MOONCALF: ESSAYS

by

BY SHAMALA GALLAGHER

(Under the Direction of Ed Pavlić)

ABSTRACT

"Mooncalf: Essays" is a collection envisioning the open/experimental essay as the terrain where poetry breaks down in face of the social. In particular, the essay form makes itself necessary for grappling with the complexities of identity, privilege, and passing. Intertwining personal confession with cultural criticism, the book fixates on race, addiction, trauma, and neurodivergence, asking what it means for one's own suffering to "count." It explores the writer's relationship to the wealthy Silicon Valley ethnoburb where she grew up, as well as to the impoverished and gentrifying neighborhoods in various cities where she later worked in homeless services.

INDEX WORDS: racial mixing, queer studies, homelessness, sexual violence, mental illness, alcoholism, class in America, Indian Americans, Asian Americans, Silicon Valley, families, essays

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DEDICATION, DEFINITIONS

For my mother, Vijaya, though I hope she won't read it.

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MOONCALF, n. *OED*.

a. A mole (mole *n.4*), a false conception. Now *rare*.
Formerly regarded as being produced by the influence of the moon.

...

1658 tr. G. della Porta *Nat. Magick* ii. ii. 29 A certain woman..brought forth in stead of a child, four Creatures like to frogs... But this was a kind of a Moon-calf.

...

b. An ill-conceived idea, enterprise, or undertaking.

...

*a*1849 H. Coleridge *Ess. & Marginalia* (1851) I. 85 We have seen writers..irrationally furious when the mooncalves of their brain have been undergoing the rod of criticism.

...

c. A fickle, unstable person. ***Obs. [...]*** A person who idles time away in dreaming; someone absent-minded, distracted, or given to sentimentality.

d. ***colloq.*** A born fool; a congenital idiot; a simpleton.

e. A deformed animal; a monster. ***Obs. rare***.

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CHAPTER 1

MOONCALF

Mooncalf, you woke in your body, where you were alone. Blood pounded hot in the cave that contained you. In there you felt a buried fringe glitter, so you touched the hot low dark till you shook. You ruined hours palming the shaking cave, your thought in its holes.

At last you lifted the heavy arms and saw them smeared with hair. You could not believe the oil-dark of the hair that grew from your body. It turned you into contortions of brambles. Looking at the ocean, seeking a mirror, you came upon your eyes. They blazed with rot like desperate fruit. They shone from the shadowed hulk of your form with the brilliance of a monster's eyes.

I am learning to look into the eyes of a monster: to watch them glitter from their tortured form and not turn away. Mooncalf, I am writing a book for you: for all those who hunker in ruin. A man came to your island and named you a monster, and so I am writing a book of holes.

Mooncalf, your name belongs to a story that begins with a storm. How the torment of silver and black begins to harbor itself behind the blue mirror. Flicker and surface in the soaking heat. Air soaks in itself and then the first shattering flash. In a tempest, your course muddles suddenly in flailing winds. A self is a rickety structure, a home you build on your back from the twigs of whichever earth.

The Tempest is a book about the invention of the self: about the solitary and glittering stuff it is made of and the solitary and uncertain theaters in which it unreels. Sometimes the self

contains a stutter of whiteness, a blip of emptiness in the page of the story, and it is unclear what will continue. I had such a year: you palpate the floor of yourself and find there only a hole.

Mooncalf. You should write your book if you can, because your grip on your youth is loosening and you don't understand what comes next. For years you've been scared of age, as if fear could be real preparation. You reminded yourself: I am getting older—even when it seemed preposterous to think it. You counted the years in your head and tried on ages five years older. You thought: that is not so bad.

But then come a year you will look at your hands. You will look at your face. Your anger will not be reasonable. Youth is some glass of spilt gin, but yours was not spilt unfairly.

On one birthday you were defiant; you wore a small dress; you put to your lips glasses and glasses of hungers. Nights ended then still in makeshift dancing and unharbored kisses at someones. It was evident to you you were still beautiful. Anguish also was young and would unfold with glory but not with certainty. You broke the glasses and were senseless and later they asked you to leave.

And now it is later (years later) still. And beauty itself is a poisoned apple you forget to pretend not to want.

Mooncalf, you come forth bearing an imperfect form. You are encased in this form and what you have made of it and what you will make of it as it will tighten and wither, loosen and furrow, mold-dance and dust-fruit, as it will slip and change.

Soon it will be inarguable that you are older. Then it will be inarguable that you are old. Then you are clawing the soil to get free or wishing your ash would turn to body again in the air.

Mooncalf, it is time for the calculus of being, time for searching the areas inside you to ask what's the use. Who are you, Mooncalf? It is time to ask.

I am from parents of two different races, so that when I grew old enough to name myself I didn't know which name to say. I wear a skin like my father's skin: pale. I wear hair like both parents' once was and which is (for now): black. I wear—or for some time wore—a belief in my skin as deep and tawny like my mother's, a warm and complex gold which showed that I belonged somewhere if not here. But it is not true—the color—not visually. Instead, I wear the color I first felt: a pale, untrue-feeling freak-color, a paleness that looks like whiteness but is not.

But Mooncalf, any book you make will be like you: an abandoned house. You have rapped a long time at its window. A sentence is a pale monstrous girl and it is chattering its nightteeth. You open every notebook so that you will not look at the first you opened. And for work or meaning you'll walk where the city peters out, at the city's perimeter in an old small shop where they give you a raspberry beer in a bag. One you can open in your hands and then walk alone in the street. I don't want to walk alone in the street, you say. But in your hands lives your hair's yanking.

Mooncalf, I am writing this book because I don't know how to make sense of the networks of longing that mean a person. The strands of aired anger sneak into the open home. I am here with this speaking mess and this unreeling of daytime.

Prospero was once a duke; then he grew fascinated with the shining tunnels inside his books, and he let what he ruled be stolen. Thus alone with his magic he lived on an island of

failure, “master of a full poor cell” (I.2.20). Caliban, you were chained to this island of failure too.

You are not worthless, someone said to me in a bar. But onward, and night it sears itself closed.

Mooncalf: it is spoken in *The Tempest* by an ordinary, drunk fool. The storm has undone his certainty; he is pacing the lost territory wildly. The lost territory where *The Tempest* occurs is the site of my questioning. Something wrests you free of your securely clasped relation to life, and now you are drunk and wandering the island.

Mooncalf is what the fool names Caliban, the enslaved native of an enchanted and uncertain island—the native of a bewilderment. Two fools encounter this mooncalf, one by one. Each fool encounters the mooncalf on its own. Alone you meet your double, your monstrous twin.

