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Hear Me Roar

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HEAR ME ROAR

By

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Bachelor of Arts, Whitman College, Walla Walla, WA, 2016

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

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in Creative Writing, Nonfiction

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Creative Writing (Nonfiction)

Hear Me Roar

Chairperson: Judy Blunt

Committee Member: Erin Wecker

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Hear Me Roar, a compilation of personal essays interspersed with short forms, grapples with the nuances of compliance versus autonomy in the context of the male gaze, beauty standards, and pop culture. The collection also explores what it means to treasure something—another person, an object—and how to express and deepen that affection.

stay undomesticated

been swearing more
since I dug out
or was let out

darned sweaty socks with satin ribbon
stewed roadkill porcupine with napkin rings
scrubbed bathroom grout with plastic hairbrush

been carrying the hatchet
since he clearcut my closet
extracted mattress salt

now I split wood not hairs
hack grudge-bridges to pieces
prune by machete like he taught me

no stepping stones no beauty bark
no suburban spindle sedation
no petro-ponytail obedience

been avoiding dollhouses
since I noticed
how they've shrunk

A Woman Found Wanting

A sign on the interior door at Planned Parenthood indicates that the staff are operating today without federal funding. I speak to the front-desk employee through a pane of plexiglass, like at a bank or a movie theater but without the microphone. She informs me that their computer system is down and hands over a packet of paperwork. The waiting room is clean, furnished in a style I'd call middle-school-office chic. I set my bike helmet on a side table and sit to complete the intake forms.

Filling out this kind of paperwork used to be emotionally neutral to me, as a healthy, able white person leading a medically uninteresting life. No drug use; hardly any alcohol consumption; no surgery except wisdom teeth removal; all injuries related to sports; none of the sexual activity that could cause pregnancy until I was 22, having recently finished college. After I graduated I stayed on to join the staff of the career and community service office. I also started assistant coaching women's volleyball at a nearby university. These two jobs set the stage for a burnout that was, in retrospect, inevitable.

That fall I felt disoriented by the abrupt change that graduation had wrought on my identity: no longer an undergraduate, student government leader, or varsity athlete, but still part of the campus where I'd been all those things only months before. I often did not leave work in time to eat before going to coach practice and lost weight from skipping dinner. For a couple months I tried the Nuva-Ring, a hormonal form of birth control that I bailed on when I couldn't stop crying for a week and felt too afraid to insert a replacement. At the end of the women's volleyball season it turned out that the head coach would not be returning, which left me in charge of running spring season and

attempting to recruit for the following fall. I don't want to disparage my younger self, but there's a reason that collegiate-level head coaches are not typically 22-year-olds. I was not experienced enough to shoulder so much responsibility, and I was stretched far too thin. At this time I also coached a men's club team and trained a couple of high schoolers on the side. When I think about this younger self, I see a woman too confident in her capacity and too insecure to say no. It was as if I needed to locate my threshold for too much.

In the waiting room, the mental health section of the form gives me pause. I believe that my depression was situational, not fundamentally chemical. Checking the box will not capture this distinction. I haven't had an anxiety attack in more than a year—two 4/20s ago, to be precise, when I panicked about my boyfriend thinking about trying pot. There's no way to indicate that I had a prolonged bout of depression and anxiety but that I'm better now. I mark the boxes anyway, because I want to acknowledge what happened, but I don't necessarily feel less nervous.

No single factor led to my depression—rather, the combination of overwork, minor identity crisis, and deteriorating eating habits overwhelmed me. If I had to pick a timestamp for its beginning, however, I'd choose a January 2017 tournament with the men's team, where the triggering event unfolded. For this particular competition, because the gym was close to my hometown and because staying in even a grody motel could eat up most of the team budget, we all slept at my parents' house. On the second night a younger player, whom the captains had invited to attend with the caveat that he

wouldn't see much playing time, went to see a friend who lived nearby. Everyone else stayed in to watch the movie *Dodgeball*.

The next morning, most of the guys were bleary-eyed, and something smelled. As I thought about how the player who'd gone out the night before had returned stumble-drunk, a sense of foreboding gathered in my gut. I began to piece it together: he'd thrown up not only in the trailer that the neighbors had lent us for some of the team to sleep in but also on my parents' very expensive couch, stinking up the downstairs and waking up almost everyone in the process. A thought hung on the outer edge of my consciousness—*this is very bad*—but I refused to let it settle. I'd coached these guys for free for two seasons; my desire for their success was intense, if not unhealthy. Their opportunities to compete were limited, and they were generally outmatched by their opponents. In other words, we needed every advantage, including sleep, to have a shot at winning. So with a toothbrush and soapy water I tried to scrub puke from the trailer cushions and the couch pillows, as if I could scour away both the vomit and what I was about to have tell my father.

When we reached the court for our first game, frazzled but trying to pretend otherwise, it turned out that the balls needed for warm-up had been left in the car. This was more than I could handle. I felt short of breath, as if my feelings and life were moving too fast for my heart and lungs to keep up. As I strode through the parking lots, trying to calm myself by playing music on my phone, it was difficult to grasp how the thoughtlessness of one person had derailed something I cared about so deeply. The pressure in my head mounted. I wanted to be somewhere else, ideally by myself. It was a small one, and I didn't recognize it as such at the time, but this was my first anxiety

attack. Unsurprisingly the team did not play well; we lost all of our games quickly and in poor form.

—

As I make my way through the paperwork, I hesitate before marking the eating disorder box. I'm still not sure if my experience counts. I never went to in-patient treatment; I didn't need to. I did not develop anorexia or bulimia, the better-known and better-studied eating disorders verified with a listing in the DSM-5 (Diagnosical and Statistic Manual.) I prefer the word "orthorexia"—an unhealthy obsession with healthy eating and exercise—to describe what happened, but it's a less common term, despite having been coined before I was born. It's also not an option on this form.

There are no boxes for what I'd really like to say, such as "still has trouble feeding herself" or "has yet to reconcile her relationship to her belly" or "contends with occasional body hatred, knows that it is socially constructed, then feels guilty about said feelings." What I wish a medical practitioner would understand is that I got lucky. How fortunate that the counselor I was seeing for the depression and anxiety had survived advanced anorexia herself and could sense the tendrils of disordered eating pulling me in. How fortunate that I had great insurance. How fortunate that there was an anti-diet dietician practicing in that small town and that there was someone to guide me to her. I finish the form and return it. A nurse calls my name. I follow her to the scale.

—

In the months following the tournament, I kept coaching too many volleyball players and started sleeping more and more, even staying in bed during our town's satellite version of the 2017 Women's March. For a while I thought I was deficient in some nutrient and

bought a bottle of iron supplements that I was then too chicken to take because of all the potential side effects listed on the label. Somehow I'd forgotten that depression didn't require suicidal thoughts. I was not concerned with my mortality (and as my depression wore on I often told people this, because it felt like a line I needed to draw, as much for myself as for others); I was just fatigued and less interested in what normally called to me. I had an anxiety attack at work about a refrigerator delivery, and another one about painting some office file cabinets yellow. I often felt close to *losing my shit*, though I didn't totally know what that shit-losing would entail. I got a dramatic haircut. Thoughts of quitting my job or breaking up with my boyfriend became a barometer; whenever these possibilities were appealing, I wasn't doing well.

Eventually I decided to see a primary care physician. I was wary of drugs and hoped to leave with a counselor referral. But somehow I walked out with no referral and a prescription for Welbutrin. "Some girls take it for their whole lives," the doctor told me. "It just gives them the boost they need." Both this information and the breeziness with which she shared it unnerved me, but I wanted help and Welbutrin was not a "true" anti-depressant. Not a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor, that is, which I didn't really understand until I read a book about it, but while I was in that office I got the sense that Welbutrin wasn't the hard stuff. Whatever was happening to me wasn't that bad. Not yet. And she seemed to understand my situation at least partially. She explained that people can experience the various stages of grief about objects, too, such as losing a wallet, and that I was mourning the end of college. This emotional insight, coupled with her authority—I had never really asserted myself in a conversation with a medical professional—led me to decide, impulsively, to give Welbutrin a try.

At my second appointment with this doctor, about a month later, she complimented me for not having gained weight despite being depressed. This time I got around to what I'd wanted to say one bottle of Welbutrin earlier, and finally secured the referral. After the second bottle of Welbutrin I stopped taking it, partly because refilling the prescription seemed like too much effort and partly because I was feeling defiant. I didn't like putting non-essential substances in my body, and Welbutrin was not changing my life, anyway. Its main advantage was that it obligated me to eat breakfast more consistently. It had to be taken in the morning, and I could not handle any kind of pill, not even gummy vitamins, on an empty stomach. I did not see that doctor again, but I kept going to the counselor.

As part of our work she sent me to a local psychiatrist. Given my reservations about medication, this was probably destined to fail. But it sounded like his approach was, for a Western therapy practice, fairly holistic, and I was game to try. From a rigmarole of blood tests that he ordered, we learned that other than being a little short on vitamin D, like most residents of the Pacific Northwest, I was pretty healthy. The most important result came from a gene test, which revealed that I have a genetic mutation commonly referred to as MTHFR (methylenetetrahydrofolate reductase). The human brain needs folic acid to function but can only use this nutrient in its methylated form. People with MTHFR have diminished methylation processes. In other words, because of the mutation, my brain runs out of juice way earlier in the day than other people. I wasn't sure what to make of this information, because until this run-in with depression my mind had seemed both resilient and highly functional. But I wondered whether the circumstances were causing this lack of methylfolate to come into play in new ways.

And, given my distrust of anti-depressants (only strengthened by a book called *A Mind Of Your Own* assigned by the counselor), I was thrilled by the possibility that taking some new vitamins might be all I needed.

I started taking vitamin D, methyl cobalamin (a form of vitamin B12 that supports the methylfolate), and L-methylfolate. And I got worse. I felt anguished all the time. When, as I'd been instructed, I increased the dosage of methylfolate about a month in, I had what I call an itch attack and other people call hives. It should be noted that I am prone to hives; early on in my depression, when two different rashes developed on my torso simultaneously, an allergy doctor confirmed what I already knew—I have sensitive skin. Regardless of whether the hives were related to the methylfolate, I intuited that this itch attack was a sign. The vitamins were not living up to their promised outcomes, and if this was how depressed these vitamins were going to make me feel, I didn't want to take them anyway.

So I stopped using the methylfolate and researched its supplementation online, where I found a whole community of people and discussion dedicated to the difficulties of attending to this deficiency. One participant wrote fervently about additional supplements and precautions he recommended to others with the mutation to better prepare the body for extra methylfolate. I printed a couple pages of information from this website to take to my upcoming appointment with the psychiatrist, who worked in a regal-yet-homey office. He would sit behind a substantial, dark wood desk while the patient could sit on a poufy, coffee-colored leather couch or in an armchair. The tone of the light cast by various lamps was warm, not clinical. Someone had taken the time to install gold crown molding. The overall effect was both cozy and pretentious.

When I went to see him for the second time, armed with my research, I felt ready to speak up for myself. I told him about the hives; he said it was “extremely unlikely” that the vitamins had caused them. I told him I’d stopped taking the vitamins; he said that maybe I just needed to try a little harder, to *push through*. I mentioned what I’d read; he told me about the problems with looking things up on the internet. I said I’d been feeling worse; he said that was either a sign that I needed a bigger dose of the vitamins or that I might need a drug such as Welbutrin in addition to the vitamins. I said I was wary of Welbutrin, because doctors are not supposed to prescribe it to people with eating disorders; he countered that that warning existed only because Welbutrin can cause seizures in patients with severe anorexia, and that almost all anti-depressants cause some appetite suppression anyway. I said I was afraid of taking a drug that would decrease my hunger, given the weight I’d already lost by not eating enough food; his final suggestion was, with that stipulation, that I could take an anti-psychotic.

By this point my chest was tight and my eyes were prickling. I was having a hard time, sure, but I didn’t need an anti-psychotic. He hadn’t been listening. Neither my intellectual effort nor my body intuition were valued in that room. He thought he knew what was best for me. I lied and said I would try the vitamins again. On the way out I lied to the receptionist about how I would call to schedule another appointment. I even smiled at her as I said this, trying desperately to keep my voice even. Once I’d bundled myself up and stepped into the December night, I let the tears go and took out my phone to text my boyfriend. “That,” I typed, “was not a great doctor’s appointment.” I never went back.

My heart beats faster as we approach the scale in the hallway. It doesn't matter whether I've gained, lost, or maintained my weight; checking always makes me feel bad about myself, so I've vowed to stop. And now that I know how little bearing weight has on a person's health, which is to say, almost none, I've also decided I never want to be weighed by a medical professional again. But I haven't actually put this newfound stance into practice. I inhale and tell the nurse I would prefer not to be weighed. As far as acts of resistance go, this is a small one, especially because it's over before I can even revel in the moment—the nurse acquiesces and we walk into an examination room, where she checks my blood pressure.

I made this appointment because I'm due for a Pap smear, but I also hope to discuss some issues that are not urgent but remain murky for me. These people talk about sex and genitalia and reproduction for a living, I figure. Might as well take advantage of the time. We sit on rolling stools while she asks a series of questions, such as what kind of protection or contraceptive I use. I tell her that my partner and I use condoms, and that I don't want any hormones.

—

In the 1940s a scientist named Morton Biskind, who would later testify before Congress about the harmful effects of DDT on wildlife, published some of his findings regarding endocrine disturbances such as menstrual cramps. According to *How to Stay Out of the Gynecologist's Office* by the Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers, Biskind

learned through examinations and interviews that the most common causes of these conditions which plague many women and which are a major reason they are given hormone-like drugs is not some mysterious gland change but rather *nutritional deficiencies* or poisoning from *toxic substances in work environments*. He was appalled at the practice of giving hormone-like drugs for such conditions when the cause was clearly malnutrition or work-related health problems. Indeed,

he was sure that *hormone-like drugs worsened the underlying cause*. Even though the drugs could regulate bleeding and lessen premenstrual tension and cramps, giving the appearance of health, they actually increase the body's nutritional requirements and strain the organs of the body which filter out poisons.

This research came out more than seventy years ago. More than thirty years ago, *How to Stay Out of the Gynecologist's Office* identified iatrogenic, or physician-induced, infertility caused by prolonged birth control use as “an unpublicized health scandal.” Until I read *WomanCode* by Alisa Vitti, around the time of the prolonged Nuva-Ring crying jag, I had never encountered this information. Vitti suffered from polycystic ovary syndrome and for years doctors prescribed her birth control to mask her symptoms. The hormones tempered her misery but did not eliminate it, so she decided to find an alternative. She learned, as Biskind's research indicates, that she needed to treat her underlying endocrine imbalances and that these were caused and exacerbated by stress, disruptive ingredients (in cosmetics, cleaning products, and food), and hormonal birth control. Though I no longer agree with the restrictive eating regimen in *WomanCode*, this book was pivotal for me: it validated my decision to stop using the ring.

The last time I had some routine STI testing, the tests took two visits to complete because I'd been unable to find any information on the clinic's website about whether the fact that I was menstruating would impede them. (The general internet, such as YahooAnswers, isn't great for these kinds of questions.) When I told the doctor that I “only” used condoms, he admonished me. It was polite, professional chiding, borne of concern. And it irritated the hell out of me. Since that ill-fated psychiatrist's visit, I'd become more suspicious of men who wanted to tell me what to do. And since Vitti had confirmed my instinct that birth control is not the modern miracle we want it to be, I'd

concluded I wanted to take my chances with condoms. At least while abortion and the morning-after pill are still available.

—

In the examination room I try to tell the nurse about how intercourse can be painful, or even itchy-burning-painful, that unfortunate trifecta, but it is not always or even frequently this way. In the process of describing what I think causes this discomfort I fumble some of my words, not because I don't want to talk about it but because I don't talk about this subject out loud very often. "Why don't you tell the doctor about this when she comes in," the nurse says. "That way you don't have to say things twice, if you're uncomfortable." I do not react quickly enough. She stands up. *Wait, I want to say, I'm not uncomfortable! Or, well, maybe I am, but I'd like to be less uncomfortable and practice by telling you first.* Before she leaves she gives me a card to write down what I want to talk to the doctor about.

The gynecologist comes in. We speak for a few minutes before the Pap smear. I've read that copper IUDs, the ones without hormones, can exacerbate cramps. I ask if this is accurate. She verifies that they often increase bleeding and pain. "I probably take out as many of those as I put in," she says. I move on to my next topic of discussion. "Sometimes my periods are pretty bad," I offer. We've already spoken about the condoms. "You said you're not interested in using birth control?" she asks. I confirm that this is true. She changes the subject.

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The plight of period symptoms is neither new nor uncommon. It is this constancy, however, that I want to question. Each month from a similar set of ingredients—low

back pain, nausea, mild feverishness, acne, irritability, fatigue, cramps, and diarrhea—emerges some unexpected variation on the familiar. The period that started while I was on a plane (July 2019). Puking in a hotel toilet before breakfast (November 2012). The kind of headache where it hurts to laugh (December 2016). Taking four Advil in a despairing attempt to smother terrible cramps (June 2017). Throwing up in a warehouse bathroom (September 2019). I know that the cyclical nature of menstruation means that I can't expect to feel exactly the same throughout the month, but in the face of this discomfort I refuse to accept that my lot is just to tolerate it, that I could stand to try a little harder, to *push through*.

Much of Western medical practice is interventionist; that is, responding once an illness has taken root rather than keeping it from occurring. Even screening, considered a preventative measure by doctors and insurance companies alike, is typically a way to detect what has already taken place. Antibiotics and vaccines save lives, but many of our treatments address symptoms instead of causes. Dayquil and Nyquil don't heal a cold; they tamp down sniffles and coughing so you can act like they're not happening. This framework is likely why the gynecologist had nothing to say if she couldn't prescribe me birth control to obscure the effects of PMS. Millennia of knowledge about ways to mitigate its causes—teas and seeds and herbs and womb steaming and shiatsu and stretches and Eastern medicine in general—have yet to infiltrate the canon of Western medicine.

