

RECLAIMING AN ABANDONED BODY:  
A CREATIVE NONFICTION ESSAY COLLECTION

A Thesis

by

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Submitted to the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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May 2019

Major Subject: English

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how a queer adolescent can abandon and reclaim her body. These creative nonfiction essays focus on my personal experiences as a bisexual girl growing up in Southern conservative suburbia. The collection's title comes from my concept of bodily abandonment, which refers to bodily neglect and the desire to escape one's physical body. I concentrate on the singular "abandoned body" because the specificity of personal experience is vital to the bodily reclamation process. At the same time, I do not ignore the relational aspect of bodily experiences. The body in this essay shifts in relation to the people with whom it comes in contact, illustrated in "Intermingling Dyes," "A Conversation Overheard at a Concert," and "Relational Bodies."

I also consider how regulated social structures influence the queer adolescent body. Keeping in mind Jacqueline Rhodes' notion that "the discipline of our queer bodies relies on the violent enforcement of Be-ing by narrow gender codes," this collection considers how queer adolescent bodies are regulated by societal expectations (13). In particular, the narrative persona in the essays pushes against feminine gender expectations. As an infant, she throws lacy socks and pink booties aside because her feet need freedom ("Mommy and Me"). As a child, she compares herself to her hermit crab Minnie, who gets labeled 'female' for choosing a feminine Minnie Mouse shell but later migrates into a masculine Batman shell ("Living in Captivity"). As a preteen, she poses as people of various genders on a social networking website ("Fluid"). The narrative

persona's actions can be read both as a resistance to societal gender codes and as a desire to escape the confines of her material body.

The struggle with the physical body, then, is at the core of this collection. Above all, this collection proposes that the experiences of the physical body deserve careful attention. The collection considers whether telling stories about bodily experiences can help neglected queer bodies be reclaimed.

## DEDICATION

Dedicated to Asher Brown, Seth Walsh, Billy Lucas, and any other abandoned bodies that might need it.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Stabile, and my committee members, Dr. DiCaglio and Dr. He, for their guidance throughout this project. Thanks also go to my friends and mentors in the English department for making me feel welcome at Texas A&M University. Finally, thanks to my family for their constant support and encouragement.

## CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

### **Contributors**

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Aside from suggestions and commentary, all work conducted for the thesis was completed by the student independently.

### **Funding Sources**

Graduate study was supported by a teaching assistantship from Texas A&M University.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

So the thing at the end of the day is, ladies and gentlemen, that you are so much more than your orientation. You know it and I know it. So don't let those bullies and those ignorant, fearful, small-minded people prove you wrong. You have to be strong, and you have to pay attention to the positive. And in doing so, you will push through and you will rise up and you will live your life to the fullest. It gets better, but it's up to you.

(“Adam Lambert ‘It Gets Better:’ Perez Hilton”)

I watch the “It Gets Better” videos over and over in 2010. Every LGBT celebrity I know of makes one: Chris Colfer, Ellen DeGeneres, Neil Patrick Harris, and Adam Lambert. Come to think of it, I don't know of very many LGBT celebrities. Why aren't there more?

Ellen DeGeneres is my favorite. I eat while watching her show every day after school. I skip having lunch in the high school cafeteria to read in the library, so I'm famished by the time I get home. I pause with a potato chip halfway into my mouth as Ellen explains that the “It Gets Better” Campaign started after a string of teen suicides. My eyes fill with tears at the same time hers do: as she starts listing names. Thirteen-year-old Asher Brown from Cypress, Texas; fifteen-year-old Billy Lucas from Greensburg, Indiana; thirteen-year-old Seth Walsh from Tehachapi, California.



I throw the chip aside. I don't feel like eating anymore. Like Asher, I'm from Texas. Like Billy, I'm fifteen years old. Like Seth, I'm from a Christian family. Like all three boys, I'm still a child. I wonder if any of them ever had their first kiss. Maybe they were too young for kissing, or maybe they had trouble finding someone who wanted to kiss them. I wonder what it would be like to kiss a girl. I wonder what it would be like to get bullied for kissing her.

"It gets better," the celebrities say. That's the point of the "It Gets Better" campaign—to convince LGBT youth to hold onto the promise of a better future. We should hold on to today because tomorrow will be better. What happens if tomorrow never comes?

"It's up to you," the celebrities say. The burden is on us to imagine a better version of the world. We are the youth, after all. We are the ones with the power to incite change.

"You have to be strong," the celebrities say. We repeat the mantra to ourselves. We whisper it under our breath on school buses. We have to rely on inner strength. The outside world will never accept us.

They're trying to help, but "you have to be strong" implies that the kids who killed themselves were weak. "It's up to you" implies that no one else will help us. "It gets better" sounds like an empty promise.

We are more than our orientations. Now we have to prove it. Be better than them. Rise above. Turn the other cheek. Don't stoop to their level. Don't lash out. Don't hate ourselves, even if everyone else hates us.

Forgive the preachers who gently state that we'll burn in hell if we don't change. Smile at the friends who use "gay" as an insult. Ignore the classmates who snicker at the "lesbian part" of Anne Frank's diary.

I grew up in Southern conservative suburbia. Everyone was Christian. Everyone was Republican. Everyone made racist, homophobic, and sexist comments on a daily basis. It's difficult to grow up embracing minority identities in a place that resists difference. Queer adolescents raised in conservative conditions are bound to suffer from institutionalized and internalized misogyny and heterosexism.

Internalizing societal hatred for their bodies may cause adolescents to "abandon" their bodies by disassociating from their physical forms. For example, a depressed queer adolescent may neglect basic bodily needs (like showering and brushing teeth) as I do in my essay "On the Abandoned." I refer to the dissociation between body and self as bodily "abandonment." This collection considers how to reclaim abandoned bodies by thinking back to my personal experiences as a bisexual adolescent.

I can think of no better way to address queer adolescent experiences than by writing a creative nonfiction essay collection. The twelve essays included here paint a picture of my younger self as she struggles to come to terms with her bisexual, feminine body. The links between queer theory and the creative nonfiction essay genre, which I will develop below, make me confident in my choice of genre and subject matter.

Queer theory's understanding of "queerness" resists simple definition. In *Tendencies*, Sedgwick writes,

A word so fraught as queer is—fraught with so many social and personal histories of exclusion, violence, defiance, excitement—can never only denote; nor even can it only connote; a part of its experimental force as a speech act is the way in which it dramatizes locutionary position itself. Anyone’s use of “queer” about themselves means differently from their use of it about someone else. (338)

Sedgwick recognizes the complicated history of the word “queer” and the impossibility of pinning down such a loaded term. As Sedgwick notes, the definition of “queer” depends on who uses the term and how they use it. Annamarie Jagose defines queer as that which destabilizes “the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire” (3). Jagose posits that the “definitional indeterminacy” and “elasticity” of the word “queer” are essential to its understanding (98). Following in the footsteps of queer theorists like Jagose and Sedgwick, I will not “pin down” the “loaded term” by providing a strict definition. Instead, I will describe characteristics of queerness that relate to the creative nonfiction genre.

In these essays, I consider queerness in both the specific sense of sexual orientation and the more general sense of nonconformity. I understand queer bodies as bodies that do not fit into a regulated social world. The norms that govern a social world may relate to race, gender, sexual orientation, class, ability, and more. While a broad understanding of queer bodies may risk of losing the “sexual specificity of the word queer,” an all-encompassing view of queerness allows for a focus on the instability, multiplicity, and fluidity of identity categories (Ahmed 172). Referring to queerness only in terms of sexual orientation would ignore the fact that sexual identity is not stable, nor

does it exist in a vacuum. Rather, sexual identity must be considered as one of multiple identities, all of which influence one another.

Keeping in mind the link between queerness and nonconformity, I see a number of connections between queer theory and the creative nonfiction essay form. First of all, queer theorists and creative nonfiction essayists share a love for personal narratives. Choosing to write a creative nonfiction collection means choosing to value the personal. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed wonders, “Why call the personal a digression? Why is it that the personal so often enters writing as if we are being led astray from a proper course” (22)? As Ahmed suggests, the personal should not be framed as “digression.” For a creative nonfiction collection, the personal is the core of the work. The creative nonfiction collection involves nothing but “being led astray” by inviting readers to wander through the hearts, minds, and lives of the writer. In creative nonfiction, there is no “proper course” from which readers may “digress:” the personal, messy and broken as it may be, is the only path to take.

As the above quote suggests, queer theorists like Sara Ahmed value personal digressions. Queer theorists often consider queerness itself as “digression” or deviation from the norm. Ahmed thinks about queerness as a failure to take the steps seen as necessary “for a life to count as a good life,” such as marrying a member of the opposite sex and having children (21). Ahmed suggests that a life “must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one’s futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. A queer life might be one that fails to make such gestures of return” (21). Because the creative nonfiction essay

doesn't chart a life's course but rather examines moments, events, and memories, it troubles the chronological (and originally autonomous white male) narrative (and heteronormative) expectations.

