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Award Winners

Jim Wayne Miller Poetry Award
David Haydon
“Tongue”

Browning Literary Club Poetry Award
Josh Daniel
“Netflix & Chill”

Ann Travelstead Fiction Award of the Ladies Literary Club
Rachel Sudbeck
“Seal Women”

Wanda Gatlin Essay Award
Dakota Phelps
“Exsanguinated”

Zephyrus Art Award
Elizabeth Hoffman
untitled

Writing award recipients are chosen by the Creative Writing faculty of WKU; the art award is chosen by Zephyrus staff.
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Are You a Listener?
Sara Ann Alexander

SIRT-1,
the assertive one,
looks like a sun with orbiting
neuro-responsibility,
stress resistance,
and insulin sensitivity.
Similarly, the sun hits my skin
and it's back again:
unwelcome warmth
in the course—
fingers turn blue
while they trace routes of Neptune,
now the furthest planet away,
the only one Johann Galle did not see first.
He projected his feelings
on a plane,
played with instruments,
knowing the distance
and other planets in the way.
A stray orbit of Uranus told him
to look in the telescope, then
named the blue transgressor
after the Roman God of the Sea.

Lesser known omens
cling to cope
and flits of hope
drown and swallow
harrowing pleas.
SIRT-1 failed my energy,
dimmmed stars
in my sky.
Mitochondrial orbits

as big as a cell—
the nuclear core bits a dysfunctional hell,
enzyme function that cannot tell
why the lie is better than
stifled reality.
I'm more like Maria
than you could ever see,
and I take my own great exceptions to ill hours.

Who else is out there?
Shakespeare, you can leave
unless you too are a listener—
scour the sky until fate's here
and we all die,
that signature move of the poet
or who he claimed to be.
Breathe If You Know What I Mean
Sara Ann Alexander

You won’t build my house—
Oak foundation erect
as a church steeple,
deceitful floors
and swinging doors
grained with every year;
much more years here than around my finger.

You won’t plant acorns
between my legs;
raintorm segues
from her to me.
Slumber in lumber
is not a sleepy tree.

Party of three
or partly free?
Do you dare
to compare us,
the bundle and the temptress?

If I press
or impress;
dress, to undress
You notice me, a lotus among
Cherry
blossoms, a caution
of unfaithful murk.
Birch forests speak
louder than we.

One Time This Van Flipped and You Were My
Gracious Inertia
Sara Ann Alexander

Masks line the sullen road;
Faces slowed to avoid collision and
facts of roadside derision
when brake and Jesus wheels
take a Godspeed curbside appeal.

Raccoons litter the E lane, their
stiffened limbs
a tenor christened with regret
collected when I hear your name,
Levi, a spy for daunting ail,
a haunting perfected
where you thought you failed.
I couldn’t blame you

only me. When I couldn’t see
the blood in your eyes
behind the mask
when the bullet pulled
you
away
and I can only find you as
roadkill along I-65 and highway 41
along the sullen trail home.

I am not alone,
but a glutton
to dream your sails
unveil again.
Facts
Josh Daniel

This world we live in
lends itself to uncertainty.

I don’t know
(for instance)
The distance between the earth
and the moon

Nor do I know
the names
of the elements spread across
the periodic table.

But I do know
some things:

I know
there are
110 edges
around the rim
of a quarter.

I know
the national animal
of Scotland
is a unicorn.

I know
in 1943
a surprise volcano erupted
in a cornfield
in Mexico

And I know
beneath your layers of irony,
and out past
the gulf of my reticence,

Lies the fact
of you and me.
Netflix & Chill
Josh Daniel

I remember an episode of
“The Office”
(I watch too much TV)
when Ryan
hooks up with Kelly
on Valentine’s Day,
not realizing the repercussions
until it was too late.

And whenever I witnessed this trope
play out
on other shows
(I watch too much TV)
I would think
“This never happens
in real life.”

So

Two years ago,
when we hooked up for the first time
on Valentine’s Day

And you were Kelly
and I was Ryan
I should have predicted
the fallout
that came
after you wanted more
and I did not
and I woke up
late that night

to the discordant sounds of
you
drunk,
outside,
laughing and slapping slices of cheese
on to my window.
Whiskey and Turntables
Brittany Eldridge

Did you ever look at the stars? 
I had one named for you.

Yesterday you put whiskey on your pancakes 
and you fucked me on the dryer just so you could 
feel the vibration between my thighs. 
You asked me to dance so you could 
put on Jazz music

I saw a shooting star once.

I called you Johnny Depp 
and you smiled at me. 
You put whiskey in your Cheerios 
because you said breakfast 
is the most important meal. 
You ran over our dog, Felix, today, 
and I just buried him in the cheerio box.

Did you see the lunar eclipse?

I found your note this morning 
and it said you weren’t coming back. 
I’m only crying because the whiskey is gone. 
I’ll just turn on some Jazz music.

Elizabeth Oates

Pulsate
Scavengers
David Haydon

They were scavengers, 49’ers, miners.

My grandfather tore his family
from the Melvin Circle project
to plant a garden.
A gold rush to Bloomfield Road
where he could plant and pick squash.
To a field where his daughters
Picked flowers and his sons picked fights.

Pickers of the earth, searching,
destroying for gold.

Our family farm is where
my mother picked blackberries and
I pricked my fingers and bled
on their briars.

Homesteaders picked and chose land.
They planted roots of home and family.

My sister’s legs were the site
of picked scabs. Her nails
clawing, removing dead skin
to watch them bleed
and scab over again.

We are a land of pickers,
a family of choosers.
Tongue
David Haydon

I have a scar
on the tip of my tongue
from the pivoting blades
of safety scissors
slicing red flesh.
Blood and spit combined,
and a paper towel
clotted them both.
I told the nurse
it was accidental.
Maybe it was.
Or maybe it was
the middle child's desire
to mute himself.
A conscious decision
to bleed out
from inside the mouth.

Wishes
David Haydon

An eyelash
on index finger
make a wish and blow
Eyelash wishes.

Forty lashes kill a man,
so they give him thirty-nine.
A lash on bare skin
to the back
leg, arm, neck.
A lash to ego and desire.
Eating flesh and leaving
open wounds behind.

I lash
myself with each wish.
All Is Uncertain
David Hornell

I closed my eyes and dreamt
Frenetic thought with
Floating geometry.
Triangles, squares,
Fluttering to a cardiac beat
Somewhere.

In Japan, they have square watermelons.
I think too much
But little things like that
Keep me happily distracted.

Twenty-five days ago I turned
Twenty and all is uncertain.

My head is drenched in tragedy:

I think of Bobby Leach
The first man to traverse
Niagara Falls. In 1926
He slipped on an orange peel
And split his leg clean open.

