

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*

## *Dream House as Heat Death of the Universe*

As long as I can remember, I have been obsessed with physical and temporal limits. The beginning, the end. The first, the last. The edge. Once, when I was a kid, I stood in that wonderful sand right at the lip of the tide—the kind that could be wet and pliable or go hard like damp cornstarch—and yelled to my parents that I was standing on the line of the map. When they didn't understand, I explained that there was a line on the map between the land and the water, and I was *on it*, precisely.

Many years later I went snorkeling with my brother off the southern coast of Cuba. After dipping around the coral reefs near the shore, my brother asked our guide—a tanned, shirtless, free-diving hippie named Rollo—to take us both farther out. So we went into the open water, where if you relax your body the whole of the ocean will rock you back and forth, make you a little seasick. Rollo took us to the place where the shelf dropped off. One minute I could see the sand, and the next there was a deep, blue-black nothing. The three of us surfaced, and Rollo told me to watch him. Then he dove down and down until the darkness swallowed him up.

Even though I was safe—my back was exposed to the air and I was inches from oxygen—I gasped and lifted my face out of the water. My brother said, “What’s wrong? What’s wrong?” and I tried to explain but could not. A few seconds later, Rollo surfaced, grinning. “Did you see?” he asked.

A theory about the end of everything: the heat death of the universe. Entropy will take over and matter will scatter and nothing will be anymore.

## *Dream House as Destination*

You drive to Bloomington with her, because you love her and you want to deliver her safely. You don't trust those airplanes to remind her how much she is loved.

The Dream House looks just as you remember it. The pod full of her things has been delivered and sits in the yard like a shed. It occurs to you, when you open it, that someone could live in one of these, probably. A microapartment. Then you think about Narnia; the way Lucy enters the wardrobe and steps through those fur coats until she is in the snow, and there is the lamppost, and there is a whole new world frozen in a terrible winter by the White Witch.

You unload it under the watchful eyes of her parents, who observe as you lift her tiny frame high to untie the mattress from the ceiling. She tells you later that they looked starry-eyed to see you picking her up like that—like you were some strapping lad showing off your strength.

After you all go out to dinner, you fall into bed and cry and marvel, all at once.

## *Dream House as Utopia*

Bloomington: even the name is a promise. (Living, unfurling, soft in your mouth.)

## *Dream House as Doppelgänger*

When your cell phone rings in the late afternoon, you know what's happening before you pick up. You do not believe in psychic powers, but still, you are certain.

"I need to know this is real," she says when you pick up. "I need to know that you're in this for real."

"I am, I am."

"I just broke up with Val," she says. "It's just—it's just clear from what's been happening since she moved that this won't work between us. We're gonna stay friends, of course, and she adores you. But she's going to go back to the East Coast."

You email Val, feeling strange. She writes back: "I hope eventually we can be really good friends. I want to be in your lives for a long time."

Afterward, you feel happy. Then you feel guilty for feeling happy, then happy again. You've won the game. You didn't know you were playing, but you've won the game just the same.

From now on, it will just be you and the woman in the Dream House.<sup>15</sup> Just the two of you, together.<sup>16</sup>

15. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type T92.4, Girl mistakenly elopes with the wrong lover.

16. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type P427.7.2.1.1, Poets and fools closely allied.

## *Dream House as High Fantasy*

After that, nothing is the same. At first, it does what it is supposed to do: confirm every single sneaking suspicion you've had about your own value for so long. You are lucky to have met her. You are not some weird, desperate mess. You are wanted. Better yet, you are needed. You are a piece of someone's destiny. You are critical to a larger plan that will span many years, many kingdoms, many volumes.

## *Dream House as Entomology*

"I know we were doing the polyamory thing when I was with Val," she says. "But I don't want to share you with anyone. I love you so much. Can we agree to be monogamous?" You laugh and nod and kiss her, as if her love for you has sharpened and pinned you to a wall.

## *Dream House as Lesbian Pulp Novel*

The cover tells you what you need to know. Depraved inversion. Seduction. Lascivious butches and big-breasted seductresses. Love that dare not speak its name.

There are censors to get past, so tragedy is a foregone conclusion. It was written into the DNA of the Dream House, maybe even back when it was just a house, maybe even back when it was just Bloomington, Indiana, or just the Northwest Territory, or just the still-uncolonized Miami Nation. Or before humans existed there at all, and it was just raw, anonymous land.

You wonder if, at any point in history, some creature scuttled over what would, eons later, be the living room, and cocked its head to the side to listen to the faintest of sounds: yelling, weeping. Ghosts of a future that hadn't happened yet.

## Dream House as Lesson Learned

You have a redheaded aunt, your mother's closest sister. As a child you not so secretly referred to her as your "scary aunt" because she was known to fly into unpredictable rages; rages that, more often than not, centered on you.<sup>17</sup> You dreaded the annual trips to Wisconsin because you knew it meant close proximity to a woman who clearly really hated you and did comically little to hide it. It was a power struggle, which was weird because you had no power at all. You cannot remember a conversation with her in which you weren't tense, tiptoeing around unseen land mines.

Things that you remember sparked her anger: the time you made popcorn with your cousin and sprinkled parmesan cheese on it; the time you and your cousin tried to make watercolors out of flower petals at your grandmother's house; the time you started to describe the movie *Return to Oz* to your cousin. (It was too scary, apparently, even though the same cousin had read, and described to you in great, horrifying detail, the entire plot of *Needful Things* the night before as you clutched your stuffed dog and stared at her in the darkness.) In middle school, when you were always fighting with your mother, your aunt told you over AOL instant messenger that if your parents got divorced it'd be your fault, and she threatened to cut your father's balls off. (Years later, after your parents' toxic, miserable marriage came to an end, you traced back to that moment as the first time you felt the tiniest twinge of sympathy for your aunt, who had gone through a divorce of her own and never remarried.)

Your mother explained away her behavior with any number of facts. Your aunt was a single mom, she said, a nurse who worked very hard to support her kids. She had a disease called endometriosis and was often in pain. (Years later, when the condition bloomed in your own body, you observed that you

17. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type S72, Cruel aunt.

managed to get through the worst of it without screaming at small children, or anyone for that matter.)

Your aunt met the woman from the Dream House, once. Your cousin, her daughter, was graduating from college in a nearby midwestern town, and the two of you attended a party thrown in her honor. Your aunt was stiff and polite, your cousin utterly delighted. Later, you felt ugly with regret: Why was the only girlfriend you took to Wisconsin the one who'd reinforce all of your conservative Catholic relatives' perceptions of queer women?

