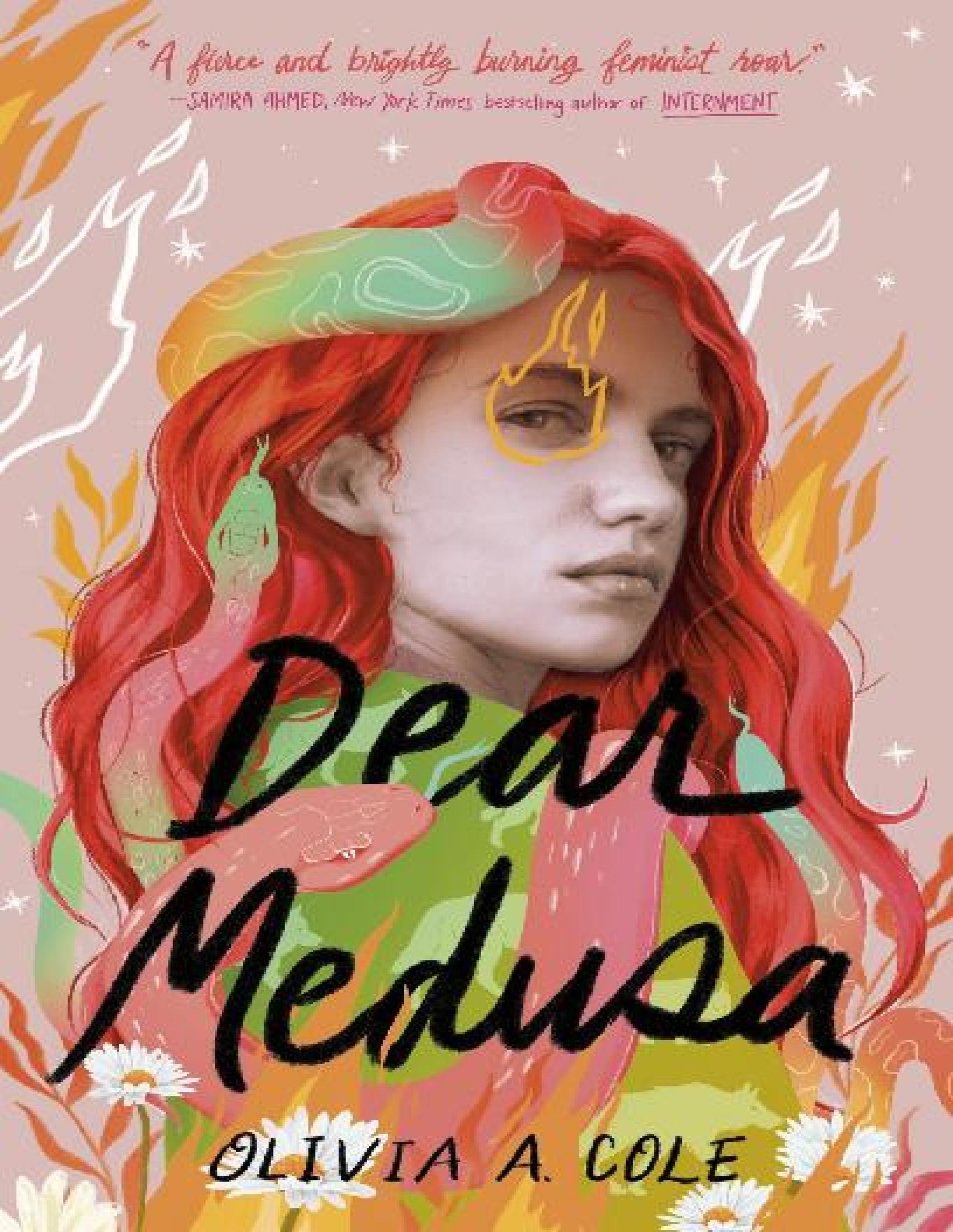


*"A fierce and brightly burning feminist roar."*

—SAMIRA AHMED, *New York Times* bestselling author of INTERMENT



# Dear Medusa

OLIVIA A. COLE

Praise for  
THE TRUTH ABOUT WHITE LIES

“A brave and searing deep dive into white supremacy from the side of the privileged.”

—NIC STONE, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Dear Martin*

“A brilliant, riveting page-turner. Cole has flawlessly crafted an addicting story about the depths and domino effect of white supremacy.”

—TIFFANY D. JACKSON, bestselling author of *Grown and White Smoke*

“A vicious, incendiary novel, told with clarity and precision.... Unforgettable.”

—MARK OSHIRO, award-winning author of *Anger Is a Gift*

“This is brilliant, brutal, and essential reading for all.”

—ASHLEY WOODFOLK, acclaimed author of *The Beauty That Remains*

“Brilliant, urgent, and profoundly honest—this is the kind of novel that knocks on the door of your heart and demands to know who you are.”

—BRENDAN KIELY, *New York Times* bestselling coauthor of *All American Boys* and *The Other Talk: Reckoning with Our White Privilege*

“This is absolutely necessary work.”

—KIESE LAYMON, award-winning author of *Heavy*



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OLIVIA A. COLE



 LABYRINTH ROAD | NEW YORK

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*For me.  
And for you.  
And for all of us.*



FRIDAY, AUGUST 31

*The worst part of working fast food is the name tag*

because there's always somebody's mom with coupons  
who thinks they are somehow being cheated by the teenager  
at the register, and their eyes always dart down  
to your chest to look for a way to be in charge.

"Listen," she says, and I see her eyes laser in,  
search out my name.

"*Alicia*. You overcharged me for my mozzarella sticks. Now,  
do I need to ask for the manager or are you going to make it right?"

*Make it right*. Ever since last year, everything  
sounds like justice or  
its burning absence.

She thinks she's been done grievous wrong  
by the two dollars extra on her waxy receipt  
and my mouth is supposed to be apologizing  
but my mind is on everything else:

- the whole school/world calling me a whore
- Sarah cutting me out of her life like a tumor
- my parents, the wood chipper of their life between them

In the end I just say, "Ma'am, I'll do my best.  
I'll do my very best."

We both know  
she'll still call the manager over,  
will still make the world a witness  
to all the things she thinks she deserves  
even with my smile so bright  
it shatters.

*It's my last weekday shift before school*

and it's just girls on the clock, no creepy manager,  
no too-old guys pretending they're still in high school  
and eyeing you over curly fries.

Slow day. No construction workers,  
no cops expecting free food,  
no guys in suits who refuse coupons  
because they want you to know  
they're rich:

just teenage girls who don't go  
to the same school,

carrying different gossip  
not about each other  
and thus unimportant.

Stephanie is the shift manager  
and she's only twenty-one so  
when there's no customers  
she lets us turn up the lobby music  
and all of us sing along.

*The final day of August is like a guillotine*

separating September from the rest of the summer  
in one clean slice, the red sun bleeding out  
over my feet as I circle the school  
in my Meat Palace uniform  
one more time before I start junior year.

It's empty. No one but me  
would ever come to school while the freedom  
summer drops like gold confetti  
still sparkles on our shoulders.

But I like it like this, the quiet, the way  
the beige bricks drink up the sunset,  
taking on a color that reminds me  
of a desert. Dry, baked,  
vicious.

I've never been anywhere but here.

My feet take me to the track, like they miss it.  
Maybe they do. Maybe they remember  
how it felt to transform  
from girl to mustang  
with grateful lungs heaving.

Freshman year  
I could fly.

Then sophomore year happened.

I look back at the pink bricks,  
settling into a deeper shade  
now that the sun is sinking.

I'm sinking too, down onto the bleachers,

the metal warm against my thighs.

This school is empty of people

and full of memories

and I don't want

any of them.

*My mother offers to iron my school uniform and even  
though I want her to, I say no,*

because sometimes  
in this place  
where I am

it feels good to refuse  
help, because saying yes  
to even something like an iron

feels like saying yes  
to everything else

when my whole life  
has become a pipe bomb  
full of pieces  
that explode in a furious  
*no.*

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 4

*The school bus stops on my block but I don't get on.*

I've been taking the city bus all summer  
and I like the way it makes me feel  
like I'm living in a different world  
than the people who are supposed to be  
my peers. What's the difference?

At least on the city bus  
I can pull the string,  
and it makes me feel  
like I'm in control.

I can get off whenever I want  
wherever I want  
even if my destination  
is predetermined.

On the city bus I can still wonder  
what the people there think about me,  
whereas at school  
once I walk through the door  
I already know what they're all thinking,  
what they're all going  
to say  
about all the versions of me they think they know,  
laid alongside  
all the girls I was before  
in stark contrast.

## Flashbacks

They are like ripples on a pond and they begin  
in my earliest memories of myself:

Playing in the fountains at Elwain Park  
with no shirt on, five-year-old bird  
chest

Eight and pointing at bras in Target, my brother  
wearing them like hats while my mother  
shopped and I laughed

Sarah getting her first bikini, me ten  
and silent and feeling a brand-new envy  
grow in like ivy

Me eleven

Me twelve

Me thirteen

Me fourteen

Curious and curious

Me warming up

Me sneaking to buy my first thong

Me excited for someone

anyone

to notice

Me kissing Michael Strong

the day I got my braces off

just to feel what someone's tongue felt like

sliding across new teeth

Me hearing about what good girls

do and think and say

and always feeling like a neon opposite  
even if only in shadow.

Me thinking I had secrets until last year  
when I learned what it meant—  
    what it really meant—  
to hide.

*There's always a white kid who says "Why do the Black kids sit together in the cafeteria? They segregate themselves."*

And I'm a white girl too so what do I know  
but I think the answer is so obvious in a school as white  
as this one  
where Halloween parties still feature blackface and redface  
where the student council only barely voted  
(5–6)  
to maintain a special events calendar for Black History Month  
and the cheerleading squad is all white but shouts *yas queen, werk!* between  
routines.

Dawn of Day 1  
and we're all in the cafeteria waiting to be dismissed,  
the swell of the student body heaving as if on a ship at rough sea,  
all of us deciding where we fit, where to squeeze in, if anyone we hate or  
love  
has rendered certain sections unsittable.

The girl who says it this year is skinny and blond,  
a sophomore, and her whole table murmurs and laughs,  
casts glances at the three tables where the couple dozen Black students,  
the half-dozen kids from Mexico and El Salvador,  
all take refuge in each other's presence.

Why wouldn't they

when to sit anywhere else in this sea of narrowed eyes and fake laughs  
would be like throwing yourself overboard?

I'd never say that I consider my pain equal  
but I can say I know

how it feels to step onto a ship  
and be confident that everyone on board  
is watching you, thinking that you're not a sailor  
but a creature from the deep.

*The only text messages I get are from coworkers.*

**Mariah:** can you take my shift tomorrow

**Alicia:** what time

**Mariah:** 3:30

**Mariah:** ...?

**Alicia:** I'm in school, sorry. Yes I'll take it.

**Mariah:** I thought you were dropping out

**Alicia:** I wish

*And from random dudes.*

**Him:** Thinking about you

**Alicia:** I know what that means

**Him:** yeah;)

**Him:** free tonight?

**Alicia:** tomorrow

*Day 1 was a success*

in the way that surviving a haunted house  
is a success:

I walked through the halls and saw  
lots of ghosts

but never  
the Devil  
himself.

*The garage is full of smoke*

and someone who doesn't live in this gray house might think something is on fire.

If they looked closer they would know nothing is, the smoke they see only the last remains of what has finally ceased to burn. What's left of my family is a cold smolder. Divorce is only white-hot for so long. If you've ever watched a fire you know it eventually gives way to a gray zero, smoke coming from nothing, piles of ash.

The smoke is my mother sitting in a lawn chair cigarette in hand, coffee can next to her for the ashes. She talks to her mother or her sister sometimes a friend from college and from where I stand in the kitchen I can hear the low blur of her voice, the clink of the can when she taps, the slide of a beer across the concrete. It's only the two of us.

My brother and my father have become heavy apparitions. They exist but on a different plane. My mother is here with me but she's also somewhere else—on nights like tonight the garage is a distant universe I would need time travel to cross. Sometimes I stand at the door and try to listen while my leftovers spin in the microwave.

Occasionally she laughs, but mostly she cries.

*My parents met when my father was still mid-divorce*

with his first wife, one child already somewhere  
in Montana.

He was 31 and my mother 20  
and she was dancing at a college party  
when he saw her,  
her hair the same black as fresh asphalt  
but softer, and swinging,  
and he never danced  
but that night he danced for her  
the way birds in the wild  
spread feathers and perform.

But like geese  
and not doves,  
my father takes many mates  
and even when my mother still waxes  
romantic about love at first sight  
(even now)  
and the way the music slowed  
when their eyes met,  
sometimes I wonder  
(since the divorce)  
what he was doing at that party  
in the first place.

## *Portrait of a day*

Dawn and toast.

Bus and its flickering yellow light.

School and its silent rivers of judgment.

Boys and their fingers in my belt loops  
even when we don't know each other.

No Sarah. No nobody except  
a girl in physics who talks to me,  
but she talks to everybody.

Weeks 1 and 2 down and I skipped art  
both weeks to avoid the hallway  
where "it" happened.

Lots of ghosts, but no Devil.

Bus. Meat Palace.

Repeat.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 13

*Sometimes people put notes in my locker's grille*

Sometimes one word, sometimes several,  
never more than a sentence.

One at the end of last year said  
*sex isn't a hobby*  
and I had so many questions, the first  
of which was  
*is putting weird notes in people's locker a hobby?*

But that's the voice in my head  
that says I'm too mature  
to let these things bother me.

That voice is a little  
overconfident.

Still, I had to laugh  
when I looked up *hobby*  
in the dictionary app  
on my phone:

hobby: (n) an activity done regularly in one's leisure time for pleasure.

*The note-leavers didn't waste any time this school year*

so when I see the paper poking out from down  
the hall, my stomach sinks, even as the mature  
voice in my head says something tough  
like *let's see if their handwriting has improved.*

It has.  
Neat blue pen.  
Circles dot i's.

But this one doesn't feel  
like the others.

It says:

*What's done in the dark will be revealed in the light*

and if I didn't know Sarah  
was twelve miles away at her new  
school, I'd think it was her  
issuing one last barb—it sounds  
just Bible-thumpy enough.

There are more words on the back  
but I don't read them.

I may be a lot of things  
but a masochist  
isn't one of them.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 14

*I have two shirts for work and only ever wear one.*

Terry is the new manager of the restaurant—transferred in when Joey got caught setting up a fake robbery, emptying the safe into the backseat of his car.

No bag or anything. Shit for brains.

But I would rather have Joey than Terry, who is older and goes to church and wears a tie every day like he doesn't know this is a Meat Palace in a nondescript part of town.

He lurks in drive-thru while I'm working, tells me to take my nose ring out. He pretends he has to stand very close to me to see if I'm wearing it or not. He thinks because I am sixteen that I don't know every trick in the book.

Maybe I don't. But I do know there is a book

and that Terry pulls pages from it when he leans close to see my nose ring slips close behind me when he's restocking napkins stands close when the cashier steps out to take her break

Close close close

Never quite touching.  
I know it will come—it always does  
when men like Terry take your silence  
for consent  
or better yet  
total

ignorance.

They know if you can claim not to know  
that they can too,  
like a hand down a teenager's bra  
is just a mistake  
a slip in a puddle  
an agree to disagree.

I can hear my (ex) best friend's voice now, Sarah:  
"If you hate it so much then quit."  
"If it really bothers you then why haven't you said anything"

At the time (before she cut me off)  
I didn't have the words that I have now.  
I didn't know how to say

"This world is full of wolves. I've already  
met worse wolves than Terry.  
Terry is just a dog. Running from a dog

At this point,  
at this juncture  
in my career with wolves,

feels like admitting I'm a rabbit  
when every day I feel more like a bull.  
Sometimes wolves hunt bulls  
and they win. But sometimes  
they get the horns."

*The first wolf I remember was bagging my mother's groceries.*

I was fourteen and we'd just come from the pool.

(That doesn't mean I was wearing a bathing suit.

That doesn't mean I was wearing shorts.

People always wonder what I was wearing.

Why

when it comes to girls and wolves

do we let our brains look for reasons

why she deserved to be prey

before we notice his fangs?)

His name was Adam. He was twenty-one—

I learned this later.

At the time he was scanning my mother's

broccoli and bread

and when her eyes lowered to her purse

his rose to me.

Sometimes I remember the way the blush

felt crossing my cheeks and wonder

if I was to blame after all. After all

I was pleased to be noticed.

An older boy,

a man,

someone with perspective.

Not many people really noticed me at school

(before "it").

But Adam did.

I thought he saw something my peers

didn't see. I thought maybe in that moment

under the fluorescent lights  
I had transformed into something worthy.

My father came back then from buying  
a lottery ticket and if he saw Adam's eyes  
he pretended not to.

My father never liked conflict.  
He avoided it like chewed gum  
on the sidewalk.

Maybe if he were different  
everything else would be too.

*You are the ghost in the ghost town when people pretend  
you are dead.*

When I started sleeping with guys, my friendship with Sarah became an  
hourglass.

The first therapist my mother sent me to had one:  
it gave me anxiety.

Watching the grains slipping through a hole I couldn't quite glimpse,  
knowing that their transfer meant an end...  
even though I looked forward to the end of every session,  
I couldn't take my eyes from that hourglass.

Watching Sarah slip away was like that.  
By the end, after hickeys  
condom wrappers  
pictures in my phone,  
I could see the sand of her, sliding  
down and away,  
her calls and texts like the last few grains  
slowing, slowing, gone.  
Time's up.

She didn't know about the Colonel.  
He was her favorite. He nominated  
her for the national science fair.  
He held her hand aloft when she won,  
sharing the shining gold trophy,  
the two of them posing for the photo  
that would end up in the article online.

She didn't know. I didn't hold it against her.  
She blinked at my questions when I asked  
*Is he ever weird*  
*Does he give you a vibe?*

Then, more directly, one night when  
we were on her couch watching Netflix,  
half-asleep:

*Does he seem like a wolf to you*

“No, Alicia. No. What the fuck Alicia”

After that I became strange to her, my skin  
going translucent except for the part  
on my neck where I let John Poggrund  
suck a strawberry to the surface.

She saw that. Eventually, only that.  
The girl she'd known since second grade  
disappeared and Sarah didn't bother to look  
for where she'd gone.

Sand and sand.

Time's up.

Time was always running out.

## *Sarah's speech*

She begged me to come to church with her one week  
even though I never really did church. I would spend  
the night and go home in the morning while she put on  
Easter-colored dresses and pantyhose.

*It's okay, you can wear one of mine*  
when I begged off because of jeans  
and maybe I should have smelled a trap,  
but I put on the dress, I put on the shiny shoes

and I sat in youth group with Sarah on the day  
everyone gave their prepared speeches  
on topics of their choosing.

I don't remember everything Sarah said that day—  
a three-minute speech is a lot to remember.  
But I remember the last part very well  
and even though she never looked in my direction  
while she spoke, every word was aimed  
at my skin, and lives there,  
every vicious syllable:

*I wear a purity ring so  
my mind remains innocent  
my body remains untouched  
my soul remains blameless  
and when girls give in to flesh  
they are none of those things  
will never be those things  
again.*

*It's not a story I tell.*

Some people like talking about their firsts  
but I don't. I'll say it here,  
so that I say it somewhere.

It was Adam in a park after he'd persuaded  
me to let him drive me home.

I had walked to Kroger to buy licorice  
for the movies on Saturday.

I was crossing the parking lot when he pulled up,  
still in uniform. Name tag still on.

I don't know what kind of car it was.  
It was the kind that takes detours.

He said he wanted me to see his favorite  
part of the park near my house.  
I'd been there before. I'd been going  
there since I was a little kid,  
in the bleachers with Sarah, watching  
her big brothers play T-ball.

He walked me through the woods  
and he carried a blanket  
and if I'm being honest I knew exactly  
what he wanted and I never  
told Sarah any of this because I knew  
what she would say, even if she didn't say it out loud:

“You knew what he wanted to do  
so why did you go?  
You just walked beside him, like  
a sheep to slaughter.”

How do I say, I knew but wanted  
to be wrong.

How do I say, I knew  
and knew it was somehow  
inevitable.

How do I say, a sheep  
doesn't really know about  
slaughter until their ears  
are full of screaming.

But I didn't even scream.

It seemed ridiculous.

I was afraid someone on the T-ball field  
would think I was dying, even  
if a part of me  
was.

*My mother thinks I've dyed my hair red for attention—*

How can I explain to her the ways that she is

right  
and  
wrong.

As of last night,  
my hair is the color of a brick  
the moment before it goes through  
a stained-glass  
window.

My hair is the color of a fire engine  
driving through a burning building.

My hair is the color of a dart frog:  
generations of death adapting  
into this exact shade of poison.

It's called aposematism—  
we learned about it in bio.  
It's when an animal advertises  
to predators that it is not worth  
the attempt to consume.

Bright red and orange,  
the colors of pain,  
I WILL MAKE YOU SICK  
I WILL KILL YOU FROM INSIDE YOUR THROAT

ATTENTION!  
I MAY LOOK LIKE PREY  
BUT I WILL END  
YOUR

## LIFE

My mother says I want attention  
and maybe she's right  
My mother says I am just making a statement  
and maybe she's right

But in my mind it's not saying  
*please*—  
it's saying  
*don't*

and this is how I know men  
are not really wolves  
because maybe  
a wolf  
would listen.

## *Another thought about Girls-Who-Do-Things-for-Attention*

It's people's favorite way of dismissing girls  
like me  
or girls like  
anybody:

“She's just doing it for attention”

Whether they're talking about  
depression  
or tattoos  
or loud laughs  
or sex  
or rage

If a girl is doing any  
of these things  
she is “doing it for attention”

and I have  
to ask

since when is that bad

and since when did people forget  
that humans are like  
flowers—  
that we need  
water and light  
to grow?

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 24

*My life is leaving me behind and so is the bus.*

We're already getting grades back and I give enough fucks to fill a thimble.  
My fucks are the empty bulb of the hourglass:  
I have none left, they have trickled down  
like sand.

Still, when Ms. Gladstone asks for me to wait after last period, her eyes are  
honey brown  
and the light in them shines sad,  
and I think my mother might look like this  
if she ever actually looked at my report cards anymore.

When someone who hates you tells you  
you're falling behind  
it has a way of turning your whole heart into a shield  
to deflect the bullets of their words.  
When someone who loves you tells you  
you're falling behind,  
the shield  
your whole life  
turns to paper.

Ms. Gladstone talks to me  
like she loves me, but when she asks  
*Is something going on*  
I still can't tell her because behind her  
on the shelf is a picture of her  
and the Colonel, hands linked—  
Field Day, school colors painted on their faces,  
smiles on their mouths. I tell her *nothing*  
and that I have to catch the bus before

it leaves me behind too.

I sprint down the halls—  
the bell has rung and no one can tell me  
to stop, so I go and go, and if a child in me  
survives, she imagines she is a horse in the Derby  
and the other Thoroughbreds aren't even close.

Even so, the city bus leaves me, and to keep  
running would be stupid, so eventually I stop,  
my Meat Palace uniform dangling out of my backpack  
like it too wishes it could escape  
this day,  
this life.

Coach Tinsley is walking toward the field  
with the track team—he's new  
this year—and he waves his clipboard,  
shouts  
“Come warm up. You'd smoke the girls at the Mason-Dixon” and I whisper  
*Fuck you*  
under my breath, under my breathless,  
but for once I'm glad the intended ear can't hear  
because the smile in his eyes is real  
even if his offer isn't.

*People who know you now vs. people who knew you then*

Coach Tinsley is new this year and doesn't know  
that I used to fly.

Coach Young retired and I'm glad,  
otherwise she'd be at my locker asking me why the hell  
I'm not running track this year. I don't think I could tell her.

I don't think I could tell her about the pair of shorts  
crumpled in the bottom of my locker  
like a corpse.

Tinsley seems nice enough but he doesn't know  
that the girl he sees catching the bus  
has two bloody stumps under her shirt  
where wings used to be  
and when he makes jokes about running

the stumps tingle, phantom limbs.

He doesn't know that he's talking to a ghost  
that when he jokes about running  
he's rubbing salt into a wound  
he can't see.

Sometimes I pass people I used to run with—  
we were never quite friends: the seniors I called close  
all graduated—but I know they recognize me:

Jacob Wheeler

Tierra Pryor

Tabitha Renfro, eyes like diamonds  
sharp and hard.

In her mind

who I am now

doesn't quite square

with the girl she ran 4x4 with,  
but to look closer  
would mean  
just that: coming close,  
and she's afraid  
what I am  
is infectious.

## *Thoughts before bed about the Devil.*

I've never read the Bible: after Sarah became a holy roller she was always trying to make me, but after her speech, how could I?

Maybe I should read it, just to put things in perspective.

Sometimes when I'm trying to talk myself out of all the things that hurt me I say to myself "It's not even that big a deal."

A teacher at your school is an old pervert.  
So what if he \_\_\_\_\_  
and \_\_\_\_\_  
and \_\_\_\_\_.

Worse things happen:

the globe is heating  
California is on fire  
and people get murdered  
and children go missing.

But if I agree with Sarah on anything it's that the Devil might be all around us, that maybe Evil has big projects, like a history paper due at the end of the semester, but It also has little things It does throughout the day:

homework and busywork  
and sewing projects, and maybe

the Colonel  
is just a side hobby.

*PS Devil*

Because of her speech I know what Sarah's Bible says about lust  
but even without the Book, I've learned that there are parts of me born in  
shadow.

Even when I'm not meaning to, I think of what Sarah said that day  
under stained glass: *blameless*. And the equation seems so clear—

that if you welcome touch, you must also welcome blame,  
and sometimes I can't make it make sense, but in my saddest moments all  
the pieces click:

that curious part of me born in shadow, that part that felt warm in fifth  
grade  
when Samantha Westward's head dropped onto my shoulder while she slept  
on the bus;

the part of me that felt slick and shiny when Johnny Trejo  
put me on his shoulders in the pool and spun me around until I screamed in  
the sun.

The existence of these parts meant I welcomed touch and therefore must  
accept blame.

By opening the door just that crack, just that inch, for Samantha, for  
Johnny, for the girl  
I kissed at camp—  
it was enough for Adam to squeeze in too.

But it doesn't matter anymore. Everything shiny and warm has burned off  
and I think I know  
what the Bible says about lust and flesh, but what if there's no lust anymore  
—

just flesh,  
methodical flesh?

What level  
of hell  
does that  
doom me  
to  
and will it be  
longer  
than how  
it feels  
right now?

## *PPS Flesh*

Over the summer I climbed into the backseat  
of Ray Rangeland's Toyota  
after he parked it by the river

and he seemed surprised when I took off my bra  
but not more surprised than I was when he asked me  
*What's the rush?*

We sat there so long that dew settled  
on the grass  
and on the hood of his car  
everything sparkling.

He asked me when I feel the most free  
and maybe it was because we'd been quiet so long  
but I said  
*When I'm running.*

We talked about the smell of grass  
and Paramore  
and how neither of our mothers could cook

and when he finally kissed my neck  
I felt the dew on my own skin  
all over. Behind my eyes.

After that he texted me for about a month  
before he gave up.

That night by the river was the first  
time since "it" happened  
that I'd felt present in my body  
for more than three minutes

and Ray might've understood

how running feels like freedom

but I don't think he could comprehend  
how the flesh I wear is feral—

that giving it kindness sends it farther  
into the trees, eyes glowing

that it no longer understands softness  
when everything it touches turns to stone.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 26

*I am quiet.*

My grandmother always said a watched pot  
never boils,  
but I am under too many eyes and still  
constantly boiling  
over.

The first time was Monday  
with Mrs. Fisher.

Jack Driscoll  
was sitting behind me, leaned close enough  
for me to feel his breath on my neck.  
He whispered something I couldn't hear but  
I didn't need the words themselves to know the shape.

"Shut up," I whispered,  
and then there were Mrs. Fisher's eyes,  
magnified by her glasses,  
magnified by disdain.  
She was always telling me to put a sweater on.

On Monday I was already wearing a sweater  
but I existed and my mouth was open  
and the rifle of her gaze was  
aimed at my chest.

"Be quiet" she said  
And I said  
"I am"  
And she said it again  
"Be quiet"  
Like even my protest was an insult

And I said it again

“I am”

And she said “then why can I hear you”

And I said “maybe because you’re listening  
for me, you fucking bitch”

And beside me Chloe Wallis gasped

but that was the only sound until  
the crackle of the walkie-talkie—

Mrs. Fisher calling security

“Escort Alicia to ISAP.”

*Rage is a chicken-or-the-egg scenario*

I never used to feel this way:  
the way rage pushes inside my body,  
a red hand forcing  
its way through my ribs and into  
my chest, expanding like a sun.

I never used to get mad  
about anything.

Maybe I didn't have anything real  
to be mad about.

I don't know how to tend this garden  
full of wild red things.

Before, I would have gone running. Now,  
the things I do to stay calm are things  
a stranger would do:

ride the bus  
play card games on my phone: poker, spades, Razz  
memorize street maps  
play music so loud it makes my head hurt  
and never songs I like.

Anything to escape my brain, body.  
Anything to be somewhere  
someone  
else.

*On the way to ISAP I pass memories:*

The locker that used to be Sarah's,  
where we were both standing when Jamie Waller  
asked her to homecoming.

The stairwell where she snuck  
a cigarette while I kept watch.

The doors to the auditorium  
where she sang a Taylor Swift song  
freshman year, before she gave it  
all away for choir.

The cafeteria doors, where she pointed  
at Blake Felipe and the other golden girls  
and said "Those should be our people."

I pause at the locker long enough  
to remember the Eleanor Roosevelt  
quote Sarah pinned  
on the inside:

*Many people will walk in and out  
of your life, but only true friends  
will leave footprints in your heart*

and I can't help but laugh  
because footprints make it sound  
like a crime scene,  
and my whole life feels like it's wrapped  
in that yellow tape.

While I walk the rest of the way to ISAP  
I wonder if the quote is still in Sarah's locker  
at her holy new school, if she ever looks

at her words and thinks about me.

But of course not  
because a ghost doesn't  
leave footprints.

*In-school suspension is a paradise.*

Mrs. Fisher sent me for the first time:  
the perimeter of desks facing  
the chipped beige walls.  
No windows. One door.  
Mr. West's desk at the head of the room  
like a warden's roost.

I took my seat there among other people who  
couldn't keep their mouth shut  
couldn't keep their fists to themselves  
couldn't keep from becoming  
the shape of a thing that didn't fit  
into a classroom made for compliance.

It wasn't so bad. Mr. West played  
old music all day, half asleep,  
enforcing nothing but near silence.  
I sometimes snuck out my phone  
to google the names of the singers:  
Percy Sledge,  
Tammi Terrell.

After my fourth visit to ISAP  
I had learned some of the songs  
by heart and that's when I met  
Deja, both of us humming  
"When a Man Loves a Woman."  
Ms. McAllister sent Deja to ISAP  
for wearing a weave that violated  
the school handbook: a pink streak  
at the front of her head.

*Students must wear natural hair colors,  
Deja mocked. I guess they don't notice  
you.*

*I would argue that red is natural, I whispered.*

She looked at my head, the color of poison.

*For a fire engine, she whispered back, and we laughed  
quiet enough so that Mr. West  
stayed asleep. It was supposed to be  
punishment  
but it felt like swimming away from a shipwreck  
and finding shore.*

No eyes, no questions,  
and above all  
no Colonel.

*I call him the Colonel because*

everyone does.

When I entered Marshall as a freshman, blinking  
like a cub leaving the cave,  
I didn't know about the Halloween tradition:  
all the teachers dressing up as  
whatever their class voted they should be.

Ten years ago  
maybe more  
a student said he looked like  
Colonel Sanders:  
white hair  
white mustache,  
eyes twinkling under spectacles.

His hair has been white for a long time  
I guess.

Every year the student body votes the same:  
it's tradition now.

They line up and cast their ballots two weeks  
before Halloween, everyone writing  
THE COLONEL  
in all their laughing penmanship.

I did too.  
Until this year.  
This year when I'm given my ballot  
I write  
WOLF  
and drop it into the basket.

I know it will never be counted.  
It will be pondered, dismissed.  
He will never see it.

It's not the kind of action that matters  
but I don't know what kind does.

*My mother is missing jewelry and blames me.*

We both know I'm a scapegoat. I entertain  
her careful questions, the usual charade.

She asks me so she can feel that she has asked  
someone.

My brother's door is closed. He's home  
and not home.

He goes to another school, one with ROTC and a STEM program.

He liked ROTC until they made him cut his hair.

He liked STEM until he had to think.

He has new friends with long hair.

He has new friends who don't think.

Sometimes they come hang out in the basement  
and my dad isn't here, and my mom is an adult  
so she has to pretend that she's not  
afraid of teenage boys

But they all smell like metal and never say hello and my brother never  
makes them  
and things keep going missing.

One of them, Justin, is narrow and pale,  
always smells like weed and cats.

He's the first person I've ever heard say  
the N-word, dropped casually while  
they play pool on the table my mother  
no longer touches.

I look at my brother, alarmed,  
and somewhere inside him is the way  
we were raised, locked in a trunk,

and the trunk jumps at the sound of that casual N, like a corpse trying to rise.

Justin sinks another stripe and my brother's smile is a sailboat with a hole in its hull, limping carefully past the floating corpse. I'm afraid of Justin staying in our house but I think my brother is more afraid of him leaving.

*Text from a random at 9pm*

**Him:** what are you doing

**Alicia:** nothing

**Him:** what would you rather be doing

**Alicia:** anything

**Him:** pick you up in 20?

**Alicia:** k

*Sex is and isn't like the movies.*

I have learned that there are different versions of sex.

There's the kind where you kiss and there's the kind where you don't.

There's the kind where you take off your socks and there's the kind where you don't.

There's the kind you can tell people about and there's the kind you can't.

Whenever I have sex it's the *don't* kind.  
It's the *can't* kind.

I'm not sure when the transition happened.  
It must have happened, the crossing of a line:  
it must have been a fine one,  
and maybe it's dotted in places, where girls  
can weave into one lane  
and then over into the other,  
depending  
on who  
and when  
they fuck  
or who  
or what  
they are.

In the movies there are two kinds of women:

Ones who have sex and people still look them in the eye,  
and ones who have sex and people look through them.

In the movies when women have sex they are often screaming.  
I'd seen enough porn by the time  
I was fourteen to know  
that this is a script  
we're all supposed to follow.

Over the summer I had sex with  
Louis Knopp and he said I was  
too quiet. He seemed  
like the kind of guy who watches  
a lot of porn. He was looking  
right through me.

In the movies the camera can't go  
inside the woman's head.  
You never know if inside they are screaming  
for a different reason.

*tbh I don't really count Adam. I only count Renée.*

We went to summer camp together when I was twelve.

We shared a cabin with five other girls, and when moonlight  
would tiptoe through the cracks in the roof

Renée would tiptoe to my bed and crouch  
there for hours, her face inches from mine, whispering

jokes into my hair, my laughter hidden by the green sheets  
I'd brought from home. On the night before our parents

came to rescue us all from mosquito bites and sunburn  
she crouched under our last moon together and kissed me.

I still remember the way she smelled like ferns  
and something I couldn't place, something that smelled like  
home.

*Sometimes I see a person and our whole lives unfold in my brain:*

First date  
First movie  
First dessert  
First kiss  
First fight  
First jealousy

Sometimes I see a stranger and imagine what it would be like to hold their heart alongside my own, protecting it as my own. Sometimes I lock eyes with a stranger, not when I'm playing the Game but accidentally across a crowded store or sometimes on the bus

and I wonder if for a moment in their head we're married.

My whole head is hypothetical:  
what if [this] happened  
what if [that] hadn't

Sometimes I'm waiting for my mom in the car outside the bank and across the parking lot glimpse my soul mate.