One may consider, then, how both the creative nonfiction essay and queerness fail to live up to heteronormative expectations. Creative nonfiction essays reframe normal every day experiences as strange and exciting. In her essay "The Intelligent Heart," Patricia Foster explains how a male colleague complained about the narcissistic dullness of the creative nonfiction genre. Following the conversation, Foster muses: "Perhaps I have no right to material so close to me, stories that fester and clot inside me like the beginnings of a chronic disease. [...] Perhaps the old way of storytelling in the essay is dead" (175). Foster imagines stories as incubators for personal experience. It is no accident that the essay's critique comes from a heteronormative male colleague; the heteronormative figure does not care about personal (especially feminine) experiences. At the essay's end, Foster's colleague wonders, "Who cares about the I?" "I do," Foster says, "gathering up the pages of [her] story. I refuse to be dead" (177). Foster's "I" refers not only to herself as an author, but to a collective and inclusive "I" of diverse essayists. Foster cares about her own "I," but she also cares about the "I" as a concept: personal storytelling as a sociocultural practice. Writing creative nonfiction as a form of bearing witness to the experiences of others. A refusal to stop valuing the personal. A way to gather the fragments into an incomprehensible but nevertheless worthwhile whole.

The creative nonfiction essay's lofty goals—to portray material experiences of diverse bodies; to bring readers into writer's lives; to make the "normal" strange—can

never be fully realized. In fact, the word “essay” stems from the French *essai*, meaning “to put to a test” or “attempt.” The creative nonfiction essay “attempts” to achieve the unachievable. I would like to consider the creative nonfiction essay’s failed “attempts” alongside the notion of queer failure. Queer theorist Jack Halberstam suggests that “failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2-3). Since queerness destabilizes identity categories, identifying as queer requires continual deconstruction and reconstruction of the self. Queer futurity cannot involve reaching set points along a life course—in fact, queer futurity rests in eliminating the concept of a set “life course” altogether. The “unmaking” and “undoing” of queer futurity are seen as a form of failure. However, Halberstam suggests that queer failure can be generative; perhaps the creative nonfiction essay is one of its products. Can the creative nonfiction essay not be considered a form of queer failure? Does the creative nonfiction essay not seek to “unmake,” “undo,” and “unbecome?” Does it not also seek to “create,” “cooperate,” and “surprise?”

To surprise readers, creative nonfiction essays take on fluid forms. For example, the modern “hermit crab essay” allows content to determine form. An essay about anorexia may be presented in the form of a menu; an essay about depression in the form of a pill bottle’s instructions; and so on. Beyond the hermit crab form, creative nonfiction essayists do not hesitate to play with narrative forms or chronology by telling stories “out of order” or in fragments. Writing a creative nonfiction essay collection gives me the freedom to play with the structure of the essays themselves as well as the structure of the

collection as a whole. The essays' order defies chronology; for instance, an essay about my potential children ("Possibilities of Personhood") comes before an essay about myself as a baby ("Mommy and Me"). The essays themselves also defy readers' expectations. My baby-self's skin is rough like a shedding snake's ("Mommy and Me"); my preteen-self becomes a predatory online figure ("Fluid"); and my adult-self complicates the tendency to victimize domestic violence survivors ("Intermingling Dyes"). The essays' content and form take various shapes not only to surprise readers, but also to allow the collection to embody fluidity.

Fluidity is essential to theoretical understandings of queerness. Jaqueline Rhodes explains that "queerspace exists always already between Sr and Sd. We do not work together against struggle but inhabit the struggle for meaning at its sweet spot" (6). Because inhabiting queerspace means inhabiting a struggle for meaning, queerspace can be considered fluid.

Like queerspace, the creative nonfiction essay pushes against established boundaries of genre and form. In an interview with *Guernica Magazine*, essayist Jamaica Kincaid examines how "often the lines that define the traditional European arrangement of fiction, non-fiction, history, etc. are not useful" (<https://www.guernicamag.com/does-truth-have-a-tone/>). The simple distinction between creative nonfiction and fiction would be that one tells the "truth" and the other does not—but what is "truth" when biased perspectives and creative liberties allow facts to be reformed in the creative nonfiction essay? In another interview, Kincaid expands on the perceived uselessness of literary distinctions:

When I first started to write, I thought, “I’m really not a writer because I don’t have those distinctions, and the distinctions are what you would find in an English literary person.” [...] When people think of falling standards, they must be thinking of people like me who just sort of usurp all the boundaries and just mix them up and just cross borders all the time. (165)

Here, Kincaid simultaneously identifies the creative nonfiction essay as a border-crossing genre and pushes against the “creative nonfiction” label. Kincaid’s resistance to the “creative nonfiction” label is reminiscent to queer theory’s essential tension: labeling oneself as “queer” seems to undo the destabilization “queerness” aims for. Bringing my knowledge of queer theory into a creative nonfiction collection has allowed me to explore the tensions in each construct in a digestible (as opposed to queer theory’s difficult-to-understand) format.

In this collection, I translate aspects of queer theory into experiences the average person can relate to. For instance, “Soft Hands” addresses a queer struggle with normative gender codes. The narrative persona sees her soft hands as the embodiment of traditional femininity, limiting her possibilities for gender fluidity. At the same time, she realizes that changing her hands to be seen as genderfluid means acknowledging the gender norm’s validity. In keeping with both the creative nonfiction essay tradition and the tenets of queer theory, the narrative persona inhabits the struggle for meaning rather than coming to a definite conclusion. The other essays in the collection follow suit by considering how gender codes and heteronormative expectations affect the narrative persona’s worldview.



Above all, this collection asks readers to embody the narrative personas in each essay. Ideally, heteronormative readers will finish the collection feeling as if they have lived in the body of a queer feminine subject. Living in a queer feminine body, even momentarily, may help heteronormative readers recognize the fluidity of identity categories.

I hope queer readers of the collection will identify with the narrative persona's fluid understandings of gender and sexuality. Simply knowing that other people like you exist—not just celebrities, but confused children, explorative preteens, and lonely teenagers—makes a difference. Writing this collection has been a cathartic experience for me. I hope this collection touches other lives, too. If a single reader feels the slightest bit less alone because of this collection, I'll consider it a success.

## CHAPTER II

### HOSPITAL VISITS

Vesicoureteral reflux (VUR) is the backward flow of urine from the bladder into the kidneys. The primary diagnostic procedure for evaluation of vesicoureteric reflux is a voiding cystourethrogram (VCUG), which however requires bladder catheterisation and distention of the bladder. This typically causes significant discomfort to the patient, requiring immobilisation of one form or another. (Mayo Clinic)

At four years old, I take my first ambulance ride following a minor seizure. I haven't been to a hospital since before I can remember. This hospital is large and loud. I don't like it here. It smells gross, but not gross like garbage. Gross in a *clean* way, like when my dad puts on too much cologne. I don't scream, but I curl up in a ball as tears stream down my face.

My mom helps me take off my clothes and change into a hospital gown. She arranges my outfit in a neat pile beneath her chair. I keep trying to grab it back, but I can't reach that far.

I usually love touching new fabrics. I always run my fingers over silky dresses and fur coats when I walk through clothing stores. I've touched enough stuff to know that this gown material sucks. It's rough and scratchy—not nice to touch at all.

It's too cold for this outfit, too. The room feels like my Grandpa's basement in North Dakota. My mom lets me use her jacket as a blanket until the doctors come in. I put my arms through the oversized sleeves and huddle up for warmth.

Three men in lab coats march into the room. They make my mom take the jacket away so I start shivering. The hospital gown, open at the back, makes me feel naked. Goosebumps rise on my arms and legs.

Doctors push aside the gown's paper-thin material. Their gloves shine with clear liquid lubricant. The metal table feels icy against my bare back. I lay down on the table, squinting under bright white lights. The lights turn the doctors' faces into shadowy blobs. One of the blobs pins my arms down when I try to sit up.

"Spread your legs," he says. I refuse, so he forces my shaking knees open. Like prying open a clam. I cry as gloved hands start to explore.

Experience and expertise with catheterization is very important, yet the procedure is often relegated to the most junior member of the medical team available. Even with experienced hands, the procedure can be emotionally and physically traumatic for the child and family. A child who has suffered an emotionally or physically traumatic catheterization will almost never cooperate in the future.

(Robson, Alexander, and Thomason)

My mom lets me bring my stuffed back bear (Blackie) along to my tests. He's a ragged-looking creature. His tear-matted fur is vanilla-scented from spilled ice cream. He

protects all of my girlish secrets behind his perpetual grin, visible only if I lift his snout and expose its underside.

I call Blackie “he,” but I don’t think of him as a boy or girl. His underbelly is smooth and flat. Stuffed animals don’t have to worry about hospital visits because their bodies are simple. Blackie’s tummy never rumbles like mine. It’s always the same. I rub the furry tummy for comfort. I wish I was made of the same soft, clean lines with nothing but stuffing inside.

“First, the doctor will wash your Private Place with soap and water. It might feel cold and weird, but it’s not going to hurt,” a Child Life Specialist tells me before each test. The Child Life Specialist—whose name is Julie or Jessie or something—smiles. She has red lipstick, white teeth, and smooth brown hair.

Child Life Specialists help talk kids through scary medical procedures. They normally give us a sticker afterwards. I have a notebook full of stickers. I have shiny stickers, animal stickers, flower stickers, sparkly stickers, funny stickers, and even pop-out 3D stickers. My friends are jealous, but I tell them not to be.

I brace myself. The washing isn’t bad, but I don’t like being naked in front of so many people. My breathing gets harder.

“You need to relax,” Julie/Jessie tells me. “It’ll feel better if you do. They’re about to attach the catheter. It’s just a tube that’s going to put some special dye inside you so we can see your insides.”