After that, when your grandmother passed away, you went for a drive with your scary aunt and your mother. Your scary aunt said, apropos of nothing, "I don't believe in gay people," and from the back seat—empowered by adulthood—you said, "Well, we believe in you." Your mother said nothing at all.<sup>18</sup>

18. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type S12.2.2, Mother throws children into fire.

## *Dream House as World Building*

Places are never just places in a piece of writing. If they are, the author has failed. Setting is not inert. It is activated by point of view.

Later, you will learn that a common feature of domestic abuse is “dislocation.” That is to say, the victim has just moved somewhere new, or she’s somewhere where she doesn’t speak the language, or has been otherwise uprooted from her support network, her friends or family, her ability to communicate. She is made vulnerable by her circumstance, her isolation. Her only ally is her abuser, which is to say she has no ally at all. And so she has to struggle against an unchangeable landscape that has been hammered into existence by nothing less than time itself; a house that is too big to dismantle by hand; a situation too complex and overwhelming to master on her own. The setting does its work.

This world might as well have been an island, surrounded by impassable waters. On one side, a golf course—owned by the university, as was the house—where drunk undergrads would stagger like zombies, silhouetted on the hill. On another, a stand of trees that suggested a forest, mysterious and laced with wildlife and darkness. Nearby, houses occupied by strangers who either never heard or didn’t want to get involved. Last, a road, but the sort of road that led to another road, a larger one. Unfriendly to pedestrians. Not meant to be traversed, really. Miles from the town’s center.

The Dream House was never just the Dream House. It was, in turn, a convent of promise (herb garden, wine, writing across the table from each other), a den of debauchery (fucking with the windows open, waking up with mouth on mouth, the low, insistent murmur of fantasy), a haunted house (*none of this can really be happening*), a prison (*need to get out need to get out*), and, finally, a dungeon of memory. In dreams it sits behind a green door, for reasons you have never understood. The door was not green.

## *Dream House as Set Design*

The scene opens on a nondescript house in a neighborhood on the outskirts of Bloomington, Indiana, a few years after the close of the aughts. It’s a suburb, but one fringed with wildness; animals move over the property as though no one occupies it at all. A front door faces the street, but this door will remain closed. The driveway leisurely loops up the left side of the property like a creek, a mailbox at its mouth. The shingles are off-white; a red chimney is the only hint of character. Behind the house is a large tree with a wooden swing dangling from a low branch. It is opposite the only door the residents will ever enter: a back door that leads into the kitchen.

The kitchen—like the rest of the house—is filled with a combination of the dense, dark wood furniture you helped her move down the stairs of her last place, and broken, mismatched pieces from the previous owner. A standing lamp with a fraying electrical cord; a small kitchen table; a creaking sofa whose springs are like peas beneath a princess’s mattress. The house is functionally a circle: a kitchen that opens into the living room, which opens into a hallway from which the bedroom and bathroom protrude, which leads into an office, which loops back into the kitchen. In the bedroom: piles of clothing, stacks of books, a bright purple dildo, a bottle of men’s cologne shaped like a headless torso—Jean Paul Gaultier’s “Le Male”—half-empty. In the kitchen: a bamboo salt cellar for artisanal sea salt, weirdly dull knives.

Everywhere in the house, there are cardboard boxes. Not new ones, either: they are soft and smell sweet like Pizza Hut boxes damp with grease. (Like Angela Carter’s Beast in “The Tiger’s Bride,” “The palace was dismantled, as if its owner were about to move house or had never properly moved in; The Beast had chosen to live in an uninhabited place.”) It is a bizarre mix of money and trash: like the belongings of a fallen aristocratic family. There is something desperate about the house; like a ghost is trying to make itself known but can’t, and so it just flops facedown into the carpet, wheezing and smelling like mold.

The curtain rises on two women sitting across from each other: CARMEN, a racially ambiguous fat woman in her midtwenties with terrible posture. She is typing away on her computer. Across from her, THE WOMAN IN THE DREAM HOUSE, white, petite, and boyish, also typing, her jaw set hard. Around them, the house inhales, exhales, inhales again.

### *Dream-House as Creature Feature*

You go down into the basement exactly one time, and there are spiders down there, dozens of them. You don't know what kind, but they are big enough that you can see details on their bodies—their faces! Their spidery faces!—even in the dim light. You run back upstairs, laundry basket abandoned, and beg her to do your laundry for you. She does.

## *Dream House as American Gothic*

A narrative needs two things to be a gothic romance. The first, "woman plus habitation." "Horror," film theorist Mary Ann Doane writes, "which should by rights be external to domesticity, infiltrates the home." The house is not essential for domestic abuse, but hell, it helps: a private space where private dramas are enacted behind, as the cliché goes, closed doors; but also windows sealed against the sound, drawn curtains, silent phones. A house is never apolitical. It is conceived, constructed, occupied, and policed by people with power, needs, and fears. Windows is political. So is the incense you burn to hide the smell of sex, or a fight.

The second necessary element: "marrying a stranger." Strangers, feminist film theorist Diane Waldman points out, because during the 1940s—the heyday of gothic romance films like *Rebecca* and *Dragonwyck* and *Suspicion*—men were returning from war, no longer familiar to the people they'd left behind. "The rash of hasty pre-war marriages (and the subsequent all-time high divorce rate of 1946), the increase in early marriages in the 40s," Waldman writes, "and the process of wartime separation and reunion [gave the] motif of the Gothics a specific historical resonance." "The Gothic heroine," film scholar Tania Modleski says, "tries to convince herself that her suspicions are unfounded, that, since she loves him, he must be trustworthy and that she will have failed as a woman if she does not implicitly believe in him."

There is, of course, a major problem with the gothic: it is by nature heteronormative. A notable exception is Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, with its powerful queer undertones between the innocent protagonist and the sinister, titular vampire. ("You will think me cruel, very selfish, but love is always selfish," Carmilla tells Laura. "How jealous I am you cannot know. You must come with me, loving me, to death; or else hate me and still come with me, and *hating* me through death and after.")

We were not married; she was not a dark and brooding man. It was hardly

a crumbling ancestral manor; just a single-family home, built at the beginning of the Great Depression. No moors, just a golf course. But it was "woman plus habitation," and she was a stranger. That is probably the truest and most gothic part; not because of war or because we'd only met with chaperones before marriage; rather because I didn't know her, not really, until I did. She was a stranger because something essential was shielded, released in tiny bursts until it became a flood—a flood of what I realized I did not know.<sup>19</sup> Afterward, I would mourn her as if she'd died, because something had: someone we had created together.

19. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type T11, Falling in love with person never seen.

## *Dream House as Idiom*

I always thought the expression "safe as houses" meant that houses were safe places. It's a beautiful idea; like running home with a late-summer thunderstorm huffing down your neck. There's the house, waiting for you; a barrier from nature, from scrutiny, from other people. Standing on the other side of the glass, watching the sky playfully pummel the earth like a sibling.