And so Caliban, our first mooncalf, is a man. I address you now as the first mooncalf, Caliban. Mooncalf, a wild-haired man on an island. Mooncalf. Caliban. Mooncalf. I am talking to you directly, Mooncalf, looking at you. When I am saying Mooncalf right now I mean you. And also, Mooncalf, I mean I.

Each time I read *The Tempest* it is for you. I don’t even read it; I flip through and look for your name. I look for all your lines. I want to be stunned into joy by what they disclose. I want to see the real story glittering underneath and I want it to be yours. I want to unearth the lines you don’t speak.

Mooncalf. You are a dark-skinned man I could meet on the street, walking alone late at night. I have met you like this in cities. I have met you in the neighborhoods we walk in, Mooncalf, the ones where pavements smear with dirt and funk, and women walking to cars clutch their keys. You and I don't own cars, Mooncalf, so this is where we are: walking toward each other so that our paths cross.

I know what you look like, Mooncalf, because I have met you. When Trinculo met you, he didn't know if you were an animal, and he didn't know if you were alive. He said he didn't know what you were, because you smelled: a "very ancient and fishlike smell" (II.2.25-26).

Mooncalf, I know what a man can smell like. In the cities I have smelled men on the street. I have given them money or I have looked them in the eye and said no. I have hurried past or I have laughed at their banter. I have displayed solidarity or I have screamed. Last night a man with a beer in his pocket asked for a cigarette and a lighter. He put the cigarette in his mouth and he stood with the lighter and gestured. The lighter was orange and I watched it move in his hand where we stood on the curb in the full-on dark. We stood near a hospital, which is on my walk to the bar where I meet my friends. I don't know how to feel about this walk to the bar, Mooncalf, on which out for my own revelry I walk past others meeting death. But revelry is close to death, you would tell me, Mooncalf. He moved his lighter in the nighttime, which was orange, as the flame would be orange if he sparked it. He moved it because it was in the hand with which he gestured. Mooncalf, this man was angry—he had been in prison, he said—he had not committed the crime—he was angry and drunk—I was scared. I was scared, Mooncalf, of a man because he was standing in the dark with his anger and he was out of prison and he was holding my lighter that he would not light.

Mooncalf means monster, or fool, or stupid one; mooncalf means an aborted fetus, human or cow. The first OED definition of "mooncalf" is "a mole," meaning "an abnormal mass within the uterus, specifically one formed by the death and degeneration of the fetus early in gestation." Some people thought this was caused by the influence of the moon. Thus in 1594, Pierre de la Primadauye describes "The moone calfes in the womb, which fall out often." In 1658's *Natural Magick* Giambattista della Porta's provides an example: "A certain woman..brought forth in stead of a child, four Creatures like to frogs." Later the word took on the meaning of "an ill-conceived idea"—a wasted thought, a not-quite-being that should have been killed at is source.

But "mooncalf" is an ironic word. I like to stare into the star-drunk ironic space between the cruelty of its reference and the silky beauty of its sound.

Mooncalf, perhaps I could get people to forgive me when I told them I was scared of you on the street. I was a woman, I could tell them. I was a woman and he was a drunk man. And in this way we—those who were not, at that moment, mooncalves—could huddle together and could speak of our cruelty as fear.

When Trinculo meets you, Mooncalf, he is scared of you and your smell. But then the sky is wracked again with heaving dark and wind and he is even more scared of the storm that has brought him to this shuddering island. He smells his own confusion. "Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows," he declares, and he creeps under Caliban's garment. (II.2.25-26).

Mooncalf, what is happening here? Trinculo huddles close to Caliban's flesh. Caliban stands still, perhaps, perhaps so still that Trinculo doesn't see him as a person, as someone you need to ask if you're going to come close. What could have made Trinculo do this, climb in close

to a stranger who smells? Can Trinculo smell Caliban still? Was he drawn toward Caliban by desire? Is Caliban paralyzed now by the strange mess of a person, not-him, in his clothes? Is there love in this scene or only violence?

Later in literature, Ishmael climbs into bed with Queequeg. And Mooncalf: I am writing this book in order to climb into bed with you.

Mooncalf, I don't mean to keep us straight: I don't mean to hold us apart from each other and say: you are this, I am that. The world is thick with such talk, Mooncalf, but it is not true. I want us to be full of each other. I want us to say: we are full of each other already.

Mooncalf, if my skin bore a color that told you I came once from a subcontinent in the heat, perhaps you'd look at me and know our alliance instantly. I would like our alliance to be visible. But, Mooncalf, my skin is pale. I have tried to believe in it as amber or dusking and I have burned it brown in the sun. Before it turns brown it needs to redden and smart—to take on a strange, delicious ache. I lived once where the sun was glorious and devastating, and for those years my skin glowed near my desire, and later I paid in wrinkles. Mooncalf, perhaps it is right to wear marks on the skin.

Mooncalf, I am not satisfied with anything I am. Purple flings itself against the night. Purple stains and stains itself against the night, which breaks in half, which bristles. Mooncalf, I write this from failure—I write starting inside my own failure to write, because it is a place to start. I stand with my back to the cliff of failure. I grip a handful of posies of error. I am walking forward in the error-night. I trip on error's names, which are boulders that crop up in the house. They smash their brains on the floor. I walk through. They rack their brains on staining.

Is this prose, Mooncalf? When I'm too scared to write it and I write it anyway, this prose slips out of prose's edges. And so it is a late stain, so it is a blunting of night and a mass of screaming and no state from which to eat the years, from which to keep them from staring madly at what they think of as home.

Mooncalf, what is prose, that thing that divides a book from a waste? This is the prose a mooncalf must write: prose asking what is itself.

In *The Tempest*, prose is what the ordinary fools speak when they encounter the monster, when they climb inside it and find therein one of themselves. (Though that particular mooncalf speaks in poetry—speaks in blank verse like a king.)

Mooncalf, that gorgeous word, is another sad barb of violence—spoken by a powerless person to someone still more powerless. But, Mooncalf, it is where we start. In our own tempest, then, Mooncalf, we will make ourselves, in the image of our own longing.

Last night two white men I know were smoking outside a bar in the Southern college hipster town where I now live. Each city of the South, I think I see now, is two cities superimposed: a city of "slaves" and a city of "people." A city of mooncalves and a city of the guilty: conjoined twins of cities. I live in the guilty one, determined to disown it. But it is hard to disown your own ground.

These two white men were smoking and a black man came up to smoke with them outside in the night. He asked if they wanted to hear jokes. "Are you racist?" he asked.

"No!" they said.

"That's my first joke."

All three laughed wildly. Later the man said, “These college students. They’ll buy you drink after drink but no one will buy you a burger.”

