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Thin Bodies

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THIN BODIES

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

by

ELIZABETH M. TRAN

May 2015

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ABSTRACT

Thin Bodies is a fictional thriller revolving around a retrospective, female voice. It is a short novel-length view into the insular community of the sorority, specifically in the U.S. Deep South. The town and university are both fictional, as are the characters, sororities, and events, but they are based in realistic institutions of socialization and community. Sarah Beth, our protagonist and narrator, considers her coming-of-age through her recruitment, initiation, ensuing leadership, and eventual fall from grace in her sorority, Theta Kappa. The group of women that this novel intends to characterize struggle with identity and how they are perceived against standards of class, race, and gender. The novel's perspective is one that is removed from the present action but attempts to keep the reader within the narrative, moving from scene to scene chronologically, in short, fast-paced chapters, and culminating in the suicide of a sorority member. Sarah Beth provides occasional hindsight and ultimately reaches the realization that these social institutions function in order to reproduce themselves, and in the case of Theta Kappa, this reproduction has been occurring for more than 150 years. The novel has a gothic tone mixed with dark humor in order to occupy a dual space of entertainment and literary value.

DEDICATION

For my sisters

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge Tommy Franklin, Jaime Harker, and Megan Abbott for their help in editing this manuscript. I would also like to acknowledge Josh-Wade Ferguson and my parents for their unwavering support.

PREFACE

All characters and events found within this work are fictional. The town, organizations, institutions, and places are imaginary. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, establishments, or events is purely coincidental.

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CHAPTER I

Leigh was on the roof of the sorority house, giant t-shirt hanging from her thin body, limbs bony and branch-like, childish, silhouetted against the bright night sky. We'd done so much coke and had so much whiskey, so much, I didn't know what was going on, but I knew something had changed in Leigh those last few weeks. I didn't stop her when she kept going with the lines and the shots. I danced and Leigh cried and then she was happy, and then we were out there; me, looking up at her from the sorority row parking lot, feet firmly planted on rocky, black asphalt, and Leigh, on the roof looking out somewhere far away, arms spread, not making a sound. It was just the two of us, with the moon and thin bodies.

I don't remember how we ended up there. I don't remember a lot of things about that night like, why we were alone or, what Sarah Mae had said to Leigh just after the house caught fire or, how many times I'd thrown up even though I usually kept a rigorous log of it in my journal. I didn't remember even though I knew things to be necessarily true like, that the weather was cool but unseasonably humid and, that my vomit just before dinner must have been pink from pink lemonade sherbet and just after dinner must have been pink from marinara sauce, little bits of bowtie pasta speckling the toilet bowl. I didn't remember these things as if they were tangible realities but as story book details, fake and untouchable.

Cool moisture on my face, a mist of rain that coated my skin, and I knew it coated her too, clung to her luminescent skin and to the fibers of her shirt but didn't drench her, and I think about her a lot now after everything, how she was for those few minutes. There were lots of

stories, but this seems like the only story now, as if our lives were building to this moment. I think about how glad she was up there, glowing like some radioactive goddess, a vague smile, and I imagine how remarkable she must have felt, so different than she'd been for months. She'd forgotten how wonderful it was to not give a damn about Sarah Mae or Beau Boudreaux or Buford University or any of it.

When Leigh jumped, her body fell in fast slow motion, boneless and limp, leaving a trail of shadows in the crisp January air as she plummeted towards the house mom's parking spot. A deadened thud when she hit Ms. Guillory's car, and then the sound of disturbed gravel when her body landed on asphalt. The car alarm went off. It sounded distant, muffled and unimportant. I stood there and stared at Leigh's body. Blood was leaking from her skull and her wrist was bent the wrong way, her Yurman wedged in the crook, and everything looked surreal, weird, pixelated, but this is the one thing I remember for sure, knew to be real despite, like so much else, its sheen of unreality.

I'd always wanted that Yurman, the thick, 7mm cable cuff bracelet. It had the diamond detail and amethyst capping each end. I pulled it from Leigh's wrist but couldn't get it free. Leigh's face, wide and already bloating with death, shined in moonlight. All the images were moving, delayed, staggered, like a frozen computer screen. Ms. Guillory's car alarm was going off, it became incessant, louder, clouding my thoughts and becoming real, distracting, shocking me into life. I staggered back feeling scared and disgusted by the deadness of my only friend, as girls in giant t-shirts draped over their bones, their limbs like branches, walked out the backdoor to see what noises I was making.

CHAPTER II

I left Tickfaw, Louisiana as soon as I could for Harper, only an 8-hour drive into the northern part of the state. It felt a universe away, disguised in money, the people beautiful, the meticulous landscape of the town bathed in some strange glow of quaint whimsy. At least, this was my first impression, a girl who had only known Tickfaw her entire life and had wanted desperately to leave it.

