

the lint from my pocket

Mikayla Meyers

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## *Claddagh*

Deemed a woman before the stainless steel, imported specially from Ireland, could wed my ring finger. So instead it made a mistress out of my pointer for about two and a half years until my body unveiled itself, exposed how fertile it had become. “Now listen, sweet heart, you wear it with the point of the heart pointing outwards so that your *love is open to the world*, but when you get married, you turn it so the point of the heart is leading up your arm, that way your *love is closed off to the world* because you have given it to your *husband*.” As if love were a gasoline valve, the friction of the reflective grey against my digit sparking the gas into an inferno. Still too young to handle matches, much less understand how to *belong* to a *man*. Officially declared a woman with a chain link of metal that screams like wedding bells when it drops on the bathroom floor. Its pure white shimmer stares back with the heat of sealed fate and a due date. Until that date, I do *belong*. *Belong* to a childish secret, to knowing glances, and woman’s lips colored in like a picture book. I *belong* in my grandmother’s stories, in a nation’s pride, to a paint splat of green on a map. I would *belong* there until I could *belong* to another, to an infant’s palm closed around my ring finger.

### *Swallow the Fire*

She said she liked to swallow fire because it tasted like her father's cheek when he was on his deathbed. Said his skin felt like the bark of a giant sequoia tree against her seven-year old lips. That he tasted like the heat from the summer's ash pit, like the gold-laced pages of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. She said it was a way of life; keeping a fire kindled in our throats where angels like to play so that when it floats away it might help another dying spark grow mighty once more. When asked if it hurt she only smiled, retorted that it felt just like the time she had to swallow three teeth at once because she got into a fight with a boy on the playground over a squished worm: it didn't cause her pain but made her choke on her next words. Her rebuttal to if she was afraid that the fire would cause her death, was sharp as a cicada's song. "Not at all," she said, "because I've seen a sequoia tree deep in the woods, and within its charred and sullen bark, it held a flame. The flame raged and it snapped its fangs at me from between the slabs of bark, yet the sequoia held fast without fear, swallowed the fire down like the black and white photo inside the gullet of my locket."

*When I Found Her*

my mind took familiar laps  
around the classroom -  
rattling.  
a loose bullet -  
ricocheting.

from wall to chair  
to blackboard to window  
to ink on lined paper  
to name:

Sappho.

poetic fragments as  
scattered bone shards and  
century-old dust  
how to place together  
dare to place together  
or lay the spirit to rest  
yet always ask:

How does this language make us think?

This language. His language.  
Always male tongue on child's paper.

content to ride the same carousel  
around  
    around  
        around  
            around

Stop.

“Who exactly was Sappho?”

flesh of the hand exposed  
cold, stagnant, static air  
naked.

it came;  
\*foreign words  
\*hidden words  
\*curse words  
\*beautiful words

“She.

She was the first published female poet.

She wrote explicitly about her attraction to both men and women.

She lived on the island of Lesbos.

She is mother of now haven word: Lesbian.

no, word(s): Sapphic Love.”

sap-phic

/ 'safik /

adjective

1. relating to lesbians or lesbianism

2. relating to Sappho or her poetry

noun

1. verse in a meter associated with Sappho

and all fell still.

brain bullet lost from its momentum;

now quiet.

but there was urgency.

confusion.

HIDE THESE WORDS:

she, her, lesbian... love

if we tumble a word over, and over,  
won't the saliva of our tongues  
wash it of its meaning?  
will we cease to recognize it anymore -  
as word, as language?

Will we lose her?

Preserve her.

preserve the only ancient name  
that has helped build my home.

### *When the Boat of Gold Comes*

eyes sunken back into their sockets just as the titanic sunk to the base of the sea, and as she rises towards her 103rd year she missed the devastation of that wreck by a thread, no, a single breath, she does not speak of an unsinkable vessel forgotten by God, she speaks of a giant boat like that of Noah, a boat choking on more riches than shone in her eyes, of riches that now wallowed in her lungs and made her every breath catch as if a coin were jumbling around inside, she promised, yes this boat would come, it would whisk her away, would be harbinger of her escape from hallways haunted by the ghosts of decay and feces, from forgotten tea that sat on her desk for days, from phantom faces floating around her and begging “remember remember remember,” from the white-cruled nap drool on the sleeve of her cozy purple sweater, this vessel of gold would come and take her away from it all and she would call, yes, she would call us when it came she said, she would need help, of course, she could not lift all that gold herself, no, not with her buckling legs of softened toothpicks, not with her silk-wrinkled fingers that swelled at the knuckles, certainly not with the shriveled blue wire of blood vessels below the translucent skin, soon, she promised, her room would no longer smell of thinning flesh and plain-scented laundry detergent, her room would no longer be clogged with old books, too heavy for her jittering hands to lift, filled with letters too small for her to see, no longer filled with her roommate’s presence, the stack of stuffed animals that she swore were her roommate’s “she has so many and more on her ranch! and her family still brings her more!” to which her roommate later shook her head to us, no, those were not hers, they all belonged to forgetful great great aunt Nina, the paper stars and falsely chipper construction paper owls strung up for fall would all blow away with the girth of the ship, ah, yes, the ship so large that it would swallow the entire elderly home whole as Jonah was gulped down by the whale like one of auntie’s evening pills, she would get out of here, soon, soon, and she would call, yes, she would call us when the gold arrived, and she would call us when she “felt better,” insisting, “come back when i am better come back when i am better come back when i am better yes i will call when i am better i will call when the boat of gold comes” this old gal had quite the fire in her yet, the gold already glistened in the pits of her shrinking eyes, eyes that seemed as if they may roll right out of their sockets, she could see it already, the gold would be with her, and i could see it in every nervous lip-lick, every tumultuous half-smile, “come back when i am better come back when i am better” but as we left my grandmother shook her head, hands tightening around the loop of her purse straps that hung as a sad, tired child about her shoulder, her knuckles pale as her face, “death” she spoke, “she was talking about death”

*My Daughter is in Love with Bones*

My daughter is fascinated by bones;  
she knows where the Clavicle is,  
and the Sternum.

