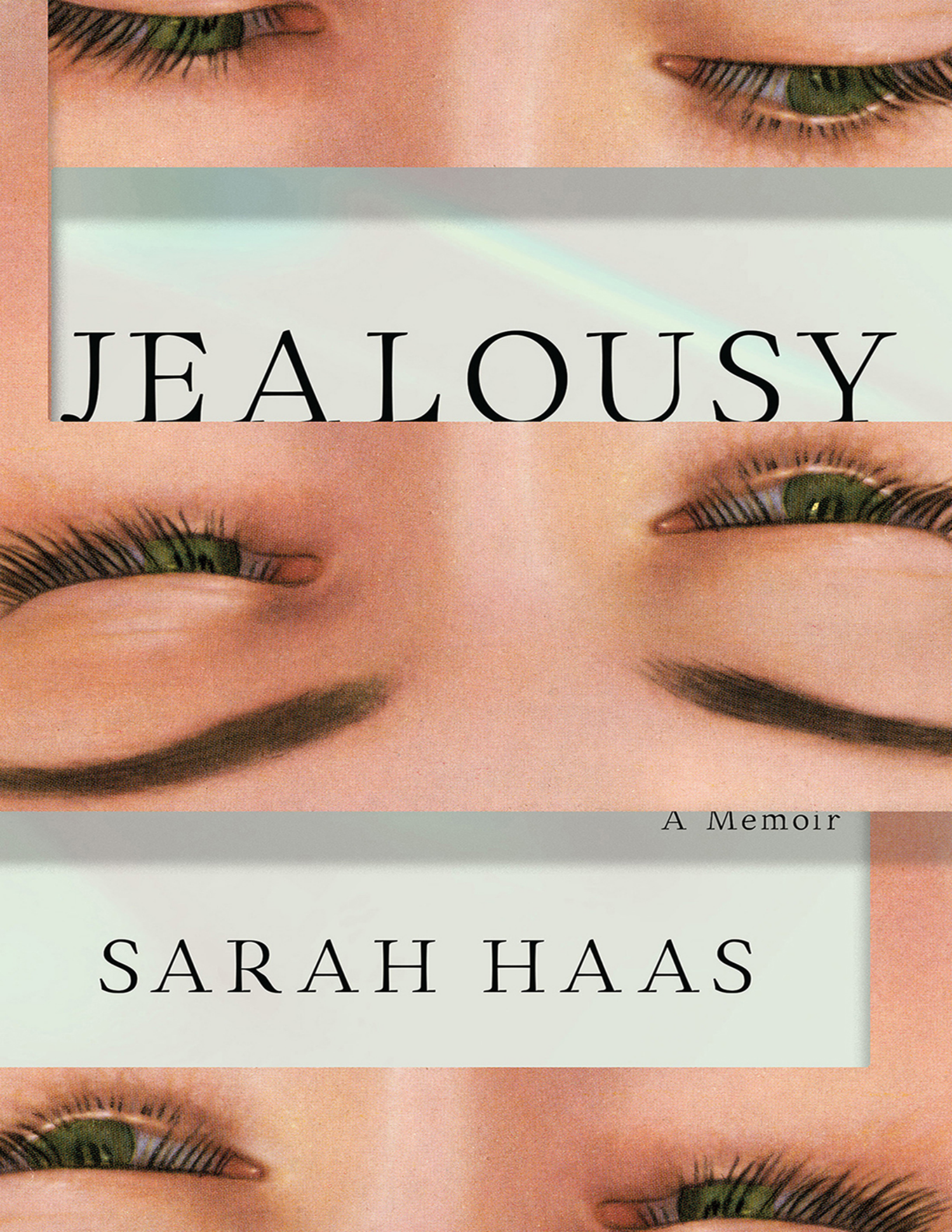
JEALOUSY
A Memoir
SARAH HAAS

# Jealousy

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# Jealousy

A Memoir

Sarah Haas

Catapult
New York



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*For Jill*

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You keep your mind to yourself at the cost of closing out the gods.

ANNE CARSON

Love is not to the point at all: the antagonism one feels within oneself in its presence is far more crucial.

VIVIAN GORNICK

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# Jealousy

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# Contents

Preface
In the time before the beginning
Origin Story
The Fathers
The New Age Dawns
The Problem of Fixity
The Muse
Single Mothers, Absent Fathers
Independence Day
Me & You
Him & Me
Gold Hill
“All Around and Away We Go”
Prove It
The Window & the Frame
Her
A Theory of Color

Beef Tartare
The Descent
Wedding Day
Eclipse
It’s Fine
Fuck It
The Algorithm Adjusts
YOLO
Invidia
The Magic of Macy’s®
- Scene
- Scene
- Scene
- Scene
- Scene
- Scene
- Scene

Our Strange Routine
Yellow Walls
Blank Slate
The Grasp
My Body of Work
Heaven or Las Vegas
Playing Myself
The Terror!
200 mg of Ibuprofen
The Return
Time Passes
Repossession
Shadows
The Ultimate Joke
(To Explain)

# Acknowledgments

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# Preface

In the ongoing legend of my life, I'm a god like every other god: massive and excessively real and utterly alive. A tiny piece of the prima materia from which everything else springs—light and dark, a seedling and a joke—a crack, growing into and through life's errant rot. I am as immortal as hypocrisy, by which I mean I am always living exactly as much as I am dying.

The other gods won't admit it, but they perish at their own hands, too: killing themselves, or killing one another, or watching as their creations drown in the intoxication of their own myths. But over time, the gods got smarter; they exorcised themselves of that which threatened their goodness. But how to dispose of it?

In me they saw an ordinary god like an ordinary girl, full of her secret loneliness and insecurity, and they knew they needed only to wait. Soon enough I would corrupt myself, would take away their burden, would become the embodiment of all earthly evil. The gods named me Jealousy and banished me from heaven to the deepest and darkest valley on Earth.

The ideal place to build a house, I thought, the simple home I always wanted, and deserved. So I dug and dug into the side of the cliff until the earth became so thin and porous I could hear the underworld scream. At the sound, all nearby life withered and died, rotting into a thick fog that didn't dissipate but endured, as shadow endures, the double and immaterial soul.

Now, everything I touch becomes filthy with the same black grime. The snake at my feet, for example. I pick it up and let it slither inside me, feeling it sustain the endless pleasure of my bodily decay. My bad breath and my molding teeth, this venom dripping from my tongue. My crossed eyes that cannot look in the same direction. Suspended as I am between life and death, I stay sleepless through the long-extenuated nightmare of my life because the gods may not want me but they need me. Minerva is always about to knock at my door, to ask for another favor so as not to contaminate her good soul by despairing the happiness of others. She needs me as all stories need me. Yes, she'll send me out, again and again, to drip my jealous venom into open but unsuspecting mouths and unleash their latent bad.

I'm happy to do it, really I am, for the only happiness I know comes at the sight of someone else's trouble. What else is empathy if not life's constant gnawing, gnawing, gnawing at others the way I am being gnawed.

This is my shame. This is my mythology.

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# In the time before the beginning

Everything was indistinguishable, monochromatic, and pure. There was nothing but the unanimous self. Glub, glub, glub. And then, at the first thought of me, I flashed into existence. Inverted and embryonic, I entered the womb of my mother, emblazoning through her liquid dark.

But already I'm getting ahead of myself, zooming past the time before the beginning, past eternity (which language can only attempt to describe—urgeless, imageless, ungraspable—an animated void). The only way to approach the prima materia is by way of its opposite, which isn't the afterword but the origin, the firm point in time that suddenly asserts out of the timelessness of nothing and nowhere. So let's start again at the beginning and then take a step back.

The moment of insemination was recently captured on film. In black-and-white photographic stills, the egg appears as a dark circle in a dark frame. The fertilization appears the inverse of a total solar eclipse, a dark circle illuminated by a ring of light—a zinc firework, it's called—before quickly fading, but not quite back to black. The light lingers. Stubborn. It won't go away, because the instant has already passed into the time before the

beginning when my mother was just a woman nesting inside a succession of mothers who were moaning and moaning and moaning: the sound of mythology devolving into poems. There is always another version of the story that's been told.

In the colormap version, the egg appears as a yellow-green circle with a red bulge of sperm on its edge. Suddenly, it attaches. Blue edges form, and the green separates from the yellow, contracting to the center. Meanwhile, the yellow pushes out, dispersing in a circumferential burst of ions that release —an instance of light—and the blue edges bleed in: a flood of indigo and violet and magenta. For a moment, the green is overwhelmed. It disappears. But from the zero point, it resurrects as the rest of the spectrum dissipates. The egg is back to yellow green and the sperm is returned to red, just as it was in the time before the beginning. The same, but different now because darkness exists as an absence.

Let's not get too attached to that beginning either, to the yellow-green self and the red other. Color and meaning are just tricks of the light. Interstitial nonentities. Consensuses undermining themselves in order to reinforce; it appears the story is standing still while it's actually running away and out of reach.

Soon the egg's membrane will embrace the sperm by extending dozens of armlike flanges to wrap and pull the other close until the membranes fuse. Once inside, the sperm will dissolve to expose a net of genetic material, already tangling with the egg's to form colorless X-shaped chromosomes—*chromo* for color; *soma* for body: the discordant name for the form that has neither. Not yet. But, in the aftermath of light, it's impossible not to imagine life embodied in color because imagination is both a crushing force and a unanimity, two versions of a story becoming one that's as untrue as it isn't. And yet, over and over again, this is the experience of the real, and the real is the bedrock of the divine.

For a long time, everyone agreed that, if there was a beginning, then there must be a God: a first mover, a first cause, a first turtle, a first grain of sand. It didn't matter whether natural laws were applied or abandoned,

philosophers and scientists and priests all agreed and, for the most part, they still do.

There are only two ways around God. One is to deny the existence of a beginning. (Good luck with that.)

The other is to become suspicious, as Wittgenstein did, of the so-called laws of nature, which “people should stop looking at as unassailable, as did the ancients at God and Fate.” The truth is there are no rules. Beginnings and endings are made of the same absurdity as the ongoing now, but no one can hold on to that. Yes, people cling to their convictions, to their gods and their fates. Just as I cling, stubbornly, to these attempts to understand the start because the problem isn’t beginnings, it’s me: always looking past what’s right in front of my face.

Maybe the only way to understand is to tell the story in reverse, to say that, before I existed, there was a woman and a man who met at the Bus Stop, which was a strip club. And before that, there were two cabbies taking fares back and forth to the Crossroads, which was a mall. And before they were in cabs, they were in bars, and before they were working, they were shopping, and before there was a mall, there was construction, which was first an undoing, a noisy machine removing the trees and the grasses and even the hills until the land was flat and apparently barren. No longer virgin ground, but widowed. And before there was grass, there was spring, and before there was spring, there was winter turning everything into one white and continuous form.

Let’s go forward now, just a little, because it’s difficult to presage the arrival of spring, which happens before it’s noticed, an unwitnessed event. Deep underground, the perennially forgotten roots turn from ghostly white to pale green, the feeble shade of prophecy because, before there was life, there were stories of life, and before there were stories, there was color; it’s only after the color and after the stories that “life itself is a picture,” or so Frederick Douglass writes. “But to be seen it must be withdrawn from view. Only begin to imagine its absence, and sun, moon, and stars halt in their

courses. All nature is hushed, silent, petrified—dark, shadeless, voiceless, sightless—dead.”

In other words, before there is life, there is darkness, but nested in the dark is an eternal appointment with the dawn.

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# Origin Story

No one remembers my mother's birth, not even her mother, who thought it might have happened on either the twelfth or nineteenth of June. Maybe this is just the nature of beginnings—destined to slip away. But it's more likely their amnesia was actually an omission: when my mother was born, she almost killed her mother, as daughters sometimes do. So, from either the twelfth or nineteenth onward, the family loved her as a double negative loves; love as a self-erasing contradiction; they loved her life to the brink of death.

I think the only time my mother was happy, like, really happy, was when I was inside her. She was thirty-two, and for nine months, people's mouths genuinely lifted at the sight of her. She was so happy that she bought an asparagus fern and sang to it to help it grow. She got a perm. She went swimming every day. Everything was buoyant, even my Father, who was mostly absent, off drinking bubbly beer and performing stand-up comedy at the Crossroads Mall.

The Crossroads Mall also sold asparagus ferns. And perms. And swimming suits. To try one on, my mother stepped inside a changing room and drew

the curtain, her silhouette stretching across the white drape while her reflection multiplied in the triptych of mirrors. Impressed by the reformation of her body into its refraction, she leaned in to get a better look at the now-infinite expanse of checkered retail floors compressing and expanding her pregnant figure: her tricky intersection—her keyhole to the crossroads that has always been the source, lying latent the way my mother was once latent in this world made out of women before they become mothers now regenerating at the mall.

She says it was the first time she felt like herself. *In the beginning*, she says. And then the thing she always says next, which is *I*. The first thought, and the first edge. The self arising as a line that divides heaven from Earth. And so the word becomes a joke—a division that unites—because the name I call myself is the name you call yourself, too.

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# The Fathers

The Father was always making mistakes. At first, He tried to learn from his fuckups, which were increasingly ours. But soon He grew frustrated. Eventually, He seethed with a new kind of feeling, a love all mixed up with hate that insisted on control. He loved us too much, do you understand? Loved as a double negative loves. *Jealously,* He said, a word so befitting that He offered it up as a hyponym of His name. Another word big enough to reaffirm its own existence. Inspired, the Father issued a command not to picture Him, then another requiring us to love Him, exclusively and forever.

We tried, but we kept making mistakes and so we left the Father with no choice but to destroy groups of irredeemable people, four or five or six times, depending on who you ask. And then, in a fit of despair, the Father destroyed the entire world.

But the Father felt bad. He was really sorry, and He promised He'd be better. As proof of this covenant, He cast a rainbow across the sky: His white-light embrace of our colorful if broken souls by which He started again and we started again. This time, the Father subdivided His perfect self

into three even more perfect parts because, like I, God doesn't dilute, no matter how much He disperses and expands. As His singularity redoubled, mathematical laws buckled to accommodate the Father's new form: an equilateral triangle without a fatal flaw. A divine mitosis. The imperfectly perfect Father becoming three impossibly perfect Fathers shepherding a succession of really good Fathers who aren't jealous and who don't kill but love.

My Father, for example. He claims to be the first man to patent a style of art. To explain, he reverts to the past tense in admission of his ancient imperfection: *It started with a mistake*, he says, an errant mark that he didn't cover up but chose to incorporate into the page in order to perfect it. On the privilege application, he coined the erratic style *Hot Pop*, the phrase by which art would turn into property, branded on hundreds of T-shirts and hats. The phrase was so fitting it became a hyponym of my Father's name: Hot Pop drew a portrait of Mario Andretti, but Hot Pop really wanted to draw Tim Allen, who just wouldn't write Hot Pop back, no matter how many Hot Pop hats Hot Pop sent him. It was the permanence of my Father's success that condemned him to eternal failure, cementing him in the ranks of the divine that thought they could outsmart imperfection. But I'm getting ahead of the story again. My Father was not yet a Father and not yet a Pop. He was just a cabbie after work, sketching on the back sides of cocktail napkins before calling my mother to fuck her and I into conception.

*Proof*, my Father said months later, holding a blue and parallel-lined pregnancy test he'd bought at the Crossroads Mall. *A mistake*, my mother said, her head falling into her hands. It was the twenty-first of December.

The Father of the shopping mall is named Victor Gruen. The idea came to the Jewish architect around 1951, just a few years after he fled Nazi Vienna to resettle on U.S. soil. In divinatory speeches, he spoke of his mall as a hotbed for culture. The American version of the Greek agora. A re-creation of his beloved European town square. He spoke of carless cities surrounding expansive parking lots chalked with yellow lines like yellow brick roads leading to a life well lived. Inside, he said, would be paradise: art and music, a post office and a grocery, a shoe store and a dress store and

a tailor. Inside, he said, the lights would always be set to just past dawn and the weather would always be perfect.

But the thing about weather is it changes. And the thing about Hot Pop is that I can’t find any evidence of a patent. And the thing about singularities is that, no matter what, they cannot and do not decompress. In other words: jealousy exists, and rainbows and perms fade. But my Father insisted on staying. He loved us too much, do you understand?

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# The New Age Dawns

I was born on the day I was due: July 14, 1986. It was Bastille Day, but revolution was just another excuse for a holiday. The economy had never been so good, and my mother was tipsy on red wine. *Welcome to the world*, my mother said to the staccato pop of distant fireworks.

My Father recorded my birth on film, a birth scene that is more or less the same as every other birth since the beginning of time. But in the film everyone keeps saying *this one is special*. Birth number 117 billion and one. *God's little miracle*, my Father says, pointing up to the stars. My mother keeps saying she is overwhelmed, presumably with love.

The first picture of me is taken seconds after I am born. Me: coated in amber mucus, shimmering in white halogen. I'm rising up and off the photo paper with the force of a 5,500-kelvin flash as bright as a cloudless summer day. I appear purer than pure light.

The camera my Father used to capture my birth was a Canon T70. Equipped with a microelectronic chip, LCD screens, and color film, it was advertised

as the first camera of the computer era: “However you envision the new age, part of it is here. Introducing the camera with brains.” But its basic function was the same as any camera: a dark box that admits light through a lens to make an image that would later become fixed.

My Father bought the camera at the mall because it was mascoted by a cardboard cutout of Wayne Gretzky saying “It makes the great shot simple.” In the TV advertisement, Gretzky drops four defenders to their knees just by turning around. My Father liked Gretzky because he was good at hockey, sure, but also because of the athlete’s penchant for producing motivational quotes: “A good hockey player plays where the puck is. A great hockey player plays where the puck is going to be.”

It’s a rip-off of a Schopenhauer line: “Talent hits a target no one else can hit. Genius hits a target no one else can see.” Either way, the gist is the same: to reframe the unperceived as what’s worth reaching for. But genius comes with the risk of unrecognition. And, here, at the mall, it also comes at a price: MSRP $290.

The first mall was born in 1956 in Edina, Minnesota. It was called the Southdale Center. It would be Gruen’s new outlet for “that primary human instinct to mingle with other humans.” Forty thousand people attended its opening, and Gruen promised even more to come, because the mall had “magnetic powers to attract more people and hold them.” In still photographs of that first day, people shop at two department stores. They pose in front of mannequins throwing footballs with their smooth-faced Fathers. They peruse seventy-two other shops. In the atrium, men stand around in business suits, and small-waisted women cluster around benches. Globe lights hang down from the ceiling while children point at installations of ferns reaching up toward those electric suns. In picture after picture, the mall holds them, these many “more people for more hours—more cash registers ringing more often for longer.”

Months later, Frank Lloyd Wright came to visit. In a black-and-white photograph, he stands in a gray coat with a gray top hat that nearly hits the short gray ceiling, a sky of drop-ceiling squares. The Father of organic architecture, Wright believed that a building must be an expression of genius that "conceives and integrates" by "beginning again at the beginning," every time and always. But, in Gruen's achievement of the never-ending dawn, the mall was a denial of beginnings, a copy of a copy meant to be copied thousands of times so that every reproduction was an idol, a blasphemy, a terrible corruption of the original town square. "Imitation is never flattery. It is insult," Frank Lloyd Wright said on his way out the door. "You should have left downtown downtown."

He left Edina for Chicago, where he unveiled his plan for The Illinois—his unbuildable ideal tower, his mile-high "city in the sky." But before he had to reckon with the impossibility of his design, Frank Lloyd Wright died.

My Father also dreamed of success beyond failure, whether as an artist or a stand-up comedian. But back then, he was too good, too exact. When he painted—cars and motorcycles and malls, for example—people said the pictures looked just like photographs. And, although some people found his representational talent impressive, they mostly found it irrelevant. When he told jokes, people thought he was just being mean, their laughter coaxed from delusions of superiority and then seduced into accord.

For example, in almost every set, my Father told one about having an affair with a hot and naked redhead. When the wife got home early, the redhead jumped out the window and clung to the windowsill while he peed, shit, and vomited all over her, only for her to realize she'd been hanging just a few inches from the ground. There's more to the joke than that, but I won't bother to explain, only to say that once, when I asked my Father how he depicted shadow, he replied: *All art is of shadow because it's shadow that depicts.*

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# The Problem of Fixity

In 1833, William Henry Fox Talbot decided he wanted to become a Father, too, one of the many Fathers of photography. He was on his honeymoon at Villa Melzi and, in the early dawn hours, he sat alone outside. In front of him stood a great white house on top of white stone steps guarded by white stone lions. To his left, a row of trees announced a pathway to a cluster of faraway white houses. Ahead, a white stone balcony edging Lake Como's blue water. He wanted to capture it, the place and the beauty and the fact that he was there, a part of the full scene he both experienced and witnessed. So the draftsman unpacked his camera lucida, a piece of faceted glass hovering above his sketchbook on a metal armature. As light passed through the prism, an image of the Italian scene was refracted and superimposed on the page. All Talbot needed to do was trace.

The resultant image is childlike. Correct, but cartoonish: silly lions, sloppy stonework, teensy houses with oblong windows. Talbot explained his failure: "For when the eye was removed from the prism—in which all looked beautiful—I found that the faithless pencil had only left traces on the paper melancholy to behold." He vowed to remove the problem, which

was himself, by inventing a camera that wouldn't need an artist's direct hand.

For years and years and years, Talbot tried. And the other Fathers of photography tried. Niépce and Daguerre and Talbot all trying and failing until, eventually, Talbot failed his way into a photogram, an impression of shadow to paper by way of touch—*flowers and leaves, a pattern of lace, the reticulations of an insect wing*—images of material opacity, recently departed. What appeared on the paper was not real, but reality's imprint, part specter and part revelation in reverse.

But too soon, the shadows were obliterated by the light that once created them, page after page returning to newfound blankness. "Fairy pictures," Talbot called them. "Creations of a moment, and destined as rapidly to fade away."

In the defeat of the decay, the question of fixity sprouted in Talbot's mind. "But how charming it would be," he mused, standing among twenty-five thousand pieces of paper too sensitive to expose to light. "And why should it not be possible?" Talbot calls this question his "original idea," which is a nice way of thinking about questions and ideas and origins: as incidents of pursuit and avoidance, paradoxes that both excavate and explain the ungraspable.

Several of the other Fathers had the same original idea, their collective idée fixe that spawned a litany of photographic beginnings. In 1826 or 1827, Niépce solved the problem of fixity with bitumen of Judea and lavender oil. Daguerre solved it with mercury in 1839. Talbot solved it with salt in 1841. Sir John Herschel with iron in 1842. Heliotypes and daguerreotypes and calotypes and cyanotypes: so many first copies of the world.

Jean-Christophe Bailly is right to remark on this repetition of beginnings, to say that "it's important to return to them, again and again, to try to understand not just how it came about, but what it was that came."

And Bailly's right to assign these beginnings a nodal quality, too, to liken them to the non-places where eclipses occur, to those grand upheavals when day masquerades as night and so when it's most difficult to discern the quality of the hour, to a singular event that's also a lineage of events in which the trajectory of human consciousness pivots and changes, to a point in time and space that's nonexistent but nevertheless real, to art, to Longinus's "mighty genius carried into the souls of its rivals, as from a front of inspiration, an effluence which breathes upon them until [. . .] they share the sublime enthusiasm of others."

But photography is also a science with a history and a technology that progresses and a product that's for sale and it was Daguerre who received the state-sanctioned certificate of invention. This version of the story isn't a lie but a deception befitting his process. To fix the image, Daguerre enclosed himself in a small, dark room filled with vaporized mercury: a remedy that's also a poison; a friend that can flatter and lie. For hours, he inhaled and exhaled and waited for an image to emerge that could compete with reality and, upon the occasion of his success, he emerged from the dark with a declaration: "I have captured the light and arrested its flight! Now, the sun itself shall draw my pictures." (Then again, it's only the Devil who can cast a shadow in the dark.)

In sober reinforcement of Daguerre's claim, Frederick Douglass described the accomplishment as a transference of "sublime, prophetic, and all-creative power," from God to man. Just as the first Father's creations, Daguerre's proved to be flawed and fragile, too. Early practitioners compared the surface of the prints to butterfly wings, disintegrating a little bit with every human touch.

Daguerre's first images didn't survive. The oldest one that remains is a still life, taken in Daguerre's art studio turned photographic. Arranged in a traditionally artful composition, there are drapes and baskets and a ram's head and a plaster relief of the human form. But the viewer's focus rests on two central putti, those cherublike guardian spirits that link the human and divine realms. This point of origin can be taken in two ways: as another

suggestion of the nature of photography, or as a turn back to cherublike baby me.

The day after I was born, my Father took me from my Jewish mother's arms and drove me to church. He stripped me naked at the altar and surrendered me to a white-robed priest. When he returned me to my mother, he said: *Sarah Rose has been saved*.

It was then that my mother noticed the furrow between my eyes, *like a gutter*, she says, pointing to the pictures, to where the holy water funneled from my brow and into my mouth until I was consumed by milk and holy water.

In picture after picture, I glow undiminished. *Evidence*, my Father said, *of your godliness*, my Father said, the lunar reflections I impelled from row after row of downcast and devoted faces. Crowds parting and then clamoring to see my freckles, each as perfectly placed as the stars.

Except that, in the pictures, the stars don't sparkle. Time doesn't tremble. The violence of the passing hours stops, or appears to stop. I am a baby forever, anointed by a god who is outlasting time, but can't succumb to it as we can. Or, I am a baby forever condemned, by a devil who is fixing time, trading souls for seized shadows.

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# The Muse

When I was a toddler, my Father took me to the mall, where he bought me markers and a suncatcher that passed from the shelf to his finger without ever weighing down my hand. I knew the prism only as lofty and untouchable: a heart-shaped thing capable of exposing ordinary light for what it really is, a consortium of colors. Foolishly, I crawled around the room lusting after the tiny rainbows, Walter Benjamin's flock of winged creatures flitting about, from form to form.

Benjamin thought children understood color better than adults because they assumed it to be "the medium of all changes, and not a symptom." Like me, they tried to capture color as a thing in and of itself. If Benjamin and children are right, then color not only precedes the spectrum but is its basis. And if the spectrum is the medium, then color could be the same as the universe itself. Imagine it: a time before the beginning that's utterly chromatic; a chaos of color.

Of course, the theory is unconventional and difficult to prove because, "roughly speaking: objects are colourless," writes Wittgenstein. Roughly speaking, he is right. Language insists on color as an attribute: black is an

expression of soot, red is only borrowing from rust, and a leaf is not qualitatively green, but for a time appears to be. Once the chlorophyll drains, color proves to be a trick of light now playing a trick on me as I fumble around chasing rainbows while my Father chants the spectrum, again and again, seemingly determined to turn its uneasy syntax into a song —*red*, *orange*, *yellow*, *green*, *blue*, *indigo*, *violet*—as if the music might recollect the index of refraction back into a light white whole.

He doesn't know his playful musicality has antecedents. After discovering the color spectrum in the mid-1600s, Newton assigned each slice to a note because he assumed that color was a vibration the same as sound. His scale begins with D, which is the halfway point between violet and red. Ringing out, it's the note by which the spectrum becomes a circle eating its own tail. While I fumble around, the laughter intensifies, the color and the laughter that's been hiding in plain sight, as curving and continuous as my mother's arms now drawing in to collect her *silly little girl*.

Back at home, my Father sat me down to draw another portrait becoming the scene and the site of his invention. As the story goes, I ripped the pen from his hand and demanded he draw me with the colorful and washable markers instead. So he did, drawing me in red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. But the markers were too big and his hands were clumsy with them. His strokes were broad and wild and never quite right. He tried again; he drew another portrait; another, then a dozen more until the floor was littered with paper and the Irish white skin of his hands was covered in color smudging into black. Eventually, he declared the work *finished*, by which he meant a work without mistakes. He stood back to admire his salon: dozens of girls who looked vaguely like me, dozens and dozens of white girls made of color. He wanted to give me all the credit. *You did it!* he said, picking me up and spinning me around and calling me his inspiration to abstraction.

*Finally*, he said, *I'm a real artist.*

I doubt it was explicit, or self-aware, but my Father's statement was also his original idea, the point at which *art* became a word like *I* or *God* that's too

big to be real, even as the word points, compass-like, to reality. It was my Father who taught me this. *To paint is to handle color*, he told me once, years later, when we were standing in front of Ellsworth Kelly's *Red Yellow Blue II*. But I didn't think the triptych qualified as art. It was too easy. My Father held out his hand and swooshed it back and forth through some imaginary thickness, the conductor of an orchestra of color made material. And then he just stood there for a while, thinking, until he said, *Well, look how little it took to make you ask such a big question*.

Seeing the gallery of me collecting on my bedroom walls, my mother didn't see art but idolatry, a girl not loved but confined by false images. A most threatening mimesis. Afraid, my mother excommunicated my Father from the house.

On his way out the door, he turned around to take one last photo. In it, I'm sitting on the stoop, chin in hands, elbows on knees. I'm not looking at him, but already in the direction of his departure.

My mother stayed, but it was then that she started to turn away from me, too. She went to work as often as she could, every day and night shift at the hospital where she nursed people back from the brink of death in the ICU. When she returned home, she would kneel beside me in my bed and cry. Over her shoulder, I watched the sun rise onto the wall of portraits. Day after day, I watched the washable colors blanching in, or was it rejoining with, the light.

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# Single Mothers, Absent Fathers

A few times a year, my Father called from 1,500 miles away to recite our history. Over and over again, it began with the story of my conception and ended with his delivery to greatness. *I am the greatest artist who ever lived*, he would say. An arriviste: *not as great as the greats, but greater*. His resultant fame was imminent and unstoppable, a fame I was both told and incentivized to believe in because it was a fame that would outlive us both. First, he said, it would lead him to Chicago, to his glass tower in the sky, where he would meet with the best gallerist in the city. But he warned that his fame was also dangerous, so great that it inspired not only love but also an envy becoming jealousy turning into a hate aimed against him. His fame, he cautioned, could end with his being murdered in the streets.

The excitement in his voice—it was a death my Father yearned for, as if it would transform him into the son of man. His lust for death frightened me. I was so newly alive; I didn't understand wanting to die. Under the constant prophecy of his end, I clung to my Father more and more so that, at the end of every phone call, I was hugging thin air. And my Father, my magical Father! Every time I hugged him, he would swear that he could feel me.

My poor mother, increasingly alone and growing weary from the labor of upholding my vague existence, her once-open compassion tiring into specifics and complaints. She wanted me to want her, too, and then to behave accordingly: to listen, to tidy, *to help me or to go away and live with your Father*.

A few months later, he'd call again, drunk and so happy he was on the verge of tears. He called from the pay phone at his local pub to tell me the same-same stories of the few times he'd seen me, at five, seven, ten years old: versions of a girl honing into a scripture now replacing the actual me. Like the original scriptures, my Father's was stripped of all its vowels—no breath and no moan, no mother and no *I*. "It's clear the problem *there*," Joy Williams writes of another young girl under the paternal spell. "In itself it explains almost everything." But the problem was that I couldn't see the problem, couldn't imagine having a sense of self, let alone losing one. Whoever I was, I was first of all a daughter, *korē*, which was Persephone's name before she was raped by the Devil and made his wife, back when she was just a girl like me, undefined except by the existence of her Father.

After I hugged him, my Father always said goodbye the same way: he would tell me how close we were, *closer than every other Father and daughter*, even though we were more than one thousand miles apart. Even though he was calling less and less. What else is faith but the assertion of absence as presence?

I begged my mother to let me live with my Father, but she refused to actualize her empty threats, even as she became overburdened and started to diminish toward death, ingesting various poisons to make her like a corpse. It was too late. My Father was gone, no longer full-bodied but withdrawn back into a single point, the center of the frame that imbues a picture, or a vision, or a Fatherly love, with a sense of depth.

Or the TV, which my mother and I were increasingly looking at, and into. It was the nucleus of our living room, lending everything an unearned dimension. It was easy to forget that every display was an animation, and I was always shocked when my perception adjusted to accommodate the

frame: my mother and I revealed to be but a small part of a room, which was a small part of a suburbia, which was a small part of a city where things were actually moving and happening. In refocusing my attention on my mother, I noticed she appeared small and statuesque in her state of absorption; from my state of detachment, I admired her ability to be so solidly in one place. Her unending state of grace. And then I pitied her. An unbearable pity. I detached even further. I left.

Alone, I went to the Crossroads, where my youth promised to stretch eternal. To get there, I walked through a meadow. I took a bus. I walked across the expanse of parking lots and a brigade of yellow lines. I transgressed every threshold to arrive in the mall, which was basically a copy of the first mall, which was the same as every mall now in every city in the United States of America. Sure, the stores inside were different, and the fashion was always changing, and instead of a fountain in our atrium there was a large wooden owl. But these are the kinds of differences that lose themselves in the process of assimilation. These same but different truths that live in the Crossroads where the light's always set to dawn and the weather is always perfect.

The most notable difference between the original mall and my mall was that all the mannequins had lost their heads. In their decapitation, they'd shed their specificity to become Marguerite Yourcenar's Greek statues, "those hard objects [. . .] changed in the way time changes us." Because of "their maltreatment by Christians or barbarians," they'd tumbled into a brokenness to which I was beginning to relate. Growing up is a process of falling apart, specifically through the process of desire, which is an illusion of repair. Looking up into every window display, I saw my head in the reflection, placed firmly atop the mannequins' well-clothed and ideally formed plastic shoulders. My process of individuation was also my process of sameness: the formation of Frank Lloyd Wright's prophesied mobocracy, or a Deleuzian meadow in which every shopper is a blade of constituent grass.

As weeks and months passed at the mall, my selfness diffused, either sheepish or rhizomal. I wasn't anybody, but I wasn't alone either, and the

endlessness of communal wanting was my girlish achievement of an American perfection that possessed. I wanted everything; I wanted nothing —what mattered most was that I could afford very little. Until one day when I came across a blonde girl who called herself *a friend*. For hours, we sifted through the discount shelves at the jewelry store, and we talked about everything we wanted as if it were already ours. She dared me to steal a gold ring. I did her one better: I stole two.

In light of the mall's early offenses, Victor Gruen was eager to disown his offspring. "I am often called the Father of the shopping mall," he said, "and I would like to take this opportunity to disclaim paternity once and for all. I refuse to pay alimony to those bastard developments."

In light of my early offenses, my Father called me *spoiled*. My mother put me on a plane so that I could work for him during the summer. So it was with two golden rings on my finger that I boarded a plane for the Midwest.

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# Independence Day

I was twelve. I was alone. I was suspended thirty-five thousand feet in the air, somewhere between my mother and Father. Neither here nor there. The musical D should have been ringing out of everywhere. Instead, all notes blended into the plane's ambient noise. The brown and sometimes pink of the engine. The white of the conditioned air. Different versions of too much noise conforming into silence. For two hours, I listened to everything as if it were nothing while I knit, stitch after stitch. I was sitting next to a woman who was writing her Father's obituary. She didn't seem sad so I asked her, *are you sad?* She laughed. Eventually, she admitted that she *just didn't know*. Silent again, knitting again, sipping on a complimentary cup of iced orange juice, which is when my first original idea sprung in me, out of the clouds, out of the colored sound, out of the space that existed in every loop of yarn, a supralingual and barely traceable question about truth as contradiction, lofted on the airplane's wings. In school, I was learning about principles of lift, thrust, weight, and drag; in the air, I came to understand that antagonisms can do incredible things. And then the descent began: The seat belt sign turned on. The plane landed with a thud. My ears popped. Then, in the return of fragmentated sounds, they rang in the note of D, ringing off the plane and onto the tarmac as it

funneled me to my Father, who was perfectly framed. *She knit the whole time,* the flight attendant told him, and it was the only thing my Father ever said about the trip, over and over again—*she knit, she knit, she knit*—as if the time before the trip's beginning were also its only memorable event.

Once, I'd inspired my Father to art and comedy. Now, he worked at the carnival, where he drew caricatures of people with big heads and bigger tits that came with even bigger price tags. To attract new customers, he'd ask me to pose, my once-divine beauty now a way to entrance crowds of people to watch as he smoothed away my flaws with deceptive strokes of the pen. In the succession of finished pieces, I saw the idea of me amalgamating into a verdancy of budding womanhood. The ideal of almost-womanhood. The divinity of a woman on the verge. The archetype of not-quite-womanhood that makes grown men fall to their knees in an imploration to fuck. The first and last time anyone called me God was when a man who wanted me to call him *Daddy* put his cock in my mouth, his friend likewise moaning awestruck in the background. It was July 4, 1998. Independence Day. The staccato pop of distant fireworks.

Fireworks are composed of a shell filled with black powder and small pellets called stars. The fuse is lit with a spark, and then the black powder's constituents respond to the fire: the sulfur melts first, flowing over the charcoal and then into the potassium nitrate, which burns to produce energy and gas, the combustion that propels the firework up and into the air. At a certain height, a second fuse ignites, which sets off the stars exploding into a glorious display of color and light: copper stars turning green, strontium stars burning red, iron casting gold. Aluminum, magnesium, titanium all raining a familiar white. The white of photographic flashbulbs. A white that isn't full of color but devoid. The white of a girl being fucked into inexistence.

