

# In Our Tremulous Cauldron

by

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*A full belly does not make for a chaste spirit.*  
-St. Catherine of Siena

Anorexia Mirabilis:

- 1.) Miraculous loss of appetite
- 2.) "...I not only wish to abstain from bodily food but I wish to die a thousand times a day..." –St. Margaret of Cortona
- 3.) Starvation as a means to transcend vulgar physicality, the base and gluttonous nature of the body, to move towards the divine realm of the soul
- 4.) Act of feasting only on the "delicious banquet of God"
- 5.) Employed for enhanced communication with God
- 6.) Ability to abstain from nourishment as proof of the fervency of one's connection to the divine
- 7.) Melted the flesh of the holy person, wearing thin enough that her heart could be seen beating behind her clearly visible ribs
- 8.) Belief that suffering had an effect unlimited by time, space, or separation of physical bodies; starving for the sins of others, for the very existence of sinfulness

### **1371, Italy**

At the Carnival: Catherine undergoes spiritual espousal, gives self up to God

### **1371, Italy**

7:00 AM: Catherine has insatiable hunger for the Eucharist

9:00 AM: Catherine has taken Eucharist, during which time she seems to be in a delirious trance, quite pale, moaning as she swallows

12:00 PM: Catherine takes no lunch, instead continues praying, secluded in her chamber, refers to the table laid for her in heaven

2:00 PM: Catherine scourges self with iron chain

3:00 PM: Catherine complains of severe stomach pains, which she bears as penance; "Food will be taken on high. Food will be taken on high."

6:00 PM: Catherine, while at prayer, mutters a semi-intelligible series of words in regret for all the times she has been without hunger for God

### **1371, Italy**

At the age of nine, Saint Catherine wakes up early, the rest of her home still quiet. She calls out to her mother, Lapa, who, deep asleep, has no answer. Catherine has just been visited in a dream by the voice of the Savior, who whispered sweetly in her ear: *Love me forever only me and I will love you forever. Love me forever and love nobody else. Love nobody. Love no body. Forsake your body. Come to me.*

Lying still in a bed for a moment, Catherine stares straight up to the heavens, lust for the divine burns her gaze through the thatched beams, and she slips one thin-wristed hand delicately past her nightgown, leaving the other hand resting on the soft waves of her breathing belly, swearing to Jesus Christ that no one but He will ever touch her, her own finger is His.

Falling back to sleep, Catherine is again visited by the sweet voice of the Father, this time his pink lips drip the words into her ears, and he places a tiny ring of thorns upon his bride's left hand. *My love my love my love.*

Catherine wakes up bleeding between her legs.

### **1997, in the air between D.C. and Northampton, Massachusetts**

I'm 8 years old, maybe 7, on the plane. It's my first time traveling alone and I'm feeling particularly self-important. The 12-year-old girl sitting next to me in the

unaccompanied-minors row is holding a peachy-blue-covered book in her lap. There's a dreamy, bony girl on the cover too, but you can hardly see her, she's disappearing, half-disappeared, into the hazy background. The 12-year-old's fingers are tan and wrapped in silver rings. I ask her if I can look at the book. She lets me hold it, tells me she just finished it and what it's about but I'm ignoring her; I've already started reading. I read the whole thing straight through without looking up. And when I finally do the trance is not gone. I am in a web of calculations, the beautiful ballerina girl's mysterious sadness, how she expresses her ultimate aloneness through her body's decay, how her mouth stays closed at all times, how she closes out the world with her lips in a sad line.

I can't remember her name, the anorexic heroine, but she stayed sweetly in the back of my brain like a pleasantly unquenchable thirst. Like lust, sort of. But weirder and more tunnel-y. I burrowed in it. The cage was planted in my mind and if I needed to go in, I would. If I needed to die, I would. That was the thought, really. But even worse: a vengeful death. I wanted everyone to see me suffer.

It wasn't so different from my nightly fantasies of my death from cancer. I was in a hospital room, seemingly quarantined: bald, and crying silent tears, or at least so they seemed through the fuzzy glass window panes my family and friends pressed their faces against as they peered in. Their eyes were wide and sorrowful. In my actual bed, in my pink sponge-painted room, I felt sharp tears in the corners of my eyes. I cried for my relatives crying for me, for the missed opportunities of a life cut short, for my brother standing in my empty room and

my basketball team losing the next tournament for lack of a good replacement point guard.

### **1372, Italy**

Catherine skips around the house hearing the voices of angels. She can't hear her mother over the orchestra of prayer in her head and through her veins. She tells her mother that Jesus has visited her, smiled upon her, left her in the throes of ecstasy. He has fed her. She cannot eat dinner, Mama. She is full of Christ.

Catherine leaves the table, mouth full of Mary Magdalene's tears. She falls asleep with eyes full of the blood of Christ.

Catherine screams for Mary in her sleep. Her mother comes running in, having misheard. "I'm here, my child," and Mama puts her palm to Catherine's head.

Catherine stirs in her sleep, props herself up on her sharp elbows, and spits up ash into her mother's open hand.

### **1978, Massachusetts**

Margaret loves and caresses her pointy bones. She knows they deter sexual predators. Virginity protected internally by her devotion to God, externally by the disgust her appearance incites in fellow humans.

Margaret takes one meal. She begins at 1:30 AM, everything having been set up in the hours preceding: one plate, one cup, one fork, one knife, one egg,  $\frac{1}{4}$  onion, 4 grapes, a bite of banana. She finishes eating at daylight, and if food is

left, then so be it. Darkness is the devil. Light is Jesus, and she will not be gluttonous when held by her savior.

Margaret longs for the lightness of the promised land .

### **1375, Italy**

Catherine exalts in the feast on high, each bite is sweeter than any earthly taste, even of the Eucharist.

Catherine foams at the mouth and gorges herself on God.

### **1997, D.C.**

Sometimes I imagined my grandfather dying instead, just to make myself cry for someone else. My grandfather was very thin and soft-spoken. He chewed about 40 times before swallowing a single bite and urged everyone around him to do the same for fear of choking. I ignored him while sucking down bowls of cereal at my grandparents' cheap department store kitchen table with the chintzy floral tablecloth. They were poor but I didn't know that at the time, and they bought much better presents than my father's mom, the rich detached grandma. My mom's parents both died before I had any concept of money. Except I remember being in the Old Navy dressing room once, in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, before my Grandma Honey died, but after Grandpa Po had passed. I was trying on a lot of stuff while my mom sat on the light brown ledge, folding garments as I tore them off excitedly, plunging into the next item. As we were getting ready to leave the dressing room I asked my mom if it was okay that I was getting all this stuff. I felt icky and guilty all the sudden. As she buckled a pair of dark-wash jeans onto a

hanger my mother gave me a truthful look. "It's okay to spend money on yourself sometimes. We have the money. Your father and I work hard so that you can spend some money."

Later that afternoon when I did the requisite fashion show for my dad, coming in and out of my parents' bathroom in new hoodies, capris, t-shirts, and one short blue cotton skirt, I saw the smile on my father's face as pained. I imagined him thinking, "So this is where my money is going, huh?"

That night I lay on the carpet of my bedroom floor, imagining a full bowl of macaroni and cheese. Meditating on my favorite food I thought to myself, "You must not eat again. You must not eat again." My cheek squished into the blue carpet fibers. When I woke up the next day, I had forgotten about my diet plans. I ate my cereal quickly.

### **1375, Italy**

7:00 PM: Catherine folds her body in half, kneeling on the cold floor.