She shows me the small plastic tube and the tape they’ll use to keep it secure. I don’t want it inside my body. I cry quietly, trying to be brave. Julie/Jessie lets me grip her

hand as hard as I want. When they tape the tube to my body, I squeeze the comforting hand hard.

“It hurts,” I whisper.

I mean something else when I say “it hurts.” I mean that it’s uncomfortable, that it stings, that it makes me more aware of my body than I want to be. But children don’t remember this stuff anyway, as Julie/Jessie tells me.

“It will be okay. You won’t remember this when you’re older. Just hold on a little longer, sweetie.” They always call me “honey” or “sweetie.” I don’t know their names either so I guess it’s fine.

Julie/Jessie guides me through a breathing exercise. I try to follow her instructions: “Breathe *in*... and *out*.... *in*... and *out*.”

When my mom sees the doctor attach the catheter, she turns pale and her eyes roll back in her head. The nurse, doctor, and Child Life Specialist rush over to her. They lower her limp body into a chair. I’m stuck on the table, attached to a tube, clinging to Blackie since I can’t reach my mom. I want to help her. I also want someone to help me.

The process of inserting a urinary catheter into the urethra of a young child, followed by putting the child under an X-ray machine on a hard table, is clearly a source of psychological stress and the cause of tears, nightmares, and retained memories. (Chesney et. al)

I write about it in school. Prompts like “Write about what scares you most” always lead to harrowing tales of hospital visits. I don’t describe the actual procedure because it seems too shameful. But I have nightmares about it. I never wet the bed because I’m required to “hold it” during the procedure as they fill my bladder with dye. My bladder bursts in some of the nightmares, shooting black liquid all over the pristine white hospital room.

In other nightmares, I have bigger tubes attached to every part of my body. Tubes go through my throat, my ears, my nostrils, my arms, and my legs. And of course, the usual part of my Private Place—the part I don’t have a name for yet.

Every night before bed, I count the days until the next procedure. I can’t pronounce the word for the dreaded thing. I think of it only as “The Test.” Heck, even my parents have trouble pronouncing “cystourethrogram.” I don’t know the proper word for my illness either. I tell people that I have a “kidney and bladder disease.”

I take medicine every night. I’m a practiced medicine-drinker. A medicinoholic. I don’t mind the taste of the thick pink goop. My dad sticks his finger in it once for a taste. He gags. He would have trouble choking down the bubblegum-flavored concoction each night. I guzzle it with a swig of milk and a smile.

Mrs. Crabtree, my Girl Scout Troop Leader, worries about giving me the medicine when we go on a weekend trip. She keeps rummaging in her backpack to make sure it’s there.

“Remind me, what time do you need to take it? How much am I supposed to give you? Do you take it every night, or every other night?”

Taking the medicine is second nature to me. I chug the pink liquid like an adult taking a shot. I can gulp down a medicine-cup's worth of any liquid. At lunch time, other kids mix foods together on their plates and dare me to eat it without throwing up. The most impressive combination of foods I eat is a mixture of chocolate milk, ketchup, pepperoni pizza, mashed potatoes, and orange juice. Kids crowd around me and cheer, clapping wildly when I display my empty mouth. I collect quarters each day until Mrs. Beasley catches us.

In 1984, O'Donnell and Puri introduced a new approach to the treatment of VUR, the Sting procedure. From 0.3 mL to 1.0 mL of a 50% suspension of teflon [...] is injected under the ureteral orifice of refluxing patients to form a solid support behind the intravesicular ureter, creating an oblique entry point for the ureter into the bladder and preventing its outward displacement during voiding. (Giuliano, Patel, and Kale-Pradhan)

When I'm ten years old, Dr. Ben discusses the possibility of surgery. Doctors let kids call them by their first names if they're young enough and frightened enough. Dr. Ben addresses my dad, who sits in a chair across from the exam table. My mom hasn't brought me to an appointment since the fainting incident. I sit on a paper-covered table, legs hanging over the side, kicking my feet.

I wonder why Dr. Ben's office has a mirror running parallel to the exam table. I learned about parallel lines in math class this year. I hate math, but geometry is cool. I let

a couple boys in the class cheat off me on tests. I wonder what it would be like to have a body like theirs instead of one like this. I avoid looking at my reflection in the mirror. I've just pulled my pants up after a quick exam. No touching, thank goodness. Only looking.

I always have male doctors. My parents say they're used to working with older kidney patients. They act awkward about examining my Private Places.

"Can you...er...um...lower your pants? And.... panties?"

Dr. Ben's cheeks lose their pinkish tinge when the exam ends and he starts to describe the surgery. Dr. Ben calls the surgery "STING." Doctors love acronyms. This one reminds me of the bee that stung me at SeaWorld. The stupid bug landed on the back of my knee and died when I bent my leg. The bee sting hurt so badly that I cried all day, even when the dolphins performed. A surgery called STING had to be bad news.

"Maybe I don't want the STING," I interject.

Dr. Ben will only make eye contact with my dad. He turns his head in my direction and focuses on a spot to the left of my face. Maybe that's what the mirror is for—so the doctor can look at himself when he has to address difficult patients.

"Do you want to live like this forever?" Dr. Ben asks.

"Maybe."

"You wouldn't be able to have kids," Dr. Ben counters. That could be a lie.

"I don't care! I don't want kids anyway," I reply. I don't know a lot about giving birth, but I know babies come out of somewhere around the Private Place. I can't stand the thought of doctors messing around below my waist any more than they already do.



Dr. Ben shakes his head and smiles. No reason to trust a ten-year-old girl's future plans.

The vagina is a muscular, hollow tube that extends from the vaginal opening to the uterus. The vagina is about 3 to 5 inches (8 to 12 centimeters) long in a grown woman. Because it has muscular walls it can expand and contract. This ability to become wider or narrower allows the vagina to accommodate something as slim as a tampon and as wide as a baby. The vagina's muscular walls are lined with mucous membranes, which keep it protected and moist. (KidsHealth)

As a preteen, I don't hate my body for the same reason other girls do. I wear long shirts to cover the V of my pelvis. I cringe at descriptions of female genitalia in textbooks. I wouldn't mind the descriptions in the abstract, but I hate applying them to myself.

In sixth grade, the girls and boys are split up into separate classrooms. The girls watch a video explaining periods and tampons. The video shows real images of clean white tampons, with cartoon images of how to put one in. The cartoon features "Little Sally." Blood pours from her body like water streaming from a cranked-up faucet. I learn the word "urethra"—that's where they put the catheter. It's not too far from the vagina, where Sally puts the tampon.

Us girls watch the screen in silence, eyes wide. We don't talk about it afterwards. When the boys and girls reunite at lunchtime, I notice that the boys also look shocked. I

wonder what they had to go through. It couldn't be as disgusting as blood *literally* pouring out of their bodies.

"I don't want to be a girl anymore!" I tell my mom when I get home from school. The school must have told the parents what they were doing, since she immediately realizes I'm afraid of having my period. She knows I don't like blood. She doesn't know the real problem isn't blood.

"I'll teach you how to do it when the time comes," my mom assures me. "You can use a mirror to see where to put the tampon. It's not so bad."

I've never looked at that part of my body in the mirror. How can I put a tampon in when I can't even look at my pelvic area without thinking about doctors and their probing fingers?

My mom tells me about sanitary pads, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I can use those to manage the blood. I don't have to deal with tampons. I can just avoid my genitalia, except when I go to the doctor. But the doctors' visits will end soon, they tell me. I'm eleven years old now. I'll be having the STING surgery this year. So maybe I won't have to think about my private places anymore. What a thought!

Surgery in children, even if minor and routine, and all the surrounding circumstances, such as analgesia, anesthesia, hospitalization, etc. may function as distressing life events for children and their parents. These stressful situations cause anxiety, which impacts not only at the time of surgery but also on postsurgical recovery. (Carneiro, Caldas, and Pais-Ribeiro)

The day of the STING surgery is the first time Dr. Ben makes eye contact with me.

“This isn’t open surgery so we won’t be cutting you. It’s just an injection. The biggest danger is the anesthesia. It will put you to sleep during the procedure. Since you’ve never been under before, we don’t know how you’ll react to it. But this is why we waited until you were Big Girl,” he says.

I’m eleven—too old to be called a “Big Girl.” Despite his use of the dumb phrase, I try feeling grateful to Dr. Ben for explaining the dangers of the procedure. I know the explanation is an effort to treat me as an adult, so I need to accept it like an adult would. Dr. Ben acts like I could go to sleep and never wake up. Death scares me. I don’t know what will come after it.

As I lay down, he arranges a mask over my face. It reminds me of the muzzle we put on my dog Dixie when she bites someone. My dad says if she’s too aggressive, she’ll have to be “put to sleep.” I’m being “put to sleep” now, but not in the same way and not for the same reason. Dr. Ben tells me to count backwards from ten. What if I am counting down the last seconds of my life?

“Ten, nine, eight, seven...”

Pediatric medical traumatic stress refers to a set of psychological and physiological responses of children and their families to pain, injury, serious illness, medical procedures, and invasive or frightening treatment experiences.

Medical trauma may occur as a response to a single or multiple medical events.

