Boob Suit: Tales of the Dressed Flesh

by

Kelly Bancroft

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Signature:

_______________________________________________________________
Kelly Bancroft, Student

Approvals:

_______________________________________________________________
Dr. Philip Brady, Thesis Advisor

_______________________________________________________________
Professor David Giffels, Committee Member

_______________________________________________________________
Professor Varley O’Connor, Committee Member

_______________________________________________________________
Peter J. Kasvinsky, Dean of School of Graduate Studies and Research
ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the ways in which one woman learns to define herself through acquiring and casting off the costume of conventional roles. Set against a working class, Mid-West backdrop, the thesis seeks to understand how females identify themselves through collecting objects, playing roles, and ornamenting the body. The thesis also examines the margins between physical and spiritual, lover and loved, naked and costumed, and beauty and horror as the reader follows the narrator from childhood through womanhood. Its story is ultimately one of a woman’s journey to feel comfortable in her own skin. The personal essays that comprise the thesis echo the assemblage of the narrator’s self and are divided into two sections linked imagistically and thematically. The third and final selection is a journal of disease and reflection which explores the ultimate surrender of the self to the dissected body.
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The Necklace

I’d gone to the craft store because gazing at skeins of yarn and jars of paint and bright, shiny objects relaxed me, and I was tense that day. The holiday hustle and surge having just passed, I felt eager to get all that glitter behind me and to get the new year—a new Kelly?—before me. Store clerks on hands and knees were stocking shelves with Easter bunnies and plastic eggs while bins at the back of the store overflowed with the detritus of Christmas: 75% off Santas, reindeer with chipped antlers, ripped-winged angels. I was in my jewelry making stage and gravitated toward the beads section to dream of the next necklace or pair of earrings I would make—or at least buy the supplies for.

It pleased me to find these aisles empty (I needed elbow room for my browsing) except for an elderly woman leaning on her shopping cart. I guessed she was in her early eighties. She wore a smoke-gray sweater the same shade as her wavy hair, and when she smiled pleasantly at me, I smiled back. Then I caught the glint of her necklace. It was choker length with antiqued silver links—hand-forged?—and a sturdy, oval locket. I forced myself to look away so as not to be rude but this was more than difficult. The necklace’s shape and color, its heft and delicacy, captivated me the way some women are mesmerized by babies. I wanted the necklace, wanted to know more about it, wanted my paltry jewelry-making skills to rise to such a gorgeous occasion.

As I shopped—woman and cart in my periphery—I fantasized a history for the necklace: It had survived a foreign war nestled in the pocket of her boyfriend’s flak jacket; A dowager aunt had dashed into her burning estate to retrieve it—and died! Right there in the craft store the old woman grew young in the way a film’s heroine moves from near-death to the back story blush of her life. Like in “Titanic”. I watched that locket slip from its chain to the floor of the sea to become the heart of the ocean, at least the heart of Pat Catan’s Craft Center.
The woman must have noticed my staring because she smiles again, and I took this as my cue.

“That necklace is so beautiful,” I said.

She smiled again and went to speak, but in my enthusiasm for the necklace, I interrupted her.

“Is it an antique? I love antique jewelry. It must be very old.”

And here’s the part I replay over and over.

I reached out my hand to touch the pendant. Mind you, I did not touch it, but I came within an inch of the woman’s neck.

She raised her hand to her throat. She put her thumb on the pendant.

“It’s not a necklace,” she wheezed through the hole in her trachea.
Boob Suit
“Fashion is a language that creates itself in clothes to interpret reality.”

--Karl Lagerfeld
Singer Sewing Machine No. 66 (With Attachments, For Family Use)

My grandmother’s sewing machine rests under a sheet in the upstairs hallway. It is the treadle kind where the band wheel and bobbin winder and belt guide groan to life when you pump its wide, iron pedal. Permanently fixed in its oak cabinet, the machine rises stubbornly from it. It is black, anvil-heavy, always cold, with hand-painted gilt swirls along the arm and throat and face plate, as if to make delicate a most practical and indelicate machine. I never saw my Grandmother Jones at the Singer, but I easily imagine her there, neck bent, slippered feet pumping as she guides a hem over the feed dog. Her arms jiggle in the cheap, sleeveless housedress she loved so well she insisted her daughters bury her in it.

When my grandmother became too ill and too volatile for her daughters to care for, she had to surrender her slim savings, along with any proceeds from the sale of her tiny, cluttered house and its contents, to Shepherd of the Valley nursing home so she could become a resident there. My mother nabbed the machine before the auctioneer came to peddle the old woman’s things: the collection of rooster knick-knacks, her blonde dresser set, my grandfather’s spittoon, my uncle’s defunct pistols, the new stove, the print of Jesus with his hemorrhaging heart. Of the four Jones girls, my mother, Verna, was the only one who wanted the machine. She was really the only one who cared much for homemaking. She kept the cleanest and prettiest house (her youngest sister, Marilyn, threw out dishes if they sat too long in the sink). She was the best cook (Aunt Betty, the middle child, found garlic salt too exotic). She had the greenest thumb (Edna, the eldest, put out her cigarettes in the withered spider plant). And she had attained the highest domestic goal any girl from Mineral Ridge, Ohio, might dream to reach: She’d landed the best husband (Betty’s was hateful, Edna’s a drunk, Marilyn’s a wanderer).
As a teenager, my mother learned to sew practical pieces such as curtains and pillow cases on the treadle machine. She occasionally indulged in sewing personal items, mostly plain dresses with simple lines. The attachments that came with the machine, for plaiting and gathering and ruffling and embroidering, my grandmother had no use for, and my mother found too unwieldy to use on the heavy machine. When she got her own electric Singer (and her own daughter), she made up for lost time. She sewed for us matching mother-daughter Easter outfits of eyelet with fuchsia rick-rack and smocking at the sleeves. She made for herself a lavender evening gown that gathered and slid off the shoulders just-so. Once for a Christmas talent show, she fashioned four snowmen costumes out of sheets with glittery buttons and hoops and tinsel fringe that shimmied right above the knees of her and her friends.

When we lived overseas, my father hired a Spanish carpenter to build for my mother a sewing cabinet of magnificent proportions, like a ring box an emperor might give his betrothed. It stood seven feet high and five feet wide when its elaborate doors were closed. When opened, they revealed built-in shelves, storage nooks, a bobbin rack, a fluorescent light and a counter for the sewing machine. My mother’s triumphant creation there: a flamenco dress made for me without a pattern—endless ruffles of taffeta and cotton, black punctuated with buttercups.

The cabinet now hovers, closed, in the smallest bedroom of my parents’ house, the room from which they forward to me mass emails about the war or salvation. Its shelves overflow with neatly folded fabric my mother has purchased over the years and remnants from outfits she made for me as a girl. One printed swatch shows animals in the shapes of the alphabet—an elephant making an “E” with its legs and trunk, a giraffe bending into an “L”. Neither of my parents seems to notice or mind the unused cabinet, though it fills over half the room. When my father teases my mother that it’s big enough to bury them both in, she says he planned it that way all along.
My mother stopped using her machine around the time my grandmother entered the nursing home. I would later recognize this period as when the depression my mother had battled most of her life began to overwhelm her, as it had my grandmother. Her neck hurt too much, she said. The close work bothered her eyes. There was no one to sew for any more since I was all grown-up. Patterns were so expensive, she might as well just buy the damn dress.

I have inherited my mother’s graceful but poorly constructed neck. It stiffens easily, sticks like a rain-warped door. I have inherited, too, my mother’s love of texture and fabric. I collect unusual vintage prints that catch my eye, like handkerchiefs featuring drink recipes or bark-cloth cowboys riding the range of the living room curtain. My favorite find: a few stained yards depicting Charles Lindbergh’s Trans-Atlantic flight, discovered in the bottom of a five dollar box that I won as the sole bidder at an auction. I will inherit my mother’s sewing machine and cabinet when she dies. At sixty, she began to label and list those objects that will come to me, those that will go to my brother. I will have two cabinets then, my grandmother’s and my mother’s. I will never use either.

What I have not inherited is my mother’s ability to sew. More than that, I have not come into the patience she once had for her craft. I’ve made some attempts. During my first (and failed) marriage, I sewed simple curtains and skirts with a second-hand machine my mother-in-law gave me. But I sewed them on the fly, cheating, it seemed to me, because I’d use “stitch witchery”, a hemming tape that sticks to fabric when ironed. I couldn’t sit still long enough to hem by hand. I would avoid button holes or zippers or waist bands. I never used a pattern, not because I could succeed without one, as my mother could, but because I couldn’t read them. Just as I can’t decipher maps. Or instructions. Or recipes. My eyes don’t light on the page well or for
long enough. I misread signs, misconstrue meaning, see the number five as the letter “F.” If I had grown up in the days of diagnosing children, I’m sure I would have been labeled. But it has always seemed like more than that to me. I somehow have the wrong temperament for home-making, the wrong hands and heart, like a feral wife. Indeed, my grandmother’s machine lies under a sheet to protect it from my latest decorating project. I started to paint the upstairs hallway in April but now, in the last week of October, it remains half-done.

Though I’m more content than not, though I laugh more than lament, though my faulty transmitters negotiate most of my days well enough, I do sometimes dwell in the future. I have no nieces or nephews, no children of my own. My step-sons—one lives with me and my current husband mostly cooped-up in his bedroom, the other lives with his mother—seem far away, unreadable. I am at the age now that my mother was when she closed her own cabinet. I try to picture what will happen to my grandmother’s machine when I die, who will unfold my Lindbergh fabric, what will become of that second cabinet, beautiful and useless, that will eventually come to me.
Agnes

Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.

--Sylvia Plath, *Mirror*

Specs

Agnes’ waist ranges from 30-36 inches, hips from 40-46 inches, bust from 39-45 inches. She has twelve dials: four at the bust, four at the waist, and four at the hips. She has a lock nut for height adjustment and eight sections, including her neck (with pin cushion) which can also be adjusted. She has precision molded pedestal fittings and a telescopic tube assembly with Hem Measure and Gauge.

She is guaranteed against faulty workmanship for a period of two years and will be replaced free of charge provided she has been used in accordance with the instructions given. If a replacement of any part is necessary you may return the damaged part and you’ll receive a replacement in due course.

Her name

Agnes was almost named Ethel, my mother tells me.

“Except that’s your grandma’s middle name and I didn’t want that. She’d be following me around everywhere.”

My mother left home right after turning eighteen and marrying my newly enlisted father. Neither returned to Mineral Ridge—except for short visits—for twenty years, when my father retired from the military. By then my unpredictable, unstable grandmother, Vada Ethel Stegall Jones, had been reduced to a harmless old woman, murky-eyed and confused.

“Why Agnes?”
“She just looked like one. Missing her head and arms and everything.”

The dressmaker’s dummy pictured in the Stage by Stage Assembly Instructions wears a label just above her left breast that reads “Twin-Fit.” My Agnes has no label, so it’s either come off or she’s not exactly the model pictured—though in every other way she seems to be. I’ve seen dress forms by other names—“Form Design Double,” “My Double Dressform” and simply “My Double”—each designed to help the everyday seamstress fit to her body. There’s even a dummy for girls—“Miss Venus Dressform”—for those who wish to tailor a miniature goddess of love.

I named one of my first dolls after myself. Baby doll Kelly looked nothing like me with her short black hair, her perpetually needy mouth, but by naming my miniature after me, I was acting on the instinct Agnes’ makers well knew: We all want to gaze into the world and see ourselves reflected.

The origin of her birth

She was not actually born, of course. Just as no doll or stuffed giraffe or mass-produced beloved ever issued from the womb, per se. But we can agree that she was created, she was mastered. We can say she sprung from her creator’s head as Athena sprung fully formed from the head of her father, Zeus. Out she came, goddess of strategy and the female arts, armed with the weapons her mother had given her.

I don’t know whose exact head Agnes sprung from, but her instructions tell me she first came from E.E. Owens & Co. Ltd. in London and was then shipped to A.E. Arthur, Inc. of Maryville, Tennessee. From there she arrived at JC Penney in Lexington Park, Maryland, where my mother and father found and purchased her in 1972. I wouldn’t go so far as to say she was adopted, but my parents did pick her out and gave her a good home.
If she could speak, what would be Agnes’ native tongue? Would she have my twang when I first learned to talk in Memphis, our family’s third city? When we’d visit Mineral Ridge, Grandma made me say water (werter) and biscuit (bees-kit) and dolly (darwly) and would laugh, pleased, I think, that I sounded like her native Kentucky. Or would Agnes speak like a Londoner? Her Brit roots show in the somewhat stilted verbage of her assembly instructions: “Enlist the aid of another person to measure your shoulder height” and “To programme your neck size” and “The model is now ready for you to commence dressmaking.”

**Her skin**

Agnes is cloaked in foam-backed 100% nylon in a “classic gray suitable to any sewing room decor,” but to me she is the military issue of barracks, of file cabinets, of the U.S.S. Enterprise my father sailed on during the Vietnam War. Her polyester slides between my fingers like a cheap flag on a stick. But it’s durable. It has clothed her for 40 years, and though it has come unglued at the breastplate, there are no marks otherwise.

**Agnes’ first outfit**

What was the first dress you used her to make?

“I can't remember,” Mom tells me. “Except it was probably something simple since I didn’t know how to use her. Then your dad showed me how to set her up and I used her more.”

**Agnes’ first room**

Agnes’ first room was also the first room my mother ever had to herself, she tells me.

“Hardly had a pot to piss in when we was little. All four of us sisters slept together.”
When we moved to Maryland, our fourth city, my mom got her sewing room. I was ten and remember this house well—two identical and adjoining red brick structures made into one, the wall between them torn down. Mom set up Agnes and her machine in the large room that was created when the houses were joined.

I have this image of Agnes standing at the window that overlooked the back yard, but I’m not sure that’s where she stood.

“Sometimes she did,” Mom says. “She’d fade, though, in the sun. So not all the time.”

I walked through that room afraid to look behind me knowing Agnes, despite having no head, was watching me.

**Agnes at the window**

From my mother’s sewing room window, Agnes could see the back yard, the identical patches of yard and brick homes. She could see across the street where we crossed the baseball field to enter the woods and play near the ponds. She saw, too, the parking lot where I led a small gang of kids in defacing the neighbor’s convertible one afternoon. We threw sticks and berries in it, drew lipstick across the windshield and doors because this neighbor had been mistreating his dog.

My mother, it turned out, had also been watching. I could decide my own punishment, she said.

I locked myself in the half-bath on the first floor, just below Agnes’ room. I stuck rolled-up towels under the door and around the windows. I held my breath and hung my head over the electric heater and waited for death. When I grew tired, I went and watched television with my family.
“What made you think such a thing?” Agnes might have asked me, taking me to her hard, gray breast, a little twang in her concern.

Agnes’s second room

Our fifth city.

“She usually stood in a corner in a small sewing room in Spain,” Mom writes in an email.

“I would just put her up and down as I needed her use. I made three dresses using her as a guide and hanged them on the clothesline and a gypsy came by real quick and stole every one of them. I went through the neighborhood to see if I could find the gypsies but I couldn't find them. I'll bet if Agnes could have run she would have caught them.”

I remember the fireplace in this house. I remember tree rats jumping from pine to pine, the lizards that lined our doorways. But I don’t remember Agnes in that room. I don’t remember that room. I spent my time outdoors. My brother and I walked to the beach. We played in the woods. I sunned myself on the roof. Wrought iron bars cosseted every window. What did Agnes feel when she looked out through them? Did she want to break free into the fresh air and sun? Or was she comforted knowing she was constructed of the same molten stuff beneath her nylon skin?

Her Latin roots

The patron saint of chastity, gardeners, girls, engaged couples, rape victims, and virgins, St. Agnes of Rome became a martyr at the age of 12 after refusing to marry Prefect Sempronius’s son. One legend claims she was dragged naked through town to a brothel where all of the men who attempted to assault her went blind. Another says that when she prayed, hair grew and covered her body so the men would not want her. When finally released to die, the
bundle of wood at her stake would not catch fire, so the officer in charge stabbed her in the throat. Blood is said to have poured from the ground around her.

My Agnes likes sharing this martyr’s name though she’s never considered herself sacrificial. Yes, she’s moved everywhere without being consulted, worn dresses she could never keep, heard conversations she could never repeat, but she did it for love, for family.

**Agnes’ nemesis**

“*Uniquely You Shape Pinnable Dressform* is unique for a few reasons. Being made of soft foam means it is ideal for use by corset makers as it can be squeezed and shaped much like the human body. It turns a full 360 degrees and has a realistic bust with adjustable ‘bust string’ to obtain natural cleavage. Several women can use the same form with the use of individual covers! Consumer accepted for 23 years. Your personal cover is zipped onto the pre-shaped body form and becomes your twin because it compresses to fill the shape of the cover.”

The accompanying dress form system pictured in the seamstress’s catalogue is a collection of rubber pieces that resemble petals dropped from a week-old rose. Crop out the draw string bag and advertising text and they become O’Keeffe’s trumpet flowers or numbered lilacs, the microcosm of the feminine blooming.

**Agnes goes home**

We took her plates apart, swaddled her in bubble wrap, sealed her in a box labeled “Sewing room.” We handed her to the Mayflower men with their clipper ship truck. Our belongings went ahead of us each move, and there were always days or weeks when we lived without our own house. We spent our last days in Spain in a hotel near the bull-ring in the city’s
center, living out of one suitcase each. I brought along a few comic books with the same plot of Archie perpetually hounding Veronica and Betty. Except for their hair, they were the same girl drawn from the same few lines. Dumb Archie.

Where we heading when we left Spain wasn’t home to me and my brother, but it had remained home to our parents even twenty years later. Where was my home? Where was Agnes’? From the hotel window I looked up and imagined her with our clothing, our furniture, our records, our toys in the C-130 overhead. She’d be landing in Ohio, we’d be reunited, we always were. I couldn’t wait. Each time we unpacked our belongings, it felt like Christmas though we already knew what each box contained.

**Agnes in Ohio**

My brother took the smallest bedroom because he had the single bed. I took the larger because I had the canopy and matching faux-French provincial. My parents shared the third. No sewing room.

“Did Agnes come out when we went to Ohio?”

“Let’s see,” my mom tells me over the phone. “She was set up for a while temporarily. Your brother had that room first. We’ve been here over thirty years, so as soon as he got married and moved out I took that room.”

“Do you remember when you put Agnes away for good?”

“She came out sometimes. Twenty years ago probably. I made that Oklahoma dress for you, remember that?”

“I do.”

“Then your father made it the computer room.”
I thank her for the information, tell her I’ll talk to her soon. The phone rings five minutes later.

“I made that dress for you. I fitted it on Agnes. I remember. It was your first day of school.”

“Where?”

“Here in Ohio. You was so scared. You didn’t know a soul. I remember I asked if you wanted me to walk you up the stairs.”

“I don’t remember any dress.”

“It was peasant style, multi-colored. Blue with little flowers. The sleeves were short. It went under your bust and then flared out.”

“Really?”

“You said you wanted to walk in by yourself. I sat in the car and cried.”

I remember what I wore that first day: A pair of corduroy pants, a flannel ruffled shirt, a cardigan. It was August and very hot, but I had the romantic notion that the first day of school should evoke autumn. Everyone else wore lightweight pants and t-shirts. They stared at me. I was suffocating when I tied my sweater around my waist to appear fashionable.

I like the idea of wearing a dress better. I like thinking that I fit in more properly and that Agnes accompanied me in spirit as I walked those long, gleaming halls.

