

circuits

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ABSTRACT*circuits*

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circuits is a narrative Twine Game that explores the act of remembering, witnessing, and narrativizing sexual trauma in a time when conversations about what constitutes sexual trauma, how to talk about it, and which discursive communities have a stake in this discussion are particularly prominent in media, classrooms, and art. Through poetry and photography, *circuits* looks specifically at an individual's experiences with sexual trauma in order to explore how the act of writing sexual trauma is negated and rehashed through institutions, on media platforms, and in courtrooms. *circuits'* fragmented and cyclical construction reflects the chaos of remembering and repeating trauma. As the story winds around itself, the artificial photos develop, constructing a body as well as a narrative, and suggesting that trauma narratives are not just repetitive, but regenerative. The title of this project, *circuits*, reflects the interwoven process of narrating one's own trauma through the body, media, and institutions, as well as the power in and difficulties of reconciling one's experiences with the trauma of others. *Circuits* weaves together many conflicting themes including self-identification and self-harm, archival obsessions and erasure, censorship and hyper-publicity, truth and facts, submissiveness and authority, to create an interconnected map of experiences that the reader/player must navigate. My goal in publishing *circuits* online is to explore how interactive platforms such as Twine can not only make a story more accessible, but allow for new methods of storytelling. This paper copy of *circuits* is intended to only be read in addition to the digital version.

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circuits

although this work is based on the life of the author, it is mostly a work of fiction. the only characters based on real people are the narrator and her immediate family. any other characters resembling real people is purely coincidental.

content warning: the following story contains mention of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and violence as well as references to self-harm and mental illness.

intro

i need someone to listen to me.

--i'll do it [one]

--i can't hear [two]

--who am i? [three]

[one] thank you.

--where am i? [four]

--who am i? [three]

--it's too white for me to see [five]

[two] i'm sorry. i mean i need someone to see me.

--who am i? [three]

--where am i? [four]

--it's too white for me to see [five]

[three] who am i?

--an image of a naked girl

--my face was in the newspaper

--an old friend

[four] where am i?

--i hear teaspoons, i smell coffee.

--i remember this place. we've been here before.

--this is my bedroom. that's my cat.

[five] draw something.

--a woman's leg

--a city skyline

--i'll leave it empty for now.

thank you, i remember now.

paul celan was wrong when he said *no one bears witness for the witness.*

everyone is a witness to everyone else.



feet

the last picture i have in my archive of Him is of my feet.

they'd frozen because of bad boots or bad circulation. or because the heated bus shelters are never actually heated because they don't want people sleeping in them except that of course people still sleep in them, just in the cold.

when i called Him, i was numb and my toes were deep purple, black and bruise-like. He asked why i hadn't called for a ride, but it's because i didn't know i was allowed to. i dipped my toes in the bath and soaked in the worry in His voice. it was lukewarm, but burned a slow, penetrative thaw.

as the colour of my toes shifted red, pink, i wished i was still slogging my way home through the park and the windchill. blind and numb, where every ache eventually subsides into exhaustion.

you want honey? He asks and i say *yes*, even though i've never liked the flavour.
it takes Him ten minutes to bring me the tea. He feeds the cat, scrounges through cereal boxes to find the kettle, smashes dishes together looking for something like a mug.
when He finally sits, i inch towards him a little, with a dinner glass full of tea burning the inside of my palms. His fingers rest on my thigh and tap at it gently.
my feet are cold, i say.
He meets my eyes and His face gently melts away from worry. He edges me closer, and pulls my feet beneath His legs, rubbing them gently. my body is melting snow.
His cat joins us that makes Him smile. i sip the tea, realize honey is the best flavour.

in summer, winnipeg is a humid blanket stinking of manure from the loveday mushroom factory. the mushrooms are so good, we tell tourists, to justify the stench.

i wait for the bus, despite knowing it's a game of godot, sweat leaking down my back and into my underwear, staining the underarms of my fresh shirt. in the bus, i need a sweater.

it's 9:30 at night and i still can't walk home without sweating. as the bus pulls away, a black truck slows beside me. i take the alley, for safety's sake, and regret my decision-making when the fence beside me erupts in barks.

at the end of the alley, the truck emerges, having circled around the block. i pull out my phone and start dialing, step closer to the fence, despite the gnashing teeth.

the truck slows beside me and i give up my breath.

got a light? a man asks.

no, i cough, pressing the lit phone to my ear and walking out of reach of the car door, closer to the dogs.

i can't see his face, but i can tell he doesn't like the phone, as he starts to pull away. as soon as he rounds the corner, i run, past the corner my mother was attacked on, and the driveway where i once heard a woman screaming.

at home, i choke on my own breath as i strip off my sweaty clothes. i burrow into my bed and hyperventilate beneath the sheets. His shirt is buried beneath the pillow and i inhale His already absent scent.

i pull out my phone and text Him: *creepy thing just happened! i'm rly scared. can you talk?* He doesn't respond. i try calling, but He doesn't pick up.

my parents call me to dinner instead. i get dressed and slide into His shirt, hoping my mom won't ask where it's from.

whose shirt is that? she asks as soon as i walk in the room.

some old thing i bought at a thrift store.

i don't remember it, she says. i don't remember being so good at lying.

i sit at the table, trying to be casual, *so, this creepy guy in a truck followed me home, asking for a light. he slowed down beside me on the main street, so i took the alley, but he, like, turned around and came up in front of me.*

i watch my parents' faces slip into worry, *that's so scary.*

yeah, i don't know, it's okay i guess. i started calling home, just in case.

smart idea. i'm sorry we didn't pick up.

well, he took off when he saw the phone. i didn't actually finish dialing, i lie.

the sheets are folded like a gift. conversations fail. everything becomes a lecture, a lesson in the right way to bite your own tongue.

i find it impossible to imagine Him throwing a glass at my head, because that would obviously be abuse. she tells me He did that to her. i reach out to Him, because i know He'll be hurt, because she's hurt, because she wasn't supposed to know about me.

one nauseous day later, He gets back to me and then everything feels clear for a while. i write Him more emails, signed them off with x's, unsure of whether they're kisses or cuts. or dead fish eyes.

