

2014

# The Gallery and Other Stories

Adrienne Lang

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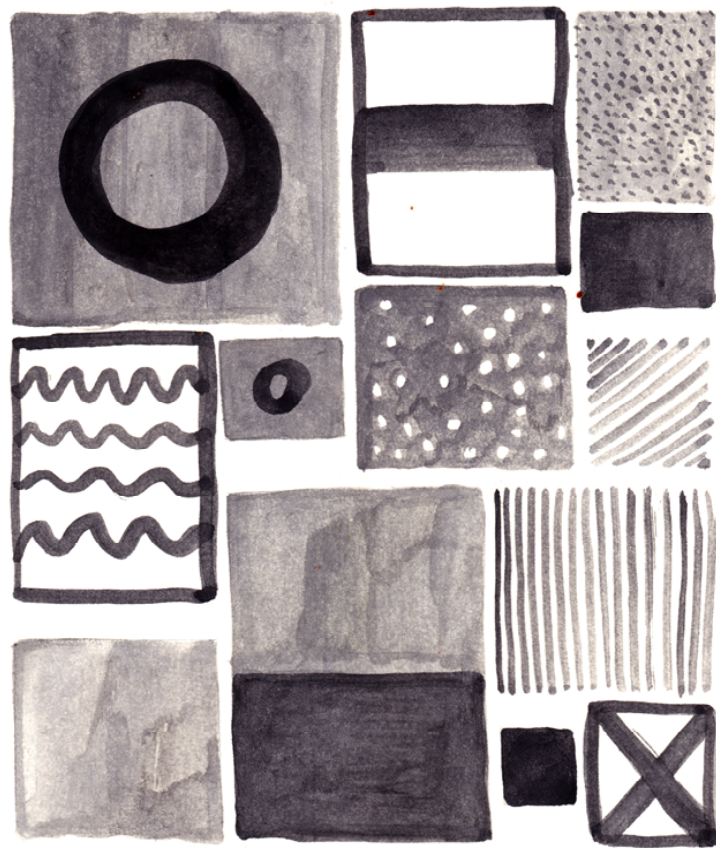
## Recommended Citation

Lang, Adrienne, "The Gallery and Other Stories" (2014). *Senior Capstone Projects*. 291.  
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# The Gallery

and other stories



Adrienne Lang

*The Gallery*  
*and other stories*

*by Adrienne Lang*  
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*Fall/Spring 2014*

## *Spread*

When they finally got to the gate and sat down to eat their lunches they discovered that they had been lied to; the sandwiches did have mayonnaise. It was impossible to miss the thick white spread on the bottom bun, only partially hidden beneath the lettuce leaf. Yet the boy at the kiosk had said there was none on the sandwiches, and furthermore, that there was no mayonnaise on any of the chain's sandwiches. He had been so friendly, so instantly likeable, and as the couple walked away with their food the wife had said to her husband, "He had a perfectly shaped head for a baseball cap." Her husband agreed, and they had left a generous tip in the jar beside the register.

Now they sat with a slice of bread in each hand, staring at the evidence of the boy's deception. Across the aisle, an old woman carefully peeled an orange inside of a zip-loc bag, her hands sheathed in blue plastic gloves. They could smell the skin as she tore it apart with her fingers.

Was it possible that the boy himself had been misinformed? Maybe when his manager had gotten to that part in the training, he had mistakenly heard "none of our sandwiches have mayo" when his manager had in fact said, "All of our sandwiches have mayo," and so far no one had corrected him. And perhaps not enough people asked about the presence of mayo, so that the misunderstanding had never been exposed. Perhaps mayo was not, for most people, the controversial spread the couple had thought it was.

Maybe, the husband imagined, it was simply a matter of laziness, or, to frame it more kindly, of fatigue. Maybe their order would have required the boy to make all new sandwiches from scratch instead of pulling the pre-made, plastic-wrapped ones from the

refrigerated case, and so he had lied to them to avoid the extra work. The boy probably woke at the crack of dawn and drove at least an hour from the other side of the city to work all day at the airport for minimum wage. In light of this tremendous effort, couldn't one small lapse be forgiven? And hadn't the husband himself taken shortcuts at the office or at home when he was tired, leaving a dish in the sink for his wife to wash, later claiming he had intended to clean it?

Beside him, his wife considered the darker possibility that it had not been laziness but an act of intentional hostility. The boy had looked at them and seen two yuppies with an expensive stroller, the kind of people who drank decaf lattes and fed their baby organic applesauce and were used to having everything just the way they wanted it. The wife began to grow angry. How dare the boy presume to know anything about the difficulty of her life.

But when her husband asked if they should return to the kiosk to ask for new sandwiches the wife shook her head no, and he was relieved. They were both afraid to return to the boy with the friendly face whom they had liked so much. They had felt a kind of brief but pure connection with him, the way you do with a stranger who pays you an unexpected kindness, and they were afraid if they went back he might roll his eyes, do something to prove that he was not the good person they had believed him to be. Or worse, that he would be just as polite as he was the first time, revealing that they were not the people they believed themselves to be. That they were touchy, suspicious, entitled.

The wife scraped at the bread with a small plastic knife and put the sandwiches back together as the woman across from them finished her orange, removed the gloves, and began chewing ice from a large cup. The couple ate, the sound of their chewing drowned out by the ice cracking, and watched the planes wheel around the tarmac outside. They found that they couldn't taste the mayonnaise at all, but they couldn't taste the sandwiches either.

## *The Funeral*

The twins had always assumed that they would die together, and when it eventually happened that way, they arranged for a joint funeral. The dead men wore identical suits and ties, identical haircuts, and lay in identical oak coffins in separate but identical rooms, so that visitors experienced a kind of morbid déjà vu as they passed from one room to the other to pay their respects, twice, in an identical fashion. The funeral parlor had neglected to put up name placards, making it impossible to tell who was who.

“He had the most beautiful singing voice,” a woman in one of the rooms said.

“No,” said a man, “I think that was the other one.”

