

NATURAL DOMESTICATED DISASTERS

by

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Natural Domesticated Disasters

Thesis directed by Associate Professor of English Ruth Ellen Kocher

The focus of *Natural Domesticated Disasters* is on the fractured and broken in the domestic realm, specifically upon the gulf between the domestic and the *domesticated*, the power of the American home to ensnare and enslave.

The stories in this collection seek to walk in stride with the middle-aged woman, she who does not get paid enough to give a damn about the air quality around your asthmatic brat of a child, she who devours cigarettes on her retail job break and hovers waiting in the mini-van outside the elementary playground. My objective is for the reader of this manuscript to leave with an urge to hide the kitchen knives, or lock the door, or play loud music to bury their thoughts. I want this collection to feel familiar enough that it tastes slightly sickening, like the soft spots of an over-ripe peach, yet I want the reader to eat those peaches down to the pits.

I believe the best prose is composed of lines you can't ignore. My favorite authors — Donald Ray Pollock, Etgar Keret, David Sedaris, Chuck Palahniuk — have a talent for making their readers itch with a hypnotic manipulation of words. This collection, as a whole, seeks to do the same, to perform those delicate acts that live between *schadenfreude* and pity.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Sitting In Your House, Waiting For Your Welcome
2	Free To Better Home
4	Misunderstand The Gestures But Never My Expression
5	Eating Leftovers
10	Our Therapist Recommended We Work On Communication
11	Hope Is Thing With Feathers Molted and Shred, Home Is A Nest Better Left Abandoned
12	Said The Spider To The Fly
15	Leadbelly Scrapes Bottom
18	A Helping Mechanical Hand
21	Why The Dog Must Die
24	Letters For Our Leader
29	Another Round Of Bullshit Enters A Crowded Room
31	Hogwash
35	My Whore's Heart
37	Fucking Badly
39	The Last Plea From Your Demon
47	Natural Domesticated Disasters
58	Home Is Where The Heart Dies
60	Open Those Pockets For Me
61	God's Obliterated Beauty
63	Bibliography

NATURAL DOMESTICATED DISASTERS

ALISSA M. FEHLBAUM

SITTING IN YOUR HOUSE, WAITING FOR YOUR WELCOME

The walls of this room are incredibly blank but I talk to them, regardless, when they're not too busy grinding migraines into the pulsing cartilage fragments of my skull. Here are basements with no ceilings, holes that are not concave, futures that are not migratory and here is where sometimes I can remember how I arrived but mostly I don't even try.

I have been told I'm quite adept at capturing the meaning of abstractions but I'm not sure what could have possibly compelled such a vulgar untruth because I have dreams of deserts that cause me to wake up face down on the carpet, dry-mouthed and sweating. I'm pretty sure the people who know me best avoid me routinely—I haven't seen them in years—but I've made such mistakes before. There are ways to escape every hallway. Ways that don't involve doors or windows or even moving at all—I've been promised this again and again.

The cardboard box I am waiting in smells like it's been freshly unearthed and it reminds me a little of my childhood bedroom: all humid and cobweb corners and disbelief. The only lamp in the living room does not light so in the night there is only darkness. I like sitting here in that dark, waiting for you to come home, and knowing that the longer I wait the worse everything can become.

FREE TO BETTER HOME

I think the cat knows that I'm leaving him soon.

He's been darting outside any chance he can get and sniffing around the suitcases I've been filling and hiding throughout the house. I caught him meowing into my slowly vacating walk-in closet and I've had to stop him several times from scratching at on the sides of the recliner I'm damn well taking with me but can't fathom how the hell I'll fit it into my car.

I've tried ignoring him like you keep suggesting, but he's forcing himself on me when he claws at my arms as I walk by the kitchen counter or when he scampers between my feet when I walk down the stairs. I swear to god he's trying to kill me and you always laugh, but it isn't funny. This isn't funny anymore. Sometimes he snatches at my waist as I walk through the door, other times he just outright attacks me when I come home. I'm pretty sure he knows I'm not taking him with me and that's just fine because he's always liked you more.

The cat, he understands a lot of things. He can tell when I drink myself into steady concentration on the scent of your hair, the scent of your collar, the tastes on your tongue on those nights you come home so very late from work and fail to say one word to me before stripping down and crawling into our bed. I know the scent of deception. It was three weeks straight before you noticed I'd started smoking again and now the cat, he sniffs at you like you're a stranger every time you come through the front door. But maybe his habit has rubbed off on me, just a little.

The little bastard has taken to nesting in the box spring. Not inside our box spring. Not that I can tell, anyway. He seems to prefer the guest bedroom, but then so do you some nights.

The cat has been collecting things there. Beer bottle caps and paper clips and several of my larger hairpins; the earring I thought I'd lost for sure on some late night taxi ride I don't really remember and that cufflink you accused me of losing, too.

That goddamn cat has destroyed three rolls of toilet tissue this week alone. Finally, I'll admit it, you were right: we should have gotten him declawed when he was a kitten and I don't care at this point if it's considered cruel and inhumane. I don't care because anything with a heartbeat experiences pain at some point, and that goddamn cat has inflicted far more than his fair share upon me. You both have.

But the cat and I, we get along sometimes. We're both quite good at waiting; we both excel at entertaining ourselves. He sits on your shirts when I fold loads of our laundry in between glasses of wine; he paws at my half-smoked cigarettes laid out like a battlefield of tan body bags all across our front porch. The cat, unlike you, doesn't mind my smoking.

The last thing I remember on those empty nights is the cat purring on my stomach. The first thing I feel upon waking is your empty side of the bed and the cat licking my feet. When you ask why all your clothes reek of my perfume I don't have an honest answer and the cat, my orange tabby confidant, is even better at keeping secrets and playing sweet than I am.

I think the cat knows that I'm going to miss him a lot more than I'll miss you.

MISUNDERSTAND THE GESTURES BUT NEVER MY EXPRESSION

My body language is open like a map unfolded for reading look
how my legs cross at my ankles in your compass rosy direction
my elbows jut at angles just for you

I am active I am leaning
forward translate me
bend me to your interpretation

I can perfectly recall
all the words you've scribbled on to napkins
you still haven't memorized my phone number

Suck on that paintbrush while I fixate on my dirty boots
I'll trade my fidget for your itch if you'll be my distraction I'll even sit still
long enough for the paint to dry

Get the focus just right this time, please

Word Count: 105

EATING LEFTOVERS

“I’ve thought about smothering you in your sleep with the body pillow we keep between us,” I tell my husband over Wednesday night’s meatloaf.

“I’d just put it over your face, capital-T-like,” I say, stirring clumps from Thursday’s bowl of instant mashed potatoes, “and then I’d set my knees down on your ears. I imagine you’d wake up, of course.” The crust of the pie I baked this afternoon is a lattice layer of golden-brown that crumbles so perfectly under the polished silver tines of my fork when I slice into the warm, cinnamon-apple filling. “I’d ride the muffled bulge of your face until your legs stopped kicking.”

I watch as a brown liquid drizzles from the spout of his grandmother’s gravy boat to the pile of wet, sweaty lump of food on his plate; watch as it floods over freshly un-canned green beans, swim around the decaying meatloaf, seep over the rim of a plate from our wedding china and bleed onto the linen tablecloth I steam-pressed that morning.

“Probably,” I say, fingering each bead of the pearls hanging around my neck, “because you’ve always been so goddamn reluctant about going down on me.”

My husband does not chew, his eyes do not blink. His hand is frozen, mid-pour, until at last the boat has emptied and the gravy has run from the table to his lap and dribbled onto the white carpet of the dining room floor.

I wake up staring at my husband's shoulder blades every morning and every morning the dark red hairs on his upper arms have crept just a bit further towards his back. This migration has been occurring for decades, slowly advancing like waves lapping at a cliff side until at last an entire cavern forms. Some things cannot be stopped.

I've read about a parasitic worm that invades the body, seen pictures of a man so afflicted. It enters the host as a larva in stagnant water and can grow up to three feet in length when mature. For a year the guinea worm goes unnoticed: the adult female worm has already created a weeping wound for it to burrow in and out of—like some organic needle weaving through blistered, swelling flesh—by the time it is diagnosed. The man in the photograph is shown using a twig to reel the worm out of a sore on his fevered foot and there was an accompanying up-close photo of the reeled-out parasite, so pale and skinny like angel hair, wrapped taught around a small bit of wood that sat innocently like some forgotten, half-finished summer camp craft against the top of his ankle. I can imagine that man waking each morning, winding his foot's twig in slow twisting millimeters until at last the worm was removed from him completely. I can imagine the worm breaking.

