femaleness, and love in its many forms with a sensuous ferocity that is all her own." —Ariel Levy, author of *The Rules Do Not Apply*

"Blazes through the stories we've been told with a dazzling fury and a brilliant beauty. Whatever we are or were, this is a map to a new becoming . . . A fuck-all guide to resilience and reclamation, a breathtaking reimagination of who we might be in spite of what we've been told. *Girlhood* will bring you back to life." —Lidia Yuknavitch, author of *The Book of Joan* and *Verge*

"An exquisite collection . . . Febos' insight is devastating, the examinations of her world—from the female body, queerness, consent, slut-shaming, and intimacy—are rigorous and compassionate. This is a book for mothers, daughters, and our deepest selves, a true light in the dark." —Stephanie Danler, author of *Sweetbitter* and *Stray*

"A gorgeously written, perfectly calibrated investigation into the traps, paths, and challenges of being female in this world. It's a stunner of a book." —Jami Attenberg, author of *All This Could Be Yours*

"American patriarchy teaches so many of us to hate our own bodies and stifle our own desires—to make ourselves smaller in every way. *Girlhood* is a smart, fierce, gloriously sensual critique of these lessons by a writer who has fought hard to unlearn them. Thank you, Melissa Febos, for charting this magnificent route of queer feminist resistance!" —Leni Zumas, author of *Red Clocks*

"Reading *Girlhood* felt like having a spell whispered into my ear. 'You carve yourself,' Melissa Febos writes, and the phrase becomes command, elegy, incantation. In these pages she conjures not only the past, but an allegory of experience at once universal and exquisitely personal. Intimate, urgent, and stunningly beautiful, this is a book that will be passed from hand to hand, from heart to heart." —Alex Marzano-Lesnevich, author *The Fact of a Body*

"At once intimate and didactic, lyric and wise, *Girlhood* is a must-read hybrid text for women looking to define themselves from the inside. This book is an exorcism of social messaging and external gazes, and Febos is a warm and erudite exorcist." —Melissa Broder, author of *The Pisces* and *Milk Fed*

"Lucid and timely . . . Febos's wit and sincerity push aside tropes of purity to make room for stories of real power and desire. The great surprise of the book is how masterfully she reinvents the path to womanhood, a philosopher's eye turned protectively toward the tenderest parts of the writer's former self." —Wendy S. Walters, author of *Multiply/Divide*

GIRLHOOD

Essays

MELISSA FEBOS

With illustrations by Forsyth Harmon

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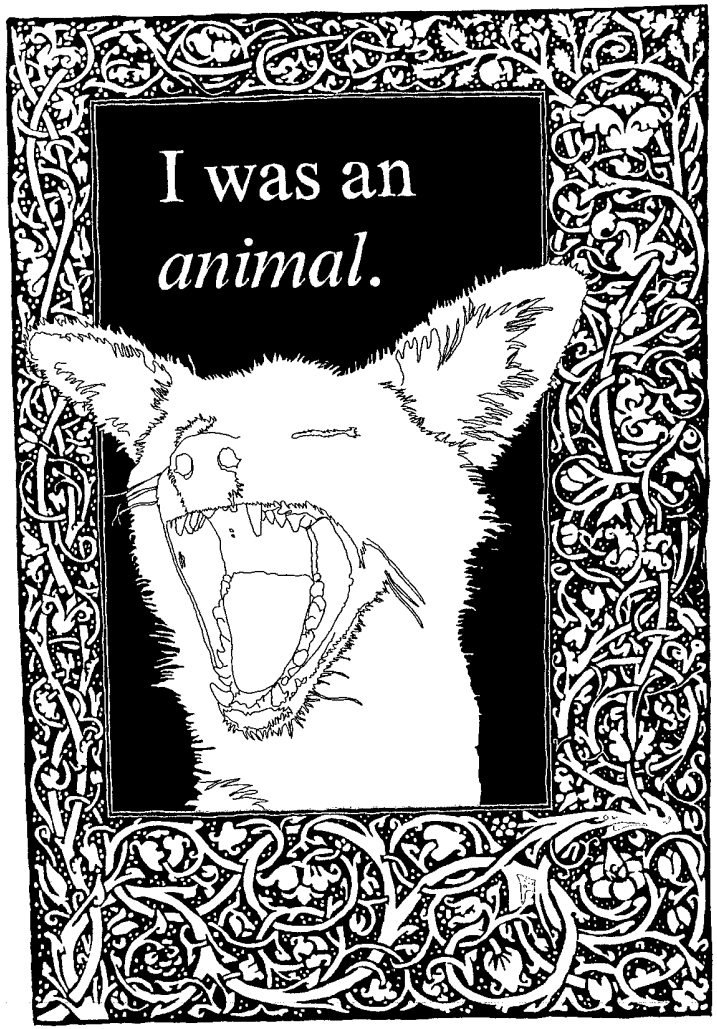

WILD AMERICA

NARRATOR: You're a girl, not an animal.
VALERIE: A she-mammal or a female child. I was on the borderline between human being and chaos.