He picks me up from a friend's house. the friend shoves his dick down my throat before letting me leave. when i get into His car, He kisses me on the lips before i can say anything, so i decide i'd better not.

we drive around in circles, but it's like the only place we know is the university, because that's where we end up. He has some papers to mark, i have one to hand in. He takes his time rifling through papers. i sit on the floor, roll my socks up and down my legs.

you look sexy, He flirts.

i laugh. *i'm yours*, i try.

He doesn't take me home, but lets me suck him off in his car. my head hits the horn as He cums and He laughs. i swallow it all down, like glass, like it will hurt me.

but His laughter is warm and His hand reassuring as it runs down my back. He asks if i'm okay and i say, *yes-no-yes-iloveyou*, because i can't lie and then He is the one with glass in His throat.

my mom and i pick scabs. this disgusts the men in our life—fathers, brothers, lovers—
but, if anything, that only makes us pick more.

my father breaks glasses, less out of anger than carelessness. his sweeping is also
careless, so sometimes i pick glass out of my mom's feet.

it's comforting, the chance to mother in return, to help, to fix something by pulling all
cleanly out at once. it's ritualistic and i'm a seasoned pro. i can even find the roots of splinters.

i try to hookup with some guy from tinder at my place. he's sweet and gentle and offers to go down on me first. but, as his head bobs down, memories start to come up, like vomit, except the sobs are dry and silent.

i ask him to stop, something i've learned recently, and even ask him to leave. he does both with grace and an array of sickening butterfly kisses across my cheeks.

as soon as he shuts the door, i pull every window open and let the winter air pour in. my entire body, the entire apartment, is soaked in the smell of someone else. i remove all my clothing, my sheets, and carry them down to the wash. i burn my skin in the shower and then fall asleep with the snow blowing through the screens, masking the bedroom in whiteout.

i had a nightmare last night that He was keeping me trapped and torturing me. the escape was worse, because all i could do was wait for Him to find me again, wait for the inevitable loss of control.

nothing keeps. my plants all died a long time ago. my food is always expired and ants are eating my soap. there is loss everywhere, but it doesn't bother me so much anymore. it's acquiring something new that scares me. because i don't know how to keep things. or keep things intact.

i used to think i was unique for not self-harming. now i think i'm unique for the way i harm myself, biting, scratching, picking, bruising, fucking. it's not self-harm so much as habit. or maybe it's liberatory, a chance to regain control. a chance to feel.

sometimes i wonder if i'm not stuck out of time. i never seem to fit. my clothing is tight. i want to wear pants, but only dresses are not uncomfortable.

i contain things. too many things. moods, memories, pills—three a day.

we used to bond over our pill dispensers. we'd take too many sometimes and make ourselves sicker.

i think my pills are making me sicker. the doctor says i just need to learn to adjust. i'm bad at adapting. i never seem to fit. i'm good at getting stuck.

i keep waiting \ my feet beginning to thaw / unable to move.

i only did it once, was only able to do it once. i liked having the marks and i wanted to show someone, in pride. look—look what i was able to do, and i'm not even fucked up or anything. i still have total control.

that's what most people who self-harm say, my psychiatrist tells me.

but you said 'sometimes you need to hurt someone to help them,' i remind him, as if he forgot, or as if i believe what i'm saying. he looks back at me with eyes so warm i long to scream, or sob, or strip off all my clothes and ask him to take me. but i only just sit there and laugh, *oh, boy, we've got a long way to go, huh?*

he smiles and i can't stop giggling. hysteria never felt so refreshing.

my favourite stories to tell about winnipeg are how it always smelt like shit and how the tallest building, the one you can see from everywhere, is where i lost my virginity.

but it would be a lie to say i did not love home and i'm not that good at lying anyway.

over tea and crafts, my friends talk about their experiences with men. the stories overlap, making way for new recognitions.

one time, in winnipeg, a man followed me all the way down portage until i gave him my number and then he called it to make sure it was actually mine. i told him my name was joy but he thought i said joel. i tried to ignore his call, but one day i accidentally picked up and it was this guy calling for joel and i said 'there's no joel' here, which i guess was true.

we all laugh. emma pours the tea. *you want honey?* she asks.

i shake my head, *too sweet.*

we cut and sip and stitch our way through each other's stories, wrapped up in sweaters and blankets and huddled together for warmth. our voices blend together beneath the milk of winter blues and i take a moment to admire my own canvas.

i like this kind of art, it suits me. and i've always had a knack for rearranging.



throat

i've been feeling sick. strep throat or something. maybe i've gone off.

He still turns me on, i'm not sure how. nothing else gets me going. even sylvia plath isn't doing it for me. ~~i feel guilty.~~ i just need a break from school or life.

He still sees something in me. He still sees a lot of things in a lot of other someones.

