

A Soft Place to Touch

by

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Abstract

This novella explores what it might mean to inhabit the space of non-desire. Tracing the intersection of physical and mental illness, sexual trauma, and the conventional mode of sexual desire, this piece of fiction blends creative and academic writing to tease out the opportunities for other modes of relation and care that emerge when one no longer wants to desire. A central exploration here is how the psychic influences the somatic; how do these psychological and emotional forces, these affects, come to bear on the body, the site of sexual desire? This novella explores these themes in a series of vignettes that attempt to mimic the way the mind works when compressed by illness and trauma; I hope to move through these vignettes the way the mind moves through memory and mental illness. To an extent, I have followed a line of psychoanalytic thought with this project, wishing not to pathologize or moralize, but instead to ask what it might mean to live alongside all of these forces, to live alongside non-desire in a world that hierarchizes sexual desire. This novella was imagined and written in conversation with the writing of Anne Carson and the paintings of Kris Knight, and for its critical apparatus, draws on the writing of Sara Ahmed, Ann Cvetkovich, Sigmund Freud, Adam Phillips, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, among others.

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Mom, who taught me how to build a life around books. Dad, who taught me that we can always grow and believe in being better. Kelsey, who is braver and stronger than I am.

Finally, to Justin Bilinski, who changed everything.

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In Sickness & In Sex: An Introduction

Last month, sitting in Bru Coffee + Beer House with my friends Emily and Keighlagh, the sky having opened up, unleashing a deluge of water that overwhelmed the gutters of Jasper Avenue, I was reading passages from Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*. I brought this novel along with me on a whim. It is a novel that I proposed to use as a central intertext in this project but one that I thought had fallen out early on in the process of writing, after I decided instead to turn in other textual directions. But there, in the coffee shop, to distract myself from the nagging thought that I had left my windows open in this storm, I read aloud:

I notice how often I sit still, not even thinking. My eyes keep worming their way along the rusty stains that the rain has left across the ceiling. I hate it all, every room. Some part of me is in protest. I can't relax, can't accept it as home. There's something lurking in the shadows, something that doesn't approve of me, that won't let me straighten my shoulders. Even the familiar old furniture is aloof. I didn't know before it was so dull and ugly. It has taken sides against me with the house. I hate it too. (Ross 33-4)

Sinclair Ross's only novel *As For Me and My House* is narrated via a series of journal entries by an unnamed woman who we come to know, through her relation to her husband Philip, as Mrs. Bentley. She shares with him a small house in Horizon, a fictional town nestled somewhere in the Depression-era prairies. The two had been artists before settling in Horizon, but now lead lives that have been tempered by responsibility and disappointment. Together they inhabit their modest house, described as a sinister place where "[e]very clink of a dish or fork is solitary and foreboding like a chip off the crack of

doom” (19). The novel charts Mrs. Bentley’s emotional and mental state as she is haunted by her desires, her deflected acts and words of affection, and her suspicions regarding her husband’s inner life. All of this is reflected back to her through the house, a place with an “unsympathetic stillness,” that is a space of “silence and repression and restraint” (81). All of the uncommunicated hopes and desires, the accumulated disappointments, that mark their relationship come to reside in the house along with them, transforming the space, turning the domestic into a site of paranoia for Mrs. Bentley. Reading these passages alerted me to the fact that, though I thought I left this text behind months ago when starting to do the heavy work of writing the novella that follows, deciding on other intertexts, it stayed insistently in the background.

The following novella, *A Soft Place to Touch*, has not a dissimilar pulse. It opens with an unnamed young man, normatively coupled in what we learn is a long-term domestic and romantic partnership, who has taken leave from graduate school due to physical illness and mental strain. Stress comes to him from a number of directions. His professional life is marked by disappointment and lack of confidence after leaving graduate school; he is in the throes of an illness that results in debilitating stomach pain and that does not seem to subside; he hates sex with his partner and wonders whether he has the capacity to feel sexual attraction whatsoever. This question leads him to conduct an experiment, to flirt with infidelity, as a means of attempting to reignite desire in another object. Where at first he wants to feel desire—to fix himself—he comes to the conclusion that he would rather pursue sites of non-desire and the other relations that it allows. Throughout the novella, the protagonist attempts to order the desires and non-desires he feels or believes he ought to feel. Like in *As For Me and My House*, the stresses and

anxieties of the narrator's life are manifested in the house he shares with his partner; just as he feels alienated in his body, in his life, in his relationship, in the face of sex, the house he shares with his partner shifts and cracks at the edges of reality. The house takes on an uncanny quality, the word coming from the German *unheimlich*, the opposite of *heimlich*, or homely, that which is familiar. This led Freud to describe the uncanny as what is “old-established in the mind” but which has “become alienated from it through the process of repression” (241). His paraphrasing of Schelling—“everything is *Unheimlich* that ought to have remained hidden but has come to light” (224)—is particularly salient in the cases of *As For Me and My House* and *A Soft Place to Touch*, where the familiar domestic space is transformed by the repressed emotions, affects, and desires of those who inhabit and narrate these spaces. Those affects, desires, and non-desires that the protagonists have repressed in an attempt to manage themselves bubble to the surface and are rendered visible in their domestic spaces and beyond.

Ultimately, this novella attempts to bring to light those secret and at times shameful thoughts that have to do with non-desire. *A Soft Place to Touch* is an experiment in narrating non-desire, in following the threads leading out from the protagonist's bodily unhappiness—illness and sexual trauma—to ask: what causes someone to detach at the very site of attachment? Is there a reason at all? How can one live alongside this detachment in a world that privileges particular modes of desire, particularly the sexual?

Non-Desire

It was after I'd written several drafts of this novella that Nat suggested to me that I read Leo Bersani's *Is the Rectum a Grave?* The titular opening essay begins with the

following remark: “There is a big secret about sex: most people don’t like it” (3).

Encountering this assertion after completing a novella that is for all intents and purposes about a fear, an anxiety, a dislike of sex, was provocative to say the least, and I was struck by the similar sphere that I had unknowingly been working in. However, a notable difference is that for Bersani, the bind might seem that while most people don’t enjoy the act of sex, they would like to, that there is some desire there that keeps them at it. *A Soft Place to Touch*, instead, asks what it means not to like it, but also to not want to like it, and thus narrates the experience of non-desire. If we accept Freud’s claim that “the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego,” (16)—the ego being instinctive part of one’s personality that has been altered by the forces and conditions of the outside world—then this novella traces the absence of sexual desire and its effect on a subject’s movement through a world that privileges the sexual romantic relationship. Layered on top of this is the lens of illness. The somatic element of the text looms over the protagonist’s life and is inextricable from his experiences of sexuality. If we accept that the ego is a bodily ego, then *A Soft Place to Touch* recasts sexual desire for the protagonist as something that has an adverse effect on the body, something that triggers or corresponds with illness, and therefore reverberates psychically as well. It means that the forces of our social world, one that prioritizes and emphasizes sex, has the potential to harm. In this novella, it is through the space of non-desire that other desires and affects are explored, and perhaps alternative models of relation are rehierarchized.

After all, the opposite of desire is not the absence of desire, but instead might be some other obstacle or possibility, one that could allow other desires to emerge and move about once normative sexual desire is rejected. The question became: how was I to locate

and narrate sites of non-desire, particularly where they rub against scenes of sexuality, and also make visible other forms of desire and relation? Adam Phillips reminds us that it is impossible to live, to move about the world, without wanting. Our desires propel us forward. He emphasizes that it is “the wanting that is our lifeline” (n.p.) that catapults us into inescapable relation to one another, in conflict and joy and difficulty. How is it that we might be thrown into relation when we reject the sexual? In responding to this call, I tried to be mindful of what forms emerge and might only be possible when one rejects one desire for another. Halfway through the novella, the narrator states: “I want to refuse sexual desire as the primary form of wanting” (83). The investment of *A Soft Place to Touch* is in staking out these alternative modes of wanting, to sketch out what might be possible in the face of non-desire.

I noticed myself struggling to handle this question during the writing process, falling into conventional forms of desire even when I was trying not to. In an earlier draft, David loomed larger, was a more prominent character. He was not only the object through which the protagonist would test out sexual desire, but I had also written him as an object of some other desire that I did not anticipate or necessarily even mean. Other desires seemed to seep in, regulated perhaps by the same social forces that I wanted to be writing against. David was read by some as the crush figure, someone who the narrator was captivated and allured by. One reader interpreted David as an exciting new conquest to distract the protagonist from his routine and boring domestic partnership. The weight that I gave David made it so other desires could be read between him and the protagonist. Or, another possibility, his proximity to the protagonist allowed readers who do experience normative sexual desire to project those conventions onto the relationship. I realized that

this would undermine the ambition of the novella to trace non-desire, as I seemed to be narrating the story of someone looking for a fresh, vibrant love affair. And so, I rewrote David further into the background, so there could be no question that he was only an object through which the protagonist could attempt to ignite sexual desire. Sheila, the protagonist's friend, moved forward in the text, became someone who made visible these other threads of desire. Sheila became a character through which a relationship of friendship and care was explored and became an opportunity for me to imagine how it could look to move the sexual romantic relationship from the top of the relationship hierarchy. In the version that follows, touch and care register differently, as in vignette 42, when she runs her fingers through the protagonist's hair and he reads the sensation of touch differently. In the space of non-desire, care comes to meaning in a radical new way for the protagonist.

In the words of Lauren Berlant, "the story of your life becomes the story of the detours your desire takes" (77). This novella works to tell the story of non-desire's detours, the places where it rubs up against the desires of others, the desire for conventional relationships, even at times the desire to feel desire and eventually the desire not to want that at all.

Illness

When Ann Cvetkovich writes that "trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable" and that because "it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all" (*Archive 7*), she is gesturing towards the cavities that trauma makes in lives and in the stories that circulate about these lives. Whether it be

shame or embarrassment, disgust or anger, or whatever other affects might haunt the survivor of trauma or illness, there are real psychic obstacles to narrating particular experiences. To borrow from Adam Phillips, there is an element to what we experience and thus say in the world that is difficult to face. *A Soft Place to Touch* operates with these ideas in mind, particularly in the spaces where sexuality, illness, and trauma intersect.

I was hesitant to make too tight a connection between trauma and illness and sexuality—to say one causes or is a result of another—but there is a sense in this novella that the chronic stomach pain that the narrator suffers is caused, in some way, by a residual trauma. Perhaps there is something to be said about the fact that the illness narrated in the novella is located in the gut, so often called our second brain. As Clementine Morrigan writes, the body cannot heal or thrive “when, on a gut level, [one] feel[s] unsafe” (68). She, as so many others, locate the gut as the core of one’s health, sense of wellness, and the place where healing starts. It is where we feel our most visceral reactions. Our stomachs drop or flutter with butterflies. Things can feel like a punch to the gut. We have to learn to trust it. This is what the protagonist struggles to do throughout the novella, both literally and figuratively.

With this in mind, I was interested in placing him in his stomach via a dreamscape, locating him in an otherworldly rainforest scene, not unlike the ways I was interested in turning the house into a place of hallucinations, where the protagonist falls into visions of overgrowth and plant life that foreshadow his eventual journey to the stomach. As aforementioned, the house acts to reflect back to the narrator his mental and physical illnesses, as well as the anxieties that have dominated his romantic relationship. To look to Gaston Bachelard, the house is, after all, “one of the greatest powers of integration for the

thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind” (6). It occurred to me how connected these spaces are to one’s interior life; to say that a house has an interior and that the stomach is housed within the body is obvious but also resonant. I wanted to move the protagonist from his domestic space, a site of anxiety and violence, into his stomach, the site of his illness and pain, but also the place where we are said to most trust ourselves and to know things intuitively. Cvetkovich reminds us that “[it] can be hard to tell the difference between the inside and outside—between what’s inside your body and what’s out there, between what’s inside the house and what’s outside in the neighbourhood or on the other side of town, between your heartbreak and in the world beyond” (*Depression* 158). Indeed, so many of the outside forces and traumas have been internalized—the bodily ego—and so the metaphor of the stomach becomes a site where the protagonist can go, someplace internal, that also registers the effects of what is outside. On a somatic level, the forces that work upon him end up residing within him.

Form

As I started to conceive of the project’s thematic pulse—that of a young queer man interrogating his sexual life and its effects on his personal relationships, professional life, and physical and mental health—it seemed more and more important for these interrogations to be represented in short, discrete bursts. Seeing as we find the narrator at the tail-end of a long-term and seemingly stable romantic relationship, coping with physical illness and episodes of psychic distress, struggling to make sense of how it is he came to be at the mercy of these complex affects, I recognized the need for a form that mirrored the short windows of available time between pain and despair to reflect on one’s

life. Considering the narrative voice of this novella and the impetus for the protagonist to perform analysis on his own memories and experiences, a form that also sharpened the sense of interiority was essential. Admittedly, I did experiment early on in the writing process with a more conventional fictional narrative form, one with mid-length chapters and prose that worked to fill in the blanks, that attempted to make connections within the text more explicit, but I found that this method depleted rather than enlivened the story. The form needed to reflect the type of thinking that is possible when the mind is under duress, as when one is ill or depressed.

What does trauma, illness, and the body do to form? In *On Being Ill*, Virginia Woolf writes that sickness “makes us disinclined for the long campaigns that prose exacts” (19). Indeed, whether that illness is physical or mental, it makes demands on one’s attention so that focus is impeded and limited. One might even learn to edit one’s thoughts so that they contain only the essential. Woolf reminds us that “[w]e cannot command all our faculties and keep our reason and our judgement and our memory at attention while chapter swings on top of chapter” (19). Illness takes these things away from us. Consequently, the narrative form is showing only fragments of a whole narrative, those things that are seen through the fog of illness and trauma, those things we can bear to remember. In Phillips’s paraphrasing of Freud, “[m]emory ... is of desire; the thing we keep needing to forget is sexuality” (n.p.). This, then, might account for the instances in which the vignettes narrate scenes of desire and non-desire but fall away after a scene of sex or sexual trauma is recounted.

And so, as the protagonist moves through the plot, memories crop up and become important referents, demanding of the novella a narrative form that worked in a way that

memory might. I found longer, more descriptive chapters to be unsuitable, as memories come in glimpses, at random, often outside of the logic of time. Rather than nestle the necessary flashbacks of memory within long blocks of exposition and contextualization, I wanted each memory to hang, to resonate rather than be swept along in the energy of longer-form narrative prose. After all, memory invites ongoing reflection and analysis. Pamela V. Sing reminds us that “the use of the fragment is suggestive of life narrative itself as testimony, of that which is both preserved and unfinished” and that, as a form, it is “particularly apt ... for dealing with topics such as memory processes, the construction of the past, and the discovery that the meaning attributed to a given incident or action changes with time” (182). Indeed, the protagonist’s memories crop up *at* times and linger to ask him to consider how they have changed and work in the context of his present day experience. I think here, too, of Michael Garrett, who notes that the fragment or the vignette encourages readers to drift within a single episode, “to linger over it, reread it, even decide that it can be rewritten as a synecdochical representative of the larger narrative in which we stumble upon it” (4). Not only is this what I hoped readers of this novella might do—get lost in a vignette, take it out and play with it—but it is also a force I wanted enacted upon the protagonist. I wanted the formal impositions of the vignette to elicit the same readerly response in the narrator as he thinks through his own life. The narrator, in nearly every vignette, lingers, rereads, or recounts, and, with his critical attention to his own psychic life, rewrites the narrative while simultaneously turning away from these moments of discomfort and confrontation.

Perhaps Anne Carson said it best when she said that the “magic of fragments” exists where it “leads into a thought that can’t ever be apprehended” (“Art of Poetry”). She

observes that “there is a space where a thought would be, but which you can’t get hold of. ... [N]o matter what the thought would be if it were fully worked out, it wouldn’t be as good as the suggestion of a thought that the space gives you. Nothing fully worked out could be so arresting, so spooky” (“Art of Poetry”). I find this so apt and so arresting because ultimately there is no neat conclusion to this narrative; the fragments are left to hang till the very end. If the novella poses questions—where does this aversion to sex come from? How are these feelings of disgust, fear, and anxiety around sex connected to trauma? How is trauma connected to mental and physical illness? —the form of the novella creates the space for the interpretive work to move in several directions, playing out and colliding, offering only suggestions of thought.

Further Thought

All of this is to say that *A Soft Place to Touch* is a project still very much in the making. There are questions and gaps in the text that I would like to tease out in further drafts, opportunities to narrate scenes that right now are only mediated through flashbacks but that might worth being shown. For example, I would like to revisit vignette 36 to better narrate the scene in which the protagonist learns that his partner has known all along that sex has made him uncomfortable and that he pressed on just the same, purposefully ignoring those signs and disrespecting the boundaries of the body. In this draft, the protagonist’s response might be muted. Where I hoped to articulate the vein of guilt and obligation that runs beneath their relationship, I may have occluded the possibility for other affects such as anger, disappointment, or disgust. With this in mind, the point of climax between David and the protagonist might also be worth narrating. In the text as it stands

now there have only been men who have violated the boundaries of the body. What value might there be in representing a man who listens, one who hears the point of view of the protagonist without judgement? In this draft, this is only relayed to Sheila, and this might be an opportunity to hold in contrast to vignette 36 the possible reactions of men to non-desire.