The aforementioned great insurance covered a dozen sessions of acupuncture a year, no questions asked, so in the front half of 2018 I took advantage of all twelve appointments. The new year had marked a general improvement in my disposition, but I

wasn't done with depression, either. The clinic's website said that people found acupuncture relaxing and even fell asleep during their treatments. It took months for me to experience this. I bawled for the majority of my first session. An uncontrollable grief rose in me as each spot where a needle had been inserted throbbed intermittently; the ones in my thumbpads were particularly painful. I cried because I was inexplicably sad, because the pain was unfamiliar, and because I didn't know if I was supposed to be crying. The acupuncturist had forgotten to tell me beforehand that the tears were normal, that it was nearly impossible, even foolish, to try to hold back the sorrow while the needles were in.

Traditional Chinese medicine understands the human body as a network of channels that supply qi and blood to the organs and tissues. In English, the twelve primary channels, or meridians, are named after the organ they're associated with. The acupuncturist explained that he had picked needle points to help my liver channel (associated with grief) flow more freely. The crying was a sign of release. Eventually the sessions toned down: the needles hurt less, the urge to cry decreased, and I could even, on occasion, remember to stop tensing my shoulders. I felt heard by the acupuncturist, who would, for instance, add needles to spots on my feet if I said I'd been napping too much. He wanted to know about minor discomfort (thirst, diarrhea, muscle soreness) that I had previously thought was too insignificant to share with a primary care physician. He listened to the nuances of my feelings.

In the way that no one difficulty caused the depression, it would be inaccurate to pin my recovery to acupuncture alone. (I got a yoga studio membership. I moved houses. I stopped coaching so much volleyball and started playing more of it myself. I

saw the counselor often, and then the anti-diet dietician. I read many—probably too many—self-help books.) But the acupuncture did help. As the treatments progressed, the pressure in my head dissipated, and tasks like washing dishes no longer felt insurmountable. With this experience of acupuncture under my belt, I decided to try it again, in 2019, to see if it would help with my periods. I went to a community clinic between a hair salon and a weed dispensary. Early in our first conversation, after we'd talked about the smell emanating from the basement where the neighbors trimmed their marijuana plants, this new acupuncturist said, "Western medicine doesn't really address women's health at all." I relaxed. He understood.

Improving menstruation is a slow process. Evidence for whether a treatment is effective is only available once a month. When I go to acupuncture regularly, drink tea and take herbs daily, and warm my abdomen with heated rice bags or smoldering moxa (mugwort) throughout the month, I can reduce my discomfort, but these practices have yet to enact some magical transformation upon me. I keep going, however, because the alternatives are unappealing. I asked my primary care physician whether I might have endometriosis, where the uterine lining grows elsewhere in the pelvis and can cause significant menstrual pain. "For all the advances we've made in modern medicine," she said, "we're so far behind when it comes to women's bodies," and for a moment in that examination room, I loved this doctor dearly. She explained that if I did have endometriosis, I would be required to try two kinds of hormonal birth control first. If my symptoms did not subside, only then would I be eligible for a surgery to remove the unwanted tissue. To cap it all off, the surgery does not necessarily keep more tissue from

growing back. Symptoms, not causes. “So, if acupuncture and ibuprofen help,” she said, “you might as well stick with it.”

—

The Pap smear requires that the gynecologist examine my vulva and then put a speculum inside me. She’s friendly and respectful, which I appreciate, but her demeanor doesn’t change my disinclination toward what’s about to happen. It’s an odd sensation. The lack of nerve endings down there means I can’t totally feel the metal, but when she cranks the speculum open, a wave of nausea rises through me. I make an involuntary noise. She asks if I’m okay. I say something noncommittal but reassuring—I can’t see any benefit to complaining. Once she has swabbed the walls of my cervix for a cell sample, I scooch back up onto the table and remove my feet from the stirrups.

We speak briefly about the discomfort during sex that I failed to discuss with the nurse. “Oil lube works really well,” the gynecologist says.

“Can’t you not use oil lube with most condoms?” I ask.

“Oh, right,” she says, “You’re using condoms.”

It’s a human moment, yet this interaction communicates volumes. It encapsulates my frustrations: with the dangers of hormonal birth control that these doctors seem willing to ignore; with the subtext of these condom comments, which is that I’m somehow doing it wrong, even though the alkalinity of sperm increases the likelihood of vaginal infection and even though condoms, unlike the IUD, pill, and ring, limit the transmission of STIs; with the implication that I am somehow incorrect or asking for too much in my desire to have sex without getting pregnant while also protecting my fertility

for later, not because I'm sure I want to have kids but because I don't want the decision made for me by drugs with side effects that physicians don't disclose.

When I get home, I complain about speculums to my roommate. "Wouldn't it be better if there were some kind of, you know, warm-up?" I feel slightly embarrassed about what I'm about to say but say it anyway: "Like with a vibrator?" She makes a face. "I think the problem here," she says, "is that it's a choice between having an erotic experience in the doctor's office, which no one wants, and being uncomfortable during a decidedly non-sexual experience. It's a lose-lose situation." A couple weeks later I will learn from *How to Stay Out of the Gynecologist's Office*, which is based on findings from years of running alternative women's health groups in the seventies, that women who inserted the speculum themselves for a self-exam were "pleasantly surprised" to learn that the procedure was not painful because they were in control.

Now that I've learned how to clamor in a medical context, that is, to insist loudly enough to be heard—and now that I know that I'm training an underused muscle—I've been thinking about finding a doctor to supervise, or better yet, work alongside me, while I give the methylfolate another go. I'm no longer banking on these supplements to fix my mental health, which seems like a far safer context in which to experiment. I've been reading more about MTHFR and how it's worthwhile to figure out the vitamins because the mutation has been linked to heart disease, mood disorders, and reproductive problems. In an article by a naturopathic doctor about the challenges of taking methylfolate, I found a list of possible side effects. First in the "mood changes" category: depression. And first in the "physical symptoms" category? Rash.

castle collateral

she fantasizes about dunking her hair
in a bucket of bleach begging a stylist
sing me honey resurrect me golden

peroxide the pleasure of living gilded and gossip-worthy
look at that brazen streak people would say she's unhinged
what a waste of money to trade hair for straw

princesses confirm: tricksters return
to collect your first-born
precious metals depreciate
blonde cachet runs out

still she dreams of changing her locks
damaging her strands of hair pearls plot
for access to another fairytale dark at the root
extend the loan elongate the prologue
where words fall ruby

Miley Unleashed

Britney’s shiny, fire-truck-red latex catsuit is back, this time with metal teeth on the crotch—specifically the crotch of Miley Cyrus as she crawls, punches, flexes, and gyrates her way through the 2019 video for “Mother’s Daughter.” Directed by Alexandre Moors, the video is a carefully wrought spectacle, and the visual reference to Britney Spears’s outfit from the 2000 “Oops... I Did It Again” video is unmistakable. Female American pop stars cannot appear in red catsuits, curved crotch spikes aside, without evoking “Oops,” especially if they share Disney Channel training, as Cyrus and Spears do.

Oops... I Did It Again was the first CD I ever bought. I idolized Britney Spears in all of her midriff-baring glory, developing an affinity for crop tops myself that has not, to this day, worn off. (This would likely resonate with Miley, who once joked, “If I owe anybody an apology, it’s the people who make the bottom half of shirts.”) While Britney Spears was in the sweet spot for my unquestioning adoration (she was about nineteen when I was six), Miley Cyrus was born a couple years before me. This is important because though I loved Hannah Montana (my best friend and I had a sleepover in high school to screen *Hannah Montana: The Movie*), I aged out of her demographic. I was in college when Miley abandoned Hannah.

Five years later, with her feminist anthem “Mother’s Daughter,” Miley alchemized her teenage rebellion into the battle cry of a line “don’t fuck with my freedom.” She had finally articulated her own evolution.

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That iconic Spears video set a stage of sorts for “Mother’s Daughter.” In “Oops,” the flare-legged, turtle-necked red catsuit and its contrasting white ensemble represent the angelic lyric “you think I was sent from above” and the devilry that undermines it—“I’m not that innocent.” The song’s speaker rebuffs the advances of a suitor who, in the video, has followed (stalked?) Spears all the way to Mars to present her with the long-lost necklace from Titanic. She keeps the necklace, admonishes him (“aw, you shouldn’t have”), and sends him away.

When Cyrus sings “back up, boy” multiple times while wearing a similar but edgier catsuit in “Mother’s Daughter,” she amplifies the sentiment of “Oops... I Did It Again.” For all its coy, faux-confessional distress, “Oops” is a song about rejecting a man. In her video, Spears oscillates between a neutral-sex-object stare and what looks like genuine anger as she lip-syncs that she’s not that innocent, dammit. Cyrus channels this defiance and intensifies it. A pretend apology becomes a demand, if not a restraining order: *back up, boy*.

The lyrical echo and the catsuit allusion amount to a gesture of solidarity, Cyrus to Spears, from one Disney-bred child star to another. Spears did not fare well during her transition from teen stardom to adult celebrity. She suffered a decline in mental health well-documented by a tabloid frenzy in which photographers took pornographic pictures of her without her consent. Though Cyrus clearly grew to resent the confines of her Hannah Montana image and broke away from it with typical teen celebrity rebellion (getting tattoos, smoking weed, dancing “sexy,” etc.), that virginal guise also protected her for longer. In 2008, Annie Leibovitz photographed Cyrus topless but holding a sheet over her chest for Vanity Fair. Cyrus was 15 at the time and still in high Hannah-

Montana gear. In the accompanying story, Bruce Handy wrote, “in an era when every under-age actress in Hollywood is stalked by the Ghost of Britney Future, [Cyrus’s success] depends on her continued public innocence.” Cyrus, however, told Handy that because she knew Spears (and Lindsey Lohan, another Disney “trainwreck”), she understood that they had “good hearts” and were “struggling.” The catsuit in “Mother’s Daughter” suggests that Spears, supposedly a bad example to follow, is a pop-mother to Cyrus, worthy of homage.

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I coached a U12 volleyball team in 2014. One day at practice, the subject of Cyrus came up. The year prior had been rife with her unruly performances: she’d licked a sledgehammer naked in the video for “Wrecking Ball”; the drug/party ode “We Can’t Stop” had topped the charts; and at the VMAs, Cyrus had wiggled her tush while grinding on Robin Thicke. A nine-year-old player told us she’d been crushed when Miley eviscerated Hannah, saying with unnerving gravitas, “Talk about breaking a little girl’s heart.”

Cyrus distanced herself from Hannah Montana over the course of about five years. As she told Elle, “The minute I had sex, I was kind of like, I can’t put the fucking wig on again.” Yet after so much effort to shed, if not exorcise, her Disney persona, Cyrus returned in 2019 to blond hair and blunt bangs in the style of that famed wig. This surprised me, in a good way. “I decided that I’ll just be Hannah forever,” Cyrus said in a cheerful Twitter video after her trip to the salon. A few months later, she put out the “Mother’s Daughter” video. By permitting her child-star hair aesthetic in the same space as her edgiest feminist work yet, the video offers a visual reconciliation with the past.

Regarding her Hannah Montana period, Cyrus told Elle, “I feel like I’m just not ashamed of that anymore.”

“Mother’s Daughter” forms part of Cyrus’s triumphant reclamation of her highly scrutinized “Wrecking Ball” video. In “Wrecking Ball,” Cyrus rides a literal, gigantic wrecking ball naked or semi-nude, depending on the cut of the video. She endured a maelstrom of slut-shaming for this performance. In an open letter Sinéad O’Connor told Cyrus to stop “prostituting” herself. Though the discourse between O’Connor and Cyrus devolved—Cyrus ridiculed O’Connor’s mental health struggles and (righteous) anti-Pope activism; O’Connor said Cyrus was “too busy getting [her] tits out” to educate herself—O’Connor’s reaction was indicative of the misogyny, internalized and overt, that flared up in the video’s wake. One writer for *The Guardian* criticized Cyrus for having filmed “a wank fantasy” and predicted she would feel “embarrassed” about the video in the future. “Mother’s Daughter” is spliced with close-ups of Cyrus’ face, a tear running down her cheek in a shot nearly identical to one that appears throughout “Wrecking Ball” (ironically, Cyrus told *Rolling Stone* that the shot had been inspired by O’Connor’s video for “Nothing Compares 2 U.”) By referencing a much-maligned past project, “Mother’s Daughter” seems to say, “I regret nothing.”

I do wish that the “Wrecking Ball” video had not been directed by Terry Richardson, the photographer notorious for sexually harassing numerous young women, particularly relatively unknown models. His involvement casts the video in a far creepier light. The fact that he steered the whole project makes it seem more voyeuristic, as if the “wank fantasy” comment, which I find abhorrent, might also be partly true. Still, Richardson’s contribution doesn’t devalue the video wholesale—rather, it exemplifies the

rampant misogyny of the music industry that Sinead O'Connor was trying to warn Cyrus about, albeit without much tact or solidarity.

Reactions to “Wrecking Ball” obsessed over Cyrus’s nakedness. But the policing of her so-called indecency and sexual pantomiming obscured the politics of self-pleasure put forward by the video, wherein Cyrus rides the wrecking ball. She sits in a prime position for (female) masturbation, mounting—that is, assuming a traditionally masculine posture above—the object which could provide that pleasure. And she rides it as an agent of destruction. Rarely is Miley Cyrus recognized for promoting self-pleasure through her continued willingness to openly touch herself, both sensually and sexually. At the 2020 VMAs an enormous, glittering disco ball descended from the ceiling during Cyrus’s performance of “Midnight Sun.” She straddled the chain from which it hung, reigning from atop the wrecking ball once more.

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Any credit owed to Cyrus for her sexual boldness is limited by her tasteless appropriation of Black culture. This tension emerged most infamously during her 2013 VMAs performance, alongside Robin Thicke, mashing her song “We Can’t Stop” into his song “Blurred Lines.” Critics panned the performance for using Black women as props—the Black back-up dancers wore enormous teddy bears on their backs—and for the appropriation of twerking, a dance move with roots in New Orleans bounce culture and, going further back, Mapouka dance in Côte d’Ivoire. As Jody Rosen wrote for *Vulture*, Cyrus’s twerking allowed her to “[annex] working class Black ‘ratchet’ culture, the potent sexual symbolism of Black female bodies, to the cause of her reinvention: her transformation from squeaky-clean Disney-pop poster girl to grown-up hipster

provocateur.” While Rosen and company identified the racism of “Miley’s Minstrel Show,” the anonymous women’s bodies police took to the internet to call Cyrus a slut. Even more esteemed sources, such as The New York Times, cashed in on double standards and called the performance a “molesting of Robin Thicke.”

Cyrus’s Black appropriation phase lasted for quite some time. When I finally listened to the entirety of her 2013 album *Bangerz*, I found that some of the songs try cringingly hard to be Black. It’s a toss-up whether “Do My Thang,” where Cyrus raps lines like “mind yo bidness / stay in yo lane, bitch,” or “SMS (*Bangerz*)” is worse. Despite featuring Britney Spears (a combination that should be unstoppable) and sampling “Push It” (released in 1987 by female rap super-group Salt-N-Pepa), “SMS (*Bangerz*)” manages to be remarkably bad. The refrain “I be struttin’ my stuff” sounds wrong when Cyrus says it. And when Cyrus hosted the VMAs in 2015, she wore dreads.

Still, that 2013 VMAs performance was also an unrestrained display of female self-gratification, particularly in the “Blurred Lines” segment, where Cyrus was effectively invited to (coerced into?) acting as the sex object. She stood in for Emily Ratajkowski, the most prominent of three female models featured in the “Blurred Lines” music video, all of whom appeared topless. (Robin Thicke and Pharrell Williams, of course, were fully clothed.) So at the VMAs, Cyrus turned her role in a song about domesticating women and disregarding consent into a ribald quest for female pleasure, grinding on a foam finger and on Thicke himself.

Cyrus retains this sexually transgressive spirit in the video for “Mother’s Daughter,” in which she touches herself often and all over the place. She rubs her breasts and hips and pelvis; she also rubs up on Vendela, a female model who receives the most

screen time besides Cyrus herself. In the video Cyrus, who identifies as pansexual, enacts a queer orientation with Vendela—yet another facet of the “back up, boy” sentiment: *back up, boy, because I don't need a man at all.*

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Both the imagery throughout “Mother’s Daughter” and the crew it assembles flaunt female anatomy. A menstrual, traditionally feminine red-and-pink color palette is the backdrop for shots of scarlet-spotted underwear and balloons shaped like nipples rubbing together. These balloons poke fun at the shirtless double standard (flat-chested men can go topless in public; women, as well as men with “moobs,” a word I wish didn’t exist, are punished for the same behavior.) Actor, dancer, and single-mother advocate Melanie Sierra adds to this commentary: she appears breastfeeding her youngest child, lit from above and wearing a sun-rayed crown like the Virgin Mary herself—though, as the video reminds us in one of its flashing slogans, “VIRGINITY IS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT,” and pregnancy leaves marks. The video cuts between a metallic-ring-embellished C-section scar, another taboo image, and a horizontal zipper unzipping in the same position. The teeth of the zipper recall the metal fangs on Cyrus’s catsuit, an allusion to *vagina dentata*. This is a Latin phrase for a myth found in folklore worldwide about a woman whose vagina teeth protect her from rape and/or punish men who have intercourse with her by castrating them. This costuming choice may be the most overt visual version of the “back up, boy” imperative: *back up, boy, or I will bite off your penis.*

And yet the video resists a reading of “back up, boy” as directed only at male-bodied people. The most prominent man in the video, Casil McArthur, appears glittery,

necklace-clad, and shirtless (remember: male nipples are allowed). He rubs his hand across his mouth, smearing his lipstick dramatically. This gesture emphasizes how the makeup, a tool of feminine performance, is just that: a tool. He can wield it defiantly. Looking anguished, he lip-syncs the words “back up, back up”—the word “boy” is elliptical. Because McArthur, a trans man, is the video’s only recognizable example of a man, it’s powerful to see him in particular perform this line. When his appearance emphasizes the construction and malleability of gender, his iteration of “back up, boy” rejects mainstream (cis) masculinity. “Mother’s Daughter,” then, celebrates female anatomy—which has been mystified and maligned for millennia—but also proposes a transinclusive feminism. It’s a kind of body feminism that opens its embrace to femme, feminine, female, trans, and gender-nonconforming bodies. In this way, the video broadens the category of woman. In 2019, Cyrus told Elle, “‘She’ does not represent a gender. She is not just a woman. ‘She’ doesn’t refer to a vagina.”