But house idioms and their variants, in fact, often signify the opposite of safety and security. If something is a house of cards it is precarious, easily disrupted. If the writing is on the wall we can see the end of something long before it arrives. If we do not throw stones in glass houses, it is because the house is constructed of hypocrisy, readily shattered. All expressions of weakness, of the inevitability of failure.

"Safe as houses" is something closer to "the house always wins." Instead of a shared structure providing shelter, it means that the person in charge is secure; everyone else should be afraid.

## *Dream House as Warning*

A few months before your girlfriend became the Woman in the Dream House, a young, upper-class, petite, blonde undergrad named Lauren Spierer went missing in Bloomington. The parents of the woman in the Dream House were apoplectic; she was not an undergrad but she was young and upper class and petite and blonde and thus a potential target for whatever monster spirited Lauren off this earth.

(Years later, you learned that another girl went missing at the same time. Unlike Lauren, she did not come from a wealthy family. Her name was Crystal Grubb. The family struggled to get other people to care; eventually, they found her strangled in a cornfield. It is not an extraordinary thing to claim that some people are more valuable than others to the world.)

You were both acutely aware of Lauren's nonpresence in those first few months. Massive signs were hung and erected all over town; in them, her face was tilted, her sunglasses perched in her hair. Every time you went out, you thought about Lauren, last seen with no shoes, walking down the street on that humid June night. Where was she going? What was she walking away from?

## *Dream House as Appetite*

You make a mistake early on, though you don't know it at the time. You admit to her that you are constantly nursing low-grade crushes on many people in your life. Nothing acted on, just that you find many people attractive and do your best to surround yourself with smart, funny minds, and the result is a gooey, lovely space somewhere between *philia* and *eros*. You've been this way as long as you can remember. You've always found this quirk of your personality to be just that, a quirk, and she laughs and says she's charmed by it.

Over the course of your relationship, she will accuse you of fucking, or wanting to fuck, or planning to fuck, the following people: your roommate, your roommate's girlfriend, dozens of your friends, the Clarion class you haven't even met yet, a dozen of her friends, not a few of her colleagues at Indiana, her ex-girlfriend, her ex-boyfriend, your ex-boyfriends, several of your teachers, the director of your MFA program, several of your students, one of your doctors, and—in perhaps the most demented moment of this exercise—her father. Also, an untold litany of strangers: people on the subway and in coffee shops, waiters at restaurants, store clerks and grocery store cashiers and librarians and ticket takers and janitors and museumgoers and beach sleepers.

The problem is that denial sounds like confession to her, so the burden of proof is forced upon you. To show that you have not been fucking those people, you become adept at doing searches on your phone, providing evidence that you haven't been in contact with anyone. You stop talking about a promising student in one of your classes, because she becomes fixated on the idea that you have a crush on a nineteen-year-old who has just learned how to balance exposition and scene.

One day, as she rubs her fingers over your clit, and you close your eyes in pleasure, she grabs your face and twists it toward her. She gets so close to

you, you can smell something sour on her breath. "Who are you thinking about," she says. It is phrased like a question but isn't. Your mouth moves, but nothing comes out, and she squeezes your jaw a little harder. "Look at me when I fuck you," she says. You pretend to come.

## *Dream House as Inner Sanctum*

I often think about how special it is for children to have their own rooms; the necessary sacredness of private space (of the body, of the mind). I am, my friends tell me, a traditional Cancer in this way: I love to nest, to make areas mine.

I had a room to myself as a kid, but my mother was always quick to point out that it wasn't *my room*, it was *her room* and I was merely permitted to occupy it. Her point, of course, was that my parents had earned everything and I was merely borrowing the space, and while this is technically true I cannot help but marvel at the singular damage of this dark idea: That my existence as a child was a kind of debt and nothing, no matter how small, was mine. That no space was truly private; anything of mine could be forfeited at someone else's whim.

Once, wanting space from my parents after a fight, I closed and locked my bedroom door. My mother made my father take the doorknob out. And while I'm sure they remember this horrifying moment very differently, all I remember is the cold sensation in my body as the doorknob—a perfect little machine that did its job with unbiased faithfulness—shifted from its home as the screws fell away. The corona of daylight as the knob listed to one side. How, when it fell, I realized that it was two pieces, such a small thing keeping my bedroom door closed.

I was lucky in that moment that the deconstruction of my door was a violation of privacy and autonomy but not a risk to my safety. When the door was opened, nothing happened. It was just a reminder: nothing, not even the four walls around my body, was mine.

## *Dream House as House in Iowa*

In late October, she visits you in Iowa City and decides to be a Dalek for Halloween. You are confused by this, profoundly, because she scorns the most earnest bits of nerd culture for reasons that are never precisely clear. She's never seen a single episode of *Doctor Who*. When you tell her you're going to be a Weeping Angel (you found the perfect nightgown in a Mennonite thrift store; a heavenly, draping Grecian shift in a barely there baby blue), you have to explain the villain to her. But she wants to be a Dalek, and she wants to make the costume herself; when she gets to town she begins to buy and assemble the pieces. She cuts up cardboard boxes, slices craft-store foam balls in half for the Dalek's signature texture. She buys gold spray paint. Your basement fills with fumes.

The night of Halloween, your girlfriend insists on making an elaborate dinner—tuna steaks lightly seared on each side. Butternut squash risotto. Her costume is not done—the spray paint has only just dried, the foam pieces need to be glued to the torso. When you try to gently move her along, she snaps at you, so you begin to get dressed in your own costume: the nightgown, a pair of painted wings, and white and blue makeup on your face and chest and arms. This last part takes much longer than you anticipate—is it that you underestimated the surface area of human beings in general, or your body in particular? You stand in front of the mirror swirling color onto your face as she slams things and stalks around the house, angry that her costume is not finished. Every so often, you snarl soundlessly into the mirror.

She yells questions at you every time she passes the bathroom door. Why did you insist on tuna for dinner? (You didn't.) Why did you let her be a stupid Dalek? (You don't answer.) What the fuck are you supposed to be again? (An ancient alien life force that disguises itself as the statue of a

weeping angel. They send their victims back in time and feed on the potential energy of the life no longer lived in the present. A terrible undeath.)

"A what?"

"A statue," you say. "Just a statue."<sup>20</sup>

On your way to the party, it is an almost-perfect night: a little nippy, the air smoky and sharp, the drag and slide of autumn leaves across your path. You show up so late that it's moved past fashionable and full swing, and the party has entered a scarier, darker place. You walk past a friend who has combined alcohol with something else, and when you say hi to her she looks at you with the blankest, most dead-eyed stare you've ever seen.

