pregnant friend. Talma's elbow somehow landed on a window and broke it, though I believed the rumor that Talma elbowed that window, a way to make herself the aggrieved party in the incident. For days later she cared for her bloody wound in common areas so we'd all see. I was right there—Talma and I were both assigned the case—but as Alice would say, I always miss the most important parts. I must have been talking to the pregnant woman, because I knew we were about to lose her and I did my best to Connect in the last moment or two. *I can tell you're very strong*, I told her, *your strength will see you through this challenge, you'd make a wonderful mother*. Then we both jumped at the sound of glass breaking and someone, maybe Talma, shrieking. *I remember*, I tell Talma. *Well, they're threatening to sue. And you know how Marjorie resolves these situations*. I didn't know, but I could guess; legal challenges are bad for the Center, so

of course Marjorie would try to appease anyone who had an issue. *We're both done if you ask me*, Talma says. *But you're the one who had the conflict*, I say. *We both had a conflict*, Talma says slowly, *and we were both assigned the case, together*. OK, I say. We're standing by exam room one now, a closed door. *Well, that's the answer to my question*, Talma says, and I say, *You haven't asked me anything*. She says, *Clearly you don't have my back*. I think for a moment. *If I say that escalation was both our fault, then we're both fired. How would that help you?* I ask. *For you this isn't an actual job*, she says. *And even if it was, you don't have kids at home that depend on your salary. But you do whatever you think is right*.

I can't concentrate on much after that, and waiting till the end of my shift seems unbearable. I walk over to Marjorie's office and tap my fingers on her half-open door. She looks up from her desk, seems surprised to see me. I suppose I've never stopped by her office spontaneously before. Or maybe she sees something in my face that surprises her; maybe I still look like someone who just wept quietly in a stall. *Talma talked to you*, she says, and now I'm the one surprised. Marjorie points at one of the chairs across from her and I come in, close the door, sit down.

*Look, she says, I'm no dummy, I know your ways and I know Talma's and there's no way that incident was your fault. My body should relax to hear this, but it doesn't; my muscles are a knot and my breath still shallow. But you understand, don't you?* Marjorie asks. I give a faint nod, though I don't really know what I just claimed to understand. *I can't afford to lose Talma; she's very experienced, very skilled. And to this woman—it's not like she knows who's who. I tell her the worker on the case has been fired for cause, she goes away. Or at least that's my hope.* I stare at a plant behind Marjorie. It looks thirsty, unhealthy. I try to think fast. *If she doesn't know, I say, can't you just... tell her you fired me?* Marjorie chuckles. *I know the type, believe me—she's trouble, if I lied to her it would backfire. And thou shalt not bear false witness,* she adds quickly. Something isn't adding up in my brain, but I'm not sure how to ask if illegal immigrants can sue. *The Iranian woman, I say, is trouble? Or the Jewish one?* Marjorie seems confused. *You must be thinking of a different escalation,* she says. *This woman is just a little bit French.* No no, I say, *I have the right incident—when Talma broke the window. It was two friends, one of them Arab and I think the pregnant one a Jew, illegals. Not French.* I can tell Marjorie is losing

patience with me. *Look, she says, the details don't really matter, OK? I looked up the name she gave me, and we have a case number for it and an escalation note, so this isn't a mix-up. And I think you know I wouldn't do this if I didn't have to, right? But we can't afford a lawsuit or bad publicity. This woman just won some big case against several states, something about deforestation. Trust me, anyone who uses words like deforestation is bad news.* Marjorie chuckles at this but it sounds forced. When I don't chuckle back, she says, *If I didn't know the difference between a nothing call and the kind of person who's out for blood I wouldn't be running the Center.* She looks at me and I can tell she's sorry. *Think of it as saving the Center!* she says, her voice an octave too high for the circumstances. I nod. *I'm truly not sure this would even work,* she says. *The incident might only be an excuse for her to sue, try to get us on something.* This only makes me feel worse, that maybe she's letting me go for nothing. *Could I come back if that happened?* I ask, and Marjorie looks at me like she does whenever my voice gets small, though my throat isn't doing anything weird. She smiles. *Let's pray,* she says, *for the good of the Center, that this problem goes away.* I want to ask her if it's because I don't quote scripture,