Sometimes it's a boy.  
But almost always it's a girl.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 30

*My brother pretends he doesn't care.*

On the rare evening we are in the same room at the same time  
no one but us

I try to talk to him while he nukes pizza rolls.

*How's school, David?*

*Any teachers you like*

*Any girls*

*Any boys, I might whisper.*

I feel like a third parent  
or a distant aunt  
asking stale questions  
to elicit any response  
besides the stiff shrug.

He has eyes only  
for pizza rolls.

Watching him in the kitchen  
under the dim glare of three  
bulbs, the rest burnt out and unreplaced,  
I stare at his acne  
the beginnings of a beard  
the hollows under his eyes.

He's always been skinny but now  
he looks like an opened envelope:  
sharp corners and something removed  
from inside, something important maybe—  
not a bill but a certificate, a notice  
that something critical has taken place

and I didn't get to it before  
it headed for the shredder.

*Sarah: Part 1 of (?)*

Thinking about how if none of this had happened  
we might still be friends.

Thinking about how if none of this had happened  
I'd be on the school bus next to her.

Instead of here on the 22, unable to fall asleep  
in case I miss the stop.

Thinking about how if none of this had happened  
I could text her and tell her about David

About my parents

About the Colonel

About the Colonel

About the Colonel

But that's impossible because the Colonel  
is where this all started. (Kind of.)

Thinking about how if none of this had happened,  
none of this would have happened.

*Sarah: Part 2 of (?)*

Left on read for five months.  
Sarah hasn't spoken to me, or even  
answered a text, since May,  
leaving the wound  
of our friendship to fester  
all summer.

Sometimes when I am walking home from  
a boy's house or even  
when a boy is unzipping my pants  
I hear Sarah's voice close  
in my ear like she is also in bed  
on the couch  
in the backseat  
with me:

"You don't even like him.  
If you don't like it why  
do it?"

And even in my head I don't  
have an answer other than  
"At least I'm in control."

I know if I said it out loud  
invisible Sarah's voice would say  
"Control? Just play Xbox."  
We used to play Halo  
but like my mother's jewelry  
the Xbox is one more  
disappeared something,  
like my dad, like my brother,  
like my smile.

*Sarah: Part 3 of 3*

I've known Sarah since second grade and never told her  
I like girls.

In fourth grade, I knew a girl named Frankie  
who was always climbing trees  
and she was the first Valentine I ever  
cut out paper for instead of just using  
the ones with cartoons you buy from Target.

I didn't write my name—even then I knew  
that there were parts of me  
that the light shouldn't  
touch.

*Celebrities announce they're gay*

And it's hard even when you have millions of dollars  
to insulate you from the weight of people's stares.

I don't even know if I'm calling myself gay.

I don't know anything

except

there is a list of things people

call me,

and so far

*dyke* isn't one.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 2

*Everything we're learning is supposed to matter*

But with every class I sit through  
trying to stare at the board and not  
the inside of my head

it feels like a map to a land that doesn't exist.

Mrs. Fisher tries to make us see the shape of numbers  
and the way formulas are like the world  
but my world looks so different than the sterile  
textbook examples.

Mr. Hudson lectures about history but ends up  
talking about his divorce most days  
tells us to go to law school so we don't get  
screwed in the proceedings.

Mr. Mattson teaches physics and out of everything  
this feels the most like something I can focus on  
until he gets into gravity and I become hyper-  
aware of the earth sucking me down  
into the ground.

Only Ms. Gladstone's class feels like a refuge  
because at least the worlds in the books she assigns  
feel like me:

real and not.

People in pain  
and telling  
their story.

*There's a new girl who flouts the uniform*

in subtle ways. Bicycle shorts under her skirt,  
black school tie instead of navy blue.

She has a nose ring

in her right nostril the size  
of a pin's head. It's all the same  
every day, like a uniform  
she chose for herself.

She moves through the halls  
like she's under water, slow  
and graceful. When she passes

in the hallway, I almost  
get caught in the  
undertow.

*Working drive-thru isn't all bad*

especially when you're sharing the shift with someone who hates people as much as you do.

Mariah taught me the word *misanthrope* and while I have acquired my hate of people Mariah says she was born this way. She has a unique reason to hate every customer:

*Her voice sounds like a car muffler.*

*He looks like he beats his kids.*

*He started his order with "gimme a..."*

People with manners are occasionally spared, but she still hates them.

It has begun to rub off on me, and we have contests for who can predict how ugly the customer will be based on the sound of their hungry voices through the speaker.

Cruelty feels like aloe on a sunburn.

After my fifth point in this game, predicting acne and an overbite, I hear my grandmother's voice in my head: *Keep making that face and it will stick like that.*

I wonder if cruelty is the same, a habit like any other, a muscle flexed too often growing stronger and stronger. But I can't make myself

Stop

Not until the voice I hear coming through the speaker is one I recognize, and I wave

off Mariah's predictions.

The car pulls around.

Deja from ISAP, the streak in her hair blue  
now. Her mother is driving, Deja  
leaning across to pay.

She sees me, lights up, and her mother's  
smile is like the door to a garden,  
flowers beyond. I give them free  
milkshakes and Deja gives me  
her number.

*Some misanthrope*, Mariah says,  
but even she is smiling,  
and we let the cruel muscle rest  
until the end of my shift.

*Poems are like underwear.*

Sometimes you want people to see them.  
Sometimes they're uncomfortable.  
Sometimes they're dirty, sometimes they're  
full of blood.

Sometimes they're sticking out of your bag  
and you drop them and someone picks them up that wasn't supposed to and  
then they want to have a conversation about your underwear that you  
weren't prepared to have.

Ms. Gladstone saw my poems, not my underwear.

She said if I ever want someone to read  
them, she would like to see more.

I only ever write when I'm supposed to be  
doing something else.

In class.

At work.

At home instead of homework.

On napkins, on receipts, not even a notebook.

I don't think what I'm writing about  
is what Ms. Gladstone will want  
to hear.

I don't know what other people's poems are about.  
Shakespeare didn't write about the man on the bus  
who pulled his junk out and waved it six inches from your face.  
Robert Frost was writing about undisturbed snow, not  
the smell of latex and locker room.  
Not how, since you dyed your hair, random men call after you:  
*RED!* on the street.

But you'd rather be Red than Alicia.

*It's not always men.*

There's a girl named Lisa who never remembers my name but always wants to give me a hug. It feels like middle school

when everyone wants to hug everyone—the churn of energy and hormones makes you grabby and strange.

Lisa is grabby and strange. She always calls me the wrong name, always wants a hug in the hallways between classes, always holds me a little too tight.

There's an urgency, a rawness when she clutches her arms behind my back that makes me think she could possibly be a wolf or maybe has just been bitten by one already.

*Sometimes I feel like a narcissist*

for thinking people are watching me  
but when there are slips of white paper  
stuck into my locker, I know it can't  
all be in my head.

I throw them away without reading them.  
The paper itself makes me feel hunted.  
I don't need any more reasons  
for my heart to pound  
when walking down certain hallways  
is enough.

*In the back of my mind is the mature voice*

quiet and cautious:

*You could tell Ms. Gladstone about the notes.*

*You could tell her you feel*

*like a rabbit*

*on the run*

*like a ship*

*filled with holes*

*Maybe the notes in your locker*

*could be bread crumbs*

*she could follow to the center*

*of your heart, where the real*

*problems are.*

Hey, mature voice,

it must be nice to think

things are that simple,

to think things can be separated

so neatly,

to think that pulling one thread

won't unravel the whole sweater.

I may not know everything, but

I know enough to be sure

that every secret in my life

is connected at the core—

I don't know what the notes mean

or who's writing them, but

I do know that shining a light

means you see what's in the dark

and a girl can only handle  
so many monsters, especially  
when there's one staring back  
in the mirror.

*What my brother and I used to be:*

Before I grew boobs and he grew tall  
people would ask if we were twins.

We're not. The things  
that made us the same  
were the trappings of childhood:  
big teeth, the same haircut  
because I always wanted  
to be like him  
and our mom  
didn't care to differentiate  
daughter from son. She loved  
us the same and so if we looked  
the same  
it was a reflection of her heart.

Middle school came and we split off,  
a thread fraying as it made its way  
through the needle, pieces of him  
going that way and pieces of me  
somewhere else.

Maybe that's just the way it is.

Maybe I watch too many movies:

the big brother swooping in  
to protect her, or at least leaning  
in the doorway of her room,  
distant but warm.

My brother and I used to be something  
resembling close.

Maybe the way it is

is the way it always was  
and I was too much of a kid  
to notice.

*"Since Sarah left me"*

Sounds like a marriage breaking apart,  
a wife writing poems about her husband  
going off to war. That's a little  
what it feels like when I think about Sarah  
even if her war is a private one,  
the battle against sin. She goes

to the big fancy Christian school now  
and I remember somehow knowing  
even as a fourth grader  
when she joined youth group  
at her church,  
that her going would change things.  
I just didn't know how much—

how virginity would become a coin in her purse  
how hell would become a comet in her palm  
how judgment would become a sword in her belt.

Since Sarah left me  
means "since she went to that school."  
Since Sarah left me  
means "since she stopped answering my texts."  
Since Sarah left me  
means "the day she left me standing at the bus stop alone."  
Since Sarah left me  
is many events rolled into one wound that wears my best friend's face.

*Wolves love bus stops.*

I remember exactly what I was wearing  
the first time I took the bus alone.

High-waisted jeans, a T-shirt that showed an inch of my stomach.

I'm always thinking about  
*what I was wearing when.*

Standing by the telephone pole that day,  
staring at my phone,  
I transformed without knowing.

Girl into rabbit, soft furred thing with belly  
exposed, ripe for fangs.

Eyes became teeth. Men in cars rolling past with  
no rules, no accountability, half-domesticated

Howling out their windows, HEY BABYing with their wives on mute,  
NICE TITS to the beat of  
stereo music. WANNA FUCK when it's more than one in the car and  
they're

entertaining/impressing/masturbating  
each other with my embarrassment.

Although I wasn't embarrassed at first.  
When you're fourteen and just realizing  
maybe someone thinks you're beautiful  
you can mistake the sound of howling  
for a heart song.

It's never a heart song.

I thought I was receiving compliments

at the bus stop. I thought it was about me  
but  
it's about them:  
how something about a girl alone  
at a bus stop makes their fangs grow past their lips  
and the gathering feeling of saliva makes them want to spit these words into  
the sky.

That was two years ago.  
I'm used to it now.  
When I told this story to Sarah  
she said *you were fourteen*  
*why were you showing your stomach*  
*walking around by yourself?*

*The Game I play that I never lose/win.*

Sometimes I take my break at Taco Bell  
across the street. We get free  
food working at Meat Palace (when the manager is out.  
So more like: we *take* free food)  
but eventually your entire life starts to smell  
like beef and I sometimes take refuge  
in the smell of beans instead, a refugee  
in another fast-food land.

I sit at a corner table scribbling on a napkin  
and nearby a man sits alone, finishing  
his lunch. He's wearing a uniform but I don't  
know what kind. Medical maybe. Ambulance  
driver. EMS. I don't know. It doesn't matter.

I see him because he sees me.

He's looking at my legs under the high table  
where I perch. Khakis stretched tight  
while I'm sitting down, my thighs flattening  
and spreading.

He doesn't try to hide that he's looking.  
We make eye contact.  
He's probably twenty-five.

The Game I play doesn't have rules.  
Sometimes I don't know I'm playing it.

I am sixteen and what Adam called jailbait.

This Game means I make myself bait. I stare  
at the man too old to be staring back  
and wait for him to notice I'm sixteen

wait for him to care  
wait for him to recognize what should be a deal breaker.

He stands to clear his tray and I wonder  
briefly if he's leaving. My stomach flares  
with disappointment  
with relief  
but then he's coming over, eyes narrowed,  
mouth curling in a smile, and all I think is

*There you are.*

He asks my name and I tell him.  
He asks if I work here. I point across the street.  
He teases me: something about *do I like beef.*

I've heard that one before.

I ask how old he is and he says twenty-seven.  
He asks for my number.  
He doesn't ask how old I am.  
When I give him my number he looks me in my eyes and tells me he'll call  
me later.

I wonder how long I'll play this Game: testing men  
for fortitude  
wondering when adults will be adults.  
He leaves with my number.  
I finish my tacos.

I have done this so many times,  
always winning,  
winning myself  
into oblivion.

I never try with women.  
I know it wouldn't  
work.

*Sometimes it settles in later:*

I have given a twenty-seven-year-old man my phone number.  
The reality rattles in my ribs.  
I always hope they won't call:

*Prove me wrong.*

*Prove me wrong.*

*Prove me wrong.*

They always call.  
They think they have found something easy.  
They never guess that I'm thinking  
*So have I.*

*My life and school are overlapping universes.*

Sometimes when I walk the halls, class to class,  
I feel like I am more than a Martian.

Mars is too close.

Outside these walls, I am something stranger than my peers,  
who laugh with teeth and eat school lunch  
and do their homework and can make their mouths  
say *yes ma'am* to a teacher who doesn't hate them.

My orbit crosses this place, and so I go.  
My planet has no sun, no moon, I don't know  
what I'm even orbiting. I'm not a planet  
at all, just a lonely asteroid  
hurtling through space.

But then there's the new girl.  
I learn her name is Geneva.

She still wears black every day and  
today when I pass her in the hall  
I'm studying her as if with a telescope  
and her eyes lift and catch mine.

Her black lips crack to  
release a sliver of a smile  
and without meaning to

I think

*Oh, there's the sun*

*Envy is a sin too, I think,*

and I almost  
almost  
text Sarah to say “look how  
I know all the things that turn the soul  
into a rotten apple”  
but I think if my soul is an apple, Sarah  
has already condemned it to a ditch  
or maybe the mouth of a dead pig.

There is a girl I envy at school—lots  
of them if I’m being honest: the easy  
way they move through life, how  
the hallways are just another red carpet.

But if envy is an apple  
(to continue the fruit metaphor)  
Blake is the core.

She has red hair  
—naturally red: not like mine—  
not the color of poison  
but the color of new pennies shining  
at the bottom of a wishing well.  
She is the wish in human form.

Blake is a senior and she plays field hockey.  
Blake wears the right amount of makeup.  
Blake has had the same boyfriend  
since freshman year, which is something like  
a sign of her purity  
a testament to her goodness.

Blake’s hair is always moving and her smile

is always glinting and she is quiet but not  
too quiet.

She is funny but not a ham.

She wins field hockey games but never showboats.

How do I put it into words?

Blake is a new penny.

Blake is a wish.

Blake is who I wish I could be.

*Blake's friends, however,*

have the same white teeth as Blake  
but they might as well be sharpened  
into points.

Last year I was a different kind of creature  
to them—the kind that drifted  
by unseen and unthreatening: track team ponytail no makeup  
and the only thing that has changed  
besides everything  
is the track team.

But rumors are faster  
than I am  
    (was)  
and when they see me in the halls  
I realize that to me  
    I am a ghost  
but to them  
    I am a monster,

that like Frankenstein  
I have stepped outside of some sacred  
agreement, except I'm not  
the mad scientist  
but rather  
the thing rising from the table

and when I pass too close to Blake's  
friends, their eyes  
are torches, lunch utensils  
are pitchforks.

In their minds there are two kinds  
of women, and only one  
is allowed to be human

so they spend all their time  
making sure everyone knows  
exactly which one  
they are, and that means  
making sure I know  
exactly which one  
I am.

*I cut art again*

because I just can't bring myself  
to walk down that hall, knowing  
what I'll have to pass to get there.

So I wander the school  
empty and echoing  
like the Colosseum  
until I dodge into the auditorium  
to avoid security and find  
one of Mr. Hudson's classes  
onstage, two microphones  
like bookends, Deja  
at one and Clay Bevin  
at the other, while the rest  
of the class takes up the first two rows,  
watching.

Clay is finishing his side of the debate  
but hearing his closing remarks  
is enough: *and that's why cancel  
culture is un-American, because  
if we can't separate the art  
from the artist, then we foster  
a culture of victimhood*

and everyone down front claps,  
a couple whoops before Deja  
starts to speak:

*Victimhood is a funny word.  
You talked for ten minutes but still  
didn't give an example of what being "canceled"  
has cost anyone besides hurt feelings.*

*All the people you named are still rich  
Are still famous  
Are still free  
Are still racist or hateful  
Still have the benefit of their good name  
so what the hell has cancel culture  
actually cost them?*

And Mr. Hudson interrupts, calling  
*Foul language is automatic forfeiture!*  
and no one in the rows of seats claps for Deja  
and she looks so alone up there  
on her side of the stage  
the new red streak in her hair like a spark  
from my own head

so I stand up and applaud as loud as I can  
screaming until my throat sandpapers  
until everyone in her class turns around  
in their seats, shocked  
until I see Deja's smile light up the stage  
until Mr. Hudson chases me out  
right into the security guard's waiting frown.

And then  
it's back to ISAP.  
But it was worth it.

## *First text from Deja*

**Deja:** Why do you work at Meat Palace?

**Alicia:** Because I need money

**Deja:** But why Meat Palace tho? Why beef

**Alicia:** It was that or Taco Bell

**Deja:** I feel like Taco Bell would've been a better fit

**Alicia:** why?

**Deja:** bc you're kinda spicy

**Alicia:** it's fake

**Deja:** so's Taco Bell 😊

**Alicia:** lol fair

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 13

*I visit my dad's new apartment.*

He thinks it's temporary.  
I can tell by the way he only unpacks  
what he thinks he needs—  
boxes lining the walls  
as if in waiting.

My mother has kicked him out before.  
But this was the first time  
she had proof: iMessages  
he deleted from his phone  
but not his computer.

Rookie, even now.

He wants me to spend the night  
wants to talk about my brother  
wants to talk about fixing  
our family.

Somehow when he envisions all the things  
that need fixing, all the things  
that are wrong with our lives  
in a gallery of portraits  
and fractured landscapes

he never sees himself  
in the frame.

*One thing I never do*

is send anyone photos of my face.

I've never understood the way other people  
can take selfies so effortlessly.

In the mirror I am pretty:  
my eyes look normal, nice lashes  
my skin is okay.  
My hair has always been kind of nice  
without much effort.

But in the eye of my iPhone  
I become something by Picasso,  
nose like a book that has not been properly shelved  
eyes blank

I look hollowed out  
and pale, the way a mannequin  
might look if suddenly  
realizing it had thoughts  
but unable to think about anything  
but plastic.

When guys ask for pictures  
I just send a photo of my boobs  
because even though everyone  
is always staring at them  
they don't have eyes,  
and with no head  
who could ever really say  
whose chest  
whose mole  
whose skin with heart beneath

the photo really contains?

*I look for the new girl's Instagram*

All I have  
is her first name  
and I know  
it's not enough  
but I look  
anyway  
almost afraid  
to find her,  
the phone  
close to  
my face  
in the  
    dark.

*Deja invites me to the mall*

and neither of us have any money  
not really  
but we walk around and look at things  
we might buy if we did,  
and Deja tells me about how the concept of the mall  
is going extinct  
that everyone shops online and that all these big cavernous  
buildings full of things no one needs  
should just be converted into parks.

*Public space*, she says,  
and I feel like I've entered  
a conversation with a college professor  
who just happens to look like a teenager in Nikes.

She wants to major in business economics.  
I don't know what that means.

The mall feels empty and when I say so she asks me  
if I know why.

*No.*

*Because last year they banned unaccompanied minors from shopping. It's  
code for Black teenagers. They think we steal. And now their stores are  
shutting down. Bird-brained.*

I think of me and Sarah  
and how many pairs of earrings  
we lifted every weekend,  
how many stupid things like socks  
like keychains  
like makeup.

(Stealing must not have registered  
the way sex did  
in Sarah's hierarchy of sins.  
Ditto smoking.)

Deja smiles at me over the top  
of one of those racks of jewelry  
that spin.

*The only reason they haven't kicked my ass out is because I'm with you.  
How does it feel, for your whiteness to be a shelter,  
a chaperone?*

And I'd never thought about being white like that—  
as a possession, as currency—  
but I shrug and say  
*Do you want me to steal you some earrings?*  
and Deja laughs and laughs and laughs.

*Sometimes, only sometimes,*

I feel mad about being white  
and all the things I'm not supposed to think  
or say. My life feels like a minefield already:  
I have big breasts and a big mouth  
and I'm supposed to hide them both,  
and sometimes  
only sometimes  
*white* feels like just one more thing  
I have to hate  
about myself.

And then I watch videos while waiting for the bus home  
and I see  
the never-ending pale parade  
the advertisements for beauty products  
that define *me* as Beauty  
the way people  
who look like me  
are always stealing ideas from girls  
who look like Deja  
how when a girl with my face goes missing  
voices all rise in one unified horror.

And then I'm still mad, but not at the people  
who call all this white shit what it is,  
but at myself—and the magician—  
for almost falling for  
a trick as obvious as a coin  
disappearing behind the curve of a  
very  
Caucasian  
ear.

*There's something hidden there that I'm not smart  
enough to see*

but it makes me think of my brother's friend Justin  
and the way he smirks when he says the N-word—  
like it puts money in his pocket  
like it puts helium in his balloon—  
and I think there must be something we have in common  
besides simply being white  
that makes me hear *white* and cringe  
that makes him hear *white* and grin

because they are opposite reactions,  
but opposites are related *because* they're opposites

so what force is pushing on me  
and Justin both  
and why does it feel like the same  
tug-of-war  
between the Pure Girl  
and the Whore?  
When my knee jerks against *white*  
and I defend myself against a sword  
that doesn't exist

who is blowing up my balloon?  
What pennies drop into my purse?

*When I get home, my brother asks me where I've been*

and I should be happy to hear his voice, speaking unprompted, but his tone is vinegar and sours the whole room.

So instead of answering, I ask why the fuck he cares and he just stares at me across the kitchen like the distance between us is a canyon with no bridge, and also like he's seen inside my phone and my head.

*Justin told me he heard you're a dyke.  
Are you a dyke?*

It drains the poison from my eyes, and poison was the only thing I had. The one thing I haven't been called has spun itself into existence, and in a way I'm not even that angry because, of all the things they say about me

*(they—the mysterious, faceless they)*

this one feels more personal, like whoever hurls this insult has looked at me and for once seen something true.

In the end, I say nothing and he leaves and his doorway becomes

another place I cannot cross  
without judgment.

*My brother taught me to read*

but not sitting by my side and trailing his fingers  
across the words on the page, or sounding out  
a single syllable.

He's eighteen months older, and learned to read first.  
He would sit in the car on the way to church  
when we still went  
and read all the billboards out loud:

**Save 10% on your car insurance with GEICO  
Lion's Den Palace for Men  
Buy one get one free at Kroger**

I envied the way his eyes translated the mysteries all around me  
and I raced to catch up.

He was given a book of poetry when we were little.  
He wasn't into it  
and so it fell into my hands.

I've been scribbling ever since  
never in a notebook because it feels  
presumptuous,  
feels like I'm calling myself something  
other than the obvious: GIRL WITH THOUGHTS  
SHE SOMETIMES WRITES DOWN.

I used to write my brother notes.  
When we were ten and twelvish  
we would slip paper under each other's doors  
at bedtime and in the morning swap answers  
before school.

When he turned thirteen the answers turned

into those grains of sand at the end of the hourglass:  
slower, trickling.

There had to have been a last note.  
I wouldn't have recognized it at the time  
not knowing it was the last.  
You never know if something is the last  
until it is.

Sometimes I want to try again and ask him more questions:  
Where do *you* go at night  
Where is the Xbox  
Why are you friends with Justin  
What do you think is going to happen to us

But his light is never on  
and my fingers can't quite force themselves  
to spell out his name.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 22

*I saw the Colonel today*

for the first time this year, successfully  
tunneling through the school the way I have  
like a mole.

He didn't see me.

That's it. That's the poem.

## *The saddest part about the Colonel*

(Well, not the saddest part)  
is that he was never part of the Game  
where I meet a man's eyes  
and wait for him to be an adult.

He's the one who put me on the board,  
shoved dice into my hand.

With the Colonel I walked into his classroom  
hating science, but wooed by the way he made  
everything a joke, always teasing, *the cool teacher*.  
He did it with everyone, not just girls like me—  
baby fat migrating up toward bras—  
had the same imp smile for every student.

When I looked in his eyes  
when I stayed after class to ask questions  
it was because he made me feel safe  
enough to admit I never really understood  
basic things like balancing equations  
or naming and formulas

I came to him as a student  
and he came to me as a teacher  
until  
the day  
he came to me  
as a wolf.

*That's when the Game began.*

Maybe not right away.  
His arm around my shoulders  
his fingers at the edge of my bra,  
it pulled all my atoms apart  
then dropped them into stasis.

Weeks passed  
and months,  
everything that made me  
who I am  
rearranged,  
like Dr. Manhattan in the test chamber  
put back together as something  
not quite human.

I saw on Tumblr that people with trauma  
will sometimes reexpose themselves to trauma  
over and over until they think they understand what happened.

I don't know why I play the Game.  
I understand what happened.

My biology teacher hurt me  
and if I was smarter I could find a clever metaphor  
about chemistry that tells why and how  
but the simplest way to say it is that  
I was a student but he saw a rabbit  
and no one will believe me  
because he's the most  
beloved wolf in school.

*Afterthought about wolves and their prey.*

I try not to say *sheep*.

In fairy tales, wolves are after sheep,  
and maybe it's because Grimm and Mother Goose  
and all that old European bullshit  
always had wolves and sheep on the brain.

But in *this* country wolves hunt  
deer  
elk  
rabbits

Everyone thinks sheep are stupid.  
Maybe they are—I've never met one.  
I know they're supposed to do what they're told.  
They follow the herd.  
They walk willingly to the butcher,  
or so the butcher says.

When we say "wolf in sheep's clothing"  
it's a comment about the wolf  
but also about the nature of sheep,  
easily fooled.

I have never been a sheep  
in that way.  
But wolves hunt me anyway.

*I fell asleep in Algebra II.*

When people talk about the best dreams  
they always talk about flying,  
their arms becoming wings that bear them  
into the sky.

I never dream about flying.

In my best dreams  
I am running.

I'm running so fast  
the ground ceases  
to exist, I become one  
with the wind.

My feet carry me to something  
that feels like sky.

Maybe that's the same thing  
as flying.

*The new girl passed my locker today.*

Geneva.

I should call her by her name.

But *the new girl* still feels right  
because she is the only thing  
that has felt new in a long, long time.

*In bed thinking of sins*

I wasn't raised to think about sins, deadly or otherwise.

I wasn't raised to wonder if I was going to heaven or hell.

Sarah put these thoughts in my head.

So did the whole world, I guess.

We're always so preoccupied  
with what happens when we die.

We don't even know  
what's happening while we're alive—

our world swarms with secrets and we walk down aisles of them  
like Walmart purgatory.

I wonder if Geneva goes to church or if  
like me  
she's looking for salvation  
elsewhere.

*My brother got home at 1am on a school night*

and my mother didn't even ask him  
where he'd been. She asked for his car keys  
and he didn't give them to her  
and she couldn't make him  
and my dad's not here  
to help.

*My brother's name is David.*

I have to remind myself  
because it doesn't fit him  
anymore.

David seems like a gentle name  
or at least it always has to me.

Since he started hanging out with Justin  
and Scotty  
and Andrew

his edges all seem harder,  
even without the ROTC cut.

I stand at the kitchen counter with my mother  
when they all come in from having been  
somewhere  
and we watch silently  
as they all troop past  
saying nothing  
not even hello  
and file down to the basement  
to play pool on the table  
my mother paid for.

When we hear the door shut my mother  
breathes out  
like she's cooling coffee  
and says "where does he meet all this white  
trash" and my mind says what I've heard  
Deja say:

*White is white  
and modifying trash with white*

*implies that trash  
is Black by default*

*or maybe  
trash is modifying white?*

but my mouth says  
“I don’t know”

because trash or not  
I don’t know where my brother meets boys  
whose smiles look like razor blades  
dragged across skin  
when we were raised to never  
draw blood.

*Deja texts me to say that ISAP stands for In-School Adjustment Program*

and we LOL over all the things we've adjusted in that quiet gray room:

**Deja:** my bra

**Alicia:** my posture

**Deja:** my stance on teachers' pensions

**Alicia:** the height of Mr. West's chair when he was in the bathroom

**Deja:** my circadian rhythm

**Alicia:** what??

**Deja:** SLEEP

**Alicia:** my need for light and air

**Deja:** anything but my attitude

**Alicia:** never that

*I almost text her to ask if she ever had class with the Colonel,*

but decide not to because there's no way  
if she says yes that I can keep from asking  
about wolves  
and she may not even believe in them.

Whatever creature she thinks  
I am,

she has decided to talk to me anyway  
and I don't want to test  
limits that surely exist.

*Wolf is an apt metaphor because*

- sometimes they hunt in packs
- a werewolf can make more werewolves with its bite

I can't think of anything else.

I kind of like  
actual wolves.

They're endangered.  
I wish these were.

*Sometimes I'm torn about eyes*

because there are times when I'm  
riding the bus  
walking to class  
shopping with my mom,  
when I will look up to find  
eyes on my body,  
hungry stare, sometimes someone  
my age and sometimes  
not, a stare that turns me  
into a meal.

And sometimes I like the way it feels  
like someone has lit a torch  
in my stomach in deepest night  
and all the moths come seeking.

Is it possible  
to like something sometimes  
and hate it other times?

Am I allowed  
to decide when  
I want to be  
a feast?

*I should be doing homework*

but I can hear my brother and his cadre  
of losers, shouts and laughter rising  
through the floor. I am conscious then  
of what is below me and it makes me think  
of what is above me, and when I think  
of what is above me, I think

of Blake Felipe.

I'm not obsessed with her—if I'm obsessed  
with anything, it's the architecture of a Good Girl—  
and I cruise her Instagram  
studying the way her boyfriend laces his fingers

around her belly, the way her smile is the same  
in photo after photo, like every day is ctrl + c  
ctrl + p-erfect.

Her hands clasp his and she wears a ring  
like Sarah's and I wonder if she prays

if she carries heaven in her pocket, and if  
she ever slips the silver over her knuckle

and her underwear down over her knees,  
taking everything off, even the plaster smile.

I wonder if she ever touches herself in the dark,  
if she's ever cheated on her four-year boyfriend

just to see, just to taste another person's sweat,  
to watch her lucky-penny hair sweep over their chest.

I know she has not. These are all the ways we are different.  
These are all the ways that she is gold and I am rust.

And I could blame the Colonel—and for some things, I do—  
but when my phone's screen goes to sleep I think again

of the doorway I inched open, the box whose lid I cracked,  
how everything that slithers through is my doing.  
In the dark my breath hisses like a serpent.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 26

*Today I made myself go to art*

and when I passed his classroom  
it was different.

The door was closed.  
I can only remember it  
being closed  
one time—the first time.  
I was in it.

*I couldn't breathe.*

I froze on the way to studio,  
everything in me turning heavy—  
the hallway is a river  
between classes, rushing and rushing,  
and around me people pushed.

I was a blockade at the center, a dam  
of still flesh, staring at the closed door,  
its empty window. I couldn't make myself  
move closer, but my neck strained  
my eyes trying to become X-rays

Was someone inside  
Was someone inside  
Was someone inside

*Don't you have somewhere to be?*

Ms. Balwick, staring me down with those eyes  
teachers get when they have already heard  
that you're a problem,  
when they're waiting for you to be that problem  
so they can solve you right over to ISAP.

I say nothing, make my body unfreeze,  
walk toward studio one heavy step at a time  
and the hallway rushes around me but behind me  
the door  
stays  
closed.

*His door is always open.*

That always-open door is part of his mythology:  
he always wants to be bothered.

Even when he's grading he will always smile  
at an interruption. That smile zeroes  
in on you until the rest of the world fades  
and you feel important  
seen  
heard.

Sometimes I walk past that always-open  
door and the always-open  
wound it rubs raw by sight alone  
throbs.

I see the skeletons along the back wall  
some human  
some not  
studies of anatomy  
the nervous system,  
circulatory,  
and though the Colonel  
isn't a killer  
whenever I pass, I can't help but wonder  
how many other bodies  
he has on display  
in his mind.  
But today the door was closed.  
And I can't stop thinking  
about why.

*Geneva/the new girl is good at art.*

She doesn't mind when paint gets all over her.  
I wash my brushes twice at the sink  
for an excuse to pass by,  
peek at her portrait—a woman's smiling face—

but mostly to glimpse her hands

the way her brown skin looks like Earth itself  
splattered in blue and green  
like I am flying high above the clouds  
and looking out the window of my lonely ship  
to see her,  
the planet,  
waiting.

*It's more than halfway through October.*

The Halloween contest is approaching,  
when all of us will gather in the cafeteria  
the tables folded away.

I've seen this show twice now:  
clapping and shouting  
before I knew better.

The Colonel will perform:  
white suit, cane, and grin.

The cool teacher,  
the funny guy,  
the one who lets you get away  
with everything  
never writes a detention  
except once when Vic Parrent  
punched a guy during bio.

The good guy, the smile  
and twinkling eyes  
are both reputation and résumé.

I plan my sick day now.

*I should know the date of the first time "it" happened,  
but I don't.*

It was spring—months after Halloween.

That's all I remember.

Before then I had sat in his classroom  
learning to trust my scientific abilities,  
and by the time the Halloween contest  
rolled around I was already an acolyte:  
I had written COLONEL SANDERS  
on the paper just like everyone else,  
shoving it into the ballot box  
while we all laughed, knowing.

He stayed after school sometimes.

So did I, for track.

I popped my head in to say hi,  
entered when he motioned me inside.

I was wearing school-issued blue shorts.

There was a falcon on my chest.

He smiled and closed the door.

*Deja always brings her food—*

and sometimes as I'm leaving the cafeteria  
her lunch block comes in, and I overhear  
her friends teasing her for the woven bag  
she carries, the Post-it note that her mother  
writes with a heart fluttering to the tabletop.

Sometimes she sees me watching  
and beckons me over, but  
I always say no, point to the door  
like I have somewhere urgent to be.

She always smiles like she understands  
even if she doesn't, and her friends  
raise eyebrows,  
but she never stops asking.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 30

*Greetings from the pit in my stomach.*

This day has been lurking on the horizon  
like a distant hurricane  
threatening the coast where my heart  
has made its home.

It's 1:30pm and I'm sitting in Mrs. Fisher's class.  
Her phone rings, the mostly ignored thing that sits on her desk.  
She answers it, and I already know even before her eyes  
travel across the classroom to my face.

*Yes, she is, she says. And Yes, I will.*

She hangs up.

*Alicia, she says. The Colonel would like to see you in his class.*

And she doesn't bat an eye, and neither does anyone else.  
Why would they?  
He is a well-hidden wolf.

When I don't move, she blinks, stares

*Did you hear me?*

In the hallway, the air  
sticks in my lungs like tar.

I pass an emergency exit and something inside me considers  
lunging through, triggering the alarm  
that will make the ceilings rain and send  
my peers out into the first cold day of fall.

But Principal Warren is there and asking if I have a hall pass

and I don't, but I tell him the Colonel sent for me  
and all he says is  
*Well, don't keep him waiting.*

*His classroom smells the way it always has.*

He asks me to sit at his desk and grade freshman papers.

I say nothing.

Just take the red pen

mark everything wrong.

I should be in Mrs. Fisher's class failing

Algebra II

but I'm here

and he's here

and his classroom door is closed

and maybe I'm supposed to write

about what happens next

but maybe if I pretend

none of this is real

it won't be.

*When I leave his class I feel like the jack-o'-lanterns*

they have decorating the front of the school.  
Hollowed out, eyes like wounds.

I go back to Mrs. Fisher's class  
and all I can think about is what Sarah  
would say:

*There you go, lamb  
to slaughter, you knew why he called  
you to his class, you knew when  
he started to close the door  
but you still sat there quiet  
so that must mean you wanted  
to be there, that some part of you  
likes it, likes him. You already  
sleep with everyone else,  
why is this any different?*

And her voice in my head  
is so loud that it drives me  
to the bathroom to puke until  
like a jack-o'-lantern  
everything inside  
is scraped out  
and my teeth are slick  
with slime.