People keep asking who you are. You grin and place your hands in front of your eyes, the Weeping Angel's signature pose. No one gets it. "What is she?" someone asks, pointing to your girlfriend.

"A Dalek."

"What's that?"

"The most evil aliens in the entire *Doctor Who* universe. They committed genocide against the Time Lords, and the Time Lords against them. They basically destroyed each other."

You are definitely the most uncool person ever to attend this MFA program.

The woman from the Dream House, as a Dalek, can barely move through the crowd. People keep knocking into her costume.<sup>21</sup> You want to tell her

20. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type C961.2, Transformation to stone for breaking taboo.

21. One Halloween, when you were in middle school, you went as a stick of gum, a costume you built yourself from cardboard and tin foil and pink paint, with holes for your arms and your face. Your cheeks felt hermetically sealed in the face hole, which was a bit too small and resembled those child-sized photo boards at tourist attractions. The words ORIGINAL FLAVOR were painted vertically down your torso. It was a brilliant costume, huge and funny, but when you got on the school bus you realized you couldn't sit down in it, and were forced to kneel on the ground. All day you knelt through every class, your teachers mercifully not saying anything. At lunch, kids kept striking the back of the costume, but when you turned—laboriously—you could never tell who was doing it. During the last period, as you went to the bathroom, a teacher you'd never met stopped you in the hall. "Congratulations," she said. "You won the costume contest!" She gave you a tiny booklet of movie passes. You felt pleased, even though you hadn't realized there was a contest. It made everything worth it.

a joke—"Start yelling 'Exterminate!' People will move!"—but she wouldn't get it. You watch her down one drink, then another.

After an hour, she walks home drunk and furious. You follow her for blocks, watching her bump along ahead of you, not certain what to do because you have the keys to your house. She has a colander on her head, like a conspiracy theorist—a true tinfoil hat. You'd been angry with her before, but there is something so tender and vulnerable about a grown woman, in a disintegrating costume of a character from a show she does not watch, stumbling back to a house in drunken anger. You think, this will be a good story, one day.

A wasted undergrad happens across your path. "A ghost," he says, his eyes widening. "A ghost!"<sup>22</sup> He tries to touch you. You tell him to go fuck himself, dip away from his grasp, and unlike that time in Savannah, she does not rescue you.

When you get to the house, she is kicking the door. The knobs of her Dalek costume are falling off into the grass. You approach her. "I have the keys," you say, wearily. She jumps, and then begins to scream. "Why would you scare me like that? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

She is still yelling as you go inside. "Why did you want to make such a fancy dinner?" she says. "You fucked everything up, this whole night you fucked up. We just have this weekend together and you have fucked everything up." She is still yelling as you begin the laborious process of washing your face, your skin emerging in patches through the makeup. "What the fuck are you supposed to be, anyway?" She is still yelling as you stand in the shower, the temporary hair dye swirling creamily down the drain. She is still yelling as you put on your pajamas. In bed, she says, "I want to fuck," and you say, "Maybe tomorrow," and turn into your pillow. Maybe next Halloween will be better.

22. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type CA62, Taboo: laughing at sight of ghosts.

## *Dream House as Lost in Translation*

How to read her coldness: She is preoccupied. She is unhappy. She is unhappy with you. You did something and now she's unhappy, and you need to find out what it is so she will stop being unhappy. You talk to her. You are clear. You think you are clear. You say what you are thinking and you say it after thinking a lot, and yet when she repeats what you've said back to you nothing makes sense. Did you say that? Really? You can't remember saying that or even thinking it, and yet she is letting you know that it was said, and you definitely meant it that way.

## *Dream House as the River Lethe*

Later that fall, she asks you to join her at the Harvard-Yale football game. It is a favorite tradition of hers, and she has flown there for the occasion, but she needs to be back in Indiana earlier than expected. "If you drive there, you can bring me back," she says. You drive from Iowa to Connecticut to meet her.

And so after a day of autumn temperatures and flask sips and people in furs and expensive bottles of champagne rolling around on the muddy ground like Budweiser cans, you sleep hard in an uncomfortable hotel bed. The next afternoon—after delays, and brunch with her friends, and more delays—you prepare to leave. She is a reckless driver—nothing has changed since that trip to Savannah—so you get behind the wheel of your car without asking.

You pull away from New Haven alternating between the radio, conversation, and silence. You scoot down through Connecticut and New York. In Pennsylvania the light drops away early, and rain glosses the pavement. Somewhere in the middle of the endless, hilly length of this state, the one you'd grown up in, she interrupts herself midsentence.

"Why won't you let me drive?" she asks. Her voice is controlled, measured, like a dog whose tail has gone rigid; nothing is happening, but something is wrong. Dread gathers between your shoulder blades.

"I'm okay driving," you say.

"You're tired," she says. "Too tired to drive."

"I'm not," you say, and you aren't.

"You're too tired, and you're going to kill us," she says. The timbre of her voice hasn't changed. "You hate me. You want me to die."

"I don't hate you," you say. "I don't want you to die."

"You hate me," she says, her voice going up half an octave with every syllable. "You're going to kill us and you don't even care, you selfish bitch."

"I—"

"You selfish bitch." She begins to pound the dashboard. "You selfish bitch, you selfish bitch, you selfish—"

You pull off at the next exit and park at a gas station. She throws open the passenger door even before the car stops moving and stalks around the parking lot like a teenage boy who is trying to cool down before he punches a wall. You sit in the driver's seat, watching her pace. The urge to cry is present, but far off, as if you're high. When she starts walking back toward the car, her eyes fixed on your face, you hastily unbuckle your seat belt and run to the passenger seat. You don't want her to leave without you, and you're not sure she won't.

Afterward, the drive is framed by the wet, dark mountains. You remember going through Pennsylvania around Christmas the year before and seeing eighteen-wheelers overturned on the side of these same roads, their engine blocks blackened by extinguished fires. And cars, too, on the highway's shoulder, casually burning. She goes eighty, ninety miles per hour, and you have to look away from the climbing needle. The shadowy shapes of deer pass in front of you through curtains of rain. I am going to die, you think. You pray for a cop to pull you over, watching the side mirror for blue and red lights that never appear. You clutch the door when she accelerates, and when the car whips weightlessly over a hill. "Stop that," she says, and goes even faster. "Sleep," she commands, but you cannot sleep.

Midnight comes.<sup>23</sup> You enter Ohio, a state you've always found terrifically boring to drive across, but now your adrenaline—which you are sure will run out eventually, though it hasn't yet—makes your hands tremble on your lap. You drive past dead animals by the dozens: raccoons blasted apart by speeding tires, deer whose muscular animal bodies are contorted like those of fallen dancers.