My daughter is in love with bones;  
she likes to lift up her shirt and suck her  
belly in so she can see the gaping mouth  
of her rib cage,  
always desolate and bored,  
empty, hollow.

My daughter told me we have 24 ribs;  
if we had 22 we could bend all the way in half,  
and just think what we could do with that.

My daughter caresses her bones;  
her digits, her Distal Phalanx  
running along her Femur,  
flitting across her shy Manubrium Sterni,  
racing her saliva into the pit of her throat  
to see who touches the Hyoid Bone first.

My daughter likes to pretend that she's a stegosaurus;  
when she bends forwards as a hunchback,  
she is proud of her fan of  
Cervical Vertebrae, Thoracic Vertebrae, Lumbar Vertebrae,  
all akin to fingers chopped in half  
as they reached for the sky-  
reached for food.

My daughter can trigger the Patellar Reflex;  
and the Gag Reflex.

My daughter knows every hip piece;  
how they fit just as the ghost  
of a 50-piece puzzle on our living room floor-  
the Sacrum fits inside the Ilium,  
below the Sacrum is the Coccyx,  
farther beyond that, the Pubis.

My daughter knows how they fit;  
so she wants to take them apart  
and put them back together,  
bend the pieces, break the pieces,  
to fit as she likes.

My daughter takes pictures of her bones;  
flash embraces the frame her peachy skin is laced over,  
when she smiles in the mirror, her Incisors sigh back,  
tired, rusted, corroded.

My daughter makes sweet love to her bones;  
she likes to hang them up, dust them off,  
make them pop with shading - contour,  
and when she shows them off,  
others make love to her bones as well.

### *Mullinix Park*

The slide looked like a warped Airhead to him. An Airhead that had been pinched all over between the sweaty fingers of an eight-year-old before being torn in half by the child's right row of teeth. The slide looked like his artwork when he lined crayons up in a straight line in his hand then drew a curvy line with them all at once. The only difference was, the slide was a sick, dark green and not a colorful rainbow. Ezekiel wasn't even too sure it was a slide, but it had to be. In his six years of playground experience, a long platform stretching to the earth in a downward slope was a slide, no matter if it was missing its safety side walls or not. It was a slide, he concluded. And that was that.

One of the poles that held up the top of the slide had peculiarly placed plastic steps jutting out from it. Peculiar, only because they lead to nowhere. There was no platform to climb up to and reach, no base camp, no clubhouse, no castle, and no wiggly bridge to jump up and down on. There was only that pole placed close to other poles with odd steps on them and black rope strewn this way and that between them. There was no order to it at all. Perhaps that was the point. Every park that Ezekiel had ever been to seemed to follow a particular pattern. Baker Park, Ballenger Creek Park, the park where the younger kids play at the elementary school with the massive sloping ditch to the side of it. They were all alike and it was from these parks that Ezekiel had

learned what to expect. The default expectation of a playground; a swing set with seats for both children still in diapers and seats for the big kids, a slide or two or three, some monkey bars, and if you're lucky there might be a marble puzzle built into one of the platforms. The only park that had managed to surprise him before this one was the one with the big plastic dinosaur bones that he could climb on. Even that one became mundane after a few "climb-ups" and "jump-offs".

This park defied all he had learned to expect. It made him uneasy; his palms cold yet wet, his ears clogged with the day's breeze, his heart hung low in his chest and throbbing with a dull quake. His mommy was with him, sitting on the flat surface of jutting rock mounds and scrolling on her phone screen with sharp jerks from her thumb. Looking up at his mother made Ezekiel's breaths lodge in his throat like gravel. The rocks she sat upon weren't too far away, yet it was as if she were miles away; distracted, indifferent. Today she was wearing Ezekiel's least favorite hijab. It was a rusty red that made him think of dried blood and angry faces. His favorite of her hijabs was her floral white one with the kissing cherry blossom pattern. She only wore that one when she was happy. Really, really happy. The kind of happy that made Ezekiel want to kiss his mother's cheek and brush her hair for her. His mommy had three different kinds of days and Ezekiel could always tell what kind of day it was going to be by the hijab that she chose out that morning. Rusty red for very bad (when Ezekiel's eyes watched nearby plates, vases, windows, and waited for them to shatter), sandy tan for neutral (when Ezekiel was a piece of furniture and his mother was simply window-shopping), and cherry blossoms for really, really happy (when Ezekiel was her blessed child that breathed life

into her cheeks like steam on a bathroom mirror).

His stomp-to-light-up Sketchers fit just right on top of the odd pole steps. The navy-blue cloth to his hoodie snagged along the chipped pole paint as he hugged his arms around it. Step up. Step up. With no promise at the top, nothing to rest his feet upon and hold him just a little closer to the sun—closer to a thick warmth that he could only compare to his Sunday oatmeal. But the slide was hard to climb on top of. With no sides to the slide, and nothing but the small steps holding him up, Ezekiel could only swing his right leg up into the air to try and hook it over the slide. A few swings and he caught friction against the slide with the rubber sides of his Sketchers. The gap between his left foot and right foot made his heart swirl in his stomach. Whimpers broke from his throat, silent at first, just loud enough for his shadow to hear, then louder just to see if his mommy would cast her eyes up only for a moment. Her eyes stayed boxed into her phone screen but at least Ezekiel's shadow heard. The figure below him clapped and held out its arms. *You can do it, Ezekiel. I'll be right here to catch you. You trust me, don't you? It's me. You and me. Just as we always were, sweet boy.* The threat of a fall made him feel empty; an abandoned finger puppet made of flesh. He slowly inched onto the slide with his back facing the bottom. Tiny palms, still skinned from a fall the day before, scrambled on the smooth surface for a grip. Any stability for purchase put more breath into his lungs and he learned to hug tighter. But then his weight made the sloped platform totter side to side. Wobble, and totter. This wasn't how a slide behaved at all. Ezekiel knew that much, at least, and so he lunged back to the pole steps and let out a scream. He looked around. Only his shadow heard.

