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An Unstable Container

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AN UNSTABLE CONTAINER

By

John LaPine

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

AN UNSTABLE CONTAINER

This thesis by John LaPine is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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ABSTRACT

AN UNSTABLE CONTAINER

By

John LaPine

An Unstable Container is a collection of short creative nonfiction essays and poetry, with influences from personal memoir, lyric essays, race and gender studies, and poetry. The work examines the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, and the ways in which language, society, and the human body contribute to the construction of one's sense of self. Through the lenses of language, modern technology, medicine, and genetics, *An Unstable Container* explores blackness, queerness, masculine identity, growing up in rural Michigan, and the dangers and pleasures of corporeality. The collection also interrogates the social institutions of marriage and religion, gender roles, and non-traditional family structures.

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2017

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Ann and Robert Holmes, without whom I would not be, and to my family, whether through blood, marriage, or choice.

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The author wishes to thank his thesis director, Matthew Frank, and thesis reader, Jennifer Howard, for their advice and support, without whom this project would not have been completed.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the MLA Style Manual and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

An Unstable Container is a collection of short creative non-fiction and poetry. Each piece draws heavily from the genres of personal memoir and lyric essays, and are based on my life growing up in the rural Midwest as a queer black man in an overwhelmingly predominantly white community (96.0% in 2010, down from 97.29% in 2000). Most of the pieces were composed during the Fall 2017 semester, after I took over a year off from writing starting May 2015, the end of my second year in the graduate program.

I am fascinated by change, progress, the passing of time, and how people, animals, the environment, and society either develop and/or degrade. Change permeates this thesis, as it does with my own life, and with all things. Things erode, or grow; they decay, or develop. Time either builds or demolishes. Every few years, I feel as if I come of age again, as if I've been demolished and rebuilt—I come out of the closet, or I lose 20 pounds, or I lose 20 more, I conquer my phobias, hearing myself speak in recordings, or public speaking, or loneliness—every few years I take inventory of my life, and the changes I've made or undergone, and realize I am not the same person as I was six, four, even two years ago. In many ways, I am still a work in progress. I don't feel like I've arrived; I am still arriving all the time, at new stations, new terminals on the path to some destination. Change still buffets me; every day, it tosses me around like waves, choppy water. But I welcome change, and I hope to continue to change, to adapt to my situation, and make myself a better person each day. These essays, too, are works in progress. It is

impossible to say how much they will grow or erode, given time. The future is unknowable, unknown.

I didn't come out until my first semester of graduate school. This was a major change. Much of my writing concerning queerness (specifically, my homosexuality) feels new, fresh, and raw. Although homosexuality is (and always has been) a major influence in my writing, this collection is where I've written about it most explicitly, so I haven't had much time to muse, just four years. My feelings are complex: proud, when formerly shameful; unique, while desiring homogeneity; existence as minority and the impossibility of heteronormativity, yet still latching onto institutions like monogamy and marriage; disavowing gender roles while embracing masculine ones. To exist on the queer spectrum is to espouse some parts of majority culture, and spurn others. How much? That depends on the individual. Much of this work concerns domesticity, subversions of traditional gender roles, and religion and marriage, as well as masculine self-identity and self-expression. Even within LGBT communities—a group categorized by their shared non-heteronormative desires, roles and goals—there are men (and women, and people) who seek to reinforce traditional, constricting gender roles—that “men should be men.” Gay men's dating profiles will ask “no fems” or “masculine men only.” Part of the work of this thesis is to subvert those expected roles from within the LGBT community, despite my own occasional compression into these roles. I am still learning myself; I am still changing.

Originally, I conceived of this thesis as a collection of letters between myself and other members of my family, as well as found documents. However, I realized the epistolary structure would not support several of the essays; the disconnect between form

and content meant either unbelievably long letters, or many very short essays. So the epistolary form was dropped, while I kept the found document form, utilizing internet adoption applications and dating profiles as containers for essay and poetry. The rest of the collection adheres to traditional poetic and essay forms, which better suits the pieces' lengths and content.

“Finding people near you” is a lyrical flash piece in the form of online dating profiles (e.g. Tinder, Grindr). The second-person point-of-view places the reader in the shoes of a man reading profiles from three different men, as the men advertise their own bodies to each other, and to the reader. I am interested in combining words based on sound and/or visual aesthetic to create a mood. The piece draws heavily from poetry, creating a play of words and sounds to evoke the sometimes sleazy, sometimes dangerous, yet rarely meaningful connections forged through these smartphone applications. Despite any explicitly sexual language, the piece achieves a perverse sensual through its word choice, alliteration, eye rhymes, and the personal nature of second-person point-of-view. The piece was previously published online in the *Foliate Oak* literary magazine, my first publication.

“Application for Adoptive Families” adopts the form of an adoption form. Set in the year 2027, the essay imagines a future between the author and his romantic partner, two men looking to expand their interracial, non-traditional family, and places their answers and dialogue in conversation with the presumptuous questions posed by the agency through the form, which imposes constraints on the complex, often multiple identities of the applicants, limiting lived experiences to check boxes, radio buttons, a single .jpg image file. The questions themselves imply rigid societal expectations and

reductive gender norms for adoptive couples, leaving literally no room for non-heteronormative answers. The questions, were adapted from an actual online application.

“Truvada” is a poem about a relatively new HIV treatment method, Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis, or PrEP, which prevents contraction of HIV in the user. Taken daily as a pill, Truvada is currently the only FDA approved brand of PrEP. Clinical trials in the early 2010s showed it 99% effective with perfect usage, with decreased effectiveness with imperfect usage, and is recommended with use of a condom. However, some have used the drug as a license to avoid condom usage altogether. It is available only through prescription by men who have had unprotected anal sex in the past six months, anyone who shares equipment while injecting intravenous drugs, anyone who has intercourse with a partner who may be HIV positive or of unknown status, and other at risk groups, including “men [and transgender women] who have sex with men” (MSM). Obtaining a prescription for this medicine so vital—really, a vaccine—involves subjecting oneself to a clinical categorization and identification. Personally, I do not have a prescription. I’ve always been paranoid of overmedication and unwanted side effects. I am skeptical about the health benefits of the pill, which, although has prevented HIV contractions, has also (inadvertently) encouraged less safer sex practices. The poem’s focus on language, written and spoken, waves the often lyrical terminology of prescription side effects with poetry, influenced in part by Claudia Rankine’s lyrical essay *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*.

“black boys, beware” was originally conceived as a list of questions to white men who commit race-based discrimination in dating. Although the ghost of this first draft remains in a few, within the editing process, I discovered the addressees were not white men, but black boys, the victims who allow themselves to be at once celebrated and

stereotyped, fetishized and ignored, sought out and purposefully excluded. I have been among these boys, and it is simultaneously thrilling to be lusted over, and horrifying to allow another man to reduce his attraction to you to one attribute: your skin color. The revision utilizes poetic form as a call to arms and a celebration of loneliness, using turns of phrase to play with cliché language (*“fuck yourselves/ instead. revel in aloneness, cold feather comforters,/your own fingers, meals for one.”*), lending new meaning to stale words. For me, this is part of the power of poetry; to breathe new life into worn out, overused phrases.

“NSVs” was one of the essays originally written in epistolary form, as a letter to my biological father, Dennis, set in 2015, the year before he died from stroke-related complications. This form would have had all the events told in past tense. However, present tense suited the action better, presenting scenes rather than information dumps that attempted to make up for lost time, so I rewrote past tense scenes into present in several paragraphs. Early in the drafting process, I also realized the letter form was too flimsy for the weight of the content, and read too angsty and accusatory (“I’m writing to **you**, absent Dad!”) than literary. So I pivoted to a traditional, three-prong braided essay format instead: quantifiable/biological evidence of homosexuality; my weight loss; and throwing a ball with Jon.

Jon and I are best friends, living together for three years across three houses. We spent enough time together that friends started calling us “The Jo(h)ns.” I look up to him as a member of my non-blood family, another older brother of sorts, though we both mentor, inspire, and look up to each other, and I am forever grateful for his wisdom, patience, encouragement, and level-headedness, which act as a foil to my own

irrationality, rashness, and ridiculousness. He's taught and influenced me in unquantifiable ways, from fashion choices and social interactions, to advice on physical activity. We have been best friends, workout partners, roommates, teammates, and life coaches for each other for years. He appears in much of my writing due to his positive influence on my life.

In weight loss communities, an NSV is a non-scale victory, a moment in one's life when they realize their weight loss has an effect outside of the number on a scale. Some non-scale victories include noticing your clothing fitting looser, or noticing new muscles or bones sticking out in the mirror, or a litany of compliments from coworkers or friends about your weight loss. Any time you've noticed you've lost weight outside the scale, you've reached an NSV. Going from a size 40 waist to a size 30 is one of the biggest accomplishments (and biggest changes) of my life. I grew up not knowing how to count calories, so learning to measure my food was a major part of becoming the person I am today, a person I consider much healthier, happier, and more active.

"I'm the whitest black guy at school" is a flash essay with influence from poetry which interrogates biracial identity in rural communities, the construction and expression of identity through the body, as well as the expectations and limitations imposed by the multiple facets comprising one's identity and sense of self. The piece uses the body as a literary device to understanding race as a social construct rather than as biological fact. Repetition throughout is a performative element drawing from spoken word poetry. Pairing it with "NSVs" and the following piece highlights the significance of the theme of body as constitutive of identity in this collection, especially for black Americans,

specifically those living in rural communities, specifically predominantly white communities.

“today at lunch danez smith says nigga” is a flash essay borrowing from poetry. The piece interrogates the reappropriation and use of racial epithets by members of historically systemically oppressed communities, and meditates on the damage of hate speech in rural communities. The repetition within the piece borrows from spoken word poetry, the genre which helped launched a literary career for poet Danez Smith, the work of whom influenced much of the content and style of this essay, my poetry, and this thesis. I am always interested in the meaning carried through words, both in contemporary usages and the historical weight, as well as the social limitations of reappropriated words. I have had the conversation about “who can say it” several times throughout my life, and expect it to come up more frequently as the word’s influence extends further into popular culture, crossing more cultural lines, and appearing more often in media.

The first draft of “Hemophilia: Of Blood, Sweat, Semen, & Other Body Fluids” was composed two years ago, for a graduate class called “The God Chronicles,” a genre course focusing on religion and spirituality in literature. The researched component—the life of Captain Robert FitzRoy as he sailed with Charles Darwin to the Galapagos Islands aboard the HMS *Beagle* in the mid-1800s—works to imagine his life as he attempts to reconcile his fantastic and revolutionary discovery leading to Darwin's theory of evolution with his own spiritual understanding of the world's creation. A captain, hydrographer, and child of aristocrats, FitzRoy was a practitioner of “flood geology,” a discipline that attempted to find geological proof of the biblical flood, but, when

confronted with evidence that directly conflicted with this creation story, FitzRoy scrubbed his own research to better mesh with Christianity's teachings, and avoid “mis-educating” other sailors and scientists. He would devote much of his life to denouncing Darwin's theory of evolution, the development of which was enabled through FitzRoy himself, who specifically sought out the scientific-minded Darwin as FitzRoy’s own companion to avoid loneliness and boredom while at sea.

The essay was originally conceived and composed as a traditional, three-pronged braided essay: FitzRoy's life, my attempt to donate blood in high school, and my own search for spiritual meaning after realizing my own homosexuality. The version appearing in this thesis is a heavy revision of that original piece, combining the latter two prongs into a single, memoir-style thread, and exploring FitzRoy's life even deeper through the other thread. I composed more scenes to achieve a better balance between threads. In the original essay, the historical thread jumped points-of-view, from Captain Pringle Stokes, to FitzRoy, to Darwin; the revised version stays closer to FitzRoy, inhabiting his point-of-view, achieved through additional research and editing. Reducing the essay to two threads allowed a more coherent, cohesive pairing of events between past and present.

The collection’s title, *An Unstable Container*, has several meanings. The first, perhaps most explicit, is the body. The body is an unstable container, an ever-changing, ever-developing vessel for one’s mind, soul, essence. It is both limiting and limited by objective, biological truths, societal perceptions, and inevitable change as it undergoes the growing process and the aging process, as a person experiences multiple comings of age throughout a life, sometimes made manifest as corporeal or changes in actions, and

other times as changes in attitude, mood, personality. The body is not a stable, complete representation of a person's personhood, nor should it be, but acts as one facet that contributes to construction of identity and the self for any given slice of time.

