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Body Will

Kathy Ryan Hoover

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BODY *will*

Katty Ryan Hoover



Body 1 (Self-portrait)

We are mountains. When we women offer our experiences as our truth, all the maps change. There are new mountains. That's what I want—to hear you erupting. You Mt. St. Helens who don't know the power in you—I want to hear you. . . If we don't tell our truth, who will?

—Ursula K. LeGuin

Body Will

Love's mysteries in souls do grow
But yet the body is his book.

—John Donne, *"The Exstasy"*

This is a story about bodies, more specifically my experience of my own body. Bodies do not exist without our experiencing them, they are, in fact, alive with us. Bodies are variable, fallible, lovely. Bodies are big, small, angular, soft or hard. With our bodies, we breathe, eat, stretch, make love and war. Our bodies, in many senses, are our selves.

Philosophers today debate over the significance of the body and its relationship to our mind, and, possibly, our soul. Most agree that the rise of the capitalist state has led to the objectivity concerning what our bodies can *do*, and this severance has hurt us deeply. Without being connected to our bodies, we risk disorder, violence, even death. Only a healthy relationship, one based on reverence and dialogue, can make us reconnected and bring us home. Our bodies will do as we will.

I . Birth and the Mother

Birth and the Mother: Who Comes First

One is born, the other births. A push, more pushes, the release. A baby, then a child, a mother.

My mother doesn't believe me, but I swear I can remember my birth, or at least the moment right afterward. It might have come to me in a dream, later, but what reason do I have to believe it wasn't a flashback, a memory? I am lying in someone's arms, feeling warm, relieved, and there is the doctor, white coat, arms outstretched, smiling down on me. His teeth, I remember, were a little yellow.

My mother chose a male obstetrician far away, after she heard from someone who worked for the male obstetrician in town who said my mother better not dare come in his office, because Amanda, who was my father's first wife and also childless, was his friend. Besides, my mother wanted to have me naturally, and the male obstetrician in town didn't do that. Instead, my mother drove ninety miles every week toward the end, lying, like routine, on a cold vinyl bed for another male obstetrician to inspect me.

Recently, I became interested in midwives, and decided if I ever become pregnant on accident I will have the baby in my own home by a woman, a personal delivery. Apparently, midwifery in the truest sense, I mean where the midwife has her own tools and doesn't rely on any doctor except in an emergency, is a dying breed. One midwife who lives near me invited me over, and I went without hesitation. The home was on two acres of an old farm, and when I pulled my car into the driveway she was already waiting. Inside, there were large plush couches over solid wood floors, and I sat across from her as she adjusted a heating pad for her back.

"I hope you don't mind if I lie down," she said. "I'm just getting so old now. I'm only doing one birth every couple of months. In the past, I've done hundreds in one year."

When I ask her what draws her to birthing as a profession, she says it is something she got into on accident.

"My friend asked me to help her with her first child, and I just started teaching myself techniques. Soon I got good at it, and I didn't want to stop. It is special, really, that people let you share in such a memorable process."



Children 1 (Gallilean Home, orphanage for children of imprisoned mothers)

When people talk of births as being special, I wonder if my mother thought of it as special at the time, even with all that pain and without any anesthetic. Or, is that perspective something that comes with time, after the blood and the afterbirth are wiped clean of the body and the baby, and philosophy is all that is left? It turns out I haven't gotten pregnant, but one of my friends, who is a male, has a girlfriend who has. Because their relationship is failing, they're debating over whether or not to keep the baby. When he asks me for advice, I say it's important to separate the baby from the mother, that sometimes you have to think about what's best for one and not the other. When I ask my own mother what she thinks, she says pregnancy is always independent of the man, that once the birth is near, separation is inevitable. It is *she*, she says, who will have to decide.

I tell my friend he needs to talk to his girlfriend, because he's leaning toward keeping it and she toward not. I say tell her you know it's her body but that she'll be a good mother, and besides, families are different now. Children are different now. Even if you can't work out things together, you should do what's right, first.





Children 2 (Kenya)

My Aunt Who Loves Egypt

When she married into the family, my mother warned us she was refined and cultured, had a proper upbringing. A true *Southern Belle*, but of the new breed; she had an executive career, a sleek black Lexus parked in a contemporary home, an appreciation for the arts, modern photographers like Leibovitz and Mann, and knew the proper gift etiquette for a gay wedding.

She kept her own name, because, she says, she promised her father she would pass it down before he took his own life in the eighties. Now that I know her, I think that's an excuse, that she would have done it anyway.

She never wanted kids, and so the pregnancy a year later took us all by surprise. She said they had both decided, *independently*, to keep it. The rules would be simple: no Barbies, no pink, call me *Kim* not *Mom*.

Now, five years later, I watch the daughter, always smiley—tonight dressed in blue jeans and a sweater with a felt horse on the front, crawl into the broad lap of my aunt. My aunt smooths her jet black bowl cut hair around her face.

Earlier, amidst an elaborate southern meal—fried okra, sweet potato casserole, homemade biscuits so light they turned to hot air in the mouth—my aunt had defended the word *feminist*, defending me really, in the context of female doctors. It began when my mother had announced with an unusual amount of surprise that her new neighbor was a cardiologist. A *female* cardiologist, she said, glancing around the table for a response. I had remained quiet except to point out that my mother didn't trust female doctors, simply because, she reasoned, she had never been to one before. My aunt perpetuated the conversation until my mother finally went silent, then rolled her eyes and took a sip of her wine, slowly.

"I'm thinking of taking Breezy to Egypt," she says now. "I'm fascinated with the country, and they've just uncovered the tombs of Ramses' sons." I nod in approval. "They suspect he has hundreds of them, and they've only unearthed fifty. It's the most amazing discovery in years—every section completely untouched, full of stone warriors, pottery, jewelry." She pauses. "He had so many sons, she



Mother 1 (Kenya)

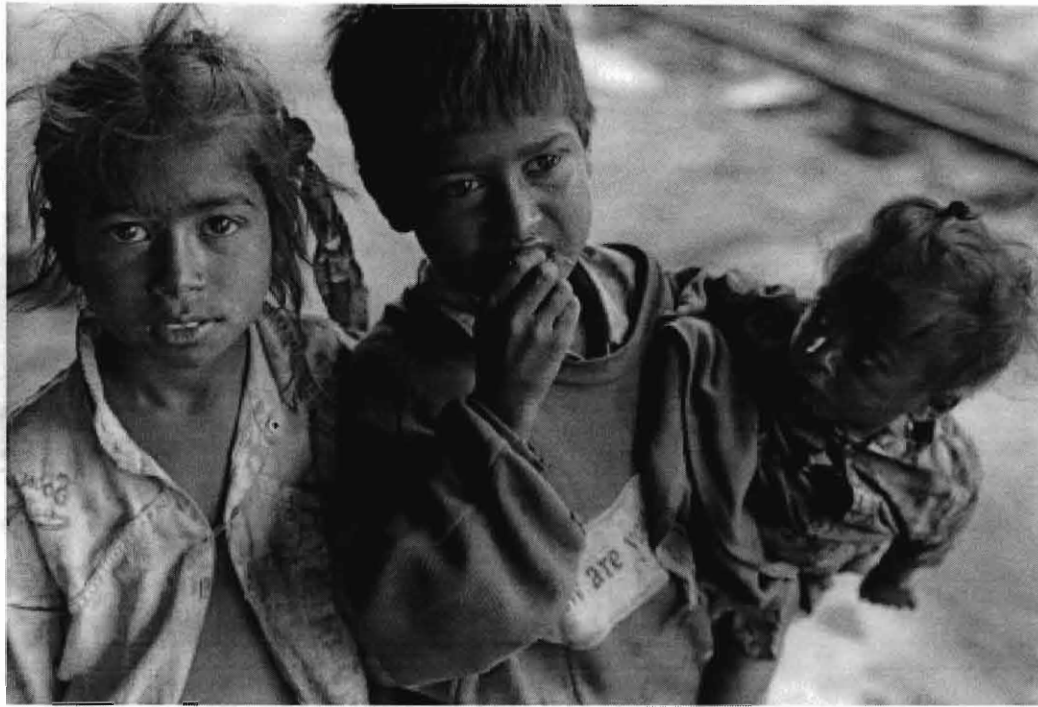
says, and looks at me intently. Miles after miles of an intricate maze of rooms, and each son has his own."

I know that during the day my aunt wears suits, defends cigarettes, insists the most profitable company is itself a contributor to the anti-smoking campaign. I imagine her at work, in her marbled office, legs crossed, making the case that tobacco isn't scientifically linked to cancer. I wonder if she believes what she says, or how she "What do you think, Breezy?" she says and turns Breezy's face to hers. She smiles and wriggles free of her mother's hold, hops off her lap and runs away without another word.

Once, in a four-star restaurant in Boston, my aunt sat down to an appetizer of oysters on the half shell, and in the first bite, clamped right down on a genuine salt water pearl. The restaurant was so excited they let her keep it, and because she had it set in white gold, she sometimes wears it on her neck. Tonight is one of those times, and it dangles above where her V-neck splits.

"You know," she says, looking back at me, "I can't imagine what it's like to be one of four-hundred sons," and I can't either, so instead I imagine each one lying flat beneath the ground, tucked beside all the necessities and pleasures of his own world, his own life a simple treasure, just waiting to be discovered.





Children 2 (India)

Untitled Canvases

My mother is an artis. Every six months you'll see her working, tearing down spaces from room to room before she builds again, moving in Italian-made armoires, plush couches, reframed oil canvases. She turns old wall into new walls and new walls into old. Sponging and layering ragging. She used to decorate me, too, painting my face beyond its youthful hues. Sliding me into velvet, ribbons and purple. When she could do no more, she took me to professionals. They streaked my brown curls icy blonde and colored my fingertips "Toast of New York." Drew aesthetic arches before they ripped the hair beneath my brows. Removed my scars and patted my face, left it more beautiful than when they started, like the deco sun-lit dens my mother makes from ugly, closed-in attics.



Mother 2 (China)

The Scar

It was the first time I tried to fly. At some point, don't we all? I had pushed two sofa chairs arm to arm, leaning my hips against each velour-covered side, pushing my weight into until the two touched. My mother had her back turned, involved in a project beneath her, focused on the floor in front of her. I can't remember now what she was doing—chipping away old tile, gluing a broken vase, tying ribbons to a frame, maybe—something under the pretense of remodeling the house, an endeavor she took on no short of three times a year.

And so she couldn't have stopped me, really, when I climbed atop my soft mountain, one foot on each head rest, and leapt—forward, near the cement stair, which separated the living room from the dining room. The dining room itself was elevated like a crown, a glass table, expensive silverware, delicate china, all of which went unused until each Christmas, when I watched the elders arrange them gingerly before dinner.