In all ways other than appearance, the twins could not have been more different. The younger twin had been a nervous child, later a serious student. He had worked hard, avoided taking risks, respected his parents. He had carried out several faithful, monogamous relationships. But his life had been shadowed by a constant, crushing sense of anxiety and guilt, the belief that his well being depended on his following every rule, and the subsequent fear that he was wasting his life in a fruitless quest for perfection.

The older twin, on the other hand, had always been loud and fearless. He had been uninterested in the feelings of others, neglectful of his health and safety, irresponsible with money. He had done drugs, cheated, lied, stolen from friends, manipulated women. He had believed the world to be inherently malevolent, believed that because he had been hurt he owed nothing to anyone, and that every man was entitled to take pleasure where he could find it. Now, in death, the twins were the same, just as they had been at birth when they emerged one after the other, slimy and screaming, human beings but not yet people.

Throughout the night the twins' mother moved back and forth between the rooms in a slow, perpetual loop of grief. She tried to hold the image of one son in her mind as she went to view the other, but as soon as she arrived at the second coffin the memory of the first son had disappeared, replaced by the face of the second, which, was, of course, the same face. She hoped that if she continued to move back and forth in this way, she too, would be able to forget which son was which. The two identical bodies and two identical faces would gradually blur together, so that she could finally cease to think of one son as "good" and one as "bad," and thus relieve herself of the lifelong shame she had felt for loving one of her children more than the other. She could begin to think of them as two halves of one person that had somehow separated, an accident.

Later, when she goes to visit their graves, she will approach them from behind, so she cannot see the writing on the stones. She will kneel down, place her hands on the earth, and pray for her boys buried, identical and nameless, below.

## *The Gallery*

She was getting tired of men sending her pictures of their penises. It always happened at the worst times. She would be sitting having a cup of coffee with her mother, or in a meeting at work, and when she reached for her phone to check her messages, there was a dick on the desk.

Had this become common practice? Was the world in the midst of a penis-texting epidemic? Consultation with female friends supported this theory. Lately there was always a story in the news about some congressman or rapper. But the penises she received were never famous penises, and rarely wealthy penises. She couldn't make money by selling the photos or blackmailing their senders. Yet they continued to arrive, periodically slipping into her inbox in the night, waiting there for her to erase them. Somewhere in the far corners of the internet was a graveyard for all the unwanted, deleted penises.

"They're just so in love with it they want to share it with everyone," a friend said, but she disagreed. She saw little pride in the pictures, just shame and desperation. The penises were photographed like objects from a crime scene, cut off from the rest of the body. Out of context, they looked like lonely sea creatures.

She knew plenty of women who hated their own genitalia, who had spread their legs in front of a mirror as little girls and, horrified by what they had found there, never looked again. But women were lucky because their ugly thing was tucked away and hidden inside of them, while a man's stuck straight out in front. There was no avoiding it. And so they tried to foist it off on someone else.

Please just look at it, the pictures seemed to say. Maybe if you look, it will be better.



At some point she stopped throwing them away. That seemed too easy. How would the men know that the pictures had been discarded? They would never know that she had clicked delete and sent their messages to the trashcan. They might, instead, imagine her sitting in her dark bedroom, her face aglow in the light of their gift. She didn't want that.

She started saving them, and asked friends to forward her any pictures they received. After amassing a small collection, she printed them out and taped them to her living room wall. Her friends came over and studied the gallery, like visitors at a museum. It was fascinating, they agreed. There was so much diversity represented, so much variation in size and color. Some stood perfectly straight, while others veered slightly in one direction or the other. It was educational. She should make a website, someone suggested.

Occasionally men that wanted to sleep with her came into the living room and when they saw the gallery, panic formed in their eyes. The men would weigh their desire for sex against the threat of whatever it was they were looking at. They would look for the door, then for her breasts. And she would watch the comic swivel of their necks and feel a strange kind of pleasure, surprised by how good it felt to be cruel.

Oh, it's just a little collection. Who knows, she would say, with an arch of her eyebrow, you might be up there.

Their eyes would dart, searching. It was dizzying, like looking at intricate wallpaper and trying to find the point where the pattern repeated. They couldn't pick themselves out of the lineup, yet they saw themselves everywhere. It was akin to the feeling they sometimes experienced early in the morning or late at night, while shaving or brushing their teeth, when they stared into the mirror for too long and their eyes slid out of focus, and for a one fraction of a second they forgot that what they were seeing reflected in the glass was their own face

## *Birth*

A woman gives birth to a two-liter of Coca Cola. As she holds it for the first time and rocks it back and forth, she thinks that she had not expected motherhood to be so fizzy. She tries to hide her disappointment from her husband, who seems relieved by the cleanliness and lack of gore.

“Good shape,” he says.

“Yes,” she says, trying to sound bright. “I guess I’ve always liked cylinders.”

They bring the baby home and lay it in a crib next to their own bed and after gazing at it proudly for an appropriate amount of time, go to sleep. But the mother wakes several times in the night. She had expected thrashing, wailing, bad smells. Instead she hears silence. The father sleeps soundly, but the mother is troubled.

“This isn’t right,” she tells her husband in the morning.

“I think it’s fine,” says the father.

The father chooses to ignore unpleasantness whenever possible. So far this is working out well for him, except when his wife makes it difficult. His wife cannot shut her eyes to inconvenient truths. His wife will spot a stain the size of a chocolate chip on the corner of the rug and scrub at it with seltzer for as long as it takes to remove it. His wife stands in the bathroom at night, pulling at the loose flesh that has accumulated around her middle, instead of hiding it away in large pants and loose sweaters, as he does.

“But if you’re really worried,” he says.

They drive to the pediatrician’s office. The baby is strapped securely into its car seat, which doesn’t stop it from sloshing every time they turn a corner or hit a bump. The sound

makes the mother wince. She keeps twisting around to make sure everything is okay. It's the clearness, she thinks, the way you can see everything inside. She fears that at any moment all the liquid will come spraying out.

The husband munches on some old candy he left sitting in the cup holder.

"Skittle?" he offers.

In the examination room, the mother doesn't know what to do with the bottle. First she puts it down on its side, but it starts to roll toward the edge of the table, so she stands it upright.

