

**DEDICATED TO CONTRIBUTORS, LIVING AND DEAD.**  
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Fine Arts degree at  
Sarah Lawrence College, May 2016

## MANIFESTO

1. Pay most attention to the sensuous, emotional experiences. Eat tostones, drunk on the D train. The entire car smells like wet paint.
2. What a blight! My heart in the folded shape of a brain stem.
3. Burn your wallet alive, like she's a witch in the dark ages and you're a misogynistic, illiterate peasant. Your phone buzzes at 1am on a Saturday morning: *Baby, are you awake?*
4. It's your favorite work friend- she wants you to go to a strip club in Mount Vernon with her. D list rappers have their birthday parties there. You happily pay a \$30 door fee- along with a \$50 minimum for credit cards. That night, did you even once wish you stayed in bed? *Fuck, no.*
5. Question your ideals of physical beauty. You saw a stripper at Sue's Rendezvous who you could stare at all day, but don't want to touch. The end result is the most bewildering question you've ever asked yourself- *Why can't I gain weight around my ass? I'd be so fucking hot.*
6. Question your ideals of linguistic beauty, too. Make yourself organic macaroni and cheese before you sit down to read Mary Oliver, who you once famously declared to your mother-, **literally makes me want to die.** It's official; you have now tried five times.
7. Refrain from engaging emotionally with things that you know are hollow drama. Sure, your friend from home had sex with that Fine Arts Work Center fellow with the wife- but it's 4am.

8. Remember: when you remind her tersely that you have class at 10, a mere 6 hours from then- all she replied is *I wish –you- were here.*
9. Never forget that there is no clear answer to why people act the way they do. Without dedicating yourself to figuring them out. Which you don't really need to do.
10. Be more self indulgent in trying to figure yourself out, instead of flailing about and then feeling bad for getting bruised.
11. Hesitate to call writing work. You aren't trapped inside while writing unless you want to be, and you don't have to associate your *play* with moronic assholes unless you're careless. Kick yourself in the teeth if you need to keep going.
12. Hold on to said teeth.
13. Swallow the leg you've magically grown from the roof of your mouth for the purpose of motivation, but only in polite company.
14. Let the leg smash your front teeth in private, after your Adderall and eggs.
15. Keep going.
16. Remember that drugs and alcohol will rarely result in sex for you- they result almost entirely in embarrassment.
17. Therapy is both less alienating for others and less painful for you.
18. Writing is the best though.

19. You're not a liar or a bad person for fictionalizing the truth even lightly in a piece. In fact, that's basically safer.

20. Continue trying to be kind where you can in writing and in life.

21. Continue to be honest where you can't.

## 1. POETRY

## PAPER TIGER AT A PARTY

This gold, shadowed black tequila that I'm so committed to drinking tonight

is not the hallmark of my incipient disaster.

Instead, it

signifies the wide pills on the cheap,

rough cotton bandage

that I can't drink the whole bottle against my better judgment, change.

I'll rot as I grow into it. Instead of with my friends, I'm alone.

Have I gotten the message? Thirty is waiting.

Semiotics in my taste: plain colors, geometry.

The forty six year old Jazz musician that wants to fuck

me says *tummy*, about what he calls *that delicious ache, creeping*.

Arousal, he thinks is seeping through my stomach, but I hate it.

Then I'm a little girl, again. Ignoring phone calls, tearful and impotent.

Picking my nose in the dark of my room, meditating on the trail of spilled,

black paint on the linoleum floor, up to my windowsill.

This tiger's eye, blessed by a Santero last Saturday in the Bronx

Is nothing but a dim rock, absorbing the artificially bright light,

just above my window. The paper tiger's head,

still nowhere to be found.

## ENGLISH WAYS TO SAY, "I HATE YOU"

"I'm not much for you" is an English sort of expression, indeterminately wordy in avoidance of the word hate. But that's alright, because mid ADD, I run a thought, as a squirrel up a tree. Me, suddenly a dog with a greater prey instinct than my own, lumpy Labrador. Truth lands on my head, pigeon shit white in the center, dripping shades of curdled milk around my freshly laundered hair. That metaphor being more drawn out and multi-layered than the truth: you didn't love me enough to let me grow up. If you did, I wouldn't be writing you this poem. And I wouldn't have started sobbing irrationally because a waitress was wearing your body lotion. *But I'm not much for you,*

so I'm writing you this poem, thinking about you

late at night, when I could be smiling, asleep.

Or best: writing about anyone, anything else.

**PROVINCETOWN MA, 02657 (DREAMSCAPE, AUGUST.)**

When I die, leave me by the warm phosphorescence of Herring Cove.

The aerial view that you'll recognize first

is a sheer accident of hundreds of years of ocean current,

battering on the moraine- reducing it to a skeletal fist.

Those of us who know little else will fly

over an outdated emotional topography forever in our dreams.

My reddest tender spots, blaring out from each of our most important streets:

Bradford, Nickerson, and Bangs. Lighthouses,

as though we'd forget where the land ends.