I received the brochure for Buford University, a private college, on University and Career Day, junior year my spring semester at Grant High School. The event was held in the school gymnasium, and all classes after lunch were canceled so we could walk from booth to booth, table to table and configure a humble future for ourselves. The career tables were sponsored by local businesses; I avoided eye contact with the woman brandishing flyers for beautician school and walked around the large crowd surrounding the booth for Felicity Bros. Construction to get to the table with a banner hanging from it, “So You Want to Go to College!” The university information table was vacant, manned by no one, the materials set up by the school counselor, Deborah, for people to simply take. I couldn’t blame Miss Deb for a poorly organized College Day—she was overworked and understaffed, the only academic counselor for all 438 of us. The brochures were fanned across one white fold-up table. I took a handful, afraid that if I left even

one college brochure behind, my chances of escaping this life would plummet by impossible margins.

Glossed images of blonde sorority girls in antebellum hoop skirts, smiles stretched and frozen adjacent to that of preppy black men wearing a Bill Cosby sweaters in the quad reading Nabakov seduced me in full color. I would learn that this was not at all what campus life at Buford looked like; but I was seventeen turning eighteen, and I sat outside our trailer in the fire circle my stepdad had crudely delineated with rotting logs and chunks of cement that were crumbling near the trailer park entrance driveway. It was more glamorous than the public state university by far, and the community college by eons, but unlike Harvard or Yale or Berkeley, or even Emory or Tulane which were still close, Buford's glossy, sturdy cardboard brochure looked like a real paradise within reach, something that was a dream approachable by car and student loans.

I applied for the state's scholarship program and federal financial aid. I signed myself up for sorority recruitment, saving the three hundred fifty dollar registration money from working at Willy's gas station, standing behind the cash register and enduring the leers of men in sweat-spotted wife beaters. This was a Marlboro Reds and Wild Turkey town. In Harper, students smoked Camels and drank Jameson. I didn't know these things about Harper until I arrived and saw for myself the spectacle of it all, the spectacle I was not a part of but wanted to be a part of so badly and even now, don't know if I ever was even a little bit.

"Heard you goin' to that fancy school up north," said my stepdad, Jimbo. I refused to call him that.

"Yeah Jim," I said. His eye twitched but instead of correcting me, he spit brown saliva into a Dasani bottle full of watery, old chewing tobacco.

“People up there don’t like us coastal trash,” he said. “I got thrown outta one of them snooty bars near Buford once for *inappropriate attire*. The *attire* being my tattoos.” He pointed to the topless mermaid on his arm, a ribbon with text twisting around her tail that read *Veritas*. “Can you believe that load of crock? Still fires me up.”

“We don’t even live on the coast. I’m not coastal trash.”

Jimbo didn’t mean to hurt my feelings but realized that he had. It was just a harmless joke that people made all the time about swamp people and southern gentility, but there was something biting about the truth of being considered trash by anyone, anywhere. He stood at the fire circle and dug his toe under a sodden log, staring at me through the glare of the setting sun.

“Make sure you give ‘em hell, Bethy,” he said, and then tossed me a blue plastic food stamp card issued by the state. “Your momma wants you to pick up some ground beef from the store for the Hamburger Helper. Your favorite.”

“Hamburger Helper is not my favorite,” I said. That night, I tried to act indifferent even though I really did love “Cheeseburger macaroni.”

When I arrived at my freshman dorm, Ville Hall, it was obvious from my cutoff shorts and tight tank top that I didn’t know what Hadley Newman, my new roommate, seemed to know about sorority rush. Hadley Newman had all five of her rush week dresses picked out, laying on her dorm room bed. A linen sundress for both days of Icewater Round, pink chino shorts to pair with the t-shirt Greek Affairs gave everyone for both days of Philanthropy Round, a teal cocktail dress for Skit Round, and a conservative black dress for Preference Round. Her mother called her twice already that day to see how moving into the dorm had been, to ask if she’d steamed all her rush week outfits.

“Have you walked down the row yet to see the houses?” her mother asked. I could hear her from the earpiece.

“Yes,” Hadley said. I learned that Harriet Newman was a sorority mom, one of those women you saw at the grocery with voluminous hair, the petite but slightly gone to seed body of a former dancer, perched in heels as she considered the brie selection for the next Junior League function or Bridge Club meeting. She’d called Hadley everyday (three days) since Hadley had left for move-in, and the preceding week had taken her shopping for all her rush week dresses. Harriet was the type of woman who knew how important every detail was, in the way that I didn’t yet understand because I hadn’t been on the other side yet, didn’t have the privilege yet of seeing, or rather, experiencing myself how much sorority women really did care, plan, select.

“Well, what did you think of the houses?” Mrs. Harriet said. “Which one was your favorite?” As if her daughter liking the antebellum architecture of one house somehow correlated with the women in the sorority itself, or would increase her chances of getting into one more than the others.

“No, they all looked great. I don’t know,” she said.

This was a lie. I had been there with her, had walked down the row with her for the first time, in callow wonder of the columned, brick mansions, weeping willows and Southern live oaks twisting on front lawns. I knew which house she liked best because I liked it best too, but Hadley was annoyed with her mother and felt that admitting to her the awe she felt in the shadow of Theta Kappa’s imposing profile was like rendering all her sullen defensiveness at being treated like an idiot unjustified. But she was an idiot and so was I; we knew nothing of the planning and manipulation involved in Sorority Rush. We thought it was hors d'oeuvres and soda water with lemon and smiling a lot.

