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**THIS
BORING
APOCALYPSE**

**BRANDI
WELLS**

I try to fit her legs inside my mouth

She struggles, tries to kick away and keeps almost kicking my face.

Stop, I tell her, *or I'll make you*.

She doesn't care. Keeps kicking. I grab her ankles and weigh them down with my legs, my body's weight. I press my mouth against her knee. First one knee and then the other. It's smooth, but tastes bitter, feels bristly and undercooked. I open my mouth wide and try to pull her, really pull her, until the thing I want is inside and therefore fully mine.

She keeps kicking, so I remove her legs. I just rip them off. They won't torment me any longer. I won't worry about the distance between the legs and me, what might be happening to the legs while they're away. The legs break off clean, crisp. Now, they're an accessory.

Those are fabulous, someone says.

Beautiful, another person says.

I nod and smile. I know they are good legs, firm legs, legs I can really grip. Legs I can do something with. I take

them to the park, put them on a bench beside me and cross them, la-dee-dah. The sun shines on us, tans skin, warms insides. It's a lovely afternoon.

Later she calls me from work to say, *I miss my legs*. She cries long hours into the phone, but I don't listen. I have grown accustomed to not listening, the blocking of words, the blocking of bad and not okay and less than thrilling. *I am less than thrilling*, she says, but I am not listening so I cannot be sure she says this. I think she says it. I imagine she says it. It's the kind of thing she would say.

The legs begin to stiffen

They are no longer malleable. I have trouble bending them into shapes. They will not cross or uncross and I cannot strut them as if they're walking. The skin feels hard. There are sizable bumps I never noticed before and believe me, I should have noticed. I have felt these legs. I have had these legs inside my mouth. They are familiar legs. So these bumps worry me.

I try to give her legs back but she doesn't want them.

No, she says. She has become accustomed to legless life. She drags herself everywhere and has developed shapely and muscular arms.

They are beautiful arms, I say. But I don't know what's under that skin. Muscles bulge on her arms, but there are more bumps, red bumps that ooze clear liquid. *Beautiful*, I say.

Since neither of us wants them, I put her legs in the hall closet. *Every item in its place*, I say. I will not think of things I cannot see.

She says she is self-conscious about her arms and

wears a sweater.

You don't have to do that, I say. Your arms are beautiful.

She tugs the sweater down over her arms, puts gloves on, and tucks the ends of the gloves into her sweater. She sweats but won't take the sweater off. She wears the sweater to work. She wears it to bed. I walk in on her in the shower and she has the sweater on. She screams for me to get out. Perhaps it is because her sweater is wet and a wet sweater is not as effective as a dry sweater.

It's okay, I say, but she says she doesn't care.

Sometimes I feel lonely and I take the legs out of the hall closet and hold them on the couch.

I only do it when I'm alone. I wait until she leaves for work, dragging herself out the front door and down the street. Then I cradle the legs and press my mouth to flesh. The flesh has more give now and the stiffening has relaxed. The bumps aren't affixed to one place anymore. They float in what feels like soggy sponge. I move them with my mouth, carefully, because I am afraid the skin will split and all the bumps will pour out. I put the legs away before she gets home from work. I feel uncomfortable about them and I'm not sure she would understand.

**She is gone long hours and I worry she is
seeing someone else so I cut off her arms**

Without arms she cannot drag herself to work. Without arms she cannot drag herself anywhere. We will stay here together in the house we've grown accustomed to with its floral couch and claw foot tub. We have made a home for ourselves and she will respect that.

Sometimes when I tire of looking at her, I take her outside and leave on her on the front porch. She is quiet and watches birds and squirrels climb up tree trunks.

I sit inside with the legs, tracing my mouth over flesh and pulling them to my body, warming the skin with my skin. I only bring her back inside when it gets dark.

Even with these breaks, I tire of her lounging around the house, always in the way, always underfoot.

I wish you would do something, I say, but she doesn't answer. *You can still roll*, I say. *You are acting pitiful for no reason. Obviously you can roll. I have seen you roll.* I pick her up and carry her out into the street. *There*, I say. *Roll away.* I push her with my foot, a light kick, just enough to get her started.

She rolls but has trouble keeping herself straight. She veers off into the ditch and I have to put her into the middle of the road over and over. Eventually she quits rolling and just closes her eyes.

Okay, I say. We'll go back inside.

She grows less beautiful

It is hard to look at her. Her legs and arms were once strong and firm and expendable. I worry about her expendable parts now. How many are left? What can she survive without? I worry I won't possess the skill to make the necessary cuts. I worry how long it will take to whittle her down to the smallest viable version of herself and what will be left then? Will I even like what's left?

Her appendix seems an easy choice. *You do not need it*, I tell her, gouging it out with clean deep cuts. She twists and turns, but the appendix comes out easily. It glistens, hardly drips. I toss her into a bathtub of ice and she cringes but can go nowhere. I try to leave her to herself, but I use some of the ice to make myself margaritas on the rocks. She used to love margaritas on the rocks.

Do you remember? I ask, *how you loved margaritas on the rocks?*

She doesn't remember.

Do you remember? I ask, *the time you peed down the side of my car, telling me that you could pee standing up?*

But she doesn't answer. Only shivers and closes her eyes.

With all her shivering there can be hardly any peace at all. *Quiet*, I tell her, but from the bathroom there's a constant rattling noise. I hear it in the hallway, the kitchen, the living room and even in the front yard. I can't enjoy meals. Every time I try to take a bite, rattle. Rattle. Rattle. Rattle. I eat loud foods. Celery sticks and carrots. Potato chips. But these foods are not loud enough to mask her noise.

**In the mornings I take her outside
to lie in the sun and feel warm**

I lay her in the sunniest part of the yard. I rub her body with suntan lotion and place mirrors all around her torso, so the sun cooks her.

Are you going to eat me? she asks.

I hold her up to the sun and look at her body. I imagine sandwiches and stew and porridge and breakfast burritos and I look at her leathered, crinkling skin.

No, I say. *I do not think I can eat you.*

I gather slender people and cook them in the sun.

Sbbb, I tell the slender people, *sbbb*.

But it is hard for them to listen because I have cracked their skulls open delightfully.

You are delightful, I tell them.

They cook and cook until their bodies are delicious brown leather that I cover with garlic and cracked black pepper and olive oil. I take their small bodies inside to share with her, but she tells me, *NO*, she does not like olive oil.

To impress her I tan my body and it is so tan, so

brown, so cracked and leathery. But she is not impressed. She will not open her eyes when I stand over her tub of ice water. She won't even shiver. She won't give me the satisfaction of a shiver and her shivers are so satisfying. I can subsist off only shivers for whole years of my life. In fact, for the first seventeen years of our relationship, I did.

To spite her I practice being beautiful

I hold it for one minute. I am beautiful for one minute. Then I try five minutes. Ten minutes. Half an hour. After a few weeks I am beautiful for hours at a time. Eventually I am beautiful for days. I can be beautiful in my sleep. I lie beside her ice tub to show her and she shouts, attempting to wake me every few hours to assure me that, *YES*, I am still beautiful and she is still watching me and no not for a moment was I ever not beautiful.

I bring her a pet bird

But she will not hold it. She will not stroke its feathers or hold it to her chest. I know she does not have hands or arms, but I offer to hold the bird to her face or bosom and she refuses. She wants nothing to do with the bird, though it's a lovely young bird, chirping and flapping its blue speckled wings. She closes her eyes and sinks into the ice water.

I hold the bird under the water with her and I tell her to look. *Look*. But she won't respond. She doesn't respond when the bird thrashes or when the bird ceases all thrashing. I leave the bird floating in the water, so when she's feeling more personable, there will be a bird waiting for her. A beautiful companion.

She is becoming less and less responsive, sleeping long hours, keeping her eyes closed, so I place an ad in the paper, searching for her replacement. A string of people sends me letters. All of the letters are blank, but this doesn't seem out of line with the ad I placed, which was just me thinking about placing an ad, but never doing it.

The legs are blistered and sopping with pus

I don't know what to do with them. They should have toughened and dried out by now, but still they leak. I try to hold them, but the skin gives way, collapsing around my hands. As the skin splits, the bumps I've worried about pour out. They're round and spongy and black. I squish one in my hand and yellowed fluid leaks out. It smells like butter and salt and it stains my hands, my nails. I hold the legs and they leak onto my lap and I am soaked, coated.

I put the legs into a food dehydrator and I cover them with barbeque sauce because barbeque sauce is an important part of my culture, a part of my heritage. Here, everything is pork. People wear shirts with smiling pigs plastered across the front. People zest pigs to create ham dust. There is nothing more volatile than a pig that's just been zested. They hide in corners and squeal if anyone goes near them. They could bite off entire hands and no one could really be angry because, FUCK, you just zested the poor thing, you bastard.

Everyone I know has a secret barbeque recipe or they know which restaurant serves the best barbeque. Often, people carry bottles of barbeque sauce under their clothes and they pull the bottle out and hold you down and force you to eat the sauce. You will think it is delicious and you will say so or they will do other things.

But the legs shrivel up inside the food dehydrator and the barbeque sauce dries too much to flavor the meat. I try to feed her the barbeque legs anyway and she eats because she is starving and she asks if I got the sauce from someone else and I say *no. No.* Of course I make my own sauce. I have a sense of pride. I would not shame myself that way. Sometimes people wander into my yard, asking for the sauce. They come with empty jugs, buckets, and sometimes they just cup their hands and wait.

After about half a leg she quits eating. She stares at the leg and then turns her head to one side, refusing to let me feed her any more. She can tell. She can tell by the bone, by its shape, that it is her leg.

Good for digestion, I tell her. *I swear it's the best thing for you.*

I do not care for her feminine mystique

I am a woman too, I tell her and I cut off her breasts. She doesn't watch me do it, but I know she feels it, feels the jagged, sloppy cuts. She feels the pulling and the breaking of skin as I rip fatty tissue away from its base.

I hold one severed breast up, but she won't look, so I discard them both.

Later her lopped-off breasts grow onto the palms of my hands. It is difficult to touch things with these mounds of flesh in my hands. It is a numb feeling, like wearing many layers of gloves and knowing underneath the layers my hands are dirty and dry. Knowing that moisture is not soon coming. Knowing pores will continue their drying process, their shrinking process, until they are no longer capable of absorbing any sort of liquid. No longer capable of expelling sweat and waste. This is a nervous feeling, an inhibition.

Whenever I leave the house I wear gloves so no one will see. I worry there will be instances which will require the removal of these gloves. Someone will need to

inspect my hands. It will be a hands inspector. They will be certified and will have the necessary tools to inspect hands. *Remove your gloves*, they will tell me and then they will hold my wrists so I cannot withdraw my hands and everyone will look at my hands.

