



lauren samblanet

like a dog

p.

LIKE A DOG

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Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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spontaneous acts of scholarly combustion



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lauren samblanet

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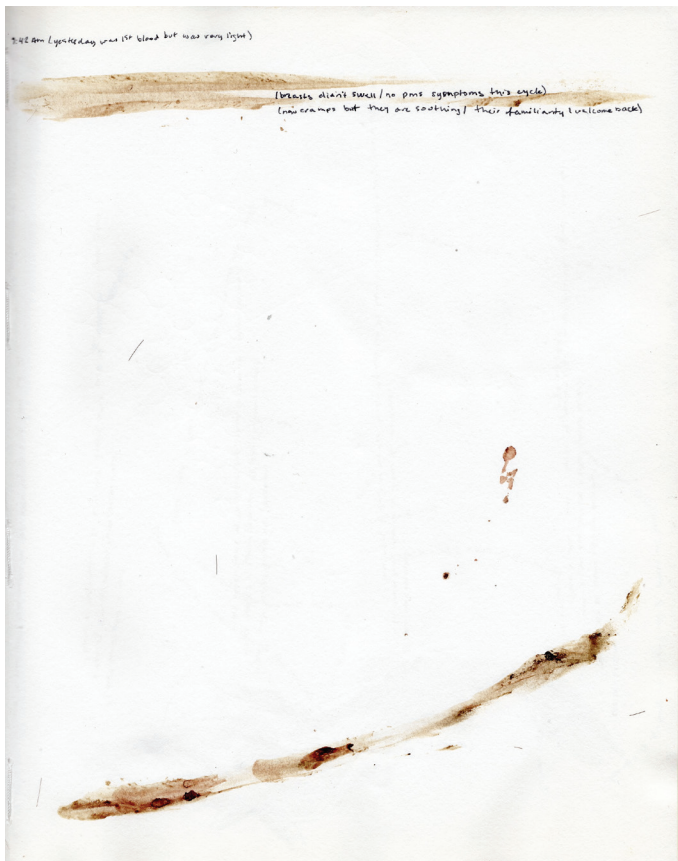
*more and more lately i feel that female aggression is
a necessary antidote to the disease of guilt — a highly
feminized form of guilt that prevents women from freely
experiencing pleasure or getting what they want.*

—jackie wang in response to *nymphomaniac volume 1*



7:42 am (getting up and 1st bleed but was very light)

(breasts don't swell / no pms symptoms this cycle)
(micromas but they are soothing / their familiarity / welcome back)



dear b,

the present is very painful right now.

when i began writing this project, it was for your new narrative class. it began as a creative final project that utilized similar writing strategies as the new narrative movement.

i wanted to write about sex because i often write about sexual assault but never sexual pleasure. also, p had joked that i was basic in my sexuality, that i was not as interesting sexually as i originally let on, and i wanted to prove him wrong.

after i turned in the project, in december of 2015, i didn't want to look at it — i was embarrassed by its simple writing and boring narratives and attempts to make my sexual and filmic obsessions seem at all exciting.

by summer 2016, it grew appealing again because i had just finished a project for a workshop that was intensely focused on trauma and emdr therapy, which had been unsettling and challenging to work on. *like a dog*, though serious in its own ways, felt somehow lighter, easier to write through, at least at first.

simultaneously, my relationship with p was beginning to fall apart, mostly because i was unable to express my needs clearly, unable to fuck or be intimate because of a flare-up in my ptsd. i chose not to prioritize my partner because school was all-consuming. in other words, i was failing my partner both sexually and emotionally.

unable to cope with or work through this because my mental health was in decline, i decided to return to *like a dog* and hoped that exploring my previous sexual experiences might help me

reclaim my sexuality in the present so that i might, at least, not fail my partner sexually.

as the project evolved, it began to reflect my sexuality more accurately. though the original draft of the project mentioned sexual assault, it had barely touched on the subject and how that type of trauma further complicates sexuality.

i also felt an urge to include the present, which in earlier drafts did not exist inside the project. the present was murky, confusing, distressing.

my relationship was dissolving. i thought i had feelings for an ex-partner, g, though i have since recognized that those feelings were not real but rather reflected needs i had that p was unable to meet because i didn't voice them. my ptsd symptoms were getting more intense and i was acting out — sabotaging my relationship, not sleeping, not eating, dissociating. but my partner and i were also unable to work through our relational and communication issues even when i voiced my needs and even when i softened to vulnerability with him.

when my relationship ended, this project included that awful period, too.

and now it must include what has happened since:

m's hands around my throat, his fucking me without permission. p's anger and his forgiveness. and my inability to forgive myself.

sometime post breakup, though we were still living together, p expressed frustration that i had been writing this project about my desire for g and other past and present sexual desires that did not include him. he wasn't frustrated because they didn't include him, but because i was writing about these desires while

i was with him. he felt i was giving space to these desires in a way that was unjust.

perhaps this is true.

but what his argument did not take into account is the very reason that i write: to get through things, to work my way through the muck in order to find clarity and understanding.

in person, i can often be quiet. i'm overly concerned with what those around me think of me. i feel my voice has less value. these issues render me silent. it's hard to really hear myself sometimes through the noise of other voices.

when i write, it takes a while, but i start to hear myself, start to believe myself, start to work through the things that are clogging my mind, the things that have become confused because of too many outside voices.

this is not a crime: the need to write through.

perhaps though, i should have shared those writings, should have been less afraid of his judgment, should have known him enough to know that he would work with me, not against me.

should have, should have, should have.

so, b, that is how i got here.

that is why i am writing.

that is how i came to be here, in this nightmarish, painful present,

1

dear v,

i realized recently that i've never really shared any of my sex stories with you.

sure, you know some of the people that i've had sex with and you know some details, but i've never actually been able to share the full stories with you.

it's not just you either. i've never shared these narratives with most of my friends. h is the only one who knows more of what happened, but only of a few encounters.

what is it about sex that is so hard for me to share? or what is it about people that makes talking about sex so difficult?

even recently in the letters i've been writing, even on paper, i refuse to go into too much detail.

i use all the words about fucking but the intimate details, the real details about bodies, about my body and how it feels when it's being fucked — i leave those details out.

maybe this is a turning point,

1

dear h,

remember that night when you, a, and i got too drunk and there was the potential of a threesome?

okay, well, not just potential.

it started happening.

but a was being obnoxious because he clearly wanted to fuck just me and didn't seem to care what either one of us wanted.

i was internally freaking out because, i don't think i've told you this yet, i still haven't fucked a woman, which is strange because i have ex-girlfriends that i would have loved to fuck but it just never happened.

you were so close to fingering me, but i knew it would be rude not to finger you back and i panicked. so i told you that i needed to stop with the three-way petting, but a wouldn't stop and so he fucked me in the shower.

did i tell you that a couple days later he told me that i made him want to stop relying on bdsm to get off? like something about me made him want to just fuck, rather than to only fuck me while dominating me?

h, i think i've always been envious of you.

through your sex stories you've shared with me, i've come to let you represent a kind of freedom that has felt inaccessible to me. i mean, of course, i've had a lot of sex, but i've held back a lot, too.

you know how some people think there's a correlation between a desire to have sex with multiple partners and being sexually abused?

i hate that people see us both as falling into that cliché,

l

dear e,

living with you was a sweet dream. watching art films and foreign films with you at night. then waking up and coming upstairs to find you gazing out the window in thought, a mug of tea in your hand. it often took you a moment to come back from wherever you had wandered to in your mind, but when you came back, you were so fully there with me.

ever since i can remember, i've had trouble not getting lost, not gazing out in thought. i think for both of us this behavior was intensified by being lonely children.

we've both talked a lot about how, as children, we built other worlds that we could enter, places where adventure and friendship were plentiful.

for me this took place mostly outside, in the backyard beneath the plum tree where i searched for glass shards in the dirt because i believed that they would allow me to travel through time and space, or in the side yard tree that i would climb and sit in, or in the park where i would swing and listen to music and sing as if no one else was around.

in middle school, the subject of my daydreaming, as it's often called, shifted from time travel and new worlds to my crushes. i imagined being kissed and feeling skin. if i really liked someone, the daydreams were not just about being physical; they became grandiose romance plots about how we would run away together. they always involved running away, escaping.

while the act of running away was heavily detailed, all that happened after running away was kissing and feeling skin. there were no daydreams that involved marriage or children or much

more of a future than a few days. the created daydream for my crush would play on repeat in my mind, with new details added in each iteration. at times, these daydreams began to feel incredibly real, as if they had actually happened.

my mom has always said that my imagination is at once my greatest strength, because it allows me to express myself through painting and writing, and that it is also my biggest weakness, because of the realistic nightmares that have plagued me since childhood. i would say my daydreams are more akin to the nightmares. not because they are horrific.

certainly as i've aged and had more sex, the daydreams have become much sexier and much more detailed in their hopes for kissing and feeling skin.

i imagine seeing g again, his long hair now short, his fingers still long and sexy. he makes me a meal of food he foraged. we can barely finish our food because i'm staring at him greedily. we go to his room and he sits on the bed. i part my legs and straddle him, coming in for a long, hungry kiss. the kissing continues, our mouths mixing wetnesses, my hands on his bearded cheeks, his hands on my waist, my ass. our breathing becomes panting, and i can't help but moan a little as i take his hand and bring it to my mouth — two fingers inside, on my tongue, to lick and suck — and his cock grows so stiff. his hand slides down my pants but the angle is not right, so he flips me over onto my back and finger fucks me until i've cum three times. i climb on top of him, shimmy down his long frame, and suck his cock until he's close to cumming. i slide back up and kiss him, then i sit on his cock and ride it until we both puddle ourselves in delight.

but by getting lost in imagined relations, relations that often feel so real, i distance myself from the present.

i distance myself from my partners.

sometimes the imagined world becomes more satisfying than the real one and i allow myself to create more and more intricate daydreams until i find myself in my head more often than in the physical world.

how do you bring yourself back to the earth in these moments?

i'm here in philadelphia, miles from you, and i can't bring myself back down,

1

dear r,

you often ask me to write letters to myself and other people, noting that i don't actually have to send them, but that i could if i wanted to.

r, i've been writing these letters since before i met you. i never send them.

there's so much in my life that goes unsaid. i'm working to undo this but it's a great challenge after so many years of silence. sometimes my mouth feels glued shut. sometimes i manage to open my mouth but what i want to say refuses to move past my throat. it just sits there, rotting.

i think it might be time to take my notebook to the next level. i use this notebook to track my body. it began in b's class last semester as a means of daily writing in order to think about and find presence. daily writing is hard for me and i experimented with several ways of writing in order to figure out what would be more useful to my practice.

finally, i found a way of writing toward embodiment.

i began by smearing my period blood on the notebook. or i glued hair that fell out during my shower to the pages. i cried on it. i blew my nose on it. i smeared vaginal fluid on it. after this gesture of letting my physical body find the page, i would then write around whatever bodily residue was on the page. i thought of it as a choreography — a dance of the body, wherein the first movement was the bodily fluid or residue, and each movement from there was the stroke of the pen. thus, i found myself writing on the page in all directions. sometimes the choreography

was upside down, sometimes the choreography was a swirl in all directions.

i found this practice to be restorative and healing. it allowed me to find my body in a time when i was so anxious that my body seemed to often drift away from me.

for a few weeks after m choked and raped me, i continued using that notebook because i was dissociative, and at the time it seemed helpful to seek out this form of embodiment.

but then i took the notebook home to colorado with me for the holidays, and when i returned to philadelphia, i found the notebook was no longer a safe space.

this is because i realized how much my mental health had been in decline since grad school started. and how that decline had led me to break up with p despite my love for him. the notebook contained markers of this decline and it also contained that dissociative december sparked by m's hands around my throat.

i have a new notebook now. it was a christmas gift. the pages are much larger. the quality of paper is nicer.

still, i hardly use it. my body writing feels violated, spoiled. i don't know how to reclaim it. i don't know how to find a practice that is healing again.

b wants me to rescan the pages of the notebook for this project, *like a dog*. each time i pick up the notebook, i begin weeping and feel repulsed by it. it reminds me of all the things i didn't say and all the ones i said out of fear. it reminds me of how i fail in relationships. it reminds me of when m was just my good friend and not my rapist.

i don't want to fucking touch my notebook.

i'm thinking of utilizing the new notebook as i try to touch the old one. what if i wept onto the new notebook? what if i puked onto it? what if i really let myself loose? if i stopped caring how gross the notebook might seem to others? if i stopped caring how others might judge me in my pain?

reclamation now means no longer caring at all.

i feel it's time to just let my grief and my rage loose,

1

dear s,

i wrote you an email with feedback on your poem you sent me. you sent a video of the poem being performed along with a movement sequence. this somatic experience really added to your poem, which was about the end of relationships as a kind of death. as you recited the poem, you walked frantically, arms by your side. for the most part you walked and repeated the poem so quickly, until one moment in the middle, where you paused. the significance of the death felt so removed from you, the speaker, the performer, until this slowed down moment. but then you quickly sped your walking and speaking again. distancing from the weight, from the emotion of that death.

i wished the video would have continued, so that i could have witnessed your audience's reaction. it's hard for me, sometimes, to understand my own reaction without witnessing the reactions of others. with nothing to measure my own thoughts against, it's hard to be sure that my thoughts are the right thoughts to have.

even though i sent you feedback, i refrained from giving you all of my thoughts on it. something got in the way.

it was the fear of creating another rift between us. what if my feedback was too harsh and drove you away? after we graduated, we began drifting. you moved and i stayed behind. you were in europe when we began rekindling our friendship. we exchanged emails, sharing updates on our emotional states and daily lives. these emails also exchanged art that was inspiring us, creative projects we were working on, and feedback for those creative projects. this is how i came to watch you perform the poem i mentioned above. and after watching it several times, i felt my own thoughts forming, but i also felt my love for you and my desire for our newly rekindled friendship to grow more. the fear

that honesty would cause you to drift away again arrived in the form of a sinking feeling in my gut.

also present was the fear of not sounding smart enough or eloquent enough. this fear is ever present when i speak or write, but is amplified when i'm speaking with people like you, people who are brilliant creators and deep thinkers.

and too, i was afraid of us becoming closer again. because then if another rift occurred, it would hurt as much as the first time. maybe a bit of distance is necessary in all human relationships, so that when trouble arises, we can stay afloat alone. of course, it is this line of thought that has caused me a great deal of heartache since i used to often push away those who i loved the most. because proximity, in my mind and in many of my experiences, has resulted in pain. i have tended to let fear of that pain pull me out of sustained closeness with others.

it strikes me, as it might you, how many of my behaviors are driven by fear. and also how much my fear keeps me in limbo. with fear of being abandoned by those i love *and* fear of being close to those i love, i'm hovering in the liminal space between intimacy and distance.

not long before you sent the poem you performed, you sent me the pdf of a book called *art and fear*. out of fear that i might actually move through my fears, i still haven't read it.

trauma creates patterns in our movement. our bodies, in response to the violence that we experienced, find patterns they feel safe in. the trauma is held in the body and those patterns of movement help keep the trauma where it is, so it doesn't just spill open into our entire system.