It was sunset when we had decided to stroll down sorority row and look at the houses we would soon be walking through. The water gleamed orange from the Southern setting sun, a strange dusky fog settling, hovering over the surface of the lake. It was hot, humid August hot, but when the sun began to set, the wet air felt cool against our necks.

I stood in front of the Theta Kappa house. It sat on the highest ground on the row, where the road curved around and reached the top of its incline before sloping back down, and I had to crane my neck to look up, to take in the sight of it. Four mammoth columns lined the brick front porch, hunter green rocking chairs swaying from the wind coming over the lake. I could hear them, the faint sound of voices chanting just behind the front door, like ghosts behind a veil that were just beyond my reach. And I thought in some secret, dark place in my heart that they were calling to me, saying my name, whispering, the wind carrying it to my ears, “Sarah Beth, Sarah Beth, Sarah Beth.”

I stood in line with my nametag hanging face-forward around my neck. I kept glancing down to make sure it wasn't twisted. It read “Sarah Beth Haney, Gamma Chi Group 23.” Our recruitment counselors were called Gamma Chis, and ours was Charlotte, and she was beautiful. She had wavy brown hair and perfect makeup everyday. One hundred ten degree heat index and 100% humidity did not exist in her universe. The other girls in Gamma Chi Group 23 would spend hours debating what sorority she was in since Gamma Chis were required to disassociate from their sisterhoods in order to be objective counselors to Potential New Members. “Composed, helpful, and objective,” they'd said of our Gamma Chis during the Recruitment Convocation.

“Don’t forget it, and make sure people can see it,” Charlotte said as she handed us our laminated nametags during our first group meeting, the evening before the first Icewater Party. If you didn’t have a nametag, you couldn’t attend the Rush Party, simple as that.

“*Char-lee?*” said Dorothy Getty. We’d only had two meetings with our Gamma Chi so far, Rush not even having started yet, but Dorothy asked dozens of questions, always prefacing with Charlotte’s nickname in a prolonged, nasal whine. “I lost my name tag already.”

Charlie’s mouth twitched. I even thought I saw a judgmental gleam in her eyes when Dorothy spoke, but I knew it must be my own projections. She remained composed, helpful, and objective, and I had no idea who she really was.

“Two minutes,” said the Gamma Chi stationed at the door of the Phi Kappa Omega house. She held a stopwatch and stood akimbo. I heard “two minutes” echo as Gamma Chis stationed at every front door down the row said it, and Charlotte said it, passing on the information to the Gamma Chis pacing up and down the row, ensuring everything was in place, all bodies were in their allotted spots.

We stood in line alphabetically on the brick pathway to Phi Kappa Omega’s giant, red front door. I could hear faint rhythmic noises, the sound of leaping and pounding, banging on the wall, stomps and chanting, “Phi Kapp!” in a girlish pitch drifting through the walls to our ears.

“One minute,” said by dozens of Gamma Chis, like clones all wearing large purple jerseys and various colors of the same Nike athletic shorts, their mouths opening and closing just milliseconds apart, overlapping exhales and inhaled.

The girls in line ahead and behind me began to fidget, and I began to squirm too, patting my hairline, adjusting my bra, checking my cuticles. I could see the sun waver through the thick,

wet air and shimmer over the surface of the brick path. The brightness hurt my eyes and warmed my spongy, cool skin. Our bags with our phones and face powders and lipsticks sat in piles on the sidewalk, guarded by Gamma Chis. We all felt naked waiting, just our bodies and our voices to guard against the unknown poised behind the front door.

The Gamma Chi at the door knocked twice and heard a two-knock response from the other side. “Ten seconds,” she said in tandem with the other “Ten seconds!” and Charlotte walked down the line of the her Gamma Chi Group, flipping nametags the right way, confiscating a cell phone from Diana Holstrof, taking sweat soaked coffee filters, and telling Yolanda Griggs to put her heels on already.

“Five, four,” the voices said, and I looked behind myself in panic at the lake and the sky, feeling claustrophobic under the roof of shade from the oak trees, voices bouncing off branches.

“Three, two, one,” and the Gamma Chi lugged the door open to reveal women wearing pale yellow sun dresses lining the door. They clapped rhythmically, a standing dance, their hands hitting their thighs and each other’s hands in obvious practiced unison, like something from *Grease* but with the control of cheerleaders. Walk up and down Sorority Row during Sorority Rush, you can still see them throw their front doors open at exactly the same moment in fated unanimity, each house reverberating with a different song. Hundreds of girls’ voices, one song floating over another song, over another song, over another, each house trying to sing louder so that their song was the only one to hear.

“We welcome you with a Phi Kapp Clap, We welcome you to the best place on the map, Phi Kapp, Phi Kapp! Come on in, we welcome you, come on in to our sisterhood, too, Phi Kapp, Phi Kapp!” they sang, the claps mesmerizing. Charlotte stood at the end of the walk. She tapped her hand on the shoulder of the next girl in line at the nod of the Gamma Chi with the stopwatch

standing at the door. Serena Hackman seemed to float over the brick porch and disappeared into the mass of bodies beyond the doorway, and Charlotte tapped my shoulder before I could register that I was next. I stumbled over the uneven bricks and stopped, faltering before I could cross the threshold into the first sorority house I would ever experience.

