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# Juggernaut: A Memoir in Pieces

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JUGGERNAUT: A MEMOIR IN PIECES

LEEANN OLIVIER

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Charles Ambler, Ph.D.  
Dean of the Graduate School

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LeeAnn Olivier

2018

JUGGERNAUT: A MEMOIR IN PIECES

by

LEEANN OLIVIER, M.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

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of the Requirements

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

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## Critical Preface

### Aesthetics

In my lyric essay “Everything’s Gone Green,” which is set in the Piney Woods region of Lake Livingston, I utilize the color green as a connecting thread to investigate the sacred and healing aspects of nature and landscape. More importantly, however, what emerges in this piece is how the natural world became the one place where my former husband and I were able to co-exist and understand each other. This essay, which I wrote in Liz Scheid’s lyric essay class in the summer of 2017, became the seed for my thesis, a series of lyric essays woven together to form an experimental memoir. These essays address the link between place (bodies of water in particular) and identity, and they examine my experiences being married to (and eventually divorcing) a man with a traumatic brain injury that led to drug addiction, domestic violence, and a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Through the process of research, writing, and lived experience, I also came to the conclusion that my husband suffered from at least one of the Cluster B personality disorders, a dark assemblage of brain malfunctions that includes narcissism, borderline personality disorder, sociopathy, and psychopathy. Therefore, another layer was added to my research and focus of my thesis.

I had also written and published an essay entitled “Love Like Saltwater” that interweaves the story of a hurricane my Cajun ancestors survived on the Louisiana coast and my troubled relationship with my alcoholic father. This piece fits into the first section of my thesis, as it is heavily place- and water-based and also involves the source of dysfunction and abuse that would later haunt my adult life.

As a writer, I am deeply influenced by myths, fairy tales, and a feminist lens; and I would describe my aesthetic as dark, raw, visceral, and sensual. I see myself as a visual artist who uses

words instead of paint. In my essays, I employ many conventions of poetry, using imagery, diction, and musicality to create worlds. Animals often wander into my essays. Cormorants, vultures, dolphins and turtles appear in the essays throughout *Juggernaut*. I incorporated a great deal of place-based research into my essays as well, making sure the details in the worlds I am depicting are vivid and precise. Tim Hernandez's research-based writing course, which I took alongside my thesis hours in the spring of 2018, was very instrumental in helping me conduct and incorporate both field and secondary research into my project.

Another important influence on my work is the field of eco-feminism. My thesis chair when I received my first master's degree in literature from UTA in 2002 was Dr. Stacy Alaimo, an internationally recognized scholar of ecocultural theory, environmental humanities, science studies, and gender theory. Her monographs include *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* and *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*. Dr. Alaimo's critical work has influenced me for over fifteen years. I also presented on a panel at the Southwest Popular Culture Association Conference in New Mexico in February 2018 to discuss eco-feminism in dystopian narratives and in my own work. Even though my book is nonfiction, it still draws upon dystopian themes, mingling our current ecological calamities with the dissolution of a relationship that felt apocalyptic in scope. One of the essays, "Blight," imagines a post-apocalyptic future set in my home on the Trinity River. This essay was published as a short story in the Fall 2018 issue of the literary journal *The Hunger*. I believe my collection is necessary because it pays homage to a natural world that is in crisis. Moreover, the larger cultural narrative of women speaking up about abuse and becoming empowered also heavily informs this project.

In addition to Lake Livingston and the Gulf Coast, the landscapes that inform my collection have had a personal significance to me, my childhood, my family, and/or my former relationship with my husband. These include: Bayou Black, Lake Charles, and Lake Caddo in Louisiana; the Trinity River in Texas; and the many watersheds and urban spaces in Brooklyn, New York, where my best friend lives.

### **Finding One's Place in the Landscape**

My thesis coincided in theme and timeframe with a year-long faculty-development leave project, for which I feel fortunate. I was granted a sabbatical year by the community college where I teach, Tarrant County College Northwest Campus in Fort Worth, Texas, in order to write, research, and travel. As a published poet and writing professor, I initially envisioned my faculty-leave project to be an inquiry into writing about place as an anchor for larger concerns, a way for students to link where they came from as individuals to where we are all headed as a culture and a planet. By taking in the world around them, student writers can add to the understanding of a place—its people, animals, plants, and ecosystem—and offer their audience an eye into the world where they live. Writing about place allows students to become fully engaged in the fervor and realities of the spaces they represent, the communities in which they interact, and the landscapes that inhabit their hearts.

In addition to conducting field research and writing poetry and creative nonfiction about place and nature, I broadened my emphasis to include developing an Environmental Humanities curriculum that would take advantage of our unique campus on Marine Creek Lake. This program would involve using our new Nature Center as a classroom and collaborating with our Horticulture department. My hope is that our students will be able to pursue a degree track that

allows them to utilize place, landscape, nature, animal consciousness, and conservation efforts as inspiration for their creative and analytical assignments in the Humanities—thus helping them to become global citizens and custodians of the environment.

I spent the year (2017-18) studying current literature in the field, traveling, writing about various ecosystems and sacred spaces, and contributing what I learned in the form of writing-workshops for the community. My ethos as a poet has been to give voice to the voiceless, primarily in telling the stories of suppressed female characters from myths and fairy tales. I published a chapbook of poetry in 2016 entitled *Spindle, My Spindle*, which is essentially a collection of portraits of these marginalized characters. My plan for my thesis was originally to create a series of landscapes, and in many ways, that is what it turned out to be. My creative mission is now to try to give a voice to the environment. I researched Environmental Humanities programs at other colleges in the United States to see how their multi-disciplinary curriculum was designed and implemented. This research included examining service learning projects for students and unique learning-community combinations with an ecological focus.

My project also addressed student engagement. According to a study published last year by the Ecological Society of America involving college students at Wittenberg University in Ohio, students involved in service learning projects in the field of Environmental Humanities showed an increase in engagement with and comprehension of the course material and a better understanding of the applicability of course content to real world issues. Perhaps most importantly, many recent studies, including one published by Stanford University last year, have shown that when students unplug from technology and spend time in nature, it changes the workings of their brains in ways that improve cognitive ability as well as mental and emotional well-being. College students often have very stressful lives and suffer from problems such as

anxiety and depression. Helping students develop and foster a connection with nature is one way to improve, not only their critical thinking skills, but also their overall state of psychological health. As part of my project and my MFA thesis, I ended up devoting my time to extensive research, reading, and writing in the fields of: environmental humanities, ecocriticism, the effects of nature on the brain, the connection between place and identity, the art and craft of nature writing, the relationships between humans and animals, the toxic bond between empaths and narcissists, recovery from domestic violence and abuse, and the use of nature and art to help aid in trauma healing.

I returned to teaching in the fall of 2018 and gave a presentation about my leave-project and MFA thesis for the faculty and administrative body at Tarrant County College. In this presentation, I discussed some of the essays in *Juggernaut* and explained how they were tied to various types of ecosystems, such as sacred sites, cultural landscapes, ancestral and family places, dreamscapes and internal landscapes, cityscapes, haunted spaces and sites of trauma, and spaces for healing and safety. I also explored ways in which I am using my own work to help my students write about places that are significant to them, particularly students in my creative writing classes. Toward the end of this presentation, I “came out” to my colleagues as a survivor of domestic violence. Similarly, while my book began as a series of landscapes and did end up being largely landscape-informed, the reality of my abusive marriage to a deeply troubled narcissist took over my life as well as the scope of my thesis and leave project.

### **Navigating Through Narcissistic Abuse**

When my husband and I first fell in love, he told me that he was coming to terms with the fact that his father was a narcissist, and we both began reading and listening to the work of

Richard Grannon, a psychologist and master practitioner of neural linguistic programming (NLP). Thus, my introduction to the psychological study of narcissistic abuse and its effects involved learning about the negative impact this type of parenting has on a child. But my husband Kevin's investigation into this phenomenon served as a kind of smokescreen and created cognitive dissonance and denial when I started to suspect that Kevin himself might also be a narcissist. His official diagnosis was bipolar disorder, which Chicago-based psychiatrist Dr. Kenneth A. Cohen had identified at least a decade before we started dating. I attributed his grandiosity to manic episodes, and I read a book called *Loving Someone With Bipolar Disorder* in order to learn more about my role as the partner of someone with this illness.

I remember the exact moment when my research shifted to my role as the partner of a narcissist, however. I was taking a shower, and Kevin came into the bathroom and started banging on the shower door and yelling at me because he couldn't find a clean pair of socks to wear to a meeting with one of his yoga mentors. He dragged me out of the shower, dripping wet, so that I could help him with his quest. When I investigated that exact behavior, which I found utterly bizarre, my search led me to the word "narcissist." I started seeing a counselor privately who told me she thought he was probably actually a "borderline." However, I couldn't find many books about dealing with a borderline, and my gut still told me he was a narcissist. (And honestly, after all of my research, I think they're essentially the same thing.) So I downloaded a book on narcissistic abuse to my Kindle, and reading it was like looking into a mirror of my life. I began downloading every book I could find on the topic and reading them secretly. Unfortunately, Kevin figured out how to see what e-books I was reading by logging into my Amazon account, and he became furious when he discovered the nature of my current line of research. So I removed the books from my virtual bookshelf.

But over the next few weeks and months, I began conducting copious research into not only narcissistic personality disorder but also emotional abuse, trauma bonding, codependency, and the controlling behavior of abusive partners. These self-help books ended up informing my thesis a great deal, particularly in the last section, in essays such as “The Narcissist’s Arsenal: A Glossary” and “Going Feral,” in which I am finally able to find a vocabulary to describe my particular trauma. Thus, the landscapes I explore in my collection shift from external to internal. Not only have I added these invaluable titles and authors to my bibliography for this project, I am also planning to write a self-help book exploring this phenomenon as my next major writing project.

### **Writing Through Trauma**

“It is poetry...that has enabled (Rosaldo) to grasp ‘how deep rage could grow out of grief,’ poetry that speaks an understanding of loss and that speaks of it in something other than the individual voice,” Jean Franco writes in her foreword to Renato Rosaldo’s haunting collection *The Day of Shelly’s Death: The Poetry and Ethnography of Grief*. In these poems written many years after his wife’s tragic accidental death, Rosaldo explores the effects of personal trauma from the perspectives of the local Mungayang villagers who helped his family, the objects surrounding and thus symbolizing this moment of profound loss, and even the Phillipine landscape itself. Using a similar approach, Raymond McDaniel chronicles the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in an assemblage of the voices of a ravaged New Orleans in his collection *Saltwater Empire*. The act of writing through grief and trauma is a difficult but valuable practice, one that can provide catharsis for both writer and reader. Writing about trauma can convey and validate the author’s personal truth; make a coherent experience out of

fragmentation; and turn the literal into the figurative, thus making suffering emblematic and universal and transmuting trauma into art.

Expressing one's truth can be liberating for victims of trauma because many of us have had our realities invalidated, often by perpetrators of abuse and/or people who are supposed to be our protectors and champions. Putting our own truth in writing helps to solidify it, to make it real. In this way we become our own champions, or own reporters of truth. In Paola Bozzi's article about Herta Muller's work, she argues that poeticizing or fictionalizing one's experience through writing can be a way to discover and release "one's true self," despite pressure to conform to the expectations and perhaps alternative realities of family and society. Moreover, writing that is purely representational (just the "facts") does not convey one's personal truth as well as writing that is processed and filtered through the world of the imagination (Bozzi).

In a 1997 paper in *Psychological Science*, Jamie Pennebaker describes a series of experiments in which participants were asked to spend three consecutive days writing about a traumatic event, to explore the thoughts and emotions surrounding the event, and to tie it to relationships with significant others. Pennebaker followed the people in these studies over time and noted that they reported fewer illnesses, had fewer doctors' visits, and suffered fewer symptoms of depression in the future as compared to victims of trauma who had not written about their experiences. They were also less likely to miss work and school, their performance at work was higher, and these effects lasted for months and years after writing about their trauma (Markman). There is a healing effect to simply put one's truth down on the page. Rosaldo said that it was only after writing about his grief over the traumatic incident of his wife's accidental death that he was able to clear away disease that had manifested in his body (Hernandez).

Writing about trauma can also help us to create a holistic narrative out of fragmented parts. According to U.T. Austin psychology professor Art Markman, one reason for the stress of psychological trauma is that our representations of traumatic events are fragmented. Because they are fragmented, there are constant reminders of them ricocheting through our psyches. But, because they are painful, we do not process them deeply. And so, we suffer the stress of remembering a painful situation without resolving the incoherence. We often have painful facts with no story to bind them together, but the mind is most settled when there is coherence to our thoughts (Markman). There is great benefit in creating a story in writing that links together emotional memories. Making these traumatic events more coherent makes memories of these events less likely to be repeatedly called to mind, so they can be laid to rest.

Scholars of Muller's work have also "connected images and strategies of fragmentation and disruption with trauma theory" (Bozzi). While a great deal of Modernist writing attempts to make a narrative whole out of fragmented parts, surfictionists such as Muller create "black holes" rather than "wholes" with their fragments and then give readers a way to climb out of these treacherous spaces, creating a kind of catharsis (Bozzi). Either way, this concretization of traumatic memories can prove healing for the writer and the reader. Rosaldo said that grief is something that cycles around in a fragmented way, and we are not in charge of its appearances and re-appearances in our lives. But transmuting this pain into poetry offers us a great opportunity to heal and transform (Hernandez).

However, it isn't necessarily trauma alone that makes for a compelling poem or story. Sometimes the surface content, no matter how well it's written, still needs to connect to something more, something deeper. Not every troubling or difficult thing we have experienced will be interesting to someone who doesn't know us. In Muller's work, "the author's

representation of a certain authentic experience (is) dependent on the senses and therefore radically individual” (Bozzi). Muller’s writing about trauma is informed by both the individual senses and the poetic imagination. Poet Sasha Pimentel gave me some advice in one of her workshops that has transformed the way that I write and the way that I teach writing. She said that the more concrete, specific, and individualized our images are, the more deeply and widely we will be able to reach our readers. According to writer, teacher, and trauma survivor Said Sayrafiezadeh, everything *can* connect and be emblematic if we know where to look, and we are able to discover which images to extract from our personal experiences that will render them universal. For example, Muller’s work articulates trauma in an unflinching way but also uses lyrical language and exists in the realm of the imagination. The reader responds because of the poetic, imaginative sensibility of Muller’s art. “To see imaginatively is to clothe something in a fiction that transforms its meaning and may take the simple form of an image, a system of images, or a fiction proper evoked by the language” (Bozzi). This layering of images over perceptions is a way to turn trauma into art. And by turning our trauma into art, we can create poetry, according to Rosaldo, that is “accountable to” a larger “social and psychic world” (qtd. in Hernandez).

My own experience of writing through the trauma I have experienced in an abusive marriage has been an attempt to document and validate my reality, to piece together fragmented images, and to turn a personal truth into a universal narrative. Trauma is a visceral and immediate experience, but by turning it into pure image, this can provide a way to veil one’s truth, in a sense, allowing each reader to interpret the work according to his/her lens. In my poetry, the traumatized body turns into a space that allows creatures to clamor in. Obviously this is not “reality” because the body could not survive such an invasion, but it is my visceral

experience of the reality of emotional abuse transmuted to imagery on the page. In transitioning from poetry to the lyrical essay form in order to document my experiences, however, I don't have to choose between pure image and pure "truth." I can do both simultaneously. Just like in the work of Herta Muller and Renato Rosaldo, my poetic images can enrich my factual reportage and vice versa. Writing lyrically about grief and trauma can be "an attempt to release one's true self" and thus to find and express one's true voice.

### **Bibliographical Influences**

Artistic works from several different genres also served as inspiration for this project, including books of poetry, essay collections, nonfiction books, and short stories. Dense, brief lyrical essays detailing women's lived experiences, such as those found in *Shape of Blue* by my thesis chair Liz Scheid, *Bluets* by Maggie Nelson, *The White Album* by Joan Didion, and *M Train* by Patti Smith were extremely stirring to me as I was working on my own project. Each of these female writers speaks her own truth in an eloquent way and explores grief, trauma, memory, and the importance of landscape. As a writer with poetic sensibilities, I often read poetry collections, and there are a few that I read as I was writing my thesis whose influence wound their way into my work: *Bestiary* by Donika Kelly, *Citizen* by Claudine Rankine, *Banana Palace* by Dana Levin, and *Bone Map* by Sara Eliza Johnson. The work of these poets is especially visceral and haunting, and I hope my work can be described in a similar fashion. After I read as much as I could stomach about narcissism and abusive relationships, I turned to other nonfiction books to use as a source of healing, particularly *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, *The Heroine's Journey*, *The Artist's Way*, and *Animal Speaks*. The feminine and nature-

centered spirituality of these books helped me to find and craft my own voice as I was writing my memoir.

Even though my collection is nonfiction, I believe much of it is also informed by the genre of feminist, literary horror. Several of my essays, including “Tapestry,” “Blight,” and “Monsters,” either address this sensibility or utilize its aesthetics. As I was writing, I happened upon a short story collection called *Her Body and Other Parties* by Carmen Maria Machado. These vignettes of women navigating through various sites and spaces of horror had an impact on my collection as well. My thesis committee advised me to stay open-minded and allow the work to take me where it wanted to go. Looking back at my essays, I am surprised at the thread of influence that horror master Stephen King seems to have knit throughout my book. I believe that King must have experienced domestic abuse first-hand (perhaps from his father against his mother) because he is so skilled at turning the survival of this type of violence into art, and he often does so by looking through a feminist lens.

Because I was documenting my year in order to bring back evidence of scholarship when I returned to work, I took many photographs of the various landscapes I was writing about. These photos served as a kind of field research and journalistic reporting. They enabled me to recall the events in greater detail and to describe the landscapes in such a way that I was better able to create a sensory experience.

Not only did I utilize my own images as inspiration, but I was also very moved by some of the visual art that I encountered during my travels, and this art served as inspiration for some of my essays. “Tapestry” was heavily influenced by a Louise Bourgeois retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Her sculptures pulled me in with their own sort of enchantment. Giant, maternal spiders crouched above metal cages, forever mending their broken

webs. Women turned into spirals, pivoting on pointed toes. I felt like each room represented a decade in the artist's long life, and I walked through her body, wrapping myself in the fabric of her memories. "If you bash into the web of a spider," Bourgeois once said, "She doesn't get mad. She weaves and repairs it." Bourgeois cut up all the textiles of her childhood—bed linens, towels, tablecloths, handkerchiefs—and spent the rest of her life piecing it all back together again. Weaving was her way to make things whole. I felt like that was what I was also doing by weaving together threads of my life to form a cohesive whole in my collection.

The "David Bowie Is" exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art inspired my essay "Ashes to Ashes" because the experience was immersive, engulfing all of my senses. In April of 2018, immediately after I tried to establish "no contact" with Kevin and met with my lawyer to move forward with the divorce proceedings, I escaped to New York. Roaming through the David Bowie exhibit, I started thinking about the ways our experiences merge (or sometimes clash) the external world that we process through our five senses and the internal landscapes swirling around within us. I believe this concept informs many pieces in my thesis.

## **Challenges and Resolutions**

One of the prevalent difficulties I encountered was the traumatic nature of using my own life as my thesis subject. I recently spoke with a colleague whose MFA thesis project was to make a documentary about his own food addiction, and he struggled with this stressful and vulnerable merging of life and art, especially since he (like I) was working under a strict deadline. I believe all artists' lives inform their work, writers in particular. However, because I chose to write a memoir in prose, the project I undertook was especially personal. In the throes of my abusive relationship, which I kept trying unsuccessfully to end, I sought a resolution not

only for my own well-being but for the sake of closure for my book and its potential readers. My biggest obstacle in finishing my thesis was the stressful nature of my life. Even after I established “no contact” with my (now ex) husband in April 2018, I was diagnosed with complex post traumatic stress disorder. While writing about my trauma did prove to be incredibly healing, there were times when it felt like a Herculean effort. There were some days in which the last thing I wanted to do was to re-live my harrowing experiences on the page, but I didn’t have the luxury of waiting until I was ready to process those experiences and turn my attention to other work in the moment.

I put the finishing touches on the collection and pieced everything together during the weekend of September 28, which would have been my third anniversary had I stayed married to Kevin. That weekend I escaped to the Gulf Coast with my family and had the pleasure of writing my final pages on a balcony that overlooked the Atlantic Ocean. But even in that idyllic setting, as I was immersed in my work, the horrific political landscape infiltrated my headspace. As I was writing about my own trauma and abuse, which included sexual assault, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford gave her courageous testimony to a future Supreme Court justice and a throng of other powerful white men who expressed all of the empathy of a rhumba of rattlesnakes. While this horror-show made the collective pain body of all women who have experienced similar trauma swell up inside of us as red and throbbing as whip-welts would have appeared across our flesh, it also lit a fire in me to finish my project and to make sure I wove at least some of the scorched-earth political landscape into it. I overcame the writer’s block that had been plaguing me by focusing on adding my voice to a collective body of brave women’s stories instead of allowing myself to drown in my own personal pain.

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## **Juggernaut: A Memoir in Pieces**

*Several festivals are held at the temple in Puri, India, each year, the most important being the Chariot Festival in midsummer. On this occasion, the image of Juggernaut is placed on a 60-foot-high cart and pulled through the town by hundreds of people. Occasionally worshippers have thrown themselves beneath the wheels of the cart to be crushed as a sacrifice to the god Jagannatha. This practice gave rise to the English word juggernaut, meaning a person or power that crushes anything in its path.*

--The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable

## **Pandemic**

After the bomb your body  
becomes bunker to pandaemonium.  
Your heart a nuclear winter.

You heave open your ribs' hull.  
Creatures clamor in, cramped  
and chittering. Fur and tooth. Squirm

and blight. Your couplings little holocausts.  
They eat you out, healer turns monster.  
Bright spinal knurls spatter against the wall,

a Pollock painting. Your gut a panoply, devil's  
knot. Nest of snakes, Medusa-wound.  
Medea-mad. You name yourself  
*Aftermath.*

## **I: Blight**

## Everything's Gone Green

*There came a time  
I couldn't look at trees without  
feeling elegiac—as if nature  
were already over,  
if you know what I mean.  
It was the most glorious thing I had ever seen.*

—Dana Levin, Banana Palace

We pause to take in the green all around us. Lush. Wet. Tall grasses and wildflowers swaying on stalks. An aristocracy of blackjack oak trees and loblolly pines encircle us and bend toward each other to form a canopy, a jade ceiling blanketing a lake as glassy as cellophane. At Lake Livingston in the Piney Woods region of southeast Texas, my nephew Joe and I wake up early, while the rest of the family sleeps. I sit on the front porch drinking coffee and watching the sun rise over the lake, and he prepares his rods for a day of fishing. My two dogs explore the new landscape, sniffing and rolling, covering themselves in the smells of dead fish and worms and rodent urine. Maya's ears perk up as she hears the sounds of bass splashing in the water.

