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The Immortal Jellyfish and Other Things That Don't Know About Love

Tianli Kilpatrick

Northern Michigan University, tkilpatr@nmu.edu

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THE IMMORTAL JELLYFISH
AND OTHER THINGS THAT DON'T KNOW ABOUT LOVE

By

Tianli Quinn Kilpatrick

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

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By

Tianli Quinn Kilpatrick

My thesis is a collection of creative nonfiction essays that play with form and language in an attempt to show that trauma can create beauty. This thesis originated with trauma theory and specifically deals with sexual assault trauma, but it also covers topics including international adoption, self-injury, and oceanic life. Jellyfish are a recurring image and theme, both the physical jellyfish itself and the mythological connection to Medusa. Jellyfish do not have brains, but they have developed complex stinging tentacles that for all their beauty make them dangerous. I chose jellyfish because their dual representation fascinates me. I think they were the perfect vessel for me to explore my own traumas.

This project speaks to larger systematic abuse issues. Many writers have addressed these topics before my thesis and many will continue to write about them after. I hope that my essays, and their eventual publication as part of a collection, will add to the public conversations, and remind abuse survivors that beauty can still exist.

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INTRODUCTION

My interest in producing a thesis that engaged and interrogated the various causes, parameters, and consequences of trauma, began in the EN504 Principles of Critical Investigation class during the Fall 2016 semester. In this class, I first read excerpts from *Unclaimed Experience* by Cathy Caruth where she puts forth the idea that trauma is a dual language, in the sense that it entangles the “complex ways of knowing and not knowing” (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). This duality “[oscillates] between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (7). While my thesis specifically deals with the trauma of sexual assault and how traumatic events influence my sense of self, many trauma survivors live in a liminal space between a desire to remember the event and a desire to forget it. In this sense, survival itself can be a crisis.

The liminality Caruth speaks of interested me most acutely because of a word I learned while studying in Greece in 2014. The word is *χαρμολύπη*—*harmolypi*—which roughly translates into “beautiful sadness.” I understood this as a state wherein a person does not want to die but does not want to live either. It is a state that I have lived in for years since my first assault, and it’s a reality that I think is true for many people. Once I had connected this Greek term to Caruth’s theory, this became the driving force behind “The Immortal Jellyfish” essay.

The title essay “The Immortal Jellyfish” braids jellyfish facts, associative inquiry thereon, and personal sexual assault narrative, in order to weave both the beauty and devastation that can result from one traumatic event. I hoped that this stylistic braided form would present a platform where the jellyfish imagery mirrored my personal narrative. The deadliness of jellyfish is often

overlooked for more predominant predators, like sharks, and I feel like the aftermath of trauma is overlooked in a similar way because the traumatic event itself looms larger to the public eye. The aftermath of trauma is messy and often worse than the event itself because its suffering is prolonged. I think this is why this essay spends more time on the effects of the assault rather than the assault itself.

One text that exemplifies this unintentional living in liminality is Maggie Nelson's *Something Bright, Then Holes*. In her poem, "Night-sitting," she writes: "The water was black or just / the darkest green, ultra-perilous / its slow lapping bringing back / my old impulse to suicide / suddenly, without being / unhappy, or at least without / knowing it..." (Nelson 12). In this moment, the crises of life and death conflict. The slow lapping, the beauty of water "the darkest green," triggers an old, but well-known, suicidal impulse. In a way, these lines are a comfort moving into a different comfort; the comfort of this watery scene coupled with the comfort of an old, familiar thought. Nelson is connecting impulse to water imagery, emotion to place. I try to mimic this in my essay "Contrapasso," where notions of safety on land converses with the lives of sea creatures through elliptical imagery. In one section, I pair the images: "I remember what the tree looks like where you died. Hagfish chew a hole in the whale's side, making a home sheltered by ribs." Like Nelson, I am creating a parallel between emotion and place, but my essay differs by connecting different ideals of safety to a specific place: the ocean.

*

In my essay "Adoption Agreement," I wrote about my adoption entirely in test format—multiple choice, true/false, and short answer questions. I ask questions like, "The amount your parents paid for your international adoption is equal to your worth" (true/false) and "Why might your adoptive family reverse your adoption?" (short answer). Since I do not know all the answers

to the questions I ask, I wrote a footnote for each question. The footnotes follow a different narrative, one about me riding a horse at night. The footnotes talk about how I can feel the “concussion of hitting the ground ripple up through [the horse’s] suspensory ligament, along the cannon bone, and up across my radius;” how I can identify the different horses by the sounds of their greetings. I want the horse narrative to respond to the standardized questions because not every adoptee has the same story or knows the same information, so I am more willing to label myself an equestrian before I label myself an adoptee. Standardized tests standardize the person themselves. In this essay, I tried to resist this idea that my answers to a question could put me in a box and label me within the same parameters of other adoptees. On the few adoption studies I have participated in, I have never encountered a question asking what I am doing with my life now and whether being adopted influenced that decision. I hoped this essay could be my way of answering by saying those questions on adoption surveys cannot be answered just with an adoption narrative. Instead, I am answering them with the narrative I have created, one that was not constrained by being an adoptee.

In my essay “Medusa,” I combined an exploration of my mother’s depression, neurotransmitters and synapses in the brain, and a rewriting of the Perseus and Medusa Greek myth. In this rewrite, Perseus does not kill Medusa because he realizes she never asked for the violence brought against her. Generally, the focus of this myth is Medusa’s death. However, the trauma I focused on was her rape by Poseidon. Either way, this myth is about abuse and power over another. Since these myths came from the Ancient Greeks trying to make sense of their world, violence naturally made it into each story. The trauma in this essay is not just Medusa’s, it’s also my mothers. There is generational violence that we cannot avoid. It seems that violence

and trauma are innate parts of life, and so have found ways into my essays when I did not want them there.

I worry about becoming the kind of writer who can only write about her abuse. Many of my essays include a trauma narrative that I have made converse with something else. I cannot escape my concern that my traumas define me, but even if they do, at least I can find new ways to write about them. For example, my essay, “What I Don’t Know About Love,” ends with the lines, “But there’s fear in love too. The fear that the next time he touches you, he won’t be gentle,” and I never wanted this to be part of the essay. However, despite my attempts to write about something else, a line or two about consent or physical violence sneaks its way in, and sometimes I don’t catch it until I’ve read through the essay several times.

*

I think we can get in the way of our own survival; maybe writing about the past is keeping me in it for too long. In *The Colossus of Maroussi*, Henry Miller admits: “I had vanquished all my enemies one by one, but the greatest enemy of all I had not even recognized—*myself*” (Miller 70). There is a disconnect between events and the survivor’s understanding of what happened. In Miller’s terms, I have become my “greatest enemy” because my writing has not let go my personal traumas. By writing and researching my own experiences, I have stayed there in those scenes. Maybe I thought I could use this thesis as a way out of that history, that writing about trauma would nullify its effects. I know this sounds ridiculous; I have pretended for too long that this is possible. Perhaps instead of silencing myself, this thesis has encouraged me to look differently at my history and so change the way I talk about it. To start with, I am talking about it, even if it is just through writing, and that is significant by itself, but I am doing so through various lyric forms that confront the identity trauma creates. Lyric essays worked for

me in writing about my traumas because the white spaces personifies both the silence that results from trauma and the silence handed down through generations.

*

The aftermath of trauma is a dead language, a language that is always playing catch-up, always under construction. It is no secret that in a rape case, saying “no” only once is legally not enough (Krakauer 43). And so we write, “we tell ourselves stories in order to live,” because maybe that will be enough (Jamison 179). Trauma does not have solid edges and so cannot be described by a universal language. This is the construct Caruth sets up, that the language of trauma is the language within the event itself, its anxiety aftermath; it is what has changed between the first assault and the writing of it, between Greece and this thesis.

In this sense, language heals with the survivor. Language and storytelling provide agency and power. One example of this is Sonya Huber’s *Pain Woman Takes Your Keys*, a memoir on chronic pain. She describes pain as a frustrated entity that is “trapped in a body that is ill-fitting for its unfolded shape.... It folds up its wings and legs and spindles quietly and blinks up at you when you say ‘I know’” (Huber 4-5). She personifies its presence as something like a friend because it is a constant she can rely on. I modeled my essay “How Self-Harm Loves” based on her “What Pain Wants” essay. Like in Huber’s essay, I personify my own pain associated with self-injury in lines like “Self-harm uses the serrated edges of bottle caps to make Venn diagrams on your skin” and “Self-harm draws triangles and 3D boxes across your wrists with black pen while you sit in class.” While Huber is writing about chronic pain’s influence on her daily actions, the pain in my essay feels like a younger sibling who is indignant and frustrated and surprised that it has a voice in both public and private places. In the unconscious ways trauma

enters my essays, this voice of pain comes with me to Old Navy and Bed, Bath & Beyond. We eat pizza together.

*

Writing can be a solace, just as much as pain can be, and yet our attachments to these comforts keep us in a place of ever experiencing the PTSD aftermath. In Frances Driscoll's book *Seaglass Picnic with a splash of posttraumatic stress*, she writes: "...we don't get to choose. / If, later, we want death, / we have to murder ourselves. / There are a lot of ways to do that. / ...My list includes: / Lack of exercise. Red Meat. Cigarettes. / Loss of both night & peripheral vision. Irish whiskey. / Neat" (Driscoll 47). Compared to a crisis of life, the crisis of death has so many options. I think about what my list entails: horses, Tylenol, trauma narratives, overworking, jellyfish, myth. Sometimes the silence that surrounds these crises is part of a strategy to maintain agency, authorship, and control over an experience. Silence about a traumatic event is a choice, and much like a decision to talk, not one easily made. I used to think silence was a tool to perpetuate cycles of abuse, and it can, but it can also be used as a weapon by consciously omitting details. In "The Immortal Jellyfish," I wrote about the assault only briefly. The majority of that narrative explores the aftermath. I avoided writing the specifics of the assault, not because I do not remember, I remember everything, but because I do not have the language to write it. In the case of this essay specifically, not writing directly about the event says more than writing about it.

