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THE GIRLS WE LOVE: ESSAYS

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But now I think there is no unreturn'd love—the pay is certain, one way or another;
(I loved a certain person ardently, and my love was not return'd;
Yet out of that, I have written these songs.)

—WALT WHITMAN

ABSTRACT

The essays in this collection explore moments of painful personal transformation—those instances when our lives are irreparably divided into “befores” and “afters.” Love, be it erotic or familial or platonic, is a central character in each of these essays. Love both ruins a family and knits it together; love unites young people and tears them apart; love ushers forth great honesty and even greater deception. In the words of Walt Whitman, love is never unreturned. Out of love, comes story.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For my father, who loved me too much to let me become an engineer.

Autonomous Consumption

My mom tried to coax many different versions of me into existence. None came naturally. I couldn't paint as well as she could, despite hours spent hunkered behind a canvas, listening to Bob Ross's chipper instructions. I couldn't sit like a lady: my knees always ended up pointing in opposite directions. Legs of a triangle, not a princess. I couldn't make it through Mom's soap, *Guiding Light*, in silence. I couldn't even remember to keep my elbows off the dinner table.

The one thing I mastered was masturbation. I didn't need to scour outdated issues of *Cosmo*, brave the late-nineties Internet, or smuggle *The Joy of Sex* out of the library to learn my way around my body. Even in preschool I was a little orgasm factory, churning out pleasure with stunning finesse for someone who thought she peed out of her vagina.

One autumn evening, I toddled into the kitchen as my parents prepared dinner. I stood beside Dad, casually massaging my lower pelvis through my pants. To his credit, his face didn't register any shock at all. He was used to my eccentricities: I carried around a tattered copy of *Black Beauty* for "resurge"; I rushed to our screen door at the end of every infomercial to find "the number on your screen"; I believed ham came from a bird, misunderstanding "ham hock" as "ham hawk." Dad's voice was light when he asked what I was doing.

"I'm peeling," I said, rubbing myself. "Like a banana."

His response doesn't matter. What matters is that I don't remember Mom reacting, not laughing or rolling her eyes or even reprimanding me. And maybe she did confront me—maybe she bent down on her stiff, misshapen knees and explained not to fondle myself in public, and maybe we hugged afterward and laughed about my banana comment like actresses in a sitcom. If so, I let that memory dry up years ago. Like most things concerning my mother, I wanted it out of my hands.

When I was in elementary school, Mom forbade me to watch my favorite cartoon, *Rugrats*. I was turning into Angelica, she said. Angelica: the brat. The antagonist. And, apparently, the lone obstacle to us living in perfect mother-daughter harmony.

I saw a slew of obstacles, and none of them looked like a pigtailed blonde. I saw the time Dad left for a days-long business trip, how Mom had given me one sliced pear for breakfast each day; with no Dad around to supervise, she could finally launch her skinny crusade. I saw myself eating that pear in little rabbit nibbles, gnawing at the pulp when the last slice disappeared. I saw the bus ride to school when my stomach—my fat, flopping, out-of-control stomach—groaned evidence of how disgusting I was. That grumbling hunger, stifled with a sharp punch to the gut in Mrs. Ford's art class: that was my and Mom's real obstacle. But instead of telling anyone about the pear incident, I sneaked candy when Mom wasn't around and watched *Rugrats* at friends' houses. I found ways to indulge on my own.

Occasionally, I would hole up in the basement and blare *Rugrats* and masturbate right there on the carpet. Because of Mom's Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease, a rare genetic neuropathy, she couldn't get down the stairs to catch me in the act. I could orgasm repeatedly, my face pinched in ecstasy as the show's soundtrack plinked on.

My secret consumption came at a price: my pants size swelled, just as Mom's anger did when her crusade failed. In second grade, I sulked to her that an older boy on the playground, Elliott, had called me fat. As I placed three slices of Kraft American cheese on my TV tray for lunch, Mom clucked her tongue.

“Three slices of cheese, huh.” Her face was granite. “If you eat like that, you'll really be fat, like that Elliot boy said.”

When I entered middle school, Mom switched our family from normal life to diet life. It began with a paperback volume on her bookshelf, but soon enough *The Schwartzbien Principle* was everywhere in our home. It was in the cupboard, suddenly emptied of crackers, pretzels, pasta. In the pantry, where low-carb chocolates roosted beside low-sugar Jell-O powder. In the fridge, where eggs, cheese, and meat abounded.

“Carbs are the key,” Mom coached me, “to fat storage. It's like they open doors in your cells that tell them to store fat.”

And: “Cellulite is the fluffy fat, the kind that looks like cottage cheese. You get it from eating carbs.”

Handing me a lunchbox that matched hers: “School lunches pack in over *eighty grams* of carbs. That's more than we—” broiling me with a stare—“want to eat in a day.”

In the middle-school cafeteria, I learned to keep my lunch inside in my lunchbox as I ate, only letting bites be exposed in the second it took them to travel from Ziploc to mouth. I tried to avoid my classmates' questions, which proved impossible. Why did I eat rolled-up turkey, instead of sandwiches? Why did I have low-carb faux-peanut-butter cups instead of Reese's?

Why did I have diet sodas in every flavor imaginable, from orange to cream to ginger ale? Their curiosity soured my appetite, made me crave being let alone.

Through it all, Dad was my ally. He was the only person with whom I could eat without feeling ashamed; he was the only person from whom I didn't hide.

Tuesday nights in middle school were dedicated to piano lessons. Dad would drive me to Robert M. Sides and wait patiently on the foyer's cold metal chairs. I dreaded the lessons, but I looked forward to the ride home with him. More often than not, he'd take us to the Dairy Queen drive-thru for vanilla cones.

The Tuesday-night rule was that we didn't order Blizzards or sundaes or any treat served in a cup. Cones were ideal because we could eat the evidence. One night, though, we didn't properly cover our tracks—we threw away the cones' paper wrappers in the kitchen trash, not the garage trash. Because she had so much difficulty walking, Mom never opened the heavy trashcan in the garage. But she checked the kitchen trash often.

The door to my bedroom burst open as I struggled through an algebra problem. I knew it was Mom because the knob slipped and sputtered for a few seconds before giving way. The struggle egged her anger on.

"*Liar*," Mom hissed, her face a mess of rage. She'd removed her workday makeup and pulled her bangs back in a headband; she looked old and pale and startlingly furious. "I saw the Dairy Queen wrappers."

She still had the coordination to slam my door.

Every time we shopped, Mom insisted on accompanying me in the dressing room. The Gap caused the least anxiety, because its walls were floor-length, soundproof. Nobody could hear the knives Mom threw behind those doors. Old Navy was the worst.

I would follow Mom's unsteady gait across the thunderstorm-colored floor. Every dressing room we passed, I could hear the women inside—this is too tight, that's too revealing, *this* is the one! I'd slam our door, but I couldn't stamp out the sound of Mom barking orders. She'd insist we start by trying on the jeans. "Because they're the hardest," she would say, frowning, seated and staring as I undressed. If I asked her not to watch me undress, she'd get angry. I'd feel her eyes on my thighs. I was always the biggest kids' size—sixteen, eighteen if they carried it.

So the pants ritual began: could the fabric fit over my legs? Could the zipper close? If not, a protracted sigh. If yes, the humiliation began. Could I squat down? (Eyes on the folds of my stomach.) Could I bend over? (Eyes peeled for a bulge around my sides.) Could I sit comfortably? Lift up your shirt when you sit; let's see if the waist strains.

And the final test, when I'd suffered all the others: could Mom fit her hand inside the waistband? Two or three frigid fingers, knuckles gnarled from the Charcot-Marie-Tooth, nails sharp. She'd jam her hands inside the pants and feel my circumference. She'd touch all the contours of my body, everywhere fat laid its claim, and sit back, sigh.