Mooncalf, I cannot be neutral, because I live in a world of Prosperos. In this world exist Calibans too, but the world likes Prospero better. Prospero, Prospero, Prospero. If I stand there and choose neither, the world will simply go on: Prospero, Prospero, Prospero.

This time, then, I choose Mooncalf as the name of Prospero. I choose Mooncalf as the name of Ariel. I choose Mooncalf as the name of Miranda. I choose Mooncalf as the name of Stephano. I choose Mooncalf as the name of whatever their name is, those usurpers of the careless Prospero’s throne, so that he and Miranda were forced to find this island and grow lonely and powerful and beautiful. I choose Mooncalf as their name. I choose Mooncalf as the name of Stephano and Mooncalf as the name of Trinculo. I choose Mooncalf as the name of the island and I choose Mooncalf as the name of the storm and I choose Mooncalf, of course, as the name of Caliban, the kind name of Caliban that loves Caliban and casts him as beautiful. I choose Mooncalf as the name of Sycorax, his mother from Algiers, and the name of his absent father. I choose Mooncalf as the name of the stage, that “bare island” from which Prospero (Mooncalf) speaks out at the end. I choose Mooncalf as the name of the reader and the name of the writer and the name of the sucking dog under her desk and I choose Mooncalf as the name of my desperation that makes me write this, my fear of growing old without having created. I choose Mooncalf as the name of all my fears that I am a monster and I choose Mooncalf as the truth of the monster I am.

I choose Mooncalf as the name of the closeness that will grow between us, as the closeness that grows between monsters in the wasteland; Mooncalf as the name of the wasteland that is the name of the utopia too.

For a while I became convinced that because of my monstrosity I was glorious. Then an empty glitter ripped into my late twenties and I became for a while that thing close to monster: a ruin. I lived broke on a hard plain of snow. I lived far from anyone, save a few strangers who stared. I had gone to chase a vision, which wasted itself as sleet sank into the wheat.

Now I live somewhere else; somewhere new that holds hope for a life. Here I have begun contracting my madness and filling, again, the page. But it is clear to me now: this can happen. I have a different understanding of the terrain of being. It is a thicket, it is a wilderness, it is a city of mirrors, and to survive you need gratitude for whatever meager earth is this hour's stand.

Once I believed that I would redeem myself by writing; I believed I was stumbling toward greatness. But mooncalf, I no longer believe in greatness. There is no greatness. When we call someone special, we are trying to escape the brute fact of the consciousness of everyone. We would like to say to ourselves that certain people matter: that an artist matters more than a drunk. But we are saying this because it is too hard for us to accept that everyone matters, because if everyone matters, everyone living briefly and starving, everyone wasted in jail, then our world right now is a spectacular failure, the greatest ruin there is.

Mooncalf, my body is full of every place I have walked, in streets and classrooms, and my skin is hardened and rutted and my mind cannot free itself of its knowledge of the costs of wildness. Still my mind believes in wildness: our terrain.

In every town on the face of the real world live mooncalves, in every city and every stretch of forsaken agricultural land. In my daring I say: in every person. And so I choose to name myself mooncalf, too, though I am not Caliban, though my skin is achingly pale and he is a man from an island I have never seen. But: he is from a lonely interior island where I am from also.

What is Mooncalf? I am calling you Mooncalf, someone who will snatch a glance at her own grotesque in a mirror. Her face is the wrong color and she can't understand why her belly bulges. Not with a child: with herself. Her own ragged being. I am saying she for Mooncalf but she is not what I mean. She is the year you saw nothing of yourself but your single hurt color. She is the cringe inside the room of children: they all exchange glances about her. She has no high school diploma. She has too many degrees and doesn't know the song that is playing. She is pale in a room where they're dark, or she's ink-dark in a room where they're gold. She lives on the street or she longs for the street. Angry at houses, she could cast herself into the street.

I am not saying those are all the same things, Mooncalf: I'm not claiming the same life for each. But I'm calling them the same name, Mooncalf, anyway.

The Tempest is barely a book. It is a play, a book for enacting itself upon the air. I love a book for its outer boredom. A book is a tangle of disobedient air shut up in a shell and hidden in dullness. It is not like a film, whose blaze parades itself and demands our looking. A book is strange for our age. It is a project of shyness. It is someone speaking to herself in a cave, alone in a chamber of cave with a single candle and the phone in her pocket gone dark. But she is not

after all speaking to herself. She is speaking to the cave's enchantment, to her deranged belief in the cave as an altering and pressing at wonders.

Mooncalf, here is your book.

CHAPTER 2

SAFE HOUSE

Perhaps other essayists can write essays. Perhaps other writers can write at all. Perhaps others are people, truly people: not only do they carry their selfhoods proudly into the streets like gorgeously made-up faces, but when they come home the faces do not wash off. No, they carry them through the house like that, nuzzling their children; they sit before the Internet, rubbing their eyes; they strip naked and shower, and still they persist in wholeness.

But I am not like that. To me an essay is impossible. When I need to write one, I lock myself in a room for hours, opening on my screen more and more windows. When I despair of one beginning, I find solace in another, only to mar it with a near-identical attempt. Now the screen is haphazard with windows, each peering out onto a half-built house. Now I let my mind wander, and now I am touching myself. Here I find what my essay was missing: drenched late-summer shaken by rain, a teenager alone in her house. Insatiable cicadas, the world in its glorious wreckage. So, though it's midday, I crawl into bed.

I write the essay *because* it is impossible. If an essay were to offer itself to me—whole, sanctified, palatable—I would no longer be interested.

The year I quit drinking, I found a part-time job working nights at a safe house.

I'd just turned thirty—which is, if we're honest, an unimaginable age. I'd spent most of my twenties staring hard at its approach, as if a stare could ward it off.

Drinking is a good occupation for fear years, because it turns trouble into a romance. It turns trouble into a song: in the sweet, heavy grain of a voice, the weight of the day dissolves. Fear is the most gorgeous song, fraught with a thousand voices. With it the evening grows large.

But, living like this, there is always too much day in a year. The day eventually surfaces, wearing your own face.

And so I turned thirty and said: I quit. Thirty: I stood this side of a stout wall of age. Unable, of course, to see what was different.

The trouble with quitting is that it is empty. You raise to your lips an empty cup, turn your face to an empty night.

In the empty night, then, I went to the safe house, so named for its proximity to danger: a shelter for women escaping abuse. I drove there in a deep-red 2002 Honda Accord battered from my own poor driving. I showed up at nine p.m. on Fridays, when my friends arrived at the bar, and at nine p.m. Sundays, when others neatened their houses for the ordinary week. I showed up almost always in the same loose blue dress with gaping armholes, cut for a child, with large pockets to hold a pill-white cordless phone. This was the crisis line, which I'd carry through the house as I puttered around the office. I showed up with a key fob dangling from my neck, but still I showed up in pajamas: dressed not for work but for the restless embarrassments of night.