He plays out in parts and patterns—checks the locks, fumbles for keys, texts, takes off shoes, adjusts the heat, gets a drink—like steve reich, repetitive but enchanting, variations on a theme. we move together entranced in a fugue / state.

the repetition is enchanting, nauseating. maybe i'm ill.

i close my eyes, i want to shut down. but i don't say anything, He is too tired, and i'm scared of what i might disrupt.

tonight: dick in throat, i choke out a *stop*, but it comes out like *cock* because it's hard to enunciate when there's one inside you.

i just try not to vomit and wait until a moment when i can spit it out. my words, i mean. but when i open my mouth, all that comes out is cum and an apology: *sorry, i usually swallow*.

He rolls His eyes.

we met because i came to talk to Him, because i asked for advice, because i'd written a story, because i thought He'd like it, because ~~he told me i was smart~~ i was a pushover, because i wanted attention, because i am desperate, because i am young and therefore dumb, ~~because i liked Him~~, because ~~he was~~ i found Him inspirational, because i like the wrong kind of men, the wrong kind of attention, because i am wrong, because i am the cause, because someone needs to be the cause, so i am, because i wanted to impress Him, because i wanted to help, because i wanted to do what i didn't want to do, because ~~He told me~~ that's who i am.

we always did feel the same, we just saw it from a different point of view, tangled up in blue, he sings.

bob dylan? i ask.

you're a good learner.

a+ student, i tease.

my hair is trapped under his shoulder, but i don't mention it. i don't want to ruin the moment. instead, i sing: *what if life were only moments? well, you'd never know you had one.*

He doesn't get the reference. doesn't ask, but starts to snore.

kundera claims that human lives are composed like music. that *everyone is a note in a sublime bach fugue*. he describes the *wonderful solidarity based on lack of understanding*. the irony of fugues is that they not only create and interweave, but also erase: the musical construction of self at odds with the temporary loss of one's identity. *often associated with hysteria*, the dictionary adds.

i'm a good, *good* learner.

i stand at the front of the courtroom. i brought six women with me, thinking today was the trial, only to find out that it is actually just a hearing to set up our next hearing. ~~besides, they don't let women into the actual trial.~~

do you have counsel? the judge asks.

i'm sorry.

speak up!

i, uh, don't know what counsel is.

the stenographer rolls her eyes. He laughs. at least i know what a stenographer is.

a lawyer. i assume you don't have one then.

i don't know how—

your next hearing will be in three months. sjasdf fasdifj wahwef nwwj erzxdif jjianwef awn.

i can't ~~hear~~ speak.

one day, i try screaming. my brother puts his arm around me, strokes my hair, doesn't know what to do. he wants to kill Him. all the men in my life do. they want to help me, make me feel better. maybe i'm sick. maybe there's a cure. but i doubt it's murder / my mother strokes my hair, says, *i should have warned you better*, because that's what all the women in my life say / they comfort me by sharing their stories. it stops being comforting \ He strokes my hair, tells me i am beautiful, not to ever let anyone hurt me \ says, *don't tell your parents about this*.

an ex stands with me in front of the bay downtown, smoking cigarettes, and waiting for the bus. his smoking always both disgusted and entranced me, in ways that remind me of Him.

that's just the legal system, he says, in response to a story i told him about being left alone in a courtroom with Him.

i know, i say. better than you ever will, i swallow. it doesn't sit right.

this is probably a bad idea, but / i shouldn't be doing this, but / it's unethical, but / i know i hurt you, but /

what my client means to say is—that's not what i'm saying, not what i'm saying, not what i mean, i mean, i don't mean to be mean, but—

we can't talk about it until we understand it. we can't understand it until we talk about it. we talk about it, we talk about our understanding. we understand our talk. we are very understanding.

so, on twitter, people can make new accounts even if you block them, i explain to the judge from across the room.

a fan spins around above us. i think this table has been here since the building was made. you know its an important building because the washrooms are made out of marble and limestone and when i was peeing i found a fossil in the wall.

you can't make your account private? honorable [REDACTED] asks.

i could, but He could still create an account i wouldn't recognize.

uhuh, so you could delete your account.

well, i kind of need my account for—

you must not feel very threatened then.

my lawyer steps in for me. *what i think my client is saying is that—*

i give in. my lawyer speaks for me. he is comforting and tall with a manly kind of authority. men listen to him. He even shakes hands with him. my lawyer looks a little like gregory peck, or maybe i'm just hoping for that kind of trial. justice means everything other than what it's defined to be.

i am defined to be patient, quiet, and brief. my problems are too complex for these marble floors. they might scratch the surface if let loose. i imagine a swarm of lawyers pouring water across the marble foyer, freezing it into ice, and hauling me across the slick surface like the bronze bison of the legislative building. only to find out that i still don't fit in.

He's the most caring man X He is so human X everyone i know hates Him X He made me realize who i was X he's super funny, looks like jesus, kinda X oh, yeah, i've heard about Him X He almost prevented me from pursuing my degree X i love him X it's like i've always known Him X He's one of those people you want on your side X because He's got a nasty bad side X i trust Him X we were supposed to meet up for coffee X He locked the doors and X everyone says he's a wonderful X it's like He's not even X human, so human X he will bend over backwards to X i can't help but smile when X He lied about X He made me X He told us X He doesn't X He is X He won't X He would never hurt you.

dr. [REDACTED] discouraged ms. [REDACTED]'s claims that she had any reason to feel threatened by him. he testified that he wanted nothing to do with her and that she was being irrational. dr. [REDACTED] testified that she always consented to sexual relations and that she came to court to cause a scene. he described her as a narcissist who is very unstable.