**Anges in High School**

I was an average student. I liked to sing. I believed in ghosts. I liked making up stories for my friends and kept an ongoing comic/romance/suspense novel in a spiral notebook I passed to them during class. I took a Home Ec class and baked a cake that flopped. From there I went on to sewing. My first project: a pillow shaped like a walrus face. I cut out pieces of felt for its
tusks. Next, a skirt. I went to the fabric store with my mother and a list of supplies: tracing wheel and paper, straight pins, thread, elastic, a seam ripper, bobbins, hemming tape, scissors. As I gathered these in an extra sewing box of my mother’s, I imagined creating ornate, gathered dresses and fitting them on Agnes. I would adjust her knobs to mirror my broad shoulders, flat chest, narrow hips.

But when I unfolded and spread out the pattern, my throat tightened. What did these arrows and dashes mean? Along which line was I supposed to cut? What was the grain? The bias?

“How’s your skirt coming?” Mom would ask. We were forbidden to work on our projects outside of school.

“Great! A few more weeks!”

My seams were cock-eyed, my hem measurement off. My bobbin thread kept tangling the needle. I longed for my mother’s hands, my brother’s math skills—he could tabulate Yahtzee scores in his head. Or the brain of my father who could dismantle any machine and put it back together.

When I passed Agnes, I refused to meet her eyes.

Agnes at the wedding

She sat on the bride’s side. She knew it was a mistake. When the bell tolled precisely at my “I do,” she muttered, “It doesn’t count. We didn’t hear her say the words.” She didn’t throw rice. She didn’t go to the reception. She didn’t want to dance.

She went home to stare out the window and wait for my return.

Agnes in the attic
“You know when I lost the instinct to sew?” my mother said. “After my sister Marilyn died. I lost interest in my crafts. She always did that with me.”

Agnes went into the attic then, got tucked behind a deflated air mattress and a rusty Coleman stove my parents used when they’d fish off of “Belle,” the boat my father christened after Mom. In the attic, she, Agnes, nestled against the box of my mildewed Archies, my brother’s wood-burning kit, my father’s stack of Westerns, the folded dresses my mother would never fit back into but couldn’t part with.

Agnes and I resembled each other most then. I’d just left my marriage and lived in the attic apartment of a crumbling Victorian. When I gazed out of its front window, I could nearly see the cemetery of my maternal ancestors where I’d often walk, wondering what mark I’d leave in the world.

**Agnes in the shed**

“You still have Agnes?”

“Somewhere,” my mother said.

“Can I have her?”

“That’s fine. What’ll you do with her?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll just dress her up.”

“She’s in the shed,” said my father, putting on his coat. She’d been moved from the attic to the loft of my father’s wood shop, an enormous structure he’d built in the back yard before he retired. It was jammed with his lapidary equipment, his saws, planks of polished wood, bits of stained glass for windows or lamp shades.

I followed him outside into the snow. “She’s up there.”

In the storage space above the beams.
“Dad, if I’d known she was clear up there, I wouldn’t have asked. Let me go up there.”

“I got it.”

My seventy-one year old father trundled up the ladder nailed to the back wall. I watched him in his field coat—he’d bought a matching one for Pepper, his schnauzer—crawl above my head, navigating the beams.

“Maybe you can just hand her to me?”

“I’ll rig her up. Give me a minute.”

Soon she emerged from the small door near the roof. Agnes cocooned in plastic, a rope around her middle, my father on the other end easing her into my snow-covered arms.

**Agnes’ ensemble**

Last summer I went away on a writing residency and when I returned, my current husband and his sons had secretly renovated a spare bedroom, tearing down the rain-damaged walls and ceiling, putting new ones up again. They painted it bud-colored. This would be my room, the first I’d had to myself since that attic apartment twenty years before. The desk faces a window that frames two maples—one blooming, one dead—and the neighbor’s Labradors who run outside on a long lead. Agnes stands beside my desk.

Today she wears the flight jacket my father wore on ship in the South China Sea. I wore it for many years, too, but now the leather’s cracked and the sleeves are fraying. One Halloween it completed my Amelia Earhart costume: Bobbed hair, khaki jodhpurs, white blouse. I wore an adhesive tag: “My name is Amelia. I am lost.” Agnes also wears a neon blue wig, a costume piece from an original opera that I helped children write and produce. Its heroine was an environmentalist, a plain, nerdy girl in a fishing cap who morphs into a mermaid.
Occasionally I’ll dress Agnes in the scarves I’ve recently learned to crochet. I can’t read the patterns or count the stitches well, but I like worrying the yarn, keeping my hands busy beyond the keyboard. Friends make requests for the scarves, and I name the creations as I stitch them. “Clown” is shocking pink and purple. “Sea of Zen” all oceanic blues and greens and lilac. I like to take pictures of the scarves in progress wrapped around Agnes’ neck and email them to my friends.

Agnes’s face

My father carried in his wallet a black and white photograph of my mother taken shortly after she had given birth to me. He handed this photograph to a street artist in Japan and described my mother’s coloring to him, and the man created this painting on rice paper that now hangs on the wall beside Agnes. I like the story of the painting’s creation. I imagine my father pulling the snapshot from his pocket, closing his eyes, remembering his young wife’s face. It’s a romantic notion, I know, one my mother doesn’t share.

“Painting reminds me of when I was a girl and pretty,” she says. “You can have it.”

I stare at the painting. I see myself in the rice paper face though my mother’s hair in it is black and lopped short and she is much younger there than I am now.

Then I look to Agnes, my eyes travelling to just above her neck plate and the collar of the aviator coat. I try to picture her face. Is it cock-eyed or gorgeous, wide-eyed or winking? Is it mine? Is it my mother’s? When I really work to picture it—at this very moment I’m trying—my mind thumbs through a hundred features without landing on her set. For all of my bright imaginings on the page or in the twists of crocheted scarves, I can’t see her face. I don’t think she has one.
The heads of women

She collected the heads of women. Dainty ceramic planters from the fifties. They had delicate noses or wore hats or had bows around their necks. Her Aunt Betty had given her three, and after that, she saw them wherever she looked. She didn’t use them as planters but as decoration. She lined the stairs with them, and creeping down in the dark to lie on the couch after her husband fell asleep, she didn’t even brush against one. Bat vision. Cat vision.

The couch, for example. Though it was dark blue, she could easily find it at night. The cat’s claw marks on the back—those were its stars. What happened to that couch? She didn’t care but still wondered. You could wonder about what you didn’t care about.

For example, what her first husband had said the day after she’d found that woman in the house. Did he still believe it? He’d leaned into her car window smelling like smoke and that lemony cologne. She’d never liked either but hadn’t told him. If you loved someone, you didn’t say those things. Or that she didn’t like his skin right after he shaved, that it made her anxious. He looked too naked like that or young, that pale blue flesh. Like he was a boy pretending to be a man—then what would that make her?

She’d found a woman on their couch. Girl? She—the wife—had come to get her tiger-striped coat. She’d left him just the week before (for good, she thought, but was secretly thinking of returning). She’d let herself in with her own key because it was early and he’d still be asleep. She’d opened the door and there was that girl draped across the couch as if she were a dress thrown off before lovelmaking.

“I’m getting my coat,” the wife said.

The girl nodded without looking at her, shoulders going stiff as if to brace herself. For what? The wife wasn’t going to fight or even insult her. She’d decided that moment never to
return to the house again. She grabbed her coat. She heard him rushing down the stairs, avoiding
the women’s heads.

The next day, leaning in her car window he said, “You know, sex and love. They’re
completely different things.”

She’d never thought that, never imagined that he’d thought so. That theory explained so
much about him. Of course. She felt unsteady like the first time she’d met a boy who didn’t
believe in God. There were people like that? What then?

What had become of the wheelchair? It was tall and wicker with icy black wheels. It
occupied the corner of the livingroom near the foot of the stairs. When things were good between
them, they took turns wheeling it around the house, dodging the furniture.

There were good moments, good nights. Like that murder mystery party they hosted. You
could buy one in a boxed set with character cards and invitations and plot summaries. People
came in costume. She was Charlotte somebody. One friend dressed as the General and wore an
eye-patch and veered around in the wheelchair all night snapping a leather riding crop. Her
husband was professorial with a pocket watch tucked into a vest. Charlotte, the hostess, wore a
slim vintage dress and Dr. So and So eyed her and asked if she were the grand prize. He said this
in front of his wife, and Charlotte bowed her head to dodge the light of the compliment. There
was no killer that night. The mystery went on too long. The clues were confusing, led nowhere.
Still everyone enjoyed themselves, and they drank to the health of the murderer, whoever he or
she might be. The remaining guests took turns in the wheelchair when the General went home.

They’d bought it at one of their favorite antique stores. She’d loved it instantly because it
looked just like the wheelchair in her favorite horror film about the ghost of a crippled child
murdered in an attic. The ghost’s red ball keeps bouncing downstairs even after the man who
lives in the house hurls it into the river. In the last scene, the rider-less chair teeters at the top of the stairway before it chases the man, and the house catches fire.

“They’re not the same things,” said her husband, leaning in the window.

“They are to me.”

She drove away. They’re the same because I make them the same. To have one without the other is too risky.

All the small deaths never avenged. The wife standing by while her husband flirted with Charlotte—she died for a second. That girl on her couch was also a murderer. Years later looking at a photograph of herself that night, the wife understood she had killed the young woman she was then. She was so pretty in that picture. It’s not being vain to say so, she thought, because she’s not me. She’s Charlotte. She’s a suspect. Her face as unknown as those she found while thumbing through junk store shoe-boxes of postcards and tintypes.

There were cards for their stereo-opticon, too—a Victorian-era Viewmaster that tricked the eyes into seeing two images as one. Like marriage, she thought.

“And I know we love each other,” he’d said, leaning into the window.

She didn’t know that but she wouldn’t say so. You didn’t say things like that to people you loved or even just thought you loved.

It wasn’t affection for each other but for the bygone. The women’s heads. The wheelchair. The painted drumset that lit-up. The Roseville pottery. The mohair couch. They kept chalk carnival figures in their defunct fireplace. Twenty years later she sees that the cold hearth stood for the marriage-heart that was missing, but then, she couldn’t know that then because, well, then what?

“I know that we love each other.”
They shopped, they collected. Her favorite spot was an old schoolhouse turned into a junkstore. The owner lived in a trailer behind it where chickens pecked along the walk. The store was unheated and damp, the windows boarded. Abandoned webs. Bugs belly-up on the fluorescent lights.

She pointed to a framed image on the wall.

“That’s hair,” the owner said. His fingertips were nicotine-orange. “They weave a picture out of their family’s hairs.”

A flower in a vase, curls of brown shades, maple, blondes. She wanted it.

“Not selling it.”

There were jewelry cases with “Dust Me” scrawled on their glass. Dressers with hobbled feet. Boxes of postcards wishing you were here it’s so beautiful here it’s like a different world missing you.

She went off on her own through the cluttered aisles and rooms opening to rooms. She lost her sense of direction but found what must have once been an auditorium. She expected to see children’s faces peering from behind the curtains, waiting for their cues.

They had talked of having children, counted on it. He’d said “Whenever you’re ready. It’s up to you.”

Was she a flower that pollinated itself?

Toward the end, in another antique store he’d said, Look! Look! pointing to a child’s rocker. She wasn’t in the room but standing in the doorway. He must have sensed her. He turned and smiled warmly. He prided himself on smiling rarely. She stared at him, at that smile, at the chair, at the blue skin from his morning shave.

I’m leaving you.

In the car he said What a nice chair, perfect, we should think of getting it.
Leaving you.

_I know we love each other_ he said _I was looking forward to having that child._

He kept everything they’d collected. The carnival figures, the chair, the drum, the vases, the wooden secretary, the old ring engraved _Nellie_. He stayed in the house they rented from his uncle who lived above the garage, who cut down their roses when he felt ignored, pretty roses with their names on metal stakes: Apothecary. Garden Blanket. Kerry Island. She took the lamp her father had made.

“Can’t he make you a new one?” her husband had asked.

She left her grandmother’s bedroom set. The dining room set. The pottery. She couldn’t ask for her things. She couldn’t take them. She didn’t care. You can still wonder about what you don’t care for.

Six months later, she heard he was having a garage sale. He had to move. The Great-Uncle had died and a long-lost daughter was swooping in to claim the house. So she went. The detritus of her former life. The cowboy tablecloth, the books, the lithoprint of a woman dashed on the rocks. Another of the woman—what was her name?—who had killed her husband in the bathtub. They had hung that one over the bath.

And the heads of the women. The ones her aunt had given her, one with a newly chipped nose, all of them lined up on the table. Five bucks each. She bought the chipped one.

Funny that I’m buying my own things, she thought. That it doesn’t bother me.

How much for the wheelchair, she wondered.
The lounge singer’s dress

I’ve just come home from a two-hour search for the perfect striped swath for my husband’s turban. He’s neither Arabic or Sikh or Indian but an American mutt dressing as a sheik for Halloween. The Sheik, as in Rudolph Valentino’s title role in the 1921 silent film that made women faint and men walk out at the screenings. I wanted to get the details of the headdress right, so as I shopped, I consulted the photo I’d found online of the Sheik leaning over the helpless-yet-titillated Lady Diana Mayo, the independent western traveler he would try to tame. If I was lucky and didn’t get too distracted by the 60% off fog machines and strobe lights—All Hallow’s Eve was just four days away—I might even muster the patience to grab fabric for his tunic, too.

There was some discussion in our house as to what to call the Sheik’s main garment.

“I need a dress,” Steve said before I went out shopping. He waved the image of Valentino at me, apparently forgetting that I was the one who had found it after searches online auto-suggested Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and Rudolph Giuliani.

“I’ll get you a robe.” I’d already been strategizing his costume and didn’t need advice.

He pointed to the picture. “This isn’t a robe. It’s a dress.”

“Maybe I can find a vest, too.”

“And a dress.”

I snatched the image from his hand. “I’m going as Edith Head,” I grumbled.

“Who?”

Edith Head, I explained, the famous Hollywood costume designer. I always saw her name on the credits of the Money Movies I watched after school. She’d outfitted Grace Kelly, Ingrid
Bergman, Veronica Lake, Natalie Wood, Elizabeth Taylor, every Hollywood beauty. She’d won Academy Awards.

“What kind of costume is Edith Head?”

“Joke,” I said, folding the Sheik into my back pocket.

Costume designing is a thankless job.

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My original plan had been to dress as a lounge singer for the Halloween party. Picture Michelle Pfeiffer in a slinky gown sprawled across a Steinway in “The Fabulous Baker Boys,” except my version would be more like Saturday Night Live’s campy lounge act, The Sweeny Sisters, circa 1982. That’s when I worked as a lounge singer in hotel bars accompanied by drums and a keyboard. The costume I originally planned for this Halloween would pay homage to that girl I’d been—just graduated from high school with no plans except to quit my job as a cashier at Hardee’s. In families that sent kids to college, it’s called the gap year. For me, it was dog-paddling between Scylla and Charybdis.

The costume would also be a nod to our band manager, a man with a Santa beard who insisted I wear provocative clothing. I refused, though I tried to compromise by wearing satin—satin pants, satin shirts, satin blazers. I didn’t think of myself as sexy and wasn’t going to dress like it. I didn’t want others looking at me that way, either. As much as I wanted to embody Mercedes Simpson, the only girl in school who wore a strapless black gown to prom (this in the decade of virginally puff-sleeved, Gunne Saxs dresses), I felt vulnerable and exposed when I showed my flesh. I wanted to know what Mercedes knew, but didn’t want to learn it first-hand. I
also understood that dressing the part would make me have to act the part, and at eighteen, I had barely been kissed. How could I impersonate the sexy chanteuse? I didn’t have the repertoire.

That band manager would have approved of the dress I picked for my lounge singer get-up. It was a Goodwill find—black and silver polyester with puckers on the hips, a deep v-neck, and pleats up the sleeves like the lining of a coffin. A Halloween costumer’s dream, it could work for Elvira or Morticia or even Samantha Stevens with few modifications. My plan was to blow-dry my hair Farrah style, spackle on the blue eye make-up, and practice my Donna Summer in case I got any requests.

“How will people know what you are?” Steve asked when I showed him the dress, which he admitted was pretty cool. “How will they know you’re not just some eighties chick? You carrying around a mic all night?”

Though he offered no alternative costume ideas, he made a good point. Maybe the lounge singer dress wasn’t the greatest idea after all.

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I should explain that we weren’t just dressing for Halloween but for our own eleventh annual Halloween bash. A lot of pressure comes with hosting for so many years. Will people still want to attend? Will the black light still work? Will newish friends get along with oldish friends? Should I invite x who is now married to y even though z (x’s former ex) might show up?

Of course, the most important element is the costume. Costumes. Because it was originally my idea to throw the party—and to continue the tradition—it usually falls on me to figure out not just my outfit but also Steve’s and, sometimes, that of my oldest step-son, though he is usually content to be a zombie or a priest. Easy enough. I might gripe that I don’t like the
costuming assignment, but my Edith Headness loves the challenge of assembling the right ensembles. Going from one thrift store to another to find the stuff to make my vision come alive is an artistic process. This is why I refuse to shop at those garish party spots out on the strip peddling overpriced costumes that flimsily tie in the back and are packaged as “French Maid” or “Cowboy” or “Killer” to avoid copyright infringement. Buying one of those costumes is like purchasing a oil painting from the guy in the mini-mart parking lot. It’s like being in a lounge band.

Costuming as the hostess of your own party poses considerable challenges besides tracking down a dress for your six-foot-four-inch husband. Who do you want to be? More accurately, what costume can you commit to? The hostess’s job never ends, so her make-up can’t be too complex, her wig too tight. Extra appendages (rubber arm protruding from a shirt) can’t be too cumbersome. The costume can’t be so abstract that it requires constant explanation (“Lady Liberty shackled by corporate America”). Accessories must not be too delicate (a Stepford Wife’s tea cup), too awkward (stuffed parrot duck-taped to your shoulder) or require too much maintenance, though I’m pleased to say that my guests happily took turns caring for my be-horned doll the year I dressed as Mia Farrow in “Rosemary’s Baby”.

What about couple costumes? Can your relationship withstand the pressure of being considered cute, even precious? For the first eight years, my husband and I resisted the idea while still brainstorming the possibilities. Bush and Condoleeza. Starsky and Hutch. Oil and Vinegar. Then one autumn after watching Arthur Penn’s masterpiece “Bonnie and Clyde” for the first time in recent memory, we looked at each other and knew. It was so romantic.

When I say we wanted to be Bonnie and Clyde, what I really mean is that I wanted us to look like Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty. Beautiful renegades. Picturesque outlaws. For more inspiration, I studied online photographs of Penn’s film, but also shots of the real Bonnie
Parker and Clyde Barrow. There was Clyde holding the diminutive Bonnie in his arms. There was Bonnie hiking her leg up on a fender, cigar dangling from her mouth. While out searching for those costumes—long skirt, beret, holster, suit jacket, toy pistols—I recalled two other photographs I’d found: Parker and Barrow’s morgue photos on www.criminalcollection.com taken after the ambush that left Clyde with 17 bullet holes, Bonnie with 26.

It briefly crossed my mind to costume Steve and myself as the outlaws dead. That would certainly negate the couple-cuteness factor. But who would know who we were? Would we need to carry around a shot-up cardboard Ford? I decided against it. The next year we’d grab another chance to dress as a grotesque couple: Jack the Ripper and his victim—at least party-goers easily guessed my guise as “the victim”. To be more precise, I was actually Mary Kelly, the Rip’s fifth victim, but I didn’t tell anyone this, not even Steve. I liked this deeper anonymity, liked that only I knew my true identity. Besides, what kind of woman knew the names of the Ripper’s victims without even looking them up? I didn’t want to reveal that to even my closest friends frolicking in the livingroom under their many guises.