(The National Child Traumatic Stress Network)

Twelve years later, I'm fixed in some ways and damaged in others. The end of the hospital visits isn't the end of my relationship with my lower body. For one, sex is a thing. Now that I've reached "sexual maturity" (so to speak), romantic partners and friends often ask me if I've been sexually abused.

My friend Clarissa and I will be watching a movie like *Fifty Shades of Gray*. During the sex scenes, I'll pretend to be very interested in the popcorn bowl between us. Eventually, she'll notice that my moments of fascination with popcorn coincide with sex scenes.

I'll brush her concern aside and we'll keep watching the movie.

Moments like this pile up until they lead to the inevitable question: "Has anything bad ever happened to you? You know, sexually?"

The words, so hesitantly and kindly spoken, are completely off the mark.

"**No**," I answer emphatically. Many young girls *are* sexually abused, and I'd never pretend that my experience was the same as theirs. "No, I've never been abused."

I describe my medical history. I frame my reaction as *overreaction*.

"I had a few weird tests done on me as a child...to help this kidney problem I had, haha. Made me a bit uncomfortable with my body, haha."

No one wants to hear about catheters. No one wants to picture a child with her legs forced open. No one wants to talk about trauma.

I don't tell family members or therapists about how my medical experiences made me feel. Voicing the emotions changes them into something trite. I feel the need to qualify everything I say.

“Having catheters put in so many times kinda messed me up. But hey, I can still have sex. It's all good—as long as I don't think too much about what's going on *down there.*”

I say *down there* like my genitalia isn't a part of me.

Like I can separate myself from the trauma by making light of it.

Like experiences only matter if I admit they matter.

### CHAPTER III

#### POSSIBILITIES OF PERSONHOOD

When I was in high school, I had a dream about aborting a child. As abortion stories often do, the dream began with a crush. I spoke to Robert Brennan, my would-be high school paramour. We laughed together while leaning over a dissected lab rat in science class. I rubbed his arm, noticing the manly hair that had already sprouted there. I wasn't supposed to touch him with the plastic gloves, but we both knew he would be the only one touching the splayed rat.

“She sure is fat,” Robert said as he sliced the rat’s stomach open with a scapula. “Wait... There’s something inside her.”

Robert cradled a tiny translucent sac in his white glove. Through the slimy reddish-white goop around the sac, we could see the pink forms of a dozen rat fetuses. The fetuses looked like they were asleep. I expected their eyes to blink open at any minute. Their miniature paws would claw at the sac as they tried to break free. To my surprise, every pair of eyes remained closed. I wondered if the fetuses were technically “dead” since they had never really lived.

Mrs. Bell rushed over to see our discovery. “Wow, you got a pregnant one! Congrats! It’s rare that we get to dissect pregnant animals.”

The dream dissolved, and a new scene took its place. I sat in a white bed with papery sheets. When I pressed my legs together, I felt the gelatinous liquid smeared

across my inner thighs. Young lungs cried out for the first time on every side of me. In the dream's haze, I wondered if I had given birth. Every time a nurse passed by the room with a pink or blue bundle in her arms, I expected her to hand it to me.

Robert wasn't there. I hoped the baby would look like him. I could imagine going through the pain of childbirth for a child who looked like someone I already cared about. The nurses passed my room without a glance in my direction. Instead, a toddler appeared at the end of my bed.

He looked like a cherub with alabaster skin and clear blue eyes. The eyes reminded me of Robert's, icy and piercing. I thought I heard the child say, "You pushed, and pushed, and pushed, and got me out!" but when the words fully registered in my head, I realized he had said, "*They* pulled, and pulled, and pulled, and *scraped* me out!"

I woke up with sweat dripping down the back of my neck.

It seems to me that a fetus is that is more a possibility of a person than a person itself. I don't know when a fetus becomes human. Becoming human might be more of a process than a singular moment. The process must start in the womb, when the baby first makes its home there. When the baby leaves the womb, it becomes human by interacting with the outside world. Through first sights, sounds, tastes, and touches the baby learns what it means to be human. The baby figures out how to exist outside its mother's body.

During pregnancy, two bodies exist as one. The mother-body and baby-body can only be separated by birth or death. The lab rat from my dream died with fetuses quickening in her belly. The rat fetuses, yet unformed, could not live without their

mother's support. Fetuses exist between life and death, waiting for their fates to be determined by their mothers. The lab rat's fetuses didn't have a chance.

The rat mother was born and bred for dissection. Unlike the rat, I felt like I had a choice. I was born and bred in a world where I didn't need to have children; where Senator Wendy Davis fought for Texas women's right to abort; where women dated women, and men dated men, and my parents said it was fine "as long as they keep to themselves."

The rat fetuses were destined to die long before they were born. The doomed rat mother had a male mate, but I can't have biological children with my partner. Maybe my biological children were destined to never be conceived. Maybe they were destined to exist only in dreams and idle fantasies. Maybe they were destined to linger like possibilities in my mind.



## CHAPTER IV

### MOMMY AND ME

My mom loves tiny baby feet. Because she loves baby feet, she also loves baby shoes. She especially likes baby shoes that seem too complicated for babies to wear—light-up shoes too expensive for a child; tennis shoes a baby could never tie; ballet slippers for the elusive dancing newborn. She likes the tininess of the shoes. She likes how they look like an adult's, except shorter and stubbier. She likes being able to fit what is normally big into the palm of her hand.

I was a disappointment. When my mom tried to put pearly white sandals or brown lace up baby booties on me, I'd throw them across the room. I wouldn't even wear socks. She bought purple socks with bows on them and blue socks with lace along the tops. I discarded them all. She said my feet needed freedom. My toes wanted to spread beyond what the little shoes allowed. Even though my feet were tiny, they were too big for my mom's favorite baby shoes.

My feet were too big in an un-cute way. They demanded to take up space. My mom only likes big things that emphasize smallness. For instance, she loves oversized baby headbands because they make small heads look smaller. When she tried to put large flowery headbands and stiff felt hats atop my little round head, I ripped them out. My hair was a perpetual mess because of her efforts to confine it. Chunks of hair hung askew across my forehead and fluffed out to create a halo around my face.

Despite the halo, I looked like a demon child. I had jaundice, making the whites of my eyes yellow, the deep blue of my irises tinted. The blue merged with the color of my pupils so that my eyes appeared to have a black slit in the center. Snake eyes. In home videos, I lay in my crib observing the soft pink mobile and pastel yellow walls with a cold reptilian glare.

Babies are supposed to have smooth, velvety skin, but mine was like a shedding snake's: white pieces of dead skin framed the thin, red fingernail trails lining my face. I scraped my face with blunt fingernails the size of Ladybug spots. My mom had to tie washcloths around my hands to stop me from scratching the angry dry skin. My jaundiced skin had trouble adjusting to the world outside her womb.

The rest of me had trouble adjusting to the outside world, too. I cried constantly. There are few videos of infant-me in which I am not crying. I presented every person I met with my gaping red mouth, uvula trembling as I screamed.

I hadn't learned manners yet. I hadn't learned to cry only behind locked bathroom doors. I hadn't learned to wear proper shoes and accessories. I hadn't learned to make myself appear quiet and unassuming. Never. My infant-self cried as much as she wanted, discarded the clothes her mom expected her to wear, and screamed with all the power her young lungs could muster. She paid no mind to what her mother thought because she paid no mind to what *anyone* thought. I have a strange respect for that defiant infant, even if she bears little resemblance to who I am today.

## CHAPTER V

### INTERMINGLING DYES

I loved Josh for what he was not. He was not like my ex. My ex was a Chemistry undergrad who attended the same university I did. Josh had never been to college. My ex criticized me constantly. Josh complimented me constantly. My ex lived in the dorm room next to mine. Josh didn't even live in the same town.

Unlike my ex, Josh had emotions. He wasn't afraid to show them. He was sweet. He brought me flowers, bought me jewelry, and paid at restaurants. Never mind that I didn't ask for or want these things. They were his way of showing he cared.

I did wonder why he brought me such brightly-colored flowers. The flowers were dyed unnatural colors like electric yellow and neon orange. They stuck out from the rest of my apartment like a clown in a garish wig. I kept a number of live plants in the apartment. Their soft green, pink, and brown natural tones soothed me. Josh had seen my houseplants. I dropped comments about preferring live plants to cut ones. He didn't get the hints.

I've always been a proponent of thoughtful gifts. I got Josh tickets to a Mavs game, a mix CD, a photo album with pictures of us—that sort of thing. Not everyone enjoys gift-giving as much as I do. I understood that. So I forced a smile as I accepted the fluorescent-colored flowers whose dye stained the water I put them in. By the time I threw the flowers away, the water looked like a pool of black blood.

I loved the flowers because I loved Josh. My heart clenched when I looked between the ugly flowers and his proud, expectant face. He loved brightly-colored things and he thought I would love them, too. So I loved them.

By withholding the truth from Josh, I treated him like a child. This was demeaning of me. It was wrong. But it was also my way of loving him. I loved him the way I would love a child: With endless patience and understanding.

Josh held his fist up to my face. He let it hover in the air right across from my nose. It was the size of two of my fists put together. I had no idea if he would actually hit me. Josh's brown eyes, usually full of warmth, looked glassy and dead. I flinched away from his fist, which made him angry. I started to cry, which made him angrier.

"Just... stop... crying," he growled. His fist hung in the air between us. Trying to stop crying only made me want to cry harder. A lump formed in my throat as I tried to hold back the tears. Something clicked inside me when I realized that I might need to stop crying to survive. I wiped my face and nose with my hand.