I grew up half-white in an Asian neighborhood, in Asian schools. Half-white in that case is a body like an empty cup. Half-white is a teenage insomniac, all night talking on the phone to a boyfriend who commands her to undress.

But also I grew up rich, or in a house where money was solid. Sad as a house could be, its floors held stable. The children raised there would go to college. They would have careers. From the vats of savings built for them they would grow their own savings. They would not starve. It was a house that held certainties in its future. No one would stay at a safe house. They were already safe in the walls of money.

My mother's friends from India were puzzled that I worked at a non-profit. Does that mean she makes *no* money?

Not none. But not money as I had learned it. Not money: she was *not meant* to stand on floors smelling of cleaner, floors smelling of dust. She was *not meant* to have a job all pocked with night—work barely work, for work was about the day.

Night-work alone in a low-lit office, in one unit of a house that was not quite one. It was a house they came to when fleeing a house, and thus it was less a house than the opposite of a house, a refuge from house. And also—are houses like this?—it was charged always, hushed. Its hours felt of hinge hour, crucial hour. To me, I mean, though the hours weren't mine. A job: to occupy another's hushed hours, to restock the kitchen, to check the chores. And often not to know what to do: brick of night that is a house, where I am the one who won't live there.

Each day worker of the shelter had her own desk: night workers, alone, had none or all of them. I liked to sit at Ilene's desk, pinned with photos of her and her grandchild. Ilene was a former resident, and she was the toughest—the residents tried to come to me to ask permissions before Ilene came in. A rule of social services: the more life-hardened the worker, the closer she had come to the lives of the women, the more confident she was in setting rules. I was on the far extreme from Ilene: the smiling sweetest, the most wishy-washy. Each night at eleven p.m. my job was to check chores: to see if they had cleaned a bathroom. Not very clean myself, I would stand in a bathroom puzzled about whether it counted as clean. And I would check it off anyway.

And then: wherever I was standing, in the office, in the bathroom, the phone in my pocket would ring. Answering a crisis line: pressing your ear to a presence. Waiting for someone to reach into the black space to fumble for voices. Asking: if I cast a wire of need through the silent dark, will it reach. Waiting for someone to stand in the yard of a ruined home, her hand touching the end of a wire, desperation with its finger on daring.

I pressed my ear to the phone in the Deep South, where I am not from. Where I barely understand the accents—shame-thick, feminine—of begging. Where—at two a.m., at six a.m., I mutter exhausted platitudes, woken from the red loveseat in the back of the office—from a few hours of tossed sleep.

Or the begging is not there in the voice. Or the voice is not feminine.

Perhaps there are others who know how to be of service. There are, I think: look at Ilene. But for me to stand in this house is to stand reverently in heightened inadequacy. To enter a room where my presence is awkward. To stand in a house of compromised tools. Even Ilene: she makes a housing plan for each person, she shows her all the places she can apply. But Ilene knows that the waiting lists are six months long. She knows how hard it is to get in. She knows the woman doesn't make enough money to afford a house without help. Sometimes Ilene has access to a subsidy. She knows that the subsidy will last only so long.

The only authority I have, the only skill, is that I am not homeless. I do not live in this shelter. I return home somewhere else; on the nights that I don't work, I sleep. I have no practicality, the most useful skill. All I can offer is that I am willing to stand in embarrassment at the threshold of the house.

Work that is closer to the rage only possible in dreams. Work: I refuse to sleep tonight behind the walls of my house, which is built on the houselessness of others.

Most women who come to the safe house are not yet ready to leave, to unhook the begging-chain that ties them to the people who hurt them. To save their lives they must leave.

And in my first year of thirty I am in the empty house of myself. If there is danger in this house, it is an abstract one. Once, a decade and a half ago, a boyfriend threatened to kill me. But he isn't here anymore. No one will kill me but the slow slink forward.

What do I do? There is an immense number of years. It has piled up on the floor of my being. The residents don't see the years. They are always mistaking me for a twenty-year-old

white girl because she too is *sweet*. This *sweetness*: I suspect it. It's made half of desire, half of fear.

Midway through the first year without drinking, my craving for drink wanes. Or does it? I can't remember what it's like to put a drink to my lips. In its place is—nothing. A twitching absence, not filled.

In my personal mythology, I am mixed-race in a way that means I belong nowhere: in every abandoned firefly-field reeking of summer. In every unbuilt house....

But really I am from Silicon Valley, California, from an affluent suburb of Asian American teenagers so terrified of failure that we cut ourselves preemptively, lest we lose the debate round, lest we earn a B on the test. Do not mock: a B is a terrible thing when you are the first of your family born into abundance, when you are the first one gifted the untrammeled freedom to earn your worth. "Grades are so high," wrote Wall Street Journal reporter Suein Hwang about our high school, "that a 'B' average puts a student in the bottom third of a class.[1]" In fear that we might one day be caught in that pit of ingrates, we performed our penance just in case. Thus we so alarmed the whites in our neighborhoods that they began to move away.

[1] Hwang, Suein. "The New White Flight." *The Wall Street Journal Online*. November 19, 2005.

I moved away too. Perhaps I also feared us and what we would make of me. I wanted to make something else out of myself, to make my own failure into a kind of ethos of kindness, to be aligned forever with those forced to fail....

And this is a questionable ethos. Just as drink is a question I asked over and over, with no reason to ask it.

When I go out in public I often present myself as someone who knows how to live. It is shocking how easy it is to put on this face: to have combed hair or just a smile. Then I seem not to be, myself, a trench of desperation. And it's true—often I can live perfectly fine. It surprises me: plenty of times I am one of those people whose lives you might stand outside of and say, with admiration in your voice, that is a person.

This is not how I am in the essay. My essay grows in the crawl space beneath public life: blue-black, dank, spider-scattered, thick with a senseless heat.

I am thirty-two years old. For twelve of these years I have worked or volunteered with the homeless in cities where I am not from. It has been a practice of abject shame to be so poor at my jobs. The homeless are, I think, ashamed too. But theirs is a hard-edged shame: it looks more like anger. They watch me acutely—I fumbling at the edge of whatever brought me to work near them. They watch me with suspicion or gratitude: this girl who has her own house but won't sleep inside it.

This essay—I want to write it so badly. But inside the essay I am never the one who has written it. I will never be on that side. Inside the essay I will always speak as the desperate one, for I have an alliance so deep it is source: with the one who looks at her house and—in brave rage—sees that she must unbuild it.

