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How we were not sparrows

by

Sara Marie Richardson Perez

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Debra Marquart: Major Professor
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2010

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We began as a cluster of girls,
both impossibly still and continuously making small motions, like sparrows,
sit cross legged, the tips of our knees touching, small moist hands clenching other hands
until they were somehow collective, delicate tilt of our chins as we listen, the attention paid
to one girl's new bracelet, glances at our own empty wrists, picking at the bit of pink polish
on a pinky fingernail the size of a ladybug with the thumb of the other hand.
We already know who was prettiest, knew who the boys liked best.

Much later
in dark rooms we, girls, scatter to corners,
to closets, to rooms lit by single bulbs,
to laundry rooms and to places on purpose alone.
Small breasts are covered in white cotton bras with pink rosettes in the middle, a tight bow
sewn on with a single stitch, purchased by our mothers at Younkers, brought home in plastic
sacks,
We took the straps off the little plastic hangers, delicately one by one.

In basements, we,
in corners, we feel the chapped lips of boys, boys chewing Big Red, are kissed, by boys
wearing jeans and smelling like their older brother's Obsession, boys with hands, sweating,
un-tucking blouses and inching hands over stomach, touching the tiny pink rosette and then
the white cotton softly like these boys would touch something they had just captured, like
the baby rabbits at recess, sparrows dumped from the bare branch nests.
Girl, Growing

An Artist not many years ago painted the picture of a young girl standing on top of a hill in the wind and sunshine, looking far into the distance. That is the attitude of every growing girl. She too is looking forward, listening, wondering; she too is seeing the vision.

- Benedict, Caroline (1927). Our Girls And Our Times

1.

We played MASH on the bus on the way home from elementary school. In the sticky green seats we turned around on our knees to talk to our next best friends, made baby feet with the side of our hands and tips of fingers on the steamy bus window. We sang songs that were vaguely sinister and hinting at things that boys and girls did in the d- a-r-k, dark, dark, dark. There were accompanying hand movements, synchronized clapping and switching to meet your friend’s hand, 1,2,3,4, 1,2,3,4. We were waiting all together to grow up and the only thing that made it bearable was the idea that all of us would do this unknowable thing at the same time.

Miss Suzy had a steamboat, the steamboat had a bell
(ding, ding) Miss Suzy went to heaven and the steamboat went to —
Hello operator, Please give me number nine,
and if you disconnect me, I will chop off your —
Behind the ‘frigerator, there was a piece of glass,
Miss Suzy sat upon it and broke her little —
Ask me no more questions, tell me no more lies,
the boys are in the bathroom zipping up their —
flies are in the kitchen, the bees are in the park, Miss Suzy and her boyfriend are kissing in the
D A R K, D A R K, Dark, Dark, Dark.

Girlhood isn’t nice, not in the way we imagine it to be, a wide-eyed Precious Moments innocence. Instead, it was balanced and known through point and counterpoint. You and then me and her and her. Time to accept certain milestones, to grow, because there was a
collective urging. All of us flying off in the same direction, no one leading exactly, everyone following, like birds startled and shaken from a tree by some sharp insistence of sound. Go.

Growing up meant being singular. The space allotted for you was not big enough for all the folded and knobby knees, the chubby moist breath of your best friends. If someone liked you, a boy, you were expected to go with him alone. The giggling huddled blanket of girlhood was left and you walked with strange lightness toward a secret self, a self who had secrets. While clapping, after a recital, a game won or lost, I think about how nice it is, the sound of everyone clapping at once. Even though we are all clapping by ourselves. I like the idea of the collective memory of belonging.

2.

How to play MASH:

David
Ricky
Chris
Clara
Vivian
Lula
Slugbug
corvette
van

teacher
artist
business lady

MASH Sheet

anshop
Summary: The purpose of this game is to construct a possible future. Using a complex mathematical equation developed by closing your eyes while a friend makes hash marks or concentric circles in the middle of the MASH circle, you are able to predict your life - who you marry, where you will live, etc. You go around and around the edges of bracket, crossing off and circling until you arrive at the four sets of answers.

It is sometimes okay to cheat – *see troubleshooting section* - in emergencies.

Step I: Choose your husband

A. This is the most important category because, even if you live in a mansion, it doesn’t count if you have to be married to someone like P.J., who picks his nose and carries around a fake walkie-talkie.

B. To make it more exciting you should let your friends choose the third boy because it is more risky – like real life. This is a high stakes game and shows who your real friends are.

C. One rule is that you have to have at least talked to your possible husbands a minimum of two times. He should know your name. This makes it so some girls don’t always pick older people in high school or movie stars. That’s just not realistic.

   I. This category carries the most possibility for embarrassment due to the possible revealing of your choice of husbands. It is absolutely against the rules to tell any boy the results of a MASH game. This is especially important to remember when playing within hearing distance of any sibling – the privacy policy.

   a. Steph’s older sister Holly once told Derek that he was Steph’s husband when he was riding by on his bike. Steph was playing in the sprinkler in the front yard wearing an old striped swimsuit with the elastic all worn out on the bottom. In her shock she tripped over the sprinkler and cut her lip. Later, Holly threw up at the mall. Karma.
Step II: Choose your children’s names

A. Sometimes people try not to care about this category or to say they don’t even want kids. This results in nothing but awkward silence.
   I. It is best if you have no good children’s names ready, to pick ones that other girls think are cute — it helps if you have them end in a “ie” or “y.”

II. There is sometimes a subcategory about how many children you have.
   1. One of the numbers is usually huge, like 20. It can really wreck your life to have 20 kids.
      a. Once in 6th grade Amy, spit on another girl’s crispito at lunch because she got Jordan for her daughter’s name. Jordan had been officially declared Amy’s daughter’s name way back in 4th. There are rules about these things.

C. The names also determine, by default, the gender of your children.
1. The game can become complicated if you are playing with people who insist on being dedicated to real life.
   a. For example, if you have three children and three children’s names, by default, their names would be the ones chosen.
   b. This is not allowing the universal equation to fully work, and in the end, too much reality ruins the game. Some girls just don’t get it.

Step III: Choose your career

A. This is generally the least important category. No one makes squeaky noises in the back of their throats about getting “teacher” or “doctor” – you don’t hold your breath when this category is being decided.

B. One rule is that you can’t say three careers that are crazy or unlikely to happen; model, actress and singer are not good choices and make you look like you think you are really pretty – one of the largest sins of girl world.

  I. When Tricia Doyle told our third grade class she was going to be a model for Sears no one thought she was cute for the rest of the year; she had to be brought back to reality.

Note: Occasionally, category 3 is replaced with what car you would drive – a subcategory if you are playing with girls who don’t know three cars, is to just choose colors of cars. Some examples for those who are unsure are: convertible, Mercedes, SUV, and slug bug. Red, baby blue, black, and pink are acceptable color choices.

Step IV: Choosing your house

A. The letters on top stand for the types of dwelling you might live in with your husband and various cute children.

  I. The options are already decided for you but cover a wide variety of structures: Mansion, Apartment, Shack, and House.

  a. In ’89 Lindsey S. took a summer trip to Oklahoma to visit her cousins. Instead of Shack they had Ship. This was quickly adopted and became a reasonable alternative to Shack that allowed you to still salvage a good life by pretending you were on a really long cruise.
Trouble Shooting:

If you can see the game turning wrong, a meaningful cough or look may help to create a slip in the counting, thus changing the outcome of the game. You are, in the end, at least partially in control particularly if you have a menacing glare or are known for your pinching fingers.

3.

I got a Barbie Ice Cream Shop for my birthday when I turned nine. It made real ice cream in some elaborate scenario involving rock salt and incredible piles of AA batteries. My mom said we couldn’t make it. The Barbie cart, where the ice cream was made, was only big enough to fit my hand inside and a fistful of ice cream hardly seemed worth all that work.

A girl named Janelle lived down the street and although we weren’t friends at school somehow in the late afternoon when the social order of school didn’t apply, we would play
together. She would sit outside on my front step while I had a snack with my Mom and went to the bathroom. Sometimes I would not come out for a long time if *My Little Ponies* were on TV.

It didn’t seem mean to leave her out there nor did it ever occur to me to invite her inside. She was my riding bikes friend and then only barely because she was always saying weird stuff about her rubbing her private parts on her bike seat. Which made me feel awkward and guilty – I was careful when riding over the bumpy gravel of the bike trail to keep a distance between my seam of my shorts and the seat. No one ever told me to do that, that talking about private parts was wrong. My mom even taught Sex-Ed at the Adolescent Mental Health Unit where she was a therapist. We had models of vaginas in a box in the office, a copy of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* displayed on the same shelf as my Ramona books and the stack of Little Golden books, *The Poky Little Puppy*.

I asked her inside once when it was raining and no one could let a little girl sit on the wet front steps. Janelle never wanted to go home after school when it was just her step-dad there. She had a brother but he was friends with some older boys in the trailer court and wasn’t at home either. He was always standing around with those boys in front of Casey’s with no shoes, popping wheelies on their dirt bikes. Her mom worked all the way past when I was in bed.

I got out my Barbie Ice Cream Shop and a case of my second best Barbies. The lid to their case unsnapped to reveal the Barbies lined up, perfectly composed. I never put them away without matching outfits, even the little plastic shoes. I had to make balls of my fists when Janelle grabbed Mieko, the Hawaiian Barbie with hair all the way down to her knees, and immediately pulled the swimsuit off her plastic body. I didn’t say anything, didn’t know what to say, but felt a swirly turning over of my stomach, as I watched her hands, dirt under
her fingernails and marker smeared on her fingertips, all over my Barbie’s body. Janelle’s hair was always dirty and never seemed combed. I could see her scalp through the sections of brown hair, separated with having been unwashed for too long.

“Look at her boobs.” she said turning Mieko around to show me, “Do you have any Ken’s?” I pulled from my shelf my Dad’s empty shoebox, the only container I had that seemed manly to hold all my Ken’s and pushed it towards her. The dolls that I had picked to play with today were lined up by my knees, untouched.

“Watch this.” Janelle whispered, removing Ken’s pants, his red tee shirt, loafers. She lay Meiko on top of the ice cream maker and then lay Ken carefully on top of her. She put her finger on Ken’s smooth curve of butt and pushed them hard together.

“They are doing it. This is what boys and girls do.” When Janelle went to the bathroom I covered Mieko and Ken with a sock edged in pink lace from my hamper.

So much sweetness wasted, here. Or sweetness that is turned sour like milk thickening, forgotten on a counter. The ice cream that we never made was always the greatest ice cream I had ever tasted. I did not really play with the Ice Cream Shop after Meiko and Ken made some version of passion on the counter where Skipper and her friends ordered their vanilla cones.

We rode bikes later that afternoon when it stopped raining. When I got home I told my mom that I was sick and used that excuse to do things that I had outgrown. Sitting on laps, curled up small with a blanket. It was tempting to suck my thumb, but that was just too small. My mom let me watch Full House.
Your general conduct with boys lays the foundation of your social reputation. It is up to you, therefore, to show common sense and good taste. Take the matter of petting. It is cheap for girls to pet. Boys do not want their sisters to cheapen themselves in this way.

--Brockman, Mary (1936) What Is She Like? A Personality Book for Girls

4.

I lived on a street with many boys. I had seen all of their penises in passing. We would be playing a game, kickball, hide and seek, tag and someone would run off a few feet in the backyard to pee. Once a whole afternoon was spent trying to get ants to crawl inside my neighbor’s penis which at the time seemed no stranger than capturing a bug in a box or displaying some double jointedness in your thumbs. Interesting in a distracted way, not overly so.

It was clear that the penis was important. The way it was displayed with a sense of importance while peeing, the comparisons made one to another by their owners. Whatever girls had was not for display. Women on the other hand, with plump mounds of flesh on their chests were special. In the magazines found in every small town neighborhood, someone’s Dad’s, the women were laid out on rugs, or climbing ladders, their mouths open slightly as if they were singing a single small note, ah.

These women had nothing to do with me or with anyone else I knew. My mom and the other neighborhood mom’s weren’t like this. It seemed boy-like, this kind of display, the low hum of pride in the body on top of every picture. I wasn’t proud particularly of my body, which could run and was smooth and flat. It just was.

In a bit of family folklore, that is still embarrassing as a grown up, my child self asked about all that funny hair on the ladies’ privates. When my mom told me that one day I would have that too, the horror was immediate and full. My mom said I cried and cried. It did seem
like a horrible, horrible, taking over that meant you would no longer be yourself and that your body would be funny and lumpy.

Smart girls ward off advances by pretending not to notice or not to understand and diverting attention to something else. Boys don’t want girls who talk too much or try to appear wise. While they like a certain amount of assurance, they want a girl to know when to sit back and look interested. The best “line” with any young man is to make him feel important.

- Brockman, Mary (1936) *What Is She Like? A Personality Book for Girls*

5.

I was un Kissed and he had a moped that had SR on the side, my initials. That meant something. Obviously. While I was babysitting Beau and Belinda, he rode his SR moped over and we watched *Teen Wolf* on the big screen TV while Beau and Belinda took a nap in their beds.

I studied the screen while he looked at the side of my face. I commented on the oddity of teen wolf’s jacket, about his crazy moves on the basketball court, staring intently, riveted by the hair sprouting from the teen’s neck, his back, the length of his fingernails as they turned into claws. I thought about teen wolf, about all the times before. When he was just himself—brushing his teeth, watching TV, eating mashed potatoes with his grandma. How one day he just changed, became something uncontrolled, something wild.

I wanted to be wildly kissed and also did not. I wanted to stay small, to eat mashed potatoes with my grandma forever, the same girl. We kissed on the stairs. My back awkwardly pushed into the wooden handrail. One of the babies was shouting from their crib, noises not words. And that was what it felt like, loud noises that did not make words. Me, but not. Only after he sped away on his moped did I look at myself in the mirror, checking for a visible change, touching my lips with the tips of my fingers, nails with Pretty
Posy polish, chipped. When Beau and Belinda’s mother returned I collected my $20.00. I felt a sudden need to confess. I pressed down the desire to tell their mother that I ate all the tortilla chips and I kissed, was kissed.

I rode my bike to my best friend’s house, pushing on the pedals each time, not coasting at all. The nervous click, click of the never-quite-right gears matched my heartbeat.

When I got to her house I left my bike laying in her yard. No time for the kick-stand.

   Steph: So, are you going out?
   Me: No.
   Steph: But you kissed him!?
   Me: Yes!
   Steph: With tongues?
   Me: Yes. (looking down – flushed memory dimming)
   Steph: Did he touch anything else? (Increasingly panicked tone)
   Me: yes.
   Steph: Everyone’s going to think you’re a slut! (Head in hands)
   You’ve got to get him to go out with you.
   Like, now. (Wagging of finger)

His mom took us to the movies, Saturday. He sat in the back of the theater and leaned over so close I could see the muscle in his jaw working, smell the Big Red in his mouth. I told him I couldn’t kiss him again unless we were going out, people would talk. His mouth was already on mine before he asked “Wunna go out?” I nodded and tucked my shirt tighter into my jean shorts. There were rules to be followed. We held hands in the dark, goose bumps rising on my legs in the air-conditioned cool of the theater. When the light from the screen flashed brighter, illuminating our hands, my same old legs and striped tee-shirt, for a moment, in this new light, I didn’t recognize myself.
6.
In junior high Gennifer B. got pregnant. This was the same girl that had been put in time-out for all the playtimes in Pre-Kindergarten because she was going in the bathroom with boys and . . . I don’t know what, looking or showing, something bad, was all I could imagine. I didn’t go to the bathroom during all of Pre-Kindergarten at school, peed my pants more than once on the bus on the way home because I was afraid of whatever Gennifer and Jung twins were doing in the short stall of the bathroom.

