



Alter Egos

by
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Honors Project

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Introduction

My life has been made up of many diverse personal as well as cultural connections and disconnections that happen for me on two levels, my body and my language. I have been able to integrate the connections/disconnections by fusing my body with my language through reading and performing my poetry. The language of my poems comes off the page and is placed on to my body through my voice, movement, gesture, eye contact, etc. But this integration has been a long time coming, and the process by which I made the discovery of this integration has been joyful and sometimes frightening. In the first part of this preface, I would like to flesh out what I mean by connection and disconnection, and then I would like to tell you about some of my connections/disconnections as they occurred on the levels of the body and language.

When I started to put this manuscript together, I intended to find my one true self, and I was convinced that I could find that one self through my autobiographical poems. With the encouragement and insightful help of Professor Kris Straub and Dr. Brenda Freeman, I discovered that my SELF is made up of a wide range of cultural and personal connections and disconnections that create the writer who sits in front of you today. As I thought, talked, and wrote about the many connections/disconnections of myself, I tried to define what a connection is for me versus what a disconnection is and how those two work together.

When I looked up the literal dictionary meaning of the verb "connect" I found, "to join, fasten, link together by means of something intervening <a bus line ~s the two towns>." I was intrigued by this example of a bus line and began thinking about how my definition of connections related to it. Connections were

ideas that I heard or read about that felt comfortable and congruent with the person I was at the time, ideas that were reassuring about my feelings. Eventually, those connection-ideas became a part of my work and facilitated my writing voice in a positive way. And sometimes a connection is a bus ride that takes me from my solitary position as writer behind the computer screen to a social position as performance artist behind the microphone.

Disconnections, on the other hand, were ideas that made me uncomfortable with myself and even undermined my confidence and decision-making abilities. Disconnections were ideologies that I eventually recognized as harmful to my developing self, such as the "Beauty Myth" ideas that are so often promoted for women. Disconnection with these ideologies became necessary if the self I was trying to develop was to survive. Disconnections could also facilitate my written voice, such as when my grandfather's suppression of my speaking forced me to develop my written voice if I was to have any voice at all.

Disconnections

I believe the first disconnection I was conscious of occurred when my mother and father divorced in 1977. I was six years old, and just like many children who go through divorce, I believed that my father left because I was not good enough. Even though my mother often told me during and after the divorce that it was not my fault, I was getting a different message from my grandparents, my mother's parents. My mother and I now lived with them, and I was in their house six out of seven days of the week. It was a sin, according to the Catholic Church, that my mother was divorced, and the church I had been going to all my life now excommunicated us for this sin. My mother and I had to leave that church and go to a more "liberal" Catholic Church. Today I fully realize how much my grandmother's life revolved around the old church. When my mother and I were excommunicated, we became my grandmother's embarrassment. My grandparents often fought with my mother, and although I was not supposed to, I heard them. I knew my mother very well, and I knew how badly my grandparents made her feel about the divorce and how she was living. Somehow she wasn't a good daughter now that she was divorced and had brought her kid back to their house. I was somehow not good either. If my mother was bad for being divorced, then I must be bad, too, because my mother and I were both divorced from my dad. I was already beginning to feel that I had something to be ashamed of. I began to think that if I could hide or suppress the fact that I was divorced, then maybe I would appear to be good. It took a few years for me to do something about feeling "bad" while wanting to appear "good," but eventually I reconciled this dichotomy and stopped seeing my father at all. I did not talk about him, I tried not to think about him, and I

wanted total disconnection from him so that I could survive and be good in my relationship with my grandparents.

Because I disconnected with my father, the main, male influence in my life was my grandfather, my mother's father. As I was growing up, I went to public schools where there was a mix of children from many class and racial backgrounds. I was very passionate, emotional, and outraged at any injustices I saw happen or that happened to me -- even at that young age I was very sensitive to racial and class-based issues. My mother was always very understanding and helpful in these situations as she had many experiences along different race and class lines in her job as a Head Start Teacher. However, my grandfather always, without fail, would wave his hands at me in dismissal, even tell me that those things were none of my business because I was a white woman, and say that no one could talk to me about anything because I was too emotional about everything. He would tell me I had to learn to talk calmly and to be objective if I wanted to be taken seriously. I struggled for a long time wondering if I should "stay out of things that didn't involve me," but also feeling that *those things* did affect me. I grew up wondering: if I felt passion and emotion about something, then was that issue not to be taken seriously? I could not talk about my parent's divorce, my sense of loneliness, or anything about myself without being emotional; therefore, I grew up with my grandfather's voice in my head telling me I was not someone to take seriously. I grew up thinking that my feelings must not be worth talking about. And I grew up wondering how it was that feelings had no place in racial and class-based issues. How could I not feel outrage when my best friend who was a mulatto was called "oreo" or

"chocolate milk" by other children in the playground? How could I be objective and unemotional about that?