Conclusion

Writing this novella has been an opportunity to think with ideas in a way that made them free and malleable. What I hoped to do was to write in a way that Leon S. Roudie described as “[n]ot ‘applying’ a theory, but allowing practice to test theory, letting the two enter into a dialectical relationship (1). I hoped to play with the task of exploring the experiences of non-desire in a world where sex is at the centre of relation without pathologizing, without quelling or curing uncomfortable or unsavoury desires, affects, and traumas. To, in the words of Adam Phillips, “come up with something to do other than [get] better” (n.p.), which is the impetus for the protagonist’s experiment to reignite desire. Ultimately, I have come to see the thread of the narrative to be coming to accept the validity and possibility in non-desire. Initially the protagonist feels as though this lack of sexual desire is something that he should fix, that there is something morally wrong about his inability to feel sexual desire. I hope that, in writing this novella, I have been able to hold a space that is morally neutral for the protagonist to explore all of these intersecting forces that orbit his psychic and somatic worlds, to come to accept non-desire and to find other possibilities of relation, friendship, and care.

“even the bed takes on the wrong geography”

Aislinn Hunter, “We Go Over It Again” (95)

“You can’t tidy up people the way you can tidy up a room, she said. They’re too narrow or too big. And even rooms, she said, don’t take long to get untidy again.”

Sheila Watson, *The Double Hook* (63)

“Can a painting change real flesh? Can a metaphor turn reality white?”

Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (94)

Prologue

When pain drags me from sleep and back into the dark ocean of this room, where I gasp and try to pull myself up out of its depths, you don't notice. You go on sleeping. The clock reads 4:43 AM. I move, crouched, toward the bathroom, where I keep the light off and lie in front of the toilet, pulling the bathmat towards me and curling it under my head. The pain comes in waves, acid crashing against the lining of my stomach, etching marks into me, a kind of erosion. I put my ear to the side of this pain, spiked like a hard shell, and only hear you snoring, dreaming of something else, oblivious that this is happening again.

You go on sleeping while I shiver on the floor. I am naked. Last night, after dinner, while I was holding my hands still in the dishwasher, you came behind me and wrapped your arms around my torso, pulled me into you by the belly and put your lips on my neck. I could smell our meal on your breath. The little hairs on my neck bristled. I could feel them moving against you. A shiver radiated out from my core while you kissed my neck, made my skin wet and cold, and I stared down at the water as you whispered something about it having been so long, how you just couldn't wait anymore.

You were right. It had been a long time. I make you wait for me, hide from you in small ways, even though we share this house and there aren't many places to run to. And so, this time, I agreed to let you have me; why should I always be so selfish when all you want is to make love to me? In every book I've read, every film I've watched, every conversation I've had with friends, the single ones or the attached ones, sex falls at the centre. Everyone's hungry eyes on it. Why do mine look away? What you want—what everyone seems to want—is not what I want. Desire and its absence live in this home with us. But sometimes, like last night, I acquiesce, out of guilt and love, the affects that rub

against each other like plates in that sink. So I told you to meet me upstairs, that I just needed to finish the washing up first.

You squeezed me tighter, kissed me on the neck again, and told me not to be long. I waited until I heard you open the bedroom door upstairs before breathing my ragged breaths. I raised my hand to wipe your saliva off my skin, the dishwasher feeling cleaner. With my other hand I fingered the grains of rice that settled to the bottom of the sink. My stomach contracted then, a soft thrum to let me know that pain was coming, that I would be sick again, that it was only a matter of hours.

I emptied the sink and dried my hands then turned to meet you, only pausing on the stairs for a moment.

1.

This is what I see from the second floor window: the branches that make up the crown of an old American elm and through the spaces between them a snow-covered road. Sometimes, when I am tired of pretending to be writing, I close my laptop and look out that window. I stare through it until my eyes lose focus and begin to quiver, until my vision loses clarity. I am able to convince myself that there is no tree at all, that there are no branches, that there is no snow-covered road below. With my blurred vision the branches become cracks in the pane of the window and I trick myself into believing that now, maybe, I can get out of this house.

The office smells clean. It's bright, if drafty. There is a medium-sized window whose white wooden sill just meets the edge of the desk I pushed against the wall. On the desk rests a laptop, a notebook, a mug and a chorus of rings that mark everywhere else that mug has been, some of them staining the wood more deeply than others. There is an ugly but comfortable swivel chair, two bookshelves to the right of my desk, each of them only half-full. I tell myself every morning that they should be consolidated, that it seems mindless to have two half-full bookshelves when there could be one full one, but you remind me of all the books I still have in my university office that will fill them and then some. But I haven't gone back to that office and don't have any plans to. I have left that whole life behind. The books will never make it here.

There's a chair on the other end of the room that I stole from my university office before I made the decision to drop out of the PhD program. It's decent—designed for an institution like a university, maybe a waiting room—with metal legs, wooden arms, olive green leather upholstery. The lines are good and it was free. It serves as a relic of that time.

Finally, above that chair, on the otherwise bare wall, hangs a print: *Wilted Flower* by Kris Knight. It's a painting of a man in a blue collared shirt patterned with dripping petals in pinks, mauves, creams. My fingers move against themselves when I look at it, recalling the buttery feeling of petals left in a too-cold room, desperate to fall, only needing a little pull. His back is to me, his porcelain face a mystery. He has dark hair like I do. Sometimes I imagine he is me, looking out of this house the same way that I do, the life inside each of us wilting in this winter.

2.

Across the hall from my office is our bedroom. It is important to me that I keep the doors to both rooms shut at all times so the energies don't mix. I don't want what happens in one room to stain the other. The humidity in each room is different, and I would see all the places where these energies condensed, dripped down the walls and pooled. Each room, then, has to be controlled. I can tell it puzzles you. You don't see all the ways that you have marked this house. Even in your absence you occupy it.

The task of describing you: you are tall, green-eyed and red-haired with a straight nose and short beard. Your gaze is open. Your body is strong and one I envy. Your muscled back curves in at the base, your shoulders are round. You have not built your body so much that you have lost the belly that softens your physique. You cover all this bulk in wool sweaters in the winter, in shades of blue and green, brown like earth. You have a look of luxury to you, wearing your richly patterned shirts underneath these sweaters, always sumptuous florals or dark geometrics. All of these fabrics are rich and soft off the body, folded in a dresser drawer or hung in a closet, but when you wear them and I brush your arm or shoulder, your hard muscle nestled beneath the material, I feel an itch. It has been so long of this that now, before even touching you, my skin begins to form hives. I pass it off to you as an allergy to the detergent and now we collect barely used bottles of different brands in the laundry room.

You decorate yourself in the same way that you have decorated the house. To describe you is also to describe the house. You occupy all rooms. In the living room, for example, you are all over the walls. They are covered with your presence and the art you have collected over the years. You started collecting when you were in grad school, using

your scholarships to buy pieces by the artists you admire, and now that you work in the gallery you have filled every spare bit of wall with something. The kitchen is yours too. Loose mounds of fruit in bowls for your morning smoothies, spilled protein powder formed like dunes on the counter. The floors hum with your strange warmth. The musk of your neck wafts from the most unusual places. Once I opened the cutlery drawer for a spoon and you emerged, stepping out of the tiny space with your wool pant legs hiked up, socks exposed, to envelop me. I don't open drawers all the way anymore, not until I've peeked in first.

But it is the bedroom where you reign, where the scent of you is thickest. It is harder to see you here but impossible not to feel you, to breathe you in like humid air. You are somewhere in the blue of the walls, in the teak of the headboard, the copper of the bedside lamp. The drapes are the same weight and colour of your favourite suit, the one you plan to wear to your next gallery opening, that you have hung on the closet door with a maroon tie draped around the hanger. It looks like the casing of you waiting for the body. You lurk in every shadow all at once. Even when you aren't here—when you're at work, maybe, or the grocery store—I see your eyes glow from behind the dresser or through the crack of the closet door. You keep the rumble of your low voice in this room. I think you stalk me from inside the walls, your naked frame in the drywall like a cat hunting mice. I feel ridiculous saying all of this because I know, intellectually, that you aren't really here, but I feel the threat of you and your love that is imprinted on the walls. I'll need to cover them with something else.

I wonder if you know all the ways you have taken the rooms of this house and made them yours, and everything that sits inside them. All of the things in this house seem to be

waiting for you to come and use them, myself included. I have become an object. I wait, studying all that has marked up the blue paint of this bedroom: times when having you on top of me has made me want to stop breathing, when the heat of your skin has given me infection and fever, when I have been unable to push you off, squirm away from your body, times when I have had to resort to biting your neck to get your attention, times this gesture has been misread. This room is where these times are replayed, over and over. Part of me knows that you would stop, would not push anymore, if only I could say the words to you.

But something about you makes it very difficult to say yes.

3.

There is a mirror at the base of the staircase where I catch us side by side and notice with a shock that we look so different from one another. The top of my head barely scrapes the six-foot mark where yours surpasses it. I push my dark hair back off my forehead and keep no facial hair. On windy days, no matter the season, I shiver because there is nothing between my skin and organs, neither fat nor muscle. My clothing hangs off of my flat frame, flapping around my body like clean laundry air drying. I lack the bulk of you. I take up such little space. Even when I stand slightly in front of you, in plain view, your body eclipses mine. I wear white shirts like the drapes in the living room and disappear next to the curtains that you treated so carefully. Once, at a dinner party, one of your friends asked where I had gone. I was there all along, standing between the fireplace and the open window, waiting for an opportunity to speak.

I try to avoid this mirror and any others I might be compelled to travel by. I hate to see the skeletal curve of my spine curving from my neck down my back. The eye moves immediately towards my ill-fitting collar, emphasizing my poor posture and slouching shoulders. I miss my old frame, the uniform skin of my fuller face, my strong back. All of this diminished so slowly that it was difficult for me to grasp it as it happened. I started wasting away so gradually. It was only the arrival of illness that made me see myself as I had become: too thin and too weak, my teeth softening. I became a spectre standing beside windows, losing contact with the floor and floating through hallways. I started to notice things moving in the house that must have been there all along but that I hadn't been able to see. Take, for instance, the little plants that your footprints have burned away from the floor. I will need to replant them. Or pay attention to the worlds that you trapped between

the windows, all the tiny spores circulating, waiting for you to pop the seal. Consider for a moment the bones of this house groaning and pushing on the door that we painted after moving in, unable to decide what to keep in and what to keep out.

4.

We painted the door blue, lighter than a robin's egg, soft like powder. We put on new hinges. We stopped hearing it almost altogether. I spent an entire afternoon with my head against the cupboards and my palms on the marble counter, waiting so long to hear the door creak again that I began to hyperventilate. Eventually I got used not to hearing the door itself but instead to hearing the sound of boots, and then of laces, and then, when I trained myself to listen more closely, to the sound of mud, the sound of wet earth on the floor I had just cleaned.

The door had been white before. We bought a screen door to put on top of it. You noticed it yellowing a little, like a tooth, you said, as you installed the screen. This simile made me squirm whenever we cracked the door open. It sounded sharp and my tongue would move to the crown that protects what is left of that one molar. Something strikes me there in the night after we've finished brushing our teeth.

You thought the door must be from another building. The house was built just over fifty years ago by my grandparents. Most of the house was in good condition. Its greatest offence was the tiny awkward kitchen, oak everywhere. Oak is a good wood, you said. It's an expensive wood. Look how stylish it is. And it lasts, you said, as I looked around, feeling sour.

I asked if the front door was oak too. Is oak a good wood for doors? It might be. This door has seen some things, you said, slapping your hand against it with a smile and leaving a handprint that stayed, though I tried scrubbing it more than once. One day while you were out working, after we painted the door blue and made it quiet, I stood looking at

the place where your handprint was, still somewhere under the paint. I put my hand against it. I put my hand against it and it felt wet. I looked down and there were drops.

5.

This is how the house came to be ours.

While my grandmother was passing away, slowly, over the months that coincided with my departure from the university, my mother announced that she did not know what to do with the house that was to be passed along to her. “It’s too old for me,” she said, standing in her own kitchen, which she keeps cold and white and modern as a tooth implant. She gestured here towards me, and this is when it was decided that we would move into my late grandmother’s house in St-Albert-de-Métis.

And so we did, and you have settled in, started to make minor alterations and small repairs to the space while I sit at the kitchen table. I can feel in my body that this is the coldest winter I have lived through and while the pipes of this house haven’t shaken, something else rattles in the walls at night. I tell you about it in the morning but you haven’t noticed. You sleep through anything, calmed by the cold air on the other side of the blanket.

You’ve done what you can to seal the windows. Every window in this house, except for mine, in that office, has been covered with cling film. You stood at these windows for hours with a blow-dryer, melting the plastic to the windowpanes, sealing them off, while I went from doorway to doorway, watching you work, saying nothing. When you got to my office, ready to seal off the final window, I stopped you. I couldn’t bear to think of this room sealed off, and me inside it, without any air except what was being recycled throughout this old house. I have never struggled with claustrophobia, but something about this ceremony of keeping the in *in* put me in a panic. After I rushed you out of the room, sending you on some errand in the shed, I hurried to the window and pressed my sideways

head against the corner, pushed my puckered lips against the dusty sill, sucked. I remember thinking of the shame I'd feel if you had caught me, as though breathing here was somehow illicit. Still, when the bitter cold air pushes through that crack, when the wind hits the front of the house just right, I shudder with my entire body. This is the only room where life is allowed.

6.

Woolf said of illness that it “often takes on the signs of love, and plays the same odd tricks.”¹ I thought of this as the nurse inserted the IV hookup into my hand and I surprised myself by watching. This was the first time the illness put me in the hospital. The nurse who applied jelly to my swollen belly joked that it looked strangely like I was pregnant. I grimaced. I had been awake for over twenty-four hours, most of them spent writhing on the bathroom floor with a gut so swollen and inflamed that it protruded alarmingly, comically. I was at unable to throw up but desperate to. My stomach expelled everything to emptiness and then kept contracting as if there was still something in there. What was my body trying to get out of me? For an entire day and more I was unable to keep anything down, not even water, without that feeling of being cut very precisely from the inside. And so, finally, my mother drove into amiskwaciwâskahikan to pick me up and bring me all the way back into St-Albert-de-Métis to be rehydrated via IV. I threw up in a canvas tote on the way, in tears from the pain and in shame and annoyance, both softened by comfort, as my mother watched me.

It wasn't so long ago, that first visit to the hospital, though there have been others since. It is still new to my life, something I think I can lose, or move away from. I would use the word suppress, but it was already inside of me. Where else would I push it? We spent six hours in the hospital that night. At first I made you and my mother sit together in the waiting room. I didn't want either of you to see me. But my mom is deeply curious and soon I heard her interrogating the patients in the beds approaching me, asking them about their ailments. You followed meekly, politely, carrying the jackets.

¹ Woolf, *On Being Ill*, 6.

You diagnosed me yourself, identified the trigger as stress, located it in the graduate program, English Department, the University as a whole. You repeated it on the way home from the hospital, back into the city, to the apartment we shared downtown before moving into my grandmother's old house. You reminded me of your theory at every red light. During that car ride you asked me to put everything down that was too heavy for me, to stop swallowing what is too much, too heavy, too toxic, to leave grad school and find another way to write.

“You know I won't think any less of you, right? You know I'm so proud of you and that you don't need a degree to be worthy of anyone's pride. It hurts me to see you in pain like this and to know you're putting yourself through it.”

There is love in this phrase, but there is also a latent chord of something else. My physical pain causes you emotional pain; you are not happy because I cannot feel well. And because I do not feel well, it takes other things away from you: a partner who is healthy enough for dinners out, long trips abroad, sex and pleasure. I would like to be able to do all this for you. Sara Ahmed writes that happiness contains within what she calls its language of reciprocity a certain coercion: “You have a duty to be happy for me.”² This is the model through which we relate to one another. It is hard, after a day of vomiting, to find anything left to spit up, to muster that energy, and so I sat back and listened with my head against the window. Should I have made a noise? You said it again as you parked the car, attempted to refine your argument, but you have never been persuasive. I didn't believe you or your diagnosis. And anyway, you didn't yet realize that while this illness corresponded to the timing of grad school, it also corresponded to the timing of you.

² Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 91.

7.

But I did leave in the end. Not until I completed my MA and started my PhD, but then I got sick again. The pain in my stomach overwhelmed me and started in on my mind as well. I became alienated from my body. When the pain came, I had no choice but to feel it through, never able to foresee or prevent it, as much as I tried to communicate with myself, to try to think myself back to health. I changed my diet, restricted it to almost nothing. I felt too weak and I stopped going to the office, then stopped leaving the house, and eventually stopped getting out of bed. My phone lit up with concerned text messages from classmates and baffled emails from professors. I answered none of them. I took my phone, unsynced my university email from it, blocked the phone numbers of the friends from my cohort, and I let the battery drain. Still, my mind indexed the envoys making their way to me, unread: messages of care, curiosity, concern, possibly even understanding.

I admit that grad school was destructive to me. Not the rigour of the work, necessarily, but the culture of overwork, competition, the normalization of anxiety and depression. Things are supposed to be hard, I was told, but you do it, then you do the next hard thing, and then the one after that. Others have. And yet I was the one to let it deplete me, sitting up in bed with a searing stomach. I wish I'd known which signs to listen to. The heartburn, the loss of appetite, the late nights writing papers about representations of furniture in Victorian novels and the burning stomach after only a few hours of sleep. All of these signs of my body weakening, all this for only average performance.