I study my husband's back hair and my fingers twitch into pinchers ready to pluck each one, so determined to investigate how far into his skin these red graying curls have rooted. I envision the long strands running just on the inside of his body, under the surface of his skin and down over his shoulders; into his arms and ribs and lungs until they finally bore into the warm, sticky caverns of his heart. Something about that image comforts me. I suspect it's the idea of such a slow death that seems so familiar.

“Everything about us is leftovers,” my husband told me at dinner last week. “I wake up exhausted every morning because I’m so tired of sleeping in the same bed next to you.” He stopped to shove a forkful of turkey down deep into his gullet and I watched as the white meat navigated around his words. “I mean,” he said, still chomping and chewing, “I come home and you ask me how my day was—same fucking tone, same fucking words, even—and I answer in the same goddamn way. Aren’t you tired of sitting stagnant? Don’t you ever lust for something more? Something new?”

I stared at the food on my plate and digested but my husband kept talking, nonetheless.

“Some days I drive past our house so I can pretend I don’t live here.” He said, stabbing the butter in exclamation point then slathering it across his bread roll. “If wasn’t so convinced you’d keep the dog, I’d have been gone by dawn yesterday. You know he likes me better. He won’t even come when you call him.”

This is true.

The dog walker’s hairs—so much longer and blonder than my own—showed up on the underside of my pillowcase after I returned from a weekend away in the mountains for a women’s writing/yoga/hiking retreat. Three of them—supple and bare and curving in a way my body has never been capable—laying right there on the sullen lilac-colored fabric I’d spent weeks searching for in department store after department store before finally deciding to just make our bed’s king-sized quilt and sheet set on my own. I’ve always been fond of projects that take equal parts skill and determination, or so I’ve been told.

Once I saw the hairs on my pillow I found them everywhere: on the passenger headrest of my husband’s luxury sedan, in the bathroom sink on my side of the counter, nestled among the organic kibble in the dog’s food bowl.

Under the living room couch I found a tube of lip-gloss. It glittered like a teeny-bopper pop star on my finger and tasted of over-sugared strawberries. I put all of these things, the hairs and the lip gloss and eventually a torn condom wrapper I found beneath the floor mat of my SUV (the date on the package five years expired) in a plastic sandwich baggie I place in an empty shoebox on my side of the closet.

I wish he'd find it.

Every time I take my husband into my mouth I picture that goddamn dog chewing on a rawhide bone and have to fight the urge to bite my teeth down in the same gnashing rhythm. One night, when his eyes are closed and his breathing is deep and even, I whisper into the gray budding hairs of his ear, "If our marriage was a competition, I would win for keeping secrets," but he's too deep into his post-orgasmic sleep to hear me. He smiles indulgently like the young man I married then rolls over onto his gut, away from me and my side of our bed.

I started tipping the dog walker an extra \$5 a week. She's just a poor college student, after all, and I feel bad for her. I have seen every inch of my husband's body; I know the man that exists beneath that flesh and the faults he is incapable of overcoming.

It's a Sunday, and Sundays mean doing chores around the house—as a couple, at least, because I for one am always doing chores around the house every fucking day—right after we get out of church. During the summer we go to early service to avoid the sun and the sweltering humidity the afternoon always brings, but today we accidentally slept in. I may have forgotten to set the alarm. Or maybe the dog unplugged it.

I've been watching sweat drip down my husband's face from the corner of my eye for hours. The beads travel down his receding hair line; down his bushy, rusting brows then even further to the dirt-filled pores on the tip of his nose, down onto his upper lips where it lingers in an over-moist build up and gets sputtered around in the gasps of his exercise-induced asthma.

I know the wet marks forming along the spine and the armpits of my husband's white cotton polo will leave behind jaundice-yellow stains that I will have to pre-treat and scrub before washing; I can smell the stink of my husband's aftershave mixed with his body odor wafting on every breeze; and yet, I still find myself inexplicably giddy as we garden the front lawn's flower beds.

My husband softly grunts with every weed he pulls while I smile to myself and cultivate the soil. His sweat travels down the crevices of his jowls, and I count each bead that lands one or two drops at a time so silent and steady upon the rosebushes he's trying to prune. I know that the sunlight will burn his salt into the leaves and scorch the petals with a brown-then-blackening mark that will eventually turn porous with tiny pin-prick holes.

I've seen it happen before.

To be burned and penetrated so caustically... the very notion makes me ache a little, far and deep in the bottom-most pit of my stomach. My eyes water with envy. Finally, a burning I'm willing to indulge. I rub my dirty hands on the outside of my thighs and, as if he can feel my stare upon him, my husband turns into the bright afternoon glare and asks me what I'm thinking.

I look at the spade in my hand and tell him my truth.

OUR THERAPIST RECOMMENDED WE WORK ON COMMUNICATION

Even if I wanted to read what I wrote last night aloud right now I couldn't, because I was too drunk to keep my pen upright and the only thing legible on those pages is the anger in the slanted scrawl of my handwriting and the words, "fuck" and "I hate you."

Thanks so much for saying I have a way with words when we both know if that were in the least way true we wouldn't be seeing that quack shrink you picked out of the phone book, your son wouldn't be smearing his shit all over the bathroom stalls at school, and the dog wouldn't have shed half his coat from hiding under our bed when we're screaming in whispers to each other.

Sorry for deviating on the phone earlier.

\$600 a week should be fine

Love you.

-Me

Word Count: 150

**HOPE IS A THING WITH FEATHERS MOLTED AND SHRED,
HOME IS A NEST BETTER LEFT ABANDONED**

Your mother was a seamstress. She joined every feather and single gold sequin together for those wings, nearly sent her arthritic knuckles numb into the night while you slept, her gray eyes so tired and so weary.

Your father was a blacksmith. He shaped the bow of your cupid arc, hammered the metal out of your family's silver serving set and fired it with his black, rough hands in the kitchen's angry brick hearth long into the evening, even when he had been up and working longer than the sun that day. The wiry pinions he harnessed were sturdy and constructed perfectly for you.

They were lost so easily. Those wings, those fragile things, your mother helped you search desperately in the snow for several frigid hours, they would not be found until spring, by your father, in a patch of sunlight slowly weeping ice in the creek bed.

Mangled, rusted, the feathers missing or completely clumped and frozen, your father made you carry those wings all the way back to his work bench and your mother, during dinner, wouldn't meet you in the eye. They ate silently, they sighed heavily, their cheeks ruddy, disappointed—not in you, of course—but in their hopes, so dashed and foolish, and that last chance they worked so hard to provide for you to escape this place.

SAID THE SPIDER TO THE FLY

The fly is trapped. The fly is trapped in the window. The fly lives between two panes of existence. I know that the fly will perish soon if I keep it trapped in the window. I have yet to decide what the fate of the fly will be.

I keep my husband's heart in a jar on the windowsill. The sun shines down, the wind blows warm and cold, but no flies can invade the jar. My husband's jar is sealed tight but still I open it, sometimes. Sometimes I open the jar and I hold his heart in my hands. My husband's heart, it beats just for me.

The wings of the fly beat against the windowsill.

The buzzing of the fly is muffled through the glass.

While he slept I listened to my husband's heart beat through his chest. I could feel each pulse if I rested my finger on his jugular. His breathing was always deep and regular. Sometimes I would fall asleep beside him, listening to his breaths going in and out and in again. Each rise and fall of my husband's chest was slow and melodic and living.

The fly in the window perturbs me.

It knocks against the glass and the screen and back again.

The fly searches for escape. There is none.

When my husband was sleeping I would run my fingers along his neck and cheek and ear. I would study the follicles of hair sprouting in stubble fields on his chin. I would count his dark eyelashes while his eyes fluttered, innocent and unknowing, safely beneath their lids. When my husband woke he would look into my eyes that were searching his.

My eyes, he said, were my best feature.

It has been hours now, and still the fly continues beating against my window.

How long must I wait?

The fly is a pest, but my cat is no longer here to make it prey. My husband hated my cat. Cats, he said, are predatory animals, meant to keep away pests in the barn and not meant to be kept indoors. They serve no function, he said, but to hunt. My husband was a hunter. We had no barn. My cat was still put outside.

The fly is a filthy creature.

