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WHAT LITTLE GIRLS ARE MADE OF

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

KAITLYN WALL

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ABSTRACT

This collection of poems discusses and illustrates the experiences of young women, with a particular focus on female relationships.

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For the girls of 402, then and now,

And for my mom

“She feels like a child in a fairy tale. In her mother’s stories— she had a mother once— there was a woodsman who was supposed to take a girl’s heart back to an evil queen, but he couldn’t force himself to do it. Another sliced open a wolf to save the people it had eaten. The woodsmen were strong and good. But they left girls in the woods sometimes, girls who then had to fend for themselves.”

--Julianna Baggott, Fuse

I.

Emergency Contact

For Lauren

Paramedics are pointy and too tall for her bedroom. They are imposing; they carry oversized needles they aren't afraid to use. They swaddle her in plastic wrap and pack her into an ambulance. An hour ago she called to say she needed my help. She falls asleep on the way to the hospital and doesn't see the river lit like fireflies when the ambulance's lights bounce off the water.

In the waiting room, my lover and I drink hours-old coffee, chewing imprints into the Styrofoam lip. The TV sells a bullet-shaped blender—we watch the colors spin into froth until the nurse comes to get us. In the back, Lauren shudders between the bed rails; her head twitches to the left. I snap at the nurse three times to change her IV because the needle digs into her hand every time the blood pressure cuff swells. We cross our legs between chairs and take turns reading from Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss* while she sleeps and wakes and shakes, small beneath the coarse sheets.

You think this is about how I saved her life, but it's not. About how I took too many Tylenol myself a decade before, so I knew how she felt, I remembered, but it's not. Before she called that night I wanted to build her a nest up high in the branches so she couldn't climb down. After she called I drove across campus and held her hair from her face while she vomited up the kind of wine we only drank in college. I called the people I knew would call the ambulance. The paramedics belted her onto a gurney and wheeled her down the hallway. When she was out of sight, I sat down on the cold floor and screamed like a child.

This is about wanting someone else's hurt to make you feel essential. About how for weeks she'd been say thing that living and dying were the same as doing laundry as eating breakfast as showering, and I didn't tell anyone because I thought she needed me not to. This is about how I knew better.

What Little Girls Are Made Of

Part 1

Once upon a time, four girls shared a house by a river. They made believe they were sisters—they shared gossamer wings and sat out on rooftops while the sun bleached the sky. Over time, they knit into each other like vines, gnarled as a crone's hands. Their house held them like paper dolls. There were stairs like springs and reinforced windowpanes, and they spent hours in the rain saying i love you to the sidewalk.

Each was a girl from the stories: raven-haired, white-as-snow. N was the oldest. She had scabs on her knuckles where they caught on her teeth when she pulled them out of her mouth. Her hair, when it curled around her face, was the thickest thing about her. Next was B—her father shot himself in the driver’s seat of a Honda Civic when she was sixteen. She carried the date of his death around in her fist, scratching her palm on its edges. K rarely slept alone; she slipped herself beneath a curtain of bodies the other girls never got to see. She drank too much but not as much as L. L was the youngest—she toddled between their rooms. In the winter she became cold enough to hold hands over the stove’s burners, imagining the smell of burnt skin. They didn’t all live in the house but the house was where they lived. They left the windows open year round, their white curtains strangling in the wind.

There were mornings, still and frosted as a windowpane. The girls sat on the floor and ate scrambled eggs from small circular plates. In the afternoon they took naps together, nesting inside each other like teacups. It was only the nights that forbade them, keeping them inside the house as though the ground outside was crusted with glass.

Once L spent the night inside the house's fireplace. She pressed her cheek against the brick and shrieked like a cat. She pawed at the mortar until her fingernails broke. The girls watched until she quieted, then followed her upstairs and into her bedroom. Her hands were stained with soot—she teetered in the stairwell, leaving grey handprints on the wall. It was months before anyone wiped them off.

