

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

UTC Scholar

Honors Theses

Student Research, Creative Works, and
Publications

8-2022

Aboutness: the lyric essay

Alicia Gladman

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, mp618@mocs.utc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.utc.edu/honors-theses>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gladman, Alicia, "Aboutness: the lyric essay" (2022). *Honors Theses*.

This Theses is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research, Creative Works, and Publications at UTC Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of UTC Scholar. For more information, please contact scholar@utc.edu.

Aboutness: The Lyric Essay

Alicia Gladman

Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
English Department

Examination Date: 6 July 2022

Sarah Einstein
Associate Professor
Thesis Director

Sybil Baker
UC Foundation Professor
Department Examiner

Contents

Aboutness: The Lyric Essay	1
What I Know to be True: A Collection of Lyric Essays.....	9
What I Know to be True.....	10
Vienna	19
The Things I've Lost:	23
On Being a Messy Bitch.....	26
Gay Shit.....	32
Triptych	40
Desert	46

Alicia Gladman

Departmental Thesis

Dr. Einstein

18 June 2022

Aboutness: The Lyric Essay

When my sister and I were maybe eleven and thirteen years old, we got into a fight on the landing, in front of the double doors that opened into our suburban home. I don't know what we were fighting about. We were territorial and reactionary, and our fights embodied that; We claimed space with each other in ways that we were afraid to do in the world, both of us quiet and ill-at-ease in public.

On an average day, I begged my sister to include me in their life and when I was rejected, I pushed my way in by force, barging in on their social and personal space. They, on the other hand, were both protective and afraid of me; I was part of them and also alien, and they didn't know how to reconcile my turbulent company with their gentle qualities. Our fights were vicious, and in them I now recognize a frustration with the wider world that we were then barely able to put words to.

I only remember that day on the landing because my sister cried, insisting that I had tried to push them down the stairs. I remember them holding onto my clothing, or maybe my arm, much of their body on the steps below me, desperation and injury in their expression. I responded to their accusation with a total denial, and my memory is shaped by my version of the story: We were pushing each other, both with equally bad intentions. I was just the stronger of us two.

Both of our stories were true, but we presented them to our parents as two mutually exclusive possibilities, each of us trying to absolve ourselves of the majority share of the blame. Our characters were on full display in that moment: My sister defensive, quick to shut down in the face of a perceived injustice, me insistent, imagining that if I repeated my story enough times it would become the definitive truth. In the moment, both of us were too distracted by the pain felt to imagine the pain inflicted, then later, too ashamed of the pain inflicted to validate the pain felt.

Something of this dynamic has always remained between us. Tempered by care and respect, we still tiptoe around one another on uneven ground. I know that I am rarely willing to risk activating my sister's defenses, and I tailor my words to them more carefully than I wish I did. The love we share is deep, and uneasy.

Recently, I began writing an essay about my family, about its queerness and its idiosyncracies. Where it had flowed before, my writing ground to a halt when I came to what I intended to write about my sister. I wondered if I was afraid to write about them, for fear that I would misdiagnose the essence of our relationship, and I wondered what key pieces of our narrative I still did not understand. I wondered what had yet to be named about the dynamic between us.

It is the naming of things that draws me to the lyric essay, and the uncovering of things that need air. There is something tangled in my sister's and my complicated history that needs to be teased out, something, maybe, that I have always known but never considered. The multiplicity of narratives, both between us and within each of us, must be studied in cross-section rather than by following any sequence of events. This, to me, is the strength of the lyric essay; It stops at a moment, looks around, and tries to name every force in the room. It is only

by examining each of these forces that the lyric essay creates a space where both the reader and the writer can engage with a multi-faceted reality, one that lays bare a more detailed picture of our experiences than any single narrative can do when it stands alone.

Once it has carved out a space for complexity to exist, the lyric essay as a form becomes limitless. Equally compelling in its examination of huge and tiny life events, these essays become less about what is happening and more about what *else* is happening. What happens when something happens. In “Structure: Lifeblood of the Lyric Essay,” Lesh Karan writes: “I had discovered a prose genre where the writer leans on form... to eloquently hold the inexpressible *aboutness*, to let meaning dance in the spaces between its juxtaposed parts.” This “aboutness” is key. The lyric essay expresses what falls between the visible, traceable pieces of our lives. In her craft essay “What is Missing?” Julie Marie Wade identifies this in another way: “Perhaps the lyric essay is an occasion to take what we typically set aside between parentheses and liberate that content – a chance to reevaluate what a text is actually about. Peripherals as centerpieces. Tangents as main roads” (241). This reevaluation of the text requires a willingness to engage with the uncomfortable complexity of our own motivations at any one moment.

It is our habit, societally, to seek the *truth* in a narrative, the singular storyline. But these things that we “set aside,” as Wade says, amount to adjacent truths that we deprioritize. The appeal of a tidy storyline is strong, but in that distilled version of events, we may miss an opportunity to engage with other, equally critical pieces of our emotional experience. In his essay “Our Queer Little Hybrid Thing,” Ned Stuckey-French writes: “The personal essay differs from the inverted checkmark story in that it doesn’t tell (or just tell) the story of an event... Instead it lets you into what a particular person thinks about an event...or a subject, person, place or problem.” Only foundationally about the concrete details of an experience, the

lyric essay invites a closer look at the strands of truth that, once woven together, create a more intricate vision of the moment under examination.

The act of putting words to something that has been subtly present invites a certain relief and recognition from both writer and reader. In her segmented essay “Manual,” Amy Bowers writes about witnessing the police killing of her neighbor. While she processes a mixture of helplessness and guilt and grief, she weaves in a narrative about finding a tick on her son, about checking him for signs of Lyme disease:

Secretly, there is something about this I love. I am called into action. I am relevant. I can solve the problem, organize solutions, carry the burden in ways that I feel slipping away daily. I hold on tight to the connection, even checking his thigh for longer than I need to. To extend my usefulness. (97)

Bowers here is naming a kind of complicated pleasure she takes in checking her son for signs of sickness. That pleasure, perhaps, comes as a reaffirmation of her purpose in a world in which she cannot prevent a man’s violent death. While the pleasure of such an act seems that it should be peripheral to her concern for her child, it becomes the focus of the moment, asking to be defined and granted the same importance as every other force at work in this essay. This intimate definition lends clarity to the larger experience explored in the essay. As contiguous strands of her experience are identified, a fuller picture of the moment emerges, one that includes things easily overlooked that make sense of the story as a whole.

The lyric essay is a form that can examine an instance and put words to what felt too charged to name in the moment. It is this sense of perspective that allows the lyric essay to move away from the immediate sequence of actions that make up an experience, and move towards an

introspective untangling of the influences that were then, and perhaps are now still, at play. In “Our Queer Little Hybrid Thing,” Stuckey-French articulates this act of looking back:

A good way to begin drafting an essay is to explore a story that you yourself aren't quite sure about, a story that haunts you, a story you need to tell but you don't know why...

The struggle is both to tell the tale but also to find your inner voice from that time (the voice of reflection) and your inner voice now (the voice of retrospection).

In her essay “Woven,” Lidia Yuknavitch does this by lacing together moments from her past, shedding light on the ways in which they affected each other. The narrator, who had experienced devastating violence at the hands of skinheads, tells of grading the work of a student with this same affiliation: “I gave him a C, only because I could, whether or not I should have. If he'd challenged the grade, he'd have won. In many ways he was the best writer in the class. What is a teacher? A mother?” The dubious morality of her actions are a part of this moment. This student was not graded on the merit of his writing, but on the emotion and the trauma of the narrator. However, this small moment of pettiness functions in the context of the essay as a response to the narrator's experience of violence. Aware of her own power over this young man, she is simultaneously aware that she is responding to the way in which she was once overpowered. This essay presents us with a moment that is both vindictive and reclamatory; while it is unfair to the student, for the narrator it is a way to dislodge the powerlessness of the past. Landing neither entirely in one camp nor the other, the lyric essay is able to fold time frames together, in this case to examine some of the ways in which power shifts and slips. Without telling the reader how to respond, this essay walks us through the messiness of this moment, and simply gives name to the quiet parts that are so often lost in the larger narrative.