We, the producers and distributors of used Trojan condoms

and Red Stripe beer bottles,

the partiers that revolve our small town world in summer-

Girls, Boys and gender abdicators swimming naked together, except

for garlands of coffee shop garbage and beach plum thorns.

Each floating object singularly unique, in flow, in thrall

to the bass fish toothed, dismembered nights.

Browned out at the edges,

a calendar full of wounds.

Fishermen's fingers floating in the current,

glossy trains of bown-red mottled

blood attracting schools of silvery,

lead grey, dead eyed creatures.

Finned finer

than the accordion

of skin between a labrador's knuckles.

## **ARS POETICA ON A BLOWJOB**

It's okay,  
move along.  
Once along,  
you'll have nothing  
persistently slack  
in my throat  
which is squirming  
both to breathe  
and keep you in.

## DRUNK

He looks like a crow, eats like a dog,  
Wild, mean. Foaming at the mouth with something  
that smells like blood or vermouth, or maybe he's just  
some other type of lover with another sort of face like mine?  
He told me that my face was distinctive. *Distinctive* rings  
in my head. Like a well worn insult from a loved one, dribbled  
so often that you've memorized it, the tone used to inflict  
the most damage and the tiny stresses in each blood stained  
syllable pointed in all the most vulnerable places. When then  
*why can't I tie my shoelaces?* I feel the part, of the poet,  
Gazing gently at the angles on the floor,  
as you open the door on my forehead.  
My blood on your thoughtfully unfashionable white pants.

## UP FACTS AND PHONE SEX (EMPHASIS ON ZALMAN)

Among American university students, 3.7 % say that it is definitely sex, to masturbate on the phone. Do **you** think that makes us lovers, formally? The other night, *I* told **you** about the other man nine years older than **you**. Who (unprovoked) hugged *me* around the waist, from behind before he announced in front of a room of primarily Spanish speakers that *I'm* his. **You** said: *That's great, I guess.* (Downwardly, aural frowning.) The past tensed: hours *I* spent on **you** coming sharply into focus, before flying over *my* shoulder. Teal head, this bird- black clawed. All this and red wings- nothing naturally occurring to New York State. *I* came, hard. Again and again, alone with the phone pressed to *my* ear. Again, *my* hand wrapped around the logical conclusion: that *I* am a lovebird, who rotates her head seven thousand degrees per second.

**GUILTY** (*ADMINISTRATOR'S COMMENTARY IN ITALICS.*)

Speaking with certainty in the retelling, right hand  
under the ear, crooked elbow aching. Fingers curled white,

around a phone barely noticed, due to the headache  
forming as a fist. From the inside out of my left hand,

expanding to suffocate what could have been  
a nice day. *I hear you're in the creative writing*

*program.* We call it just the “writing program” but-  
that’s fine, maybe poems could have come together,

elements of my face. Instead, I’m struggling to respond politely  
to ‘questions’ from school officials. Allegedly important ‘details’.

*But what were you wearing that night?* A blue  
dress, tied around the waist. Fleece tights. Realizing

that since we were alone, it’s a “he said, she said.” A new noun in my life,  
a long boat to strand me on. Bound, pushed out into the world to die.

*He said that you spoke to him about a bad date.*  
Isn’t this supposed to happen when statements

are taken? Why on the phone, with blame  
inflected? *He said that he apologized to you*

*for the confusion.* Where was the confusion  
in asking who on campus has fucked me?

Where was the misunderstanding in his fingers,  
uninvited on nipples that migrated, humiliated

from their body, shortly thereafter? *Hazel I'm sorry*  
*if I've given you the idea that I'm not properly*

*attending to your complaint.* After literally  
assaulting me, he joked about murdering me.

But we're both still here- me, speaking with  
my naturally tannic tongue again. Pressed

to the roof of my mouth. He's up my nostrils, in my head

descending from the library ceiling, many legged, bouncing,  
shiny and expectant at the thought that I was defenseless

while he locked all the exits  
moving  
closer and closer.

**ABOVE (PURPORTED SMUGNESS.)**

As **above**, so as a synonym, *higher than*  
we've been in a while. Body, suddenly abstract  
in relation to everyone on the train stairs, so below.  
Looking down, **above** the others? No, no, only-  
happy, happier,

*happiest.*

Thinking of: extending, over and **above**, wings out.  
*But* inevitably touching as limbs tend to do when gravity interferes,  
smug and superior as it is. The bird, damn bird thinks it's so great, **above**  
primate concerns about  
apology, apologies,

*apologists.*

For living well. **Above**, average- volume  
turned up to eleven. *Louder* and deeper *than* the  
bass in white ear buds, vibrating next to the train.

## **LIGHT**

I'm watching him move  
and I'm wet. Walking past fast.

Centers of gravity in his hips  
swell for me when he's alone  
and I'm outlasting  
everything else in his day,  
a dead star.

A hug materializes, I treasure it.