In Junior High, the basketball girls, meaner, more powerful, and taller than I, would call you a slut if you even let a guy put his hand in your shirt; a pregnancy should have been astronomical. It should have blown our 13 year-old minds into new cruelties if we were using the sliding scale of sins. If hand over bra equaled whispered name-calling, a wall of backs for a few days at lunch, surely a pregnancy would result in a public lynching, stoning at least.

But no one even mentioned it. Not whispered. Not pointing. Nothing. Babies and the things that you did to get them wasn’t. was not. So, we couldn’t talk about it or acknowledge the bump under her Looney Toons sweatshirt.

We had the same PE class and when she changed into her PE clothes, a faded oversized tee-shirt from Bud’s Autoparts and a pair of shorts borrowed from the nurse, I saw her stomach stretching and pulling in the flash of a switch from one shirt to another. Her stomach had red and white lines, like scratches, stretchmarks, from side to side.

She lived in the trailer park by the highway. I saw her walking home from school. She held her winter coat, an oversize Raiders Jacket, closed against the wind with her hand, her backpack on her arm practically dragging on the sidewalk. It was pitiful. But I didn’t feel
as sorry as I should have. My normal rules of what was good and bad did not include a space for 8th grade pregnancy.

Before she got pregnant in 7th grade chorus, I heard her talking to another girl about going out with an older guy, someone who had graduated last year or the year before, Donny. They were laughing about his dick and the things he wanted her to do. And maybe they were talking louder because they could see the way I was eavesdropping, my lips pursed, fingers pushing my hair behind my ear, straightening up with my chorus folder in both hands. I bet it was something close to fun to shock people with what they knew, to make me drop my folder, the music falling under the row of chairs in front of me, to force me, for a minute, to be part of the secret - the same, separated by chance and time; nothing more.

Be sensible about attentions from boys. If a boy pays you special attention, don’t be hasty to attach undue importance to it. If a boy pays you a compliment, accept it with a smile and a “Thank You.” If it is too personal, pass over it lightly as you can.

-Brockman, Mary (1936) What Is She Like? A Personality Book for Girls

7.

In ninth grade, I had a boyfriend whose father owned all the farmland that bordered our small town. The corn was planted and grew tall behind my house. At night in the summer when the windows were open I could hear the wind brushing over the tasseled tops of the corn. I listened to the wind brushing over the tops of stalks. It could have been saying his name. I realized how silly that was, how foolish I was to imagine this. I whispered his name as I lay in bed, the corn lining up, ordering the wildness outside my room. I counted him like sheep to myself.
I sat behind him in the 4th grade on the bleachers. The whole school was watching a visiting mime named Fax. It was the first time they met. The boy was practicing miming in the bleachers, kept making an invisible wall, extending and snapping his wrists and moving his lips like he was saying something of great importance behind the wall. He kept shrugging his shoulders and gesturing to his ears. I felt badly that I couldn’t hear him. He was really good at miming. That should have mattered more.

After I got my braces off he lay me down in between the small aisles of his father’s tall green stalks of corn. The corn created a canopy over my head, the sharp green arc of leaves and between the flopping tufts of tassel, the green gray of the heavy Iowa summer sky. It was going to rain today. The ground was hard under the small winging blades of my shoulders. We kissed. He was really good at kissing. He said my name over and over while he was looking past me, to the point where the corn narrowed to a solid wall of green in the distance.

We stopped going to the cornfield after the corn was harvested and the brown stalks stood lonely and bent over, halved, in the dusty stretch of field. I sat on the back steps of my house and listened to a crow perched on the fencepost. Its black body was a terrible beauty. When it flew away there was not one sound.
Boys like cheerful girls. They will expect you to be in good humor, and will tell you to “snap out of” a mood.

-Brockman, Mary (1936) What Is She Like? A Personality Book for Girls

In ninth grade I tried out for the dance team. I wasn’t particularly coordinated or a good dancer, but I wasn’t good at sports with balls and I hated running and I wanted to be cooler. The dance team girls were sexy, they had boyfriends and talked about them at practice. When I got my uniform I lay it on my bed and mourned my decision. I would look ridiculous. Those girls were old. They had hair-sprayed bangs and Esprit tote bags. They had boyfriends with cars. I sometimes still had my mom French braid my hair.

When I tried the uniform on, first, the heavy dance hose, then, the black spandex leotard and finally the sparkly bands at the wrists. I took my hair out of the ponytail and fluffed it up looking in the mirror. And while I can’t say that I looked amazing, I didn’t look foolish either. I could pass for one of them.

There was something particularly lovely for me about when we did a kick line. A poetry involved that wasn’t surface. It was something about the hands on each other’s shoulders, the pointed toes and synchronized hops that reminded me of being a smaller girl. When you couldn’t quite tell which leg, which hand, was yours and in all that whirring beauty it didn’t matter.

Of course, boys admire good looks and you should make the most of your own. Remember that the foundation is particular personal cleanliness and that, first of all, boys like girls who are beautifully clean.

-Brockman, Mary (1936) What Is She Like? A Personality Book for Girls
The pom squad’s uniforms were spandex – black with red sequins spelling out Bombers across the chest in cursive. We were sparkly girls in front of the football team at a pep rally. Performing. This isn’t amazing. But it was a realization, a knowing, power came from the stretch and curve of fabric over hips and breasts And although the hips weren’t much, they still held the eyes of these boys, these boys who crushed pop cans, who crushed other boys who talked about lats and drills. We eyed each other in a stand off. And what was given and what was taken seems confused. I didn’t know what to do with that new hunger starting between my thighs and the power carried in the sway of the collective of our hips walking out of that echoing gym.

Boys like girls who can join in things. If you want them to find you good company, learn to dance well and to swim and to play a good game of bridge. Entertain boys in your home no matter how modest it is, and give them something good to eat.

-Brockman, Mary (1936) What Is She Like? A Personality Book for Girls

In the locker room before practice our coach came in with a clipboard and stern expression and it was clear there was going to be a talk. Three of the older dancers, seniors and pretty, stood up and one by awkward one revealed that they were pregnant. When the rest of us went to run laps and do stretches on the gym floor they stayed behind gathering their shoes and jackets, old water-bottles from their lockers.
The boys’ basketball team held their practice on the other side of the gym. Usually we took pleasure in being watched, in their preening and glancing over, the nudging of one boy to another while we pretended not to look. We would stretch elaborately, showing off the bodies we had only recently acquired. The dance team was supposed to be sexy. The spandex uniforms and sparkly make-up. The dances were as suggestive as possible without overtly referencing sex. But now it just seemed foolish to think that we could be sexy, do all that teasing and showing, without it having any consequence. I knew their boyfriends, saw them from a distance in the hallways and at games. Connecting them with films we watched in Health class, the sperm and the sparking/dividing, seemed impossible. They were just regular boys, regular girls. Nothing magical about them.
Interviewing

1.

My grandmother and I used to play two games. In the summer I turned six much of my time was spent in the basement involved in one the following games:

1. rich lady from West Des Moines, or
2. job interview

I was always interviewing for the job of secretary, which seemed like the most glamorous, high-heeled job, typing with long clacky pink fingernails, answering phones with many buttons. All things that I longed to do. I couldn’t imagine a better career path.

I had to bring my baby, Gary, along to the interviews. Gary lived at Grandma’s house. He had a little wooden bed next to the washing machine and the shelf of canned foods. I explained Gary’s physical appearance, both to myself and to my Grandma/Interviewer by constructing an illness. Gary was one sick baby. He was my Dad’s doll, from the late 50s, a boy-appropriate Howdy Dowdy looking doll. He had a permanent toothy smile which I had no choice to equate with some kind of serious mental illness. He was constantly having surgeries. “Oh Gary’s got to have some more surgeries. He’s got the troubles. Poor, poor, Gary.” There is actual tape-recorded footage of Grandma and I, Gary propped on my hip, grinning ominously at nothing in the middle distance.

And we had bigger problems, more than Gary’s troubles, I was often, in these fantasies, blind. I still typed amazingly fast. It was me and Gary against the world.

Gary was fatherless. My own father was extremely present. He made odd bologna pancakes and read me books and tucked me in when my mom was working. It just seemed logical that I alone would have a baby, even an unpleasant Howdy Dowdy one like Gary. My first game was motherhood. Wife seemed a lot more complicated – full of potential pitfalls.
Teenager wasn’t me either. I had no older siblings, no chance to see real live teenagers in action.

As a mother I could sacrifice. Take a difficult secretarial job despite my limited vision. Mothers seemed honorable. Being a real mother seemed destined, like my practice was actually leading somewhere, would pay off big time someday. I would be so skilled. Not like those other girls with their foolish Princess play or the boys in my neighborhoods who would wear towel capes and jump off of decks. I felt like these games were actual training. I was practicing how to get a job as Secretary and how to balance the difficulties of raising a smiley child with many surgical needs with a career. I was serious with my answers.

“Do you have your own transportation to work?”

“Yes. I have a Volvo.”

“Can you use a typewriter?”

“Yes, I am a very fast typer.”

“Can you answer the phones?”

“Yes, I have a very cheerful telephone voice and can write down messages.”

In that basement I could have been anything – an astronaut, a rock star, a gymnast, a clown, a scientist, a witch. But I chose secretary as my top fantasy.

2.

The top male role-play fantasies according to Maxim Magazine are:

1. Nurse
2. Teacher
3. Secretary
4. Librarian
There is an awkward mothering hiding just under the surface of this – a competence mixed with subordination. The sweet sullied. None of these jobs are the “real” boss. There are the helpers. There is a doctor, a principal, a boss that is more in control.

3.

In my own childhood fantasy the phone was never for me. I wanted to take accurate messages and file my pretty nails. I wanted to be helpful, useful, praised. I wanted someone in charge to tell me I was doing a good job. I wanted to always be doing a really excellent job.

4.

In my high school yearbook I was voted “Teacher’s Pet” and “Man’s Lady” – like Lady’s Man but in the feminine. I lost “Most Flirtatious” by a single vote which was a dangerously chose margin. Although I am not entirely certain what Man’s Lady implies, it seems clear that I wanted to be liked. To excess. The most.

But I didn’t ever feel like I was trying. I wanted to smile at my teachers and help them pass out papers. I wanted to laugh at even the awkward boy’s joke by his locker. I really wanted to stay after school to tutor you. It was about being good and happy and nice and sweet and helpful. I had read between the lines of things and this was the right thing to do to be the best girl.
Beauty Secrets

*Check your posture by examining it sideways in front of a full-length mirror. Your head, shoulders, and hips should be aligned up exactly over each other. In this position, the chest is up, the abdomen in, and the buttocks is tucked under. You unconsciously assume a good posture when you try to squeeze through a narrow space. You pull yourself up, and tuck yourself in, in an effort to make yourself slimmer. This should be your goal, girls.*

-Brockman, Mary (1936). *What Is She Like? A Personality Book for Girls*

1.

When I was in elementary school I had three obsessions: the huge purple moons under my eyes, my lack of dimples, and my giant fat calves. My mother was, unlike popular psychology would like to suggest, not obsessed with her own looks or mine. I can’t blame this self-hatred on her or my father, who were both peace-loving and pro-women—*Our Bodies, Ourselves* sat on our bookshelves next to *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and my dad’s Stephen King collection. I think my real desire was to be animated, not as in lively, but as in Disney.

I tried many things to change the hopelessness of my horrible conditions. After being tucked in, I rigged up a handy dimple-making device out of toothpicks and scotch tape that I attempted to wear while sleeping. I did special exercises intended to shrink the awful flopping of skin that was my small calf. Apparently I had the idea that the muscle should disappear and all that should remain to support my body was a bone and the covering of skin. My methods were less clear with the circles under my eyes. My mom told me that when people had very pale, thin skin like mine, the veins under the eyes were closer to the surface so you could see them. I had lovely skin she told me. Despite her insistence I knew even
then that mom’s aren’t really truth tellers. They are too heavily influenced by blood connections and the hum and glow that surrounds you, their creation, to be honest. I had to instead, try to rub the purple off with my fingers and when that didn’t work ask God, Santa, the Easter Bunny, anyone with power to make me pretty and take that purple stuff off my face.

2.
I loved fairy tales. I liked that they were always predictable: a used and abused woman, scrubbing floors, friends with mice, unfailingly decent and kind, gets pretty. All at once, the world lies down before her, the grass bending before her dainty feet; those that never noticed her immaculately clean floors are now praising them loudly. Generally, royalty become involved, actual crowned Charmings or just the football captain and head cheerleader, to elevate a new pretty girl to her deserved status. There is lots of bell-like laughter.

Pretty equals power. Those who didn’t recognize this beauty, made it scrub floors, are punished. They are ugly, it is revealed. And sometimes small birds want to peck out their eyes. Or maybe they are allowed to keep their eyes but they aren’t prettiest anymore. It is clear that they are mean or worse, slutty.

It’s like walking on the edge of a razor blade. To be beautiful you must also not try too hard. Try too hard, be the wrong kind of pretty and be the kind of person whose eyes get pecked out. Or who “ask for it” in too-tight tops, who tease. It is sometimes an accident, this teasing, this asking.
3.

Last week I was with my friend Katie who has a vast and varied collection of friends who are so different from each other that I sometimes imagine that she is trying to fulfill some kind of goal, a checklist. Justine was a real gold mine because she was a stripper. We pulled into the driveway of Justine’s house, a big white and brick house on a cul de sac in a part of town with “Caution: Children at Play” signs and well-tended lawns. The house had a door and trim painted a cheerful cranberry and a pillar on either side of the doorway.

“Hey!” Justine said over the sound of “Cherry Pie” that was blasting from the sliver of a cd player built into the underside of the cabinets. She turned the sound down with a little remote on the counter and turned around to greet us. As she turned Katie’s jaw dropped in a cartoon version of surprise. I also couldn’t control my eyes – they were inexplicably drawn to the balloons of flesh held to Justine’s chest. They were so large that they truly seemed to defy laws of gravity, dismiss them, spit on gravity and all of its children.

Justine was wearing a bright pink halter top without a bra and these things, like entire other creatures, pets nearly, rested on the top of her body in a way that seemed both extremely uncomfortable and also somewhat engaging. Like watching someone do strange tricks with their tongue or to show you some achievement of double-jointedness.

“Yeah. Well, they paid for the house payment. Since I got these I can make at least 2 grand a night.” Justine thumped her right breast with thumb and forefinger, “These girls make some serious money.”
4.

Steph was obsessed with curly hair. Her hair was a pretty coppery color and lay shiny and smooth around her shoulders. My hair was large and poufy seeming all the time—having yet to discover gel or more subtle tools for brushing other than a strange black bristly brush that crackled with static electricity every time I got it near my head.

Steph was also very invested in being tan. As a natural red head this goal was unlikely and perhaps more honestly, impossible. After laying in the sun all day at the beach on our trip to Costa Rica Steph got sun poisoning so severely that she had to remain inside vomiting and laying on cold wet blankets for the remainder of our vacation. The heat radiated off of her body like she was charged with some electrical current. Although we were supposed to share a bed it was both too wet and too hot to lay anywhere close to Steph. The smell of aloe and burned blistering flesh was around her like a net also making sleeping in close proximity unpleasant. I slept on the cement floor and because the house had no doors or windows, just openings to the beach, sand crabs would crawl in the house.