“Everything's so green here,” I tell Joe. “Doesn't it make you feel alive?”

“Yep,” he replies, in the monosyllabic fashion of a teenager. But he is a child of nature, planning to attend Texas A&M Galveston in the fall of 2019 to study ocean engineering, so I know he gets it. A chorus of frogs surrounds us, their cries punctuated by my dachshund Bijou's barking. She's a born huntress, taunted by the wail of this prey that surrounds her.

If Kevin were here, he would probably be outside with us now, even at this early hour, soaking in the beauty and hiking with the dogs through the forest. Lately our love of green is the one thing that still connects us.

I think about green, my favorite color, the way it envelops and heals: Aloe vera. Ayahuasca. Lavendar. Yarrow. Cannabis. Lemon balm. The way it keeps returning despite humanity's efforts to wipe it out.

\*\*\*

Green is the color of creation, the color of yes, of go, of bless, of grow, of abundance and expansion.

My mother's eyes are yellow-green, flecked with light. A cat's eyes, the eyes of a Celtic witch, they dance like gemstones. My husband's eyes are gray-green. They smoulder and warn—the glow of a pre-tornado sky. Mine aren't so dramatic but are green nonetheless—hazel and pitch-dark—the color of a Louisiana bayou at dusk or Army fatigues on a soldier crouched in a moonlit trench.

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I used to wear red a lot until my therapist Dr. Mabli said to me: “You should wear green more often.” Dr. Mabli always wore green or blue. The day he gave me this advice, he wore a turquoise shirt, the collar starched, the skin of his neck olive-dark and his green eyes impish under his glasses.

“Why?” I asked him.

“Because you're Mediterranean. You don't have much pink pigmentation. Green is a contrast to red, so it will bring out some pink in your cheeks. Make you look healthier.”

I didn't know that my 75-year-old, Italian-born therapist from the Bronx was also a member of the fashion police. But, due to my need for paternal approval, I followed his advice.

Now, when you look in my closet, articles of clothing arranged according to the color spectrum, you'll see a sea of kelly-green morphing into forest and teal. Sea-green and lime-green. A turquoise sweatshirt with the words “The Yoga Project” embossed on it in silver letters. A bell-sleeved olive blouse that wraps around and ties at the waist. A strapless lime-green

sundress I bought from a beach vendor on Galveston Island, its skirt emblazoned with purple calla lillies.

My skin, which I inherited from my French father rather than my Irish mother, has green undertones, my veins teal rather than indigo. Winter is not my season. In the winter I am bone-white, but unlike my Irish friend Amy, with her rosy cheeks and bright, blue eyes, I see the green underneath the pale. On the plus side, my skin turns a golden-brown as the months turn warmer, while hers burns and freckles.

My half-Hawaiian husband also prefers to wear green, his closet a sea of cool colors—faded jeans and gray yoga pants, soft teal t-shirts and heavy cotton jackets. I have asked him to move out, but that doesn't mean I don't still love him. That doesn't mean I won't still draw his fragments to me after he's gone, pressing my face into whatever khaki-green windbreaker he chooses to leave behind, as if oxygen itself seeps from its threads.

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My first memories of God were green.

When I was five years old, my mother's ailing schnauzer Kip disappeared. I was the one who found her still-warm body, in a patch of grass behind the backyard hideaway of my camo-green tent. I remember placing my hand on her silver fur, feeling the life slipping out of her and knowing I was exactly where I needed to be. I saw a column of green light spiral upward from her body, illuminating a tornado of dandelion motes and pollen spores in the air before it disappeared.

God didn't live in the Methodist church my family attended. I never understood why I had to wear itchy tights and starched dresses and mary janes I wasn't allowed to scuff just to

cram into a pew and try not to fall asleep or pass notes and drawings to my brother, scribbled on the backs of church programs.

But every summer we attended a family reunion in Lake Charles, Louisiana, where my mother's cousin David officiated at a sunrise worship service. God lived amid the weeping cyprus giants, the dogwoods and the redbuds, the lake gleaming like silver, and the pale-green sky lit up with streaks of rose and gold at dawn.

As an adult I don't subscribe to any particular religion. And even though I study Tibetan Buddhism and yoga philosophy, my spiritual leanings are still pagan—my sun in Taurus, my heart ebbing and flowing with the changing cycles of the moon.

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Kevin and I got married two Septembers ago at the water gardens under the Harvest moon—a full, super-blood-moon eclipse, to be precise. Nature is what united us, what still bonds us. When we cross the rusty suspension bridge that leads into Z. Boaz Park, we step into a place where we become raw, where all of our drama and demons fall away. Pokeberry bushes serve as threshold guardians. Once inside the kingdom, we try to name flowers, to identify birds by their songs. In some places the grass is so tall, it feels more like we are swimming through it. Kevin breaks off a big stick, waves it in front of us like a wand to check for spider webs. Sometimes a red-tailed hawk cuts across the sky, its shriek as haunting as the battle cry of a warrior. These are the moments I will miss the most.

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Two weeks ago, on the eve of the summer solstice, my friend Christi invited me to a free yoga class on the banks of the Trinity River. A lattice of cedar elm branches criss-crossed above us as we leaned back into reverse warrior or rose up from the ground into bridge pose. The deep

green river undulated beside us, long and lithe as a garden snake. After class, I noticed Christi's manicure and pedicure, her fingers and toes painted clover green. "I love your nail-polish," I said.

"I just got this done today, and I knew I was going to see you tonight. That's why I chose this shade," she said. I had been writing about green for the past two days, thinking about green, seeing it everywhere. How strange and wonderful to see my thoughts manifested on my friend's hands and feet.

Lately I have been noticing the green spines of books on my shelf; green tubes and jars of sunscreen and foot lotion and hair texturizer in my bathroom; the forest-colored leaves embossed on the red patio pillows my dogs like to sleep on underneath my writing desk; tints of patina in the gray skin of the elephant in the painting that hangs on my kitchen wall; the pea-green velvet couch my husband's doctor sold to us for \$100.

Even my car is green, or green-ish anyway, although the official color Mini-Cooper released in 2009 was called "Oxygen blue." On the desk in front of my laptop, my journal is green, as well as the potted cactus and peace lily plants. An empty bottle of "Prophecy High Priestess" sauvignon blanc—one that I saved because of its depiction of a green-robed sorceress—sits in the kitchen windowsill above the sink.

What we focus on expands.

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My handsome green-eyed husband is a drug addict.

He was diagnosed with bipolar disorder before we started dating, and he revealed this to me at the beginning of our relationship, giving me a way out if I wanted it. But I had known

Kevin since I was ten and loved him with a pain so radiant it cut through everything. There was no way out for me.

He was my older brother's best friend, and when we were growing up, he lived with my family off and on for six years. As a child I never questioned why he kept getting kicked out of his own home. I only knew his infinite kindness, his love of animals, the way he seemed more at home outdoors than indoors. He was my brother's only friend who never hit on me, never acted creepy, never treated me with anything but respect. He used to sleep on the other side of the wall from me, he and my brother smoking pot and listening to Pink Floyd. I'd place my palm against the wall, curl up next to it, imagine I could hear him breathing.

He uses drugs to mask his symptoms, to try to regulate his troubled mind. I understand this. I used to think addiction always involved a drug of choice. I thought there were simply meth-heads or coke-heads, alcoholics or gamblers, sex addicts or heroin addicts. But my husband is addicted to being an addict. It took me two years to figure out he was an addict because his drug of choice kept changing.

I was his drug at first, which explains why I didn't notice it. We married after a brief but intense courtship; then he became addicted to day trading, gambling away all of the severance package he'd been given by the financial-services company in Chicago that laid him off. Suddenly I was the sole breadwinner. And I was married to an addict with a mental illness.

In the past two years, he's churned and burned through mushrooms and meth-amphetamines, opiates and exercise—his tall, muscular body an endless human symbol of a snake eating its own tail, over and over.

Marijuana is his daily fix. When he ran out of money, he turned one of my bedrooms into a lab. A rich friend funded the operation, bought grow lights and exhaust fans, humidifiers and thermometers. They bored holes in my walls and taped up the windows with trash bags—a Pentecostal preacher on one side of my house, a cop on the other.

I'm not a smoker, but I have no moral problem with weed. I believe it serves as medicine to people who really need it, including my husband. But conservative Texas is a long way from legalization.

Still, I learned how to detect ripe buds through a magnifying glass, marveling at the amber beads that formed on the fuzzy tips of the leaves. Instead of knitting while watching TV at night, I would trim plants. It was a meticulous exercise, like shaping Bonsai trees, my hands sticky with resin, the living room ripe with the smell of green.

If it weren't for Kevin's rage problem, I might still be aiding and abetting him. In March, when he put yet another fist through yet another wall, I snapped out of my codependent stupor. I stopped saying yes. I started seeing the color red every time I closed my eyes. I started saying no to everything. I became a wall of NO.

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At Lake Livingston Joe and I stay up late. We creep to the lip of the pier, dip our crab-nets and wait for meat. Two tacit egrets wade through a tangle of Bible-green vines, the buck-moon low and swollen as a toothache in a night sky gilled with green. My phone lights up neon green with texts from Kevin. I ignore them. My nephew and I fall asleep on the floor of the cabin, my dogs huddled between us. With the front door open, we feel the warm breeze, hear the frog and cicada chorus. Yellow jackets lurch and hum, trapped behind the screen door in a woozy ballet of half-flight, too drunk from summer to even know they're dying.

## Love Like Saltwater

As I study my genealogy chart, I love to say the names of my Cajun ancestors, names like Jean Baptiste Olivier and Marie Magdelaine Monpierre, liquid names that curl in the mouth like minnows, then unfurl and swim off the tongue. I come from a family of fishermen. My immigrant relatives made their living catching silverfins and tiger prawns in the netherworld of Bayou Black, the swamp singing in their veins, as lush as green rivers.

On a Sunday afternoon in August of 1856, long before hurricanes had female names, a violent storm ravaged Terrebonne Parish where my ancestors lived on the Louisiana coast, killing over two hundred people. The hurricane also destroyed the hotel and gambling houses at nearby Isle Derniere, leaving the island bereft, void of vegetation and split in half, the once bustling seaside resort transformed into a haven for brown pelicans and black-backed herons, royal terns and laughing gulls. Rains flooded the Mermentau River and destroyed crops along the bottom lands. Saltwater soaked rice fields in Bayou Black, stripped fruit from orange trees, and smeared the air with swirls of brine and citrus. Survivors clung to bales of cotton and washed ashore as the storm subsided. My great-great grandmother Delphine, whose name is a French-Greek hybrid of “dolphin,” survived the storm. She was fifteen when the hurricane hit.

I imagine Saturday night before the great storm, Delphine and her sister Aurelia, like my nephew Joe and me, dipping their nets and waiting for crawfish. I imagine on Sunday morning after dawn, the sun turned the moor to loam, and a violet sheen skimmed the gulf. I imagine Delphine sprawled on the front porch, watching the sky glower and sink and the vultures wheel and dive like black angels. My great-great grandmother was a Catholic girl, but I imagine, like me, she harbored a secret pagan heart. On Sunday afternoon, the storm loomed, and Delphine’s limbs aquiver, she whirled and danced like a dervish while the sea swelled. She was Hurricane Delphine, deciding whom to love when she saw who could crawl from the shambles unscathed,

who could cling to a bale of cotton and sweep ashore, his swamp-green eyes singed with salt, his blue-black hair braided with seaweed. This is how she would choose her mate—her own personal Poseidon. I like to pretend this is how she met Pierre Zephirin Olivier, my great-great grandfather.

A century and a half later, their ghosts dance on my ribs, their maritime blood brewing inside me, imbuing me with a hunger for salt and brine and sun. Perhaps this is why I swam as soon as I could walk, staying under the water until my flesh puckered and my green eyes burned, flicking my imaginary fins, twirling like a drunken ballerina, and tumbling over and over until I almost believed I could breathe water instead of air. A timid child too scared to climb trees or ride bicycles, I was always the first to dive, fetching pennies that glimmered like buried treasure at the bottom of the pool. Once I even swam with dolphins off the Mexican coast of Isla Mujeres, my hands gliding over the animals' satin spines as they keened and twittered, their powerful bodies coiling around me, weaving human and dolphin skin into one skein. I felt like I was home.

Shortly after I learned to swim, I figured out how to mix my father's martinis—gin rather than vodka, shaken instead of stirred, laden with green olives and poured over ice. I wanted to make myself useful to him. This is how it began, I suppose, my addiction to addicts. I remember the heady smell of the liquor, the clink of ice against the tumbler. I remember how he chilled the olives in champagne until they were smooth as emeralds bobbing in bubbles. I used to dive for the olives submerged at the bottom of his glass, and I would suck the juice out of them, rolling them around on my tongue, loving their briny, gin-and-champagne-soaked taste. They tasted like the ocean, like the swamp where my father's people lived, like fishermen, olive skin and sea-green eyes and ink-dark hair...like my father himself.

While most of the girls I knew received cars and college educations from their fathers, the Olivier genealogy chart is the only thing my father ever provided for me after I turned eighteen and he no longer had to pay child support. My father and I never knew each other well. All we shared was the same saltwater in our veins. A born seaman, he served as a lieutenant commander in the Navy and was often stationed overseas at exotic-sounding places like Guam and Bahrain and Okinawa. When I was in elementary school, he lived in Japan for two years, so I became obsessed with that seafaring country—their Kyoto dolls, their sushi rolls and squid salad, their beds as compact as cupboard drawers. When my father returned to us in Shreveport, he didn't have much use for me outside of my bartending skills. He found me too fey, too fanciful, too peculiar. He called me a “bleeding heart liberal,” “an egg about to crack.” Then he left us for good.

My father never really knew his father—Alcide Olivier, nicknamed “Frenchie”—because he died when my father was a little boy. In the only photograph I have ever seen of my grandfather, he stands, haggard and swarthy, next to my elegant grandmother, his shock of sable hair mussed and oily, a hand-rolled cigarette dangling from his mouth. Working as a roughneck on a Gulf Coast oil rig, Frenchie traded in a life of fishing for a life of drilling. He swapped the salt air for sulfuric acid, and his blackened lungs couldn't take it. So I suppose it isn't my father's fault that he didn't know how to be a dad. He never had anyone to show him.

In the French folktale, “Love Like Salt,” a king asks his daughter how much she loves him. She replies, “I love you as much as fresh meat loves salt.” The king is so perplexed by his daughter's answer that he disowns her and banishes her from the palace. Years later the banished daughter marries a prince from a neighboring kingdom and invites her father to the wedding. Still desperate to please her father, she requests that the food for the wedding feast be prepared

without any salt. But the king spits the food from his mouth, declaring it “tasteless.” The king then embraces his daughter, apologizing for his neglect and admitting he was wrong to misinterpret her words. For the rest of the wedding banquet, the king relishes plump shrimp curled in crimson sauce, fat scallops soaked in butter, and brine-drenched oysters dipped in sea salt, affirming they are the best foods he has ever tasted.

Unlike the mythical French king, I doubt my estranged father will ever appreciate my way of looking at the world, acknowledge the hole his absence carved into my life, or forgive me for being who I am. But I can try to forgive him. After all, his DNA is the salt that flavors my food. He gave me more than a genealogy chart, more than a list of French names printed in black font on twenty pages of white paper. He gave me sea gods washing ashore. He gave me ancestors fishing under the feverish flambeau of the bayou, luminous as selkies drying their silken skins in the sun. He gave me a rich history from which I can weave stories, spinning them around in my mind like dolphins spiraling up from the bottom of the sea. He gave me my love for the water.

## Biting My Tongue

Even after eight years with Brock, we could skulk into some seedy bar where his band had probably played and talk and talk like new lovers, like people just discovering each other. He was my boyfriend before Kevin. There were fewer fireworks in that relationship, but the friendship was strong. We'd talk about our childhoods, about movies we loved, embellishing, even making shit up, but it didn't matter. We were both storytellers.

His spirit of choice was whiskey, which matched his deep, Oklahoma drawl. He sounded like bourbon laced with morphine and honey. He had a voice for radio but didn't stay in school long enough to finish his Communications degree. I drank Cape Cods, or "vodka-cranberries with lime" as I called them in the bars we usually frequented, fearing the bartender, with his dyed-black hair and face that rarely saw sunlight, would either not recognize, or worse—sneer at—my order. Bars have a way of interfering with your circadian rhythms. We'd sit in the dark all day, drinking and talking, then tumble outside at three in the afternoon, blinded and surprised by the sun, hunching down and covering our faces with our hands like vampires. That was before Brock got sober and I got a real job. That was when our lives revolved around drinking and smoking and bands and tattoos—the art girl and the rockabilly boy.

A couple of years ago Brock emailed me to say he was sorry. Sorry for all the ways in which he had hurt me. I responded by saying, "Yeah, me too. Sorry. So sorry," not realizing then that he was on his ninth step, and his email was an amends letter. But then I remembered all the times he would hang his head out of the car window, puking on the passenger door of my red Hyundai Tiburon as I drove us home, the way my gut would curl up with anger and revulsion and guilt. How he'd pass out on the bathroom floor of our old, dank rental house in the cultural district, and I would just leave him there, my gut still knotting, not willing to drag his big carcass

to a more comfortable spot. Sometimes if I were feeling generous, I'd at least throw a blanket over him.

I've been rescuing men my whole life.

No knights on white horses ever swooped in to liberate me. Instead my mother's brand of feminism may have instilled empowerment, but it also turned me into a martyr. She taught me that women were the superior sex, and therefore, it was our responsibility to placate and coddle the males of our species. So we were the ones always trying to save my father, my brother, and Kevin. From their addictions, from their damaged hearts and brains. With Joan of Arc as our icon, we were the knights on white horses.

In the 1970s, I taught myself to read from a shoebox filled with cassette tapes. Each tape had an illustrated story booklet that accompanied it, allowing me to see the words as I listened to them. I remember the pastel hues of each matching story and tape--lime green or salmon pink or powder blue--the squeaking sound the plastic envelopes would make as I unearthed each treasure from its casing, the click and whir of the tapes as their spools spiraled over and over again in the cassette player in my bedroom. Mostly I favored the obscure stories—"The Selfish Giant" by Oscar Wilde, Hans Christian Andersen's "Thumbelina," or the whimsical tale, "Johnny Fedora and Alice Bluebonnet," a love story about—of all things—hats on horses' heads. But it was Andersen's mermaid who captivated me the most. I remember a row of figures rising from the waves on the cover of "The Little Mermaid" booklet, their long hair snaking down their backs in glittering shades of copper and gold. I had to look at the "Snow White and the Seven Dwarves" cover if I wanted to see dark hair like my own, but that story didn't interest me: Perky princess

cleans up after seven little men only to end up cased in glass, waiting like a coma patient to be awakened by yet another man.

No...it was the mermaid whom I turned to over and over again--the girl who did the rescuing, who breathed life into her precious human prince, the girl who yearned for a red, sunlit world in which she didn't belong. This was the real story of bargaining and self-sacrifice. I can still see the illustration of the mermaids rising up from the water like the bobbers my brother used for fishing, their shorn heads speckled with stubble because they had sold their shimmering locks to the sea witch in exchange for their little sister's safe return. I remember the silence of the mermaid's voice gone mute after the sea witch cut out her tongue so that she couldn't even scream when her tail split into legs, couldn't cry out night after night of dancing on glass in hopes of entertaining her beloved. The original narrative is no Disney-fied fairy tale. It's a brutal story in which Andersen tortures his protagonist, symbolically castrating her by slicing off her tongue, splitting her tail, and stabbing her new feet with a thousand tiny knives.

Stories have the power to enlighten, to heal, and even to transform. But maybe favoring this story in particular and reading it time and again created a *samskara* in my psyche—a bad pattern, a furrow burned into my brain like the groove on a record.

In my literature classes, I often ask my students to name their favorite story of all time. I ask them to ponder the question: “How has your story shaped you?” What I want to know is, do we find ourselves living out our favorite stories, over and over again? If this is the case, I suppose children need to be careful about which stories they choose. But how can we be? Don't stories choose us? I don't know what drew me to Andersen's brutal tale, but I know I have found

myself living it, over and over again—rescuing washed-up princes, biting my tongue, eating my words, stuffing my feelings and soaking them in wine.

Whenever I said anything Kevin disagreed with or perceived as criticism, his face changed into something almost monstrous, his green eyes blackened. His square jaw twitched, body tightening, big hands clenched into fists. Then *his* words spewed forth, loud outbursts or streams of insults, little daggers pricking my guts. So I learned to stay quiet.

I interviewed him about his head injuries, hoping to gain more insight into the static that permeates his brain, the constant crackle he tried so hard to obliterate, sometimes with yoga and meditation and time in nature, sometimes with hard drugs and visceral screams and smashing glass. On good days, he just talked. And talked. I saved hours of voice recordings: Kevin describing football injuries and street fights, kickboxing knock-outs and amphetamine overdoses, motorcycle accidents and self-inflicted wounds. When I showed a transcript of the interview to one of my mentors, he said, “But where are you in all of this?” I was dissolving into that marriage, my once strong voice fading to a whisper, to the white noise between Kevin’s monologues. I traded my voice to love someone who could not love me back, for the privilege of being pierced by a thousand tiny knives.

The third time I left Kevin, I tried to lay low. I didn’t change my Facebook status. I only shared the information with close friends and family. But still the exes began to circle around my dying relationship. “Vultures,” my colleague Cheryl said when I told her Kevin had hacked into my iCloud and was enraged from reading unsolicited texts from ex-boyfriends. Vultures have an undeserved bad reputation, but I try not to bore everyone I know with that story.

Brock didn't want anything from me except my voice. Outraged by the male crimes rising to the surface of our culture on the wave of the #metoo movement, Brock wanted me to be the voice for a feminist podcast we ended up calling "Knowing Her Place." We met at a Starbucks on a rainy Sunday so he could download some audio software to my laptop. He handed me an old-school microphone on a tripod, bigger than my fist, painted with a matte-white finish like some vintage British sports car. "I think it's time for men to shut up and listen," he said.

Now the microphone sits in my office, next to my monitor as I'm typing this—beckoning me, a tiny red light blinking at the top of its dome like a lighthouse calling a ship to shore.

## The Wild Horse In Us

When you're in love, everything is shrouded in magic. When you're in love with someone who is larger than life, the world gets tinged with a kind of golden haze. That first spring Kevin and I were together, everyday incidents took on mythic proportions.

I remember one morning we were awakened by the sound of dozens of crawfish scuttling across the damp courtyard of Kevin's apartment complex. We peered out of his fourth-floor window, the courtyard a freak show of creatures with gnarled pincers pummeling the air like the gloves of punch-drunk boxers. The April rain soaked the ice buckets Kevin's frat-boy neighbors left out, along with those little science-fiction monsters they hoped would just die. But after we ventured out of the building with our umbrellas and rain boots, we counted nearly one hundred survivors, peeking out from bushes, stairwells, and doorways. We gathered them into grocery bags, hauling our cargo down to the mouth of the Trinity River. We released the crawfish, bag by bag, and they crawled, dazed, into the water.