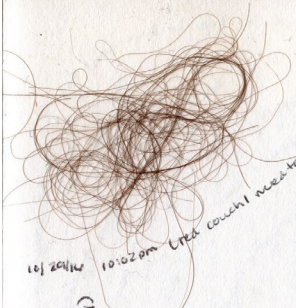
the same is true of our thoughts after trauma. we get caught in patterns, in loops, that offer us the illusion of safety. our bodies, afraid that the trauma will either spill open or reoccur, teach

us to fear unexpected movements. our thoughts, afraid that the trauma will either spill open or reoccur, teach us to fear curiosity. in the body this can cause chronic pain. in the mind, this can cause brain fog, chronic uncreativity, shallow thought, and excessive fear.

s, i want to dance with you again. to watch the way you improvise.

because watching you move through your trauma reminds me that i can move through my own, and when we dance together, i feel less alone in what happened to my body,

1

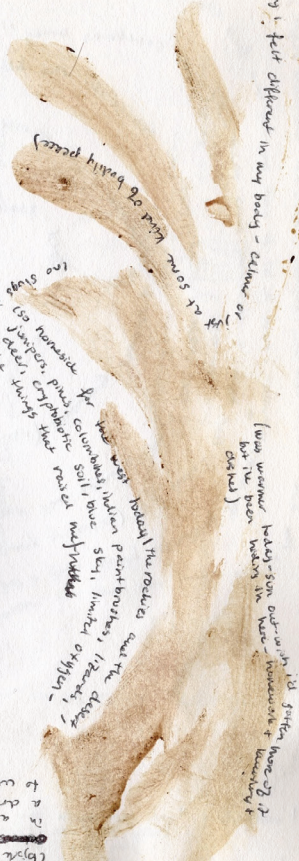


10/20/01 10:02am

(I'm a weird comb and I don't go to work and I don't go to work)

(I've been analyzing last night with a
in a huge hotel (Chong Kong?). Then
a dragon, stories of soldiers/stories
to work some for like a day)

link but feeling utterly uninspired / anxious / stir crazy
I've caught me to



some sort of
with the brush (piece)

no sign in a long time (but always nice)
I'm a weird comb and I don't go to work and I don't go to work
I've been analyzing last night with a
in a huge hotel (Chong Kong?). Then
a dragon, stories of soldiers/stories
to work some for like a day

(was water today - sun out - in 100 degrees
but the sun was in the - 100 degrees + humidity)

11/12/60
Barnum

Don't it reads nice & like you' but subtexted now

Spies (and) I've been so out of contact
finally contact but also some stuff

(It's really "empty dream" - i sort of want

endless friends)

to go out with it and just first and only)

I should be more I should be more

the meaning is hard and should be sweet as if business

dear e,

i hope you've seen *nymphomaniac* by now. you used to watch all of lars von trier's films, just like i used to.

if you have seen it, recall the second volume, in which joe, the protagonist and self-proclaimed nymphomaniac, is caught masturbating in the bathroom at her workplace. after attempting sexual sobriety and attending a sex therapy group that she is forced to be in because of her job, joe insults everyone in the group, lights a car on fire, and as the film's wikipedia page states, "realizing she has no place in 'normal' society, joe turns to organised crime and becomes a debt collector, utilising her extensive knowledge of men, sex, and sadomasochism."

but really, joe continues to operate *inside* of society.

the structure of debt collection is not outside of capitalism — it is fueled by capitalism. she finds a place in society and she clings to her subjectivity and her sexuality, or so it seems as she recounts her sexual history to seligman, the celibate bachelor who has taken joe in after she was beaten by her ex-lovers.

and while the climax of the film leaves us wondering if she has finally abandoned her sexuality, or at least is not so much in its clutches, no matter how monstrous she feels after a sexual encounter and no matter how nightmarish the fallout after those encounters is, she returns, again and again, to her relationship to sex.

everything she recounts to seligman has sexuality at its core. it is her driving force, so much so that when her employer demands she go to a sex support group and when she attempts sexual

sobriety, she cannot bear it— to the point of needing to light something on fire.

do you think that our sexuality defines us?

do you think that our deepest sexual desires are more honest than other aspects of ourselves?

1

dear v,

do you remember when i lived in the dorm and you accused me of talking with the same intonation and spoken mannerisms as my freshman dormmates? i denied it for a long time. but we both know i was doing it.

i continue to do that with friends. part of my personality fades out and part of the friend's personality slides in.

how much of this is me speaking and how much of it is you?

do you think there was a time, before capitalism, when subjectivity was not singular?

what i mean is that maybe subjectivity could have included both of us inside this i,

1

dear h,

my friend s was here in philadelphia recently. you've never met her. you moved to california before i started collaborating on dances with her. anyway, s was here and we were walking down south street. we walked past one of those lingerie and sex toy stores, and she told me that she's been thinking about how prudish she is compared to me.

i wondered about that. i mean, it's totally true — s isn't so open about talking about sexuality or her own sex life. along with this, she's one of those people for whom sex has to be a romantic act — she likes sweet love-making with one partner. and for me, sex can be that, but more often it's just fucking devoid of much emotionality or romance. i think that if we made a scale of prudishness, it would be s as the most prude, e and v as the next most prude, then me, and the least prude would be you.

only one person has ever called me prudish. did i ever tell you about my first girlfriend, z? i don't think i have. she was beautiful. she introduced herself to me via myspace, even though we went to the same high school. she said something about having seen me at my job, at the movie theater. quickly the conversation turned into her telling me how beautiful i was and asking if i was into women. up until she asked me that, i had never considered if i was, despite having a very intense girl-crush in middle school.

when she asked me, my sexuality opened up before me and i suddenly knew i was bisexual.

she really wooed me. we dated for almost three months. she drove an old, baby blue truck, smoked cigarettes, loved my favorite band, wore boxers, and had these really wonderful lips

that were small and kind of fish-like, but they were so soft. we made out often and spent all our free time together. but we never made it past making out, so she broke up with me on instant messenger.

at the time, my family computer was in the living room, and my parents would have been disturbed if they had known i was dating a woman. so z was breaking up with me slowly on messenger, and i was just sitting there, silently panicking and trying not to cry.

when i asked her why, she told me that i was a prude.

one week later, she had a new girlfriend. they dated for a while and then broke up, at which point, i dated z's new ex, just to spite her. but i didn't sleep with her either, or the next three women i dated.

which brings me to you, because we could have fucked, but we just kissed and touched each other's breasts instead. i guess z was right, to some degree, about my being a prude.

but the thing is, h, you know how much i love fucking, so i guess my prudishness is sometimes there and sometimes fades away. just like lately, my libido is there briefly and then fades away.

does that ever happen to you?

1

dear v,

when we used to pass notes in middle school, your handwriting was a little bubblier than it is now and mine was a little bigger than it is now. but our handwriting from that era is still recognizable — it still retains the features that make it familiar now, despite having some changes.

i know nothing of handwriting analysis, but, it seems that size can change over time, the amount of space a letter takes up can grow or shrink. but i'm not sure if there are other elements that can change. and i'm not sure i could articulate just what it is that makes a person's handwriting recognizable.

going through old notes creates two simultaneous feelings — the first is gratitude for the intimacy of my friendships with women. even those that were short-lived still hit a level of intimacy that was intense and sweet. we utilized the page of our notes as if it were a real space that we could enter together — a safe space, a space for honesty, no matter how distressing that honesty might be.

the second is a feeling disturbed not because of how many boy's names show up in the letters or how often the boys change, but because we, at times, talk of nothing else. a high focus on crushes is something often attributed to teenage girls, said to be caused by hormones. i'm not convinced this is the truth, or at least not the full truth.

something put the idea in our heads that boys were meant to be the focus of our attention, that without a boyfriend or at the very least a crush, we were somehow not as valuable as other girls. the notes without the details of our crushes are much shorter

and often say, *i don't know what to write*, as if without boys, the notes need not exist at all.

we wrote so many notes about boys, though hilariously i don't know if i named them now if we'd remember who most of them even were. i don't recall several of the ones you liked, or one who i liked, a boy named cc.

the only cc i recall is one that i met in high school that i never told you about since it was a very random escapade that probably would have just made you question my judgment all the more. he was friends with two of my coworkers from the movie theater. he was quite muscular for a high school student and had beautiful, high cheekbones.

i don't remember all the details, just that my two coworkers, cc, and i watched a movie together at the theater, and afterwards cc and i ended up in my van alone together, parked by the lake. we made out in the back seat of the van. if my memory is right, i think he was seated and with legs parted like a book, i straddled him.

while he was an excellent kisser, i remember vividly that his fingering skills were less than good, which was made even more frustrating because i actually gave him a handjob. since i tried to avoid handjobs at that age, i remember the feeling of his cock in my hand more clearly than i remember most cocks. it was just longer than the width of my hand, so it was smaller than average. but it was so stiff — it felt more bone-like than the other cocks i had encountered.

cc sent me a facebook message a year after our van experience asking if i worked at the movie theater. i asked if he remembered us making out in my van and he replied that he had no memory of it and was he drunk at the time?

i don't understand drinking in high school. you and i never even thought about drinking. for me that was because the flirting and making out and touching were plenty. all those bodies, all that touch got me drunk enough. even now i would rather fuck than drink.

your notes are a little more stable than mine in regards to their object of affection. this is, of course, not surprising given the above story, the other stories you know, and all the stories i never told you for fear of judgment.

you've always been better at fixating on just one crush or lover at a time. i'm not really sure if it's better to focus on only one person at a time. it makes commitment a hell of a lot easier, makes it easier to remain monogamous. but why not explore the options? and if i'm just going to fuck someone, i don't really need to think they're that interesting or exciting.

this is where we differ.

if i feel bodily chemistry with someone, i'll go for it. but for you, it's all about that bigger connection and the feeling that they could become someone worth committing to.

i just want to get fucked,

1

dear s,

i've been thinking about when we met each other. i wrote about it not long ago for a project in b's new narrative class, which was ultimately not about you, but rather about w, though not really about w but about how w led me to collaboration and dance and embodiment. i told you about it last year and you asked me to send it to you but i couldn't because i was too self-conscious about it.

for now i'll share with you its closing section, which briefly mentions you:

it is the week of my birthday. my friend, v, is about to move out of the country for the peace corps. the setting is boulder in the fall — the air is cool and it smells just slightly of decay. the leaves have changed. on campus, the &know festival is going on. w has scheduled a movement and writing workshop with kj holmes, a dancer. the workshop is required. after the workshop, there is a reading and bhanu kapil will be there. this is not required, but it is clear that w would like for us to attend. w has high expectations for us.

it is my first time in a dance studio since the tap dance classes i took when i was a child. no shoes are allowed. two of the men in class are already joking about how badly they want to leave. dance and poetry, to some, is not an appealing combination. but the other four of us seem at least a little excited. several of w's mfa students show up to the workshop. and one dancer, s, who is blonde and moves so carefully, interests me.

kj begins by asking us to walk around the studio. first we do so very slowly — noticing the sensations. we speed up. we touch the walls and doors and cupboards and chairs. we begin to spin our arms around. we walk on our toes. is anyone else invigorated?! i notice my toes — does anyone else realize that they often forget certain parts of their body? it feels nice to notice those parts again. it feels nice to have my bare feet pressing onto the cold studio floor.

at one point, we all gather, huddled kind of close, on one side of the studio. kj tells us the rules — she will begin. she will run into the studio and improv into a gesture and hold it, paused in that gesture, until someone yells stop. she will then return to the group and sit down, and the person who yelled stop will run into the space and hold a different gesture until the next person yells stop. and so on and so forth until she decides the game is over. w adds that we will write in response to each held gesture, we shouldn't think too much about that writing but instead, just see what comes up.

the game begins. my heart is pounding. i'm scared to yell stop, scared to run into the space, scared that i won't know how to choose a gesture. after all, i'm just a poet, not a dancer. my writing about the held gestures is influenced by fear and anxiety. my head feels foggy and my limbs feel light.

somehow, my voice, without my consent, calls out *stop!* my legs lift my body off the floor. i am running. i settle in the center of the space. i am facing away from the group. my knees bend and i am crouching. my left hand settles with fingertips on the floor. my right hand extends toward the ceiling — the fingers slightly curled. my head is bowed. i settle in. my legs feel tired. my heart will not calm down. but i am no longer afraid. i am connected. i can feel my toes.

stop!

this writing is a bit sentimental and perhaps cheesy, but that day felt cheesy to me in the best possible way. it's still my best birthday in memory. i wish you had gone to the reading after — you would have been very moved by bhanu's reading and ritual.