*The text I don't send Sarah*

Remember that time in fifth grade when we went to the Halloween dance dressed as bats but Mr. Andrews thought we were devils and said we couldn't come in and we called your mom crying? Every day feels like that.

Hey Sarah, do you think I'm a monster? Do you think I'm a dyke? Do you think I'm a devil?

Do you?

*The thing about giving things away*

is that people think  
because you give things  
away  
that means  
nothing  
can be taken  
from you  
even if the thing  
you give away  
is your body.

Is that what  
it means  
to be canceled?

Is canceled  
like math:  
giving  
and  
taking away  
canceling each other out  
until  
nothing  
of me

is  
left?

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 31

*Halloween*

I tell my mom I'm sick.  
I can't bear to go to school  
and see the Colonel  
in his white suit, square-fanged,  
while around me  
Geneva and Deja  
and everyone else  
clap and cheer  
for a wolf  
dancing onstage.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 5

*The only thing I can paint in studio is red.*

Not a red apple  
Not a red rose  
Not a red anything  
just my brush dragging slow  
and deadly across the canvas  
like stripes of exposed organs  
like roadkill  
like a vein opening for a knife.

Ms. Gupta pauses at my shoulder  
and I can hear the wet sound  
of her mouth starting to open  
and then changing its mind  
before she moves on  
down the aisle, away  
from the scene of this murder.

My hand keeps moving  
and so does the clock's  
and by the end of the period  
I am just standing to yank  
the whole painting into the trash

when someone appears at my side  
close enough for me to smell  
their lotion: rose water,  
sweet and soapy.

I look up and find Geneva's eyes  
studying the riot on the page  
the canvas white only at the edges.

*I don't know what it means* is all I can manage,  
because this is what Ms. Gupta is always asking  
us to consider, but

Geneva only cocks her head, and I get the feeling  
she's walking through the mess of it,  
seeing that some of the organs exposed  
on the page  
are mine.

*I don't think you have to*, she says.  
*Not until you're ready.*

*Thank god we still have a house phone*

because when I get home from school  
before my mother  
I see we have a voicemail.

I expect telemarketing  
a dentist appointment reminder  
but Ms. Benton, the dean of eleventh grade,  
is speaking into our kitchen  
telling “the parents of Alicia Rivers”

that  
“your daughter”

has been having  
“some problems”  
at school

and she would  
“love to speak to you”

about “finding a solution”  
to this “erratic behavior.”

I press delete before she can say goodbye,  
and tell myself it’s not wrong  
because the message was for “the parents  
of Alicia Rivers,” plural,  
and only one of them  
lives here.

*Text from a random who is less random because he goes to my school*

**Him:** Me and Travis want to see you

**Alicia:** "See" me

**Him:** lol don't act like you haven't done two guys before

**Alicia:** I don't have to act

**Him:** are you coming over or not?

**Him:** Travis knows you're wild, it's fine

**Alicia:** I have a paper due tomorrow

**Him:** I didn't know hoes did homework

*Travis is on the football team and likes to hit people*

I have felt afraid many times  
    when getting into a car  
    when stepping inside a house  
    when walking down the hall at school

but this fear is different.

It's the same feeling of standing too close  
to a railroad track,  
the train rushing past in a blur of metal  
and noise

or teetering at the edge of a bridge  
with no rail, nothing but space,  
emptier even than me.

No, I don't think Travis would kill me.  
Nothing that dramatic. It's just  
that they don't even pretend  
to like me—for them, the insult  
is part of the fun.

This fear is like watercolor—  
to these two boys I am already half-  
invisible. They are the water:

under their existence  
I feel myself fading, spreading thin  
until there's only a ghost  
of a ghost  
left.

## *ISAP for skipping art class again*

and Deja isn't there, so I just sit and stare at the ceiling,  
tapping my foot to the song I now know is  
"If You Think You're Lonely Now" by Bobby Womack.  
ISAP is good for one thing—I could probably go on a game show now  
a game show for only old music  
and clean up. Win a car  
that I could drive offstage  
and toward the horizon.

Mr. West dozes in his chair and between card games  
on my phone, I stare at his round stomach,  
rising and falling, Bobby Womack near his ear.  
I wonder if ISAP for him  
is like a chamber for time travel,  
where he falls asleep  
and the music transports him to when these songs  
were the soundtrack to his life.

I have songs like that. Some old, like I absorbed  
them through my parents, and some not.  
Billie Eilish has a song called "Bad Guy"  
and even though it's not new  
it still calls up something familiar in my skin  
that makes it timeless.

Bad guy  
the equivalent of a viper  
in a dress.

I don't wear dresses. But sometimes  
when I'm trying to transform myself  
into someone with a heart made of iron  
I tell myself this is what I am,

that my hair is red like a siren  
and not a salamander

that I am a vicious man-eater  
and not a rabbit

not a rabbit  
not a rabbit  
not something so easily consumed.

I am the thing with the fangs.  
Not a wolf but something more monstrous,  
not a sad girl with a scar across her soul  
but a creature who eats souls  
for breakfast.

*I see it when I finally lower my eyes to my desk,*

carved into the wood, the letters sharp and crooked as scorpion legs:  
ALICIA RIVERS IS A DYKE HOE

and it takes me a full minute to realize

*really* realize

that it's my name on this desk

and despite the pit in my stomach

widening into a chasm

part of me wants to laugh

because someone in this school

thinks saying this about me

is going to break my heart

As if this is the worst thing that they can do

the worst thing that has been done

the worst thing that can be said about me.

Listen kid, if you think this is bad

you should hear what I say

about myself.

*I take a picture and send it to Deja*

**Alicia:** I think my ISAP desk is calling me a slut

**Deja:** lolol

**Deja:** wait is this real

**Alicia:** 🤔

**Deja:** the fuck? whose ass do I have to beat

**Alicia:** you told me you've never been in a fight

**Deja:** first time for everything

**Alicia:** don't waste your fists on a hoe

**Deja:** who else would I use them for?

**Deja:** also, what is a dyke hoe? specifically?

**Alicia:** lololol

*Deja invites me to her family game night*

and I say no  
because I think

she's just  
being nice

and the  
only thing

worse than  
senseless cruelty

is fake  
kindness

and I don't  
want her

to think  
she owes

me anything  
but

the  
truth.

## *Things They Call Me: A List*

- Slut
- Hoe, a derivative of Whore
- Whore, obviously
- Girl with daddy issues
- Attention whore, which is different than just Whore, apparently
- Only Good for One Thing
- Lightbulb (“how many does it take to screw”—it doesn’t even make sense)
- Lunchbox (“you can fit everything in it”—this one is at least somewhat creative)
- Pathetic
- Whoremione (I laughed at this one)
- Liar
- Dyke (does that apply if you’re bi?)
- Dyke hoe

## *Pre-slut*

I remember when other people were the slut  
before me.

I remember sitting in the cafeteria  
when Sarah still went here

when everyone was talking about Taryn Billups  
and how she supposedly gave two guys  
a blow job on the same day.

Maybe at the same time.

Now it's my turn. It's hard to say  
where it began—if I slept with one guy  
too many, or if the Colonel's touch  
left a stench like gasoline  
that the whole school  
can smell.

Rumors are like wildfire:  
a little breath  
and the flames are running  
catching  
burning

The only difference is  
wildfire burns  
everything in its path,  
and a rumor about a slut  
only burns one.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 19

*We're going on a field trip to the history museum*

and I end up on the same bus as Deja.  
I try my hardest to sit at the front but she sees me  
before I can duck down—yells my name  
relentlessly  
until I make my way to the back with her  
and her friends.

She lets me have the window  
and allows me to be ignored  
but in closer proximity.

Her friends are loud and sing songs  
I don't know, and some that I do.

She overhears me murmuring to Chaka Khan  
a name I only know because of ISAP,  
and she bumps me with her elbow,  
beaming. We sit close, singing low,  
and then she bumps me again, pointing:

In the seat across the aisle and one up,  
Melody Ross is sitting with Matt Wheaton,  
her boyfriend of two days—  
they have a sweatshirt over  
their legs. Her hand is under it,  
in Matt's lap, moving.

*Not slick*, Deja whispers, laughing,  
and it doesn't occur to me that this  
can be funny, that some things  
can be done by some people

and not by others  
and the rules change all the time.

When I crack up, Deja thinks I'm laughing  
at Melody and Matt, but really  
I'm laughing at the lightbulb in my head  
and how it only took one person to screw it in.

*I keep seeing Geneva in the museum*

and it feels more like science  
and less like history  
the way I end up in the same exhibits  
as Geneva,  
the way we end up side by side  
studying ancient suits of armor,  
as if a magnet has been installed  
between my ribs and draws me  
toward something in her made  
of iron or nickel.

*I thought they were all made of metal,*  
she says, and I think she's reading my mind  
until I realize she's talking about the armor,  
the way the exhibit says some civilizations  
made armor out of plants, of animal, of wood.

*Some are made of bone too,* I say, pointing.

And then she's looking at me, her hand raised,  
and she takes a single finger and presses it against  
the back of my hand, saying  
*And some are made of skin.*

*Girls are either straight, gay, or whores.*

Even people who are supposed to know better think this.

The world is so eager to put people into boxes they can understand.

The ideal box: straight, of course.

Less ideal, but understandable at this point: gay

But bi?

If you're a girl who's bi, you're a slut who can't make up her mind and just wants an excuse to fuck everyone.

See also: attention whore

See also: whore, whore

If you're a boy who's bi, you're really gay but don't have the guts to admit it, because what REAL MAN has slept with women but still wants other men?

Then, if you're a girl, there's the best box: not having sex with anyone at all.

(Too late.)

## *Algebra of "Why boys?"*

Number of dreams I've had about kissing girls > number of boys I've  
kissed

I hear Sarah in my head always  
like one of her church's angels  
shaking her finger and her head:

*You don't even like him.  
If you don't like it why  
do it?*

Define your terms, Sarah.  
*Him* and *it* don't balance  
the equation  
or whatever.

Apples and oranges.

I don't think this is about math  
to begin with.

It's about hunger  
and if boys are apples  
and girls are oranges,  
the apples hang lower on the tree,  
are easier to reach.

Is that the only reason?  
Is there something wrong with me?

*I fall asleep on the bus back to school,*

too many half nights in my bed at home  
catching up with me  
and powerless against the rocking  
of the bus, the quiet melody of low conversation,  
everyone too tired after walking around the museum  
to sing.

I wake up as we pull back into school,  
my head jolting up from Deja's shoulder.  
She laughs and says *You're just like my sister.*  
*Always asleep in the car*

and I'm embarrassed, not just for the little bit  
of drool at the corner of my mouth  
but at the rush of happy and sad  
that I feel at being someone's sister  
once more.

*My mother is waiting for me in the kitchen.*

The door isn't even closed yet and she's shouting:

*A man was here asking for you. He said you're his girlfriend. What the hell is going on, Alicia?*

*Who was that? He was as old as your cousins!*

*He had to have been twenty-five!*

*What are you hiding from me?*

And I have too many questions of my own that I can't ask:

What did he look like?

What was he driving?

Because if I were "normal"

there would only be one answer

to the question of "who"

but instead I can think of a few,

although I don't know why the hell

any of them would knock

on my door in broad daylight.

*It must have been one of David's friends  
fucking around, I snap, I don't have  
a boyfriend*

and it feels good to at least tell this small truth. I watch her face relax,  
do math,  
the likelihood of my brother  
having friends who would do something  
like this outweighing the probability  
of her quiet, hardworking daughter  
stepping out of line and into a shadowy lie.

When her back is turned again, accepting  
all my nothing,  
I feel a knot in my throat  
not because I want to cry  
but because I want to scream

to tell her  
that a wolf was at her door  
and she's yelling at me  
instead.

*Text from a random at 9pm*

**Him:** I came by your house today, I didn't know you lived with your parents

**Alicia:** I'm 16 of course I do

**Him:** I didn't know you were 16

**Alicia:** You didn't ask

**Him:** Wow

**Him:** Are you busy tonight?

*You'd think I would stay home*

after my mother freaked out,  
after my secret life almost came  
unraveled.

But frozen in my head  
is the picture of rage  
painted on my mother's face  
when it dawned on her  
that maybe her daughter  
was wading in dark water.

It makes me want to stay on land.  
But now I hear her in the garage  
not crying, but cursing at my father,  
and my brother's door is dark,  
and a sinkhole opens in my chest.

The random's name is Johnathan and he picks me up  
in a light blue Hyundai. He's in college,  
not quite twenty-five like my mother thought.

But he has his own apartment  
and he takes me there  
where I waded into that dark water,  
sometimes looking at my phone  
to see when it will start glowing and screaming,  
my father coming to the house to check on us  
and finding me gone.

But it never does.  
He never does.

*In ISAP for skipping art: Part (?)*

We are allowed up for a bathroom break  
all at once  
so Mr. West can escort us  
with the help of Mr. Upton, the security guard.

Except this time, Mr. West waves  
everyone out—when I get to the door  
he holds his arm out to block me

and my heart turns into a rat  
fast and dirty  
looking for a hole to hide in  
or maybe a limb to chew off.

I stare at the door starting  
to swing closed, wondering  
if this will be the day I howl.

But then his arm reaches out again, catches  
the door, props it open. Turns back inside  
the classroom, gestures for me  
to follow.

He comes to the desk I was sitting in  
last week, the one I sent Deja a photo of.  
The words are still there, of course, and we both  
stare at them. I feel the heat on my face  
like it's hell.

*This you?* he says, nodding down, his frown  
so deep I can't see the bottom.

I nod too.

He frowns more, staring me in my eyes,  
and then his hand lifts, offering me something silver.

A razor blade.

*Here*, he says. *Scratch that shit out.*

I reach, and my fingers are shaking,  
and I take the blade and use it  
to render the words invisible, slow  
at first and then faster, turning  
it all into a scar.

He watches, shaking his head.  
*Fuck these kids*, he says,  
then goes back to his desk  
and nods to Diana Ross.

*If only a razor blade fixed everything.*

This is not an allusion to suicide  
or even mass violence.

I'm just wishing  
I could take that silver metal  
in my fist

and scratch it through my life  
until every ugly thing that has been true  
is no longer.

*Blake Felipe was staring at me today in the cafeteria*

with no smile on her mouth, even as her friends  
whirled and chirped around her the way  
happy girls do. I was sitting by the windows  
imagining I was one of the red leaves blowing toward oblivion outside  
and she was at the table that she was born to sit at  
but for some reason she was staring  
at me, even when I switched to the other side of the table,  
even when I looked down  
and then up again,  
even when I turned my back  
and then glanced in her direction.

It's not like high school movies,  
where the cool girls are rattlesnakes  
and girls like me are tripped  
into plates full of ketchup. Rather  
there is a wall that separates us  
a line we don't cross,  
a beach of untouched sand stretching between us,

and Blake staring at me  
the way she was  
stepped upon that beach  
though I don't know why.

I haven't slept with her boyfriend,  
but maybe one of her friends  
has a boyfriend I slept with  
without realizing it.

By the time I look again, she's gone  
but I can't get the expression on her face  
out of my head

even if I don't know what it meant.

*Mariah the misanthrope is crying in drive-thru*

and I tell her to sit on the floor of the booth  
before customers see her and wonder  
what the fuck is going on.

Terry the pervy manager has gone to the bank  
to get us change for the hundreds in our drawers  
so Mariah sits at my feet while I take orders  
for beef and cheddars while also  
running the cash register. I glance down  
at her occasionally and can't see her face  
buried in her hands. Every few minutes  
I pass her down stiff brown napkins,  
the Meat Palace logo catching her tears,

and I almost say  
*I didn't think you were the kind of girl who cried*  
but being a misanthrope  
doesn't mean anything  
when it comes to  
a broken heart.

*My brother asks me to bring home mozzarella sticks*

and I smile, even if I'm annoyed  
that he waited until 7:58  
when I clock out  
at 8:00. But I drop the sticks  
into the boiling grease,  
stare down at them as they  
transform.

I think I'm probably losing my mind  
at this point, comparing  
myself to mozzarella sticks,

but how can I not  
when they are submerged  
in burn, transforming,  
when Sarah said  
I'm going to hell?

*I didn't expect Justin to be at our house, but I should have.*

He has become like a mole on my brother's face:  
I'm having trouble remembering what David  
looks like without Justin  
slumped by his side, always the same smell  
coming off him in waves:

Weed and cats  
Weed and cats  
Weed and cats

I don't think my brother's gay—  
he called me a carpet muncher  
when I told him I had a crush  
on a girl in ninth grade—but I guess  
David being gay doesn't mean  
David can't also be cruel.

But I can't explain why else Justin  
would have turned my brother into Velcro.  
They're standing there in the kitchen  
when I walk in, and the smell of cigarettes  
tells me my mother is in the garage, smoking  
and probably/definitely crying.

I stare at my brother and he stares back,  
nods at the bag.  
“Is that for us?”

“No,” I say.  
“It's for you.”

“Same thing” says Justin

and he doesn't say it the way a boyfriend would  
not flirty or funny.

He says it the way kudzu would speak  
of the car it has swallowed:

*We're the same thing. This is mine now.*

MONDAY, DECEMBER 3

*In the morning I usually avoid the mirror:*

I don't think I actually look like myself until noon  
after the puffiness of a half-slept night has worn off.

But today I look in the full-length mirror that hangs on my wall  
standing there in my bra and underwear that don't match,  
my hair piled on top of my head. My legs had gotten skinny  
for a while, with no track, no weight room.  
They look like they've changed again now:  
the result of my daily sprints to the bus stop, perhaps,  
or maybe all the Meat Palace.

Staring at my legs  
I remember how they once felt  
carrying me around the track,  
one stride at a time, one breath  
at a time. The never-ending  
*strike swish strike*  
as my legs carried me on and on,  
part of a beautiful, complicated machine.

My body felt  
powerful  
capable  
brimming with joy,  
part of me.

Now I feel like Dorothy,  
tumbled out of a tornado  
into a strange land.

I don't recognize any part

of myself. When I stare too long  
at any one extremity  
hands  
ankles  
I feel a swell of something  
like grief, words in my head  
repeating

Those aren't mine  
Those aren't mine  
I'm not mine

*When I leave for school, Justin and my brother are  
sleeping on couches*

the TV still on. My mother's car is gone  
so she must have gone to work.

That means she walked right past them  
and didn't wake them,  
didn't reach for the remote  
to shut everything up.

I imagine her pausing at the door,  
looking back at what her life has become  
and saying  
*Fuck it.*

*On the bus, I stare down at my khaki legs*

wrinkled and with a grease stain near the knee.  
I wear the same pants to school as I do to work.  
I'm sure my classmates sit in physics and wonder  
where the smell of beef is wafting from  
but I don't care. I heard someone say once

that girls don't dress for boys, that they dress  
for other girls, that we're more interested in impressing  
our own sex than the opposite. Sometimes I hear  
a game show host in my head say things  
like an announcement over the speaker at Walmart:  
*Heteronormative, ladies and gentlemen,*  
the voice says now,  
*what about everybody gay?*  
*Everyone neither lady*  
*nor gentleman?*

Either way  
I don't dress for anyone.  
More so, I dress for no one.

Boys don't actually care  
what you wear, just what's under  
it, and they really don't care  
about that either if they're being honest,  
and they rarely are.

*The new girl/Geneva is sitting with someone in the  
cafeteria*

A boy.

He's white with a nice haircut—a senior

I think, with a name like

Nathaniel

or Sebastian

or Alexander.

Something long

like his eyelashes

and I feel a stab of something

green in my stomach,

another kind of envy

than the plant that blooms

when I stare at Blake Felipe.

This plant has ragged edges

and I tell myself it's because

Geneva and the boy each have someone

to sit with in the cafeteria

and not because

they're sitting

so close.

*Guess what, Sarah?*

I'm sinning again.  
This time Jacob Wheeler  
wants to give me a ride  
to work.

We used to run track  
together—he was more into  
cross-country, if I remember  
right.

He catches me at the bus stop  
and says *hey*.

We're not even out  
of the parking lot  
before his hand  
appears on  
my thigh.

*Jacob Wheeler doesn't actually try to get in my pants.*

When his hand went to my leg  
he was trying to wipe off  
the grease stain near my knee.

*I thought it was from my car*  
he says, and sounds embarrassed.

*It's grease, I say.*  
*From work.*

*Oh. Okay.*

We ride in silence. He seems  
to already know where to go—  
I guess my Meat Palace shirt  
is direction enough.

We're pulling into the parking lot  
when he finally speaks  
asks me why

I don't run track anymore:

I was so good  
I was so fast  
Didn't I set a record

Yes I was  
Yes I was  
Yes I did

But I don't say it out loud: those words  
have sharp edges and snag  
in my throat. Instead I say

*I just have other priorities right now  
and am out of the car  
before he can ask what they are,  
before he can see  
the tears that emerge  
for the first time since  
the Day.  
Thanks for the ride, though*

*Work is a good distraction*

especially when Stephanie is the shift manager.

She says *Terry will be in later,*

almost as a warning,

and I say *But not yet?*

And she shakes her head.

Mariah comes out of drive-thru

mascara intact

and says

*Crank it.*

Stephanie turns up the lobby music

even though there are two old ladies

in a booth and they look

offended by the three girls

dancing by the soda machine,

one of them—me—

singing into a mop.

## *Snapshot of a(n) (im)perfect girl*

If someone were to peek through the Meat Palace window  
at me doing fast-food karaoke  
and this was all they knew of my life  
and this was the only part of me they ever saw,  
they would think that everything was fine:

That this snapshot,  
this moment,

was a perfect teenage girl  
living a perfect teenage life

and while I am here  
with this song playing  
that is what I will pretend  
to be.

*I'm not scheduled for Saturday and Sunday*

and I ask Stephanie why.

*You requested off a long time ago, I thought?*

*Don't you have a wedding to go to?*

Stephanie knows my life better than I do.

Tomorrow morning we're going to Cincinnati  
for my dad's sister's third wedding.

My mom isn't coming  
and my brother is.

I try to imagine what this car ride will be like,  
stare at the floor I just mopped

and entertain the idea  
of slipping, breaking my leg.

No point.

I would still have to go, even though a cast  
would ruin Aunt Linda's photos.

*My father is always on time.*

He's waiting at the end of the driveway,  
not bothering to come and knock.

My mother seems relieved to watch us go,  
especially my brother.  
I imagine her fumigating the house  
while we're gone,  
trying to get the smell  
of weed and cats  
out of the couch Justin lounges on  
like it's his own.

David gets in the front seat and I don't even argue.  
I imagine the backseat as a ditch  
on a battlefield, safe-ish  
from flying artillery.

But no one argues. My dad is an expert  
at pretending everything is fine,  
and my brother actually smiles,  
tells Dad a story from school.

I should be happy, relieved  
that the two hours to Cincinnati  
are peaceful, but I can't help but feel  
everyone in the car is wearing a mask,  
especially me.

*The dress Aunt Linda wants me to wear is pink*

and looks terrible with the neon poison of my head.

*Is there...anything you can do about your hair?*

She says it with her mouth twisting in that same way  
my father's does.

*Nope, it's permanent,* and I turn away before  
she can see me smile.

My mother hates the color of my hair  
but I think she'd be happy that it pisses off Aunt Linda.

They never liked each other.

## *The thing about weddings*

is that everyone gets drunk, and no one notices  
if the teenagers do too.

I sneak a little to drink but I've never liked alcohol  
and leave it sitting on someone's table.

I find my brother at the edge of the hotel ballroom  
watching my dad's family make fools of themselves

on the dance floor while Aunt Linda walks around  
posing for pictures. Her dress follows her  
like an ivory puddle, and after I stand there  
next to David for a full ten minutes  
he says out of nowhere

*Remember when Aunt Linda hosted the family reunion?*

Yes.

*She looks like she made that dress out of the curtains in her bathroom.*

and we both laugh forever  
remembering that bathroom  
    all yellow-white lace  
    all chipped porcelain statues of Jesus and lambs  
    all damp hand towels with tattered edges

we laugh louder than the music  
and it feels so good to be  
on the same team  
even for a moment  
even at the expense  
of someone else.

*While everyone is slow dancing*

I stand out on the balcony alone, without a coat,  
even though it's December and the chill has set in.

I look out at Cincinnati and think about moving here—  
moving anywhere.

College is on everyone's mind, and next year  
I'll have to start applying.

Or at least pretend to. Currently I plan to lie  
and say I didn't get in anywhere.

Maybe I'll work at Meat Palace my entire life.

There's a woman named Debbie at work who has.

Cincinnati has Meat Palace.

*In the back of my head there's a whisper*

but it's not exactly words.

The feeling of my feet striking track

The sound of my breath in my own ears

The slow crawl of sweat at the nape of my neck

The swing of my ponytail at the top of my shoulders

The way the whole world fades around me,

my lungs the only adversary, and also my only partner,

my muscles part of that beautiful, complicated machine that

Lets

Me

Run

And then the whisper becomes words:

*You could run again.*

*You could run in college.*

*Coach Young always said you could.*

*You could go to the Olympics.*

And that's where I smash the whisper with my fist,

because sometimes it seems absurd to wish

for things I know I don't deserve.

How could I?

Look what I am.

*On the way home, my dad is glowing*

the way he always does when he has been around his family.

*I should really move to Cincinnati, he says.*

*I should. My whole family is there.*

*Not us, David says, and I'm so shocked I twist  
the hem of my shirt in my hands, saying nothing.*

*You can come visit me, Dad says, so cheerful.  
He has already decided.*

He has already decided to extricate himself  
from the wound of this former life.

*Linda was so beautiful, wasn't she? he says.*

*What a wedding.*

*What a third wedding, David says,  
and my hands go on twisting.*

*What's the big deal? Dad laughs.  
She's a woman who knows what she wants.  
Sometimes you have to kiss a few frogs  
before you find a prince.*

I wonder what he would think of my frogs.  
I wonder if he would still call me princess.

*Cincinnati sucks, David says,  
All they have is chili.*

Only then do I speak:  
*With noodles, I say.*

*With noodles, David says.*

*Sunday nights*

Are like

Waiting for a bus to hit you

Standing in a baseball field  
watching a ball hurtling toward your forehead

Walking through a desert about to drink  
your last drop of water

Climbing a fence knowing  
there's a tiger on the other side.

Not a tiger.  
A wolf.  
Always a wolf.

*Monday it finally happens:*

Someone's boyfriend told their girlfriend  
that he had messed around with me  
while they were "on a break."

A girl named Audrey who I've spoken to  
only once comes up to my locker  
with a lot of foul names  
but no fists, and I've encountered  
enough of the former already  
to be able to turn my back.

My shoulders absorb the rest of her words:

*That's why he's my boyfriend  
but you're just a skank.  
He doesn't care about you.*

That's the only time I say anything back:  
*Audrey, what makes you think I care about him?*

*It's not until she walks away that I see the note*

Slipped into the grille of my locker, white and creased  
like a fancy dinner napkin.

When I open it, the words are blue, sweeping  
and smeared:

*I know about him*

I almost laugh  
because apparently Audrey  
isn't the only one whose HIM  
I have crossed paths with

and somewhere underneath my layers  
of shell, of skin-turned-armor,  
something raw and pulpy  
like the inside of a clam  
twinges

I should feel bad  
I should feel something

Mostly what I feel is relieved  
that all these random HIMs  
distract me from the HIM  
that's as specific as  
a scalpel.

But there's something else—  
the blue ink, the circles for i's.

It's the only kind of note I've gotten  
this year, and an eel

twitches in the bog of my gut.

Something that wants me to notice.

Something I'm not ready to look at.

Something I can't bear to see.

## *Things They Call Me: An Updated List*

- Slut
- Hoe, a derivative of Whore
- Whore, obviously
- Girl with daddy issues
- Attention whore, which is different than just Whore, apparently
- Only Good for One Thing
- Lightbulb
- Lunchbox
- Pathetic
- Whoremione
- Liar
- Dyke
- *Skank*

*I don't have ISAP for two days and it feels like returning to Earth from a space shuttle.*

Mrs. Fisher says,  
*I'd almost forgotten what you looked like!*

And I don't know if she means it to be funny  
or cruel

but the class laughs  
either way.

## *Texts with Deja*

**Deja:** Mrs. Fisher just mad that her ass looks like a pancake in those pocketless parachutes she struts around in

**Alicia:** I think she likes the pancake look

**Deja:** speaking of pancakes, come with me on Saturday to this new brunch spot

**Alicia:** ...brunch

**Deja:** Breakfast + lunch dummy

**Alicia:** I know what brunch is! But that sounds so...

**Deja:** Bougie?

**Alicia:** lol yes

**Deja:** So wear a dress. Come on it will be fun

**Alicia:** Saturday?

**Deja:** Don't tell me you have to work. Meat Palace doesn't serve breakfast

**Alicia:** Yes we do!

**Deja:** Omg don't say WE

**Alicia:** lmao fine

**Deja:** good

*I run to the bus stop after school*

but I'm early and my shift doesn't start until  
four. I pause, wondering  
if I could make it there in forty-five minutes  
if I walked fast.  
Or if I jogged.

If I ran.

I hook my thumbs in my backpack loops  
and start down Baker.

With the backpack on my back,  
even empty of books,  
it feels like conditioning:

My mind races back to freshman year  
when Coach Young had us run  
and run  
and run

Relays, sprints, v-sits, butt-kicks, box jumps

My muscles seem to twitch inside my khakis  
remembering, knowing, missing.

The memories feel like an injection,  
fill me to buzzing.

It buzzes all the way up to my head,  
the afternoons spent in the sun  
and then when the leaves began to sweep down,  
running the halls on rainy days.

It was raining the first time, That Day last March.  
That's how I knew the Colonel was still in his classroom,

how I saw the always-open door.

That memory pushes all the buzzing down,  
out. My muscles begin to ache, feel heavy.

I stop running.

I get to work late.

*I smell cat and weed as soon as I get home*

and know immediately that Justin is here,  
that my brother has returned home from Cincinnati  
and picked up right where he left off.

*Is Mom at work?* I ask.  
Her car isn't here, so she's somewhere.

He shrugs, doesn't look at me.  
He and Justin are on laptops  
playing a game involving orcs  
and elves. I can hear the screams  
of damsels in distress.

Justin glances up, eyeing me  
as if wondering why I'm still here.  
Here where I live  
Here in my house  
Here in my own home

He sees me staring back says  
*Can I help you?*

*Don't you have somewhere to be?*  
and I try to make my voice as sharp  
as I feel, imagine myself a thorn  
in his shoe. He just goes on staring,  
silent, and I hate the look  
in his eyes, the way he makes me feel  
small, exposed. I hate the way  
my brother sees nothing.

Eventually I look away and I go to my room,  
close the door so the smell of Justin

can't sneak into my carpet.

I lock the door for good measure.

*Texts with my mother*

**Her:** I'm at dinner with some friends

**Alicia:** Who?

**Her:** Old friends from my last school

**Alicia:** Oh okay. I'm home just fyi

**Her:** Of course you are—it's 10 o'clock! ;)

**Alicia:** haha yeah

*It never occurs to her that I may be somewhere other than where I say I am.*

She doesn't even know  
that Sarah and I are no longer  
friends. I wonder sometimes  
when I use Sarah as an alibi  
if one day my mom will run into her  
at the grocery store  
and every lie, every alibi,  
will explode right there  
in the produce section  
like an overripe melon.

My mother works as the secretary  
at an elementary school two miles  
away. She switched from a middle school  
because everyone  
from the kids to the principal  
was "raised in a barn,"  
according to her.

She never talked about friends,  
she never talked about anyone  
except her boss who was a functioning  
alcoholic and would sip from a flask  
between parent conferences.

"Dinner with friends."  
It has never occurred to me  
that my mother may be somewhere  
other than where she says  
she is.

*She's probably dating and I would be happy*

at the idea of her kicking my father  
to the curb of her mind

except the idea that she is at dinner  
holding hands while I am floating

in the silent, empty world  
my life has become

makes my whole room blur  
with something like tears

but that might also be nausea.  
My mother feels alone, just her

and the garage, the lawn chair,  
the phone pressed against her face

while my grandma tells her she "never  
should have married that silver-spoon shithead."

Loneliness has a way of turning forests  
into trees: the whole disappears,

a single trunk remaining. I think again  
of kudzu, the way the vines swarm

up the trunk and swallow everything  
whole. Something is eating me alive

and right now I want to call my mom  
but my mouth is full of vines

and in the end I just lie down  
to sleep.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 6

*Mr. Hudson asks where my homework is*

and he must be surprised when I laugh, because his eyebrows shoot up to the middle of his forehead.

I slept for only three hours last night—  
the rest of the time I spent shifting,  
sure I felt fingers at the edge of my shirt,  
prying at the top of the sheet.

My best dreams are about running  
so fast the wind can't catch me.  
My worst dreams are about trying to run  
and my muscles collapsing in columns of wet cement,  
wolves snapping at my heels.

So when Mr. Hudson asks where my homework is  
all I can do is laugh because wearing a mask  
feels impossible when everything is this wrong.

He asks why I'm laughing and I'm so tired  
I'm honest:

*For a history teacher,  
you're pretty terrible at learning from it.  
I haven't turned in homework in four weeks—  
what the hell makes you think  
you're going to get it today?*

He'd been teaching about this or that war  
and now bombs drop all over his face.

I'm in ISAP five minutes later,  
Mr. West shaking his head, pointing at a seat.

I don't bother playing spades on my phone.  
Aretha Franklin sings me to sleep.

*Mr. West escorts us to the cafeteria for lunch*

Where we have to sit at the ISAP table,  
not allowed to talk  
to the general population  
only eat in silence among each other  
which is perfect for me.

But over the course of those thirty minutes  
I find three separate pairs of eyes  
watching me:

1. Blake Felipe. Again. Her expression is cold. She's with another senior, collecting box lunches for a senior trip. She stares at me the entire way to the door, eyes like smooth ice.
2. Audrey. She sits next to her again-boyfriend, smirking at me like a cat with cream. She doesn't understand that if she is a cat, I am a lizard, and lizards don't give a fuck about cream.
3. Geneva. She doesn't stare like the other two. Her eyes wander like two searchlights crossing a swamp, but they always come back to me.

*Geneva stops to say hi.*

She has already dropped her tray off  
and stands with her hands empty,  
one reaching as if to tap my shoulder  
but I'm already turning around  
when she arrives at my table.

*Keep moving, young lady, Mr. West says,  
These students are in ISAP.*

He says it just as her lips are parting to speak  
and they twist closed again like a shy blossom  
when she hears his voice.

In the end she just waves with one  
of those delicate painter's hands.

I wave back but I want to kiss  
her palm.

*If Sundays are:*

a bus

a baseball

a desert,

Fridays are:

a horse and carriage

a Nerf ball

an oasis

Not without risk

but a hell of a lot safer

than the other stuff.

*Tomorrow I'm getting brunch with Deja*

and I feel more nervous than I do when I'm opening the door  
to a car I've never been in.

In the car scenario  
everything there is to fear  
I have already seen.

In the brunch scenario  
I open myself up to a different kind of trauma:

the Sarah kind,  
the kind that slices past the skin  
and all the way to the heart.

There should be a special word  
for the kind of heartbreak  
that comes not from a lover  
but from a friend.

*Brunch is like breakfast but everyone is more awake.*

Everything in the restaurant is made up of bright colors,  
including the people, everyone more dressed up  
than they would be for breakfast.

It's called Chicken or the Egg  
and there's a paleo section on the menu  
that I'm staring at—trying to understand  
what paleo actually is—when Deja  
and her friends arrive.

I knew it wouldn't be just the two  
of us but I still feel awkward,  
like Pinocchio string-walking  
to the booth we're led to,  
sitting down among  
real girls, flesh and blood  
beside dull wood.