The President stood just beyond the brink. She was tall and willowy, and her slender hand touched my shoulder, a firm but subtle shove into the house. “Phi Kapp welcomes you, Sarah Beth. Come on in.” I tripped over the rug, and when I regained my composure, I realized the clapping women on either side of me were stepping in and out, making the walkway bigger and smaller, a pulsing, undulating, and utterly disorienting path of yellow dress and flesh that was what I imagined how walking in one of those optical illusion images would be. Which is why I didn’t notice the girl who had appeared beside me, why I didn’t know where she’d come from or even how long she’d been walking next to me.

She had celebrity beach waves, tousled but somehow impeccable, not a strand out of place. They bounced as she walked beside me, and tan, patent leather pumps clacked on the large moss green tiles. “Hi, I’m Olivia,” she said. I could hardly hear her over the continued singing. Her hand rested lightly, almost unnoticeably, on the small of my back, steering me to a table of water glasses, condensation bleeding rings onto the white linen tablecloth.

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“Would you like some water?” she said, taking a glass from one of the alumna managing the water table. I told her yes and she handed it to me, a gold napkin with the Phi Kapp crest underneath the wet cup. We walked to into a capacious living room with several modest crystal chandeliers, and Olivia led me to a powder blue, claw-footed armchair. The wall paint was a shade of pear.

“Would you like to sit?” she said. I nodded and sat. I noticed that not every Potential New Member got the option of sitting. “Hold on just a moment,” and she turned to face the doorway, joining back in to the song and clap as naturally as continuing a conversation at the dinner table after taking a bite of food. I sucked down all the water in my glass, accidentally slurping air and jangling the ice at the bottom in a most unattractive display that was thankfully masked by surrounding noise. I had unconsciously crumbled in my right hand the gold, crested napkin into a disintegrating wet ball.

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The girls in line ahead and behind me began to fidget, and I began to squirm too, patting my hairline, adjusting my bra, checking my cuticles. I could see the sun waver through the thick, wet air and shimmer over the surface of the brick path. The brightness hurt my eyes and warmed my spongy, cool skin. Our bags with our phones and face powders and lipsticks sat in piles on

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“We welcome you with a Phi Kapp Clap, We welcome you to the best place on the map, Phi Kapp, Phi Kapp! Come on in, we welcome you, come on in to our sisterhood, too, Phi Kapp, Phi Kapp!” they sang, the claps mesmerizing. Charlotte stood at the end of the walk. She tapped her hand on the shoulder of the next girl in line at the nod of the Gamma Chi with the stopwatch standing at the door. Serena Hackman seemed to float over the brick porch and disappeared into the mass of bodies beyond the doorway, and Charlotte tapped my shoulder before I could register

that I was next. I stumbled over the uneven bricks and stopped, faltering before I could cross the threshold into the first sorority house I would ever experience.

The President stood just beyond the brink. She was tall and willowy, and her slender hand touched my shoulder, a firm but subtle shove into the house. “Phi Kapp welcomes you, Sarah Beth. Come on in.” I tripped over the rug, and when I regained my composure, I realized the clapping women on either side of me were stepping in and out, making the walkway bigger and smaller, a pulsing, undulating, and utterly disorienting path of yellow dress and flesh that was what I imagined how walking in one of those optical illusion images would be. Which is why I didn’t notice the girl who had appeared beside me, why I didn’t know where she’d come from or even how long she’d been walking next to me.

She had celebrity beach waves, tousled but somehow impeccable, not a strand out of place. They bounced as she walked beside me, and tan, patent leather pumps clacked on the large moss green tiles. “Hi, I’m Olivia,” she said. I could hardly hear her over the continued singing. Her hand rested lightly, almost unnoticeably, on the small of my back, steering me to a table of water glasses, condensation bleeding rings onto the white linen tablecloth.

“Hi, I’m Sarah Beth,” I said.

“Would you like some water?” she said, taking a glass from one of the alumna managing the water table. I told her yes and she handed it to me, a gold napkin with the Phi Kapp crest underneath the wet cup. We walked to into a capacious living room with several modest crystal chandeliers, and Olivia led me to a powder blue, claw-footed armchair. The wall paint was a shade of pear.

“Would you like to sit?” she said. I nodded and sat. I noticed that not every Potential New Member got the option of sitting. “Hold on just a moment,” and she turned to face the

doorway, joining back in to the song and clap as naturally as continuing a conversation at the dinner table after taking a bite of food. I sucked down all the water in my glass, accidentally slurping air and jangling the ice at the bottom in a most unattractive display that was thankfully masked by surrounding noise. I had unconsciously crumbled in my right hand the gold, crested napkin into a disintegrating wet ball.

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“We welcome you with a Phi Kapp Clap, We welcome you to the best place on the map, Phi Kapp, Phi Kapp! Come on in, we welcome you, come on in to our sisterhood, too, Phi Kapp, Phi Kapp!” they sang, the claps mesmerizing. Charlotte stood at the end of the walk. She tapped her hand on the shoulder of the next girl in line at the nod of the Gamma Chi with the stopwatch standing at the door. Serena Hackman seemed to float over the brick porch and disappeared into the mass of bodies beyond the doorway, and Charlotte tapped my shoulder before I could register

that I was next. I stumbled over the uneven bricks and stopped, faltering before I could cross the threshold into the first sorority house I would ever experience.