I'm attracted to the sub-genre of the lyric essay, not only for the room it makes through its use of line breaks and white space, but because that white space asks the reader to interpret the text in their own way, to see their own personal narratives between mine. Originally, the audience for my thesis was myself. I wrote these essays because I needed to write them.

However, that audience changed after reading Roxane Gay's *Hunger*. I admired the way she bluntly confronted her traumas and I noticed a change in my writing after reading her memoir. My writing became braver, more willing to write what I wanted without letting my fear of telling the truth hold me back. Now, I'd like to think the audience is survivors of abuse, and I hope that these essays and their eventual publication, will help a reader somewhere to write about his or her own traumas by not letting a fear of telling the truth hinder creativity or silence their voices within this larger narrative to which we all respond. Writing about my traumas, and what I have learned from writing about them, allowed me to explore and dictate the parameters of PTSD and memory. I control how they converse with jellyfish, Macintosh apples, and wooden playgrounds.

What I Don't Know About Love

1.

On the weekends I don't drink coffee, sometimes just to see if I'll survive. I didn't go to the hospital when you flatlined. There's an apple on my kitchen table rotting. I took out the trash last night and left the apple behind. The Law of Conservation of Mass states that matter can neither be created nor destroyed. I was states away when my dog was put down; saying goodbye over the phone is not a hug. You never saw a cardiologist; you knew you had a heart problem. I once kept a snowball on a plate in the freezer. Mom threw it outside because she didn't have room for waffles. I collect soda tabs, wine corks, keychains. You retell the story of how you were dead for 30 seconds. I keep a tally of how many times.

2.

When Zeus released two eagles to encircle the world, one flying west and the other flying east, they met in Delphi, marking it as the world's center. I only buy hand soap with fish engraved on them. I dreamed I made friends with a blacktip reef shark and named her Layla because it's the Hebrew word for night. Ravens mediate between life and death, friends with the lost souls drifting in liminality. Ravens croak and crows caw. Odin's Huginn and Muninn were ravens, not crows. Fish become soap, become clean, never fully used. Love is synonymous with consent. According to the laws of thermodynamics, the sum of the world's entropies create a central zero. Sometimes I imagine waking up in an animal's body, tonight a flying squirrel with little paws to hold things or a nightingale with an inquisitive call, tomorrow a whale shark unafraid of going deep.

3.

They say the heart is the container of happiness and whatever overflows still resides inside the body. Hollow love is me standing above a grave dug too shallow for me to join you. The red-checked blanket we've wrapped your body in takes up too much room. A poetry professor once told me never to use the word "love" in my poems. *It's vague*, he said, *tasteless*. But I am still learning not to be afraid of this word; pain is not a side effect of love. In my after death checklist for my best friend, I've instructed her to go horseback riding, to tell that guy I still love him, to burn my journals and roast marshmallows over their flame, to remember me.

4.

I flirt with Death, but I'm not serious. If I wasn't a writer, maybe I'd be working with horses full time, maybe I'd be working on a snorkel/dive boat, maybe I'd be doing something else I have never done before like studying law or playing with pyrotechnics. Macintosh is my favorite apple. The desire to die can be addicting, but so can the will to live. It all comes down to a choice. I don't question the writer's job, I question my ability. The inside of a sea urchin is orange and spongy. I thought myself immune to the helpless kind of fear. When my mom tells me she's suicidal, living at a graduate school 1,085 miles away has never been harder. I love the crunch of biting into a mac, the way it fits perfectly in my cupped hand, the way my teeth grind against skin, against teeth.

5.

There is nothing wrong with loving pain. The bottle cap warms in my palm as the sharp edges print Venn diagrams across my skin. I still play on wooden playgrounds when given the chance;

I don't have to pretend to be a kid. Trauma is a science; it intensifies memory to make it feel ever present. The first playground was built in 1859 in a park in Manchester, England. At some point, we all go through a crucible. Some people come out changed, some people come out dead. But there are some that don't leave. Some sit in the flames and learn to love the fire. Some stay because it's easier to embrace the pain. Playgrounds originated in Germany as a platform for teaching children how to play correctly. I am a student of trauma. I let splinters live under my skin until they decide to leave.

6.

The gravitational force at Earth's center is zero. I light a candle in my apartment, watch its shadows dance across the walls. It jerks its body back and forth to music only it hears. I welcome the pain in my neck from staring too long at stars. Popcorn is not even the first ingredient in popcorn balls. The flame flickers, then is still, then flickers again. I know that nothing anyone ever does to me can be worse than what I do to myself. Gravity spins everything with mass in the universe and I forget that we too are spinning. Fire dances in glass-strangled freedom, a self-feeding star that never sees its shadow.

7.

I can say "I love you" in seven languages. Let us do more than talk of Michelangelo. The emergency number in Norway is 4-1-1. I've called it. *Te amo*. Professor Moriarty asks, "Staying alive. So boring, isn't it?" *Je t'aime*. I once danced around the kitchen with the Halloween candy bowl upside down on my head because it made my mom laugh. *ani ohevet otcha*. Language halts

me. I have to pronounce it, let it twist my tongue into shapes it does not know. Σ' αγαπώ. Horses love by grooming each other. It's true otters hold paws to keep from drifting away. *I love you.*

8.

In high school, my friends and I sharpied the word LOVE across our forearms in green, black, and orange: the colors of depression, suicide awareness, and self-injury, according to the Active Minds and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention websites. There's a specific darkness in the back of a movie theater where the light from the screen shines off everyone's face in the same way. We drew butterflies on each other's wrists to keep us safe. Jumping out of an airplane at 13,500 feet is like swimming over open ocean. Sharpie wove through our scars creating erasure poems across our arms, poems we rewrote each time they washed away, each time different, each time more permanent.

9.

I hold myself accountable to the sea gods, to Poseidon, the hippocampi, to Enki. I wonder if whales and dolphins have gods. I wonder if the sea urchin god judges his children based on their spikes. The ocean can kill in countless ways. Swim diagonally out of a riptide. I wonder what god was born from the humpback whale's bubble net. A box jellyfish can kill a human in two minutes. I want to read the story of Seth and Loki in the same room together, who would come out alive. I wonder if a reef builds itself to teach juvenile fish how to play. Each time a male pufferfish creates his sandy crop circle, a god is born. I've seen the green flash but not the northern lights. Shrimp have the power to break a human thumb, but they don't.

10.

Love is the nicker from horses when they see a friend, the way their nostrils quiver, lower lip loosens. It's the daintiness of a red-bellied woodpecker trading food with his mate. It's walking in the rain because your friend doesn't want you to see her cry. Love is the wolf whine, ears back, head titled, but love is also the mourning howl. When we brought you and your new pacemaker home from the hospital, our home adopted the smells of betadine and dried blood. I hear love in the sound trees make when they scrape together. I see it in the intimate way waves can be both gentle and angry with rocks. But there's fear in love too. The fear that the next time he touches me, he won't be gentle.

Medusa

The term *Medusozoa* is a subphylum of the jellyfish species, I wonder if their brainless bodies have the ability to interrogate the silkiness of their tentacles, the connectivity of their nerve nets. An umbrella-shaped body distinguishes this specific form of cnidarian. In 1752, Swedish zoologist Carl Linnaeus coined the term *medusa* in regards to jellyfish, referring to the Greek gorgon Medusa. This term refers exclusively to the non-polyp life-stage, which most people associate with a pulsing bell and trailing tentacles. The first time I realized mom struggled with depression was on Grand Cayman in 2000. We were staying at the Turtle Nest Inn, located right on the water, where sand followed us inside whether we wanted it to or not. We were always finding sand in our beds, our sandwiches, between the couch cushions. We had finished eating crème brûlée, I was playing with the dog Blackie, Dad was napping, and Mom had walked off down the beach by herself. Mom didn't return for hours, and when it finally started to get dark, Dad wondered if someone should go after her.

Before her curse, Medusa worked as a priestess for Athena, swearing an oath of celibacy to the goddess. But Poseidon showed an interest in Medusa and raped her in Athena's temple. Athena blamed Medusa, perhaps unwilling to admit her own failure to protect, and punished Medusa, cursing each beautiful hair that tempted Poseidon so they would never again tempt anyone else. Medusa hid herself, ashamed that her hair had become venomous snakes, her eyes blind orbs, and her skin an ugly green. She envied her gorgon sisters, Stheno and Euryale, for their immortality. Neurons communicate via electrical and chemical signals, talking to other neurons, talking to themselves. These signals dance up and down the spinal cord, like squirrels on

telephone poles, tiptoeing across wires, one particular acorn held carefully in the mouth. The action potential occurs when the right acorn passes through. Sometimes the acorn is dropped from the wire, a neurotransmitter to be picked up and carried elsewhere. There are six trillion electrical signals sent through neurons every second just to operate a body and mind. I imagine a Medusa who won't admit to being lonely, a Medusa who hides under the rocks because she blames herself.