I hit it hard, one millimeter, the doctor, would say, from blinding me.

Afterwards, I knew that something had gone wrong, and the pain I felt I don't remember as a consequence of the cut. My mother whisked me up, crying, carried me through the elevated dining room and stepped down on the other side into the kitchen, set me on the island and pushed a dish rag to my head. She was crying, and I know she called someone, my father, maybe, because he wasn't home, or the doctor. Whoever it was calmed her enough that she left for a moment, the towel smelling of spaghetti turning redder with my blood, and returned with something closed in her hand. She eased me into a reclined position on the island, and almost like a surgeon, studied my eye beneath the fluorescent lights.

"It's a butterfly," she said, "and I think it'll work, for now, at least."

Beneath my closed eye I imagined the butterfly on my face, my mother pushing the warm wings across my eyelid to my temple. Had she killed it, caught it in a net, suffocated it in a glass jar?

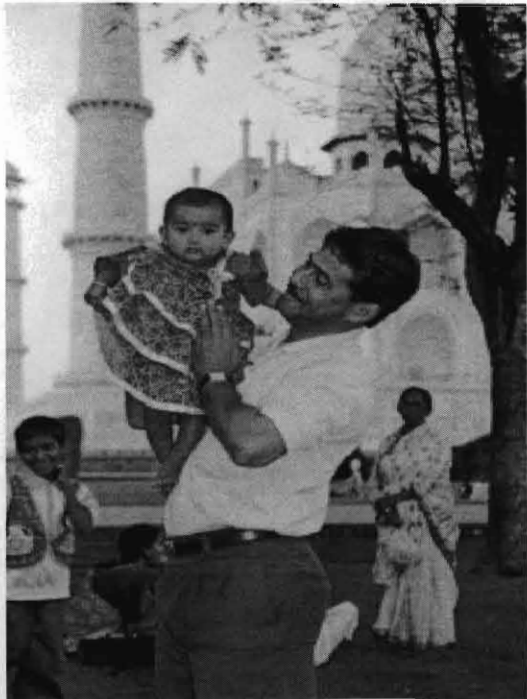


Mother 3 (South Africa)

Had she done that for me? I felt the stick of each wing as she pressed, squeezing the wound together, and a little more blood trickled into my ear. I imagine my butterfly, two eyes of her own, open and watching for me.

I never got a stitch, my mother still confesses, The ear, nose, throat surgeon, lucky for us, had been trained as a plastic surgeon, and so my mother had asked, as I lay sterile in a small white bed, my nerves dulling as the medication sunk in, "What can we do about that scar?"

I made a move, I think, or a sluggish groan, so that after the doctor nodded in agreement, my mother leaned toward my scarless eye and said, "Trust me." And how could I not trust her, this woman who'd never let me fall if she could, who'd touched me with fluttering hands? This woman—my mother, the decorator, the healer, the butterfly catcher, the one who couldn't take the scar, but tried.



Mother 4 (India)



Mother 5 (India)

problems personally. A week ago, in a local bar, I had dragged Ali outside because she was screaming an inch from his face how much she hated him. They hadn't made up. Later that night, after she stopped crying, I had suggested to Ali her dislike of Elijah might be derived from some of her own issues, maybe that her dad had left her mother, but immediately, she resorted to hysterics.

I always thought of the Elijah I knew as separate from the Elijah that may or may not have treated Sarah the way we wanted. In class, in "Modern Protestantism," he always sat to my right. Sometimes I would sneak a look at him, able to catch the muscles tense on the back of his neck when he leaned forward a bit. He was very attractive, there was no doubt, but what I liked best is how he smiled unexpectedly, like when he'd turn around and catch me gawking.

Because we had a class together, his parents call to ask if I'll get his paper from another. It is a spiritual autobiography, and only a rough draft, but he'd worked hard on it, they knew. And he must have worked on it, because I don't think they knew much about his life at all.

When I show up on campus after a shower, the professor tells me to come in, and I do. I take a seat, though I feel like I've been sitting all day. On the wall is a picture of Jesus, an African-American. I think of how historically accurate it is, that Jesus was blacker than white, despite the pale face in the images that dominate our churches in the South.

I look at Dr. Hodges and he is looking beyond me to the window. It is silent for a good two minutes, when he says, "I'm only staling. The truth is . . . the truth . . ." He stops and swings his chair around to the adjacent window, so that I'm watching his profile.

"It's a very personal document," he says.

"I completely understand."

"No, I'm not sure you do. This particular manuscript is very

revealing." He looks back at me. "Were you close with Elijah?" he asks. He and my roommate have known each other since they were kids. She's never loved anyone else."

"And he?"

"I believed he loved her just as much."

"Well. You see, I want to do what's best for the family, of course, and still protect Elijah's confidentiality. And so, I'm just not sure what to do."

"I hadn't really thought of it that way," I say, "but now that you say it—"

"Elijah admits to many things about his lifestyle in this autobiography, and I'm just not sure it would be appropriate for the funeral." The phone rings abruptly, and I jump a little in my seat. Dr. Hodges nods at me and reaches for it, mutters a few yeses and then hangs up.

"Well, that's settled. The department will not let me give it to you, anyway." I wait for him to apologize or dismiss me, but he simply faces the window again.

"I'll tell you what," he says, rubbing his smooth black head after another pause. "Let me see if I can't get you some passages, you know, for someone to read at the service." I tell him that's fine, that I'll just tell the family we're waiting to get it approved.

"Let's not tell them anything, yet," he says, and he swings his chair away from me.

Later, I tell my therapist I'm in an uncomfortable position, that if I died unexpectedly, I'm not sure I'd want any of my friends or family to see a personal essay I'd written. But of course, I acknowledge, if they knew, they'd be offended.

I tell her I'm growing resentful of my roommates, but how could I be?—we weren't supposed to be angry, for God's sake. She asks me how I'm dealing with losing a friend, but I don't tell her about the lying around or the spiders. Instead, I say I'm doing okay, just thinking a bunch. She assures me that death isn't something we can ever wrap our heads around.

Death, and Where It Ends

To philosophize is to learn to die. Montaigne
Fruit must fall from the tree. Jerry Hunter

If we'd grown up in the same household, my therapist says, than it might have been easier. We might all handle it the same. *Handle*, we say, as if we had something to hold, when really it's what we can't control that's directing us. Coping, I guess, is a better word, but it doesn't really feel like coping, either.

If we'd grown up in my house, then, this is what we'd be doing: lying beneath a down-comforter, staring at the ceiling, watching a spider as it moves from one end to the other. My roommate, Annie, whose family is used to scurrying, moving, providing as much support as two arms and two legs can, comes in my room every hour to disturb my gaze. She has errands for me—first it's wine, then dinner, then more personal deliveries of the bad news we're all handling. And I'm the candidate, since Annie doesn't have a license and Ali, our other roommate, came from a family of hysterical criers.

All of this we're trying to handle for Sarah, the fourth roommate, who got the call about Elijah at four-thirty this morning. At the time, I was dreaming I was swimming in Barbados, where I'm hoping to go after graduation, and I'm touching a piece of brain coral when the high-pitched screams start from outside my door. I had to blink for a second to determine if I had waked. I finally jumped up, opened the door, and there was Sarah, curled beneath the floodlights on the flowered carpet, screaming. I moved to the ground with her, wanting to know what was happening but not knowing if I should push her to say. And then she stopped, still not looking at me, and what she said next I sort of expected but can't forget: *Not Elijah. I won't be able to make it without him.*

Once, a few years back, after a month long bout of depression, I took an entire bottle of Tylenol. Afterwards, after two frustrated nurses worked the pills up through a tube, the doctor had asked me why I had done it.

"Boy trouble?" he said. I told him I was too tough for that sort of bullshit. I knew I didn't want to die, but I thought I could scare myself out of what I considered to be endless monotony, where

everyday was a struggle against sameness. If life was so much fighting, I just wanted to be motivated, to be committed to some sort of win. My therapist, whom I expected to give me the typical call-for-attention analysis, simply said I probably needed some time to rest, a vacation, maybe.

When I came home from the hospital three days later, my roommates moved quietly around me, as if one of us might break. I enjoyed the silence, because I knew if people were watching, it meant I wasn't alone. This same kind of quiet is outside, surrounding us. We're not talking about how he just bought the motorcycle, that he and Sarah had been broken up only a week, that another girl had been with him, managed to go free with only a broken leg. I sit on the porch among our friends, trying to piece everything together, but all I have are moments: holding Sarah, my trying unsuccessfully and in a hurry to maneuver my SUV by our neighbor's car, which had, as usual, blocked me in. The hospital, the large female cop who came and sat beside us on the curb, telling us it was a head injury, he should have been wearing a helmet, he was already gone when they got there, and Sarah needed to pull herself together. Sarah telling her to fuck off. Me trying to remember how to get home. Stopping on the side of the rode, leaning out the door and throwing up.

Thanatologists, philosophers of dying, repeatedly state that death is not something we ever experience, because it is the cessation of experience itself. They admit that watching another die is the closest we'll get. All day I've been watching Sarah, searching for clues, or answers, or maybe just making sure she hasn't meant what she said.

She's sitting in a lawn chair on the porch, Annie holding one hand and the other around a closed water bottle. She has stopped crying, but still keeps staring.

We had never agreed on the quality of Sarah's relationship to Elijah, but some of us were more vocal about it. Annie just wanted Sarah to be happy, or so she said, but Ali took their

This Sense

*For my professor, who asked us,
What are eyes for?*

From the beginning,
when our ample bodies rose from dust,
we must have seen, selection only one
answer to light, its own question,
and flourished.

And is this not survival: tonight, standing where
she would have been, watching the sky
rise and fall into a cabaret of colors,
plastic flowers that bloom in an instant
and wilt as soon into the river below?
I watch the reflections in your eyes
like flickering scenes from an old film and
realize this is how it must have been
for Eve, fixed on all the visible fruits
of the world and only one forbidden—or Adam,
the way Michaelangelo saw him, outstretched
toward God—all the beauty of the universe,
right at his fingertip, just beyond his
reach.

