

Stones:  
Stories from Sappho

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### Abstract

*Stones* is a collection of 37 short stories and prose vignettes that take root in extant fragments of poetry by Sappho, an Ancient Greek lyricist from the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE. One of Sappho's fragments is embedded in the body of each story, as well as generating the title of that story. Rather than attempting to recreate the original poetic context from which these fragments emerged, I have allowed my imagination to dictate the terms of each story. Various translations of Sappho's poetry are used in this collection: Mary Barnard's *Sappho* (Berkeley, 1958); David Campbell's *Greek Lyric*, Vol. I (Cambridge, 1982); Anne Carson's *If Not Winter* (New York, 2002); and Jim Powell's *Sappho: A Garland* (New York, 1993). Additionally, I have approximated my own translations of certain fragments, based not on the original Greek but on a survey of English translations by Barnard, Campbell, Carson and Powell, as well as Guy Davenport (Ann Arbor, 1965).

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I dedicate this work to my grandmother, H el ene Comay.

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*like the sweet apple at the top of the tree, which the apple-pickers overlooked,  
or couldn't reach*

When Lydia finally asks about you, I use the analogy of the apple on the tree. You, of course, are the apple, in part because you devoured so many of them—carted them home by the bushel, cored and peeled and baked them, simmered them to sauce and munched them raw. You are just beyond my grasp, like the sweet apple at the top of the tree, which the apple-pickers overlooked, or couldn't reach. This is in an orchard, you see, and there are hundreds of apples overflowing in baskets at the bases of the gnarled trees, but I want none of them, and I stand there looking up to where that one apple hangs from a twisted branch, scheming of ways to get it down. Here, for Lydia's sake, I become a little comic. I tell her to imagine a speeded-up cartoon version of me scurrying up the ladder against the tree and reaching with a trembling hand before tipping away to land in the grass. Imagine that, I say, but over and over, with zippy cartoon music playing in the background. Scurrying up the ladder, and boom, crashing to the ground. Scurry and crash. Scurry and crash. She laughs, and also looks sorry for me, and gives me a little kiss on the cheek. But I haven't told her the ending: that finally, after endless scurrying and crashing, a miracle occurs—maybe my arm has gotten stretched with practice—and I close my hand around the apple. But something has gone wrong. To my surprise, my thumb sinks into the fruit straightaway. The apple is completely rotten. My thumb is squishing around in mealy brown flesh and there is a sudden smell of oversweet wine and I find myself shuddering as one does when one discovers that something has gone bad in

the fridge—a furry film of mould, or sour clots of milk. And in the same uncontrollable way, without any intention at all, I find myself pulling out my thumb and pitching the apple—flinging it, really—in a long arc across the orchard. I can't even hear it land.

*of all stars the most beautiful*

My mother had her hand in the crook of my elbow as we walked down Queen Street. Because my father had only left in June, and because I would be leaving in a week for grad school, I let her treat me like a gentleman escort and hoped I wouldn't see anyone I knew. "Isn't this nice," she said. "Just you and me and the sunshine." When we walked by the photography studio I tried to hurry her past the photos in the window so she wouldn't obsess over the happy couples like she had the other night when she saw a man giving a woman flowers. But we both glanced over anyway and saw a large picture of my father in a tuxedo with his arms around the stomach of a tiny, pretty pregnant woman in a wedding dress. We hadn't had any idea.

My mother started to cry. People looked, and looked away. She tried to pull herself together by straightening her back and stamping and shuddering like a horse does, and wiping her eyes and saying to me, "I'm sorry, it's just...I'm sorry," and bursting into tears. I patted her shoulder as if she really were a horse and said, "It's okay. Come on, Mom, don't...it's okay." All I could think to do was guide her across the street into Trinity Bellwoods Park. We sat on a bench while she cried and shuddered and apologized and cried again.

Across from us sat a homeless man—shockingly fat, wearing three sweaters in August. After a while, to my dismay, he heaved himself up and waddled over to settle on our bench beside my mother. She wiped her eyes and apologized to the homeless man and then got back to crying. I was sure I could smell him from where I sat. He began to



mutter something in a low voice with some sort of accent. Roma? Romanian? As he muttered, my mother's crying lessened until it was just an occasional snuffle. I couldn't make out what he was saying at first and then I could. "Of all stars, the most beautiful are those that fall. Of all falling stars, the most beautiful are those that fall alone. Of all solitary falling stars, the most beautiful are those that fall unseen." Over and over he said this.

I really felt I loved this man for soothing my mother; I forgave him his smell and his fatness and his sweaters. But I also couldn't help but think that falling stars aren't stars at all, but meteorites. The thought niggled at me. I asked myself, Is this the person I am to be, nitpicking over the difference between meteorites and stars while my mother cries?

*when all night long it pulls them down*

Coming home from putting out a fire, how can they be expected to kiss the cheeks of their sleeping children and take out the leaking garbage and shuffle through the bills lying on the table and not drink the whiskey under the sink and spoon their wives while listening to their stories as well as their complaints and ask them questions and care about their answers and answer their questions and then lie peacefully beside them without letting go when all night long it pulls them down, this threat and thrill of flame?

*we shall give, says father*

“Of course we shall give,” says father to the girl my age standing in our doorway with a bundle of brochures that tell us what we’ll be giving to, and an envelope to hold the money that we’ll give, and even a machine in case we want to give by credit or debit instead of cash. And I think to myself, Father is a good man to be giving like this, even as I think, Father is a pretentious dick to use a word like *shall* in this day and age, and even as I think, Father isn’t only giving to whatever this brochure tells us he’s giving to: he’s also giving it, figuratively speaking, to Sharon Cohen, the next door neighbour, and probably also to Marcy, his secretary, although that remains speculation on my mother’s part.

*That man seems to himself*

How did we meet? Well I was waiting for the metro, all pleased with myself to be living in the city after having spent twenty years in a town where the farmer's market is the highlight of everyone's week, and I was picturing how good I looked waiting there, how urban I'd managed to become in three days. I honestly thought that if I bought my clothes in the city I'd belong in the city, even if one or two of the things I was wearing came from the downtown branch of a chain that also had a branch in the tiny mall next to the farmer's market in the town where I had spent the last twenty years. It was hard to know where to shop! But I looked good. Lots of black, and slim cuts. Ankle boots with little heels, jangly earrings. I kid you not: as I waited for the metro, leaning against the wall, all I was thinking to myself was: City girl

When he tells it, he says he saw me there and thought, Little lost lamb. I hate that! I don't even believe him. Who would ever think the words *little lost lamb*? And I know for a fact that I did not look lost (let alone lamb-like). I knew exactly where I was going. I can still picture the way I was leaning against that wall. A confident lean, a rebel lean, like James Dean would lean as a woman in the metro in 2006 minus the leather jacket plus some jangly earrings. Similar boots.