there is no evidence to suggest that ms. [REDACTED] was raped or ever a victim of a serious threat. her counsel, mr. [REDACTED], argued that dr. [REDACTED]'s use of email, facebook, twitter, and other online apps counts as "harassment," however j. [REDACTED] found this unsatisfactory. dr. [REDACTED] testified that she used her online presence to provoke him whereas ms. [REDACTED] claimed she needed an online reputation for work. it has been suggested that, if ms. [REDACTED] feels threatened, she should delete her public accounts.

i wake to His touch, His voice, reading. wake to a moment, to an extended arm, to hanging on for just a moment longer. but all we seem to have is moments, un-connectible, untraceable, contradictory.

isn't this nice? He asks. my head is jammed into this armpit. He won't let me get dressed.
yes, i say.



my grandma once told me that she had to substitute plastic garbage bags for a forgotten bikini top and, still, she couldn't keep him off.

she was a modern woman. she knew how to delete.

she used to look at me, with guilt, used to pull my shirt up over my breasts, tell me, *don't live a life of regret.*

His romanticism whited everything out. white clothes, white sheets, do not remain white. i bought a white coat one winter and immediately sat in spilled juice. i tried to wash it out, but could only spread the stain around. my mother scolded me for buying something white, she understands just how impractical whiteness is.

i'm full and i haven't even eaten. i cook for Him instead, a recipe i learned from my aunt.
i sort through His papers and take out the trash. this is what kindness is: being full with affection.

He tells me to take my top off, asks my tits where they've been hiding.

nowhere, i say. they're always there.

but i know they are too visible. no matter how i try to hide them, under layer after layer of
clothing.

sometimes i think i wouldn't mind losing a breast.

take my nudes.
take my nudes with white sheets.
take my nudes with bruises.
take my nudes, the ugly ones.
take my nudes where i manage to look alright.
take my bondage nudes.

the night before she died, my grandma came to me in a dream. we sat together in the church pews as we always had, except this time there was no hearing aid screeching as she adjusted it, no loss of communication. she understood everything i said just as she once had \ back when she could hear me and i couldn't yet understand. where the more i learned to speak, the more she disappeared.

after waking from the dream, sweaty and disillusioned, with the hair of a gorgon, i took over her trauma. i was diagnosed with depression, anxiety, a bad case of archive fever.

everything fell apart, reassembled, began again.

feel your breasts lying down. you can begin at the nipple, moving in larger and larger circles until you reach the outer edge of the breast. you can also move your fingers up and down vertically, in rows, as if you were mowing a lawn. this up-and-down approach seems to work best for most women. when finished, repeat.

i have a pain in my side from trying to find a tumour that isn't there. i never know what to be paranoid about when i'm not having sex. there aren't enough lumps. i need something to probe and i can't stop searching this absence. i've turned worry into bruises and buried fingers under skin, but i can't find a trace of anything.

i do not ask Him to show me the pictures because i know i will not like how i look. He tries to read to me, but i cannot listen past the ringing in my ears. He threatens to tear up my short story because i was not paying attention.

~~i refrain from saying anymore.~~

i lost my story in an attempt to be oblique, in an attempt to protect myself Him. it is too much of a risk to give up responsibility for someone else's memories, or to keep track of which memories are not my own. i gain back my words in the voices of other women, but that only requires more listening, telling.

she tells me about about how He trapped her in His apartment and held a knife to her throat. or maybe the knife was a hand, or a series of carefully constructed words. it doesn't really matter. i am not a judge, and the feelings are too familiar.

i spent my childhood behind books with my feet pressed to the heater, dreaming of the kind of man i would one day fall in love with. dancing in the front yard in pretty dresses thinking eventually someone would pull over and ask me to marry him

eventually / i unraveled. into either truth or pessimism. a pothole full of maggots. a sunburn. bleeding through my bikini because i didn't know how to get the tampon in and i always leak anyways. i learned to fill up garbage hills (like the one i used to toboggan down in the winter) and not complain about my weekly bleeding /

the doctor just says, i'm one of the unlucky ones. i go home with the phantom of a speculum still inside me.

i am becoming an archive. i bear the weight of stories. details overlap, it doesn't matter that they're different, they're all invisible in the same way. i regurgitate stories, to try and fill the gap.

sometimes His words intercept, take over. sometimes i am so worried about collecting that i don't even see what i've erased.

i quote star trek in poetry class. i'm a mixed metaphor. it's in my coding.

in star trek, every time someone gets beamed up, they are cloned. they die to make way for a new version of themselves, with all their memories but none of the experiences. only dr. mccoys seems to understand how existentially fucked up this is. but it's best if you think about these things metaphorically anyways, particularly mortality, like the bible.

i seem to only give birth to infinite new selves. but i have trouble letting go. i don't move. the only way to go anywhere is to constantly erase the previous model.

take my nudes, the ones that were not supposed to be seen.
circulate me, circulate my nudes. maybe they'll fight back. because people seem to like
the vulnerability of my skin much more than the vulnerability of me anyways.
and i've always been good at being rearranged.



i used to have to remind myself to breathe, scared i might stop otherwise, might accidentally forget. i used to panic about forgetting, would remember too much \ i used to get off on asphyxiating on my own memories / now, i take meds to help me get over my memories / or to better remember them / or i don't remember / i don't remember why.

my friends don't understand when i try to explain us to them, although i've only told a few.
you don't understand, i tell them, their frowns. i shift the story, so they'll see. i like how He sees
me, when He sees me

eventually / i stop mentioning Him at all.

tonight, i have had too much to drink. i ask Him if i can go to the washroom and He follows me, locking the door behind Him. He watches me pee, looking down at me. there is nothing quite so intimate.