Oh my god, everyone will say and they will reject me.
We all reject you, they will say.

In the absence of her arms, I grow lonely

There are not enough arms in my life. I consider their size and softness, suppleness, the delicate bones prone to fracture, the crook of an elbow, the honesty found in that useful hinge. I try to collect arms, but I'm unsuccessful. Other people have a more respectable number of arms. These people shouldn't be so pompous about their collections. I have been collecting for such a brief time. Why shouldn't they be expected to share or at least direct me to their source?

I place an ad in the paper requesting arms for my collection and people line up on my lawn, gripping the arms of their children, their spouses, their friends, their neighbors.

Are these for me? I ask.

The people nod vigorously. *Please, use this one*, one woman says.

No, this one, another says.

No, no, no, someone towards the back of the line says. *Look at these arms. Superior arms. Flawless.*

Don't worry, I say. *I can use all the arms.* I go down the line and pull the arms off each person. Some of the

arms come off easily with enough pulling and some are a struggle, pieces of tissue and muscle clinging the arm to the torso, so people team up to help me sever the connections. *Thank you*, I tell them. *Now please go away*. And they go away. I do not know where they go, but it is away and I feel pleased with all of them.

I bring the arms inside and try to put them into the ice tub, but they will not fit. *You are going to have to move*, I tell her, but she doesn't move. I pull her out of the tub with towels, holding her away from me, and she drips all over the floor. The dripping isn't just ice or water, but yellowed liquid and bits of flesh.

Where will I put you? I ask.

She doesn't answer and I lay her on the couch, face-up so she can enjoy the living room. Then I carry the arms into the bathroom and put them into the ice water. They pile up and don't all fit in the tub, but throughout each day I rotate them so they're all in the ice water at least some of the time.

Her body grows into the couch and no matter how hard I try, no matter how much effort I exert, I cannot pry her off the couch. She laughs at me as I try to lift her. Her body has finally dried out, stopped leaking. Her skin is turning floral and the floral couch is turning skin. I cannot discern which is which, but I know her body is still there because I can hear her breathing.

I tire of arms

They seem far too small, insubstantial. Their accrument matters so little. I can have arms or not have arms. I can collect more or not. I develop an affinity for torsos but I always find them attached to worthless appendages. I try to convince people to bring me torsos already detached from their appendages. Detaching arms and legs and heads is hard work. Grueling and rewarding, but it would be best if everyone else would gruel while I am rewarded.

No one brings me torsos. Not a single torso. I dream of lovely torsos against a red or purple background. Intimate table settings, candlelight flickering.

I go out in search of torsos. No one is hiding the torsos, hoarding them like I expected. Do they not realize the torsos are delicious? Have they never tasted a torso? Licked a skin-covered rib or grazed teeth against the muscle of back? But I realize everyone else is one step ahead of me. They are hiding their torsos and well. They are leaving the appendages attached to their torsos. They are leaving their torsos alive and allowing these torsos

to have jobs and friends and hobbies like working on their cars or building paper mâché statues. These people are smart. They have planned well. But I am on to them.

Sometimes it is hard for me to tell which torsos are for eating. It is hard to distinguish between a person who you love and a person you intend to consume, a person you intend to de-arm and de-leg and behead. You should label those close to you. But even then, it would be a tricky business. How am I to tell a well-intentioned label from a label someone is securing to mislead me so they might hoard the torsos for themselves? So I label the people, not in a confusing way, but in a well-intentioned manner. I carry a self-inking stamp with me everywhere I go. It is double-sided. One side says *Delicious*. The other side says *OH this one does not look so good. It does not look so good at all*. The stamp is self-inking and I have added a sort of acid for semi-permanence. I would hate for the stamps to wear off, but also I do not want them to be permanent. A person might grow less delicious after a few years or a formerly unattractive person might become more delicious. Things can change. So the stamps only last a year or so. At least this is what I think. I can't be certain because I have just begun the stamping process.

**The stamped people grow smarter and
begin making moves to lessen their
delicious qualities**

They develop poor eating habits. They eat nothing but junk food and fat and grease and salt, far too much salt. They stand in fields and lick salt blocks. The fields fill with people and there is no sensible place for the horses and cows to stand and there are no sugar cubes anywhere. At first the cattle mill about uncomfortably, standing very close, crouching when necessary, legs bent awkwardly, hooves digging into earth so they can hold on, so they can maintain their positions. Then they are pushed to the extremities of the fields, bodies tight to fences. Then they spill out of the fields and away.

They roam the streets because they have no place to go. They have no space of their own. They are no longer well-adjusted cattle. They begin to inter-mate and form a new cow-horse hybrid that is less well adjusted. They make a sound like wind and their eyes drip yellowed water. Their bodies are small, muscle and skin tightly wound around

bone so they take up less space, but are now denser, heavier.

Groups are formed for their elimination. All the cow-horse hybrids are harpooned and dragged out of the street. Their bodies scrape along the pavement and earth so that much of their skin is removed. At packaging houses they are processed and meat is stripped neatly from their bones. This meat is salted, cured, and hung so it dangles, dripping and waiting for consumption. Discarded bones bleach in the sun. So much meat is produced that it cannot be eaten and it is necessary to find new ways to dispose of the meat. Companies try convincing the public to consume the meat in mass quantities. The way they do this is they send employees to an individual's house and these employees have some of the uneaten meat. The employees hold individuals down and force-feed them. This tactic is highly ineffective because some of the individuals choke and cannot consume the meat. The individuals who do not choke die the next day or the day after that. There is mouth-foam and pale skin and bleeding from all the orifices.

Eventually holes are dug and the meat, still rare and bleeding, is buried in the ground. There is a great fear about what might grow there. This is fertile soil. What hybrid between soil and red meat can exist? Will the soil absorb the meat or will the meat absorb the soil? Will the meat suck everything inside itself so nothing can grow and there is no

ground to stand upon and everyone falls down into the pit of the Earth, but there is no pit of the earth? Will everyone suffer horribly with the feeling of emptiness and nowhere? Will they?

**I burn my house to the ground because
my interests have become more global**

It is the only way to start over and be rid of everything, but it's harder to burn down a house than I thought. There are a dozen false starts and the fire keeps going out. In movies the house always goes up in flames and burns and burns, but my fire flickers out. It takes me weeks to successfully burn everything to the ground. After it's over I worry all the flickering might have created a sort of house I can't see or feel or experience properly without an appropriate flickering.

But in the ashes I find her still breathing and dripping and needing things.

I thought I was done with you, I say. All the arms are gone. And the tub full of ice. All of this, I tell her, all of this is gone.

She does not care. She drips more to spite me and to spite the lack of everything. I don't know how to leave her here, not after she survived the burning. Not after she dripped on ash and looked at everything open and empty-mouthed. So I pick her up and hold her tightly against me.

She is covered in ash and I strain to breathe. My nose drips.

I've always had bad allergies, I explain and I look inside her and see she is full of ash. I pull her stomach out and empty it and wash its lining with cold water. Then I bury the stomach in the ground. *There*, I tell her. *We'll both be comfortable now*. But I worry about her other organs and remove them too. I wash them all with cold water and bury them in the ground.

Now there is so much room inside you, I say.

I climb inside and take a nap. She is a warm dripping sleeping bag. When I climb out she looks empty, unfulfilled. I dig up the red meat and fill her torso with it. She becomes engorged, almost glowing. Full.

Every day I open her to look at the meat. The first few days the meat swells, seeming to have absorbed some fluid. But eventually it becomes a new sort of thing. The meat is more than meat. The meat is flesh. The meat is shaped into the forms of small people and then these people are equipped with weapons. Handguns, rifles, lacrosse sticks, bows and arrows, and even tiny daggers. The tiny people grow real skin. It looks painful. They writhe and twist, but eventually the skin is grown. In the days after, they continue to tremble and weep, from which I ascertain they have grown tear ducts and probably other organs. Hearts, lungs, spleens, kidneys, and the lot.

One day I open her up and the tiny people spill out, fully formed and apparently functional.

Will you miss them? I ask and she nods. But the tiny people stay near us as we walk and they grow a bit each day. I see her watching them, nervous.

I cut off her head because it has become an inconvenience.

I am tired of her ability to decline. Without a head there are many things she will not be able to do and she will feel to me more like a possession and less like a responsibility. I do not know what to do with her head at first, but then I bury it in the ground. There is crying beneath the ground, but when we walk far enough away I can no longer hear the crying and I feel good about my decision.

The tiny people grow larger and begin to feel like a threat

I fashion nets with bits of skin and muscle and tissue that I pull from her torso. Her body trembles, but she is mostly still. I can tell she feels threatened by the tiny people and I'd like to eliminate them for her. I throw the net over the tiny people and they try to run away, but the net is too strong and their squirming is ineffective. I drag the tiny people away and bury them deep in the earth, below the rotting meat. I worry they will continue to grow after I bury them and might be able to free themselves. To prevent this I slice off their arms and legs and heads and bind their torsos very tightly together. They make such beautiful bundles.

I pull more muscle and tissue off her and make bigger and stronger nets and I run through the streets, scooping up everyone I see. I feel excited by my new preoccupation. Some of the people struggle and some of them relax quickly, already resigned to the idea of being captured. I cannot decide if I prefer the strugglers or the relaxers.

One of the men I capture has beautiful arms and legs. His arms and legs remind me of her arms and legs, back when she still had arms and legs. I keep him separate from the others. He struggles more than the rest, but grows tired and weary after days of struggle with no food or water.

I slice off his lips and hold them in my hand, pressing mine against them. They feel soft, porous, like they might absorb me entirely. I accidentally swallow one of them, but I make myself vomit it up. I can't risk the lip resting in my stomach and absorbing my intestines, my organs, my blood, or my bones.

The man is just as beautiful without lips. The man and woman are beautiful together, though in very different stages of life. I run his hands along her raw and bloodied torso. *Isn't it romantic*, I say.

I remove his arms and legs so he will not be so different than her and I can tell she feels more comfortable. She was getting anxious, twitching at a different rate than usual. Her body was splotching red differently, splotching faster and then unsplotching and resplotching in quick succession.

I decide to leave his head attached because I long for companionship.

I have wanted someone to talk to, I tell him. *I have wanted conversation and closeness and intimacy, which all arise from more than proximity*. He nods. He understands. I know this because he tells me that he understands. His lipless mouth

moves to form the words, *I understand.*

Though I leave his head attached, I contemplate his neck. Neck bone soups have been delicious for ages. My mother told me they were delicious and my grandmother confirmed this fact. Before I was alive, my grandmother's grandmother told her that neck bone soup was delicious. The broth is infused with umami and has deep, multi-leveled flavors. The smell of neck bone soup starts mouth glands to water.