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But I changed those original lounge singer costume plans. I didn’t want to carry around a microphone all night or tell people who I was. I didn’t want to go around singing “MacArthur Park”. The more I thought of the Valentino outfit and studied the picture, the more I wanted to dress as part of that period. I stashed my perfect lounge singer get-up in the back of my closet, and started focusing on the character I now really, truly, wanted to be for Halloween: Greta Garbo.

“Greta Garbo?”
Steve was making the bed as I adjusted the burgeoning sheik costume hanging on our closet door. I’d decided to use a curtain as the turban (I couldn’t, in fact, find the perfect striped swath in the fabric store) and to cut off the sleeves of Steve’s striped bathrobe for the vest. The dress/tunic? At a local thrift store that blasts Christian music and keeps a prayer request basket by the register, I’d found the perfect garment for $3.99: A beige, polyester gown, size 20. It was nicely made with reinforced seams and shoulder pads stitched expertly into the sleeve lining. I imagined a bosomy mother-of-the-bride proudly wearing it at her daughter’s ceremony, and part of me felt badly about my plans to deconstruct it. Was I taking the dress from someone out there who really needed a nice gown but could only afford one second-hand? I held it up, imagining Steve in it. Yep, it would definitely fit. But then I imagined that poor hypothetical shopper again, and I put it back. I walked around the store looking for a lesser garment to destroy. XXL scrubs? A nightgown? I held up the dress again.

I took it home. I lopped off the sleeves, turned it around backwards and cut a long slit for the neckline. I glued strips of black felt around the hem and chest to make it look vaguely foreign.

Steve turned to watch me fussing with the costume.

“Nice,” he said.

“Would you put it on?”

“Now?”

“Please?”

He slipped the dress over his head. He curtsied.

“Good,” I said, eyeing the hem. “Now the turban.”

He sat so I could more easily wrap the curtain around his head. I safety-pinned it into place then grabbed the second panel.
“What’s that one for?”

“It’ll flow down your back. I’ll attach it to the turban.”

“Don’t make it too annoying.”

When I finished, I led him to our full-length mirror. “What do you think?”

He flashed a dashing, Valentino-esque smile.

My Greta quest could now commence. I went searching for images. Should I be Greta in “Mata Hari” or “Anna Karenina”? Or should I be more obscure? I found pictures of a brunette Greta Lovisa Gustafsson shortly after she left her post as a lather girl to model for department store ads. Who had Greta been before she was christened Garbo? Could I dress as that woman? Nobody would know who I was any more than they knew that dark-haired girl before she was discovered.

As I searched for the perfect version of my Garbo, I realized the search wasn’t completely about the costume. I was looking for the woman behind the image, just as I’d wanted to know the real Bonnie Parker before I dressed as her. Maybe Parker wanted to know that herself. That infamous shot of her smoking the cigar, leg up on the fender? She told hostages she hated it, when she freed them they needed to let folks know she didn’t smoke cigars, it was just a picture. Then there was my Mary Kelly costume. Who had Kelly been before she was the sixteen-year old prostitute disemboweled by Jack? For that matter, who was Jack? A Mason? A deranged Duke?

I suppose I wanted to bring them all back to life, and what better night than Halloween when the ancients believed the veil between the living and the dead is lifted? When “soul cakes” were given out to the poor who went from house to house praying for those in Purgatory. With
each cake eaten, a spirit was freed. Maybe my costume would be a sweet that could release Greta.

Okay. I admit to getting a little caught-up with the thrill of the occasion, inspired by the plastic skulls aglow around the house. Besides, if Purgatory truly existed and Greta Garbo dwelt there, I don’t think she’d opt to be released having at last found the peace and solitude she’d been craving. Garbo was uncomfortable in the limelight and notorious for her attempts to move about incognito in trench coats and men’s hats. Dubbed the “Swedish Sphinx,” Garbo avoided talking about herself publicly, but a few self-revelatory gems do exist. One of my favorites: “There are many things in your heart you can never tell to another person. They are you, your private joys and sorrows, and you can never tell them. You cheapen yourself, the inside of yourself, when you tell them.” Maybe Purgatory is that land inside ourselves where the unsaid resides.

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“How will people know you’re not just a regular silent movie star?” Steve asked when I told him about switching from the lounge singer to Greta.

Title cards.

I would wear one around my neck—so would Steve—and that’s how people would know who I was! But what would I say? My obvious choice was Garbo’s classic line: *I want to be alone*. I discovered in my research, though, that she was misquoted here: “I never said I want to be alone,” she remarked. “I said I want to be left alone. There is all the difference.” That would be on my title card. I would mingle realities even further. It would be my comment on Garbo’s comment about her own comment!
What happened to those childhood days of ballerina and clown costumes?

“Were Valentino and Garbo ever in a film together?” Steve asked.

“No.”

“All right.”

“But I can just be Garbo and you can be Valentino. We don’t have to be perfectly matched.” I sensed my exquisite plan crumbling.

“I agree.”

“I mean, don’t you think?”

“Whatever you want.” He kissed me on the forehead and walked away.

I searched through my closet for Garbo clothes. I practiced painting on her trademark brows. I tamed my hair into finger waves and typed up her quote in “Nickelodeon” font for the title card. Still, I felt the initial thrill fading. Maybe it was too artsy an idea. Too meta. Maybe I couldn’t pull it off. Maybe I should just throw a sheet over my head and go as a ghost. Or a lounge singer.

I took the lounge singer dress out of the closet. The party was just a couple of days away now, but I could whip it into shape. It was all in the accessories, really. I could borrow the toy microphone of my friend who dressed as Hannah Montana last year. I could find blue eyeshadow by the truckload. Yes, that’s who I truly wanted to be for Halloween. A lounge singer.

When I worked as a lounge singer, I was impersonating a lounge singer. Badly. The barflies I sang for often compared my voice to the mellow altos of Karen Carpenter and Anne Murray, and though I was flattered, I doubted these women ever sang under a mirrored ball. Though I liked their voices and even had their albums, I didn’t want to sound like them any more than I wanted to—or possibly could—sound like Donna Summer or Olivia Newton-John or Sheena Easton, those voices whose tunes I had to cover. I wanted to sound like myself, but I
wasn’t sure what that sounded like. What songs would that girl have written? I didn’t know. Who was that girl up on stage in the shiny get-up? I didn’t know. Now staring at the lounge singer dress, I realized how far I’d travelled from being that unformed girl to this woman who now felt free to dress as she wanted. How liberating to grow into an adult who happily abandons her own identity to assume another for a night. The options. The inspiration. No wonder I couldn’t make up my mind.

That night Steve and I watched “The Sheik,” keeping a notebook nearby so we could jot down title cards he might hang around his neck (he’d pick “When an Arab sees a woman he wants, he takes her!”). We laughed at the Sheik’s gesticulations as he lugged Lady Diana Mayo off to his home in the desert. I was disappointed that Diana’s disguise as a harem girl didn’t fool the Sheik for long, but I should have guessed the drama depended on his peering through the charade.

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Our first party guest arrived dressed in a cocktail dress, hair up in swizzle sticks and a giant, shiny olive sewn on.

“A martini!”

She nodded and pointed at me. “A silent movie star!” She read my title card: Marriage is captivity—the end of independence. I am content with my life as it is, the gem Lady Diana Mayo confidently uttered minutes before falling for the Sheik.

“I was going to go as Greta Garbo—” I began to summarize my artistic process when Ms. Martini interrupted me.

“This is way better. Nobody would have known who you were. “
A devout Catholic friend dressed as a priest in high tops. A conservative mother of two was Kat Von D in stick-on tattoos that wouldn’t wash off for days. Flannery O’Connor arrived in a pillbox hat. Another friend showed up as Lolita, having coerced a guy she was crushing on to dress as Humbert Humbert, who wore a monocle and false moustache and looked more like Thurston Howell, III. The evening’s best costume grand prize (a jar of plastic eyeballs) went to a couple dressed as a mafia king and his gun moll. He wore an enormous full-head mask and a pin-striped suit with inflatable shoulders, she a flapper dress and pistol.

As for our costumes, Steve got shining reviews for his Sheik and even more howls when we posed for pictures wearing our combative title cards. Miraculously, his curtain-turban stayed on all night and wasn’t too annoying. His silent movie star crimson lips occasionally needed to be touched up, but that was small price for the effect. My costume got equal praise and allowed me to hostess-with-the-mostest and dance with Kat Von D—though I was momentarily miffed when one friend looked at my costume and asked if I was “reprising” Bonnie and Clyde. Steve and I won second prize. I secretly forfeited it to Lolita and Mr. Howell.

The next morning, I rolled out of bed wearing smeared make-up, bobby pins still in my hair. The Sheik had gotten up before me, wiped off his darkened brows, and was wrist-deep in dirty dishes. I wandered around the house picking up the party’s detritus: the gun moll’s red feather, a wooden crucifix, the Mafioso’s deflated shoulders lying on the window seat like a jellyfish. I felt a little punctured myself, the way you do when you come home from a great vacation to make your own beds and breakfasts again.

I looked around at the shambles. One of my shoes on the mantle. Red wine on the throw rug. Confetti skulls strewn on the couch. Even our cats, draped across the furniture, seemed hungover.
“I think that was the last one,” I said to Steve standing at the sink.

“Really?” He turned around, puzzled. “Why’s that?”

“I don’t know. It just feels so sad afterwards.”

“Darling,” he said and kissed me. “Too much wine, maybe?”

I sniffed and shuffled back to the bedroom.

My Garbo lay lifeless on the floor. The Shiek’s turban, unwound now, looked clumsily rigged, so obviously a curtain. That could go back to the thrift store, though his wine-stained dress there in a heap couldn’t be saved.

I gathered my outfit and stepped into the closet to merge it with my regular wardrobe. Then I caught a flash of the lounge singer’s dress, its garish splendor, its glitz. It would have made a great disguise, not at all that difficult.

I held it up in front of the mirror. I thought about next year.
Boob Suit

I want cleavage. I want a yawning hollow worthy of a romance novel’s heroine. An abyss where proclamations of love echo through time. A chasm. A canyon. A gorgeous gorge. “People in hell want ice water,” my dad’s always declared, and I’m afraid the old adage applies here: You’ve got to have big breasts to get big cleavage and at forty-two (years, not bra size), I’ve given up hope at last.

A woman like me shouldn’t want big breasts. Educated, sensitive, well-loved, and hip to our culture’s enthrallment with breasts, I shouldn’t care. It should be fine that no man’s eyes have ever lighted on my chest more than a nano-second before darting back up again. In fact, according to my buxom friends, I should be delighted. Big boobs get in the way of just about everything, they say. Their backs ache from the weight of their “girls” and with age comes the inevitable gravitational sag.

But just as women with ringlets crave stick-straight hair and women with sticks covet curls, I believe that women with small breasts would like big breasts, if only for a day. I don’t want Pamela Anderson’s rack but a nice C cup, enough to make my top buttons struggle to close. I’d like to need to wear a bra and maybe even enjoy shopping for one. When my dad quips in defense of small breasts that “more than a handful is wasted,” I’d like to laugh the way one does when enjoying a joke without really understanding it.

I first grew conscious of my breasts only when others did. Frequently mistaken for a boy, I played one in a community theater production when I was twelve. Audience members praised me after the show, telling me I was a talented boy. When I walked into the closing night party wearing my on- and off-stage sweatshirt, jeans, and Keds, I found my mother kibitzing with the
play’s director. “A few more months,” he said in a stage whisper, “she couldn’t have played the part.” Both looked at my chest and grinned. I partied with my arms folded across my ribs.

I didn’t start my menstrual period until I was fifteen (though I’d faked cramps for years to get out of gym), and I felt strange and mildly retarded because of the delay. My mother liked to tell how hers arrived one afternoon when she was ten. She’d been climbing a tree to hide from the neighbor boys when she saw blood and thought she was dying. She ran home in tears to a mother who had refused to buy her or her sister pads. “We used rags,” she told me. “We had to throw the dirty ones in the furnace. Me bleeding like a stuck pig. Imagine that!”

It bothered me nearly as much as standing out among my friends with their emerging waists and hips and breasts and who began awkwardly carrying purses to school on certain days of the month. My best friend, in fact, possessed the body of a grown woman before her junior year. The boys sniffed after Megan. She liked the attention, but wasn’t exactly comfortable with it. Her figure got her confessions of love from her voice teacher and an English teacher, both married. She was flabbergasted.

I felt butch next to Megan, though I’d grown out my chopped hair and occasionally wore a dress. The women in my family were voluptuous to boot. In grainy prom pictures of Mom and her sisters, their hour-glass figures spilled out of strapless crinoline numbers. Where had my boyish figure come from? “Your great-aunt Beck was flat,” Mom told me. “You got her clodhoppers, too.”

The difference between my body and Megan’s became painfully obvious when we toured with our high school concert choir. As new members of this elite group, we feared the notorious “initiation”. Two hours out of the school parking lot, the senior members forced us to wear plastic snouts and order our McDonald’s breakfasts in pig latin. By the end of Day Two, we’d been shoved into a group shower, in our pajamas, and transformed into human sundaes. A senior
soprano’s mother owned the local Dairy Queen and supplied the chocolate sauce, candy sprinkles and syrup for the older girls to pour over us.

Surely that had been the climax, we thought. But the next morning, we were told to enter the bus one by one. Hair still spiked with marshmallow cream, we heard outrageous laughter coming from the windows. Megan and I feared the worse. I soon saw for myself why the hysterics: Our bras, apparently stolen by the older girls and given to the boys, now hung from the luggage racks. I was to claim my bra, unhooking it from where it dangled above the head of a senior boy. That’s when I saw that somebody had deposited pieces of fruit in all of them.

Oranges filled the cups of Megan’s. Two grapes rested in mine.

What’s private becomes public during adolescence. Covert hairs, pimples, bumps, scents and secretions appear as if, since our births, they’d been readying to strike when we’re most vulnerable. It’s when I first realized that my body operated in its own way with or without my consent, and it made me feel angry, embarrassed, and helpless. The most humiliating part of the fruit-in-the-bra episode was not, I later realized, the two measly grapes that stood for my breasts. It was that somehow a consensus had been reached: I was flat. It had been noticed. It had been noted. What my tormentors didn’t realize—I hadn’t even told Megan—was that I’d had my mother buy me a bra just for the tour knowing I’d probably have to undress in front of the other girls (see: skipping gym). Who knows what my peers might have done with that information? It also struck me later that my orange-breasted best friend suffered as much as I did though we fell at opposite ends of the size spectrum. (The new choir-boys got their own torture: I remember one freshman the older boys mysteriously and loudly called the “Bald Eagle” though he had a full head of hair.)

Everybody’s got a tale of adolescent cruelty. If they don’t, I’d be happy to lend one of mine. But what happened with me—and with other women I know—is that it stuck. It burrowed
deep. The pain lodged in those hidden bunkers the hairs and pimples desert when they surface to become our sudden enemies. Was I too sensitive? Yes. Should I have told my tormentors to choke on my training bra? Yes. Have I outgrown the feeling of physical inadequacy I learned early on? In my head, yes, but not in my heart, though it beats strongly beneath my flimsy, nearly-A cup.

In hindsight, not being seen as sexy forced me to cultivate myself outside of any boy’s opinion and regardless of my looks. Many times, I witnessed my friends’ schizo-shifts when they fell for a new boy. If the boy liked the Steelers, they’d suddenly plaster their bedrooms in black and gold. If the boy liked racecars, they’d now while away their Saturdays at the Sharon, Pennsylvania, Speedway. The worst offense: if the boy liked thin girls (and they all did), they went on lettuce and spoonful-of-peanut-butter diets.

Once I got to college, this sense of self turned into a confident bravado that masked my fear of rejection. If guys didn’t like me the way I was, it was their loss. I wasn’t comfortable in my body, but I wasn’t going to let them know it. Secretly, I wanted to be one of those women who flaunted her shape in spite of its conventional flaws. I still admire them—the ones with generous bellies or butts or arms who wear form-fitting clothing without apology, the ones who wear plunging v-necks without so much as a shadow cast between their breasts.

I camouflaged my body instead, wearing layers of loose-fitting, boyish clothing, particularly on top. And I refused to pretend to have more up top than I did. I kept in mind that scene in “Animal House” where Pinto, at last alone with the mayor’s sexy and drunk daughter, stuffs his hands up her bra only to find his hands filled with wads of Kleenex. Nope, no padded bras for me. No push-up bras, either. I would be found out, no doubt. And if I loved a boy
enough to let him see me topless, you can bet I’d already figured he’d be the kind who wouldn’t care about that.

Those few who have seen me sans blouse have made comments that stung, however well intended. In the middle of a make-out session, my breasts at last exposed, one fellow took an anthropological approach: “Breast size, you know, is just cultural,” he offered. Another claimed, “I never liked big boobs anyway,” sounding just like Charlie Bucket, who upon discovering his one Wonkabar doesn’t contain the last remaining golden ticket, says it probably makes the chocolate taste bad anyway.

The significance of these comments, like the grape incident, has less to do with what the boys said than with what I heard. I thought of my sexuality as particularly tied to what I was lacking: an ample bust. I never saw myself as whole. I was guilty of the offensive and dangerous parceling of parts that fashion magazines do so well and, I admit, so attractively. Thumb through any issue and you’ll find articles isolating parts of the body rather than talking about the whole package: Five Steps to Flat Abs! Wave Bye-Bye to Big Butts! Often they feature the “What Men Really Find Sexy” exposé where men—who knows where they’ve found them—confess what body parts really get them hot. There are ass-men, neck-men, and breast-men, just as there are guys who prefer drumsticks and dark meat.

One effect of this glossy dismemberment is that girls and women can find their own bodies so foreign, they don’t want to talk about, let alone touch, them. In ninth-grade health class, I remember being herded into the auditorium with the other girls where a nurse from St. Elizabeth’s informed us about breast health. Breast health? She passed around an artificial bust that smelled like a swim cap. In one breast, a tumor lay concealed. The other breast was normal. “Pass it around,” instructed the perky nurse. “See if you can feel which one is which.” We tittered with embarrassment at what seemed a vaguely lesbian exercise. The nurse passed out
pamphlets that featured arrows on an illustrated breast like on the face of a clock. We were to examine our breasts at the same time each month. I turned red at the very thought. I also remember wishing I had boobs like that dummy’s.

During my first mammogram twenty-five years later, I was no less embarrassed to reveal my body to the radiologist (after I lied to her about my “regular” self-exams). I felt as apologetic as I had with lovers and guessed my small breasts would make her job harder. The lack of significant breast tissue, in fact, made it a painful experience that actually left my chest bruised from the machine’s vise grip, and I’m reluctant to make my next (overdue) appointment, even though I’ve had two aunts succumb to breast cancer. When I think of putting it off any longer, however, I remember my Aunt Marilyn when the cancer had spread to her brain. Wheeling through the hallway, she hiked up her shirt and, giggling proudly, showed a stranger the hollow place where the breast had been.

“What size bra do you wear?” my mother asked over the phone the other day as she drove toward the expanse of outlet stores where cows had once grazed. A touchy subject, this—my bra size, not the cows. I felt myself steel against her as I asked why she wanted to know. “They’re having a Buy One Get One Free at the Hanes store,” she said. “They’ve got the kind you like.”