Every morning that spring we surveyed the Trinity for signs of life but never saw any crawfish creeping under the bridge or scrambling along the shore. Six weeks later, however, we spotted a baby crawfish ambling in the sand of the river bank, no bigger than a spider, its pink shell paper thin as an x-ray. I remember us grinning and hugging, dancing on the shoreline, as mad as Dr. Frankenstein, so pleased with the results of our infiltration of the ecosystem, with our ability to create life. I remember Kevin saying, "Nature always shows up."

After we got married, Kevin still had a way of lighting up my world, of making an adventure out of ordinary life. A year after the crawfish incident, I remember the weather turning warm and dry after a week of rains. We spent hours hiking with our dogs, exploring the trails of the Fort Worth Nature Center on Lake Worth, getting lost in the dense foliage and spying

armadillos, vultures, pelicans, cormorants, and deer in their natural habitats. Sometimes we just drove--long, meandering rides in Kevin's convertible Mustang.

One Sunday we passed a field of horses behind an enclosure on the side of the highway, a honey-colored mare craning her neck over the fence to get to the lush grass that grew close to the road. "Get back inside that fence," Kevin said to her, as if she could hear or understand him. "You might hurt yourself." Then he said, "Let's go feed the horses."

"With what?" I asked.

"The good grass."

"It looks like they have plenty of perfectly fine-looking grass inside the fence," I said. But Kevin made a U-turn and looped around the highway, careening back down the service road that bordered the horses' enclosure. We climbed out of the car into the fierce March wind, stray hairs that had escaped from my ponytail whipping my face. Our dogs ran to the fence and crawled under it, wagging their tails and sniffing the horses' legs as if they were greeting old friends. Kevin started grabbing clumps of grass and holding them up for the horses. At first the horses were timid, so he threw the grass over the fence, and they nosed it with curiosity, sniffed, and began nibbling.

Eventually they walked over to us, and we kept pulling up verdant bundles of sod, made a brilliant green from the recent rains, and offering them up to the horses, who chomped and slurped with abandon. The honey-colored horse was first to accept our offering, but then the chestnut-colored one ambled over, then the white one with charcoal-colored splotches, then the small brown mare with the single spot of ivory between her eyes, shaped like a star. Our dogs danced around the horses' legs, dodging their hooves.

Virginia Woolf, who also had bipolar disorder, wrote, “There is no denying the wild horse in us.” Throughout my relationship with Kevin, I kept that quote on my office door underneath an image of the author, her hair morphing into a black horse with its legs prancing down the back of Woolf’s neck and its wild mane coiling over the top of her head. Kevin was the wild horse in me, and he was the physical manifestation of a side of myself I didn’t know any other way to access. He was violent, yes, but he was also tender. This roller coaster of intermittent reinforcement is what makes abusive relationships addictive. This is why we stay. Our times in nature, feeling the earth spin, were the moments when I still loved him madly, the times in between the rage, the moments that reminded me why I married him, when once again I felt blessed, choosing again what I chose before.

## Tapestry

They say our bodies go into fight-or-flight mode when stressed, but I am all flight, a creature of air, Libra ascendant. Even my appearance is bird-like—small-boned, sharp-nosed, thick hair like a cap of starling-colored feathers. So I find myself at Dallas Love Field on a Friday in late October, the airport glittering purple and black, orange and green. Witches' hats, pumpkin earrings, stuffed black cats, and Frankenstein-monster dolls spill out of the gift shops. I have a four-hour flight delay, so I buy a magazine called "World's Scariest Places: Haunted, Creepy, Abandoned" and scroll through it while nursing a \$12 glass of Prosecco.

Ten hours later I'm buzzing around my best friend Keith's apartment in Brooklyn on the outskirts of Prospect Park. I show him the magazine, and we begin to map out all the places we'd die to visit. His boyfriend Paulo, who hates Halloween anyway, is in the Phillipines for his art show, so we have all the time and space in the world to inhabit our weird selves, to embark upon our morbid journeys. Keith goes into his bedroom closet and emerges with a cylinder and a box of thumbtacks. He unrolls a world map and tapes it to the wall. I marvel at the fact that something so monumental could emerge from such a cramped space. What else is he hiding in there?

Keith is short and broad-shouldered, ink-black hair, jet-black glasses, black beard flecked with gray. His body is covered in tattoos, movie monsters and pin-up girls and red roses snaked with thorny vines. "I'm thinking Isla de las Muñecas," Keith says, sticking a pin on the map just south of Mexico City, his fingernails chipped with black polish. I picture this island of haunted dolls: plastic babies littering the jungle's lungs, pinafores torn, dead eyes glittering. "I may find some long lost relatives." Keith's father is from Mexico, but he's never met him.

“I want to go to Spreepark,” I say, pointing to the photos in the magazine. It’s an abandoned amusement park where broken carnival rides clutter the forest like candied hellhouses, and giant wolves open their synthetic jaws, wide as caves. I pick up a red pushpin and stick it in the heart of Berlin.

“You always want to do something that involves fairy tales,” he says.

“True. Speaking of, how about the Suicide Forest?”

“The what?”

“Aoikigahara,” I say, leafing to page 80 in the magazine. “The Sea of Trees. People walk in and get lost on purpose. Then they hang themselves in the trees or just never find their way out.” As morbid as this description is, I want to be engulfed in a flood of green: hemlock fir, Japanese cypress, and Fuji cherry trees encircling me like the arms of a goddess. A forest floor carpeted in sage-colored moss, plants spreading their roots out over the surface of hardened lava as if they were crawling. My eyes move East on the wall map, I find Japan and put a thumbtack near Mount Fuji. “I don’t want us to kill ourselves or anything. I just want to get swallowed up by the woods for a while. We could pretend to be Hansel and Gretel.”

“We already are Hansel and Gretel,” Keith says. “My mom’s a wicked witch, both our dads are useless, and you married the Big, Bad Wolf.”

“There’s no Big, Bad Wolf in ‘Hansel and Gretel.’”

Keith glares at me. “You’re splitting hairs.”

Keith and I met in an acting class when we were in middle school. Our mothers hoped theatre classes would help channel our dramatic personalities. On the first day of class, our teacher—a small, round woman named Dot—instructed us to find a “twin” we could mirror.

Keith and I were the two shortest kids in the class. We locked eyes across the room, then shuffled toward each other. “Pretend your partner is your mirror,” Dot said. “One of you start moving. The other one, imitate your partner’s movements.”

We felt self-conscious and silly at first, but after a few minutes, I couldn’t tell whose movements were leading and whose were following. And for almost two decades Keith and I orbited the world like two mirror images, two twin moons, until he moved to New York to design clothing. Now he sells menswear for Marc Jacobs instead of creating, and I lecture about novels instead of writing my own. But when you’re twelve, your deepest wish is to find your own dark heart mirrored in another’s, and that’s what we had found.

“Here’s where I *don’t* want to go,” Keith says now, picking up a black pushpin and putting it right where we are, in New York. “Kingsborough,” he explains, the institution where his schizophrenic mother was committed two years ago. “It’s just three train stops over. But the last time I was there, she was hurling her own poo at her roommate, and she crouched under her bed when they came to sedate her. It was a shit show. Literally. I mean I’ll go again, of course. But I don’t want to. I’d rather...I’d rather have my balls eaten by fire ants.”

“I don’t want to go to Shreveport,” I say, sticking a black pin in Louisiana. “When I saw my father last, I had to chase him around the casino because he moves fast for someone with Parkinson’s. And he was mainlining martinis. He kept forgetting who I was, but he had no trouble telling the bartender, ‘Beefeater Gin, three olives, straight up.’”

“What would you rather do?” he asks.

“I’d rather...Ummm...I’d rather have...a raccoon piss in my eye?” Keith is better at the “I’d rather...” game than I am.

“Nice one,” he says.

“Or home,” I say, putting another black pin in Texas. “I don’t want to go home.”

I remember yesterday morning in Texas. As I huddled in my bedroom closet, I heard sounds of glass breaking and the guttural cries of a wounded animal. A cacophony of noise engulfed my house, but I didn’t venture out until I heard a door slamming and a motorcycle engine revving, then quiet descended over the house like a thick curtain. The kitchen looked as if a nursery of raccoons had ransacked the place. Shards of glass glinted on the floor, and open drawers spilled their contents of silverware and whisks, magnets and pens, one drawer face completely torn off. Beer from a smashed six-pack still fizzed on the countertop, filling the kitchen with the smell of bread dough. One of the tiles in the floor had a large chip in it. How do you break a tile? I thought. My next thoughts were: *My house, my kitchen, my floor, my tile* because I remembered my marriage counselor Dr. Mabli’s question: “Does he break *your* things or *his*?” At least that wasn’t *my* beer.

Then, as I sat on my suitcase in the doorway of my bedroom, marveling at all the worlds I had access to with a simple swipe of the thumb, I looked up the definition of “borderline” on my phone, the Madonna song from childhood trilling through my head. The American Psychological Association said: “A condition characterized by being *almost but not quite* a sociopath or psychotic or narcissist or neurotic.” But I thought about all of the other possible definitions of “borderline.” I imagined a seam intersecting sea and sand. I thought of the long rim cleaving my husband’s body from mine. I heard the hiss of a slit stitch, a fringe that could fray, like worn silk, spilling down our spines and splitting wide, gulping into a gully too ample to breach.

After I packed my bags, I scrolled my phone again for an exit plan, a magic portal I could click open and disappear through. Instead I found an article: “How to Leave a Partner with Borderline Personality Disorder.” For some reason an image flashed in my mind—me as a kid riding the roller coaster at Hamel’s Amusement Park in Shreveport, over and over in giddy dips and loops, the smell of burnt sugar ribboning through my tangled hair. But in that moment, I felt like my seatbelt was stuck shut, and I was lurching and pitching, careening through the dark, seasick as a green-gilled sailor who’d love nothing more than the sight of land. “Go ‘no contact,’” the article suggested. Good luck with that, I thought.

But the next online portal I opened took me to the website for Southwest Airlines, and I booked a flight to LaGuardia. Just. Like. That.

Saturday Keith has to work, but I wake up early and walk across the street to Prospect Park with my journal and a cup of dark roast from Tugboat on Flatbush Avenue. Sitting on a park bench, I identify with all the winged things, noting the difference between a monarch and a pearl crescent butterfly, a witch moth and a black swallowtail. I watch the flight patterns of cormorants and geese, detect the scree of a hawk, the scream of a jay, the chirp of a sparrow. And when I hear the autumn song that sounds like, “Oh... pretty, pretty, pretty, pretty, pretty,” I know a blood-red cardinal roosts nearby.

But my own flight patterns are tricky for me these days with Kevin’s fears of abandonment. In May I took my nephew Joe to Galveston Island to visit the campus where he wants to study ocean engineering. We watched as the Sea Life lab students released ten rehabilitated sea turtles back into the Gulf of Mexico. All ten round bodies turned themselves toward the ocean like compasses, their flippers making little sand angels as they crawled back

home, one by one, getting swallowed by the murky waters. Joe and I wiped our faces with the backs of our sleeves, the Gulf Coast wind thrashing us like cat-o'-nine tails. "I got some sand in my eye," Joe said, sniffing.

"Yeah, I know. Me too," I said.

While I was on the Coast, Kevin started taking fentanyl, an opiate more potent than heroin that one of his friends purchased off of the Dark Web. "This killed Prince, you asshole!" I yelled at him when I returned home to find a few traces of white powder still lining the inside of an orange pill bottle and Kevin deep in the throes of withdrawal.

"We thought it was Oxy," Kevin said.

"Like that makes it any better."

That night on Keith's couch, lulled by the Q train's whir and the conductor's bright monotone: "Next stop: Coney Island," I dream about one of the turtles from Galveston. She has thirteen scutes spiraling across her calloused carapace, one for each new moon of the year. I lug her to safety, pivoting the broad disk of her back around like a ship's helm until her tail curls toward me, but she shimmies out of her casing like a burlesque dancer, and I catch her glass-green belly in my hands. And in the morning I know it means I'm not Athena, not Artemis, no virgin goddess of war. I lay my weapons down in earnest, too keen to slither out of my armor, too quick to let love pummel all of my softer parts.

Last April, after even Dr. Mabli told me to give up, I wrote Kevin a letter asking for a separation and flew to San Diego to present at a film-studies conference. That's when Kevin started threatening to kill himself. It's October now, and he's still living in my house. And I have

no idea what might await me when I go back home Monday. But I always go home. I have a decent job and three rescued dogs. I have an aging mother who needs my care and a teenaged nephew who still wants to be my friend. And I'm as addicted to Kevin as he is to drama. Maybe I'm even as addicted to drama as Kevin is to me.

On Sunday Keith and I take the Q train to 57<sup>th</sup> Street, the morning sun glinting through a frost-gray sky, our breath making smoke rings as we speed-walk, huddled, half a mile to the MOMA. Paulo is a member, so we get to meander the white labyrinth of the museum before it opens to the public. We are first in line at coat-check where I hand over the tapestry coat Keith bought me a decade ago at a second-hand shop in Chelsea. I need a new coat but hate to part with this one, its lavender faux-fur collar and cuffs encircling my bones like I'm the snow queen of Narnia.

Second only to nature herself, museums are like churches to me. We amble through the permanent collection first. I visit this sanctuary every time I come to New York, but it never ceases to enthrall me. I stand in front of Magritte's *The Lovers* for a long while, the heads and faces of its kissing figures enshrouded in white fabric. I think of Magritte at age 14, watching his mother's body as policemen hoisted it from the Sambre River, her wet nightgown wrapped around her face. I think about love as glamour, as bewitchment. I wonder if we ever really know anyone's true nature.

But it's the Louise Bourgeois exhibit that pulls me in with its own sort of enchantment. Giant, maternal spiders crouch above metal cages, forever mending their broken webs. Women turn into spirals, pivoting on pointed toes. I feel like each room is a decade in the artist's long life, and I'm walking through her body, wrapping myself in the fabric of her memories. "If you

bash into the web of a spider,” Bourgeois once said, “She doesn’t get mad. She weaves and repairs it.” Bourgeois cut up all the textiles of her childhood—bed linens, towels, tablecloths, handkerchiefs—and spent the rest of her life piecing it all back together again. Weaving was her way to make things whole.

“I knew you’d love it,” Keith says.

“I need to buy the exhibition catalogue,” I say.

“It will be cheaper at Strand.”

So we take the N train to Union Square and wander the aisles of Strand Bookstore, lingering in the Art and Horror and Film sections. We buy a voodoo doll “for protection against people with bad taste in music,” then lug a pumpkin from the Park Slope Farmer’s Market home on the subway. When we cross the Brooklyn Bridge, the setting sun illuminates dust motes spiraling around the train car like glitter embalmed in ether.

The forecast predicts rain on Monday, so I know tomorrow morning I’ll stand in the fog and drizzle waiting for my taxi, my dark bob tucked into my red hoodie, my Union Jack rainboots making loud splashes in the muddy puddles on Ocean Avenue, like a little kid playing in the rain. After I get into the backseat of the cab, I’ll turn and blow kisses through the rear window, wait until Keith can no longer see me until I start to cry.

But on my last night in New York, we cook deep-sea scallops dipped in squid’s ink, drink Velvet Devil cabernet, and eat black sesame-seed ice cream for dessert—all the foods that stain the lips and tongue. “Paulo told me that if you eat black foods, you can cheat death,” Keith says.

“You can also get stuck in the Underworld,” I say.

“But you still get to come up for air once a year,” he says, raising his wine glass. I do the same, thinking: No, not Athena. A different sort of goddess. One’s who’s eaten the fruit of the

damned. The apartment is clammy with stale air and seafood smells, so we crack open the windows, and I feel my broken spirit scattering out of the apartment like a spider.

“Did you read *Damage* by Josephine Hart...or at least see the movie?” I ask.

“Oh yeah, that’s the one where the guy falls in love with his son’s girlfriend. The old creeper!”

“But it was Jeremy Irons,” I say. “He can creep on me anytime.”

“Sometimes I think I’m a better feminist than you are,” Keith says.

“Oh, most definitely. But you should read the book, seriously, it’s really good.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll read it.” And I believe him because he’s the only person who reads everything I tell him to read.

“Anyway, in the book—maybe in the movie too, I can’t remember—there is one person for every person,” I say. “It may be a child or a lover or a sibling or a friend. For the mother in the book, it’s the son. For the protagonist, it’s his son’s girlfriend. I think maybe you’re my one person,” I say.

“Yeah, I know,” he says. “I always imagined we’d grow old together.”

“Maybe we will.”

That night we lie on Keith’s bed, his jacket a dark hulk looming on the closet hook. It’s the night before Halloween, so we play *The Shining* on an endless loop like they do in Room 217 of the Stanley Hotel in Colorado. I think of these loops in our lives like symbols of the ouroboros, like snakes eating their own tails. Over and over, I wake in the night to hear Shelley Duvall screaming, “Jack, *please don’t*.”

## Story

Story will find you. If your mission is to make art, and you're not making art, the universe might get offended. She might lift you by the scruff of your neck, and, like a mother threatening a wailing child, she might hiss in your ear, "I'll give you something to write about."

This has been my experience with writing.

Poet and novelist Marge Piercy said, "A real writer is one who *really writes*. You have to like it better than being loved." I don't know if I'm a real writer. I don't know if I like it better than being loved. Perhaps if I had entered the world cosseted in a cocoon of love instead of a family replete with alcoholism, criticism, and neuroses, I might not have felt the need to fill the void inside of me with love from external—and often inferior—sources. Then again, I might not have felt the call to write at all.

On better days I like to think I write because I am a conduit for story. I like to think I am not the writer but the magical channel through which stories must pass. If I get out of the way and show up at the page, I enable this "magic" to happen.

I write because if I don't, I get mired in the busy-ness and drama of everyday life. I try to fix my students' problems, I become chauffeur and cook and caretaker to my extended family because my lack of human children means they think I don't have anything else to do. I marry men with drug addictions and personality disorders. I use their chaos as an excuse to avoid my craft. The page is where the drama needs and wants to go, but if I don't put it there, I live it out instead.

I write because I'm in love with language. To paraphrase W.H. Auden, I write because I like the sound of words hanging around together. If I could be a painter or a sculptor, I would probably do that instead. Something about making tangible art on a grand scale seems more real to me, more significant. My friend Winter paints abstract landscapes. She fills canvas upon

canvas with swathes of sweeping color, creating storms and forests and galaxies with textures, with mad brushstrokes. I want to live inside of her paintings. She is a petite woman whose paintings are monumental, covering entire gallery walls. Her art commands space and takes a shape and place in this world.

But I was given different tools. Black Garamond font on a white screen. Green Pilot-gel ink on recycled journal paper. Purple Sharpie on 3x5 notecards, one word per card, so I can arrange and rearrange words as I sit on the living room floor, sifting through my mystic toolbox, forming incantations in a circle around me on the area rug.

My art is small and insignificant in comparison to Winter's, at least to the naked eye. But for as far back as I can remember, the universe has put words in my head, in my mouth, in my hands. Words crowding around in my heart and tumbling out of it. Today I am filled with words that mean "female healer"—words like *curandera*, *shamanka*, *santera*. I am fascinated. I am intrigued. I want to play with these words, breathe life into them on the page. But I don't want to steal from a culture that doesn't belong to me, so I unearth a word I can own: *traiteuse*. A *traiteuse* was a female Cajun faith healer who would lay her hands over warts to make them disappear and stomp and dance around cotton crops to keep infestations at bay.

And from that one word, a story begins to take shape in my mind. A protagonist emerges, a *traiteuse* seated at the helm of a little john boat, rowing down the dark fingers of Lake Ponchartrain, a long plait of hair snaking down her back in a flood so black it could stain the water. I remember taking my nephew to a rainforest museum exhibit in Galveston, the crude "shamanic tools for hunting magic" encased in glass. With the beginnings of my *traiteuse*'s narrative buzzing within me, I pull out a box of items I've collected from my nature walks: umber-and-ivory-striped hawk feathers, crooked balsa-wood sticks, strange horned pods shaped

like shrunken steer skulls, dried amber-colored mushrooms cascading like layers of chiffon on a Balenciaga ballgown. I turn the treasures over in my hands, thinking about crafting fetishes for my heroine.

An old Chukchee proverb states that “Woman is by nature a shaman.” I also believe that Woman is by nature a creator. Sometimes she creates life. Other times she creates art. The most powerful women of all, like my friend Winter, manage to do both. And sometimes our art is also our healing practice. Sometimes our art needs to be expressed for the purpose of healing ourselves and maybe even others. Lately I feel something primal gestating inside of me, waiting to claw its way out. Something made of words, of images, of shamanic hunting tools...turned visceral and tangible on the tongue, on the page.

It’s better to put all this weirdness, all of this terrible beauty, on the page. It’s better to make art than to make a dumpster-fire of my life. Now more than ever, I feel that pull, that call.

So I leave my husband, whom I’ve loved since I was ten. My loud, looming hulk of a husband with his mood swings and his addiction demons, with his clutter and his daily crises, who has taken up way too much space in my house, in my life. I barricade myself in my new space, turn my writing desk to face the window. My dogs growl at my feet as jackrabbits nibble on the overgrown front lawn. I write. A lifetime of personal drama seethes and whirls behind me. I write. A luminous Texas summer yawns and stretches out in front of me. I write. Because finally, I think just maybe I like it better than being loved.

## Blight

*“They want to change things. They just want to see what happens when they tear the world apart.”* –Donnie Darko

Whenever Kevin leaves the townhouse for a few nights, I am able to exhale. I begin to create an alternate universe for the dogs and me, a world where I get to keep all of them, and we are free of his torment. But it is difficult to conceive of eradicating him from my life without calling forth the annihilation and reconstruction of my entire world.

So this is how my world will end.

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At night I imagine the dogs and I are morphing into one creature, all fur and teeth, blood and bones, with fourteen legs and four heartbeats, twitching itself to sleep in a heap on the dirty mattress, dreaming of salmon and shiraz, long car rides and warm dinners, all the things it took for granted in the old world. My pack stays warm this way, twitching and dreaming, a low whine escaping from the dachshund Bijou’s throat as she curls her nose into my armpit and kicks at my ribs with her claws. Maya, an American Eskimo mix, turns over on her back, paws dangling, in the place where Kevin, the other human, used to sleep, Maya’s white fur shedding in wiry tufts that blow around the room, like steel wool wrapped in cotton, tickling my nose and chafing my skin. Mook, the old brown chihuahua, mostly deaf and blind in one eye, sleeps in a soundless and motionless coil between my ankles, his body humming heat like a little generator.