The rain slows, then stops, and you enter Indiana.

In the final stretch, when she exits the main highway and takes a two-lane country road south to Bloomington, the car begins to yawn to the left; kissing the double line, surpassing it, and then to the right, where the door

23. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type C752.1, Taboo: doing thing after sunset (nightfall).

passes within inches of a metal barrier. When you look over, the back of her skull is touching the headrest, her eyes closed. You bark her name, and the car rights itself.

"Now *you're* too tired," you say. "You're falling asleep. Please, let me do this final stretch. We're almost there." You have never been so awake.

"I'm fine," she says. "My body is my bitch. I can make it do whatever I want."

"Please, please pull over."

She curls her lip, but doesn't say anything else and doesn't stop. Every so often, the car swerves drunkenly. You pass a religious billboard that asks you if you know where you'd go after death. In full daylight, this sort of manipulative propaganda would make you roll your eyes. But now, it tugs on an old childhood fear, and you whimper and then try, too late, to swallow the sound.

When you first came to Bloomington—when you helped her find the Dream House—it was impossibly bright. It was late spring, and the trees were electric, new-growth neon green. Now the leaves burn in red and orange, and brown ones spiral away from the branches. The season is dying and you are going to die too, you are certain, this night.

The car pulls into the driveway around four in the morning and sits there in silence. You feel like you are going to throw up. The leaves drop onto the car's roof and the wind snatches them away with a papery scrape. Finally she reaches to unbuckle her seat belt, but you are watching the lawn. Two dark shapes are crossing it, like dogs, but not. Coyotes? It would have been a lovely sight at any time, but in contrast to this night's terrors it is so beautiful your face tingles.

"Look," you say softly, pointing.

She starts as if you've struck her. Then she sees what you see. You wait for her coo, for her sweetness.

"Fuck you," she says. She leans toward you and speaks directly into your ear. "You say 'look' without saying anything else, I think you're fucking pointing out someone who's going to fucking kill us. It's the middle of the night. What the fuck is wrong with you?" She kicks open the car door; the coyotes bolt for the trees. You watch her stomp through the Dream House. Her silhouette is thrown up against a series of illuminated windows—kitchen, bathroom, bedroom—and then all the lights go out.

You get out of the car and sit against the side of the house, putting your winter coat on backward like a smock. The coyotes come back, after a while, trotting casually across the lawn. Deer too, and foxes, all paying you no mind, as if you are part of the scenery, as if you aren't there at all.

You could go to bed too. Or, you could sit at the table in the kitchen and watch the scene from behind the windowpane. But that, you think, would be like putting this night in a museum—removed, too-soon forgotten. Sit with this, you think. Don't forget this is happening. Tomorrow, you will probably push this away. But here, remember.

Your butt goes numb in the grass. The lawn is a theater of wildlife. Your little car, stalwart as any stallion, sits silent and bright in the driveway, finally cooling down after her long drive. Birds titter early-morning Morse code from the trees. A gaggle of drunk students crests the hill at the edge of the golf course and stand there looking at you—perhaps believing you to be a ghost—before shuffling down onto the street. "Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love," Allen Ginsberg wrote, "past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?"

And in the same way that the wrist rotates faster when the door latch is about to release, the predawn night speeds up a little just before the day comes. And though it would not be until the next summer solstice that you'd be free from her, though you would spend the season's precipitous drop into darkness alongside her, on this morning, light seeps into the sky and you are present with your body and mind and you do not forget.

In the morning, the woman who made you ill with fear brews a pot of coffee and jokes with you and kisses you and sweetly scratches your scalp like nothing has happened. And, as though you'd slept, a new day begins again.

## *Dream House as Spy Thriller*

No one knows your secret. Everything you do (running your thumb along your jawline to search for blonde and spiny hairs, zipping up a sinewy boot, twisting a highball glass around a wet sponge, tapping a hot printer that reeks of toner, brandishing a black bottle of wine in a doorway, lift-dropping a sweaty T-shirt against your breastbone as the treadmill slows, unfolding a wallet to pay for broccoli and tissues, turning your back to a bonfire, folding your arms over your breasts in front of your classroom, writing tight lines of notes as the others talk, laughing your braying cackle that turns heads) is heightened with what you know and they—all of those ordinary citizens—do not know.

## *Dream House as Cottage in Washington*

Many years later, I wrote part of this book in a cottage on an island off the coast of Washington State. If I could choose one word to describe the island, that word would be: *wet*. Or maybe: *elemental*. Slick, meaty slugs littered the grass, the path, my porch. When I hiked to the ocean, I watched falcons dive into the water and pull up writhing fish. When I crossed a saltwater lagoon, clouds of gnats followed me as if I were the queen of the damned. At night I slept with the windows open, and I heard so many creatures: owls, frogs, and once, something that sounded like a slide whistle. Once I picked up a snail to observe it and dropped it by accident. When I picked it up again the shell was cracked, and a white foam was frothing from the site of the injury. I was horrified at the monstrosity of my mistake—the pure, unbridled thoughtlessness of it. I'd come all the way to this island to write a book about suffering, and you did something terrible to a resident of the island who'd done no harm.

One day I was chatting with a fellow writer while viewing Mount Rainier when we both heard a scream of terror. We stopped talking and stared at each other; when it happened again, we ran off into the forest, yelling the names of the others. Except for our panting, there was only silence. "Maybe it was an animal?" I said, though I doubted it.

The night before everyone had to leave, we were all gathered around a campfire when we heard it again—three howls that crescendoed into the unmistakable sound of a woman screaming. We started, and then agreed that it must have been an animal, a bobcat or something. But that didn't stifle the chill that accompanied the sound, the grievous and undeniable sound of fear.

## *Dream House as 9 Thornton Square*

Before it was a verb, *gaslight* was a noun. A lamp. Then there was a play called *Angel Street* in 1938, and then a film, *Gaslight*, in 1940, and then a second film in 1944, directed by George Cukor and featuring an iconic, disheveled, unraveling performance from Ingrid Bergman.

A woman's sanity is undercut by her conniving husband, who misplaces objects—a brooch, a painting, a letter—in an attempt to make her believe she is mad so that he ultimately can send her to an asylum. Eventually his plan is revealed: he had murdered her aunt when the woman was a child and orchestrated their whirlwind romance years later in order to return to the house to locate some missing jewels. Nightly, Gregory—played by a silky, charismatic Charles Boyer—ventures into their attic, unbeknownst to her, to search for them. The eponymous gaslights are one of the many reasons the heroine believes herself to be truly going mad—they dim as if the gas has been turned on elsewhere in the house, even when, it would seem, no one has done so.