It feeds on garbage and shit and the dead.

I hold my husband's heart to the glass of the window.

The fly stands still.

When I hold my husband's heart in my hand I am gentle, even though my hands are calloused now in his remembrance, I am gentle. I run a fingertip over each edge of ventricle, my fingers trace every branch of veins. My husband's heart beats and it beats just for me. His heart is shriveled, so bitter and black now, but I can't help holding it still. I loved my husband. At night he held me close to him and his hunter arms never left my side. My husband was a sure shot. Gun in hand, he always provided. My husband was a soldier, once. He never took orders lightly.

This is not the first fly to invade the homestead. We kept a net over the crib. We kept nets in the doorway. We kept nets in the windows.

My husband was a hunter and he brought our food home. The carcasses hung in our shed. The flies nested into fur, in the blood dripping onto the floor. My cat stayed in the shed, but not for long.

The wings of the fly slow as night creeps over the window. The wings flutter then the wings don't move at all. The meat weeps plentiful in the shed. My husband's heart sits in the windowsill. His heart beats strong in my hands.

There is no weeping in the winter. There is only thawing in the spring. The summer spills blood onto the shed floor. The autumn mercifully takes the living with it.

LEADBELLY SCRAPES BOTTOM

There's not much to look at.

A few metal pipes rooting out of concrete at sharp angles that have edges that are even sharper with rust; cracks that carry deep across the pocked and cratered foundation like a roadmap. The smell of freshly disturbed dirt hangs in the air—it's wet but not too wet to stop digging—and the sharp sounds of earth-moving machinery backing up and breaking ground is doing nothing to quell your Monday morning hangover. Past the tree line of overgrown pines, about hundred yards in, is a stomach's worth of black coffee and greasy scrambled eggs. You're sure you can smell it still, even way over here, and the cherry flavor of your nicotine gum has only managed to enhance the fresh taste of your vomit.

"You look like shit," Dwayne spits too close to your boots for your liking, and you're tempted, quite sorely, to say, *Fuck you, Dwayne, I popped your daughter's cherry when we were both in the tenth grade and I hope your pacemaker finally gives out today*, but you do not because Dwayne would deck you out cold with a sledgehammer, no question, before you could even tell him it happened in his own bed.

Plus, you do look like shit. You feel even worse.

You can't remember last night or the last few days. Well, that's not exactly true. There are bits and pieces. But nothing is cemented... Shadows run just at the surface, something tugs at the line beneath your feet.

"Wake the fuck up, Finch." Snap to Campbell, who, a little too hard, is pushing at your shoulder with the bit end of his jackhammer. You are standing on the air compressor hose.

You are awake. Say so.

“Says you,” Campbell’s reply comes covered in the dust of a buzzsaw. Sweat runs down both sides of his crooked beak of a nose. Your forearm swipes your forehead. You’ve been up longer than the sun and it’s flogging you early. The pines clump close and cover most of the site in shade but there’s no escape from the humidity; spring brings thunderstorms that roll in almost every afternoon and the work has been slow-going. The only luck so far has been in the soil and no clay is damp and forgiving.

Everything else has been one fucked delay after another. You’ve never been on a demo that’s taken this goddamn long, no one has, goddammit, you mutter, goddammit, and goddammit everyone is pissed off. This is very pissed off work.

You are a human excavation machine. You dig. You claw. Your head is a pounding wasp nest on fire, burning-red and angry and your hands have long lacked the capacity to register pain, all of your body is numb. You dig with your entire body because this is what a little dumbass leadbelly like you, Finch, have to do, so you don’t even feel that surge of high voltage stop you, hard, you’ve hit bottom, you’ve hit me. Not a single floodlight on the site even blinks, no one has even noticed yet.

Shocking. Breaking through the precious flaps of your flesh, is me; I am combing through your shale-bones bound so tightly with its precious rootlings and clay innards; everything within you so wet and fresh and burnt-orange, so rough and pulsating and breathing. You have finally hit bottom, you have finally hit me.

You have broken into me, Finch. Your shoulders swings and so does the shovel, up and back, the dirt goes over before you have a chance to stop yourself from breaking so deeply me,

Finch, can't stop you can't drop that handle from your hands. Don't even think to drop the handle, don't think to stop digging at me.

Keep your mouth shut. Keep digging. The trench for the ground line has to get in today. You showed up an hour late this morning, you show up late an hour late every Monday morning because every Monday morning you wake up hungover and shivering, miserable with the taste of cherry-flavored nicotine vomit fresh in your mouth again, too tired to give a fuck about what did or didn't happen over the weekend, those precious blank spots between five straight days of this hell job; so fuck where you slept last night, you have to keep digging. You haven't truly broken me yet.

Keep your mouth shut. Stop gagging at the smell of me mixed with the vomit on your shoes. Keep digging. Your eyes will follow mine, my eyes in the tree branches, your boots will sink further into my wet gravel settled in sediment, you will feel my fingers knot rope across your collar bones and run you through with iron strands and metal trenches. Keep your mouth shut and keep digging.

You are awake. Say so.

Very good, my little Finch, very good.

A HELPING MECHANICAL HAND

The robot will scoop the cat's litter box before picking up your slacks from the dry cleaners. The robot will unclog your gutters. The robot will unclog and unclutter your entire house. The robot will make meatloaf that tastes better than your grandmother's blue ribbon recipe, in less time and with more care baked into every perfectly-portioned slice.

The robot will pick you up from the airport when your redeye flight has arrived and from the bar when it's last call. It will erase your Internet history. It will feed and water your houseplants, renew your magazine subscriptions before they expire, and sing to your toddler during naptime while folding your laundry.

The robot will remind you that your wedding anniversary is coming up and then sign your name to the bouquet and card it bought because it knew you'd still forget. The robot will cut the crusts off your chicken salad sandwich. It will argue successfully on your behalf against frivolous lawsuits. It will accost every bully from your childhood on the street and force them to eat a piece a dog shit, just like you were forced to do by your older brother's best friend in the alley behind your childhood home as your brother belly-laughed on his feet and you cried and cursed your eight-year-old life into the shit-smeared pavement.

The robot will cure your older brother's liver cancer years later, and you will watch as he regresses back into the asshole he was before he was dying. The robot might be able to make your brother's liver cancer come back. Just a little.

The robot will tell you exactly what to say to get your teenaged step-daughter to respect you again. It will always remember that you like your whiskey neat. It will balance your check

book, file your taxes, sort out the recycling, notice your slightest weight loss and help you quit smoking. The robot will never let your bathroom run out of easily accessible rolls of toilet paper. The robot will keep your hedges trimmed within the Home Owner Association guidelines. The robot will pat your knee in a reassuring manner while you're waiting for test results at the doctor's office and keep those results confidential when they finally, depressingly, come in.

The robot will fuck your wife. It will give her multiple orgasms and it will do it even better than the shower attachment she picked out when she redecorated the master bathroom with your Christmas bonus. The robot will wash the dog with this shower attachment and some nights you'll come home from work to find the showerhead set on jet-engine pulse: the dog will still be filthy and smell like the death of whatever it rolled in while you weren't home, but at least your wife will be in a fantastic mood. On these evenings you'll try to come up with a joke about dirty masturbating bitches while shampooing your hair with something that's supposed to smell like vanilla and pomegranates, but none of your awkward passive-aggressive puns will seem worth waking your wife over when you see that she's already gone to sleep. The dog will be asleep too, covering your side of the bed with fur and pollen and dirt and shit particles.

The robot will change your sheets in the morning.

The robot will appear in dreams in which it will confide in you the things it's never told anyone else. You will not be able to remember these things upon waking. The robot will never tell anyone about the time it found you piss-soaked and shallow-pulsed in the monoxide filled garage, or how you cried and trembled onto its gleaming robot shoulders like an exhausted infant afterwards. The robot will never tell anyone how you kissed it that night—softly, chastely, like a shy lover—on its robot mouth. The robot will know better.

The robot will return your library books in a timely manner. It will pull out a chair for you to sit. It will wash your most private places with all the skill and interest of dedicated nurse when you're elderly and bed-ridden. It will make you coffee and ask if you took your multivitamin. It will pick out the shirt that best brings out your eyes. It will call you at work sometimes, just to see how your day is going. It will laugh at your stupid jokes. It will encourage your hopeless goals. The robot will know that you're incapable of loving yourself.

The robot will love you, anyway.

WHY THE DOG MUST DIE

The dog must be taught a lesson.

