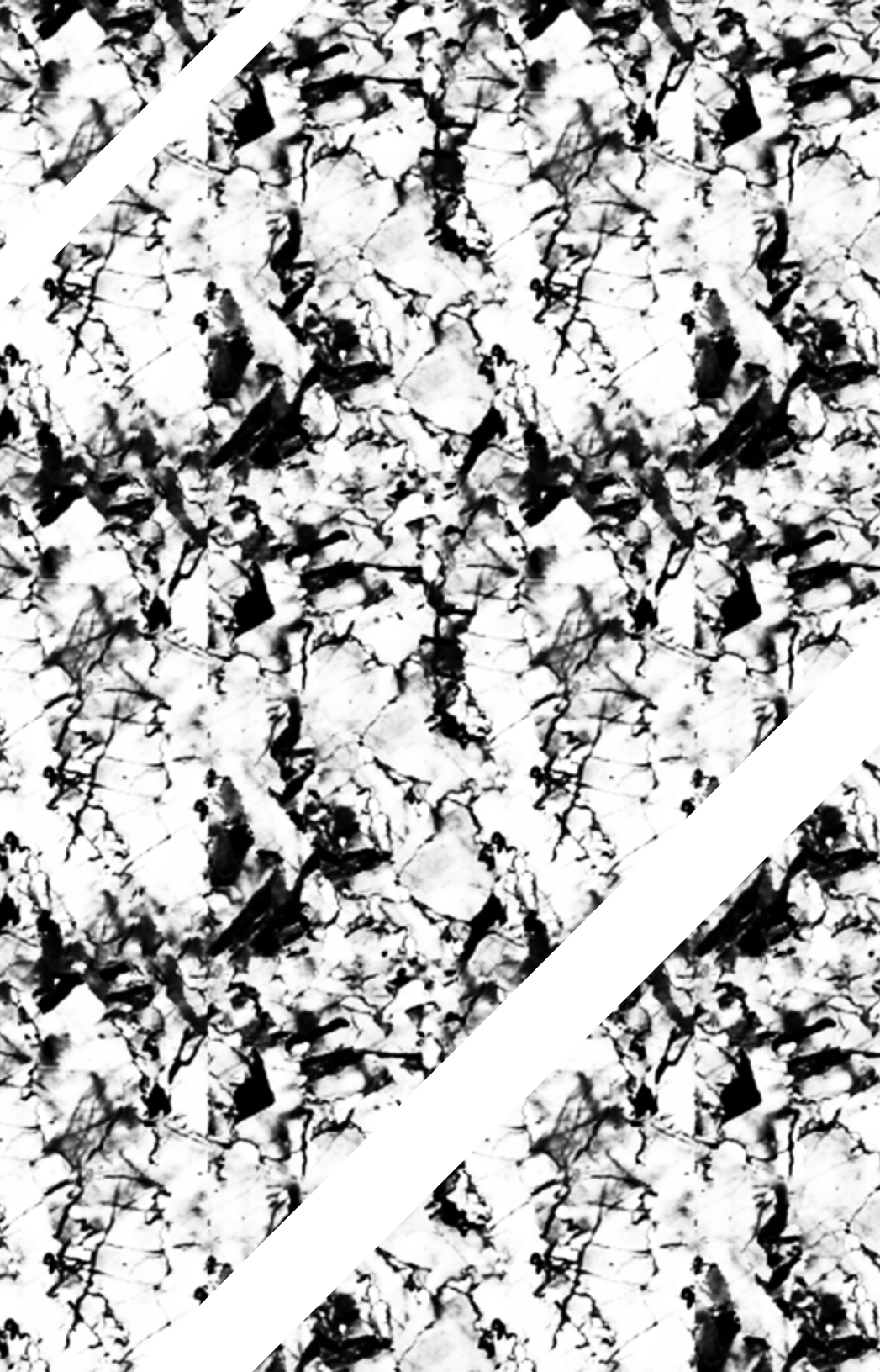


FIRE SALE

BRIANNA JOHNSON





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#55

## ESSAY PRESS GROUNDLOOP SERIES

In Essay Press's Groundloop series, curated by Aimee Harrison and Maria Anderson, we seek to bring together authors exploring diverse subjects through loud, innovative architectures.

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## INTRODUCTION


I come from whiteness, which is not innocent. If I speak of things which cause intense pain, it is because I have felt pain because of them. Not feeling would cause greater pain to the memory of those brutalized. I don't condone evil, but I acknowledge it. I am here to acknowledge it.

I have been weak. I have been in terror. I hated that I could be weak. I hated that I could have a lineage of evil. I do not wish to appropriate the tragedy of others, only to tell the story of how some part of a tragedy was my lineage, that some part of evil was drawn in my family, that some very large part of female objectification, violence, mental illness, and death kept its pace with me. This is what I have come from. I am not going to lie as I continue to grieve. I grieve our great capacity to be evil. I believe telling our evil cauterizes it.