—Sara Stridsberg, *Valerie*

Eloise Brill and I sat on the beach at Goodwill Pond while nearby our fellow campers ate cellophane-wrapped sandwiches on rotting picnic tables. It was the summer of 1989, and our parents had enrolled us in afternoon swim camp at the public pond. Rumor among the elementary school set was that the water in Goodwill Pond was warm and yellow because of not sunshine and pollen but rather a high concentration of pee. It seemed plausible, given that we all definitely peed in the water. I didn't care. I had just won the afternoon's timed race and was buoyant with my victory.

"Are you a lesbian?" Eloise asked me, smug as only a nine-year-old with a new word can be.

"I don't know," I said. "What's a lesbian?"

"Give me your hand," she said. When I did, she pressed hers against mine, the grit of sand between our sticky palms.

Someone's happy scream bounced across the water, followed by a splash. Eloise squinted at the tops of our fingers. "See?" she said. "Your ring finger is longer than your pointer finger. That means you're a lesbian."

I drew back my hand to examine it. She was right. What else might my body reveal about me that even I didn't know? The thought crept through me like a shadow. I shrugged. "Let's go eat lunch," I said and brushed off my hand on my swimsuit, as if I could leave the worry there in the cool sand.

Consider the Hecatoncheires. Three children of Uranus and Gaea, they were named for their hundred hands. Cottus, the striker; Gyges, the big-limbed; and Briareus, the sea-goat, maker of storms. They were giants who grew up to defeat the Titans. They were earthquakes and sea storms, powerful beyond measure.

Now, consider the Hecatoncheires before all of that. Not as triumphant warriors, not as the guardians of Tartarus. At the beginning. What is a sea storm as a child? How does an earthquake begin to know itself? That first rumble you hear and think: *me*. Our power may be innate, but we learn its meaning from others. No one is born knowing the difference

between a sea god and a sea monster. What if no one told you that you were a Hecatoncheire? Where would you hide all those hands? How could you not start to hate them?

Before I learned about beauty, I delighted in my body. I was a passionate child with callused feet and lots of words. I talked fast and moved faster—through the woods around our Cape Cod home, up trees, and into the ocean's crashing surf. Finely tuned to the swells of my own and others' hearts, I sensed a deep well at my center, a kind of umbilical cord that linked me to a roiling infinity of knowledge and pathos that underlay the trivia of our daily lives. Its channel was not always open, and what opened it was not always predictable: often songs and poems, a shaft of late-afternoon light, an unexpected pool of memory, the coo of doves at dusk whose knell ached my own throat and seemed the cry of loneliness itself. It was often possible to open the channel by will, an option that I found both terrifying and irresistible. I would read or think or feel myself into a brimming state—not joy or sorrow, but some apex of their intersection, the raw matter from which each was made—then lie with my back to the ground, body vibrating, heart thudding, mind foaming, thrilled and afraid that I might combust, might simply die of feeling too much.

Though this state seemed obviously the most *real* and potent form of consciousness, I knew that it was not "reality." Later, this understanding evolved into a fear of my own susceptibility to madness, but as a child I simply understood that a person could not live with an open channel to the sublime inside them; it was impossible to hold on to the collective story of human life with that live cord writhing through you, showering sparks like a downed wire in a hurricane. Human life was defined by composure and linearity, school bus routes and homework and gender and bedtimes and taxes. Though I could meet its requirements most of the time, I knew my adherence to the logic of reality was tenuous, that a more feral sensibility reigned beneath it.

The resiliency and strength of my young body was a source of comfort in the face of this dissonance between inner and outer worlds, because it offered a link between them. The body was a weird unfathomable masterpiece, a perfect shard of what coursed through that channel. My body was not, however, subject to radical shifts in consciousness. It was always *real*. It always felt good to know that I could easily climb the enormous oak tree beside our driveway, swim to the center of our pond, exert a concrete power on the physical world with my own two hands. Indeed, my hands seemed the locus of my body's ability, their pliant strength leading every physical encounter, their size—larger than most other

children's—a measurable proof of substantiality and of a creative intelligence far beyond the human.

The game was this: alone, I would trudge to that place in the woods where the pines were tallest and, at the right time of year, the ground a bed of their smooth needles. Close to our house but not in view of any human construct, I would lie on the ground, close my eyes, and clean my mind like a chalkboard. Sometimes I made a story for myself, but it was crude and beside the point: I was from another planet, I had been struck amnesiac—all that mattered was that I'd fallen from the sky a stranger. My eyes would flutter open and carefully absorb my surroundings. I might clutch a handful of pine needles to my face, inhale their green scent, touch a slender spoke to my tongue. In summer I would wade into the pond, imagine it was the first water ever to close around my ankles like two cool mouths.

In the outskirts of our yard, I stalked our family dog, my heart pounding. I discovered the garden hose and drank the contents of its sun-warmed belly. Sometimes I made it all the way inside the house without detection. Oh, the frightful pleasure of making the most known place in the world an alien landscape. The cool shadows of an interior. The naked smoothness of floors. The absurd bounty of cabinets stuffed with

food. My wonder was bottomless for the world empty of stories, mine alone to name.