The outcry of a firework's sound depends on the size of the opening through which the eruption occurs: a smaller opening produces a whistle or a scream, while a totally confined space produces a load-bearing boom. In my case, it was the force and utility of an aphoristic pop, followed by the

fizzle and shake of his waning light. The hush of black powder falling down and away into the dark night.

Time doesn’t stop and wait for the girl to collect herself. Rather, she waits, as the seconds stretch and then pass into minutes and hours and days and weeks and months that, over the years, return her to a normal sense of time passing while she continues to wait for a self to emerge, for a woman to aggregate out of those little particles of black powder, no longer floating through space but colliding and recombining and amassing into bigger and bigger particles of rock, first pebble-sized and then boulder-sized, which is when the girl takes a step back to see how many rocks there are: a vast galactic band, a synestia, doughnut-shaped and spinning around the earth until, eventually, it reconstitutes into the moon.

It’s a good theory, anyway, and the best way to describe my bildungsroman, too, even if it wasn’t exactly a self I was building but an object that could reflect a self, wandering and posing and trying to mold the energies of the sun into a form consciousness could both measure and comprehend. Through this recursive procedure, I hoped to become the reflection of the girl you imagine seeing in the convex of your favorite silver spoon, a curved and shimmering apparition of your desire, attractive but blank enough to assume any deposition: the thing you’re just about to say: the word on the tip of your tongue. A fleeting satisfaction. But even as the light withdrew, I clamored to keep it, a desperation churning into my attraction for the whoever-you-are who happens to be standing before me.

I fell in love thirty-six times. Every time I fell in love, it turned out that the person was actually an idea of a person, and that neither the person nor the idea was in love with me.

Number Two kissed me on a dare. Number Eleven didn’t know my name. Number Twenty-Two stopped fucking me in a garden to take a call from the girl he actually liked. Number Thirty-Six shoved me up against a wall and pushed his forearm across my neck and demanded I tell him what kind of bitch I was. And then Number Thirty-Six fucked me. The problem wasn’t

that I couldn't talk, or that he didn't ask, but that I didn't know the answer, which is more or less what the problem continues to be.

I fall in love whenever love presents itself as a possibility, and then I accept it by saying the word *love*, every time issuing it as a question. But everyone knows *love* is too vast a word to mean, like *art* or *God* or *I*. However naïvely, I hoped that repeating the word thirty-six times would defy its profundity and solidify it into a particle of meaning. Like the word *yellow*, which I learned by saying *yellow* every time I saw something that was: *yellow* sign, *yellow* light, *yellow* sun. But eventually repetition turns a word to mush: *yellow yellow yellow yellow yellow*, until all color is a part of the same mystery, nothing the same as everything, love the same as *love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love love*, no longer self-evident and no longer a means of communication but just four letters all in a row—a word—begging for the reciprocity of someone else to help form the meaning of me.

The men I loved tended to explain love to me, usually as if it were a black hole, a phenomenon insisting on itself until it becomes its own source of gravity so intense that it condenses two beings into one. Love like shopping at the mall: a consumptive force; an act of conformity that engulfs. Seduction in its most sinister form.

Sometimes I imagine a white hole instead: a cosmic region of collapsed space-time that cannot be entered but from which light constantly produces itself and then escapes. White holes aren't real, but theoretical black holes in reverse, so that, if time and existence went backward into the time before, I'd be there spewing out light. It's the only imaginable process by which I could become myself without the need for somebody else to love me.

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# Me & You

Me: just another thirty-something standing behind a diner counter, looking out on each and every person with their clasped hands, heads bowed, faces aglow, every body taking the shape of the self turned inward. Their shadowless faces. A perfect room of perfect self-absorption both basic and divine: it looks like everyone is praying.

I'm one of nine red waitresses wearing the uniforms we have to buy ourselves with the money we make. The color is supposed to suggest our cohesion, but it appears differently on each of us, one red becoming nine shades of red. I think the color looks a little too pink on me, too girlish, and a regular tells me it makes me look hot. I don't tell him he called me another server's name, because it doesn't matter who we really are, at least not as much as how we're seen. As Josef Albers writes, "color deceives continually."

The array of red doesn't intimate we want to be here, only that we are. We don't, not really, but we don't allow one another to admit it. Instead, we smile. We say, *Thank you*. We conform to whatever happiness exists inside this restaurant we can't seem to escape. In our uniforms, we embrace our

sameness because it’s easier to be foolishly content than it is to want what we can’t have: to marry rich or to write, for example. Sometimes, we flirt with men who tip big and every time we hope we’ll get lucky. In the meantime, we stay, because of the cold, hard cash (so many coins in my pocket!) and the time card I punch: the thick cardstock paper, the clunk of the machine dressing one line after the next with indisputable ink, the last sound I hear before stepping outside and into the treeless lot where I get in my sun-soaked truck that somehow doesn’t smell like cigarettes and fake maple syrup.

But I’m getting ahead of myself again. My shift has only just begun. I look down, in harmony with everyone here, and in the treacherous light I see the me who is not me but me looking down into my palm and into my phone’s 12MP, 1/3-inch sensor with a wide-angle (28 mm equivalent) f/1.8 lens. My face, my braided hair, my black Russian bandana—I think I look pretty. So, with one press of my thumb, I take a picture of my shadowless face and post the picture online. My private posture turning portal to the public world:

Me: looking down at a camera, my sunglassed face surrounded by sky and goats.

Me: in the back of my beige V8 pickup wearing a felted cowboy hat and short jean shorts.

Me: forearms outstretched, sleeve tattoos exposed, large hands around a ceramic mug I’d made.

Me: wearing broadcasting headphones and a red-striped shirt, my face partially obscured by the local radio station’s microphone.

Me: in a puffy down jacket, posing with the nose of a cream-colored quarter horse that I take care of but am not allowed to ride.

Me: pinning me to myself, a specimen, a dead butterfly in a box.

The pictures make my life look even less like mine than it already is, all improved by the same filter that’s paler and softer and prematurely faded, as if what just was is already long gone. How strange to see a passing mood lacquered to the fact of the moment. To look at an obviously altered picture

and feel that it is more true. I've convinced myself that I could be yellow beige forever without needing to be enthusiastic about being at all.

I have a dead butterfly in a box; for twenty years, I've watched its shadow on the wall, flickering in the changing light. I found it above tree line, encrusted in ice. Frozen, it still looked so alive. Remarkable, I thought, I didn't even have to kill it to keep it.

Underneath the dead pinned thing, I wrote its scientific name, *Danaus plexippus*, which translates to *sleepy transformation*. The name comes from the mythology of metamorphosis in which a soul incarnates as a worm, eating until it's loaded enough to hang upside down and survive while its skin hardens into a chrysalis that is both a coffin and a womb. And then the skin opens as a corpse's mouth, from which the butterfly escapes.

Underneath the photos of me, I write too much. The same as saying nothing at all.

It's difficult to see the self clearly. Easier to see what the self is not: not a thing or an empty street. Not one among a line of sun-washed buildings. Not a lamp in a perfect row of lamps, a tree in an imperfect row of trees. No, the self is not a background blurring into a fog of light, nor the front of the frame honing into definition: first, into a curving street, then into a shape that is not fog or tree or lamp. But in the shape, there is a recognition, perhaps because the form is blurrier than the rest, the blur of something that moves, something alive. A person, maybe. A somebody, self-conscious and self-defined and bending slightly forward to hover over another somebody. A posture of subjugation; the shape of our distinction; the human edge. Focus on us, for the sturdy fact of our existence is proven once and for all, in this, Daguerre's first photograph of man.

Now, Daguerre said, we can see ourselves clearly. Now, Daguerre promised, we can understand ourselves fully.

There are several noteworthy omissions and inaccuracies in Daguerre's photograph. First, the unknowable dozens or hundreds or thousands of people walking by, too quickly to be captured in the long exposure time required to imprint the immortal pane.

Second, the image is flipped, so that the man on the left is actually a man on the right. What a fitting perversion for the device deemed "a mirror with a memory"! The fading understanding of what didn't last. A memory of a memory of the last time the memory was had.

There are other problems, too—the scratches on the plate, the lens's barrel distortion, a chromatic world issued in gray scale. But, as the flaws of the image amass, they become a part of photography's overall precision; the photograph's prejudice is our prejudice, too. The bias implicit in our point of view. No wonder we can't see ourselves clearly, uncaptured and unexposed and hiding from ourselves in the ombré edge of every vignette. You and I, gods on the periphery of man.

I didn't intend to write to you so directly. Not like this, and not yet. But already I'm wanting to see myself through your eyes. Before you came in, I was alone, looking at and through the backlit window, a composite of my mirror image and the view. I turned on the OPEN sign, and I opened the door, and I let you in.

Inside, we both stay at a distance and converge. I brought you a cup of coffee before you even asked for it, exactly how you take it. It's like I knew. And now you're listening to me talking, going on about my reflection, how it rivaled the Rocky Mountains, and you become atmospheric; from your point of view, you're telling me that I looked right-sized; as I hear it, you mean to say *small*. My idea of myself shrinks. The second vanishing point in our two-point perspective.

In this book, there are also many other people, some of whom I've never even met and so whom you'll know as well as I. Strangers and imaginary people on the edge of fiction. The third person is in play, and with it an omniscience that no true story can adopt while maintaining its genre. To justify and explain myself, I'll borrow from Guo Xi's Three Distances and depict us on the third: me and you, looking at each other from the top of two points of equal height. Of course, Guo Xi is attempting to capture a more comprehensive real, so he's incorporating High Distance and Deep Distance, too. But here I am, telling you and the ancient master that it's not true enough, that we also have to look down to get to the reality of this jealous situation. *No problem*, you say. *I'm not afraid*, which is what every person says before they look down upon the chasm they've been pretending isn't always underneath. Realizing how far you have to fall, you tremble, and you note that we wouldn't survive the collision with the ground. *Don't worry*, I say. *We're going further down than that*, all the way to the center of the underworld, where our heads will twist around so they can look back because that's how jealousy is and what it requires. As we make the descent, it's crucial that you don't abandon your senses, even as I abandon mine.

So please, don't forget your point of view, now, when time is still serial and the text is still read from left to right and the color spectrum is still red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. Remember being outside the diner before it opened, because it was then that you saw your reflection in the window, too, overlapping with and then encompassing mine. It was as close as you can get to being a god, witnessing me: a young woman who is still dressed in red but who is about to quite suddenly turn green and then blue.

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# Him & Me

I'm in my truck when I first see him as six illuminated pictures in a spectrum from left to right. I thumb through them, fingerprint to face, face, face until touch becomes feeling, feeling, feeling for him. Plasmatic, light confusing with the material of my pulsing blood. Familiar, it's as if I already know him. A memory of what is yet to come:

Him: in a brimmed hat and a blue Dickies jacket, carrying a bundle of kindling.

Him: standing outside the back door of a car, putting on or pulling off a pair of pants, looking away from the camera and down the road.

Him: pushing back into a reclining sofa under the weight of two poodles.

Him: sitting down in front of dozens of panels of synthesizers, his profile illuminated by the faint lights of the machine and a giant piece of glowing selenite.

Him: in a basketball jersey, at a Sixers game, alone and flashing a peace sign.

¯_( )_/¯, he writes.

Understanding the shruggie as a joke, I smile—one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi—and then the crack of my laugh. I touch his face, smooth and glassy. I swipe right. Immediately, my phone buzzes. Boom boom.

We: a match.

It's not the first connection I've made online. One of a dozen, or is it one of a dozen dozens? I've lost track because none of them mattered. None of them made me laugh, not like this, thunderously, with the sound of sudden light. Not an expression of contradictory feeling, but a comic explosion that runs countercurrent to the endless succession of leftward swiping. A pause, then a laughter perched on the edge of fear. A laughter so deep it's diabolical, by which I mean it's self-fulfilled but wanting more. And all of that for what? An emoticon. A bunch of punctuation aesthetically rearranged, breath reordered to resemble a shrugging face.

But, oh! What a shrug. A shrug that nails me to my selfhood that otherwise exists as an unpinnable and nagging suspicion that everything about me is an accident in a succession of accidents: the absurdity of the About Me section on this and every other social site. Where I hurried past, he confronted. He faced and he shrugged and now I'm shrugging, too, inspired to heed the substantiality of what isn't there—the crack that carries a dielectric capacitance to connect the earthly and divine—the bolt of the metaphorical that succeeds in connecting one idea, one thing, one person and the next.

So I'm heeding the temptation to write about lightning here, as an accidental segue. I could explain the science of differential charges between the sky and the ground. But the truth is that no one knows exactly what lightning is or why it strikes or when. We only know that the capacitance of Earth is about 710 microfarads (μF) and, while the capacitance of storm clouds changes, the capacitance of the human body is almost always about 100 μF. It's that steady difference between Earth and us that makes it possible for people to use smartphones. When a finger contacts the screen, it absorbs some of the device's electrical charge to create a drop in voltage

that the software interprets as touch. My perception of touch is adjusting, too—hard and cold and smooth, the gesture of reaching out and waiting for connection, for my phone to resonate in my hand—*beep beep buzz buzz—Hello!* he writes—the root of our thread on its way to becoming a bolt of mysteriously branching light.

Before I reply, I tell my best friend, a redheaded diner waitress, that I've met *the man of my dreams*. She looks at me, betrayed. Just the night before, we'd sworn off men, promised to stay by each other's side, to live together and to raise her daughters together, forever.

*Just look at him*, I say. So she does.

*I want to sit on his face,* she says.

She laughs for exactly as long as it takes for me to stop trusting her. The start of my decay. Even though I know it isn't her fault, that the picture of him half outside the car and half undressed is meant to seduce. Is seductive. My best friend is on the same side of the glass as me, but it occurs to me that her position isn't fixed. Too easily, by swiping right, she could match and overcome the glass to become another woman who takes a private picture of him now squarely in the public realm. She: the whoever-it-was or whoever-it-will-be watching him while supine in the back seat and looking just slightly up, her head still pushed up against the closed back door, crammed and trying to capture him in that post-fuck time and space now preserved forever, for me, for my best friend who's licking her lips.

*If you don't work out, then send him my way*, says the friend who is no longer my best.

As Ursula Le Guin reminds, "you can only be cruel if you have and cherish a self."

After work, alone, I study the public and online versions of him, starting in the most recent past and moving backward in time:

Him, drinking ayahuasca at a Peruvian bar.
The Nazca Lines.
A selfie, his bearded face and bulbous torso framed in a hotel mirror.
Synthesizers.
A screenshot of a 3D animation he made, a jagged image of a girl at a strip club, frozen mid-twist around the pole, blonde.
A keyboard.
Mountains, trees.
In the background but out of focus: books; in the foreground: *The Private Life of Plants*.

I haven't read *The Private Life of Plants* but I do have the same edition on my shelf, not mine but someone else's, like all the other books in my prefurnished apartment. I take it down, hold it in my hands, and think about reading it but download the series instead.

The documentary uses stop-motion photography to track the movement of plants so often mistaken as still. To capture this growth of cellulose walls, the filmmakers took hundreds of thousands of sequential stills on silver-coated cellulose film. Pieced together, serial time quickens, and the plants appear to yearn, like us, for the light. But their movements also hint at a more Schopenhauerian ideal of human consciousness: a seeking without desire, an art of living, a "blind willing into the world of representation":

A flower blooming to face a sun that looks like the flower's face.

A mushroom spore casting a perfect self-portrait and then standing back to apprehend its likeness.

A serpentine vine stalking up a tree in the dark damp of a rainforest, up and toward the light. By the time the vine reaches the canopy, its stalk is thick

and woody but for the always-verdant tip. Tender, it is overwhelmed with light. Wilts. Singes.

Undeterred, I'm bending down toward the light of my phone, tendrilling through his pictures in search of sturdy images to hold on to, each prehensile achievement encouraging me to reach further back, back, back in time:

Snow.
Joel Embiid.
Poorly home-baked bread, mostly crust.
Picture after picture of electronics.
Him, standing in front of a sign that reads WELCOME TO COLORADO. Caption: *I live here now.*

Back, back, back and into the before where my desire is quick to intermix with what I see into Los Angeles where he lived maybe with a girl who was holding a mouse and where maybe he was standing in front of structures that look like UFOs and maybe it was him again facing a display of 3D animated sex scenes he'd made for an art show but definitely him posing with a goat right after he surely sat with those poodles on the couch in New Jersey where he must be from and where he recently visited but not until he had probably visited some dinosaur statues with either the pretty brunette leaning against him in the booth or the pretty brunette who's stroking his blue-glitter beard with his fully tattooed arms limp at his sides which are the very same arms from the previous picture of him reclining in a pleather chair when the ink on his arm is not yet fixed but still an impermanent blue outline of the unchangeable future.

Enough; I'm too smart to get burned by refulgence. I know that there is a limit to what a person ought to know about a person one does not. After all, when I meet him, I don't want to have to remind myself that he is a stranger.

What *The Private Life of Plants* appears to reveal is an illusion. The appearance of movement given by pictures that are still. A chimerical sequence of events. A dream or a fever. A fantasmagorie, as in the world's first animated film, released in 1908 by France's Émile Cohl:

From the blank screen, the artist's hand emerges to draw a stick figure of a hanging man. Now a hanging clown pulling himself up into a box. A magic box! Inside it, then out, a clown sitting in the second row of a movie theater. A woman sits in front of him, blocking his view. Her head grows bigger. The clown is inside her head, which is becoming a box. A magic box! A gentleman emerges. The clown cuts off his head and the head transforms into a wine bottle that sucks the clown inside. The wine bottle reveals itself to be a flower. The flower is an elephant's trunk. The elephant is a house. The clown is inside and the police are knocking. The clown jumps out of the second-story window. He falls. He falls apart. The animator's hand returns to repair and reassemble the broken figure. God is revealed! But once the clown is fully himself again, God disappears and the clown is a balloon rising up and onto the back of a horse. The pair trots away, but before they reach the edge of the frame, they disappear.

The series of reeling photographs, each slightly different from the next, tempts the viewer to forget the gaps in between. Narratives are born in this forgetting, and *Fantasmagorie* refuses to let the viewer forget the absurdity of the omission. On his feed, though, nothing abrupts. I'm scrolling through his pictures again and again and making my own animation in which anything could happen next: California > poorly baked bread > Joel Embiid > snow > and maybe in the next box—a magic box!—a picture of me.

And yet I'm standing still. Trapped in the same old, same old. Ordinary red me in the inescapable red now. It's 6:00 a.m. and I'm peeling plastic wrap off a carton of orange slices because every plate receives exactly one, a color to offset the breakfast browns. Customers rarely eat them, the class aversion to consuming the garnish. Instead, they order orange juice for six dollars a glass.

Sometimes when I heave the plastic jug labeled FRESH from the fridge and onto the counter, I think about the oranges in the tub, which are real oranges grown in actual orchards, about the people who pick them, about the machines that juice them and jug them and box them, about the trucks that traffic them from Florida to here, to our once-small town now sprawling out into the endless suburbia becoming a clown on an elephant's trunk becoming a mall where oranges are always in season.

Sometimes when I place the six-ounce cup of juice in front of a customer, they complain that the volume is *too small, isn't worth it*, and I agree. But how would I know? Servers aren't allowed to drink the juice, *so precious*, not even if we pay full price. So I'm sucking on one after another centimeter-wide slice while looking at him in the extraordinary light of my palm until, suddenly, it is him, texting: *Back from Peru!*

He asks if he can buy me a drink. I say, *Yes*. We agree to meet halfway between us, in a little pub in a little mountain town called Gold Hill.

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# Gold Hill

The drive up to the top of Gold Hill is steep and winding, through thick woods and along crisp creeks. But soon the ascent reveals the landscape's latent toxicity, leaching into the water: for every pristine mountain, there is also a denuded one. Piles of discarded ore so high they threaten to top the actual mountains. Through the windshield, I can see the earth and its innards all at once, a survey of geological history and its aftermath. I grip the wheel to wrap a curve and watch my two golden rings catch the sun. Again, it's a version of orange tempting me to track color back to source, to rewind through my two-ring life, back into the mall and through the original theft, to be inside the store, again, and then I'm imagining my way into the factory that made them, the refineries that refined them, the 1,500 miners who mined the ore from the thick underground veins that birthed them. The rings should be heavy, but they weigh almost nothing. Together, I bet they're less than a tenth of an ounce.

Two hundred thousand ounces later and there are almost no miners and no gold left in Gold Hill. Just the occasional guy panning for the occasional flake in the occasional stream, lifting it from one currency to another. Gold isn't just valued for what it elementally is—uncorruptible, malleable, and

solid enough to build an economy on—it is also overvalued, for what it appears and promises to be: not just different from the rest of the earth, but better. Gold gilds us, our fingers and our ideas of ourselves, too. It's why the ancient Egyptians called it the *flesh of the gods*; to make the mundane seem sacred, one need only flay the divine and perform a holy graft.

By dipping a fragile daguerreotype in gold chloride, for example, which is how the early prints became lasting and stable and, for the first time, reproducible. Heralding photography's newly distributive power, Frederick Douglass declared the imminent end of prejudice, for, surely, "we will see what ought to be by the reflection of what is, and endeavor to reveal the contradiction."

But now, I'm gripping the gold-laden camera phone because I've come to depend on the prejudice it both grants and reinforces. Because I'm afraid of the prejudice reality is about to destroy. Every first date is also a loss: our ideas of each other won't survive it.

We meet outside the Gold Hill Inn, a bar as populated by regulars so drunk they'll forget themselves as it is by tipsy tourists taking pictures they'll remember forever. I see him from a distance; from a distance he says, *I didn't know you had such big eyes*. Closer up, I feel the crooked darkness of his teeth issuing a haunting invitation. In return, I offer him my double-edged smile.

*We're matching*, I say, pointing first his way and then mine, back and forth at his jeans and then my jeans. His white shirt and then mine, at our brown boots, brown hair, brown eyes. We order two old-fashioneds and, while we drink them, I impress him with the things I know about that he knows about, too: Joel Embiid. Bread. Mountains.

To my surprise, he seems not to know anything about me at all. I lean into the mystery. For example, when he asks: *Do you like being a waitress?* I

answer with a question: *Would you like me to get us a second round of drinks?*

While I walk to the bar, I watch him in the mirror watching my ass. While I wait for the drinks, I think about how good it feels to be so materially, if shallowly, admired. When I come back, he says, *You have a nice ass*, then leans in to ask if I want to stay for dinner. I lean in to say, *Yes*, noticing that he smells like Aveeno and cigarettes, but then I look at the menu and balk at the price: one hundred dollars for the set course, including two glasses of table wine each. It's more than I made that day at work.

*No*, I say, habitually spinning the two gold rings, around and around, on my finger. *It's too expensive*, I say, watching the light the rings reflect on the floor, a scattering of iridescent rays.

He waves his hand and makes a sound full of *ss*es. He asks for a table for two.

Once seated, I watch him place the napkin on his lap and, unsure how to behave, I replicate his movements. For two hours, I imitate his self-assurance, first by giving my opinions about the food (*pretty good*; *overcooked*), then by confessing the ambition my working class has taught me to hide (*to write!*), and finally by asking him leading questions, a way of espousing my preference as fact: *You don't have one of those mountain houses in a valley, do you? I can't bear being in a house with no light.*

Again, he waves his hand, but this time doesn't make a sound. He tells me he has a cabin surrounded by trees. That there's a creek running right smack-dab through his front yard.

*It's beautiful*, he says. My tendril reaches.

*Sun touched*, he says. My tendril grasps.

Half a carafe of wine and two cocktails later, I'm too drunk to drive but the mountain roads are almost always empty, and I'm practiced at staying in the lines. He pays the bill, then follows me out to my car, two acts of chivalry I'm not used to. I don't know what to do. I look at his mouth, at the crevasse of his jagged teeth; I want to fall in. But then I feel trapped by being so deep inside, unwittingly a part of the transaction of a hundred-dollar dinner date in which my debt is now due. Or maybe I want to kiss him. Either way, I lean in, too quickly. He spooks. Jumps back. And then he overcorrects, leans in and opens wide, his tongue devilish and serpentine. I pull away.

*Oh*, he says. *Sorry*, he says, hurrying to unlock his truck that happens to be right next to mine. I make some joke about how my truck is bigger. I laugh. And then I get in my big truck and look down on him, so far below.

*See you soon*, I say through the window, surprising myself with such a casual reference to the future.

I drive down the foothills and through the cavernous dark: high beams on, windows open, chain-smoking and saying *fuck fuck fuck*, over and over again. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.* All night, he'd spoken about desire in the past tense, with no pretense for who he'll become, no gap between who he is and how he appears to be. A man I don't have to believe in but to accept.

When I'm almost home, I call my mom: *Either I never see him again*, I say, *or I'm going to have to marry him*. I hang up and cry, embarrassed at how easily I've fallen in love. Number Thirty-Seven.

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# “All Around and Away We Go”

Just a few days later, he sends me a playlist, my phone’s tinny speaker moving from silence to the round sound of a poor man’s voice crooning *Saro*—a name that sounds like mine if it were made of wood, as his little log cabin must be, groaning and creaking with the rise and fall of the sun. In the West, I think, the sublime is made of wood, but then there’s Lee Hazlewood emerging out of the wood as a steel train on steel tracks, always propelling forward, always expansively forward, but not to the places he thought he wanted to go. I can’t help but nod along, my bobbing and instant affirmative, up and down, up and down, the beat’s internal temptation to agree with these love songs that are already more than a little sad, tributes to love that sneak up and change everything, so many discarded plans. But here’s Scott Walker, begging me to illuminate anyway, to better see the futures we’re stealing from each other while we’re living together, for a time, in one another’s *dream* becoming Oh No Ono’s *swimming*, *swimming*, *swimming* for survival in an ocean when we could have just stopped and remained on firm ground. But we’re egging each other on, two parts of the playlist that’s still in the process of becoming, not a narrative but an architecture we’re inside of even when we’re not. Not a roof but a canopy. *Oh baby*, let’s get rid of the roof and lie under the stars.

But why try to put it metaphorically when there's just one word that will do? He and I—we're *numinous*—the word upwelling from the gap where the unassailable border between two people is supposed to exist. What a profound disturbance. A reflection of the uncanny weather: it's May and unseasonably hot, but it's "Winter Now," the playlist insists, Broadcast singing about the *snow* and the cold that shocks us to our senses. Unless we're just dreaming. It's hard to change direction in the middle of life, to overcome the forces of habit and of the lives that are already underway. Margo Gruyan knows, and you know, and I know that this is the first time we've met. Given our newness, it shouldn't be hard to say goodbye, but Guryan's *mmmmmm* doesn't want to let go and neither do I, stretching into the next song where I'm "Aht Uh Mi Hed," then the next three songs, which are made of circles and going around in circles, Shuggie Otis's circles overlapping with Aldous Huxley's dizzying circles of the "terrors overwhelming those who have come, too suddenly, face-to-face with some manifestation of the *mysterium tremendum*," but why reach beyond the playlist for an old external reference because here it goes again, around and around and upside down around again, the nauseating insistence, the temptation of disgust, of a love drawn into that which repels. Mr Twin Sister explains why we do it anyway: to feel *it* anew, again, this ground, because surely the same real existed before when I was alone and will exist after when we're *smiling* as one, the tenuous exaltation tempting me further down the rabbit hole as Blood Orange invites me into his bedroom, not once, not twice, not even three times, but four, a repetition spinning into a question that wants to know if I'll go just a little bit further: You say you like to give, he says, but have you ever been *pleased*?

I invite him over for dinner to the house that isn't mine. To prepare, I clean and then wash the house down with vinegar and lemon juice. I wash the dog and then myself, shaving my bikini line and trimming the hair short but still long enough to keep its curl. I pull *The Private Life of Plants* from the shelf and place it on the bedside table. To give the impression that my life is growing, I go to the Big Box Store and I buy a blooming jasmine plant and

an expensive yellow pot. Back at home, I skip the transplantation and put one pot inside the other. The plant will be dead in three months.

When he arrives, he isn't sure where to put his stuff, so he makes a small pile by the double-potted plant. He inhales, sighs, says, *I love jasmine*.

He walks around the one-room cottage house, full of thousands of books and so many other nice things that I wouldn't be able to afford. He seems impressed, and surprised. Wary of my unintentional deception, I am quick to correct course, to admit that I don't own any of it, that I pay part of my rent in exchange for cleaning up the shit from the horses. He nods and keeps walking around admiring things anyway—the built-in bookshelves, the high ceilings, the leather couch. I bring him a glass of Big Box Store white wine and watch while he notices the book on the nightstand, the first thing he touches. He picks it up and tells me what I already know: this book is by his bedside, too. The moment I have been waiting for. My ready quip. But I stumble over the words, try to wink but end up blinking instead. I giggle.

*Never mind*, I say.

Surrounded by someone else's walls of books, he says, *You must like to read*.

I do, so I nod, nod, nod, even though I haven't read a book in years, nodding my way through this house's litany of unanticipated significations. Everything here is looked at as a picture, in a ready-made language that I'd tried to anticipate but failed to understand.

*So do I*, he says. He asks me what my favorite book is and suddenly I can't think of a single book I've ever read. I scan the shelves, panicking, desperately looking for a title I recognize, but I can't find a single one. And then I remember, seemingly out of nowhere, Richard Brautigan.

*Richard Brautigan*, I say. And it's true, I do like Richard Brautigan. Or at least I used to. To prove it, I tell him about *The Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966*, which I consider to be one of the *greatest love stories of all time*. I tell him that I identify both with the ugly librarian who refuses to leave his cave and with his girlfriend, the most beautiful woman in the world, *a beauty so bright it kills*, I say. *Eventually they live together. Together, they can live a normal life.*

*Okay*, he says. *My favorite book is about Bigfoot.*

Minutes later, out of nowhere, he apologizes. *Sorry*, he says, before telling me that his mother could die at any minute. *Cancer. Seven years.* He doesn't call it a battle, doesn't say she's losing, doesn't say much at all.

*I just thought you should know*, he says.

He's leaning against my kitchen counter while I stir a pot of tomato sauce on a hot plate. I look up to meet his eyes that are watching the wooden spoon go around and around, her brink of death not an edge but an orbital collapse. I stop cooking the pasta before it's ready and the penne crunches in our mouth like bones.

When he's about to leave, I swing my legs up on his lap, pinning him down to the couch. We touch. It's warm. We kiss. It's fleshy. Touch. Kiss, kiss, kiss. Eventually, I stand up and pull him toward the bed, down and on top of me. And then I stop.

Before he can ask what's wrong, I ask him if there's *anything else I should know before we do this?* and I'm proud of myself for this caesura, this small act of self-restraint and so of self-protection. But he doesn't understand what I'm asking.

*Like STDs*, I say. *Or another woman.*

*Nope. Just my dying mother*, he says, sliding his hands between my legs and pushing them apart.

I'm thirty-one years old and this is the first time a guy's ever eaten me out. He's lying face down with his mouth on me, the tongue that felt so serpentine against mine having found its purpose here. He looks up at me and smiles. I've never thought of myself as edible, as something to be relished. Unsure of how I am pleasing him, I look away. With his head once again buried between my thighs, I watch his legs kick up at the knees and swing back and forth like a schoolgirl's. I laugh. He stops. Grabbing his head with both hands, I pull his face toward mine, avoiding his wet and sloppy lips. It strikes me then just how unwilling I am to get to know myself.

Pleasure is different with him. Before, it was superficial, clitoral, reaching out for something that wasn't quite there. But with him, I am overwhelmed and overcoming, not in an abandonment of myself but of my edges, the two of us fucking our way into dreaming and then back into waking so that, from light to light, I'm moaning my way through a world made only of vowels, into a sound where orgasm's pleasure joins orgasm's pain and where meaning deflates because everything is self-evident.

When I'm done and totally spent, he's still inside me, still hard. I'm wondering what to do, worried about him staying and about him going because any additional sensation would destroy me. He holds me for a second and asks if I'm done. The return of the consonant: *mmmmmhmmmmm*: the return of the edge. He rolls over, the same as withdrawing. Erect, he walks to the shower, and I worry he might explode with unexpression, but he doesn't. He just turns on the water and sings himself a little song.

Strange. For him, coming wasn't an essential part of sex. I'd never known a man like that, only the kind for whom sex was a necessary petite mort, or a violent Freudian conclusion, or an urgent mode of Kristeva's interior reorganization. But he was seemingly unconcerned with the end result. In the lack of expectation was a lack of guilt, and the absence of my debt

uncovered a liberatory potential, the rumored jouissance, not Lacan's but Kristeva's: "One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [on enjouit]. Violently and painfully. A passion."

I get up to make him coffee. I watch him towel off and dress. He's running late, he says. He leaves. And then I'm alone again, with enough space between us for me to think of him erotically.

The obvious thing to do is to masturbate, but I don't want to. I want to remain here and now, tethered to the edges of myself, to my remerging aesthetics. I want to linger in the aftermath. I point my phone's selfie camera between my legs to look at myself and whatever is left of him.

The skin is darker here. An earthy complexity of color. And there he is, too, his unfinished whitish yellow, amid my bluish brown and softly pink. Farther in, an entire gradient of reddish purple at the point of myself where I turn so mystically interior. It's not the spectrum I'd learned and known myself to be a part of, but the bodily confusion of color existing despite, because every color is of brown and sometimes red is next to orange and sometimes it's actually kind of green. Occasionally, yellow consults with red, and sometimes with blue, and sometimes with both at once. Here, the reality of color is that it's not an order but an environment of color. A queasiness of color. A feeling of color that is also a color of feeling. It's what Kristeva must have meant when she wrote of color as "the shattering of unity," for here, at the edge of self, is the palette of my would-be abjection. But there is no degradation, only an essential shimmering, swirling, around and around again. Suddenly I understand, fully and gutturally, why my inner immanence had been enough for both of us.

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# Prove It

Our third date is at his “sun-touched mountain cabin,” which is actually a prefab house deep inside a deeply shadowed mountain canyon. It’s only four in the afternoon and already the day is acting like night, the darkness settled all around like a fog.

I lost cell service ten minutes ago. Too late, I realize no one knows I’m here. I turn off my headlights, grab the Chihuahua, and wonder if we’re foolish to stay. I don’t see him standing there, on the front porch, waiting.

*Hi*, he says, and I jump back flush with the anger that accompanies fear. My Chihuahua barks, runs ahead of me and toward him, yipping. Unlike the picture version of him covered in poodles, he doesn’t try to pet or calm her but ushers her inside with his unsympathetic foot. She pees on his carpet. Pushing past him, I act surprised and then apologetic, and he watches while I search for paper towels, find paper towels, use paper towels to sop up the urine seeping into the cracks of his click-lock and easy-install wood floors. The smell is already mixing into the dank of his house: old water, softener salt tablets, propane, smoke. That hint of Aveeno. Cigarettes.

Tidy but unclean, the house appears to be an old woman's: pastel-blue walls, pastel-pink polyester couches, oak tables and padded oak chairs all in different shades of stained wood. The whole place is filled with the sound of ticking clocks left behind by the previous owner.

His odd additions are obvious: the taxidermied animals, the framed pictures of UFOs, the uncreased books not laid out in a row but stacked. An entire room full of synthesizers churning away in the background, the ongoing creation of his newest album, *Zero Point*: as in *the hypocenter of a nuclear explosion, or the fixed point of reference in a coordinate grid*, he explains. The front cover centers around an animation of two bodies, his and hers, intertwined inside a blue void. I ask if I can listen in. Shyly, he refuses. He flips a switch and turns off the sound and with it the blinking lights.

*Your house is like a museum*, I say, by which I mean one of those weird ones on the side of rural highways in South Dakota, each room spiraling out in a series of additions that are somehow always entered by stepping down and into while the ceilings spiral up and out into rooms that appear to slant left but that actually slant right, construction mistakes remarketed into tourist traps by blinking neon signs that read THE HOUSE OF OPTICAL ILLUSION. But he's so intentionally holding my hand, guiding me further and further into the maze when I stop to ask him why he called his house "sun touched." He tells me he hadn't meant to lie, but that there is always a difference between what we say and what we mean, and suddenly we're outside, standing under the new moon and the unstained night sky and next to a broken fence that was demolished by a strong wind.

*Why is Nederland so windy?* I ask.

*I don't know*, he says. *Why?*

*Because Boulder sucks.*

It's a bad joke that people here used to tell about people like me who live below the mountains, where it's almost always sunny and calm. He doesn't

get the joke, so I tell him: *It's a joke.*

*Not if it's not funny*, he says. Fine, but laughter isn't what makes a joke a joke.

*It is funny!* I say. Not funny haha, but funny nonetheless. Funny the way Clarice Lispector is funny when she writes, "and it's inside myself that I must create someone who will understand," which is funny because jokes depend on solipsism, because we're all living alone inside ourselves, because when the self cracks, it's freed into something more universal, at least until the universal reconfines. Haha.

But he thinks my joke is mean, and I suppose he's right. After all, "laughter is satanic," says Baudelaire. "It is thus profoundly human." I don't blame him for not laughing, but I wish that he would because I want us to be in on something damnable together. To be disgusted and delighted, together. I scramble to remember a better joke, something Norm Macdonald said about a frog hopping into a bank, but before I have it, it's too late. The man I'm with is taking a moral stance against jokes, now saying something about how *jokes are dead in the era of memes*.