But Deja is a butterfly  
and to her we are all flowers:  
her attentions flutter between us,  
bringing us together.

I'm glad I wore something  
other than my work pants  
for once.

## *Brunch conversations*

*Deja: One more year and we can shake this place off like dandruff!*

*Amanda: Eww! I'm eating! Why are you so nasty?*

*Deja: The school is nasty, not me! Right, Alicia?*

*Alicia: You can get shampoo for dandruff. I don't think there's a cure for Marshall.*

*Denise: That's high school in general though.*

*Deja: Nah, there's something extra trifling about Marshall. Can't put my finger on it.*

*Amanda: Maybe if you weren't in ISAP all the time...!*

*Deja: When I'm in ISAP it's to make a statement. Alicia knows. They're always policing Black girls' hair but never say nothing to Alicia about hers.*

*Amanda: Maybe because Alicia doesn't give teachers no lip!*

*Isis: (arriving late) You must not know Alicia very well!*

*We all laugh.*

Even me, after what Isis said.  
It's funny because Isis doesn't know me either  
but she knows something *about* me,

something that has nothing to do  
with whose car I've been in  
whose floor my bra has been on

but rather  
the fire that comes out  
of my mouth when Mrs. Fisher  
or Mr. Hudson looks at me  
the wrong way.

We all order variations of pancakes  
and it's nice to have this new aspect  
of my reputation  
precede me.

*Deja's friends are nothing like Sarah.*

They say what they think and silences  
are only because someone is checking their phone.  
It's nice to be around people who tell you what they're thinking  
without having to guess,  
without having to stare at the gaps  
and wonder what's behind them,  
inside them.

*Everyone says Andrea is dating Mike now,*  
Denise says, pouring a cascade of amber over her pancakes.

*He doesn't act like he has a girlfriend,* I say,  
and all eyes hover on my face, eyebrows raised.

*What does that mean?* A smile starts  
at the corner of Denise's lip like spilled syrup.

*Nothing,* I say. If she's spilled syrup I feel  
like I've spilled ketchup  
or cranberry.  
Blood.

Something that stains.

But Deja laughs, a sound like cracking ice,  
and it melts a piece of something in me:

I'm not proud of everything I do  
but her laugh tells me maybe  
there's a different thing to feel  
than shame.

*Deja's friends aren't mine yet.*

It sounds bad but I've never really  
hung out with Black girls before,  
not because I didn't want to  
but because it just didn't happen—

I learned about gerrymandering  
on TikTok and I know it's about elections  
but sometimes it feels like our lives  
are gerrymandered too—my middle school  
as white as cave fish, and Marshall  
not much different. They split

the “gifted” kids off in their own classes  
but Deja is the smartest person  
I've ever met and she's not in them.

Until now it's just been Sarah—  
Sarah by my side since  
second grade. I'm the kind of person  
who has always been satisfied  
with one good friend, even when the “good”  
starts to wear thin. That's the problem  
with having all your eggs in one basket  
as my grandma would've said. One breaks  
and then what do you have?

She never actually said what you would have,  
but the answer is a lonely mess.

And it's too soon to call Deja's friends  
mine  
but as we leave brunch, all of us walking  
for the same bus stop,

I allow myself to watch them, imagining  
what could be.

They talk about church but the Bible doesn't fall out of their mouths like  
fists.

They talk about boyfriends and boundaries and basketball.  
They call each other on their shit, they laugh and laugh.

Their hairstyles are the balance of math  
and poetry: there are specific rules being followed,  
a formula I don't quite know, but there is the rhythm and loveliness  
of poems—color and light and texture  
all coming together in the form of braids  
and swoops and waves.

Deja sees me watching and smiles:  
*What? Do I have something on my face?*

*Just your face*, I say, which is something  
I used to say to my brother, and him to me,  
but now I'm saying it to her and she's laughing  
and I wonder  
if this is how family  
is chosen.

*The westbound bus comes first.*

Everyone catches it but me and Isis.

We wave when it pulls off and I expect awkwardness to flutter down from the sky and land between us like a flock of birds. But Isis is on the dance team, peppy, all teeth and eyes.

She looks me up and down while we shiver, says *Can you dance? We need two more people.*

When I tell her I don't know, she laughs: *How do you not know if you can dance?*

*I've never tried.*

*Well honestly that probably means you can't right now, but it doesn't mean you can't ever.*

We laugh at that, at the erasure of a fairy tale: the lie that one can Cinderella (verb) a skill: rags of rhythm to the riches of the complicated routines I've seen her team execute.

She eyes me again.

*Do you do sports, though? You've got body! What do you do with it?*

I hate that my first thought is Adam  
the Colonel  
randoms  
in my head like pollution,  
clouding my thoughts.

*Deja says you used to run track, she says.*

She doesn't notice the left my brain has taken in the traffic of this conversation. *What happened?*

*A lot, I answer.*

*An injury? Whatever happened, you've gotta rehab that.  
Some things just take time but  
you'll be running again soon.*

The wounds she imagines are so different than what are.

I don't know how she can be right.

The break inside me  
is not a sprained ankle.

*My mom isn't at home the next two nights*

but David is, with Justin and the other carpet stains  
he calls friends. I wait for him to come upstairs  
for more snacks to ask him:

*Is Mom working extra shifts?*

*She said she was meeting friends, he says,*  
not looking at me.

*What friends?*

*How should I know?*

I feel like the mother of a teenager,  
sit in her chair waiting for her to come home,  
ignore the texts from guys on my phone  
while I stare at the door.

9pm. 10pm. I have to sleep  
or waking up to catch the bus  
will be impossible. I send her a text

*I waited up for you*

then turn off my phone.

*The new girl/Geneva is waiting at my locker Monday morning.*

I see her at the end of the hall like a comet  
smoldering into Earth's atmosphere.

I almost turn around, break  
for the exit.

But she sees me before  
I can disappear.

I'm drawn to her like a worm  
to warm soil.

*Hi, she says. I was wondering  
if I could ask you something.*

I brace myself. What question  
could possibly exist

that would bring her into  
my universe?

*Sure, I say.*

*Sure.*

*Could you maybe not cuss out Mrs. Fisher  
today? Because I'd like to sit with you*

*at lunch, and you being in ISAP  
makes that really hard.*

I don't know how long I stare  
at her, waiting for words to come.

Her smile answers anyway.

*Good, she says.*

*I bite my tongue when Mrs. Fisher says*

*Look who's here!*

as if the reason I'm in ISAP every day isn't her,  
as if every day she doesn't dangle herself  
like a red cape before a bull. Today her eyes  
sweep down over me, looking for uniform  
infractions, settle for a moment on the stain  
near my knee. I go to my desk.

My classmates ignore me, except Shane  
Balter, who flips paper wads at my hunched  
shoulders. It is incredible to me  
that boys are allowed to be boys  
for so long, while girls  
are made women years before  
we're ready.

## *Thoughts on "maturity"*

Teachers, parents, family, strangers  
always call girls  
"mature."

Serious  
stern  
responsible  
girls.

Thoughtful  
reliable  
trustworthy  
girls.

As I got older, my body pushing  
against the inside of my cartoon T-shirts,  
*mature* took on a different definition.

*You're so mature for your age*  
said the man at the gas station  
when I came inside to pay for my dad.

*You look so much older. You act*  
*so much older* whispers every man  
trying to convince me that giving them  
my phone number is appropriate,  
explaining how we are the same.

From first grade to eleventh  
when a boy has hit me, screamed  
in my direction, goofed off while the girls  
sat in their seats and obeyed,  
I have been told

*Girls mature faster than boys*

and when I was younger I would take it  
as a compliment but now that I'm sixteen  
and I've seen the way it all plays out  
year after year, I've realized

it's not a compliment—  
it's a scam.

*Scam or not*

I keep my mouth shut in Mrs. Fisher's class, even  
when she tells me she's taking points off  
my homework for using a pen  
instead of pencil.

I stare at her back.

*At least I did it*

*At least I tried*

*At least I'm here*

and I can feel the curse words  
bubbling in my throat like oil

but on the other side of this hour  
is the cafeteria  
and in it waits  
Geneva.

*She already has her food when I get there*

and I'm too anxious to eat, but I slide through  
the line anyway, just to give myself time  
to collect myself, to gather  
all these feelings like fish into a net.

The white guy she sits with sometimes  
Nathaniel/Sebastian/Alexander  
is nowhere in sight

and I wonder if she's dumped him  
or if he's sick  
or maybe he's in ISAP  
and she's traded us out  
like Pokémon cards.

The seat across from her is cool  
against my butt and I focus on that,  
not the heat of her eyes  
like two lamps over a lizard tank.

She smiles vaguely, like she's surprised  
I'm here, or maybe pleased, or maybe  
like she forgot she'd even asked me  
to come. *Hey* she says, and I say *hey*  
back, and she says, *So,*  
*here you are. Alicia.*

I nod, swallow back the swelling  
in my throat at the sound of my name  
from those lips.

I haven't kissed a girl since Renée.  
Am I still bi if I've kissed a dozen

(or more) guys  
and only one girl? Am I still bi  
if one kiss has filled my dreams  
for four years, but not my life?

*I'm Geneva*, she says, and I say *I know*,  
and she takes a bite of her apple  
with a curve of her lips like I have told  
a very clever joke.

*Well now we know each other*, she says,  
and smiles more when I say *Yeah*.

*One of Geneva's eyes is squintier than the other*

and her nose has the slightest angle.

She doesn't pluck the hair between  
her eyebrows, and one is perpetually raised.

She clenches her teeth on one side,  
so her jaw looks sharper on the right.

Her chin is the only thing that's mirror-  
image: sharp and short.

Someone in art history said that symmetry  
is beauty  
and that person—  
    whoever he was—  
was an idiot.

*But I still cut art.*

The promise of Geneva and her paint-covered hands  
is sometimes enough to pass the Colonel's classroom  
but when I aim my feet for studio,  
they take me to the library instead  
and so I follow, wandering through the aisles,  
feeling like a raccoon avoiding porch light  
as I evade teachers walking laps  
to keep an eye on their students.

That's when I find Deja, tucked  
into the back of the history stacks,  
knees drawn up to her chest, eyes  
flowing over the pages.  
She doesn't even notice me  
until I sit down, when she jumps,  
then smiles. *Let me guess,*  
she says. *Cutting.*

I shrug and we read, her *The Color Purple*  
and me a random book I pull from the shelf  
about Greek mythology, flipping  
past tridents and Pegasus, everyone shirtless  
and carrying either lambs or lightning.

When I get to Medusa I pause  
because I know her name but not much else,  
only that the snakes that are growing  
from her head are less frightening  
than the hell in her eyes  
and the book is mostly text  
but it feels like looking  
into a mirror.

*"What's that about?"*

Deja is peering over my shoulder at Medusa's snakes and I whisper the short caption:

**One of the three monstrous Gorgons, generally described as winged human females living in caves, venomous snakes in place of hair. Those who gazed into her eyes would be turned to stone.**

Deja nods, familiar, and we both agree that, if we could, there are a number of people at Marshall who we would gladly stare into statues. I ask about her book, which she holds up, looking thoughtful:

*I think you'd like it, she says.*

*Why?*

*Because I think these ladies love each other.*

*Oh. I mean...okay. Why do you like it?*

*Because it's about a Black woman finding her freedom. It kinda reads like poetry.*

*Do you write poetry?*

*A little. I write about love but it's hard sometimes. I think my ideas about love are different than everybody else's.*

*How?*

*People seem to think so much  
about skin. I don't want anyone  
to touch me and it's not because  
anyone hurt me—it's just because  
sex isn't something I'm interested  
in. But I could write poems  
about love  
forever.*

*People have sex without  
love all the time. You  
should be able to have  
love without  
sex.*

*You think so?*

*If somebody says you  
can't, then I'll turn them  
to stone. How's that?*

*It's a plan, Stan.*

*We sit shoulder to shoulder*

in the stacks  
until the bell  
rings.

I learn  
ISAP isn't

the only  
place to find  
peace.

*This time Coach Tinsley is waiting at the bus stop*

and I don't see him until it's too late, until I'm already  
panting to a stop after my sprint from Mr. Mattson's class.

*We meet again!* he jokes, and I try not to roll my eyes,  
at least not where he can see. I keep my eye on the road  
waiting for the bus to appear. One thing  
about getting faster  
is that I'm here earlier every day, more time  
to wait, more time to be seen.

In the corner of my eye, the track team  
is moving down the block toward the track,  
and I think I see the tall figure of Jacob Wheeler  
paused, watching the bus stop.

Coach sees him too. *Jacob tells me you used to run!*  
*I'm new, as you know. I had no idea...*

He goes on, thinking he's giving me  
this big pitch: they need more girls,  
they need more 400-meter runners,  
more girls for relay, just  
more girls. I'm fast.

I seem in shape. Not much conditioning.

There's a meet in three weeks.

I could be part of a team, part of something,

I could get scouted for college...

But behind him the school doors are opening,  
the sound of squeaking steel,  
and the Colonel appears  
in the sunlight like a shark fin  
cutting above the waves.

I should have known  
that today felt too  
smooth.

*What do you say?* Coach Tinsley says, grinning,  
stupid, oblivious. *Come meet the team next week.*  
*You know athletes get to skip class sometimes, right?*

I can't look at him. I don't know if he is man  
or wolf or just too young to know  
what world he's walking in.

But the bus has come to save me  
and I let it bear me away without giving  
him an answer.

*Another headline about a celebrity who DMed a teenager*

They all blur together eventually: actors  
singers, priests, presidents,  
teachers, mentors, respected  
members of society.

Everyone is always so surprised  
when the fleece comes off,  
when the wolf is unsheathed:

everyone clutches  
their pearls

meanwhile  
in the shadows  
there are always girls  
and boys  
who heard the howls

when everybody else  
was too busy clapping  
or saying  
*amen.*

## *Texts with Deja*

**Deja:** Can I ask you a question?

**Alicia:** I might not have an answer, but sure

**Deja:** What does it feel like to want sex? Like...sexual attraction. Desire. What's that like?

**Alicia:** ooh awkward

**Deja:** 😬

**Alicia:** ok fine. I mean, it's hard to describe. It's just...there. Somewhere between fire and ache. Like your skin is hungry for that person. Like your body is alive, but more than just your heart beating. Like it's directing your brain to seek out touch. Idk. Does that make sense?

**Deja:** NOPE

**Alicia:** welp

**Deja:** My friends always say that I just haven't met the right person, and when I do I'll feel different about sex and attraction. But I really don't think so.

**Alicia:** I feel like you probably know yourself better than anybody else does.

**Deja:** My sister said, "Just wait, you feel like this now, but one day you'll bloom like a sunflower." But I already feel like a sunflower. I'm open, golden, glowing.

**Alicia:** I hate when people act like who you are is a phase.

**Deja:** Why do people find a way to think something is wrong with a girl no matter what?

One minute we're not supposed to be having sex, but as soon as a girl doesn't want to have sex with ANYBODY, something's wrong with that too? "Oh you're secretly gay."  
Or, with Black girls, "Oh your standards are too high."

**Alicia:** Idk, I still think virgins have the easiest time. Comparatively speaking.

**Deja:** Nah. No one has the easiest time, see? It's like a kaleidoscope duct-taped to a sniper rifle. Everything so pretty until the crosshairs turn on.

**Alicia:** Hm true. The rules always change

**Deja:** Who makes the rules? Let's beat their ass

**Alicia:** Arthur-fist.gif

## *More texts with Deja*

**Deja:** btw Isis said she saw you talking to Coach Tinsley. You thinking of running again...?



**Alicia:** I don't have time for extracurriculars

**Deja:** What, because of work? Colleges don't care about Meat Palace, girl!

**Alicia:** I don't care about colleges, so the feeling is mutual

**Deja:** You can't work at Meat Palace your whole life

**Alicia:** Why not

**Deja:** The better question is WHY. What are you hiding from?

*Things I don't tell Deja*

My whole life is how it feels  
when you get your purse stolen.

You don't have anything of value anymore.  
You don't have a way to prove who you are  
because your ID is gone. Everything  
feels empty. You're afraid to care

about anything too much  
because what if  
it just gets  
stolen  
again?

*My mother pretends everything is normal*

and still hasn't acknowledged the text I sent her about waiting up. She moves around the kitchen making dinner, and I watch her from the doorway before she notices I'm home. Something about her looks different, some subtle adjustment to her shoulders.

I examine her for evidence of love, for traces of a new man who has straightened her spine. When her eyes catch mine, she smiles.

*Hey Turtle, I'm glad to see you,* she says, and points at all the dishes that need doing. She hasn't called me Turtle for what feels like a lifetime.

*Have you asked David?* I ask, already pushing up my sleeves.

*He's not here,* she says.  
*Just us.*

*I almost tell her.*

We're side by side and the light is low  
and somehow with both of us in shadow  
it seems like it might be easier here to say  
the words that live on the tip of my tongue:

*Adam hurt me and then the Colonel hurt me  
and now I've been hurting me  
and I need you to help me make it stop*

But my brain is a nest of hypotheticals  
and all I can think about is the questions  
she would ask:

*Why was I alone with either  
of these men, what was I wearing,  
what did I say, how did I smile,  
did I say no, or was I just silent,  
because silence doesn't count*

Plus as she hands me more dishes  
to bury in soap, she seems relaxed,  
her smile hasn't yet retreated  
to the corners of the kitchen,

and this is the first time since she kicked  
my father out that she has stayed  
in the room beside me for more  
than five minutes, and I can't bear  
to be the thing that seizes her smile  
with pliers and flings it into the dark—

I can't bear to be one more thing  
in her life that didn't turn out

exactly as she'd hoped.

*There's a blinking voicemail on the machine*

and I delete it while she puts the leftovers away,  
her back turned and oblivious.

I don't need to hear it before knowing it needs  
to disappear. It is either my father  
maybe calling on the way to Cincinnati,  
bags packed, or it is my school  
calling to express polite concern  
about the girl with poison hair  
and a poison mouth.

Neither message  
is welcome  
here.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 17

*It's actually cold now and that means coats.*

I pull out the red puffer coat I've worn  
for the last two winters—it still fits,  
but unlike last year, when my hair was still  
light brown, the color of a rabbit,  
now my head matches the coat.

I stare at myself in the mirror,  
the way I look like a warning:  
STOP  
WRONG WAY  
NO TRESPASSING

I am always thinking of myself  
as a salamander  
or a traffic signal  
and never as a girl.

I wonder if any of Medusa's  
snakes were red.

*My mother tells me to wear a hat*

but she's distracted. It's the kind of advice  
she feels required to offer. My brother  
is already gone, or maybe he's still here  
but asleep in the basement. Neither  
my mother nor I check. She offers

a ride to the bus stop but I say no.  
She doesn't know I take public,  
and she wouldn't understand  
the way the school bus  
feels like walking into the steel jaws  
of an animal trap, the kind that snaps  
the ankle, cuts through  
to the bone. She doesn't understand

that I need an option of escape,  
that a school bus driver  
doesn't have to listen,  
that there is no string to pull  
when the air begins to thicken  
in your lungs. I know what she would say:

*Isn't that the point?  
To get students to school  
without letting them get off?*

And I would say  
*Exactly*

*The cafeteria is always quiet on the first really cold day.*

The last of autumn has leaked  
out of everyone's bones  
and left chilled waiting rooms,  
everybody already thinking  
about spring,

bitter about the puffy coats  
that take up all the space  
in the slender cells of lockers.

I scan the huddled masses for Geneva,  
lower my eyes before I can find her.

I can feel people staring at me,  
at the redness of my being.

Hair.  
Coat.  
Rage.

I feel myself starting to transform  
in their eyes  
from the slutty girl  
to the scary girl  
  
and that's okay  
with me.

*The announcement speaker crackles to life*

and everyone jumps or shivers  
like the sound of it was a defibrillator's  
electrodes placed against our collective chest.

Principal Warren's voice addresses us:

*There will be a special presentation today—*

and everyone cheers, because a disrupted day  
is a good day—

*as we introduce an interim faculty member  
Dr. Kareem, who will be spending some time  
with us at Marshall as she does research  
for her university. If you see Dr. Kareem  
in the halls please welcome her warmly*

but no one really hears or cares  
no one has any intention of being warm  
no one has any intention of doing anything  
but what they had already decided to do:

sleep during Dr. Kareem's presentation.  
Myself included.

*Text from a random at 9am*

**Him:** I know it's early but are you free?

**Alicia:** I'm at school

**Him:** Don't you get a lunch break?

**Alicia:** I can't leave during break

**Him:** Maybe you can sneak out?

*It has never occurred to me to skip school*

and I stare at my phone as the bell rings,  
new wells being dug beneath me,  
caves I have yet to spelunk.

There are two security guards at Marshall  
and probably a dozen doors.  
Surely people skip all the time.

His name is Randy  
and I think I gave him my number  
at the bus stop.

His face swims  
in my memory,  
blurred with other  
faces, other days.

He hasn't seen me naked  
but wants to.

This is the part  
where I am supposed to feel wary  
about what kind of guy  
wants to pick up a girl  
for sex at 9am.

This is the part  
where survival instincts  
are supposed to rise like  
back-of-neck hairs.

This is the part  
where I'm supposed to love  
myself enough to see

that he doesn't care  
about me or my life.

But I don't.  
I text him back  
*Okay*

*Deja texts me as I'm dropping my books off*

**Deja:** Have you seen the Dr. Kareem lady yet?

**Alicia:** No is she here already?

**Deja:** Yeah me and Isis just met her in the hallway outside 1st. She looks like a freakin supermodel!

**Alicia:** Meaning she looks hungry?

**Deja:** omg shut up. Body-shaming skinny folks is still body-shaming!

**Alicia:** My apologies to all the rich and famous supermodels

**Deja:** Anyway! You have to sit with me and Isis during the presentation. Dr. Kareem said she's starting some type of group for women at Marshall. Maybe she'll pick us!

**Alicia:** Oh...I wasn't going to go actually

**Deja:** wtf do you mean you weren't going to go? The whole school has to go

**Alicia:** ...

**Deja:** Even ISAP. So forget about it. See you there. Third row.

*Maybe Deja is divine intervention.*

Maybe the Randy dude is a serial killer.

Maybe when I don't answer his text  
asking where to pick me up  
he goes on a rampage  
and drives off a cliff.

Maybe I dodged a bullet.

Or maybe not.

Either way, I guess I'm going  
to this stupid presentation  
where Deja and Isis  
will sit on either side of me  
like a chaperone sandwich.

*My mother texts me as I'm walking into the auditorium  
and the pit in my stomach deepens.*

*I need to talk to you when you get home, she says.*

*I have to work, I text back.*

*PHONES AWAY, a twelfth-grade teacher barks. He's talking to someone  
else  
but not for long.*

*I'll be home waiting for you, my mother says.*

*Is someone dead?*

*No is all she says.*

*I almost wish someone were,  
so I would know what to expect:  
a corpse, and not the gray castle  
of possibilities that my brain  
begins to build.*

*Dr. Kareem isn't skinny but she does look like a supermodel.*

She's the kind of person who carries a torch in her face.  
Every smile is electric, every gesture  
of her black-polished fingers  
like free birds.

She stands on the stage and speaks boldly  
into the mic and you can tell she's used to it,  
to speaking out into a dark room,  
because it's like the mic isn't there at all,

*no can you hear me now* jokes  
*no is this thing on.*

It is on  
and so is she

and I'm suddenly very glad  
I didn't sneak out through  
a non-emergency exit  
into the car of a man named Randy.

I am suddenly very glad  
I am here in this school  
for once

because the Colonel is sitting on the far side  
with Ms. Balwick and Mrs. Fisher, listening  
to every word when Dr. Kareem says straight  
into the mic:

*Everyone thinks they know how to solve  
the problem of girls,  
girls who are so-called problems, but rarely*

*does someone ask those girls how  
they'd like to be solved,  
or if they see themselves as a problem  
or a reaction.*

*Dr. Kareem says she's going to choose a group of girls*

from all walks of life  
whatever that means

to join her in the music room  
after winter break.

The group will meet on Fridays,  
when they will be excused

from class to take part in her study  
where she listens to the girls talk

about their lives and their challenges  
and what inspires them.

I know right then she is not going to pick  
a girl like me. Why would she choose

someone who has only ever inspired  
a faceless classmate to carve

*Alicia Rivers is a dyke hoe*  
into the face of a desk?

*Ms. Gladstone's class is full of talk*

after Dr. Kareem's presentation: the girls  
are excited about a woman like Dr. Kareem  
being interested in their lives  
and the boys are jealous that they  
for once  
had to listen to something  
that didn't place them  
at the center.

*I don't know why we all even had to go,  
says Greg Wayne. It was all about  
girls.*

*The same reason, says Audrey,  
that the whole school has to go to the pep rally  
for your stupid football games  
that you guys never win.*

And even though she called me a skank  
I still find my mouth  
curving into a smiling snarl.

*At the end of the day, Geneva is at my locker,*

and all my muscles that were poised to sprint  
for the bus stop suddenly slacken into syrup  
rolling slowly from the maple. I stand apart, staring

and she sees me then, a smile radiating from her face  
like sun bouncing off water. It catches me, holds me  
still. *What are you doing after school?* she says.

*I have to work.*

*Do you walk? I think I saw you walking  
last week.*

*Sometimes.*

*Can I walk with you?*

I don't know if I actually say  
yes. I must, because she smiles  
again, and then moves slightly  
to the side, a signal: We can go  
now.

We go.

We walk.

I don't notice  
the cold.

*Walking conversation with Geneva*

*Geneva: How long have you worked at Meat Palace?*

*Alicia: Two years.*

*Geneva: Do you like it?*

*Alicia: Absolutely not. But the people are cool sometimes.*

*Geneva: I think that was the longest string of words I've ever heard from your mouth.*

*Alicia:*

*Geneva: Except when I've heard you cussing out Mrs. Fisher.*

*We laugh.*

*Geneva: Why does she hate you?*

*Alicia: I don't know.*

*Geneva: I think there are certain people that are like security sensors and when a bag goes through that sets them off, they freak out.*

*Alicia: Am I the sensor or the bag?*

*Geneva: I think you set Mrs. Fisher off, is what I'm saying. Something about you sets her off.*

*Alicia: ...so I'm the bag.*

*Geneva: I mean, I think you're carrying a lot. So yeah.*

## *Things I learn about Geneva on the way to Meat Palace:*

### *Part 1*

- She says “bagel” like “BAG-el”
- She says “bag” like “bayeg”
- She does not mind the cold
- She does not eat fast food
- She’s never been to Pakistan, where her dad was from, but she wants to
- She wants a Godzilla tattoo
- She has a cat named Morpheus
- She moved here with her mom to be with her grandmother, who has cancer
- Marshall is not as bad as her old school
  - but there were no Pakistani girls there (or here) and it’s a special kind of lonely
- She used to play the clarinet
- She had her first girlfriend when she was thirteen

*Things I learn about Geneva on the way to Meat Palace:*

*Part 2*

She has a way of making you feel  
seen. She only has two eyes  
like anyone else but the things  
she says make it seem like her body  
is covered in eyes, like her mouth  
her hands  
her feet

are eyes of their own  
and when she speaks  
when she touches  
when she walks

she is seeing  
everything  
seeing me,  
and drinking it  
all in.

*Things I learn about me on the way to Meat Palace: Part 1*

There is a flock of birds that live  
inside my rib cage  
and when Geneva Dhaliwal  
speaks, all their wings  
fill with air  
and make circles  
in the sky  
of my body

*Things I learn about me on the way to Meat Palace: Part 2*

I am

halfway

in love

with a

girl named

Geneva Dhaliwal

already.

*Mariah the misanthrope quit.*

I walk into drive-thru thinking I will tell her  
about the walk with the girl with a name  
that sounds like

a superhero

a wildflower

a famous scientist

a magic spell

but instead of Mariah it is Debbie  
who has worked at Meat Palace since she was sixteen  
and whose fingers twist like curly fries  
from arthritis.

She smiles silently, pointing at the headphones  
to indicate she's currently taking an order,  
as if I can't hear their voice like a drum major  
echoing out: *Gimme a...*

I turn away, pretend to check the stock of sauce  
in the lobby but really I'm looking out the front  
window to see if I can still glimpse the form  
of Geneva walking back toward school  
alone, but she's already  
gone.

*I think of Geneva the entire way home,*

like her presence is a bottle  
of sunshine I sip from in the gloom of night.

The bottle only goes empty when I walk in  
and find my mother sitting in the kitchen,  
waiting. Her text has been looming  
on the horizon of my mind. *No one is dead,*  
I remind myself,  
but that still seems like the best-case  
scenario. Her face is flat.

I sit down across from her and she presses  
her hands against the table, mouth pinched.

She takes a deep breath and I just know  
that my whole shadowed life is about to spill  
out of her mouth and onto the floor  
between us.

She opens her lips:

*I think there's something wrong  
with your brother,* she says,

and she's so serious when she says it  
her eyes so blue  
that it takes a moment for the words  
to catch up to the fearful hope  
in my head.

We just look at each other, and when  
I am finally able to speak  
all I can think to say is  
*No shit, Mom.*

*No shit.*

*David isn't home.*

Of course.

He is an apple

on a branch

that took a knife

to itself.

He falls far

from the place

he grew

and calls himself

a pear

instead.

*If David's a pear then I'm a lemon.*

All my thoughts are sour acid.  
I sit in my room with my back  
against the door and listen  
to my mother's voice drifting  
in, talking to her mother:

*I was worried about David  
but now something  
has gotten into Alicia.  
I feel like I'm fucking  
this all up, Mom, how  
am I supposed to fix  
something I didn't  
break*

and my chest squeezes  
with guilt, hearing  
the tears in her voice,  
but I can't make myself  
open the door and go  
to her arms.

*Sometimes I think about the little things*

that when shoved into the same frame  
grow enormous.

The day in Kroger with Adam,  
my dad ignoring the staring cashier,  
my mom too worried about the text  
my dad was checking on his phone  
to notice the flush in my cheeks.

The day at the optometrist  
getting glasses I would never wear.  
The man, my dad's age, who slipped  
the spectacles onto my face and adjusted  
their arms over my ears, letting his fingers  
trail against my cheek, looking  
through the crystal lens and deep  
into my eyes. My stomach was in knots,  
my mouth sewed shut. I kept looking  
at my parents but neither of them  
seemed to notice and it only made the pit  
in my stomach dig deeper, feeling  
visible and invisible at the same time.

The boy, Donald, at church whose mother  
was a meteorologist on the local news.  
The way he would scrutinize my outfit  
every Sunday, right around the time  
my boobs were coming in. His eyes  
like shears, cutting everything off,  
including skin. *Going to need new shirts  
soon, Alicia. Those aren't going to fit  
for long. You're going to swell up*

*all over soon* and the youth minister  
would pretend Donald was making fat jokes  
which would have been fucked up enough  
but this was something else.

For as long as I can remember  
I have been afraid of my body  
as it is,  
but also  
afraid of what  
it will inevitably  
become,  
and whose.

*I read an article about mass shootings*

and how when a person survives one  
in a movie theater perhaps  
they may never go to the movies again.

The wide dark,  
the silver glow,  
only the narrow aisles  
for cover...

it's all too much.

Sites of trauma.

And I think that school  
has obviously become  
a site of trauma for me

but so has Kroger  
and the park  
and sometimes  
the bus

even though it is also  
a vessel of freedom.

But the thing that all  
these sites have in common  
is my body,  
and I wonder  
sometimes  
how you avoid a site  
of trauma when the site  
is your own self

and I think the answer is  
you stop thinking of the body  
as yours  
and maybe that makes it  
easier to walk  
inside it.

*I don't have Geneva's phone number*

but I know her Instagram now, and in the cave  
of my room I scroll  
and scroll

through every smile  
every burrito  
every Boomerang

by the time morning  
leaks through my window  
I think I know her  
life by heart.

*Somehow I end up looking at Blake,*

pictures of her golden legs  
pictures of her golden life

I think there must be a line  
too fine to see—  
one that separates  
good girls  
and bad ones.

Sometimes my life feels like climate change,  
everything that's wrong  
too massive to fully comprehend,  
crushing and hot  
and inescapable.

Looking at Blake is like looking  
at an ice cap that won't melt  
a polar bear that never goes extinct.

Maybe I could be that cold  
if it meant I would  
survive.

## *Text with Deja interrupts the Blake rabbit hole*

**Deja:** I think I'm going to quit debate team. I'm so sick of Clay.

**Alicia:** His smirk makes me feel stabby and I've never even had class with him. I don't blame you.

**Deja:** It's just, I was there first, you know? It was fine before Mr. Hudson took over.

**Alicia:** Mr. Hudson is dopey. He's like that guy who wasn't cool in high school and so he tries to side with the cool kids now like it will make him one of them.

**Deja:** Who's cool? CLAY?

**Alicia:** Clay Bevin, Blake Felipe, all of them. They know everyone's jealous of them (including Mr. Hudson) and they love it.

**Deja:** Imfao I don't know who this \*everyone\* you speak of is, but there's nobody on this earth I'm jealous of except maybe Normani. Maybe.

**Alicia:** You know what I mean. Popular kids, their big golden circles.

**Deja:** Psh their circles aren't the only circles.

*Deja has a theory*

This is the first time she sends me a voice note, and I mistake it for an accident at first—a brief scuffle before her voice wheels out of my phone’s speaker:

*Too much to text so hear me out. What you said about circles has me thinking.*

*I think there is a big circle we’re all supposed to stay at the middle of—not a circle, actually. There’s a heart that claims to love us and we are supposed to exist at its center, right? As long as we stay*

*at the center, we are loved. People like Blake and Clay are popular the way a mirage in the desert offers water. They never stray from the center, and are loved for it.*

*But lately I’ve been feeling off-balance. And I realize the more I learn about myself, the farther from that center I am and even though it means I am not like Blake or Clay, the farther from that center I get the freer I feel. Does that make sense?*

*That the farther you get from the thing that claims to love you as long as you obey its rules, the happier you will be?*

I don’t want to answer for myself—  
not yet—so I send her a voice note  
back:

*What rules are you breaking?*

When she answers back, she’s laughing:

*Alicia, I think I'm starting to realize  
that my whole self is a broken rule.*

*Up late thinking of Sarah*

like a never-ending game of solitaire  
or, more accurately,  
Jenga:

my years as her best friend  
a wobbling tower  
as I pull and slide  
each wooden memory.

*Those should be our people,*  
she said.

Words like *popular* and *cool kids*  
*golden boy/girl*  
*perfect perfect perfect—*

all the things and lives  
we were supposed to be jealous of.

What about Blake sparks envy?  
Of all the girls at Marshall  
why was she sticky enough  
to catch the fly of my eye?

I think again of pennies  
dropping into purses—  
the thing I'm not smart enough  
to see swims into view once more.

It still doesn't quite  
click.

All I know is that Sarah always  
had her eye on the throne

and maybe that's part of why  
when I fell short  
I fell so, so far.

*Up late(r) thinking of freedom,*

and what Deja said about finding it  
far from the center of an unloving heart.

First my skin and then my mind remembers  
Ray Rangeland, him whispering across the front  
seat: *When do you feel the most free?*

Running, still.

If Blake is at the center of that circle-heart,  
I am running for the perimeter, but

I haven't bumped into that free feeling  
Deja talks about—not since Renée  
in a cabin surrounded by the songs  
of crickets. Although maybe my fingers  
skimmed its edge that night with Ray.

Deja talked about kaleidoscopes and rifles—  
maybe I've been looking at this all wrong.

Freedom not just the doing, but the being.  
Sometimes when someone's tongue  
is in my mouth, my eyes are open  
looking for the horizon.

It's three in the morning and I run  
my tongue across my own smooth teeth.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 19

*I forgot about Dr. Kareem until I almost tripped her.*

Walking down the hall, my eyes on my shoes,  
and suddenly there was another pair  
of shoes in my field of vision,  
and they were stumbling,  
and my arm shot out  
and steadied the person  
they belonged to, and when  
I looked up, it was Dr. Kareem  
who had also been looking down,  
reading a yellow-paged notebook  
full of red-inked chicken scratch.