"The higher the animal, the more it plays," *Wild America* host Marty Stouffer explained in one episode. "Once the demands of instinct, such as the need for food or sleep, have been satisfied, animals have the time and inclination to play." *Wild America* was a half-hour show that aired on PBS from 1982 to 1994, created by Stouffer, a native Arkansan and nature conservationist. Each episode began with its triumphant horn-laden theme and an introduction by Stouffer himself, clad in a colorful sweater and groomed beard.

"True play is aimless, with no goal other than to experience new sensations," he elaborated. Nonetheless, he went on to explain, often play is also constructive. Young mountain goats strengthen their legs by leaping and romping mere minutes after they are born. Juvenile martens stalk squirrels in a pageant of the hunting techniques they will use as adults. "I think we can learn something from this," Stouffer mused in his voiceover. "Perhaps we could find a way to play less desperately, and to learn more playfully."

I loved *Wild America* not for Marty Stouffer's philosophical digressions but because, like my game in the woods, it reset the context of the familiar. However often Stouffer

imposed human narratives on the animals depicted (very often), it was still always clear that survival was the priority that assigned value to everything in the animal world. If the wild marten was overcome by her own feelings, she didn't let it stop her from procuring dinner for her babies. I might have had to close my eyes during the part of the nature documentary when the pack of hyenas felled an antelope, but they had no qualms about tearing warm mouthfuls from her while she still kicked with frantic life.

My mother had raised me vegetarian, and though I harbored no real desire to eat meat, sometimes, in summer, I would take a hunk of watermelon to a remote corner of our yard and pretend it was a fresh carcass. On all fours, I would bury my face in the sweet red fruit-meat and tear away mouthfuls. Sometimes I'd rip handfuls out and cram them between my teeth, which wasn't much like any animal I knew of. It was less playing a particular kind of animal than enacting a form of wildness that I recognized in myself but that had no appropriate expression in human culture.

I watched *Wild America*, along with the more savage nature specials on public television, and thought, Maybe. Maybe no one else recognized themselves in the hyena's blood-soaked grin, her ruthless hunger. Maybe no one else's heart raced,

fists clenched, neck tensed—unable to tell if she was more impala or lion. Well, I did. Alone in the woods behind our house I had beaten my chest, acted out my own invented stories without a thought to how another's gaze might see me. I sympathized with the jittery business of squirrels and fanatical obsessions of our golden retriever. I was confounded by silverware, why it should exist when we had such perfect instruments at the ends of our arms.

Walt Whitman claimed our distinction from animals to be that "they do not sweat and whine about their condition," and "not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things." I learned in elementary school that we were animals, but unlike other animals, we did not seem driven by the instinct for physical survival. We were so far up the food chain that it was no longer even visible to us. We were beyond survival, in a dark and lofty realm wherein our obsolete instincts had been perverted into atrocities like capitalism and bikini waxing. I might not have been able to name this, but I recognized it.

Sometimes, when I momentarily detached from the narrative of human life that we all took for granted—the one that presumes that money, cars, shopping malls, pollution, and all of industry are not a catastrophic misuse of our resources—and

glimpsed it from a more evolutionary angle, it seemed so bizarre as to be unlikely. Was this life or some strange dystopian movie, a dream we were all having and from which we would soon wake to resume our sensible animal lives, in which "nature" was not a category of television show or a variety of experience to cultivate a preference for consuming, but the only thing, the everything?

In elementary school, however, we kids were not making an ontological study of late-twentieth-century middle-class American life. We were neither learning about capitalism nor reading Whitman. We were learning how to *be* human. We were learning the exact way in which, though we were animals, we should not look or act like them. To call someone an animal was an insult. As my peers and I approached puberty, this was unfortunate, because I had trouble keeping track of the narrative. I was covered in scabs and bruises. I was sun-browned, full of sighs, and interested in every orifice. I was an animal.

By middle school, this felt like an especially disgusting secret, because I was also a girl.

Sometimes I think about going back. I imagine reversing the film of my personhood, reeling the spool to find the single frame where it all changes. As though there would be one murky celluloid square in which my body was taken away

from me. Not just my body, but all the pleasures that came through it. A hand reaching into the frame and snatching it all away—the sting of salt water on my skinned knees, the ache of a palm tendered by oak bark, the pelt of gravel against my calves as my bike flew downhill, the hum of my legs after running all day, my own voice ringing in that cathedral of pine trees, the perfect freedom of caring only about what my body could do and never about how it was seen.

There wouldn't be just one frame, of course. It was so many things. The skinny girls splashed all over movie screens. The television set my mother tried to keep out of our house. The slippery issues of *Teen Magazine* that started arriving in our mailbox. That classmate at her pool party, silently commenting on my precociously developed figure. The rich girl who pinched my thigh and pointed out how much thicker it was than her own.

I didn't learn to hate my hands until the end of fourth grade, when my body exploded—almost a year after Eloise Brill and I sat on the beach at Goodwill Pond. It was mutiny, flesh swelling from my chest and thighs before it did in anyone else my age. I was enormous, I thought, Alice after eating the wrong pill, busting through the house of what a girl should be. I was the Incredible Hulk, but instead of a superpower,

my size and strength were a damnation. Girls were not supposed to be enormous. They were not supposed to be scabby and strong. Inexplicably, strong and big were what every animal wanted except us.