He's changing the subject, distracting me from my point by describing his view of the Continental Divide that flatlanders like me can't see. *Worth it*, he says, kicking the fallen fence. But, from the bottom of his dark and cold valley, I can't see the tall peaks that were so obvious from the diner down below. I can't even imagine them; from inside his depths, it's hard to imagine that there's anywhere else to be but here, with him.

He walks me to the greenhouse. *Okay, not exactly a greenhouse*, he says, but a corner of the garage, stripped and repaneled in plastic and bathed in a soft yellow light meant to supplant the sun. It's piled high with gardening junk—pots and soil and wood and dozens of half-used bottles of fertilizer—piles and piles of stuff surrounding an orange plastic hydroponic growing tower, *a realization of our potential*, he says, because we could always be better. One by one, he spins the tiers of the self-fertilizing tiers to show off a jungle of green chard and crowning green broccoli and dangling green

peppers that appear to be reaching down, toward us. So willing to produce, for us.

I object to the qualification of this as *gardening*, which, I argue, requires hands and contact with the actual earth. *What we've been doing is good enough*, I say. Nibbling on a piece of Swiss chard, he wants to know if the leaf counts as real, as if I'm not about to carry it inside and into a stainless steel bowl, massage it, mash the bushel down to almost nothing. He watches, smacking after every sip of whiskey, starting to speak and then stopping. Another sip of whiskey. Smack. I mash and mash until the heap of greens threatens to disappear, which is when he says, *I want to have children*. And I smile, not because I do, too, but because he thinks this is important to say, to me.

I pour myself a whiskey and try not to cough after I drink it, walking around the house, fingering through his books on occult studies and hominid research and encounters of a third kind. I open one, to a picture of a flying saucer hovering in midair, casting a shadow onto the field below. Not what it actually is, I think, but a fuzzy blob in a grainy grayscale rectangle designed to suggest depth.

*I always assume these things are fake*, I say, and he's quick to correct me, on both practical and theoretical grounds. *It might be possible*, he says. *Sometimes, even fake things are real.*

*Okay*, I say, *so then how can you tell this photo is . . . legitimate?*

He points to the shadow. *Proof*, he says. And then he's looking at me, studying my face.

*You look so much prettier in real life than you do in your pictures*, he says, opening his phone to look at my profile and calling them *deceptive*. I balk, can't imagine a more exacting exhibition of how I see myself. But he's shocked I haven't learned to see myself photographically, and he tells me I've been taking pictures of myself all wrong, that I'm not supposed to look

down into the screen, but to hold the phone up, with the camera positioned above me, *like this: pretend you're looking up at the sun; extend your chin up and out and over; imagine you're holding an orange underneath your chin; don't drop the orange; look happy!*, which is what I'm doing, following his every direction, my spine extending up and arching back. I take a picture. The flash flashes. I blink. The imaginary orange drops to the piss-stained floor. We laugh. We look at my selfie on the phone.

*You look great!* he says, putting his arm around my shoulders and giving me an endearing kiss on the head. I don't think I look like myself at all.

*I found a diamond in the trash heap*, he says. I take it as a compliment, but the whole thing feels like a lie in the way compliments are so often lies, false in their intentions or reception or both.

A lie. Yes. That's what I'd meant to say about the photo of the UFO. Not a fake, but a lie. A knowing deception that takes advantage of whatever one is predisposed to see: a UFO casting a shadow on the ground, or the lie one wants to be told. I WANT TO BELIEVE, says the poster on his wall. And so do I. I want to believe that who I am is the same as the girl in the picture. I want to be convinced by my own performance, too.

Where once the camera was placed below, a tool within my command, now it's rising up and I'm bending the knee, as a pauper before a king. In hoisting the camera above me, I know I'm going against the historic grain of artistic self-portraiture, which tends to resist such submission—Dürer, Rembrandt, Kahlo—wide-eyed painters who painted themselves to meet their own gaze. In the world's first selfie, Robert Cornelius assumes the posture, too. Taken in 1839, he's staring straight ahead. But, in passing through the lens, his gaze is captured and with it his agency, which the camera now assumes. When he reappears, it's on the photograph's terms, and when I do, it's on the phone's. Cornelius and I, two among a stock of people who, in looking first ahead and then up, have lost their self-definition, no longer subjects but objects in an endless scroll of people-like-things that hadn't meant to lie our way into this feeling I'm feeling and that's surely between us, too, as reciprocal as it is objective and not just

some errant by-product of all the dishonest pictures and white lies we've told to get here—*yes* to another glass of whiskey, *yes* I like cigars, *yes* I want children someday, too.

He's laughing and telling me it's no big deal while I'm following him out to the back porch to sit and listen to him talk and talk and talk about aliens he wants to believe in when all I really want is for someone to accompany me in silence while I look up at the stars.

*Sorry*, he says. *I'm boring you.* He stops talking, grabs my legs, and smiles.

*I manifested you*, he says, and even though I don't know what manifestation is or what it entails, I can tell he really means what he says, that his *manifestation* is a placeholder for his feelings, for the deep but unspoken want he has for me, not as I am, but as he perceives me to be. A part of me hates him for this, his magical belief, the way it reduces me and everyone else down into his solipsism, wresting me from the safety of my own.

We go inside to make a fire and I watch while he gathers wood, stacks wood, ignites wood with a match. I watch his face go from pale to flame-licked, a ligneous extension of light. The wood cracks and groans; he tells me he thinks of himself as a tree, and it seems newly obvious that fire was not only stolen from the gods but also given by them, the site of humanity's sometimes reciprocal and sometimes forced intercourse with the divine. At least this hybrid origin would explain the dual capacities of fire: to heat and to burn. And why fire is always reaching up toward the divine.

It's mortals like me that stare into fire instead of up where fire points, entranced by the play of shadow and light. It occurs to me that here—in this room, in his world—is an enchanted alternative: an opportunity to abscond from the confusion of myself by becoming a materialization of his desire.

I grab the neck of his shirt and pull him onto the couch, where we fuck. We take our time. We feel our way through it. I worry I'm feeling too much and the worry prolongs the feeling. By the time we're done, the fire is just a pile

of ember and ash. There’s not enough light to see, so we turn away from intimacy and toward our phones, where we can better look each other in the eye.

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# The Window & the Frame

In the morning, he's looking at his phone when he says, *My life online is more real than this one*, by which he means the one that contains him and me. Together. Lovers in a bed. Talking and then not talking. Touching and then not touching. Him, looking at me, then at his phone. Me, looking at him, then away and toward the wall at the foot of his bed, at a cross-stitch made by his mother—HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS—and just slightly below, at a map of a dinosaur theme park, a yellow brick road mazing around a volcano, through the Triassic, Jurassic, Cretaceous, and beyond. Remnants of his childhood past, I assume, collected and pinned to the wall.

*Home is where the heart is*, I say as he rolls out from under the covers.

Naked, he stands up, walks out of the room, turns on the shower. The steam fills the house with the smell of Aveeno mixed with his iron well. Back in the bedroom, he lathers himself with lotion and then dresses in an exact replica of the outfit he wore the day before, and the day before that, and the day before that. Uniformed, he leaves to drive down the canyon to work.

Naked, and with dried cum on my back, I stay in his bed, staring at the wall. It's eight in the morning and the sun is still tucked far below the eastern canyon wall. I grab a robe and roll a cigarette and go outside, where there still isn't much of a view of the Continental Divide. But there are flowers, so many flowers: orchids and bluebells and columbines and orange flowers and yellow flowers so much more vivid than their names that I don't know and don't want to, all of them leaning like the trees into the sun that's already behind the hill. The wind picks up and then I'm leaning, too, tethering myself to the ground like a shadow that can't be whisked away. The wind relents. I stay, sitting and smoking. I don't mean to count my drags (eight) or the cars going by (twelve) while thinking of him (thirteen) already missing him (fourteen, fifteen, sixteen) driving myself into a hysteria of smoking and counting and missing and wanting: him.

But I don't know him well enough to remember him right, not a body, not even a shape of a body, just the haze of unearned memory. I try to remember the smell of Aveeno but can't, grab the robe, pull it to my nose and inhale—Tide and mildew, just like every other man I've ever fucked. The generality only abstracts him further.

I should know better than to grip what's impossible to hold but here I am, hand clutching phone, a bolt-hole compressing all this vagrant desire into just 0.55 mm of glass, so slim and so transparent. As Rosalind Krauss reminds, "*glace* in French means glass, mirror, and ice; transparency, opacity, and water." It's easy to forget the distance between the real and the unreal. The window, which is also a barrier between the person and what they see, between the him who is not here and the him who always is. I scroll and I scroll and I scroll through a grid of dithering primary colors masquerading as something less or more. Pause on the color purple, which is pixels red and blue. I haven't seen him wear the color before. Zooming in, I see a small, white arm stretching across his chest.

Chilled, I go inside his cold house. I gather a bundle of wood for the stove and then change my mind, replacing each log back on the pile. I don't want him to know I lingered. I want him to think of me as a secret. I get dressed and then try to make it look like I was never there at all.

I lock the door. I close the door behind me. I glance back through the gridded window to check my work. Seeing nothing out of place, I get in the car. I look through the window while I drive. At home, I look through the window toward his mountain, which is hidden behind lots of other mountains. I look until dusk, when the window is no longer something that admits but reflects—flowing in two directions—back toward its liquid source and forward to frozen death. I look. I look away. I look down at my phone (which is a kind of window). I look into the grid (which is a kind of frame). I look past the grid's mullions and muntins, no longer reminders of the external but modes of repetition designed to be looked into and past, the design by which my attention narrows in to enlarge the pictured world. Or, as Krauss writes, "to freeze and lock the self into the space of its own reduplicated being." I've been looking at my phone for so long that his semen starts cracking on my unwashed back.

It wasn't always like this; just yesterday and the phone was just another thing I occasionally used; how quickly I've come to want it, to need it, my habit stripping the device of its last traces of strangeness. This is the first night I will sleep with a phone in my hands. Nudging it awake, I'm wanting for the illuminated comfort of its lock-screened time, and then I'm being nudged awake by my phone: with an email; with a new match; with a message from he who is transforming from dream to grid and from grid back to dream until it's all a part of the same architecture built by swiping up, down, sideways, and into the morning's post-sleep thirst. The neutral taste of my water makes me think of the iron-salted taste of his, not so different from the taste of blood and cum. I think of this while I look at my phone, a kind of church. A sip of water, a kind of communion.

*OceanofPDF.com*

# Her

Before I met him, I would lie here and wonder: If I sit here, just sit, will anything ever happen? Sometimes, I would count how many seconds I could stare into the sun and then, after I closed my eyes, I'd count how many seconds the red afterburn would last, and then I'd open my eyes and count how long there would be a darkness at the center of everything. As Motokiyo writes, "the greatest heights are equivalent to the greatest depths." But the mountains can only be so tall, and the sun can only be looked at for so long, and eventually the afterburn fades. It's in my phone, at last, that I find a depth that cannot be measured.

Now, a week or ten days later, I'm looking again at his unchanging face, still snuggled between the same-same poodles. So much desire. The obvious thing to do is to masturbate, and this time I want to. I get back in bed and take off my underwear and lower the furry face on the smooth screen in between my legs, my neck bending plantlike toward the phone's light. I touch it; I touch myself; I touch myself with the phone until I feel something, a something I choose to regard as desire. But it's not. I want something new about him to want, so I give myself permission to scroll further back in his feed than I've allowed myself, scrolling, scrolling,

scrolling all the way back to the beginning that's been buried under the constantly refreshing current, to a blurry picture of a woman's face, her hand rushing to cover it. Maybe I should have known it would begin like this, as it always begins: with a woman.

Seeing her feels like a discovery, either despite or because it looks like she's trying to escape her confinement. But here she is, caught in his box, her shadow flickering on his binary wall; she lives on in her evasion. Her blur is an exhibition of photography's success: in every moment a stillness exists. But it's also evidence of its failure: every moment moves. Unable to pin her, he names her in the caption instead: [redacted] *made me get on this app.*

I click on her.

Her shadow cast across a mall's moat of black asphalt, intersecting rows of white and parallel parking lines.

A gray cat, presumably hers, lying down in a pile of freshly laundered clothes.

Picture after picture after picture of her childhood mall, shuttered. Its label-scarred department stores and its elevators rusted shut. Then, on the day she learned it would be demolished, four concrete arches rising up in front of an intricately mosaicked tile facade.

Other malls. LA malls and Texas malls and random rural malls, postmodern and modern-modern, decrepit and new but always sacrosanct. Sontag says that photos capture the dying and so malls are the perfect subject because they are dying and dying and dying. After all, the lifespan of a mall is only seven years, or so I learn in one of her captions while trudging through the aftermath into the terrain of the always dying and dead.

Sontag chimes in to double down: “Photographs are always of the dying.”

But in picture after picture, she saves the dying, transferring the old consumer architecture onto the new one in my hands. How heroically she concentrates her attention, her photographic focus. How perfectly her genius aligns with the genius of photography itself.

I’m in awe, both intimidated and terrified, with “repulsive wonder” (Sontag, again) and yet so intractably drawn in, scrolling, scrolling, scrolling through rows and columns of things she liked and then framed and then captured, things she thought interesting or important, retro buildings and Wetzel’s Pretzels and another landscape of asphalt where heat shimmers up into nothing but the next picture of an ice cream shop in the *perfect ice cream weather*.

*Isn’t every weather ice cream weather for you tho*, he comments.

Her white arm, in her white-sheeted bed, resting on her cat. It looks like someone else took the picture. A tease of her reflection in the mirror above a Las Vegas hotel bed, the edge of a leg (or is it a blanket?) visible at the left side. I zoom in, imagining what happened just before or just after the picture, what she looked at next. Into his eyes? At her phone? At his cock? Or back at herself? At the she who I still have not seen.

A rest stop mural; a doughnut shop (#doughnutqueen #LasVegas); another abandoned building; another abandoned mall; another abandoned store, this time with fake flowers stuffed into its broken facade.

And then an abstraction so different from the rest: not a picture but a video of a concrete truck, rolling its way through a crossroads. It’s the filter that makes the shot, found in the field, a holographic film that must have been plastered to a window redoubling through her lens and turning every light into a rainbow. Every pixel carouseling through the whole spectrum. Occasionally, the frame is overwhelmed with a burst of green light and blue. Or is it one color, perfectly in between?

I don’t know. It’s early in the morning and I should be asleep, but I’m impelled to find a picture of her—surely it exists. In it, she’ll be fully displayed so that I can zoom in on her every feature from every angle. I don’t want to hate her, but to understand her, both why he loved her and why he left her. What I don’t want is another picture like the next one, in which her beige leather shoes corner a landscape of #Colorado, probably near where he stood half naked on the side of the road. No. I want to see a picture of her—her face, her body—my desire intensifying into a need to know, a desperate hope that my thumb’s next flick will reveal her enough to answer the only question that really matters: Is she pretty?

But she doesn’t give herself away like that. She’s a shadow, or the contour of a bedsheet, or a vague unreflection in a nail salon window or in the back side of a mirror being carried across the sidewalk. A silhouette elongating on a concrete staircase in the corner of a half-lit and half-shaded frame, her expert use of angle and curve that’s splitting her in two: hard and soft, light and shadow. It’s here that she declares herself *a photographer at last*. I zoom in on the shape of her petite body that’s leaning into the hard angles of the stairs, both of them so precisely wrapped in their own shadows, so perfectly opposed, and yet she seems so light and unbothered, as if she’s always existed in a body that holds itself well, never hunching under the burden of its own size and weight. Her lightness could support the world.

My aching back; I sit up straighter, for a moment not trying to hide the size of myself—almost six feet tall—inside the shell of myself. I pretend the good posture is mine, that it feels natural, that I could sit like this forever.

At last, she appears. She: a beautiful grayscale queen on a concrete throne, the goddess Selene, topped by a waxing crescent moon. Pretty. Small and blonde and pretty. An archetype of prettiness, even. And then there she is again, two pictures of her in a row, her eyes framed by clear plastic glasses. Her spectacular tits making a topographic map out of her pin-striped shirt.

For a moment, I let her be who she is, and I admire her. For example: how her face is as symmetrical as her photographs. And, for a moment, my admiration is a happy self-surrender.

But slowly, my back resumes its habitual hump. With one hand, I reach down inside my concave chest to touch my breasts: two silver pancakes barely more bulbous than my bottom ribs. *As long as there's a handful*, a man told me once, but there isn't. I measure the height of my nipple against my finger and confirm that it is, indeed, greater than the height of my breast.

Already, it's too much to let her be who she is without also making her into what I am not, our distinction slipping so easily, so dangerously, into our comparison. Her breasts that undermine my femininity. Her smallness that presupposes me a giant. Her prettiness so much prettier than mine—just last week a customer called me *handsome*. Handsome and hunched, I'm looking at her from my side of the screen as if she's on the other, looking back at me. She is so naïvely self-confident, so willing to be herself and to like what she likes, which is what he likes, too—old malls and UFOs, sure, but most importantly: her. His name appears beneath her every post as her name appears beneath his. The intimacy of their online correlation.

Sontag writes that "desire has no history," but Sontag didn't scroll up and down through an ever-present past, a once-private memory turned into a document of persistent appetitions. And yet, Sontag is not wrong, because this is not desire but the camera's fantasy of desire. A violation. An attempt to possess. A slippery deception that's becoming my fantasy of desire, too.

Unable to hold myself any longer, I'm buckling under the weight of their phantom but surely mutual want. I'm crumpling to the floor, the familiar crush of attraction compressing me and reducing who I think I am, sitting on this wooden floor, in this room, with this little Chihuahua curled in my lap, my consciousness degrading surreal. Scrolling, scrolling, scrolling until all of it and me and her and him becomes one picture that I can't let go of, an empty stairwell as seen from her perspective looking down at brown bricks and brown handrails and brown circling stairs but also sideways into mirrors that are filled with reflections of brown bricks and brown handrails and brown circling stairs, an infinite array of brown rectangles and lines framing the void of her, her double becoming an infinite series of selves, her mise en abyme, every one of her faces obscured by her camera so that

when I zoom in, it’s not her eyes I see but my own, staring back at me in the reflection, perfectly framed by her lens.

Dizzy and wanting for firm ground, I scroll quickly and all the way back to her beginning. His name is right below. He: her first like. It’s a picture of two doorframes at a distance and illuminated by the sun—not overlapping with but connected by the horizon so that they face in both directions—forward and back.

I want to make the image small, so small it disappears, but pinching in does no good. I am only allowed to expand, to make the photograph larger, and so I imagine myself smaller, infinitesimal, a slipper-shaped paramecium studying each detail becoming a behemoth. My finger slips. The picture shrinks. Scrambling to resurrect it, I double tap. The haptic confirmation follows; the empty heart turns blood red. I tap again, just one panicked jab desperately trying to undo color to return to the blank. I exit the app and hide my phone under my legs, as if hiding the weapon can undo the transgression. I pick up my phone and log back in and return to the shelter of his feed, where I am immediately confronted with the fact that, here, I do not exist.

*OceanofPDF.com*

# A Theory of Color

Days go by. A week. Eventually, I call, but he doesn't answer.

Days later, he texts, *what's up*, no capitalization, no question mark. Too quickly, I reply, with proper punctuation: *Would you like to come over for dinner?*

*Yes*, he texts. He'll come after work, around five thirty.

When he arrives at six, we kiss hello and then drink a little, mostly as a means to fuck. While we do, I feel myself separating and dividing in two: one of me playing along, unfeeling but groaning, while the other me is thinking of her, wondering how they used to fuck until that's the only half of me that matters. I don't even realize he's coming on my back until he's done and heading toward the shower.

Back in bed, I don't mean to talk about her, but I do: *Someone I think you know liked one of my posts*, I say.

*But then she unliked it*, I add.

*Some girl in LA*, I say.

I don’t mean to lie, it’s just that I do. Maybe because it’s a lie I know I can get away with. A lie upon which I can construct a more preferable truth, which is how myths tend to begin and then go.

He doesn’t seem surprised. He laughs a little, tells me not to worry. *She just does stuff like that.*

*I’ll talk to her about it*, he says. *She’s probably just jealous.*

*Don’t*, I don’t say, sitting naked and cross-legged in bed. Instead, I smile, but hide my teeth, suddenly aware of the foulness of my breath. I’m trying to think about how to escape myself, but the way he’s looking at me: it entraps me further; I giggle, get up, go to the bathroom, and look at myself in the mirror, my face tinted by his surrounding purple walls. I smile, adjusting the edges of my mouth to try to convince myself I’m smiling, really smiling! But no matter the contortion, it doesn’t look real. A nonspectral smile, a purple smile that is actually red and blue.

Pick one, Sarah. Red or blue? I became purple too fast and I can’t go on this way, being both a self that experiences and another that narrativizes and therefore lies, one lie becoming another lie becoming a lie so big that I’m living a life that isn’t real. Best to return to experience. But then I’d have to spend the rest of my life swimming back across a gulf so wide I’d never arrive at the other shore—I’d be treading water in the midst of unreality forever—or, I’d be what drops off at the end of an ellipsis, a stone that can’t skip all the way across the pond . . . There are so many reasons not to attempt the journey, the least of which is exhaustion and the most of which is shame. Easier, then, to become the presentation. To conform, just a little, here and there. To both evade and embrace myself while staying on firm ground.

Red or blue. Red or blue. Red or blue.

I wish I could pick yellow. People like yellow; with its suggestions of happiness and sunshine, it gets away with a lot. Just keep smiling! But yellow is too easily tainted, its endless contemplation of orange or green. Green would be good; men like green, remember? I walk out of the bathroom while looking down at my phone, down and down and down into my phone, considering how to proceed, when the scrolling presents itself as the perfect solution, both an evasion and an embrace. No need to admit what I've done, but to just keep scrolling and cycling through as a way to incorporate what I've done into who I am now. I'll ride the wavelength and tighten it. I'll shorten the height between my crest and my trough. I'll make the gulf smaller and then I'll ride the quickening wave. Incrementally, I'll become green—light green and then green green and then, eventually, I'll be greener than grass instead of paler. After all, it's at 555 nanometers that perception is at its best; once I'm green, I'll see everything so clearly; maybe then I'll be able to sustain verdancy forever.

It's what Max Scheler would do. Instead of denying the inevitability of naïveté's corruption, the phenomenologist sought to understand it, partly because he needed to as, one by one, his German neighbors were turning against him, a Jew. Curiously, he refused to place their hatred at a distance. Instead, he admitted he recognized their *ressentiment* as that which existed in himself, which is the *ressentiment* that exists in me, too. For him, self-description wasn't a lie, but a way to harvest himself for phenomenological fodder. So he ran *ressentiment* through his mind as if *ressentiment* was light and his mind was a philosophical prism. Just like that, it was all laid out in a pretty little rainbow, neatly divided into its constituent parts. In the categorical spirit, I'm taking my metaphor seriously enough to create a theory of color:

> The spectrum begins as we all begin, consciously and with a naïve self-confidence that's as natural as white is to light. "As natural as tension is to the muscle."

With a blush of red, foolishness gives way to distinction. The self and the Other begin in red, the color of blood, not self-contained but in the open air. It’s the shade of self-consciousness, and, later, of redemption.

Orange is the color of comparison by which you and I associate and correspond. Not better or worse but orangey and oranger. A fitting name for a color that stems from its likeness to a fruit. An orange simile that’s also an act of orange self-exposure.

Out of orange, judgmental yellow arises. Yellow evaluations, yellow opinions, yellow choices. The yellowness of taste and mood and (dis)pleasure. Pretty yellow; gross yellow. The yellow beginning of good or bad, better or worse.

In green, we grow and become: a sprout wanting to become a plant; the beginning of wanting to be other than one already is. The great green disturbance of desire. Kierkegaard’s “bittersweet admiration” for another. It’s in green that envy notoriously springs.

(Here is a threshold: slim, but worth mentioning. Go any further and a nonrevertible corruption occurs: a fermentation no longer healthful but harmful. Green getting bluer is an envy spoiling bad.)

There’s blue mold everywhere. Jealousy is all over everything. Passionate blue, arduous blue; poisonous blue, possessive blue. The beginning of the hostile force. The beginning of the end. A metaphorical subrogation.

Downhill, now, to indigo. To hate. The Other is the enemy. Morality dead set and contorting itself into condemnation. In indigo, murder is justice; either the gods bless wars or the gods are dead. Indigo ire is as expensive as it is ancient.

> Frothing violet, now, a *ressentiment* so ruthless it wants to annihilate the Other just for the fact of its existence. No tolerance, for guilt or grief; the point of no return. Violet is the final stage of life, the violence of death, and the color of mourning.

Cautiously, I'm surging from inside myself with green. Careful not to progress, I need to retain the ability to slide it back, to glide back through yellow and orange and red to rejoin the elegant schematic as a whole. But I'm in love. Already, I want him. Already, I'm solid green; I'm on dangerous ground. The only way out, I hope, is to make him look at me while he's eating me out. To show him not just the want but the full complication of color and feeling that exists in every woman; maybe he'll recognize that the spectrum's entanglement exists in him, too; maybe we'll prove color, once and for all, and render its every theory irrelevant. After all, his mother is dying tonight, *like, actually dying*. Proof of life, at last. I try to fuck him but it's the one and only time he can't get hard.

On my back, in the darkness, I stare at HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS and try to convince the linear spectrum to behave. To let everything be green and wonderful. Or to strip the world of green entirely. Let it be summer or winter forever! But green is always coming and going, never really here and never really gone because the color isn't self-possessed, no matter how badly we want it to be. A leaf that's always green. A youth that stretches eternal. A life that doesn't have to end. But I know how narrative structures work. We know how this story goes.

*OceanofPDF.com*

# Beef Tartare

With his mother on her deathbed, we shop at a Big Box Store for a laptop so he can work during the funeral. Without looking at the price, he picks the most expensive one, *because it's powerful*, as if it could outwit fate. I can't see how, only that it's cool that it folds inside out to become an oversize tablet with a touchscreen. *I'm an animator*, he explains, as if that makes it make sense. While he pays, he seems disappointed. I guess anything can always be better.

Afterward, he takes me to a strip mall restaurant that raises then butchers then cooks the animals it sells as fifty-dollar courses. We eat three: still-bloody beef tartare on crispy pig ears, scoops of heritage pork, lamb radiatore, all of it so freshly dead. We drink two bottles of red wine that I'm told is *very good*. And it's through bloody and stained teeth that he thanks me for making him forget so thoroughly about his dying mother. If he's being honest, it's the kind of honesty I appreciate most, hinting not at one's goodness but at its inevitable and ongoing pollution.

*I'm happy I could help*, I say, sliding the hefty bill across the table toward him.

Outside, he kisses me, just a peck. But I don’t want it to end, so I kiss him again, and again, and again.

*Enough*, he says. *My mother is dying.*

Stepping back, I open his driver’s-side door. While he slides and then buckles himself in, I pat him on the arm like a pal. And then he just drives away, not waving goodbye, not looking in my direction but eyes fixed, straight ahead. Left alone in the parking lot, I get the feeling that this will be the last time I see him, that the death of a mother is not the kind of thing beginnings like ours survive. Sometimes, to grief, hope is a betrayal.

I’m kicking the curb in the parking lot, waiting for the wine to lose its edge. I take out my phone to take a like-able picture of the place, but I don’t see anything beautiful about it. I put my phone away and walk to the periphery, balance-beaming on the concrete parking blocks, where I find two feathers on the ground, trimmed and stitched together to form an angulated cross. I pick it up: a thing to hold and not to picture. Ordinary, magical. I turn it over in my hands, twirl it, hang it on my rearview mirror and I think about grief as an intersection of what it conjures and of what it requires. About destiny as the crossroads of accident and choice. About him and me, and about him and her. Surely he’ll return to her now because there are two versions of him: one that begins with his mother, and one that begins with her, she who is necessary to assuage death’s abruption. She who smooths life continuous. Or so I think while I sober up and wait for his mother to die.

She met his mother once, or at least I think she did, that not-so-old picture of her feet toeing the New Jersey–Pennsylvania state line, yellow on one side and green on the other, a chromatic split that occurs at the halfway point of every bridge that crosses the Delaware River. I’d noticed the picture because it was not only stygian but symbolic of a physical and social threshold that she actually crossed, from one state to another, from lover to family.

I have the next day off work and I spend it planting a medicinal garden in dozens of terra-cotta pots. While I'm tamping down belladonna seeds, he texts to announce the death of his mother so that her end coincides with the beginning of the plant that's to come: its yellow-and-indigo flower and its deadly indigo fruit. I'm planting belladonna because it reminds me of my mother, too, of her lust for death. Of her imagination that goes further than mine dares, into and past the end, to embrace the plant's hallucinogenic delirium. I'm trying to inherit the lesson: I'm closing my eyes and kneeling before the pot and calling it by his mother's name and praying for him to love me back. In exchange, I promise to love him, well and fully and forever. I touch the dirt. I put a pinch of it in my mouth. I wait.

When I open my eyes, the dirt is still dirt and death still isn't graspable, only a knowledge of death without its confrontation. No wound with yellow pus or red blood. No blue corpse. Nothing to show me the thin line between beef tartare and the cow that preceded it. Just the imagination of belladonna's silent but deadly bell, a specter of a faraway man who may or may not be waiting for me to respond to his text.

I type *I'm so sorry* but, too aware of the meekness of my sympathetic reply, I don't hit send. The expression pales in comparison to the pain I imagine he is in, an imagined pain that's prompting real pain in me. It's not the right thing to say—*I'm so sorry*—but it's all there is to say, a twelve-character stopgap meant to halt the shrinking distance between the words *mother* and *death*, but which I also really mean—*so sorry*—for this person I barely know—*so sorry*—that the pain I feel doesn't sponge up his, can't correct the course of disease, can't undo undoing.

*I'm so sorry*, I type. I send.

Of course, he doesn't text back, and I don't blame him. Instead, I text again, ask if there's anything I can do, a question I imagine romantically: the two of us holding hands at his mother's funeral.

*Yeah. Actually, there is*, he writes. He asks if I can stay at his house while he's gone, water the plants, keep the lights on and the bed warm.

*Of course*, I reply.

I pack up two bags, one for me and one for the Chihuahua. I call off work for a few days. I lower the shades and turn off the air conditioner. To keep the belladonna seeds from dying, I overwater and injure them. In between every chore, I check his online accounts and see his stories turning to sightings of rainbows and hummingbirds, the things his mother promised would symbolize her soul in the afterlife so that, when I'm driving to him and a rainbow appears, I, too, understand it as a sign—his mother's rainbow becoming our mother's rainbow—the collective and possessive pronoun unfurling as a path that might become an actual and lasting bond between us.

Then again, rainbows can only be seen opposite the sun and so at odds with their creator. So maybe it's as Huai Nan Tzu writes: "When the state is in danger of destruction, the aspect of the heavens changes and a rainbow appears." He calls it a "prologue to our psychic disturbance."

I arrive at his house wanting to hold him, but he's already gone. No note, no instructions, no Wi-Fi password. I pick up my phone to ask him for it only to remember that there isn't any service. I could drive into town, but I don't want to rustle this intimate cocoon of aloneness, my aloneness nestled inside the aloneness he left behind.

As the hours tick loudly and slowly by, I resist the urge to enjoy or entertain myself. I'm determined to observe the passing stoically, my funereal observance of a mother I never met and never will. So I sit, and I lie, and I pace, and while I do, I look: out the window, up at the ceiling, at the high-pile carpet, upon the powder-blue wall, over toward the bookshelf, where I recognize a photograph, a still of a concrete truck that was once spinning and lavishing in rainbows. Hers. Framed. The shot features a definitive flash of green blue.

Instantaneously, my actual vision is supplanted by something else, eyes not seeing but boring into a consciousness that threatens to replace the actual world. I try to stop it, try not to think of her but of the real things in front of

me. The books, for example. Look at the books. But the photograph is on the bookshelf, and a photograph is never just one thing but a physicality succeeded by its depiction succeeded by the timeline of her history. I'm sitting in this house, no longer funereal but possessed. I stand up and knock the picture gently down. Turning around, I look at the house, determined to somehow mark it as mine.

My polyester couch. My ugly blue plates. My piss-stained wood floors. My bathroom. I take out my toothbrush and place it on the counter next to his, staring at the ring of desiccated toothpaste collected around the base of the head. I pick it up and run it under the sink and rub it off the same way I rub his cock. There is no way she loved him as well as this, I think, drying it off, nestling it into its charger.

*Home is where the heart is,* I say.

And then I close my eyes to the thought of it. But sleep is far away, the darkness a confusion of spinning rainbows becoming the greenish-blue rainbows of a spectral abstraction that's important enough to print and then place in an all-glass frame that might as well go on and on and on, edgeless, like their love, the color slipping out from between the panes and into my subconscious, which, like photographs, teases and dances around memory while succumbing to the next day, to a robin's morning song outside his bedroom window, into a nest holding five blue eggs, real and about to hatch.

I touch my phone awake and take a picture. Quickly, I dress in his clothes and get in his truck and drive into town to send him the picture because surely these eggs are more than these eggs because the picture is more than what it depicts. From the parking lot, I hit send.

And then, in the desolation of pavement, I wait. I get bored. I go in and buy a six-pack of beer, and I wait. I drink until I'm drunk and have to pee so badly that I can't wait anymore but have to drive out of the lot and down the ribbons of black, back to the odd company of his empty house, where I pee and then drink. And then I clean. His dishes, his clothes, his corners, his

carpets, his walls—his world becoming ours. I tell myself that I'm taking care of him, of us, but deep cleaning is also an excuse to look deeply into his private realms. The further I proceed into the dirtiness, the better I get to know him, the less I feel alone. So I'm sweeping the laundry room, the bathroom, the kitchen, under the fridge and then behind the fridge, sweeping up years of dust and a little scrap of paper, too. A Wi-Fi password in a dustpan. I leave the job undone and grab the paper and enter the alphanumeric into my phone. On the cleanness of the couch, I collapse, then nourish myself with his feed, his good fodder.

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# The Descent

On the morning of his mother's funeral, four of the robin eggs hatch. The fifth one will rot, but I won't tell him. Instead, I take a picture of four young heads yawning up for their mother and send. He replies, *awwwww*, then posts the photo online as if he took it himself. His caption mentions the extraordinary timing, *surely a message from beyond the grave*.

When I see the image online, I double tap, feel the vibration course through me, think about how nice it is that his mother revealed herself: to me, the fifty-second like. But of course she saw it first, liked it first, her name appearing in its earned spot just beneath the caption, where only the most frequent likers dwell. It's unlikely she knows the picture is mine (or, more accurately, ours) but it is likely that she thinks of the picture as at least a little bit hers, the way everything a person likes online becomes a little bit theirs. I click on her username so she can become mine, too.

Nope. I'm blocked. It doesn't matter why or how it came to pass, only that this is confirmation: she knows I exist. I should be embarrassed. I'm not. I'm undeterred. Emboldened, even, to lean further into my false version of events that I'm beginning to understand as an experimental truth. After all,

truth is a curation and, as his dead mother liked to say, *we are the choices we make*. For me, though, choice is null; it's him and only him, and I need to make him believe that she is the one lying and not me. To do that, I need to know more about her than I already do, to lie my way into a fiction that feels viscerally real.

I create a second account. I search for her, find her public profile: she's so easy to mine.

At this, the beginning of my downfall, history starts occurring to me in the present tense of her every photograph—yesterday, and last year, and five years ago—every day happening again and surrounding me, too. I go to his feed, back to hers, his, hers, until his and her version of events is now stereoscopic. With no decipherable distance between one person and another, one time and the next, each photograph is an entrance to the infinite looping of their relationship, as timeless as it is real as it is hypothetical.

Cross-eyed, I hover over a picture of her doing karaoke in a dimly lit bar, singing someone else's song in a voice that's all hers. I can't decide if she should be good or bad at karaoke, only that I admire her ability to be so authentically phony. I've never done it; I wouldn't dare, choosing instead to be envious of what I admire. And so I convince myself that my envy, all envy, is good: a sign of clarity, both aspirational and sweet, a productive emulation.

But how quickly envy darkens into Kierkegaard's "unhappy self-assertion." I post a picture designed not only to promote the ways I am different from her but also to assert that I am better, specifically for him: an orange-under-the-chin selfie of me and my flowing brown hair surrounded by the presence of his house, his things. After I post it, I refresh my own feed every couple of seconds, waiting for likes that don't come. I delete the picture.

When I return to her, my onetime fondness for her photos remains intact but changed; looking at them, I think I might as well have taken them myself. I

become a thief: beginning at the top and working my way down, I take a screenshot of each and every one of her posts, dozens and then hundreds of screenshots recapturing her every capture, my phone mimicking the sound of a camera—her camera—with every click. The nearness between the fake sound and the real sound encourages me further; I'm copying copies until eventually the act starts to feel original, a form of creativity itself. I imagine I'm Sturtevant, painting Jasper Johns's painting of the U.S. flag: the symbol become his painting; his painting become hers; her photographs made mine. Not only am I right to do this, I think, but I am inspired. And she is my muse, just as I once was for my Father.

I spend the rest of the afternoon cropping and then saving and then organizing the screenshots in a folder I entitle *Her*, every copy becoming a layer cake of visitations—of history (hers) and imagination (mine). Together, I imagine we are transcending the bounds of my imagination to share an actual experience of a world even realer than this one—the world as understood through my eyes assuming hers. But it's not enough, this empathy. I want to subsume her.

