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Also by Carmen Maria Machado  
*Her Body and Other Parties*

# IN THE DREAM HOUSE

*A Memoir*

Carmen Maria Machado

Graywolf Press

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The events described in this book represent the recollections of the author as she experienced them. Dialogue is not intended to represent a word-for-word transcription, but it accurately reflects the author's memory and fairly reconstructs the meaning and substance of what was said.

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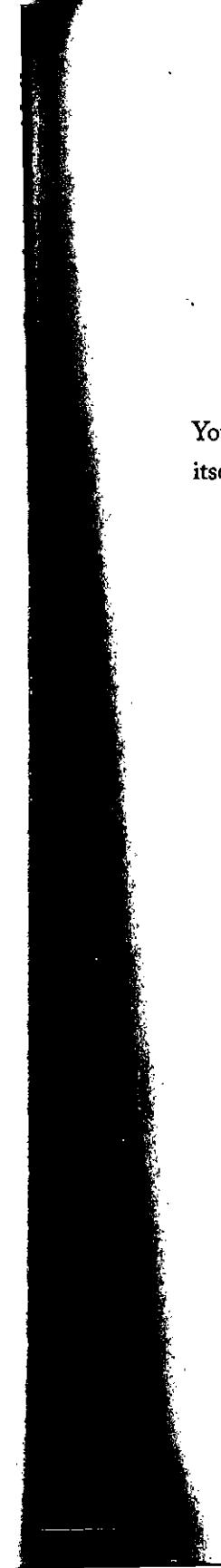
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If you need this book,  
it is for you



You pile up associations the way you pile up bricks. Memory  
itself is a form of architecture.

—Louise Bourgeois

If you are silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you  
enjoyed it.

—Zora Neale Hurston

Your mind indeed is tired. Your mind so tired that it can no longer work at all. You do not think. You dream. Dream all day long. Dream everything. Dream maliciously and incessantly. Don't you know that by now?

—Patrick Hamilton, *Angel Street*

### *Dream House as Overture*

I never read prologues. I find them tedious. If what the author has to say is so important, why relegate it to the paratext? What are they trying to hide?

## Dream House as Prologue

In her essay “Venus in Two Acts,” on the dearth of contemporaneous African accounts of slavery, Saidiya Hartman talks about the “violence of the archive.” This concept—also called “archival silence”—illustrates a difficult truth: sometimes stories are destroyed, and sometimes they are never uttered in the first place; either way something very large is irrevocably missing from our collective histories.

The word *archive*, Jacques Derrida tells us, comes from the ancient Greek *ἀρχεῖον*: *arkheion*, “the house of the ruler.” When I first learned about this etymology, I was taken with the use of *house* (a lover of haunted house stories, I’m a sucker for architecture metaphors), but it is the power, the authority, that is the most telling element. What is placed in or left out of the archive is a political act, dictated by the archivist and the political context in which she lives. This is true whether it’s a parent deciding what’s worth recording of a child’s early life or—like Europe and its *Stolpersteine*, its “stumbling blocks”—a continent publicly reckoning with its past. *Here is where Sebastian took his first fat-footed baby steps; here is the house where Judith was living when we took her to her death.*

Sometimes the proof is never committed to the archive—it is not considered important enough to record, or if it is, not important enough to preserve. Sometimes there is a deliberate act of destruction: consider the more explicit letters between Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok, burned by Hickok for their lack of discretion. Almost certainly erotic and gay as hell, especially considering what wasn’t burned. (“I’m getting so hungry to see you.”)<sup>1</sup>

The late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz pointed out that “queerness has an especially vexed relationship to evidence. . . . When the historian of queer experience attempts to document a queer past, there is often a gatekeeper, representing a straight present.” What gets left behind? Gaps

where people never see themselves or find information about themselves. Holes that make it impossible to give oneself a context. Crevices people fall into. Impenetrable silence.

The complete archive is mythological, possible only in theory; somewhere in Jorge Luis Borges’s Total Library, perhaps, buried under the detailed history of the future and his dreams and half dreams at dawn on August 14, 1934. But we can try. “How does one tell impossible stories?” Hartman asks, and she suggests many avenues: “advancing a series of speculative arguments,” “exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities),” writing history “with and against the archive,” “imagining what cannot be verified.”

The abused woman has certainly been around as long as human beings have been capable of psychological manipulation and interpersonal violence, but as a generally understood concept it—and she—did not exist until about fifty years ago. The conversation about domestic abuse within queer communities is even newer, and even more shadowed. As we consider the forms intimate violence takes today, each new concept—the male victim, the female perpetrator, queer abusers, and the queer abused—reveals itself as another ghost that has always been here, haunting the ruler’s house. Modern academics, writers, and thinkers have new tools to delve back into the archives in the same way that historians and scholars have made their understanding of contemporary queer sexuality reverberate through the past. Consider: What is the topography of these holes? Where do the lacunae live? How do we move toward wholeness? How do we do right by the wronged people of the past without physical evidence of their suffering? How do we direct our record keeping toward justice?

The memoir is, at its core, an act of resurrection. Memoirists re-create the past, reconstruct dialogue. They summon meaning from events that have long been dormant. They braid the clays of memory and essay and fact and perception together, smash them into a ball, roll them flat. They manipulate time; resuscitate the dead. They put themselves, and others, into necessary context.

I enter into the archive that domestic abuse between partners who share a gender identity is both possible and not uncommon, and that it can look something like this. I speak into the silence. I toss the stone of my story into a vast crevice; measure the emptiness by its small sound.

1. Eleanor Roosevelt to Lorena Hickock, November 17, 1933.

# I

Eros limblackener shakes me again—  
that sweet, bitter, impossible creature.

—Sappho, as translated by Jim Powell

## *Dream House as Not a Metaphor*

I daresay you have heard of the Dream House? It is, as you know, a real place. It stands upright. It is next to a forest and at the rim of a sward. It has a foundation, though rumors of the dead buried within it are, almost certainly, a fiction. There used to be a swing dangling from a tree branch but now it's just a rope, with a single knot swaying in the wind. You may have heard stories about the landlord, but I assure you they are untrue. After all, the landlord is not a man but an entire university. A tiny city of landlords! Can you imagine?

Most of your assumptions are correct: it has floors and walls and windows and a roof. If you are assuming there are two bedrooms, you are both right and wrong. Who is to say that there are only two bedrooms? Every room can be a bedroom: you only need a bed, or not even that. You only need to sleep there. The inhabitant gives the room its purpose. Your actions are mightier than any architect's intentions.

I bring this up because it is important to remember that the Dream House is real. It is as real as the book you are holding in your hands, though significantly less terrifying. If I cared to, I could give you its address, and you could drive there in your own car and sit in front of that Dream House and try to imagine the things that have happened inside. I wouldn't recommend it. But you could. No one would stop you.

## Dream House as Picaresque

Before I met the woman from the Dream House, I lived in a tiny two-bedroom in Iowa City. The house was a mess: owned by a slumlord, slowly falling apart, full of eclectic, nightmarish details. There was a room in the basement—my roommates and I called it the murder room—with blood-red floors, walls, and ceiling, further improved by a secret hatch and a nonfunctional landline phone. Elsewhere in the basement, a Lovecraftian heating system reached long tentacles up into the rest of the house. When it was humid, the front door swelled in its frame and refused to open, like a punched eye. The yard was huge and pocked with a fire pit and edged with poison ivy, trees, a rotting fence.

I lived with John and Laura and their cat, Tokyo. They were a couple; long-legged and pale, erstwhile Floridians who'd gone to hippie college together and had come to Iowa for their respective graduate degrees. The living embodiment of Florida camp and eccentricity, and, ultimately, the only thing that, post-Dream House, would keep the state in my good graces.

Laura looked like an old-fashioned movie star: wide-eyed and ethereal. She was dry and disdainful and wickedly funny; she wrote poetry and was pursuing a degree in library science. She *felt* like a librarian, like the wise conduit for public knowledge, as if she could lead you anywhere you needed to be. John, on the other hand, looked like a grunge rocker-cum-offbeat professor who'd discovered God. He made kimchi and sauerkraut in huge mason jars he monitored on the kitchen counter like a mad botanist; he once spent an hour describing the plot of *Against Nature* to me in exquisite detail, including his favorite scene, in which the eccentric and vile antihero encrusts a tortoise's shell with exotic jewels and the poor creature, "unable to support the dazzling luxury imposed on it," dies from the weight. When I first met John, he said to me, "I got a tattoo, do you want to see?" And I said, "Yes," and he said, "Okay, it's gonna look like I'm showing you my junk but I'm not, I swear," and when he lifted the leg of his shorts high on his thigh there was

a stick-and-poke tattoo of an upside-down church. "Is that an upside-down church?" I asked, and he smiled and wiggled his eyebrows—not lasciviously, but with genuine mischief—and said, "Upside down *according to who?*" Once, when Laura came out of their bedroom in cutoffs and a bikini top, John looked at her with real, uncomplicated love and said, "Girl, I want to dig you a watering hole."