Pangea

Some believe there was a time when the hard world knew
itself as one body, one name. One indiscriminate flat of life,
before the rumbling layers of an ocean floor erupted
and split it wide. Sent the pieces far enough to grow
their separate persons, separate selves. I think of this

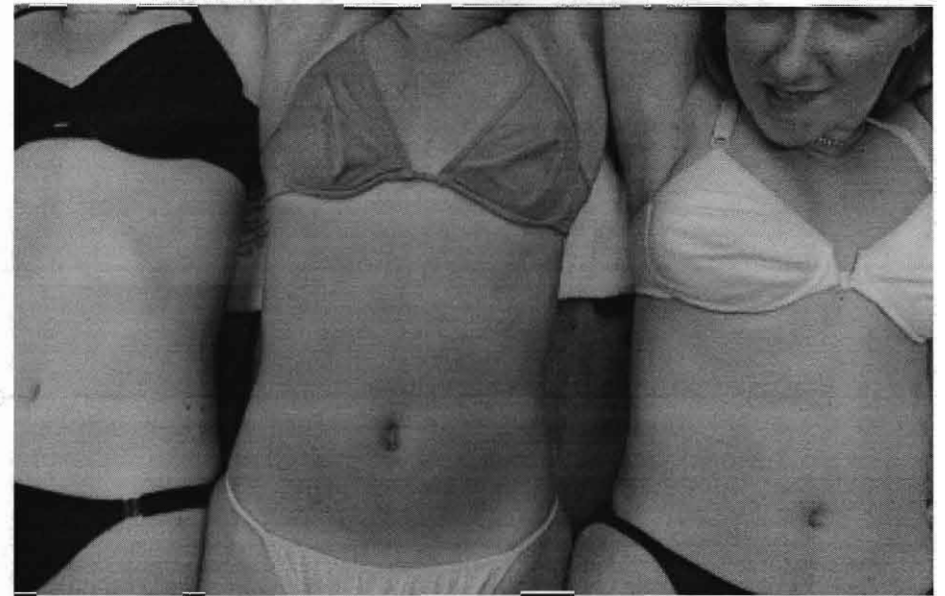
as you sit in the back, writing fervently and determined to go
undisturbed, tearing up unfit pages piece by piece. For me,
the driver, only the name of a city changes; stretches of yellow
grass turned gray by night and movement, the flickering
of a broken street light every mile, stay the same.

We've fought over the same things again: *Where are we
going? and How long will it take to get there?* though we
know there have been different times, like earlier, when
we stopped at a lonely stand to feast on fruits of the Indian River,
our hands eagerly ripping skins of grapefruits and oranges, sweet

rivers of juice escaping the slits of our mouths.
I wonder how long it will be before you climb up front again,
the silence soon continuing except for the slide of your lips
on my forehead, the sound of our moving back together, to
something unsettled, wanting to remain unbroken.



Costumes 2 (Violence)



Womanhood 2 (Ecstasy)



Costumes 1 (Violence)



Womanhood 1 (Ecstasy)



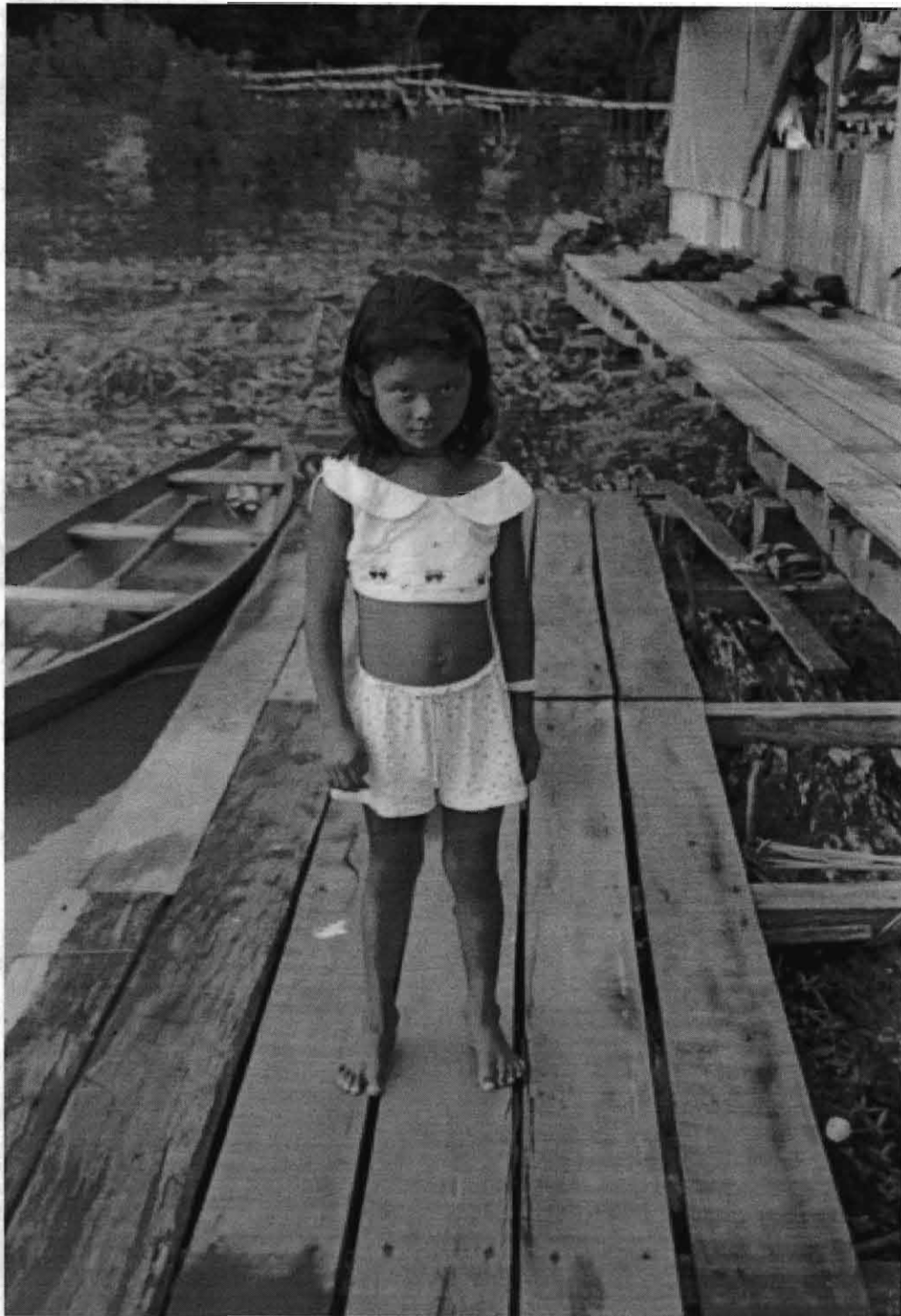
The Voyeur (Violence 2)



In this way the priest will make atonement for her, and
she will be clean.

-Leviticus 12:8

Metamorphosis



Girlhood 1 (Ecstasy)



Girlhood 2 (Ecstasy)



he Scar (Violence)

between sex and death, for love cannot exist without loss. When we love passionately, we are motivated out of fear for loss, for mortality, for death. Without death, love is not as urgent, but love, with the inevitable fate of loss, is violent.



Post-History

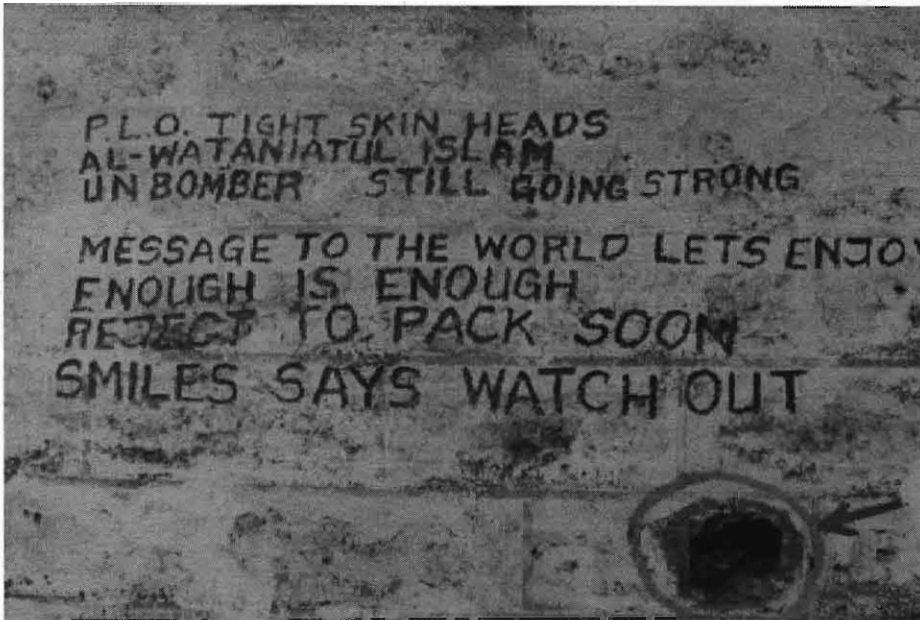
September 13, 2001

Pictures of war: two American troops, arms open inside the plane, the flag, of course, strategically framed behind a bleeding eye, a patch. Essays on Lincoln—did he love the slaves?—poetry, Kant, feminist theory—queer (did you know?) is now politically correct. How to bake a crepe, where to go in Europe—the Tower, the bulls, Morrison's grave. How could I not be here, gathering lines the way government is troops, preparing for action? And it's all here, every conquerer and his sexy affair, this saddening rise and fall of humanity, the way it swells, stretching for shore, falling through sand. I'm in the middle, on a soft chair, the echo like silence with its own sound. It both begins and ends with this: me in the bookstore, fighting with words.

Sex and Death: Marrying Ecstasy and Violence

Love is a kind of warfare.

—Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*



Violence 1

In both the beginning and the end, there is blood. Ancient tribes believed there are two types of blood, one being that which was made to flow, as in battle or sacrifice, and the other being any associated with women, as in menstruation or birth. Birth always begins with sex and culminates in blood, and it will always lead to death. Death may begin in blood, as well, and likely it is violent, maybe ecstatic.

Ecstasy and violence are often coupled among life's most significant moments, creating a puzzling, complex dichotomy. Witness: females in certain faiths among the world are circumcised as ritual, a ritual of womanhood, among women. Their blood spills to ensure their salvation, where they are chaste, pure, sometimes infinitely without ecstasy. Western feminists have fought this practice, calling it mutilation, demanding the preservation of the clitoris and ecstasy, but for many non-Westerners liberation may be a violent measure, circumcision a ritual of strength. Violence, then, is in the sacrifice, ecstasy in the spiritual salvation. Witness now: sex itself. Sex in its purest form always leads to bliss, but rape and other sexual crimes are a violent death of something wholesome.

I argue that females in particular are more familiar with ecstasy and violence relative to our sex. Even the word sex is used to establish biological differentiation between women and men, but being a woman, under an oppressive system of structural violence, has called for a certain death of femininity. Girlhood may be full of ecstasy, but soon, during puberty, the metamorphosis, a woman learns her femaleness is deficient. It is then she bathes herself in paint and silk and plastic, and the death of her most inner self begins. And what about love? Love is the bridge

II.