He has to go too, tells me not to watch. i wait with Him, facing the wall, avoiding the mirror. i listen to Him, his breathing, the slow trickle. He opens the door and we leave together, our footsteps in sync. we are becoming one, i think.

i have become a part of Him, cornered away and hidden out of sight like His wife's clothes, her boxes of tampons. eventually, He tells me about her. He tells me she is crazy, that He loves her. He compares me to her. she is wise, i am young, she is old, i am inspired. variations of her form vaguely in my mind, but i push them out because the not-knowing is easier and because i am scared of becoming crazy and wise as well.

i used to fear the sounds of breathing, mine most of all / now, i count on His nose whistles and snores. i count them too, like sheep, to try to put myself to sleep. beside me, He rasps and rattles as i try not to hyperventilate. my second chances are not rebirths / but resuscitations \\\like kate bush singing *out—in—out—in* on repeat in my head until i live in that rhythm, that beat. until i learn to breathe in through the pain, like you would through a stretch, in order to remember how to feel, scared i might stop otherwise, might accidentally forget.

the duvet presses my body into the bed and i'm drowning in my own sweat, but if i move i might wake him. i breathe in under my own breath. is this what it means to recover?

the clinic gives me a panic attack. i can feel my heart racing, but it doesn't register on the monitor. *these symptoms are all in your mind*, my psychiatrist tells me, *nothing you feel in a panic attack is real*. except that right now my feelings are all i have to hold onto. they are the warning sign, the invisible symptom. nothing shows, so the telling seems false.

they forget me in one of the rooms. i assume they would never forget someone, so i just sit there, re-enacting *waiting for godot*, singing show tunes under my breath to return my normal heart rate to normal. a nurse opens the door, says, *oh, you're still here*, and leaves.

stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that dignity.
(chimamanda adichie).

your writing is trapped in a bell jar, He tells me.
no wonder i can't breathe. i've trapped myself in a vacuum. too much inhaling with no
chance to let anything back out.

stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also break.

what happened?

- i remembered
- i forgot
- i left
- it doesn't matter
- it's still happening

we meet in a panic attack. or maybe the panic comes later. but it doesn't matter what or who came first, more that He keeps coming back, every time i fuck. my panic is a threesome. my panic is a choking. a regurgitated reminder that the person beneath me, over me, inside me, might not always be this gentle.

[the floor of the clinic is smurf blue. my words are rubber, i am glue. everything i say bounces back and sounds like Him.]

me : *i think i may have been assaulted.*

nurse: *we get a lot of people in here who have been assaulted.*

me: *it's a sexual assault clinic.*

nurse: *yes. can you describe assault for me?*

me: *what?*

nurse: *what do you think assault is?*

me: *i don't?*

nurse: *define it.*

me: ~~*i don't / i'm just looking for / i don't know what to say / i just want help.*~~

nurse: *what do you think it means?*

me: *a kind of violence? but, like, words can be violent too.*

[wrong answer. she presses a buzzer and *weakest link!* flashes above my head. the audience screams with laughter.]

nurse: *take a look at our pamphlet. [her lips are honey] it defines what we consider assault.*

during the days of our court battles, i lose control of my bowels. i can't sit still in class because of the constant overflow of shit; my entire body rejecting everything i've ever shoved into it.

somehow i still fall in love with books. i collect words i can use when i'm ready to speak again. *i've been told neither magic nor my illness are real, yet they form the foundation of who i am* (maranda elizabeth). i'm sure that one day i'll be ready to speak again.

what happened?

--i forget

--i lost control

--i was uncontrollable

--it's a blur

--i wasn't there

i want to have a panic attack in front of Him. to have an excuse to speak or to make Him notice me. i don't want Him to think that i'm manipulative. instead i have one in class as He texts me, chugging a bottle of pills or lying in a bed, whichever you believe.

His texts spring leaks, more than i have fingers to stop so i use my voice instead, whisper pleas to the screen of my phone. His voice oozes: *i want to die. i'm not good enough for you.* i lick up His words, try to spit them back, end up swallowing instead. He picks me up and we drive around our words, mapping circles through the city, tying knots with our path. He drives me home, lets me out. His *i love you* freezes in the winter air and i wrap my fingers around it.

later / i notice it's a bottle cap i'm holding onto.

psychiatrist: *you are a wonderful storyteller.*

me: *it's in my blood.*

psychiatrist: *you do not have to say anything if you don't want to.*

me: *i do. i mean, i want to. it is my only method of forgetting.*

i didn't tell my story to the media so no one heard it. so maybe it isn't even really true. instead, i told a bunch of people a bunch of stories and they told me to stop talking. i became confidential, confessional. i whispered things to myself and became more and more unbelievable.

i am not a very private person. i interfere too much. if i spread my legs for you will you let me see your eyes? hysteria has started to seem like the most logical option, but i don't even believe in logic.

i used to admire vulcan logic in star trek, but i see now that the show was mostly about emotion, about going with the gut and what felt right. i've lost control of my gut and maybe that's a sign. logic can only stretch so far and then things stop making sense.

try telling the court room: *i was in a dream and then i woke up*. there's no ~~other~~ way to explain it.

she's deranged, He would say. just listen to her!
and it wouldn't be hard to believe He was right.

*janey: i don't want to commit suicide anymore, like i used to; i want to go through death.
how can i go through death? (aloud) hey death!
(death doesn't answer.)
janey: goddamn you answer me even if I'm a woman! (selah saterstrom)*

how will i be remembered?