In two months’ time, he died.

Caught in these cold, frenetic thoughts
I dreamt of thaw
And I’m sure the Donner Party did too.

I’m frustrated, because I’m closer—
Closer to dying, damn it, and I still haven’t
Written the next great American novel.

I am, however, gently comforted by the fact
That banging your head against the wall
Burns 150 calories an hour.
You Met Me at a Strange Time
David Hormell

My mother called in the middle of the night and said Nancy died so I kept to myself that spring and my liver took a beating and my heart developed a chasm where she used to fit

in Ohio—where the asphalt by the mailboxes was stained with blood, evidence of when Joe had a stroke and hit head and since then he’s been taking it easy and refuses to drink coffee or talk to his father.

Naïve me, I assumed from an early age that all of these people were infinite because they knew me and I had several near-death experiences:

there was the time I didn’t buckle my seatbelt or the time I rode my bike without my brain bucket or the time I fell down a steep hill—I was invincible at age five.

It felt as if my world was beginning to end but I didn’t talk about it because I favor distance and feeling numb and that’s why I wrote that poem about self-harm in third person and

I made the mistake of depending on another person for my happiness and I became unhappy and she was the second person to call me emotionless in a six month span.
Kitchen
Bryson Keltner

In the kitchen there’s a woman—
hers glasses fogged from soap steam.
My legs dangle over the cabinets,
but she doesn’t mind.

Store-bought biscuits are a sin,
so I roll out the real ones.
There’s more flour on the floor than the counter,
but she doesn’t mind.

Her fried chicken is perfection.
Gravy goes good with everything.
She’s pouring more sweet than tea,
but she doesn’t mind.

Pecan pies flavor the house.
Her recipe is better than everyone else’s.
People say they’re almost magical,
but she doesn’t mind.

In the kitchen she freezes corn,
but she’ll never have to shuck it herself
because I’m a little bigger now,
but she doesn’t mind.

In the kitchen she cooks a favorite.
I am home from dorm kitchens.
She has to make the biscuits on her own,
but she doesn’t mind.

In the kitchen you will find
a blood pressure monitor.
There’s not quite as much sugar in the tea,
but she doesn’t mind.

Making magic is a little harder.
Her strawberry jam still graces biscuits
even though they’re frozen now,
but she doesn’t mind.

In the kitchen, she’s sitting down.
I am cooking for her instead.
The magic will never be as good as hers,
but she doesn’t mind.
Disguise
Blake Logsdon

"Most of the appearance of mirth in the world is not mirth, it is art. The wounded spirit is not seen, but walks under a disguise." —Robert South

Rum drips off the frostbitten lips of the collapsed St. Nicholas, lying prostrate in the Christmas snow.

A crazed hound rips into a young girl's body. The blood seeps into freshly-cut grass, and memories that will never erase, stain her summer dress. The animal's hidden animosity, concealed by a friendly face.

The undersized Napoleon
Takes great nations under his reign—
A moment of godlike success. His eyes refuse cowardice, a soul dedicated to conquest.
College: The Whole Thing
Emily Christine Lowe

Your opinion doesn’t matter in elementary school either. It matters in college. College is just your opinion. Just you raising your hand and being like, “I think Emily Dickenson’s a lesbian,” and they’re like “partial credit.” And that’s like a whole thing.

—John Mulaney, The Comeback Kid

College is just you being treated like a twenty-two-year-old kindergartner, your opinion won’t matter. Your teacher won’t care that you have anxiety disorder and it took you the first seventeen minutes of class just to talk yourself into raising your hand, she won’t flat out tell you you’re wrong, but she’ll tell you you’re wrong. You won’t talk again for the next three class periods. You try to, but you’ll talk yourself out of it. Remember what happened last time. The whole class thinks you’re crazy. Sometimes you’ll never be right for a professor, and that’s like a whole thing.

College is just Netflix, with the intermittent break for homework. Twenty-seven hours of NCIS. Five hours of sleep. Two hours of that literature homework you really should have read by now. Five minutes to decide if you can make it one more day without a shower. Twenty-three hours of Grey’s anatomy. Even sex comes with Netflix. Netflix and chill. And that’s like a whole thing.

College is just cramming. You have six days to study for a test, you tell yourself you need to start, but it’s back to good old Netflix. You actually pry yourself away from Netflix enough to go to sleep and go to class. It’s sixteen hours before the test. You won’t sleep at all. You’ll cry into your cup of coffee, trip down a flight of stairs, and somehow manage to pull a B out of your ass. And that’s like a whole thing.

College just isn’t worth it. Your dad managed just fine without it, in fact he makes more than your mom, who has a master’s degree. Your dad works with a lot of men, and even a few women, who make more than your mom. None of them finished college. Men especially don’t have to go to college to make money. “But you’re a woman” they remind you. And that’s like a whole thing.

You lay curled up in bed scrolling through your Facebook feed. Some dimwit you still call your friend explains that “There body is they’re own.” A friend texts and asks if you want to go out tonight. The local bar has shots on sale because it’s Tuesday. Your thumb responds that you have homework and you return to your scrolling. For a few minutes you get into a heated debate about whether or not David Avocado Wolfe is actually a reliable source, because someone who graduated with your mother is one of his disciples, and you wonder why you ever accepted the woman’s friend re-
quest in the first place. You lay in bed the rest of the night, scrolling through Facebook and not finishing your homework. That’s like its own thing, too.

Exsanguinated
Dakota Phelps

“The art of living well and the art of dying well are one” – Epicurus

I was twenty-one when I hacked apart dead pigs in a meat shop. Blissfully alone, I was locked inside of a refrigerated room to carefully carve a pork loin into perfect one-inch thick aiguillettes. Wiping away the accumulating blood and juices and connective tissues before plating and wrapping the slices for sale, I was able to let my mind become utterly void of any thought or concern. I just did my work and tried to do it right. I’d carve and squeeze and slice, and when I’d completely eviscerated the meat, I’d tear out the remaining sinews of pig from the plastic packaging’s pooling puddle of acidulated water. Pigs and humans share something like 98% of the genetic information that is responsible for the development of our skin cells.

* It was a year and a half later when I saw the similarities between pig skin and human skin myself. Using a razor to unzip the delicately thin canvas of skin covering my forearm felt comfortingly similar to the resistance and friction felt when opening up a plastic-wrapped pork loin. Blissfully alone, sitting against the beige wall on my bathroom floor, I could dip my arm into the nearly overflowing too-hot water of the bathtub, wipe away the bloody juices, and be right back in that meat shop, mind devoid of thought or concern. When the laceration was deep enough, I could reach inside and feel that familiar satisfaction as, having eviscerated flesh and tendon, I tore at vein and nerve.