Bergman's Paula is in a terrible, double-edged tumble: as she becomes convinced she is forgetful, fragile, then insane, her instability increases. Everything she is, is unmade by psychological violence: she is radiant, then hysterical, then utterly haunted. By the end she is a mere husk, floating around her opulent London residence like a specter. He doesn't lock her in her room or in the house. He doesn't have to. He turns her mind into a prison.

Watching the film, you feel for Paula, even though she is not real: her suffering is captured in celluloid's carbonite. You watch it over and over again in the dark: admiring the eerie shots of their respective shadows against the fanciful Victorian furniture and decor, pausing over her defeated expressions, her swooning, her dewy, trembling mouth.

Ingrid Bergman is a mountain of a woman, tall and robust, but in this movie she is worn down like a sand dune. Gregory makes her break down in public, during a concert; later, he does so in their home, with only their two

maids as witnesses. No audience is too small for her debasement. "Don't humiliate me in front of the servants," Paula sobs. But even if they hadn't come in and seen what they'd seen, we would have. She might as well have said, "Don't humiliate me in front of the audience." Because either way, we—servants, viewers—are witnesses without power.

People who have never seen *Gaslight*, or who have only read secondhand descriptions of it, often say that Gregory's entire purpose—the reason he "makes the lamps flicker"—is to drive Paula mad, as though that is the sum of his desires. This is probably one of the most misunderstood aspects of the story. In fact, Gregory has an extremely comprehensible motivation for his actions—the need to search for the jewels unimpeded by Paula's presence. The flickering gas lamps are a side effect of that pursuit, and even his deliberate madness-inducing machinations are directed to this very sensible end. And yet, there is an unmistakable air of enjoyment behind his manipulation. You can plainly see the microexpressions flit across his face as he improvises, torments, schemes. He enjoys it and it serves him, and he is twice satisfied.

This is all to say, his motivations are not unexplainable. They are, in fact, aggravatingly practical—driven by greed, augmented by a desire for control, shot through with a cat's instinct for toying with its prey. A reminder, perhaps, that abusers do not need to be, and rarely are, cackling maniacs. They just need to want something, and not care how they get it.

## *Dream House as Cycle*

Cukor was known to torment his actresses to get "real" performances out of them. One biographer wrote that Cukor "seemed almost to revel in taking [Judy] Garland to the brink for scenes where she had to bare her emotions. . . . [He would remind her] of her own joyless childhood . . . and career low points, her marital failures . . . and chronic insecurity." The makeup artist from *A Star Is Born* said, "He knew how to hurt a woman, and he used it several times to get them into a mood for a crying scene." While shooting an iconic scene in which Garland's character, actress Esther Blodgett, dissolves into hysterics in front of a studio head, "Cukor had Garland so worked up beforehand that she was sick, was physically throwing up," the biographer wrote. "[But while] he might have been rough on Garland . . . it was for a purpose."

In that scene, Esther is in her dressing room between takes. She's wearing an absurd straw boater, heavy eye makeup, a cherry-red cardigan that matches her lipstick. Overly large freckles are drawn on her cheeks. Around her the room is full of reflections: crystal, mirrors, chrome; pink-and-silver cellophane around a bouquet of white flowers. When Oliver Niles asks after her husband—an alcoholic on an intense downward spiral—the cheeriness falls from her face like a person slipping into sleep. She gets up and fusses around a bit before sitting again to talk. She shakes, stammers, gasps shallowly and sharply between words, tilts her head back to catch her tears. Her eyes dart around, never settling on any one place except, occasionally, somewhere behind the camera. She sobs with abandon. Her hand goes to her mouth, as if she has just realized something she does not want to admit. She rubs her hands roughly over her cheeks, wiping away her freckles. "No matter how much you love somebody," she ends, her voice soaked in misery and resignation, "how do you live out the days?"

The scene is unnerving, devastating, wildly effective. Were it not for my moral unease about the details of its creation, it would be difficult to argue

with the results: a character who, like *Gaslight*'s Paula, truly seems on the verge of an acute nervous breakdown (and, unlike *Gaslight*, with the actress not too far behind). Once they'd finished shooting and Cukor had gotten what he wanted, "gentleness and humor took over." He touched her on the shoulder and said, "Judy, Marjorie Main couldn't have done that any better."

As the scene draws to a close, Esther redraws her freckles, collects herself, and returns to the set. There, in front of so many people, she picks up right where she left off—arms flung open, and singing.

## *Dream House as the Wrong Lesson*

When MGM made the Academy Award-winning version of *Gaslight* in 1944, they didn't just remake it. They bought the rights to the 1940 film, "burned the negative and set out to destroy all existing prints." They didn't succeed, of course—the first film survived. You can still see it. But how strange, how weirdly on the nose. They didn't just want to reimagine the film; they wanted to eliminate the evidence of the first, as though it had never existed at all.

## *Dream House as Déjà Vu*

She says she loves you. She says she sees your subtle, ineffable qualities. She says you are the only one for her, in all the world. She says she trusts you. She says she wants to keep you safe. She says she wants to grow old with you. She says she thinks you're beautiful. She says she thinks you're sexy. Sometimes when you look at your phone, she has sent you something weirdly ambiguous, and there is a kick of anxiety between your lungs. Sometimes when you catch her looking at you, you feel like the most scrutinized person in the world.

## *Dream House as Apartment in Philadelphia*

Many years later, I wrote part of this book in my apartment in West Philadelphia, the one I share with my wife. Before we moved here, we'd been living in a terrible, dark building nearby. There were mice and cockroaches. We had to lay traps. One morning, I walked out of my bedroom to make coffee and found a mouse sprawled on one of the glue traps, looking like an adventurer half-melted by acid in a forbidden temple. It squealed a horrible squeal. I googled "What to do about a mouse in a glue trap" and found an article with advice. In my pajamas I walked outside with the mouse and the trap in a plastic bag, and I stomped on it as hard as I could before tossing it in the dumpster.

As for the cockroaches, they made me feel like I was on the verge of madness and transcendence, like G.H. and her passion. At first, I was fastidious, looking for a paper towel to cleanly smash them as they darted around the counter. Then one day they moved into the digital clock in our microwave, and I could see them silhouetted there. The nymphs shed their skins against the glow, left part of themselves behind. After that, I developed the sort of detached practicality I had imagined was reserved for professional assassins in movies. Then, I killed them with my bare hands.

## *Dream House as Pathetic Fallacy*

She, the woman in the Dream House, always buys too much produce. It never makes sense to you how she fills her fridge—every shelf bursting with leafy greens and robust stalks and thick roots and rotund bulbs, the bright, modern lines of the appliance utterly concealed. There is something sensual about it, almost erotic, until everything begins to go bad. Every time you open the fridge it smells more and more like a garden (dirt, rain, life), and then like a dumpster, and then, eventually, like death.