I do not mean to be a part of a genre of shock. I do not mean to appropriate evil. "*Ach, du*" is something I understand; not in appropriating victimization, but in debunking the theory that never mentioning any of it keeps us innocent, that staying out of it means we were never involved. Processing our capacities to evil and grieving the evils of our past on an individual, cultural, and human level ensures identification of gross injustices of our future. At least, it has been essential for me. I do not then wish to impart that I am perfect now.







*Everything seems domestic. And yet such a strangeness wells up in our eyes, like tears. It's that she is already gone, she who is called Bathsheba. But the body remains. That much more body, that much more flesh, that much heavier here, now that she-Bathsheba is elsewhere.*

—Hélène Cixous

*I couldn't escape my family because I still didn't know a man who would help me.*

—Kathy Acker



1.

## When Persephone reckoned she liked it.

This isn't going to be pretty. Sitting behind a dull white sheet, I saw all the family stirring up the church. Typical as Lodi in a morgue sheet, and me across him like a pieta. We never did that. He stood, legs splayed, his arms clamped in front of him. I am sold to him. Not in truth but a messy dream. In truth, in a joke, I was traded for a boat. The white roof began to seep and wane and bilge until the bodies poured out. The family was gone, and the bog was the only thing left. Stepping over them, those people, my foot stuck in deep. Suction held it there for quite a time before I could pull it up again. The smell was all over, but the light was still beautiful. Eventually, the floor came back, built itself up, and I lived on it for a while.

In order to survive, I made a human into a fictional character. I stood beneath a veil and hid from it. I killed it again and again. I loved killing it. Almost as

much as I loved loving it. It was like a demon pet kept in a holding tank. Until I saw the human. And the killing became secondhand and dreary and not enough and action, action. Take the car and kill it. Kill him. A veil. A deadening. A continuous freezing. I had hidden for years. I had been on the run. But if he sees me, I don't want to be running.

Story to follow: yes, yes, the veil that lives in the souls of men. Am I willing to give myself up? Oh, yes. Half way up. Could get no farther. Daddy's ambition was alive. Little girls never fill wood boxes. But they do. They fill them well. I've never seen it. So, the little girl had to be punished not so much for getting into it, but for telling the story about it.

It wasn't a jungle. It was a cave. I'm most comfortable in isolation. And most deadly. I live there. When my parents die, I leave. They do not still invite me to stay. They do not invite me to leave. They are careful. And they are afraid of the sea. They are always at work. And they prize work. Hard work. Harder work. And pain. There was death, sweet and old. I sit in the most uncomfortable and dirty spot. When my parents die, I leave. I am tempted to jump off the cliff and hit the cave like an alarm code. Give in blood. Who am I when my mother leaves? How can I kill my father? I risk my vision/my version of wet rock to save her. She won't leave. An explosion precisely timed. A cave-in. Headlamps. Both the sensation of being crushed and drowning in a pool. Half a cupful/ half my face. And deliberate. And the worst of both. What scares me is I know nothing. What scares me are the places I don't know.

I have the feeling of being constantly in a dream. I have no energy and often watch something I should be able to fetch or stop, but move to go and don't. When I was little, I had dreams where all of a sudden I'd have the weight of rocks in my hands. And I was stuck.

Numbness of my face at any age. My face at any age is a skull and a girl and something dreamy. I live my happiness and my sadness, and they are ancillary to this life which is the writing. I see no point when my vision is clear of both. I write from a place beyond happiness or sadness, but of so much seeing of the world and keeping this body.

I was reared in a woman's house. She must've worried how I'd turn out. It is a dangerous way of life. The thing I was born. I don't remember being too brightly lit to not cry. To just stare there. I remember being choked by living. Life is made.



I have lost. Windows shake. Outside, there are bees in the garden forgetting my construction. I am going to write about being distracted. I am going to write about being stuck together. One day, I am created bitter for more. What I lack without exactly knowing the meaning. The subject is that chaos. The subject: to be left to exist by myself.

I would like to write the story where I leave. I would like to write the future when I am alone, when my parents have died, when I am grief, when I stand at a landscape and am not a daughter, but the sun.

What do you do to make waiting easier? I recognize this as a fountain stance. It is necessary yet excruciating. And there is no help that can be extended to a fountain. I hope you make it through the excruciation to love excruciating.

When the price of lumber, steel, gasoline rises with Daddy's social security maybe he can afford to care for his girl well into her spinsterhood. Maybe not. Maybe she'll die here, and Daddy'll get the check. America disintegrates with pretty retreaters. It is a buyer's market in the world of lips and thighs. They tread monosyllabic useless fatherless sold into the cause of Daddy's midlife crisis again and again. No well-lived father has money for his daughter to be schooled. No well-lived father could survive it. Still, the weak creditless creatures are the only ones who can bear foreclosure with an *uh huh*. Buy a house with gravity heat and live bats itching on the mothball carpet. Women chant on the meat block by the canned goods. The black on Daddy's tassel topsiders is louder.