"This body of mine without food, without even a drop of water: in such sweet physical tortures as I never at any time endured"

5:00 AM: Catherine wakes up to find stigma along side of torso, beginning around soft waist and moving upwards approx. 3 inches. Bleeds for 30 hours, remains at ecstatic prayer for the entire duration of bleeding plus 24 hours following. Wound remains, closed like bite marks.

### **1978, Massachusetts**

Margaret, paralyzed by hunger, gives in and eats during the day.

“Lunch,” she records in her daily planner, “one slice tomato, one tsp. mustard. Extra exercise will be added accordingly.”

### **1980, Massachusetts**

Margaret, age 67, stands five feet seven inches tall, weighs 55 pounds upon entering the hospital.

Margaret taken directly to emergency room. Transferred to treatment ward after vitals have been stabilized.

Margaret asked to draw a picture of herself in group session. Draws a girl who appears to be around 10 years old. Says her “self” is not a body. Her “self” is a soul that will receive the sweetest salvation with the Lord.

The girl in the drawing has pigtails and no mouth.

### **1378, Italy**

In the late evening, Catherine, age 16, takes a pause from her prayer to remind herself how gluttonous, selfish, and greedy she is, how sinful her true nature, how defective, how unworthy. *God wants you to starve yourself.*

Catherine has been granted private quarters by her father, and here she practices her own form of worship. She lies down on the floor, sitting on her bottom then working her way down to the ground, vertebra-by-vertebra, feeling each rib gently crushed. C moves her back up and down the floor, letting her



itchy wool covering scratch deeper into her skin, over time turning the skin red, making first hives and then, still scratching, bloody hives.

She counts her ribs, tracing fingertips across her rib cage, counts the days since she last took food, counts down until she will feast on her savior's soul, the holy Eucharist: *Eat only of God's flesh and blood, forsake all other food and drink, feel the full divine desire of starvation, starve your soul of all impure and evil forces, feed your soul only on God.*

With closed eyes Catherine envisions the remaining penances she is to practice this evening, and in this way experiences the pain twice: once in anticipation of the delicious torture, and once physically. Thrice for God she flagellates herself, then takes off her clothes to prepare for sleep. Naked, she settles into her bed of thorns.

### **1980, Massachusetts**

Margaret peels a rotting banana and shoos away the flies swarming around it. She slices into 15 bites and arranges them in a semi-circle atop a floral plate. Inside the semi-circle she places: 5 almonds, 3 tablespoons of cottage cheese, ½ piece of moldy wheat bread. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner are served.

Margaret walks around her house in quick-toed laps, down the stairs into the front hall, up through the kitchen and over to the dining room and back up the stairs and so on. Margaret counts steps in murmurs as she walks. Her brow is furrowed. Checks the clock. 3 hours fast walking, 650 calories burned, 100 Hail

Mary's said, she beams into her own reflection every time she passes the first floor mirror. She feels herself becoming herself.

### **2004, D.C.**

I'm dry heaving in the pediatrician's clean white bathroom, still fully clothed waiting to see the doctor. I make sure to swallow any liquid that rises into my throat. I take a big slurp of water from the sink every time I feel well enough to, and keep alternately drinking and heaving until I feel just about ready to burst. This, I have found, is about when my stomach is holding on to five pounds of water. I slip back into the waiting room and take a seat next to my dad. It's better when he does Saturday mornings, and not my mom, who is usually all pursed and tense around the mouth, lips pulled into a frowny pout, and pretending to read *House and Garden* with her glasses pushed down a little on her nose and her face leaning down and forward into the magazine.

I dig my nails down into my arm. I try not to think about my bladder, or how long until I'll be able to relieve it. I worry I should have had more to drink. My fingers leave crescent dents in the fat of my fat arms. Enumerate: 15 years old, have had approx. zero calories so far today (fuzzy on caloric content of toothpaste. I make sure to spit for at least two minutes after brushing, swishing tons of water around the back of my throat and then violently ejecting it, along with any possible toothpaste remnants), it's 9 AM, I have a fat swollen stomach full of water, 5 lbs. of water I've split homework up into 5 sections, each one should take around 45 minutes, I have 1 Diet Coke hidden in my desk drawer (lowest)

and I shiver in anticipation of drinking it much later, when my stomach is not so tremendously submerged with water. Water flooding organs and pressing down into bladder. Cannot urinate until after weigh-in. Then Dad will drive us to the bakery on the way home for huge disgusting morning glory muffins. Will do my best to flush mine down upstairs toilet.

### **1378, Italy**

Catherine believes she has been specially graced by the absence of menstruation. Obsesses over productivity, travels for days from orphanage to convent to monastery, delivering bread and meat while she herself fasts and refuses to sleep.

Eats five orange seeds on Friday to represent the wounds of Christ.

Prods throat and rejects the seeds:

“We do justice for our miserable sins.”

### **2004, D.C.**

One day when I was 14 I was luxuriating in the sun beating on my jutting hipbones. I was walking away from my last period class, Photo, because I hated the smell of the white art-room floor and Ms. Hadley’s mean squinty coffee breath. The darkroom smelled good, and was quiet, and I would have liked to just hide in there on the floor beneath one of the tables holding the basins full of chemicals. But I sucked at Photo and I couldn’t understand what I was doing and I was constantly asking little questions to my classmates so I could avoid a stale

tongue lashing from Ms. Hadley, whom I took to calling Mrs. Havisham in my head. I thought my English teacher, if he knew, would love this.

I got nervous when he came to my basketball games. Mr. Reddy. Some days he didn't teach at all, if the 8<sup>th</sup> grade class he taught before us 9<sup>th</sup> graders had been especially cruel. He just lay his big sad forehead in his athletic palms and we all sat quietly for 50 minutes. Most people wrote notes or did homework.

Sometimes we all exchanged unsure glances. I stared at the top of Mr. Reddy's brooding head, his glorious dreadlocks falling sadly around his shoulders. I pierced his scalp with my worried eyes, hoping to somehow press myself like a cold cloth on his fevered soul.

I ate lunch in our English classroom, after I stopped eating with the rest of my friends in the cafeteria. Lots of yogurt. Light supersweet chemical strawberry. There were plastic spoons from the basement closet at my house where we stored trash bags, toilet paper, napkins, paper towels, random Solo cups, a couple beer bottles, a bucket full of cleaning supplies, and a supersized container of plastic cutlery. I did a lot of planning ahead. Like measuring out my cereal at night, before bed, and putting it in a bowl on the top shelf of the cabinet. Then in the morning I raced downstairs before my mom was done blow-drying her hair to grab the bowl, and if she didn't come down by then to supervise my breakfast, I poured some milk over the cereal, paddled a spoon around the flakes until it was dirty and they were soggy, then poured the whole thing down the kitchen

sink. Now I had to be really quick, shoving the clumps down the drain with my hands and leaving the used bowl in the sink to prove to Mom I had eaten.

Mr. Reddy drew notes on the board using arrows to connect his thoughts. The chalk raced around the board and he opened his palms towards us as he excitedly explained the significance of a literary passage. Opened his palms and begged. I got it, I thought. I got him. I get you. But the thing at basketball games was this: I got so nervous when he came to watch that I went on hustle overdrive. I was all over the court, under one girl's legs, fighting for the jump ball, sliding around on the balls of my basketball shoes, and he always laughed. One day he came into the classroom as I finished up my yogurt lunch. "You're good," he nodded towards me, "but what are you doing on the ground all the time?"

### **1980, Massachusetts**

Margaret wears a smock-like faded green dress and folds her purple veiny hands around each other, pausing to bite her yellowing nails that come off like tissue paper, then spitting them out onto the ground before returning to her constant handwringing. She counts her dollars, delivered weekly from her father, and prepares to leave for her daily grocery store trip. She keeps no excess food in her house; only what she might eat in the next day or two. Emergency rotting fruits and vegetables ooze onto the spotless gray countertop. Margaret looks up and blinks a tight smile through the sunlit window. "Life is a miracle," she prays over her kitchen counter, the alter, and her fruit fly congregants buzz their amens.