I used to be sure that words were magic, that they could transmit any image, sound, mood, or location through ink or pixels alone, that they were an objective truth, infallible. However, they gain new meaning when used near other words, or in specific contexts. Words mean drastically different things to literally everyone on this planet. In this way, words, too, are unstable containers, carrying both unique meanings for each individual speaker, and heavy cultural baggage. And words change; they change in meaning, even in sound, throughout time. Instability inhabits most aspects of our lives. I still believe in the magic of words, though I am growing less certain of their absolute, unshakable resolve.

Each institution explored in the collection—marriage, gender roles, the family—are also unstable containers, and the essays and poems seek to expose their instability through destruction of expected binaries. In my life, I seek to destabilize these unstable containers, to expose their instability, and to change cultural understanding of what it is to be normal, to be a person, to be. Existing in the intersection of multiple minorities—to possess what W.E.B. DuBois would call a “double consciousness” or, for me, a “triple (quadruple?) consciousness”—is to necessarily (actually, impossible not) to stand outside the prescribed binaries and not point out hypocrisies, contradictions, irrationalities, and injustices inherent therein.

Finding people near you

Carter

18

Looking for dates or friends or right now or fun. Be my daddy. Stroke my salmon legs. Comb my hair until bluish eels blush purple. You are wood and I am samurai sword, wedging apart your rigid cell walls, or I'm on your fingertips like tacky glue, or I am blackened unagi on your lips. Or I'm Vaseline, greasy jar in mom's bedside drawer, and you are petroleum carpet stain by her radiator. Or we are molten rings bubbling up magma through your ocean floor, eroded, weathered, atmospheres of wet pressure, where sunlight cannot penetrate, where the fish don't need eyes, where we can let our sight fail us and trust in our unseeing until we're dredged up, petrified solid

Jacob

23

Handsome, muscular, down to earth, tattooed back, no Asians or blacks because I know you're all the same, reptilian or apeish, or primeval, primordial, covered in muck, lungless salamanders, egg-laying and venomous platypi, just like my brother used to say, yes, you're just like my brother told me you'd be, mercurial. You'll push my throne, grab fistfuls of facial hair. You'll box my ears and tear out canine teeth like dusty dandelion roots until you are a lone belay on sunbeat crag, with bloody knees from banging rock, bloody hands from holding rope, from clutching at sandstone. When's the last time you screamed at the top of your lungs? When's the last time you ran for your life?

Adam

27

Discreet, masculine country guy who loves the outdoors. Let's grab a beer and see where this goes, wrap ourselves canvas silly, catch each other's breaths, lift like noble gasses, but somehow less reactive, let's grab another beer—see where this goes. Let's boil river water for coffee and catch fish in the morning, and I'll teach you to hold this knife—no, not like that, like this, there you go—and if you let me touch your brown diamond—if you teach me how to hold that too—we'll see where this goes, and I'll let you taste whatever you'd like, and let you say “beautiful,” let you use that word, let you approach it like two arms of galaxy dust, sinew tensing across lightyears orbiting the same black hole until we both fail to collide, to collect into stars, to coalesce into something less meaningful.

Application for Adoptive Families

Thank you for considering adoption. For over 40 years, Family First Adoption has been committed to working with families to provide safe and successful adoptions, and we look forward to serving you as well. Our organization was founded in 1987 by Gloria Maya, who started Family First because of her own desire to be a mother.

This form should take about fifteen minutes to complete, and is always free. We look forward to learning about you and the child you are looking for.

Tim had the afternoon off and a loaf of zucchini bread in the oven. I'd been the one to bring up kids, but he took initiative to research for us. After our first rejection, I could sense he'd lost faith. He hated failure; I liked him. But more than that, he hated giving up, so I don't know why the application surprised me.

I'd fantasized about a home outfitted with trendy sturdy expensive furniture, but our loft full of Ikea, black and brown and brittle, satisfied a domestic urge I'd espoused since I'd been a teen. We filled our apartment with Brusali, Billy, Oxberg, Fjällbo, Norden, Svalsta, Lack, and Stockholm 2025.

Personal Information

First Name: Timothy

Last Name: Rodriguez

Spouse's First Name: John

Spouse's Last Name: LaPine

Street Address: 3025 Independence Ave

City: Seattle

Zip Code: 98102

State/Region: WA

Are at least one of you US citizens? Yes

His cell phone: (206) 458 1109

Her cell phone: This again?

Let's just fill it out, babe.

Okay. But I know they won't want us.

Relationship status: Let's get as far as we can.

You know they don't take fags. They're more likely to take a straight sex criminal. This is useless. Let's put "Polygamists."

Date of Marriage: Maybe this time, they will. Be positive.

Despite our cheap furniture, we were both unreasonable men. I didn't expect the application but could predict his anger to a T. His patience for what he considered great injustices was nonexistent. The principle, he'd say. I'm not supporting it. Meanwhile, I tried to console him, encourage him at least, reenergize what had so quickly been dampened by blatant heteronormativity. I instinctively leaned in and touched him on his shoulder, rubbing where I knew a knot lurked, and breathed a gentle sigh, and wished my sigh could transfer from my flesh to his.

I needed him to support it. And I knew he did. But I guess my unreasonability was that I thought I could make him feel good about going on, trudging further into this space he'd already decided he hated. Sunlight reflected through our living room window and drifted along eggshell walls the way it does this time of day, kaleidoscope of tree leaf shadows and photons refracted from their intended paths. It was 4:32. A beautiful son or daughter would brighten up our predictable grey lives. Perhaps we could brighten their's. My biological clock ticked.

More about Him

Date of Birth: 05/16/1988

Race/ethnicity: Hispanic or Latino origin

Date of any previous divorce: You know they're gonna see our names and throw it in the goddamn trash.

You don't know.

I do.

Occupation/title: Automotive Repair Technician

They're gonna shred it.

Company: Stingray Auto

I'm sure they'll look. I'm sure they get this all the time.

Highest level of education: Some college

Then why's this form so shit?

More about Her

Date of Birth: January eighteenth, my queen?

Race/ethnicity: Is there a box for mixed? Okay, just check Black I guess.

If Tim didn't feel the urgency to adopt, he didn't show it. My mother had always wanted grandchildren, and I knew I couldn't march into old age without a familial legacy to show. I wanted Mom to meet our kid, even if she wasn't either of ours. She'd be ours. The scent of bread, soft and yeasty, coated the apartment, and I wondered how many neighbors were jealous of what we had, of Ikea hammered together in this room, of the smell of our fresh baked loafs, our homemade pizzas, our chilis, curries, and stir-fries, how often the aroma of garlic and oil sizzling and onions and carrots and celery discovered their noses. I was jealous of them sometimes. Often, actually. As long as I can remember, I've looked to others to know how to live. I've compared myself to others to get better at living. I try to built myself up.

Date of any previous divorce:

Occupation/title: Assistant Professor

Company: Seattle Pacific University

Highest level of education: Masters

More about your Family

Number of children you currently have, and ages: 0

Have you ever been denied for a home study? If yes, why? No.

Does anyone else live at this residency? If yes, who? No.

Have you ever been foster parents? No.

Many adoptive parents choose to foster to adopt. They receive a child out of foster care, whose parents were too fucked up on opiates, heroin, oxys, percs, or amphetamines, meth, or crack, to raise their own children. They are taken out of their homes and placed into foster care, where they are sorted through the system and filtered into homes like ours. Usually the courts will give the parents a chance to fight for their kids. Sometimes they do.

I hoped the child we might receive had real deadbeat parents. I hoped they wouldn't even try to fight back for the child, because I knew we'd get immediately attached to our baby.

No-show parents meant our chances of actually adopting were higher. But I felt guilty wishing a child away from its parents too. If they fail, we'll succeed. If they succeed, we'll start again.

Your adoption hopes

Age of child you wish to adopt (check all that apply):

0-6mo, 6-12mo, 12-18mo, 18mo-2yr

We'd discussed adopting an older child, but Tim had decided that growing up with gay parents would be hazing enough for the child, let alone knowing from the start that they're adopted. I told him a white child would probably figure it out.

Race of child you wish to adopt (check all that apply):

any

But secretly I hoped for a black boy or girl. I knew they were adopted the least; I knew they were often the most in crisis. I wanted them to grow up looking like one of us.

Looking like me.

What are your reasons for wanting to adopt?

Should we say “In hopes of becoming big beautiful infertile mothers like Gloria?”

Your Ability to Adopt

These are factors we look at when deciding a family’s ability to successfully adopt, including health history and parenting ability, as well as criminal record. Answer honestly so we can best serve you.

His Health History

Do you have a past or current medical or mental health issue? Wait, I thought we were past the personal questions. Depression (history of), HIV positive, chronic back pain

Do you use alcohol? Not anymore.

Have you ever had a problem with alcohol? Yes

Have you ever had a problem with drugs? No

Her Health History

Do you have a past or current medical or mental health issue?

Any medical issues, my beautiful queen? Depression (history of), chronic knee pain.

Do you use alcohol? Yes.

Have you ever had a problem with alcohol? No.

Have you ever had a problem with drugs? No.

His Criminal Record

Have you ever been convicted of a crime? If yes, please explain.

DUI (2019).

Her Criminal Record

Have you ever been convicted of a crime? If yes, please explain.

Anything you wanna tell me, babe?

No.

Financial Readiness

What is your adoption budget? Include family assistance, loans, fundraising, etc.

15,000

Combined annual income? 75,000

A Few Final Questions for Him

Describe your hobbies: automotives, home repair and DIY, baking, fishing, hiking, travel, drag shows. Should I put drag shows? They probably think we're all rapists.

Describe your wife's personality: She's a strong, independent half-black man.

Be serious.

I am.

What do you admire about her? "Her penis."

C'mon.

Fine. "His penis."

On a scale of 1 to 10, what is her level of patience? 8

A Few Final Questions for Her

Describe your hobbies: reading, writing, cooking, board games, travel, biking, lifting

Describe your husband's personality: funny, smart, outgoing

What do you admire about him? His mechanical prowess. His ability to take control of a situation, and his ability to solve problems.

On a scale of 1 to 10, what is his level of patience? 6

Six?

Okay, 7.

Write 10. We need help.

I want to be honest

I said, immediately realizing my mistake. Tim's nostrils flared, and then the oven beeped.

He leapt from his seat, heading to the kitchen to retrieve the loaf before it burned.

I thought about how we could better spend the adoption money. Our furniture was fine, if

not disposable, but our appliances were almost 20 years old, straight out of the 2010s.

The fridge, blocky and inefficient, thrummed and clunked every hour. It wasn't even WiFi

enabled. I wanted a new blender, a dough mixer, a toaster oven, a convection oven,

utensils, a set of sterling flatware. I wanted a new apartment, a new life. I wanted money

for art. Instead, we'd spend tens of thousands just to adopt. We'd go broke buying food and diapers and clothing every few months, a stroller, daycare expenses, doctor visits, car seats, toys, and all those unexpected expenses for a baby who might not be ours. I wanted to be honest on the form, but maybe I secretly wanted to fail.

I scrolled back up and changed the six to a two. Tim shouted from the kitchen, scorching his finger through our holey oven mitt. The faucet ran cold with water.

About your Faith

His Religious Information

Do you attend church? Fucking Christ.

Which church do you attend? What should I put? Flying Spaghetti Monster? Invisible Pink Unicorn?

Put Catholic. You're baptized, aren't you?

Are you for fuckin' real? Fine, put it down.

What are your spiritual beliefs? (thoughts on God, Jesus, the Holy Trinity, the Bible) and how do you plan to teach these to your child? Just make something up. The religious parents wanna hear something.

I'm not doing that. It's dishonest. It's indoctrination. I'm not bending for these nuts. You think a Muslim would teach their kid about the trinity? It's bullshit. These parents are gonna want us to send pictures of our kid in a yarmulke, videos of her speaking in tongues, and certificates of fuckin' authenticity once she finally gets confirmed.

Those are three different... Whatever. I'm just making something up.

Her Religious Information

Do you attend church? Yes.

Which church do you attend? Catholic -- Saint, uh. Babe, who's a good saint?

I don't know. You know I only go to Mass to make my mother happy. I don't pay attention. Michael sounds legit.