* Attention to detail is critical when handling pork loins. They have an irritating tendency to slip out of their plastic-wrapping when first opened. To avoid that problem, I found hooking my fingers into the flesh on the side of the loin opposite that of the opening in the plastic to be a useful gripping technique. When carving up the loin, I found that by placing the index finger of my dominant hand against the spine of the blade approximately two and a half inches from the bolster lip, I was able to ensure more surgically precise incisions.

* Attention to detail is also critical in order to successfully execute one’s suicide. Especially when one’s concentration is as jeopardized as mine was. As to why I did it, I will say only that my circumstances seemed to demand it. So I endeavored to do it right. Having read about the symptoms of exsanguination, I begrudgingly approached my task with the same diligent preparedness that I had learned in that meat shop. The water in the tub needed to be just cool enough to prevent unnecessary burns, and just warm
enough to induce a sort of coagulopathy. For that, I had a thermometer handy. To regulate fluctuations in body temperature, a box fan faced me and a blanket lay beneath me. To assist with post-incision subcutaneous navigation, a diagram of the interior wrist was taped to the toilet in front of where I sat, and to combat thirst I had prepared a pitcher of water. For carving I had an apparatus fashioned from an Exacto knife and three Gillette Fusion blades. For waiting, a pack of Fortuna Menthol 100’s.

* At the end of the day I would drive home from that meat shop, arms covered in muscle and guts, and I would begrudgingly force myself to take a shower. I remember how muculent the pig’s plasma would be, and how long it would take to get off of my skin, and how I didn’t really mind because the hot water felt so good after spending the day locked in a refrigerator. I would climb out of the shower, into my bed, and sleep like a baby, perfectly exhausted from a day of hard work. The next morning my alarm would start beeping, and I’d wake up ready to take on the day.

* After opening my arm, severing my ulnar nerve to reduce sensory input from the ulnar region, and breaking my artery with a quick tug, I relaxed my arm into the perspicuous water and watched it become clouded as a red balloon inflated out of my wound. I watched as that balloon grew and grew, until finally enough of my blood had been expelled that the air tasted like pennies, and the bathtub was a sanguinary chalice. I closed my eyes, sighed out all my worries, and gratefully waited to be consumed by closed unconsciousness. The next morning, beeping from the machine next to my bed woke me up as the nurse came in to check my stitches.

I was afraid.

Blessed Are the Hippies
Haley Quinton

I met Jesus
in a urine-soaked alley
behind a bar last night.
He wore blue jeans
and looked Middle Eastern.
I’d always been told
to look for a white guy
with flowing hair
and a beauty pageant sash,
but I knew it was him.

He told me to beware
the leaven of the Pharisees.
I didn’t know what leaven was,
but even I knew enough
to stay away from Pharisees.

Then he said that the meek
shall inherit the earth,
and I liked the sound of that.
“Meek” made me think
of gentle and loving,
and I’d always felt pretty meek.

Then Jesus patted my shoulder,
looked me in the eye,
and said, “Peace, bro.”
I think he meant
“blessed are the peacemakers,”
but I couldn’t be sure.
Essential Oils are Wrong
(after Michael Robbins)
Haley Quinton

I want to believe
the truth that's out there
shall set you free,
but I've seen the writing on the wall that says the cake is
a lie.
Well, then, let them eat the lie
and forever rely
on the livers they wear
on their sleeves.

I had a dream
you dreamed
a little dream of me,
or maybe just of Jeannie,
in black and white
before the Technicolor tones,
and anyway, as Conrad says, we live as we dream—
alone.

The Mermaid Who Was Stuck in a Human's Body
Haley Quinton

Adelaide, the youngest Carter child, thought she was a mermaid. Regina, her mother, blamed herself for showing her The Little Mermaid when she was still "Too young."

Penny, Ada's much older sister, rolled her eyes at this.

"There's no such thing as too young for The Little Mermaid, Mother," Penny said.

Robert, Ada's father, didn't care one way or another what species Ada thought she was, as long as she wasn't causing him any trouble.

"She'll grow out of it," Robert said over his newspaper between bites of breakfast cereal.

Penny indulged Ada's behavior. She signed her up for swimming lessons at the Y when Ada was five years old. Ada, being a mermaid, didn't need the swimming lessons, but they gave her the chance to go swimming all year round.

Penny sat in the bleachers, the air hot and damp and smelling of chlorine, listening to the sound of her sister and the other children splashing around the pool. Ada was a much better swimmer than the other kids, though they were still too young to realize it. Their parents, however, were very aware. Ada was never invited to their birthday parties.

Penny flirted with Benji the lifeguard during the lessons, so bringing Ada wasn't entirely selfless.

Regina began speaking seriously about taking Ada to a psychiatrist shortly after Ada's eighth birthday. She thought Ada dropped the whole "I'm a mermaid" thing, at least until Ada's teacher called her in for a conference.

"I want you to read this," Mrs. Robinson said, passing a piece of loose-leaf notebook paper to Regina. The classroom had the salty, sticky smell of young children, and the walls were brightly plastered with primary-colored posters. Regina took the notebook paper and skimmed over what was a (quite good, in her opinion) story about the adventures of a mermaid.

"So what seems to be the problem?" asked Regina after finishing the thrilling conclusion where the mermaid had successfully chased off a shark with her bare hands, single-handedly saving her family.

"Mrs. Carter, this was supposed to be a personal narrative."

Regina went home and told her husband about it while Ada was playing in the backyard. Penny, who at this time had started college but still came home some weekends, rolled her eyes.

"Ada's fine, mother. So she wants to be a mermaid. What's it hurting?"

Robert didn't care one way or another, as long as Ada wasn't causing
him any trouble.

Regina told Ada she was taking her to see Dr. Schmidt after Ada turned twelve. Ada was slowly but surely losing friends. None of the other seventh graders wanted to be friends with the weird girl who told everyone she was a mermaid.

Ada told her she wouldn’t talk to Dr. Schmidt. Dr. Schmidt, after all, was a human doctor, and Ada was a mermaid.

Penny, at this time graduated from college and living at home again since the recession had taken away her career dreams, worried that this whole thing was her fault for encouraging Ada for too long.

“Can’t you just not tell the other kids that you think you’re a mermaid, Ada?” Penny asked her. They lounged on Ada’s bed, Penny painting Ada’s toenails.

“But I am a mermaid,” said Ada.

“You’re not,” Penny said.

“I am,” Ada said. “I want my big toe done in purple, please.”

Robert didn’t mind his daughter’s newfound social exile much, because at least boys would stay away from her if she were unpopular. He remembered what he was like as a teenager, and he didn’t want anyone like that around his little girl.