I ask him if he knows that neck bone soups are delicious and he says he prefers a parsnip broth with sweet potatoes and rosemary. He stresses that the rosemary is essential. No good dish can be without rosemary.

Run your fingers through rosemary, he says. It'll be on your hands for days.

I plant rosemary everywhere we go

The rosemary springs up all around our feet, growing quickly, largely, and obtrusively.

It is because of the meat in the earth, I tell him, and the things it's doing to the soil.

But the rosemary becomes menacing. It grows toward us, towers over us. There is hardly any sun and when there is sun, the brightness smells like rosemary.

Her body smells of rosemary. She is absorbent, but I don't know why she is more absorbent than him or me. Perhaps it is because she has less skin, more open flesh, blood ready to meet the day. She has always been an open sort.

He asks to be planted in the soil, under the meat so he might become better. He admires the shape of the rosemary, admires its rate of growth, and its apparent position of power.

I might grow, he says. I might be impossible to stop.

I tell him I will shave bits of his skin off and plant them in the ground. *A trial run, I say, to see what happens.* The skin

comes off flaky and uneven, but still I plant it beneath the meat. The meat bubbles and foams, coming apart, but held together by the force of the dirt packed around it.

You can't get rid of anything these days, I tell him. You hide it and it's there. You destroy it and it comes back stronger, more menacing, more thoughtfully constructed.

He nods.

We will check back, I tell him. We must give your skin time to change, to grow, to become different. These are not things that happen instantly.

I cannot stop thinking about his neck

I cut into and begin unraveling it like very delicious and wet yarn, and I wrap it around my hand, like spool. *I am not making sweaters*, I tell him. *But I am making neck bone soup. There will not be enough to share because there is never enough to share. Neck bone soup simply isn't the sort of dish you share. But, I say, I promise I will add rosemary to the dish. I do not want it to be offensive. I think your ideas are important.*

I begin to gather rosemary for his soup, but in one swift motion the rosemary seizes her body and lifts her into the sky where I cannot reach her, but I can see her torso swinging from a stem. Bits of her drip down to the earth and she cringes in the breeze.

I spend days watching her and every day she is less familiar to me. Less herself, less the version I understand, and more a stranger.

You are a stranger, I whisper to no one.

She sways so far above me that I cannot make out the features I once so clearly knew. It is hard to go on without her. She sways in the wind and water drips from her but

dissipates or blows away before it touches ground. The space between her torso and the ground is extra absorbent. I feel a pull, a clinging, a drawing in and in.

I tie bags of dirt around his body and mine so that we'll be clung harder to the earth, protected. It is hard to lug him with me when we are both so heavy, but I lug him anyway and her body feels further and further away. Eventually whenever I look into the sky, I can no longer see her. There is just rosemary and sky and dangerous gravitational pull.

The weight of it all makes me very tired. I cut a hole in his abdomen to release pressure. This will make him more manageable to lug around. I squeeze his abdomen and water rushes out. Rosemary rushes out.

Where's this rosemary from? I ask. *Where?*

He does not answer, so I squeeze him more, forcing more rosemary out, clumps of it, gooey pieces, whole plants, roots included. His organs spill out and these are also covered in rosemary.

They smell beautiful, he says, but I am not sure this is true. I think they smell of mucus, if mucus has a smell.

I worry about what's inside him so I take him apart. Everything in pieces. Everything, manageable. I pull off his skin and wrap it around my body to be sure I do not lose it. Skin is important and has many functions, such as: dinner, such as: costuming. I pull muscles apart

and find more muscles. Beneath the layers of muscle are more layers of muscle until there is bone.

You will not win, I assure him, but I worry he IS winning because inside several bones I find sprigs of rosemary. The bones splinter and stick in my fingers, under my nails. Inside some of the organs are whole rosemary plants. I worry I will never find all the rosemary. There will be doubt and it will grow beside the rosemary, an uncontrollable cross-pollination occurring every second.

I am almost certain I have no need of him. I remember thinking I needed her, but she has been gone for many days and I do not miss her at all, so it seems likely I do not need him, the less charismatic of the two. I could bury him in the earth under the meat and I might never miss him. I worry what will happen to him if I bury him. He might find ways to grow appendages within the soil. He might develop arms and legs and new appendages that are more impressive than his former arms or legs. He might gather strength from the soil, from earthworms, from the meat rotting there. He might regrow lips. He might grow stronger muscles and become entirely unmanageable.

I wish to cast him into the sea but do not know where the sea is or how to find it.

Where is the sea? I ask, but he doesn't answer, so I cut off his head. Useless. It became useless so slowly I hardly noticed. One day it had many uses and the next it had none.

I watch the birds, trying to discern where water might be, but they could be flying to birdbaths or swimming pools or ponds. Maybe lakes. Or maybe the birds are not interested in water at all. Certainly not salt water. Maybe they are out flying for the mere joy of flying. Maybe they are going to find food or meet a friend. Maybe a secret, undetectable aggressor is chasing them. *Birds*, I shout, shaking my fist at them, but they are no help.

I wish for an education of the body

I am tired of losing things, forgetting them, just because they are not clasped in my hands. I want a body that operates separately from my mind, leaving my mind free to wander, to do the important work of living. I want to teach my body. I do not want an automatic environmental learning of the body. I do not want to mirror other bodies' movements. I do not want any other person to determine which direction blood runs through my veins. I want to make these decisions for myself.

I believe the education of the body should be slow. It should be a determined thing, mapped out and well planned. I will instruct my arms as to which direction they ought to grow. I will be certain my leg growth is correct and balanced. Blood flow will be passionate. Bone growth will be passionate. All of my organs, passionate. Passionate lungs and spleen and liver and heart and kidneys and intestines. My intestines will be the most passionate intestines. I could pull them out and use them for a variety of high stakes tasks.

I feel glad I have not buried him because there is still someone nearby to admire me. I pull my intestines out of my body and rub them on his body, in a way where I am also trying to educate his body. My organs have grown so intuitive and passionate that they can teach other organs.

I do wish I had her body so I could begin a similar education in her. I carry him roughly through the rosemary, looking up the stalks and calling out for her, but she has no ears that I recall. I cannot find her, so I hold lectures and viewings so others might grow more passionate organs, but I fall off the stage and twist my ankle. Oh their organs are hopeless, I think.

My ankle swells and I worry about what is inside it

I have not instructed my body to do this. This swelling, pain, and discomfort are not according to plan. Perhaps I have not educated my body at all. I rub the swollen flesh, and it hurts, but all new growth hurts. All change hurts. To remain the same all the time is to be dead and being dead does not feel like anything.

My new growth swells every day and rapidly. It is the size of a golf ball. Then a tennis ball, then a softball, and then almost a basketball. It is the size of a large cat. I rub the swelling and it emits a sound, guttural and wet. It grows much larger than a cat, until it is the size of a toddler.

With this new growth, I do not have the time to devote to his care, so I drag him away and bury him beneath the meat, dark and red. I need to make room for this growth. I think the growth's significance could be much greater than his. I feel sad as I cover him with soil and meat, but I try to memorize the surroundings of his grave, in case this grave is temporary and I decide to come free him from it. If this

growth is different than I think, if it cannot become what I want, I may need to return and unearth him from this rotten ground.

Every day the growth's noises increase. I cannot sleep through these noises. I talk to the growth in a singsong voice that I hope is comforting. *It's okay*, I say, petting it lightly. *It's okay. There have been horrific things on this Earth and we can only hope that you will soon grow to be one of them. It is important to become a part of the horror, lest we'll be controlled by it. Then the horror will overwhelm us. But if we are a part of it, we can at least control the part of it that we are.*

It gets more difficult to move with the growth. I cannot drag myself forward. It's not the pain. It's not that I can't walk on it, even though I can't. It's just that this growth has become too heavy. I can no longer lift my leg or even drag the weight if I try to pull myself along the ground. I lie still. The growth bulges and moves like it's stretching itself toward my face, like it wants to embrace. I lay back on the ground and I squeeze and squeeze the growth, wishing whatever is inside could be free. I want it out. I want a peaceful exit and a complete detachment. Cleanness. I want to turn the wound inside out and wash it with ice water, scrape the whole thing clean. Repair the damages. Teach my flesh to be new and strong and better than it was yesterday or the days before yesterday. Now that I know how wrong flesh can be, I know how right I

want it to become.

I wake in the middle of the night to find that she has been born anew from my growth. Her body is fully regenerated, better formed than before. Stronger and cleaner and larger. She's a foot taller than me, but this may be because I'm still hobbled. My wounds need time to heal.

She is not the same as before

She is not indecisive and moody. She appears strong and good.

I desire lemon, she says.

I try to ask her how she came to be in my growth and how she escaped it, but she will only repeat lemon. *Lemon lemon lemon lemon lemon*. I try to hold her hand, but *lemon*. I try to teach my body to be healed, but she will not quit with the *lemon lemon lemon*.

I don't have time for this, I try to tell her, but she is all *lemon lemon lemon*.

We search for lemons and I grow tired of her desires, but this is the way with most relationships, so we continue our search. We look in stores and trees, but these lemons have already been stripped of their positions. I suggest digging but she scoffs. I explain that much has happened in her absence and that there are likely lemons in the ground, underneath our feet.

Let's just dig, I say.

But where? she asks.

Not here, I tell her. This won't be the place.

I take her back to the place where I buried his torso and assure her this will be the place for lemons, so she digs. Her well-formed beautiful arms, like shovels, cut through soil. Her back arches, the curve enough to make me blush. Her neck glistens with sweat.

How much farther? she asks.

Not much, I say, not much farther.

She scoops out the soil and meat with bare hands.

I found something, she says. She lifts his torso in the air and even through all the dirt, his skin shines, glistening with pus and with need.

While she is surprised I shove her into the hole and take his torso into my arms.

It is as I suspected, I tell him. *The growth wasn't what I wanted and doesn't fit into my world at all.*

I hold him close. *I'll keep you safe,* I say. *We won't talk. We'll have a quiet understanding.*

**She keeps getting out of the hole and
I have to lure her back to it**

It takes her about a day to crawl out of the earth and to clean the meat from under her nails. Tracking us down takes another half day. Sometimes I spend all my time walking quickly away or running when I feel frantic. Sometimes I try to hide. Once, I crawled inside his torso, but she found me there.

After the first few times I find it easy to lure her back to the hole and rebury her. She's so believing, so willing to go anywhere to find the lemons. I quit running and hiding from her once I discover she is so easy to handle. I spend all my time looking for lemons. I ask everyone I see where I might find lemons and they say there are no lemons, but someone gives me a pack of lemon seeds.