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I revel in the video’s attention to detail, such as model Aaron Philip’s sculptural, metallic purple heels and luxe white-fur blanket, but I wonder if this prettiness sanitizes the effect somewhat. The menstrual panties, for instance, with their evenly spaced, petal-like dots, are quite cute. Even when activist Trydryn Scott and dancer Paige Fralix undulate by a bonfire, their bare chests and backs painted with the slogans “I AM FREE” and “RIOT GIRL” in the style of “body posters” favored by the Ukraine-based, militant, sextremist group Femen, the raw scene feels cleaned up. The smoke billowing amidst their slow-motion writhing is blue and pink, for goodness’ sake. This is not to say that feminism can’t be artistic or portrayed by an auteur—see “New Rules” by Dua Lipa or “PYNK” by

Janelle Monae. But the cool outfits and color-coordinated photoshoot backgrounds in “Mother’s Daughter” do somewhat elide the tenacity that real life requires of video guests such as non-binary skateboarding phenom Lacey Baker or youth water activist Mari Copeny.

This aesthetically pleasing form of feminism seems most effective when it interrogates beauty standards. Sure, Vendela, Miley, and her mother Tish (also prominently featured), are hot, skinny white women, but they’re only part of the equation. Philip, who was born with cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair, wears a sparkly, belted mini-dress and the aforementioned fabulous metallic heels. Dancer Amazon Ashley, who appears in a low-cut, chartreuse jumpsuit with a “World Wrestling Champion” belt around her waist, stands at 6’7”’. When Philip (the first Black, trans, disabled model to sign with a major agency) and Amazon Ashley (a Black, trans, “too tall” burlesque performer) and Angelina Duplisea (a white, cis, fat activist) all appear in the same work, an expansive understanding of body acceptance begins to emerge.

Duplisea, whose Twitter description reads “Plus Size Performer/Professional Fat Shaker,” in the video reclines nude among the pillows on an ornate chaise lounge. The emerald cloth in her hair, combined with her dangling earring and her glance over her left shoulder, evoke the 1665 painting *Girl With a Pearl Earring* by Johannes Vermeer. Duplisea’s pose, with her left knee bent in the foreground, is also reminiscent of the figure of Venus in Peter Paul Rubens’s 1612 *Venus, Cupid, Bacchus, and Ceres* as well as Michelangelo’s 1531 statue *Night*, which Vermeer later sketched in 1601 (*La Nuit*). These works of art were created during an era when women’s bodies were permitted to be larger, whether they labored in fields or feasted at banquets. Their

fleshiness was revered. In response to “Mother’s Daughter,” online comments blatantly fat-shamed Duplisea—for instance, “I’m sorry, but the person in this image is not acceptable.” Such reactions lay bare the bleak reality that her mere presence in the video is radical. By alluding to the artistic lineage of the Renaissance, Duplisea’s portrayal in “Mother’s Daughter” points toward alternative forms of beauty. That possibility becomes even more liberating when triangulated with Philip and Amazon Ashley.

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“Mother’s Daughter” pushes back on the notion that Miley’s father, Billy Ray Cyrus, made Miley into the star she is today. (Though no amount of pushing back changes the fact that Billy Ray’s fame, surname, and genes were a huge leg up.) Tish is Miley’s manager, and the song lyrics give her credit: “My mama always told me that I’d make it / so I made it.” As these lyrics play, we see a long shot of Tish and Miley absolutely decked out in Chanel. They wear matching tweed suits adorned by Chanel belts and necklaces, their arms crowded with bracelets and rings. Fittingly for these French-designed ensembles, they sit on a Louis VIX-style couch, Miley resting her head on her mother’s shoulder. Tish holds a (Chanel) teacup and saucer and gazes directly into the camera, looking pretty damn royal. Both lyrically and visually, Cyrus identifies herself with her matrilineal heritage, a feminist salute reinforced by cameos from elder relatives as well as her brief appearance in Joan-of-Arc-inspired golden armor. When I noticed that my research rabbit hole had led to dissecting the Cyrus genealogical tree, I decided to cut my losses and make educated guesses about the three older white people in leopard-print clothes who show up for less than a second: the woman in glasses looks like Cyrus’ maternal grandmother, Loretta Jean Palmer Finley. The man could be Carl Dean,

husband of Dolly Parton, who is Cyrus's godmother. The other woman could be Dolly herself. Or Dolly's sister Stella. I do not know. Regardless, here Cyrus celebrates her under-acknowledged ancestors, invoking the die-for-your-beliefs legacy of Joan of Arc and elevating her (biological, entrepreneurial) mother, Tish.

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The first time I watched "Mother's Daughter," I was floored. The video introduced me to the new Era of Miley: in 2019, she divorced Liam Hemsworth, starred in a Black Mirror episode as a futuristic pop-princess heavily inspired by (and distorted from) herself, and joined Lana Del Ray and Ariana Grande on the new Charlie's Angels soundtrack. With the song "On a Roll" by her Black Mirror character, Ashley O, Cyrus became the first female artist to chart songs in the Billboard 100 under three different names. In response to allegations that she'd cheated on Hemsworth, Cyrus tweeted, "You can say I am a twerking, pot-smoking, foul-mouthed hillbilly, but I am not a liar [...] I am simply in a different place from where I was when I was younger." The "Mother's Daughter" video manifests this quote, albeit in totally different context: Cyrus acknowledges her past self, especially the thornier parts, but she's looking ahead, paying tribute to her predecessors and embracing the contemporary feminist moment.

Back in 2008, those semi-nude photos of Cyrus in Vanity Fair unleashed a parental and media uproar ("MILEY'S SHAME," blared one New York Post headline). Cyrus responded to the backlash with an apology and said publicly that she was "embarrassed" by the pictures. Ten years later on Instagram, she posted an image of an article about her apology with the caption "I'M NOT SORRY FUCK YOU."

The “Mother’s Daughter” video makes a similar move. It validates “Wrecking Ball” and other past work that engendered misogynistic vitriol and even extends that affirmation to another singer, Britney Spears, whom the press has similarly punished for baring her body. “Mother’s Daughter” selects a lineage of antecedents to honor while also presenting a many-faceted, gender-encompassing, collective feminism that foregrounds the human body in many of its, to use a Darwinian phrase, “endless forms most beautiful.” The title of Cyrus’s 2019 EP, *She Is Coming*, couldn’t be more fitting—and “she” includes more people than ever before.

Taylor Swift Tells the World to Calm Down, Forgets She Has a Lot of Money

A year after it came out, this is what I love—and will probably always love—about Taylor Swift’s “You Need to Calm Down” music video: Adam Lambert (whose face is on a t-shirt I’ve had since eighth grade, when I saw him at an American Idol concert with my dad) giving Ellen DeGeneres a forearm tattoo. Tan France pouring tea directly from the pot into his mouth while en route to a tea party with his fellow cast members from the show *Queer Eye*, suggesting that the Mad Hatter was indeed queer in all senses of the word. Todrick Hall slaying it in kaleidoscopic platform boots. A fierce ensemble of stars from *RuPaul’s Drag Race* preening and, importantly, not competing with one another, each one dressed as a female singer against whom the media has pitted Taylor in the past—Ariana Grande, Lady Gaga, Adele, Cardi B, Beyoncé, Katy Perry, and Nicki Minaj. And then there’s Taylor herself, walking toward the camera and away from the trailer she’s just set aflame, wearing bedazzled cat-eye sunglasses and a pink swimsuit under a lavish, calf-length, swoopy-sleeved magenta fur coat. In the rose-trimmed pool, her floaty is her throne, and she lounges with her heels still on.

I may be late, in internet time, to the technicolor trailer park party, but in 2020 the video still constructs a delectable fantasy. It’s a rainbow nod to 1950s America, except without so much racism and sexism. The song takes on the phrase “you need to calm down,” an admonishment stereotypically levelled at ‘hysterical’ women, ‘disrespectful’ people of color, or ‘angry’ queers, and turns it back on both Taylor’s haters generally (the internet mob, the media, and the tabloids) as well as the people who can’t seem to handle queerness, such as the US President, on whose birthday the song was released. The opening lyrics criticize anonymous online commentators: “you are somebody that I don’t

know / but you're taking shots at me like it's Patrón / And I'm just like 'damn' / it's seven A.M."

Unfortunately, this behavior at which she's poking fun is also how the video treats working-class Americans—taking shots at people whose lives Taylor Swift won't know, unless she squanders her \$400 million net worth. So this is what I wish could be excised from the video: the group of protesters. A predominantly white circle of them, intended to represent the homophobes, marches outside the only brown house, patches of unkempt grass in the yard, in an otherwise colorful trailer park where everyone else has ever-pristine Astroturf for lawns. Unlike the fashionable, well-coiffed coterie of more than twenty featured celebrities, the protestors are clad in denim, cowboy hats, sweatshirts, overalls, and flannel—typical American clothing, most of which originated from working the land or in a factory. The protesters don't wear visible makeup. They do sport slightly ragged hair (i.e. that of normal people, except for the guy with an impressively scraggly beard) and some missing teeth. They carry signs, two of which are misspelled (“get a brain, morans” and “homasekuality is a sin.”) Perhaps this caricature of backwards and backwoods rednecks is the final stage of Taylor's exorcism of her country roots, but there's a difference between saying “shake it off” to oppressive views and ridiculing people for having less money than you.

The video's incarnation of homophobia conflates poverty—such as lacking access to the level of dental care that pays for replacements when teeth fall out—with closedmindedness. This portrayal of the protesters furthermore advances a potentially dangerous argument, similar to the illusion that white supremacists only grow up in Idaho or Texas, that we can blame heteronormativity exclusively on a certain kind of

uneducated Christian (another poster reads “Adam and Eve Not Steve”). Members of the Westboro Baptist Church picketed some of Taylor’s concerts back in 2013, but that seems like an old bone to pick. A literal rendering of spelling-challenged marchers is unnecessary for a song with the line “just makin’ that sign must’ve taken all night.”

Including the protesters infringes on what would otherwise be a fantasy by suggesting that poor people aren’t enlightened or monied enough to be near, let alone play in, the rich, queer sandbox. I’m not saying that anti-gay protesters, or even straight people generally, deserve to infiltrate queer spaces. Rather, I want to interrogate how the video muddles socio-economic status and anti-gay attitudes. When people who might actually live in trailers appear to have been relegated to the lone ugly structure, the video’s trailer park setting is no longer just a fun fairyland. It becomes an appropriation of the trailer park as a ‘cute’ aesthetic for a bourgeois playground.

The cast of celebrities appears to be having a dandy time on set, but in reality their fame and wealth do not protect them from discrimination and microaggressions. Pop star Hayley Kiyoko, who in the video plays a sharp-shooting archer and in real life is referred to by her fans as “Lesbian Jesus,” has spoken publicly about the straight double standard implicit in comments she’s received from music executives (e.g. ‘you’re going to make *another* video about girls?’) Billy Porter’s cameo—a stride of pride between a line of protesters and a row of ‘real’ residents of this trailer park as they sun-tan—is simply unforgettable. And yet Porter, whose acting expertise and inimitable style have ensconced him in a seemingly untouchable echelon of celebrity (from which he deigned to grace a Taylor Swift music video), still received flack for the tuxedo-gown he wore to the 2019 Oscars. Though Porter struts through the video as only Billy Porter can, his

trajectory also delineates a class line between those who can spend their time sunbathing and those who resent being edged out of a community where they can no longer afford to live.

If we imagine the world in the video as an LGBTQ haven, why are the protesters even there? *Who let them in?* The ideal queer takeover wouldn't rely on gentrification. The presence of these protesters, or rather, their cartoonish poorness, does not ruin the video entirely, but it certainly complicates an already messy matrix of straight privilege, queer success under capitalism, and watered down, well-intentioned messaging. Many critics have already dissected whether "You Need to Calm Down" works as an allyship anthem (short answer: sort of, but it's clumsy.) Whatever solidarity the video achieves is severely constrained by its glossy vs. scruffy, metropolis vs. boonies, enlightened atheist vs. ignorant Fundamentalist dichotomies. This framework erases rural (and religious) queers.

Given these many flaws, what I appreciate about the video are its moments of aesthetic affirmation and whimsy. I still love that the embroidered quote hanging on the wall of Taylor's imagined RV bedroom —"Mom, I am a rich man"—was Cher's response to her mother's insistence that she needed to "settle down and marry a rich man." I still love that the mailbox in a rainbow-picket-fenced yard says, "LOVE LETTERS ONLY." And I really love the reunion during a cake fight at the end of the video, where Taylor, wearing a French fry costume, finds and touches hands with "I Kissed A Girl" singer Katy Perry, wearing a hamburger costume. This moment fulfills a longing harbored by my 18-year-old self, when I was a bottle of mustard for Halloween and hoped to meet a bottle of ketchup that night. (To no avail, though there was someone

dressed as a bottle of Tabasco.) And I think this is one of the ways to truly care about a piece of art: to notice where the craft is unmatched, to feel disappointed when it falls short, and to dream about how you would have tweaked the final product. I wouldn't spend time deconstructing the video or imagining a different version if it didn't matter to me. I admire Taylor Swift, sometimes reluctantly, often in earnest. She's come a long way from her teenage spot on the bleachers, and she's retained a remarkable amount of creative control over her work. Which is why I'm hopeful that she can become more thoughtful about who she's bringing with her; that she can figure out how to uplift without also throwing people under the bus.

failure to abridge

I talk about you all the time
like you're a secret
refer to you rarely by name
don't want people to think I'm hung up
or hanging on
your role re-cast as an extra
as if you weren't my witness and disciple

if I text, you show up in my dreams
some mechanism some reaction
like a tarot equation in a technical subconscious

of when we writhed and read that room together
red wallpaper red rug stubborn landlady
remember? curled into resentment
from Sisyphean consciousness
but I keep these recollections to myself
cool girls don't reminisce

To Quench

Washington, 2014 & 2016

I dressed up for Valentine's Day: a skirt over snazzy tights, vintage leather shoes that had belonged to my mother, some statement necklace (pink, surely) atop a nice shirt, and a headband with a gigantic black lace bow lounging in my hair. During dinner we sat at a small table in the dining hall. I was enamored. Not in love, not precisely. I admired him—his attitude when we played Ultimate or dodgeball or basketball together (hardworking, competitive but not cheap), his discipline (which was actually a disdain for sleep, but such attitudes impressed me back then), his kindness (he collected friends through sheer determination), and his enthusiasm for being outside (he liked to snow camp and river kayak and would later nearly lose a thumb in a gnarly climbing accident). And, of course, his handsomeness, which I found overwhelming. “You inspire me to *aspire*,” I wrote in earnest in a love letter that I'd created—drafted, in fact—to give him for the occasion. After having had a crush on him for almost a year, it was thrilling to actually be with him, thrilling that he liked me back.

He invited me to go on a walk after we ate. We headed toward the creek, the moonlight causing him to share the story of when he'd discovered as a child on a camping trip that the moon, too, could cast shadows. We most likely held hands. He was sure in his step, his tennis shoes faring just fine in the mud, whereas I picked my way carefully, trying not to dirty my heirloom Oxfords. I wondered why he hadn't told me where we were going or given me an opportunity to change outfits. It had always irritated me, and still does, to be wearing the wrong clothing for the activity at hand. As we squelched along the path I felt frustrated because I knew, though I never would have

let on at the time, that I needed to play up and cultivate my outdoorsiness to be with him. My stylish street clothes were not productive toward that aim.

One boyfriend, some maybe-dates, a summer fling, and three additional crushes later, I would date a man whose favorite form of volleyball, like mine, happened in a gym. We played outside in the summer primarily because it complemented our indoor game: the uneven surfaces of grass or sand required more effort, and the typically smaller number of people on each side meant more ground to cover, more touches on the ball, more defensive strategy. It was deeply satisfying to return to playing inside after months of outdoor ball and feel like you could run unencumbered and jump several inches higher. He also believed that the best part of backpacking was the glorious meal at the end of the trip upon returning to running water and restaurants. This, I later realized, was progress.

Oregon, 2014 & 2015

He took me to a friend's barn on the plateau for a sunset concert, one of those incandescent communal experiences of music that reminds you you're alive. On Sundays we rode our bikes several miles on a back road with mountain ranges visible in the distance on either side until we reached the next town over, where we would eat waffles before going to play frisbee. We wrote and mailed one another letters even though we lived a block apart. He was fighting fire in the place where he'd grown up; I was working somewhere I'd never been and inserted myself in his summer.

He was slightly awkward, the kind of guy I usually could charm. One day at the lake we perched on rocks and dipped our feet in the water, letting it lap around our ankles. I shifted so that our knees touched, and he recoiled. This reaction surprised

me—I had not, at that time, thought critically about consent and believed that the touch of a woman was always welcome—and I misinterpreted his movement as a lack of interest. But we kept hanging out, drinking tea and starwatching together, and as we grew closer I imagined that I was altering his life forever, that he’d never met anyone who shone like me. And maybe that was true. The problem with casting myself in such a light, however, was that it obscured how much I craved his attention.

