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The University of Southern Mississippi

WE BECOME DELICATE BOATS: POEMS AND ESSAYS

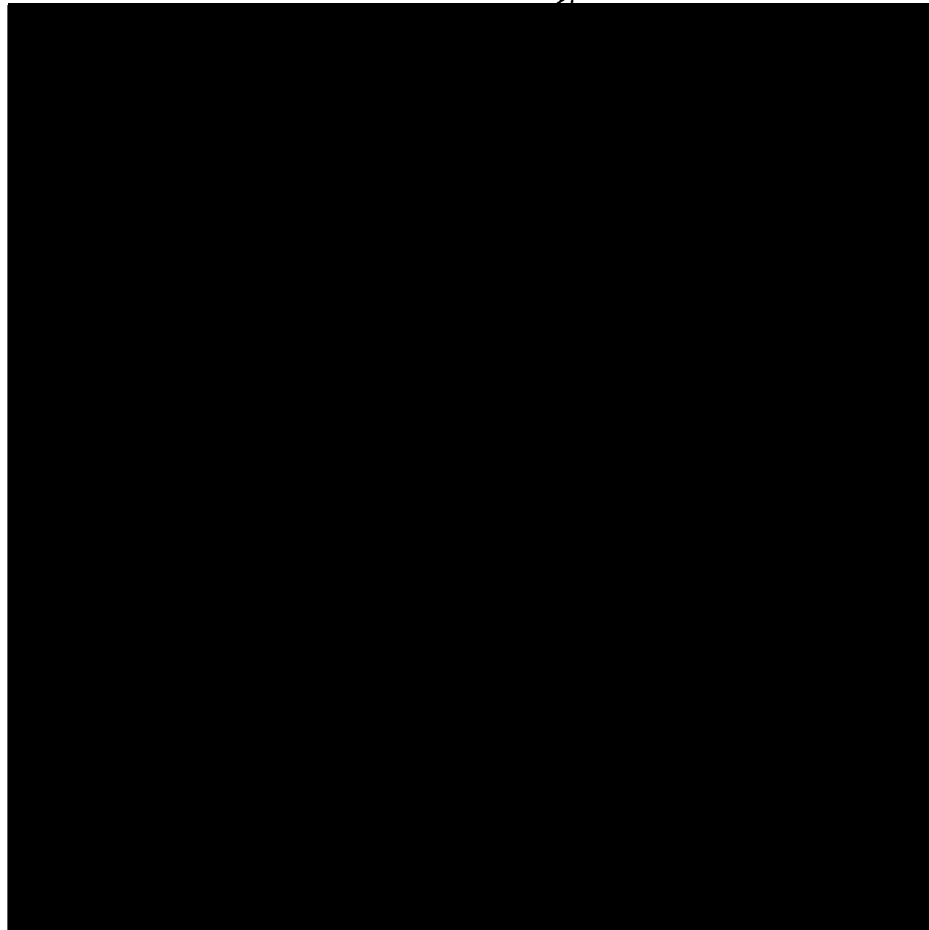
by

Deja Anne Earley

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Studies Office  
of The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Approved:



May 2008

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2008

The University of Southern Mississippi

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Abstract of a Dissertation  
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## ABSTRACT

### WE BECOME DELICATE BOATS: POEMS AND ESSAYS

by Deja Anne Earley

May 2008

My collection of poems and essays, *We Become Delicate Boats*, takes inspiration from a broad range of sources that shift into each other: paintings, pop culture, literary figures, dreams, relationships, faith, family, history. For example, some poems throw together unexpected bedfellows, like Kafka's Gregor Samsa and Marie Antoinette; others are anecdotal, like one that describes going on a blind date with a man who actually turns out to be blind, some re-imagine stories we already know, like one in the voice of Medusa, talking about which occasions call for her various snake "wigs." Although quite a few pieces are playful, an underlying theme emerges: a simultaneous obsession and deep disturbance with frailty, with disfigurement. Through the poems and essays, I try to articulate that frailty, and find an attendant humor and beauty.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

### A NAGGING THAT IT WON'T DO: ON BEING MORMON AND A WRITER

Not long after I moved to Mississippi to start my PhD, I decided to give the bar a try. I'm Mormon, and I graduated with my BA and MA from Brigham Young University, which has been voted by The Princeton Review as the nation's number one Stone-Cold Sober school for the last ten years. Thus, I hadn't set foot in a bar except for once, in England on a study abroad trip, to use the loo. But I was lonely in Hattiesburg. I had a roommate that I acquired through the Mormon connection, but we hadn't really hit it off. So when I heard that it was a colleague's birthday, and grad students were meeting at the Mahogany Bar ("The Hog"), I decided to go, drink a Sprite, and make a few friends. I'd gathered that bars were big hangouts for the grad students, and figured that from my evening at The Hog, I'd know whether I could handle joining them on a regular basis.

I found I was uncomfortable. I was really naïve: I even realize that other people would have clear drinks—ones that looked like my Sprite. So while I was sitting there, I thought my colleagues could have assumed I was drinking with the rest of them, and this was disturbing to me. My identity as a Mormon sort of hinged on not drinking (among other things), and if I didn't have that, I wasn't sure who I was. It seemed everyone was smoking—inhaling, and then turning their head and blowing out of the side of their mouth so that they could hear what I said over the din. We were on the patio, but everything smelled like beer, and I only knew that because once, at a fair, someone spilled some at my feet. Also, I had never seen a drunk person before. When my friend Ray started to (ever-so-slightly) slur, cursed more than he usually did, and was louder in

a general way, it took me quite awhile to figure out why he was acting strange. Once I did, I felt dim-witted for not getting it sooner, and wanted to go home.

When I got back to my apartment, my roommate was still up, anxious to know how it went. I think she knew I wouldn't like it, and she wanted to hear me say so. I was sort of miserable by that point. I smelled like smoke and I just wanted to shower and sleep. When I told her I didn't have a very good time and felt like I didn't fit in, she looked at me, tilted her head and said, "Don't you get it? You'll never fit here. You'll never fit with them because you're Mormon, and you'll never fit at church either, because you're not from around here and you're getting a PhD."

I don't remember how I responded, but I do remember that I didn't want that to be true. I walked around campus the next day, feeling incredibly isolated: like I was in this portable, silent, glass shell. Like I'd never get out of it, and no one would ever get in—at least not while I lived here.

Unfortunately, it feels like her comment applies to the way I think of my task as an artist, as well. In my experience, the world of art and the world of religion don't get along. Of course, this wasn't always true; art used to be almost exclusively religious. I don't think reconciling art and faith was a problem for John Donne. And maybe it isn't true now in a general way; the two have made significant invasions into the opposing camps: Charles Wright, Mark Jarman, Flannery O'Connor, Jeffery Hill, Graham Greene, even Eliot and Hopkins and Dickinson attest to overlaps. But they are opposing camps. And I've felt in a personal way that they're difficult to reconcile.

When I applied for PhD programs, I visited University of Nebraska at Lincoln to meet their faculty and see if I liked the school. I didn't; in part because I talked to a

Mormon professor in the English department who, when I asked him how to negotiate being a member of the church and a member of the department, told me, “Keep your mouth shut. Don’t even let anyone know you’re religious, let alone Mormon.” This man had a metal claw mechanism instead of a left hand. I remember looking at it out of the corner of my eye while we talked, wondering what had happened.

I don’t think that’s how it’s been at USM. I think most people know I’m Mormon and it’s not a big deal. On the one hand, when I’ve written stuff about my faith, it hasn’t seemed to be a problem. But I’ve also, at other times, sensed both subtle and overt dismissals of any sort of organized belief system. I mean, I certainly understand why we don’t have long discussions about how to save everyone’s souls (I wouldn’t want to have them, anyway), but there are times when my peers seem bent on editing any mention of God out of my poetry, or when there seems a silent agreement that anything faithful is by nature naïve, or in a graduate seminar, when asked to describe what Jesus looked like, someone volunteered that he looked like “a pussy.” It’s not as if it’s okay to make equivalent comments about other faiths: saying that Abraham or Muhammad or Buddha looked like “a pussy” would be an unforgivable lack of political correctness. It’s Christianity that’s under fire.

On one level, I understand this resentment of Christianity. One of the things I’ve learned in Mississippi is that religion has hurt and alienated a lot of people. It’s hurt and alienated me, too, truth be told—but we’ll get there in a second. There’s a reason for the bad taste my colleagues have in their mouths. And it’s not as if that bothers me. It doesn’t really matter to me what people do or don’t believe; I haven’t been passing out

*The Book of Mormon* in the halls. But the attitude toward Christian faith doesn't exactly make me feel at home, either. It's like my roommate says: I don't quite fit.

I don't quite fit with the Mormonfolk, either. When I was at BYU, we used to have long discussions about what sort of moral obligations we had as artists and thinkers, if any at all. At the time, I thought I did, and they were very specific. I couldn't fathom saying "The F-word." I couldn't fathom representing a sex scene. I couldn't fathom admitting to any sexuality of my own. I couldn't fathom writing anything that would make my mother blush, and there's a compelling reason for this concern: Mormons blush a lot.

There's a Mormon fiction writer who's made it big-ish, Brady Udall. I'll confess: I haven't read one of his books, at least not all the way through. (Truth is, I get bored.) But I bought a hardcover copy of *The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint*, and while I was still at BYU, my roommate read it. She said it was okay, but that he said "The F-word" a lot, and there were some sex scenes in it. This, she disapproved of. It was clear that she meant that she didn't think he was holding up his obligation as a *Mormon* writer, to write about this sort of stuff.

This is where I come from. In fact, this is who I was when I got here. This is who my family still is. I recently drove from Utah to California with my older sister, listening to *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* on CD, and every time the reader said "fuck," I could hear my sister suck in air; maybe she even physically cringed. I was surprised. I think I was like that once. I'm not sure when it changed. But I know that the other day, teaching my poetry workshop, when NWA came up (hiphop as it

relates to the history of poetry, et cet), I found myself saying, “Fuck the police.” And I did cringe inside. And for the rest of the day, I wondered if I had lost my way.

So maybe it’s still who I am. I don’t know yet. But I do know that it seems hard to make art without dealing with ugliness and anger and doubt and brutality and confusion and sexuality and the whole gamut of language. I mean, the word “shit” is simply more poetic than any of its alternatives, is it not? So a few months ago, in my poem “Biolumenesce,” when I wanted to talk about a car covered with bird droppings, I said “bird shit.” If it ever gets published, my mother will shudder.

It seems like all this stuff is superficial, right? Does God care if I say “shit”? I was raised to think that He most certainly does. The most vulgar thing my father ever said when I was growing up was “dammit,” and I can count the number of times on one hand. That’s by no means true in every Mormon family. But it was true in mine.

Do I have an obligation to my faith? I can’t tell you how much I hate to think about that question, and how much I can’t escape it. It’s exhausting. I begin to understand why so many artists abandon their religion. Marianne Moore is one of the only modern/contemporary poets I know of who didn’t, at any point, split. And I wish I knew how she managed it. Because the only two Mormon poets to make any kind of substantial name for themselves—May Swenson (gone, now) and Timothy Liu (alive and well)—no longer claimed themselves as Mormon by the time they made their name. They are both, incidentally, gay. I think it was Leslie Norris—Welsh poet and non-Mormon poet in residence at BYU for the last several decades of his life—who said that Mormons will never have truly great writers because we don’t have enough angst.

Trying to be Mormon and realizing you're gay would certainly fuel sufficient angst. As my ex-Mormon ex-boyfriend can attest.

But I'm not gay. And I am Mormon. And I want to write. And I think I might have sufficient angst. And, most importantly, I think Mormons are in sore need of good, honest art. We're lacking it right now, partly because we blush so much. Once, in a class discussion about our artistic obligations, a fellow BYU student said something that I thought was very insightful about why we're so afraid of edgy subjects: we're relatively young, as far as churches go. Joseph Smith prayed in a grove in upstate New York in 1820; God and Jesus appeared to him, and after that, things didn't go so well for him or his little church. They were driven from settlement to settlement by mobs that burned their homes and temples and farmland; the governor of Missouri put out an extermination order on them, ordering anyone and everyone to shoot them on sight; Joseph himself was murdered in Carthage, Illinois. It took us a long time and a lot of traveling and a batch of false starts to get on our feet. And even longer to feel like we weren't the butt of *every* joke. The fact that Mitt Romney could even begin to have a campaign speaks to how far we've come. But people are, with good reason, wary. We can be odd folks, and without all of the doctrine spread out in front of you, it looks like we've got some wacky ideas.

This means we've only been around for less than two hundred years, as opposed to the extensive histories of Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, or any of the other major religions. And we've spent most of our time trying to keep our ties straight and convince the world that we're not threatening enough to exterminate. So we're wary, too. We want to be good. We're not comfortable with the infallibility of our membership. Or maybe the right phrase is the complexity of our membership. Certainly



when our art is displayed on the big screen or in a gallery, or in a novel that sells, we prefer that the artist remain sufficiently rosey about what it's like to be a member of our church.

Thus, our art is watery. Downright bad, at times. There's a very famous visual artist within the Mormon community named Greg Olson, who paints pictures of Christ with butterflies on His fingers and children on His knees. People go *crazy* for Olsen's stuff. But it's *terrible*. I don't even know how to explain why it's bad except to say that's it's sentimental, and the painting itself—the craft—seems vapid to me. The point is not that I don't like Greg Olson, the point is that I don't feel like I have any models, what the Modernists called “a usable past.”

That's not to say I want to be thought of as a “Mormon Writer.” But I'd like to feel like it's possible to be Mormon *and* be a writer. And that seems more difficult than I thought it was going to be. The task is important to me because both edges of my identity need the other, as balance. For me, my faith keeps my head on straight when it comes to art—it is hope and meaning and answers in the face of nihilism and deconstruction and bending reality. And art keeps my head on straight when it comes to faith—it is humor in the face of the serious, and it forces me to present reality without self-pity or sanctimonious judgment. It seems to me that this is what one world can offer the other in a larger stance: perspective.

Every time I wrote about being Mormon at BYU, my professors encouraged me to open it up to a “broader audience,” which seemed to mean take out any reference to my faith. This bothered me. I didn't want to feel like I had to edit the way I saw the world in order for the world to accept it.

But now I know that all artists have to do that: art demands that we shape our experience. We make decisions about inclusion and presentation in order to allow a reader to access our message. And my professors weren't actually saying I had to abandon any mention of Mormonism or Mormon culture, I just had to know how to present it. And I didn't know yet. And it's not exactly something they could have taught me either, although I've been resenting them a little for not having tried. The only way to learn effective presentation was for me to leave the insularity of Utah and expose myself to a more diverse audience: I had to learn what people care about, and how to talk about what I care about in terms they can relate to.

My real breakthrough with this came when I was in a rut last summer: depressed, devoid of creativity. I couldn't write a thing; very little seemed worthy of articulation, and when something did seem worthy of articulation, I didn't feel like the right writer for the job. Maybe it was the heat and humidity. July gets bad enough down here to make anyone stupid and vacuous.

But I think my artistic self was rebelling against my spiritual self. Or maybe it was the other way around. Anyway, they weren't getting along. What I was worried about, what all my emotion was focused on, was something I didn't think was acceptable subject matter for a Mormon woman trying to write poetry to a national audience: my status as a single Mormon, and sexuality within the church. Among other things, Mormon doctrine is focused on family: it's important that we have and take care of them; it's important how we treat them; we will be with them after we die—forever and ever.

Unfortunately, I don't have one. I mean, I do. I've got a mother and father and five siblings; I'm second to the youngest. Trouble is, they've outgrown me—all of my

siblings are married and have kids. And it's getting to where all of my friends are married and have kids, too. Not only does this cause me to feel antsy, it's also unfortunate because we can't have sex until we get married. So I'm a virgin. I'm therefore infantilized from both directions: any Mormon woman worth her salt is reproducing and raising perfect little children of her own; to fail to do so is to fail to fully participate, to be left out, to sit alone at church, to feel like you're riding coattails. (Note: This is a cultural phenomenon, not doctrine. The prophet himself would tell you this was self-pitying nonsense. Yet, I can't escape it.) And from the other direction, from society as a whole, well. A twenty-five year-old-virgin? Maybe I don't know how the story goes, but from what I've gathered, I'd have to be either hideous or frigid.

Like I said, this was where I spent (spend) most of my emotional energy. I couldn't stop fretting about it, couldn't relax into my own life. Since my poetry usually comes out of my emotions, and I didn't think I could write about that one because no one would understand, I thought I had nothing to write about. A friend in the program had been trying to convince me to stop worrying so much and just write it. I protested that I didn't know how; I had been trained not to.

Then I dreamed one night that I married my father. That my mother, knowing how badly I wanted to be married, offered him, and I accepted. We married, had a big wedding with lots of flowers and pink skirts, and tall polka-dotted cakes. The next morning, I woke up, remembered the dream and thought, "If that's not fodder for poetry that anyone could care about, I don't know what is."

I wrote the poem. It's titled "And I Remember He's My Father." It begins, "I'm Mormon, and as such, long / to scrub babies in sinks, / deliver vegetable casseroles to

wakes, / find a husband willing to unclog drains.” And ends, “just a slight nagging that it won’t do. // Slight until the wedding night. / When we’re on either side of a bed, changing.”