To be human meant that unlike in most other species, females were the cultivators of meticulous plumage. We competed to be the weakest and smallest and most infantile. We seemed to spend all of our resources withering ourselves to be attractive to males. The goal was to be as soft and tidy and delicate as possible. It made no sense at all. I was not in the habit of withering myself. I was not tidy or delicate.

I had always eaten the same way I did everything—with speed and vigor. One day at lunch, after I polished off a soggy square of cafeteria pizza, the girl next to me stared with bald observation.

"What?" I said, self-consciousness radiating through me.

"You eat so fast," she said with a touch of self-satisfaction. "I can't even finish a whole piece of that. It's so *big*."

Wild America had taught me that wolves could go more than a week without eating, but I could only make it one day. *I won't eat anything but string cheese this week*, I promised myself. One Saturday, the only thing I consumed was a bag of sugar-free Jell-O powder. I licked my fingertip and dipped it into the tiny bag of red sand until it glowed crimson, until my mouth was aflame with chemicals, as though I had poisoned

myself. I would have poisoned myself if I thought it would transform me into a smaller animal.

In hindsight, the extreme reversal of values—big and strong going from best to worst—shocks me. Men seemed to have it all, to be considered superior in all perceivable ways, and yet we were discouraged from striving for any form of dominance deemed masculine. To be described in any way as "manly" was the vilest of insults. Such adaptability was required of us to perform this internal U-turn, to conform our loyalties to this crackpot framework, rife with contradiction. I can see now that our ability to do so was evidence not of a lacking survival instinct but of a finely tuned one. What I needed to survive middle school just happened to be the opposite of what I would have needed to survive on *Wild America*.

Instead of eating contests, we had starving contests. Instead of boasting of our strengths, we forged friendships by denigrating ourselves. Instead of arm-wrestling each other, we compared the size of our arms, competing not for strength and size but puniness. It didn't take long for someone to point out that I had "man hands," an insult I subsequently used to abase myself well into adulthood.

I inherited a lot from my mother, though I first recognized my hands. We have long fingers, wide palms, and strong nails.

They don't carry our ring sizes at mall kiosks. We shop for gloves in the men's section of department stores. We don't bother with bangle bracelets. In adolescence, it struck me as unfair because my mother was beautiful, with fine features and dizzying cheekbones. No one was ever going to be distracted from her face by her hands. But me? My hands gave me away. I was a Hecatoncheire among humans. My two miracles had become monsters.

In school, I learned to talk less. I moved slower and hid my body in oversize clothes. I longed to be a smaller and cooler thing, less wanting, less everything. Though I felt gigantic, I wasn't. It was not the first time I mistook the feeling for the object, and not the last. This is what happens when you give your body away, or when it gets taken from you. Its physical form becomes impossible to see because your own eyes are no longer the expert. Your body is no longer a body but a perceived distance from what a body should be, a condition of never being correct, because being is incorrect. Virtue lies only in the interminable act of erasing yourself.

My body, though fickle in conception, was starvable, concealable, subject to the reconfiguration of desire—when someone thought it pretty, so it became. Not my hands. No matter how my self-conception changed from moment to moment, my hands remained long and strong and wide and scarred. They were maps that led to the truth of me. I was no

petaled thing. I was not a ballerina. I was a third baseman. I was a puller, a pusher, a runner, a climber, a swimmer, a grabber, a sniffer, a taster, a throw-my-head-back laugher. I used my hands—they were marked by things and left marks. They would never let me become the kind of girl I had learned I should be.

What of the girl I actually was, the one who rose from a bed of pine needles to name her own world? She was exiled. The channel that connected the wild in me with the wild outside could not be destroyed, but I did my best to seal it, as I strove to tame my own nature and wither my form. I turned away from the real inside of me and oriented myself outward. I did not look back for a long time.

What we hate or fear most in ourselves tends to be among the things we first notice in others. As anorexics read cookbooks, I started to read hands. They reveal us all, it turns out. Even our fingerprints are the evidence of how we touch. First, when we are three-month-old fetuses, our fingertips' skin outgrows its outer layers, buckles under the swiftness of change. Then we form their ridges by grasping the walls of our mothers' wombs and our own bodies, feeling our way through that first small world. In this way, that world shapes us, defines our

physical selves more permanently, more individually, than any part of this greater one.

As a teenager, I learned to mute a person's words and watch their hands. Chewed cuticles, jagged or polished nails, knuckles lumped with scars—the motion of a person's hands often mimics the motion of her thoughts. Hands grope for elusive ideas and clench the ones we want to hide. They flutter like propellers, moving us closer to the right words. They pinch and squeeze to police us, the silent gestapo of our inhibitions.

My hands were undisguisable, so I learned to hide them in my pockets and sleeves, behind my back, under my thighs, and in fists—my two anemones, closed in the perpetual nighttime of shame.

By the time I was thirteen, I had divorced my body. Like a bitter divorced parent, I accepted that our collaboration was mandatory. I needed her and hated her all the more for it. Despite my deep sympathy for all other animals, I was sociopathic in my cruelty toward this one. When she disobeyed me—in her hunger, in her clumsiness—I was punitive and withholding. I scrutinized and criticized and denigrated her ceaselessly, even in dreams. Not before or since have I felt such animosity toward another being.