A yew tree grew in their backyard. It filled the house with floating, slipping moonlit dresses over the girls' heads. They danced in the hallways all night, shredding their shoes, shuddering when they ran into each other, the shock of ice against ice. Only the house witnessed their games. They held their faces to the windows, watching as the tree's branches lit up like candles.

L held the bottle to her chest like a heartbeat. N reached out her hand, opening and closing her fist. L kissed the glass opening, upending the bottle against her lips. She paused to swallow twice in the middle before handing it over.

N bent her head and shredded her fingernails onto the carpet. She was papered like a mouse's ear, her mouth always smelling like vomit or smoke. Like someone had needed to sketch weakness for an art class—that was the curve of her wrist, her collarbones knitting below her throat. Over time, wings began to grow from her back. You could count the bones in her spine without touching her. You could break her arm as easily as a stick of chalk.

N and L were the closest. Sometimes they disappeared together, coming back with their fingers entwined. The other girls granted their wishes—they ignored N's red-rimmed eyes and L's tangled hair. N and L pushed their narrow beds together and slept in the space between the mattresses. They sat up alone, guarding the house like sentries, wondering what it would be like to sleep for a century.

One afternoon, the girls ran off to the river. Bathing-suited and sunburning, they submerged and came up, shaking out their hair. They pressed white fingerprints into each other's skin. It was still early, before the winter broke open, before the wife, before the cracks were visible on every girl's skin. Even N glowed in the sunlight. They made each other promises that day. They laid down on the ground and held hands, their outstretched arms forming a star. They pricked their palms and pressed them together, bleeding into each other like watercolors.

After N left for the hospital, L became what they spun themselves around. She left red splatters of punch on the walls and kicked a hole in the bathroom door. N had always hated the other girls' attention—she'd been shrinking and growing and shrinking again for ten years before the girls met. But L had never been watched like this. She'd been high for all of high school, stealing pills from her sick father, but her oversized eyes went unnoticed. She must have loved it, how steady her sisters were, how constant, and she must have hated that she loved it.

It was rare for any of the girls to be alone. L and K were sometimes indistinguishable—they drank from the same bottles and their voices were the same pitch. They found the forest together, wandered in among the trees and stayed lost for days. B and N sat up all night on the porch swing until the dew dusted their skin. When L and K returned they had scratches on their arms and birds in their hands. B took them inside and brushed the leaves from their hair. The youngest girls were the most careless—they broke plates on the kitchen floor. They lit their curtains on fire.

B wasn't exactly like the rest of them. She managed things the other girls couldn't imagine managing. She spent entire weekends sober. She folded sheets of paper into tiny boxes for the youngest girls to play with. This kept them quiet for hours. She followed the ambulance the night N went to the hospital, cringing at the sirens. In the emergency room, she whispered to the nurses while they scurried around, trying to show the girl in the bed how not to die. A girl built of bone. B carried N to the car like a basket of flowers. N slept in the backseat, the moonlight reflecting off her pale face.

They sat up late, reciting bedtime stories for one another. Thistles blind Rapunzel's prince when he falls from the witch's tower. The bite of apple lodges in Snow White's throat; she wakes when the prince's kiss dislodges it. B braided K's hair while she sat against the bed, her eyes still. They never knew how long it had been since K slept. They gave her pills to push her under but she taped her eyelashes to her forehead and lined her bed with florescent lamps. Not unlike L, she longed for warmth. During the coldest months, she'd walk to the self-serve tanning salon at the end of the street and put quarters into the machine until her skin was taught and pink. Later, L would peel the petals of skin from K's shoulders, leaving them in small piles on the carpet for the other girls to wander around.

Part 2

One day, some time before wings took her far away from her sisters, N fell in love with a man who was married to a woman the girls all knew. He drove past the house at night, his headlights flashing through the windows, and N would go downstairs and watch from the back porch. He left roses on her quilt. None of the other girls knew about the man. This how N began to separate from the other girls, and thus, this is how she managed to leave.