I was pleased with how it turned out, but it also terrified me. I had no idea how anyone else would react; I worried they would misunderstand, think Mormons had weird Freudian things going on. The thing is, good art is supposed to scare us sometimes, right? It seems my best stuff has been when I said the honest thing, when I plucked the thought I didn’t want anyone else to see. A. Alvarez, in his book of essays, *The Artist’s Voice*, writes,

The authentic voice may not be the one you want to hear. All true art is subversive at some level or other, but it doesn’t simply subvert literary clichés and conventions you yourself would like to believe in. Like dreams, it talks for parts of yourself you are not fully aware of and may not much like. Sometimes it goes against your daylight principles, though if you try to clean up your act you kill the life of what you have to say.

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I didn’t want to write those poems. I was wearing ribbons in my hair, smiling a lot, and looking like the model citizen of the Mormon community, even if I was crying myself to sleep at night. I liked that façade. But in trying to clean up my act when it came to writing, I had been killing the life of what I had to say. When I just sucked it up and said I wasn’t happy with it all, and tried to say it with a sense of irony and humor, it seemed less tragic, anyway.

My colleagues in workshop liked it; they seemed to understand, and even relate to it. It felt like I had spoken to how it felt to be human, not just Mormon. And when I sent it out with other poems that specifically address my Mormon identity, two of them got snatched up by the first place I sent them to, within a week of submitting them. I've gotten several kind rejections on the others, including a lengthy one from Herbert Leibowitz, the editor of *Parnassus*, who said that in all of his years as editor, he'd never come across poems that talked about virginity, and that I did it well. He didn't take the poems, because they publish mostly reviews, but it was an encouraging note. It's a nice feeling that I may have something to say that isn't already being covered by dozens of other poets. I mean, the whole world is talking about sex. It seems only fair that someone talk about *not* having any.

I had tapped into craft, a way to approach the subject that worked. Andy Warhol said that "Art is what you can get away with," and I had gotten away with it. I did it by writing in first person with bald directness, with unadorned language, without attention to my spiritual life per-se, but with surprise and sense of humor. I think, in those poems particularly, it's hard to tell if I'm in the real world or in dreams. I rely on sensory details, on dialogue, on the tangible concrete edge of my faith, of my doubt.

But I wasn't just worried about that academic sector of my audience: workshop and publishers. I worried about the folks at BYU as well. On some level, every Mormon scholar's dream is to make it back to BYU, where there may not be a ton of salary, but it's quiet and safe and the students are generally smart and polite, and, when it works right, it's a place to fuse the academic world with the spiritual. The trick is: if you're too edgy, you can't come; they won't hire you. After I wrote several of those Mormon

poems, I started to get really nervous. I sent them to my mentor professor at BYU, John Bennion, asking him if they were too edgy, if I should worry about them. He wrote back that no one, not even the dean of the Humanities college, should have a problem with those poems. He said what Alvarez said: that if I tried to censor myself, I'd kill my art. He asked if he could show them to his workshop class. So maybe it's just me. Maybe I'm not as edgy as I think I am, and maybe these worlds fit together easily if I just calm down.

I wrote poems in this vein for a while. I had daydreams of gathering enough to have an entire manuscript of them, getting it picked up by a publisher, and selling millions of copies to single women (Mormon and non-Mormon) across the nation. Even if they hadn't cared about poetry before, I would win them for the genre by speaking so freely and artfully to emotions that they care about and had felt themselves.

Of course, I didn't. I got tired of it. As it turns out, I tire easily of poetic projects. I'll get a grand idea, write four or five poems in that vein, then feel desperate to move on to something else, and be stuck until I do. And I certainly get tired of myself as subject matter pretty easily. Finally, as fascinating as it can seem to me sometimes, my love life and absent sex life is not that interesting. I mean, how much can you say about nothing, about an absence, even if it aches?

It reminds me of something I read in Randall Jarrell's *Poetry and the Age*. He argues that every poet's prayer should be: "Lord, don't let me keep on believing *only this*; let me have the courage of something besides my own convictions; let me escape at last from the maze of myself, from the hardening quicksilver womb of my own charactericalness" (146). It's as I said before, I don't want to only be a "Mormon

Poet,” writing strictly about that sector of my belief. I don’t want to only write about my personality—it is indeed quicksilver. But I was glad to know that I could write about it, effectively and straightforwardly and without shame.

It was even more satisfying to realize that I actually had done it before: During junior year of my undergraduate degree, a roommate got engaged to an odd, geeky sort of fellow after two weeks of dating. The poem about my observations of their relationship seemed brilliant at the time, but I had since abandoned it. I wasn’t even sending it out for publication anymore. When I started workshopping these “Mormon” poems, the lines of it kept coming back to me. Turns out, the tone was the same. Turns out, when I submitted that exact poem (with no changes) to workshop, they hadn’t a clue that it was one I wrote five years before; it was so similar to what I had been doing.

Perhaps that’s what a degree in creative writing is for: learning how to write what we were already writing, only better. We have to get our original interests beaten out of us, only to find that we circle back around to them, more equipped to handle the project, knowing better the craft behind what we’re saying and how we say it, and having a lot of other things to say and ways to say them, too. It reminds me of those lines from T.S. Eliot’s *The Four Quartets*, “The end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And to know the place for the first time.”

Despite my satisfaction, workshop’s approval, and the positive feedback from editors, not everyone was thrilled by the Mormon poems. You can imagine, my father was by no means ecstatic. I didn’t tell him about the poem in which we married until it was accepted for publication. I sent it in an email, then called to tell him it was there, and that he ought to check it out. When he read it, he said, and I quote, “Uggggggg.”

My mother, on the other hand, had more substantial concerns. She was worried that disgruntled ex-Mormons, or those already inclined to see the church in a negative light would use my work as “ammunition”: evidence that Mormons are stifled, unhappy creatures. I tried to say that that clearly wasn’t the point, as I haven’t left the church, so I obviously don’t place my blame there. And besides, it’s not any of my business what those folks assume, is it? My job is to make good art. Faulkner, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, said that the only thing worth writing about is “the human heart in conflict with itself.” This is my heart’s conflict: the struggle to keep a faith that I nearly let go of at every turn, but can’t manage to abandon. And the struggle to make art for a group of people that I’m not sure want it. They both—my art and faith—run too deep in me. I can’t extract them, or separate them.

There have to be other people like me. I can accept that my roommate was right about my time in Hattiesburg, but I can’t bear to believe that she’s right about the whole world. So, when I finish, I plan on going to a big city and rooting around until I find them. Asking if they’d like to go out, maybe have a Sprite.



POEMS: BLIND DATE

DISFIGUREMENT DEPARTMENT

## HOW TO SEDUCE STONEHENGE

Start with a small stone. Hold it for a moment,  
dappled, cold to your cheek. Make eye contact,

but don't swank. No need to charm the brooding  
posts and lintels. No need to whisper, confess.

You won't be fool enough to offer your heart.  
It won't embrace you back. Won't caress.

Don't wonder who cuts the grass at your feet, or  
why the freeway splits the Salisbury plains, or

how the grazing sheep can ignore their henge.  
Listen to the crows tucked in their stone nests.

Watch the spiders pace their dewy webs.  
Come away with lichen on your lips.

## MARIE ANTOINETTE AND GREGOR SAMSA

*Some Gregors, some Joes and Janes,  
do not know they have wings.*

--Vladimir Nabokov

When he, tucked in bed at her Versailles,  
woke to a domed belly and flickering legs,

she fed him old cake. She dined on strawberries  
while he moseyed the trails of the gardens, sniffing manure.

While she whirled in the Hall of Mirrors, he tracked  
a sticky path, his brown reflection bounced a thousand times.

In his honor, she shaped her hair like his back, bangs like legs.  
On days she played shepherdess, he was her sheep dog.

No one lodged an apple in his side. No one shooed him to his room.  
He hid beneath orange satin couches, blue silk sheets.

And when they took her head, he was the last  
to stand tall on two legs, and hiss.

## ELEPHANTS AND APPLES

A girl stretches over bushes,  
feet steadied by her grandmother.

She offers green apples  
to the snout of an elephant.

His folded face sniffs her fingers  
while I shame the woman in my mind:

Your grandkid is two fingers  
from a nose that can't tell apple from pinky,

a nose that need only loop and tug  
to snatch and snap.

I eye the baggy beast:  
his flies feasting,

his ears flapping,  
his thin tail twirling.

## SPIDER PLANTS

My mother asks me to chop  
off her head, shake it over  
the balcony, then return it.

I slice my little hands across  
her neck. "Make sure you get  
everything. I want it hollow."

I cradle it in my arms,  
shake it, twist it back on.  
But I don't tell her I want

to really cut someone.  
Just to see what would  
come out, just to see

what would land  
in the spider plants  
with a soft thud.

## MOTHER WHITMAN'S BISQUITS

"... Thoreau helped himself to some of her biscuits from the oven."

--*Walt Whitman: A Life*, Justin Kaplan, 219

Whitman's mother invites Thoreau in,  
tells him, "Wally's at White Pond, having a bath."  
He waves his cane, takes a parlor seat.  
Her hands flutter above her lap,  
his hands clutch and unclutch his hat.

When she bustles upstairs,  
Thoreau whiffs biscuits.  
He pulls three, tosses them  
hand to hand, scrapes a chair  
across her floor and catches her eye.

Mrs. Whitman clasps  
her apron in the doorframe.  
While chewing wide and breathy,  
he reports, "Not quite done."  
She opens and opens and closes her mouth.

## MUDDY WATERS AND THE CAT

The dapper Muddy Waters paces  
the porch, waiting for his woman.

When the eyes he catches are crossed,  
he drops his hat. The crosseyed cat

stares him down, purring. Muddy steps,  
stomps to scare it out of its glare,

but the cat just pauses, unfazed,  
licks a paw. He freezes mid-lick

to give another crooked look.  
Muddy shakes his head.

Reminds himself the woman looks good.  
He's here because the woman looks good.



## T. S. ELIOT'S MANDOLIN

Think of him on the beach, doing yoga for his nerves, turning his hooked nose and slicked hair to the sky for a sun salute. He wrote in a hut, wrapped in a blanket, his toes tucked in the sand, connecting nothing with nothing. Run softly till I end my song. Dear Vivian, bring my mandolin. Hums, strums the Shakespearean Rag.

I imagine you playing the mandolin. Combing the catalog of your mind while you comb your hair. In pops a line from Baudelaire. In you tuck it. And then you stop and look at me. Turn your frank gaze and curled grin to me. Or to something past me. The ocean. Your fingers fumbling for a pen. I think of you fumbling. Spilling weak tea on your bathrobe. Writing your mother. Touching your toes.

“LET DEATH COME UPON US PLANTING OUR CABBAGES”  
for Virginia Woolf

Indeed, it would be lovely:  
Bent over a patch,  
hands deep in dirt,  
sun making its progress  
across our backs,  
a broad-brimmed hat  
with blue ribbons trailing.

And then we could just sit back.  
No wading out. No notes on the mantel.  
We'd feel a flutter in the chest.  
The seeds would scatter.  
The spade abandoned in the grass.  
And we wouldn't see the lacey heads peek up.  
But off we'd go. We'd go.

## AVALON VALLEY REHAB

Skin cancer grows on my aunt's temple,  
black and wavy, like barnacles.

A nurse in purple scrubs feeds her coleslaw  
while my father bustles like a new dad.

He explains the difference between her cell phone  
and the remote, folds a sweater, jams a paper clip

into the frame of her glasses.  
I perch on a wheelchair, looking away,  
rubbing the soft inside of my sleeve.

## FOR THE MONSTER

The sun broke  
through the ceiling  
and you shouted,  
lifted your thick hands.  
You were a heavy-footed infant,  
wiped clean.

My kitten on my lap,  
I taught you to float  
the heads of daisies.  
You smiled, sighed,  
tossed me in.

## TAPPING

I helped a blind man  
cross the street.  
When I glanced back  
at his progress,

I realized *right there*  
did not mean  
*to the left*  
like I thought it did.  
It meant nothing.

I didn't go after him.  
All day I saw him,  
tapping too confidently  
towards a freight dock.

## MEN WITHOUT NOSES

“Men Without Noses are Very Beautiful, Like Antique Marbles.”  
--Kathleen Scott, WW I Masks for Facial  
Disfigurement Department

He sits still while they paint on a slight  
grin, hint at five o'clock shadow, try  
to match his skin. He lifts the mask, thin

as a business card, to eat, brush his teeth, sleep.  
The paint sheds in places, scuffs. He ages  
around it, past it. And still, she prefers

he keep it bedside. She prefers he fasten it  
before he touches her good morning.

## UPON BEING ASKED WHAT AVOCADOS TASTE LIKE

Satan grabbed the green apple,  
pulled it into a pear,  
demoned its shade, gave it a hard  
brown heart before God took  
it back, its flesh still subtle  
and green enough to love.

## PHAROAH'S FROGS

At first, my kids wept at every squish.  
They tried to pick out ones to love, to name,  
begged for shoeboxes and arranged  
a mobile home community in the den.

Damn Moses. Does he have a clue what that reeks of?  
Or how it feels to step on one? Like a water balloon  
full of mayonnaise and pretzels.

But you know? We adjusted.  
The kids collected leg bones, used them as currency.  
I wore boots and earplugs.  
If my wife—so resourceful—  
found them in the microwave, she zapped them.  
In the fryer, she frizzed them.  
In the oven, she brushed them with Bull's Eye  
and cranked up the heat.



## TAIL

Coming home,  
neon signs are bright  
balloons—suspended  
in dark, waiting.

I imagine they  
follow when I speed by.

My neon flock  
trails at ninety,  
stretching miles behind,  
clutching me in gleam.

FEBRUARY 11, 1963

The day of Sylvia Plath's suicide,  
Julia Child hosts a televised kitchen  
for the first time. Propping chickens  
on their tails, she knights them with a long knife:  
"Miss Broiler, Miss Fryer, Miss Roaster."

## WINCHESTER TOUR

The tower begins in the crypt.  
A stone statue of a man  
is reflected in the flood at his feet.  
Sunlight perches on his shoulder.

Climbing the spiral, I grip  
the rope railing, curve into  
the wall, create ballet positions  
to fit my feet on the steps.  
A century ago, I would have fit fine.

Recalling the tiny slippers  
and slim rose dress  
in the Bronte's museumed bedroom,  
I see Emily flip these corners  
just ahead of me.

My feet echo.  
But her words,  
her ache for shadowed heaven,  
loop in my mind,  
lead the way up.

I twist past a butterfly  
lying in a windowsill  
with dust, cobwebs, flies.  
I imagine the orange wings  
finally landing, settling slowly.

If pinned down,  
would Emily say we will have wings—  
red, feathery,  
sprouting from our shoulder blades  
like the angels in the stained glass?

Or will we use our feet—  
tired, covered in dust,  
wading through flood,  
like the statue in the crypt?

Heaven could meet in the bell chamber at noon.  
Emily and I could host lunch in twelve beats,  
the butterfly perched on her ear,  
teaching the angels how to place their feet,  
teaching the statue how to fly.

## ON TOP OF THE BOSTON SCIENCE MUSEUM

We wait to see Mars, watching the Charles, shivering in the wedge of open night. The telescope woman tells us, "He has lassoed two moons in his orbit, both currently loyal and potato-shaped." Some day, one moon will spin in and shatter; the other will twist out, dilly-dally in black, leave Mars splintered.

She says, "Find his moons by ignoring them. Look at them, they're gone." We practice covering one eye, turning bare eyes to sky, anxious to see two moons. I hope to catch a hint of how he lassoed, if he knows his fate. Eye to scope, I can't hold my head still. My heartbeats distract me. I only see one, wonder which.

## GEORGE ELIOT'S LEECHES

Propped in bed  
on starched white pillows,  
her "sweet creatures"  
kiss her elbows.

Pale,  
in a no-frills nightie,  
she drains the offending flow,  
advises:

If your heart aches, bleach it.  
Drain it.  
Give it nothing to squeeze.

## THEN WE BECOME STRANGERS

Last night I dreamt my nailbeds molded.  
my ankles stiffened,  
the skin on my face peeled away.

When you ask what I'm thinking, I tell you  
about the brown shoes in the art exhibit,  
suspended from the ceiling by fishing line,  
swinging like dancers, meeting briefly.

You reach over,  
rub a smudge off the dashboard.

*PICASSO'S WOMAN WITH YELLOW HAIR*

Over coffee, her lover sketches her,  
shapes her sloth fingers  
while she sleeps,  
cradled in her own mass.

She dreams she's perched  
with a child in a paper boat.  
The two of them peek  
over the thin rail,  
watching Picasso's head  
on the pillow.

The click of his cup  
recreated in the saucer.  
And her eyes dart open,  
peer past her arms.  
His face still bows over hers.  
She's caught, immense and moony  
in the frame of his journal,  
his name a brand on the tablecloth.