Anyhow, I didn't notice him looking at me, probably because I was so wrapped up in getting my lean just right, and when the train came I sort of sauntered over to it, thinking, City walk, and of course I tripped right then, as punishment for being so obsessed with myself. I went flying through the doors of the train and I have to admit that

it was actually pretty scary for a second, scary enough that I wasn't even thinking, City girl takes a spill, until a man grabbed me out of the air and just swung me onto my feet as if I were a kid and we were playing a game. He was very serious and a little mad at me for not having been more careful, which annoyed me, and I thought to myself, That man seems to himself pretty important if you ask me, but the thought wore off when he took me for coffee, or maybe not so much wore off as got buried under a bunch of more exciting thoughts.

That's how we met. The meet-cute, as they say in Hollywood. And it *was* pretty cute there for a while. But what I think about now, fifteen years down the line, is where *were* we in all of this. In all that leaning and sauntering and falling and being caught and going for coffee and everything that comes after, you have a man who seems to himself pretty important (if you ask me) and a woman who seems to him a little lost lamb but seems to herself all-things-city, and there just seems to be a lot of *seeming* going on, if you see what I mean. We're happy—it's not that—two great kids and a beautiful three-storey in Sutton (what do you know, I got so urban that I didn't even want to live in the city anymore!), but I've always imagined love to be the kind of place where you wouldn't have to *seem* to be anything at all, and still, the other day I watched him straightening his tie in the mirror and there he was, exactly the same man who set me on my feet the day we met, and I felt this ache of disappointment that we would never really be anything other to each other than two silly people in the metro, leaning, falling, catching, seeming.

*Their hearts froze*

*Their wings dropped*

They met in spring, which pleased them because their love blossomed at the same time as the trees and flowers.

When things began to go badly, it was of no consolation to either of them that leaves everywhere were withering in commiseration. In time, their hearts froze; their wings dropped. And as feather and sinew settled into place, an icicle snapped and a branch bowed lower under the weight of snow.

*like the hyacinth in the mountains that shepherd men  
with their feet trample down and on the ground the purple flower*

They don't warn you about the dangers of oblivion. They should tell you: Stay away from the men who don't really see you or else you will end up like the hyacinth in the mountains that shepherd men with their feet trample down, and on the ground the purple flower is a smudge like a larger version of the mosquito on the window that the just-bitten boy with the palm of his hand has crushed, and on the glass the mosquito is a smear, in places dark with mangled limbs, in places bright with blood that isn't even its own.

*they say Leda once found a hyacinth-coloured  
egg hidden*

They say Leda once found a hyacinth-coloured egg hidden in the river-grass. It was spring. Flowers spotted the grass with colour. There were daisies and tulips, buttercups and flowers all shades of purple and blue—lavender and lupine, violets, bluebells, irises and hyacinths. And there was the hyacinth egg, round amidst the pointed grass and the blooming flowers.

They say she took the egg from where it lay in the river-grass. She had never seen an egg of such a colour. She had known the matte turquoise of robins' eggs, and speckled cream and common brown, but never before an egg of hyacinth that appeared wet with the sheen of sunlight—a hyacinth pearl. When she found it in the grass, she felt the egg in her mind as though she were holding it in her hand. She could perfectly imagine its weight, and the satin touch of its shell against her fingers.

She picked it up and cupped it lightly, fingers curled around its shell. They say she never should have taken it. They say it brought her rotten luck. But she had never seen a hyacinth-coloured egg, and so enchanted by the sight, she couldn't help but want it for her own.

Leda brought the egg to her hut in the woods and kept it on a shelf among stones and sea-glass. As the days passed, she began to grow beautiful while the colour and shine of the egg began to fade. Her eyes glowed with yellow-flecked purple as the egg turned a



dusty rose-grey. Soon the egg began to smell—a strange and sour stench. Leda decided to take it back to its home in the river-grass.

They say she was walking to the river when she met a swan. They say she crushed the egg in her fingers with fear and yolk ran down her hand like hyacinth syrup.

*full appeared the moon*

*and when they around the altar took their places*

Brightly shone the stars. Still was the air, and balmy, and full appeared the moon, and when they around the altar took their places they weren't surprised to see her missing. "She's not here," said the one holding the bull, but even he knew where she'd be. They'd seen the sailor's boat come in that morning, and on they went with the ceremony because they knew she wasn't coming. Cold was the water the leader sprinkled over all of them, and as the bull shuddered and snorted under the drops, in a flash they saw her skin all flushed and quivering. When the grains were thrown they saw her arch. She bucked as the bull's neck snapped, cried out as the women wailed, and as the fat began to sizzle in the flame, she slowly sank and sighed. They saw it all. Knowing where she was, they couldn't help but see. They didn't approve, but they couldn't stop seeing.

*Love shook my heart like a wind falling on oaks on a mountain*

When she walked in, I was trying to figure out the stapler function on the photocopier. She said, “Don’t even think of asking me for help. I hate those machines more than anything!” Then she gave me the widest, easiest smile, and clipped back her hair so it wouldn’t get caught in the paper cutter. Love shook my heart like a wind falling on oaks on a mountain. There were casualties: the seventy-five copies that went unstapled, and my thoughts that fell away from me like dry leaves torn from a branch to skitter across the ground.

*multi-talented*

“You’ll love her, Jane,” he said to me last week, and as his best female friend I couldn’t do anything but smile and say how much I wanted to meet her. He wouldn’t understand how I can be his best friend and still seethe with jealousy when he says, “She’s the perfect girl, Jane. The girl of my dreams. Beautiful, kind, multi-talented.” Really it’s the “multi-talented” that gets me. I’ve come to terms with my looks—striking in an ugly-beautiful way—and to be honest I think kindness is an overrated quality that usually just means spineless. But multi-talented—what irks me is its suggestiveness of all-things-amazing combined with a total lack of specificity. Ever since he said it I’ve been devoting an embarrassing amount of time to figuring out what those talents might be. It seems likely that this girl plays an instrument, and either paints or writes poetry. He’s an illustrator, but he doesn’t have great taste in literature, so I’m hoping it’s poetry he’s referring to and not painting, because then she might not actually be as talented as he thinks. That can’t be all, though. Multi-talented would imply more than two talents, one of which might not actually be a talent. Probably there’s a sexual component. There was that smugness in his tone that guys get when they think they’re being noble by not boasting about good sex, which is really just a sneaky way of boasting about good sex. “Multi-*talented*,” was how he said it. So yeah, she probably gives great head or else is very game to try any number of challenging positions. Now we’ve got musical, poetic/artistic and sexual proficiency. I suppose that’s enough to earn her the title? But I feel like I’m missing something, a quality above all other qualities to really put the talent

in multi-talented. Speaking several languages, including sign language? Winning triathlons? Knitting sweaters with difficult patterns? Scoring over 500 points in Scrabble? Making knots out of cherry stems with her tongue? Correctly guessing the weights and/or ages of strangers? Impersonating politicians? It's killing me not to know. What I really want to do is call him up and say, "Fred, please. Just give me a list of these multiple talents. Just be specific and we won't have a problem."

*in a thin voice*

I always bring Jamie along because he'll say peculiar little-boy things, which lets us chime in with "What a goof" (me), or "Isn't he precious" (her), or "Cutie patootie" (a nurse). Or he'll devour the fruit cup from her tray with such gusto that we'll all laugh, and meanwhile someone has rushed off in search of a balloon for him, or crayons and a pad of paper, which pleases him so much I'd think he was faking it if I didn't think he was too young to fake it.