The dog has been teasing you. He has been calling you names, calling you a stupid bitch, a little pussy. He has mocked you more than once for the piss stains on your bed, flaunts how even he is housetrained. The dog needs to be taught that if he can't say something nice he won't be able to say anything at all.

The dog must be stopped.

He's been giving you looks out of the corner of his eye and these glances last too long, they make you uncomfortable. He's been searching in your closet, trying to unearth all of your treasures and find all your buried secrets: the keys you found that work to your older sister's journal, the hair clip shaped like a peacock feather in the back of your mother's make-up drawer. Old undies with tears and holes and stains. Other things that you have tried so hard to keep hidden. One morning you forgot to close the closet door all the way and when you came home from school and there he was, the dog was in your closet. You yelled and kicked but he keeps trying to get in and he's going to find everything, one day. You have to stop him, and soon, because it's going to happen any day now, everything will come out unless you stop him.

The dog should be punished.

He found the squirrel you were watching in your secret spot between the fence and the back wall of the shed. The dog brought pieces of your squirrel into the living room and made your mother screech and dance around the carpet, up onto the sofa and as far away as she could get from the slobbery bits of your little squirrel's body. That was your project. You needed all of

those parts. You had been inspecting the squirrel every day, studying the trail of ants that carried away its black little eyeballs and the mites that took to nesting in its rough fur. The decay of the squirrel was slow, for sure, but you knew that this death was living, watching it made you feel alive in ways you'd never felt before. The body bloated and deflated, it made smells that were familiar and stomach-twisting and comforting, all at the same time. That was your squirrel. You loved it, maybe. Entire afternoons were spent in attempts to gain its trust. You camped out beneath your mother's birdfeeder every afternoon until the squirrel was willing to eat birdseed right from the palm of your hands. Your mother kept warning you that the damn rodent would bite you, give you bloody rabies, but it never did. If anyone should have been scared, it should have been the squirrel: you were surprised by how easily its little neck broke with just a simple twist of your hand, how familiar it felt to twisting the plastic bag of a loaf of bread closed, but with a little more snap and a lot more pops. The dog should be punished for ruining what was yours.

The dog has to disappear.

Your father values him too much. He pets him with whichever hand isn't holding his J&C or pawing his balls. Your father talks to the dog in a way he's never talked to you. He strokes the dog with adoration in his eyes. Your father only ever touches you when you walk in front of the TV, and then it's by the shoulders and his grip is so hard that you bruise, and all the girls in the locker room see these bruises and look away with what you think might be guilt or shame. Your father would never hit the dog. Your father would miss the dog much more than you, if you ran away he wouldn't give a damn but if the dog ran off tomorrow he'd be distraught, inconsolable. Your father would love and appreciate you a lot more if you the dog were to disappear forever.

The dog needs to learn what right and wrong means.

He has been telling you to do things you don't want to do—things your parents have told you are very, very bad. You cut your sleeping sister's hair off to her earlobes just to make him stop barking at you about it. You felt bad doing about doing it, too. The next day was picture day at school and your sister wept angry, frustrated tears all morning. Your mother was furious, too. When she asked why you cut her sister's hair, why, why did you chop off your sister's hair, the dog was adamant that you not tell the truth. He told you if you told anyone about him—utter any whining at all—that the whole world would find out what a twisted and perverted freak you are. So you kept your trap shut. The dog demands stuff like this all the time. He made you explore your neighbor's house the day after they moved out and told you exactly where to find the book of matches in that bathroom drawer and what to do with those old newspapers stacked in the vacant garage. The dog watched fascinated as the flames climbed up the wall, his tail wagging, and you watched, too, absolutely fixated on the giggling of the flames. The dog led you out the back door, into the dark night of the backyard, just as the sirens screeched up to the sidewalk. You were giddy in your escape until you saw the full scope of your actions—the charred, sickening framework of your behavior in the morning. The dog will lead you into darker places, and you know it. You don't want to know, but you do. Your every committed misdeed, all your future sins, they eat at your insides. The dog needs to know what this deep wrong hurting feels like.

Word Count: 990

LETTERS FOR OUR LEADER

Dear Brave Tyrant,

I am circling my square nine-foot-wide floor and knotting up this rusted ankle chain and cursing your mother and your name. It is raining through the chicken wire that rails over this barbarian barbed-and-ironed wallpaper and so desperately have I razored my dreams into these plywood kennel walls onto my skin. Too quickly the words jerk out of my grasp and escape from beneath my framing palms.

I am cursing your name and my fate equally, Dear Brave Tyrant, and this is not the first time. Nothing but time have you ever given me, but don't dare to dream it will be our last exchange. I have been giving glances—backwards and upright and several ways over across—to the railroad yards surrounding this cage and I have been scraping away at the silver-headed plate of this world. I am patient and I am waiting for time. Time will radiate out over the spoilt clocks, time will devour your shaking hands and you, Dear Brave Tyrant, will fall barefoot and nude without bile lining your stomach valves and without chiseled armor, without the calloused bottoms of your soles and without your long dark eyelashes. You will live forever in the desert of remorse, in time. Dear Brave Tyrant, I have foreseen this all as clearly as I have penned it here, pained and bloody. Time will consume you just as you have consumed me, and as completely.

Post Script:

You should run, Dear Brave Tyrant, run, while you have escaped me and run quickly. You may whip and lash but still I will rip to shreds your leather halters. My eyes will see outside

of these zippers once more before I'm buried under the water's edge of your orders. Those muddy waters of that cracked porcelain tub in which you have tried to drown me so many times, that attempt at a final holding baptism will not soak me, no matter how forcefully I am plunged.

Dear Brave Tyrant,

These wrists will come un-handcuffed. My mouth will smirk un-gagged. Memories still tick within me and I feel each one crawling up and branching down every nerve. A great bloom will come into spring, I have penned it into your glory story; a great bloom will rise and it will mutilate you beyond mutilation, and you will be forced to recall each wound with me. Your body will be snatched by mine. My bones will live atop yours.

Once upon a time, my Dear Brave Tyrant and I fought shoulder to shoulder. Our firebombs wept down upon the coiling lines of close-curtained hearses and those ants, we squashed them wholly. They broke from their simple line parade march and ran with their broods into chaos, their black funeral cloaks were dots of sparks running between the granite mausoleums. Together we laughed like children as we watched the weak race into their humble wheat fields where more of our breaks waited. The medals and buttons adorning our jackets shook with the reverberation of our hefted shoulder cannons, the badges on our chests melted under the heat from the lobbing bombs we'd thrown. We reloaded and we aimed. We swore if we died in the blitzkrieg that our fallen corpses would grin great crooked, foggy snouts onto Death's glass window panes. We fired and reloaded, fired and reloaded, fired and reloaded until we too were aflame.

Dear Brave Tyrant,

Your undoing will hurt my heart, truly.

As a child your smoke rings were carried by the moths that swarmed your porch light, they tapered away like they were always meant to circle the moon. Even when the graying billows of your faceless clouds swelled my irises red, I glowed and I glowed for you, my Dear Brave Tyrant. I cannot begrudge the sun's adulterating mistress: in battle your hair falls from your helmet in renegade waves to your shoulders and the thrum of adrenaline in your marching blood dilates your pupils until they become impossibly round pools of bulleted ink and oh, Dear Brave Tyrant, I admit you are truly stunning.

You are stunning in those news reels and tri-color posters; tearing your war elephants over the telephone poles in Malaysia with a burning pool of rubble buried deep in your every footstep. I ache to be there at your side, Dear Brave Tyrant where the bitter aftertaste of crystalline grains on your tongue affronts every set of lips you take captive and your charming commands claim quick victory over dominion. "War infects and impassions the saintly just as much as it invigorates and emboldens the wicked," my own rhetoric in your mouth reasons, and I would never have written those words if I did not so fully believe them, if I had known you would lock me away where, My Brave Tyrant, where I am forced to be away and forced ache for you.

Your uniform has found the top of my rough sheets again, I wake and you fall away so deeply, back into the crevices of my sleep. I wake and I am ragged, breathless and shivering despite the boiler pipes of this ribcage and my burial blankets. I wake and I am bloody from scratching bites that pimple my limbs and stomach from these fever plagues. I wake and I remember where I've hidden the key that opens these locked cells. I wake and I contemplate

setting myself on fire. I wake and I pace and I circle my nine-foot-wide square and send my ankle chain scraping across this concrete, cursing you, Dear Brave Tyrant, and my fate for our greed and passion to destroy.