After our return to the US, Steph maintained a brief flirtation with fake tanning lotion, this was somewhat successful as it did not result in any vomiting but did result in Steph being an odd uneven orange color for one week until the results faded and she returned to her pale and lovely self. She then gave up and resigned to being fair and committed to sunscreen. Not so with the curls.

One important thing to realize about perms is that they burn your skin if they drip onto your neck or the sensitive skin of your exposed hairline. Even the chemical smell of the stuff made my eyes water while my beauty operator squeezed the perm solution onto my head in thin hissing streams out of what looked like was a clear ketchup bottle. She wore gloves. I had no gloves, just a small washcloth that I was supposed to use to catch the drips
of perm solution before they rolled into my eyes. I frantically patted my forehead every three or four seconds. What makes this seem like a good idea is a mystery.

Steph and I decided to get perms together in 1993, the height of perm popularity, at the urging of her older sister who drove us to Great Clips in her car the Brown Bomber. After the process, which takes up to three hours for longer hair, we were free. Our heads each looking like small poodles had been set loose and were now sleeping on our scalps. The other downside of perming was that you couldn’t wash your hair for three days following the perm or all that work would be for nothing – your hair would return to its normal straightish state. So, for the three days we waited, a cloud of chemical stench following our hair – and thus, since it was attached, sadly, to our heads, us.

5.

“I’m getting a facial tattoo – permanent makeup.” Joy McSurry, third grade teacher, said between bites of her Lean Cuisine chicken alfredo in the teacher’s lounge.

“It takes so much time to put on eyeliner everyday so I am getting permanent makeup. It’s relatively painless. And then I won’t have to worry about it.”

“Oh!” I could only react with a noncommittal answer because I wasn’t entirely sure she wasn’t joking. I also couldn’t stop the only images of facial tattooing I knew from replaying in my head. I could only think of gang members tattooing a single black tear drop under their eye, or writing “Crips” in swirly script on their necks. This grandmother of a woman – plastic frame glasses and round sweatshirt-ed form – was not what I considered a candidate for tattooing at all, ever. She always asked me to wear a warmer coat, “for goodness sake.”
After the procedure the area around her eyes was a little puffy and red. After the swelling went down she appeared much the same as she did before, but I pictured her in the evenings, grading 3rd grade essays on the history of the state capitol wearing the same kind of flannel flower printed nightgown my own grandmother wears, with her eyeliner smoky and defined – ready for tomorrow and the day after that.

6.

There are moments in a woman’s life in which she seems to star in her own made-for-TV movie. The sun shines, you move as if a soundtrack is playing in the background of your life, everyone around you, the homeless man selling newspapers on the corner, all the silent rows of people waiting to get on the train, the surly checkout lady seem nicer, as if they are all thinking good thoughts, nice thoughts about how you’re going to make it in this world, gosh darn.

In the semester I studied in London I was often wrong. Wrong in a myriad of complicated ways. But on this particular day, I was starring in Sara’s London Adventure. I felt good, powerful, pretty. I understood the Underground routes! I didn’t need my copy of A-Z(ed)! I didn’t look as though I was wearing large neon AMERICAN sign! I hadn’t earned a comment about how stupid Americans are from my Brit Lit professor! I was wearing a new dress, black with a swinging full skirt. The kind that if at some point during the day it would have become necessary, I could have turned around and around quickly and my skirt would have made a nice circle around my legs. It would have been a good effect for the movie. And it was sunny. After days and days on endless gray drizzle. It was spring.

After my class in North London, I waited for the Tube along with twenty other London people. We were all friends. The problem was that we hadn’t discovered our
friendship yet, as we had never spoken. One man in particular seemed friendly, glancing over at me every few minutes, looking quickly away. After stowing my wallet deeper in the recesses of my bag I returned his look. He was a little older than me and in need of a shower. But on this day, as already is clear from my former delusions, it seemed possible that he was a scholar, he was rushing home to shower after studying for ever so long, instead of dirty-ish creepy guy in the Underground that was staring in a weird way. It seemed possible that we would become great friends. I was hungry for friends.

We boarded the Tube to Victoria Station and he positioned himself directly across from me, next to the door. As I pulled out my book, I smiled tentatively at him, not at his eyes, but at his chin. A general smile that could mean I am simply recollecting something amusing from long ago.

It was then that I noticed his penis. It was difficult to ignore at that point, as it was large and purplish. And the fact that he was holding his penis, appearing through the open zipper of his trousers, in his left hand and smiling at me. Everyone else, my former friends, read their newspapers, listened to their headphones, stared off into the darkness of the underground windows. I wanted to alert someone, to say something, but the quiet on the Underground is a condition close to hypnotism. And what would I say? Now, many things come to mind – but then everything seemed horribly impolite.

After he had relieved himself, wiping the cum on the inside of his jacket. He continued to stare at me. He winked. It was as if we had shared something, him and I. When I got home I stuffed the new pretty dress in the bottom of my suitcase.
Original cosmetics contained the oh-so-friendly ingredients of lead and mercury. Queen Elizabeth used to cover her entire face in white lead creating a look that she called the “Mask of Youth” and other people, I imagine, called odd and scary. Queen Victoria of England later banned the use of cosmetics (except by those in the theatre) as have some fundamentalist branches of Islam. The reasons cited were that cosmetics had power, could be used to mislead or to unleash uncontrolled desire. The very goal of cosmetics today.

Sephora.com, a popular website and store devoted to carrying a wide variety of makeup fragrance and skin care products, has 171 different mascaras, 744 perfumes, 163 different results when I searched for pink eye shadow. All these products are designed, if they are successful, to mislead or unleash desire.

Makeup has a biological basis, a link to sexuality and at a baser level recreation. Teeth whitening, clearer skin, bright white eyes speak to us as a species and say with red blinking arrows, good partner here, good genes. Eye makeup, particularly liner and shadow draw focus to the eye and the pupil. Dilated pupils indicate sexual attraction and makeup intends to make your eye stand out in this way. It is also a scientific truth that the larger the eye the more vulnerable and cute seeming the creature is perceived as being. This is true in the animal world. Bunnies have larger round eyes and are cute. Rats have small squinty eyes, not cute. Dogs and cats, and especially puppies and kittens – have large eyes. Snakes have eyes that are almost invisible, not cute, not at all.

It makes sense that makeup has in most cultures a traditional, ceremonial purpose. Theater works in the same way as it creates a character different from one’s self. From the geishas elaborated powders and red bow lips, to Native American and African rituals.
makeup has been used to indicate that something out of the ordinary is going on, to create a
difference in the appearance of a person, to be for a moment at least, more than yourself.

8.
Holly carefully rolled the curling iron down on Steph’s forehead tucking her hand in
between the heated metal and the vulnerable skin beneath Steph’s bangs. Katie, Steph, and I
are preparing for our first dance club outing in the big bulging city of Des Moines. We have
prepared an elaborate set of cross checking lies for our parents and have convinced Holly,
Steph’s older cool sister, to take us with her and her friends. Although we have been
giggling about the plan all week at the 8th grade lockers, excluding all those deemed not cool
enough to attend, now we are deadly serious. Understanding for the first time our possible
ridiculousness if we don’t look right, act right. We listen to Holly’s every word, picking them
up and stuffing them into our pockets like hungry orphans would with crusts of discarded
bread. I imagine this is the way soldiers would look before a battle – intently listening the
words of the commanding officers as if your life depended on that listening.

Holly, for reasons we were too grateful to try to question or understand, had agreed
to take us in and teach us how to be beautiful, how to be cool, how not to be laughed at in
public. Steph and Katie had a head start as they had both had older sisters and moms who
weren’t as feminist as mine. As an added disadvantage, as an only child, my mom wasn’t
eager to send me catapulting forward into adolescence. The other moms seemed to
understand the inertia, the desire to grow up as strong and impossible to change as gravity,
and give in, give up.

They had all teamed up on me, the one furthest behind and clearly in need of the
strong hand of guidance. I had already been curled and was waiting with hot rollers in my
hair while they each patted or stroked some color on my face and then stood back tilting their heads back and forth to double check the results. At the end, confirmed by a look they shared together and a glance at Holly’s big silver watch, they held a mirror up to my face and stood behind me fluffing rearranging my hair. I didn’t recognize myself. Having recently been set free from the torture of braces and the awful perm finally grown out of my hair completely I was not used to feeling anything else but despair when I looked in the mirror.

“You look beautiful!”

“And hot – Daniel’s going to totally ask you out.”

“You should do this all the time! You look really pretty.”

And in those words and in my reflection in the mirror rose a beastie beast, an impossible quest that I would never be free of. I was, in that moment, closer to beautiful than I could remember being. And I wanted it badly, this beauty. And just as surely as if they had offered me speed, cigarettes, diet pills, an addict was born.

9.

They told me it was candy. In sixth grade I was hated. Not with a ugh, she’s annoying, normal kind of dislike. A fevered passionate hatred from the people I had jump roped with, had sleepovers with, shared secrets with – all the things you imagine little girls doing in small Midwestern towns.

I got a death threat in the mail. I remember my mom crying behind the bathroom door while I sat on the couch. On my desk at school notes arrived like small bombs, vials of poison. They often included marble game pieces from some game we were too old to play, Sorry maybe. They told me it was candy. And then they said, I hope she chokes.
It was because, my classmates informed me, I was ugly. They also said they hated me because I was mean, but I knew that wasn’t true. I was nice. So, I suppose I was ugly.

I learned in the awful roaring of that year I was twelve, when a group of three of boys from my class would stand outside my bus window and yell “Bitch” until the bus growled into gear and puffed off into the distance, or when “Ugly Bitch” was written in the snow in my front yard with a stick, that being ugly was the worst thing that could happen to you.

It made you untouchable. I carried within me my own mini-plague. I made people bad.

10.

"We find that unattractive individuals commit more crime in comparison to average-looking ones, and very attractive individuals commit less crime in comparison to those who are average-looking," say Naci Mocan of the University of Colorado and Erdal Tekin of Georgia State University. Mocan and Tekin analyzed data from a federally sponsored survey of 15,000 high schoolers and discovered that being attractive has a chartable effect on the way a person’s life unfolds. Other studies have shown that unattractive men and women are less likely to be hired, and that they earn less money than the better-looking. A variety of tests demonstrate that this result is not because beauty is acting as a proxy for socio-economic status. Economists found that, in a way, beauty is capital – it “purchases” things that others, the less attractive simply can’t afford.

11.

It was only after I got my braces off that he agreed to “go out” with me. We would walk along the gravel roads at dusk, holding hands. He brought along a sweatshirt that he laid in between the rows of tall corn. In an awkward series of gestures and kneeling and apologies I
was laying on the sweatshirt my fingertips and hair splayed out in the dark Iowa dirt. When I came home from walking my Mom would notice my dirty palms, the dirt under my fingernails. I don’t remember how I explained.

Once a crow landed on a fencepost close to where we lay. I could feel the heat of the black gaze on me as we lay in between the rows of corn. I felt like crying. This boy said to me in between the furious kissing “Why didn’t I see you before? Why did I wait so long?” The answer seemed painfully obvious. Because I was ugly then. And now I am not. It wasn’t a mystery we could puzzle out together. It was a story I already knew.
For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let everyone of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reveres her husband.

--Ephesians 5:21-33

1.

In elementary school my mom braided my hair into two careful blonde braids down my back each morning. Sometimes she would curl the end pieces with a wooden spoon. I had a red coat that went to my knees. It had thick toggle clasps that I could button myself. My father read to me every night, *Pippi Longstocking, Anastasia Krumpnik, Wrinkle in Time*. I had a pink reading lamp and a special blanket. It had pictures of pastel kittens playing. It was called the kitty blanket. I didn’t even tease other kids on the playground. When I would try to spend the night at a friend’s house my parents would never even go to sleep because I would always call at 12 or 1:00 and ask to be picked up. I would wait at the end of the driveway with my pillow and the other kids would wave sadly from the big picture window. I wanted to go home.

2.

Look. I was good. Soft and sweet. Shy and nice. Good. I followed rules and smiled. I won awards. I sang at church. Look. My voice was clear and fine. I stood behind the communion benches and sang to God.
I wanted to be in love but, sadly, I was instead often not. I made a vow of purity until marriage. I signed a special paper and said a special pledge. And even though I was actively searching for the One, he was unfound and I became very familiar with the specific physical reaction that occurs when being broken up with. The symptoms are as follows:

1. Nausea
2. A feeling of separateness from your body
3. Dizziness

I am not a person who is comfortable with scenes. Even watching small embarrassments on television, a man with food on his face, a fictional girl with glasses being rejected by the cool kids, makes me feel sweaty.

I imagine all the boyfriends I’ve ever had walking away, whistling, after our breakup thinking, “That went well.” I’ve always tried to make people feel good about the breakup overall. I’ll be fine is my slogan. If he wasn’t The One, then I was one closer to finding him! In junior high and high school I would write letters to my future husband in curvy cursive handwriting. I knew that he was out there, the man that God had picked for me. He was waiting and I was waiting. I sometimes thought about him while I was brushing my teeth, wondered if he was brushing his teeth too. I prayed that I would be led to the right person. It was just a matter of time. It was like a deal God and I had. Be good and I’ll give you this.
5.

I got married in a rose garden. He, my new husband, wiped my tears with the pad of his thumb standing in that garden, my veil streaming out behind me in the wind and my hands shaking in his. The sky opened up, the clouds shaping a hole, a spotlight for the sun to appear through. The sun reflected on the lenses of his glasses and his hands were shaking as I held them in mine.

6.

I had a bouquet of roses and hydrangea. After the wedding I dried it upside down, secured with rubber bands, in the closet of our new house. Every time I got the vacuum out I would see it and remember the swish of my dress, the crinkly slip underneath, the singular way that tulle rustles against the legs.

7.

When my husband text messaged me “I am in love with someone else I cant keep it a secret anymore” at 2:00 in the morning I waited a few minutes before calling him. I called 67 times. At 2:37 I brought a blanket and went to sit in the driveway of our house. It was March and still cold. The tree in our front yard had hard nubs that would become leaves. The branches made thin shadows on the cement. I waited in the driveway. I wanted to go home. No one would answer.

8.

I sat on the bench outside my house at 4:30 in the morning. The sun come up and made new shadows on the driveway. I heard the sound of sparrows in a nest, cheeping. I held my cell
phone tightly in my fist, and I watched the minute change, one by one for an hour. The bench was painted the color that was leftover from the bathroom. When he called he said nothing was going to change. He asked me to stop crying. I could hear girls yelling, laughing, in the background, the muffled sound as he covered the phone with his hand. He said it didn’t matter how much I cried, it didn’t change anything at all.

9.

In college I was in a singing group called Cornerstone. The purpose of this group was to go to churches around the Midwest and sing and lead a worship program. I had a solo on the song, “Carry Your Candle.” It was a big deal. It was the song where the church lights would be dimmed and we would all have candles and would sway back and forth, our faces lit by the small flames. We would tell people that all problems could be solved through God if you would just come to Him with your burdens. The candles represented the hope we all have in Jesus the Son of God - The promise of eternal life.

Money problems? Solved.
Need a partner? Found.
Infidelity? Cured.
Depression? Just a myth the Devil plants to keep you away from God.

If you believe hard enough you can conquer any problem.

At practice, Felicity told us that people who were “depressed” simply were not spending enough time on their knees. We prayed for those poor sad people.
10.