I plant the seeds in the backyard of an abandoned house. I spend very little time there. I'm afraid she'll crawl out of the earth, track me, and find me with the lemon seedlings. Before the trees can grow and prosper she will destroy them. Her eagerness for lemons does

not include patience for growth. She is not prone to waiting. And though I leave the house frequently and do not spend much time inside it, I know one day I will live in it. Maybe we'll live there together, all three of us. She can help me watch over his torso. His safety is important.

I only bury her in the ground once a week now, so I can check on the lemon seedlings. I don't have to lure her into the ground under false pretenses anymore. We both agree it is time for her to be buried and we walk together to her grave. She climbs into the earth and closes her eyes while I cover her body with dirt. *Goodnight*, I say. It is a restful time.

The lemon seedlings grow at different rates and jealousy ensues

They all lean toward me. I measure their water out carefully to be certain each seedling gets the same amount of water. I do not want to appear unfair. I wish I could rotate the seedlings to be sure each one is receiving the same amount of sunlight and wind damage, but uprooting them feels dangerous and I wouldn't know which one to uproot first.

Eventually the seedlings demand to be considered trees.

We are tall enough, they say. We are large enough. We have long been trees. It should have been obvious to you.

You can be whatever you want, I say.

The trees have never considered this possibility. They thought the only options were seedlings or trees, but now they know their options are without limit and they consider new plans. Several of the lemon trees uproot themselves immediately and explain they are going to throw themselves into the ocean. The other trees take more time. They contemplate for hours. Then all but one of the trees uproot themselves, explaining that they want to see the world.

Paris. Amsterdam. Parts of Australia. Antarctica. Canada. Southern Africa. Chile. They want to travel everywhere. They explain they have seen quite enough of this space and are going to move on now, *goodbye*.

The lone lemon tree begins to produce lemons, tiny things. They look like little knots. I urge the green knots to become lemons. I tell the knots about lemons and about the potential of lemons. I talk about lemon soufflé.

When they grow to be sizable, fully lemons, I bring her to them.

For you, I say. Finally.

She stands for a long time looking at them. What could she accomplish with the lemons? I worry about the danger of lemons. What can the lemon tree accomplish? What can the lemons accomplish individually? The slyness of the lemon. The lemon's ability to hide and cloak itself. Anyone looking at the small yellow knot would think, *this is only a lemon, just a lemon*. And what can a lemon do? What threat does a lemon pose? There can be no danger in lemons. But they would be wrong because these lemons have potential and are dangerous. These lemons possess cunning. What kind of cunning do these lemons possess? What kind of cunning is best? Are the lemons separate units able and willing to act as individuals or are these lemons linked? If I kill the head lemon will all the smaller lemons die? How will I know

which lemon is the head lemon? Will it be determined by size? Shape? Hardness? Ripeness? Taste? And who would judge the taste? Who knows what to look for in a lemon? Isn't this person more of a threat than the lemon itself? The person who is capable of judging the lemons, weighing their worth and selecting the most prime lemon, this is the person I fear.

I build a fort to protect myself from the person capable of judging lemons

I make a fort that doesn't look like a fort. If my fort looks like a fort, the person capable of judging lemons will know what to attack and will do so quickly. I make a fort that looks like a lemon. It looks exactly like a lemon. In fact, when she comes to visit me, she eats the lemon and tells me it is delicious. I watch her for a while, wondering how safe the fort is inside her stomach. Could I climb into her stomach and still be safeguarded by the fort? But I remember digestion. Surely her digestive track is no safe place.

I make a fort that looks like nothing. The person capable of judging lemons will never recognize it. He will never be able to attack it because it is impossible to attack nothing. But I misplace the fort that looks like nothing. For me, nothing has always been a hard item to locate. Hard to carry with me, hard to remember, hard to feel attached to. I have lost nothings before and I hardly remember those nothings or the idea of

having those nothings. I lament the loss of nothing, but is a short, unremarkable lamentation, so I lament short lamentations, because remembering feels significant. Self-expression should be valued. There should be more prolonged screaming and bleeding, being born and dying, dying again, dying differently, dying in a way that is long lasting. I have seen many unimpressive deaths. Death should be more than the lack of life. Death should be a terrible event, forever ongoing. Life is so momentous. Why shouldn't death be lauded as well?

I make a fort that looks like tortured people. I have always been good with tortured people. It is my talent. They appreciate working with someone who appreciates them. It is the secret of the tortured. They do not want to be saved. They only want to be admired as beauties and labeled aesthetically pleasing, because of course they are pleasing. Who hasn't tortured someone and felt that twinge of pleasure? That beauty? That something? That something-something? I am good at torture. It is a talent many possess but few are proud of. If a person has a skill, they should be praised for their skill. Their skill should be appreciated and utilized. When I go into the houses of strangers and torture them, I expect a *thank you*, and a mint, and a sweater, because it has been cold lately and torture is tiring work and I do not like to be cold. I do not deserve to feel uncomfortable, because I have a skill and

this skill should earn me something. It should matter.

I abandon forts. They have not worked for me. The tortured people accumulate in great piles, but they do not make me feel safe. They do not make me feel that his torso is safe, ragged as it is.

I dread the man capable of judging lemons, so I destroy all the lemons. I build a fire and burn them. It is a citrus burning. Nothing anywhere on Earth can smell bad. Nothing can smell unfresh. Young people fall in love. They hold hands and sniff each other, admire one another. There is mating and the production of untortured offspring who may acquire torturing later, either as a skill or as a fate.

The world is turning beautiful and I move into the abandoned house I have longed for.

The best way I keep his torso safe

Is to consume it. People gather around and watch me eat. Any time I drop bits of flesh or carrot on the floor they rush to consume them. They lick the floor and then they lick each other's tongues and teeth to be sure they have realized a maximum level of enjoyment. They grip each other by shoulders and throats. One of them bites another's tongue off and then the others take turns drinking the blood from the tongueless one's mouth. This person will be popular and well liked for the rest of their life, I am sure.

She brings me the person who is capable of judging lemons

He is a small man, maybe the size of ten lemons if they were stacked on top of one another and then given arms and legs and a lemon-head.

Hello, I say. He does not greet me. He begins inspecting my clothing, looking under my shoes, gazing at the spaces between my fingers.

He is looking for lemons, she says.

There are none, I say. *I have gotten rid of them for this very reason. I cannot abide such a tiny and seemingly powerful man.*

The man continues his search, digging into the earth around us, then climbing trees and asking me repeatedly, *where are the lemons, where are the lemons, where are the lemons.*

She tells me she is in love with this man who is capable of judging lemons.

This cannot be true, I say. *I thought we were in love.*

No, she says. *You are my mother.*

But still, I say, *we are in love. We have been in love for a long time. I was your mother a long time ago, if that is really a thing*

you want to believe, but I am certainly not your mother now.

I cannot believe someone would pretend to love this tiny and impressive man. *It can't be true*, I say.

It is true, she says.

Yes, he says, *I am very impressive. See? You are impressed by me right now. I am sure of it.*

And I am impressed but I cannot imagine a love. Only a jealousy and a judgment and a scorning. I can always imagine a scorning.

I would like to further diminish this tiny man. He would be so small that I would not notice him or be threatened by his ability to create categories and place objects or people inside these categories.

I create categories for the tiny man. Tiny. Male. Damned. Shrinking. So tiny, no one will even be able to see him. Sliced in half. Pitted like an olive. Oh, his pit is not firm. It is soft and malleable. Eaten. Eaten slowly and with care. Unhealthy, but eaten, always eaten, always in the process of being eaten. It is a never-ending process. No, it will not end. I will never let it end. Never.

She is lonely without the man capable of judging lemons

I tell her I am sorry. I tell her he wasn't permanent. *I could tell he would have been gone soon*, I say, but she doesn't believe me.

In order to distract her, I cover her in butter. I melt vats of it and drench her.

This is apocalyptic, isn't it? she asks.

Maybe, I say. *But people do not like to hear about apocalypses so we will need to keep this one quiet.*

Is there anything I can do to stop it? she asks.

No, I say. *There is nothing you can do.*

She begs me to get rid of the butter and I tell her the only way to properly remove butter is to eat it. She buys bread and bagels and rubs them across the butter, rubs them over her body, scooping and smearing, sometimes dabbing.

Delicious? I ask and she shakes her head. She concentrates on the butter. I have never seen one person eat so much butter. My love for her increases with every

swallow she takes, with every bulge in her little throat. The grease on her face and hands and neck and knees makes her more beautiful. She glistens. She shines, radiant with butter.

She develops heart disease, but tries to cope. She takes breaks from whatever she's doing to deal with her heart attacks. *They are so small*, she says. *Not that difficult to manage. A quick seizing of the chest and then it's over.* Her face pales and she trembles. It's amazing to watch the pain pass over her, to imagine her heart seizing and then pounding onward.

In spite of heart attacks, she is beautiful. She has always been beautiful, but now people acknowledge her beauty and their subsequent desire to consume her. It is something more, this desire to slip one of her hands or feet into their mouths. To suck and swallow, digest and enjoy. They lick her spine and graze teeth against her skin. Then there is the sound of teeth scraping bone, the sound of enjoyment. No one can contain themselves and they eat every bit of her. Teeth do more than scrape or graze. Teeth crunch and rip and there is a wet cutting sound. The separation of muscle and bone. Then the breaking and splintering of bones. The sucking of marrow. The dangerous ingestion of splintered bone. Smacking lips and groans. The smell of over-full. The swelling of abdomens. The expansion of everyone to fit the pieces of her inside themselves.

**Now that she's gone I cannot decide
which of her consumers to love**

They have all taken parts of her and inserted those parts into themselves, so I cannot bear to part with any of them. I chain them together and lead them back to my house where they sleep on the floor around my bed. Huddled piles, snoring and breathing, drooling on each other and the floor.

The room is so hot I cannot bear it. I take to eliminating them as they excrete. A dead body is a cold body and a cold body is pleasant. A cold body is a thing I can enjoy and appreciate. I pull the cold bodies into bed with me, intertwine legs, nuzzle cold necks, feel that wonderful emptiness of no beating heart, no expanding lungs. Just stillness and quiet.

You are all such disappointments, I tell the people still chained together on the floor. I wait to see if any of them will become a dead and cold body I can love, but none of them desire my love. None of them are willing to take the necessary steps. They continue to live, breathe, and

produce heat. The heat multiplies and creates more heat. Unbearable heat. Something must be done.

Every day I kill another one until there is only one left. *You are my favorite*, I say. This favorite nods. I can tell the favorite appreciates being the favorite. I pull the favorite into bed with me and we crawl underneath the cold and dead bodies. *We are in love*, I whisper and the favorite nods. *Why won't you talk?* I ask, but the favorite won't answer.