There were moments, though. As a teenager, at night, alone in my bedroom, sometimes the illusion of autonomy from my body would crumble and I would be flooded by the most profound sorrow and tenderness. I would look at my strong legs, each scar on my knees a memory. My soft little belly that had absorbed so much hate. Even my hands—like two loyal dogs that no amount of cruelty would banish. I suddenly saw my body as I would any animal that had been so mistreated. My poor body. My precious body. How had I let her be treated this way? My body was *me*. To hate my own body was to suffer from an autoimmune disease of the mind. In these moments I had the thought that I was mentally ill—in a literal sense, for what else could describe this hostile relationship to my very own body? I had no way to differentiate what aspects of my behavior were inherently *me* and what were cultural impositions—insofar as this task is ever possible. What I could see clearly was the violence with which I treated the body that held custody of those other ineffable aspects that I considered to be myself. It held me, and I ought to have held it with equal care. I was unspeakably remorseful, as I imagine any abuser would be in such a moment of self-appraisal. I sat in the dark and hugged myself. "I'm sorry," I whispered and squeezed my own shoulder. "I love you," I said. While I slept, the veil would draw once more. In the morning, I rose from my bed and looked in the mirror with disdain: *You again.*

Now those moments seem proof that self-love is an instinct, as animal as any other function of the self. The ferocity of my affection could not be erased, only suppressed under total vigilance. My self-hatred was not self-generated. It was an expression of the environment outside of my body, which, it eventually turned out, I could change.

My first girlfriend, Lillian, confused me. Her short, matted hair and carpenter's pants. The duct tape that sealed the rips in her down coat. Her soft voice and easy tears. Her delicate hands that rustled thoughtlessly in her pockets or against my face. Even paint-flecked, with perpetual crescents of dirt under her nails, she was more girl in this way. I wanted to kiss her all the time. I also envied her the freedom of that ethereal form. In it, she could be herself and still be beautiful. What did I think would happen if I did the same? I'd be seen an ogre, all my hundred hands exposed.

For most of my sixteenth year I spent most of my free time with her, which was a considerable amount, as I'd dropped out of high school. I might have been self-possessed enough to insist upon homeschooling myself, but I was consumed by insecurity around the one person whose esteem I desperately sought. Whatever power they had held over me and however they had shaped my thinking, by fifteen I saw my former

classmates and teachers as irrelevant, characters with walk-on parts that would never appear again in the story of my life, whereas I needed Lillian to *love* me, and that meant I had to scrupulously hide the aspects of myself that I suspected might repel her. This was sheer projection—Lillian may well have been attracted to me *for* those very qualities—I simply had no reference but the most base heterosexual model of how to be attractive to another human.

I spent the majority of my time in her company tense with control. My body was bigger than hers in so many ways, and I feared drawing attention to this fact by being too flagrant in my movements, my laughter, my opinions. I had successfully internalized the belief that all my animal aspects—including, and perhaps most of all, the inherent vigor with which I approached life itself—were an affront to my femininity and should be annihilated if possible, and, failing that, vigilantly suppressed and camouflaged. My experiences in school had taught me to hate my body, to mute any protruding aspects of myself that might draw attention, but my relationship with Lillian refined this skill. With her, I could be openly queer. I wore men's shirts and battered Doc Martens. I didn't wear makeup, but I was still in disguise. A fascistic watchfulness governed my body.

After observing us together, a friend of my mother's once commented that I seemed "so much more mature" than

Lillian. It was true that there was something childlike in the way my girlfriend inhabited her body. She sat with her legs either akimbo or improbably knotted, fidgeted restlessly, ate with her hands, and regularly stared into space for whole minutes. I found her seeming lack of self-consciousness mesmerizing and worshipped it as yet another corporeal ideal unattainable to me, a freedom that could be afforded only by those more finely constructed. That is, because she was beautiful, she could be uninhibited, even slovenly. I was young enough to still suffer from the misapprehension of beauty as freedom, the idea that if a woman succeeded by the impossible terms of patriarchy she might graduate in some way from its hold. For years I longed to affect this appealing tension between elegance and dishevelment. My mother's friend could not have been more wrong, I thought, in her assessment of the difference between Lillian and me. Nevertheless, I met her error with an uneasy mixture of relief, pride, and anguish—an experience that would become familiar in the years that followed, and likely is to any truly secretive person. It was proof that my fastidious efforts to conceal both my real self, whatever that was, and my profound insecurity were working. I was again alone in the truth of myself, but this time under my own direction.

But how to indulge any genuine impulse in this landscape of control and obfuscation? My desire for Lillian was *real.*

We'd kiss for hours in her messy bedroom, stopping only to flip the cassette tape or gulp a glass of water. My desire was a galloping thing, and her touch, unlike that of boys, didn't snuff it out. If my body had been a passive machine from which men made withdrawals, like an ATM whose code they were handed on the day of their first erection, then with her it was a winning slot machine, screaming jangly music and spewing coins.