Margaret slaps a hand down, landing beside a week old carrot, accidentally silencing one of God's children. She doesn't notice; leaves the house with crushed fly innards on her palm.

### **1380, Italy**

On the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas the tiny, lovely saint dies. She tiptoes out of her bedroom on silent bare feet and disrobes as she moves swiftly over the cold dark wood, long white nightgown slips past her feet and she is not naked.

(Just gone.)

### **2004, D.C.**

I

Have no body

Float above the roller-skating rink on clouds of sugar-high hip-boney afternoon death

Hold onto the narrowness of my pelvis and imagine a long thin pillar reaching through body up towards head and out, out and up forever

Suck in gut and feel pulled upward

Wish I could be emptied out

Party's over. Dad picks me up. I get in the car and we listen to the classic rock station on the way home. I grip the side of my jeaned thigh as we drive over the

highway, anxious about getting into an accident that isn't fatal. I pray, "as long as it's fatal."

### **2004, D.C.**

I woke up and tasted like metal

My belly was pulsing from inside, webbed feet and hands trying to get out

The devil tastes like:

One apple

Three pieces of wheat bread with mustard (TOO MUCH! THREE PIECES!)

A bite of mom's chicken chili so she would get off my back

(the upstairs toilet ate the rest of the bowl)

Acid

Metal

5 sticks Orbit Sweetmint gum

I am panting for you

Who are you

Run my tongue along my teeth like they're my fingers on my ribs

### **1380, Italy**

Catherine switches hearts with God.

### **1980, Massachusetts**

Margaret lingers around the produce section at the grocery store, scanning the fruits and vegetables, calculating calories and prices. She piles a bag of lettuce on top of one bag of baby carrots and wishes she had a calculator to check her math.

Squinting, she finds the deli counter and wonders if they might have one. But then she imagines the grease on the numbered buttons and decides she can't touch it anyway, so she pushes her mostly empty cart towards checkout.

### **2004, D.C.**

One day I skipped Photo and slipped past the back gates by the backfield. I walked with lazy swinging hips in black jeans. I dialed Arielle's number and when she answered, proclaimed, "I'm having a high today, Arielle." I heard the smile in her voice: "Recorded. October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2004. Jillian is having a high." I walked towards the CVS with headphones in. Began to feel numb again, just a little, in the tips of my body. Fingertips, toe-tips, tiny hair follicle tips getting numb and dead. I had three dollars in my back pocket. I bought a Snickers.

Another day I skipped basketball practice to go home and lie naked on my blue bedroom carpet. It felt so fuzzy. I slid cold scissors around my various fat deposits, breasts, stomach, hips, thighs, but mostly stomach. And I let the blades rub against me as I grabbed all my tummy flab and imagined just slicing it off.

One chomp of the scissors' mouth and it could be gone. I found this terribly comforting.

### **1980, Massachusetts**

Margaret goes to her father's for dinner every Friday, and these days she doesn't buy groceries, but she still walks to the grocery store, and around it in just the pattern she would were she shopping, she pushes an empty cart to make sure



the calorie burn is as close as possible to the same (sometimes she stacks carrots and lettuce on top of one another to be exact), and when she's done with her usual path through the aisles, over the sticky white floor, she drops her cart back at the door and walks home. She goes about the rest of the day as usual, scrubbing the kitchen counters and staring out the window in prayer, watching the light fade and waiting for her the lights of her father's car to blink at her and take her from her prayers to the soft gray passenger seat upholstery, and then to the gleaming dark wood table, that broad empty oval, at which the two of them sit quietly, and Margaret refuses to drink water from her father's glasses. Who knows how carefully they have been washed, and how many calories have gotten stuck, over time, to the sides and rim of the cup? She never says this to her father, but always tells him she isn't thirsty, and she's also not very hungry. Her father looks at her sadly, but he always looks at her sadly, and he now he doesn't even ask if she would like some water.

## **2009, Maryland**

At Johns Hopkins Hospital, I write:

Checks at night, every hour on the fifteen, stopped waking up each time, got more than 3 hours rest total for the first night in a week

Quiet in group today felt like typing on keyboard in dayroom felt like playing piano became virtuoso for just a handful of minutes

Fell asleep after lunch in big black rubber group chair

Yelled at for fidgeting

Yelled at for sitting back in chair

Yelled at for drifting off

Yelled at for complaining of stomach pain

8:00 PM: Am I still here?

9:00 PM: Still here. Bathroom break, supervised

Famous fasting girl

### **2009, Maryland**

I can't sleep tonight for the first time in a few days. Every beep wakes me up again, every light flicker and nurse-shoe clomp on the hospital floor sounds as loud as it did the first couple nights. If I become conscious of where it is I am half-asleep, I immediately feel the itchy thinness of the white starchy blanket and hear the air-buzz from drips and computers and alarms.

I am profoundly awake.

I write:

6:00 AM: Weight and vitals taken. Sock-foot forward down the hall back to the room, hold gown closed together in one fist and put clothes on.

7:30 AM: Take last unsupervised pee of the day, until 10 PM.

9:00 AM: Finish last of three 4 oz orange juice boxes, toast with 2 butter pats, mound of scrambled egg with 1 butter pat, ½ cup hash browns, chocolate Ensure over ice (then eat the ice).

So full so full so fatso so sososososos fucking full/fat.

11:00 AM: Lying on the disgusting human sized pillow covered in the slobber of a tremendous variety of rotating patient-nappers, hugging it to fall in and out of dazed morning sleep.

11:50 AM: Lunch announced early today. Get off pillow like automaton. Just next meal. Just next meal. Clear mind and steel heart. Make cage in mind and go in there.

12:00 PM: 2 Ativan before lunch plus calcium and vitamins.

1:30 PM: Woozy from Ativan and sick from vanilla flavored Ensure. Hope they get chocolate by dinner.

### **1982, Massachusetts**

Margaret spends the day sweeping and mopping the kitchen, getting down on all fours with paper towels soaked in cleaning solution to scrub at any stubborn dirt. The knees of her stockings become wet splotches as they press angrily into the moistened floor, and when she takes them off her skin is pinched red and smells like lemony chemicals. She lovingly lotions her kneecaps, then her hands, dried from the day's work.

### **2009, Maryland**

I write:

5:00 PM: Refused to finish Ensure and had privileges restricted, sat with nurse on duty until 10 PM

10 PM: allowed to leave nurse's station after five fucking hours and went to take a shower

10:15: Play with fat stomach bulges in shower, grab at insides of thighs, shake body up and down and see how it ripples in slow motion. Hate into the mirror and tuck wet body into bed

### **2009, Maryland**

There is a 14-year-old girl in my ward who claims to be fasting under the orders of God. Myra was diagnosed as schizophrenic, catatonic type. She freezes in various positions, unable to move, sleep, eat, or communicate for up to days at a time. Myra spends most of her time praying and involved in her Bible studies. When she freezes standing we have to hurry to gather around her on all sides in case she falls, and stay there until the nurses come to take over.

Now Myra is gone. I utter prayers obsessively at mealtimes. PleasedearsweetGod let me become nothing. Buy pack of gum from one of the outpatients who sneaks it in. Chew 2 packs by evening.

Sweetmint Sweetmint.