Sometimes I hope Kevin will crawl through the door and merge into our collective mass of bodies, wrap his long form around my back, pull me to him. I miss the way he spasmed

himself to sleep, little earthquakes pulsing underneath his warm skin. I miss tracing the freckles that spilled across his broad shoulders, the two dragon tattoos snaking up and down his lean back, convulsing like wings. I miss the deep bass timbre of his voice, traces of Chicago rounding his O's.

But other times I fear his return in equal measure and keep a gun stashed under the mattress just in case. I like to slide my fingers between the mattress and the wooden floor and touch the gun's cold, hard edges: five bullets in the chamber, one for each human and canine creature left in my world, myself included, of course.

Mornings are the best time, as the sun rises over the river, and the dogs and I watch the nest of raccoons huddling in the tree outside of our window. Great blue herons and white egrets glide, agile as angels, and the river unfurls from their glossy feathers as they skim its glass lip. The river's supply of fish seems endless—channel catfish and pirate perch, largemouth bass and blacktail shiners—but I wonder how long it will feed all of us, human and canine and bird alike. Lately I swear I can hear the faint trill of a trumpet calling “Reveille” on the other side of the river each dawn. It reminds of my father, a trumpet player who only joined the military so they would pay for him to go to college and major in music. I can't see anything through the thick web of cedar and hackberry trees that engulf my small house, and maybe I'm imagining the music anyway. In the womb of half-sleep, I can pretend it's a normal morning, that I still have human neighbors waking up in the townhouse across the courtyard, that Kevin is downstairs making chai, that I will be going into the office later that day instead of out foraging with the dogs.

I never wanted three dogs, but before the Blight struck, Kevin taught me how to control them. “Always make them walk behind you, especially through doorways,” he said. “Your small size doesn’t matter. They sense your energy.”

Now the dogs and I hike every day along the river’s edge, searching for chokeberries, muscadine, white mulberries, a big stick in my left hand to slash away spider webs, the pistol in the holster on my hip to protect us from predators. I wave my right hand in the air, snapping away like a castanet dancer, cueing my pack to follow.

Kevin rescued Maya from a shelter in Chicago before we started dating. But as the Blight began to tear at Kevin’s mind, and he morphed from man to monster, Maya’s loyalty switched to me. When Kevin raged, the dogs and I would run into our bedroom closet and snuggle under the rows of jeans and blouses, t-shirts and dress pants. I pretended we were sheltering from a tornado, like my family used to do in Louisiana when I was a kid, four humans and one dog hunched in the bathtub, a twin mattress on our shoulders, sirens wailing. As Kevin’s episodes increased in length and frequency, the dogs and I began to spend so much time in that makeshift shelter, I even shoved a small black desk salvaged from the curbside (Kevin called it “garbage gold”) into one corner of the closet with my computer on top of it, the cursor on its screen blinking through folds of fabric. Now I write in journals by candlelight, and most of my clothes have been turned into more practical items like blankets and bandages. And Maya is my souldog, the two of us pale and sensitive, quiet and big-eyed—“Maya-Lee”—two damaged halves of the same whole creature.

Kevin rescued Mook too. He hopped into the passenger seat of Kevin's Mustang one sweltering August in Texas when Kevin spotted Mook on the street, brown fur matted and caked with hotspots and insect bites, a smelly old flea collar around his skinny neck. He was small and old but funny and fierce—reminding us of Sri Mukherjee, one of our gurus—so we called him Mook for short. Only Bijou was my original dog—aggressive, territorial, devoted to her family. But now, with Kevin gone, we are a pack, the four horsemen. Mook the clown. Bijou the warrior. And Maya-Lee the twin flames.

I was not immune to the Blight, but I figured out a way to stop it in its tracks. Save yourself. Give up something you love. If you were lucky, the Blight only ate away at something you could live without—an ear, maybe. An eye, an arm, a kidney. But if it chose your mind, like it did Kevin, or your heart, like my mother, or your spine, like my brother and my best friend Keith, then what you had to give up would probably take your life with it. I was a teacher in the old world, and the Blight attacked my throat. I woke up one morning after Kevin was gone, my throat so bruised and swollen I couldn't swallow, my tonsils fuzzy and engorged as tennis balls. I thought about cutting them out and cauterizing the wound, but I had no medical training. Instead I sat outside all night, watching the full moon's reflection in the river, humming and chanting despite the pain, offering my voice to the water, Maya howling softly beside me. In the morning, the pain was gone. I could swallow, but I could no longer speak.

Now I carry the burden of my losses like stones in the belly of a fairy-tale wolf. As I lie in my canine heap on the mattress, an ink-black vulture swoops toward us, perching on the tall loblolly pine tree just outside the window, fanning its wings out, a black ballerina preening before a bow. And I think about the last good day: the vultures wheeling and diving as Kevin and the dogs and I lay on a blanket in a meadow near Turner Falls, the place where I first knew that I

loved him, a morbid picnic of valium and bullets spread out around us. “Do you know why vultures don’t have feathers on their faces?” I asked Kevin.

“No. Tell me,” he said, lacing his big fingers through my smaller ones, drawing my hand to his lips.

“They were the only animals brave enough to push the sun away from the earth, and it burned their feathers off. But it saved all the other animals.”

“You and your stories,” Kevin said.

It was our second anniversary, and we had used half of our last tank of gas to drive north to Oklahoma. The Blight had decimated our world by then. We had lost everyone and everything we loved: our families and neighbors, my job at the college, the college itself, all the other researchers and faculty and students dead, Kevin’s yoga studio an empty silo with walls of broken mirrors. We were running out of food. Kevin hated the way he was changing as the Blight ate away at his brilliant mind, turning him into something to be feared rather than loved. But on this particular Tuesday Kevin was lucid, so he would be strong enough to kill all of us with his father’s gun, saving himself for last. That was our plan anyway.

But life doesn’t always go as planned. Instead I dosed the last glass of Pinot Noir with just enough valium to put Kevin into a deep but temporary sleep. Then I brushed his long, salt-and-pepper hair off of his olive face, kissed his forehead, gathered the dogs into my old blue Mini Cooper, and drove three hundred miles back home to Texas, not a soul on the road, windows rolled down, Maya and Bijou shoving half of their bodies out of the windows, paws on the sills, wind blowing their fur back as they inhaled the cooler October air.

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It won't be much to live for, but it will be enough. Shelter, books, and candles. Berries, birds, and river. Bijou, Mook, and Maya-Lee. Maybe one day I will try to cross the river with my pack. I want to tell the others my secret. If there are any others. I can no longer speak, but I could scribble it down on a scrap of paper. I could scrawl it in the dirt. I could tell them how to stop the Blight. Tell that ghostly bugle player and his comrades, if he has any comrades left, they'll have to be very brave. To give up something they love.

## **II: Monsters**

## Ashes to Ashes

I know sometime in the future I'll want to be right back here, crawling through the sparks and synapses of David Bowie's brain, my headset enclosing me in this glamorous world, my best friend and his partner wandering these catacombs with me, all of us close in proximity yet each immersed in his or her own private experience.

But right now my grief weighs me down, a lead balloon in my gut, my limbs like liquid metal sinking to the gallery floor. Present-moment awareness, the balm that would soothe me, eludes me now. I wander like a specter through this exhibit, only halfway here. The soaring, music sweeps over me; David Bowie's baritone a cross between a croon and a snarl, an angel and a demon. As I glance around like a woman possessed, eyes seized up by unseen forces, Bowie's words in my ears sync up with his lips on the screen. His costumes and personas surround me, a mold of his face an accoutrement to some of the mannequins on display. His flowing coats cinched in to a wasp waist, his glittered leotards lean as cats.

I remain snared in a trauma bond, love-struck, even after signing the final divorce decree. I've escaped to New York again. It's springtime now, the sky still grey as pewter, the raindrops still casting a blue sheen on the black trash bags that line the streets. And here at the Brooklyn Museum, swimming through the "David Bowie Is" exhibit, thoughts of my ex-husband infiltrate this headspace so that *his* tall form, *his* pretty face, *his* lean hips get mixed up with Bowie's.

Just like in Kevin's life, madness was the refrain playing in Bowie's family background. Three of his mother's sisters became psychotic along with Terry, his older half-brother. Their insanity and Bowie's fear of it was a major theme in his music. In 1967, the cumulative effects of emotional abuse, being unwanted and stigmatized, resulted in Terry's first psychotic episode. He

saw a blinding white light and Jesus Christ appeared, telling him he had been picked for a special mission. Bowie immortalized this incident in his line “a crack in the sky and a hand pointing down at me” in the song “All You Pretty Things.” Terry spent the rest of his life in and out of mental hospitals until, in 1986, he threw himself under a train.

Kevin’s family tree was also littered with suicides, and his older brother Kenny, diagnosed schizophrenic, once stood on the railing of a balcony outside of Kevin’s high-rise Chicago apartment with his arms outstretched, ranting about Jesus for several hours until Kevin managed to coax him down. Their father, Ken, Sr., beat his sons into submission until Kevin started to fight back. Kenny remained scared of Ken but would hold his girlfriends hostage, perpetuating the cycle of abuse.

But Bowie managed to transcend the trials of his youth, the myth of the “bad seed” in his family. Bowie showed us that we have many different potential selves, more than we often know. If we can identify them, we can be so much more than the sum of our childhood maltreatment. Developing a dialogue between the different parts of ourselves, we can resist the cascade of destructive patterns that trickle down the generations.

Perhaps Kevin wasn’t confident enough in his own skin to allow his madness to be channeled into disparate personas, to embrace his almost feminine beauty. The baseline state of the borderline is a searing shame, a self-hatred that flares into rage at the slightest provocation. But one time he dressed in drag for me, wearing eyeliner and fishnets and a blood-red wig—my own private Bowie, my own tortured rock-star soul.

Now, two hours after we entered this house of mirrors at the Brooklyn Museum, I am spit out, dazed, into the final room. The quote on the wall reads, “David Bowie is teaching you that everything changes.”

## Juggernaut

Right after high school, I fell in love with a boy named Simon who reminded me of Kevin. Kevin, five years older than I, had married his first wife by then, and I had long since abandoned my crush on him. But Simon shared his adventurous spirit, his affinity for nature: plants and animals and the environment. Both of them were lean and olive-skinned, deep-voiced and gangly but somehow as pretty as girls. And while Kevin's hair morphed to blue-black by the time he was in his twenties, then turned silver in his forties, Simon's hair stayed the color of burnt caramel, and his eyes were as dark as swirls of black coffee.

I realize now that their thrill-seeking spirit was an addiction to chaos that all narcissists seem to share, along with a perpetual state of boredom with the ordinary world and a need to draw those closest to them into their madness. And *my* addiction of choice has always been the narcissist and/or addict himself. I thought they were both human embodiments of Icarus, their souls in danger of burning from their proximity to the sun, to a realm I didn't think I could access without them.

During high school, Simon's arrogance was on flagrant display. He was like a peacock in River Phoenix drag, so I never admitted to my physical attraction to him. But we made out secretly, everywhere and always—backstage during play rehearsals, his house during “study” sessions, the parking lot behind Taco Bell—regardless of whether or not either of us had an official boyfriend or girlfriend at the time. The first time we kissed, he remarked upon the size of my nose when viewed up close, and he often told me about his erotic dreams and fantasies involving me, insisting that his fantasy version of me had bigger breasts. I also wished I had a smaller nose and bigger breasts—two sources of Kryptonite throughout my adolescence—and Simon, like all narcissists, knew how to utter the barbs that would sting the most. Sometimes

when I was standing at my locker, he'd amble through the hallway and smack my backside as he slithered past me. I'd whirl around just in time to see him jaunting away from me, never looking back, as if he owned a part of me. I didn't have the language then to label him a narcissist, and it is only now that have I found the courage to face the truth of my past relationships, to reframe them as what they really were.

"Do you think Simon was a narcissist?" I asked Keith on my last visit to New York.

"Oh, absolutely," Keith said, without missing a beat. "Simon was a dick-bag at best. He could be so hurtful toward you, it would make me see flames."

I remember a freezing-cold football game during our junior year where Simon sidled up behind me on the bleachers, wrapped his long arms and legs around me, keeping me warm, and resting his sharp chin on the top of my head. We stayed like that for the whole game, which neither of us was particularly interested in, not talking, just breathing the same space, our icy exhalations as white as puffs of smoke. And I just let him. I just let him do what he wanted with my body, his physical presence inducing some sort of trance-like state. My girlfriends rolled their eyes at me and edged away from us on the bench, as if we were going to have sex right then and there. On the way home from the game, the car of boys he was riding in pulled up alongside my car of girls, and he rolled the window down in that frigid air to stick his bare ass out of the window at us. My girlfriends all shrieked. Laura punched me in the arm, as if I was somehow responsible for his Neanderthal behavior just because I'd let him curl his lanky limbs around me like a spider monkey for the entire game. But even I recoiled at my own behavior.

Why did I let him have so much power over me?

Right after high school, I started working at a bookstore in the mall to help me pay my tuition to a local state college. Simon was waiting tables at a nearby restaurant, and he used to come visit me while I was working. But I still didn't take him seriously. One afternoon, as we sat in the Food Court on my lunch break, he said, "I'm sorry about the way I treated you in high school. I'm sorry about who I was. But I'm different now." I cocked my head to one side and narrowed my eyes at him. Then he told me, in the same type of language that Kevin would often later use, that his recent trip to South America with Greenpeace had spurred a "spiritual awakening" in him. He was so heady, to me then, I remember, his musky male scent, his tawny hair brushing his shoulders in the '90s fashion, his pretty little nose pierced with a silver stud. I wanted so much to believe him. And he never gave up.

But I stood him up on our first date, still not taking him seriously. We were supposed to go see a band in Dallas, but I went out with some friends instead, arriving home around 2:00 a.m. to find Simon's silver Toyota Civic parked in my driveway. "You're late," he said. "But you said you'd go out with me, so you're going out with me." I had to admire that level of confidence, so opposite from my own evasive demeanor. If I liked a boy, I always found running away from him to be the best strategy.

"Nothing's open anyway," I said. We were too young to get into bars, but even the local bars were closed at that hour.

"Dunkin' Donuts is open 24 hours," he said. I was tired and ready to go to bed, and the last thing I wanted to do was sit in a bright, ugly donut shop with this arrogant boy in the middle of the night. But he was right. I had agreed to a "real" date with him for the first time in the four years we had known each other.

So we went to the donut shop on Camp Bowie Boulevard and drank coffee, our faces giddy, our pulses racing. Something was happening. After our glamorous late-night dinner of coffee and kolaches, we snuck on to the lawn of the Kimbell Art Museum, threw our shoes off, and danced in the wet, green grass. Simon had a blanket and a bottle of cheap red wine in his trunk. We lay on the blanket, naming constellations, talking about the authors we liked to read, about the revolutions we wanted to start. We talked about how we hoped to stop George W. Bush, Jr. from being elected as governor of Texas. We talked about all the animals we wanted to save from extinction.

And that night a flip switched inside of me, my heart flopped over in my chest like a flounder on a fishhook thumping against the bottom of a boat. I'd been crazy about boys before, of course. So much so that "Crazy About Boys" could have been my Native American name. Girls with bad paternal relationships often start young—curious about male bodies, male scents and sounds and rituals. My first kiss happened when I was in middle school, at a keg party by Benbrook Lake, when a much older boy coaxed me on to a picnic table and wedged his tongue between my lips, his mouth warm and fizzy with beer.

But that night, lying on a blanket on the museum's manicured lawn, early summer, Simon's long fingers laced through mine, talking and laughing like children, I fell in love for the first time. We sat on the lawn until the sun came up, a light drizzle coating our flesh and making the summer air bearable. When he took me home, he walked me to my mother's front door, and, as the June rain drummed like a heartbeat on the roof, we stood on the front porch. Simon held my face in his hands, his thumbs stroking my cheekbones. My insides contracted and uncoiled; light unraveled from my belly in ribbons and glimmered outward toward my toes and fingertips.

My fingers turned electric where I touched him. I grazed my hands over the patchwork of scars that laced across his back from a car accident. I tried to memorize their intricate pattern.

And for the next three years Simon would hurt me over and over and over again, imprinting that constellation of scars into my psyche, an endless needle scratching an endless groove, sleeping with a herd of vapid girls and parading them in front of me, leaving lacerations from his acidic tongue. Simon's father, too, was a narcissist, whom Simon despised. And Simon was whip-smart, more cunning than Kevin, more confident. Less brutal in some ways, less physically threatening, but crueler and more in control of his own damaged nature.

On my twenty-first birthday, just after Simon returned home from a backpacking tour through Europe, he left a present on my front porch. I picked up the package and unpeeled the brown paper wrapping to reveal a framed, 10-by-12-inch photograph of...Simon. Of course, I thought. How arrogant for him to give me a picture of himself for *my* birthday.

But when I inspected the image more closely, I realized that, although Simon's face was centered in the photo, a series of paintings surrounded him. He stood in the Matisse gallery at the Pompidou Center in Paris. I remembered how I was supposed to fly out to meet him in Paris, but I never did, and a pang of regret jabbed me in the stomach. Just to the left of Simon's wild mane, I spotted Matisse's *Jazz Icarus*, my favorite art work, the one I'd had a poster of hanging on my bedroom wall since childhood.

Only four colors comprise *Jazz Icarus*—pure black and the three primaries: blue, yellow, red. While cobalt saturates the backdrop and majority of the canvas, an ink-dark figure sways and dances in the center of the painting, catching the viewer's eye. His head tilts back, right arm raised toward the top left corner of the canvas, yet it droops like the limb of a willow tree. He

balances on his right leg, so his left appendages are less active, more sedate. Six bright-gold figures, which could be stars, sunbursts, or even birds, explode like camera flashes to the left, right, and top of the dancing man. On the left side of the dancer's torso beats his heart, a miniscule but vibrant crimson sphere.

It is this smallest component of the image, the figure's scarlet heart, which always drew me to this art piece. I find it fitting now that Matisse named the piece after Icarus, who fell into the ocean and drowned, like Simon most likely did, after flying too close to the sun.

For over twenty years, I've held Simon up, like a god in a carriage, throwing myself under the wheels of his ghost. Only now, in the wake of my divorce, in the process of healing from Kevin's narcissistic abuse, do I allow my brain to recognize the whole story. Simon's disappearance the year after he gave me that portrait forever catapulted him into the realm of myth. While hiking alone on the island of Kauai, the same island Kevin's ancestors were from, its cliffs lush with vegetation, Simon vanished into thin air. Now, over twenty years later, a backpack found near the mouth of a waterfall is the only trace of him that remains.

"I think we both allow Simon a certain respect due to his horrible death," Keith said. And it's okay to hold these two dichotomous images at once: the demon and the angel, the harbinger of darkness and the bringer of light, all crammed into one memory: A pair of bare shoulders, knobbed and brown as axe handles, and me pushing my face into the curve of his back as if oxygen itself seeped from his skin.

The summer before he disappeared, Simon and I drove home to Fort Worth from the University of Texas at Austin. We listened to Peter Murphy and R.E.M. and Rage Against the Machine, shouting along with the music, Simon's deep voice reverberating through the car. I

remember wearing a white peasant blouse and jeans, cotton and denim shielding my skin from the Texas heat. Simon's brown chest and feet were bare, his thighs covered in tattered cut-offs, his wheat-colored hair tied back with a scrap of leather. If Simon was the sun, I was the moon.

As we drove through Waco, we saw two homeless-looking men standing on the side of the road. They were filthy, their beards matted and flecked with dirt, their worn boots caked in mud. Simon stared at them with interest. "Are those your cousins?" I teased. As he slowed the car down, I said, "Seriously. What are you doing?"

"Giving these guys a ride," Simon answered.

"Are you crazy?"

"It's good karma," he said. "I owe it to...somebody. When I hitchhiked in Europe last summer, people always gave me rides."

"That was Europe," I said. "This is Texas. They're as likely to shoot us as they are to thank us."

"Come on. Where's your sense of adventure?" As the men got into the back seat, their stench filled the car, an acrid mixture of soil and sweat. We rolled down the windows.

"Where are you headed?" Simon asked them.

"Oklahoma," one of the men answered. "So as far north as you can take us."

"Are you hungry?" Simon asked. I handed them a box of crackers, and they devoured them, ravenous, crumbs flying from their mouths. The package was empty in seconds. We gave them the rest of the food we had in the car. The man who had not spoken handed me a pamphlet. As I thumbed through it, I realized the men must belong to a religious sect.

Oh, god, I thought. Well, at least they probably won't kill us. Then it dawned on me. Without thinking, I blurted out, "You're...you're *Branch Davidians*?"

“Not anymore,” the more talkative man answered. Simon laughed, a full baritone laugh that I still hear sometimes in my dreams.

Two weeks earlier the Waco siege had ended in a fire that killed almost a hundred members of the Branch Davidian cult, including their leader David Koresh. “You mean you escaped from the compound?” I asked, incredulous. The men just kept eating. I glanced at Simon, who was still grinning. I smiled too. We were conspirators, helping these men be reborn on the other side of the Texas/Oklahoma border, old sins burned clean in a madman’s raging fire. They rode with us all the way to Fort Worth, dozing as we listened to music. We dropped them off at a train station downtown and gave them all the cash we had, which wasn’t much.

When we got closer to home, Simon parked his car on Skyline Drive on a bluff overlooking the city, a spot that he had loved since childhood. We lay on the hood of his car, gazing up at the full moon and the pinprick stars, heat from the engine seething beneath our backs. Simon’s fingertips grazed as light as moths on my skin, and his car’s stereo droned us to the lip of sleep, where the borders of our two separate dreams brushed, in that Texas town where nothing interesting ever happened.

## Save Me From What I Want

*Live fast  
and dye your hair.*

*That's what I wrote on my  
Converse in 8<sup>th</sup> grade.*

*Maybe it was the way  
the feeling pulled me*

*like a girl  
pulling a ponytail.*

*Maybe I didn't get the job  
cause of the polka dots.*

*Maybe I don't care  
cause of the wave.*

*Today I'm blue.  
Tomorrow I could be anywhere.*

*All these pop songs about dying young  
like it's gonna be so epic.*

*The only difference between 8<sup>th</sup> grade  
and now is the blowing up*

*the use of color  
& perspective.*

*Things that are with you  
when you wake up*

*& you feel like  
someone's there.*

*Same rainbows  
under her eyes*

*clouds floating in the air.*

*–Marisa Crawford, Manic Panic*

Despite my traumatic attachment to Simon, I was unprepared for the way I would fall for Kevin, the original Icarus, the original Narcissus, when he came back into my life, that knife to the gut, that tumble down the rabbit hole. I also still have a photograph I took when the first Kevin was fifteen and I was ten, next to Lake Caddo, his skinny shoulder blades jutting out like propeller wings tarnished brown under the flambeau of the bayou. I remember thinking he looked like Neptune with his blue-black hair and his net of crawfish writhing under his big hands like a womb.