I think of our summer together very fondly, even now. We continued to correspond when I went back to school in August. He was one of the most consistent pen pals I’d ever had. I believe that letter writing can be its own kind of love, but it would be untruthful to say that I wasn’t also drawing out our romance. The following summer I decided to go see him for a weekend. Together we took a pleasant hike through meadow grasses and evergreen trees. The hike seemed short, even stilted, not unlike our conversation. He felt both familiar and anachronistic: I wasn’t sure how to talk to him anymore.

A perverse curiosity—I knew I would not like the answer, but I needed to hear it anyway—led me to ask questions, or rather, probe, until he admitted that he’d actually planned an entire camping trip. But our interactions were so much less comfortable than before that he’d decided to nix the overnight tent excursion. “I thought you wanted to see if there was still something there,” he said. This sentence, more than anything else, undid my determined suppression of an instinct that a visit would end in unmet expectations. Until we reconvened face-to-face, I had not been able to admit that I’d been harboring a possibility in which I no longer believed.

Montana, 2018

I could tell that he liked me and it felt good. We'd gone out a few times. I kept lying to my roommate about hanging out with him, pretending I was going elsewhere. The only way I can explain this childish behavior is that I felt ashamed of my inclination toward him, especially because it was based on characteristics such as his freckles, which I found inordinately attractive, or the speakers in his car, which had superb sound fidelity. *Pull it together*, I told myself after I'd sneaked out of my own home to go to a party at his house. He thanked me for coming and brushed my shoulder with one of his knuckles, the only indication that I was different from anyone else at the gathering. I cherished this gesture even as I noticed that he did not dust his bedroom and liked to smoke pot, a habit I've learned I cannot abide in a boyfriend, no matter how prudish it makes me sound.

By the time I decided to stop seeing him, we'd already made plans to drive to some hot springs about an hour away. We parked the car, crossed the highway, and followed a pine-needled path to hot springs on a steep hillside. Rain spritzed and bounced on the water, and from a low angle it looked as though the little pool extended seamlessly into the cloudy horizon. Even though I knew he and I were not compatible, and even though I do not, or at least should not, need to date anyone, part of me felt disappointed that the trip would end any possibilities with him. *Someone is better than no one* seemed to be the deep-seated belief undergirding this disappointment. I told him he was good-looking and that I enjoyed hanging out with him but didn't want to pursue it further. I cannot say why I felt so reluctant to be alone—but at least I could identify the feeling.

California, 2019

One night it poured. We went to the baths around ten or eleven, but once we slid ourselves into the hot water, sitting close enough to speak but not close enough to touch, it felt like timeless time. The ocean rolled and crashed on the cliff below as raindrops cooled our shoulders and splattered on the surface of the bath. The night was dark but not black—the clouds a deep grey and the sea a cauldron, an ambiance like the opening of *Macbeth*, with mists and mysteries and witches' words gathering in the air.

Many people, including this man I'd just met, chose to bathe nude there. I was not ready to have such an encounter with my body in front of a near stranger, so I wore a swimsuit. I was very careful not to accidentally brush any part of his body and made a perhaps exorbitant amount of eye contact. He, on the other hand, seemed totally comfortable. We talked about our hometowns and aspirations. The curiously purple-grey light did not change in timbre; we alternated between submerging our torsos in the water and sitting on the stone edges of the bath. For my younger self this set-up could not have been anything but the prelude to a romantic encounter, but as the conversation floated along I noticed that I felt both nervous and liberated by neither flirting nor trying not to flirt too much. It was powerful, to be with a naked man without sexual implications or the threat of violence. Eventually we tired of talking and rinsed off in showers that overlooked the tumultuous sea. A curtain of rain rendered our towels irrelevant on the walk back to the cabin, but we were still warm from the bath. The mud on our feet didn't matter.

Idaho, 2019

When you moved across town, I bombed your former oven with the real-deal

cleaner that smelled like cancer in hopes of pleasing your cheap-ass property manager. The last time I got sick, you made chicken broth and ferried Mason jars of it to me on your bike. You've let me trim your abundant curls, and you're willing to spend your bookstore credit on me. I've darned every sock you own with colorful thread. We share my vacuum—I drive it to your place every few weeks. We are a couple; at what point do we become a unit?

In the last twelve years, the longest I've been single has been nine months, a fact that younger me would have been proud of and current me finds worrisome. It suggests I don't know how to be by myself. Despite this longstanding tendency to fall into caring for someone and being cared for by them (or adored—in the beginning, it can be difficult to tell the difference), there are lines of commitment I find myself bumping into, unwilling to cross. When I discovered that a trip I'd planned to Boise involved a nine-hour drive each way, I invited you first out of selfishness. I wanted company—someone is better than no one. I do not like driving alone for long stretches.

“Sometimes I feel like you think of me as an accessory,” you said, which was hard to hear even though I knew it was true. I'd tried to crowbar you in for convenience. Then I realized that circumstances might have nudged us toward something for which we (really, I) might be ready. I asked you again, differently, to come with me anyway. *Be my road trip comrade? My partner?* During the opening hours of the trek, the highway wound through the evergreens and the rain picked up. You'd never been camping before and so were unabashedly excited about our plan to sleep that night at a site my boss had recommended along with directions that sounded like some variation on “To Grandmother's House We Go.” And your enthusiasm did not wane, not even when we

ended up pitching the tent in the dark and in the rain and spending the night effectively on the ground because we had no sleeping pads. As I drove, you read aloud to me from an anthology, one of the stack of books we'd piled into the backseat because both of us dislike being caught without something to read.

The rain began to splat. You raised your voice slightly. Water started accumulating on the road and sweeping across the windshield as if a sheet had descended overhead, containing us in a precise capsule of weather, topography, and each other. The rain grew louder, fell faster; the wipers were no longer able to disperse the liquid flowing across the glass. We hadn't seen another car in a long time. The downpour increased in ferocity until it sounded like hail and you, accordingly, were nearly shouting to be heard above the din, and I, accordingly, had slowed down.

“Amor!” I interrupted, almost yelled, to ask you to pause. “Oh-thank-god,” you exhaled, like it was one word, relieved because reading at such a volume—volume of sound, volume of water—had been straining your voice. We carried on, ourselves silent and the rain smacking the car, encasing us in its percussive. We gave ourselves over to the deluge. Eventually it subsided, a diminuendo to a drizzle. The precipitation faded and sunlight cut through the steam now rising from the ground. From the mist sizzling along the curve ahead emerged two moose. I braked, giving them lots of space. A gangly calf slipped on the wet pavement, following its companion across the road.

no going back to ballpoint after the Pilot G2-07

fat ink hides flaws glosses sins loosens lips
Chocano wrote: no going back to plain toast after Jesus
can't unsee the martyr or unfeel the flow
sliding between hands gliding past truth
like his moccasined feet on Catholic school floors
skating those hallways with speed so slick
nuns called him irreverent
they phoned his mother who confiscated
the shoes soles worn thin

Keep to Myself

I like the idea of it. Of dancing with a man I don't already know. In practice, however, I try to avoid eye contact with strangers on the dance floor. Which is tricky because I also like to scan the crowd and check people out. Sometimes, despite my tried-and-true technique of looking at the DJ, ceiling, or wall, I lock eyes with an unknown man. Though this interaction is bound to occur if I keep my eyes open, I chastise myself: *dang it, now he might think you want something.*

Dance is liberation. When I'm inside the sound, the separation between my intellectual mind and self-conscious body dissolves. I can inhabit myself. I love the point in the arc of a party when the dance floor empties out, when its only occupants are a coiled-up couple, some diehard and drunk-jumping college students, and few stalwart, down-to-dance folk like me. But one of the main spaces to dance as an adult is at the club, where the pressures of being seen and the possibilities of being close are at once threatening and exhilarating. I prefer to move with more space and dance with my arms spread, flailing even.

I also dance this way as a protective measure. It's not that I don't like to dance with company. What I do not like is discovering that I am dancing with someone. It is rare that a man presses his pelvis into my butt without asking or sneaks his hands around my waist from behind, but the potential for this behavior is real enough. When I dance, I stand my ground and throw my head and fling my limbs to send a message: *do not interrupt me; do not touch me; I am here, but I am not here for you.*

Good shaving requires consistency, a sharp razor, and either a hatred for stubble and wisps or a fetish for hairlessness, neither of which I've ever been able to summon. Consequently, I've spent the majority of my postpubescent life with prickly underarms and legs. I periodically trim my pubic hair with a pair of craft scissors, having decided to subject my nether regions to red bumps no longer. When I was 23, my pink, squiggle-printed electric razor from Walmart stopped working. So I first stopped shaving because I didn't feel like buying more batteries. How strange that I knew how long my eyelashes and eyebrows could grow but had no idea what would happen with my axial hair. Maybe my armpits were magic and I had never bothered to check.

I was delighted to discover that my apparently abundant armpit hair did not disgust me. I'd been worried that I wouldn't like it, that my aesthetic preferences wouldn't align with my political opinions. The hair grew out soft and slightly wavy. I felt edgy, even cool. It was disappointing when, a few weeks in, my boyfriend asked me to shave it. He was a clever, insightful person, and, especially compared to other men I'd dated, down with the feminist cause. "But you get to have that!" I squeaked at him, my voice coming out higher-pitched than I'd intended. I pointed at his long, light-brown armpit hair. Though I could have gestured at any part of his body: his ample beard, his downy chest hair, his leg fuzz. He said he knew it was unfair. He just didn't like how mine looked.

I understand where he was coming from: I am proud of my armpit hair, but I am not the viewer. I can see how he could have agreed that women are held to high standards of hairlessness and yet have been unable to undo a lifetime of visual conditioning. Though it saddened me to do so, I shaved. I wasn't ready to turn my

armpits into a site of conflict in our relationship. When he broke up with me I let the hair grow back. And when, about a month later, my queasiness at the thought of seeing someone besides my ex had subsided somewhat, I went on a few dates. I found myself looking forward to one with a man with long, luscious black hair. I considered shaving before the date to make a safe first impression. Someone I'd just met wasn't worth the effort, I decided, but I wore a shirt with sleeves just in case. We ended up naked in my bed, talking about body hair, of which he had plenty. I told him about how my last romantic partner hadn't liked mine. He kissed my left armpit. "Sorry," he said, "Was that too weird?"

Once, on the way to dinner on an eight-degree winter night, as I walked with my scarf wrapped high to cover my nose and my hood pulled low, a truck drove by. A man inside shouted, "I want to fuck your pussy!" Another time, in a different city, I returned to my car after seeing a friend's show to find a handwritten message on a ripped-out sheet of notepad paper on the windshield: "Hi Sexy you are so hot if you were single. I would to eat your pussy like no1 ever has. And you have nice tits. You drive home safe **BABY**."

Because I, too, check out men on the street and think about what it would be like to *have* them, I'm not sure I occupy the moral high ground. But no matter how overwhelmingly attracted I am to someone, I've never wanted to yell at them about it. In the last couple years, I've been catcalled far less frequently. This decrease might be attributed to the fact that I do not jog through certain neighborhoods anymore. It is perhaps because I no longer walk at night along streets lined with fraternity houses. It could, on an optimistic day, be because people have improved—maybe my anecdotal

experience is indicative of a larger trend, a decline in street harassment. And yet buried deep within my relief about not getting honked at lies a nugget of insecurity that asks whether I have not been catcalled as much because I am not as pretty as I used to be. Such is the insidious nature of misogyny. I feel disappointed at the realization that I've pinned some corner of my self-worth to how often others objectify me.

It wasn't a frequent occurrence, but I liked having sex with the anti-armpit-hair boyfriend when he was tipsy. He would take my clothes off urgently and say my name more and speak with endearing, childlike honesty. "I'm happy because I'm with you," he told me once as we walked in the middle of the road, caressed by the glow of the streetlights and heading to my apartment after a party. Or at least I enjoyed these interactions until he admitted he did not remember all of them. He'd woken up in my bed with only a piecemeal recollection of the night before, and he'd had the experience of discovering he was kissing me without knowing how he'd gotten there. After this revelation, he saw the look on my face and tried to reassure me, saying, "I definitely wanted to be there." But he could not comfort away my horror. I had not intended to coerce a non-consenting partner into my bedroom, but I'd done it anyway.

We do not often acknowledge how easy it is to inflict violence on other bodies without meaning to. Once, on a dusky Sunday evening, I was driving about 35 miles an hour when I saw an animal on the road. There was time to react, to change course, but my body did not respond. Instead I hoped the animal—as I hurtled forward, it became clear it was a small dog—would get out of the way. There was a thump and a squeal. I

pulled over to see if I could locate a limping creature or a carcass. I found no physical evidence of what had occurred. All that remained was my shock at what I'd done.

Some guy told me once that by visible cleavage he could tell which women at a party were looking to hook up with someone. The rape-culture alarm bells sound in my head when I hear people, particularly men, say things like that, but another practical, more subterranean part of me knows that there is some truth tangled up in his words. Before I left to study abroad in Spain during college, something I read, probably a pamphlet, suggested that men are more aggressive in that country. Armed with that information and in search of a going-out dress to take with me, I went to Express and told a salesperson I wanted something “not too slutty.” I am not proud of this word choice (nor the xenophobia that produced it), but it was efficient. She knew exactly what I meant.

I bought a fitted purple dress, sleeveless, with a vertical slit that ran from my collarbone to a chickenpox scar on my chest. A peekaboo cutout, big enough to be suggestive but small enough to remain professional, much like the length and cut of the dress—long enough that I could move but tight enough to accentuate my figure. Over time I've realized that skirts and dresses with hemlines that show the birthmark on my left thigh make me antsy, not because they are unflattering but because I find myself pulling the garment down all the time. Though it seems like a convenient and individual comfort meter, the birthmark indicates how I've internalized what constitutes respectability, what precarious respect a woman can hope to command, and what threshold separates the ladies from the whores.

I like to show off my body, but the origins of that impulse are messy, difficult to unravel. Sometimes I wear a low-cut shirt in part because I know the neckline will make it easier to initiate conversations with heterosexual men; other times I want to feel sexy without aiming that sexiness at anyone in particular. I do not always want to cover this part of my body and wish I had more permission to celebrate my chest without sexualizing it. If I say my breasts are beautiful, I sound like a moon goddess acolyte. If I say my boobs are nice, I sound like an inarticulate teenager.

For one of many spirit days in seventh grade, I chose a mishmash of apparel: a red t-shirt belted over a black one, a ruffled polka-dot mini-skirt, mismatched soccer socks, lipstick and eyeliner (applied with a middle-school hand), and a red pump on one foot and a black ankle-strapped heel on the other. I went downstairs to eat cereal with my father, who back then drove me to school for zero-period jazz band. My dad has long championed my wardrobe choices. He admires my panache. But on that particular morning when I was twelve, he asked if I knew what a prostitute was. Something deep inside me clenched in disbelief. Had he really just said that I looked like a hooker? I do not remember what I adjusted, but I know I changed my clothes to secure his approval before we left. Throughout that day, the morning's discussion kept resurfacing in my mind, each time bringing with it a twist of shock and shame.

When I think about my childhood in its entirety, this experience is not indicative of my father's parenting. It is more a striking blemish on a decent record than a demonstrative moment. And yet it speaks volumes that my father, who loves me dearly and occasionally reminisces about those mornings we used to share and the outfits I used

to wear, felt like he needed to protect me from the sexualizing gaze of the world and, ill-equipped to explain the paradoxes at work, ended up inflicting it himself.

When I go to bars or parties, I find myself both wishing no one will touch or talk to me and craving male attention. I hope someone will flirt with me and I feel like a failure if no one approaches. The conflict between my knowledge—*how men behave in my presence should not matter*—and my gut feeling—*but it sure as hell does*—sometimes fuels my righteous fire, but it mostly leaves me frustrated and sad.

As we sat at a picnic table on a pub patio, a guy who was high on cocaine because his cat had died, or so he told us, announced this to my friend and me: “I’d fuck the fuck out of both of you.” That friend, whose specific beauty is magnetic, did not react. She was used to how she looked, by which I mean that she was accustomed to men speaking baldly to her like it was a favor. Whereas I felt shocked by the violence of what this man had said in casual, albeit coked up, conversation. Like it was a compliment. I know this reaction makes me sound naïve, too young for the realities of leaving the house, but it seems dire, that someone could say something so aggressive and the best way to handle it was to keep a straight face in public and mourn the cracks alone.

“You know what I noticed last Thursday?” a man once asked me at a house party. A sense of foreboding prickled in my stomach. He was buzzed and had already complained about the ice skating lessons in which we were both enrolled and how they required him to prance “like a princess” even though he was training for hockey. “You were wearing eyeliner,” he told me, as though he’d revealed a stunning observation. I might have felt flattered or forgotten about such a comment if I were interested in him,

but as it stood I didn't feel much like flirting. I wanted to say, *you don't know anything substantial about me*. I could tell he thought I was pretty, but there are a lot of people who think so. I am tall but not too tall, white, and slender with conventionally attractive proportions. To think I am pretty is not a special opinion. When it doesn't come with anything else it makes me feel like a shell.

Before leaving, he found me to say goodbye. I was sitting cross-legged on the floor with some other guests. I could tell he wanted something, maybe a hug, but I did not get up. He stood over me and squeezed the exposed skin on the border between my neck and shoulder. A couple hours later, he asked me out over text. I did not respond but slept poorly. I kept waking up to toss and turn and ruminate on my misplaced optimism about this man, whom I'd been proud of inviting because he was not part of our established circle of friends. I was not responsible for his behavior, technically, but still felt like I'd brought it upon myself, like my man-screening mechanism was faulty. In the morning he apologized for the previous text and clarified that he wasn't interested pursuing anything romantic. Relief washed over me. I replied neutrally: "Ah yes thanks for clarifying."