I didn't plan to go home for Thanksgiving break in 2017. The original plan was for Mom to visit me in Michigan. But in October, she called and said through tears, she couldn't handle flying. I sat on the desk in the empty office next to mine and reassured her that this was okay. While talking, I opened the grey drawers, surprised that nothing remained from past tenants, not a magnet, a notepad, a paper towel roll. I wondered who will sit in this office next, and what empty office they will find for private conversations. I offered to go home, because I still wanted to see her, and in this way, I wasn't completely helpless. While home, I met up with Mom's best friend to talk about Mom. We sat at a wooden high top table eating burgers and fries, and I tried to get her to see that Mom couldn't just decide to be happy, that the "old" version of my mother wasn't coming back and that it wouldn't be healthy if that did happen. My octopus ring clinked against my water glass and I pretended not to see the disappointment in her face. The jellyfish's mouth is located on the lower surface, the subumbrella. This mouth can be partially closed by a membrane called the velum. From there, the maze of canals that make up the digestive track vary in number and shape from jellyfish to jellyfish. Below the velum are the tentacles, above, a network of sensory organs. After Poseidon, Medusa wandered into Africa, young snakes dropping from her

head at each place she visited. The Ancient Greeks believed Medusa turned Africa into a place full of venomous reptiles.

On our annual Caribbean vacations, the arguments always started with Dad choosing the next snorkel spot on the island without consulting Mom or me. He'd spend hours pouring over dive maps, online printouts of the best snorkel sites, and a yellow legal pad where he organized all these notes. While he planned the next trip, Mom paced the room crying, and I tried to stay out of the way of everybody. Mom vented to Dad that she wasn't needed there, that Dad and I didn't want to be with her, that the whole vacation would be better if she had never come, that our lives in general would be better off without her. Dad dismissed her concerns by saying things like, *you're already here so just have fun, I'm not buying you a plane ticket home, I'm busy reading right now*. Then it was my turn to console her, to enable her to do this again. I'd take the car key out of her hand, tuck it under the bananas and out of sight. Dad would snap at me for this in the morning because it would make us late to the reef. I tried to tell him that the reef didn't know about time, but already, he was distracted with his notes on water temperatures and tide schedules. I'd hold Mom's hand out on the balcony, hoping I could ground her. I'd bring her a map of the island's reefs, ask her which one she wanted to see, agree with whatever spot she chose, then later persuade Dad to detour his plans. I knew by the way her shoulders dropped forward, her reluctant sigh that isn't so different from my father's, and how quickly her tears stopped that I'd managed to convince her to stay.

Neurotransmitters collect at synapses, between presynaptic and postsynaptic neurons. Like a forever relay race, neurotransmitters are supposed to be picked up by the postsynaptic neuron's

protein receptors. These neurons repair cells, keep a heart beating, create the chemicals behind jealousy, self-esteem, and fear. This synapse is the point of conversation, the coffee date, the sit down between parent and child, between husband and wife. At each synapse, one neuron is responsible for sending the neurotransmitter while the other is responsible for receiving it. When this goes wrong, we drive off the road, we drop the plate, we miss the step, we get depressed. Only the successful reuptake of neurotransmitters ensures the kind of understanding and safety that keeps a family together, a parent out of the hospital, and a kid from a school suspension.

Mom wasn't as strong a swimmer as Dad or I, so she preferred to revisit the sites where we knew the reef and knew the strengths of the currents. On Bonaire, we knew the tides pulled to the east at 1000 Steps but that was the best spot to find purplemouth and spotted moray eels. Mom didn't like the strength of the waves against the rock ledges located just down the road from the Salt Flats. On the other hand, Dad wanted to try new sites, where we might see new creatures, where we could get lost on the reef because that was all part of the adventure. Sure, there were spots I wanted to visit again; on Grand Cayman, I loved the Turtle Farm on the west side and the barrier reef at Rum Point. My favorite spot was along Seven Mile Beach, at least until a drunk man chased after me with a knife calling me Queen Elizabeth. While he threw handfuls of paper money at me, I remember feeling angry at my father for leaving me on the beach while he snorkeled. When Dad returned, I ran to the car and locked myself in he collected his snorkel stuff. Through the back window, I watched the man pick up his money, look at our green car, straighten his Bob Marley beanie. But I also loved exploring new spots, usually the ones Dad wanted to try too, so unless directly asked, I stayed quiet. In 1904, German biologist Ernst Haeckel popularized *medusae* through his vivid illustrations in his *Kunstformen der Natur*. The

tentacles reminded him of his late wife's long flowing hair, so he drew them in ringlets of red and gold. My mother is afraid my father will leave if her depression becomes too much to handle. I wonder how often she thinks about when she had breast cancer, and Dad didn't know how to deal with it so he didn't. He stayed at work longer, spent more time with his centrifuge and gel electrophoresis machines. He made up excuses to not pick her up from the hospital, let friends stay with her when she came home, and when he was home, he buried himself in *Science* journals.

Serotonin is a mood regulator, controlling anger and decreasing anxiety, and one of three neurotransmitters that influence the depression threshold. Not enough serotonin creates OCD, depression, suicide. Dopamine controls motor movement, attention, aggression, thinking and planning. When too much is received, it results in Parkinson's, while too little creates schizophrenia, alexithymia. I imagine a Medusa who hates the fact that she turns things to stone. I see her walking through her home, trailing her hands along the broken Doric and Corinthian columns, talking to her snakes until she's learned each speech pattern, until they run out of conversations. She imagines a man who comes into her lair, without sword and shield ready, someone who is blind, whose eyes don't see light, someone who she can't kill.

Jellyfish are not fish; they are invertebrates because they don't have backbones. Jellyfish are more closely related to corals and anemones. We'd pretend we hadn't fought over anything, and even if no one argued the rest of the vacation, the heaviness of that first argument weighed on all of us. These arguments became routine on all vacations; Dad argued for the riskier decisions, Mom wanted to keep us safe, and I just tried to keep us in the water as much as possible because

they never fought underwater. Norepinephrine is the fight or flight neurotransmitter. It elevates heart rate, circulation, respiration, and influences moods. Too much creates depression, a racing heart, mania, my mother.

Until I was about ten, I could fit inside the pantry. I'd stand silent, watching through the wooden slats, my heels pressed against the bags of cat and dog food, elbows nestled between cans of tomato sauce and tuna, head cushioned by cereal boxes. I'd watch my parents pace back and forth as they fought. Mom's tears slurred her words, only seeming to anger my father further. He'd slam down whatever was in his hand. If I couldn't see it, I'd guess at the sound of its weight hitting the table or counter, a mug, a magazine, his fist. I hid in the pantry until they finished fighting, until Mom stormed off upstairs, or Dad walked out of the house slamming the door behind him, until the voices from the TV filled the silence. I knew that I would find them later doing what they always do when they don't want to talk to each other. Mom would be upstairs in her bed watching TV or feigning sleep. Dad would sit at the computer until its screen was the only light in the house. For days after, I replayed their words in my head because their silence hurt more than their shouting. If Medusa had lived now, would she have been diagnosed with chronic depression? Would she have hated herself so much that death became preferable? Would she have tried to scratch out her own eyes?

My mother is frustrated with herself because getting better takes time. She's tried yoga, reiki, meditation, and acupuncture in hopes that one of these could cure her. Life exists in that synapse, that conversation between two neurons. This synapse is where sensation and awareness exist, where emotions are created, felt, and recognized. We directly feel the neurotransmitters in that

synapse, and what those neurotransmitters carry determine our lives. I think my mother images a world where there is one cure for everything, where she can spend a few hours in the yoga studio and its positive effects will ripple outward into her marriage, her friends, her health. When the neurotransmitters overpower the neurons, they can choose to carry more bad than good; they create everything from Tourette syndrome to depression to cerebral palsy to epilepsy to ADD. Mental illness is a disease of these synapses.

Jellyfish don't have brains, but they find ways to communicate. Jellyfish that live near the surface and depend on currents to travel release chemicals that alert other jellyfish in the area. Deep-water jellies flash colors using bioluminescence, the chemical reaction between luciferin and luciferase. On Bonaire, we turned our flashlights off under a dock, kicked our fins in the night black water, and watched the millions of dinoflagellates light up in blues and greens, the single celled amoebas that use the same bioluminescent mechanism as deep-water jellies. When Mom tells me her psychiatrist has diagnosed her with clinical depression, I don't tell her a psychologist I saw during undergrad diagnosed me with the same. My parents and I have always operated on a need-to-know basis and I've just decided there's a lot they don't need to know. It takes her a while to come to terms with knowing she has a generalized anxiety disorder. I don't tell her about my PTSD. Instead, I tell her stories about the horses, about the books I'm reading for my classes, about all the ways I am fine.

According to a study published in the *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment* journal in 2011, autopsy reports show that people who have experienced multiple depressive episodes have fewer norepinephrinergic neurons than people who experienced no depressive history. However, this

isn't a standard for everyone with depression. Some people showed low levels of serotonin that then triggered a drop in norepinephrine levels, which lead to depression. Aided with gifts from Athena and Hermes, Perseus enters Medusa's lair using a mirrored shield to see around corners. He tiptoes through the maze of columns, shallows his breathing, holds his sword upright at his side, ready. His hands hold onto columns as he peers around them, keeping an eye out for Medusa's black dress, listening for the hiss of her snakes. Dad thinks Mom can become better by "thinking happy thoughts." He repeats to her, "you're doing just fine," and I don't think Dad realizes that not being fine is okay too.

Medusa knows the second he sets foot in her home because the snakes on the left side of her head fall silent. She follows his movement and prepares herself for the guilt and self-loathing she feels each time she kills. She walks along the ledge above him, waits for him to stumble upon the courtyard of stone bodies, her killing ground. It was just good housekeeping if he died in the same place as everyone else. Mom's best friend is too busy telling her "I want my old friend back," that she doesn't see Mom's trying to find a way back, that Mom's realizing she can't go back.