Ada spent her sixteenth birthday party in the pool at the Y alone. Regina still blamed herself for showing her The Little Mermaid. Penny blamed herself for getting Ada the swimming lessons. Robert was now a bit concerned, though still relieved that his daughter’s unpopularity spared him from the boys.

Ada floated in the deep end with her face under the water, listening to the sound of the blood in her veins. It sounded like ocean waves.

“No one ever asks me what I think,” Ada, eighteen, said to Tommy, who was sucking on her neck. She tasted of saltwater.

“What do you think, baby?”

But Ada knew Tommy didn’t care what she thought any more than anyone else did. Robert was at home reading the newspaper while eating cereal, still confident that no one would touch his daughter. Tommy’s hand crept up Ada’s thigh.

“I’m a mermaid,” said Ada.

“Yeah, you said that,” Tommy said.

“Do you know what mermaids do to sailor boys?” “What”? Tommy leered at her.

“Drown them.”
Choices
Natalie Marguerite Rickman

The life inside me
was barely beating
when I decided
to suffocate it.
I put four
misoprostol pills
in my vagina
and cut my own
cord to motherhood,
Stamped out
my legacy.

Choice.

It's like childbirth
my mother said,
I had a miscarriage once,
I had you two years later,
labor pains are the same,
she said
you're in for a doosy
she said.
Its been fourteen days
and death still creeps
out of me
and worse than the pads
constantly lining
my blood stained panties,
is the death smell I can't escape,
copper and vomit
floating like gas
at my pants zipper.
Choice.

I shower every day,
rub my asshole and thighs
with a patchouli soup
to try and cover up
the hellish smell.
It rides over e
like a man
in a dark hooded cloak,
like a death man.
I day dream about babies
but that’s always been true
even before I murdered
my child.

Choice.

I dream of nursery walls
lines with photos of me
and my sister
and mother
and father
as babies.
My suckling child
will know family.
I try to picture myself
in this apartment
with a child.
It could work for years
if we shared a bed
which we would
share a bed.
Choice.

I can’t help but wonder about
the mother
I would be.
I have long since imagined,
a beaming smile,
a baby on my hip,
I practically wrote this death
in to my life.
I dreamed about it too hard.
Choices are easier in dreams.
Now I write the word
one hundred times,
reflect on its meaning
and it seems foreign to me.

Choice.

I am twenty three
and I want to earn
my masters degree.
I work at a frozen yogurt shop,
and make ten dollars an hour,
my income is disposed almost
as soon as I clock out.

Choice.

What choice did I have?
What kind of life would we lead?
Death still swims in me,
that’s no longer a choice.
Will parts of it swim forever
like parts of a child swim forever
in their mother’s womb?

Choice.
I mull it over,  
sip my coffee.  
The word is completely foreign.  
Twenty days after  
the anniversary  
or roe vs wade  
and I don’t feel entitled  
to choosing  
even though I am white,  
mostly straight,  
even though  
when the doctor called  
I made an appointment  
with a clinic  
in Louisville  
almost immediately.  

It didn’t take twenty minutes  
for me to decide.  
It didn’t take twenty minutes  
for me to choose.

Names  
Natalie Marguerite Rickman

There are names I will not name my children.

I.  
I’m twenty-three in two months.  
I’m driving home at ten in the evening  
from working a six hour shift.  
The air is humid and cold  
and I’m taking long drags  
of well deserved nicotine.  
I walk in the giant door  
of my one bedroom apartment.  
I live alone  
but not by choice.  
I have a French sounding name  
but I’m from the bluegrass state—  
Marguerite, like my mother.  
My t-shirt is wet from washing dishes  
for the last hour and my hands  
are starting to dry out from sanitizer.  
I throw the shirt on the rug  
and sit in my bed naked.  
The French are so casual about being naked.  
Let’s not talk about living alone.

There are names I will not name my children.

II.  
There was a loud growl  
of a Jeep Rubicon in our drive way  
for eight months the year  
I was fifteen.  
For eight months my father  
grew more bald every time
I walked out of his door
with perfume under my shirt
and eyeliner in globs on my lids.
Chris, in the Jeep,
he was a wrestler,
he had a wrestlers neck
and a wrestlers grip.
He took my virginity in a hot tub
and called me a trooper.
We had sex ten more times
and he moved to Virginia.
My father grew lines
on his expanding forehead
for six months
while he listened to me cry
on the other side of my bedroom door.
We never talked about it.

*There are names I will not name my children.*

III.
Its Halloween and I have globs
of eyeliner on my lids.
I am a 60’s English super model.
I am the first person alive
or dead to ever have their heart broken.
I have red teeth from drinking dark wine
and lines on my mouth
from well deserved nicotine.
I’m standing in the doorway
watching you through your zebra
mask, watch Courtlin through your mask.
She stands shoulder to shoulder
with me while I try to talk to you.
I look up at her, six feet tall
in six inch heels.

I ask, but she wont excuse us.
Women are so territorial.
She is dressed like a cat
if cats wore lingerie,
with three sixes on her face.
You walk away together
and she holds your hand
on the sidewalk
and I cry about it
for the next ten days.
We haven’t spoken since.

*There are names I will not name my children.*

IV.
My uncle Matthew was in prison
for eight years, his daughter
was ten when he got locked up.
Twenty years later and she still
can’t brush her teeth.
Sexual trauma fucks people up.
Of course most of her teeth are gone now
from years of avoiding her hollow space.
She smiles a gummy grin,
her skin has always been pale
and covered in moles.
She pulls all her hair out,
I say *pulls* because it’s constant.
She wears a blonde wig
but the wig is made to have dark roots.
Christmas is unbearable,
everyone hugs him
and keeps a close eye
on the babies running free
around whatever house we are in.
I want to scream and hit him.
I can almost feel him sliding into my gut,
like the trauma is mine,
like I want to brush my teeth.
His gaze is enough to creep me.
My family never talks about it.

There are names I will not name my children.

V.
When I was eight I missed
the first two weeks of school.
My parents took me on vacation
to the south of Florida.
I was two weeks behind
the rest of the class
for the rest of the year.
My teacher, Kimberly,
I can’t even remember her last name,
yelled at me while I was cleaning
my eraser head on the carpet
and I smashed my little noggin
on the corner of the table.
I started to cry eight-year-old tears,
the pain was real
but I was too old to gush.
She asked me what two times two
was and I couldn’t answer.
She asked all the other children
in our class to come to her wedding.
We never talked much.

VI.

I will name my child Green; she will always be budding.