Sexual pleasure was equally thrilling and terrifying, not for the usual reasons. We had not gotten far beyond heavy make-out sessions, and though I longed for more, I did not dare. My desire was a portal, the single permitted link to my wild and true self that Lillian had access to. I lived in fear that were I sufficiently possessed by lust, I might expose too much of myself and drive her away. I was well enough versed in the scripts for female desire to know that we were supposed to have it, or at least perform it, but in a girlish, mewling way. My desire was not that. Like the right poem or song or slant of light, it was a doorway that opened directly into the part of me that understood hyenas better than humans. I sensed that there was a threshold over which I would completely lose the ability to monitor myself. Like a power surge or septic tank failure, I might flood the room with my putrid worst: make guttural noises, contort myself in grotesque positions, reveal the bestial facts of me.

I was cautious in our exertions, rarely daring to touch her in some way she had not already touched me. After hours of kissing and groping, my hips would rock with frustration. What next? We didn't have the internet then. We didn't know what else to do. We weren't brave enough to try something. Which one of us was the boy? I wondered. I was terrified and certain that it would turn out to be me.

One day we lay on a blanket in the grass of her backyard. The trees hummed with insects, the air was hazy with pollen. I read a novel, peering over it occasionally to watch her dip a paintbrush in a slick of watercolor and drag it along her sketchpad, the wet tip like a tiny black tongue, streaking the white with purple.

Eventually she tore out the paper and handed it to me.

"For you," she said and kissed the top of my head.

I took the paper, suddenly buoyant with hope. I had not known enough to want this, but still, it had found me. For a moment, anything seemed possible. Even my own happiness.

I smiled at her and then turned to study my gift. Next to the colorful figure of a woman's nude form and a tree with tangled branches she had painted a short poem.

"Sometimes you touch me more like a bear than a butterfly," read one line. Shame shot through me in hot streaks. Me, with my clumsy bear paws. *Wild America* had long ago taught me that a bear needs her enormous paws for climbing, swimming,

swiping, and navigating landscapes of ice—what good were mine? I felt ugly and crude, prehistoric in my proportions. I felt like Lennie in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*: crippled by my own hands, misfit for human society, terrified of crushing the things most precious to me.

It's a lesbian cliché—the first-date hand comparison, not so widely known as the U-Haul joke, but a hallmark of every romance I've ever had with a woman. Straight people do it, too, but the interaction doesn't hold quite the same charge because men and women don't primarily fuck each other with their hands.

In my twenties I started announcing "I have really big hands" whenever I saw the moment coming. "So do I," my dates often replied, but mine were always bigger. My fingers stretched longer and my palms wider that those of women six inches taller than me. The rest of me was muscular and curved but concealable, mitigated by my petite stature and the heels I wore every single day. I had spent decades disguising the rest of my body with sartorial modifications, but my hands were brazenly big, unabashedly big. There was no getting around them.

If I had been fucking my lovers more, I would have gotten over it faster, and if I didn't hate my hands, I surely would have

been fucking my lovers more. The women I loved dressed in men's clothes, were always taller and bigger than me in most ways. And mostly, they fucked me. From the moment I began really having sex with women, I was grateful to be queer, to realize that my attraction to my partners had nothing to do with their adherence to oppressive definitions of femininity. Lillian remains the only female lover I've had with whom I confused wanting and wanting to *be* in that particular configuration; the opposite was true of all my subsequent paramours—my attraction to them had nothing to do with that old idea of beauty as delicacy. I cherished the spread of their thighs across chairs and their weight on top of me, inhaled their musky scents with relish. I craved the animal in them. Nevertheless, to offer myself the same freedom was still inconceivable.

Though I recognized the gift of a sexual experience so much less bound by heterosexual prescription, I was not free. No lover had ever seen me naked with the lights on. I never forgot myself. Whenever a lover looked at me, so did I, fastidiously monitoring the position of my limbs and torso lest they give away their secret enormity. I still feared what my body might reveal before I could.

It wasn't that I rationally *thought* any of them would stop loving me if I stopped striving for an ideal I'd settled on at

twelve years old. It was a belief and a set of behaviors so deeply implanted in me that it resided beneath my intellectual functioning. I had "known" better for years. Knowing that we've been conditioned doesn't undo it. I had surveilled myself for two decades, nurtured the fear that if I didn't, I'd expose some hideous corporeal reality that would repel those whose affections I most craved. I couldn't just decide to stop, nor had I. I lived then, as many women do, like a house inhabited by dueling caretakers. One always papering the walls for some anticipated guest, the other tearing them down. One cooking elaborate meals just for the other to throw them in the trash. Imagine the energetic waste! Probably you don't have to, because you know yourself the way one can build a life around fighting the patriarchy and still have parts of your own mind believe that your worth correlates exactly to your desirability to men. Consciousness doesn't preclude false consciousness. It is one of feminism's raisons d'être.

This imbalance in sex worried me, though I never spoke of it. I don't believe, and didn't then, that all sex ought to be perfectly reciprocal. But I knew that ours wasn't, in part, because I was afraid. I was afraid that if I fucked a lover, she wouldn't like it, or that I wouldn't. I was afraid that I *would* like it and find myself repulsive. Worse, that she would find me repulsive. I was still afraid of being the boy.