The President stood just beyond the brink. She was tall and willowy, and her slender hand touched my shoulder, a firm but subtle shove into the house. “Phi Kapp welcomes you, Sarah Beth. Come on in.” I tripped over the rug, and when I regained my composure, I realized the clapping women on either side of me were stepping in and out, making the walkway bigger and smaller, a pulsing, undulating, and utterly disorienting path of yellow dress and flesh that was what I imagined how walking in one of those optical illusion images would be. Which is why I didn’t notice the girl who had appeared beside me, why I didn’t know where she’d come from or even how long she’d been walking next to me.

She had celebrity beach waves, tousled but somehow impeccable, not a strand out of place. They bounced as she walked beside me, and tan, patent leather pumps clacked on the large moss green tiles. “Hi, I’m Olivia,” she said. I could hardly hear her over the continued singing. Her hand rested lightly, almost unnoticeably, on the small of my back, steering me to a table of water glasses, condensation bleeding rings onto the white linen tablecloth.

“Hi, I’m Sarah Beth,” I said.

“Would you like some water?” she said, taking a glass from one of the alumna managing the water table. I told her yes and she handed it to me, a gold napkin with the Phi Kapp crest underneath the wet cup. We walked to into a capacious living room with several modest crystal chandeliers, and Olivia led me to a powder blue, claw-footed armchair. The wall paint was a shade of pear.

“Would you like to sit?” she said. I nodded and sat. I noticed that not every Potential New Member got the option of sitting. “Hold on just a moment,” and she turned to face the

doorway, joining back in to the song and clap as naturally as continuing a conversation at the dinner table after taking a bite of food. I sucked down all the water in my glass, accidentally slurping air and jangling the ice at the bottom in a most unattractive display that was thankfully masked by surrounding noise. I had unconsciously crumbled in my right hand the gold, crested napkin into a disintegrating wet ball.

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CHAPTER VI

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“Yes,” Hadley said. I learned that Harriet Newman was a sorority mom, one of those women you saw at the grocery with voluminous hair, the petite but slightly gone to seed body of a former dancer, perched in heels as she considered the brie selection for the next Junior League function or Bridge Club meeting. She’d called Hadley everyday (three days) since Hadley had left for move-in, and the preceding week had taken her shopping for all her rush week dresses. Harriet was the type of woman who knew how important every detail was, in the way that I didn’t yet understand because I hadn’t been on the other side yet, didn’t have the privilege yet of seeing, or rather, experiencing myself how much sorority women really did care, plan, select.

“Well, what did you think of the houses?” Mrs. Harriet said. “Which one was your favorite?” As if her daughter liking the antebellum architecture of one house somehow correlated with the women in the sorority itself, or would increase her chances of getting into one more than the others.

“No, they all looked great. I don’t know,” she said.

This was a lie. I had been there with her, had walked down the row with her for the first time, in callow wonder of the columned, brick mansions, weeping willows and Southern live oaks twisting on front lawns. I knew which house she liked best because I liked it best too, but Hadley was annoyed with her mother and felt that admitting to her the awe she felt in the shadow of Theta Kappa’s imposing profile was like rendering all her sullen defensiveness at being treated like an idiot unjustified. But she was an idiot and so was I; we knew nothing of the planning and manipulation involved in Sorority Rush. We thought it was hors d’oeuvres and soda water with lemon and smiling a lot.

It was sunset when we had decided to stroll down sorority row and look at the houses we would soon be walking through. The water gleamed orange from the Southern setting sun, a

strange dusky fog settling, hovering over the surface of the lake. It was hot, humid August hot, but when the sun began to set, the wet air felt cool against our necks.

I stood in front of the Theta Kappa house. It sat on the highest ground on the row, where the road curved around and reached the top of its incline before sloping back down, and I had to crane my neck to look up, to take in the sight of it. Four mammoth columns lined the brick front porch, hunter green rocking chairs swaying from the wind coming over the lake. I could hear them, the faint sound of voices chanting just behind the front door, like ghosts behind a veil that were just beyond my reach. And I thought in some secret, dark place in my heart that they were calling to me, saying my name, whispering, the wind carrying it to my ears, “Sarah Beth, Sarah Beth, Sarah Beth.”

I stood in line with my nametag hanging face-forward around my neck. I kept glancing down to make sure it wasn't twisted. It read “Sarah Beth Haney, Gamma Chi Group 23.” Our recruitment counselors were called Gamma Chis, and ours was Charlotte, and she was beautiful. She had wavy brown hair and perfect makeup everyday. One hundred ten degree heat index and 100% humidity did not exist in her universe. The other girls in Gamma Chi Group 23 would spend hours debating what sorority she was in since Gamma Chis were required to disassociate from their sisterhoods in order to be objective counselors to Potential New Members. “Composed, helpful, and objective,” they'd said of our Gamma Chis during the Recruitment Convocation.