"I'm going to get a tissue," I said. My voice sounded hollow. I stood up and started walking to the bathroom. I didn't plan on coming back.

He grabbed my wrist. "Wait."

I tried to pull away and the hand on my wrist tightened.

"I really need a tissue," I said, sniffing. My face felt flushed and puffy. Salty trails lined my cheeks where tears had washed away my makeup. My dress was dotted constellation-like with fallen tears. I always dressed up for him. I didn't know why. Josh

always wore oversized T-shirts and shorts that sagged to show his underwear. I looked at him with swollen, questioning eyes. He hadn't let go.

“You can't leave the room until we work this out,” he said. “Please.”

His voice had changed. It didn't sound angry anymore. It sounded gentle, apologetic. His face had changed, too. The frown's hard lines had softened into a grim and worried expression. His narrowed eyes had widened. He looked innocent now, childlike with his round cheeks and freshly-shaven face. His short hair had recently been cut by his mother. The simple buzzcut made his head look even rounder and larger.

I continued to think of Josh as childlike even when he got angry. I treated his angry moments the way one would treat a toddler's temper tantrums. Josh, the six-foot, two-hundred-and-eighty-pound toddler. Too bad his flying fists could actually cause damage. I didn't think Josh was a monster. He was my sweet, naive boyfriend who changed into someone else when he got angry. I wasn't *scared* of him—or at least, I didn't want to be.

When he threatened me with his fist, I wanted to get out of the room and out of the relationship. Somehow, his apologetic expression and kind eyes kept me from running away.

“You know I would never actually hit you,” he said. I knew no such thing. The Josh who sat in front of me at the moment didn't seem capable of violence. He looked soft, younger than his years. Yet a few moments ago he had seemed to pulse with aggressive energy. Josh sensed my hesitation. “Don't be scared. I'd never hurt you. I was just messing around. You take things too seriously.”

He seemed harmless now, sitting on the bed as I stood above him. His fist at his side and head bowed below me in shame. I looked at his exposed neck. I could hurt him now if I tried. I could run away now if I tried. He wouldn't be able to stop me from this stopped position. I didn't move. I seemed to have the power now, but in truth I had never felt less powerful.

“I would never hurt you,” he said again. “I promise. Pinky swear.”

I let my pinky tangle with his. Was I afraid of him or afraid of myself? Afraid he would hurt me or afraid I would let him?

## CHAPTER VI

### STAINS

3AM was a lonely time. The birds outside my window had retreated to their nests at dusk. The earliest morning talk show didn't start until 5AM. I watched *The Morning Show with Sherry and Bob* every day and sometimes fell asleep to the hosts' comforting chatter.

Sherry, long-legged and striking, handled current events. "A video posted on the Internet last Wednesday, which is now going viral, shows a man's dog protecting him from a bear! My little Yorkie would run away shaking. What do you think, Bob?"

Bob wore wrinkled plaid shirts and ill-fitting jeans. He looked frumpy alongside his co-host's formal dresses and heels. "Sherry, the dog in that video must've been bred with a calculator."

"What's that, Bob?"

"That's the kind of dog you can count on!"

Sherry chortled at the silly joke while I sat before the TV unphased. I didn't watch for Bob's sense of humor. All that mattered to me was that the show was live. There were at least two other people awake with me, talking, laughing, and vibrating with life. Since the show wouldn't start for another two hours, I was alone.

I looked like a troll. My dad would have called my hair a rat's nest. I hadn't brushed it in a day or two. Hair had recently sprouted throughout my body. The hair dotted my skin in random patches. Tiny red cuts running up and down my legs testified to

my lack of razor skills. Permanent dark circles hung moon-like under my eyes, and my limbs felt heavy from recent weight gain.

One moment, I was crouching over my laptop. The next, I was curled up in a ball on the floor. A wave of nausea rolled over me. The blood rushed from my face. I hadn't thrown up since I was a baby, but bile rose in my throat now.

When I went to the bathroom, I saw blood. The blood pooled on my plain white underwear like a Rorschach inkblot. I took a lot of psychology quizzes online, so my mind immediately attempted to find a shape in the stain. But I couldn't puzzle a meaning out of this one. It looked a little like a butterfly, wings fluttering. I could just as easily see it as a maroon dragon, teeth bared. It could even pass for a red fox, eyes slitted.

I threw the soiled panties into the laundry basket and stuffed my shorts with toilet paper. Hoping not to wake my parents, I tiptoed back to my room and collapsed beneath my covers. Two years earlier, I had watched a school video about menstruation. The video showed an animated girl in a pink dress with blood pouring from her body as if from an open wound. I came home crying, disgusted at what my body would do. The only thing that consoled me was knowing it would not happen for a few years. I had forgotten about the video until the red stain confronted me.

I pictured the stain as I lay in bed, still trying to make sense of it. Stains can be ugly or beautiful. When we think of ugly stains, we think of accidents. Mistakes. Spilled coffee, splashed mud, overfilled burritos. Intentional stains can be artistic. Stained glass mosaics, tie-dyed shirts, finished wood furniture. Accidental stains seem shameful because they are unintended. I don't set out to spill my coffee; I spill my coffee because



of my clumsiness. Personal shortcomings create ugly stains. Ugly stains must be hidden or scrubbed away. Ugly stains are embarrassing. I've donated many a perfectly good shirt to charity because of a tiny, just-noticeable-enough stain across its hemline.

Starting with that first period, I would throw out dozens of stained panties. My mom would scrub at my cargo shorts and skinny jeans to erase the stains. Charities won't take anything with blood stains. Blood stains are different from other stains—especially menstrual blood stains. Who would ever wear a piece of clothing imprinted with the ghost image of a stranger's menstrual blood?

I knew bodies could be gross. I'd been sick and injured before. This seemed worse, more alienating. It only happened to girls. My brother wouldn't have to deal with it. Even though he was the younger sibling, I wanted to be like Jacob. We shared everything, down to the stereotypical matching outfits normally reserved for same-sex siblings or twins. I couldn't share this with him. I couldn't share it with anyone. My family didn't talk about "private place" subjects like menstruation, masturbation, or sex.

Mom and Dad didn't explain that menstruation and masturbation are normal steps to adulthood. Puberty, and all of the mysterious bodily changes that came with it, was relegated to the disgusting and the unspeakable. I couldn't imagine showing the blood stains to my parents and facing their repulsed expressions. I curled up in bed alone, hugging my knees to my chest.

My room faced the east. Through the open blinds, I saw that the sun had stained the sky red. Stains had the potential to be ugly or beautiful. Because they had to be hidden away, I knew my stains were ugly.

My mom nudged the door to my room open and peeked inside. She flinched in surprise when she realized that my eyes were open, staring. She liked to look in on me in the morning, and I usually pretended to be asleep.

“I saw your panties in the laundry,” Mom said. The words felt like an accusation. “You’re becoming a young woman. Here are some sanitary pads.”

She threw the thick package of pads onto my legs. I sat up in bed and held the package gingerly between my fingers. The toilet paper scratched against my inner thighs. No doubt I was ruining my shorts as we spoke. I needed sanitary pads because my blood was unsanitary.

“I know you’re not feeling well, but make sure you hide the panties under other clothes, and always wrap the pads in toilet paper,” she went on. The picture of the pad on the pink package was pristine white. If the blood-stained panties were any indication, my menstrual blood would destroy that cleanly whiteness. What a shame. “Seeing all that blood would scare your brother.”

Menstrual blood was a secret among girls because boys would fear it.

“What if it scares me?”

“Girls are braver than boys,” Mom said. I didn’t feel brave. I couldn’t even control my own body. “Let’s get you ready for school.”

I followed her down the stairs. Closed blinds made the bottom floor pitch black. We descended into the darkness together. Mom flipped on the kitchen light, and I grabbed one of the dining room chairs. I arranged the chair beside the kitchen counter. Mom retrieved a hairbrush and went to work on the unruly pile of knots atop my head.

This hair-grooming session in the kitchen was our morning ritual. It continued until my dad found out and made us move to the bathroom with the cats' litter box. The penetrating odors of litter and cat shit replaced the soft scents of chocolate chip muffins and freshly baked bread. Like my menstrual blood, my tangled hair was too unsanitary to exist in the open. Behind closed doors, my hair had to be reshaped and smoothed down until it resembled Sherry's glistening blonde locks on *The Morning Show*.

Every time I cringed at the yanking of my hair, Mom said, "Beauty is pain."

*Beauty is pain. Girls are braver than boys.* Those maxims were supposed to get me through the awkward struggle of puberty. They were supposed to lead me to the ultimate goal: beauty. Stainless, knotless, flawless beauty. Now I wonder if such a thing exists.

CHAPTER VII  
ON THE ABANDONED

I leaned over the mirror, running a brush through my poufy hair until it hung flat. I wiped the white crusts from my eyes and splashed my face with water. I rubbed away the thin pillow-imprints on my cheeks. Despite my efforts, I looked tired and unhappy.

Maybe makeup could hide the imperfections I couldn't fix. I dabbed my face with primer and dusted it with concealer. The concealer flattened my skin, covering its redness and its pores. I looked in the mirror yet again. My face looked better, but the oversized T-shirt and athletic shorts weren't doing my body any favors.