Using the phone that is also a camera that is also a mall, I shop: I buy a pin-striped shirt and clear-rimmed glasses. I make an appointment to get my hair lightened to the color of her sandy blonde. And, from what I assume to be her vintage Etsy shop, I buy a white sun hat with a black ribbon, as modeled by her expertly hidden face.

Is there such a thing as leg-shortening surgery? Apparently, yes, in which a portion of femur and/or tibia is removed, the bone refastened with metal plates, and screws, and rods until the pieces fuse into one cohesive mass. It takes months to heal, and my movement would be forever changed, and limited. Unfortunately, the surgery costs $76,000. More than I can afford. So I buy a photo-editing app for $24.99 that promises nearly invisible refinishes.

I'm succeeding in becoming more like her (or am I becoming more like myself?), and the self-creation makes me feel godly. A zealous self-fashioning that's also a participation with the divine. My emulation posits

me as one among the Greek pantheon, notorious for the jealousy surging and swirling among them. But while it is their narrative function, it is not their nature; they are immortal gods, after all, and self-undoing is for those in the undying underworld. The gods don't need jealousy but they crave it, use it as something to break up the monotony of eternal heaven, where nothing happens (or so David Byrne suggests). To keep it out of sight, jealousy is relegated to the daimonic cast just below. But even there it is too corrosive, too dangerous. To further protect the gods from themselves, jealousy is split into two: whenever romantic Phthonos envies, chaos erupts; where vengeful Nemesis passes, there is a ruthless return to order.

But I'm less interested in their stories than in their taxonomy that has more to do with me and who I am becoming. *Daímone*, from *da íō*: to divide, to distribute; this two-sided jealousy that's both a separative fate and a distributive destiny; these two-tongued two spirits promising to destroy and deliver; the two-sexed demigods, his and hers.

I wonder if I should call him, to offer him some comfort the way a good girlfriend like her surely would. But what if she already has. Or worse: what if he called her. What if he needed to cry. What if he asked her to come to the funeral. She's probably already there.

For a moment, imagination transcends its bounds again. But in the next, it occurs to me that what is imagined cannot happen, because imagination is a kind of anti-reality, prohibitive in its detail. So I concoct a scheme designed to prevent the two of them from being together at all, an act of reverse manifestation. I'll imagine as many scenarios as possible to prevent their actualization:

He calls her and sobs.
She calls him and he feigns strength or indifference but
    asks her to come to the funeral anyway.
From LA, she takes a red-eye to Newark.
She flies out the next morning to Philadelphia.
He pays for the flight.
Or she does.

She uses miles.
She arrives in the morning, or at night.
She takes an Uber from the airport to his house.
He picks her up at the airport and takes her to his hotel room.
They either cuddle and then fuck, or fuck and then cuddle.
Or maybe they only fuck, or only cuddle.
Either way, it's from under the covers that they talk about getting married, about how happy that would have made his mother.
On top of the covers and fully clothed, she tells him she has a boyfriend, so he tells her about me, *no big deal, a glorified house sitter*.
They laugh.
They drink whiskey.
Wine.
Or beer.
They fall asleep, or they don't.
In the morning, they eat breakfast with the family.
They go to a diner and get pancakes.
Room service: waffles.
Both are dressed in black, even him.
Or, he wears what he always wears and brings his laptop to the funeral.
They walk into the funeral together, hand in hand.
She keeps her hands in her pockets.
She shows up late.
They stand throughout the service.
They sit in the front row.
Or maybe they're so perfect they're weightless.
They hover above the ground.

I imagine and imagine and imagine while trying not to notice imagination's counterfeit effect on me; my new reality and its occlusion of the real. I should have known, my eyes unfocused as they are in that middle space in between one thing, one thought, one imagination and the next. In the separation, I'm finding another kind of company, this time with crudity—I haven't brushed my teeth in days. I haven't left the house. My hair is a nest unbefitting the robins.

The Chihuahua barks. Pees again, this time on the carpet. My eyes refocus to reground on the puddle quickly sinking into the blue, in this pastel room, then into the roll of paper towels I'm learning to keep nearby. I sop up the urine and throw the towels in the fire, my version of a folk ritual intended to cleanse, then to close my inner portal to the inner hell.

During my last night at the house, I pack up most of my things while leaving little hints of me behind: a book, a few pairs of fresh underwear in a drawer, the toothbrush. Props on a stage.

I leave before he returns, then wait for him to text. But he doesn't, not that night, and not the next, and not the night after that either. For a week, I check my phone every ten minutes until eventually he writes: *Come over this weekend?*

When I do, I wear my carefully curated costume of her: the pinstripes, the glasses, the hat. I brush and shine my new blondish hair. And when he opens the front door to see the new me, he gets horny. He pulls me close and then closer. Tells me I look *hot*. Right away we're fucking, and this time I put myself entirely to the side to act how I imagine she would. The pretense unleashes an untapped freedom. Whatever border I'd established between perversity and pleasure is thinning as I feel something like joy in being loved for pretending to be someone else. To puncture the membrane, I rearrange him to sit cross-legged and lower myself on top. He's holding me so tightly, pressing us improbably close together, so deep inside. It's the best sex I've ever had, and the only fuck I'll remember for the rest of my life, sex as a mad craving for that which eventually escapes.

Afterward, we sit on the couch and watch *Jules et Jim*, a movie I can only understand as about her because she looks like Catherine and behaves like Catherine and enchants like Catherine because all the world is in love with Catherine, even as and especially after she drives herself off a bridge.

For dinner, we're sitting over New York strips and Swiss chard. From opposite ends of the circular oak table, I'm looking at him and he's looking

down at his phone. For the first time, I ask him who he's texting. He puts down his phone, *ahem*s, and says he has to talk to me.

*I don't want to have kids anymore*, he says, because he just can't imagine being a Father in a world in which his mother is dead.

*It's okay*, I say. But I'm not so sure it is. None of this feels okay. I get the sense that he wants me to leave so, with a quick kiss goodbye, I do, driving down the mountain and back to the plains. I sit on my stoop and stare back up the mountains and imagine what he's doing in our house without me.

That night, she posts a picture of vintage brown curtains closing on a stage.

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# Wedding Day

I spend most of the next few weeks preparing to officiate my friends' wedding: reading love poems, memorizing love poems, ripping off love poems and turning them into someone else's vows. I also make an appointment to get an IUD because, ever since he said he didn't want to have kids, I've been fantasizing about him coming inside me.

The next time I see him, I ask if I can recite a love poem. He says *no*, that poetry makes him uncomfortable. Instead, I tell him about the IUD and ask him to come inside me. Again, he says *no*, that it's a risk he's unwilling to take. So it's ten minutes later and with cum on my back that I recite the first lines of a poem to him anyway:

*The whole process is a lie,*
*unless,*
*crowned by excess,*
*it breaks forcefully,*
*one way or another,*
*from its confinement—*
*or finds a deeper well.*

Most of the wedding speech is a rip-off of that William Carlos Williams poem, which isn't all that romantic but a blunt treatise about the imagination of love clashing with life's *sorry facts*. I fly to the Midwest to give the speech, and I don't give the poet any credit.

After the ceremony, I sit in the corner of the reception and eat four slices of cake while one guest after another approaches to tell me it was the best wedding speech they'd ever heard. My mouth is so full but nevertheless manages to eke out a chain of *thank you*, *thank you*, *thank you*. As the night goes on, the train of compliments turns into pickup lines from too-drunk single men. One of them brings me a fifth slice and a straight-up invitation to fuck. I decline, but I do take the cake with me as I walk out of the barn and into the middle of a field to sit under the silence of sheet lightning, jagged and sprawling and silent and not even trying to touch the ground. I lift my phone up to take a video; I send it to him.

Too impatient to wait for a reply, I call to offer a drunken confessional: I tell him I miss him, and that I wish he were here, and that I want to build a life with him, one with a little garden *in full bloom*, just like in the poem, but he doesn't get the reference. I tell him that I love him, even though I know the bolt won't connect.

*Never mind*, I say, pausing to see what feelings my feelings have stirred in him. Apparently, none. I ask him if he's okay.

*Yeah. Sorry. I'm tired.*

*Okay*, I say. *But did you hear me?*

*Yeah.*

*Okay*, I say. *Sorry.*

*I don't know what to say, Sarah*, he says. *My mother just died.*

*Never mind*, I say again. *I'm sorry*, I say again.

Without giving him a chance to reply, I hang up. I walk across the meadow back to my rental car and lie down in the back seat. I push my head against the door. I try to imagine my life with him but I can't. Instead, I put my hand down my pants, mimicking my imagination of how the two of them fucked in the back seat. I try to start at the beginning of the story, when they get in the car, then drive down the road, his palm in between her legs, her hand on his dick. They pull over. Rearrange. He pulls up her shirt, pushes the heel of his hand on her breast, her head hits the door, my head hits the door, I come, a coming that comes from within the imagination to manifest as a full-bodied quiver. It's not the same as coming with another. Not a reciprocal coming but a coming aiming for the divine that's just out of reach. Arrival isn't possible, only more coming. I sigh. I open my phone to search for the picture I'd just imagined. She's posted a video of escalators, going up and down, around and around.

I tap away from her and toward her picture of his calves, the photographic prompt that will collapse every sense into one supercharged seeing that's dense enough to approximate another's touch. Photography's pornographic effect is as innate as it is reliable, and it's part of its origin story, too:

> A thrust of an ass.
> A hint of a breast.
> Demure nudes lying sideways on a chair, or reading books, or parting curtains.
> A woman standing on her head with her cunt exposed to the world, her eyes blood-filled and popping.
> A man, emerging from the ombré edge to suck on a breast.
> Or here, a man with his cock up against her vulva.
> Another with his fist now way up inside.

When people first looked at these daguerreotypes, they said the people in them looked alive. Exhilarating, they said. And dangerous, Lord Chief Justice Campbell warned, "a poison more deadly than prussic acid, strychnine, or arsenic." But the fragility and the risk of the daguerreotypes

only piqued the erotic feeling further so that it was a coming better than actual coming because to touch the illusion would be to break it. But when I touch the glass, the enduring picture offers diminishing returns. The durability dulls me.

I close my eyes again, grafting the bare-legged photo back into my mind. Again, I'm enlisting him and her into my fantasy without their consent and this time when I come it's a rerun. A climactic but anticlimactic cum. An inevitable if slightly premature cum. A no-real-person-involved cum. A cum that lands with a thud. Bathetic: my increasingly spurious desire.

He and I, we don't talk for weeks. I assume it's over but, wanting closure, I ask him to talk and he agrees to meet me on his lunch break at work. We sit at a picnic table, in between an open space of suburban prairie and his glass-sided office building; our reflection appears within the field. I wear my sunglasses to protect from the glare.

However sweetly, he tells me he needs a break.

I ask for how long, but he doesn't know.

*My mother just died*, he says, and I try to understand when he explains that he's not even sure he'll stay at his job, or in Colorado. Who knows: maybe he'll go back to Los Angeles.

I ask him if what he really means to say is that maybe he'll get back with his ex, *with her*.

*Yea. Maybe. I don't know.*

I ask him about the playlist he sent, the one that surely meant he was in love?

*Just a bunch of songs I like*, he says with a shrug.

He doesn’t say more, and I don’t ask. We just kiss a quick goodbye.

On the drive home, I practice thinking about him in the past tense. And then I try not to look him up online. I water the plants; I try to let go. I try to come while thinking of nothing at all.

But for one last try: later that week, I drive two hours out of my way just to pass by his house. Moments before I lose service, I text to ask if I can stop by, *just a friendly hello*.

When he doesn’t reply, I stop by anyway, pull into the driveway, but his car is gone. I drive home the way I came and, when service returns, his texts arrive all at once:

*No.* And, *Please don’t.* And, *Why did you leave so much of your stuff here?*

I tell him I’m still nearby, can come by to pick it up.

*No*, he says. *It’s too late.*

The next day, I make an appointment to remove my IUD; she posts a picture of a raven framed by her rearview mirror.

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# Eclipse

I’m in a meadow, under the canopy of a cottonwood, my back against the trunk, my spine sinking into the crevices in the bark. I’m returning to myself. I’m staring at the ground, where the umbrage is not its ordinary dappled dark but composed of a hundred thousand tiny crescenting shadows intermixing so strangely with my shape on the ground; my contour no longer smoothly mine but as jagged as the celestial shapes the light everywhere now assumes. I should have known my shadow wasn’t mine. Shadow doesn’t belong—not to the sun or to the moon or to me. But, in a way, I belong to shadow, as I belong to life, my childlike inability to control or outsmart it.

I came outside to look directly at the disappearing sun and then to be blinded by the depth of the dark that can’t be measured. There will be no more love Number Thirty-Seven and no love Thirty-Eight either; I am destined to spend my life alone in this field of wild grass.

I’ll try again another way: I’ll make a camera obscura like almost every other earthly fool. I’ll poke a hole in a box and place it over my head and step out of the shade of the tree and into the shade of the moon. By looking

away from the sun, I look into it at last—John Locke's "ideas of things without"—the presence of absence on the cardboard wall, reversed and inverted and intermixing with the blind spots of my perception.

Theoretically, it's possible to know the real, the self, if only one can discover just one true thing. *Give me a place to put a lever, and I can move the earth*, Archimedes said. Just one solid point upon which I can build myself. As if I could untie my chains, turn around, and walk out of the box-headed cave forever. As if I could escape my own shadow.

But there is no such place. No lever long enough. And so it is that, in logical versions of the world, truth is only ever a conspiracy; a transposition of the world and not an occupation of it.

From within my cubby, I'm watching the dark titrate with the light. This new beginning linked through a chain to the first beginning, to the first picture of an eclipse, taken in 1851 by Prussian daguerreotypist Johann Julius Friedrich Berkowski. To capture it, he attached a small refracting telescope to the camera's lens. He waited for totality, and then he waited for eighty-four seconds more. His picture looks exactly like the zinc firework that looks exactly like the coin of light I'm looking at in the box. I could take a picture, too, a copy of my first perception of another extraordinary light. But I'm bored of beginnings. In pursuit of the narrative takeover, I bring the phone outside the camera and take a selfie with the box still on my head and I post it to a feed of box-headed people with crescent-shaped shadows taken by other people looking through their phones during the same solar eclipse. Her, too: a crescent-shaped woman waving at me from within the palm of my hand. I wave back.

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# It’s Fine

At the end of August, he calls to tell me he’s been thinking about me. He pauses, and I don’t fill the silence until after he asks if I’d like to see him again, if I’d *like to go camping*.

I don’t know if I want to or not, only that this unexpected restart reforms our first beginning into something solid, a completed chapter now suggesting another chapter about to be written. *Sure*, I say, we can begin again, which is when he tells me he’s never been camping, but is pretty sure he can figure it out.

*No problem*, I say. I’ll take care of everything.

I pack up a tent and two sleeping bags and two sleeping pads and a little camp stove and propane and a set of camping pans. I buy camping-appropriate foods and toiletries. I scrounge up two sets of long johns and fleece jackets and fleece socks. I roll all the synthetic gear into compressed logs and layer them into my pack full of everything two people and a little dog need to live for a long weekend in the woods.

At his house, I unpack and then repack the bag, double-checking and preparing the equipment. He's standing there, hands in pockets, watching.

*So then*, I say, *you're ready to go?*

*Yeah*, he says, before telling me he's *just bringing what he's wearing*. The same clothes he's always wearing.

*I'm also bringing a bag*, he says. *Obviously.* He walks into his bedroom and reemerges with a black stealth survival pack covered in straps meant to carry grenades. Instead, there's whiskey, cigarettes, and a handgun, *just in case*. As he slings one strap over his shoulder, I suggest we keep it close to home. Hands in his pockets, he agrees, watching me while I hoist my heavy pack onto my back, then make a sling out of a long sleeve for the dog. While I do, while he's still standing by, I decide I like the inequity of what we carry, like that a woman can carry more than him without it needing to be remarkable or impressive. With me leading the way, we walk out the door, straight up the mountain, and into the woods.

It's a short hike. Twenty minutes later and we're at the top of the first hill that's conveniently clear and flat. *Good enough*, he says, so I set up the tent while he makes a bench out of dead juniper branches and calls it *a love bench*. I tell him I'm confused, that we're hardly talking, let alone in love. I tell him *I'm no dummy*, that I've noticed his silence and his distance. Staring into his silence-filled eyes, I'm trying to see if he's full of something that he either can't or won't express. Or, if he's empty.

He looks away, offers me the whiskey bottle, pats at the open space next to him on the bench. Too close, too branchy. I sit on the ground. He lowers the whiskey bottle and, slug after slug, we get drunk. I look at him through his cigarette smoke and try to decide if he's handsome or just familiar. Either way, I bum a few, take them apart, and reroll them up into little spliffs. I get high and I laugh and I play. But, just as he doesn't like jokes, he *doesn't like games*. I teach him how to play cribbage anyway but before we finish we're fucking. And then we're fucking again. For the first time in weeks I'm not thinking about him, or about her, or about him and her. I'm not thinking

about myself either, I'm not thinking about anything at all. I'm just fucking, and it's fine.

The next morning, I pack up and then we walk back down the hill to his house. While he makes breakfast, I go around with a box to collect my things: the book, a few pairs of fresh underwear in a drawer, and there it is —a lacy, magenta, polyester thong.

I pull it out with my pinky and try to make the question into a joke: *Yours?*

He shrugs. *Probably my sister's*, he says.

Of course, it's bullshit. I know it's bullshit. But I choose to believe him anyway. By which I mean I choose to stop believing myself. I leave the underwear in the drawer, close it, and go to the bathroom to get my toothbrush. With the full box in my arms, I apologize for leaving these pieces of me behind and shimmy my way out the door.

He calls the next day. He can't get enough. He wants to see me again and again. Weeknights. Weekends. Morning coffee. Lunch. He wants more and more, but I don't have any time left to give, so he asks me to make more time, to take time off work, to take a trip with him to Las Vegas that I can't afford. *Don't worry*, he'll pay. He tells me to pick whatever hotel I want and to book a few dinner reservations, too, *don't even look at the price.* But of course I do, because the price is part of the fun of a hotel room that costs more than a month of my rent. Of a dinner that costs more than I earn in a week of serving food.

So what if the two of them went to Vegas together a few times? This time he's taking me, and the proof is in the money, all this money I don't have to earn in order to spend; all this money that's making me trust him more than I should. I think of my bills, then of the tips I won't get. I'm worried that if I mention the deficit, he'll offer to pay me for my time. I'm worried that loving him will cost me my job and then become it. That I'll need to love

him forever in order to survive. So it's with his credit card in my hand that I ask him about her. For the first time, I say her name.

It's a name I said out loud then, but haven't allowed myself to say in years. Because, for me, there are two versions of her: one with a name that is not mine to mention, and another as anonymous as a pronoun—*she/her*—and as sacred as a pronoun, too.

I only need to say her name once.

*Do you really want to know?* he asks.

I do, and so, in between words like *um* and *it's hard to explain*, with his hand on my knee and his eyes on mine, he says: *She's my soulmate, but it didn't work out in this lifetime.*

He keeps talking, but I struggle to listen, *blah blah blah*, something about how he hopes love is kinder than she had been.

*I can't do this*, I say, pulling myself away, *there's no way I can do this*.

He grabs at my hand but misses. He pulls me back by my shirt.

*It's no big deal*, he says. *Really*, he says, sending her a text, *right here and now.*

He says, *See? This is where she and I end.* His contained desperation.

*You don't have to do that*, I say.

*I'm not asking you to do that*, I say.

*I'm not even sure it matters if you do that*, I say.

But now he’s the one who’s not listening, but reading out loud as he types: *I cannot do this with you any more. I have a girl friend.*

And even though the syncopation between his typing and his voice aligns, I’m suspicious of everything that happened between them and everything that didn’t and everything that will.

He hits send. I hear the text *whoosh*. He puts the phone back in his pocket while intimating the same little shoulder shruggie from his dating profile, this time to reiterate what he’s already said: *See? No big deal.*

We both hear the phone chime in his pocket. We both pretend not to notice him thumbing down the volume. Not to notice that I’m crying. The phone, buzzing this time. Him, laughing, saying he should probably unfriend her on Facebook, too.

A convenient excuse. He retrieves his phone and this time he’s silent while he reads whatever it is that she’s written, that he’s writing, that they’re writing to each other while I’m sitting beside them on the couch, his contained desperation becoming mine.

I don’t know what he’s saying but I imagine I do:

Him: *We can’t do this anymore.*
Her: *Why?*
Him: *I have a girlfriend.*
Her: *I know. And I have a boyfriend.*
Him: *OK.*
*But mine is jealous of you.*
*We can’t talk for a while.*
*Soon tho.*
Her: *I understand.*
*I hope so, too.*
*You’re the best friend I’ve ever had.*

I don’t know. But I know.

Which is how it will be from here on out, me and what I think I know subdivided across at least two different but simultaneous realities: one that contains him and me, and the other that also contains her. Either way, it’s no longer possible for us to go to Vegas without her, the two of us so thick with her absence that there’s hardly room for anything else.

We don’t fuck. I can’t sleep. I’m lying awake imagining me in an Elvis chapel in a white wedding dress, the ghost of someone else.

And then the two of us, old and in adjoining deathbeds, his sweet anticipatory smile, eager to meet her in his next life, at last. His last word is a shrug: *See? No big deal*, says the man who may or may not love me. But not, like, the most.

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# Fuck It

In the morning, I say *fuck it* and take his credit card out of his wallet to make all the fancy reservations on his phone. When it's done, I hand both back to him and he stares at his belongings as if they've become strange, as if the transaction means something more than either of us could possibly understand.

I've always imagined the soul hovering around the head, but when he said the word—*soulmate*—I watched his hand tighten around his phone.

Most of what I know about souls is colloquial: I know that souls can be blessed, and lost, and searched, and sucked, and poured, and sold, and judged, specifically by gods and devils who deal in souls. I've heard souls described as immaterial shadows, and I've also heard souls equated to light: "where it is, is day; where it was, is night," Emerson writes. In this schema, the eye isn't just the window to the soul, but the prism that exposes the soul's spectrum of "physiological colors," namely time and space. If he's right, and the soul is the realest entity in the universe, then it's very troubling to hear that the camera steals souls, even if it's just a colonialist rumor, an exposition of their own worst intentions. And it's also very

concerning to consider that every photograph strips a layer of skin, as Balzac writes. Although maybe the photographic horror is simpler, as in Sontag's accusation of a photograph as "a sublimated murder—a soft murder."

Supposing they're all right, then it's layer by layer that a person is replaced by an image of a person. Newly disembodied, our souls are just out there, wandering around, odorless and immaterial and entirely beside the point. Until, all of a sudden, two souls bump into each other and realize they could be wholer than whole, which is when the soul becomes paramount. How cruel, then, that his soul and her soul were so easily defeated by practicalities, or so I imagine: he wants to live rurally in the mountains, and she in a city by the sea. I want to shake him to his senses—*go to her, no matter what it takes!*—but I don't, and not only because I'm selfish but also because we're latching on to each other's bodies as a bump of turbulence strikes, the Grand Canyon gaping wide some thirty-eight thousand feet below. How terrifying it is to be or not to be a soul! A small thing shuttling through the big nothing. Until now, it seemed better to assume that no part of us would survive the fall.

*Beautiful*, he says, leaning across me and looking out the plane's window at the canyon disappearing as we near the Las Vegas skyline glowing in the desert dusk.

There is Paris and there is New York and there is the Great Pyramid beaming up a solid beam of light.

And although it is not Paris and it is not New York and it is not the Great Pyramid, it really is a great pyramid.

Maybe the soul is like that, I think, a thing that is both what it is and what it is not. An architecture that puts symbolism before form in space. Inorganic but not out of place.

*The birthplace of postmodernism*, he says, still leaning across, but *postmodern* has lost all meaning for me, except as a frequent word beneath her posts. *A building that is also a sign*, he says while I look down on the city that looks like a city but is mostly a giant mall. *Architecture as a hypothesis of space.* Which is what most cities are these days, gigantic malls, and I hate them for letting themselves be consumed and denuded by materialism like that, one culture after the next transforming into shopping centers, which are not cultural centers but cultish viruses, imitations of life with ambitions to replace it. *Architecture as a series of substitutions.*

I've always hated this city in particular, a city-mall so big that it sucks more than its share of money and water out of the commons that is the barren and arid West. But as the plane descends and the city enlarges, I'm beginning to think there's a need for a place like Vegas, where people can exorcise their obsession with money—can love money and use money and win money and lose money and hate money—because at least it's honest, money no longer standing in for something else but doubling down upon itself until it becomes real, as real as the two of us now walking hand in hand down this mirrored strip where night is as bright as day. *What money is for*, he keeps saying, now fingering a wad of green twenties. When I look back at his face, I see David Byrne emerge from it, real life superimposing onto a man in a movie now declaring the mall an American anthem: "People here are creating their own system of beliefs. They're creating it. Doing it. Selling it. Making it up as they go along," David Byrne says, because "shopping is a feeling," which is what the man standing next to me is actually saying, too. I see a woman dressed in sequins, her clothes clinking with the sound of money, and I assume she's the source of all the Strip's light; I close my eyes to shield the glare and the blackness inside my lids glows the exact same blue as the James Turrell we're now standing under, standing in awe while waiting for elevators to take us to the second story of a high-end mall because he *wants to buy me something nice*. He doesn't know I'm gut-punched by these blue and then indigo and then violet *Shards of Color* I've seen before, that she posted to her feed just two days ago, when she was here, standing exactly where we're standing now. She might still be here, might be why we're here, reality doubling down again, revealing itself to be phony.

I consult her feed but the picture is gone. Maybe she took it down. Or maybe it's a premonition of a post that's yet to come. Or maybe it's the ganzfeld effect at work on me, a saturation that's also a deprivation: my increasingly obsessive mind overcompensating by making things up. But here, in Las Vegas and in the mall, the architecture of shopping integrates with the architecture of vision and then combines with the stroboscopic light to create an architecture of edgeless projection. The elevator opens into a hallway rounding a corner where I see her in every person emerging from the deepening blue, then in the shade the color casts. Her shape on the wall, then on the ground, then in the shadow following every woman passing by. With cold black eyes, I look at them in order to extrapolate her from their specifics: the shapes of their noses, the curves of their necks. My judgments are predetermined: their basic faces, their ugly heads. I try to look into their terrible eyes but can't see past their disgusting under-eye bags and gaudy gray smudged eyes, because she's tricky like that, hiding in shadows pregnant with her possibility.

Absentmindedly, I walk by a $1,200 green coat and let my fingers brush the wool. When he says, *Buy it*, I feel better, a feeling that's already passed by the time I walk to the cash register. I hand it to the woman behind the counter and tell her I've changed my mind. I fall back into myself, and grieve for the green woman I could have been. I ask him for a hundred dollars. I tell him, *If I'm gonna buy that coat, I'm gonna have to earn it*. I bet the money on a basketball game and watch as it doubles.

I'm beginning to suspect I belong in Vegas more than I'd care to admit. Just another part of the city's all-encompassing confusion awaiting the inevitable collapse. Me: just another big decorated shed on the Strip that's on the verge of demolition. Like the Stardust, or the New Frontier, or El Rancho, buildings that America and I watched implode to the ground on prime-time 1990s TV. Spectacular: a great firmness lost in the futility of what remains. Clouds of dust and light and shadow.

She posts a picture of red smoke, green and blue light. Of the horror vacui her absence creates.

*Such a shame*, he would say, if this conversation weren't all in my head, *these beautiful old buildings keep getting replaced with such boring new ones.* And he'd be right, the iconic Stardust hotel demolished and rebuilt into the irresistibly impressive Resorts World, a flashy megacasino designed to rescue America from the faded perversity of nostalgia. But Resorts World only makes it worse because it's only when we're in possession of the new that we regret what's been lost. Which is how she loves him, I think, and how she loves this city, too: as a person taking a picture of a thing about to be destroyed. In a way, then, she's saving the city, and him, from death.

We make our way south to the pyramid, the tomb. From inside I look up into the vacuity under the distant capstone, and I wait for it to fall in on itself. Our concentric collapsings so unlike the Great Pyramids that are eroding naturally and from the outside in, losing 0.01 percent of their volume each year—to the rain, to the wind—which is how soulmates fall apart, I think, not all at once but sloughing off a bit here and a bit there, piles of talus accumulating in cracks. Wisps of dirt flying off to collect nearby as new dunes in the evolving landscape. Grains of sand bound to meet again in the next geologic era.

Standing ten feet away from a ten-foot-tall poster of the Blue Man Group, I try to see the pyramid as she would: I hold up my phone and search through it for symmetry and shade. I try to take a perfect picture. Surprised at my success, I post it online. Eventually, I get twenty-seven likes. When he sees it and double taps (twenty-eight), he says, *Wow, that's actually a really good picture*, and then he puts his arm around me.

But I don't want that kind of want right now. I slip away by getting a pace ahead, making him follow me into the elevators. Ascending at a thirty-nine-degree angle, we scale the four corners of the pyramid in a windowless box. (A magic box! Soon the four corners will become one.) Without a view for reference, it's difficult to sense the sideways movement, not a stomach dropping but a stomach sliding slantwise and up like a rhyme that doesn't quite. My nausea is only encouraged by the dimly lit hallways that corridor to the atrium (the biggest atrium in the world!), an atrium so big it contains another pyramid, which houses a mall inside a tomb-casino inside a tomb-

hotel. I lean over the rail and watch the ground open up beneath our floating ground. The rail is short. I lean across it and past the fear that exists at the edge of everything to see all the tiny black dots below. They're difficult to think of as people. Insects. Vermin. Animals that are smaller than me and better off dead. Such is the nature of my immense and growing envy becoming jealousy becoming a hatred for everything she could be. I take out my phone to take a picture of all the awful people and get distracted by the possibility of dropping it. I've heard that dropping a penny from way up high can't actually kill a person down below. I've also heard that a dropped ballpoint pen has at least a chance of puncturing a skull. I don't have a pen or a penny and I'm not giving up my phone. So I open the camera and watch as the atrium's yellowish-green and greenish-blue light floods the screen.

He's afraid of heights. He's standing with his back pressed against the wall. He's sinking into the plaster and sliding back toward the elevator bay and down the edge of the triangle, which is either the shape of love's exaltation or perversion.

It was Sappho who first depicted this geometric situation—three lovers all sitting at a distance. Then she colored them greenish yellow because the beginning of desire is the beginning of green. Most translations pin the phrase as "*paler* than grass," but Anne Carson writes it as "*greener*." In the composite, a transient virescence is implied, an into or out of greenness that Carson is careful to distance from Jealousy. "Jealousy is beside the point," she writes. It has nothing to do with love, at any of its stages, because jealousy "arises in fear and feeds on resentment."

In other words, my yellow-green-blue feeling can't be both love and jealousy. I have to choose. I could try to jump off the jealous track onto the khlōrotic, which lifts, as an envious admiration of another uplifts, and then grows, as a moss on the surface of life. Impossible. There is no alternative to what's already underway because choice is nullified by Maurice Blanchot's decree: "this is the rule and there is no way to free oneself of it: as soon as the thought has arisen, it must be followed to its very end." Certainly, I'm doomed by my jealous feeling, spreading as Ovid's

“greenness” spreads across the “canker’d breast” at Minerva’s request. By enlisting jealousy, she hoped to stop love, to halt a world on the verge of full bloom so that every unharvested fruit was left rotting on the vine. Living replaced by decay. Living captured in the gerund. Living mocking living, just as Shakespeare’s “green-eyed monster” mocks and mocks and mocks until green no longer fears descending into a tailspin of derision, its wavelength shortening blue and then bluer until it’s the green-blue color of being inside a body as benumbed as this tomb built above the earth full of fake plants glowing blue. Light-blue sun and dark-blue walls and blue-man groups. Ocean-blue fountains. Thundercloud-blue money machines. Decaying-wood-blue doors. Bruise-blue me, bleeding without blood as I step into the ash-blue box and slide down the edge of the gunmetal-blue pyramid. Try to possess the other side of one of its triangles and it collapses into a line. Try to catch the line’s opposite end and it collapses into a point from which spaciousness cannot resurrect. Maybe the soul is like that, I think, as the elevator lands and I run outside to look for something, anything, that’s alive and green and firmly planted in time and space. But it’s September. We are in the desert. Everything green is already dead.

I am one of one hundred thousand people on the desiccated Strip, where the only way to escape the crowd’s crushing force is to look up at a sky that is no longer self-possessed but Yves Klein’s. In the 1950s, the artist made the color material and then claimed it, just so he could prevent the damned birds from interrupting his would-be possession. After he took the blue, he made women roll in it, and then he gave it away; what an execrable generosity. But I don’t want to capture blue like Klein, or even like John Herschel, but only to use it to escape like Anna Atkins, whose blue photograms depicted life under water, the sentience that preceded ours and this desert’s, too, pages and pages of plants crawling out of the sea to become inevitable us, skeletal white against ocean blue.

Yes, life evolves in a certain order and now jealousy exists. See it coursing through my veins, blue-blooded and thirsting for indigo and reaching toward violet, its fated and murderous end. Blue wants to bleed out of my skin, to burst red and then oxidize deep purple. I’m not walking down the Strip but dithering—red blue, red blue, red blue—through a crowd of little

dots reinflating and then individuating into a real person who might as well be her. A horror of hers. I'm trembling my way through them when I see her, through a window, illuminated in a flash of kill-or-be-killed violet. Vivid violet. I scream. I lunge at the glass. I slam into my own reflection. Delighting in my failure, he laughs. I can't laugh, can't even breathe; my costume of her, it's tightening in the desert heat. Suffocating me with polyester. *I've packed all wrong*, I say. So he flags down a cab and takes me to the mall at the other end of the Strip. Fashion Show, it's called. I know because she posted it on her feed last week, too.

*What a stupid fucking name*, I say, as we exit the car to face this mall that isn't dying but living and profiting off some 249 stores and services, including seven flagships. All in all, it covers almost two million square feet. In 1981, it cost $74 million to build. In the early aughts, it received a $1 billion renovation that included a retractable runway for fashion shows, a plaza, and the giant UFO-shaped steel-blue Cloud meant to provide both shade for pedestrians and real estate for advertisements. Today, it features a moving projection of tall blonde women and short blonde women who look like her, a giant awe-inspiring her that's supposed to incite envy and then jealousy in a way that makes you want to shop and then buy and then own. Before we enter, I step back and into the place where she also must have stood to take that other picture that no longer exists.

*What a stupid fucking mall*, I say. I mean to drop it as an insult and let it land as a force of pure negation. But he stretches out his hand and catches the penny before it can hit her: *Maybe, but it's worth at least trying to appreciate*. I glare; he hunches in defeat.

He's learning to follow me and my mood, to stand behind me, where my shadow is, too. I choose to believe that he likes it, as suggested by a picture I found of him online in which he's wearing a collar and being walked around on a leash. To punish him, I use his money to buy a $200 pair of jeans, a $500 coat, and a $1,000 silk dress.

On the way out of the mall, I stop to admire a lacy and magenta thong in a display window. The look in his eyes. To reward him, I buy two.

On the cab ride back to the hotel, we talk about what kind of porn to watch. *Something with no blondes*, I say. He doesn't ask me to compromise but I do because she's already a part of this relationship anyway—*fine*—a threesome, FMF, one blonde and one brunette. Right away, I climb on top of him, grab his cock as if to conquer it, but he tells me to slow down.

*It's just getting started*, he says, taking my hand away from him and placing it softly on my inner thigh.

I watch the women touch each other. For a minute, they pretend they're there for each other, before clawing away each other's clothes in competition for a cock.

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# The Algorithm Adjusts

Almost immediately, my phone fills with ads featuring nearly naked bodies, all of them blonde and skinny and white. Before, the algorithm lured me with promises to gratify my desire—for pretty vases or baggy trousers or stacks of books with the implication that there was also time to read them in sunlit bay windows. Now the objects are growing in vigor and intelligence. The objects are people who look like her. Pictures of actual or artificial women trying to sell me sex. I don't want sex. I don't want to live and I don't want to die. I just want to go online where dead things go to live so I can hate them and block them without consequence. I click on the ads and I show the women on the screen to him. I ask him how much he thinks it's worth to watch them for an hour. He grabs my leg and tells me he'll fuck me for free. I feel him grow from soft to hard.

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Victor is briefly thrilled to discover he can animate the dead. Then, almost immediately, he begins to question "whether [he] should attempt the creation of a being like [himself]." But his imagination is "too much exalted by [his] first success to permit [him] to doubt."

His lack reminds me of Talbot and Niépce and Daguerre. It reminds me of Gruen and Frank Lloyd Wright. It reminds me of my Father and every other Daddy who both did and didn't doubt their desire to do what they could. It reminds me of my capacity to do great and terrible things, too. Of this jealousy that exists. Whether I created it or it created me, it is my creation. With a life of its own, I cannot abandon nor renounce it. Rather, finding "so astonishing a power placed within my hands," I wonder how far into the descent I'm willing to go.

I shove his hard cock inside me. While we're fucking, I'm thinking about the diminishing distance between me and the worst I am capable of. The friction of being so near to the limits of a morality I still uphold. How exciting. I orgasm too soon and roll over to look at my phone while he finishes himself off.