I find the favorite in a back bedroom reading poetry

This is what you do with your time? I ask.

My favorite apologizes and says it will write me an apology note and place the note inside my mailbox, where I will read it and feel apologized to.

I try to explain that I don't have a mailbox anymore. Like all the mundane objects in my life, my mailbox left a long time ago. Perhaps it uprooted and made for somewhere new, somewhere more interesting. My life without a mailbox has been difficult. I have not been able to maintain any sort of correspondence. There are never any invitations, postcards, bills, or junk mail.

I try sitting at the end of my driveway with my hands stretched out in front of me, palms up, but the mailman ignores my hands. He finds my hands to be a less than satisfying container.

My hands are a fine container, I tell the mailman, but he won't believe me. He keeps my letters and my junk mail in a satchel decorated with my name and a crudely drawn

portrait of me.

That doesn't even look like me, I tell him, but he laughs.

I do want the favorite's apology letter, so I try digging a hole but there is never any mail inside it. Inside the hole there is only a group of voiceless toads. I realize all the toads have gone silent and need someone to supply a voice for them. I stand behind the toads and attempt to voice what I feel their concerns are:

These lily pads are not sturdy enough.

I wish birds wouldn't try to eat me.

There are never enough flies. I wish all the other toads would quit eating all the flies or that maybe scientists would speed up fly reproduction and there would be an abundance of flies and this would decrease competitiveness because isn't competitiveness ruining society and especially ruining the way toads relate to one another?

I try saying all these things for the toads, but no one will listen. No one cares as much about toads as I do, so I let the whole thing go and I give up on receiving mail in the hole I dug. I drag my favorite outside and bury it in the hole. After enough time, I don't remember exactly where the hole is anymore and I don't remember that I ever had a favorite.

To entertain myself I do egregious wrong

It is harder than I imagined it would be. I keep committing tiny wrongs.

Your wrongs are so small, people say. They laugh and cover their faces with their hands and I feel embarrassed over my very small wrongs. I try harder. I wake every day with new plans for egregious wrongs and I become more successful. I give people tiny cats and I use the tiny cats to murder other, cuter tiny cats and then I kill the original cats. Someone suggests that using such tiny cats means my wrongs are still very small and I feel embarrassed. I have all these cats and I don't know what to do with them. I worry the only solution will be to put the cats down, but I love the cats. I have killed too many things I loved. All the time, I eat the things I love. It happens before I notice it is happening. I am talking to a person and then somehow I have eaten them or some large portion of them. Their gnawed face gapes at me mid-sentence. Drool and blood seep down their neck. I miss the portion I ate even though I can feel it inside me.

Cat management has become an issue, a problem to be dealt with. The cats are horrible clichés. Everyone is talking about it. *Horrible clichés*, they say. And they say, *Not in that good kind of cliché-way but you know, in that other way.*

I'm embarrassed to show my face. I try to lure the cats away, but the cats either do not see the mousy toys or they do not care about such unenticing mousy toys. I don't know how to get them to leave. They're licking their paws and eating old tuna and burying their poop in the yard. It's becoming a situation. The tuna stench is overpowering, seeping into my pores. I'm pissing tuna and sweating tuna and drooling tuna in my sleep.

I've created a mission for you, I whisper to the cats. Then I whisper a thing into their ears too enticing for the cats to ignore.

When I wake the next morning, they're gone.

The days of understanding

There were days when rationale mattered, when one thing happened and then another thing and another. These things seemed to flow organically into each other. Anyone could predict what was going to happen next. They called this the science. But the science has broken down over the years, gone into disrepair, become impossible to use. The people railed against the science and called it religion, which was the dirtiest word. They destroyed the banks and the churches and the congress houses.

My attempted egregious wrongs find me

They come in the dark, which is when egregious wrongs come. It is clichéd but egregious wrongs are often clichéd. It is hard to be new and different and egregiously wrong. This is understood. No one is upset about it. No one holds it against the wrongs or those who commit them.

The egregious wrongs try to hold me down. They try to pin my body to the bed, but I do not feel pinned. I don't feel trapped or contained. It feels like what I thought lovemaking would amount to when I was a child and lovemaking sounded like a beautiful and romantic thing. Before I knew it would amount to this holding down and weight, before I knew how boring it is. These wrongs crush me, but the crushing is not final. It is not comprehensive. I cannot be fully crushed because these egregious wrongs are part of me. I roll over and crush them back and people stop to peer into my window and watch the crushing.

That's beautiful, a woman says.

I know, I say. *It always is.*

They are crushed completely, into a fine powder, and I lap them up. I press spit-slicked fingers against the powder and suck the powder off my fingers.

The cats return

Just in time, I say. I want them to tell me what they've done, what they've seen. I want to hear what's happening in other parts of the world. *Are trees falling?* I ask. *Are trees falling everywhere?* But the cats won't answer. They lick their paws and go to sleep in quiet, perfect rows. Some of them purr while they sleep and some do not. Some twitch and flick their paws out as though they're grabbing at something and some do not.

The cats do not wake up. I shake them and pet them and beg them to wake. I massage their legs to get the blood flowing. I've heard circulation can be very important and a lack of it can kill or cause extreme discomfort or boredom. *Are you bored?* I ask them, but they will not wake.

I pile as many sleeping cats in the closet as I can fit. If I cannot see them, I do not have to think about them, and if I spend long enough not thinking about them, they will cease to exist. This has always been the way with such matters. I have piled many things in my closet, but the closet is forever empty and I am forever not thinking

about some specific thing.

Some cats wake, but never sleep again. I do not know if they are afraid of the not-waking and being piled in the closet or if there is some other cause. I have a diagnostic specialist examine the cats. The diagnostic specialist holds each one and rubs its face on his face. He whispers into the cats' ears and the cats whisper into his ear. I feel excluded.

But finally the diagnostic specialist puts the cats away and says, *post-traumatic stress*, while tapping his cheek, as though to point at it, but what significance is there in his cheek?

What? I ask, but the diagnostic specialist will only nod his head and repeat, *post-traumatic stress*, and he leaves saying, *I can have no part of this. I cannot be blamed.*

I worry about curing the cats. I worry about what kind of cures and cures for what? How do I cure a thing I do not understand? I worry about what caused the cats' post-traumatic stress. I know that guessing is the only way, because they will not answer me and the diagnostic specialist has gone away, maybe forever, but certainly for now, and this is a thing that must be dealt with if I am to proceed happily.

I buy a bayonet and chase the cats around the house and into the yard. I stab at them, barely missing, and sink the bayonet into the ground. I pry it from the earth and

chase them, waiting to see which cat will be the first to tire. It takes hours, but finally one of the heavier cats quits running, crouches against the ground and looks back at me. I heave the bayonet toward the cat, shifting the bayonet's weight at the last second, so I sink its tip into the earth beside the cat. In those moments there is no look of recognition in the cat's eyes. There is no knowing or peace or understanding. There is no horror that suggests a horror other than for one's life. So it was not bayonets that caused this.

I collect every grandmother I can find even though some of them swear they are not grandmothers and have never been grandmothers. It is easy to say such a thing, so I do not take their word for it and I drag each of the elderly women back to my house. They crowd into the living room and make cooing noises. Their feeble hands shake as they pick up and hold the cats. They crawl on hands and knees and talk to the cats in high-pitched voices. Always reaching for cats, cuddling, cooing.

The cats look pleased until the grandmothers peel the fur off them. The cats cry and struggle to get away, but these women are precise and experienced. They hold the furless cats in their arms and nuzzle their little heads. *Purr*, the women urge the cats, but the cats will not purr. *Purr*, the women demand, but the cats refuse.

The women leave with the cats. I try to stop them,

but the women are strong. They have garnered strength through life experience. *Stop*, I say, but they walk hard and I can do nothing.

The diagnostic specialist returns

He wants to know where the cats are and I cannot answer him. He finds the cat pelts scattered on the back lawn and I cannot explain. I shake my head and shrug. I tell him I miss the cats and I would rather have the cats than not have the cats, but I do not think he believes me.

The diagnostic specialist returns the next day with several suitcases, duffel bags, and a large trunk. He tells me he is moving in. He tells me he plans to observe me.

I have done this before, I tell him. I am good at this.

I fill the tub with ice and tell the diagnostic specialist, *climb in. It's comfortable. Climb in.* And he does. Who can resist a tub filled with ice and water? Certainly no gentleman. Certainly no one with discerning taste and this diagnostic specialist has discerning taste. He has the diplomas and certificates to prove he has discerning taste. He carries them with him in a rolling suitcase. Each one is framed and gold plated. Each one sparkles. The ones he likes the most are coated in a thin layer of glitter.

Not to be upstaged, I create diplomas and certificates

for myself. CONGRATULATIONS, they say in bright letters. Bold letters. Letters that can be seen from several miles away even if you are underwater and even if you are blind and even if you have been dead for many years. CONGRATULATIONS!

When I finish, I invite the diagnostic specialist to disassemble himself.

He tells me it is a tedious process. He tells me that I have been doing it incorrectly all these years. He tells me the way I've been doing it is not permanent. It's an embarrassment.

But I'm not a specialist, I say and he tells me that everyone is a specialist. Everyone has talents and capabilities and I must have felt I was doing it wrong. Felt the wrong sorts of pops and snaps, breaking and tearing that was not the correct breaking and tearing. I'm not sure I understand, but he waves me away, tells me that he will begin the process and if I check back I will see what he means.

The cats come back and their post-traumatic stress has been dealt with

They remain skinless and explain that skin was their impediment and the removal of skin was necessary. They praise me for being the catalyst that led to this event. They purr and offer me gifts and sit in my lap. They leave behind a sticky pus residue, but they seem adamant about being in my lap. Things are decided and things are sticky and sometimes this is just the way things are. They smile and say, *thank you*. I pet their pus and try to appreciate their sentiments.

The women return, asking for the cats.

I think they are comfortable here, I tell the women and I shut the door. The women knock and wait on the porch. They line up in rows when they cannot fit on the porch and these rows stretch into the front yard. *Please go away*, I tell them. *Please never come back. You make me uncomfortable and rows make me uncomfortable and I don't know how to return these sticky cats to you. I am not sure I want to return them and I am not sure they want to return. Please go away.*

But the women do not go away. Their feet sink into

the soil and they become affixed. Their roots grow down deep and spread across the yard. Several trees become uprooted and the driveway crackles and turns to rubble. The women grow taller and their arms stretch toward the sky, leaf-covered.

They grow there for a season and their arm-branches begin to bear fruit. This fruit bears a striking resemblance. It is a familiar fruit and when the fruit ripens and drops off the tree, it's him and her, whole again, complete, the best versions of themselves.