I peered outside my bathroom window. The sun glared back at me. The world looked hot and stifling—perfect weather for my flowery, form-fitting dress. As I pulled on the dress, I noticed my unshaven armpits. I groaned. Wearing a dress made shaving an absolute necessity. I stomped over to the tub.

I plucked my blue (men's) razor from the tub's edge. Men's razors are cheaper than women's, and I preferred blue to pink. I wetted the blade and ran it over my armpits. The tiny patches of skin didn't deserve an entire squirt of shaving cream. The blade scraped the dark stubble away.

My armpits stung. I rubbed deodorant over the wounded area and looked at my reflection once more. I would never be beautiful, but I looked passable. I didn't look tired or formless anymore. Even if I wasn't beautiful, I had made an effort. I was ready to go out in public.

Because of the nice weather, I couldn't resist spending the day outside. I decided to explore a garden near my apartment complex. Grabbing my phone and keys, I started walking to the garden. I looked down at the sidewalk whenever cars passed me on the street. One car honked as it went by. I kept my gaze down and fidgeted with my dress. I didn't want to know what the driver was thinking.

When I reached the garden, I breathed a sigh of relief. Dense branches and tall overgrown grass hid the garden from the road. Drivers wouldn't be able to see or honk at me anymore. My body was no longer under surveillance.

As I explored the garden, I realized that it had been abandoned by humans. Left to the wilderness. Plants and animals had reclaimed the space. I admired the hordes of butterflies that fluttered around forgotten flowers. I followed thorny overgrown paths and examined splintered benches. I marveled at the spaces between broken boards, which attracted soft pink morning glories and pale white mushrooms.

The garden reminded me of a body. Evenly-spaced boards ran in parallel lines across the top of an old canopy like ribs. Vein-like vines twisted through decaying wooden boards. Across the canopy's bottom, weeds grew in artless patterns like an unwanted rash.

I heard the footsteps of a mysterious animal in the distance, leaves rustling beneath its feet. I pictured a rabbit jumping up and down like a beating heart. I imagined a snake curling up in its den like a tangle of intestines. I envisioned a bullfrog expanding and contracting like a lung. I marveled at the notion that each member of the garden's ecosystem, like each component of a body, worked together to keep a structure alive.

In the garden, it struck me: as long as life continues to flourish, abandoned gardens and abandoned bodies are not empty vessels of forgotten promise. Abandoned spaces are full of water, blood, saliva, semen, mucus, bile, urine, plasma—fluids that sustain life. Gardens and bodies continue living even when they are not maintained.

I thought of the times I hadn't maintained my body. When I went through bad bouts of depression, I found it difficult to even brush my teeth or wash my hair. Plaque and grease grew. I didn't care. My body, unappreciated, seemed no more significant than any other collection of cells. Like gardens, bodies don't seem to matter when they're abandoned.

Yet life continued. My body didn't simply fall apart when I stopped caring for it, just as the garden didn't fall apart when people stopped maintaining it. Life continued to exist—albeit in a different form. What if I chose to see my greasy hair as a dirt-covered window, reflecting light that had to fight its way to shine through? What if I chose to see my unshaven skin as fertile soil, hair sprouting in random flower-like patches? What if I chose to see my red-rimmed eyes as cardinals, splashing forgotten landscapes with bursts of color?

When I went to the abandoned garden, I wasn't looking for my body. As usual, I was looking for a way to escape my physical form. A distraction. Yet when I arrived there, I couldn't help seeing myself. I saw my stretch marks in the wrinkled, tattered petals of a dying rose. I saw my pale skin in the cracked, sunwashed paint of a broken sign. I saw my chubby thighs in the steady, powerful trunks of an oak tree.

When I saw my body in the abandoned garden, I realized that gardens and bodies don't have to be maintained. Nature reclaims abandoned spaces. It would be hard to fully appreciate nature's excesses. I would never stop washing the white crust from my eyes or shaving the dark hair from my armpits. And that was alright. I could keep washing and shaving every morning. But it was time I stopped cringing when I saw my reflection in the mirror. It was time I stopped looking down when cars passed me on the road. It was time I accepted my body for what it was: a natural form, a vehicle I used to navigate the world, and a thing worth reclaiming.

## CHAPTER VIII

### SOFT HANDS

When I was young, I didn't understand how people knew I was a girl. I flinched in surprise when strangers at the grocery store referred to me as "miss" or "young lady." How did they know? I looked like my little brother. Jacob and I had the same sly smirk, arched eyebrows, and round cheeks. Our bodies had the same straight lines. I didn't wear makeup or jewelry. Only my hair separated us from being perfect look-alikes. I considered cutting the long locks off, Mulan-like, so I could switch places with him.

Ten years later, I told Steve the story.

"You could never pass for a boy," he said. "Your hands are too soft."

I wanted to protest. My brother's hands were soft, except when they were sticky with peanut butter. Anyway, strangers rarely touched me. Did Steve think people could detect the texture of my hands from a distance?

Maybe my soft hands were notable. Tyler said my hands were the softest he'd ever felt. Tyler's hands were violent, reaching out with a glimmering pocket knife to stick someone in the back. (He had earned the nickname "Stabby" by stabbing someone in our middle school bathroom). His hands were small and rough, with a callous along the left thumb from rubbing it over his treasured blade. We held hands in a movie theater, me on one side of him and my friend Sara on the other. We formed a hand-holding chain like elementary school kids playing Red Rover. I liked the rough texture of Tyler's hands. I thought, *So, this is what a boy's hands feel like.* I only found out about the stabbing later.



Even though his hands felt rough, I couldn't imagine Tyler doing violence. He reminded me of my grandma's baby angel figurines: blonde-haired, blue-eyed, and glowing with innocence. His cute face and small frame made him an unlikely suspect. When he stabbed people in the bathroom or lighted fires on the football field, the teachers *tsked* and sent him to the principal's office.

The principal, Dr. Boyd, asked Tyler what he was thinking. Tyler explained that he only acted out to stick up for himself. Other boys made fun of his size, so he scared them away with knives and fire. Dr. Boyd pitied Tyler. She sent him back to class with a light warning. Tyler went through the same cycle again and again. No one ever punished him. However, his actions transformed his body, making soft hands rough.

Tyler saw soft hands as a limitation. I can't deny that my soft hands have limited me. I applied to work as a dishwasher, and my soft hands ruined my dishwashing prospects. The manager said, "We don't like to put girls in dishwashing. The chemicals destroy their soft hands, and it's a nasty job. Maybe you could work in packaging? You'd be helping two older women."

Out of desperation, I took the packaging position. That job was also hard on the hands. My coworkers warned me to wear gloves whenever I wiped the shelves with cleaning solution. Alice made me feel the calluses that had formed on her raw, aching fingertips from constant exposure to the bleach mixture.

"This job is hard on the body," she said. "Don't make it harder than it has to be."

I hated wearing the gloves. They gave my hands a rubbery scent that could only be washed away with persistent scrubbing. The scent made me gag during lunch breaks

as I brought the usual PB&J sandwich up to my face. I wanted nothing less than to ignore the rules and let my hands become rough and calloused.

I could have let the bleach solution wear away at my skin, but Alice taught me that soft hands are healthy hands. Calluses shield skin. Harder layers of skin grow over damaged areas, shell-like, to protect the body from pain. Intentionally letting my hands harden would mean inflicting pain on my body, forcing my naturally soft skin to toughen in response. I would be like Tyler, except that my violence would be directed internally. Instead of letting my hands harden, I wore the gloves.

I chose to preserve the softness that pigeonholed me

When someone tells me I have soft hands now, I thank them. I choose to recognize softness as desirable. My soft skin may be weak, but only because I choose not to let the world toughen it. Softly, I refuse to be molded into whatever shape the world wants me to take.

## CHAPTER IX

### FLUID

I learned about myself by impersonating other people. Even though it's a cultural no-no, I can't blame people who go online pretending to be someone else. When we imagine catfishers, we picture aging men preying on little girls or overweight boys sitting in their parents' basements. As a middle schooler, I flipped the script by pretending to be older guys and girls. The Internet allowed me to escape the confines of my physical body. I flitted between genders, ages, and sexualities. I tried on identities and tossed them aside when they didn't fit.

I created fake profiles of eighteen-year-olds on a website called *MyYearbook*. I wanted to appear older so people would respect me. I often impersonated guys because the site was disproportionately popular among straight girls and gay boys. I found pictures of male models with fringed black hair, dark eyeliner, and skinny jeans.

I even encountered other profiles with the same stolen pictures. In addition to my unknown co-conspirators, the site had its naive, innocent members, who couldn't tell the real from the fake. Those misguided souls posted *actual* pictures of themselves and told you *genuine facts* about their lives. They allowed themselves to develop feelings for their online chat buddies.

I felt bad about tricking those people. One of them was a buff eighteen-year-old named Jake from the Midwest. He thought I was a beautiful eighteen-year-old named

Samantha with a strip of pink in her hair. He got too serious about coming to visit me in Texas, so I confessed.

“I’m not actually who I say I am,” I typed. “I’m younger. I’m not as pretty. Those pictures aren’t me.”

Jake didn’t care.

“Hey, send me a real picture of yourself. I’m sure you’re cute. How old are you?”

I toyed with the idea of sending a real picture, but I knew I couldn’t handle the rejection. Someone else on the website had rated a real picture of me (submitted anonymously) seven out of ten. Seven meant average. Average wasn’t good enough to get attention when there were so many attractive fake profiles. I didn’t want to make the mistake of making this real.