N's love for the man was, and then it wasn't. A year passed in between but the time didn't matter, because the sisters weren't privy to it. What mattered was what happened after N told the wife. The husband left town. The wife sought out a new apartment in which to begin her coming apart. N went back to her sisters and let them enfold her, all the while using her fingers against the back of her throat to force what was left of him out of her mouth. The other girls watched while N faded, and were concerned of course, but as she contained less and less she became increasingly absent, disappearing from her bedroom at night, coming back with bloodshot eyes and bleeding fingers.

The town had curved glass barriers; it contained all but the husband. There were two main streets, three blocks of houses to the river's edge. The girls started seeing the wife around, floating between doorways like a terrible angel. She was taut as a violin string, but her hair bled a darker auburn and her face stood out like snow. She shrank almost as fast as N. The wife was a jewelry box ballerina, spinning in slow circles. The girls all watched the wife; she became so careful and quiet she almost disappeared.

The affair was the catalyst. The girls had been close before, but it was nothing like it would become. The aftermath included the husband appearing in places she did not belong, telling N he loved her, telling N she was a whore. Thus the girls grew into a family, and like all families they kept each other's secrets. Perhaps if it had not been for the husband, there would have been no house to share, only separate bedrooms with locked doors. But such considerations are irrelevant. N fell in love with the husband and ruined the marriage of a woman she cared for. The husband became a threat, and thus the girls felt protective, and they flew toward N like bees, eager to surround her.

N knew the wife better than the other girls. The two wrote letters to each other in their own language. They shared dresses and pine tables in the coffee shop where N worked, their pretty heads bent over the shining surface. For a year they shared a man and the wife never knew, until she did. After that, she stopped coming to the coffee shop, but sometimes she would walk past on the sidewalk and N would see her hair in the window before she went to throw up in the bathroom.

N and the wife held mirrors to each other's faces. Both were thin and etched like lace—they had the same inclinations: they chewed squares of cake and sipped from bottles that made them shrink. Perhaps this is why the husband haunted them both. They'd wake separately in the night, remembering his mouth suctioned to their necks like a fish. Whenever the wife tried to swallow, blossoms would spill from her mouth and splash against the tile floor. N wrote the wife's name over and over on her forearms, pining for what she had destroyed.

This is what she does not tell her sisters:

1.

It did not matter to me that he was a terrible man. It was not what I did but what I allowed him to do: slip my dress from my shoulders, take each part of my body in his mouth. I never thought of her that night, never considered her pain—I had already divorced them in my mind. I should say I was innocent until that night, unaware of his wanting; I have said so, in fact, but this is a lie. Men have wanted me since I was very young. I am familiar with their attention—familiar, but not immune. She was the things I wanted to be—still, poised, serious and kind. I could say I wanted to be close to her, but that is not true either—I wanted to *be* her. Very rarely did I understand the connection between what he and I were doing and the pain that would consume her. Very rarely did I feel guilty. He was more aware of how his fucking me would affect her, even unsettlingly aware. He taunted her with it. He would tell me to come over and we would have sex in their house—not just in their bed, but in the shower where she washed her hair; on the kitchen counter with his head between my knees, my palm tight across my mouth. He'd pick me up for a quickie in his backseat and then go home to make dinner with her, his fingers still smelling of my cunt. Still, I managed to keep them separate in my mind. This is a mark of something in myself I do not understand.

2.

Regret is a useless emotion. It lives in you and does not process, does not dissipate—it settles in, it leaves its skirt and panties by the door and lies with you in your bed.

3.

Regret was the house I occupied for over a year after the affair ended, regret and the need to apologize when I knew I could not. What I wanted most was to apologize—to say, “I’m sorry. I’ll make it up to you.” But how does one make up a marriage? Time is not origami; time is a spiral of glass that has already cooled. That he was a terrible man did not matter to me. That perhaps I had taken some of what she would have received, that year, that perhaps I had even provided her with some relief, did not matter to me. All that mattered was my regret, which was amorphous, which only occasionally contained the memory of her broken beauty, and less and less over time, until the particulars no longer mattered, the who and what no longer mattered, and all that was left was me and my need to wring my body in such a way that it apologized for me.