The "personal" in my essay has nothing to do with everyday personhood, the kind we rehearse for each other in stores, workplaces, parties. This "personal" is the opposite: made from the unbearably glittering stuff of consciousness—such an unstable glitter that its brash emptiness almost renders everyone helpless.

Before we go outside, perhaps we are all the same: empty buckets, fistfuls of ache.

"It does help to have a lower Asian population," said the PTA president of a nearby, whiter high school, speaking to the reporter. "I don't think our parents are as uptight."

I have many friends who are writers, and they are often writing; wracked with anguish as they are, human and riddled with doubt and desire, the fact remains that many of them *often write*. Some of them say, "I've been getting lots of work done." There is not a statement in the world a writer could make that would alienate me more profoundly. For me, writing is not work. It is a long, empty encounter with the twitching day.

Will there be a day when I see myself as a "person"? When I see myself from the outside and think: that is enough, that is me?

And if that day comes—if I can no longer remember the whistling, the holes—if I cannot remember the senseless parking lots of a city, if I cannot remember the miracle it would be to feel I counted as anything at all: let this essay stand. Let it be enough that someone finds the air hot-blue, quick-altered, or the white cold that waits in the pit months. Let it be that writing was once hotly ragged. Let it be that a day was a dress I didn't want to put on. Let it be that if you are here, self-bitten, self-unbuilt, stalled by something too nameless to speak: this unbuilt house, for you, exists.

I had to check the residents' chores; I saw that they were not done, or I could not tell if they were done; they were done, or undone, by single mothers—children in shelter with them or wrenched away. I checked: "Done." I fell asleep on the red loveseat in the back room of the office, hotline phone in my pocket, interrupted now and then by crises.

Yes, this is an essay, but I hope it is barely so. If the world is becoming violent and dangerous as an unbuilt house—if it has been that way for centuries (it has)—my contribution is that this is my element. A world like this is intuitive to me. For us, I will do what I can.

The *I* of an essay: a twig to brandish at the exhaust-soaked night of the highways that lead away from the shelters.

It's true that "essay" *means* attempt, if you look to its Old French origin; among essayists it's a beloved cliché to say so. I love it too: how etymology forgives my affinity with failure. But in an unjust world, attempt is not enough. I want the essay to be alchemy, to be miracle: a

desperate energy that builds to a moment in which, to each other, we become as real as ourselves.

Let me give the reader this: leaping over the fences of what is sayable. The way a girl in a safe house, leaving her abuser for the first time, might rattle at the door of her life, might press her face to the window and watch the headlights streak the night.

CHAPTER 3

SAFE HOUSE

I can't tell you the address of the house where I work. It's in the American South, where I am not from. To get to work, I drive away from the part of the college town that masquerades as my home by making me feel at home, by making me feel that I live in a little city where artists and intellectuals belong. There is a coffee house in my town where I appeared every day one summer to "work," never doing any work because my friends the writer and the philosophy student appeared there at outdoor tables in the sun. I went to the coffee shop to await their appearance, purchasing a cup and drinking and dreaming of that bitter blaze. I walked half a block to the one-room co-op to buy a salad of dark greens cut with vinegar and spice, each day. Each day I bought chocolate, also. I brought my treats back to the coffee shop to talk with my friends. And yet by the end of the summer an essay had waded out of the unwritten by the time a deadline occurred.

This is not at all the work I want to talk about. The work I want to talk about is unfamiliar to the neighborhood of the essay as I write it. The two types of work coexist in my life, the way that two groups of people—at least two—co-exist in a gentrifying neighborhood and never get to know each other.

The safe house where I work is for women who need to leave abusive relationships and stay somewhere where they cannot be found. Women can stay for at most ninety days. To drive

there I drive away from the coffee shop, from the one-room co-op, and toward the large grocery store, the Ethiopian restaurant, the frozen yogurt shop where I started to go as an alternative to having drinks—feeling like I was in high school again.

People have a remarkable ability to occupy the same space as one another—to speak to one another—without ever really meeting. In a room with my friends, I understand only abstractly that they are as real as I am. I might be a worse person than most people, and if so, let's meditate upon my failings because they might interest us. But I suspect I might be representative. I am shockingly alive to myself; everyone else feels pale, comparatively imaginary. I work at the safe house in part because I want to convince myself that other people are real.

It is a small complex of two apartments and an office and a common area. In each two-bedroom apartment live eight people at most, four to a bedroom. Then there is a kitchen and a living room with two couches. In this room the TV is constantly on.

Adam grew up in a house with the TV constantly on and with the air thick with smoke—a house whose sadness I lusted for in the first years of our relationship. It was the sadness of someone low-income and white from the Midwest—so different from the wealthy Asian Silicon Valley sadness that bored me into paralysis. I learned that I can quickly someone else's sadness my home—or maybe there is little difference between two kinds of sadness.

I correct myself. I have never yet lived the sadness of a low-wage worker working to support a family, and maybe I never will. But the sadness of an unemployed woman living in a safe house and the sadness of the PhD student who works her second job there have much in

common. The sameness is in the tinge of weight on the hours, the bleary drag down into senselessness.

I am afraid to try to speak about the people in my city who are not like me. I am afraid of the violence of representation, I say to myself—but, more accurately, I am ashamed to be wrong.

I live in a gentrifying neighborhood, in a house across from the projects. We bought the house for a price that was probably too high, my mother and I, and so if the property values in the neighborhood go up, I think this means, we are part of the blame. I have often been a gentrifier in this manner. Adam points out that he himself grew up in publicly funded housing. I am suspicious of myself, I who am a problem in this town. I tell myself: at least I am a rogue problem. Someone who is not from here, unpredictable, my story in this town not yet hardened.

So great is my uncertainty in myself that this is the only way I can write: in paragraphs like episodes, not looking back. For my comprehensive exams, which I am taking this third year of my PhD program, I have made a list that is vaguely about the essay, and most of it is books that are made of fragments, books that are unfinished. I am reading books that are unbuilt houses, and I am at home in their neighborhood. *The Book of Disquiet*, *The Pillow Book*, St. Teresa of Avila's *The Book of My Life*. I want to throw up my hands in frustration, toss all the books in the air. All the books are called *Book* because they are on the verge of not being books. Books not quite books, houses not quite houses. Can a meaningful life be made here, a functional one, sewing and unsewing the edges, fingering the edges? Or should I give up and return to the neighborhoods where things have names, outsider as I feel there.

The safe house is part house, part office, part "programming unit." The programming unit is the most interesting room to me because it belongs partly to the domain of office and partly to the domain of the home. Someone who does not feel like being around her roommates seeks solace there. A fourteen-year-old daughter who does not get along with her mother sets up camp there. The new Shelter Life Coordinator, whom I've met once—a honey-blonde twenty-two-year-old girl in a long skirt who goes out to pick up fast food for her own breakfast and lunch—makes cookies in that room and puts on movies for everyone to watch together.

