

COUPLETS

A LOVE STORY

MAGGIE MILLNER



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[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[A Note About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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FOR NICK

It well may be that in a difficult hour,
Pinned down by pain and moaning for release,
Or nagged by want past resolution's power,
I might be driven to sell your love for peace,
Or trade the memory of this night for food.
It well may be. I do not think I would.

—EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

PROEM

I became myself.

I became myself.

No, I always was myself.

There's no such person as myself.

I wouldn't have to turn my eye

inward, I thought, if I could train my eye

on him—the one I loved.

But I was wrong. My eye loved

everything it fell upon.

And then one day it fell upon

a mirror. And he was nowhere

in the mirror. And she was everywhere.

Book One

1.1

All my life I've shown up late.
But when I do, I compensate
for my delay—I laugh and preen and carry on
as if I had been present all along.

I stayed in utero, for instance, two
weeks after I was due,
then came out so decisively and fast
I couldn't breathe. I spent my first
night on earth alone inside a tent
flushed full of oxygen, the event
from which (my dad believes)
have sprung like fires all my weird anxieties.

Mostly I can't see myself at all
until I sense in someone else a parallel,
like how I only realize what
I want at the moment I attain it,
my mind the final part of me to know.
I've hurt people I love being so
late to my desires. Last year, I met someone I thought
I couldn't live without, and in the process lost
another, without whom I thought I'd
die. *If I had only realized*
sooner, etc., etc. But I handled things ineptly
and he left. I didn't die. Instead, I went to therapy

and saw the stegosaur uptown, stayed with friends
and drank a lot of tea. Even then,

riding the bus to visit my new lover,
I was breathless always, early almost never.

1.2

She found me in the winter at a bar,
one of those places in Bed-Stuy not far
from Clinton Hill—a platonic meeting
set up by a friend who worked in media
and thought we'd get along. I got there first and snatched
a booth and started reading *Middlemarch*,
a novel I've been halfway through for more
than half my life. When she strode through the door,
*Oh shit, I love that book, I've read it fifteen
times*, she said, and asked my favorite scene.
I looked down at page 98,
open on the table. *Maybe when Lydgate
first meets Dorothea, and Eliot's
talking about how the "stealthy convergence of human lots,"
when analyzed in retrospect,
shows a "slow preparation of effects
from one life on another,"* I replied. *Totally*,
she said. The conversation turned to poetry,
our few mutual friends: one's PhD, one's startup,
one's divorce. I was too skittish and caught up
in my charade to feel, charging the space
between us like a ray, the knowing gaze
of Destiny, which Eliot would say stood *by
sarcastic with our dramatis personae*

folded in her hand. Besides, I practically had a husband—
a man as opposite to her as Casaubon

was opposite to Will. On the A train
home, I read that paragraph again,
then closed the book and marked the chapter,
telling myself that I'd resume it after.

1.3

I thought she thought my life was trivial
since she was queer and edited periodicals
and I was a poet who had never dated a woman.
Every night she'd attend some trendy function
with people dressed in Eckhaus and Givenchy
while I shambled off to walk-in shows at raunchy
bars, or raunchier bars that never put on
shows. Or anyway, that was my perception.
Now I know that hers were mostly networking
events—book launches and openings—their settings
often even spots where I'd have grabbed a drink
myself. Still, when I surveyed the fabric
of my life back then, its familiar openwork
of sex and teaching, kale and NPR,
and the boyfriend at the center I revered
but felt I had been failing many years,
I dreaded she'd dismiss me. (Though when I looked
at him—and at my friends—I thought, *How bad could*
my life really be with people like these in it?
Gentle, loyal, practical, considerate...)
The difference was, I knew my friends,
I knew my life, while hers remained
a vivid new reality that swirled
behind a scintillating door, a world

where people wore athleisure haute and seemed
to vape incessantly, the sticks lighting up green
or white like tiny pagers every time they'd pull.
I hated the air that came out of them, the smell
like cleaning solvent or an afterthought
of fruit, but found them mesmerizing, too. I'd zone out
and imagine that a tiny person lived inside each
cartridge, who would sprint to switch
the lightbulb on and fan the fire
when she felt a drag. *She must get so tired,*
I would think. This elaborate e-cig reverie
was not so different from my theory
of her life—which, because unknown,
was also marvelous and false, complete invention.
It took months to really reach her through the cloud
of myth my adoration made. Until I could,
I lived in fear she'd finally see
my fetish and discrepancy, and flee.

1.4

The record kept spinning, though it was over. Roselight wafted through the potted fern. *What if*, you heard yourself saying, *I had your permission?* Your boyfriend sighed. At your feet, the cat honed his claws against the couch, which doubled as his scratcher. Space was precious then; you were always having to invent new means to store what little you owned. You liked to think of the smallness of those rooms as a sort of formal constraint—and besides, you appreciated how cheap the apartment was, how its windows looked onto a hillside park from the height of which you could watch the evening sun sink exactly into Lady Liberty's torch. The place was a smaller version of the apartment you had leased together in California after college, subsisting principally on frozen potstickers and toast. At the time, it hadn't felt like anything was happening at all. But now everything that followed seemed like aftermath. There were the dreams, for example, which had begun after your move back east—dreams so lifelike and profane they felt like pornographic footage from another life. In one, you were seduced by a throng of elderly women who held you down and licked you all over in a Turkish-style spa. In another, you and a college friend engaged in slow, multiorgasmic tribbing on the floor of her dorm closet, wearing nothing but owl masks. The dreams became a second life, a secret room you visited for part of every day. Your boyfriend pulled the cat into his lap. *What do you want to do*, he asked, *that calls for my permission?*

You looked past him, out the fogging window. *Women.*

1.5

So I asked to sleep with women. At first, he agreed.

If that's what you think you need,

he said, *I wouldn't want to stop you.*

But shortly after that he asked me not to.

Maybe I was too far gone already—

floodgates, barn door, whatever. Or maybe

the vow I made then—*no, I never will again*—

predicted, in a way, its own subversion

by establishing a rule

that I could break. In middle school,

I once got suspended for a hall pass

I'd stolen and then forged, after skipping class

to make out with a boy I'd barely met

who groped my still-imaginary breasts

beneath my shirt. Afterward, I remember

most of all my parents' shame, their somber

faces, which erased the aphrodisiac

of misbehavior. Looking back,

sometimes I suspect that the appeal

was in the rule-breaking (e.g., to steal,

to cut the class, to lie)—which was, *itself*, the sex.

That lust to me was wanting to transgress

beside another. To be so totally compelled.

To share a truth you have to lie to tell.