In her essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde defines the erotic as "a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling." Our oppression, she claims, is predicated on the suppression of this resource and its inherent power; "As women we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge." I had read Lorde's essay in college and loved it, without comprehending the full breadth of its relevance to my own life. A mercy, because I was not yet ready to change. When I read it again, I was ready.

In my early thirties, I became conscious of the fact that I had been in consecutive monogamous relationships since my teenage years. It was notable, I thought, but also fairly ordinary. Lots of people were always in relationships. I was just a relationship person, I told myself, though even in the privacy of my own mind it had the ring of rationalization.

"Don't you think you should take a break?" my mother asked me when I was thirty-two. I had just ended a three-year domestic partnership.

"Probably," I said, though I had already begun the next one. When it ended, I decided that I really ought to take a break. I wanted a different kind of relationship and knew that it was me who needed to change. Then I got into four or five much shorter consecutive relationships. By thirty-five, I understood

that the decision to take a break could not be a casual one. Too much of me for too long had been oriented toward other people and their attraction to me. A break would only be possible if I drew a solid line between not only myself and those most overt entanglements of sex and love but all the precursory activities as well. There could be no flirtation, no friendship even partially predicated on sexual tension, no voyeuristic perusal of dating apps. I was a person so habitually attuned to the charge of attraction that I *accidentally* got into committed partnerships.

Since middle school, when I rejected the power and pleasure of my body as a sublime vehicle and traded it for the framework insisted upon by the rest of world, I had considered the value of my body primarily as it related to other people, namely men. By my thirties, though I rarely saw men as potential partners, that framework still defined much of my experience. A part of me still loathed my physical self—hated my big hands, thought my proportions cartoonish and grotesque—and that part of me found the transformative power of others' desire an irresistible relief. Being in a relationship provided a constant source of this relief, while reinforcing my habitual reliance on others' perceptions of me as a condition of self-acceptance.

It was hard, at first. I had to restart a few times, so rote was my behavior. But when I truly committed to the quest of

being alone and of turning inward, the change was immediate. Like a plant growing toward the sun, my life began to open. Or something began to open in me that let more of life in. My time was suddenly my own, which subtly but completely changed the texture of beingness. I ran and slept and taught my students and talked for hours on the phone to my friends and family. For the most part, these were the same things I had previously done, but they *felt* different, as if I had taken off a pair of gloves that I hadn't known I was wearing. I reread "Uses of the Erotic," in which Lorde explains that "the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing," and sighed with recognition.

I wrote all day, until I wasn't sure if I even remembered how to talk to other humans, a strangeness that I inhabited first with trepidation and then glee. Free from the bondage of another's gaze, my own loosened. I felt *the doing* as I had not since those days in the woods as a child. I shook loose the context of my life and explored it anew. I tasted the pine needles and ate watermelon by the fistful. I reopened the channel inside myself, old enough now to know I was not alone, nor mad, but capable even of finding words for its fiery power.

Most of all, I experienced a radical change in my relationship to my own body. That instinct for self-love that I had glimpsed at twelve and worked so hard to exile had been

waiting for me all those years. I bought a new bed, and every morning I woke alone and gently patted myself down, as if taking inventory of my valuable cargo. Good morning, hips. Good morning, thighs. Good morning, hands. I stared at them with that old sense of wonder. It was just us, for three whole months, and then the better part of a year. Eating whatever I hungered for. The late-night reading and list writing. The silvery wordless mornings.

How wrong I had been about freedom. I had mistakenly thought that beauty was the price of it, that I must succeed at erasing myself in order to be myself. In fact, it was the opposite. Only when I divested from the systems that benefited from my self-hatred could I relinquish it and glimpse freedom. As Lorde promised, "when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves . . . then we begin to be responsible for ourselves in the deepest sense."

I had only wanted to change my way of loving and being loved. I didn't know that doing so would return me to myself. If the erotic is "a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings," my hands are, and have always been, erotic instruments. They were the first conduits, the first actors of that chaos of strongest feelings, inextricably bound to my sense of self as a child. After years of estrangement, they pointed the way back.

That year I began assigning my creative writing students the task of writing a love letter to the part of their body with which they have the most fraught relationship. It has ever since been a regular part of my curriculum. The students find it extremely difficult. However painful, we often cherish our own self-hatreds, mistake them as intrinsic to our survival. After they write these letters, however, after they read them with tremorous voices and flushed faces, there is wildness in their eyes, as if a door has opened, as if a tiny flame has lit deep inside them. I would cup my hands around each one if I could.

Six months into our relationship, a year after my celibacy ended, Donika and I spent a long sunny Saturday wandering around Toronto, holding hands.

"Will you tell me something that you like about me?" I asked as the sun heavied with afternoon, made everything slow and golden.

"Of course," she said. "What kind of thing?"

"Hmm," I said. "A shallow thing?" It was the sort of exchange that had already become a convention of our relationship. In the very beginning, we had agreed to ask for exactly what we wanted from each other and had both kept that promise. How simple it was, and how long it had taken. It had required all

of my previous relationships, a decade of therapy, and nearly a year of celibacy to learn how to identify what I needed, how to ask for it, and finally, how to receive it. In this and so many other ways our love felt like the culmination of so many years' work.

"Something that I like about you"—she smiled—"is that you are not very tall."