Chris accuses me of using him, to which I reply that Chris doesn't get much say in the matter considering how many visits *he's* paid (four) in the last six months. But while I'd never admit it to Chris, I do wonder if this is really the place for a child. I can always smell the room in his hair after we've left—a mix of bleach and vomit. I think, This isn't how a child's hair should smell. But that usually leads to me picturing *her* hair (or lack thereof), which in turn makes me feel selfish and frivolous for worrying about something like the smell of my son's curls.

Having Jamie there doesn't actually change much. There inevitably comes a moment when the nurses will be out of the room and Jamie will drift off into his own world. The instant he starts puttering around and murmuring to himself, she'll turn to me, and in a thin voice she'll say, "Have you thought about what I asked you?" or "Please, will you just open your mind and put yourself in my shoes?" or "This isn't a life, Karen." And every time, I'll go and scoop up Jamie so he giggles, and I'll say to him, "What's up, doc?" or "Tell grandma about the animals we saw," and all the while I'm shaking with

absolute fury and also with absolute guilt, and I'm smiling as hard as I can at my little boy while the fury and the guilt grind against each other like gears in my stomach, but even this is bearable if I can manage not to look at her until she has hidden all of her disappointment.

*Virginity, virginity, where did you go?*

*I'll never come back, never*

Carol flung herself down on the bed in a faux faint. I'd just delivered the news. Three of us were giggling and the fourth was probably jealous. "Ooh," cried Carol in her damsel-in-distress voice. "Virginity, virginity, where did you go?"

"I'll never come back, never," growled Melissa, as if they'd rehearsed it. I threw a pillow and we all laughed, except the jealous one.

Actually, my virginity hadn't gone anywhere, but the lie had just popped out. Carol had lost hers months ago. Melissa was pretty enough to "save" herself for the "right" man. Gertrude had an ugly name, a sour manner and a lazy eye. I had no excuse.

As we threw the pillow back and forth I practiced answering questions in my head. Yes, it had hurt but only a bit. No, we weren't in love. I had promised not to tell anyone his name. Yes, he'd treated me very well. Of course he'd enjoyed it. I'd enjoyed it too. But what was the fuss about? No, I didn't feel any different.

But they didn't ask me anything. Carol said, "Did you watch *Friends* last night?" and everyone had, including me, but I had to lie about that too, for continuity. And though I was relieved not to have to give them any details, it bothered me that they changed the subject so quickly. Maybe they were all jealous. Maybe Carol had been lying too.



Four years later when I actually lost it, I had no one to tell. They were still my best friends. I could have confessed, but it wasn't something we were talking about by then. They had had sex too many times for the first time to matter anymore.

I was sitting on the subway in yesterday's clothes, starving, eyes burning because I'd stored my contacts in a glass of water overnight. I thought about calling my mother, I was that desperate.

I had questions. Is it okay to keep your contacts in water? How do you shower with someone without one of you getting very cold? What do you do if you need to poo in the morning? How much is it supposed to hurt, actually? Should you take it personally if he insists on turning off the lights? Is it normal to feel sad, afterwards?

The sadness worried me most. A hollow feeling, like I had lost something (but something other than the obvious). To fill the space, I imagined us back in Carol's room at fifteen: "Virginity, virginity," and Melissa's growly "never."

People on the subway were looking at me oddly and I wondered if I had said it out loud.

*sheet, sopping wet*

When people ask Ruth why she is closing the store she says, “Oh, well, you know retail. The long hours, and all that traveling—it just doesn’t seem worth it anymore. I want to see Carla grow up; I want to really use that wonderful kitchen of ours.” This is the truth, as far as she can tell.

On a Monday two months later she is sitting at the table while Carla runs in and out of the room. Each time Carla enters, Ruth is supposed to act surprised and a little scared, though not too scared because that will frighten Carla in turn. Ruth begins to feel as though she can only breathe when her daughter isn’t in the room. She sighs, and relaxes the muscles in her face only to tense them into a smile when Carla bursts back in.

There doesn’t seem to be an end in sight. “Don’t you want some lunch?” Ruth asks. Or, later, “Let’s read a book together, shall we?” But Carla doesn’t bother to respond, so intent on running in and out of the kitchen. Her diapered bum waggles behind her as she goes. Ruth’s jaw feels stiff and tight.

It isn’t just the game, of course, or that particular day. The more time Ruth spends at home, the more of a stranger her daughter becomes—inscrutable, at times unpleasant. It is this and not this. It is Trevor coming home at eight o’clock and flinging his jacket on the chair and saying, “She’s not in bed yet?” It is the mothers at the park asking her to keep an eye on their children so they can whip off a work e-mail on their smart phones.

That night she has a dream that stays with her. In the dream she is back in Java, where she used to go to acquire textiles for the store, but this time she is actually working

at one of the batik factories. The other workers don't speak to her. They pound the silk and pour the wax in silence. Her job is to lower the fabric into the vat of dye, only there are no pulleys in place to do this, which means she has to plunge the cloth down with her own two hands until she is past her elbows in cold blue water. Then the dream shifts and she is in the backyard of her childhood house, hanging up the laundry with her big sister. Her sister hums as she pins each piece of clothing to the line, but Ruth is having some difficulty. Every time she reaches into the basket she finds the same sheet, sopping wet and dyed a deep indigo blue. She wrings out the sheet and hangs it up and reaches back into the basket and does the same thing all over again, and every once in a while she stops what she is doing to stare at the sheet dripping blue spots into the grass.

She wakes up not knowing what to make of it. On the one hand she felt deeply anxious in the dream, mocked and even menaced by the persistent reappearance of the sheet. But at the same time she was oddly calmed by the knowledge that no matter how many times she reached into the basket she would always pull out the same thing. The next morning, sitting in the kitchen, she closes her eyes and returns to the laundry scene just to see that shade of blue and hear her sister's humming in her ear.

*Never disturb a stone*

1. “It’s very old-meets-new,” says the architect. “See? Nothing garish. Glass everywhere, but we’ll keep the original stone foundation and parts of the interior walls. Provencal farmhouse meets Van der Rohe.”

“The neighbours will despise us,” says Mark. “It’s bad enough we’re American.”

“Mark,” says Sheila. “Would you please stop caring what everyone thinks? This is our dream house.”

2. “No Monsieur,” says the baker to Mark. “We have no more pain au chocolat. These? They are reserved. And how is the construction progressing?”

3. Sheila gasps. “It’s exquisite,” she says. “See?” says the architect. “Worth the wait? Old-meets-new. Never disturb a stone if you don’t have to, is my modus operandi.”

4. Mark thinks, When we have a kid we’ll have to put stickers on the glass so that he/she doesn’t try to run from the living room into the wheat field.

5. A bird dies trying to fly from the wheat field into the living room.

6. If you lie down on the original stone foundation you can feel like you are lying in a Provencal farmhouse. Mark thinks, If I were a mouse on this floor I would think I lived in a Provencal farmhouse.