What kind was that? The only bras I wear are sports bras, the ones you slip over your head and that give women with large chests a “uniboob”. I get them at Wal-Mart for six bucks a four-pack and they last for months. Sexy lingerie it isn’t, but I’ve gone that route. I once purchased a deep purple corset complete with underwire and a plunging neckline, with hooks in the front and laces in the back, but I ripped it off before revealing myself to my lover.
Shopping for bras is more painful than a mammogram. The lingerie departments mystify me. Demis and semis and femis. Water, gel, air, vegetable and mineral inserts. Strapless bras and ones with straps clear as scotch tape. Cups that adhere directly to your skin. Bra sizing baffles me and is nothing short of Trig. I even had the bad idea of going into Victoria’s Secret once, assured by a good friend that they’d have the perfect bra for me. I scared quickly. The sexy, black-clad sales clerk suggested a “bralette” and asked if I wanted help with the fitting. I’d read plenty of articles about the proper way to fit into a bra by bending over and filling up the cup (for those whose runneth over). I knew too-tight straps could actually cause nerve damage, and I knew to get the back strap on the tightest hook because the bra would stretch after wear. The idea of someone helping me fit into a bra, of measuring me, almost made me vomit. I quickly fled and bought another four-pack. If I’d been wearing a bra instead of training pants in the sixties, I would have added mine to the liberating pyre.

At this point, I’ve got two options: Accept my body or get plastic surgery. I confess I’m strongly drawn to the makeover shows you can find on any channel at any time. The blood and guts don’t bother me, the actual lifting of the face off the bone structure a la Silence of the Lambs for the face lift, the plastic tubes sucking out fat that looks like the congealed goop my grandma kept in an old coffee jar by the stove. The breast augmentations seem particularly gruesome, the lifting of the pectoral muscle to insert the saline or silicone. Or slicing the nipples. Or poking a hole under the arm pit for the insert. Just last night I watched a petite hair stylist go from an enviable 36B to a 36 DD. Three months later, she was showing off her new boobs under shirts less substantial than a hair net.

The internet is jammed with plastic surgeons courting customers. These sites show impressive before and after shots, while customers testify to great new sex lives and soaring self-
confidence. “Natural” breast enhancement is also available. These “herbal” concoctions come in liquid or pill form and purport to target the mammary glands. They are sold under such names as “Bust Booster” and “Bra-Va!” come complete with testimonials to sway the underdeveloped.

You can find just as many horror stories. One website called “Silicone Holocaust” shows photos of caved-in chests and physicians holding up torn implants that have leaked into women’s lungs and bloodstream. Another site calling itself “pro-breast” shows a gallery of “non-sexualized breasts,” the evil (natural) twins of the surgically enhanced ones. There I saw asymmetrical breasts and tubular breasts, breasts with nipples like pinheads or uncharted brown islands, breasts of obese women and flat women, breasts with nipple hairs, and even male breasts. The un-retouched boobs were about as sexy as the corn silos that spot the Ohio farmland. I found myself wincing at the shape of some of them, guilty of the same cultural aesthetic I criticize.

The final site I visited was an online atlas of anatomical drawings. There were women with “redundant mammae,” “supernumerary mammary glands” (as in ten on either side) and a photo of two women, one missing a breast, captioned “the unilateral absence of a mammary gland in sisters.” These unglamorous images certainly sobered me. They also made thankful I wasn’t born with tits enough for a litter.

Breast implants are definitely not for me, but nearly 200,000 women in this country alone say it’s for them, despite the potential complications and side effects—the nipples lose sensation, implants do rupture, over half of women undergoing breast augmentation require three to five more operations after the initial surgery. Although no direct link between augmented breasts and breast cancer has been found, studies show that there is a higher risk of brain and lung cancer
associated with women who undergo breast implants. Another oddity to ponder: these same women run a double chance of committing suicide or dying in an automobile accident.

So what is the solution for a flat-chested modern woman like me? The Boob Suit. The Boob Suit will be engineered by the same folks who added 200 pounds to Gwyeth Paltrow’s delicate frame in “Shallow Hal.” Easier to wear than the Fat Suit, the Boob Suit would be just like a bra but with breasts supplied. This high-end rack would be made of the highest quality boob-like material the labs can muster, the fair-to-cocoa colored flesh perfectly lifelike, pliable and pretty, the nipples perpetually erect and pointing right through your blouse. I’d like to spend a day in the Boob Suit and see what it’s like. I’d like to enjoy or despise the looks I’d get. I’d like to run with the suit on. I’d like to lean over my husband’s newspaper and pretend to poke out his eyes with my faux-nipples. I’d like to have to fish my favorite pendant out of my cleavage.

But only for a day. In fact, there should be a timer built in, so us flat girls don’t let the attention go to our heads. Should the alarm fail, though, I suspect my internal timer would tick. I see myself traipsing around Victoria’s Secret, high on the possibilities of bedecking my breasts, turning the sexy clerks into stone with my mud-flap silhouette, when I glimpse myself in the dressing-room mirror. I look confident and hot, but something doesn’t seem quite right. What would I look like with a smaller chest, I wonder? Wouldn’t it be nice if guys looked me straight in the eye without stopping first at my cleavage? And so I take off the boob suit, leaving its perfect, starlet self in a fleshy heap on the floor. Let some other woman try it on, I think, as I depart the shop, deflated but mostly content.
Loose Threads
The art of losing isn't hard to master; 
so many things seem filled with the intent 
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

-- Elizabeth Bishop
In the Fortune Cookie’s most intimate booth my college boyfriend and I sample the pu-pu platter. Wind chimes whirl around us and a lacquer screen depicting a sword fight divides our cozy spot in Smoking from the diners in Non-. While David talks about his day at the radio station, I’m constructing lies to tell my parents so I can stay out later than usual. I plan to lose my virginity tonight.

I’m nineteen but know almost nothing about sex, nothing specific about what’s down there. In there? Mr. Garcia, our high school Health teacher and Track coach, substitutes anatomy lessons with tales of dangling raw steak down your throat to bait tapeworms, some of which he swears can reach lengths of 30 feet. At home my lesson books are the dimly sexual Harlequin romances and my grandmother’s 1890’s medical encyclopedia featuring a uterus that resembles a witch in a ripped gown, hands grasping the ovary-apples. My equally chaste friends know nothing about the body’s nitty-gritty, either, and I could never ask my mom or aunts if you peed and had babies out of the same hole, let alone where a man might insert himself.

The soaps I watch offer little instruction. Lovers hike-up sheets to their collarbones and shut bedroom doors when the deep kissing begins. Still I chew over General Hospital’s controversial story from years before, Luke and Laura’s affair which began as a rape in a disco and finished with vows at the altar. Whenever I hear the assault’s soundtrack (Herb Alpert’s Rise), I get a little tingly though I know I shouldn’t, know love isn’t like that, at least shouldn’t be.

David, my first boyfriend, is Luke’s opposite. Soft-spoken and gentle on the brink of wishy-washy, David bunks in an attic room next to a motel everyone knows is a whorehouse.
Summer nights the ladies sprawl on the porch like cats in season, calling out to the college boys on weekend pub crawls. David’s three roommates have huge voices and bad timing, and twice when I’ve summoned up the courage to have sex with David, his roomies have pounded on the door. They need cigarettes. They need cash. One of them incessantly craves oranges and thinks David stashes them under his bed.

This house of men—David is six years older than me—seems full of mysteries. A couple of times, David goes downstairs to the bathroom only to return forty-five minutes later. Is he sick? I’ve touched the thick scar that runs from his navel to sternum, but he doesn’t want to discuss it. It imparts a romantic, even violent air. Cue *Rise*.

At the Fortune Cookie, David orders egg drop soup for two while I settle on a lie: We’d gone to a late movie and the car broke down on the way home—nothing original but my folks know David drives a piece of junk. *Ladyhawke* is still playing at the mall, and if my parents ask about it, I know from the trailer that the plot involves a rescue and stallions and a lady who gets transformed into—um—a hawk!

As I finally settle down to enjoy my last meal as a virgin, the couple at the next table distracts me. A man my age with an oak-thick neck leans into his date.

“I’ll kill any guy that gets near you.”

His date stares at her hands.

I look at David, who seems not to have heard.

“I just get possessed. I can’t help it,” the guy says.

His date fingers a chopstick.

“Just warning you, that’s all.”
I’ve never heard a man speak like this except on television, never even heard my father raise his voice to my mother. If anything, she’s the yeller and once got so angry—she proudly relates—that she lobbed a fork at my father’s head, impaling the wall beside his cheek. Would I ever love or hate a man enough to chuck utensils at him? Would David and I ever reach such passion?

“Don’t get all weird on me,” says Oak-Neck now sipping his tea. “I love you.”

Our waitress brings the soup. She wears a snug satin dress slit up the back, which makes me wish I had a butt like hers, which gets me wondering what my naked butt looks like and, most important, how I’ll get out of bed without David seeing it after I surrender my virginity.

I read my paper placemat. “I’m a dragon.”

“What’s that?”

“Passionate and fiery, it says.”

David looks down at his. “I’m a dog.”

“It says we’re not compatible,” I sigh. “And that dude over there’s an asshole.”

David shoots me a look to hush-up, then lights a cigarette.

I know what’s next.

I am subject to certain fits when the sky inside me turns dark. Mom says her own mother had “at least two personalities”—one saintly, the other like the devil when she’d force her daughters to pray to the radio. Mom falls into cavernous depressions and during my junior year, she swears she’ll die if she leaves the house. I know I’ve inherited this strain—always the ruminator, the sensitive. I feel a bond with Jinx Malloy in my Archie comics who walks around with a storm cloud and lightning bolts overhead. Planes crash in his wake. People fall from ladders when he waves to them. My luck has never been bad—I often won cakewalks as a child and chance auctions as a grown-up—but I suffer storms of my own making. During tornado
season, news anchors tell you to run into the cellar or dive into a ditch if a twister is churning your way. What do you do if the gale flares inside your own head?

“You okay?” David asks.

I feel short of breath, tell him I’m fine.

“You sure?”

I see Oak-Neck’s knuckles go white as he grips his girlfriend’s hand.

_Breathe, Kelly. Breathe._

What is this? I remember some girl’s English class presentation on monosodium glutamate. She said Chinese places use it all the time. Could this be an allergic reaction?

“I need you,” Oak-neck tells his girlfriend. “I’ll never let you go.”

I throw my arms into the air.

Our waitress comes by. “More tea?”

David jumps up, stands behind me, asks if I’m choking. I shake my head.

Oak-neck rises, not a glance our way. “Let’s go,” he says.

“Maybe we should go,” says David.

The synchronicity of this moment stops me like a fright stops a hiccup, and I catch my breath again.

Oak-neck lays down some cash and heads for the door, his girl lagging behind.

“Might as well bind her feet,” I say.

David grins. “Glad you’re back.”

We stay and with two straws empty a drink the size of a birdbath.

I will be seized by such episodes throughout my twenties. My mother will call them panic attacks, but that doesn’t sound right to me. What I experience isn’t psychological, I tell her, but physical. Maybe my body that night was responding to changes in the barometric pressure. Or to
the smoke David tries not to blow in my direction. Or to our waitress’s perfume. (Was she wearing any?) Many years after that night in the Fortune Cookie, though, I will be sitting in a different restaurant with a different man thrashing out the end of our love affair when the room goes dim, and I begin to choke. My lover wraps his arms under my rib cage and jerks me out of the booth.

Eventually I relax enough to breathe, and we turn to another topic.

Back at David’s place, I call my mom to tell her we’re heading to Ladyhawke. No answer. I dial again. No answer. Mom rarely leaves the house these days except for groceries or to visit her sisters, and it seems too late for either. Dad works midnights and won’t be home for hours.

I head for David’s room, waving to a couple of the roomies, high and plugged into headphones. It’s stifling up here, so David has turned on the ceiling fan and taken off his shirt. Gentle kisses, a few soft words. I trail my finger along his scar and he tells me how his mother’s priest visited the hospital and offered last rites before his surgery years before.

“I threw the bastard out.”

I want more of his story. I want more of him.

The prostitutes next door shout. A few doors down, the Brass Lion Pub booms Jimmy Buffet. I want to relax, to fall into David, but my brain swirls with the broken-down car and images of Michelle Pfeiffer sprouting wings.

“I’m going to call again.”

“Now?”

I go downstairs to use the phone where one of the roomies sits peeling an orange and staring at the wall. I dial and this time my mother answers.
“Where have you been?”

“In a tornado.” Her voice shakes. “Where have you been?”

She’d been shopping at K-Mart when she saw the sky shift to bruise-green, she tells me. The power went out, customers took cover. They watched the funnel churn down Rt. 422.

“Put the news on,” Mom says. “The roller rink’s flat. What have you been doing?”

“We had Chinese.”

I tell her to take a deep breath. I’ll be right home.

David lays naked and snoring when I return to the attic. I watch his scar rise up and down, up and down. I creep up to his penis tucked away between his thighs, a whirl of dark hair surrounding it. It looks as alien as it does harmless. I sit at the window for a while listening to the sirens in the next county and consider the larger world out there in shambles and how meager my desire now seems. It will vanish for weeks before David finally enters me. Briefly, in broad daylight, the prostitutes napping next door. I’m not sure I desired him even then, but it seemed time to step into that adult universe that no more resembled what I imagined than my uterus contained a witch.

The tornado ravages McKinley Cemetery where my Grandma and Grandpa Jones and so many of my relatives lay buried. Mom and her sisters try to convince the National Guardsmen to let them in to see how our family fared—graves have been upturned, mausoleums slammed to bits, they hear—and they especially worry for Maudie Jean, the infant sister they never knew and whose humble marker my Grandpa had chiseled out of stone from the nearby quarry. How will they ever find her in that mess?

David and I stay together for four years. We share affections, but our romantic life doesn’t amount to much. His disease comes out of remission, and I help take care of him,
bathing him and changing his dressings, muttering prayers out of earshot. Who would have suspected love might require this? The perfectly coiffed nurses of General Hospital routinely fell for their handsome patients, but the sick always recovered. What do any of them know—what do I really know—about our private storms?

The tornado didn’t so much as tilt Maudie Jean’s cross, by the way, and I still take this as a sign for the way the world upends our desires and leaves markers in its place.
My Scar

When the oncologist informed me that my hysterectomy would be a vertical, abdominal procedure, rather than the more common horizontal, vaginal one, he apologized for the nasty scar it would leave. He needed to palpate my organs, he said. He knew the look and feel of cancer, and opening me up in this way would give him the best view.

“I haven’t worn a bikini since third-grade,” I quipped. “I’m not going to start in my forties.”

This wasn’t exactly the truth: I haven’t worn a bikini since I was a toddler. I have a picture of my marshmallow arms and legs plumping out of the homemade two-piece, a nylon strawberry covering each nipple. This may be the last summer I ever felt comfortable in a bathing suit, certainly it’s the last time I was ever willingly photographed in one. But now that I have my vertical, abdominal scar, I’m tempted to wear a bikini. I want to show the scar despite my ever-lumpy middle. In the year since my surgery, I find myself growing anxious rather than relieved as the scar fades, and I want to display the scar before it—and my recollection of the illness that produced it—vanishes from my life now that I am “cured.”

The scar on my abdomen runs six inches down the middle of my body, from just below my naval to the start of my pubic hair. Because I have a round belly, the scar follows the curve of my gut, leaning a little to the left from where I’m looking down at it. The scar is flattest and widest where it ends, as if a thumb has been pressed there into warm dough. Just below this spot, the tissue feels rippled and thick, like the underside of an elastic waistband, and I find it comforting to trail my finger across it some nights before I fall asleep.
Most of the sutures used to keep the incision closed were inside of my pelvis, so there were no visible stitches. I was surprised and disappointed by this. As a child, I’d always wanted them and envied the twelve my brother earned on his chin when he careened his bicycle boldly without hands into a cement wall. I was a notoriously clumsy kid, but my scrapes and cuts were never deep enough for sewing up, even when most of my heel got lopped off once sliding downhill on cardboard. There was nothing left to stitch then, so I limped around all summer with a mummy-foot, pouting that I had nothing more interesting or lasting to show for it.

The wide, bologna-colored jag stretching from my father’s chest to his waistband, which he unveiled every summer when working in the yard, also fascinated me. I liked to hear my mother tell how the E.R. doctor diagnosed my young dad with a heart attack that turned out to be a gangrenous gallbladder. I wanted a scar because scars came with stories: they were stories. The desire intensified in my teens after watching the movie “Tell me that you love me, Junie Moon,” in which Liza Minelli plays a young woman facially disfigured from an attack with battery acid. Junie was witty and tragic and had kooky friends, and I wanted to be like that. I wanted a shorthand stroke for who I was. A scar was easier than figuring out the vagaries of my identity. *This* is who I am, I could announce. *This!*

My scar is lilac-colored. When I drink wine, the scar turns the shade of beet juice and is warm to the touch. I can’t seem to get over this, and whenever I drink too much, I lift up my shirt to show my husband. *See how warm?* Because he is a patient man, he touches my scar and confirms how bright and hot it is. I’m embarrassed by my behavior but can’t seem to help it and fear I’m turning into one of my aunts: Marilyn liked to show me where her breast was lopped off from cancer. Edna liked to pull down the neckline of her t-shirts to parade the mass of scars from
her many heart surgeries, one of which left her with a pig’s valve. “Listen,” she would say at the kitchen table. “Can you hear it click?”

I’ve showed my scar to friends who have asked (mostly women) and friends who haven’t (mostly men). Once at a party, I asked a friend of a friend, if he wanted to see it. He threw out his hand and yelped “No!” as if I were about to assault him. I suppose showing a person your scar when they haven’t asked is a kind of social violence, like when an acquaintance details her life story when you just want to chat about the weather. What do you do, though, if you have a story to tell but have told it to everyone already? What if the need to tell it remains even as the original danger and drama have passed, even as the scar is fading—no, because the scar is fading?

How can I make the scar more permanent? I thought for a while of tattooing around it. It most resembles a creek, I think, and the right artist could render a pastoral scene. Cross-hatches would turn it into railroad tracks, a symbol for this past year’s journey. Too hokey. A peacock feather? The stem of a flower? No, I won’t get a tattoo on my belly, mostly because it’s still sensitive—numb, too, half-asleep. If the cat goes to walk across my middle, I flinch. After a long day on my feet, it pulses. When I told the manager of the local health food store that my incision didn’t feel entirely healed, she recommended ingesting colloidal silver. I took a dropper under my tongue every day for a week until online research led me to Paul Karason. He suffers from “Cosmetic Arygyria” caused by swallowing too much of the silver, and his face has permanently turned that blue-sterling of the Tin Man.

I took photographs of my belly as I was healing and occasionally peruse them. In one, my belly’s the size of a woman’s far into her pregnancy. Another zeroes in on the abdominal drain—“the hand grenade”—that I tucked into a sock pinned to my side to keep from seeing the fluid it contained. There is a shot of the incision right after I removed the bandages, another close-up of
two scars—minor constellations—that the drains left, the infected one carving a divot in my gut. In an art class, I used one of the pictures as a model to paint a 3 by 2 foot portrait of my belly, the abstract segments of my flesh in purple, orange, violet, lily-pad green. Fellow students painting landscapes or bowls of fruit avoided me in class, as if afraid I’d tell them what I was rendering.

Actually, one student barely in his twenties did ask what the figure was. I showed him the photograph. I told him about the unexpected diagnosis, the rushed surgery.

“But you’re alright now?”

I told him I was fine though dumbfounded and still a little scared. I’ve seen him a couple of times since that class, and I feel tenderly toward him, as if by telling him about my scar, I’ve told him who I am, though I know there is more to me than that.
My Portrayals

Angel

One of several. White sheet. White skirt. Halo? A saggy-armed woman draws a set of wings from a pile at the Christmas pageant and fastens them to my back.

Mom says she constructed the wings herself.

“They sent stuff home to make them. Me and your dad put them together with hangers.”

Where does this memory of the gossamer heap come from then, and my delight as that woman selects my pair? My shoulder blades arch with the heft of them. I’d thought angels only weighed as much as feathers. How would I lift off?