A long meteorite, my red hair  
shining  
under his ear on the train ride home.

Tangled around  
a matte, black button.

## **ABOUT:THE BRONX ON A FRIDAY NIGHT**

Smoking weed in a fire exit, ruminating.

Getting twerked on by an old woman that was, we justmet.

Unable to be in the moment, friend reminds (with a whisper to the ear,)

how this night overlooking the Harlem river isn't **about**, or concerning, loss.

**About**, around. Scanning **about** the room

helplessly for a certain mess of hair.

Ghost materializes in the weak lit,

grey stairwell. Speaker, redder than:

the body's often sublime, hated

responses to humiliation.

This is not **about**:

arousal, heat, or heart rate.

**About**: definitively not (always-) going

home before midnight. *Cinderella, doing shots*

*of cheap gin from a glass with a unicorn on it, shoplifted at Party City.*

## FLIRTING WITH SEACAUCUS

This boy told me he's from Secaucus- so I ask  
If he's ever gone looking in the meadow, the irony-  
*what meadow*

grass, for Jimmy Hoffa. As soon as the question  
is out of my mouth, I regret it. Another joke nobody  
my age will get, but

the boy smiles. *I've thought about it.*

## PROVINCETOWN/FOG

Hometowns, not so bad

when you're able to see

the fog for itself.

And not some dumb

metaphor for the illusory:

whiskey,

cocaine

or superficiality.

Instead: a mass

of pretty fucking

water particles.

Finding in the familiar: a joy, again.

## IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME

How did I get here? I'm twenty six, with a history of failed romances and sexual impropriety that's been half kept under wraps.

My Phone rings along to Benny Goodman on my nightstand.

With you, I am unashamed of my underbelly,  
unsunned as the surprising nakedness of a shaved, surgical square plot of dog in a vet's office.

*Don't worry,  
she'll be running around again soon, I promise.*

Nine thousand four hundred

And ninety days in, mostly spent hiding out alone in my room with books.

You did that too, in Brooklyn.

Nobody else wants to hear about my college advisor, confessing his mostly unwanted, fifty eight year old love for me.

I gagged. His response was:

*Hazel, you would have been a really talented bulimic.*

Moon eyes presiding over the altar of his nose in dim light.

You got angry at him when I told you that story,  
and I'm sure that I'll never feel ashamed again.

Look at me. Thirteen million, six hundred and sixty five thousand,  
six hundred seconds of little to no attention paid to God.

You walk a thin tightrope of a curb, while I've never thought of the divine seriously,  
outside of art. Dories, paintings. Whales, ghosts. Floating homes.

Dorothy Bradford's corpse supposedly buried near my childhood supermarket.

A thick, silver codfish swallowing a rosary.

Surely these things would impress my Rabbi, Robert Lowell.

Three hundred and twelve months old- am I just an especially large baby?

It takes twenty four months for a little person to earn years.

I've lain so many toddlers away. Until I caught you- blessing an apple  
before it entered your rotten mouth, full of crowns.

## HOW TO BREAK YOUR HEART THREE TIMES

1.

He whispers hoarsely in your ear,

“I want to open you up.”

You let him in- fingers probing your thin, fibrous little heart strings.

You reach a hand inside yourself- spreading your ribs.

The bones are looking cleaner than you'd have imagined.

You expected them to look like an archaeological dig.

He tells you proudly of having fashioned a 'new noose', as if

he has a very unique collection of crafts. He's attached it to the highest rail in his closet, saying that he's "only going to look." You know that if he was really going to use one, choose a favorite- he wouldn't have told you.

Three days later, you read that Robin Williams was sober when he died.

2.

On Friday, you drink one too many small glasses of two dollar wine at a party, confessing- you like him, a little. Lilted, sing song. A bright green block of text, comfortably sent.

Rationalizing it- You can touch him when you're sober, even getting excited about it. Usually, you're feeling like you just drank black tea on an empty stomach. Smiling at the couple dancing together, you feel like you're in on a nice secret. For once. Then, snap. He makes you feel stupid, even without syntax. Deflated and sober after midnight on the F train.

The *fuck you for thinking you could have something nice train-* he's sorry for being harsh- but you're a nice person, and things are the way they are. You wish he had Ebola for ten minutes. Then you realized you don't. You would have treated him, though. Your blue blood for his shtetl rooted cellular fallow. What burns is knowing how it seems unnatural at first, to have affection within reach.

3.

He calls you Monday night. *Just wanting to make sure you don't hate me. I haven't forgotten about you already,* he adds.

You pretend to giggle.

Is this the light at the end of the tunnel?

(Your rabbi, Robert Lowell- says that's just the light of an oncoming train.)

Are you done with him? Your dead grandmother appears in a dream, sitting on the edge of your small bed- *listen, pudgy business, he's*

You don't remember what she says next, only that she was dressed to go to the supermarket. Her little, cold hands are reassuringly fiddling with silver buttons on her tan, quilted coat.