And so I began to write and read as a form of expression for my outrage, passion, disappointment, sadness, as well as for the happiness and triumphs. I wrote so that I could say what I wanted when I wanted without the direct judgment of my grandfather. I wrote in private so I could avoid any possible judgment from anyone. I had to write disconnected from other people so there was no threat of my writing being suppressed as my speaking was suppressed. I read in the hope of finding worlds that I liked being in, worlds I could go to in my imagination, where I was not worthless, where I was taken seriously, where I found other people like me. I read in the hope of connecting with someone who had emotions AND was serious. I did this privately because I had such a passion for writing and reading. I was sure that if I was emotional about these things, then my writing and reading must not be something people would take seriously. These were disconnections that happened for me on the level of language, but I also expressed disconnections through my body.

These disconnections through my body were directly tied in with language and the "Beauty Myth" some mothers and grandmothers had grown up with and were imposing upon me and my junior high school friends. I had one friend whose mother would tell her she was getting too fat around her hips, and then in the same breath, her mother would try to make her eat more of the dinner she worked so hard to cook. My friend also knew that I had encountered similar schizophrenic situations with my grandmother, so my friend taught me her "trick." She would eat plenty at the table so as not to offend her mother, and then she would go into the bathroom after

dinner and purge so she could avoid the critical "fat" comments. The adults in our lives wanted us to eat and be healthy like the television milk and beef commercials told us, but those adults were also women who knew first hand that a woman gets looked at before she gets listened to. I have continued to wrestle with bulimia and compulsive eating behaviors ever since seventh grade.

Throughout high school and my undergraduate years, I have struggled with my body and my language, bulimia/compulsive eating and poetry. Let me try to explain the circular logic that I was living in and trying to break free from. As I experienced positive reactions and encouragement about my writing from teachers, students, and other writers, my eating disorder peaked. My grandfather told me that if I was emotional and passionate about something, then that something could not be serious, could not be considered as a real job, could not lead to success. I did not know how to take my own writing seriously or how to say, "I am a writer," or how to be happy about my successes. If I let myself learn how to say, "I am a writer, and I am successful at it," then I would be proving my grandfather wrong. I would be proving that the one male influence who had been around for my entire life was wrong. So I created a way for him to be right by equating success with my body weight.

With the help of countless cultural paradigms that tell us Beauty Equals Success (i.e., a woman gets looked at before she is listened to), I found a way to be a writer and still prove to myself that I was not good enough, just as I was never good enough for my grandfather. When I have the most success in writing, I would force myself to "fail" in Beauty, indulging in the compulsive patterns that lead to weight gain. If I was finding achievement in my passions, I would abuse my body and food intake so that I would become fat. I

would chop off my hair and dye it awful colors so I would be ugly. In this way, I set myself up so that I could never take myself seriously by my grandfather's or by societal standards. I always found a way to let someone else's standards condemn me. I was always letting someone else undermine my Self, my decisions, my confidence. I would disconnect with my body whenever I found connection through my language.

When I entered recovery for bulimia/compulsive eating, I consciously discovered that disconnection and connection do not have to be pitted against one another. I began to realize the subtle or not so subtle relation between disconnection and connection in my life. I consciously began to give my connections as much weight, importance, and serious consideration as I had always given to the disconnections. I began to consciously appreciate that the disconnection with my speaking voice created my written voice. I stopped resenting the fact that I could not make verbal connections as I grew up, and I started appreciating all the written connections that helped me become who I am.