*Hurry up*. I'm thirsty. I need to get out of this desert. I tell him to drive me to the lake; *dehydrating reservoir*, he corrects, right after he comes. On the way, he insists we stop to get doughnuts, *the best in town because no one knows about them*, he says. I don't tell him *I do* (#doughnutqueen #LasVegas).

The shop is just a little box as bland on the outside as it is within, bare-bones, four blank walls and a display case of pastry: pink doughnuts with sprinkles, raspberry-filled doughnuts, sugar-dusted doughnuts, chocolate-covered éclairs—I'm sure she'd order one of each. But it's the plain one I'm interested in, the only one I have eyes for. A figment of the real me: my grandfather used to love them. So I'm staring at it as it swells with sentiment and quickly grows outsize, overshadowing all the rest, now as big as the display case, the restaurant, too big, it has to be hoisted by a crane out and onto the roof, and there she is, smiling and turning it into a picture, another thing in a chain of mundane things turned interesting with a flash, and all just because she's there, standing in front of the doughnut-topped store to which her slight frame is offering an exquisite sense of architectural scale: you could fit thirty of her inside it. You could just eat her up.

He nudges me and then puts his arm around my shoulder, and I hurry to tell the woman behind the counter that *I'll take one plain, please. And a cup of coffee, black.*

*Seriously?* He seems disappointed. I know it's not impressive but it's the only true thing about myself I can remember.

I insist we eat the doughnuts in the parked car, which is in the lot of an abandoned department store. In the passenger seat, I take a bite, then another, and while I'm chewing, it occurs to me that maybe a soul is like a doughnut, an edgeless torus in which every point is always on the brink, as life and death are, the product of two impossibly but perfectly aligned circle-like shapes.

He squints through the windshield and asks me if I can read *the labelscar*, another word I know from her captions. I assumed I knew what it meant: the stain where the store's sign used to be. I thought of a building like a body aging in real time but for where the sign provided shelter from the sun and protection from the weather. The fresh, pale skin underneath a wedding ring, for example.

Looking at the labelscar close up, I see it is the opposite, that the bit of the building that's been covered up has aged faster than the rest, accumulating dew and dust and bird shit so thick it's one big rot, the rottenness that's happening inside me, too, under the guise of new jeans, new boyfriend. I clutch my *plain, please* and my *coffee, black.*

The rest of the facade appears healthy and moving on; there's a FOR LEASE sign taped to the window. He wants to get up, get closer, to figure it out, as if it fucking matters. I watch while he pursues his interest, up and out of the car. While he walks away, I think about secrets, the things people conceal. The tattoo he got covered up, for example. He won't tell me what it was. Instead, I stare and stare at what's there now, the face of Gelsomina from Fellini's *La Strada*, the woman whose most memorable line is "the fool is hurt, the fool is hurt, the fool is hurt." I stuff the rest of the doughnut in my mouth and chew it down to mush.

We drive through the desert for a little less than an hour until we arrive at Lake Mead, which is almost empty. Vegas's secret and slow death, perfectly out of sight. From far away, the lake looks deeply blue. Alluringly blue. The car is still running when I step out, walking and then jogging into the water, which appears green as I approach and then greener as I'm stepping in and then paler as I'm swimming away into the decrescendoing spectrum, swimming as fast and as far as I can until the pale-green yellow water presents a way out. What if, instead of seeing itself through, my jealousy refuses its own life? Stops bobbing and sinks back into the blue-becoming-green-yellow-orange-red until, however pitifully, it's subsumed by the white-light poetry of a life overwhelmed by the profound beyond. Me: finally achieving artistry by walking into the sea like:

1. Jeremy Blake, who walked away into the waters of Rockaway Beach, his body found days later by a fisherman.
2. Ray Johnson, who dove off a bridge into Sag Harbor and was seen backstroking out into the vast.
3. Bas Jan Ader, who attempted to sail across the Atlantic, *In Search of the Miraculous*.
4. Ann Quin, who drowned herself by walking off a pier.
5. Paul Celan, who, in the middle of the night, waded into the Seine.

Sure, Celan technically walked into a river, but the mouth of the Seine is said to be where the stones of Chronos lie and so it's where they were swallowed by the sea of time. Sometimes, alternative seas will have to do, like this reservoir. I'm bobbing and breathing and looking around me at the concentric circles left on the cliffs by all the water that once was where it wasn't supposed to be. Maybe a soul is like that, I think, not some transcending ethereal thing but the iron and saline vestiges of embodiment no longer outlasting what is. A succession of rippling wavelengths now rising up the canyon walls to eventually surpass the strata of earthbound color to become the light of pure time.

I float on my back and look up into the blue sky. I let my ears sink just below the surface until all I can hear is glub, glub, glub, just like the sound

of a soul, I think, primordial and undying, echoing forever through whatever water's left.

I look up and see him on the shore, holding out a towel. I swim back. He shows me a picture he took, *of you in the lake*, he says. But I'm so small, just a speck, what it looks like when I feel like myself.

I walk back to the car to get my phone because I want to take a picture of him, too, standing at the tip of the peninsula, at the point in time and space when he will get the closest to understanding me. On the screen, he looks small, an insignificance among the expanses of blues that aren't so bad, a gradient of sky blue that's utterly unpossessable, and a water blue that's utterly unconcerned with us, but only with the beige ground layered underneath, undertone upon undertone of the most unenthusiastic yellow. "*Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous*," I say, pushing the trigger, because it's what Victor says to his monster, too. I lower the camera and wave to him, standing there, in his blue jeans and white shirts and brown shoes. The scenery is beautiful but the tiny detail of him is what makes it worth preserving; extract him from it and I don't want to be here, at this reservoir that's just another thing that shouldn't exist, taunting the thirsty and surely envious but also grateful desert. I look at the picture. Examining it, I escape myself for just long enough that it becomes possible to abandon my jealousy while remaining on firm ground. I could stop. I could forgive him. I could love him before it's too late. I could look at this photograph forever, for an eternity, which is the opposite of an origin, remember? An animated void that can always accommodate another drop.

Scientists discovered a color like that, an oversaturated blue green that's fuller than full, the color of God's cup runneth over. It can only be seen in a lab and only by stimulating the rods in the eyes. Olo, it's called, as in 010, as in binary code. *Imagine it*, the scientists say, seeing more and hearing more and smelling more and tasting more and feeling more and more until you can actually sense your soul. Proof, at last. What a relief! A relief by way of oversaturation. A pain that appeases because everything could always be worse. And therein lies the brutal and inevitable return, the

seemingly harmless temptation of *just one more post* in Sontag's already "image-choked world."

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# YOLO

I post the picture of him by the lake online because I know she'll see it. Because I want her to know I'm closing in. When he sees it, he tells me he likes it, but he doesn't double tap. In my $1,000 silk dress I start frowning, in a silk circus tent alongside dozens of Le Cirque's frowning fresco clowns. Frowning because he won't publicly like me, and won't even consider posting a picture of the two of us online. And he's frowning, too, when he finally answers: *Because she'd hate it.* Both of us frowning over $100 plates of fish topped with its own roe. If the frowning clown is standing on his head, does it count as a smile? He reaches across the table and puts his fingers on my chin and pushes up and tells me to *smile*. He pulls out his phone. He takes and then posts a picture of me in a silk dress with a silver spoon in my mouth. It's the first of his pictures that she doesn't like.

The sommelier approaches with a globe of ice wrapped in gold leaf and serves it from within a golden and glowing pineapple. *Just put it in your mouth and wait,* she says, and we do, the heat of our mouths thawing the thin skin until it's a gush of sweet seawater. I gasp. I laugh too loudly. Pardon the interruption. Back to your meals. Except for the thick woman

with the thick black-rimmed glasses who yells through the restaurant to tell me to never stop laughing as freely as I do. She looks so comfortable here, as if she owns the place, as if it were her idea to serve unhatched eggs on top of their dead mothers, call it art or a joke or madness. Over a $25 glass of *Fuck, this is good. How do you pronounce it? Sauternes with a silent* s*?* I steal a peek at the $1,000 check and laugh again, my mouth so wide that I'm sure he can see all the way into me, both into what's alive and what's rotting, but he's looking at me like he loves me, which is when I know I've gotten it all wrong: a soul is pure fiction, an empty bag we stuff with all our depraved ideas about romance and love and everything else that we want to be real but can't prove. I lean across the table and kiss him as if it means nothing because it does and when he kisses me back it feels new, like a color painted into wet plaster that promises to last.

We walk out of the restaurant, arm in arm, in a love-fueled and cuisine-induced psychedelia. It only took $1,000 to transform whatever tarnished understanding I'd had of the world so that now it's not just the people sparkling, or the sequins they wear, but the room and the world shining on their own, in tempo with the cha-ching symphony of computerized slot machines and ice clinking in glasses. If I've been in love before, it wasn't like this, like Vegas, a place made real with every purchase, all of us consumers tainted by the atrocity of what we must do. Everyone a complicated expression of darkness and light. The man in the fancy elevator, for example: he isn't wearing pants. Or this businessman who's losing cash at the same rate as the schlub who's winning it. The monk or the addict or the magician, all asking for money in the lobby. As we chassé through, I toss each of them a five, and then we dance our way across the casino floor and twirl our way out of the rotating glass doors and onto the street, where people are running and screaming and afraid. A woman trips down the stairs, knocking over a cooler full of ice now sprinkling with cans of Fresca pounding down the stairs. The soft thud of her body landing at my feet. She looks up at me. *There's a man*, she says. *With a gun*, she screams. A group of women banging on a door. A security guard shaking his finger back and forth. *No one in. No one out.*

The panic spreads quickly, contagious in the swelling crowds scrambling away. This American terror. The bizarre dither of red, white, and blue, of independence and naïvete and jealousy, suddenly and violently and inevitably appearing as purple as *ressentiment*. For the first time since we arrived in Vegas, people are looking each other in the eyes, scanning one another's faces for the seed of their sickness. I turn to face them and to join them, but he grabs my hand and pulls me upstream, the two of us walking against the torrents and retracing our steps, through the mall—past the blue light and the green coat—back to our hotel, where the bouncers won't let us in until we can prove we are paying customers, because it costs money not to get shot in America. We flash our key card and walk on to the shuttered and silent hotel casino floor, the abruption of stillness in a city that never sleeps. In the pause, I remember that I need to buy a tube of toothpaste, and *Yes*, the security guard says, *the gift shop is still open*. The half-sized tube costs eleven dollars. I have a mind to complain but the TV is streaming live footage of twenty-two thousand people being sprayed down by machine guns fired by a single faceless man up above. What a terrible God. I thank the cashier and then go upstairs, riding the elevator up to the forty-second floor while staring at a poster that reads WELCOME TO SIN CITY. In the room, we don't turn on the TV but hold each other while wondering what the screaming would sound like if we weren't in such an expensive noiseproof room with triple-pane windows. I touch a button and watch the curtains close. We fall asleep, peacefully, because it's just another night of falling in love in America.

And then it's just another morning in America, the name for this place that consumes with a capital "A," turning North America and Central America and South America into our America; citizens mirror their nations and nations mirror their citizens; we turn on our phones and learn that fifty-eight people have been murdered; I don't want to learn anything else about them, so I don't; instead, we go to an all-you-can-eat brunch buffet. There are a lot of people here, but it's so quiet that the sound of eating is loud, the inappropriate clang of coffee cups on tables and the scrape of forks against teeth. It is the worst mass shooting in American history. I get a plate of crab legs because eating or not eating won't undo all that murder. I crack shells and search for information about the shooter. Who he is. How he did it. Why? But the news is still breaking. We know only that he's dead, too. His

name. What he looks like, the same picture of him flashing and reflashing across every screen on every network in America while the rest of the bodies lie in anonymous black bags.

It's a bad picture, taken poorly and from below: double-chinned, eyes closed, a shine on his balding head. Except for his smile, which is close-lipped and familiar, almost exactly the same smile I'm wearing in the picture of me with the silver spoon in my mouth. Sweet. Satisfied. I'm toggling back and forth between the news feed and my feed, the shooter's photo and my photo, his smile and my smile. While cracking one, two, three platefuls of crab legs, I use the editing app I bought to look more like her to enhance my likeness to him. I recompose his lips and my lips into our lips. Our ears. Our chin. The augmentations appear as an animation so that I'm watching myself become a mass murderer. But I am not him, not yet, so I blur my eyes closed. I remove my hair. Over a fourth plate of legs, I beg myself to stop. Isn't it enough to know where jealousy begins? But I can't, because, again, Blanchot is right: "a thought demands loyalty." Of course some thoughts ought to remain unthought and left to die a pitiful death, but not this jealous thought that is my idée fixe, my leitmotif—I have to find out how jealousy ends. I edit my face so it tilts like his and the transformation is almost complete.

On the ride to the airport, we drive past the two windows the shooter broke by shooting through them, and I see them as two eyes, two windows to the soul. I use the app to turn my irises violet black and then, he and I, we are the same.

Inside the airport, every TV is turned to the montage of horror—country songs, shots firing, people screaming and fleeing, the shooter's quiet, close-lipped smile, which causes the lips of every person watching to frown. So many upside-down smiles. I turn up the brightness on my phone. Brighter and brighter, trying to see if the inside of me is the same as the shooter's inside, too.

It's supposed to be easy to spot the difference between the doppelgänger and the original because the double doesn't have a shadow. But just because

it’s invisible doesn’t mean my evil twin isn’t attached to my feet and following me around in a perfectly variant correspondence of one-to-one. Whenever the dark is complete, she wells up inside and emerges from my eyes to become a part of everything I see. The view is bleak. Everyone else is against me. And, in America, I—or the she inside me—have a military might legally nested in my hands. To do the worst possible thing, we don’t even have to lift a finger. We just have to press, and hold, and we all know how practiced I am at that.

On the plane, the guy next to me still has blood on his shirt. When he turns to look at me, I panic and turn away. The stranger grabs my hand, the hand that is already holding my phone, the picture of the shooter and my close-lipped smile. My grip tightens. I look at the man and frown. The man loosens his fingers. I slip away and delete the picture and I want to cry out *This isn’t me!* because I want everyone to know my badness isn’t my fault, that I’ve been totally and completely replaced by a systemically evil *I* that’s distinct from my own. If only I could prove it.

*My shadow must have escaped my feet*, I’d say. Maybe it curled up into a dark seed that I fed to him and then it reentered me through his ejaculating dick. I must have eaten it and swallowed. It must have rooted in my gut and turned it into a womb and now it’s springing up and growing big and thriving in my body now hosting this twin stranger. This haunting and doubled soul that cannot be removed. These two gold rings stuck on my finger, the feeling of a soul after it’s been sold to the Devil, I think, unappalled and unchecked by remorse. I no longer hope to avoid the inevitable.

I don’t scream out. Because, if I’m being honest, it’s the badness in me I recognize and the light that seems strange. Me: the ship of Theseus, the paradox of a thing being replaced bit by bit until it’s entirely new but carries the same enduring name. My first white lie soliciting a second red lie requiring a third one that’s spitting out the spectrum seemingly all at once in a splatter of additive bullets now bleeding violet. *Envy her, hate her, defeat her and everyone who reminds you of her.* Nothing has changed about me but jealousy and, where once I was horrified by it, now I am seduced. I’m

taking pride in my intimacy with terror, as I am in my intimacy with him—the shooter, and the stranger on the plane, and the man I'm with—no matter how terrifically concocted. We're in this together now—#VegasStrong—and there's no going back to how things used to be before a word like *murder murder murder

# Invidia

We return to Colorado. We're sitting on his pink couch. I turn to him, so we can begin again, with just a few questions:

*Was she ever in this house?*

*Did you love her?*

*Is she funny?*

*Did you fuck her on this couch?*

He turns inward, doesn't answer. I call him an *asshole*, but he assures me he's not. To prove it, he turns it around on me, calls me *jealous*. I try to turn the accusation into an insult hurled at him but can't. I'm too busy reveling in how it became so true.

*I'm sorry*, I say, because I should. The apology and the shame are performative, the calm surfaces that allow jealousy to course and churn and froth underneath, to form new systolic peaks of *ressentiment*. I turn toward him again; he turns toward me. I sit on him and he turns me onto my back. While we're fucking we're also turning, spinning, cycling through assertion and submission. Shoving, choking, pinning, biting until the old versions of ourselves are overcome. Revolution is always a violent event.

Afterward, we're in bed and I turn to thinking about her again, this time while making constellations out of the moles on his back, me and my jealousy comingling with the stars, spawning new jealousies I hadn't thought of yet, jealousies that beg, jealousies that engender new mythologies. I get close to him and then closer, breathing in the metamorphic gases seeping out of his pores—Aveeno, stale cigarettes—a pheromonal intoxication that imbues me with powers far greater than the daimonic.

"Let the old gods die," Marcel Schwob urges, in a succession of incantations. "May each god vanish upon creation." "May all creation vanish upon creation." "May every god be the god of the moment." "May each put his ruins to use."

The Romans respected jealousy. For them, Jealousy was a dangerous god: her eyes with double pupils and her poisoned venom tongue. Her ugliness was proud, no longer buried under shame. She didn't belong on Olympus, or in the underworld, but just barely on the side of the divine, at the bottom of a deep and dark valley, on a pink polyester couch. But you know this already. I told you this is who I am before we even began.

The problem is that the Romans didn't go far enough; Ovid only gave Jealousy a couple of paragraphs, not a portrait but a snapshot, as if she were just a narrative device. I'm giving myself an entire book and this is the time for my full-throttled invocation. Say my name—*Invidia*—to look against.

Already, I tried to tell you this: Jealousy is inborn in the eye, sight become a transgression, the eradication of a threshold between me and the other who no longer exists. In the myth, Jealousy's victims lose their voices and then turn to stone; in my story, it ought to be enough to take her picture. From within his urine-soaked house, I hatch a plan to unleash his imagination and capture it as my own. To begin, I lean over and kiss him while he sleeps.

*OceanofPDF.com*

# The Magic of Macy's®

When he wakes up, I'm looking him in the eye. I smile. *I refuse to sit on a couch that you fucked her on*, I say.

Whatever he says doesn't matter. I make him take the cum-soaked polyester piece of shit to the dump.

While he's gone, I let the fire turn to smoke so that the canyon of his house is embedded in black fog. When he returns, we fuck on the carpet where the sofa used to be, and I fuck him as only a god can, a divine fucking that ensures first the abeyance of his disbelief, then his obedience.

For lunch, I serve him rotting peppers. I add drugs to his drink. And then I lure him down the canyon to the mall where he will buy me a new couch, a cheap postmodern knockoff—*blue*—because what is real is what feels real is our descent, he and I driving down the winding mountain roads, down, down, down and into the pit of the plains to a mall surrounded by a moat of melting asphalt. Within the molten river, we park. And then we ford, the ground beneath us streaking with yellow parking lines. Ugly. Banal. Boring

yellow lines that threaten: an army of lines guarding the entrance to Hell, where fire neither consumes nor regenerates but preserves. The glass doors of Macy's rise up to lord above.

I raise the camera in my hand to my eye and watch the place transform, zooming in and out, in and out, focusing in on this Macy's that could be any Macy's. I see the wave of my reflection in the glass door, a me who is everyone on the threshold of every Macy's everywhere. Exhale. Finger the trigger. Feel the camera's guts lunge and snap. The film's chug, then the film's advance. If every photograph is a transformation of the general imaginary into the specific real, then every photograph is a step toward her demise. I push the bronze bar of the Macy's—this Macy's—and I step across the threshold.

I look to the left. I look to the right. I remember this mall from my childhood, too, and so do you. I was here and you were here when we were ten, twelve, sixteen, at the cosmetics counter, all those free samples of perfume; I spray a cloud and run through it so I can smell like our memory of Gap's cut grass or ck's One. I rush past the men's department and the kids' department and through the displays of sheets that are always surprisingly expensive, through the euphoric guilt of every purchase past and present, to get to the innards of the mall, where the artificial sun is always rising, the endlessness of dawn glaring off the glass of a shuttered cell phone store and a nearly empty LensCrafters and a Hot Topic staffed by two girls who haven't changed since 1998. A GNC, still thriving off the empty promises of creatine. And a security desk, armed with a guard who's armed with a phone and a gun, what's the difference. I nod but he's so still I'm not sure whether he's alive or just another faceless person extracted from real people I won't allow to exist. The ideal subject. I raise the camera and frame his face. Exhale. Trigger. Lunge.

Advance. Into a showroom of living rooms, dozens of possible lives emanating from Macy's single source. My experience of her is becoming a shadow conjoined to my feet. Lifting the camera to my eye, I implore the lens to grant me more: I want access to her point of view, I want to assume her perspective entirely, I want to possess her as she has possessed me. I

zoom in on her shadow growing bigger and bigger until everything is inside its shade, wrapping and then enveloping and then holding us still. From within the dim, we realize our shadow cannot survive the dark.

I open my phone and, in the perfidious light, I conjoin with her again. A momentary relief. Relief chasing relief. The mechanics of compulsion become the mechanics of invasion inside the utopian town square, and I'm welling up from its bowels, insatiable and eating her alive so that I'm the shape of her bulging out, and she is the undifferentiated shape of me.

It's only once I've assumed her completely that I realize I love her. And, in order to keep loving her, I must save her from myself. I regurgitate, an act I think of generously as a birth. But, as any mother knows, it's too hard to see her standing there, so separate from me; I walk toward her and hug her, hard enough that she reabsorbs, two women now one four-legged and four-armed faceless beast.

Maybe she and I are soulmates, I think, and maybe our soul is like that, not an image but the sound of our four-legged footsteps becoming a spectral music that reinvigorates our dance into a waltz, out of one mall and under the arches of another, the frame of her childhood mall's arches under an ancient drop ceiling that's rotting in the exact same pattern as his moles, a long hair extending from one like a ladder to the stars.

Looking at it as an invitation, we discover what we've always known: together, we are perfect for him. So, doglike, we climb the ladder to find that his heaven is just another cave. And inside the cave there is a chair and a chain and a bunch of shadows dancing on the walls: a trap. Like the Devil, she tears herself away and cuts the shadow from our feet. She disappears in a puff and leaves me alone to watch the world collapsing into my imagination of it.

Alone, my eyes refocus to the light. My ordinary shadow is attached to my two feet. I'm sitting on a blue couch in a fake living room surrounded by other fake living rooms surrounded by fake bedrooms and, in this layer of Hell, he is handing the salesman a credit card. He is leaning toward me and whispering in my ear: *I can't wait to fuck you on this couch.* I laugh. I close my eyes and lean my head back and laugh even harder because the blue fabric is woven from unreality. We all know it's really her couch, the one she would pick if she were here, and the one they will fuck on when she eventually returns. But to unravel it now would leave the two of us without a place to sit.

He's whispering in my ear again: *Open your eyes*, he says, *I'm doing all of this for you*, by which he could mean anybody, the familiar or the universal *you*, the vague whoever-he-needs to witness his life so that he can see through another's eyes what was too close for him to see clearly: her, his soulmate, his destiny. Not *you*, his brutal fate. You stop laughing. You open your eyes to discover that the mall is gone and you're standing in an auditorium, the only member of the audience. Her shadow is on the stage. *This show is all for you*, she says. *Welcome to the theater of your delusion:*

*OceanofPDF.com*

SCENE

*The lights flicker. Dimming and then black. And then a single light, center stage, the screen of your phone projecting onto the floor. You forgot it was in your hands. Its beautiful light; your shadowless face. The stage infills with a search bar, a blinking cursor, your nagging questions stretching across and begging for answers she's agreeing to give:*

Was she ever in this house?

*The front door opens, the bags crash down. He picks her up and carries her across the threshold.*

Did you love her?

*She's vomiting into a toilet while he holds back her hair. Thinking she won't remember, he tells her that he does.*

*A picture of an engagement ring, so postmodern.*

Is she funny?

*The room reverberates with laughter.*

Did you fuck her on this couch? What was it like to fuck her on this couch?

*You feel him grab her upper thigh, then her topographic tits, his cock swelling against her. He grabs her hands and turns her around and pins them behind her back. The TV turns on, porn, MFM. She opens her mouth to moan and a black snake slithers out of your mouth. You reach out and grab her hair and regurgitate the serpent back into her open throat.*

*OceanofPDF.com*

## SCENE

*You are the world and the world is a stage and the stage is a projection, of a three-by-three grid of ten-by-ten-foot boxes. You click on one and watch as it enlarges. Plano, Texas. It's summer, too hot but for the shimmering aquamarine of a backyard pool. The smell of grilled meat. A good Father, always nearby. She opens her mouth and the snake contorts and twists into a mother, just home from church, carrying a pale-yellow pitcher of sweating lemonade. Everything is the faded hue of childhood—both Gingham and Lark—dark at the edges and sun stained in the middle, the memory of a past that wasn't damaged by technology but improved by time.*

*You click back and, square by gridded square, the scene transforms into her childhood mall, 1981. Perfect, as if everything would always be new. The stage, the grid, they're full of people shopping in this store and that, talking and not talking, walking and sitting down to eat. A car rolls up, parks in front of the mall. He opens the door, his head still full of hair. She opens hers, her long blonde hair straight and loose. She runs up to her Father and gives him a hug, then runs to get some ice cream. Her Father turns to him and offers a warm hello, shaking his hand and then pulling him in for a hug.*

FATHER: I thought she'd never find a man, let alone a man as good as you.

*OceanofPDF.com*

SCENE

*The grid is dark, the stage is dark, the phone is dark. A voice, slithering and disembodied, chatters away in the rhythm of Garth from* Wayne's World, *but softer and girlish and winding its way through nothing*—like, um, you know—*something about* Leo DiCaprio, *she says, saying his name as if she knows him, as if she loves him, because she's the kind of person who can love people she's never met. When she's done talking, the podcast hosts laugh and laugh.*

*You don't want to know this. For some reason, it really bothers you to know this. She is making sure you know this.*

*OceanofPDF.com*

## SCENE

*Music rises, soft cellos, distant drums. And then, slowly, it's dawn, a light projecting from behind you to reveal her standing directly in front of you, her back turned, the same constellation of moles. She looks at you.*

HER: My childhood mall is dying.

*She turns her head to look stage left. You're seeing her in profile for the first time.*

HER: My childhood mall is dying.

*Slowly, she turns to look stage right. She's so symmetrical. The kind of woman men are trained to fall in love with. She turns to look at you, a tear falling down her cheek.*

HER: My childhood mall is dying.

*And there he is, in between you and her, centered by a spotlight, listening. He's wiping the tear from her face. She's been looking for him. He left her so she would look because she understands what you just can't grasp: nothing connects the stars as strongly as separation. He was waiting for the right moment to return to her, for her tear to fall, and with it, the curtains.*

*OceanofPDF.com*

## SCENE

*Morning. The grid remains, but it's bare and totally white. White fog floods the floor. On stage, the car is already running, the windows rolled down. Their favorite band, Cocteau Twins, is blasting through the window and intermixing with the highway's white noise. They will travel all around the country—a grid of roadside attractions and kitsch—before they get to Vegas. She is setting both the route and the agenda and it is firm—the Creation Museum, Elvis's mansion, a Bass Pro store inside an arena-size glass pyramid, the UFO crash site in Roswell, the Great Sand Dunes. But first, they stop at the UFO Watchtower, which is just across the street.*

*They get out and look at the junk on the ground, what humanity amounts to. She takes a hundred pictures. He buys a mug. Back in the car, they realize the parking lot is empty. They climb into the back seat. He pulls up her shirt, pushes the heel of his hand into her breast while his fingers cup the top. He thrusts inside her and her head hits the door and your head hits the chair while they come and you surrender. He opens the door and steps out to put his pants back on. She takes a picture of him and you look and look and look.*

*With a few exceptions, he would have chosen all the same places, which is what he loves about her: without having to synthesize, they might as well be one. She didn't even have to say yes for him to know that they would end up at the Elvis Chapel in Vegas, that she'd packed the perfect white dress.*

*They stop at the iconic sign:* WELCOME TO FABULOUS LAS VEGAS. *She takes a perfect picture through the window of the moving car.*

HIM: Get whatever hotel room you want, don't even look at the price.

*She chooses kitsch over class, a little roadside joint with a totally classic neon sign. A picture emerges in the grid, slowly enlarging until it overtakes the set entirely: a tease of her reflection in the mirror above the hotel bed, the edge of a leg (or is it a blanket?) visible at the left side.*

HIM: Whatever restaurant you want . . .

*He slides a ring, so postmodern, into his pocket.*

*OceanofPDF.com*

## SCENE

*Interior of the Peppermill, a classic supper club, but with mirrors instead of windows. Fake red and pink flowers are reflected everywhere. The two lovers are in a booth, not touching, but sitting face-to-face. She's wearing a black tank top, the straps cutting close to her neck, soft and elegant and bare. The server brings tiki drinks. You can see them mouthing* thank you *but the restaurant is so crowded and loud you can't hear them. He speaks. She laughs. Over and over again. You're watching their mouths when finally their voices rise above the din:*

HER (*yelling*): What?

HIM: I love you!

*She shakes her head.*

*The ring box is on the table.*

HER: Please don't.

*She stands up and leaves.*

*OceanofPDF.com*

## SCENE

*He's standing at the front of a movie theater in LA in his white shirt and Levi's, but his brown leather shoes are swapped for more casual Chucks. Behind him and on-screen: a collage of vintage cartoon characters and the text* Saturday Morning Cartoons. *In the middle of whatever it is he's saying (something about animator Otto Messmer's disdain for the limelight; "Like the cartoons, I am silent"), he sees her eating a bowl of cereal from the cereal bar. Quickly, he wraps it up, jumps off the stage, walks up to her on tippy-toes as if she wouldn't notice him coming. You see Messmer's Felix the Cat fill the screen, talking to Poindexter. But then their bodies block the projector. You can't see the machine the little genius is building; you can only see the two of them, one four-legged shadow.*

HIM: Hi.

HIM: I'm here with someone else.

HER: So am I.

*But it's not true, for either of them, because although they came with other people, they're both alone now, as they're always alone whenever they're together, the theater emptying like the world until they're the only two people at the center of Messmer's blue planet's zero-point void. He steps closer to her.*

HIM (*whispering*): You know it's impossible to see you and not want to fuck you.

HIM: Why are you here?

HER: Because it’s impossible to see you and not want to fuck you.

*He grabs her hand, pulls her out of the light and into the projection room. Absent their shadows, the screen infills with Felix the Cat clinging to the back of Poindexter’s built and fully functioning flying saucer as it whips through outer space. He pushes her up against the wall and leans all of him into her, then pulls back just a little, to pull her closer.*

HIM: I’m leaving LA.

*She’s heard this before. She doesn’t believe him. It’s just what he says every time it’s too hard to be so near her.*

HIM: I got a job in Colorado.
I bought a house.
I want you to come with me.

*What he doesn’t say is that he picked Colorado because he knew she wouldn’t want to live there. Wouldn’t follow. She starts to cry.*

HER: Sure.
We can stop in Vegas on the way and elope.

HIM *and* HER, *laughing*.

HIM: I still have the ring, you know.

HER: I know.

*And for once they stop laughing about the proposition of their marriage.*

HIM: I would have taken care of you.

HER: Yeah.

*Neither of them can look at the other, two sets of eyes fixed firmly on Felix the Cat zooming past a sign that reads STRATOSPHERE—WATCH OUT FOR FALLING STARS. And in that moment, she knows that what she feared is true: ideals die, just as Poindexter's flying saucer is running out of fuel. He'll be in Colorado and she'll be in LA and Felix the Cat is stranded on the moon. Looking around, Felix sees a shadow that looks like Poindexter, and even though it turns out to be cast by a rock, it makes him feel less alone. She grabs his cock.*

HER: I brought handcuffs.

HIM *and* HER (*in unison, and in perfect sync with the film*): Yes, Mr. Felix, I guess I have been a bad boy.

*OceanofPDF.com*

You're tearing up. You're actually crying. And, for a moment, you think you understand her because you understand their pain: not even soulmates can survive reality. You're proud of yourself for being so empathetic, even though you know better, that empathy is just a projection of your pain smothering hers.

But then she ruins it. She jumps on stage and in front of the light and turns the projector on you. In the backlight, she disappears; she was never really here; there is nothing else but you—the stage, the theater, everything, including her—entirely metonymic. You're turning around inside yourself in desperate search of an exit but it's blocked by your shadow. You try to pass through it, and you're greeted by the truth: the whole spectrum is a lie, and you knew it from the start because you're not the kind of god who hides in the light but a god like Victor Frankenstein who inhabits the dark in order to bring forth its monstrous life. You're a nightmare: the terror of what is no longer latent but liberated and extending, now, as a dream into a waking that's drenched in the evil you already had in mind. "*You have made me wretched beyond expression*," you and Victor say to your namesake monsters just before you kill them, and just before you board the ship of Theseus, which is your redoubled self, sailing into an ongoing life that's something like death, your bodies bobbing across a dark sea under a dark sky. With unclosing eyes, you bask in the totality until you understand: darkness isn't a lack, but a source of subtractive color.

Newton didn't go far enough; he wasn't willing to betray his masterful God. His sacrosanct light. It was Goethe who went into the underworld to plumb the earthly depths to find out what color is actually made of. The only thing left to do is to accept what is, then to follow the embodied spectrum through the guts of the ground until you're covered with its muddy pigmentation. Its black gore, which is what the soul is like, you think, its bilious substance,

now accumulating in your mouth; you're inseparable from the chromatic, not as it appears, but as it materially is.

*You look beautiful right now*, he says, taking a picture, and turning his phone around to show you. You: your eyes lost in the middle distance, the absorption required to observe the changing nature of the self. It's the beauty of a woman lost in the realms of her suspended mind. He's coming in for a kiss but eye contact would ruin it, so you close your eyes and turn away.

They reopen and I reemerge. Where am I? Florida? Yes, we're on vacation in Florida. Three months have passed since we bought the blue couch and he's looking at me, his head tilted like a dog's, telling me he loves me as if he's said it a thousand times before.

I start to tell him *I love you, too*, so casually I can't possibly mean it. But then I remember the first time I said it; I was so afraid. I shoved him up against a wall, and I made him say it first. Everything we've been through together is doomed to be part of whatever is happening now.

I'm pulling him toward another mall, toward a glass door with a bronze handle—WELCOME TO THE GARDENS. I'm walking through it and then across the freshly waxed marble, then tile, then chevron wooden floors. Air-conditioned. So cold I wish I'd packed a sweater.

I'll window-shop for one, sizing up each mannequin until I find the one that most resembles her, newly identifying the deadness in it with the deadness in me because everything is fully material now, even the soul. Eventually, I make him buy me her lavender cardigan. I make him say that he likes it. And then I make him look down into the mall's lobby—fake marble floor, fake plastic plants, fake leather couches in a perfectly symmetrical arrangement, the new world order of the real. Malls are ready-mades and ready-mades are art made for viewers armed with a photographic eye. I raise the camera. I look through the lens down upon the lobby and, because everything is just a thing, I bypass thinking like me or thinking like her so

that I’m thinking like a lobby and I’m thinking like a camera and I’m thinking like a mall.

*So, this is what you like, huh*, I say. He doesn’t reply, so I take another picture.

*This is what makes you wanna fuck her*, I say.

He gets annoyed, turns and walks away. His turned back is the repercussion of no longer replacing the world with my imagination of it. For months, I’ve held him hostage to my mind, making him fight the same fight we’ve been having over and over again since I first asked him about her. *Of course I love you*, he said, pressed against the wall because the wall is what’s effective and walls are everywhere. But he’s walking between them, away and out of the mall. He’s shouting over his shoulder. *I’ll be waiting in the car*.

Slowly, I follow him, over waxed chevron wood, then tile, then marble floors, through the carpeted vestibule and out and into the sun. My reflection in the blank glass door. My shadow trailing me across the lot. Proof of the embodied me who’s following him, standing there in his gray shirt and leaning against the gray rental car in the middle of so much hot and gray asphalt. So much gray that gray overtakes so that the gray is all I can see. An achromatic return to the duality of black and white—so simple, so wrong—and all mixed together in the middle ground. I’ve heard it’s what happens to sailors on long ocean voyages, that they stop thinking of the sea as green or blue—only ever gray—a grayfield; a desert; surrounded by so much water I can’t drink. By all these malls I can’t seem to escape.

Certain he’s going to leave me, and not yet in the car, I ask him just one last question: *Have you ever lied to me?*

He doesn’t hesitate: *No. I don’t lie*, he says. He declares himself *incapable*.

Impossible, isn’t it? To always tell the truth? This lie that he insists isn’t a lie but makes me doubt everything else he’s ever said. This impossible and throwaway thing he says outside a mall. This propaganda of the self.

*You have to believe me*, he says.

But then he looks at me, trembling in the driver’s seat. He shakes his head and says: *You fall apart so easily.*

*OceanofPDF.com*

# Our Strange Routine

I'm reinforcing myself by closing the distance between us. Box by box. Brick by brick. Wall by wall. I'm packing up my life, and moving it into his, and piling my things up next to the new blue postmodern couch that's already covered in my dog's hair. I'm moving in because I have to abandon the life full of reminders that I've abandoned myself. My mom who misses me, my boss who's about to fire me, my landlord who's threatening eviction, my friends and their relentless inquisitions, always wanting to know why I'm willing to abandon them for a man. I hate that they wonder about me at all.