7. “No Monsieur, we have no more baguette. And how is life in the glass house?”

8. “We need to get curtains,” says Mark to Sheila.

9. A snail has glued itself to the glass above their bed. They watch it, and then, while they sleep, it watches them.

10. “We need to get the windows washed,” he says.

11. Every morning seven crows line up outside the bathroom window and tap their beaks against the glass. If we were going to have a kid, thinks Mark, we would have to get rid of those crows.

12. In the middle of the night Sheila finds Mark asleep on the kitchen floor.

13. “Here, Monsieur. Fresh chaussons aux pommes. You look tired this morning.”

14. “I thought you wanted this,” says Sheila.

*who arrived from heaven in a purple shawl*

While my brother was in the hospital, he told me stories I'd never heard. He might have been inventing them. He called them folk tales. I would lean in to listen and feel the puff of his breath.

For three days I couldn't see him because his immune system was so compromised that I would be dangerous. The day I was allowed back he was weaker, less himself. Shaken, I listened as he began to tell a story about a baby girl who arrived from heaven in a purple shawl. Finding her in a pile of leaves, an old woman named Greta picked her up and squeezed her with instant, terrifying love.

My brother grew too tired to finish the story. He drifted to sleep and in the early morning he died.

I still think about that story. How did it end? The shawl must have worn thin as the baby grew. Greta would have aged and wrinkled as we all do. What did she name the baby? She probably used whatever name she had thought of as a young woman when she dreamed of having children. If she was anything like me, she might have named her Pearl.

Arriving from heaven wouldn't necessarily have made the baby an angel. Growing into a girl, she may have been curiously aloof. Sometimes vacant scorn might have flashed across her face. Greta may have grown lonely. I know that one can grow lonely from flinging love wholeheartedly. I know that one can wrap oneself in loneliness as if it were a shawl.

Eventually, Greta must have died. Perhaps the day she died was like the day my brother died. The air was cool and clear, and rays of light came through the window-blinds grainy with dust. But who would have cried when Greta died? I don't imagine Pearl would. I picture her dangling her feet above the river beneath a marbled sky, dropping the scraps of her shawl and watching them sink, then walking away, sullen and ordinary, as the scraps settle like purple moss on the river floor.

*sinful*

What my roommate does, bringing home a different man every Friday and Saturday—it might not be so bad if she didn't go through the breakfast ritual the next morning. She stays in bed while he trots off to the supermarket, and then she chops or grates or measures while he fries or bakes or assembles. The breakfasts I've seen—French toast stuffed with pancetta and parmesan, ricotta pancakes with berry compote, eggs benedict with smoked salmon, biscuits, loaves, mint and mango salad—you get the picture. Not the sex itself, or the different men, but the sex with the different men followed by the breakfasts—there's something sinful about it. Don't write me off as some crazy Christian, and don't you dare boil it down to jealousy—I have my own life, I do—it's just, you'd have to see those breakfasts, or smell them. You'd understand.



*Wealth without virtue is no harmless neighbour.*

*The blending of both brings the height of happiness.*

William would only accept advice from the fortune cookies at Princess Pearl restaurant. Those little slips of paper had driven him to revamp his wardrobe, purchase twenty-five lottery tickets all in one go, and call up his elderly mother just to say hello and thanks for raising him. More than once he'd said "I love you" to his wife Sally because a fortune (the same one on three separate occasions) told him to.

Coming home from work one day, Sally saw her husband standing in the street in front of a homeless man, scratching his head. The homeless man had rigged a can to a fishing pole and dangled it over the sidewalk for people to drop in change, and William stood just beyond the pole like a giant, head-scratching fish that the homeless man couldn't catch. She watched him for a while and then crossed the street and dragged him home.

It turned out he had gone for a late lunch at Princess Pearl. He handed her the fortune: *Wealth without virtue is no harmless neighbour. The blending of both brings the height of happiness.* At first he had thought the most immediate and easy sign of virtue would be to give the homeless man some money. But then, as he was reaching for his wallet, another thought occurred to him: if he gave away his money, he would be the tiniest bit poorer. He mulled this over. An increase in virtue seemed to prompt a decrease in wealth. What to do? The fortune wasn't very specific. Would virtue without wealth be no harmless neighbour, too? Which is to say, a *harmful* neighbour? In order to attain the

maximum amount of happiness would the ideal mixture be 50-50 wealth-virtue? Hard to say! And did giving a loonie to a homeless man merit more virtue points than that same loonie would yield in wealth points? “You can see my dilemma, can’t you?” said William to Sally. And she had to admit that she could.

*glossy doorknobs*

One should always be suspicious of people who live in shiny houses. I'm talking about the kind of houses that have pianos without any fingerprints on the keys, or glossy doorknobs and candlesticks that appear only to have been handled by ghosts. I mean it! It's really all part of the same thing: fear of fingerprints = fear of bodily traces = fear of bodily fluids = (obviously) major fear of sex. People who just can't live with the smudges of life, so to speak.

*gathering flowers so very delicate a girl*

I'm sick of scenery and don't care for the book I've brought. He's gone through five back issues of *Home Woodworking* and five back issues of *The Home Shop Machinist*. My legs are stiff. Conversation doesn't even seem like an option.

"I'll be in the dining car," he says, and I realise with a start that I haven't taken a train alone in thirty years. *Thirty. Years.* Since we married. Planes neither, nor buses. He has, once a month for work, but I haven't.

Now's your chance, I say to myself. Relish in your solitude while he's off searching for Pringles. But the cows, the fields, the tractors, the trees, the telephone wires, all look exactly the same as they did a minute ago.

To pass the time, I consider a divorce. Him crying, me keeping it together while I tell him we've just forgotten how to live. Then me crying later that night, alone in the house (he's taken a room in a motel). Telling our friends: "It wasn't that anything was wrong, per se. It's more that nothing was particularly *right*." Breaking the news to the kids: "Be fair, Sadie. I've never seen *you* with a man for more than six months!" "Travis, don't even get me started. You haven't got a monogamous bone in you." Losing just the right amount of weight from vigorous, yet meditative, walks along the river. Gently rejecting the handsome man at the Baroque concert: "Actually, I'm quite content to be on my own for the moment. But thank you so much for asking."

But even that gets boring after a while.

It starts to feel like a very long time that he's been off in the dining car.

The train is slowly passing through the outskirts of a town when I see, gathering flowers, so very delicate a girl that I hold my breath for a moment. I wonder if I'm imagining things, but no, there she is, making her way along the slope of grass between the train and the woods. She could be a pioneer, in her little calico dress, with two long braids and a basket full of daisies. *Daisies*. It cuts me to see her there, for all the predictable reasons. I was a delicate girl once too, and now I am fat, and fifty-five, and bored. Sadie was a delicate girl and now she won't be caught dead with flowers. The last time I gave her a bouquet she gave me a speech on gender constructs. I remember the day she stopped letting me braid her hair. I nodded stoically and drove her to school and then burst into tears. And marriage isn't delicate, that's for sure. Either it's sturdy as an elephant or it's already over. The world is getting uglier. Who has baskets anymore? Or calico dresses? Or delicate children, for that matter—aren't children getting uglier too? Tupperware, is what the world's got now. Tupperware, and rayon, and hefty, pug-nosed babies. And there are fewer flowers growing wild, less grass for them to grow on.