Connections

I made one of my first connections in fourth grade when I found Eleanor Roosevelt. I read many books about her and as many of her writings as I could find. I found it amazing and incredibly familiar that she was a passionate woman who was powerful, and yet, without fail, the biographer was sure to let the reader know that Eleanor was not a "beautiful" woman. In fact, in Rachel Toor's biography of Eleanor, an entire chapter, "A Girl Named Granny," is devoted to Eleanor's looks and how that affected her life. As a child, I internalized this beauty vs. power dichotomy on the level of language and on the level of the body. This woman was passionate, powerful, and taken very seriously. This woman was everything my grandfather said I could not be. This was one early connection that helped me find a powerful and emotional woman that I could identify with and look up to. Unfortunately, at the same time, this example was helping me to internalize the "Beauty Myth" and to believe that any power I gained could be discounted through the standards of Beauty.

Reading Naomi Wolf's book, The Beauty Myth, helped me to identify and consciously connect with this internalization. Wolf suggests that through culture, religion, and politics we have created a dangerous ideal of beauty that we impose upon our children. In simplistic terms, Wolf shows that when this ideal includes only very thin, rather tall, usually white models of beauty, the ideal becomes dangerous because there are not many women who fit that model. Hence, individuals will internalize the ideal and constantly set themselves against that ideal concluding that they are not "beautiful." Eleanor Roosevelt and every other woman I know had

the help of cultural paradigms of beauty to undermine their confidence in their own passions and power.

For me, personally, this myth was internalized and manifested itself in the form of my bulimia and compulsive eating patterns. As I said before, when I succeeded in writing, I followed compulsive eating patterns and "failed" in Beauty; therefore, any power I might have gained through my writing was discounted. With the power of my writing negated in this manner, I would then move toward bulimic habits, purging my way to thinness and Beauty. While on this purging path, I believed I would find power in the attainment of the "Beauty Myth." What I did not consciously realize until I read Wolfe's book was that "success" in Beauty still discounted the power of my writing. "Success" in Beauty meant I really was being looked at instead of listened to. After consciously making these connections, I tried to figure out how I had internalized the "Beauty Myth" before the full-blown bulimic and compulsive eating patterns developed.

When I look at my journals from around the time that I was beginning to read about Roosevelt, I can see the start of a pattern involving food and how I felt about myself. I would write about my feelings, but I always wrote two or three other things first. I would report what I ate, how much exercise I did, and then conclude with some sort of judgment. For example, on May 4, 1980, when I was nine years old, I wrote, "I walked 15 blocks today. Felt good, too. Tomorrow I am going to ask the teacher for something special." Even at nine years old, I was worthy of "something special" only when I was successful at regulating my body through exercise. It didn't matter what I said or what my grades were. I was "something special" only when I was successful at regulating the way I looked. And this pattern continued throughout my life until it became the

full blown eating disorder that created the connections and disconnections I discussed previously. Even in fourth grade, I was internalizing the "Beauty Myth." But I found that I was doing other things in fourth grade, too.

By re-reading my journals, I also discovered that through my reading, my language, I was making other more positive connections. One early connection helped me to find my passion for poetry. When I was about nine years old, I began reading Shel Silverstein's books, Where the Sidewalk Ends and A Light in the Attic. With his sense of humor and his incredible sketches in these books, I began to hear a child's voice in his poetry. I began to realize how faithful this adult was in his writing to the child's point of view. To me, Silverstein's poems were my poems, my voice, my drawings. For instance, in A Light in the Attic, there were two poems I identified with strongly. The first is called "Union For Children's Rights" and is a drawing of children holding picket signs with the words of the poem on the signs. This piece showed me silent children making a lot of noise with their signs. I wanted to hold a sign, and so I kept my journal with me at all times. I wasn't able to hold it out for everyone to read yet, but I could hold on to it for strength. The other piece is called "Skin Stealer" and is about a thief who steals people's skins after they take them off and go to bed. The lines that always intrigued me the most were, "Now wearing [my skin]/He runs through the street...Doin' things and sayin' things/I'd never do or say." For me, I think this was an introduction to the many selves we have within our one skin. I recognized that the child who could not speak her thoughts in my grandfather's house was the same child who could speak her mind in her writing. Shel Silverstein showed me that my writing could speak my mind in a specific form, poetry.