Then she'd decide whether or not she liked the pants.

Mom joined a quilting club when I was in seventh grade. How she managed to finagle her fingers into threading and operating a sewing machine, I never knew, nor did I care to ask. I

was thrilled because, once every few months, she and her friends would travel to a quilt shop in Amish country and give Dad and me a get-out-of-jail-free card.

Dad and I knew we had to make the most out of those quilting nights, so we forced down shocking quantities of food. We'd go to Red Lobster, split a lobster pizza as an appetizer, clean out entrée plates. Then we'd get two tubs of Orville Redenbacher's and a movie from Blockbuster and set ourselves up in front of the TV. If we ate ourselves out of popcorn, Dad dipped into his stashes of pretzels and tortilla chips. He took special care of me on those nights, letting me choose the movie, running to the kitchen to fetch me snack after snack. He did everything he couldn't do when Mom was around.

Mom started buying me issues of *Seventeen* magazine—because it was her favorite magazine when she was my age, she said. At first, I loved it: the glossy images, the beautiful models, the personality quizzes and makeup tips. Then, one day, I turned the page to an article about problems “down there,” as vaginas were coyly referred to. Accompanying the text about yeast infections and off-color discharge was a cropped picture of a model, lower abdomen to mid-thigh, her underwear occupying the bulk of the page. My eyes shot to her pristine thighs: taut, tanned and separated by a full inch. When I looked in the mirror, I could only make my thighs separate if I gathered my fat and pulled it out of sight.

I mentioned the thigh gap to my parents in the car one day, the magazine photo seared into my mind. “But that’s so unrealistic,” I rationalized to them. Still, I found myself studying my lower body, all the bulges I disliked. “Everyone’s thighs touch.”

“When I stand, my thighs don’t touch,” Mom said from the passenger seat. She stared straight ahead as she spoke.

I didn't say anything. I didn't say *but all your leg muscles have wasted away!* I didn't say *but you're not normal!* I tried to dissolve into the silence.

By the time high school rolled around, I was tired of the fight, tired of myself. I began logging calories eaten, miles jogged, sit-ups completed. I joined the Cross Country team, just as my older sister, Erica, had.

In tenth grade, after I'd forced off twenty-odd pounds with the disgust of someone tossing aside a stained shirt, Mom and Erica took me shopping. We went to a brand-new department store: it stood lonely beside an empty lot that was supposed to house a resort before the funding fell through. Miles of parking spaces radiated out from that one lit building.

I needed a dress for my sister's friend's wedding. Since it was Christmastime, Mom picked an armful of crimson dresses for me to try. She marveled as Erica zipped them shut, one after the other, smooth lines of tight closing over even-tighter skin. Mom's eyes kept skimming my flat, pale stomach, and the elegant crests of my hipbones below it.

Mom gasped audibly when Erica fixed the zipper on one spaghetti-strap number. I looked like a tube of lipstick: screaming red, streamlined. The dress came to my mid-thigh, and ruched my body into an hourglass shape. I had no figure to speak of; instead of me wearing the dress, it wore me. Mom declared it perfect.

Before the wedding ceremony, I took three Advil so I wouldn't feel my heels making my stress fracture ache.

Mom and Erica pressured me to dance. When one of the groom's cousins, Caleb, finally asked me, Erica beamed at him.

"Good man," she said, nodding as he took my hand.

Caleb had dirty-blond hair and a contagious laugh. He danced thoughtlessly, like someone completely comfortable with himself. He asked for my number before the night was over.

The next day, he sent me a text message: *I want to pop your bubble.*

The message flamed over my phone as I pedaled a stationary bike. I wiped sweat off my forehead and increased the resistance. I knew two things: first, I never wanted to feel Caleb's hands on me; second, the phrase was *pop your cherry*, not *pop your bubble*. He couldn't even get the line right.

Eleventh grade, in The Cheesecake Factory.

"Just what are you trying to do here?" Mom's voice hacked through restaurant, butcher-knife blunt.

"Mom," Erica said, squeezing my hand under the table. "Calm down." I squeezed back, trying to siphon as much heat from my sister as I could. I was shivering despite my bulky coat, which I rarely took off.

Mom's mouth curdled as she looked at my chopped salad: a small pile of vegetables, raw and bare of dressing as I'd requested. I'd guzzled Diet Coke since we arrived, filling myself with carbonation, imagining the little bubbles expanding inside me. I planned to chug as many glasses as it took to feel full before the dessert course.

"That's not a meal," Mom said, her tone ratcheting higher.

"Laney's fine," Dad said, looking around to see if other diners were watching. "Let her eat what she wants." When Mom opened her mouth again, the muscle in Dad's jaw flexed. "Let it *alone*, Sharon."

I stared at my plate, eating diced tomatoes one by one. Over the past year, since my shin stress-fractured for the first time and my period disappeared and my hair thinned, Mom and Dad had been on high alert. They didn't talk about my eating disorder, but they watched.

That night in the restaurant booth, skinnier than I ever dreamed, I swallowed a smile and chewed each bite of salad exactly twenty-four times. Because even though everyone was *watching* me, they were *glaring* at Mom. I might have been sick, but I was not the problem.

I arranged to attend senior prom with a small group of girls; however, what began as four friends turn into a gaggle of us, all painted and perfumed and elbowing for a place in front of my bathroom mirror. A Ball Without Balls, I deemed the occasion. Dad laughed and snapped photo after photo of us girls on the patio, in the living room, by the flower bushes; Mom loomed in the background with a robotic smile.

Even as I twirled through the ballroom with my friends, my thoughts kept sliding back to the moment in David's Bridal when I first examined my dress in the tri-paneled mirror. I stood on an elevated platform, holding in my stomach and smoothing down my skirt. Dad's face, reflected in the mirror, smiled in awe.

"I love it," he said. "That's the one."

A little girl had sneaked away from her mother to watch me model the dress. When her mother found her and yanked her back to the bridal rows, the girl kept her eyes on me.

"She looks like a princess, Mommy," the girl exclaimed in the excited, breathy way of a child.

I blushed and looked at the carpet. Behind me, Dad chuckled.

Behind him, Mom sighed. “Oh, that’s gorgeous,” she said, her words enunciated and thick. “Oh, I love it. Oh, wow.”

And I knew what was coming, just as I’d know to expect a rush of heat from an opened oven: “It’s just such a shame you don’t have a boy to go with.”

I defeated nature during my freshman year of college. I reversed biology’s sinister march toward breasts and hips and thighs; I triumphed over hunger; I grew too lean, too strong, for any of my pants or belts. I wandered into clothing stores and tried on ever smaller sizes, but I never bought them. Even when I slid into size-zero skinny jeans at the Gap, I left them folded on the bench in the dressing room.

Because what if you outgrow them, I chided myself.

Or what if you can get smaller.

I never got smaller than 109.6 pounds, roughly the weight of my fifth-grade self. At 5’9”, I discovered I was eligible to try out for *America’s Next Top Model*. I was too self-conscious to be a model, of course—I hated the camera lens—but I took pride in the fact that I *could* model, if I wanted. Suddenly, I had value.

I took a job hosting at an Italian restaurant, letting our overweight guests serve as my personal incentives to avoid carbs. One of my fellow hostesses suggested I find an agent, take my modeling potential seriously.

“I used to model, when I was little,” she said, cleaning some marinara sauce off a menu. “Until I got hips. But with your body and bone structure, you could totally do it.”

I was never more proud than when I wrangled back a smile in the hepatologist's office as he said: "We tested for everything that could cause elevated liver enzymes, and everything came back negative. We think it's the anorexia."