## BOB DYLAN AND QUEEN HATSHUPSET

*Now my heart turns this way and that ...*

--Queen Hatshupsut

*It's your brand new leopard skin pillbox hat.*

--Bob Dylan

At sunrise in the Valley of Kings,  
he spoke songs in her ear  
over honeycomb and locusts.  
His rowdy hair grazed her long neck,  
her hand sunk in the sand.

At concerts she sat on the front row,  
good posture, carefully tapping her foot.  
He stumbled and shouted, sang one to her.  
But she didn't know it.

She's queen now.  
Her statues are breastless,  
with an unbecoming beard.  
Her breakfasts are politics.  
The man wearing her leopard skin  
is the court architect.  
It matters little what he loves her for.



## AWARE OF AN UNROLLING

While sick, propped on pillows,  
Henri Matisse held a cased curl  
in his palm, drew it.

Assistants with wide brushes  
painted sheets of paper,  
spread them on his lap.

*I became aware of an unrolling,  
found an image in my mind  
purified of the shell.*

He took scissors,  
snipped massive patches,  
swirled a wild coil.

## MEDUSA'S WIGS

Tree boas are my everyday 'do.  
I can be blond at Wal-Mart  
or reading Austen.  
I hold them in with a hat,  
long curls down my back.  
They kiss my ear  
while I'm flirting in produce.

Adders are my power suit.  
Until I stir up the thick beauties,  
they're subtle enough  
to pass for dreads.  
They're pitiless; one hiss,  
and fate's sealed in stone.

For nights on the town,  
I slip on my brahminy thread snakes.  
Thin, black, blind—  
they make a perfect French twist.  
All females, they don't interfere  
when I let my hair down.

*TIBURON*

Bob Bottini, 1951

## I. On the Mary Barbara

You shoulda seen Bob  
fly off that deck.  
One minute we're fishing tuna,  
having a good laugh  
and a sandwich,  
and I look over just in time  
to see him yanked.  
The water's already chumming,  
so I'm hollering and running around,  
sliding around, trying to get some help,  
to get him outta there,  
to get that thing offa him.

II. from *La Prensa Grafica*, San Salvador Newspaper

Adventure: USA Fisherman Attacked

Mr. Bottini's companions  
saved the daring sailor  
from the enormous sea  
beast. He was fishing  
tuna, a delicious seafood.

## III. Postcard from a Neighbor

Dear Bob—  
You should not steal fish. They belong to the sea.  
Perhaps if you leave off, they will not bite you.

## WE BECOME DELICATE BOATS

A man climbs stairs on crutches,  
and I notice he's newly wounded,  
stump still wrapped.

He explodes into human frailty.  
Not only the swell of severed hamstring,  
but all our lost hands, eyes, breasts, kidneys.  
We tuck tight bodies in coffins. This happens.

Tiny paper boats speckle  
the surface, cradling votives. The lights  
push off in the arc of his arms  
as he drifts through them.  
He peers into the tops of them,

looking for the names  
of the bodies he loves.

SEX TALK SUNDAY

## BRILLO

It's a strange thing, staying a virgin long enough to appreciate what it means, to look out at my students and realize most (if not all) have been where I haven't. To only get jokes and scenes because I've heard other jokes and scenes and had dreams I didn't mean to have. Especially since there are afternoons when I sit on the other side of his couch and consider taking off my shirt. And then one half of my sense slaps the other, wonders what it's thinking, buttons me back in.

If I had married my boyfriend freshmen year, like I hoped, I'd be single again by this point, and he'd be living downtown with his boyfriend. But I wouldn't carry around this innocence that I relish and despise. I wouldn't feel unopened.

And maybe my divorced friend wouldn't have said that thing that keeps nagging at me, that I think about when I wash quickly in the shower. We were walking to the hot tub, and she said she hadn't "shaved"—all weighty, like our other friends would get it. And then she said something about Deja being like a Brillo Pad down there. I hate her for saying that.

## AND I REMEMBER HE'S MY FATHER

I'm Mormon, and as such, long  
to scrub babies in sinks,  
deliver vegetable casseroles to wakes,  
find a husband willing to unclog drains.

I long fiercely.  
Partly because we can't have sex  
until it's time to make  
pink-cheeked children.  
And I'm getting old.

I dream my mother offers my father  
as marriage material. He's done nicely for her  
for thirty-four years, she thinks he'd do nicely for me.

And it's the event I've been mapping—  
all skirts, rosebuds, and tall polka-dotted cakes.

But quick, with just a slight nagging that it won't do;  
slight until the wedding night,  
when we're on either side of a bed, changing.

## THE UNFORTUNATE MARRIAGE

Sun does Moon's laundry each morning,  
wringing night from his coat,  
tucks him under her bright blanket.  
All day, he'll sleep, she'll burn.  
At dusk, she'll sink.  
All night he'll pluck the linty stars, fling them.



## IVAN PAVLOV AND SHIRLEY TEMPLE

Pavlov cracks the curtain,  
sees Temple trotting up the front walk.  
"Ah, hell. Already?" He's quiet while the dogs  
scramble and drool at the doorbell.

"Mr. Pavlov, aren't you home?"  
She shouts over the dogs,  
rings and rings until he swings the door wide.  
"I beg you, Shirley. Next time knock."

Temple drops her small red caddy of shampoo  
and brushes, leans her face in to a terrier.  
"Morning, Plum. Ready for bathtime?"  
Plum, in a puddle, licks a ringlet.

## BUNNIES

*Ensenada, Mexico*

A vendor walked by, carrying a flat black box  
of jewelry, and my sisters got up off their towels,  
leaned in, clutching the tops of their swimsuits.

I stood to the side, small behind my sister, wondering  
why they didn't pick the bunnies. They were by far  
the prettiest. When the oldest asked, "Deja, which ones?"

I pointed to the bowtied rabbits, nestled in velvet.  
The vendor plucked them out, smiling. His rough  
hand held them to my ears, "Playboys? Si? Si?"

## OVATION

I stood with the fireplace,  
holding hands with the clock.

If I had known you had planned a goodbye  
I could have played it like a diva.

I moved us to the kitchen.  
I wanted to wear my chef hat,  
and cut onions.

Both of us cool, composed,  
we delivered lines  
and paced the linoleum.

When you were gone,  
no one stood but me.

## IN HEAT

She rolls and squirms, moaning for her male kitten to help her out. He's young enough to think it's playtime. He climbs on her back, chews her neck, but when she tenses and sticks her ass higher in the air, he runs off, looking over his shoulder, like he's wondering what her problem is. I'm wondering what her problem is.

I can't fathom this begging. I won't even wear tanktops in public, so I'm not sympathetic. I get tired of her constant slinking and kick her. She rolls into it and keeps going. I'm ashamed.

I set up exile for her in the living room—food, water, litter, and no progeny. But all night she cries to be set free. I hear her pace, leap for the door handle. Hours later, she hasn't let up. I question my motives.

When I get her spayed, she comes back concave. A recent stray, she's got no meat to make up for lost organs. She walks unsteady on her feet, starts to whine. She's not in pain, she's still in heat. Hormones haven't caught up. I sit on the edge of my bed and watch her, hollow frame sliding across the carpet.

## EATING MY LUNCH IN TRAFALGAR SQUARE, I GET MY PICTURE TAKEN

If your Texan grandma  
begged the fountain ducks to hold still

or if your German nephew scattered pigeons  
on a May afternoon

if your Pakistani boyfriend  
posed like Admiral Nelson

or if the American teenagers  
reclining on the lion's back  
draping their arms around his neck  
sitting on his paws  
picking his nose  
giving him bunny ears  
and a kiss  
belong to you

look for me to the left  
one inch tall  
eating my yogurt  
wearing a red sweater.

I'm going home.  
But my image will go on  
in rolling suitcases,  
show up in glossy prints,

get re-wound when your French cousin  
hits the wrong button

stay trapped forever in a film canister,  
dumped when they snatch your great aunt's purse.

## ARTICHOKE

Humming, I nestle two artichokes,  
fill water to their hips, sprinkle salt.  
I nearly forget to turn on the burner.

I melt butter in two green cups,  
then teach him to bare his teeth,  
scrape the fleshy edge.  
He tries one leaf.

I don't give up. I take a knife,  
split the hair from the choke,  
present him with a forkful of the heart.

## SLEEPING AT THE FABRIC STORE

I dream the ladies follow me home,  
still pushing their packed carts.  
They line up at the foot of my bed,  
Demanding: 2 yards, 63 yards, 42 centimeters,  
an acre of slipping satin, 16 inches of leopard print fleece.

I plead my shift is over.  
I can't cut fabric in my sleep.  
But they keep shoving 40% off coupons under my pillow,  
angry I am out of Santa-suit velvet.

Shift to the kitchen table,  
and they are all my grandmother,  
chewing saltines and drinking milk to unwind.  
We snap jokes and laugh about zippers  
before I tuck them into their carts,  
settle them under scratchy batting,  
flannel bolts for pillows.

I tell them I finally forgive them  
for being too sick to see my debut  
in Hansel and Gretel when I was 10.  
I tell them we're moving the patterns  
to be close to the notions.  
I tell them I will cut again tomorrow.

## NOT YET

Still, yesterday, we sat at lunch.  
Servers and cooks gathered  
at the door to watch a storm,  
holding their aprons and nodding.

He offered to get the car,  
and I watched him run across the street,  
hunched to keep it out of his face, striding.

Slick from the rain,  
his car was covered in white blossoms,  
dotting the roof and slope of the hood.

I rushed out when he was still  
down the street, U-turning.  
“Sorry,” I said, climbing in,  
“I didn’t think you would get closer.”



## OUR HILLS LEFT US

Our hills left us. Leveled out.  
I don't mean to say that we flat-lined.

It was nothing so dramatic.  
Just a settling, like smoothing out a wrinkle.

I was thinking of that line of Plath's,  
about the pears "fattening like little Buddhas."

And how I had felt like a pear.  
You kissed my feet, the tops of them,

where the skin is loose and soft.

## THE UNFORTUNATE MARRIAGE (2)

At one end of Pearl Street, the red sun sets, glows  
around the Mississippi pines like it's burning  
a block away. At the other end, the moon  
looks steel and solid in the sky. Nonchalant.  
As if it hadn't shown up early to see how it's done.  
Learn how to blaze, not slip from the sky.

## NOTHING SHINES

My sister and I loosen knots  
from eight hours in the family car  
by catching fireflies.  
Tonight she looks twelve and not thirty  
as we slink behind the winking lights  
and clamp them in plastic cups  
topped with scraps of shower caps.

Once we've captured four lightning bugs  
we race to the hotel to show our parents.  
But all the flickers dwindle in the dark bathroom.  
They will not twinkle  
no matter how long we gawk at the cups.

My sister's husband and sweet pink girls  
are at home, six hundred miles away.  
I don't know why she joined us,  
leaving her garden and girls to Nick.  
To us, she mentions water for her tomatoes twice,  
cold medicine for the girls three times,  
Nick, only when she worries ten is too late to call.

The next night on the road,  
the bugs in tall grass  
look like stars that wandered down  
for a break from their responsible loft.  
They glitter in streaks,  
thousands of quick flashes.  
*I say I once heard if you smash a firefly on your face  
it glows for at least an hour.*  
My sister keeps watch out the window,  
tells us Nick was watching TV when she called.  
We are quiet.  
She looks old.

## BOUNTY

Our father taught us to kill:  
One cent for smashed snails,  
two cents for drowned June bugs.

We plucked snails from their nests  
in the pink lady plant, stomped gravel thick  
with gut, and wore silver-slimer shoes all summer.

June bugs attacked the figs, eight on a single fruit.  
We emptied our nets in hose water laced with Lysol,  
and crushed the ones still wriggling in the grass.

The next summer white butterflies ate holes in our salad nasturtiums.  
Our dad placed bounty at fifty cents. But they didn't slime or buzz,  
and they chewed and flew before my yellow net could close.

## ORANGE BOUGH

Her father comes home with a bough of oranges,  
heavy with globes and waxy leaves.

She and her sisters lean over the edge  
of his traveling trunk.  
The oldest traces her finger  
over the curve of a fruit,  
the others gasp.

Then their father  
is above them, reaching  
into the trunk, lifting  
the bough over their heads,  
placing one in each of their hands.

## PAN OF ICE

*Phineas Wolcott Cook, November 1864*

I roll tobacco into tight balls, stuff  
them down the throat of a sick ox. One shot  
to rouse her before the wagons head out.

She snorts and stamps, kicks to tell me enough.  
The tobacco balls land in dirt. My hand gets caught,  
comes out slick with blood and throat slime. I shout

for Anne, but she's tipped a kettle. That's twice  
she's scalded her foot. Bandaged, beat, we wait  
to sleep until our fire's embers, glowing mound.

Anne dreams she's standing in a pan of ice.  
She's wearing a pair of beautiful skates.  
In the morning, the ox is cold on the ground.

## HYACINTHS

Given another spring,  
he would have plucked his stubborn  
purple hyacinths all season.  
Pretty, but too abundant.

His body had been holding him  
like he used to hold me by the campfire—  
a loose embrace, whiskers brushing my cheek.  
I was held, but anxious to hop off,  
do something new,  
put his body to the side.

## SMALL GREEN SPIDERS

I took off my glasses  
and used Chekhov for a pillow.

The trees, tall and blurred,  
curtained me.

I dozed, felt tiny bodies  
skim my skin.



## SUMMER LIGHTNING

Can I fall for angles?  
The ninety of knees  
when you sit next to me?  
The forty-five of elbows,  
when you lean over your camera?  
The delicate triangles of lightning  
when they burst in the black above the cedar?  
You keep catching things to develop them later.

Deciding what arcs between us  
is as easy as measuring lightning's quick angles.  
The math homework of angels.  
The geometry of flashing infatuation.

## HE'S NOT COMING

Enough with the swollen music.  
It's quiet when it's over.  
A train's wail wakes you.

You eat a frozen pizza  
and three squares of chocolate.  
Then you sneeze.

You drive home from the video store in the dark,  
watching your reflection in the car window,  
wondering if you're pretty.

Stop looking up. He's not coming  
in with peonies.  
He didn't hire a brass band  
to say he's wrong.

## SWARM

Without sting, they kissed  
my arms and cheeks,  
caught in my curls.

They couldn't wait  
for my father's boxes  
and clean frames,

so they swarmed  
with me at the center.  
I blinked, felt like an eye.

In an elbow  
of the lime tree,  
they shaped a hive.

The tree bowed,  
the heavy bulb of honey  
grazed the ground.

## A ROACH

Legs-up, it kicks like a baby on its back,  
the delicate antennae tapping porcelain.

When I drew the green curtain, I squawked.  
Then hooted while I looked for a boot.

But a smash would have produced guts like  
cottage cheese, required plucking the fat carcass

before settling my nude backside in its place.  
So, humanely, selfishly, I coaxed it to a cup.

Padding out to the porch, I flung him far and hoped he  
felt mutually. Even cleansed, my bath crawls.

## SILENT NIGHT

Ari can't hear carols.  
And when she plays the angel in our nativity  
her message for the shepherds is silent.

She's spread-eagled in my arms.  
I dip to help her feel the rhythm  
of her mother's piano.  
She swirls the gold ribbon  
we used for her costume  
like she hears each note.

Earlier that day,  
all through her mother's duet,  
Ari screamed,  
Her eyes on the lights  
at the back of the chapel,  
her tiny fingers crying "more"  
long after the sacrament passed.

*CADA REGALO PERFECTO*  
*Sonora, Mexico*

Watching three orphans scramble on half-buried tires,  
and the others grip pencils and crayons as if we'd given them chocolate,  
I turn my purse inside out.

The Altoids to a boy who sketches me on his new chalkboard,  
looking up again and again to get the nose right—a Sesame Street oval.

My lipgloss to a slouching girl with an unpronounceable name  
who loves geography and sweeps the cloistered walkways every day.

The crackers to a sweaty kid I snatch at group picture time  
to be my friend for the count of three.

My frozen water bottle to those we watch  
through the back window of the bus  
who jump and wave in the dust  
and trash and shattered flowerpots  
next to the technicolor Cristus in the dry fountain  
His robe magenta,  
His arms open,  
a plump bird perched in His hand.

## I TEACH SUNDAY SCHOOL

A girl I've never met meets me at the door,  
whines at my leg until I hold her. Thin arms,  
thin mouth, a sour smell I overlook while fetching  
crayons, glue sticks, snacks. She lifts her dress,  
exposes the top of her baggy white tights, looks at me.  
We both sing: "Faith is knowing the sun will rise."  
I sit next to her, tap her hands, whisper no.

Kyle, on the front row, holds a cardboard  
box on his lap, a green scrawl on the lid.  
It's his turn to toss the bean bag and recite  
a miracle, but he stops, looks at me, says  
"This is my box," like I have to meet it  
before he can toss. He places it on the chair,  
doesn't know the miracle, returns it to his lap.

Michael sucks on his plastic bat, swings it so  
I'm showered in spit. "What's the bat's name?"  
I ask, taking two fingers to slow it. "Jesus."  
When I end the bat business, he howls and I hold  
him like the Pieta, his sweaty back sticking to my arms.  
I rock him, pray in his ear until he sleeps,  
his tears soaking my blouse, his bat tucked in my bag.