A father-daughter reaches its most intimate level. An *It*. A memory that's a reel. A daddy that's a film. A daughter that sits in the chair watching. Interrogation of the alien skull. And contort like lies wouldn't go far with me now. All too well. All too lonesome. I am forced to watch the movie whenever there is energy for light. A daughter is lidless and slumped over like the stroke victim. To him, it's like she speaks in water.

I live in a mixture of men in sedation and women in grappling hooks. It is like. I struggle with suspension. Sloughing off skin. Lay back and take it. If men like

evil and holes. Holes out of nowhere that pile up and poke new ones and a ballroom of the most awful men watching and hollering at seeing the hooks in places. Men with bald heads and black holes and white skin. Women who look angry and sexed like snakes with steel assemblages. This is my experience. This is what it's like with my lackluster dealings with men, Daddy and otherwise, who bothered to insist. These holes are this body.

Too beautiful to last. Women have hair, but remain dependent. Saying how much more attractive I look with my hair up.

I reach for the mute button. I read for the character I twist psychologically. I twist epidemically. I turn heroine to heroin. I identify I have a Maker. I undo my sadness like lacework. I am conducted with boards and signatures. I have read whatever the board has read. I and we create seasonal labor for my body.

Women owe it to themselves to refuse drink. Men in rocking chairs and endless belts that pull all of the machinery after it. We made an awful mistake when we married Daddy, didn't we?

## 2. Lodi.

**K**inky light. Out from a race trailer, busting. Lodi looked at me older like I was his wife. You waved goodbye like an old man says *hullo*. I was small and inferior behind Daddy larger than light or lake or trailer. Grace in turning and stepping in grass like I never have. He was long in the light, passionfruit orange humidity, churchy. My neck twisted in breakings in brokenness and—that's it—completely.

As the engine bangs me against the footboard at angles, it sounds to me like years. Slippery inches. How all I could think of was hiking my skirt to a beach of boys and a race of men that would follow each other head over engine to die cut up in the water. I don't think I'll see Jesus grin again. Lodi starts smoking cigarettes again to ease the tension. Drain water and tar waters and bucket water and engine water. Colognes: he limped in, limped out. Join my

husband and the little girl's hand and turn on the ignition to the engine to that fast boat to the water. Belongings may be moved, discarded, sold to support addiction. Ceasefire the slipstream of money just as his jawline is a loosened balcony. Say I burned up a piston, a cylinder, the crank stops cranking. Begin tearing it down to a spine. Take the pins from their aluminum holes. Check damage. Compression. Seizing. Answer Daddy on how much money I have in the bank. We'll lose the house, but I will not waste a single cold cupful of methanol. Make it juice, make it spool up from the mouth of the carburetion, breath and combustion. Sleep on the bone fragment you steer with a currency of beer and wonder where we will live next year.

Three months of eating money. Six years of waiting to die by collision.

(Lodi says at 22)

*The girls in California.*

*I watch them at the water parks,  
have em splash at their feet  
cause they don't want it to hit  
that place.*

*It ends with three letters and begins with one.*

*I been thinking of movin out to the Midwest.  
More boat racing. Buy a house.*

*Your dad has high hopes for me.*

*I'm German. I like being German.*

*They took the Von outta my name.*

The lake and he drove. We go for a ride. Voices bother him. Words bother him. Throats and wind and dogs bother him. But the smells he likes and the food he likes. And what would he like? And what would he like?

I showed Lodi my vagina. He asked and said I talked it up  
*why not bust her out.*

She: on the side, puffy and sleeping.  
*Open her up.*

Cunt: open with my fat fingers.  
*Well hello there.*

This: girl has gone fishing. Pounding. Clamdiving.  
*I'm going to blow out both ends.*

He saw me, and he wanted it still. We're going to play. And we're going to do what people do when the engine's running. I saw him: cast flagpole.

*Can you be its friend?*  
Then I shaved her.

*You gotta be patient.*  
There's no firm feminist ground to stand on when Lodi likes it

*full smooth.*

And I thought, *I haven't seen it like this since I was seven.* I played with it like I played with it then,

pinchers. I thought, *Should I really be talking double penetration with a guy I've never had sex with.* Lodi says

*the funny part is:  
you want the bone,  
but what if yer disappointed?*

I drank a case of beer and told Lodi I'd throw my underwear in the fire. Rhinestones. In front of Daddy and Momma. I was stopped, but Lodi told me maybe he kind of wants to see it.

The smoke signals. The last burnt offering I had were pictures of Lodi and how fitting to burn the cage right off the girl like an apron fused to the thighs to fly down the stairs unprotected and a bruiser. Lodi said

*those things would've killed the fire*

Big enough to hold you, like Sarah laughed, and the gods held her pelvis, and the angel Gabriel inseminates and dies like a bee.