The doctor walks in and shakes their hands without looking up from his clipboard.

"What seems to be the problem?" he asks.

"Our baby is a soda," says the mother.

"And a healthy one!" says the doctor, giving the bottle a pat. "You must be so proud."

The mother frowns.

"Have you tasted it yet?" asks the doctor.

"Have I what?" says the mother. She is starting to feel slightly hysterical. There are posters on the wall depicting the interiors of various human orifices which appear to her, now, beautifully pink and fleshy and unevenly shaped.

"Have you tasted it?"

"I'm not drinking my child!" the mother says.

"She only drinks diet," offers her husband.

"I myself prefer Pepsi," says the doctor, relieved by this chance to make small talk, "but my wife does the shopping and she likes Coke, and really, cola is cola and not worth arguing over."

The husband laughs politely and decides that he likes the doctor. He likes men who pretend not to take themselves seriously.

The two men look at the mother, who has grabbed the bottle from the table and hugs it to her chest. They exchange an uneasy look over the top of her head.

“Rest,” says the doctor, “is all you need. Rest for Mom and baby.” He gives the father a quick wink before leaving the room.

The mother invents projects to keep herself busy. She alphabetizes the spice cabinet and separates the spoons meant for soup from those meant for tea. She has an excess of nervous energy. The baby needs nothing. It sits quietly and gleams.

She becomes excited, one night, when the label begins to peel, but a bit of Scotch tape fixes the problem easily, and afterward she sits back and stares at the result, hoping guiltily for something more to go wrong.

She reads parenting books. She flips through the pages, desperate for useful information. There are chapters on feeding, sleeping, rashes, and how to ignore your baby when it cries, but nothing on plastic, except which types are safe and which ones contain BPA and should be avoided. The books are eventually abandoned, relegated to the bottom shelf of a dusty bookcase.

She goes for walks, which doesn't help. The streets are too full of moving, living things. Leaves fall from the trees and spin past her face or get tangled in her hair, like bats. Children shriek and threaten to run in front of cars only to be rescued, at the last second, by the arm of a distracted nanny. The sight of a dog humping a fire hydrant brings the mother, inexplicably, to tears.

A friend suggests shopping will make her feel better. The mother doubts this of this, but decides to try it anyway. While shopping doesn't always make her feel better, it rarely makes her feel worse.

This time it does. She goes to the baby boutique and flips through racks of tiny clothing with armholes, designed for children with appendages and digits. She holds a fleece onesie, sadly rubbing the feet as a nervous saleswoman watches from across the room, then buys a tiny knitted cap and thinks she understands what it must be like to be a fat woman leaving a store with just a pair of shoes, the only thing that fits.

The mother begins to have nightmares. In one, she picks up a glass of soda and drinks from it, only to discover that it is actually a glass of acid. It burns a perfectly round hole in the center of her tongue and when she sticks it out her husband tries to toss breath-mints through it, like a beanbag game.

In another dream the bottle explodes. The cap flies off and hits her in the face, giving her a black eye that never fades.

In another her husband walks into the kitchen and finds her pouring the contents of the bottle down the sink. The brown liquid comes out with a glug, then hisses and foams around the drain.

“Too sweet,” she says, shaking her head. “It’s much too sweet.”

## *The Yard*

Dear X,

At the end of your letter you told me to take care of myself, so I went out and bought an axe. It was so heavy -- why didn't I expect that? I took it and went to what used to be *our* and is now only *my* yard. Both of those pronouns are just figures of speech, of course, since I only rent an apartment in the building and don't own the yard or anything in it, including the tree, which, legally, I did not have the right to cut down.

This is the tree, as you'll remember, that we had sex beneath on the night that we first met, when we were both too happy and drunk to worry about any of the cars or homeless people going down the alley in the dark. I scratched my back on the bark and my face on your beard and both were rubbed pink and raw.

Afterward, you were pink too. You said you were allergic to pines. What a stupid allergy! I thought. I asked, what about Christmas? And you said you were Jewish and I said that was lucky.

The tree wasn't that big, but it took me almost an hour to fell it. (I looked that word up in the dictionary, to make sure it was correct. It feels wrong to use a past tense verb for an action done in the present. *To cut down (a tree)*, my dictionary says, *or, alternately, to beat or knock down [someone or something].*) I'm not very strong and have lived in the city all my life. Until now I had only seen axes in cartoons. I figured out that when you swing an axe you use your legs and your stomach more than your arms. You have to put your whole body into it. I hacked away in short, clumsy blows. As I got close to the end I became nervous that the

tree would fall and crush me, and so I would take a swing and then dart across the yard, leaving the axe lodged in the trunk and the tree still upright but teetering. Some neighbors watched me from their porches.

I heard you're moving to Los Angeles, where they don't have pine trees. I don't know what kind of trees grow there. Oleanders, palm trees, maybe. Those sound more beautiful, better for pinning a woman up against.

This tree is still lying in the yard. So far, everyone has been too lazy to remove it. The openings in the fence are small, and the fence itself is too tall to heave the dead tree over, as one of the men from the building tried to do. The landlord visits rarely, as you'll remember. If and when he does, there's a good chance he won't even notice the change.

Best Wishes,

Me

## *Warning*

I was getting tired of no one listening to me when I speak, so I ran into a room and yelled, “The building is on fire!” I watched the people streaming out, pushing one by one through the small exit. When the room had emptied I walked calmly to the window. I looked down at everyone standing outside on the lawn with their hands on their hips squinting up at the sky, looking for smoke. I wondered if they could see the small, pale circle of my face behind the glass.

I stayed there watching them for a little while. And then the fire department showed up, and of course they were upset when they found out that there wasn’t a fire. Fires, death, these are things you’re not supposed to joke about. Except I wasn’t joking. How can I explain it? I can only say that I needed to be able to say something and to see something else happen as a direct consequence of me saying what I said. I needed to speak and have everyone stop, put down their sandwiches and their cell phones and pay attention to me, the small-headed, shaky-voiced person waving her hands back and forth at the front of the room. Because so often I feel that when words leave my mouth they just turn into air that other people inhale, and that air goes into their lungs and then their blood, and then my words fuel those people as they think and move and go about their day. And so when no one listens, I start to think that to be crass is the only way to be heard. I think that I need to be loud and say ugly things and sometimes tell lies that will make people react.