There is a weight to identifying these elusive truths; while it will enhance the meaning of the moments under the microscope, so too will it bring back their emotion. Coming back to “What is Missing?” Wade writes: “Lyric essays are often investigations of the Underneath—what only seems invisible because it must be excavated, brought to light. We cannot, however, take this light-bringing lightly” (246).

In the braided essay “Against Fidelity,” Leslie Jill Patterson examines the end of a marriage through her own experience of the relationship, of cancer, and of a forest fire. She ends her essay with these words: “And because – if there’s any truth to swear allegiance to, it’s this – part of my story intended to prove my devotion to him, so I could start running before he realized I was gone.” Patterson acknowledges, at the end of her essay, that there is, even inside of her own excruciating pain, a multiplicity of motives, that some part of her was building herself a defense, an escape. This strain of calculation does not minimize her story, but saturates it with the complexity of truth; it is imprecise, varied. While the “Underneath,” the peripheral strains of a lyric essay might cost the writer some nobility, it brings writer and reader closer to the essence of the experience.

This act of collecting together adjoining strands of one story, of outlining a multitude of truths, is a place where the lyric essay is distinctly powerful. It challenges our appetite for resolution, and lends integrity to an indefinite search for self-understanding.

When things feel off between my sister and me now, there are countless strands of history that flow into the moment. An essay about my sister cannot ignore their alienation in grade school, my catastrophizing protectiveness of our parents, our competition for social status, that I forget that we have spent more time apart than together and I can never know who they are entirely. Every thread of a lyric essay compounds the meaning in a piece of writing, and invites

the reader to understand the ways in which they weave together. A form more concerned with exposition than conclusion, the lyric essay asks us to reimagine what is central, what is true in a narrative, and allow it to shift as our own understanding of ourselves necessarily shifts.

Works Cited

- Bowers, Amy. "Manual." *A Harp in the Stars*, edited by Randon Billings Noble, University of Nebraska Press, 2021.
- Karan, Jesh. "Structure: Lifeblood of the Lyric Essay." *Brevity*, 15 January 2022, brevitymag.com/craft-essays/lifeblood-of-the-lyric/. Accessed 16 June, 2022.
- Patterson, Leslie Jill. "Against Fidelity." *A Harp in the Stars*, edited by Randon Billings Noble, University of Nebraska Press, 2021.
- Stuckey-French, Ned. "Our Queer Little Hybrid Thing." *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies*, vol 1, no.1, 2014. www.assayjournal.com/ned-stuckey-french-our-queer-little-hybrid-thing-11.html. Accessed 16 June, 2022.
- Wade, Julie Marie. "What is Missing?" *A Harp in the Stars*, edited by Randon Billings Noble, University of Nebraska Press, 2021.
- Yuknavitch, Lydia. "Woven." *Guernica*, 3 August 2015, www.guernicamag.com/woven/. Accessed 5 June 2022.

What I Know to be True: A Collection of Lyric Essays

What I Know to be True

“You talk to her, you are clear, you think you are clear, you say what you are thinking and you say it after thinking a lot and yet when she repeats what you have said back to you nothing makes sense. Did you say that? Really? You can’t remember saying that or even thinking it and yet she is letting you know that it was said, and you definitely meant it that way.”

- Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House*

Defamiliarize - de·fa·mil·iar·ize | \ dē-fə-'mil-yə-,rīz \ *transitive verb* : to present or render in an unfamiliar artistic form usually to stimulate fresh perception. *I remarked, from time to time, that I felt I had been more myself when I lived in Vancouver, that it was as if I was looking at a strange, shrunken version of what I once was, that something had altered my trust in my own reflection, that when I found a moment of truth and tried to share it, she told me that I was hurting her, and I doubted my instincts. Somewhere along the way my mind had been defamiliarized. I watched it respond through what I imagined were her eyes, and the mind I knew to be thoughtful, astute, and lively changed color, and it was careless, defensive, and depraved.*

Defeat - de·feat | \ di-'fēt \ *noun* 1: frustration by nullification or by prevention of success. 2 : an overthrow, especially of an army in battle. *It was not in her nature to accept **defeat**, she was the strongest person I had ever met, undeterred by our ridiculous, cross-continental circumstances, unafraid of looking stupid, or trying something new, or being told no. I had come to town for one night and she approached me, asked “Are you from that shitty punk band?” and I replied by asking which one. When I left the next morning she told me to find her number, and I did, from someone in Ohio two days later.*

Defect - de·fect | \ di-'fekt \ *intransitive verb* 1: to forsake one cause, party, or nation for another often because of a change in ideology. 2: to leave one situation often to go over to a rival. *I went back to visit her for my birthday, we spent the week playing hard to get with each other even though I was, obviously, not. We rode bikes around town, sneaking beers and kisses under bridges and softening ourselves in the heat of Tennessee in July. The day I was supposed to leave, she convinced me to call the airline and say I'd been in a car accident, buying me one more sweet day, one day to **defect** from my life and listen to the rain on the roof of her camper.*

Defense - de·fense | \ di-'fen(t)s \ *noun* 1 : capability of resisting attack. 2 : means or method of defending or protecting oneself, one's team, or another. *She told me six months after I met her that she wasn't going anywhere. She called me at midnight from a show in Kansas City, me in*

*my tiny bedroom in the Downtown Eastside. I was moved by how well she knew her mind, that she could say something so decisive and romantic when things were so uncertain and we were so far apart, and when I heard it my **defenses** fell clattering to the ground.*

Defeminize - de·fem·i·nize | \ (,)dē-'fē-mə-,nīz \ *verb* : to divest of feminine qualities or characteristics. *She encouraged my inner bad boy, liked that I could fix things, that I was strong. I went through a subtle readjustment, **defeminized** the self that I showed her and tried, without noticing, to tuck away my softer parts, hide them under a Natural Light and a new pair of overalls.*

Defer - de·fer | \ di-'fər \ *intransitive verb* : to submit to another's wishes, opinion, or governance usually through deference or respect. *I **deferred** to her when she told me she did not want to visit my family, who wanted so badly to have her at their patchwork pie and spaghetti Christmas dinners, wanted to understand the music she liked, who were so impressed by her fearlessness, awed by the exoticism of her slight Southern accent. I **deferred** to her when she told me that she didn't want to meet my friends, in the salty way she did when I couldn't tell if she was joking or not, and I let it go, assuming she would one day come to love them as profoundly as I did.*

Definition - def·i·ni·tion | \ ,de-fə-'ni-shən \ *noun* 1: an explanation of the meaning of a word, phrase, etc. 2 : a clear or perfect example of a person or thing. *Time in Tennessee lost all*

definition, the first time I could remember not having to be anywhere. My life and obligations scuttled away and hid somewhere behind the fog of my fresh love. I spent my days swimming in the creek with her old dog, spent my nights drinking gas station beers around a pallet fire, wrapped up in her jacket, feeling alien, romantic, special.