What are your spiritual beliefs? (thoughts on God, Jesus, the Holy Trinity, the Bible) and how do you plan to teach these to your child? I believe in what we can see: in the tangible benefits of church; in the goodness of fellow woman and man; in camaraderie and fundraisers; in treating your neighbor how you'd like to be treated; in the way we structure our lives; in the benefit of regular meditation; that we aren't predestined to do anything great; that we have free will to make choices that affect ourselves and others; that our actions on Earth have consequences, and that we are responsible for these actions; that when we die, we never come back; that we make our own good luck; that we must set ourselves up not to fail; that, not through God, but through ourselves, anything is possible; that all are created equal; that we all bloom under the same sun; that we are all fruit fallen from the same tree of life; that if you bite my flesh, my juices will run down your face; that these juices are the same as your own; that no one is greater than another; that no one is greater than another; that no one is better than anyone else; that no one is better than you.

Click here if you'd like to submit a photo.

You wanna submit a picture, hon?

Do you think they really need it? Two queer dudes? Send 'em one of me in drag.

Please note that this is simply an application, not a contractual obligation by either you or Family First. Any information provided will remain completely confidential, and will not be shared with anyone besides Family First staff as we evaluate how to best help you. By clicking "Submit" you agree under penalty of perjury that all information is complete, accurate and true. Providing incomplete or false information may result in the termination of services.

Tim retreated to the kitchen to wash some dishes. He had a performance that night, so he wore gloves to protect his manicured fingernails, a classic housewife from the 1940s, a perfect portrait of Pan-American domesticity. I reread our answers from the top, then read them again.

Submit.

black boys, beware

boys who only say I love you when they're drunk,
swipe left men who find brown eyes forbidden
fruit, sink canines in cornea, and drink pupil ink like molasses,
but darker, who expect rape fantasy, or thug, or Bruh.
who say i've never been with a black guy. what do
you want diversity funding? or; i only date black guys.
what do you want? a punch card? lack heartholes.
swerve ten gallon hat's scratching itch, eyefucking
crowded bars, all paw, claw, and saliva saccharine
on moustache, well poisoned to pitch. black boys;
do not engage musty needs. these men should not be
your friends. do not let them fuck you. fuck yourselves
instead. revel in aloneness, cold feather comforters,
your own fingers, meals for one. shun marble halls
claimed hallow: dustless, pure. they aren't—
don't deserve your dirty sacred nights, to rattle storm windows.
walls come down, glass smashed, moonlight, distorted,
dissolved by waxen moths. silk paper: devoured.

Truvada

Side effects include: mild diarrhea skin
rash stomach pain headache itching strange
dreams and in some cases changes in shape

and location of fat around the body:
your body tonight sings hollow,
dull metal, tastes as such. Basquiats
await frazzled crowns, sunken eyes
baseboard flat, deranged, fat
molecules rearranged.

Serious effects include: kidney failure
bone pain increased fracture risk
and new tendencies to breed, absorb
seed like cottonswab, like God's
flood intended, to reach wet equilibrium.
The ark can't hold us both. Be clean.
Bury shame like turtle eggs,
silt soft. Chug your bloody; ask I
slip it in raw, a drain.

That night my teeth fall out. Not at once,
in pieces, four half molars, decayed
fragments spat in hand. I'll wake,
rub tongue along jaw surprised
for hours I don't taste blood.

NSVs

A few years after my father Dennis' stroke, my roommate Jon asks me if I want to throw the ball around.

“Will you teach me?” I ask.

“How to throw a ball?” he says. Incredulity flashes across his blue eyes, his dark eyebrows rising while a smile tugs at his lips. There aren't a lot of 24-year-old men who don't know how to throw a ball. It's a rite of passage for so many young men, younger than me. I try not to read his look as amusement; I don't want my inability to amuse him. I don't want to be unable; I want to be able. I want to succeed. A graduate student should know how to throw a ball.

I think Jon knows how hard it is for me to ask for help. He's seen me walk away from games of Frisbee when I tossed the disk too short, when I felt incompetent. He knows that whenever I feel embarrassed, my short fuse is likely to give up, to spare myself red cheeks and hot face. I can't stand onlookers. I hate when they watch my body being faulty.

“I never really learned how to throw,” I admit.

“I'll teach you,” Jon says. His voice is reassuring. Jon is the youngest son of three boys. His parents could afford his hockey habit in high school; it helped develop his coordination and stamina. I'm the middle child, but both my siblings come from marriage. They are my step-father's children from his first wife. I am my mother's only son. I won't ever meet Dennis, the man who gives me half my genes; he will die next year from complications from his stroke at age 62. So, of course, we never play catch. Dennis' children tell me he was never quite the same after his stroke. I don't know what he was like before.

Jon and I take our pair of brand new mitts to the backyard, Jon with ball in hand. It's a warm spring day. We rent a small, one story house with a large backyard on the outskirts of our rural city in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The backyard houses a charred fire pit encircled by stones. A small forest of various trees marks the property line—thin white birches, grey barked oaks, sticky white pines, white ashes, and sugar maples. Our tall, unmowed grass feeds dozens of varieties of insects: mosquitoes, clouds of gnats, red aphids, black flies, deer flies, deer ticks, American burying beetles, dragonflies, and on tepid nights, luna moths and lightning bugs. Often deer bed down in the forest, even right outside our bedroom windows. Jon steps out through the sliding glass door and I follow, shoes crushing fragrant grass. I shuffle backwards until I decide I've reached the right distance to throw. Jon shoos me further back, gesturing with his long arms. I shuffle more. He waves again; I move back more and his features start to blur. Soon, all I can see are his dark hair and the shadow of his nose. I wonder if my pitch will reach him from here; I fear it won't.

*

In elementary school, I wore nothing but sweatpants and shorts. I didn't own denim, khaki, or corduroy, not even a pair of nylon shorts, cargo shorts, or chinos. But my older brother, a sixth grader, told me that you could tell a kid was fresh from elementary school by their sweatpants.

“So you better get a pair of jeans,” he said. I didn't want to stand out; I wanted to fit in. More than that, I wanted to fit seamlessly. I didn't want my classmates to notice I'd made the conscious change from elastic waistbands to constricting Levis. They might point it out and tell their friends. John's changed, they'd say. They'd see me in my new

pants in the lunch room or hallway. They might pry and ask why I'm wearing these clothes, why I look like this now, and I wouldn't know how to answer, because "Because everyone else does" or "My brother told me to" would mean I hadn't made the choice myself. I'd let others make it for me. By the end of the first day, would the talk around school be that John had changed his entire look just to fit in? What kind of person does that? Who needs validation that bad? Is he trying to look like us? What happened to his personality? Why do you think he lost himself? Who does he think he is? Does he even know?

It would be even worse, though, to remain in sweatpants throughout middle school. So the summer before fifth grade, my mom took me to Kohl's to find a new pair of pants for the school year. I tried on a few pairs of light blue Lee jeans with the zipper fly, the button, the brown patch on the back right hip advertising that I chose the cheapest brand. I took one pair into the changing room and slid them over my legs. The waist was tight; it wouldn't button. I strained to make the button reach the hole, but the material wouldn't give, couldn't stretch to fit my body.

"Let's see them," my mom said from behind the closed door. I walked out of the fitting room, faded pre-washed jeans still unbuttoned. "Let's try another size," she said. She returned to the rack, found a pair a size bigger, and handed them to me. I slipped them on. The button fastened, but it choked my waist. I could barely inhale. Opening the door, I waddled out and Mom tried to slide a finger into the waistband. "Too tight," she said, returning to the rack again and producing the next, larger pair, which fit well enough, the button fitting neatly in the hole.

Shopping before the school year became a tradition in middle and high school. Each year I would outgrow my old shoes, jeans, and shirts. Each year, my mom and I would travel to Wal-Mart or TJ Maxx and she would outfit me with a new pair of sneakers and jeans, a shirt or two, and reward me with a blue raspberry slurpee or a vanilla frappuccino.

*

In the minutes before our eighth grade English class starts, Chelsea tells our class she's got a trick.

"Did you know you can tell a gay person by their fingers?" she says. "My dad read it in a magazine. He's a doctor," she loves reminding us. Her dad reads lots of scientific journals; we hear this every day. "He's on the precipice of discovery," she says. The class crowds around her desk in the back corner, shoulders bumping, straining while she explains. I watch from my desk next to hers.

"Straight men have longer ring fingers. Straight women have longer index fingers," she says. As an example, she holds her long, white fingers, adorned with platinum rings, together in front of her like picket fence planks to show everyone how straight she is. Even from my seat, it's obvious; she's got the right ratios. "A person with inverted lengths is queer," she says. Actually, she says, "*queeeeer*," the hard Q and drawn out E, the word accusatory, poison in her mouth. She turns her hand so everyone can marvel in her demonstration, her perfect straightness.

As if hypnotized, each kid extends their hands in front of them, to learn their lengths, to show them off to each other. Twenty-four hands raise, and forty-eight eyes scrutinize. Even the classroom posters—Yoda browsing comics, Tony Hawk skating,

helmeted while reading—look from their walls, curious as we are. Who could miss a chance to spot the queer? Who knew it was this easy? My hand raises too, as if Chelsea’s compelling it, lifting it herself.

She reaches across the aisle and grabs my wrist.

“Ha, gay hand,” she says, jabbing a French manicured fingernail into my palm.

“It’s not,” I say. I tug my arm back and shove my hands into my denim pockets before anyone else can inspect. I don’t know if my hand is gay; I hadn’t had time to look myself. But I can’t check now, can’t risk anyone else seeing it and confirming my gay hand. And I don’t want to confirm it myself.

The teacher walks in late, and we continue our analysis of Elie Wiesel’s *Night*. But my focus all class is fingers, my inverted ratios. I try to peek at their lengths while the teacher calls students to read, laying them on my desk behind my book, but I feel every eye watching me, to catch me checking myself after Chelsea’s accusation. They want to watch self-doubt embed its roots in me. Chelsea eyes me all class too.

I spend the rest of the day examining my fingers. I hold them together flat on the lunch table, ignoring my pepperoni pizza. I hold them out in front of me in art class, caked in clay. Still gay. The top of my ring finger barely reaches the bottom of the nail on my index. On both hands. No matter how I angle them. By sixth period, the fingers still haven’t changed, and I ride the bus sitting on them, pressing them into the leather seats. By then, I had suspected I might not be straight, but it took until the finger ratio to seal it in my mind. I knew correlation was not causation; it is my attraction to men and not my fingers that determine my sexual orientation, but somehow this quantifiable fact of my

body solidified what I had only suspected. Being gay had left its biological fingerprints all over my body, and my long index finger was proof.

To keep my secret, I decide to avoid ring sizings, joining hands in prayer or séance, or any other activity that make my fingers visible. I will avoid it for the rest of my life. I can never get my palms read. My heart line and health line will remain encrypted, concealing hints of my future. I'll need to take precaution when waving, high-fiving, shaking hands. I want to slice my fingers off; they shed my secrets like skin cells, their lengths a whisper you might hear if tuned to the right frequency. I start holding my fingers curled, hands balled to fist, or holding each other, in case someone might look at them and interpret the runes.

*

“Ready?” Jon says. He throws the ball before I can respond. It soars through the air, rotating slightly as the air catches in the stitches, and it speeds toward me. It's a great, technical pitch. I stretch out my arm. My fingers pull the leather mitt open, but the ball falls several feet away and into the carpet of grass below. I shrug off the miss and grab the ball, now scarred with its first grass stain.

I expect embarrassment to crowd my mind and shut me down. But it doesn't; I feel comfortable being incapable with Jon. I know he won't pass judgment. Jon is a patient teacher; we'd become workout partners, and I had already asked him for help on my form while lifting, squatting, and curling. I couldn't ask anyone but him to help me learn this simple task. He'd held my ankles during sit-ups, and I'd held his. He critiqued my jogging form. “Chest out, shoulders back,” he'd say as we trucked along trails in woods near our house. “Shorter steps up hills. Keep up,” he'd huff. We'd seen each other

covered in sweat, armpits and backs damp, struggling to stay upright during the final miles of our runs together. We'd squawked "Spot!" at each other when the barbell grew too heavy to lift, when our arms started shaking, threatening to give out. He'd helped me learn to fail; I knew failure through him.

"Don't be afraid to run for it," he says, his baritone voice drowning out birdsong in the backyard.

"You either," I say, laughing. Both of us know he won't have to. His tall frame and long arms mean he can snatch a ball from a distance several feet from his core. And I don't expect my first pitch to be a zinger. I roll the ball in my bare hand, rubbing the cowhide exterior along my palm, feeling the red stitches protruding from its face, the smooth surface marred by the raised sutures. I touch the laces with my long index finger, and I grip the orb tight to prepare for the pitch.

*

By sixth grade, I am become aware of my body, its mass, the space it takes up. I fit differently into tight classroom desks, belly pressing fiberboard. I lag and huff behind my peers in gym, walking the last laps of warm-up each day. I stop trying to run, and start spending more time indoors playing video games. During one summer clothes shopping trip, I ask my mom if she knows why I am so big.