## SEX TALK SUNDAY

I sit in a class of virginal twenty-somethings,  
rows of polka dot skirts, shiny shoes, sculpted hair,

waiting for a stern and nervous bishop  
to deliver the semi-annual sex talk.

He stands, buttons his suit coat, unwraps  
the delicate tissues of a bakery brownie,

and hands it to the first girl on the front row.  
“Pass it around,” he says.

While it winds back, he preaches the joy  
of matrimonial union, the dangers of being

alone in dark places with boys, staying late,  
watching movies horizontally.

When the brownie returns, he leans in and lowers his voice.  
“You see,” he says, “who will want it, now?”

I’m thinking that it doesn’t look too bad,  
that I’d like nothing better than to push past the bishop

and lick that brownie very slowly. Or better, bite.



## RED ROCK

*Cane Wash, Utah*

Hiking in, the night silhouettes  
the canyon, tall lines traced by the moon.

I meet an oblong angel with streaming wings,  
drawn on rock. Ants trek across her feet.

By firelight, I swim, cradled in the river.  
Bats glide low on the water.

The smell of rain wakes me.  
I watch it play against the wall of red faces.  
A tiny window looks down  
like a blue eye.

## BLIND DATE

We're in the tall, carpeted corridor of the theater  
and there's this faltering weight on my right shoulder  
and I'm understanding why the ride here—in his  
BMW—was halting and strange, why he  
braked at odd times, why we crawled through construction.

We're Mormon, so we generally  
don't even hold hands until date four.  
And all the sudden he's grabbing  
my shoulder, explaining he's night  
blind, needs me to guide him to his seat.

I pick a row and clamber  
over jeans and buckets of popcorn, settle in.  
When I look back, he's still at the edge of the aisle,  
hand outstretched, face humble and waiting  
in the flashes from the screen.

## INTERMISSION

In London, alone at a ballet,  
I wear a wide hat  
and sit very straight.  
The man next to me is eyeing  
me, checking me out, maybe.

I want him  
to be checking me out,  
to invite me for intermission  
wine, to stand at the window,  
one heel propped behind the other,  
flirting from behind my hat.

Trouble is, I don't drink wine.  
And I don't talk to men who aren't Mormon,  
lest I fall from grace, on my ass, something.

I don't know how I'd tell this man I can't drink,  
can't follow him home, can't share a joint or  
rob a bank—whatever would follow hello.

So I sit stiffly, angle away from him, dart off.  
And when I come back from the bathroom  
he's at the window with a freckled brunette,  
her head tilted back,  
a long blue dress,  
a glass glittering in her hand.

## SALT AND VINEGAR

My roommate and the man  
 who sunk to one knee with a ring  
 after two weeks of dating  
 discuss Halloween in our living room.  
 Their kisses sound like stirring macaroni and cheese.

*I'll be Cruella Deville and you be a dalmatian.*

*Okay.*

*I'll be Snow White and you be a dwarf.*

*Okay.*

*I'll be Little Bo Peep and you be a sheep.*

*Okay.*

She calls me in as audience to hear his story about his pet frog  
 and she's lying on the sofa like a diva—pale skin, dark hair, head tipped over the edge,  
 asking him to get a can of olives, complaining of her third migraine this week.  
 He's kneeling like he never got up.

He mutes commercials on the Cartoon Network  
 and she swats his hand from picking at his chin.

*Stop it. Now tell them. Listen to this. He's just so cute.*

As I leave, she covers his eyes during the panty hose commercial.

Just before midnight I hear her lead him to his car with their salt and vinegar chips  
 to read their daily chapter of *Between Husband and Wife*.

Down the aisle of their future they shuffle.  
 She hunts for a bargain.  
 He pushes the cart.

## PANSY THEIVES

When I left the parking lot, he had one thumb  
hooked in a Harley belt buckle,  
one hand holding a cigarette, pinky in the air.

His accomplices loaded the backseat  
of a mold-colored El Camino with pansies,  
hot merchandise from the outdoor garden event.  
His eyes warned me away—to put my alarm,  
disposable razors, and cupcakes in the passenger seat, and go.

And I did, but I nearly U-turned.  
I wanted to steal something lovely,  
to be in-cahoots.  
I would have settled  
for the glow of his cigarette.

## THIN BANDS

I watch a couple on the train.  
He's in black cashmere, she's in black silk.  
They are newly married, the thin bands  
their most prominent feature.

They kiss unselfconsciously.  
He grabs the back of her head,  
fingers her hair. Touching foreheads,  
they tease each other in French. I reek  
from travel, watch like I'm starving.

I try to turn, to study a man read  
a story to his son and a rubber snake.  
A woman with a pinched mouth  
remove her stocking and scratch her ankle.  
A teenage girl with an eyebrow piercing,  
who can't take her eyes off the couple.

## STRAY

She had her kittens on a rainy day, called to me when I got out of my car and there they were, a damp heap under the neighbor's porch. But this isn't about how I carefully lifted them into an apple box and brought them inside, or the way I almost wept when I had her small family settled and suckling.

It's about how it feels to try to sleep when her clan's in the corner, snuggled in my sweater shelf. When she bathes them or inadvertently sits on their small heads, they squeal like piglets. So I wander past at two a.m. for warm milk and Tylenol, and she keeps her green eyes on me. All four babies are attached to her side in a row and she stretches out her paws, spreading claws, and this is what gets me.

Not having suckled anything, I can't tell if those claws mean that she's dying, suffering. Or reveling in it. I'm a twenty-five-year-old virgin, and I think I'm jealous of that damn cat. Lying in bed, feeling ripe. It's difficult to sleep.

## GOLDFISH

Near a lake, sleeping tight in a tent,  
I slit the belly of a goldfish,  
place a child inside.

He's snug, swimming in gold.  
But I can't recall which fish.

Morning, I dive in,  
check split fish bellies  
until a baby spills in my arms.



## AFTER

All afternoon the kids have darted around the backyard,  
backdropped by my father's blackberries and mulberries,  
fighting over baseball mitts, leaning into their parent's  
faces, smiling at my camera over chocolate ice cream cones.

Later, my sister struggles her son into striped pajamas,  
sends him off to make his rounds,  
kissing us goodbye on the tip of the chin.  
She buckles him into their car and takes him home.

Same with my four other siblings and their young  
families, their husbands and wives and houses.  
They go enact the rituals of bathing, tucking,  
telling stories, checking nightlights, locking doors.

And now it's very quiet.  
I sit up and read.  
Only my parents in the house,  
sleeping in the same bed, aging.

ESSAYS: HOW TO DROWN A JUNE BUG

## HOW TO DROWN A JUNE BUG

The summer I was ten and my brother Gavin was seven, my father set cash bounty on the heads of snails—a penny each. The snails were easy to kill. We knew they lived in the naked lady plant. We plucked them out by the domes of their shells and stomped them in the gravel, their guts making thick mud with the dirt. Snail slime covered our shoes all summer long.

I grew up in San Diego and my father had a thing for gardening, so the yard was worth defending: Peaches, white peaches, blood oranges, tangerines, loquats, mulberries, pomegranates, figs, limes, lemons, blackberries, apples, persimmons, nasturtiums, corn, sugar baby watermelons, sunflowers, rose bushes, and four bee hives flourished on our half acre of land. The list of the fruit I feasted on from the garden feels now like my imagination must have added a few trees.

The big garden fed a big family. There were six of us—three older sisters, Amara, Kira and Meesha. An older brother, Garret, and my younger brother, Gavin. As second to the youngest, sandwiched between the boys, I was lumped as a younger kid. Gavin and I spent most of our time playing in the garden, even when we weren't making money by defending it—constructing shoes from leaves, saving our cat from pirates, serving lunch from the French-fry-shaped ice plant. We didn't mind killing the garden pests. Protecting was even better than pretending.

It took us one season to wipe out the snail population, and the following summer, my dad put us to work on june bugs, setting bounty at two cents, and assigning my older sister to sew nets for us. Defending figs from junes was harder than squashing snails. Junes are buzzy and aggressive. There was something sick about smashing them as they

jerked around in the net. Not to mention the gross job of cleaning the net after stomping. After experimenting with a variety of methods, we settled on taking a bucket from the sand box, filling it mostly with water from the hose, and topping it off with Lysol Tub and Tile Cleaner. We left the bugs swimming weakly while we went back for another net full. If they still writhed when we returned, we dumped the bucket on the grass and stomped them like the snails.

The next year there were no snails in the pink lady plant or june bugs bothering the figs. I paid more attention to them because I felt I had saved them. And we had a new assignment, the most cunning threat yet—we were asked to take on the quarter-sized white moths that feasted on our salad nasturtiums and the leaves of our sugar baby watermelons. The bounty for the moths was an incredible fifty cents. But while my brother went out netting them for hours at a time, I saw it differently than I had the year before. It was strange that something dainty was worth the price of twenty-five junes. And I didn't like the thought of the snails I had stomped and bugs I'd drowned. It bothered me that the new pests didn't slime shoes or buzz in my ear, that I often confused the moths with flashes of sunlight, and that they landed like ballerinas on the petals. I didn't like how easily they fled. But I did like that they escaped. After the best maneuvers, sometimes they still shot out of my brother's net, ready to land and feast again, and I liked them for that. I wanted to save both the watermelons and the white moths. It may not be true that that was the first time the world felt complex, but it seems like it was. Because I couldn't decide whether it was good or bad to exterminate those moths, I never caught one.

In February, just a few months after the summer of the white moths, we lost the house and the yard. When a bookkeeper embezzled from the family company, it sent us into a financial spiral that eventually led my family of eight to a one-bedroom apartment beneath my grandmother's house, a place my four older siblings nicknamed "The Hole." We lived in the basement for three years.

At that age, I didn't know much about why we lost our house. My parents used words like mortgage and foreclosure, and I copied them like I knew what they were. But I didn't realize the house wasn't ours until we had to leave. I had thought ownership meant our stuff was there—my Sunday dresses and Madame Alexander doll in the closet, and my cat's bowl of food by the Tupperware cupboard in the kitchen.

My father worked for the small family business, Safeway Insurance Company. It was a piece of my childhood that I did not question. I thought everyone's father worked with their grandmother and had weekends off. Everyone's mother bought two carts-full of groceries on Wednesday afternoons.

Things got bad before we left that house with the fruit trees. My dad wasn't home much and my mom talked about nothing but money. In the months leading up to the move, I sometimes avoided my father completely, and other times refused to do the dishes so I could prove he was home. If I didn't make him angry, it was like he wasn't there at all. There were probably more weeks than I'm aware of where we lived off food storage from our shed in the back yard. Two of the beehives stopped producing honey. The pomegranate tree died. The rose bushes, the blackberries, the white peaches, the new banana tree all failed to produce their crops. My dad was putting his time into saving our finances, not the garden. He knew we would lose the house.

We lived for six months without making a mortgage payment. Before we were evicted, my older siblings made a running joke about the federal marshal coming to post our notice. We imagined what would happen if he came without us realizing it, and some innocent visitor brought it to our attention. My sister's date would pick her up for the Sweetheart's dance, hand her the paper with a shy "This was on your front door," while she turned the color of her dress, and my family laughed in the kitchen.

I remember we managed to laugh on the day we moved out, joking about the black burn in the linoleum where years before my brother had panicked and thrown down a flaming tortilla. I sat backwards on a dining room chair, and looked through the slats, laughing at my brother. I was experimenting with my emotions, trying to see if I could keep my sister's jokes and the heavy feeling in my mind simultaneously.

Gavin and I climbed onto the mattresses in the back of the van and we drove away. I must have told my parents eight times in the five-minute ride to my grandmother's house that I didn't want to move. They told me again what they had told all of us, that we would move again in three months.

\*

It was evening, sprinkling rain when we pulled into the separate driveway on the side of my grandma's house. There was an old green truck at the front of the driveway with four flat tires. We had a small yard bordered by a cobblestone walkway, a green and white awning over the doormat. There was a security system sticker on the front door that my dad told me someone put there to scare away would-be thieves.

It took until bedtime to carry the boxes into the apartment and situate temporary beds on my grandma's couches for the kids, and a mattress for my parents in our

apartment. It was quiet in my grandma's living room. We had slept over before, but this was different. I cried as I tried to fall asleep, trying hard to be quiet. After I finally went to sleep, I kept waking up, feeling like I had lost something small, like a watch.

I was awake the next morning before my parents came to get us up for school, and there were more birds in the trees outside than I had ever heard. I thought maybe my grandma lived closer to the San Diego Zoo. I thought maybe someone was playing a nature tape to make us feel better. But I decided it must be God. Before my mom nudged me, I imagined God placing more birds than usual in these particular trees, then touching me awake a few moments early so I could hear them—His way of saying things would be okay.

When we went downstairs for breakfast, my mom looked exhausted and my dad was still sleeping, his back turned to us and a green blanket pulled over his side. She had cleared boxes and cooked oatmeal, which I was smart enough not to remind her I hated. We ate our breakfast on overturned boxes and went to school.

\*

Within our first days in The Hole, my mother and I went to Salvation Army and bought two hot plates. Every night my mother cooked over those hot plates and lamented how little space, how little money we had for food, how she had no idea what she would make tomorrow and every day after that.

One night she made a stir-fry that we ate over toast with mustard. She asked me to make a salad and I refused. Instead, I watched *The Simpsons* with Gavin on the couch, while I could hear the vegetables sizzle, and the toast pop, and my mother complain that I never helped her. I skulked to the table only after she hit the TV off and demanded that

Gavin and I come and eat. I sat down dramatically, and the end leaf of the Duncan Fife table collapsed under the two-by-four that held it up.

The wok landed face down on the carpet, and the towel full of toast scattered. Some of the thick stir-fry landed on the leg of my jeans. My mother started to cry. I stared at the green peppers and mushrooms and corn and onions oozing down my pants and in a pile on the floor and felt sick at what I had done. But I didn't apologize. What I wanted was to be smacked for it. I felt that would make us even somehow. But my mother did not smack me. She sat crying at the table. Then she cleaned up the carpet.

\*

We moved only five minutes away from our old house, so at school it wasn't hard to pretend that I still lived there. I never invited friends over. I never talked about where I lived. It seemed people talked a lot about their bedrooms when I was in middle school; I stayed out of those conversations. I never told anyone about living there, and no one from school ever came inside.

Every time it rained in the apartment, the basement flooded and soaked the carpet. My parents slept on a hide-a-bed that folded out of the couch. My brothers slept in the back bedroom where we had two mattresses stacked on top of one another. Gavin's was a crib mattress. We filled the rest of the room with our dressers—stacked so high they covered the window and I worried they would fall over while my brothers slept. My sisters and I slept on mattresses in the corner of my grandma's living room upstairs. Every night at nine, our dad would send my sisters and me upstairs so he and my mother could go to bed. He pulled their hide-a-bed out of the couch that they paid fifty dollars for at a garage sale. It reeked of cigarette smoke.



My sisters and I hated to go upstairs. We begged to talk to our mom, outlining quickly what important things we still had to report. And sometimes she'd softly reason that we could, and my father would groan, but we were allowed to stay for a few minutes before we went to bed. My father would turn over and start trying to sleep while my mother sat in bed, rubbing moisturizer into her face while I told her what happened during lunch.

My cousin and aunt, and my cousin's six-year-old daughter lived upstairs with my grandma as well. They watched TV until we came up. As they left, my cousin slammed her sewing stuff around like she was angry.

During the day, my older brother spent most of his time locked in the bathroom, listening to *Rage Against the Machine*. The rest of us piled on the couch, watching TV, kicking each other, living close.

\*

My dad threw himself into whatever business endeavor seemed promising—Amway, Consumer Byline, international banking deals, a scripture case company. He came home excited to tell us that the funds of our big break would be coming through “Monday or Tuesday of next week”—it became a standing joke in our family because the “next” never switched to “this.” No one was more heartbroken about that than my father. He walked into every deal believing it would pull us out of our rut. I don't know why he tried multi-marketing schemes and sketchy endeavors. Sometimes he seems noble to me: the man who could have walked away from his family when it got hard, and didn't. Other times that version of my father seems unforgivably young, naive.

My mother watched every moment of the O.J. Simpson trial, cleaned the tiny hole we lived in, and petitioned God for a change. I don't understand all the reasons she didn't work either. But it had to do with my older brother. They were worried he wouldn't make it through high school unless my mom stuck around.

When we were in desperate need of dental care, my family loaded in the van and crossed the Mexican border. I got my first two cavities filled in an office where I couldn't read the posters on proper flossing. They told my younger brother he had gingivitis. My mother got a root canal.

\*

After a while, we adjusted. My father planted a garden. He planted lettuce, basil, chives, and peppers in round orange planters at the top of the stairs leading up to my grandma's house. When he watered them, the water cascaded down the steps like a waterfall. The list of what we took from our garden wasn't as long as before. But my dad was still there, still planting things.

After the first year we lived in the apartment, I decided that if there was no space for me inside, then I would live outside. It would be like the house with the big garden, only better. I would come indoors only to sleep. I would turn into one of those weathered, wild children they made Disney movies about. The first step was to plant the package of pansy seeds on the side of the house. I asked my dad for help, thinking it could be one of those daddy-daughter moments. But he insisted that I figure it out on my own. "Read the back of the package," he said.