1.6

You hadn't intended to see her a second time. But when she invited you out for a drink one Friday night, you decided to go and find out if perhaps your desire had waned, had taken care of itself, as strong feelings born of fantasy and instinct sometimes do when brought into the harsh light of lived causality. But it was the same thing all over again—immediately on seeing her, you felt flushed and exposed, as if you'd been caught crying. Your stomach considered for a moment revising the course of its metabolism. You sat at right angles on a banquette in the corner of the room, brushing knees, then hips, then shoulders. At last call, you were the only people there. Then she asked you to share a cab with her; you did; she asked you to walk her in; you did; she asked you to come upstairs; you did; to get into her bed; you did; to press yourself lengthwise against her; you did; to fall asleep like that; you did; to drink coffee with her when you woke; you did; to kiss her on the mouth; you did; to kiss her with your tongue; you did; to let her touch you once, just to see if you were really as wet as you said you were; you did; to unclasp your bra; you did; to rub yourself against her till you came; you did; to read her the erotic poem you loved; you did; to remove your pants; you did; to let her taste you; you did; to come again, inside her mouth; you did; to penetrate her gingerly; you did; to get out of bed at last; you did; to go get pizza down the street; you did; to eat it on the sidewalk in the snow; you did; to go back home with her; you did; to sleep there one more night; you did; to stay until the sun came up; you did.

1.7

When I was with her, the physical
experience of my pleasure—*the little*
death—seemed to make the nauseous question
of whether I was in possession
of a clear and unified self
mostly irrelevant. Those days, I was something else:
a soft vacuity. A sort of net.
No guilt, no age. No epithet.

1.8

Occasionally, it occurred to you that it might be better to write the account in the second person: truer to the spirit of that time. You no longer felt that experiences belonged to people in the first place; they were always the outcome of forces beyond the strictly personal, and only became art at the moment they were made available, if in an altered form, to someone new. The trouble was that you were also embodied, which meant that you could never quite transcend yourself, or evacuate the frame, or shirk the myth of the grammatical singular. Still, there were mirrors, and there were books. You took great comfort, in those days, in writing that seemed to relate to its author as both the object and the subject of the work—an idea that had acquired a certain cachet in recent years despite its being approximately as old as literature itself. *A lot of events in the book, said Jamaica Kincaid of her novel See Now Then, would seem to parallel my own life. But ... my own everyday life, is sort of very untidy and smelly and kind of revolting on close inspection.* Natalia Ginzburg took a symmetrical position, in a memoir whose preface asks us to approach it as a fiction: *Even though the story is real, I think one should read it as if it were a novel, and therefore not demand of it any more or less than a novel can offer.* People had also begun to read differently, it seemed: a phenomenon that had something to do with the internet and something to do with the markets more generally, which were based increasingly on the trafficking of abstractions. The relationship between writer and reader had grown especially transactional, didactic; a peculiar kind of literalism had taken hold. It was in the face of this literalism, you thought, that the great writers had pried open and enlarged the space that separated story from truth, widening it bit by bit into a vast commons in which everyone might live. Sometimes when you sat down, alone with your mind, you felt you were performing both parts of an elaborate duet, not unlike the one you played in sex, where you drifted in and out of corporality like a vapor hovering around its boiling point. Language offered to confer a kind of bothness on your life, by objectifying it necessarily. Once in a while, there would flash before you an image of yourself from the outside—toward

whom, for the briefest moment, you'd be able to feel something like indifference. Just a person. Just a pronoun. Just the form you saw the world through,

soft and warm and waiting to be used by you.

1.9

I tried to stay away from her. Could not. I'd turn to J
or T and say: *Today's the day*

it stops. Nothing right should feel
this dirty, nothing real

this quicksilver and fanged. I kept thinking
of that show *My Strange Addiction*,

which was enjoying a comeback among my peers
in those months, despite its cancellation years

before, conceptual depravity,
and total exploitation of its cast. Reality

TV seemed newly relevant, I guess,
as life itself grew ever more fictitious,

perpendicular to time. Obsession was a subject
that obsessed me, regardless of its object,

but I hated watching strangers getting hurt
by theirs: doll collecting, surgery, ingesting dirt

and glass. There was no joy depicted—
just decrepitude, abjection, musty rooms. If I directed

one, my show would air the pleasures
of compulsion, and be named *Screw It, I'm Going to Text Her*,

or *Nothing's Wrong, You're Just in Love Again*,
or *True Life: Turning Twenty-Eight in Brooklyn*.

1.10

I told my boyfriend immediately;
I've never been too good at secrecy.

It was the final straw before we parted.
She'll make you suffer in the end, he said—

not meanly, but as if reporting something true
about women in love and what they do.

1.11

Things kept happening that seemed so improbable
that if I'd read them in a novel

I'd have put it down: stories so perfectly
schematic they resist retelling—obvious, already
penned by Fate.

Like when he and I were on a date
for Valentine's, and she walked
into the bar. And came right up. And shook
his hand with one she'd slipped inside
my body days before. Or like the blood
that came in steady, heavy rivulets
the last night he and I had sex,
which at the time no logic
could explain. (Turns out the contraceptive stick
I'd had installed a decade prior
chose that very moment to retire.)

Or like when I was walking, in the final
hours before our breakup, down Canal
and a sparrow fell out of the sky
headlong, and landed at my feet. It didn't die
on impact, but lay there, twitching
the black seed of its eye in my direction.

Or just the artless metaphor in all
of this. The hand, the blood, the bird I couldn't kill—

though I knew it would have been
the kinder thing, the more benevolent.

1.12

There are many ways, of course,
of telling it. But each account obscures

some other version equally true.

One is that I lied to everyone I knew.

Another—this one I really do believe—
is that for years I loved him more than me.

I can conjure even now our first apartment's tile:
white diamonds in their blue argyle

frieze around the sink, the dirty grout
I'd scour with a toothbrush while he was out

at work. I can count four bathmats
over eight years, hear the record player catch

every time we stood up from the table.

And I can still feel the invisible

moat we both believed in, on the other side of which
we knew lay torment, exile, wreckage,

the anarchy of singledom. Loss upon loss.

I remember testing it, the moat: throwing across

a rope to check its breadth, twice to the waist
wading in before retreating, shamefaced,

reining myself back. To him it was a sea,

I think: entirely impassable. To me

it was a dizzying ravine

that circled us for years, then cut between.

Book Two

2.1

Everyone had the same Ikea bed.

She tied my wrists to hers, above my head.

(She liked what she called *clean lines*, I would learn;
her major had been architecture.)

Sometimes when I lay there, waiting, bound or free,
I'd envision its assembly:

the tiny standard-issue wrench that torqued
the socket of the bolt, drawing the particleboard

flush against the rails. The hundred screws.

The greasy crossbar with its queues

of stapled slats. The wooden dowels,
which had seemed too large to fit their holes,

that gently she'd forced in. The plastic pegs.

The vinyl footboard, trussed between the legs.

2.2

As a child, whenever anyone said *killing time*, you'd picture a woman in a silk bolero stabbing with a dagger a wall of colorless jelly. That's how you felt, divvying up the quilts, the eBay cutlery, the books: like a vengeful person, with a weapon in her hand. It seemed unforgivable to end anything on purpose, especially when you saw the life you'd made together as *alive*: a symbiotic animal you'd raised with him, now tugging at its rope. Furred and hungry, and looking at you with the blank face of a factory cow—a face, so soft and innocent and gaunt,
you'd have to be a monster not to want.