She will have the fierceness
of a giant forest
and stand tall,

her leaves reaching high
in to the wind.
She will be liquid,
a nature that can freeze
or flow or become mist;
she is fiercely changing.
I will carry her with me
on my hip long after she
is old enough to walk.
I will hold her close to me,
parts of her swimming in me
from the moment she is born
out of love or hate.
However she is born,
whatever season she sprouts in,
she will always be Green,
she will always be budding.
Our conversations
will be endless, we will talk
and swim in changing water,
we will bud and watch the trees bud
in every season.
A Thing That Should Be Beautiful
Erin Slaughter

“There is a temptation to eulogize that which I do not understand
and to think of a sister as a thing that should be beautiful.
A thing that does not bleed at night. Whose horrors are lesser than
or equal to my own. As if I could know my own.”
—Sister, Alicia Jo Rabins

1. I was named for roots and nostalgia, a country whose tongue is knife and
earth. My sister’s name is bread broken and given, first my father’s and
then my mother’s. Body and blood.
2. Our mother taught us songs to spell our names. They sounded suspicion-
   ously like jingles from cereal commercials.
3. You called me Sissy. I called you Bissy. We caught frogs in Grandma’s
   back yard and named them after each other.
4. You were small and loud and bright, like a city filtered through a key-
   hole.
5. On the afternoon of my sister’s wedding, we are drinking mimosas from
   paper cups in a stranger’s kitchen. In an hour, she will get married in a
   stranger’s living room. The doors and shutters are closed, and bodies are
   rustling outside. She is wearing white. My dress is black lace.
6. When she went to rehab, we found her toy box filled with cans of Bud-
   weiser and Four Loco, her backpacks stuffed with aluminum and glass.
   Behind her dresser: eyeshadows stolen from Sephora, and a $1200 cam-
   era stolen from my mother.
7. I was sitting in my car in the Wendy’s parking lot when she called and
told me she was pregnant. She was freshly eighteen and dating her boy-
friend for three months. I said: Holy shit, Jesus Christ. She said: I’m
going to keep it. We hung up the phone and I cried.
8. When she came back from rehab, her hair was short and in her face was a
   gnarled swamp, the kind I’ve only seen in the eyes of evangelicals. She
   painted her walls blue and my mom bought her brand new furniture. I
   locked my bedroom door at night.
9. At our father’s funeral we made everyone leave the room. We dared each
   other to inch closer to the casket, into the yellow light.
10. Remember when we played house? When you were “Ma’am” and I was
    “Sir” and dolls were children? When the rooster crowed we’d sit up
    from the carpet, wipe the fake sleep from the corners of our eyelids?
    And the rooster sounded like a villain in the basement of a haunted
    mansion?
11. Items at my sister’s wedding: Three Christmas trees. Two strings of
pearls my mother wore at her wedding. A picture of my dead father on
the fireplace mantle.
12. You were always the beautiful one.
13. In a dirty Dollar General, my sister tells me the baby’s name will be
Gracelyn, and for days afterwards, my heart echoes: Gracie.
14. When we were young I promised you that once older and able, I would
buy you a kitten. Now I have a cat, and you have two bloodhounds. You
have a daughter, and I have only these stories.
15. When she was pregnant I met her for lunch to convince her that she
shouldn’t disown our mother. She said our mom was weak, she didn’t
trust her with her child, didn’t care. In the restaurant bathroom, she lift-
ed her shirt and said: Feel, the baby’s kicking.
16. My father called her the son he always wanted.
17. When my niece was born, my mom only saw her granddaughter through
the pictures on my phone. The neighbor’s wife had a baby girl and my
mother cried every day.
18. The story goes: when you were a toddler you bit me so hard and often
you caused welts, drew blood. Mom took us to the doctor, and the doc-
tor said you would only stop if I bit you back. I began to cry and said:
But I could never hurt my little sister.
19. The story goes: I told you that you would fly if you jumped from the top
of the swing-set, but you fell and broke your arm. When I saw the cast,
glorious purple and waterproof, I practiced jumping from the fence eve-
day.
20. You were always the beautiful one and you knew it.
21. Stephanie is a shame that lives in my blood, like my father does; the
shame of family members awful and loved and not loved well enough.
The difference is in breath, in pulse. The difference is that she’s alive,
and there is no eulogy for the living.
22. My sister is an item on a to-do list, a trip to the post office, a story still
moving, dancing, shifting like smoke.
23. I call you to ask if you remember what we called the sticks we used to
beat our father with when he screamed at our mother, and you were too
young, you don’t remember, but I know it’s not your fault.

Karly Manuel

untitled
How to Work the Night Shift
Rachel Sudbeck

Step 1:
Get a job working the night shift as some sort of concession to your insomnia. Reason that, if you are not going to sleep anyway, then you might as well get paid for not sleeping.
Tell yourself that this counts as taking control, rather than giving up.

Step 2:
At training the first thing your manger will tell you is, “It doesn’t matter what you do here, so long as the laundry gets done and the breakfast gets out.”
Learn to fold a fitted sheet. The day shift will always leave these for you because they’re hardest. Turn the lobby tv to the Hallmark channel (perfect background noise) every night, and set your laptop up in the laundry room with a pirated episode of Game of Thrones. Stand by your bin of fitted sheets and tuck and curl and fold them until you are dancing and turning with each motion. Listen to the Lannisters have sex graphically as HBO will allow.
It doesn’t matter what you do, as long as the laundry gets done.

Step 3:
Ignore the text from your brother asking if you are going to church in the morning. The idea is patently absurd, because in the morning you will be far too busy staring at the ceiling, trying to sleep, and not sleeping, and not even getting paid for it.
Stand at the desk. Try to stay awake.
Stand at the desk. Try to sleep.
Wish that you had at least tried to keep up the church thing when you came to school.
But none of this matters, because the laundry is done and breakfast doesn’t need to be out for another two hours.

Step 4:
Run to the bathroom because, it turns out, when you haven’t slept in two days it wreaks hell with your digestion. Dry heave into the toilet while the broken ceiling light flashes staccato into the back of your skull.
Run audit. Count your drawer again and again because your hands don’t work and your mind can’t keep track.
Start making breakfast at 3:30, right when the Hallmark channel
switches from reruns of Frasier to reruns of I Love Lucy.

It would take maybe five minutes to put out breakfast if you didn’t have to brew coffee. Chew on a bagel and try to drink a cup for yourself.

Dry heave again.
Now that breakfast is out, however, nothing you do matters.

Step 5:

Take out the trash. Put on your jacket because it is cold and the sun is only just rising. Someone found cocaine in your trash can once. Today you find a large store of moonshine. You can’t see it, but you can smell it, and the trash bag is heavy with liquid. You have to heft it over your shoulder in order to get it to the ancient dumpster between your hotel and the Cracker Barrel next door.

The bag will split, because of course it will.