Sex and Death (Violence and Ecstasy)

The funeral is exactly like all the ones I've been to. Everyone is silent, or crying, stiff in their seats as they listen to the preacher. Except for at Elijah's funeral, there is no preacher, because his mother is going to read part of his essay. Early this morning, Dr. Hodges decided he would let it go, after all.

I am surprised to see her so composed, her hair cropped and parted to the side. She is not crying, and she speaks slowly when she says, "I thought there was no way better than to let Elijah speak for himself." She clears her throat.

"He wrote 'A man who hasn't lived long can reflect only on what he's been given in a short amount of time. I've been given a lot. My knowledge of God began with my mother, who did not demand that we believe what she prescribed, but encouraged us to see what we may find. Parks and beaches were our churches and conversation our gospel, and we spent hours observing nature and what a higher power had given the world. I grew up believing that I was made with beauty in mind, that only earthly possessions would make me impure.

"It didn't take me long to forget what I knew as a kid, and through the terrible choices I've made, I've lost sight of who I really am. I've always known that my strength came from somewhere outside myself, but without knowing who I was, or creating myself the way I wanted to be, I didn't have what it took to use it.

"The older I get the more I know about life, but what I know best is how much I don't know. But isn't that what it's about, really, the ultimate search for answers? For the truth? If I die tomorrow, I'll know not that I found it, but at least, in the very least, I was looking."

I look around the auditorium to see how people are responding. No one meets my eyes—everyone is looking forward, still silent, except for the rhythmic suction of sniffing. Are we to take what he wrote as gospel? As inspiration? I doubt he knew it would be read within this context. Or if he did, would it matter? Can we ever write anything meaningful about death? I think it's too large, that any essay is just a stake in it.

Regarding his writing, Ray Bradbury used to consider his it a victory against death, what he called *darkness*. Supposedly, when he put *The Halloween Tree* in the mail, he said: "There you are, Death, one up on you again!" I think that's the way it was for me in the hospital, that I just wanted to give death the bird, and keep living.

At the gravesite, Ali is on my one side and Annie the other, as Elijah is lowered into the ground. We're carefully evaluating Sarah, who is standing beside Elijah's mother. I wonder if he was conscious during the few seconds after he fell from the bike, and if he was, what he thought about. Scientists continually debate over what actually constitutes death, whether it's the loss of pulse or brainwaves or the brain's ceasing to consume oxygen. If Elijah's body had ceased to function, was he still in it? I question if he thought about Sarah, or religion, or of significant moments in his brief life, or if all the moments did what we call *flash* before him. I wonder if he thought of his paper and believed what he wrote, or if he knew he was dying.

Some Greek philosophers believed that the soul is only truly free when a person dies. I think of Sarah, the way the way she's coping, the way she moves with ease now and puts her hand on the backs of our friends, promising it will be okay. Tonight, as I'm writing this, Annie and Ali have already gone to bed, and when Sarah comes in from outside she moves to put her hand on my head, leans down and kisses my hair.

"I couldn't do this without you," she says, and I know these are just words, the kind of rhetoric to which tragedy makes us accustomed. When she walks away I watch her ponytail sway a bit and wonder if she will make it, if she's committed to getting through. I guess she doesn't have a choice, really, that either you move on or you don't. Or, maybe it's that dying isn't really that different from life—whether we reach out for each other or in toward ourselves or away from everything—in the end, what we don't know just might keep us going. ✦

III. Treatment and other Institutions

Treatment and Other Institutions

My first experience of treatment came when I was eighteen, after six months of what the treatment team called “eating disorder behavior.” It’s true: I was hardly eating and purging what I did, and my legs stopped brushing each other when I walked. What I realized while in treatment was that every area of my life needed a revamping. It was not just my eating that needed help, but my hegemonic perception of myself and the world.

Treatment today is necessary for everyone. We must take the time and space from our ordinary lives in order to heal, and in order to forget what we’ve unlearned. We must undergo treatment in order to become reconnected to our bodies and ourselves, to experience reconnectedness.

During and after treatment I learned to question every form of institution and how and why it shapes my experience. In church, I asked the priests why women cannot be spiritual leaders. In school, I asked why all the minorities had been left out of the history books. When the World Trade Center fell, I asked where God was and why didn’t anyone tell me the United States government trained the very same man we’re trying to blame? School, church, marriage, family, these are the rungs of society that make ladder of American culture, and no individual lives independent of them. These are the institutions that sculpt us, and treatment is where we go to fix what most institutions have undone.

My last few semesters of college have focused on American studies, art, literature, history, and most importantly, how Americans function as members of a national and global community. My experience on Semester at Sea, during which I traveled to nine non-Western countries, including India, China, and Vietnam, has greatly influenced my thoughts on my country, and I know longer buy into what sociologists have called the *American jeremiad*. I do not believe in American moral superiority, and I find more identity among humanity than within any other category.

After being an impatient and traveling on Semester at Sea, my next experience with treatment came with my part time job at a lock down facility for male sex offenders under the age of eighteen.

Going in, I was sure controlling my anger would be the hardest part of the job. What these boys needed, after all, was a strong, sensitive, intuitive female. What I found out, after weeks of arduous and emotionally taking work, was that when it came to bodies, sex, anger, treatment and the world, I had more to learn than to teach.



treatment v. 1. the act or manner of treating something, such as a person or a subject.



The Fixing (Basic Needs 1)

How to Be an Independent Woman

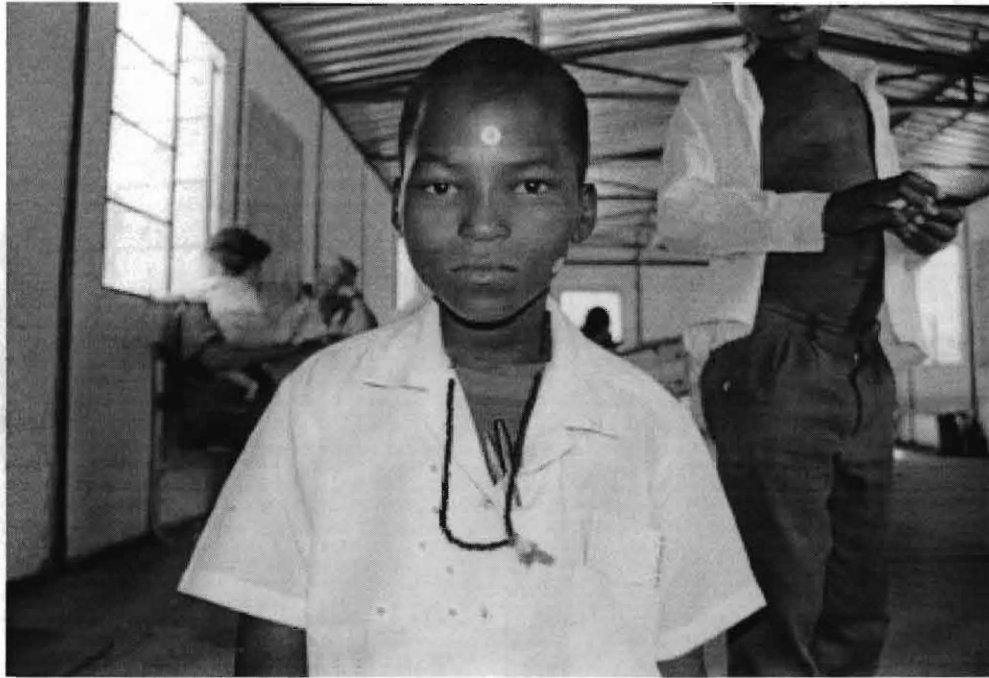
First, imagine your mother, before you're born, as a girl who looks forward to half-priced, week-old cherry pie for dessert on Fridays. When she gets older, she'll go to college in Florida, where it's sunny all year, and meet a rich, loving man who plays football and sports snowsuits to class. She'll be a cheerleader, develop streamline muscles and then turn over her life to him. When they want kids, you'll be placed inside her womb. That way, before it even begins, you'll be learning about the woman you don't want to be.

Let her raise you, hate that she can't cook and that she lives on a budget managed by her husband, your father. Hate that she pulls your hair into too-tight ponytails, smears your mouth with lipstick, which she does to you much more than to your curly-headed sister, who rebels violently. Hate that she criticizes the large Italian nose she gave you as distracting from the rest of your beauty. That in high school, when a boyfriend cheats on you, she'll take his side, insisting that a man has got to do what he has got to do. Swear you'll never forgive her, but realize then you'll be spending the rest of your life trying to let it go.

One day, when you see her and your father fighting over her weekly allowance, ask her why she doesn't work. She'll say, "That's just the plan."

At age eleven, make your own plan. Commit yourself to being a doctor and, after your sixth-grade class has a women's counselor on "Career Day," decide you're going to be what she calls a *feminist*. Start to recognize how the word "man" stands for you, how someday you're expected to be a good wife. Exclude "wife" from your plan, promise yourself you'll never be a mother, you'll never diet or succumb. Study the *Official Anatomy and Physiology Coloring Book*, memorizing terms like *coracoid process of the scapula* as you go along, using your markers to make every system of the body a piece of work.

At age fifteen decide to take the feminism thing back. It's so hard to go against the grain, anyway. You're so tired of standing up in class, politely asking the teacher to use *humankind* while your classmates grunt and your friends roll their eyes. Have ten boy-friends simultaneously (none of whom are in your class, of course)



The Star (Basic Needs 2)

and brag to your friends about it.

They'll say, "You'll never commit to one."

"You're right," you say, determined and proud. Soon, though, your stubbornness and confusion will manifest themselves. You'll start eating less and less and as the pain begins to numb, your mother, of all people, will notice your body slimming down. "You look so good!" she'll say, but in six months she's decided you have a disorder. She'll drag you to therapy, the first and last time she will go, and even though you'll beg her later, she'll simply reply, "You've got to this on your own. We can't join hands in a circle around you."

Your father, who's now resorted to suits and formalities, will take you for a ride in his sports car to talk about life. You notice he's running stop signs and stealing sideways glances toward your seat.

"Something's wrong, Dad," you ask. A tear runs from his blue-tinted glasses, and he says, "I think I'm losing you." As you watch the city blur outside the window of his lightweight, fiberglass car, you decide it's time to eat again.

The therapist, who calls herself Dr. K, will help you. She encourages you to resort to feminism, and really, that's all you know how. She wants you to get angry with your mother, which is much more difficult, so you try really hard, concentrating on feeling it like she suggests, straining your gut, but it only feels like you're constipated. So, you decide, if separation from you mother is impossible, then you will separate from men. As a result, you'll spend your first year of college struggling with your heterosexuality and surrounding yourself with lesbians. One of them, Chris, who is built like your father but has hair that falls down below her shoulders and is the same glistening brown as yours, is sure that you're a typical closet case. When she offers to kiss you in order to break the spell, you accept, but feels just like kissing the rock-star poster you had when you were a kid, the one that hung next to the diagram of the heart. And when Chris calls crying about her girlfriend, the stripper who has run away with her manager,

you've discovered that lesbians have problems, too. Admit that you like boys and keep struggling with that. Date some who will tell jokes like "How do you know when a woman is going to say something really great? She'll say, 'A man once told me . . .'" Cry when they say these things in front of their friends and expect them to change. Know that they won't, and let them take care of you, still, when you wish you knew how to take care of yourself.