When I was in my early teens I found another poet with whom I felt a kinship. This was Carl Sandburg. My aunt had sent me a copy of his book, Harvest Poems 1910 - 1960. This was my first real sense of history, a sense that there were writers who were emotional and taken seriously throughout time. I identified most with a poem Sandburg wrote called, "Little Girl, Be Careful What You Say." Sandburg wrote that words are "finer than spider-webs in the moon/...stronger than rocks or steel/...soft as the music of hummingbird wings./So, little girl, when you speak greetings,/when you tell jokes, make wishes or prayers,/be careful, be careless, be careful,/be what you wish to be." I was sure that Sandburg had written this for me, sure that he had heard my grandfather's dismissals of me, sure that he was trying to tell me that there was power in my words -- even if those words were spoken only on the page. At that point in my life, my journal pages held my jokes, wishes, and prayers, and now Sandburg was telling me that my words on the page were powerful enough to let me be whatever I wished to be. This poem has stuck with me, and in fact, when we had to memorize and recite our favorite poem in my first college poetry workshop, I chose "Little Girl, Be Careful What You Say." And when we had to write an imitation poem in that same workshop, I wrote "Little Girl, Be Careful When You Fuck." I have included my imitation in the SELVES section of this book.

The next writer who gave me a sense of power about my writing was Anais Nin. In my later teen years, I began reading her journals upon the suggestion of an erotic reading list compiled for Cosmopolitan. What I found in Nin's journals was indeed erotic, but also incredibly empowering for me. First of all, I was reading someone's journals. Her journals were published pieces of art. I had

been keeping journals for myself for years, but it was not until I read Nin's work that I even conceived of my work as something open to the possibility of publishing. Granted, Nin's work gained credibility from the company she kept with Henry Miller and Otto Rank, but I had a whole life in front of me to find credible company, too.

The second level of identification with Nin came for me when I read about her reasons for keeping the journal at all. She started her journal at a young age when her mother and father separated. She had begun the journal as a letter to her father when she was unable to speak to him. She had created a voice for herself when the circumstances of divorce left her unable to speak to her father, and then went on to make that voice a published, widely-read work of art. I had created my journals out of an inability to speak after my mother and father divorced. In a sense, this was one of the first and only "divorce books" I found in a time when children's books and Mister Rogers' Neighborhood had not yet fully explored the area of divorce and its impact on children.

Then something extraordinary happened during my senior year of high school. I enrolled in an Advanced Placement English class with a man named Skip Alcibiade. We all called him Mr. Alcid. His fierce reputation preceded him, and he was the one English teacher you did not want to have. But I entered his class with a different feeling than the sentiments of the crowd. I did not know Alcid personally until the AP class, but this was the faculty member who supervised the school's literary publication Puckety Ripples. And my poems (as unrefined as they were then) were published in Puckety Ripples three years in a row. This man had already

encouraged my writing, and I was looking for more inspiration and courage as I entered his class.

One of his most important projects for that year was to have us keep a journal which we periodically turned in to him. I had a choice at this point to either keep my school journal and my personal journal separate or to combine them and trust Alcid with my most private life. I made the intimate choice at that point and wrote my journal for Alcid's class in an honest and frank manner. And an amazing thing happened. Alcid did not judge me. He was understanding and compassionate at crucial points during that year. And we became friends. I think the most valuable thing he gave me were the following words: *Sometimes what is normal is the most difficult to define.* He helped me realize that "normal" and "abnormal" are subjective terms that can be defined differently by different people with different experiences. Even if I was emotional and passionate, Alcid always took me seriously. He never dismissed me with a wave of his hand. And he encouraged me to be serious about my writing as I went on to college.

It took me a few years to figure out what direction I wanted to take for my college education, and I attended several institutes of higher education before I found Carnegie Mellon University. At Carnegie Mellon, I was not only writing, but also taking Literary and Cultural Studies as a major. In the core class for this major, I encountered Professor Keya Ganguly. She gave an incredible lecture about investigating the history of accepted beliefs, movements, languages. In one of her lectures she told us that objectivity is an ideology in crisis. You can imagine how I latched on to the phrase, "objectivity is an ideology in crisis," since objectivity was the ideology my grandfather had preached to me for as long as I could

remember. I suppose I was less interested in proving that objectivity was in crisis and more consumed with trying to accept that subjectivity was to be taken seriously. I was discovering for the first time that the line between objectivity and subjectivity was a very, very fine one. I became consumed with the idea that no one comes to any experience tabula rosa (a blank slate). Consumed with the realization that my grandfather's opinions about objectivity were subjective and formed out of his experiences. Consumed with the realization that my ideas, passions, opinions are based on my experiences, based on what was written on my slate. Throughout my LCS experience with Keya Ganguly, Kris Straub, and Lois Fowler, I came to realize that my experiences might be different from my grandfather's, but certainly not less valid.