"You're not big. You're husky," she says, then changes the topic. "Are you excited for camp?" We walk through the activewear section and search for a new swimsuit and pair of sandals for our annual weekend trip to the family cabin. Despite the property's proximity—an hour drive from home—we only trek there once a year, when the extended family comes home. Huskiness runs in this side of my family; my aunts and uncles have

been watching their weights for years. Each year, it's a new system. Sometimes it works, like when my uncle dropped 40 pounds after a stomach surgery. My mom warned me about his appearance before his annual visit to our family cabin.

“He's going to look very different,” she said. And she was right. When I saw him, gaunt was the word in my mind, his wrist and cheek bones exposed, excess skin sagging from his neck and arms, greying hair wirier than I remembered. But the system never works for good in this family. The next year, my uncle would have gained nearly all of it back. He and his wife still follow Weight Watchers, counting their points as they watch their carbohydrate intake, but I haven't seen him look as thin as that day.

I need a new suit because I outgrew last year's, but none of the bright colored polyester trunks appeal to me. I let Mom pick one out, a bright blue pair.

“I trust your fashion sense,” I tell her. But I know I won't wear it; I am too self-conscious of my growing body to swim in the lake, to let me family and aunts and uncles see me shirtless, rolls folding across my belly, chest puffy, soft. Despite the lake's blue allure, I would not swim, would not expose my bloated stomach and skin marred by stretchmarks to my closest family members.

I had become aware of the changes of puberty as well. Hair sprouted from my forearms and legs, darker each day, and I started wearing longer sleeves and pants to cover them. They crept down my bicep, dandelion stems on the soft brown mound of my arm. I plucked them out each night by hand, blood dots pooling in moonlight, but every morning I'd find more, and choose a shirt with long sleeves, and sit in the back of the classroom and pull them out when the teacher turned away.

“Want to try them on?” she asks, flipping them around so I can see the design.

“No,” I say.

“You don’t like the color?” she asks, but she knows blue is my favorite. “Do you want a red pair, babe? Do you want a different design?”

“Let’s just go,” I say. “Please.” Trying on the swimsuit would expose my body, my hairy legs, to her. Embarrassed that I was no longer a boy but a man, I feared I would have to start doing mature things. I was nervous about the responsibilities my changing body would bring. Would other kids notice my hairy arms? Would their perceptions of me change? Would I have to start paying bills to my parents? Would they ask me for rent? Would my mom stop dressing me? Would I need to start dating? And how does dating work? How do you know when to kiss? Who to kiss? I didn't feel like a man, and I feared being treated like one.

*

I finally dare to throw the ball. I toss it underhand by instinct, my first misstep. Throwing underhand feels like it gives me more control over my own body. It has less strength but I can safely predict where the ball will travel. It drifts through the air across the yard; compared to Jon's pitch, it's a snail. Instinctively, I recoil at the bad pitch. Jon lurches forward, mitt open, and steps hard on one foot to catch the lob in the leather, then readjusts himself upright. He laughs; he wanted a real throw, the classic overhand pitch you’d see in televised baseball games. I want that pitch too—that's what I had in mind when I'd asked him to teach me—but the cruise control of my brain doesn't even consider an overhand toss. My body has never made that motion. Instinct says the underhand is safer.

“Try it like this,” he says, and pitches the ball back to me. His motion is fluid. His long arm rotates, swings up, then his back leg pops up like the players on TV, like he's receiving a passionate kiss. The ball leaves his hand and sails through the air, displacing a few mosquitoes who chose to mate here today; on its way to my side of the yard, it spins as gently as the globe, showing off each side, each stitch, the Wilson logo black on white cowhide.

I stretch my mitt, leather flared out, but the ball flies out of reach, soaring over my shoulder and diving to the earth, nesting in the grass like a rotund chickadee. I've failed my first pitch, and both catches. This is a game that children can play. As a grown man, I still can't handle the ball, can't throw it properly, or even catch it. I pluck it from the grass again. In my hand, the ball feels like a round explosive, and I'm afraid to hold too long in case it detonates and takes half my right arm with it, the shrapnel of cork and woven yarn embedding in my skull.

*

The words “throw like a girl” hum in my ear, and I fight the intrusive and misogynistic thought. I had heard it hundreds of times, from peers, films, books, television, cartoons, teachers, friends, parents of friends, my own parents, my own mother. “I run like a girl,” she has said. Or, “It'll make me scream like a girl.” Maybe the thought was theirs once, but now it is mine alone. The stereotype, like all stereotypes, is false and toxic. Plenty of women can throw better than me, and I know this. They're on professional teams. They are Olympians. They train their whole lives to throw like girls; they repeat the motion one thousand times. Ten thousand times. A million. “Like a girl”

doesn't mean anything because ability does not depend on gender, and I wish I could throw like those women.

But still, I wonder if my aversion to sports somehow correlates with my sexuality. Maybe faulty hand eye coordination and daddy issues are co-morbid. Maybe exposure to increased levels of estrogen in the womb affects an embryo's brain, how we develop, training us to love men, neutering our ability to slapshot or slam dunk. But, of course gay athletes have succeeded in every sport, competed in Olympic events. The 2016 summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro boasted the highest number of openly LGBT athletes; 64 out of 10,444. LGBT athletes participated in boxing, basketball, swimming, volleyball, soccer, rugby, field hockey, beach volleyball, handball, high jump, discus, badminton, kayak whitewater slalom, canoeing, judo, pole vault, taekwondo, road cycling, javelin, track and field, race walk, diving, equestrian, rowing, gymnastics, and the 800 meter run. I want to say "We are not disabled by sexuality." I want to group us together—myself with these athletes—because we are in the same group. We are all LGBT. Look what we've done, I want to say. But I have not achieved these things; they have. I cannot say these are my achievements; they're the achievements of the people with whom I happen to share a group. In 2016, LGBT athletes represented only 0.6% of the competitors, but their successes—the fact that they've "made it"—means it's not impossible for a *queeeeer* to compete alongside anyone else. If I have any inability, it is not my sexuality; it is mine alone.

*

Scientists and researchers have studied the biological, measurable, quantifiable differences between heterosexual and homosexual people. Evidence from a 2003 study

suggested homosexuals' hair whorls in a counterclockwise direction, while heterosexual hair whorls clockwise, supposed evidence of perhaps a “natural” way to be, a “right” and a “wrong,” visually and visibly betraying a secret of thousands of queer people worldwide. However, a 2009 study of 100 homosexual and 100 heterosexual men found no correlation between sexual orientation and direction of hair swirl.

This same study, however, did support an earlier correlation between birth order and homosexuality; the more older brothers a man has, the higher chance he identifies as homosexual later in his life, the theory that a woman's body sees a male baby as a foreign and masculine threat, and produces more estrogen to counteract the object, a habit it continues as more males form in her womb, resulting in many gay men with several elder brothers. But endocrinology is complicated, and we cannot determine the degree to which our brief time in the womb affects sexual orientation, and how much is determined after birth, or if those are even the right questions to ask.

I have two older brothers—one step-brother and one half-brother— but I am my mother's only son. Sometimes I wonder if Dennis' absence was a catalyst to my homosexuality. If I knew my real father, perhaps I wouldn't be gay. If my father and mother still loved each other like they did the night I was conceived, maybe I would be straight.

*

For years, I let my hair grow long and curly because I was afraid to cut it. I let my imagination about my peers' reactions control my behavior, my looks, my choices. I feared their response—any response—to getting my hair cut. I wasn't afraid that my haircut would look bad; I was afraid that people would say “Hey, something looks

different about you.” I was afraid of doing anything to draw attention to myself. A haircut certainly did that. So I didn't cut my hair. I didn't want anyone to notice me changing; I wanted to be constant, invariable, reliable. I wanted to be the sure thing, the sign that maybe not everything is destined to move, that maybe some things can stay gold forever. For me, this was my hair.

In seventh or eighth grade, I cut it. Then, for years, I didn't cut it. I let it grow throughout high school and college. Teachers would ask me to sweep my long, black curls out of my face. Classmates sitting behind me took joy in pulling it and letting it spring back to my scalp. One asked if she could cut a lock and save it. I let her. My hair became notorious at school, iconic. It haloed my head like a helmet. Students and parents could spot me in a crowd from across the bleachers. I started to get recognized around our small town, perhaps from my hair, but also because I was one of three black students in our high school of 350, in a small, rural town of 6,000. Black people made up 0.06% of the population, or a little over three and a half black people.

Around this time, I started getting confused for a woman. I'd be at the local Shopko, facing the shelves, when an employee would say “Excuse me, ma'am.” Or I'd be out to eat with my mom, and the waitress would say “What can I get for you ladies?”

“You may have just offended my son,” my mom would sometimes say. Sometimes I would speak and they would hear my voice and their faces would redden. Sometimes neither of us said anything. But the mis-gendering almost always embarrassed the mis-genderer. I did feel a little offended, but mostly I was confused. I'd started to sprout a thin, soft mustache—another feature I was afraid to cut, so I let it grow for too many years—so my face was not particularly feminine. Or, my moustache was so

feminine, they thought I was a woman with a moustache. My voice had started to deepen, although it is still not very deep today. But between my long hair and my overweight body, it was probably easy to see a chunky black woman with luscious hair shopping for Sour Patch Kids, rather than the seventeen-year-old male hiding behind a huge afro, trying to avoid being noticed.

*

It's my turn to throw again. I feel the ball in my ungloved hand, run my brown bare fingers over the laces, picking away at a string. For good luck, I think. I let go of my idea of a good pitch and just throw the thing, remembering it's explosive. I swing my arm backward and upward, and release the ball at the peak of the arc. My shoulder rolls, popping and protesting the unfamiliar movement. The ball rolls out of my palm and pops way too high—higher than the roof of our home—then falls too short, hitting the ground in front of Jon like a meteor. Jon chuckles, and I try to convince myself he's laughing with me, not at me. But I know how ridiculous I must look, trying so hard to toss a ball 25 feet, my face so serious and focused, my limbs flailing to mimic his pitch. I stretch. I pull my shoulders toward the center of my back. Pitching flexes a muscle in my back or shoulder I don't know I had, and after its debut use, my deltoid twitches like a strobe light, every nerve in my shoulder and in the right side of my back twinging, bristling. The signal to my brain says “Pain.” Stretching eases the discomfort, but when I exhale, pain settles back into the muscle, begging me to stretch more. I ignore it; now is not the time for weakness.

“Think of your arm like a trebuchet,” Jon instructs. I think about the piece of medieval machinery, its heavy, wooden brick of an arm, and I wonder what mechanism

makes it a perfect thrower. How does it know how to launch a projectile? Where does it get its leverage? How does it know the exact trajectory, how speed and angle combine to achieve a pitch so precise? What does it know what I do not? I imagine my arm a beam, all wood, my joints as rusty metal. The ball is a stone in the sling of my arm, and I channel medieval warfare. I hurl the ball. *Trebuchet, trebuchet.*

*

I visited our family doctor for a check-up in late high school. Between fifth and ninth grade, my shirt size went from a youth large to a large to an extra-large to a two-X, a size I would inhabit into college. At home, I was too afraid to step on the scale. At the doctor's office, I had no choice. I took off my shoes and stepped up on the frigid platform. A nurse slid the weight bar to a number; I've mentally blocked the number, but it must have read almost 250. That number must be recorded in a file somewhere in their office. At 5'9", it meant "morbidly obese," about 70 pounds above a normal weight. This was me at my largest. In photos from this time, I look large, cheeks round, chins multiple. Most of my facial expressions in the photos are mock pain, or silly grimaces, eyes crossed and mouth agape, feigning happiness. I rarely took a serious or smiling photograph at this age, opting for "goofy" instead. I thought, if I looked serious, then my problems would be serious. So I'd look goofy, and have no problems.

The nurse sat me down, and, after taking my vitals, listening to my heart and recording my temperature, she told me the doctor would be in shortly. The doctor was a middle-aged woman, brown-haired, brown-eyes, with cat's eye glasses and a golden cross necklace dangling from her pale neck. She asked me the usual questions. How have

I been feeling? Do I drink? How many in a week? Do I smoke? Do drugs? Not even marijuana? No, it's not a trick question. Am I sexually active? With whom? How often?

When I came out to her, her expression didn't change. Her cat eyes didn't look up from her clipboard, but she scribbled it down with her yellow pencil, cross swinging. My medical record now says “MSM” or “man who has sex with men.” My homosexuality lives alongside my heaviest weight in a file in their offices.