4.

He and I behaved the way people do when the nature of their relationship is illicit. One night, he pulled me from the bar where we were having dinner with his wife, and bent me over in the alleyway behind the building, and I'd been drinking, and in the middle I pressed my hands to the alley wall and vomited on the brick path, and he never paused the motion of his hips against mine.

5.

One weekend the three of us went to New York, he and I and his wife, for a writer's conference. In the afternoon we disappeared on the subway train while she was having lunch with friends, and emerged in another part of the city. We held hands and saw a movie and made out in the back of the theater, knowing that no one we knew would see us, and because it was all so ordinary, so boring and rote, it seemed to me the most exhilarated I had ever felt. Perhaps this is why what happened after happened; perhaps such brashness made him feel bolder. He told me to wait for him in the hotel room I was sharing with another girl, and once there he undressed me and pushed me onto the bed and forced his penis into my rectum and held his palm over my mouth until my lips bled. In the middle his phone rang and he pulled it from the pocket of the pants he hadn't bother to take off, and answered it, and I could hear his wife's voice on the phone while he confirmed their dinner plans. He hung up and went back to fucking me until he was through, and then he took pictures of me lying on the duvet, unable to stand. After that, he left, and I went into the bathroom and rinsed the blood from my mouth and thighs.

N was quiet in her hospital bed, her mouth weak from the sedative. Needles swung from her mouth like ribbons; they laced the bedrails. She was weeks from leaving the house and her sisters, though none of them knew. Her hands twitched toward each other beneath the sheets, as though longing to knit together.

When N was gone she was not there anymore. For a while the girls wore her dresses, the fabric tight over their breasts. Over time all the zippers broke, and they had no way to imitate N's presence. They hoped she'd come back different, that they'd hear the front door open and the house would run over with what had displaced her illness. But they heard from her less and less, and eventually they forgot even the stories that she told, and they stopped finding her long hairs in their bed sheets.

Among the other girls, there was some talk of escaping. Two of them sat up together and whispered of bedsheets tied to headboards and thrown out windows, of the careful shimmy to the ground. It didn't matter which two. They never did, of course. They were frightened of the forest and the wolves it contained.

The girls never saw N again, at least not together. Some time passed, and then she went to visit each of them separately; she met them in traffic-laden crosswalks and grabbed them around the waist, as though holding on could save her life. She was the same as she had been, and not the same. A woman's face marked her shoulder, holding a bird up as if to the sky. The letting go—like a healing, but not. A stand-in for healing. The other girls had learned. So much time had passed—after N left, the girls began to flush out into their own shapes, no longer a single shifting mass; their faces brightened, they split away from each other like duplicated cells. They grew up like trees and became distinct and curved. They had little to say to each other, after that. They kept their secrets to themselves. Only N was spared their cool ignorance; they took her in and let her sleep in their wider, more grown-up beds, and listened to her talk about spending the summer in each girl's city, about the heat slipping sweat down their legs. The other girls knew better, but they made believe anyway, for N's sake, for the sisters they no longer had, the versions of themselves they no longer knew.

Their earliest memories were of porch swings and rain showers. Even then they had begun to twist together, so tight and thick and needled.

It was years before they went back, climbed the house's front steps and found the door unlocked as usual. They wandered the empty kitchen, staircase, hallways lined with closed doors, the voices behind them high and clear. They didn't have to ask if that was what they sounded like. The house was as it had been, except there was no L cutting her palms on broken glass in the living room, no N pulling webs of her hair out of her head and leaving them to catch on the shower walls, no K morning-after puking in the downstairs bathroom. It was nothing like it had been. For years they'd been wondering what had happened there, during the two years when they guarded each other like sisters. They expected their shadows to stain the walls like smoke. But the house smelled of fresh paint and baking. Its rooms were quiet, even after midnight.