The girl is already out of sight, and the town is swallowing the train. So do I want to sit here getting depressed about something I saw for ten seconds by the side of the tracks, or do I want to join my husband in the dining car, where we'll sit and snack and pass the time trying to think of even one new thing to say?

*to hold one's tongue when anger rises in the chest*

When I was twelve I read a short story about a father who would stuff his mouth with a dishtowel to stop himself from yelling in an abusive manner at his wife and children. It was a Russian story and I read it with a Russian accent in my head.

The father believed in total transparency. “Zee problem is not enger,” he would explain to anyone who cared. “Enger is life. Vot von must do is simplee to hold von’s tongue ven enger rises in zee chest.” And he would tap his heart with one hand and cover his mouth with the other for emphasis.

This story made me very hopeful. I put the book on the coffee table. Once a week, my father would yell about the state of the house and my mother would clean. She’d put the book on the bookshelf and I’d put it back on the coffee table, or on the couch, or beside the phone. We moved twice in the next five years and I brought the book with me and put it in each living room. Then I moved out.

He never read it. Or he read it but didn’t agree. Or he read it and agreed but found our dishtowels too dirty.

*I might go*

“I might go,” I say, but he doesn’t look up. It’s like he hasn’t heard me. “I might just go,” I say, louder this time, but still he doesn’t look. Do I really want to go? Or do I want him to want me not to go? What does he want? Why won’t he look at me? Perhaps it is because he wants me to go. Well he might just get his wish then. Or might it be better to show him that I’m not going anywhere? I could say to him, “I might stay.” Would he look up then? He might.

*makeup bag*

If I were to die on this street corner and you were to open my purse, here's what you would find:

- a wallet with a 20 dollar bill and a photo of my brother on a beach at the age of three
- a notebook with less than ten pages of writing
- no pencil
- an eraser
- a Ziploc bag half full with sunflower seeds
- three Bounty wrappers
- two broken bicycle lights, both red
- a makeup bag with a tube of mascara, a travel toothbrush and a mini-bottle of vodka
- a Jehovah's Witness pamphlet that gives you the option of checking one of two boxes:

- I choose to place my confidence in Jesus as my saviour.
- I choose to reject Jesus and continue my life without him.

I've checked the second box with a red pen. I thought that was funny, once.



*someone will remember us*

*I say*

*even in another time*

His nerves are acting up, he says. He hasn't gone out in three days and he smokes a lot, as he always does when he gets nervous. It drives me crazy how he won't use an ashtray, or rather how he uses everything as an ashtray. He doesn't like the light so we keep the blinds down and from time to time I go into another room just to look out the window.

By the fifth day the place doesn't smell very good—he doesn't like to bathe when his nerves aren't right. I've called in sick to work for both of us but I am banking on this day being the last. Five days is what it takes, usually, for his nerves to settle down.

I keep finding mugs half full with ash, in odd places. Inside the piano, for example.

Mornings he sits in his study and looks at a picture of his daughter, who isn't speaking to him. It could be that he thinks this is my fault, since it is my living in his house that she is upset about. But obviously this is not actually what she is upset about, and he must know that, seeing as he is a psychology professor as well as a sensitive person.

At noon he likes to push away the lunch I've made.

For the rest of the day he'll read. A book a day, which makes me think he isn't reading very carefully. When a week has passed I look to the stack of books beside the

couch for clues. All biographies: Marcel Proust, Mao Zedong, Leonard Cohen, Abraham Lincoln, Napoleon, Renoir, Picasso. I stay awake thinking about this.

In the morning I think I've figured something out and I go to the study and wrap my arms around his chest from behind the chair. "Someone will remember us," I say, "even in another time. I'm sure of it." But nothing changes and I don't know if this is because I've misjudged the root of his bad nerves or because he knows that I'm not actually sure of it at all.

I focus on cleaning the cigarette ash but it is hard to keep up with him. I find it everywhere: ash on top of the fridge, in a bedside drawer, in the toe of a shoe, in a jar of honey.

*deep sound*

“No,” my brother says, he can’t lend me any more money. AKA *won’t* lend me any more money. And yes, by lend I mean give. Being an actuary, he clearly has the funds. “We shouldn’t be talking about this here,” he hisses. What, money talk is off limits just cause we happen to be in grandma’s hospital room? Fuck it, she can’t breathe by herself, let alone hear us. And if she could, she’d be on my side. “Darn it, Johnny,” she’d say, “can’t you give the girl a break? You’ve got all that money just floating around in that big house of yours, unless what’s-her-name has spent it all.” Actually, what’s-her-name probably *has* spent it all. That bitch. The last time I saw her she told me I looked skinny. In this phony therapist voice, as if she actually cared. And then my brother chimed in, all concerned. “Are you getting enough to eat, Bern?” Fuck the both of them. I’d be getting a lot more to eat if they’d give me some fucking money.

“Come on, Johnny,” I say now. “You know I love grandma.” Way more than he does, but who’s counting. “I wouldn’t be asking if it weren’t important. I *owe* people, you know? And these are not exactly great people.”

He’s not biting, so I take it up a notch. “You and I are the only ones left, Johnny! We’re all we’ve got.”

I can see him softening. His skin actually looks looser around the eyes. “Shit, Bern, don’t you think I know that? I worry about you all the time.”

Is his lip wobbling?

“It’s just, Sharon and I have discussed this, and it seems like giving you money is feeding the problem. We’ve got to get you help. I’ll pay for it, but it’s got to be really *helping*.”

Nope, lip not wobbling, just the ugly mouth of a fucking hypocrite.

“Uh-huh,” I say. “And have you and Sharon *discussed* the little fact of a certain someone else’s problem? Involving a certain bougie-banker powder?”

“Seriously, Bern? Talk to me when you’re working fourteen-hour days six days a week. I mean it. If you can hold down a steady job, I don’t care what, as a fucking trash collector even, I will 100% get off your back. Fair?”

No. Not fair. Fuck. Even as a kid I knew steady jobs were for robots. I stripped the power suits and lab coats off my Barbies and sent them naked into nature, AKA the backyard. They came back with a clear sense of self and a burning desire to follow their passions.

“Bern,” says Johnny then. “Bernadette. What went wrong? When did you stop being happy?” Which is rich, coming from him. The last time I was at his place, he was watching bad TV with zombie eyes. And once in a while he would reach over for his Pepsi without looking away from the screen for even a second. I had to block the picture to get his attention. My brother, who used to read about outer space for fun. Who used to cry at the six o’clock news.

We stopped watching the news when mom and dad weren’t there to watch it with us anymore.

Johnny is looking at me like he really expects an answer. When did I stop being happy? My legs feel insanely heavy, like I'm a car with a wheel clamp. I want to get the fuck out of here but I am so, *so* tired and my brother is still waiting.

This time I'm sure his lip is wobbling. Mine too.