“Don't forget it, and make sure people can see it,” Charlotte said as she handed us our laminated nametags during our first group meeting, the evening before the first Icewater Party. If you didn't have a nametag, you couldn't attend the Rush Party, simple as that.

“*Char-lee?*” said Dorothy Getty. We’d only had two meetings with our Gamma Chi so far, Rush not even having started yet, but Dorothy asked dozens of questions, always prefacing with Charlotte’s nickname in a prolonged, nasal whine. “I lost my name tag already.”

Charlie’s mouth twitched. I even thought I saw a judgmental gleam in her eyes when Dorothy spoke, but I knew it must be my own projections. She remained composed, helpful, and objective, and I had no idea who she really was.

“Two minutes,” said the Gamma Chi stationed at the door of the Phi Kappa Omega house. She held a stopwatch and stood akimbo. I heard “two minutes” echo as Gamma Chis stationed at every front door down the row said it, and Charlotte said it, passing on the information to the Gamma Chis pacing up and down the row, ensuring everything was in place, all bodies were in their allotted spots.

We stood in line alphabetically on the brick pathway to Phi Kappa Omega’s giant, red front door. I could hear faint rhythmic noises, the sound of leaping and pounding, banging on the wall, stomps and chanting, “Phi Kapp!” in a girlish pitch drifting through the walls to our ears.

“One minute,” said by dozens of Gamma Chis, like clones all wearing large purple jerseys and various colors of the same Nike athletic shorts, their mouths opening and closing just milliseconds apart, overlapping exhales and inhales.

The girls in line ahead and behind me began to fidget, and I began to squirm too, patting my hairline, adjusting my bra, checking my cuticles. I could see the sun waver through the thick, wet air and shimmer over the surface of the brick path. The brightness hurt my eyes and warmed my spongy, cool skin. Our bags with our phones and face powders and lipsticks sat in piles on

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“No, they all looked great. I don’t know,” she said.

This was a lie. I had been there with her, had walked down the row with her for the first time, in callow wonder of the columned, brick mansions, weeping willows and Southern live oaks twisting on front lawns. I knew which house she liked best because I liked it best too, but Hadley was annoyed with her mother and felt that admitting to her the awe she felt in the shadow of Theta Kappa’s imposing profile was like rendering all her sullen defensiveness at being treated like an idiot unjustified. But she was an idiot and so was I; we knew nothing of the planning and manipulation involved in Sorority Rush. We thought it was hors d’oeuvres and soda water with lemon and smiling a lot.

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“One minute,” said by dozens of Gamma Chis, like clones all wearing large purple jerseys and various colors of the same Nike athletic shorts, their mouths opening and closing just milliseconds apart, overlapping exhales and inhales.

The girls in line ahead and behind me began to fidget, and I began to squirm too, patting my hairline, adjusting my bra, checking my cuticles. I could see the sun waver through the thick, wet air and shimmer over the surface of the brick path. The brightness hurt my eyes and warmed my spongy, cool skin. Our bags with our phones and face powders and lipsticks sat in piles on

the sidewalk, guarded by Gamma Chis. We all felt naked waiting, just our bodies and our voices to guard against the unknown poised behind the front door.

The Gamma Chi at the door knocked twice and heard a two-knock response from the other side. “Ten seconds,” she said in tandem with the other “Ten seconds!” and Charlotte walked down the line of the her Gamma Chi Group, flipping nametags the right way, confiscating a cell phone from Diana Holstrof, taking sweat soaked coffee filters, and telling Yolanda Griggs to put her heels on already.

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The President stood just beyond the brink. She was tall and willowy, and her slender hand touched my shoulder, a firm but subtle shove into the house. “Phi Kapp welcomes you, Sarah Beth. Come on in.” I tripped over the rug, and when I regained my composure, I realized the clapping women on either side of me were stepping in and out, making the walkway bigger and smaller, a pulsing, undulating, and utterly disorienting path of yellow dress and flesh that was what I imagined how walking in one of those optical illusion images would be. Which is why I didn’t notice the girl who had appeared beside me, why I didn’t know where she’d come from or even how long she’d been walking next to me.

She had celebrity beach waves, tousled but somehow impeccable, not a strand out of place. They bounced as she walked beside me, and tan, patent leather pumps clacked on the large moss green tiles. “Hi, I’m Olivia,” she said. I could hardly hear her over the continued singing. Her hand rested lightly, almost unnoticeably, on the small of my back, steering me to a table of water glasses, condensation bleeding rings onto the white linen tablecloth.

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CHAPTER X

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I stood in line with my nametag hanging face-forward around my neck. I kept glancing down to make sure it wasn't twisted. It read “Sarah Beth Haney, Gamma Chi Group 23.” Our recruitment counselors were called Gamma Chis, and ours was Charlotte, and she was beautiful. She had wavy brown hair and perfect makeup everyday. One hundred ten degree heat index and 100% humidity did not exist in her universe. The other girls in Gamma Chi Group 23 would spend hours debating what sorority she was in since Gamma Chis were required to disassociate from their sisterhoods in order to be objective counselors to Potential New Members. “Composed, helpful, and objective,” they'd said of our Gamma Chis during the Recruitment Convocation.