When I am sobbing about my fear of the future, my husband says in exasperation: you'll write your book, and then you can make it into a commodity. He's right: it is the fear that I will not be able to make it into a commodity that has haunted me, despite my alleged lack of belief in the commodity. It is hard to sell a house that is a pile of wood.

What if I were to live my life without shame? Of course I have many reasons to be ashamed, but I am ashamed, I think, for all the wrong reasons. I am not very ashamed, for example, of how poorly I do my job at the Safe House.

This is a night job at which I arrive at nine p.m., but when I am not at this job (I'm sober, remember) nine p.m. is my bedtime. Here I stay up until eleven, grudgingly, and then I undress at the house, pulling my dress over my head so that now my skin is all palely bare in the office building. I take off my bra so that I can sleep more comfortably in my dress and leggings. This office is carpeted like a small bedroom in a childhood home, its loveseat red and slouching. How

often are people naked in office buildings? When I worked at the AIDS nonprofit in Austin my coworkers and I learned one happy hour that all of us had been closing our office doors and crying, separately—then going out into the hallway when it was time to act like workers again.

Crying and undressing in offices—both are illicit activities, and illicit not because they are immoral but because they are too feminine. The safe house, though, is an office in which you are supposed to undress. This is a moment to celebrate, I think: the skin prickling in the instant the dress is off.

As you know, I am supposed to check their chores. In my own house Adam does all the chores, sweeping the floor's dark wood and washing the dishes, laying down pee pads for the old dog dying of cancer.

I go into the two units with pages stapled together into pamphlets—with a little grid to check off whether each chore is done. In the social services offices we use paper more than it's used in the rest of the tech-savvy world where I live.

There are so many pens and pencils in the office—cups of pens and pencils everywhere. Pens and pencils enclose a reverence. James Agee talked about this in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: how each object is real. Agee said that he would rather not write a book—he would rather present the reader with a pile of objects from the sharecroppers' houses.

Maybe soon I will improve my way of being.

Or maybe I have no reason at all to be ashamed, because maybe it is too late in the life of the earth to be ashamed, and now there is only room for goodness, only room for salvage.

I cannot stand the way that a city operates, or can I? I want to live in a city in which all of us actually belong together. My next thought, though, is that perhaps in the city we *are* together, whether we belong or not. Perhaps this is a more complicated way of being than the one I desire. Right now I am in Hendershot's, the same coffee shop I haunted gleefully in the summer, except now it is a couple days after Christmas, the town emptied of its college students. An interracial, black and white (I think) family is at the table to my right. There are three people at the table, their body shapes large, echoing one another in form the way that I imagine a family might echo one another. The three of them. I do not know what I want a family to be, except that I like the idea that a family is a house without walls, echoes turned to shape. I wonder if this family is happy. The father and daughter are each on their devices, she leaned forward over the table to peer into his phone, he on his flat screen.

A woman, Beatrice, called me three times over the Christmas weekend when I was working at the safe house—one of the residents at the house, sent to the hospital over Christmas because of her sickle cell anemia. She called me because she wanted someone to talk to, lying in her hospital bed, somewhere from the home that she and the other women had made out of sheer fierceness.

This woman is calling because she misses the house where we live. She has asked other residents to bring her her black hair, the narrow braids she'll weave into her natural. Beatrice says to me on the phone: I miss y'all so much.

I don't know if Beatrice knows my name, because she—and many of the residents—mix me up with Tamar, a thin, dark-haired white girl a decade younger than I am. "Are you the one I talked to last?" someone says when she calls me. "You sound just like her."

Beatrice, not caring if it's me or Tamar, talked to me for perhaps two hours in total that weekend. She told me that twelve Christmases ago, when she was also in the hospital, she insisted that everyone get together for a party in her hotel room. She told me that this Christmas an ex-boyfriend of hers was in town, going to catch a bus somewhere else and would be near the bus station for four hours, wanting her to come see him.

"Do you think you'll him you're in the hospital?" I asked, even though she had already said she wouldn't. Sometimes at my job I can't think of anything to say and so I simply repeat what others have said.

In fact the jobs that I love—working in social services, in teaching—are just situations in which these questions play out: can people relate to one another? I want to know if people can relate to each other *outside of the structures*, which of course is contradictory because I am meeting these people inside of an inorganic structure, an institutional one.

The first reason that I work in social services is not to help anyone else. It is to convince myself that connection is possible. It is to put myself in uncomfortable social situations and to see if I can act out of honesty and goodness. Working in social services is offering myself a philosophical medicine, an existential medicine.

The First Nations writer Terese Mailhot, speaking about her time in a mental hospital, her time in social services offices, calls them *white institutions*, which must be right. These structures were set up by the people in power. Or am I just saying that in order to check it off a

list, to unpin myself from associations with the insidious sources of power? I think the first safe houses were the houses where friends stayed when they were not with their abusive husbands. I think they were set up by women working out of practical urgency, the one quality missing most in my own life (coffee shops, pointless worry over the essay's boundaries).

I work at social services jobs, then, for the express reason that I am bad at them. I use the jobs to cultivate reverence at my own inadequacies. What a strange way of living—but in living it and writing it, maybe I am making something happen. Maybe at the end of my time as a writer I will find that I made so many godforsaken crannies in life light up.

I went to an AA meeting today, December 28. The town's streets whistle with whiteness, the college students gone. When Adam left for work this morning I chased after him out of the door and declared, "I'm so lonely." "It's okay," he said, warming up the truck he would drive to work. I saw him there in his dark green shirt given him by the county. I was awake at the desk in my room, shining on my face the sun lamp that was supposed to deliver me from depression. Given that this is nonfiction, it occurs to me that my writing might be more interesting to the reader if I spent less time in abject boredom—so I try, or I think I am trying.

When I came home from work the day after Christmas, I had planned to stay awake but went back to bed, despite the fact that I had already slept for eight hours. In *You Are Not Your Brain*, a self-help book I sometimes bring to my bedtime at the safe house, a book wielding a crisp black-and-neon-green cover—I learn that the more you indulge your unhelpful impulses, the more your brain strengthens the circuits that link them together. So, for example, if I now drive home from the coffee shop and climb back into bed, my brain will find it more and more

plausible that malaise points me to an escape hatch in the productive day I've planned. Okay, then. I won't do it now.