You mention it once, but then she does that thing where she repeats what you've said a few times, each time getting a little more sarcastic until you apologize, though you never know what you are apologizing for. It is her money, yes, her fridge. And her rot.

## *Dream House as the First Thanksgiving*

You arrive in Bloomington just before the holiday to learn that she has invited her entire graduate cohort over for Thanksgiving.<sup>24</sup> You stare at her in disbelief. "All of them?" you ask. You count the number of people in your head.

"But you have, like, two chairs," you say. "Only one small table. You haven't even really unpacked."

She does not say anything.

"You told them it's potluck style, right? They're bringing their own side dishes, and we just have to do, like, a bird or something?"

"No," she says. "No. That would be rude. We are taking care of people."

"Who is going to take care of us?" you say. "I'm broke."

"Don't be such a fucking bitch," she says.

This is how you find yourself at the Kroger's at 11 p.m., alone, picking up groceries and trying to remember how you ended up there. You pay for all of it.

Back at the house you discover that she has only a handful of pans, too, and you defrost the Cornish game hens and baste them in oil and salt and pepper, and at some point you realize you'll have to cut them in half. You're not normally squeamish about meat but you find yourself balking at the idea of cracking through those backbones, pressing glistening spatchcocks down onto the aluminum foil.

"Help me," you say.

She takes off her shirt and bra and cuts each of them with a pair of kitchen shears. The blades bite and open the birds from thigh to throat. The sound of it is terrible. It reminds you of the time you were ten feet from a lion in

24. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type C745, Taboo: entertaining strangers.

South Africa and it was tearing the skin off a zebra leg, and the caveman part of your brain was screaming *RUN RUN RUN*.

She pulls out the spines and turns the birds over; presses them into the pan like open books.

You are still cooking when people arrive, still cooking as people are laughing and eating off paper plates standing up and not quite looking at you.

## *Dream House as Diagnosis*

Should you be concerned? You feel sick to your stomach almost constantly; the slightest motion makes you nauseated.<sup>25</sup> There is a burning in your gut, cramping, too; acid, probably, and hopefully not cancer. You develop a tremor in your limbs, a weird closed-down sensation in your esophagus. You cry for no reason. You can't come, can't look her in the eye, can't bring yourself to go to one more bar. Your back starts to hurt, and your feet, and a doctor says to you, direly, that you need to lose weight. You bawl your eyes out and miss the punch line entirely: the weight you need to lose is 105 pounds and blonde and sitting in the waiting room with an annoyed expression on her face.

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25. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type C940, Sickness or weakness for breaking taboo.

## *Dream House as I Love Lucy*

There is an episode of *I Love Lucy* in which Lucy meets Charles Boyer, the actor who played the evil husband in *Gaslight*. Concerned that Lucy's passionate love for Boyer will result in some harebrained scheme and inevitable catastrophe, Ricky convinces Boyer to pretend to be someone else. Boyer agrees to play along and adopts a fictional persona, but (of course) chaos ensues, until, finally, Lucy discovers the deception.

Watching it, I can see the humor—the campiness of it, Lucy's wide eyes and mugging for the camera, the crazy plotting and slapstick chaos that defines the show's screwball pleasure. But behind all of that, he is saying *I'm not* who he is, and it is a game and she is certain but then she isn't certain. *I'm not*; it becomes a funny joke, but the joke rests on the deception.

"That's a dirty trick," she says furiously when she learns the truth. Ricky chuckles.

Even now, I feel uneasy watching episodes of TV shows about mistaken or stolen identities. The slipperiness of reality that comes along with the comedic device of misunderstanding when someone is not mistaken at all feels uncomfortable to me. When I watched this episode, I could only see the way it eerily mirrored *Gaslight*'s domestic abuse: jealousy, raised voices, commands. "This is a private matter." "You're mine, mine, all mine." All with a sheen of slapstick, of humorous distance. Isn't this funny? This is funny! It's so funny! It could be funny! One day this will be funny! Won't it?

## *Dream House as Musical*

You do not realize how much you sing until she tells you to stop singing.<sup>26</sup> It seems that you sing everywhere: in the shower, washing the dishes, getting dressed. You sing musicals and hymns and old songs from childhood (from church, from school, from Girl Scouts). You make up songs, too, with lyrics for whatever is happening at the time. She sings along to music in the car, but only when the music is playing. You ask her to sing to you, without music, but she refuses.

During a rare moment of clarity, you tell her, sassily, that if she can't accept your singing, she can't accept you. It is supposed to be a joke, sort of, but it lands flat. "Maybe," she says, her voice cold down to the pith.

26. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type C481, Taboo: singing.

## *Dream House as Cautionary Tale*

One weekday, when you drive back from the Dream House, you notice you're low on gas as you blow past the Illinois-Iowa border. Your GPS tells you there is a gas station off a lonely, wind-strewn exit, and as soon as you get off you sense the mistake. It looks like a long country road; just cornfields punctuated with barns and houses. You keep driving; surely a gas station will creep up over the horizon? But every time you crest a hill, you just see more country roads. Should you turn back? Perhaps a station is just around the next turn? Twilight falls away, and suddenly the landscape flattens and is swallowed by darkness.

You pull the car over and consult your phone, but there is no signal. You sit there, breathing deeply. What would your dad say? What would anyone have done in this situation before cell phones? Should you walk? Should you go to someone's front door? You just want to be home.

You have been screaming for a whole minute before you become fully aware of it. You are pounding the steering wheel—your poor car, she has never done anything except your bidding—and howling, "Fuck, fuck, fuck." You don't know why you are crying. Everyone gets lost.

## *Dream House as Rapture*

As a kid, you read those *Left Behind* books, and even watched the wooden, incoherent movie with Kirk Cameron. Cheap thrillers with apocalyptic themes and biblical righteousness: Could there have been anything else so perfectly constructed for your teenage self?

You were obsessed with the idea of the Rapture, even though your family never went to that sort of church. You found it intoxicating, disciplined. He could come at any moment. He could come and take the believers and leave with them, and you'd have to be ready. You had to be trembling, prepared, on edge, ready for the moment. You could never relax, never let down your guard. Because if he came and you failed the test—and Jesus would know the innermost chambers of your heart, you could not lie to him—you would be left behind, and you would remain with the nonbelievers (clutching the folded clothes of their taken loved ones) as the apocalypse tore the world apart.

Then one day you learned that rapture could also mean "blissful happiness," and you understood, fully: that it is important to live in unyielding fear with a smile on your face.