Why do you keep coming back? I ask them. *Can't you see I already have so much going on? I don't know what to do with you this time.*

They assure me they know what to do with themselves. The first thing they do is chop all the women down and use their bodies to build a house across the street. The house moans and shakes whenever the breeze blows. The women call out to me when I walk by and sometimes there is a loose woman who reaches out and tries to grab me if I come too close.

All the skinless cats go to live in the house across the street. So much sticky pus is left behind that I use it to form a new cat, a permanent cat that cannot leave me even if it wishes to. I place this cat on the center of the kitchen table and we have conversations while I'm eating meals or while I'm sitting at the table and not eating meals.

The diagnostic specialist has disassembled himself

He is in parts strewn all across the bathroom. Torso strung out and neatly separated into pieces. Bones laid in rows from largest to smallest, widest to thinnest. Organs lined up in order of importance and attractiveness. His spleen is surprisingly good-looking. His disassembly is complete and meticulous. It is the most successful disassembly I have ever seen and probably the most successful one that has ever occurred.

**The cat I formed of sticky pus
leaves me too**

He goes across the street to live in their house. I watch them sitting in the living room together. They hold the sticky pus cat in their lap and stroke him. He curls into a ball and falls asleep. All the other cats, still skinless, gather around their feet and sleep.

It is domestic. It is a thing that has not existed for decades. Domesticity is dangerous, like the science or religion. Domesticity has long been eradicated. It is punishable several ways. One: the couple is dragged into the street. They are dragged into the street for hours. It is not a quick dragging. It is not a thing that quickly comes to pass. Two: the couple is made to remove each other's hearts, simultaneously. If the couple refuses, their intestines are pulled out and wound together. Then they are still made to remove each other's hearts. Three: nothing happens and they are allowed to continue their existence as is. This third punishment is considered to be the worst of all the punishments.

I make something of the diagnostic specialist

I put all his parts back together and he is more than the sum of his parts. He is something new and different and beautiful and artful. I am not sure how he is different. He looks to be assembled the same as before, but there is a glowing that implies more and better. His glowing is so bright that there are no shadows in the room. He is a thing to destroy shadows.

I take this new diagnostic specialist with me everywhere, but people run away. They need their shadows. Some of these people have had their shadows since the day they were born and to go on without them feels impossible. At first I chase the people, but then I grow tired of that. A new sort of person emerges, a sort who is looking to cast off their shadow. They are looking to start over. These people feel more powerful than the other people. To throw everything away is a powerful thing. Even if you are throwing away a thing that did not work, it is still hard to start over, to start with nothing.

At first there is only one such person. Then a few. Then huge groups. Someone says the word *cult*, but we kill them. Someone mentions religion, but we kill them too. And when someone says, *the science*, we all agree this is the proper nomenclature, but we kill that person anyway, to be safe.

The science

The science changes every second. We take turns trying to name it. *Horror! Cats! Pus! Wonder!* People shout names as its shape drifts from one to the next, reforming and reforming and reforming, leaving a sticky trail in the air. Someone claims responsibility, but we take turns pointing at that person. *Heretic*, someone yells. *Imposter*, someone yells. *Jesus*, someone yells. We drag him out into the street and do the things to him that should be done to heretics, imposters, and Jesus. We do all of those things and then some more things and we smile. We are the collective and we are glad and it is a better feeling than being an individual.

I decide to make a place for myself in the house across the street

I will use, of course, the science. The science is capable of many things. Science is capable of destruction. See: total destruction. See: partial destruction. See: beautiful destruction. See: quiet destruction. See: loud destruction. Loud destruction is my favorite destruction and is well known as the best sort.

I put their house inside my house. There is room. There has always been room. And now they are together, with me, and I can monitor them, as they deserve to be monitored. This is the way with science. This is the way with caring.

The diagnostic specialist and I watch the way they move. She takes such small steps and he takes huge ones. His knees bow out and she's pigeon-toed.

How did they get this way? the diagnostic specialist asks.

Let's find out, I say.

We want to be certain that they are the correct sorts of people, but the diagnostic specialist and I cannot

agree on what the correct sort of person is.

Test them? he asks.

And do one-act plays, I say. *To see which of us is the most astute. What will the tests be worth if they aren't scored by an astute instructor?*

We have them attempt a series of physical feats. *Jump,* I say, and they both jump. We measure the jumps. *Run,* the diagnostic specialist says, and they both run and we measure to see who is the fastest. *Make sandwiches,* I say. *Boil pasta,* he says. *Draw a picture,* I say. *Write a story,* he says. We scream our demands. We scream our demands in other languages to see which of them will understand.

They scurry back and forth. They hop and leap and do the crabwalk. They climb trees to the very top and they hop out of the trees. They laugh and each one laughs louder and louder until they are screaming at one another. Then the diagnostic specialist and I laugh louder. Then they laugh louder. Then us. Then them.

My one act play

My actors come off the stage and drag the diagnostic specialist onto it. They hold him securely by his arms and make sure his elbows hit the floor as they drag him. He grimaces and complains and they grind his elbows harder into the floor.

Once on the stage, they hook the diagnostic specialist to several pulleys. The pulleys maneuver the specialist around the stage in a way that makes it seem like he's dancing. *You are dancing beautifully*, the audience yells. And he is. He is elegant and even though he is not wearing a flowing ball gown, I feel like he is. I can feel the soft material against my face. I can see the way it drifts and billows around him, like he's floating.

Beautiful, I shout at him.

Let's not put on any more one-act plays, he says.

The audience

The audience is not elegant at all. They are all sharp angles. Acute angles. Jabby endpoints and soft middles. The jabby endpoints stick into the soft middles. There is screaming and an attempted adjusting, but the adjusting ends in more jabby endpoints in more soft middles. The middles are drained of all insides and what's inside is surprising and embarrassing. One woman exclaims, *I had no idea that was in there*, and lifts her twelve-year-old daughter into her arms. *I have missed you*, she says. Another woman finds a corded telephone. Another woman finds a lima bean plant. *We shall eat well this winter*, she says. Another woman finds nothing, but she takes the twelve-year-old daughter, the corded telephone, and the lima bean plant. *I shall do many things this winter*, she says.

The audience takes us out to dinner. They dote on us and feed us the eggs of exotic fish we never knew existed. The diagnostic specialist picks the eggs from my teeth and squeezes them until they pop. The insides squirt out and I lick the goo from the diagnostic specialist's

fingers. The audience sticks out their tongues for a taste, but we are shy, coy. I wipe my mouth and the diagnostic specialist puts his hands in his pockets.

We walk home with the audience and we feel nervous like we are on a date. Both the diagnostic specialist and I worry about whether the audience will try to hold our hands. We whisper this to one another and we smile coyly at the audience. The audience presents us with a variety of expressions and we feel uncertain how to interpret the expressions.

They want to hold our hands, the diagnostic specialist says.

They want to eat us, I say.

They want to bury us in an unknown place, he says.

They want to pick my nose, I say.

They want to lick the inside of my mouth, he says.

They want to stretch my face and climb inside my mouth and live there for many years, I say.

Probably several years, he says.

And when they leave I will miss them, I say.

As much as you miss anything, he says.

At home, we take the audience into a dark room and we love them. At first, it feels voluntary. It feels like the audience is into it. They are grabbing their faces and making the right kinds of noises and their eyes are rolling back into their heads. Then something changes and their bodies are trembling and their hands are trying to pry our

hands off. Their hands are like pointy little daggers, but our hands are bigger and more effective. I have grown more confident about my hands and I wouldn't be here with this diagnostic specialist if his hands were any less impressive than mine.

So we dim the lights, because brightness will not do, and we do what we want. We laugh and there is ripping. *Tell me when it hurts*, I say. *Tell me too*, the diagnostic specialist says.

We wake in the morning and leave the audience alone in bed. We don't want to be rude, but the diagnostic specialist and I have plans. We don't have the energy for petting or confirmation. We haven't energy to say, *you're pretty and special and so important to me*. We haven't the energy for any of that. We roll over, climb out of bed, and make a run for it.

Later that day, the audience leaves us a message on the answering machine.

We are waiting for you to come back. We are waiting for you to come and hold our hands and tell us our hair is pretty. Our hair is very pretty, you know. Other people stop us and compliment our hair all the time. It's embarrassing how often people compliment our hair. It makes it difficult to carry on with our regular lives. It's very stressful. So anyway, we are wondering when you are coming back? We made fresh squeezed orange juice from oranges we all squeezed. It was erotic the way we squeezed those oranges. We wish you had

seen it. If you had seen it, you would come back immediately. You would run to us. I wish you had seen it. Where are you? Are you coming? Are you?

The diagnostic specialist erases that message but they call and leave another message.

We are drinking all the juice. All of it. Other people wish they could have juice, but we do not care if they are thirsty or if they need vitamin C or if they are very, very lonely. We do not care at all. We would zap all the vitamins out of those people if we could. Then we would lord those vitamins over you. Look at all our vitamins, we would say. Look. Hababababbaa. And you have none! None!

But if you would just call us back we would share our vitamins and then you would also be sustained. You would feel healthier and stronger and probably a good bit taller. Think of all the things you could reach that you can't reach now. You could use that top shelf, the one you've never used before. The one you've been staring at and longing to use. We know about longing. We too wish for fulfillment. So please, just call us. It would be an easy thing to do. Just call. It is that simple.

We don't return their calls and the audience comes to our house. They knock on the door and we pretend not to hear. We hope they will go away if we do not answer. We don't move because we are afraid they will hear the movement inside the house and feel encouraged to knock and wait longer. I consider chopping the diagnostic

specialist in half and splitting him between the audience and myself. Then everyone could be happy. But I worry about his insides and I know this is a route I have traveled down many, many times before. It is familiar and boring and has an ending I do not enjoy. We agree to continue ignoring the audience. They will become background, setting, hardly noticeable. Like a fence we've forgotten because it's overgrown with ivy and kudzu.

**We find that though we have forgotten the man
and woman, they continue to exist**

We reconfigure our focus. *It's what's inside a house that matters*, the diagnostic specialist says.

The man and woman have gone on living inside their home inside our home. They have made themselves very, very small and therefore hard to test, diagnose, study, or otherwise involve in the kinds of research that interest both me and the diagnostic specialist.

We buy a couple of lab rats to keep beside them. Such tiny people deserve pets, even if the pets are larger than them and even if the pets are lab rats that have undergone horrible treatment, are disfigured, and have violent personalities. At least a violent personality is honest. No one is faking that. The lab rats are outfitted in clean white lab coats and stand upright. All their movements are full of grandeur.