The feeling of fucking me is sawdust. Forget chainsaws. Remember: let's take the body and add hands. Lick it. OK don't come at all. Be regretted. Be a relay sweet supremacy on my tail. Spit the same



gristle on whiteness on pinkness to mud DEADBOLT  
what treat is good here. He swears it's no problem,  
that debt is always female.

*I'd like to see you work  
on a girl*

If she smells like dogs, I'll ask her to perfume it. From these first principles, I gave Lodi a meal of two women, of three, of how many bodies again. Became toys. Little girls to bend over his knees. I was on my knees, ass in the air, face planted in her pussy, sucking on a lip, on clit gible, and I tasted period. She was writhing, and I wanted to throw up, smelling discharge of a friend. Eager *Holy Mother* she cried. A nonplussed lesbian experience, it was murky and muddy and blood wiped out on the sheets. It freaked him out. Jolts. From behind. He's licking me. I woke up a little. He was in me. I worked a little harder on that clit, gnawed it out of the way. Then, he was there with me. A tongue tongue organ.

I don't think she came but put on a show. Her tits were big and fell all over in solid formation, whereas mine disappear. Go to the bathroom, go home. Lodi jackhammered her. Blood brown smear. His dick almost gives out. I try to fire it up, her and me kissing on him. I was too dry to bang, and I feel pushed aside, and Lodi says to my friend,

*show her how it's done.*

I dismount, look out the window to the snow, airport, and military cemetery.

He removes his flaming shit. He says it will glow in the dark, shiny, does that mean he's healthy? Goldilocks from the borderlands, algae, led the girls down hard, lines, dark hair, a geography across his heart. I asked him how many women he has no memory of jabbing bits of anatomy into. He said

*let's not go there it's not bad but let's not go there.*

I have seen onrushing bellies, a section of the human species on a carousel, screwy metals and mirrors, kaleidoscopes striking circles popcorn carotid caryatid. There are curved brims dumping blood, but Lodi is a drainpipe crossing my back, my whiter skin, whiter autopsy, I got a pistol in this intense curling. He says, *I got a trick, look that way*. He spits on me. Saharacunt. It's a grave not a vermillion bath, somehow a bride of a spill on the floor.

Lodi pours over flies that smell like women. All night long in a lap and a sudden push. Quit guarding my chest because they come, pray, arrived. Lament in moans and a swallow. Again: there's the barefoot men in a midair entrance, understood. Husband stung, women are perfumed from their heads like babies.

There are girls one should keep transparent except for buttons. Storage units. Bottomless. Amassing evidence: all men are unknowable. Bikini squint. Hairdresser AWOL lunatic. Singing dirty to no one there. I am wife-material, while it throws up a wide stillborn child. There are too many kinds of women's faces. How many abortions have you been the spunk of? One, he said, for sure. I know of another/a possibility. Not mine. Not even a scare.

Gethsemane, he's here.

Gethsemane, he's gone.

He went and will let his anger go on casters, down halls, broke down. His shirt draws too close, then too far to see. The master craftsman stoops from old age and I kiss his head when I reach it. Rough neglect, men out of town, down the years. The odyssey is this: lead me back, I'm wasting time.

### 3. Black resin.

We stopped fucking in winter. Bombed-up, then it stopped. He hurried into me and backed away. Ragged fucking, and he still says a 140-pounder is a big woman. I outweigh the beautiful dead passing. Mouths are for sale, smother, watching me. I risk my short human drink. I write the subject of I'm dead, jumped in. Anymore, anymore hands on a good reason. I'll do it, I've sworn it. I am so sweet to survive. I got to be ready to play like a jukebox. If he was the scum of the earth bugging me for orgies: I am his flick, I am his dark shoes, I am fastened to his ears, not a girl but a hot space. I would shoot the skinny dogs if the bitch came to do the wrong thing with you whimpering down laws on the aluminum shavings. *Shut up* in sign language is me holding her throat like a bag. This was just a little skirmish before they knew I was the tongue of that place.

I know I come at him with a lot of Delphic gestures. All of my moves previously held belief, but not blindnesses. I have a confessional eye and I want to make him a brutal god. Ashes of bondage and relief. He saw me as some kind of inconspicuous depth. If he looked hard at me, I would become not much more than done-unto, a pit or cranny. I know that forfeit. When I look at him, I see nothing, nothing that cannot see. I felt a fond bend towards it and that was him. Black presences come to me fully alive. I've saved nothing.