You mistakenly ask your family for advice on your failed relationships.

"Sometimes," your mother says, "you'll have to consider the benefits of the situation."

"Like money?" you ask.

"Yes," she says.

Your father assures you that if you're going to be a feminist, you'll have to settle for a man that's not. "But don't worry, look at your mother and me. We never agree on anything."

Your sister, still in high school and dating the same guy since kindergarten, says, "I don't know why you're so worried about finding a man who understands your goals. What's the point having goals, anyway, when you're just going to get married and have kids?"

Work toward a major, but decide it won't be pre-medicine because you hate organic chemistry. You finally realize that in the anatomy coloring book, it was the way each cell and organ functioned together, moved together, that captivated your interest. The way formed systems of color and harmony. Painting, you'll take then, and women's studies, where there are more radical feminists than you. The feminists will teach you about Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf and Susan Faludi, and the words *misogynist* and *patriarchy* will be ingrained in your heart. At night, play Ani DeFranco at full blast to override the train that runs by your apartment, then brush glitter over your eyes and make sure your hair is in just the right place. Adjust your breasts in a low-cut top, and go out with Chris and her friends, desperately searching the bar for one straight man. This night and many others, you will aim for sexual liberation and settle for shame.

Try really hard to make more female friends, because Dr. K says it's important. Join a sorority to bond with women who seem fun and friendly and beautiful. Envy their cashmere sweaters and tightly strung pearls, despise the way they respond, "Oh, you're a fem . . . inist," as if the word were a painful word to speak.

Write an essay for your sorority about women bonding and being powerful. To your surprise, they'll reward you for it, ask you to read it aloud at a banquet and then Nan, the President with fluffy hair, will wish you good luck and remind you that the only time you're allowed on the platform is to make a speech. Later that night, at the closing, Nan approaches the podium to announce that she has a big surprise! She's getting engaged.

She holds up the ring she's been hiding in her shirt pocket, and it glistens all the way to the back of the dining hall where you're sitting, poised with your fork midway between the salad plate and your mouth. "Tell us how!" someone yells from the audience.

"Well," she says, "he took me to the park where we had our first date . . . and our first kiss." She pauses and her cheeks go blushed. "It was perfect."

Perfect, you think.

Continue going to see Dr. K. twice a week. Notice that, although it's been three years, her hair is not graying, and she must have been sixty when you started. She'll suggest you bring in some of your paintings, which, after two semesters of art class, still look like the ones you and your sister did at the kitchen table fifteen years ago. Nonetheless, Dr. K will say, "Look at this one here," pointing to the one you call "Freedom," the painting of three circles linked and another outside.

"This could be a family portrait," she says. Realize that she's insinuating you're the small, empty circle outlined in back, lingering outside the group on the edge of the paper. After that session, it's a long ride back to your apartment.

One day, the anger toward your mother comes. You and your family are having Christmas dinner at a four-star restaurant, the lobster's fresh and the wine is old, and you're reminiscing about the past. Your sister asks your mother who was the easiest to raise.

"It was definitely you," she says, and she's speaking to your sister.

"Well," (she's talking to you now), "you were just so . . . so much for us, with everything you went through, especially the eating thing."

You set your wine glass down with more force than a fragile dish should be able to handle.

As you prepare to graduate, start to think about a career. *What can't you do with a women's studies major?* you assure your dad. *Besides*, you think to yourself, *even if I don't make a lot of money, I'll be happy. Even if I end up looking forward to cherry pie on Friday, life will be good.*

In one of your last non-women's studies, non-art, required classes, you'll meet a guy who wears only button-up shirts and khakis. At the authentic Italian restaurant on your first date, he'll ask you how you feel about abortion. Sit up straight and rigid in your chair and declare that you're pro-choice. Be prepared to cite the last article you read on the viability of a fetus before he says, genuinely, and without resistance, "Interesting."

"Oh," you say, letting your body relax in your chair. And this is how it will be: your letting go muscle by muscle, eventually promising him that following your impulses is the right thing to do, though you're not sure you really mean it. Nevertheless, you'll end up in deep, dark, depressing love with this man who wears brand-name clothing and is majoring in business. On a weekend trip to the beach, rejecting your thought that the beach is such a cliché place to go with a lover, you take a walk with him on the shore, admiring the sunset, as perfect as a painting. Lie on the sand beside him, and when he buries his face in your breasts to cry and say he's scared, comfort him, remembering this is the first time he's cried in years.

"What's there to be scared of?" you say.

The next week, go to his house, sit him down, and explain why you want to take a break, why eventually you want your relationship to be platonic.

"I don't understand," he says. And you say you don't either.

As you sit crying hysterically across from Dr. K, she says, "So you're not ready? That's okay. It's just where you are. There's still

so much for you to discover." But it's not okay, because right then you'll realize that all this time you've never gotten angry with your father. But you don't dare bring this up, because if you do, you might be working toward readiness for a relationship with the other man you love. And you're just not sure you're ready for that.

Dr. K suggests you do more recreational activities. You start taking long walks throughout breathtaking scenery, mountains that cut blue backdrops, the parking lot of your apartment building. You bundle yourself up against the cold, missing the warmth of the beach, and listen to the train as it slides by, humming mechanically, sounding its horn to alert you. Before going back inside, you watch it go on forever, then slip suddenly into darkness, as if it knew exactly where it was going, as if it wasn't afraid to move alone.





School 1 (Vietnam)



School 2 (Vietnam)

The Teacher

It rises within us, this thick bread of purpose, and howe might Become. Or, as we like to say in the West, what we might do. Like at a part, when people ask not What do you love? But What do you do? Often, we're confused, lost, unmotivated, left with wholes of desire unfed, without the push that brings grown men to fondle steel, women to tie blue wounds with torn squares of squirt, or something more or less meaningful. I used to want to be a doctor, before I discovered photography. Some will teach, help to hide the one truth whispering small reminders of fate. And that truth is this: nothing matters. It could have been my life or the next. It could have been his, near 1970, when he made portraits instead of matrices where his parents placed numbers. He used twisted figures then, only for the timing of light, life for Mr. Evans, with those images made famous in eighteen months. He made the images, but it it was my teacher who made the prints. I can see him, crouched beneath the safe orange bulb, detailing the way black separated from white, saying to himself, *Keep working. They'll be here soon.*



Church (Kentucky)

Friday Night Sabbath

and I'm lost in the *click-click*
of keys on a desktop.
A voice from the street corner
beginning on conduction,
breaking through the cracks
of my second story window.
Pulls me from my words.
He is screaming now,
straining the ribbons run deep
inside his throat.
I make a phrase at a time.
Do you love the Lord?
he asks me. My stomach,
the tight part beneath
my heart, moving
up and down with each
melodic word.
Jesus has died for your sins,
and then nothing,
then the bleating
of a saxophone downstairs.

Basic Needs 3 (China)





Girl Performing Tricks, Tianenen Square



Waiting, Tianenem Square

Red China

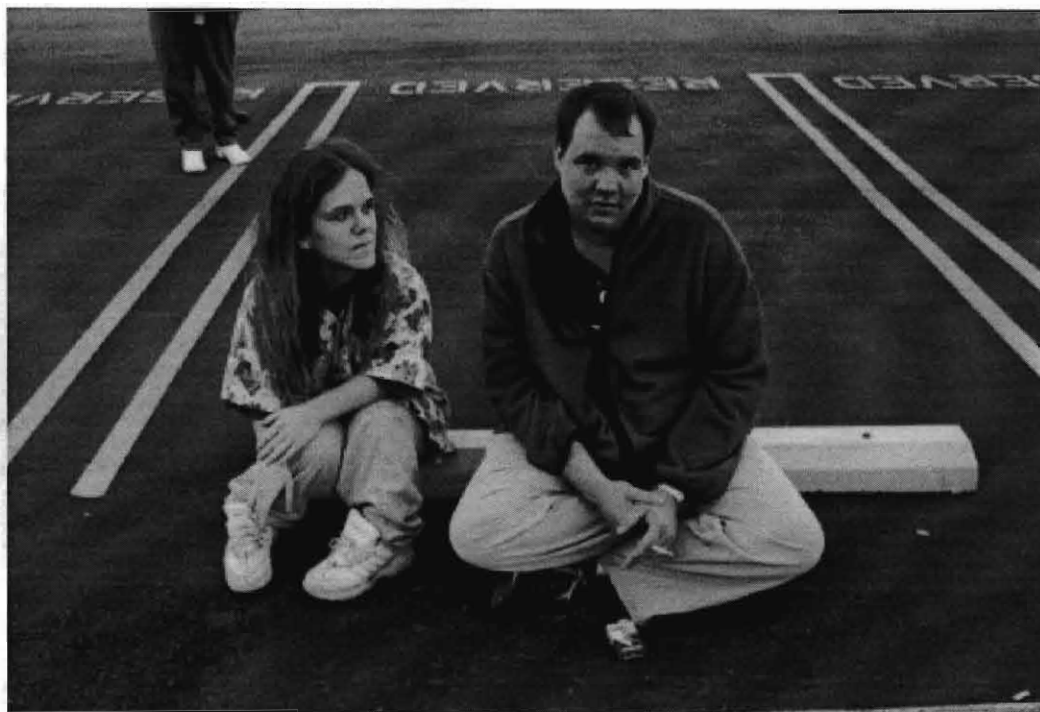
At twelve, I watched the massacre,
 swimming pixels of light over continents,
 red coming the fastest,
 the sound of screaming like music unbridled.
 My mother saying, *You're safe*.
 Today in the square, a young girl performs for us,
 arches back and stretches hand to ground,
 the black spikes missed by braids
 pointing south. Mao looking
 over. She is a monument beside
 the stone soldiers,
 a living fulcrum between
 the hard bodies of lives lost
 and the fallibility of my gaze, an adult
 watching her turn tricks, taking
 pictures of color, turning red
 to black and white.