because I don't Connect enough—I want to know if this would still happen if I was better at my job—but Marjorie seems ready to end our meeting. She smiles at me again. She says, *This is unfortunate*. Something about her smile, something about that word, *unfortunate*, makes me want to scream, and for a quick moment I think I might. I'd use bad language, say this is bullshit, tell Marjorie she's talking like this is out of her hands, some unavoidable evil, what a freaking joke. She's *choosing* to ruin my life, and just as easily she could make a different choice. But I look at Marjorie's eyes, and there is nothing there for me, and I know the Bible says to refrain from anger, so I refrain. *Yes*, I say. *It's unfortunate. Very unfortunate.* I keep sitting there, though I know Marjorie wants me to leave. Perhaps eventually I'd be forced to leave. But for now, I avoid Marjorie's eyes, relax my muscles, and stay in the chair. My body is grounded. My spirit is calm. And in this moment it turns out that I can quote after all. I hear myself say to Marjorie, *The Lord will fight for you. You have only to be silent.* Marjorie smiles at me but she seems concerned. It's clear that she's not listening properly, or mishearing my intention, so I repeat. My voice is quiet but steady, a confident whisper. *You have only to be silent.*

# ABOUT THE BRIGID ALLIANCE

BY CAROL DAVIS

A COUPLE OF YEARS ago I had the crazy idea to ask Amanda Uhle if McSweeney's would consider putting together an anthology about reproductive freedom. As a cofounder of The Brigid Alliance, a nonprofit travel service for abortion seekers, I have long known about the alarming divide between the constitutional right to have an abortion and the ability to access one. Abortion access was something my generation held as sacrosanct in the years after *Roe v. Wade* became part of the collective psyche. Before *Roe*, I knew of several young women who

had to resort to unsafe, secretive, and humiliating measures to have abortions. The women I knew carried deep emotional scars, and I still hold the memory of their stories in mind, which is one of the central forces behind this anthology. As you have no doubt felt in the stories you've just read, the power of narrative is profound.

There was a time when I believed the stories about abortion access had been relegated to the past. I was dead wrong. Abortion remains limited or simply unavailable in many parts of the country. Clinics are forced to operate under restrictive and often arbitrary law or forced to close because they cannot afford to meet the same medical standards mandated for hospitals. The remaining operational clinics are often several states away, forcing many individuals to seek care far from home, *if* they are able to afford the cost of travel. And that is often a big *if*. Despite the fact that abortion is still legal in all fifty states, misinformation campaigns and restrictive state laws work to diminish hard-won protections. Women and girls as young as ten years old are forced to travel hundreds of miles to access care or are forced to have a child. The heavy burden, both financial and emotional, often falls upon those already living below the poverty line, and who already struggle to

maintain healthy, dignified, and productive lives for themselves and their families. These restrictions serve no one, but rather collude with existing structures of injustice and fuel a furious acceleration to what the U.N. Human Rights Council considers a severe human rights crisis.

The Brigid Alliance grew out of sleepless, adrenaline-addled nights, where the only antidote to the political shambles wrought by a morally vacant administration was to imagine a way forward, to imagine a country that normalized abortion as medical care and offered protections for everyone who needed them. Until that time, The Brigid Alliance would offer those protections. Since August 2018, The Brigid Alliance has arranged and paid for travel support for nearly 2,200 women and girls. Support begins with the first telephone conversation and continues throughout the journey, until the client returns home safely. Our intake coordinators speak to each client with patience, thoughtfulness, and compassion, arranging every detail, whether straightforward or complex. We customize each itinerary to meet the individual needs of the traveler: round-trip airfare, train or bus tickets, a hotel room, childcare, cash for meals, taxis, or a new set of tires for a client's car. The guiding light is our pledge to close

the gap to access. In this way, The Brigid Alliance makes choice possible.

While the new administration offers some hope for reproductive freedom, it cannot undo the years of legislation—driven by anti-choice and right-wing fundamentalists, who have worked steadily to enshrine systemic misogyny, racism, and bigotry—which forms the basis of most anti-abortion regulation. And as legal cases work their way through to the Supreme Court, the ultra-conservative majority of justices will no doubt overturn *Roe v. Wade*, or render it meaningless. This past year, as communities around the country were swept under by COVID-19, these hardened biases were especially heinous, as some state representatives used the pandemic to restrict abortion access even further.