Scarecrow

One of several. In a cardboard field on a gymnasium stage. I stick wire in my pigtails so they stand out straight. I wear plaid on plaid and shredded pants. I like wearing mismatched clothing, take comfort in asymmetry. This seems now the first inkling of the condition I’ll have when I’m grown.

As one of several scarecrows, I stand perfectly still because

\[
\text{A scarecrow stands on one little spot} \\
\text{and never moves, like it not,} \\
\text{unless the wind blows,} \\
\text{and over he goes.}
\]

On my one line—“It’s a hoe!”—I raise my arm and point downstage. I wanted to be lead scarecrow, but Dick was a boy.
Veronica Lake, third-grade basement beauty pageant

The name sounds like a swan that lives on a lake. What I know of her? She is thin and elegant, while Elizabeth Taylor is violet-eyed and divorced, Jayne Mansfield headless. I brush my long, golden hair to make the waves shine, and my mother proclaims I’m Veronica incarnate.

I wear mom’s crinoline prom dress over my nightgown, hold it up with one hand while sashaying in front of my parents and their friends in the cellar. Which house? I lived in many and hauled the prom dress along until it shredded from too much play. I would study a photograph of my mother as a teen wearing the dress, leaning against a car, my father’s arm hooked around her waist. Dad slim, already balding, Mom curvaceous and brunette.

“I developed early,” she said.

Into what?

I liked to imagine how it would feel not to exist since I didn’t when that shot was snapped but now played in that same dress. It dizzied me to think of the universe threaded together through that gown and the people developing in it.

Oliver

My chief competitor for the lead sings “This Land is Your Land” while I croon the Carpenter’s “End of the World” for my audition. The song is sad and serious, and when I nail those last low notes I know the role is mine.

I prepare for the part by polishing my accent with words like mum and pip and chips and Cheerio. I’m good at accents, a natural mimic. Mom says she wants a mynah bird, but I think she already has one in me. I study the face and costume of the boy on the cover of the album, copy his vocal inflections. I have his hair and coloring now and don’t mind playing a boy since people
often mistake me for one, waitresses and movie ushers pointing to the Boys when I say I have to pee.

Our stage manager measures me for a cap and breeches and a velveteen vest. He asks me if I’m claustrophobic since I’ll be placed in a coffin, and I tell him no, no, that would be fine and fun. Except I never get to lay in a casket or go on stage. Our director gets arrested. No one knows just what he’s done, but mom hears it has to do with children—good thing we learned before tragedy struck.

Nick

In “A Thousand Clowns,” I play a boy Children’s Services wants to yank from his uncle’s custody. I wear a sweatshirt and jeans, a baseball cap on my cropped head. When people come up after the show and call me a boy, I feel powerful fooling them. What else from that show: One prop was a Spanish doll with hollowed-out breasts fitted with blinking lights. And once while learning lines at the house of the man who played my uncle, I glimpsed his genitals. He wore loose shorts and no underwear when he crossed his legs. I examined his face to see if he’d seen that I’d seen. Nothing.

My favorite English teacher, Miss White, co-stars in the show. She wears long skirts and flowered blouses and wraps her waist-length hair in French braids and chignons. I like the sound of these fashionable words, and think her the loveliest woman I’ve ever seen, next to my mother. I want to look like them both, but believe at twelve that I’ll never again come across as girlish like when I played that angel or Veronica Lake.

One night driving me home, Miss White says, “My grandmother died. That’s why I’m so sad tonight. I cried. I cried all last night. Then I watched myself in the mirror crying. Is that bad?”
“No.”

I understand what it’s like to not just look at yourself in the mirror but to search for what others might see there, what they might recognize of themselves in you.

A revelation that night: When I grow up, I’ll be an actress, a walking mirror.

All-school music spectacular “LoveLoveLove”

Our choir director needs volunteers for the opening sequence where wild animals march through the audience. I want to be the monkey because I get to wear a full-length faux-fur suit and a paper maché head the seniors in art class have made. It’s heavy and hot and smells like Elmer’s glue. I feel a new courage and abandon in this disguise. While the giraffe and zebra elegantly high-step through the aisles, I lunge. I scratch my arm pits, gnaw my swinging tail. People laugh and try to see who I am through the eyeholes, but nobody can guess, and I’m glad, certain they’ll be disappointed if they know it’s me in there. I feel alive in the suit. I feel lovelovelove.

Our choir director instructs me to return the head after the show, but I can’t give it up. I stash it in my closet until eventually he forgets, and my family moves again, and it goes with me. I will occasionally take the head out in private to finger the layers of newspaper and chicken wire that the rot reveals. Eventually it will disintegrate.

Arabian Nights

In Dance we rehearse our Arabian Nights routine all winter while awaiting our Spring recital mail-order costumes. I’ve seen them in the catalogue and know I’ll look just like the veiled lady on the cover of my Learn to Belly Dance album that I play my finger cymbals to—I certainly feel like her. But when the outfits arrive, I grow sick. They look nothing like the ads,
these sequined bikinis with fabric haze around the butt and eyes. I’m the biggest girl in class, already feel as segmented and round as a snowman. I hate my protruding belly and walk with my arms across it despite my mother telling me not to. Each girl gets the veil of her choice and I grab the shocking pink one, attempt to fashion it around my middle to hide my girth.

After the recital I quit dance class. I smooth Saran Wrap around my belly to make it smaller. I try to hold my breath to become skinny while I sleep. Gazing in the mirror in the morning, I see a hair’s difference between the Kelly I’d been at nightfall and the one that awakes in my bed.

My favorite bible character party

My Jehovah’s Witness aunt throws my cousin a “My favorite bible character party” for her birthday, transforming my uncle’s basement bar—regularly festooned with Schlitz signs and cocktail napkin drunks imagining pink elephants—into a romper room of silly string and crepe paper. My favorite object in the bar is a set of cocktail stirrers. Black plastic native women with bulbous lips, kinky hair. They stand in profile with numbers—16, 25, 40, 65, 80—on them, each figure’s breasts drooping further to the ground as the numbers rise. What will my body look like when I’m 25? When I’m 80? At fourteen, I look nothing like that first stirrer-girl.

“I’m Jezebel,” my cousin proclaims, welcoming me into the cellar, twirling around. I had given her the Arabian Nights costume, and she looks beautiful in it with her flat belly and dark hair. “What are you?” she asks.

Bath robe. A striped sheet knotted around my head.

“A shepherd.”

Not even Joseph. A type. An invisible.
My aunt’s an invisible, too, at least to her husband, and my mother claims nobody ever listens to her. Is this my destiny? To be unseen? Unheard?

We eat a cake that looks like the Bible and play Pin the Tail on the Donkey in the Manger. My uncle briefly appears to make us all Shirley Temples. I sit at the bar chewing #25.

Detective Oakshott

Kelly is cast as a detective in a department store where the mannequins come alive under a magical sun lamp. Initially, she’s not cast, and she’s shocked by this while realizing that she shouldn’t be. Now a sophomore in high school, she’s begun to suspect she’s not really special and that her early success at acting was luck. Or because she was cute. She’s neither now.

Not getting cast flings her into a minor panic. What will she do with her life? All she’s got down is mirroring. She makes an appointment with her high school guidance counselor, Mr. Smith. He thumbs through her academic folder: Good attendance, B average, non-academic track. Kelly studies the posters on the wall: Marines in mud-hues, Nurses in white, college girls with hair flowing the russet of Autumn leaves. What could be her camouflage?

“Have you been thinking about your future? It’s never too early to be planning ahead.”

“I want to be an actress,” she tells Mr. Smith. There, she’s said it. Out loud. Except it’s like she’s talking about some other girl. Who is this “I”?

Mr. Smith squints. “An actress.”

“Yes.” It’s the only thing I know how to do, that other girl wants to say. Except I don’t even really know how to do it. I don’t know what I want except to leave town and become somebody new.

“How do you plan to become an actress, Kelly?”

“Go there.”
“Where’s there?”

“New York.”

“That’s 500 miles away.”

“So?”

She thinks of that song her mother and aunts like to sing:

If you miss the train I’m on  
You will know that I am gone  
You can hear the whistle blow  
Five hundred miles.

“Soooo.” He closes the folder. “I guess you better get busy, huh?”

But then a change in plot. The senior first cast as the department store detective turns it down. No bit parts for her, thank you. It goes to Kelly then, whose intense relief overshadows her dislike for the role, a “man-ish” character with a dozen or so lines. Detective Oakshott. The name is far from the elegance of Veronica Lake. Is this how Kelly is seen even now that she wears lip gloss and has grown out her hair? She remembers the joy of once fooling an audience into thinking she was male, but she’d like a new power now. What would that look like?

Her best friend M. who lands the lead mannequin role—she has power. Boys slip notes in her locker. A married deacon at church has confessed his love for and lightly brushes her knuckles when passing the offering plate. On stage M. gets to wear a child’s lacy dress and pigtails. What will Detective Oakshott get to wear? Trench coat, man’s hat. In spite of herself, Kelly likes how the baggy coat envelops her body and protects her like that monkey suit did. Soon she discovers another freedom in acting a small part: The director pays little attention to her and lets her act pretty much as she wishes. A new shade of invisibility, this. Another revelation: You are free if no one’s eyes are on you.
When Kelly asks what shoes she should wear as Detective Oakshott, the director claims it doesn’t matter, the audience won’t really see since most of her action is downstage. She decides not to wear shoes at all, then, just black socks. She’ll certainly be more comfortable in stocking feet, and she won’t have to ask her parents for money to buy new shoes. But when she steps on stage for the school performance and eyes her classmates—the boys who fling pencils at her in the hallway, all the dance-line girls with their perfectly feathered hair—she realizes that her feet can be seen, that a detective going around investigating a crime in socks is ridiculous. That she is ridiculous.

She leaps off the stage. She races up the aisle and chucks her coat and black socks.

Detective Oakshott removes her hat, looks around. “Where did Kelly go?” she asks M., who does not shift an inch.

“Where’s Kelly?” she asks the director, who shrugs.

“Where did she go?” The audience looks left and right, shrugs.

Kelly is racing down the school’s main hallway. She has tossed her hat, dropped her pants.

“Has anyone seen Kelly?”

She is out the front door. She is running, running.

*Lord I’m five hundred miles away from home.*
Crazy Horses

One night not long ago, I dreamed of Donny Osmond—the grown-up, Technicolor-Dream-Coat Donny, not the Tiger Beat idol whose face used to paper my bedroom walls. In the dream, Donny desperately loved me and wanted to take me home to his sprawling, toothsome clan. I’d impressed him by reciting the birth order of his nine siblings, as well as their instruments and favorite colors. Donny and I were motoring to Utah when the scream of my husband’s rotary saw rudely awakened me.

The sweet Donny dream interrupted a stretch of far less pleasant ones. On and off for two weeks, I’d been dreaming of, well, feces—poop, crap, grumpies, number two, dropping the kids at the pool. I’m taking one and I can’t stop. Or the toilet’s plugged up, and I’ve got to unclog it with my bare hands. Or the bathroom stall where I eternally squat has a glass door that opens onto a mall’s concourse. A quick on-line search of “dreams of feces” assures me this is a common dream-theme, and analysts offer several meanings. Dreams of defecating, I discover, suggest a huge excess of emotion that needs to be dealt with “before it turns toxic”. Gillian Holloway in “Dream Discoveries” says that “the body cannot survive in good health without proper elimination and evacuation, and the psyche in its own terms requires the release of psychic waste as well.” Some cultures claim that feces dreams portend great financial success. Freud thought you were fretting over money if you dreamed of playing with your poop.

On the eve of my Donny dream, police hit the lottery when they pulled over a red Cadillac Escalade for having no visible registration. Driving the vehicle was Isaac Jeffs. Beside him sat his trembling brother, Warren Steed Jeffs, the leader of a polygamist sect who was also on the FBI’s Most Wanted List. Warren Jeffs had fled Utah in 2005 to avoid prosecution for arranging a marriage between a 16-year-old girl and a middle-aged, married man. The news that
night featured shots of Jeffs in handcuffs, a ferret-like, frightened man. ¹ Women across the country wondered who would marry a man like that, let alone be devoted enough to share him with a few dozen others. The big news shows that week tried to answer that question with exposés on polygamy. Their guests included adult women who had been handed off to grown men at the age of 12 or 13. One program gathered a roundtable of polygamous “sisters” touting the benefits of multiple marriages—they shared household chores and jointly looked after their hoards of children.

Discussion of Jeffs’ church crammed the airwaves. He had inherited the throne of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints after the death of his 98-year-old father, Rulon Jeffs, who left behind 65 children by several women, nearly all of whom the son later took as his own wives. The FLDS had broken away from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when the LDS denounced polygamy in 1890. "President and Prophet,” was Warren Jeffs’ official title. “Seer and Revelator.” Members of the Latter-day Saints Church vehemently informed us that week that Jeffs was not a Mormon. Mormons do not believe in polygamy. Mormons believe in family, in clean living. Think Tabernacle Choir. Think Osmonds.

Like a million other girls in the seventies, I worshipped Donny Osmond. I watched every “Donny and Marie Show” episode and knew all the Osmond trivia. I wore head-to-toe purple (Donny’s favorite color) and still have a photo of myself wearing a crushed velvet Donny cap. I knew all of his songs, of course, but my favorites were those my parents also knew. In a brilliant marketing scheme to hook pre-orgasmic girls on an idol harmless enough for their parents, Donny crooned remakes of classics my mother liked to sing around the house—“Go Away Little

¹ In May and July 2007, Jeffs was charged with multiple counts, including sexual conduct with minors and incest. In September 2007 he was found guilty on two counts of rape as an accomplice. He was sentenced to 10 years to life. He is imprisoned at the Utah State Prison.
Girl,” “Twelfth of Never,” “Too Young.” The Osmonds’ background, of course, smelled Bazooka-sweet. As Mormons, this clan shunned pre-marital sex, alcohol, drugs, even caffeine, and my love for Donny was equally chaste, as uncorrupted as the “Puppy Love” he sang only to me.

In 1972, young girls needed such innocence. Hanoi burned with Nixon’s bombs. George Wallace’s campaign near my home ended with a bullet. And on the other side of the world, a girl the same age as me tore naked down a street in South Vietnam, skin on fire from the Napalm payload accidentally dropped on her village. Along with my purple get-ups, I wore a clunky POW/MIA bracelet inscribed with the name of a soldier gone missing in the war. Sunday nights I checked the rows of names in our local paper to see if his showed up among those men who, whole or in pieces, were brought home. I don’t recall the name of my soldier, just the shadowy weight of it circling my wrist.

The Osmonds were the antithesis of war, the opposite of agony, though my older brother certainly howled in pain when I played their music. But in that year of Donny’s “Puppy Love” and “All I Have To Do is Dream,” the Osmonds came out with an album that puzzled me even more than would their later album entitled “Osmonds Live” (I read the title as Osmonds live—rhymes with “give”—which made me wonder if I’d somehow missed rumors of their death). In an attempt to electrify and harden their sound, the Osmonds wrote and recorded the album, “Crazy Horses”.

There’s a message floatin’ in the air
Come from crazy horses ridin’ everywhere
It’s a warning, it’s in every tongue
Gotta stop them crazy horses on the run
What a show, there they go smokin’ up the sky, yeah
Crazy horses all got riders, and they’re you and I
The “Crazy Horses” album cover pictured the brothers standing in a cluttered junk yard in strange dress—overalls, engineer hats, a limo driver’s jodhpurs. The grills and chrome of trashed cars surrounded them. Jay (the drummer) held up a huge wrench like the kind my father used on his VW jalopy. A cartoonish cough of gray smoke behind them spelled out “Crazy Horses” in exhaust-shaped letters. I didn’t get it. Where was Donny’s girlish face, his helmet of dark hair, his gleaming keyboard of teeth on the cover of the “Portrait of Donny” album released three months before? Where was the photo I could hold close and kiss goodnight? The “Crazy Horses” album cover frightened me, at least the front of it did. The back side pleased me, though its relationship to the front confused me. There the brothers stood in another yard, this one lush and green. Instead of a wrench, Jay held a spade, a rainbow patch stitched on his breast pocket. Donny tilted a watering can. In the background, Alan sat atop a ladder beside a thriving, dense tree.

The sound of the album frightened me as much as their newly-formed politically conscious image. Though they’d recorded earlier songs with guitar riffs and polite nods to their psychedelic contemporaries, the title track proved too much for me:

Never stop and they never die
They just keep on puffin’ how they multiply
Crazy horses, will they never halt?
If they keep on movin’ then it’s all our fault
So take a good look around
See what they’ve done
What they’ve done
They’ve done
Crazy horses

Right after “horses” came the electrified whinny of a horse, created with voice or guitar or bass, I just didn’t know. I didn’t like this new sound. I couldn’t make it fit my image of the honey-toned Osmonds. It felt dangerous and not in the thrilling way of ghost stories or roller coasters. I
resented the brothers for reasons I couldn’t understand then. I felt like they had defected, grown-up without me. I stashed “Crazy Horses” on my bookshelf between “Portrait of Donny” and a Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass album I liked to dance to alone in my room.

Osmond fans still debate the meaning of the critically maligned song. Some swear it’s about shooting heroin while others think its theme is obvious—it’s about air pollution. In an interview decades later, Jay Osmond set the record straight and confessed it was an anti-smoking song. I have downloaded a clip of it to my laptop, and when I listen to it, I still get the sour feeling in my gut I experienced when I first heard it, when I felt suddenly unsafe, exposed, betrayed.

It’s no great mystery, then, why Donny appeared in my dream, all grown up and just as sweet as he had seemed as a boy. Who wouldn’t want their childhood symbol of innocence to remain intact despite the inevitable lowered voice and five o’clock shadow that accompanied his adulthood? That he visited me on the heels of Warren Jeffs’s capture is even less mysterious. Jeffs stands for the adulterated life, a misconstrued version of what the Osmonds stood for. He symbolizes the best of the Mormon religion gone bad. Jeffs’ was a criminal abuse of power, especially over young girls. Donny’s power was to enrapture them and carry them safely to the threshold of adolescence.

But what about the poop dreams? Perhaps that is more mysterious. Was my psyche so toxic I needed to clear out my innards on a nightly basis? Maybe I was tapping into an ancient, universal symbol of the transition that each of us undergoes throughout our lives. Certainly innocent, androgynous Donny became that symbol for me when I was a girl on the brink of becoming a teenager. The sound of “Crazy Horses” seemed to signal the shift that would
inevitably come for me, and soon, a change I both longed for and feared. The Osmonds had
revolutionized themselves with that album. When and how would I revolutionize myself?

The anxiety I felt in my toilet dreams resembled what I felt as a girl in the midst of
violence and change. And it is what I sometimes feel these days among the presidential debates
and another foreign war, the shadow of Korea’s nuclear arsenal, the stock market crash, gunshots
in the neighborhood, college coeds disappearing, trapped coal miners, collapsed bridges, quarrels
with family, dust bunnies, piles of laundry, late movie fees—you get the picture. It’s no wonder I
still need Donny. Don’t we all crave the return of innocence? Let Donny appear, angelic, while
I’m plunging the commode. Let him steal me away for a night. He’ll bring me back, no doubt,
my pockets filled with souvenirs from the trip.
The Cedar Closet

She loves the screened-in porch where the cats prowl and the jade plant thrives. She loves the fireplace even now, especially now, that the chimney swifts are building their teacup nests inside. She likes thinking of the house stirring with life she can’t understand. The swifts’ twitters and moans scared her at first—where are those coming from?—but soothed her once she knew what they were. She loves the wainscoting. She loves the beveled glass of the French doors. Once through these panes she snapped a picture of her husband asleep on the porch. He appeared in pieces—several gaping mouths, several arms limp over his head. She would like to see a picture of herself through these panes. That was one way of looking at yourself, wasn’t it? Through glass; in fragments. Darkly?