I never invited my family to come to hear me sing. I would lie and say that we were going to Minnesota, farther. My grandmother had been hospitalized for her depression and on cycle after cycle of anti-depressants, which would work and then not. She was beautiful and tiny, had small bird bones in her back, in her hands. She had a collection of fur coats and diamond rings. On Sunday afternoons when I visited her with my mom she wore the same pajamas as last week and listened to *The Rose* sung by Bette Midler over and over and cried. She was mean sometimes. She sometimes didn’t leave the house even to get the mail. She only liked to eat circus peanuts and 7-Up. She was depressed. My mom also suffered from depression and had for years. I believed in God but I didn’t think I could look my mom or my grandma in the face while I stood in front of a shiny Sunday morning congregation and said that they just didn’t try hard enough. I knew it was bullshit but I sang it anyway.

11.

Much later, after I could not stop crying, literally could not stop crying, I made an appointment to go to the doctor. I dressed up and took a shower so I did not look crazy. In the room I sat on the table covered with thin white paper, my feet dangling in my fancy shoes. When the nurse asked me what was wrong, it started again – the eruption of gasping and sucking in of air, the ferocious slip of tears onto the white paper, onto my upturned hands, empty. It wasn’t Him, it was me. Crazy. I tried to fix me, to believe and be made whole, but it didn’t work.
12.
I was washing dishes, the leftover egg I had made a few days before difficult to scrape off the pan. He, my husband, had just gotten back from wherever he went all night. He brought me a sandwich, ½ a tuna fish on wheat. I don’t like tuna fish but I ate it. I didn’t ask questions about where he had been. Weeks ago, I had already begged him to stay, actual hands and knees, wiping the snot on the sleeves of my sweatshirt, begging. I had gone to the marriage counselor alone but I hadn’t told anyone that he wanted a divorce yet. I went to school, participated, smiled. At night I sat on the couch with the TV off, just sitting. I took the dog on long walks around the neighborhood, past all the houses that looked just the same. Even the trees were planted in the same exact spots in every identical lawn. My life was narrowed, scratched away to equal one foot and the other walking, to showering while touching my body as little as possible. To avoiding my eyes in the bathroom mirror. My body distant from the roaring mind. I prayed to be a good wife, to do the Right thing.

13.
He was sitting on the couch watching Sports Center and eating Baked Doritos. I asked him if he might change his mind. It was late March; the trees had single leaves hanging from bare branches.

He said he was happy now. He smiled.

Her name was Sarah too.

14.
My father has large calloused hands. He builds houses. He takes bits of wood and nails and pink fluffy insulation and then he makes something. While I escaped to visit my best friend,
my dad packed my married life into boxes and put it in his truck. Then he carried the boxes into the new house. He got me three boxes of tissues and blue flannel sheets. He was brave and I was not. He packed my socks and underwear, pajamas into boxes and carried them away. He stacked my books on top of each other in neat piles in the back of his truck. He took the light bulbs, the vacuum, the couch, the rugs. He packed up the Christmas decorations in the red and green plastic container. My wedding dress was white. It had a small ivory bow around the waist and was light, tulle and chiffon, silk. My mom told me that he had to go back three times for the dress. He would get to the 2-10 corner and turn around. The house was empty and the dress was alone in the closet. But even though he takes wood and nails and makes something strong and big, this he couldn’t fix. He carried my wedding dress in his large calloused hands down the stairs and into his truck. It rode beside him in the passenger seat home.

15.

That year after Easter service, the rising of God, the rejoicing and Amen, the tips of my fingers are colored like pieces of candy. Like the jelly beans and sweet hard chicks and ducks nestled in the bottom of my basket in the crunchy green nest of grass recycled from last year, from the year before. The basket is left over from when I believed in bunnies, but more than that believed in my own ability to skip pain. Believed that this Love would surround me like marshmallow coating, would protect me from losing, from failing.

Look, here is evidence. I was soft, good, sweet.

After church, we dyed Easter eggs. My mother and I poured vinegar and warm water into the same white china mugs that we did last year, the year before that and the year before. The tiny pills of dye fizz up in the water and the hard-boiled egg clicks on bottom of
the cup. My spoon catches the egg and pulls it up, transformed, out of blue dye, out of the cup of red, the yellow. The same magic even now that I don’t believe it.
Medicated

_The chief and primary cause of this development and very rapid increase of nervousness is modern civilization, which is distinguished from the ancient by these five characteristics: steam-power, the periodic press, the telegraph, the sciences, and the mental activity of women._

-George Beard (1881), _American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences_

1.

When I was small I often had strep throat. My particular set of symptoms were obvious to me, even at nine or ten. My neck felt like a leather belt was tightening around it, as if a scratchy yard of wool lined my throat, my throat re-upholstered while I slept. And there was a particular rolling of the stomach; a turning away from even the sweetest foods that meant surely the diagnosis would be strep throat.

At school, I would know that the sick was coming but would try to will it away. Before I would give in to lying on the awful blue-green sick bed while the school nurse called my mom, I tried to be not-sick for as long as possible. Eventually, I went to the nurse’s office, the hard butterscotch candy clicking against her teeth while she took my temperature.

All the afternoons when everyone else was at school, I was waiting in small rooms with old magazines and toys my mom never let me touch. I swung my patent leather feet from the silver edge of the doctor’s table while my mom patted my hand, my cheek. The cotton swabs stabbed the ache at the back of my throat, two times. Quick quick. The small Dixie cup of lukewarm water. And then, the reassurance of the rubber white shoes on linoleum, the soft knuckled knocking, tap, tap, tap of the returning nurse on the heavy
wooden doors, the nurse nodding, confirming, handing my mom the tiny slip of paper that we traded for pink medicine at Dalenay Pharmacy on Main Street.

On the way out the receptionist always handed me two cookies shaped like kindergarten flowers with holes in the middle to put your finger through. I ate the cookies while my mom wrote a check, tucked her checkbook back into the pocket especially made for it on the side with a snap. And driving away I was safe in the backseat, buckled in.

Even though each bite scratched on the way down, getting the cookies at the doctor that made them seem like medicine, like they were part of getting well. And there was something wild and foggy about being sick that made me want to follow directions. Even before my first teaspoon of pink bubblegum medicine I was better than before because the sick wasn’t getting bigger, flying around in my body but had been labeled, named, known. Pinned down like the dusty edges of the insect collection, mounted on cardboard, kept under glass.

2.

My grandmother’s purse is still full of her, of the collections of those last days and years. My grandpa brought it back from the hospice and set it there – ticking. Black, leather, a diamond clasp, braided handle, a Chanel scarf tied to the shoulder strap. She had four closets, full. Price tags still attached. Jewelry stuck into vases, on high shelves, tucked in the cushions. Home Shopping Network boxes still heavy and taped in the back bedroom under the bed. My grandfather’s clothes hung in the basement on wire hangers. Five shirts, three pairs of pants.

Last week my grandfather let some neighbor, some blue haired wobbling thing
take home some bits of my grandmother with her, a scarf, a gauzy summer shirt off the shoulder. She who bakes thick stews and wet brownies, gloppy frosting, (casserole!) will never understand the appeal of gauze, the power of a shoulder, tanned and lovely, to take over a room like my grandmother did. That black purse sits on the high-backed chair in his bedroom, has sat there for two years. I imagine him going in the bedroom, leaning over to take off his work socks, balancing one hand on the dresser. Not sitting in the chair.

The purse has, among other things, cigarettes, a red patent leather wallet with fifteen dollars, the particular heft and jangle of prescription bottles. Tiny blue and white pills rattling around inside. The bottles all look the same, brown with white lids, the mechanics of the top, arrows pointing the direction one should press and turn to release the pill to a mouth, to a sip of water from a waxy disposable cup, all the way to better.

I used to order the pills on my visits, while my mom and grandmother had coffee. I was a girl and they were women and there was no crossing over to the other side then. I would make towers of the bottles, sort and stack them, tall ones here, shorty ones here. Alphabetize their unpronounceable names. The bottles sat lined up like soldiers on every counter of my girlhood.

Part of being a woman was having the brown bottles in the kitchen lined up.

Part of being a girl was sorting them, pressing down the childproof tops for practice.

Our hysterical patients suffer from reminiscences. Their symptoms are the remnants and the memory symbols of certain (traumatic) experiences . . . they cannot escape from the past and neglect present reality in its favor. This fixation of the mental life on the pathogenic traumata is an essential, and practically a most significant characteristic of the neurosis.

-Dr. Sigmund Freud
3.

After he left there was an absence of reaction. It was like my chest, my heart was hollowed out, using the shiny silver melon scoop we got as a wedding present, leaving the shell of bone like rind. It was only later after survival seemed logical, likely to occur, despite, that I imagined my heart grew back in. Growing a heart from a small black seed of what remains is like wooing pain, inviting the plumy and desperate, fickle beating of the young muscle forming and attaching itself anew.

I imagined the blue bursting of my blood pumping through the new arteries, the tracing of the blood, untouched by oxygen, through my veins, colder than before. The muscle filling and unfolding like petals in the projector movies I had watched in dark classrooms all those years before with the outline of sun edging the pulled-down blind.

In my house the blinds were always pulled down. I did not want the neighbors to see me in my pajamas in the afternoon, crying over this rind of existence, the new blue pulsing hurting my chest, my legs, and my eyes. In the shower I was careful not to scrub too hard, did not like meeting my own gaze in the mirror while brushing my hair. I was being careful with myself, felt that even too much light could scare something away, the fragile new bud of heart tended like a prize orchid, a rare specimen only blooming once and at night.

4.

When she was a teenager my grandmother didn’t have a coat. But it was almost like she didn’t need a coat, even in cold Iowa winters, because she was so adored by boys with cars who gave her rides to and from. Her high school picture, her black hair painted blond, was passed from school to school as an advertisement for the photographer. And she was tiny
small in a way that a certain kind of man admires. Practically pocket sized. Brown eyes that
looked up and adored a certain kind of man.

That same way of looking down and then up with wide palpable need that charmed
Jesus every Sunday at the Catholic church at the end of Main Street in this anywhere town.
Eyes cast down at the rosary, beads turning in her little fingers, and then (pause) looking up
as if only this one prayer flung up with batted eyelash could save every last one of us. And
she was a truly excellent bowler.

When her appendix ruptured at age 17 there wasn’t any money to pay the doctor, no
money for coats, no money for appendixes. But she didn’t even need an appendix, what she
needed was a husband. One with money to pay for this appendix that was un-needed. And
he was found. She got a red winter coat lined with rabbit fur and a line of neat black stitches
across her abdomen.

When she was my grandmother we never, ever went bowling. It was laughable the
idea of bowling, really. For Christmas one year my grandfather bought her a long fur coat.
She loved the idea of coats, had them lined up side by side, price tags swinging in the closet,
but this one was too long or short, the wrong color. There was a Fight. It was like they were
involved in a long and frustrating game of catch, one where he would try to ball up all his
love for her and throw it at her from a distance. And although once a prize winning bowler,
she wasn’t much good at catch. She would turn around or reach but miss, and then he would
try all over again. For 50 years.

5.
Only a few pictures exist of my Great-Aunt Pearl. She came to Iowa from Tennessee and
smoked a corncob pipe. Even though her father had money for shoes, she didn’t want to
wear them. In one picture she is sitting backwards on a big draft horse – one that was used
to pull a plow and her head is tilted back. When she was 39 years old she decided she was
dying. She went to bed. She didn’t get up for more than a moment for ten years. And then
she died. She was right in a way, we would all be right to say we were dying and take to our
beds.

When Pearl was lying in her bed, watching the seasons change out the window year
after year – the corn changing from brown/black turned over earth, to tall green stalks, to
yellow husks blowing across the gray sky – there wasn’t much to do with people when their
minds decided to stick to something that wasn’t true - crazy people were sent to sanitariums,
the cost and the gossip were more than what her family could pay.

Mental illness seemed contagious. And it is. But not in the way people imagined. You
can’t catch crazy like a cold, by sharing and spoon or the air in a close room. Crazy is already
in a body when it’s born, curled up small and waiting. The feeling gradually closing until your
only choice is to lie down and let it.

6.

A burn, right calf, shape and size of egg, light pink
Four small cavities filled with silver in molars 4,6,12, 18
A constellation of freckles – right shoulder –
if connected looks like a bird, with one wing, flying
Two pin sized holes in the flesh of my navel
A bruise, plum and violet, left knee
and while I don’t know how it came
I press it with my index finger and
pain blooms through my body – dull and low
the same as when I think about him
how I rush back to that place again and again
in my mind – I do not need a guide or line
of breadcrumbs or shiny buttons to get there
but arrive without knowing how, to ache again
If found, please, return me in my imperfection.
Draw me a map to get back.

7.
I went to the Burger King drive-through one Thursday afternoon. It was slow. The line of dusty February cars idling, windows cracked. A dumpster stood at the back of the parking lot and while waiting to order my chicken sandwich, to pay, I fantasized about parking my car next to the green slick edges of the dumpster and climbing in. I imagined lying there among the rotting bags of garbage and feeling something close to relief at not trying any longer to be here or there, in this line or at my house or talking or saying nothing. The car behind me honked, the man inside waving his hand out the open window of his Buick.

_In the late 1800s representations of madness were found in productions of Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Marking Ophelia as one of the first and most widely known examples of a “madwoman” in popular culture. We see Ophelia’s singing and her disordered appearance, placing a particular emphasis on her hair as the crowning mark of her derangement. Loose, tumbledown locks of hair with flowers, weeds and straw serve as tropes for sexual availability, lapsed social decorum, vanity and madness. Through Ophelia’s haphazard dress and breast-baring costuming, her sexually disordered appearance is gauged to accentuate the explicitly sexual nature of women and madness.

“The Feminization of Madness in Visual Representation”
Jane E. Kromm, _Feminist Studies_
8.

Symptoms of depression include:

- Loss of interest in normal daily activities
- Feeling sad or down or hopeless
- Crying spells for no apparent reason
- Problems sleeping
- Trouble focusing or concentrating
- Difficulty making decisions
- Unintentional weight gain or loss
- Irritability
- Restlessness
- Feeling fatigued or weak
- Feeling worthless
- Loss of interest in sex
- Thoughts of suicide or suicidal behavior
- Unexplained physical problems, such as back pain or headaches

- Mayo Clinic brochure, 2009

9.

I made an appointment to go to the doctor. I dressed up and took a shower so I did not look crazy. In the room I sat on the table covered with thin white paper, my feet dangling in my fancy shoes. When the nurse asked me what was wrong, it started again, the eruption of gasping and sucking in of air, the ferocious slip of tears onto the white paper, onto my empty upturned hands.

The nurse stood next to the table and said “shhh” over and over and patted my hand. One small human gesture that made things both worse and better. I imagined myself as a wild animal, easily startled, wide-eyed. I imagined my hair scattered with flowers, sticks.
The doctor gave me a slip of paper that I traded that afternoon at the pharmacy on Main Street for a small brown bottle of white pills.

I poured all the pills out on the counter when I got home, sorted them in piles of two, one-two, one-two, one-two. A month of pills, “Take one in the morning with breakfast, and one at night before bed.” It was the same direction I’d always followed with medicine before, the pink bubblegum liquids of medicine cold in the refrigerator, but different. It was never my fault when I had Strep throat, or tonsillitis. I had done nothing to court the sickness, to bring it to me. Nothing I could have done could make it go away.