Deflate - de·flate | \ di-'flāt , dē- \ *transitive verb* 1 : to release air or gas from. 2 : to reduce in size, importance, or effectiveness. *I felt myself **deflate** when she called me from Miami, yelling something into the phone about my ex, telling me she couldn't trust me, and I spent weeks explaining to her that I had nothing to hide, dredging my own heart to understand what I had done wrong. I felt myself, for the first time, put aside the hope of being heard, and simply beg to be allowed back into her favor.*

Deflect - de·flect | \ di-'flekt , dē- \ *transitive verb* : to turn (something) aside especially from a straight course or fixed direction. *I **deflected** the conversation about moving until she told me it was time to shit or get off the pot, and I decided to do it, maybe because I knew she already resented me for the amount of time I had spent deliberating, or maybe because she was threatening to date someone else.*

Deform - de·form | \ di-'fōrm , dē- \ *transitive verb* 1: to spoil the looks of, to disfigure. 2: to mar the character of. 3: to alter the shape of by stress. *I had a new life, we spent our nights making dinner together, watching cartoons, playing music. The pieces of the relationship that seemed to be **deformed** at the beginning smoothed over, the injuries seemed to heal, although some days I wondered if that was only because I was on her ground, and she was never on mine.*

Defrost - de·frost | \ di-'frōst, 'dē-,frōst \ *transitive verb* 1 : to release from a frozen state. 2 : to clear (a window or windshield) with a vehicle's defroster. *We drove through Colorado, slept in Walmart parking lots in the bed of my station wagon, and woke up with the sunrise, clutching coffees while we watched the windshield **defrost**. We found a postcard at a gas station that we liked so much, we decided to buy two and send them to each other. They said “Family of Four, Colorado,” and it was a picture of a couple, a dog, and a truck.*

Deft - \ 'deft \ *adjective* : characterized by facility and skill. *We planned trips together, we drove to the Everglades, to the beach in Charleston, to a cabin in Gatlinburg, but what I loved, what I craved, was the time spent driving, her **deft** handling of the old Nissan Hardbody that pulled to one side, my legs folded up against the dashboard to make room for the dog. We would listen to true crime podcasts, pausing the narrator every so often to speculate on the details, or to discuss where the next coffee stop would be, or to point something out along the side of the road.*

Degenerate - de·gen·er·ate | \ di-'jen-rət , -'je-nə-, dē- \ *adjective* : one that is degenerate : such as a: one degraded from the normal moral standard. b: a sexual pervert. *She didn't want me to get off by myself, like I was stealing something from her, and I felt like a **degenerate**, a creep. One day she got angry because I needed her too much, another day she got angry because I didn't need her enough. She told me that she had never wanted to settle down, but I remembered that she had promised, one week into my first visit, that she would build me a home like he did in the Notebook, and that we would live in the hills and build dirt bikes together.*

Degraded - de·grad·ed | \ di-'grā-dəd , dē- \ *adjective* 1 : reduced far below ordinary standards of civilized life and conduct. 2 : characterized by degeneration of structure or function. *She met someone on vacation, decided to extend the trip from a month to six weeks while her dog slowly died at home with me. I watched him collapse in seizures, gasping for breath while his paws groped the air. I would crouch next to him, my knees in a pool of urine, and whisper desperate words at the top of his head. His seizures came more frequently, his body **degraded**. I took apart the bed frame, and we slept on the floor together, both of us tired and sore.*

Degree - de·gree | \ di-'grē \ *noun* 1 : the extent, measure, or scope of an action, condition, or relation 2 : relative intensity. *When we fought, I asked her not to yell at me, and she told me that*

*she wasn't yelling, that she just spoke with a **degree** of intensity that I wasn't used to. Because I was from the West Coast, because my family was diplomatic and gentle. That if I was going to live here, it would serve me well to learn how to live with this tone.*

Degression - de·gres·sion | \ dē'greshən \ *noun* : a stepping or movement downward : —used chiefly as a correlative of progression. *She left the state while I was out of town, a note on the table said that she needed to take care of herself in the best way she knew how. Our phone calls were chaotic, me panicked, her defensive. She asked me to visit for my birthday, then backpedaled. I asked her why she didn't break up with me, she asked me why I didn't convince her not to. We saw a therapist online, and I wondered what his notes would say about the **degression** of patience, of familiarity between us. I later learned that she had moved in with her new girlfriend.*

Dehisce - de·hisce | \ di-'his \ *intransitive verb* : to split along a natural line. *also* : to discharge contents by so splitting. *My dad came to town so we could play backgammon and work in the garden and go through the motions of being human. One day, I spoke to her on the phone and I hung up, cried on his shoulder, and felt something split, **dehisce**, a cleavage between that morning and that evening. Then my dad and I went for a walk and that was it, a definite ending.*

Deign - \ 'dān \ *intransitive verb* : to condescend reluctantly and with a strong sense of the affront to one's superiority that is involved, to stoop. *She would not **deign** to hear my anger, and so I told her I did not want to hear from her anymore. One day I came home for lunch and she was in the living room with her new girlfriend, and I threw her cymbals out of the door, shaking, grateful that my sunglasses hid my eyes.*

Déjà vu - dé·jà vu | \ ,dā-,zhā-'vü ,-'vü \ *noun* 1 : the illusion of remembering scenes and events when experienced for the first time. 2 : a feeling that one has seen or heard something before. *I went home to Vancouver for my birthday. One night when I was drinking beers on the dark slope of McGill Park, someone told me that an old sweetheart had beat up their girlfriend, and when confronted, simply refused to be accountable, no room for public contrition in their sense of self. It was a record scratch, a moment of **déjà vu**, and I wondered if that was the sweetheart who had taught me that if a person is injured enough, they could do whatever they want to me, and that was how wrongs were righted.*

Deleterious - del·e·te·ri·ous | \ ,de-lə-'tir-ē-əs \ *adjective* : harmful often in a subtle or unexpected way. *I would get angry and then wonder about my own culpability, wonder whether my happy childhood had a **deleterious** effect on my relationships because I felt guilty, then became permissive, then became resentful. I wondered about my right to be angry at all, at a person who might never know how to do anything but protect herself.*

Delicious - de·li·cious | \ di-'li-shəs \ *adjective* : 1: affording great pleasure 2: appealing to one of the bodily senses especially of taste or smell. *I walked home from the bar down the street, wearing my crocs and a pair of soft pants, buzzed, and it had just stopped raining, and the sound of water settling in the trees underscored the darkness. I said something flirtatious to my neighbor and stepped into my house, turned on a Moses Sumney song, and I felt **delicious**, and vital, and alone.*

Deliverance - de·liv·er·ance | \ di-'li-v(ə-)rən(t)s , dē- \ *noun* : 1 : the act of delivering someone or something : the state of being delivered. *especially* : liberation, rescue. *Some days I felt as though I was breaking out of a years-thick pea soup fog, flecked with the moments that I cannot forget because they have names: a wedding, a death, a fight, a trip to Florida. I wondered if the times in between would come back to me, or if they would remain somewhere underneath my conscious memory, a distant alarm. In the meantime, I felt lucky to have been left, to have nights where even my anguish and my fury was entirely my own, and that small act of reclamation was itself a kind of **deliverance**.*

Vienna

Inspired by Lorrie Moore's "How to Be an Other Woman"

You don't remember him before that night at the bar, although you worked together for years. You would split a rotisserie chicken on Wednesdays at the shop, and he shared a plate of root beer ribs with you, the first time you tasted one. He had worked there for too long, even he knew. You liked his style, but you thought he complained too much.

Somehow, he only came into focus that night. You were having a drink with a friend, who convinced you to go dancing at the Astoria. He was there, drunk, spilling his beer and moving his lips against your ear, bobbing his head and closing his eyes whenever the beat picked back up. He had a childlike smile.

That night, you got so drunk you were asking strangers for money, begging drugs off the girls in hats in the bathroom. You were one-upping yourself, acting stupid. Of course you ended up going home with him, surprised even as it happened at the strength of your attraction to one another. Your room was barely bigger than a closet. You slept on a loft bed, to save space, and he scrambled up the ladder, clumsy and excited, almost breaking the railing. You had to duck your head while you were fucking or it would bump against the ceiling.

In the morning, he stole out the side door, bashful and apologetic, hoping not to interact with your many roommates. You kissed him goodbye, bit his lip, he made you feel salty. Later that day, he sent you a text that made your stomach kick, something about how you tasted. You thought carefully about everything you said back to him, composed messages to find the right balance of candid, sordid, and unconcerned. He did not play hard to get.