The park seemed empty to Ezekiel. Empty except for him and his mommy. *No.* Him and his shadow. As his heartbeat relaxed into a trot, Ezekiel could see from his perch strangers in a world next to theirs: business women with their blouses puffed out of their blazers, grungy-looking music men with their patched-up backpacks of wanderlust, and dog-walkers that seemed all the more exhausted when a passer-by gave a look at their pet. Yet all these people never looked back at Ezekiel as they rushed along the sidewalk just below. They never seemed to notice his curious eyes, or his mommy's angry under-breath words as she clasped her phone with tight hands and shook it like an infant. He was invisible it seemed. Him, and his mommy too.

Even odder than the park itself, was the fact that Ezekiel couldn't remember how he'd gotten there. He remembered getting into his mother's silver car, feeling her dry knuckles scrape against his cheek as she yanked the seat-belt over him and his car seat, then suddenly he was inspecting the odd curvy plastic that he had wrongfully deemed a slide. With one careful step after another, Ezekiel made his way down the pole and back to the mulch below. *Solid.* But what was *that* thing? Over there? A wiggly arm reaching up with a green claw at the top? A yawning alien head? The mulch should have crumbled and shifted with protest as Ezekiel ran over to the thing, but he heard nothing and instead turned to smile back at his loyal friend.

It looked like a wiggly staff reaching out of the ground with a black base at the bottom and an angry green head at the top. Ezekiel planted a foot onto the platform below and wrung his hands around the staff. This one felt much safer to him; closer to earth and easier to hold. Even the smoothed paint finish felt like home compared to the stepping stone pole from before. It

reminded him of his mommy's hands on a good day; soft as clouds from her vanilla lotion. Suddenly, the platform that he stood upon began to shift drastically to the left and spin him around the staff, but not completely around. Instead, it chose to perform a half-circle swoop, then saunter back around to where it had begun. At first the shock made Ezekiel's ribs ache with momentum from the twist, but he quickly learned to relax as the platform lost its vigor. *But why?* His shadow spoke, *what an odd thing to do*, and an old memory took hold. *Why.*

"*Why? Why!*" The voice of his mother cracked loud and shrill from a blurry figure in Ezekiel's mind.

"*Why have you made mommy feel like this, Ezekiel? Do you hate mommy? You do! You must hate mommy! Do you want to see mommy die? Do you?*"

The glint of a thin silver blade in her hand hurt his eyes and made his heart feel like it had just rolled in pine tree needles.

"*If you want mommy to die, then she will! She will right now!*"

Her sleeves slid up just enough for Ezekiel's memory to focus on old lines and fresh red stripes on his mommy's wrists. The still yet blurred image of her showed a creamy tan face, and a rusty red hijab. Ezekiel hugged her thigh. Mommy dropped the knife and shuddered.

No, don't cry. Big boys don't cry. Daddy didn't cry. Not ever, not once. Mommy was crying now from her spot on the rock. Crying and bopping her head, holding her phone with her other trembling hand. Don't cry mommy, big boys don't cry. But daddy said mommy does, so it must be okay. Ezekiel

ran now to a bench in the shape of a donut. The mulch still made no sound. Neither did the water from the creek just along the way, nor did the footsteps of the people on the sidewalk below. All Ezekiel could hear was mommy's sobs and the scratch of his own clothes shifting about his frame. Everything seemed to move slower here, apart from everything else just beyond. The park was still, with no other life besides him and his mommy. Not even birds, not even ants. It was dead but brought to life by his own childlike curiosity.

It reminded him of the day they went to the flea market. Spring was trickling into summer and the heat in the air made them glow instead of sweat. It was like a circus with small tents littering the gaping field. The round-top tent was the mountains behind it all; quiet and soft as it housed the clatter below. Ezekiel knew what a puppy-dog felt like as he stood amongst the adult giants. He felt small, so small that his own path was beyond the comprehension of the tall ones around him.

*"Look! Ezekiel! My child, look!"*

His mommy's vanilla-scented hand lead him along with a patient grip. As he looked up, her cherry-blossom hijab appeared to be the mountain's flowering branches—turning the mountains into thick tree stumps. The beaten field earth felt like it bounced back against Ezekiel's small feet as she led him along to a tent. This tent loomed with the scent of old flesh and baby powder. Its only visitors were elderly women with their disinterested husbands at their side. The men looked off with longing eyes at a fishing tent across the way. Their eyes seemed to say: *"Just ten more minutes now... I'm sure she'll be done in ten more minutes..."* One of the men wore a baseball cap that said, 'U.S. Army

Veteran' and Ezekiel's heart sped. He didn't know what veteran meant, but he knew the rest with pride. He wanted to run to the man and tell him everything he knew. Ezekiel wanted to tell the man about his daddy, but his mommy loved to look at tea cups. She brought Ezekiel towards a tent with tables garished in overly ornate cups. Ezekiel loved to watch his mommy as she looked at the cups.

*“Ay! This one! Oh! Look at the little bitty leaves carved into the side... so small... small like your winy toes when you were the size of my hand!”*

Ezekiel giggled at the thought of his once baby toes wiggling before his mother's eyes. He imagined her eyes looked on at him as they did at the glazed ceramic. Almost as if the gold shine reached out to his mother's face and rejuvenated it; making it bright as the gold itself. The thought made Ezekiel feel warm. She didn't snap nor snarl when he reached a small hand up to close around the cloth of her top. Instead, her hand came down and brushed over his peach-soft hair. She felt so warm; a comfortable warm, a safe warm.

*“Oh, Ezekiel, look at this.”*

She lifted her hand from his head so that she could grab one of the tea cups and cradle it in both palms. Her body slowly sank towards the tattered grass into a low crouch before Ezekiel. Her gravity pulled him in.