When the postsynaptic neuron receives the neurotransmitters, they can either excite or inhibit that receiving neuron in sending on its own signals. The proteins within the synapse are called ion channels, and they allow or prevent charged atoms to pass through the membrane. In July of 2013, we stayed on Bonaire for two weeks. At night, Mom liked to stand on the beach and watch the waves. Sometimes Dad or I joined her, sometimes both of us. Mom held my hand but wouldn't look at me, squeezing my fingers to remind herself that I'm still there. The gentle

undertow pulled us into the sand and we followed the progress of ghost crabs as they moved from hole to hole. Mom wondered whether someone could swim to the point where horizon and water met, where blues mingled with reds and purples. I've thought about this too, if I could swim far enough out to greet the sun, to no longer see the shore. We watched the horizon closely, waiting for the green flash, waiting for my mother to tell me maybe she's not happy, waiting for the tiny sliver of light that disappears in an instant, the coupling and separating of photons.

Perseus sees a light flash off to his right and he ducks behind his shield, shutting his eyes tight. He doesn't die. He lifts his head above his shield, unwilling to die cowering on the ground. Walking toward the light, he sees that it's just a reflection off a sword. He steps into a courtyard, sees about twenty stone bodies in various positions of fight. At first, he thinks they're statues. Then realizes they are the soldiers sent in before him. All of their swords are raised, shields failing to cover their faces, mouths open in silent angry shouts.

One weekend in high school, Mom insisted we sit in the snow in our bathing suits for as long as we could. We changed, her into a navy one-piece with flowers, me into my favorite teal two-piece. We walked barefoot, out the side door, and Mom jumped into the snow. I jumped in after her, my nerves recoiled from the coldness, swearing at the snow with me. A cloudless sky watched us, but we were immune to the sun's warmth as the snow seeped into our cells and slowed our synapses. I don't remember what we talked about, maybe about my classes, her teaching, how Dad worked too much. We stayed there until our muscles were past the point of controlled movements, until the mourning doves started singing, until the cold pain was no

longer funny. We watched the fading sun glitter off the snow piled by the road, the ice sheaths on the branches, the stray snowflakes collecting like a tiara on my mother's head.

Medusa pauses behind him, her snakes have whispered in her ear, *wait*. She hears the tip of his sword hit the ground, his shield rustle against his tunic. She steps behind a column to consult with her snakes. When I went home for winter break, Mom and Dad didn't fight once. The silence felt comfortable because they weren't walking on eggshells around each other. I didn't have to hide from the shouting. I didn't have to play liaison between two parents in the same house. I brought Mom with me when I ran errands. She didn't trust herself to stay in the house alone, so Dad and I alternated staying with her. While Dad worked during the day, I stayed with her, but I had nights free. During the day, we'd drive around Shrewsbury, going food shopping, going to the bank, paying bills at Town Hall, or parking at the reservoir and watching the water from the car because she wasn't physically strong enough to walk around.

Perseus feels sorry for the gorgon, sorry that she's become prey to so many men, and realizes he doesn't want to die here like them. He doubts that she asked for any of this. While I was home, Mom set up camp in the living room with the mattress from the rollaway bed, the navy blue comforter, a pillow, *Anne of Green Gables*, and a heating pad. I'd bring her small meals four times a day, or she didn't eat. It was often a mixture of chicken and rice because she was so scared of upsetting her stomach. We didn't talk about school because it reminded her I could only stay for a month. She seemed to feel better while I was there, and I dreaded what my leaving might do to her. Too often, she curled up, body shaking, crying "make it stop" and Dad and I were helpless to take her pain away.

Perseus hears a hiss behind him. He lowers his sword and shield to the ground and turns with his eyes closed. He hears her dress whisper closer. *Why do you want to kill me?* She asks, her voice softer than he imagined. *I don't know*, he answers. Too soon after being home for winter break, I will graduate with a Master's degree. I used to want to move abroad after graduation, to start over in a place where I don't know anyone. I imagined a little place somewhere in Europe where I spent the day working or riding horses, then at night, I'd go to a city that never slept to find live music and street food. But now, with Mom's health issues, and with Dad's increasing heart issues, I'm terrified to live far from them. Mom has a severe fear of abandonment caused by her childhood, and each time I leave her, I can't help but think I'm adding to that.

Blind me, he says. He reaches around his feet until he finds his sword. Turning the hilt toward her, he hands it over. She raises it, waits for him to object, to pick up his shield and fight her, but he doesn't move. She punctures both of his eyes with his sword. They walk hand in hand, Perseus and Medusa. She shows him around her home, guides his hands to identify the chips and scars along the columns that mark a ledge or drop off. She shows him where the smooth parts designate a corner, and soon the oils from his hands add to the oils from hers, and the columns start to look shiny. The stone underfoot smooths from use, narrow walking tracks mark each trail, but Medusa and Perseus see none of this. Within the synapse, the balance of hundreds of excitatory and inhibitory inputs to a neuron determines the threshold for the action potential to fire. I wonder how many neurotransmitter inputs are required for a person to think suicide. Is the number more than 500? Is it 501? Does a neurotransmitter feel guilty for tipping the balance?

Perseus thinks to use Medusa's abilities for his own ends. He convinces her to travel with him to find Atlas and turn him to stone in revenge against Athena. Along the way, she teaches him how to listen to her snakes, how a soft hiss is more useful than a louder one, how the snakes hold their own counsel and Medusa is not to pay attention. Perseus learns to recognize the differences between the voices, how the ones that were once Medusa's longest hairs are the oldest and so whisper the most useful advice. When they turn Atlas to stone, Athena realizes their alliance and covers for her mistake by naming the Atlas Mountains, the now permanent shoulders holding up heaven and earth. Mom's mountains are the side effects that scare her, the ways in which Dad is still dismissive. But I see how he hugs her, wrapping his body around her curled form, creating a new kind of wall.

I worry that this is my future. That despite not being biologically related to my parents, I was raised in a house that avoided feelings. My parents taught me the language of silence, as their parents had taught them. Mom thinks I'm smart when it comes to mental illness, thinks I must have lots of friends who struggle. She asks what medications they're on, how effective they are, because she hopes they will work for her too. I hear her resentment when I tell her Celexa worked for one of my friends because it, and two other medications, didn't work for her. She struggles to stay on the medications long enough for them to make a difference. I try to explain that a synapse hates change. I wonder where in the world I will be when Mom finds a medication that works for her. Does the amount of guilt correlate to the number of geographic miles?

Back in their columned home, Medusa eventually discloses her rape. Perseus runs around kicking stone men until his feet bleed. Medusa cries for the first time since being turned into a

gorgon, and from her tears spring Pegasus and Chrysaor, the last remnants of Poseidon's abuse. I see a Perseus who is patient with Medusa, who lets her snakes comfort her first, who listens to how exactly he can help her. At her request, Perseus moves each of the stone men out of their home, clearing an open space where they both can redecorate.

Adoption Agreement

1. Please specify your nationality:¹
 - a. American
 - b. Chinese

2. Please specify your ethnicity:²
 - a. White
 - b. Hispanic or Latino
 - c. Black or African American
 - d. Native American or Alaskan Native
 - e. White
 - f. Asian/Pacific Islander
 - g. White
 - h. Other
 - i. White
 - j. White

Your answers to questions 1 and 2 MUST agree

3. Please specify the name by which you are called most frequently:³
 - a. Tinali
 - b. Tilani
 - c. Tionli
 - d. Becky
 - e. Quinn
 - f. Kilpatrick
 - g. T
 - h. TK
 - i. Bitch
 - j. Tianli, as in Tiananmen Square, as in *tiens*, French for “yours”

¹ Under a full moon, invisible horses move in their paddocks. Breath ghosts dance up, the only proof the horse is there. I wonder if they count full moons, how they record the passing of time.

² The outlines of their bodies indistinguishable from each other. Colors mix and shaggy coats make a herd of one, five, eight. I hear them first: the soft rhythmic thud of their feed on packed snow. Does a horse know it is a horse? Do they judge the barn cats for being different?

³ Scout's bay coat only looks copper in the barn's light. When he steps away into shadow, falling snow highlights only his black mane, the curve of his back, and the dock of his tail. I call to him, *Scouty*, and he looks up, ears pointed forward.

4. Please specify your geographic location:⁴
 - a. Hefei, China
 - b. Shrewsbury, Massachusetts
 - c. Meadville, Pennsylvania
 - d. Marquette, Michigan
 - e. Other

5. Short Answer: Where are you from? Like, where are you *really* from?⁵

6. “You’re lucky your parents took you in.”⁶
 - a. True
 - b. False

7. Please specify your ideal family:⁷
 - a. Biological
 - b. Foster
 - c. Adopted
 - d. Horse girls
 - e. Friends
 - f. Families with Children from China reunions
 - g. The seven other girls adopted in my parent’s adoption agency group
 - h. All the horses I have loved
 - i. Greyhound Friends rescue dogs
 - j. The eels of 1000 Steps, Bonaire
 - k. All of the above
 - l. A few of the above
 - m. None of the above

⁴ The trail is light enough for Scout to see. If I squint, I can just make out the shadows that tumble from snowbank into our path.

⁵ I’m on Scout bareback. Burying my fingers in his fuzzy winter coat, he fends off my frostbite. Between my legs, his body heat keeps me warm. I feel the long muscles that run along his backbone shift and slide as each hoof pats the ground.