But then sometimes I think that the best thing to do is to not say anything at all. To walk out alone, shut the door behind me, and let everybody burn.



## *The Proposal*

On the day my father proposed to my mother, Frank Fergusson murdered Rich Bernstein in the basement of DesignCo, a company that made vertical blinds and ugly, flame-retardant fabrics used in hospitals and nursing homes. My mother worked there as a secretary and my father was a manager in the warehouse, where he was put in charge of a shifting group of alcoholics and recently released convicts that he had no say in hiring.

My father tells it like this. He was working late one night, cutting something with a table saw, when a thought arrived: he would ask my mother marry him. At that point they had been dating for only two months. He doesn't mention anything about love. He describes it as a compulsion, bordering on possession. The idea came to him and he knew that he would do it. Until that night, he had believed he would never get married. But it was as if he had dared himself, and couldn't back down.

The next morning he went out and bought a ring. This part of the story lacks details – he doesn't remember where he bought it or how much it cost, only that it cost most of what he had, which was almost nothing, and that it wasn't very nice.

I don't know why he proposed to her at work. Maybe he was too nervous to wait. Maybe he knew that the details wouldn't matter. He says he knew that she would say yes.

He came into work an hour late. While he was hanging up his coat, Frank was heading down to the basement to meet Rich. My father took the ring out of his coat pocket to look at it one last time before going upstairs to the office. He opened and closed the lid four times, the same number of times that Frank bashed Rick in the back of the skull with a

lead pipe. If you like, you can imagine the timing lined up just so, so that each hollow snap of the box echoed the thud of metal on bone one floor below.

The murder came down to money, everyone found out later. Rich had loaned Frank a few thousand dollars that Frank couldn't repay, and he was too ashamed to face Rich, Frank told the police during his confession. He didn't know how to tell him he didn't have his money.

That morning my father rode the elevator up to the fifth floor with another man, who looked familiar to him, though he didn't know why. He told the man he was going to propose to his girlfriend and that she was going to say yes. The man laughed and told him congratulations, that it was good news.

My mother did say yes, of course. She didn't notice the cheapness of the ring, or else she loved it regardless. It fit perfectly on her thin finger. The other people in the office stood up and clapped. That was when someone ran in to share the news about the murder. After he did it, Frank had walked into Accounting and told his boss what had happened. He had sat down at his desk and waited calmly for the police to come and arrest him.

Then my father knew why the man in the elevator had seemed familiar. He realized that the man was Frank, his blonde hair turned dark with blood.

My mother was frightened and started to cry. My father took her hand. As he held it, he felt the ring's band pressing into his palm, the metal cold and smooth and foreign against his skin.

## *The Soup*

It probably happened while she was cutting up the carrots. It would have stood out against the onions or the bright green celery, which she chopped first, and so it was with the carrots that the tip must have slid into the pot (the tip of a carrot looking not unlike the tip of a finger) before she even realized she was bleeding.

My mother was an elegant woman, but never fussy. She wrapped her hand tightly in gauze and a bandage. She set the table and ladled the soup into bowls.

My brother ate sucked from his spoon through puckered lips while I stirred slowly, watching my reflection in the broth. My father seemed to have left his mind back in the family room, where the TV still played. Every time he took a sip steam rose up from the bowl and the lenses of his glasses shined with fog, making him appear like a cartoon character, or a cat in the dark.

My mother only told us after we had finished eating. She held up her bandaged hand then dropped it quickly from sight, as if to discourage us from thinking too much about it. The three of us looked around at one another, exchanging the unspoken question.

At the time I wondered how she could be so nonchalant about it, how she could go about collecting plates and silverware and humming while a sliver of her own flesh was dissolving at the bottom of someone's stomach. I remember the way her hair looked, perfectly curled, and the precise outline of her lipstick that extended all the way into the hard-to-reach corners of her mouth. I realize that I am currently the age that my mother was then, or close to it, and I think that by now I've sacrificed enough of myself that a fingertip would feel like nothing, just so much dead skin. Now I understand that the painful part is

not the slice of the knife but the smile you wear afterward, as you clear away the remains of the day.

# *Muse*

“Never date an artist,” my father, an artist, once told me. “They’re all in it for themselves. You have to be selfish to make something beautiful.”

I was fifteen. We were at a museum standing in front of a Picasso, a painting of his girlfriend that looked nothing like a woman, and I thought of my mother at home, vacuuming or pounding out chicken breasts with a mallet.

My father made huge paintings of female nudes that sold for tens of thousands of dollars and hung in major museums. The canvases took up entire walls in his studio, the bodies forming entire, sprawling landscapes. A single areola was a like a black hole. Standing in front of it, you felt you might fall in and drown.

He hired assistants to help him paint, a dozen or more people crouched on scaffolding and dabbing away at the enormous women, like paleontologists excavating a dinosaur with toothbrushes. Sometimes as a teenager I worked for him, too. I was allowed to paint the less important parts, the backgrounds, or the toes.

Models came and went. Some of them were beautiful and some of them weren't.

In art school, my father said, the models went out to smoke on their breaks wearing nothing but trench coats. I pictured a huddle of women shivering on the street corner, ballerinas with bruised feet, or something equally glamorous. But he said they were mostly other art students, girls with long braids and hairy legs who idolized Frieda Kahlo. I wondered about those art school girls and how many, if any, my father had loved. He had a few photo albums from the time, all of them only half full, and I searched the pages of seventies sepia for female faces. They would be unusual women, I thought, strange and

worldly and bold, the kind of women I hoped to become. But they were disappointingly normal. They had brown hair. They wore glasses and turtlenecks.

Against my father's warning I dated a sculptor named Len in my early twenties. He was ten years older than me and was always trying to teach me something. In art museums he would lead me by the hand to, say, a Degas bronze, to gesture at some particularly beautiful curve of anatomy. But I always preferred Degas's bathers, the one that turns away from the viewer and crouches, egg-like, in a washtub, revealing nothing more than the white curve of her back.