your movements on this day were so careful, so awkward in the most beautiful way. the next time i had class after the workshop mentioned above, i asked w if i could work with you for an upcoming dance and poetry collaboration assignment, and one of the cis-male poets was upset with me because, as he told me, he wanted to work with you for his collaboration project so he could try to fuck you.

in a way, i felt that by collaborating we were saving each other: me saving you from that poet, and you saving me from the dissociation of my body from my mind, and from the deep loneliness of writing.

i felt like we were opening each other's worlds, showing each other new art and pushing each other's creativity. each time i left our collaborative sessions i felt cozy, like i had been in some sort of a womb that we shared together like twins — you blonde and me brunette, you graceful and me graceless.

but both of us valued and needed,

1

dear v,

it's ten in the morning on a saturday.

the weather app on my phone says it's very warm outside but my apartment is freezing and my cat is napping on my blankets and i don't want to wake him up so i'm shivering and drinking tea and crying on and off.

what is happening in our friendship is what seems to be happening to many of my friendships and it's unsettling but perhaps it's just the way of things.

friendships, all human relationships, ebb and flow. there is a wash. we do things for each other and hopefully, with time, a balance is achieved in which both people feel heard and cared for and loved. maybe you have given me all you can right now. maybe you cannot listen to me anymore.

it's ten in the morning on a saturday and i think p is not interested in trying to rebuild and i feel completely dismantled. i feel small. i feel like my life is collapsing in around me. i tried to tell you yesterday through text that something was wrong, that *i'm still a mess tbh* because you haven't been talking to me about anything serious, because i feel awkward talking to you about my pain.

the *tbh* feels necessary to both confess the truth to you and to simultaneously downplay it through abbreviation. *tbh* makes it sound at once lighter and more intimate. i've used it a lot since m assaulted me, with friends old and new.

i've been trying to build my friendships. i've been trying to find support. i've been trying to offer it too, but perhaps i, in this intense moment of pain, am failing at supporting others.

v, what is happening in our friendship?

i want to reach out to you but you're so distant. everyone feels distant right now and i keep reaching out and grasping at air.

am i the problem in all of my human relationships?

am i creating all of these rifts?

1

dear b,

you said that in my new work, i'm using the word *hole* like a talisman. it stands for something and is guiding the work, but you are unsure what it is, what it means.

i know what the hole is.

the hole is a place for hiding. it is an opening.

it is a warm and wet and dark cavernous space that can support life.

when i say hole, i mean pussy, most of the time, but it isn't just the pussy.

the hole is a portal. it is muscular and clingy. it holds onto.

the hole is a space that can be filled but the hole does not need to be filled.

the hole is my relationship to this body i was born into, this body labeled as female, this body that is oppressed, fucked and filled,

this body that sometimes forgets it can be in control,

1

12/10/16 (morning day)

(60 marks complete)

(Dussq. mercus)

dear h,

did i ever tell you about the *good girl* thing? does that ring a bell already, from your own sex life?

i first noticed it with c.

i know, i shouldn't bring him up after all the time it took for me to get over him, but it's important. it didn't happen at first though, because before c found out that i told a lie about how long i'd been with g, he acted differently toward me. at first, we had this insane, lustful, romantic sex that in retrospect seems like something he used to lure in all the women that he fucked. then, g confronted him, and suddenly things changed. he became much less emotionally available to me, though as you know, he didn't even seem available to himself that often.

the sex also changed. it seemed that my lying about g made less romantic sex more appropriate.

still, the sex was hot and he is one of only a few men that have made getting my pussy eaten feel amazing, and the orgasms were wild. every time i came, c would say: *good girl*. when i asked him about it, he said that it was exciting for him that i was cumming, and he just meant like: good things are happening for this girl. i wonder if he was already fucking the other women when this good girling began.

o also said it. but in more of his dominating way: be a good girl and _____, where the blank became things like watch yourself get fucked, or suck my dick like a whore. when o said it, it felt more degrading than when c did, even though c was lying to me and o was never cruel to me outside of our fucking.

x said *good girl* also. he said it both times we fucked, in the cow field and after my art show. didn't he also use the word slut or maybe it was whore? which is interesting because he was cheating on his girlfriend to sleep with me, so by definition, he was the slut.

anyway, i think he said *good girl* when he fit his entire dick, which was delightfully long and thick, into my pussy. he mentioned that his current girlfriend and many other girls couldn't take his whole cock.

why was hearing that satisfying for me?

am i a good girl?

this seems to imply that, in sexual settings, i fulfill men's sexual desires without putting up a fight.

or that i seem to truly enjoy sex without holding back?

i like that second option better,

1

dear k,

it's late and all the men are out taking care of themselves.

i'm home alone in the apartment that will soon not be mine. it is the fourth day of my period and i can smell the earthy scent of my blood wafting up from my pussy. *grey's anatomy* is on for no reason other than noise. i'm hungry but unwilling to eat. instead, i'm sipping on the sleepytime extra tea that you gifted me, hoping desperately that i can quiet my mind and find sleep soon.

it's two in the morning and i haven't slept yet and the men are out taking care of themselves.

the men are asking for clearer boundaries.

the men are pressing for what they need.

the men are asking me to think more quickly and more logically.

the men are out drinking, are out dancing, are out flirting. i'm not fully sure where they are but they are out.

the smell of my blood is wafting up and even if i knew how to take care of myself in this moment, i'm not sure i would.

this breakup is supposed to be amicable but, somehow, it seems to be emotionally charged to the point of hostility. i am being asked to take responsibility for more and more each day, but he takes less responsibility each day.

it's nearly two thirty in the morning and the men are out taking care of themselves and i am still trying to caretake them. in my attempt to treat them with care, i refrain from saying certain things. i try to step delicately around painful truths. my caretaking is actually pain making.

and as i caretake the men in this way, i neglect my own needs — i forgo self-care.

the blood is leaking onto my panties, but i don't really care. it's a different type of wet than being wet with pleasure. the panties feel slimy rather than soaked.

k, the men keep telling me what to do.

the most frustrating thing about it is that it's framed as assistance, but i never asked for that assistance, and worse yet, i can't seem to say no to that assistance, even though it isn't what i need.

what do i need?

1

dear e,

i was talking with one of the first-year students in my grad school program today in the french patisserie that i'll take you to when you get here in january. we met so we could finish our dialogue project for b's workshop. the basic idea of the project is to simultaneously build relationships with each other while also creating a critical discourse about our creative practices and poetic beliefs.

my partner and i had corresponded, until today, over email and in a google doc, which has been ideal since it takes both of us a while to process. in fact, it's always easier for me to correspond via the written word, which is probably true of many writers. writing gives me time to deeply think and re-language my thoughts until i sound intellectual and poised and linguistically graceful, or sometimes so that i sound messy but controlled.

we talked about a lot of things today in the patisserie and landed on lars von trier a few times.

if i tell someone about lars, i always put this disclaimer out there: *it's not that i'm recommending that you watch his films. it's just that, in some ways, they might be worthwhile or productive.* i have to warn people about how difficult the films are, even if sometimes a film by lars might be useful for a project or line of thought they are engaged with. if someone has watched his films, then the disclaimer changes to *i don't love or respect him, but his films impacted me.*

i understand now why lars needs to come with disclaimers, but until recently, during the process of more critically dissecting his films, i was frustrated having to offer those disclaimers.

when you and i started watching art films together, i was less aware of my subject position, of dominant patriarchal ideology, and thus i was also less aware of the misogyny, racism, and other problematic themes and content of some of those films.

of course, not all art films are misogynistic, racist, violent, etc., but much of what is considered canon or innovative, and most of the films that receive critical acclaim and awards, either center problematic and harmful content or do what language poetry did — view the cinematic frame as an object free of social context, which is, in my opinion, another type of violence.

and so, e, in our cinematic journeys together, as we prioritized films that had won awards or that we had heard about from film students and professors alike, we were watching many films that seemed to just be punishing their female characters, to just be working out male aggression towards women on the screen, where maybe the director felt there would be no ramifications for such aggression.

violence in a virtual space, however, is still violence. and misogyny enacted in the space of a film still promotes misogyny.

with lars, we must also recognize the violence he commits when he is interviewed, and the violence in how he's treated women actors during the production of his films. his violence is not just within the diegetic world of his films; it spews outward, and harms real people and their bodies.

all of this being said, it has been easy for me to get swept up in the ways lars's women characters remind me of myself. this was even more the case when i knew nothing of lars and when i had not yet seen most of his films, and thus had not yet noticed the pattern of him punishing those characters.

these women are depressed. they are raw. they cannot contain their sorrow or anger or bodies. they are sexual in ways that i don't often see in media. and maybe, once i noticed the pattern, i also identified with them because they are punished and because they are punished by men.

they are punished not just for being depressed but also for feeling happiness. they are punished for expressing their sexuality and also for withholding it. they are caught within the contradictory shaming of the patriarchy in which any action and its opposite are crimes for women. in fact, their crime is not the action or its opposite but their crime is simply being women.

this mirrors life and mirrors my own life. alongside this, with *nymphomaniac* in particular, i couldn't help but feel like joe was the first character i had seen in media whose sexuality was nearest to my own.

i've watched many movies about women's sexual awakenings, sexual experiences, and encounters. i've read books about these experiences and talked to friends about their own experiences. i continually found that the words being used and the desires being described and the moments of real pleasure being conveyed were at odds with what i wanted and what i already experienced.

joe was not a mirror but at least a blurred reflection, like looking at myself and my sexual life through a puddle. even in how she is punished in the film, i saw myself and my life there too.

i hate that it's true but his films opened a space for me to think about the treatment of women by men. before i read any feminist theory or poetry or met feminist friends, i had lars and isn't it sick that, for me, lars allowed me to question the ways in which my body and choices are policed by men?

reflecting now, i realize that we've talked about identifying with his female characters, but we've never talked about the misogyny of his films or the punishment of his female characters. we usually get caught up in identifying with their depression.

but why hadn't we ever linked that depression to the way we are treated by, policed by, and punished by men?

1

dear h,

i wrote you a letter a while ago about my sexual experiences with women, by which i really mean my experiences making out with women, which were sexual in nature but never led to sex. i wrote that i can be a prude, when it comes to sex, but i related it only to my physical encounters, or lack thereof, with women.

it's not that i don't want to have sex with a woman. in fact, it sounds wonderful to me. i've fantasized about it, masturbated while thinking of it, climaxed, and hoped that i might experience the real thing in the non-fantasy world.

someone in philly sent around a questionnaire about sexuality for a poetry project she's working on. while filling it out, i realized how much of an impact the homophobia of my youth had on me. as you know, i grew up in a christian family. church every sunday. youth group every week.

what a horrible, cliquey place that church was. my sibling and i were both not cool enough, in school or at church, to be invited into these cliques. along with that, it came out after a few years that the youth pastor was assaulting a girl in the youth group. that church was not at all a safe haven. it seemed to me that it just spread hate and hypocrisy.

when z asked me out, i didn't have hesitations about her gender. she was beautiful and kind and that meant yes, i wanted to go out with her. my friends and i began discussing sexual orientation soon after. i identified as bisexual, and still do.

my friends and i went to gay-straight alliance meetings. z and i made out in the hall even though our homophobic principal asked us not to. friends at school were kind because they too

questioned heterosexuality. some people that were outside of our friend group were kind, others didn't notice, some were flat out hateful — calling us dykes as if we were repulsive to them.

not long after z broke up with me, a message was delivered in my youth group about homosexuality. i remember the message because i heard it again later at another church. this time it came from a straight man, the second time it came from the mouth of a gay man: *god loves all of his creations. he doesn't hate gay people so long as they don't act on their homosexual impulses.* in other words, it's okay to be queer if you never let that queerness manifest in physicality.

soon after the youth group incident, my mother found out, through my myspace account, that i identify as bisexual. she offered me a pamphlet called *straight talk* and asked me to talk to our pastor.

it wasn't until recently, in therapy after filling out the survey mentioned above, that i realized how much of an impact this upbringing had on me. r, my therapist, wondered why i had listed my orientation as bisexual but i had only discussed my relationships with men. it took a few minutes of stumbling over my words to realize that growing up in this homophobic environment had caused me to completely shut myself off to the possibility of being in relationships with anyone other than cis-men.

r has been helping me realize just how much i care about what others think about me and how this stems from my difficulty accepting myself without the acceptance of others.

this makes me wonder what other things i've shut myself off to for fear of rejection. sexually, i think it manifests in my obsession over what my female friends think of my sexuality — do they think i'm a slut? do they judge my kinks, even though i so

rarely tell them what my actual kinks are? do they think i'm desperate for having sex free of commitment with many partners?

for a long time, i couldn't even name my kinks to myself. i'd watch them play out in porn films, and despite being feverishly aroused, i would tell myself i was fucked up for cumming to those acts moments after finishing. it wasn't until my late twenties that i told anyone about those desires, and even then, i was ashamed of their existence, of how much i wanted them even though they went against the narratives swirling in my upbringing and in the larger culture about how, what, and who i was supposed to desire.

the first times those kinks came to life were by happenstance. partners would, without communication or consent, let loose their own sexual desires on my body, and in some instances, their desires would align with my own. this further enlarged my sense that i should, if not fully shut myself off to those desires, at the very least never speak of them. and the longer i went without speaking them, without allowing myself to even fully accept them, the more cobwebs grew over them, and the more a sooty layer of shame and fear accumulated too.

i realize that these fears are driven by the common ideology more so than by my beliefs.

but this realization has not yet freed me from the fear,

1

dear v,

i know you never used the actual word, but i've felt like you believe that during periods of my life i've been a slut.

in trying to think of the way *slut* is used in porn, in films, in life, my brain gets tangled in a knot. maybe there are three types of sluts:

sometimes, in porn, *slut* is used in a positive way. you can be a type of slut that is approved of, which means that you please all the many people you sleep with. it means that sleeping around results in you knowing how to please your partners.