I laughed. Moments before, I had commented on how comfortable I was in the sneakers I'd worn for our day of walking. It was rare for me to wear sneakers for anything but jogging. I had worn heels of some kind almost every day since my late teens.

"But if I were taller, I could wear shoes like that," I said, stopping at a boutique window to point at a sleek pair of oxfords.

"Why can't you wear them now?" she asked, genuinely baffled.

I grimaced. "My legs are so short and my hands and feet are so big. I'd look like a little troll," I explained. I'd never been this honest with a lover about my preoccupation with disguising my true form, my belief that it needed a disguise. I might have learned what freedom was, but my ability to live it was still limited in these small and tenacious ways.

Like my past lovers, Donika is taller than me and dresses mostly in clothes designed for men. The similarities end there.

I don't mean that her hands are bigger than mine, though they are. I mean that the roles we assume in our relationship don't fall into gendered categories, in or out of the bedroom. It's part of what makes it possible for me to share with her these inhibitions; I am certain that she doesn't need me to play the girl. We just get to be ourselves.

"Do you know what else has a small body and big hands and feet?" she asked me.

I shook my head.

"A baby tiger," she said. "They are very strong and nimble. They are excellent swimmers and climbers, in addition to being extremely cute."

As I laughed, she turned her body to face mine. When she spoke, her voice was gentle but firm. "Little friend," she said, "I am charmed by your proportions. Just because you have an issue with them doesn't mean that anyone else does." She looked back at the window. "I think you'd look great in those shoes."

Part of learning to receive things is learning to do so when you haven't even asked for them. To let love sneak up on you with its warm splash of light and just stand there squinting. It can be a lot to take. I stood there for a minute, not sure if I was going to cry. I didn't. We kept walking.

In canto 6 of his epic satire *Don Juan*, Byron contemplates his own adoration of all women, and muses about the Hecatoncheire, "enviable Briareus . . . with thy hands and heads . . . hads't all things multiplied in proportion." To which I say: only a man would think one hundred dicks better than one. Only a person who doesn't know that *thy hands and heads* can indeed *be* all things.

Today, my love has no aversion to being fucked. Our fucking is no partially clothed, one-way activity. When my long fingers, my strong fingers, slide inside her, she writhes and mews and grunts. Yes, like an animal. We are animals, never more than now.

For a sliver of time, I sometimes step out of myself, like a wheel that's lost its track. I see my body crouched over her, thighs flexed, back slick with sweat, face dumb with desire, mouth open—and I shudder, ready to tuck it all back in and make myself small again. To do that would mean leaving her here alone in this bed, leaving this *here* that exists only between both of our bodies. So, I don't. I blink twice and step back into myself.

More, she instructs me, and I have more to give her. My hands are enormous. They are brazenly big, unabashedly big, hungry and huge and beloved. The desire they enact, this desire we share, is earthquakes and sea storms. It blinds our thoughts and clenches our eyes and makes us pray to gods we

don't believe in. It washes us onto the shore of the bed, slack and salt-crusted, wrecked by pleasure. All that time, I thought it was my hands who needed to shrink, when it was I who needed to grow into them.

Once, after fucking me, she said, "There is a word in my mind, but I don't know if I can say it. It's going to sound silly."

"Tell me," I said, my head on her chest, mouth briny with her.

"Sublime. Fucking you feels like the sublime."

I laughed and rolled onto my back, threw my arm over my eyes.

"It is!" she insisted. "Sometimes it scares me. I feel like I could just lose myself in it."

"We call that sublime," Kant wrote, "which is absolutely great" and marked by "beyond all comparison." A thing that can inspire us to feel a fearfulness, "without being afraid *of* it." An earthquake, for example, Kant understood as a sublime event.

I knew exactly what Donika meant, but I had no words to name it. My knowing was from a time before I knew such experience was speakable. Our sex does not feel like an exchange of power, but like a natural event that can only occur when both of us stop thinking of ourselves and trust our bodies

completely. No one plays the boy, because no one *plays* anything. It can't happen unless we trust that we'll be loved at our most animal.

Intimacy, I've found, has little to do with romance. Maybe it is the opposite of romance, which is based on a story written by someone else. It is a closeness to another person that requires closeness with oneself. It is not watching lightning strike from the window but being struck by it.

True love is not the reward for a successful campaign to domesticate oneself. It is the thing I was practicing all of those years ago, in my own constructive play. It is entering the woods a stranger, shaking loose the stories assigned you, and naming the world as you meet it, together.

It is true that I am loved now for exactly the things I have tried to erase in myself, but this isn't a story about love teaching me to love myself. It's not even about the decision to love myself. Loving myself has never been something I was able to do simply by deciding to.

This is a love story, though. The kind where the lover laments all the years she lost at the altar of some false god. When regret seeps in, I try to remember the Hecatoncheires. They did not defeat the Titans as children. They lived under their power. They were *of* the Titans. It took years for their

strength to surpass that of the old gods. But when they did? They threw mountains, a hundred at a time, one for each great hand. And what if they had been taught to hate their own strength? Maybe it would have taken a hundred years for them to grasp a mountain in hand, to understand what they could do, that they could make their own Olympus.