He loved to eat, he brought you to the Polish deli on Commercial, the Trinidadian diner in Port Moody. He would bring home sweets from the Persian grocery and hand them to you reverentially, watching your mouth move and waiting for your inevitable sounds of delight. He was a hedonist.

He was obsessed with the city, angry at how it had given in to the rich. He raved, told you all he ever wanted to do was paint, because he could be alone, because he didn't have to watch as the show spaces on Hastings closed, as the condos on Main Street went up, and the city filled with creeps riding fixed-gears. Those assholes who would rather look good than feel anything, he said.

You were conscious of his age, conscious of acting like an adult, your posture improved around him, you were careful with your words. It made you feel curated, like everything was a choice, and that made you feel powerful. You went to 1067 for a jazz show, sat on the dirty couches with your knees barely touching, looking at other people. You rode your bikes to Burnaby, taking turns watching each other's legs pump, stuffing your faces with goat roti at the end of the trail. You rode the 253 back along the water, hanging from the hand grips and lurching into each other at every stop, the smell of his sweat setting off sirens in your body.

At work, behind the counter, he would slide his hand up your skirt while you were ringing up customers. You would stay late, not looking at each other, telling everyone you were just going to finish this repair. You would end up in the back, pressed up against a pile of broken bike wheels, your hands unbuttoning his Dickies. You drank expensive beers together and met his friends, without explaining who you were.

He kept changing his mind about leaving the country. His girlfriend was there, but you were here, and his studio, his favourite restaurants, the mountains. He talked about biking home from the bars in Austria, the diesel smoke making him gag. Here he had things to paint, but there he had people to buy them.

You listened carefully when she came up. She had an old cat, she was his age. To you, she sounded boring, mean. You were his hot young girlfriend. You knew you kept him up at night. You wore tight skirts and matched him drink for drink. You liked to disagree with him. You kept his secrets.

You went out for dinner with your aunt, in the restaurant under the YWCA hotel. Every story you told included him, the bike rides in Stanley Park, the night his friend snuck you in to see Ghostface, the fundraiser for the bike shop. She asked if you were seeing anyone, and answered herself when you smiled. You told her about his girlfriend, told her you were staying out of it. You were relieved to talk, after smiling to yourself about it for so long. She wondered out loud if his girlfriend knew yet. She said these things are more obvious than we think.

He didn't like having you at his house. He lived in a woman's basement, and she had a young child, he said, and stupid rules. Once, he stole you inside, rushing you through the shared kitchen and down the narrow stairs. You stayed for an hour, uncomfortable in the temporary space, the teenage boy's bedroom. He only kissed you, quickly, and then ushered you back out into the rain, and took you to the Lido for a beer.

Your coworker dropped by unannounced at 8:30 one morning. When she knocked, he had been sitting next to the kitchen window, and he ducked and ran into your room. She asked if that was who she thought it was, and you told her he had come over for coffee, although you

missed a beat. She raised an eyebrow and left quickly, though any other morning she would have stayed, and you would have ridden to work together.

There was never a routine between you, you were always grasping for the moment in front of you. He explained why he was leaving when you didn't ask, and you explained why he should stay when he didn't offer. You were careful not to beg. One night, while you were coming, you felt a paralyzing stab in your head, and you refused to stop until you were finished, although it was the most blinding pain you had ever felt.

After he left, you only talked over the phone while his girlfriend was at work. You started seeing someone, and he talked about it as if you were some kind of superhero, incapable of jealousy, sure of yourself. You were jealous, and you were unsure.

On New Year's you sent him a message that read "Happy New Year. I wish you were undressing me." He didn't answer for three days.

He came back to the city in the spring, came back to work, you steered clear of each other until one night after a fundraiser, you met under the awning of the Dollar Grocer, and he told you he was already in the doghouse anyway, and put his hand up your dress. He spent the weekend in your bed. He left again shortly after.

He sent you messages about eating rabbit paella, riding his bike to Lisbon, drinking Romanian liquor, he reminded you not to call him during the evening. You told him about the blood sausage borscht your roommate made, that you played pinball at the Cobalt over the weekend, and even though you stopped talking dirty, you always checked the time in Vienna before you called.

The Things I've Lost:

Inspired by Brian Arundel, The Things I've Lost

One dollar, or two weeks' allowance, for stealing a pack of Bubblicious gum from the Safeway on the way to church, and for hiding it in my pants, and when mum recognized the cuboid shape against my leg because I had made the mistake of asking for it, begging for it, before slipping it into my slack sweatpants where it stuck out like a brick in a quilt, she marched me back to the busty blonde at the checkout counter and made me hand it over, a little sweaty, and apologize, and say I wouldn't steal again, ever in my life, until I turned fourteen and decided that theft was the best defense against capitalism.

The sense that theft was the best defense against capitalism, though maybe it's that I would rather avoid the embarrassing conversations, when a security guard asks me why a thirty-something-year-old professional is stealing fifty dollars worth of high-end probiotics from the Whole Foods instead of just getting the fourteen dollar yeast infection medication from Walgreens like the rest of the world, and even though I still want to try, I do not think he will understand, after all it is his job.

My job, after two hours reading a fantasy novel, crouched behind a display at the ceramics booth at the mall, the one that my nice neighbour Cherise hired me to work, and that I couldn't hack because I didn't know how to say, how can I help you, that's a lovely piece isn't it. Because learning how to walk the mall meant being told I was a dyke, that the knock off Adidas tank top my mum had made me stood out more than it blended in, because my school lunch was a curry in an old margarine tub and my mother didn't shave her armpits, so instead of cruising

the mall I would pretend to smoke at the bus stop outside the Eatons until someone called me out for holding a plastic straw between two fingers.

A smoking habit, when I learned that I could sell my eggs to someone so eager to procreate that they would spend eighty thousand dollars on a slim chance at pregnancy. Seventy-five thousand dollars to the agency, for the bottomless miniature bags of Smart Pop in the lobby, and five thousand dollars for me, if I pretended I had never smoked, not one day in my life, and in the end they would take twenty four eggs and end up with no babies, and I would buy a house and realize that I would do anything for five thousand dollars, that I would probably do anything for one thousand dollars and that my morals kick in around the five hundred dollar mark, not that there is anything morally wrong with selling your babies.

Mr. Babies, my first cat, who helped me through what I could call my first divorce, because it went on for so long and I dream of even now, years later, and I want to talk to him every day just to make sure he doesn't hate me, although maybe it would be easier if he did, because I half-left him a dozen times and then I full-left him once, to move two thousand six hundred and fifty-seven miles away, to marry a woman from Ohio and live amongst my political antipodes, and even then he treated her with absolute grace, and if it weren't for Mr. Babies I would have quite possibly walked off the Lion's Gate Bridge, like that man who shattered both of his legs but accidentally lived. But I didn't have to find out because I had an odd-eyed cat to feed, who arrived when I needed her and moved two thousand six hundred and fifty-seven miles with me and then, when I got there, died for no reason, on the kitchen counter, where she knew full well she was not allowed to go, and maybe if I had gotten to the spray bottle in time she

would still be with me today, instead of being a rosebush, half buried under sticks and leaves, in somebody else's yard.

The yardarm, or when the sun was past it, when my boyfriend worked graveyards and would wake me up at eight fifteen with a beer and we would drink until noon and then sleep until three and I would teeter on my bike down Dunsmuir and arrive at the shelter where everyone could smell the booze on my breath and made fun of me for gingerly sipping my coffee over the crossword with my head in my hands until I woke up enough to realize someone was dragging a moped with a chain through it's wheels across the sleeping area, or that someone was overdosing, or that four twenty-something-year-old boys were watching porn around a cracked laptop in full view of the other thirty-six residents and I figured, to save them from wisecracks later, I should go remind them to get their dicks wet in private now.