But this was different. It was only me saying I was sick. No test or results, no cotton swab of my throat or Petri dish growing bacteria as proof.

A woman, generally single, or in some way not in a condition for performing her reproductive function, having suffered from some real or imagined trouble, or having passed through a phase of hypochondriasis of sexual character, and often being a high nervous stock, becomes the interesting invalid. She is surrounded by good and generally religious and sympathetic friends. She is pampered in every way. She may have lost her voice or the power of a limb. These temporary paralyses often pass off suddenly with a new doctor or a new drug but, as a rule, they are replaced by some new neurosis. In the end, the patient becomes bedridden, often refuses her food, or is capricious about it, taking strange things at odd times, or pretending to starve. Masturbation is not uncommon. The body wastes, and the face has a thin anxious look, not unlike that represented by Rossetti in many of his pictures of women. There is a hungry look about them, which is striking.

-George Beard (1881), American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences

10.
It wasn’t as simple as being left. As him leaving. I left even if I did not walk away.
It was as if I had decided to lay down the weight of my thinking body and let it be done. He was Not my husband but the man I was loving, loved. The secret of his skin on my hand was a kind of betrayal. I felt the small hairs on the back of his neck, breathed in the scent of his laundry detergent. It was Cheer. But it wasn’t cheer at all; it was much darker and scarier and meaner and more delicious than cheer. It should have been called “Bad news” or maybe “Risky” or “Don’t Hug Him.” Although is it true “Risky” is much more difficult to market. But in this betrayal of touch, or scent, I was sent away. I was like girls who are unfortunately pregnant from petting in backseats of Volvos and have to go Upstate somewhere. The person I was simply disappeared and a new monster person took her place, a betrayer.

I remember walking past the clock tower on campus at night, the clock’s swinging bells ringing in my palms. I was aware of the places where I had touched him, the moment where I had traveled from myself. My thoughts felt only loosely tethered to me, tied with string, knotted with lace, with crinoline. I wondered what his lips tasted like, his breath, his teeth. I imagined the sweet taste of clementines, of licking the sweet line of juice off my forearm. The ringing hour left indentions of silence after it was done with its long and awful tolling.

In the jittery silence after the bells, I stopped, imagined the touch still carried in my hands from him transfer into the ground like electricity. The down, down, down of grass, of black dirt and worms and crawling, of fossils sleeping and then whatever comes next, absorbing my betrayal, my desire, and leaving me colder. Everything else in my life seemed smaller, like driving away from home and seeing a person there in the driveway waving, shrinking. I imagined pictures of this man, locked in a box somewhere. Shaky videotaped images of small him holding onto a grown-up’s fingers and walking. Walking to me. Walking
closer to the sick feeling of wanting him. The buzzing insistence of things gone wrong, but desired.

12.

At church, I am thinking about buses crashing at intersections, the slow sound of metal in my ears, about trains derailing in snow and about small sparks on ends of frayed electrical wires, about one mouse, a slip of gray down, small teeth shivering the wire. About heavy ships drifting towards icebergs, about the fish swimming underneath that ship about the silence of night in the middle of the ocean and then the sudden shudder of ice cracking. I see myself, inside. The church has stained glass windows, pictures of Mary, Jesus and Judas, who betrays with a kiss, I sit under the red reflection of glass. I imagine the white light pushing away from me and scattering itself on the ground like seeds, like shards of what I said to him and how much I meant to spin those words out in the world towards him for him to catch, to keep. Even if they were not mine to give.

13.

I went to church on Sundays with my father all the way through high school. He didn’t go anymore after I went to college, although I never asked him if he felt sad about it or if he didn’t care. The choice to go to church wasn’t particularly examined – we just went. We did not discuss it later over dinner. My mom never asked us how it was or what the sermon was about, about the thimble of wine and the fingertip press of bread at communion. She went only to the Christmas service and sang loudly with the candlelight on her face.
My father and I always avoided eye contact, looked at our hands, at the hymnal in its wooden cage, the tiny pencils sharpened and stuck into perfect sized holes next to prayer cards, whenever the sermon veered toward healing.

If you believe, you can be set free from any illness. I thought about the nest of my grandmother’s hair.

We started to go to church in what I remember as coincidentally the same time that my mom got sick. My mom went to nursing school and worked full time. She has the softest hands and laughed loudly. On every videotape made of our family you practically have to turn the volume down if something funny happens. We have one tape of us when I was five in the backyard. She sang me the song “Cigarettes and Whiskey” while she pushed me on the swing set – just like her mom did.

“Cigarettes and whiskey and wild, wild women. They’ll drive you crazy, they’ll drive you insane.”

I cried whenever my mom had to go to work or was late coming home. I wanted to sit right next to her all the time. I still call her whenever I am even a little sick, need to hear her voice when panicking – her calling me “sweet-pea” over the phone.

She was a therapist so would have zeroed in on the signs and behaviors of our family’s brand of crazy quickly. Had mothered her mother through hospitalization and new meds over again. Instead her body turned in on itself. She would start to get sick at around 9 at night. It didn’t matter whether she ate or not. She would lay pale on the couch or on the bathroom floor until she was so far from being okay, crying in hysterical jagged spurts, that my dad would take her to the emergency room.

I would take my schoolbooks and sit silent in the backseat, too young to be left alone at home so late at night. I hated the emergency room, the sliding corner-of-the-eye looks the
staff gave us when the doctor’s couldn’t find anything wrong and we came back too often. No Petri dish or swab test to prove this.

We all looked crazy in the florescent buzzing half-light of the waiting room. I was too skinny and had awkward permed frizz, braces, skin flushed with pimples on my chin and forehead. My dad wore white New Balance tennis shoes, flannel shirts, had messy untrimmed nighttime hair and calloused, dirty hands from working all day. During the day my mom worked three floors up, had keys to keep the crazy people in the unit where she was a staff nurse. Dispensed medicine and small Dixie cups sips of water from the nurse’s station. Had an official jangle of keys on her wrist and smelled like hand lotion. But down here at midnight and one, they thought we looked crazy, pitied and dismissed us to the car, my mom sleeping in the passenger seat all the way home.

At Mayo they finally diagnosed her with depression. She collected the bottles of pills prescribed, lined them up in a wooden box in the kitchen.

I believed in God but I didn’t think it would help us, really. It was okay that my mom didn’t come along to church because I didn’t think we could sit in the pew and listen to the pastor’s wobbly voice and fist pounding in front of the shiny Sunday morning congregation, telling us she just didn’t try hard enough, that she just needed to pray. Maybe it was true for other people, for healing an appendix or a broken bone, one of the small ones in the hand or toe.

14.

Lexapro is small and white. Circles. I take it every night with a pink glass of water next to the sink. It is so small that I almost don’t know I’ve swallowed anything at all. I imagine the synapses firing, speeding up in my brain as I swallow, as the pill dissolves. They
are like tiny rockets. Sparkly silver and quick. I feel better in two weeks. The dumpster doesn’t seem logical, doesn’t tempt me or seem to fit me anymore. Not better, better. Not like none of it matters or that I’m clown and puppy happy. It’s only that I don’t feel like everything is over. I have stopped imagining that even the birds are looking at me, that their beady bird eyes are accusing me of some awful unspeakable and true thing.

I feel like something planted that is barely growing. But still. Better.

Her restricted impression, her confinement to the four walls of the home, have done great execution, of course, in limiting her ideas, her information, her thought-processes, and power of judgment; and in giving a disproportionate prominence and intensity to the few things she knows about; but this is innocent in action compared with her restricted expression, the denial of freedom to act. A living organism is modified far less through the action of external circumstances upon it and its reaction thereto, than through the effect of its own exertions.

-Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1899), *Women and Economics*

15.

My mom was born in a small town. My grandfather fixed cars at the station on Main Street. My grandmother stayed home and cleaned and got mad. She was too pretty for that small town with one street and two kids and a husband who never listened, damn it. At the time I imagine that it seemed like her anger was the result of them, my mom’s sticky baby fingers on the clean oven door, my uncle’s temper tantrums, her husband’s sighing in the chair at night while watching the news, even that push of air into the clean living room was enough to set her off.

They moved when my mom was twelve. They left that one street town and its straight line of, gas station/mechanic, drugstore/soda shop, Ben Franklin Five and Dime, Doll’s Fabric and Patterns, Barber Shop, and a doctor’s office with a wooden sign hanging out front.
Dr. Erikkson was the doctor in town. Located on Main Street but as far south as one could go and still be technically in town. My grandmother had been having an affair with Dr. Robert Erikkson for the last ten years. I can only speculate on what happened, whether they parted and confessed, if there was a discovery by my grandpa driving home from the shop, whistling, noticing something telltale and odd, a collection of bits that added up to an accusation, a revealing and thrusting forward of truth. Or maybe Mrs. Mabel Erikkson came into town one afternoon or found a letter in a pocket or smelled Joy (my Grandmother’s perfume) on his jacket. Maybe they were in love, or perhaps they weren’t or maybe one was and one wasn’t. Or maybe they were bored or unhappy or countless other reasons or all or none of them.

They moved. Packing late at night and waving out the back window of my Grandpa’s shiny Ford at early morning on Main Street, streetlights still on as they pulled out of town.

Illness of sexual energy levels gone awry, as well as the loss of control of the mind over the body – including women who allow their bodies to become subject to uncontrollable movement as nymphomaniacs throw themselves to the floor, laugh, dance, jump, lash out, smash objects, tear their clothes, grab at any man who came before her. It was also believed that those who suffered from this madness would, without treatment, eventually become a raving maniac, robbed of her mind
- Goldberg 1884

16.

I pulled into the driveway of our house, the one my husband still lived in and knocked three times on the front door, waiting by the blooming daffodils the bulbs I’d planted last year arriving for spring. I was picking up papers, signing them at the bank in front of a notary.

There is much that is official about heartbreak.

He handed me the papers in the blank living room emptied of my things, left only with the TV (his) and a leather couch (new). He yawned stretching his arm over his head and
in that movement a body bloomed on his arm, a woman’s body and face, dark brown hair blowing in invisible wind, a tattoo of his new girlfriend.

I seemed ridiculous next to this girl’s blowing hair on my husband’s skin. As I was leaving he said that he was glad that I came over, that it helped him feel more certain that he was doing the right thing. I shut my old front door and drove to the bank to sign the papers in front of the notary.

17.

It had only been married for one year when I started meeting him for coffee. Laughing in a sparkly way that was clearly wrong. I counted down the minutes until I would see him again. It was a horrible cliché. All the right things at the perfectly wrong time.

In some way I took each cruelty, each glimpse of that tattoo of Sarah, each off-handed dismissal by my husband, each night sleeping on the couch, or waiting for a call, as mine to have. When I told my husband that I might die he said that people who acted crazy like that were weak, that he wouldn’t even talk about something so stupid.

Each time I knew I deserved this – was being punished for the coffee, for the sparkling, for the desire, knowing his scent and burying my face in his neck, my thoughts about this other him were enough to deserve this punishment, whatever it was. Would take it if I could get out and go to him
When going to my grandmother’s house there is a moment of waiting, a deep breath taken before twisting the knob, after the knock there is a moment that is the emotional equivalent of holding up one finger when flying a kite – testing the direction of the wind.

We could always tell if she stopped taking her medicine. Last week she was better, smiling, wearing slacks, the coffee bubbling merrily in its pot and then, this time, she would be lying on the couch, a sheet draped over the cushions, her back to the door. Rosary on the coffee table next to the pile of knotted tissues.

I never understood, the pushing of boundaries, tearing away the layers of getting better to reach that awful core again. Until I had my brown prescription bottle on my own kitchen counter it seemed self-destructive and mean to keep on getting almost better and then getting crazy again. Like picking a scab until infection festers under the surface, or like rolling that same boulder up that same hill. What I did not understand is that destroying your life sometimes seems like the only logical choice, the only thing left to do. Sometimes destruction looks a lot like hope. As if wanting better bad enough will make it so.
(My block is 2,125 steps.)

1.

At night I used to walk alone around my block, past the same fractured slant of sidewalk tilted by the roots of an misplaced tree, the young woman with her baby on her front porch swing, the bikes leaning by the back door, tiny bell on the little girls bike glinting in the streetlight, the muffled woof of the black and white lump of a dog laying in the grass of the house two away from mine. 917, 921, 822, 815, 914, 916, 917.

(In July, the hottest month, daily temperatures range from morning lows of around 61 and afternoon highs of 82° F.)

2.

Inside my house was a man whose neck when he came home from work in the summer smelled like pennies – bright and copper - and who woke up most every morning to find me somewhere in the house crying, unable to quiet the insistence of my grief. This man helped me calculate my life, the one I did not yet have, the number of reasons, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 . . . that I had to get up while I lay on the floor that awful roaring summer.

(The temperature inside a human heart is always 52 degrees, even in the heat of summer)

3.

If I could tell you this without mentioning the word heart and all that it bares, the construction paper cut out, sappy Valentine chocolate, the achey breaky, Care Bear terrible cliché of it, I would. But my heart (oh my heart) stands on the edge of itself with this man, on tiptoe, the throb of it cupped in his hands. I have figured
the risk in this love, multiplied and divided it’s measurements and lines. Worried over inconsistent results, the elusive black and white divisions, my miscalculations.

(The moth’s heart is without chambers or valves and reverses direction when excited.)

4.

I kept walking around that block, circling him, for these long nights of summer and he stood in the doorway with the moths floating and jabbing the porch light above his head in loopy ungraceful circles. He watched me walk away and return, walk away and then farther, turn the corner measuring the block with my bare feet. The distance I was walking adding up to a summer of miles. Here and away as the pulpy mess of my heart beat down the steps again.

(The broken human heart beats 100,000 times each day.)

5.

Most of them belong to him.
Bride

-But all along from twelve or thirteen, love begins to take its place in a girl's mind. She reads poems and stories in which the hero is the central figure, a marvelous being, beautiful, noble and chivalrous, dark and stern, or fair and charming. It is all the same to her. The stranger in town, the man who looked as though he carried a secret sorrow, the one who bowed so deferentially, or danced so divinely, -- any one of them all was a possible lover.

- Benedict, Caroline (1927). Our Girls and Our Times

1.

It came encased in plastic wrap. I would not unwrap my newest issue of Martha Stewart Weddings until I got back to my dorm room where I would turn with care every light-as-feather page scrutinizing my possible futures. My friends would appear in my room like moths until we were all huddled around the light of the magazine with a series of post notes, color coded for each person, and mark our dreams with comments. “Hair? Half up?” or “I love this ring!” in the loopy signature handwriting of girls who’d been practicing linking her name with a cast of characters in the guise of boyfriends/potential husbands for years already. Mrs. Sara Lawler, Mrs. Jon Lawler, Ms. Lia High-Lawler, Mrs. Alisa Baum, Mrs. Goeing, Mr. and Mrs. Miriam and Paul Ashley.

I was 18 when my subscription began, have the first ever issue of the magazine. I saved them all in a Tupperware container under my bed, one that was supposed to be used for bulky wool ski chalet sweaters, of which I had none. I laid each issue inside softly, the post-it notes of all our dreams waiting to be referenced on that oh-so-magical day of our potential engagements.

Martha Stewart Wedding had the power to enchant even the most unlikely of candidates, my roommate my freshman year - a Biology major who ran Cross County, voted (by me) least likely to brush her hair or change out of her seemingly infinite collection of sweatpants, the math major down the hall whose social skills seemed to only permit
equations or logical thinking, even the quiet girl from 2nd floor who during our Junior year I would have to explain the concept of “hand job” to.