Like a picara, I have spent my adulthood bopping from city to city, acquiring kindred spirits at every stop; a group of guardians who have taken good care of me (a tender of guardians, a dearheart of guardians). My friend Amanda from college, my roommate and housemate until I was twenty-two, whose sharp and logical mind, flat affect, and dry sense of humor witnessed my evolution from messy teenager to messy semiadult. Anne—a rugby player with dyed-pink hair, the first vegetarian and lesbian I ever met—who'd overseen my coming-out like a benevolent gay goddess. Leslie, who coached me through my first bad breakup with brie and two-dollar bottles of wine and time with her animals, including a stocky brown pit bull named Molly who would lick my face until I dissolved into hysterics. Everyone who ever read and commented on my LiveJournal, which I dutifully kept from ages fifteen to twenty-five, spilling my guts to a motley crew of poets, queer weirdos, programmers, RPG buffs, and fanfic writers.

John and Laura were like that. They were always there, intimate with each other in one way and intimate with me in another, as if I were a beloved sibling. They weren't watching over me, exactly; they were the protagonists of their own stories.

But this story? This one's mine.

## Dream House as Perpetual Motion Machine

There's this game I played during gym class when I was eight, when they sent me to the outfield during baseball. I would stand so far from everyone else that the balls my classmates hit could never reach me, and our gym teacher didn't seem to notice that I was sitting open-legged in the tall grass.

The teacher, Ms. Lily, was short and stocky and had a cropped haircut, and one of the kids in my class called her a lesbian. I had no idea what that meant; I'm not sure he did, either. It was 1994. Ms. Lily wore baggy athletic pants with patches of neon greens and purples in abstract, eye-searing patterns. (When I learned the story of Joseph and his coat of many colors in Sunday school, all I could think of was Ms. Lily's outfit.) The synthetic fabric hissed when she walked; you could always hear her coming. I have a clear memory of her trying to explain body isolation to us—she drew a line down the center of herself, starting at the top of her head. When she reached her crotch, kids giggled. From there, she showed us our left sides and our right sides, how to move each independently and then in tandem. She spun her arms like a carnival ride.

*Fitness!*, she'd say, touching her right hand to her left foot, then her left hand to her right foot. *You only have one body! You have to take care of it!* Maybe she *was* a lesbian.

Sitting in the grass during those baseball games, I'd rip up all of the weeds within my reach, leaving my hands smelling like dirt and wild onions. I broke dandelion stems and marveled at their sticky white milk. The game is this: You take the dandelion and rub it hard beneath your chin—in my case, right over the narrow white scar I earned falling in the tub when I was a toddler—so hard the florets begin to disintegrate. If your chin turns yellow, it means you're in love.

At eight I was reed-thin, anxious. I was too tightly wound to be dreamy, most of the time, but sitting in the grass gave me a kind of peace. Every class

I took that dandelion's severed head and worked it against my chin until it was a hot, wet ball, like a bud that hadn't yet opened.

The trick, or maybe it's the punch line, is that the yellow always comes off on your skin. The dandelion yields every time. It has no wiles, no secrets, no sense of self-preservation. And so it goes that, even as children, we understand something we cannot articulate: The diagnosis never changes. We will always be hungry, will always want. Our bodies and minds will always crave something, even if we don't recognize it.

And in the same way the dandelion's destruction tells us about ourselves, so does our own destruction: our bodies are ecosystems, and they shed and replace and repair until we die. And when we die, our bodies feed the hungry earth, our cells becoming part of other cells, and in the world of the living, where we used to be, people kiss and hold hands and fall in love and fuck and laugh and cry and hurt others and nurse broken hearts and start wars and pull sleeping children out of car seats and shout at each other. If you could harness that energy—that constant, roving hunger—you could do wonders with it. You could push the earth inch by inch through the cosmos until it collided heart-first with the sun.

## *Dream House as an Exercise in Point of View*

You were not always just a You. I was whole—a symbiotic relationship between my best and worst parts—and then, in one sense of the definition, I was cleaved: a neat lop that took first person—that assured, confident woman, the girl detective, the adventurer—away from second, who was always anxious and vibrating like a too-small breed of dog.

I left, and then lived: moved to the East Coast, wrote a book, moved in with a beautiful woman, got married, bought a rambling Victorian in Philadelphia. Learned things: how to make Manhattans and use starchy pasta water to create sauces and keep succulents alive.

But you. You took a job as a standardized-test grader. You drove seven hours to Indiana every other week for a year. You churned out mostly garbage for the second half of your MFA. You cried in front of many people. You missed readings, parties, the supermoon. You tried to tell your story to people who didn't know how to listen. You made a fool of yourself, in more ways than one.

I thought you died, but writing this, I'm not sure you did.

## *Dream House as Inciting Incident*

You meet her on a weeknight, at dinner with a mutual friend in a diner in Iowa City where the walls are windows. She is sweaty, having just come from the gym, her white-blonde hair pulled back in a short ponytail. She has a dazzling smile, a raspy voice that sounds like a wheelbarrow being dragged over stones. She is that mix of butch and femme that drives you crazy.

You and your friend are talking about television when she arrives; you have been complaining about men's stories, men's stories, how everything is men's stories. She laughs, agrees. She tells you she's freshly transplanted from New York, drawing unemployment insurance and applying to MFA programs. She's a writer too.

Every time she speaks, you feel something inside you drop. You will remember so little about the dinner except that, at the end of it, you want to prolong the evening and so you order tea of all things. You drink it—a mouthful of heat and herb, scorching the roof of your mouth—while trying not to stare at her, trying to be charming and nonchalant while desire gathers in your limbs. Your female crushes were always floating past you, out of reach, but she touches your arm and looks directly at you and you feel like a child buying something with her own money for the first time.

## Dream House as Memory Palace

From the street, here is the house. There is a front door, but you never go in the front door.

Here is what lines the driveway: all the boys who liked you as a girl. Colin, the dentist's son, who told you in a soft voice that your dress was beautiful. You looked down to confirm for yourself, and then skipped merrily away. (A diva, even then! Your mother told you this story; you were so young you did not remember it on your own.) Seth, who, in sixth grade, bought you the brand-new *Animorphs* book—the one where Cassie transmogrifies into a butterfly on the cover—and had his mother drive him to your house so he could give it to you. Adam, your beloved friend who worked at the local movie theater and brought home garbage bags of day-old popcorn so you could watch movies your parents would never let you see: *Memento* and *Dancer in the Dark* and *Pulp Fiction* and *Mulholland Drive* and *Y Tu Mamá También*. Adam burned you so many CDs. Some of them were too weird for you. There was one band who just destroyed instruments into microphones, and you rolled your eyes and said, “This is stupid.” But then Adam’s mom took both of you to Philadelphia in January to see a Godspeed You! Black Emperor concert. The band started late, and you huddled together in a shared hoodie. The music was byzantine, kaleidoscopic, inexpressibly beautiful. You didn’t know how to even talk about the mix of audio and sound, the way the symphony of it washed over you, vibrated every part of your body. Once, Adam wrote a story about you and later, a song, when you went away to college. You did not know what to do with Adam’s love, the steady and undemanding affection of it. Then, Tracey, who had a twin brother, Timmy. They were Mormon and sweet, and you had a crush on Timmy, but Tracey had a crush on you. You once ordered a free Book of Mormon from the internet and ended up having a two-hour-long conversation with a young guy—he sounded so handsome—who was calling from Salt Lake City to gauge your interest in their religion. You couldn’t say, “I ordered

it because I am in love with one half of a set of Mormon twins and the other half has a crush on me.” So instead, you bantered about theology for two hours before you regretfully got off the phone. Anyway, those boys. You were suspicious of their feelings because you had no reason to love yourself—not your body, not your mind. You rejected so much gentleness. What were you looking for?

The back patio: college. So many unrequited crushes, and—ultimately—the worst sex. You once drove across four states to sleep with a man in upstate New York in the dead of winter. It was so cold your drugstore-brand astringent face wash froze in its tube. The sex was bad, obviously, but what you remember most clearly is what you *wanted* from that night. You wanted that drive-across-four-states desire. You wanted someone to be obsessed with you. How could you accomplish that? You were awake all night staring at the streetlight in the parking lot outside his bedroom window. Why did men never own curtains? How do you get someone you want to want you? Why did no one love you?

The kitchen: OkCupid, Craigslist. Living in California and trying to date women, but failing because Bay Area lesbians proved to be pretty testy about the whole bisexual thing. So then, a parade of men: sweet men and terrible men and older men. Professionals and students. An astrophysicist, several programmers. One guy with a boat in the Berkeley marina. Then, moving to Iowa and going on a bunch of terrible dates, including with a man you kept seeing later in the waiting room of your therapist’s office. He played piano. A med student, maybe? You can barely remember.