I knew that I didn't want to write anymore, that walking into the Humanities Centre tightened my abdomen until I felt the sweetness in my mouth and the stinging that moved from my gut to my ears, where it rung loud. I made no progress with my course work. My

supervisor grew more and more concerned, gently suggested new ways to spur productivity, offering to mediate conversations with my professors, but my mind was muddled by pain. I realized that I needed to expel this from my life the way my body was trying to expel everything else. And so I made an appointment with the chair of the graduate program, filled out the appropriate paperwork, and took a leave of absence without any intention of returning.

Without anything to do, I paced the apartment. I was barely able to eat and I survived on boiled potatoes, plain white rice, white fish. I started reading Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *A Dialogue on Love*; I started going to therapy. I spent my evenings scrolling through art dealers' websites, seeking beauty somewhere out there, because what had not changed was my desire to be making things. Even when my stomach flattened me with pain, when the brain fog was so thick it was almost corporeal, I still knew I wanted to be creating. It hurt me more not to be thinking or doing, but I wasn't sure I could do it in an academic setting anymore. I began seeking practices to nurture me again. Sedgwick, after her cancer diagnosis, began crafting. She described the practice of crafting as "so *not* writing."³ With writing, she said, her "perfectionism gets all over everything. ... Maybe it's called 'knowing what you're doing': it feels less and less good."⁴ Lately I could not even claim to know what I was doing in my academic writing, only that I knew that it was taking more away from me than it was giving. Maybe it's true that, ensconced in academia, the part of me that did anything productive with my writing was dampened. My mental energy was being pulled elsewhere. I only had so much of that. What worried me then was what would happen if I could not pull it back?

³ Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 199.

⁴ *Ibid.*

This is how I spent my time. Months passed. My grandmother passed and my mother made the arrangements for us to take up the house and get out of this apartment across the river from the university.

So now I exist in this room on the second floor while you are at work, trying to pull my attention back, trying to nurture a new project. This makes you happy, because it means that I've started the work of fulfilling a promise to you: to take a break from school and regain my health. You are happy to support the both of us while I take this time, working to support my health and the possibility of this new writing, which of course I am grateful for. But it has also reframed things for me. Do we always write for another? There is an obligation here, now, that I be well and write this for you, which stands against the fog of my mind in sharp relief. I do this for you perhaps more than I do it for myself. It makes it harder when it does not come. And it does not come. But still, every day, I walk into this room on the second floor, open my laptop, the Word document, and sit quietly without writing a word until the day is over and you come home and ask, "How did it go today?"

"It's good," I say. "I think I'm breaking through."

Then you smile at me, widely and warmly, as though this is the best news you've heard all day. It seems to make you truly happy to hear this, so I keep saying it.

"That's great! You deserve this, you know."

And you? What do you deserve?

8.

It is in the therapist's office that I see things most clearly and where I am able to index the goodness of you. I tell Mary that I wish I could be good for you: warm and caring, interested, someone to laugh with, who is able to love you. It is here that I can confront how much you are giving and how much I am taking, and also list the things I hold back from you that you take anyway.

“Was there a time when things didn't feel so strained?” she asks from her chair across the room from me. There is nothing in this room to hide behind. Its design—white walls hung with black and white photographs of trees, the white rug on the light wood floor, the two black leather Barcelona lounge chairs we sit in that are divided by a glass-top table—keeps things clean and orderly. Every blemish is rendered hyper-visible. In this room it has become easy to tell the truth.

And so I tell her about the drive we took down the west coast, from Oregon to California, how blue the water was, how we were able to talk for hours as you drove along the ocean, that I laughed and felt safe with you. This was before graduate school. But even then, there was a notable void in our relationship: I didn't want to touch you in the ways that you wanted. I did derive physical comfort from you—loved to cuddle in front of the TV or in bed on weekend mornings—but I could not initiate any sexual contact with you. I would count the days between the times we would have sex, try to drag out that space, to find other intimacies in hopes we would eventually replace sex altogether. Even when things were good and I was healthy, this was between us.

But now, in the throes of this new life, balancing the pain of my stomach and the new task of writing, the pressure that comes with knowing you are making these sacrifices

for me, it has become more difficult. I don't want to touch you at all anymore. We sleep facing away from one another and I don't linger in bed in the morning with you anymore.

When watching TV, we sit apart.

“Are you still having sex?” Mary wants to know.

“Yes,” I say. When I can't avoid it any longer.

“How does it feel for you?”

Now? Forced and violent. Before it was simply unpleasant, dull and inconvenient.

But it has taken on another edge now, one that pulls me to panic. My cells light and swirl in a getaway plan. My asthma returns after years of dormancy. Fight or flight. And not just with you, but with anyone. I have not wanted any of my previous boyfriends, never wanted their bodies up against mine, in my mouth or on my tongue. I would simply put it off until we reached an impasse and then we would separate. But things are different with you. We are so entwined. There might be something worth saving here, if I can fix myself. That's why I'm here, really, to explore this, to heal and be normal, finally.

But instead of saying all this, I say, “Sex is fine, I guess,” and she asks me something else.

9.

It was one evening in our old apartment, when I was supposed to be writing, that I came across a painting on a gallery's website that looked as though it were from a dream—sweet and soft and delicate but marked by something sinister—that it put me into a panic. My ribcage contracted as if it were wrapped tightly in a tensor bandage, my heart squeezing through its cracks and beating out, my breath caught somewhere inside while I took in the painting. This particular painting—Kris Knight's *The Unsuccessful Joke*—moved me beyond admiration. I was held by it and made to stare at something I was at once ready and unwilling to see. I sat, my hands hovering over the keys, and looked through shallow breaths.

Rendered in soft greys and greens is a young brown-haired man looking away, making no eye contact and yet nonetheless interpellating me. A hand from outside the frame holds his jaw as though directing the young man's gaze. The hand looks relaxed, and I can't quite tell if there is a violence being suggested here. How easy it is to cast doubt. The thumb rests at the base of the jaw, the forefinger near the pink, full lips, a shadow around them where he shaved. His blue eyes are open wide, alert, reacting. He has feathered lashes. The eyebrows raised but not arched, making room to take something in. A blush paints the cheek. What is he looking at? And then there's the mask that's pushed back onto his head, which sports a wide, baring smile. The mask has deep creases near the mouth. There, the soft pink of skin. There, how soft it looks, and how it falls around the cheek and jawbones, giving in to the pressure of the hand but also resisting, like there is a whole life underneath. The hand near the mouth, on the cheek, a caress, a violence. Who removed the mask? Why is the young man wearing it? Whose face is on the other side?

These, I realized, are the questions I am trying to answer in my writing. Suddenly, urgently, I wanted to piece together every violent, sad thing that has been done to me and to my body, to put them all in order. I opened my Word document and wrote a sentence, then another, then another. I deleted nothing that night, just wrote, forcefully pulling as much as I could from the body where these questions have been living. I wanted to write everything in that single night. I realized then that I was addressing my writing to you because, ultimately, I wanted whatever I was writing to be an act of care, even when it rubs painfully, even when it reveals enough to wound you. I hadn't realized that I was swallowing so much. But I want what happened between us to have the beautiful edge of this painting. I want my skin to be redone this way, in peach pastels. I want to be slippery pink and blue. When you touch me again I want to slide away, come off on your fingers, so I will leave a smear on whatever you touch, so there's some kind of proof, some evidence, not exactly red-handed but something like it.

10.

When I couldn't write, I cleaned. I could not get the house clean enough. I had been scrubbing the floors for days before I stopped. I spent hours pressing down on the sopping floorboards. I leaned into the heels of my hands like I was kneading bread, then sat back, gingerly bending my wrists the other way. Would the floor rise? The house was baking.

I had been thinking about you the entire time. How we moved into this place and you smiled as we unpacked boxes, got to cleaning the cupboards and stacking the plates. Smiled even when I dropped the bowl your grandmother left us, even as you cut your hand on the pieces as you picked them up and I stood over you, watching. I remembered you deciding to love this house and deciding to love this new life that I brought you into, illness and frustration and all. I thought of myself and how the best I could offer you in return was not to vocalize the disgust I felt in this house, at the way tiny seeds from your toast fell to the floor, were kicked aside to nestle in the cracks between the linoleum floor and the hardwood of the hallway. I thought of the revulsion as I watched the sink drain too slowly, pipes groaning and bubbles breaking through at the drain, sounding like smacking lips. I scrubbed through all of this. I thought of this house as its own autonomous thing.

All of this thinking took place before I noticed that I had scrubbed myself into a corner. I used too much water and got myself stuck. The pool of water I made was moving, in control of itself, belching and dragging its sickly suds further across the room and toward the door. I panicked and tossed a rag into the centre of the spreading puddle to stop its flow. It landed in a heap and the bottom grew dark, limping as it pulled up some of the water. The puddle paused, stopped growing, and I relaxed against the bottom cabinets, resting my hands on the floor pebbled with crumbs. But then it resumed its crawl toward

the door. I threw another rag next to the first, then one more and I was out. The scraps of cloth had gone black from soaking up the grimy water but still the pool shouldered its way to the door.

I unbuttoned my white cotton shirt and threw it into the pile, then my undershirt, and then my socks. My jeans went in next and then my underwear, but the water would not stop. I leaned over the puddle, careful not to fall in, and fished out my shirt. It was sopping. I wrung it out into the bucket of suds and began scrubbing with it, trying to fight the water from behind, like a child pulling an animal's tail.

The water was at the door, and rising, making a knocking sound, like the sea against a hull, and then you opened it from the other side. The daylight hit the puddle and it shrunk back, almost disappeared, into the pile of damp rags and clothing only a foot in front of me. You looked surprised to see me naked on the floor, in the corner of the kitchen against the cabinets, wringing my shirt into a bucket of cold water that had been out so long, most of the bubbles had burst and turned to film.

You came to lift me and I noticed your boot leave a mark on the floor.

11.

When I am sick you are too good to me, too attentive, and I know that I don't deserve it. When I'm sick, you ask me what I need. Don't you see that's too much? It smothers me more. There is a reason I'm sick. Maybe it is the stress of grad school, but maybe it's guilt, for taking you and refusing you, all at once. I don't want you to see me. I make you wear your headphones so you don't hear me throwing up, groaning, and groaning devolving into whimpering. When I do find the energy to get into bed, propped up because to lie down feels like the muscle of my stomach is tearing open, you lay beside me and try to hold me. I know where this comes from. It would make you feel better, comforted, if I held you while you were sick. You are enacting the ceremonies of love that you want me to perform in return. But I'm not able to.

Still, I take from you just the same. If you call me after work to ask if I need anything, I'll list a few items, annoyed that you didn't intuit my need of them. In these moments I am aware of my selfishness, and I even chide myself for it. You think of me first, always, even still, and I want to give back to you. I think there is even a place inside me where I am sad that I can't seem to. This is the place where my love for you resides. You do not stop caring, even in the face of rejection after rejection. You come home with bags in tow. You unpack the items I requested, and a few others.

"I got you some surprises for when you're feeling better," you say in your gentle voice. In it I catch notes of love for and fear of me. I take them without saying anything in response.

You want closeness and intimacy and I want to give them to you. But any proximity cuts a line in my stomach, builds a tension in my shoulders and chest. Even your hand on

mine jolts me into some place I don't want to be. I bring the items you bought for me to the couch, arrange them on the coffee table, and look at you, where you stand in the kitchen, unsure what to do and waiting for an invitation. What I want to tell you is that there is still something good in me that has been occluded by all of this but I don't know how to get to it anymore. I want you to help me but I am hardening too quickly. I am losing track of myself. I want to erase the lines I've drawn between us. It would all be so much easier if I could do that, maybe find in myself a sexual desire for you, for anyone, that we could make a bridge between us out of.

Instead, I pat the cushion beside me. You move towards me slowly, like a small, suspicious animal until I muster a smile, and then you bound towards me in full hope that this time I will stay close to you, that this time you have finally done enough.

12.

I told you that I thought I was going to throw up, I had never laughed so hard before. You were speeding down the QEII from amiskwacîwâskahikan toward Wichispa Oyade, where you were hoping to buy a piece by an artist whose work you'd recently been introduced to. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision. You called me from the parking lot of the Humanities Centre to tell me that a sale had fallen through and there was a chance you could buy it. You said we could make it there, make the purchase, and get home before midnight. You had two sandwiches from Farrow for the ride. I shut my laptop without a second thought and told Sheila, my friend and officemate, that I was ditching our night class, and I ran down to meet you.

The whole drive down to Wichispa Oyade I felt loose with happiness, high from the thrill and freedom of skipping class, singing along to the radio in between bites of sandwich and sips of ginger ale. The autumn fell all around us. We made it into the city around 6:00 PM and drove straight to the gallery. You had called the operator of the gallery from the road, charmed him until he agreed to stay late for us, and sure enough, there he was, pacing in front of the door when we pulled up in front.

The painting you chose was huge—taller even than you—and wider than your arm span. In geometric black and yellow lines and shapes—contrasting, overlapping, broken—was a nude body. He was posed standing upright, almost life-size, his glossy, raised profile stark against the white negative space around him. His back was slightly bent over his right knee. One of his arms was lifted up to the face and the other wrapped around his torso, his fingers painted with bold, vigorous strokes. He stood as though he had just been hit, the moment before doubling over. A dark patch of black hatched paint at the rib like a bruise.

The portrait chilled me, but you stood with your eyes wide and a slack smile plastered to your face.

“Look at him,” you said softly. “No direct light source, lit almost artificially. Look how he is standing defenceless, static. It’s such a vulnerable, intimate piece.”

“Oh, yes,” said the gallerist. “Such a deeply moving portrait. It’s at once distressing and tranquil.”

I read the title of the piece: “Self Portrait II.” So this was how the artist saw himself. I stood closer to the canvas and looked up at the face. Rendered in detail and then painted over with a faint layer of black with a dry brush was the face, a handsome one, eyes wide open and staring straight ahead. It was unsettling because the eyes did not betray any pain or discomfort, fear or shock, that I saw in the pose. But there was something captivating about the eyes that I couldn’t deny. I tried to enter through them the whole time you arranged payment and delivery, and before I knew it, the sun had set and it was time to drive back to amiskwacîwâskahikan and let the gallerist have his dinner.

You were so excited to have made the purchase that you started acting silly, speeding once we made it onto the highway, singing Ella Fitzgerald at the top of your lungs. Doing this seemed to have made you so happy, and I felt happy too, uncomplicated. I started to sing along, taking the harmony, both of us wailing along down the dark highway. We didn’t notice right away the flashing lights of the police car coming behind us, still far away but gaining.

“Fuck,” I said, looking frantically side to side. My anxiety was already pitched up, but you couldn’t be brought down with me. The day had made you bold, and you looked at me with a wink and said you’d take care of it. You sped up even further, looking for space

enough between two other cars and quickly slipped between them without signaling. I held my breath, and sure enough, the police car sped past us. We were undetected. I let out all of my breath and looked at you. Your eyes were twinkling, and you smiled at me. I started to laugh. I couldn't believe you'd done that. You were usually so meek, buttoned-up, rule-abiding, and I loved this other side of you. We laughed until we caught our breath and then sat in silence the rest of the way. We were happy.

I look at Mary, who smiles and nods to me. She thinks it will be helpful to remember how things used to feel and so we have spent my sessions this way, me recalling a memory and unpacking it together.

“That’s a nice story,” she says.

“Yes, but it was a long time ago.”

13.

My body heals, even if it does so slowly. All the healing takes place inside, up and down my secret wounds, places you can't see but that you still watch for. The initial days after a flare-up are marked by a dull pain in the muscle of the stomach wall that causes me to walk slowly, to try not to bend or move my body. It is these moments when I understand why the core of our body is just that, the core. It is used for almost every movement. I promise myself that if I heal, I won't take it for granted again.

I know you watch me as I move gingerly around the house. You are always in my periphery. When I begin to move with ease again, your shoulders lift. Your hope rises. I have taken to lying, dragging out the dramatics, to keep my body to myself a little longer. The night you knew I felt better it started to snow again. I had been sitting with my eyes unfocused, unblinking, calmed by the even movements of white at a diagonal. I wasn't thinking. I bent quickly to pick up a book I dropped, stretching and reaching my torso, and you sat upright almost immediately. I knew that you were on to me and that I would have to acquiesce. You'd been so patient while I healed. You were due. And so I relinquished. But that night, when my body shuddered at your touch and rejected you again, you couldn't bear that shame anymore.

We had been in bed and you were holding me like you do, and already I was feeling claustrophobic, disgusted that your skin was sticking to mine, repulsed by the lightness of your touch and the wetness of your lips when you kissed me near the ear. The sound of it. Then more frequently, with more force. Small moans. I moved my head away and it must have seemed like an invitation to my neck, because then you were there, your tongue

sliming and writhing like an eel. Your tongue inside my ear, depositing saliva and pulling away, leaving it wet and cold and dripping. I moved again, and you climbed on top of me.

We hadn't had sex for so long and we didn't have any condoms in the house, so you put your weight on me instead, began to gyrate and thrust against my torso, awakening a tenderness there, and your arms moved up my body. I had lost my ability to speak, my heart raced, and my throat went tight. It was difficult to breathe. My eyes dart. I tried to push you away, but you read this movement differently, like I wanted it rough, and you grabbed my wrists and held me down. I moved against you, thrashed as much as I could, still unable to speak. Why didn't I speak? My throat rattled, and I saw how you heard this as excitement, passion. But I felt threatened and afraid. I tried to bite, snapping my angry jaws at you. You kissed my mouth, hot, half wet but dry too, sour, like you hadn't eaten.