⁶ If I slide my hand down onto his shoulder, I feel the concussion of hitting the ground ripple up through his suspensory ligament, along the cannon bone, and up across my radius. His skin twitches but accepts my touch.

⁷ I close my eyes against the cold wind. Scout’s ready to run. My left hip drops when his right hind leg steps under him, my right when he steps left. This pattern is intrinsic. I feel his muscles tighten, his back lift. I touch my heels to his sides and he leaps forward.

8. What is your highest educational degree or level of school completed:⁸
- No schooling completed
 - Some Chinese school
 - Completed Chinese school
 - High School graduate, diploma, or GED
 - Bachelor's degree
 - Master's degree
 - Doctorate degree
 - Other
9. Short Answer: Are you interested in adopting children in the future? If yes, international or local?⁹
10. Do you want to connect with your biological parents?¹⁰
- Yes
 - No
 - Not possible
11. The amount your parents paid for your international adoption is equal to your worth.¹¹
- True
 - False

⁸ My body moves with him out of habit. He leans around the turns and I lean with him, ankles like weights keeping my body even with his. Around one turn is the rotting brown couch, the snow preserving the white stuffing inside. When he lowers his head, I drop my hand to his neck, keeping a straight line from my elbow to his mouth.

⁹ I hold the reins in my right hand, while my left hand floats at my side, colder in the wind because there's no mane there to shield it. We fly by the yellow signs marking the laws of the trail: hikers yield to bikers, both yield to horses, to us. It's a cycle we all learn to follow.

¹⁰ My hips never break contact with his spine, move in the way they have for years, in the ways that's comfortable, natural, consenting.

¹¹ We pass the hill leading up to hole 3 from when this land was a golf course. I sit back and slow him to a walk as we approach the landfill. He listens to the gentle pressure of the reins on his neck, steps where I direct him, legs cross legs and we weave through the rocks.

12. Please specify your home:¹²
- a. Hefei, China
 - b. Shrewsbury, Massachusetts
 - c. Meadville, Pennsylvania
 - d. Marquette, Michigan
 - e. Χανιά, Greece
 - f. Woodwind, Bonaire
 - g. USS Enterprise (NCC-1701)
 - h. Becky's apartment, Massachusetts
 - i. Turtle Nest Inn, Grand Cayman
 - j. The Baths, Virgin Gorda
 - k. Elsinore, Denmark
 - l. Any horse barn
 - m. Only children have homes
 - n. Eldhestar, Suðurlandsvegur, Iceland
 - o. Wonderland
 - p. The gods put me in the wrong place
 - q. Other

13. "Aren't orientals like yourself usually in the sciences?"¹³
- a. True
 - b. False

14. Short Answer: You are never more embarrassed by your Chinese heritage than when:¹⁴

¹² On top of the old landfill, we halt. Grass pokes up through the windswept snow. Scout raises his head, ears keen on something in the distance that I can't hear. Maybe he hears the horses back at the barn, the dogs barking their greetings. I pat his neck, feel the muscles bulge as he arches his head.

¹³ Scout knows I usually let him breeze across. I drop his mouth and lean forward the smallest degree. I sit as still as I can to stay out of his way.

¹⁴ As his strides lengthen, reaching for more distance, I feel us rise and drop with the uneven ground. When I ride, my body and mind are too busy to think about anything other than my horse. There's a moment after he pushes off the ground and before his front legs land, that we're suspended in air, floating. For that millisecond, we're flying.

15. What is your religious preference:¹⁵

- a. Protestant
- b. Jewish
- c. Norse
- d. Orthodox Church
- e. Greek myth
- f. Muslim
- g. Celtic
- h. Christian Scientist
- i. Mesopotamian
- j. Atheist
- k. Other

16. You are (circle all that apply):¹⁶

- a. A map of 1994 Hefei that does not exist
- b. A Mongolian birthmark people think is a bruise
- c. Able to eat street meat in Beijing, China
- d. Afraid of Trump's America
- e. Not 100% sure of your birthdate
- f. A Zodiac Wood dog

17. Short Answer: Why might your adoptive family reverse your adoption?¹⁷

¹⁵ I ride to be connected to another body, to move as one with a twelve thousand pound animal. At the end of the landfill, I sit back, reconnect my joints with his body. He stops, and I feel his sides expand against my legs, his breaking shaking both our bodies.

¹⁶ On the walk back, we pass a tree stump, about horse height, with a rust-covered handsaw lodged in the middle. It's barely visible in the darkness of the tail, but we know it's there.

¹⁷ We return to the barn slowly, enough time for Scout to cool down. The woodpecker hunts off to our left. The winds brings the whine of snowmobiles miles away. To return is to come down from adrenaline, to step back from safety.

18. Why did your Birth Mother choose adoption?¹⁸

- a. China's One Child Policy
- b. I was not a boy
- c. She couldn't bring herself to drown me
- d. She wasn't ready to be a mother

19. Short Answer: What is your American Dream?¹⁹

¹⁸ I love Scout for his reckless need to run, his eagerness to try anything I ask of him, the way his tongue sticks out the side of his mouth when he yawns.

¹⁹ As we step back into the barn's light, the other horses greet us. Scout never whinnies back, but his relaxed ears and lowered head say he appreciates it. Without seeing them, I identify the high-pitched Halflinger nicker, the low throat rumble of Percherons, and the pitiful whimper of the lonely Friesian.

How Self-Harm Loves
after "What Pain Wants" by Sonya Huber

Self-harm turns the light on because five hours of sleep is enough.

Self-harm uses the serrated edges of bottle caps to make Venn diagrams on your skin.

Self-harm doesn't like being written about.

Self-harm tries on cardigans in Old Navy's fitting room mirror and compares their sleeve lengths.

Self-harm sits cross-legged next to you on the floor and hands you the knife and the paper towels.

Self-harm uses alcohol to turn your scars red and points out where you missed a spot.

Self-harm doesn't know how to say no.

Self-harm makes four people in a room overwhelming.

Self-harm tested the bite of your office scissors against the back of your hand, and is truly surprised that they can cut.

Self-harm is a verb conjugated in return and guilt.

Self-harm wants to know how long you can hold your breath and not pass out.

Self-harm loves to tell stories like "my friend's cat plays rough," or "I got scraped by the barn door."

Self-harm likes rum better than vodka.

Self-harm doesn't like cognitive dissonance.

Self-harm is frustrated you tattooed over your scars.

Self-harm says to scratch at your wrist with your fingernail until you start to peel up skin.

Self-harm has fun when the car slides on black ice because it knew you were going too fast.

Self-harm draws triangles and 3D boxes across your wrists with black pen while you sit in class.

Self-harm blames the barn cat when your mother asks about your scars.

Self-harm hands you the mane pulling comb at the barn because it knows you can't use it without cutting up your knuckles.

Self-harm whispers to you in a voice of falling rocks that settle over your brain like a blanket.

Self-harm wants you to tense your calf muscles until your compartment syndrome kicks in.

Self-harm reminds you to lift your head high and smile.

Self-harm walks into doorframes and chides you for being clumsy.

Self-harm reminds you it's hard to get blood out of carpet so you should probably move to the sink.

Self-harm uses a knife to scratch mosquito bites.

Self-harm sprawls on the couch because you're sitting on the floor.

Self-harm likes the music really loud, loud to block out your heartbeat.

Self-harm picked out your favorite knife, but let you pick the color.

Self-harm guides your fingers to the dent in your titanium plate, presses down to test the bone's strength underneath.

Self-harm finessed the amount of pressure to draw blood without leaving a scar.

Self-harm laughs at people who ask, "doesn't that hurt?" because they don't understand.

Self-harm is annoyed with you that you woke up.

Self-harm feels guilty for blaming the cat.

Self-harm is disappointed that Bed Bath & Beyond locks up their kitchen knives because how will customers know about their sharpness.

Self-harm imagines coloring in the Venn diagram with sharpies, but can't identify the color in the middle.

Self-harm chews at the skin around your fingernails until it bleeds.

Self-harm wonders what ecstasy is like, but doesn't care about you enough to try it.

Self-harm loves doing the dishes because the soap and water sting the cuts across your fingers.

Self-harm eats 50% of a medium Domino's pizza with pepperoni and pineapple and then throws it up.

Self-harm wonders why you have a paper cut because it doesn't remember that happy accident.

Self-harm peels the scabs off for fun.

Self-harm has graphed the area around your collarbone that never regained feeling after surgery.

Self-harm looks up "love" in the dictionary and hopes that a synonym is not "pain," because it can't be.

The Immortal Jellyfish

We squeezed under the couch and met in the middle. In second grade, I saw things and wanted to try them. We wiggled closer, the tall dressers and white slats of the closet shrunk away. A spider's abandoned web disintegrated when I blew on it. We pulled ourselves along by the wooden slats above us into a spot that pushed our heads into the carpet. We giggled. We counted down. We kissed. And the second our lips touched, we scooted away from each other as fast as we could, heads hitting the edges of the wooden frame. Laughing, we agreed to never do it again.

My first kiss with a boy was consensual.

**

A group of jellyfish is a bloom, swarm, or smack. A group of sexual assault survivors are people.

**

Late at night, the distinction between Crete's olive trees and the Aegean blurs. Below the stone wall, I could hear the goats settling down for bed, the rabbits shifting in their cages, and the soft scent of soil. In the loft, I pushed away from Vassilis and walked around the table cluttered with empty raki bottles, bottles that I had offered to help clean up just moments before. Downstairs, I paused at the door to the room my study abroad roommate and I shared. Looking up to the loft windows, Vassilis's frame blocked the light from inside but I could still make out his beard. Closing the heavy door, I checked and re-checked the lock. I tiptoed past my sleeping roommate, past our clothes strewn from suitcases to floor, past the little kitchenette with its empty cabinets, and into the bathroom. Staring at myself in the mirror, I brushed my teeth twice and half wondered if the centipede that had been behind the sink was sleeping. In the darkness, I could just make out my shape staring back at me, my eyes that held my gaze and couldn't look away.