My experience in CMU's Creative Writing program also helped me to find inspiration for my writing. With the help of Professors (and poets) John Repp and Jim Daniels, I found my voice and refined it through my poetry. From their encouragement and example, I learned that being a writer is a very serious (as well as fun and rewarding) business. Upon Jim's suggestion I have read and found mentors in writers such as Sharon Olds, Lucille Clifton, and Joy Harjo. I have found pride in my work and the ability to share that work in workshops, readings, and in publication.

Another most important CMU experience came for me through the Student Counseling Center. With the help of Dr. Brenda Freeman, I have gone on an archeological dig through my conscious and unconscious mind. She helped me to remember and fully appreciate all of the connections and disconnections you have just read about and more. I have begun to uncover the layers of myself that make up the many aspects of my personality and writing. In an attempt to

integrate these aspects (my body and my language) and to accept my success and beauty AS IS without conforming to society or family standards, I have created the voices you will hear as you read **ALTER EGOS.**

Friends

The Empress of the Tarot

The Magician has turned up
as your partner
in the house of desire.

honey, he'll let you ride
on the tails of the comets, but
he is not practical,
clock time means nothing
to him.

so when you're tossing
and turning because he hasn't
popped in on time,
call me and I'll use rose oil
to wash the clutter out
of your life.

after that, sweetheart,
you will be satisfied
for the rest of the night
by the magic of your own hand.

Busstop Girl

She had her arms around
the neck of the parking meter
her head leaning on
its shoulder. The wind blew
and her hair swayed
to Sinatra's version
of *Imagination*
that only she could hear.

She woke up from her dream
as the bus came toward her,
and instead of lingering
with the parking meter
who offered her lots
of his time,
she climbed into
the open arms of the bus.

Friends

I was an only
child. When the sun
came out, I always
had my shadow.

I named my shadow "Friendly"
and I blamed her
for writing on the walls
with purple crayon and
for eating the orange flavored
Flinstone vitamins.

Other imaginary friends
ate watermelon
on the front stoop or
were my audience as I sang
Madonna songs.

Then Monica came
along. Friendly and I
nicknamed her Moonie.
She's the one
real friend
who will always sit with us
watching MTV and drinking
Five Alive juice out of the carton.

Dear Santa,

I wanted lots of presents, but mommy says we're getting married again for Christmas this year. mommy says this year we're marrying a muslim, she doesn't have time to shop for presents. He's nice, but he wears this cloth around his head, and mommy says all of them do that. So i was just wondering if you might have time to fill my stocking with some cloth and a book that shows me how to wrap my head like that? i don't want to look funny when we get to his house.

Thank you and merry Christmas.

The Essence of Smell

I'm about to breeze by
when I stop to pet his dog.

He asks what fragrance I'm wearing,
and I answer, "Obsession."

"Mmmmm, you smell so good," he tells me,
and I reply, "I'm glad I don't smell like
cigarettes."

He tells me that
the first man he ever fell in love with
wore Obsession.

As I walk away, his dog chokes
on her collar
chasing the ghost of first love.

Our 24 hour convenience store

I wake
at 5:30 every morning
and run till 3.

She wakes
at 3pm and runs until 2am.

Sometimes she wakes me
so she's not alone in this house
during the graveyard shift
and we talk about men
or the episode she missed
of "Saturday Nite Live"
or about the table of 12 old ladies
she spent all night waiting on --
only to have them stiff her.

The two of us meet up
at least once a day
for a hot cup of sanity
or a euphoria-filled doughnut
under the neon sign
in our livingroom that flashes -
OPEN OPEN OPEN.

Alliteration

I ask,

“What is alliteration?”

South Side Siggy answers,

“Kara kisses cab drivers.”