Part 3

The princess's companions mined jewels; everyday they returned to her, silent in an empty house except for the birds shrieking against the windows. Everyday her loneliness grew until it occupied all the spaces her body had left. She was enticed three times by the disguised queen: first by a silk ribbon, then a golden comb, so bright against her black-as-night hair. Then the apple, half-red and half-white, polished like a lozenge. It was her desire for beauty that admitted the queen each time, desire and innocence, not hunger for the apple or sympathy for the woman on her stoop. Then the deepest sleep, the glass coffin, the prince's mouth against her throat. The queen betrayed by her own reflection. The princess slept among the prisms, waiting for the tale of her beauty to absolve her of her own mistake.

The whole castle slept after the princess pricked her finger—a hundred years, and primroses grew over the castle’s façade. The vines held the castle closed; briars marched along their length like red ants. Princes and young men tried to cut their way to the doors and died tangled in the vines, their eyes plucked out by thorns. On the hundred and first day the vines gave, and the prince entered the castle and kissed the girl awake. The source of the spindle was unclear: an old woman in a locked tower sat spinning, and the princess found her way to the tower on her own, and didn’t know not to touch the needle.

The sisters told each other stories like these, about N, about the wife: that both could be healed by tears. That the wicked are punished and the innocent preserved, a princess in a locked tower. But N believed in a different story, the one where the girl falls through the mirror and finds herself in a world where everything is slightly enlarged. She believed in penance. She spent so much time on her knees, fingers in her throat, trying to rid herself of light.

Cinderella's stepsisters had their eyes pecked out by birds. Rapunzel was named for a plant her parents stole from a witch, who demanded the unborn daughter as penance. The witch locked her in a tower with no door or staircase and used her golden hair as a ladder, and the prince came, and made her his lover—this is the part they were familiar with. But Rapunzel, naïve as a heartbeat, revealed her pregnancy to the witch. The witch sent the girl away and pushed the prince from the tower. Thistles took his sight. How to hold these two stories in the same hand: the eyeless sisters, the blinded prince, the catalyst that is a beautiful girl.

II.

Revision

Last week I told a stranger I fucked all my best friends in college, but that's not true; I never fucked you—the night I dragged my fruit punch mouth down your torso and slipped my fingers inside you, I was slow, careful, and when you came you were quiet, but your body tried to fill in the hollow beneath your ribs—your hips rose, then your chest—your chest was flat like a tabletop; your chest was a place to rest a dictionary on. While you stilled I watched the sweat sheen across your skin and thought of that girl who broke her neck on the staircase out back because she wasn't careful enough on the ice. You opened your eyes and sat up and kissed me—you were hungry—and I grabbed onto the dark nest of your hair, and all I could see was the bloom of her brain on the sidewalk.

Rotations

Our rooms were wet and pulpy like oranges. They were thick with smells. Across the hall two girls fell in love with each other. We had expected this for some days. One of them had blonde hair and a name that started with an L. I wanted to be in love with her too, but I wasn't. The girls pushed their beds together and made their blankets into a cave. The staff moved them into separate rooms and later sent one home. I'm not sure what happened to them after that.

Years later I knew a girl with a boy's name who fell in love with a girl who had my name but wasn't me. There were many hallways. We slept in all of them. The two girls went to see a movie where people disappeared and came back as older people dressed in the same skin. The girl with my name froze in the winter and broke like an icicle. The girl with the boy's name held her wrist to a flame so she could try to remember what it felt like to be cold.

Contract for Safety

A light on the corner of the house flicks on, illuminating the backyard. The dog barks as the light shines in her eyes, tinting them green, before she turns in a circle and lies back down. Behind me, my mother opens the screen door and closes it slowly so the sound of it slamming won't wake my father. My hand slides into the pocket of my food-stained apron, gripping the heavy wad of small bills, making sure the money's still there. My mom's got an oversized t-shirt on and she smells like fryer grease too—we've both just gotten off work. She joins me at the deck's railing and lights a cigarette. We start recounting the day, our mutual exhaustion building toward giddy until we are both bent over with laughter.

We never talked like this when I was young—there was too much fighting, too many “I don't want tos” and “I hate yous.” Then I grew into a teenager and darkened like a lampshade. That was five years ago, long enough for me to realize that the fear of waking to find your only daughter dead on her bedroom floor is one that I can't understand, and one that she will never let go of.