Just then, grandma farts. And I mean *farts*. Like a whoopee-cushion—this big, deep sound, a kind of rumble, while she keeps lying there, sweet as can be, the most peaceful expression on her face. Like she's been listening all along and wants to get a word in.

I hear a snort. A snort and a sputter. Johnny is bright red and puffing out his cheeks, trying to keep the laughing in, but it bursts out of him. He's shaking with it, and pointing at grandma and trying to say something. "Ffff...Ffff...", and bam, he's got me. It's like when you swallow so much of something that you have to puke: laughing pours out of me until my stomach burns. It keeps on pouring, and soon we're doubled over, Johnny and I, laughing out tears while grandma lies there, and all I can think is: Am I happy? Am I sad?

*I do not expect to touch the sky*

I wake with a jolt in the night because I have not done anything. I have not done anything because I have not wanted anything. I have not wanted anything because I know that I will not receive it. I have lived my life with my hands in my pockets because I do not expect to touch the sky. What does one do, waking to this at the age of seventy-two?

*a vine that grows up trees*

In the woods by the house where I once lived, there's a vine that grows up trees and kills them. It happens slowly, over five or six years—a funny sight, the trunk disappearing into a sleeve of vine leaves, and then the branches. Finally, when the trees can't get enough sunlight, they die upright, and it can take a few more years before they topple to the ground.

Tom and I lived in that house for three years in our early thirties, for him to paint and me to write. The front of the house met fields, with a driveway running through, while the back met woods, and there was no one around for miles, which was how we thought we wanted it.

Living there a while, I became sure the trees would fall whenever something bad happened. After our dog died I found a tree lying at the edge of the woods. When Tom and I would fight, I often thought I could hear the creaks of a tree getting ready to fall. This was all a bit speculative, I admit. The only time I saw a sure causality was when Tom left me. Actually, the tree fell first. We heard a muffled thud and looked out the kitchen window to see it flat on the ground, covered with vine leaves like some feathered beast. We hadn't even been fighting when Tom turned to me and told me, quite matter-of-factly, that he was going to leave.

I suspect that Tom had his own thoughts about bad things and trees, but that he imagined the tree would fall first and then the bad thing would happen, rather than the other way around as I imagined it. To my mind, Tom's was a dangerous way of thinking,

because the falling tree might influence his behaviour in the same way that getting your fortune told can make you go out and do something wild because you think it's in the cards. I have a feeling that Tom hadn't really, hadn't fully planned to leave me until he heard the tree drop; that he saw it lying there, a portent of a terrible future, and felt his choice had been made for him.

Other times I think about it differently. I think that maybe we were more like those trees than we knew, and that the life had gone out of us long before Tom left; that we had been standing dead in our places for years like wood hollowed with rot, leafless, only no one could see it beneath the mess of vines.



*see-through dress*

The second time Sylvie sees Sophie is at one of Carolyn's roof parties. Sylvie is there with Alan, but "there" is really two places, as she and Alan have occupied opposite ends of the roof since arriving. She can see him talking to people while she leans against the wall and doesn't talk to anyone.

Almost everyone that evening is laughing.

Sylvie notices Sophie fake-smiling at a middle-aged man telling a story. He uses the same hand gesture repeatedly—a curlicue in the air.

Sophie is wearing a see-through dress. On purpose? Maybe not. She is standing by a lamp and Sylvie knows that dresses like that can be tricky, that what looks opaque in a fitting room can surprise one in sunlight or in lamplight. It is almost a nightgown—white, sleeveless, hanging in an A from chest to knee. Underneath, silhouetted by the lamp, are small round breasts, a gentle sweep from waist to hips, legs slim and slightly bowed.

Sylvie thinks the man's curlicues might be meant to distract Sophie so he can look at her breasts. In fact she thinks that all the men are looking at Sophie through her see-through dress, or that the ones who aren't looking are very carefully not-looking. Alan, she thinks, is very carefully not-looking.

She needs rescuing, thinks Sylvie.

No. She loves this.

A burst of laughter—the curlicue man has told a joke. People all around are laughing as Sylvie turns to look out over the roof. Downtown blinks at her while the river sulks.

The first time Sylvie saw Sophie was at one of Carolyn’s Ladies’ Luncheons. Ladies are women who aren’t married. Luncheons are lunches with the crusts cut off.

Seven ladies sat sipping mimosas. Four of them were wearing hats. Carolyn had encouraged hats. “I refuse to wear a hat,” said Sylvie to Alan that morning. “But you won’t be a real lady,” he said back, which she would have taken as a joke if he hadn’t told her the week before that her clothing could use “more shape.”

Sophie arrived late and hatless. “Ladies!” she cried in a fake British accent. “So dreadfully sorry for my tardiness.” And then, in her regular voice, “I’m starving!” She reached over Carolyn’s shoulder to grab a mini-quiche.

“Everyone, meet Sophie,” said Carolyn. “Nobody’s got stories like Sophie. Tell us everything!” And Sophie did. About a man named Rick who wanted to leave his wife for her, but who had a little yappy dog that made her think they were “fundamentally unsuited.” About a man named Colin who only liked to eat canned food, his favourite combination being canned tuna with canned corn and sometimes half a can of beets thrown in for colour, but who had “exquisite taste” in everything else. “He loves Cocteau,” she said. “And he can fuck for hours.”

Then she said, “Oh but I’ve just gone on and on. Someone else talk. Please!” So Margaret, a hat-wearer, offered up a story about a promising date that had ended with a forehead kiss, and “Ha!” said Sophie, “That reminds me...”

Turning back to the party, Sylvie finds Sophie looking straight at her from the laughing crowd. There is a look on Sophie's face like she is very strongly wishing for something.

What does she want? thinks Sylvie.

What do *I* want?

There was one thing Sophie said at the Ladies' Luncheon, near the end when just Sylvie and Sophie and Carolyn were left. She told them about a rabbit she'd had as a child, and how if you stood with your legs apart this rabbit would loop around your feet over and over, endlessly entertained. "He made," said Sophie, "a literal infinity," and for a moment Sylvie liked her.

Alan catches Sylvie's eye and raises his glass. What can he be toasting?

Then she hears the oddest laugh—her own, hearty and full, as though she is terribly amused by a joke she has made to herself.

*to those who have quite had their fill  
of Gorgo*

To those who have quite had their fill of Gorgo, we recommend the following:

- Avoid a sudden rupture. Friendships are best ended so slowly that the movement is almost imperceptible.
- Keep in mind that it is not your place to instruct those around you how to feel. They may like Gorgo very much. This is their prerogative.
- Note that a strain can easily develop between two friends who feel very differently about a third friend. There is not much to be done about this.
- Acting irritated with someone is likely to exacerbate her irritating qualities.
- Your exasperation and distaste, if detected, will almost certainly lead to one of two reactions in the injured party: an eagerness to please that appears unpleasantly slavish, or a sharp resentment that manifests in underhanded barbs.
- Pretending to like someone when you no longer do is a hasty solution that will only increase her bewilderment when your irritation finally shows.
- Moreover, she may well see right through you. Disingenuous gestures of friendliness are usually more transparent than one might expect.
- However, if you are very good at pretending, this may in fact be useful when paired with a gradual and imperceptible extraction.