On my computer before I collapsed into my sad second bedtime that day, I looked up AA meetings. There was one at a church on campus and one at "After Hours DUI School" toward the shelter, near the shelter's satellite office in the police station. I thought about how if I went to the After Hours DUI school I might see someone from the shelter. I also thought that I did not want to go to a DUI school again—that I had gone once, after my actual DUI, and that was enough—that I wanted to go to an AA meeting in the spirit of philosophically playful melancholy, not with a sense that I had done something wrong. I wanted to go to an AA meeting for the sense that my life mattered in itself—that life was made of wholesome, humble earth I could hold in my hand.

I knew that the meeting on campus would be whiter than the other. And still—I chose it. I drove to this meeting that was on campus, scared that no one would be there. Five minutes before it started I decided not to go. I drove around the block. But then I turned the corner and came back. I had done nothing in the day so far day except dream about going to the AA meeting. It was in a church. I thought that I would just drive into the church parking lot and see how many people were there. If there were a substantial number, I thought, I would stay. It turned out that the parking lot was so crowded, crowded with people and people all gathered for the purpose of being there together.

Beatrice called me at six a.m. last night when I slept on the Project Safe couch. It was a late-December night of sixty degrees, and the office heats on those days—the temperature was above seventy, and I was wearing long black leggings that I had to take off, exposing my winter-

jungle unshaved legs—leaving me in sock feet and a childish bright-blue dress, my hair rumpled, covered with odd blankets from a corner of the office. Recent nights there I've found it most comfortable with my feet up on the loveseat's edge, using a dirty-sunshine-white blanket enveloped in a cotton sheet. When I sleep on the couch I leave the lanyard with my keys on it on the floor at the couch's edge, alongside the white cordless phone—a sleek and virgin-white model from the year 2000.

As I walked up to the door of the AA meeting, I saw others—white people, white people—walking to the door of the church too. It is getting harder for me not to crawl into the doors of a church and ask them to take me. I am near a need for the spirit.

I think of memoir as a kind of writing that has dirt on it—the dirt of need. The dirt of the writer's need to bring herself forth. I barely admit to writing it, or trying to write it. But I chose to go to the AA meeting because I wanted to believe that machinations of change occur in low, dark hours. I wanted to press so far into my need that I met someone else there.

CHAPTER 4

SAFE HOUSE

There is a house I can't really tell you about. I can't tell you where it is. Nor can I tell you what it is like to live there. The lives of others take place behind glass. The one of us named *I* presses her face to the window.

The house is swathed in green, because this is the season when the green starts. There are tiny white stars of jasmine on a fence somewhere—in the deep, green, haunted, low country I'm not from. I live there, though. But not in the house, not exactly. No one lives there exactly. Tiny white jasmine stars; then, out front, the sheen of a crushed Miller Light can at the curb. It shines like a large gold insect. And a blue beer cup, large as a palm, its spine cracked. So that it splays and bares its white inside lips.

When you get to this blue beer cup, turn around. We are in the dusky, slow streets at the town's edge. There is a street sign behind you with its name rubbed out. Take that small street, which snakes like the slip of a river. Walk long enough to forget your worry, or, more likely, to worry it deeper. Then look up.

It is a small fourplex, painted drab, like a missable yellow flower. Like the drab flowers that hang low in their bush.... and a small parking lot flanks it. And you can't see it now, but there is a yard behind this, a rain-faded plastic tricycle there. And three low swings whose long metal cords twine. And a slide, and a covered table where women gather to smoke. If you sit to

smoke there, and stare, you see a large street where cars race by, stinking of metal and their cargo of lives. How did we get here?

I wear the key to this house on a black cord on my neck. Deep gray fob, a smooth place here for my thumb. I click it outside the door, and there appears a green flick of light.

But I only come to this house at night. I cannot say for sure that the house exists at other hours. So let's say it's night now, at the late start of it, early summer, nine p.m. The drenched blue of the heat is here. All day it has worn at itself, like someone who's spent years on an angry thought. Now it gives itself up. Blue, blue, blue: the night expands, slack, until stars appear to pin it. I used to drink at this hour, but now I come here.

I come here on Friday and Sunday, wearing loose pants with pockets and a rubbed-soft t-shirt. The green pin of light lets me in. The lights are pulled low. I climb stairs to the hushed office: desks, manila folders, one slow turning fan. The last solitary worker waits inside. I will relieve her. The white phone carries the hotline. Quiet now, it could wake.

This is a house where women live. They live here for at most ninety days. They live here when their own houses have turned unsafe—when, in the night, they have to leave them.

When a woman calls us, it means that her own house has turned. A house can catch roaches, which quick-flicker on the mirror, sudden near the toothpaste. And likewise it can catch menace—like dirt and fur, which cling in the legs of the dresser, webbing. Or mold that feathers the ceiling, lush in itself, out of nothing. Profuse, prolific: threat is a denizen. Once it has grown, it is there.

The woman cleans the house all day, knowing she has to leave. She wishes she did not know it. But the splinter of knowing it has lodged in her palm, which is hot now.

So she calls.

"Pack a bag," we tell her. "But don't let him see it."

"Decide which door you'll use to get out. Stay close to the exits."

"Find a room where the door locks, or where you can push a dresser against it."

"Stay away from the kitchens and bathrooms."

She cleans the shoe closet. In two days it has furred over with dust. She finds her son's soccer duffel from last season, his tiny cleats inside, and one folded sock. She keeps this bag in mind. Weeks pass, then the man blacks her eye again. Now she removes the cleats and the sock. She folds in the boy's red summer shorts and his blue jeans. The next day he asks her where the jeans are; feeling silly, she gives them to him again. But she packs away her own knee-length khaki greens. They curl close over her large, curved thighs the man once would trace with a finger. Now he calls her fat, though she's the same size she was. His face screwed and red when she comes home from her receptionist job. On other days, he is open-mouth laughing drunk. Both are bad. Her son goes to his friend's after school instead of coming home. Now he's stopped asking—just goes. She's glad.

Another woman has not packed a bag. She's out on the street, alone. It happened suddenly, how her girlfriend swiveled to face her, the neighbors asleep. She goes out to the large rushing street, wanting to be near anyone—strangers who won't judge her, for she is nothing to

them. Her face is unhit, tonight, but tear-gummed, her lashes turned sharp. She dials the phone. She remembers her girlfriend confessing long ago, face moon-black, rapturous: I'm scared I might hurt you one day.

Another woman has been sleeping in her car for months, parking it outside the Walmart. Sometimes her son lets her pull up a sleeping bag on his porch, but only now and then – otherwise, he says, his girlfriend gets mad.