I'm not sure what reminds us both of that time, but we are still laughing when she says it.

“I wanted to stay in the living room.”

“What do you mean?”

“When you were in high school. After you took the Tylenol. I wanted us to stay in the living room. I wouldn't go to work, and you wouldn't go to school. We would just stay in the living room.”

“Indefinitely?” I'm laughing now, and she is too, because it's ridiculous. “What would we eat?” I ask.

“Well I guess I never thought about that,” she says, still laughing. “But at least I would know where you are.”

Convalescence

I.

The doctor told my mother I could die within two years. I was sitting in the room, or the room was sitting around me. I was picking my fingernails. After they left I began to peel the paint off the wall beside the bed in crescent strips. Under the paint was more wall, only whiter. I peeled until the whiter space grew into a big circle. This took some weeks.

II.

My roommate was a birch tree; her arms spread out like branches. She was vaguely yellow from all the greenhouse sunlight, speckled like an egg. In the mornings I watched her stand, all rooted in the wind. I watched her roots spread. I coveted her reaches. I knew I'd never grow that tall.

III.

One night an older boy threw his bed across the room. A man in a blue blazer pressed the boy's face into a utility box. He didn't mean anything by it—the man was paid to do this work. The boy's cheek split open and bled down the wall.

IV.

At night the floor spun like a carousel. It was quietest then. The girl who slept across the room faded out beneath her breath. The ceiling yellowed from the thin light outside.

V.

When I was leaving, the nurses found the pile of paint strips beside my bed and told me I could have eaten them and gotten lead poisoning. They said this could be a way to die. I'd heard of a kid who drank bleach from a measuring cup. Years later I fell in love with a girl whose body shrunk under a bed sheet. We swathed the rooms we shared with silk and glass and I pretended everything had flowered like the ocean.

in order to remember

The newest scars on my arm are so red in the cold they look like they're still bleeding. My students stare. Last week, I regretted not wearing long sleeves at least three days. I've cut a whole history in that arm, years counted off in white marks like the scratches in a doorframe that mark growth. They get wider as they go up, which means I cut deeper, which means I needed to lose more of myself in order to remember. On bad nights I think the only reason I haven't cross-sected that wrist, dug around for the artery, is because I tattooed over the oldest lines. It took three hours and cost three hundred dollars, and thinking that before I pick up or when I'm already holding a blade means I don't want what I sometimes think I want. Writing this is like writing about my boyfriend and I having anal sex; it's like the reader can see my insides. I started in my parents' bathroom when I was fifteen, skipped a razor over my skin like a roller-skate. That was nine years ago, and last week my boyfriend threw out all the knives in our apartment after red beads burst from thin scratches I can't now remember making. A stranger reads a poem and then asks to see the marks, says, "You really went to town on yourself." I wish I could explain better, how a girl under twenty trains her body to split open and feel relief. Medieval saints let blood in order to make more room for god. Last summer I stole bandaids because I couldn't afford to hold myself together long enough to heal.

III.

What You Learn From Google

My new boyfriend's ex-fiancée is two inches shorter than me. I'm twelve inches shorter than him. I'm pocket-sized, but she was pocket-pocket-sized.

The pocket girl lived in Vermont with my boyfriend in the winter of the year before last. In Vermont it never remembers not to snow. I lived in Mississippi then; it only snowed once, and the day after the sun shone so warm it melted the snow into ice and we got three days off school. The winter before that it snowed so much the power lines fell and drowned in the wet. I laid on a mattress through February, stuffing my mouth full of flammable things. This was Pennsylvania, where the winters are easier than Vermont but harder than Mississippi. When fall starts, my chest opens with tired. I take shelter from the kinds of natural disasters that insulate.