We stared at each other, surprised  
to find someone's universe  
overlapping with our own,  
and then she smiled, a faint  
smile of something like  
recognition.

*Thank you, she said. Alicia, I think?*

*How do you know my name?*

*I'm learning lots of people's names, she said.*

*Some people call me Red, I said.*  
*(And silently: among other things)*

*And she said, What do you  
call you?*

*And I said, Alicia, I guess.*

And she said, *Then I will call you  
Alicia.*

## *Texts with Deja*

**Alicia:** I met Dr. Kareem

**Deja:** Isn't she dope?

**Alicia:** She smells like honey

**Deja:** That's something you say about someone you have a crush on

*Sometimes you get too comfortable.*

I have gotten used to secrets  
and keeping them.

With Deja I have been  
loosening my lips.

I do not have a crush  
on Dr. Kareem  
but with Deja  
I have gotten comfortable

saying what I think  
without wondering  
how it's going to sound  
and now she's heard.

## *Texts with Deja two minutes later*

**Deja:** I hope that didn't come off homophobic. I didn't mean it like that. I just meant she kind of has that effect on people. I'm not even gay and she gives me butterflies

**Alicia:** Oh okay

**Deja:** I know you like girls, Alicia. I don't care. So does Amanda. She's a lesbian-lesbian though. No boys at all.

**Alicia:** Oh

**Deja:** I don't care, okay? Don't be weird.

**Alicia:** Okay

**Deja:** You're being weird

**Alicia:** I am?

**Deja:** Please relax lol

*I actually do relax.*

It's a strange feeling, especially  
here at school. So relaxed  
I fall asleep in Mrs. Fisher's class.

Although maybe that's because  
I didn't sleep last night.

Either way, she sends me  
to ISAP. Home  
away from home.

*I pass my locker on the way,*

and almost miss the corner of paper  
sticking out, blue ink  
visible through the fold.

It's like smoke in the distance,  
the silent roar of a far-off  
forest fire burning  
its way forward.

My whole life is already ablaze,  
I don't want to look  
but I do—

*We should talk-*

*I know your secret.*

and all I can do is think  
*Jesus, kid, which one?*

*Mr. West opens the door and sees me.*

Sighs.

Points to  
a desk.

Says, *One day*  
*I'm going*  
*to get tired*  
*of seeing*  
*you in here*  
*and I'm going*  
*to show up*  
*at your house*  
*and talk*  
*to your parents*

and something  
like a cringe  
must wound  
my face because  
he frowns  
shakes his head  
and says  
*but it won't*  
*be today.*

*Sometimes I wonder what normal secrets are like*

the kind that don't compel anonymous  
blue pens to harass you via locker door:

A boyfriend your parents  
don't like.

A C+ in calculus.

A joint smoked  
behind the garage.

A window snuck  
out of for a kiss.

A car borrowed  
for a summer joyride,  
returned silently  
to the garage.

Secrets that,  
if discovered,  
would merely dent  
the fender

not rend the machine  
into pieces of shattered  
metal.

*Ms. Gladstone keeps me after class.*

Her eyes are worried jewels  
behind museum glass.  
I see myself reflected  
above the half frown.

*I wanted to tell you today,  
she says, so you're not taken  
by surprise.*

Does she feel the pit  
in my stomach, dropping  
and dropping?

*Dr. Kareem asked the faculty  
for recommendations  
on girls to be included  
in her study.  
I told her I thought  
you should be one of the twelve.*

I say nothing and she keeps  
talking:

*I know you're having a tough year  
but I think you have a lot to say  
and could contribute  
something important  
to the group.*

She asks if that's okay  
and I barely stop myself  
from saying *Does it matter?*  
because it's already done.

But as pissed as I am  
I keep it to myself

because Ms. Gladstone  
isn't Mrs. Fisher and I think  
she means well, even if  
she has just decided  
to put the salamander of my life  
under the glass of a microscope.

*Geneva's coming toward me after school and I run.*

I spent half the night scrolling through her smile,  
but right now I need to feel the burn of my lungs  
to remind myself that I may not have control  
over anything else in my life, but I can  
always make the choice to run.

*I see Coach Tinsley under an umbrella watching from the track*

but I keep going. I don't wait  
for the bus, I don't wait  
for the rain to stop.

I run all the way to Meat Palace  
and don't stop until  
I'm in the break room,  
chest heaving, legs shaking.

My clothes are soaking wet,  
a puddle growing slowly  
around me.

Stephanie appears  
*You know you don't  
work today, right?  
It's Wednesday.*

And she's right,  
but I sit in the break room  
for a half hour anyway  
listening to the rain.

Any port  
in a storm.

*Debbie comes to slice the beef.*

I can smell the cigarette smoke drifting off her clothes  
from where I sit three feet away. She loads  
the big hunk of beef onto the slicer  
and runs it expertly, steam rising,  
the thin layers of meat falling  
into the stainless steel.

She sees me watching and smiles.  
*I could do it in my sleep.*  
*I'm better at slicing beef*  
*than I am anything else.*

*I've sliced more beef*  
*than I have licked envelopes*  
*than I have picked flowers*  
*than I have blown out birthday candles.*

*I've given this place a lot of years*  
*and one finger,*

and she holds up the stump,  
wiggles the remaining digits  
around it. I never noticed

until now. *That happened*  
*here?* I ask, and she nods.  
*Right where I'm standing.*

*Sometimes I still feel it—*  
*I lost a part of myself*  
*but we still remember each other.*

She's talking about her finger  
but after she leaves with the beef

I sit and cry.

*I wait until the rain stops*

then walk home. There are three texts  
on my phone that I've been avoiding:

**Mom:** Would you be interested in talking to another therapist? Not about the divorce but  
just about...you?

**Random:** Free tonight?

**Deja:** Isis is thinking about quitting dance and running track. They need more girls. She  
doesn't wanna do it alone tho. Would you do it if she did?

Everybody has questions  
and I have no answers.

*When I text Deja back I ignore her question and ask my own*

**Alicia:** If I knew something about someone, something bad, would you want to know

**Deja:** Someone I know?

**Alicia:** Kinda

**Deja:** Someone at school?

**Alicia:** Kinda

**Deja:** Is there a serial killer in your physics class or something

**Alicia:** No

**Deja:** Are there monsters among us?

**Alicia:** Yeah, me

**Deja:** lol plz

*Weed and cats.*

I smell Justin before I see him,  
although he's just putting on  
his coat to leave—maybe he's  
been waiting for the rain too.

He ignores me, steps outside,  
my brother close behind, watching  
him cross the lawn.

*Are you gay?* I ask  
when it's just me and David.  
*Do you like him?*

*You're so fucking stupid,*  
he says. *Why, do you want  
to fuck him too?*

It feels like a black hole  
has opened in my throat  
as I realize the things  
people say about me  
have reached my brother's  
ears, and he would rather

spit it all back at me  
than choose not  
to hear.

*I almost tell him the truth.*

He's my big brother.

In the movies,  
the father  
the brother  
the uncles  
(except the dirty one)  
all combine to form  
a human umbrella  
a sword  
for the girl child.

It's patriarchal,  
I know.  
It implies  
that girls  
can't take care of ourselves  
and that women  
won't,

but it's one stereotype  
I sometimes wish  
were true in my life:

to have men  
in your life  
who know  
that the battle  
we face against  
men who are  
wolves can only  
be won  
with the help

of men  
who are not.

*My brother hasn't seen me cry*

since we were little kids. I'm not much  
of a crier, and besides, I already  
cried at work, and twice  
in one day just seems excessive.

Lately all my tears  
have transformed  
from blue to red,

so even though my brother's  
words are a dagger  
in my heart, I don't cry.

Instead it all turns to rage  
and I scream at him  
in this empty house,

so loud my throat  
feels like broken glass

so loud his eyes  
go wide,

like a trespasser who mistook  
a ghost  
for a sheet.

I scream at him  
until he goes to his room,  
closes the door  
against my magnificent  
fury, and I stand at it  
screaming  
until I run out

of words.

## *Texts with Deja*

**Deja:** You know you have read notifications on.

**Alicia:** ?

**Deja:** So when I ask you stuff and you don't respond I see you've read it and are just ignoring me

**Alicia:** Not ignoring. Considering.

**Deja:** Yeah yeah well CONSIDER telling me why you don't wanna run track

**Alicia:** I told you

**Deja:** It ain't about your schedule. What I look like, BooBoo the fool?

**Alicia:** I'm not acquainted with BooBoo.

**Deja:** lol You get on my nerves

**Alicia:** 😊

*Up late thinking about Medusa*

I'm starting to realize  
that a woman doesn't get that mad

so mad that her hair turns to snakes  
so mad that her rage turns blood to boulder  
so mad that she withdraws into a cave  
and dares the world to follow

all on her own.

I realize I've been thinking  
of myself as a ghost  
but I've been comparing  
myself to the wrong  
kind of monster.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 20

*It's Thursday and I'm embarrassed of my butterflies.*

They're going to announce Dr. Kareem's girl group  
in homeroom. It feels stupid to be nervous  
about something I don't even want.

(Do I?)

The butterflies in my stomach  
feel more like maggots,  
inching up my esophagus.  
Somehow thinking of it  
as butterflies  
feels like thinking  
I deserve to be chosen—

the maggots feel more appropriate,  
swimming through the rot of me.

Still, when Ms. Gladstone reads  
the list of twelve girls—  
three from each grade—  
I see the flutter of the smile  
on her lips

and think maybe in the crawl  
and creep of my maggots  
she sees a flash of green,  
like a caterpillar  
instead.

## *The list*

### *Freshmen*

I don't know any of these girls

I don't know any of these girls

I don't know any of these girls

### *Sophomores*

I don't know any of these girls

Tierra Pryor (she runs track)

I don't know any of these girls

### *Juniors*

Prya Farooqi

Alicia Rivers

Deja Duvall (thank god)

### *Seniors*

Lena Herman (also runs track)

Eugenia De León

Blake Felipe (of course)

*A lot of girls are bummed out that they weren't chosen*

but I can't help but think we are all excited  
about something we have no name for.

We have no idea what we are getting into  
with Dr. Kareem, only that we will be allowed  
to miss class once a week.

Maybe that's enough for us all.  
(Since when do I say *we* and *us*?)

*Ms. Gladstone makes eyes at me,*

wanting me to be happy about this thing  
that will occasionally free me from class.

Maybe she thinks that's the only reason  
I would want to do it.

What I'm happy about is that next week is winter break,  
that I won't see the Colonel

or Mrs. Fisher, or even ISAP  
until after the new year.

My mind is busy on the way to art  
until I reach the place in the hall

that always brings me back to Earth,  
as if the ground itself grows hot.

But today the sight of the Colonel's door  
plunges me not into fire, but ice.

The door is closed again, and that only  
means one thing.

*Is there a word for this feeling?*

I am an emotional flashbang.

I am a blank stare.

I am a well of dread.

I am a tongue of fire.

But mostly  
I am gray  
as guilty stone

because the sight  
of that door  
closed

just makes me relieved  
that I'm not  
behind it.

*But...*

Someone is.

Someone is.

Someone

is.

Someone

is.

Someone

is.

*I can't paint anything in studio.*

I pick up the brush  
but it feels like the fire  
that has been keeping  
me alive has smoldered.

All I can do is dip the brush  
in white paint,  
make circles  
and circles  
and circles,  
everything invisible  
and happening  
over and over again.

When Geneva appears  
by my side she doesn't speak.

She rests her hand  
on my shoulder  
and leaves it there  
while the white circles  
go on  
and on.

Ms. Gupta makes Geneva go back to her seat  
and part of me is relieved because the warmth of her hand  
on my shoulder was like a living thing,  
and the way that Geneva seems  
to be made of eyes, seeing everything,  
makes me feel that if left there long enough

her hand would become  
X-ray

stethoscope  
thermometer

seeing and sensing  
the bones  
the breath  
the fever

of every secret  
hidden in the wound  
that is my body.

*But Ms. Gupta can't keep Geneva from walking with me  
after class*

and I'm relieved about that too,  
the way having her by my side  
as we pass the Colonel's class  
door now open  
makes me feel safer  
like a ship sheltered  
by a lighthouse  
while passing through  
that dark water.

*I know we don't know each other very well,  
she says, but Sunday is my birthday.*

*I'm having a sleepover.  
You should come.*

And then she's  
gone.

*We're too old for sleepovers.*

I haven't been to one since I was ten,  
and I picture Disney movies  
and popcorn  
and someone's mother  
with crossed arms  
calling down the stairs  
that 9pm is too late.

And right now  
standing beside my locker  
alone, I still picture Disney  
movies, but I also  
picture Geneva, beside me  
on the couch  
in a room lit only  
by the television.

Our bare arms turn silver  
as they move  
closer and closer  
to touching.

*I'm supposed to work the day of the sleepover.*

The plan was to work  
all through winter break.

But maybe

just maybe

I will tell Terry

I have

strep throat.

*I can't go to a sleepover.*

I'm sixteen years old.

I don't even know Geneva.

I don't know any of her friends.

I don't even know how old she will be.

I don't know why she invited me.

But I do know that I can't stop  
writing her name along the edge  
of my favorite notebook.

*Random thoughts about Debbie's finger*

I've heard you can reattach  
the thing that's been severed  
but only if you find it in time  
before rot sets in

and I wonder  
if it's the same  
with souls:

if you have a finite  
amount of time  
to find the thing  
you've lost  
before  
you are forever  
soulless.

## *Reattachment*

One time at Sarah's house  
her brother left to drive  
his new girlfriend home  
and all Sarah's mom did  
was rag on the girl, Gina,  
because so-and-so's mother's  
coworker saw her going  
into Planned Parenthood last year

and I feel like this city  
is too big to be this small  
but I guess it's not big enough  
to contain something as massive  
as Gina walking through  
that black-tinted door.

I've lost count of all the things  
that Sarah could condemn me for  
so when I think about Debbie's finger  
and my dirty soul  
I also think about hymens  
and whether when you're a born-again  
Christian, if that can be restored too,

and I almost laugh to imagine Sarah  
torn between which she loves more:  
the Word of God,  
or hating me.

*My brother actually speaks*

when I walk in the house, looking up  
from his pizza rolls to say  
*I saw Sarah today.*

It's like I conjured her.

There she is:

at the sink washing mud  
off her church shoes

in the corner playing hide-  
and-seek

in the mirror looking at new  
braces.

*I'm pretty sure it was her anyway,*  
he says. *I almost forgot*  
*what she looked like*  
and I just shrug, but inside  
I think

*I haven't.*

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 21

*"Have you ever told her how you feel?"*

"Maybe she doesn't know she hurt your feelings."

I'm eavesdropping on the bus:  
two college students sitting close,  
young men with backpacks  
on their laps.

*She wouldn't care, says his friend.  
All she cares about is her fucking piano.*

And I don't know who they're talking about  
or who this piano-loving person is

but I think I agree with the dude:  
some people are so focused  
on the things that are important to them  
that your wounds are insignificant.

Maybe it doesn't mean that they're evil,  
but it doesn't mean you're not bleeding.

## *Fantasy vs. reality*

### FANTASY

Walking into school  
and finding the halls empty.

The track team girls  
who graduated last year  
are back.

The Colonel's classroom  
is empty, boarded up.

Geneva is at my locker  
and she's insisting  
I come to her sleepover.

### REALITY

I walk into school  
and the halls are full  
of the same eyes and mouths.

The track team seniors  
are still gone.

The Colonel's door is open,  
and when I pass it for  
art studio, I can hear him  
inside humming.

Geneva is at my locker  
and she is insisting  
I come to her sleepover.

*I'm so happy to see her*

that my heart doesn't even clench  
when it sees the white paper  
sticking out of my locker.

I crumple it into the trash  
without looking—at this point  
I can tell that someone  
is trying to get my attention

but I still refuse to look.

*It's running weather*

I don't know why  
the gray sky

calls to me,  
but it does.

It's cold. The track  
team will be inside

doing laps, and so  
when the bell rings

I make my way out  
to the track, alone,

grateful for the stillness,  
the company of silent pigeons.

I'm wearing khakis, as usual,  
but I drop my backpack

by the gate  
and begin.

*My head may be a mess*

but my legs work just fine.

Running on the track feels  
different than sidewalk,  
than hallway. The way  
the path curves  
is like déjà vu:

I have been here before  
but the memories feel  
like looking at something  
through water:  
wavering, blurred.

It becomes clearer  
as I run, my lungs starting  
to squeeze.

It's not just because I'm tired.  
I feel as nervous as I would  
if there were runners before  
and behind, an actual race  
and not just a foray into the cold.

I'm competing against nothing,  
pushing against nothing  
except the wolf in my mind  
that stands between me  
and everything I call mine.

*Voices ruin everything.*

I hear them coming, the echo of laughter  
off the tan bricks darkened  
by rain. The track team  
is coming out after all, led by Coach Tinsley  
carrying his clipboard, his whistle.

I'm almost to the finish line  
but veer off, grab my backpack.  
I hear my name in someone's mouth  
but don't look back, just head  
for the gate that will take me toward Chestnut.

Jacob Wheeler tries to catch up  
but he's not made for sprints  
he can't fly  
the way I used to.

I make the track disappear  
behind me, try not to think  
about how I must look  
to them:

roach skittering out of the light  
rabbit scurrying for the bush  
ghost sinking into the floor  
a face lost in a nest of snakes

## *Teenage bumper stickers that no one believes*

There's an assortment of things people say  
that remind me of bumper stickers  
stuck on the back of cars to convince people  
they believe them, but no one does:

*Who cares what other people think!*

*As long as you love yourself that's what matters!*

*Time heals all wounds!*

Everyone cares what other people think  
even if it's small, the size of a hangnail

Loving yourself is more complicated than algebra and physics  
and I'm failing those things already

And that last one is just  
bullshit

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 23

*I tell my mother I'm going to a sleepover*

and she doesn't even ask whose.

She assumes it's Sarah  
and I let her. She thinks  
my former life still exists  
and I don't have the heart  
to tell her that the person  
she thinks is her daughter  
has slowly gone extinct.

## *Texts with Deja on the bus*

**Deja:** you remember what I told you in the library?

**Alicia:** wanting to turn people to stone?

**Deja:** kinda. What I said about not wanting to have sex

**Alicia:** yeah

**Deja:** I'm pretty sure it's not because I'm not ready. I think it's because I'm something else.

**Alicia:** like what?

**Deja:** I googled asexual and I think that's me. do you think that's weird?

**Alicia:** being asexual?

**Deja:** yeah

**Alicia:** do \*you\* think it's weird?

**Deja:** no.

**Alicia:** then no

**Deja:** I still like boys. I still love boys.

**Alicia:** you just don't want to have sex with them

**Deja:** right

**Deja:** so that's it? I'm just...asexual

**Alicia:** I mean, Ace sounds really cool tbh

## More texts with Deja

**Deja:** rant incoming!!!

**Alicia:** lay it on me

**Deja:** I was sitting here zoning out while our pastor talks and you know what's some bullshit? Imagining how people are going to act if I tell them I'm asexual. Like, as a Black girl I REALLY can't win because on one tip, people make out Black girls to be TOO sexy, like everything we do is sex, even when we're just living life and wearing sneakers and eating Cheetos or whatever. So like, me being asexual, people will say YOU CAN'T BE ASEXUAL, YOU'RE TOO SEXY or whatever. But on the other tip, books and movies always cast the Black girl as the "friend" who never has a boyfriend and shit, like nobody wants us, so if I say I'm asexual, people will be like OH YOU'RE PLAYING INTO A STEREOTYPE OF BLACK GIRLS AS UNDESIRABLE. Like, I'm damned if I do, damned if I don't, and I just want to live my life and wear sneakers and eat Cheetos.

**Alicia:** You deserve all the Cheetos in the world.

**Deja:** Thank you. Yes, I do.

**Alicia:** Don't take this the wrong way, but church...kinda sucks. All that \*purer than thou\* bullshit.

**Deja:** Hold on now! lol But no, I feel that. I don't know if you've ever done Black church, but it does all the purity stuff too but...extra. I've had church ladies come up and tell me to pay special attention to the pastor's lectures on lust and temptation and I'm just sitting there like...this literally doesn't apply to me?

**Alicia:** To quote my ex-best friend, "Your body belongs to God first, and your husband second." 😬

**Deja:** I see why she's an ex. 🙄 It pisses me off because this all acts like sex is inevitable? Um, not for me! And it's not because the Virgin Mary is my bestie but because, like, this is who I am. It's not about being pure. I just wanna do what I wanna do.

**Alicia:** Which means NOT doing.

**Deja:** Let the church say amen! Also, you're a good friend.

**Alicia:**

**Deja:** I SEE that you read the message, Alicia. You can't pretend you don't see it when I give you love!

**Alicia:**

**Deja:** We are going to fight lol

*Geneva's house is a normal house*

Not big, not small.  
Not dirty, not clean.  
The curtains are new  
but the carpet is old.  
It is a house where a family  
lives, and the walls  
feel warm with conversation.

Her mother is painting the guest  
room where Geneva's grandmother  
will soon come to live, tells me  
to make myself at home,  
that the other girls  
will be here soon.

I knew I would be the first  
one here. I planned  
to be late, but the bus  
came on time  
for once in its life  
and delivered me three  
blocks away. I couldn't  
slow my feet, and here  
I am, sitting on Geneva's couch  
holding a glass of water

wondering how late  
the bus runs in case  
I need to escape.

*She always smiles before she says something*

that reveals the fact that she is made of eyes.  
Her lip curls at the side. She holds her orange  
calico cat on her lap, both of them gazing at me.

*What, I ask.*

*You're not wearing khakis, she says.*

*So?*

*I thought you might wear them  
as an excuse to leave for work  
if you started to feel like  
you don't want to be here.*

*I do want to be here.*

*For now, she says. It's okay  
if you change your mind.*

*Then the doorbell rings*

and her other friends are pouring  
into the house, four girls  
that don't go to Marshall.

Felicia, from her art group  
Aida, from her art group  
Michaela, a cousin  
Parnisha, a neighbor

It is amazing to me  
that Geneva has lived here  
for five months  
and has more friends  
than I've ever had  
in my entire life.

Not just friends  
but sunrays  
all smiling  
all kind  
all bearing gifts

And I hear my grandma's  
voice in my head  
*Birds of a feather*  
and Mr. Mattson's voice  
*Like attracts like,*

and I wonder  
what kind of bird  
what kind of element  
am I, where  
the kinds of things

I attract  
are the friends

the people

who want

to hurt me.

*All our songs*

Michaela, the cousin, is the only one  
who isn't a painter, but she  
likes to sing, and when we've all  
been introduced, she laughs  
and says our names sound like a song

Felicia, Geneva, Aida  
Michaela Parnisha,  
Alicia

She sings our names one  
after another, changing scales  
until the sounds of who  
we are blend into real music—  
I can't tell where I end  
and they begin.

*Geneva's mom is a white woman named Genevieve*

and it makes me smile to think about  
all the men walking around the world  
made sophisticated by the Junior  
at the end of their signature,  
a rubber stamp banged  
down by a paternal hand,

and here is a woman  
born in Minnesota  
who decided that her daughter  
would be named for her,

not so much a stamp  
but a needle threaded  
with two pieces of yarn,  
woven together  
but distinct.

When Geneva sits on the couch  
Genevieve comes in  
wearing paint-splattered coveralls  
and bumps her daughter's elbow  
with her hip. They share  
the same smile  
that reminds me of the rim  
of a teacup, curved and warm.

When Genevieve disappears  
to give the roomful of girls  
privacy, she goes into her room  
with the door closed,  
starts a conversation  
with someone on the phone.

In the living room, we're watching  
a movie, but sometimes  
when the scene is slow and quiet  
I hear Genevieve in her room  
laughing.

*Geneva's dad was a chef*

and he died when Geneva was eight.  
That's old enough to remember.

There are pictures of him on the walls  
on the way to the bathroom,  
photos of him in the city  
where he was born, Karachi,  
Pakistan, where she told me he learned  
to cook. I stop for a while to study  
his face, the gifts he gave his daughter:

his wonderful almost-crooked nose  
the playful arch of his eyebrows  
the half-moon under each eye  
that appeared when he smiled.

Geneva appears at my elbow  
and that's when she tells me  
about him, pointing to the photos  
where he stands in toque  
and apron, brandishing a knife  
as if to stab his sous-chef,  
his face comically devilish.

*Cancer, she says.  
Sometimes it seems like  
everyone has cancer.*

It does. Sometimes it seems  
like everyone is suffering  
from something, but I guess  
it doesn't seem that way—  
it's just the truth.

*I was right about the Disney movies*

and no one pretends to be too old.

I don't vote when the girls are deciding  
what to watch but I'm glad when they pick

*Moana over Frozen*

and then later

*Coco over Frozen II.*

I don't participate,

but I am here,

and later still, when the dark  
settles in, and everyone starts

to whisper, and secrets

drift out into the air,

I still don't participate

even as my back sinks

into the teal couch

that doesn't smell

like weed and cats.

I have so much I could say

especially as I hear

the inner worlds of Geneva's friends:

*My dad thinks he's like this business genius but sometimes he seems like  
he's twelve.*

*My cousin, she's always popping pills and everyone acts like it's not  
happening but it is.*

*This guy at my school is a senior and he's always trying to fuck freshmen.*

I decide to speak then, I say

*That guy is a fucking wolf and someone needs to handle him*

and everyone is surprised  
especially me, because  
who am I to talk about  
what should be done about someone's wolf  
when I can't even handle my own?

*It's so much easier to talk about other people's  
problems*

and together, me and Geneva  
and these four girls I don't know  
rip into the guys at each other's schools

*There's a double standard for everything  
and it's not just about who gets to sleep  
around. It's everything. Boys get to be mad  
about shit, they get to smash stuff  
when they're pissed, they get to be full  
of themselves. Even when they lose  
they get to cry: when we cry  
we're too emotional and it's the reason  
we can't run the country;  
when they cry because they lost  
a football game everyone is like  
"oh wow look that's so sweet  
see men can be vulnerable"  
I'm so tired of this shit*

and all of Geneva's friends just nod  
and say *so fucking true*  
but Geneva catches my eye  
in what's left of the light  
and from the angle of her smile  
I know she is seeing more  
than I intended.

*Like a prophecy becoming real before my eyes*

the light of the television bathes our skin in silver.  
Everyone is asleep on the floor, their breath  
and the folds of blankets coming together like woven oceans.

Geneva is next to me on the couch and I'm staring  
at the clock, at the 2am I'm always awake to see  
but which somehow looks different here, where Geneva's  
head slowly slides down to my shoulder.

It's not the slow nod of sleep, but a smooth decisive  
readjustment, as if she decided that's where her temple  
should rest, and made it so. My shoulder  
feels suddenly like a holy place, I feel suddenly  
like my body is made of marble, not because it's heavy  
but because it's shining.

I know she's not asleep because I feel her eyelashes  
against my arm when she blinks, like the feet of butterflies  
searching for a something bright enough to be mistaken  
for a flower. For a moment I forget I'm not alone  
in my room and I whisper *I don't know why you like me.*  
I can't see her face but feel her smile by my bicep.

*You're not afraid to be loud,* she says.

*There's so much I don't say,* I reply.

*For now,* she says.

## *Geneva, Geneva, Geneva*

With all the other girls asleep  
her name is the only song in my ear.

She slips to the floor and guides  
my hands to her shoulders. Her skin  
feels like warm water  
and she squeezes my knuckles, a code,  
a request.

I have never given a girl a massage,  
I have never sat in a silent silver room  
with my hands on the moon's body.

I don't dig into her muscles: mostly  
I slide my palms down and across  
the slope of her neck,  
watching my hands disappear  
into shadows, then reappear  
again, new.

After a while she tugs me down  
then climbs up behind me,  
and her hands against my skin  
coax my muscles from rock  
to sand. Everything sharp  
in me, she turns soft.

When her lips connect  
with the place where my skin  
meets my hair, my blood turns silver,  
and I reach up to find her face,  
take it in my hands,  
and breathe.

## CHRISTMAS EVE

*On the bus home*

it's daylight  
but when I close  
my eyes against  
the sunshine  
my eyelids  
are still coated  
in moondust

*I forget for the first time that my hair is red,*

pass the mirror in the hall at home  
and stop, surprised.

For a moment, the poison  
on my head doesn't match  
what's in my heart.

I wonder if Medusa

ever found a touch  
    soft  
        enough  
    that  
        all  
    the  
        snakes  
    hissed  
        themselves  
    to  
        sleep.

## *Texts with Deja*

**Deja:** Your phone was on DnD last night...

**Alicia:** Yeah I was busy

**Deja:** Busy with...?

**Alicia:** Nosy!

**Deja:** I have one! I use it! I smell...romance

**Alicia:** What are you even talking about

**Deja:** Who's the lucky human

**Alicia:** I went to Geneva's house for her birthday

**Deja:** Went on DnD so all your admirers didn't spoil the mood

**Alicia:** I don't have admirers

**Deja:** Your phone is always hot. You've got something

*Sometimes it's hard to explain*

how being the object of someone's desire  
isn't the same as being wanted

how always having someone to call  
isn't the same as having someone to listen

how someone may stare into your eyes  
but sometimes they're looking  
at their own reflection

how you can be in a room with a thousand people  
and still feel alone.

*Winter break is a break because it's broken.*

Nothing could make me look forward  
to going back to school, but Christmas  
in a house of these particular silences  
is like riding through a china shop  
sitting on a bull's back.

My father stays in Cincinnati,  
and my brother stays in his room  
and my mother stays in the garage  
so I prowl around the house unbothered  
on silent, hungry feet,  
eating everything in the kitchen

and occasionally cocking my ear  
toward the door between me  
and my mom, where I expect  
to hear her tears, and instead  
hear an intermittent laugh.

My brother walks in for snacks,  
frowns at my presence. I point  
at the garage door:  
*Has she been dating somebody?*  
I say it fast before I can take it back.

*She's been going to therapy, dumbass,*  
he says. He takes the whole plate  
of Rice Krispie treats Grandma mailed  
and disappears again like a ghost  
banished back to its grave.

*I never go in the garage when my mother's on the phone*

But what David says sticks in my head  
and before I drift to my room, I reach for the handle  
and slowly crack the door.

When I peek out, she looks almost  
the way she always looks: wrapped in a coat,  
sunk into a folding chair, phone pressed  
against her face. There's no smoke  
drifting in the air—in fact, I don't smell it  
at all. She heard the squeak of the door  
and looks my way, and her eyes  
are clear, if tired. Just before  
I close the door again, her voice  
catches my ear, the phone angled away  
from her mouth, the words for me:

*I see you, Turtle in your shell,  
I see you...!*

I wasn't ready for any of this.  
So I pull my head back inside  
and lean against the door for a while  
before I go to bed.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 2

*What is a new year*

when it's all filled with the same shit?

Alarm.

Toast.

Bus.

Grease stain on khakis.

Fluorescent hallway.

Mrs. Fisher.

The always-open door.

Blake Felipe, her perfect smile.

But then there is Geneva,  
waiting by my locker,  
Tupperware filled with a pale  
something, sprinkled with pistachios—  
malai laddu, she says,  
her dad's recipe. Her eyes  
and it  
are sweet, a gift  
for the New Year.

Then there's Deja,  
hip-bumping me in the hall  
between classes, smile  
like fresh snow.

*Friday!* she says.

*Dr. Kareem's group!*

*It's going to be cool.*

Her excitement is a virus

I don't mind catching—  
I forget to put up my mask  
against it.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 4

*Dr. Kareem makes us all shy*

Even the girls who came into the music room  
filled with bubbles and chatter  
settle into their chairs like bashful deer  
with her chair completing the circle  
at the front of the room.

*I want to know all your names, she says  
and I want to know who you are  
what you're afraid of  
what your biggest challenge is  
what you think you need to overcome  
to be the person you want to be.*

I can tell by their faces  
that most of the other girls  
are thinking about college  
and scholarships  
about being good and kind  
and pretty and famous

and I know right away  
that agreeing to this group  
was a mistake.

Everyone is so optimistic  
one foot on a rainbow  
ready to ascend.

Everyone wants to impress Dr. Kareem.  
Everyone wants to be the best version of themselves.  
Everyone wants to shine.

I feel like a stick in the spoke  
of a glowing bicycle,  
a popcorn kernel that will inevitably  
stick in the teeth. I look around  
the room and think I am the only  
one who brought rain to the parade

which is why I'm surprised when it's  
Blake Felipe's turn and rather than speaking  
she closes her eyes and cries.

*Blake's friends immediately comfort her—*

she is the kind of girl who has friends in every room.

I look at the floor—people crying has always made me nervous especially girls. I'm always afraid that comforting them will get me too close, that they'll smell the gay on me, regard my open arms with suspicion.

Blake dries it up quickly, shaking her head.

*Sorry, she says. I'm PMSing. And senior year has been...really hard.*

And this is why I know I shouldn't be in this group because my first reflex isn't to lean in to sisterhood—instead I feel like curling into myself. How hard can this year have been, when one is Blake Felipe? To be gold, to be good, to be guarded by the smiles of everyone around you?

*Let's talk about that, Dr. Kareem says. What has been really hard for all of you this year?*

And the circle spins, shy mouths opening one by one, and it feels a little like Geneva's sleepover, all the grievances slipping out into the light.

Blake: college prep

Deja: dealing with racist teachers

Lena Herman: trying to be faster at track so she can get a scholarship

They go and go, and eventually it's my turn and I feel the eyes on me, seeing me  
taking in the red of me  
and I swallow, wishing I could swallow myself, or the room could. This place is not for me, I see that now, but

it's too late and they're looking.  
Nothing else to lose.

*I'm Alicia, I say. And...I guess I've been struggling with...feeling alone.*

And I don't dare look around the room at first, at the judgment I know is waiting.

But when I do finally look up  
heads are nodding, including Dr. Kareem's.

## *Texts with Deja*

**Deja:** It's supposed to be 70 degrees this weekend

**Alicia:** Thanks, climate change

**Deja:** Come to my cookout

**Alicia:** You're having a cookout? In January?

**Deja:** Carpe diem hoe

*The last barbecue I went to was at Sarah's house*

and I almost text her to tell her  
how when you have so many memories  
with one person, it's like a crime scene after they're gone.

Fingerprints everywhere, sometimes visible  
and sometimes only popping out at the eye  
when a light is shined from a specific angle.

*My brother isn't home but Justin is.*

Sitting in the kitchen eating a bowl of cereal, chewing  
mouth open.

*What are you doing here? Where's David?*

He says my brother went to pick up his check, and I stare at him  
with eyes that I hope are like razors  
eyes that demand an answer to the question

I shouldn't have to ask:

*Why are you here?*

He keeps chewing. For five minutes  
the only thing moving  
is his mouth, the flash of his teeth  
around the silver spoon.

Eventually I go to my room, lock  
the door. I stare at my phone  
and consider calling my mom  
but when it ends up in my hand  
pressed against my face  
the name I press is DAD.

When he answers he sounds surprised,  
like his daughter's name on his screen  
is a blast from the past,  
a voice from beyond the grave

*Is everything okay?* he says.

*No it is not,* I say,  
but when he asks me what's going on  
I can't speak.

It's like my whole body is a confession  
but my throat is a clogged pipe.

I'm so tired of being asked to say  
the things that people should  
already know.

*David is at my door in the morning.*

I haven't seen him awake before 8am  
in a long time.

I'm fastening my belt, the last piece  
of my uniform, and he watches me,  
still in flannel sleep pants.

*What did you say to Justin?*  
he says, and my fingers pause.