### **2009, Maryland**

In the hospital I am 19 years old, wearing leggings and my glasses every day, big t-shirts to cover up my grotesque bulging stomach. One day my favorite nurse tells me leggings are not allowed because they are "too sexual." I crumple into a plastic tan chair in the dayroom and cry. I'm confused by the word sexual. The

next time I had sex was in a motel room and I watched my distended belly slap against itself. He tells me I look the same as before. I go into the bathroom and slam silent punches into the mirror. Then I want to throw up but it's time for dinner. They close the register before I have time to buy the giant cookie I need to meet my calories for the day. I'm scared it will show on the scale tomorrow and they'll bump my calories up even higher. I steal a monstrous, stale chocolate chip one from the pushcart and flee the restaurant.

I'm exhilarated to have stolen. I don't know if I've ever really stolen before. I cackle. The joy is real and he can tell. I don't look the same though.

## II

*That to deny the existence of witches is contrary to the obvious sense of the Canon is shown by ecclesiastical law...And whosoever thinks otherwise concerning these matters which touch the faith that the Holy Roman Church holds is a heretic. There is the Faith.*  
-Malleus Maleficarum, 1487

Mysticism (according to William James):

- 1.) Defies expression
- 2.) Cannot be imparted or transferred  
(The mystic can only be understood by another who has experienced the mystical, and even then the only transferrable knowledge is generalities; the event itself is held by the individual and God alone)
- 3.) The mystical state is one of insight and knowledge, given through illumination, revelation, reverie, and often sexual pleasure unattached to the physical body itself
- 4.) The mystical state is unsustainable
- 5.) Periods in between mystical experiences often involve quiet reflection on experiences and deep peacefulness
- 6.) The mystic is without free will for the duration of the event
- 7.) Characteristics of mystical trances include: prophetic speech, automatic writing, writhing of the body, screaming, throwing the neck back with eyes closed, producing holy bile from the mouth
- 8.) To stimulate the mystical consciousness, dilute nitrous oxide or ether with air (use nitrous oxide if available, more potent)

### **1692, Massachusetts**

Mary Barker examined:

Swears that Goody Johnson has made her a witch. Confesses she *made a red mark in the devil's book* with the forefinger of her left hand. Says she *has such a load and weight at her stomach* that she is hindered in responding to questions put to her by examiners.

G. Johnson testifies:

*This witch is a woman of very turbulent spirit, given to strange fits and mischief making amongst her neighbors. She has said that she wishes when her child had fallen into the river that she never pulled him out.*

### **1692, Massachusetts**

Bridget Bishop examined:

Bishop, hear some of your charges. William Stacy accuses you of several pranks against him. Says one night he was going to the barn when he was suddenly hoisted and thrown against a stone wall, that soon after he tried to lift a Bagg of Corne of about 2 bushells but could not budge it with all his might. He believes you to have been instrumental in the death of his daughter Prisilla, two years ago.

*I know not of any of this.*

You did not kill W'm Stacy's daughter?

*No.*

You know W'm Stacy?

*Yes.*

Samuel Grey accuses you of witchcraft in his own home. He says that you came into his home several nights, one night waking him up with something cold on his lips, and that you were above him with something between your hands. His child in the cradle gave a great screech and after that night the child, a very likely child, did pine away and was never the same again, and died in that lamentable state some months later. He says he did not know you other than by your garb

and countenance, but on seeing you knows you as the woman in his house. Do you deny too his charges?

*I have never seen this man before!*

...

Bridget, Reverend John Hale testified that Christian Trask had been a woman devoted to reading scripture, and then after one day of being in your presence, reported that you two were now friends, and thereafter fell into a trance that Hale later recognized of those bewitched. She was in and out of distractedness for months until her death. Were you not instrumental in her death?

*Indeed I was not. Her death was self-inflicted.*

Why would she inflict her own death?

*That I cannot answer.*

Did not you bewitch her into self-harm?

*I did not.*

How know you of her death?

*It has been talked of all around since.*

Know you of her injuries?

*Yes.*

What were they?

*Three. A piece of her windpipe cutt out. Another wound above through the windpipe and gullet and jugular.*

And how did she inflict these injuries by use of only a short pair of cissars?

*I know not.*



It is impossible for her to have done so.

*I know not how she did it.*

### **1995, D.C.**

I can recall the powers of my mind in my childhood, the days when I could fly, and then suddenly days when I could not, and the wood chips I used to stir my mud and rock potions beneath the playground structure during recess. I can remember the grainy wood between my teeth, the healing powers my concoctions had, the way I fed them to invisible deers and rabbits who came to visit me in my lonely lodging where my wisdom passed by the eyes of fellow womankind, and I alone could behold the earth's powers.

But in time there were more of us, small women in leggings and large t-shirts, with no regard for the messy nature of the work, without minding the stains we acquired in the process of our gathering and stirring, with the single-mindedness of brewing, pooling our knowledge with the gifts that the spring dirt had to offer, the solemnity of our duty looming large. And together we rode invisible horses around the playground, howling with laughter at the wind whipping against our faces, and riding home finally to revel in the day's work.

### **1692, Massachusetts**

Witness E. Hubbard testifies:

*Sarah Osborne pinched and poked Elizabeth Hubbard with knitting needles, making her ill with an unknown ailment.*

*Osborne is known to have fornicated with hired farmhand after her husband's death.*

### **1692, Massachusetts**

Salem Marshal Deputy Samuel Brabrook arrests four-year-old Dorcas (commonly Dorothy) Good. Examination takes place the following day. Dorothy's mother testifies against her. The child spends 9 months imprisoned in the Witches Dungeon.

### **1995, D.C.**

My mom stood with barefeet pressing into the wood of the kitchen floor, her high arches redder than the rest of her feet except her toenails, painted a deep burgundy. I sat stroking the glossy nail of her big toe, staring up into the darkness of her far-away nostrils through the blur of the steam rising from the stovetop. She had cuffed the sleeves of her loose black t-shirt, the muscles of her arms flexing as she drew the wooden spoon in circles around the big black pot, the skin of her underarms hanging slightly down. I knew how soft that part was, and what it smelled like. I imagined biting into it. In my mind her arm began to bleed. I tried to stop biting but the skin was so soft and my teeth wanted to sink into it and the imaginary blood dripped down onto me on the floor, and I pressed my fingertips into it and began painting a new coat on my mother's toes.

### **1693, Massachusetts**

The devil appears to Ann Foster in the shape of a bird! Such a bird she has never seen before and she tastes it! She wants to eat it but it flies away, and as it vanishes, its color changes from black to white and then she knows it is the devil. When it comes back, days later, its plumes are again the darkest and silkiest black. The devilbird flaps its wings lightly, invitingly, and this time comes right to her. She eats it alive, crunchy beak first and then little fleshy mouthfuls, feathers spit out or swallowed, bone sucking to get all the final scraps of delicate meat. And then he was inside her and she took on his dark strength.

What to do with the dark strength? Ann Foster is told to bewitch a neighbor's hog to death and she does, the animal grows two extra legs and its eyes become large as a horse's and finally it screams out in the devil's voice as it dies, *Ann Foster will be prosperous!* And then the hog is dead.

And then Ann Foster is told to kill the two children of Andrew Allin and so she does, making little puppets of them and sticking pins in, first slowly and gently, once or twice a day, then finally in full force, repeatedly, until Andrew Allin hears his children shrieking and runs inside the house to find them rolling on the floor, tongues askew and flopping from their mouths and blood spurting out in thin, violent streams. Out Allin flees in horror and grief. Ann Foster sneaks in and drinks the blood of the dying children.