In the end I gave up, stopped struggling. Maybe you wanted to prove something to me. I waited for you to finish, all over my chest, and tried not to heave when the beads hit me. I almost swallowed my tongue. You rolled aside and silently handed me a Kleenex. I wiped myself down, rolled over, feel sick to my stomach, and you held me through the night.

14.

The morning after, I pretended to be asleep as you got ready for work. I pretended that the sound of your hangers dropping to the floor did not rattle me, that the sound of you tossing discarded clothing into a pile, the soft fabric thump, didn't prod in me the feeling that the obstacles that prevent me from fleeing were growing taller and more plentiful. You turned all the lights on while you dressed. You crawled back into bed to kiss my cheek and said goodbye and I put on a sleepy groan for you, then I waited for you to walk out of the room, to the door where you turned the lock to let yourself out and go. Then I lay there counting my heartbeat, feeling like I'd been expelled from my body. You were still on me. I caught vomit in my throat. Standing in the shower later I tried to boil you off.

When I was clean again, and calm again, I went to my office and shut the door. You don't exist as much here. It was only days before that I had started plastering the walls with pictures, trying to cover all the places on the wall I know you had touched, and then the spots you had looked at. I tacked photographs of all my other worlds: here, shots of the Humanities Centre that a dear friend used to take, who taught me to love Brutalism. Sugarbowl in winter, too dark to see anything but its illuminated sign running the length of the building, and Christmas lights on the fenced patio. Trees in Garneau, the theatre. And then of the school house in St-Albert-de-Métis, the chapel, which still refuses to budge, not even to flinch, when confronted with the violences of colonization. And then of water, leaves, trees, cracked concrete. None of these things belong to me and never have. I want to give them all back and leave. I want to take down the structures and go, taking with me every hard edge, every sharp corner, so none of us ever need to rub our skin against them again.

On the wall above my desk is where I tacked print-outs of more of Knight's paintings so I could look at them together. They speak to one another when I am not in the room. I heard them. Soft performers in ruffled collars. Sensitivity. There's one I notice more than others now, *Every Time a Little Less*. Lying face-up, blue-skinned and blushed, so much shadow around the lip, the jaw, over the eyes, he isn't resting. You can see by the lashes that his eyes are slightly open. This could be a painting of me in bed that night, after you came on me and my skin went cold and pearly in the shadow. Am I beginning to read too much into things? I can't keep doing this to myself. I can't keep letting you do this. Every time, a little less of me.

15.

I open my laptop and decide to log in to my university email for the first time since beginning my leave. I type in my username and password and wait for the page to load. I see the number of emails sitting in my inbox and stand up, daunted by the number, then sit down again. I gesture vaguely to myself, then task myself with deleting the junk, listserv messages, and anything I simply have no interest in reading. What's left are a couple dozen emails from professors and friends. Sheila has sent the most. Her email subjects grow more intense as time progresses. Her early messages—"Checking In," "How Are You?," "You Alive?"—are followed by ones that betray the humour that she uses to communicate frustration: "Open This I Swear to God," "omggggggggg we're breaking up," and "i sold all the books you left here and moved to Montréal." I opened that email first.

I don't even know why I bother writing to you anymore. And I'm serious about your books. I'll sell them. I could use the shelf space. Who needs three copies of Autobiography of Red? Anyway, I miss you, and if you're reading this, write back and I'll consider forgiving you for ghosting me. I hope you're doing okay.

I feel a pang of guilt, thinking about Sheila sitting in our old office alone, writing to me and receiving nothing in return. If I'm honest, it hadn't occurred to me that anyone would miss me. I thought Sheila would get a new officemate and move on, that grad school is all that united us. Maybe these are other side-effects of this illness: selfishness and social paranoia. When I closed the door to that world, I didn't think I would miss the people from it, or that I would be missed. But I was obviously wrong on both counts. This is what brought me to check my email in the first place. I hit reply.

If the offer of forgiveness still stands, I want it. How are you? And things in the Department? Write back, let's make a plan. I need to get out of this house. Miss you, sorry for being the worst.

I hit send and take a breath that fills me to my diaphragm. Something in me tells me I won't heal if I close myself off any longer. I stand and shake my hands out. I pace the room, suddenly filled with anxious energy. My laptop dings and there is a message from Sheila.

The Prodigal Son returns. Today is Monday, I teach tomorrow, but I want to see you Wednesday. Tell me you are free. Meet me at Leva at 3:00 PM or I'm sacrificing one of your Anne Carsons.

I am about to enter the world again.

16.

As much as I may be ready to step back into the world I left behind, there is still the world you and I share, and nothing deters you from making your advances. You suggest sex more and more often, hinting at it coyly, like it is on your mind now more than usual. I don't think that you enjoy it either, the act or having always to initiate it. There is part of you that seems cautious, perhaps waiting for me to reject you again, or worried that I only give in to quiet you. This is how it is. Things feel different between us the day after we engage in some sort of sexual contact. I think you regret it, wishing both that you didn't want it and that I did, our mirror desires. Neither of us can be happy in this. I have taken up different tasks to distract you from it and to make my contributions. If I can't enjoy sex with you, I can at least be useful in other ways, not always just taking from you. I try to cook dinner each night now.

Before you arrive home, I tidy the kitchen. I wipe down the countertops but there always seems to be something left on them, dragging a mark across the surface. I use new cloths, fresh paper towels, and still, there are red streaks on the surface that I can't seem to scrub away without causing some new streak. These marks begin to shift in the light, move in and around each other. The blinds on the window cast shadows. It must all be light play, maybe dry contact lenses. I leave the kitchen to take them out and put my glasses on, and when I return, I'm met with gleaming countertops, unmarked by anything.

This time in the kitchen reminds me of Sheila's research: how to cultivate feminist care networks through fermented foods. She would regularly bring fresh loaves of sourdough to the office. Over one long weekend she made jars of sauerkraut and brought me one that leaked all over my tote bag on the way home. All these memories fixate me on

my gut flora. It occurs to me that this pain I feel might be my fault. I have become inhospitable. Nothing good will grow in me anymore.

When I cook now, I am conscious to nourish us with meals heavy in prebiotics and probiotics. I want to reverse the damage I may have done and give whatever good that is still inside me a fighting chance. I bring the cutting boards out. They reek of garlic and onions. They haven't been cleaned properly. It isn't your fault but still I roll my eyes, curse you. It makes it easier to displace all of my frustrations. I slice a lemon in half, pour coarse salt on the board, scrub. I didn't realize there were so many cuts on my fingers until the sharp stings hit and I recoil, dropping the lemon on the floor. I bend down to pick it up and discover more crumbs on the floor. Seeds from your bread are sprouting roots all across it, between the tiles. There are ants and beetles with beautiful iridescent green shells I want to poke pins through. The lemon has fallen into the brambles. I have to reach all the way in, elbow-deep, then to the shoulder, and it's still too far away. The salt on its flesh is burning the earth where it's landed. Slugs are sizzling and popping. I want to stay here, where it is damp and cool and lit yellow by the kitchen light. I want to stay here in the paleness of Kris Knight's Gucci Flora, soft witches' weeds around me, moths dusting my eyelids. I'm suddenly unafraid of spiders.

I lay like this forever and then I get up to make a fire. I wander. Night never comes but still I know I must make a shelter for protection. Something is coming. I arrange large fronds, enormous petals, discarded wings into a home. I do not build a door; nothing here can slam or creak, nothing sounding like a tooth breaking at the root, pulled out with such force that it hurts for days. I live forty years in this place, and then you come home, place

your coffee mug on the counter, spilling a drop that runs in a streak, and ask why all the food is rotten.

17.

I walk in to the café a few minutes late and see that Sheila is already seated a table near the door. She rises as I approach and lunges in for a hug.

“How the hell are you?” she asks excitedly. There are two drinks on the table. “I ordered our usual: almond London Fogs.”

“You are a dream,” I say, sitting down and setting my bag on the empty chair next to me. “How are you? I’m sorry it’s been so long.”

“I’m still trying to decide if I should be angry with you about that. You just disappeared. You’re lucky I’m so persistent or you’d be down a friend.”

“I can’t afford to lose another one of those. I’ll make it up to you.”

“Deal,” she says, raising her mug. I raise mine too and we lightly tap them.

“So how are you?” I ask. “Fill me in on everything I missed.”

“I wish I could tell you that something interesting has happened. I still don’t have a single chapter done but I’m trying not to think about that. I switched flours and my starter seems a lot happier.”

“Have you tried the turmeric bread yet?”

“Without my trusty taster? No. Maybe soon, now that you’ve waltzed back into my life. What about you? What have you been up to? Are you—” Sheila pauses here. “Are you doing okay? Is being on leave helping?”

I pause for a moment too, take a sip of my London Fog to give me more time before answering.

“Yeah, I think it’s helping. I’ve been rereading some stuff for my dissertation so I’m ready when I come back. You know, you really need to read *Autobiography of Red*.”

“Don’t tell me that’s what you’ve been reading.”

“Why not?”

“You have three copies in the office. Are you telling me you have one at home too?” I smile and raise my eyebrows. “Four copies? You have four copies of this book.”

“Listen, it’s good.”

“It must be the best damn book ever,” she says, rolling her eyes. “How’s your writing?”

“About the same as yours,” I say.

“Fair. Okay, can we agree that that’ll be the end of work talk? Time for department gossip?”

“Finally,” I say.

And so Sheila fills me in on everything I’ve missed since taking my leave: new flings and breakups, rumours of infidelity, embarrassing conference papers, stories of pedantic professors in departmental meetings. It surprises me to admit that I have missed this.

“You know, Alicia is having a party on Saturday night. I’m not seeing Candace anymore—don’t ask—so I’m bringing you with me instead. Don’t say no. And don’t do that thing where you say you’ll go but then you cancel last minute. You owe me.”

She’s right, and so I agree to go. We make arrangements to meet beforehand, then we talk about small things for the time it takes for us to finish our drinks. When we stand to leave she hugs me. It is the first instance of physical contact in the space of several months that hasn’t caused me to recoil in disgust or pain. I find I’m embracing her back, pulling

her closer to me, her soft sweater under my chin. Have I needed physical comfort? We pull away from each other and smile, walk out together, and stop at the corner.

“Saturday. Meet you at 8:00 PM. Wear whatever you like. Bring something nice!”

Then she turns and walks back toward campus and I watch her go, unsure where I’m to go next.

18.

Stepping in to the party feels like opening a bottle, quickly releasing the pressure that had built up, like being instantly drunk and lightweight, one of the bubbles. Sheila and I walk in first to a sea of shoes and then of people, most of them members of my former cohort, familiar and unfamiliar all at once. I've brought a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc with me for others to drink and I set it down on the kitchen counter where Alicia and almost everyone else are gathered. A kitchen party. She sees us, throws up her arms, and calls me by name. She rushes over to hug me.

"How are you? You look so handsome," she says, looking me up and down. "You're so slim! Grad school hasn't been as kind to my figure," and she gestures to her body that fills her black dress deliciously. Alicia's smile is full-confidence and holds a knowing, biting laughter I am envious of. I think of how much I wanted to be her during our time in courses together; she's elegant and poised, articulate and sharp. I always felt so foggy. My memory fades. I could never remember what it was I read. When speaking I worried I'd lose the attention of the room, so I stumbled. Alicia was all of the things I wanted to be.

"Come here, I want to introduce you to my boyfriend," she says, dragging me and Sheila by the wrists into the depths of her kitchen—pristine—and stopping in front of a tall man with hunched shoulders and nervous eyes. "This is Chris."

I smile, shake his hand, introduce myself. Sheila does the same. He nods and smiles and asks if we're Alicia's friends from school. Sheila responds affirmatively immediately and instinctively. I look to the floor. Alicia starts telling Chris about Sheila's research,

which is adorned with such words as “brilliant” and “important” and Sheila politely accepts every one of these compliments.

“And what do you do?” Chris asks me, pulling my eyes up from where I have been comparing the state of everyone’s socks. Everyone’s socks look brand new but mine. I never could get mine to stop pilling.

“I’m working independently,” I say.

“He’s on a break from the program right now,” says Alicia. “But he’ll be back! I know it!”

I smile weakly, unsure what exactly to say, to agree or disagree. I decide on: “Sheila, let me get you a drink.” She gives me her order.

The drinks station is laid out just outside the kitchen, on her long wooden dining room table. Bottles are arranged, solo cups lined up, buckets of ice for drinks, another keeping wine cold. A few people stand around it chatting, but no one is making drinks. I grab two cups. I fill mine up with ice that I plan to let melt throughout the evening, and a second cup that I fill generously with a Riesling for Sheila. I lift both in my hands and turn back towards the kitchen. Then I hear my name coming at me from my side. Approaching from the right is someone named David, another acquaintance from my cohort, who happens also to be brilliant. Everyone in the cohort was brilliant. That was grad school. It was other things that separated you from the rest, other things that helped some succeed and broke others. He is one of the successful ones. He seemed to breeze through course work and seminar discussion. His papers were praised by professors; he managed to get one of his papers from a class we took together published. It is difficult even now not to

measure my worth against him. My papers were usually incoherent and always pages below the requirement.

“It is so good to see you,” he says, extending his open hand to me as though to shake it. I lift both drinks in an apologetic shrug. He grins. “I didn’t think you’d come out tonight. I’ve missed you around the department.”

“I’m very missable,” I say. I’m not in a place to entertain him, and I feel a pressure to bring myself up to his level.

“Tell me what you’ve been doing? How’s your life of freedom?”

“So you’ve heard. Well, most impressive: I’m all caught up on my back issues of *The New Yorker*.”

“That’s no small feat,” he says, chuckling.

“No, it isn’t,” I say. “I’m grateful to the department for giving me this time to do the work that really matters. Otherwise I’d be teaching.”

“That reminds me: I’ve got a 100-level course this semester and I included *Autobiography of Red* on the syllabus. I remembered you talking about it so passionately when that group of us went out for drinks and thought I’d give it a read. It’s good.” He leans onto the corner of the drinks station, relaxes into a lazy half grin.

“That explains the commission cheque I got in the mail. It surprises you that I have good taste, does it?” I say. David laughs.

“Not at all,” he says, laughing. “Maybe you could come join us when we start discussing at the end of the month. I’m sure they’d love to hear from an expert. Really, tell me, when are you going to come back to us and write that dissertation on Carson? I miss seeing you around HC.”

“I’d like to give you an answer, but I’ve fallen for another writing project. I’m going to ride it for a little while, see where it takes me.”

“Oh? And what’s that writing project about?”

“Right now I’m really into blank pages. Negative space, you know? It’s a postmodern gesture.” David laughs again.

“Come on. Give me a clue.”

I have nothing to tell him, but thankfully I don’t need to say anything, because suddenly Sheila is there, grabbing her now warm Riesling from my hand.

“Never rely on a man to get anything done in a timely manner,” she says to us both. She nods to David and says his name in greeting. They begin to talk about some seminar they both attended, and so I tune them out and scan the room. I used to read exhaustion and uncertainty and anxiety on many of these faces across seminar tables. Now they are all relaxed, laughing. They got through it. Why couldn’t I?

19.

I leave the party early and catch a bus back to St-Albert-de-Métis, then walk forty minutes from the station to the house. You said you had a gallery event that night and would be home late. While brushing our teeth you told me that you were announcing a new show with that artist you love so much, whose self-portrait you bought for your office on the main floor of the house. So all the lights were off when I approached the house from the street. I put my key in the door and opened it, kicked off my shoes, and walked straight up to my office on the second floor. I opened up my laptop and then the Word document. There is a lot of blank space, but there are words too. Over the past several weeks I've managed to write a few decent pages. Even I can see that they aren't bad. I could have told David that, at least. I could have told Sheila that. That the writing isn't bad.

Mary suggested I write about myself at first, just to get back in the habit and to wake up my eye again.

"It's easier to pay attention to the things that make up your life," she told me. "Then you can move outside of it."

But instead I feel I keep moving within it, revisiting every instance of shame and pain that we exchange between us. Mary encourages me to see this practice through. I reread what I wrote last: an account of our last sexual encounter, descriptions of how my heart raced, how you seem in those moments to grow and expand to be even larger than you normally are. I have started to put my fear here.

But through my writing I am learning to articulate my desires in the face of yours. I thought that I felt no desire at all. I thought, for some reason, that sexual desire is all there is, and that that sexual desire's opposite is no desire at all. But now my other desires are

emerging, taking form, and I realize that what I desire is not to inhabit sexual desire of my own, but to strip you of yours.

20.

I bring fifteen yellow tulips in a blue ceramic pitcher up to my office and set them on a pile of books on the green leather chair. I still haven't sealed the window so it's cool in the room. Tulips prefer cold environments. The air moves strangely here now. Dust is gathering in odd clumps in corners, under furniture. I kick one out of sight and sit down to write. Starting is difficult every time. It is important that I don't stop trying to write my way through this. To determine where it is I have gone, to ask what is working on me. And what I am doing to you. I must find an element of sweetness in this story.