the second type of slut has a negative definition. the *nasty* or *dirty* slut who deserves to get fucked because she's already been used and is therefore tainted and damaged. this usage of the word slut is all too familiar since it seems to be the reasoning gg used to excuse his sexual aggressions toward me.

there is a third type of slut and this type is what i imagine you would have called me. it's the slut who has a lot of sex and really enjoys it, regardless of what external forces say of her sluttiness. while this kind of sluttiness seems positive to me because it requires that pleasure be accepted and prioritized internally, i have been assuming that you disapprove of this type of sluttiness because of the way you talk about sex. it appears as though some part of you believes that sex *has to be* meaningful and should *only* be shared between two people who love each other, and therefore, you find this slut's sexual encounters to be disgusting.

i've been wondering about the word *nymphomaniac* lately, too. h and i have used that word to describe ourselves before. here are two definitions via the internet:

- a) a woman who has abnormally excessive and uncontrollable sexual desire
- b) (of a woman) afflicted with abnormally excessive sexual desire

the words that unsettle me here are *abnormally*, *afflicted*, and *excessive*. while being a nymphomaniac is different than simply having a sexual appetite, it concerns me that women can have *abnormally excessive* sexual desire. at what point does a woman's sexual desire become not normal? at what point is it too much?

it concerns me even more that having an excessive sexual desire, for a woman, is an *affliction*. it concerns me that my *excessive* sexual desire makes others uncomfortable and it concerns me that others get to decide when my sexual desire becomes *abnormally excessive*.

recently, i found this definition of a similar word, *whore*, in an essay by chanelle gallant in the book *pleasure activism*: "we use the term 'whore' to refer to the feminine sin of demanding too much."

and here we find all these words aforementioned and all the many other words i have not yet used in this project that describe women who have sex, who give into desire, who allow themselves to enjoy the pleasures of bodies. women who are *abnormally excessive* in their sexuality, who are *afflicted with abnormally excessive sexual desire* are women demanding more than society tells them they can.

what are we told to want from society? to be chaste but not too chaste. to give ourselves to one who loves us but not to explore our sexuality deeply or with multiple partners.

i wonder what you would have been like in another reality—the one in which you didn't see sex as an act of love, but rather the one in which you saw sex as an act of pure pleasure.

what would sexuality be like if it could exist outside of ideology?

1

11/11/11 7:00pm

Steps	1, 2, 3
Steps	1, 2, 3
Steps	1, 2, 3
Steps	1, 2, 3
Steps	1, 2, 3
Steps	1, 2, 3

of when the
the bits / or / considered
work present with
left any

at which point I considered writing a
work present with
left any

at which point I considered writing a
work present with
left any

I found to keep

(Gunnar) from 2 p.s. me no song,
And the D.P.

6 steps and 3 songs

to form previous
(to make the inner circle)

There 2 photos here (1 frame)
there now

Look at the song
Look at the song

Ok

nothing nothing nothing
 but the
 rust rust red
 that leaves
 the inside inside.

so at circumference
 the rust
 will spread
 & engulf the
 whole plant
 as it happens
 & engulf the
 whole plant

inlets
 & number of inlets
 will vary with the
 size of the plant
 are there patterns within continuing?
 step step step / one two three / is the basic unit of growth
 (radius) (circumference)
 a nose bleed / what's bread / burning

the heat of sour emphasizing the heat of dry and ~~heat~~ barrier

dear s,

i want to make something with those wooden toys that we found at goodwill.

it's not a fully formed thought, but i want to create a short film using our wooden elephant, penguin, and don quixote toys. it might involve strange sounds and possibly have some language. rather than your hope of a rube goldberg machine, i was thinking there would be a string on the music box elephant's tail, and a hand offscreen would pull the string while the music played.

like i said, it's not a fully formed idea and this seems to be a problem for new collaborators. since you don't live near me, i have been on the search for new dancers and makers to collaborate with. but thus far, no one is interested in my partially formed thoughts. the dancers i've met want simple direction. it feels less like collaborating and more like i am being asked to present already created choreography.

i miss when things were good between us as collaborators, when we both lived close enough to create together and when there were no rifts, real or imagined, between us.

i could bring you partial ideas and, together, we could work toward a fully formed idea.

we'd help one another think more critically about the seed that started the project, and through exploration, improvisation, and collaboration, we would build something together,

1

dear h,

you've never met g, but i know you know about him. this story is only partially about him, but mostly about my favorite sexual act.

in high school i was angry. i dyed my hair often, wore mostly black, listened to only punk and emo music, and sometimes cut myself during class. but part of this anger that extended outward was directed toward men, and worked against the oppressive ideologies that were at play in my family and school.

my anger, at least some of it, at this time surfaced from my desire to keep love and sex separate or to deny love altogether, something that joe from *nymphomaniac* and i had in common at this young age. i didn't allow myself to be in a sexual relationship longer than a few weeks during this time of my life.

along with this, i often allowed men to finger me, but would not offer them a hand job or really any form of satisfaction in return. if i did offer satisfaction, i would cut off the sexual relationship sooner than i would have with someone who was offered no satisfaction. i accept now that my behavior was somewhat cruel, but it made me feel so powerful — not like i was dominating the men, not power that was derived that way, but rather, power that was derived from having agency, from being able to choose.

i was fingered by a lot of guys in high school. in cars, on couches, in basements, in beds when parents were out of town, in parks. i loved it and still do. so many women are obsessed with getting eaten out but for me, it's all about fingering.

g dated t for a year or so before i met him. t and i had already stopped talking when she met g, so i never heard about him,

but i did see photos of them together on myspace. i came into contact with him later — he had seen me at my job at the movie theater, likely looking angry behind the glass at the ticket booth. he said nothing in person, but sent me a message on myspace, something to the effect of, *hey, don't you work at the movie theater? i think that's where i know you from.*

after talking on myspace, g and i decided to meet up. he came to pick me up at the apartment my family was renting. he showed up in an old, sleek car that his grandfather had gifted him. his long hair and gauged ears made my father visibly uncomfortable, though he was also likely uncomfortable because so many guys showed up to take me out and then he never saw them again.

i honestly don't remember where we drove. i know i was supposed to be home by eleven. i know i wanted to fuck the hot, tall hippie who was driving me around. at some point, we pulled over and started making out. by this point, i was wet but also realized that it was almost eleven, my curfew.

we stopped kissing and he started driving. outside the gate to the apartment, he pulled over, crazed, and starting making out with me again, grabbing my tits, and then, the magic happened — his hand, fingers so long, slid down my pants, greeted by my warm and wanting cunt. he started to finger me and i was blown away by the intensity, the fucking amazing intensity, of his finger fucking style.

unfortunately, as incredible as it felt, i was afraid of my father's rage. the clock: 11:05. i told g we had to go, and while he drove into the gated apartments, he mentioned that it was silly to be panicked about being a few minutes late. then: my father standing in the parking lot, furious, and g annoyed at my father's rage, and me, wet and wanting, slinking inside, back to pretending my sexuality did not exist.

g texted me to hang out again a few days later. i knew my father hated him, so my strategy had to be different. i told my parents that i was with a friend and drove my mom's van to g's house.

g lived in the basement. i don't think his parents were home, or if they were, they took no interest in my arrival. we headed down to his room, dimly lit, incense scented, tapestries on the walls.

at this point, g was already into drugs and i had never even been drunk before. he pressured me to try smoking hookah, an activity that i found to be unpleasant. we smoked for a while and talked about ourselves, and i realized early on that this was a person i could actually like, which felt unaligned with my usual desires at that time.

so we smoked hookah, and then laid on his bed. we started making out — he was the best type of kisser, aggressive but not so much so that you felt like your face was being eaten. kissing led to over the pants petting, and then, his long fingers slid down my pants, like they had in his car. i must have been so wet — knowing what to expect.

no one else had ever finger fucked me in such an intense way.

i think it was only three fingers inside my cunt. it didn't have to do with girth, but rather with length, and speed, and the level of hardness. i literally fell off his bed. then i asked in a sort of soaked daze, *what are you doing to me?* to which he did not respond. he just grinned, so confidently, while he continued to finger me.

there is something about finger fucking that i just need. i never crave getting *eaten out*. first of all, that language *eaten out* makes it sound as if i'm a food source. sex is primal, but this language makes it slip into the archaic, the patriarchal, like i'm prey.

you don't know k, a dear philly friend, but i recently wrote to her about this:

i was thinking about what it means, what it does, to ingest or make something out of our own bodily matter. how separation from one's body is a means of oppression. ingesting one's own bodily matter, or making with one's own bodily matter, as a way to gain control again, to shift the power dynamics. when we are in our bodies, we are better able to fight back, we are able to be present, to understand our bodies. we are told how to view our bodies—through advertising, pornography, films, etc. but in understanding our bodies for ourselves, we can begin to dismantle these cultural forces and shift the power dynamics. how i've always found the language, "eaten out," to be off-putting (a man ingesting my bodily matter seems to reinforce power dynamics rather than disrupt them, even if my own physical pleasure is involved).

though, my physical pleasure is rarely involved with being eaten out. g's intensity carried over from fingering to pussy licking, though i wouldn't find this out until years later. he licked so hard, ate so greedily, that my clit would throb, pleading for reprieve.

i've always found ways to maneuver around eating out—i would give long blow jobs and then say something like, *i just want to feel your cock inside me*, or just grab their hand and jam it inside of myself—anything to avoid the eating, even a slightly painful entry of fingers or cock.

for me, the clitoris is simply too much to handle. sure, if i'm alone with my vibrator, i enjoy some clitoral focus, but it seems that porn or culture or something has led men to believe that intensely licking or petting the clit is ideal. while intensity works for me during internal orgasms, that does not carry over into clitoral orgasms.

this small site, full of nerve endings, is, of course, a place of pleasure, i won't deny that. but for me, it must be treated delicately

and with care. and *delicate*, *tender*, and *caring* are not words that i've wanted to associate with my sexual experiences.

yesterday, i was reading an article g posted to facebook that was discussing the effects of pornography on today's youth. while the article articulated important points about consent, it lacked any sort of empathy or acknowledgement for women that desired kink or sex that was rough. the article stated, *it is intimacy and tenderness that so many girls and young women say they are looking for. but how will young women find these sensual, slow-burn experiences in men indoctrinated by pornography?*

even at a young age, at the sexual awakening stage, i did not crave tender, intimate, or sensual sex. i'm sure you didn't either, h. and having my cunt eaten out needs to be, while not necessarily intimate or sensual, at the very least tender (now i'm thinking about meat as being best when tender — my little clit, so tender, being eaten). if i allow this tender sex act to take place, not only is the man ingesting my bodily matter, but i am also falling into a gender stereotype that says women *only* desire this tender, sweet sex.

i like the feeling of being full. of my cunt being filled and then being emptied out. i can take men in. i can take them in and can take pleasure in knowing that the men can't see inside — they have to cram their fingers, tongues, cocks in with no idea what might happen next. fingering and fucking mess with the power dynamics of sex in this way. when they eat me out, they can see everything — when they shove themselves in my pussy, they can't see, and though i cannot see either, i know what my pussy is like, i know what will happen.

i have the control,

dear e and v,

it has been strange to tell friends about what happened with m. i've received so many responses, so many opinions about what to do next, and a few responses, like your own, that have unsettled me.

it seems like neither of you consider what m did to be too bad. as your friend, as a woman who has been raped speaking to women who, to my knowledge, have never been raped, your responses concern me because neither one of you seems to categorize m's actions as rape.

maybe to you, it seems like a playful moment of kink that i freaked out about because i wasn't into it. maybe to you, it seems like a partially consensual encounter that doesn't really deserve serious consequences. e, you said m was acting *honorable* by agreeing to the consequences i dealt and v, you said *what i needed m to do so i would be okay* was *extreme*.

consent is murky to us for so many reasons. living in a culture where we are never taught about consent in an extensive way, seeing acts of non-consent passed off for harmless mistakes in films, the overflow of porn that skips over any moment of consent, the ways in which survivors of rape are blamed in courtrooms and newspapers for the violence they endured because of what they were wearing or what they had to drink—these are just a few of the influences that have created a broader rape culture, which many of us can't even see until we or someone we love experiences a crossing of consent that causes irreparable harm.

for a sexual assault survivor, consent becomes even murkier. speaking from my own experiences, it is often hard for me to say

no or *stop* because those words led to further harm during my sexual assaults. it is often hard for me to say *no* because when i was first sexually assaulted at a young age, i didn't understand what was happening and i could not leave the situation, so now i become confused about how much agency i have.

when m choked me, i could not say *no* because i dissociated and because i felt my life was in danger—there was such force as his hands gripped my neck that saying *no* felt like a certain death sentence. i could survive the rape, but perhaps would be choked to death for saying *stop*.

if i felt like it was rape, if i was not consenting, if he made me afraid for my life, how was it not rape? if he entered the sexual encounter through violence, without asking permission to be violent, how is that okay? while i love you, your comments hurt me deeply and amplified my self-blame. i wonder if you think it's okay because he apologized after, because he was "willing" to accept consequences, because he's now in therapy.

it isn't okay. and in the aftermath, i'm not okay. his being in therapy, his apology, cannot erase his hands around my throat, him entering me without permission and without a condom, his hands pulling my hair, his semen on my sheets, my fear, my paralysis.

and now, this hell i'm living,

1

dear t,

when you died, this question repeated in my mind: how was i the one that survived all of it?

you, d, and i became friends in middle school. you and d first, then you and i, then the three of us, dressed in black, not talking about what caused our depression, but acting out from that depression with actions like self-harm.

now i know that what we had in common can best be described by a scene from *the l word*. *the l word* is terribly flawed, problematic, and even harmful, particularly toward bisexual and transgender people. however, some scenes from it have stuck with me, and while most people hate jenny's character, i was always drawn to her. i had never seen a character on television who survived childhood sexual assault. and in moments, her character reminded me of myself — not just her pain and how it manifested, but also her initial fear of her sexuality.