**BUT HE SAYS I'M JUST A FRIEND (ALL IN ONE BREATH)**

I'm stumbling into talking about him and  
who am I kidding, I'm doing it full on purpose,

well

well,

well,

it's just so god damn easy,

he makes it so god damn simple

popping up on my newsfeed

or messaging me at 3:30 in the morning

that he wishes he lived closer because I

look like such a snuggler,

and I know where he lives

because

I traced his phone number on google earth

and he takes the 6 train to work

(in Harlem) every day but

I'm fine with being just a friend

after he ran his hand possessively

through my hair and said that his heart

entered the building when I did,

but he says I'm just a friend

so I'm fine with being just a friend

when he hugged me like we hurt

the same way and I believed his arms

and his energy and his presence

like you believe a friend,

*(breathe)*

You know?

## **BIG ME STANDING IN MY WAY (FOR MY GREAT GRANDMOTHER)**

*I know you, brown suit.*

The grass and the road aren't textures,  
they're jade separated by a semi uneven  
stroke and grey blue, Provincetown colors.

Ocean, pitch,  
spit, sand,  
weed pine,  
green, tidal,  
flat.

The bushes, one tree: same deep green, purple-blue teal  
that looks good on all of us.

A catalog of obsessions,  
both kicked and fed. Booze  
to the side, the Catholic church  
to the right. Cigarette,  
teetering in hand. Dead  
dog, behind.

*I know you, brown suit.*



Big Me Standing In My way,

*Mary Hackett, 1950 (Written explanation on the back-)*

The elec. Light poles, In foRm of cRosses poinT the way

But I have yet to cRoss The BRidge InTo Freedom

2.

“FICTION.”

Just kidding, it's really mostly fiction.

## HONEST

1. I'm in such a rush to find love because the only ring bearer I can ever imagine is my lumpy, twelve year old Labrador who was named after Gracie Allen. This is one of only two concrete, consistent thoughts I've ever had in my life about having a wedding.
2. The other is that I could never get married in Provincetown. My parents and grandparents both did, and they both honeymooned on Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, respectively- and divorced. Painfully.
3. When my best friend stopped talking to me it made me doubt whether anyone could ever love me. Here's this person with whom I shared everything and who really knew me, or so I thought- and she walked away. I'd never before felt that comfortable being that consistently open and honest with my parents, or a therapist.
4. Did I steal the cough drops in my purse from my old job? When someone brought up the Bermuda Triangle in conversation, did I semi contextually bring up the fact that my great uncle Hart Craned himself there? Are there naked photos of me on the internet? Did I once break a man's toe completely by accident?
5. The answer to all of those questions is yes.
6. Now I've fully manifested as what my cousin Trevor called "a prettier Lena Dunham," all I can say is that I'm glad I have the sheer lack of filter to admit those things. Because at least I'm being honest- nobody can tell me that I'm not a 'reliable narrator' anymore. Because I've realized that I have no real reason to be ashamed of anything.

## VERA & MARY

- · Vera pitched a fit at your grandmother's funeral, because you were sitting with your father, Tim. When your father cries, you feel at ends- you're the one who's openly doing the weeping at any given time. You're a Cancer, a girl, and a poet. He's a Leo, a man, an actor. He was gripping his girlfriend, Cora's hand- yours, harder- your fingers were numb. Front pew, to the right. He whispered hoarsely in your ear- *don't you dare touch your phone*. You took it as a mark of your own incipient maturity that this didn't upset you. If you had been a teenager, you would have certainly taken it as an affront. Or remembered it as an incident, as opposed to a single detail, years later. You answer softly to him that you absolutely would never touch the glowing, black jewel tucked deep in your purse. Left on vibrate. Meanwhile, your mother is in the back pew with her husband, texting you repeatedly. *Come sit with me. Why aren't you with me? I'm your mother*.
- · Vera finally left the funeral when she wasn't mentioned in the eulogy. Nobody's wives, present or past were mentioned- but all the grandchildren were, you, most preeminently. But that's not important to her in the moment, because the name *Vera* never appeared. After the service, at the reception- your cousin Molly defends her. *But she's your mother*. You smile, cruelly- *she should wait her turn*, you say. When her parents die, you'll sit with her. Your father's eyes widen. Cora looks at you, stunned. She's a mother of a girl a few years younger than you with a severe drug problem. You're glad that she didn't come- you get to be the star asshole at the memorial. Vera once referred to anyone with more than one child as "having spares." This callousness is you will deal with things now. Since all of your childhood worst fears.. aside from being kidnapped by a pedophile, or parental death- have all come true, you have no more pretense. Your parents are divorced, your cats have all died, and your best friends moved away- and Mary's fucking dead. *Brave new world*. You don't like it, but you'll accept it.
- • *She'll always be with you*. You know your mother means this in a greeting card, cartoonish way. Mary's little hands, your size, almost identical except for your

fingertips- on your shoulders as you jaywalk across a New York street, keeping you from certain death at the hands of some stranger who has no idea whose daughter you are. It's a childlike concept- that the dead take care of us. It exists more for our comfort than anything. If we really believed that sort of thing, we wouldn't say it. You wouldn't do that to Mary or Vera. Do you really want her watching you black out on tequila and shoving a hand down a friend's throat? You know that you definitely don't want her watching you stealing anti allergy medication from someone you just slept with and strolling to your Uber in a tunic. In a subtle, biological way, you won't mind though. You can find her in the little things: your handwriting, your now, deceased taste for gin. Pile of black ballet shoes, head tilt. Your thick, fine, straight hair. Your little smile when you're quietly happy. You just have to look for her.