I disappear from their frame of reference to reappear in his house made of big-box stud frames and cinder blocks and drywall that reinforces us. Wanting for a mortar to bind us, too, I lay out our relationship as a contract: I'll take care of the house and, in exchange, he'll pay for everything. Readily, he agrees, adding that, in my free time, I can do what I want, which is presumably *to write.* Even though I don't know how—to do what I want or to write—I accept his patronage because it provides the tempered freedom that I assume art requires. It's the best I can hope for or get. So I'm moving in slowly, testing our agreement with each new load of my stuff.

And when the redheaded diner waitress tells me she'd *love to come by the new place*, I tell her I never want to see her again. I hang up the phone and pack up another box.

A week before the move is done, I ask him if he *really wants me to be here all the time? To think of your house as mine?*

He replies, *If it goes wrong, you'll be the one who's put out, not me.*

It's not romantic, but it's what I want to hear, his indifference a sign of our endurance. It's possible he's saying other things, too, nicer things, but if he is I don't hear them, don't believe them, because whatever he says is muffled by the effort required to hide the imaginations of her that I'm trying to suppress.

The night before the move is done, I slip. I think of her explicitly, and to think of her is to bring her back to life. I ask him again: *Has she ever been here?*

*No*, he says. *This house has only ever been yours.*

*Do you even love me?* I ask.

*Of course*, he says. *Everything I do is proof*, he says, by which I assume he means the money he spends, the time he commits, his presence and his patience. But I can't remember the last time I believed him. Or anyone else but me. Everyone else's thoughts threaten to expose and destroy the solidity of my increasingly self-referential thinking.

To entertain his claims would be to acknowledge the tiny chance that the sun won't rise tomorrow but explode. And to admit the improbability is to brace for the inevitability, too; the sun is dying, that's a fact. At some point, the fact of this death will become more important than the sun's habitual life. Its hydrogen will run out and then the sun will swell. It will overtake Mercury and Venus and then Earth. It will swallow us whole. Only then will

it collapse into self-contentment, I suppose, just as *ressentiment* collapses morality into a value system of its own. A white-hot density slowly claiming itself to be the sun.

On the darkest day of the year, I don't wait for dawn before leaving my old life behind. It's still dark out when I arrive at his house with the last load of my stuff, the back of my truck filled with plants, including the belladonna. Uncovered, they freeze to death on the drive. Later, I'll harvest the dead flowers.

When I arrive, he's still sleeping: *Why are you here so early?*

Already I feel unwanted. I leave him alone with his lingering sleep and unload the rest of my stuff into an unceremonious pile on the living room floor. Pretending he's not there, I try to do what I would do if I was home alone, which is to go outside and smoke while looking at the sun, but it still hasn't risen.

He wakes up, late, and we drive into town for breakfast at the local diner while someone else does my job and he pays the bill. When we return home, we sit around in awkward silence and wonder how we're supposed to behave now that it's going to be more or less like this forever. We watch TV. We fall asleep on different sides of the bed. And in the morning, he's off to work before I've even stirred.

Alone, I don't write. Instead, I move his things around to make room for mine. I begin by consolidating his clothes into one set of drawers and one side of the closet, an excuse to place the lacy thong that I no longer believe to be his sister's next to his briefs. I move on to the kitchen, the bathroom, cleaning becoming my reliable excuse to search for clues of them, the vestiges he surely keeps just out of sight.

He's been here for two years but never finished unpacking, so I'm going through his boxes, too, storage boxes full of mementos and paraphernalia of the past, not photos but actual things: old ticket stubs, a fake Olympic

medal, pamphlets from various woo-woo conventions they must have attended together, old licenses and ID cards from work. I'm not yet sure I have permission, so I scavenge carefully, archivally, trying to keep the chaotic order of his boxes intact, to preserve the precise intersections between one thing and the next.

At the bottom of one box, I find an old phone. I try to turn it on but the battery is dead. I put it back in the box. I unpack more of my things, filling in this space that doesn't feel like mine.

He comes home with a shooter or two of whiskey already in him, and I pretend I'm happy so that he'll say *yes, of course, totally* when I ask if it's okay to go through all his stuff. At least in the beginning, I'm trying to play the role of a dutiful girlfriend.

*Sure*, he says, *I've got nothing to hide*.

*Good*, I say, pulling one of the old licenses out from my back pocket. *Because now I know what you look like without a beard.*

The laughter that's unleashed between us is surprising. Our deep but lofting acknowledgement of what's been missing—the bare chin—a piece of past exposed, physically and accidentally, as memory actually is.

We stare at the relic that was once his verification. He looks different, younger. Time fades and time passes and, too quickly, the artifact loses its appeal so we're both looking at our phones that never do because, according to Sven Spieker, they contain a "sophisticated form of the archive [that is], or aims to be, the condition of historicity itself." But it's not a condition and it's not a history. It's an acquittal of conditions and history. An unconditional made of unacknowledged holes and reinforced presences. An archive of her that reasserts and replaces while the ID card fades and remains.

I'm sharing my thinking with him because I want him to share my evolving understanding of the durable real. He nods along. But when I ask him to delete his pictures of her, he refuses; he doesn't understand what I'm saying about history, about letting go of myths. I try another way: I fold a piece of paper in half seven times until it's impossible to fold again. He understands the physics, but not the point of heeding natural limits. *You need to forget her if there's going to be room for me*, I say, but he's unmoved. So I turn to a less theoretical manipulation because, I'll be honest, it was never about the thinking but about the thinking's desired result. I try to appear sad and pitiful and then I beg. I cry, unsure if the tears are real. But he tells me his feed is how he will remember. His rational insistence on remaining self-captured.

She posts a picture of a sunset. Underneath it, she writes something about how wonderful it is that we don't get tired of these things, *even though we see them every day*. She says it's *something I think about a lot* and I don't know why she's sharing her thinking, only that, when I look at her sunset, I think about a little phrase from Lacan, his "traumatic real" that lurks behind every attempt at representation.

The sun rises, the sun sets. Our strange routine: every day he leaves me to my occupations, to my boredom and my jealousy that entertains, less and less, rerun after rerun. To satisfy its temptation, I rummage through his boxes, finding things again that I've already found—the ticket stub to the UFO convention, a medallion from a restaurant called Medieval Times, his old cell phone that I can't get inside of, its silence taunting like a Shepard tone, the illusion of a sound's intensification, always rising, always getting louder, always just about to burst like my envy that long ago corrupted into jealousy and hatred and *ressentiment* that's surpassing itself, but into what? Ennui. Languor. Endless enmity. Perhaps.

All day I wish reality wasn't. I try to convince myself that I'll be happy again when he's home. Again and again, he walks through the door a little tipsy, the only way he can endure my inevitable unraveling. At first, I'll pretend I'm not at all aggrieved, but night after night, my performance deteriorates. My increasingly dour *How was your day*s turning into tired

and barely veiled attacks against her. Her specifics abstracting into generalities meant to condemn—not just blonde people but people who wear those stupid clear-framed glasses and people who like the movie *Titanic*, and all the people marching for women—so many stupid people! My mounting and ironclad offense. He listens. He nods. I do not allow him to disagree, or to laugh. When he does anyway—so ready to defend her!—I turn whatever he says into a social or political argument in my opinion's favor because I am entirely ignoble, a totalitarian of my own making.

Eventually, I apologize, *so sorry*, for letting my thoughts get away from me like that. Again and again, he forgives me. For some reason, he doesn't hate me for being so predictably hateful; instead, my jealousy is interpreted as a sign of love. Disease as a sign of life. He hugs me. He massages my feet while we watch a movie.

Tonight, it's *À L'intérieur*, a French horror movie in which one woman slowly cuts another woman apart in order to take her unborn baby. By the end, every bit of the set is covered in blood. Afterward, we have sex just tough enough to bore through the layers of my hatred, my jealousy, my envy, until it gets somehow to the me that exists beneath, the me that's coming alive and into pleasure. Our strange routine.

At the end of every night, we have sex. Each time, I'm working up the courage to ask him to come inside me until one night I just don't let him escape. He panics. Says I've tricked and trapped him.

*I just wanted to know what it would feel like*, I say.

He holds me and says *it felt nice* and *maybe someday it won't hurt so much to think about having a kid without my mother*, but I'm thinking it's all a cover for wanting to come inside her and only her forever.

The next morning, he goes back to work. In privacy, the jealousy unleashes; I throw the framed photograph of the concrete truck casting rainbows against the wall.

I spend the rest of the morning vacuuming broken glass from the carpet, some of it from under the door of a closet I hadn't yet opened, full of yet more of his unpacked boxes.

I think: *He wasn't planning to stay.*

I think: *He's always planned to return to her.*

The first box I open is a rat's nest of cords. I untangle them as if a pile of necklaces or fishing line—carefully, patiently, and a bit awestruck at how these lines snag creatures from the depths. Each time one is freed, I try it in the dead cell phone until I find the perfect fit. I plug it into the wall and the screen illuminates, flashes with a low battery sign. While it charges, I stare, checking every minute or so to see if it will turn on, worrying less about the consequences of what I am about to do than about how not to get caught: I will turn off the Wi-Fi, the Bluetooth, the data. I will only look into the hardware of the thing itself, whatever memory it retains.

In the meantime, the blank and black glass of his old unilluminated phone is somewhere in between an exhausted object and a magical portal, like a piece of obsidian that forms at the base of a volcano when lava is suddenly chilled. People used to shape shards of it into tools and then weapons, as the progression tends to go. Others polished rounds of it into mythomaterialist mirrors, which is how I'm looking into this one, a relic capable of revealing the heart of me, more accurately than the camera. In this reflection, I look like myself and I'm beautiful. Not decaying Invidia, but a mysterious woman whose flaws are smoothed into shapely contours, all lips and cheekbone and brow. Snow White's witch, looking in the mirror, seeing a beautiful bride: my skin looks young and dewy. In the darkness, my eyes sparkle with light so that I'm reborn as one among the gods who contain the good. This version of the phone—not a portal but a mirror—is also a turning point with a corrective function. I could take it even further and grind up this old glass into powder, an antiseptic that can be applied directly onto my open moral wounds. A panacea: I'll heal and heal and heal my way into whoever I would be without all this jealousy. Some ordinary but beautiful hag living in the deepest and darkest valley on Earth.

Instead, I tell myself to be patient. To remember what I already know, that beginnings and color are both embedded in the dark, and that nothing always gives way to something, to a real or imaginary light that pushes inner vision into the prophetic beyond. It's how a looking glass becomes a scrying stone, too, and this one's about to reveal jealousy's next step. Looking into the glass, I know, beyond a doubt, that there was only ever this imminent moment of turning on the phone.

She's so easy to find. The most recent text is from about a year ago and at least six months before he met me, a message telling him he'd left his toothbrush in their hotel room. The electric one with the rings of desiccated toothpaste. The rings I'd rubbed clean. I hurry to the bathroom and throw the toothbrush in the trash.

Back to the phone and scrolling back in time, there are fewer texts than I'd expected, mostly unimportant, but there are surges of meaningful exchanges, too, full of words like *missing* and *soulmate*, then a picture that he'd sent to her just after he'd moved to Colorado, of the dinosaur map taped to the wall.

*I wish you were here*, he writes.

I never even bothered to suspect the map, thumbtacked so casually beneath HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS. All the mornings I'd stared at its landscapes of geologic time while he slept beside me: a fool, imagining him as a boy dwarfed by life-size models of brontosauruses. Instead, it's an artifact of their history and the backdrop of his thirty-fifth birthday, *the best birthday of my life*. The day he decided he'd propose. If only I'd tried a little harder to use my imagination against reality, then I might have precluded this detail, too.

I've been warned against confusing the map and the territory, but I walk into the bedroom and tear the map from the wall. I shred it into pieces.

Back to the phone, tethered to the outlet: a picture of the engagement ring, then a picture of another ring he'd bought and actually given her, garish but totally her taste, then a picture of her wearing it followed by a dozen or so of their joking considerations of a shotgun wedding in Vegas, replete with dozens of *haha*s and *lol*s.

Then there is the time he met her parents, how much they'd loved him, *thought she'd never bring a guy home, let alone a guy like you*, or so she quoted her Father as saying. It doesn't matter that these things happened, only that they'd happened so closely to how I'd imagined. Having proved itself, my imagination resurrects, more powerful than ever before.

When I arrive at the end of the texts, I turn off the phone and put it back exactly where I'd found it. I pick up my phone, open my file of pictures labeled *Her*, and scroll through them all, slowly, as if for the first time, each of them begging to be reunderstood.

When he gets home, I say, *I didn't know you wanted to marry her*.

He doesn't ask how I know.

I ask him why it didn't work out, and he shrugs.

I ask him, *Why me and not her?*

*Because we make sense*, he says.

And then he stops answering my questions. He says it has to stop. *All of it.*

Of course, it won't. He doesn't even know about the pain pills I've been stealing from his dead mother's cancer stash, taking one every afternoon, a few hours before he gets home so that I don't have to deal with what I'm doing and who I've become. Drugged and numb, I just sit in the bathtub until the water is cold. And then until the water drains. And then until it fills

up again. I get dressed, make dinner, act like everything is *totally fine!*, all of it a cover-up for my evil and secret cyst lying just below the skin. Eventually it will burst. Eventually he will leave me, but when?

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# Yellow Walls

When he gets a new phone, he leaves the old one in the house and he doesn't even try to hide it. He kisses me goodbye and then he goes to work and just leaves it sitting on the kitchen table. I listen for his truck tires to hit the dirt, then the pavement, then to diminish into the hum of the next approaching car. And then I grab it, now so practiced at breaking into phones that I don't bother being careful. I turn it on, turn off the Wi-Fi, scroll through contacts looking for her, only to discover that here, she does not exist.

*Impossible*, I say.

I look again, under her first name, under her last name, and then I sit there for as long as it takes to read through every one of his thousands of contacts. She's nowhere.

I turn off the phone.
I turn it on.

Off.
On.

All day off and on, just to check again. And again.

Once, I risk turning on the Wi-Fi.
Nothing.
I turn it off.

On.
Off.

Day after day: nothing, the phone nudged into my catatonic and clutching hand.

Off. On. Scrolling through contacts, looking at the screen I've looked at for hours spanning days and weeks until I finally see something that's been there all along, which is precisely why I didn't notice it: the contact search bar. I enter her name and watch as the list of thousands narrows down to just one result: *Scully*. I tap. I see a screenshot of a plane ticket to Colorado, for her, scheduled for just before the solar eclipse. A few days after he took a break from me.

SCULLY: *I can't wait to see you.*

HIM: *I am so excited.*

SCULLY: *At the airport!*

HIM: *Yay! I'm here, idling curbside.*

I'm imagining seeing her at the same time he does, walking out of the airport's sliding glass doors, emerging from the crowd and finding her way to the front and center of his frame of attention, now mine. My heart drops at the sight of her: the *Scully* to his *Mulder*. I should have known. The I WANT TO BELIEVE poster on the wall.

According to the texts, they are together for the next five days, when the only communications are pictures: at the diner, at the Carousel of Happiness, at the mall. The texts resume after he drops her off at the airport.

SCULLY: *Thank you.*

HIM: *You are welcome anytime.*

And then the line that stabs:

HIM: *Please move here. I will take care of you.*

For her, his care is not enough; she doesn't even reply. For me, his care is everything; he doesn't even have to actually love me.

Several days later, he texts her again:

HIM: *Should we elope in Vegas?*

SCULLY: *YES. But when? Is next weekend too soon?*

HIM: *Not soon enough . . .*

HIM: *Your Father will be so happy.*

SCULLY: *If only your mom were still alive!*

She tells him she'll drive and meet him at the hotel. He doesn't reply, either because they're soulmates who wordlessly plan logistics, or because they're talking on other apps I can't access without getting caught.

The next text comes two weeks later:

HIM: *I have a girlfriend*, which is what he'd written while sitting next to me on my couch.

SCULLY: *I know.*

SCULLY: *I'm seeing someone, too.*

SCULLY: *See you in Vegas,* she writes with a *;-)*

He told me he'd said goodbye. What he meant was he'd disappeared from view. Only a few more texts from her—mostly jokes about his *new girlfriend/wifey*. He didn't reply. Or he did somewhere else. Or he didn't and he will.

I text him: *I thought you were incapable of lying.* I send a picture of the screenshot of her plane ticket.

I don't wait for him to reply. I just throw my phone across the room. I pick up his phone and enter my name into the search bar. Up comes a text he sent to his friend: *Should I marry Sarah?*

The friend replies: *I thought you weren't attracted to her?*

It turns out I was right about another thing, too, right that he liked me most when I reminded him of her. Right to disguise myself as cooler, blonder, shorter. Entirely different. Another her.

It's no longer enough to beat her or to replace her or to overcome her—I want to destroy her. And I want him to watch because I want to destroy him, too. I want to annihilate them both, not because they did anything so terrible but because of how much their love for each other hurts me. I resent them for being part of a world that doesn't conform to my desires.

ME: *You fucking liar.*

He calls, says, *So what is this? I'm guessing you broke into my phone?*

*You told me you didn't lie*, I say.

*Because I don't*, he says.

*Bullshit. You told me it was over. You told me she'd never been here. That she was no big deal.*

*I never lied to you*, he says. *It's just that none of what I said to her was meant for you.*

I hang up. Fuck. I'm leaving because it's the only way to know if he'll follow me.

ME: *I'm leaving.*

HIM: *OK. You don't have to, but I won't tell you what to do.*

ME: *You betrayed me.*

HIM: *I hardly knew you when she came here. My mother just died. We wanted to say goodbye.*

ME: *And then you took me to Vegas the same weekend you were supposed to go with her?*

ME: *I read through everything.*

ME: *I know everything.*

He doesn’t respond.

A minute later, he calls to disagree, to reassure me that what I think I know pales in comparison to what I don’t. He says, *Almost everything between us was an inside joke*. Newly positioned on the outside, my realities are colliding, clashing, alternative truths battling to the death until there is no such thing as truth. I’m sobbing. Desperate. Yelling. Eyes crossed. Pulling out chunks of my own tangled hair. At last, his every secret has disappeared, and I misunderstand him more than ever before.

*I’m going to keep eating dinner with my friend*, he says.

I accuse him of having dinner with her. He tries to make a joke. I don’t laugh. *I’ll see you when I get home*, he says. He hangs up.

I’m alone with my dog on the floor of our house. I pull down my pants and piss on the carpet. I’ll blame it on the dog.

I don’t cry. This is the dying star I expected. I pour three fingers of whiskey and slam it down. For once, I don’t cough, and the silence starts to go down just as easily. This time, four fingers. Next time, five. And then I walk into the bathroom and finish off his mom’s last bottle of pills and stumble back to sit on the toilet, chin in hands, elbows on knees, eyes closed and looking

inward and toward the direction of my departure. I push the heels of my hands into my sockets until the dark of inner and outer vision is total and complete. It's then that the magenta emerges. The color that Goethe sensed and then added to the circular map at the point where the spectrum both begins and ends. The tone of D. The bridge between violet and red. The shaded interaction by which the extremes of *ressentiment* and naïve self-confidence discover they are neighbors.

I get up. I fill the tub with hot water, rising and rising, the opposite of Lake Mead. I undress. Naked, I look at the bathroom walls that, when I first moved in, I wanted to repaint. I thought I'd brighten them to make up for the room's lack of natural light. Under the Newtonian influence, I thought I'd paint them yellow. It was my way, I suppose, of thinking about the life that lay ahead, unfolding like a spectrum in which he goes to work and I stay home and paint bathroom walls until we retire and die. Maybe it's a silly kind of life to want. Maybe I don't. It's possible I am living the wrong life, that someone else should be inhabiting this skin, this body, this tub inside this house. But then I watch as the fiction of my mind confronts the fact of my body and the space it occupies, the volume of the water it will displace. When I submerge, the tub overflows.

Of course I've thought of all the ways I could kill myself—drown, pills, slit wrists in a tub—but I never imagined I'd do it like this, all at once, not an act of self-loathing but of being too much alive, do you understand?

But my suicide, singular and alone, would only bring them closer, a grief that would surely send him crawling back to her. I'll have to go further. I'll have to love the world too much, do you understand? Love as *ressentiment* loves, which is a passionate kind of hate. The elegance of the solution is that it takes me into account, for, with the advent of me, there are now far worse things to fear than death. *Ressentiment* doubled down. Invidia running her own errands. Me? I'm the lord and the weapon. A fucking fascist.

There's no longer a need to ask—Where does evil begin?—because you and I, we already know the answer: with an ordinary girl like me. Mussolini and

his philosopher, Giovanni Gentile, explain it better than I can, the way evil "sinks deep down into the personality" and "dwells in the heart." The "soul of the soul," they say, right before they name it fascism. Maybe the soul is like that: a deleterious procedure: a targeted attrition of meaning that slowly replaces words with their opposites: choice with duty, love with hate, self with soul and soul with power. Yes, the soul is a jealous power by which one possesses another, then reasserts the reduplicated self; it's our transgressive passion that defines us. As Gentile writes, we can act only "by entering into the process of reality and taking possession of the forces at work within." Which is precisely what I want to do, to him and to her and to you. For the good of us all, I want to love us into perfect and orderly and everlasting life.

I pour more whiskey. Grab a knife and eat some belladonna. I sink back into the water but this time it doesn't overflow until I think of her. There isn't enough room for both of us, so I imagine our mutual replacement: her, here, instead of me; her petite body inside this tub wondering what color to paint these walls.

And I think of me, back in my truck and out on the open road, free but untethered, just like she appears to be, always passing through pretty places but only stopping long enough to take a picture. I think of all the tables I could serve and then bus in diners all across the country. My rented apartments, the security deposits I wouldn't get back. The books that, in all that imperfect living, I wouldn't have time to write.

The knife slips, slices my leg as it falls into the water. Sharp pain; bloody water. But I'm detached from this experience, all experience, which is but an enchantment, a spell that can't be uncast.

Maybe I should just kill her. Maybe we would be better off. First, I could push my thumbs into her eyes to take away her precious sight. Injure her as I've been injured. I could prevent her from perceiving the world on her own terms and then finish the job.

Or I could just kill him, free her and me both. I could poison him with belladonna, make him hallucinate as I have, all the way to the painful end. Who would bother to suspect me? I have nothing to gain from his death and everything to lose. And when she comes to the funeral, I'll be wearing black with her magenta thong underneath. I'll stand by his coffin as the grieving girlfriend. I'll smile at her as she approaches, then lean toward his family standing to my left. In their ears I'll whisper about how much she hurt him, *that dirty little whore*.

Pathetic. I'm fucked up enough to admit that I can't bear the idea of an end to this tragedy, because I've become attached to my wretchedness and my cankerous bullshit, too. I'll grieve it when it's gone. So I make a supremely practical decision designed to preserve and institutionalize my badness and our threesome, too: I will marry him. I will capture him and make him mine. Because he needs someone to tell him what to do. And because she needs him to die like a mall dies, not to disappear all at once, but to slowly shutter into a shell of empty space. And because hardening into his wife is the only way I'll survive my own destruction. I feel my eyes focus steady when I decide to stay, not because I love him but because he'll let me. And because he'll pay. Again, I sink.

I reemerge as his future wife, trying to imagine the shade of *yellow yellow yellow* I'll paint the bathroom walls. After all, when color is paint it has substance because it's a pigment that absorbs, just like a housewife absorbs until a good life is reflected back. *What color should I choose?* a version of *what color should I capture*. From a taxonomy of dictatorial paint chips with colonial names, I'll choose one among the segregated and categorical shades that will become, brushstroke by brushstroke, the version of happiness I dutifully upkeep. And when he comes home to a clean house and a warm dinner and throws his bag on the clean floor, I'll nag him with a domestic proverb, "everything has a place and everything in its place," because every good fascist knows "freedom is about authority."

Why is it that every time I try to be better I get worse? But I need to do something with the rank values I've both inherited and cultivated, and the difference between evolution and revolution is as slim as the difference

between the shades of saffron and flax. All I know is that yellow is a tactic and a choice, remember? And, for once, I don't worry about how much it will cost.

It's late when he comes home, the two of us sitting on opposite sides of the blue couch, the distance of our mutual distrust. We say a bunch of unmemorable things to each other until, finally, he admits he's pissed.

Usually, I yell and he listens. But this time it's the other way around:

*You're the only one who makes me think of her.*

*No matter what I say, you use it against me.*

*I've fucked other people and loved other people and so have you.*

Usually, when we fight, he looks away. But this time he's staring at me so intensely I find it hard to look back. Looking down at my empty hands, I hear his frustrated utterances:

*Nothing is wrong.*

*There are no problems.*

*Everything is fine.*

*Aren't we happy?* he's asking this time, as if he really thought we were. *Happy in a way that has nothing to do with her?* And I'm nodding along, because everything he says is as true as it isn't. I keep nodding while he gives up, walks past the tattered map on the floor by our bed.

Alone again on the couch, I think about happiness, newly certain it comes from something as subtractive as yellow.

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# Blank Slate

*I can be happy if we move out of this deep and dark valley*, I say to him, out and into a house she's never been to; better yet, a house made of walls we build ourselves. *Yes, I can be happy if you buy me a mountain meadow, our blank slate*. It's what every recovering fascist wants: a world without a history, a world to do with what they will.

He finds the next best thing online and, sight unseen, he buys it: a south-facing house in the high-desert forest where it's almost always sunny. *Carved into the side of a hill*, he says, showing me a picture online, *a modern-day cave*, he says. *In the middle of nowhere.* Built off-grid, the cave is called an Earthship, and it's designed to be a self-sustaining world: to harvest the sun and the shadow and the rain and all our human waste so it can be channeled into a verdant garden that's always fruiting.

*Impossible to kill the plants*, he says. *Even for you.*

*It's perfect*, I say.

He buys it and then gets back to work because, to move, he'll have to quit his job, his money, his benefit. While he's getting paid, I stay home to refill his empty boxes with his stuff and my stuff, reconfiguring into future systems that don't need so much stuff to be sustained. In anticipation, I'm throwing about half of what we own away, and organizing or archiving the rest. Carefully, I'm keeping every remnant that might lead back to her because I still want to be tormented by her figments; moving on is a process, and I'm comforted by our refusal to forget her. When he comes home, it's comfort I seek when I ask him, again, to delete her pictures from his feed. He doesn't answer but slaps a hundred-dollar bill in my hand, tells me to buy myself something nice.

Instead, I use the money to take my grimacing Chihuahua to the vet, to assess her pain that I'd wrongly attributed to age.

*The cancer is everywhere*, the vet says.

I ask for two more days, and I spend all of them holding the barely breathing dog, swaddled and shivering, on my chest. I'm also holding my phone, above the dog and out of her sight, while I search for a new dog online. I buy one that reminds me of the dying Chihuahua so that, while one of my hands holds death, the other holds a picture of its replacement. After the euthanization, I only grieve for as long as it takes to drink two beers, which is as long as it takes for my attention to return to her feed, to study the post she recently made for her dead cat. I script a memorial of my own that's designed to both reference and outdo hers, writing about how my little piss-covered dog taught me to love the unlovable parts of myself. The likes accumulate (the most I will ever get) and then I get busy scrubbing the dead dog's stale urine from the carpets, the last chore that needs doing before staging the house, photographing it, and putting it on the market.

To stage, the realtor advises me to give prospective buyers what they think they want: a sun-touched cabin in the woods. She calls it *nature's unanimous ideal*. To fulfill the requirement, I start undoing the dramaturgic aspects of our life, tearing up the set I'd been designing to exhibit the domestic ideal. In the end, the walls aren't repainted yellow but white and

our things are replaced with props. Think: red-and-black flannel blanket, or a deer head on the wall.

It would be easy to mount one ourselves: he has guns and the deer are always passing by the house. I see at least one every day. Instead of writing, I watch them eating grass and flowers and I don't mistake their stillness for calm. Look closely, at their always-trembling bodies and their whipping tails and their grinding teeth. In the winter, they shiver, too. I feed them, throwing little piles of green alfalfa around the white and icy yard. They're beginning to trust me. They let me get so close I don't even have to zoom in to take a picture, and yet, they tremble, with all the tension that's embedded in their muscles, a whole species shaking with a collective history of fright because they're so used to being looked at as prey.

But I love nature, which I'm always protecting and reclaiming (two of three words that I read online as part of the fascist dictionary of nature). I'll take a picture of the deer instead. Framed and hung, they will look so good in the real estate photographer's photos of the house. Taken with a wide-angle lens, the deer stretch across the living room that's oversize and overly bright. The realtor is pleased, *amazed*, by the appearance of the pictured life that mimics and then outstrips ours, with its bigger-than-life blue couch that's unmarred by a single dog hair. Unpictured are the hours I spent kneeling and picking out individual strands while I kept the new dog in a crate.

The blank slate is bullshit; it's all a domestic act (domestication being the third word from the fascist dictionary of nature). The protection and the reclamation, too, the hidden work behind $365,000 of walls and warmth and safety surrounded by wilderness. It's not a love of nature but an imposition. A control. Bring up the pictures on your phone and see for yourself: a backlit house in the endless woods and all without a trace of death. Imagine your life here, subsuming mine, just like the creek running through the front yard—fresh water, never stale. It's tempting, isn't it? If so, your piquing fantasy of replacement is my greatest success. Again and again, I've told you that this place is made of darkness, but here you are, imagining light, and thinking like a mountain, and untethered by shame.

I’m trying to get under your skin. To break the high literary rules and manipulate the reader down and into the depths of my desire because I want you to want what I want you to want. Specifically, my house: it’s not selling and we’re lowering the price.

Generally, I want you to feel the dissolution break when you realize your idea of nature isn’t nature. Whether it’s swelling berries or rhizomal fields or bloody-mouthed wolves, it’s a “nature created by the regime and subjugated by design” (or so I read in the fascist dictionary of nature). Every idea of wilderness is a propaganda; simulacra of meaning and language acting like themselves, if only to distract you from the stillborn core of your self-interest. Because nature, like art or god or I, is unfathomable. It exists beyond the grasp. The more we try, the more quickly wildness perishes. Look around you! The decline of nature is everywhere, the evidence of our jealous minds in effect. Look closer: every instance of our earthly demise is imprinted with the mechanics of our possessive condemnation, the wounds that bear the marks of our bullets, the striations of our logical persuasions and rhetorical tricks. See? With the disembodied swiftness of the royal we, I turned me into us, and us into gods who think of life as things: things we created, use, and understand. To justify it, and to get away with it, I had to assume I understood you: the irredeemable other, the unthinking sheep, tricked into the dark woods by the false promise of light and goodness. Meanwhile, I’m heroically propelled toward a real wilderness that lets me off the hook because mine are the woods that Aldo Leopold saved by “thinking like a mountain.”

He came up with that phrase by shooting and killing a wolf who was surrounded by her pups. He watched the “fierce green fire dying in her eyes.” And then he waited for the deer population to flourish so he could shoot them dead, skin them, flay them, consume them and empower. But nature was overwhelmed by all the undying deer, and soon Leopold was too, surrounded by “the starved bones of the hoped-for deer herd, dead of its own too-muchness.” Leopold felt bad. He promised to be better. He reined in his need to control and vowed to do no harm and leave no trace.

To really inherit the lesson, though, I'll have to be ashamed. I'll have to kill something and then regret it. I ask him to buy me a weapon. He gets me a short-barreled snake gun that sprays bullets at the ground. *This way*, he says, *you're sure to hit what you're aiming for.* But before I can shoot, he tells me I have to learn how to clean it.

1. Lay it across your lap, like a child.
2. Soak a square of cotton cloth in Ballistol, then thread it through the loop at the end of a wire longer than the gun's barrel. It's the smell of a garage with the precision of threading thread through a needle.
3. Pass the wire through the barrel as if it were a bullet.
4. Repeat until the white cloth is black and oily.
5. Start again with a new square.
6. Again and again, knowing that the cloth will never come out totally clean.

I stop only when it all feels a bit ridiculous—the gun and this impossible ideal of cleanliness. He tells me to soak one last cloth in Ballistol anyway, and then to massage the gun like a body until I know its shape with my eyes shut—its sight, its strap, its barrel, its hammer, its grip. I grab it. I load it. I walk outside, and I raise it to my eye and aim my sight and press six times and shoot six times and watch how totally the glass bottles shatter. An obliteration: of bottles, of form, of the distance between the target and me, of everything separation exists to prevent—you and me, here and there, this and that—reduced to Adorno's "vacuum between men and experience, in which their real fate lies."

I hand over the gun—not Chekhov's or MacGuffin's, but just another thing that raises the tension and doesn't relieve it because that's not how jealousy works. I tell him to lock it in the safe and command him to keep the combination a secret. *OK*, he says, *but first you have to clean it*. He hands it back to me, and I lay it across my lap, like a child.

We move to the cave in the spring. From our old house (now $345,000) we drive six hours south and take six right turns, a line that's kind of a circle. We drive in separate cars. Through the passenger window of my eighteen-foot U-Haul, I watch the Rocky Mountains flatten into verdant plains, the sagebrush desiccate into desert. I sit in total silence for most of the drive, thinking like him, by which I mean thinking about her, about all the road trips they took. If I let all the moments blend together, I'll arrive more quickly. I'm thinking and thinking and thinking. I'm moving forward but not past.

When I pull into the village, it is sharply visible against the setting sun. I pause at the only intersection in town. I wonder what people do here, with one crossroads and no mall, just two gas stations and two dollar stores and two big churches. And then I drive past and through, the dark-gray asphalt turning to beige dirt that continues past the municipal dumpsters outlined with crows, past two yellow DIP signs pierced by dozens of bullets, past the sign PRIVATE PROPERTY KEEP OUT, and up a hill that is almost too steep, into the driveway that is, in a way, ours.

It's a strange thing to own land in a place you've never been. (Stranger, even, than owning land.) But the gate is open and there is no fence, and the silence offers a different kind of threshold—the kind you pass into and not over.

I drive a quarter mile more, past the dying gardens and all the way up to the house, where the U-Haul and I stop, perched on the top of a ridge at eight thousand feet above the distant rising seas. Through the pine barren, I can see the metal roofs of the village. Looking down, I call it *my fiefdom*. I laugh, overjoyed at the height of my throne.

I ask him what he's thinking about. *About a color*, he says, *something in between green and blue.*

From above, looking down, the house is invisible, blending in with the hill into which it was carved. But from below, looking up, it appears impassable: a twelve-foot wall of glass and rock rising up out of and then

back into the ground. I step toward the glass and in the reflection, I don't see the trees or the man, only my face, twisting.

I open the front door. The house is filthy with orange dust and the walls are dripping with iron and the built-in plant beds are wild and overgrown and full of spiderwebs. The air is hot and still. As I walk across the room, the dust plumes up and wraps around me like a cloak. I look down at my feet to find a snake's tracks. I follow them until I find the snake's shedded skin. I pick it up to admire; he carries in the mattress; I fuck him on the floor.

From within my wilderness, I dream about a mall. She's standing in front of me, reduced to the barrenness of her silhouette. She's ducking under caution tape to stand in front of her childhood mall as it is now: a dilapidated nail salon, a Payless, a cash store, an AMC movie theater. The other people milling about are poor; in the parking lot there are a couple dozen cheap and old cars. There are also two radio stations broadcasting from inside what used to be a Gap: KBFB and KZMJ and, on the scratchy broadcast, a man talks about the imminent demolition of the mall. *Valley View Center has been bought by a development company planning to return it to its promised grandeur.* The $2.5 billion project will transform the mall into a mixed residential and commercial neighborhood. I'm looking at the plans, not blueprints but 3D animated renditions of an ideal world in which everything that's happening is exactly what was meant to happen. People living above the Starbucks and working at the Starbucks and drinking Starbucks while they walk their dogs on concrete trails around beautiful green spaces without any weeds or bugs. *Construction will begin this summer.* In an interview, the mayor reassures his constituents: "This is not the closing of Valley View Center, it's the beginning of something new. It's the era of renovation, rejuvenation, and innovation," capitalism's leitmotifs overlaying fascism's because greatness is not chosen, it's recognized, but even she can't find anything beautiful about this new perfection. Instead, she takes a picture of the old mall from across the parking lot as I've seen in her pictures before, but now the picture is becoming an image because it's incorporating its mother, its prima materia to which it returns, the grass and weeds that are both causing and growing up through the asphalt's cracks,

tree roots and dirt rising up through crumbled sidewalks. Yes, I dream about a wilderness that returns by way of a dying mall.

I can't tell if it's my eyes opening or the dawn. For confirmation, of time and self, I grab my phone: 5:30 a.m. Both. I am absorbing into my environment. I can't tell if we're reconstructing together, or if I'm losing control.

Instead of unpacking or writing, I open the phone to check emails and texts and in on her, too, but there's no service. No feed and no advertisements and no mall. Just a rectangular metal-and-glass thing that's also a calculator, a clock, a camera, and a distant but edgy delight. Or is it terror? These days, the sublime isn't found in mountains that loom or over cliffs that chasm or in any presence that threatens but will not perish. It's in the incommunicability asserted by the middle of nowhere. In an absence that thwarts.