2.3

No one's fated or doomed to love anyone.
The accidents happen, we're not heroines,
they happen in our lives like car crashes,
books that change us, said Adrienne Rich, and she's
right. There's nothing so profound
about my dating life. In the foreground
the world was tilting into Hell, and not
figuratively. The precariat
was almost everyone. The rich people
I knew still entertained a kind of magical
thinking—*we could always run off*
to the country, they repeated—as if
country were a place that would keep being
for the taking. I didn't even know why I was weeping,
in my bedroom up the hill from the Atlantic.
I knew there'd been a grave misunderstanding.
I had let my life become a story.
Degradation was a theme, and rivalry,
ecstasy, submission, happenstance.
The only moral was the pressure of her hands,
the grip of leather tugging at my wrist
where the cuffs that were her birthday gift
to me etched sallow, scar-like creases
in the flesh. Outside, entire species

were expiring. Fascism had come
back into vogue, with every random
website giving proof. It was hard to know which aspects
to feel guilty for, so I was like my Catholic
mother, always rounding up. Maybe that's why
I felt most free when I was choked and tied
with cables to the bed; when bound and gagged;
when told that I was very, very bad.

2.4

She was also dating someone else,
they believed in alternative relationship models,
which meant she could keep seeing me
provided I agreed to polyamory
and didn't ask for more than my allowance
of her time. Our dates she scheduled in advance;
the other girlfriend got most Fridays
and any night I stayed in grading essays,
but Tuesdays and Saturdays were mine.
It was equitable by design,
though also not exactly democratic.
During those months there was a lot of panic,
moral and otherwise, concerning men
and domination, *open*
borders, what precisely was harassment.
About sex I had emphatic,
lucid, memorized opinions
crusted over a cesspit of dark ambivalence.
At parties I spoke less and less, skewered
olives on my tiny cocktail sword.
Often, when I kissed my lover,
I could almost taste the other
girl: her close-cropped hair and longer, coltish legs,
her pit-sweat and the apricot-ish dregs

of her perfume. Was I not
really a bohemian at all? I'd thought

I had a different heart, one with doors,
one that did not love perforce

toward the condition of possession.

But when she'd pull out of me and toss her harness in

a duffel bag with lubricants
and toiletries to carry to the other girlfriend's

house, I felt rush through my blood
a surge of insecurity and dread,

and I would retch and clutch myself and weep.
This was why I liked to keep

two of her fingers in my body
while we slept. I longed to be her property.

I wanted her to smell me in her nail-beds
all day long. One morning, as we said

goodbye, I told her that she owned me.

I wanted her to say it back, to preface it with *only*.

2.5

My girlfriend's other girlfriend was a novelist
who every other weekend had a tryst
with B, a hedge-fund manager, in a Manhattan
hotel room, while another woman,
also a novelist, sat beside the bed.
All three, it should be said,
were very rich. The second novelist—
who was, I'm told, romantically obsessed
with B—got off on watching him ejaculate inside
my girlfriend's girlfriend, while begging from the bedside
that he stop. At home B had an infant
and a wife, for whose unwitting absent
body my girlfriend's girlfriend's made a kind of proxy—
absorbing the animosity
of the second novelist, whose true object was
the woman B had married. The ménage à trois
also qualified as fieldwork, since both writers' manuscripts
narrated their relationship.
(Each hoped her own, of course, would be
the better book, eventually.)
When I thought about their triangle—devised,
it seemed, to make perverse the otherwise
bourgeois and bloodless days
in which their creativities were caged—

my mind went to my own. My vanity.

My wife like the quiet savagery

inside a dog that gets the dog put down.

If there was a distinction to be drawn,

it was only that the thought of my betrayal

didn't turn me on at all

but pained me in a way I couldn't fetishize.

And the jealousy that would arise

in me did not increase my selfish pleasure,

but threatened—so I felt—to snuff it out forever.

2.6

I kept making the same ludicrous wish
that the things I didn't like might vanish
of their own accord. Envy. Pimples. Debt.
My stack of griefs. The internet,
whose central purpose seemed to be
to turn the best parts of humanity—
our hungers for belonging, art, and sex—
into surveillance logs and payouts for execs.
It was both invisible and everywhere
like the wealth gap or the ozone layer
and foiled any threat of our collectivizing
by rewarding only purchases and infighting.
Of course I had no plan to make it better.
And I knew my sneering hauteur
was its own repellent habit: an itchy frock
I wore to parties, where I made small talk
about book reviews and carbon capture
while down below the surface of our banter
I'd feel a sheet of rime steadily start
to form between me and my counterpart.
Since when is pleather vegan leather?
Since when is theory clearly better
intel than the news? I'd retreat to someone's toilet
and despite myself, I'd hit

her up, desperate to be lifted from my body.

Come over, she would say. *The literati*

can't give you what I can. And I'd comply.

And it would work. You can't be lonely,

after all, if you're not inside yourself.

You can't be dwelling if you're somewhere else.

2.7

I went on apps to meet people who weren't
her or him. There'd be this quick hormonal current
when my finger skimming glass
achieved the grayed-out screen that meant a match,
which then a queasy emptiness produced.
It was like spying in a closet an old coat you used
to wear, and finding it still flatters you and even has a dollar
in the pocket—but then you notice on the collar
a large brown stain like blood, and a tear in the lining
from that frenzied night in Nanjing
with his sister, and a dark mystacial whisker
from the cat you owned together
on the cuff ... And in your hand isn't money
but a ticket stub from when you saw *La grande*
bellezza the week after you cosigned your first lease
in Monterey. So what had felt before like luck now seems
another ploy to show you what you've lost.
I'd go for drinks with people over whom I'd passed
a thumb in the affirmative, and sometimes
it was even sort of nice: drinking turbid natural wines
while touching knees, or talking Adrian Piper
with an art student I'd soon learn was a biter
when we kissed. But beneath the conversation
I'd detect this faint reverberation

that, when I listened close, I understood
to be her name. And if I tuned in harder, I would
often hear, below that pitch,
another, deeper throbbing, which was his.

2.8

It had grown apparent, in the slow-then-sudden way of certain ulcers, that you were desperately unhappy in the arrangement. That you could no longer stand to share your lover or to subdivide your own consuming love. You'd claw your arms at random in the bath. You'd phone your friends, whose voices rose in pitch. You'd pull your hair out, strand by strand, waiting for the train. Some nights, you'd hail a cab at 3:00 a.m., stealing silently out of your lover's bed and down the neon street, half-naked through the half-thawed snow, panting as if fleeing mortal terror. The two of you would spend the next day in a standoff or an argument, each trying to prove she was the party who cared less while fearing that the opposite was true. Sex was the only possible rapprochement. How else could you articulate a wish that you yourself couldn't understand—a wish that seemed the most obscene hypocrisy? *"I want the safety and solidity I used to know."* *"I think I'd feel more free if more constrained."* *"I wanted out, now I want in."*

"How dare you do to me the very thing I did to him."