## THE GIRL FROM STOP & SHOP

Howie came into the grocery store you worked at every day after the night you first met at his art opening. Multiple times- until he seemed to realize that he got your schedule right. From then on, it was like clockwork. At first you were never able to remember his name, but he'd never hesitate to remind you- his eyes clearly betraying a hint of confusion or hurt. In his mind, this was all okay because you *must* be as attracted to him as he was to you. This couldn't be predatory at all- his wife Audrey had practically put you on his plate that night; exclaiming dramatically in the crowded, optic white gallery on how beautiful she thought you were. *Classical, like an angel-creature in an old painting.* You liked her, instinctively- she reminded you of gentle, but somehow still edgy girls that you idolized in school who made pottery and listened to Carly Simon with their moms. She's about five foot four, with a black Jean Seberg haircut on her little head. Her eyes are small, dark. Her nose is long, voice reedy- it seems to come from her flared nostrils. She admires your Bikini Kill t-shirt. She saw them in 1994 in Washington DC. You're jealous. You were in Provincetown, feeling traumatized by elementary school every day. Other kids were so scary, you laugh. She smiles, agreeing- that's just how she felt. Her parents were at Woodstock- she wishes that she could have been there, too. You wonder aimlessly aloud to yourself if everyone misses out on something like that. She half listens before taking your right hand, forcefully. Your hands are smaller than hers and you stumble a little bit with the force she exerts, tripping over your own feet. You smile again at nothing in particular, focusing on a fixed point high on the wall. This is the most interaction with strangers you've had in months outside of your job at the grocery store and you enjoy it. A little. The first thing you formally notice about Howie, her husband (fifteen years!) are his pupils expanding, like he's been doing drugs. He's what- 43, maybe 46? You were told how old he was at one point, but you forget. You think he dresses like a homeless person. A grimy black trucker hat with an abstract yellow logo indoors in January, a grey and red fleece pullover and paint- (or is it food? You can't tell-) splattered khaki pants. He then proceeds to ignore Audrey for the rest of the evening. He even goes so far as to bring you a cocktaill, though you put that down to your imagination, with the refused drink. Mutual friends had abandoned you, stone cold sober in a room full of drunk people you didn't know. He was only trying to be kind.

You're loyally waiting for Jessica and your other friend to return. He says that he admires that. Jessica had mentioned you before; apparently- referred to you as her little sister. She was his oldest friend. You thought that he looked like a relative- some distant cousin it would be almost acceptable to flirt with at a family gathering. Howie was six foot three to your five eight, barrel chested, broad shouldered, chubby. Auburn, greying beard- a shadow of thinning hair on his head. You noticed that his eyes were an arctic blue at one point when you caught him watching you.

For weeks afterwards, he'd run into you and your friends out at bars- quickly out drinking everyone around him. He'd joke about not leaving his beverage unattended in front of you since you were  *LIABLE to roofie him*, retreating to the bathroom wearing his torn black nylon parka with dark fur around the edge of the hood. He'd come out almost ten minutes later with his drink suddenly overflowing- you realized later that he was refilling his drinks from a flask in the bathroom. Naively persisting in the idea that you're just friends, you go to what you are lead to believe is an 'after party' at his studio after the bars close one Sunday. It was really just the both of you, some Ritz cheese crackers in the box and a bottle of gin- your grandmother Wendy's favorite, - (he remembered the boar's head.) You later realize how entirely adolescent the experience is- who else would have all of those things without even some citrus soda- except a teenager or a drunk? Two am rolls around to find yourself with his face buried in your chest. He admires your perfume again; chin resting smugly on your cleavage.  *You smell like a meadow*. You're scared for your grandmother; he's scared that he can't paint anymore. You promise to remember his name. He laughs, his hand moves, and you see his ring. Then you remember that his Audrey, wife- was kind to you. You tense up. She's been back in Brooklyn for weeks, but you like having someone seeing you- like this, a visible attractive woman. Even if they're a married, middle-aged alcoholic. You're a twenty three year old college drop out who wears a nametag (sometimes a fake one- as often as you can get away with it, you're Olivia, Mariza, Dolores or Lila-) and a uniform to work. You're drunk- he wants to move so he's sitting up, and you stand for a second to readjust your leopard dress. You sit back down on his lap and he asks you if you've realized how physically similar you both are. You feign ignorance. But in reality, that's part of the reason you're still there.  *Not like Audrey and I*, he says-  *she's so little I'm afraid I'll kill her when we fuck, so she always has to ride me. That would*