- Pangs of doubt will inevitably accompany the procedure. Be advised that feelings of annoyance usually outweigh those of kindness in the long run.
- It is difficult, if not impossible, to know whether you will regret your decision after the fact.

*The doorkeeper's  
feet are twelve  
yards long! ten shoe-  
  
makers used five  
oxhides to cobble  
sandals for them!*

Giants have the same problems as regular-sized people, on a larger scale. Have you ever seen a giant sneeze? I know a giant, a doorkeeper around town, who once got fired for sneezing on the job. The sound of it frightened the clients. Not to mention the trauma for those who got caught in the spray.

It isn't easy being big. This guy gets all his clothes custom made. He's got no choice. The doorkeeper's feet are twelve yards long! Ten shoe-makers used five oxhides to cobble sandals for them! I don't even want to guess how much it cost him.

The worst of it is, just last week he lost another job. It was the sandals' fault. He was walking to work when the strip of leather over his left toe tore off at one side. Without that strip in place, the doorkeeper couldn't take a single step without tripping over his shoe. It turned out this particular piece of oxhide had been the linchpin holding his foot in place.

He hobbled to work and then fiddled with his sandal for hours, trying this and that to secure the strip around his toe. I guess a few riff-raff slipped in through the door while he was busy dealing with his shoe, and the management didn't like it.

It strikes me that our man keeps losing jobs because of matters beyond his control. No one's got his back; no one's coming to his defence. It makes me want to do something for the guy.

Even before his sandals broke, they were giving him trouble. You'd expect more out of custom-made, premium oxford shoes, but they gave him blisters. Giants get blisters just like the rest of us, only bigger. His were the size of melons. They burned, and bled, and oozed with pus. He had a happy week when they finally healed, but then his sandal broke and things went back downhill.

*until you're ready*

The bark of a dog in the night sounds so lonely that I think, What have I been waiting for? Of course I love him. On the bus in the morning, two teenagers on one seat make me disgusted with love. The same dog the next night sounds so lonely that I think, There is beauty in solitude. On the bus the next morning, a stooped and wrinkled man clutching the arm of his stooped and wrinkled wife makes me reconsider.

In any case, it doesn't matter. The last time we spoke he said, "Don't talk to me until you're ready to commit." I'm not so stupid as to think he's been waiting for me these last three years.



*gifts from the wedding shower*

Friends and family, have no fear, we are making haste to return your gifts from the wedding shower. We understand your concern. You offered us gifts on the premise that we would provide a wedding. In all fairness, we did deliver the beginning of one, right up until the part where you're supposed to say "I do." But no, of course that doesn't count. Without a doubt we must adhere to time-honoured social code: if wedding = gifts, then no wedding = no gifts. Although, I must point out the logical fallacy of this equation: *if A, then B; not A, therefore not B*. Inverse error, it's called. To play the devil's advocate for a moment, what precisely is the problem we are trying to rectify? Do you want your hideous gravy spoon back because we didn't follow through with a chicken/fish/pasta dinner and an open bar? Or are you thinking of our feelings? Perhaps you'd like to spare us the pain of using hand towels with our initials intertwined inside a garish heart?

*like some old geezer*

When she told him she was pregnant, he slumped lower in his chair. “Really?” she said. “You’re going to sit there like some old geezer at a time like this?” He couldn’t help it. He was suddenly, painfully arthritic. His vision dimmed. “It’s not what it looks like,” he wanted to tell her (but he was too tired to speak). “I’m not one of those guys who doesn’t have his shit together!” He saw a tear well up and wait in each of her eyelids.

What to say? That he had aged at thirty-six? That he still loved her? Sure, he’d be a father to her child, though judging from the ache in his knuckles, wrists and elbows, he wouldn’t be able to hold much of anything in his arms.

*or you love somebody else*

So she starts telling me this charming story, right? About this little dog she saw on her way to work who was peeing with both his hind legs propped against the wall. Really leaning into it, like almost peeing vertically. “It was the cutest thing in the world,” she says to me. So I say, “Yeah, that sounds pretty damn cute,” and I give a little chuckle to show we’re on the same page. But all the while I’m thinking, Either you didn’t hear what I just said, or you love somebody else. How does a guy go about figuring out which of those things is true? Either I let it slide, or I say it again, “I love you,” and see what she answers this time.

*with what eyes?*

I know it's my problem not hers. But living downstairs from a very old blind woman and hearing her bump into things day and night, it isn't easy not to worry on a semi-regular basis about the fact that she lives above me with nothing but fire hazards. This worry isn't even selfish—I know I would probably get out fine in a fire, being on the ground floor and pretty alert and all—no, this worry is completely on her behalf, since that Wall Street daughter of hers doesn't seem to care, what with never visiting more than once a month, and only staying for half an hour, and talking so loudly that I can hear every condescending word. “Aren't you lucky,” the daughter said to me once in the hall, “to have each other as neighbours!” as she glanced (I swear) at my empty ring finger. It isn't easy. Living there, listening to the crashes like she's dropping bricks and dinnerware, and the gargantuan thump and whimper of the lady herself falling down, it's hard not to dread this very old blind woman's weekly offer of tea. The littlest things can start to get to you—her thrift-store smell, and the way it takes her a million years to boil water, and that you-and-I-understand-each-other *look* she gives you when she finally hands over your tea, oh and her irritating habit of responding to everything you say with the phrase, “I see.” And I mean literally after every single thing you say, like even if you go, “It's a nice day out, isn't it, Mrs. X?” she'll go, “I see.” Well hearing that response after having heard the absolute disaster of her life upstairs, it can take all your strength each time she says “I see” not to smash down the chipped teacup and leap up from the very stained couch and yell, “With what eyes? With what eyes, Mrs. X?” and storm out of the

apartment, after which you'll surely regret what you've done to the point that you will seriously consider moving, and in that state of regret you'll search yourself to figure out what could have made you so mad. You know it can't really be a very old blind woman. Actually you seem to have a very specific problem with the phrase "I see," and could it be that you really just can't stand the fact that she says it when she can't, in fact, see, and that perhaps you are just extremely frustrated with this stupid language of ours that makes very old blind women say things that can't possibly be true?

*golden chickpeas grew along the shore*

By the time they put me in the hospital, my vision was green-tinged and blurred. I had to close my eyes to rid myself of a neon world.

The doctors and everyone else told me what I had. They showed me a drawing and said, “This is what you look like. And this is what you think you look like.” And I thought, Yes, sure, but looks are beside the point. I’d rather they asked me what it feels like. “Well,” I’d say, “it feels like swallowing a bucket’s worth of frogs and then realising that they are still alive.”

Closing my eyes proved useful. No more doctor, no more mother, just pictures like you wouldn’t believe. Cats swung from their tails off the branches of sycamores and licked the bark, and golden chickpeas grew along the shore of a river while rainbow trout tried to snap them up in vain.