My hope is that the narratives in this beautifully orchestrated anthology will open our minds and our hearts, to continue a dialogue about the realities and experiences of abortion access. The collective voice herein speaks to our shared humanity; the power of narrative has the power to unite. Until the political and social systems reflect the same humanity and respect for all lives, The Brigid Alliance will work to mitigate the obstacles to abortion access.

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 CONTRIBUTORS

SHELLY ORIA is the author of *New York 1, Tel Aviv 0* (FSG, 2014) and the editor of *Indelible in the Hippocampus: Writings from the Me Too Movement* (McSweeney's, 2019). In 2017, *CLEAN*, a digital novella Oria was commissioned by McSweeney's and WeTransfer to coauthor, received two Lovie Awards from the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences. Oria's fiction has appeared in the *Paris Review* and on *Selected Shorts* at Symphony Space, received a number of awards, and been translated into several languages. Oria lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she has a private practice as a life and creativity coach. Her website is [www.shellyoria.com](http://www.shellyoria.com).

KRISTEN ARNETT is a queer Florida writer. Her recent novels include *With Teeth*, published by Riverhead Books in June 2021, and *Mostly Dead Things* (Tin House Books, 2019), which was a *New York Times* bestseller and a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award in Lesbian Fiction.

HANNAH LILLITH ASSADI teaches fiction at the Columbia University School of the Arts. Her first novel, *Sonora*



(Soho Press, 2017), received a Rosenthal Family Foundation Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and was a finalist for the PEN / Robert W. Bingham Prize for Debut Fiction. In 2018, she was named a National Book Foundation 5 Under 35 honoree. Her second novel, *The Stars Are Not Yet Bells*, is forthcoming from Riverhead. She lives with her family in Brooklyn, New York.

CARRIE BORNSTEIN lives in Sharon, Massachusetts, with her husband, Jamie, and their three children, three chickens, two guinea pigs, and one dog. In 2017 she served as a gestational carrier for a couple overseas and blogged about her journey at [theresnoiinuterus.wordpress.com](http://theresnoiinuterus.wordpress.com). She is currently the CEO of Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters Community Mikveh and Education Center, a twenty-first-century creation, rooted in ancient tradition and reinvented to serve the Jewish community of today.

AMA CODJOE is the author of *Bluest Nude*, forthcoming from Milkweed Editions in fall 2022, and *Blood of the Air* (Northwestern University Press, 2020), winner of the Drinking Gourd Chapbook Poetry Prize. Among other

honors, Codjoe has received fellowships from Cave Canem Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts / New York Foundation for the Arts, and the Jerome Foundation.

DESIREE COOPER is a former attorney, Pulitzer Prize-nominated journalist, and 2015 Kresge Artist Fellow. The former communications director for Planned Parenthood of Michigan won the 2014 N.O.W. Harriet Tubman Community Service Award. In 2018, she released a short film, *The Choice*, which has medaled in film festivals from Berlin to California. The author of the award-winning collection of flash fiction, *Know the Mother* (Wayne State University Press, 2016), she is also a contributor to the seminal anthology *Choice Words: Writers on Abortion* (Haymarket Books, 2020).

GEORGINA ESCOBAR is a queer Mexican playwright and maker of sci-femme narratives, ultra-humanistic mythos, and *frontera*-funk stories. A MacDowell Fellow, Djerassi Resident Artist, and recipient of the Kennedy Center Darrell Ayers Playwriting Award, her work has made the Kilroys List, National Music Theater Conference (Eugene

O'Neill Theater Center), The Mix, and 50PP and been seen or workshopped at INTAR, Clubbed Thumb, Lincoln Center, Milagro, Aurora Theatre, Bushwick Starr, and Two Rivers, among others.

ALISON ESPACH is the author of the novels *The Adults* (Scribner, 2011)—a *New York Times*' Editor's Choice, and a Barnes and Noble Discover Pick of the Month—and *Notes on Your Sudden Disappearance*, forthcoming from Henry Holt & Company in 2022. Her short story series *In-Depth Market Research Interviews with Dead People* is an Audible Original, and her other work has appeared in *McSweeney's*, *Vogue*, *Joyland*, *Salon*, and other places. Currently, she teaches creative writing at Providence College in Rhode Island.