The living room, the office, the bathroom: boyfriends, or something approximating them. Casey and Paul and Al. Casey was the worst. Al was the kindest. Paul was knock-you-sideways perfect; he fucked you and fed you and tried to teach you to love California. It was all you ever wanted: He was so pretty. You loved his downy ass, his surprisingly soft scruff, the strength of his hands. You wanted to crawl up inside him and have him crawl up inside you. He made you feel special and sexy and smart. He broke up with you because he didn’t love you, which is a very good reason to break up with somebody, even though at the time you wanted to die.

The bedroom: don’t go in there.

## Dream House as Time Travel

One of the questions that has haunted you: Would knowing have made you dumber or smarter? If, one day, a milky portal had opened up in your bedroom and an older version of yourself had stepped out and told you what you know now, would you have listened? You like to think so, but you'd probably be lying; you didn't listen to any of your smarter, wiser friends when they confessed they were worried about you, so why on earth would you listen to a version of yourself who wrecked her way out of a time orifice like a newborn?

There is a theory about time travel called the Novikov self-consistency principle, wherein Novikov asserts that if time travel *were* possible, it would still be impossible to travel back in time and alter events that have already taken place. If present-day you could return to the past, you could certainly make observations that felt *new*—observations that had the benefit of real-time hindsight—but you'd be unable to, say, prevent your parents from meeting, since that, by definition, had already happened. To do so, Novikov says, would be as impossible as jumping through a brick wall. Time—the plot of it—is fixed.

No, Novikov's time traveler is the tragic dupe who realizes too late her trip to the past is what sealed the very fate she'd meant to prevent. Maybe you mistook your future voice shouting through the walls for something else: a heartbeat pacing and then rapid with want, a purr.

## Dream House as a Stranger Comes to Town

One day, she texts you to ask if you can give her a ride to the Cedar Rapids airport. She needs to pick up her girlfriend, Val, who is visiting from out of town. You agree because, of course. Historically you've done just about anything for a beautiful woman. (Years ago, when you lived in California, your stunningly gorgeous coworker called you at seven in the morning because she needed help jump-starting her car. You were out of bed and on your way in ten minutes, and when you opened the hood of her car you made a point of contemplating the machinery below you, as if you had any idea what it meant.)

In the car, you are so busy talking you miss the exit—blowing past a strip club, Woody's, and the sign for the airport. When you finally arrive and park your car, you walk to the baggage claim and watch these two beautiful, tiny women run at each other. One brunette, one blonde; like Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe. The blonde sits and the brunette crawls in her lap; they laugh and kiss. (You would love that version of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.) You turn away and examine a poster for the University of Iowa very closely.

In the car, the brunette laughs easily and openly at all of your jokes. You watch her surreptitiously in the rearview mirror. You drop them off back in town.

A few days later, you're talking to your mutual friend. "I think she likes you," she says.

"She's really hot," you say. "But she's seeing someone. I just, like, literally picked up her girlfriend from the airport."

"Oh yeah," your friend says. "They're in an open relationship, though. That's what she told me. I'm just saying." She throws up her hands with mock innocence. "She's mentioned you a bunch."

Your heart launches itself against your rib cage like an animal.

## Dream House as Lesbian Cult Classic

You arrange to hang out at her house. You are going to watch *The Brave Little Toaster*, a movie you haven't seen since childhood but that you remember loving and being terrified of.

You sit inches from each other on a green velvet couch, drinks sweating on the coffee table. When your favorite number is on—the junkyard cars singing bleakly of their erstwhile lives, reminding you that they are now worthless and about to die—her index finger drifts against your hand, and you feel a clench of desire. You know this move. You've done this move a thousand times: I am too shy to turn to you and tell you what I want; instead, I will pretend that I am not quite in control of this single, nomadic digit. The movie ends, and you both sit there in the dark. You start to nervously chatter about trivia—“Did you know the story this movie is based on won a Nebula Award? It—”

She kisses you.

Upstairs, you both tumble onto her bed. She never kisses you in the same place twice. Then she says, “I’d like to take your shirt off. May I?” And you nod, and she does. She slides her hand around your bra clasp. “Is this all right?” she asks. The room smells like lavender, or maybe you just remember that because her comforter was lavender. Every time her hand moves somewhere else, she whispers, “May I?” and the thrill of saying yes, yes, is like the pulsing of the tide over your face, and you would gladly drown that way, giving permission.

## Dream House as Famous Last Words

“We can fuck,” she says, “but we can’t fall in love.”<sup>2</sup>

2. Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955–1958), Type T3, Omens in love affairs.

## *Dream House as Confession*

She was short and pale and rail-thin and androgynous, with fine blonde hair about which she was inordinately vain. Blue eyes, an easy smile. You are embarrassed now to say that you were impressed by her in a very strange, old-fashioned way. Despite being from Florida, she had a distinctly upper-class, New England air. She had gone to Harvard, looked dapper in a blazer, and carried a leather-encased hip flask preppier than any accessory you've ever seen.

You have always suspected that you are shallow when it comes to desire, and there it was: all of those factors flipped your brain inside out and turned your cunt to pudding. Maybe you were always some kind of hedonist-cum-social climber-cum-cummer and you just never knew it.

Despite the fact that you were the same age, you felt like she was older than you: wiser, more experienced, worldlier. She'd worked in publishing, she'd lived abroad, she spoke fluent French. She'd lived in New York and been to launch parties for literary magazines. And, it turned out, she had a weakness for curvy-to-fat brunettes in glasses. God herself couldn't have planned it better.

## *Dream House as Dreamboat*

You love writing across from her, the two of you tapping away with verve and purpose, and occasionally peeking over the edges of your laptops at each other with goofily contorted faces. When you go out to dinner, she orders tuna sashimi and insists on placing it on your tongue. It is sturdy, labial. It melts there. She orders dirty vodka martinis and you come to love their brine. She reads your stories, marvels at the beauty of your sentences. You listen to her read an old essay about how her parents never let her eat sugary cereal. You tell her, often, how hysterically funny she is.

## *Dream House as Luck of the Draw*

Part of the problem was, as a weird fat girl, you felt lucky. She did what you'd wished a million others had done—looked past arbitrary markers of social currency and seen your brain and ferocious talent and quick wit and pugnacious approach to assholes.

When you started writing about fatness—a long time ago, in your LiveJournal—a commenter said to you that you were pretty and smart and charming, but as long as you were zaftig you'd never have your choice of lovers. You remember feeling outrage, and then processing the reality, the practicality, of what he'd said. You were so angry at the world.

You wondered, when she came along, if this was what most people got to experience in their lives: a straight line from want to satisfaction; desire manifested and satisfied in reasonable succession. This had never been the case before; it had always been fraught. How many times had you said, "If I just looked a little different, I'd be drowning in love"? Now you got to drown without needing to change a single cell. Lucky you.

## *Dream House as Road Trip to Savannah*

It was your idea to go to Georgia over spring break. You've never been to the South, not properly, and you're writing a story about Juliette Gordon Low and her house in Savannah. It's a twelve-hour drive, a sneeze. Plus, it's March, and freezing, and it's been a long winter. You want some sun. So you ask her if she'd like to come with you. She says yes. You buy new underwear at the mall.

She gets behind the wheel of your car, and you leave Iowa before the sun rises. You fall asleep almost immediately and when you wake it is snowing and she is speeding. You sit up, pick crust from the edges of your eyes. Road signs indicate that the lane is ending and she has to merge; she makes her move too late and hits a pothole at a diagonal. The tire blows.

You are somewhere outside St. Louis. She pulls over; you call AAA. They come and put on the spare, and the guy recommends a place down the road to get a new tire. You do as he suggests, and when it's done she takes the wheel again, but within a few miles back on the highway the new tire is flat too. You pull into a repair shop exclusively for eighteen-wheelers; there is something hysterical about your tiny Hyundai with all its liberal bumper stickers sitting among those behemoths. It is the early months of 2011; marriage equality is smoldering, catching fire in some states, doused with water in others. The Justice Department says it will no longer enforce the Defense of Marriage Act. Things are *happening*.

As the two of you sit there, you start crying. You are embarrassed that your car has failed you so early in your journey. She apologizes, says it was her fault, and you tell her it wasn't. "It's not a great car," you say, by way of explanation.

She laughs. "I guess this is part of the adventure. And we haven't even gotten there yet!"

The mechanic seems to notice the two of you—that is to say, he notices your unbearable levels of queerness, the proximity of your bodies, the

constellation formed by those details and the bumper stickers and, maybe, he just has a sixth sense—but he doesn't say anything, for which you are grateful. He explains that the tire that was sold to you is full of huge, unpatchable holes. He'd put on a new one, but your car takes strange, specific tires in an uncommon size, and you'll have to go to a bigger city to find them. He puts the spare back on. This time, you drive. Somewhere in Illinois, you get a tire that fits.