My Dear Brave Tyrant,

You have wounded me. The lines drawn by brutalities are known best to the dandelion that battles with the wind, so pierce deeply into my vital seeds, Dear Brave Tyrant, my sharp slicing debaser, push me down into your rich fields with truthful, fruitful visions and forgive the anxious vibrating so inspired upon me. I have entrenched my mind in your soil; you cannot grow further without me. Fold me back out into the deep, Dear Brave Tyrant. Drip into my rooted heartbeat some draught of precious pouring because I've been pissing into this ink for weeks and nothing, not one goddamn word, has sent your vertebrae vibrating into air raid warnings. I've traversed this heart three ways plus three ways more in hopes something will race out of this carapace that cages me. My fractal bones are pierced together with iron studs exhausted and I can feel my pieces floating away in the air, each part identifiable by its own blood-tagged discretions. Pray my mind will slice apart and read just as clearly: run me over easy, an eggshell skewered on a thumbnail-sized razor and a tuned pitchfork. Those barbed wires will run out sometime, even thicker through my veins.

My Dear Brave Tyrant,

You have eaten me up at last.

I sing wild this final song you're too busy to hear. You've heard this chorus before but won't be able to identify these chords—even though I've showed them to you thousands of times before—and these chimes that ring now won't reach your mind. We swore on our first battlefield

that we would fall from this world together. Dear Brave Tyrant, you will keep that campaign promise with me, whether you intend to or not.

ANOTHER ROUND OF BULLSHIT ENTERS A CROWDED ROOM

Let's play Truth or Dare.

I have never been very good with names but you should play along, anyway, because I am so very desperate to answer your questions. I will answer honestly, but only when you're looking me in the eyes. My teeth are pearly white with the residue of my purest intentions and my nails have been polished to hide all the shit that lies beneath them.

I promise not to tell you any of this.

Maybe next year will offer a good season for reason. The only luck I've found so far was buried deep beneath a dead oak tree, but then I've always thought hunting to be stupid. I will apply antiseptic to the scratches on my arms before I start blaming you for taking us so far off this conversation's path, and you, you will chug that chalky liquid until I am able to diagnose all the causes of your heart ache. The bruising on your wrists will fade over time, I imagine.

I imagine you a lot.

I will blow my smoke in your face and you won't bat an eyelash. I will hand you drinks that you will chug down without asking what's in it. It was imperative that I got here before anywhere else and you are very lucky I have arrived so quickly and in such dizzying speeds, my fantastic prowess trailing behind me and, no, no, I didn't hear what you were saying but don't bother repeating it.

I apologize, I am barely passing for polite around this time every day and you're overrunning any levels of tolerance I'd stored away and really, you should just pass me over for

the attention of someone else, someone much more understanding and interesting than I can be, even when I'm here right now in front of you, radiating at my best.

I don't mind, not at all, not from the likes of you, not in the very least.

HOGWASH

I have stitched each finger to my palm. From knuckle to nail I have needled black thread in and out, strong and double, until it looks as if my skin stops and starts within my fists just like my brothers have promised forever. A train somewhere in the distance crosses a bridge I've never seen but the tracks wash through the thick tree trunks and slip between the cracks of these barn walls, whispering outside news that is impossible to ignore: *These rocks will not unstone today, today these rocks will not unstone! Today is Slaughter! Today is Slaughter! These rocks will not unstone!* It's so happy a song. I sing it true like I have sang for weeks and singe my needled hems on the burners of the gas range. Today is black and white and I've woken early to see it gray. My charcoals glow cherry red but too soon turn to ash as I grasp them inwards. My stomach rumbles empty.

My stupid little piggy hates my morning kisses. She jolts alive just as my pocket knife plunges across her teats, burrs into her shoulder flanks. I clutch and twist until I feel the blade peck upon the wood boards beneath her and the thread running my hands tighten with each lick.

Piggy's pink tongue thralls out of her toothy-mouth. Piggy shits fear onto older piles of fear on the sloppy floor. Stupid little piggy gives shrilly grunts. Stupid little piggy gives filthy hollers. Stupid little piggy screams and screams until my knuckles are juttied in bony ridges and I am forcing piggy's curses back down into her maw, exactly like my brothers showed me.

Stupid piggy tries to escape like she has tried to escape before but the chains on the wall rattle and chatter in the same chatty conversation that holds all stupid little piggy sows in place. My stupid little piggy doesn't know any better, my stupid little sow has not learned that lesson

yet, but today is Slaughter and my piggy must be prepared. I pull piggy out the barn, the sun's rising hovers over our shadows. The yard mushes dark red under my swollen feet—the leathers of my soles wore away marches ago and the barn and the broom have gone strawless. No orders buzz over the static of radio waves but every night me and my brothers still listen. The river will not unfreeze and the snow boils brown over butane torches. The canteens cannot go without filling even if stomachs will.

Stupid little piggy is going to bloat us back happy.

Piggy hates going outside. Her nubby little knees try to catch and grip in the mud. I push and whip her forward but stupid piggy mucks deeper. More work for me. I have to wash piggy.

“You have nowhere to go, stupid piggy,” I heave over her bleating. “Nowhere to go but Slaughter soon.”

My strongest brother, splitting wood for the fire, laughs and spits lucky when me and piggy pass him. I lash piggy to the splitting tree. The barrel my brothers patched is full of rain water and waiting. My youngest brother has pulled rope and cords from the creek bed. My oldest brother has sharpened his best razor on whetstone. I ground up roots and salt rocks for days to make the brine for piggy's bath. Little piggy eyes grow wide. Her saggy sow nipples shrink up into little nubs in the soaking.

“Hold still,” I put to piggy. “This will only going to hurt if you move.” But stupid little piggy is stupid and I have to hold her head under the salty water before she finally understands, until piggy passes under. Piggy baths always go smoother this way.

Hard and tight I tie piggy to the tree to dry and collect her dressings, the entire way I titter. Stupid little piggy looks like a pudgy baby: her bare skin splotched and hairless, her brow

contorted and mouth wide open in a silent fidget scream. Piggy won't be buried like the babes she birthed or like the bulbs in fall. Stupid little piggy won't be buried at all.

I poke at piggy's tender ribs when I pluck and hook her over and have to swallow down mouthfuls of my wet, sweaty thoughts, my sinful fantasies of sucking rails of marrow and slabs of muscles marbled over in her fatty back bacon, her charbroiled skin flayed into thick fillets.

"I am going to eat you, my stupid little piggy," I stroke her, "I am going to chew you right up raw." Stupid little piggy purrs under my hands.

Stupid piggy got loose in the woods once and we didn't capture her for weeks. There was no point in running her. The same ropes of barbed wire I use to whip her into walking, those enclose the tree lines, too. Stupid piggy thought she was smarter than me and my brothers and that she could outwit our traps and root out and away from us. My little piggy sow thought she knew our ways, but stupid little piggy sow is stupid. She doesn't know how to read and she doesn't know how to write and she doesn't know how good my brothers and I are at hunting and hiding and fighting.

Those woods only seem like an escape. You can still find old paths if you know where to look but all of them end in brambles, regardless of which way you turn. It takes a skilled eye to read futures and my stupid little piggy suffers from tunnel vision. The misfortune that she has fallen upon us fails to wash away our sweat and worse, for too long our guts have rotted empty and sat see-through.

Stupid little piggy is going to color us in good.

"Rocks will rot unstone to way!" My stupid piggy chirps over and over, grinning big and dumb as I wheelbarrow her to the plank. "To lay this daughter! To lay this daughter! Rocks will rot unstone!"

My brothers hoist her, our stomachs thunder. Stupid little piggy bats her eyes at the smoke we blow into her nostrils. She sneezes at our spices and powders. When she keeps kicking and twisting each of my brothers takes a limb and pulls her still.

“Please, brooders, please!” Stupid piggy cries, her bloated body stutters heavy. My brothers bend her open for me and I thrash my threaded fists about her face and ears a few times, goodbye, my stupid piggy sow, goodbye, and my knife clutches diagonal into her soft undercheek. “No, brooder, no,” goes stupid little piggy squealing. I smile and she smiles bloody, her yellow teeth peaked and grouted and I know I’ll unroot all thirty-two of her cute little piggy teeth long before today is over. My tongue crosses piggy’s skin, her jaw unstapled from tendon. I lash at her salty flesh, registering each bump and scab and scar and quiver that continues even after my brothers join in to my gouging. Stupid little piggy chokes and thrashes, her blood paces out bright on our hands until at last she is fully inside us, devoured. My threaded fingers have hardened into calloused hooves and my brothers are panting around me, so hungry and thirsty still.