“Don't forget it, and make sure people can see it,” Charlotte said as she handed us our laminated nametags during our first group meeting, the evening before the first Icewater Party. If you didn't have a nametag, you couldn't attend the Rush Party, simple as that.

“*Char-lee?*” said Dorothy Getty. We’d only had two meetings with our Gamma Chi so far, Rush not even having started yet, but Dorothy asked dozens of questions, always prefacing with Charlotte’s nickname in a prolonged, nasal whine. “I lost my name tag already.”

Charlie’s mouth twitched. I even thought I saw a judgmental gleam in her eyes when Dorothy spoke, but I knew it must be my own projections. She remained composed, helpful, and objective, and I had no idea who she really was.

“Two minutes,” said the Gamma Chi stationed at the door of the Phi Kappa Omega house. She held a stopwatch and stood akimbo. I heard “two minutes” echo as Gamma Chis stationed at every front door down the row said it, and Charlotte said it, passing on the information to the Gamma Chis pacing up and down the row, ensuring everything was in place, all bodies were in their allotted spots.

We stood in line alphabetically on the brick pathway to Phi Kappa Omega’s giant, red front door. I could hear faint rhythmic noises, the sound of leaping and pounding, banging on the wall, stomps and chanting, “Phi Kapp!” in a girlish pitch drifting through the walls to our ears.

“One minute,” said by dozens of Gamma Chis, like clones all wearing large purple jerseys and various colors of the same Nike athletic shorts, their mouths opening and closing just milliseconds apart, overlapping exhales and inhales.

The girls in line ahead and behind me began to fidget, and I began to squirm too, patting my hairline, adjusting my bra, checking my cuticles. I could see the sun waver through the thick, wet air and shimmer over the surface of the brick path. The brightness hurt my eyes and warmed my spongy, cool skin. Our bags with our phones and face powders and lipsticks sat in piles on

the sidewalk, guarded by Gamma Chis. We all felt naked waiting, just our bodies and our voices to guard against the unknown poised behind the front door.

The Gamma Chi at the door knocked twice and heard a two-knock response from the other side. “Ten seconds,” she said in tandem with the other “Ten seconds!” and Charlotte walked down the line of the her Gamma Chi Group, flipping nametags the right way, confiscating a cell phone from Diana Holstrof, taking sweat soaked coffee filters, and telling Yolanda Griggs to put her heels on already.

“Five, four,” the voices said, and I looked behind myself in panic at the lake and the sky, feeling claustrophobic under the roof of shade from the oak trees, voices bouncing off branches.

“Three, two, one,” and the Gamma Chi lugged the door open to reveal women wearing pale yellow sun dresses lining the door. They clapped rhythmically, a standing dance, their hands hitting their thighs and each other’s hands in obvious practiced unison, like something from *Grease* but with the control of cheerleaders. Walk up and down Sorority Row during Sorority Rush, you can still see them throw their front doors open at exactly the same moment in fated unanimity, each house reverberating with a different song. Hundreds of girls’ voices, one song floating over another song, over another song, over another, each house trying to sing louder so that their song was the only one to hear.

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“We welcome you with a Phi Kapp Clap, We welcome you to the best place on the map, Phi Kapp, Phi Kapp! Come on in, we welcome you, come on in to our sisterhood, too, Phi Kapp, Phi Kapp!” they sang, the claps mesmerizing. Charlotte stood at the end of the walk. She tapped her hand on the shoulder of the next girl in line at the nod of the Gamma Chi with the stopwatch standing at the door. Serena Hackman seemed to float over the brick porch and disappeared into the mass of bodies beyond the doorway, and Charlotte tapped my shoulder before I could register

that I was next. I stumbled over the uneven bricks and stopped, faltering before I could cross the threshold into the first sorority house I would ever experience.

The President stood just beyond the brink. She was tall and willowy, and her slender hand touched my shoulder, a firm but subtle shove into the house. “Phi Kapp welcomes you, Sarah Beth. Come on in.” I tripped over the rug, and when I regained my composure, I realized the clapping women on either side of me were stepping in and out, making the walkway bigger and smaller, a pulsing, undulating, and utterly disorienting path of yellow dress and flesh that was what I imagined how walking in one of those optical illusion images would be. Which is why I didn’t notice the girl who had appeared beside me, why I didn’t know where she’d come from or even how long she’d been walking next to me.

She had celebrity beach waves, tousled but somehow impeccable, not a strand out of place. They bounced as she walked beside me, and tan, patent leather pumps clacked on the large moss green tiles. “Hi, I’m Olivia,” she said. I could hardly hear her over the continued singing. Her hand rested lightly, almost unnoticeably, on the small of my back, steering me to a table of water glasses, condensation bleeding rings onto the white linen tablecloth.

“Hi, I’m Sarah Beth,” I said.

“Would you like some water?” she said, taking a glass from one of the alumna managing the water table. I told her yes and she handed it to me, a gold napkin with the Phi Kapp crest underneath the wet cup. We walked to into a capacious living room with several modest crystal chandeliers, and Olivia led me to a powder blue, claw-footed armchair. The wall paint was a shade of pear.