“I’m actually fifteen,” I said. Another lie. I was twelve.

“Oh, geez... Well, um, that could be okay. Just let me see what you look like.”

I ignored that message and the ones that followed.

At least Jake knew my gender. I fooled too many unsuspecting straight girls who were clearly excited to be getting attention from a “boy” for the first time. I didn’t string them along. We had regular conversations—the type I would have with my friends. Whenever the girls tried to flirt, I shut them down.

“Heeeey, QT. How ya doin’?”

“I’m doing well! What’s up?”

“Just chilling :3 btw, you’re adorable!!”

“Thanks! I’m actually in a relationship, but that’s so nice of you :) Let’s be friends?”

“Ah, sure.”

They would check in with me every few months to see if I was still “in a relationship.” I only felt a little bit guilty about lying to them. They were using me, too. Many of their profiles were as fake as mine.

In my waking life, I pictured my online chat buddies as shadowy figures. They had profile pictures, but I wasn’t stupid enough to trust their authenticity. I told myself that they were people just like me: average, lonely teens with greasy hair, acne, and insecurities.

I lost perspective when I slept. In my nightmares, the shadowy figures unmasked themselves. They were leering old men with yellow teeth or amorphous blobs with crazy eyes. They mimicked our conversations in deep, croaking voices.

“You’re sooo handsome,” they said, reaching towards me with sharp overgrown fingernails.

“I wish I were there right now,” they said, glaring from the darkness of rundown shacks.

“Oh, the things I would do to you,” they said, licking their blood-stained lips.

I couldn’t shake the images after waking up. I imagined my anonymous suitors standing under the streetlight outside my bedroom window or crouching beneath piles of blankets in my closet.

I wondered how my chat buddies would picture me if they knew my profile was fake. Would they think I was a monster? A deranged human? A simple trickster? Since I wasn't who I said I was, I could be anything. Anyone. I had covered myself in layer upon layer of fog until even I couldn't see what lurked beneath.

What did people off the Internet see? They didn't know about my identity crisis. My long hair, budding breasts, and small stature made them read me as a girl. In McKinney, Texas, 'girl' meant 'straight girl.' My parents assumed that I was secretly dating the few boys I talked to in middle school. To be fair, I *was* dating them. I couldn't tell if I did it because I really wanted to or because I expected myself to want to. My friends always asked which boy I liked. It was one of the basic questions girls asked one another back then.

“What's your favorite color?”

“When's your birthday?”

“Who do you like?”

I had to answer. Saying “no one” was unacceptable. Saying a girl's name was unimaginable. I said the name of whichever guy I talked to the most. Then my friends would pester me for “updates” on the boy.

“Did you talk to him?”

“Text him?”

“Meet up with him?”

I did what they asked. My identity in the physical world was supposed to feel more real than my online identity, but it didn't. It felt like something that had been

assigned to me. If I could choose my real-world identities the way I chose my identities online, I didn't know what I would pick. I liked being a girl. I liked being a boy. I liked talking to girls. I liked talking to boys. If I could decide my identities in the physical world, I would still feel conflicted. But it would be nice to have a choice. Even better: the freedom not to choose; the freedom to flit between; the freedom to try on identities and toss them aside.

CHAPTER X  
RELATIONAL BODIES

I lay in bed, heart beating through the darkness. *Stay still*. Sleepovers feel like tests. How long can I deny that I'm attracted to girls while sharing beds with them? It's easy with my close friends; our relationships have planted themselves firmly in the platonic. Yet at school field trips and large birthday parties I share beds with practical strangers and mere acquaintances, whose relationships to me are murky and full of potential.

The charged scene: Me and another girl lay side by side in a hotel bed. My fatigued body cannot sink into the soft cushions. Nerves charged, I curl up on the furthest edge of the bed and force my eyes shut, trying to ignore the waves of her body's heat. I worry about falling asleep. What if my tense limbs uncurl over the course of the night? What if I move away from the edge of the bed? What if my unconscious body brushes against hers?

I face away from my companion even as my neck begins to cramp. She faces towards me, wrapped in a blissful slumber, careless limbs splayed across every corner of the bed. I draw boundary lines around the shape of her body. I must stay at least five inches away from these imagined boundaries for the remainder of the night. I settle into the tiny area I have assigned myself.

She has no idea. Awake or asleep, she doesn't hesitate to touch me. She sits on my lap, holds my hand, links her arm through mine. It's common knowledge among my



friends that I don't "like" physical contact. It's true that I cringe —not because I don't like it, but because I'm afraid of liking it too much. She doesn't feel what I feel. She has nothing to fear. She ignores my gentle protestations and hugs me anyway.

It's absurdly difficult to avoid seeing her naked. She changes clothes in front of me, shrugging her pants off without warning. I turn away as soon as I notice, heart racing in my chest.

"Check out my new bra," she says as her shirt joins her pants on the floor.

"Cute," I say, giving the pink bra a quick glance out of my peripheral vision. It has an intricate design that I don't take the time to examine. The repeated shapes might be dogs, cats, or flowers for all I can tell.

"It's soft, too," she goes on. "Feel it."

I start to shake my head, but she grabs my hand and presses it to the cup of the bra. The cold silk feels like fire against my hand.

"Yep, it's soft." I move my hand away, keeping the response short so my voice doesn't shake. I don't want to tell her to stop. I don't want to admit that I feel uncomfortable after such innocuous feminine interactions.

Boys help. I'm not afraid of touching them, and I'm not afraid of liking it. I'm expected to like touching boys. It's normal to like touching boys. I'm normal because I like touching boys.

There are plenty of boys to choose from, and I like them: Conor with his swoopy hair; Robert with his sweet smile; Jared with his brooding looks. I imagine dating boys I

admire. I let myself wonder what it would feel like to kiss them in movie theaters and dance with them at concerts.

I tell myself that I like girls because I want to be like them. I scroll through Bryce's pictures because I wish I looked like her. I blush at Whitney's compliments because I envy her popularity. I get nervous around Haley because I know she's cooler than I am.

I don't imagine futures with girls I admire. I stay as far away from them as possible. But I can't always avoid them. Sometimes they approach me. Sometimes we're invited to the same parties. Sometimes we end up sharing beds at sleepovers. Whenever that happens, I lay in bed, heart beating through the darkness, wondering what I'm so afraid of.

## CHAPTER XI

### A CONVERSATION OVERHEARD AT A CONCERT

The crowd stands in dim half-light before the stage. Colors shift from blue to pink and back again. Grainy background music washes over us as we wait for the show to start. A small blonde girl stands beside me, close enough that I can feel the heat radiating off her body. She talks animatedly at her taller friend.

“He has to realize that what he did wasn’t normal. That’s not how people usually act.”

The girl looks up at her friend for confirmation. Her friend nods. I nod to the music.

“I should like talking to him. I should enjoy talking to him more than I enjoy talking to anyone else. But I don’t. I tried. We couldn’t have a coherent conversation. He came home drunk half the time. The other half, he didn’t come home at all. Who knows what he was up to?”

The girl laughs. Her voice trembles. Perhaps with nerves. Perhaps with excitement. Perhaps with fear. Her story sounds personal so I try not to eavesdrop. I look around for something else to focus on. Religious symbols line the top of the wall above the stage. I recognize a Star of David, a Yin Yang symbol, a star and crescent, a Madonna, and an Om. I imagine the symbols dancing together and melding into a single super-symbol. I later find out that this wall is called the God Wall. The girl’s voice breaks through my reverie.

“I flinch every time he lifts his arm. I know he would never hit me, but I always flinch.”

My focus shifts back to the girl. She has said something that I have never said but often felt. It is as if the words were echoing unspoken in my head until she voiced them. She goes on.

“I’m scared. I’m always scared around him. It doesn’t matter what he does. There’s no fixing it. I’m always going to be scared.”

I understand. I understand completely. The girl’s friend grimaces, not understanding. The girl smiles and changes the subject.

“I’m doing well since the separation. I just paid my rent bill on my own for the first time!”

The girl’s smile falters. Her eyes mist over as she recalls a memory.

“I don’t know if I should take him back. I don’t think it would be healthy. But I don’t want to start all over again. We married so young. When I look back at our wedding photos and see how happy we look, I wonder if I made a mistake... We were smiling so big...”

The past she describes sounds exactly like a future I’ve imagined.

“I was telling some coworkers about our fights over lunch the other day. I told them about that time he threw the wine glass. They looked horrified. It reminded me that what happened to me isn’t normal. My life is crazy. I’m okay, though. I’m completely okay! They couldn’t believe that I was okay.”

I imagine the girl in business attire. Legs crossed, she sat alongside her colleagues at a high-end restaurant and told them this story. I can't imagine her bringing the gruesome story into such a refined place. Her story makes more sense in this dirty concert venue, surrounded by the oppressive smoke and odor of weed.

The last time I was at this venue, a mosh pit started right where the blonde girl and I are standing. If a mosh pit starts tonight, she'll shove me. I'll shove her back. Shared experiences of violence will continue to connect us.