By the time my oldest sister Amara got home from serving an eighteen month church mission in South America, we had gotten so used to our living conditions that her

reaction surprised us. We still laugh about her trying to straighten the stacks of videos around the television, preparing for her fiancée's first visit to meet the family, and getting so frustrated that she shouted, "How can you live like this?" and started to sob. We looked at each other and didn't know what to say. We didn't know how we lived like that. We just did.

On the anniversary of the day we moved in, my father declared a family holiday. Every year we watched *Groundhog Day* and ate pizza. My dad would tell us that our time in the hole was just our chance to get things really right, to figure out how to treat each other, even though every day was as tedious as if we'd been living the same one for weeks. Every year we hoped it would be our last Groundhog Day, but we joked that even after we moved out, we would come back to celebrate our family holiday with our aging parents, living in the same apartment, the carpet still stained.

As awful as it was to have no money and no room and no stove, my mother would sometimes tell me she liked living there. It was like a cocoon. No visitors. No invasions of privacy. She built a routine—making herbal tea in the morning, going on a run, watching OJ, talking to her kids, and thinking up dinner. Alone, but simple. In some ways my mother still prefers that kind of life. If she could have just her husband, her children, and a few daily simple tasks, that would be her ideal.

\*

My mother once told me that in the early days of their marriage, when my family had struggled with money before, they believed they could change their situation by changing their attitude. She confesses they went to a hypnotist, trying to tap into the powerful forces of their own minds. The hypnotist had them chart their goals and dreams

on a big poster board they kept in their bedroom. As hard as I try, I can't quite imagine my pragmatic parents in the office of a hypnotist, or carefully marking off progress toward a distant goal. I do remember a vestige of those days. I remember my mother's mantra that she shouted above the roar of the vacuum or as she walked down the hall toward her home office, punching her fists in the air, "We *refuse* to give up! (She stretched out the word refuuuuussee so it was very long and emphatic.) We will continue *boldly, firmly, and insistently* (dramatic pause) until our good appears!" Depending on how she shouted the word "refuse," I knew how badly she needed to hear herself say those words.

But no matter how much she used the mantra, they ultimately had to do something more profound to make their "good appear." Part of the problem was back taxes, so my father started a letter campaign with the IRS, asking for a settlement. Finally, after a year, they granted it—something they rarely do. My father signed and told us we were moving to Salt Lake City. It felt like God released us, plucked us up, and landed us in Utah. And even though I hated my parents for that move too, it was the change we needed. My father used the money from the sale of the insurance company to pay for a course in computer certification, beginning a new career when he was almost fifty years old. Thus far, it's been a decently successful one.

My dad has been tracking down a good mulberry cutting since we moved to Utah. One Saturday, when we were living in Utah but still didn't have a house or a garden, I remember that he spotted a good tree. We were on our way to a wedding reception downtown and he stopped the car across from a German bakery. We watched him take his pocketknife to the tree, cutting a tiny stem.

## SLEEPING AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM

A group of Japanese tourists gathered around a single glass box in the British Museum. They snapped photos with their cell phone cameras and their digitals and listened to their tour guide. I watched them from across the gallery, wondering what had caught so much attention. Once they had cleared a little, I wished they hadn't. It was a body. The leathery form was curled in near-fetal position at the bottom of the glass case, tucked in sand and surrounded by pots. Dozens of people were milling around, ogling.

For some reason, I felt instantly defensive of the man at the bottom of the case. I felt an impulse to shove them away and demand they leave him alone. But I didn't. I got closer. I wanted to know what he was doing there, why he wasn't mummified or in the ground. His plaque proudly announced him: "Ginger. A late Predynastic Egyptian Man. 3400 BC."

A little girl was standing near Ginger's glass box, her hands and face pressed to it, staring down at him. She turned around and asked her dad, "Dad, was it really a real person once?"

"Yeah, it was a real person. It's been preserved."

"What does that mean?"

"Kind of like a pickle." He laughed at his analogy. "The sand keeps it so it doesn't decay, like how the stuff in pickle juice shrinks up cucumbers so they don't go bad. It made his body stay just like that."

The little girl thought about this. I could see her out of the corner of my eye, looking carefully at Ginger. I thought for a moment that I'd found a kindred spirit, someone equally disturbed by this particular display.

Instead, I heard her dad ask, “What are you doing?” He tried to follow where her eyes were looking. “Oh, I get it. Are you looking for his tinkle?” The girl admitted that she was and her father laughed.

“It probably dropped off,” he said. They didn’t find it, but he did point out the hair on Ginger’s head—slightly wavy and bleached blond.

They left and I kept staring at Ginger. His mouth was open and I could see his teeth—as if he had gone to sleep, drooled, and never woke up to wipe it away. He was in a sleeping position, mostly on his stomach, but a little curled up to one side. He was curled in the position I sleep in. For both Ginger and me, one leg is a little more stretched than the other.

His fingers were curved, the top of one pointer missing. His skin stretched, troublingly leather-like. On one leg, just below the knee, it had split and I could see his bone. I didn’t want to see it. I didn’t want to see ribs and his spine through the thin skin. I didn’t want him to be number ten on the audio guide.

I thought of two other works in London museums, both by Sam Taylor-Wood — the Tate Modern’s video *Still Life* that shows a bowl of fruit, time-lapsing into rot—from plump to putrid in two minutes; and *David*, in the National Portrait Gallery—footage of the dashing football hunk, David Beckham, who sleeps in all his muscled glory for a full hour on screen. A sick cross of the two brings me to this. I thought about Ginger’s decay happening quickly in time-lapse photography—thousands of years in a few minutes. A man who falls asleep and dries down to skin and bones for your time-lapsed pleasure.

I walked away from his display and stood there, trying to shake off my bother about Ginger’s final resting place. As I moved to another gallery, I knew what I wished:

I wanted to lift the case off Ginger, take him carefully in my arms like my dad used to do for me when I fell asleep in the car. I'd take Ginger down the stairs. I'd ask someone to lift the lid off a sarcophagus, and place Ginger inside. Rest his forehead against the cool black stone.

## ON VEGETABLES

He had been eight years upon a project for extracting  
sunbeams out of cucumbers ....

--Jonathan Swift

On a London study abroad trip, I noticed that *Time Out* listed a performance by a group called the Vienna Vegetable Orchestra, which plays all of its music on vegetables. Next to the listing, there was an interview with one of the band members: “We like the idea of tasting and smelling sounds—eating the instruments, and therefore ‘eating music.’” I couldn’t resist.

I went to the concert partly because I have a thing about vegetables. I was raised on them, raised to think they were important. In London, I didn’t have many friends. I felt isolated, homesick, bored. I read about the vegetable concert right after I decided to buck up and enjoy London. Determined not to go alone, I tried to drum up enthusiasm, but people either had plans, or looked at me like I was out of my mind when I invited them to hear vegetables.

The crowd milling around Cadogan Hall, the site for the concert, wasn’t what I expected. There were women in soft cardigans and a lot of lipstick, men with oxfords and sweaters, and children. More families than I would have guessed. People were dressed for the occasion, dressed up. I had worn jeans and a T-shirt. I hadn’t expected anyone to take the vegetables seriously.

I sat fifth row, dead center. On stage, chairs and microphones stood around baskets, with vegetables spilling out of them. They reminded me of the baskets of Victorian London street vendors in pictures. On one table sat a carrot, speared by a drill.



The musicians made percussion on a casaba melon with a microphone attached. A man used two parts of a cucumber to make a sound like swishing spit. Above that came the whistle of a carrot flute. Nearby, a man in glasses hit a squash with leeks. A woman with wispy black hair peeled zucchinis near a microphone, another plopped thumbs out of a hollow carrot. The music sounded techno, mostly just a subtle rhythm, several levels of sound.

\*

I keep a photograph on my desk of my older brother and me, perched on our kitchen counter. I'm young, grinning, wearing white shorts and a pink ribbony top, my hair in light brown ringlets, my brother's head covered in blond curls. He's gripping the edge of the counter, his arms straight. I'm holding a huge tomato. Around us, the counter is piled high with them. We're surrounded by dozens of tight red globes. I can think of how it felt to hold that one in my hand: it's still warm from being in the yard; the skin is taut; the stem pokes my palm; the sharp, sticky smell of the vine stays on my arms after I've hopped down from the counter.

My love for vegetables was slow in coming. In the summer, my father kept a garden and we feasted from it. I remember walking the rows of cornstalks at sunset, my father watering, me begging to be allowed to order pizza for dinner. I asked if we could have pizza at least once a week. We got it once every six months. My father would say, "Look at all this food, Deja. We don't need to buy pizza. Take this squash into your mother, will you?"

Even in winter, the bulk of my mother's grocery purchases were vegetables. We had a salad every night. No frills, just green salad: romaine lettuce, roma tomato, grated

carrots, avocado on a good night. I remember choking it down. I remember my mother telling me, “Just five more bites.” And I’d have to get each one approved before I took it, in order to eat as little as possible.

It’s not like this anymore. When my family gets together, it’s understood that my mother will bring the green salad, and all of us fill a quadrant of our plate with it. Now one of the best memories I have is camping on the beach in Mexico, my mother making a long hoagie sandwich on French bread, with turkey, swiss, and every kind of vegetable I can imagine. When I go home, my parents eat meals that consist of squash, potatoes, and salad. Ever fall, my sister has a harvest feast. Everything she serves comes from her garden: Butternut pesto pizza. Tomato salad with four kinds of tomatoes. Zucchini and yellow crookneck quiche.

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Halfway through the vegetable concert, a man a few rows up got angry at a young couple behind him for laughing at the vegetables. “Excuse me,” he hissed back, “I paid for my ticket. I want to hear.” He was an older gentleman, balding, his remaining hair slick and grey. He wore a red gingham shirt with a red sweater tied around his shoulders. The couple tried to respond politely to the man’s request. But a group was playing vegetables on stage.

My understanding was that the group meant to be taken lightly. In the Time Out interview, a band member reported, “Once, in Belgium, they didn’t get us—we were met with complete silence.”

\*

A few days ago, standing in line at the grocery store in the Hattiesburg, Mississippi, the clerk asked me what avocados taste like. I was tongue-tied. I wanted to say something so accurate and so profoundly beautiful that he would try them and love them. In the end, I think I just said, “Ummm ... they’re kind of nutty tasting?” By that point, he wasn’t listening. He was telling me my total. But I couldn’t stop thinking about the experience. I was appalled that store clerk had never eaten an avocado. It seemed some indication of a lack of culture. I knew this was unfair. In part, this interpretation comes from what else has happened while I’ve been in Mississippi.

Or maybe it has more to do with what happened before I moved here: The year before I came, I had a group of tight knit friends in Utah that, looking back, I realize love vegetables like I do. We spoke the same language. Three nights out of the week, we got together for what we called “dinner group.” There were nine of us, so once every three weeks, we made a meal for everyone. It got to be extravagant: spinach salad with brie and candied walnuts, artichokes in pesto dipping sauce, homemade gnocchi, babaghanooj, hummus, Thai curry made from scratch, Romanian cabbage wraps, shrimp and vegetable yakisoba, sausage and vegetable calzones, Indian Saag that called for four pounds of spinach. My favorite thing to make involved starting with something simple—tacos, sandwiches, wraps, quesadillas, pizza shells—and setting out a dozen bowls of toppings: tomatoes, lettuce, diced purple onions, spinach, artichokes, avocados, cilantro, olives, roasted red pepper, cucumbers, grated carrots, shredded summer squash. I’d load whatever object up with as many toppings as I could fit, usually filling it too full to close. No matter what we were having, all of us gorged ourselves. We’d eat until we could

barely move, then lie around on the carpet, holding our distended stomachs, dozing, telling each other about our lives.

Sometimes, after dinner, a few of us would play tennis or go hiking and then come back to my house, so I could make my mother's recipe for spinach drink: pineapple juice blended up with spinach, a few leaves of fresh mint, and ice. It sounds terrible, but it's exquisite.

During the summer, we took a kayaking trip down the Colorado River. I can't remember how we handled the freshness factor, but we managed to eat gourmet: for dinner we had rosemary red potatoes, garlic asparagus, and lemon salmon that we nested in our campfire, then set out on rocks and ate communally with plastic forks. For lunch, we balanced our spread on a kayak and feasted while we sat in shallow water. We dipped cucumbers and crackers in Tupperwares of rosemary lemon hummus, basil walnut pesto, and maple carrot pate, swigged Martinelli's Sparkling Apple Cider, and smeared melted bars of dark chocolate on our tongues and teeth. I'll probably never have a group of friends like that again. I mean, that only happens once, right?

When I moved to Mississippi to start a graduate program, I got set up with a roommate through a church connection. I had never met her. My first night in town, she was giving me a tour of the city when she told me that she'd never read a book, any book. At least not all of one. At least not any she could remember, even though she was a junior in college. I was there to work on a PhD in English.

A few days later, we were invited to dinner at a neighbor's house. The neighbor had a lot of leftovers from a ham dinner at home, and wanted to share. Mississippi had been, like London, lonely for me, with no prospects for change. I had left my large tight-

knit family and large tight-knit group of friends. Having spent my days up to then finding reasons to go to Wal-Mart because it seemed crowded and familiar, I was excited to have a fresh shot at meeting people, and I figured I would make a salad. I had some spinach, an avocado, carrot, some croutons, tomato. I would make it beautiful. I would arrange the vegetables like I used to when I was a kid, with the tomato at the center of it, and all the other colors radiating out. I would make friends. Maybe we could have a dinner group again. After fluffing the spinach in a bowl, I started cutting the cucumber.

My roommate walked through the kitchen, “What’s that?” she asked.

“Huh?”

“What’s that you’re cutting?”

I stopped and looked at her, trying not to sound shocked. “You’ve never seen a cucumber before?”

“Oh. I guess not.”

We already seemed unbearably different. This cucumber thing was not going to help.

Later, at the neighbor’s, I tried to get my roommate to taste the avocado, the spinach, and the cucumber—none of which she had tried. I’d personally only seen her eat fast food, or chicken fingers that she fried in her countertop frydaddy, then nestled down on Wonderbread with a thick slather of Miracle Whip and ketchup. Of course I thought this was shocking. The horror, the horror.

She stood in the corner of the living room with a small wedge of avocado on her plate, poking it with a fork. The hostess and I tried to dispel her fears, telling her it just tastes a little nutty is all, not even much flavor to be frightened of.

The hostess's boyfriend stood closer, peering down at her plate, warning her, "Don't try it. I've tried it and I know you won't like it. Really, don't do it. You'll regret it." Finally, she picked it up with a single tine of her fork, and placed it carefully in her mouth, all teeth. She gagged. Rushed to the kitchen.

When we got home, I shut myself in my room and cried myself to sleep.

\*

The Vienna Vegetable Orchestra looked like they'd dressed as beatniks for the occasion. All black, many of them in turtlenecks. Longish hair. By the end, one man had vegetable guts all over his black leather pants.

I could smell the instruments from my seat—the leeks, the drilled carrot. The yellow pepper flute sounded like Charlie Brown's teacher. WaWA waWAwawa. A tall man with graying hair rubbed two leeks together, licked them, then rubbed them together again like a bow and violin. A woman coaxed a squeaky rhythm by chafing two cabbage leaves together near the microphone. A man blew on a piece of leek between his two thumbs, like a grass flute. The wispy-haired woman intently played what they called a cucumber-phone—the bottom made from a red pepper, the body a cucumber, the top a carrot with drilled holes to change the note. They paused to tell us the next song was dedicated to English weather—very wet. The song was made by blowing water bubbles in hollowed halves of butternut squash. After that number, they had to wipe their faces.

The wispy-haired woman had sliced an eggplant up the thick center and she used it as a sort of clapper—holding it by the stem. A row of carrots, resting on a bed of lettuce, became a xylophone. The man in dark glasses snapped green beans and celery near his microphone.

\*

I'm not always glad I was raised to care about vegetables. Sometimes, my roommate's ideas about food seemed enviable. I want to fry something and eat it without blinking. Because of how I was raised, I can't really eat anything without my mother's voice in the back of my head, asking me if there's enough green to it, if I've made the wisest choice. On the London study abroad, on a day trip to Oxford, I walked along High Street, trying to find something to eat. Long after everyone else had made their choice and wandered off to find some grass to lunch in, I was still poking my head in shops. I realized what was taking me so long: I was trying to find something that both sounded good to me, and that my mother would approve of. I settled on a tomato, basil, brie baguette. I didn't really want it, and my mother wouldn't have been all that proud: no lettuce.

This still happens. Selecting from a restaurant menu is almost excruciating for me. The other night I ordered Chilean Seabass. They asked me whether I wanted it grilled or fried in almond flour. I felt rebellious, picked fried. It didn't come with vegetables; it came with parmesan and herb grits. It was all incredibly tasty. But as I left, I couldn't escape the nagging at the back of my mind. I had certainly done wrong.