Things do not go as planned and the lab rats keep the man and woman as pets. I knew the lab rats were smart when I procured them, but I hadn't fully realized

how smart until now. The diagnostic specialist suggests it is because of a special breeding process. He says the rats themselves maintain this process and do not require any sort of monitoring by human beings. The rats have a series of charts and books they work with and these books are written in languages I cannot understand and are filled with symbols that make no sense to me.

The lab rats fashion collars and leashes for the man and woman and take them for walks around the house. Whenever the woman or man does something right, they are rewarded with a greenish-brown pellet from a satchel one of the rats carries on its hip.

Good boys, the rat says, patting the woman on the head. *Good boys*.

The man and woman make a kind of chirping noise and rub foreheads and noses against the rat's legs.

Soon the lab rats encourage the man and woman to mate. I am uncomfortable watching. A rat holds the woman down and encourages the man to climb up. The man's body is pale and traced with scars and stretch marks, proof of growth. The rat keeps saying, *no, you're doing it wrong, don't do it like that* and he makes the man climb off the woman and start over several times. The woman shakes and her breasts sway. Finally things begin to go how the rats want and then it's over. This process is repeated daily until the rats are satisfied.

The man and woman give birth to a litter of young

The infants are squirming pink things with tufts of grey hair matted to the backs of their necks. Their eyes are closed, coated in yellowed mucus, which the woman attempts to lick off, finds distasteful and spits out, rubbing her face and neck afterward. The man tries to wipe the mucus off with a handkerchief, but the handkerchief sticks to one of the infant's faces.

I pick this infant up by the furry nape of its neck and put it in a jar where I will keep it separate from the rest. I drop in a few Cheerios and some bits of torn up toilet tissue. I make cooing noises at the infant, but it trembles harder and clings to the bottom of the jar, flattening its body into a sprawl. Perhaps my cooing is too loud, too threatening. I do not know how to achieve a less menacing coo, so I discontinue my noises and leave the infant alone.

It'll grow, I think.

The lab rats begin their experiments and tell us we can watch

Experiment number one, a rat tells us.

The rats line the infants up from smallest to largest. One of the rats lifts the smallest infant and puts it inside the largest infant's mouth. *Chew*, the rat says.

The man and woman seem stressed and pace back and forth. They do not interfere with the rats' experiment, but they wring their hands and cry.

The largest infant struggles to swallow the smallest one, coughing and flailing. Finally the rats remove the smallest infant from the largest one's mouth.

Sometimes these things don't work, the diagnostic specialist says.

Sometimes these things take time, I say.

Experiment number two, a rat tells us.

The rats take turns throwing the infants to the floor to see which one will bounce the highest. Each infant is thrown three or four times in case the lack of bounce is due to the thrower and not the throwee.

Could be rat-error, the diagnostic specialist says.

Experiment number three, a rat tells us.

The rats taste a bit of each infant and announce their findings.

Infant one: salty, with a bit of crunch. Scraped the inside of our mouths uncomfortably. We worry we will not be able to consume beverages with any level of acidity for several days.

Infant two: tastes strongly of base, grainy, has a coppery aftertaste. Even after mouthwash and toothpaste there is still the taste of copper.

Infant three: mushy, falls to pieces, tastes bitter, but smells sweet. We think this one would be well suited as a dessert infant, presented with chocolate ganache or fruit compote.

Infant four: very wet, very, very wet. We tried to press it between paper towels to dry it a bit, but it is eternally wet and tastes of nothing.

Infant five: tastes like vinegar and dill. Burns the throat in a pleasant way. Something comforting about this one.

Experiment number four, a rat tells us.

They draw a curtain and do not allow us to watch this experiment, but there is a great deal of banging and a few yelps.

Experiment number five, a rat tells us.

The rats kill all the infants, but they kill them slowly and with care.

See the care, the diagnostic specialist says.

Yes, I say.

And you see there, he says, pointing. That's the right kind of care.

The infants look dead, but they look dead with care and like they have spent some great portion of their lives being loved and looked after by a responsible group of people. This is all anyone can hope for. This is all anyone can want out of life.

The diagnostic specialist decides to conduct his own experiment. He takes the rats and attempts to make them mate.

We are not doing that, they say. We do not do that.

After his failure, I also conduct my own experiment. I pry the handkerchief from the infant's face and this prying removes some skin.

It's prettier without facial skin, the diagnostic specialist says. Facial skin is one of the greatest impediments to mankind. It is a recent discovery.

When did you discover this? I ask.

Just now, the diagnostic specialist says. You saw. You were here.

We water the tiny man and woman and watch them grow

They absorb the water and become inflated. Their swollen bellies and arms sag with liquid. After enough water and time they grow to the size they once were, a few inches taller than me and just a bit wider, but the ratios are all off. Their arms are too long and drag the ground. Their foreheads are tall and engorged and they look as though they might explode if pricked. Their feet are too wide to fit any shoe, so they decide to proceed in bare feet.

I cover their bare feet with dirt so I will not have to look at them.

You've planted them again, the diagnostic specialist tells me. *You're always planting things.*

Perhaps, I tell him, *I was a gardener once. Perhaps I am interested in growth and production.*

I can tell he doesn't believe me. I can tell because he says, *I don't believe you* and shakes his head.

After a few rainstorms, the man and woman ask to

be uprooted, but I tell them what's done is done. They ask me not to speak in clichés and I tell them both, *them's the breaks*. Then they accept their new positions, their new occupations. I think the other trees on the block are jealous. The other trees begin to grow faster and display leaves in a wider array of colors. Orange, pink, green, purple, and blue. Only the more ambitious trees display blue. A few of the trees produce a violet and I can tell they meant blue. I feel embarrassed for these trees and I climb up and pick the subpar leaves. I wouldn't want their embarrassment to grow.

Yes, the diagnostic specialist says. There has been enough growing.

The man and woman bear fruit and we stand outside to watch it grow.

I am so tired of this bearing of fruit, the diagnostic specialist says. It has begun to grow tedious.

Things have been tedious for a while now, I say.

And they will grow more tedious before they end, he says.

Of course, I say.

The diagnostic specialist and I discuss splitting up

To avoid tedium, he says.

To avoid the endless repetition, I say.

We discuss splitting our possessions and starting over alone. We count up our appendages and decide who will take which arms and which legs. We divide everything, evenly I think, but the diagnostic specialist lingers.

I ask him to go away. *I do not know if our relationship is causing this tedium*, I tell him. *So you will have to go away. Possibly far away, but as long as you don't tell me how far, it will not matter to me how far you go. If you are next door but I think you are six thousand miles away, it will be the same as if you were six thousand miles away. Distance is about perception.*

**I worry the sensations I feel are less
than the sensations others feel**

I do not know how to make myself feel more or differently. As soon as I feel one way, I try to also feel the other way. I am quick about it. Hotcold. Fastslow. Smartdumb. Madhappy. Sadsad. I make sure to feel every possible way. A cornucopia of feelings, an array, a delightful platter of feelings.

I gather people and keep them in my basement. *Please*, I tell one of the people in the basement, *tell me how this feels*. I rip their pinky finger off. I rip my own finger off and hold our fingers side by side. Then I hold our hands side by side. I compare our complete hands. I compare our incomplete hands. I look at our faces. Our faces look very different. I observe an acute unhappiness in their face and I add that to my graph. Acute. Very acute.

I uproot the woman from the yard and carry her inside

It is painful for her. Her ankles are swollen and her feet are gnarled. Her skin has browned and her arms are bent in an upright position, reaching for the sky. She's covered in knots and sap. I try to rub the sap off, but her skin flakes away like bark. I try to bandage her but she says, *stop, please stop.*

You will stay in the living room for now, I say. Maybe later, the bedroom or the kitchen or the bathroom.

Not the bathroom, she says.

We can try different things, I say. I am not trying to box you in or push you right up against the box so you can't move. That's not what I'm all about.

Not anymore? she asks.

Not right now, I say. It's hard to say how I'll feel later or tomorrow. And if I feel one way you can be certain I will work hard to feel the other way as quickly as possible.

Thanks, she says.

You're welcome, I say. And, goodnight.

The next morning she cries that she misses him.

I tell her this is silly and that he's outside and he's doing the same thing he did yesterday and the day before that and all the weeks leading up to that.

But I want to see him, she says. *I want to be near him.*

That makes no sense, I tell her. *If you've already seen it, you should be able to imagine seeing it again.*

I can't imagine it, she says.

Would things work better for you in the basement? I ask. I feel sad thinking she might belong in the basement with the others.

But she says no. There will be no appropriate imagining in the basement or kitchen or bathroom or any other place. She says that even though I think it is the same every time, that for her every time is very, very different. She says she feels a different way each time and I feel jealous of her ability to switch feelings so abruptly.

I do not have that many feelings to work with, I tell her. *I'd like to, but I just don't. It makes me sad, but maybe this is the same kind of sad as all the other sads I have felt. And it doesn't feel necessary to feel this way, because I've already done it. I see no benefit in repeating my feelings. It is tiresome and predictable.*

To satisfy her, I hack off some of his limbs and bring them inside, to comfort her, to show her how he is the same. *Exactly the same*, I say.

She cries more.

No, please, I tell her. I don't know how to deal with your tears. They feel boring.

I describe how he looks without these branches, but this makes her want to see him.

But you can see the branches, I say. Why do you need to see him? The branches. Right here, the branches.

I wave the branches around so she can see they are branches. So she can see how they move or fail to move. So she can appreciate them as I intend her to appreciate them.

See, I say. See?

Finally we decide to build a new version of him. She seems to cheer at the possibility of a new him.

We can leave out the bad parts, she says.

But I tell her, *we should include the bad parts. Bad parts are interesting parts. The other parts are just filler to support the bad parts.*

We do make this version of him slightly smaller, so we can pick him up and carry him places whenever we need to.

I always hated how heavy he was, she says. Now he'll go wherever I like.

We do not equip him with thumbs and we make his spine very weak. Love is possible here.

The diagnostic specialist sends me letters and I find I have missed him

His first letter appears in the bathtub and I grab it right before she turns the water on.

He writes, My arm has been doing things I don't want it to do, so I wonder if I took your arm instead of my own when I left. I wonder if we did not divide our belongings correctly. At first, it was only when I was sleeping. I would wake half inside the fridge or somewhere downtown or in a stranger's backyard. It seemed innocent. Just the relocation of the arm and therefore the relocation of the body.

Then I began to feel dragged during my waking hours. The arm wouldn't wait until I slumbered. The arm interrupts at the most inconvenient times. You can imagine, I'm sure. And the arm has no amount of caring for the body it's attached to. It attempts to drag me through walls, off cliffs, and over crowds of people and you know how angry people can get sometimes.