The doctor's words stirred up memories of all the nights I touched myself while falling asleep. They weren't sexual touches—I'd lost the drive for those. Rather, I traced the topography of my hipbones, fragile as icicles; the concavity of my stomach; the delicate ridge of each rib. Mornings, I faced away from the full-length mirror and watched my back as I breathed. Exhale: normal. Inhale: every rib, in sharp relief. I'd never known I had so many bones to see. As the months passed, I kept seeing more.

"This—" the doctor gestured to my body. I flexed my stomach muscles, since I had no fat left to suck in. "This is too thin."

I walked out of his office into the caramelized June sunshine, shivering but elated. I was, officially, sick—I had EDNOS stamped on my file, referrals to two more doctors, orders for another round of blood tests. Besides elevated liver enzymes, I had the low blood sugar of a pre-diabetic, a sluggish heart rate, and several vitamin deficiencies. The doctors thought I'd be infertile, at best. At worst...they trailed off, their mouths stapling shut to hold back the truth. They didn't say, outright, "you're killing yourself," but I tasted the richness of that verdict on their tongues.

My work was complete.

Fourteen months after that doctor's visit, I was twenty pounds heavier, a junior in college, as I watched a tanned hand cup a Macintosh apple. Apple to lips: contact, crunch, chew.

And the smell of cologne, like the cinnamony scent Erica's husband, Jeremy, used to wear, the one that soaked into every pillow of our guest room.

I watched the apple disappear, bite by bite. What captivated me most was the raw strength of its holder: snapping-strong, sweet-smelling as sugar. The most beautiful person I'd ever seen. She was not a boy, like my Mom had in mind. She was better. She was magic.

I didn't know what to say to her, but I had to speak, so I caught up with her after class.

"You know," I said, watching her discard the apple. I stayed a halting half-step back.

"You ate that apple wrong."

She raised her eyebrows, looking from me to the apple core in the trashcan. Her bite marks covered its surface, illuminating brilliant spots of white beneath the red skin. "Yeah?"

I nodded. "If you eat it from the top down, instead of around the sides, you can eat right through the core." My face simmered in the moment her eyes caught mine.

"There's gotta be a weird metaphor in there somewhere," she said, and strode out of the room.

What can I say, other than that she took care of me?

I loved to watch her cook. She danced while she fried eggs, used almond butter instead of oil, shook her hips to electronica. She made meatballs and fajitas when she was drunk, swigging malt liquor as she went. She said she was a functioning alcoholic, but the way she laughed made me think it was a joke. The most elaborate meal she made for me: Atlantic salmon, baked with rosemary over apples and pine nuts, served atop tri-color rotini, paired with countless beers.

One night, she called and ordered us Papa John's. When the deliveryman arrived, she answered the door to my apartment, paid with cash from her pocket. We ate cross-legged on the carpet.

I don't do things like this, I thought with every bite. *Cheese, meat, sauce: calories. Calories at three in the morning! I don't do things like this.* But with each swallow, I paused, looked at her, edited my thoughts.

I didn't do things like that, but we did.

Later, as we lay under the covers, flirting with sleep, we talked about bodies.

"I want to be 123 pounds," she whispered. "That's where I like myself best."

And I thought: 123 pounds sounds perfect. Whatever you are, is perfect.

I didn't consider the fact that I was seven inches taller than she was. I knew what I was capable of. I knew I could accomplish 123 pounds.

Over Thanksgiving break of that year, I asked Dad to take a walk with me. We carved a mushroom-shaped path through the woods, five miles of snapping twigs and crackling leaves. Over the noise of our footsteps, I told Dad I was gay.

He said he already knew—and, as of the month before, so did Mom.

"I always suspected that your mother might like women, too," Dad said, as casually as he'd test for ripe pears in the grocery store. *Is this one soft enough? This one might be okay.* But he was talking about my mother, not a firm fruit.

"Well, she doesn't really like sex," he explained. Hands in his pockets, he looked unperturbed by the conversation. "And she always had very—close—relationships with women.

“But, anyway, she insists you’re not gay,” he said. “Though she agrees that some people *are* born that way. Just not you.”

As we sliced through the cold, rounding out the miles toward home, I wondered what it would be like to be Mom. So defensive, so cornered. Everyone—all the doctors, the nutritionists, her husband, Erica—had agreed that my eating disorder was not *my* problem. And they’d looked at her, silent, when they said it. I wondered if my sexuality would be served the same way: cold, with a side of judgment.

The phrase “getting your just desserts” came to mind.

A few weeks after my fling ended, I stepped on the scale. It was an anemic April morning: the sky was wan, colorless, as exhausted a color as I felt.

122.0.

It hurt when she dumped me, of course. It hurt more in the weeks before. It hurt most the time she was half-drunk, happy-drunk, and we stood on her balcony and she smelled delicious and she shrugged and said, “I guess I like you when I’m drunk.” It hurt most to know *I* was making *her* sick: we could only work if she indulged her addiction. Maybe it took an addict to love an addict. Maybe neither of us had any right to feed our addictions, or one another.

I stepped off the scale.

The Girls We Love

The first time I watch *Titanic* I am fourteen, longhaired and small-breasted. I've never kissed a boy, never known a touch more risqué than my dad's arm on my shoulders during movie nights. He and I watch endless films splash across our television, oblivious to a world wider than Wege pretzels and Blockbuster rentals. Weekends flicker by in a strobe of blue light and laugh tracks, one that blips me from pre-K all the way to high school.

As the *Titanic* sinks, our basement throbs with darkness; cold prickles my skin and sidles under my cocoon of quilts. Tears roll down my cheeks as the credits roll over the screen, and when I look at Dad, his eyes are glistening like sea glass. We have the same barreling forehead, the same craggy Russian nose and chin. People never find my mother when they search my face.

An outsider might question why Dad and I bunker in our underground hideout, sheathed in ratty blankets on the threadbare couch, while Mom reclines on leather upstairs. I might find it strange that she lords alone over the high-ceilinged den with walls painted marigold. Instead, I tiptoe past her lounge like a prisoner skirting the sheriff, and she keeps up with the Kardashians well enough to lose track of me.

Replaying *Titanic* in my mind, I see Rose and Jack making love in the backseat of a car; I see her telling him where to put his hands. Her palm smacks the fogged window again and again. Jack disappears into the cerulean sea, frozen and drowned for love. It's as surreal a sight as my friends kissing their boyfriends, their hands nipping at belt loops and shirt buttons. I'm not

lying when I tell those friends I think I'm asexual. At sleepovers, I straddle them for back massages during marathon rounds of Truth or Dare. They interrogate each other—who do you like? Who would you rather kiss?—as I trek over trapezii and deltoids, my fingers finding every sore spot. These massages exempt me from the game.

“Is love really like that?” I ask Dad, nodding at the screen where Rose and Jack were. I flex my palm, and in the television light it looks anemic, pale as a halved apple. I try to imagine it thrust against a window in a heave of passion, and fail. I bury it back under the blanket.

Dad watches the screen fade as he considers my question. I repeat myself—is that really how love feels? Like you'd die for the other person?—and give up expecting an answer by the time he says, “Yes. In the beginning, at least.”

Only when I slide into bed that night, my legs goosebumping at the chilly sheets, do I wonder about the end.

Dad retires over Christmas of my senior year. He wants to savor my last few months at home, he says—to enjoy those seasons. Snowstorms pummel the state all winter, so we establish a new tradition: every morning that I wake to a two-hour delay, we brew coffee, stash our pockets with Kleenex, and set out for the nearby woods. In Timberland boots we lumber across miles of forest: five if the snow isn't wet, if our matching Reynaud's fingers don't throb purple, if Mom won't be too annoyed by our absence.