She loves this closet most. Because it is no one else’s favorite except the old calico’s. She brushes against Kelly’s legs. She utters a small cry and begins to knead an old winter coat Kelly lays on the floor when there are visitors and the cat gets frightened. The coat is stuffed with down. Does the cat know she’s resting on birds?

That coat really could go to the veterans for their June 13 pick-up. That’s her task today. The assignment she’s given herself. To sort. To separate need from want. She has read articles on the best way to clean out your closet. Does it fit? Is it torn? Have you worn it in the last year? The three most important questions.

She loves the closet’s darkness, its narrowness. She once thought she might make it into a meditation room, empty it out, cover the floor with pillows. She would sit in there and think. Or not think. That’s what meditation was, wasn’t it? This would be a room for not thinking. She is not good with not thinking.

The closet is lined with cedar to ward off moths.
--It must be working because I’ve never seen a moth in here, she once told her husband. What is it about cedar that moths don’t like? Is cedar somehow the opposite of light, which moths certainly do like, of course?

Now that they’ve shared so many years, she doesn’t expect him to listen to questions like these; there’s freedom in that.

--Do they think a light is the sun? Or the moon? Or the mother ship? She laughed. What about that black bug in the spider web?

For a week they’d been watching a spider ensnare a black bug at the kitchen window, its web connected to the dish drainer. Neither she nor her husband could bring themselves to disturb it.

--Don’t spiders need naps? she asked him.

--I guess not if its life depends upon it.

What did her life depend upon? Some mornings doing chores she liked to set her mind to a single question. To meditate but without sitting still. What is Time, for example? Or If I had no name, what would I be called? Or If I were blind, how would I know what I looked like? She liked the cedar closet because it seemed a friendly space to ponder such questions especially on a cool June morning of sorting her castaway clothing.

Castaways. Misfits. Like in that television show she watched when she was a girl. There was an island for elephants with spots, trains with square wheels. It hurt to think of those toys without children and whose flaws rendered them unloveable. If she got her pick in toy stores, she insisted on the animals whose noses had fallen off. If they were missing eyes or had lopsided tongues, she loved them more.

Do they fit? Are they torn?
A pale pink jacket, a slim black skirt, a cotton blouse that never fit right. She easily places these in a bag for charity. A pair of too-small sandals. This—the wool dress she never wore but was on sale. There. The way the bag takes shape emboldens her. Some bits are so easy to discard.

The cat sighs, turns over.

The first wedding dress, for example. That went in a sorting-out several years ago. She’d slipped it over her clothes for curiosity’s sake. She couldn’t tug it past her rib cage and this confirmed, yes, she’d outgrown both the dress and the sentiment.

She was her most perfect size on her wedding day. Twenty-five years ago. She’d lost several pounds without trying; lost the weight as if it were a wallet or a license; as if it had just slipped from her pocket. Where did it go? Into the air? As if she needed the sharpness of clavicle and elbow to remind her that she was alive. She knew it was a mistake to marry him. She was young; the dress was ivory. It fell to her ankles. Sequins clung to the lace like diamonds in a web. She bought it in the mall right off the hanger, as they say. They? How is it that we make their words our own? She didn’t believe in making a fuss like her friends did for their bridal gowns. Dresses like foam on expensive coffee. It wasn’t about the dress. It was about love. You will know, her mother had told her. You’ll know when it’s love.

She hadn’t loved him. Or thought she had but thought differently soon after she’d agreed to marry him. But it was too late now: People had gathered; potatoes simmered in the silver chafing dish; the band was assembling.

Who was it now that first mentioned the bell?

--Did you hear it? One of her guests joked. She sat on the bride’s side. Did you hear the bell?
Of course. The church bell rang just as she said “I will”. She couldn’t even hear her own words. Had she even said it? There is my loophole, she thought. What kind of person would have such a thought right there at the altar?

--That bell rang right when you said it! said the guest.

--Right that second! said another.

She could wear the dress again if it were another color. She tried to dye it black and it came out like ash, so much better than black. She wore it the New Year’s Eve of the divorce. She attended a party with friends. What pressure to kiss at midnight. She felt it as soon as she walked into the party though it was only eight o’clock. Whose idea was it? She kissed the air’s cheek at midnight. The curled tongues of countless horns blared a full minute or so past. A few had sounded even seconds just before.

Had the year actually turned? Was this the new start’s start? Had she actually married that man?

She sent the dress to charity. The man no longer occupied a spot in her heart; why should the dress take room? One square of her heart was burned grass; a bald spot.

Does it fit? Is it torn? When did you wear it last?

--Will you have any donations for us on June 13? The solicitor had asked on behalf of the American Veterans Association. They called every month for donations.

--I think so.

--We’ll be in your neighborhood. We especially need ladies’ purses and shoes. Will you have anything for us?

--I will.

--On the porch as usual? We ask that you put it out before 7 a.m.
Once she forgot to put it out early enough. She’d had it all bagged but when she woke up it was nearly nine.

--We came by and it wasn’t there.

The same caller. She recognized his scolding voice.

--I’m sorry. I slept in.

She knew she should be the one who was angry. He had asked her, after all. Maybe he himself was a war veteran? How old did he sound? Maybe he had fought.

--Will you have it there this time? June 13.

--I will.

--Don’t forget.

The cat stretches its right leg like a dancer. She licks between her toes. Kelly bends down to stroke her. That coat on the left. Fake tiger’s fur.

She last wore it at the hospital bedside of her former father-in-law. He reached for her hand. My son has lost a good one, he thought. Her face is cloudy. Is it the medicine? Is it my heart? Is this a tiger in my room? I lived on a farm. We didn’t have any tigers. We had cats they dropped off. I was dropped off by my mother. They took me in. Said I was Swedish. I don’t know how they knew that. We grew apples. An apple farm.

--I’m sorry you’re here. How are you feeling?

He lost a good one. She was like my own daughter if I’d had one. Except her face is cloudy. She is wearing fur. Nurse, there’s a tiger in my room!

--You look pretty in that coat, he’d said.

Later that night in a motel, the man who would be her second husband said, You are so damn pretty.
Was that it? Or was it awful pretty? He was looking down at her on the bed. How she held onto that phrase. She tried to repeat it for a friend but couldn’t get the accent right. She imagined fields when he spoke. Loving him would free her.

--So damn pretty, he said. It shouldn’t have mattered so much, what she looked like as she lay there in that coat.

--Take off your dress.

She took it off; put her coat back on over her naked body. The tiger stripes were her own.

The cat stops bathing herself; slips into sleep.

That wool shirt of her father’s. Kelly puts it on. Fit? Yes. Ripped? One point of the collar where the plaid is worn to thread. She remembers a photograph of her father wearing this shirt. He was at his most handsome then; smoking a pipe; sitting on a picnic bench. They were camping, her family. In a park in California? She remembers pictures of ancient redwoods. A petrified forest? What was it petrified of? Her brother’s hair had not yet turned brown; her mother’s body was an hour-glass. The white-haired girl there, that was Kelly. How could it be that the girl in that picture she recalls is now the woman remembering the girl then? How could this same grown body now not remember that day in the campground but only the photograph of that day? What is time? If she were not called Kelly, what would be her name? She’d read somewhere that our cells die or regenerate or flake off every few years like snakes or lizards. Seven? So the skin, then, must always change. That is how we forget. Except look at that mark on her arm. She’d always had that small black mole. Her dermatologist wanted to get rid of it.

--I’ll say it bothers you. Insurance will cover it then.

--But it doesn’t bother me.

--It doesn’t?
--I don’t know. I’m so used to it.

--Doesn’t it catch?

--Not really.

The doctor had first gone to college as an art student but soon realized her small talent, she once told Kelly. The skin, though, didn’t it look like a masterful painting? The drawn cross-sections of the epidermis mesmerized her. She could be a different kind of artist, not a starving one. She could perfect the skin and make a living from it.

--It would just take a minute. I don’t think you’d even need a stitch.

--I don’t think so.

--Insurance will cover it.

--I’m sure.

She couldn’t get rid of that wool shirt. It was a net that held the fibers of her father in the petrified forest then who is her father now.

The can-can skirt could most certainly go. She slips it over her head, and the border of its stiff crinoline brushes the cat, which scampers away. She last wore it as a Moulin Rouge girl for Halloween. Pointy boots, feathers in her upswept hair. She tied ribbons to a camisole to disguise her arms a little. She didn’t like her arms, never had. Not because of the birthmark. That square inch on her arm she liked perfectly fine! Her arms were too heavy, the muscle hidden under too much flesh. She was not that unusual. Didn’t all women want to change at least one part of their body? She remembered her mother and aunt grabbing their belly fat and pretending to cut it off. Her best friend in school tried to slash her wrists with a butter knife. That was different; she wanted to remove the whole self.

Kelly and her mother were running a bath.
--I hate my arms.

--Just be glad you have arms, her mother said.

Of course she was glad she had arms, of course! She’d been misunderstood. As a girl she was always being misunderstood. Of course she didn’t want to be without arms. Or to be like that little boy she remembered from her early childhood. He rode around the neighborhood in a toy with one wheel, sitting in the middle of a bright plastic circle. Thalidomide. He didn’t have arms but flippers; his fingers fused as if in a peace sign. It had to do with the war? No, it was a drug doctors gave pregnant women to help them sleep, to help with vomiting. He was mean, aggressive. He scurried in that toy like an insect. She wanted to befriend him but he frightened her.

Of course she wanted arms!

She cried in the bath tub. To be misunderstood was worse than almost anything she could imagine.

So she tied ribbons around the straps of her camisole to cover her arms. She felt fine showing her legs, though she was knock-kneed. She wore thigh high stockings. She drank and danced and lifted her skirt to reveal black bloomers. The skirt set her free; set her afloat.

She wore it again at a Mardi Gras party. She dressed as a chicken, held a mask to her face most of the night. The man who was not yet her husband dressed as a farmer. She stashed a battery-operated button in her bra. When she pushed it a recorded cockadoodledoo came out. Later that night they crept away from the party to an upstairs room. She lifted her skirt; he got behind her. At the finish she pressed the button, which made them laugh so hard they had to cover their mouths with each other’s.
There against the north wall, the blouse of roses. She knew it fit her still because its fabric stretched. Three years ago. It was May. She’d bought it for her friend’s wedding. Kelly was so thin then, but it would still fit now. That January they’d discovered the illness; they’d found its epicenter. Her epicenter? They’d said it was not very bad. They changed their minds: It was very bad. They plopped her organs in a dish and declared her healed.

She could eat only applesauce; pudding; soup. She hated feeling weak. She refused pain pills. Once she fainted in the kitchen having just gotten a bowl of gelatin. It was orange, sun orange, moon orange jiggling in its glass dish. She was so hungry. She took one step: a shift occurred in her head. She called out to her husband and next she was on the floor in his arms, the gelatin over his shoulder like a moon, a sun. She saw terror in his eyes. She’d had a vision of a soldier. That is love, she thought. That look in his eyes.

This is not love, she thought of the first husband at the altar. The bells chimed; there is my loophole. He was trembling. Not once did he look her in the eyes. He glanced at her cheek, at her mouth, even when he said I will. Never in her eyes. She should have run. Why didn’t she run?

This blouse, a mass of flowers for her friend’s wedding. She would be her attendant. The blouse would cover her still swollen belly. Ruffles at the neck and a spread of roses as if real petals made up the blouse. The bride almost didn’t go through with it. What if it doesn’t work out? I’ve waited so long. Is it worth it? If I’m left with nothing? My brothers is flying in from the island. The cake.

Remembering that look of terror and love on her husband’s face, the gelatin moon over his shoulder, Kelly said, “Marry him. Love him as best as you can.”

Was that it? She wasn’t that eloquent.
The wedding! The band! The cake was marzipan with fresh and painted anthuriums. The bride’s mother danced in a wheelchair. A man waltzed with his former wife. Like riding a bike, isn’t it? Her painfully thin torso, ribs and clavicle against his flesh. Why did we? Look at us so natural. You were always so thin I felt like an elephant on top of you. At our wedding you could tell whose side was whose. My side caused the church to list.

A guest brought sombreros for the bride and groom. The groom’s brother made a poignant toast.

--Want to renew our vows? Kelly’s husband whispered to her.

She was so taken aback. She thought she’d misheard. Not a showy man, sentimental but not in public ways, never leaning toward the lavish; they’d bought their bands from a catalogue. Was it the illness that made him want to marry her again? Was it this night? Did it matter? She was so moved by the question she told another couple sitting there. He wants to renew our vows!

The moment she spoke it she knew she’d spoiled it; he’d meant it to be private. She understood that now. She wished she could erase it; spill of ink on a white tablecloth.

Look at her closet. Look at all of the flowers.

These two flowered dresses. Or cover-ups; stores called them that. Simple dresses to wear over your bathing suit. She had bought them at an open air market in Spain. Thirty years after she’d left it, she’d returned to the country she’d occupied as a girl, though not the town of forts and lemon groves and wells where she’d lived so happily, so obliviously. This was Gandiá, along Costa Blanca. Their Spanish friends lived there. Kelly’s husband translated the wife’s poetry, exchanged language lessons with him.

--How much, she’d asked the woman selling the dresses. She showed her seven fingers. Was she a gypsy? Kelly went through a pile of dresses. All thin cotton flowers.
--Siete?

This one or this one or this one.

It was getting so hot. Already nearly 100 and there was still the mile walk to the beach. It would be cooler there because of the ocean, of course. She hadn’t minded the heat as a girl. Her second husband wrote a song for her to sing.

Shark’s teeth sifted from the snow-white sand
Cadiz in the distance like a promised land

Except she could not get through the song without crying, so he sang it for her, sang about being a girl in Spain. Did he embody her better than she did?

The ocean took her then; it made her forget herself. She wore a yellow bikini with seahorses her mother had made for her. The boy seahorses carried the babies. They had pouches like kangaroos. When they hatched, the babies came out fully formed. Seahorses and starfish confused her. Weren’t starfish just shells? She’d found one on the beach. They had been alive? This was its exoskeleton?

The ocean took her. She fell asleep once on a raft in her seahorse suit and woke to find the shore too far away, a beige line, her brother nowhere in sight. She put her foot down. There was no bottom, no ocean floor. She saw Poseidon gazing up at her clutching his trident and she knew he would take her, she would never surface.

Now the ocean did not agree with her. The sun torched her. The dermatologist had taken off sun spots, left a divot above her breast. She didn’t like bathing suits. In them she felt ugly, the opposite of oblivious. Her friend’s body dark and slender in her bikini. Always Kelly had friends like that—dark-haired, petite, full-busted. Like her friend there asleep in the sun. Kelly still in her cover-up over her one-piece suit. As if two equally beautiful friends would be too much for the universe.
Then in the distance, music. A steel drum band. A dozen barefooted men in bathing suits pounding the sand, coming toward them. Her friend woke up, sat up, stood up. Right in front of Kelly and her husband and her own husband, the friend danced in her bikini. Small steps, elbows bent.

--How we danced in Cuba, she said, for she was in exile.

As Kelly was this time in Spain. Exiled because she’d lost the language, the ocean, picked up tatters: pantalones, pulpo, guitarra, naranja, amor. ¿Dónde está el bañot, she asked the waiter. ¿Cómo estás? A violinist came to the table. Her husband asked him for a song. What was it? A sentimental tune. Her friend in a strapless red dress got teary-eyed. Children climbed monkey bars on the beach. Drunken lovers littered the sand.

That night in bed, her husband said, She told me she’s in love with me. She wants me to be her lover.

In the courtyard the sound of dripping water. A suit hanging out to dry, ocean collecting on the floor.

--Am I invisible?

--I told her I love you.

Do they fit? Are they torn? When did she wear them last?

Kelly hangs the cover-ups on her bedroom door to air. How can she hold against them what they witnessed? The friend wrote, Please forgive me. My next book is dedicated to you. To me? To us both? Who am I if not Kelly?

The cat stretches. Kelly reaches for the mandarin jacket, holds it against her to gauge where the cuffs land. Naranja. Like the sun. Yes, she remembers, that is when I went to a party as a Japanese girl.
Thank-You’s

“Let us rise up and be thankful, for if we didn't learn a lot today, at least we learned a little, and if we didn't learn a little, at least we didn't get sick, and if we got sick, at least we didn't die; so, let us all be thankful.” ~ Buddha

Dear Aunt Flo,

Since the moment you unexpectedly arrived and stained that handmade quilt when I was fourteen, I’ve hated you. Dreaded your arrival every month. Called you the curse though I never believed I was the daughter of that mythical Eve. When I read that my period connected me to the tides and the moon and all that—no, that was too nebulous for me. My periods made me a woman? Nope. My heart, my sympathies, my love for all sentient beings (on most days), that’s what makes me a woman. I’m sorry, Aunt Flo, but I’ve always held you in disdain.

Twenty-nine years. That’s 1713 days of my life bleeding, give or take.

I wanted you out of my life, Aunt Flo, as if you were as real as my flesh and blood Aunt Edna who never seemed to like me no matter how hard I tried, whose dirty looks hurt though I could never pinpoint what I’d done.

So I went to the doctor to see how to put an end to you.

You who caused me so much misery, who seemed so unnecessary (since I had no child and never would), you led the doctors to my disease. Everything fell into place. The preliminary biopsy. The dilation and curettage. The diagnosis. The image of the cancer blooming.

I guess to speak of it as a pretty thing, a flowering, is a little cheesy, a little romantic.
Now here I am without a uterus and you get the credit, Aunt Flo. Your swan song pretty much saved my life.

Still, I have to say I don’t miss you. When the tampon commercials come on with their smiling girls in white capri’s kicking it up on the dance floor or leaping over fire hydrants, I sigh in relief. I have given away my unused boxes of pads. I’m planning a ritual tampon burning. I’ll invoke you, Aunt Flo, sister of my mother and hers and hers all the way back to that first storybook blood of Eve, whose fig leaf, I bet, couldn’t stop her tide.

I hope I don’t seem ungrateful.

Thank you.

Kelly

* 

Dear DMXI-MRI technician,

I hope this gets to you. I don’t remember your name. You attended to me on the morning of January 7. You probably don’t remember. My asthma kicked in I was so scared. You let my husband come in to be beside me—long hair, glasses. He was writing in a notebook, poetry, sitting there next to the machine. You probably don’t get too much of that.

About halfway through you asked if I had to go to the bathroom. You said you could see my bladder getting fuller and fuller. I didn’t know how I could get through the next hour you told me it would take.

In the booth, you showed me myself. The images of my bladder expanding like a new planet. I saw my ovaries. My uterus. I looked at the images carefully, quickly, looking for a sign of the disease. What did you see? I wanted to ask but knew even if you saw the mutant cells you wouldn’t be allowed to tell me.
So thank you for letting me get up to go to the bathroom. It made my day a little easier, a little more human as I sat in that humming and thumping machine. Thank you for letting me view that strange picture of my insides for what would be the last time.

Sincerely,

Kelly Bancroft

*

Dear Guitarist in Room 312,

We never did meet, but I want to thank you for that infernal song you played for three hours over and over and over, never getting any better. I listened to you—no avoiding it!—through the walls of the hotel room next door, and you frustrated me to no end. Infuriated me. Your not-getting-it-right felt like a comment on my future that night before surgery an hour from home and preparing to be cut upon by the acclaimed oncologist.