*What? I didn't say anything to him.*

*He says you were acting weird.*  
*What's your problem?*

I stare at his face, remembering  
how we used to look alike,  
remembering how people used to ask  
if we were twins, so little space  
between us in their minds.  
Everyone saw it: the heaviness  
of our brows, the firmness  
of our jaws, the wide mouth.  
We had an uncle who joked  
that we both looked like  
a singer named Steven Tyler  
because Steven Tyler  
looked like both of us, and we  
never googled Steven Tyler  
because it was better to share  
our ignorance and be inside  
a joke we didn't understand, together.

Now we both have circles under our eyes  
lips pressed tight against our teeth,  
eyebrows low.

We have changed beyond recognition  
but in the same direction.

We have both mutated  
into shadows of who we used to be  
and ended up looking the same again,  
but I still don't recognize  
his face.

## *Texts with Deja*

**Deja:** you're coming to the cookout today right

**Alicia:** I think so

**Deja:** don't chicken out. What, you scared to be around a bunch of Black people?

**Alicia:** no, but I'm scared it's going to rain. Or snow. It's January.

**Deja:** if it snows we'll just go in my uncle's basement. His house is huge.

**Alicia:** what should I bring?

**Deja:** just yourself

*Deja's uncle's house is huge*

Probably the biggest house I've ever seen in person,  
the kind of house that looks like a government building  
or a historic landmark that no one actually lives in.  
The entry floor is marble and the sound of my feet echoes  
when I step inside, Deja grinning:

*I told you his house was huge. He's a corporate attorney.*

I don't really know what that means but I figure  
people not knowing what you do is a requirement  
for having this much money.

Deja leads me through the museum-house  
and it feels so empty and cold until  
we get to the backyard, where Deja's family gathers,  
spread out across the sprawling grass  
like a laughing orchestra.

A wave of *hellos* and *hey honeys*  
washes over me like a rush of ocean,  
leaving me feeling a little breathless.  
Deja's family is huge, a gathering  
more like the scope of a family reunion.

*You know how to play spades?*  
someone is asking me, a boy a little older  
than us, with eyes that squinch when he smiles.

*Leave her alone,* Deja says, swats at him  
for a moment, but stops when I say yes.

The boy—a cousin: James—squinces  
his eyes even more. *Who taught you  
to play spades?*

*My phone, I say.*

*That don't count, he laughs, but  
he stills gestures for me  
to join the table.*

*James was right.*

Playing spades in real life  
isn't the same as playing on your phone.

Everyone is yelling at me  
and half the people at the table  
are standing up halfway through  
but everyone is laughing  
and I can't remember  
the last time  
I smiled  
this much.

*And then I see Deja's uncle.*

He's been working the grill, black pants  
blending into a black apron, his back to everyone  
while he nods to music, flipping burgers.

*Meat's done*, he shouts, and everyone turns,  
abandons card games, James protesting.

I stare at Deja's uncle, tall, built.  
His shirt fits a specific way,  
like the fabric is as conscious  
of his body as women probably are.  
I have seen men like this:

men who turn heads, who expect  
to curve every neck in the vicinity;  
men who gather girls like rose petals  
and send them scattering;  
men who are so used to hearing yes  
that they don't recognize no,  
or won't.

I move to the table at the back  
of the group, dread pooling  
in my stomach like dirty  
rain slipped down from the gutter.

He places the meat on the table  
and looks up.

*Deja points at me before she hands me a plate*

Uncle Ronnie, this is my friend Alicia,  
and his eyes shift from her face  
to mine, noticing me for the first time.

I stare at him, and without meaning to  
the Game surfaces in me, like a toxic  
cloud rising from the rainwater.

It's like a rubber hammer tapping  
a kneecap:

reflex

instinct

automatic

Whenever the part of me that's wounded  
unfolds to play the Game, I feel something  
in my eyes change: a peeling back,  
as raw and red as the meat still uncooked  
by the grill. It's a feeling that imitates hunger,  
that dares the wolf to look back  
and not eat.

Uncle Ronnie straightens, wipes his hands  
on his apron, then extends his hand.

*How you doing, young lady.  
Make sure you get you a burger,  
unless you're a vegetarian  
or something.*

Then he turns his back, cackling,  
and returns to the grill.

*Deja doesn't notice my face.*

She's laughing, yelling at her uncle's back  
*Not all white girls are vegetarians, Uncle Ronnie!*  
But he just shrugs, nodding to the music,  
adding new burgers to the smoking grill.

*Don't listen to him, she says,*  
and she's pushing the plate into my hands  
pointing out which burgers are well done  
and which are a little more rare  
but the only rare I can think about  
is Uncle Ronnie, who has been given teeth  
to rip and tear and chooses instead  
to smile.

## *Everyone is eating*

and telling jokes, rewinding  
to other cookouts, other gatherings,  
other games of spades. I listen,  
smiling when appropriate,  
answering when spoken to,  
but my mind is elsewhere.

I'm trying to put my finger  
on the thing squirming inside me,  
the feeling of embarrassment,  
the disappointment and the relief,  
all clinging together in a mass  
of blushing blood and tissue.

It's not until Uncle Ronnie returns  
from the grill with the final plate of burgers,  
settling into a seat at the head of the table,  
that it hits me. He makes himself a plate  
then gazes down the table, his eyes  
coming to rest on me and Deja.

*So how is school for you girls?  
Grades okay?*

And then I realize:  
he sees me as a child.

It's like a bolt of lightning snaking  
down electric from the sky. Almost  
every day since I was thirteen,  
since my body first began to transform,  
I have moved through the world  
surrounded by men trying to convince

me and themselves  
that there is no such thing as too young  
for a woman, or too old for a man,

that there is no such thing  
as an unavailable female body.

I have been moving through the world  
feeling like a glowing green light,  
green for go

Go

GO

and Deja's uncle Ronnie is the first person  
in a long time to see me,  
not the red of my hair,  
but me  
and decide on his own  
to stop.

*I feel like a little kid.*

I am sixteen years old and have grown  
accustomed to feeling  
both large and small.

Large, because I take up  
so much space in the imaginations  
of men, not because  
I'm pretty or sexy  
or even particularly  
interesting, but because  
I exist,

and

small, because I am made  
to feel that I don't matter at all  
and that *no* is a word  
I'm not entitled to—  
that everything I am  
and have done makes me  
ineligible for respect.

But in Uncle Ronnie's eyes, I am  
neither large nor small,  
significant nor insignificant:  
I am a sixteen-year-old kid  
who does things like  
have sleepovers and go to high school  
and go to my friend's uncle's  
house on weekends.

And he's right, I am, and do,  
and even though he's missing

so much about who I am  
and what I've done and seen,

the feeling of gratitude  
is so heavy and sweet  
it feels like sinking into syrup  
and drowning in good amber.

## *Texts with Deja*

**Alicia:** Your family is really cool

**Deja:** Whoa. You like never text me first! You must have actually had fun

**Alicia:** I did. Thanks for inviting me

**Deja:** What are friends for?

*I wonder if Medusa had friends*

if there was anyone who made her want  
to fit a hat over her head of snakes

quiet the hissing long enough  
to play a game of cards

to drink sweet tea  
instead of tears.

But tonight, at home,  
I mostly wonder  
about Medusa's family—

if her mother was an adder  
if her father was an asp  
or if they were as she began

flesh

and chose to leave her  
to the caves.

*Sometimes I can't look at my hands*

because if I stare at them for too long I start to realize  
they're attached to my body  
and that my body is real.

I've heard people call it a spiral—  
the mental cave I fall down when remembering:

all the girls I was before

all the parts of myself I've lost

all the people I could have been.

Sometimes when I look at my hands  
it's like seeing a face in an airport  
that belongs to someone  
you thought was already dead.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 17

*Geneva has started waiting at my locker*

and it's almost like on Valentine's Day when you get to school wondering if there will be a red heart waiting at your desk, a rose, a massive stuffed bear.

Geneva is more than all these things, and less obvious—her smile is like a secret just for me, even though now that we have started walking down the hall shoulder to shoulder, people sometimes turn and look, wondering.

I can't tell if they're worried for her safety—new girl unaware whose proximity she's entered—  
or if they see the thing that I feel:

a sun rising out of the teacup of her smile,  
filling the space between us with light,  
warming me for the few minutes  
before we part again for class.

*So when there's a note on my locker*

I stubbornly think *Geneva*,  
even as my stomach sinks.

She doesn't have my phone number  
and although she gave me hers  
I haven't had the guts to text her yet.

It is Geneva.

Geneva  
Geneva  
Geneva

But the piece of paper poking through  
the vent is white and lined, and it slips  
out into my fingers when I tug.

Then I see blue ink,  
and everything I have been trying  
not to see, trying not to know

is here.

Seven words, written  
in neat looping print:

*I know about the Colonel.  
me too.*

*Nothing can be undone.*

Not coming to this school.

Not running track.

Not walking into the Colonel's class  
that day, and  
the other days.

Not sealing my mouth like a tomb,  
silent.

Not having sex.

Not telling Sarah about it.

Not lying to my parents  
every single day.

Not reading this note.

*Jacob Wheeler catches me at the bus stop again*

and when I turn away, start to jog,  
this time he sprints, his gazelle legs  
closing the distance before I even know  
it's a race. His hands are out  
in front of me like he's trying to flag  
down a runaway train, like he sees  
the red of me and is offering water  
to calm the flames.

*Just wait, just wait, he says.  
Please. For a second.  
I know you don't want  
to run, but Tabitha Watts rolled  
her ankle and we need someone  
for the 4x4 tomorrow.  
Please. Just one day.  
Just one race. A scrimmage.  
I won't bother you again  
but we need your help for  
just  
one  
race.*

*Coach Tinsley is watching from the school door*

and his posture is like Jacob Wheeler's, poised  
as if on eggshells. Not like they think I am glass  
and might crack, but that I am a bomb  
that might explode. Their nervousness  
makes me want to scream, the idea  
that *I* am the thing everyone is afraid of  
when they walk the halls with a wolf.

The bus is coming, and he sees it,  
and he knows it's my escape pod,  
and he says one more time: *Please*.

I'm getting on the bus.  
*Tomorrow*, he shouts after me,  
*tomorrow at four!*

The doors close behind me,  
and the feeling that overwhelms  
my body is like thirst.

I sit by the window, head on glass,  
try to think of beautiful  
peaceful things:

Lilacs, petals on a river,  
Geneva, paint on her fingertips.

I stare out at the passing blur  
of traffic until I'm swallowed.

*I keep imagining the Colonel's closed door*

and it transforms into a bone  
caught in my throat.

I can't swallow.

I can't speak.

All I can think about  
is that I  
knew.

Whenever I close my eyes  
I see the always-open door, closed.

And I knew what it meant  
and never raised a fist to knock.

Never summoned my courage,  
never let my rage turn me into a weapon.

I just walked past the door quietly,  
the lamb I always say I'm not.

*I ask Stephanie to put me on back line*

and she's confused at first, because I haven't made sandwiches since I was first hired, haven't sliced beef for a year.

There must be something in my eyes, on my face like a tattoo or a stain

because she agrees, moves Debbie up to the drive-thru and I tuck myself into the shadow of the microwaves and refrigerators, assembling sandwiches and salads with robotic precision. It feels good not to speak.

It feels good not to engage.

It feels good to be a pair of hands.

It feels good to be good for one thing.

Eventually, though, we run out of beef, and I plod to the back, remove one of the steaming meteors of meat from the oven, plop it onto the slicer.

I watch the mass become thin layers, think of Debbie's finger separating from her hand, all those years ago but in this very spot.

How many fingers have been lost and never found, how many girls like me have been shoved through the slicer, mangled, coming out unrecognizable on the other side?

How many of us walk past each other every day, not knowing what we've lost, not knowing we are missing

the same pieces?

## *Texts with Deja*

**Alicia:** has anything bad ever happened to you?

**Deja:** of course

**Alicia:** do you want to tell me?

**Deja:** I mean, I could. Some of it is hard to say?

**Alicia:** that bad?

**Deja:** yes and no. sometimes it's just not big stuff. A million little things. Sand on a beach.

**Alicia:** At school?

**Deja:** Yes. But this whole world wants me to be smaller than I am. Smaller and neater.

**Alicia:** like it's putting you through a slicer

**Deja:** it's more like the sand. You know sea glass? The sand and the salt wearing it down smaller and smoother every day, year after year. And I'm not even allowed to be mad about it

**Alicia:** Everyone hates angry girls

**Deja:** yeah but I'm talking about being Black. I don't know if you've noticed, but when we're in ISAP it's bc I said "please don't be racist" & you said "fuck you Mrs. Fisher you look like a sardine somebody slapped"

**Alicia:** Imfao I've never said that

**Deja:** but you see my point.

**Alicia:** Taken. They'd make me captain of debate team if I said what you say

**Deja:** I really am going to quit that shit

**Alicia:** like actually?

**Deja:** no lol fuck Clay Bevin

**Alicia:** For the record, I like you big and bright

**Deja:** Yeah? what about sharp?

**Alicia:** especially that

*Something I've learned from Deja*

**Bodies**

are classified  
as dangerous

for different reasons  
depending  
on who they belong to.

*We have a calendar at home that's always empty*

but when I get home I see my mother has written something  
in red for Friday next week, the same day as Dr. Kareem's group:  
*eye exam for Alicia.*

We have to do this every year if I want to avoid  
the glasses I gave up to run track.

I guess contacts aren't necessary since I don't run  
anymore, but the thought draws my eye

to the calendar's square of tomorrow, white  
and empty. I remember Jacob Wheeler's face,

the appeal between his eyebrows: *please.*  
I'm out of shape. They must know.

The part of me that is a primal beast,  
shrinking from fire, wonders if this is a trick,

a ruse to draw me into the light, only  
to bring a club down on my skull.

The idea makes me bristle, a bear  
lumbering down through my veins.

I would never call the track mine, but  
when I ran, the wind itself felt

like it belonged to me—*Pry it*  
*from my cold dead hands*, I think,

but then I think, *Well,*  
*someone kind of already did.*

## *First text conversation with Geneva*

**Alicia:** Hi. This is Alicia.

**Geneva:** At long last! What are you doing?

**Alicia:** Lying on my bed.

**Geneva:** In your Meat Palace uniform

**Alicia:** What is it with you and my uniform

**Geneva:** Just teasing. How was work?

**Alicia:** I have all my fingers.

**Geneva:** Three cheers for no blood. How many burgers did you make?

**Alicia:** You know that Meat Palace doesn't serve burgers right

**Geneva:** They don't?

**Alicia:** lol no

**Geneva:** Oh.

## *Texts with Geneva: Part 2*

**Geneva:** Has your hair always been red?

**Alicia:** No.

**Geneva:** Send me a pic from before

**Alicia:** Why

**Geneva:** Because.

**Alicia:** [image]

**Geneva:** A bathing suit pic!

**Alicia:** It's the only one I have on my phone with my natural hair

**Geneva:** Are you trying to seduce me?

**Alicia:** Would it be working?

**Geneva:** Yes. But that would be true no matter what picture you sent

### *Texts with Geneva: Part 3*

**Alicia:** What are you doing

**Geneva:** Sitting on the couch with my mom

**Alicia:** Just sitting?

**Geneva:** Watching Netflix. She likes crime shows. We're solving murders

**Alicia:** 10pm on a school night. Tsk tsk

**Geneva:** I'll sleep on the bus.

**Alicia:** What are you doing tomorrow afternoon

**Geneva:** Nothing. Why...?

**Alicia:** If I asked you to come with me to something, would you?

**Geneva:** Yes

**Alicia:** I thought you would say "it depends on the something"

**Geneva:** It doesn't

## *Texts with Geneva: Part 4*

**Alicia:** Tell me a story about you

**Geneva:** Once upon a time there was a girl who lived in a cold kingdom in the north. She knew its ten thousand lakes by heart, and one time she did yoga on the rocks for three hours until the sun set and she should've gotten lost because it was so dark but she knew the path so well she was fine. She found her way through the trees and the lake kept her company. It looked like there were ten thousand moons on its surface. She tried to paint it when she got home but nothing could do it justice so she always pictures it just before she goes to sleep instead. It was the night she found her way.

**Alicia:** did she live happily ever after?

**Geneva:** we'll see

## *Thinking about princesses and peas*

In the story, the queen tests the girl at the gates  
with a tower of mattresses, a pea at the base.  
Only a princess would feel it, and the girl does.

I'm riding the city bus to school in the morning,  
thinking about Geneva, about how her singular  
presence in my life makes the rocking ocean  
seem somehow more still.

And I am not this princess, because in the story  
the girl was destined to marry the son  
of the queen and the concept of anyone's son  
has lost all appeal. But  
I do think that if I were to take all the weights

from my shoulders and lay them down  
to sleep on, with Geneva at the bottom,  
I would still feel her.

I would still feel her.

*I forgot about Dr. Kareem's girl group*

until her assistant came around to the classrooms,  
gathering us all up, herding us down the hall  
toward the music room. We have to pass my locker  
and I glance in its direction, wondering  
if there will be another note, a white banner  
flagging me down. There is nothing.

Correction: there is nothing *today*.

There will always be something.

I have already read the note—

*me too* burned onto the backs

of my eyelids: there is no

unseeing what has already

been staring at me

out of the deep,

unknowable dark.

*Dr. Kareem asks us how our weekends were*

and people offer their college application answers. Everyone is still hell-bent on impressing her, looking for ways to draw her honey-brown eyes to their face, their story.

Deja, though, offers something that turns our heads:  
*I got into a fight with my aunt, she says. She was talking about R. Kelly and how all those girls he raped knew what they were getting into. She didn't even care that most of them were my age. I know Deja well enough now to hear the tremble in her voice. I wonder if the aunt was one of the smiling women I met in Uncle Ronnie's vast backyard.*

*It's not always men who are on the wrong side of things, Dr. Kareem said. Sometimes we are our own worst enemy, fighting battles with people hurt by the weapons formed against us both.*

*What do you mean weapons?* says Prya, sounding unconvinced, suspicious.

*Any time you feel that your personhood has been turned into a liability, a target on your back, a trip wire at your feet, someone has put a weapon to your throat.*

Dr. Kareem sounds so sure when she says this, so unapologetic for what I know would make boys laugh or roll their eyes, what would make some fathers sigh at our drama, that we all sit quiet, and then one by one our hands start to rise.

## *Weapons formed against us*

*Annika: Our periods. There's like a whole industry of companies and products that exist to make us feel bad about periods.*

*Lena: Hormones. Like when they say trans girls can't run track and compete against other girls. It's so stupid because I have friends who are cis girls and they're faster than a lot of cis boys. If I'm faster, then I'm just faster. It's like they're insulting both of us.*

*Eugenia: Family. My brothers never have to do dishes or help with dinner, but I always have to. But we all have to do homework. So they have all this free time that I just...never have. All these empty hours that I don't get. It adds up.*

*Deja: Our hair. If it's short, you're a lesbian. If it's long, you think you're cute. And there's different rules for Black girls. White girls can wear cornrows and dye their hair all kinds of colors but it's like it means something different on my head.*

*Tierra: Why do white teachers always act like Black girls are more mature? Ever since I was in first grade they've been treating me like an adult.*

*Alicia: I'm so tired of being called a slut.*

*The room had already been quiet*

because something about Deja and Tierra  
saying the word *white* multiple times  
in a row has the effect of a Taser.

But now everyone shifts and stares,  
because with the exception  
of Deja, all of them have probably  
called me a slut  
a hoe  
a whore  
a skank  
at least once  
even just in passing,

and hearing the slut  
address her own rumor  
is like the beef at Meat Palace  
sitting up on the bun  
and discussing what it's like  
to be a sandwich.

The sandwich  
is not supposed  
to talk

The meat  
is supposed  
to stay meat

and everyone is shifting  
in their seats, including me,  
and I have so many things  
I could say, and it all feels

so close to my teeth,

but all the words disappear  
down my throat  
and I'm just  
a sandwich again.

*Dr. Kareem has the look of someone drilling for oil,*

like a fine black mist has just appeared on her fingertips.

She gazes at us, drinking in our silence,  
and I'm grateful at least that she doesn't stare  
only at me. When she finally speaks  
she says

*Let me tell you a list  
of things that don't exist:*

*Flying pigs*

*Dinosaurs—at least not anymore*

*Zombies*

*The Queen of Canada*

*Freddy Krueger*

*and*

*Sluts*

*Everything Dr. Kareem says feels like quartz*

Hard and flat, no room for argument to seep in,  
flawless. She lets her eyes wander the room, searching  
for someone brave enough to argue, and though Blake  
Felipe narrows her eyes, everyone listens

and so Dr. Kareem goes on.

*The invention of the slut  
is the same kind of lie  
that called Medusa a monster.*

*Depending on the story,  
Medusa was a whore  
who seduced men toward destruction,*

*or maybe she was just a beautiful  
girl in a world in which  
beauty is power.*

*In most tellings  
she was raped by a god  
then transformed  
into a monster.*

*Whatever the reason,  
our history focuses  
on her monstrosity:  
the way she would turn men  
into stone with one gaze,  
her scream like a sword.*

*So much of who we are told  
to be  
is a suit sewn with myths:*

*Virginity? A violent scam.  
The hymen never existed  
to measure purity or chastity—  
one more invention  
designed to bind us.*

*Even the concept of ugly  
is a farce, the hatechild  
of patriarchy and white supremacy.*

*The history you are taught  
the future you are instructed to imagine—  
spokes in the same crushing wheel.*

*Some women find escape  
in domination—your teachers  
who wear whiteness like a badge.*

*I have to ask you, girls:  
how many of you have walked  
through this world as a woman,  
placed into a box that's too tight,*

*and how many of you have ever  
for a moment  
wished you had a nest  
of snakes upon your head  
to do all the things  
you can't yourself?*

*We're all silent when we leave the music room*

and we all have different destinations  
but as we spread down the halls  
it feels a little like something  
from the room is following us,  
that even after we've left  
Dr. Kareem's words cling  
to us like slime  
or maybe  
like pollen.

*I finally google Medusa*

because since the library with Deja  
it's like the woman and her snakes  
have haunted my steps.

The photos online are different  
from the book: so many  
interpretations of her face  
and her life  
but it's generally agreed upon:

Medusa was beautiful and the god  
Poseidon noticed. He followed her  
into Athena's temple and  
"had sex with her."

Athena was angry and turned  
Medusa into a monster with a terrible  
face and snakes for hair, and at first I thought  
this was revenge, so that Medusa  
could kill at will, but then I read  
that it was punishment.

For Medusa.

But that is the part  
that history kind of skips. The part  
that all the stories tell instead  
is the part that came after:

Perseus, the hero, comes to slay  
the beast that is the snake-haired woman  
and when he finally took her head  
everyone rejoiced, including Athena.

One thing I notice is that no one  
really talks about Poseidon at all  
and as I sit in Mrs. Fisher's class reading  
from my phone, I think  
*That figures.*

*Are you there, Medusa? It's me, Alicia.*

Of all the things you turned to stone  
with the killing eyes you didn't ask for,  
I wonder how many times  
you tried looking in the mirror,

wondering if now that you had transformed  
from girl to monster

it was possible  
to transform again  
this time into a rock  
that

feels

sees

remembers

nothing.

## *Letter to Medusa: Part 2*

Not only did gods and goddesses alike  
join forces in your destruction,  
they gave the man with the sword  
extraordinary tools to turn you into dust:

Athena gave Perseus a special shield,  
Hermes gave winged sandals,  
Hephaestus gave a sword,  
and Hades gave his very own cloak of invisibility.

It seems odd to me that you  
were just one girl,  
and mortal,  
but you scared the gods and goddesses  
enough  
to send all those weapons  
in the effort of closing  
your eyes.

*Mrs. Fisher sends me to ISAP for using my phone*

and I should have known it was coming,  
because whenever I am actually in her classroom  
it's like my presence is a pebble in her shoe,  
a hair in her soup. Her eyes actually light up  
when she glimpses my phone under the desk,  
she's borderline gleeful when she grabs the walkie-talkie.

If my life is a tragedy, and I don't know  
if it is, then maybe Mrs. Fisher is Athena  
or Hera, one of the women who cut Medusa down  
without ever having to carry a sword.

Mr. Upton, the security guard, comes for me,  
escorts me out, and when I pass Mrs. Fisher  
I look her straight in the face  
and even though every day on this earth  
still makes me want to cry  
I still feel a stab of satisfaction  
from the way she refuses  
to meet  
my eyes.

*Halfway to ISAP, Mr. Upton stops at the water fountain*

just as Tierra Pryor comes around the corner  
carrying a hall pass.

It's been three hours since  
Dr. Kareem's girl group  
and I wonder if Tierra  
has been thinking about Medusa  
as much as I have.

It's hard to tell, but she does pause,  
glances at Mr. Upton,  
and then whispers  
*Please*  
*don't forget*  
*about the scrimmage.*

She thinks she's persuading me  
to jump out of a plane.  
She doesn't know  
that my track shoes  
have been in my locker  
for months  
waiting for me to  
remember how to fly.

## *Texts with Geneva in ISAP*

**Geneva:** So have you decided if you're going to do "the thing" you told me about?

**Alicia:** Not yet

**Geneva:** Are you going to tell me what "the thing" is?

**Alicia:** ...

**Geneva:** Are you getting an abortion or something?

**Alicia:** What? No.

**Geneva:** Why else would you be so secretive?

**Alicia:** lol It's a track meet, Jesus

**Geneva:** You run track?

**Alicia:** I used to

**Geneva:** "Today" and "used to" seem like opposite things

**Alicia:** I'm deciding if I want to again

**Geneva:** What's stopping you

**Alicia:** I'm not sure

*When Mr. West takes the ISAP kids to the bathroom*

I sit down to pee and stare at my thighs  
in the weird fluorescent school light.  
They are the pale yellow of my winter skin,  
starting to sprout hairs from where I shaved  
last week. My legs haven't seen the sun  
since the Day, the Time, the Incident.

I haven't worn shorts since the Colonel's  
fingertips made them impossible. Blue  
and white, our school colors, in a crumpled  
ball on my locker floor. I can't wear those.

Touching the shoes will be hard enough,  
tying myself into those laces, walking  
in my own footsteps. Am I actually  
going to do this? Am I actually  
going to attempt to be  
who I used to be?

Does that person still exist?  
Has she been waiting  
for me?

## *Texts with Deja*

**Deja:** Tierra says you're thinking about running today?

**Alicia:** I didn't say that

**Deja:** But are you?

**Alicia:**

**Deja:** But are you?

**Deja:** Hello?

*It's one long, straight line*

from ISAP to my locker, and I make my way  
wondering if the shoes will still fit,  
or if everything about me that feels as if  
it has both swollen and shrunk  
is true. I am overcome with memories

the way my legs used to shake as I approached  
the line, the way my lungs would feel small  
as I bent, fingertips to pavement.

And then the shot.

And my legs would find their courage  
and my lungs would open to the air  
and together me and this body  
would fly, my hair streaming  
like gold snakes behind me.

I have no idea what my face  
looked like when I ran.  
I never cared.

I'm not even  
at the track yet and my legs  
have already begun to tremble,  
and I walk slowly because of this,  
staring down. So it's not until  
I have almost reached my locker  
that I see it:

the note.

A white triangle like the fin  
of a shark protruding

into the hallway's swift current.

It takes me a long time to reach it—  
I am walking along the bottom  
of the ocean: the weight of the sea  
pulling me back and down.

When it's in my fingers I wonder  
if I have the strength not to read it,  
but it inevitably opens in my hand,  
the blue loops swimming together  
and crushing into my eyes:

*I think I'm going to tell. Will you?*

## *Texts from Deja*

**Deja:** I'm going to come to the meet

**Deja:** I'll be cheering you on!

**Deja:** You nervous? I can give you a pep talk!

## *Texts from Geneva*

**Geneva:** I'm by your locker—where are you?

**Geneva:** Want me to meet you at the track?

**Geneva:** Are you okay?

## *Texts from a random*

**Him:** I just passed your Meat Palace 😊 Do you work today?

**Alicia:** No but I'm free

**Him:** Oh nice. Where can I pick you up?

**Alicia:** Anywhere

*I'm running*

I might as well  
be barefoot  
the way  
every step  
hurts  
the way  
each time  
my feet  
hit the earth  
I feel  
my bones  
rattle.

Don't bother  
with bus stops  
or sidewalks,

the only aim  
is to stay  
in shadow  
is to stay  
in secret  
is to stay  
burning so hot  
that the smoke  
obscures  
the flames.

*His car smells like cedar*

the little green tree hanging from the rearview  
swinging in pointless circles.

He reminds me of a cop, the smile  
that is part uniform, part disguise.

I've ridden alongside enough wolves  
to know that he likes this part,  
the part where he gets to believe  
he is convincing me of something:

the part where he imagines a wall  
that he approaches with a pickaxe,  
an iron gate that he steals up to  
with a fistful of keys, trying each  
one while grinning full-fang.

He likes imagining that I am a peach  
he is coaxing into a pie.

He imagines he is a mouthful  
of teeth, and he is.

What he doesn't account for  
is the fact that the peach  
is searching for the knife,  
for the bite,

the peach is proving a point  
even if it means the uprooting  
of her core.

## *Nothing is simple*

His name is Deon and he doesn't know  
how old I am because he never asks

even though I'm wearing a  
school uniform

even though I have hanging cuticles

even though I have scuffed shoes

even though I don't have a haircut,  
just hair.

I catch glimpses of myself  
in the window, all the things  
that make me feel like a child  
all the things that Deja's  
uncle Ronnie saw that painted  
a red X through my viability,  
and wonder if it's a matter  
of vision—

those that see  
and those that don't—

or a matter of perspective:

those that see and know,  
and those that see  
and choose not to care.

*His house is clean.*

I have seen the dens of wolves  
and they all look different:

waxed floors  
laundry on the banister  
pots on the stove  
no pots at all

the only thing  
that's always the same  
is the wolf  
who lives there.

I am here but I am  
nowhere.

I think of Medusa  
stone  
I think of Geneva  
soft

I think of all in between,  
all the betweens I am.

## *Texts from Geneva that I see later*

**Geneva:** You weren't at work after school.

**Geneva:** I got some mozzarella sticks and waited for you. I see why people eat fast food.

Kind of.

**Geneva:** Something made you disappear today. I wish I knew what. I'm here if you want to talk.

## *Text from Geneva at midnight*

**Geneva:** Your friend Deja was worried about you. You have a lot of people that love you, just so you know. Whatever you're dealing with, you don't have to deal with it alone.

*Instead of telling my story, I ask her to tell me another story about her*

**Geneva:** Once upon a time there was a girl who loved her father and this didn't mean she didn't love her mother but to her father she was like a jewel in his crown and he never minded when she was under his feet while he made chicken korma, and sometimes he would boop her nose and leave an orange dot of turmeric. The girl remembers that even now. The girl's father had no family in the cold land of the north, the land of her mother, and losing her father made everything colder still. In this new place the girl has aunties who make korma for her because her mother wouldn't know where to begin and sometimes the aunties still make comments about how the girl's father should have married a woman from Pakistan and sometimes the girl agrees which makes her feel guilty even though she loves her mother. The girl likes it here better even though her mother is lonely for the lakes so sometimes the girl still tries to paint them. Their house is full of lakes but empty of her father.

**Alicia:** What was his name?

**Geneva:** Arjan

**Alicia:** Does the girl paint portraits of him?

**Geneva:** No.

**Alicia:** Why not?

**Geneva:** Sometimes it feels like painting is magic, and the girl dreams that painting him would bring him back. She knows that when she paints him and he's still gone, it will feel like losing him for good.

**Alicia:** Maybe when you bring back something you've lost, it returns in a different form

**Geneva:** Maybe

*Thank god it's Saturday*

I don't think I could take walking into school  
and seeing Deja

Tierra

Jacob Wheeler

Coach Tinsley,

watching their faces decide

whether or not I am worth

speaking to, my absence

worth interpretation.

In my state of isolation,

in the cave whose dark

I have grown so accustomed to,

I am unused to disappointing

anyone but myself.

*I'm getting my khakis out of the dryer*

when my mother appears at the top of the basement  
steps. I know it's her and not my brother  
by the soft cough that passes her lips  
whenever she is about to start a fight.

*You don't need the pants, she says.  
You're not going to work.*

*Yes I am, I call up.  
I go in at 10.*

*I called and told them  
you weren't coming in, she says,*

and I think I've misheard her  
until I turn and look up  
the mountain of stairs,  
at her face staring down,  
at her arms crossed not  
over her chest in defiance  
but over her stomach  
as if in pain. *Is someone  
dead?* I say. I'm always asking  
if someone is dead, looking  
for a shadow bleaker  
than my own, but all she does  
is disappear.

*She's waiting for me in the kitchen*

*I saw someone drop you off last night.  
Your brother told me you've been going out  
at night, and last night*

*I waited and watched, and I couldn't see  
who it was but I can tell you it wasn't a boy,*

*it wasn't a girl, it wasn't someone your age,  
it wasn't someone who should be*

*dropping you off after dark, it wasn't  
Sarah, it wasn't her mom or brother,*

*it wasn't someone I know, it wasn't  
someone whose car you should be in*

*and all I want to know, Alicia, is what  
is making you so afraid of life*

*that you are putting yourself  
in the way of something so sure  
to crush you?*

*I should feel so many things*

but in this moment all I want to do  
is go to my brother's door,  
knock on it politely,  
and when he answers,  
throw my fist against  
his face.

But he's not home.

Of course.

The men  
in my family  
enjoy ripping  
open the cushions  
and when feathers  
begin to fly,  
crashing on another couch.

## *Texts with David*

**Alicia:** I can't believe you snitched, you fucking bastard. I can't believe after months of not saying shit to me you run tell Mom instead of talking to me

**David:** You seem to be operating under the illusion that talking to you has been an option for the last eight months

**Alicia:** Oh, now it's my fault? What, because I'm \*so rude\* to your little friend? Fuck him and you

**David:** You make everyone nervous

**Alicia:** ME? ME.

**David:** Me and Mom are worried about you

**Alicia:** Worry about yourself, cunt

## *Thinking about notes*

The papers that were slipped into my locker  
are nesting under my pillow, not at risk  
of giving me bad dreams since  
I rarely sleep. It's daylight

but I lie staring at my ceiling  
thinking about the notes  
I used to scribble to my brother,  
tucked under his door  
like evening prayers.

I can't remember  
what any of them  
ever said, what David  
and I spent so much  
time and ink relaying  
to each other.

I know I kept at least one,  
squirreled into the shoe box  
under my desk. I retrieve  
it, find his handwriting  
easily, always so mechanical  
and square:

DEAR ALICIA

I HOPE YOU HAVE A GOOD DAY  
AT SCHOOL AND MS. RUPE  
ISN'T MEAN TO YOU. SHE  
WAS MEAN TO ME, BUT MAYBE  
YOUR FIFTH GRADE  
WILL BE DIFFERENT THAN MY  
FIFTH GRADE, MAYBE SHE  
WON'T KNOW YOU

ARE MY SISTER AND SHE WILL  
GIVE YOU A BREAK. REMEMBER  
YOU CAN ALWAYS GO  
TO MS. HARRIS'S CLASS  
DURING LUNCH. SHE ALWAYS  
LET SENSITIVE KIDS  
HANG OUT THERE WHEN  
WE NEEDED TO.

I stare at the words  
*sensitive kids* and we  
and think my brother must have  
at some point imagined  
himself as a rabbit,  
and I wonder what  
animal he is now.

## *Texts with Geneva*

**Alicia:** I didn't say it last night so I'll say it now. Sorry I ghosted

**Geneva:** Are you still feeling like a ghost?

**Alicia:** Yes

**Geneva:** If it helps...I can still see you.

*What I don't text Geneva*

What if I'm feeling  
more monster  
than ghost

what if my hair  
turns to cobras

what if my eyes  
turn to machine guns

what if my tongue  
is forked and bloody

will you still see me?  
will you still see me?