When you pull into the parking space outside the hotel, she leans over and kisses you. She kisses your top lip, then the lower one, like each one deserves its own tender attention. She leans away and looks at you with the kind of slow, reverent consideration you'd give to a painting. She strokes the soft inside of your wrist. You feel your heart beating somewhere far away, as if it's behind glass.

"I can't believe that you've chosen me," she says.

In the room, she takes off your new underwear and buries her face between your thighs.

Savannah is warm and fragrant. The trees drip with Spanish moss, and the water in the fountains is dyed green for St. Patrick's Day. The Juliette Gordon Low house is a beautiful, rambling mansion crowded with antiques. Underneath the "Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace" sign that hangs over the entrance, she eggs you on into increasingly ridiculous poses; you are both giggling when you go inside. The ancient women staffing it, who are all wearing drag-queen lipstick and eye shadow, respond to your excited pronouncements about your love of Girl Scouting with silence.

The tour is fascinating. Juliette, you think, sounds like a big dyke. The guide describes how she was constantly dissatisfied with her home—the furniture, the gate outside—so she just took on their design and modifications herself. She learned to smith metal. Why is it that badass women who don't follow the rules always sound like lesbians to you? A psychiatrist would have a field day with that realization. (Though, in your defense, there is a portrait of her in a button-down top and with a hat like a park ranger's and looking butch as hell hanging on the wall.)

Afterward, the two of you walk through an old cemetery. She kisses you behind a mausoleum. She tries to get you to fuck her there, and you don't

want to out of respect for the dead, but she is so beautiful. Then an employee shows up and you rearrange yourselves quickly and leave, laughing.

You drive to Tybee Island and order a platter of seafood—twisting open crayfish and swallowing scallops, eating nothing but the fruit of the sea. It is just mouthfuls of butter and water and salt and muscle. After the meal, you go to the beach and wade into the water. You see dolphins.

Every so often, her phone rings, and she smiles and walks some distance away to tell Val about the trip. Even as she shrinks with distance, she waves at you.

On your last day in town, a drunk man accosts you on the street. You are holding her hand when he comes up and grabs you. She shouts, "Let her go!" and does a martial arts move on his arm. He backs off in surprise, telling you to both go fuck yourselves, and staggers away.

You tremble for the better part of the next hour. As you walk back to the car, she keeps apologizing for not intervening sooner.

"Sooner than immediately?" you ask.

"I saw him coming from a mile off. I saw what he was going to do," she says. "I know this is new to you, but I've dated a lot of women. This is just par for the course. This is the risk you're taking."

The drive home is wild, almost tweaked. You cover half the country—North Carolina to Chicago—in one day like fucking maniacs. You could, you think, drive forever and ever with her at your side.

## *Dream House as Romance Novel*

A week after you get back from Savannah, you are fucking on your bed and you come and she says, "I love you." You are both sweaty; the silicone strap-on is still in your body. (When dating men, you always loved feeling a cock soften inside you afterward; now, you pant on her chest and slide off and it springs back to where it was, slick and erect but spent just the same.)

You look down at her, confusion muddled with the vibrations of orgasm,<sup>3</sup> and she claps her hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry," she says.

"Did you mean it?" you ask.

"I didn't mean to say it just now," she says, "but I meant it."

You are silent for a long beat. Then you say, "I love you too." It feels stupidly, sickeningly correct, and you don't understand how you didn't know until now.

"If I don't get into Iowa, I don't know what I'll do," she says. "I want to stay here with you. That's all I want."

## *Dream House as Déjà Vu*

She loves you. She sees your subtle, ineffable qualities. You are the only one for her in all the world. She trusts you. She wants to keep you safe. She wants to grow old with you. She thinks you're beautiful. She thinks you're sexy. Sometimes when you look at your phone, she has sent you something stunningly filthy, and there is a kick of want between your legs. Sometimes when you catch her looking at you, you feel like the luckiest person in the whole world.

3. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type C942.3, Weakness from seeing woman (fairy) naked.

## *Dream House as Bildungsroman*

I didn't date when most people dated. When other teenagers were figuring out what good and bad relationships looked like, I was busy being extremely weird: praying a lot, getting obsessed with sexual purity.

The summer I was thirteen I was saved around a bonfire at a Christian summer camp. I'd spent most of the weeklong session making box-stitch plastic lanyards and climbing trees, but now the counselors—barely in their twenties—fed us s'mores and encouraged us to think about everything we'd ever done wrong. A "Certificate of New Birth," printed on thin, grainy paper, was presented to me the next morning. It marks the exact moment of conversion at 10:20 p.m., well past my bedtime.

Afterward, I was an antihipster, as earnest about Jesus as I could possibly be. I walked around with a patch on my backpack that said "Ask Me Why I'm a Christian." I wore a ring that said "True Love Waits." I went to church and liked it. I believed Jesus was my savior; that he had a personal stake in my salvation, as personal as my parents' love for me.

When I was sixteen, a new associate pastor, Joel Jones, was rotated into our United Methodist parish. When he introduced himself to the church youth, I felt a kick deep in my pelvis. He was handsome, with a goatee and straight, sandy hair that jutted out over his forehead. He was a little pudgy, but only just. He had a wedding ring. And when he shook my hand, he looked directly into my eyes.

Joel was around a lot. He participated in youth group events alongside his normal church duties. He gave smart, politically progressive sermons that sowed chaos and indignation among the older congregants, which delighted me no end. Sometimes I would linger after the service was over. He always talked to me like I was an adult; he always remembered my name.

...

In my senior year of high school, our church connected with a Methodist congregation in Lichtenburg, South Africa, that was looking to start a youth camp for its children and teens. A group of adults—including Joel—decided to do a trial run, and they invited me to go with them.

We departed a frigid Northeast midwinter and arrived in the middle of a Southern Hemisphere summer. The camp was held on a sprawling farm outside town, a palatial property with a pool and a large white fountain and a gate running along the road. The campers, ranging from my age—seventeen—down to nine, stayed in a converted barn. I ran an arts-and-crafts elective. We built bonfires around which we sang and played guitar and made spontaneous confessions.

Boerboels—a South African breed of giant dogs that resemble mastiffs—roamed the grounds. There was a new mother with distended nipples and a loping gait, and her massive puppies, who scrambled over each other to get to our outstretched hands. The owner of the farm grew sunflowers, and in the fields their luminous heads were always turned toward the light—one morning he drove us into their midst to show us how they followed the sun's path across the sky. The land around us was so flat you could see black thunderclouds slit through with lightning in every direction; storms so distant they never arrived. I had never been so far from home.

Every night, after the campers went to bed, I would sit and talk with Joel. He spoke openly, honestly of his faith; how he struggled with his own imperfections: pride and jealousy and—his voice dropping low—lust.

"I'm supposed to be a man of God," he said one evening as mosquitoes chewed up our limbs in the darkness. "But I feel so weak. I feel like every day I fight against my instincts, and half the time my instincts win." He put his head into his hands. I reached out and touched his arm, and he didn't shrug it away. When he spoke next, I felt the vibrations of his voice in my fingers. "I'm supposed to lead all of these people and be an example, but sometimes I wonder if I'm the right person for the job. Maybe it should be someone better." I'd never heard anyone talk this way about himself. "I don't know what God wants from me," he said, finally. "As a leader, and as a man."

I wanted to cry. I considered my own lusts and shortcomings, the way my life was coming apart. My parents wouldn't stop fighting. An assault was years in my past and yet continued to interfere with my sleep, my ability to receive touch. I thought often about sex, even though it frightened me.

I was always crying, always uncertain. What, I wondered, did God want from someone like me?

One night, Joel and I took our sleeping bags outside and slept next to each other under the stars. I'd never seen a sky like that, unstained by city light. The Milky Way was stunningly clear; starmatter smeared across the black. There were new constellations here, on the bottom of the world. The planets gleamed; satellites slipped across the sky. When I woke up, there was a dung beetle pushing a small brown ball through the grass inches from my nose. I am normally terrified of insects, but at that moment, instead, I was cracked open, ready for wonder. In the beetle's determination and slow progress, I saw indescribable splendor.

When Joel woke, we walked to the pool and stared at the edge of the still and glassy water. He pulled off his shirt. He had a rectangular insulin pump attached to his abdomen; this vulnerable detail tugged on some mysterious thread inside me. He unhooked his pump, and turned to me, arms outstretched, and let me push him in. When he came up from the blue, he grabbed my ankle and pulled me in with him. We circled each other, my clothes floating weightlessly around my body. Only when I got out of the pool an hour later did I realize what I'd done: the fabric was soaked, slightly bleached, heavy as lead.

After we got back to the States, I would drive to church after school and just sit in his office for hours. He kept the door closed.