I used to lie on the pier while he and my brother fished, the dark water webbing beneath my back, carrying armies of crabs pink as plastic soldiers and a chorus of fish that leapt and undulated in August hues—russet and blue and vermillion. The pier wound like a snake through miles of crooked trees more fitted for a jungle with their heart-shaped leaves sprawling around us like waterfalls of ink. Kevin was my god, so different from the most of the earth-bound boys at my middle school, their knees and elbows shuffling without grace down the hallways.

Thirty years later I am sitting next to him on my brother's couch, this "Birdman of Chicago," nature still lighting up his veins like an electric roadmap. He shows me another photograph—a snowy hawk he rescued, caught in a fishing line, its wings stretched sideways like a crucifix. That night I dream his long arm is wrapped around my waist, and I wake in a sweat with my sheets coiled and twisted around me, still trying to name the color of his eyes—too fluid for agate, too light-flecked for stone, knowing I will offer myself up to him like a lamb to the slaughter, and wondering why and how *sometimes* the dead come back.

## Good Hair

Kevin always had beautiful hair. In his twenties he was a body builder with a black belt in karate and a mass of dark hair that made him look like he belonged on the cover of a Harlequin romance novel. But I liked it even better when we got married. It was still thick but mostly silver and cut short in the fashion of rulers of the ancient Roman Empire. Hints of pepper peeked through the salt, and all of it shimmered in the sunlight like liquid metal.

Sometimes, even though I was only five years younger than my husband, a store clerk or bartender would ask to see my ID when we would buy alcohol. “Do you want to see my ID too?” Kevin would ask.

“Oh, no, sir, that’s okay,” was the inevitable reply.

“She’s my wife, not my daughter, okay? We’re practically the same age!” Sometimes he got defensive.

So he tried to talk me into letting my hair turn gray as well, perhaps because he wanted to control me or because he saw me as an extension of himself, our physical connection so intense it bordered on morbid. And because I was hypnotized, walking around in a stupor for the first couple of years of our relationship, I agreed to try it for a while.

“What you need is a role model,” Kevin said. “Find an image of someone you want to emulate, and post the image where you can look at it on a regular basis.” He proceeded to pick up his phone and show me a recent photo of the bearded George Clooney, looking every bit like a dashing sea captain or the wolf in “Little Red Riding Hood,” flecks of white dotting his ebony fur. “Like this,” Kevin told me. “This was my role model when my hair started changing. Clooney is my gray god, if you will.”

But I had a feeling it would take me more than a few clicks to find a beautiful *woman* with gray hair.

I was right. All of the actresses my age—the ones who haven't become unrecognizable from plastic surgery or been forced to live in a cave so that their subjugation to time won't offend the masses—sport some dyed version of the same blonde or red or black hair they've had since puberty...but with highlights.

So Kevin suggested I look for images of witches.

“Excuse me?” I said.

“You know how you're all into the pagan thing. Find yourself a witch with flowing gray hair, a gray goddess.”

My facial expression must have spoken volumes because he back pedaled. “I just think it would be cool to start a trend of gray-haired women with young faces and bodies.”

Nice try.

But the conversation did get me thinking about the lengths we go to in order to conceal our age as we mature, as if the inevitable process of aging somehow makes us flawed, makes us bad people. And the juxtaposition of the two images—Clooney and the witch—is telling. Our cultural perception of a gray-haired man allows us to conjure up pictures of debonair movie stars, while a gray-haired woman gets equated with a monster.

Like most women, I never appreciated my natural hair until the gray started to creep in, which happened to me in my late 20s. Before that I had straight, dark hair, thick but silky—the color of chocolate when I was being kind to myself, the color of mud when I wasn't. I had “good hair.” I know this because my mother told me so, and she is not the type of person to dole out compliments, not even to, or perhaps *especially not to*, her own children. Instead she decided

long ago what traits she would ascribe to my brother and me, both good and bad, as if her utterances somehow brought these attributes into being and made them True. I had good hair and pretty hands and feet. These are traits that she felt she did not possess but for which I still owed her thanks. Despite her assurances about my “good hair,” however, I never allowed myself to embrace it.

After all, how could I become a Barbie doll or a cheerleader or a fairy-tale princess with hair like that, a witch’s broom that has recently swept up a pile of ashes? So in middle school, I used a product called Sun-In, bleaching my dark tresses to an unflattering shade of orange as I baked myself, lying on a beach towel in the back yard. In the 1980s when curly hair was in fashion, I further tortured my orange locks by giving myself a home perm, ending up looking like some stick-figure version of a girl from a Whitesnake video. Then there was my neo-goth phase, in which I cut my hair short and dyed it blue-black because it was much more dramatic than my boring brown. Now I spend a great deal of time trying to get back to the “natural” haircolor I never liked in the first place, all to maintain some illusion of youth. Because the color is changing, I can grieve it, I can call it chestnut or coffee or sienna...anything but potting-soil-brown.

And maybe it was my adolescent desire to be different from everyone else that contributed to my agreement with Kevin to go natural. I looked around and saw the same slick cap of mahogany bobbing about on the heads of middle-aged women everywhere. It was as if we were all dying our hair with the same shade of Old English wood polish we’d use to restore luster to a piano or a dining table. I wanted my gray to be a statement of rebellion, of individuality. I hoped my *real* hair color would be pretty like my husband’s. Maybe, instead of gray, it would be silver or pewter or platinum, like a built-in tiara. My elderly mother did not

approve of my little experiment. Maybe she was afraid people would see she had a daughter with gray hair and would thus begin to suspect her bright copper helmet of hair might not be natural.

I wanted my transition to be a revolution, an act of defiance. I wanted to rise, as statuesque and metallic as Lady Liberty. Instead of a torch, I would hold a wad of cash that I saved on salon appointments in my outstretched fist.

But during that transitional phase, I became more enslaved to vanity than ever. Fearing a colleague or student would mistake the silver zebra stripe down the center of my head for the first signs of a nervous breakdown, I went to great lengths to disguise it. Hats, headbands, scarves, turbans that a swami would envy, bandanas that made me look like an extra from *Sons of Anarchy*, all graced my head. There is an entire industry capitalizing on women in just such a state of flux and preying on us in this vulnerable time. Root sprays, creams, powders, and tubes of shoe-polish-looking substances that you can squirt directly onto your head all promise a temporary fix to an unsightly problem.

“Sometimes it seems like we're all living in some kind of prison, and the crime is how much we hate ourselves,” Claire Danes once said on my generation’s cult classic TV series *My So-Called Life*. She was right.

I remember watching my musician friend Daniel’s five-year-old daughter Lotus after a gig at an outdoor restaurant along the Trinity River, while Kevin helped Daniel load instruments into his car. Lotus is a gypsy child with olive skin and dark brown eyes, her dusky hair a mass of luscious coils bouncing around like slinkies. It’s beautiful, of course. The stuff of envy. But she had befriended a little blue-eyed, blonde-haired girl at the restaurant and was taking turns riding her new friend’s pink bicycle on the adjacent river trail. Not nearly as skilled of a rider as her

new friend, Lotus climbed on the bike, turning the dial between the handlebars until it clicked to a picture of a blonde princess. And then, eyeing the trail ahead of her with grit and determination, she began to inch the pedals forward.

“You girls and your hair,” Kevin muttered as he returned to witness the scene. I think what he meant was...we always want what we don’t have. Lotus and I are Natalie Woods who want to be Marilyn Monroes. And maybe voluptuous Marilyn Monroe wanted to be elfin Natalie Wood. But more likely, if they had to do it over again, they would both just wish they’d been born plain enough to live long and boring lives instead of short, tragic ones. It’s vicious. And absurd. A virus in the female collective consciousness that I don’t know if I should blame on our mothers...or our fathers...or the media...or ourselves. I guess the dreaded aging process just adds another layer to an already disturbing dynamic. A war against the self that for some reason often gets waged on our heads. Even Gen-X poster girl Angela Chase (Claire Danes in *My So-Called Life*), despite her depth and authenticity, was unhappy with her hair. Angela’s mousy brown hair—a metaphor for her life, of course—was holding her back. So in the pilot episode, she dyed it a vibrant red shade called “Crimson Glow.”

## Pain Body

### Fall 2016

By ten p.m. on the night of November 7, the champagne I'd purchased to celebrate the election of the first woman president was gone, used instead to drown sorrow, to choke back shock. Kevin lay on the floor under a table that he'd shoved against a window in the living room to allow his plants to get some light. His arms were wrapped around Jasper, a Sharpei/pit bull mix that we had rescued. Our other three dogs were draped across my lap and shoulders on the couch, providing comfort in that uncanny way that dogs have of sensing our pain.

The next morning I managed to haul myself to my eight a.m. class, but I did not know how to alter my grieving face. I turned it toward the windows, raising the silver blinds, one by one, letting my students look at the storm swelling over Marine Creek Lake.

I knew Ahmed had been sleeping in his car, and Liliana was working long hours at the Quik Trip to send money to her family in Guadalupe. Rahim was going to graduate with his daughter that December, but he wanted her to wear the gold honors sash he earned. And Lucas, the Iraq war veteran, drank himself to sleep every night, trying to quell angry hints that glinted and crouched like tin soldiers in his brain trenches. I held their secrets. I carried them around like stones in the belly of a wolf. How they were there at eight a.m. on a Wednesday was a miracle, some rare trick of light. My grief was a black crab that crawled through the back door, intestines cut into sections on the classroom floor. I wanted to kick out the windows with the flats of my boots, urge everyone to hurl desks and howl, our cries the jangling wails of a Chinese opera. How could I talk about *Beowulf* when the world was burning? Instead I scrawled nine words on the board:

You are loved.

You are loved.

You are loved.

### **Fall 2018**

Kevin didn't vote for Trump. As I watched him on election night curled under the table with Jasper, I thought, maybe, he felt it too. The female pain body. But, over the next year, he would occasionally defend Trump or his voters, especially his narcissist father, a former Republican candidate for mayor of a Dallas-Fort Worth suburb. Like a typical borderline, Kevin's ideology would ricochet all over the political map.

Now it's almost two years later, and the political landscape is exploding. My abusive marriage became my personal epi-center of the female pain body, my ground zero. I slayed my demon, yet another sexual predator is about to be appointed to the Supreme Court. I don't watch the testimony; instead I drive South again with my brother and his family on the last weekend of September, just after the Autumn Equinox.

Every woman who is demeaned, discounted, shamed, and disbelieved on the public stage is like another bullet wound to any of us who have been hurt by men, by the perpetuation of a patriarchal system that is as toxic to the collective body of the feminine as a marriage to a psychopath is to an individual woman.

I feel the worst for my eighty-year-old mother, an empath who doesn't even try to protect herself, a feminist who clawed her way through her own abusive marriage and crafted a teaching career in her fifties as a single mother with two children. She refuses to travel and has no one to confide in except me. I have always been her confessor, a burden quite often borne by the youngest child. I hear the raw pain in her voice as I talk to her on my cell phone, while my

brother, the getaway driver, goes into a convenience store on Galveston Island to buy cigarettes. “They’ll confirm him,” she says of Kavanaugh. “They’ll confirm him. No one cares.”

But I am finished with this over-identification with pain, with this resignation to allow the patriarchy to continue to fuck us over. I want to tell my mother that as long as she makes an identity for herself out of this pain, she cannot become free of it. But I’ve tried to have that conversation with her so many times. All I can do now is realize that I, too, have been attached to this pain, so attached to it that I married it, bound my life up to its sprawling tentacles.

But I’m free now.

So I vote, I teach, I spread the message. I mount a rainbow-striped Beto sticker on the back of my mini-Cooper and hammer a Lupe Valdez sign into my mother’s front yard for her. I get certified to register my students to vote. While Dr. Christine Blasey Ford is cross-examined on the political stage, I dip my toes into the Gulf of Mexico, the normally teeming beach a ghost-town on this rainy fall afternoon, Bijou chasing seagulls with the speed and grace of a tiny greyhound. I look at my photos of Galveston’s empty Pleasure Pier after I get back to our rental condo and see that they are eerie, as gray and spectral as a carnival that danced and whirled a hundred years in the past.

## Bullet With Butterfly Wings

“When Stefan drugs Maleficent and cuts off her wings, do you see this as an allegory for rape?” I ask the students in my Myth and Fairy Tale class. The girls nod. The boys’ faces redden as they attempt to sink low under their baseball caps. In this cinematic flip of *Sleeping Beauty*, when Maleficent awakens after Stefan’s brutal attack, she howls in anguish, mourning what she has lost. Her wings are her source of power. Like a young woman's sexuality, they are precious, and the crude way in which they are sawed off her back—her trust broken, her body violated—leaves her ravaged inside and out.

I tell my students the original story of *Sleeping Beauty* is actually a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Italian fairy tale called “Sun, Moon, and Talia.” In this brutal tale, when the prince encounters the comatose heroine Talia, he is not satisfied with merely a kiss. We know this because nine months later, Talia—still sleeping—gives birth to twins. Just like in *Maleficent*, the protagonist is unconscious and therefore unable to give consent. Thus, the original *Sleeping Beauty* is also a story about rape.

When I was nine, my brother’s friend tried to rape me. Not Kevin. Never Kevin. Kevin was always my protector when we were kids. My perpetrator was named Jeff. And mine is not a unique story. Change the girl’s age, the identity of the assailant. Maybe remove the words “tried to” and re-word the crime to past tense. Maybe “raped” becomes “molested” or “touched” or “watched” or “forced.” And perhaps it’s not every young woman’s story or every young man’s story (in their cases, probably even more deeply hidden). But it is the story of far too many of us. For so many of us, our first direct experience with injustice involved the violation of our bodies,

and even worse, the insidious worming into our minds and hearts that has the power to poison us for the rest of our lives.

I was one of the lucky ones. My assailant, although five years older and much stronger than I, was neither an adult nor a relative, and I managed to fight him off. But to this day I loathe being awakened in the middle of the night, dragged out of dreamland. My throat goes dry, my palms sweat, my lulled heart immediately amps into full fight-or-flight mode. I learned that kicking was my best defense, ramming the soles of my feet into his chest, pointing my toes and aiming for his eyes, all those years of dance lessons paying off. Kicking became such a reflex mechanism for me that twice in my adult life, nurses would feel the need to strap all one hundred pounds of me to a hospital bed to avoid the wrath of my weaponized limbs.

At the moment of the assault, I managed to clear enough space with the force of my legs to jump out of the bed and run down the hall to my parents' room, which was unlocked. I didn't wake them. I just grabbed a pillow and lay on the floor, heart pounding, curling up next to Bonnie, our West Highland White terrier.

I wish my story ended there. Because maybe then I could re-frame it, re-write it, make it into a survivor's tale rather than the story of a scared and betrayed little girl. Maybe then I would have grown up kicking my way through life, a warrior goddess, as tough as my pop culture icons: Buffy, vampire slayer; Xena, warrior princess; Michonne, zombie tamer.

In the past few months, discovering other women whose experiences directly mirror my own has been profound and liberating. In listening to their stories, my own horror is validated and recognized, but it is also perpetuated, as I learn to reframe and accurately name each instance of trauma for what it really was.

A few days ago a woman on a forum for female survivors of narcissistic abuse posted the following thread: “Has anyone else had the experience of the narcissist having sex with you before you’re even awake in the morning? My husband has been doing that to me for years. As I have gotten stronger and more aware of his narcissistic tendencies, I wonder if it's common.”

Her question made my blood go cold. Over sixty women responded with a resounding yes, including me. Many women also explained to her, correctly, that having sex with an unconscious woman is rape, and she needed to end the relationship. Narcissists see people as fuel, as supply for their needs, and they see their partners as extensions of themselves, so I believe that may be why this phenomenon is so common.

Kevin also used my body as if it was his own, the way Simon did all those years ago, only this time, we shared a bed for three years. This time, it was much more than a slap on the ass or a worming of limbs, encasing me like the roots of a tree snaking through dirt. The first poem I ever got published and won an award for, in college, a re-telling of the Psyche and Eros myth, ended with the line, “Women were made instead to be invaded.” I had no idea how real that line would become. Kevin complained a lot about my wearing pajama shorts to bed early in our relationship, so I abandoned those, but I always wore panties, as if that thin layer of fabric could somehow protect the borderland of my body from invasion. But every morning, between 3 and 4 a.m., as he spooned himself around me, my back turned to him, he would simply pull that layer down far enough to allow himself some room and insert himself inside of me. Every morning except during my menstrual cycle. I am 5’2” and weigh 100 pounds. Kevin is 6’2” and weighs 180 pounds. So no, I wasn’t able to sleep through these encounters, but I learned early on that if I managed to stop them by clawing my way to the edge of the bed, away from his body,

then I'd suffer consequences for the rest of the day, the week, however long he chose to punish me for rejecting him. Sometimes I chose the consequences instead of the sex.

The worst part of it is that he veiled this violation in intimacy, and I believed the lie, or at least a part of me did. I think maybe even he believed it. He was my husband, after all, and he wasn't being violent, wasn't pinning me to the bed or tying me up or covering my mouth with his hand. And I was still attracted to him, wildly so—the woodsy smell of him an intoxicant, his shoulders broad as a Norse god's, his brown skin a warm place I wanted to crawl into. But not when I was cosseted in the womb of my own sleep.

So eventually, my body began to rebel, to fight for itself, since I was doing such a lousy job protecting it. Kevin and I always marveled at our chemistry, how neither of us ever infected the other one, despite his STD and both of our sensitivities. Toward the end, however, when my body had had enough, it began getting bladder infections, and my menstrual cycle, the only safe time of the month for me, went haywire. Kevin had an app on his phone to track my periods, so I allowed him to believe I was menstruating even when I wasn't, so that I could get a few mornings of relief. When I visited my primary-care doctor, she said, "I see women your age become pregnant by accident all the time. Do you really want to be tied to this psycho for the next eighteen years?" She knew everything. She knew enough to save me from myself.

What I remember most about Jeff's invasion into my bedroom when I was a child, the thing that shaped me the most, was my father's response to the attack. I told my mother first, and she pleaded with my father to forbid "that boy" from entering our house ever again. But my father accused me of lying. My father said that a boy from a good home wouldn't do something like that and that he was welcome in our home any time. My mother, always the good military

wife (until their divorce), deferred to the commander's wishes. My parents' reaction was the worst betrayal, the one in which my own wings were ripped off. Now, on the precipice of forty, I'm still trying to grow them back.

## Monsters

*“Oh, monsters are scared,” said Lettie. “That’s why they’re monsters.” –Neil Gaiman*

The last night I spent by myself in the townhouse, a tall figure with Kevin’s shape and energy glided into the bedroom, awakening me. I sat up in the bed, our three dogs sprawled around me, and called out his name. No one answered. The entity crept on to the mattress beside me and pulled me toward it. It smelled like Kevin too—that hot scent of male flesh, sandalwood, and leather.

Then it roared.

My body began to vibrate until I swam into the liquid wall of sound, paralyzed by an invisible net, like Snow White encased in her glass coffin. The sound started to suck me in. I was losing myself. I felt dizzy, descending sideways into a black hole. My heart thumped and raced, a sparrow smashing against a cage of bone. I struggled to catch my breath. I was disappearing into his roar, and I could feel my sanity slipping away as I grasped at objects in my mind that once held meaning to me—bell, book, and candle; ring, rock, and crystal.

My defense mechanisms of freezing and fleeing were not available to me. So I fought it. I climbed my way out of that growling cavern, kicking and clawing and screaming. I woke with a gasp, covered in sweat, my heart a gloved fist in my chest. I turned on the lights and the television, gathered my dogs around me. It was 3:33 a.m.

Earlier that night I had been playing Shaun Colvin’s song “Get Out of This House” on a loop, like a mantra, dancing in the kitchen as I cooked: “Go jump in the lake. Go ride up the hill. Get out. Get out of this house. It’s a house of your making. It’s a house of ill will. Get out. Get out of this house.” I had asked Kevin to move out at least three times in the past year, and I was

gearing up for a fourth battle. But in the end, his parasitic energy had infected my house, and I've seen enough horror movies to know what that means.

It means sometimes leaving is surviving.

Some women marry houses, according to Anne Sexton, and I was in danger of just such a fate, digging in, staying put, washing its walls down every day, trying to exorcise its demons. But suddenly I was grateful to my parents for dragging me through three states and five houses by the time I was ten. If I knew how to do one thing, it was move.

As an empath, I also knew how to sense and respond to energy, but I think that's a trait I was born with. I'd been having paranormal experiences my whole life, accepting the unseen as part of a larger web of experience. In the fourth grade, when my attempts to describe Santa Claus as a non-corporeal "spirit" were met with gaping stares by my classmates, I learned to keep my mouth shut about this part of my world. I guess growing up in a dysfunctional home brings with it its own share of ghosts. My brother and I coped by transferring our real fears into fiction, reading *Fangoria* magazines and Dean Koontz novels, staying up late to watch John Carpenter and Wes Craven flicks.

My love for horror was one of many aspects of my persona that Kevin mocked and judged. "In the final moments before your death, you're probably going to see evil clowns," he said to me once, his voice laced with venom and superiority. "That's not what *I* want to see." Kevin even said it was *my* love for horror that turned *him* into a monster.

So I would hide my hobby, hoping for nights alone so I could text Keith or my friend Miranda for recommendations, so I could watch *Channel Zero* and *The Invitation*, *American*

*Horror Story* and *10 Cloverfield Lane*, *The Babadook*, and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*.

One of the last movies I saw before I left the townhouse was *Gerald's Game*, a Stephen King adaptation in which a woman tied up on a bed spends the entire film learning how to free herself, taunted by images of her abusive husband. As it turns out, horror movies have proven to be rather instructive.

That mixture of “real” dysfunction and perceived evil that marked my childhood is a phenomenon that bonded my best friend Keith and me. He once showed me a photograph of himself at age ten, posed in front of a tilted Christmas tree. Small for his age, he wore Batman pajamas, his dark hair messy, his brown eyes big as saucers. Keith swears the blurry orb above his head in the photo is paranormal in nature, and I have been unable to convince him that it is simply an out-of-focus Christmas light. But I can understand why he thinks his childhood home was haunted.

Dissociative Identity Disorder, Keith's mother's illness, is characterized by two or more distinct personality states or an experience of “possession,” as evidenced by discontinuities in sense of self, cognition, behavior, affect, perceptions, and/or memories. When Keith was a child, his only explanation for his mother's altered states was demonic possession—the way her face would flush and disfigure, the inexplicable strength she would gain as she shattered glass table tops and kicked holes in locked doors. And I must admit, whenever I would walk into that house, covered in weeds and dark as midnight no matter what time of day it was, I would feel a chill creep into my bones. One time we stayed up all night with a tape recorder, trying to catch evidence of a real haunting. But we didn't unearth anything.

As a teenager I wasn't the kind of goth who listened to Marilyn Manson or pierced my face. I was the kind who wanted to live in 19<sup>th</sup>-century England, my closet a sea of dark velvet

and lace, my lips stained in my favorite Revlon shade called Blackberry, reading *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (books that are now some of my favorites to teach in my British literature classes). Years later I would be admitted to an outpatient treatment program for major depression and would discover reruns of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* which aired on FX at 6 a.m. every morning as I was getting ready to go to treatment. Even more than yoga and Prozac and six weeks of grueling group therapy sessions, I credit that TV series for saving my life.