## *Dream House as a Lesson in the Subjunctive*

Yes, there are spiders in the basement, and yes, the floors are so uneven you can feel them pushing your right leg up against your torso if you run too quickly from room to room, and yes she's never unpacked and is using tall cardboard boxes filled with bric-a-brac as furniture, and yes the couch is so old you can feel the springs in your back, and yes she wants to grow pot in the basement, and yes every room has bad memories, but sure, the two of you could raise children here.

## *Dream House as Fantasy*

Fantasy is, I think, the defining cliché of female queerness. No wonder we joke about U-Hauls on the second date. To find desire, love, everyday joy without men's accompanying bullshit is a pretty decent working definition of paradise.

The literature of queer domestic abuse is lousy with references to this<sup>27</sup> punctured<sup>28</sup> dream,<sup>29</sup> which proves to be as much a violation as a black eye, a sprained wrist. Even the enduring symbol of queerness—the rainbow—is a promise not to repeat an act of supreme violence by a capricious and rageful god: *I won't flood the whole world again. It was a one-time thing, I swear. Do you trust me?* (And, later, a threat: the next time, motherfuckers, it'll be fire.) Acknowledging the insufficiency of this idealism is nearly as painful as acknowledging that we're the same as straight folks in this regard: we're in the muck like everyone else. All of this fantasy is an act of supreme optimism, or, if you're feeling less charitable, arrogance.

Maybe this will change someday. Maybe, when queerness is so normal and accepted that finding it will feel less like entering paradise and more like the claiming of your own body: imperfect, but yours.

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27. "I go to sleep at night in the arms of my lover dreaming of lesbian paradise. What a nightmare, then, to open my eyes to the reality of lesbian battering. It feels like a nightmare trying to talk about it, like a fog that tightens the chest and closes the throat. . . . We are so good at celebrating our love. It is so hard for us to hear that some lesbians live, not in paradise, but in a hell of fear and violence" (Lisa Shapiro, commentary in *Off Our Backs*, 1991).

28. "What will it do to our utopian dyke dreams to admit the existence of this violence?" (Amy Edgington, from an account of the first Lesbian Battering Conference held in Little Rock, AR, in 1988).

29. From a review of *Behind the Curtains*, a 1987 play about lesbian abuse: "By writing the play [and] by portraying both joy and pain in our lives, [Margaret Nash rejects the] almost reflex assumption that lesbians have surpassed the society from which we were born and, having come out, now exist in some mystical utopia" (Tracey MacDonald, *Off Our Backs*, 1987).

## *Dream House as Inventory*

She makes you tell her what is wrong with you. This is a favorite activity; even better than her telling you what is wrong with you. Years later, it's a habit that's hard to break.

You can be an incorrigible snob. You value intelligence and wit over other, more admirable qualities. You hate it when people say stupid things. You have an ego: you believe you are good at what you do. You're neurotic and anxious and self-centered. You get impatient when people don't understand things as quickly as you do. You've definitely done some dumb things because of horniness—embarrassing things. You've degraded yourself in front of more than one person. You secretly want to be a man, not because of any doubts about your gender identity, but because you want people to take you more seriously. You love squeezing zits. You'd rather have an orgasm than do most things. Occasionally—and often without warning—your ability to give a fuck drops to exactly zero, and you become useless to anyone who needs you. You've had sexual fantasies about the majority of your friends. You wish someone would call you a genius. You've cheated at board games. You once went to an emergency doctor's appointment on Christmas Day because you thought you had herpes, but it was just a zit. As a child, you were a tattletale, and you remain an unflinching rule follower. You're a prude about drugs. You're a hypochondriac. The only way you can focus during prolonged meditation is thinking about an orgy. You love a good fight.

## *Dream House as Tragedy of the Commons*

She is always trying to win.

You want to say to her: We cannot advance together if you are like this. Love cannot be won or lost; a relationship doesn't have a scoring system. We are partners, paired against the world. We cannot succeed if we are at odds with each other.

Instead you say: Why don't you understand? Don't you understand? You do understand? Then what don't I understand?

## *Dream House as Epiphany*

Most types of domestic abuse are completely legal.

## *Dream House as Legacy*

She goes on a ski trip to Colorado with her parents, and you are not invited. She calls you from the lodge while you are at home, writing.

"I'm taking a hot bath," she says. "Drinking a gin and tonic. Thinking about you. I'm going to get myself off. I miss you."

"I miss you too," you say.

"Do you want to get off with me?" she asks. The idea is tempting—your cunt clenches and relaxes, a reflex—but your roommates are in the kitchen, feet from your door, and you don't trust yourself to be quiet.

"I don't know if I can, right now."

"You know," she says, her voice leaking through the receiver like gas, "if you're not turned on by me, you can say so."

"I'm not—what?"

"If you don't find me attractive, maybe we shouldn't be together at all."

You are sitting up straight now. "Are you breaking up with me?"

"I'm saying that it's really hard to be with someone who isn't into you, and I don't think I should be."

"You are breaking up with me." You feel a sudden ballooning in your chest, somewhere between panic and elation. You hang up the phone. She calls back immediately, and you reject the call. Again, and again. You start sobbing, and John comes in. He asks you what's going on.

"I think she just broke up with me," you say.

The phone keeps chirping. John gently pries it out of your hand. "Why don't we turn this off?" he says. You try to turn it off but you are having trouble remembering how, so you open up the back and remove the battery. The whole thing goes black, mercifully silent. You are sobbing in disbelief, your body aching from the whiplash turn of the conversation. He hugs you tightly, and you sit there together.

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After an hour, you put the battery back in the phone. Almost immediately, it rings. You pick up. She is weeping.

"Why weren't you answering my calls?" she sobs.

"You just broke up with me," you say.

"I didn't break up with you!" she howls, and then from the background you hear her father's voice, enraged. "Is that that *fucking bitch*? Get off the goddamned phone—"

And then she starts screaming at him to go away, and the phone goes dead.

John stares at you but doesn't say anything.

You will eventually lose track of the number of times she breaks up with you like this.

## *Dream House as Word Problem*

Okay, so, there's this woman, and she lives in Iowa City, and then she moves to Bloomington, Indiana, 408 miles away. And her girlfriend, who loves her very much, agrees to do the whole long-distance thing. She doesn't even pause, it's what she would call a no-brainer. (The pun is lost on her, in the moment.) She spends the entire second year of her graduate school experience shuttling back and forth to Bloomington. She does it gladly. In one trip, she can listen to 75 percent of an audiobook. If she is driving at sixty-five miles per hour, and the average length of an audiobook is ten hours, how many months will it take for her to realize she has wasted half of her MFA program driving to her girlfriend's house to be yelled at for five days? How many months will it take her to come to terms with the fact that she functionally did this to herself?