Later that night she tries to pray but in flies a new bird, this one yellow, and it performs magic and closes her throat. She feels close to choking and is unable to

utter a syllable of prayer. She wants to cry out to God, she wants to speak against the devil, that bird, her insides, but no noise will come. When at last her throat opens, the devil speaks through her: *Don't you want to be prosperous Ann Foster?*

### **1556, Germany**

Walpurga Hausmannin meets with the demon Federlin, who takes her to the devil to sign her contract. In celebration they drink wine and eat roasted baby toes, finally copulating on the streets as night falls. Federlin gives his lover an ointment with which to kill children and animals, and she does so eagerly, sucking their blood and pulling out their hair to use for potions.

### **1587, Germany**

Walpurga Hausmannin confesses to the murder of 40 children in her position as a midwife. She is taken through town before her execution; her left breast torn off first, then her right, then her left arm, and finally her right hand, with which she had signed her oath as a midwife. In this form she was burnt alive, her ashes poured into a stream.

### **1996, D.C.**

In my bed at night I could squint my eyes and see little colored dots that I thought were tiny people. I had them fly on little brooms around my head, tiny buzzing women moving around a black castle that floated in the darkness of my room. When I fell asleep I dreamed of going to the imaginary friend's house I visited night after night, climbing hundreds of twisted, narrow stairs up to her attic room. The house got thinner as it went, coming finally to a sharp point. It

was under this point that my friend lived in a tiny wooden room with a small glittery bed and her huge black dog. The dog scared me; it had long white teeth and mean eyes. But he was calm when my friend stroked him, and he settled his big heaving belly onto the wooden planks on the floor, and then us two friends could play and play until my babysitter came to pick me up. When I woke up the little women could still be seen in their castle, but I could not go to my friend's house, and I felt every morning that I had lost her.

### **1963, Massachussets**

The devil's cats sneak up on Tituba and try to suck at her arms. She won't let them but they grow bigger, hissing and pushing Tituba into the fire. She screams as the hem of her dress alights and tells the cats she will do as she's bid. And now they force her towards the children's room, and here they disappear suddenly, but they hiss commands from inside Tituba's body and she feels their paws scratch at her chest. Tituba is to move close to the children, first the blonde one. She does this. Tituba is to pull her sewing needle from her dress pocket and to thrust it into the child's palm, one then the other, one then the other, until the blood is running down the child's arms and then she will do the same to the other child and then she is to STICK THE NEEDLE into the second child's eyeball but she WON'T, she REFUSES, and then the cats hiss from her throat and scratch at her lungs and she shrieks and hisses and plunges the needle deep into the child's huge blue eye right through the dark pupil and then she swings round wildly and plunges the needle into the eye of the other child and screams in a

triumphant meow and out the door she runs, coughing up pieces of the cats as she goes: an ear, a paw, matted furry stomach flesh, and tiny rough tongues.

(It had been different for Walpurga. She loved the way the children's bodies flailed beneath her as she rubbed the ointment deeper and deeper into their chests, where it burnt large scabby wounds that let out their deep, mahogany pools of blood like fist-sized gems. Walpurga dove her fingers into these pools and collected the blood in vials, all mixed up, this child's blood, that child's blood, from chest, from ear, from forehead, from eye, from stomach, from hand, from foot, from genitals, from leg. But now Walpurga, dead, cannot enjoy the pleasures, her fingers now dry, dryer by the day.)

### **1598, France**

Francoise Secretaine sneaks up on eight-year-old Loyse Maillat as she warms herself by the fire. When asked where her mother is, Loyse replies that she is out tending cattle. When asked where her father is, Loyse answers that he is away for the night but she knows not where. Francoise Secretaine then holds out her palm and conjures up a crust of bread and asks Loyse to eat it. But the child refuses, she says the bread resembles dung. Francoise Secretaine bares her teeth and clutches the young girl's head in her free hand, her wide palm and endless fingers crushing against the girl's skull, luxuriating in the silkiness of the fine blonde hair. And then Secretaine holds open the girl's jaw with her other hand, the bread between her agile fingers, and she inserts it into Loyse's mouth, pushing it against the back of the small pink throat and all around the little wet

tongue and finally mashing the girl's jaw closed and open with her hands and hissing *swallow little Loyse swallow little Loyse swallow*. The girl does so with great struggle, her face scrunched red, the body trying to reject the food, and when it has been eaten Secretaine snaps her hands from the girl's jaw and Loyse lets out a great gasp for air.

### **1997, New York City**

My mom and I were always in black when I was young. We would match by mistake: black jeans and black sweaters, black boots, though Mom's were heeled and mine were not. We laughed about ourselves, accidental twins, mom's sharp nose pointing us forward as we walked city blocks, not often hand in hand though we saw other mother-daughters like that. They were in shades of blue, soft red scarves, yellow sundresses, pink cardigans. Pink cardigans. We sneered. I up at my mom, she down at me, our blue eyes piercing the space between us. One day we wore thick black leggings with our boots, and long black sweaters, and we both wore our glasses. We went out shopping for the day, trying on black t-shirts and scarves, tossing them aside, trying on black dresses, and black leather coats. My mom's nose was long and straight and she lay her dry fingers on my face, touching my soft cheek and I feel the sharp tips of her pointy nails.

### **1693, Massachusetts**

The Devil's Sabbath begins as always, with an affirmation of allegiance to the master, with the osculum proganum, the profane kiss, which he receives as a ram. Once that is said, he shows himself in the form of a man, though entirely

cloaked, and his face and skin cannot be seen behind the shiny blackness flung over him. He shows the women how to compound a poisonous potion to pour into the broths of enemies. The crowd inhales the potiony air, the dry tang of it fills them with delight and they grind their teeth. Mary Bradbury grins and a flame bursts out of her mouth like a tongue. She bites at the air, ingests potion, grows wild for the night, to ingest the night, to become the night, become the night, and finally she shrieks and runs towards the cloaked devil, landing at his feet and writhing, rubbing her body against his form and shrieking. And the devil throws off his cloak and drapes it over the moon and grins his shiny teeth towards his minions, so that they are the only thing lighting the darkness, and he flings open his arms and hisses his secrets until the Sabbath is over. Then the devil closes his mouth, and all is darkness.

### **1999, Pennsylvania**

Sometimes I cannot help where my mind goes. It runs out of my control, but I anticipate violent thoughts and so—have I caused them? I'm in bed at sleep away camp, on the top bunk, saying nightly prayers that I whisper towards the sky. I close my eyes and recite the same prayers each night, and as I pray for my sweet cat at home—for him not to be hit by cars, for him not to go hungry if he stays outside at night—I can't help but imagine him starving, then his limbs chopped off, then his nose torn from his face, then the car tire running over him forwards and backwards. I worry that I'm making it happen. Not just in my head but in real life. I want to scream but must stay silent. It's after 11 and no talking is allowed. I dig my nails deep into my forearms as punishment. I hold them there,



deeper, deeper, and clench my teeth. I cry a few quick tears. My wet face is still. I fall asleep and wake up with dried blood on my arm and quickly suck it off so no one will see.

### **1556, England**

Examination of Elizabeth Francis by Rev. Dr. Cole and Sir John Fortescue:

Francis, did you not bewitch the child of one William Augur?

*I did.*

And did you cause the death of Andrew Byles?

*I did.*

How did you kill Andrew Byles?

*With the aid of the cat Sathan and by the will of the 33evil I seduced Andr' Byles and killed him. But then I became pregnant with the child of Andr' Byles and I was given a charm by which to kill the child in my stomach by the devil, he having given it to me through the mouth of the cat Sathan.*

And when did you come to know this cat Sathan?

*He was given me by my grandmaam Eve when I was twelve years. I kept Sathan for sixteen years and then traded him to Agnes Waterhouse when I was overcome by a feeling that I needed one of her cakes.*

Where did that feeling come from?

*I believe she caused it with a spell or potion.*

Did she know the cat Sathan's powers?