2.9

Her job was taking other people's prose and coaxing
it to coherency. Mine was coaching
young people to translate life experience
to prose. But our own story made no sense
to me and twisted up whenever I tried
writing it. On the bus ride
to her building, I listened to Liz Phair,
Irma Thomas, and an outfit from Montclair
that she and I both loved, of a genre
halfway between emo and Americana,
like the love child of Bright Eyes and Loretta Lynn.
So much from that time is still so redolent
of nervousness and sex: her sandalwood cologne
and reading H.D. on her phone,
and crying in the mezzanine
at BAM and on a bench in Fort Greene
Park, and the sticky Ottolenghi cake we made (*no butter*),
and juices from an app. Rebecca West. The comforter
we patched to stop it drowning us
in goosedown every night. Soylent. Cunnilingus.
Saraghina, before all the Sturm und Drang.
The quaver in her voice when she first sang
the song that afterward became
the anthem of our romance, named

after a book of letters named after a fervid,
almost painful shade of red.

2.10

Now and then, I'd get the strange impression
that *she was me*. A stab of chthonic recognition
would set off a little spasm in my eye.
Sometimes from far away I'd spy
her slanted walk or messy hair and every muscle
in my body would contract. At school,
while my students bent over their exams,
I'd scroll through photos on her Instagram,
the fabric growing damp between my legs
where her finger liked to press
itself inside me like a key. An undiscovered
ancestor. An eidolon. An isomer.
And an uncanny sense of unity,
to love in her what had always seemed deformity
in me. To yield. To feel the snugness of the fit.
To turn the lock. To hear the little click.

2.11

Her father was receiving some award
for contributions to the field of prewar
British history, the UK Constitution
and its laws. She asked me to be her plus-one,
and since in those days I said no
to nothing, I said yes. She wore an indigo
fast-fashion suit that looked like YSL.
I wore a one-piece rayon thing that felt
like silk. Her hometown was a fancy box
inside of which the school was lodged
like marquetry, its spires throwing tiled
shade on taciturn colonials,
too ritzy to relax completely in. Still,
we made our best attempts. With Adderall
in her blood and in mine Pinot Meunier,
we sat through speeches, sniffed bouquets,
carved butter off of cold, misshapen eggs,
and brushed each other's legs
under the table. She pulled me into every family
photograph, for which I grinned maniacally,
a cartoon of myself. Back at the house,
she tore the rayon off me on the couch
beside a child's well-loved bear, against which
minutes later I would quake and twitch,

crying, mouthing *yes*. The next morning, past bare trees
and melting freight containers on the Northeast

Corridor back to New York, she asked if we
might date, from there on out, *exclusively*—

and though it felt like learning I had passed
a somewhat byzantine and painful test,

there was no question what I'd say.

I knew just one word anyway.

2.12

Then it was the future. You were free to love whatever you loved. A swing hung down and you got on and swung over the valley. The old ballads echoed in your ears: the spurned and spurning lovers, the devilish mothers, the sky with its incurable little rash. Above the neck, you were one big happy treeline, tipsy on the seasonal dramas of the leaves, the smell of snow gestating just over the lip of the horizon. It all makes sense when you're alive, although you couldn't explain it to anyone who wasn't: the books, the sour rain, your walking home all glad and fucked and apple-eyed, so cold and red because of it, because of having skin. A street called Throop. A room called bed. Your lover's back at daybreak, begging to be scratched:

Lower, lower, higher now. Now harder. Yes, like that.

Book Three

3.1

When she and I would fight, I'd miss him most.
And we were always fighting in those
gauzy days of mucus and diaphony,
when she'd indulge my every schoolgirl fantasy
for hours in the house-sit and then run out
without a word because she had forgot
she *had a thing*. Stuff like that. Not cruel, though
often maddening, and far below
what I'd expected out of him.
His love had been the organizing system
of my life. I'd known it since nineteen.
When she would breach its terms, my protean
heart would thrash against its skin
for what it knew would shelter it. For him.

3.2

Other times, I could feel myself become
him. Those tics I'd found most tiresome—
his artificial cheer, his trick
of going silent in the heat of conflict,
or accusing me of being self-indulgent
without ever specifying what he meant—
suddenly belonged to *me*, my temper
having lifted in our time together
some properties of his. His ideas
crowded my head, as if through an earpiece.
His hand's phantom weight guided my own.
His scowl in my mirror, and in my microphone
his speech, down to the voice's
note of spite, the patronizing diagnosis,
the words I'd use to scold her when she told
a tasteless joke ... It was the same old
dialectic I'd tried to leave behind.
This is partly why I thought I'd lost my mind.
But when she'd start to plunge
into depression, as I've often done—
curled in bed or prostrate on the ground,
listing all the people she'd let down—
it was by remembering how he'd soothed me
that I soothed her. And when I held her cheek

against my cheek, I was drawing from the well
of love *he* filled. So I became after all

not him exactly but a kind of conduit
between them: a conversation they conducted

with my mouth. And when I was not unbelievably
sad, I was moved unbelievably

to hold inside me both my lovers
and to introduce them to each other

there, in the hollow just above the heart,
among the little folds where the voice starts.

3.3

So much from childhood was perfectly
preserved in her: the habits of hyperbole
and spilling food, the love of pranks, the madcap
laugh, the tendencies to overshare and nap
most days. She always wanted to be touched,
was indiscriminate with trust,
and seemed incapable of ever telling
time. I found it all incredibly compelling.

Still, it did sometimes feel strange
to have to explain to someone my own age
why a lie about an ex might sting
or a sudden cancellation be unsettling.

(And once I'd named it, the initial hurt,
now cauterized in language, felt remote—obscured.)

But I knew if I indulged all this
I'd earn the same forgiveness
for the childish faults I hadn't
outgrown yet myself. My frequent
whine. My spottiness on politics.
My lecturing. My cold vindictiveness.

And underneath, that formless, nagging doubt
I needed her to kiss away—to quell, to siphon out.

3.4

It was the day you had arranged to pick up your remaining things. The cat would be there, but your ex would be at work, typing or pipetting while you scavenged the apartment for your favorite clogs and empty book of checks. His job was important; he studied the genetics of various creatures as they evolved in response to climate change. Corals and mosquitoes, limpets and parasitic wasps that ate their way through the skin of pupal caterpillars from the inside out, rending them quite literally in half. The less resilient died as the oceans warmed and acidified, as deserts spread in some places and cities rose like sprawling, virulent forests in others. But in many cases, some members of each species would survive, and his life's work was to find the hidden code that distinguished these—the evolutionary winners—from their kin. When you used your old key to enter the apartment, you found the desk strewn with scientific papers and a new nautical print above the couch. An ancient feeling reared its head in you, and with it the desire to get on the floor and kneel. You did. Then you climbed outside your skin and watched your body for a final time encircled by that space. At that moment, the cat leapt lazily down from his perch by the bed. He walked toward you, and you stretched your arms toward him, and his pointed face grew larger in your field of view. Some recognition flared between you like a match. Just when you thought you'd touch, he skirted you and spat and hissed, then sauntered to the corner and his dish.