Here: there have been times when I do miss you. There have been times when I waited for you to come home, watching from the window in my office like a child waiting for their parents to come home after a night out. Like that child, I would dash from the window, slide down the stairs to meet you eagerly at the door. But what motivated these feelings? Was it happiness or guilt? Belief that I could change the dynamic we have fallen into, something outside of neglect? I want to know the date that this all became too much for us, when complication stepped lightly through the door as you opened it, ducking under your arm and into the house. I would like to find the answer to this. My teeth ache.

Since talking to Sheila I have been rereading Anne Carson: *Short Talks* and *The Autobiography of Red*, *The Beauty of the Husband*. Someone said of her writing—the citation is incomplete; in the interview, she only calls this person “Someone”—that in her writing, every word resists the next word.⁵ Some of her work is in fragments, only what is essential, and that's a form I consider adopting. I have tried to write about this in length and then I run out of words. I have been trying to write about meeting you, following a

⁵ Carson, “Conversation” n.p.

pace behind you as we walked toward your apartment. You vanished against the clean white walls, the concrete floor and high ceilings of your building. The space seemed to suck up sound; my heart pounded an empty thud. You had lights hanging from the beams, a couch in green, and after an evening of shyness on your part, you suddenly seemed comfortable. You might have mixed drinks and sat close to me. You kissed me and even then my body knew, but I let you keep going, though I timed my mouth to keep you from entering it, maintaining a barrier between you, a stranger, and me, sometimes a stranger too. You led me to the bedroom. Why did I follow and then keep following? I let you undress me, and watched you undress. Even then I did not like where you put your lips, your hands. The sounds of a mouth puckering and pulling, feeling cold and too exposed to you, wanting to leave but feeling as though it's too late.

Every touch resists the next touch.

21.

When we go to bed, you take the left side and I take the right, and we have learned to keep our distance. If we do embrace in the night it is because you are the one who is wrapped around me. You fall asleep so easily, snore, and I am alone with my thoughts. Since starting to write about us, memories I hadn't wanted to confront have been uncovering themselves, asking to be written too. I stare through my eyelids into the dark.

I was five and it was nighttime, in a gymnasium that in my memory is enormous and long like a hanger. I see it now from an aerial view: rows of sleeping bags with boys stuffed inside, young boys the entire length of the gym. Pathways between us where men—some of them our fathers—walked with swinging flashlights, guards on patrol. Scouts Canada, a sleepover for local sections.

Why wasn't I sleeping with my friends? My sleeping bag was beside an older boy, a Cub Scout whose name I never knew but whose face I see to this day. First he whispered. I whispered back, young, afraid, wanting to impress this older boy. Flashlights sweeping. What did he say? Adults hushing us for talking. Lights out. He whispered something else and unzipped his sleeping bag and somehow everything else is forgotten except feeling something in my hands that was hot and sticky. Lights behind his head, far away, so many men talking in a corner with folded arms, one of them my father.

I see it now from an aerial view. The sleeping bag zipping up again. My small young self turning back over, onto the back, and we lock eyes with each other, him down there, me here. Every night, you beside me. Through my eyelids, I catch my own gaze until it is dark and I fall asleep.

22.

I don't sleep well anymore and I wake long before you. This bed makes my back ache and I'm grateful for it. It gives me something else to concentrate on while I wait for you to wake up and get out of bed, shower and leave for work. I can't talk to you until I sort out these memories, and this is why I don't get up with you, talk to you over breakfast, tell you what I've been dreaming about. I don't want to worry you or invite you to diagnose me again. That's what it comes down to.

I ended up staying in bed all day long, remembering how it felt to be touched then, and how it feels to be touched by you now. It occurs to me that every time I have been faced with a sexual encounter, I let myself be touched because I didn't want to disappoint whoever stood opposite me. Every time it seems like the thing I ought to do, to not cause an inconvenience or a commotion. It seems like something normal. I should want to be touched. And these men derive pleasure from touching me.

There's a slice of window that isn't covered by the blinds that the light sneaks through and moves about the room, which is why I can't move and have to stay quiet. It moves like a searchlight across the wallpaper that I'd chosen to cover the blue paint that held on to your fingerprints. You're right: it is too dark for the space. I insisted on a dark floral wallpaper because I'd become obsessed with the design Kris Knight did for Gucci years ago. It's become a way to make sense of my life, following his work, and so I wanted to bring some softness into this space where before things had felt too severe and unsafe. The floral wallpaper suggests that there are still things beyond this room, that there is a depth of floral life, and that once I learn the trick to it, I'll be able to separate the front layer and step beyond what I can see before me and eventually find a place where I'll be better

protected. When he was preparing to illustrate his version of the Gucci Flora, Knight said that he researched the plants of ancient Pagan Rome that women used as a way of gaining and exerting power over the men in their lives.⁶ I wanted something to give me power too, to protect me.

Now our walls are black with soft mysteries of flowers that cut through the night like stars. They spin in the light, arcing over the wall in your absence. Vines grow. A spider spins an impressive web. They speak, too. They tell me to reject you. They tell me to protect myself. They tell me they can help me, that some of them are poisonous and they know the recipe. I listen calmly and patiently explain that I can't do that because I love you and there is an agreement, an economy between us. They don't understand and they start speaking over one another. It's so loud with rustling leaves and rattling petals, clicking insects and water drops, in a cacophony of wetness. Then you turn the lock in the door downstairs and its grinding cuts the room with silence. Everyone stands still so you don't notice. You call my name, but I'm playing the game too. Who can stay quiet the longest? You come upstairs in your socks and open the door.

“Have you been here all day?” you ask, your voice concerned and maybe also exasperated.

“Yes. I haven't been feeling well.”

“Oh, I'm sorry. I was hoping we could spend some time together tonight.” I know what you mean when you say that. “Is there anything I can do to help? Can I make you some soup?”

⁶ Knight, “Gucci Presents” n.p.

“No, I’m fine,” I say, pushing the duvet off me and sitting up. “I’ll come downstairs. Just give me a minute.”

“Okay. Let me start supper.”

I realize then that I haven’t eaten all day and that heartburn has been settling in my esophagus. Now that you’re home, I feel as though I am too deep within in my body, and that it is reacting to me, trying to push me back out like someone else’s organ, transplanted in for necessity, survival. There’s an ache on the upper left quadrant of my stomach: my problem area. I place my hand on the pain and I’m beginning to swell. I rub my stomach very softly, very gently, the way it likes, the way only I know how. I will be sick tonight. I will be sick all night and won’t need to face the awkwardness of rejecting you for another several days at least. My body knows and hurts me to protect me.

23.

These stomach pains are reliable. I did get sick but I have difficulty recovering again. The pain continues throughout the night and I no longer think it's worth it after all. I lay in the bathroom where I clutch the bathmat in both hands, whimpering into it for hours. I've thrown up all I can; there is nothing left, but my stomach is still swollen. I am on my hands and knees. Looking down, I see that my stomach has fallen out of place and it is only the skin of me holding it in at all. I want to know how I look from the inside.

When morning arrives, I insist you go to work and not stay with me. I am able to stand and walk, hunched over and slowly. I don't need to crawl anymore. I think I'll be able to sleep. You leave and I make the mistake of trying to drink water. I am dehydrated and while I take very small sips, it opens the searing wound in my stomach and I am doubled over again, screaming inside my inhalations. I need to find a way to protect my body. I was stupid to think it was trying to protect me. It's only convenient timing.

I spend the entire morning in searing pain. I pass out twice and dream of math equations. I wake up in a sweat. I am dizzy and dehydrated. I call a cab to take me to the University Hospital and wait the entire afternoon in the ER, leaning far down the chair. The woman seated across from me opens a bag of dill pickle chips. I am nauseated and famished. I want them. I glare at her until she relocates.

Finally I am admitted and rehydrated. I get another ultrasound. I am asked my symptoms and a nurse administers a breath test. They suggest a camera down my throat should this continue and I agree; I have been weakened enough. I'll do anything.

“It sounds to me like your symptoms could point to gastritis,” the doctor says when I finally see her. “Your breath test will be back soon and we’ll be able to determine if you have H. Pylori.”

“H. Pylori?” I ask. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“*Helicobacter Pylori*. It’s a fairly common bacteria that lives in the stomach. More people have it than you’d think, though not everyone shows symptoms. If that’s what you end up having, we’ll know how to treat it. In the meantime, I want to put you on some PPIs to control your stomach acid. That might help soothe the stomach lining and prevent more of these flare-ups.”

“I’ll take anything,” I say. The doctor writes me a prescription and then hurries off to see her next patient, leaving me to remove the gown and put my shirt and sweater and jacket on alone, my core still feeling torn up.

I had been talking to Shiela about my gut flora and my suspicion that I don’t have much of it to speak of.

“You could have bad bacteria overgrowth,” she offered. “The good guys get killed off. It’s common. Diet high in sugar, stress. That’ll all do it. It could be that the stress of grad school pushed you to the edge and compromised the good guys in there.” I thought of telling you this, but it would only corroborate your theory that grad school is what brought this on in the first place and I don’t want to give you that satisfaction. What about the stress you put my body through every time you come too near to me? I could never say that to you.

“The body knows when something is wrong,” Sheila said. “You just have to believe it.”

24.

I take a bus and then the LRT, slicing north from Southgate through South Campus, McKernan/Belgravia to Health Sciences/Jubilee until I arrive at the university. I come this way because it's familiar to me; it isn't faster. But it is safe and had been habitual, and it strikes me that even though grad school may have been bad for me—I can't deny it wasn't good—there is something to be said for having a sense of responsibility and purpose and belonging, a place to navigate, to feel familiar in. I climb out of the station with my prescription folded in my hand, entitling me to thirty 40 mg tablets of Pantoprazole. I walk across campus to the pharmacy and wait in line.

In the midst of my conversation with the pharmacist—"What are you taking these for?" "Gastritis." "I see you have been on this medication before?" "Yes." "Will you need an explanation of how to take them?" "No."—I turn my head to the side and catch from the corner of my eye the sight of David in line behind me a few people between us. I want to evade him, hunching my shoulders up, tugging at a hood that isn't there. I was only just able to evade his interest at Alicia's party. Sheila was a good buffer, as were the other people mingling around the table in the dim lighting. Here, under the hanging fluorescent bars of light, it's too difficult to go undetected. And I know that by the way the space is laid out—two parallel lines from the entrance to the counter and very little on either side—I'll have to pass him as I leave. I'm told that my prescription will be ready in fifteen minutes and that they can offer me a beeper if I'd like to go sit outside, which I decline. I move aside to let the next person come to the counter and decide to greet David.

He is scrolling through something on his phone when I approach him and seem to shock him out of his attention. He hadn't noticed me, then. I could have passed by unseen.

I'm committed now, though, so I walk straight to him, stand before him, and this pulls his attention from the screen of his phone.

“Would you look who it is,” he says easily.

“Big kid on campus,” I say, nodding and grinning. “So, what brings you here?” I immediately realize what a strange and personal tone this question takes when in a pharmacy line—it becomes too invasive and awkward—and so I scrunch my face, rolling my eyes at myself. “Sorry, that’s personal.” But he laughs and holds up his finds: Tylenol Extra Strength, a tensor bandage, and a box of condoms.

“Looks like you have a good night planned,” I say. David laughs.

“Oh, these are not to be combined,” David says with a wink. “I like it rough, but not so rough that I need mending afterwards.” If he wanted me to say something in response, I disappoint him. I am disarmed.

“So I fessed up, now it’s your turn. What brings you here?”

“My stomach. Erosion of the stomach lining. I’m the lucky winner of a 30-day round of medication”

“Wow. Yuck. Ouch.”

“That about sums it up.” A moment nods between us, and then David is next in line. He goes to pay and I stand alone, looking back and forth, rocking on my heels, and then he’s back.

“My time here is up. I have to go prep for class now, but I hope we run into each other again. Same time next week?” He uses the box of condoms to salute me, clicks his tongue and smiles, then turns to go once I nod to him. Another twelve minutes elapse and I retrieve my medication, to be taken thirty minutes before my first meal of the day. I realize

that I am jealous of David and the ease with which he seems to navigate the world, the way he stands with his back straight and his shoulders aligned, unafraid of what people think of his neck and of the short hairs that grow there, the parts of himself he can't see but others can. Like he belongs here. His lack of shame in buying condoms—sharing with the world he uses them, inviting people to imagine him opening the box, unwrapping one, putting it on, filling it. The carefree way he joked about the way he prefers to have sex—rough, but not too rough—and how nice it must be to feel that roughness not as an attack, or to feel any of it all, even the bits that are not rough, as something other than a threat of violence. It seems I need mending afterwards and then forever, permanently wounded, needing to be wrapped back up.

25.

The morning is erased by heavy snowfall. I sit at my desk, facing the whited-out window that shows more of my reflection than anything outside. There is a small sheet of ice on the windowsill that has crept through that crack, adding an element to the room. I hope more will enter, that it will melt and drip from the sill on to my desk, that the water shows me the direction the room is falling. I meet with Mary again tomorrow and want to have more written by then, have more to show her, to prove my commitment to wellness and to figuring all this out. I have only written two sentences so far this morning and have spent the rest of the morning looking into the window or at my phone.

I have taken to scrolling through photographs, long enough for me to lose a sense of time. Our lives are curated now; I'm shown only what I want to see. I scroll past photos are of books I'd like to read, food I'd like to make, or ceramics I'd like to throw, but there are also plenty of photos of men for me to linger over, where they pose in their outfits or show off their gym progress. This platform shows me what I desire. But I stop myself, realize that I don't desire these men. I don't want to have them or touch them. I don't want to consume them. But I want something. These men are handsome, beautiful in ways that I recognize and even admire, but my desires never bleed into the sexual.

Perhaps this is the reason why I am so attracted to Kris Knight's work: his men are beautiful, carrying an aesthetic grace that I might describe as chaste. I don't detect in them a sexual impulse but rather a feeling similar to my own: a tiredness of it, an anxiety around it, a fear that it is coming. They are only paintings, though. Nothing can get to them. This comforts me. I scroll through photographs of men so unlike the ones in these paintings, who clearly do want to be pursued, felt, touched, sucked, fucked, in all the ways I should

want to be. Most of these men are strangers to me. I don't know them and won't ever. That doesn't matter here. These men who show their bodies—often muscled, even if they're lean—aren't seeking connection with me. I analyze their shoulders, chests, stomachs, waists. They eat well. I notice this now, whose bodies don't appear to be teetering on the verge of being underweight. These men seem to be able to eat, their stomachs strong, the lining of them coated and uncompromised.

I scroll through photos of these accounts I follow and then, not unexpectedly, find a photo David has posted of himself. He is wearing a grey t-shirt, sleeves rolled up a little, and his brown hair falls in waves over his forehead. His hands are behind his head, arms up, showing off the parts of his body he seems to have been sculpting. I wonder how someone can muster the mental and physical energy to perform one's daily responsibilities and still have the resources to lift weights and build a body like that.

There are people commenting: *Handsome! Great arms. Daddy.* So many other men, expressing without shame their desire for him—his body—so publicly that it puzzles me. Am I supposed to do this? Could I do this? Where is the spark of desire that I am seeking? I have asked Mary if I am broken, unable to access these feelings that everyone else seems to so comfortably. Sex rules the world, I tell her. I see it everywhere. It is how I am supposed to relate to people and I can't get there. It is alienating, I tell her. She asks me if I've always felt like this. I nod. She asks if it is something I want. I nod again. Wouldn't that make things easier?

“If this is something you'd like to work on, we can work on it,” Mary said.

“Sometimes the best way to develop an appetite is to eat.”

So I do the same as these men and type a comment of my own beneath his photo:

For me?

It is an intellectual curiosity that leads me to do this. It is an experiment, a place to ask the physical; is this for me? Is a feeling like this something that is available to me, really, the way it is available to David and to any of the men here who are commenting on his photos? I feel a wave of thrill, but I know enough to locate it in this question. It is only that I left a comment at all, entered into this engagement and might discover an answer, that excites me. It is only an experiment and I know that viscerally. I know that I am missing the point, approaching this with a detachment and neutrality that is so unnatural in this arena, not at all what would happen in the wild. I am about to turn off the screen of my phone when I see a message on the top of screen where I read David's username and the first few words of a message: *I haven't used them all...*

And only a winking face hanging off those five words when I do open the message. My mouth goes dry and my heart begins to race, not from excitement or arousal, but from the awareness that he is talking about the condoms, and guilt over what I'm doing. You would be devastated because it would look like I am seeking in someone else everything that I reject from you. You wouldn't be able to hear the ways that this experiment is meant to help us. If I'm not broken, if I find I am able to feel some sexual attraction for someone—anyone—then there's hope for us. Other forms of therapy, maybe. But I won't know unless I do this, and so I carry on. I will see this through. It is not meant to hurt you. It's something that I hope will help me be better to you. Even so, it feels wrong. It is wrong. I type back.

Oh yeah? Something simple, that lays an invitation but still requires him to do all the work. I see that he's read the message and is typing something back.

Yeah. I always wondered why we never got closer. I always thought you were hot.

I always wondered the same, I lied. I know enough to know that I should compliment him back, affirm something about his appearance, and that this should solidify what he'll read as interest. Your arms look great in that photo.

I have other photos too.

Oh yeah? Repetition. I don't know what else to say, but I realize I don't need to say anything else. It is only a few seconds before he sends me another photo, protected within the walls of our private conversation. It is a photo of him without his shirt on, taken in a mirror that traps him backwards. I see that his chest is well-developed, as are his shoulders. *Yum*, I type. *Looking good.* I roll my eyes to myself.

Thanks. Do you have any photos to share?