*I told her that he would do what she would have him do. And Agnes Waterhouse was so pleased by him that she would give him a drop of her blood as a reward when he had followed her commands.*

Do you know what commands she gave to the cat?

*Not many though she told me that she did grow tired of being married and commanded the cat to kill her husband.*

When was the husband killed?

*Some 9 years past.*

...

Francis, Mrs. Poole charges you with cursing her and causing her pain in the head. What say you to this accusation?

*Mrs. Poole refused me any yeast when I come to her house and ask.*

How did you cause the pain in Mrs. Poole's head?

*I gave the crust of bread to a dog who would bring into her house a potion and leave it under her bed where she would smell it as she slept and in the morning wake up with pains.*

What was in the potion?

*The devill made the potion and bid me use it on those I wished harm. And I never myself brewed it.*

How did the devill deliver the potion to you?

*The devill himself delivered it to me in the form of a toad. He held the potion in his mouth and spat it into my hand, at which time he bade me give him bread and milk in thanks for his gift.*

...

Did you harm Mrs. Poole in any other ways?

*I made her baby fall ill and vomit all the food given her. And then I cursed her cradle so that it did rock violently without cease and so the baby were all the more sick.*

And the cradle could not be made still by anyone?

*None but me.*

### **1693, Massachusetts**

Mother Stauntan was angry with John Hopwood, who refused to her any milk. And so she said the cows would quite surprise him at the next milking, and then she open her cracked red lips in a square smile to reveal fangs and foaming around the gums. And then John Hopwood fell back, repulsed, and she let out a joyous hoot and ran away and seemed to levitate several feet off the ground, moving at great speed away from him. And at the next milking the cows kept yellow unblinking eyes fixed upon something in the distance, and seemed off balance. And then when John Hopwood went to their udders they gave out blood, vast quantities, until they bled out entirely, and lay dead, all in a heap, upon the ground.

Mother Stauntan squealed from her perch above the house, watching from the roughly shingled roof, pulling patches of it off and throwing them down so they rained upon sad John Hopwood, who stood staring in horror at the bloody mess, and then she had the cows stand again, all in unison, and they spake such to old

John Hopwood: *You shalt not prosper, John Hopwood.* And the life left their bodies once again.

### **1999, D.C.**

As I was getting ready for Halloween, my mom told me I could wear her purple lipstick for my punk costume. I had to peel a crackly top later off the lipstick, but underneath that it was smooth and violet-colored. Before I was born my mom used to dress up on Halloween and go to parties with my dad. She'd wear a pointy black hat and a long silver-black wig, the purple lipstick, and a small smile with soft eyes. I'd never seen her eyes like that. I'd hardly ever seen her let anyone take a picture of her, and if forced she wouldn't smile, or she would give a close lipped, tight smile with strained eyes. She didn't dress up for Halloween anymore, but sometimes we'd carve a pumpkin together. My dad put on the same scary chef mask every year and ran around the house for a few minutes with the rubbery chef cheeks jiggling and his fingers scrunched up like little claws. I would always scream and cry, because the mask really was scary, and that would make the mad chef giggle, and that would make me cry more. Finally my mom would yell at my dad to stop teasing me, and he would peel the chef's face off and his own would return, round and smiling.

### III

*He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore.*

*-Sigmund Freud*

A common treatment for hysteria was the Rest Cure:

- 1.) Developed by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell
- 2.) Involves the retirement of the patient to bed for an extended period of time, while taking involuntary muscular exercise in the form of “rubbing” or massage. Patient takes meals of bland food alone in bed, and digests in quiet, dark room. Patient alone at all times except when during visits for massage or to be seen by physician. Patient allowed no books, no writing equipment, no sewing, no conversation, no intellectual stimulation
- 3.) Recommended for wealthy women who are tall, gaunt, overextended in their charity work and/or of exceedingly delicate temperament
- 4.) Usually recommended after attempts at treatment at spas or with the usual tonics
- 5.) Treatment often taken in conjunction with tonics
- 6.) Weight gain is often necessary in Rest Cure patients; introduction of heavier foods into diet after first two weeks of total rest

Less common treatments included removal of the clitoris, ovariectomy, the surgical removal of the ovaries, and bloodletting.

#### **1900, Germany**

Kathe masturbated breathlessly until she was 8. Then she fell ill, and when she recovered she became a good little girl. Kathe sat at home.

One day, Uncle Hans got her alone in his shop and pulled her towards him. She thought the worst part was his heavy breath. When he kissed her, she thought that she was ingesting the insides of his body, that horrible dense tang moistening her dry lips. She had never thought about her lips much before. She had never thought, “I have lips.”

Kathe pulled her arms out of Uncles Hans' sweaty fingers and turned away. She felt sick. But when he left Kathe felt even sicker, coughing and hoarse. Then every time he left, she felt sick like this, and grew unable to speak until he returned. She thought it was his absence that made her ill. But she held her breath in his presence so she wouldn't have to smell his oniony insides, and she no longer liked to hold his hand.

Sometimes when Hans left, Kathe did not go right to bed, but flung herself around the apartment, scratching her fingernails into the wooden kitchen table or making herself into a tiny ball, arms wrapped around knees and rocking back and forth until she burst out and screamed. She screamed until her voice, again, left her, and her mother made her go to bed. And Kathe would lie in bed, ill, feeling worse by the second, wondering when Hans would return to make the pain stop.

Kathe's voice was being sucked from her throat downwards into her body, and as the sickness got worse she thought of the endless pit of her stomach darkness and watched her voice tumble eternally down.

Kathe fell ill again. This time she was unable to speak for months. Her doctors asked, what is the sickness? They found nothing in the uterus, nothing in the ovaries, nothing in the skull.

The doctors asked her where the pain is. But Kathe knew no location except that eternal vastness inside her stomach. The pain was not in space, or rather, the

pain *was* the space. We do not see the air, we see the divisions of air: a bookshelf, a shoe, a building, the sun.

### **1997, D.C.**

The contents of my room used to transform into monsters every night. I couldn't fall asleep because I was scared that if I did, my mouth would open, and then spiders would climb in. And first I would be fine, tucked in bed under a pink and blue flowery comforter, seeing nothing in the dark. But then, and I felt it happening, I dreaded it every night, my eyes would adjust to the darkness, and forms would emerge as if from nowhere. They were outlines first, then filled in, and I could recognize my desk, a dresser, a cushioned love seat. But as soon as I could see them they melted into all sorts of different monsters. The love seat was a short, thick beast, the desk merged with a bookshelf and lamp and towered above me, the fan grew spider eyes and stared down at me. They watched me, all of them at once, from their various positions in the room. They never moved but I was in constant fear that they would come closer, and I would want to call for my mom across the long hall to her bedroom, but the silence was so precarious, like trembling glass, and to break it was scariest of all. As if the second I broke it all action would begin, but if I was still and silent, the monsters would be too.

There was this one *Zombie-like* figure, a tall thin man with a black top hat, hanging out in the doorframe. He *was* the doorframe actually—it had become a doorframe with a man leaning against it. My door was open to the hallway light, so I could see him only in the shadows, but he was there every night, standing to the side of the doorway as if to tease me with the open space behind him.

## **1885, France**

Augustine feels a spider in her ear and becomes deaf for one hour before her arm becomes paralyzed. The paralysis spreads to her neck and her head stays steady the whole hour, eyes moving around in a still container, lips pursed constantly, not a quiver, eyes move faster, betray her fear, she can still feel the spider and she cannot move her arm, she cannot move her neck, and her eyes, that last refuge, begin to spasm about the lids, so that she cannot see straight.