--blue

--blacked-out

--the way you always are

--a breath

--i forget

she points to my hands as they grab at my shirt sleeves. i hadn't even noticed this habit; fingers shaping my speech, my own secret sign language reaching at words, hands, anything.

tell your parents, she says, in the same voice she used while teaching us plath, cvetkovich, hejinian, mendieta.

i take a sip of earl grey, so hot it burns my tongue, wonder how jean luc picard ever stomached such a burning comfort. wonder how to sit down with star trek and tea and then to tell this story. how to even start.



paint

everyone always says water tastes like nothing, but the taste of nothing changes between cities. in winnipeg, the water tasted like snow, in montreal, like rain. in new york, like the steam rising out of the sewers. i take all of these flavours in, try to discern what home tastes like.

i have become a connoisseur of nothings.

they say His lawyer will tear me apart, without realizing the extent to which i have already been torn. they tell me to study up on my life so i'll know how to answer factually. i know already where i will fail: he will point out how i asked Him to tear me apart, call my testimony into question, and ask me for proof. i will be paradoxical, imperfect, and honest. i will fail the test. yes, sometimes i want to be torn apart, other times i don't.

this might sting.

He gently / cream across / self-inflicted cut. the kindest gesture. i wish it would sting /
nerves / broken.

there is a difference between / cut to black.



He tells me how to improve my writing. to confine it with constraint. restrict it to a certain genre. my writing chokes up, but my body falls under. wrists bound to wrists, eyes hid, hips open, wrapped to a bed.

no. that part was consensual. it's not that easy. i'm not that easy.

eat

me

layer after layer

i filled the entire glass with milk before seeing the long crack across its surface; completely whole so long as it remained immovable, but existent only on its promise to collapse.

i don't cry over spilt milk, i cry over the inevitable spill.

why didn't you say no? he asks.

i don't know—i don't—i didn't— i say, i think i screamed it—no, no no no no—or maybe i said—sorry—or laughed. i laugh, i mean—stop—or, help or—i'm confused. shake my head, it wasn't that easy—i didn't know what was happening—i don't know how to answer this question—i didn't know how to act—i don't know what you want me to say—what could i possibly say? i repeat, what could i possibly say? what could make you believe?

communication short-circuits—fizzles. cut to black.

what becomes worst are the repetitions, the ones i can't control. the return of last night's supper. my story keeps repeating in variations beyond myself, hundreds of other women with similar words streaming past my eyes. i can't stop clicking, reading.

i spent most of my life harming myself somehow. when trauma is in your cells, you perpetuate it. (tanya tagaq)

i tell Him to fuck me while trying to seem fragile, ask Him to tear me apart because i want to seem unbreakable. i toss my hair, see myself in the mirror, and turn away. i look into His eyes instead. He tells me how sexy i am when i am naked.

afterwards / my movements are small, head bowed, covering myself. i do not ask Him to show me the video because i know i will not like how i look. i love my vulnerability, but tonight it tastes like rust.

tonight:

i

His eyes.

out

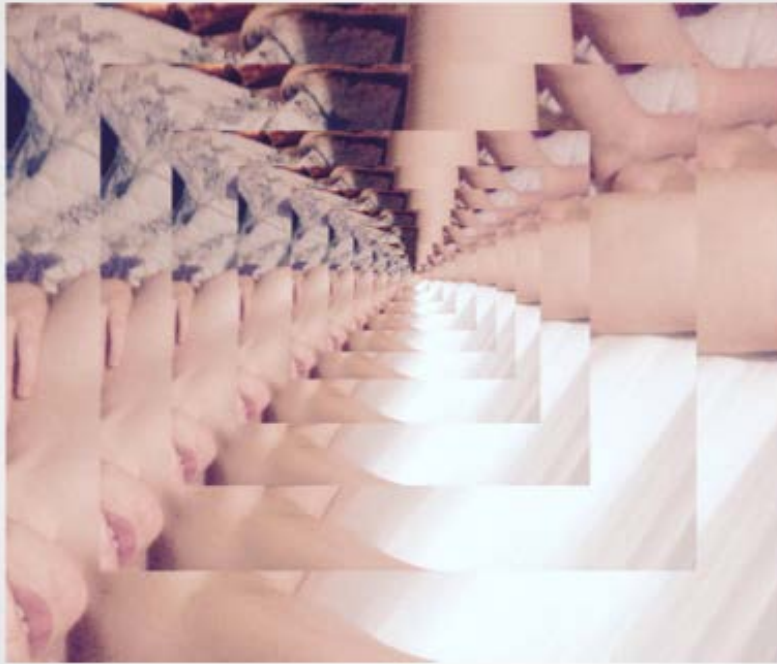
spit

there is a difference between \ cover up and recover / there is a difference between \ bondage and violence / there is a difference between \ *i love it when you're naked* and *i love you when you're naked* / there is a difference between \ one cut and another / there is a difference between \ *yes* and *yes* / there is a difference between / anonymity and censorship \ there is a difference between / there is a difference between \ there is a difference between / \ X / \ there is a difference

backlit in blue / i don't \ i didn't / look at the / screen looks back as me

/ skip /

stitch nerves back together / this kind of pain / *some will know* / embroidery and stories /
the simple fact of pain / repaint the bedroom / *this is becoming* / repaint my body / *my mortality*
(sarah kane) / map, sort, repeat / *healed to pieces* (paul celan)



selfie

He sat across from the table, eyes on my shoulders, my collarbone. i took down my hair from a knot on my head and it fell in curls across my cheeks. like ingrid bergman, i hoped. he smiled at me, *you should wear it like that more often*, his suggestion masked as a compliment. he was looking me in the eyes. *hold my gaze*, he said, and i tried, but eventually had to give up.