## *Texts with Deja*

**Alicia:** Remember what I said in Dr. Kareem's group?

**Deja:** Yes.

**Alicia:** I keep thinking about what you said about a circle, or a heart, or a box, how the farther somebody gets from the middle—from what everyone demands they be—the happier they are. The freer they are. I'm not saying you're wrong, but I don't feel happy. Or free.

**Deja:** Never?

**Alicia:** Sometimes.

**Deja:** Do you want to talk about it?

**Alicia:**

**Deja:** I guess I should have expected that.

**Alicia:** I'm sorry. I'm not a very good friend.

**Deja:** Why not?

**Alicia:** I don't know how.

**Deja:** Better get some training wheels, doll

*My mother waits in the kitchen all day*

When I come out at 2pm she is eating a cheese sandwich  
and drinking chocolate milk. She stares at me,  
then down at her plate.

*Dairy when I'm sad, she says.  
Some things never change.  
Do you have things like that?*

At first I don't think I'll speak,  
but the words come on their own,  
the quiet house, the empty  
doors, the silent garage,  
all like a cup I have to fill:

*Chocolate when I'm sad, I say.  
Cheese when I'm angry.  
Salt when I'm scared.*

*Grab yourself some food then, she says.  
Let's talk.*

I go to the fridge and stand  
in its white glare. All the shelves  
are full, but I don't know what  
to reach for.

*I'm supposed to be talking*

I'm supposed to be pouring out my heart.  
My mother is looking at me  
for the first time in months,  
actually seeing me and not the apparitions  
of her marriage  
her mother  
her past and future,  
and still my throat  
is the clogged pipe,  
stopped up with debris,  
with garbage and mess.

I think my crying might make her  
feel better, to know that something  
in her daughter is still breathing  
is still bloody and alive.

But maybe nothing is  
because I end up eating  
peanut butter and jelly,  
which is what I eat  
when I'm feeling lonely.

## *Thoughts about silence*

When Sarah and I were in sixth grade, she didn't speak to her parents for nine days, a silent strike in protest of their decision to keep her home from the church camping trip.

Her silence was a demand, her silence still contained words. I don't know what my silence is saying.

My mother and I sit on the couch watching a movie from the 2000s and everyone is carrying huge purses and tiny dogs and I barely catch a word of it because I am trying so hard to listen to the inside of my head searching for the thing that is binding my tongue. My mother probably thinks I'm depressed. She thinks whatever cloud has stretched over my life is one that she saw in the Parenting Teenagers Handbook. She is always blaming things on herself, she probably thinks this is a symptom of divorce has probably been researching family therapy, self-help books.

She is so good. It doesn't occur to her that all the clouds in this storm stirred because of me, and opening my mouth will only add hail to the rain and thunder.

I watch her watching the movie  
and imagine my silence as a bunker.  
But when I really think about it  
I don't know who it's protecting:  
her  
or me  
or Him.

*"You can tell me"*

She says it midway through another movie.  
We've been on the couch all day.  
Maybe she thinks she can wait me out.  
She doesn't know I've been holding  
everything in for so long already.

*Even if you don't tell me everything, she says.  
Even if you just want to say a piece.*

*I'm not friends with Sarah anymore*  
I say, before she can ask more questions,  
before her tongue in her mouth becomes  
a sword in my heart. *She stopped talking  
to me in April. She said she never  
wants to see me again.*

Beside me my mother takes a deep  
breath. She's going to ask why,  
she's going to do the thing  
that mothers do, when they  
can't help but transform  
into scissors, needle, scalpel:  
surgeons over the lives  
of their children.

*Sarah was always a judgy  
little bitch, my mother says,*

and I almost snap my neck  
turning to see her face,  
and when I see her raised  
eyebrows, her half smile,  
I can't help but laugh,

a sound that rises and rolls  
out of me like magma,  
so fast and hot  
I can't stop.

I'm still laughing when she says  
*You've probably been feeling  
really lonely*, and I realize then  
the faint, faint line that exists  
between laughter and tears.

*It's been a long time since I fell asleep*

with my mother's fingers in my hair.

On the border between awake  
and asleep, I can imagine  
I'm a baby again,  
young and new and without scars.

Part of me thinks I'm dreaming  
when I hear my mother's voice  
trickle through, but I'm not:

*I read that anger can grow  
of trauma. That it can turn  
a human into a volcano.  
I want you to know I'm here.  
It's okay to be angry.  
I can stand your lava.*

I'm glad my eyes are closed.  
Open, I might cry,  
and I'm not ready  
for anything  
that doesn't  
burn.

*I'm still asleep on the couch when David comes home*

the smell of weed and cats surging in alongside him,  
Justin at his heels. Justin goes on to David's room

but through my half-closed eyes, David pauses  
by the couch and looks down at me  
for a long moment

before he lets out a breath in the low light.  
His steps down the hall are heavy and slow  
and I don't know if he's drunk or sad,  
or something else I cannot name.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 22

*Short week for MLK*

and no one is taking anything seriously except Mrs. Fisher,  
who sends me to ISAP for not wearing a belt.  
Cussing her out gets old—when I leave I just say  
*Thanks for the stellar education, Margaret,*  
and people laugh, but I don't care.

Mr. West waves me in wearily, and it's just us  
two in the silent gray room, the voices  
of the Temptations like a warm gold light  
in the corner. Sitting staring at the wall  
I gradually realize that I'm not nervous.

I am alone in a room with a man, Mr. West,  
and no follicle of my hair, no cell of my blood  
ripples with anxiety. I glance at him  
every few minutes, the way his face folds  
down to study the book in his hands.  
He's reading something called *Salvage  
the Bones*, and I wonder who  
taught him not to howl  
at the moon.

The door opens and I already know, somehow,  
it will be Deja. Mr. Upton leads her in.

*What are we protesting today?* Mr. West says,  
not looking up from his book.

*Everything, Mr. West,* she says.

*Everything.*

*I hear that, lil sister. Take a seat.*

*She knew I was there.*

She walks straight toward me, and students in ISAP are supposed to sit two desks apart, but today she comes and places a hand on the chair right next to me, glances back at Mr. West. He looks up, feeling our proximity, and the brown eyes behind his glasses take us in, take in whatever prayer is on our faces. One hand rises, waves us off. Deja sits down.

*Do you want to talk, she whispers.*

*Not really.*

*You have to talk to me sometime. You have to tell me what's up with you.*

*Do I?*

*Did something happen? Something I don't see?*

*I can only sigh.*

*Dear Athena,*

Some people on the internet say  
that what you did to Medusa  
was a gift, so she could take revenge

on men like Poseidon  
(who *wasn't* just a man)  
for doing things like what Poseidon  
did.

But I call bullshit, Athena.  
I don't know who you paid  
to sell that version of yourself

but if you gave a shit  
about Medusa  
then why did you give Perseus  
the goddamn shield  
he would use to kill her?

You were a goddess  
and Poseidon a god  
so if you wanted revenge  
why didn't you  
take it?

*Jacob Wheeler and Tierra Pryor are dressed*

for practice. I pass them in the hallway and feel  
my body tense as their eyes pass over me,

seeing

and then consciously

unseeing.

Last week they could see me,  
but then I ghosted.

Maybe some ghosts

haunt

themselves.

## *The Sixth Sense*

I watched it with my mom once when I was thirteen and she was so excited about the twist, couldn't wait to see if I caught it. I didn't, but I was less interested

in the ghost of Bruce Willis than I was in the little boy who saw blood everywhere he turned, little girl ghosts vomiting their secrets into his bed when all he wanted to do was be normal.

I don't want to be that ghost for Geneva—she has her own problems, her own aching heart. So when she meets me at my locker after school, I want to truly disappear, want to watch my skin turn into nothing.

But then she smiles  
and every cell of me is visible.

## *Geneva walks me to work*

It's hard to avoid the eyes of someone like her  
who sees so much, seemingly without looking.  
We've walked three blocks when she takes my hand  
and it's like the moment before a tornado  
touches ground, when all the world goes still  
and silent. Or maybe it's the moment after  
the storm has passed, or maybe the moment  
right in the center, the eye, when  
the storm blinks, and you think you're safe.

My grandma used to tell us all  
that when a tornado was on the horizon,  
to open every window of the house—  
to let the storm air in so that the pressure  
didn't burst every pane into a roar  
of glass. I know this was not good  
advice, but with Geneva's hand in mine

I walk down the street toward Meat Palace  
with the urge to throw open  
every window of myself  
let in the heady scent of storm  
because in the middle of all this  
it feels as if I'm going to burst either way  
and maybe I would rather smell  
the rain and look the storm  
right in the eye.

*I'm not good at being honest*

even though Geneva makes me want to be

so when she asks me to tell her  
a story about myself this time

my brain is a minefield  
of all the things I can't quite  
look at, let alone say.  
She thinks I'm so brave  
so tough—  
she doesn't know  
that a white piece of paper  
with blue ink sends me spiraling  
scattering into pieces.

But she asks again,

and the only thing I can say  
is that when I hold her hand  
I remember being small  
and walking through the market  
touching the smooth skins  
of apples and apricots—

how I always loved art  
class, the still life,  
capturing light.

I say  
*You should paint your father*

and she says

*Maybe I'll paint you*

and I say

*Or you could paint your father*

and her smile is as soft

and sweet

as a plum.

*Geneva asks to come in and sit in the lobby*

but I see Terry's car in the parking lot, and I know he would be an asshole, tell her she had to buy a sandwich per hour or some bullshit. So we say

goodbye, and I let her hand go, and everything about watching her walk back the way we came is like watching a unicorn retreat

into a storybook. But that makes it sound like Geneva is magic, and she isn't. She is an ordinary girl who is not ordinary at all.

*Because Terry is on the clock I have to take out my nose  
ring*

and I can't ask to work back line because it's only  
Rodney, me, and Debbie, and Rodney doesn't do register.  
So me and Debbie take drive-thru and Terry  
handles the counter, which is the easiest place  
to work this time of day, but Debbie is a good  
partner and we roll through the orders:

*please and thank you and have a nice day  
here's some extra napkins  
what kind of sauce would you like  
here's your change*

It's easy to take my mind off all the things  
that eat my wooden brain like termites.  
*Thanks for choosing Meat Palace, what can  
I get for you today?* Over and over  
and they answer, sometimes rude  
and sometimes not, always hungry,  
and everything is fine  
until the voice that answers  
belongs to Sarah.

*She orders a beef and cheddar with no sauce*

which is what she always ordered when she would come hang  
out while waiting for me to get off work she sounds close  
to the order speaker, which means she's probably driving,  
which means she has her permit, which also means  
her father is in the car, or worse, her mother,  
or maybe her brother Reese who once  
told me he was praying the gay kid  
in his class would go to hell even  
though that kid, Sam, still went  
to church three times a week  
my heart feels like it's been  
dropped in the deep fryer  
scalded to nothing and  
by the time Sarah's  
car pulls around  
and I see her  
face smiling  
I just want  
to turn  
into  
ash.

## *Debbie takes the money from Sarah's hand*

I almost warn her, *Debbie watch out, she bites*  
but instead I stand just beyond her shoulder, my eyes  
feeling dry and hot from not blinking. The fryer  
is beeping, and behind me, Terry barks my name  
telling me to pull the fries. This draws Sarah's eyes.

We look at each other for the first time since April  
and probably longer, because even when she  
was still masquerading as a friend, her judgment  
had boiled, she had begun her silent jury  
of my life, never looking me in my eyes.

Even that day at the bus stop,  
when she brought down the axe  
disguised as piety between us:

*We are two different people and I think  
it's better if I pray for you  
from a distance. Right now I need  
to unburden my soul before  
I can help yours.*

We stare at each other through  
the drive-thru window, and I wonder  
if she's remembering what she said,  
the way her words flowed so freely,  
not from practice but from ease,  
and mine stopped in my throat.

Her mother's in the passenger side,  
handing over the money, and Sarah  
passes it in to Debbie.

I pull the fries. They're not burnt.  
I bag them, pass it to Debbie, silent.  
Debbie is about to hand their order  
through the window when Sarah  
holds up one palm: *Actually*

*can we have another order  
of fries? That girl wasn't  
wearing gloves.*

*I don't know how it ends.*

I turn away and end up in the supply closet.

I am surrounded by industrial-size cans  
of condiments and pillars of napkins.

I breathe in the smell of bleach and beef.

*I could live here, I think.*

*I could live right here. I could eat  
ketchup and whatever else  
and never have to walk  
out into the world ever again.*

The door opens behind me,  
and I turn expecting Debbie.

It's Terry. He's wearing the face  
that I've seen on other snouts:  
the concern mask. The one  
that pretends to be serious,  
but behind the serious  
is something sparkling.

*Did something happen?  
Is this because I shouted  
at you about the fries?  
I'm sorry if I scared you*

and his concerned arm  
encircles my shoulders,  
his frown hovers above my head.

*Dear Medusa, I think.  
Would you rather be snake  
or stone? Would you rather  
hurt yourself or everyone*

*your eye falls upon? Probably  
you would rather that  
you had never been turned  
into a monster  
at all.*

*"Terry, how about you give that girl some goddamn space?"*

I didn't think Debbie could curse. She looks like a sitcom grandmother, neat silver hair and violet eyeglasses on a chain. When she opens the door that chain is swinging, and her eyebrows are arched above the frame. *Can't you see she's upset? Why is this door closed? Someone's asking for the manager up front, and that would be you, Terry. Alicia, I need your help taking some things out to the dumpster.*

Her voice is like an eagle swinging down from the highest clouds, talons bared and driven by the weight of wing and gravity, strong enough to make a wolf spring back, severe enough to make the fangs abandon prey.

Terry leaves fast. It's just me and Debbie and the fast-approaching army of my tears, and she either doesn't see, or pretends not to, but she tugs on my sleeve and gestures for me to follow out the back door.

*We carry armfuls of everything expired*

Bread and produce and turnovers  
piled into boxes, and it's all supposed to go  
straight into the dumpster. I know this  
because I've done it, and I move to rip  
open the bags, toss it all straight in,  
but Debbie stops my hand, shakes her head.

*Terry tells us to take it out of the packaging  
so that homeless people can't eat it,  
but Terry has never been hungry  
and I don't know what heaven  
he thinks he's getting into  
by dumping bread into mud  
but me and him must think  
about different gods  
when we pray.*

And she shows me the other side  
of the dumpster, between the metal  
and the wall, where she stacks  
everything in a neat pile,  
the bread and the tomatoes  
and the heads of lettuce  
that faceless corporate bosses  
say is no longer good enough for customers.

She piles it all up nicely and then leans  
against the wall to smoke  
a cigarette, waves at me to stand back.

*You're so young, she says.  
Your lungs are still pink and clean.  
Sometimes it's hard to remember*

*that you and your body  
are in this together.  
But try not to forget.*

*Also, do me a favor, honey:  
quit this job and do something  
else with your precious time.*

*You're sixteen.  
I know it's not all sweet  
but hang in there.*

*Hang in there.*

I'm not even sure what it's supposed to mean.  
It's a slogan that has always been printed  
under the photo of a cat hanging from a branch  
or the coyote hanging from the ledge.

*Hang in there* implies help  
is coming, but I don't hear any sirens.

Then again, maybe some help  
walks on silent feet:

Debbie in the doorway  
when Terry's palm closed on my shoulder;  
Deja's whispers in ISAP;  
Mr. West and his razor blade;  
Dr. Kareem and Medusa;  
Geneva  
Geneva  
Geneva

In the old days when a cat was stuck  
in a tree they would call the fire department.  
Now there are too many things on fire  
to waste time on one little cat.

Surely they get down on their own  
eventually? Surely they realize  
the strength of their claws  
and climb.

### *Letter to Medusa: Part 3*

How does it feel to know  
that after the boy with all the gifts,  
all those blessings,

came and took your head,  
that he used your dead eyes  
to vanquish his enemies,

took the only monstrous gift  
you were ever given  
and made it his own weapon?

*Hey Poseidon*

I always hear how your brother  
Zeus liked to turn into animals  
to walk the earth and have his way  
with women:

bull

swan

cuckoo

Did you ever take a page  
from that godly book

Did you ever set foot  
as paw

Did you ever go gray  
and running

Did you even bother  
to pretend  
to be any other predator  
than the one you  
already are?

*At home I think I'm alone*

but when I'm closing the microwave on my leftovers  
I hear the rise and fall of laughter in the basement,  
my brother and his friends  
playing a game or watching a movie.

I hurry with my food, hoping I can eat  
and disappear before they come upstairs,  
but I am just putting my plate in the dishwasher  
when the basement door opens,  
the sound of feet up the steps,  
the smell of cat and weed rising.

Justin appears first, mid-conversation:

*I'd never fuck a Black girl, he's saying,  
but the girl in that movie could make me  
think about it,*

and my brother and the other two boys  
Cody and Andrew, or Cliff, or Coby,  
all laugh, and they all smell like smoke  
and I wonder if my brother has ever  
bothered to tell them that they can't  
smoke inside our house, or if his sister  
is the only human he has no problem  
talking shit to. I ignore them all,

stare only at David. He is the only one  
whose shame I am interested in,  
whose decline I have watched  
from inside the test tube.

*Are you going to say anything?*

*Are you going to tell him he's racist?*

I say, and they all look surprised,  
as if a mannequin at Target  
opened its plaster lips. I squeeze  
my glass of water tighter. *Are you  
going to tell them you weren't raised  
to talk about people like that?*

And David blushes, as if the reminder  
of who he used to be is a joke  
at his expense, a stain on his pants.  
Justin says:

*Don't you have a dick to suck?*

and laughs, and my brother mumbles  
something that sounds like *Shut the fuck  
up*, but it's too quiet to hear and too soft  
to know  
at whom  
the words  
are aimed.

## *Hang in there: Part 2*

Hang in there, cat,  
because there are wolves below,

and although there is kin  
on the branch beside you

you can't count on anyone  
to pull you up

but  
yourself.

*I follow them out into the yard*

It's dark. Late. I imagine my mom down the block  
staring through her windshield, but no,  
she would only do that when the person  
being watched is me. We are alone in the night,  
the street asleep on a Thursday evening.

My blood is full of wasps.

I'm still clutching the glass of water  
and it sloshes over onto my knuckles  
as I stride across the grass,  
up behind the group,  
my legs as shaky and strong  
as they are before a track meet.

*Hey motherfucker*, I say,  
and maybe I scream it,  
and I watch my foot rise  
from the stiff grass  
and connect with the back  
of Justin's knee.

He stumbles forward,  
and I meant to throw  
the water in his face  
but instead I throw  
the whole glass  
and it cracks into his jaw  
as he turns to look  
at me. The glass doesn't break

until it hits the ground,  
bouncing onto the sidewalk,

and then I launch myself  
at him, imagining my hair  
streaming like snakes  
as red as a comet  
    the Big Bang  
fucking up his whole world.

He hits me, his arm longer  
than I expected, and stronger,  
and my own world explodes in stars  
but I stay standing long enough  
to watch David headbutt  
Justin in the stomach,  
send him crashing to the ground

where he delivers fist after fist  
into his best friend's  
face.

*No one calls the police.*

All of the boys (and me) are white  
so although there are eyes  
peeking between blinds,  
the only thing that happens is Mr. Perry  
across the street calling, *You boys  
go on home now, you hear!*

They do. Justin limping,  
the other boys muttering,  
shaking their heads.  
One of them calls something  
when they're halfway down  
the street to which David  
shouts, *Bite me, bitch*

and then it's only me and David  
in the yard just outside  
the aura of the porchlight,  
him glancing at me sideways  
and muttering  
*You're so fucking stupid.*

## *Texts with Geneva at midnight*

**Alicia:** I hit a boy in the face today

**Geneva:** Are you okay?

**Alicia:** I hit him and you're asking me if I'm okay!

**Geneva:** I'm assuming he hit you back

**Alicia:** How did you know?

**Geneva:** Does a bear shit in the woods?

**Geneva:** Does a tiger have stripes?

**Geneva:** Does a wolf howl at the moon?

**Alicia:** What do you know about wolves

**Geneva:** Everybody knows about wolves

FRIDAY, JANUARY 25

*Letter to Medusa: Part 4*

How did you get ready for your day?  
Did you brush your fangs,  
pet the snakes growing from your scalp,  
nod to their hissing like the radio?

Did you eventually get used to  
the gray walls of your cavern  
or did you ever look toward  
the light and think

*I want to see the sunset  
even if I turn the whole  
world to stone?*

*When Justin hit me*

I ducked just enough for his fist  
to strike my head.

The tender lump is hidden  
under my hair.

Just like  
everything else,

the snakes  
obscure

the  
story.

*My mother almost gets me sent to ISAP*

when she texts me during Mr. Mattson's class—  
luckily he doesn't hate me as much as Mrs. Fisher.

I glance at the text by my locker: *Don't forget  
you have an appointment with the eye doctor  
this afternoon. I'll take you.*

I write back *okay*  
but I'd already been looking at my glasses  
on the counter of my bathroom.

I only wear them at night  
but there's nothing stopping me now  
from wearing them all the time:

no track to run  
no burpees to knock  
them off my face

In my skull are the same eyes  
but my life dictates how they see.

*I've been dreading Dr. Kareem's group,*

dreading my own mouth, which more and more  
I can't seem to keep shut. When we all are assembled  
in the music room it's awkward, because usually  
Dr. Kareem addresses us as a group, says something  
to get a conversation started. Today she just sits  
and stares, and stares, and stares, and it's like  
sitting in the presence of a great wise owl  
and as the time ticks by you can't tell  
if you're an owl too or if you're slowly transforming  
into a mouse.

I am always thinking of who is the predator,  
and who is the prey. I wonder if it will always  
be this way, or if eventually I can walk  
through the world not as rabbit  
or mouse  
or even monster  
but as a creature  
that could eventually  
be human.

*"I googled hymens"*

Eugenia says out of the blue, *what a scam* and almost everybody laughs, even Dr. Kareem, but Blake frowns.

*How is it a scam? Just because people aren't as serious about virginity as they used to be doesn't mean that it's fake.*

Dr. Kareem's laugh dwindles away and Blake, cool-popular-sunflower-Blake blushes under her gaze which is never fierce yet always intense. But Eugenia answers first:

*I mean, prove that it's real though?  
I read that some people's hymens are like a dot, and some people's are like a ring around the edge.  
When they say you lose your virginity, they're saying something is lost.  
I don't feel like I lost anything.*

Blake stares.

*Okay but it hurts  
the first time. That's  
virginity. That's something.*

Then Dr. Kareem speaks up:

*Are you speaking from personal experience?*

Blake's only answer

is a blush, so Dr. Kareem goes on.

*That one's first time having penetrative sex must always be very painful is another myth. I ask you all to always think about the production of knowledge: who makes it, and for whom.*

*How can virginity be defined by a hymen when not every person has one? When no hymen looks the same? When it can be torn by horseback, by bicycle, by tampon?*

*When we are born into this world, we can scream and we can swallow, and that's about all. The hymen is not about chastity, some pristine bow tied around a wedding-night sacrifice. It is a gift from nature, to keep bacteria out of the body we are not yet capable of caring for without help. Have you ever changed a diaper, for god's sake?*

Laughter. Even Blake, whose face is no longer gold sunflower but red tulip. Dr. Kareem shakes her head and sighs, finishes:

*People, all I'm trying to say is that if your first time hurts maybe it's because your hymen is intact, or maybe it's because you're nervous and in need of lubrication.*

*Either way, please remember*

*the production of knowledge  
and what we generally accept  
as true. Is it a fact, or is it  
an electric fence around the yard  
to keep the house cat  
from exploring the wonders  
of the world beyond?*

*Lena says*

*I've been thinking,  
about what Dr. Kareem said about weapons  
created to harm us. And it reminded me of the Bible,  
how they say "no weapon formed against me  
shall prosper" but I was thinking  
that if all these things we talked about*

*periods*

*and body-shaming*

*and hormones*

*and gender roles or whatever*

*and racism*

*and slut-shaming*

*if these are all weapons formed against  
us*

*then we're helping them prosper*

*when we turn them*

*against*

*each other.*

*"And what about virgin-shaming?"*

Prya says.

*Because that's a thing too.*

*People have sex when they're ready  
but everybody is always judging  
when they do it:*

*too soon, too late—  
everyone always has something  
to say. There was a whole movement  
about sexual liberation  
but we're still on the same old, same old.*

A few months ago  
I would have heard her  
and seen nothing missing

but now, I look at Deja  
and I see she's already thinking  
the same thing—two options,  
nothing in between or beyond.

I open my mouth to speak  
up for her, but Deja is already  
speaking up for herself:

*The thing that bugs me about virginity  
is that everyone seems to think being a virgin  
means you're saving sex—for God, for prom,  
for the right person at the right time.*

*But I'm not saving it. Why don't people see  
that sex is not part of my reality?  
Maybe this is like describing the color orange*

*to eyes that only see black and white*

*but it's not about purity, it's not about fear  
or pain or judgment or God  
it's about me and the world that exists  
inside me, and sex  
is not part of that world,*

*and it would be great  
it would be so freaking great  
if people stopped talking about liberation  
like it begins and ends  
with the decision of when  
and where and how  
someone says yes to sex,  
like no is always temporary  
or a placeholder.*

*I've been so used  
to debate, that who I am  
has become a subject on a stage  
but I think I am done  
debating my reality.*

*I refuse to let anybody  
shrink who I am down to purity.*

*I'm not sex or abstinence  
I'm not a nun or a bride  
I'm not clean I'm not dirty  
I'm Deja Duvall.*

*"Well, damn."*

For a moment this is all Dr. Kareem says  
and then her look of surprise  
cracks into a smile and she laughs:

*You just exposed a gap in my thinking and I'm grateful. I will have to think  
about this before I can give a worthy response.*

I don't think I've ever heard a teacher react like that  
when they were told something they didn't know.

*I will say, she adds,  
the word slut-shaming  
assumes there is a slut to shame.  
As I've said before,  
there is no such thing as a slut,  
a whore, a hoe. There are only people  
who choose to have sex  
and those who choose not to—  
she looks at Deja—either  
temporarily or not!  
The number of partners  
is irrelevant.  
We are not who we have sex with  
We are not who we don't have sex with.*

*We are an expanse.*

And I hear her, and it should probably  
make me feel better, but in my head  
all I can think about is the word  
CHOOSE  
and the echo of its binary.

Choose. Or choose not.  
In so many cases  
I can't find myself  
in these two categories.

I have gotten into cars, stepped  
through doorways, and didn't want  
to be there. But my feet walked,  
my waist bent to sit.  
I was not duct-taped.  
I was not handcuffed in a trunk.  
And still, in the back of my mind,  
I felt that many things were before me  
but choice wasn't one of them.

What choice does a rabbit have  
walking through a world of wolves?  
Does the rabbit have to grow fangs  
to survive, or does it have to recognize  
its softness and transform?

Why can't a rabbit be a rabbit?  
Why am I comparing women  
to rabbits  
to begin with?

I think again of what Deja said:  
circle, heart, box.

What Dr. Kareem said  
about electric fences.

Maybe I don't feel free  
because I haven't yet  
run  
far enough.

*"You said there's no such thing as a slut,"*

Prya says. She's still grappling.  
We all are.

*But if there's  
no such thing  
as a virgin  
either, then  
what is there?*

And Dr. Kareem  
grins like  
Prya has dug  
her hands deep  
into dark  
soil and  
found gold.

*Dr. Kareem spends the rest of the group listening*

to everyone talk about ways we can be in partnership with other women and spends five minutes facilitating a debate between Lena and Annika when Annika says trans girls need their own partnership instead of expecting sisterhood from cis girls. I recognize myself in Lena, the desire to be silent battling with the flame that builds in your belly and struggles up your throat. There are things that are important to one person, things that we feel need to be important to everyone. This is how the world works, this is how the world continues to turn, and maybe get better.

## *Lena's argument*

*Annika is saying only a cis girl  
has experienced  
the struggle of  
girlhood and womanhood  
like your girlhood  
your womanhood is the same  
as everyone else's  
in this room*

*like Deja's girlhood  
is the same as mine  
or mine is the same  
as Alicia's.*

*Prya  
has to fight every day  
to persuade these teachers  
to give Muslim students the  
respect that they give  
Christian kids at this  
dumbass school,*

*Deja  
has to spend her girlhood  
educating adults  
on why her girlhood  
matters, so why*

*is a trans girl's*

*girlhood  
her coming  
of age*

*any different, why  
is her experience  
of girlhood not just  
another facet on the  
diamond of woman*

*why can't we all just  
shine together*

*Deja says*

*because diamonds' value is inflated  
by an exploitive structure  
that assigns worth based on  
an arbitrary set of rules*

and Dr. Kareem says

*Sounds about right*

and we all laugh  
even me, and I'm so proud  
to have a best friend  
who can make a joke  
like that, even while  
people's eyes are full  
of tears.

## *Texts with Deja*

**Deja:** I always feel like I can punch a hole in the sky after Dr. Kareem's group

**Alicia:** Or punch a hole in someone's face

**Deja:** Whose? Anyone specific?

**Alicia:** I can think of a few.

**Alicia:** can I ask you something?

**Deja:** of course

**Alicia:** I probably should have asked you this before. How did it make you feel when we talked about sex in the group before today? With you being asexual?

**Deja:** Invisible.

**Alicia:** I thought it might

**Deja:** I'm torn. Cuz on one hand everyone notices that I'm Black right away...it feels nice to have part of who I am be hide-able. But people just assume that all girls are available for sex and it's just a matter of persuasion and damn I just wanna live and BE on my own terms.

**Alicia:** praise hands.gif

**Deja:** ew don't lol

**Alicia:** sorry

## *The diamond of woman*

I don't much feel like a diamond but I can't get  
Lena's speech about girlhood out  
of my mind. My girlhood

isn't Deja's

isn't Lena's

isn't Prya's

isn't Eugenia's

isn't Annika's

but we are like the Olympic rings,  
Venn diagrams with corners  
of our lives overlapping. We have  
so many things in common,  
chief among them  
wolves

and it's disappointing

no, upsetting

no, enraging

that of all the things we have in common  
the one we feel deepest is that we've all been bitten  
by the same set of fangs  
or at the very least  
seen them flashing  
from the dark.

*"Be there in ten minutes"*

texts my mother, and I'm thinking about the puff  
of air they whiff into your eyeball at the optometrist  
while I make my way toward my locker.

I'm five feet away by the time I notice  
the piece of paper sticking out  
of the grille, waving softly  
in the breeze of passing students.

I freeze. I don't want to go any closer:  
the white paper is a crime scene  
is a contagion zone  
is a glowing SOS

Touching it feels like stepping in blood  
tracking it all over the house  
then wondering which puddles  
are mine  
or hers.

The note:

I need to talk  
to you. Meet me  
in the library  
after school

*I sit down next to my mother and she asks why I'm sweating*

*I ran from my locker.*

It's the truth.

I did.

I just don't tell her

that what I'm running from

is handwriting written

in blue loops,

words from a grave

dug behind

a closed door.

*I barely notice the puff of air*

I read the letters

E  
F P  
T O Z  
L P E D

I compare slides:

The first one is better  
than the second one  
Okay, now the second one  
looks better

I'm always afraid I'm failing a test  
when the only test to fail here  
is truth. Can you read line five  
or not? Two options.

Can you see what's in front of you?  
Are you afraid to admit  
when things get blurry?

*They recommend new lenses for my glasses*

even though my mother says I don't wear them,  
and in my head I'm still hearing my own frail whisper:

*You can wear glasses now. You don't run.*

But Mom is oblivious. Says yes to new contacts,  
and the doctor's assistant leads me over to the mirrored  
section where I'm supposed to put the new lenses  
into my eyeball and demonstrate that they fit,  
they work, they allow me to see.

Once they're in, I see.

I see him.

The same doctor from last year,  
his neat haircut, his tie, his white  
coat, his smooth beard. His hands.

*Let's make sure these look all right,*  
he says, and he settles down across  
from me, studying each eye.

Underneath the desk, our knees  
touch. My mother is on her phone  
several yards away, waiting for me,  
no need to watch. Plain sight.

And it's not as if he has his palm  
down or up  
my shirt, it's not as if he's  
the guy on the bus with his dick  
in his hand, but his fingers  
are against my cheeks, and his face  
is inches away, and from a distance  
one would think he's just doing  
his job, but his knees are against

my knees, and in the center  
of each of his eyes there is a sparkle  
like a fleck of gold sinking into a muddy river.

None of this makes me bleed. None of this  
is something that, alone, I couldn't bear.  
But everything seems to be bleeding together,  
and carried along on the current  
are white pieces of paper sticking out of my locker  
screaming ME TOO  
and yes, maybe I could bear it all, bear this...  
but after everything else  
    why should I  
    why should I  
    why should I

My eyes are already open but now  
I open my mouth, wondering  
if I'm brave enough  
to scream.

*"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"*

I jump, and so does he. It takes me five seconds  
to fully realize that it wasn't my voice  
but my mother's,

that she is standing two feet away  
with her face contorted in rage,

that she is pointing at the eye doctor  
that he has pushed away from the desk  
that my knees are cooling like rain on scorched earth  
that his mouth is half-open  
that he is stammering excuses  
that my mother goes on shouting  
that other women have come to look  
that most of the men stay in their seats  
that two of the assistants are looking wise  
that one of them shakes her head  
that I'm only wearing one contact  
that the room is blurry  
that my mother goes on shouting  
that my mother has one hand on my shoulder  
that my mother goes on shouting  
that she is pulling me away from the desk  
that she is telling him "I saw you, I saw you"  
that my mother goes on shouting  
that my mother goes on shouting  
that my mother goes on shouting  
that he disappears into the back room

it takes me thirty minutes to stop crying  
it takes me an hour to tell her she was right  
it takes me until midnight to realize my mother

saved me from a wolf

## *Politeness is a trap*

One year I had to do CPR and safety training  
for babysitter training. I learned  
to breathe into the lungs, to pump  
the chest, to clench my fists  
beneath the diaphragm to dislodge  
food from the windpipe.

The trainer cautioned us  
about women who choke:

*Women are raised  
to never make a scene.  
They start to choke  
at a restaurant, and excuse  
themselves to the bathroom  
so as not to disturb  
the other diners,  
and they die  
on the floor  
alone*

and thinking about this  
it occurs to me  
that the only reason the eye doctor  
gets away with it  
is because in such a public place  
he is counting on the rabbits  
we were raised to be.

Our politeness is prey,  
mice  
that don't  
squeak.

## *Turtles*

don't trust the world with their softness—  
after who knows how many eons  
of learning this the hard way  
a shell grew from their flesh,  
dappled with the colors of forest:  
double defense.

I don't remember when my mother  
started calling me Turtle.

I'm reminded that she has known me  
longer than anyone, that she might know  
how long I've been soft and scared  
before my memory even begins

and that even through the crack  
of my shell  
she might see me  
once she knows where  
to look.

## *Texts with Geneva*

**Alicia:** Are you out of the closet to your mom

**Geneva:** No. Well, kinda. I just assume she knows.

**Alicia:** What's stopping you from just telling her?

**Geneva:** Good question. Maybe I just don't feel like explaining things right now. Or maybe I wouldn't have to explain at all. I don't know.

**Alicia:** Do you ever feel like if you have to balance one more thing on your head, everything will come crashing down

**Geneva:** Sometimes. But you know what the answer is when you feel like that?

**Alicia:** No

**Geneva:** Handing something to someone to hold ;)

**Alicia:** I don't think your hands are big enough

**Geneva:** Then maybe we can just put it down

**Alicia:** Or burn it

**Geneva:** Burning it is always an option

## *Thoughts about Geneva*

At camp when I kissed Renée, the whole cabin  
felt like a glowing universe  
shrunk down around us,  
everything so simultaneously huge and tiny  
that I could fit myself in my own pocket.

I know everyone imagines bi girls  
as just trying to get attention  
from guys

and bi boys are supposedly  
just apprehensive about saying  
they're "fully gay"

but I can't help but think that both  
of these scenarios  
make it seem like men  
are at the center of everyone's attraction

and maybe sometimes they are  
but in this small universe of my heart  
Geneva is the sun  
and I am  
every revolving planet.