This is my limit. The thought of participating this way, taking a photo of my exposed body at all, let alone sending it, disgusts me. I must play this off coyly, find a way to say that I am unwilling to progress beyond this point that doesn't bruise his ego.

No, I've never taken photos of myself like that. I don't have as much to show off.

We'll see about that. What are you doing?

I know this question's direction. It is leading, suggestive, an invitation of his own to proceed in another direction, and so I invent an excuse to go. I tell him I am about to head out the door to meet a friend for lunch and so I need to cut this conversation short. I close off by saying I'll hopefully see him around. This is far enough for now. I think of him and feel nothing. I think of you.

Hope to see you around too. See a lot more of you.

I close the app and place the phone face down on the desk, where the ice is beginning to melt in a stream, forming a thread almost directly to me, before it swerves over the edge of the desk and onto the floor, trying to get somewhere but missing the mark.

26.

I've been seeing Mary for months now and still I find it difficult to resist the urge to reciprocate acts of interest or care. It takes time to learn how not to fill the time with questions about the other person, how they are, their weekend plans. In this context it is inappropriate. This person, for the next hour, is dedicated to listening to you.

I tell Mary that this writing exercise is bringing up things that I haven't thought about in a long time. She asks if these memories help me go deeper, like I am in a well and am trying to find the source of things. I suppose that is what I'm doing. Dorothy Allison has talked about what it is we are not supposed to say out loud: "how it comes together—sex and violence, love and hatred."⁷ She calls him the man who walked across her childhood. What can I say here of the footprints all over me that have dirtied me up, made it so I can't connect to you in this way? What solution will there be? Here is my one secret side. Can I ask Mary to excise it for me? It would do no good. This is something I must live alongside, and if I live alongside this, where do I make room for you?

I don't want to do this anymore, I want to say to Mary. I don't know that it's worth it, doing this over and over, writing this out to face it again. The objective seems silly to me now: to adjust my relationship to sex, to tolerate, maybe even eventually get some pleasure out of it, and then keep doing it for the rest of my life until my body gives out? This thought almost makes me laugh, it seems so silly. But it would be normal, and the threat of it follows me anyway.

⁷ Cvetkovich, *Archive 4*.

27.

From the window of this office, if I lean hard on the far right corner, I am able peek at the corner of a field where the neighbourhood children play. In the summer they are noisy and carefree, breathing more air into the world, making it lighter. I remember doing the same. Where I grew up there was a field where I would play with the rest of the neighbourhood children. It seemed enormous, though it probably wasn't. One day, there was construction happening at the parking lot at the other end of the field, maybe half a dozen men working there. I was with a neighbourhood boy who was more outgoing than I was, whose name I don't remember. He was braver than me, I always thought. "Come on," he said, and brought me over to the men. We stood watching them a while and then he shouted, "Hey!" to get their attention. A few of them looked our way and turned back to their work, but one kept his eye on us. He set down what he was holding and walked over to us, on the other side of the short wooden fence dividing the parking lot from the green area.

"What are you two young men doing over here?" he asked.

"Just wanna watch," said the other boy.

"Do you like tools?" The other boy nodded while I stood two paces behind him with my hands behind my back. "Here, I've got some scraps you can play with, but be careful. No throwing these around or swinging them or anything."

He moved towards a pile of discarded objects and fished out a few of wood, a couple short pieces of piping, and a length of thin chain,

"Like I said, be very careful. I don't want you two getting hurt, and I don't want any of us to get in any trouble."

“We will. Thank you!” said the boy, excitedly lifting the chain from the pile and running off, leaving the rest behind. I followed. I followed him all the way back to his house, where his parents had built him a treehouse that he climbed inside. I’d been up there before. There wasn’t much to it. It was empty, plywood floor and walls, room for a door and a small opening for a window. There was a crude wooden chair and that’s it. It was dark. When I made it up, he was dangling the chain from the window outside, dropping it and pulling it up, over and over.

“Let’s pretend that I’m a robber and you caught me and you chained me to the chair,” he said.

“Okay,” I said in agreement, and he sat on the chair. He gave me the chain, holding one end, and I started walking around the chair so that the length of chain encircled him. It fell loosely around him.

“Tighter, or I’ll escape,” he said, so I pulled the slack and kept winding around him, tucking the end of the chain into itself. He wriggled a little, and I forget much of the rest, only remembering moments, like when it was me in the chair, unable to get out, and his hands on my body, places I didn’t want them.

Ann Cvetkovich has called trauma “unspeakable and unrepresentable ... marked by forgetting and dissociation.”⁸ Perhaps that is why, as I sit here, trying to write this out, I face these dark scenes, places where the film developed wrong, or where the editor took too much away. I can’t write out what I can’t get to.

I raise my eyes from my computer screen to the window, where I want to see that tree, the street below, the field if I lean hard on the far right corner of the desk, but it’s only

⁸ Cvetkovich, *Archive 7*.

a black box with white and grey flecks flickering at its edges. My childhood face appears there, like this window is a screen, but I only see myself, staying still, waiting it out, accepting the unwanted contact. Perhaps this is where I learned it. Vivek Shraya asks, “How many sexual desires and fantasies are formed out of potential or actual male violence? Or rather, to what extent is sexuality shaped and constrained by childhood experiences of male desires?” She asks what desire would look like if it didn’t develop alongside violence at the hands of men.⁹ Has violation formed the foundation of my sexual life? How many times have I passively let men use me, touch me, pleasure themselves, there in body but mentally elsewhere. Watching these patterns form before me. Look, I ground my teeth even then.

⁹ Shraya, *I’m Afraid of Men* 25-6.

28.

When the sex is happening and I am living it, it is in some ways easier than remembering it later; each moment only lasts a second. By the time I realize what is happening, time has already moved on and something else is happening, and there is some relief in knowing that I'm closer to the end of it. When you say my name, or make any sound at all, the syllables only ring in my ear before disappearing. I am able to wipe them from my mind, away like I do the beads you have deposited on my stomach and chest. If I mark it down, though, and write it, there is the word on the page suspended, written over and over. It stays even when I want it to end, even when it should have ended, and this time it is not you who have left the mark for me to wipe away. I have done it, permanently, over and over.

The worthwhile question comes from Anne Carson:

Fiction forms what streams in us.

Naturally it is suspect.

What does *not wanting to desire* mean?¹⁰

So how to narrate this *not wanting to desire*? It is not that I do not desire, but that I do not want to. I do not want to anymore. Mary and I thought this writing exercise might reframe sexual desire for me but instead it reveals to me that I don't want that space in my life. I have been excavating all this from my life, my memory, but I can't reform it. It just languishes on the page. What I desire is to refuse. I want to refuse sexual desire as the primary form of wanting. I want to be done.

¹⁰ Carson, *The Beauty of the Husband* 75.

I look at *The Embrace*, one of Knight's paintings depicting a young man holding another close to him. We see only one face, its eyes closed somewhat sadly, the lips appearing to be resting on the other man's neck, the soft crook below the ear. He has auburn hair, a cap on, no shirt. All we see of the other man, the one being held, is the back of his neck, his shirt a pattern of colourful diamonds. Perhaps, I think, this could be you embracing me, as you have done so often, so sadly. Maybe in this scene I've just told you everything that is emerging in my writing and you've seen the fiction that I have been, that I have formed for myself and lived in for as long as I can remember. Perhaps you hold me because you've done a good reading of me. Or perhaps I'm the one embracing you, sadly too, because everything that I've held back from you is out in the open and still I don't want to do it.

29.

Another memory surfaces at a site of shame: it was my first boyfriend, the one who pried me open and inserted himself. I was still in high school; he was not. I was not experienced but he should have been. I followed his lead and was eager to. I can recall now, even from this distance, that I was eager to have sex with him. I don't think I was attracted to him, but I was craving initiation into this world that would make me normal. I'd be touched on my own terms, and do touching of my own. I thought it would be easy. He carried a build I liked. His chest was broad. I remember him being taller than me. He was, by any account, a handsome man.

In the days leading up to it, I had been relying on what I could find online to teach me about sex, spending late nights trying to locate reliable information discreetly on a shared home computer. I didn't want my parents to know. My only education in sex had been cobbled together from message boards and chat rooms. There was no one in my life who I could ask. I wasn't able to say any of it out loud. Was I just expected to know?

The night it happened the first time, I tried to do everything right and thought I was ready. In his bedroom, the first door on the right down the hall, a closet across, and his bed, the TV on the dresser that I could see myself in, and we were both undressed. He was the first to see me like this. Why does trust feel so immediate sometimes, even when it's unearned? He said something to let me know that he was ready to start. We had already been kissing, touching one another, our lips and tongues on each other's bodies. I was already trembling. The anticipatory reaction, the body rejoicing in small ways for what is to come. I had no reason yet to expect anything than desire and pleasure. And so, when he

told me to, I positioned myself like I'd seen on the porn I'd watched to learn how to move, what sounds to make, and over my shoulder watched him unroll a condom onto his dick.

It was bigger than I expected. When I saw it the first time, out of his jeans in his car, I was in a naive state of shock that mixed with admiration. But a hand can move, can open or close, loosen or tighten at will, according to the size of the object in its grasp. When he lubed himself up and thrust it in, fast and all the way, my very first time, and when I screamed, and when he said, "Fuck, there's blood. You're bleeding!" and pulled, my hands grasped at nothing, squeezed my fingernails into my palms, wanting to claw myself out of time and back out of this room, this apartment, this neighbourhood, back to my childhood bedroom where I didn't know this type of pain.

I bled a lot and then it stopped. I said I was fine, but the pain lasted. For a week and more, I was too ashamed to go see a doctor about it. I sat through my biology classes leaning on my hip. When I noticed the bleeding didn't really stop and only paused, I finally went for help, and another man entered me, this time much gentler, gloved and clean, apologetic. He explained that there was a tear and that it was healing. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"But this might cause problems for you down the road. There might be minor scarring, and considering the area of the wound, you could develop complications. But it's just a chance. You could just as easily go the rest of your life without any residual pain."

Residual. It resides in me, this shame, this secret, the wound that could burrow itself deeper in to me. Here is a boundary between me and you. You've always wondered, never asked. I suppose you could call this a complication.

30.

I make the decision that I will be easier for you. I have started waking up with you again, sitting opposite while you eat your breakfast of sliced ham and eggs on toast, ketchup. We talk about the gallery and you tell me about the show that is only a few weeks away. You have the art stored away in the gallery and you love each piece, talk about them in detail, sharing your interpretations.

“I’ve missed this,” you said one morning, cutting in to one of your eggs. The yolks run over the plate, white and perfectly flat with a short wall that the running yellow almost floods. Some of the whites are still wet and runny. The ham flops from your fork into this mess, beads flying to the table. “It’s the perfect way to start the morning.”

“Good,” I say, offering a smile and wiping up the drops of yolk from the table.

“Will you be writing today?”

“I will. I think I’ll go back to campus for a little while, write in the old office with Sheila. I need a change of scenery.” I can tell this makes you nervous, the proximity to what you identify as the source of my sickness, but you are happy that I’ve been more present in your life—“waking up,” you called it—so you nod and tell me that sounds like a nice idea.

“It’s probably nice to be around all that intellectual energy,” you say. We sit for the rest of your meal saying little, then you get up to leave for work. I follow you to the door, say goodbye, lock it behind you, and return to the kitchen. I take a loaf of bread from the freezer and drop two slices into the toaster. I slice an avocado in two, slash the knife into the pit and pull it out, and fork out chunks of its meat for the toast. I eat, shower, and leave for the day, the peels of the avocado left to brown on the board.

On the bus ride to campus, I notice my stomach quiver in that particular way and worry that I might get sick so far away from home. It's a fear of being stranded. Safe meals can, without warning, become dangerous ones. I worry that the avocado was too fatty, that the grainy bread was too complex. I cradle my stomach for the rest of the ride.

Things feel better when I arrive on campus—it helps to be off the bus—and I walk towards the Humanities Centre, where Sheila and I shared an office on the fourth floor. We'd made plans to write together today and then grab a late lunch, and the anticipation and excitement I felt in the days leading up to today caught me by surprise. I decide to walk outside, the length of HUB, which casts its long shadow over the concrete sidewalk between it and Rutherford Library. It's cold and icy here, somehow also dusty, and I cross under the building to reach HC, entering on the main floor. I walk towards the stairwell and pause. In the classroom directly in front of me is David, teaching his group of first-year students. I watch him while I take my gloves off, stuff them in my bag. He seems passionate and engaged, seated on a table at the front of the room. He wears a forest green knit cardigan without buttons. I peek around him and notice there are no slides on the projector. He's just talking with his students, and they seem to be responding. I walk closer to the door to try to catch what they're talking about.

He sees me and smiles, mouths, "Wait." I nod and sit down on a bench outside the classroom. I only have to wait a few short minutes before his young students stream out of the doorway. I stand and it isn't long until he emerges, a book bag and travel mug in his hands.

"Look who it is," he says. "You have an email to respond to, you know. We're starting Carson next week. Still interested?"

“Of course. I’d love to listen in,” I say.

“What would I have to do to convince you to give a guest lecture?” he asks, raising his hand to my shoulder and squeezing it. I shrug and he removes it.

“I’m only available to lecture on how and why to drop out of a PhD program.”

“That’s a shame. I don’t think they’re ready for that yet. So what are you doing around here, dropout?”

“I came here to get some writing done. I’m heading upstairs to meet Sheila.”

“Great. Walk with me to HUB for a quick coffee. Sheila won’t mind.”

“I wish I could, but I really do have writing I need to get done.”

“We’ve all got writing to do. Don’t you remember that the first trick to writing is not to write? Come on, I’m helping you out. Don’t let me go into HUB for coffee alone.”

I sigh, look around. David is right: Sheila won’t mind if I’m twenty minutes late. She might not even notice if she’s deep in her writing. And so I agree. We walk up the stairs, through the pedway connecting the Humanities Centre to HUB, walk the entire length, and find a table in front of the decent coffee shop near the entrance to the LRT. He buys a coffee for himself and a chamomile tea for me.

“It’s nice to see you again. I thought I scared you off with my messages. When you weren’t responding to my emails, I thought I really blew it,” he says, sitting down with our drinks.

“No, not at all. I’m sorry, I’ve just been busy. I let my inbox get away from me.”

“No need to apologize. We’re here now.” He takes a sip of his drink. “So I didn’t scare you away with my messages?”

“No. I’m very brave.”

“Glad to hear it. So Sheila told me about your boyfriend.”

“She did?”

“Yeah, at the party. She told me to stay away from you and not to complicate things that didn’t need complicating.”

“Complicate how, exactly?”

“She knows I have my motives,” he says, winking again. My stomach vibrates and a tiny pain ripples along the muscle. This is so foreign to me that I don’t know how to respond. It was so much easier when we were messaging on our phones. I could linger over text, but here David is, in front of me, and I need to say something. But I don’t need to, because then Sheila’s hand is on my shoulder.

“You are supposed to be with me,” she says, standing now over the table where David and I are sitting.

“Hey Sheila,” he says. She looks at him and nods, then shakes her head a little. She looks back at me.

“Did you get lost?”

“We just ran into each other,” David says defensively. “We’re just finishing up anyway.” He stands and lifts his cup, nods to Sheila and looks down to me. “It was nice seeing you again. Let’s do it again soon.”

“Bye David!” Sheila says as he turns and walks away. She turns to look at me and watches while I pick up my jacket and my bag. She exhales sharply and then says, “Let’s go.”

31.

Sheila closes our office door and I settle in to my old desk. All of my books still lining the shelves beside it, some of the same piles intact on the desk. Sure enough, a copy of *Autobiography of Red*, there at the top.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to be seeing David,” she says, sitting down in her chair and facing me.

“Why not?” I ask.

“Just don’t trust him, that’s all. I think he’s up to something.”

“What could that be?” I ask, feigning ignorance, removing books from my bag and opening my laptop.

“Girl, you know he has had a crush on you since our first day here.”

“Well, I’m not single or looking. That should put an end to that,” I say.

“Just be careful around him. I don’t think he operates 100% above board.” She opens her laptop. “How are things with your guy, anyway?”

“They’re fine. He’s busy with a new show that’s coming up.” This felt familiar and good. Sheila and I spent more office time with the door closed hashing out our relationship problems than doing actual work.

““They’re *fine*?” I really hope you’re going to give me more than that,” Sheila says. I look up at her and shut my laptop.

“Okay. You want the truth?” I ask her. She shuts her laptop and spins in her chair to face me, her eyes sparkling with anticipation.

“Spill it.”

“Okay. I don’t really know how to say this, but we haven’t really been...” I pause, nervous and vulnerable. “We haven’t really been having sex.” It isn’t exactly true but gets close enough to the problem, and I think that phrasing it this way will Sheila more to say. She’s nodding.

“Dried up, huh? You’ve been together a while! That’s normal.” Sheila bats a hand in the air. “Do you both feel this way?”

“I think he would still like it.”

“But you don’t?” I shake my head and look down at desk. Sheila is quiet for a moment and then asks: “Is that why you’re talking to David?”

“No,” I immediately say. “Well, yes. Maybe?” Sheila says my name and shakes her head.

“I don’t want you to get into any trouble.”

“I don’t want trouble either. The thing is, I just don’t want to have sex. Not with anyone. Not even with David. Maybe I’m talking to David to try to inspire something in me. Attraction? I don’t know. But I don’t feel it yet.” Sheila exhales audibly.