From the open window next to the shower, I could still smell the soil. Tiles freezing against my bare feet, I paced the room until 3AM.

The next morning, after a breakfast of yogurt, honey, and mountain tea, my professor brought me back to loft. We sat across from each other at that same table now cleaned of raki bottles. The sunglasses in my hands shook as I played with them; I was distracted by the click the arms made when they folded against the table. He listened to everything I said, unmoving, waiting until I was done. I told him what Vassilis had done the night before, about brushing my teeth until even the taste of raki was gone. When I told him about Vassilis watching me from the loft window, my professor said he was probably waiting for an invitation into my room. I told him it was not the first time someone knew me too well. I told him too much.

**

Jellyfish kill more people than sharks do every year. In rape prevention training, girls are taught to yell *fire*, because no one comes when you yell *rape*. Maybe next time I'll yell *jellyfish*.

**

There are upsides to being assaulted, I've found. At restaurants, I have the best seat at the table because I can see everyone in the room. Late at night, I'd rather be alone in the dark than with anyone else.

**

Three months after Greece, I went to Zaza Ink in Massachusetts alone and asked them to tattoo a jellyfish across my ribs. They questioned me, asked if I wanted color, if I wanted shading, if I was *sure* I wanted it on my side. I told them it was my own drawing and a solid black outline was all I wanted. I remember this big bearded guy in a black tee-shirt, black leather vest, and

sleeves of tattoos didn't intimidate me. We talked about poetry and his interests in Whitman and Plath, how English and writing were his favorite classes in college. For the hour I laid there, I didn't flinch once.

**

It took me years to write the word *rape* and even longer to say it aloud. There's something wrong with the word; it sounds right but curls the tongue wrong. It originates from the Latin *rapere*, the French *rapir*, to seize, to abduct, to take by force. Perhaps it's the lack of extra letters, the suddenness of four letters that carry so much weight. It's not a word that can be misspoken, nor is it a word to be misunderstood. It requires the speaker to confront the word and all its implications; it demands too much. It's a word synonymous to guilt, interchangeable by self-blame, and feeds on shame.

Faking denial is easy, but there are only so many ways to mute myself. One way is to throw all my energy into being busy. Another is to make myself a joke. Yet both remain inefficient. Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth talks about sexual assault survivors oscillating between a crisis of life and a crisis of death, between the nature of an event and the nature of its survival. The event and the survival correlate, leaving the victim in a constant state of experiencing both.

**

Just to see if it could be done, researchers in Dallas, Texas created a saltwater/peanut butter mix and fed it to moon jellies. Apparently, they took to it as well as their previous food sources. So now, peanut butter jellyfish exist. That's something. I wonder if the researchers thought about the implications of forcing an unnatural food on these sweet jellies. I wonder how natural it is to feel disgusted by my own body.

**

My sleep patterns drift, amorphous, untethered, the complex shape of insomnia, or a jellyfish. A smile is the easiest lie. I know how to make myself so tired I can't cry. I know I cannot forget my own blame. I know not wanting to die is hard work. I watch the banners of lights from passing cars dance across my ceiling, never fully reaching into the corners of the room, and I know.

**

That dead jellyfish washed up on the beach? The one you're poking with a stick? It will still sting you.

**

I still feel his hand on my shoulder, his alcohol breath against my ear, his rough tongue too large for my mouth. I feel him when I don't want to in the touch of others. From across a room, he smiles at me; I blink, remind myself to breathe, and suddenly it's just the harmless flirtations of a colleague. A man who looks like him sits in a chair outside my office and I have to remind myself not to stare. I smile at him as I walk by, but wonder if he knows, or cares, that it's not genuine. I wake up in the night mid-scream, suffocating. Blindly, I push off the invisible hand covering my mouth. A whisper, "I enjoyed our time together," his voice tingles in the back of my mind. I don't dream in color; I dream in the weight of a body pressed unwelcome against mine.

**

Deeper water jellyfish are red, purple, green, yellow, striped. The jellies that live closer to the surface tend to be colorless. Jellyfish navigate every ocean, and even venture into freshwater lakes and ponds. When I swim in the Caribbean, invisible ones find me. I find red ones in the Mediterranean, taunting me with their flower-like organs.

**

I blur my traumas, forgetting where the symptoms of one bleed into the symptoms of another. I don't remember when the panic attacks started, but I've perfected the act of hiding them. I let the emotions roll through me, thrashing until I let them out. Sometimes the aftermath of trauma is worse than the trauma. But I don't let them out. I hide my panic behind schoolwork, days of eating too much or not eating at all, and countless episodes of *House* and *Sherlock*, loving the characters' suicidal tendencies and wondering what it's like to stick a knife in a wall socket.

**

Our first night in Athens, while our cohort slept, I followed my professor through the city looking for live music. In one little open-air restaurant, we found two musicians playing a bouzouki and a tambourine and a man singing. We sat at a little table and ate chicken livers and potatoes. I fell in love with the sounds of *S'agapo giati eisai oraia*, a folk love song, and my professor translated it for me. The small crowd knew most of the songs, and their voices rose to the rooftops of the narrow cobblestone street.

**

Adults who recalled childhood sexual assault only upon the trigger of a second assault often maintain a silence of the trauma. This decision not to speak is not the same as an inability to speak. These unremembered events steal agency from the victim even to admit traumatic amnesia. Rather, they relive the events through flashbacks and dreams. I write about this assault because I can, because the dreams may control my nights but I have a say if they control the days.

**

Jellyfish mature from polyp to medusa. There's one species nicknamed "the immortal jellyfish" because it has the ability to travel back in time to the polyp stage. At times of stress, the cells

convert back into pre-mature polyps and the jellyfish's life starts over. I wonder if each stressful meltdown is an attempt to regain a previous self. I wonder if the jellyfish prefers the previous self.

**

Jellyfish survive without brains, hearts, ears, or bones. However, some species have 24 eyes, some of which can see in color, and they can breathe through their thin skin. I guess that compensates. Instead of brains, they have nerve nets: a system of interconnected neurons without tangible form. These nets are flexible, allowing the jellyfish to sense changes in the environment and respond accordingly. Many have bioluminescent organs that glow in patterns to attract prey or distract predators. I wonder if jellyfish have memories. I wonder if they ever hurt each other on purpose.

**

The word trauma comes from the Greek τραῦμα meaning “wound.” However, this definition originally referred only to an injury of the body; it wasn't until Freud came along and used *trauma* to refer to an injury of the mind.

Greek words nag at me. The curves and accents of the words captivate me, the ancientness of the alphabet and its continued usage today. They compel me to interrogate the etymology, the sounds, making me repeat it until I think I'm saying it right. While in Greece I learned the word χαρμολύπ—*harmolypi*—which translates roughly into “beautiful sadness.” It's the feeling of being both sad and joyous at the same time. It's the liminal space between a crisis of life and a crisis of death.

Even with the assault, Greece fascinates me. I cannot forget my obsession with the language, how I have a Greek dictionary app on my phone, the depth of the culture and history, the caldera of Santorini and how goats can run vertically up rock.

**

Moon jellyfish get their name from their white color and shape. Where they swarm, the waters turn milky, as if white cloth floats just under the surface. I held one in my hands once, feeling the slime ooze between my fingers. It laid upside down, its tentacles hung away from its body. A jellyfish doesn't have the muscle to move away from a hand. I wonder if that position was uncomfortable.

**

A few nights during our stay at Vassilis's farm, he would play the bouzouki or lyra for us. Sometimes he sang, sometimes he brought friends over who drank until they fell out of their chairs, until Vassilis had to pull them away from our table of ten college women. When he played, Vassilis rocked to the music, his thick beard resting just above the strings, his eyes closed.

The night he assaulted me, our cohort had gathered in the loft for dancing and drinking. We learned the traditional line dancing styles of *hasapiko* and *sirtaki*. We each took a turn in the ouzo dance, tiptoeing in a repeating pattern around a shot glass of raki while our cohort threw white paper napkins at us.

Eventually, everyone cleared out to go to bed, and only my professor, Vassilis, and I remained at the table. My professor stood to leave, and he asked if I was going to stay. Vassilis was still playing the lyra softly and I decided to stay because I loved the music. We talked about my studies in college and my trip so far in Greece. He asked if there was a song I liked so far,

and I told him about my first night in Athens listening to music. Vassilis picked up his bouzouki and played *S'agapo giati eisai oraia*.

Maybe that lulled me into a false sense of security. Maybe I'm an idiot for not reading the signs. I walked into this situation, but more importantly, I didn't leave. I can't forget that.

**

"I can't imagine you letting someone rape you," my friend says when I tell her.

**

Jellyfish are plankton, not fish. Their name *cnidarian scyphozoa*, the true jellyfish, combines the Greek for "stinging nettle" and "cup." They are really sea jellies. Their bodies cocoon poison, the kind that seeps into a victim's flesh and creates memory, the kind that is both respected and feared.

**

His tongue explores my mouth and now my own feels too big. A large beer belly rubs against mine. Hands pin my wrists down. I can't flip myself over. I wake up when I kick the wall, and I wonder if that ever bothers my neighbor. My skin crawls and I drag myself out of bed to shower at four in the morning. I scrub until I can't feel my own skin; I turn the water temperature up until I'm so red I look sunburned, until the steam coats the mirror and I can't see anything. The steam patterns the mirror like the bells of a hundred moon jellies.