She told me, for my weight, height, and age, my blood sugar was too high, and I was at risk for “pre-diabetes,” a serious condition, but reversible with diet and exercise. My mother had already been diagnosed with Type 2, and I would be next, the doctor warned, if I didn't change. I needed diet. I needed exercise.

“And if you want to be healthy,” she said, “you better choose to be straight.” She told me the health risks of homosexuality—increased chance of contracting HIV, an increased rate of prostate cancer (although only four quantitative articles have ever been published on this topic, according to a 2016 study in *LGBT Health*). And if I wanted children, I needed to be straight, she said. “Children need both parents, a mom and a dad.” The word “choose” made no sense. I didn't choose to be gay as much as she chose to be straight. I couldn't control my attraction to men; there was nothing conscious, no choice to be made, and besides, why couldn't I be a mom? I often cursed my homosexuality, praying at nights that I wake up straight, because life might be easier. Not just for health benefits. I wouldn't need to adopt or grow a baby in a test tube. No one could call me Faggot, and I wouldn't need to come out; I could fit in. If I were straight, everything would be seamless.

That night, determined to lose weight, I drank half a glass of orange juice for dinner, my mother knocking at the door once to ask if I was okay, if I needed anything.

*

In college, during an all-dorm mixer, a room of fifty students and I drink putrid cherry punch in a cookie-cutter dormitory lobby. It's only five p.m. but night seeps through the windows this time of year, the windows black holes, absorbing fluorescent light. I came to the mixer to meet new people, future friends, to maybe find someone with shared interests. I sit on uncomfortable, tacky furniture that feels like cardboard covered in cloth while a bowl of candy travels around the room to each person who participates, saying their name and major, and why they're in college.

When the bowl arrives at me, I jump into my introduction. I say I study English.

"I hoped to study words, how they work. Their gravity," I say. "their magic. Their ability to bring anyone anywhere, to describe anything. Words matter," I say. "I believe in them, and their power." Then I take a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup. Impressed with my composure while speaking in public, I pass the bowl and run through what I've just said over and over in my mind. I sounded confident, I think. Not a downer. Mature, even intelligent. Friend material.

Then we break into small groups for an activity, and a resident adviser groups me with two other boys, each outfitted in Adidas, each hat backwards. They look like clones—the same square jaws, the same blue eyes, as cookie-cutter as the lobby. We are handed a list of twelve celebrities—Mother Theresa, Michael Jordan, Steve Jobs, Thomas Edison, Abraham Lincoln, Florence Nightingale—and told they are all on a boat which

will sink unless we throw five of them overboard. Our assignment is to agree who to throw, in order to save the rest. It's an experiment in ethics.

In our small groups, we reintroduce ourselves.

"I'm TJ, here for business management," says one. "I'm gonna own a business like my dad."

"Hospitality management," says the other, Rick, dip of tobacco in his lip. "I wanna own a resort." He spits into a Gatorade bottle. I re-introduce myself to the boys. When I start speaking, they share a glance. I sense they know each other, perhaps came together. They mirror each other's body language, sitting slouched with legs apart. I finish speaking.

"You talk like a girl," says TJ, and I can feel blood rising, hot in my face. They notice this too. I could not help but feel slighted, and they knew this. I was not out of the closet. Not to these boys, not to any friends. I'm not sure what they perceived in me that announced non-heteronormativity. But this rooted it out and attacked.

"Are you a queer?" asks Rick, pursed lips spitting into his bottle again. "You a sissy?"

"No," I lie. I don't want to answer, but I do. I don't want to engage; I want to finish the activity and go back to my dorm. I don't know why I stay, and I don't know why I answer. The rest of the room chitters. People meet new friends and swap contact information. They laugh about drowning Gandhi over Rosa Parks. I sit in uncomfortable silence, trying to conjure words that let me escape this interaction; the words don't come, so I stand up to throw away my candy wrapper, and planning to leave.

“Ha, you even walk like a girl,” says one of the boys. I’m not sure what offends me about their observation. Women are beautiful when they talk and walk. Perhaps it’s my fragile masculinity that feels wounded—not the fact that I apparently perform the feminine gender role, but that I do not or cannot fit the masculine one, despite my physical sex. Not that a feminine cadence or saunter carries inherently negative traits, but that I was outside the prescribed binary.

As a male, everything I do is “like a male,” and I know that. Nothing escaping my male mouth could be female, right? No matter how I walk, I’m a male walking. I try hard to ignore their injurious claims, but I still remember it seven years later.

They wouldn’t jeer a woman for walking or talking “like a girl,” but when a male adopts feminine characteristics, he fractures the binary. Still, I resolve that week to sound more masculine, to un-lisp my esses. In classes, I drop my voice an octave. I walk less with my hips and more with my chest, to make sure I don’t sway. For some reason, I change myself for those boys—I intentionally do not say men here. They weren’t. I don’t know how I was before them, and I don’t know if I can go back. Back in my dorm, I bury my face in my pillow and fall asleep.

*

My trebuchet is short again, and Jon runs to get it. Three throws, and not a single successful one. Three strikes, I think. I want to yell “Yer outta here” to myself. I want to give up, to stop this shameful display. But I also know it’s too early to call myself done. We’d only been out for five minutes. Quitting now would be more embarrassing, somehow, than never achieving a good pitch.

“Try planting your back foot when you throw,” Jon says. “You can get more force behind your pitch.” He demonstrates the motion, swinging his arm back, rotating his shoulder, then kicking up his back leg. I picture my leg like a spring, and try to mimic his movements, my limbs acting as counterweights.

“And make sure you follow through,” he says.

“What does that mean?” I say. He thinks how to rephrase in a way I'll understand. After a beat, he finds the words.

“Let your arm swing after you let go of the ball.”

Jon retrieves the ball and pitches it back. It launches from his bare hand, right toward where I'm standing. I could catch it. I know I could. But I don't start chasing soon enough. Instead, I stumble backwards toward it late and it flies over my head. I pick it out of the lawn with my left hand mitt. I think about a catapult as I drop my right arm behind my hip like loose rope. My shoulder tenses and I lift my arm back and above my head, and slingshot the ball toward Jon's open mitt.

*

I downloaded a calorie counting app for my phone. I logged each food, each meal, each snack, even drink, in the food diary. I did it for a year. Pattern developed. If you burn more calories than you eat, you will lose weight. For every 3000 calories you burn or don't eat, you'll lose roughly one pound of fat. That means, if you operate at a deficit of 100 calories a day, you'll lose one pound in a month. Cut 200 calories a day and you'll lose two pounds in that month instead.

The first food to go was sugary drinks. I dumped out liters of soda—Pepsi, Sprite, Dr. Pepper— cartons of juice cocktail,—apple, orange grape—and nearly a gallon of

sweet green tea. I realized I ate too much at each meal. I'd cook an entire frozen pizza and eat it for dinner. 1440 calories. I'd chug three cans of soda a day. 450 calories. I did not know what a serving size looked like; I ate two servings of cereal for breakfast, 254 calories instead of 127. Overeating was so easy.

And I learned how bad calorie dense foods were for me. I learned that 200 calories is barely two-thirds of a Snickers. It's just fourteen potato chips, or a little over one Pepsi. None of these would fill me for longer than fifteen minutes. Instead, I could budget those calories for a giant salad with all the fixings: romaine with juicy cherry tomatoes, a generous sprinkle of sunflower seeds, slices of earthy mushrooms, fresh bell peppers, and enough ham to get a salty piece in every bite, with a handful of baby carrots on the side, and a tall glass of water. A salad isn't "good for you" because vegetables are some magic panacea for losing weight. They take up more space in your stomach. They fill you.

Eventually, I learned how to make my body shed fat; I counted kilocalories and learned the macronutrients—the difference between a carbohydrate, a fat, and a protein, and how the body processes each. I tightened my belt as my waistline lost inches; I bought myself new pants, from size 40 to 38 to 34. At night, I laid on my back and rubbed my hands over my shrinking belly, across newly revealed ribs visible only while prostrate. Sometimes my stomach growled. I learned how to stop listening. And I watched the scale's needle struggle to hit 200. Then, it couldn't reach 190. I remember the night, the room—the bathroom—tiny, windowless, yellow and fluorescent. I remember the grating sound of the vent fan, grinding above my head, how I stepped on and off to scale over and over again, watching the needle swing up to 198, then 0, then

198 again. I remember how I sat down on the toilet and cried. I knew the number was not an indicator of my health, but it was so unfamiliar. I'd never seen the scale say less than 200. I expected to wake up the next morning 60 pounds heavier, as if running and lifting and measuring cups had been an exhausting, hungry dream.

*

At 23, John and I agreed to be work-out partners, to keep each other accountable, to wake each other up at dawn to jog, lift, count each other's push-ups and sit-ups. I was surprised by what I discovered my body could do. It could run three miles at a time. It could lift heavier and heavier objects each week. Jon could lift more than me, and faster. He counted to ten before I got to six.

But I caught up. And then he jumped ahead, adding more weight, pushing faster. I caught up again. Muscles began to emerge on my arms, my leg, pectorals on my formerly flabby chest. I showed him where I liked to jog, and encouraged him—his frame larger than mine—to keep up and maintain speed in the third, fourth, fifth mile. I knew I could be his motivation because he was mine. We were tethered together, because we each knew each other could do better. On the weight bench, he taught me perfect form of presses, counted reps and spotted for me, helped me learn skullcrushers for my triceps, bicycle kicks for my abdominal muscles, and squats for my quadriceps, my thighs, calves, and gluts. Together, we pulled up, pushed up, sat up. We made progress with each other, counting to higher and higher numbers, lifting heavier bars, beating our own fastest miles. Until then, I'd resigned myself to terms like “husky,” as if my big bones were something genetic, something my mother and father had bestowed upon me, a predestination of stockiness.

*

In September 2017, scientists at Stanford University claimed they had taught artificial intelligence how to determine if a person was gay or straight based on facial structure alone. Researchers said gay men were more likely to have a narrower jaw and longer noses; gay women had larger jaws. The AI was able to identify gay men 81% of the time, and gay women 71% of the time. The researchers pulled photos and sexual orientations from online dating profiles. The algorithm studied 14,000 white faces; other races' faces were not represented widely enough for their dataset. When LGBT civil rights groups GLAAD and HRC decried the study as both junk science, and also as “reckless” and “a weapon” against both gay people and misidentified heterosexuals, the researchers responded by saying they only developed the technology as a warning sign. They accused the “well-meaning lawyers” of trying to debunk good science, but warned that their findings, if correct, “should be urgently addressed by technology companies, policymakers, and the public.”

Internet commenters were incensed. They imagined a future in which automated robots could hunt down homosexuals by facial analysis alone, a video camera strapped to a motorized killbot that might exterminate our people. It's a scary, but unlikely future. However, with the publication of this study and the development of this algorithm, it is increasingly likely. All it takes is one person with the will, the means, the technology. We now know it's not impossible.

Gay men are hunted and arrested and imprisoned in several countries today. In February 2017, sources reported that over 100 gay men were being held in secret prisons— what human rights advocates are calling concentration camps—by the Chechen

government. Police and military invite men on dates, record their conversations, then blackmail the men with those recordings. Their phones are searched for explicit, incriminating messages and photos. Police have encouraged parents to perform “honor killings” if they suspect their children are gay. Family members have turned in their own gay sons and brothers to the police for tarnishing the family names. The Head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, claims there are no gay people in Chechnya. The journalist who broke the story has gone into hiding.

In August 2017, a pop singer named Zelimkhan Bakaev left Moscow, where he lived, to attend his sister’s wedding in Chechnya. He never made it to the celebration, and, as of November 2017, he is still missing, feared kidnapped by human rights advocates. He was never publicly out, but was unmarried. In late September, two videos of Bakaev emerged on YouTube. In one twenty-eight second video, he dances near a couch and smokes from a hookah; his mother has noted several strange facts about the video, including the Chechen architecture, his sloppy haircut, and his weight loss. She believes he was forced to film the videos; he has not been in contact with his family.

In October 2017, Egyptian police arrested 65 people who attended a concert after images emerged on social media of a rainbow flag raised at a Mashrou’ Leila concert these men had attended in Cairo. The lead singer of the Beirut-based band is openly gay. Dozens of the arrested have been put on trial, and the band has been banned from the country for its “abnormal art.” Detainees are subjected to anal probes, what Human Rights Watch says amounts to “torture.” We don't have to wait for the killbot; the threat of being hunted is already here. Our own faces betray us and I don't know what mask I should wear.