*“What do you see on this one, ibn?”*

This teacup was white as the sun if one dared to look upon it for too long. The decoration and trim was painted upon it in a quaint light blue. Ezekiel remembered being taught once in class that blue used to be a color for baby

girls because it was strong. Along the belly of the cup were birds; swans and doves flying together, and in such unison, that their bodies made a heart.

*“A heart, umm.”* Ezekiel let his fingertips graze along the side of the cup to feel the birds and their few defined feathers.

*“Look closer, ibn. What else?”* His mommy smiled with a gentle bloom of pride as she looked upon the plump little face of her son.

*“The birds, umm?”*

*“Yes! Yes, little one. Do you know what these birds mean to us? To our home and to you and me?”*

Ezekiel’s eyes were far away as they gazed at the teacup birds. They were beautiful and soft like his mommy’s hair. He shook his head after a moment’s pause, fingers at the beaks now. The beaks were much more rounded on this cup’s side and he pictured they would be dart-like in real life.

*“Birds can fly only by the grace of Allah. Didn’t you know that, Ezekiel? Allah makes the birds fly and the birds, they protected Muhammad. They helped Muhammad escape capture. You know what I think, ibn? I think the birds are using Allah’s might to protect your daddy, your baba right now. I’m sure of it.”*

To protect Ezekiel’s daddy who made wooden prop planes and took Ezekiel to Hobby Town, so he could look at the Dungeons and Dragons figures. Ezekiel’s daddy who let mommy cry and get upset but always hugged her afterwards because *“Mommy cries. That’s just how she is. You just have to love her stronger.”* Ezekiel’s daddy who bought his mommy the cherry

blossom hijab the night before he left; left with thick brown boots that reminded Ezekiel of sail boats. He left with a backpack for a giant and his hair combed perfectly in place. He left in a blur of green and brown and a dash of red, white, and blue on his shoulder. Left after leaving a kiss on mommy's wrists, and when she whimpered, her lips. He left on a bright blue day when the birds were out and swooping above.

*Angels in the Architecture*

Earthbound  
he found a windowsill  
painted by men named  
William Cochran and Paul F. Wilson.

they were the poachers of angels.

Earthbound  
when the soles of his palms  
pressed paint still wet upon the sill  
he began to melt into the stone.

mu\*ral  
/'myoorəl/  
a painting or other work of art executed directly on a wall.  
of, like, or relating to a wall.

don't you see?  
he was only curious.

but they had taught the stone  
to hunger only for the paint of  
melting angels  
and so it ate.

Earthbound  
you can visit him still  
and if you look hard enough you may  
see that his wings were white before shading.

Earthbound  
and they captured him.

an\*gel  
/'ānjəl/

a spiritual being believed to act as an attendant, agent, or messenger of God,  
conventionally represented in human form with wings and a long robe.  
a person of exemplary conduct or virtue.  
of, like, or relating to a wall.

Earthbound  
in silence

he has watched over the people of Frederick  
from that belly of stone since 2000  
and he wishes only that you believe he is there  
because when you reach out to touch,  
his paint dries further into the wall.

*the apple too smelled like death*

It used to feel smooth—the skin of the apple. It used to reflect the light from the bulb above; it used to smile with a glaze of wax. It was freckled, before. Taut, red skin imperfect but tantalizing for its imperfections. It was so many years ago that I remember it—when I first felt it in my palm. The apple was larger than my hand. I could cup the bottom, but its waist, the girth of it, swelled beyond the width of my palm. Back then, in that moment staring at the apple in my hand, I believe I may have been eight, maybe nine. Later, when *it* happened, I was thirteen. But the apple, the apple was so red, so lively, so angry, and my skin just below so pale and cold. When my mother placed it my hand, it smelled like insecticide, dirt, and wax. That was the first smell I remember, at least. Later, when I thought about the red apple I would only smell my dead red lining from within—that sickening thick slime sliding between my legs. That smell, it smelled like death and so I felt that the apple, red and undulating, the apple too smelled like death.

She told my sister Gretchen and I to roll it across the splintered wood floor between each other. There, in the center of the living room we would sit and roll the apple back and forth, back and forth, leaving from one palm to the other's and on. Mother made us do it for a few hours at a time at first, then until dinner, then for days.

“Take the apple, take it.” She said. Her hair was long and dark and her eyes even darker. I do not remember a time when she hugged Gretchen and I, but I didn’t want her to, wouldn’t want her to. Her frame looked sharp; like the dream I once had of falling into a bed of knives. The way she moved, it was almost as if the house were breathing and she was merely riding along its current: unable to sturdy herself or decide for her own which direction she wanted to walk in.

“Take the apple, take it!” She demanded, and spittle flicked from her gums onto the horizon of her dry lower lip. It was busted open on the corner, crusted with dried blood and swollen.

“You will roll this apple until you learn what it means to be good little girls. What it means to be a woman! You are too young to learn yourselves but if you’re going to survive, you need to start young. I will teach you. This is it, this is your lesson, now take it!”

And so, we sat on the wood boards, Gretchen and I. Gretchen looked different than I did. Prettier. I always thought so. Her skin was tanner and her hair ignited with explosions of bright blond curls. I always envied her. She never felt the need to brush her hair in the morning. She didn’t need to. Mother loved her more because Gretchen didn’t speak.

“She’s biologically better at being a woman.” Mother would say. “She just came out better than you. Mute. She’s already a better woman than you’ll ever be.”

Gretchen wasn't mute, at least not to me. We had designed our own language, her and I, between our glances and the twitches of our pinkies. We made up a code with the pillows on our bed and how we folded our clothes in our dressers. It was our secret story—something we owned together.

Today, this day that I remember, we had been rolling the apple since breakfast at 5 a.m. it was now almost ten at night. The apple's skin was popped and peeling. Its insides were brown and drooling onto the boards, making a mucky trail between us. My hands were so sticky my fingers clung to one another.