Allow the glass to burst on the ground behind you and allow the moonshine to burn against your shoes and pants and the small of your back.

Hold your breath against the sick sweetness.

Think that you are tired.

Think that you are going to throw up.

Think that if you do throw up it won’t matter because the laundry is done and the breakfast is out.

Step 6:

Wait behind the desk and concentrate on not smelling like moonshine. It’s already 6:45 by the time a customer wanders down for breakfast, and if you can avoid talking to him for another fifteen minutes then you will be free to go home and crawl into bed and not sleep.

At 6:50 though, two men will walk in, and the older one (the father) will say with a thick accent, “I’m sorry, but it’s very cold outside, and we were wondering if we could pray somewhere here?”

Your Customer Service persona will take over, and your voice will be pitched slightly higher as you say, “Of course sir, do you need privacy to do so?”

They will, because the one man who is eating breakfast is staring as he smacks his cereal.

Let them into the back office. Customers aren’t supposed to go there but it doesn’t matter what you do. Leave the door cracked open a little and count the drawer again.

Listen. Let the drawer close while the rolling lyrics of a foreign prayer waft under the door and wash over you. It is 7:10. The morning person is late. It doesn’t matter.

When they leave the young man will thank you bashfully without the accent of his father. The older man will say, “I want you to know that we appreciate this very much. It means so much to find such kindness.”

Customer service Persona will be silent long enough for you to say, “I promise, it’s no problem.”

He will say, with a strange emphasis, “But it really does make such a difference.”

Step 7:

At 7:15 the morning person will wander in.

Go home.

Sleep.
I've Been Moseying Downwards for Long Enough
Rachel Sudbeck

The Gods say
“true art is born of suffering.”
And I say
thanks mom,
but I am fifty pounds of cellulite,
and a hundred pounds of gumption,
so I’m a smidge too much
for stage and screen.
So Kurt Cobain can come
however he wants,
and Oedipus can stick it to anyone
but the man.

The Greek chorus is gathered
in my high school auditorium,
and with the metronome pounding
their three part harmonies soar
and they sing
“You are a fuck up and you are fucking up
and what do you intend to do after graduation?”
And I say
I’m not in this for your catabasis,
and I can’t say if Kanye will agree,
but Orpheus had the best comeback tour
of all time.

The muses swim
into the lines of my notebook and say
“here we are now,
entertain us.”
And I say
sorry bruh, but I was never very god at the guitar,
so for the time being,
here’s Wonderwall.

Seal Women
Rachel Sudbeck

I never used to think that kids were very cute, but Preston is the
genuine article. The girl is all doe eyes and chestnut curls, and band-aid
knees and gap teeth.

“Have I told you about selkies?” I’ve been tucking her in these past
couple weeks, since her dad started working the late shift.

“No.”

I lean in, like I’m telling her a secret. “At night, seals roll themselves up onto the sand and take off their skin.” I get all my best stories by
clicking around the folktales section of Wikipedia.

“Oh gross!” She’s delighted.

“Yeah, but do you know what’s under there?”

“Guts and stuff?”

Drop dead gorgeous women. They just peel off their seal skins and fold
them up like a coat.”

“Seals aren’t girls.”

“Well have you ever looked inside a seal? Hm? Have you ever dis-sected one? How do you know they aren’t all secretly sexy ladies?”
Her mouth is wide open. That’s what’s great about kids. As soon as
you make it sound like something could be true, it is.

“And,” I say, “if a guy can grab one of her seal skins before sun-rise, then she’ll marry him and they’ll have a bunch of babies.”

And this is what I love about Preston, because as soon as I tell her
that she says, “Why do they leave the water then?”

“So they can go dancing.” I’m not certain on this point, but it
sounds like a good enough Fairy tale reason.

“Where do they dance?”

“At the club.”

She rolls her eyes. “Seals do not” she rolls her eyes again, for extra
emphasis, “go to clubs.”

I resist the urge to make a joke about clubbing seals. “How do you
know? Have you ever been to the ocean?” I’m only asking this because I
know she hasn’t. She shakes her head.

“Well if you go at night you’ll see their footprints. Flipper to stilet-
to, shimmying across the sand.”

She wrinkles her nose. “They do all that just to dance?”

“There’s no music under the sea.” I mimic like I’m underwater, I
gurgle and bubble and kiss her on the forehead. “And they want to catch up
on tv.”

“Is it worth it?” She’s laughing.
“Oh. Probably. Probably they think it’s worth it.” I tuck her stuffed bear in next to her, so that there’s a girl head and a bear head, staring up at me side by side from under the blanket. “A husband and some babies aren’t the worst thing on earth.”

***

The women in my family are all built like seals, all round in the middle but coming down to dainty little points in the hands and feet.

My mom used to go swimming at the Y on Tuesday nights to try to burn some of the fat. Sometimes I’d come with her, drape myself across one of the pool chairs, and shout encouraging things at her while she swam, lap to lap, over and over again. My cheerleading would echo around in the chlorine air and the other swimmers, if there were any, would either look at me like I was annoying or like I was adorable. I thought she deserved some encouragement for all that back and forth. A pool without a slide seemed exhausting.

Maybe ages later she’d emerge, wring out her hair, and start chasing me around the locker room, demanding a hug.

“No, you’ll get me wet,” I’d scream, running around the lockers, loving avoiding her. The game was always over once she had to pause to snap at the elastic around the ass of her swimsuit. She was always bruised back then; her thighs and arms brushed with blue and purple, stark against the white locker room, all of the other women ignoring it.

When my father told me she’d left I pictured her getting sucked down the drain of the pool, everybody ignoring that too.

***

“Okay, here’s one. A woman is lying dead in her bed. She was murdered, but there are no marks on her body. The only other thing in the room is a pair of scissors. How was she killed?”

Leni’s on her phone, the screen glinting off her face, making the sweat on her forehead glow blue.

“I’m naked, panting, sprawled next to her across her mattress. “Is this some kind of threat?”

“No, you asked me for a riddle earlier and I couldn’t think of one.”

Her band had just finished a set, and she’s leaned across the bar while I was cleaning dishes and asked if I wanted to go home with her. I’d told her to ask me a question that was a little hard to answer.

“I’m not sure that’s how pillow talk works.”

“Well at least I’m not telling you about seal mermaids or whatever. Seal sirens?”

“You know sirens were actually bird women?” I’ve read this particular Wikipedia article.

“No shit?” Leni settles in across from me, looks me right in the eyes, like she’s interested. And she does look like a bird too, all willow bones and hooked nose, all long neck and sharp shoulders.

“Mm-hmm. They just live by the ocean. Like seagulls or something.”

She laughs, like it’s funny. “Have you ever even been to the ocean?” She’s only asking because she knows I haven’t. I shake my head.