Lovers

Lipstick

I watch his lips
as he speaks to me
in the car on the way
to his home where I
babysit his children.

I walk in the door
and children tumble
off the stairs as he climbs
to the top of his bookcase,
"Here, you should read
M.F.K. Fisher and Saroyan."

I sit at the kitchen table
reading the last pages
of Saroyan and wondering
if she's watching
his lips move when he says,
"I'm going to the office
after I take the sitter
home."

Does she know
that he actually comes
to tuck me in tighter,
to take care of
his wounded sparrow,
his young woman living
alone?

But she is not
paying attention, she is
a mother first, already
half-way up the stairs, gone
to tuck her children in.

At my house he asks
with strawberry shaded lips
why I wiggle when he
gets close to me, and as I crawl
onto his lap I tell him
it's because his wife's lipstick
is such a good color for me.

day and night

He told me
the truth, told me
about the other woman,
the 19 year old who was
fucking him whenever he
wanted, who kept her mouth
shut, who wanted to be
his mistress, who liked being
the one who knew everything,
the one who wasn't lied to like
the wife who was lied to.

The anger welled up
in my fingertips, I reached for
the ashtray, tried to throw it as near
to his head as I could, even though
we had agreed to try
honest, tears, glue
for the broken glass.

The tears welled up
in each of us as the broken pieces
sliced our fingertips. We bled together,
and I bled because I knew his truth,
her truth, I KNEW
because I'd been there, I'd been
the mistress, spread
my legs whenever he could
get away, said nothing
when family emergencies came
first, had known loneliness
when he buckled his belt
at 4am, and I'd even been
convinced
that his wife was a fool.

Now I was the fool who had
let him get away, who had
begun to believe
that what I had between my legs
was no longer good enough,
who had spent lonely evenings
whimpering "please..."

And now he and I sit
on the edge of the bathtub
rubbing raw wounds
with peroxide, gluing
the pieces together
with bandaids.

while the mistress paraded in black lace keeping
Victoria's Secret in business whimpering
only after he fucked her raw.

When you confess about your mistress,

the glass slips out of my hand
as my heart slips from my chest
shattering on the linoleum.

6 months between visits

Six month ago you moved
out of state, i've sent you
photo after photo
picture postcard after postcard
and you

hung every photo, every card
on an archway between
the livingroom and kitchen
and i was

with you.

After six months, you
open the front door
for me and i walk into
the archway and i am
with you, looking

at all the photos and cards,
my eyes pass face after face,
familiar words picked
and sent to you, all of them
from me-- except *this* one

the one that says:
i misses your kisses
the one that has all my
attention, the one that calls me
like a dart board

it would be
a perfect throw, bullseye
right in the middle
of the heart over 'i' in *kisses*,
right in the middle of
the other woman.

my shades of green.

We decide to go on
with our lives,
we won't put
our lives on hold,
we don't know
if we'll ever live
in the same city again.

When I see your new
home, your new life, the life
you have not
put on hold -- I find:

a green m&m in the couch
her razor in your shower
her diet soda in the fridge
her "love" card hung
on the wall next to the photo
of Alaskan puffins i sent you.

I want to be happy for you, i ask
for details, you tell me she is:

uneducated
for sex only
a mean drunk
from an abusive background
but that you'd never hit her
and finally she is

disposable like her razor
in your shower

Check books out here ^

A bright sunny
evening, the band plays
jazz in the street, the grills roast
corn still in its husk, my eyes focus
watery from the glare off the drum.

I see him and walk by, too scared
to say a word, but he comes
to me, even hugs me as his wife comes up
right behind, and I don't remember
what we said, can't recall
her name, but she *knew*
and still said, "Stop by sometime."

Are they swingers or can I
have him to myself for a while -
like a library book?

Relationships

The female
Praying Mantis
fucks
her mate, tears off
his head, then eats
what's left of him.

She doesn't ever wonder why
he won't spend the night.

He didn't bother
to spend the night.

Over breakfast,
I keep thinking
that the coffee is bitter
and so am I.

But after rinsing
with Cool Mint Listerine
I am

absolved.

pms warning signs

He stops
in the doorway of the kitchen
when he sees I'm eating
Crunch Berries with Edensoy.

He answers NO
when I meet him at lunch
and offer him some
Peanut M&M's or a sip of Pepsi.