My Martha magazines are like the sacred texts of some obscure religion, a military field guide, a football playbook. The Bride becomes the military leader committed to a cause with such zealous fervor it borders on insanity. She takes her mom and her friends, her future husband, on a crash course in following orders, in following directions without questions or back talk. She says, “Jump!” You jump. She says more sparkles; you find some f-ing sparkles. She says the punch is awful; you get it away from her NOW. She says “March!” and you are halfway up the aisle. It isn’t cute, really, or romantic, this wedding planning. It’s a legion of women with Martha at the helm. The mission: the best and most beautiful day of your life.

2.

Case Study: A.

She is engaged. My friend from college, A, had been dating her fiancée, C, for a few months though they had known each other for a few years. He seems nice and when he looks at her his eyes soften in a way that is almost painful to observe, his adoration palpable. C was raised in a family of sisters; he is sweet and often nods without any reason for agreement.

A is a lion of a person. Intensely Christian, a common characteristic in my small Midwestern college, she is on fire to be married, to have sex, finally, and to become a woman in the eyes of her family and the church. She also comes from a family with money, was the County Fair Queen, and the Prom Princess. She is pretty and can be attentive in a way that makes you feel like you are standing in a warm pool of light and then can just as quickly shut off, the switch flipped.
She has some magical quality that kept her parade of boyfriends coming back to her door in our dorm. One memorable boy our senior year slept outside her door in the hallway after she slammed it in his face, played love songs on his guitar until his sobbing/singing became too pathetic and we opened the door to ask him if he wanted to sleep on our couch. We are meeting her mom at Schaeffer’s, the most up-scale bridal salon in Iowa, to try on dresses.

“I would have never said ‘yes’ to under a carat.” She adjusts her sunglasses in the rear view mirror and pushes her fingers flat to admire the ring as it sparkles in the afternoon sun. Another friend who is a recent bride said that she loves driving anywhere now because she likes to look at her ring, driving gives her a chance to look at her two carat Princess cut ring in the sun. This makes me nervous, as she wasn’t a particularly good driver in the first place. A. has her wedding binder in the backseat and I flip though the glossy pages while we drive.

“I’ve already got the cake ordered. I love carrot cake and I love chocolate cake so I decided to get one chocolate and one carrot both with cream frosting. The display cake will be covered in fondant, but we won’t serve that one. We’ll just cut it and then serve the sheet cakes. Chris hates cake! But I told him that’s the tradition so he’ll at least have to eat it when we feed each other. That’d be weird to not do that! Don’t you think?”

We walk into Schaeffer’s and tell the young woman dressed in black that we’re here for our appointment. And here common sense departs from us completely. The mid-price for a bridal gown at Schaeffer’s is $2,000. The idea of buying a dress to wear on one (important) afternoon for the same price as I paid for the Tercel I drove for the last four years somehow makes perfect sense. Is, in fact, necessary. And in that moment comes the trick – give someone an obnoxious sales figure while they look at themselves in a full length three way mirror wearing a piece of satin and silk that resembles everything about the Barbie
dress and Cinderella fantasy they’ve held since they were small and the desire to own it moves like hunger. At first, small and easily denied and then in a relatively short time becoming fierce and all consuming.

She is beautiful. When she steps out of velvet curtain dressing room in a silk Amsale gown with a cappuccino sash and ivory beadwork on the bodice, when she nestles the diamond-ite tiara into her hair and tucks the veil’s little teeth into the pocket above her everyday ponytail, it is nothing less than a transformation. There are drugs less addictive and mood altering than the sight of yourself as Bride.

This is before the actual stomping and fist shaking at the stationary store when we learn the invitations will take a month to order and is miles away from the yelling at the small Asian seamstress who accidentally poked the Bride with a pin while bringing in the sides of this same dress. There is not even a hint in this moment of the sobbing in the bathroom stall when A’s sister rudely brings her boyfriend to the wedding and “steals everyone’s attention on my special day.” In this moment I believe the dream too. Believe that with this dress will follow happiness.

3.

I’m not saying that this is the affliction of all women or that this is what we are all doing when all the men-folk are off hunting and making corporate deals. Not saying that flashing a wedding magazine, of which there are many: Brides, The Knot, InStyle Weddings, Modern Bride, Elegant Bride, The Rainbow Wedding (LGBT weddings) just to name a few, will reduce women to cooing, post-it noting versions of their former selves. Some women could care less. They have, in their own words, I imagine, “better things to do.” I am not sure if there is a potential seed that exists, a symptom list or genetic predisposition for obsession, all I know
is that it strikes hard and without mercy; it’s most diagnosable symptom the loss of common
sense. I suspect one warning sign, something all of Martha’s little fan club had in common,
was playing with Barbie a great deal as children.
I am confessing in the same way people with addictions do, “Hi, I’m Sara . . .” I am
admitting my love of things pouffy. I am a person who adores a good Disney ending, loves
the feeling of silk charmeuse or vintage lace on my hips, under my fingertips. Don’t even
get my started on the almost painful joy that tulle is to me, the beauty of a veil! I want to see
your engagement ring. I want to hear the story too. I want to know if you’re going to have a
flower girl (I wouldn’t, really). I might cry at your wedding, will notice the dyed to match
shoes, with appreciate the calligraphy of the favor boxes of royal blue and crimson m&ms.

I’ve never been particularly good at the fine print. The part that explains that this is
one day in a multitude of days, most of which border on ordinary, some of which will be
down right bad. It would be easier to see a wedding day, a wedding dress, as some kind of an
answer to the question of what the hell is going to happen in your life. The answer to “Will
this, will I, be okay?” The fine print tells you a whole bunch of crap that you don’t want to
know, about how your dog might get run over, that he might pack a suitcase and shut the
door softly, that you might be making the biggest mistake of your life, but only so far. After
all, after the wedding there is all that life still to live.

4.
Case Study: E

The dress was a sample, that means it had been hanging in the shop, being tried on
for a year or so and was now being sold, as is, to make way for the new line. It was Judd
Waddel, a New York designer whose elegant wedding dresses start at around $3,500. It was
plain, ivory, an empire waist. There was a large yellowish stain on the train and a black
smudge on the bodice. E wanted it anyway, for $4,500. She was in school to be a nurse. Her
future husband worked at Sports Mart. Her mother would never ever have agreed to a down
payment price on a dress.

But E was determined. She got a credit card, maxed it out with the dress and the
$300 alterations and shoes. She donated plasma once a week to pay her credit card bill.
There was still $1,000 left on the card a year her divorce was final.

5.

There is a certain and inevitable danger in letting one day govern your fantasy life for
years. The first and most obvious problem is that marriage is not one ultimate party. You
can hear the bridal cry in the distance, across the aisles of polyester blend silk of David’s
Bridal warehouse and behind the swankiest heavy velvet curtain of a bridal boutique dressing
room, “But it’s my special day!”

And yes. But when the wedding becomes the point in the distance when your life
will magically become every fulfillment of your adolescent dreams there is nothing waiting
there but unavoidable disappointment. Distracting yourself with a huge kick ass party, with
you as its super star princess is not exactly what prepares you for a lifetime with a partner,
one who will screw up, who will spread in the middle and develop in middle age an odd
coughing habit that will annoy you and fill you with uncontrollable rage, and you, the lovely
bride, will be unable to avoid the graying hair, the frazzled impatience after putting the third
child to bed. Something that bridal syndrome blinds you to, for one day your life does not
resemble life, you can call all the shots, yell at people who disappoint you, have everything,
right down to the last pink Amelia rose and softly glowing fairy light exactly how you want it.
How tempting. But when the idea of marriage seems like the sad consolation prize, a lifetime supply of Wheaties after losing the red Corvette, there is a problem.

The Martha Army tendency rears its ugly head when the groom shrinks smaller and smaller in the picture of a life until he becomes an afterthought while the Bride and her day take on the inflated proportions of a balloon bumbling down the street in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. So powerful that in a particularly strong gust of wind eight handlers can’t control her, light poles can be tipped, small children trampled.

I can’t count with both hands the number of times I’ve heard from an engaged friend, “He just has to show up.” The question of him, the groom, showing up becomes an actual task, as the behavior of some brides becomes more and more ridiculous. But it is not just the Bride – not the blame of women and their “crazy” ways but instead of product of a culture who at the supper table of life does not know when to say when.

The institution of marriage has clearly changed. The ever depressing and wobbly statistic of a national divorce rate of nearly 50% is one interesting aspect that the bridal industry would rather ignore. Our grandparents, those celebrating now their 50th wedding anniversary, got married in a different time. And more importantly with different expectations of what marriage would be. Marriage meant having children, eating dinner, watching Ed Sullivan, carrying lunch to work in a brown paper sack. There was no Tivo, no Ziploc, no Internet. The divorce rate was 11% and the idea of having a sexual relationship before marriage publicly frowned upon. The roles for what men and women were expected to do were much more clearly defined. You didn’t necessarily have to have it all to be happy, to be okay. So, as women grow more and more independent, embracing the ability to be financially responsible for supporting their lives, becoming far more likely to be first time homeowners, having access to a social life, sexual relationships, and independence to choose
based on their own desires what and when and how they will do whatever. As it becomes less and less necessary for a woman’s survival, marriage and weddings become more and more romantic, and larger and more expensive, have become the ultimate status symbol, someone to promise to love you and only you forever.

The brides themselves are not entirely to blame. The wedding industry was, in 2006, a 72 billion dollar industry. The average wedding budget is 20,000 and the average engagement ring is 2,000. Have a wedding or get a 2007 Ford Mustang, or a Focus and have 6,000 left over for a year of college tuition. There are billions of dollars devoted to making you fall in love with that dress, to want that ring, and people scheming up ways for you want to see yourself dancing in ballroom of the fanciest hotel downtown. It is the average women’s chance to resemble celebrity.

_InStyle Wedding_’s entire magazine’s focus is on giving the bride tips and inside information about what celebrities are doing, thinking about, buying and wearing for the own surreal weddings. MTV, a network not noted for their past interest in the “union of the two souls”, has had three successful shows based on following a celebrity couple as they plan their nuptials and begin their life together. While we fan the flames of our growing obsession with celebrity imitation our own real life relationships resemblance to their flimsy pairings seems to be growing as well. According to New York Diamond Traders, "In the six months following J.Lo's engagement to Ben Affleck, we sold more pink diamonds than we'd sold in the previous six years!"

6.

Case Study: D
The theme was pink and sparkle. The groom was tall and dark and handsome. The bride was short and sweet, blushing and blond. The price tag for the magical event was tipping toward $25,000. The bride, D., and her mom were no longer speaking after D.’s mother refused to get the third meat option at dinner, pork, beef AND chicken and wanted her to chose just two.

“Everyone will think we are cheap and then I’ll have to know that everyone thinks we couldn’t afford a nice wedding for the rest of my life. God, I mean, who just has beef! And we’re not even getting the crab cakes or artichoke pasta. Everyone is going to hate this wedding! Including me.”

The catering costs are already at close to $50.00 a plate. The cake and dessert bar costing $1,000, $600 of that just for cake with special pink hued frosting. The cake topper, a silver sculpture like bride and groom, just arrived UPS adding another $100 to the cake budget total.

Her dress is a giant princess pouf, as described by the bride. The argument about pork is verging on ridiculous as the bride hasn’t eaten anything but Ramen noodles and Slimfast for weeks to fit into princess pouf that was ordered too small with the intention to lose that tricky 10 pounds.

D isn’t talking to her fiancée either. He hasn’t been helpful in addressing the invitations, is insisting on having his sister as a groom’s woman – a practice D finds “tacky” and is foolishly holding onto having a dollar dance which D thinks is degrading. The wedding is almost called off twice and by the time everyone finally arrives, limping, to the wedding day, almost no one is speaking. The pork is really good. But the pink frosting is a little too sweet.
7.

Case Study: H

H and D– April 5th, 2007

H’s wedding budget

$2,300 dress
$1,841 tuxedos for groom and groomsmen
$2,200 bridesmaids dresses and shoes
$2,330 ceremony and rental cost
$1,100 wedding gifts and hotel cost for out of town guests
$3,130 flowers for ceremony
$2,600 photographer
$12,000 reception – including catering, rental of space, tent and linens
$800 stationary – including thank you cards and invitations with RSVP and postage paid
$4,000 honeymoon to Cabo San Lucas

8.

I still love weddings despite being more than a little bitter; having been knocked around a bit by love and its other sides and names. My first wedding was pretty. And perfect. The fact that my second wedding happened proves that pretty and perfect weddings do not offer much protection in the end. Even knowing better, I wanted to put that dress on and believe that everything will be okay even though there is not even a diamond-ite bit of truth in that idea.
To Run

1.

Last Tuesday, walking. Alone, about a half mile from my house toward a small creek, nameless, and a bridge where I always like to walk in that half light and dark of early evening. It is when the mothers are pulling the meatloaf out of the oven, the light switches flipped on in response to the realization of the darkness on the book read next to the window. No one is out.

New houses are being built all around the creek, the bridge. Cornfields turn into split-levels, driveways poured into the black turned soil. Burger King bags roll across the dirt in a breeze. No one lives here yet; soon, maybe a family will move in and wait for a neighborhood to grow around it. I can hear a hammer beating from inside one of the houses, louder in the stillness of the late afternoon. This house, third on the street, is more than the skeleton of house, but still half made, the stairs leading to the idea of an upstairs visible from the sidewalk as I walked by.

I have my headphones on, listening to Spanish lessons, today: how to request a hotel room with a double bed (cama matrimonial) and a view of the sea (con vista del mar) for two nights (dos noches) when over the voice of my Spanish instructor in my ear, I hear someone shouting.

The man with the hammer, who is no longer hammering was standing next to his truck in the dead-end street, one that empties into field and field until the highway. He motions me over with a two fingers a half smile. He is older than me. White, jeans, tee shirt, hat. Nothing more remarkable than that. I want to be nice. And I couldn’t run that fast.
Those were the two things that appeared first in my mind. As my teacher went on to explain the differences in “I want” and “I would like” in my ear I knew that I had broken the first and most important rule.

Don’t be alone.

2.

The children rehearse their fears everyday from 10:00 to 11:00. 11:00 we begin the slow weaving, impatient line toward washing hands. 11:15, we walk like ducks, or like rabbits, or like astronauts wearing space helmets, or like we are holding giant bubbles in our mouths any trick to keep us quiet in the hall. The rest of the students are still learning I remind them as we stand single file by the door. Only kindergartners eat their lunch right now. If I forget to say it, they wait.

”Should we be quiet?” they ask. “Are we the only ones who will eat?” they feed me my line. And I agree. They want it the same every time.

They start practicing disaster again at recess, and then in the afternoon at center time. Even math is taken over with the edge of calamity. It is some biological wonder this insistence and persistence of the same stories played out. In adult life we claim to seek new experience, monotony being the worst of all possible hells. In childhood it is not the sparkling new that keeps, but instead something like this:

There was a boy/girl/squirrel/princess/Batman who was all alone is the woods/city/apartment/school. He/She/It was very afraid. And then the Mommy came and it was okay.

This is the best story they know.
In some under part of childhood we all know how terribly perilous is our survival. We are all small then. We do not understand the logistics of survival. Everything seems a bit magic in the most menacing of ways. Adults can be kind; buy toys, snacks, good suppers, or not. But there is little a child can do to change the way things work. So, to be left alone is the ultimate primal fear. We cannot survive alone.