Text messages bother me, sometimes. The smaller than me ex-fiancée doesn't bother me much because she doesn't exist. Some kinds of cereals bother me, but never soymilk or scrambled eggs. My new boyfriend almost married a girl in Vermont but the winter made him crazy—he thought fire would scrub his hands clean and warm—so he moved south to Florida and then deeper south to Mississippi, which is really north from Florida.

Last night he said he wanted to die most of the time. Our apartment has a no knives rule. A no prescription painkillers rule. A medicine cabinet full of balance in the kitchen. My sunlight is his sunlight plus or minus three. I'm addicted to caffeine and Reese's cups and the twice or three times daily showers we take together. My skin itches where it's healing. I want to always find him on the bedroom floor, counting carpet fibers with his eyelids turned off.

Start with a landscape.

Start with a bird with its wings pinned to the sky, a lakeshore, a windowsill. Don't mention your scars, or the nights you've lost to screaming. Build a house of windows; streak the carpet with sun. Put a basketball hoop in front of the garage. A stone walkway. A porch swing. Put your son on a bicycle in the driveway, training wheels skittering on the pavement. Put your son in the driveway with his father's hand on the handlebars, the other on the seat, until the bike catches speed and your husband lets him go. Put your still-crawling daughter in the grass, pulling up handfuls with her tiny palms. Build a house; build a tiny life. Set it in miniature on your kitchen table. Wear it around your neck on a chain. This is how you will survive what comes before: the nights he sits in his car, staring through the windshield while his left arm trembles, the days you can't open until 3pm because your body feels too heavy for the sun. Hold the life in your fist; press its imprint into your palm. Swallow it; keep it in your throat on the nights he sleeps on the couch while you curl small and snail-shell in his bed. Don't look back. Wait on the mornings. When he comes to you in the night, fingers frantic in your dark hair, press your back into his chest, close your eyes against the moonlight while his breathing floods your ear.

the difference between fucking and making love

I've been pulling my fingers through your hair, nightly; I've been fingering the knobs of my spine—in my kitchen you ask what I'm doing and I say I'm making sure the bones are still there. Last week I cut my thigh open in a coffee shop bathroom. This is the same as saying last week I ate a chicken salad wrap. It's the same as saying last week I drank the same amount of alcohol you need to bleach your hands with. I've never seen palms like yours before—skin stretched and raw—I've held the space where the red fades to white, nearly halfway up your arms. We both want to hurt the same parts of ourselves on purpose. I've never seen a torso like yours before. I've never begged anyone for the things I beg you for. As a rule you and I don't transition well, which means our turnings leave bruises—your body over my body over your body—; in the mirror I press the soreness and know I might spend the rest of my life wanting to suck you off my fingertips like salad dressing; we might swallow each other while the shower water runs cold over our heads; you might squeeze me between your chest and the brick of the alley behind the bar where we met and I knew you'd make me still; you might press your fingers down my throat; I might slide beneath your eyelids and wake up in the morning in your mouth, still wet, still open, still gasping.

love poem for mississippi

After your mattress cover stains with ink and lines of blood, after sex on my aubergine sheets and coffee and ribcage against ribcage against the carpet, after we take our morning pills in the afternoon and stay up naked on the rug on the counter on the bathroom floor, after I stop sharpening razors on my pelvic bones and you stop cloroxing the door knobs in your apartment, after the days turn into days and we build a time capsule for the pills that are keeping us alive and bury it behind the shed in the backyard, and after the after, and still after, and after that, I'll birth the best parts of you and me combined in flesh made of flesh with no scars and no nights like these nights. We'll water her so she'll grow like a miracle. One summer, we'll take her to the shore and I will not be afraid of the width of so much water meeting so much land, and you will not be afraid of the sand or the wind moving the sand into your hair, and neither of us will be afraid of jellyfish or the things that bob beneath, and I will lay on the beach in my body that is a real body with no edges whittled down to points, and you will hold her tiny hand in your softened hand, and she will toddle, and I will watch as you follow her toward the tide.

KAITLYN WALL once took her bathing suit off in the backyard when she was three-years-old, and her parents are still talking about it. She holds a B.A. from Susquehanna University, and lives and works in Oxford, MS.

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