*obviously be more fun with you.* He laughs, eyes sparkling. You pretend to giggle- you know that was intended to be complimentary, to plant images in your head, get you wet- but it just makes you sad for her. Blushing, suddenly- you realize that you really want to fuck him, all concepts of sisterhood between women having gone up and out through the skylight. You missed being touched. Beyond that, you haven't been to bed with anyone since the first time in 2006. Something nobody would know unless you told them- you've stayed on birth control all the while, hopefully. Something about being physically admired makes adult you nervous at first- you're still unsure whether or not it's a big, cruel trick. You reach for the gin and take a long swig. He watches, smiling. You know it's irrational to be paranoid about the intentions of someone who clearly has the same insecurities as you. After making out for a while longer, he rubs your clit through your underwear and tights. Pausing to detecting the hint of a tampon string, using it to his (your?) advantage. *Another night, I'll know what to do with you.* You like his beard on your neck. Hot, wet teeth. Erection against your ass. You think that you're about to come- he's twisting your left arm behind your back, your right hand gripping his thick forearm. But you don't. So you pretend to and he believes it. His lavender grey cat Marco suddenly is staring at you judgmentally from the top of the closest bookshelf, acknowledging your presence long after you had forgotten he was even there. He has green eyes and a low brow bone, almost like a feline Neanderthal. His sparkly bubblegum collar catches the light. You wonder if Marco thinks you're a slut.

Wendy tells you what you already knew when you go to visit her at the old folks home which even through several renovations, and re buildings has always been referred to in Provincetown as 'The Manor'. (For unknown reasons.) It's noon, and you're barely past your hangover. You haven't taken off your tortoiseshell wayfarers, and there's lipstick on an unbrushed, tea stained yellow front tooth. She doesn't alert you to your own sloppiness- she knows that you're aware of it. You finish telling your story and take off your sunglasses. Her eyes sparkle with recognition when they finally meet yours. You are both home, together. *You liked it. But that's okay.* You self-consciously touch the teeth marks on your pale, already bruised neck. *Attention is an okay thing to like.* She's the only one to whom you'd consider retelling the uncensored version of events- even though it moved her to recount the time she threw a stainless steel martini shaker at your grandfather's wheelchair

bound mistress's head at a party. *Tadd Everett made me crazy.* What you don't remind her of- because you know that it won't help anything, is that they were both perpetually inebriated throughout most of their marriage. That no other man continued to rent space in her head the same way because he's the only one who went to great lengths to get her to even pay attention to him. He had a crush on her at Swarthmore, from the beginning of freshman year- she had noticed him too, but in an effort to save herself from potential embarrassment in case she was alone in her interest- she had ignored him, enthusiastically. Straining to pretend not to remember that he was Tadd Hackett from Chicago, just back from the Pacific. He had joined the yearbook club, befriended her roommates- all until he had made himself odd, but endearing. She's five foot two, and you've been taller than her since you were eleven. You read an Anne Carson poem to her from the New Yorker and Google her photo on your phone. *That looks like me.* You wonder aloud whether it's wrong to want to see where it goes. *Do you like him, or are you bored and sad?* Nobody, not even your parents or your friends can read you as well. Wendy knows your insides- your father Toby used to call you 'the twins.' You want to act hopeful- tell her that you're not sad, that she has another good fifteen years in her. Lie to yourself, that your children will have a few solid memories of her. Putting up a facade of cheer, you try to explain- you never really had a teenage experience. You were at boarding school in Vermont- everyone was tripping on acid, engaging in animal husbandry or hiking. You recreationally stayed in your room with books and fell in love with a 47-year-old cooking teacher. You're aware that none of your adolescence was terribly normal. So you're experimenting, working out your own cubic plot in the world a few years late. No big deal. *You're in the town you grew up in- bagging groceries. This isn't the world. Men aren't experiments.* You know that- you just mean outside of an- she mouths *academic* before you finish, and you sound out the letters with your mouths, looking each other in the eyes. *In-sti-tut-ion.* You look at her face, imagining her with shorter hair, a few inches on her, subtract the big tits you inherited, add some stubble- your father if he doesn't quit smoking. Before you know it, you're both laughing at the way mouths look while saying words. *But really, do you like him?* She's out of breath from giggling with you, still smiling but serious. She's told you on a number of occasions that she's grateful that you could never smoke, you can barely handle exercise because you were in the hospital so often as a kid with some infection or another in your lungs.