i ask him to look at me. sometimes he does.

in the video, He is laughing and so am i.
this moment, just as real as the rest. i still laugh at the joke, at my childlike giggle.
i will not erase the good. i will preserve, layer over layer, until i become whole.
overpainting is the only way to see the colour clearly.

my nudes circulate. my story stops moving. i am stuck, feet in the snow, with everything moving around me, pumping through black arteries.

we drive through the city, singing at one another, but never together. later / as i move to get out of the car, He tells me a story, familiar with a difference:

tonight was beautiful. it doesn't matter that we missed the show, we became our own: two lonely people alone on portage and main with even the sky on our side, weeping with us. i know things did not go according to plan, but that is what makes it so perfect. you and i do not fit into ordinary plans, we must make our own.

He touches my hand, rehearses the events of the evening.

i was there, i say, laughing.

He shifts into drive, says, *i'm reminding, so you won't forget.*

i mistake this remembering for reality.

i don't understand how she could do it, they repeat, questioning her, not his, actions.

i feel like i understand. i say *i believe* between the rumours and maybe that is why she ~~made an ending for herself~~ made herself into an ending. it is impossible to imagine her pain, but i keep trying. i want to make a mark, like she made a mark / on my wall, which i scrolled past.

she still has birthdays on facebook, annual memorials, everyone writing themselves into her wounds. i keep reopening her story. it no longer matters how deep her cut. i can never feel enough.

i am scared of exposure, but love looking. i move, quietly as i can, across the floorboards, so as to not wake Him, but He wakes anyway and peers at me, into me, as he always seems to do. we're lit by the blue of the monitor, looming between us. *don't touch it*, He says and goes to the washroom.

i don't even ~~look~~ move.

i have stopped trying to explain myself, stopped telling people about Him. i am tired of eyes, the way other people see me. but he keeps looking. through the screen of his phone: calling me late at night, filming me nude on his bed.

i can never write this right.

i am tracing a history of my self through old love letters. i hang onto things: letters, images, fragments. i hang off of myself. i have trouble letting go. i am a product of every wrong and right move of my swaying breasts; sacks of fat, slapping and sweaty, bulging, uncomfortable flesh. *am i sexy, am i sexy, tell me i'm sexy?*

during the day, i am exposed, on edge, waiting for someone who looks like Him, who looks at me like Him.

michael caine says that to come across convincingly as an actor, you have to focus on only one eye. that if you keep switching back and forth, you look dishonest. i must be the most dishonest person as i can't meet anyone's gaze these days, am too scared to claim my stories as real.

it's the people who rely on truth who scare me most of all.

my mom tells me how she couldn't stop looking over her shoulder after she was attacked. except then, one day, she noticed she had stopped. *eventually, it will go away*, she says, but i'm not sure what exactly it is that goes.

i belong to the backspace generation. i should know how to erase. i sent pictures, tried to frame a moment, backspaced over my generation \ stuck in a time lapse \

tiny nude women stare back at me from the screen, uncannily like myselfies, but out of place. i should have looked sooner. i didn't know there was another archive of me.

i photographed myself so i would never go back to that man. (nan goldin)



my winnipeg

my mother once told me that she did not mind if a building was torn down, so long as she had the memory of it. but now we no longer remember which building she was talking about.

i still have the scaffoldings of memories. maybe it's a map i mourn for, something to tie the pieces together: the concert hall to that radisson to this bench. i trace a history of my family through old lovers. i write about it on twitter. i tell other people's stories, adopt them as my own, because theirs are easier to believe. i paste these stolen stories into a narrative, trace and erase until everything overlaps because, if winnipeg taught me anything, it's that everything overlaps.

He met me at a bookstore. it was staged, Him driving through the traffic to see me. i met Him at the top of the stairs, said *fancy seeing you here*, as i always say to people i expect. He smiled at me, down at me, all over me. we're like the fitzgeralds, zelda and f. scott. we treasure dysfunction, disillusion. we walk through the shelves, rehearsing our favourites: woolf, plath, duras: *please devour me*, hemingway, keats, michaels: *everything human and broken depends on perfection*, joyce, kundera, cage:

outside, He pulls out a cigarette. i read between the ashes and his face. i watch His lips, trace His words across the parking lot and into his car. He drives me through potholes and snow. i look up at Him. and the sky, like an oil painting.

maybe it's maddin's fault but the bay downtown always makes me want to cry, in the abandoned washrooms, preserved by neglect, and i used to go there with cigarettes, maybe to dispel the myth that i am a christian or maybe to find some meaning in nostalgia, of which there is none, no matter what maddin or the movies say, but i would always stop half a cigarette in, hating the taste in my mouth.

i have broken myself down into eras. before and after. still here, after-after, here-we-go-again. at some point i became crazy or perhaps i was all along, perhaps He was all along.

we give Him a name, my psychiatrist says, *to remember who did it*. his eyes are warm, or tepid, i can't tell the difference. i look at the floor, my hands. *what is His name?* he asks, gently adding, *you don't have to answer*.

it's the same roads that we pass over again and again. like arteries, maddin would say. there are veins i cannot travel down. black and blue streets. the corner where He stuck his hand down my pants as a group of men watched. how much have these streets seen? how much worse?

i've heard this story before, my professor says, every woman is telling these stories these days. it's the latest trend.

all my essays end in paradoxes. He compliments this, compliments me. i lose track of when i'm being graded. i lose track of what i've read and what i've experienced. *i am a woman and my business is to hold things together, my business is to tear them apart* (fitzgerald).

i pulled away my childhood wallpaper, but it was stubborn and took the paint off too. i picked off parts of His crumbling windowsills so as to take a chunk out of Him and i left for a similar but different city without noticing His bottle caps still in my pockets, the salt on my boots. everywhere i go, i carry this residue.