jenny, one of the main characters of the show, discovered her queerness in the first season through an affair. in the second season, jenny is involved in a love triangle with her friend and her roommate's lover. jenny and this roommate, shane, can't afford their rent so they find a third roommate, a man named mark. mark is a filmmaker who is hoping to get out of the porn industry and into documentary film making. he decides that his perfect documentary topic is now right before him — the secret life of lesbians. his friend convinces him to install hidden cameras all over the house so he can better capture his subjects.

one day, jenny finds mark's recordings and through them, she also discovers her girlfriend is still in love with her roommate. it's not the discovery that her girlfriend isn't in love with her that

causes her to spiral into a full blown mental health crisis. it's the violation of being watched and recorded without consent.

when mark tries to make amends with jenny, she refuses and challenges him. in a scene that i remember often, especially when i am met with a new violation or memories of past violations, jenny confronts mark:

jenny: i want you to ask your sisters about the very first time they were intruded upon by some man or boy.

mark: what makes you think my sisters have been intruded upon?

jenny: because there isn't a single girl or woman in this world who hasn't been intruded upon, and sometimes it's relatively benign, and sometimes it's so fucking painful, but you have no idea what this feels like.

and there. that was our link, t, and our link to d. the initial intrusion.

it's not as if we were the only girls who had experienced male intrusion at an early age, but we were the only ones at our school that we knew of. even if it wasn't for years that we knew exactly what had happened to ourselves and to one another. we were the only girls in all black who had to slink to the bathroom sometimes to cry or to cut or to pick. and when we found each other, it felt like we might, by sticking together, be able to survive it.

but then i went to a different high school, and you began to use drugs to cope, and d began to drink, and we drifted apart.

you cut a hole in me with language, claiming that you could not be my friend. perhaps the hole was cut with silence too because no reason was ever listed for the dissolution of our friendship — i simply became unworthy of your time.

i know now, two and half years after your death, that class played a major role in why i lived and you died. we were both raped again, though how many times you were raped, i do not know. but i was able to move out of state, to go to college, to afford therapy. you couldn't afford college. your mom spent her excess money buying drugs from g rather than contributing to your life. you never went to therapy. you moved out of town and then you died of a heroin overdose.

g told me once that you couldn't take a cock as well as i could. when he told me, i was so pleased — my pussy, flooding and pulsing outward. g and i were older then — i had just moved in with him. i never asked him whether you liked being eaten out or fingered, whether you could handle his intense eating out style, whether it made you uncomfortable like it made me.

g told me about the time you two were high on prescription pills and you passed out and he fucked you in your ass even though he knew you didn't want to have anal sex.

he told me this after we'd been together for at least a year. it dismantled me. i could no longer fuck him. if i tried, i had flashbacks to my own traumas. you hadn't died yet. he said he would reach out to you to apologize. but an apology does so little in the face of sexual violence.

the problem with trying to understand sexuality is trying to decipher what is us and what is ideology. this ideology becomes doubled for the childhood sexual assault survivor, for those of us who have early memories of being sexually touched against our will before we can understand if it's against our will or not.

what is me, what is my will, what is consent?

which sexual desires are trauma responses and which are healthy desires to explore?

i don't think you ever had a chance to figure these things out. d seems to be figuring it out. but i can't bring myself to talk to her. something about your death makes it too hard for me. but i hope she's okay.

i sometimes have fantasies about being reborn so that my body is now free from the memory held in its cells of sexual violence. if we had new bodies, we could have sex free from trauma. but then i realized, it isn't our bodies.

it isn't our bodies at all that are the problem,

l

1927
L. de ...
L. de ...
L. de ...
L. de ...
L. de ...





dear h,

do you feel that you have defined yourself through your sexuality? through your self-proclaimed nymphomania?

imagine if your *abnormal sexual desire* suddenly left you. imagine if nearly every time you fucked, you got a yeast infection and couldn't fuck again for weeks. imagine if you were fucking and then your past trauma flooded your memory and started to feel like it was happening in the present.

the heat death of the libido.

it's miserable not to be fucking, especially when it feels like my body is failing me, like my body is the problem.

sex is a way back into my body. and once in my body, i feel cognitively clear and able.

so h, who am i without all that fucking?

l

dear e,

i brought up lars von trier in one of my last letters to you. i was thinking about *nymphomaniac*, which led me to think about sex in all of lars's films.

until *nymphomaniac*, the sexuality of the women in his films was driven by external forces or emotional states. in *breaking the waves*, bess is driven to place herself in the path of sexual violence because she believes her sexual acts will heal her husband from his accident.

in *antichrist*, while charlotte gainsbourg's unnamed character has a sexual appetite, it stems from grief.

in *melancholia*, justine's decision to fuck someone who is not her husband on her wedding night stems from melancholia.

but in *nymphomaniac*, joe is sexually free, and her intense sexual appetite stems only from herself. she isn't pursuing sex as a way to cope with intense emotions or because of external forces and belief systems, at least not to begin with.

and yet, while her sexuality appears to be her own, she ultimately feels like a terrible person for putting her pursuit of sex above all else. so even though lars grants her a sexuality that isn't forced on her or that isn't the result of a distressing mental state, she is still punished, both in the ways she talks about herself to seligman and in the violence she endures in the second film.

still, i wonder if she only feels terrible about her pursuit of sex because of the shaming reactions of other characters, like jerôme, about how women are supposed to behave and how female sexuality is supposed to manifest.

would she still feel terrible if she were allowed to exist outside of the misogynistic landscape of a von trier film?

1

dear r,

i haven't touched my notebook in weeks. it sits on my desk under school papers and books. each day, more gets piled on top of it and it falls further and further from my line of vision.

i think of the phrase, *out of sight, out of mind*, and how this phrase often feels false. out of sight elevates things, people, and ideas to the level of nagging obsession.

the problem with my notebook now is time. while i have the time to write and track my body, the way i am experiencing time is hindering my engagement with my notebook practice.

my perception of time now is different from how i've experienced time in relation to trauma previously.

when i first began to deal with my traumas, i experienced time the way that many survivors experience it. due to flashbacks and nightmares, the past often blurred into the present in a horrific way. i would be in a culinary school class and then suddenly, also back in my rapist's room while he was raping me.

this is my understanding of typical traumatic time. though we are now far from the events of the past, those events suddenly feel as if they are happening again—meaning the past, that which is unsafe, endangers the present moment, and in this way, time compounds upon itself.

however, now the unsafe moment is the present. it is this current moment that is painful, filled with fear and regret and heartache. it is here, in the present, in this city where my most recent rapist lives, that every block of the city feels unsafe.

i've spent so much time in therapy processing past trauma, but m raping me created a trauma which is present and ongoing due to the unsafety i feel walking around the city.

unlike previous periods of my life, the past has faded away somewhat. if i have flashbacks, they are more recent — they are memories of m choking me, pulling my hair, raping me without a condom on. however, it is not these flashbacks that pain me most.

my inability to dissociate is what is most painful.

i don't want to feel present in the present, but i can't seem to abandon it or alter it or hide in the past. this is not to say that the past is not blurring into the present — memories of p, of m, and of when i began the mfa program feeling hopeful, play on repeat in my mind and do so sometimes so intensely that i cannot sleep, cannot help from weeping or having panic attacks.

time is at once muddled and painfully clear. to track my body in my notebook would be to accentuate the clarity and realness of the present.

when i began the notebook, i hoped it would ease dissociation, would clear my mind, would tether me to my body. and it did.

knowing the power of this tracking, i cannot bear to continue the notebook right now. i don't want to be present for what feels like a nightmare.

were i to track myself in my notebook right now, could it hold all the liquid my body is expelling in its sorrow? all these tears, the vomit, the urine, the thick boogers, and the runny snot? the pages would warp and it would become so heavy, so stinky.

and as it warped, as i became more tethered to my body, how
could i bear it — being so tethered, seeing my pain on the pages?

i've abandoned containment,

1

dear b,

my timidity in classrooms, my silence, never felt linked to anything outside of myself. usually, it's fear of saying something unintelligent, or of saying something intelligent but not being able to answer a follow-up question about it. i've never really thought of this timidity as being caused by something other than my fear. that is, until this semester.

the only woman in my cohort. one of only four women in a class dominated by male presence. many of these men speak up, speak with confidence, speak loudly. one woman in class also has this ability to speak up and her ideas are perhaps the most compelling ideas being brought up by students.

outside of a classroom, i'm not so timid. especially around men. though i have started to notice men speaking louder than me, in order to be heard, in order to make me quiet. i think this leads to equally shitty behavior on my part — i start to listen less. sometimes, i bring up ideas in the middle of theirs. having noticed this, i don't like my behavior, but i realize it's a form of resistance. it's a less dignified way of fighting back. wouldn't it just be easier to bring this up with the men i'm speaking to? to say: excuse me, but when you start to talk louder than me in order to be heard, it makes things feel kind of archaic and awful. you, as a man, have a right to be heard, and i, just a woman, should listen.

i suppose there's also the little matter of you being my professor. there's a lot of pressure — to be smart, to be impressive, to be engaged and rigorous in a way that pleases.

so there are these problems — these loud, confident men, my fear of failure, my fear of you. and there are two things that i wanted to say in class that are still haunting me. i know i should have

said them, but i have this problem in which i'll know exactly what to say — have it planned out word for word — but my vocal cords seem stuck. they can't move, and i sit in class and rub the lepidolite in my hand because it's supposed to help soothe anxiety and i listen to all the men state their opinions and ideas and i am mute and then, the moment has passed — the subject changes and my comment is no longer relevant. sometimes this will happen at the exact moment that i feel i could have said my comment, and sometimes, i will spend the whole class feeling like my vocal cords will never work again.

i'm writing because i need you to know that i had these two things to say, about renee gladman's *newcomer can't swim* and dodie bellamy's *the letters of mina harker*. i need to say them, mostly just for myself, to prove that i can. i know this might be silly because i email you thoughts on the texts every week, but i need you to know that i was present in class, i was engaged, that this class has had a huge impact on me. also, these things are terribly relevant to this project we're inside of — these letters that are exploring my own sexuality, ideas of female sexuality, and how these relate to identity formation.

here goes. *newcomer can't swim*: in class, one of the men was concerned about louie. he asked: isn't louie a dog? and the question seemed kind of silly and not so important, and also it's pretty clear that louie is a human due to his ability to speak and to travel. but i think his question actually leads to kafka, to *the trial*. here's what i wrote in my notes:

like a dog not a dog — like a metaphor — subject is forced to be submissive — made submissive through waiting — how being between cities leads to a canine quality — what else leads to this dog-likeness? in the trial, k becomes *like a dog* because the law dominates him — he's lost in a system that lacks logic, that lacks a logical structure, but that still holds power. k loses his power to the law & here, louie is forced to observe or to operate inside

of other powers (family, city, etc.) — like a dog — no longer wild or powerful — submissive, forced to be *good* or *bad* — space as law, an ideological state apparatus, a power one must submit to (note: reread “the flogger” section of *the trial*). also, ideas of female sexuality as law — slut, nymphomaniac — words forcing me to be submissive — a system that lacks logical structure, but still holds power.

i also think about *the letters of mina harker*, which has been a driving text for this project. do you remember when you pointed discussion to dodie and kevin’s discussions of gender in the book? here’s what i wrote in my notes:

one of the men said something about how mina represented not pleasure, but heartlessness and selfishness, while dodie represented love and kindness. someone else said something. nothing related to gender. what is important in this scene is that these definitions of mina and dodie are kevin’s — they are not dodie’s. they are men’s opinions of dodie and mina’s femaleness, of female sexuality. and for this male voice, valued traits are love and kindness. sex is not included. heartlessness is not included. a good woman is one who is loving and kind. she is not necessarily sexual. she is never selfish. here, sex is placed in the same category as heartlessness and this category is negative. what about what dodie and mina think of themselves? mina asks about sex — *mina gives a lot through sex*, and i get that — it is possible to give through sex without being loving or kind.

sometimes giving through sex actually feels more powerful than just being kind,

1

dear h,

right now my sex life is made up of only dreams, both day-dreams and dreams that find me during sleep. i see m, and occasionally f, quite often while sleeping. you don't know them and don't really need to know them or our backstory in order to hear about this dream.

in it, m and i travel by train to f and n's, as is the case in real life when we visit them. the train ride is uneventful, so uneventful, in fact, that m and i don't even speak during our journey, nor do we look at each other. we gaze out the window to see hills thick with trees flashing by and blurring into undecipherable green masses. we arrive at the station in the dark. it is summer, the air thick and hot and lit up by fireflies, stars, moonlight. f is waiting for us in a car. he is enthusiastic in his greeting and m gets in the passenger side, up front by f, while i sit in the back. m and f talk rapidly in the front, about musicians i've never heard of, poets who i haven't yet read, vacations that i couldn't afford to go on. in this way, the dream mirrors real life — my silence, my lack of knowledge and funds, my gazing out the window but seeing nothing for it is too dark to see the stream, the quaint town, the old ruin of a church.

we arrive, by dirt road, at f and n's and head inside. n greets us with a cheese plate and a salad. for the first time in the dream, m and i finally look at each other. his eyes, blue-green. his hair, disheveled. he raises his eyebrows, a sign of excitement for what is to come. i blush, knowingly.

post dinner, post wine, post art film, we push the couches in the living room together. the agreed upon moment has arrived. f and n start kissing, which seems only natural given their marriage. m and i look at each other, tentative, nervous, tender,

wanting. at the same time, we move closer, closer, until our legs touch. his hand moves to my knee, my thigh, he's warm, he's long and lanky. looking at each other, we bring our faces closer and i am all blush. i part my lips, kiss him. the kiss grows, our tongues slipping into and out of each other's mouths, my hand moving through his messy hair, his hand traveling on my leg, from thigh toward ass, and then he begins to rub my cunt. i moan, kiss him more intensely yet still tenderly and through my body language, i cry, emphatically, yes.