“Would you like to sit?” she said. I nodded and sat. I noticed that not every Potential New Member got the option of sitting. “Hold on just a moment,” and she turned to face the

doorway, joining back in to the song and clap as naturally as continuing a conversation at the dinner table after taking a bite of food. I sucked down all the water in my glass, accidentally slurping air and jangling the ice at the bottom in a most unattractive display that was thankfully masked by surrounding noise. I had unconsciously crumbled in my right hand the gold, crested napkin into a disintegrating wet ball.

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I applied for the state’s scholarship program and federal financial aid. I signed myself up for sorority recruitment, saving the three hundred fifty dollar registration money from working at Willy’s gas station, standing behind the cash register and enduring the leers of men in sweat-spotted wife beaters. This was a Marlboro Reds and Wild Turkey town. In Harper, students smoked Camels and drank Jameson. I didn’t know these things about Harper until I arrived and saw for myself the spectacle of it all, the spectacle I was not a part of but wanted to be a part of so badly and even now, don’t know if I ever was even a little bit.

CHAPTER XV

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“Heard you goin’ to that fancy school up north,” said my stepdad, Jimbo. I refused to call him that.

“Yeah Jim,” I said. His eye twitched but instead of correcting me, he spit brown saliva into a Dasani bottle full of watery, old chewing tobacco.

“People up there don’t like us coastal trash,” he said. “I got thrown outta one of them snooty bars near Buford once for *inappropriate attire*. The *attire* being my tattoos.” He pointed

to the topless mermaid on his arm, a ribbon with text twisting around her tail that read *Veritas*.

“Can you believe that load of crock? Still fires me up.”

“We don’t even live on the coast. I’m not coastal trash.”

Jimbo didn’t mean to hurt my feelings but realized that he had. It was just a harmless joke that people made all the time about swamp people and southern gentility, but there was something biting about the truth of being considered trash by anyone, anywhere. He stood at the fire circle and dug his toe under a sodden log, staring at me through the glare of the setting sun.

“Make sure you give ‘em hell, Bethy,” he said, and then tossed me a blue plastic food stamp card issued by the state. “Your momma wants you to pick up some ground beef from the store for the Hamburger Helper. Your favorite.”

“Hamburger Helper is not my favorite,” I said. That night, I tried to act indifferent even though I really did love “Cheeseburger macaroni.”

When I arrived at my freshman dorm, Ville Hall, it was obvious from my cutoff shorts and tight tank top that I didn’t know what Hadley Newman, my new roommate, seemed to know about sorority rush. Hadley Newman had all five of her rush week dresses picked out, laying on her dorm room bed. A linen sundress for both days of Icewater Round, pink chino shorts to pair with the t-shirt Greek Affairs gave everyone for both days of Philanthropy Round, a teal cocktail dress for Skit Round, and a conservative black dress for Preference Round. Her mother called her twice already that day to see how moving into the dorm had been, to ask if she’d steamed all her rush week outfits.

“Have you walked down the row yet to see the houses?” her mother asked. I could hear her from the earpiece.

“Yes,” Hadley said. I learned that Harriet Newman was a sorority mom, one of those women you saw at the grocery with voluminous hair, the petite but slightly gone to seed body of a former dancer, perched in heels as she considered the brie selection for the next Junior League function or Bridge Club meeting. She’d called Hadley everyday (three days) since Hadley had left for move-in, and the preceding week had taken her shopping for all her rush week dresses. Harriet was the type of woman who knew how important every detail was, in the way that I didn’t yet understand because I hadn’t been on the other side yet, didn’t have the privilege yet of seeing, or rather, experiencing myself how much sorority women really did care, plan, select.

“Well, what did you think of the houses?” Mrs. Harriet said. “Which one was your favorite?” As if her daughter liking the antebellum architecture of one house somehow correlated with the women in the sorority itself, or would increase her chances of getting into one more than the others.

“No, they all looked great. I don’t know,” she said.

This was a lie. I had been there with her, had walked down the row with her for the first time, in callow wonder of the columned, brick mansions, weeping willows and Southern live oaks twisting on front lawns. I knew which house she liked best because I liked it best too, but Hadley was annoyed with her mother and felt that admitting to her the awe she felt in the shadow of Theta Kappa’s imposing profile was like rendering all her sullen defensiveness at being treated like an idiot unjustified. But she was an idiot and so was I; we knew nothing of the planning and manipulation involved in Sorority Rush. We thought it was hors d’oeuvres and soda water with lemon and smiling a lot.

It was sunset when we had decided to stroll down sorority row and look at the houses we would soon be walking through. The water gleamed orange from the Southern setting sun, a

strange dusky fog settling, hovering over the surface of the lake. It was hot, humid August hot, but when the sun began to set, the wet air felt cool against our necks.

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VITA

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EDUCATION

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Survey of American Literature to the Civil War (Fall 2014, May 2013)

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Survey of American Literature since the Civil War (Fall 2013)

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AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

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CONFERENCES

2014 Reading: "Thin Bodies." Southern Writers, Southern Writing Conference.
 Creative Panel. University of Mississippi. Oxford, MS. 17 July 2014.

2014 Reading: "Thin Bodies." Isom Student Gender Conference. Creative Panel
 on "Outliers: Abroad and at Home." University of Mississippi.
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