MY WHORE'S HEART

hunger-fucked and angry,
my whore devours
tubes of raging ruby red
lipstick to make her insides
match the outsides of her pumps
scuffed soles worn
thin like she got nothing,
not a damn dime
zero nickels zero pennies zero
excuses for leaving babies
smeared on cracked out sidewalks,
drowning in this acid rain pour
broken ribs, breaking chests
bloating, heaving, screaming, crying,
“o lord what corner did my whore mama tramp off into this time?”
“why she so dead and danced fancied face down on broken bottles?”
damn dimes drop
hard on dark ground
my whore can't see
she is the butt of my cigarette jokes
with ragged holes in her torn panties

send her whore hands packing
south to pick pockmarks,
scab her strained whore knees
on the snarled teeth of slobby dogs,
chase her into stains
that are hers and not
hers are fully-formed abortion bruises,
bones of wire hanging on raw memories
of back-alley abuses
where not a fucking dime gets laid
this red will play out
like junk dollar slots and scratch-offs
this red will pay out
in a curb stomp
a curb stomp
on her stupid whore
fuck of a heart
left retching always
in the gutter for more

Word Count: 205

FUCKING BADLY

When I pinned you on the ground and moved my lips against your firmly unmoving ones I was so nervous that sweat dripped off the bridge of my nose and forehead onto your own flushing cheeks. I knew that this wasn't the way it was supposed to go but I held fast to your shoulders anyway. I tried to hush your words with my tongue in your mouth and I tried to inhale your gasps for air, but I only managed to get my fingers tangled in with the bits of twigs and leaves in your hair, and I accidentally nicked your lip a few times with my incisors. My arms gave out from having to hold you down. The cold wind made your hands shake and shiver. I blame myself for not being more prepared.

I only wanted to feel you give in to me a little; only wanted you to see I'm not so bad after all. Even when I spread your legs apart I was thinking of your comfort: when I ground my body into yours against the dirt I was seeking that friction just for you. I want to do everything for you. I want to do everything to you. My feelings for you are wet ink on crumpled paper—completely incomprehensible and subject only to the scrutiny of your expert interpretation.

I am tired of being lured into sleep here by darkness overcoming candlelight. I am tired of the drum beats that echo off these cavern walls and I am tired of feeling the water drip down my spine all the time on these days so great and so parallel in distance while so far apart in measure, like a heartbeat a part in measure: a heart beat a part a heart beat a heart a heart a heart. Mold grows over this doorway. The ghosts of this forest knock their knuckle bones all over wooden branches, they screech like yard owls fighting over bones in the tree lines. There's not a night I don't find myself praying in the corner for relief. There's not a night I don't find myself praying for you. Your last letter was just three pages long and mostly about yourself. I

only had to read it once. This was much harder than I thought it would be. Leave your mark on these walls and I'll return my own to these pages: thumb prints into ink regardless of intentions and stains saturate every layer of me, beyond skin and beyond recognition. I want you, for once, to squirm in a good way at my touch. I want you to kiss me back. I want you to smile. I want you live. I want you to live for me only. I want you. I want you so fucking badly.

THE LAST PLEA FROM YOUR DEMON

Is this what it comes down to?

Writing these frantic words so that maybe—maybe—there will be a record left once I have been torn apart? Jesus Christ, I can hear them coming even though you are still miles from me yet. I will let you take me, Father, God, I will.

You will deliver me unto salvation.

Yesterday morning I walked Gato out to the woods because I fear what they might do to him if they discover he is the only being I have felt a deep kinship towards, perhaps—dare I say it?—even loved. I have wasted many minutes today staring at his fur on my clothing and sheets; trying not to cry every time I notice his half-full food bowl, trying not to remember the way he pawed the water from his dish or tried to catch the birds through the window. There are fresh scratches on my arms where I held him tightly to me—he struggled and growled the entire time on our journey to the wilderness—and oh God, how I wet his face with my tears. What's worse is that the little bastard needed no prompting from me when I set him on the ground: he quickly dashed for a bird in the distance like he had spent his entire existence in anticipation of being let go. When I started walking towards the village I kept looking back, expecting Gato to follow me or at least look to see where I was going, but he never acknowledged our parting. I even expected him to be mewing at the front door this morning, but maybe cats can smell impending doom and he has the wits to stay away. At worst they'll assume I've eaten him, too.

I'm sorry. You always hated when I try to be funny in serious moments. I will be serious now. I will be truthful for you here. I will lay my sins, bare, right here for you to read and I am

sorry, I am truly so sorry I couldn't say them aloud. It hurt too much to be honest and I've never been very good at meeting your eyes. You became too much too at reading my own.

The first life I took belonged to a man. He looked so industrious in his tie and hat, biking towards the sweaty, smoking factories with his battered, business-only briefcase balanced on the shiny handle bars. When I charged at him he swerved with such force that the case went flying into the overflowing ditch weeds. I laughed at the stupid surprise on chiseled face, laughed so hard my sides hurt even after I had finished tearing out his throat. It still makes me chuckle a little even now but I think that might be the hysteria; it's catching, or so I hear. Maybe you had to be there. Maybe you were.

Maybe you were standing with me in that ditch, in spirit, because I remember smiling all the way back up the hill to my house, outright grinning at how refreshing it was to feel so comfortable. So familiar. So at home. I had to walk slowly to make sure the pedals of the business man's bicycle didn't tangle in my skirts, but I didn't mind at all because everything was green and bright and glorious and beautiful. At the top of my hill—just before the rutted drive that by now you, yourself, are so familiar—I walked the bike into the river and watched the current ride it down the submerged stones of the water's path in a graceful sort of way, a way that a man in a tie is never capable. He had tasted just as dull as his starched shirt and leather loafers, his thoughts about timetables and spreadsheets and spending reports had overwhelmed any organic sweetness he might have possessed, many of the lives I took tasted the same.

"The impulse to gag in the face of each memory is entirely the point." I've heard you say that a hundred times. Prayed it with you a thousand times more.

Maybe sometimes you didn't know and for that I apologize.

When you take me I wonder if you will feel like I have felt when I have taken one of them. There is power in dominance over dominion—a power in the art of devouring a life whole—and I have subsisted on it for so long that is difficult for me to remember a time where I did not exist solely to quench that need.

I wonder, will you do it with the same grace and flourish I have attempted so many times? Did you notice that I tried?

I am sorry for being so blunt.

I followed your daughter for months before I took her, wholly convinced her willfulness and rebellion would make her taste wild, but all I found in her blood was a need for attention that left my tongue itching for days. I think, in retrospect, I was hoping she would taste like you. How fateful was it, that it was you, Father, it was you who found me months after her disappearance was written off as a tragic tale of another small town runaway, another lamb lost to the damnation lying within the city walls? Oh, no doubt, Father, no doubt.

Never doubt that my heart has been devoted to you, completely.

I never said I wasn't a liar and sometimes you were all too willing to look away, you were all too willing to look away and I'm so thankful for it because I don't regret a single struggle. I have faith. I have my faith because of you. You taught me about penitence and the meaning of remorse and the many faces of forgiveness.

Do you think God has a sense of irony? Or did irony just force its own way into the world, a natural disaster born of fateful mutation?

After I took the old woman I went home and wept like a frustrated child; felt the emptiness in my chest vibrate deep as the heart-beating pulse of a head submerged underwater.

Never before had I wished to die but at that moment I wished for death more than anything. I prayed to be struck down by some force more divine than my own hands at my own neck because that old woman, that old devious cow, had been able to hold me off for a few moments with her wicked tongue and I despised myself for succumbing to such weakness.

“Child,” she softly crooned in the face of my bared teeth. My spit dripped onto her polished floorboards. “What in Heaven’s name have you done to yourself?”

I hesitated, I did, may mighty God damn me, I did, but I could not address her question because I truly did not know the answer. My madness never permits me to focus, not for long, not when I’m hungry. The old woman’s bare, gnarled toes twitched to inch forwards but I’d already circled her in my wide, sure steps before she could turn her dusty cowl even once in my direction.

I am the rabid fox prowling in your henhouse.

I am the copperhead snaking up the leg of your baby’s pram.