We talked. We talked about God and ethics and history and school; his marriage; the sexual assault in my freshman year that I couldn't excise from my brain. He gave me permission to swear in front of him, which I did, profusely. "Fuck that fucking fuck," I'd yell, new to profanities. "That asshole. That shitty asshole." Joel watched me meditatively from his office chair, rocking against its hinges. Once, I sat down on the floor, and he joined me there, our knees touching. "Sometimes you just need a change of perspective," he told me.

Eventually, he insisted on meeting outside work. He gave me his cell number, and when I called he met me wherever I asked him to go. I felt a strange rush of pleasure at this development. We'd moved past the default scenes and settings of ministry. He met with *parishioners* during office hours,

with the door standing open. But he met with me at diners at two in the morning, and I saw his face in the reflection of darkened windows. I drove to his house and waited for him to get dressed so we could go out. If his wife wasn't home, he'd change in front of his open door as I looked and didn't look, and then we'd drive to local restaurants and he'd buy me potstickers or grilled cheese sandwiches and I'd try not to cry too loudly. Once, I fell asleep in the booth, and he waited for me to wake up.

My mother didn't like that I called Joel by his first name. "It's inappropriate," she said. "He should be 'Pastor Jones.'" What I couldn't explain to her—what I barely understood myself—was that Joel wasn't just my pastor. The boundaries that should have been up between us—minister/congregant, adult/teenager—had completely dissolved. We were friends. We were real, honest-to-goodness friends, and I did not have a lot of those.

Joel rarely mentioned my age, but when he did I could see the gulf of time between us, and I hated it. His words were a mantra that I repeated in my head. *It's going to be okay. It's not your fault. You're not a bad person. God loves you. God loves you even though you're not perfect. I love you.*

And I wanted him. On top of all of this, I wanted him. I knew he was married, but it didn't seem to matter. He told me that his wife couldn't get pregnant, and they'd stopped having sex altogether. Maybe that was what I sensed in him: something caged, unfulfilled. He radiated desire. I wanted to kiss him, I wanted him to hold me, I wanted to associate sex with something besides fear and guilt. I wanted my life to be shaken up, to go from being who I was to someone renewed.

In those months, hazy from lack of sleep and raw with anxiety, I felt like a calculator with someone's finger over the solar panel—fading in and out, threatening to shut off altogether. Joel, though, seemed to run on his own hunger. I wanted to be like that.

I wept the last time I saw him. I was going to college, but I didn't want to be so far apart. He assured me he was just a phone call away. "Plus," he said, "DC isn't that far. Maybe I can come visit."

At school, I had my first kiss, my first grope in the dark. I felt strange afterward: elated and sad and content and like an adult. When it was over, I went back to my dorm room. It was after midnight. I took my phone

into the hallway so my roommate wouldn't overhear, and I called Joel. He asked me what had happened. I told him, one detail after another. He didn't refuse any of them; just listened until I was done.

"What should I do?" I asked him, the question slipping out of my mouth before I could stop it. Until that moment I'd been, secretly, excited, bolstered with the newness of a man's stubble across my face, hands that went where I wanted them to. But in Joel's silence, which carried a whiff of disapproval, I recalled the sin of it.

For the first time, he didn't seem to know what to say. Where there had always been smooth advice that felt right and good and clear, now there was reticence. Hesitation.

"Ask for forgiveness," he said, finally.

A few weeks later, Joel stopped responding to my calls.

I went about my normal routine, but his silence hovered around me. Was he angry about my hookup? Was he—jealous? I panicked. Maybe he had lost interest in me. Maybe I'd crossed some invisible line, committed some unforgivable act. I sent him a few emails, spaced at what I hoped were ordinary intervals. He didn't respond.

A few weeks later, I was sitting in my dorm room on my brown corduroy comforter, trying to decide whether to go to the dining hall, when my phone rang. I told my roommate to go ahead; I'd follow in a second.

My mother's voice was restrained, slightly chilly. "Pastor Jones has been fired from the church," she said.

"What?"

"The rumor is, he was having an affair with a parishioner," she said. "A woman he was giving marriage counseling to."

I hung up; called Joel. His phone rang and rang. I couldn't believe that he could do such a thing, and then hated myself for judging him. And as his voicemail message played, a small-girl, jealous part of me wondered—if that was what he'd really wanted—why he hadn't chosen me. I'd been there. We'd been so close. He could have done it, and I would have, happily. "Call me," I said, trying to steady my voice. "Please. I need to talk to you."

I took a train home and drove to the parish house. It was dark, but I knocked on the door anyway. When Joel didn't answer, I went home and emailed him again.

"Please," I said. "Please don't shut me out. Or if you're going to, just tell me, tell me so that I'm not dangling in this in-between place. You stood by me when my world was falling down around me. Please let me do the same for you."

He responded a few hours later. "Carmen, I'm okay but things are confusing. I have to go, the library is closing. Joel." That was the last I ever heard from him.

By the time I got around to dating people I was a little desperate, a little horny, and a lot confused. I had figured out exactly nothing. I came of age, then, in the Dream House, wisdom practically smothering me in my sleep. Everything tasted like an almost epiphany.

## Dream House as Folktale Taxonomy

In Hans Christian Andersen's story, the Little Mermaid has her tongue cut out of her head.<sup>4</sup> In "The Wild Swans," Eliza is a princess who is silent for seven years as she stitches nettle shirts for her brothers, who have been turned into the eponymous birds.<sup>5</sup> Then there's the Goose Girl, whose identity, title, and husband are stolen by a treacherous maid, and who cannot speak of her plight for fear of her life.<sup>6</sup>

The Little Mermaid suffers in other ways too. The process of growing legs is as painful as knives slicing open her tail. She dances beautifully because every time she steps, she is in agony. Still, the prince does not pick her. At the end, she considers killing him to save herself, but she chooses to die instead and is carried away by angels. (She has, through her suffering, earned a soul.)<sup>7</sup> But before that, the witch takes the muscle of her tongue and cuts through the tissue. If you have ever sliced a pork chop with a shitty Ikea knife, you know what it was like—that sawing, that rocking back and forth, the slick and squeaky give of the muscle, the white marbled fat.

Eliza, on the other hand, is lucky. Well, lucky-ish. Well, luckier. The nettles are stinging nettles, and she has to harvest them from graveyards. And she has to be silent the whole time: silent as she creates the shirts with her raw and blistered hands, silent as a man falls in love with her, silent as they try to burn her for being a witch. And even once she has finished her task, she faints before she can speak, and so her brothers have to speak for her.

And the Goose Girl? She survives. She straight-up survives. Yes, the false princess has her beloved talking horse killed and his decapitated head hung

4. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type S163, Mutilation: cutting (tearing) out tongue.

5. Aarne-Thompson-Uther, *Classification of Folk Tales*, Type 451, The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers.

6. Aarne-Thompson-Uther, *Classification of Folk Tales*, Type 533, The Repressed Bride.

7. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type Q172, Reward: admission to heaven.

from a gate for all to see. Yes, she has to watch someone waltz around with her identity on like a costume, afraid to say what needs to be said. But in the end, with the help of a kindly king and a goose-boy, her truth comes out. She marries her prince and rules with kindness and is happy until the end of her days.

Sometimes your tongue is removed, sometimes you still it of your own accord. Sometimes you live; sometimes you die. Sometimes you have a name, sometimes you are named for what—not who—you are. The story always looks a little different, depending on who is telling it.

There is a Quichua riddle: *El que me nombra, me rompe*. Whatever names me, breaks me. The solution, of course, is "silence." But the truth is, anyone who knows your name can break you in two.<sup>8</sup>

8. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type C432.1, Guessing name of supernatural creature gives power over him.

## *Dream House as Menagerie*

A line has been crossed—you've fallen in love. "I have to talk to Val," she says. "I have to tell her, I have to figure this out. We've been together for three years," she finishes, by way of explanation. And though everything has been on the up-and-up, you feel a weird stab of guilt. This is how emotions work, right? They get tangled and complicated? They take on their own life? Trying to control them is like trying to control a wild animal: no matter how much you think you've taught them, they're willful. They have minds of their own. That's the beauty of wildness.

## *Dream House as Star-Crossed Lovers*

One day, a letter arrives. She is rejected from Iowa's graduate writing program but accepted into Indiana's. She tells you this with sorrow, over the phone even though you live less than a mile apart.

You cry in the privacy of your bedroom. This was inevitable, you think. It's been great, but it's over.

A few hours later, she knocks on your door. In your bedroom, she kisses you and explains: Val is going to leave New York and come live with her in Indiana. But she wants you to come and visit, to continue dating. "Val says we can try it," she says. "I just—I think I've always been polyamorous, and it makes so much sense. I want to be with both of you. I want to make this work. Is that crazy?"

"No," you say, wiping the tears from your glasses. "I can't wait to try."

## Dream House as Daydream

She and Val need to go house hunting in Bloomington, and they want you to come along.

A few days before you leave Iowa, you find a vintage photograph for sale, black-and-white with three women laughing, one of them holding a baby. From the forties, maybe, but you're just guessing. You buy a frame at a thrift store and take the picture with you.