My dick, when it fell out of the top pocket of my bag in the Chicago airport, and I looked up at the person sitting across from me and then quickly moved two rows over, unsure if I should pretend it didn't happen, or write a letter to Dan Savage so that thousands of people could know how to behave if such a thing were to happen to them.

Thousands of dollars in immigration fees, to live in a country that makes me happy some days, nauseous others, where there are more guns than songbirds and I have to get drug tested to get a job but on the bright side I can sell my eggs to buy a house, and that might be all I've ever wanted.

On Being a Messy Bitch

“She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be - for a woman. And that no one would ever be that version of herself which she sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand. There was only her own mood and whim, and if that was all there was, she decided to turn the naked hand toward it, discover it and let others become as intimate with their own selves as she was.”

- Toni Morrison, *Sula*

For years, I felt as though I would never find someone who understood me. Maybe this was the blameless consequence of being an introverted child with more imagined friends than real. The feeling was insidious, though, and years of longing for an instant connection left me believing that true friendship was something that I would recognize on sight.

Karmin, maybe, had that insight, but I did not. We tell the story of the night we met differently. She tells anyone who will listen: She saw me from across the room. Salt-n-Pepa’s “Shoop” was playing. We were at a party, we were drinking, people were talking, but the connection between us was stronger than the noise. Our eyes locked. We started singing the words as we walked towards each other through the crowd. We traded each line back and forth perfectly. Born to perform together. She knew then that we had something special.

I don’t remember any of that, except that we were drinking. I remember being surprised at the level of interest this stranger showed in me. She was fearless, a kind of social tornado, able to hold a conversation with three people at once. Over the next few weeks, incomprehensibly, she kept calling me. She immediately asked me to play in a band with her, although it seemed to be some kind of pick-up line of hers; she propositioned people with this

idea constantly. While I have never known her to play in less than three bands at a time, to this day I feel privileged to have been chosen.

Karmin reveled in attention, mastered the greasy-sexy look of having woken up on a couch somewhere, and she was a magnet for excitement. If I had compared her to anyone in my past, she stood out in wild contrast. I have spent my life daydreaming of libraries and games of solitaire, but Karmin incited this foreign excitement for life in me. She felt comfortable in every environment I didn't, but she made me feel as though she needed me there alongside her. No one else could have sweet-talked me into performing music I had written on a stage, even in front of fifteen skids who wouldn't remember a thing about it the next morning.

She was dating my boyfriend, that was how we met. He and I had been dating for a few months, casually and tumultuously. We would run into each other at punk shows or at parties, get deliriously drunk and weave back to his messy apartment together. It became a habit. After months of this, he confessed to me that his roommate had asked if we were dating yet, and he had admitted that we were. I accepted that, and only now realize that I hadn't wanted to be the first to acknowledge that I was taking what we had seriously. But when he met Karmin, he disappeared for a week. I was convinced our relationship was over, and when I saw him next, I had rehearsed my anger and hurt for days in my head.

I hold no resentment towards this boyfriend; he was consistent and kind. Throughout the years he made me feel safe to leave, find pleasures where I wanted, and crow or vent as needed upon my return. But those were the early days of our relationship, and while I was still deciding what to expect from him, I braced myself for all kinds of pain. The night I saw him after he met Karmin, we walked a long way together, and he soothed me, convincing me that this woman he

had met was not a threat to our relationship, but someone who had a special talent for making time disappear. She moved from one thrill to the next, and he had ridden along for a few days. He thought that I would like her.

I did like her. She started dating someone new, and I acknowledge that made our friendship grow more easily. In those early days, there was a sweet overtone of flirtation between us, too. While we never wanted anything sexual from each other, there was an intimacy between us that bordered on romance, something that felt thrilling and secret and that can't be shared or explained. We went to parties together but snuck out to sip a beer on my porch, catching up on each other's nights, before walking back to rejoin our friends and pretending we'd never left. We spent whole days watching movies and eating take out in my bed, waking up from afternoon naps with our legs kicked over each other like toddlers. We travelled together, Karmin learning to read the terseness in my voice when I needed a minute alone, coaxing me out of my shell when we made new friends, and reminding me that spending ten dollars on a bedazzled denim vest at a street market is not a moral failure. I, on the other hand, read the maps.

Our band took shape, a goofy labour of love. Born out of a drunken plan to rewrite song lyrics and surprise people at karaoke nights, it took on an irreverent life of its own. We toured as often as we could, playing our friends' musty basements and backyards, sleeping on the benches of the van, and fighting over wet wipes on long, hot drives. That band was a release valve for all of us. Outside of relationships and families and work and rent and groceries we had a place where we could be creative, act stupid, and lift each other up without any thought to how the world was receiving us.

I met someone while we were on tour in Tennessee, and we began a strange cross-continental flirtation. I was still dating the same boyfriend. We had found an easy rhythm and lived on the same block, respecting each other's space, comfortable in each other's company. Meeting this person stirred that up. I was excited by this new relationship, frustrated and confused by Vancouver, and began to consider moving to Tennessee. My attention to him was increasingly divided, and although I was slow to recognize it, our relationship was ending.

I still have a hard time talking about it. That relationship had raised me, in a way. We had been together for six years and it took me almost another one to recognize that it was over. But during that time I hurt him incredibly, spending months at a time in Tennessee, inconsistent in my contact, unable to be honest with myself or with him. While what I was doing technically fit the contract of our relationship, we both knew that this felt different.

While I was in Tennessee, Karmin and my boyfriend slept together. It was another act that, by virtue of omission, technically fit the parameters of our relationships. I had never asked either of them not to. When my boyfriend told me, I told him that it was fine. Karmin called me not long after, and again I said I didn't mind. But as it sat with me, it grew increasingly hurtful. I was angry at both of them. It felt sloppy, unnecessary, and unkind, and I knew that they both could have easily found someone else, someone less precious to me, to spend the night with.

I didn't hear from Karmin for weeks after that. In retrospect, I think she was picking up on my confusion, and unclear on how to move forward, gave me space. I, on the other hand, counted the days she didn't call, each one a strike against her. Increasingly I wanted her to apologize, I wanted her to check in on me. But I was also in a different country, living my own

unavailable fantasy. There was no moment of reconnection that we could lean on, no confessional late night conversation to air our muddy feelings and leave them behind.

Finally, we spoke. I reached a breaking point with my anger, and called her one night from a restaurant patio, asking her to talk. I told her how I felt, told her I was hurt by her silence, that it had amplified the careless choice into an injury. We rebounded. When I came home shortly after, we dove back into our friendship. I leaned on her more than ever as my relationship in Vancouver unraveled under my own guilt-fed indecision. She reminded me of who I was and encouraged me to stick to my choices, even when they led to me moving across the country, away from her.

I am not proud to say that in leaving that relationship, I worked hard to consider his faults, unwilling to allow that things had just come to a natural end between us. While there had been a few other minor betrayals on both of our parts, I used the one between him and Karmin as a catalyst, as leverage to extricate myself on the side of good. Of course this was not the case. I had begun leaving him months before that happened. And truthfully, I had forgiven them both shortly after. But if I told the story to a stranger, the guilty parties were obvious. So I held onto that petty justification.

She forgave me this, too. Not a stranger to the complicated independence of emotion from intention, Karmin made space for me to talk through all of this, and in turn made it clear to me that she loved me, and valued our friendship above it. She had her own reasons, her own messy habits, built from her own tangled motivations.

That wasn't, and won't be our only rift. I am a tyrant, she is a trainwreck, and our natures baffle one another. Yet through her I learned that friendship isn't inherent

understanding, but choosing to return even when we don't understand. When I moved to Tennessee, I was afraid that Karmin would move on. But the melodrama of our history has cooled and reformed. She is there, on the phone or in person, to hear about my blunders and my victories, and I have learned to love the unpredictable charm of her life. She is the reason that Vancouver still feels like a home to me. We are as messy as ever, and we don't mind cleaning each other up.