At the time, I hated the song—what was it? I hated you. I hated that ridiculous hotel with its former grain silo rooms, its winding, joke hallways. No corners to hide in or to trap the dark. I felt like I was wandering around in my own cells. Most of all, I hated your hope that you would get those chords right. I hated that the next morning when I would be under, you’d probably still be hammering at that song.

I watched the Discovery Channel to drown you out. I watched re-runs of Roseanne but even the laugh track couldn’t cover you. Why didn’t I call the lobby? Why didn’t I have the heart? Now I know that your playing distracted me, helped me to leave the circling in my own head. Your blasted guitar brought back the memory of my own lessons when I was a girl. They didn’t last long—my fingers hurt, I complained. I wanted to be a rock star overnight. I learned
five measures of “Fire and Rain.” I didn’t have it in me to work through the uncertainty of my
talent, of being average with painful fingers, and I let my guitar rot.

I’m sorry I almost knocked on the wall to quiet you. I’m sorry I didn’t appreciate you at
the time, Guitarist in Room 312. But I appreciate you now.

All the best,

Kelly Bancroft

*

Evil Nurse,

Thanks so much for not changing my catheter bag when I asked.

Thanks for not answering my alarm for 45 minutes. Oh, and for telling me I had to walk
but not offering to help.

Thanks for using my bathroom all night when I was not quite sedated (I recognized the
key-jingle of your walk).

I hope you get this. I mean, I know you’re busy and—as you said—I’m not the only
patient on your floor but, hey, thanks so much.

Kelly

*

Dear Dr.’s Wells, Morton, Jackson, Simpson and Long:

Thank you so much for the invention of anesthesia!

I understand there’s some debate about who gets the credit, so I’m thanking you all.
Does it really matter who managed to put an end to the crazy pain of so many? Alcohol and
opium and cannibus and strong-arming only did so much to keep an amputee still. Then you
guys come along and change the course of human suffering—not to mention the nitrous oxide parties.

I was given ether when I was a child getting my tonsils out. I remember seeing pigeons flying around the surgery, which had turned purple like my brother’s bedroom when he flipped on his black light. I counted down from 100, got to 98 and was out. When I awoke, my mouth tasted like a muffler and I threw up for what seemed hours.

Things are better now, though your invention still boggles my mind: If all of our sensations are temporarily taken away where do we go then? Where do those lost hours collect? Who are we when we’re feeling nothing? Are we always just our bodies—urine output, blood pressure, respiration, temperature? Why doesn’t that seem like enough?

So many questions, dear doctors. If you were here, I’d sit you down and ask you. I guess I’ll just have to heartily thank you instead.

Thank you very, very much.

Kelly Bancroft

*

Dear Verdelle,

I want to thank you for your kindness. You probably don’t remember me. You probably assist 100 patients a week. I bet you’re as kind to them as you were to me.

That late night at my bedside, you told me about the promise you made to your beautician aunt. If you were going to be a nursing assistant, she said, you must never let a woman walk down the hall looking like a mess. I was quite a mess when you came in. You combed my hair—do you remember? Three day’s worth of snags. You got them all out and gave me a ponytail. You insisted.
Then you walked me down the hall. I hadn’t gotten up yet but you said I had to prove I could walk if I was going to go home. I wanted to go home.

Now I’m home and thinking of you and your kindesses. My house is old and drafty. We have large rooms and a fireplace. When it isn’t lit, it’s an open mouth coughing up winter. Nobody’s home today but me and the cats. I bet if you were here I’d feel so much better. And not just because you could give me my shots and make me tea. But because you are a good soul and I believe in the Soul. Plus, my hair hasn’t been washed in two weeks. Maybe you could help me with that, too.

Thank you, Verdelle.

P.S. I think you should be go on to nursing school like you said you might. You’d make an excellent one.

Sincerely,

Kelly Bancroft

* 

Dear Chris,

I received the books in the mail a few days ago. Thank you. They definitely look like ones I’ll enjoy, and I should certainly have time to read them over the next month or so (they’re saying 6 weeks, but I’m shooting for less).

I’d planned to get a lot of reading and writing done, actually. Homebound in winter, I’m covered in blankets and sitting a foot away from the extra heater we bought—I think these awful chills are lingering effects of the anesthesia. I usually have a notebook and a pile of books beside me. Your two are now on top, in fact, inviting me.
But I’m not getting to any of the books. I’m not writing, either. A few notes here and there, mostly jotting down measurements of fluids and milligrams of meds. I’m watching television instead. Bad television. Lots of it. Re-runs and Lifetime Channel Viewer’s Choice movies. I watched “Planet of the Apes” the other night—the original with Charlton Heston—hadn’t seen that since I was a kid. I didn’t realize how powerful it was, how cynical. I also watched a documentary about Countess Elizabeth Bathory, murderess of hundreds of young women so she could remain youthful by bathing in their blood. These are the oddities that capture me lately, that require nothing of me but that passive state of watching.

But books, good books, literature like you’ve sent me, like the ones on my shelves? Like the ones we read when we were English majors and felt unexpectedly understood, as if a guest from the past had described our hearts? Those books, the talent, that stirred us to become writers? I don’t seem to have the energy—courage?—for great literature right now. Maybe it’s because I feel so keenly that I’m the protagonist in my own unfolding story right now.

Another fact I have to confess: These writers, these women who have written the books you’ve sent me, I look at their pictures on the dust jackets and see how much younger than me they are. The good schools they attended, the credits to their names. I remember where I thought I’d be at this age—my own book by the time I was thirty. Fame. At least a little. I can’t help but think lately about how much life I may or may not have ahead of me, if the illness is as advanced as they’re supposing.

Okay, I’m getting morbid now. This note has gone astray.

So thank you for the books. I know I’ll enjoy them when I have the focus and gumption again. “Who’s the Boss” is coming on in a few minutes, and I plan to join the millions of other watchers out there who are biding their time.

Love,
Dear Ira Levin,

I’m your biggest fan, truly, and I want to thank you for your many masterpieces, not the least of which is “The Stepford Wives”, which I just viewed tonight for the umpteenth time. My friends were over to visit me. I’ve recently had an operation and can’t get out of the house. They asked if they could come over for a movie night, my pick. They’d bring the pizza. And so it was “Stepford Wives”—the original, not the crappy remake.

My favorite part is toward the end when Joanna finally sees her robot self—the one she was being sketched for, the one for whom she was unknowingly reciting the alphabet so her voice could be simulated. Joanna walks into that horrible house and sees her other self, the self in the mirror brushing her perfect hair, her plasticized breasts at attention under her negligee. The ultimate Joanna, the version all of Stepford wanted her to be. That’s when the real Joanna knows she’s in for it, when she realizes her life on earth, in Stepford, is ending.

When I was a girl, I was mesmerized by the film, terrified by it. I wondered if there was this other me out there, a perfect, robotic me. An obedient and beautiful me who always flawlessly enunciated the suitable words. What would be like to meet my other self, to find my exquisitely fashioned self reflected there in the mirror? What would it be like talking to my synthetic me?

Now that my friends have gone tonight, I’m thinking of that other self again, that manufactured self. I’ve felt like that lately. All of the unknown hands on me. All of the tests and wires and images and cold surfaces—stethoscopes, x-ray machines, the arms of waiting room chair, limp handshakes. The breeze of lab coats.
What happened to Joanna’s soul when Stepford sacrificed her for that artificial self? Who was this new Joanna if she never aged or got sick or complained or loved or was grateful?

Here I am asking you these questions when all I really meant to do was to thank you for Stepford Wives. And for Rosemary’s Baby, a very close second.

Your seriously greatest fan,

Kelly Bancroft

* 

Dear Amy Washington, third-year NEOUCOM student,

We never formally met but you assisted Dr. J. in surgery. I found your name in the records. It feels odd having never met the person who lifted my organs and cut my tubes and shifted my bladder. But then maybe you were like the pretty assistants in General Hospital who expertly hand the brilliant surgeon his scalpel and don’t do the real dirty work?

Maybe you were one of the blue masks leaning over me just before I fell away.

Maybe we’ll meet again, but I doubt it. I’m sure you wouldn’t recognize me even if we did. Did you even see my face?

No. You weren’t removing my face.

I assume the surgeons get all the credit in these situations, so I wanted to make sure to thank you for your part.

Sincerely,

Kelly Bancroft

*
Dear Grandma Bancroft,

Rhoda. Mother of my father. I never met you. Years before I was born, you were gone, gone before my father became a man. Years, too, before we even saw a photograph of you, it hurt my father so much to remember. There wasn’t one in the house. I was in my twenties when I finally saw your face in an image my brother and I unearthed. There I was. Same eyes and cheeks. Same braid.

I grew up in the shadow of your tumor, Rhoda. All I knew of you: You were fifty-six. They took the mass out of your pelvis in May. In August it had tripled and suffocated you. You stood on the front porch bleeding. My father, your son, told us for the longest time it was stomach cancer. He’d gone to deliver papers that day. When he returned, you were gone.

When the medical professionals have asked for my history these last two months, I tell them what I now know. The cancer was in your uterus, as it was in mine. Your medical records are long gone—I’ve tried to find them—but my father says that’s what it was. Uterine. I’m not sure how he knows this. Nobody talked about it, not even his sister, who is now dead. Maybe he doesn’t know this for sure but is trying to put together a story to make some sense of his mother’s illness, his daughter’s. When they tell me I’m too young for this disease, that I don’t fit the profile, I tell them about you. They draw a circle on the page and a line connecting us.

I’ve learned I’m going to be alright. Your fate won’t be mine—at least not likely. In 5 years when I’m officially out of these woods, I will be nearly your age when you died, although because I never knew you living, you’ve never really felt dead to me.

Once I dreamed I was riding in a car on a date with my father when he was just a teen. White curls, blazing eyes. We looked alike but nobody seemed to notice or think it strange. He was taking me to your house on Furnace before going to a dance. He wanted me to meet you, but you wouldn’t come out of the house. I woke up confused, uncertain about where or who I was.
Grandma, thank you for your son. Thank you for these faulty cells that make me who I am, though who that is I can’t quite yet say.

Love,

Kelly
In Janus
January

Again I reply to the triple winds
running chromatic fifths of derision
outside my window:
Play louder.
You will not succeed. I am
bound more to my sentences
the more you batter at me
to follow you.
And the wind,
as before, fingers perfectly
its derisive music.

--William Carlos Williams
January 2008
The patient is a 43-year old G0 P0 female who began having heavy prolonged menstrual periods. She saw Dr. C., gynecologist, to talk about a NovaSure endometrial ablation procedure. Dr. C. performed an endometrial biopsy on 12/23/07.
January 3

While waiting for two hours to see the gynecologist, Steve and I play hangman, read maternity magazines, watch maternity infomercials. We run into an acquaintance of mine who tells me that she’s pregnant.

“Are you expecting?” she asks me.

“It’s a nope.”

I was, of course, just not in the way she meant.
January 4

How do I talk to people about this? What do I say? Who do I tell? I worry about worrying people. I want to underplay the possibilities. I want to make things alright. Cancerous spots on the body are talked about in terms of boundaries—are they clear? Are they murky?

I’ve never been good with boundaries.
January 6

I tell C. about the situation in an email. When she was diagnosed with breast cancer, we walked a labyrinth together in the parking lot of a church.

I have ordered a meditation cd to help me relax.

I think I might need a labyrinth.
January 7

Yesterday, D. said she'd put me on the church's prayer list. I said that would be fine. Really it is more than fine to think that folks who don't even know me are wishing for my good health and have faith in their combined efforts. They trust that they are being heard if only by each other.
January 8

Last night I dreamed the results of my biopsy were sent to my house. The gynecologist had filled out a series of boxes corresponding to what she saw and what she said she believed. In the Stage 3 box, she had drawn a squiggly line.

She also sent a pamphlet for a Cleveland hospital where I would have my surgery. Photographs showed a communal kitchen and living room. Rules about cleaning up after myself and using the refrigerator were conspicuously posted.
January 9

The MRI clinic takes Visa and Mastercard. They have this clearly posted. It's good to know that people uncertain about their futures can put off paying for their tests.

The MRI machine made a thousand different sounds today. I heard "my wife, my wife, my wife" and "mommy, mommy, mommy." Steve, sitting beside the machine, heard "money, money, money." I also had a hard time keeping myself from singing to make a chord with the notes the machines made.

A visualization to keep me from going crazy: My dead cat, Israel, walking up on top of me, lying down and sleeping. I felt the weight of him.

The attendant asked me if I had to pee. When I said I did, she let me get up. She showed me the on-screen image of my bladder getting huge, huge. Staring at it, I quickly looked for "signs" of my illness. I saw the black cervix, the white knobs of my pelvis and my spine. I saw my uterus.

Tonight it makes me sad to think that all of that will be taken out of me. That there will be an empty space there. It's a radical notion, isn't it? That organs can be taken from your body and you can still function. And that I will leave the hospital with the body of a post-menopausal woman.
January 10

The language of cancer scares me. Survival, stages, cells, invasions.

I must quit looking at uteruses (uteri?) on-line, diseased and pristine, before’s and after’s.
January 11

I am suddenly concerned about Steve falling in love with another woman when I am gone.
January 12

The MRI results came back. The cancer, it appears, is contained in the uterus. I didn't realize the weight there was to not knowing the extent of the cancer. I feel alive again, my feet on the earth again. I had put myself into a survival mode, trying to brace myself for whatever the worst might be.

I told Steve for the first time today that I worried I was going to die. I hadn’t been able to say it, only thought it, afraid I would distress others.

At work, everyone was so happy about the good diagnosis. K. baked me a uterus cake out of red velvet chocolate. Fallopian tubes and all. I was going to save it—like a piece of wedding cake—to finish after surgery, but I think I'll have a ritual tampon burning then instead.
January 13

I am feeling much more positive lately about all things, understanding that the energy to be negative hurts my body. I am trying to pay attention to what stress feels like in my body and to avoid it. I need to segue this illness into making changes in my spirit and body.

My shopping impulse is changing—at least for clothes. This is strange. What to put in the empty space that clothes-shopping sometimes fills?

Books, beads, a birdhouse.
The patient was referred to Dr. J., gynecologic oncologist, for further workup and definitive therapy.
January 15

Today we went to the oncologist in Akron. I was taken into the room by an assistant, a heavily made-up woman with bleached hair. She took my medical history and asked about birth control. Steve was in there with me. I told her he’d had a vasectomy, and she went into detail about helping with her own husband’s vasectomy, clipping the vas deferens right there in the office.

The oncologist was a serious, focused man with a youthful face. He asked how he could help me, and I immediately understood he didn’t know why I was there. I told him that in Youngstown I’d been diagnosed with uterine cancer, and he apologized that he hadn’t had time to look at the records that had been sent to his office beforehand. He did so right then, circling and highlighting items, changing the color of his pens as he did so. We sat and watched and waited.

He laid out the problem for us: Though it *appeared* on the MRI that the cancer was in the uterus only, it was almost impossible to tell for certain. “It’s just shadows,” he said. Not until he could see and feel the uterus would he be able to know for sure. He then went into an explanation of the types of cells that are commonly found in uterine cancer (also called “endometrial” cancer, he said) outlining the first (Grade 1) and the third (Grade 3, the most serious). I assumed that because he seemed to be saving Grade 2 for last, that this was what I had.

Wrong.

It seems one of the types of cell present in my biopsy is clear cell. Because of its particularly aggressive and invasive nature, he said, he would have to grade the tumor as a 3.

What happened to Grade 2, I wanted to ask him. Didn’t he know the way jokes are told? That you always save the best bit for last?
He went into detail then about how Dr. C. could not do this surgery, despite what I’d been told. “She knew that,” he said. He explained survival rates, that chemotherapy and radiation might be needed. He would examine my organs while I was still under so that they could determine how many lymph nodes to take. He explained how he would dissect the nodes around the urethra, talked about blood vessels and nerves and ways to repair them. It would still be some time before they could stage it.

Steve asked if removing the nodes from around my leg would affect my walking. Sometimes there is some minor nerve damage, lack of feeling, the doctor said, but it should be fine. My condition was “urgent”, though not “emergent,” he said. He would get me in as soon as possible, hopefully in a week. I would go into a surgically induced menopause. He’d put me on hormone therapy.

When the surgeon asked us if there was anything else he could help us with, I asked him for a martini. He didn’t laugh. Later in the car, Steve and I agreed that it’s probably best not to have a surgeon who laughs easily.

Back home I tried to stay focused, positive, tried not to jump online and look at the five-year survival rate of this grade (58%). Or that clear cell shows up in about 5% of women (ages 65-70) with uterine cancer and is likely to recur. How badly it feels in this case to be considered rare.
An endometrial biopsy revealed a “poorly differentiated grade III adenocarcinoma of the endometrium” with “focal clear cell changes.”

Because of the bad prognostic cell type, the patient was offered a radical hysterectomy with bilateral salpino-oophorectomy and complete bilateral pelvic lymphadenectomy and periaortic lymphadenectomy.
I’m trying to decipher between my fears and my facts and my instincts.

When Steve left the house this morning, I lay down in the dining room and cried. I hadn’t realized until today how I’d always imagined myself as an old woman. I’d pictured myself widowed and living alone with a bunch of animals surrounding me, fairly healthy, reading, writing.

I have never thought I might die early, young, like this.
January 17

C. says she has books for me that had been useful to her. T. sends me “radiant health”. L. says she will pray me right into healing. V. sends me an email about the “white light of Christ” and we discuss what a good mantra might be, who might be a good deity to pray to.

I find White Tara, the Buddhist goddess of compassion and longevity. I make a rosary for her.

No man I’ve talked to has offered any kind of prediction about my health based on their feelings, but I am struck by how my female friends so comfortably use the word—I have a feeling this is going to be fine. I feel it.

Too many times my feelings have been wrong—perhaps because I feel too often or too much.
January 18

In the chiropractor's office today, I stare at the little plastic skull opening and closing in the fish tank.

I can’t stop seeing my friend John. The last days of his life (he just turned 40), his body had become nothing but bones in his bed. The cancer spread so fast, he was gone in five months.

Where will I be in five months?

We had his memorial in late November. It is January.

I wonder if there will be a memorial soon for me.

In the bathroom at school, the tampon machine reads “Empty.”
January 19

Dreamed last night that the surgeon opened me up but refused to operate because I was filled with tangles of silly string.

I think I will get a tattoo that works with the scar. I will start thinking of designs. Maybe leaves around the line? A feather? A bridge?
January 20

Went to a hockey game last night to get my mind off the upcoming surgery. Afterwards in the parking deck, Steve was acting like Superman and leaping over the dividing walls. I decided to go over one of them, too, but I misjudged the distance to the ground and fell hard, bloodying my hands and knees, ripping my pants.

The fall stunned and upset me. I felt so vulnerable and lost, as if I didn’t know how to treat my body properly, didn’t know how it worked in the world. It reminded me of when I was a kid and used to fall and get banged up so often, the hospital questioned my mother about abusing me. The fall also hurt a lot. I tried to work with the pain, accept it, incorporate it, knowing I would need to do that in a few days, too.
January 21

Yesterday on the phone my parents wondered if the doctor might cancel surgery because of my knees—risk of infection? My knees are red and swollen and throbbing. I feel like an idiot thinking that I might actually jeopardize my surgery. My father tells me to remember that I am 43, not 12.

My knees pounded and pounded all day. In bed, I thought about using my mind to help heal them. How exactly I would do that, I wasn’t sure. I focused on the pain there, pictured it vanishing, pictured light infusing the busted-up spots.

They’re better this morning, but I won’t take all the credit.
January 22

My energy wanes by evening and its hard not to obsess. Day time is easier. Tomorrow I go to Akron to spend the night there before my surgery.