The feeling of being harnessed is catching. Keeps pace with me. Never polite and starting to get to me. I feel most comfortable when the cockpit closes. Cock and bull. A tie-down, tie-me-up, bed. A perpetual hiss of go go go. The men and the boys make sure to spray me in the face as they throttle it in the turn. Wet, never stays long, reminds me how fast I'm going. Behind that breathing glass. (I have a question) *How did I look out there?* Like a girl. And Lodi said

*very respectable third.*

But he didn't say it to me. To Daddy. To anyone, as he stands upon me. Is this a war, or the faint gargle of love? Not indifference, never indifference, just too much noise. I have bruises where my arm bones should be. I have welts and eyes of yellow, purple, blue, dimpled blacks on my thighs, knees, my legs have bruises like amoebas, a petri dish. I'm the pretty girl that can sell a sport. I sell fast. "Boy, you were hauling!" Wait 'til I put her hammer down. This is the thing about this tribe: puking drunks. Everybody turns to watch.

My own strength as a passing breeze across thick spray. I drive a bloodstream coming from a tank, plastic red, plastic black, plastic yellow. Most men on the beach have kneeling in their heads. Lodi says he doesn't want to make it past 50. I couldn't bear it without him, and Daddy won't be here anymore to get me moving, to strap me down. Lodi's the only one who knows what it takes to kneel and pray. Kneel and bob. Burrow into the wake. Why do I have a feeling this marriage is childless? As illnesses and weaknesses go, I lay my eggs in batter on the beach. I got no time to catch that bus. Sucked back into my body like a spitwad. This is the underground. Bloodblooms. Kicks it through the air. This is sick, this finding love. These are clams I found on the beach, white punk and muddy. I offer one to Lodi and he gives me a look like

*oh you!*

I should have won. I raced against the pitch, the boys, the sticky stiff oiled crew with grappling hooks on shore. Kiss me sourly as if you don't like it. I draw breath, and there are times when a shovelful of dirt reports to me before it drops. I caulk the edges, lacquer up, talking as I go. I know even less about how men live like brutes.

A Viking funeral is Lodi is in front of me. Two by two. My head beating against the back of his arm. A natural habitat that is so utopian, it's in flames. Machines ripped off his back, this holy automobile. If you go, leave my country like you. Buried deeds lie in the grave, but over water there is only human sacrifice. Singing them to never recover in a black space.

The art of a burnt girl.

For her to distort, pick at, and flatten. Read it, theft, but she happened to be there. Porcelain pretty exteriors consigned to darkness, disabling the body with char yelling something. This found excitement as a surrogate for rape. He wins, becoming a thief. A medal then fastened around his neck. Silence was his rule about it. My flesh/the miserable object. My seat is placed inside the box. Jackass/almost dead before removed. I am the iron crucifix that makes this boat a grave.

## 4. Verboten.

Come to me in the spirit of that car wreck, the smell and kiss of the static TV screen. Marc Kadlec was dead by the time I was six. Skin, a pink that'd been dead for six months, a mauve. A puce. By the time I was seven or eight, he was a part of the quilt laid out in the Duluth Convention Center. Each square a rectangle, the size of a grave, Kleenex kinked and sputtered in the silence/AC. I had a cold. No one really cried, except Gramma Kadlec, because he had been such a "good-looking guy."

A lot of color, a lot of patches on concrete. Generally understood it would be bad to laugh or play around, even while being a kid. I was Momma's little wrist pin, moving with her, stuck to her while she celebrated the life of a brother she never got to know in adulthood. The day Marc died and the day I found out I had an uncle. My purpose was one of keeping Momma out of Gramma's hands. Now that Marc was



dead, she'd want everything from us. I was the girl, so I was sacrificed while Daddy and my big brother went fishing off the paved Hayward roads, a whole mile of fleshy dust. When Marc died, and somehow started to matter, when that big red phone in our kitchen hung up, he spat a whole lot of shit at me that made him dirty and pickled.

Not so much a human then, but a small evaporation from my mother. I snickered at him in the box, a little tumbler urn. Turned to Momma and said, "Boy, he must've been pretty small." Let's push over a pew. Let's rip off that lady's fat hat and spin it in the air. *Come on, Momma, let's ruin your brother's memorial service.* I was fascinated with his burning. *Momma, they really burned him? O,* because he's a contagion. We should've packed gas masks. I think I might've said that. I remember it making Momma laugh. Come on Momma, what's this guy's deal? A pastor? I was six. I was not a human but a murderer. I'd kill him all over. Root through his dirt pile and find the small cyclone of my uncle. I don't know you, so I can kill you. I can burn the burned. Lesion after lesion flaring like paper floats in the Congregational church and making Momma laugh.

Picture the AIDS patient: a cocktail shrimp. The tincture of a prawn. Delicious. Ready to succumb, suck on, the incinerator. Yellowed earth. Marc was

probably in the hospital when I was sitting on my swing-set not swinging. Climbing it and planting on the top beam. Yellow paint coming off in metal peals. Momma said the thing was ugly. I didn't play like I didn't know how to but alone in a space that was unreachable. Marc burned up when I was six, sitting on the kitchen floor flat out. Momma picked up the red phone, a thousand yards of cord. An emergency phone. The best phones that never die. The red phone hung up.