I made watercolors of seashells, rocks, buttons and other things you could find between the cracks of sidewalk or at the bottom of a coat pocket, and I made the paintings as small as the things themselves, using a magnifying lens and a three-haired brush. I was technically skilled, Len said, but lacked *vision*. What was it that I was trying to say?

Nothing. I was trying to say, 'This is a pebble. This is a coin. I paint what I see,' I told him. That's it.

I sold the drawings for a few hundred dollars a piece to people who wanted art that would fit neatly above the fireplace and not offend visitors.

## *The Ugly Man and the Movie Star*

An ugly man had an affair with a movie star. I can't tell you which one, but you might be able to guess. She may or may not have been blonde. She may or may not have had a beauty mark on her upper lip.

It was only one night. No one found out about it and no one talked about it afterward. It was perfect because it was impossible. No one would have imagined that the short, balding, pot-bellied, near-sighted man could ever be with such a famous, beautiful woman.

But even though no one knew about the man, no tabloid wrote about him, and no fans gossiped about him, the movie star, who slept with hundreds of men and forgot almost all of them, always remembered him. She remembered how they had sat in her hotel room that evening drinking scotch, and how, while getting up from his chair, he had spilled his drink on her dress. She remembered how instead of taking her dress off then, he had knelt on the floor and dabbed at the skirt with a paper napkin.

## *The Tree*

A woman came home to find that her boyfriend had turned into a tree. This was just as well. She was tired of always worrying about where he went when he wasn't with her, and what he did, and who he talked to at work, and what he looked at on his computer, and who he emailed, and what he bought, and what he was thinking about all of the times that she had asked "What are you thinking about?" and he had said, "Oh, nothing."

Even better, he turned into a fig tree, and every morning she woke to a pile of fresh fruit that had ripened overnight and dropped to the floor. She sliced them up and ate them on her cereal. She liked to think that this was his way of apologizing to her, as a tree, for all of the things she suspected he had done as a man.



## *My Old Friend on the Internet*

I have an old friend who posts a lot of pictures of herself on the Internet. I don't like it because:

1. She's a lot prettier now than she was when we were friends.
2. Now she's prettier than me, whereas I was always the prettier one.
3. She lives far away and we no longer speak, but I see her all the time.
4. I miss her. I'm not in any of the pictures with her, nor have I taken any of the pictures.

If she's not going to be my friend any more, I would like her to just disappear, please.

## *Gifts*

I'm dating a man that has a lot more money than I have. Most of the time we pretend that it isn't an issue, though most of the time it is, at least for me. The problem is that I wish that I had more money than I have. But whenever my boyfriend offers to spend his money on me I always refuse, because I don't believe it's right to spend money that I haven't earned.

Instead I watch him spend the money that he's earned on himself and feel bitter, because even though I believe it's wrong to spend other people's money, I also believe that I deserve to have all of the nice things that I can't afford.

Last week he offered to buy me a coat. It was beautiful, made of shaggy white lambs wool and fashionably oversized. It enveloped my small body and made me look, he said, like an adorable yeti.

We were at the store where he was buying new shirts for work, and after trying the coat on I kept walking past it to stroke the sleeve and look again at the price tag in the hope that I had misread it the previous time. I rolled my eyes and tried to convince myself that to charge so much for a coat was not only shocking, but offensive. It cost seven hundred dollars.

My boyfriend said he'd like to buy it for me. I told him thank you but no, unfortunately I couldn't accept a gift like that.

Afterward, I let him buy me a cup of coffee. I realized that although I insisted on splitting dinners and movie tickets, I always allowed him to pay for my coffee at cafes. It was a negligible expense, two dollars and fifty cents for a cup at our usual place, and it seemed to

make him happy. This time, while he paid for our drinks, I waited at a table by the window facing the street and I did some math.

I estimated that we got coffee at least two times a week, sometimes as many as four or five when we had nothing better to do. If we averaged fifteen coffee stops per month (a conservative estimate), at two dollars and fifty cents per cup, that meant he spent about forty dollars per month on my coffee. By that time we'd been dating for around a year and a half, or eighteen months. At forty dollars per month, that came out to seven hundred dollars, more or less.

Any pride I felt for refusing the coat disappeared. My own coat hung from my shoulders, as if I were being weighed down by its cheapness. When my boyfriend returned we sat quietly and drank while I stared out the window. My face must have looked strange because he asked me what was wrong, if the coffee tasted bad.

I said it was fine. I was thinking about all of the things that I would have to pay for that month, like my rent. Like groceries, and gas, and a present for a friend's wedding.

I had made a mistake. I saw that I often abandoned my morals, that, in fact, I did it all the time, but always at the wrong time. Always when there was too little in it for me.

## *The Wines of Bolivia*

The reason Bolivian women have such beautiful skin is because of the Bolivian wines. While most alcohol leaves the drinker parched and puffy-eyed the next day, a drinker of Bolivian wine will rise in the morning with the rosy flush of drunkenness still in her cheeks. They say it's because of the sun, that it shines longer on the skin of the grapes, which produces more of some substance (no one can remember the word). But maybe the grapes absorb something of the sun itself, and it's this stolen sunlight that radiates out from the faces of the Bolivian women.

When this beautifying effect was discovered, the American women flocked to Bolivia. They toured the Bolivian vineyards with their husbands in tow, and at the end of the night their husbands drove back to the hotels, carrying their drunk, sleeping wives to their rooms. They watched television in bed while the wives snored beside them, misting them with yeasty breath. But when the Americans woke the next morning, they were disappointed to find that the women were no more beautiful than they had been the day before. Their skin contained none of the sought-after Bolivian blush, but remained dull and wan, the only pink to be found in the ugly jag of a burst blood vessel. It appeared that the wines alone did not produce the desired effect; the magic was only activated when the contents of the grapes reacted with the contents of women who had grown from the same Bolivian soil.