Please. Do you have my arm?

**I tell the people in the basement
that I'll let them out one at a time**

They line up eagerly.

The basement smells of ammonia and wretch, I say to them.

What does wretch smell like? someone asks, so I send them to the back of the line where they can think about it more.

Tell me how to be happy, I say to the first person in line, because I've heard you can extract information from people in exchange for their safe passage over an easement you control. *Tell me*, I say.

The person stands quietly for a moment. *Have you tried running?* they ask. *Running and running so that nothing in the present can attach to you, because you are just slightly in front of the present? You aren't exactly in the future yet, so you don't have to deal with that stress. Just run and run*, they say.

I let that person leave and I encourage them to run. *Best to stay just slightly in front of me*, I say.

I ask the second person, *how do I remember the important stuff?*

If it's important, you won't forget it, they say.

I send them to the back of the line. *A good answer, I say, requires more effort than that. It should be more complicated. You're going to have to try harder or you'll die down here. You'll die up there too, but it feels worse to die down here. At least, I have been working to make sure it's worse. Please let me know if it's not worse and I can work harder to make it so. Lately, I have not been afraid of hard work.*

How have you grown so tall? I ask the fifth person. *I have tried growing tall and it has not yet come to pass.*

She holds her arms up in the air and moves in a special kind of way and begins to grow slowly but noticeably.

I don't feel answered, but I let her go because she feels like something special and I think she will come back if I want her to.

The line is fidgety and I send a group of them to the back. *Now be still,* I say to everyone.

How do you like to pass the day? I ask the eleventh person.

The eleventh person invites me to their home and I accept. I tell all the people waiting in line that I will return and I lock the door to the basement. I put on a light jacket and we go to this person's house. His house is very small with a wire fence surrounding it. He holds the fence down while we both step over it and he takes my hand while we're walking up the stairs.

You are uncommon, I tell him.

Wait, he says. I haven't shown you yet.

We go inside and inside are all the arms I ever lost, dangling from the ceiling, glued to the wall, and piled on the floor.

You've been following me, I say.

No, he says. We just have common interests. This is how relationships are supposed to work.

I've had a lot of relationships, I say. And they worked in many different ways that were not similar to this.

He digs to the bottom of a pile of arms and pulls out a small brown box. *Open it, he says, so I do.* Inside is a gnarled wooden doll, smiling at me, licking its lips.

I do love it, I say.

I knew you would, he says.

But this love, I say, doesn't extend to you. It is just a love for this small wooden doll.

The doll looks up at me and blinks its eyes almost shut and makes a squeaking noise.

I see what you mean, the eleventh person says.

We agree to have the occasional dinner and keep in touch, though I'm unsure whether we will really meet again or have the occasional dinner. When I look closer I see there is no wooden doll. It is only a bowl of peas, flecked with black pepper. *I am not fond of peas, I say and I leave.*

I write the diagnostic specialist a series of letters and leave them in the bathtub

My first letter reads: *You have never really been a diagnostic specialist. I wasn't sure how to tell you that when we were together, but now I feel safe telling you. You're actually just the man who repairs damaged wallpaper. You aren't the man who originally applies the wallpaper. That is a different man. I just called you the diagnostic specialist because it felt more important. It seemed more special. I thought you would notice, but you never did.*

How did you not notice? How, when you never diagnosed anything? You certainly did not diagnose something in a specialized way. It is amazing what people will believe.

My second letter reads: *I want to complain about my wallpaper. It has been peeling, even though you supposedly repaired it for me. Maybe you did a bad job because you thought you were a diagnostic specialist and also thought it was weird that I would ask a diagnostic specialist to repair my wallpaper, but still, you did a bad job. You should do everything to the best of your abilities.*

My third letter reads: *If you remove both your arms, you are welcome to move back in. But not if you only remove one arm*

or one arm and part of the other arm. It'll need to be a clean job. I don't want to be able to tell you ever had arms. I want your flesh to be smooth.

I see the eleventh person on a date with someone who is definitely not me

This person is wider and taller than me. I thought the eleventh person was for me, so it is shocking to see the eleventh person fulfilling some other function than the imagined and intended function.

Excuse me, I say and the eleventh person and the person who is definitely not me both quit eating. They lay their forks on their plates and look at me.

The eleventh person has been reserved for me, I say to the person who is not me. *What are you doing with the eleventh person?*

The person who is not me picks up her fork and resumes eating. She eats quickly, shoveling food into her mouth, biting down once and swallowing. This cannot be sufficient chewing. The food must be traveling down her throat in very large pieces that are going to be difficult to digest. This will cause her severe pain later.

Why subject yourself to such pain? I ask.

She does not answer, but she quits biting down even one time when she puts food in her mouth. She swallows it

immediately. Sometimes there is a choking and sputtering, a flinging forth of dirtied saliva filled with pieces of the food and splashes of oil.

But, I say to the eleventh person. What about us? I thought I was significant to you. I thought this could be a thing that mattered or at least a thing that mattered from a distance or through blurred vision. If I squinted I could think it mattered.

The eleventh person agrees and abandons his date to show me all the ways he can matter.

He grows into a tree.

I've seen that before, I say.

He becomes a container that will expand to hold whatever I want.

I'm doing all the work here, I say. I'm selecting the objects that will fill you. I'm deciding how much and you're just sitting there, waiting to be filled. This isn't an interesting relationship. This does nothing for me.

He curls up on the ground and begins to die. It is slow, slow enough that I can see the passage from life to death, the moment of in between, the moment of becoming.

Thank you, I say. That's really something.

The diagnostic specialist comes back

He is delivered, legless and armless.

At least you still have your head, I tell him and he turns around to show me that he's missing about a fourth of his skull in the back.

But here you are, I say.

His body is smooth and worn down. My only regret is that I couldn't be a part of the process that made him this way.

**The woman has taught this new version
of the man to do many things**

The diagnostic specialist and I go to observe the woman and the man. The man looks less like a tree than I expected. Sure, there are leaves and branches, but a face is beginning to emerge.

He can walk and make tea. She instructs him to make tea over and over again. He makes the tea and pours the tea down the sink and makes the tea and pours the tea down the sink.

May we have some tea? I ask her, pointing to the diagnostic specialist and myself.

He hasn't learned to do that yet, she says.

The diagnostic specialist and I go on a double date with them

It is hard to tell if we are at a fancy restaurant or a murky bit of land with some rotting deer carcasses. It used to be easy to tell the difference, but lately the two have come to look identical. A rotting deer carcass is fancier than anything else we eat.

The diagnostic specialist refuses to eat, citing some problem he's been having with a lack of appendages, so I lay him on the floor beneath the table, but facing upward so we can still talk and I can relay what he says to the rest of the table.

Our companions don't do as well. The woman keeps trying to hold the man down and he keeps getting up, which upsets his place setting.

You never should have taught him how to do that, I say and then I feel sorry that I said it, because I can tell she feels ashamed. Some things can't be helped and I hadn't noticed that this was probably one of them.

When we get home they go straight to bed without

speaking to either the diagnostic specialist or me. We try to be very quiet so we don't disturb them.

They want what we have, I tell him and he agrees that our relationship has become in vogue recently. *In the fashion*, he explains. *But eventually our relationship will become less desirable to the community and to you. What will you do then?* he asks.

Goodnight, I tell him and I tuck us both into bed.

She tries to slip inside my skin while I am sleeping

It feels like someone is trying to unwrap me to find out what's inside.

Stop, I tell her. *Stop, there's nothing inside. It's me all the way from the outside to the inside.* But she keeps trying to pull off my skin, keeps grabbing at loose edges and pulling, clawing at any weak point.

I can't sleep like this, I tell her. *I need my rest.*

Be more agreeable then, she says. *Make this easier for both of us.*

I allow her to take bits of my skin. It seems easier to just give her pieces of skin while I'm awake so she won't continue to disrupt my sleep. The interruptions were beginning to have lasting effects. I found it difficult to stay awake during the day and to concentrate on tasks. So I just give her what she wants. I tear off the almost dead pieces of skin from the creases of my elbows and around my fingernails. These pieces were going to flake away eventually.

This goes on for months and she has begun to look just like me. We stand side by side and stare into mirrors.

Neither of us can tell which of us is which. We run our hands over each other's faces and bodies. We hold each other close, feeling each other, feeling warmth and heartbeats.

There's not always a heartbeat, she says.

I know, I say.

For fun, we switch places. Just for a day, we agree. I go into the bedroom and lay beside the man. He seems more man and less tree every day. Most of his leaves have long since fallen off and he's all bare, bare, bare.

She lies in the other room with the diagnostic specialist. I don't know if he can tell it's her and not me. I don't know if he'll care that it's her and not me. I don't know what they're doing. Is she running her hands along his torso, touching the places where appendages used to be? Has she found the gnaw marks at the base of his head?

Do you love me? I ask the man.

He doesn't answer and I don't know if he doesn't answer because she has not taught him the answer to this question or if it's because he knows exactly what kind of question I'm asking.

In the morning, I take him outside and plant him beside the former version of himself. The two are beautiful next to each other. It seems they have come to a comfortable place where they can meet in the middle, man turning tree and tree turning man. I have the urge

to uproot them both and grind them to pulp. I have the urge to make them pollinate one another.

She finds I've planted her love in the yard and she says we will share the diagnostic specialist.

I don't know, I say. *The diagnostic specialist has begun to feel like mine, like less of a lover and more of a thing I own.*

We will own him together, she says. She lifts his body and rubs her face against his skin, all the places where wounds have been soldered back together.

We fall asleep on either side of him, both of our faces pressed into his sour-milk-smelling skin with its too large pores.

Goodnight, I tell her.

Goodnight, she says.

He struggles a bit between us, but we press our bodies against him and hold him firm.

**We have trouble sleeping, so the
diagnostic specialist tells a story**

He says when he was a young boy he used to be a bird.

Of course, I say. Of course.

No really, he says. I was a bird, a very regular bird. You know those birds you see in the park and someone says, what kind of bird is that, but no one knows because it just looks like a regular type of bird? Not distinctive. Just a bird.

And then what happened? I ask.

Well, he says. One day I just wasn't a bird anymore. For a lot of days after that I kept expecting to be a bird, but I never woke up to be a bird again. Sometimes I still expect it.

**We step back and watch our lives
and are really quite bored**

Let's not do that again, she says.

Yes, I say. It was really, really boring.

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*

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GET OUT OF JAIL
* VOUCHER *

Tear this out.

Skip that social event.

It's okay.

You don't have to go if you don't want to. Pick up
the book you just bought. Open to the first page.

You'll thank us by the third paragraph.

If friends ask why you were a no-show, show them
this voucher.

You'll be fine.

We're coping.