f and n part, and n moves toward m. she pulls him away from me and they begin kissing ferociously. f is moving toward me, but i'm worried that m is enjoying kissing n too much, that he will forget me and only pleasure her. my body tenses as f touches the small of my back, but i kiss him, anyway. n and m move toward us. n touching f and f touching me and m touching me and n. m and f touching my cunt. m letting go of n's hand so he can snake his fingers into my fingers. in the dream, i want to tell everyone to stop. i want to tell m that it is only him that i want tonight, but mirroring real life, i remain silent. m fingering n and f fingering me. n moaning and me silent. n kissing me and me touching n's breasts. n rubbing f's cock and one of my hands moving to f's cock to rub with her. my other hand sneaks away, tenderly touches m's hair, then slides down and rubs his cock.

that's the dream, h. no other penetration takes place. the dream has only happened once but it remains clear. my discomfort with kissing anyone but m, my jealousy over anyone else touching m, and that fucking word — *tender*.

when have i ever wanted in any life — dreaming or waking — to have tender touching, tender sex? this feels so far away from how i have always desired, from what i have always desired.

when i first met m in my waking life, though thinking he was cute, i couldn't stand him. he seemed, not arrogant necessarily,

but certainly very unaware. unaware of his subject position, of his privilege, and so when he spoke, he lacked a sort of understanding of those he spoke with. he didn't understand that his knowledge was a product of his wealth, of being a white cis-man. for a long while, i tried to get to know m but felt that we were only ever talking about the surface, which as you know, is my least favorite type of relation. i like the kind of openness that allows one's inner experiences to become outer, the kind of openness that asks both people to share without holding back. this type of sharing is the basis of all of my real friendships, and without it i tend to feel untethered and unsure, and often find myself falling silent.

m and i spent a lot of time together since we met, but so many of our early conversations were about poetry, art, and theory. i tried to slip in some of the openness that i desired, but for a time, it felt hopeless that m would ever open up to me. luckily, after much work and one-sided over-sharing, he finally began to talk with me like a close friend, telling me secrets and offering little parts of himself that i imagined had been kept, for a long time, under lock and key.

before he began opening up, i had a few sex dreams about him. these dreams often involved angry sex, in which, after he spoke too long about some shitty musician i had never heard of and had no interest in hearing about, i would push him against a wall and start kissing him, in anger. i would whisper in his ear, *m, i fucking hate you*. and then we would have delicious, frustrated sex in which he would fuck me hard while he fingered my ass, bit my neck, and pulled my hair, while i would claw and scratch at his back like a feral cat.

and now, this tenderness.

do you know what it reminds me of, actually? you don't yet know this because we hadn't met yet, but in high school, among

my many flings and short-lived relationships, there was a boy named j. i dated him in freshman year for two days, then he kissed me, and i freaked out and dumped him. but j was close friends with one of my best friends, q, so we continued to hang out, the three of us together. j wasn't very open with us until his suicide attempt toward the end of freshman year.

the day they let him out of the hospital, we went to q's house. it was raining, a thunderstorm. we went outside and ran around in the rain, exhausting ourselves, overjoyed to be soaked and together. we lay down in the middle of the street, the smell of rain wafting up from the warm asphalt, our heads touching and triangled together. j told us about his attempt, explained where he learned to cut up, not across.

we cried together, then q and i bounced up. i pulled j up, forgetting the bandages on his wrists and accidentally pressed my thumbs into his wounds. he shouted at me in pain, but immediately calmed down and tenderly chased me down the street so he could catch me and embrace me in a long, lanky hug. we headed inside to watch *donnie darko* and eat nutella on toast.

after this, j and i remained open with each other. q moved to texas and j, who had unreturned feelings for q, began to hang out with me more often. we developed a beautiful friendship that lasted, in this close way, for only another year. we began to make out often. j's parents were rarely home in the afternoon after school, so we went to his bedroom and cozied up on his bed, holding each other tenderly. we would talk about how much we missed q and our mutual missing somehow led us to this tender kissing. the first time this happened, he told me to kiss less aggressively and showed me a more gentle way to kiss that still expressed desire.

i have never wanted to kiss anyone else in this way. it's not like i'm a cold-hearted person who doesn't understand that sex can

be fantastic and still sweet. it's more that i don't tend to enjoy this kind of sex. it feels too intimate, it distracts me from the bodily sensations, it becomes too much about lovey feelings, feelings that often don't, for me, in the moments of sex, feel relevant.

but now, this tenderness. this desire for tenderness with m, who at the time of this dream i only thought of as someone i really shouldn't pursue, but who i wanted to kiss, both while waking and dreaming.

i never used to second guess my bodily desires for people. in the past, i would just act, regardless of the potential consequences. i think it's that desire for tender kissing that threw me off, that caused me to not only fall silent, but to not move at all.

a desire that paralyzes,

1

dear e,

i've been thinking more about *nymphomaniac*. do you remember the scene in which joe discusses her sexual education and before seligman replies, he imagines her in a schoolgirl outfit, much like one might see in porn.

i just pictured what an education would look like in your storytelling, he says to joe. but in actuality, he is picturing it for his own arousal and through that arousal. it has nothing to do with her aside from envisioning her as sexual, as only a sexually appealing body. what's worse is how cheesy his idea of her sexual education is.

by mirroring the campiness of porn, seligman creates a sexual image of joe that he finds erotic, but in fact, his eroticism is not only expected and boring, it is also at odds with what joe truly finds erotic.

though joe is not always honest with her sexual partners, sometimes lying to them that they have given her her first orgasm, she still meets each encounter and each telling of the encounter without campy, forced, or cliché details. when she tells her own stories, there are no schoolgirl outfits, no overused tiny plots. joe is honest in her representation of her sexual encounters even when they make her look monstrous or heartless. and while many of the scenes are sexy, they do not feel overacted, cliché, or campy in the way that seligman's vision of joe as a schoolgirl does.

much like seligman's vision of joe's education, the fly fishing that seligman is constantly comparing joe's story to in *nymphomaniac* seems like men's attempt to make sense of women: to put joe's sexuality into a context which is less terrifying, less wild,

less feral—to make the borderless bordered. and joe always tries to explain that seligman is never quite right, saying: *i don't know about that but.*

it stays with me: her refusal to allow her nymphomania to be made rational, bordered, logical; her refusal to let him take over her story; and his persistence in relating it to fly fishing and schoolgirls. all of his comments are an attempt to make her nymphomania acceptable and understandable to him (to men).

but it can't be contained,

1

dear b,

so what if the poem is ugly and sort of resembles vomit and feels like vomit when it comes out of my fingers and onto this virtual page and stinks a little and contains no hope or light and is full of rage,

1

(drawing for me) +
Ginger for me
(for me) +
me to help (Ging)
(for me) +
(for me) +
(for me) +
(for me) +
up



9/17/2017
4:30
pm

(so windy outside/
yoga when the wind
was smaller (yoga moved
the wind thru and moved
feet) + made space for a
new type of music)

(more music but meant movement)

(what the hand knows/speaks that those don't)
(no/what mind doesn't | hand)

dear h,

they never hit me except for during sex. they hit open handed, usually with the palm, very rarely with the backside. occasionally, they punch. actually, it was only one that punched — the same one who anally raped me — gg who is not to be confused with g.

most of them prefer to choke, though. the dangerous ones are the ones who keep their hands around my throat, squeezing tight, refusing to let go until my eyes have welled up, teared, as if my eyes are gasping for the air my lungs so badly need.

there is a difference between consensual rough sex and non-consensual abuse, but this is a distinction that has been blurry not just for the men i've fucked, but also for me. maybe this is true for you too.

how old were you the first time you had rough sex?

it wasn't until i met gg that sex got rough. the boys in high school were never rough though they sometimes were intense, fast, and over-eager which resulted in slightly painful fingering or fucking. but gg was the first one to leave the realm of unspoken but not terrifying roughness and to enter purposefully non-consensual abuse.

the first thing was his foot fetish, which was only strange because he wouldn't back down. he wanted his cock to be touched by my feet and he refused to stop asking until i gave in. that's not rough, physically, but that's a breach in consent. it's ignoring boundaries and using coercion. it's trampling down boundaries by force until the desired outcome is obtained.

no one teaches us about consent.

it wasn't until after he had non-consensually choked me, hit me, spat on me, face-fucked me to the point of puking, anally raped me, repeat, repeat, repeat, that i finally realized something was wrong in our sexual relations. how many times did i say no only to have my boundaries forcefully trampled?

it sickens me that i stayed, even after he fucked me while i was weeping, after he held my hand to his rigid cock and forced me to give him a hand job while i was weeping. when i left him, i could barely articulate to him the ways in which our sex was not okay.

i'll never forget the first time i spoke it. i was with g. everything was fun and fine and then suddenly, i was weeping next to him, telling him how i finally felt free, telling him about the repeated sexual abuse when i was a child, and then it finally clicked — gg had raped me, he had abused me — and until that moment, i couldn't even see it.

there's this tiny line, i think, between rough sex and abuse and i don't even see the line sometimes. we talked about this once, when you visited me, about a year after you had left for california. you were getting ready to move to the east coast to be with your boyfriend and we were talking about your exploration of bdsm with him. when i talked about my recent experience with accidentally crossing the line between rough sex and abuse, you understood but also seemed to think i was overthinking it, making it more complicated than it needed to be.

i wonder what you think about that line now — if, like it has for me, the line has become not just smaller but also clearer.

when rough sex is fun, it's really fun, but when it crosses the line, it's catastrophic.

i wonder what makes us crave rough sex. is it as simple as being culturally conditioned to both accept and desire gendered violence, to crave gendered humiliation and submission?

if this were the case, then wouldn't we be able to shut off our desire for rough sex as soon as we became aware of that conditioning?

1

dear s,

i wrote you some letters last spring, just a few months after your visit to philadelphia. i wrote them in response to the long poem you sent me. i saw them as a creative response to the poem, and a creative response to missing you.

i never sent them.

before i met m and before i recoded his name as *m*, i called him *s*. but you are the original *s*. *s*, my dear one, my confidante. but also now, my distant friend.

when we started to work on our collaboration post-graduation, things started well. it wasn't until a year after this collaboration attempt that we discussed the rift in our friendship. you said it was because i was too worried about the cost of the project and the time it would take. i said it was because you didn't tell me what upset you, you just became distant.

when we discussed it, we were eating tahini with crackers and drinking pomegranate juice in your parent's kitchen. the next day when i got in my car to drive the two hours home, i wept. i wept because the distance, despite our talking about it, did not disappear. i wept because i feared it might never disappear.

here are the letters i never sent you, the ones i cannot send. i realize now that the project we're inside of is equally about reclaiming my sexuality and reclaiming my relationships. there's something here about how deeply trauma affects all types of intimacy, about the way fear and conditioning act like a kind of glue.

the category of confessional writing is so curious to me. so many writers who are labeled confessional are women. many of these

women were deeply unhappy. confessional has long felt like a jab from other poets. when i've been labeled confessional, it feels like a way to say my work is too centered on me, too honest, too depressing, and too far from critical thought.

and yet, honesty is not without critical thought. and confession is not without craft. and the *i* is never far from the *we*. to speak honestly about our lives and the pain within them is to speak honestly about the ideologies and culture in which we are steeped. to speak honestly at all is to combat the collective violence of silence, of holding in secrets to keep others comfortable.

i admit that the problem with my confessions is that they are nearly always what i wished i had said. they are the honest answer that i have not found the bravery to actually speak. and it is another type of violence to withhold.

what goes unsaid, often is silenced because i lose trust in my friends' ability to work with me through problems. i fear that if i voice how i really feel, how something they have said wounded me, the friend will get angry with me and abandon me. so i've confessed here, and now i have all these letters.

dear s,

do you remember the fish project we talked about making?

i still want to make it. i know, i've mentioned that before and we haven't and your response was not excited, but what if you remembered the before and we could go back there?

not back in time, not before, not seal the crack so the rift wouldn't divide time like this.

i just mean is there a way to be collaborators again?

1

dear s,

i bleed onto paper.

i've abandoned containment.

i bleed onto wads of toilet paper — it's wasteful — but i want to see the blood, to feel it between my legs and anyway panty liners give me rashes.

i think about your poem.

there's blood.

as you mentioned, there's water exiting the system.

i think about my listening to you talk about missing your ex. i do understand, i do. i'm here for you. i know it's horrible.

but what can i really do?

you're bleeding out for someone and it's not me, won't ever be me.

i'm not sure if it's romantic, but

i just want to create an after the after.

one that is markedly different than the first after.

there was us:

collaborators / friends

r i f t

after / friends

why can't there be

after / collaborators / friends?

i want to open a residency in the desert. for survivors and their art.

i want you to run it with me.

i want to stop all this blood— is it yours or mine and where is that mop?!

1

dear s,

do you think metaphor clarifies or abstracts?

do you think abstraction fragments?

is fragmentation a negative thing?

there's this film i'm about to make and it's like building a world out of household objects for our wooden toys to have a journey in.

there might be some blood.

my body as an interruption.

my faceless form as a moving interruption to a still frame.

l

dear s,

there's a lot of blood today but i can't find the source and as you know, i'm terrified of doctors so the hospital is out of the question.

our mop head is off-white, so i can't possibly mop the blood up without ruining it.

there's a lot of blood and some cramping.

i think about the blood as an interruption just like movement interrupts stillness and speaking interrupts silence and my body interrupts space.

i ought to lay down,

1

dear s,

time is almost up.

we could make something or we could not.

i was thinking that we could make a dance using skype?

maybe not skype but sending each other video of movement
and responding to it?

if you move closer, can we make something together?

can we make a second rift, with an after that is markedly different?