3.5

Oh, my little shade. Not dead, not even lost,
but lost to me as certain facts are lost.

Two extra toes, eyes wide for your species,
your shoulders' bony knobs and scattered fleas.

He kept you when we parted, never
really discussed it. You'd always loved him better—

and besides, any nothing I got
I deserved. But you'd loved me too, I thought,

or trusted me at least to give you meat,
the movement of my hands, my heat,

and even tried to nurse, in kittenhood,
some breastmilk from my earlobe, drawing blood.

Just be grateful you didn't
have children, everyone said. I wasn't

grateful, though in some moments
was relieved to think that nonexistence

meant for them no suffering. Still, my private devil craved
their suffering, which would have made

my own more real, more sensible.

And our love. And the way time pulled
against the pent-up force of my life, which
unhitched altogether from itself. Unhitched

like his belief, like you—who were to us
less child than witness.

3.6

Often I dreamt that he and I were back
together. The relief was like a bivouac

I sheltered under, sighing in the reeds.
Then sleep would lift, and I'd be in her sheets,
the bleary, cold confusion
like a drink of rancid juice when

I'd expected cream, or cream when
I'd expected semen,
both flavors melding in my mouth before
reality announced itself once more.

One night, I was in labor with his daughter.
She came in the caul. And when we cut her
out, she had my girlfriend's face, its flattish
physiognomy. Rachel Hadas

wrote that poems and dreams both include
unappealing truths that usually elude

the person *living her daily life in prose*.
I licked the vernix off our daughter's nose,

and when I woke could not recall
the taste of my old life at all.

3.7

When you lived with him in Monterey, you'd spend every evening on a moldy, high-back couch, watching the light outside go mauve, then die. The neighbor's house was strung with discs of mirror that turned in wind, blinding you when the sun was right, or throwing phantom orbs the cat would hunt across the wall. Those years were shapeless, unperfumed, a tinting of salt and beaten air. Winter looked identical to summer, which gave the dim impression of a stilled planet, of a planet to which the worst had already happened. It was also a time when stars were back in style—not knowing their names or physics, but using them for augury or just diagnosing personality traits. Many turned to stars because they felt jilted or unpersuaded by Western science, which had by that point made most other knowledge irretrievable, but some just said, *It's fun, it's only fun. You don't have to believe in anything.* You couldn't see the fun. Still, you startled when the chart said you were flirty and contrarian, obsessed by hair. Just that week you had received a regrettable haircut, which energized in you a passion for hats. A helmet was a sort of hat, and you wore one every weekend when you bicycled to the abandoned military base, where bits of missile nosed out of the beach and ice plant splashed the dunes with rust and green, the colors of alarm. Ahead of you between the bluffs would tromp the man you loved, a stalk among sargassum, tacking west. Or else behind you if you pedaled fast, or next to you if talk or some dispute were under way. Your fights, you thought, were very rare, though he found them very frequent, it was a question of thresholds. Sometimes you would fight about how much you fought, facing each other in the little apartment you shared by the harbor, frothing up the atmosphere between you with your hands. During PMS, you'd say outlandish things: *I feel like a spayed cat, I feel like a woman trapped in a painting that depicts her as a virgin, but she's not a virgin, she's not even a woman all the time.* The West exhausted you, its lassitude and gorse. It was a soft frontier that fell away as soon as you got used to it, vapid daylight spinning itself always into gold. This was just before the era of overt misinformation, or perhaps that era's undetected dawn, and for a while you

suspected that the world was an invention of your mind—which made it difficult to advance at all across that world, or make the bed, or taste the fragile cod the wharf-men hawked. Looking out over the cliffs, the man would say the names of fish and succulents, the processes by which the beach had cleft itself so steeply from the crag. A tern flew by. The sun moved through a slotted spoon of cloud. You've come to think that place was like your interest in your life: hidden, for a time, beneath a sheet of sand and dread. Until one day, with sudden clarity, you started to perceive it.

That was the same moment you began to leave it.

3.8

On nights I couldn't sleep, I'd think of when,
ten miles south of Pleasanton,
he and I had stopped for snacks and boba
and CDs, the only format the Toyota
stereo would play. This is how we came to know by heart
over that fortnight in the desert
every word to *Big Willie Style*,
Enter the Wu-Tang, Smiley Smile,
and Michelle Branch's studio debut, *The Spirit Room*.
"You Get Me" was the title of Track 2,
and I could do the voice, a caterwaul
that broke across the last vowel
of *understands*. Outside the window, tattered,
careless roads striped the crumpled frontmatter
of Mono County. Fur of unknown provenance,
strange reptiles, blue-brown hills with knots
of sunburned grass. When we addressed
each other then, we used as epithets
nonsense words, or words from abstruse poems,
or words we just identified with home—
Hayride. Pudding. Linen. Sugar. Dimples.—
relishing their sounds. We'd have this impulse
later that same year, when we'd adopt and name
the cat we'd then incessantly rename,

and whenever we discussed our future kids,
like that day outside the Panamints,
eating eggs, naming babies between bites.
When I'm most homesick for that life,
I tell myself that even there,
my heart must have been pulsing with its queer,
thin tune. Even in Travertine. Even in
Tecopa, near the thermal spring
whose sulfur turned my silver green,
where he photographed me naked, peeing
symbols in the sand. Rolling a spliff
outside Methuselah. Downshifting up a cliff.
Pitching our tent without the rain-fly
and lying in it, staring at the sky.
The pines above our heads, he told me,
were the oldest living bodies
in the world. His voice got soft and round and full of breath.
If he'd asked then I would have answered yes.

3.9

In the city, your eyes are for the trees, but in the forest, they seek the silver in everything. You lived a long time by the sea, but you could never see your own reflection in it, so you left, just packed up all your ornaments and left. You forgot to try to love it for itself, which is the sort of condition you have. All day, admiring the storm outside the window for its recklessness, then turning on it like an ill-trained dog. But how bright the rainfall made the motorcycle leaning in the street! And how glad it made the oaks, which were the only living things in the tableau. Another day, the mustard velvet curtain might have intervened, but it was sashed that afternoon, and anyway you resented it for even being there, threatening to take away your view. You wanted to say to the curtain, *What are your intentions with my daughter?*, as if the window was your child and had come out of you, plunging out along with everything it held between its jambs: the rain, the fence, its little silver nails. As if the whole world had come out of you with the window, passed into existence through the window in *your* body, and now gazed resolutely back at it—your grille of bone, your spile of blood,
the only place you'll never get beyond.