When Dad married Mom, neither of them knew what her Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease truly entailed. Only my grandmother had the disease—she, and a smattering of distant cousins Mom never managed to track down. Mom only heard rumors of them: their trouble walking, their hands that deadened with age. Neuropathy isn't uncommon in Appalachia, but CMT in a

woman, and in only one child of five, is. As we hike through the woods, Dad tells me stories of venturing into the stacks of Penn State's library with Mom. Like most university couples, they went on regular dates. Unlike most couples, those dates included researching the incurable and degenerative disease that was crippling one of them.

“But why did you—” I cower from the question on my lips. My boots kick clots of snow into the air. I watch them bloom white, sparkle, then disappear. “When you read those things, why did you—?”

“Stick around?”

I nod, though Dad is too busy navigating the snowdrifts to look at me. I picture him poring over medical tomes as the sky glowers orange, as the sun dissolves over the wintry campus. He studies images of withered feet, high-arched and curling into themselves, and reads how one day his girlfriend will be unable to walk. To dress herself, hold cutlery or get on and off the toilet. Yet he reaches for her hand, his thumb tracing the crest of her first finger, and turns another filmy page.

“I stuck around because I was in love,” he tells the snow that banks the path. “Maybe I didn't know what I was up against. Maybe I did. Maybe I felt bad, because your mom was there when I really needed someone, so I thought I should be there for her.

“And I know she feels left out when we go on these walks,” he says, guilt and condensation ghosting his mouth. “I do. And I don't want to hurt her. But I can't give up this time with you.”

The lines drill deeper into Mom's face every time we close the door on her. There's the year she catches Dad ditching work to take me to matinees, *Seabiscuit* and *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *A Cinderella Story*, our fingers glossy with butter; the year she discovers the

luxury karaoke machine he bought me and stored in the basement, where she couldn't go; the first year he attends Back-to-School Night as a single parent so we can traverse the building quickly. Her silent treatments last for days. She accuses me of hating her, and him of supporting it, and I come to understand the heavy cost of loving me. I promise myself that I'll never let anyone sacrifice for me the way Dad did; that if anyone suffers for my love, it will be me.

I find Dad one January afternoon contemplating his reflection in a glass of merlot. Since his retirement, the after-school hours have become the highlight of our days: we can spend time together openly because Mom is at work, not sulking in the next room. But Dad always reserves the red wine for dinnertime, when we dice vegetables and season meat together in the mellow kitchen light. He never drinks alone.

His eyes don't meet mine as I enter the room.

"I've been reading First Corinthians," he says. He settles his elbows on his knees, sighs a not-first-glass sigh. "'If any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her.' Seven-twelve."

In eighteen years he's never uttered the word *divorce*.

He smirks. "'For the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children—'" he pauses, rubs his forehead—"would be unclean; but as it is, they are holy.' Seven-fourteen."

The light tickles his hair as he bows his head, igniting reds and golds throughout the thinning russet. The top of his head looks like Christmas again, like ribboned gifts and potted poinsettias. But his face is all winter, a furious one that threatens to linger far longer than a season.

“Divorce,” I sample the word, looking down at my wrists as I do: two white willows branching from a rumpled sweater.

“She screwed me over on the life insurance annuity.” He ekes out a brittle laugh. “If I die first, I’m giving her a hundred percent of the benefit. But if *she* dies first—” the muscle in his jaw jumps.

“And she lied about it, too. That’s the worst part. She acted like we were a team, like we were making the decisions together.” He bites his lip and drains the glass. “I’m sorry. Forgive me.” He forces a small laugh, a wretched, wobbly one, and calls me by a pet name. “I shouldn’t drag you into this.”

“You can talk to me,” I whisper, perching on the arm of the couch. Everything in this living room, the enclave Mom deemed “the fancy room,” looms oversized and overpriced: the custom-made chairs; the reupholstered loveseats where only company sits; the hand-painted china plates arrayed above the bureau. She wanted extravagant, so Dad agreed, even though we rarely host guests.

Dad doesn’t look at me. “No, I’ll be okay. I’ve got my investments—she can’t touch those. And I’ve got you.” He smiles, still dimly. “I know you’ll take care of me.”

“Daddy—”

“I shouldn’t say things like ‘divorce,’” he slurs. “I shouldn’t put you through that.”

I coax the wineglass out of his hands, something I’ve done more and more over the past few years. Mom doesn’t know how much he drinks; he ferrets the boxes away in the basement, ones we buy when we claim we’re running errands, ones we pay for with cash. I tell Dad we can talk another time, when he’s feeling better, and I shut myself in my room.

I remember standing before my mirror, four years old, while Dad twisted my hair into a ponytail and clipped on a bow. I remember snuggling into his chest on the piled basement couch, one ear tuned to the movie, the other to his stomach, which gargled like an undersea monster. I remember tucking the word *divorce* under my tongue since I was young, hiding it like the last sliver of a caramel, letting its sugar meld into my mouth.

We never continue the divorce conversation. Another storm pounds the town that night, an ice storm. As usual, as he has after every weekday snowstorm of my life, Dad escorts Mom to work so she won't slip on the walk into the building. He always walks with his right hand clamped around her left arm, but in winter he looks extra grim, his mouth stapled shut in concentration.

I expect we will hike when Dad returns, but when the door careens open, rebounding off the wall, he wears Mom slung across his back. She brays like the animals I've seen shot on TV documentaries, her mouth yowled open, jaw jutted forward. Dad staggers under her weight but manages to get her to the couch, then get ice, then change his mind and remove the ice and reload her into the car. When he phones from the emergency room, his voice is deflated almost to nothing.

In the weeks that follow, after the doctors call with the X-ray results (patella fractured in two) and Dad stops muttering to himself (*I only looked away for a second, don't know how I let her fall, don't know how she went down so fast*) and Mom's wheelchair arrives (purchased, not rented), she announces her retirement. Dad stations her in front of the television and spends his days bringing food, clearing food, adjusting her, readjusting her, taking her to the bathroom, adjusting her again. It is, indeed, a long winter.

Once Mom can bend her leg by degrees, she decides to call a realtor in Florida. Dad's eyes look dewy when he breaks the news to me, but he's tired—too tired to argue. She wants to go South, so he agrees, then returns to the kitchen to fix her dinner.

They settle into the retirement village of Mom's choice. I email Dad before every call, and he arranges to elude Mom, to "run to the store" so he can talk to me. Occasionally, if she's sunning on the lanai or busy on the computer, he slinks into the garage and talks to me from inside the broiling car. If Mom knew how often we conversed, she would disapprove, maybe even forbid it. At the very least, she'd demand to listen.

"I don't think I could handle this marriage without the Lord," Dad confesses one night. It's February and I'm pacing the neighborhood, eyeing the houses lit like jack-o-lanterns. Inside their cheery windows I see living rooms rainbowed with television light, kitchens where parents tag-team loading the dishwasher. The scent of steak slicks the air around one home, and I close my eyes and pretend I smell Dad's sirloins on the grill. I pretend I don't live alone, a college student in a drafty house that smells like dust and Lean Cuisines. I pretend Dad is walking beside me, long-divorced and happy, his voice a bell cutting the winter dark.

"Your mother won't—" Dad sighs, a sharp crackle in my ear. "Can I say this? Forgive me if it's too much information, but—your mother refuses to have sex. She won't let me touch her." He sighs again. "So I don't, of course I don't. Because God's shown me how to get through it."

The wind makes my contacts shards of glass on my eyes. "How?"

"You," he says, calm. "I have you."

"Daddy," I frown into the night. "No."

“I mean it,” he continues. “You’re my purpose in life. When I think back on it, and I ask God why it all worked out like this—why I married your mother, why I found the Lord so late, why so much struggle—I realize, it’s you. The only reason I’m here is to support you. To send you off into the world.”

I gaze at the houses around me, bricked snug against the winter.