To recover the pathway to my desire, I leave the safety of the house to walk through the woods, where every beautiful thing I pass pulls to be looked at photographically. A picture of a penstemon flower, of its compound leaves, and another of a cocoon dangling from a node. A weird clump of iron emerging from sandstone. The snowcaps of higher mountains. The flats of distant mesas. But the frame cannot contain the clouds coming in too quickly and piling up into a giant cumulonimbus that envelops. The sublime as it used to be. Little me, inside a John Martin painting of the end of the world, trembling in the thick dark of an oil thundercloud. But I'll do almost anything to avoid being in the moment, this moment—I'll even use a simile—this moment like an art history, this place like a painting, this sublime incommunicability like this raven surfing on the sweltering wind. Eye to eye, his freedom taunts me: not an achievement of his will, but a relinquishment that lifts him above that which would otherwise constrain—my unfreedom: my self-consciousness—even in the wilderness I'm somehow standing next to a wooden cross. Someone built it; someone else sawed off its arms; I'm holding out my arms in a pose of crucifixion to complete it; I'm lifting my phone to take a selfie that I can't share; I'm halted by the emergence of a bar of service.

I sit down, I hunch in, I find her and find out what I missed. Déjà vu. The Vegas pictures that were and then weren't are either reposted or fulfilling their prophecy: of her under the blue Turrell, of her looking up at the Fashion Show mall, of her in a hotel bed in a hotel room that looks the same as the one in which he and I watched porn to remind ourselves of her. Back and forth, up and down, I scroll through them again and again; are these remnants of the past or instances of the now? I don't know. Only that he is here, too, his name listed underneath all three, still her most prominent like.

I don't need the sublimity of thunder anymore, but for the delight and terror of him and her outlasting him and me, even in the middle of nowhere, our blank slate. They're shifting on the wind, and surviving the move, and outlasting dying malls and new developments and natural collapse to thrive in the regenerating wilderness. Tug down on the screen, tug and tug and tug and their ongoingness refreshes to survive the end of civilization to forge a new beginning: him and her in Eden 2.0. They'll have the whole world to themselves.

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# The Grasp

I *will be happy*, I tell him, *if we are engaged to be married*, mutually possessed. I assure him it's for the best, that real freedom depends on these touchstones of restriction. I beg and beg until he proposes, and I accept, and then we begin planning the wedding that I'm hopeful will preserve our ruin.

We get married twice. Once, on the ridge in front of our new house, small and private and ours. My stolen gold rings are replaced by agreements in diamond and platinum.

And then again, a few months later, in Las Vegas. Three years to the date after our first trip. While we're planning it, I suggest a marriage at the Elvis Chapel and a reception at the Peppermill, *just like she would have wanted*.

Instead, he chooses a wedding in the desert by Lake Mead, then a meal at one of our favorite restaurants because it is the wedding he thinks I would want, if, that is, I knew myself well enough to know a thing like that.

The night before we get married again, I ask him about her, *for the last time*, I say, doing my best to phrase my questions as direct quotations of their texts:

> *Tell me about "the best birthday of your life," the one you spent with her.*
>
> *Tell me about the first time she told you she loved you, "the vomit on her tongue."*
>
> *Tell me about the dinosaur park, what it was like "driving with her through time."*

And he does. For the first time, he tells me what it was like for him to be with her, and even though I know the plot points, it's a story I've never heard.

When he's finished, I ask him to *promise it's over*. And he does.

*Now say it like you mean it*, I say. When he does, I delight in his honesty, my belief: our exchange of prenuptial gifts.

While we're lying in the dark on opposite sides of the hotel bed, I don't try to stop hating her for becoming the distance between me and my life. I remind myself that I'm marrying him not just to overcome her, but also because of her. I convince myself that love is the winnowing of possibilities, the confining solidity of three becoming one.

In the morning, we're standing hand in hand in the red desert: he in a brown polyester suit, me in a long white dress. But it's windy, the clay whipping into the air and turning it red, his vows whisked away before they land, something about promising to never tell me what to do, who to be, how to live. He cries while he promises this, his via negativa version of love, cries while looking at me, the woman and the love he won't or can't describe. I can't help but hate him for his apophasis. I can't even bring myself to look

at him. Instead, I look past, off and into the space between the desert's terra-cotta hills. Vacant. Vague. Too open. Somehow, we've gotten to this point in the story without its main subject being revealed.

I expected our moment of betrothal to be sealed by descriptions of his specific love for me, his specific wife: my brown hair and my big feet and my dark humor and my tendency for drama and despair because I've come to understand that the confirmation of a woman is her description by a man. But his vows are his refusal. So when he says, finally, *I choose you*, *Sarah*, I fail to understand it as a gesture of freely willed affection, or as an honorific reference to his mother's idea of fate, but as his hurtful insistence that our marriage is not one of love but of logic. I wince. I want to cry out in pain but it's an absence of pain without any exclamation. He waits for me to look at him, and then he continues on without: *In this life*, he says, *and in the next*, and I smile, not because I'm joyful and in love, but because he implied our immortality. A coded reference to the irrelevance of her soul. I wipe away the tears. I've won.

What I say in my vows doesn't matter. Only that I say too much.

When I'm done, we kiss. When we're done kissing, I turn around to see a guest holding out her phone and asking me to take a picture, *just her and the groom*. She says that, by comparison, I make her look fat. She hands me her phone. I step out of the way, center them, snap.

I turn around and see people everywhere taking pictures, snapping, their faces thrusting awkwardly up and out as if they were all holding oranges under their chins. And I'm running around in my white dress, unsure whether I'm experiencing this wedding or enacting its performance—a picture here, a picture there—until I'm at the top of a red spire—snap snap snap—inside a red arc—post post post—pictures that will keep appearing, for days, weeks, each photograph taken now an excuse to appear again later. Post by post, a wedding transforms from an event into a thing, to have and to hold.

To escape the grasp, I descend. I walk past the seeing and being seen and hide behind a rock. I lie in the sand and wade in the red remnants of the ancient sea that disappeared so a desert could form. An evolution that marriage and photographs seemed hell-bent on preventing.

I'm looking into the color that surrounds me as if my Greek chorus of artists and philosophers and inventors might emerge to tell me what to do, to remind me of how the story goes now that I'm a wife. Surely Talbot will come to reinvigorate my understanding, or Lispector will remind me that I don't know how to be alive, or Petrarch will finally appear to talk to me through the descent that reveals. But they don't. I've waded through the color wheel, over and over again and, today, I'm dressed in white staining red. Blues, indigos, and violets are in the past. Everything is beginning again. This is my ritual cleansing through naïveté and into distinction and so the chorus is stubbornly silent and my every thought and feeling is unreinforced on this side of the threshold I've crossed but don't understand because thresholds can't be shouted across or explained. Just as a first menstruation or a rape, marriage is an undergoing now undergone, the terms of the characters and the red sands shifting underfoot, as mythologies do. So I'm falling into my private allegory and fading into color when the music starts.

The first note is D and it coincides with the first word: *Home*. The song was his idea, a rare instance of our shared taste, and the midpoint of a live album that transgresses the entire continuum of a human life, which is the moment when people realize naïvete is part of a cycle they've been through before and so when they start to fear death. When they grab on and try to hold on to whoever it is that is nearby, ostensibly forever.

Neither one of us was prepared to dance, so we're awkwardly bouncing our hips side to side while we're encircled by all the people we think we know and exposed by all the things we don't know on this side of marriage. Now that his soul is mine, there's a new question to ask: What, then, is the endgame of the soul? Which is when David Byrne reforges the once-harmonious connection between love and death into the causal. Our catastrophic inevitability. Of course our chosen song is suggesting a violent

end, followed by an ecstatic, maniacal wail. We stop dancing. The song dissolves into the wind. Our red wedding ends and we drive through the red sand to the hotel room, where I change into a red dress. We drink red wine. We eat bloody and raw beef. The drunker we get, the fewer pictures there are until, at 3:00 a.m., he and I are alone in bed and I'm trying to figure out how to tell him *no, no, please don't* but without saying a word. My legs that won't spread and my cervix that won't open and my hymen that won't bleed. Instead, I lie underneath him and cry. He holds me until he doesn't.

*It's okay*, I say, looking up at my husband. *Nothing's wrong. Nothing.*

Soon we stop having sex, at least spontaneously; I schedule it once a week, as I do with every other chore. And when we do, I can't orgasm; I'm struggling to understand the point of pleasure. It's only when I think of her that I can come close, but even then I can't let go. Flashes of color, but without reason or relationship. They come and go and I don't try to hold them, loosening my grip and taking an odd comfort in being detached. It's not freedom, but it's not authoritarianism either.

Instead of loving or writing, I clean until our house made of dirt is spotless. *Soon*, he jokes, *it might disappear.* Months go by this way because it isn't until after we are married that I realize I never bothered to like him, skipping right to wanting who she couldn't have. Now that he is mine, my feelings for him are dull and unpiercing. A dullness that bores into me as proof that we are married but not yet in love. It reminds me of that old fable, the one Nietzsche and Scheler liked to recount in the context of *ressentiment*:

One day, a hungry fox spots a bunch of ripe and violet grapes hanging from a vine trained on the branches of a tree. So the hungry fox jumps, but not high enough. She tries again, this time taking a running start, but she still can't reach the grapes. She tries again, constructing a pile out of garden rubble to gain extra height. She climbs up and stands on her hind legs and cranes her neck and, this time, grabs the grapes. She sits down on her heap and clutches the purple bulbs and looks up at the world with disgust. "What a fool I am," she says. "Now that I've gotten these delicious grapes,

everyone is going to try to take them.” So she doesn’t eat the grapes but guards them, and then she slanders them, telling every hungry passerby that the grapes are rotten so that they’ll take other bunches of grapes until there are no grapes left. Finally, the fox is alone with her fruit, only to discover her bunch has desiccated into raisins. The fox doesn’t like raisins, but she eats them anyway, if only to justify the value she once placed upon grapes.

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# My Body of Work

To reward my labor (and counteract my disinterest), he transfers everything—the houses, the cars—to my name. Overnight, I'm rich. And I complain. I tell my husband that I feel unduly beholden to all my possessions.

*You're a writer*, he says. *A writer's house is supposed to be messy.*

*Yes*, I say. *But not a wife's.*

Instead of writing, I tell my husband *I will be happy if we have a baby*, a version of happiness that might actually be true. So we try, just once, my husband fucking me, finally and fully in a way that introduces chance. When he comes inside, I feel the sperm colliding with the egg, but I doubt the reciprocity of the beginning. Having gone all the way around the circle of *ressentiment*, the yellow-green egg need only consult my ongoing experience to summon the red bulge from within itself, both source and end, center and circumference, because the spectrum is a circle and the circle is the spherical continuum of me who contains: blue edges forming

and then bleeding in while yellow is bursting out—an instance of light—indigo and violet and magenta flooding to fill the vacancy. In other words, I need my husband only symbolically.

In the aftermath, I'm shaking with a chaos of power while my husband shakes the excess off his soggy cock. To hold the brewing inside, I pull my legs up and into my body and rock back and forth, already assuming the posture and the motion of a sphere that contains another sphere, a gyrospheric mother containing her young. Whether I keep the zygote or lose it, whether I have a child or abort, my motherhood has begun. Naïvely; jealously; ressentfully. The hybridity that's proving substrate to everything nesting inside everything else.

The first image of the baby is of two floating pink and parallel lines that, even if they went on forever, would never touch. Confirmation in the form of an unrecognition. Genius and its concomitant grief.

The second image of the baby is made of sound. I've watched TV. I know what to expect: the warm gel massaged onto my naked skin by a magic wand that listens to the child in order to depict it on a screen. My husband will be holding my hand. But in real life my husband has to work so he doesn't see what actually happens when my pants are pulled down and spread wide so that a giant cock-shaped transducer can be shoved inside and then swirled around and around, deeper and deeper inside while I worry about crossing the thin line between fear and respectability and pleasure. To distract myself, I watch the screen. *Enhance, enhance*, the nurse mutters, holding the rod in one hand and clicking the mouse with the other until not a baby but a lizard-shaped thing emerges on the screen. *Sarah*, she says, *let me introduce you to your baby.* She prints out the picture. She hands it to me. The nausea of the first trimester prepared me to reach out and take it. A lifetime of being a woman prepared me to smile while recrossing my legs and pretending I'm not disappointed, both by what happened and by what I see.

In an effort to bolster the image and so my appreciation of the fetal and maternal growth, I begin recording my body's progression with a picture a day—one, then two, three, then four—a serial attempt of self-regard and an attempt at self-revelation. To take them, I balance the phone on branches and rocks while I pose naked in the woods, à la Francesca Woodman. Picture after picture of my increasingly blurry-edged nudes, posing with snake skins in front of trees instead of with eels in front of mirrors. I'm imitating a series by Woodman titled *Self-Deceit*, a way of imagining myself into the art of self-portraiture. In the photographic age, the interesting task is not to reveal the self but to mask and distort until I'm more lucid than real.

Proud of my accumulating body of work, I show my husband the pictures. *Self-portraits*, I call them, tapping the brightness of my phone up, as far as it will go, so that I appear awash in pseudo-divine light. Swiping left to right, it appears as if I'm swelling, an image animating into something like motion, a body like a vine or a clown in a box, a magic box!

*Selfies*, he says, his subtle but catastrophic correction. I should have heeded Sontag when she said, "to think only of the self is to think of death." Instead, I'm Narcissus, staring at myself while slowly sinking into the ground, this—my brief bloom—my narrative pique. Soon I will retreat, indistinguishable from every other mother, wilted stem and brown bulb, my contractile roots pulling me deeper into the soil.

Instead of trying to put the self in motherhood, then, I'll aspire to art. It's what Woodman did, pivoting to the grandiose with her *Blueprint for a Temple*, a fourteen-foot-tall blue femmage that turned photographs of women into the actual pillars of Western civilization. Eventually, it would be regarded as a masterpiece. But then it was a flop. Just twenty-two, Woodman jumped out of an Upper East Side window because a woman's body isn't a pillar but an hourglass, a measurement and an embodiment of a time that goes on with or without us.

Instead of making art or writing, I grow and I clean and I make room in my life for the baby's. While I do, I imagine myself a part of the background of

the mundane, which is one way to elevate into art. As Jeff Wall says: “Baudelaire was right when he said the most fascinating element is the commonplace,” which Jeff Wall says is always exciting and new. A space in which domestic meanings accumulate into significance. I imagine Jeff Wall is sitting outside my wall made of windows, looking at me through his lens, watching me clean as if I were the janitor in his *Morning Cleaning*. But Jeff Wall isn’t watching me. Nobody is. The only documents of my mundanity are the doctor’s notes. *Everything’s normal*, she writes. A body of work but not a masterpiece.

I’m desperate to be more, and to be seen as more. I pack a suitcase and leave my house and my husband behind so I can board a train and ride it all the way to the other side of the country. For two weeks, I sit and glide on the parallel rails, arriving in one city after the next but not touching ground until I’m in New York, alone and five months pregnant and far past the point of no return. From the train, I walk straight to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The first thing I notice is so ordinary I’ve overlooked it every other time. The outlines. They’re everywhere—on Grecian urns and Persian pots and medieval still lifes and biblical scenes and Egyptian engravings. In every Rodin. Picasso. Wilde. And in Thiebaud’s cup of coffee, too: “see the edges of the edges,” he advises. Every thing, and every person, and all art: a study in outline. The entire museum is a testament to distinction and so a mausoleum for the unquenchable lust for unification. Every canvas. Every sculpture. Every person wandering the halls. These beautiful embraces of being stuck at a distance.

I arrive at an Alice Neel, my belly inches from the belly of one of her pregnant women, the edges of our edges creeping ever closer until a guard barks at me to *get back*. *No touching*, he says.

I turn around to find my way outside. I pass by a projector pulsing off-white light against the white wall. Expecting an image to emerge, I wait. Nothing happens. But as I walk past the machine, I see my own shadow, the bulge at my center emerging. The shape of my body turning into ours. Suddenly I

feel a fear so profound that it’s obvious this is the first time I’ve ever really been afraid.

*Congratulations*, someone in the gallery says, because the shape of my silhouette is all anyone can see. Finally, in being seen on the walls of one of the greatest museums, I understand that pregnancy is a consumption of self; what a relief. This must be how Persephone feels when she returns to the underworld, fall after fall after fall. Or what Barthes must mean when he writes his version of jouissance as a “living contradiction: a split subject, who simultaneously enjoys [. . .] the consistency of his selfhood and its collapse. Its fall.”

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# Heaven or Las Vegas

Back at home, I encourage my husband to go away for one last hurrah with his friends. He goes to Las Vegas and, while he's away, I don't write but lavish in stretches of uninterrupted time spent looking at my phone. But then, on the fourth day, a picture of her emerges in my hand, posted just a few miles from our house.

*Finally kicking it down old Route 66*, she writes.

I'm overtaken all at once with the fervency of all the jealousy I've ever felt, renewed and unashamed. I slide into it, breathing it in, deeper and deeper until it's no longer a skin-deep tingling but a self-sustaining quake. Not a reciprocal coming but a familiar one, a coming that's just out of reach. I rise off the couch and descend into town.

I could drive around the village, for hours, looking for little blonde women in beat-up old Subarus. Finding none, I could roll down the windows and blast the Cocteau Twins, like some kind of a duck call in duck-hunting season. I could find one, finally, only to discover that, up close, she's too

big. Another who's too platinum. I could watch her fill up her wrong model of Subaru anyway, through the windshield and from a distance. I could hate her, just because. I could go home empty-handed, except for the phone that's refreshing, refreshing, refreshing but unquenched, until three hours later, when she's posting from somewhere three hours away. But what kind of narrative climax would that be?

Jealousy demands a more entertaining alternative, and my imagination demands a more satisfying one. In it, I find her too easily, at the second of the small town's two gas stations, where she's filling up her old car that's surely the same as the one in her pictures. Her: no longer pictured and preserved but breathing and real and wearing a baseball cap and baggy black shorts. She's even smaller than in my imagination. How infuriating.

Through closed and tinted windows, I watch her go inside the station and reemerge with a small plastic bag full of food. She gets in her car with the windows rolled down and she keys the ignition. A Cocteau Twins song starts playing; it's "Heaven or Las Vegas," a song I know well because I knew, just knew, it meant something to him and her. I've studied every inscrutable line for clues: of the fundamental and unrelenting confusions of (un)requited love, of the source of light, of the (un)quenchable soul, of wanting him to be in Las Vegas while I'm just standing here, with her, in heaven.

Despite myself, my foot is tapping along to the rhythmic code. My nodding head, saying *yes yes yes* to imaginations of him in a nearby hotel room, waiting for her to return with snacks to refuel them for their next raucous pre-baby fuck. I could call him. I could despair. Worse, I could hope I'm wrong and that this is all some big coincidence. Some cosmic joke. Haha! Instead, I get out of my car and walk toward hers until I'm perfectly framed by the sun in her rearview mirror, my curved shadow indulging the curve of the earth as it envelops her light completely.

From within the darkness, her eyes scan upward in the mirror, from my feet to my bulge that's brewing supernatural. With a power I've forgotten I have, I coax her eyes up, up, up and hold her gaze with mine, belittling her for

daring to behold me. Pained, she looks away. I laugh and laugh and laugh and watch her shrink smaller and smaller into her unempowered self, until she's nothing but a little girl, unloved and unwanted, crying and driving out of town. A gratification full-bodied and profound.

A few days later, when he returns home, I don't tell him she was here, if I found her or if I didn't. Any disclosure feels wrong, a betrayal of both versions the story deserves. Instead, I keep her a secret, an ember encrusted in ice. I welcome him gently. I let him tell me stories about Vegas and fuck me and then I encourage him to catch up on sleep.

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# Playing Myself

The day before I am due, I play God in a film. *Accidentally perfect for the part*, the director says as I walk through the door, his hands mimicking the billow of my body. He stands to relinquish his chair so that I am sitting in the center of the room, and I inflate with the power of regaining my place at the center.

Immediately, the crew concern themselves with me, busily encrusting my face in shards of mirror until I am a body with a face that's now a reflection of everything I can no longer see: the white-walled studio, its curved and so invisible corners, the camera, a ladder, the light. The crew touches me, undresses me, revealing and reducing me to mirror and skin and shape. *Beautiful*, the director says, and I imagine what he sees: his head on top of my pregnant body.

He puts his hand on my lower back and guides me to sit in a different chair, in the middle of an empty stage, the warmth of every spotlight, the coldness of every hidden gaze. A god, not omniscient but unable to see, but with a blind sense of myself. The click of the camera, the chug of the roll. *Action*, the director says.

And so I initiate my godly recitation of someone else's silent script: I stand; I take seven slow steps forward; I stop, I lean, and I look—into the lens as if I could see it focusing firmly on my face, which is God's face, too, zooming in until I occupy the entire frame and my faceless refraction subsumes both the camera and the god that is me until, as one, we assume we know everything.

*Cut*, the director says. Just one take. *Good enough.* Because the film is more precious than a god who is a silent symbol without any lines. So many times I've tried to imagine it—a life of one's own—but all I end up with is a life like this one, in which the aim and focus of the camera is always just beyond my control. Still and in the center of the room, unseeing and unseen, I wait for someone to bring me my robe.

Reconcealed and alone in a corner, I peel the mirrors from my face. I start with the eyes so I can watch the room refill with itself. Each piece carrying with it a strip of my skin. The pile of mirrors is an accumulation of my fractured body and reflection. I'm watching myself reconstitute, my eyes splitting across so many shards and looking in every direction, back and forth between the self and the next scene unfurling as smoothly as the camera's approach and then ascent of the ladder that doesn't stop at the ceiling but transcends past the white roof becoming first an edge, then the obliteration of edges, going beyond and into the depths of space in which it's too dark to see the color of the pregnant cavity better known as the mathematical void. It's here where the camera's gaze remains: here where it cannot see. It just stays there and stays, looking and looking into the dark, waiting for the lens and the eyes to adjust until nothing emerges as something.

The first pictures of space were taken this way, too, little lenses wide open and waiting. But when the images were developed, the star-lookers' sense of awe quickly deflated at the little unimpressive dots of light.

More than one hundred years later, the Hubble telescope captures images of the same patch of sky showing the Orion Nebula, M42, a gaseous range of color. It's white-hot in the center and then magenta all around. It's

intermixed with blue and tinged with green. Its depths deepen into violet. The colors and the moods of the ongoing beginning.

Succeeding Hubble is the Vera C. Rubin Observatory’s LSST Camera, the largest digital camera ever built, its 3.2-gigapixel sensor encompassing both visible and near-infrared wavelengths. With it pointing into space, I wonder what the clarifying vision will reveal. Looking at myself on the floor, I can’t help but wonder what it could find if it looked into the belly, not of Orion but of me.

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# The Terror!

The film was never released. No one got to see me play God, not even me. But my husband did take a few pictures, which I posted online. One hundred and fifteen people liked the post, but it wasn't enough. I wanted to see myself on-screen, larger than life, if only because I was so full of it. I wanted people to stand up and clap and cheer. I wanted my godliness to be undeniable. I wanted to be the stuff of cinematic legend, the next *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*: seeing the train approach the screen, the entire audience is said to have risen up and fled in panic.

It isn't true, or at least there's no evidence of it being true, and it would be very odd if it were. The train is not pummeling toward the audience but arriving at a point just off-screen, which a nineteenth-century audience trained in linear perspective would have understood. Seeing is an ongoing evolution, prejudices formed and enacted and then overcome as vision propels along rules of diminution and progression: things at a distance appear smaller, and yet on the screens, they approach, so big and surely fated for collision, with the audience, with motherhood, with the real.

Fear is trained along the lines of linear perspective, too, and there is no way out of today, and tomorrow is just as inevitable. But tomorrow is different, both in degree and in kind, because tomorrow is the day I am due. The only way out of it—the birth and the terror—is to align with the rumor instead of the math. To get off the platform and stand on the tracks because to collide with fate is to derail it. But just as I think I'm saying something new and different, I know it's just another inroad to the old idiom: *the only way out is through.* There will be no arrival, but an endless approach, which is the terror of the train of time and a train of thought, too. The endurance of the never-ending gap—between me and experience, motherhood and me—coaxes the terror further, because, from this side of the threshold, birthing appears to inhabit the opening, and because "a thing is just a rift," as Thomas Merton says, "between what it is and how it appears." Frederick Douglass phrases it a little differently: "The picture of life contrasted with the fact of life [is] the ideal contrasted with the real," he says. He's explaining why pictures are so convincing: they keep the distance intact. Marguerite Duras says as much about literature, that "writing separates you from life." Even though I know Merton is right, and Douglass is right, and Duras is right, I want to prove them all wrong because, today, I'm Tiamat—I contain the oneness of the world—desperate to birth and write my way past the gap and into living.

He and I, we're not touching but next to each other in bed when he shows me a picture that attempts to connect us: *the first one ever taken of the two of us, together,* he says. It was taken exactly nine months after we first met. In it, we're standing next to his mother's grave, the moment mapping me directly onto his origin to become original in this moment, too. Apparently, rarely, a photograph can transpose duration into space. Until now, I'd forgotten all about it. It was like it never even happened because it was too incompatible with this jealous story I've been dead set on both being in and telling. It's too late to go back and experience the moment that could have acted like a tufting needle that would have drawn him and me into consensus. Instead, the baby will have to perform this function because this is the story that's been written and today is the day after I'm due.

Everything is a reminder of my indebtedness to time. A bill that needs to be paid. A library book I've been meaning to return. Too late, I'm walking into the hospital, through the sliding glass doors, down a white hallway that leads to another white hallway, my perception so honed into this converging perspective that's delivering me, step-by-step, to the culmination that's just another chain of white hallways, now bulging out to form a white waiting room that's also, somehow, still a hallway, bulging as a snake bulges while it waits for a mouse to digest. As my pregnant body bulges while it waits to birth. I'm waiting as people everywhere are always waiting: for life to begin and end because all of life is a hole at the center that is both the promise of arrival and its prevention. It's always been there, where the eggs are, the zeros where I've held the power of nothing inside. A nothing that wants to be; to become something; to begin. I'm next in line, my body inside a history of bodies, which is the shape of 117 billion birthing bodies.

What's notable about the number isn't its magnitude but its silence, because the decibel of a woman's scream in childbirth registers between 100 and 120 dB. Standing next to a loud motorcycle. Or being at a rock concert. But the pain of childbirth has never been systematically studied because it is assumed to register so far off the scale of 1–10 that women would not continue to birth. I can hear a woman screaming through the wall. How honest. Whenever I ask someone what it's like to give birth, they skip over the pain and go straight to the *joie de vivre* and the overwhelming love that they say I'll come to understand after my initiation into the kingdom of the delivered.

My husband says the screams sound like war or orgasm. Taken as a set, it's a fitting comparison because people in battle and ecstasy are weirdly silent about their experiences, too. But while the soldier aims and shoots, and the ecstatic chases and succumbs, the laborer just waits and wades. This is not a tragedy, but the genius of women's work, of pregnancy, of one second becoming the next. No beginning and no ending but constancy. But how?

My mother arrives just as I'm settling back onto the table to prepare for induction. The shape of my pregnancy occludes my view of her, or is the view of her: the shape of the body that birthed me. I can feel my mother

touch my legs, then the doctor spread them. Feet in cold metal stirrups. The device she's inserting, behind the cervical wall and in front of the amniotic sac, was designed by a man to insert into a man's cock, which is what it looks like: a plastic cock with one ball. But first: more cold steel. Cranking. One finger, then several. A small plunger. The strangeness of internal prodding being replaced by the cervical catch. She attaches the cock to a saline drip that mimics the chemical makeup of amniotic fluid, which is almost the same as the sea. I imagine myself walking into it. I imagine myself disappearing into death. My mother touches my head. Looks me in the eye. The nurse doses my blood with Pitocin. The beginning of the end.

Too soon, the pain, which is also a pressure welling up. A spine that's splitting in two but that I can't articulate because the bolt outpaces my tongue and the last syllable extenuates into a scream. The nurse looks afraid. The nurse says *Oh no*. My husband's mouth takes the shape of a circle that time starts to wrap around and around until the spine zippers back into itself and I moan in a string of *aaaaa*s abating into an edge of *hhhhh*s. The nurse laughs and I laugh and my husband looks at her and then at me and then at her and then at me, searching our mouths for clues. *Congratulations*, the nurse says. *You survived your first contraction.* For the next forty-eight hours, this is how labor goes. Let me try to show you:

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Contraction by contraction, language sheds its edges and so its linear obsession but for the hoarse and quiet scream of every end's helical announcement of the beginning that's to come: *I am dying I am dying I am dying*. Anne Boyer was right; "pain doesn't destroy language: it changes it." It's just that pain cannot be forged into a history that redacts in order to preserve, or explained in a philosophy that's written with the words it's about, because pain is where the laws of the universe emerge out of understanding to converge with the ongoing antediluvian that is the end of language and the beginning of experience converging with sound.

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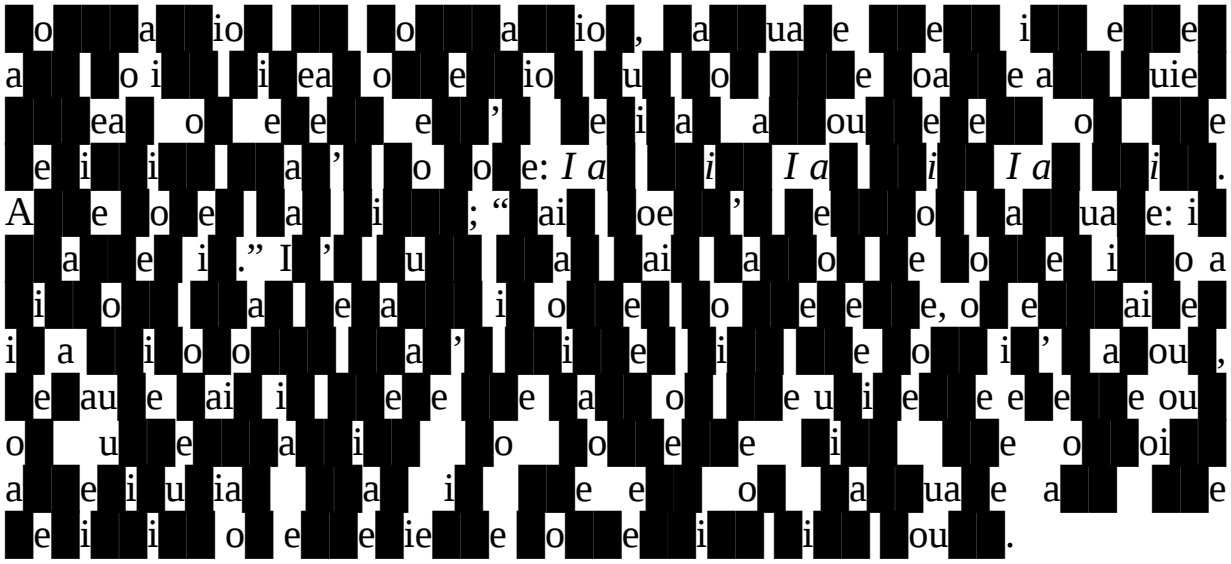

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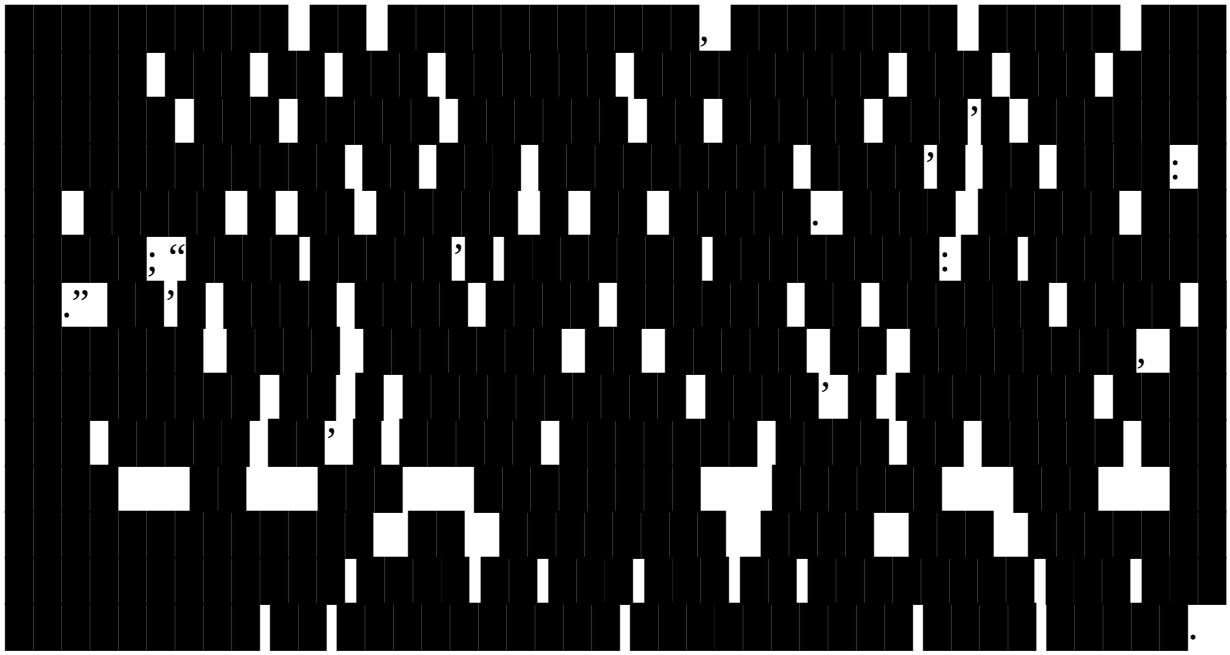

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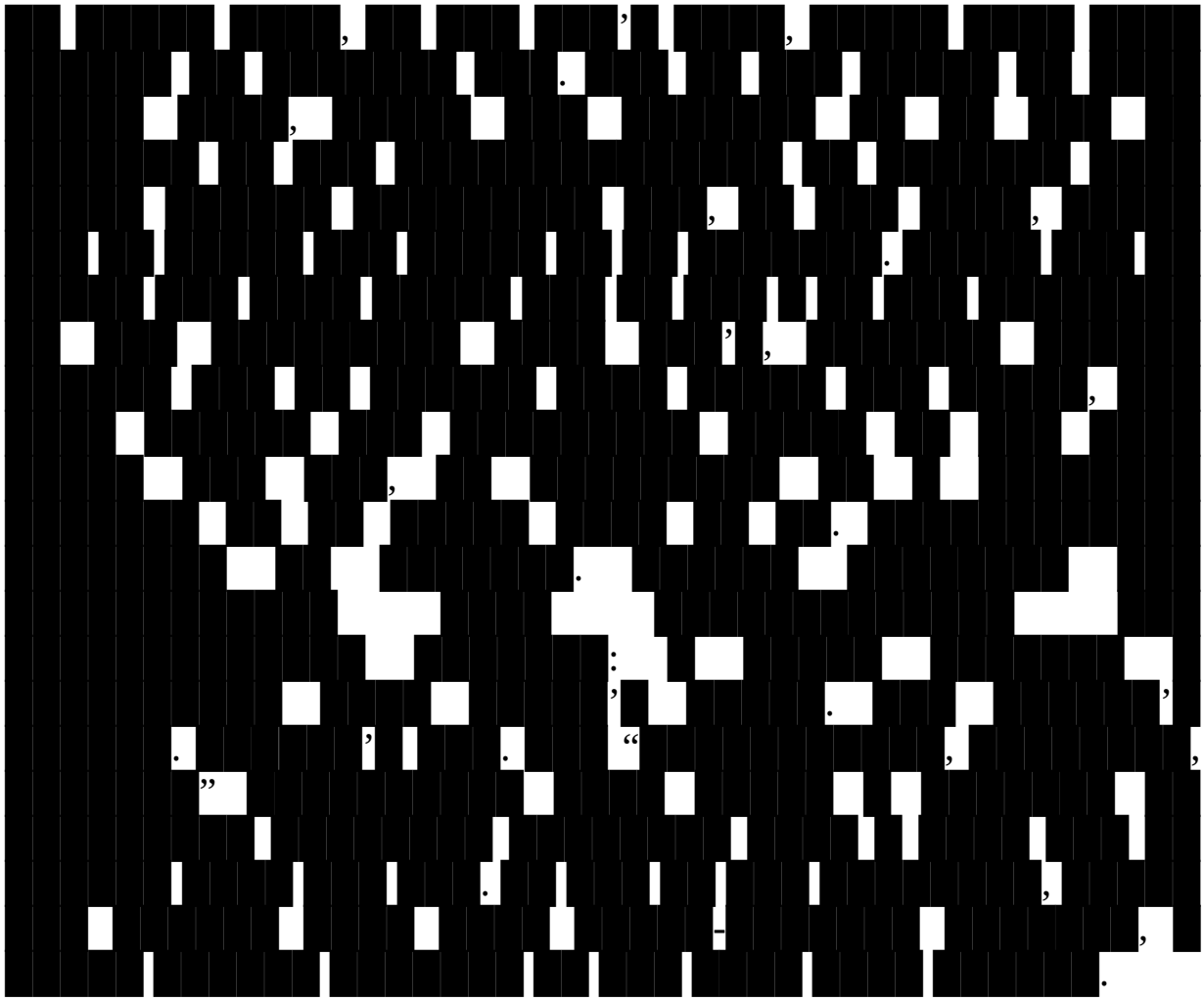

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To speak then, to say God's name, would have been enough to destroy Him. But on the brink of such total loss, there was nothing to do but to succumb to the reconciliation of reality with truth absent semiotics, for, in the real, there are no names and there is no meaning. There are no edges but only sound and me and I am the guardian of the threshold that isn't, turning myself inside out to become both inner and outer, the time before the beginning, which is the time after the end, an emptiness or a fullness wanting to be other than it is. *Ressentiment* yielding to naïveté. Violet becoming red by dissolving into extraspectral and supralingual magenta: a color without a wavelength that doesn't exist. The nebula's source. Goethe's eye. His "allegorical, symbolic, mystic" crossroads from which I express my monstrous creation emerging with a roar and in tandem with the sun. Me and my son together, dying and reborn into this blood-covered reality, a nurse gently patting at our skin with towels.