The fireplace beside us had fallen to cinders and the winter cold outside was inhaled by the house. It froze my skin, burned my throat and my lungs when I breathed. My hips ached from sitting in one position on the hard wood for so long. They panged with sharp, needle-point throbs down to my knees, then flared again in the balls of my crossed ankles. It was an annoying pain and nothing more. There was another pain, one I wasn't familiar with. It rose from some deep pit in my stomach, spreading its talons up through my abdomen. At least all I could think to call it was a pain, but it disguised itself as lesser. It felt like an uncomfortable weight had nestled itself inside below my belly button. It curled up between my intestines, my guts. It felt un-right. I was swollen, as if my body were no longer mine.

Gretchen's eyes were glazed over. They had lost their excitable gleam by now. She stared coldly at the wood floor as if any roll now, she might fall forwards. Normally, mother let us go to bed by now, but the time slowed on. Our rolling grew slower and slower. My limbs felt as if they moved

mechanically—like a puppet with wooden joints. Occasionally, we would stop—rest our eyes, let our bodies settle like the frost on the grass and leaves and thorns outside.

Then we would hear her, the woman inside our mother.

“RoLl ThE ApPIE... rOLl It!”

Our mother sat in the rocking chair across from the fireplace. She didn't face us. Instead, she faced the empty wall worn from water damage below where the snow made our roof into a hammock. The chair slowly rocked. With every swoop the wooden arches cracked and wailed. Mother's feet didn't touch the ground and still, it rocked. She knitted—sweaters for Gretchen and me, I think. They were our size. She made many of them over the years, since the apple rolling began. They were folded in stacks in the attic; each of them with a rose pattern. I wonder whether those sweaters were cries for help—if they were signs that she still loved us, that she was doing all she could to love us, but we were just barely out of reach. She couldn't push harder than she was being pulled away.

She sat there, knitting a loop every minute or two or five. When we stopped rolling the apple, she continued to rock, continued to knit, and then we heard the other.

“RoLl ThE ApPIE... rOLl It!”

Mother's lips did not move. The voice, it sounded like it came from her stomach. It rumbled. The first few times we heard the voice, back when it all began, we thought perhaps Mother was only hungry. Gretchen would look up, then back down and dismiss the sound, so I did too. Then it got louder.

Clearer.

“RoLI ThE ApPIE... rOLI ThE aPpLe...”

When we recognized the sound as a voice—as alien woman’s voice—we stopped rolling. Gretchen looked up at me. Her eyes were glossy, her pupils quivering. I saw her, then looked down at her hand. Her pinky was tapping against a soft bruise on the apple. I nodded. I heard it too. Then there was a loud crack. Gretchen started and sucked in a sharp bundle of frozen air. It must have hurt because she slapped her hands on the floor after, bending over to cough. I turned to where the sound came from. Protruding from the wall in front of mother’s face was her knitting needle. Cracks sprawled out like fingers around the penetrated wall. Then it bled. The wall began to leak a thick crimson stream.

“RoLI ThE ApPIE... rOLI It!”

Although my throat was dry, the last of my saliva moistened a cry.

I rolled the apple.

That was the first time we heard the voice. Between then, and this moment I tell you now, was the span of about five years. Between then, and what I recollect in this moment, it was repetitions much the same. There was a schedule to it before: wake, make the beds, do the laundry, clean the floors, eat breakfast, bathe, roll the apple, dinner, brush teeth, then bed. But now, this time, the hour felt closer to three in the morning.

“RoLI ThE ApPIE... rOLI It!” The other woman demanded,

and so Gretchen and I sharpened our backs, gathered our energy and rolled again.

The pain in my lower abdomen got worse. It felt like I had been chosen for dinner; like someone tucked a napkin into their collar, lit a soothing candle on the counter, picked up a silver knife and a silver fork, then dug right into me. They twirled my lower intestines around their fork like spaghetti—stretching it out to see how long the noodles ran, twirling it some more to wrap them around the prongs, then took a bite and with their front molars and severed the noodles in half. It makes for digestible bites.

As the early morning pulled along, the house fell dark. I could only make out Gretchen and mother from the streamline highlights of moonlight on their frames. The natural light of night flit graciously through our windows. What little it allowed me to see was a blessing. I was concerned for Gretchen. She was coughing more now, and her shivering never ceased. She shook like a dead goose that a dog had got its jaws around. Still, I thought, ‘mother will let us stop soon. Soon she will let us stop, and we will be warm in bed together under the blankets until dawn..’

But then dawn came. Light swelled in through our windows, warmed our limbs degree by gracious degree. About an hour after the sun had risen (it’s hard to say for sure, there were no clocks; all my perceptions of time are guesswork) but about an hour after the sun rose, it came. I was confused at first. It started off with a damp feeling. I pushed the pulped apple away from my palm once, twice, once more, and the dampness began to nag at me. At first, I thought the floorboards themselves were wet. I thought that the morning dew

had found itself inside because the fireplace had extinguished hours ago. Then it was more than merely damp. I was sitting in *wet*.

Gretchen noticed it before I did. I sent the apple away, and this time it did not return. Feeling that our rhythm had broken, I looked up. My eyes traced the long sticky road we had painted on the wood with the apple's nourishing innards, up Gretchen's trembling hands, and finally to her gaze. She was aghast. She stared at me with a sense of horror stronger than the one conjured from the woman inside our mother. With reluctance, I followed her gaze to my lap. Swelling from my vagina was a deep, velvety pool of red. It tore through my white night gown and the floor boards below drank it like liquor. I felt my heart freeze—cold consuming me. Suddenly, all I could think about was my many discomforts. My hair was unkept and poking defiantly around my face, my hands were sticky and matted with dust and apple residue, my mouth tasted sour, my lap soaked everything on me, around me, and the smell of something rotten rose from it. I was disgusting, and from that realization, desolate and ashamed.

It was then, when I felt the full breadth of my filthiness, that the creaking from the rocking chair stopped. I was too entranced staring at the red to notice it at first. The red felt like it stared back at me with malicious intent. I noticed the footsteps instead; quick, padded, demanding as they sped towards me.

“How could you?”