“I wouldn’t have married your mother, had I been a believer in college.” He says it as if he’s giving me a gift. “And then I wouldn’t have you. And that would’ve been the biggest tragedy I can imagine.”

Dad and Mom met in the lobby of Electrical Engineering East, where she flirted with him at the registration desk before summer classes. She never rose from her seat, so when he fetched her for their first date he couldn’t help but gape at the braces that clamped her calves. Her twiggy arms and fingers, features he’d thought lovely on such a tall woman, suddenly made sense. When he opened the car door for her, he thought to himself, *she’s nice, but this is a one-time thing.*

But he’d taken a gap between his sophomore and junior years of college, two years of crisscrossing the country in a freight truck, and found himself disoriented at Penn State. His classmates were young, pudgy-faced, stationary in the way of anyone who hasn’t spent months speeding over highways. So Mom went from a one-time thing to a full-time thing, and soon enough Dad had a Master’s in electrical engineering and they owned a ranch house close to campus.

I meet Renee on the third day of my third year of college. If room 320 had been on the other side of the hall, we could have seen Electrical Engineering East through the warped

window. I never mention that to Renee, though; I sit inches from her for a month before I summon the courage to even look at her.

Maybe my whole life would have unfolded differently if she hadn't breached that first conversation. Like those paper fortune-tellers I played with in grade school, maybe that pocket of myself would have remained covered if I'd never swooned over her eyes. But I more than swoon over them: I look into her irises as someone would look over a cliff, my terror electric. Those brown eyes smolder dark as the glass of the first beer she pours me—my first drink, ever. She splits the amber bottle between two Ball jars and clinks hers to mine. From her balcony I can see all the landmarks of my life: campus, the library, Electrical Engineering East.

“I think this is the start of a beautiful friendship,” she says as I take my first gulp of beer. And I lean against the railing, so lightheaded I might dissolve into her cigarette smoke and float away.

Renee loves another girl—she stipulates that from the beginning.

I love her—I tell her that by November.

Neither of these declarations matters.

As fall steepens into winter, I stockpile packs of Orbit bubblegum in my backpack because it's her favorite; I buy Bic lighters and pretend they're hers, given me to hold, so her cigarettes always burn bright. I lean left during proofreading exams, let her copy my perfect papers, and grin when she calls me her grammar hammer. I program my phone so hers is the only number immune to the “do not disturb” setting; her messages interrupt my classes and my sleep. We share my textbooks: I shuttle them to her several times a week, braving icy sidewalks for a few minutes' conversation. I consider myself the luckiest girl on campus.

On her twenty-second birthday, we are the last two awake. The other party guests sprawl across the floor and the couch, their vodka-laced snores shredding the quiet, their cheeks dappled with mascara trails and the glitter Renee showered over everybody. It's 4:30 in the morning, and we've reprised the old act: Renee shut herself in her room with the girl she loves, the unavailable one, who refused her. I wept on the balcony, looked over my campus touchstones and contemplated jumping, my feet naked on the frosty concrete.

My head cottonball-light, I curl up on the living room floor without a blanket. I don't expect Renee to return, yet I'm awake and ready when she bends down beside me. "Come to my room," she whispers.

Someone already splays across her bed, so we squeeze onto a beanbag, our spines arching like the crests of a heart as we make room for one another. She casts a duvet over us, tucks our feet in, then finds my eyes. Her pupils are wide as sunflower heads.

"Rub my back?" she asks. She rolls onto her side before I can answer, before a smile kisses every pore on my face. "Then I'll do yours," she mumbles into the beanbag.

"You don't have to."

I know she won't, and it pleases me. As I sweep my hands over the contours of her neck, her shoulders, her vertebrae, I don't want to tell her I love her—I want her to feel it. *Don't worry about returning the favor*, I think, willing my hands to emote it. *Let me do everything*.

My fingers explore the threads of her shirt until, bold, I slip my hand beneath it. I rake my fingernails over her flesh, delighting in its tautness, its heat. I did this at sleepovers for years, for other girls, and it meant nothing. Now, as we whisper to one another in the dark, I understand what it means to put my hands on someone.

After many minutes, after the sky lightens and casts the room in aquamarine, I lock my knees behind Renee's and curve my body around her back. Her heart pounds beneath my touch, and I hide my face in her neck.

The next day I will learn that she remembers none of it: not the poems I scribed into her skin; not the moment when she rolled over and laced our hands together, weaved her legs through mine. But for the night I am whole, happiness burning like tobacco smoke in my lungs. *This*, I mouth into the darkness, too quiet for her to hear. *You. You are why I'm alive.*

When Dad and Mom visit, I stay at home, not at the new apartment I've rented near campus—the apartment close to Renee and my new life of beer and cigarettes and forgetting to call Dad. I notice him eyeing me all week, sifting through my words when I speak and staring after me when I leave the house. On the last night of the visit, I discover a neon-green note taped to my bedpost. *We need to talk*, it reads. *Come find me.*

He and Mom laze side-by-side on loungers, eyeballing the television in silence. I hesitate in the doorway of the den, clasping my elbow, wondering how to summon Dad without alerting Mom. Eventually he notices my shadow bobbing against the opposite wall and scrabbles out of his seat. Mom furrows her eyebrows at him and he grunts something about his stomach, making a vague pained gesture. In my old bedroom, with the door closed, he folds me into his arms and suction my ear to his chest.

“I miss you so much when I'm in Florida,” he sighs, holding me so tight that each breath pulls me in, then pushes me away.

“I know, Daddy.” *But I have Renee now*: the thought digs spiked shoes into my heart. I look away, guilty but not sorry.

“You love her, don’t you,” he whispers. “Renee. You talk about her all the time.”

Her name triggers an avalanche of memories: brown eyes slick with vodka; aquamarine light; snores like a music-box song coaxing me to sleep. I see the clay armadillo beside Renee’s bed, the postcards from her grandmother tacked around her desk, the chapbooks strung like Christmas lights atop the bookshelves. Her cologne tickles my nostrils like the tease of a sneeze or the first gulp of beer. I feel her on my palms and in the tears wheedling out of my eyes.

“It’s okay if you’re together,” he says. “You can tell me.”

I groan, shake my head, lean away from his words. “We’re just friends.”

He spools me in, as if doing so will stitch me back together. “First loves are hard. And I can tell you really love her.”

I nod—a *yes* that beats the air like an errant *Amen* in church.

“There’s a part of us that never gets over that first love, I think. We carry pieces of them with us forever. But hopefully we bring the best of them, and forget all the rest.” He gives me a bracing squeeze. “Have I ever told you about Joanne?”

I wriggle out of his grasp, confused, and find his eyes. We both know he never mentioned a Joanne; her name smells red, more forbidden a word than *divorce*.

“We were high school sweethearts—crazy about each other. We never seemed to get the timing right, though; she always liked me when I was after somebody else, I was always chasing her at the wrong time. But when we managed to be on the same page, it was like nothing I had before. Or since.”

His hands knead my shoulders again, insistent as grief.

“And I never told anyone,” he says, “but a few years ago, she found me.” He reads the shock in my eyes. “Not in person; on Facebook. The day I made my profile—*the day*—she sent me a message. Within hours.”

Tears speckle his hazel eyes.

“And I replied.”

This time, I don’t ask why he’s telling me this. This time I hug him, because I already know.

When my Renee’s ringtone wakes me in the middle of the night, I don’t hesitate to grab my keys. All she says is she’s at a bar, in pain from a bruised knee, and doesn’t want to walk to the bus stop. I scrape the sleet off my windshield, imagining Dad asleep in his lakehouse with the windows wide open. It would agonize him to see me skidding onto the slick, empty street, but I do it anyway.

My car’s tires struggle for traction on the roads’ patchwork of ice and powder. The storm raged in alternating bursts all day: freezing rain one hour, pluming snow the next, turning the town into a frozen layer cake that no number of plows could conquer.