**

The jellyfish defense mechanism includes its stings and its easily hidden transparent body. When prey become tangled in the tentacles, pressure inside the nematocysts cause venomous threads to uncoil and hug the unwilling victim. The first time I was stung, I was five years old. While

snorkeling around St. Thomas, I swam through a swarm of almost invisible stringy jellyfish and came out covered in itchy red welts that left scars I scratched at for months.

**

The Portuguese man-of-war is not a jellyfish. Rather it is a siphonophore, a colony of individual organisms that only survive by working together. The colony on top is gas-filled, which the jellyfish can deflate in order to sink from threats on the surface. Like a network of neurons, they must all decide to fight or flee. An indecisive jellyfish is a dead one.

**

My ghosts followed me across the country, from Pennsylvania to Massachusetts to Michigan, into conversations about a colleague's thesis on *Fifty Shades of Gray*, into my freshmen classroom and a student's lewd comment, into my apartment at night when I can't lock my door just right. Each night I watch myself lock the bronze deadbolt, hearing the solid click as it finds home. But it doesn't sound right. The passing cars light up the walls but their gaze falls short of the lock. I hear other people coming home; I hear them close their doors; I imagine they know how to lock them correctly. In the darkness, I stand in front of my door unlocking and locking it until it feels safe. The metal stays warm from my fingers.

Binge

1. In high school, we drew butterflies on each other's wrists to keep us safe. The dare was not to self-harm until the sharpie faded.
2. While suicide is spiritually unacceptable in Hinduism, the discipline does tolerate the right to die through fasting to the point of starvation. I wonder, then, how they define suicide, and about the bearing that definition has on behavior.
3. In Mauritania, fatness is considered an indicator of wealth, and so a marriage asset in women. I wonder if those women ever write about their weight, if they ever regret why they are loved.
4. Croutons: a small piece of fried or toasted bread used as a garnish. Croutons: a food Mom didn't let me eat. When the waiter brought my Caesar salad, Mom moved in to fork the croutons off onto a spare plate. Once she finished, I could start eating. She took them off my salad until I learned to, until I felt guilty for eating one.
5. In the February of my freshmen year of high school, I collected a handful of acetaminophen from the various bottles we had lying around the house. From these bottles, I carefully took enough, but not too much, that the loss would be obvious. They pooled in my hand, like a handful of pebbles, pieces of Styrofoam, too lightweight to kill. While my parents were in Boston for a concert, I locked myself in the upstairs bathroom and swallowed them. I don't know how long it took until I was nauseous and vomiting,

with my head resting on the edge of the toilet bowl. I remember that I had kicked the white bathmat into a corner. I remember the comforting solidity of the bluish wall behind me, the coolness of the toilet. And I wondered if this was what hitting rock bottom felt like.

6. When I was eleven, my horseback riding trainer taught me that the key to riding was not understanding equine anatomy or balancing my body with the horse or even creating a partnership, but in knowing when to put down the fork.
7. One winter when I came home from college, Mom put one of the corsets she used in her Boston College physiology lab on me. Standing in front of the TV while Dad leaned around us to watch basketball, she pulled it tight until my waist looked photoshopped, like how a muscle must feel hugged by its fascia. *Too bad you can't look like this all the time*, she said. I wonder if Dad's view got better as I got thinner.
8. Binge-eating disorder – If a horse eats just a couple extra pounds of grain, they can colic. They'll thrash on the ground, kicking at their stomachs, unable to voice their pain. They'll roll until their insides twist past the point of surgical help. They can't stop themselves from eating too much but they don't know it can kill them.
9. Ketones: a symptom of diabetes, the liver creates these molecules when the body burns fats, not glucose. Once, after eating seafood in Narragansett, Rhode Island, Mom stopped me in the middle of the sidewalk, leaned in close, and smelled my breath. She asked my father if he too smelled the ketones' fruity tell. He didn't.

10. In science laboratories studying metabolism, mice are force-fed until their organs threaten to rupture, until their fur dulls, until the only sign of life are twitching whiskers. They yield results until they die.
11. I've had my funeral planned since I was six years old. There would be a variety of Pop Rocks candies in a bowl by the door. No flowers, because even in death I imagined my allergies finding me. There would be rock music for people to sing and dance. Everyone would wear blue so the reception room resembled the ocean.
12. I came home from high school one day to find Mom at the kitchen table stitching up her finger. She had a mat of gauze, a glass of white wine, needle in one hand, her teeth held the thread tight. When I asked, she said, "the knife slipped; could you tie a knot here please?"
13. The first time I hurt myself, I was twelve years old. I took the sharp end of a Plackers dental floss and scratched it against my skin until it bled. I was careful to keep the scar under my watchband. Each time I look at my watch, I reset the band's placement so it covers the scar.
14. Binge (verb) – when I wasn't paying attention, the pony Spice snuck her way into the feed room and knocked over a can of grain. I didn't hear the noise so I don't know how long she ate before I found her. After pulling her head out of the can and firmly shutting

the door, I hand-walked her, watching for any signs she might be in trouble: a sideways swaying of the head, an impulse to throw herself at the ground to roll, sweaty or tense flanks.

15. Each time I take pills, whether Tylenol, vitamins, or Vicodin, I wonder how many it would take to kill me. I imagine them collecting like moonstones in the sand; I hold their bitter taste between tongue and tooth before swallowing. Sometimes I take Tylenol when I don't need it. Sometimes I wonder if everyone has some form of chronic pain so I should just suck it up and deal with it pill-free. Sometimes I believe pills can numb both physical and mental pain. I once pretended red grapes were placebos and I ate through the bag until I felt sick.

16. When Odysseus resisted the Sirens' call, they drowned themselves out of frustration at their failure. Wisp-like bodies sinking to rest among their shipyard of corpses, faces turned upward, watching the surface.

17. When I hate myself for getting lower than a B grade, or when I don't finish my homework before the day it is due, I don't let myself eat the rest of the day.

18. Dad tells me, "pain is just the body complaining." I hear, *just learn to ignore it.*

19. Binge (noun) – what I did in college out of boredom.

20. I am still working on erasing myself, but my stomach pokes holes in my silence.
21. Each time I came home from college and my mother picked me up from Logan's airport, she always had a comment about my weight. Before we passed the New Balance cruise ship building docked at the Warrior Ice Arena, the giant Citgo sign, before emerging from the Ted Williams tunnel, I'd hear something like *you've gained some weight. Getting a little heavy, aren't you. You could lose a few pounds.* Her words filled the ever-growing space in the car between us, placeholders to all the things I wanted to tell her about school.
22. One year, I joked with my father that if I came home from college having developed an eating disorder, Mom would probably throw a party. I imagined cupcakes with blue frosting and the warning to not eat too many. I imagined different types of salad: spinach, pasta, fruit, coleslaw. I imagined not eating at my own party. Dad agreed.
23. After my first year of graduate school, I had lost twenty pounds. I attributed it to stress and working at a horse barn six days a week. Throwing and stacking sixty-pound hay bales or trying to stay with a bucking horse is a good workout. My doctor tells me, "please don't lose anymore." My mother says, *but you could lose a bit more.*
24. In Japanese culture, suicide erases all misdeeds of a life and raises that life to spiritual enlightenment. Across Asian cultures in general, suicide has the power to make an individual worthy of life.

25. One Christmas, my aunt gave me a Make Your Own Rock Candy kit, much to my mother's displeasure. I set it up on the dining room table, pushing aside *Science* journals and articles about motor phenotypes and neurobiological dysfunctions in lab rats. Every morning I checked it, believing I could see the sugar crystals growing. Before I could taste the sweetness, before my teeth could hurt from the sugar, Mom threw it out. The science journals never got thrown out. They stack up on bookshelves, the dining room table, the corner behind the filing cabinet.
26. I stand in the Walmart aisles comparing nutrition labels. I decide if I really need Cheez-Its with their six grams of fat per serving, or if the price of chicken is worth the protein. Mom's voice always loud in the back of my mind comparing grams of fats, sugars, sodium, proteins, guilt. Walmart's blinding lights make me squint to read the labels.
27. To prevent an accidental overdose, acetaminophen brands reduced the maximum daily dose for adults from eight pills to six pills.
28. When the TV is the only light in the house and I am the only one awake, I steal my father's toffee candies. The crumbs collect in the breaks between my fingers and I make sure to lick up each one so not to leave a trace. I shake the container, rearranging the remaining candies, so it doesn't look like any are missing. I've only dropped the container once. I stood on one foot waiting for the crash to wake the house.

29. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among Asian-Americans ages 15-34.

Although cancer is the first, the cultural links between suicide and honor run deep in blood, blur international borders, bleed into adoptive families.

30. Too often I stand in front of my mirror in the morning trying on two or three different outfits because I can't decide which one I hate my body less in. Dresses and skirts accentuate the wrong curves. Jeans are usually a safe bet, but only with a belt to pull the waistline thinner. I used to love cargo pants until my mother told me they are "masculine" clothes, they make the hips boxy, not sexy.

31. My Mom identifies people by their weight: "The one who's really overweight." "She's a little chunky." "He could cut a few pounds." I try to point out other aspects: the color of their shirt, the braid in their hair, but she only sees what they could lose.

32. From downstairs, I hear the floorboards squeak as Mom tiptoes into the bathroom to weigh herself on the scale. I wonder if the floor squeaks in the same way when I do this.