Basic Needs 4 (India)



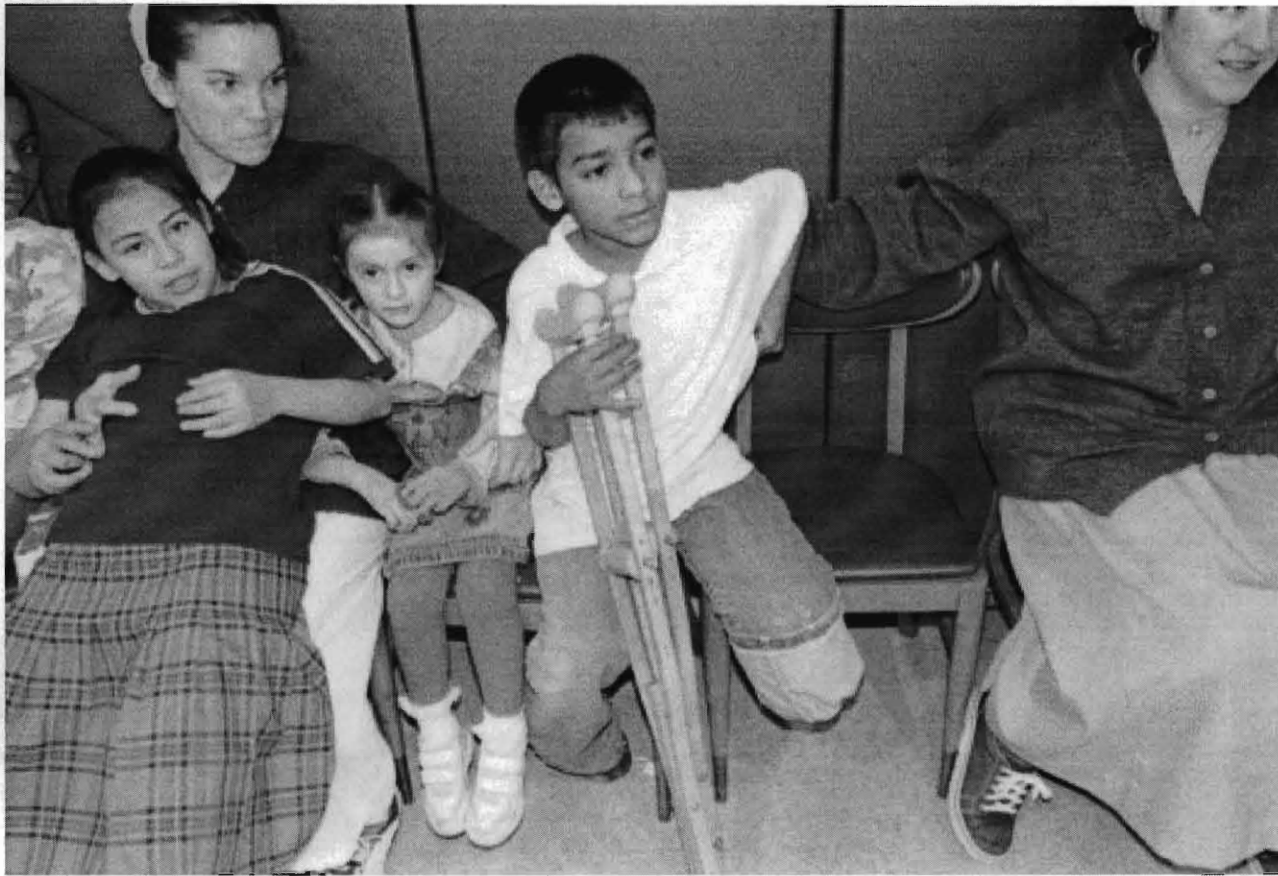
Basic Needs 5 (India)



hospital (Basic Needs 6)

The Session

He says he doesn't remember and she says you don't remember? and he says the drinking was worse after the split and she says it was worse when they were still together, before he turned ten. He says he's never seen him drunk and she says than why do our sisters remember? He says it was different when they lived with him and she says yes, he did stop, but he was drunk when you were around and he says I've never seen him drunk and she says what about when he pulled you out of bed, gave you them lectures and it ended with a whoopin? He says, I know, I remember. She says he was drunk and he says he was making sure our rooms were clean. He just wanted them clean, he says. He says he's never seen him drunk and she says listen, I'm saying you have. He says I guess I didn't know what it looked like and she says so do you think I was drunk? and he says no and she says, I was, not during the whoopins, but a lot. I remember the time you passed out he says and she says yes, when I asked you why you didn't tell me what was going on and he says yes, when I didn't know what to do. She says I learned you kids meant more to me. He says he tried to talk to his dad about what he can't remember, because his sisters say they remember more and he says his dad says that he's putting all that behind him, and yes, maybe that's not one hundred percent fair, but while his dad is in jail he needs to be focused on the good. She says how do you feel about that? and he starts to say my sisters feel and she says how do *you* feel and he says I didn't know at the time and she says how do you feel *now* and he stops to say aren't we out of time?



Treatment 1 (Gallilean Home)



Treatment 2 (Gallilean Home)

Treatment

I watch him move broom over tile,
 Slipping over dust he can't see
 through eyes swollen with morning.
 These chores are too hard for him.
 The slick rank of manure, the melodic churn
 of machinery, a horse's hard body
 beneath him, he can handle. It's 7AM,
 too late for the dreaming
 where girls with oiled legs cross
 and re-cross. And that's the best of it.
 The worst: his father and another woman,
 the rape, their spreading him between two sheets,
 teaching him what he doesn't want
 his body to be—the product of their own
 torn hands. I wish I could pick
 his pain like the blue violets
 welting outside the window, catching
 the sunlight just in time,
 hand him his future like a fresh bud.
 Maybe then he wouldn't begin each night with
 The same prayer,
God, please bring me a monster truck,
and please, God, don't forget
to leave the keys.



reatment 3 (Gallilean Home)

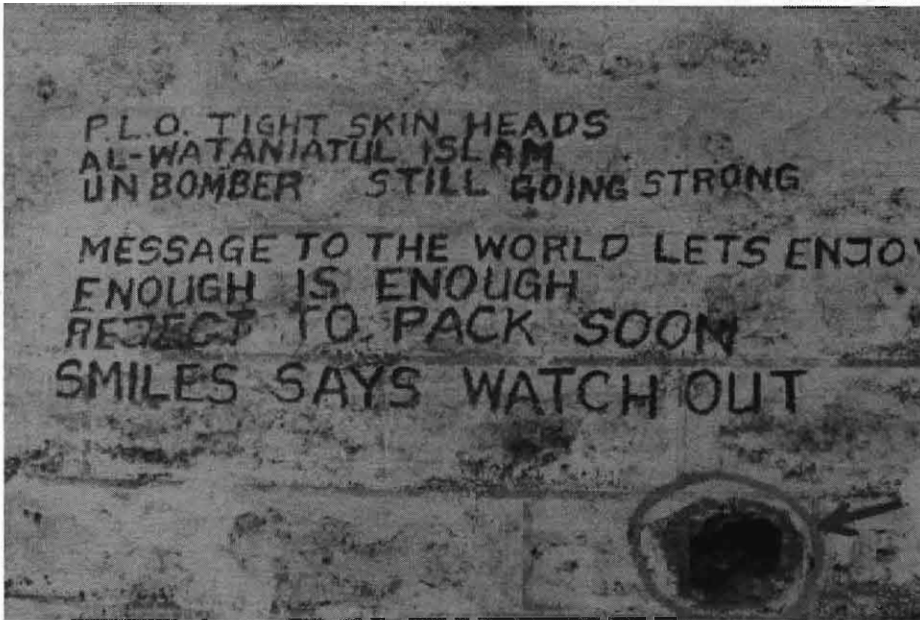
II.

Sex and Death (Violence and Ecstasy)

Sex and Death: Marrying Ecstasy and Violence

Love is a kind of warfare.

—Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*



Violence 1

In both the beginning and the end, there is blood. Ancient tribes believed there are two types of blood, one being that which was made to flow, as in battle or sacrifice, and the other being any associated with women, as in menstruation or birth. Birth always begins with sex and culminates in blood, and it will always lead to death. Death may begin in blood, as well, and likely it is violent, maybe ecstatic.

Ecstasy and violence are often coupled among life's most significant moments, creating a puzzling, complex dichotomy. Witness: females in certain faiths among the world are circumcised as ritual, a ritual of womanhood, among women. Their blood spills to ensure their salvation, where they are chaste, pure, sometimes infinitely without ecstasy. Western feminists have fought this practice, calling it mutilation, demanding the preservation of the clitoris and ecstasy, but for many non-Westerners liberation may be a violent measure, circumcision a ritual of strength. Violence, then, is in the sacrifice, ecstasy in the spiritual salvation. Witness now: sex itself. Sex in its purest form always leads to bliss, but rape and other sexual crimes are a violent death of something wholesome.

I argue that females in particular are more familiar with ecstasy and violence relative to our sex. Even the word sex is used to establish biological differentiation between women and men, but being a woman, under an oppressive system of structural violence, has called for a certain death of femininity. Girlhood may be full of ecstasy, but soon, during puberty, the metamorphosis, a woman learns her femaleness is deficient. It is then she bathes herself in paint and silk and plastic, and the death of her most inner self begins. And what about love? Love is the bridge



he Scar (Violence)