3.10

Some mornings, leaving my girlfriend's
house, I'd glimpse my whole existence,
all its eras, as a single arc—unified, unbroken.
I saw a person who kissed mostly men,
wrote poems in the prevailing style, owned a cat.
I saw a different person after that,
and before, I saw a little girl.
What was I saying? That there were
these different selves—I need you to see them—
they were shapes made out of lines, and then
one day they all began to cross, the lines,
as if by some obscure design
the analysis of which became the purpose
of my life. Or maybe the *pattern* was
my life, and its analysis
merely my living. Sexuality is,
after all, a formal concern:
finding for one's time on earth
a shape that feels more native than imposed—
a shape in which desire, having chosen
it, can multiply.
And isn't love itself a type
of rhyme? And don't *gender* and *genre* share one root?
Maybe I really am a poet,

needing as I do from these imperfect sets,
which constitute a self, the lie of sense.

3.11

Her attention was blazing and uncatchable
like the goldfish in the fable
who can talk his way out of anything.
I thought monogamy would bring
a quality of safety—of sustained
focus—I had craved and blamed
her other girlfriend for depleting.
But her affection still felt fleeting,
going away with her wherever she went,
fastening itself to whomever she happened
to be looking at. By then I knew she loved
me. But my approval didn't seem enough
for her; she wanted it from everyone
and always slightly more than what was given.
When she turned her face toward mine, I saw my need
vibrating out of me to meet
her own, and the point of their connection
was a minor star, a nuclear reaction
all I cared about was trying to maintain.
Then she'd turn to someone new and kill the flame,
and I would have to wait there in the dark,
pitying myself, my stupid heart,
or chase her down and pick another fight
to get our little spark to reignite.

3.12

I was reading the book by Nathalie Léger
(translated by Cécile Menon and Natasha Lehrer)

about the actor and director Barbara
Loden, who made a movie about a bank robber

named Wanda, when this line jumped out at me:
She said it is easy to be

*avant-garde but it is really difficult to tell
a simple story well.*

I texted my girlfriend: *See? Narrativity
is everybody's problem.* That history

was once *today* is never not a shock.

In the cloister of my childhood, the lilac
would just bloom and molt and wilt and then be pruned,
without ever purporting to have learned

from its anthesis. *It was an interesting
idea ... that the narrative impulse might spring*

*from the desire to avoid guilt, rather
than from the need ... to connect things together*

in a meaningful way is something Rachel Cusk
made her narrator confess to someone once—

another line I won't forget, although
I don't always agree. I do think stories let us show

how lives can interweave (giving the lie
to culpability—the sovereignty of *I*)

but also feel the will to make events
connect can be unhelpful, because it sets

us up to think life might behave in ways
that life just won't behave.

In retrospect, the shape of things looks more entropic—
strewn salt—shards of glass—rhapsodic

blurs of random light and scraps of songs
I can't rightly call mine, call anyone's.

Book Four

4.1

The second adolescence—like the second first love—
is a time we have few legends of.

I wear the weight of mine around my throat
and finger it in worried moods. My wild oat,
my tonsil stone, my souvenir from when
I stepped—*directed by desire*, à la June Jordan—
from the script. I wish that reckoning on no one
and everyone: to witness what can happen
when we press the cobalt button that says BUY—
the long human machine begun, the hands that fly
among the storeroom shelves, the possible
conceding, choice by choice, to the immutable ...

There is frequently the feeling of a garden:
the feeling of chasing a garden.

If I have to pass the factory and morgue along
the way—if I have to cross the river someone
thought to give the fatted name of *superfund*—
still I couldn't spurn the air, its moribund
perfumes. In lieu of resolution, then, a question:
Will the next time be as doomed as this one?

4.2

Going on a trip you have played
no part in planning is one of the great
luxuries of existence, I kept thinking, that
week she brought me, in a town called Bath
in Maine, to a converted stable by the ocean.
There was no Wi-Fi, no reception,
but the quaintly corded landline
with its *answering machine*
allowed us to ask D to bring more beer
when he trundled up on Tuesday from Revere.
I kneaded dough while she redecorated,
switching the table and the cellarette,
changing lightbulbs, swapping rugs, and from a cupboard
ferreting out dishware she preferred.
Every day we'd watch the tide
perform its incremental sleight
upon the beach: making isthmuses
and islands out of land that seemed continuous,
often stranding unsuspecting beachcombers.
Their figures bobbed like floaters
in the eye. Gummies laced with THC
we'd bought in bulk from the dispensary
elevated everything. As did sex.
As did coming on the floor, whole body flexed

and hot against her hand. Eating by oil lamp. Flinging a
frisbee down the strand and reading Linda

Gregg, who had just died,
by the fire. Going six days without a fight.

Thinking life could really be like this.
Taking baths and calling them eponymous.

4.3

From Maine, you drove to Red Cloud, Nebraska, home of Willa Cather, because you'd heard she was a famous lesbian, though Cather never publicly discussed her sexuality, so scholars disagree on this. You knew that she lived for forty years with a woman with whom she was apparently in love, but almost all their letters have been lost. And while her fiction isn't explicitly homoerotic, it's erotic in other ways—when her heroine feels *the future stirring* beneath the prairie's *shaggy ridges*, for example, or when the plow moves the earth into *long, sweeping lines of fertility*. In one scene, the light itself is *full of action*, infused with *a peculiar quality of climax—of splendid finish*. The light in Red Cloud fell on you like that, your car parting it into pale curtains over the dusty road, your girlfriend's features leavened by its gleam. Arrival is a form of climax, and coming out a form of arrival, and *coming* another word for *climaxing*, the one you always used. Until that day, you'd mostly touched in dense, gentrified neighborhoods of large northeastern cities, where two women in love was unsensational, approaching a cliché. But here on the Divide, you felt conspicuous and alien, like the twin albino mules in Cather's book about the priest. This was why, during the tour of the author's girlhood home, you pretended to be just friends. You walked apart and gazed ahead, resisting grazing fingers on the nickel-plated stove. Later, you would reason that the pretense was mimetic of the life you'd come to celebrate: more a sign of deference than unease. The family's little kitchen smelled like soot. In the upstairs bedroom papered in a pattern of gold freesia, you imagined Cather's living body tending to its need beneath the quilt, the way you yourself had done in childhood, picturing acts you couldn't understand involving rope and soft coercion, in a town equally desolate and small. The smiling guide historicized the dinnerware and needlecraft, then captured in a photograph your stiffness by an ornamental shrub. Three blocks away, past the courthouse and a dog run, stood the family's second home, which unlike the first one was remodeled and where you rented a bed for the night. In Willa's room, your girlfriend took your picture, legs spread broadly open and foreshortened by the angle of the shot. Afterward, she kept

repeating how, despite the carpeting and Wi-Fi and mini bottled waters in the fridge, the sunlight was the same as it had been in Cather's time—as light, though it can age us, doesn't age. This idea made Cather somehow proximate, alive. You felt her there in company with you beneath the sheer, elastic blondness streaming now over the plains and through the window in the drawing room, where as you came you whispered, *Let's not ever go back home*. Cather once wrote that happiness is *to be dissolved into something complete and great*. Another time, you might have read those words and thought of death. That evening, leaving town, you stopped to watch the irrigators draw their massive circles on the fields. A grouse alit. The wind rushed in. Some trees began to lean, their dark, misshapen crowns in correspondence with the clouds.