*now this one goes out to all my friends*

Jack was about to embarrass us all and there was nothing we could do to stop him, save dragging him off the stage, which I considered. We were in the gymnasium of the Ukrainian Federation, with dollar-store decorations but a live band and an open bar. It was so late it was early. We were all so equally drunk that together we were sober. Siobhan and Mike had left hours ago in the honeymoon car with the rattling cans. “Stay,” they’d said. “Enjoy the party.”

Jack and I were in a fight, but no one else knew and so we kept almost forgetting. Alone at the table or by the bathrooms we would remember and resume our urgent, low-voiced conversation.

“If you’re going to break up with me, just do it already.”

“Jack! Would you stop? I told you, that’s not what I want.”

“Just please, let’s get it over with.”

“We can’t talk about this here. Let’s talk about it later.”

“Would you at least just tell me who it was?”

(Pause, as Felix Sharpton squeezed past us to the men’s room.)

“Forget it. We shouldn’t be talking about this. Let’s just go enjoy the party.”

Impossible, of course, and then surprisingly possible, until the next time we found ourselves alone.

At one point he’d slipped his arm around me, probably just out of habit, but Margo Wilson had pounced on it and said, “Oh, you guys are so in love. You know?”

You're one of my inspiration couples." Which was really a very hard thing to hear at that particular moment, and he took his arm back as soon as she looked away.

Then he'd gone and danced too closely with Marie Labelle because he knew I found her threateningly pretty and threateningly French.

The fight was about the fact that three days earlier I'd confessed to kissing a man at a party. This wasn't even true—we hadn't touched at all. But we'd spent seven hours talking and I'd torn myself away at four in the morning to come home, buzzing with energy. I didn't say a word to Jack that night or the next, but finally (and I'm not proud of this) I couldn't not tell him. I couldn't not tell him because all I could think about was how excited I was to have met this man, and how badly I wanted to share this news with my best friend.

I know. It had never been a problem that my boyfriend and my best friend were the same person. It had seemed like a very good sign, in fact.

I lied about the kiss because I felt so guilty, if that makes any sense at all.

So now it was three days later and I didn't know what to do, and we were at this wedding, which made everything stranger, as if we'd slid into another world. A world in which our friends wore too much makeup and glided around like happy, silly fish, while a mediocre band played slower and slower to the clink of bottles from the bottomless bar.

Sitting by myself for a moment in that world, I felt like everything was going to be fine, or at least like nothing was not going to be fine, or at the very least like nothing.

That was when I saw Jack shuffling across the stage to consult with the band and thought, He is about to embarrass all of us, but most of all he is about to embarrass me.



Behind him the band looked weary. I tried to catch his eye to jolt him out of whatever foolish fantasy this was, but he was looking above me to the back of the hall.

Slowly, loosely, he brought the microphone to his mouth and said, “And now, this one goes out to all my friends, all my beautiful friends out there and anyone who’s ever been in love.” He said it with such confidence, as if he’d been singing all evening and it was just the time of night for a good love song. Or a good heartbreak song—I didn’t know which direction he would take it.

He went with love:

At. Last.

Boom-bum-bum Beem-bum-bum Boom-bum-bum Beem-bum-bum

my-y Looo-ooo-ove has come alo- ong  
 Boom-bum-bum Beem-bum-bum Boom-bum-bum Beem-bum-bum Boom-bum-bum

Beem-bum-bum Boom-bum-bum Beem-bum-bum Boom-bum-bum Beem-bum-bum  
 my-y

lonely days are o- ver  
 Boom-bum-bum Beem-bum-bum Boom-bum-bum Beem-bum-bum Boom-bum-bum

and life is li-ike a song  
 Beem-bum-bum Boom-bum-bum Beem-bum-bum Boom-bum-bum Beem-bum-bum

In the seven years we’d been together, I hadn’t known he knew the lyrics to that song, but now he sang every word, with a voice that wasn’t good, but wasn’t particularly bad, either. It was just *him*—mild, like he was talking to us, to me, about what to eat for dinner. Which was his tone most of the time, actually.

I was crying, then, but feeling, for the first time in a long while, clear and sure. Life wasn't a song but a series of songs, and ours was over, for no good reason other than the fact that time moves, and we have to move with it. Everyone looked tired now, and sick, and sick of things, slumped in their seats or swaying in place, as if they, too, understood that something had to change, whether they wanted it or not, whether or not they were ready.

### Index of Fragments and Translations

The fragments of Sappho's poetry that generate the stories in this collection are arranged below in alphabetical order by their opening words. Each fragment is numbered in accordance with the classification system employed by Eva-Maria Voigt (V) in *Sappho et Alcaeus: Fragmenta* (Amsterdam, 1971). I have used various contemporary translations of these fragments, including my own approximations, specified below. The page number on which each fragment appears in this collection is listed in parentheses. For full references of the translations used, please see the Bibliography.

a vine that grows up trees: V 173; trans. Anne Carson (42)

deep sound: V 29A; trans. Anne Carson (38)

full appeared the moon: V 154; trans. Anne Carson (13)

gathering flowers: V 122; trans. Anne Carson (31)

gifts from the wedding shower: V 169A; trans. Hannah Rahimi (52)

glossy doorknobs: V 117A; trans. Hannah Rahimi (30)

golden chickpeas grew: V 143; trans. Jim Powell (57)

I do not expect: V 52; trans. David Campbell (41)

I might go: V 182; trans. David Campbell (34)

in a thin voice: V 24D; trans. Anne Carson (17)

like some old geezer: V 85B; trans. Hannah Rahimi (53)

like the hyacinth: V 105B; trans. Anne Carson (10)

like the sweet apple: V 105A; trans. Hannah Rahimi (1)

Love shook my heart: V 47; trans. David Campbell (14)

makeup bag: V 179; trans. Anne Carson (35)

multi-talented: V 90; trans. Hannah Rahimi (15)

Never disturb a stone: V 145; trans. Hannah Rahimi (23)

now this one goes out: V 160; trans. Hannah Rahimi (58)

of all stars: V 104B; trans. Anne Carson (3)

or you love somebody else: V 129B; trans. Hannah Rahimi (54)

see-through dress: V 177; trans. Hannah Rahimi (44)

sheet, sopping wet: V 119; trans. Hannah Rahimi (21)

sinful: V 69; trans. Anne Carson (27)

someone will remember us: V 147; trans. Anne Carson (36)

That man seems: V 165; trans. David Campbell (7)

The doorkeeper's feet: V 110; trans. Mary Barnard (49)

Their hearts froze: V 42; trans. Hannah Rahimi (9)

they say Leda: V 166; trans. Anne Carson (11)

to hold one's tongue: V 158 trans. Hannah Rahimi (33)

to those who have quite had their fill: V 144; trans. Anne Carson (47)

until you're ready: V 45; trans. Hannah Rahimi (51)

Virginity, virginitly: V 114; trans. Hannah Rahimi (19)

we shall give: V 109; trans. Anne Carson (6)

Wealth without virtue: V 148; trans. David Campbell (28)

when all night long: V 149; trans. Anne Carson (5)

who arrived from heaven: V 54; trans. Hannah Rahimi (25)

with what eyes: V 162; trans. Jim Powell (55)

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