Renee clambers into the car beneath the amber pulse of a stoplight, and the back wheels fishtail as I steer us toward the main street. We merge onto roads emptier than I’ve ever seen them, but I’m not afraid—not even when we crest the street’s steepest hill and see the snake’s tongue of road rippling before us. Since childhood, I’ve read reports of buses stalling and cars colliding on this slope, but I begin its descent calmly. If we spin out, at least we spin out together.

But we don't—not as we pass the old Blockbuster where Dad and I began so many weekends; not as we near the liquor store where I waited for him to buy his merlots. I've waited for Renee outside that same store, replaced memories of Dad with ones of her bantering with the cashier, a dark-haired nymph clutching her box of Franzia. I imagine a time when she'll be gone, after the storm subsides and the traffic returns, and I wish that future away. I wish it could stay the two of us, the only girls in the world, mesmerized by snow surges studding pearls through the sky.

On Valentine's Day, a message from Renee bathes my car in digital light. She tells me she's been accepted to a school down South, almost as far as Florida. I stow the phone out of sight and merge onto a highway, fully aware I'm speeding, fully indifferent. As my car carves an eastbound path, I think of Renee's balcony and the campus lights like birthday-cake candles arrayed beneath it. I wonder who will own that view once she leaves.

She asks me to drive her to the airport for her school visit, and I agree before she can finish the question. I want to be the last person she sees in Pennsylvania; I want to be the one by her side, even if that means taking her away. We peel out of town on a March afternoon in twin leather jackets, Renee deejaying the radio. Halfway to Scranton, she tells me to pull to the side of I-80, to the gravelly shoulder that slopes into still-dead grass. She says she'll stretch her legs, smoke a cigarette. When I told Dad about her nicotine habit, he instructed me to never let her smoke in the car. "The smell will soak into the seats," he warned. "It'll never come out."

That's why I let her light her L&M inside, half-heartedly nudging the tip toward her open window between drags. I imagine the smoke, a cocktail of ash and breath, settling into the

interior. Like the salt puddles she tracked inside all winter, the ghostly bootprints I'll never wipe away, her scent can stay in my passenger seat forever.

The car quakes as tractor-trailers whoosh by, swallowing us in their sound. I wince at every tremor, and Renee laughs at me and tousles her hair with her free hand. "You're so scared right now," she teases.

"My parents never did this," I say, checking the rearview mirror. "Never let us stop on the side of the road."

But that's not true. In November of my dad's senior year, he drove Mom down route 26 to their favorite restaurant. As dusk peppered shadows over the scene, he maneuvered his Mercury Monterey off the highway, telling Mom he heard something wrong with the engine—not to worry, he said, but he'd better check out that clunking. He wrenched open the hood, tinkered for a few minutes as she gazed at the foliage.

"Here's the problem," he said, clunking the hood back into place and bending down beside her window with a small diamond ring. "This little guy was stuck in the carburetor."

What is a diamond, anyway, but carbon and heat? I watch Renee's cigarette smolder, orange then gray then gone, and think it's not so different from a precious stone. Maybe if the season weren't still settled in cold; maybe if the wind wouldn't nip so sharply beneath our too-thin jackets; maybe if there wasn't an endless summer awaiting her in the South—maybe then the heat would reach the carbon in Renee's hand, turn it to diamond. Maybe we could kindle something here, on the roadside, that would last.

Alone in Renee's living room as another party winds down, I muse at my reflection in a glass of beer and wonder about the girls we love, and the ones we don't. I wonder which is the

bigger tragedy as I pursue stranger after stranger on these nights, in black rooms that feel aquamarine.

Renee summarizes it best as she plucks the drink from my hand and drapes a blanket over my legs. Pity spikes her voice; I feel its icpick in my knees. She thinks I'm asleep, but I'm awake to hear her and the girl she will take to bed.

“She watches everything I do,” Renee whispers to the girl—not one she loves, but the one she'll love tonight. “It's so hard.”

In the morning when I wake, a pretzel on the pleather chair, I think of Dad in Florida, rising to the sun and to the woman who never cast Joanne from his heart. I think of Renee, asleep in the hands of a girl whom she will abandon. I think of her in the South, letting another girl pay for her cigarettes, scribbling in another girl's textbooks, and maybe leaving that girl, too, in the end. And I fumble for a phone to call Dad, stifling tears when he answers on the second ring.

Birds of Venus

“There’s no such thing as fiction.”

Renee said it often, her face set hard enough that I believed her. She built worlds with her words—not just in her poems and stories, but with every sigh and exhale. The myth of her intoxicated me.

When I began writing nonfiction alongside Renee, I shielded myself behind second-person language. *You do this, you think this*—my stories stuttered out like commands. Renee told me to “grow a pair.”

She also told me that she rooted for me (or, rather, for the fearful *you* of my nonfiction). Unfortunately, that was “not a good instinct for the story.”

Venus: the Roman goddess of love and beauty. The goddess who turns sex from vice to virtue. See also: the goddess of prostitutes.

The first time I told Renee I loved her, her mouth stapled in frustration.

“You don’t,” she said. “You like me because I have short hair, and because you think I’m exciting. And don’t finish that,” she said, pointing to the forty-ounce bottle of malt liquor she’d bought me. It was the second drink of my life, and I’d accepted it from Renee like a sacrament. Even months later, after learning that Hurricanes only cost three dollars, I felt blessed by Renee’s generosity. My gratitude, like debt, grew with time.

Renee tapped my Hurricane, a warning chime, before she slid back to the party. I flitted over to her best friend, Perry, who was quickly becoming one of my best friends. For some reason, flamboyant, ostentatious Perry liked me. He took me to parties more often than Renee did, showcasing me to the university's queer community with a zeal I should have found ominous. He smiled when he saw me, challenging me to finish my drink.

"Renee said I shouldn't," I slurred. The alcohol made me feel caged in the space between laughing and crying. I hated not knowing what emotion I'd experience next. I hated the acrid taste Perry's cigarette left in my mouth.

"Fuck Renee," Perry knit his eyebrows together and clinked his bottle to mine. "She's not the god of you."

I laughed as I fit my lips to my drink. I laughed as I swallowed. I laughed as I blinked and saw shards of glass at my feet and understood that the shattering came from me, dropping my drink.

"Oh, no," Perry said, sounding close to a yawn.

"I was so close to finishing," I told the glittering glass on the lawn. I bid goodbye to the pieces that Perry kicked into the grass off the patio.

"We'll get you another," he said. When another boy suggested I lay off the alcohol, Perry laughed. "She's fine," he said, scanning the table for more beer.

"I'm fine," I echoed.

Venus: from the Latin *venes*, "charm" or "magic potion." *Venes*: the root of *venenum*, "poison."

Tattoos decorated Renee and Perry's bodies. Renee had them on her arms, calves, scalp. Perry had them on his shoulders and back. One Thursday afternoon, after a poetry reading, I announced to them that I would get a tattoo, too. I just didn't know what, or where, or why.

I skipped my afternoon class to walk home with Renee and Perry. We stopped in a store where Perry had been caught—or almost been caught; I could never trap the story in my memory—shoplifting. He bought a tank top to wear to a concert that night; Renee bought bright green socks with topless women sewn into them.

When I told Renee I wanted her to pick out my tattoo, she hesitated before saying she couldn't, it had to be my decision.

"I'll take you," Perry said without making eye contact.

The dual natures of Venus: love and war. Hesperus and Lucifer. Giver of pleasure and of revenge.

Beautiful, but dangerous.

When I told Renee I felt shy about sex—writing about it, talking about it, everything about it—she told me to read Anais Nin. *Little Birds*. I found the coffee-stained copy on the third floor of the library. My lips parted as I read the complete title.