4.4

That fall, I'd rush out of her bed to catch
the seven o'clock train to the college

I taught composition at—
supporting claims, active voice, citation format.

The difference between *summary* and *analysis*
was a large part of the syllabus,

so much so you could say the line between
them was the joist on which the whole semester leaned.

I think I really liked the teaching,
with its emphasis on logic and *slow reading*:

another cornerstone of the curriculum
but also a constraint I'd always suffered from,

having no other choice. Before that, I had only
ever taught poetry

(which had no claim to usefulness, alas—
though it allowed me to give out more As),

and in my current role felt duty bound
to teach my students everything I wished I'd found

out about at their age: Evidence
must precede argument. Verbs are the heaviest

lifters. Change is constant and inexorable.
The Oxford comma isn't really optional.

You will fall in love. The relationship
will end, though not at the same instant

as the love. Some version of this will continue,
maybe forever, happening to you.

Restate your thesis in the final paragraph.

You can fuck up and still be fine—remember that.

Always include a bibliography.

Don't promise your life to anybody.

4.5

As a teen, I didn't like to show my poems
to other people—not the animal ones,
not the grief ones, not the ones about sex.
I was afraid of being known, I guess,
and even more afraid of being called
the kinds of names I was already called
for having sex as a young femme
person to begin with. Shame
was more befitting, I was constantly advised,
than was desire—which if it did arise
should really only yield more shame.
In adolescence, I had sex the same
way I did everything: with a rabid, abstract interest
in experience, and how the forces it encompassed
had evolved. The same way I'd drink Gatorade
and feed the family dog. Same way I'd masturbate
thinking about girls I used to race
in the 400-meter dash, my face
going the crimson of my singlet,
across which was blazoned PATRIOTS
in white. After college I stopped writing
about sex and then stopped writing
the word *I* and then stopped writing any word
at all. For a time, I thought I had matured,

and felt, if not exactly pride, at least the pretty,
riskless pleasure of conformity.

But this was never my nature.

For freedom, I have learned, I'd barter

virtue every time. For any fierce, untrammelled feeling,
now I know I'd give up almost anything.

4.6

Inevitably, whenever you tried to write as if you were someone else, you would arrive at an impasse—which begins, of course, with *I*. You would think then of the whole tender, gendered history of confession-as-vocation, of Virginia Woolf's demand that women write *all kinds of books, hesitating at no subject however trivial, even and especially those unrecorded gestures, those unsaid or half-said words, which form themselves ... when women are alone*. It was true in your experience that, unless you were a man assigned from birth to be so, you were seldom encouraged to think of your bare feelings as particularly literary. Even less so when the feelings in question were ordinary and interpersonal—the purview of *women in a drawing-room*—or carnal and obsessive, on the road to physical compulsion. You thought of Audre Lorde's category of *the erotic*, an idea that everyone loved to talk about in those days, which encompassed the wellsprings of sensual, nonrational, spiritual knowledge that run against the logical systems dictating civic life. Lorde wrote that women's subjugation had historically meant *a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives*, and further warned that the erotic, when it was expressed, was often mistaken for the pornographic and dismissed out of hand. Maybe this helped explain your own defensive impulse to circumvent the personal altogether. Still, every time you set out to objectify yourself completely, some small, inchoate voice would start to moan inside you, begging to be given subjectivity. The voice was as stubborn as a child, as terrified of abandonment. It didn't care about having a name. It didn't care about telling the truth. The voice just wanted its time. It came from underneath your conscious mind; usually you felt you merely served as its stenographer. *Interdependency between women is the way to a freedom which allows the I to be, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative*, said Lorde, elsewhere. So that was how you tried to hear the voice: as a plural, rising, elemental chorus,

not factual, not yours—but somehow actual, and ours.

4.7

Soon enough, the weather changed. An icy gel
recast the sun. The street accrued a veil
of snow we kicked and crunched while walking
north on Fifth. Somewhere, a hand was tocking
down the seconds till a bell would toll, a cell
would let a microbe in, the Dow would fall—
and one night, in another of our desperate fights,
I'd say, *You've ruined my entire life*
and there, suspended in the void between
our mouths, those words I didn't mean—
but often thought—would linger like a toxin
does before inhaled, admitted, turned infection.

4.8

The drive upstate was slower once the sleet began.

We wove through brown, depopulated towns in my sedan,

her mother in the passenger's seat, sleeping,

while she curled in the backseat, also sleeping,

and I blared a podcast about secular

Christmas rituals. It was December.

The sky was ominously dense. She'd booked an Airbnb

four miles down a dirt road from my family

so we could spend the holidays together.

There'd be wood fires and toddies in bad weather

and long hikes. There'd be potatoes au gratin,

poetry each night, and *Little Women*

in the village theater, followed by a quarrel

about presentism, men, and Meryl

Streep. There'd be my little house and yard

whose ragged border was the stream. It would be hard,

I knew, to square the transformations of that year

with the place where I'd grown up, which appears

always consolingly the same. The temperatures

were higher, and local polling places tenser,

than in my childhood—but the oaks and lilacs and vervains

were still themselves, and so the starkest change

would be in me, and whom I had brought home.

My mother made lasagna and a tarte aux pommes;

my father made his quota share of puns.

On New Year's Eve, some friends drove up from Brooklyn,
with whom we visited a famous cave and floated
down an aquifer in wooden boats
through dripping, pink-lit chambers like the inside
of a giant human heart, to celebrate our ride
around the sun. But afterward, sitting alone
and wishing she would put away her phone
and sing a hymn with us, and staring
at my coupled friends and parents,
who anyone could see were safe in love—I felt the slow
arrival of a harbinger fall over me like snow.

Something was wrong. Her being here was premature,
so that instead of festive I just felt exposed and poor
and, when the clock struck twelve, too numb with fear
even to turn to her. We wouldn't last the year.

4.9

OK, so nothing lasts. The proof of life is in the aching.
It was long and torturous, our breaking,

like our beginning, torturous and long,
gored by fights and scored to every song

from *Diamond Life*. I hope someday an archivist
will pull our texts out of the nuclear detritus

to display. *This is the sentimental stuff,*
they'll say, *of homo Homo sapiens in love.*

In one, I praise the wild face she made in sex.
In others, we share travel plans: Trieste,

Taipei, hiking hut to hut around Lake Como.
(Broke, we looked at maps instead in SoHo.)

Every conversation ends in arguing
on some familiar theme. Saying versus doing.

Money versus wealth and whose was whose.
What to do about the virus in the news,

if one day it spread to North America.
Her tongue, my groove, her ex, my grudge. Etc.