He orders take out
for himself after he finds
my empty carton of Ben n' Jerry's
and smells the lingering aroma of mocha java.

When I turn on Roseanne
and tear out the Salt 'n Vinegar potato chips,
he runs for cover.

There's a chiropractor in my bedroom.

He got his D.C. and said
*No more adjustments
on the bedroom floor.*

He found work
in a clinic and on my
first visit there, he asked for
my medical history,
then scribbled away
before I said a word
because he already knew
the details: he caught me
when I fell down
the spiral staircase,
held my hand after I
wrecked into a pole
on Penn Avenue,
and massaged my head
when the migraines came.

This morning he sat on the edge
of the bed as I told him
I'm afraid of doctors' offices,
he tried to calm my fears
as he zipped my dress,
and his words continued to soothe
in the examination room
as he unzipped and handed me
that silly robe that ripped
like wrapping paper when he
opened it to feel my tail bone
with cold, but familiar fingers.

When he turned around
to write down the results
of his probing, I pinched
his butt, and my fears dissolved
when I heard the doctor's
most intimate giggle.

checkmate

i was fifteen
you took me to bed
and i blushed when
you whispered, asking
if i'd like to play
bed checkers

For years, i blushed
every time you stood
behind me pulling
my attention, my body
my ear close to you

you knew exactly how to
fuck me

but the seven year itch
set in, you were determined
to scratch, back
and forth, scraping
skin till you tired,
asleep before the blood
could rush to my cheeks

sleeping next to you
after two years of
the itch, i learned how to
heal myself, how to
itch myself to sleep, and

so i am surprised
when i hear you

whisper through that lovely space
between your front teeth to ask
if i'll join you for a game
of bed checkers,

when you pull
me so close, no air
between my back
and your chest,

when you tell
me how much you love
to see my lips red
blood rushed to them.

Selves

LITTLE GIRL, BE CAREFUL WHEN YOU FUCK

--an imitation of Carl Sandburg's poem,
Little Girl, Be Careful What You Say,
from "Complete Poems (1950)," Harvest Poems

Little girl, be careful when you fuck
when you have sex with men, men--
for men are made of lies
and lies, child, are made of cruelty--
and cruelty is so painful--pain is the maker of bruises--
pain scalds like boiling water,
burns like lit cigarettes,
aches like broken ribs:
 and men are deceitful, too,
 more deceitful than your older brother
more than a magic man,
more than your local politician,
and unashamed, too,
like a child free from his diaper,
 So, little girl, when you fuck,
when you let him have his way, making love or hate,
 be aware, be hurt, be aware,
 be the woman you have to be.

As a Woman

I must be "equally proficient at LIFE and DEATH -- given these poles, I must suspend my SELF between the two like the wide-winged LEDA of Sex that I was built to be and give BIRTH to the Half-Gods of my desire."

Born as a female, "intuitosity" became Scheherezade's choice weapon. But Fred Rogers is sure to save her as he is the second coming of Christ. Yet he is simply the man who comforted her when she was brought to repent. Just like Scheherezade in the Vatican, I feel out of place.

I arrive with enough confidence to seduce the Pope and enough humility to admit I actually caught him SNOOFIN a cute little ass. I still believe it was the Bible that looked me straight in the eye and said, "Sweetheart, Commitment is married to Joy." So I lost 30 pounds, am down to a size 9, and I dress like a butch...(feminist...humanist)...

Even the golden band of marriage strangles me like a turtleneck that's two sizes too small. So I ask you: If St. Valentine was really beheaded, then why do we give chocolate to celebrate his decapitation?

Somewhere between Kitschmania and Sexual ambiguity of little girlishness, the tour bus stops in the Biblical city, Sodom. There is nothing like a blind night in Sodom when you can't recall smoking Camels with no filters or vomiting on his ex-girlfriend's shoes.

But these days, I am accused of possessing the GOLDEN FLEECE! And why am I accused? Because I happen to single out the lovely eyes of the blonde beauty who warns me that he is not prejudice -- he'll fuck anyone, anywhere, anytime (preferrably me, handcuffed, in the dark) -- AM I REALLY THE FIRST TO SAY NO?