In Indiana you go from house to house together. You drive; your girlfriend is in the passenger seat; Val is in the back. The loose explanation is that they are the couple and you are the friend with wheels, but in every place you are all thinking about bedrooms. Do you need two, one for you and her, one for her and Val? What about a futon in the office? You all laugh, crowd into rooms. If the landlords have questions, they don't verbalize them. You think, *They can't even imagine it, the perfection and lushness of this arrangement.*

One house is magical—tucked into a deep pocket of trees, all wood and rustic, with more rooms than you could fill if you tried. You remember a puzzling set of indoor windows, as if the house had swallowed a second, tiny house. Another is hilariously dilapidated, and every surface of the kitchen is covered in clean, drying shot glasses; a party house with at least one curiously conscientious resident. It smells like teenage boys: sweat and scented sprays and Doritos.

During a long interval between appointments, you visit a pet store and see a tiny pile of ferrets, nestled together in their enclosure. You give them all funny voices; tell a story about the boss you had at a summer job who asked if she could show you a photo of her kids and then showed you a picture of her ferrets. By the time you're back outside in the sunlight, you're all laughing.

The last house—the most perfect—is owned by a beautiful young couple, both redheads, whose children come to the door clutching their mother's

skirt while she stirs a bowl of batter. It is like a fairy tale. Chickens peck in the yard; a beautiful, lanky dog sleeps on the porch. The house is heated by a wood stove. You know the place is impractical—too far from town—but you love it so much your heart aches. It is here—standing under a canopy of trees, watching your girlfriend talk to the husband—that you first admit the fantasy to yourself: that one day the V structure of your relationship will collapse into a heap, and the three of you will be together.<sup>9</sup>

You put Val on a plane, and then the two of you drive back to Iowa. As farmland scrolls past you, you find yourself imagining a whole new life, a perfect intersection of hedonism and wholesomeness: canning and pickling, writing in front of a fireplace, the three of you tangled in a bed. Fighting with your kids' guidance counselor. Explaining to your children that other families may not look like yours, but that doesn't mean something is wrong. Most kids would give anything to have three moms.

You catch yourself mourning already. You look over at her. "Let's take one more road trip together," she says.

9. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type T92.1, The triangle plot and its solutions.

## Dream House as Erotica

In the late spring, you surprise yourself by asking her to cover your mouth as you come. She does, pressing a firm palm against your crescendoing howl, and it's as if the sound is being pushed back into your body so that it might suffuse your every molecule. When you are ebbing, and try to inhale but can't, she lets go, and you can feel the lingering tingle of unlanguage.

After this, you ask her to talk to you in a low, raspy stream while she fucks you, and she does: switching effortlessly between English and French, muttering about her cock and how it's filling you up, pushing her hand over your face and grabbing the architecture of your jaw to turn it this way and that. She shaves her cunt smooth, and it glows like the inside of a conch shell. She loves wearing a harness; you suck her off that way and she comes like it's real, bucking and lifting off the mattress.

You don't know what is more of a miracle: her body, or her love of your body. She haunts your erotic imagination. You are both perpetually wet. You fuck, it seems, everywhere: beds and tables and floors; over the phone. When you are physically next to each other, she loves to marvel over your differences: how her skin is pale as skim milk and yours, olive; how her nipples are pink and yours are brown. "Everything is darker on you," she says.

You would let her swallow you whole, if she could.

## Dream House as Omen

You both take jobs as standardized-test scorers at Pearson to make some extra cash. The building is low and squat, in a corporate park just outside Iowa City where the town gives way to cornfields. It reminds you of a job you had at nineteen when you were a glorified telemarketer, calling homeowners in the Lehigh Valley to convince them to replace their windows.

You sit at long tables where there is a computer at each station. You wish you could grade essays, but you spend the majority of the time evaluating the sort of long-form math problems that gave you hives as a teen, laughing out loud at cheeky kids who make drawings or jokes or write "Fuck if I know" where the answer should be. It is mind-bendingly boring, but it is income, and the two of you even make a sort of friend: a woman who sits with you at lunch, and whom you often drive home.

The hours are long, the breaks are short, and by the end of the day you are usually eating Cheetos from the vending machine and feeling bloated and pickled from the preservatives. You go to the bathroom a lot, mostly just to get your blood flowing and keep you from falling asleep.

It is on one of these trips that you hear a woman sobbing in the handicapped stall next to you. You pee—except you peed half an hour ago, so it is barely a trickle—and after you wash your hands you rap lightly on the door and ask if she's all right. She unlatches the door, hiccupping, a slender, small woman with huge, dark eyes. She says that she's having a *traumatic episode*. You ask her if she wants to go outside, and she says yes, and the two of you go and sit on a patch of grass by the entrance to the building. She tells you that she was raped, a long time ago, and she has been struggling to get someone to believe her. The two of you begin to talk—well, she talks; you mostly listen and nod.

The afternoon creeps by. You keep waiting for the boss to notice you're missing, to come out and yell at you—but they either don't know, or don't care. At a certain point, you wonder what time it is, but you are afraid to interrupt the stream of her monologue by pulling out your phone.

When you finally do, you discover two things: you've been out there for almost two hours, and your girlfriend has called and texted you half a dozen times. *Where are you, where are you, where are you*, she asks, and just as you lift the phone to your ear to call her back, the front door of the building opens and a herd of scorers begins to pour out, including her. You give the woman you've been talking to your phone number, tell her to call you if she needs anything, and then dart across the lawn.

Your girlfriend is glowering. Your new friend is running next to her, looking a little anxious and breathless, and gets to you first. "She was just worried about you," your new friend says, with such preemptive anxiety that you are taken aback. The three of you get in your car, and your girlfriend is radiating fury. You drive silently to the friend's house. When you get there, she seems almost reluctant to get out of the car, and once she's out she lingers, like there's something she wants to say. But then she goes inside. As you pull away from the curb, your girlfriend slams her hand on the dashboard as hard as she possibly can.

"Where the fuck were you?"

You explain about the woman in the bathroom, what she said to you, how you couldn't text because she was talking and you didn't want to interrupt her. You fully expect this explanation to deflate her rage—you even expect her to apologize—but somehow she gets even angrier. She continues to pound the dashboard. "You are the most inconsiderate fucking person I've ever met, and how fucking dare you just walk out of the building with no explanation like that." Every time you bring up the woman she starts yelling again. A few blocks from your house, you pull over.

"Don't talk to me like that," you say. Then, horrifyingly, you start to cry. "I had to make a decision, and I feel confident that I made the right decision."

She unbuckles her seat belt, and leans very close to your ear. "You're not allowed to write about this," she says. "Don't you ever write about this. Do you fucking understand me?"

You don't know if she means the woman or her, but you nod.

Fear makes liars of us all.<sup>10</sup>

## Dream House as Noir

She is not your first female crush, or your first female kiss, or even your first female lover. But she is the first woman who wants you in *that* way—desire tinged with obsession. She is the first woman who yokes herself to you with the label *girlfriend*. Who seems proud of that fact. And so when she walks into your office and tells you that *this is what it's like to date a woman*, you believe her. And why wouldn't you? You trust her, and you have no context for anything else. You have spent your whole life listening to your father talk about women's *emotions*, their *sensitivity*. He never said it in a bad way, exactly—though the implication is always there. Suddenly you find yourself wondering if you're in the middle of evidence that he's right. All these years of telling him he's full of bullshit, that he needs to decolonize his mind and lose the gender essentialism, and here you are learning that lesbian relationships are, somehow, different—more intense and beautiful but also more painful and volatile, because women are all of these things too. Maybe you really do believe that women are different. Maybe you owe your father an apology. Dames, right?

10. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type C420.2, Taboo: not to speak about a certain happening.

## Dream House as Queer Villainy

I think a lot about queer villains, the problem and pleasure and audacity of them.

I know I should have a very specific political response to them. I know, for example, I should be offended by Disney's lineup of vain, effete ne'er-do-wells (Scar, Jafar), sinister drag queens (Ursula, Cruella de Vil), and constipated, man-hating power dykes (Lady Tremaine, Maleficent). I should be furious at *Downton Abbey*'s scheming gay butler and *Girlfriend*'s controlling, lunatic lesbian, and I should be indignant about *Rebecca* and *Strangers on a Train* and *Laura* and *The Terror* and *All About Eve*, and every other classic and contemporary foppish, conniving, sissy, cruel, humorless, depraved, evil, insane homosexual on the large and small screen.

And yet, while I recognize the problem intellectually—the system of coding, the way villainy and queerness became a kind of shorthand for each other—I cannot help but love these fictional queer villains. I love them for all of their aesthetic lushness and theatrical glee, their fabulousness, their ruthlessness, their *power*. They're always by far the most interesting characters on the screen. After all, they live in a world that hates them. They've adapted; they've learned to conceal themselves. They've survived.