The most determined Americans brought cases of wine back to the States for further study. Various chemistry experiments were performed in labs, where things were distilled and isolated and extracted, the extractions turned into pills and creams that proved useless upon clinical testing. In the end, a cosmetics company found that blending the

reduced wines with a makeup base produced a kind of creamy rouge that, when rubbed onto the cheeks, artificially approximated the sought-after flush. They packaged the product in three-ounce tubes and sold it in drugstores nationwide for a very reasonable \$5.99.

## *The Rock*

The meteorite exploded over the city at seven A.M. on a Friday in late January, the first event of its kind in nearly a century. As it descended, the mass expanded rapidly outward until the horizon was, for a brief moment, saturated with light. Children being driven to school that morning saw the flaming streak and cried out from the back seats of cars, thinking the sun was falling from the sky.

Traffic on the roads slowed to a stop right before the single, deafening boom rang out, followed by the chaos of hundreds of car alarms. A radio DJ, hearing about the event but unaware of the extent of the damage, began to play *Great Balls of Fire*, until his boss appeared outside the booth gesturing for him to cut the song short. Unable to resist an opportunity, the DJ apologized to listeners for “failing to grasp the gravity of the situation.”

The city’s children would later learn in school that the visible phenomenon produced when a meteoroid passes through the Earth’s atmosphere is called a meteor. It isn’t a meteorite until reaches the ground. The children closed their eyes and tried to conjure up the fiery blip on the dark screen of memory, thinking, *Meteor, meteor, meteor, meteorite*. But these technical terms proved too complicated for everyone besides scientists and third grade meteorologists, and the citizens came to refer to the meteorite simply as “the Rock.”

When the Rock exploded it produced a force exceeding that of a small nuclear device, shattering the windows of buildings. Offices and schools were evacuated and hundreds of people arrived in emergency rooms, cut and bleeding, with shards of glass embedded in their skin like mosaic in stucco.

After the explosion the citizens were, understandably, nervous. Traumatized children took to their crayons to design defense programs that, while unbuildable, were no less absurd than many proposed by adults. Common solutions included giant nets strung across the earth like a soccer goal, enormous, horseshoe-shaped magnets, and metal Meteorite Protection Suits, a cross between space suits and medieval coats of armor. The federal government proposed the development of a national Spaceguard program, to increase the effort to study and monitor Near Earth Objects, as well as the creation of a disaster response force specifically devoted to disasters caused by outer space debris.

The problem with planning for disaster, of course, is that the same disaster rarely happens twice, and if it does, the second instance is almost always separated from the first by years, often hundreds or thousands. By then people have forgotten, or the story of the last disaster has been so completely transformed from history into myth that the threat is rendered null. Every year, hundreds of citizens gather in the city park for a festival commemorating the Explosion of the Rock, where a group of children selected from the local elementary schools, dressed all in silver, gather to perform the Meteoroid Dance. There they parade back and forth across the stage in a clumsy shuffle, giggling at the strangeness of their new metallic legs.

## *The Gifts of the Magi*

A woman was growing older and losing all of her hair. It came out in strands, then in longer strands, then in handfuls. There was nothing to be done about it, but she didn't want to throw it away. Her hair had been important to her. So she saved it in a box, and by the time she was nearly bald she had collected enough to knit a shirt and cap for her husband.

The shirt and cap were not comfortable, but they were certainly interesting. Everywhere he wore them, the husband received compliments on his hairy clothing, though he no longer received compliments on his wife.

A man learned that he was going to die. He hated the thought that his wife would be left alone. Not because he would miss her, though he would, or because he didn't want her to be lonely without him, which he did, but because he didn't think it was fair that she should get to go on being alive while he had to be dead.

He had an artist friend carve his effigy out of wood then shaved off his hair and had all his teeth and finally his fingernails removed, and applied these details to the wooden man with strong craft glue, to give to his wife as a parting gift.

Shortly after he had finished the project, his doctor told him that his situation had changed. It appeared that he would not die after all. The bald, toothless, but still living man went home to his wife and the wooden man to tell them the news. This was difficult for his wife to take. She could accept the fact of a dead husband, but she didn't know what to do with two half husbands.



## *Disaster*

The first thing we noticed was the eggs. Something was different about them. The whites stretched too far when cracked, almost six inches without breaking, and the baked goods stopped rising properly. Our wives shook their heads at the cakes, flat and inedible in the bottoms of the pans. For birthdays, we switched to ice cream, which, of course, was no good for candles. But by that time the matches had gone bad, too. We had to strike through a whole book searching for the one that would light, and pretty soon none of them would. We threw them away, or gave them to the kids to use for crafts. It felt like we were traveling backward through the history of human progress, first to the days before leavening, then the days before cooking, before man learned to make fire.

Soon after that, the plants began to die. It wasn't so much a shriveling, like you would expect, as the opposite, an over-saturation. The fruits swelled with liquid then dropped off and rotted in piles that smelled sweet at first, later sour. We tried to save as much as possible. We collected the pulp in stray pots and jars, but all we could do was stomp it into different types of mush. We called the mush by different names to make it more tolerable: soup, porridge, purée. It all tasted rotten. Pretty soon we ran out of mush, too. We had long emptied our pantries of instant noodles, eaten dry like crackers, and tinned meat.

By that time the women had all gone blind, so they couldn't see how thin they were becoming. We told our wives they were beautiful, then hid our faces and wept for their lost breasts, their perfect, heart-shaped bottoms. Of course they knew, eventually. They could feel their hipbones poking through the fabric of their skirts, the way their tailbones stung when they got up from sitting on a hard chair. They cried into our necks, asking the same

questions again and again: Why? Why us? And we responded, the way we always did, even when we didn't have an answer, because it was our job to know things. We said it's not our fault. We've done nothing wrong. There's no use thinking that way. We said, There are still good things left.

And then all of the children turned into fish. We woke one morning to find them flapping and gasping in their beds and scooped them up, rushing them to the bathtub or the kitchen sink, where they swam lazy laps. They were giant goldfish, yellow and so fat they were almost round, like peaches.

We decided seven days was the right amount of time to wait. Then we reduced it to five. After three days, we decided, finally, that there was no chance they would turn back into humans.