Augustine sees death's eyes on the tips of her son's yellow fingers.

Then the church bell tolls and she scratches holes into her palms and peers down into the holes, their bloody soil, and then the bell stops and she ceases to scratch, looking up at her son with a smile.

"You might be being watched,"

she whispers to herself in the mirror,

only she is looking at her dresser door

"I look dead today"

Then, looking closer,

She sees a man's face staring back at her,

A face she doesn't recognize but somehow knows

And its mouth is contorted as if in pain

"Is he who is watching me?"

"Are you who is watching me?"



One day she is walking along the path by the river under the willow tress, enjoying the thin air of early fall, when she looks up to appreciate the turning of the leaves. Then she herself loses color and shivers, calling out for her dead mother. "The mice are back! They're all over the trees!" She wants to run but is unable to lift her feet. Her breath becomes short, she is pulling for breath but her lungs seem to be shutting. She closes her eyes so as not to see the mice, squeezes them tight and whimpers for her mother. When she opens her eyes, the mice are gone, and she goes on walking, thinking how very cool and thin the air feels.

The doctors wonder how a woman can make her body lie. She has a fever, yes, every time the sound of that distant bell rings... every time she menstruates... every time her child speaks. But how does she produce this fever? How can this be a lie?

### **1999, D.C.**

Sometimes I'm not sick but I sort of feel sick. Or I don't feel sick but I feel something else that isn't great, or I do feel sick but know I'm not so try not to feel sick. My mom used to say, "You don't feel 100%" and she would give me lots of sweet attention, like putting covers on me while I lay on the couch watching TV and making me toast and jam for dinner. She checked on me more than usual too, poking her head in and asking, "How's my baby doing?" I understood "not feeling 100%" in my body but not in any definite sensation or place. It was a wider ache, a dull nothingness that irked me and made me feel restless, but also stuck.

That feeling stayed with me and infected my best friend Arielle too. In sixth grade we felt so much blankness exploding inside of ourselves that we knew we had to do something. Arielle began to straighten her hair. I shaved my legs for the first time at her house, and went home scared to death my parents would notice. Arielle developed food allergies that would suddenly disappear, and began picking incessantly at her scalp. I bit my nails and then, disgusted with that habit, remembering this girl in elementary school who used to chew and suck on her fingers all day, I began to jitter instead. My legs didn't stop shaking. I couldn't sleep because my legs were alive.

### **1870, France**

Elisabeth is in her seventh year at the convent when she falls ill with icy stabbing pains in her head and swelling in her limbs. She is cared for in the infirmary until it is decided that her case is chronic, and then she is sent home to be cared for by her parents. Elisabeth tells her parents that before her sickness the nuns had called her possessed, because she prayed constantly, even when alone in her room, and they had once opened her door to see her kneeling on the bed, legs spread wide and hands clasped in prayer, gazing up and panting with an open mouth, shuddering and not responding to anything said. The nurses dragged her by her arms and legs down the long cold corridor and brought her before the priest, who every day from then on made her bathe in ice water, adding more ice to the tub until she turned completely blue, then leaving her to shiver in her thin cloth dress.

Elisabeth recovers somewhat at home, but then her breath becomes labored for some time before her voice becomes hoarse and finally goes away altogether for the next month. She is put to bed and hypnotized regularly and the doctor tells her that when she wakes up her voice will return. Each time it does not, and her mother weeps, then goes to the kitchen to mop and sweep and scrub until late at night, when Elisabeth will finally wake up from a heavy sleep to take broth. She eats nothing else for the month. One day, during hypnosis, the doctor grips her neck with his cold fingers, applying pressure to her larynx and causing her to cough, then gag, then finally spit up mucus for upwards of three minutes. As she is cleared out the words come up, they seem to fall out of her throat at increasing volume. The words are mumbled and unclear at first, then sharper: "The pain! The pain!" And when asked what pain, Elisabeth grows limp and falls back against her pillows. "The pain... the pain..." She can say nothing else. It is just that. The pain. It has no origin and no location. There is nothing else. When she stops taking even the nightly broth Elisabeth is given medications that are meant to rouse her. Her cheeks flush slightly and she rubs herself up and down frantically, but other than that no change is seen. She refuses to speak and most days she keeps her eyes closed altogether.

### **2002, D.C.**

One night before I went to bed the hem of my pajama pants grew a ladybug. I reached down to take it off but it was a cake crumb. I was in eighth grade. That night I felt bugs all over me, then every night after. It only happened when I was

in bed. I'd get itchy all over and spend the night unable to sleep, scratching at myself in a sea of insects. My parents thought I might have bed bugs, so I switched beds. The guest room bed had clean and fancy white sheets, high thread count and gold stitching. They were no better able to protect me, and I spent the night sitting on my toilet, head in my hands, half awake, shuddering as I scratched at the memories of bugs still moving over my skin. My mom thought perhaps she could exorcise the bugs by changing my linens. She had Hilda, the woman who cleans our house, wash an already clean set of sheets and pillowcases, just so I could be totally sure they were clean, and neatly make my bed. But the insects did not go away, they crawled up higher, and a rash broke out on my cheeks. My dad gave me cortisone cream and I rubbed it all over my face, several layers every night. Finally the rash seemed to go away but then, at exactly the time I used to put on the cortisone, the skin on my face seemed to perk up, expectantly, and when no cream was applied my cheeks began itching even worse than they itched before, only now they did not get red and no hives formed. They just itched and itched and the itching grew intolerable, until I grabbed the cream and spread it on my face and neck and shoulders. For two years I never again skipped this nightly application, unless I was at a friend's house, where my cheeks never seemed to itch. And then one day the itching just stopped.

### **1930, New York**

When her sister fell ill, Edda cared for her night and day, sleeping beside her in a big armchair and waking up periodically with a frantic feeling that she should

not have fallen asleep, that perhaps her sister had needed something or had woken up and become lonely or had even died. She would then be unable to sleep, and spend the next several hours pacing around the small bedroom, feeling the onset of mourning and grief and then quickly pushing it down, past her stomach where it tickled at her, down her body, until it could not reach her at all. She would pace, and press down upon that feeling whenever it threatened to rise up, and pace until her legs got tired, and then finally she would have to sit down, her legs become heavy weights beneath her skirt, and she pushed so hard upon the bad thoughts as she sat that she ceased to feel at all their sly maneuvering in through the cracks. Then a brilliant pain announced itself on the fleshy inside of Edda's left thigh, and though there was no mark on the leg itself, Edda could see the pain like a circle of bright orange flames inside her closed eyes.

The pain leaked out into the new space, this one square and not aflame but with cool electric blue surrounding it, pressing up against the neighboring flames. She first felt it on the morning of her sister's death. Edda had become so good at pressing down upon her thoughts, almost all of them, so that her thinking was constantly focused upon pressing down, and never really seeing or feeling or thinking a thought at all. But as she stood by her dead sister and stared at her face, turned so that only her cheek and the tip of her nose were visible to Edda, she had an upward surge of thought so full of rushing intensity that it almost got through—it rose past her stomach and almost up to her chest and then! She shoved it down, and it wasted no time but zoomed down her leg and lit up its

electric blue fence, a sharp stinging pain whose presence rekindled the flames of its neighboring pain so that it lit brighter than ever before, and the brilliant pain became all the more brilliant, and the two pains seemed to converge and yet stay quite separate, and Edda fainted.