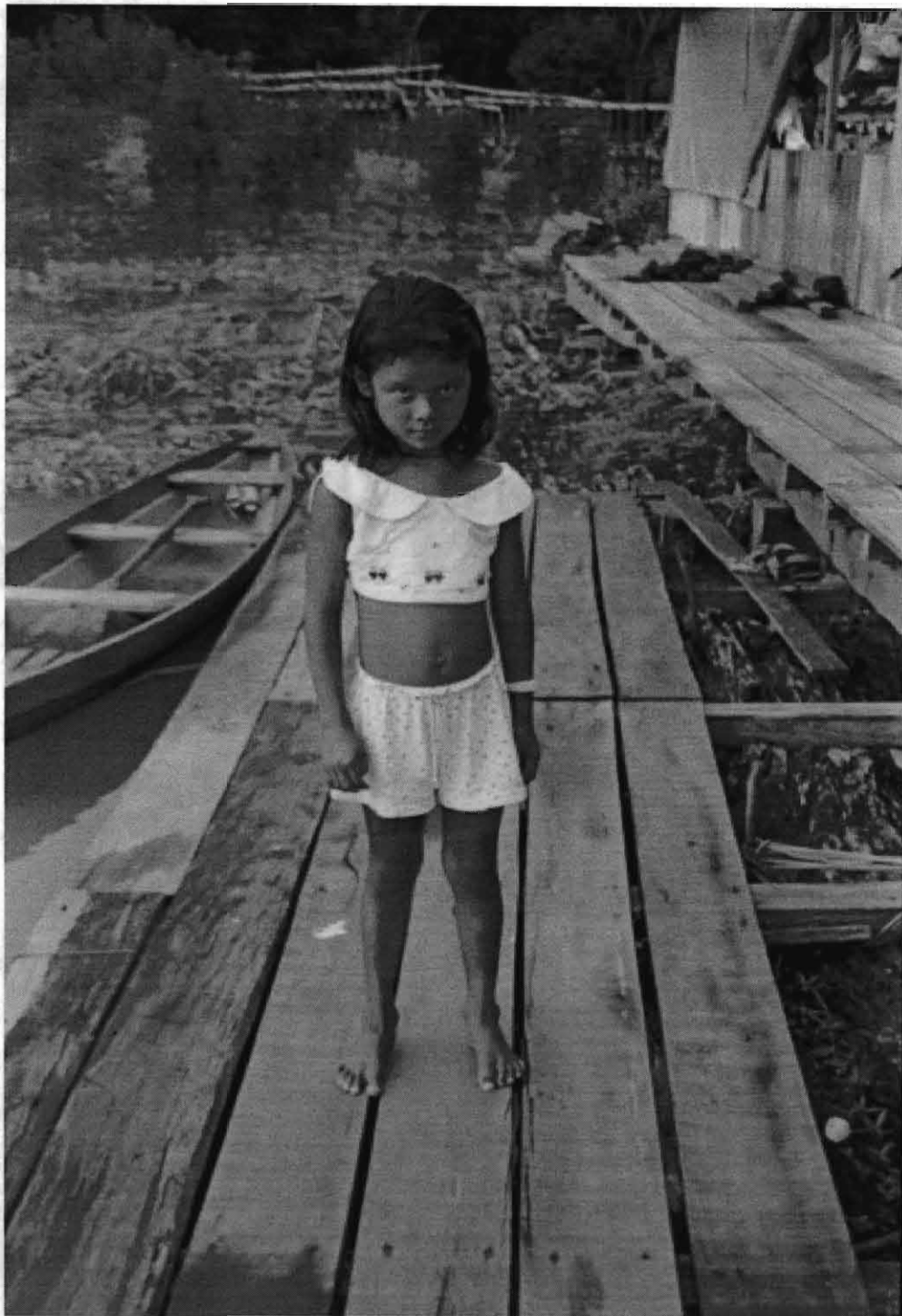
between sex and death, for love cannot exist without loss. When we love passionately, we are motivated out of fear for loss, for mortality, for death. Without death, love is not as urgent, but love, with the inevitable fate of loss, is violent.



Post-History

September 13, 2001

Pictures of war: two American troops, arms open inside the plane, the flag, of course, strategically framed behind a bleeding eye, a patch. Essays on Lincoln—did he love the slaves?—poetry, Kant, feminist theory—queer (did you know?) is now politically correct. How to bake a crepe, where to go in Europe—the Tower, the bulls, Morrison's grave. How could I not be here, gathering lines the way government is troops, preparing for action? And it's all here, every conquerer and his sexy affair, this saddening rise and fall of humanity, the way it swells, stretching for shore, falling through sand. I'm in the middle, on a soft chair, the echo like silence with its own sound. It both begins and ends with this: me in the bookstore, fighting with words.



Girlhood 1 (Ecstasy)



Girlhood 2 (Ecstasy)



In this way the priest will make atonement for her, and
she will be clean.

-Leviticus 12:8

Metamorphosis



The Voyeur (Violence 2)



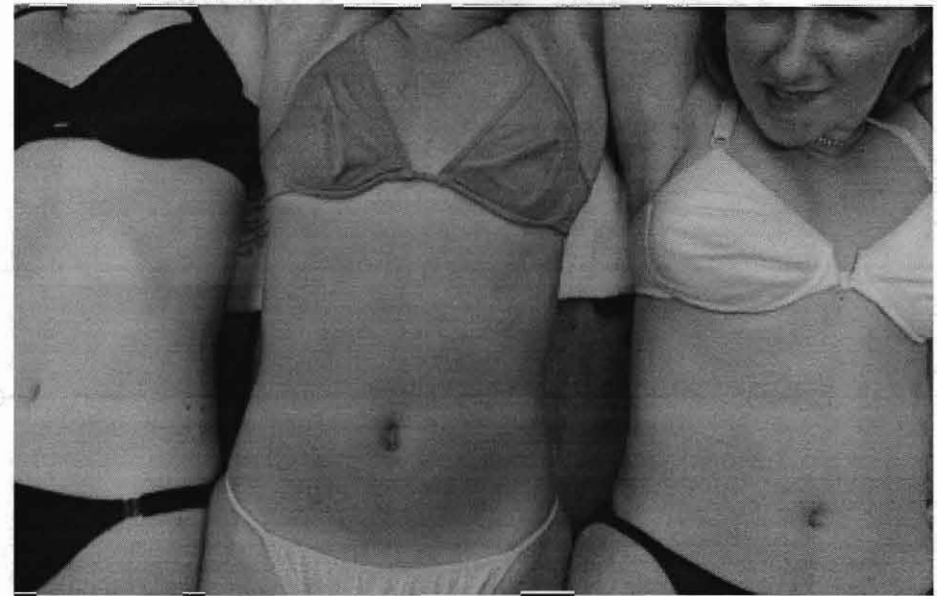
Costumes 1 (Violence)



Womanhood 1 (Ecstasy)



Costumes 2 (Violence)



Womanhood 2 (Ecstasy)

This Sense

*For my professor, who asked us,
What are eyes for?*

From the beginning,
when our ample bodies rose from dust,
we must have seen, selection only one
answer to light, its own question,
and flourished.

And is this not survival: tonight, standing where
she would have been, watching the sky
rise and fall into a cabaret of colors,
plastic flowers that bloom in an instant
and wilt as soon into the river below?
I watch the reflections in your eyes
like flickering scenes from an old film and
realize this is how it must have been
for Eve, fixed on all the visible fruits
of the world and only one forbidden—or Adam,
the way Michaelangelo saw him, outstretched
toward God—all the beauty of the universe,
right at his fingertip, just beyond his
reach.

Pangea

Some believe there was a time when the hard world knew
itself as one body, one name. One indiscriminate flat of life,
before the rumbling layers of an ocean floor erupted
and split it wide. Sent the pieces far enough to grow
their separate persons, separate selves. I think of this

as you sit in the back, writing fervently and determined to go
undisturbed, tearing up unfit pages piece by piece. For me,
the driver, only the name of a city changes; stretches of yellow
grass turned gray by night and movement, the flickering
of a broken street light every mile, stay the same.

We've fought over the same things again: *Where are we
going? and How long will it take to get there?* though we
know there have been different times, like earlier, when
we stopped at a lonely stand to feast on fruits of the Indian River,
our hands eagerly ripping skins of grapefruits and oranges, sweet

rivers of juice escaping the slits of our mouths.
I wonder how long it will be before you climb up front again,
the silence soon continuing except for the slide of your lips
on my forehead, the sound of our moving back together, to
something unsettled, wanting to remain unbroken.

Death, and Where It Ends

To philosophize is to learn to die. Montaigne
Fruit must fall from the tree. Jerry Hunter

If we'd grown up in the same household, my therapist says, than it might have been easier. We might all handle it the same. *Handle*, we say, as if we had something to hold, when really it's what we can't control that's directing us. Coping, I guess, is a better word, but it doesn't really feel like coping, either.

If we'd grown up in my house, then, this is what we'd be doing: lying beneath a down-comforter, staring at the ceiling, watching a spider as it moves from one end to the other. My roommate, Annie, whose family is used to scurrying, moving, providing as much support as two arms and two legs can, comes in my room every hour to disturb my gaze. She has errands for me—first it's wine, then dinner, then more personal deliveries of the bad news we're all handling. And I'm the candidate, since Annie doesn't have a license and Ali, our other roommate, came from a family of hysterical criers.

All of this we're trying to handle for Sarah, the fourth roommate, who got the call about Elijah at four-thirty this morning. At the time, I was dreaming I was swimming in Barbados, where I'm hoping to go after graduation, and I'm touching a piece of brain coral when the high-pitched screams start from outside my door. I had to blink for a second to determine if I had waked. I finally jumped up, opened the door, and there was Sarah, curled beneath the floodlights on the flowered carpet, screaming. I moved to the ground with her, wanting to know what was happening but not knowing if I should push her to say. And then she stopped, still not looking at me, and what she said next I sort of expected but can't forget: *Not Elijah. I won't be able to make it without him.*

Once, a few years back, after a month long bout of depression, I took an entire bottle of Tylenol. Afterwards, after two frustrated nurses worked the pills up through a tube, the doctor had asked me why I had done it.

"Boy trouble?" he said. I told him I was too tough for that sort of bullshit. I knew I didn't want to die, but I thought I could scare myself out of what I considered to be endless monotony, where

everyday was a struggle against sameness. If life was so much fighting, I just wanted to be motivated, to be committed to some sort of win. My therapist, whom I expected to give me the typical call-for-attention analysis, simply said I probably needed some time to rest, a vacation, maybe.

When I came home from the hospital three days later, my roommates moved quietly around me, as if one of us might break. I enjoyed the silence, because I knew if people were watching, it meant I wasn't alone. This same kind of quiet is outside, surrounding us. We're not talking about how he just bought the motorcycle, that he and Sarah had been broken up only a week, that another girl had been with him, managed to go free with only a broken leg. I sit on the porch among our friends, trying to piece everything together, but all I have are moments: holding Sarah, my trying unsuccessfully and in a hurry to maneuver my SUV by our neighbor's car, which had, as usual, blocked me in. The hospital, the large female cop who came and sat beside us on the curb, telling us it was a head injury, he should have been wearing a helmet, he was already gone when they got there, and Sarah needed to pull herself together. Sarah telling her to fuck off. Me trying to remember how to get home. Stopping on the side of the rode, leaning out the door and throwing up.

Thanatologists, philosophers of dying, repeatedly state that death is not something we ever experience, because it is the cessation of experience itself. They admit that watching another die is the closest we'll get. All day I've been watching Sarah, searching for clues, or answers, or maybe just making sure she hasn't meant what she said.

She's sitting in a lawn chair on the porch, Annie holding one hand and the other around a closed water bottle. She has stopped crying, but still keeps staring.

We had never agreed on the quality of Sarah's relationship to Elijah, but some of us were more vocal about it. Annie just wanted Sarah to be happy, or so she said, but Ali took their

problems personally. A week ago, in a local bar, I had dragged Ali outside because she was screaming an inch from his face how much she hated him. They hadn't made up. Later that night, after she stopped crying, I had suggested to Ali her dislike of Elijah might be derived from some of her own issues, maybe that her dad had left her mother, but immediately, she resorted to hysterics.

I always thought of the Elijah I knew as separate from the Elijah that may or may not have treated Sarah the way we wanted. In class, in "Modern Protestantism," he always sat to my right. Sometimes I would sneak a look at him, able to catch the muscles tense on the back of his neck when he leaned forward a bit. He was very attractive, there was no doubt, but what I liked best is how he smiled unexpectedly, like when he'd turn around and catch me gawking.