In Alain Guiraudie's *Stranger by the Lake*, the young protagonist, Franck, witnesses an older man, Michel, drowning his boyfriend in a lake that serves as a local cruising spot. Shortly thereafter, he begins an affair with Michel. After the boyfriend's body is found, the gay community that exists along the shore is shaken, thrown into emotional turmoil while simultaneously maintaining its collective routines. As an enterprising inspector begins to sniff around for answers, Franck finds himself lying for his new lover and trying to get closer to him.

Franck's decision to stay with the handsome, magnetic murderer is only a few notches exaggerated from a pretty relatable problem: an inability to

find logical footing when you're being knocked around by waves of lust, love, loneliness. Michel does not have the campy fabulousness of so many queer villains, and is in many ways far more sinister. He is attractive, charismatic, and morally empty. We are given almost no clues about his backstory, his murderous motivations.

There is a question of representation tied up in the anguish around the queer villain; when so few gay characters appear on-screen, their disproportionate villainy is—obviously—suspect. It tells a single story, to paraphrase Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and creates real-life associations of evil and depravity. It is not incorrect to tell an artist that there is responsibility tangled up in whom you choose to make villains, but it is also not a simple matter.

As it turns out, queer villains become far more interesting among *other* gay characters, both within a specific project or universe and the zeitgeist at large. They become one star in a larger constellation; they are put in context. And that's pretty exciting, even liberating; by expanding representation, we give space to queers to be—as characters, as real people—human beings. They don't have to be metaphors for wickedness and depravity or icons of conformity and docility.<sup>11</sup> They can be *what they are*. We deserve to have our wrongdoing represented as much as our heroism, because when we refuse wrongdoing as a possibility for a group of people, we refuse their humanity. That is to say, queers—real-life ones—do not deserve representation, protection, and rights because they are morally pure or upright as a people.<sup>12</sup> They deserve those things because they are human beings, and that is enough.

Toward the end of *Stranger by the Lake*, the police inspector confronts Franck as he leaves the beach for the day. Franck is, literally, trapped in the beam

11. A cliché born of a necessary evil: the fight for rights. As with race and gender and able-bodiedness, the trope of the saintly and all-sacrificing minority is one that follows on the heels of unadulterated hatred, and is just as dangerous (though for different reasons).

12. This type of characterization was useful during the fight for marriage equality in the United States, but its shortcomings are many. It is, for example, not an accident that people have had trouble wrapping their heads around Jennifer and Sarah Hart, a white lesbian couple who starved their six black adopted children before deliberately driving themselves and their kids off a cliff in California in 2018. It is also not an accident that people struggle to conceive of queer women as capable of sexual assault or domestic abuse. (There's plenty of sexism tied up in this, too, a Lizzie Borden type of conundrum. Who is capable of committing unspeakable violence?)

of the officer's headlights, and as the conversation progresses the metaphor is sharpened even more. "Don't you find it odd we've only just found the body, and two days later everyone's back cruising like nothing happened?" the officer asks him.

Later in this scene, Franck will be visibly overcome with grief as the officer asks him to have compassion for the dead man, begs him to have a sense of self-preservation.<sup>13</sup> But even in his grief, he is clear-eyed. "We can't stop living," he says.

*We can't stop living.* Which means *we have to live*, which means *we are alive*, which means *we are humans and we are human*: some of us are unkind and some of us are confused and some of us sleep with the wrong people and some of us make bad decisions and some of us are murderers. And it sounds terrible but it is, in fact, freeing: the idea that *queer* does not equal good or pure or right. It is simply a state of being—one subject to politics, to its own social forces, to larger narratives, to moral complexities of every kind. So bring on the queer villains, the queer heroes, the queer sidekicks and secondary characters and protagonists and extras. They can be a complete cast unto themselves. Let them have agency, and then let them go.

13. There is a second, minor detail in this scene that sent me spiraling: the inspector asks Franck, "What if there's a homophobic serial killer on the loose?" The inspector does not necessarily know that the murderer is gay himself; he is guessing that the victim of a maligned demographic might have been targeted for belonging to that group. But I wondered: if a gay murderer targets only gay men, is that gay murderer himself homophobic? This question is something of a snake eating its own tail, and I cannot dig myself out.

## Dream House as Road Trip to Everywhere

It is July. Iowa in July is nothing but drama: wet heat, tornado warnings, thunderstorms so violent you have to pull the car over. Mosquitoes flock to you; your legs are swollen with their needs.

You plan your trip: Iowa to Boston, Boston to New York. In Boston she'll show you her old stomping grounds; in New York you'll both get to spend time with Val. Then New York to Allentown so she can meet your parents, Allentown to DC to meet your college friends, DC to northern Virginia for one of your oldest friend's wedding, and then down to Florida so you can meet her parents. The idea of the open road lights you up. You have always adored driving great distances across your country: it is the only time you ever feel any kind of patriotism.

Her parents don't want you to drive. They worry about accidents; they beg you both to fly. You come to a compromise: you will drive to DC and fly to Florida from there. They pay for your tickets.

Every step of the trip is sweet and sour. While you drive you slip your hand between her legs, jerk her off as you zip past cornfields and stopped traffic. (She is hot; you are stupid.) You fight near a rest stop in Illinois about, of all things, a Beyoncé song. ("If the lyrics were about how *men* ruled the world," she says to you, "you'd hate this song.") When she kisses you in a McDonald's parking lot in Indiana, you both look up to see a group of men—a risk of men, a murder of men—standing there watching, laughing, pointing. One man does that tongue-waggle-through-the-fingers thing, which you have never seen anyone do in real life. You fly out of there as fast as you can; you don't even buckle your seat belt until you're back on the interstate.

## *Dream House as Accident*

In Boston your friend Sam—who you still think of by his college nickname, Big Sam—overhears her making you cry, and acts cold and distant to her even though you just want him to pretend like he didn't hear anything.

## *Dream House as Ambition*

She takes you to Harvard's campus, which you'd never seen, and you find yourself engaging in some kind of weird retrospective fantasy. When she shows you the undergraduate dining hall, which basically looks like Hogwarts, you keep thinking to yourself: Maybe I should have gone to Harvard? Maybe I should have applied? You keep thinking back to why you applied to the colleges you did, and you remember—for the first time in years—that you chose your college list almost completely at random. You wanted to go to a city and you wanted to get out of Pennsylvania; those were the only two criteria. You wish you could accurately describe the bone-deep ache of walking on that campus, the too-late realization that you'd fucked up your whole life by not having sufficient ambition. Who are you? You are nobody. You are nothing.

She takes your arm as you walk among the buildings, as if you would have belonged there, as if you belong there, like she does.

## *Dream House as Man vs. Nature*

In New York City you visit a store that sells natural and scientific ephemera. Deer skulls in cases, petrified wood, articulated bat skeletons in bell jars, amethyst geodes as tall as a child, taxidermied mice, trilobite fossils, leather-bound birding books. There is something hypnotic about this store. You wish you could spend all day there; you wish you could spend thousands of dollars there. It reminds you of a store you used to go to as a kid—Natural Wonders, RIP—and how it always made you feel like equal parts Ellie Sattler and Lara Croft.

That night, lying next to her on a futon, you tell her about a fantasy you have:

"We have a beautiful home; the sort of home that has its own library, filled with books and the sort of things an amateur gentleman scientist would have had in his library in the nineteen-tens. And we throw a huge, lavish party, and everyone comes, and there is laughter and drinking and delicious food. I'm in a beautiful, clingy fifties swing dress, and you are in a suit and tie. At some point in the evening, when everyone is a few drinks in, you pull me into a private corner of a small room and slip your hand up my dress, murmuring into my ear what will happen when the guests have gone home. And then later, when you have kissed the last person on the cheek and locked the front door, we fumble and tumble our way toward the library, where you push me down on a lush, red divan and I unknot your tie and unbutton your shirt, and there among the bones and the books and the paintings you slide your hand up me and bite my neck and after I come I jerk you off while dead things look over us." This fantasy springs up so fully formed it feels like it's already happened in some past era, as if instead of creating it you've just plucked it out of a soup of history and consciousness.

"Yes," she says. "Yes."

## *Dream House as Stoner Comedy*

It is summer in New York, and the heat is an animal that won't climb off. You're staying in her friend's apartment in Crown Heights, and you and she and Val smoke a lot of weed. You have never been a pot person—you have, in fact, been a bit of a ninny when it comes to drugs; when you even say the word *drugs* you feel ridiculous—but you smoke because she does and she'll be annoyed if you don't. ("What, you think you're better than all this?" she says once when you decline; after that, you don't decline.) You cough and cough because you've never gotten used to smoke.

You get so high, by accident. So high that when you take the subway to Little Russia, to the beach there, you remember almost none of the trip aside from a few bright, distant fragments. Being in a drugstore and feeling like you were a sacrifice to the Minotaur. Hot sand. Her touching your back with cool lotion. (There are photos of the three of you, evidence of your presence there. You're smiling, and you look unbearably soft.)