Little Birds: Erotica.

Shortly after, I threw my first party ever, because Renee said she'd come. I found an overage person to buy me a case of beer, a bottle of Absolut, and a Hurricane. When Renee rooted through my fridge, she found the Hurricane and held it up eagerly.

"Is this yours?"

I could see how she wanted it, so I said no.

“Are you sure?”

I said again, she could have it.

“But it’s not *your drink*?”

I nodded, refraining from saying that she could have whatever was mine. But I saved the bottle cap she left on my kitchen counter, the bottle cap that wobbled like a little black world. I saved the empty bottle from the recycling bin, too.

After two in the morning, when everyone had left except Perry, who’d passed out on my bed, Renee perused my bookshelf. Before she arrived, I’d turned one book so its spine faced inward. Of course her eyes flew to it, and she pulled it out of hiding.

“*Little Birds*,” she read, giving me a long, slow look. “You actually got it.”

I swallowed. “You told me to.”

Her smile was warm, and sober. “That’s—” she shook her head. “That’s the biggest compliment ever.”

Because Perry claimed my bed, Renee and I stretched out on the floor. Because Perry wrapped himself in my sheets, Renee draped us in my feather duvet. Because she laced her hand in mine, I fell asleep holding her.

Among the birds associated with Venus are the dove and the sparrow. The dove, the symbol of love, is especially sacred to her. Doves draw her chariot through the sky; doves may have protected the egg that bore her.

As for the sparrow: *passer, deliciae meae puellae, quicum ludere, quem in sinu tenere.*

Sparrow, my lady’s pet, with whom she plays while she holds you in her lap.

Did Catullus mean sparrow, the fragile bird? Or *passer*, slang for penis, figure for lust?

For Venus is both dove and sparrow, love and lust.

On a rainy Monday when the trees were newly bare, Perry took me to Tattoo Mark's. I brought a printout of a simple tattoo: a birdcage for one forearm; freed songbirds for the other.

Perry pointed to a peacock on the shop's wall and said, sure, he'd take that.

"To continue my bird theme," he told me, gesturing to the other tattoos on his back. He smirked. "This one'll be the king cock."

I let him go first, watching mesmerized as Perry laid himself across the table. His eyes bored into the wall in front of him, milky and unfocused. He looked as if he might fall asleep at any moment. He looked as if he felt nothing.

When the tattoo artist blotted all the blood off Perry's upper back, and taped him shut, and sanitized the table, it was my turn. I gave him my forearms with the solemnity of sacrifice. I winced at the rubbing alcohol, cold on my unbroken skin.

I only objected once: when the tattoo artist demonstrated where he would place the birdcage. Centered on my forearm, right-side-up to the world, upside-down to me.

"Shouldn't it," I frowned at him. "Should it face me? I mean, is it for everyone else, or is it for me?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Of course it's for you—it's on your body. But do you want everyone to look at you and wonder why you've got an upside-down birdcage on your arm? No. You don't."

"He's right," Perry called from the waiting area. When I glanced at Perry, I understood that I should make no more interruptions.

I tried not to wince as the needle bit my skin. I tried to look as impenetrable as Perry, staring past the pain into an emptiness no one else could see.

Perry and I are both Leos, born unto the scalding August heat. Our birthdays are separated by two years, four days, and 45 miles. I was born with a morning Venus in Gemini; he with an evening Venus, retrograde, in Virgo.

The Monday after my party, after falling asleep to the latex feel of the Band-Aid on Renee's finger, Renee announced that she had a date with someone else. We were studying together in a café. She didn't look at me as she debated which restaurant to take the girl to. She was colder than usual, avoiding eye contact when she said goodbye too soon. She didn't mention my party at all.

A Venus in Gemini indicates a proclivity for short, intense, simultaneous relationships. Some astrologers predict I'm inclined to more than one marriage. They phrase it as it's a blessing.

A few days later, trudging through the rain to my apartment, I watched my phone light up with a call from Perry. He invited me to dinner, told me when and where to pick him up.

Tucked together in an Olive Garden booth, Perry and I picked at our pasta and talked about love. He'd never experienced it, he said. Not being *in* love. When I asked him if he wanted to fall in love, he said he didn't know.

“The gay stereotype is pretty true,” he said, shrugging. I watched the bones of his shoulders and collarbone flutter. He was so thin. “It’s more hookup culture. Not really relationships.”

It stunned me that the more I pressed, the more ways I contorted the question *but don’t you want love?*, Perry appeared as blasé as ever. When I brought up my anger toward Renee, he wasn’t interested in that, either.

A Venus in Virgo, Perry’s Venus, has many negatives. Disappointments in love; secret affairs; a tendency to be overcritical in relationships. But, as a retrograde evening Venus, Perry’s artistic, driven, passionate.

Regardless of how much—or how little—attention Renee paid to me, Perry’s was constant. We talked for hours online; he started bringing me to parties on the weekends without Renee. I’d slip him a twenty and linger outside the beer store while he bought our drinks, then we’d stumble to a basement somewhere, listen to music I’d never heard before, hold shouted conversations with people I’d never see again.

The Latin adjective *lucifer* translates to “light-bringing.” As a noun, “morning star.”

In the Latin Vulgate, *lucifer* appears in 2 Peter, the Psalms, and in Job twice. There, it means “light of the morning,” “dawn,” even “the zodiac.”

In the Easter Proclamation to God: *Flammas eius lucifer matutinus inveniatur: ille, inquam, lucifer, qui nescit occasum. Christus Filius tuus.* May this flame still be found burning by the Morning Star: the one Morning Star who never sets, Christ your Son...

But Lucifer—the Venus morning star—my Venus—is best known as the fallen angel.

Renee flew south for Christmas break, leaving Perry and me alone as the new year rushed forward. Frost rimed the empty sidewalks that I traversed, alone, day after day. With nothing else to do, I let my feet match the beat of my thoughts, continually returning to Renee's last night in town.

At the last minute, I'd decided to buy her a Christmas present. While she attended a bar tour with other friends, I darted from shop to shop on the downtown strip, my nose pinking and eyes smarting from the cold. On my last stop, the art-supply store where Renee once worked, I found a change purse, palm-sized and shaped like a songbird. The bird unzipped down its spine, revealing a hollow pocket dyed gold and redolent of rubber. Into that golden womb, I nestled my letter to Renee, penned on thick, creamy stationery.

Hurrying to Renee's apartment, I imagined her dutifully removing the bird from her backpack on the airplane, flattening out the letter on her fold-out tray.

Open on the plane, she'd read again, taking in the nervous swoops of my *ls*, the tails on my vowels. *That way we're both up in the air*. She'd smooth the creases of the paper, break the envelope's seal, and then—high above the Earth—she'd understand.

But she never read my letter. She left town without noticing the bird I left outside her apartment.

Sunday, December 21, 2013: the Winter Solstice, the year's longest night and greatest darkness. At 9:53 p.m., Venus moves into its forty-day retrograde.

On the night of the Winter Solstice, I waited outside the restaurant where Perry worked, hands huddled in the pockets of my parka. Lampposts illuminated circles of empty sidewalk and the wind gnawed my cheeks. The waning gibbous loomed overhead as Perry exited the restaurant, lighting a cigarette which he wouldn't finish.

It was my first time at Perry's; usually we stayed at Renee's, downtown, or we went separate ways after a party. The neatness of his bedroom unsettled me; for the first time it occurred to me that Perry had a home—Perry, who referred to women professors as “geriatric whores” and told me to decline dates via “a dismissive jerking-off motion”; Perry, who joked openly at staring at our classmates' crotches when we circled up for discussions; Perry, who once said something nice to me, then stared at me in utter seriousness and said, “you know I just complimented your soul, don't you?”; Perry, who seemed to hold all the power in the world. He had an unwrinkled duvet and Christmas lights on his walls and a poster of his favorite professor over his bed.