MONDAY, JANUARY 28

*I'm standing in the kitchen shoving all my papers*

into my bag. I'm wearing my last pair  
of contacts. They will last five days  
and then it will be time to slip on  
the glasses. But for now, the world  
looks clear, if not bright.

My mother walks in, and then my brother  
and for a moment  
we are all standing silently  
in the same room, three  
pairs of the same cheekbones  
and the same wide mouths  
frowning for the same  
and different reasons.

*Did you get in a fight?*  
she says to my brother.  
This is the first time she has seen him  
since he hit Justin, the slight bruise  
under his eye more like a lilac kiss by now.  
David and I exchange glances.

*No, he says. Just fucking around  
with Justin.*

*Oh you two are still friends?*  
I say, here under the safety  
of my mother's gaze.

He puts on his jacket.  
I can't make him answer.

I can only let my eyes  
follow him out the door,  
hoping he feels them  
long after he's out  
of sight.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 28

*I put on khakis with no stain*

My mother has slipped new clothes into my closet  
the same size and brand as what I was wearing  
before, the tags still on and no grease  
spot by the knee. You're supposed to wash

new clothes before you wear them,  
but I slip them on and stare down  
at the smooth clean fabric, surprised  
by the way the spotlessness  
makes me feel  
new too.

*The bus is late and so am I*

so everyone is already in class by the time I arrive,  
stopping by the office for a tardy slip.

They know my face by now, raise eyebrows  
meant to warn me about their judgment  
but I only raise my eyebrow back, because  
none of them have ever actually talked to me  
and yet my name on pink slips of paper,  
passed on by Mrs. Fisher, gives them a story  
to hear, and then repeat. I take my slip and go.

I have to pass Hall 1 for my own first class,  
and I'm crossing an open door when I hear  
voices raised coming from inside:

*Miss Duvall, I have asked you repeatedly  
not to wear gang colors in your jewelry.  
It specifically violates the handbook  
and the spirit of our school.*

It's Mrs. Bullock and she's talking  
to Deja. I pause, feeling all  
my bones turning into metal birds,  
fluttering and sinking simultaneously.

*It's an AIDS awareness wristband, Mrs. Bullock.*

*It's a gang color that violates  
the student handbook, Miss Duvall.*

Deja is calm but Mrs. Bullock's voice  
sharpens and soars. *One day  
it won't be security that comes to get you  
but the police!*

And then I'm in the classroom.

Everyone is blinking at me, including  
Deja, trying to figure out  
what I'm doing there. I don't know  
either, only that the mouth I can  
no longer rely upon to stay closed  
is open and speaking to Mrs. Bullock:

*What kind of fucking teacher are you  
Let's look at everything red in your classroom  
Adam's shoelaces, your lipstick,  
Jill's backpack, Hannah's nails.  
Are they all going to ISAP?  
Look at my fucking hair.  
Am I?*

*Answer: yes*

Me and Deja walk side by side  
behind Mr. Upton, who shakes  
his head while he walks.

*Ricky ain't gonna believe  
this shit, he says.*

*Who's Ricky?* says Deja.

*Mr. West.*

*...Ricky West, I whisper.*

*Is he a DJ?* Deja mutters.

*You two shut up,* Mr. Upton says,  
but he's chuckling  
when he says it.

*After Mr. Ricky West chews us out*

while Mr. Upton laughs, we settle into desks  
and listen to Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell  
sing about pictures in a frame. I've never  
been in ISAP this early, barely a quarter  
of the way through first period.

*Mr. West, I say after a while.  
Can I go to my locker?  
I don't even have my books.*

He gives me a long stare,  
an uncle look, and gives me a hall pass,  
with a face that says  
*Don't try any bullshit,*  
and I nod and nod and nod.

The halls are empty, and with the orange  
pass in my hand, I feel like I've been given  
a ticket to the moon, to Mars, free  
to roam. But I come sinking down  
to Earth when I get to my hallway  
and see the white paper  
emerging from my locker.

## The note

I'm going to report him.  
But I want to talk to you  
first. Meet me after school.  
Library. By Poe.

*My feet carry me to the Colonel's hallway*

to his always-open door, propped open now  
with an ancient brown doorstep. He has a class:  
I can hear him talking about mitochondria,  
the same jokes he's always told making his voice  
light, making him the teacher everyone  
wishes their other teachers were like.

The Colonel  
    is an alibi for himself.  
    is paint over asbestos  
    is a pothole patched with gum

I stare down at my clean, new khakis,  
the way the angle of the lights casts  
shadows like stains down the front.

These won't always be my pants, but these  
will always be my legs.

These will always be my legs  
These will always be my legs  
These will always be mine

*I would've been in art class*

and I peek in, watch Geneva's brush rising and sinking  
rising and sinking, a face appearing before her.

I watch until it takes shape:  
the ironic eyebrows  
the almost-crooked nose  
the all-knowing grin

her father, emerging from the white canvas,  
the pieces of him she takes with her  
everywhere she goes.

I text her: *You have your dad's smile*  
and wait just long enough  
to watch her peek at her phone,  
for that smile to tinge her mouth,  
before I disappear back down  
the hall.

## *Texts with Stephanie from Meat Palace*

**Alicia:** I'm going to be a little late today, I'm sorry. Something I have to do after school.

**Stephanie:** That's okay. I've got Debbie and Rodney and Forrest working.

**Alicia:** Not Terry?

**Stephanie:** Nope.

**Stephanie:** Btw he got chewed out by the regional boss last week

**Alicia:** Why?

**Stephanie:** Who knows. Sounded like a customer filed a complaint.

**Alicia:** A deep-fried mystery

**Stephanie:** He's a deep-fried asshole

**Stephanie:** Delete that 😊

*Geneva is at my locker after school*

I'd rather see her waiting there than another wavering piece of white paper. She thinks she's walking me to work and I can't think of a way to tell her or not tell her without sounding shadier than I feel.

*I have to meet someone after school,  
I say. It's important.*

Her face that always knows everything does not know this. I've never seen her frown except when she's concentrating.

*Can I text you after?* I say.

*Will you?*

*Yes. Is that okay?*

*It's going to have to be, isn't it?*

I can feel me pushing her too far.  
I want to grab her back and hold her.

But I watch her leave, watch everyone leave,  
waiting for the crowds to clear, for  
the eyes to disappear. The library  
is never busy after school  
or even during school.

The portrait of Edgar Allan Poe

on the back wall is a place  
where teachers tell us to meet  
when we have research projects.

This is not a research project.  
I don't know what this is.

All I know is that whoever's hand  
writes in blue loops that look like the path  
of a robin's wings, wrote the words  
*Me too.*

that they have stood on the closed side  
of an always-open door  
and somehow they know  
that I have too.

*Edgar Allan Poe isn't the only face on the walls*

Octavia Butler is painted by the checkout desk,  
Margaret Atwood by her side. Toni Morrison  
and Sonia Sanchez, who I know from the poetry anthology  
I stole from my brother when we were kids.

With no distractions, it's easy to look around  
this place, at all the painted portraits,  
and tell myself I'm seeing it for the first time,  
notice all the details that I've missed in the three  
years I've been a student at Marshall.

I've never noticed the portrait of Herman Melville  
wearing a shirt that says *I luv whales*  
or the smiling face of Jane Austen  
holding a sign that reads *gossip belongs in literature*.

All these stories, all these faces—  
it takes me a moment to realize  
when a real face has appeared beside me,  
to realize that the penny-bright hair  
the freckled skin,  
the deep deep frown  
belong to Blake Felipe.

*"You finally came."*

Inside my backpack, all the notes from my locker  
feel as if they've suddenly caught fire, burning  
a hole through the fabric. It's not until now

that I realize how hard I was trying not  
to imagine who the notes were from.

No name meant no face, no face  
meant not real.

I have spent so much of the last year  
wishing nothing were real,  
but everything is

and I can tell by the look in Blake's  
eyes that she has been trapped inside  
a wolf's jaws  
and now she's clawing  
toward the sun.

*We end up outside*

and we both say at the same time

*Spring will be here soon.*

Tomorrow it will be March.

Track season officially starts.

Spring break.

Prom gossip.

I want to skip it all.

*It's almost been a year, says Blake,*

and all the wandering my brain

does when it's free-falling,

when it's looking for a soft place

to land, comes to a stop.

*I saw you on April fourth. With him.*

*After school. I saw you walk in,*

*I saw the door close. I know*

*what the closed door means.*

*It was April seventh for me.*

*The year before.*

*Was that the first time?*

*No. I think it started*

*in March.*

*I hate the spring, she says.*

Her voice is a well,

the echoes long and deep.

She is pulling her ribs

out through her mouth

one by one

and all I can do is listen  
and sit  
and cry.

*Blake Felipe is a perfect girl.*

She has had the same boyfriend since freshman year.

She never breaks dress code.

She always buttons the top button of her uniform.

She always turns in her homework.

She smiles in her yearbook photo.

She gets elected to homecoming court.

She always wears clean shoes.

She always smiles and nods.

She always has a pack of girls surrounding her.

She always laughs at their jokes.

She never raises her voice.

Blake Felipe is a perfect girl  
she stands as close to the center  
of the box as she can get  
and for all the talk about what I wore  
and who I took off my bra for,  
in the end, we are the same.

*It started sophomore year*

then kept going.

Blake is a senior.

She has been going to this school

year after year

smiling her way toward graduation

and no one—

not even her boyfriend—

knows what

she's been

smiling

through.

*Blake says*

*I decided I'm going to tell the cops.  
It's almost the science fair  
and he always gives his speeches  
and takes pictures with the trophies  
and does his whole act.*

*I'm telling,  
but I couldn't tell until  
I talked to you and told you  
that I'm sorry I didn't warn  
you, that I'm sorry I didn't  
scream fire the very first time.*

*I'm going to tell them  
there are other girls*

*I'm going to tell them I saw  
I'm going to tell them I know  
I'm going to tell them it's him  
I'm going to tell them it's all  
too late*

*but that I'm graduating soon  
and then I'll be free of him  
this place  
these walls  
these bricks*

*this school  
that feels like a grave  
that feels like a slaughterhouse  
that feels like a place to drown*

*A car appears before us*

Red Chevrolet, a blaze so bright it looks wet  
in the gray spring fog. Devin, her boyfriend,  
with his head out the window shouting

*Let's roll!*

and I watch her face transform  
the mask rising out of the ash  
bright and convincing.

I am sitting beside

the homecoming queen  
the field hockey champion  
the honor roll student  
the good girlfriend  
the honest daughter  
a human

She has not dyed her hair red,  
but inside her everything is burning  
everything is burning down  
and down  
and down

*I walk to work alone, thinking*

about how the Colonel is also burning—  
he was the scorching match.

I wonder how many girls he set ablaze  
who left this place seemingly whole  
only to burn down later, away,  
where the sparks couldn't catch.

Blake has been smoldering but her plan  
is to take her fiery hands and cup them  
around the entire school before she goes

and then she will graduate and be gone  
but I  
will still  
be here.



*Meat Palace and randoms are in the same box*

in my head: autopilot, no thinking  
just doing, just hands working,  
wearing two different uniforms.

But today while I make change  
and feed the hungry  
I can't turn my brain off

I can't disconnect my hands  
from myself, can't shove everything  
away into boxes—the lids are open  
and everything overlaps:

    all the girls I used to be  
    all the girls I have been  
    all the girls I am

are customers zooming through drive-thru

and they have been hungry for as long  
as I can remember—  
aren't we all hungry for something?  
I am allowed to be hungry.

## *Hunger*

I have been looking at every late night, every step into moonlight, every  
slip of cotton and nylon as  
a path springing from the Colonel, from Adam in the park and my silent  
scream

but the only path leads from myself to myself:

me hungry, me curious, me wild, me trying to kiss my way back toward the  
wonder of touch

toward skin and not biblical flesh

I have been told that girls like me are hurting, that girls who have explored  
this many backseats are in pain

and I am

I am

but I am healing too

there are states between hurting and healing

I walk in that space

I am trying to hold on to my body

I am finding my way

## *Texts with Blake*

**Alicia:** do you think every girl who sleeps with a lot of guys has...“problems”?

**Blake:** no. I know girls who just like to have a lot of sex. My sister’s in college and she hooks up with everybody just because she feels like it.

**Alicia:** so you really don’t think sluts exist, like Dr. Kareem said

**Blake:** I think I need to figure out what to think. Production of knowledge, remember?

**Alicia:** no offense but I think you’d figure out what to think if people had been calling you a whore all year

**Blake:** fair

**Alicia:** I’ve spent all this time wanting to be you

**Blake:** you can’t be

**Alicia:** why not

**Blake:** because you’re you

**Alicia:** and who are you?

**Blake:** I didn’t stay with Devin this whole time because I love him. I kept dating him because having a boyfriend makes me feel safer

**Alicia:** do you ever wish you did things just because you want to do them, and not because the Colonel did what he did

**Blake:** yes

**Alicia:** me too

## *Texts with Blake*

**Alicia:** How did you know? About me?

**Blake:** You look on the outside how I feel on the inside. One day I was walking to calc. I saw you go in. I saw the door close.

**Alicia:** Why didn't you say something before? To me

**Blake:** You know what it means to pretend, right?

**Alicia:** Yes

**Blake:** Me too

**Alicia:** I've seen the door closed too. Was that you? This year?

**Blake:** Yes. But maybe someone else too.

**Alicia:** He called me to his office a couple weeks ago. Called Mrs. Fisher and had her send me.

**Blake:** I'm sorry

**Alicia:** He's not going to stop, is he

**Blake:** No

## *Letter to Medusa: Part 5*

You never had a curly fry  
but if you ever got the chance  
to stand over the boiling pit  
of a modern fryer, you would probably  
have done what I did:

poured everything in,

bag after bag  
fries  
mozzarella sticks  
chicken

watched it all turn black

mozzarella sticks turning into charred shipwrecks

fries like a crumbled house

Rodney calls Stephanie and, god  
bless her, she doesn't scream at me,  
just holds me by the shoulders  
and says, *You should probably  
go home.*

So I do.

*Text from a random*

**Him:** I think I just saw you walking down Vine. Want a ride?

**Alicia:** Do you know how old I am

**Him:** ?

**Alicia:** How old are you?

**Him:** Why does that matter?

**Alicia:** I want to know how old you are

**Him:** Age is just a number 😊

**Alicia:** Age is life, age is experience, age is a car, age is money, age is voting, age is rights, age is an entire system, age is power. It's more than a number

**Him:**

**Alicia:** ????

**Him:**

*These shoes aren't made for running*

but I run anyway. The ground is wet and the trees  
are coming back to life but all I can smell  
is the burning fries at Meat Palace, the odor  
of smoke joining with grease, the way  
everything turned slippery and hot.

My new pants are ruined, machine-gunned  
with spots of grease. I did this to myself.  
It's like everything that makes me feel  
unclean has no choice but to rise  
out of me and appear on my clothes  
and on my skin. It doesn't matter  
what I wear: inside the cloth

is still this body, and no matter  
how many showers I take  
how much I exfoliate  
I can't rinse off the thing  
that clings to me.

But I'm running.  
I have not run far enough.  
I have to keep running  
until I break through  
that electric shock

Dirty or not  
damaged or not  
I am flying  
My feet are my wings  
Are my  
Are mine

*Fuck you, Poseidon, and you too, Athena, and you too,  
Hera,*

and you too, Perseus, you bitch.  
You needed golden  
sandals to do  
what I do.

You took  
a sword and a shield and a cloak  
and those  
shoes

and you thought  
it made you  
a god  
because  
you spilled  
the blood  
that everyone  
whispered  
about spilling.

You killed Medusa  
and then married  
Andromeda, and you  
probably thought  
she was so different  
because she was naked  
and helpless when you  
rescued her. But

what you don't know  
is that Medusa was once naked

and helpless too,

and that you and all  
the gods and goddesses  
spent lifetimes  
convincing everyone  
that Medusa was  
a monster, when  
the slightest change  
in story  
could have given  
Andromeda  
the snakes.

*While I run, I think of swords*

It's easy to behead the monster  
with so many gods providing the tools

but what if Medusa wants  
Poseidon's head  
on a plate

what if Medusa wants  
her own temple  
with Athena  
barred for life?

What if Medusa  
has her own ideas  
about justice  
and they don't  
just stop  
with Perseus?

*I arrive sweating in the kitchen*

just as my mother puts the voicemail  
from her phone on speaker.

*This message is for the parents of Alicia Rivers—*

and all the adrenaline that carried me  
from Meat Palace to the door surges one more time,  
propelling me across the kitchen to try  
to intercept her hand, erase it before  
she knows what she's hearing. But  
the words are out, and she stares at me,  
the voice entering our ears together,  
not who I expected:

*This is Coach Tinsley at Marshall  
High School. I wanted to see  
if we could talk about Alicia  
and get her more involved  
in extracurriculars. She needs  
more credits to graduate  
and I know she's been having  
some trouble this year  
but maybe we can get her  
on the right track. That pun  
was unintentional, my apologies.  
Give me a call back when...*

My mother has lifted her eyes  
from the machine and studies me  
with a growing frown.

*What trouble does he mean?  
You're not running track*

*anymore? What happened?*

I don't tell her the truth.  
It's still a knot in my throat. But  
she sees me now:  
I recognize her recognition.

She is a hound in the woods  
who has caught the scent of wolf.  
It's only a matter of time.

## *Texts with Geneva*

**Alicia:** Are you awake

**Geneva:** I think we're both night owls. Did you do what you needed to do after school?

**Alicia:** Yes. Can I ask you something?

**Geneva:** Yes

**Alicia:** Do you only like me because I work at Meat Palace?

**Geneva:** Shut up lol

**Alicia:** I'm going to quit.

**Geneva:** There goes my fast-food connect.

**Alicia:** Maybe my skin will get better away from all that grease

**Geneva:** I think your skin is beautiful

**Alicia:** Changing the subject

**Geneva:** To?

**Alicia:** You

**Geneva:** What about me?

**Alicia:** Who was your first love?

**Geneva:** Myself

**Alicia:** Perfect

## *Texts with Deja*

**Alicia:** I think I'm going to run next Friday

**Deja:** 😞

**Alicia:** Come on

**Deja:** Do you think you'll be ready? Have you even been conditioning?

**Alicia:** You have no idea.

## *Texts with Deja*

**Deja:** btw I finished that book The Color Purple

**Alicia:** How was it?

**Deja:** Definitely like poetry. I hate that she got raped though

**Alicia:** Oh. She did?

**Deja:** I was thinking about Medusa. Isn't it bullshit how nothing changes in 3,000 years, or even in 100 years.

**Alicia:** And definitely not in one

**Alicia:** By the way, did you know Andromeda was actually probably Black

**Deja:** The most beautiful woman in the world? That tracks

**Alicia:** I wonder if Mrs. Bullock knows that

**Deja:** Mrs. Bullock doesn't know her ass from the Odyssey

## Texts with Deja

**Deja:** guess what

**Alicia:** 🙄

**Deja:** I think I met somebody

**Alicia:** !!!!

**Deja:** His name is Farhan.

**Alicia:** Where did you meet him?

**Deja:** At debate. We got paired to debate fracking.

**Deja:** I destroyed him. 😏

**Alicia:** Of course you did. What's he like?

**Deja:** He's smart. He's beautiful. He's romantic. He's read Audre Lorde.

**Alicia:** ...who's Audre Lorde?

**Deja:** Jesus Alicia 🙄

**Alicia:** I'm sorry, I'm googling!

**Alicia:** Oh I know her. She writes poetry.

**Deja:** she does??

**Alicia:** Jesus Deja!

**Deja:** bye!! lol

*Dear David*

*Last night I had a dream that we were on a sailboat  
and the wind blew so hard that the sail  
ripped into the sky, and the ocean  
around us was a flat gray coin.*

*We sat on the boat together, quiet,  
until I realized both of us were on fire.*

*And it was weird because my fire  
was only burning me, and the smoke  
was choking only my lungs,*

*but your fire was spreading  
to the boat and I kept saying  
David, watch it, watch it,*

*but you were just staring  
at the sky and burning  
and burning  
and while I was turning myself  
into ash, you were sinking  
our boat.*

*Then there were other boats  
all around us, and the sparks  
from your flames were catching  
their sails, turning the whole ocean  
into a flaming orange rage,*

*and I said David, look, why  
can't you just keep it  
to yourself? and when  
I woke up I still didn't know*

*why I was the one  
who felt guilty.*

*David, I know we're both  
on fire, and I have no idea  
what lit your blaze  
but don't you see  
that the way you've chosen  
to burn is sinking  
all the ships and not just  
your own?*

*I slip it under his door*

the way I used to, the way we used to  
when we were two sides  
of the same coin and not  
two foreign currencies  
both shimmering down  
through murky water.

TUESDAY, MARCH 5

*I cross the parking lot at school*

and see Blake Felipe climbing out of Devin's red car. She swings her bag over her shoulder

and now that I know where to look  
I see the ghosts under her eyes,

the way her boyfriend's hand on her shoulder  
weighs more than he could ever even know.

We lock eyes, only for a moment, and then  
her gaze sweeps over the parking lot

at all the people streaming toward  
Marshall's pale stones. We are searching

for the same thing: pondering the faces  
of our peers and wondering how many

wear our same mask.

## *Text to Blake*

**Alicia:** Do you ever wonder who you would be if it had never happened

**Blake:** Yes

**Alicia:** Me too

*Any day that's not Friday isn't a day at all*

Thursday I go to work and give Terry two weeks' notice.  
He says *Sure, fine*, and goes back to shuffling papers,  
not looking me in the eye. Debbie is slicing beef  
ten feet away, and I feel her eyes even with  
her back turned. I come and look over her shoulder  
watching her hands move expertly over the machine,  
over the meat, her missing finger barely missing.

*How long did it take for you to get used to it,*  
I ask, and she smiles a little.

*I don't know if you ever get used to it, she says.*  
*A piece of you is missing. But you get along,*  
*and you learn new ways to live.*

*But I can't find new ways to live*

Can't just go on without my missing piece  
Can't just get along

Not when the Colonel  
    is still smiling for pictures  
    is still wearing wool  
    is still howling at the moon  
    is still slowly closing his door

What do I do  
about the pieces he has taken from others  
about all the pieces  
he has yet  
to take?

## *Text to Blake*

**Alicia:** Why didn't you tell before?

**Blake:** There are a lot of reasons.

**Alicia:** Tell me one?

**Blake:** You know how every time it comes out that a celebrity or a politician has raped someone or even sexually harassed someone, everyone on social media has an opinion about it? Family, friends, everybody?

**Alicia:** Yeah

**Blake:** When you see your aunts and grandfathers and dad and friends all call women liars over and over again, you don't need to wonder if anyone will believe you if you tell.

**Alicia:** Because they've basically already told you.

**Blake:** Right.

**Alicia:** If a man is loved enough, a woman can't be hated enough

**Blake:** Exactly.

*My mother comes in late*

and I'm not sleeping  
and she must know  
because she opens my door  
because she sits on the edge of my bed  
because she whispers into the dark  
because she explains she's trying  
because she has been carrying a lot  
because some of it she hasn't put down since she was ten  
because nothing changes in a hundred years  
because wolves are in all the oldest stories  
because we have discovered fire but still don't know what to do with it

but my mom says she's trying to learn what to do with it  
because she knows I'm going through something  
because she's been going to group therapy  
because she wants to be there for me  
because she knows she hasn't been  
because she's been buried  
because she's so lonely  
and when she lies down  
I make room for her  
and she doesn't talk  
anymore, she just  
sleeps and so  
do  
I.

FRIDAY, MARCH 8

*The cafeteria is being set up for the science fair*

All the science geeks setting up their presentations.  
It's not like movies, where the projects are volcanoes  
and rudimentary machines built with coffee cans.

Our science geeks are serious: organ donation research  
Perpetual-motion machines  
Cloud services for breast cancer diagnosis  
Sand bioreactors

Our school always wins trophies  
and the faces in the setup are focused,  
ignoring everyone not affiliated with the fair.

Today is also the first track meet  
and Jacob and Tierra  
and the other runners cluster  
in the halls between classes,  
pacing like tigers,  
prickly and electric.

Part of me wants to cross the chasm,  
tell them I'll be there beside them  
at the starting line. But every time

I pass the cafeteria I see the Colonel,  
walking between tables, offering advice,  
always laughing, setting everyone  
at ease but me.

## *Texts with Geneva*

**Alicia:** have you ever had sex with guys

**Geneva:** I've never had sex with anyone lol

**Alicia:** do you hate that I've had sex with guys?

**Geneva:** how could I hate anything about you?

**Alicia:** it's easy actually lol

**Geneva:** Stop.

**Geneva:** Have you always liked girls?

**Alicia:** Yes. Boys too. Sometimes I wish I didn't.

**Geneva:** I understand that without any context. You know what I hate?

**Alicia:** I've never heard you say "hate" before so I'm intrigued

**Geneva:** Ha. No, I hate when people ask me how I know I'm a lesbian if I haven't had sex  
with anybody yet

**Alicia:** IYKYK

**Geneva:** If you know you know.

## *Texts to self*

**Alicia:** do you regret having sex with guys?

**Alicia:** only when it was regretful. when it felt—what's that word Dr. Kareem used that one time? That means like something is mandatory, even if no one told you it was a rule?

**Alicia:** compulsory

**Alicia:** compulsory

**Alicia:** only then?

**Alicia:** Then. And when it feels like an escalator out of my head. When instead of an adventure into cricket song, touch is a cave I disappear inside. When it's the point of a pin dragged across secret skin. When shame is an echo echo echo

**Alicia:** I just want to be what I am. Whatever that is

**Alicia:** Seems simple

**Alicia:** I feel like it could be

*Be what I am*

Deja, untouched,  
and me, no inch untouched

someone gazing from afar  
might see opposites  
    compulsory twoness

It feels like I am back  
at the optometrist,  
everything snapping  
into crisp black focus:

We are not two sides  
of a flat spinning coin

We are a ball turning  
in the palm of a sun-warmed hand

We are traveling through  
space

We both exist outside  
any container  
that seeks to hold us  
We are both  
made of blinding  
light

*I've never been to the coach's office*

since it became Coach Tinsley's. It still has all the plaques won under Coach Young—I guess they belong to the school and not her.

Coach is at his desk on the phone when I walk in. His eyebrows raise when he sees me, like he's a ghost hunter finally getting an apparition on camera.

I stand by the door until he hangs up, and when he does he tells me to sit down. I am wary still of the door, of its potential to close. I don't know him, don't trust the mouth that looks empty of fangs but may be hiding them under those square human teeth.

*What can I do for you, Alicia?*

*I'm going to run, I say.*

*Today?*

*Yes.*

*Well...*

*Can I run?*

*Sure you can*

*Dr. Kareem looks sad when we enter for our group.*

She usually has all her words warm and ready  
but today she's searching for them  
in the corners of the room, on the ceiling,  
and when she eventually speaks she says

*I'm so sorry, but this is our last meeting. I've been informed that our  
conversations are inappropriate and I'm being  
asked to continue my research observing your classrooms rather than in  
this room  
with you  
alongside you  
in community with you  
and girls I am so sorry*

but before she can finish, Annika is crying

*it's my fault  
it's all my fault  
my brother told my dad  
that I was kissing my boyfriend  
and we got in a fight  
and I told him what you said  
about hymens, that it's all  
an invention, that everything  
I'm supposed to feel bad about  
is like a ghost story at Girl Scout camp,  
and he didn't hear me  
he didn't see me  
he just said he was going to call  
the school and put a stop  
to all of this.*

*When Dr. Kareem smiles, I'm surprised*

because I don't feel like smiling, and Annika is still crying  
Eugenia's arm around her shoulders. Deja's eyes  
are shining wet, scowling. Everyone's faces are doing different things,  
we are feeling different things, but we all know one thing  
to be true: something has been taken from us.

*Cry now, Dr. Kareem says, it's okay to grieve a loss  
when it happens, but know that we have already won  
because we had this, and will have this.*

*You have felt what it's like to be in community  
with one another, to give names  
to the things that hurt us.*

*What has happened is a tale  
as old as time: sever mouth  
from ear when freedom is whispered  
spoken  
shouted*

*But what do we say to them  
before we part?*

*We say: you were too late.  
You were too late!  
We have already heard each other!*

*Dr. Kareem asks us what makes us angry*

and everyone has an answer.

Boys/men staring at our chests when we speak, mispronouncing our names,  
sometimes

on purpose

bra strap snapping, be good at everything, sexy and innocent  
simultaneously

take up just enough space, aware of who's watching, always watching  
our brothers do what we're not allowed

*you're too pretty not to smile*

what's there to smile about, asshole?

*watch that pretty mouth*

Women athletes at the Olympics getting fined for covering up but in high  
school

we get expelled for not covering up  
more.

You want sex you can't want sex why don't you want more sex no not that  
kind of sex no not that

either what do you mean you don't want sex at *all* your entire being is  
defined by sex

the boys who slur about hijab but ask with secret smiles to see the hair  
underneath, white girls who

say we're all in this together but *together* means using brown girls' backs  
as a bridge

Black girls like goddesses

Black girls like heroes

Black girls like mules

Black girls like angels until they're too angry

Black girls everything but girls  
Black girls like Simone Biles  
never allowed to say no

everyone with an opinion about skin skin skin

**a)** too much makeup **b)** you look so tired **c)** stay out of the sun, brown girl,  
before you get browner **d)** don't you want to cover your pimples **e)** why  
do you *have* pimples you're supposed to be

perfect  
perfect  
perfect

why are you so mad why are you so sad why are you so quiet why are you  
so loud...

So we get louder.

And Dr. Kareem encourages us:

*Scream it. Say what makes you angry.*

*It's just us:*

*be as loud as you want*

and we're timid at first—  
still afraid of taking up too much space,

but Deja catches my eye  
with hers, still wet with tears:

she is mortar, pestle

dynamite, match.

She is boat and river.

She is traveling

and I want to meet her. As we

scream the names of things

that tear us down, I promise

the air that I will be brick—

I will be brick and not wind,

not a drop in the slow hurricane  
that erodes her grain by grain.

*Louder*, says Dr. Kareem, and asks

are we still afraid  
of what our voices might accomplish  
if we unleash them?

Maybe  
but one by one we do  
and if anyone is passing in the hall  
they might think that someone  
released a pack of wolves  
and maybe  
they would be right.

*Walking through the halls*

I can still hear the howling in my head

but more than that I hear rustling—

I feel like a snake shedding its skin

inch by

papery

inch

sliding it off as I become

something

new.

*I find Deja in the library*

buried in the stacks, burrowed deep  
in new pages. The bell will be ringing  
soon, sending us all outside.

When I sit down beside her,  
she doesn't look up from her book.

I can't see the cover, but  
AUDRE LORDE is in the margin,  
Deja's finger stopped on the page.  
I've read this poem,  
"A Litany for Survival."

*It is better to speak,*  
I read. *It is better to speak.*

Deja whispers, maybe because  
we're in the library, or maybe  
because it feels like a secret:

*Sometimes I feel like I'm dancing  
on the edge between fury  
and joy*

and I can tell she's not ready  
to say more, so I just lay my head  
on her shoulder, and she  
rests her chin on top.

I murmur some of what  
my mom told me:

*It can all turn a human into a volcano.  
I want you to know I'm here.*

*I can stand your lava.*

Elsewhere in the library,  
pages rustle and people sneeze.  
Feet cross the carpet and people laugh  
when they're not supposed to.  
Twenty feet away, Blake told me  
her truth. Here, there are a thousand books  
to learn from and a thousand books  
to unlearn.

When the bell rings, neither of us move.

*They won't let me check this out, Deja says eventually,  
laughing low. I have too many fines.*

*Fuck the fines, I whisper,  
and we walk out with the book  
tucked under my shirt.*

*I'm wearing last year's shoes but they feel different.*

My feet haven't grown  
but something else  
has.

I feel bigger than I've ever felt  
like every step might crack  
the pavement

and when I pass the Colonel's classroom  
on the way outside  
I pause for a full minute.

He's not there.  
He's in the cafeteria preparing  
for the science fair  
and I don't dare step in  
through that always-open door

but I do look,  
and I'm seeing more  
than plastic arteries  
and ceramic bones

I'm seeing my bones,  
watching them rise  
and walk to the track.

I remember the thing  
that I saw on Tumblr,  
how people with trauma  
will sometimes reexpose  
themselves to it,  
salt in the wound

to stay alive.

I am tired  
of salting the wound—  
I am ready  
to salt the earth.

*Jacob Wheeler sees me first*

and starts to walk to meet me, before pausing  
hands half-raised. He thinks I am wild,  
that approaching too fast might  
run me off, a torch in the eyes  
of something creeping from the forest.

He isn't wrong. Stepping out  
onto the track makes me feel  
exposed—even in long pants  
and a hoodie, my skin feels  
bare, the stands full of eyes.  
Deja is there, and Geneva,  
and they offer thumbs-ups  
and waves, and smiles  
made small in case they scare  
me off. Everyone thinks  
I'm on edge. They aren't wrong.

*You're here*, Jacob says,  
and I nod. *Are you ready?*  
I nod again. Words seem  
like too much. He has plenty:  
he tells me Coach has already  
registered me for two events,  
that my name is on the ledger.

Soon I'll be at the line,  
soon I will be asked to run,  
soon I will be asking myself  
to fly.

*I didn't call my mother*

but Coach Tinsley must have.

I see her in the stands,  
far from Geneva and Deja  
because she doesn't know

they exist—she thinks  
Sarah is the only friend  
I had, that with all  
the swimming I have done  
through purple-dark water,

I have been swimming  
alone. I gaze at them  
from the starting line

and I realize just how wrong  
we both have been.

*"Runners on their marks"*

The call comes, and I'm still looking  
to the bleachers. That's how I see the cars  
pull up, dark blue and official,  
and the people stepping out of them,  
the same serious navy.

No sirens, no lights,  
but Blake is there  
beside a woman with hair  
like a jar of pennies  
wild like snakes.

We are all here  
and my throat is full  
of hissing breath.

Daughter and mother  
Deja and Geneva  
Lena and Eugenia  
girls and girls and girls

We are all here:  
some center  
of the universe drawing us  
all together before we become  
combustible—all that we are  
exploding into the fury  
of what we will become.

I can hear Blake's mother  
howling. Soon mine  
will be too. My brimming throat  
is aching to empty.

*We are all here, I think.*

*Here we go.*

And there goes the pistol.

*My legs are my own*

and they can fly.  
The sky is the color of March  
turning to April, the bricks  
are the same color  
they have always been.

I am running  
like I have always  
been.

I am running away  
from wolves  
and gray rooms  
and hidden teeth

from grease stains  
and Bibles  
and weed and cats

and I am running away  
from plaster bones  
and wooden hearts  
and Cincinnati

I am even running away  
from clipboards  
and blue cars

but the track is a stretching circle  
and it will bring me back—  
it lets me run away  
and back  
at the same time.

In this moment,  
my lungs  
are breaking—how  
can I speak when I can't  
even hold air—but  
at the end  
of this circle

I think I will  
be brave enough  
to breathe.

*Dear cave,*

Dear grass,  
Dear shadow,  
Dear pit,  
Dear bosom,  
Dear boy,

I hope you find this letter  
written in the sand  
the words shaped  
by the movement  
of my body

the trail suddenly ending  
as I remember  
that a monster  
is made of imagination  
and I take flight.

You will find me  
where the sword is made

You will find me  
where the shield is forged

You will find me  
with my feet already wearing  
the winged shoes

You will find me  
shredding the cloak

All the gifts given  
by the gods  
breaking

in my teeth.

I am flying to Olympus  
and I'm not coming alone.

Sincerely,  
Medusa

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## *Note for Readers*

To any readers who need resources on sexual violence, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center is a place to start looking for help:

[nsvrc.org](https://www.nsvrc.org)



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