Several months after I moved to Mississippi, a one-eyed man asked me out. He had lost one of his eyes in a bottle-rocket accident, and on our first date he wore a black patch like a pirate. I went on the date because I hadn't dated in months; I didn't think I was interested. It wasn't the missing eye that turned me off. I kind of liked the pirate patch, actually. But we just seemed different. Sometime during the evening of the first

date, I was surprised when I looked down at my salad and realized my face hurt from laughing. I was having a good time.

The Pirate was smart, funny, interesting. He had been married up until a year before, when his wife became a stripper and started smoking crack. She'd taken everything he had and left him with thirty thousand dollars worth of debt. He had paid it off in a year of working hard and living with his parents. While he had been married, he had lived in Jackson. He had been home for several months, and people that knew him when he was younger were still coming up to him, gushing at him, glad he was home. He told me about places to visit and made the South fascinating and rich. He told me I was pretty and smart, but intimidating, standoffish.

He'd taken me out several times by that point. He was moving slowly but attentively. I felt like it was my turn to reciprocate the attention by inviting him to dinner. I made it as casual as I could—told him I was just cooking and had made too much. I called my sister to get her recipe for chili to achieve some casualness, and I thought I'd cook a few artichokes to achieve some elegance. I hummed as I nestled the ornate vegetables in a saucepan, filling water to their hips. I left the front door open, hoping he'd come in and see me there at the stove, cooking and humming. I wanted him to stand in the doorway and watch me for a moment. I had it all worked out.

But it didn't work. I was in the bathroom when he arrived. He came in and sat down, hollered that he was there. Not as picturesque as I'd planned. Later, just as we're sitting down to eat, I realized I hadn't turned on the burner for the artichokes.

As we finished the chili, I pulled down two green cups to melt butter in them, added Italian spices from England that I only use on rare occasions. I wanted to impress



him. I wanted him to think I was cultured and widely traveled. I wanted him to like what I cooked.

He'd never had an artichoke.

Things with The Pirate were about to go sour, for various reasons, among them: he confessed love for my roommate. It seems to me the turning point was the artichokes.

I pulled the steaming vegetables from the water and set them between us. They burned my fingers when I tried to strip the leaves. He looked at me skeptically, didn't try to pretend he was comfortable. Instead, he over-played his skepticism. I responded by gushing about how good they were, talking about how my mother used to make a big stockpot full of them—one for each of my family of eight. I found out later, from my roommate, that the chili had given him some gastrointestinal trouble. He was anxious to split, and certainly wasn't interested in having anything else to eat. But I took it personally. I thought he was made uncomfortable by my pretentiousness and wanted to throw it back at me, wanted me to make sure I knew I was the oddball.

I showed him how to bare his teeth and scrape the fleshy edge. He tried one leaf, declined another. Said it was okay, but he didn't want more. I didn't give up. I took a knife, split the hair from the choke, presented him with a forkful of the heart.

\*

For the grand finale of the concert, one of the musicians got up to roll onions and rutabagas down a sound-sensitive ramp, stumbling on a carrot on his way over. The onions tumbled across the stage, landing on a little boy on the front row, who was terribly frightened. He inched up and up in his chair until he nearly stood in it, trying to avoid getting smacked by the flying onions and rutabagas.

\*

After I had been in Mississippi for a few years, I went to a crawfish boil. It was a church gathering, and they had thirty pounds of crawfish. I arrived just as they were pulling gargantuan silver pots off the flame, draining off the water, and dumping a mountain of scarlet carcasses onto the table. Those crawfish, steam coming up off of them, were one of the most striking and beautiful things I'd ever seen. But I didn't know how to eat one. I got a friend, Matt, to show me. I was enthusiastic, but nervous about cracking its body open. And Matt kept saying, delightedly, "You've really never had a crawfish? Wow." I was glad I didn't know, glad to bend over the red shell and be shown how to twist off the end, break the rings of the tail, and extract the meat. I stood around the trashcan with people that I still, after several years, didn't know very well, that I will never be close to: all of us cracking and slurping and talking about technique, tossing in our crawfish remains.

\*

When I go home, I don't have my mother's voice in my head, because she's the one who feeds me. Sometimes I'm nearly as whiny about eating salad as I was when I was a kid. My father dishes me a huge helping, and I cringe. Romaine is not my green of choice. It seems rough, businesslike. But most times, especially in the summer, I swoon for my mother's salads. She homemakes a miso ginger dressing. The base of the salad is not romaine, but the sweet, frilly lettuce that we grow in the garden. I put on my flip-flops and get a large wooden bowl and a serrated knife. Outside, in the afternoon shadow of the house, I stop at the mulberry tree first, so the purple taste stays in my mouth while I cut lettuce, basil, chives, and cilantro. When I go in, my mother uses

nearly equal parts herb and lettuce. At the table, no one has to tell me how many bites to eat. I eat them all. I want to lick my plate.

The main course is grilled salmon, broccoli sautéed with red pepper flakes, and Parmesan couscous. After we're done, my mother fills three small bowls with lemon sorbet. My parents and I sit on the back porch, all of us leaning back in our chair, quietly eating.

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After the concert, the group served curry soup in the lobby. They assured us it wasn't from the vegetables they were using, the leeks they'd licked. The soup was wonderful. As I slurped it, I noticed that several other members of the audience were holding instruments and I realized it made sense for the musicians to give the instruments away. They'd rot soon. I went back into the hall while the orchestra was cleaning up. I hesitated at the back. These people, cleaning up the vegetables, felt like my people. They spoke my language. I went up and politely asked if I might have an instrument of some kind. They gave me a carrot flute.

I took it home, snapped a picture of it on my bedspread, washed it, and played it until it was rubbery, until I could nearly bend it in half.

## THE ELEPHANT DOESN'T MATTER

On the first day of last semester, I walked into a developmental composition class wearing an outfit that I was both proud of and terrified by: a tight, brown skirt, with a cream, tucked oxford and brown alligator pointy-toed heels. My students knew I was in charge and the command felt good, even if I had just changed out of my flip-flops in the stairwell, even if the toes were pinching during roll call.

I teach freshmen comp at a mid-sized university in South Mississippi. In the first class of a semester, I always ask my students to tell me a story that no one else in the room can tell. I'm stubborn about it. If anyone else can say anything remotely like their story, they have to tell another. I do it not only because it gives me a chance to glimpse their personality and associate their name (Ebony: attacked by rooster on the first day of kindergarten. Check.), but also because it softens our connection. Ideally, I have them laughing, feeling safe in the new class.

So after roll in my developmental class, I stepped carefully from behind the podium and told them that when I was ten, my sister convinced me I should let her duct tape my head for a dollar. When she pulled it off—with me screaming, her laughing, and my mother shouting—clumps of my curly hair stuck to the gray tape. Then I asked for their stories. A few of them told about sibling torture of the same sort. But the majority of them couldn't think of anything to tell. I prodded a story out of most of them, but I had to settle for what I had never settled for, simply because they wouldn't give me more.

And then I got to the last student, sitting in the back left corner. I knew he was one of the football players. He was lounging in his chair in a bright red shirt, watching me with a tilted head. He wouldn't give me a story.

“Torree, it’s easy. It can be from your childhood or today or last week.”

He watched me for several seconds, said, “I tripped on my way to class.”

Somehow I knew this was a test, that he was lying, that it was my job to refuse the lie.

I started to respond, trying to make something of the story, trying to make it a story at all. “Did you laugh or feel embarrassed or did someone see you or laugh at you?”

I was grasping at nothing. None of my questions were any good.

“Uhhh ... no. I just tripped kinda on the stairs. This girl laughed at me.”

“You’re lying to me, Toree.” I had never flatout accused a student like that before. Taking it a step further, I smiled at him when I said, “And plus, even if it is true, I think you can tell us a more interesting story. Come on. Tell us something else.”

He was surprised, but he also seemed pleased I had called him out. He couldn’t think of anything else, still trying to insist he tripped, to the point I was sure he didn’t even scuff his heel.

Time to go. I told Toree to think about it. He would be required to tell me a story next time. Packing up my stuff, I tried to process what had happened. I’d never seen a class so reluctant to tell me about themselves. The entire fifty minutes had the tone of my exchange with Toree. Although I worried it was personal, that they didn’t like me, I didn’t think it was about that. I believed them when they said they couldn’t think of a story. I didn’t know if that was because they considered their lives too boring to tell in front of their peers, or too exciting to tell in front of me.

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Later that day, I taught an honors composition class. When I had gotten my teaching assignment, including both developmental and honors, I knew it would be a

stark contrast. I had no idea how that contrast would manifest itself, or how quickly. As soon as I walked in the honors class, I could sense their energy. They were smart, alert, healthy students. They were students through and through, entirely comfortable in that role, wanting to learn, wanting to be there, almost glowing with it. We whipped through the same routine, a story unique to them. I introduced myself, told them about the duct tape, turned things over. There was no hesitation this time.

A girl in a pink polo shirt raised her hand and reported, “This summer I lived in Alaska and worked with a foundation to save whales.”

The next student, with hair deliberately in his eyes, “When I was fifteen, I worked with a physics professor on this campus to develop a computer program to simulate a proton neutron something something gizmo.” (I couldn’t understand the last half of his sentence.)

Another, “I play drums in a moderately successful rock band. We’re on the radio and we have two albums out. The only reason why I’m here is because the U2 concert in Jackson was on the same day as the test to test out.” The girls around him laughed and turned to look at him.

Somehow, the intro session had run amok. They had strayed into bragging. “Because I went to a magnet high school, blah blah blah.” “When I studied at Julliard, blah blah blah.” “Once, when my father and I were driving the M5, blah blah blah.”

I was unsure. I didn’t feel quick on my feet. I felt overwhelmed by their opportunities, especially in light of my previous class. Before we ended, as I rattled off the homework assignment that suddenly didn’t seem challenging enough, the girl who saved whales raised her hand. “I don’t mean to be rude, but how many times have you

taught this class?" I was being tested again. She wanted to know if I had enough experience to teach *her*. I had enough experience to feel confident in my answer—her class would be my ninth. But those students had thrown me.

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Early in the semester, I took both classes on mini field trips to the university rose garden. I worried about taking the developmental class, worried they'd wander off while I wasn't looking or something. Really, I don't know what I was worked up about. But it seemed necessary to give them a speech before we went:

"Listen. We're going to the rose garden. We're walking there together; we're leaving together. I'd like to do more stuff like this. But it will depend on how you behave today. If you wander off and act poorly, no more field trips. We'll sit in the classroom and learn like boring students and teachers, page by page of the textbook." As soon as I said it, I understood I'd made a mistake. These students were used to that kind of speech. It was clear in their faces. I wanted to apologize to them, tell them I trusted them. Maybe I should have. At least I decided never to talk to them like that again—like I considered them delinquents.

We walked to the rose garden in the sticky heat of a Mississippi August, my class spread out in front of and behind me. I walked with Toree, the one who had tried to tell me he'd tripped, asking him about his game the Saturday before.

At one point he looked over at me and said, "You're like a teacher slash student." I wasn't sure what to do with his comment. He was right. I was a PhD student. My purple backpack was full of books for my own classes, and I was trotting along next to him in flip-flops and a denim skirt. I don't think he meant to challenge me. I think in

part he meant he felt comfortable. But I suddenly felt very short and small and young. Like I wasn't a teacher at all. Humble.

We came up on the rose garden. It's a series of curved rows, making concentric ovals, spread out below the green dome of the administration building.

"There it is," I told them. "Now go look at it."

They hovered around it, clustered in groups, hesitating. Their assignment was to make a list of fifty observations—sights, smells, sounds, textures, tastes even. They had piled their backpacks on a square of concrete. Some of them held a spiral notebook in their arms. Slowly, they started to wander in.

The sprinklers had been on too long. We stepped lightly through the flooded grass. Drops of water flicked up my skirt, and sweat beaded up on my students' foreheads and chins and temples. Watching them walk through the rows of roses, writing in their notebooks, I felt a rush of affection for them.

I met one of them in front of a bush of deep red roses—another football player, very large, who ironically goes by Ant. He had a yellow hand towel draped over his head.

"Ms. Earley, what's this rose called? Hot Cocoa?" There was a label stuck in the dirt.

"Yep. Looks like it's called hot cocoa. Why, do you think?"

He bent to sniff it. "Don't know. Don't smell like no hot cocoa." He straightened and looked at me, smiled.

I wrote down observations, too: blue dragonflies careening, the beep of a truck backing up, a small black bug in the crook of my arm. Some surprising students got into



it, scribbling in their notebooks with enthusiasm. Others trailed behind, looking embarrassed to be on the field trip. I came over to a group of them gathered outside the garden.

“Don’t forget you can write down what you say to each other. Dialogue is important in good observation.”

One nudged another. “See! I *told* you.”

The other bent to write, “Teacher talking.”

I laughed.

“Teacher laughing. That’s even better.”

I grew quiet, watching the students still in the garden.

“Teacher silent. I got that.”

After they all had fifty observations, we gathered in the shade to talk about what they had written. They expressed surprise at how many they’d found, how the items spilled out once they got going. I had a few of them read their lists: Grass. Petals on grass. Peach-like roses. That little monument thing on the ground. Saggy roses. A bug hit me in the face. Breeze. The teacher, she start laughing. My hand start sweating. I seen a small butterfly. I seen Checkers restaurant.

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I need students to like me. Honestly, it doesn’t even matter as much if I like them. Of course, it’s a pleasant feeling to like one’s students. But not as satisfying as adoration of oneself. In part, I teach for that feeling: When the room is full of twenty-seven people who respect me and will do whatever I say. My developmental students seemed to alternate between indifferent and adoring. Part of why I liked that day in the

rose garden with them is that it felt like a pastoral orbit of admiring students. Generally speaking, although in class they could be irritatingly apathetic, they never fought back.

My honors kids, on the other hand, were much more intense—both hot and cold. When I took them to the rose garden, they wandered off solo, having isolated experiences with “nature” that they wrote about in their notebooks with wrinkled foreheads. When we gathered under a tree and I asked to hear their lists, one student (after a very long silence) raised her hand and declared on behalf of all of them,

“I think we’re not talking because we feel like we’ve had these revelations about what beauty and nature mean, what it means to describe them. To speak of it would break the spell. Do we *have* to talk about it? Can’t we just leave with this feeling?”

A few others nodded. I stubbornly tried to generate discussion for a few more minutes, trying to come at it from different angles. They had missed the point. I hadn’t hauled them out there to get in touch with Mother Nature, for crying out loud. Just learn to observe. Not knowing what else to do, I let them go.

The honors students read me more carefully than they read their assignments. If I ever mis-stepped with them, did something for the wrong reason—like changed their assignment because I wanted less work—they knew it before I did. It was unnerving, challenging. I like being adored. I’m not as interested in being scrutinized.

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Thinking about these two classes reminds me of an idea I had when I was a kid, that a true grandmother would never yell at me. I decided that as soon as one of my grandmothers yelled at me, I couldn’t love her because she clearly didn’t love me. Simple kid logic.

One summer, when my mother's mother was visiting, I said I wasn't hungry when it was time to eat dinner. My grandmother, frustrated in a way that seemed furious, shouted, "Those that don't eat when it's time for dinner, don't eat!" The fact that she declared my scolding in an aphorism made it more threatening and final.

I went to bed, feeling that not only was I going without dinner, but with one less grandmother. I remember being disappointed and surprised. I had expected the other grandma to go first. This one seemed so much nicer. Later, when the other grandmother yelled at me for jumping on her couches, I felt orphaned somehow. Left without a single grandmother who loved me.

So maybe that's what I worry for when I teach. That moment when I can tell they see through me and don't love me any more. And things aren't the same after that.

With the honors students, although we had had prior moments that made me uncomfortable, the most powerful one came in the rhetorical analysis unit. Since the paper asked them to analyze the rhetoric on a website, I was teaching them about advertising, showing them a PBS video about marketing to teenagers. There was an interview with a thirteen-year-old who was trying her best to look seventeen in order to land a modeling gig, and doing a disturbingly good job of it. I paused the video on her face. She was putting purple eye shadow on, humming "Oops! I did it again." She had said something like, "It's really important to always look good. I mean, like, if I don't look good, I just don't want to see anyone. I'll stay home from my friend's house if, like, my hair doesn't look right."

I paused it, and asked my students to remember something the video had said earlier about advertising "killing" what it finds, suggesting that this girl's personality had

been killed by marketing agencies. Some of them bristled, their hands itching to rise. It was a melodramatic point, a silly thing to say. And I had set myself up, too. I had told them at the beginning to be thinking about rhetoric, to tune into what everyone was trying to sell them—not just the advertisers the video was reporting on, but also PBS, and me. They did that. I found I didn't like it.

“Ms. Earley,” they said. “What do you mean, ‘*killed*’? I don't see anything wrong with her. It's still her choice. It's not anyone's fault or responsibility to monitor when she starts wearing eye shadow or listening to Britney Spears. It's her life.”

I didn't know what to say. I tried to get more serious. “She's thirteen. What do thirteen-year-olds usually look and think and act like? This girl isn't even human any more. She's a product of pop culture, a conglomeration of the movies she watches and music she listens to and beauty magazines she reads.” Despite their protests, I was getting warmed up by this point, feeling teacherly, feeling ready to bring it on home, ready to nail it.