*

Some days, I hear my step-father's voice come from my mouth when I tell my roommates to clean around the house, when I beseech them to wipe down the bathroom sink ("It takes two minutes, boys"). My disbelief is his disbelief. His values are mine too. When I spend the day alone cleaning the house, I mirror his days off. I remember coming home to a house that smelled like Lysol and freshly vacuumed carpet finally free from dog hair and cookie crumbs. I knew he'd skipped work when the house was clean. Now, my roommates come home to the scent of Lysol and an out of season candle, Holly Berry in the spring and Apple Pie Spice in July. We share no blood, but each day, our non-genetic bond pulls us closer. His impact on my psyche is made manifest as I grow older, closer to his age when he met me and my mother.

But then there are aspects of me I do not recognize in him, parts that are not my mother, and I wonder how much of me comes from Dennis, my biological father, the man I never met. When my fuse shortens and my temper flares, is that him? When I got detention at school for punching Devin C. in his glasses, bloodying his face for calling me King Kong, was that him? My mother said she didn't raise me to act like that. Did he? When I feel the urge to tattoo my body, to pay a man to stick me with ink and needles, is that him? When I drop a man after two dates, is it him? And my inability to throw this baseball—is it his muscles in my arms? His nearsightedness corrected by my contact lenses? His large teeth rotting in my jaw? His clogged pores in my nose? Was it his voice in my mouth in those moments I said I hated my mother and step-father, his venom on my tongue when I berated them for not paying my way through college? Are his hands writing this essay? I want to take responsibility for my own actions, but the question of

nature versus nurture still plucks at our brains—mine, and, by extension, his—how much do we share with our parents, even when they're absent? How much of us comes from their absences, the negative spaces where they're meant to be?

*

Weight loss communities celebrate non-scale victories—NSVs. These are moments in your life when you realized you've lost weight aside from the number on the scale. Buckling your belt a notch tighter is an NSV. Running into a high school friend who says “Wow, you look thinner,” is an NSV. NSVs are important because they make sure you remember losing weight is not just about one number, which is often an inaccurate indicator of health. There are reasons to lose weight besides a lower number on your scale. There are other ways to measure your health.

I had several NSVs. I still haven't left my hometown, so I've frequently seen old classmates while I've been in various states of change, various weights as I remind myself not to snack, as I order water instead of soda. They are always amazed at my transformation. My default response is “I've been trying,” or “I'm working on it.” I want to stay humble, because it still does not feel real. I fear saying “Thanks, I feel great” might balloon me back to 250.

I kept a food diary. I did not keep a diary of NSVs, but I still remember each one. Every time I sized down in jeans or shirt or shoe, every time an old acquaintance noticed my shrinking gut, my arm muscles and chest muscles becoming more toned, more defined, every time I looked in the mirror and noticed my thinning face—each NSV was the best moment of my life, until the next one came and dethroned it. I've had hundreds of best days of my life. Many of them happened in a row. I've lost count, but I keep them

all close: every compliment, every surprised look from old friends, the parade of numbers—lower and lower, then lower, still—marking my shrinking waistline, each time I donated old pants and shirts to thrift stores, each time a coworker has said “John, you're a small guy, you can squeeze through,” each time I bought a smaller shirt, the first time I wore a large, the first time I wore a medium, the first time I tried on a small. I'm small, now. I'm small. From extra-extra large. I feel like the word Small doesn't fit my body. I fear the day I slip, eating an entire pantry of food in one night, every slice of bread and frozen pizza, all the cheese in the fridge, and I will wake up and no longer be small, but extra-extra-extra-extra. But today, right now, I am wearing a shirt and the tag says small and for once I can somehow believe it.

*

I'm no longer trying to lose weight. I'm trying to gain it. Now that I'm fitter, I'm focusing on my muscles, on becoming bigger and stronger. Muscle weighs more than fat, so putting on pounds is okay. I've lost all the weight I need to. I'm not trying to be the smallest. I want to be the strongest because I can't afford to be weak. Sometimes men like me are detained by governments. We are attacked by boys like the ones from college who told me I walk like a girl. Sometimes the attacks are physical. I need to know how to hold my own. I want to learn how to swing a bat, to save myself.

Jon whips the ball back. I catch it in my mitt with a satisfying thump. The velocity surprises me, and the ball hits bone, my metacarpal where my finger meets my palm; the impact bruises through my mitt. I shake my hand and roll my wrist, eight small bones like robins' eggs. The soreness in my back blooms across my back and shoulder. Lactic acid

sours my cells. Discomfort creeps like vines, urging—daring—me to stretch to relieve the pain. I roll my shoulders; tendons pop.

“Put your fingers along the laces,” Jon advises, demonstrating a peace sign with his fingers. “Let them guide your hand as the ball rolls.”

I try to remember all the advice Jon's given on how my body needs to move, to look, to feel to throw properly. Leg planted, kicking up for force, follow through, watch how I, fingers on laces, let it roll, look right here, arm a trebuchet, loose like rope, follow through, follow through, and don't be afraid to run. I try another pitch. It sails faster this time. Jon's eyes widen and shift as they track the moving target—the fastest pitch yet—and he snatches it out of the air.

“There ya go,” he says. It feels good to impress him. More than that, it feels good to accomplish the task. It feels good to win, even a victory this small. I feel like I've validated us both today. This has not been a waste of time, because our progress is measurable. We couldn't. Now, we can. One good pitch. Count it, tally it, mark it. One. It's no longer impossible. We both feel good because we both succeeded today. We throw the ball back and forth a few more times, until the sun sets below the treeline, shadows lengthening like legs outstretched. I make a few good pitches, and even more good catches. For a minute, we hit a rhythm, and neither of us drop the ball for a few pitches. A brisk chill cools the spring air. I see my own breath when Jon suggests we retreat inside. We won't have a chance to throw the ball again that year; between moving to a new house downtown with no yard, Jon starting at a new job, and me returning to school, we will become too busy for ball. But the soreness in my palm will last for days,

an invisible bruise, a memento of our non-scale victory. The mitts will seem far away,
frozen as if behind tempered museum glass, airless as a specter.

I'm the whitest black guy at school

or sometimes “ever” because I don’t remind my classmates of the black people they’d seen on TV and in movies, because I was the only black person they knew in real life, and so why should they assume I’m genuine when Hollywood is gospel and I am simulacrum, a falsehood? If I don’t carry a gun, am I not black? If I’m not a crackhead, am I not black? If I’m redbone, am I not black? If I am half-white, am I not black? If I am well-spoken, am I not black? If I don’t speak in slang, am I not black? If I don’t want blunts and big booty bitches, am I not black? And if I do want, why can’t I want, like the Invisible Man’s yam, why can’t we both happen to be black? And aren’t I that guy who worked at Pizza Hut? No I am not. And aren’t I that guy who was in my accounting class? No I am not. No. I am not. If I am black, I must attend university, because what else is a black person doing in Upper Michigan? That’s why any black person would be here, of course. And he says where are you from? And when I say here. And he says, no, where are you really from? A black kid growing up twenty minutes from here is impossible. And if I am black, I am possible, and if I’m black, will you make me forbidden fruit? Daddy issues? If I am black, I must be a fast runner. I run. It’s necessity. I need to feel my knees ache, my feet against the ground, need to haul my body forward, need sweat, need stitch tearing down my side, need mass gasp cry and sweat, need to swallow it, spit back out, need stumble toward water, I need to let water drip down my chin and chest, I need armpits soaked, I need to hate myself, I need this, and when it feels like my heart sings a bright aria, sings *You will limp tomorrow*, writes lyrics on tendons, carved in cartilage, etched bones, and when I'm drenched, when I feel like I can’t possible go on, I do. I go on because I feel more when I shrink. I make less of myself with each

breath, less being, less mass, less me. Less a man who once retreated, less man frozen by war spears heat. And if I shrink maybe you won't see me, and if I shrink, maybe I can't be hit, and if I run, the body camera won't capture my face, and if I run, it is not because I am black, but because I am still alive and I am black.

today at lunch danez smith says nigga

and no one laughs but me. i don't know why i laugh. maybe being black is funny, our inside joke that begins with kindergarten bullies and ends with your hands in the air at in a traffic stop unsure what to say, afraid to say anything in case the anything you end up saying ends up being the wrong anything and you end up dead, bleeding out from your ear, your eye, your nose, your heart, your heart, your heart, your teeth sunk into the backfat of the curb. it's not haha funny. or maybe I am afraid no one else catches it because they say it so quickly, nigga, even though somehow our small town has conjured four black people inside one cafe and i never hear the word in real life so i laugh to let them know i heard as the word vibrated across black coffee pots and clinking teaspoons, that it caught and hung in the string of lights above. but i think a slight glance, shift of eye or lip or voice, says laughter is not the appropriate response to their story, whether tickle, insult, or good tea. even though i've been black all my life it sometimes always feels new, learning where to appropriately laugh at nigga, and when nigga means you're serious, deadass, straight, as if my half-white ass could ever be a real nigga, to know the genuine place for nigga, the ideal location in a sentence for nigga, could ever take the prescriptivist approach toward nigga, to divine the grammar of nigga, to be entrusted with the word nigga. my sophomore year, on a bathroom stall, someone writes "John is a nigger," and underneath someone else carves "I agree" as if it were up for them to decide. as if it were up for debate. i don't tell anyone about the graffiti but it disappears after christmas, the evergreen paint sanded to hazy mint, ground to bits then painted over, as if color spoke louder than words

Hemophilia: Of Blood, Sweat, Semen, & Other Body Fluids

On a July afternoon in 1828, Flag Lieutenant Robert FitzRoy, the 23-year-old son of English aristocrats, stood aboard the deck of the HMS *Beagle* alongside Captain Pringle Stokes. After nearly two years at sea together, and surviving through a bitter winter navigating the Straits of Magellan, the men shared a sigh, staring into the sapphire saltwater of the Tierra del Fuego archipelago. The South American hillsides were verdant and alive, the mountains capped with snow. But while FitzRoy saw the beginning of a long adventure, he could never know what Stokes saw: two more long years at sea, no way back home to Surrey in southern England. No escape. Stokes had agreed to captain the *Beagle* on its first voyage; however, when the journey proved treacherous and desolate and lonely, Stokes fell into a depression.

That night, Stokes closed the door to his captain's cabin and locked the door. By mid-morning, he'd still not emerged. Usually an early riser, FitzRoy was surprised when Stokes missed breakfast, and the crew worried. After navigating the morning through the archipelago sans captain, FitzRoy headed below deck. Crouching, he descended down the hallway to find the captain's door still locked. He knocked. No answer. He tried again and no answer. The crew was leaderless, but experienced; they finished the day without him.

That evening, FitzRoy tried to rouse Stokes from his room again. He'd talked to onboard doctors, though it was unlike Stokes to be seasick. He tried to talk with him through the heavy wooden door, asked other men to try the same, even asked one of the boys to try picking the iron lock, all with no success. After several minutes, he gave up, retiring to his own room for the night, where he dreamed about a terrible storm, miles of

clouded sky, the scent of expiring fish, the wind carving through albatross wings, lifting him up and out of the boat, and then back down and into the water below.

*

Mom baptized me Catholic, but only so Grandma wouldn't have a conniption. I don't remember this; I was less than one year old, and had no say in my dive into holy water, no voice to protest my plunge. My mother is not a believer. But my grandmother's teachings howled in her ear. Unbaptized infants go to purgatory; if they grow to be unbaptized adults, they go to Hell. So Mom drove us to the nearest St. Louis or St. Peter or St. Michael or St. Christopher's and allowed the priest to hold my tiny body above a blessed font, to say the words he needed to say, to let the light from stained glass refract onto my new skin, and to bathe me in the waters he'd blessed himself.

My parents never took me to church or Sunday school, never taught me scripture or verses or sins or forgiveness. My earliest knowledge of “my” religion came from after school TV specials and from the whisperings of friends whose parents dragged them to church each week. Apparently, we were all created in seven days. Then there was a garden, a snake, an ark. We owe everything to a man who died for our sins, said my friends. Wasn't I friends with Jesus? I started telling kids I was Catholic; it helped me make friends.

My grandmother clung to the Catholic tradition under which she was raised. Grandma had my mom when she was 40—the church strictly forbids birth control. Even condoms go against God's plan; if he wanted you to have sex, it was for procreation, and latex interfered with this plan. Catholics believe the only two factors that determine your eternal salvation are a quick dip in the baptismal font and the confession of every sin.