I felt a hand grab my hair, another my arm and yank me to my feet. It hurt—my legs mostly. They were stiff, and my joints were sore, and I

stumbled as if I had never learned how to walk in the first place. My legs were weak appendages incapable of stability.

“You’re staining the wood! You become a woman and the first thing you do is muck up everything? Dirty girl!”

It was mother’s voice lecturing me, not the other. I looked up at her and she appeared nearly dead. She looked exhausted and on the brink of collapse, and yet the strength she used to pull me away was remarkable and dangerous.

“Gretchen, go run some hot rags!”

My sister looked at me, her eyes welling with worry for me, and pity. She stumbled just as I had when trying to stand back up again. She had to claw and scrape any furniture nearby to pull herself up and keep her there. Mother stared down at the stain I had made, and the other woman’s voice steamed up from her stomach.

“DiRtY! DiRtY! DiRtY! FiLth! WhAt A LiTtLe wHoRe oF SIN!”

Gretchen had not run off for the rags yet. She stared on, petrified. The other woman’s voice bellowed, guttural out of our mother’s stomach.

“SsSsssSerpent’s WhOrE! FiLthY cHiLd, mOtHeR oF SIN!”

The voice echoed through my ears, but I grew distracted, something dripping on my face. When I looked up at my mother, I saw that she was crying. She looked down at me and her eyes were the kindest I had ever known them to be. Spit worked the muscles in her throat and I thought the words ‘I’m sorry’ may be stuck inside.

*Letter to Georgia O'Keeffe*

What would you say to a child's pastel bathed  
Fingertips as they worked, determined to witness  
what you saw within each bodily  
Curve of a flower's lip and enveloping chastity?  
Would you have been ashamed?  
That the child discarded her vibrant flower  
Simply because another tormented her, jest  
That her abstract *Bleeding Heart* looked like a *vagina*?

What would you say if you knew  
She adorned the landscape that God had given  
Her in shame? Obscuring her every bit of flesh  
In the scorching sun so as to avoid exposing  
Her flourishing child-bearing hips?  
How would you paint her?  
As your *Red Hills and Bones*? Spine and femur  
Weeping behind a fortress un-ventured?

Would you have been proud of the  
Petrified rabbit's skull that whispered  
Sweet comforts from her vanity drawer?  
Shut in just as her body, from the light in fear  
Of capture for the law in which she had challenged;  
Finding harmony within death and fading  
Essence, a sense that only manhood may  
Obtain and horde for its own oppression.

How would you paint her now?  
As she gags on her own sorrows projected  
At the fresh bands of femininity pressing to the surface?  
Would you paint her as *Ram's Skull with Brown Leaves*?  
Stained and exhausted chasms curling as a falling fortress,  
Weary from life as the still yet juvenile skin  
Of her motherly promise began to stretch thin,  
Seen as a cattle brand instead of warrior scars

What was it that you said?  
*"I decided to start anew, to strip  
Away what I had been taught."* To  
Kneel to metamorphosis is the ultimate  
Pilgrimage, and this child has become a *woman*.  
As you clench proudly at the meat of your breast,  
Every shadow of your living corpse is  
Beauty.

How would you paint her now?  
As your *Flower of Life ii*?

The boiling blood of her heart  
Performing a crescendo for her  
Supple and full breasts,  
Planting creation within her shy,  
Pink carnation.

Sensitive to touch.

What was it again?

*“I feel there is something unexplored  
about women that only a woman  
can explore.”*

## *The Dragon's Horde*

Dublin is a dragon and on my first night, I rode atop its head. Pairs of feet still stained with United States soil flitted across slick cobblestone streets. The night hung as a black curtain above warm lights—string lights strewn across street alleys, lamp lights, storefront signs, pub lights. The air tasted sweet with an earthy metallic. Street music reverberated between brick and called me over to stay awhile. But there was too much to hear, too much to see, and the body of the dragon curved on. We skipped down the streets, a flock of wild, adrenaline eyes and parched lips. Air-weary travelers, the pub lights lured us in to music and drink. Once we tired of one, we rushed the streets in search of another, and another; *The International Bar*, *Temple Bar*, *The Hairy Lemon*. Our hearts were insatiable. After two drinks, the dragon called me back to its streets. This time, alone. I found my way back to the music and stood in place for a while to feel the moist air settle on my cheeks. The first night is what I pictured it would be like, but it was only night, and I had yet to see Dublin under the scrutiny of day.

In daylight, the hypnosis of city lights is quieted. The city becomes something new altogether. In the daylight, I realized that Dublin is a dragon.

Let me elaborate.

Its body, scales of uneven cobblestone, snake and glide beneath the untrained feet of a visitor. As feet walk on and familiarity is lost, the body bends below and guides one street into another, and another, and another, until bearing has returned. Webbed spines fray along its jaw, and when the wind blows past, tight and quick, it makes music. Dusted with bar-light stars and dew from misty rain, Dublin's flesh shimmers. It is a dragon with a 120-meter-long lance for a heart. This lance has many names: *The Spire*, *The Monument of Light*. The lance has a magic about it. Light never ceases to shine from its peak. It is the vision of one, unified Dublin. But as most hearts are, this one is still conflicted. Dublin has scars over old wounds. It has notches in its bones from bullets. Their remnants stare back, blasted into the pillars of the General Post Office, a building that sits along the dragon's spine: O'Connell Street Lower.

If Dublin is a dragon, then what might be its horde? I say "horde" and not "hoard" because this dragon collects live things. They sit in heavy jackets and thin jeans on O'Connell Bridge and the ends of Ha'penny Bridge. Their sleeping bags gather by storefronts and crosswalks. One man sits and reads from dawn till dusk every day, another woman asks tirelessly for just enough euros to rent a hostel room for the night. They take turns with a tub of chalk and write poetry on the sidewalk.

They write;

*Some people look down on me*

*Because I am Homeless*

*But who are they to judge*

*For I bleed blood and*

*I breathe the same air*

*So! How can anyone judge*

*For no one in life is...*

—and it sits unfinished in the minds of passersby. They only looked because suddenly, the concrete was colorful beneath their feet.