Gay Shit

1. There was something queer about our family. People could smell it on my sibling and I on our first day at school, the thrill of a new student tempered by the distinct sense of something heretical. It was something our classmates had to look for. Not the burden of a visible otherness, but the strain of an ill-fit, like we were a shirt buttoned improperly, all the right elements and still something didn't work. It took them time to develop the vocabulary for their suspicions. Sometimes it was circuitous, something about our mother's body hair. Sometimes, we were just dykes.

Our family was close. We cooked all of our meals at home, rarely had guests over after lunch, and before dinner. We tired of company quickly, a group of introverts who understood the benefits of time alone together. When I read *Fun Home*, there was a tiny piece of us I found in there, an anxious, particular, self-defined family. Every night before bed, my sibling would ask if they were going to throw up, a reflexive question with a predictable answer. At the same time, and again in the middle of the night, my dad would be checking the locks on all the doors, the knobs on all the elements of the stove. My mother had ground her teeth flat, and slept in a mouth guard so she slurred her speech when we woke her up. I wonder if our anxious habits were hereditary, if I bit my nails and tapped my feet because my father did, or if they were each, individually, the result of feeling ill at ease in the world. Maybe the safety we felt together made every other space feel filled with peril.

It took me months to realize that our new next-door neighbor was not allowed into our house. My mother wondered if it was because of our bumper sticker, which said, in purple letters, "I'm religious and Pro-Choice." We played in the street, or in her basement, and I now

imagine her beautiful mother watching us tensely from the top of the stairs, although I am sure I am superimposing that detail.

My sibling came home from school crying many times. When I look at pictures of them now I am not surprised. Buttoned up to the neck in white shirts, clunky buckled shoes, they shouldered a physical discomfort when we moved to that town and didn't put it down until they left, seven years later. They seemed not to have found a body that fit, and our classmates, predatory in groups as children often are, noticed. My sibling retreated, happier babysitting preverbal children than they were with their peers, who might, at any second, say something cruel.

For a while, my parents came to our school at lunch when their days off lined up, and spun skipping ropes, teaching the girls in my class double dutch. It was at once wholesome and fey, my father standing over six feet tall, bobbing his head to the beat of our feet. My mother, in a *No Nukes* t-shirt and unshaven armpits, counting us in. As an adult, I would often describe my parents as the gayest straight couple I knew.

The term *PC* floated into my consciousness, a sort of catch-all for the kind of social catastrophe we were. So what we were vegetarians, a boy told me as we lined up for school pictures in the fifth grade, it didn't mean we were better than everyone else. I was embarrassed by the lentil mush that I brought to school in old margarine tubs.

I played mini-golf with my classmate and when we finished, we chose a blue best friends necklace from the prize case, two halves of a blue plastic heart on a slippery polyester string. She told me not to wear it at school, and I remember her struggling to explain to me how something this special should be kept a secret, and I assented. I understood that I was worth loving. But I understood, too, the stratification of the playground.

I did not accept my otherness gracefully. I daydreamed about all of my classmates dying and me, the lone survivor, emerging as some kind of hero, spared for my unique value, by god, maybe, or an invading army. I daydreamed about peeling my skin off and revealing a more blonde, less freckled beauty, somehow imagining that my discomfort stemmed from being not Aryan enough. Worse than this, I was a bully. My only friend, someone whose quiet loyalty I took for granted, bore a steady unkindness at my hands. I pushed her and pulled her to get what I wanted, assuming she didn't know her own mind, and in response she went limp, combining self-defense with concession.

I practiced calling things *gay*, worrying that not saying it would doom me to becoming. Thinking that surely my classmates would notice that if I couldn't use it as an insult, there was one obvious conclusion. But saying it was worse. It stood out in my sentences like I had choked out a frog, more recognizably uncomfortable in its presence than in its absence.

In school I felt ungainly, smelly, huge. In my twenties, listening to a Kimya Dawson song, I recognized that I *had* felt too large, in my smaller than average body. I hunched my shoulders, hoping to erase myself even while I hoped to stand out. When I could, I stayed inside during recess. I felt like I was ruining something perfect, a monolith of suburban cleanliness that was interrupted by my undefinable otherness.

I did not notice, then, the otherness of those around me. The whiff of queerness drifted off of other students too, although I was fixated on my own. I did not consider my best friend's brownness, in a sea of blonde, how she, too, stood beside me practicing words that she hoped would help her feel less visible. I remember noticing poverty in that classroom, but not considering a burden that could touch my own.

Sometimes I wonder if the hostility I remember was real, if we received any special attention or just happened to be hit by the bouncing ball of accidental unkindness that knocks around any classroom, any space full of people who cannot yet consider the full impact of the words they have just learned. I wonder if we were popular, admired for our difference, but so defensive that we never noticed. I think about that Miranda July story in *No One Belongs Here More Than You*, where everyone who ever hurt her feelings shows up and apologizes, and I imagine how an adult would articulate a hurt they caused, by accident, at nine years old. I wonder if those people remember us, how they remember us, or if we are completely forgotten, a memory never once reinforced by recall.

2. My favorite ex-boyfriend once said, while describing me to his friends, “I didn’t know until now that what I needed all this time was a *boyfriend*.” I don’t remember why he said it, I might have just fixed a flat on his bicycle, or replaced the broken window on his bedroom door. I remember smiling, the pride that I felt at having been recognized.

When I asked him out for a drink, he later told me, he had been shocked, assuming that I was a lesbian. It was something other men had remarked on before, confused as to why a woman with such short hair would be looking at them so salaciously. I had aligned myself with queerness on a cultural level. Or rather, after coming out as a teenager, I had muddled through life until I moved to Vancouver and started working as a bike mechanic, and that is where I discovered Queerness. There, I found people that attracted me. People that I took to with a mess of wanting and wanting to be.

I wondered later if my sexual orientation was that bike shop, that space and time that called out to me in a way I had never been called out to before. It was messy, filthy in fact, we ate off the work benches and drank coffee out of blackened mugs. We hosted debaucherous parties, made out in the work truck in the parking lot, shared clothes and lived together.

The concentric circles around that space introduced me to more people, and I learned the language of queerness that spoke to me in stick and poke tattoos and permed mullets. It was a trend. How we noticed one another on the street was fashion and function, it identified us politically and sexually. Who I had sex with had everything and nothing to do with it. For most of my friends, gender was not an enormous consideration in their partnerships. That was, maybe, the center of it. Queerness, in that moment, felt like something that didn’t ask, or care, a kind of art or dress or life.

I had queer imposter syndrome. I wasn't *gay* gay, meaning, maybe, no gold star, or that I was an undiscerning slut, or maybe that men were unshakeable from my sexual fantasies. I wanted to be noticed by butch women, and I wondered if that made me narrow-minded, if it was some kind of internalized self-hatred. I worried that my queer partners found me too straight, and my straight partners found me too queer. That wasn't quite it... I worried, in queer spaces, that I was too straight. And worried, in straight spaces, that I was too queer.

Who was it that I imagined would decide? I dated a tall, broad-shouldered woman who always wore expensive work boots and once left a rose on my doorstep. I imagined the scales of queer identity to be held by someone who looks like her. Gay, clean, romantic. Probably wanted the best for me, a little too intense. I caught my style shifting with relationships. People mistook one partner and I for sisters all the time, maybe because of the way our wardrobes began to bleed together. I toughened and softened, molting with the seasons.

As I frantically tried to work out the equation, the interplay of orientation and presentation, I became fluent in two languages. Maybe it was more, it was straight femme, straight butch, queer femme, queer butch. I traveled, trying on different hats in different cities, a coquettish weekend with a German man in New York, fixing a roof with a woman in Arizona, ballgowns at the opera with a girlfriend in Vancouver. I never could choose a favorite.