Uncle Marc did not shrink from AIDS. He exploded with it. He tripled in size, round shiny edema. Blood vessels that weighed and rotated like roots. He outgrew his underwear. He was in the nursing home where every two hours a different friend would take a shift, and AA came to him in his deadly bigness. His ashes were thrown in the hills above the farm, where he had an affair with his cousin when he was young. He got a degree in Forestry. Grampa Kadlec gave him a pair of mallard ducks. Grampa never hugged the girls, but Marc got to sit on his lap. He worked for the crew that picked animals off the road and wanted to work for the DNR He loved anything with feathers, especially waterbirds, ducks. He ate smoked salmon at his last birthday party, 12 days before he died.

There is no real present tense. I mucked this up again. I am seeing things awful things. I punch Marc in the face, real time. Punch in the face like a punch in dream. I can't move in dreams. In water completely. Punch Marc in the face, but gently. He has AIDS. He is edematous. I wait a bit before I hit cheekbone and hold it. Claypot. Push into his bone like bone on bone. Nothing shatters, just the pressure of a contaminated brain and what I have to do with it.

These are my rotting things.  
This is my rotting room.

I drew swastikas on my arms and in my notebooks. And tried to cover them with flowers and a giant heart. There was a time when I practiced swastikas on notebooks at home, or at school, in history class. It's a thing to master. All legs pointing to the other and going round like a pinwheel. My friend and I danced and tried to figure how to make one with our bodies saying this is the way Nazis tango. This could have been a hate-crime. I could never have had this history. I might never have told you.

I will never not have evil inside me.

My aunt Rita wrapped a rubber band around her finger and left it there overnight. She woke up screaming. Her finger was iron and bulged out and around. Rita started seeing people from Hayward in her twenties, living in in the cities, working in a morgue. *They never said nice things*, Gramma told me. If only she had happier visions. Whenever this family gets fucked up, they go to Duluth, and Rita went there for treatment. Her pillbox was a calendar. Her visions were full spectrum. Sitting at the table in the farmhouse, Rita'd take off outside, we all thought for a smoke, but then she'd come back in saying so-and-so was in the field.

Gramma said she had *mother's intuition* one night and stormed in on Rita screaming in her government-supplied home. A man had come through the wall and was raping her as Gramma was sitting there watching her kick and wrangle her large legs from under him. The smell of him.

But, most of all, she had visions of me. Me: telling her she's ugly. Me: telling her that her smoking is harmful to my health and makes her look like a brick wall. Me: telling her she should just kill herself, options and variances. Me: I know a girl who threw herself in front of a train, you could do that, there's plenty of iron trains. Me: you should kill your Mom. Me: your boyfriend's a blond retard and my Daddy's worried

he'll rape me. You were right to kill that Indian man's baby, listen to Gramma, leave the Reservation alone.

All that was greased was and how/what we know about her. The skirt must go. With the imps and the high contrast. Among them, but above all, out of her mind.

Rita died on a garage sale stationary bicycle. Blockages bursting and sepsis. Her boyfriend, who she decided not to marry after Gramma talked her out of it, said she was *backed up* and was on the bicycle to get things moving. In her house, they found a jug of canned prunes, half gone, and ten packages of dried spaghetti.

Marc heard voices too, at least Daddy thought so. Momma has zero memory of Marc. She doesn't remember him ever visiting San Francisco, but Daddy swore he did for about three months. Daddy felt sick about Marc being a faggot

*God, now what?*

From that family. Momma had to start having babies after 10 years with Daddy just to get her mind off her following Rita into the cave. It was in the truck, in the Ford, 1981, that Momma told Rita and Marc that she was pregnant. He said

*You did this to make me feel bad.*

They never talked again.

In the cities, he lived with a doctor, his psychiatrist, who Gramma blames for everything. He'd been in treatment "more than once" for a couple reasons, "straightening out" for a while after he came out. Marc wrote fiery letters of Gramma touching him when he was little. Gramma might never have told me this except to say that she hates psychiatrists.

I stole things of Marc's from the farmhouse: little figurines of deer and wild life, a small book of native trees for a coat pocket, a leather walking hat with leather weave, and a bronze watch without a band. He was big into nature and hiked in the hills in front of the farm, beyond *Kadlec Road*. That's where Gramma sprinkled his ashes. In a family album, there's a picture he drew of a hawk clutching a dead mouse high up in a tree. It's really good. It made me think we had more in common. Turns out he was left-handed like me. There's a picture of him, slim, tall, blonde, and strong, in a blue flannel shirt rolled up modernly and unbuttoned enough for a gold chain and another of him as a red and black Jack o' Spades.