Him, 2:31 PM: Ha! No problem. Also, how nerdy are you, really? What is your favorite SNES game? (Or other nerdy hobbies) See you at ice skating :)

Him, 4:24 PM: Wow, you are a bum when it comes to texting

Me, 5:38 PM: I have not responded because you made me uncomfortable last night.

Him, 5:51 PM: Oh wow, really? Sorry. Was it the hair rub as I left? I am a touchy sort of person. If it was my social interactions with the group or anything else you should tell me, because I am always tryin to self-improve

Him, 5:52 PM: (Furthermore, I hope you continue to go to skating class because it is a good skill to have. I will leave you alone)

Him, 6:02 PM: So, in entire sincerity, sorry that I made you uncomfortable. I kind of just am who I am and I roll with it. You are actually the 1st girl who has ever told me that. I would like to continue to be 'skating buddies,' but if I never see you again, good luck in life :)

It is difficult to pick a single, most unsettling aspect of this interaction. That he could not wait even two hours for me to respond. That he believed I might not be capable of attending lessons anymore in his presence. That he didn't understand the intimacy of shoulder touching or how invasive it was when unwanted. That this man was 35 years old and still referred to women as 'girls.' That if he didn't understand what was inappropriate or threatening about this minor encounter, he probably didn't understand consent at all.

Once I went to see a friend's band play at a bar. I sat at a table for four, alone with a glass of grapefruit juice, until a man asked if he could join. I agreed. He sat down and wanted to know if I had a boyfriend. I said no, which seemed to offend him. "I can't believe that," he said, shaking his head as if to say that the world had really gone to shit if no one was—was what? Claiming, keeping, fucking a woman like me? "I'm too old for you," he said, like he was entitled to me and the problem was his age, not my lack of interest. I changed the subject and told him I knew the guitarist. "Are you sleeping with him?" he asked. I bristled. What a presumptuous, prying, irrelevant, and dehumanizing question. Whether I was sleeping with that friend is unimportant. What matters here is that this man thought he knew why and for whom I was there.

Several hours later I came up with a scathing reply. I know that thinking of *The Best Comeback to Shut Down That Bastard* well after the moment has passed is a common experience, but I cannot help but hate how often it happens to me. And I choose that phrasing—that it happens to me, rather than that I fail to act, because that's how it feels, like a word dam descends and I can no longer speak my mind despite the

confidence I preach and the vocabulary I've developed and the therapy for which I've paid and the ideals I write about and believe in.

I'm looking for the official confirmation. The celestial sign. The divine right to rule my dominion. I want my own manifest destiny, except instead of invading land that was never mine to settle, I am trying to claim what has belonged to me all along. The only frontier I want to conquer is my own. And maybe that colonizing language is part of the problem. Property that comes with a certificate of ownership has historically been the purview of heterosexual, cisgender, and able-bodied rich white men. So where is my earth and how do I find my footing upon it? There is no piece of paper that says *this belongs to you*. And so I stumble across the crevices and textures of this terrain, wondering how to make this body mine.

One Man, Two Cans, No Tea

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

You've never seen an apartment like this. Gobs of wind chimes hang from the ceiling. They jingle periodically, jostled by the artificial breezes of vintage fans atop rotating pedestals.

There are plants in comically grandiose pots. 'Abstract' sculptures. Velvet upholstery everywhere. An abundance of filigree. More tiny tables and footstools than seem possible.

It's full of spectacular crap, but the spectacular crap means so much to AVINASH, forties, bespectacled, whimsical, holding a rotary dial phone receiver to his ear. He's wearing a lavender suit and waltzing through the room, bunching up and releasing sections of the extravagantly long phone cord.

CUSTOMER SERVICE REP (V.O.)

Hi there, how can I help you?

Avinash clears his throat.

AVINASH

Why hello! I am calling to enquire about my package of miniature flowering tea. A jasmine variety, truly marvelous. Do you realize that a tiny, dried bulb unfurls into a beautiful blossom *in the teacup* as it brews?

He mimics the action of a blooming flower with his free hand.

CUSTOMER SERVICE REP (V.O.)

Excuse me.

AVINASH (undeterred)

Mother of pearls and swine, it's a floral fantasy!

CUSTOMER SERVICE REP (V.O.)

Mr. Kapoor.

AVINASH (rapturous)

Nowhere on the Lord's big blue marble have I seen such delight contained in a cup.

Avinash stumbles over the phone cord but does not

fall. He pops up, merrily.

CUSTOMER SERVICE REP (V.O.)
You've called eight times.

AVINASH
Have I? Well. It's been twenty-three days
and seven hours since my interweb order,
that's why I dialed you up.

Avinash picks up a small pair of tongs from a table
and absentmindedly transfers sugar cubes from a kettle
to a potted plant.

CUSTOMER SERVICE REP (V.O.)
It looks like your package is in transit.

AVINASH (exasperated)
But *when* will my minor miracle of a tea
arrive?

CUSTOMER SERVICE REP (V.O.)
Today. Like I told you last time.

AVINASH
I beg your pardon?

CLICK.

Avinash, still holding the tongs, gestures jubilantly.
A sugar cube escapes his grip and hits a wind chime.

He rushes to return the phone to its cradle,
collecting the cord in his arms and tossing the bundle
behind the phone table.

INT. STUDIO APARTMENT - LATER

Avinash is scrubbing an ENORMOUS filigree teapot with
a toothbrush when we hear a KNOCK, KNOCK. He scurries
to the door, brushes some non-existent lint from his
suit, and opens the door to reveal . . .

Two tall young men in full-body plushy RED BULL CAN
SUITS. BROHEMIAN RHAPSODY punches the air while THE
SCARLET FETTER plays air guitar. Avinash stares.

BROHEMIAN RHAPSODY
Duuuuuuuude...

THE SCARLET FETTER
...we are so STOKED!

BOTH (IN UNISON)

For the Ultra Mega Hard-Core Red Bull X-Treme No Sissies Allowed Contest Slash Stupidity Showdown!

BROHEMIAN RHAPSODY (quickly)
Red Bull takes no responsibility for injuries to ego or flesh incurred during competition.

THE SCARLET FETTER
You can call me The Scarlet Fetter--the ballingest shackle you're ever gonna meet.

BROHEMIAN RHAPSODY
And I'm the frickin' manly music to your ears, BROHEMIAN RHAPSODYYYYYYYY. What's your *hecka-bomb* competition name, bruh?

Avinash looks back and forth between them, appalled.

AVINASH
Christ on a cupcake.

BROHEMIAN RHAPSODY & THE SCARLET FETTER (IN UNISON)
CHRIST ON A CUPCAKE!

THE SCARLET FETTER
Shit, that is lit.

Brohemian Rhapsody and The Scarlet Fetter try to barge into the apartment. Their RED BULL CAN SUITS bump into the frame. Avinash attempts to slam the door. The top of one can gets stuck.

AVINASH
Good golly, mister Molly! Gentlemen, I bid you adieu, farewell, and ciao-bow-bam!

The RED BULL CAN SUIT squeezes out of the door, which Avinash shuts. The sounds of struggle cease. Relieved, Avinash leans against the door. He catches his breath. Until...

...THUD. The door springs open, knocks Avinash over. He leaps to his feet and shoves himself into Brohemian Rhapsody and The Scarlet Fetter, to no avail. They squoosh Avinash in a can sandwich until all three men fall into the room.

Avinash stands up, straightens his tie, closes the door. Brohemian Rhapsody and The Scarlet Fetter struggle, like overturned beetles, to right themselves.

AVINASH

All right, okay, certainly sure thing, fine fellows. You may enter my abode.

Avinash nods to himself. The Scarlet Fetter finally stands. The top of his RED BULL CAN SUIT squishes through a wind chime. He catches Brohemian Rhapsody's eye.

The Scarlet Fetter and Brohemian Rhapsody hurtle around the sitting room, arms wide, making airplane NEEEEERRRROOOO noises. Wind chimes clatter and jangle wildly.

Avinash looks terrified. He doesn't move.

A can costume knocks the needle onto a record player. A frenetic polka starts playing. Chaos ensues.

Avinash speed-walk-chases The Scarlet Fetter.

AVINASH

I insist you desist, Mr. Hawthorne!

Ignored, Avinash pivots abruptly to follow Brohemian Rhapsody instead.

AVINASH

Mr. Mercury, this tintinnabulation must stop!

The Scarlet Fetter and Brohemian Rhapsody jump between two couches, whooping and high-fiving mid-air. Avinash, horrified, darts in and out to save various baubles from the coffee table between the leaping lads.

AVINASH (anguished)

Land-lord almighty, why?

The RED BULL CAN SUITS collide with more wind chimes and graze a chandelier, which sways ominously. Avinash stops ferrying his possessions to survey the room. Its exquisite eccentricity has fallen into disarray.

He lets a filigree candlestick fall from his hand.

AVINASH

TO HELL WITH A HANDMAIDEN WE GO.

Avinash grabs the ENORMOUS teapot and bashes The Scarlet Fetter somewhere in the can's nether regions with it. The Scarlet Fetter falls, moaning.

BROHEMIAN RHAPSODY

So not groovy, Christ on a Cupcake!

Avinash ROARS. He rushes Brohemian Rhapsody, swings the teapot at his head, and then throws it at the record player, which cracks. The polka stops. Brohemian Rhapsody faints on a settee. One of Avinash's shirt buttons is missing.

Avinash picks up one man and then the other, a can under each arm. He is dragging them toward the door when it bursts open. An elated woman shoves a microphone in Avinash's face.

REALITY TV SHOW HOST

How does it feel to be the newest champion of the Ultra Mega Hard-Core Red Bull X-Treme No Sissies Allowed Contest Slash Stupidity Showdown?

AVINASH

Buckets and bastard bollocks! I suppose you're not here to deliver my tea either.

TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES ARE TECHNICALLY DISPLACEMENT

On jetlag upon returning from Taiwan

Sleep and I—or rather, the Pacific Standard Time Zone and I—were not getting along. I went to bed at eleven-something-p.m. and woke up at one-something-a.m., at which time commenced many hours of everything but sleep. I rolled over. I crossed and uncrossed my legs. I texted Eric, my summer flame. I went downstairs to pee and get headphones so as to avoid disturbing my cousin in the bunk above me while I watched a choreography video for the Pussycat Dolls song “Buttons.” Yes, I was twenty-four when I did this; no, that song was not current. I texted Eric some more. I found a sleep meditation recording and engaged in what might be called constructive rest, but it was not sleep. I thought a lot—too much—about Eric, and also about Justin, the person I’d dated prior to Eric, and they mixed together in uncomfortable ways.

Amidst this romantic morass, I remembered a joke I’d made to a friend in the brief window between Justin and Eric: perhaps I could finally date my fifth-grade love, Aditya. Smartphone in hand and sleep neither present nor looming, I figured I might as well ask the internet—what was Aditya up to nowadays? According to his website, he was a journalist in Washington D.C. There was a contact form. *What the hell*, I thought, and wrote him a late-night but very lucid email.

Regarding industrial vacuums at the carwash

Contain the miscellany flung across the seats and mats in your vehicle before you unsheathe one of these indiscriminate suckers. To this process I’ve lost an entire pencil and literal money (a quarter, but still). The last time I vacuumed out my car, a dangle-bead slipped off my bracelet and into the void. Then, while turning away from the

vacuum holster, I clocked my head on the driver door frame. As skull-to-metal contact goes, this was a minor encounter. Though when I went home and explained the bruise on my right temple to my roommate, she observed that this typically safe modern convenience might not be so safe for me.

On erratic correspondence

Three weeks passed—just long enough to have carted across three states my inherited typewriter that only works with Caps Lock on and to have forgotten about the email—before Aditya responded. “I believe you are the first person to ever attempt to contact me through my website,” he wrote. In the way that envy begets petty competition, I found this information comforting. My own website had such poor search engine optimization (search engine defiance, perhaps) that people only found it if I gave them the link. I’d asked Aditya about his recent social media cleanse. He’d cut back on Facebook since his hiatus, but that change hadn’t decreased his overall usage. “My job requires me to spend inordinate amounts of time on Twitter these days,” he wrote, “so I’ve merely traded one poison for another.”

God: you keep intruding

I feel overwhelmed by my potential. Staggered, really. Of all the things to be worried about, this might be the silliest, but it’s true—I feel worried that I’ll lose this potential in the deadening frenzy of the internet, in anxiety-induced naps, in my desire to be loved and cared for and revered by a man. There are so many distractions, so many ways to get lost on the way to greatness. And the truth is that I don’t want to be pretty good, I want to be a big fucking deal. Even though being famous sounds like a pain, I

think I want to be famous anyway. I'm convinced that *I have something to say*, and it scares me to imagine reaching the end of my life without having said it.

I worry about how difficult it can be to write if I don't have the fear of God in me. God might be nothing more than Deadlines, Incarnate. It seems unrealistic to expect that one day I will suddenly, magically, biblically, baptismally, be freed of my fundamental nature, able to transcend that which seems essential to my being. I was not raised in the Church, or any church really, so I'm not sure why Christianity creeps into my language so easily. Why can't I yearn for a faith rooted in something less punitive, in a tradition whose dogma isn't so repugnant to me? And why do I feel so weird about dildoes? (Shut your mouth, Freud.) Maybe you cannot feel positively about dildoes without working hard to counteract their stigma. Maybe it's normal to feel weird about them. An obsession with virginity is still an obsession with sex.

Life without an Android or iPhone, part I

My row-mate on the plane crossed herself when we landed at Ronald Reagan airport. If I were Catholic maybe I'd have done the same, not to express gratitude for arrival but to steel myself for the technological task ahead. Once we'd disembarked, I rolled my suitcase outside, parked on a bench, and extricated my gigantic laptop—so large the case had been custom-ordered—to summon a Lyft via computer. The Lyft smartphone app requires Windows 10 or higher, and my phone still ran on Windows 8. I'd been worrying about this moment—yes, about securing a Lyft—for most of the day, because, other than prying open an overfull Macdonald's fudge sundae back in the O'Hare airport, this was the most logistically challenging part of the trip.

Within twenty minutes a car pulled up, the airport internet and my almost-five-year-old computer having rallied to the cause. Into the trunk went my suitcase and backpack. The laptop, however, I zipped back into its enormous case and kept with me as we headed to my friend Jodi's apartment building. I'd hoped to also see Aditya on this trip, but to no avail—he was in India. Jodi took me out one night with her law school friends, first to a pricey, sleek-but-not-really bar. It was packed with people who wanted to stand in clumps and shout at one another, even on the dancefloor. I felt profoundly anonymous.

Finally we elbowed our way out and left for a place with a tin-tile ceiling and a far more breathable density of people. It was called Shenanigans. I felt better as soon as we walked in. We danced big, loose, and silly. We bellowed the lyrics to alt pop and rock. Jodi and I bewildered her friends by jumping vigorously to a song that the rest of them had never heard. It was from a burned mix CD, compiled by one of my ex-boyfriends, that I used to play for her back when we roomed together in college, back when the alarm clock/radio/CD player I'd had since fourth grade still worked.

After my weekend in D.C. I would take the train to New York. To hail a Lyft to get to the station (Jodi did not have a car, did have an iPhone), I unzipped my computer. “What are you doing?” she asked. No rideshare app worked on my cellular device, I told her, though it was technically a smart phone. She seemed to restrain herself from saying something, her expression settling somewhere between amusement and concern. I could tell she was chalking this one up as yet another one of my quirks. I didn't know how to explain that I didn't tolerate these inconveniences out of sheer stubbornness or a desire to be deliberately off-trend (though I'd be lying if I said that wasn't also appealing). I was

stubborn because I cared about these objects, even if—or maybe because—they were cumbersome. Underneath frustration lay affection.

On naming schemes

Stop saving files as “draftydraft.” This phrase becomes meaningless, quickly.

The Abrahamic salad yields no answers, remains crunchy

I meandered through the plaza, pausing to browse a tchotchke stand. Slipped in front of a stack of generic Granada postcards was a piece of white cardstock with only the mirrored word “PERCEPTION” handwritten in the center. I picked up the card, which was cut to size to fit in the rack, and turned it over. The other side, also handwritten, read, “If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.” An email address hovered along the bottom edge.

Once I’d returned to my homestay, I sent an email to the address, wondering who, if anyone, would respond. On one hand, I was on a roll, correspondence-wise, having written more than 200 letters the year prior, some to people I knew well and some to near-strangers, often with delightful results. On the other hand, I was studying abroad, and being in another country, even one as supposedly comfortable as Spain, intensified daily life in ways I couldn’t predict. Excitement burned hotter; disappointment sank me lower. Eventually—thrillingly—a reply came from a Belgian architecture student. Dismayed by the culture of loud, unobservant selfie-taking at the Mezquita and the Alhambra, she’d wanted to find a small way to make people more attentive. “I imagine that the people who don’t even really look at the Mezquita are certainly not going to mention my postcard,” she wrote. “But I am so glad that there are people like you who still have an eye for the details, who also notice ‘otherness,’ who are curious....”

Back then I loved how the card had initiated me into some secret society of the curious, but now I see how that designation can be condescending, particularly with regard to how people behave when they travel. I was disdainful toward the students in my program who seemed determined to speak as much English as possible, and those who used Granada as their launch pads for a semester of European jet-setting. But who's to say I'm better than most any other tourist? And who's to say that you can't be curious and take selfies, too? Before I got to Spain I thought that Granada was a pueblo (it is a city) and that the Alhambra was a domed structure (it is not). My homestay roommate laughed pretty hard about that one.