For my twenty-first birthday, my partner threw me a surprise party and made me a card which now hangs on the inside of my bathroom door, facing the toilet. It says "Don't you wish we had what these guys have? For real dicks. Happy birthday Al. I love you." The letters are stamped around a Tom of Finland illustration, two men in leather caps and jackets pressed together, their outrageous bulges touching, their faces inches apart.

There is a nebulous celebration of otherness in the word *queer*, and even while I reprimanded myself for not knowing, I had to remind myself that I was allowed to not know. That card is one strange quarter of me. Some days I see myself in it, and some days I don't. I imagine my houseguests stepping into the bathroom and wondering what it means, who it came from, as the edges curl from age and humidity.

3. My niece decided to change her name at six, and her new name sounded so made up that I laughed about it with my friends. I knew countless people who had changed their names. Some of them had cute nicknames that took over so completely that we couldn't remember the old name. Some of them changed their names as they claimed a gender identity, putting the old names to bed with determination and mettle. For some a last name became a first, almost thoughtlessly.

My sibling did not push back, but gently learned my niece's new name. Soon her friends knew her as such, and her grandparents. I was the last to get used to it, and I had never seen her so gracefully assertive as when I used her old name a full year after it had changed. She smiled at me and said "Who is that?"

When she changed her pronouns I felt old, having gone through this mental correction with friends but feeling challenged by this one. My parents, the brave radicals I had always looked up to, probably felt older, wondering if it was too soon to allow her to decide, if we had all set a strange example. Her tiny, petulant face always floated into view as I read the news about trans bathroom laws, permitting teachers to ignore pronouns, excluding trans children from school sports.

My sibling took her to a psychologist recently. She is hyperactive, demands an enormous amount of attention and energy. The psychologist and my niece talked about gender, and a week later he called my sibling to give the report. Yes, hyperactive, he said. But on the question of gender, there is nothing to report. My niece, he said, knows her gender perfectly. There is no dysphoria, only total clarity.

Triptych

Bronwynn and I lived on an island that took two ferry rides to reach, an island where people took their boats to the grocery store and the high schoolers went to class across the water every morning. “Shaped like a dick, full of dykes” is how people described that island, or maybe that was the next one I moved to.

Sandy was in Kosovo for the summer, and we were in charge of her gangling, art-teacher house. The walls were iridescent, textured, she used to paint them when she was angry, a friend told us. The top floor looked out over Heriot Bay and the ferry that left twice a day. We both got jobs at the grocery store down the block, and we learned how to drink like adults, in the daytime on a patio, unhurried, hoping someone would see how comfortable we looked. On Canada Day we borrowed our neighbour’s canoe and, tipsy, cried at the phosphorescence below us and the fireworks above.

Bronwynn had faded out of her girlfriend’s life after she met me. Even to my inexperienced eyes I saw that I was a step in a pattern, but I was too flattered by her attention, my first girlfriend, whose head fit under my chin and who wrote weird poetry in spiky letters on every surface. She was the incense-burning kind of lesbian, she wore patchwork pants and baked weed into cakes. When I heard about Sandy’s house sit we jumped on it, because the myth of island life was too alluring to say no to. I wanted to learn how to forget what time it was. I wanted to make art out of driftwood. I believed I could be a person who just went with the flow.

Bronwynn walked around the property barefoot, and if she felt the oyster shells, the blackberry thorns, she never let on. She lay on the grass for hours at a time, playing guitar, probably, or writing. She made forts in the house. I could not leave dirty dishes in the sink though, and the one day I tried to go into work, hallucinations still tracing the edges of my vision, I knew would be my last. My favourite room in Sandy's house was the living room, where a tapestry of books were organized by colour, and I knew that we could not make a mess of it because that was Sandy's art, and it was not up for discussion.

When Bronwynn started sneaking out to someone else's house at night, I threw the phone receiver at her, and she told me she had never wanted to be tied down. When I ran into the other person at Rebecca Spit, she told me I was being morally superior, that I would find myself in a similar situation one day. I told her to go fuck herself, that I knew how to treat people.

Of course I have been every one of those three people many times over. I swore I would stop moving to islands with girlfriends, but maybe Tennessee is its own kind of island.

For my twenty-first birthday, my girlfriend Charlie threw me a surprise party and made me a card which now hangs on the inside of my bathroom door, facing the toilet. It says "Don't you wish we had what these guys have? For real dicks. Happy birthday Al. I love you." The letters are stamped around a Tom of Finland illustration, two men in leather caps and jackets pressed together, their outrageous bulges touching, their faces inches apart.

I get the uncomfortable urge to explain it to my house guests. I imagine them stepping into the bathroom and wondering what it means, who it came from. It is art made of art, made during the whimpering last months of a childish relationship, made by someone whose gender

identity I later realized was waving to me from that birthday card. It was a joke, but it was something of a misunderstanding as well.

When I met Charlie, I couldn't get my words straight. I was shy, I mumbled, I was new to the city. I found them working at a community bike shop, this messy, punk rock space that I knew instantly I wanted to belong to. They were cool. They dressed in leather jackets and canvas pants, they had big curly hair undercut at the bottom, always looking like a sixteen-year-old boy from the Outsiders. We started dating cautiously, I wasn't sure what this person wanted and they weren't in a rush to let me in. We flirted with other people at parties, competing, in a way, for some kind of spotlight we had both imagined. "Making out is like a handshake," they once told me, shrugging. We raced to prove to one another who cared the least.

Charlie's mother, a chaotic white-haired woman in her late forties, owned a vintage store up the hill on Main street. We would pop in to visit her every few weeks, browsing through piles of jean jackets and silk slippers. I bought my first pair of cowboy boots from her, black leather with white stitching. They are sitting at my back door now, resoled and patched, and I sometimes wear them when I want to feel edgy while weeding my garden.

Charlie's world was mine to borrow, and I did. I had come from a Value Village background, my mother wore recycled fleece vests and practical running shoes. Charlie's world was striking, it was visual, it was edgy. They took photos of Vancouver's back alleys, double exposures of our beautiful friends in front of tombstones, dumpsters. They introduced me to new wave music, only ever played it on vinyl, they dressed me up for dance parties, pillaged their mother's basement on my behalf.

We dated for a year or so, a year during which I burned through two jobs and three houses. We spent two months living on a tiny island, playing canasta and trying to coax our

friends into braving the ferry ride to come drink with us, to come shoot pellet guns at cans and take mushrooms on the porch overlooking the ocean. We were new to ourselves, trying things on, feeling out what excited us, what bored us, what scared us.

Charlie and I broke up on an August afternoon in Maclean Park, by mutual agreement. I had just gotten back from Montreal, and we weren't as excited to see each other as we could have been. Charlie had been drinking, trying to date other people. I had been making art, trying to spend time alone. We weren't angry about it, not for a few months.

By then I worked at the bike shop. I walked around with a line of grease etched into the inside of my pointer finger. Everything I owned was filthy, stained with WD40 and dirt, and I felt like a bad boy, unstoppable and sexy. But there was some middle ground I was missing, I wanted Rosie the Riveter, some lipstick with my coveralls. Without the easy access to Charlie's trunks of newsboy clothes, I began to play around with a new look.

When I started wearing skirts and when Charlie got sober, they saw me at a party and asked me if I liked the person that I had become. I did. I didn't understand the accusation in the question, but I think, now, that they were shocked to see me become myself, and not them.

When I was twenty-eight, I spent a summer staying in a friend's walk-in closet in Brooklyn, and I met a forty-seven year old man who owned a bookstore, and we started sleeping together. I haven't seen him in years, and we are not friends. It took me some time to realize the resentment I had for him, because it took me some time to realize that what he had wanted from me had nothing to do with me at all.

The summer that I was twenty-eight, I introduced myself to Aaron at his bookstore. He was a friend of a friend. He invited me to meet him later that night for coffee at the 7th Avenue

Donuts and Diner. We spent the night walking around Park Slope. He pointed out the apartment where Silvia Federici lived, walked me past a long-closed bar that his friends snuck into once a week to cook food together, bought me his favourite Jamaican Patty from a bodega on Flatbush.