And at the root of all, the fundamental conflict
we could never see enough to interdict,

which had to do with lust and power and belief—
with who at any moment held the leash,

the upper hand. So when, just blocks from where
we'd jabbered about *Middlemarch* the year

before, in a living room in Bed-

Stuy with our playlist on, she finally said

I just can't give you what you need,

it might have been the first time we'd agreed.

4.10

You pushed the onions around in their hot skillet, asking yourself what it was you wanted. Winter air blew through the open window, drawing tendrils of steam over the range. The table beside you was covered in light, and you would sit there all afternoon, writing. The thought excited you almost the way the thought of sex excited you: not knowing what sensations would come out, what sounds. Your girlfriend used to read you that Louise Glück poem about *actual human growth* while you lay in bed together. And you would make her recite it until you knew some lines by heart: *it occurs to me that what is crucial is to believe in effort ...* You heard a sudden noise outside the window then—a sheaf of snow had slipped off the rooftop next door and landed in front of the building, making strange pale lumps of your yard. From where you stood, it was impossible to tell which lump had been the flowerpot, the table, the recycling bin.

4.11

Then I was the only person in my bed,
though other people's words ran through my head
and kept me company. One was Vivian Gornick,
who demanded: *Put romantic*

love at the center of a novel today,
and who could be persuaded

that in its pursuit the characters are
going to get to something large?

She argued that in modern life
we buy neither the plotline of the happy wife
nor the one where women *self-discover*,
so to speak, by dint of some new lover—

we're too atomized, our institutions too
clearly corrupt. Everything we do

we think we have to do ourselves. But she
was speaking about prose, and the theory

that characters should actualize,
rather than transform as many times

as time allows, as is the case in verse,
where there are barely any characters

at all. In poetry then, let me say that love
has been, above all things, the engine of

self-knowledge in my life—and even after everything
is still what makes the rest worth suffering.

4.12

Cold, ecstatic—walking through the breezeway
to the perfume shop where I was a habitué
that year, which sold fragrances with biomes as their names,
insisting that the body was a place
where events occurred, rather than a thing
to which they happened (to say nothing
of the *cause* of such events)—and buying one
that advertised itself as woodland—*bosky, sylvan*,
some tree-ish word—and name-dropped Judith Butler on the label,
misting my nape with it and feeling sexual
and unashamed, like a beautiful deciduous slut
of language ... Oh, I know how ridiculous what
it was I thought in that moment—*I am my own husband*—
but I couldn't stop, I felt that way: bonded
to myself by my authority alone.
No one beside me. No one on the phone.
And going home, writing what I'd seen and heard,
adding detail—deepening the hue—switching a word
to change or nix a sound, feeling my tongue exult
in flights by which experience might vault
beyond the mind, become an externality ...
Like cells, it's still miraculous to me.
Love found me twice, at once. If it never
happens again I'll still be luckier

than the moon. Breathing, typing these lines,
texting a friend, checking the time,
thinking it wouldn't always be like this,
but still, sometimes, it was. It is.

CODA

You could have had everything you wanted,
had it been what you wanted.

You're cutting through the park at sunset,
plane trees, wind, children on the swing set

making the exact sound of humanity.

Look how everything moves according to gravity
and reaches your perceiving organ
according to the qualities of light and oxygen ...

You bring the apple to your mouth and wish
for a little peanut butter to distinguish

it. So what. You like what you like.
A familiar-seeming man dismounts a bike

beneath a branch some birds palaver on
and which belongs, you realize now, to the very Camperdown

Marianne Moore described. Two elements
do not a pattern make. At great cost you got a sense

for what your life could be, and still had to admit
that after all, that wasn't really it,

though OK, it was on the continuum.

This city is absolutely overcome
with stories like these, which are the real source
of its creepy electricity, the force

of its seduction. That and the bagels.

You sally forth, practicing your Kegels,

passing a wedding at the boathouse on the *Lullwater*,
which is, deliciously, this quarter

of the lake's official name. And you
will lose again. And no matter what you do

you can't not want. Dip your foot in
if you like. Why not. No one is looking.

NOTES

The epigraph is from Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink."

The full quote from George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, abridged in 1.2, reads: *But anyone watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots, sees a slow preparation of effects from one life on another, which tells like a calculated irony on the indifference or the frozen stare with which we look at our unIntroduced neighbor. Destiny stands by sarcastic with our dramatis personae folded in her hand.*

The Jamaica Kincaid interview quoted in 1.8 was conducted by Belinda Luscombe for *Time*. The quote by Natalia Ginzburg in the same section is from the New York Review Books edition of *Family Lexicon*, translated from the Italian by Jenny McPhee.

The lines by Adrienne Rich in 2.3 are from poem XVII in *Twenty-One Love Poems*.

The song referred to in 2.9 is "Cadmium" by Pinegrove.

The quoted phrases by Rachel Hadas in 3.6 appear in the essay "Poems and Dreams," from her book *Merrill, Cavafy, Poems, and Dreams*.

The albums mentioned in 3.8 are by Will Smith (*Big Willie Style*), Wu-Tang Clan (*Enter the Wu-Tang*), and the Beach Boys (*Smiley Smile*), in addition to the one by Michelle Branch.

The book by Nathalie Léger quoted from in 3.12 is *Suite for Barbara Loden*, translated by Cécile Menon and Natasha Lehrer; the Loden film in question is *Wanda*. The quote by Rachel Cusk in the same section is from her novel *Kudos*.

The phrase *directed by desire*, used in 4.1, originates in June Jordan's poem "When I or Else."

In 4.3, the phrases *shaggy ridges* and *the future stirring* come from Willa Cather's novel *O Pioneers!*, as does the later definition of happiness. The phrase *long, sweeping lines of fertility* is taken from Cather's novel *My Ántonia*. The quoted descriptions of light originate in her novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, which is also the *book about the priest* referred to later on.

In 4.6, the quoted material by Virginia Woolf is from her book *A Room of One's Own*. The quotes by Audre Lorde are from her essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," except the one about *interdependency between women*, which is from her essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House."

Diamond Life, mentioned in 4.9, is an album by Sade.

The poem by Louise Glück referred to in 4.10 is "The Empty Glass."

The quote by Vivian Gornick in 4.11 comes from her essay "The End of the Novel of Love."

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A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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[Maggie Millner](#) was born and raised in rural upstate New York. She teaches writing at Yale and is a senior editor at *The Yale Review*. Her poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, and *Poetry*. This is her first book. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).

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CONTENTS

Title Page

Copyright Notice

Dedication

Epigraph

Proem

Book One

1.1

1.2

1.3

1.4

1.5

1.6

1.7

1.8

1.9

1.10

1.11

1.12

Book Two

2.1

2.2

2.3

2.4

2.5
2.6
2.7
2.8
2.9
2.10
2.11
2.12

Book Three

3.1
3.2
3.3
3.4
3.5
3.6
3.7
3.8
3.9
3.10
3.11
3.12

Book Four

4.1
4.2
4.3
4.4
4.5
4.6
4.7

4.8

4.9

4.10

4.11

4.12

Coda

Notes

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A Note About the Author

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