Tonight E. gave me a bracelet carved from an Hawaiian wood that is supposed to be sacred—canoes are made of it for safe crossing. She gave me a pendant as well, an ancient coin a friend’s lover once found while scuba diving in the Virgin Islands. At our cars, I told her that I would see her on the “other side” meaning when I woke up, and when it came out of me, it reminded me of seeing John for the last time and telling him I would see him again soon though we both knew I wouldn’t. He died two days later. I still feel like I lied to him.
January 23

We are staying in the old Quaker Oats building, now a hotel, where all of the rooms are round. Stand in one area and you’ll find an echo you can hear in another spot. I remember this same phenomenon in a church I visited when I was a girl in Spain. Eerie, enormous faces are carved into the walls of the lobby.

In a room near us—right next door?—a man practices his electric guitar. I hope he ends it soon, though it’s only 8:15 and I guess shouldn't complain. I’m tired. I’m frightened. I'm hungry and craving a cheeseburger. Everything on the t.v. shows food. A bag of chips, an Olive Garden commercial, Pizza Hut. There’s no microwave in our room so I heat my chicken broth in hot water in the sink, pour it into a styrofoam cup.

P. calls to wish me good luck and to tell me he loves me. M. is praying for me. B. is. L. is.

I’m afraid to go to sleep. I take my ring off before going to bed. When I say Goodnight to Steve, I worry that it resonates as my last one.
January 24

I am the first person slated for surgery. A man in scrubs is mopping the floor in pre-op. The nurse gives me plastic bags for all of my belongings. I fill out the paperwork for every item, surrender the White Tara rosary I made. The nurse asks me what I did to my knees, said her daughter plays basketball and bangs up her legs all the time. She makes a joke about "this gorgeous gown and these beautiful slippers" made of paper that she hands to me to change into.

In ten minutes, I hear the nurse with a patient a few curtains down making the same joke about the gorgeous gown and slippers. Dad comes in, a nervous wreck. Mom tells him he came in through the wrong door. My brother comes in. Steve comes back then leaves after 15 minutes or so when they tell him he must go.

I am wheeled into the operating room by a woman who tells me she got a hysterectomy, too. My feet open the OR doors, room 15. I am asked again my name, my birth date, the procedure I am having. I keep forgetting the clinical name—
bilateral salpingo-oophorectomy—so I just say “hysterectomy and ovaries out.”

Inside the room the table is much narrower than I imagined. I don’t know how I’ll fit on it. There are four people in masks and gowns. I can’t see their faces, barely their eyes. I am transferred from one table to another. To my right and left, I extend my arms onto two narrow tables. I think I must look from the air like a Christ figure.

It must be forty degrees in the room and I am shivering. The anesthesiologist to my left puts an i.v in my arm. I decide that to counter my fear, I must surrender to my fate. This is the first time I’ve ever done this, ever felt frightened enough to do this.

The surgery’s scheduled for 7:30. The big clock on the wall says 7:50. The masked strangers in the room tell me the doctor is stuck in traffic. At 8:00, he arrives already in scrubs.
He comes over to the table, puts his hand on my shoulder. This is the first time he’s ever touched me.

“I’ll take good care of you,” he says.

I thank him. I feel lightheaded. I am gone.
A single small focus of well differentiated endometrial adenocarcinoma is identified. No vascular invasion or margin involvement by tumor is identified. Pathologic staging according to the AJCC Cancer Staging Manual 6th ed. is pT1a NO MX
New Year’s Day

I painted the terracotta wall in the living room “beeswax” today. The old color had become oppressive and the new, buttery shade brightens up the space, helps reflect our rare January sunlight. It feels good to make such an easy change.

I remember the light that shone in the dining room of this old house one morning three years ago. Late January, a few days after my surgery, I’d come home to recover and wait on the official grading of the tumor. I spent my days pinning and unpinning my abdominal drain (aka the hand grenade) to my pajamas and measuring the fluid that came out of it, keeping track of it on a chart on the fridge. I was struggling with fainting spells, sitting up, turning over, and was confined to the house, in particular a tattered Lazy Boy recliner I’d inherited from my parents years before.

I thought I knew our house well, but now that I was stuck in it, I was noticing new details—a K-shaped scratch on the floor, how the radiators rasped, the way the bottom step of the staircase sunk slightly as if someone had lingered there too long and too often. I studied the four dining room windows, too: The ancient glass panes bow like parentheses. If you stand beside them in winter, you feel the cold on your skin. Each of the four windows is made of sixteen rows of diamond-shaped panes, each row with eight across. That’s 512 diamonds. When you’re confined to a chair, you count window panes.

I’m sitting in that Lazy Boy now thinking about the sun that sliced through those diamonds that morning. It must have shone like that before, must have on every bright day. Why hadn’t I ever noticed? The light seemed so clear and purposeful and sharp that morning. It would be at least three weeks before we would know for sure the extent of my illness, but I felt clear
and purposeful at the sight. A curtain seemed to be drawn open, and I felt thankful—to what, to whom?—that I was here to see this stunning, ordinary event.

Dusk right now and each of those diamonds reflects the fiery red and gold of the lamp beside me. Steve works a black and white jigsaw puzzle of the Brooklyn Bridge. The drugstore Christmas tree is still up and blinking. One cat is curled up on the register, the other one in her bed. Life feels ordinary again but not so stunning.

I haven’t forgotten the clear and purposeful light that day, but I have misplaced the feeling it gave me. I can’t summon that sense of awakening. This is the regrettable part of healing, I think. Our revelations travel from our bodies to our brains where they are much easier to ignore.

I’d like to make this resolution for the new year: To try to feel fully in each moment knowing the moment will pass. To remember the Roman God Janus, from where “January” comes, Janus with two faces—one looking in the past, one into the future.

I’d like to carve Janus a third face: One directly gazing at the day he is in.
January 2

I start a crochet class tomorrow. I tried crochet for the first time in 2007 when John decided to teach himself to do it. If he was really going to quit smoking this time—he’d been smoking since he was twelve—he had to find a way to keep his hands busy. At work during breaks, instead of smoking out on the front stoop, he’d go upstairs to crochet and watch “Judge Judy”. He showed me how to do simple stitches, and I made a scarf for Steve that ended up shaped like an hour glass.

The t.v. ad men are capitalizing on our good intentions for the New Year. *Chantix* commercials for smoking cessation, *Jenny Craig* and *Weight Watchers* with their svelte and transformed celebrities. Today I’ve been thinking about John and his plans for 2007, and I’m realizing again how tangled up his illness was with my own. Friends who knew us both said that John’s illness foreshadowed my own, that he was trying to warn me and prepare me, to see me through it safely. It’s a comforting idea in theory except that makes John’s suffering about me.

It also makes the universe appear more orderly than I believe it is. That two friends and co-workers—one at age forty, the other at forty-three—were diagnosed with cancer within months of each other is due only to these facts, as far as I can see: John smoked most of his life and it destroyed his body. I came from a family of cancer—three aunts, two uncles, my father and his mother.

No mystery.
January 3

I want to change the 2008 journals. I want to make them longer, better developed. I want to appear wiser. But I don’t want to represent myself as being anything except what I was at the time: rushed and afraid. I didn’t have time to think about my options, and I worked fast to order life at home and work before surgery. I didn’t have then what I see now as the luxury of dwelling in the illness.

Part of me would like to go back to the crystallization of my life that the diagnosis brought me. I miss the clarity of those days. How to get that without the threat?

I’m embarrassed to recognize that John is mostly absent in the 2008 journals. He had only been gone two months that January, why didn’t I mention him more? I spent every work day ten feet from his desk. In his right hand drawer, I could still find his stash of Big Red gum. In the file cabinet by his phone, a folder labeled “My personal shit.” His voice was on the answering machine. His photographs of the children in the opera still hung in the lobby.

I thought of him every day during his illness and after his death. With my diagnosis, I thought of him obsessively, stunned by the initial parallels between us—the cell type, our relative youth, the surprise. When I went for the pre-operative x-rays of my chest, I remembered keenly that was the circumstance under which they’d found the tumors in John’s lungs.

“How does it look?” I asked my x-ray technician.

“How’s your doctor going to get back to you.”

I knew he’d answer that way. But what if he hadn’t? What if suddenly he went pale with dread? Or avoided my eyes because he couldn’t stand lying to me?
So I didn’t write about John. To put him on the page would be to realize his death in a way I couldn’t think about then. I see my fear more clearly now, I see how I had to keep my gaze straight ahead. Still, I feel shame in that.
January 4

Birds have fallen from the sky. About five thousand of them. They’re all over the news—birds on the roofs of cars, on streets, on sidewalks. Biblical—that’s the phrase some news outlets are using. Apocalyptic. Conspiracy theorists are having a field day. UFO’s? A secret government experiment?

I admit I immediately thought omen. I struggle with the part of me that wants to believe that warnings are issued from the sky.

The theorists will be disappointed when the science comes out—it looks like trauma or a sudden change in temperature or maybe the noise of the New Year fireworks might have killed them—but I find the idea that thousands of birds can die all at once as mysterious and compelling as any end-times theory.
January 5

Scattered today.

Appointment tomorrow to see my dermatologist about a spot on my face. Even a year ago this would have made me anxious. Two years ago, I might have seen it as a sign of cancer inside of me.

I have begun to read “The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks”. It’s the story of a woman whose cervical cancer cells were the first human cells to be successfully reproduced continually in culture. It’s also the story of a poor African-American woman whose life continues to be told in the cells that are reproduced, in the knowledge gained in the research of those cells.

I believe in the immortality of words, in the stories of our cells.

A few months ago I searched on Amazon.com for memoirs about cancer and found about 700. I put away this January journal then. What made my story more interesting than anybody else’s? Why when cancer strikes so many of us is my particular experience important or unusual? And I was so lucky—mine was caught early. No need for radiation or chemotherapy. What can I really say about suffering?

John suffered. So many have. Why should I add my thin voice to that afflicted choir?
January 6

The uterus was grasped. The ovarian vascular bundle was clamped. The Endoseal device was used to cauterize across the utero-ovarian bundles. The bladder was taken down with sharp and blunt dissection. We used the Beaver blade scalpel to cut away the specimen. We made a small stab wound in the right and left lower quadrants of the abdomen. We made a stab wound in the mid upper abdomen. Polysorb staples were fired.

It still bothers me to read of the necessary violence done to my anesthetized body.
Looking at my surgical notes, I see I was in room 5254. I’ve read these pages a dozen times without noticing this. It takes me back with the power of a dream: The surprisingly comfortable bed, the pressure cuffs on my legs, the view of the parking deck, the flowers, the stuffed frog that sang “My Girl,” the bulletin board displaying today’s date, the couch where Steve slept, the voices in the hallway, the dreaded morphine that made time stop and start and stop and start.

I’m beginning to remember why I stopped this memoir project.
January 8

Gabrielle Giffords, an Arizona congresswoman, was shot in the head today outside of a grocery store in Tucson. Several others are dead. A child. A judge. Giffords, in fact, was said to be dead—CNN made the announcement. Then they took it back. She is not dead. She is alive, in critical condition.

A student of mine told me tonight how the news reports have disturbed her. She used to live in that neighborhood, used to go to that grocery store. She was in that hospital for treatment for Hodgkin’s disease five years ago. It’s all coming back to her and she’s unsettled, unnerved.

I wasn’t there but I can smell the lobby. I can hear the sounds of the gurney’s wheels on the floor. The hovering tension between hope and despair.
January 9

Last night I dreamed that I was explaining to a doctor why my father’s belly was so big. I was telling her about his tumor, and I showed her on my own body where the doctor had found the hard spot on my father nine years ago. In the dream, I could see it, a long cylindrical mass like a bolster pillow. As I touched my body, I could see inside of my father’s. I tried to pronounce the name of my father’s disease but couldn’t.

Retroperitoneal fibrosis. Now it comes to me. It took months for doctors to figure it out that spring of 2002. They danced around a diagnosis. It was malignant. No, benign. It had spread. No, it was grapefruit-sized but contained in his belly. It would grow and grow until it suffocated his organs, this much was certain.

My father was still in high school, the youngest of five children, when his mother, Rhoda, died. He remembers a tumor being cut from her belly in the spring only to return three times its size in August. She died at the same age my father was when his tumor was found, and we feared that whatever killed his mother was now alive in him. A cruel, poetic ending to the story that began with my grandmother.

Was I also living out the legacy of Rhoda’s cells?

Am I still?

I wish I had that dream power to see through flesh with my hands.
January 10

There was a nurse’s aide, Verdelle. She came into my room very late one night and asked me if I’d walked yet. I had to walk before I could go home. This was my second day there. “Nobody’s got you up to walk yet? Then that’s what we’re gonna do.”

She had beautiful hair, long braids. I told her so and she said that she was either going to be a nurse tech or go to beauty school. When she decided on nursing, her aunt, a beautician, made her promise she wouldn’t let a patient walk down the hallway looking bad. “Just because you’re in the hospital doesn’t mean the hospital’s got to be in you!”

So she helped me sit up, my first time. She got a wide-tooth comb and combed out my matted hair. She must have spent ten minutes on it. There were no mirrors—I was thankful for this—but I knew it looked better. She pulled it up in a ponytail with a band she took from her own wrist. “There.”

How to stand with a catheter bag? How to stand when your belly’s been split up the middle and you have three rubber bulbs attached to you? The day before a nurse’s aide had come in to help me and simply didn’t know what to do, asked me how we should go about it. He ended up shaking his head and leaving.

Ten minutes after she did my hair, I was standing, leaning on her. She smelled like fresh shampoo. We made our way into the hallway. It was dark, no one in sight. I felt for a minute like a mistake had been made, like I was not in a hospital but in some war-torn building that had been looted and shot-up.

We walked one little step by one little step. Made one circle around the empty nurse’s station. I was exhausted, hurting. She got me back into bed. She arranged my pillows and the bag and the bulbs. She loosened my ponytail. I thanked her. I left the next day, didn’t see her again.
January 11

I looked at my scar in the mirror today. It’s fading to the shade of an old pink boutonniere. When I was first able to climb upstairs to look at myself in the mirror after surgery, I didn’t understand where the scar had come from. Intellectually I got it. I understood the process. I understood where I’d been, but the emotional connection wasn’t there. I was disoriented by this at first, then angry, as if an act—*an attack*—had been perpetrated by an unknown assailant.

I look at the scar now as I might a birthmark I’ve finally gotten used to and which helps define me.
January 12

Another bad dream. This one again of my father. I receive a call that he has died and I feel the heft of that grief and the confusion when again and again I dial the wrong number to reach the undertaker.

Undertaker. One who takes us under.

Blizzard tonight. One in Boston and New York. I am crocheting another crooked scarf. I can’t seem to be alert today, fully in the moment. I know it’s because of the dream.

I summoned it so fully and realistically a little while ago that I began to head in the direction that leads me under.

Undertaker.

I think of death. I think of the end of all things. A shift occurs in my head, a new distance from reality, and I feel a wave of panic coming on. I did this at will when I was a child experimenting with the power of my imagination. I would picture tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow, seeing one day lined up after the other like the tombstones in Arlington Cemetery where I once visited on a field trip. I’d think of the end of all time and feel like I was falling.

I shouldn’t be revisiting this memoir.
January 13

Today I received in the mail a book I ordered from a paperback swap site, a cancer memoir in comics format. A handwritten note from the last reader was tucked in the book:

“Hope you enjoy this. I was recently diagnosed with Multiple Myeloma and found it interesting.”
January 14

At an MFA celebration in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, last night, I’m hyper-conscious of the number of students who are studying creative non-fiction, including one with a book about her “indifferent uterus” and another about her Hodgkin’s Disease. When I’m introduced to folks at my table as a creative non-fiction writer in an MFA program, I feel compelled to qualify that—“Yes, but I’m not doing it for the degree or for the job—because I know the jobs can’t even be found—but I’m 46, and I just need it because it will force me to write a book.”

This is, in fact, what I said to the friendly guest editor and agent sitting next to me when she asked what I did. I was writing a book, I told her. “Like everybody else here.” She wanted to know what it was about, and I told her about this project but felt so uncomfortable doing so. I felt like one of many thousand, not made mighty by the affiliation but rendered invisible.

I believe every story matters.

*Then why so jumpy, Kelly?*

Shortly after my surgery, an acquaintance at a health food store introduced me to a woman claiming we had something in common. “You’re both survivors!” she exclaimed. I bristled. I wasn’t so much bothered that she went on to divulge my medical history to a stranger, but that this stranger and I were lumped together by our disease-status. Illness, and even recovery, is a culture of types and data and percentages and odds.

Are MFA programs?

I’m discouraged and unsettled tonight. Grumpy and not fit for company.
I’m interested in language and in a life that refuses to narrow, that aims to expand like a wide open sky.
January 15

Three years ago today my vista was narrow. I stared at the computer screen at research and statistics. I studied images of cancer cells. I examined the atlas of the body I’d bought when John was ill so that I could see the places the doctors talked about, the bones of his that were crumbling.

This evening my vistas are so changed. I’m looking out of the upstairs window of a farmhouse we’ve rented for one night between Wilkes-Barre and Youngstown, waiting for our friends to join us. Everything out there is roofed in snow. A scruffy dog barks by the main house, a kitten standing beside him for warmth. The frozen pond between this house and the next outbuilding is covered with tracks. The star-filled sky of the deep country. I wouldn’t be able to find us on any map.

I’ve tried to resist comparing any single day three years ago to any single day now because it sets up a forced and artificial narrative. But it’s hard not to measure this night to that one three years ago spent making phone calls to family and friends after the oncologist gave his disturbing diagnosis.

Staring out of the window tonight reminds me, too, of my favorite photograph of John’s, a shot taken from the fork of two tree-flanked and snowy roads. I keep that photograph by my desk at home to remind myself—of what? The split between our fates? The difference a millimeter can make in a tumor’s location and size? The path John’s life might have taken if his symptoms had come even a few months sooner or in a different guise?

The dog has stopped barking. Our friends have pulled in to join us. I hear Steve, downstairs, rising from the couch. I see his shadow through the cracks in the wooden floors.
January 18

I’m trying to get to sleep but my pillow bothers me. I toss and turn and suddenly see myself in a coffin, a shiny pillow under my head.

_A comfortable pillow at last_, I think.

I decide this is not a vision but an electrical impulse from the charge my veins still carry.
January 20

The character of time has changed since John’s death and my surgery. It used to seem more old-fashioned, a grandfather clock whose minute hand sweeps around its face. You can see where it’s headed and where it had been and how it will circle back around.

Time feels digital now—that’s not very poetic. A wristwatch whose numbers blink and change and leave no trace.
January 24

Today is my hysterversary.

I received a congratulations email from Hystersisters, an online community I joined after my surgery to hear from women with similar experiences. It’s been some time since I looked at that website, and it felt strange to get a notice from them today—as it does when the dealership I bought my Chevy from ten years ago still sends me birthday cards. Though I know my name simply comes up in a database in both cases, it still feels good to be acknowledged by the sisters.

Last night before I went to bed I told myself to dream of John. I wanted him to motivate me to keep plugging along—despite my misgivings—in this January journal. And I did dream of him. He sat at a cafeteria table with me, and he looked good, as he always does in my dreams, always looks so healthy and fine that I just can’t break it to him that he’s dead.

No silly string. No predictions. He brought me only himself. And his sandwich, which he shared with me. I don’t remember our conversation except that I understood it was ordinary. Neither of us seemed sick or particularly wise. We were just having lunch, as friends do.
January 25

What if the lab technicians in Akron were wrong and the ones in Youngstown were right, after all?

To what extent do I share my grandmother’s cancerous cells?

Where will I be in two years? In five?

What if John’s illness had been discovered when it first began?

If John read this journal, what would he think of it?

What else should I have said?