Because we had a class together, his parents call to ask if I'll get his paper from another. It is a spiritual autobiography, and only a rough draft, but he'd worked hard on it, they knew. And he must have worked on it, because I don't think they knew much about his life at all.

When I show up on campus after a shower, the professor tells me to come in, and I do. I take a seat, though I feel like I've been sitting all day. On the wall is a picture of Jesus, an African-American. I think of how historically accurate it is, that Jesus was blacker than white, despite the pale face in the images that dominate our churches in the South.

I look at Dr. Hodges and he is looking beyond me to the window. It is silent for a good two minutes, when he says, "I'm only staling. The truth is . . . the truth . . ." He stops and swings his chair around to the adjacent window, so that I'm watching his profile.

"It's a very personal document," he says.

"I completely understand."

"No, I'm not sure you do. This particular manuscript is very

revealing." He looks back at me. "Were you close with Elijah?" he asks. He and my roommate have known each other since they were kids. She's never loved anyone else."

"And he?"

"I believed he loved her just as much."

"Well. You see, I want to do what's best for the family, of course, and still protect Elijah's confidentiality. And so, I'm just not sure what to do."

"I hadn't really thought of it that way," I say, "but now that you say it—"

"Elijah admits to many things about his lifestyle in this autobiography, and I'm just not sure it would be appropriate for the funeral." The phone rings abruptly, and I jump a little in my seat. Dr. Hodges nods at me and reaches for it, mutters a few yeses and then hangs up.

"Well, that's settled. The department will not let me give it to you, anyway." I wait for him to apologize or dismiss me, but he simply faces the window again.

"I'll tell you what," he says, rubbing his smooth black head after another pause. "Let me see if I can't get you some passages, you know, for someone to read at the service." I tell him that's fine, that I'll just tell the family we're waiting to get it approved.

"Let's not tell them anything, yet," he says, and he swings his chair away from me.

Later, I tell my therapist I'm in an uncomfortable position, that if I died unexpectedly, I'm not sure I'd want any of my friends or family to see a personal essay I'd written. But of course, I acknowledge, if they knew, they'd be offended.

I tell her I'm growing resentful of my roommates, but how could I be?—we weren't supposed to be angry, for God's sake. She asks me how I'm dealing with losing a friend, but I don't tell her about the lying around or the spiders. Instead, I say I'm doing okay, just thinking a bunch. She assures me that death isn't something we can ever wrap our heads around.

The funeral is exactly like all the ones I've been to. Everyone is silent, or crying, stiff in their seats as they listen to the preacher. Except for at Elijah's funeral, there is no preacher, because his mother is going to read part of his essay. Early this morning, Dr. Hodges decided he would let it go, after all.

I am surprised to see her so composed, her hair cropped and parted to the side. She is not crying, and she speaks slowly when she says, "I thought there was no way better than to let Elijah speak for himself." She clears her throat.

"He wrote 'A man who hasn't lived long can reflect only on what he's been given in a short amount of time. I've been given a lot. My knowledge of God began with my mother, who did not demand that we believe what she prescribed, but encouraged us to see what we may find. Parks and beaches were our churches and conversation our gospel, and we spent hours observing nature and what a higher power had given the world. I grew up believing that I was made with beauty in mind, that only earthly possessions would make me impure.

"It didn't take me long to forget what I knew as a kid, and through the terrible choices I've made, I've lost sight of who I really am. I've always known that my strength came from somewhere outside myself, but without knowing who I was, or creating myself the way I wanted to be, I didn't have what it took to use it.

"The older I get the more I know about life, but what I know best is how much I don't know. But isn't that what it's about, really, the ultimate search for answers? For the truth? If I die tomorrow, I'll know not that I found it, but at least, in the very least, I was looking."

I look around the auditorium to see how people are responding. No one meets my eyes—everyone is looking forward, still silent, except for the rhythmic suction of sniffing. Are we to take what he wrote as gospel? As inspiration? I doubt he knew it would be read within this context. Or if he did, would it matter? Can we ever write anything meaningful about death? I think it's too large, that any essay is just a stake in it.

Regarding his writing, Ray Bradbury used to consider his it a victory against death, what he called *darkness*. Supposedly, when he put *The Halloween Tree* in the mail, he said: "There you are, Death, one up on you again!" I think that's the way it was for me in the hospital, that I just wanted to give death the bird, and keep living.

At the gravesite, Ali is on my one side and Annie the other, as Elijah is lowered into the ground. We're carefully evaluating Sarah, who is standing beside Elijah's mother. I wonder if he was conscious during the few seconds after he fell from the bike, and if he was, what he thought about. Scientists continually debate over what actually constitutes death, whether it's the loss of pulse or brainwaves or the brain's ceasing to consume oxygen. If Elijah's body had ceased to function, was he still in it? I question if he thought about Sarah, or religion, or of significant moments in his brief life, or if all the moments did what we call *flash* before him. I wonder if he thought of his paper and believed what he wrote, or if he knew he was dying.

Some Greek philosophers believed that the soul is only truly free when a person dies. I think of Sarah, the way the way she's coping, the way she moves with ease now and puts her hand on the backs of our friends, promising it will be okay. Tonight, as I'm writing this, Annie and Ali have already gone to bed, and when Sarah comes in from outside she moves to put her hand on my head, leans down and kisses my hair.

"I couldn't do this without you," she says, and I know these are just words, the kind of rhetoric to which tragedy makes us accustomed. When she walks away I watch her ponytail sway a bit and wonder if she will make it, if she's committed to getting through. I guess she doesn't have a choice, really, that either you move on or you don't. Or, maybe it's that dying isn't really that different from life—whether we reach out for each other or in toward ourselves or away from everything—in the end, what we don't know just might keep us going. ✦

IV.

Reconnectedness

Listen, listen,
this wonderful sound
brings me back
to my true self.

*—Present Moment, Wonderful
Moment: Mindfulness
Verses for Daily Living*

Paths to Reconnectedness

I ask my therapist if she thinks I have a purpose in life, if I'm fated to save the world. Instead of answering, she suggests maybe I'm having a spiritual crisis. She says maybe I need a return to myself.

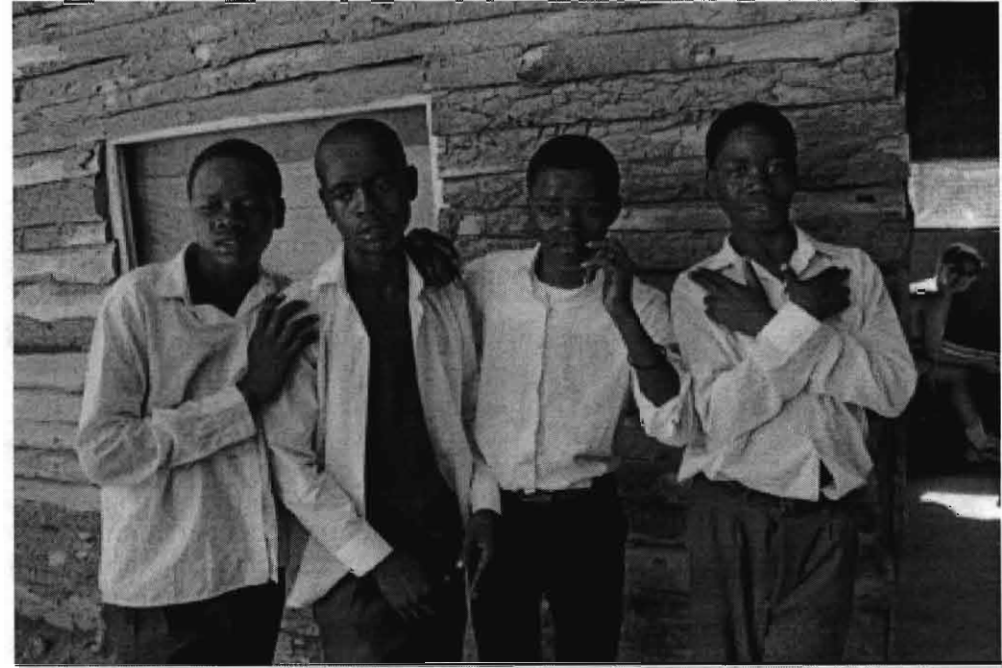
Self-realization seems impossible, if not extremely difficult, sometimes. One of my English professors once wrote a poem called "Bliss," and in it he admits to having asked all of life's questions in order to come up with one answer: bliss lies in simplicity.

If purpose and ecstasy are in the simple things, this is where mine is: among friends, within intimate relationships, in the universality of specific people, no matter what the country, in the expression of bliss no matter what the surface of the face.

I have loved and loathed my body and my experiences. I cannot attempt reconnection without realizing their importance, their connection, their imperfection. When my therapist asks if I believe in God, I say maybe, wanting to believe that somewhere our lives are all drawn as purposefully as an architectural plan, that some brilliantly constructed, heavenly body exists infinitely, outside my own.



Reconnectedness 1 (Chicago)



Reconnectedness 2 (South Africa)



Crossing Home (Reconnectedness 3)

Rest Stop, Near Natural Bridge

First in fifty miles,
and the children moving in and out
of vans like products on a line,
the dogs squatting on patches of grass,
students retying area rugs
to their roofs like dead trees.
Me in the last slot, seat reclined,
attempting to forget family under
the pretense of sleep. The rain
has calmed to mist, before the fog,
and it seems separation
isn't possible, moving only the best
illusion of distance, this between
something like destination. When
I open my eyes I'm startled by a young child
pressing on the glass, leaving a hand
of a window through which she stares,
searching for the sign of someone
inside. Just as she sees me, her mother
lets go a high-pitched cry, calling
her in and what can I do
but the same—gather
up my precious belongings,
start the engine,
and continue on?



Reconnectedness 4 (Vietnam)



Reconnectedness 5 (Vietnam)



Reconnectedness 6 (Knoxville)

The Roommate

It's a small house, with enough rooms for silence,
but she breaks it to show me the sphere,
an art project, thin wire and pipe-cleaners, turning it
so the small ball inside, the nucleus, turns
with it. It is a wire heart within a wire body,
a small globe she has made with small hands.
Upstairs, I sculpt with words—
politics on body violence, masses of theory,
the dangers of severance of the body.
She keeps moving wire over wire, tightening the knots,
making each rotation tighter,
but I am unbound here, books
scattered on the floor like construction debris
from this place I'm building, my own cage
through which to view the world
inside a home.



Reconnectedness7 (Knoxville)

If anything is sacred, the human body is sacred.

—*Walt Whitman*, *Leaves of Grass*



Body 2 (Self-portrait)