“Wow. That’s real.”

“Yeah,” I agree. I chuckle nervously.

“Have you talked to him about this?” Sheila asks.

“That would make too much sense,” I say, resignedly. “It feels too hard. I’d rather just—” I snap my fingers. “Fix it.”

“I’m sorry. That’s hard,” she offers, seeing me, validating me.

“Thank you,” I say.

“Do you think he would understand?”

Would you understand? Maybe if I had talked to you from the start. But you wouldn't understand why I thought to go to David to inspire some desire instead of working through it with you. I pick up *Autobiography of Red*, needing something to hold, to fiddle with. Carson's novel-in-verse, which sets the story of the red monster Geryon and the hero Herakles in our modern world, casting the two as lovers. Geryon—queer, creative, sad—unsure how to navigate his emotional world that is marked by love and sex, connection and the lack of it. Herakles so confident opposite him, a being that draws desire from Geryon. What I hoped would happen when David was across from me. But you? What do I tell Sheila about you?

I look up at her. She is waiting for an answer. I flip through my copy of the book, find the flag and the quote I am looking for. You dream of me in yellow.

“Even in dreams / he doesn't know me at all!”¹¹

Sheila is quiet and then says, “Maybe I should read that after all.”

I thought that maybe I could feel some desire for a man like David, who sat across from me, who seems curious about me, with large eyes, brown wavy hair, who has thick arms and fitted t-shirts. Who other men desire. Who desires me. David has said he has motives. In Stesichorus's myth, Herakles crosses the ocean to find Geryon on his island and kill him. Who was it who gave him the map, and will I have to give myself over?

¹¹ Carson, *Autobiography of Red* 74.

32.

Mary and I talk about writing. I still haven't told her that this experiment has failed. Am I facing what is true, even the uncomfortable parts, she wants to know. I am, I tell her. But I have been forgetting some things and omitting others. And I don't tell you what I'm writing. I've come up with a synopsis for a different book that I have been developing over dinners with you. I don't want to worry you with the real thing. In my shadow book, a young gay baker falls in love with a man who has celiac disease and spends the novel trying to perfect gluten-free pain au chocolat—the thing that his object of desire misses most—as an act of love. This is safe. I may have to write this book too, to make something real for you, to mitigate deception. I don't mention this to Mary.

On the bus ride home, through the suburban streets of St-Albert-de-Métis, I think about all this writing. Thinking all the way down the street we moved onto, up the front steps, to the door with your handprint still on it, and through it, into the living room where the scent of you hangs from the walls, and up the stairs and into my office, where I exhale.

I have a stack of books on my desk that I brought back with me from campus, sticky flags hanging out of the pages, marking the ideas that I might use to ground myself. I want to bring them to Mary and simply read from them to answer her questions about the book. So many times I sit dumbfounded, using fiction to fill in the gaps left behind by the things I can't or won't recall.

Here, Ann Cvetkovich on these gaps: “Because trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all.”¹²

¹² Cvetkovich, *Archive 7*.

I feel ambivalence settle in the room with me. Who do the gaps serve? What does forgetting allow? What does it feed? Remembering these encounters, smoothing their gaps, filling in the holes like you'd do in a wall just before moving. I want there to be record of this, of these feelings, so I can point to it, pick it up, place it in someone's hands, someone like you, and make you understand. To give a place to this sadness and this trauma. To face it. Sara Ahmed writes that for us to narrate our unhappiness can be what she calls affirmative. "It can gesture to another world, even if we are not given a vision of the world as it might exist after the walls of misery are brought down."¹³

My vision of the world, my vision of desire. I want to see beyond the walls of this office, of this creaking house where you have imprinted yourself, and these traumas that have imprinted themselves on me. I want that world beyond those walls, but I don't feel ready for it yet.

¹³ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* 107.

33.

I hear you come through the door but this time, instead of coming down to meet you, I keep writing. I hear you remove your shoes, hang your jacket up, and walk to the kitchen. I am writing a scene in which the protagonist and his partner are about to host a dinner party. The table is laid with charcuterie, olives, sourdough bread, and guests are about to arrive, when the protagonist's partner initiates sex. There isn't time, the protagonist says, hoping that this practical excuse will be enough to postpone the act. No one will be arriving for another 45 minutes, says his partner, leading him up the stairs, into the bedroom. He is unbuttoning his shirt, our protagonist can't seem to move his hands up to stop him, and then there is a knock on the door.

There is a knock on the door and you poke your head in. "Hey. Am I interrupting?"

You are, but I turn in my chair to face you and shake my head. "How was your day?"

"It was good, thanks," you say, and begin to tell me about the artist who is installing work in the gallery. You walk all the way in to the room and it bristles around you. You pull out your phone to show me the work, telling me you'd like to buy another one of his pieces and want to know which I prefer. All of them, portraits of men in harsh black lines. No softness, no colour at all. One seems to be grimacing; it is the painting you prefer. Another thing to bring in to this house to make it unsettling. I turn to look at the Kris Knight print on the wall, the man who is looking away, his head with its halo of pink.

"I'll email you the pictures and you can think about it. Let me know tomorrow," you say.

"Okay, I will. Thank you."

“I brought you some Thai food. It’s in the kitchen.”

“I can’t eat Thai food,” I tell you, exhaling deeply, pointing to my stomach, tired of this exchange again and again. Guilt always follows me when I snap like this. “Why don’t you have it? I’ll make myself some rice.” I shut my laptop and rise from the chair.

“I’ll just put it in the fridge. I’m not in the mood for Thai either.” As though it’s as simple as that, Thai food just being something I’m not in the mood for. “But you know what I am hungry for?” you ask, running your hands down the length of my cardigan, pausing at and flicking each button. “Hey, look at me.”

I didn’t realize that I’d developed the habit of looking down the floor when you enter my space and begin to touch me. I look up, and as soon as I catch your eyes, your mouth is on mine and you are kissing me. You are kissing me hard, slipping on my lips, wetting my cheeks. One of your teeth nicks my chin and I want to check for blood but think that if there is blood and you taste it, you might recoil, disgusted, and want to stop. But now you are moaning. Your hands are clasped on my shoulders. This is one way of being held. My arms are flat against my sides.

You pull away and look straight at me again. Your eyes are narrowed. You look crazed and passionate. “I’ve missed you,” you said, and then you kneel before me. You undo my pants and I am letting you. Every time, I let you. I want to stop, I want to go, but I don’t know where I would go, and saying no to you one more time would mean leaving. Last time I said no to you, you cried over the side of the bed, telling me that you want me and how it hurts you that you are in a relationship where you aren’t wanted. You said it’s something you need to experience, and you accused me of being unfeeling towards you. It did hurt me, because there are parts of this life together that I love. But there are so many

that scare me. You, right now, sucking so hard that it hurts, your canine tooth making contact every time you pull from me.

I have nowhere to look but at the print. The back of the subject, dark hair. Friends have mistaken it for me. The painting is still. It doesn't move, doesn't react. It tells me that it is okay to be looking away. Maybe I should stop trying to face these things. But my heart is racing and I realize I am in a fury at you for bringing this into this room, the one place I could escape to. You have infiltrated all of me. I look down at you, pull your head away by your hair. You look up at me. I slap you. Instead of drawing back, you smile, exposing your still sharp teeth.

34.

I tell you to go make food for yourself, that I'm not hungry and want to finish some more writing. You've done what you wanted to me, so you agree, and smile back to me as you shut the door to my office. I walk slowly to the chair at my desk, trembling, and lower myself onto it. I don't open my laptop. I don't do anything except look out that window. I go for hours without blinking. My eyes dry up but it doesn't matter. I sit like this while the sun sets, then the street lights turn on, and the biting cold snakes through the crack in the window. My stomach rumbles. I haven't eaten and I know I should, but I don't want to leave this room, down the stairs, to find you waiting behind some dark corner.

But the pain is coming and I don't want to go through it again, so I pull myself up and out the door. I have to pass your office to get to the kitchen, and I can see that your door is ajar and that your desk lamp is on. I tread the stairs carefully, quietly, stepping on the outside of the steps where they are stronger and less likely to creak in the cold of the house. I make it down each step and am almost outside your office door when I hear the sound of footfalls, soft carpeted thumps, and high pitched whispering, some giggles. It suddenly arrives, the realization that you aren't alone. Someone is humming, and the footfalls, I decipher, are the sounds of dancing. Speaking in low voices, conspiratorially, are you and someone else. But the doorbell never rang, the lock in the door never ground its shriek, the door itself never groaned open. No one but us could be in the house.

I stand flush against the doorframe and peer in, trying to make myself invisible. It's you, standing in front of that huge painting, "Self-Portrait II" and leaping up, chittering, arms raised, and the subject of the painting is doing the same, dancing darkly around the canvas. You both lean towards each other, leaping, humming to one another, sharing

something. Then you reach for his hand, caressing the canvas, and he leaps out of that dimension and into the room, twirling around you. I worry for a moment that I'll be caught, but each of you only look at one another, bounding around and around, giggling eerily and falling into one another's arms. My heart pounds in time to the rhythm you are marking out. Something rises in my throat and I have to flee. I run as quietly as I can back upstairs.

I am undetected. I close the door to my office. I look at my trembling hands, wring them together and take deep breaths. My stomach cries and I notice that the top left quadrant is burning. I need to eat. I need to go back down and make it to the kitchen.

I am louder this time. From my office door, I call your name, ask if you're interested in a snack. You call back, say you're already in the kitchen, and I plod down the stairs to meet you. Sure enough, you are at the counter with paperwork splayed around you, pencil in hand.

"I have been sitting here all night trying to work out this budget. I really hope we can pull this off," you say vaguely, something about work.

"You've been working all night, huh?"

"Yeah. Haven't even stopped to eat. I'm glad you suggested we eat." You put your pencil down and run your fingers through your hair. I know this isn't true and I want to catch you in it.

"Say, were you on the phone? I heard voices earlier."

"No," you say, looking puzzled. "I haven't talked to anyone. I haven't moved from this seat all night." You stand and stretch, crack your back, and limber up. "What are you in the mood for?" I carry a tub of yogurt and a basket of blueberries from the fridge and

place it on the counter, lift a piece of apple crisp that I made earlier this week from the pan into a bowl.

“That looks great. Is there enough for two?” I nod and open the cupboard for a second bowl. You walk around the counter to the fridge for a can of ginger ale. “I’ll grab the spoons,” you say, opening the drawer and pulling out the cutlery. You hand me one. “For the yogurt. Not too much for mine, please,” you say, walking back to the counter and tidying up your papers.

I dollop the yogurt onto the crisp and sprinkle some blueberries onto them, put your bowl in front of you. You look up and smile in thanks. I decide to eat in the kitchen, standing across from where you’re sitting. It’s now that I notice the handle of the spoon feels strange and wet. I must have slipped it against the side of the tub, covered it in yogurt. Looking down, I see that its handle is black, not white, and that it has smeared all over my hand. Black paint in a line down my palm, on the meat of my fingers. I look at you, spooning dessert into your mouth, oblivious.

35.

An episode:

A pain that floods the face. I have tried to tell people but it's impossible. They think I'm talking about nausea, just something uncomfortable, unpleasant, that keeps you in bed. An everyday illness that doesn't leave you wondering if you are being unstitched from the world starting from your stomach. Sometimes people nod knowingly, hum in solidarity, and tell me they struggle with heartburn too. It is hard to be heard, even when you lay out the specifics: there is erosion to my stomach lining. There is inflammation, a blood vessel that could rupture, be worn away by the acid in my stomach. The taste that comes up my throat is a fermented sourness, like yogurt, and somehow also like boiled broccoli.

My belly is coming unstitched. From it buds a wound on the inside and the outside. Once I vomited blood and watched it spiral through the water like ink. I have adopted toilet bowl cleaner as my signature scent. It is hard to be here, in the sharpness of pain. I move the bed against the wall so I can keep myself propped up in the corner when laying down is too searing. I fantasize about evacuating my body. I mourn all of what carrying this pain takes away from me and takes me away from.

When pain crystallizes thought, connections seem clearer. It becomes possible for me to swat away the debris that piles like small shavings while I etch myself a place in this world. I navigate brain fog, my mental energy directed always towards my stomach, monitoring it for a change in pain. Some pain becomes acceptable. Certain types of hurt are a relief. Pain now falls into categories of right or wrong, banal or threatening.

Does it make sense to say that all of this is connected? Writing, revisiting these memories I've repressed, fending off your advances, or acquiescing? Has all of this

contributed to my pain, to my illness, to my stomach rejecting whatever it can? I have carried all of these things in my shut mouth, swallowing their discomforts down, where they burrowed themselves in my stomach lining. I hear it's only one cell-layer deep. That's where I grew it, heard it burning up my esophagus and softening my teeth.

Sheila sent me a paper she's working on about care and fermentation. She cites Clementine Morrigan: "Guts are a metaphor for knowing. Guts are a place of processing. Guts are wrapped around themselves down in the belly of the body. I have a body sick with the shame of childhood sexual abuse. Incest. The trauma is embedded deep. It has shaped the way my body works. Gut level. I always knew this but I didn't always know that guts are literal, not just metaphorical. Guts exist at the level of language and they also have a materiality all their own. Guts are an ecosystem filled with beings which are not me, yet dwell within me."¹⁴ I realize that if I am to heal, it has to be at this level. I need to eliminate everything that I have swallowed and that now ferments in my gut. All of these things that have happened to me, that I allow to happen, have taken root in me. Every time I ignored my desires to love a different way, swallowed the desires of men who wanted my body, swallowed parts of them when they made me, marked in my stomach in a memory like the rings of a tree trunk. I wrap my arms around my abdomen, bend over slightly. I want to tell it things like I'm sorry, that I'm listening now, and I want to say those things to myself too.

¹⁴ Morrigan, "Guts" 66.

36.

This theory changes the tenor of my writing. I am writing now with more care and compassion, towards myself, towards you. Maybe I understand with greater clarity the relationship between everything that hurts us. Maybe I'm closer to the root of things. I also find writing comes easier now, that I feel freer. For the first time since leaving grad school, I write for an entire day. When I hear you come home, later than usual, I save the document and go down to meet you. You're already sitting at the dining room table with your work in front of you.

"Hey," I say. "How was your day?"

"Busy. I need to finish a bit of work tonight before the opening this weekend," you say. "By the way, have you given any thought to which painting I should buy? I have connections."

"I'm not sure I have much to say about any of them. Why don't you just pick your favourite?" I say. It seems I am unable to talk openly with you even about these little things.

"I'd love to have your feedback. It'll belong to both of us, after all." You look down at your papers for a moment, looking for something. "But sure, I'll make the purchase tomorrow and bring it around once the show ends." I am moving about the kitchen, assembling something for dinner. I am slicing a loaf of Sheila's sourdough when it occurs to me.

"Where did you want to hang it?" I ask.

"I was thinking of hanging it in the bedroom," you say. The last slice falls and I set the knife down.

“What about your office, with the other? Don’t you think it’s too severe for the bedroom?” I say.

“Oh, so we can put up that dark floral wallpaper but a black and white line portrait is too severe?” you ask, setting your pen down and sighing in frustration. “I don’t understand why everything has to be so difficult with you.”

“Not everything,” I say, quietly, offended and hurt. I am making you a trout spread you love. I cut my finger opening the lid of the can of tinned fish. The air fills with its smell.

“Everything. It’s always about you. What you don’t like or don’t want to do. What about what I want? Do you think I want to come home to a surly boyfriend every day? You’re holed up here writing while I work and when I get home, it’s like you don’t have time for me. Like you don’t want to see me.”

“That’s not true. And you offered me the time to write,” I begin to say, but you cut me off.

“Yeah, I know. I just didn’t think it would take this long or that it would be this hard. I knew it would be all about you for a little while, but when will it be about me?”

“I am trying to be present for you in the evenings. It isn’t as though things are easy for me either. It isn’t exactly fun to be sick all the time, to constantly monitor pain.” We so rarely argue that this shakes me. I look at you and take a deep breath. “I’m sorry. Let’s hang the painting in the bedroom. It’ll look nice with the dark floral.”

“I don’t care about the painting,” you say, pulling the words from your deepest register. I know what you are trying to say without saying it; you are deeply unhappy,

deeply dissatisfied, and that your patience and loyalty have become the traits that have trapped you. “How do you think it feels to be unloved? I don’t suppose you’d know.”

“Unloved? You aren’t unloved.”

“Aren’t I? You don’t show me any affection. You don’t kiss me without tensing your shoulders. Do you think I don’t feel that?” You look me dead in the eyes. I don’t speak for several seconds.

“I didn’t know I did that,” I say.

“Bullshit. I can tell you don’t want me touching you.”

“I want to.”

“But you don’t. You don’t want to. And I need that. I need someone who wants me. You know I have had opportunities, don’t you? That people have wanted me? I’m an attractive guy, damn it. But I’ve always been so fucking loyal to you. What for?” You stand up from the table and look around. It seems as though you are unsure where you want to go. “This artist who is showing his work this weekend? He’s asked me out for drinks. I accepted. As a friend, of course. Because I love you and want to be with you. But fuck.” I am surprised to feel somewhat relieved that there are people out there showing him interest, who could fulfill that part of his life. I don’t feel jealous. You are looking at me, waiting for me to react.

“I think you should go,” I tell you.