We built a bonfire in Rod Thompson's backyard. Rod sat hunched over on the ground for hours with a magnifying glass until he got a small pile of leaves to burn. We didn't tell our wives, but soon the smell of smoke and meat drew them out from the houses and they wandered toward us, leaning on one another, feeling their way through the dark.

## *The Visitor*

A visitor came while we were asleep. She rearranged our furniture, filled our fridge with groceries, and brought flowers for the kitchen, a bowl of purple lilacs, which appeared to have been stolen from the bush in our neighbor's yard. They perfumed the house with their smell.

When we found the visitor in the morning, she acted like she knew us. Surprised, we played along. At first we were sure we didn't know her, but then we were less sure. Sitting at our kitchen table, she looked too comfortable to be strange. Drinking tea, she held the cup the way you hold a thing you're not afraid of breaking. She didn't use a coaster. She looked us in the eye.

Of course, we couldn't ask her to leave, after everything she had done for us.

## *Paris*

At sixteen, in Paris, I spread ketchup on bread and ate it while a boy I had only just met watched. We were at an overpriced restaurant that served steak frites to tourists. I didn't eat steak, and when I asked the waiter for a salad *sans fromage* he looked at me as if I had asked for the moon on a plate.

The boy was a little bit in love with me. I think he was charmed by the idea of a girl who put condiments on all the wrong things. A vegan in Paris was equally rare; he must have thought this meant I was strong-willed and moral. The truth is that I was starving, the bread tasted terrible, I had no idea why I had put ketchup on it, I hated Paris, and the boy was boring and ugly, but I would have spread my own brain on a slice of bread if it meant that he would keep watching me eat.

## *Driver's Ed.*

I wake up and, in order to avoid doing everything else, decide to study for my permit test. I find a practice test online and get a sixty-eight percent, a failing grade. The questions are either so syntactically convoluted you can't understand what they're asking, or so easy they seem like a trick:

Is it permissible to make a left turn on red from a one-way street onto another one-way street that moves traffic to the left?

(Answer: Yes.)

True or false: According to state law, all passengers must wear a seatbelt.

(Answer: False.)

I read a few of these questions to my mother, who doesn't know the answers either. Apparently people that drive don't know very much about driving. They just drive.

I study my instruction booklet, which was written for high school students and features photos of people ten years younger than me wearing baseball caps and brightly colored backpacks. The kids in the pictures look really excited about learning to drive. No one looks worried, or even neutral.

I imagine all of the things that could go wrong when I'm behind the wheel of a car: the brakes go out while I'm doing eighty on the highway; I run over and decapitate a small child. Whenever I get nervous about traveling I remind myself that I'm statistically more likely to

die in a car accident than a plane crash, which has made me feel better about flying, but worse about driving.

I don't trust myself to light a match, much less operate a motor vehicle. Too often I feel foggy-headed and spacey, something I attribute to unpredictable blood sugar. On more than one occasion I've suddenly become so hungry I found it difficult to walk down a flight of stairs. Now I keep a small bag of emergency raisins in my pocket at all times.



I confess my worries to Jon, who calls me a baby. This enrages me because he's hit the nail on the head. Driving is, after all, the final step in the natural progression of human movement, after crawling and walking.



At work, I disconnect the call that I'm trying to transfer again. I do this at least once a week, pushing the buttons in the wrong order so the line goes dead before the intended recipient can answer. My boss comes down the stairs and asks, Was that a call for me? And I say, They hung up. It must have been a wrong number.

You would think that after the first few times I made the mistake I would remember the order of the buttons, but the more times I mess up the more I panic when the phone rings, and the more difficult the task becomes. I even wrote out instructions to myself on a note card, which I prop up on the desk next to the phone, but sometimes in the moment I get so anxious that I can't even read it.

The phone feels like a bomb that could explode at any second. My heart rate slows considerably whenever I leave the office.

Walking to the bus stop after work, I pass car after car parked on the street, big metal containers filled with more buttons



I might summarize the entire twenty-two year history of my brain as a battle between boredom and anxiety.



Tonight, while having dinner with my parents, a man in a small plane passes back and forth overhead while we eat dinner on the porch.

Oh! my mom says. That's the kind of plane I've always wanted to fly.

This is shocking. It's impossible to imagine her flying a plane, or ever wanting to. My mom, like me, is afraid of almost everything.

I make the mistake of saying this and she becomes so upset she tears up.

I am not, she says. Why would you say that to me?



More than anything, I'm afraid of people being mad at me. I think I would rather die in an accident than live to face another angry driver.

I read a news story about a trucker in England who hit a man on a bicycle and drove five miles with both the cyclist and the bike stuck to the front of his truck. In the end the cyclist was fine, though understandably upset. But I think I can understand the driver's position. The whole time he kept going he must have been trying to think of what he would say to the man he had just hit. He probably wanted to delay the conversation for as long as possible.



I have a dream that I've had before. The basic plot is this: I'm driving and I can't control the car. This time I'm heading down a busy road and unintentionally drift into the left turn lane. Having no other choice, I begin to turn, fumbling for the signal, which I only manage to find once I'm halfway through with the turn. I end up in an alley, where I stop. No one gets hurt, and nothing really bad happens, except that I fail at something that's supposed to be simple.



At the DMV a friendly but slow-typing Pakistani man helps me fill out my forms. There's some confusion about one section. The solution is simple, and once we arrive at it, the man explains it to me another four times through. Each time I smile and say thank you, and this prompts him to nod and start all over again. He seems so happy to have been helpful that he doesn't want the experience to end.

I take my form to the cashier, a less friendly Korean man who stares at me blankly when I give him my money. I start to wonder if I've given him the wrong amount, but then he directs me to the testing area, a little corral of school desks manned by three young black



women. One of the women slaps a packet down in front of me and explains the rules. She rolls her eyes when I say thank you.

Everyone at the DMV treats me like I'm dumb. I wonder if it's something about me, specifically, or if they treat everyone this way. Maybe that's the first thing you learn when you start working here: Assume that everyone is stupid.

All I can think about as I take the test is that if I fail, the woman will laugh at me.

I don't fail! When I turn in my answers, one of the other three girls tells me that I have pretty handwriting. I get my permit, which is just a piece of paper with some crap printed on it.