## CHAPTER XII

### BODY PARTS/BODY WHOLE

When I was drying myself off after my shower, I stared at my naked body in the mirror. I studied it. How strange to have a body. Sometimes it felt that way. Strange. I remembered what my aunt had told me once. “The body is a beautiful thing.” No adults had ever said that to me. And I wondered if I would ever feel like my own body was beautiful. (Saenz 392)

We rarely consider our bodies as wholes. We act like a “body part” can be considered separately from the whole. As if I could love my strong calves even though I hate my soft stomach, isolating parts of me and assigning blame. The soft stomach covers the core muscles that allow my torso to stay upright as my strong calves navigate a room. The popping blue veins that protrude from my hands belong to the larger network of my circulatory system that keeps my heart beating. The giraffe-like neck carries the vocal cords that let me speak, the spinal cord that relays messages to my brain, and the esophagus that transports food from my mouth to my stomach. I prefer some body “parts” to others, but the “parts” are all connected in the framework of my body.

I avoided looking at myself naked. Not that there were many opportunities for nakedness in my parents’ household, with the lockless bedroom doors and my parents’

penchant for bursting into rooms unannounced. The only time I had the opportunity to confront my own nakedness was during showers. I turned on the water before undressing. Its light pounding against tub signaled my parents to stay away. As the water warmed, I disrobed. I could see the top half of my naked form mist-like through the fogged-up bathroom mirror. My newly-formed breasts looked like tiny planets draped over my ribs. My shoulders wanted to slump with their weight, but I drew my shoulders back when I caught sight of my stooped image in the mirror. With her greasy hair and bare breasts, body dissolving at the waist, the reflection could have been a siren.

When I stepped into the shower, the water changed shape as it splashed over my form. It sounded louder and more immediate. I could see new sections of my body when I shaved my legs and scrubbed my sides. I rubbed my thick thighs with foamy white shaving cream, discovering areas I had missed before. The ever-neglected behind-the-knee section of each leg taunted me. It was difficult to reach with the razor, and I always ended up giving myself invisible but painful and bloody cuts when I tried to shave there. I never saw the cut-up backs of my knees alongside my stooped back, or my expansive thighs alongside my blooming breasts. Since we didn't have a floor-length mirror, I never saw my entire body. I saw my body in sections, but I couldn't envision all of my body parts pieced together into a single being.

Because I had trouble imagining myself as a whole, I struggled to keep my grasp on reality. One moment, I'd be sitting on the school bus considering the homework I'd do when I got home. I'd notice the wind rustling my hair through the open window and the soft weight of the backpack across my lap. The next moment, my consciousness would

seem to float outside my body. The sun streamed into my face, tattooing it with a long yellow stripe, but I couldn't feel the pleasant warmth on my forehead or the sharp sting in my eyes. Like a gauzy veil, a mental haze separated me from tactile sensations. I could peek out from behind the veil, but I couldn't feel the sun.

I had to concentrate so I wouldn't miss my bus stop. I anchored myself in the present moment by pressing my fingertips into the cracked leather of the seat. As I rolled a piece of leather between my fingers, I felt myself start to come back. I honed in on the creaking sounds the bus made as it bounced over bumps in the road. Each bump rattled my frame, making me hug the backpack closer to my chest. Finally, I confronted my own distorted reflection in the long mirror above the driver's seat. The reflection had an elongated forehead and bulbous cheeks, but I recognized her chipped red fingernails and the brown freckle on her palm. Her hand moved when mine did. That strange, curved image showed one version of my body. It was a start.

The reflection jumped when my phone vibrated in my pocket. I wrestled the phone out of my tight skinny jeans. It was a text from Walter asking if I wanted to go skinny dipping. I looked back at the distorted reflection and wondered what Walter would see if I accepted his invitation. He would be the first to see my pale breasts alongside my defined hips, wide feet, and bony hands. He would notice tan lines that I couldn't see without a floor-length mirror. His eyes would trace the length of my spine, the scattered clusters of my freckles, and the tangled web of veins beneath my skin. If we went skinny dipping, Walter would see my body as a whole. But what kind of a whole did it make?



Walter had once told me a story about his “most embarrassing moment.” He had been in the shower when the power went out. When he got out of the shower, he realized all of the towels were in the wash. He eventually ventured out of the bathroom, exposed and dripping wet. His family found him that way. They teased him for the rest of the night.

I suspected Walter of telling the story for the sole purpose of getting me to picture him naked. Walter was proud of his body. When he was wearing clothes, it was easy to imagine that he was simply skin-and-bones because of his tall height and his thin frame. However, he stripped off his shirt every chance he got, displaying chiseled abs and strong arms. I’d seen him go shirtless in the dead of winter, during one of North Texas’s rare snow days. Goosebumps dotted smooth skin, proudly worn. When he hugged me, he pulled me close to his body so that I could feel its contours. He wanted me to be aware of his shape.

When we hugged, our bodies came together. I knew his body at least as well as I knew my own. His body had faults. Small eyes and a buck-toothed grin, framed by a frizzy afro, made him look like the exaggerated nerd character from a sitcom. His thin legs didn’t have the same musculature as the rest of his body, so his torso and lower body looked mismatched. A high forehead endowed him with a perpetually surprised expression. I could have picked Walter’s body apart like this, but I didn’t. I accepted him as a whole. I appreciated his whole body as it was. The entire body that allowed him to climb trees, ride horses, and hug me. The next step would be appreciating the body that let me hug him back.

## CHAPTER XIII

### CONCLUSION: LIVING IN CAPTIVITY

Hermit crabs are cautious creatures. They have sandpaper skin and mismatched claws. Their eyes are black oil drops at the tip of two long red stalks. Before emerging from their oversized shells, hermit crabs probe the air with their stalk-eyes.

I had many hermit crabs as a child, but I was only pinched once. Hermit crabs pinch with the larger of their two claws—the protection claw. My child hand must have looked like a semi-truck to the poor creature. His protection claw clamped down on my palm until an employee took us to the back of the store and blasted it with hot sink water. The red crescent brand of his claw mark remained for weeks.

The mall store where I was pinched had a tank with over a hundred hermit crabs. Their shells were painted with pop culture images to attract customers. There's nothing more unnatural than a hermit crab with a Superman logo across its shell. Some of the poor crabs had to inhabit shells splattered with neon yellow smiley faces.

Captive hermit crabs do anything but smile. I once had a depressed hermit crab named "Minnie." I didn't know if the crab was a girl, but I decided to call her "Minnie" because of her Minnie Mouse shell. The main problem with my naming method was that hermit crabs change shells. Sometimes they outgrow small shells, and sometimes they simply curl up in new a shell for a change of pace. Minnie crawled into a Batman shell soon after I bought her. When my friends came over, they said, "He's so cool! What's his name?"

I said, “Her name’s Minnie, and I think she’s a girl. I don’t know. I guess crabs aren’t really boys or girls.”

They always forgot and started calling Minnie “he” again. Her shiny black shell with its bright yellow bat symbol seemed too boyish for a girl crab. But the pink Minnie Mouse shell had seemed to girlish for a boy crab, so what was I to do?

The one sure thing about Minnie was that she didn’t like living in captivity. She tried to escape every night. She shimmied up the cage’s corner by pressing her legs against one wall and her shell against the other. She always slid down with a screech from halfway out of her plastic prison.

Minnie died in her cage after a few short months. I read that wild hermit crabs can live up to thirty years, but hermit crabs often live less than a year in captivity. When Minnie died, she left her shell. Her tiny body looked naked and defenseless in death. Her already-wrinkled skin shriveled up. Her skin also darkened, changing from red to purple. My other hermit crabs had looked just like Minnie when they died: Herbert, Max, Sandy, Smiley. Once they died, their names and genders didn’t matter anymore. I couldn’t tell them apart without their shells.

I stopped buying hermit crabs after watching a nature documentary. The documentary said that hermit crabs don’t breed in human care. In the wild, pregnant hermit crabs run into the ocean, eggs bursting when they touch the water. The camera zoomed in on a crab with a cluster of eggs on her back. She scuttled into the ocean with a tiny backpack made of bubbles. The camera followed the crab as water submerged her. Her bubbles dispersed when the water hit, eggs scattering like dandelion fluffs in a swift

breeze. Triumphant orchestral music played in the background as a somber male voice, deep and resonant, went on about the wonder of birth. Dramatic documentary voice aside, the hermit crab's oceanic birth was beautiful.

After watching the documentary, I wondered how hermit crabs feel about mall stores. They are born into saltwater and waves, floating across the open ocean with big black eyes. Humans transport them into crowded cages. Captivity doesn't suit hermit crabs. Hermit crabs reproduce in the wild, but malls are too depressing for steamy crab sex. Not only do captive hermit crabs choose to die, but they refuse to bring children into captivity.

Minnie was my last hermit crab. The night after she died, I remained awake for hours. Her abandoned cage rested on my bedside table beside the alarm clock. The numbers on the clock shined neon blue. The blue mixed with my nightlight's yellow blush, tinging the room with an alien greenish glow. I missed the scraping sounds that used to come from her cage. She had finally escaped.

I looked at the items Minnie had left behind: the pockmarked sand, the dry water dish, the hollow Batman and Minnie Mouse shells. I had flushed Minnie's body down the toilet. Death restored her to her origins, to the watery world she was meant to inhabit. I imagined Minnie with a plain white shell, leaning into a wave, black eyes closed in contentment. With a white shell, she would seem to me like any other wild hermit crab: cageless, nameless, genderless. Free. If hermit crabs can smile, I bet she's smiling now.

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