And God save me, I hunger.

I tell you this only because if you are reading these words then you have never truly known it you will not survive the encounter I urge you to run, run now. I am consumed and I am hungry, hungry even more than that night, that night when the old bitch sniffed at me—no, no— she snorted, she inhaled so deeply—too deeply—at the air near my hair and my shoulders and I could see the whiskers on her chin jerk with the recognition of her kin, her sister, her sin and her standing there before me was too much, she knew too much, and I was so burdened with no time for her questions, not from her, not from that whore, not from her, that traitor.

“You smell like-” were the woman’s last spoken words before my hunger took control of me then as it does tonight, just as strongly if not more so. It’s a fever, an angry, blood hunger and

my whole body feels it come on in the snap of my spine. I can't turn it off, don't you know that if I could that I would, because I swear it shakes my teeth, this fever, this perversion I've indulged it too many times, God save me I bit into the old woman's throat until my tongue found her jugular and then I gnashed at the thick threaded vein until it broke because I wished to drink deeper, not to know satiation but to destroy what pained me and the old woman did not try to escape. She wrapped her hands around my back, pulled me closer to her with her thick wrinkled fingers clutching at my shoulders, moved me into the clenching chambers of her heart and deeper still into her lungs that were moving in deep, raging heaves until finally I could lick the word she was about to say before it was able to escape her mouth, taste her last word on her tongue just as surely as it was on my own. "-loneliness."

I started stalking you, Father, the next morning. You noticed immediately. Christ Almighty, did you notice, and now I can hear the anger in their voices running ahead of their feet as they trudge upwards, towards the front door I'm leaving open, wide and inviting like maybe that will be easier on everyone.

"Kill," these voices on the hillside are saying.

"Monster," their marching feet chant.

Your voice is the loudest among them and those words knife my heart deeply but I expect no less, really. This isn't much of a surprise. I don't blame you at all.

It was sweltering in the butcher shed where you found me, Father, and when you wrenched open that wooden door I was so thankful for the breeze. In the light of the moon, the deaf boy's mouth had no choice but to be a dead giveaway with its crinkled *O* of terror.

The boy made rutting sounds, pig-like and incestuous, the entire time I took him and I wondered later if it was those soaking wet bestial sounds that made you come investigate. I wondered if maybe you hadn't hoped you'd find your months-missing daughter in that shed among the hanging tendrils of leg shanks and rib meat. You looked so relieved at the sight of blood dripping from my chin down to my breasts bare and wet and red that I wept and you laughed, laughed at smell of brimstone in the tar tear you wiped so gently from my cheek.

Your eyes met mine and I blushed at the sensation of being caught. It was with your promise of a head start that I fled that night, powered on a coward's hopeful adrenaline as the deaf boy's stains dried on the lace of my dress. I'd find little muddy red droplets on the zipper of my favorite boots a few days later, long after the pain from running in those goddamn calf-huggers into the darkest part of the woods had passed. I spent the rest of that night and the following three days in the tree limbs, worrying about Gato mostly, and what would become of him if the lynch mob I kept waiting took their torches to my home while he was locked inside.

I pray that he has stuffed himself silly on the carcasses of birds and toads and grasshoppers or anything else that dare cross his feisty path in those woods.

See? I am capable of compassion.

You pretend to be blind, but I am. I mean it.

I wouldn't lie to you about this, not now.

No. Really, this time. I promise.

Last night was the first night I didn't have dreams of you because I stole a bottle of wine from the church pantry and I was too drunk to dream. Last night was the first in weeks I didn't dream of you, Father, and I was relieved this morning to wake up and not have to bury your ghostly figure from a freshly exhumed memory. It's become a routine that I've come to begrudge

you for, another pain to endure in those first few slow, sleepy moments between reality and heartbreak. And I smiled, this morning I actually smiled, because I thought maybe it would be over, maybe it would get better but no, that's not true, is it? It's just some overly-ambitious half-hope. A half-hope like your half-hope that after this I'll stop plaguing you and my half-hoping you'll stop hoping that. As in, my half-hoping you'll never know you were appearing in my dreams and my half-hoping that I've been appearing in yours even longer. Because I've been staying up late into the night and crying out in my bed for you, Father. I've been burying myself under my quilts, in the light dark of the early evening hours, even, because when you're not around I am so tired and I'm tired of feeling so tired and I hate you for making me thirst this way. I hate you for making me want you and I love you just as passionately for that. I'm sorry I never took the time to say this aloud, but they are coming, you are coming.

For months I lived among you and you were grateful for me. I taught the children and attended the potlucks and listened faithfully to every sermon, I clasped your hands in my own during prayer circles and led the choir in hymns. I still share your faith, still have my foolish faith in you and I'm so sorry this can be avoided no longer, Christ Almighty, Father, I'm sorry but I can hear you leading them closer and closer and I'm sorry I'm so sorry I thought your simple thirst for happiness would quell my own lust for life but I should have known better should have always known better because the void inside me has never relinquished control and I have never once been strong enough to take that power into my own hands.

I have tried. Believe me, I tried.

I can hear the rattle of the bullets in your gun now. I can feel the clicking of your pitchfork on the stone-paved path. I have faith. I still have faith. I am waiting for you and I will devour you.

I will be with you. Always.

NATURAL DOMESTICATED DISASTERS

I love disasters.

I do. I love them. I love watching disasters unfold like tsunami waves rolling over acres of farmland in mere minutes. I love seeing water engorge with flaming debris just before lapping at the outskirts of industrialism and I love tracking how many highways are washed out before the swell finally hits the suburbs. Watching entire mountain ranges scorch in black smoke after a controlled forestry burn bounds into an uncontrolled blaze makes my chest ache with a heat I yearn to physically feel, if only the firemen's blockades would let me. The phrases, "There were no survivors," "dozens are missing," and "call this number now to donate," if delivered via voiceover in a professionally-morose tone—tingles my spine and curls my toes. Clenching in the aftershocks of earthquakes; parsing out the tornado's winding path of twisted destruction in Before and After pictures; counting rows of shingles on a street of rooftops half submerged: these are indulgences I refuse to give up and cannot begin to fathom why I ever would want to.

I love genocide.

I love that genocide always gives us something to talk about, that it's always just as topical as the weather outside or the outcome of a recently broadcasted sports game. I love that the mere thought of simply not being in an on-going genocide (and there's always an ongoing genocide) can make the worst day seem less shitty and that undergoing needless chemotherapy seems like a better option in comparison. I love the fleeting butterfly idea about getting out there and doing something—really, I mean it this time, let's do a bake sale or something—in the name of goodwill for our fellow man from that unpronounceable place I'm so glad I'm not stuck in. I love clasping hands with strangers and questioning the morality of the human race at silent candle light vigils because those firebombed villagers and starving refugees would probably really appreciate it if they knew I was standing there for them. I love genocide for bringing people together.

I love car crashes.

I love the unexpected collision and the groan of metal twisting into angles that are the complete opposite of aerodynamic. I love the shatter of dainty curtain-drawn windows when a child left unsupervised starts playing in the family mini-van and some how the gears shift from [P] to [D]. I love the ramming of passengers against the un-insulated car doorframe and the simultaneous breaking of knuckles and glass. I love the slow-motion slamming of skulls against steel rods wrapped in industrial foam. I love how words like *whiplash* and *roll bar* perfectly define themselves, I love that both result in bloody bitten tongues.

I love serial killers.

I love that the serial killer's neighbors always heard the noises of something very wrong going on next door through the thin shared apartment walls and never thought anything of it because they wanted to believe he was harmless. Like maybe he just really enjoyed home improvement projects, or stayed up all night playing those slasher zombie video games this generation so dearly fetishizes today. I love the serial killer for his dedication to his art. I love him for his picking and re-picking of victims, carefully selecting each one like a painter pouring over the hairs of his brushes or a writer thumbing through the thesaurus for the most accurately meaningful word. I love reading the collection of journals and poems he penned for his prey. I love tracing his scars of self-mutilation incurred after yet another one of his playthings perished at his own devil hands. I love that serial killers love with their entirety and with so much passion.

I love infections.

I love the dull heart-beat throbbing caused by an angry fever enflaming the tender, inner most canals of the ear. I love the angry tears absorbed by the pillowcase of a child being held down into the mattress. I love the frustrated pleading in “*Shh,*” and, “*It’s almost over,*” and, “*Just hold still.*” I love the machine-gun popping of eardrum tissue bursting and the slow seepage of mucus. I love never having to hear a muffled sound the same way again, I love the sweeping nausea, the sweating, and the antihistamine-induced drowse.