1

dear s,

can we make an after that is markedly different?

can we stop from bleeding out?

can we respond to this?

are we one?

i'm not sure if it's romantic, but

i just need you.

there's a lot of blood,

1

dear s,

it's raining

and i have no tea.

well i have it, but i'm too hungry to drink anything.

don quixote's head fell

and his hat broke off

clean from his head.

i've glued him back together.

can we make an after that is markedly different?

l

dear s,

it's raining

and i haven't bothered to make my tea yet.

i've pissed three times this morning,

how much exits when you pee?

how much when you bleed?

when you cry?

i was thinking about a dance we could make

but i can't send this letter,

l

nearly a year has passed since i wrote these letters. when i wrote them, nearly a year had passed since the rift in our friendship that caused us to stop collaborating. it seems that when there is something necessary to say in a relationship, i say it only after it is too late.

this is happening now with p. the things i should have said when we were still together, i did not, because i was afraid he would leave if he knew what i needed. this goes back to my childhood trauma. ptsd is a lifelong disease. my childhood trauma is still haunting me.

when i saw you in december, you told me about the psychic institute you're going to. how it's better than therapy. how we don't need to talk through things, we just need to let them go. how i just need to let go.

the language of *just letting it go* causes me distress. it feels like victim blaming — like the pain someone feels from their trauma and the ways it impacts them in the present are not *that* bad. as if the impacts of trauma are not real, and instead, the survivor is making a choice to be in pain.

and too, there is the reality that trauma gets held in the body and alters the way our brains function. and without conscious healing work that trauma lingers in mind, in thought, in relational patterns. it is here, where trauma is ignored but still held, that great harm to both survivor and others can occur.

i told myself and p that after this project i didn't want to write about trauma anymore. that by writing about it, like my classmate said, i'm actually making myself more depressed — i'm allowing it to continue sitting insidiously still inside my body and mind.

i don't believe i will ever write anything in which trauma isn't present because in writing, the *i* is ever-present and brings with

it only what it knows, what it has felt, and what ideologies and realities have impacted it.

in therapy, i've been trying somatic experiencing to help change my body's relationship to the trauma. to move the trauma from a block in my body to energy my body can experience in other ways. if the trauma isn't held in my body, then can i use that energy for other things? can i repurpose its energy?

and in the same way, can i repurpose its energy in my writing? can i relate to it differently in my relationships? in my sex life?

maybe it's time to finally send you these letters. maybe by mailing them, i'll be allowing the trauma to flow in my body differently.

maybe by mailing them, i can stop all these rifts,

1

dear b,

i'm tempted to write you an email that tells you the truth.

i can't write through this.

i can't focus on the present.

i hate this project and would love to not just abandon it but to delete every version of it. to light the hard copies on fire and to take the ash from that fire and force m to eat it without any water, hoping that he would choke on it so he can feel what it's like to choke and i wouldn't have to use my hands to do it.

the truth is, b, that i'm drowning and i don't really have a support system here and i don't give a shit anymore about this writing.

i just want to feel okay. i don't want to write. i just want to feel okay and to make everything okay with p, the actual living human being that i care so deeply about. the person that i, in part, betrayed because i prioritized writing, which is after all, just a thing, not a person.

the writing feels small because i'm trying to figure out how to want to stay alive right now, because i hurt so much that i just want to be dead.

how do you write through that?

can writing heal anything?

i used to believe that it could but this whole poet thing now feels
so false,

1

(after the last community failed + fell apart + former (rival) confessed me)



(second day of blood)

Windward

(if grief always necessary?)



(Kitty has been sweet minus small spells of intense biting. we slept in bed together all day)

- when i finally bleed, it feels like a bodily growing)

2/18/2017 9:25am (on the floor, bright sun, intense cramps)

if we present in either no room, are we allowed to really give it?

(galen today + counterpath - there's nerves about seeing her + it returns to a "community")

dear v,

you told g happy birthday. was that fucked up? i'm feeling something about it, and i want to talk through it with you here. you've said g is a good person because even if he's done fucked up things in the past, he's never done anything fucked up toward me.

but that is untrue.

g has a boundary issue both sexually and otherwise. his insistence that i eat foods i dislike even though i told him i don't like them. his persistence in getting me to like beer even though i told him i had no interest in it. his weeping on the bathroom floor after i said no to sex. his persistence in getting me to like documentary film even though i told him i like art films better. his insistence that i try substances.

i was with him the first time i was intoxicated. during this experience, i told him about my history of sexual assault. this was the first time i told anyone, and the first time i even admitted what had happened to myself.

i was then forced to deal with it, because by speaking it into language to a witness, flashbacks, depression, and anxiety overwhelmed me. of course, g did not know this would be the outcome of my intoxication so this is not his fault. but g did pressure me to get intoxicated, and after this instance, to do so more and more.

over the course of our relationship, i felt and saw things while intoxicated that i wish i had neither felt nor seen. and now i wonder if i began getting intoxicated by my own choice or if i was so pressured from g that i was actually forced. and also,

there was the time he gave me more than i consented to and did not tell me until after. he framed it as an accident.

it wasn't until i had been living with him for some time that he told about what he did to t. he told me that until hearing my stories, he didn't even realize what he had done would be considered assault. still, i think about my trust with him prior to learning about his violence toward t and i feel infinitely sad and horrified and angry. i feel lied to and betrayed.

recently, i allowed myself to get swept away with an idealized version of him. but each time i see him for who he is, i want him out of my life. he feels unsafe. as he tries to change and has told me about the enthusiastic consent lectures he's been attending, it feels like too little, too late. i worry that it's an empty gesture—an attempt to be seen as a progressive man who understands consent when in actuality, he violates consent often and causes great harm. i worry that m going to therapy is a similar gesture. and even if these men are actually facing the harm they've caused and changing, i do not feel safe enough with them to try to witness their change.

without some way to know how they engage consent daily and in private, i am afraid that they aren't deeply learning or healing or changing, and i'm afraid i am not the last woman who will be hurt by them.

this haunts me because i wonder if i am complicit if they do continue to harm and assault women. by not reporting m, have i just led to another woman's rape?

and maybe it is because i was not more vocal publicly, because i did not report, that you do not believe me. it's like how people feel they can just point to how these men have changed based off what they post on social media.

though what good would reporting have done? retraumatizing me while either no repercussions are issued or the repercussion is prison which ultimately causes more harm and punishes. instead what is needed is healing and transformative change.

i don't know how to talk to you about this. i'm allowed to be angry. i don't know how to ask you to not refer to g as good, how to make sure you believe me, how to make sure you won't ask me to forgive him for the violence he enacted on me. because it's not just you i need to talk to about this. because a larger conversation is needed to shift culture and ideology.

and i don't have the energy,

1

dear s,

i wish you were here in grad school with me. you'd be so nourished by these classes. we've been reading these texts in b's new narrative class. i don't know what to call them...novels? prose? poetry? confession? essay?

we've been reading these texts that reject name and gender and time and space and genre. these texts resist a stable subject and that resistance is a result of resisting ideology — because ideology requires a stable subject.

but i wonder — how can you stand outside of capitalist society and its ideologies? really and truly? wouldn't you have to give up everything related to capitalism? and wouldn't that mean giving up language, too?

i enjoy these texts, but i also like the older new narrative texts — the ones that produce more stable subjects who are necessary for the possibility of community, of coalition. these texts reject language poetry's attempt to rinse language of the personal and of context. the texts with more stable subjects, and even the ones without stable subjects, create possibility for *i* to expand into *we*, for the personal to never be without the political, and always include and critique the broader ideological context of the absurd world of capitalism.

i fixate on this little letter, i, so much, lately.

what lives inside of it? and who?

i can't imagine a political text that holds much power without that i. a text can't show the damage of certain ideologies without showing that damage on a personal level. or if it attempts to do

so, it wouldn't be as meaningful. without the i, text lacks real-ness.

text becomes so abstract without a tethered i that it loses its urgency and impact,

l

dear k,

i don't know where this body came from or how it was made but it keeps reminding me of its presence. it is unrelenting, it is oozing, it leaks and drips and collects in puddles: clumps of hair and nails trail behind me, a marker of this body's existence. this is a human experience, says a man, this is not gendered.

but if she bleeds for seven days and doesn't die.

i bled onto my underpants, i bled onto a tampon, i bled onto a pad, i bled into a cup, i bled onto my notebook, i bled for ten days once.

doesn't die.

once i fingered myself and out came a pussy booger, a mucous stringy substance like a wet nasal booger. once i fingered myself and when I pulled my fingers out, they were covered in white clumps of yeast.

i am writing this because writing, like the body, is messy. when i read ariana reines, i feel solidarity.

i am gluey like a girl.

i am liquefied and my fat is rendered. i am disgusted by the body that follows me around. i love the body that follows me around. it is, on an ideological level, not a physical one, a body of parts that are held together by politicized glue. if i liquefy myself in order to unbind the glue, in order to rearrange the parts, in order to glue myself back together with the glue of agency, i am sure i will become undone, that parts of myself will ooze out in the process, ooze out uncontrollably, unstopably, uncontain-

ably. if i ooze like that, can i glue myself back together? is there even a glue of agency?

i'm already liquefying myself. in attempting to understand the politicized glue that holds my female body together, i have become an angry force that cannot direct itself in a focused way, that misdirects and oozes on those around me — even those who do not deserve it. but sometimes my female rage is perfectly directed, at the men who have held me down, held me back.

these are the men who make the glue that holds my body together. this is most likely not what reines meant when she wrote *gluey like a girl*, but it is one way to interpret that phrase or maybe it's a misinterpretation but it has been a fruitful misinterpretation for my current line of thought.

these are the men who make the glue that holds my body together and the glue has fused with my body and it's hard to tell what is me and what is my body and what is the glue. i don't know what the glue is made of out of but it smells very intensely and makes me nauseous and it's fused to my body and it's not just me, it's all the women's bodies, it's yours too.

it's not just solidarity it makes me feel, but it's sorrow and rage and disgust,

1

dear h,

i've been thinking about squirting orgasms.

what do you think people thought about this type of orgasm before "squirting" became a porn phenomenon?

squirting, in the porn world, seems to be linked to a certain kind of sluttiness — a certain kind of *dirty slut*. you've got to be an experienced slut to know how to squirt. in a post by user @bloomers on urbandictionary.com, a definition of squirting is listed as such: *some women (often the most unlikely) can produce vast quantities of female lovejuice during sex. The whores love showing off but the funniest are the shy types who insist they must have wet themselves and try to hide in the wardrobe.*

i remember the first time i squirted — i was with gg and it was before the really fucked up sexual abuse starting happening. he was fingering me, very roughly, four fingers, and i felt this pressure that i'd never felt before.

it's a really satisfying release to ejaculate like that — everything gets blurry and tingles and then my pussy and the bed are just soaked.

gg got so aroused, so hard, and said, *i've always wanted a woman who could squirt*, which led to a discussion about what squirting even was because i hadn't heard of it before and i was worried that in my orgasmic release i had pissed the bed, which wouldn't have been surprising because, as you know, i have a long history of pissing at the wrong time or in the wrong location.

what makes someone who squirts desirable? is it just that the vulva-haver's orgasm suddenly becomes visible? or is it because

of the porn made about squirters — which so often leans toward rough sex and bdsm? as if my body's orgasm which concludes with spraying means i have to be aroused by rough sex? as if this type of orgasm means i'm *asking for it*?

this leads me to a recent conversation with p about rough sex. we were trying to get to the bottom of nymphomania — of what separates a strong sexual appetite from sex addiction or from nymphomania. but in order to discuss this, i first need to tell you about the rough sex conversation that popped up.

i should start by saying that when i was talking to p, i was specifically referring to my own experiences with rough sex, all of which were technically non-consensual. by this, i mean that the men i was sleeping with desired rough sex and would play out their fantasies without ever asking me if i consented to them or to the roughness they involved. and of course, most of the time, i never even said no or tried to stop what was happening. sometimes because their fantasies aligned with my own and sometimes because my trauma would pull me out of the present, into freeze state, into silence.

many people are kinky, myself included, and i know consensual kink is good. but the problem is the consent piece. so many of the men i've slept with and the men i've heard stories about don't communicate their kinks, don't actively seek consent, and don't understand the violence of enacting fantasies without clear communication and clear consent.

p was trying to express his confusion over figuring my sexuality out. he mentioned that our sex, at least at first, had seemed kind of basic and normal — not boring, definitely still hot sex, but it didn't really invite kink in. but that during and after watching *nymphomaniac*, he was kind of freaking out because i told him that i identified with joe's character. he began wondering about my sexuality — how much of me had he really seen through sex?

what had he not yet seen and did he even want to see it? was there a sexual side of me that had no regard for morality, that put sexual desire first — to a psychotic degree?

in order to think about this further, he asked me if i had ever had any rough sex experiences that were not, now, in retrospect, traumatic. i began to ponder the difference between safe, consensual, and fun rough sex and unsafe, non-consensual, and damaging rough sex.

rough sex has occurred between me and:

gg

o

a

x

u

p

o is the one, looking back, who i felt the most safe with. i don't look back and wonder about why i let that kind of sex take place. in fact, i look back fondly. but why is this?

with o, there was never any charade that he wanted anything other than fucking, and he made it quite clear from the first sexual encounter that he wanted to fuck rough.

we climbed at the same climbing gym and i had asked for a belay — one thing led to another and we went to his cabin up the canyon and watched a documentary about water as a commodity and all of the toxins in water and about how the wealthy

had water and the poor and marginalized did not. he didn't have a couch — just a collection of squishy chairs, so we weren't on the couch together, like people usually are on first hang-outs. it wasn't easy to get the sparks started.