I was drawn to the show's themes of feminine power, rites of passage, and fulfillment of personal destiny. What at first glance looks like a "B" horror film turns out to be a narrative with substance. Buffy and Willow (one a slayer, the other a witch) are powerful role models for young women. Buffy's physical prowess belies her stature; she can take on men (and monsters) twice her size. Willow's intellectual ability makes her the brainy counterpart to Buffy's brawn. Joss Whedon even transforms the final episode into a sort of feminist manifesto, as Buffy extends her strength to every woman, uttering the fateful words: "From now on, every girl in the world who *might* be a Slayer, *will* be a Slayer. Every girl who *could* have the power, *will* have the power." In addition to creating strong female characters, Whedon situates the high school on top of a hellmouth, thus creating the perfect metaphor for the trials and tribulations we all experience when navigating the long, murky passage from childhood to adulthood. As Buffy comes of age, she learns to embrace her calling as a vampire slayer, and each character moves toward his or her true destiny, sending a message to viewers to find our own purpose in life.

That same year many of my female students became obsessed with Stephanie Meyers' *Twilight* book series. I railed at them to be Buffys instead of Bellas, to slay their monsters instead of marrying them and becoming absorbed in them, and then turning into monsters themselves.

Like me, Buffy is attracted to vampires, but she usually has to kill them anyway, leaving her heartsick and lonely but with her dignity and integrity intact, always fighting the good fight. Georgia O’Keefe said, “If you can believe in what you are and keep to your line—that is the most one can do with life.” That is also the lesson Buffy taught me.

When my nephew Joe was little, a boy after my own heart, he used to keep a monster journal—a small, brown, leather-bound book with unlined parchment pages. Every time he learned about a new monster, he would scrawl its name on the top of a page—werewolf, zombie, yeti—and then list the facts he knew about it: where it lived, what it preyed upon, what its weaknesses were, and most importantly, how to kill it. His parents blamed me, of course, and weren’t pleased with his line of research.

“Ann, do you think vampires are real?” he asked me once when he was about ten years old.

“Energy vampires are real,” I told him.

“What’s an energy vampire?”

“The kind of person who sucks the life out of a room when they walk into it.”

“Oh, like that kid at zoo camp who can’t talk about anything other than Minecraft.”

“Exactly,” I said.

And maybe Kevin was right. I didn’t make him into a monster, but I attracted one. During the last year of our relationship, like Joe with his journal, I became obsessed with trying to identify and name the monster that lurked inside my husband: borderline, narcissist, psychopath. What kind of monster caused him to smash his head into sliding glass doors, to

throw leashes at me and the dogs, to call me a “fucking bitch,” a tornado of fury spiraling around my house? What kind of monster crept behind his eyes as they flashed from sea-green to stone?

When I was moving out in a fury as mad as one of Kevin’s tornadoes, I found a silver sequin, small and glimmering, like a snake’s eye underneath the bedside table, and I remembered the night last spring when something shifted inside me. We were getting ready for a 1920s-themed murder-mystery party when Kevin started to tear the bathroom apart. I remember the heels from my wedding shoes clicking against the wet pavement, my three dogs running through the rain, six wet paws clamoring against the car door, a hoodie thrown over my red and silver flapper dress, my brunette waves turning to frizz.

“I think it’s the spaces that mental illness creates in their brains. That’s what allows the monsters to get in,” Keith said to me during my last visit to New York. It sounded like as good a theory as any.

And, after all of my feminist rantings at my students, I still allowed my own soul to be sucked out for three years by a deeply damaged man—a borderline, narcissist, psychopath—whatever monster was created from the crackling gaps in his injured brain. I’ve aged in the past three years, my face pale and tired, the back of my neck warped into a series of knots and kinks. But I got out, finally—slayed my vampire, exorcised my demon, morphed from a Bella back into a Buffy. Keeping to my line. Believing in what I am.

### **III: Kintsugi**

## The Narcissist's Arsenal: A Glossary

If you take a swan-dive into the dark world of Cluster-B personality disorders—because you have become, *cluster-fucked*, as I call it—you open a Pandora's box of weapons you didn't even know existed. It's as if all of these abusers were born on some distant planet with different rules that they all understand and abide by.

"They're all the same," my counselor Brittany at Safe Haven told me. "They may be homeless or they may be doctors, but it's like they're all working from the same playbook."

Or maybe they are changelings who have swapped places with their once-human hosts. I think that about Kevin sometimes, about how different he ended up being from the wild but loving boy I thought I knew as a child. Maybe *my* Kevin is swimming in the azure waters of some mystical realm because *this* world, as Auden says in his poem about the changeling, was more full of weeping than he could understand.

Most therapists aren't even familiar with the phenomenon of narcissistic abuse or how to deal with its aftermath, but there are many online forums and communities where you can find kindred spirits. At first, you learn the lexicon, which allows you to put names to your particular brand of torment. If you can give something a name, maybe you can wrap your brain around it, you can lessen its power over you. You also learn names for techniques that you can use when battling this demon, shamanic tools to aid you on your quest.

At some point, after your knowledge begins to run deep, you may abbreviate those names, turning them into acronyms for the sake of efficiency. Going "no contact" becomes NC. Your ex's mistress or new girlfriend becomes NS, short for "new supply," as in, the new fuel that he is now siphoning into the bottomless gas-tank of his heart. For the sake of simplicity, "narc" or "nex" (narcissist ex) is the preferred shorthand to refer to your Cluster B partner or former

partner. These terms may seem cold or cruel or vindictive or “bitchy,” but we are angry, we throngs of survivors who have wasted years of our lives pouring ourselves into these empty reservoirs. We are finding each other. In naming the enemy and his tools, we become educated. With words, we grow fierce wings to propel us out of the heaps of our ashes.

## **No Contact**

Not only does this mean you don’t respond to their phone calls or texts or requests to meet—their words either laced with honey or venom, depending upon which tactic is in play—this means there is no way for them to contact you, no way for them to continue to worm their way into your already damaged psyche. You block their phone number and email address. You get as much of your stuff out of your shared space as you can in one fell swoop.

In my case, Brian, Angie and Joe came over to the townhouse on a day that Kevin had yoga teacher training, and I took our three dogs to my mom’s house. Kevin was already certified to teach yoga, but instead of spending the \$5000 I gave him from the sale of my home on renting his own apartment after our separation, he gave the money to the Kundalini Yoga Research Institute for more training. At least this meant he’d be gone all day. I was a wreck, feeling like I had no right to take my own stuff, worried about what he would need. So I slumped down on to the floor, useless. Angie became the director, Joe the muscle, and Brian the court jester. We threw stuff into boxes and directed the movers when they arrived. I sent Kevin a text and then cut off his avenues to reach me, one by one by one.

A few days after I initiated “no contact,” I went to see the film *A Quiet Place* with my friends and fellow horror buffs Miranda and Mike. In a moving scene, the husband and wife,

wordlessly in sync, share earbuds and dance to Neil Young's "Harvest Moon." After the movie was over, I said, "Harvest Moon was our wedding song."

"Oh no. Are you okay?" Miranda asked.

"Yes," I said. "To be honest, all I could think about was how Kevin wouldn't be able to survive in a world where he had to stay quiet." But I would. Miranda said the movie was a commentary on the patriarchy, how it shuts us up, snuffs out our voices. I agreed with her. But sometimes, as the movie also teaches us, there can be a power in quiet. Before I initiated "no contact," I used another method I learned about in my pathology studies:

### **Gray Rock**

Before you ghost your monster, you become a ghost yourself. Don't respond, don't react. Don't let them provoke you or push your buttons. Plan your exit. In Kevin's mind, we were getting along because I had ceased to exist. A gray rock has no demands, no opinions. A gray rock makes a perfect Stepford Wife or Handmaid. I'm good at pretending. I believe this is a strength. But Kevin's favorite epithet to hurl at me was "liar." He equated my stealthy nature to lying, but I realize now that 1) He most hated the traits in me that he couldn't access within himself, and he had no ability to regulate his swirling hurricane of emotions, and 2) He was pulling out another weapon in the narcissist's arsenal:

### **Projection**

When he called me a "liar" or an "addict" or "insecure" or "diabolical," he was really talking about himself. He was the more skilled actor out of the two of us, fooling all of us empaths in his new-age circle into thinking he was compassionate, sensitive, an enlightened

yogi. As his mask slipped more and more, things he had told me in the beginning of the relationship no longer added up. He had an STD, and he told me that he got it from a woman he dated about a year before he and I got together. But then I found out he had given this illness to his ex-wife Kim, whom he had divorced seven years ago, and that was one reason she harbored so much bitterness toward him. I think she decided to go “no contact” too.

He also had a horde of female friends, and I didn’t mind that. They were platonic relationships, he insisted. I thought this made him more feminine, made him understand and relate to us better. But toward the end, after I had gone “gray rock,” he told me he had slept with all of them. This all happened, supposedly, before we got together. He revealed each indiscretion, each breach of friendship, case by case, trying to incite me to jealousy, which did seethe and curl inside my gut like fists, but I never allowed it to pummel its way to the surface.

### **Triangulation**

A relationship with a borderline, in particular, is an endless Ferris wheel of idealization and devaluation. You are placed high on a pedestal and then you come crashing down, over and over and over again. After these crashes, Kevin would say things like, “I just don’t feel connected to you anymore,” or “I thought we’d be in love forever. I guess I was wrong.” In order to keep you dangling from their beak-pointed treble hook, they find a third party to elevate while you are thrashing about in the murky waters of their contempt. With Kevin it was usually an older woman, someone with money, someone he’d probably never sleep with but who could provide for his needs.

And just like his other abusive exploits, Kevin never took ownership of his triangulating strategies. Instead he blamed my reaction on my own insecurities, my inferiority complex. This denial of one's reality is another tool in their magic box.

### **Gaslighting**

Named after a 1944 film in which a charming man manipulates his wife into believing that she is going insane, this technique is the pinnacle of crazy-making behavior, the sharpest scalpel in their little black medicine bag of tricks. If their partners were vampires, instead of the other way around, then gaslighting would be a narcissist's wooden stake. When someone gaslights, they deny your reality. You start to question whether or not you remembered or interpreted events correctly. It becomes so commonplace, such a daily occurrence, that it turns your world, your sense of self, upside down.

### **Hoovering**

Hoovering is the tactic narcissists use to try to suck you back into their debris-filled chambers. If gaslighting is a wooden stake, then hoovering is a wooden cross, hypnotizing us, burning into our brains, making us powerless against them. We get to see a glimpse of the person we fell in love with, the one we've been hoping and praying would return, the one who probably never existed in the first place but instead was a glamour, a bewitchment.

When I first asked for a divorce, Kevin cried and begged and pleaded, showering me with words and gestures of love that I had been starving for. And like the zombie that I had become, I followed him to the Trinity River, the divorce papers in his hand, and watched as he burned them with a lighter, the orange flames licking the white edges of the document until they browned,

curled in, and turned to ash. Over the next few months, I ping-ponged back and forth between my house which he had claimed as his own and my mother's, the weather turning cooler. His favorite hoovering technique became building a fire, opening a bottle of red wine, and playing Scrabble with me as we sat on the living room rug and roasted marshmallows. I always won.

Music was an effective Hoover too. He'd put on Jeff Buckley, my favorite singer. Kevin, for the most part, had bad taste in music. He'd vacillate between angry metal bands when he was in an agitated depression or Sanskrit mantras when he wanted to feel calm. He had never even heard of Jeff Buckley before we got together, but his music became Kevin's "go to," the emotional trigger he used to hypnotize me into complacency.

### **Rage-and-Blame Storm**

In narcissistic-abuse-recovery expert Kim Saeed's book *How To Do No Contact Like a Boss*, she argues that your abuser will react to your initiation of "no contact" in one of several ways. While Kevin may have responded to my initial divorce request with hoovering, his reaction to my moving most of my belongings out of the townhouse and shutting him off was a firestorm of fury and condemnation.

Too scared to stay at my new apartment that first night, I went to my mom's house. Kevin showed up, pounding on her door, our dogs barking in the background. I was shaking, heart racing, hiding, crouched in a back bedroom like a dog that had been kicked too many times. We didn't answer the door. I knew he'd be furious because he had to be at yoga-teacher-training early the next morning, and I was no longer there to feed and walk the dogs. Kevin hated being inconvenienced.

So my mother called him and offered to take the dogs for the night. He screamed at her so loudly, I could hear him from across the room. He told her that she had taught me how to be a liar, how to run from my problems. After she hung up on him, he called her back several times. She kept hanging up. I was crying, upset that someone I love should have to take the brunt of his fury. That was my job, after all. But my mother was tough, unmoved. “He’s an idiot,” she said. “His words have no power over me.” I wished so much I could say the same thing.

But over the next few days and weeks, he used a new email address that I hadn’t blocked to snake streams of venom across the digital universe, his power to hurt me always the most lethal weapon in his arsenal.

## Going Feral

I remember once while lying in bed, I crossed my leg over Kevin's, our limbs forming an X-shape under the covers. "That's what Imran said he missed the most when his wife was stuck in Pakistan," Kevin said. "He missed the way her leg would rest over his while they were sleeping." Kevin's former co-worker Imran had to leave his wife behind in Pakistan, and they were separated for five years. In the beginning of my relationship with Kevin, that sounded like an unbearable arrangement.

"What would you miss the most about me?" I asked him.

"I'd miss your voice," he said, "and the way you smell."

I knew I would miss curling up behind him, inhaling him, my face pressed into the curve of his neck. But maybe that's just my animal heritage. The image and sound and smell and taste and texture of him took up residence in my brain, over and over again.

I always thought of love as a noun, a heavy thing, an anchor someone would slip around my neck, and that's exactly what it turned out to be. But with Kevin—at first—I experienced love as a verb. I liked to watch him move, tall and sinewy and graceful, like a thoroughbred horse. I liked to look into his sea-green eyes, the black pupils dilating and expanding, his eyelashes as long as a girl's.

Was that simply because the rods and cones in *my eyes* chose to focus on him—his motion, colors, edges, and forms? But why? Why, out of the churning mill of random activities in my brain, did it choose to fixate on him?

On our first Valentine's Day together, after we'd been dating about six weeks, he coerced me into taking Ecstasy with him. I'm no Puritan, but I was nervous about it because I don't respond well to either stimulants or hallucinogens. Ecstasy is what progressive medical

professionals recommend for people with no empathy, not too much of it, so I protested at first. But I am usually up for an adventure, and with Kevin, I was love-struck, brain-washed, a willing participant in his mad escapades. Now that I am re-framing everything through my glaring reality-colored glasses, I realize he manipulated me into it. Still, we teach people how to treat us, so I know I am not just a victim in the memory slideshow that flickers across the screen of my traumatized brain.

We bought masquerade masks at a magic shop and went to see a psychedelic band called Shpongles, dancing as the burning-plastic smell of DMT smoke swirled with the black lights and macabre characters. When we got back to his apartment, I remember looking into his eyes and knowing what he wanted without his having to tell me. I had never felt that close to anyone before. But now I realize two things: 1) It wasn't magic, it was consciousness altered through drugs, and 2) It was a one-way exchange. I didn't convey any of the contents of my own heart to him; I only absorbed his into mine.

Recently I read a book called *Women Who Love Psychopaths* in which psychologist Sandra Brown describes the uncanny stare of these dangerous men, the way they hypnotize their prey. I thought of cuttlefish putting lizard-fish into a trance with their kaleidoscopic light shows. Because their target may run away, a cuttlefish will try to slow it down by hypnotizing it into a calm state. It uses its color-changing chromatophores to lure its victim into coming closer to its mouth. And sometimes, cuttlefish even eat their own kind.

What I didn't realize was that in releasing large amounts of serotonin into the brain, Ecstasy also depletes the brain's natural supply of it. This chemical flood of serotonin causes receptors in the brain to down-regulate, which basically means they turn themselves off for a while. Most people's brains re-regulate after a couple of days, but it took me weeks to recover

from this neurological experiment. I couldn't get out of bed and had to cancel my classes. Plagued with jealousy and body dysmorphia, I felt ugly, shriveled, hollowed out. I worried I would never be the same again. But Kevin was there to play the hero, and I was more addicted to him than ever, like Margaret Atwood describes in her poem "You Fit Into Me"—he was a fishhook; I was an open eye.

But even without the drugs, when we first fell in love, we talked about our corporeal connection—the way we appealed to each other on all five sensory levels—sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste. I had never experienced that before. I thought Kevin was my "soulmate," but maybe he was just my "sense-mate," and if so, then what is the difference?

The sensory nature of our conscious experiences cannot be denied because chemistry keeps us healthy, lets our bodies know what foods and products and people to avoid, as if some things were marked with signs that read "DANGER" to us personally. Biology dictates with whom we should mate and who will be toxic to our systems. But if one believes in a soul and the eternal nature of that soul, then does that mean souls choose to be born in certain bodies with certain brains and certain sense organs, attracted to certain other bodies with compatible brains and sense organs? Do we find our soulmates through the use of our five senses? Or is "love" an illusion created by biology? And why didn't my senses recoil and retreat from him? Why didn't they protect me instead of catapulting me headlong into harm's way?

Even though Kevin's official diagnoses are bipolar disorder and ADHD—conditions that are challenging enough for a wife to deal with—about a year into the relationship, I started to suspect something more sinister had tarnished his brain, causing his handsome mask to slip more and more, revealing the monster emerging underneath it. He had sustained at least twelve

concussions throughout his life, most of them injuries to his frontal lobe, a type of wound that can make its victims notoriously vicious.

Mood disorders affect the person who suffers from them, diminishing their quality of life, but they can be managed with medication and therapy. Personality disorders, however, are ingrained, unchangeable, incurable, and seem to cause more damage to the afflicted person's partner and loved ones than they do to the patient himself. Instead of walking away at the first signs of abuse, like someone with healthy boundaries would do, I became obsessed with trying to diagnose him. My research led me to discover a pervasive phenomenon—the magnetic but tragic bond between the narcissist and the empath. I don't know if Kevin is a narcissist, but I am sure his fractured brain must have dumped him head first into the noxious cloud of Cluster B personality disorders—an assemblage that includes narcissists, borderlines, psychopaths, and sociopaths. It's a spectrum, though, like autism, so a person doesn't have to fit neatly into any one category. There are even dangerous combinations like “narco-paths” and “border-paths”—mostly men and always abusive. Kevin had a conscience at times but very little impulse control. He had genuine emotions but also maintained a parasitic lifestyle, seeing people as resources he could use for sex or money or drugs rather than kindred souls who existed on the same lofty plane that he did. And with each book or article I read about the narcissist-empath attachment, my heart would sink a little lower in my chest. Perhaps I had found my soulmate after all.

I believe, even more than the physical trauma of Kevin's head injuries, his abusive childhood left him with a core wound, a gaping hole that could never be filled. As healers, empaths are drawn to this wounded soul like moths to a flame. We have the ability to sense and absorb other people's pain and often take it on as though it were our own. If empaths are not aware of boundaries and do not understand how to protect ourselves, we will bond with the

narcissist in order to try to repair any damage and attempt to eradicate all his pain. What we fail to realize at first is that the narcissist is a taker. An energy sucker, a vampire, so to speak. He will draw the life and soul out of anyone he comes into contact with, given the chance. This is so that he can build up his own reserves and, in doing so, he can use the imbalance to his advantage. As it turns out, I was the light, and he was the insect. But instead of being able to heal him, my light became dimmer and dimmer, leaving us both shivering in the darkness of his tormented psyche.

For three grueling years I learned this lesson over and over again, refusing to let go of the idea that he was my twin rather than my parasite. Kevin and I even have different versions of the same body, different versions of the same skin, but of course he is bigger and louder and darker, commanding more physical attention. You could slice apples on our cheeks, our eyes are big and round and sunken deep into our bones, our jaws twitch with a similar pulse. Our fingers are long, our high-arched feet taper into graceful tips. We even smell the same, like grass mown in the summer, wood shavings, or the lip of a glass dressed with salt and lime.

It is excruciating to sever yourself from someone who feels like a physical part of you. In the last humane message I received from Kevin, he told me about trying to rescue an injured raccoon. For about six months, I shuffled back and forth from my mom's house to the townhouse that Kevin refused to vacate, the one that I continued to pay for, punctuating my exhausting movements with frequent trips to New York for comfort, living out of suitcases and book bags, piles of dirty laundry littering my Mini Cooper. In my absence Kevin had begun feeding a family of raccoons that lived in the woods outside of the townhouse. "If you feed them, they'll forget how to feed themselves," I told him. "You're not helping them. Besides, our dogs could get hurt." But he didn't care. My words had no power over him. HE was the animal expert after all. So every evening he would line up bowls of cheap dog food outside of the fenced patio, and he

and the dogs would watch the nightly ritual from the upstairs bedroom window, where they had a clear view of the feedings. And of course the raccoons were cute, their fuzzy, bandit-masked faces, their long-fingered paws dexterous, almost human.

But it was only a matter of time before the chaos that permeated Kevin's life (and mine when I was with him) would mar this picturesque tableau. The raccoon he tried to help wasn't injured; it was rabid, and Kevin told me he was in the process of undergoing a series of rabies shots, twenty-one injections into his stomach over the course of two weeks. Despite all of his accidents and injuries, broken bones and a smashed skull, the rabies shots were the most painful thing he ever endured. The next morning after I saw his email, I woke up with a smattering of red bumps across my stomach, still manifesting his pain on my body, still absorbing all that toxic chemistry. If his pain was meteors and constellations, then my body was the night sky, the canvas upon which he painted his rage. Even though we were physically separated, we were still energetically linked.

When researching my toxic attachment to Kevin, I learned about a phenomenon called a trauma bond. Usually trauma bonds occur in relationships involving inconsistent reinforcement, such as those with addicts and alcoholics or in domestic violence situations. Dysfunctional marriages also cause trauma bonds because there is always a time when things seem to be "normal." Other types of relationships involving trauma bonds include cult-like religious organizations, kidnapping and hostage situations, those involving child abuse or incest, and unhealthy work environments. The environment necessary to create a trauma bond involves intensity, complexity, inconsistency, and a promise. Victims stay because they are holding on to that elusive "promise" or hope. There is always manipulation involved. Victims are prey to the manipulation because they are willing to tolerate anything for the pay-off, which is that elusive

promise and ever present hope for fulfillment of some deeply personal need within the victim. After a year of trying to exit of the relationship, I finally quit cold turkey, but the bond still keeps me enslaved.

My friend Miranda saw Kevin's car and motorcycle parked at a small house not five miles from where I am living. It's a house I looked at once, so I remember the floorplan—the tiny living room not even big enough for a couch, the large closet that I would have used as an office. So I picture him there, the images come unbidden, his large frame and long limbs practically busting out of those cramped walls, like the Incredible Hulk. Our two dogs I had to give up sunbathing in the front yard. I want to be free, but I am still tethered.