After dinner Jon and I go to a nearby school parking lot, which is small and circular, like a go-kart track. It's good for practicing tight turns. After a few loops around I become overly confident. Driving isn't so hard after all! I start dancing to the radio and winging around the corners. I practice driving with one hand, my other elbow propped casually on the window ledge.

Jon convinces me to drive the two blocks back to his apartment. I go at nine mph and roll through two stop signs, but I make it without crashing or having a panic attack.



There's no good reason why I didn't learn to drive at fifteen along with everybody else I know. I just never signed up for the class. Once my friends could drive, there was even less reason to learn. They took me where I needed to go.

Here's my reason for learning now: shame. Like a lot of things, driving is something I don't particularly want to do, but feel like I should do in order to be a respectable person, like occasionally wear an outfit that doesn't double as pajamas.

What if there's an emergency, my dad asks me, and no one else is around, and you need to get someplace quickly?

I say, Isn't that what an ambulance is for?

Well, not that kind of emergency, he says. A slightly less serious emergency.

I remind him of the time when I was four and stuck a dried bean too far up my nose. My mom took me on the bus to the doctor's office, and I was fine.

Well, he huffs.



Shame has been a great motivating force in my life. I think I can fairly attribute almost all of my major accomplishments to it.



Jon takes me to the cemetery to practice. It's like our own private obstacle course, complete with fake roads, stop signs, and hundreds of corpses.

You can't kill anyone if they're already dead, he says.

The problem is that every time I finish practicing I feel so relieved and accomplished that I don't feel the need to practice again for weeks. At this rate I'll be buried in this cemetery without ever getting a license.



I disconnect the phone twice today and go to the bathroom for a few minutes to cry. Then I lie and say I have a migraine so I can leave work early. I just walk around the neighborhood for an hour, walk around the grocery store for another hour, and come home at the normal time.



Today I drive around the block twelve times, in the clockwise direction. To go the other way would require left-turns and passing through two-way streets, something I'm definitely not ready for yet.

I once had a friend whose mother had been in a bad accident and refused to make any left turns. It took them twenty minutes to drive to church, when they lived a mile away. It was faster to walk.

At the time I thought it was ridiculous, but now I think, Good for her. I've come to admire people that can cling so stubbornly to the ridiculous.

She got to mass on time every Sunday. Who cares how long it took?



When I was five, I intentionally rode my bike down the back steps. I remember the events clearly, (standing at the top, looking down; the jolting sensation, a blur, then the shock of

impact, followed by pain) but none of the thought process. That kind of daring was so uncharacteristic I still can't believe that I did it.

Maybe the people at the DMV are on to something. Maybe there's something to be said for stupidity.



Outside of my apartment, someone has run over a frog. I live far from any source of water; it must be someone's pet, or else it was run over somewhere else and transported here on the bottom of a tire. It's thin and grey like a dead leaf, but the frog shape is unmistakable. Its legs are stretched out in mid-crawl.

I stare at it for a little while. I think, One day I could do that. I could flatten a thing to death.

I remember a part in *Harriet the Spy*, where Harriet writes in her notebook that she would like to write a story about her nanny's mother, a fat woman, getting run over by a truck. Whenever I read that part as a child I felt a little prick of glee, followed by guilt. You aren't supposed to enjoy the idea of killing another person. But there was something pleasing about the thought, the big round woman popping under the weight of the tires like a balloon, or a zit.



Tonight I can't sleep. It's one of those nights where I'm awake for so long that I start to feel like I'm going insane, that I would do anything in order to lose consciousness. This turns

quickly to the thought that I won't sleep at all. I'll just stay up until morning. I'll get so much done.

I walk around the apartment and eat a few snacks. Then I go to the living room and look out the window at the still dark street. Jon's car is parked there, the black paint gleaming beneath the streetlamp.

Something people like about cars is that they allow you to leave whenever you want. You can drive across the city on a whim. You can leave the city. You can hop in the car in the middle of the night and drive right out of your life.

I could take the keys from the dining room table, slip out the front door without waking Jon up. I could pull out from the curb, making sure to turn the wheel the right way -- always the opposite of what I think it should be -- and float away into the dark.

I remember the five-year-old boy that was on the news a few years ago, who stole his mom's car and drove four miles before the police stopped him. The boy told them that he was out of Cheerios and was going to the store to buy more. He made it four whole miles! If the police hadn't stopped him, maybe he could have gone further.

It's simple, I realize now. The trick to doing anything is just to fail to understand that there's any reason why you can't.

## *Acknowledgments*

Any writer of very short fiction owes a huge debt to Lydia Davis, master of the form and patron saint of odd literary women everywhere. One night freshman year, during a particularly bad spot of melancholy, I wandered to the school library to browse for books and left with her collected stories. Reading them made me feel better in some way that I couldn't articulate at the time. I think it was comforting to encounter a fellow neurotic brain, and inspiring to see it transformed on the page. The short short form was new to me as well, and exciting. I started to practice writing sentences in my journal, exploring how just one or two lines could carry an entire narrative. I am deeply grateful to her for exploding my notion of what a story is and can be.

Over the course of the year Amitava Kumar helped me to identify and develop an aesthetic. More than once he rescued me from the pit of artistic self-loathing with a few simple words. Sometimes all I really needed was to hear: "This is great. Keep going."

Having a captive group of readers to bounce material off of was an invaluable part of the writing process. This collection would be an inferior product if not for the good taste and generous attention of my Senior Comp classmates.

In February I read one of my stories at an event, my first public reading. I was nervous. My friend and housemate Lauren Stamm came to see me and laughed at all the right moments. If no one else had laughed, I would have been happy.

My boyfriend Tom starts almost every statement about my work with, “Well, I don’t know anything about writing, but…” and goes on to finish it with something helpful and supportive. Talking to him always reminds me how many different kinds of creativity exist, and are needed. I will take him, flaws included, over a fig tree any day.

Parents are often the ultimate patrons. Mine are two of the most creative and hard-working people I know. They’ve always encouraged me to make things, and allowed me the privacy I needed to do so.