They always interrupted me when I was in the middle of that feeling. “Not human? What do you mean not human? I mean, she's still a human. She's not a conglomeration of anything. She's a kid. So what?”

I sat down pretty quickly after that. I pressed play and we watched the rest of the program without pausing it again. I didn't want to talk to them any more. I felt we had had a falling out. Some part of me knew they were right. But I'd taught that unit before at a religious university, and I was used to teaching my students that there was “good” rhetoric and “bad” rhetoric, that it was our job to decide which was which, that it was possible to decide which was which. These students weren't buying it. There was no

good or bad. It was no one's job to monitor or decide what was okay or not. It just was. I knew they were more right than I wanted to admit.

After that, I was afraid to go to class again. The morning before the next class period, I was in a panic, wondering how I would regain control, wondering what to do with the students who were obviously still against me. I didn't know what to say about the video or what to say about rhetoric anymore. I finally called a colleague on my cell phone, asking him to talk me through it. I was sitting on a bench at the end of the hallway in the Liberal Arts Building, looking out the window at a billow of white generator smoke coming out of the building next door.

I said, "I think I know what to tell them. The thing these students have to understand is that there is a morality to rhetoric, an ethics, a right and wrong. I think I just need to tell them they have to accept that as a premise or we'll never get anywhere in this unit."

My friend paused. "Deja, actually, I think you need to do the opposite. I think you need to drop the morality angle altogether. It's irrelevant. It doesn't matter what's right and wrong about it. It's not your job to teach them that. What matters is that they get that everyone is trying to sell them something all the time and their job is figure out how it's done. That's all."

I looked at my shoes, angled them toward one another, and was silent. That was it. It felt like I'd been carrying an elephant, insisting that everyone should see it and pet it and love it, and someone had just told me I could have put it down long ago. That the elephant didn't matter. Why hadn't I got that on my own? By the time I walked into class, I had switched gears. I used what my colleague said to make it sound like my

students had just misunderstood my approach. But I knew they knew. I knew they didn't love me anymore.

Of course, it wasn't that simple. I had days and assignments that worked better in my honors class, and days that flopped with my developmental students. In fact, that same assignment, the rhetorical analysis, went over the heads of my developmental class. I remember one good day where I brought in a *Men's* and *Women's Vogue*, and we cut out ads and pasted them on the board. We had a lengthy, interesting discussion about a rap star reclining on the hood of a Bentley, an advertised watch barely visible on his right wrist.

But by the end of that unit, I realized I had made a mistake. I had decided to teach the paper to both classes to cut down on prep time, but also because I had wanted to believe that there was no crucial difference between my two classes. One group had had opportunities, and therefore had confidence. One group had not. It was nothing more complicated than that. But long after the honors students had turned in their papers and moved to the literature unit, I was still pushing back the deadline for my developmental students, conducting class like individual workshops, getting impatient with guiding them toward their own thesis, ultimately flipping drafts over and actually writing one for them, rationalizing that at least then they could *see* an effective one and perhaps write a good paper with mine as a guide. On one of the last days of the unit, as we were wrapping up class, one of them said, "Ms. Earley. This paper is too hard for us. You should have given it to your honors class."

I had told them about my honors class to instill confidence in them—telling them that the only thing the honors students had that they didn't was academic bravado. "I did give it to my honors class."

"Well, you should have only given it to them. We don't get this."

I was disappointed in myself. Of course it was too hard. Although there was something to be said for offering them a challenge, they didn't need a challenge as much as they needed to write. They needed to write a lot. I had done them a disservice by spending so long on such a difficult paper.

I had thought that by the end of the semester, I'd know what it was that made my classes so different, because they were certainly different—I could tell *that* from the first two minutes in each class. But I don't know what its source was. It had something to do with opportunity. And it had something to do with confidence. I wanted it to be all about those two things. I wanted my honors students to be honors students only because someone had whispered in their cradles that they would be smart, and then lavished smart-kid attention on them all along. I wanted to think that if someone had whispered to my developmental students, they would have landed in the other class.

But of course, it was more complicated than that. Whether I cared to admit it or not, it had something to do with raw, intellectual ability. And maybe how much they moved when they were a kid. And maybe how much their friends cared about school. And money. And their parents' education. And how much they cared themselves. And thousands of other personal factors that I have no idea about. And that finally, they weren't classes at all. That was a fabrication. They were, in reality, thirty individuals that I knew very little about.

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One afternoon, I came straight from a sushi lunch to teach my honors class. Standing in front, explaining the basics to analyzing a poem, I could smell soy sauce on my hands. Every time I gestured, I got another whiff. It was driving me nuts. Finally, I passed out a poem, told them I'd be back, and went to wash up while they read.

When I came back, all fifteen of them had moved to one side of the room. Usually they spread themselves evenly between the two sides, with an aisle down the middle. While I was gone they had squished together, and they all sat beaming up at me, proud of their joke. I had meant to just keep teaching, to trick them back by not missing a beat. But I was too glad they had tricked me, too glad for the evidence that they thought I was all right stuff. I laughed and they all laughed with me. They stayed where they were, and I taught from the other side of the room, leaning against one of the empty desks.

That day, it felt like they were teaching themselves, letting me only guide them along. After we had talked for a while, I split them into groups and they huddled together, pointing out things I hadn't noticed. As the groups presented their findings and I pushed and asked questions, there was both their independence and my authority. And they were not at odds.

Maybe that's what teaching is really about. Figuring out how to hang onto both authority and the students' independence. And if that's done right, students and teacher will like one another just enough to keep things pleasant for everyone involved. If that's the case, I have no idea how to do it. But I do know that it happens sometimes of its own accord.



Once, when I gave my developmental students a journal assignment, they moaned, but then buckled in. I sat at the front, for once not doing anything besides watch them. Their faces were bent intently over their notebooks, writing. Filling the page. They didn't look up. They were focused, drafting, serious. I felt a swell of joy. Not because they were mine and they obeyed me like minions, but because they had never seemed so much their own.

At the same time, it seemed that we had changed together, that we had created something by being focused on the same act at the same time. I thought of the other classrooms in the building stacked like blocks below and above and to the side of ours. And for a second I imagined our block breaking loose from the others, pushing off into the sky.

## VIRGINITY

I'm one of six siblings, second to the youngest, the only one unmarried and childless. We're Mormon, so big families are normal, sanctioned, righteous even. Being the only single kid in a big family, participating in a belief system that orbits around the family unit, having most of my Mormon friends married and reproducing, wears on me. It's not as if I'm twiddling my thumbs, pining for a knight, either. I'm twenty-five, about to finish a PhD. I vacillate between being glad about what I've accomplished, grateful for my freedom and space and time, and aching for a husband, cursing God for paving the way for me to get degrees instead of babies. At twenty-five, I'm a spring chicken in the culture at large. But in Mormon culture, I'm nearly washed up.

\*

My sister, who was pregnant with twins, miscarried on a camping trip last summer. Trying to get comfortable in her sleeping bag, she started cramping, gushing blood. At midnight while all of us slept, she rushed to the port-a-potty, shoving her shirt in her pajama bottoms so her three boys wouldn't wake to a trail of blood leading from their tent door. Her husband had had to work instead of come camping, so she passed most of the night alone, in an outhouse.

Most of my large family had attended the camping trip in Southern Idaho. We pitched tents on a friend's property and stayed for three days and two nights. My siblings and their families constructed their tents the night we arrived, kids darting back and forth under the poles, some of them helping, some of them fighting, all of them begging for dinner.

My father set up a one-man tent, for me. He inflated an air mattress and spread out a mummy bag, positioned my pillow at the top. At some other point in time, it might have really depressed me to sleep alone in my own tent, one my father set up for me. But both nights we were there, I was grateful to crawl in, scoot down in the bag, and sleep.

On the second night, my mom stood outside my tent and called my name, sounding sort of frantic. My heart was pounding before she told me what was going on.

“Will you go sleep in Meesha’s tent with the boys? We have to take her to the emergency room. It looks like she’s miscarrying the twins. She doesn’t want the boys to wake up alone and be upset.”

I got out of my tent with my things, just in time to see the taillights of my parents’ car swing out of the driveway. Wedging my feet in my tennis shoes, heels balanced, I crossed the campsite to her tent. My adrenaline was pumping, my heart beating quickly. I was bleary from being jerked awake, worried about my sister, worried about my nephews waking up and realizing I wasn’t their mom, wondering what I would tell them.

When I opened her tent, I realized she had given herself a tiny aisle of space between the air mattress and the zip-around opening. It was a long way from my individual hovel. I bedded down and tried to relax, but I was still wired. The ground made all my bones feel sharp. Noah, the four-year-old and the one sleeping closest to me, kept partially waking up, whimpering a little. But by the time I was up on my elbow, comforting him, anxious to play my role well, he was already back asleep.

While I lay there, thinking about my sister, thinking about the tents full of families, listening to my brothers-in-law snore, I realized I was clutching a stuffed animal. And it was mine.

So there I was: my sister at the gory end of a pregnancy, my parents taking care of their grown child, my other siblings tucked in their tent houses with toddlers and pregnant wives, and I was posing as a mother, clasping a stuffed monkey to my chest.

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I'm twenty-five years old, and a virgin. I'll remain one until I get married, and if I never marry, I'll die one. It goes with the Mormon territory. We're taught from the time we're small that that's the way it's going to be, but we're also encouraged to think it through. To decide for ourselves. We just know how we're supposed to decide. I realize that it's not exactly a popular approach to sexuality.

Sometimes our lessons on chastity are thoughtful and convincing, and sometimes they're juvenile, absurd. What follows is an absurd one, one that Mormons tell amongst themselves about how silly it can get: the bishop comes to the front of a classroom of squeaky-clean, well-groomed virgins with a grave expression on his face. We're talking rows and rows of striped ties and polka-dot skirts that come to the knee. With considerable ceremony, he takes out a small white bag and from the small white bag he removes a brownie. The bishop hands the brownie to someone on the front row and encourages her to pass it around. While he talks about the joys of matrimonial union and why it's dangerous to be alone in houses with a member of the opposite sex, or watch movies horizontally, or let our significant others enter our bedrooms, the brownie snakes around to the back of the room. Each person handles it so that by the time it gets to the back, it's sort of smashed, mangled. You can see fingerprints in the shiny top of the frosting. The bishop, when he has it back in hand, safe in its tissue wrap, leans in close and asks, weightily, "You see. Who will want it, now?"

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Two summers ago, a Mormon friend got married. She wanted me to be a bridesmaid. We had been close our freshman year, but since then we had drifted apart, so I was surprised she asked me. Still, as is tradition in Mormon culture, I felt it part of my duty to buy her lingerie.

Victoria's Secret is an uncomfortable place for me, as it is for most single Mormons. The mechanics and costumes of sex are baffling. Especially when I was younger, I couldn't pass the big mall windows without blushing. This time, my friend and I strode in with as much confidence as we could muster. We steered clear of anything too lacey or skimpy, anything with too many straps and too little fabric, leopard print, leather, fur, body frosting, etc. We stuck with the soft pastel nighties that hit mid-calf, trimmed in feminine lace. Those we could handle. We pulled a couple off the rack and went back to the dressing room. I stood outside, leaning on a cabinet full of bras while she tried on the nighties and asked me about my life. That spiraled quickly into asking me if I was dating. I was prepared for it. But I still wasn't sure what to say.

"Well sort of. I can't tell, actually."

"What do you mean you can't tell?"

"Well, you remember Spence. He's been taking me out lately. I think. I mean, he asks me. It's clear it's just me who's invited. He opens doors and pays for dinner and we have long, meaningful conversations where he tells me stuff he doesn't tell anyone."

"That sounds like a date to me."

"Like last weekend, we drove up to Cascade Springs, that place in Heber? We walked around while the sun set. And then he pulled out flashlights and poetry

anthologies and we read poetry in the dark, trading off between my favorites and his, stopping every once in awhile to look at the stars. He showed me the edge of the Milky Way. I'd never seen that before. And then, nothing. He dropped me off."

I could see my friend's feet stepping out of a soft pink nightgown. She sighed, "Oh, Deja. You sure know how to pick men."

For several years of my friendship with this woman, we had managed to fall in love with the same men, and, although none of them turned out to be worth the effort, they had been more interested in me than in her. It was part of why we drifted apart. This man she was marrying was her first boyfriend, her first romantic success. Suddenly, she was the expert.

Still, I guess she was right. That Spence relationship is sort of the way things go for me. I'm not married in part because I gravitate towards men that are only up for ambiguous situations. It wasn't that Spence didn't like me, it was that he didn't like me enough to make a move, which, for Mormons, would mean a kiss good night, holding my hand, a gesture towards a relationship.

A year and a half after the conversation at Victoria Secret, I'm in an emotionally intimate, pseudo-romantic relationship with Oscar, a man who's not a member of the Mormon church, which is why it's pseudo this time. We want different things. I'd like to scrub my babies in the kitchen sink and raise them to be good upstanding Mormons; he'd like a writing career and maybe at some point he'd like to cohabitate with a nice lady and have a few kids.

One night he tells me, “Look, Deja. I know what I’m fucking sacrificing. I know you. I know if I were with you, I’d always have clean clothes, and you’d always pack my lunch. Before I could even think something could be done around the house, you’d have done it. Because you’d want to.”

“Are you complimenting me? Or is this some comment on how I’m too traditional for you, too housewifey?” My feet are tucked up under me on Oscar’s red couch, and I’m trying really hard (for the hundredth time) to wrap my brain around why he doesn’t want me. I mean, why he loves me, but why he doesn’t fight to keep me. Why in May he’s going to New York and I’m expected to find some sort of situation elsewhere. And he’s so damn calm about it all.

“It’s a compliment. What I’m saying is, if I decided to be with you, I know you’d take care of me my whole life, and that my life would probably be substantially longer, too. You’re going to take care of your kids and husband, and have a career at the same time because that’s the kind of person you are. And if I decided to be the husband, my life would be full of children and good meals and interesting conversation and all that shit. But see, I can’t have it. Because to get it, I’d either have to lie and pretend to be Mormon and therefore ruin my life, or I’d have to ruin yours. And I couldn’t do either one of those things just so I could get my dick wet, or my lunch packed, you see?” He’s prone to these earthy expressions.

I can’t look at him. I’m staring at the treadmill, the blinds, the cat, anything but him. And the worst is that I know he’s staring right at me, and he knows I’m not looking at him. Some part of me is ashamed that I can’t understand it. Or maybe it’s not that I don’t understand it, but I don’t accept it. I *know* he’s not going to beg me to come to

New York with him; I *know* that if he did, I couldn't do it. And still I find myself fantasizing about being there with him, telling him about my day, going to museums on Saturdays, even having his damn dinner on the table when he gets home. It's pathetic.

Part of the problem is that we've got different theories of love. He's told me on several occasions that for him, love means letting someone go. This makes no sense. For me, love means making a decision to be with someone and adjusting your life to make it work, even if that means clamping down on the jugular. But he's probably right. My way has already led me through a world of hurt, and I assume I'll have a world more before I'm done. Although, I don't think he's been spared any pain, either. Maybe there's no right way to see it. Sometimes people can be together and sometimes they can't. And whatever way you can manage to wrap your brain around that, good for you.

I'm thinking all this while he's in the bathroom. He drank a lot of Diet Coke at dinner so he's getting up to pee every ten minutes. There's a DVD that he's already put in, and I can tell he wants to watch it, wants to stop talking about this because we've already been through it all.

"I could have gotten you to sleep with me?" He asks as he crosses the room to his place on the couch.

I laugh, embarrassed. I had told him that earlier in the conversation and he was still ruminating. "I think so. There was awhile there where I was pretty weak-willed. I didn't know what I wanted. And sometimes I felt ready to chuck it all, take off my shirt, and climb on your lap. If, during those times, you would have applied some pressure, I think I would have caved."

"Wow. I'm such a prince."



“I know.” I turn and look at him. “It’s remarkable, really.”

“Thank you. It is remarkable,” he says.

“But see, it’s weird. Because I also hate you for it. I hate that you never tried. I sometimes wonder if I were prettier, if you would have.”

He thinks about it. He thinks about it for a while. Then he says, “No. No, come on, it isn’t like that. I mean, I’ve wondered before if it could happen and if maybe it would change the way you see the world. And you’d have experiences and maybe someday you’d go back to being Mormon and maybe you wouldn’t, but you’d be glad about what happened. But on the chance that it wouldn’t change the way you see the world, I knew it would ruin you. And I couldn’t ruin you.”

We watch the movie. It’s *The Razor’s Edge*, and I’ve never seen it before, but as we watch I realize Oscar’s been quoting lines from it for as long as I’ve known him. He hates the swelling violins and smatterings of poor acting, but between all that, there are some excellent moments. There’s one part when Isabelle, a female lead, comes to find Larry and he’s swimming, and there are five martini glasses on the side of the pool, and she stands above him with her hands on her hips, tells him they need to talk, and he says, “Okay, seal talk.” And he teeters on the edge of the pool in his swimsuit that looks like Charlie Brown’s T-shirt, arfing like a seal. And poor Isabelle is impatient, but we both laugh hard at that part. Oscar says, “I always want to say that to you when I can tell we’re on the verge of a big talk.” Okay, seal talk.