Before I finally left, in the last weeks of our relationship, we were both too thin, two gaunt long-limbed colts still twined on the mattress, the couch, the floor, still fucking with the fevered urgency of new love, now laced with hatred, now hissing with a physical addiction to each other. He developed an eating disorder to add to his collection of pathologies, and I began to disappear into him, into the howling black hole that was our marriage.

But for some reason, our hair just kept growing, getting thicker and longer and wilder, his a mass of silver waves he'd sweep up into a man-bun he called a rishi knot, then he'd yell at me from the bathroom to come help him smooth out its kinks and bulges like a spoiled adolescent girl. I had lightened mine, still defying its transition to gray, and it had assumed a different texture, no longer straight and silky. If I let it dry naturally in the sun, it coiled and kinked and expanded outward—the madwoman in the attic, or the one shaking the bars in the wallpaper until her fingernails were dirty with the yellow smell.

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When I was in my twenties, I adopted a greyhound named Sebastian, whom I had for ten years. He had lived the first two years of his life in a concrete pen, a slave to the dog-racing industry. More than any other animal I've ever had the fortune to encounter, Sebastian was my familiar, my daemon, my soul-dog. When I went to look at the greyhounds for adoption, I was hoping for a small female. But Sebastian approached me the minute I walked into PetSmart, leaned his weight against me, then proceeded to follow me around the store. He was mine, and I was his.

Big for his breed and bow-legged from being overworked at the tracks, he was a gentle giant, his black fur soft and sleek as velvet, his big dark eyes filled with soul. More horse than dog, he was unable to sit, so he would tilt over and lie down on his side when resting, letting babies crawl over him, letting puppies nip at his ears. Sometimes he would curl his long body around me like an ouroboros, resting his head in my lap, his tail touching his nose. I decided it was his way of hugging me.

But I could never let him off-leash because, no matter how docile they seem, sight hounds are bred to see, chase, and capture. Any small animal could set them off in a mad dash, and at speeds of 45 miles per hour, you might not ever be able to catch them. Sebastian snagged a cat once, after a back-yard chase. It dangled from his mouth by the ruff, but when it whizzed around and swiped his nose with its claws, he let it go. And twice he managed to escape from the back yard, inciting a frenzied search. Both times I found him hanging out on a neighbor's front porch, children not quite as tall as he was petting him, as he panted and grinned. It was hard to imagine such a placid creature turning feral, but greyhounds are one of the oldest dog breeds, dating back at least 4,000 years to ancient Egypt, Greece, and Persia. If lost and forced to survive

on their own, they will go into a feral state within days, the shock to their systems turning their black eyes blank, their sharp teeth bared. They will become very difficult to approach.

I understand that now because it was what was happening to me, what needed to happen to me in order to survive the psychological violence of my marriage. I had to access fight mode, as buried deep as it was within me. It was my only way out.

Now that Kevin and Simon no longer provide a physical presence in my life, I must continue to embrace their wildness. I want to incorporate all the good parts of them into myself, their ferocity, their animal empathy, the way their electric presence could light up a room. In some ways, I want to become them, burnish my skin, light up my hair with slices of umber like cooler October tongues reconstructing the moon, all of us spare-hipped, wasp-waisted, letting them bloom in me like sea stars spreading their fingers.

No longer confining myself to indoor spaces, I will loll in the sun for hours, my hair turning to wheat, the grass smelling of flesh. I will learn how to listen to plants, tend to their needs, starting with the dove-white peace lilies and fire-orange impatiens my mother helped me pick out at the nursery. I will become feral or at least honor the wildness in me, my hair a palomino's mane tied at the nape of my neck, carving a path through the dense foliage of the woods with my huntress Bijou by my side. I will light a bonfire under the full May moon and burn the bits of Kevin that threatened to break me in two.

And maybe one day I will finally be free.

## Dog Days

In Texas some people start complaining about the heat around mid-May, but I don't see the point in that. May is only the beginning, so it's better to hunker down, let your bones shimmer, turning to liquid gold, let the sweat from the backs of your thighs slide over the driver's seat of your car, offering yourself like a human sacrifice to the mosquito gods.

Once I pulled a skillet out of a 400-degree oven and forgot to use a mitt, the handle scalding the tender skin between my thumb and forefinger scarlet. I ran ice water over it, slathered it in butter, danced around my apartment, howling and flailing like a banshee. Nothing worked. So I sat down and meditated into the pain, allowed myself to feel it, to amp it up to 120 decibels, to disappear inside of it until my sense of self was replaced by a throbbing white-hot hum. Afterward, I felt better.

That's how I approach summer heat in Texas. Why complain about it? Why fight it? I prefer to sink into the heat, dipping myself, toes first, into its quicksand. Lose myself inside the thick curtain of humidity that pulses and drones like a swarm of bees.

I always say fall is my favorite season, smells of burning leaves, coffee spiked with cinnamon on the tongue, suede boots encasing the calves, making that sharp click like the snap of teeth as I walk down the halls of my college, teeming and buzzing with young minds ripe for discovery.

But if fall is coffee, then summer is tequila. Summer is an all-female road trip to the West Texas desert on the Mexican border, where white man-splainers warn you you'll get kidnapped. Summer is bathing in hot springs laced with laudanum, your skin merging with the warm water, watching the sun set gold and glimmering over the Chinati Mountains. At least that's how I remember the last summer I spent as a single woman.

But during each summer I spent with Kevin, the fissures in his damaged brain would crackle and whir a little louder, his addictions and manic episodes at full volume, even though he is a tropical creature like me, loathing the fifteen winters he spent in Chicago, preferring long summer motorcycle rides in Texas, his brown skin turning to hammered leather. Our last summer together was a whirlwind of chaos. I remember it as the summer of sickness, both human and canine, the summer of vomit and valium, the stench of blood mingling with the antiseptic odor of emergency rooms.

As soon as the semester was over that May, I tried to escape as I often do. But instead of escaping into the post-apocalyptic world that thrived in my imagination, I grabbed our two female dogs, Maya and Bijou, and jumped into my sister-in-law Angie's silver Kia Sportage with a stash of bandanas and bikinis in my backpack. And just like in my fantasy realm, my "real" world began to unravel, spiraling out of control like the black blizzard that decimated Texas and Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl.

We drove south to Galveston, but Maya got car-sick a few hours into the drive. Angie is easy-going, but I could tell she wasn't pleased with the effluvia defouling the back seat of her car, and I didn't blame her, so we made frequent stops for me to walk Maya, who suffered from both nausea and diarrhea. It was a nightmare of a road trip. Paper towels weren't strong enough to contain the mess, so I took one of my t-shirts from my backpack, laid it across my lap and let Maya throw up on me as I wiped her face.

Unable to continue in this fashion, we stopped for the night at a motel in Leona. Maya was still throwing up, so I trailed around after her, trying to clean up the spots she left on the cheap patterned carpet that was probably chosen to disguise viscera in the first place. She punctuated her bouts of illness with a high-pitched barking at the sound of every shutting door

and every footstep in the hallway. Bijou was often the more difficult dog due to her guarding and aggressive tendencies, but she was the perfect canine on road trips because I guess like me, she was born to move. She lay on one of the twin beds in the motel room, shedding her black fur on the white comforter, her big brown eyes darting from Maya to me as if to say, “I told you she was trouble, Mom.”

When it seemed as though Maya had finally stopped puking and barking, I let out all the breath I’d been holding in, and my shoulders relaxed a little. The two girls snuggled on either side of me on the bed, I called Kevin to ask him for some advice for dealing with his dog, who had morphed from angel to demonically possessed in a matter of hours. But he was no help. His voice was garbled, his sentences slurred. Kevin has been a hard drug user for most of his life. He is a hard person if you can see past all of his Eastern yoga bullshit, his rigid body a warzone of scars—needle tracks and badly healed bones and other self-inflicted wounds. So I had never seen or heard him altered by the drugs or alcohol that constantly coursed through his veins, except when he would take too much Adderall, making him even more cruel, his jaw twitching, his pupils enlarging until his green eyes turned black.

But this Kevin I was talking to on the phone was a junkie, incoherent, nodding off in the middle of sentences, like the subject of every episode of *Intervention* I had watched on A&E. Later the story was that his friend Page had mistakenly bought Fentanyl off the Dark Web, and Kevin had taken some. Thrilled by the discovery of a substance that could affect him, could snuff out the fireworks in his teeming brain, he continued to take it. I still haven’t figured out why or how it didn’t kill him.

When I got back home, he had developed an addiction that he tried to keep hidden at first. It seemed like a quick downward spiral, but given the addictive nature of both my husband

and this particular drug itself, which killed Prince and Tom Petty, it wasn't too surprising. Kevin had begun dog-sitting so that he could have an income, and despite his addictions and mania, he was an excellent dog-sitter, his animal empathy such a pervasive character trait that it superceded the darker aspects of his psyche. I liked the job because it got him out of the house and gave me some time alone and also because it allowed me to widen my circle of canine loves by getting to know the dogs that he cared for.

One night he was staying at a home that had two big dogs, Airedale terriers, and two giant ones, Irish wolfhounds—Aero and Vetinari. I brought our three little ones over to that sprawling estate tucked into a rural pocket of town that I didn't even know existed. So we had seven dogs for the night, ranging in size from six to 180 pounds. I love all dogs, but I have a special fondness for the horse-like ones, the ones that are bigger than I am. And I take pride in my ability to command and control them so that I don't get trampled or slurped to death. I calmed the wolfhounds, had them circling around me, then lay down in the grass with them, feeling their hearts thump in their great barrel chests. The upsetting thing about big sight hounds is they don't live very long, often because of those deep chests that can cause heart and digestive problems. Aero died a few months later, so I'm grateful that I got to spend some time with him despite the stressful circumstances that would follow.

"I'm just going to take what's left in this bottle, then it will be gone, and I won't even be able to get any more. So I'll *have* to stop then," Kevin told me. "See?" he said, showing me the orange pill container lined with the white residue of crushed-up fentanyl. But he started to nod off on the homeowners' plush leather couch. He wasn't able to connect with me. He was in his own world, and I was present in *that* one, in *the* world, the one I live in and love despite its horrors, dealing with seven dogs, four of which were his responsibility and not mine.

“I’m not having any fun,” I said, pouting, turning into a child because I had no constructive way of addressing my anger, which seethed and knotted inside of me. Plus Kevin had trained me to stuff and quench my negative emotions with *his* tantrums and over-reactions, his gaslighting and minimizations of *my* truth.

“I have some Oxy,” he said. “Why don’t you take it? You’ll feel better. And we’ll be closer to the same wavelength.” The fact that he even had Oxy proved he was lying when he told me they had bought the Fentanyl by mistake, thinking it was Oxy. But I took it anyway. And for a few hours the world’s edges softened and blurred. We sat on their colossal front porch, seven dogs splayed around our feet. We watched the sun set, the sky morphing from purple to pink to gold. A rare July breeze chilled the sweat on our faces, making the leaves from the Mexican white oak and weeping fig trees in the front yard whisper. Hummingbirds in shades of chartreuse and cobalt sipped at the red plastic feeders attached to the porch’s Greco-styled columns. Kevin put on Jeff Buckley, and his otherworldly tenor dipped and soared into the landscape: “Drop down we two to serve and pray to love.” Then we took a long bath in their massive tub, streams of water from the jets massaging our limbs. Kevin propped his laptop on the vanity, and we watched a Margaret Cho stand-up special on Netflix, laughing and kissing, leaning against each other, holding hands under the water.

I read somewhere that earth signs are a little too comfortable around each other, and this was true for us, even sober. We were always naked around each other, never self-conscious or awkward. It was as if we shared the same skin. Sex, when it was consensual, could happen or not happen, but more often than not, it happened, this merging simply a more intense expression of the physical bond we always already walked around in.

Kevin kept giving me more pills, and I kept washing them down with chilled Pinot Grigio, going way past my tolerance level, thinking if I feel this good now, then maybe I can feel even better. The next morning, of course, my head was a throbbing balloon, my mouth so dry I could hardly speak. I woke up spinning, unsure where I was at first, until I realized I was splayed across a king-sized, four-poster bed, so high off the ground we must have had to pick up our small dogs to put them in it with us. I swung my legs off of the side of the bed and clamored out, taking great effort not to hit the floor too hard as I slunk down and crawled to the bathroom, heaving my guts out.

The owners were coming back that morning, so Kevin helped get me into the car, the world a thick, white-hot curtain of stimuli, the sunlight a kaleidoscope of daggers. I had overdosed. I spent the entire day crawling from the bed to the bathroom, and when all the contents of my stomach had been emptied, I continued to dry heave. In a rare instance of nurturing behavior, Kevin went to the grocery store to get me ramen noodles and ginger ale, but I couldn't consume anything for about twelve hours. He should have taken me to the hospital, but there might have been legal repercussions, so we waited it out, let the sickness ravage me until the drugs had been drained from my system. I had never felt that sick in my life, even from food poisoning, even from stomach flu. So sick I hoped death would end my torment.

I told my friend Christi about it, and she said, "It's him. He's killing you. He's toxic, and your body is reacting to that." Christi had been married to an alcoholic for almost ten years, and when she finally gathered the strength to kick him out of her house, he ended up living in his car for a while before he made it to rehab.

"No, it was the drugs that made me sick, and *I* chose to take them," I argued with her. But she just looked at me, still firm in her statement, her wise blue eyes holding my gaze.

Later that summer Kevin had a week-long gig at the Rapisands', a sweet retired couple with a yellow lab named Olly and a golden retriever named Wrigley. Their house was cluttered with kitsch and patterns, huge TV screens and overstuffed armchairs, everything in shades of autumn: gold and navy and wine-red. Cutesy knick-knacks gathered dust on the shelves, and photographs of cherubic grandchildren lined the hallways like murals. During Kevin's stay at their house, once again I brought our three mutts over, this time with the Rapisands' consent. But Bijou still has a scar above her left eye where Olly's fang sunk into her flesh, and the normally feisty Chihuahua Mook got so scared of those big dogs, he hid under the couch the whole time we were there.

It wasn't going well.

Nevertheless, Kevin decided it would be a good time to take some of the acid one of his yoga students had given him. I declined to partake but braced myself for the impact nonetheless, hoping it would be an uneventful trip. We had sex in the swimming pool, and then I found a John Cusack movie on cable and settled in to watch it, curled under an afghan on one of the rose-colored couches, with Maya and Bijou flanking me, Olly and Wrigley snoring on the floor, and poor Mook crouched in his safe space below us. Kevin lay on the other couch, lost in his own world as usual. At one point, he rolled off the sofa and landed on top of Olly, gripping her in a bear hug that the sleeping giant did not expect. Kevin sprang up, his hands covering his face, all of which were coated in so much blood, I couldn't tell where the injury had occurred.

He ran around the house in a panic, streams of blood pooling in slick puddles all over the hardwood floors. Olly had bitten off the tip of his pretty nose. I knew I had to get him to the emergency room, but all he cared about was hiding evidence, gathering up drug paraphernalia,

cleaning up blood, getting our three dogs away from the crime scene because even though the family didn't mind their being there, it was against the pet-sitting company policies. Somehow I managed to get our dogs and Kevin and bags of contraband into my mini Cooper, Kevin screaming at me the whole time. It was after midnight, and I was in a part of town I wasn't familiar with. I used the GPS on my phone to find the nearest emergency room. Kevin kept yelling at me that I was going the wrong way, bossing, controlling, brow-beating, blood staining my car seat, my heart racing, my hands shaking as much from my fear of him as my fear of his no longer having a nose and my fear of how much all of this would cost me because Kevin didn't have health insurance.

The first 24-hour clinic my GPS took us to wouldn't even see him, so they directed us to the nearest hospital. I dropped him off and took our dogs back to our house since the temperature was still in the 90s despite the pitch dark, and it was too hot to leave them in the car.

When I returned, Kevin was sitting on a bed in a triage room. The staff tending to him were cold and unimpressed. They dressed his wound and asked if we had saved the rest of his nose. If we had, they said, maybe they could sew it back together. "I'm pretty sure it's in a dog's stomach right now," I said. "I don't think we'll be able to retrieve it."

"Can you at least give me some pain medication?" Kevin asked.

"No. Just tend to the wound. There's not really anything else we can do."

"Will my face ever be the same?" my handsome husband asked.

"Probably not," they said. When the nurses left the triage room, I burst into tears, the stress and shock of the situation taking its toll. For once, Kevin didn't yell at me for crying.

This was in August, always the hottest month of the year in Texas. But fall doesn't come for us until October, so in September, we were all still wilting from the heat, as thick and parched as the barrel of a clothes dryer, as brutal as a sweat lodge ceremony. No wonder so many people in Texas are crazy.

By that September, my aging mother had been in and out of the hospital thirteen times in the past year due to various ailments, mostly a myriad of heart issues—atrial fibrillation, mitral valve prolapse, high blood pressure. Instead of helping me out during these vigils by providing meals or at least giving me some space, Kevin got angry, demanding my attention, wanting to control the environment and the people in it. But my family didn't want him around because they didn't need his chaos adding to an already tense situation. He always blamed me for that, for “turning them against” him.

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I sat in one of the gray vinyl chairs in my mother's hospital room with my phone in my hand, playing a trivia game, trying to remember the name of the body of water that snaked between Morocco and Spain. The machine connected to my mother's heart emitted a constant beep, a soothing sound compared to the high-pitched sirens that kept wailing from it the night before when her pulse would jump up into the 140s then dip back down to the 110s. A text flashed across the screen of my iPhone, Angie's name at the top. It was a photograph of my mother's golden retriever Penny, a bloody mass caked in fur on her front leg. Before I had a chance to react, my phone dinged again. “Come outside Mom's room,” the text from my brother Brian read.

“Hang on, Mom, I'll be right back,” I said. I tended to sit during these vigils, distracting myself with my phone, unable to concentrate on the intricate plots of the *Law and Order*

episodes my mother played continually on the hospital television. I held my mother's hand or tried to get her to practice long, deep breathing. Or I would sit with my eyes closed, practicing long, deep breathing myself. But Brian fidgeted and paced, walking up and down the hallways, twirling the ID bracelet on his wrist, bombarding the nurse's station with questions.

I went into the hallway. "You need to meet Angie at the emergency animal hospital on Las Vegas Trail," Brian instructed.

I arrived at the vet's office around 9 p.m., the same time Angie did, and we hoisted and pushed my mom's fourteen-year-old, overweight dog out of Angie's car. We were led into a small examination room where the vet on call looked at Penny's leg, dabbing it with a paper towel, until the mass erupted in a flood of pus and blood. We cringed, my stomach churning. "It's either a tumor or a cyst," the vet said. "We can get it cleaned up and bandaged for now, but we'll need to have it removed and sent to the lab." He left the three of us in the room, clumps of bloodied paper towels on the floor, Penny's ragged panting steaming the glass wall, blood dripping from the open wound on the back of her leg.

"Oh, god, Kevin's here," Angie said.

Kevin pushed the door open, filling the doorframe with his height, setting his motorcycle helmet on the metal examination table. His long, thick gray hair escaped from under his bandana in wild tufts, his t-shirt and jeans ragged and stained. His energy was wild, manic, his presence taking over the small room. Angie gave me a hug and left. I didn't blame her. Kevin knew where we were because I had texted him to let him know I'd be home late. He was seething because he felt shut out, and he wasn't getting any attention. "Why won't you at least let me help?" he asked, his face red, his eyes black, looking anything but helpful.

“If you really want to help, then you can help me get Penny back to my mom’s house after they’re done with her. She’s too heavy for me to handle on my own.”

“Oh, I can’t do that,” he said. “I have to be at work in the morning, and it’s already so late.”

“Then just leave,” I said through clenched teeth. He sat down in a chair against the wall and proceeded to berate me. I felt trapped in the tiny space with its metal table and glass wall, the smell of blood and antiseptic choking me. I crouched on the floor, consoling Penny. I started to cry like I always do when stress floods me, and my system starts to shut down. “Go ahead and cry,” he said. “It’s all you know how to do. What if I started to cry too?” Then he got even louder and began fake crying, mocking me. A burly man in the nearest examination room came to the door of our room and called Kevin out.

“You better shut the fuck up, dude,” he said. “You’re upsetting the dogs.” So Kevin went out in the hallway and shoved the man against the wall.

“Just leave!” I said. “Why won’t you just leave?” I handed him his motorcycle helmet, shut the glass door and sat down on the floor with my back up against it.

The next day I went to my lawyer’s office and filed for divorce. But it would take me seven more months to finally extricate myself from the relationship, our trauma bond coursing as wide and deep as true love in the dark river of my veins.

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This summer I am especially languid, listless, the end of my sabbatical year, the end of my tsunami of a marriage, one that cracked open the hull of my ribs and let creatures clamor in,

cramped and chittering. I'm left with a diagnosis of complex PTSD and three ovarian cysts that knot and twinge in my lower belly, especially in the mornings, one for each year I spent with Kevin. It's better this way, though—alone—my patio door open, mosquitos buzzing in and nipping my bare thighs as I write, Bijou (the one dog I got to keep) coiled on a pillow, watching neighbors arrive home from work, listening to the cars whizzing past on Bryant Irvin, the busy street that flanks my new apartment. I have become vigilant about keeping my space in order: making the bed every day, doing the dishes and wiping down the kitchen counters, watering the plants, sweeping the hardwood floor and the concrete patio, folding up the blankets Bijou sleeps on. It is liberating to keep objects in a designated space and be able to find them there when I need them: phone and computer chargers, remote controls, scissors, hairbrush, dish towel. I've been living in utter chaos for three years, never knowing where any of my stuff was and being accused of "creating separateness" when I tried to reclaim any of it.

Now that I've gone "no contact" for six weeks, I haven't taken or even had the desire to take any drugs other than the Prozac my primary-care doctor prescribed to help rebalance my brain chemistry. I am lonely, of course, especially as I curl up next to Bijou in the queen-sized bed, the snoring I am accustomed to hearing replaced by a whirring white-noise machine. I cycle through stages of grief, guilt, and anger. But the fear is dissipating. This summer I don't have to live in a constant state of fight-or-flight mode, my muscles knotted, the hairs on my arms standing up. I can loll in Miranda and Mike's swimming pool for hours with our friends Erika and Sean and unclench my shoulders, without my phone buzzing every half hour, lighting up with accusations and demands. I can even leave my phone tucked away in my purse in the house, our five dogs patrolling the fence or resting in the shade of the patio, the violet blooms from the vitex tree mushrooming out like Japanese accordion-fans, the goddess statue in the fairy garden

watching over us, her head shrouded and tilted in our direction. This summer it feels right to sink into this pain, this reverie, but also into this new sense of freedom, to remember what calm feels like, to remember who I am, and re-learn how to swim in the vast cerulean ocean that is me.