Somehow, the Catholic God doesn't care about the frequency, quantity, or severity of the sins committed here on Earth, as long as you repent before you die.

Our family celebrated Christmas and Easter, but I wouldn't learn the religious meaning behind holidays until much later. Christmas was never a birthday; Easter wasn't about Him rising from death. Instead, we celebrated the extra-long weekend, strings of sparkling lights. We celebrated glimmering ornaments, our sometimes fake tree, my mother's cooking, turkey with trimmings, the earthy scent of celery and carrots cut for stuffing, my father serving ham and pineapple and jello pudding. We celebrated my brother's fork shearing off a slice of canned cranberry sauce, my sister's spoon scooping mashed potatoes, the shared meal on the good china, plastic fake grass, rabbit-shaped chocolate, and sticky jellybeans. We held to these traditions. They weren't religious, but they were ours.

*

By late July 1828, the *Beagle* had reached Port Famine, on the north shore of the Strait, and Stokes had spent two weeks locked inside his cabin by himself. FitzRoy had heard the whispers of mutiny, of someone taking the helm while the absent captain composed himself. He'd even heard rumor from one of the cooks that FitzRoy himself had been suggested as the new captain, his intuition solid and blood royal. But he shoved the idea from his mind. He had learned a lot about the ship in the two years spent sailing, but he didn't yet consider himself captain material. His focus had been hydrography—charting and taming the murky depths of the salty sea, the curves of shores and ocean floors, way tides moved in and out like lungs each day. And besides, the ship still had a

captain, and FitzRoy wouldn't dishonor the man whose lead had saved their lives a dozen or more times.

Still, any effort to speak to Stokes during those two weeks was met with dumb silence. FitzRoy tried each day for the first six, then he stopped trying. The steward said he thought he'd heard someone walking in the room through the door. The boatswain thought he might have seen someone Stokes' height in the kitchen late one night, but couldn't confirm it was him. The crew had grown used to life without a captain. They slept, woke, bathed, cooked, ate, sailed, sang, reckoned, slept, dreamed, sailed, loved, woke, slept, woke, worked without him. They never mutinied; they waited for their captain, but Stokes would never open the door.

On August 1, 1828, Stokes put his pocket pistol in his mouth and pulled the trigger. A lieutenant heard the shot and told the rest of the crew. With the help of the carpenters, they managed to pry open the door. Inside, they found Stokes bleeding out, a hole in the roof of his mouth. With the ball of lead still embedded in his skull, Stokes remained coherent for almost eleven days before succumbing to gangrene.

*

At ten years old, I convinced my mother and step-father to take me to a Christmas Eve midnight Mass. Through my Catholic friends at school, I'd learned the true meaning of Christmas. It wasn't about buying the latest video game console; it was a birthday. Something about the idea of gathering in a holy place appealed to me that night. The nice clothes, singing hymns, camaraderie, peace on Earth, the colorful stained glass, velvety red carpet and golden pews, the thin, crispy Bible pages I'd only ever flipped through at a

family friend's funeral, or a cousin's wedding. It might have been the first religious service I attended. We didn't own a bible.

That night, my folks dressed in their Monday best, pinstripes, slacks and smart flats, a couple of neckties for the boys. They must have been stumped but supportive of my spiritual rebirth, wondering when the other had suggested this late Mass to me. As a family, we set off to find a church, eyeing each fluorescent cross from car windows, Dad trying to determine which midnight service might finish the earliest. My mom suggested the nearest oratory.

We entered an unfamiliar church. I sat on the oak pew and opened the hymn book in front of me. I didn't know any of the songs, and when we had to stand and sing, I mouthed the words. My parents did too. Halfway through, my father's stomach grumbled; a woman in a large hat turned to glare at the stomach that dared to protest during Mass. Together, we suffered through the hour-long liturgy. The priest's words didn't impress me. In fact, I don't remember a single one. But I do remember the joy of stealing away for a minute, splashing around in a stone font of murky holy water full of soggy dead leaf fragments and rotting maple tree samaras.

I've never talked to God. I do recall spending some number of nights as a child on my knees praying by my bed. I'd seen the maneuver in TV shows; to get what you want out of the Big Man, you've gotta clasp your hands and kneel by a bed. Orange streetlight strained through my dark bedroom window, and I put my forehead to my hands and mouthed the words I needed Him to hear. I never prayed for the safety of my family, but for new toys, or to get myself out of detention. I prayed for shorter days and longer weekends. I prayed that we'd play dodgeball in gym tomorrow. They were greedy

prayers. Sometimes, I tried whispering my prayer, but I didn't know whether that worked. I held my hands so close to my forehead, closed my eyes so hard that luminescent auroras danced behind my eyelids, and I wished and wished so loudly to myself. God never answered. My prayers somehow never came true. Had I not been pious enough? Was God busy with more important prayers, from starving Ethiopians, from those fighting civil wars in the Congo, Albania, hyperinflation in Zimbabwe? Didn't He see, I was going to church? That I went at least once? Didn't he know I deserved his attention?

*

FitzRoy would oversee many modifications to the *Beagle* before its second voyage in 1831. He'd been selected as the new captain following Stokes' suicide, and had several specifications before taking the ship back in the ocean. He ordered the exterior copper refinished, polished and shining. He had the upper deck replanked, and even paid out of his own pocket to replace the iron cannons with brass, for more accurate surveying, their invisible magnetic tug interfering with sensitive equipment. He ordered the deck to be elevated eight inches to allow more headroom below, which some sailors reported even helped stabilize the ship while at sea.

While the second voyage grew closer, FitzRoy grew anxious; excited to sail again, especially with his new position, he knew he could avoid some mistakes Stokes made. For one, he would make sure to include crewmembers who shared interests, so that everyone would have at least one person to talk to, to stave off loneliness. But FitzRoy also dreaded sharing the same room as Stokes. He didn't believe in ghosts—he was a staunch Christian man and knew suicide meant Stokes' soul was damned in Hell—but to revisit the captain's cabin felt morbid, almost perverse. By then, the blood had been

washed away, or had evaporated, but FitzRoy wondered how much had soaked into the planks, how much lingered in the air, and how much blood he might lose himself in that cabin on this voyage.

*

When I asked my father what he believed in, if he believed in God, he grumbled. The question must have thrown him off guard. I was maybe thirteen, and we had never talked about God before. He had eschewed the sanctity of “‘til death do us part,” divorcing his first wife and marrying my mom when I was six. We moved in with him and his two children, my step-siblings. In polite conversation, I drop the step. I call him Dad because he is. We share no blood.

Sometimes we feel like we are two unsynchronized frequencies; he towers above me in height and in wavelength. He’s closer to his own son, who, unlike myself, would survive through Boy Scouts, cared more fishing and women than his classes, and although my brother more closely resembled the ex-wife in facial structure, both men are lanky with long limbs, and they both reach over six feet tall. They both prefer Miller Lite, both exhibit the same road rage.

Dad exhales through his nose. “I don’t really believe in one true God,” he says after a beat, drumming his large hands on the wheel, eyes still on the road. “I don’t believe in Jesus, in the Father or the Son, or any of that stuff. But I do believe in a force or a power or something out there. There’s something out there,” he says again, unblinking. Sometimes he felt like God, a power of force and mercy and salvation. He married a single mother. He raised a child who was not his own. He would send our

family dogs to Heaven—sleeping pills in American cheese, or a heavy blanket of carbon monoxide—the only times I’ve ever seen him cry.

*

The August before embarking on the *Beagle's* second voyage, FitzRoy asked a fellow hydrographer for advice about taking a travel companion to sea. He knew the loneliness and isolation of the sea, and sought to travel with someone who shared his passion for science, who could use the voyage for research, who he could call a friend for the five-year journey. FitzRoy found a young Cambridge graduate student named Charles Darwin to fill the position.

In December of 1831, Captain Robert FitzRoy—now scientist and officer in the Royal Navy—set off in the HMS *Beagle* on its famous second voyage. But the position of power would haunt him. FitzRoy's uncle, Viscount Castlereagh, a government office worker in Liverpool, had ended his own life, one year after his father's own suicide in 1821. Castlereagh suffered from delusions and paranoia. During a meeting with King George IV, Castlereagh reportedly acted distracted or disturbed, and admitted that he believed someone was trying to blackmail him for homosexuality. The punishment for buggery and sodomy was death. Three days later, his wife had removed all razors from the house. But she forgot one pen knife, and when she left him alone for four minutes, he dragged it through his throat.

*

I tried to give blood twice in high school, the first during a Halloween blood drive. I chose to donate because a poster featuring a vampire was clever. The blood donation process began in the gymnasium with a questionnaire. Anyone aged 16 or older

could donate, learn their blood type, and get fed apple juice and chocolate chip and oatmeal raisin cookies.

“Just a few easy questions about your history,” said the nurse after pricking my finger to check my iron, her features round and soft, her hair the color of cocoa. She and the team of nurses would pull blood from dozens of young bodies and stash it in specialized coolers, taking them back to the hospital 20 minutes east to be tested for further diseases, medications or other disqualifying pollutants. The blood would be stored and used locally for transfusions.

The nurse handed me the questionnaire.

Are you feeling well today? Yes.

Are you currently taking any antibiotics? No.

Have you donated blood or plasma in the past six weeks? No.

Female donors: Are you pregnant? n/a

In the past 48 hours, have you:

Taken aspirin? No.

In the past 8 weeks have you:

Donated blood, plasma, or platelets? No.

Received a vaccination? No.

Been in contact with someone who has received the smallpox vaccination? I don't think so.

In the past 12 months have you:

Had a blood transfusion? No.

Come into contact with anyone else's blood. No.

Had a tattoo? No.

Had a piercing? No.

Have you ever:

Been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS? No.

Had malaria? No.

Had hepatitis? No.

Been to Africa? No.

Been in sexual contact with someone from Africa? No.

Used intravenous drugs? No.

Male donors: have you ever had sexual contact with another male, even once?

No.

I sat in the plush chair and surrendered my right arm to the nurse. "You have beautiful veins," she said, fingering the thin, sensitive skin. She stained my inner elbow pumpkin orange with iodine, probed for a vein, then drove the cold, hollow needle into my arm.

She handed me a stress ball. "Keep squeezing." My fingers curled and then loosened around the spongy toy, muscles contracting, tendons stretching and retracting while warm type O positive—"the universal donor"—filled a plastic collection bag. Soon, I fell into a rhythm. Squeeze. Relax-squeeze. Relax-squeeze. The room felt colder as the blood left my body. Once I'd filled the bag, the nurse withdrew the needle and bandaged the circular wound, but when I stood, I felt my blood pressure drop. The

ambient talking from nurses and other students muffled out, and my vision reduced to a pinpoint.

“Wow, you’re pretty pale,” the nurse said. She sat me back in the chair and raised my legs above my heart so blood could drain back into my face. An aide brought my cookie, and I ate it slowly as the gymnasium blurred back into focus. Bleachers uncollapsed, faces reformed. Light reentered my pupils.

I don’t know if altruism exists, but donating felt good. I liked the feeling that I’d helped someone somewhere, that I’ve contributed to humanity in some very tiny way. My blood would save a life; I’d be a part of someone else. I pictured a young woman, wounded but alive in a hospital bed after a car crash, fiancé at her side, holding her hand, her face pallid, and praying, and thanking God for the miracle, my cells swimming through her veins delivering oxygen from lungs to body between ragged breaths. Ragged, yes, but still breathing, and that’s all that counts. Thank God she’s alive, he’ll say aloud and think to himself for probably weeks following the crash. Maybe it's not altruism to hope for this romantic, melodramatic, perverse fantasy of existing inside someone else. How could I help myself? I want to be important. I want to be a hero. Either way, my donation was greedy, for myself more than for anyone else, more for my wants than any of theirs.

By the time school started the next day, rumors had begun to hum. In homeroom, I heard that two of the bags the nurses collected had to be destroyed. In gym, someone said they think it was an exchange student. In French, someone said maybe it was, how you say, «the Korean girl» *en français*? In physics, someone wondered if the other bag destroyed was a false positive. In study hall, someone wondered if it was diseased. In pre-

calc, someone asked who would donate if they knew their blood was bad? By band class, having decided one was probably one of the foreign student's, the other probably one of the drug-using students, I was sure it wasn't me.