On a field trip to Córdoba we'd visited the Mezquita. The word "mezquita" means "mosque," but my ticket for entry read "Catedral de Córdoba." That both of these names apply to the same building documents the religious history of Spain. Christian conquerors retrofitted minarets with church bells and added Catholic iconography to mosques while destroying almost all of the synagogues. But neither "mezquita" nor "catedral" captures the experience of being in one of these spaces. In Islam, God's location is indeterminate. Perhaps for this reason Islamic architecture favors maze-like, horizontal spaces, such as the Alhambra, in which to lose yourself and find God from within. But in Christianity God's position is clear—above—and towering cathedrals like the one in Sevilla embody that hierarchy. The Mezquita exists somewhere in-between, as a house of worship where a crucified Jesus hangs below Islamic arches. In battle and in colonial firepower, Christianity may have triumphed, but of those who enter it, the Mezquita asks where, exactly, God sits.

Prepare to abandon false idols

In the year before I went to Spain I'd been attempting to disentangle myself from Facebook, deactivating my account for months at a time. The site was designed to be distracting, and I began to realize, with some reluctance and some relief, that my willpower was no match for this engineering. If I wanted to stop clicking through photos for hours, and if I wanted friendships less mediated by screens, it would be easier to remove myself. You can resist the devil, or you can flee his domain. Right before I left the country, I permanently deleted my account. When you initiate the deletion process, Facebook pulls up photos of multiple algorithmically selected friends with captions: "Amanda will miss you," or, "Katie will miss you." This is a last-ditch attempt to manipulate your fear of loneliness, but Satan will deceive you no longer. As the Bible verse goes, "we are not unaware of his schemes."¹

When 'I'm not from here' is stating the obvious

The customs agent seemed annoyed. It had been a long journey to Taiwan—from Walla Walla to Seattle to Fresno to Yosemite to San Francisco to Shanghai to Taipei—and I'd forgotten to ask the friend I was visiting for her address in Hsinchu, where she was teaching English. This was a potentially serious error. Said friend was coming to get me, but I had no idea where I was going once I left the airport. The customs agent could have asked many questions I would not have been able to answer. With an eyebrow raise, however, she stamped my passport and let me go.

Guidance from neither my friend (who'd been in Taiwan for several months) nor from her brother (who'd been living there for six years) could shield me from making mistakes over the course of my two-week stay. A daytrip to the ceramics district in

¹ 2 Corinthians 2:11

Yingge was no exception. The 7/11 where I stopped for food was full of children on a field trip eating lunch in the seating area, so I decided to eat my kimchi spicy noodles and bottled green milk tea outside, on a bus stop bench. People stared as they walked and drove by. It was unclear what constituted the spectacle—me as a white person in tourist garb, me as a relatively tall woman, the act of dining at a bus stop, or the synergy of it all.

In the park behind the ceramics museum, I read an English translation of the rules for wading in the decorative pool several times—only open from June to September, wash your feet first, “suggested to warm-up your body before entering” (a phrase amusing in both its syntax and its concern, because nowhere was the water more than a foot deep), listen to the life guard, do not hurt other people, do not climb on the ceramic globes scattered throughout the pool, etc. I rinsed my feet and stepped in. Within minutes a guard appeared to whistle me out of the pool. He gave what must have been an in-depth explanation of why I should not have been in the water. I asked if he spoke English. This question prompted a further cascade of information, in Mandarin, until a stranger intervened to confirm, in English, that the pool was closed. I asked if it was for cleaning. “Maybe,” he said.

On the train back to Hsinchu, I moved from one side of the car to the other, and either a woman bumped into my elbow or I elbowed a woman in the head. She gave me a withering, universally understood look—that particular glare knows no borders.

On old-fashioned inconvenience

At this point my phone is wearing out. It struggles to connect to service, even when I’m some place where coverage is good. Many websites render poorly in the browser or just plain crash it. The search function in the Spotify app hasn’t worked for

more than a year. In a depressing missive that included the phrase “as a culmination of the end of the support process,” Microsoft announced that it was closing the store, so the apps I downloaded before December 16, 2019, are the ones I’ve got. ‘Til death do us part. My computer is even older—I’ve had it for almost six years. It is so large (and heavy) because I insisted on a number keypad and a disc drive when I got it. Seven of the nine screws that secure the bottom panel are missing.

People from many parts of my life have suggested I get new devices. I don’t quite know how to explain in passing conversation that the most environmentally friendly phone, other than no phone at all, is the one you already have. That the specter of rare earth metal mining, of its radioactive slurry tailings, hovers in my mind when I contemplate going to the Verizon store. That when I learned about the right-to-repair movement, I called my boyfriend to tell him I’d found my people. That I know I’ll never atone for my air travel, but part of me is desperate to try anyway, to coax a longer life from these falling-apart objects. That I seem irrational by some measures but am acting on deeply held conviction by others. That it might be religious, this way that my tenacity increases as obsolescence looms.

And God texted me back

Whether we’re trying to reach the divine or reach one another, we’re looking for evidence that we’re not just spewing words into the void. A church sign in my hometown says, “God is still speaking.” I find this sentiment both reassuring and haunting. Reassuring because it’s not too late to tune in; haunting because it conjures an image of God alone at a podium, addressing an empty auditorium. Whatever God has to say only matters if someone can hear it. Most rituals of prayer are intended to attract

both the attention and response of a deity; most emails and letters are sent with the hope that someone will read and reply. When I tapped out that jetlag-fueled message to Aditya, I had no idea if he would write back—what we broadcast is out of our hands, literally, digitally, or metaphysically. Does God hear more if I kneel? Who reads what I post on LinkedIn? Will the Almighty pick up if I call out of the blue?

Throughout that semester in Spain, I often wrote to a man named Jordan, whom I hoped to convince to stay in love with me even though we'd technically broken up. He was studying abroad in France, so for some of our emails I wrote in Spanish and he wrote in French. I took to signing off with “un abrazo fuerte,” by which I meant “a firm hug.” Amused, he wrote back that the software had translated it to “a strong cuddle.” So many of the emails I sent to Jordan now read to me as variations on the same question—*did you get my message*. After a long bike trip, he emailed me to say, “I just got back to Nantes where I found your letter (yay) which was missing its contents with an apology note from the mail service (dismay).”

In its highest form a correspondence contains both a wish and its granting, the grantor and the grantee switching roles often and seamlessly: a reciprocal magic. Whether we transmit data or invoke God or mail envelopes, we yearn not only for receipt but for understanding. Correspondence occurs when people decide they're willing to have something in common. To find communion through an unexpected equivalence. A believable connection. A coherence.

Life without an Android or iPhone, part II

“Hemos cambiado,” the message reads. *We've changed*. The implication here being, *and you have not*. It's 2020. The Microsoft weather app has ceased to function on

my phone, which I've owned since May of 2016. The app screen continues, "Aunque ya no está disponible, esperamos que haya disfrutado el tiempo que pasó con nosotros." I think about the cleverness of this phrasing, how the word "tiempo" can mean *weather* or *time*, how even in the process of shooing me out the door they've managed to make a pun: *although the app is no longer available, we hope you've enjoyed the time/weather that you spent with us*. My weather app access ends around the same time that WhatsApp stops working. "TELÉFONO NO COMPATIBLE," the message blares. "Ya no puedes usar WhatsApp en este teléfono porque dejó de ser compatible con esta aplicación." *You cannot use WhatsApp on this phone because it has stopped being compatible with this application*. Which is code for *you cannot use this app anymore because we've decided to stop making it available for your device*. Which is code for *we've decided people like you are too infinitesimal a percentage of our clientele to continue serving*. Which is code for *we've left you behind*.

I like how you feel you like how I look

some days she wishes to shave layers from her belly curling off like slices of parmesan & she has to breathe deep to tolerate being touched under her chin & he caresses her tummy with a tenderness so far-fetched she could cry

she sees herself as arrayed because she must appear if she is to be & she is not frigid but his searchlights dazzle & her surveillance smothers & her disdain for her pimpled temple manhandles her desire

can we turn the lights on I want to see you he says *can we keep them off I don't want to be looked at* she thinks his hands perceive more truth than his eyes & if she beholds herself if she spectates then she cannot escape the viewfinder

All That Glitters Is Not Gold (and Probably Sheds Microplastics)

The orange awning and silver letters beckon as I cross the strip mall parking lot. I almost never wear face makeup and feel self-conscious as the automatic doors to Ulta Beauty swoosh open and unleash the blazing fluorescence within. The store's bright lights and shiny floors illuminate the ragged edges of my unpainted fingernails and accentuate the peeling skin on my lips. Standing before the legion of backlit displays, the in-store salon at their helm, I feel crusty. This is not a makeup counter or a pop-up boutique. This space is at least four times the size of a drug store cosmetics section. I feel out of place, much as I do when I enter a church: the pious will detect my blasphemy. Someone will know that I don't moisturize regularly. No one here would say it in such biblical terms, but a question I found in a vintage beauty compendium called *The Westmore Beauty Book* seems to be floating in the air:

49. Do you accept the fact that homeliness is virtually nothing more than a bad habit?

However I have a \$50 Ulta gift card from my mother, a well-intentioned reaction to the time she and I went to Ulta together and I didn't buy anything. It's much easier to power through uneasiness when you're spending someone else's money. So even though Ulta is a store that makes me feel like I shouldn't wear a bulky coat—Montana winter be damned—and should wear concealer, I've mustered the will to go a few times, dark circles brazenly uncovered, armed with my gift card, in search of products that “meet my needs.”

Don't get me wrong. I like makeup. Particularly glitter. But also metallic eyeliner, rhinestone body stickers, and palettes of eyeshadow with bubbles of pigment frothing across their plastic cases. I once nearly bought a light purple lipstick because the

color was named “Philosopher.” I liked the idea of the very body parts through which my philosophizing would pass being marked as scholarly by a lavender hue. But I already had a similar shade called “Lilac Mist,” so I refrained. Sometimes I cantilever my feet into heels so tall I can hardly walk in to give presentations. All of which is to say that I like some superficial shit.

So I understand that going to Ulta can be fun. In fact it’s supposed to be fun of the never-ending sort for the customer, a fun that the Ulta website sanctifies as the search for “unrivaled ways to be beautiful.” Ulta also celebrates its environment as conducive to “the thrill of exploration” and “the delight of discovery.” This is a sparkling way of saying that the store is gigantic, difficult to navigate, and filled with products you didn’t know existed for problems you didn’t know needed solving. Hundreds of hairbrushes, hung and shelved en masse above labels with redundant phrases such as “professional deluxe shine,” remind me of my own comb, a blue plastic relic that is probably meant for children. I unearthed it in my parents’ guest bathroom. The tremendous selection at Ulta includes brushes for dry hair and wet hair and hair in any state of dampness in between. There are brushes for cleaning your brushes. There is “The Twirler,” a pink-handled thermal brush with a poky ball of bristles that looks like a soft-core BDSM implement.

Unlike Sephora, a competing makeup powerhouse whose more limited brand selection, smaller stores, and crisp, black-and-white-striped aesthetic project an accessible elitism, Ulta is for all of us. Luxury and drugstore cosmetics coexist under one roof, sharing the same confusing floor plan. Dior mascara (\$29.50 a tube) and My Burberry Blush Eau de Parfum (\$60 an ounce) luxuriate only aisles away from Maybelline blush (\$5.99) and Revlon nail clippers (\$2.99). The displays categorize some

products by type and others by brand. The “Naturals” sign in the hair care section means “products for curly, thick, unrelaxed, anything-but-straight hair.” The “Naturals” sign in the skin care section means “probably contains some herbs.”

Question 74. Is your personal daintiness score beyond reproach?

Neither this more egalitarian approach nor the cheery salespeople, however, can shake my notion that Ulta demands a sleekness that I lack. My unwashed hair glistens like some greasy beacon of my negligence. All the eyeliner I’ve applied without primer and all my years of sleeping with makeup on feel like secrets I must keep from the salespeople, whose “Can I help you find something?” chirps I rebuff. I have not reconciled my obsession with my appearance with my hunch that such vanity disenfranchises me. In Ulta the dissonance runs high: the specific joy of being surrounded by so much shimmer, gloss, and color to smear on my body contends with my revulsion at the rhetoric encasing the cosmetics. I sense that I’m in the presence of something unattainable.

Question 26. Do you know exactly what make-up can and cannot do for you?

Ulta’s mission statement proclaims, “Every day we use the power of beauty to bring to life the possibilities that lie within each of us.” This pleasant, diluted language lands in a strategic sweet spot: the sentiment feels good to read, but its vagueness disburdens Ulta from accomplishing anything beyond peddling prettiness. Ulta’s aspiration to cultivate the potential of its customers, the majority of whom are women, is optimistic. What concerns me is how Ulta and the marketing of the products it sells ascribe authority to beauty. It’s validating when a stranger compliments my star-studded leather boots or my Maybelline “Berry Frost” lipstick. Compliments are a form of social

currency that, especially when combined with the benefits of my white, thin, body, can translate to literal currency over time. Beauty, particularly straight-haired, light-skinned, small-nosed beauty, has real economic value. It can be manipulated for monetary gain. And yet an individual who manages her appearance immaculately, from the dyed roots or tightly wound curls at the crown of her head to the tailored cuffs of her pants, still cannot control how other people perceive that appearance and make judgements upon it, racist, misogynist, or otherwise. The power of pretty is only ever partial.

Question 19. Do you keep abreast of the developments in the world of beauty—as well as the world in which you live?

It is not new, the yoking of a woman's worth to her attractiveness. In 1956 my mother was born and the 252-page, male-authored *Westmore Beauty Book* was published with gems of advice such as “there is almost no limit to what your face can do for you—or what you can do for your face.” Cosmetic companies still strive to increase your “face value,” except nowadays they co-opt social justice themes in the process. Previously at Ulta, a display encouraged me to “JOIN THE REVOLUTION.” *Which one?* I wondered. On one hand we have what's now called “the Fenty effect” of pop star Rihanna's wildly popular makeup line, released in 2017, with more than forty shades of foundation formulated to actually work for women of color. After Fenty Beauty blew up, cosmetic companies that had never served darker skin tones suddenly expanded their offerings and diversified the models in their ads and packaging, too. On the other hand, many of these brands pivoted because they didn't want to seem regressive and because so-called empowerment is trendy. This profitability explains the origins of the \$30 Tarte “Dream Big” eyeshadow palette with colors like a pale pink called “Risk Taker,” a black called “Hustle,” a gold called “You Can,” and a beige called “Ambitious.”

Marketplace feminism is “more of a brand than an ethic,” as Andi Zeisler puts it. In an Ulta store, a woman has the right to choose. Among facial cleansers, that is. The IT Cosmetics display in Ulta is all about the individual who can join the movement with “game-changing” products that, “in the hands of real women everywhere, become life-changing. We believe you’re an IT Girl the moment you try IT.” The game being changed might only be that of wrinkles, but because a “real” woman’s beauty determines her value and that beauty depends on the appearance of youth, the wrinkle game does, in fact, have life-altering consequences. “That old women are repulsive,” Susan Sontag wrote more than forty years ago, “is one of the most profound esthetic and erotic feelings in our culture.” To delay this undesirable but inevitable outcome, an independent woman (who, according to IT, is simultaneously a girl), can at last assert her worth and defend herself against the ravages of time by applying “anti-aging armour” such as “Confidence in a Cream.” Such a shield preserves that independent (read: affluent) woman by infantilizing her.

Question 9. When and if your beauty regime fails to produce the desired results, can you truthfully say it is because of your need for more beauty know-how and not because of a lack of persistence or willpower?

As teenagers sitting in my childhood bedroom, my best friend Johanna and I vowed that we were going to look like the pop singer Fergie in our thirties and Mrs. Lee, the mother of my first love, in our forties. We did not talk about how Fergie’s livelihood depends on how she looks, how a team of people spend their work week creating and maintaining her image, nor how she exercises like an elite athlete. Nor did we wonder how Mrs. Lee, who offered a realistic antidote to the fantasy of Fergie—or at least an example of the effects of decent genes and a fairly comfortable lifestyle—had ended up

so elegant (code for “*still* beautiful.”) We were thirteen, for Christ’s sake. We’d fallen for what Sontag calls the “quixotic enterprise:” trying to maintain a girlish appearance even as the decades spin on. After all, an “IT Girl” strives to never lose her pedophilic appeal.

I started using eye cream in high school on the advice of my gorgeous thirty-something flute teacher. It felt like I was winning. I thought I’d figured out how to cheat the system, when all I’d done was succumb to it. With jars of “Advanced Night Repair Eye Synchronized Complex II” provided by my mother, I bowed early to the fear of aging. Nowadays I cheat time self-righteously with organic rosehip oil and shea butter eye cream made in a small mountain town in northeastern Oregon. At least this cream has ingredients I can pronounce and comes in a glass jar, instead of a very-difficult-to-recycle plastic vessel. I feel as if I’m taking care of myself when I remember to apply the under-eye serum, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to be pretty when I’m old. Knowing that this desire has been constructed within me does not make it go away.

Question 34. Do you budget for beauty? Will you give up some luxuries, if necessary, to make a proper beauty budget possible?

Ann J. Cahill and Sandra Lee Bartky argue that “the time involved in recreating the ideal feminine image adds an implicit classism to that ideal.” It seems fitting that one of the women most visibly successful at maintaining her youth in the public eye—Madonna—is also the wealthiest woman in the music industry. A Brooklyn-based boutique called Package Free sells two-inch vials of biodegradable glitter for \$12.50 a pop, and yet: Rite-Aid glitter provides a kind of solace. One of my friends likes to joke about the pleasure of “spackling that shit on.” No matter if you shop at the drug store or the department store—getting ready can feel good to anybody with any amount of

money, and it's especially enjoyable with company. I'm extroverted enough to like parties in their own right, but I like preparing to attend one almost as much, and sometimes more, than the actual event. When I'm at home deciding which fake nose ring to wear or contouring my face to look more catlike for a leopard costume, I'm most interested in pleasing myself and snagging a compliment from my roommate. Leaving the house dislocates this approval: no matter how skillfully applied my makeup or expensive my clothes, I still submit my image to someone else's gaze.