“Well, blow off that guy you’re shackling up with and I’ll take you. It’s worth seeing.” I snort. “No, I’m being serious. I’ll take you.” She prods herself up on an elbow. “You’ll have to pick a side soon anyway. Things get too serious and that little girl is gonna start having expectations.”

“Bim.” I nod a little, and she starts walking her fingers up my ass. That’s something I love about Leni. I told her I hate my but once, and ever since she’s made it a point to love it enough for the both of us.

She sings, under her breath, “Darling please, hold me tight, grab me by the cellulite.” She leans in and kisses my left ass cheek, with all the ceremony of a knight kissing the back of a princess’ hand. She settles back in across from me and we lay there for a second, staring at each other. Silent. For a second I think that the ocean can’t be that much better.

“So where’s this girl’s mom anyway?”

“She just left.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

***

Preston’s father is always telling her how beautiful she is, and I can’t say why it annoys me. Every morning he hands her a compliment with breakfast. When I ask him why he just shrugs and says, “I read somewhere that you should do that with girls, so they don’t grow up like, needing validation.”

What I want to tell him is that he’s beautiful. That I was never mad at my mom for leaving, just for not taking me with her. That if my mom had left me with a father like him, maybe things would have turned out different. Maybe I wouldn’t have grown up to be the type of woman who sticks around just so that she won’t be the type of woman who leaves.

He’s at one end of the kitchen, I’m at the other. He’s smiling. “But you’re one to talk. All she’ll talk about anymore is that weird seal story you told her.”

I’m washing some dishes. My hands have gone all puffy and wrinkled, like an old woman’s. “Oh shit, she doesn’t even know how it ends.”

“Hi?” He’s come up behind me, all close, all casual, his breath fogging against the back of my hair. I keep washing.

“Yeah. These seal women, they always find their skin. Their husband forgets to lock it up or one of their kids finds it in the attic or something, but they always do. And as soon as she gets it she tears off her clothes and she runs down to the ocean — she’ll run across a country if she has too—"
and she dives in and disappears forever.” He’s backed away a little, he’s leaning against the counter. “And her husband can’t get her to come back, which makes sense because he’s been like, raping her. But even if her kids go down and cry and scream and drown themselves trying to get her to come back up, she won’t. She’s gone forever. Just like that.”

“Shit.” We aren’t looking at each other, but his hands look tense on the counter. “That’s kind of fucked up.”

“I know,” I say, and pull the plug.

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Tsukumogami
Rachel Sudbeck

Objects can gain life. We know this. We know about the blanket that still smells like someone after twenty washings, or the lamp that turns itself on when we’re out of the house, or the doll that used to hug us back. It’s as easy for an object to gain a soul as it is for a person.

Which is to say, it’s close to impossible, but it happens.

The average mountain holds a thousand experiences. Even the smallest ones have seen children get lost or legs get crushed or lovers fall apart under starry skies. The average mountain has been kissed and broken and carved and created thousands of times over.

Nobody remembers the first time they woke up and knew that they were a person. It’s an inexplicable and terrifying and quiet experience. If a mountain starts to carve out a consciousness then it is no less surprising or impossible. It’s hard enough to believe that something as small as a human could contain a universe rattling around inside them.

And if a mountain starts to experience the sheer gravity, the whole significance of its own existence, then it’s no surprise that it might feel how any of us have felt, and it might wish that it were simpler, and softer, and smaller. And it might collapse under the weight of a thousand years pressing downward and it might emerge from its own rubble in something resembling a human shape. Perhaps a bit more condensed, perhaps a bit stranger about the eyes, but no bigger than your average grocery store clerk or bicyclist.

A world can become bigger and smaller at the same time. The base of a tree is a whole different experience than the top. The earth from a thousand feet up seems full of space. It’s only close to the ground that you notice how cluttered it is. How full it is. When a mountain becomes a person they feel cramped and small and a thousand times bigger than they used to be. They discover their own softness. They discover motion.

There’s no real trick for recognizing a mountain-turned-man. You can find them in how their spines are rumrod straight or their backs are curved and arched. Their skin can be cragged or smooth, dimpled or thin. Their eyes come in browns and greens and the sick blue of stagnant water. You might think the air is thinner around them. You might be expecting more than they give you.

Scientists measure the height of mountains by planting a radio at the top and timing how long it takes a signal to reach them. This is how we measure experience too, by seeing how long it takes for a word to reach someone’s eyes. Not every mountain is the same. There are no instructions to being a person.

If you were to crack one open they would come away in layers like
a geode. Their voices are capped with snow. They cough up diamonds that
leave their throat raw and they scratch at the gold that rises up under their
skin. Their hips curve like valleys and their smiles carve fissures into their
cheeks. They might or might not seem like they’re being viewed from a dis-
tance.

There aren’t a lot of them, but maybe you’ve walked in on one of
their support groups when you were looking for the bathroom at the com-
nunity center. Maybe you saw a balding overweight man and a petite girl with
freckles and a boy who was more leg than anything else and a dark woman
whispering something to her baby. Maybe when you opened the door they
all stared at you, stock still, the girl holding an oreo, the man holding some
punch, all of them more solid than you’ve ever seen a person. Maybe once
you’d apologized and closed the door you got the impression of a whole
world, a whole existence that only emerges when you aren’t looking at it.
That’s how some people feel after hiking, anyway.

Maybe you’ve held someone and felt like you were holding some-
thing a thousand times bigger. Maybe a kiss felt heavier than it should have.
Maybe you were sketching someone’s figure but ended up with a landscape
and hands raw with charcoal. We can be next to people and find ourselves
feeling very small. We can look in someone’s eyes and feel how inconse-
quential we are, how wide the world is. We can feel our aching limbs and
know that we have conquered something immeasurable. We can take our
picture at the edge of the cliff and feel like we have experienced something
incredible.

We can shrink ourselves down by degrees. There is nothing wrong
with being smaller than we were.
f. warden
Natalie Turner

You are the last pack of Oreos on the shelf before nuclear apocalypse. You are the sensation of a smile lingering on lonely lips, back turned, fingers coiled around an alien zygote that may one day grow up to be called “satisfaction.” You are the empty victory, the triumphant roar of early man to a rolling storm. You are the glass against my face in a car without air conditioning. You are the final blow of a sparring match that lasts three hours, blood and iron, bated breath. You are my last words etched underneath my tongue sixty-six years in advance.