SARAH GERARD is the author of the essay collection *Sunshine State* (Harper Perennial, 2017) and the novels *Binary Star* (Two Dollar Radio, 2015) and *True Love* (Harper, 2021). She lives in Denver, Colorado, with her partner, the writer Patrick Cottrell. Her website is sarah-gerard.com.

DONNETTA LAVINIA GRAYS is a Brooklyn-based playwright-actor from Columbia, South Carolina. Her plays include *Where We Stand* (Lucille Lortel, The Drama League, and AUDELCO Award Nominee), *Last Night and the Night Before*, *Laid to Rest*, and *The Review or How to Eat Your Opposition*. She has received the Whiting Award in Drama, Helen Merrill Playwright Award, NTC's Barrie and Bernice Stavis Playwright Award, Lilly Award, and Todd McNerney National Playwriting Award and is the inaugural recipient of the Doric Wilson Independent Playwright Award.

RACHEL ELIZA GRIFFITHS is a poet, photographer, and novelist. Her hybrid collection of poetry and photography, *Seeing the Body* (W. W. Norton, 2020), was selected as the winner of the 2021 Paterson Poetry Prize. Griffiths's visual and literary work has appeared widely, including in the *New Yorker*, the *Paris Review*, the *New York Times*, and *Guernica*. She is the recipient of fellowships, including from Cave Canem, the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, and Yaddo. She lives in New York City.

R.O. KWON's nationally bestselling first novel, *The Incendiaries*, is published by Riverhead, and it is being translated

into seven languages. Named a best book of the year by over forty publications, *The Incendiaries* received the Housatonic Book Award and was a finalist or nominated for seven other prizes, including the National Book Critics Circle First Book Award. Kwon and Garth Greenwell co-edited the nationally bestselling *Kink*, an anthology published by Simon & Schuster.

DEBORAH LANDAU is the author of four books of poetry: *Soft Targets* (winner of The Believer Book Award), *The Uses of the Body*, *The Last Usable Hour*, and *Orchidelirium*, which won the Robert Dana Anhinga Prize for Poetry. Her poems have appeared recently in the *New Yorker*, the *Paris Review*, *Poetry*, *American Poetry Review*, the *New York Times*, and *The Best American Poetry*, and she was a 2016 Guggenheim Fellow. She is a professor and director of the Creative Writing Program at New York University and lives in Brooklyn with her family.

CADE LEEBRON is a disabled writer. Her work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Electric Literature*, and elsewhere. She exists online at [www.msllifeisbestlife.com](http://www.msllifeisbestlife.com) and on Twitter @CadeyLadey.

RIVA LEHRER is an artist, writer, and curator who focuses on the socially challenged body. She is best known for representations of people whose physical embodiment, sexuality, or gender identity have long been stigmatized. Lehrer's memoir, *Golem Girl*, was published by the One World imprint of Penguin Random House in 2020, won the 2020 Barbellion Prize for Literature, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, and was shortlisted for the Chicago Review of Books 2020 Award.

SALLY WEN MAO is the author of two collections of poetry, *Oculus* (Graywolf Press, 2019), a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, and *Mad Honey Symposium* (Alice James Books, 2014). The recipient of a Pushcart Prize and a National Endowment for the Arts grant, she was recently a Cullman Fellow at the New York Public Library, a Jenny McKean Moore Writer-in-Washington at the George Washington University, and a Shearing Fellow at the Black Mountain Institute. Her poetry and prose have appeared in *The Best American Poetry*, the *Paris Review*, *Tin House*, *Poetry*, *Harper's Bazaar*, the *Kenyon Review*, the *Georgia Review*, *Guernica*, and *A*

*Public Space*, among others. She is a Kundiman Fellow in fiction and poetry.

KATE NOVOTNY has served birthing people as a birth doula since 2004 and as a perinatal nurse since 2007. She has cared for birthing families across the United States and in Central America. She is passionate about confronting trauma in birthing families and their caregivers. She has hosted the Taproot Doula Project since 2013, to dispel stigmas around our birthing bodies and amplify the need for funding of Black and Indigenous birth workers, as they reclaim ancestral birth wisdom.