Question 14. Do you realize that beauty today is more often a question of know-how than money?

“Nothing so clearly indicates the fictional nature of this crisis,” writes Sontag, “than the fact that women who keep their youthful appearance the longest—women who lead unstrenuous, physically sheltered lives, who eat balanced meals, who can afford good medical care, who have few or no children—are those who feel the defeat of age most keenly.” Thus the women with the most access to anti-aging serums are also subject to additional pressure to preserve themselves and all the more disappointed and ashamed when their bodies, like those of every human, show outward signs of decay. Karma adherents, vision board enthusiasts, and cognitive behavior therapy advocates might posit that when Johanna and I made the Fergie pact, this intention was enough to nudge the universe toward its manifestation. Cosmetic rhetoric would have us believe that she and I are responsible for how we look as we age, as though character determines appearance and the money we spend, the genes we inherit, the trauma we accumulate, the pollution we endure, and the marginalization we survive all have no bearing on whether we arrive at old age haggard or glowing.

Question 11. Do you accept the need to look, think, act and feel like a

beauty if you wish to be accepted as a true beauty?

“Let me know if you have any questions!” at least one salesperson trills when I wander through an Ulta. *I have so many*, I think. What distinguishes “Girl Boss” and “Center of Attention” fake eyelashes from one another? When will PÜR The Complexion Authority, which claims to “celebrate women of all ages and all skin tones,” choose a model who isn’t young, slender, white, and blonde to star in their most prominent video? When will they stop selling products with *waltheria indica* extract, part of a patented mixture for “chemically bleaching or whitening the skin”? How did the “Take me back to Brazil Rio Edition” eyeshadow palette, with a warning that reads “PRESSED PIGMENT SHADOWS ARE NOT INTENDED FOR USE AROUND IMMEDIATE EYE AREA,” make it to market? Who thought it was edgy and appealing to name a brown eyeshadow “Cat Call” or include in the Urban Decay “Vice” line of lipsticks a shade of pink called “Violate”?

People who work in makeup stores tend to be friendly and wont to giving compliments. They have to be this way, so that customers feel comfortable sharing their insecurities aloud. But the conversation I imagine we would have exhausts me. If I were to engage with one of the employees, we’d have to talk about endocrine disruptors and how I’m trying, with limited success, not to put them on my body. Ingredient scrutiny has become trendy, so more cosmetic packaging than ever highlights what’s not included, much like food labels. But there are still so many legal and prevalent hormone-interfering, environmentally damaging additives: BHA and BHT; triclosan; polyethylene glycol; siloxanes; parfum or “fragrance”; petrolatum/mineral oil; sodium lauryl sulfate; methyl, propyl, ethyl, or butyl parabens; the anolamine family (DEA, TEA, and MEA);

phthalates... and so on. The list is too long. It's difficult to remember. And while these ingredients do little immediate damage, they can accumulate and wreak havoc later on, in the form of cancer or infertility. Significant scientific and intellectual burden falls on the consumer who doesn't want to slowly poison herself.

Question 21. Do you know your own face-type—in terms of beauty?

After the litany of ingredients to avoid, I'd explain that I'm prone to rashes. Or perhaps I'd be more euphemistic: my skin is easily irritated. During a Sephora makeover in college, the stylist rubbed a moisturizer 'for sensitive skin' on my face. It stung like hell. Once at a Macy's brow bar as a tween (for an appointment my mother had sprung on me), the esthetician, after ripping out a flock of hairs, put a serum on my forehead to alleviate incipient redness. I wore a swath of supernovae acne for a week.

Then—back at Ulta—I'd have to say that I do not want cleanser, foundation, face powder, toner, astringents, blush, bronzer, primer, acne treatment, concealer, or setting spray. I have what the brand Philosophy calls "makeup-optional skin," which their "Purity Made Simple Moisturizer" promises to produce in just three days, as if all skin were not intrinsically makeup-optional. Feminine beauty, writes Cahill, "far from being something natural or innate, is a state to be striven for, a state that takes planning, careful work, and a significant investment of time." Granted my unblemished, light, and relatively young skin still adheres to conventional beauty standards. But the dominant face makeup narrative insists that all faces, including mine, need fixing: color-correction, shine elimination, pore reduction, fine-line smoothing, and perhaps a Tarte primer called "BLUR." No matter that the second ingredient after water in the "Purity Made Simple Moisturizer" is cyclopentasiloxane. The Environment Canada Domestic Substance List

classifies cyclopentasiloxane as “expected to be toxic or harmful” and “suspected to be an environmental toxin and bio-accumulative.” Purity, after all, is in the eye of the beholder. Though Purity Made Simple Moisturizer, were it in your eye, would probably cause a burning sensation.

Question 1. Are you more attractive and more beautifully groomed today than you were five years ago?

I’ve been to Ulta six times so far. Three of those times I’ve left empty-handed, too overwhelmed to buy anything. Once I bought a “third-eye” face mask to mail to my hippie cousin and coconut milk face wash for myself that made my cheeks extra soft for a few lovely days before it started causing dry patches. Both products were made by Pacifica, a vegan, cruelty-free brand with its own recycling program. Each label reads, “Formulated without petroleum, parabens, sulfates or phthalates.” This declaration appears alongside the befuddling claim that “every true beauty knows it’s what’s on the inside that matters.”

My most recent Ulta purchase, enabled by the sparkly pink gift card, included a hemp bath bomb for a friend, some NYX “Hella Fine” black liquid eyeliner, a collagen-infused marine sponge, and a jade face roller—because when healthcare isn’t universal, self-care can pretend to be. One of the benefits of what the industry calls a “skin care routine,” whether it’s rubbing your cheeks with a green stone or smoothing overpriced lotion on your forehead, is that these actions help people to stay familiar with themselves, to feel the reality of their physical bodies. Maybe access to this kind of self-knowledge is the “power of beauty” that Ulta seeks to harness. Or not.

The idea that looking good feels good and feeling good looks good is fraught. Cahill writes that the pleasure of feminine beautification must, “in order to have positive

meanings for feminist intersubjectivity, be distinguishable from the demands that patriarchal society places on female bodies.” Once, when I was 23, in a dressing room in an athleticwear store aimed at women, I tried on a teal swimsuit top.

“It fits you great, honey,” my mom said when I showed her.

“Yeah?” I smiled.

I closed the door and looked in the mirror again. The band compressed my ribcage. The straps dug into my shoulders. I felt squeezed. But it looked good. The incongruity between my appearance—*hot*—and my sensations—*too tight*—was overwhelming. I started crying, quietly.

Question 98. Do you know the beauty value of a smile and a pleasant disposition?

I know that *palatable* can be safer. *Prettiness* is a social lubricant, a waived speeding ticket, a salary bonus. What Baudelaire wrote more than a century ago about a woman’s duties—“she is obliged to adorn herself in order to be adored”—remains true. Ulta makes me uncomfortable because beauty is both a site of resistance and a site of repression, where the tools of drag performance and body affirmation in other hands can be magnifiers of self-hatred and pressure to conform. And Ulta doesn’t seem very interested in acknowledging that challenge. Instead Ulta’s feminism is comfortable, safe, and fun. It’s apolitical and neo-liberal. In this context, women liberate themselves by their individual choices and through full participation in free market capitalism. And feminism based on consumer purchases is wildly successful, to the tune of 5.885 billion dollars in sales for Ulta in 2018 and 6.71 billion dollars 2019. This corporate income is what Naomi Wolf calls “capital made out of unconscious anxieties.”

It is tempting to curse fashion and beauty as frivolous pursuits that, as Jacki Willson explains, trap women in their images and exclude them from politics. But the problem does not lie in the desire to find the best highlighter for your complexion or the pleasure of mascara that doesn't clump. The problem is that "the mask *is* the woman." No wonder, then, that going to Ulta is unsettling: the entire enterprise is dedicated to fact that my appearance is inextricable from my value as a person. In this context neither wearing makeup nor abstaining from it are without repercussions. The age-old damned if you do, damned if you don't paradox. As long as it remains lucrative to foster insecurity, I will feel surveilled under the bright lights of Ulta. I will still sense, in that store, that I am in the presence of something unattainable. My fully realized, beautiful (and therefore wealthy) self can never come into being. She will never be satisfied. And Ulta will be there to assuage and perpetuate that inadequacy.

"Your real beauty inspires me!" reads a quote from IT Cosmetics CEO Jamie Kern Lima alongside before and after photos of her with and without makeup. "Real" beauty as an inherent trait only waiting to be unveiled—a process of revelation that ironically occurs through covering the face with creams, powders, and pigments—is the mission of the Too Faced line of foundations called "Born This Way." The pursuit of "real" is also the goal of the hair-care brand Bed Head. Their extensive product line implies that this "natural" state cannot be achieved without synthetic intervention. And as it's presented by these snippets of marketing copy, the idea that our authentic selves are accessible only through artifice is a gimmick to sell products. Yet there's a path toward liberation intertwined in that concept, if through artifice I shed light on my irrepressible self.

At my roommate's behest we celebrate Purim, a carnivalesque Jewish holiday where revelers are encouraged to drink alcohol, make nonsense speeches, and wear masks, or as my roommate likes to say, partake in gender anarchy. For our first Purim party, I stopped at a barbershop and got an undercut, leaving with the hair between the nape of my neck and my ponytail buzzed. At home I realized the full ensemble, sliding in rhinestone earrings long enough to brush my shoulders and wiggling my feet into silver stilettos. Along my eyelids I glued gigantic, bejeweled fake eyelashes; across my cheeks I dusted the fancy glitter (Fenty Diamond Bomb, if you must know). And above my lips—reddened with a color named "New Temptation"—I used the liquid eyeliner from Ulta to draw a curled, mosaic Salvador-Dali-esque mustache.

Afterword

In July 2020 Ulta unveiled its “Conscious Beauty at Ulta Beauty” initiative, following in the footsteps of “Clean at Sephora” with a “Clean at Ulta Beauty” distinction based on an extensive list of “made-without” ingredients. Ulta has also begun identifying and grouping products that are sustainably packaged, vegan, and/or cruelty-free. I haven’t been inside an Ulta store in more than a year; I don’t know how these changes have affected the in-person shopping experience. I do know that in November 2020, when I finally got around to spending a second gift card from my mother (“I thought you liked that store!” she complained), the online version of Conscious Beauty was not user-friendly. It’s not yet possible to filter a product search by sustainable packaging, for instance. Instead there are long lists of brands in each category. One of these did lead me to a (supposedly) recycled-plastic tube of reef-safe, Kinship sunscreen, but I soon grew tired of inefficient scrolling and inconsistent ingredient labels and gave up on using the Conscious Beauty section of the website. Then I selected the rest of the purchase based on colors and glitter content.

In the months to come I imagine that in-store Ulta staff will hang freshly printed signs, rearrange accordingly, and set up new displays. Employees’ knowledge of product specifications will become even more encyclopedic, if they’re particularly dedicated, or they’ll reach the same threshold I did and give up on cataloguing so much information.

The Westmore Beauty Book asks,

7. Is your individual beauty plan in keeping with your personality and way of life?

But there’s no way to square an individual plan with the fundamentally overwhelming nature of an Ulta Beauty store, in part because organizing thousands of

cosmetics is a daunting task, and partly because I'm no longer sure it is worthwhile to curate an approach to beauty that communicates my personhood. I love flashy makeup. I would prefer not to get cancer. I also value consumer literacy, want plastic-free packaging, and wish deeply for better regulation. Conscious Beauty at Ulta Beauty sounds like a product that will "meet my needs." And yet I know it won't.

LED Lights Are the Scourge of Christmas

Every October, even before Halloween merchandise discount season (which, like spring during climate change, arrives earlier every year), they appear in stores and on the eaves of your neighbors' houses: hordes of LED Christmas lights beaming like grow lamps for hell-strips and water-intensive lawns all over suburbia. As Thanksgiving approaches, this cursed intersection of environmentalism, misguided market response to consumer demands, and the Spirit of Christmas™ shines with increasing fervor as the masses fall into line, seemingly unaware of how they've sacrificed one of the few remaining pleasures of commercial Christmas: quality of light. Our collective acquiescence to the harsh, blue-tinted light of so-called "white" LED strings and the abominable blue, green, red, and *orange* color scheme of the "multi" strings is a sign that we're beleaguered. Our inner aesthetic Scrooges have won.

Orange. Is. Not. A Christmas color. On older, more forgiving strings, its warmth amplifies the coziness of the other colors; when blue appears in the same context, it is a cheerful hue, tempered by some green. But LED blue—it blares, the man-spreader-and-splainer of the string, taking up visual space it doesn't deserve with a color that taxes our already screen-weary eyes. Who knew that quality of light and quality of life were so intertwined, that the decline of the former would signal such deterioration in the latter.

It is not that I dislike Christmas or am unconcerned by light pollution. On the contrary, it is from a mounting sense of planetary doom and from a well of childlike, unironic love for Christmas that my hatred for LED lights springs. Indeed these light displays cause electricity consumption to spike in December, a month where many of us buy imported objects our relatives don't want. But we will not save this earth by using

more energy-efficient lights. If you believe that Christmas, whether as a secular celebration or an homage to The Original Hippie, means more than its alcohol-soaked parties and the popularity of the song “Santa Baby” might suggest, then you’re capable of understanding that there’s something ineffable about the season. And if you cherish the twinkling of a single string as snow softens the earth, or you revel in the 16,000 (non-LED) lights comprising Ohio engineer Carson Williams’ legendary yard-and-house light display choreographed to the pulsating Trans-Siberian Orchestra song “Wizards in Winter,” then you have felt the awe that light, specifically Christmas lights, can inspire. And if you can understand that, you see why it’s concerning that this beacon of the season has been dimmed. There is no LED light at the end of the tunnel.

She Is Attuned to The Life of Objects

We stood in the driveway, my parents trying to conceal their dismay at how full the car was. It was too close to departure time to reevaluate whether I needed everything we'd stuffed in the minivan, so I brought all of it as we left my hometown in western Washington for a small college in the southeastern corner of the state. At least my dad and I had convinced my mother that a microwave wouldn't be necessary. My father surely took this opportunity, as he tends to do whenever the subject of moving arises, to recount the legend of how everything he owned or wanted had fit into the sedan he drove from Washington to California for law school in the 1970s. I can appreciate the thrust of this story—I once took only a suitcase and a backpack on a four-month stint in Spain and was content. But I also know, barring a flood, fire, or call to the convent from Jesus himself, I'm already a goner. A chronic over-packer, through and through.

*

I had to wobble and waddle through it several times before I admitted that while I could carry two loads of dry, dirty clothes in one shedding rattan basket down to the laundry room, it was quite difficult to carry two loads of wet, clean clothing back across the street and up two flights of stairs in that same basket, which had no handles. I rarely used an electric dryer; instead, I hung some of my clothes on a drying rack my father and I had constructed from the sides of a crib that he and his siblings had slept in and my grandma, apparently, had saved. The rest of my clothes splayed all over the place, dangling from chair backs and door corners and cabinet knobs and drawer handles like some hurricane of damp apparel had swept through.

I've been hauling, dragging, and pulling around stuff for years. Sometimes I feel like my life's purpose, other than to traffic in words and be kind to others, is to ferry objects between destinations. As a teenager I often spent long days at my high school—a weekday could involve a backpack, gym bag, lunchbox, flute, and, during spring season, a badminton racquet, all accompanied by many openings and shuttings of various lockers. This is why my dad took to calling me “beast of burden,” or “B.O.B.” (bee-oh-bee) for short. I do not think he was familiar with the rapper B.o.B. Though it's been a decade since he coined the name, it still crops up when I help him unpack a car or arrive at my parents' house in my truest form: laden.

A few years into college, I went to the campus academic resource center, an office ensconced in the historic administrative building, complete with a clocktower and a bell that chimed two to three minutes ahead of the hour. I browsed promotional materials while waiting to speak to a staff member. On the front of a pamphlet about campus housing, someone had made the mystifying graphic design decision to place a photograph of my shorts-and-tee-shirt-clad father on that first-year move-in day, frowning as he guarded a stack of my boxes taller than he was.

*

I keep padded mailers that I receive—or skim from the garbage—so that I can re-use them at a later date. I also save the USPS priority mail boxes in which my mother still sends me care packages even though I'm in the second half of my twenties. Recently I decided to give a half-dozen of these boxes to my father (he had come through Missoula for a fishing trip) to drive back to her. She'd be happy, I was certain, to not have to buy new ones. My mother spends a lot of time “going through” things—the coats, the craft

supplies, the technology graveyard closet—to pare unneeded items. In this instance, however, I figured her love for saving money would supersede her vendetta against clutter. On the phone, once she'd received the cargo, she grumbled, “So you know they give those boxes out for free at the post office, right?”

She sees messes as adversaries to eradicate. Even a pre-mess must be subdued immediately; she's trained my father so well that he sometimes puts away kitchen utensils before she's finished using them. My mother loves to repurpose and prefers to recycle but will only keep an item if it's contained by an efficient system. At Christmas we wrap our presents in fabric bags that my mom has sewn from rich velvets, ornate brocades, and old satin tablecloths over the years. We cut tags from received cards and attach them with carabiners instead of ribbon. Accumulation is only allowed if stored properly or displayed beautifully.

By the same token, waste must be disposed of. Once when I was a child we went to the dump to get rid of the detritus from a home renovation project.

“Don't ya feel free?” She smiled as we drove away. “Nothin' like finishing the job.”

“No,” I said, “I feel bad about it.”

We'd seen a perfectly fine chair during our drive-through, and my mom, ever the bargain hunter, had asked an employee if we could take it home and keep it from being thrown away. This was prohibited, we were told, so we left empty-handed and disappointed, not so much because we needed more furniture (this will never be the case in my parents' house) but because the chair was in good condition and about to be buried or burned. With the postal boxes then, even though they would introduce some disorder,

I knew she was unlikely to discard them. The next month my birthday present arrived, perhaps begrudgingly, in a smudged, re-labeled, and double-taped USPS box.