Marc was in Daddy's 1974 Ford. Shotgun window. Momma drove. Rita was in the middle. I don't know where they were going. Maybe to Spooner. Maybe to lunch. Maybe back from swimming. The scene changes based on if there is sand on the seat. Momma drives like a trucker. Very easy and charged.

Momma doesn't remember shit. Marc was just whining. Maybe AIDS had the right idea in this case.

I was six when he died. He lived ten miles away. He never saw me. Said no to Momma seeing him in the nursing home. I remember dropping Gramma off that summer downtown, a wall of flags. We'd never go downtown. Awful. Hate people. Traffic. Momma drove. Gramma came down a lot that summer.

Say I saw him in hospice? A little girl? A big girl? A fat girl? Marc is watching *The Price Is Right*. The music, the vomiting morning sound, too loud. Men are everywhere. Triage tent civil war. Blood we have to burn. I now know how much work it is to get AIDS. I've had a career of blood.

Gramma got a call from his gay buddies in the cities. *Marc is dying and you should come*. Abbott-Northwestern 1993. He was an old man who couldn't see anymore, tripe-faced, you could say. None of

his friends came to the memorial in Hayward. They probably had their own.

When I was six, the only two gay men I knew about were my dead uncle and Jeffrey Dahmer.

We dig trenches before we're shot down in them. No man is a furnace. The bird waits in the egg and speaks upon his marble harmonizing all evil youth. Burning, twanging, wraith-scraping so foul. This vision is unfit for building. Mad, sad, what is happening here? I can't say, more weight upon WHAT CRIME IT IS to be me. Ministers kissed me as I scolded them. *Buzz off jabberwocky*. It changes to a Saturday evening. Hell itself. And blessedness. Bit by bit, I come whistling the dirty air. All women are maniacs.

I had a dream I carried a purse with gold jacquard too. In it was a tag signed *Leni Reifenstahl*.

*I didn't know she did purses.*



## 5. Forgive/destroy.

I do not pardon.

I do not struggle.

I kill everything.

I was standing by a fence by a house that was at once a shack and then white and stately. I had moved up. I saw the figure of woman.

When I was little, I would take from the library *The History of Fashion*. Over and over. That, and an *Eyewitness Book of Mummies*. Taught-jawed and smoked meat. It seemed so intimate to me. Like I had undressed history.

Her clothing was 1820–1840s in its fullness and its tightness. A woman or a snail? I was intimate with her like I was intimate with her undressing. Like, if pressed, I could crack that safe and find her pinched skin. Relief at being unhooked. Dread at being called to action. Called to lay back.

My regressionist said I am one of not even a handful who claimed, under hypnosis, to be a famous person. He has done over three thousand of them. To be truthful, this is painful. I was not a good person. I was a mass murderer. I lived and died. I was an American President. I said my name aloud and my conscious-self did not want to. I am Andrew Jackson. I was not a good husband or father. My wife is my mother in this life. I was lying in my bed dying with white hair and the sides of my face covered in facial hair. There were many old men in the room. My breath was labored, painful, and I twitched uncontrollably in this physical world. I died, and that life was an angry one. My regressionist said he sees a presidential jaw in me.

*How do I cope now counting twenties?*

Pick up the receiver. What is this armed strong voice. Enhance audio enhance. I have never heard my own voice so audibly. God lives to disclose himself, breathes out. I left home into the dark, hearing the hum. There will be a shift on both sides of the street. The sun will make you restless. Pull the drapes in your room. Stay or leave.

Being Andrew proved to me that some part of this was real. Who would choose to be Andrew Jackson? I didn't remember much of anything about him and certainly nothing I would bet my life on other than he was a President. Of all people I could have potentially made up, Andrew would be my last choice and furthest from my mind. To share residual characteristics both temperamental and physical—this happens—I'm told.

*Of what are you most proud in this life?*

War.

I have created more reprisal and consequences than other people – than birthing others, than others who birth other lives. I have not created a single person. My resentments are my children. Mothering and feeding a rage. I would give up my entire body for it. And suffer three times worse just so it wouldn't. And my resentment is who I am. My forgiveness is who I killed. That girl. That wreck. That thousand-foot drag in milk.

I am only as dark inside as I am shaking am never still they always cram inside of me. To know all by myself: me a bit/them a bit. Someone creating me and temporarily satisfied.

I taste the company I keep referring to me because of what himself spilled out of me. A stray aspect of what I wore out of my story. Whatever is fair, that is everything for me and in the process without me. And mute. And looking more like a peeled grape.

The trail of my life will be a museum. And not of marble, but dust. It will smell like an estate sale. They will want to know where and how I slept. They will smell the dust and think this is what I smelled of. I did not. I was rank. Sometimes I smelled like butter. I have collected the relics that will be my physical presence. If you touch me, I touch you. Even if I am only my bed. Even if I am only as much. Even if I am only as good.