Splitting between the scales are buildings as spikes, meticulously groomed at a maximum of 60 meters high. The buildings are full—fit to burst, leaving its horde to camp in the streets. In the cold and mist of December 2017, the dragon counted 2,385 children in its horde. It counted 3,712 adults and 1,028 families. The horde continues to swell.

I ventured this dragon alone often. My tastes had changed. Before, I had preferred a second mind around as back-up in case my own failed. But in Dublin, I found a comfort in being lost. It helped slow my world down. It taught me to walk with purpose in the present, instead of rushing to something in my future. When I slowed down, the city felt like a dream—real, yet just beyond my comprehension. Lost, I met with beings from the dragon's living

horde. Some were on feet consumed by a nervous pacing. Some sat coiled in their sleeping bags, staring a week into the future. At the crosswalk by Christ Church Cathedral, a woman rushed to me, her hair thin and oily, her eyes red from exhaustion.

“Spare some euros please, please, spare some euros please! Please!”

My response was robotic, trained; it was all I knew. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

“Just enough for a hostel for the night, please! My father is in the hospital and I have to visit him, please, only enough for the night!”

*I'm sorry,*

*I have no cash on me.*

*I'm sorry.*

She heard me. She nodded and continued past without a word. Before Dublin was a dragon, it was a tiger. Crisp businessmen with eyes trained towards a new frontier brought their dreams to Ireland. They expanded their companies on Irish soil and watched as the country's capital flourished. Ireland became the *Celtic Tiger*. Its citizens, for the first time in a long time, felt secure. They felt fearless as they shopped in stores, ate out in restaurants, made down payments on houses yet to be built. The Celtic Tiger assured its people that they and their spending were immortal, even as the nation's economy began to stagger under the weight of progress. It was a denial that led the nation into a crippling recession. Houses now sit vacant, cold, unobtainable to the people who then found themselves scraping for some semblance of

stability. When the Celtic Tiger fell, Dublin resurrected as a dragon with a currency of its own—a horde in the thousands.

At the corner of Parnell Square is a garden. A long pool of water stretches down the garden and out at the sides in the shape of a cross. Flowers bloom when in season, and the grass on the risen earth is a striking green year-round. At the head of the cross, up a small climb of stairs, is a monument. At its base are three human bodies sculpted to appear to be clothed in loose cloth. They are thin, dejected. The first, a man, lays close to the earth as if near impact from a fall. The second, a man who looks like the same man from before, but only at the start of the fall; as if rewound in time. The third is a woman. She stands the tallest yet leans faintly to the left. Forming from the backs of all three is a flock of large birds taking flight. This garden is the *Garden of Remembrance*, and it commemorates the lives of those who died amidst the struggle for Irish freedom. The monument, atop its perch at the head of the garden, shows the Irish people rising from the ashes of their past.

This garden is surrounded by a fence and locked at nightfall. Next to the fence, a tent sits pitched into the grass, and clothes hang haphazardly from a tree to dry.

I was not a stranger to the city at night, but I preferred it during the day. I made 20-minute trips by bus from Dublin City University to the city center in front of Trinity College. From noon until late evening, I wandered the body of the dragon with no real purpose or direction. In the back of my mind, all I was searching for were sights, music, and a cup of coffee somewhere hidden from the rush of jaywalking feet and double decker buses. A handful of

those evenings in the city, I came across the same man. His hair was grey and ruffled, his beard sticky but not unkempt. The clothes he wore were stained and torn. His skin looked faded, wax-like. His eyes stared past everything—past the buildings, the dumpster, past my body walking by. When I came across him, he would mumble under his breath—caught in a heated argument with himself and a phantom that sat not far from his own lips. One evening, something about him had changed. That evening, he was pacing feverishly back and forth between the curb of the street and a locked storefront gate.

“No... No... No!... No...No! No!” He shouted, shaking his hands like they were crawling with something. I kept moving. I knew the man as well as a frequent stranger could know him. I was used to passing him quickly. A step before passing him, he lifted his arms and bellowed, “I’m not scared of you! I’m not fucking scared of you! Come fight me, I’m not scared! Fight me!” He crashed his body into the storefront gate and punched it with a sharp hook. The gate echoed a light rattle but did not give way. It was a sudden aggression that startled me. Where my feet should have sped, they halted, frozen. I looked, but only for a moment. He seemed to understand that the gate was metal, and he was only flesh. The man went back to mumbling and leaned against the gate in defeat. I walked on.

Dublin tries to hide its horde behind the Leprechaun Museum, behind a bus tour, behind a Carroll’s gift shop on every street. They sit, invisible, a few yards away from where people stand daily with smiles on their faces, holding out pamphlets about angels. Every so often, someone will notice a piece of the scattered horde along the street. They will bring them a warm cup of coffee, crouch down, and have a nice chat as if the day was warm and home was

waiting for them both. It is in those small moments that you can see them smile. Their eyes are glossed from loss of sleep, but the conversation brings a redness back to their cheeks.

Dublin is a dragon whose scales look different from afar. They reflect like a mirror, and we see only what we feel we ought to see. In case you were wondering: yes, I did drink Guinness; yes, I did go to the pubs; yes, I went to the Guinness Storehouse; but I tire of responding to an image of the dragon from across the sea. Dublin is a vibrant city. There are stomping feet in its pubs, music in its streets, and art blooming in bookstores and studios. Dublin's body is old, but its breath is young and changing. And yet, the horde is still there: living things waiting for the warm season and counting their euros to pay off a hostel room for the night. The horde does not always look like defeated bodies strewn across the streets. When they find themselves with 2.70 euros, sometimes, they take the bus. Their children return from school to a hotel room shared amongst two, three, four others. Dublin is a dragon with hypnotic, fiery nighttime eyes, and with a horde ever swelling.