*

My mom began collecting rhinestone costume jewelry in her teens and twenties, spending a few dollars on pieces that nowadays are worth far more. Hence the spare bedroom in my parents' house, which we call The Rhinestone Room. Two tall, regal, white display cases with jewel-encrusted doorknobs flank the bed. On their glass shelves sit pins, makeup compacts, metal lipstick cases, a cowgirl-gone-sparkly leather belt, picture frames, cigarette holders, tiny hinged boxes.... Originally the collection contained only vintage items, but over time the rules have loosened. Now most any trinket that's bedazzled with high-quality rhinestones or, as my mom might say, anything that's "just plain cute," such as a cheap makeup brush covered with little plastic fuchsia gems, is fair game. The jewelry that started it all actually lives elsewhere—that cabinet doesn't fit in The Rhinestone Room itself.

*

Before heading to a conference in Oregon, I went to see my parents. The visit involved staying at their house, a place I inevitably leave with more objects than I bring. This time the loot included, but was not limited to, clothing (a friend had been cleaning out her closet), paper (salvaged for re-use), and my great aunt Nell's cane, which she'd left the week prior at my grandmother's celebration of life. I brought the cane on the interstate train. Until I met Nell for dinner, I carried it around the conference like a baton.

Relieving myself of the cane had no bearing on the sheer number of *things* that remained when it came time to leave the motel. I slung a leather purse across my torso; shrugged a backpack of books onto my shoulders; slipped a drawstring bag into the crook of my arm; grasped the handles on a squishy cooler of snacks; picked up a paper grocery bag containing a formal coat, vintage beaded shirt, leather shoes, and four hangers; and finally tilted, then yanked on the suitcase, so front-heavy from the two reams of paper crammed in with the clothes and toiletries that it couldn't stay upright. It took some maneuvering to navigate the door frame, but I regrouped and shuffled pitifully toward the motel office, dragging myself across the parking lot.

Checkout time was 11:00. At approximately 10:56 I returned the key cards. The clerk was nowhere near as impressed with me as I was with myself for managing this feat. Unceremoniously she highlighted my name on a chart in a three-ring binder. I hauled my caravan of possessions outside and lined them up in front of the office: drawstring bag, cooler bag, paper bag, backpack, and suitcase (leaning on the wall). Over the course of the hour I spent waiting for my ride, I began to feel annoyed with myself for not using the restroom before checking out. I didn't want to relocate my luggage, so I held my pee and maintained the claim I'd staked on that patch of cement at the Banfield Value Inn. I had on a soft grey t-shirt emblazoned with the phrase ANTIQUING IS MY CARDIO that they'd sent in the wrong size when I'd ordered one for my mom. Meanwhile, some new guests arrived in the parking lot. They wore unmarked shirts and pulled along a single suitcase each, like sensible humans.

*

The Rhinestone Room is not an anomaly; it's just the most sparkly of many collections my mother has curated over the years. She's scoured antique stores, garage sales, and the internet (one of her usernames was needitnopewantityup) for celluloid boxes, napkin holders, dollhouse-sized dressers, Depression-era glass, Santa paraphernalia with which to festoon the bathroom for the holidays, and so on. When I was younger we went to a lot of antique malls. She said I had to have a collection to hunt for, too, so I started with buttons, then moved on to miniature ceramic pitchers (typically made in Japan and decorated with applied flowers), and landed on chromatic 50s and 60s jewelry made from a pearly plastic, some of which I still wear now. My father, on the other hand, might not call his assortment of camping and fishing equipment a collection, but that's what it is. There's a whole separate garage where most of it is stored. He ascribes to what he calls The Law of Gear: one always returns from a fishing trip with more gear than the amount with which one left. Once when I wanted him to transport some cartons and plastic to my hometown because they weren't recyclable in Missoula, he cited the Law of Gear. There wasn't room in his SUV, apparently. I'd accumulated quite a four-month stash and was miffed. Ultimately I ended up mailing the materials, in a cardboard box I'd used to move, to a recycling plant in Omaha.

*

On a glorious day at a Hawai'ian-and-country-themed thrift shop called Yeehaw Aloha, I found an antique porcelain chandelier, about a yard in diameter. It reminded me of a smaller, light blue fixture my mom had found in Florida and shipped cross-country, bundled in bubble wrap and prayers. This one, splayed on its side among a barely organized selection of lesser lamps, had pink and yellow accents. Delicate ceramic roses

dangled from the gilded, flower-wreathed arms. The store employee swaddled it in green foam before placing it gingerly in a cardboard box. I drove the half-mile to my apartment slowly, listening for any destructive-sounding tinkling from the backseat. I didn't have the electrical know-how or the patience to figure out how to make the chandelier turn on; I just hung it from a spare hook in the ceiling in my living room, where it looked ridiculous and wonderful in the corner.

“I don't quite understand the color scheme you've got going on in here,” my mother said when she came to visit and saw the pink and gold chandelier holding court over a thrifted, bulbous, periwinkle lamp, a secondhand charcoal-tone couch, a poufy purple armchair I'd bought from a colleague, a mahogany table from Goodwill and its matching chairs, which I'd re-upholstered in bodacious floral fabric, and a used nightstand as well as a hand-me-down bookcase that she and I had painted together with a color named “Turkish Teal.” I probably suppressed an eyeroll—the colors made sense to me, and I had great taste. I'd *inherited* great taste. It wasn't my fault she'd become so enamored with beige over the years. Back in fourth grade during the poetry unit, when we received a prompt that began, “Blank is,” I'd written, “Blank is the way my mom likes to paint things white.”

At this point I've carried the remaining quantity of “Turkish Teal” between two houses and three apartments and even across state lines. Rust has started to crackle the can, so I'm thinking of transferring the paint into a plastic container with a screw-top lid, specifically a parmesan cheese container sold by a certain warehouse. This is exactly how my parents store their leftover paint.

*

One day at Costco, somewhere in the borderlands between the lawn furniture and the snack section, I found what I was looking for: Command strips and hooks, on sale. There were plastic Velcro bits for hanging frames and jumbles of hooks for keys, garlands, bathrobes, coats, dog leashes, what-have-you. I wanted to finally hang some art that I'd been shuffling around on my bedroom floor for months. As I stood before the display, which featured, per Costco style, the largest quantity of hooks I'd ever seen in a single package, it dawned on me: these plastic hooks and their corresponding pull-tab adhesive strips embodied the contemporary living situation of millions of Americans.

Command hooks took off with dorm-dwelling college students because, if the user follows the instructions for removal (and does not, as I once did when I was 18, use a fork to pry them from the wall), they leave no marks on paint. Residence hall regulations have trained a generation for their subsequent lives in apartments, sublets, and house-sitting gigs, all spaces where proprietors are more likely to forbid tenants from nailing anything to the walls. As the ever-lengthening American maturation process turns the act of owning a hammer into a form of “adulting,” Command strips rescue young people and frequent movers from saddling themselves with tools. They require no hardware besides what comes in the package. They are convenient. Like many millennial consumption habits, they are more wasteful than their more permanent counterparts. But still, their rise in popularity testifies to the increase in landlords who don't want to spackle and spot-paint over holes or wish to avoid the hassle of requiring their renters to complete (and inevitably botch) the task. As people take longer to accrue the capital required to buy a house or they live somewhere, i.e. most places, where rent is not affordable, the Command strip and its legion of appendages—the brushed nickel

hook, the water-resistant bathroom hook, the clear, tiny string-light hook, the crystal-shaped jewelry hook—become only more prevalent.

*

I call them my mermaid pants: leggings bedecked with sequins like scales, black on the top and silver on the bottom. When you smooth them up and down, the colors flip, even shimmer. In college I lent the leggings to a housemate who returned them with a split down the crotch seam. My mom sewed them twice to no avail. The rip was in an unfortunate and ultimately irreparable location.

We're supposed to think that gifts are frivolous, that having possessions and openly loving them are materialistic, and that we clarify what we really value when we contemplate what we'd save if the house caught fire. My mom and I know that this posturing is pretentious at best. We understand that presents make manifest how well you know someone; they transmute affection into physical objects. We believe in the power of presents to communicate tenderness that we're not very good at articulating out loud. We honor the searching and the shopping and the wrapping as acts of love. The following Christmas there was a slender, white garment box under the tree. She'd found me another pair of mermaid pants, black-silver sequins and all.

*

Between August 2012 and August 2018, I moved twelve times. After that fateful filled-to-the-brim minivan trip to college, there was a summer at my parents' house, which was really two houses because they were downsizing; then a different dorm, where I appalled my new roommate with the number of flip-top boxes I owned; then a converted hospital room in a town with a thrift shop where everything cost between a

dime and a dollar; then a house named FUBAR because of the brown wood paneling, brown shag carpet, and brown popcorn ceiling; then a homestay abroad; then a college house with five housemates that my mom and I ended up having to clean out alone; then three houses (sublet, room rental, house-sitting) in less than a year; then an apartment to myself, the chandelier's first home; then a storage unit into which I shoved my furniture, clothing, and books, returning a couple of months later to pack the contents into a moving truck and drive it, or rather, have my father drive it, to Missoula, where we had to schlepp everything up two flights of stairs.

*

For an application process that required physical copies of a writing sample, I mailed my work in a cardboard envelope in which I'd received a small painting. I went to the old post office off Main Street in the small, wheat-field-rimmed town where I'd attended college and then stayed on to work after graduation. The original metal PO boxes still lined the walls, the counter made from some dark wood. My package was unwieldy, somehow, and the clerk asked if I wanted to buy a new, better fitting envelope. I shook my head.

"It's only fifty cents," he said, seeming perplexed. I mumbled something in response and told him to use the one I'd brought. I didn't want to get into it, because "it" would have been a soliloquy: I needed to re-use that envelope as part of my system of justifying my existence on the planet to myself, never mind all the meat I'd eaten. The joy of finding a way to use something saved is a low-level hoarder's high, and he was not about to deprive me of it. Furthermore I appreciated and even felt superstitious about the legacy and path of this envelope, its initial journey of carrying a portrait of a woman

(fingers curled alongside her hip) to my home, and its subsequent several-month respite before escorting two essays that might unfurl into my dreams. The clerk blinked, unimpressed, and processed the package.

Whatever victory I achieved that day in the post office matters because so often I fail. I recently broke the glass in a professional-grade frame I'd picked up secondhand to display one of my collages. Four metal edges had clamped around the glass; without the pane they were useless. I didn't feel invested enough to get a new piece of glass cut, but I was loathe to throw the remains away. So I called both of the custom frame shops in town to ask if they'd take the leftover pieces. "I really don't need any more hardware," said the first person; "Yeah, we don't take donations," said the second. "Did you try FlippSmart?" FlippSmart, I told her, had closed a couple months ago. They'd decided not to renew their lease. I didn't beg, but I wanted to. It would have been a conceptually perfect solution. The pieces of metal are still in my possession, currently under my desk. Next I plan to try the steel recycling facility, but it's beginning to feel like I'll end up tossing the frame skeleton after all.

If I can find an out-of-sight spot for a difficult-to-relocate object, and if I can ward off the ensuing weariness, however, sometimes the situation resolves itself. I once took some inflated plastic packing pouches from my boyfriend because I didn't want him to throw them away. This was before I'd learned about the receptacles for used plastic bags and film at some grocery stores. For months the linked pillows lived in my car. One day I was driving down a 45-mile-an-hour road with the windows down, music blasting, when a chain of pouches snaked out the window. I watched, horrified, as the plastic got

stuck on the right side mirror of the car behind me. A hand reached out to snag the flapping plastic and keep it from blowing off into oblivion.

I like to imagine that whoever grabbed the pouches had a fragile item to pack or a box that needed cushioning. And if they weren't moving or shipping anytime soon, perhaps it was someone like my dad, who cuts the sticker labels off vegetable bags so the paper doesn't gum up whatever recycling process they supposedly undergo. Or someone like my mom, who takes Styrofoam peanuts and unmarked packing pouches back to the shipping depot. And yet I know from poking through the Dumpster behind my apartment building that people throw away reusable material all the time. Once I found a plastic three-gallon water dispenser in there, still half-full. Standing on my tiptoes to reach the handle, I dislodged the jug from the surrounding garbage bags, opened the spout, and poured the water on a nearby patch of yellowing grass.

*

I asked a friend who lived in my building to help me pack the chandelier before I moved out. It was somehow more terrifying to take it down with another person's help than it had been to put it up by myself. We made the grave mistake of removing the chandelier from its perch before its travel box was ready. Most lighting fixtures look wrong on the ground; this one, we realized, could not really be set down. The arms were not fully attached but also were not removable, the conical base nowhere near level, and the fragile flowers made us afraid to lay it on its side. So my friend squatted with the chandelier, holding it upright, while I filled a red kitchen bowl with packing peanuts for the base. Together we cut slits into a cardboard box for the arms. This whole process took at least an hour.

A few days later I agonized over the placement of the chandelier box in the car. I seatbelted it into the backseat and taped strips of the original green packing foam around its appendages. So far the only casualties had been a few slivers of pink ceramic freed from the edges of petals; such small losses would be indiscernible to anyone but me or an appraiser. But I was still wary, and by the time I reached my destination, the other side of Washington state, I'd endured a final-hours frenzy of staying up until two to scrub the oven and waking up at six to leave last-minute donations outside Goodwill before they opened (I had no regard left for a sign specifically prohibiting that action). When it came time to remove the thankfully intact chandelier from the car, and the seatbelt retracted like a Chinese finger trap and wouldn't release, I didn't care anymore. I got a pair of scissors and cut the son of a bitch.

*

Earlier this year my mom and her friends began to make cloth face coverings, first from fabric stashed in her craft room and then from old shirts and pillowcases. As the design evolved, they started sewing twist ties into the upper edge of the masks to create a flexible nose bridge. "Your father likes to save twist ties, and you know how it drives me crazy," she told me on the phone. "Now I'm having to eat my words." After this conversation I dug out my own clump of twist ties from the back of a kitchen drawer to flatten and enclose them with her birthday package (mailed in a saved cardboard box, obviously.) My roommate and I used a couple of twist ties as curtain tiebacks and a few more to corral cords, but otherwise I'd had no tangible reason to keep bunching them into a jar, until now. This new purpose for the twist ties gave me an unbelievable rush: it was clear, practical, and maybe even lifesaving. Most importantly, it turned months of

potential hoarding behavior into heretofore unbelievably prophetic insight. My satisfaction was immense, and it was righteous.

After a few installments of mail featuring twist ties, my mom called to say that I could stop sending them. She'd been telling people to neither compensate her with money for the masks nor provision her with new fabric—instead, she wanted them to dig through their closets and under their beds to find material that could be re-purposed. So her friend Dani, looking for another way to help, had visited the devil's department store, also sometimes called Amazon, and ordered my mother some brand-new twist ties. A 500-pack, to be exact. From somewhere deep in my esophagus, the word “no” wrestled its way out of my mouth, probably accompanied by some spittle. The conversation moved on and I let it, silently cursing Dani, convenience, and good intentions.

*

Now the chandelier hangs in my parents' garage, suspended above a shelving unit. I didn't bring it to Montana because it needs to be re-wired, because it's such a pain to transport, and because my first apartment in Missoula had no hooks in the ceiling and no-holes-in-the-walls rules. There was an opportunity to get rid of it this summer when my parents had a yard sale, but I was reluctant. Even though it's supposed to be worth a decent sum; even though it's been hidden from view for two years now, which is a shame for such a flamboyant fixture; even though I can't tell when I'll live somewhere where it could be installed, for real, I can't bring myself to part ways with it. The chandelier seems like a promise: that someday I'll live in one structure, and someday I'll feel secure enough to relish staying in one place. And I feel beholden to the chandelier itself—after all of these trials, I want to be the one to unveil it.

*

After coffee at a sleek café, the kind with projector art and bike racks mounted on the walls, (whether for use or decoration it wasn't entirely clear), an old friend walked me over to Hippo's Hardware. Never have I felt the calling of property, that constructed American ideal, so urgently as I did in that store. My years of living in and moving between spaces owned by other people and enjoying myself in them seemed to evaporate as I wandered through the first floor in awe. Glass doorknobs burst from drawers in antique filing cabinets; ornate, vintage light switch plates and hooks dotted the walls. A display devoted to door knockers ranged from the iconic lion's head to the tail of a mermaid. Never mind that I wanted to leave the country in a couple years, that I was considering moving to New York City after graduate school, that I didn't have the job or the money to buy a shack, let alone a house. In that store I wanted my own house immediately. I wanted to outfit it with beautiful things. Maybe the bathroom could have a ceramic lavender toilet tank cover. We'd seen one on the second floor amid a long row, upright like Pez candies waiting to be slipped into a dispenser.

Then we hit the third floor. The apogee. Mismatched shelves piled with table lamps, glass shades, and flushmount covers all spilled into the aisles. In one quadrant floor lamps congregated, a luminary cityscape. Gobs of light fixtures hung from the ceiling like a dense, illuminated jungle canopy. An apricot-colored plushy lamp stood proudly, the lofted cousin of shag carpet; golden finials crowned cloudy domes; chandeliers labored under sheets of crystal or sprouted metal vines or dripped with pendant orbs; myriad mosaic and stained-glass pendant lights sprang from the ceiling,

some opalescent, some transparent, some geometric, some blooming forth from their chains.

“My mom would love this place,” I told my friend, thinking of all those antique malls we used to visit and all the hours I’ve spent hanging art in my apartments much as my mom used to make me hold shelves and shadowboxes up to the wall so she could decide where to hammer in the earthquake-proof hooks. *I love this place*, I said to myself. I let the thought sink in and marinate with this confirmation that I am my mother’s child. I carry the burden and the blessing.

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