He hands me a book, soft and thick. i open it as if it might break. He takes my hand and it is cold / outside. He looks into me, quoting e. e. cummings and pressing words into the palm of my hand: *nobody, not even the rain.* but it is snowing.



institution

i fell in love with His name first. its simplicity, how well it suited Him. i used to like writing it out, letter by letter, middle name and all, in emails, notes, the corners of pages. now i write it out like a betrayal, my tiny letters on the long legal paper. my signature at the end ~~formalizing everything we pretended never happened.~~

they leave me alone with Him in the court room. i assume they won't be gone long. ~~i sing show tunes under my breath, listen to Him chuckling beside me, peel pieces of plastic off the side of my binder.~~

today's sermon is about temptation. my eyes map the cracks in the walls, starting at the organ and branching into a great tree of fissures in the rafters. i realize there are probably a lot more stories to each church than there are in the bible.

matthew 26:41, reads the minister, *watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. the spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak.*

~~i think about how fucked up that is.~~

let us focus, he says, *on the line from the lord's prayer we've said so many times: and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

i drift off mid-prayer, back into fantasies. they'd say down in the gutters, but i'm up in the cracks.

we meet in the middle. my toes, His stooping. we breathe an inch away from one another. on the periphery, sinatra croons: *you make me feel so young*. i start laughing and accidentally spit on His face. He doesn't find it nearly as funny.

~~fingers tear at clothes, teeth at collars. tongue on nails in folds under lashes, lips on lips and knees in all the wrong places, clenched fists and soft hands made hard, harder, i can make you hard, hardened.~~

the body is a home, a building, a facade, He tells me. the body contains us. think of raymond carver's cathedral: we transcend the body, to see clearly. a bit of His "transcend" hits my cheek as He speaks. i pretend to not notice.

i go to the church in the evening, when it's empty, to practice the organ. He texts me some joke about how i should practice His organ instead. it's not really funny, except that i notice a link between organs—His, mine, the church's—that they're all the things i never talk about.

i play late into the night, let myself be loud. i play through the mistakes because i don't have to worry about anyone hearing them.

He would probably describe the experience as spiritual and He would probably be right.

He stands at the front of the class, holding an anthology. *turn your hymnals to page 109*,
He preaches. we laugh in unison and chant the prescribed academic responses: *maybe i'm reading
too much into this, but / this is probably wrong, but / this might be off topic, but /*

one student breaks the hesitation, confesses her history of alcoholism. He commiserates,
forgives, shares His own vulnerabilities. i feel insufficient for not confessing enough.

we take communion in words, baptize ourselves in stories, but there are only ever enough
to make me want more.

He has cracks in his face that i spent days writing into meaning only to realize the words all came from outside of him.

He is a whole church, a university. He is an old blue dress covered in paint, a binder in an old law building on the winnipeg horizon. He is a motif, a moment of a movement.

He hands out a quiz and i know i'm in trouble.

i could write an essay on the representation of diseased bodies in shakespeare or the way all of kundera's books are like motifs in a fugue / but i fail the quiz.

i've never been good with plots

He was in front of me at the grocery store tonight, joking with the cashiers, making them laugh. *my metro card is safe at home*, He chuckled ~~like santa claus~~. He was everything i liked about Him.

do you want to keep the box? the cashier asked, pointing to the orange crate.

he tensed, curdled, *why wouldn't i?* his voice deepening, bloody

—and it came back to me—

some people don't want it. the cashier rationalized, confused.

and he came back, ~~santa claus again:~~ *oh, ho, ho. i've got a collection going at home.* and everyone laughed, relieved.

but, of course, it wasn't Him. He doesn't even ~~need to~~ live here.

He might give you an out, ask you if you want to leave. you might even want to, but you are smart enough to know this is not a real option.

when jesus asks you to leave, you do not say *okay, thanks*; you rehearse from memory something ingrained into you over years and years of sitting on hard pews: *to whom shall [i] go? you have the words of eternal life. and [i] have believed and have come to know that you are the holy one of god understand myself as entirely dependent on you.*

He likes to teach me lessons. ~~there is a difference between~~
i used to get a rush in His classroom when i raised my hand, hermione granger embodied.
my breathing would cut / hot cheeks, and then i'd speak—praying i wouldn't be wrong. i never
was. and it wasn't that i was such a good student, but that he was a genuinely good teacher.

me: *can that be?*

psychiatrist: *you're the one who brought up paradoxes.*

me: *it's how all my essays end.*



it comforts me that endings are thus formally unappealing to me—that more than beginning or ending, i enjoy continuing. (sarah manguso)

eventually, you hear a story enough times that your tongue falls out.

this is what you'll need to do: learn how to darn socks. you need to keep your feet warm.
when you're ready, stitch your tongue back on using the same technique. learn a new vocabulary.
one with all the same words but none of the old uses.

hold on to your tongue. if it falls out again, repeat these steps.

who
is invisible enough
to see you
(paul celan)

#ibelievesurvivors