## *Craft*

“I’m a writer,” I assert, but the words sound all wrong to my ears because how can I really be a *writer*, as I say I am, if I type my outpour of language onto a screen and not scrawl it down into some travel weary journal? You know the kind that looks like it’s been dropped down a flight of stairs a couple hundred times and coffee has soaked into the light brown leather, making it look like a clot of mud. The kind that has loose papers jutting out from the side and a crackling, creased closure. “I’m a writer,” I declare, but I do not carry a journal around everywhere I go. Sometimes, you may catch me without a simple book. There’s something envious there, about that. A romanticism about what a writer ought to be. We ought to be entrenched in our own minds every waking moment of the day. We ought to be eccentric and stand out from the rest. We ought to be scribbling short-hand nonsense every other second, and jittering from either coffee or the itch for booze. Well maybe there’s some truth to it. I find I do my best writing jazzed out of my mind on caffeine. I cannot drink and write. Drinking makes me foggy, loose, easily distracted, and my attention span is already the worn-out elastic in a four-year-old’s hair tie.

I do my writing at a desk with home brewed drip-coffee (none of that weak Keurig crap) poured into the biggest mug I own. I have fluffy flavored creamer mixed inside. Good creamer is one luxury I will always allow myself to afford. Full of a hefty, presumably healthy meal that I cooked myself, I sit

and type away as my coffee cools. You see, I call myself a writer, but really, I ought to call myself an ‘imaginarian.’ I spend most of the time I should be writing on thinking. I think about people and whether they mean what they say. I think about attitudes and what it means to stare at something. I think about this time and place and say, “but what if.” I build from the ‘if’ a whole new scenario in my head. Then life goes on. The ‘if’ sits in my head and I carry on. There’s something about the timing of it. Like waiting for a chicken to marinate or for that twenty minutes of perfect sunlight to take the picture. I’m a writer, but most of the time I sit with that ‘if’ in my head until one day I feel in some deeper, unnamed pit of myself ‘it’s about time.’ Then I find it in myself to cook my breakfast of eggs in the shape of patties, sautéed asparagus and mushrooms, and peanut butter toast (or some variation of it). I brew that pot of coffee, mix it, and finally sit at that lonely desk. I sit there, and I type. I type and type as time ticks away because when I write, when I finally write, five hours is just the check point to say ‘maybe I should switch to water or tea’ before I drudge on.

So, say I’m an imaginarian. I think 345 days a year and write maybe the twenty rest. There’s editing scattered in there. It’s hidden under the misjudgment of my gut feeling. I think ‘it’s about time’ and I sit at my desk, but it is not time, and I was wrong, and so, I edit instead. I get immersed in it; combing scrupulously over each line. Grammar, sentence structure, that comes easiest. It’s the bigger picture. The large looming ‘rip me apart and build me back up again’ that is the hardest, and then I become an imaginarian again. I think about how it could be better done, what limbs to sever and what veins to cauterize. I take notes, I highlight, and then I wait again for the big ‘it’s about

time.’ Writing is like a trauma in that way. You sit on it, process it, play it back behind the curtains of your daily life. In the way you ask yourself if you left the stove on, you come back to it. You pick it apart, see how it makes you feel—wait until it stops making you feel. You live like this until finally you decide you’re ready to begin the healing process; to say, ‘you are not what you once were, but from this I will make you more.’

Then, once more, I am a writer. I sit at my desk in bedtime sweat pants and a long-sleeve winter fleece shirt that my Pop gave me. I’ve repurposed it into my ‘sleepy-time jacket’. I often write while wearing another person’s clothing—acquired one way or another. I am not cold, but it makes my insides warmer. It’s a reminder of what is out there, what is left after I write; what world remains after I have created or destroyed another. I write with instrumental music on. Lyrics, just as television or the radio, they put words in my brain and whisper sweet persuasions on how I ought to make my words bend. They flirt with the voice in my head, my voice, and threaten to overpower it. I have always been good at changing how I speak according to who I am speaking to. Some attitudes, tones, slang, feel dominant in different situations, and so, like some shapeshifter, I change. Voices, as I write, threaten to trigger that survival response in me. I begin to write as the character in the show playing behind me, or my prose bleeds into the lyrical cadence of song. Before too long, what I write is no longer a product of me, but a thrift store of humanity beyond what I can understand or control.

I listen to classical music, sometimes the popular brand of ‘low-fi chill step’. Other times I listen to angry dubstep, the kind with distorted alien

voices and bass drops the weight of an anvil. Sometimes I listen to experimental instrumental rock—something inherently optimistic and adventurous in sound. I want the emotion of the music to match the world I am in—the feeling in that place I write about. The inflection of the music keeps me immersed. It creates a soundtrack for a story not yet begun—but then again, what better place to start than with music and a feeling?

I find myself rocking my head in time. I get lost in my own chair. Every sentence feels like a step down a long dusty path in an enchanted forest. Every page, every paragraph, I retrace my steps to make sure I remember which way I came from. When I find my way back again I am shocked at the time, and the light from my screen makes me question if this is truly the reality I belong in. For a full day—five, seven, nine hours—I lose myself and write.

The rest of the time, I am an imaginarian. “I am an imaginarian” I tell my family, my friends, and they look at me funny. “What is that?” they ask, distrust in their voice. “I think about things” I reply. They shoot back, “So you’re a philosopher?” “No”, I say, “I think about things, and then I imagine them differently. I do this all day long, even when I don’t mean to. It’s more fun that way”. They look at me, taken back, confused, and frightened for me, because an imaginarian is not a profession. It is not even a real word and how sad it must be that I am stuck in this childish place where there is no real use or purpose to be had. “Hah!”, I say, “I was only messing with you. I am a writer”. “Oh!”, they say, their faces clearing from concern into a hesitant relaxation. “Can I read what you’ve written?”.

this is for the moment  
i realized i could be heard  
in a different way than before—  
concrete, harder to misplace

this is for the women in my life  
that taught me to be bold—  
wished me to be bolder

this is for every idea i have  
let drift away before a tether  
and for the rest waiting to live,  
to die, to float away

because the tether was never for them, but for me.

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