*

Between September and October 1835 Alongside Captain FitzRoy and the rest of the *Beagle* crew, Charles Darwin traveled to four different islands in the Galapagos: San Cristóbal, Floreana, Isabela and Santiago. Darwin noted that birds from different islands in the archipelago each had slightly different beak shapes, fifteen different beak shapes in total. This dimorphism, Darwin hypothesized, allowed the finches to gather food—to survive—on each particular island. The finches with longer beaks would peck holes into a cactus fruit to eat the pulp inside, while the finches with more narrow beaks would tear the cactus to mush, consuming both the plant and any larvae inside, maximizing their feeding opportunities, and, thus, their survivability, especially when food was scarce.

Finches which were better equipped to finding food survived longer, had more offspring, and passed on similar traits. The traits which gave certain species an advantage over others would carry on from parent to offspring, and so on, changing one species of bird ever so slowly into another; this theory could explain the dimorphism across the islands. This same process gives oceanic single cell organisms the ability to sense, to detect light through pinpoint eyes, to better find food, to become something different, to become multicellular, to grow, to advance and to get better, to develop legs and to eventually escape the ocean. With enough time, this process turns primordial goo into humans.

Upon their return, FitzRoy wrote an account of the voyage but edited notes taken during his previous voyage, claiming the notes contradicted “the authenticity of the Scripture;” the discovery of seashells in layers of sedimentary rock subverted his literal reading of the Bible, Noah’s ark and the six day creation story. He erased the previous captains' logs, afraid that the misinformation would reach young sailors and poison their minds.

The Royal Geographic Survey awarded Captain FitzRoy a gold medal for his findings.

*

Biology has tried to explain the reason for homosexuality in human beings. The most compelling is the “gay uncle” hypothesis—humans who cannot have children serve a societal purpose, carrying an obligation to provide resources for future generations and the offspring of their relatives. There exists a correlation between homosexual behavior and number of older brothers; with each older brother a male has, he is over 33% more likely to be gay. Hormone levels in the womb change between births. This also correlates to handedness: the “older brothers” theory only affects right-handed individuals.

Homosexuality is biological. Research demonstrates a number of physiological differences between heterosexual and homosexual individuals. Straight men and lesbian women each have slightly larger right brain hemispheres, while the hemispheres of straight women and gay men are roughly equal. Similarly, the ratio in finger length between index and ring fingers is far similar between gay men and straight women than the opposite. Gay men’s hair is 15% more likely to grow in a counterclockwise pattern. If

you know the signs, you might be able to pick a homosexual out of a lineup with nothing more than her hands, or an examination of his scalp.

Researchers at the University of Chicago studied the chemical reactions and metabolic differences between Prozac in heterosexual and homosexual men, observing the anterior hypothalamus, a region critical for the expression of sexual behavior in male animals. This part of the brain is smaller in gay men. They found that the gay brain reacts differently to Prozac; the drug even activated areas of their brains not known to affect sexual behavior. These areas remained dormant in heterosexuals.

This subverts the idea that homosexuality is a choice. Yet some still believe that we make some conscious decision to stop dating people of the opposite gender, to lie with a man as with a woman, which is “a detestable sin,” according to the New Living Translation of the Bible, “disgusting” to God’s Word Translation. To King James, I am “an abomination.”

*

FitzRoy would grow to resent his participation in the *Beagle's* voyage. A staunch “flood geologist,” he hoped their survey would have lent more credibility to Christianity's creation story, literal evidence of the biblical flood to help explain humanity's origins. In fact, he had inadvertently helped push along a controversial theory; that all species arise through natural selection, what biologist Thomas Huxley called “Darwinism.” The theory was observed through animals, but it included humans, and this conflicted with FitzRoy's understanding of the world, and how we got here.

Thomas Huxley had been a harsh critic of the theory of evolution himself, publishing a negative review of Robert Chambers' *Vestiges of the Natural History of*

Creation in 1844, which proposed an early version of Darwinism. However, Darwin would share his findings with Huxley before the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, a privilege shared by few, mainly Darwin's friends. Darwin would eventually convert Huxley. He started calling himself "Darwin's bulldog," defending the ideas presented in the book. Huxley would volunteer to publicly debate and advocate for Darwin's theory against nonbelievers, including other biologists as well as clergymen.

Huxley, who would also coin the term "agnosticism," would enter into a debate held the following year in 1860 in Oxford to discuss evolution at the Oxford University Museum. Two days earlier, on Saturday, he'd debated this same topic with another of Darwin's opponents, Richard Owen, in this same building, beneath arches like pointed poplar leaves, its open floor a cloister. However, on Monday, his debate opponent would be even more formidable: Bishop Samuel Wilberforce.

Wilberforce had gained recognition as a public speaker, and pulled in nearly one thousand speakers to the museum the day of the debate, each clamoring to hear how Wilberforce might eviscerate Huxley and Darwin's unholy ideas, or hoping to see creationism, the stories of the flood and a divine creator, discredited. Hundreds of people hoping to see the spectacle had been turned away at the door.

Also in attendance was Captain Robert FitzRoy. He didn't just attend; he intended to argue against Darwin's findings. Against his own findings. He brought along his Bible along as his evidence.

"Are you proud," Bishop Wilberforce said during the debate, "to call your great-great-grandfather an ape? Or your great-great-grandmother? Was she an ape?" He smiled, having struck such a fatal blow. "Who here," he said, addressing the audience, "Who

among you here would find jubilation in knowing their grandfather was a gorilla? Is it of no consequence to you? ” Murmurs drifted through the crowd like fog. The audacious claim that humans were no better than animals, that we descended from ape grandparents, spat in the face of God.

Huxley stepped forward. “I would,” he barked. “I would not be ashamed to know my origin—our origin—is from a monkey.” The crowd’s murmurs became a rolling boil at Huxley’s exclamation. Had he lost the debate by admitting this? Was he giving up on Darwin’s theory? “I would, however,” he said, raising a finger, “be ashamed to know my grandchildren would work so hard to obscure the truth.” He pointed that finger at Wilberforce.

When it was FitzRoy’s turn to take the stage, he raised the heavy book above his head, each thin page a banner. “If I had known what I know now,” he said, “I would not have embarked on that journey. I would have never let Darwin on that ship.” He slammed the Bible down on the podium. The crowd, unsure whether to cheer or gasp, did neither. Instead, a silence spilled over the room, a ringing in FitzRoy’s ear.

*

After my second blood donation, the local hospital sent me a letter in the mail. Both my donations tested positive for the antibodies to hepatitis B, so I should contact a hematologist immediately for further testing. Failing twice suggested more than a false positive. Records indicated that I never received the hepatitis vaccination, but Dad’s position as a landfill employee and my admittance into public schools almost guaranteed that I had been. The presence of antibodies suggested, then, that the virus had been inside me, despite no history of unprotected intercourse or intravenous drug use.

Blood test after blood test came back positive, but my doctor said my lack of jaundiced skin and cirrhosis meant a false positive for sure.

“Either that,” he said, “or you somehow contracted it, had flu-like symptoms for a week, and now you carry the disease. You might just be a carrier your whole life. You won’t know for sure until your health begins to fail. You’ll be an old man, sick or maybe beginning a round of chemo, and it’ll affect your liver, and you’ll think back to the time when a blood doctor said this might happen.”

Contemporary medicine can’t give me an answer, so I’ll wait. I’m blacklisted from donating blood, organs or plasma, even despite the low, low odds that I really do have the virus in me. It’s a safety measure, they say, just like barring any man who identifies as homosexual, or bisexual, or in medical terms, “men who have sex with men.” I will never be a part of someone else’s body. My blood will never save a life

*

I first learned about Darwin’s finches in elementary school. By tenth grade, I’d taken a stake in science. I trusted it with the answers; prayer didn’t work, but narrow finch beaks did. While natural selection provided an answer to how we got here, it said nothing about our current situation, why we’re still here today. A biology course attempted and ultimately failed to answer that question for me. We started the unit about reproduction, “the natural process among organisms,” said the textbook, “by which new individuals are generated and the species perpetuated. Every organism that exists is a result of reproduction.

As a closeted high schooler, I failed at selecting mates that biologists could consider “fertile,” and I could never help perpetuate our species. Not long after that, I

concluded: "I have no purpose." Why would a divine creator design a human who couldn't execute his chief biological purpose, his meaning of life? He wouldn't. After all, the God that I knew but didn't really believe in makes no mistakes. Each body is crafted in His divine image. Yet I still exist. Therefore, I concluded, God must not exist.

The revelation reeled me. I didn't practice a religion, but I felt like repenting. I didn't believe in God, but I felt like someone had betrayed me, placing me onto this planet like a spare part. Functionless. Purposeless. What kind of god would put me here, and why? I couldn't find an answer, so I developed a self-loathing instead. Seeing couples laughing in restaurants or holding hands around the halls in school ignited jealousy in me. Why should they deserve to be happy when I can't possibly achieve the same thing? Can't they see how good they have it? How could anyone complain with a perfect life like theirs? They have a use. I do not. They can't know how lucky they are.

*

Twenty-nine years after his now famous voyage of the *Beagle* with Darwin, FitzRoy took his own life, like his uncle Castlereagh's father, like Captain Stokes. Like Castlereagh, he would do it with a razor, preferring the intimacy of his own hand's skin to the impersonal iron of pistol. He recalled Stokes' eleven day delirium as the medical crew struggled to keep the captain afloat against his own commands.

FitzRoy had already failed at discounting the theory of evolution with which he adamantly disagreed. He wouldn't fail again. He wouldn't repeat another man's mistakes. He washed his hands at his bathroom sink, picked up the straight edge and sliced a clean line and watched rivulets of blood puddle in the porcelain. With a whistle of tinnitus in his ear, he thought he heard his wife open the door as he died.

*

I hope one day to get married. But this is not the hope of all gay men. Marriage is a sacrament forged by the church, adapted into law, and adopted by secular groups. Many gay men forgo traditional marriage in favor of long-term monogamous, or even open relationships. Some shun holy union because its religious origin, preferring free love over an assimilation into the fold of legal monogamy. Others strive for a union that closely mirrors heterosexual marriage: the traditional wedding with suits and liquor and “Shout” and cake. But marriage is more than the sheet of paper we sign. And it's more than societal convention, first dances and best man speeches. Marriage means rights. When my partner is hospitalized, I want to visit him. When he dies, I want the law to acknowledge I was his spouse, that we spent our years, our money and lives together as a team, as one. I want to live outside the institutions, but more than that, I want us to be able to die as equals.

In my dreams, our wedding is traditionally unique. One of us might play the groom, standing in front of your family and mine in a tiny bingo hall, palms damp and wringing, nervous with energy. He will wear a suit, and our friend will play the pastor, her face pierced and head shaved. She will ordain herself online and write the words she wants us to hear, the right things to unite us. There are no sides at our wedding; my brother sits next to your aunt, my sister sits with your father. Our cousins are our cousins. One of us will choose to play the bride, and when he walks through the door dressed in white, our families will rise, your father all tears. The organ plays Diana Ross and Marvin Gaye. My nephew's the flower girl; your grandmother laughs at his exuberance as he tosses pink silk rose petals into the pews and onto your uncles' laps. Our golden retriever

will bear the ring, box velvet and clasped to his collar. He'll ruin your suit with muddy paws, and then we will begin.

Our pastor will find the box under yellow fur, and look us in the eyes and say the words she wrote. She will thank your parents and mine for gathering here today in this bingo hall. She'll say Love is an ocean; it might swallow you down, or buoy you up. Either way, it's all around you. It will fill the cracks between your fingers and toes, slide down your throat and balloon your lungs. You'll swallow it like it swallows you. Love, she'll say, looks like open water and tastes like saline.

You'll pray for rain that day because you love the sound on rooftops. Someone will hear your prayer, and the sky will open up at noon and peals of thunder break across downtown, and we'll take wedding photos soaking wet in the park. In the photos, you will smile and I will try to fake a frown. We'll plan a spot to hang them in our den as we head to the reception.

My brother is the maid of honor, my sister the best man, the bridesmaids and groomsmen a collection of our closest friends. At the table, we sit and eat potatoes and roast beef and asparagus and watch our cousins and aunts and uncles dance and eat and talk and meet. We sit in soaking suits. They will strike their forks on champagne glasses, and, for them, we'll perform the kiss. We'll kiss all night. When the music stops and forks stop clinking, we will stand and tell our friends Thank you for attending our party. It means a lot that you are here, that you could make it, we'll say. You mean so much. You matter. Please eat and drink something, and love each other, and dance. Fill yourselves with food and light. Tonight, be alive.

Then you and I will try to find a quiet place alone. We will survey the party before us, and in the chaos of liquor and laughter, we will hold each other by our hips, and say Look at what we've done together. Look what we made happen. This is only the beginning.

And then we will begin.

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