Every bad guy is beaten to save something else, every big sister, little sister, mommy and baby scenario in the Housekeeping corner, a wooden mini stove and table, a small plastic grocery cart, plastic food with bite marks, and a basket of dress-up clothes, must include the inevitable turn where mommy must go out and then come back – triumphant and scolding, oversized purse dragging behind her, the plastic hamburgers ready on the table. Baby voices they haven’t really used for years returning, “Mommy!” they say and their five year old classmate answers, tone slightly frazzled and undone around the edges, a recreation of some real mom, “Yes, babies. I’m here.”

3.

Eden’s teeth are muted shades of black and brown, her smile is broken, She is a poster child for too much for candy, but at lunch she puts her leftover sandwich in a Ziploc bag, the tator tots, takes leftovers from other children’s trays. Her coat is too big, a coat for a man, and she never has mittens. I let her borrow mine and I see her on the playground, my red women’s gloves hanging from her hands
like a confession
or an apology.

My body is too big for the child sized chairs
in the guidance counselor’s office.
I am bent in half, growing smaller
as the guidance counselor nods for me to begin
The puppets staring from their stand.
The playschool people in their house waiting.
“I am not angry with you, Jacob.
There are some things that little boys . . .”
While making paper turkeys
I traced his small hands with dull pencil he said,
“I want to rip your shirt off so everyone
can see that you are naked.
Let’s do sex because
I love you.”
With a straight face, not blinking, Jacob,
with his Pokemon tennis shoes swinging.
His feet don’t reach the floor.

I watch Mariella copy the same sentences
five times on Friday.
“I like yellow.”
“I am five years old.”
“I can read.”
I ask her to read the words she is copying
slowly, patient, from the chalk board
an imitation in meaningless squiggles
onto the manilla paper.
Her eyes searched mine after each pencil stroke
to see if I will pretend I don’t know.
I watch her carefully erase again and again
until her pink eraser rubbs through the paper
exposing the a gray hole of table underneath.

Her fingers press into the small of my back.
The place where all Kindergarten embraces reach,
Grace, the visible nits and lice in her hair
squeezing tighter, eyes wide
with a want much bigger than five.
“I never want this moment to end” she says
her voice muffled as she presses her face into my sweater.
She always wants to call me Brenda.
She tells me that I would look sexy if I wore
my hair in a ponytail.
In the school bus line she waits by the door
with her pink backpack and her bruised face.
Everytime she asks to be my daughter.
She says we can can play Barbie
and asks if I have bathtub.
She asks as if it’s magic
As if all I have to do is say
yes.

Last week, the class learned to make hearts.
Their shaking hands in safety scissors
cut uneven scraps of paper
which they present, brightly colored and
folded and folded again
from their pockets, proud and hopeful.
You nis, LOVE, prite,
written with pencils gripped in fists.
The floor is littered with
the shells of their hearts.

4.

It was a rule that I knew, that Tuesday on the sidewalk of the dead-end street, so
instinctually, so at the middle of my human self, that I wanted my mother. Don’t be alone. It
is not an individual lesson, one that only I learned or that a specific group of children learn,
like language, but one that I imagine is universal. As if this message is whispered to us all as
babies in that half place between consciousnesses.

“Stay together. To be alone is to not survive.”

What makes it so impossible is that as a woman, even an American, educated, liberal,
feminist, woman a product of Women’s Lib and Equal Opportunity and self defense, equal
to being alive I wanted to be nice. And what if that man shouting to me on an empty street,
in front of empty houses, with empty rooms, and windows, had lost a puppy, wanted to
offer me candy, was complimenting my shoes? Wouldn’t it then be rude to run? Wouldn’t he
think that I was a bitch, or worse, crazy?

And this misplaced bit of etiquette is also at the core of me. I couldn’t make my feet
run even though my heart thumped in my ears, wanting life. Was this man likely to kill me?
Was he going to take me into one of the empty shells of house and do some horrible
irreversible thing and no one could find me there, not even my mom. Because why would I
be here? Why would I walk here? Alone? Would this man really mean to hurt me?

No. I realize the likely answer, both then and now, but there is, in being a girl, a
woman, an inheritance of fear, one that should be listened to, one that I shouldn’t have to
explain my way out of – the body knows and connects things which the mind denies.
My body said, go. My mind said, don’t be silly.

5.

There is always one child who plays alone. As a teacher I worried on and on about this child, not content to think of the child as only shy, even though I was a shy girl, an only child who preferred often to play alone. The real learning that happens in early childhood comes from joining and participating in other’s stories. It is through this “play” that children establish hierarchy, make friendships, deal with fear, cope with change, learn how to be. It is how they learn to process information, to deal with the inescapable disorder of the world. In kindergarten the good guys win, the mommies come home; the solution is as easy as invention.

6.

In the housekeeping corner:

”Let’s pretend I am a mommy and you guys all be my babies?”

“I want to be the big sister, and Hannah wants to be the cooker.”

“Oh, but I be the mommy.”

“Okay, but I be the mommy.”

“Now, let’s pretend that we are going to have a party for the birthday of the baby. I have to go shopping for the foods, hot dogs and cake.” Ellie, the mommy – always the mommy- slings a large play purse over her shoulder. And then looking through the pretend window to see trouble coming.

“Oh no! Some burglars are going to come and steal our money!”

“Come on everybody, hide under here, quickly, hurry!”
“Oh no! Aaaah!’ 2-3 minutes pass while the three girls huddle under the play kitchen table covering their heads with their small hands.

“Don’t worry everybody, it’s okay now. Let’s do the hair for the party. And you blow the balloons.”

In the housekeeping corner the threats from the outside are easily solved. Sometimes they hide, sometimes someone yells for help, only once did the housekeeping corner ever pretend-shoot a burglar or stranger. The housekeeping corner is also full of nodding, of agreement most of the time. Everyone says, “Let’s” as in “Let’s pretend . . . “. There is still a hierarchy clearly established, if you are a cooker or a side sister you are less central to the plot. Even worse is if you must be the neighbor. There are still hurt feelings with the girls – slights and people who are excluded. But it is done in softer tones. You must be nice.

The boy’s play is loud and filled with sound effects. They are working on the same thing – escaping danger, playing out “what if’s” but the sound effects distance me as a teacher.

In the Blocks:

“I’m a good guy! I am a Red Power Ranger!”

“No, I’m Red you be Blue.”

“Pppk, Pppk, (gun noises)
Teacher: “Boys, there are no guns in the classroom. Even pretend guns.”

“pppk, pppk, ppppk” (softer gun noises)

The two boys run around the block corner, kicking at the blocks.

“We’ve gotta get Shredder. He’s trying to get us and take our powers!”

“POWER RANGERS!”
Teacher: “Aaron, LaShawn, inside voices, please. We are doing our reading at reading table and I can’t hear the children’s voices.”

The threat of violence is present in both versions of play. The girl’s play is rarely interfered with – the boy’s, always. I am beginning to understand my own bias as a teacher and the bias in the design of classroom learning. I feel better about nice, quiet play. Aggressive, loud, sound effect play is disruptive, but more than that is uncomfortable. The violence present in the play of my five-year-old students isn’t scary – but the innate capability for violence is. The stories about “This guy got his hand chopped off!” are just as likely to appear as “I like Mom.” But I want to stamp it out, to quiet it.

The child that plays alone misses out on the opportunity to settle and place danger. They miss the chance to share their secret fear, to see it acted out in play and solved. They miss feeling stronger.

I didn’t run that Tuesday on my walk because it would have seemed like an over-reaction and because it seemed like even if I had tried I just wouldn’t have been strong enough to do anything, to run faster and farther than a man, a man with a truck. My response seemed consistent with all the other things that I didn’t do.

I didn’t complain about sexual messages written on notebook paper and stuffed in my locker in high school. I danced with boys, let them grab me and take me to dark corners because I didn’t know how to entangle myself from their desire without hurting their feelings. I didn’t want to be a bitch. I didn’t insist on my own ride. On a friend to come along. I didn’t ask for help. I didn’t run.
8.

My least favorite day in Kindergarten is “Stranger Danger.” The guidance counselor comes in, soft, whispering, sweet, to tell the kids the rules of safety.

1. Everyone that you don’t know is a stranger. Even if they look nice.
2. Don’t go with any stranger. Don’t help them find their puppy. Don’t eat their candy. Don’t. Even if they say they know your mom.
3. Don’t play alone.
4. Run.
5. Tell someone you trust if a stranger talks to you.

We do coloring pages and practice saying, “You’re not my mommy!” in a loud angry voice. The children practice saying “no!” with scrunched up eyebrows and hands on hips. They practice telling their mom. I am their pretend mom – who they chose as the closest thing – and so am in charge of saying, “What happened?” and “Thanks for telling me. That was very brave.”

We also do Good Touch/Bad Touch which comes with a set of worksheets, one that is a picture of a body that the children color in. They are supposed to put the band-aid on the place where they got a Bad Touch or were hurt. There are two warning signs to pull a child’s paper. Most of the papers get a smiley face on top for good careful coloring and are put in backpacks to go home. Papers are pulled only if the body is colored in naked, no tiny clothes drawn in, or if the band-aid is stuck on the privates. Those children have special talks with the guidance counselor.

That day the children are wary and startle easily on the playground. There are more tears, not related to the safety lesson, about other things, hitting, taking a ball, looking in a mean way, but the tears come easy today. Good Touch/Bad Touch is never part of their play.
Strangers are, but they never act out the steps that we practice in the classroom. The steps belong somehow to grow-ups, not to kids. It is always something a little magic that saves them. A gun. A magic word. A chalk-line. A dragon. A mommy.

9.

Day 21

Inside the egg grows the little chick,

little chick

little chick.

Inside the egg grows a little chick,
in 21 days.

This morning we looked through the plastic window of the styrofoam incubator and see a hole in the smooth surface of shell. Shell that fits perfectly into their palms fingers curving in carefully. They say they can feel the chick’s heart beeping in their hands. Even though I say “beating” write it on the board underline the / with red Circle the p and cross it out. Beating, like a drum, I persist. No one cares. On TV all the peoples’ hearts are beeping at the hospital. And when you are real bad sick your heart makes one long loud sound and it’s not beeping anymore.

By the afternoon the hole has grown,
a thin line around the circumference of the shell, 
and when they come back from art
I hold the pulsing shell in my palm
and we watch
their mouths in perfect Os
Claire holding her breath
Carolina and Andrea holding hands,
as the chick pushes the shell out once
now, edges folding together again
out
and folding
out
when the shell opens
they clap.
Their hands beating air
beating hands
to make the sound.

“Who will the mommy?”
“We will.”
They guard the chick
with tender ferocity
pet it with one finger
and change the newspaper
lining the cardboard home
decorated weeks ago, with windows
shutters. Flowers.
Claire holds the chick at recess.
And I pretend to not notice
Her whispered insistence
“I’ll keep you safe, baby chick.”
She holds the chick to her ear
Listening to its tiny cheeps
and quick patter of heartbeat.
She and it, apart
together.

10.

Tyrikka comes to school with rope burns on her arms.

   Leroy’s backpack is filled with small socks and plastic forks – his best things. His mom went to jail last night. He doesn’t know who will pick him up. When no one does I’ll have to call the police.

   Alice tells me that her Grandpa is doing bad touches when she stays at his house. She says that he is touching the places where her bathing suit covers. When he comes to pick her up she hides in the bathroom. I have to make her go. When I call her mom she says Alice has always been a liar.

   Jade makes a picture at Writer’s Workshop of her cot under the bar. She sleeps there while her mom is working nights. In the mornings she is always hungry. I let her have peanut butter crackers from the snack cupboard for breakfast. The other kids don’t say anything even though they are always ready to pounce on any injustice.

   Austin’s got another bruise.

   Dynisty’s mom’s boyfriend is out of jail again and sleeping on the couch of their apartment. She already told her mom what he did, what he said, but she said he’s sorry.

   Garret has lice for the fourth time this year. The nurse will have to shave his head. She does it on the playground when no one is playing. His hair blows like something pretty across the green grass.
Maribell, her mom and her sister moved into the trailer with their cousins. One room for three whole families. She is hungry too.

I could call DHS about any of these things. Could speculate that his parents are “unfit” or that she is being abused. Nothing happens after I call. Only a follow up call a few weeks later a distant telephone voice saying that the claim was “unfounded.”

I am relieved. Maybe I was wrong. While I am obligated to report what I know, what I hear and see. I am not naive enough to imagine that foster care is any better. I am not young enough to believe that I can keep them safe – but sometimes it seems that they are too old to believe it too.

11.

When they come in from recess we read a book about a rabbit who wants to play soccer. They like it, laugh at all the funny parts and at the picture of the rabbit in his tennis shoes. There is a sense in the room that we are all pretending. They are pretending to be students, to believe in rabbits and to laugh at the games he plays. I am pretending to be smart, to be able to protect them from something, from everything bad.

I am the grown-up. I am supposed to know what to do, to give them instructions on how to be safe. How to cut paper with scissors, how to drink from the drinking fountain, how to look both ways, how to make those curves and lines in books turn into words, turn into stories. I tell them to stay together, to tell a grown-up. I tell them to hold hands. We are pretending that we don’t know that sometimes we are all safer alone. There is no manual, no curriculum, for the up-close, spinning world.
I don’t imagine that I will ever know what the man wanted to say, why I needed to be so close to him and his truck to hear it. It wouldn’t be something I would wonder about except that I wrote it down and the story is without conclusion. On that day, I walked past, turning up the verb conjugations in my headphones and looked straight ahead as if walking consumed each and every one of my thoughts and not one could be spared to notice him on the street. I tried to stand straight, to walk confidently, to say with my body, “I am not afraid.” I didn’t look back.
Blood

Be particularly careful to prevent any odor from menstruation. Practice the most immaculate cleanliness during this time. Use a deodorant talcum. Supply yourself with plenty of sanitary pads and change them frequently. Never economize on these supplies. When you are to be where there is no supply, carry the little specially wrapped pads as you carry extra handkerchiefs.

-Brockman, Mary (1936). *What Is She Like? A Personality Book for Girls*

1.

In third grade Ellie D. fell on the monkey bars, her legs scissoring apart at the last moment. We went to the bathroom after recess together and she started screaming that she was bleeding. All the girls in that bathroom and those gathered outside, waiting for their turn, were shocked. I along with some of the more baby-ish girls cried. Ellie was led off to the nurse’s office, limping. We were all silent. If you threw up or broke your leg we would have said a thousand cheerful things, or at least have waved, said a weak “Bye” as the person was led away.

A guidance counselor came later that day and had a meeting with the girls about getting your period. We passed around a fluffy cotton pad, the gummy stickiness on the back worn away. But, when Ellie came back to school a few days later she told us that she was injured, a bone broken. It hurt she said and the doctor had to put his fingers inside her body to feel the damage. This was unimaginably awful.

It was likely clear to the other girls that this was not her period after all but instead, an injury. Not for me. For years afterward before I went to sleep I would think about the terrible eventuality of getting your period. I prayed that mine would never come, the screaming in the empty air of the bathroom too frightening to imagine. And worse, the doctor with his hands inside your body, something private broken and bleeding.
2.

I stopped being able to wear pants when I turned 25. My legs and arms remained the same size, but my abdomen was swollen and hard. My doctor told me to exercise more and to follow a diet low in carbohydrates. It was two years later that I discovered I had a tumor the size of a small watermelon on my uterus. That it would be impossible to get pregnant, to carry a baby to term, until the tumor was gone. That if I got pregnant I would almost certainly miscarry. That the reason I would bleed, and bleed and bleed each month was because of the tumor inside my womb.