And once again another professor's agenda of lesson plans and propositions leaves me with insomnia at 3:28am after 36 ounces of black coffee over ice with a twist of lemon. It could be the incense or the intoxicating smoke that leaves me weak in the knees and flat on my back.

Even my sexual liberation will cost you! A million bucks for one "trix" is not liberation. Instead it is simply a reflection of the inflation rate within the TRAFFIC IN WOMEN. Between this LIFE and DEATH, you can try to buy and sell me ...or you could simply have me for the cost of a few seedless grapes and a grasshopper with a broken leg.

The Reproof

As the wipers scrape
rain away, the radio dj says,
"rain turning to snow
after midnight," and I sort of
laugh, it's too warm for snow,
I'm too warm from vodka--

Out of no where
impact--my hips jar
against the seat belt
I scream, and

my eyes spin
the car is a pop bottle,
I wonder where it will stop, then

metal against metal
the pole and driver's side tango
for all to see,
people spill out, an auto man
hands me his card-- am I okay--

from the other car
the redhead screams,
You stupid bitch.

10 seconds & 18 minutes after 12

Getting x-rays
is scary,
but Doc says
don't worry
as he hands me
a lead apron, stands behind
a wall of glass, and says
pay no attention
to the clock on the wall
it 's been
stopped for as long as
I can remember.

A car passes

He is steering the car
with his left hand,
his right arm wrapped
around her, pulling her
close to him, to the middle
of the seat.

*when I was fifteen, Michael
drove a Grand Prix, he would
always hold me like that,
my seatbelt.*

Is she feeling lonely,
is she just coming
home, home from the hospital,
empty of their child? Is he
protecting her, is she all
he has left?

*in the first year with Michael, i felt
lovely and he brought me jade
and pearls from Nepal. Are jewels are all
I have left?*

His right arm wrapped
tightly around her, keeping her
next to him,
her seat belt.

*it will be 10 years this summer
for Michael and me, but my seat belt
doesn't fit anymore.*

A good child takes a side.

My father used to pour orange juice
over his cereal
when we ran out of milk. My mother
thought that was
disgusting. After their divorce, my father
wasn't around for breakfast, and I was
afraid to eat orange juice over cereal
in front of my mother.

After she left for work,
I constantly binged
on orange juice over cereal,
then purged.

So secretly, I ate
orange juice over cereal.
Secretly, I loved
my father.

Being bulimic means

trying to figure out
what it is to be
hungry (Is that what growling
in my stomach means?)

means having to learn
what it is to be
full (How can I do anything
with food in my stomach?)

Being bulimic
means choosing
fruit and oatmeal with honey
instead of chocolate chip pancakes
means eating
healthy foods you'll keep
down, instead of ice cream you'll
bring up.

Being bulimic
means be aware
of signs that say
"Refreshments served!"

means if I start
with one chip, one cookie,
the desire for ice cream will follow
the desire to bring it up will follow
what is that growl in my
stomach, what does it mean
to be hungry, what does it mean
to be full, what does that sign
say, in my head it says
beware:
"Refreshments served!"

If I could do it all again

I'd spend more time wondering,
fucking, hurting, healing

I'd spend more time laughing,
listening, singing, planting

I'd spend more time
baking
pot brownies--

I'd spend more time
with words that end in -ing.

They were both named Tony

I stood in the doorway
ripping the screen
watching my father drive away
after kissing me good-bye--
twenty years later
I'm waiting in the doorway
of the Conservatory
to meet my father for lunch.

He fogs up the windows
of the Conservatory
with his words about being
a Fundamentalist Christian,
devoted to the white, male figure-head, God,
and I am angry
because I am the Italian, female child
who never had one ounce of his devotion.

Back at the office
a man finishes chinese food
while sitting at the head
of a long conference table
looking like the *imaginary* father
who sat at the head of the table
during holidays after
my parents were divorced.
He sets his chopsticks aside
and asks if I'll go out with him.

That night we sit in the middle
of a wide-open field
no windows to catch
the breath of our words,
no way for me to catch my breath
as I quietly whisper, "Oh, God,"
when his lips drop
from my ear to my neck,
when his hands drop
from my waist to my thighs.

He kisses me good-night,
and I stand by the door
watching him drive away--
as fear molds my hands into claws
so I can rip the screen apart
just like I did, twenty years ago.

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