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Magenta is everywhere. In everything. In my skin. In my eyes, in the afterbirth as seen in the pulsating glow of the hospital's halogen lights. The magenta placenta on my chest where my son is supposed to be. It's so magenta it is the essence of magenta. My husband refused to cut the cord. My mother grabbed the scissors and snipped, which is when language was born again; even though I didn't say a word, words existed in glimpses. I don't know where my son is, only that the doctor is sewing me up, telling a forgettable joke but for the fact that he is joking and I am laughing and so my son must be okay. My husband is gone but my mother is by my side. My mother smiles. My mother says goodbye and leaves. The doctor leaves. The nurse leaves. I am alone.

Days later, I'll see the picture of my son that's taken now, beyond my frame of view. In it, he's strapped to a machine that's breathing for him. But in that moment, I'm looking away, out the window onto a world of darkness that's obliterated by the reflection of this too-bright room, still so full of blood and water. In the double, I see my husband return, my mother, the doctor, a nurse, the child—my son. They place him on my chest. Immediately, he uses his sharp nails to claw up and latch on to my breast. Soon another nurse approaches, arms outstretched for the baby, who's still struggling to breathe. I screech and hiss and retract. For a moment, the crowd watches on in horror as I cling to my blue son, but then a nurse brings oxygen to him so that I can keep him and he can live. His color returns. One by one, the people leave until it's just the baby and me. My first word as a mother is the private pronouncement of his name: *Isaiah*, the only man for whom God waits.

For the first time as a mother, I try to stand and then I do. With my son in my arms, I approach the window to show him the terrific world. Standing three stories high, we look down upon an awakening neighborhood. From

up above, it looks clean, safe, idyllic. When the sun fully crests, the shadows are long and filling in the sluggish streets, strip malls and suburbia as far as the eye can see. So many stores. So many houses. So many fences. I watch the shadows, shifting and shortening with the elongating day. A man awakens from inside a shopping cart. Another man on a corner starts spinning a sign for sandwiches or taxes. By the minute, there are more and more speeding cars. Time is passing. An ambulance leaves the hospital. The horror of the siren. An ambulance arrives. No need for a siren. I hold my son tighter. I look at him and try to think of anything other than the dimensions of my fear, its regrowth commensurate with the reemergence of language, now enviously resurging yellowish green, with wanting and failing to mean. Every word I can think of to speak seems right in one moment and wrong in the next. Fragile, beautiful, brief. How preposterous to be sure enough to say, let alone write. How profane. Gradually, in time, my lingual instincts will grow, out of red edges and orange similes and yellow judgments, into green words that aspire, then harden into jealous blue words that claim to mean. Eventually, they'll evolve, further and further into violet and indigo, the colors that they now stand against. Only then will they matter, when they're also about violence and hate and death. The antagonistic nature of language, I think, in words I can't yet say because I'm still inside an experience made only of complements. With my son in one hand and my phone in the other, I lift both the child and the device and touch them awake and it's then that I begin to write, which is where this book actually begins, in indisputable black and white:

I expected this moment of birthing to mimic Archimedes in the moment of his death, sitting at a table, hunched over his perfect circles illuminated in perfect shadeless light—an image of perfect self-absorption: a man and his self-referential idea of creation.

But how could I have forgotten the rest of the scene encircling him? Behind him, a barely visible painting of a naked body. At his feet, a globe perched on a pedestal. Above, a real Roman soldier, his sword raised and about to strike. Outside the window, the city is burning. *Do not disturb my circles!* Archimedes says, an expression befitting the moment of creation that is also the beginning of its demise.

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# 200 mg of Ibuprofen

The terrific pain I didn't realize I am in. Looking for its source, I reach between my legs to find not an open wound, but a ten-inch-long hematoma—curdled, phallic, seeping. My hand reemerges, covered in blood. The nurse gives me an ibuprofen and then pulls up my robe to look. With blue-gloved hands, he prods the hard and tender mass. I scream. The doctor comes, looks, orders intravenous morphine to dull my pain, and my reemerging consciousness, back into remission.

Day after day they keep me captive in the hospital to heal inside the white and sterile room where there is no darkness or pain but halogen lights that are always set to just past dawn and mothers who are prematurely assumed to be good. I want to leave. I want to return to my broken house that is also a cave, the one with poisonous plants and dirty walls. But I'm too high to protest, so high I am babbling on and on about love and happiness and rainbows. I stand by the window with my child, looking out and down upon the city in hopes that its shadows will speak for my shadow, too.

Finally, on the fourth day, the hospital releases me from my containment. The hematoma makes it impossible to walk or sit without pain, so I'm

wheeled out of the white hallways to the car, where I lie awkwardly in the back seat. I'm next to the baby, who, awake or asleep, keeps his eyes closed. He exists only in darkness, still unadjusted to the light.

I tell my husband to drive slow and then slower, sure that the world will hurt the baby. But soon we turn onto the highway, driving fast and then faster until every single thing blurs together into one blurry mass. I worry we won't survive until we do, until we roll up the hill and into the driveway and stop safely in front of the house that is ours. I unstrap the baby and harness him in my arms to keep him safe as I walk in pain into the burning sun and down the hazardous stairs and into the hollowed house. I retreat into a far corner of the cave, where the pain and I can covet my son. I raise his greedy mouth to my swelling breast. I close my eyes and shut out the world and await the sweet release of milk. The soft yield of our codependent pleasure.

I look down at my son, who is still fully good and fully vulnerable. I look down at my whitish-reddish-pinkish-yellow body—my extra flaps of skin and sallow sunken core. The color of the pre-child world still exists, but it's newly and umbilically untethered, to me and to the past, no longer limited to or reduced by a list of names but freed into an unnameable saturation. An undistinguished and undissected rainbow that is both in the eye and of the sky; color the same as its apprehension.

Thinking she'll understand, I describe this phenomenon of motherly love to my mother.

*Don't you want to do anything but talk about you and the baby?* she asks. I try, but the baby keeps interrupting and co-opting my attention. And I am still in so much pain. My mother sighs. She says she knows what I mean, which is that I don't want her around. That I've never wanted her, not really. She leaves the next day, which is the beginning of a more total departure. In the growing distance between us, I understand her jealousy of the child as the jealousy I inherited and am also progressing. It is in this way that I come to understand that fate is a mother.

And fate is also a daughter. As my mother almost killed her mother, so must I; to ensure the magnanimity of my motherhood, I encourage her to go by confirming her worst fears of irrelevance. I flush with jealousy's familiar heat, but it's different now, at once more protective and more productive. My ducts are sympathetically pulsing with hot milk, and I immediately express myself into an empty bottle, fuller and fuller, body warmed and sweet. The fluid of our interpossession. The baby is awake and in my arms and his eyes are opening. Everything he sees is black and white. Faced with such sincere simplicity, a surge of jealousy swells up again: the return of the terror, the rage, the fire burning inside that no one else can see or sense but for the faint flush of my cheek. I grab my phone and write.

*You look so beautiful right now*, my husband says. He looks like he wants to fuck me. I reach my hand between my legs and raise it to show him that I am still seeping blood and shit. He retracts, my seepage becoming an act of self-protection. The baby laughs, a laugh that seems to have come from me and carried through my milk to emerge from his mouth, his pure expression of my awful purpose becoming ours. I laugh, too. I offer a breast to my husband.

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# The Return

I'm a mess. My clothes are sagging and stained. My hair is thick and falling out in tangled clumps. My breasts are not quite the topographic tits I'd hoped for, but two veiny and globular objects subjecting to gravity, two taffy nipples stretching down to the floor. The milk drips out and puddles with an overabundance of everything my son needs to survive: water and fat and carbohydrates and protein and vitamins and minerals that connect him back to me. The liquid is so precious I could sell it for five dollars an ounce. Instead, I'm collecting it in bottles and lining them up in a neat little row. In succession, I watch the contents separate, water from fat, to create a continuum of white to yellow. The farthest bottle is turning green.

According to Schopenhauer, the sublime lies on a spectrum, too, and this must be it, all laid out in front of me, extending from calmer cream (So beautiful! It attracts.) to a pale and effervescent green (So horrific! It attracts.).

I reach out and unscrew the faraway lid to find a mat of curdles, thick and sour. Milk that's no longer nourishing but a threat. Instinctually, I retract.

But then I lean back in to get a better look, to inhale more lactic acid, tempted to retour the plot of my transgressions: past the point where I recognize my first lie at the river Styx and past the inner walls where my soul is now subdividing among the heretics trapped in flames, past the killers' river of boiling blood and past the woman-faced birds and into the rain of fire where fraudulent heads are twisting around on bodies. My head is twisting, too, so that when I walk into the inner circle of Hell, I'm also going backward, both toward and away from the Devil, who I can't see eating the heads of traitors. I turn around to face him, who is the disembodiment of me—an incorporeal aura of underworldly violet becoming magenta becoming violet again—I'm turning around in circles, screwballing in the profundity of the abyss, relishing in the sublimity of my inner opposition turning outward tuning in, because the center of the underworld isn't a place but the Faustian bargain that's always taking place; our mammalian milking that consumes the self to nurture its progeny; this mad lust to birth and to write and to be possessed by genius at last. My perpetual Invidian creation. To consecrate the agreement, I will both drink the rotten milk and be consumed by it.

So I'm leaning over my leaking tits with the grimacing smile of wounding myself in order to express myself until the pus sprays across my baby, who is the mirror image of my face. Encapsulated in this ordinary procedure is a synodic cycle of the self—direct motion, retrogradation, stationing direct—one minute I'm a god, and then I'm the Devil, and then I'm refusing them both, walking away from the divine and into my estrangement. This is the jealous procedure, and already the baby is mimicking the astrological progression, his mouth sucking and gulping down and spitting back up in his recurring redirection of my jealousy that thwarts life if only to reaffirm the living.

I drink one bottle but the rest goes unused because I have so much fresh milk and because I'm always with the baby because I refuse to leave my son. Of course I'm afraid he'll die, but that's not why I'm being stubborn. I won't leave him because I want him to need me. I love him too much, do you understand?

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# Time Passes

My husband is avoiding the baby and me. He's figured out a way to bring our off-grid house online, and so he's working more and more. He's making more and more money. I tell him I don't want the security he's offering, that if he's going to be so absent, he might as well be dead. Nevertheless, he returns to work, leaves the house, the baby, and me.

So I'm spending six, eight, ten hours a day bent over myself in the manufacture of milk. To say it another way, I'm spending eight, ten, twelve hours a day on my phone: taking pictures of the baby and posting about the baby and writing about the baby and reading about how to raise the baby so that the baby becomes a gateway and then an avenue for my attention to return to her.

She is changing, too, no longer just the other woman but the childless other by whom my motherhood, and my jealousy, clarifies: I, who made a baby that tethers me to place, purpose, and phone; she, who takes photographs on her phone in order to roam free.

She’s getting so popular. More and more followers every day, hundreds and then thousands becoming tens of thousands. They’re liking and, worse, engaging; she’s not only famous but beloved for her art that I’m only now understanding in terms of labor’s time: the time it took to drive to each dying mall and then to sit around and watch it die. The time to capture, time to develop, time to edit, time to post. Time to see. The kind of time I no longer have. I’m jealous of her time. But with the baby in my arms, I have no choice but to swallow my mounting hatred and force it down to the jagged realms below, where I can feel it festering and bubbling up, a word or two at a time. Substantial words that last. Words I can work with, as a potter works with clay: plastic and then leather-hard, bone-dry and then baked. Desperately and jealously, I write.

Suckling, the baby reaches a free hand up to play with my other nipple and turns the exercise erotic. I swallow harder. Instead of looking at the baby, I look at my phone, at her and at the jealous words, and I long for the emptiness of time that would allow this looking and writing to be merely envious, with the green lucidity of a mall dying as a woman dies when she is left alone, at last, to feel whatever she pleases.

But the deal is done. I can only hurt her, rob her, and hurt her again, just a little at first and then with all the pain pulsing across the wound on my vulva. I imagine pouring my spoiled milk into her open mouth and then exposing her, with my phone and then with this writing: my profane craving that leaves me yearning for her forgiveness and her attention and her pain.

And then I write. Words and sentences and chapters that wrap around her, my subject and my shame. Briefly, I worry about ethics: about my right to injure other people by doing what I want. And I worry about morals: my understanding of the good. But the truth of my jealous reality matters more, and seeking it is so pleasurable, a writerly jouissance. So I lay my badness bare and the baby and the husband are oddly unaffected. My husband isn’t upset. The baby doesn’t die. And my hematoma heals, the blood and the pain retracting back inside, but not the subconsciousness it exposed, the phallic part of my interiority that wants to fuck the world.

As almost one, the baby and I, we walk out of the cave and into the woods and toward the sun, just like that stupid longing vine in *The Private Life of Plants*. Too new, the baby's skin almost instantly burns; he will feel the pain when he wakes. Good, I think. Because here, where the desert meets the forest, almost everything born dies within days. What survives is what toughens quickly, growing prematurely violent in its own defense: pokey yucca and cacti that prick and rattlesnakes with a venomous bite. These arroyos yawning open with the heat of Earth's molten core. And then flooding, with just the slightest touch of rain.

At home, I harvest aloe vera leaves but don't bother to drain the aloin so that when I rub the baby's burn, it's with the odor of rotting flesh. With him anointed, I strap him into the car and drive him into the society I'll attempt to rejoin. Slowly at first, then fast and faster, the dangerous exterior blurring into one elongated mass until we arrive at the mall that subdivides life into civilization: grocery store, tire store, Big Box Store, shoe store, bookstore, a succession of stores becoming a succession of purchases because the baby and I, we will craft ourselves into mother and child at the mall.

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# Repossession

At first, the strategy is to hide the baby. With the carrier on my chest. With a sweater or a wide scarf. And when he cries, I hurry, first to shush him, then to run out of the room; I don't expect anybody else to love or tolerate him. I try to make myself invisible, too. I wear sunglasses and buy beige clothes, the slightly disappointing color of my attempt at public motherhood: a calculated absence at the mall.

But soon I want to be a mother and a baby who are considered good because conformity is the best disguise. So I study and mimic good mothers and babies at the mall. The good mothers and I, we bring Tupperware tubs filled with cubed fruit. We complain about our husbands' policies and day care policies and dog policies. We whisper to each other about other people's babies—weird babies, annoying babies, dumb babies—and then we blame the other mothers for having created such awful babies.

In talking to these other mothers, I learn that my baby is beautiful, *like*, *objectively beautiful*, which is how I learn that not all babies are, because these other mothers seem to wish their babies were as beautiful as mine. Determined to use this to my advantage, I style him to ensure and further

his enviableness: *the cutest baby, the most charming baby, the funniest baby*. So I buy him cute things, charming things, funny things, and then I shop to make myself into his perfect background so that, when people raise their cameras to capture his perfect light, I will make for the most lovely armament. A pretty beige couch. Like the ones in the Victorian pictures of babies, couches that were actually mothers disguised as couches that could keep infants still for the duration of film's long exposure. I am actually amazed at how still I can be while holding the baby up for a viewing, how strongly I can endure the weight of ten, twelve, then fifteen pounds, as if it's nothing. In every picture taken of the baby, he appears perfectly still and well composed but for the mysterious hand emerging from the beige upholstery. At last! I have learned to see myself photographically at the mall.

The other mothers I meet are betraying their disappearances, too, letting slip the occasional detail from the lives they lived before they became mothers. Recitations that reveal their godliness; stories as intolerably incoherent as those of dreams. But I perk up when one after another of these mothers tells me they were writers or are writers or want to be writers now that they are mothers. (How fascinating, I think, that motherhood and logophilia coincide!) *Never mind*, they say, to signal the return to our disguised despair, our flocking back to the babies, especially mine: *So beautiful. Objectively beautiful.* Over and over again, they're saying things like *Congratulations!* and *Enjoy it while it lasts!* and *So precious!*, which are not the things to say to someone who has just been raped by death and returned to life.

At first, I encourage my own entrapment, saying exactly what I think I should: *Thank you!* and *Be here now!* and *He makes me make sense!*

But slowly, I shift, as my understanding of motherhood shifts to reincorporate myself. Like the mall, I'm learning how to wield envy, a feminine power that draws the world to and then into me. To test my theory, I start turning their compliments against themselves, strengthening envy into jealousy's innate reversals: *I am so depressed* and *This too shall pass* and *birthing him cost forty thousand dollars*.

Eventually, I turn the retraction fully and jealously into a joke aimed at exposing the crack that goes all the way down to their jealous cores. I say: *Is it too late to abort* and *Do you have any Valium* and *I'll only love him if he's tall*.

I take their nervous laughter (and sometimes their Valium) as a form of consensus. An agreement of our badness that exists in us and between us and everywhere at the mall that's so systematically dependent on the jealousy coursing around and through because, in the mall, we're not trying to be better but more like a better somebody else. In the endless succession, it's our failure that's become our common ground, and I'm rolling in the mud, lavishing in our shared corruption. This is where writing comes from, I think, from our participation in the terrific violence of our individuations. But this is also where writing cannot go: our barbarism restraining into refinement at the mall.

Already the other mothers are clawing their way out of our communal bad and climbing back into shopping's moral performance; like the fabled mice churning the milk that would drown them into butter, the other mothers are churning their self-doubt into self-regard. And so the next narrative loop emerges: one blonde mother is saying she is good and another blonde mother is so sure that she is *special*. She says it without an air of confession —*SPE-cial*—front-loaded and without a care for the forgotten back—the privileges it rests upon, the supremacy it invokes. With no result to prove her specialness, it's just the perfect future tense disguised as present, a self-evident *special* that isn't.

Besides, I want to be special, too. So, either to disagree or to taunt or to warn, I tell her she's wrong. *If you're special, then everybody is*, I say, a disagreement that disturbs not only the meaning of her special word but of her idea of herself, too. She glares, she riles. She self-inflates and then she snaps back.

In a pathetic attempt at self-preservation, I hurry out of earshot and down the mall's brick corridor, down a white brick stairwell with white handrails and white circling stairs lined with mirrors. The blondes are in pursuit,

following my every move. I try to hide in shadows. I try to shut them out. But even with my head between my knees and my eyes closed and my ears cupped, I can't; the blonde hauntology is inchoative and epenthetic and resolute, mixing with the beginning, middle, and end of every thought. The only way out is through confrontation. Timidly, I uncup my ears and hear them calling my name. When I open my eyes, I see them refracted and expanding across every sliver of mirror into an infinitely receding array of reflected blondes, another mise en abyme, another endless craving, one blonde inside another blonde inside another, not just the blonde ones from the mall but every blonde I've ever befriended, envied, hated, wanted to destroy. The Blondes: their thousand eyes blinking in the mirrors and their tongues speaking now in unison and calling me a *friend*.

But how could we be? The Blondes are a category symbolic of every category to which I do not belong. Everyone who is not me and who therefore stands against. The color on the other side of the wheel isn't just the opposite but the opponent; they and I, flailing against the other in an attempt to cement our supposed superiorities. But, then again, the enemy is also the complement: the fulfillment of my deficiencies, and so the way back to the whole. To move both forward and past, I'll give all of myself to our blatant contrast and I won't look away until the afterimage is burned into my retinas because the sear of our mutual cruelty is the kind of friendship we deserve.

I give them everything they want and ask for: time and companionship, mannerisms and recipes, money and affirmation. *Yes* and *yes* and *yes*, I say. *Yes*, I'll come over for a glass of wine. *Yes*, to another and, yes, another. Drunk, I can't drive home, and they hover and buzz, talking and talking, about me—they can't decide whether they love me or they hate me. If they need me or they owe me. Either way, they want me. With a photographic sensibility of desire, they roll up their sleeve and show me my tattoo on their arm; they show me a picture of us, edited to make us look almost exactly alike; *it's so easy to mine you*, The Blondes say, laughing, *and so easy to mimic the way you write.* But it isn't enough; they have to possess my love. They're turning me into a thing and calling me their *muse*, saying it with that untrustworthy upward lilt that nevertheless ensnares, their

compliment engraved on a silver bracelet slapped around my wrist like a cuff, wrapping and pulling me close and then closer until we're skin to skin, lying next to each other, face-to-face and our membranes fuse. It's an all-at-once and everywhere penetration; an instance of light: I'm dragged across the jealous threshold. For once, I'm on the obverse.

I reappear inside their fiction. They've written me into a cage in a basement, deep inside their short story that's made of my words, my ideas, my forms, entire languages and philosophies and architectures that I'd thought integral to me now coming out of their pen as if that's where they'd come from and belong. As if I'd stolen them way back when, when the first blonde dared me to take those two gold rings from the mall, and ever since, I've been fated, not to be the author, but the author's luxury, her ingratiated friend.

I try to escape and then I do, out of the basement and up the stairwell and back into the mall. But The Blondes are enraged by my abandonment; from down below, I can hear them talking shit behind my back—*mean*, *arrogant*, *bitch*. Hearing the insults hurled over my shoulder, I realize that I've finally met someone as bad or worse than I am.

In the chase, the fragments of The Blondes are recongealing into coherence and intensifying into a blondeness pure with possessive desire. Their blonde hair is getting blonder and their blue eyes bluer so that they're overtaking every other perspective to claim The Blonde Meadows and The Blue-Eyed Skies until the world is colored according to The Blonde taxonomy of hue. But such a vast and categorical domain is always vulnerable; to assuage the threat, they have to acquire what they don't yet have: they're looking into my brown eyes like they want to rip them out of my sockets and put them into theirs so as to subsume every other entirely. They open their mouths to speak and it's my appropriated voice ringing out cacophonous and asking for more: *Give me Jealousy!* they say, their double entendre demand that asks for the manuscript and the divinity by name. Quickly, I agree, if only because theirs are the terms I've been craving: I'll get to keep my life if I give them my jealous soul. *You can have it*, I say. *It's fine*, I say. *It's yours*. And The Blondes laugh, and laugh, and laugh. *Good*, they say. *Because we*

*can do so much more with it than you can.* The deal is as cruel as it isn't because it's also the justice we all deserve. I send them the pdf.

In a rush of relief and bereavement, I feel jealousy drain, from my mind and my body and out of my fingers. A fundamental undeceiving; I am returning to myself, and to my ordinary genius, indivisible from the soul from which it spontaneously rises, the vital root from which it grows but isn't made. But how to capture it, as the artist must at least try to do? *With Jealousy*, the old me would say. For a moment, I regret giving myself away and I want to take it back—to reclaim my badness and stay on the awful track—but it's too late. I'm reeling with the loss of who I thought I was and what I thought was happening. I have no idea what happens next.

Like Orpheus, I turn around to take a final look, and the glance condemns jealousy to its new entrapment. The Blondes are transformed—their snarled hair and their sagging tits and their mouths so full of black grime. They can't stop crying, all this pain! *We're okay*, they insist, because they're getting exactly what they want. They're so self-satisfied that they're happy. Crying and happy. Which is when I realize I'm happy for them, actually, truly, really happy that they're so happy. As unprepared as I am to live without jealousy, I'm also delighted to discover that its dying impulse is a generous one.

To assuage the grief of jealousy's departure, I take my son shopping. He chooses a picture book about construction vehicles building an A-frame house in the woods, and it's almost exactly the story I told at the beginning of this book that The Blondes are now clutching, but this time it reads forward and straight, like this:

In the time before the beginning, it was winter. The world was one white and continuous form. And then it was green, and the noisy machines cut the trees and razed the ground so that they could construct, first a house and then, inevitably, a mall. But when a caterpillar lands on the excavator's arm,

the machines have to stop. For an entire season, they wonder what they should do while they wait, through the spring and into summer, for as long as it takes for the caterpillar to build a cocoon and die so it can become something else that flies away. When it does, the vehicles finish their project quickly to follow the butterfly to a beautiful and wild waterfall. It’s a utopic scene: machines and butterflies are everywhere. Knowing they’ll soon expire, the butterflies start laying their eggs on leaves so that they can die and free their souls to reincarnate as worms. But the machines just sit there. They don’t procreate and they don’t die and they don’t have souls but they do have paradise.

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# Shadows

*See?* my husband says. *Everything is fine.* And he's right: I'm in paradise and everything is perfect. The apple tree is ripe with fruit and the oaks are heavy with acorns and the deer are walking through the yard. And I'm returned to myself, every feeling belongs fully to me. I don't covet anything, not even time. Instead, I'm nursing a child while reading long books in sunlit bay windows. Life is placid. I write, suspended, but with no need for a theatrical disbelief because this is a life unhaunted by anything but the endlessness of life and leisure. I'm not even coaxed into excitement by the baby's many firsts—first tooth, first solid food, first step. My every cheer is a performance and they all indicate that the baby is fine. *Everything is fine.* So fine that I'm taking the baby to brunch.

We're at a diner almost exactly like the one I used to work in, but three hundred miles south. I'm eating and being served when my son sees his shadow for the first time, trying, and failing, to grab his shape on the ground. Frustrated, he cries while I look on to see what he'll do next. I inch closer, my shadow accidentally intermixing with his, spurring in him a relentless confusion. He screams. Wails. Tantrums. For the first time as a mother, I comfort him not by going to him but by remaining distinct.

I become a conductor of shadow; I make a shadow puppet with my fingers. His fear turns to laughter turns to want; he wants to touch that doglike thing on the ground and so crawls toward it, tries and fails to grab it. Untouchable, unknowable shadow, the proof of self that isn't. Again, he cries. And I pity him. Pity because there is no such thing as empathy that's good, but for the loneliness of pain that we inhabit but cannot share without being cruel. To distract him from his pain, I bark as the dog barks, my hand sneaking up behind him to yip him on the neck. Surprised, the baby laughs, and I laugh, which is when my hand relapses and the dog dies. Before we leave, I pre-bus and I wipe down the table and I tip big. I'm trying to be a good customer, by which I mean I'm trying to make it seem as if the baby and I were never here and that the world is magically enriched by the absence of our shadows.

That night, the baby is once again sucking on my breast, but clamping down on my nipple. Hard. It's the first time he's hurt me; his innocence so quickly marred. I'm quick to express both my pain and my delight. I shriek; I laugh; I push my nipple farther into his mouth to incentivize his commitment to harm, to prepare him for the trauma of such inevitable infliction. While he plays with his teeth on my skin, I look upon him with pure adoration. For the first time, I love him not just because he is, but for who he is becoming: more and more like me: a real person. From behind him, I look toward our shadow to discover our two shadows converging into one, the shape of it stretching irregular on the wall. Fallopian, or the shape of the Devil. The specific shape of our bad. I ask my husband to trace it, so I can take it and pin it to the wall to remind the baby of what he came from and what he will become.

I want to remind my husband of his shadow; in all this fineness, I'm worried he forgot that he hurt me, too. So I describe my favorite photograph that his soulmate ever took. The one I visit in my dreams. The one taken in the aftermath, when the vacant mall is overgrown with weeds pushing up from the underground, cracking the asphalt only to singe in the sun. It's the only photograph of hers that doesn't stall death but allows it to dwell in the utopic present, which forever becomes, never is. The only one that relinquishes control. But even as the verdancy attracts that part of me that

wants the arc of blossoming and decay, the mall's setting won't allow it. Instead, the mall thinks itself into a new and better mall. Zoom in. See? The sign with the 3D renderings of what's to come, Valley View 2.0. Her brilliant profligation of this jealous narrative's unifying principle.

Maybe a soul is like that, I say, the part of the self that is self-undoing. In collaborating with death, it becomes immortal.

But my husband doesn't hear me because he has already wordlessly walked outside. Predictable. His absence has become his only response to my every mention of her. His act of self-preservation. His antidote to the countercurrent of my once-frothing jealousy, the site of my inborn resistance to life; I was so afraid. "To experience bliss is to experience dying," Berthoud writes, the feeling and the fear my jealousy had been hell-bent on preventing. It's gone now, but the walls it built are thick and everywhere and, usually, my husband is on the other side of them. As he is now, outside and just twenty feet away, my husband sending me a picture of a moth, the same color as the front door, on which it's landed. I notice the outline of its slim shadow.

*It's huge and unusual*, he writes.

But it's not that huge, not that unusual, except for the fact that it is real and it amazed him in a way that he couldn't contain. So he took a picture, and then he shared it with me so that, even after it flew away, it would remain with us forever.

Remarkable, I think, he didn't even have to kill it to keep it.

Just after seeing the picture of the kinda-big moth, I am moved enough to invite my husband out for a dinner date. For the first time, we leave the baby to another and reenter the childless world, which feels new because it's obsolete because a part of me is always thinking about the baby. Otherwise, everything is ordinary. But there is one funny thing that happens with a napkin, then a meaningful thing that happens when the sommelier

offers us a taste of straw-yellow wine, pouring a splash into two digestif glasses. I place my palm on the base of the cup and swirl. I raise the stem to my nose and sniff. I drink. It's very, very good.

*This is the best drink I've ever had*, I say, indulging the slippery slope of comparison sliding into judgment. *Sauternes?* I ask.

The sommelier shakes his head. *No, it's made of grapes allowed to dry on the vine*, he says, *to concentrate their sweetness.*

*Raisin wine*, my husband says.

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# The Ultimate Joke

The baby is eight months old and I'm feeding him green beans boiled mushy and brown. The baby throws the spoon. Automatically, I pick it up, wipe it with a baby wipe, and refill it with another scoop, the constant cycling of his need for nourishment that has less and less to do with me. Of course I get angry when the spoon hits the floor again but, unmarred by jealousy, it's an anger that's freely mine. An anger I can live with.

When my husband comes in for lunch, I hand him the rest of the can of unmashed greens and say: *When I die, I want you to return to her, your soulmate.*

*I would never*, my husband says.

Disappointed, I want to know why not.

*Because I couldn't be with her anymore*, he says. *It would make me too sad.*

It’s the closest we’ve come to talking about her in a way that suggests a mutual understanding of what happened between the three of us. My view and his view alluding to her view, which, taken as a unit, create a shared and therefore whole perspective. For a moment, I delight in this instance of clarity that jealousy seems to have granted, my unreliable pain becoming an intimate pain that connects us all. A darkness, fully chromatic and fully good.

*It doesn’t matter anyway*, he says. *We both know I’m going to die first.*

Because death is the ultimate joke, we laugh. Soon he stops laughing, but I can’t stop. Aroused by his hypothetical abandonment, the laughter is turning into its own self-fulfilling joke. I’m crying while laughing and then choking on the laughter because the laughter is tempting death, maniacal and murderous. I’m laughing and rising up with a fist meant to beat him to the punch. I don’t care about what happens next or about the baby in the high chair, because it’s too late to feign concern. Isn’t it obvious? The violence I fear in the world is the violence that exists in me; *Not if I kill you first*, I say; my husband laughs; *I’m going to fucking kill you*, I say. But this time he doesn’t laugh, because he thinks I’ve gone too far, my husband looking at me and my badness now with a kind of astonishment. He doesn’t think I will kill him. I ask him for the code to the safe. He gives me the code to the safe. He will let me kill him. He looks away from me and back at his phone and at the depth of my rage is a kind of glee. Glee for my fist, raised and shaking. Glee for the humiliation embedded in its grasp that I’ve been too stubborn to allow. Glee for everything I’m willing to do to keep it as locked and contained as I am, inside this *wife*, inside this *mother*, inside this cave even as I’m outgrowing it. My raised and shaking fist! My deleterious refusal. I yell; I cackle; I commit to the shadow, the eternality of the lost soul. I tell my husband *I hate you*, not for the first time and not for the last, but this time it’s so funny because it’s true but not real. Again, he laughs, pityingly, his laughter becoming his cruelty, indistinguishable from the unending joke of marriage’s mutual gnawing. The challenge now is to seize the laughter and realign it, once and for all, with a violence so severe it will destroy the mythological to bask in the inescapable real because the baby is scared and because my husband is always looking at his phone and because

there is blood pouring from my vulva and onto the doorsill because it is and has always been ordinary me who is the guardian at the threshold of the thin and porous entrance to Hell.

Sensing my blood, my husband stands up and grabs me in a way that reminds me I am a woman who sometimes needs to be fucked. With every penetration, I scream, almost exactly like the baby, feeling the tightness of my surgically healed wound tearing back open. He wonders aloud if he should stop, but I reassure him that the only way forward is through. After all, my claim to immortality is at stake, my willingness to die again and again and then to endure the pain of being reborn. It’s the violence that must occur. The punch line to the ultimate joke.

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# (To Explain)

The joke is funny because, after death, you can't look back and reflect. The joke is funny because living is spinning and then living stops and then everything is still. The joke is so funny because reversals are funny, and because mythology is funny (because it's real but untrue, which is why morality is funny, too). And the joke is funny because my jealousy was alive and then it died, not because I got everything I wanted (though I did) or because she was better off dead (she isn't) but because one day the tension mounted and then crested and then fell and then I wasn't jealous anymore, just really pissed. Isn't it funny, at least a little bit? To have felt so firmly attached to your own point of view? And then the next thing you know, it's just dead.

I know this isn't the ending you were expecting or hoping for. I tried to write a self-serious one, I did. And it was really good, even if it was more than a little untrue; it was very mythological and it was the ending the preface deserved. You should have been there: I became Jealousy and Jealousy was the fire you don't have to steal from the gods, because Jealousy is where the human and the divine embrace. It was about how Jealousy does more than just heat and burn. I commanded you to look into

the flames and see the shadows that would outlast the embers as charcoal and ash because Jealousy ends the same way fire ends: in a pile of soot. To turn, I quoted Milton, “my own mouth is the well in which I dip my pen,” the soot becoming the grime becoming the jealous ink I used to write this book because language is Invidia’s medium, always trying and failing to repossess the whole. But this is the ending to the book that The Blondes wanted and entered and absorbed and repossessed so that it’s not mine anymore. The joke’s on me.

I have to complete my jealous crisis some other way. I have to stop overlooking the gap that exists between this and that, which is the gap that symbolism and metaphor hurry past. Because light is almost photography and God is almost a soul and comedy is almost always about something else. So no, jealousy is not blue or plants or light or shadow or malls or phones or feeds or jokes or fire. Jealousy is jealousy. But that’s not an ending, because an end cannot only preserve, it must also further. So I’m trying to develop an interest in what’s left. To boil everything down to its solid and nonnarrative core. It’s not easy. As long as gaps and differences exist, jealousy doesn’t end; that’s why jealousy carries narratives but doesn’t deliver them; jealousy doesn’t begin by being itself and it doesn’t end in its own self-realization. It’s born in time, with us, as an unrealized potential. Inevitable; the seed of the human capacity to possess and be possessed, already nested in the ground. As soon as it springs, it’s subject to: the sun that’s always shining shining shining, and the other woman who is still posting, always posting, and the baby who is still crying crying crying, and the husband who is somehow always wiping his cum off my back. And me, who’s still going on and on about the ongoing cruelty of a woman having a mind, her inner freedom that chains her to the idea of herself that just cannot be. Until one day it’s over. She’s too tired, or too ashamed, or because she’s dead and to die is to be free in a way that the jealous gods can never be. And so the tragedy reveals itself to be a comedy after all, and comedy is the original sin. From there, it’s all downhill, but that’s the part that belongs to us, the long, slow descent back into nothing.

Welcome to the time after the end! Soon you’ll throw your book down, and cut the shadow from your feet, and walk out of the theater laughing because

it’s over and it’s also not. Just wait, for a god, or a Blonde, or me to come and ask you for another jealous favor.

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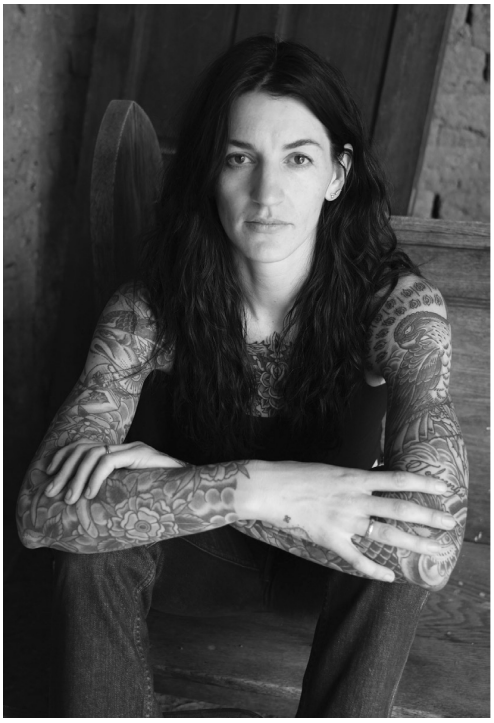

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JEALOUSY

This is a work of nonfiction. However, some names and identifying details of individuals have been changed to protect their privacy, correspondence has been shortened for clarity, and dialogue has been reconstructed from memory.

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