He lived on the fifth floor of an apartment building near 7th Avenue Station. Spending time with him reminded me of being a teenager, before drinking was the obvious way to fast-forward myself into someone's bed. I don't know that I was immediately attracted to him, but I was excited by his curated life. It felt like he was living for the story he would write later, and it was beautiful, and grimy, and nostalgic. We smoked out of his window and flipped through our mental rolodexes of friends, trying to outline where our lives crossed over. When it was five am and he invited me to sleep in his bed, we didn't fuck, we just lay next to each other for hours, wide awake, soaked with sexual tension.

That month we met up every few days. He would double me on his bike around town, an awful, tender way to travel. I met him at his studio, a strange, institutional building in the West Village, maybe, although I could never orient myself without the mountains. I dropped him off at work one day, and we stood in a doorway around the corner, unclear on how to say goodbye. He said "You look good, in your jumpsuit, with your fucked up teeth." I wrote it down.

Two months later, in North Carolina, I told him I didn't want a romance with him anymore. I was halfway through a motorcycle trip to New Orleans, and he had joined in to hitch a ride to Pensacola. He was hurt, which I understand, even now that I have sympathy for my younger self. But the weight of his forty-seven year old feelings were more than my twenty-seven-year old heart could hold space for without shouldering. I felt guilty for meeting him there, guilty for not explaining myself better. He told me that he had always dreamed of being ridden around the country on a motorcycle by a girlfriend. He had imagined us drinking coffee

in Southern diners and fighting off bigots who in truth would have no reason to notice us. He felt entitled to my part in that story.

When we got to Pensacola, we couldn't look at each other. After three weeks of highway riding, I was exhausted, but he insisted that I leave the next morning, that if I needed a day of rest, it wouldn't be at his expense. When we parted ways, I wanted to pin a note to my jacket: *If I crash, if I die because I am tired and I glide into the next lane and a semi smears me across the I-10, find this man. He would not let me sleep.* I screamed into my helmet all the way to New Orleans.

Over the years that followed I pieced him together in a more nuanced light. While he had built a public image as someone who lived to consider his place in the world, the private experiences of him that whispered around our community were experiences of a man who did not know what self-scrutiny was, a man intent on deflecting every mirror pointed at him.

But then again, maybe I found that story because I looked for it. Maybe I used our microcosm of a relationship to make sense of every moment that I felt manipulated, every relationship I walked away from feeling shrunken and hollow, only to realize that the problem had only been that I was not the shape that someone had expected. Maybe both of us were shit on that motorcycle trip, or maybe neither of us were. Maybe we were just both traveling with a person who was not really there.

Desert

Texas:

My memories of this time are held together by a handful of photographs. I thought they were artistic, close-ups of my cowboy boots or a half-smoked cigarette. In retrospect I wish I had one or two pictures of me and that boyfriend, smiling at the camera with the desert behind us, just for reference.

From San Bernardino to Las Cruces, we rode in an open boxcar with a square wheel. At first, it was too romantic to complain about the incessant rocking, and a stroke of luck that we had a roof over our heads. I had bought a winter jacket and a pair of rain pants at the Goodwill in Berkeley before we left, but otherwise I wasn't dressed for February in the desert. It was freezing at night, and the wind cut into the corner where we sat.

That boyfriend wanted to teach me things, he was insecure, and a planner. We had met at a protest, and I travelled to California to see him again. We spent a couple days fooling around in my friend's attic, and he asked me to come with him to Austin. I had the week off school, and good grace with my teachers. He knew so much about freight trains, I took him at his word, practicing the lingo in my head. No small part of me wondered if this would be my only chance to learn how to ride them. I took advantage of his eagerness.

The first morning we woke up in that train car, we were somewhere in Western Arizona. We were far enough from the Interstate that we couldn't see it, although now I wonder if it was on our right, and we could only look left. I remember leaning out of the doors every time we took a turn, trying to see how long the train was, wondering if there were other people riding somewhere up the line. After the first day, the steady humping of the bad wheel started to wear us out. Somewhere there is a video of me, lying on a piece of cardboard on the floor of the

boxcar. The room is shaking, I am shaking, my leg muscles too tired to keep moving with the vehicle. Our backpacks would slowly wiggle across the floor if we didn't hold onto them, as if they were trying to get out of the open door, give their bodies a rest.

We hitchhiked into El Paso, thinking it was too big, too dangerous of a city to ride through. A rust red fence ran South of the highway, sixteen feet high. We got dropped off at a McDonald's, hoping to look up the train yard on the cellphone we shared. We may not have gone in, just lurked on the sidewalk trying to pick up a wifi signal, waiting for the sky to darken, too cheap for a hamburger and fries. When we finally made it to the trainyard, it was late at night. The border, maybe five hundred feet away, made my casual trespass feel felonious. That boyfriend talked about drug runners and border guards, told me to wait at the bus stop while he looked for a break in the fence.

There was only one, an enormous gash in the chain link, next to the only greenery in sight. It was full of garbage, and I was sure a yard worker would find us within the hour. We waited for a train to come. I dozed, waking up in starts to dreams of catastrophe, arrest, deportation. At five in the morning a row of grainer cars lurched in front of us, and we ran from our thorny hideout, ducking low as if that would hide us from a passerby.

We were three cars apart, and the train heaved out of the yard, then reversed back in, then left, returned again, slamming back into itself with every shift in direction. The sky lightened. My red backpack was stuffed into the V at the base of the grainer car, my body stuffed in a hole behind it, watching the tracks pass below me through the frame of the car. I imagined my backpack to be a beacon, an unmistakable X over my hiding spot. I imagined a shootout, handcuffs.

The train stopped for a moment, back in the yard for a third time. I ran three cars up, leaving my backpack behind. That boyfriend yanked me up to his car, hissing at me that I would be spotted. I told him I wanted to hitchhike. The train left the yard again.

That time we didn't change directions, just picked up speed as we slid past the border fence. We slid through low-lying neighborhoods, incised by that rust-colored fence. At a slow corner, I hopped off that boyfriend's car, counted three, and grabbed the ladder that hung down from the grainer that held my backpack. I fell before I could lift myself up, and my knees dragged along the choppy gravel for a few seconds that I would dream of for years. Later, that boyfriend would tell me he thought I had died, been sucked into the driving wheels of the train, and that he had wondered what he would do, when with every second he was leaving my cloven body farther behind him.

That night, the train pulled over into a side track, and we peeked up the line and watched a van take away the conductors, leaving us alone with the train. We didn't know where we were, had no way of knowing. There were low mountains in the distance. Marfa? We climbed onto the roofs of our grainers, speaking at full volume for the first time in days. We felt abandoned, giddy.

We walked to the far end of the train, and found what that boyfriend called a cadillac: a grainer with a flat porch and a railing, to shield us from the wind and from sight. Someone had left a sleeping bag laid out on the floor. Twenty six hours later I would wake up in that sleeping bag with a flashlight in my eyes, a border guard shouting at me in Spanish. I would show him my passport and he would relax, radio the conductor to ask if we could stay. The conductor would hem and haw, and eventually radio back, saying it probably wasn't a good idea. We would pack our bags at a leisurely pace, walk to the highway, and stick out our thumbs.

Osoyoos:

Osoyoos sits in the northernmost point of desert on the continent, the cowlick of the Sonoran desert, or the Nk'Mip, or the Northwest Basin, depending on who you ask. The winters are cold, snow falls and crusts like creme brulee, and the cloud cover hangs low. There are three weeks of explosive green in the spring, and then everything dries, the mountains a rolodex of browns. The summers are hot, Californian, there are rattlesnakes. Tiny prickly pears get caught in shoelaces, and clusters of quail scuttle from bush to bush.