I love parasites.

The best dream I ever had made me wake to find my tongue running between my gum line and my teeth, the plaque-tinged lingual organ frantically searching out the bloody abscess my mind dreamt was the work of several thick, gray rooting worms. In my dream I tried to rid myself of the wiggling worms out from their swells by popping them with my fingers; extracting them with tweezers, and even pushing them deeper into my head with steaming hot washcloths that only served to blister my palms. When nothing worked in this phantasm, my dream self resorted to showing my squirming gumlines to a blank-faced panel of doctors then some masked exterminators and finally my mother, and I was chastised by all for allowing myself to become a host. I woke up soaking in degradation, my tongue a gummy foreigner trying like a fishhook to invade the tissue behind my lips. I wept in relief. Living with those parasites was the most alive I'd felt in months.

I love beatings.

This is not a dream. This is me. This is me, standing shell-shocked and swollen-faced in front of the bathroom mirror. This is me noticing the stains on the carpet hours too late to treat them, and this is each droplet serving as a reminder of the stumbles and scrapes I rode out in the dark more than once, more than twice, more than I am physically capable of recalling at all. This is me being held hostage by the trail of blood I can see leading from the sidewalk to my front door. This is me hoping, stupidly hoping, that the clouds that have been looming over my roof for days will finally rain away those traces. Gaping gash on my broken cheekbone, blackened eye shadowing my crusted nostrils—and I don't feel a thing. I am numb. Numb, even when I'm pressing packs of ice down on the bloated bruises that spread and pulse with my heartbeat. Numb, as the pounding quickens in the memory of running for my life.

I love cheap whiskey.

No one can deny the sweet burn of frugality, and I love that the burn of a good, cheap whiskey will peel the paint off a goddamn sidewalk should I drunkenly happen to spill my tumbler. I love that cheap whiskey makes me sing the blues whether I want to or not. I love the involuntary exhale that forces its way out of my esophagus after I've obliterated another ounce-sized glass and I love the fire hazards that gasp of air poses if it's exposed around open flames. I love the grimace that is schooled from the face of any experienced boozehound, love seeing that same grimace contort the face of a novice even more. I love chasing cheap whiskey with additional cheap whiskey because the idea of fighting fire with more flames has always been a sincere infatuation of mine. I love that cheap whiskey never lets you put your head down for too long. I love that cheap whiskey always takes control.

I love heartbreak.

I love listening to love songs and knowing none of them are about me. I love never wanting to leave my bed. I love going without a shower until my hair sleeks with the oils of my depression. I love refusing to step foot outside my apartment for days on end because I'm sure that the bright sunlight bearing down on my blinds will kill me, or worse: that I'll run into somebody I know. I love wallowing in self-pity while I stand in front of the mirror and tally every skin-deep flaw I have, love convincing myself that each blemish will be a forever enduring reason for why I am completely alone.

I love waiting.

Nothing is more thrilling than the itch for this line to move forward an inch/a foot/a stanza/a mile and I've been waiting to push that line with you for so long. I've been waiting to black out on this couch in your shithole apartment for months, fantasizing that you'll feel me up if I'd just lay still enough on these cigarette-burned cushions at the right time. I need to feel the heat of your palms on my flesh. I have to feel something other than the glow of the screen on my face. Do what you want to me just hand over that skin-on-skin contact. I've been waiting for it, waiting for you or any other stranger, ever since I gave up on having standards and that was forever ago. I promise not to mention this if you won't. I swear not to remember this if you promise you will.

I love you.

I do. I love you. I love you for going to war for me, even though your reasons are often stupid and misguided and self-centered. I love you for letting the car insurance payments lapse into cancellation and for convincing me to flush all three-months worth of my antidepressants down the toilet. I love you for trusting me enough to remember to take my birth controls and never telling me when the condom breaks. I love you for giving me cigarettes, for always pouring me doubles, and for teaching me how to cheat at cards; I love you for not caring about the state of my lungs, my liver, my honor, or my heart. I love the acrid smell of smoke in your hair and the ink stains on your skin. I love how you get mad when I call you pet names, especially the ones you've heard me call the dog a thousand times because deep down you know I'll always slightly adore him more. I love how you chew your nails when you're sober. I love how you kick me in your sleep. I love that you tell me when I look like shit. I love you for being the greatest horrible thing I love the most. I love you for never once threatening to love me back.

Word Count: 1,720

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART DIES

There's a bottle of bourbon behind the headboard in your childhood bedroom because your parents would be horrified if they knew how much alcohol you need to drink to be around them during the holidays. You've caught whiffs of the bitter liquor lingering on your boyfriend's breath and you feel bad that he feels the need to hide it from you like you feel the need to hide it from your own family, so you make a conscious effort to keep your mouth shut about the whole thing.

Don't spend too much time wondering if that isn't what everyone else around the table is doing. You won't like the answer.

No one ever does.

The turkey, despite your best efforts, is going to be dry this year, just like last year, just like always. Stick to the spiral ham and try hiding the green beans that taste like the metal can they were borne of underneath the mashed potatoes. That's been your mother's solution for years.

Your father will lean in your direction when he belches at the dinner table and you will grit teeth, just a little, before swallowing a gulp or three of wine. Avoid meeting the glares that action inspires. You promised you wouldn't get sloppy drunk this time, and you really meant it.

The first night you and your boyfriend spends in your childhood bedroom, as you squeezed each other for warmth and comfort in your twin-sized bed, he had to tell you several times to stop apologizing for everything you feel responsible for.

The second night he doesn't stop you at all and on the third night he wonders—aloud, so really not so much wondering at all—if wouldn't one of you be a bit more comfortable on the couch in your father's den. He lets you get as far as the doorway with the sad little pillow from your childhood bed before asking if you wouldn't mind turning off the light in the hallway. The sad truth is: You really don't.

OPEN THOSE POCKETS FOR ME

What lies within those folds so close in contact with bare skin is very important
I need to know if anything sharp
lies upon your person.

Are you carrying contraband?
It is important to be forthright;
imperative to be honest.
I need to know.

I recommend employing the truth here, for your safety.

GOD'S OBLITERATED BEAUTY

The first time I tried to kill myself, God found me. He's kept me from death every time that I try. The first time was the stable. I was working frantic to boil myself alive in the water trough. Blood was running down my bloating breasts, water dripping down my arms as I flailed and writhed and bobbed awkward and I'd had no time at all to finish my knifing and the fire hadn't even extended outside the stall. God saw me plunged and churned under frigid ocean water in the dead of night for weeks, He held me down with His mighty fist.

God always finds me. He found me when I spread an entire year's worth of jellied goose fat down the plucked bare back of my Jericho. This time I was truly afraid.

"God," I cried out from my knees at his feet, "I beg you have mercy! For I know you, my Lord, and I know well your jealous ways, that I am powerless over you and even better do I know that I am but a mere possession among many more worthy treasures than in your hold. Still I have suffered another in spite of having—always, my Lord, I swear it—your name upon my lips and your almighty brand upon my wrists." I could have kept up my mother tongue babbling but the words would have been wasted on breaths that were surely numbered among my last.

God said nothing.

God rarely speaks at all. God has no reason to. Even when He pulled my Jericho away from me by his collar and out the door by his poor long, dark winding Jericho hair, God was silent. My poor sweet Jericho left his screams and a struggling sheen of jellied goose fat trailing behind him and I knew like always these echoes would be gone long before my poor Jericho's body starting weeping, those precious dark feathers he would give up so willingly rotted with

mold. My poor jellied Jericho's noises made God angry; it is best to remain as still and as passive as possible everyone knows this but my poor Jericho never quite caught on and it is no wonder that God overheard us.

I dared not bother with hiding. I was born into His household and there is truly no place God cannot reach, His broad hands inform Him of everything He needs to know and they serve so rough and ready and capable.

God has become quite proud of my half-finished failure lines, He displays me for everyone to see His beauty's marks before all of His dear beauty fades away. I am one among many and I know myself well. Beauty does not fade nor does it bloom.

True beauty is obliteration, beauty is blackout cloaked in nothing but blood pounding, pounding pounding pounding just like God, His polished steel boots pounding pounding pounding upon my head. God will break me, break me down into jagged shards until He obliterates me beautiful, a deadly treasure finally, hallelujah, at last.

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