TOMMY ORANGE's debut novel, *There There*, was a *New York Times* bestseller, won the 2018 PEN America Hemingway Award, and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in fiction. Orange is an enrolled member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma. He was born and raised in Oakland, California.

KHADIJAH QUEEN, PhD, is the author of six books, including *I'm So Fine: A List of Famous Men & What I Had On* (YesYes Books, 2017), praised in *O Magazine*, the *New*

*Yorker*, *Rain Taxi*, the *Los Angeles Review*, and elsewhere as “quietly devastating” and “a portrait of defiance that turns the male gaze inside out.” She teaches creative writing at Virginia Tech.

ONNESHA ROYCHOUDHURI is a writer, storyteller, and educator. Her work has appeared in outlets such as *Rolling Stone*, *This American Life*, the *Kenyon Review*, *n+1*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, the *Boston Review*, the *Nation*, *Salon*, and *Mother Jones*. She is the author of *The Marginalized Majority: Claiming Our Power in a Post-Truth America*, named one of the best books of 2018 by *Kirkus Reviews*.

SAÏD SAYRAFIEZADEH is the author, most recently, of the story collection *American Estrangement* as well as the memoir *When Skateboards Will Be Free* and the story collection *Brief Encounters with the Enemy*. His work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *Paris Review*, *Granta*, and *The Best American Short Stories*. He is the recipient of a Whiting Writers' Award for nonfiction and a Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers' fiction fellowship. He teaches creative writing at New York University and Hunter College.

Yael R. Shinar is a physician and poet.

KIM GEK LIN SHORT is the author of the lyric novels *The Bugging Watch & Other Exhibits* and *China Cowboy*, both from Tarpaulin Sky Press. Her story in prose poems “Run (Rope-a-Dope)” was exhibited at the Magic Child Repository at Gallery Z, and her chapbook *The Residents* was published by Chicago’s Dancing Girl Press. Her work appears in anthologies such as *Electric Gurlesque*, *The NOW Awards*, *Forgotten Philadelphia*, and *Narrative (Dis)Continuities* and in literary magazines such as the *American Poetry Review*, *Fence*, and *PEN America*.

KATE TARKER is an American playwright and artist who grew up in Germany. Plays include *THUNDERBODIES* (Soho Rep.), *Dionysus Was Such a Nice Man* (The Wilma, FoolsFURY), and *Laura and the Sea* (Rivendell Theatre Ensemble). She is the recipient of a Jerome Fellowship, The Vineyard’s Paula Vogel Playwriting Award, and Theater Masters’ Visionary Playwright Award. Kate holds commissions from Soho Rep. and Playwrights Horizons and has been published in the *Paris Review*. She holds an MFA from Yale.

DEB OLIN UNFERTH is the author of six books, most recently, the novel *Barn 8*.

KIRSTIN VALDEZ QUADE is the author of *The Five Wounds* and *Night at the Fiestas*, winner of the National Book Critics Circle’s John Leonard Prize. She has received a 5 Under 35 award from the National Book Foundation, a Rome Prize, a Stegner Fellowship, and the Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers’ Award. Her work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, *The Best American Short Stories*, *The O. Henry Prize Stories*, and elsewhere. She teaches at Princeton University.

ERIN WILLIAMS is a comics artist interested in graphic medicine and social justice. She is the author of *Commute: An Illustrated Memoir of Female Shame* and the illustrator of the *Big Activity Book* series. She has ten-plus years’ experience in data analysis and scientific research. Her work has been featured in *MoMA Magazine*, the *Believer*, *Salon*, *BuzzFeed*, and several academic journals. She lives in New York with her family.

TIPHANIE YANIQUE is a novelist, poet, essayist, and short

story writer. Her writing has won the Bocas Award for Caribbean Fiction, the Boston Review Prize in Fiction, a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Award, a Pushcart Prize, a Fulbright Scholarship, and an Academy of American Poets Prize. She has been listed by the *Boston Globe* as one of the sixteen cultural figures to watch out for, and her writing has been published in the *New York Times*, *Best African American Fiction* (Bantam, 2009), the *Wall Street Journal*, *American Short Fiction*, and other places. She lives in Atlanta and is a professor at Emory University.

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