Sometimes you think you'll suffocate walking up stairs. Truthfully, you tell her- he looks familiar- he looks physically like every other man that's ever been interested in you. It just seemed logical- another doppelganger lover. You don't know if you like men that look like you, or the other way around. Low self esteem? Or a funny kind of self-love? *Do you like him? Just him. Don't dodge me. I'm eighty-five.* He's here- it's amazing to feel desirable again, you say. *You know you have better lips than me, don't you? Like your mother. You're as oblivious as she is about her looks. I have line lips- like a minstrel show around my mouth.* You wonder if that's why she bought so much lipstick but rarely ever used it. *If you like him, if his wife doesn't care- if you want to be bohemian that way, there are worse things you could do. He's an artist- you'll have something in common.* This is the first time anyone in your family has referred to you as an artist- usually its groupies of Wendy's long deceased mother the painter. They'd drunkenly corner you at various gallery openings when you were nine or ten, impatient to inform you that you were Mary Hackett, Bubs- reborn. You'd reply robotically that she died when you were one, so that was impossible. They'd insist that you were so much alike; you were even close to Wendy- usually something about how your soul was obviously trying to heal the karmic rupture between them. You'd break away, find Wendy- ask her if you were like Bubs. She'd always scoff. *No, you're sweet. So good and good.*

You'd only just met Howie, but he'd already become a willing outlet for your rising dread- you knew that she wasn't going to live to see another summer, but couldn't put the full sentence together in your mind. You could write it, though. Sometimes. *She's going to die.* Sitting seemingly incongruously in your journal, next to bad erotic poetry about Howie refusing to fuck you just yet. You wondered semi seriously if your cunt was going to die, first. People wanted to hear about that- your friends wanted to talk about the bearded guy who'd come into your store to flirt with you and buy pot roasts- was he even eating all of them? Or feeding the entire Fine Arts Work Center? Close friends would change the topic away from Wendy. They'd bring up dead mothers, violent exes. Your father is unreachable, or ignores you. You can't really tell which it is, but part of you is glad- you're sure that you'd have a hard time acting blasé, like nothing's going on. Your mother serves up platitudes instead of actually trying to relate. Howie listened, empathized. His topic changes don't annoy or make you resentful feel like you've been droning, unimportant. His existence in

Provincetown and your life just enough out of the ordinary for you to be forgiving. He mentioned leaving his car door unlocked with bottled water and a blanket in 1990s Williamsburg- he was tired of having homeless people breaking his windows- you laugh, but refuse to tell him you're thinking about the sweater he's been wearing for weeks. Which smells like it's been marinated cheap liquor. But he's kinder than you- he even tried to teach you how to ride a bike. Nobody's tried to help you do that since you were five, and the fact that he's so attached to the idea is deeply endearing to you. He paints a series of your lips, all in different shades of red. Suddenly, he thinks he's found himself again- he still wants to wait to go to bed, but is okay with you sitting on his face in his studio or swallowing his dick in risky, well lit places outdoors at night. One night in late March, he fingers you on a bench in the darkest corner of your favorite bar. Everyone there is so drunk, they barely notice your squirming. Everything other than work has begun to revolve around alcohol. The green lights laced behind and around all the nautical claptrap have even taken on the color of a Jameson bottle to you. He wants you to come to bed with him, he says- finally. You refuse. Not because you don't want to, but because you need to work the next day. He knows this, but declares that you just don't want him. You want to make up for lost time, you say. Days, even- as you both have them. But he says it's now or never. He's going to go to Brooklyn to see Audrey, he declares- after angrily calling you a tease. You miss him. He comes back two weeks later, and disappears out of your life.

Your grandmother dies in the interim and nobody seems to know what to do with you. Your mother tells you that two weeks is more than enough time to grieve- why are you still so sad? You shouldn't be allowed to be so testy. One day you're doing put backs- groceries that are returned, or left on the magazine racks by the registers at your store, and all of them are things Wendy would buy. St Andre cheese, Schweppes tonic water, limes, Triscuits, a liter of coca cola, coffee Haagen-Dazs- and you can't stop crying. Your manager asks you to go home, and your mother calmly inquires if you think you might be emotionally unstable. Your friends take you out to brunch every weekend, you drink for free- and everyone else you know is looking at you like they can see the cavity in your life. Howie sees you sitting in the sandwich shop on Bradford Street, around the corner from the Work Center and he gets bright red- a look on his face that you can almost identify as a potent mixture of fear and desire. Deer in your headlights. He knows you're miserable- it's hard to ignore, so he's

seemingly afraid that you'll lash out. People stare- conversely it's hard to gloss over the energy you both exude towards each other when in the same room. Your mutual friend Jessica asks if you're dying to boil his bunny. He even brags to her that he's 'been forced' to look into changing his phone number. You have a hard time convincing anyone that you don't have the time, dedication or lack of self awareness to have called him forty times a day- considering that you've never even known his area code. You discover drugs, one night at a party above the local designer chain store. The Marc-By-Marc boys were up for the weekend from Brooklyn. Your friends brought lots of blow. You take to it like you'll probably never do with a bike- putting so much up your nose your face hurts for two days. You get so used to feeling physically worn out that you almost forget what it's like to not have a weeklong hangover.