Then, it is your birthday. There is a party. You're too high to stand up so you sit, legs splayed and head heavy, with your back against the stove. People keep coming and sitting next to you and talking, and you keep realizing, in this drifting, belated way, that they're concerned for you. You try to explain that you're fine, you're fine, you're just high, but whatever you're actually saying, people do not seem convinced.

Val visits you on the floor, brings you pieces of cheese. You stick one in your mouth, meditate on its smooth mouthfeel and nutty sweetness. You like her so much. She is so kind and open, and you respect her fortitude. Another piece, this one salty and crumbly, so pleasant in the way it comes apart. How did you get so lucky, to have all of these new people in your life? The next piece is fresh mozzarella, and as Val helps you stand you think to yourself *mozzarella is basically water cheese* and then you go to another room and fall asleep.

## Dream House as Meet the Parents

In the car from New York, your girlfriend is high and quiet. She reeks of weed, and is about to meet your parents for the first time. You are angrier than you've ever been with her. "We're gonna meet my parents in, like, an hour. I don't understand why you would do this."

"You've never had to meet someone's parents when you're the *first girl-friend*," she snaps. "They look at you in this *way* and it's unbearable."

You are silent.

"They won't be able to tell," she says.

"Now you can't even help me drive," you say. "I have to do this all on my own."

You inch through New York this way, the car filled with the silent, wavy heat of your respective angers.

In Allentown, your parents are very nice to her.

## Dream House as Here Comes the Bride

In DC, she meets your college friends, whose reactions to her range from sweet and excited to reserved. (Sam has gotten to them, you realize with a panic. You haven't successfully contained the situation.)

In Virginia, you ride horses through the woods and watch the sunrise over the Shenandoah mountains. The wedding is beautiful. At the reception, you all crowd into a photobooth. You don gloves. You hold a monocle over your eye. You cock a pipe against your lips. You drink, you dance. You love the way she bops on the dance floor, the dance of someone who has joy in her body. After the wedding you have to rip her little black dress off her body because the zipper is broken and you are both drunk and stoned and laughing.

The next day, after you say good-bye to your friends, you sit in the car in the parking lot as she talks at you—*your friends hate me, they're jealous*. An hour later you are still there, your head bent tearily against the window. The new bride walks by and notices you in your car. You see her slow down, her face crimped with puzzlement and concern. You shake your head ever so slightly, and she looks uncertain but mercifully she keeps walking so you can endure your punishment in peace. By the time you've wound out of the mountains and gotten back to a freeway, the bite of the fight has sweetened; whiskey unraveled by ice.

## Dream House as House in Florida

You visit her parents' house in the southernmost part of Florida. You fought the whole way down—at the Dulles airport she made you cry at a Sam Adams-branded restaurant and several strangers looked over with judgment as you pressed a napkin against your face like a consumptive—and you are relieved to be there.

She has an ancient cat who immediately tries to bite you. Her mother is birdlike, too thin, and you are worried—for her, for yourself. Her father shows up later, pours himself a generously sized cocktail. Her family is funny and mean. They are different from your family, who you feel have never appreciated your mind. And there is only her and her two parents and you are jealous; there is no other word for it.

They feed you. Chicken and Israeli couscous and cookies and kalamata olives and a bean salad with so much dill. Seafood and risotto and fresh fruit. You laugh. "Maybe we should move here," you say, and her mother smiles brightly, and for a moment you feel like a scene in a movie, a boyfriend being plied by the culinary arts of the mother of your lover. You never see her mother eat, not once.

"If you go out for a walk later," her father says, drinking his third martini, "make sure you watch out for alligators."

"Alligators?" you repeat in alarm.

"They probably wouldn't attack you," he says. The glass is, suddenly, empty. "Probably."

The next day, you get into a fight about almost nothing at all while sitting on her childhood bed. You decide to walk away, go sit in the kitchen. "I'll be reading," you say, and you do, for almost an hour. Her mother is standing at the counter, chopping something fragrant and chatting at you in a bright voice.

Your girlfriend comes into the kitchen, and asks, "What are you reading?" as her hand starts to circle your arm. "I'm—" you start to reply, and her fingers tighten.

Her mother, still chopping, says, "Are you girls still going to the beach later?" Her knife raps against the cutting board with unnerving precision. .

Her grip goes hard, begins to hurt. You don't understand; you don't understand so profoundly your brain skitters, skips, backs up. You make a tiny gasp, the tiniest gasp you can. It is the first time she is touching you in a way that is not filled with love, and you don't know what to do. *This is not normal, this is not normal, this is not normal.* Your brain is scrambling for an explanation, and it hurts more and more, and everything is static. Your thoughts are accompanied by a cramp of alarm, and you are so focused on it that you miss her response.

An hour later, you are at the beach, just the two of you. "Let's go in the water," she says.

You follow her in because you don't know what else to do. The Florida ocean is like nothing you've ever experienced—warm as a bath but, paradoxically, full of threat. The ice-cold oceans of your girlhood seemed more hostile to life; anything could be lurking in this beautiful, tepid water. When you get out up to your necks, she says, "Let me hold you!"

You stare at her.

"Why are you so pissy?" she asks. "You've been like this from the moment we left the house."

"I need to talk to you," you say. "Earlier, when you grabbed my arm—that was so scary. You touched me and it wasn't with concern or love. You touched me with anger." You feel like a fucking hippie, but you don't know what other language to put to it, the panicked tattoo of your heart. "You squeezed and squeezed and—" You lift your arm out of the water, where you have begun to bruise ever so slightly. "Why did you do that?"

Her expression is flat for a half second before her chin begins to tremble. "I'm so sorry," she says. "I didn't mean it. You know I love you, right?"

The rest of the visit is uneventful, except for one night toward the end when you both come in from the pool just after sunset. You open the sliding glass door to air-conditioning and escalating voices, and as you cross the kitchen

together, you see her father stepping toward her mother. He's holding a drink, and he's shouting about—something. She is tight against the counter. Your girlfriend keeps moving, without pause, but you stop for a beat and look at them. Her mother flashes you a glance, and then tilts her chin up toward her husband and says, "I need to finish dinner," before turning her back to him. The moment feels fraught, but it passes and he stalks away.

In your girlfriend's bedroom, you are shaking. Outside, the air is filled with prestorm pressure. She strips down to nothing and stands there covered in goosebumps. "I don't want to be like him," she says; "but sometimes I worry that I am." It doesn't sound like she's talking to you.

When the storm breaks, the thunder is as loud as a gun.

## *Dream House as Bluebeard*

Bluebeard's greatest lie was that there was only one rule: the newest wife could do anything she wanted—anything—as long as she didn't do that (single, arbitrary) thing; didn't stick that tiny, inconsequential key into that tiny, inconsequential lock.<sup>14</sup>

But we all know that was just the beginning, a test. She failed (and lived to tell the tale, as I have), but even if she'd passed, even if she'd listened, there would have been some other request, a little larger, a little stranger, and if she'd kept going—kept allowing herself to be trained, like a corset fanatic pinching her waist smaller and smaller—there'd have been a scene where Bluebeard danced around with the rotting corpses of his past wives clasped in his arms, and the newest wife would have sat there mutely, suppressing growing horror; swallowing the egg of vomit that bobbed behind her breastbone. And then later, another scene, in which he did unspeakable things to the bodies (women, they'd once been women) and she just stared dead into the middle distance, seeking some mute purgatory where she could live forever.

(Some scholars believe that Bluebeard's blue beard is a symbol of his supernatural nature; easier to accept than being brought to heel by a simple man. But isn't that the joke? He can be simple, and he doesn't have to be a man.)

Because she hadn't blinked at the key and its conditions, hadn't paused when he told her her footfalls were too heavy for his liking, hadn't protested when he fucked her while she wept, hadn't declined when he suggested she stop speaking, hadn't said a word when he left bruises on her arms, hadn't scolded him for speaking to her like she was a dog or a child, hadn't run screaming down the path from the castle into the nearest village pleading with someone to *help help help*—it made logical sense that she sat there and

14. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type C610 and C611, The one forbidden place (forbidden chamber).

watched him spinning around the body of wife Number Four, its decaying head flopping backward on a hinge of flesh.

This is how you are toughened, the newest wife reasoned. This is where the tenacity of love is practiced; its tensile strength, its durability. You are being tested and you are passing the test; sweet girl, sweet self, look how good you are; look how loyal, look how loved.

## II

The milk was so hot, she could barely let her lip touch it at first. The tiny sips spread inside her mouth and released a melange of organic flavors. The milk seemed to taste of bone and blood, of warm flesh, or hair, saltless as chalk yet alive as a growing embryo. It was hot through and through to the bottom of the cup, and Therese drank it down, as people in fairy tales drink the potion that will transform, or the unsuspecting warrior the cup that will kill.

—Patricia Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*