instead, during the movie, i just kept looking over at him and smiling and trying the *fuck me* stare i had perfected over the years. i couldn't tell if he was interested, but right after the movie ended, he moved his chair closer to mine, so i tried to hold his hand. he wasn't interested in that, so he came in for some heavy kissing and then pulled away and said something like, *the entire time i was belaying you, i was staring at your ass and i knew i had to fuck you.*

kissing led to petting led to licking led to fucking. the sex was pretty rough — hard penetration, getting pushed around, getting told to *watch myself get fucked like a slut* in the mirror. no charade, no act — i knew things would progress in roughness from this point.

so that's one thing that i told p — there's a difference in knowing from the start that your partner is interested in rough sex and in finding out later, after only having had more vanilla sex, that this partner actually wants to slap you around and call you names during sex. first sexual encounters set things up for future sexual encounters. if i think a man wants romantic, sweet sex and then all of a sudden he's fucking my feet and choking me and calling me a slut, like gg, that's pretty shocking and it feels like it's breaking some sort of silent rule that had been set up by those first sexual encounters.

o also never confused the roughness of sex with our non-sexual encounters. outside of the bedroom, he was so kind to me — making me breakfast, teaching me to lead climb, and in the bedroom, there was never a fear that he would keep going if i asked him to stop.

gg continued fucking me in whatever ways he wanted even if i said no, even if i cried.

and u, well that's the part of my conversation with p that turned very dark, because i hadn't thought about him in a long time and as i told p about it, i realized why.

u was a customer at the coffee shop i used to work at — a handsome man, very muscular, witty, older than me by about ten years. i tried to ignore my desire for him because fucking customers seemed like it could get messy, but he made it hard.

he visited the store most evenings. we had multiple witty exchanges and he was charming and handsome, so when he asked for my phone number, i gave it to him. the text messages almost immediately took a sexual turn, which to be honest, was fine by me. he clearly wanted to fuck me, but he was flaky with plans, backing out of several nights in a row. he told me a few days later, at the coffee shop, that he was a sex addict and was in recovery. another clue i choose to ignore.

we finally made plans that were kept. we were to meet at his apartment and then go out to eat. i arrived, was buzzed up, and for about five minutes we talked about how nice his apartment was and then suddenly things changed.

we started making out. he was an aggressive kisser, holding my head close to his. we made our way to the bedroom and fucked. he choked me during sex, and unlike those safe rough sex encounters, he continued the choking after i said to stop, though not for as long as gg had.

we both came and i remember him making one of those comments about me squirting that seem to imply that my externalized orgasm made me a *slut* and offered him permission to behave in any way he pleased.

i felt uncomfortable, i remember scrambling to find my clothes. i wasn't worried about cumming again, but i also wasn't completely panicked.

after finding my clothes, we made our way to the living room. he suddenly wanted to show me things in the room — photographs, a painting. i was charmed for a few minutes but then decided to leave.

he started walking me to the door and then suddenly pushed me down, ripped my tights, said something about how much he knew i wanted him, and fucked me so hard that i got awful rug-burn on my legs and elbows.

i'm telling this to p and almost crying, but i remember when this was happening, i didn't feel like a trauma was happening to me. i certainly wasn't aroused and i would have rather been elsewhere, but it wasn't like when gg would fuck me after i'd said no.

still, my body did go limp and silent. after that, i gathered my things and left as quickly as i could.

u continued to text me and to show up at the coffee shop. he'd wait until my coworker was in the back room, and would ask me to go fuck him in the bathroom or he'd ask if i could come over after work. i had no interest in fucking him again. i had a feeling that a second sexual encounter would be much rougher than the first and might even become the type of encounter that leads to real trauma. eventually, my lack of interest got through to him and he left me alone.

there is a type of person who needs to fulfill their sexual desires at any cost. this is how nymphomania, satyriasis are usually defined. morals don't matter in this type of sexual thirst. p said it best: it's sexual need that heads toward or lands in the psychotic. the need is so great that this person will hurt others in order to reach satisfaction.

this psychosis is what makes rough sex a terrifying thing to play around with — you never know when you're going to get a o and when you're going to get a u.

h, we're not nymphs — we don't hurt people,

l



11:40 at 9:30pm
low bed / the hair

is from yesterday morning before work)
the yeast/vaginal fluid is from just now / I forgot my coat (coat decision)

(Thinking so intense - 1:1m body / 1:1:1m head / 1:1 don't deserve good further explored / 1:1 cried 1:1 cried)
I want to sleep / I finished the Comp / Julie thanked me / my hands / the / word / the but when the / being remembers / made the / opened a Pandora's box of abuse)

(~~James~~ called + said he missed me + it means so much / I miss him so much)

unit I just want to sleep

dear v,

what are the words that i've been given as a woman to create or understand my sexual identity?

all of the ones i can think of are negative. they are degrading. even if i reclaim them, how can i fully remove their original intent from my mind? how can i recode them?

how does my sexual identity meet up with the rest of my identity?

am i a stable subject?

is my sexuality a stable subject?

is my sexuality my identity?

is there language that can hold my sexuality?

is there language that can hold me?

1

dear h,

i was recently preoccupied with the idea of women's aggression. it seemed that women's aggression, as suggested by jackie wang in her response to *nymphomaniac* in her 2014 interview on entropy.com, could be used to combat, heal, or displace feminized guilt. i imagined aggression as a sort of inner versus outer dynamic.

guilt is an inward aggression—an aggression toward oneself for things one has done wrong. sometimes this guilt is warranted, but sometimes this guilt is caused by societal forces. for women, this guilt arises both when in concordance with and when in resistance to patriarchy.

thus aggression when turned outward, for women, can become a reclamation. an understanding that feminized guilt is both unwarranted and undeserved. this realization leads to anger. this anger is no longer placed on the self but is displaced outwardly.

wang discusses this aggression in relation to joe in *nymphomaniac*. joe comes across as heartless at most points in the film. she is not concerned with the consequences of her sexual choices nor is she terribly concerned with those she has hurt. she simply fucks for herself with no regard for what society thinks of her. while she is aware that her actions come across as cruel, she refuses to change them.

this is not to say she is without guilt. as she tells her stories to seligman, she acknowledges: *i'm just a bad human being*. this becomes somewhat of a refrain. i can't help but imagine lars, himself, believing that joe is bad. creating another bad character

who is a woman, just so he can abuse her—after all, isn't this what lars is always doing?

on the contrary, lars seems just as confused as i am about joe. he seems to at once be condoning her actions and blaming society for her guilt, while also punishing joe for these actions, thus implying that there is something inherently and grotesquely wrong with them. and as he punishes joe, we witness her aggression turn inward.

i think as women we float in and out of guilt and aggression.

when i recall high school, i remember outward aggression. i could not take inward this aggression—perhaps it was the hormones of youth that allowed me to push outward. in fact, now looking back, when i think of the times that i felt most sexually free, i remember aggression. an unwillingness to feel guilty for fucking. but this intense rejection of guilt led to cruel behavior on my part. not being clear with men who i just wanted to fuck. not calling men back who genuinely liked me. how much i resembled joe then.

when i think of guilt, i think of my sexual dysfunction within monogamous relationships. how after several months or a year, it becomes hard for me to keep fucking my partner. usually this is because a fear of abandonment sweeps over me.

and if i can't fuck, i feel like a failure. if i feel like a failure, i become guilty, angry at myself. everything is funneled inward until i become overwhelmed with guilt.

with p, this guilt eventually dispersed again into aggression. i'm not sure what set it off. well, i suppose it was a desire to stop feeling like the one at fault. it was a desire to let go of the guilt, but in letting go, i became an angry force and that anger was unleashed toward p and ultimately toward myself.

i don't fully know how to explain this, h. there were a lot of factors. i felt like i was failing him, both sexually and emotionally. i was afraid he might leave me. i began to sabotage the relationship. this is not uncommon for those with ptsd but linking it to my mental health disorder does not excuse my behavior. i began to hide things, to stop talking to him. i began to say things to sabotage the relationship—awful things that i didn't mean. i became angry. that anger should have been dispersed further outward, away from me, away from p.

when p and i saw *nymphomaniac* and i said that i felt, at times, very much like joe, he was put off. not because she was sexual, but because she was so cruel, so self-focused, so harmful to others. when i think of the dissolution of our relationship, i felt like joe.

h, i don't want to be like joe. at my core, i'm not. at my core, i am kind. but i don't know how to turn this feminized guilt outward in a way that doesn't harm others. and i don't know how to be sexual without falling into this aggression-guilt loop.

h, you're married now and we haven't spoken in months. do you still believe you're a nymphomaniac? what have you done with your aggression? is it guilt you feel now or are you free from it? if you feel aggression, have you learned how to direct it?

may we both be kind but also guilt-free,

1

dear r,

i've been writing these letters. what began as an attempt to suss out which aspects of my sexuality felt like mine and which felt ideologically driven has turned into an attempt to suss out which aspects of me feel like me and which feel ideologically driven and also to suss out what i am responsible for versus what has been done to me.

it is an impossible task to separate the self from ideology, for having been immersed in this ideology since leaving the womb, it has grown into me: a tangled thing, a thorny weed.

this is true for all of us.

looking back, i've always had trouble holding onto what felt like me. at school, in friendships, with lovers, i often became a borderless self, a leech-like self that sucked out and mimicked traits of my friends and lovers so that they might like me more.

it might be easy to point my finger. to say, i took on these traits because these people wanted me, pressured me to. but even if there were pressure, it was still my choice. and the choice was made because i have not loved myself, r.

and as i made this choice, i sometimes did point my finger. and when i succumbed to pressure, i became angry at the pressure and the one making it, but never at myself for having succumbed to it. when taking on others' traits led to hurt for others in my life, as it did with the start of graduate school, as i hurt p and became less like myself and more like others around me, it was hard to admit i was at fault.

i have been holding a feeling in my body for about a week now.

the feeling is very complex. in my body, i feel it most behind my eyes, in my chest, in my hands.

the feeling is not hope though it is not without hope.

after i left p and after m raped me, i lost a lot of feeling. i don't mean that i didn't feel anything — i wept and i was furious and i was full of regret and heartache. but i stopped feeling like a living thing.

i became an ache.

the feeling began on april third, even before p asked me out on a date so that we could try to move forward.

this is important because it means that the feeling came from me.

i am, of course, overjoyed to have a date with p, who i thought i had lost, who i am in love with. but the feeling had to be mine because if the feeling were just because of p, i would still be an ache, i would still be lost to myself.

the feeling that i feel behind my eyes and in my chest and in my hands is not hope though it is not without hope.

the feeling is something like independence, something like strength. it is a feeling that i am growing and because i am growing and committed to that growth, i will be all right.

but most of all, the feeling is me.

i no longer feel an ache or dead or missing.

i am alive, r, and i want to be.

today, i wiped my period blood on my journal and i was no longer afraid of the present and what i saw in that blood was me and i was not afraid,

1

dear s,

i was thinking about collaboration and friendships with women. or i suppose i should say friendship as collaboration.

when we were collaborating, the final work was, of course, important to me. but of more importance than the project itself were our sweet meetings. drinking tea, dancing, and writing about each other's movements, sharing the photographs and paintings and poems that were informing our creative interests.

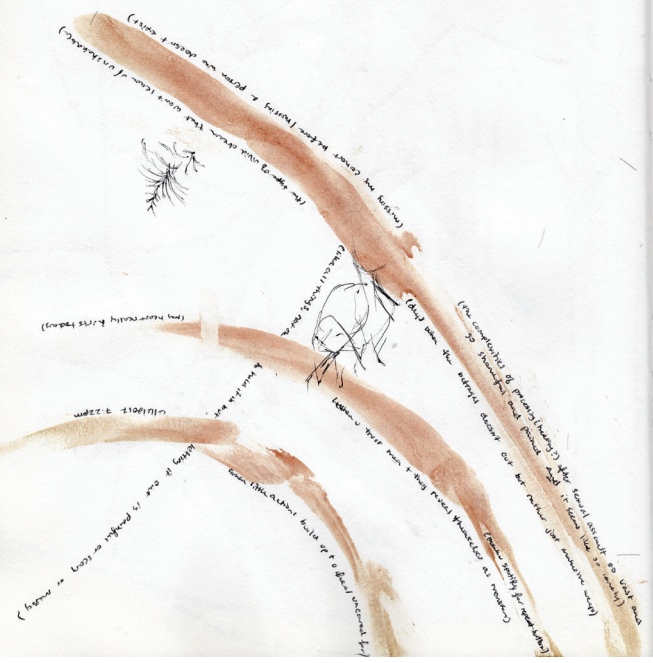
there is something so lovely about our friendship. when i'm with you, my movements become more careful, my voice grows softer but still speaks, i feel cozy. and while we do not share the intimate details of our sex lives, we share so many other intimate details and our bodies are a focal point in our conversations. through these sweet meetings, we create something much richer than our collaborative artistic projects.

your friend, y, was here this weekend. we had such a wonderful time and now i'm wondering about creating networks of friendships. how much richness would be added to our lives if we collaborated not just in art, but also in building up our connections with the powerful, lovely, intelligent, kind women that we know.

might this help us to reclaim our lives, our bodies, our sexualities?

1

Exhibit in the exhibition was on the ground of the exhibition, and it was found that the ground was not suitable for the exhibition.





notes

the epigraph comes from jackie wang's July 10, 2014 interview, "you make me feel #2," in *entropy*, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20201001225440/https://entropymag.org/you-make-me-feel-2-jackie-wang/>

on page 30, i used text from *nymphomaniac*'s wikipedia page, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nymphomaniac_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nymphomaniac_(film))

the definitions of "nymphomaniac" on page 58 were found on dictionary.com at <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/nymphomaniac>

the definition of "whore" on page 58 was found in chanelle galant's essay "fuck you, pay me," in the book *pleasure activism: the politics of feeling good*, edited by adrienne maree brown (chico: ak press, 2019)

on page 71, i reference a scene from season 2, episode 10 of *the l word*, directed by tricia brock in 2005

the urbandictionary.com post on *squirting* that's referenced on page 123 is listed as number four at <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Squirting>

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