One night out, identical to many before it and many after- you suddenly realize how empty you feel in town. Even surrounded by people that adore you, those have known you your whole life. It comes up on you out of seemingly nowhere. Where you had been smiling and laughing ten minutes before, you look down at your opaque tights, black moccasins, perfect nails and red tulle cocktail dress and see it as a costume. You stealthily retreat from your friends to sit in the bathroom crying at what happens to be the same bar that Howie gave you the ultimatum in. Not out of sentiment, but a sort of cinematic consistency. Everything's coming full circle. You leave without saying goodbye to anyone- even your best friend. You head the forty yards home to write for the first time in months. You've been secretly convinced that you see your grandmother early every morning when you're somewhere between awake and asleep, standing in the corner of your bedroom- dressed as though she's about to go to the grocery store. She looks lost in thought. Worried and you're sure that its over you. Your whimpering twenties must be scaring her. You think you know how to not make the same mistakes as she did- even if palmistry is somehow not a pseudo science. Both of you with your identical little hands, *cold hands, warm heart* she'd say. And the same feet. Men don't hold any keys to your self realization, but you're starting to see what does.

## GETTING TO KNOW DEATH IN THE FAMILY

You don't mean to be hurtful. You are technically related to the Roberts, so they are **family**. Your mother was a Roberts until she married her second husband. There's nothing **wrong** with them. You're moving past Guilford on the highway, and your uncle's new wife Tammi asks you why you're suddenly looking attentive to what is the same landscape you've seen throughout Connecticut. *This is the town my family founded! This is where Wendy used to come in the summer.* You consciously leave out the part about the independently wealthy great aunt that Wendy; your **other** grandmother was visiting.

The Hacketts, your father's side- are the ones you know best. They accepted you. They visited; they never made you feel ugly, stupid or unwanted growing up. You stop ruminating rosily as you recognize your mother's little, adult brother Lawrence, or as he prefers, Larry's- laughter at the wheel your grandfather's Volvo, speeding towards Provincetown.

*Well, Zella- since I'm your family, I don't know who you're talking about.*

There's something about his tone that translates as though you might seem fanciful. You regret not being more thoughtful with your words- Heading home to Provincetown to see your aunt and cousin that you haven't seen in seventeen years, you're hoping to make your dying grandfather happy that you're all together. That's the most important thing. Not to aggravate the working class British chip on their shoulders with tales of extinct, American WASP money.

You're at a rest stop in Connecticut- it's the first time you've seen a Christian nun in almost a year. You exclaim to your uncle on this. He looks puzzled.

*You know, Zella- rest stops are a wonderful place to view -real- minorities.*

You don't laugh. You think you saw an African American man twitch from a few feet away, but it could be your imagination.

*Is New York still dirty?*

A skillful segue, indeed.

You want to remind them that you live in Yonkers, that it's not the same thing. But you don't. It's much easier to not be perceived as argumentative.

*Yes, very.* You're trying to read a book called **Humiliation**. Your aunt is reading a Sue Grafton alphabetical mystery novel. You're in the sort of mood where those distinctions matter: sad, tired and deeply irritated. You're absorbed in digressive essays with John Waters blurbs on the back- but Tammi, who's uncomfortable seeing a tampon in your purse- is finishing a book you read twice when you were eleven. (Your aunt Helen will refer to you as 'pretentious' for reading 'strange sounding books' during this weekend when she thinks you're out of earshot.)

*All the old photos you used to see of New York City had more than a few pigeons in them.*

Your uncle brings you back from your cathartic snobbery. Everyone else is eating McDonalds; you're eating Dunkin Donuts Hash Browns because they're ninety-nine cents. Everyone debates what a good deal this is, for a long moment. You zone out drinking homemade tea from your water bottle, eyeing a pigeon outside- you think it might be male, with its pink, blue and green oil slicked neck. He's alone.

Every time a swathe of pigeons fly over you in the city, you brace yourself for a strafing of shit. It never comes.

Larry asks about pigeons again.

*Oh, lots. I'm always convinced I'm going to get..* Tammi interrupts you.

*Oh, me too, Hun. I don't think poo-poo can be helped if it happens.*

You breathe in, sharply. She's actually acting like shit is a terrifying word. Shit shit shit.

*Well, when I do get shit on- by a pigeon, that is- I hope it's an Albino one.*

Your smile forms inside your mouth, running up the roof of your jaw and inside your nasal passages. Cheeks betraying nothing of the joy in your head: you feel like you've just made a decisive step in what you view as the oncoming war for your emotional health. There's an intimacy that you're sure you're supposed to feel with your aunt and uncle but is missing. Larry sputters, incredulously.

*That makes no sense, Zella. Why would an albino pigeon make any difference?*

He's completely miffed. This isn't his type of humor. He'll make fun of your dead grandmother's drinking, the one everyone knows you were close to- but this is a step too far.

Your grandfather George is rapt. A half smile is visibly forming on the side of his face. Tammi looks somewhere between disgusted and upset.

*Getting shit on by an albino pigeon would really just make me feel more special.*

You take a decisive slurp of your iced tea, tapping your foot on the dirty eggshell linoleum.

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