33. The only time I binge-drank myself to blackout level was one night during my second semester of college. A friend, who I knew had a girlfriend, pulled me down onto his lap at a party. Drunk, he fumbled with my belt, got a hand halfway into my jeans. I tipped his drink onto him and as he swore, I ran. Another friend brought a six-pack; I drank my way through most of the bottles. He let me sleep it off on his bed. I saw both boys Monday morning in Intro to Environmental Science.

34. When I think about teaching a class with 35 students in it or when I think about someone reading my personal essays, I throw up.
35. Purposefully starving oneself or overeating are forms of self-harm.
36. My senior year of high school, I stood on the roof of a parking garage with some friends to watch the New Year's fireworks. While they all looked up, watching the colors paint the city sky, I couldn't stop looking down, something in me daring me to jump. I leaned against the concrete wall, wondered how far I'd have to tip forward to fall accidentally. Firework explosions roared in my ears, the way everything feels distant right before a loss of consciousness. The sidewalks so far below, the concrete comfotingly solid, the lack of people to land on, it all looked better, right.
37. I try to remember Mom's words aren't solely her own. She's an echo of her father, the result of his abuse, of being his daughter.
38. Mom bought a box of sugar cubes, *for the horses*, she said. Sometimes I took one for myself.
39. Sometimes I spend ten hours in my graduate school office, and then I go to the barn for three hours after. I know the horses' feeding schedules, how much oats, alfalfa, or beet pulp, is right for their diet. I divvy out two flakes of hay per horse, three in winter. Sometimes I forget to eat.

40. I want another writer to describe the way he or she imagined the pills in my hand before I took them. I want someone else to read an imagined version of my body broken at the bottom of a parking garage, resting among a shipyard of corpses. I think about how Karen Green writes about David Foster Wallace. The way Hunter S. Thompson writes about Ernest Hemingway. The way Tom Wolfe writes about Hunter S. Thompson. The way we all still write about Sylvia Plath.

41. Mom shrinks. Both my parents seem to take up less and less space each time I visit. Her once athletic frame now looks used up, like the skin doesn't drape right. Mom has to force herself to eat when she's stressed. Currently, she weighs less than 110. And yet, she's not happy, she's not proud, she's not confident. She's not all the things she told me I would be if I were that thin. I worry that I start to see my own tendencies in her: driving closer to the Jersey barriers, a longer look at the knife, the behaviors of someone who is tired of trying.

42. Virginia Woolf died by drowning herself in 1941. Just in 2017 alone, Lake Superior claimed nine bodies. Maybe it will claim mine.

43. Binge (etymology) – “to soak,” origin unknown

Contrapasso

Minos Kalokerinos was the first to find marine styled pottery at Knossos in 1878. By 1940, many of these Minoan octopus amphoras moved to the Heraklion Archaeological Museum on Crete where I traced their shapes into a notepad. I found octopi curled inside tires on the ocean floor on Bonaire in 2013. The conservation teams recycled tires to the sea floor where they provide homes for marine life and corals. I don't want to be in my own body anymore. Do opposites really attract? When a shark swims overhead, the network of chromatophores and specialized muscles protect the octopus. Tentacles hug black rubber, cells learning how to mimic this foreign texture. Outside their tires, fish have already memorized the rubber maze. I wonder if the octopus trusts its body's ability to remain unseen. Every ten days or so, the octopus darts from rock crevice to tire to hollow coconut shells, changing colors as it goes. Each new home with new threats, new sharks, same body. I wonder how long it takes to find a home.

The tarpon doesn't know its protruding jaw and bulging eyes make it fearsome. The Latin name for tarpon is *megalops*, meaning "large-eyed." Fly fishers, since the 1880s, sought out these fish for the challenge of wrestling an eight-foot long, two hundred pound body. I know all the ways I've tried to not be me. If the tarpon knew of the reputation of its black eyes, would it be afraid of itself? The hissing sound of my dive regulator and the stream of bubbles rising from my tank scare the tarpon easily. I think the burn from fire coral more resembles stinging nettle, not poison ivy. Tarpon are air-breathing fish. They gulp air to fill their swim bladders, rolling their bodies against the surface to exchange gases. I peer into the greenish shadows under the docks, hoping to catch a glimpse of silver scales, a waving tail fin. I envy the way their scales disguise them under docks. I too want darkness to hide me.

How do we forgive the parts of ourselves we hate? At night, nurse sharks become thirteen-foot bottom-feeding catfish. At night, a quick snap of teeth, another dead fish. They flash in and out of moonlight, but always return to the reef by dawn. I wonder if somewhere there is a shark that does not want to be a shark. The origin of the name “nurse shark” is unclear. Nurse sharks have adapted to perch on their fins in the sand, pumping water in through their mouths and out through their gills to breathe. They hunt by sucking prey from the sand, like a human baby nursing. During the day, they nap on top of each other under ledges or within crevices of the reef. The shark that gets bored probably daydreams of deeper reefs, or of the warm shallows where she was born. The archaic word *nusse* means cat shark. I wonder if love can save us from life. The Old English word for sea-floor shark is *hurse*. I swim over their group huddled together watching the world pass by from under the same rock.

I try to stay close to the things that make me glad I am alive: *horses, oceans, autumn, poetry*. When northern lobsters migrate south, they march single file, pushing the body in front of them to keep the line moving. *Mark Doty, Lauren Slater, Amy Tan, Philip Lopate*. Steam whines through the lobster’s shell when its body is boiled alive. There’s a reason you put the lid on immediately after; lobsters spend the three minutes it takes them to die, screaming. *Inferno, Paradise Lost, Maggie Nelson, The Shining*. Anatomy explains lobsters don’t feel pain the same ways as humans. We assume the act of a body curling in on itself is a pain response, but the research of electrically shocking crustaceans is inconclusive. *Se7en, Fuel, Prufrock, Girl Interrupted*. It does not mean they don’t feel pain in other ways. In parts of East Asia, kitchen shears cut the lobster apart, while it is still alive. Blue blood stains white flesh, and the separated

legs twitch of their own accord. Tails curl under, a reflex, a last attempt to stay whole. *February, Greece, Bonaire, Virginia Woolf*. In grocery stores, they suffocate in tanks, antennae pushed against the glass, tails uncurled, relaxed, waiting. *Language, travel, rain*. I've never liked the taste of lobster meat. I cringe watching my southern cousins snap lobster shells, using their thumbs to squeeze the last bits of meat from legs.

The *Abdopus* octopus, or algae octopus, pulls its body out of tide pools, feels the pressure of gravity hug its bones. It crawls across the rocks looking for crabs and shellfish, holding its breath until skin feels tight and suction cups dry. Can I stop time when I move from land to sea? When a fish is caught in a net and rises out of the water, do the other fish think it becomes nothing more than a soulless skeleton? I don't want to remember the first time I learned things don't come back. What do barnacles write on rocks before they die? I wonder if the pattern suction cups and slime leave is a poem in iambic pentameter.

The picture I take on Bonaire of the ballyhoo, swimming near the surface in the evening, outlives the fish itself. I wonder by how much. What should I have said to save you? Hagfish are the first to tear at a whale carcass that's sunk miles to the ocean floor. Fishermen nicknamed the Humboldt squid "diablo rojo" for the way they flash red in anger. I sometimes think like personalities attract. I should have recorded your voice singing pop songs in our high school hallway. I should have recorded the sound of your laugh because now I don't remember it. I flip through my childhood photo album of fish, and only fish. Each blurry photo resurrects its own memory, and I remember how long it took to get the perfect picture of the transparent squirrelfish, the fear from almost swimming into a four-foot barracuda, its scales turned from

silver to black with rage, its mouth opened slightly in warning. Again, I came too close. I remember what the tree looks like where you died. Hagfish chew a hole in the whale's side, making a home sheltered by ribs. I want to feel as safe on land as I do in the water. I love the crunch of a parrotfish beak biting at coral. It's loud against the crackling of sand against sand, the distant hum of a boat, and the constant whirl of waves. In 2016, I argued with my uncle because he showed off his saltwater tank like it was a trophy.

Standing on the beach in front of the Turtle Nest Inn on Grand Cayman, the moon wakes in me and I become the horseshoe crab, the nesting turtle, the stingray moving in the sand. When I see scars in straight lines, I always assume they're self-inflicted. Baby barracudas grow up in mangrove nurseries; the trees provide sanctuary from predators, from stray currents. I wonder if a mangrove is what it means to be truly safe. My friend has fresh cuts on the back of her hand and she tells me this is the lowest she's ever been. I think about how I cage myself: the bars that bleed that I've etched into my skin. When I was six on this same beach, I found a bone with miniature rows of teeth. Someone at the inn told me it was the lower jaw of a baby nurse shark. Seventeen years later, I Googled it and learned it is actually the pharyngeal jaw of a parrotfish. I think about how the moon jellyfish doesn't apologize for healing itself after an injury. Within two days, it's rearranged its cells to compensate for the loss. It's taken me years to understand trauma can form scar tissue. There's sea magic in the humpback whale's eerie song, the sneakiness of morays as they weave through coral heads. There's magic in the way currents shape the sea floor, the rock beds. I see contrapasso in the whiteness of scars, the comforting red of blood, the intentional gouging of an organ whose purpose is to protect. Eventually, the

barracuda has grown too big for safety. I wonder at what age the confines of the mangroves start to feel like a cage.

Each octopus decorates their home with shell fragments and small rocks. Dig in the sand and scatter treasures. Cut your skin on rock. Spear the octopus between the eyes to sever the nerve. On shore, beat the carcass against a rock, again and again and again, to tenderize the meat and wring out the water. Grill over charcoal. Season with fresh lemon. Serve with raki. Eat. Eat and be at home.

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