### **2003, D.C.**

In eighth grade I started to black out in the shower. I liked to shower in really hot water, so hot that when I got out to dry off the skin of my entire body was red. I never realized that wasn't normal until I showered at a friend's house one day, and she screamed when she saw my red arms and legs against the white towel. The water temperature was probably only part of the problem; I also had low iron levels, partially because I was a vegetarian. Anyway, the heat wasn't helping my light-headedness. The first time I blacked out the water droplets on the shower wall swelled and my knees buckled, so my arms—help up like before the police—and my red stomach slumped against the wall and the swollen drops and finally my feet slipped forward and I fell all the way down, landing with my head next to the faucet, so that it looked like I was taking a bath. The faucet was so shiny, and I stared at it, dazed, realizing how close I had come to hitting my head on it.

Then the doctor told me I had to start eating meat again. The chicken didn't make my stomach hurt, and I even liked the taste, but I couldn't help but imagine the insides of my body as I ate it, and I felt like I was chewing on my organs and stomach lining. But I stopped blacking out, so I tried not to think when I ate, and

finished my meals quickly, and then tried not to think about the feeling of flesh stuck to my throat.

### **2009, Maryland**

9:15 AM: We're all at the breakfast table. Yesterday was donut day and that was a mess, but today it's back to the standard eggs and packaged muffins with butter, with sides of cereal and milk and full fat yogurt. Only blueberry was left so I had to take that one. As I'm finishing my eggs, a nurse—the small old one with the sweet face who is really, really mean—calls me into rounds. Rounds always interrupt breakfast. That's when the nurses and the head doctor and the square, pink-lipped, smiling social workers sit across a giant table from you and nod encouragingly when the doctors says you're doing well and nod sadly when he says you're not.

Not doing well means you're not gaining weight fast enough, which is anything less than three pounds a week, though four is ideal. The head doctor, the "attending," this month is Dr. Redgrave. He's the nice one, extremely fat and handsome, with a short, well-kept, dark beard. Dr. Guarda is the mean one, but one time she broke down in front of a patient and told her why she was so strict, and it was because she had "let" her first eating disorder patient die by being "too easy on her." And then she made this other, living patient choke down her whole breakfast and wouldn't believe her when she said she was gluten intolerant, and later the patient got very sick, and from then on she was given special gluten free bread at every meal.

Dr. Redgrave is looking at me all the way from the other side of the large brown table, his squinty eyes (he's "sad" because I didn't finish my dinner the night before) pointed at me. I tell him the truth, that I was so full by the end of dinner, felt like my stomach was going to explode, felt so much pain that I couldn't breathe, and couldn't stop crying, and how could I have finished the last two sips of my drink? He nods in disagreement and prescribes me an anti-anxiety drug that I'll take from now on before every meal, because I was just tensing up and making digestion harder on myself. I grind my teeth. "Might I ask... have you ever tried to gain four pounds a week?" I say. He makes a face like he's heard it all before. The nurses and social workers look at me with disappointed eyes. I'd purposely worn my glasses because the prescription was old, so I could stare back without seeing much. But I had forgotten that Dr. Redgrave says I look like Tina Fey in them, and as I hold back tears I hope he will spare me that name today. I start to get up to go back to the day room where I can cry in peace with no one but all the other patients to see, most of whom would ignore me and go on crying themselves or trying to complete a puzzle missing the lower half or journaling or sitting at the meal tables staring at the wall.

I stand up. I push in my chair. I inch backwards with a small scowl. Dr. Redgrave smiles. "Chin up, Tina!"

I go back to the breakfast table. I am clenching my jaw. The other patients look up from their breakfasts—some are done and others are refusing to touch a



thing— and take note of my expression. One leans across the table to me as she takes a last bite of cereal. “He call you Tina?”

One time my dad came to visit me at the hospital and he brought me Plato’s collected works. He said he thought I’d like to keep my mind sharp while I was there, spending my days sitting, hoping nobody would talk to me. I thanked him and the next day I brought the book out with me for the day, and placed it open on my lap. Then I forgot about it and stared into space, no room in my brain for thoughts at all. My body was pumping thousands of calories slowly through my digestive tract and, now that I was used to the pain, it still exhausted my body and dulled my mind. Dr. Redgrave came striding over, his voluminous khaki pants perfectly cuffed above his black loafers, and glanced down at me. “What are you reading, Tina?”

I flipped over the book and showed him. He looked approvingly at the cover and told me he’d been very interested in philosophy as a student. I mumbled “me too” and tried to smile a little, and realized all of a sudden that I couldn’t read that book, that I didn’t want to and that besides my brain was already not sharp and to sharpen it would only remind me of the pain I had dulled.

The next day in rounds Dr. Redgrave asked me how I was liking Plato. I said I liked it. He asked me what I had read. I lied and said the *Symposium*, because I’d read that before in high school and could talk about it if I had to. I had to, because he loved the *Symposium*, and knew all about it, and apparently wanted to give me five extra excruciating minutes in rounds that day. The nurses nodded

nonstop as I exchanged ideas with the doctor. Then their eyes became slightly sadder as he announced I had not lost, but had not gained, that day. I was finally released, and out I went, and from behind me I heard Dr. Redgrave call out, "And Tina?" I turned to see his shiny brown eyes laughing behind his square glasses, one huge hand in his beard. "Apply that philosophy to yourself, okay?" I nodded and coughed out a fake one-syllable laugh. Ha. Yeah. I wanted to tell him that Platonic philosophy lent itself quite well to anorexia, so actually he might want to read a little more carefully. But I didn't really know if that was true, and they had called me into rounds just after I had poured my 2% milk into my cereal, so I knew it was going to be really soggy by now. "You're the resident philosopher!" I heard as I walked quickly to the breakfast table. He wanted to separate me from the other patients, to make me feel special. I sat down and looked around the table. All these sad philosophers slurping their cereal together.

9:45 PM: In the bathroom. Refuse to look in the mirror. Hold my stomach but try not to think about how it's pressing against my hands and bulging slightly through the cracks in my fingertips. Just get in the shower, look at feet, no don't look at feet, hate my feet, but at least they're a distraction, so OK, look at feet. The water doesn't get hot enough but I'm used to that; I'm also used to the nozzle's small but determined stream. Shampoo, conditioner, body wash. Can't have my razor because I forgot to ask during the day, but I'm also used to that. When I'm done I cover myself in my allotted hospital towel, which is tiny and scratchy and covers exactly from my chest to my very upper thighs. My body is exhausted from sitting for the past month, and from being overstuffed every day, and I fall

asleep immediately and don't wake up until morning. Then a morning nurse peeks into the room and rouses me with a loud "Good morning!" and up I go, in my glasses and loosely tied robe, sock-footed down the hallway to get weighed. As I shuffle towards the scale I realize that I've slept better at the hospital than I have anywhere in years. I remember sleepless hours in my dorm room bed at night, lying on my stomach trying to squash the hunger that keeps me awake. It's 6:45 in the morning now and I feel extremely well rested. I decide that today's the day I'll get in the breakfast line first and make sure I get a strawberry yogurt.

9:00 AM: It's one of my last days at the hospital. At breakfast a group of medical students walks through the ward, a doctor speaking in murmurs to them, with his head inclined into their little circle. They walk, squeaky sneakers in brisk unison, then pause, as their tour guide gestures around him. Then they walk again, and stop near our table, slightly off to the side and a few feet back, as if from there we can't see them looking at us. One of us, nobody remembers who, suddenly starts barking right at them. We all join in, some quicker than others, until we're all thumping our fists onto the table and barking or shrieking like monkeys. The tour group flushes and hurries away, using their passes to get through the sealed doors to the elevator. We stop barking and laugh with our mouths wide open, cackling and hooting, catching each other's shining eyes and doubling over our half-full trays. Everyone finishes breakfast that day—we eat in silence, glancing up with leftover smiles stretching across our faces, until it's time to clean up, and we bark and shriek as we throw out our plates and file back into the dayroom.