The body is a thing that will reduce. Your body decides to die. Part in however many directions you owe money. When the body begins to deteriorate, you get your breasts removed, your hands sliced open and tendons severed, so you might feel your fingers a moment. Your heart is unplugged. Your brain is watched for a period of time that is concerning. You watch your children die. You attend meetings for those who have lost a loved one. A woman becomes lonely and sits in chairs, by lamps, in rooms. Men drive themselves to lakes until they can't drive themselves to lakes. You owe a lifetime of debt. You shed dust. Obituaries run every day. This body is nothing. The disintegration of the body when the body is no longer seen.

I'm wearing a lot of clothes. Digging clams. Muddy stones that I will eat. I'm going to eat the whole ocean. All these clothes won't drown me when I'm a stone. And then there is noise and the rush, and I am touched and smooth and forever. My clothes are the structure of whales. Are the protection of tons of that fat. There's not a mirror big enough to see all of me. And not one clear enough to hold me there. Like a mirror has its gray so does the sky. So does the iron ocean. So do the beasts of the sea. So do the lolloping tongues of clams. I joke. I lick them before I eat them. I joke when they squirm I have pleased them unpurely. I know this joke makes me unpure. That's why I do it alone. That's why I smell like salt.

A wise woman, an unending task of keeping a large house, a husband, herself, a table, some shelves, piece of awning and a sheet. The country had spent quite a burst of glory in the hall in decay with him that has the rule over us 'til Jesus comes. The body of our Lord – which fits, but is stone dead. The daughter's neck skims underfoot, undertow, and under-aged. All the naked, headless, armless ones are lovely. Innumerable women walked over by the rear of the lines. My living voice was the loudest art: and the other singing women. It's true to say. Until one rises from the dead. Then we hear from her.

Air the house  
visit the shrine  
articulate the dwelling place.

I was a woman. Three hundred years ago. English. In a coastal town that is mostly gray. I was orphaned young. I lived peacefully alone and dug up clams. I married, and my husband is my mother in this life. I became pregnant and had a stillborn girl. She was like a rock. I began to think of jumping off things. I hung myself from the eaves of the roof with a belt. I didn't die right away. My feet scraped the stone side of my home. Then I just fell asleep. I didn't leave. I watched my husband come home and it was awful. He had to cut me down. Cut the leather. It took a while. My body just swung there. And then it dropped. My head dropped to the side in the office leather chair. I didn't leave. He was scared. He drank a little. He couldn't sleep. I stayed outside then, so he could sleep.

I was born with a bulging disk between T5 and T6 and mild scoliosis, which caused intense neck pain all my life. A PT, who examined me, and countless MRIs deduced that this can only be accomplished by serious trauma or an "accident."

When you suicide, you leave a piece of your soul. I have all my life been searching and waiting and today I picked up what I'd left behind.



*Are you out of your body?*

Yes.

*What do you see?*

*What I've done.*

I spent the hottest part of the afternoon in the desert tearing apart the fingers of a dead animal. Fossilized joints, two or three whole fingers. I threw them in the river. I did not want them to be any longer inhibited by hands. To release the gesture of the hand from the hand itself. The honor it is to be killed. Bending over, I was aware of not breathing and then red in my eyes. Fine then, I will half destroy/half finish. I left. The rest of the skeletal structure together. Just river rock. Just another large thirsty animal. I marked myself as a predator. It wasn't for me to take, but to destroy.

I at once felt no notion of this being strange and no emotion at all.

Tearing apart the hand is only the beginning. Finding the scattered parts of the body to destroy is only the beginning. Casting the body all ways is when it began. Tearing the hand is grasping, intimating the destruction of the past. A past that is just now destroyed. This is forgiveness. For a hand is just rock is stone is underfoot. Is white is black is shifting as stone and deposits deposit upon it. When I am done being, let me be dust. And breathe in my body like I won't weigh you down. The exhaustion of continuing to be a body for thousands of years. That is enough. What it means to that body to be destroyed. There is such a thing as forgiveness. Just as there is such a thing as breaking rock. Forgiveness destroys a thing to release it.

Because beginning followed two edges. Because  
I mark time so tightly against itself. I will forgive. I  
cannot continue being dismembered and exchanged.  
And sleeping on the ground to become a floor. This  
is the end of my dream of anger.

There is no bitter end.

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**Brianna Johnson** was a participant in the 2013 A Room of Her Own retreat. Her time there led her to found the Agua Viva Fellowship for a woman writer in recovery from alcohol and/or chemical dependency. In 2015, she was invited to act as a Waves Discussion Series contributor and lecturer alongside Maxine Hong Kingston. She has earned her BFA and MFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College where she was mentored by, among others, Rebecca Brown, Douglas A. Martin, and Bhanu Kapil. Her work has been featured in *Tarpaulin Sky Magazine* and *Spout Magazine*.



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