What I did not know was that I was already three weeks pregnant. The chambers of my baby’s heart were already forming in preparation for the first beat.

Fibroid Tumors in Uterus

-Mayo Clinic Brochure

3.

In Junior High every girl understood what it meant when another girl said something like “Can you check . . .” or “Hey, will you look . . .” there was no need to finish the sentence. It was a carefully choreographed routine of one girl slowing her steps just slightly while the other girl quickly walked ahead, five steps, ten steps. And then they would meet again in the middle. Usually no words would be required, a simple nod or a thumbs up would mean that
you were okay. In Junior High every girl understood that the most horrible humiliation was to have a red stain blooming on the back of your blue jeans or your white tennis shorts. It was impossible to be in the bathroom as frequently as you required reassurance and so even girls who were not particularly friends would tell you the honest truth. It was like a truce, a solidarity which did not exist with any other mishap. A bad perm, some food trapped in your braces, your boyfriend sending you note which said, “I break up” was all perfectly acceptable fodder. But blood on your jeans was serious.

4.

The shades pulled down to the afternoon sun, we watched the squiggle of a sperm crack the outside of the egg and be pulled inside. Bursts of light erupted from the middle of the circle of egg and sperm united. Flash and divide, flash and divide. The projector whirred in the silence, dust floating in the single beam of light, the image suddenly shadowed by Ellie rising from her desk to get the bathroom pass. The filmstrip ended making a flapping sound as if blown by a strong wind.

The film was called “Your Changing Body.” We all looked at each other in the blinking florescent light. It must have been the same look passengers give each other when the Captain announces an emergency landing and the oxygen masks are released, swinging, in front of your face. We were all destined or doomed or promised to our new bodies, to the sparking and squiggling. But we were not at all certain it was a miracle we wanted.
5.

Having waited so long with a mix of horror and resignation for womanhood to arrive, it was fairly anti-climactic. I soon discovered that you get to be a woman only for a few moments until a new goal is set. Certainly, my mom did not treat me as a fellow woman when I refused to clear the table or didn’t put my bike away or left toothpaste on the edge of sink in thick globs. Bed time was still 9:00. The next step was getting breasts and a bra to train them, and then kissing a boy. Breasts beginning are called buds. Buds really feel like small flat stones under the tender skin. I thought I had a secret cancer for a full six months before I confessed to my mom that I had these odd lumps and maybe it was breast cancer. I worried over the hard stones on my chest feeling how wrong they seemed under my flannel pajamas. The certainly did not seem like any breast I had ever seen.
6.

My uterus appeared on the TV, black and white. The technician pressed the wand around slowly back and forth on the slick surface of my stomach. I held my breath. Nothing would have changed between this moment and the next, really. Whatever was inside me had been there in the car ride to the hospital, when we ate dinner at my parent’s house, last week as I sat at my desk giving conferences. But mediated by a wand and a woman in a white coat and a TV I would know what women not so long ago only had to trust or feel. My baby.

“See this flickering,” she said, “that’s your baby’s heart.”

She turned a knob and a whooshing pulse filled the exam room. Holy. I looked at my husband and at the image of our baby on TV. The wand moved around, the tiny oval with the flickering middle that was meant to be our baby sliding back into darkness.

The tumor takes up all the space, not even room enough to show all the edges or my uterus underneath. She measures it on the screen, little rulers stretched to reach the height, width and roundness of it. Next to the collection of cells with a beating heart and developing kidneys and lungs this thing is a monster. Sometimes the tumor takes all the blood from the developing baby and so the body decides what to keep. I tell my body to keep the baby. Tell it sternly. Plead with it. I tell the tumor that I don’t mind it really as long as it just stays still and does not grow or steal. I feel like I am negotiating with a terrorist, a burglar, alone at home at night. Or like a mean dog. The way that if you lower your voice and say something sweet that a mean dog might act contrary to its nature and spare you, just this once.

7.

With every group of children I have ever taught there has been one poor child who is perpetually injured, real or imagined, these injuries require blowing on and band-aids and
special attention and a maybe-we-should-call-your-mom-ing. I have had countless little
fingers held close to my face to show that while the child pinches their fingers together the
tiny cut on their hand can produce a single drop of blood.

“Look! I’m bleeding”

The presence of blood is a sign that things are serious.

8.
I would pray every time I went into the bathroom that I would not see blood staining my
underpants. When you are pregnant you have to go to the bathroom many times, so this was
a lot of praying. It did not always work. When there was blood there was nothing else to do
but wait and see what happened. More blood, go to the hospital. The blood stops, eat a
sandwich and watch TV. My life seemed hinged on so little, so close to calamity.

9.
All the girls in lined up desks, empty pockets where the boys were missing, taken for their
own talk in the cafeteria. Girls looking straight ahead or at the floor or at the maps of Iowa
hanging down over the chalkboard, but not at each other, because seeing the inside of all of
us was not funny. But already one girl had been taken out for laughing at the mention of the
word 'vagina.' The danger of laughter was how it spread – so we did not look at one another.

“When you have intercourse for the first time some women experience bleeding. It is
nothing to be alarmed about. It only indicates the breaking of the hymen.” It was entirely
unclear what a hymen was. It sounded to me like a type of delicate pottery or a secret
woman bone. I definitely knew that I wanted my hymen to never break. Particularly in front
of someone else, a boy someone else, who was breaking tiny porcelain cups or bones so small it hardly mattered that they were broken within me.

I thought of my school nurse, her tightly permed hair and turtleneck sweater, when I had sex for the first time. I thought that she would tell me that there was nothing to be alarmed about. Pictured her by the side of the bed, patting my arm comfortably and after, sweeping under the bed for the tiny broken pieces of hymen, scattered on the floor like glass.

10.

When I was eight months pregnant there was a dead rat in our driveway. It was only a little squished and bloody. But the sight of it there seemed like a sign, a horrible dooming sign. Even when its body was gone, thrown away into a cornfield across the road, the driveway was stained. A brownish half-circle on the cement, that I carefully avoided whenever coming and going. I rubbed my belly, full of baby, protecting her from whatever evil a rat in the driveway might predict.

11.

Bleeding. Great thick purple clots on the bathroom floor. They seemed like creatures from some terrible god, alive and glistening. The size and color of plums. The clots kept on falling out, like I was the tree and this, our harvest.

I felt the baby move. I prayed.
My Grandma W. told me that they were taking all the jobs. The Mexicans. When I was little and ate lemon sherbet with tiny coffee spoons and watched *Little House on the Prairie* on my grandma’s giant TV she would tell about how they stole the jobs right away from hardworking Americans. Also Japanese people were bad. But mostly it was those damn Mexicans.

In my small elementary school there weren’t any brownish people. Mostly white farm children, with slicked back hair for boys, wet in the morning with lines from careful combing and girls with hair in two long braids or cut short in a haircut called the pixie. We were worried about strangers. We couldn't point to Mexico on the map. Iowa was big to us on the map of the world. A star sticker marking the spot. We believed that in every class, everywhere Iowa was marked with this same star. That all the teachers pulled down all the maps in the world and pointed at Iowa with wooden meter sticks to all the children. That we were the true center.
2.

I watched the Mickey Mouse club in junior high with my favorite friend, Tami, who had the Disney channel, everyday after school. I loved Ricky Luna. He had beautiful black hair that moved in a smooth cresting wave of desire across his sweet high forehead. He sometimes spoke Spanish on the show, not for long or too much. He might say, “Caliente,” for example. Ricky Luna was not an acceptable crush. I pretended to love Justin - blonde with a high pitched voice like everyone else. But my heart belonged to Ricky.

3.

When I tell people, store clerks, acquaintances I haven't seen in years and years, that my husband is Mexican. Their faces, at first, collapse in on themselves for an instant. What? But why? I can see them making mental calculations adding what they know about me and what they think they know about Mexicans. My husband warned me about this, but I didn't believe him. "They picture someone who is not me," he said, "They picture . . . someone else."

I know who they see. Maybe it is the man who comes to do the mowing and trimming in my parents’ neighborhood. Whose hair is slicked back and black and shiny in the sun and has a car with Juanita written across the windshield in white script. He is silent as he does the trimming. He is Mexican too.

My husband has wire-rimmed glasses and writes short stories about birds and Institutes of Free Thought. His father is a computer programmer for the city of Boston. He has never mowed anything. His family came legally to the country when he was 15. He transferred from his private school. He is Mexican.
My desire to explain this to people is problematic. But telling. The issue of inter-racial marriage is less troubling to the people I have had this awkward conversation with than is the idea of marrying outside your class. The test of belonging seems to be about the ability to buy your way in.

4.
My grandma always thinks I might be deported. That any moment I will be forcibly removed from the country because of my association with a Mexican. He’s a citizen, I try to tell her. It’s not illegal for him to be in the country. He is an American too. Well it's good that he has a job. She’ll conclude. I turn the channel. Clear my throat.

5.
“He has a Mexican brother! Do you think that means his family is . . . trashy?”

Even over the phone I can see the twisted mouth, the forehead wrinkled in disgust.
She, my friend from high school, is calling me from the bathroom of her new boyfriend’s house. I didn’t say anything. I nodded even though I was on the phone. My husband sleeps beside me.

Breathing in
Breathing out.

6.
It would surprise some people, I think, to know that many, many Mexican people would rather live in Mexico. That they don’t want to move to the U.S. That there is a tremendous and likely equal pride in being Mexican as there is in being American.
In Mexico City we went to the Ballet Folklorico. The dancers were beautiful. The orchestra was shiny and precise. The audience was well dressed and stood clapping for five minutes after the whirling, stomping dancers left the stage. Proud. Of the dancers and somehow of themselves.

7.
Last week a woman in David’s Spanish Cinema class asked him to come to the high school where she teaches because she said, “All my students think Mexican’s are dirty.” She wanted him to be an example of being not-dirty.

8.
When I get pregnant we joke about the tenacity of the half-Mexican baby growing in my body. I am worried about losing it – about my body being flawed and not holding the collection of cells, arm-buds and heartbeat, that will become my daughter. I want to cover my stomach with star stickers, pointing to this, my center. “She’ll stay,” he assures me, “We’re Mexican, used to staying in hostile territory.”
The Virgin de la Salud

1.
The Virgin de la Salud is the patron saint of Patzcuaro, Mexico. She is the Virgin of good health. She always wears a long blue cape. She has a crescent moon under her feet in the saint cards, which are like baseball cards for saints, shiny and small. I keep her behind my driver’s license.

2.
When we visit the church for the first time we see her – behind a large glass case behind the main altar. The church is gold and tall ceilinged. Outside is brown and flat and dirt and small. The gold is a surprise. There are steps that go behind the glass case and disappear. We follow the other people, the “belongers” hoping to blend it. The steps are carpeted in thick blue. The surprise behind the stairs is that the Virgin’s cape escapes the case and moves above our heads as if it blown there in a strong wind and then is pinned to the wall like a curtain. When people go behind the case they pin things to her cape, kiss their fingers, kiss the item they have pinned, cross themselves, whisper prayers.
3.

Some of the things pinned to the robe were:

A picture of a man with a head injury – a letter attached thanking the Virgin for the healing miracle, a long brown braid, sacrificed, a baby shoe, a child’s drawings of a sun done in crayon, and hundreds of small silver hearts stuck with swords and whole hearts and arms and legs and the faces of women and houses and dogs.

4.

I had never seen a milagro before. Milagro means miracle and is also the name of the small silver charms pinned to the Virgin’s robe, kissed. Each one means something different and can be made to mean something else depending on your prayer, on what you ask the Virgin for. Each body part piece of silver can mean that you need a miracle for the part of your body; an arm could mean that your arm hurts or maybe that you are a wood carver or a writer and you need help with what you do or make with your hands. Or a heart, the most popular milagro, can mean that your heart is broken or that your heart is sick or that your heart is broken and also sick. Or that your heart is fine but you are in love but he isn’t in love
with you. The lips milagro is for *chismosas*, gossips, or for people who need to say things which are difficult to say or for people whose lips are hurting.

5.

Outside the Basilica of the Virgin de la Salud there are small stands where I could buy homemade candy at tables with women swatting slowly at flies that move back again and again. There is a man selling meat in an open cart, his grandson wears a wide brimmed hat and sits on a small bench on the sidewalk. He is four or five and is still, watching the tourists pick their way from table to table, tripping on the uneven cobblestones and exclaiming about ordinary things. We are foolish in our enthusiasm. Everyone who belongs here is in slow-motion, not bored or engaged, not angry or excited.

6.

When we visit the church again we stop at a table outside the Basilica. The woman is selling sunglasses and Milagros right outside the gates and she answers all my questions about the meanings of each one I hold up. My husband translates. He is patient. Sometimes she shrugs and he makes something up. I pretend that I don’t understand shrugging. I get 10 of them and she puts them in a small plastic bag. She offers us ten tiny clips to pin to the Virgin’s robe but I only want one. I wonder if it’s wrong to take them home. Usually the church takes away all the Milagros after a few months and then sells them back to the women for just a few pesos and she sells them again. The miracles are recycled.
7.
My husband is new. I want to hold his hand and follow him around. I am dangerously in love, safe only because he loves me in almost equal measure. He picked out a baby milagro from the woman’s basket and that’s the one we will pin on the robe. That’s the miracle we hope to recycle. It’s not new – babies are practically the most common thing of all. But to us it seems unimaginable. When we enter the church the light changes, dims, from the sun of the morning in Patzcuaro. It is quiet, hushed. The noise from the market outside muffled even though the door remains open. I can see people walking by the gates kissing their fingers and crossing their bodies. They do it even while doing something else, riding their bikes, walking with a friend, carrying groceries, talking on a cell phone. A family inside the church walks on their knees toward the altar, heads bowed. We are wearing sweatshirts and tennis shoes.

8.
He, my new husband, pins the milagro to the robe. We kiss the milagro one at a time. I press the warm metal between my fingers and half pray, half wish for a baby because sometimes the difference between wishing and praying seems so small.

9.
I think about my milagro every day after I am pregnant. When I am afraid about the millions of things that could go wrong in the invisible unknown of my uterus. When I feel those first tiny bird’s wings flutters of her low in my body for the first time. It is 4:00 in the afternoon on an ordinary Wednesday. She, my daughter, suddenly is more real and also more possible to mourn, to want. She is something that could be lost. I kneel outside the closet
doors. And when she moves, I am not sure what I believe in exactly. The Virgin de la Salud is not mine to wish to, to pray to, to expect to intervene on my behalf. But I hope for help anyway, believe that even thousands of miles from her robe, her half-moon feet, that hidden in the baskets of sweets, that something of me, of us, still remains.
Vivian

1.

My daughter was born when the corn was high and green in the fields. Rows lining up, waiting and wilting in the heat, the light filtered green through the leaves onto the black turned earth. I waited and even though I knew, could feel my body changing and turning, I only dared to believe she was coming long after it seemed obvious to everyone else. Like every good thing that I’ve ever gotten I held off desire until I could hold whatever it was in my own two hands. Always believed that wanting anything too much was dangerous and prideful somehow. Only when my body was opened and cauterized, sutured and stapled when I was splayed out on the table like something sacrificed; my arms strapped down to the padded cross of that table, did I really believe her. I reached out with my finger to touch her cheek.

She was here and the person that I was before that moment had gone.

And we began.