You’ll be the one to hear them, too.
Blessed / Happy: A Continuation
Meredith Wadlington

I can hear them in the driveway,  
from the porch.  
They are parked in their car,  
fighting.  
Maybe about nothing.

cigarette ashes gather  
library fines are issued  
the Jehovah’s Witness leaves a pamphlet  
we tie our shoes  
we wash our hands

I AM TIRED OF FIGHTING  
I AM TIRED OF BEING AT ODDS WITH YOU  
I CAN’T LIVE LIKE THIS  
I LOVE YOU  
I, I,  
I

Billy Joel plays on a jukebox  
Nordstrom catalogs yellow  
the wino makes a collect call  
the president stated  
the board voted

He is yelling,  
it sounds like,  
with all he can muster.  
I cannot distinguish her cries  
from the laughing of our neighbors’ children.  
They are soft;  
they reverberate with fear.

travelers fiddle for cash  
a father points the way  
Walmart greeters sticker hands  
children throw penny wishes  
children drink cold milk

Soon I learn that the topic regards chores.  
I sip my coffee, thinking that  
if only we would do our dishes as soon as we finished supper,  
these two human beings  
in love  
might not be screaming in the driveway.  
I CANNOT CONTINUE TO LIVE LIKE THIS

a record skips in Chinatown  
an athlete signs a baseball  
the Pope kisses babies  
the sink overflows  
we stuff our mouths

I read another page and pretend not to hear  
the silent, violent crashing  
of a thing so good

a mother paces a waiting room  
a son feels his lover’s goosebumps  
a troupe of assassins order coffee  
apples roll off the counter  
loggers fell a grove

I LOVE YOU  
WHY DON’T YOU BELIEVE ME?
Monday Evenings After Jeopardy
Lena Ziegler

There is an old man outside, digging through our garbage. He comes by every Monday evening after Jeopardy, though I don’t think the two are related. His fingers poke through fingerless gloves as he unties, so carefully, the remnants of discarded days tossed curbside for county employees to haul away from the picturesque homes, on this picturesque street, in this neighborhood where the only people picking through garbage are jaded ex-spouses seeking court-ordered revenge. He is alone in his garbage gleaning, exhaling white clouds and muttering to himself. I wonder if he would mutter to someone else, if anyone else might listen. I would. Instead, every Monday evening I watch him. Like a habit.

They speak softly behind closed doors, but my mother’s voice carries through the space beneath their bedroom door and the floorboards. They don’t know I know. But they discuss the situation of the old man digging through our garbage, who knows which bedroom window is mine because I wave to him from it. He waves back and I wish I could dig through his garbage and capture the sad remainder of his days, aerating his loneliness so it could dissolve in the winter air like the clouds of his breath that vanish so quickly, it’s a wonder they were ever there at all.

I’m not allowed to talk to him. He chose the life, my father says, sipping tea through pursed lips. I wonder how he knows this. He lifts the teabag from his mug, places it in the cradling dip of the spoon’s surface, and squeezes the fluid from it, strangling the bag with its own string. He drops its mangled remnants in the garbage can below the kitchen sink and I imagine the old man finding it next week in our garbage can outside, curbside from this discarded conversation, from another discarded day. My parents do that with years. My father does that with people. I follow him to the living room. He has taken a seat on the couch with my mother. But he deserves more than this life, I say. I glance back through the window and the old man grins at me. My father sips his tea and pretends to forget—Monday evenings after Jeopardy, my Grandpa waves hello.

My Barbies Fucked Like Animals
Lena Ziegler

I learned about sex, when my best friend Rhiannon placed my sister’s Jordan Knight doll on top of my Hollywood Barbie and told me that’s what they were doing.

“They’re having sex,” she said, an old expert of erotica.

“What does that mean?” I asked, prophetic of the lifetime I’d spend asking that very question.

“He lies on top of her, then they fall asleep,” she replied. Obviously.

“Does he have to be on top?” I asked. She thought about this.

“No. They can be on their sides too.”

***

My Barbies fucked like animals. Not just the New Kids on the Block dolls, which were the early 90s upgrade to Ken, but everyone else too. Stuffed animals. Ninja turtle action figures. Each other. It was all normal to me. Because if sex was only lying on top, or lying next to another body, then why did it matter who you did it with? From what I could tell, it didn’t.

Sex served no purpose in the storylines of the contrived little lives I created. It was just something they did, because they could. Because I felt like making them do it. I was a pre-school porn director, who could throw away plot and authentic human behavior in favor of plastic bodies rubbing against each other for a good five minutes before collapsing.

***

Middle school and I was still playing with Barbies and still making them fuck. I switched schools a few times, but when I finally arrived at Rice Elementary in 6th grade and met Dayna, a tall, blond and radiant 11-year-old who was also a new student, I had found my partner in smut.

Dayna played with Barbies too, only she had easily twice as many as I had, with different hair colors, skin colors, and even some with soft flexible stomachs (still lean of course, but much more lifelike). She even had some real Ken dolls, mixed in with the N’Sync and Backstreet Boys editions. Whereas I grew up with just two boys to rotate between all the girls, Dayna grew up with enough boys that every girl had one all to herself, and could even choose the one she liked the most. This did not feel reflective of middle school.

We picked Barbies to play ourselves – the thinnest, most beautiful ones, with long shiny hair and hooker makeup. This is who we really were. We dressed them in bikini tops and booty shorts and made them give lap dances to the Ken dolls, while playing Ludacris’s “Area Codes.” We’d grind their bodies together, as if to start a fire. We never did.
***

In 8th grade Dayna and I started to grow apart. We had stopped playing with Barbies when sex became a topic we preferred to discuss rather than act out with toys. I became friends with Stephanie, another new student who looked more like me—chubby, pimply, glasses and uncertainty. Dayna became a cheerleader.

Stephanie was Southern, sweet and shy, and didn’t know the first thing about sex or blow jobs, of which Mattel had made me an expert. I schooled her in all things.

“You just put the guy’s penis in your mouth,” I said, oral sex aficionado.

“Why?” She asked, blushing.

“Because they like it,” I replied. *Obviously*.

“What do girls like?” She asked. I thought about this.

“I have no idea.”

***

I first had sex with Chuck, who immediately after taking my virginity asked if I had ever tried Pro-activ. We were married and divorced four years later.

Then I had sex with bodies. Multiple, faceless bodies, not attached to names. Even though I knew what girls liked and what I liked by that point, it didn’t appear anyone else did. I realized Rhiannon was right. Sex sometimes is a man lying on top of you until you both fall asleep.

I was 22. He had me on my stomach and I couldn’t move. It was combat. He had a warhead missile. I had words he said he couldn’t hear, for the sound of himself exploding. I wet my pillow with streaks of mascara. He said I made him feel bad. I said I was sorry. The battle continued. He fell asleep beside me. I couldn’t sleep at all.

A body lying on top of you so you can’t move isn’t sex, it’s something else. But no one ever told me that, and that’s something, no one likes to talk about.