“What?” you say, and now I see you expected me to say the opposite, to ask you not to go. You wanted me to rise up in jealousy and rage and prove to you that I do love you. We look at each other for a while, the smell of fish still rising, slabs of sourdough smelling warm, my metallic finger. “I knew it. I knew you didn’t want me anymore. It’s

felt like you've been pushing me away but I didn't want to believe it. Even when we're having sex, you pushed."

"You felt that?" I ask. "You knew?"

"Yes, I knew," you snap. "Of course I knew." You shut your laptop and start gathering your papers, stuffing everything into your bag.

"I didn't want you to. I wanted to like it for you." I am trying to calm you. There is guilt here, sadness to harm you.

"Don't bother. Maybe you just aren't capable of feeling anything," you say, pulling your coat from the back of the chair and swinging it on. Your sleeve whips against the window. "I'm going to go back to the office to finish this. I need some space. I'll see you later."

"Okay," I say as you walk past me. I watch you struggle to put your shoes on. I see your frustration mount; you wanted a quick exit. This is so inelegant. You finally manage and you look back at me before exhaling and turning, opening the door and crossing through. The print of your hand on the door catches the light. You are always standing at doorways wanting to be let in. You left your mark on me but I never opened wide enough.

37.

The experiment has to continue. I need to know for sure.

I arrive to David's class two minutes late so that I can sneak in and find a seat that doesn't already belong to someone else. I am conscious of disrupting the habits and routines of others, of inserting myself belatedly, ignorant of the ways things are done. He is walking up and down between the four long desks that span the length of the room where his students are scattered, talking amongst themselves. He is returning assignments, thanking each student as he places their work down in front of them. He looks up as I enter, smiles and says my name.

"Hey, thanks again for letting me join," I say. "Is anywhere fine?"

"Wherever you'd like," he says. "Just let me finish returning these and we'll get started."

I sit down at the end of the back row, take my notebook and pen from my bag and open to a new page. I write the date and title the page: "David — *Autobiography of Red*." David begins by soliciting first impressions from his students and I'm pleased to hear that so many people enjoyed reading it, found the language pointed and exciting rather than alienating and difficult. David seems happy too. He is smiling at each student who speaks, nodding and asking them questions that help them articulate what they saw in the book. This could be attractive, I think to myself. But if I felt it, would I have to think it first? Wouldn't it be more immediate? But before long I am pulled away from this thought, swept up in the energy of the room. Engaged readers, talking about a novel I love. I didn't know I had missed being in a classroom.

Once his students have shared their initial thoughts, he begins a series of slides that contextualize Carson's work as a classicist and a poet, followed by slides that provide a brief synopsis of Stesichorus's myth of Herakles and Geryon. He talks a bit about adaptation, asks his students to think of this novel as a retelling, asks if there are any other retellings that they can think of, and why these myths continue to circulate. Some of his students offer insightful comments.

"Now, let's get talking about the text. What are some of its themes?"

There is a silence that bubbles from the centre of the room. We wait together for someone to be the one to pop it. "Love?" a young man near the front of the room offers.

"Love, great. Can you tell me more about that theme?" David asks.

The student shares resonant scenes, hunting through his copy to find lines and passages to support his venture. Other students join in, adding layers to his comments, finding textual support of their own. It feels so exciting and collaborative, so collegial. Everyone is smiling, turning in their chairs to face the person talking, nodding excitedly, writing notes in the margins.

"This is great, everyone. How about another theme?"

A few others are tossed about, and then a young woman on the other side of the back row raises her hand. David gestures to her and says her name.

"What about sex? I think we talked a bit about it when we discussed love but I think it can be its own theme?" she said, the ends of her sentences pulling up into questions.

"Bingo. Sex," David said. "Let's try to untangle it from love. It might be hard to do, but let's try it. Do you have any passages you want us to look at?"

“Near the beginning? On page 28. ‘And so they developed an economy of sex / For cat’s-eyes.’¹⁵ She’s talking about Geryon and his brother.”

“That’s not sex. That’s incest,” says a woman nearby.

“Can it be both? Can it be something else altogether? Maybe it’s a site of sexual trauma,” says David. I sit up in my seat and start taking notes as this debate develops and swirls around the room. David guides his students as they unpack sexuality and trauma in the novel, the ways in which it is performed, by whom, to what end.

“Geryon’s relationship to sex seems different from other people’s,” says a student, a shy-seeming young man in the front of the room. “Normal people use sex to connect. Geryon doesn’t feel that connection.” A few students nod in agreement.

“Let’s look at page 45,” says David. A chorus of turning pages, then he reads aloud:

Tell me, said Geryon and he intended to ask him, Do people who like sex

Have a question about it too?

But the words came out wrong—*Is it true you think about sex every day?*

Herakles’ body stiffened.

That isn’t a question it’s an accusation. Something black and heavy dropped

Between them like a smell of velvet.¹⁶

You and I have had similar conversations. Every day, you find a way to touch me, telling me you want connection, and every time feels like an encroachment. Maybe I just don’t like sex, I said to you one day. Maybe I don’t think about it or need it the way you do. Do you remember how this seemed to crush you more than anything else I’d said, anything else I’d done to reject you? Because it felt so permanent to you. It felt final, you

¹⁵ Carson, *Autobiography of Red* 28.

¹⁶ Carson, *Autobiography of Red* 45.

said. Do you really think about sex every day? I asked, and you curled your lip up at me, said, “Could you say that without sounding so disgusted? I’m sorry to be inconveniencing you with my desire to be close to you.” But this question of mine came from a desire to be close to you too, in some way. One of my desires: to understand you. Knowing the mind is an intimacy, but not the kind you need or want.

38.

I take the bus home and think about us all the way home. Should I have been honest with you from the start? Of course. But if you knew all along, why didn't you say anything? Why didn't I?

You didn't come home last night. It was odd to sleep without you. It isn't that I slept better, exactly, but I slept differently. I slept calmly. I dreamt about what you said, about being unable to feel anything. In my dream I was walking through our house which was splintering and flooding and burning all at once. I felt none of it. I took one step and the floor burst into flame, another step splintered the floorboards and pierced my foot. There were mice in the cupboard and bats in the chimney, snakes coming up through the pipes, all of them crawling up my body and I didn't feel any of their bites. I walked up to the bedroom, night flowers and twisted vines, and you were there, hacking away at them. I grabbed your arm to stop you. You turned with horror in your eyes, and I looked down at myself to see that the vines were wrapping and knotting themselves around my chest, my arms. You raised your arm, the blade above your head, and brought it down on me, again and again, and I felt nothing but impatience.

I wake from this dream, get up for water, check the time. 2:28 AM. I feel only mild curiosity about your whereabouts. You must be right, I decide. I am unfeeling. This house, this relationship, detaches me from myself. Or I have detached myself from you. Maybe I have never known how to hold myself accountable and so I resort to blaming you. I fall back asleep and dream again.

If I walk through the flowers and vines in the bedroom wall, and keep going, for forty paces and then another ten, I reach my own stomach. I crouch and step into it, through

the red, dripping wound, and find it is mostly beautiful on the inside. It is humid but cool. Luminescent, furry caterpillars are crawling on dewy black-green leaves. Yellow spores are floating and there are hundreds of bees pollinating the sweet smelling flowers with pink petals the size of my hands, and tiny blue blossoms no bigger than a dime. There is a waterfall with even more plants growing along the edges of the pool, silvery shoots and reeds that rustle in the breeze.

It is only near the wound, the site of entry, that things are different. Dark and burnt with reddish-brown dust that covers and seems to burn whatever life I have here. The wound is pulsing, glowing red like lava, giving off a strange, painful heat.

“We’re trying to patch that up, but whenever we try to seal it, it just opens up again,” says a voice behind me. I turn around and see that it’s David, in a full beekeeper’s suit. He takes the mask off and leans forward to kiss my cheek. “Do you think you could help us?”

“I don’t know what to do,” I confess.

David smiles sadly and puts his mask back on. He steps behind the waterfall and the air is still with the buzz of bees.

Then the heat rises rapidly and the ground begins to shake. I turn back to the glowing red wound and it seems to be spreading, dripping its acidic magma onto the flora of my stomach, burning holes in the leaves, in the wings of butterflies, who try to stay afloat but fall to the ground like rain. Then you step through the gaping wound and we are here together, in my stomach, your shoes leaving marks on its floor, grinding the flowers to mush. But no, it isn’t you. I look and see, through the steam, my own face looking back at me. This other me kneels down, rests his hands on wet ground. He is in your clothes.

Spores gather on the shoulders of your wool sweater. Even in my dreams you are all over me.

39.

In the morning I wake to a message from David: *Hey Stranger. Been thinking about you. When do I get to see you again?*

In the morning I do not wake to a message from you.

You do not wake to a message from me.

When you left I knew that you had given up. I know why, and have known for a long time, all the reasons why this won't work, all the abuses we levelled at each other. And still, there are places in me that will miss you, will regret letting you go. I write back to David.

That all depends on you, I type back. I have made a decision to follow this through. Can I let myself feel this desire? If I want to bad enough? I need to know.

What are you doing today? David responds almost immediately.

I'll be at home all day. Getting some writing done. I send this message, recognize the need for a follow-up question. *You have a car, right?*

Yeah. What did you have in mind?

Come over. I'll make you lunch and we can have a writing date.

Any chance you'll be on the menu? David writes back. I wish he'd been original. It would make this all easier. But I write back, *Yes,* and send him directions and a few other instructions. Now that I've made this decision, I feel bold, but still detached. I tell him what I should want from him. But do I really want it?

Here is where I'll write my apology. I want you to know that I am doing this because I need it. You will leave me soon anyway, if you haven't already. But I am sorry

for betraying you, and for all the ways I've already betrayed you, pushed you away, made you feel unwanted and unloved. It doesn't matter now. What is one more secret pain?

I take a shower. David will arrive soon.

40.

He comes to the door exactly when I tell him to and lets himself in. The door creaks open.

He steps out of his boots and finds me in the kitchen where I stand facing him, a halved lemon in my hands, hips against the sink. My hands are full. He stands two paces in front of me and neither of us says anything. I look at him with detachment. The understanding is that he will undress, and he begins to. His hands move to the collar of his shirt and his fingers push and pull at his buttons all the way down the line until his shirt opens to his bare chest. There are short hairs like grass blown down by a helicopter, trimmed and clean, then his shirt off his shoulders, falling like a washcloth onto the floor.

Then his hands move down his chest, more muscled than my own, to his belt. He undoes it with one hand, tugs it open, and goes straight to the fly of his jeans. The zipper catches and he looks sheepishly at me for a moment, our eyes meeting and producing an electrical failure, suddenly the spark gone and I am looking at him, standing in my kitchen, pathetic and half-naked, and I am aware that I am about to end my partnership with you.

I nod to him to keep going, this man with a foot to his ankle, wobbling and struggling with his baggy blue jeans. Finally he gets it. Pulls at the hips, to and fro, and all the way down and he is standing only in his briefs. I want none of it.

He takes a step towards me and I turn to the counter where I have a bowl and a juicer. The lemons, cut-side down, onto the silver ridged peak and pushed down, so tender, breaking apart and spilling their juice. The liquid poured into the white mixing bowl, into something clean, and I am holding the empty skins with pulpy, mashed-up, useless insides discarded. I turn to face him again.

41.

When Sheila arrives, I am laying on the floor with my stomach in my hands and vomit down the front of my black shirt.

“Oh my god,” she says as she opens the door, then rushes toward me. “Are you okay? Let’s get you cleaned up.” She tries to lift me but I groan, almost a scream, and she stops pulling at my shoulders.

“Okay, I won’t try to move you. What can I get for you? Water? Ginger ale?”

I groan again, shake my head a little, raise my head up to her and then drop it down again, all of its weight crashing against my folded arms. She vanishes for a moment then returns with some wet paper towel. She gently cleans my face and my neck, cradling my chin with her hands, wiping so softly. She unbuttons my shirt and slowly maneuvers it off of me. I lay there, exposed and vulnerable. She sees my swollen stomach.

“Oh sweetie. You’re going to be okay,” she says. She rubs my head, then lifts it so it rests on her leg. She starts to play with my hair softly, running her fingers through it, soothing me. “We’ll get you feeling better soon.” I murmur in agreement, fixated on the feeling of her fingers through my hair, this act of care and friendship, sudden safety. I believe her. The pain subsides and I drift off.

42.

Sheila is still there when I come to, sitting on the floor with my head still in her lap. I slowly sit up.

“Now, you have to promise me there’ll be no more benders like this,” she says. I laugh, then grimace and clutch my stomach. “Okay, got it, laughing’s bad. Do you need anything?”

“Water?” I ask, pulling a blanket from the edge of the couch and wrapping myself in it.

“Cheap table,” she says, getting up and walking to the kitchen. I hear her pull a glasses from the cupboard and turn on the tap and before long is back with two tall glasses of water.

“Thank you so much,” I say.

“Just leave a good tip,” she says, sitting next to me. “So is this what you’ve been dealing with? When you said you had stomach pain?” I nod, take a sip of water.

“Thank you for coming all this way,” I say to her. “And for staying.”

“Hey, don’t mention it. But I do have a question. Where’s your guy? Shouldn’t he be the one doing all this? Not that I’m not grateful to be the one to clean vomit off your face.”

“God, I am so sorry.” I take another sip of water. “I don’t know where he is. We’re taking some time.” We sit in silence for the next minute, both of us sipping water.

“I’m sorry,” Sheila finally says. “So you had the conversation?”

“We had a conversation. Maybe not the right one.”

“Is that what made you feel sick? I remember you telling me that stress is a trigger?”

“No. This was a few days ago.”

“Just eat something bad, then?”

“David came over,” I say, staring straight ahead of me. I put the glass of water to my lips and hold it there.

“You didn’t...”

“No. We didn’t,” I say. “But we were going to. I had this whole plan to have him over, have sex with him. I didn’t even want to. I don’t want to. But why don’t I want to?” I am hyperventilating now, emotional, finally saying all of this aloud to someone. I look at Sheila. I can barely see her through the tears forming in my eyes. “What if I’m broken?”

“You aren’t broken,” she says firmly. “You aren’t broken.” She puts down her water glass and pulls me into her, and I grimace because this usually hurts, but this time it doesn’t. This touch is soft. We sit like this until my phone rings. Your name is on the screen. I answer and you tell me that you’re on your way.

“That’s my cue,” says Sheila, getting up to go. I follow her to the front door.

“Hey. Thank you,” I say.

“Don’t mention it,” she says. “I’ll leave the door open.”

43.

When you come home, you look so tired and have tears in your eyes. You say *I'm sorry* over and over again. I know why. You slept with the artist. You were desperate, you say. You were so angry. You weren't thinking. But you are so sorry. I tell you about David, to even the score in your eyes. I tell you what I had arranged, and how, when he was naked in our kitchen, I apologized and told him I couldn't go through with it anymore. Instead I made him lunch and told him everything. He didn't feel used, he said, and urged me not to feel too guilty. He took some food to go and left.

But even knowing this, you can't seem to forgive yourself for your indiscretion. I stand across from you while you cry. We have freed each other from this economy. I stand here, in the bedroom, still without a shirt, only the blanket draped over me, and there is flowering on the skin of my chest coming off the wallpaper. You move around the bed, folding the clothes from the pile in the corner I always hated and then stuffing them in to your suitcase. You look through me and say, "That's it," and I step backwards again so that my back is against the wall. It gives a little. It's damp. The vines move to the side.

"So I'm going to go now," you say, lifting your suitcase from the bed and setting it next to the bedroom door. I look at you and you are still crying. From behind me comes a rustling of leaves, their surfaces grazing my cheek.

"Take care of yourself," I say. You don't want to touch me now and I never did. You turn, pick up your suitcase, and go without another word. I hear you take the stairs at the right of the door, seven by seven, and grab the rest of your belongings at the entrance. You put your shoes on. I hear you stumble. Then you open the door and you're gone.

The bedroom door closes. The sun sets. It takes time to sort through all this. Kris Knight's Gucci Flora behind me, on my skin. It becomes part of me. The walls, the blanket, my nude body, all of us touching. Finally I turn into it. I walk a while, breathing deep breaths, creating this place. There are so many moons above me. The stars make sounds like crickets, and the crickets glow like stars. Now there are birds and beetles jewelling the sky, sounds of water in the distance, animals with great horns bounding through the trees at my side. Here are the things I desire: solitude and safety, the threat of your advances gone. Neither of us tried to understand the other, but I can't carry that guilt any more. I drop it along with this blanket. I walk shirtless through this. There are huge boulders of polished sodalite and malachite glowing from within.

Every time anyone has come to me in desire and longing, I have stood as a metaphor for its absence. I admit that I myself felt longing in those spaces of absence: longing to understand, to brush away the psychological and physical symptoms, to desire as they did. But I couldn't. I plod through through the marshland. The trees are sparser, shorter here. The light hits the water from all directions, moons with rings suspended above me. I fall to my knees and throw up, my stomach expelling everything, finally. I vomit tiny glittering stones, insects that open their shells to fly before they hit the water, fish with metallic scales that leap over the crests of the waves. Bubbles form, rainbows on their oily surfaces, and pop with a sound. I put both hands into the water. Glitter sticks to my wrists in a line, like two bracelets, and I finger the things I've expelled, rub them against one another, keep them between my fingers. It feels like the first time I have ever touched anything. I hold them until all the water cools and goes still like a pane of glass and then I sleep until the afternoon ends.

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