## Kintsugi

*“Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything.*

*That’s how the light gets in.” --Leonard Cohen*

The door was small, about the size of a coffee mug, but so heavy I had to take it in both hands, and I felt the muscles in my upper arms pulse as I struggled to hold it upright. Carved out of forest-green soapstone, the door featured a little curved handle gracing its front right edge. It reminded me of the door to a hobbit’s house, the door to another world. “My mom and I were at a Renaissance Festival this weekend,” my student-assistant Nicole said, looking down, shifting her weight from one foot to the other; her coppery hair framing her porcelain face. “She thought this was a weird gift. But I can’t explain it. I just thought you might need a door.” No truer words had ever been spoken.

When I told Miranda about this sign from the universe, this serendipitous talisman, she said, “You’re lucky it didn’t fall on your head.” More truth.

Counselors often urge women in abusive relationships to make a plan, quietly, and then make an exit, quickly. I believe the most important component of this advice is the quiet part. Under no circumstances should you let the abuser know about your plan. Stephen King, the master of turning domestic violence into a compelling horror story, knows this all too well.

The mini-series *Castle Rock*, set in the underbelly of King’s bleak Maine universe, gives viewers a glimpse into the dimensia-plagued brain of Ruth Deaver, played by Sissy Spacek. A luminous haze tints this particular episode, entitled “The Queen,” because we know that Ruth no longer experiences time in a straight line, and the director forces the viewer to follow a similar cerebral route. Ruth is trapped in a perpetual repetition of one moment, the one moment in her life she wants most to have the chance to do over again. After packing suitcases for herself and

her son, she tells her abusive, mentally unstable husband about her plans to leave. As a viewer, I cringe, realizing her mistake. She doesn't get away, of course, not the first time, nor any of the other times she's thrust back into this defining moment. "You can't leave," the memory of her monstrous husband tells her. "You can't leave...because *you didn't*." My heart breaks for her character.

But I *can* leave because I *did*.

So if in the future my mind cycles back to this central moment, over and over again, I will always step out into the warm spring afternoon and click the lock of the townhouse door closed behind me.

The narcissist will find this silent exit strategy particularly heinous because it is one that removes his control from the equation. You will be labeled a runner, a liar, a monster. I rented an apartment without his knowledge, thus causing me to have to pay the rent on two dwellings for four months, and took as much as I could from the townhouse in a few hours. After Kevin moved out too, I hired a cleaning crew to clean out the townhouse, and I arrived before they did to find the house empty...with one exception. In my closet, Kevin had set up a tableau for me to find: his wedding ring, the shirt he wore when we got married, ironed and starched and hanging on a single hanger, the mugs we drank hot chocolate from at the Old South Pancake House after our small ceremony, and pictures of my beloved dog Maya, the one I had to lose by letting Kevin go.

My family and my lawyer were worried he would trash the place. “If he wants to make her angry,” my Aunt Gayle asked my mother, “then why didn’t he leave a mess instead of a montage?”

“Because he doesn’t want to make her angry,” my mother told her sister. “He wants to hurt her.”

He succeeded. I crouched down in the closet and burst into tears, then gathered his weapons into a box. My chest still heaving with sobs, I crawled up the stairs of that hell-house one last time to look out of the window where Maya always perched, with her chin on the sill, watching the wildlife teeming in the river’s private universe. I said a prayer. I heard the cleaning crew’s van pull up, so I bolted down the stairs, wiping the tears from my cheeks with the backs of my hands. When I opened the door, I saw the side of their van—emblazoned with a giant picture of Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*, pushing his face through the opening of a wall he punctured with an ax. But instead of “Here’s Johnny,” the sign read, “Need a house cleaning?” My tears turned into laughter as I greeted the man and woman who emerged from the van with their mops and buckets and brooms. “You guys just made my day,” I told them, then proceeded to text a photo of the side of their van to a dozen friends and family members, laughing so hard, my ribcage began to ache.

Translated to “golden joinery,” *Kintsugi* is the centuries-old Japanese art of fixing broken pottery with a special lacquer dusted with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. Beautiful seams of gold glint in the cracks of ceramic ware, giving a unique appearance to the piece. This repair method celebrates each artifact’s unique history by emphasizing its fractures and breaks instead of hiding or disguising them. *Kintsugi* often makes the repaired piece even more beautiful than

the original, revitalizing it with new life. It was also born from the Japanese feeling of *mottainai*, which expresses regret when something is wasted, as well as *mushin*, the acceptance of change.

As for me, I am a fractured but luminous vessel, measuring my life in moons, following the wheel of the year as it turns on its axis of death, rebirth, and renewal. I grew up in Louisiana and Texas where the heat scalds and scorches half of the year, and sleet coats the world in grey the other half, so I look forward to those rare months when I can sit outside and gaze at the moon. I get my skygazing tendencies from my mother. Sometimes when we sit on the porch-swing in her lush back yard, we look up at the sky together, and she reminds me: “I’ve always loved looking at the sky. Once I asked Mamaw to make a dress for me the color of the sky. And she did. I can’t even describe the color, how beautiful it was, how impossible. I wish I had kept it.” I always nod and push the swing higher with my feet, our heads tilted skyward, our dogs splayed in the grass below us, panting and protecting. The full moon that blooms in May, my birth month, the month I moved into my new apartment, is the “flower moon,” its name signaling a time when bluebonnets, cala lilies, bloodroots, and anemones cover the earth in color. A time when great change is possible. A time to heal and be reborn.

I may have had to give up my feral landscape, my backyard pageant of snowy egrets and great blue herons, of bandit-masked raccoons and red-bellied woodpeckers. But as soon as Bijou and I moved in to our new apartment in the city, a roommate took up permanent residence on our patio, a green anole lizard whose skin was as vibrant as tourmaline. I named it Liz, although later I found out that he was actually a male lizard, puffing out the pink dewlap of his throat like a bellows, hoping to attract a mate.

Christians often look to the Bible for guidance, but I have a different book: *Animal Speak* by Ted Andrews. Whenever a new animal messenger appears in my life, I seek out Andrews’

wisdom. Because lizards have the ability to regenerate new tails after their first one is broken off, lizards can help us become more detached in life in order to survive. Lizards show up to help us break from our past and give us the strength to explore new realms and follow our own impulses and instincts, rather than getting swallowed up by the agendas of others. Liz was the perfect totem for me. So I decided to use the anole's appearance in my life to give me the strength to cut the energetic cord still binding me to Kevin.

According to survivor and narcissistic abuse recovery expert Melanie Tonia Evans, the effects of narcissism permeate, poison, and pollute every aspect of your being so that a virtual exorcism is required for any healing to occur. My mother, a descendant of Irish traditional witches, was born on Halloween. Despite her negation of other sources of power, she at least embraced this hint of feminine magic and encouraged me to do the same. My exorcism would not be of the Catholic variety. No male priests were needed.

Instead, on the last night of July, the moon waned crescent, no longer blooming like a flower but instead sprouting protective horns and scutes, bracketed between a buck and a sturgeon. My friend Christi arrived at my apartment, and I handed Kevin's box of tricks to her over my patio railing. She put the box in the trunk of her SUV, followed me to Miranda's house in a defiant procession, then placed it in the back yard next to the fire that Miranda had started. The smoke mingled with the hot July air, making us feel like we had stepped inside of a barbecue, our hair almost crackling with the burnt smell.

I know that a circle of women is the most powerful thing in the world. So I called these women to me, my coven, my tribe. The ones I lean on when I can no longer stand. We know about minerals and herbs and incense, what stone to keep in your pocket when you feel anxious,

what candle to light when suffering from a broken heart. Brynn and Melanie are yoga teachers, both in their early 30s and of Celtic descent, with long, wavy, midnight-dark hair, milky skin, and sky-blue eyes. Miranda, also in her 30s, has those gorgeous black curls and fair skin too, but she is voluptuous and hazel-eyed. Christi, Erika, and I are in our 40s. Christi is taller than the rest of us, with huge, knowing, gray eyes and straight, hazelnut-colored hair. Erika is also a dark-eyed brunette, the same petite height as me and Miranda, and that night she rounded out our circle.

The night before our ritual, I dreamt that Kevin was with me in the bed, as the upstairs neighbor's loud booms pulled me in and out of consciousness, only this time we weren't fighting or yelling. In a rare dreamland encounter, we were simply having a civil discussion regarding what to do about the neighbor, who either had a bowling alley or a herd of elephants above my bedroom ceiling, his clangs and thuds often springing to life around 4:00 a.m. In the dream I became lucid and realized it was my opportunity to seek closure, to pursue understanding. "Can we have a real conversation?" I asked Kevin in the dream. He agreed. "Do you think there's ever going to be hope for us?" I asked, because, after all of the pain, the horror, the trauma... a part of me still loved him, a part of my soul will always be bound to a part of his.

"Yes," he answered. That was enough closure for me.

Just like I'm trying to do with Simon, my first love, I need to be able to hold two dichotomous visions of Kevin in my mind. The boy Kevin who was like a sweeter version of my brother when we were kids, fishing, and swimming, and climbing trees, jumping out of those same trees to imitate the Lake Worth monster, making us all laugh with his antics, sweet-talking my mother into letting him borrow her car, sleeping on our couch with his fawn-colored pitbull, Kevin's black eyelashes fanned out against his high-boned cheeks. He never violated or

disrespected the childhood me, never invaded my space, never made me feel out of sorts. In one of my mother's photo albums are pictures of us from the summer we first moved to Texas: my brother, Kevin, and me, parading around in grown-up clothes, Kevin donning my grandfather's ugly yellow terrycloth bathrobe, my brother always with a hat or a wig on his head, me wading around in my mother's gold and bronze chiffon evening dresses, tripping over their hems. All of us flinging our skinny bodies into swimming pools, or posing with our hands on our hips, or playing air guitar, our tongues sticking out in an imitation of our favorite rock stars.

And Kevin never pursued me the way Simon did. In fact, it was the other way around. For over three months after I saw him that September afternoon at my brother's house, I tried to put him out of my mind, but ended up texting him on New Year's Day, in an Uber on the way home from the airport after I had visited Keith and Paulo, my driver playing a new-wave station on Satellite radio, icy rain fogging the world in a pewter-colored haze.

The first night we went out on a real date, we went to see a band, and I invited him in to my apartment afterward. He sat at my dining table, looking through my bookshelves, commenting on the spiritual authors he had also read: Joseph Campbell and Deepak Chopra, Eckhart Tolle and Marianne Williamson. As he was leaving, I stood on my tiptoes to kiss him, there in my entryway. I'm the one who leaned in, who tilted up and gripped his broad forearms with my hands before snaking them around his neck. I'm the one who made the first move. I remember that first kiss, its heady sweetness, his gentle but affirming response. I remember a voice in my head said, "Stop time." Somehow I knew, there in the dark hallway of my temporary apartment, I knew that beginning was the pinnacle, the moment that would supercede all others.

In Miranda's back yard, I took a black beeswax candle my mom unearthed from her chiffarobe and slid black pepper oil down its sides for banishing evil, followed with some white-light and euphoria oils I got at an apothecary shop Paulo took me to in Manhattan's East Village—one for calling in the goddess, the other for mending a broken heart. Miranda had cut a length of twine into a nine-inch strip. I removed our wedding rings, made of Hawaiian koa wood with an inlay of crushed lapis lazuli, from the pocket of my jeans. I tied our rings around each end of the twine, lit the black candle, and said aloud, "My heart is healed." Then I held the center of the twine over the flame until the cord turned black and broke in two. I said, "*Our* hearts are healed," and threw both rings into the firepit.

Then one by one, I burned the items in the box: clothes and cards and photographs. The flames danced. Charred bits of our marriage twirled in the smoke like fireflies. The flames climbed higher, undulating like tribal dancers in brightly colored costumes. I had never seen such polychromatic fire before, as it morphed from turquoise to indigo to violet. After the ceremony we ate a chocolate cake that Miranda had baked for the occasion and shared a bottle of Pinot Noir, talking and laughing in a circle around the dining table.

When you make yourself into a door, you become a place where the demons can get in. But maybe, you become a place where the light can seep in too. That night as I slept, Kevin failed to make an appearance. Instead my sleep was as warm and close-fitting as a womb, its hairline cracks all shot through with liquid light, its velvety borders allowing just enough room for me and only me to curl inside of its safe and dreamless space.

## Galveston

I've been to beaches where the white sand glimmers with speckles of quartz, and the water is like a plate of turquoise-colored glass. Places where tourists from all over the world are tanned and toned, fake breasts jutting out of their bikini tops as buoyant as beach balls. Places where young, brown men in white uniforms bring you pina colodas made with rum aged at the base of a volcano in glasses dressed with pink umbrellas and pineapple wedges.

Galveston is not that kind of a place.

Galveston is a long, narrow strip of an island, shaped like a dagger, designed for about 50,000 inhabitants but teeming with over a million tourists on a busy weekend. There is no airport here. People drive down from places like Arkansas and Missouri and Louisiana. For some of them, this will be their only glimpse of the ocean. The sand is brown and clay-like and so hot in the summer that it will scorch the soles of your feet. So hot that Bijou runs through it, darting back and forth wildly, trying to escape its torment. No azure waters here; instead the ocean is as brown as dirt, rich with minerals like gypsum, pyrite, and sulfide. The people here look like they are trying to escape a dark past, fouling the sea air with cigarette smoke, eyes hidden behind black sunglasses. Overweight and too pale for this climate, their fleshy white shoulders turn crimson under the relentless sun. But once I saw a bald, orange-robed monk meditating on the beach, sitting serene and still amid the sun-burned tourists flaying about in the white-capped waves.

Galveston seems like as good a place as any to nurse a wounded heart.

My family and I come here every summer; it's the place where my brother Brian and his wife Angie went on their honeymoon when Angie and I were eighteen and Brian was twenty-three. They've been together so long that she is as much a sibling to me as he is.

This summer, more than ever, I understand what it's like to feel haunted. Dreams of Kevin, whom I divorced three months ago, still plague me almost every night. I can't bring myself to erase his handsome face from my phone, his wide changeling eyes, whose shade I have now coined "psychopath blue," still boring into me. "When I open my photos, there's a section called 'People,' and his face is staring at me," I say to my nephew Joe as we ride in the back seat of Brian's Kia Sorrento, heading South toward the coast. We have made up a game to see who can name the most countries in each continent. I always win Europe. He usually wins everything else. Brian and Angie are tired of hearing us talk.

"Do they ever stop?" Angie asks Brian. My brother keeps his eyes on the road and his hands on the wheel. His silky, brunette hair, which he has worn in the same '70s shag cut since we were kids, brushes his neck. His hands are brown but ruddy, burnished from the sun. Angie struggles with the floral scarf I gave her, her recently-shorn, honey-colored locks escaping out of it. She cranes her face back over her neck pillow, setting her sea-green eyes on me. Angie is Hispanic, but her coloring is much fairer than mine. Before she donated it to "Locks of Love," I walked around with her ziplock bag of Disney-princess hair, propping it on my head and declaring I'd take over the world if I had hair like that.

"How do I get rid of his face?" I ask Joe.

“You have to go into your photos and delete all of your pictures of him.” Joe is a fortunate combination of his parents, his black hair, cut in the same retro ‘70s style as his father’s, frames his wide, turquoise eyes. He looks like he’s wearing eyeliner and mascara, but he isn’t.

“One by one?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, I’m not doing that,” I say. “Will you do it for me?” I hand my phone to him.

“Sure,” he says. “But it will probably take a while.” He cuts a sidelong glance at me. I get it. He’s trying to build his college fund, asking me to give him a quarter every time I curse or put people into categories. He has a jar. He’d be rich by now if I complied. And I decide it’s probably not a good idea to let him pour through my phone’s photo bank, so I take it back.

In my dreams about Kevin, usually I scream at him until my throat is raw or pummel his muscular chest with my fists until they’re bruised. Other times the dreams are filled with longing. He is the specter that haunts me.

So I buy four tickets to Dash Beardsley’s Ghost Tour of the Strand, with an urge to explore the haunted history of a city decimated by the Great Storm of 1900, the deadliest natural disaster in United States history. I drag my family on this excursion they’d probably rather skip, except for my nephew who has a secret fascination for the paranormal and a not-so-secret penchant for trying to make everyone else happy. We sit on the steps of the Railroad Museum, a group of twenty or so tourists, including a screaming baby in a stroller and my little black dog, who is much quieter and more well-behaved, in her red collar and leash.

Dash is late. We get restless, milling around, making half-hearted attempts at jokes, hot sea air wafting between concrete buildings. I think about my awkwardness around strangers and how social anxiety and an interest in the paranormal are probably co-morbid. Then, we hear Dash before we see him, '80s heavy-metal music blasting from his iPad as he walks toward us in time with the beat, his long, bleached-blond hair and black trenchcoat flapping behind him. He keeps his dark glasses on, even though the sun is setting, and his Southern drawl slurs and pops into the microphone on his headset.

We follow him around the Strand for two hours, and he becomes less coherent over time, even though he isn't drinking. It's not an alcohol buzz anyway. I was married to a drug addict; I know the difference. We stop in front of doorways and alleys, as he tries to tell us stories about the ghosts of Galveston, but he can't remember the endings. It's a train wreck. We stop at a convenience store to buy frozen margaritas and carry them with us on the rest of the tour, making the heat and the tour guide slightly more tolerable. Half of our group drops out somewhere along the way, but Dash doesn't seem to notice, and the tour concludes in front of the Tremont House on Ship Mechanics Boulevard, a building where hundreds of people took refuge during Galveston's infamous hurricane. "I can't take you inside," Dash tells us, "because this hotel has banned me."

"I felt connected to him," Angie tells me later.

"Yes, me too. He's an addict." Both of her parents were addicts too. "Maybe he self-medicates because of all the dark energy. I feel bad for him."

"Or maybe he self-medicates because he's bored with his life," Angie says. I shrug, realizing we are only describing ourselves anyway.

During our remaining nights on the island, Brian and Joe fish along the edges of the Moody Gardens Golf Course, the sun setting over the bay in a surreal symphony of color. The ocean along the sea wall, where we swim and sunbathe during the day, is bright and chaotic, its white-hot banks as thick as quicksand. Bijou hates it. But she loves the bay side, where she can patrol the sturdier surface of the shoreline, watching the tides wash against the rocks, pouncing on the red snapper, sea trout, and black drum fish that Brian and Joe reel in. The birds here are magnificent. I spot a green heron skulking next to us, its chartreuse legs and eyes almost fluorescent, its head a cap of aquamarine feathers, its throat deep red like a bottle of pinot noir. A roseate spoonbill flies over our heads, the lowering sun glinting off the undersides of its massive pink wings like something out of Wonderland.

“Do you know who the best fisherman is out here?” my brother asks a little girl fishing next to them. She shakes her head. Oh, please don’t say it’s you, I think. “That pelican over there,” he says. I smile, happy with his response but wondering when he turned into our grandfather. It’s better for him to turn into our corny grandfather than our absent father, anyway. We watch the big brown pelicans glide in, smooth and organized as a fleet of airplanes. They dive bomb and swoop back up out of the water, fish thrashing in their pendulous throats.

The next morning I sit on the lip of a tour boat’s bow, port-side, my legs curled under me, gripping the chrome railing like a parasailor, saltwater spraying my face, gulf wind whipping my hair into tangles. The fish-scented wind dries the sweat that covers me, sending chills up and down my arms. I am not supposed to perch up on the edge of the boat like this, but the tour guide doesn’t reprimand me, and I am grateful. His name is Adam, and he prides himself on being an ocean vigilante, reporting all the commercial boats that dump trash into the water, the Coast

Guard fining them each \$95,000 per violation. I like him immediately. Swarms of gulls and pelicans fly over us, shrieking and squawking, diving for their share of the shrimp. A pouting little blonde girl in the deck below me squeals and covers her head with her hands. “I hate birds!” she yells. I dislike her immediately.

None of us are wearing life vests.

Later that same week seventeen people would die on a tour boat that capsized during a sudden storm in Table Rock Lake in Branson, Missouri. They weren't wearing life jackets either. I know this because my mother tells me the story, choking back tears, after we've returned home to Fort Worth. She has the red hair, green eyes, and freckles of a true Celt, while I inherited my Creole father's swarthy coloring. My mother has the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen, and, while mine are darker, I see the liquid depths of my mother's eyes when I look in the mirror. “Mom, I've told you to stop watching the news,” I say. She is a news junkie.

“If all of these people have to endure such pain, then the least thing I can do is bear witness,” she argues.

I used to agree with that philosophy. And of course I'm horrified by the accident. I can imagine all too well what it must have felt like to be stuck under the boat's overturned canopy, wedged in, trying to pummel your way out as water engulfed your lungs, or, even worse, watching the heads of your loved ones, one after another, bobbing, in the wild, darkened water, unable to save them.

But now I don't think absorbing all that pain into our bodies until we're diseased serves anyone. I don't think about danger much. I've always been the thrillseeker in a family of

fearmongers, the only one who would ride the rickety roller coasters at Hamel's Amusement Park in Shreveport as a kid, the only one who would leap without looking. Some people might say such recklessness is what landed me in an abusive marriage. But we all get the God we ask for, the God we need. Kevin was my rock-bottom, the dark night of my soul. Without him, I might never have become who I was meant to be, here and now, my skin darkening under the Gulf-Coast sun, tasting the salt on my tongue. Haunted, perhaps, but in love with my freedom, with who I am becoming.

The dolphins are active this morning. Schools of them shimmy out of the water between our boat and the shrimpers, criss-crossing over each other, their skin as smooth and blue as labradorite, the stone of magic. It feels like falling in love to me, the way my heart swells when I see them. It's safer, though. It's the kind of love that lasts rather than burning.

## Vita

LeeAnn Olivier is a lifelong writer from Louisiana who is love with language and strives to use words the way that visual artists use paint. She earned a BA (1997) and an MA (2002) in English at the University of Texas at Arlington. She has been teaching English full-time at Tarrant County College in Fort Worth, Texas, since 2005, where she is currently faculty co-editor of the literary journal *Marine Creek Reflections*. Her poetry and creative nonfiction have appeared in a dozen literary journals, including *Hermeneutic Chaos Press*, *BioStories*, *Damsel fly Press*, and *Stone Highway Review*. Her poem “Leda” was a finalist for the Thomas Morton Memorial Prize in Literary Excellence in 2016, judged by Margaret Atwood, and was published in *The Puritan*. Her poetry chapbook *Spindle My Spindle*, in which she speaks through the voices of suppressed female characters from myth and fairy tale, was published by Hermeneutic Chaos Press in 2016. “Blight,” one of the selections in this thesis, was published in the Fall 2018 issue of *The Hunger* journal. In addition to teaching college English, Olivier serves as the creativity director for the yoga teacher training program at Elemental Yoga and Mind Arts in Fort Worth, where she teaches workshops in journaling, personality systems, and lucid dreaming.

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This thesis was typed by the author.