We rotated picking the music, laughing as the alcohol whooshed through our veins. As my blood turned to lava and my head started to spin, I put on my old favorite songs, shrieking with laughter when Perry knew all the words. We donned sunglasses in the semidarkness and posed for pictures on the bed. In retrospect, looking at the photographs, I'd think we looked almost like twins.

According to astrologist Maria Macario, the period of Venus' retrograde “describes very well the transition between the two modes of Venus, and her descent into the underworld before she resurrects.”

And then Perry's laptop was shut and our drinks were empty and I was standing, unsteadily, before the bed.

"Nighty-night time," Perry announced, striding to close the door. "You want the inside or the outside?"

I was already crawling to the inside, my left foot colliding with a stack of chapbooks at the foot of the bed. I mumbled an apology, my eyes already shut. They stayed shut as I felt Perry's hand on mine, his fingers stroking my upper arm, his mouth on my mouth. He was familiar—the second person I'd ever kissed. One night outside my apartment, he'd crushed his cigarette underfoot and kissed me deeply, his tongue wrapping around mine, pressing my back against the sliding-glass door. It had made me recall a bird that once swooped against my kitchen window at breakfast. The bird collided against the glass with a hollow *ping*: a higher, drier sound than I'd expected. I never knew if it died upon impact, or when it hit the ground. My dad scraped it off the ground with a shovel.

But that night in bed, Perry's mouth on mine was insistent. We weren't pressed against a window: we were covered in darkness. No one knew where we were except Renee, half a country away. The last message I'd sent her was a joking *why is the room spinning?* and she'd sent back: *drunky-pants*.

Perry was pulling my pants off; Perry was scooting down the bed; Perry's tongue was making its familiar loop-de-loop motion, but now in a new place. What shocked me more than his actions was the miracle of his desire. Perry was gay, or so he said. But I thought of him complimenting my soul; another time, saying I had a great laugh. I felt off-balance, but from the sex or the alcohol, I couldn't judge.

And then it was real sex, him inside me, and I didn't know the sounds to make so I said nothing at all. Listening to Perry panting, his mouth inches from my ear, sent shockwaves of embarrassment through me. I wondered how I'd face him in the daylight, if it ever dawned. It didn't feel like it would.

Finally Perry sighed, and I felt him move out of me. "I won't come," he whispered.

"I don't mind," I said, knowing I wasn't ovulating. But he shook his head, grappled for his underwear.

"Beddy-bye time." Sleep tinged his voice already. When I woke in the middle of the night, dazed with a headache, I felt cold all over. Perry lay cocooned inside the sheets and duvet; only my right foot was covered. And I realized, shivering, why my sister had always warned me about sex, why she'd wanted me to wait. On her wedding night, she'd gotten a suite at the priciest hotel in town. Her husband had sprinkled rose petals on the floor. They'd slept in a king-size bed, both of them warm, and the next day they'd flown somewhere even warmer.

Astrologist Kelly Rosano: "The mood shifts as the sun enters Capricorn on December 21. In Capricorn, the check comes due for the big party you had in Sagittarius."

My first appointment of the new year was a host of tests: chlamydia, gonorrhea, pregnancy. All were negative. Soon enough it became a joke with my close friends: imagine, having *Perry's baby*. A gay poet and lesbian writer for parents—the poor kid.

It was the worst-case scenario in everyone's mind, but still funny, somehow.

Rosano: “Venus in reverse is not an ideal time to begin a new relationship. What you are attracted to today, you may not be tomorrow.”

Perry and I didn’t begin a relationship, though we did continue to sleep together, especially after Renee told me to “leave her life entirely.” It was a silly fight that snowballed into a fierce hatred. Renee no longer remembered me holding her when she cried over a broken heart, no longer remembered me buying her breakfast and cigarettes. I wondered if she remembered the night I gave her glasses with Jesus holograms on the lenses, or the night she told me we were best friends. I wondered if she remembered the night we held hands, or the night she kissed me.

All it took to get myself dumped was writing about those nights. It seemed Renee no longer wanted me to write nonfiction; she no longer hated my second-person shield. She didn’t want me to grow a pair, after all. She wanted me to stick to fiction.

But Perry sought me out. We drank blackberry whiskey on his couch, and he promised me that if he’d believed Renee’s side of the story, he wouldn’t still be seeing me. His words warmed me more than the whiskey. After hearing them, I went happily to his bed.

The next morning, he, too, dumped me.

Bronzino’s painting *Allegory with Venus and Cupid* shows the gods in incestuous intercourse, an act damned and transgressive and glamorous. Scholar Robert Polhemus: “the lecherous painting portrays erotic passion subject to the most appalling ignorance and the most terrible disillusion.”

It was a friend of a friend who told me Perry was HIV-positive. My world stuttered in its rotation, locking me in my own solstice (Latin for “sun set still”). And it wasn’t like Hades at all; it was cold.

The Oraquick test is a simple swab: a loop over the gums, then a soak in a solution for 20 to 40 minutes. Little lines cross the stick, just like a pregnancy test, but they stand for death, not life. Negative is a hard purple line next to the C, and nothing else. Positive is two lines. No matter how faint, any line next to the T is enough to snap the earth beneath your feet—enough to send you falling, past Hades’ chariot, lower than anyone deserves.

If there is no such thing as fiction, then this gets to be my story: Perry contracted HIV after we last slept together, and was too ashamed to tell me. That’s why he cut me out of his life—because he was contaminated and I wasn’t. And he was in love with me, too. He couldn’t bear to look into my eyes when he said we couldn’t be together. He wasn’t gay after all, at least not when it concerned me. He blabbered about me to Renee, endlessly, so much so that it drove her crazy, so much that it rekindled her old love for me, so much so that she still dreams of me, even now. Since there is no fiction, it must be true.

Or, no—it must be true that Renee forbade Perry to see me because she didn’t hate me after all. She knew he had HIV and she wanted to protect me. She still cared, even though the message saved to my phone said *I think you deserve the worst the world can give you*. In the end, she delivered me from the worst the world could give.

No lines appeared on my Oraquick except the dark, reassuring C. No death swooped down, no HIV. I steadied myself against the counter and gasped for air and cursed. “*Damn it, Perry, damn you, you could’ve killed me.*”

Every time I thought of him, I’d think of that first night—“I won’t come”—and I’d think of Renee, and I’d wish there were such a thing as fiction, I’d wish Renee had been wrong, I’d wish, I’d wish, I’d wish.

If there is no such thing as fiction then I get to play god. I get to decree that the phoenix is a bird of Venus, up there with doves and sparrows. Phoenix and Venus: separated by mere slant rhymes. So close, it might seem they belong together.

This is my fiction: I am a phoenix, tried by fire and reborn from ashes. I am renewal. I am the December mornings after the Winter Solstice, the slow lengthening to longer days. I am flame and I am flight; I am the damned and—somehow—the redeemed.

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- **BA in English**, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA (2011-2015)
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SCHOLARSHIPS & GRANTS

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AWARDS

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- **Nominee**, 2015 Teaching Excellence Award, Penn State University
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- **1st Place**, 2014 Toby Thompson Prize for Creative Nonfiction
- **1st Place**, 2014 AAP/Leonard Steinberg Poetry Prize
- **Honorable Mention**, 2013 Edward J. Nichols Memorial Award in Prose Writing
- **Dean's List for Academic Achievement**, Fall 2011-Spring 2015

PUBLICATIONS

- "Fortune." *Crab Fat Literary Magazine*, forthcoming, crabfatmagazine.com
- "Civil War." *Experimentos*, forthcoming, www.experimentos.com
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