While we’re watching, it seems like Oscar likes this movie because he *is* this movie. He is Larry. He talks like him and thinks like him and says profound and perfectly funny things to defuse situations at exactly the right moment. He wants people

to be happy and he tries to be a good person and protect people and help them in nonjudgmental ways. Okay, maybe he's not that great. Larry's not even that great. But Larry reminds me of Oscar.

And there's that part later, when he's with Sophie, the seal-talk woman's friend/rival. They buy a canoe at a shop and Larry comes home from his fishpacking job to their white apartment, and Sophie has painted the canoe this bright, shining, cherry red. It glows. It's so beautiful. Right before Larry climbs into it, Oscar says to me, quietly, "I always want to say this to you, too." He's not really trying to be tender by saying it so quietly. He's worried about interrupting the movie. But it is tender.

On screen, Larry climbs in the canoe, hands Sophie a baguette, picks up the paddle and says, perfectly cool, with perfect affection, "Squaw—fix dinner. Nice job on canoe." I don't mean to, but I'm crying. I want to be Squaw.

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The thing that bothers me is that I'm infantilized from both sides. I'm sort of an anomaly in the culture at large. It feels like the only people that don't have sex are the ones who can't get any sex. We few that are waiting for marriage are getting fewer and looking foolisher. And the thing is, I sort of agree. I mean, it would have been one thing had I married my boyfriend freshmen year. But it's getting a little silly for me to be my age and to actually have no clue what sex is all about, to still be getting sort of squeamish when we talk about it in my lit classes or in classes I'm teaching.

For the most part I get what stuff means. But sometimes one of my students will be making a comment and I'll think, "My goodness. This kid has had sex. And I haven't. In fact, most of these students probably have. There's this whole body of

experience that I don't know about. And right now, because we're talking about sex and I am acting like I know what's what, they think I actually know. But my understanding is pure theory. No one has ever even laid a hand on my breasts." And yet, my authority in the classroom, to some extent, depends upon my pretending. If I admitted virginity, I'm convinced I'd look instantly younger, that they'd lose some respect for me.

There's another scene in *The Razor's Edge*, when a woman has just lost her husband and her kid in a terrible car wreck. She's lying in the hospital bed, and the nuns are bustling around, saying really inappropriate, asinine religious stuff with the intent to comfort her. And finally Sophie can't take it. She props herself up on her hands and shouts in the nun's face, something like, "What do you know? How could you know *anything*? My child was inside me. My husband was inside me. And you! No one has *ever* been inside you." And the nun just stands there in her white habit and she looks so stupid standing there being virginal and religious that I'm glad when the woman thrashes about and slaps her.

Like I said before, Mormons put the family unit at the center of the church. You go to church as a family, you sit with your family, while you're there they talk about improving your family. It's not that I disagree with the approach. The problem is, I do agree. But I've outgrown my family, or maybe they've outgrown me. And my new one hasn't shown up yet. So I go to church by myself, and when they talk about families, I sort of cringe inside. Or sometimes I get downright angry, want to slap someone. Or hurt; I want to leave and never come back.

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Last Christmas, my younger brother got married. I wasn't happy about this. He was my last unmarried sibling. I prayed a lot that week, begging God to help me feel okay about it. And then, a few days before, I realized I had it all wrong. I needed to pray that I'd be helpful to my mother, who was stressed to pieces. And I needed to pray to be happy about my brother, because it really had nothing to do with me, his getting married.

The only thing I wanted was not to pout or weep at the wedding. And I managed it. As soon as I started praying about other people, I became a paradigm of helpfulness and cheer. I spent hours arranging silver-spraypainted twigs in silver buckets full of rock salt, tying tulle and little blue flowers around chairs, and cooking Spanish rice for the rehearsal dinner.

The night before the wedding, my mom came in my room to see if I wanted to listen while my dad gave my brother a blessing. For Mormons, any man who has his spiritual ducks in a row can bless someone, I suppose like a Catholic priest would. I get blessings from my dad when I'm sick, when I'm worried about something, at the beginning of every school year. And my brother had asked for one the night before he married. I knew I should tell my mom no, that I didn't want to listen. But I felt like I could handle it, that I was obliged to handle it for my brother's sake, so I followed her back to my parent's bedroom and propped myself up on pillows.

My dad stood behind my brother with his hands on his head. Gavin sat up very straight in a chair from the kitchen table. And I burst into tears. I was doing fine until my dad said something like, "God wants you to understand that this is the beginning of your real life, the beginning of your grown up life. Everything prior to this has been

preparation.” And what the hell was I supposed to do with that? It felt like that meant I was a child, that I would be there indefinitely, that my life wasn’t actually real.

But it seems so clear to me now that for my brother, that was true. I mean, frankly, his life kind of wasn’t all that “real” until he met Erin and got married. He was sort of awkward and directionless. God wasn’t talking to me. He was talking to Gavin through my dad, and I was only eavesdropping. Shame on me for taking it personally, for crying myself to sleep, for not being able to wish my brother well the next morning when he left for the temple, no matter how I tried to force myself.

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So why in the world am I still a virgin? How come I put up with clutching a stuffed animal when there’s a man who would have me? It’s a good question, but I don’t know that the answer will satisfy. I mean, this is how I grew up, with God and sexuality and family and sin and goodness all tied up together. I don’t think I’m even capable of pulling those things apart into individual strands, at least not for myself. And so, whether I like it or not, my sexuality has to do with my relationship with God, and I like having a relationship with Him. He’s always taken really good care of me: comforted me, explained things when they made no sense, shifted my perspective and told me to stop whining and generally sent people and experiences that I needed when I needed them. I believe that. I know He’s aware of my existence. And at least for Mormons, He’s quite clear on sex. Aside from all of the frustrations, there’s no sidestepping the actual admonition to only sleep with one’s spouse.

Once I was at church when I had probably been thinking too much about it possibly being okay to sleep with Oscar. I had been hoping for a way to weasel out of it,

imagining that God, in perfect sympathy and knowledge of my unique situation, would lean down and whisper that it was all right, just for me, at least for a while. But there's this part at church where I'm supposed to think about what I've promised to do and what I've promised not to do. And while I was thinking, it was like God was nodding, saying, see, no getting around it. Sorry, but there's just no getting around it.

When I lived in Utah, this all seemed normal enough. I got my BA and MA from Brigham Young University—a school that's 98% Mormon, and the student body is something like 37,000. Although it's only around 50%, it feels like most women (and men, for that matter), leave with a ring on their finger, even if they don't leave with a degree. And that's the way it went for a good portion of my friends. But it didn't happen for me. I came close a few times. And I stubbornly held on to those relationships because I wanted the husband and the sink and the babies, but in the end, it didn't work.

Almost against my will, I graduated. I remember driving home from my thesis defense, crying, telling God I never meant to get the degree; I wanted a baby, not letters after my name. By that time, I was slated to leave Utah, land of Mormons, and come to Mississippi, land of very few Mormons, and meet Oscar, and have everything get more complicated and seem to make less sense than it had back home.

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Coming to Mississippi has opened my eyes to the way the rest of the world sees religion. I'm learning how much it's damaged other people, or, on the other hand, how absolutely ridiculous and naïve it can seem. But I don't know where else in the world I could access the feeling I get in the temple: a connection to everyone and everything in

the universe, that God is quite close, and my whole life is quite clear, and the world seems like a lovely, or at least a manageable place.

It's that feeling that keeps me from taking off my shirt. I can't betray it. Because I promised I wouldn't. Once, months ago, when my faith was low and I wanted so badly to be with Oscar, I considered leaving the church more seriously than I had ever done. That morning Oscar came over for breakfast, and afterwards I hopped in the shower while he waited in the kitchen.

I was standing in front of the mirror, doing my hair, when he shouted to me, "Deja, does it seem *weird* to you that we haven't seen each other naked?"

I took off my towel to get dressed and paused to look at my nude body in the mirror. "No. Not for me. Why?"

"Well, I mean, because we spend so much time together and we know so much about each other. Usually when I'm this close to someone, we know what the other person looks like naked, that's all. It seems very strange to me that we don't."

"But you have to understand. The only naked bodies I've seen and the only people who have seen my naked body—every time has been by accident."

This had never occurred to me before, but it was true. No one had seen me. Except for once when my sister barged in the bathroom after I took a shower and before I had my clothes on; or when my friend Emily and I had skinny-dipped without checking the depth of the water first; or once, when I wandered back to my Grandmother's master bathroom because my brother was in the front one, and I saw her spotty, nude backside. And I've never seen a real live penis, except for when I've changed diapers. I haven't even seen one in a picture, unless art counts.

When I came back in the kitchen, there was all this sexual tension in the room. We both knew it. There was often tension like that between Oscar and me. But because our physical relationship was so limited, the policy was to stay away from it as much as possible. We stood on opposite sides of the table, smiling sort of awkwardly, looking at each other.

He left quickly. I stood in the doorway. He turned around halfway down the walk and told me I looked “all good and shit” standing there. “Come back, then,” I said, too quietly for him to hear. And when he asked what I said, I said nothing. And he left. I closed my door and stood behind it, feeling infantile.

Right after that encounter, I went to a literature class in which a classmate gave a presentation on her seminar paper. It was about a Victorian novel written to caution young girls about promiscuity. I sat in that class, with everyone chuckling at the inadvertent innuendos and the way the main character was such an immature child until she runs away with her lover, and then, of course, she’s a fallen, worthless human, good for nothing more than martyrdom. And it seemed like it was her religion’s fault. Everyone in the room agreed that if she hadn’t been forced into the idea of chastity to begin with, she could have saved so much heartache. It seemed true to me, too, sitting there. Which didn’t help me out. I was miserable for the rest of the day, trying to make sense of it all.

There was no one for me to talk it out with. I didn’t have any close Mormon friends in Mississippi and my mother can’t even handle talking to me about holding someone’s hand, let alone being seriously tempted to bed. I mean, I couldn’t remember why it mattered, any more. I was trying to remind myself of meaningful church talks and



statistics that say that cohabitation correlates with a higher incidence of divorce. I was trying to tell myself stories of people I knew who had decided to have sex before they got married and how miserable they were. But were they miserable? Or were they fine, happy even? I couldn't remember.

And then, early the next morning, emotionally exhausted, I thought of a scene in a book I had just read for the same literature class. *The Yearling* by Marjorie Rawlings. A boy, Jodie, has raised a deer from a fawn; it's his best (and only) friend in his rural, isolated life, until Flag gets old enough to start eating the family's crops. At which point his father insists the boy take the deer out into the woods and shoot it. Jodie agrees he'll do it. But once he's out in the woods, the deer nibbling leaves and prancing about, Jodie loses his nerve and treks to the nearest neighbor, ten miles away, hoping they can help him find a way to keep the deer. For the preceding 400 pages, these neighbors have been set up as an uncivilized, violent, but ultimately kind bunch. Jodie bursts in and asks them (I'm paraphrasing here.):

“What would you do if you had a pet that you really loved, but your dad told you to take it out and shoot it because it was eating your crops?”

The mother answers: “Well, I reckon if I agreed to shoot it, I'd shoot it.”

Jodie pleads, “But no. I mean, you really really love this animal. He's your best friend in the whole world. What would you do?”

The father answers: “Can't starve. If I had to shoot, I'd shoot.”

Thinking about that scene, I realized: the only thing that mattered—the thing that mattered more than what had happened to my friends who slept around, and more than the statistics, and more than the meaningful lessons, and even more than the fact that I

really really love Oscar—is that I promised I wouldn't have sex before I got married. And I can't break that promise. Can't wriggle out of it. I mean, I could. People do. And eventually it's okay and their relationship with God gets back to normal. But I don't want to do that. I can't do that.

I know that my situation seems different from Jodie's because no one's going to starve if I decide to have sex before I get married. In a way, I'm starving precisely *by* keeping my promise. But it's nothing compared to the way I'd starve without that relationship, the way I'd feel if I broke my promise. Really, promise is the wrong word. It's deeper than that. We call it a covenant, a two-way promise, which for me makes it a natural mandate, like the need to eat.

Which is not to say I don't wish I had never committed. Sometimes, I'll be getting into my car to go home to my house for the night, and Oscar and I have just watched a movie or had a long conversation or something else pleasant, and I'll wish that I never told God that I wouldn't. I want to go back in time to when I said I wouldn't, and change my answer, or maybe just get a break from it, some sort of exception for a few months. But there aren't any breaks. This is my life. I have to shoot, so I shoot.

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Last summer, a stray cat adopted me, then turned out to be pregnant—the sides of her skinny frame swelling out into a hard globe. I fed her until she had her babies, wondering if I would keep them all when they were born. One day she wasn't anywhere around when I got home, but she was crying, and I found her underneath the neighbor's porch. It had been raining all day, so she and her kittens were in a damp heap.

I couldn't leave them. I found an apple box and Oscar lifted them into it, one at a time, while I held a green umbrella over the operation, and the mama cat tried to reclaim them by the scruff of their necks and put them back in her nest. Once they were settled, I was moved by the sight of this little family in my space.

It was hard for me to sleep with her clan in the corner of my bedroom. Whenever she bathed them or inadvertently sat on their small heads, they squealed like piglets. But it was more than the noise. Once, I propped myself up on an elbow to watch, and all four babies were attached to her side in a row. She stretched her paws out above the subtle nodding of their heads, spread out her claws, and purred like a go-cart. The babies purred like small go-carts.

This bothered me. Not having suckled anything, I couldn't tell if those claws meant that she was dying, suffering. Or reveling in it. Either way, I had this odd impulse to tear all of their sucking mouths away off her nipples, to scatter the family. I couldn't figure out why I was having violent thoughts about kittens until I got up to get some warm milk and Tylenol p.m. Walking back my bed, she followed me with her green eyes and I realized I was jealous of the damn cat. Even with the Tylenol, I lay awake in bed, feeling ripe.

Later, when the kittens had grown up and I had given all but one away, the mother went into heat. She writhed and squirmed on my bedroom floor. Unfortunately, I had kept a male kitten, and she was moaning for him to help her out. He thought it was playtime, so he would mount her and bite her neck. But when she tensed up and stuck her ass higher in the air instead of flipping him over and biting back, he ran off, looking over his shoulder, like he was wondering what her problem was. I was wondering what her

problem was. I won't even wear tanktops in public, so her begging seemed sort of shameful.

The vet told me that even though the kitten wasn't old enough to be sexually mature, he could be rushed into maturity by sensing her readiness. This terrified me, so I set up exile for her in the living room: I filled a bowl with food, one with water, moved some cat litter into a box, and found a towel for her to sleep on. I kept the baby in the kitchen and plucked the mother off the floor where she had been wriggling, shut her back in the living room.

She cried all night long. I could hear her pace, leap for the door handle, her claws scrambling to get hold of something. Hours later, I was still awake, listening to her frantic maneuvers to get set free. I started to question my motives.

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I'm loath to admit it, but those cats have become a sort of family for me. I discuss important subjects with them, ask them how they're doing, all the typical cat lady stuff. And last Christmas, I paid for them to come home with me to Utah. I worried about bringing them, but they did a shockingly fine job of staving off the isolated feeling I usually get when I'm at home—the one I felt acutely on that campout last summer, when my sister had her miscarriage. While all of my siblings' children ran around, the object of their attention and affection was my cats. It was almost like I finally had kids, and the cool kids, at that. The ones that everyone else's kids wanted to sit next to.

On the way back to Mississippi, I was waiting by my gate in the Atlanta airport. I had both cats in a single carryon, so I was trying to wait as long as possible before I brought us all on board. Standing at the gate, holding out my boarding pass, I watched a family behind me say goodbye. A man kissed his wife, then bent down to kiss his two

kids—a boy and a girl, who were visibly upset. They clung to him. His wife was stoic, as was he. I was wondering what situation could possibly merit a departure like that. I figured perhaps he was leaving the family—she was kicking him out or he had decided to leave, and so he and his wife were more pissed than emotional, and the kids just knew their dad was leaving and would miss him. I thought this made decent sense until the tableau increased in intensity. When he carefully pulled his kids off his arm, they started screaming, “DADDY!! DADDY!!!! No, NO, DADDY!” They were hysterical, crying as he got in line behind me. I could tell he saw me watching, and I felt like I had to say something. I’m no good at talking to strangers, and I’m always sort of proud of myself when I think of something to say, so I turned around and said, “Looks like you have a pretty impressive fan club, there.” It was a stupid thing to say. I don’t know why I said it. If anything has ever been none of my business, it was clearly that moment.

He answered, “The army is shipping me off to Iraq. I’ll be gone for a year and a half.” I could see tears in his eyes then. His voice had cracked a little. He was trying hard not to lose it.

My right arm was holding the carryon with cats in it. It was suddenly very heavy. I knew I was supposed to say something, but I didn’t have any idea what I was supposed to say. I turned around and said, as sincerely as I could, “I’m very sorry.” And then it seemed like the smart thing to do was to leave the man alone. We made our way down the jetway, me with my bag of cats, and this man walking behind me, emotional, quiet. I had been thinking of my pets as children the entire month I had been in town. Now, that seemed absurd.