This woman has been abused a lot before, so much it makes her tired to think of it. She's been hit by men, by a girl she worked with once who'd thought she was flirting with her. (Maybe she was, but the girl was tricky, too.) She's been hit a lot by her mother. And by this same son once, wild-eyed on something he'd told her he wasn't taking. She was evicted from her Section 8 place one month that went bad, and with that voucher gone, she hasn't found another place.

She has no abuser now, no one looking for her. She just wants a place to stay—with her own room, a door she can close and no one can come in. She calls the number and knows they might take her if she tells them: "I'm a victim of domestic violence."

(The trouble is: the safe house sinks out of my sight when I'm gone. It bobs in and out at the corner of my knowing. Don't trust me wholly.)

Friday at midnight I go to make my bed in the safe house, carrying the quiet hotline phone close. Sleep in a room in the back of the office: faded red loveseat room with one big desk. On the desk near me are piled papers. Yellow papers, a big yellow pad covered with notes from a meeting. Post-it notes all over it like hands over faces. Then typed papers all neat in their

pile: something to send to Georgia DFCS. The Shelter Manager, Mikaela—this is her desk. Framed photo of her and her mother. Framed photo of one baby, inching into a blue bedspread. A birthday card to Mikaela from the staff. Closed blinds with night traces. Night winks through the slats, genderless.

Between the loveseat and the wall is a pile of hastily folded sheets and blankets. I take one from the pile—yellow as legal paper, flanked by large purple hearts. I turn to a sleep ready to break open. A sleep with two sides: on one side my tiredness. On the other—I want to belong to the safe house. I want the phone to ring. I want to ask the caller: "Are you safe?"

This is a house with no men, though they are not forbidden at the safe house. They are allowed to come if they need to escape the order of men. But none has ever called and said: let me stay. I hope one day one will call. I hope he knows he can want to escape that order, too. This is harder for most men to know, their fists clenched as if men were holding them closed.

It is not only men who are violent in a house. Not even all houses have men. But any violent house carries the shadow of men in absence.

Is the safe house built of the same earth, the violent earth? It dreams of a different earth. The women in the house—who sleep there one night, or ninety—try to unbuild it when they go. The house builds and unbuilds; it is fingered by grasses. They are shot through with earth.

(Still: last week we learned that the women in the house were pouring oil in each other's food. The staff took the oil away and put it in our office, so that now the women need to *ask* to be given oil to cook with. After we took it, someone began putting soap in the food.)

Still—a house that unbuilds is not an ordinary house. What would grow there? In the yard of the safe house is a single blue flower. A boy sees it, the soccer-playing son. Boys are allowed here. He sees it one day. He hunts through the yard for another, but there is only one.

The boy sees that right now his mother is safe, though it means they have to sleep in a strange room of bunk beds, a room with a mother and a small girl. He has to take a different bus to school, and he's told his friend he can't go to his house. Instead grown women he doesn't know come give him toys and ask him questions. These days he is put to bed late: the women and children are in a loud kitchen, babies scrambling and crying, until ten at night. The TV is on with no one watching it: he looks up. He knows, this boy knows, that he is not a house. He will be all right; he is the kind of boy who is watchful. He will grow up like this, waiting inside himself at the only center he can trust. He will remember the house of women.

At the start of a story, a child went to the judge of the house. The child asked: "Who am I?"

The judge said: "You are not good."

The judge's words made a fire in the throat of the child. The judge was large as a table. The table was fixed at the heart of the house. The house was a person with table for heart. In the heart the child wanted to leave. The fire in the throat stuffed the child with smoke. The child was smoke-gray and throttled. The child did not want to live in the house.

But the child was raised in the house.

The child went to school and came back to the house.

The child lived in a room in the house.

"You are a bad girl," said the judge of the house.

The child was not a girl. The child knew this deeply—but did not tell the judge.

The child grew and found a college in another state. The child could leave. The child piled an old car with clothes and books from the house. The child stepped out into the day and drove: past the threshold of house, past the street of house. Past the neighborhood of house, the town of house, the city of house. State of house, country of house, long flat fields of house pricked with stars. Field of house, world of house.

Grown up now, the child does not like houses. The child likes other places: the child likes it when people gather in the street, or gather together in the black-quick bar, with its dark prickled red neon of talk. The child likes it when people gather in college—but better still would be a college on the steps of the college, a college to take the other apart.

The child has spent a lifetime running from houses. But one day in the black-quick the child met a woman who said: "Come to my house."

The child looked at the woman, whose skin shone pale brown, her hair deep brown. The child looked at the lips of the woman—like scrap-pink flowers that grew in the brambles. Flower was a night-bramble on the woman's tongue. Skin a kind of street. The child wanted to live in that street.

The woman took the child to her house. The child took up residence there, fed by the woman. The woman made her fragrant beans with cilantro. With fried onion. With the fried red stem of a chard. —She led the child to her bed. –The child, with the woman, lived in the house.

Then: ( )

This to mark the space for what happens in a house. When the house fills with smoke and the judge enters. When the judge tells the child: “You are not good.” The house is all table: a flat surface to be pinned.

At two a.m., my office bell rings. I am asleep in the mussed hair of night, twined braless in the old sheets. My shoes are on the floor beside me. I knock over a water glass—and mop it with sheets—and flop my shoes through the office. Here is a low gray cabinet of binders, one with the name of each resident. I come to the door that divides the office from the house.

“Do you have any Naproxen?”

She is a woman partly toothless, her remaining teeth crooked. Her skin is a hot brown with red underneath: she’s a white woman with street-darkened skin. She wears a tank top and jeans; she is in her late forties, but her body is lean as a teenager’s. It’s Amelia, who calls me “honey.” Our generic Naproxen is bright baby-blue in a cabinet of plastic tubs. I tap baby-blue out into her hand; I will have to mark this in her binder and the time I gave it to her.

Amelia has a tattoo at her collarbone that says her own name. Its curls arc and wing. I tell her I like it, which I do; the safe house is a good place, I think, to tattoo oneself with your own name. Everyone deserves that: the sting of your name throbbing in her skin, the blood and shaking, and, after that, the recognition of yourself in the mirror, your own (Amelia’s) shocking blue eyes seeing you in your dark-reddened skin.

If you needed it, I would draw you a map to this house.

I would say this: to get here, come to the precipice of your life.

Come to the place where you see that your life, as it is, has failed you. Where your house has failed you.

Then: call me on the phone. I might be asleep, tossed in the sheets where the previous night worker has slept. My shoes will be off on the floor beside me. I will answer the phone with a voice like rumpled hair. You might be hard to hear, straining of voice across night and crisis. You might say: I need a place to stay. But I might say: our shelter is full.

You: then he will kill me tonight.

One house, sixteen beds: I might fail you too.

I: I will find you another shelter.

: I can't leave this town. My job is here. My kids go to school here.

: I will try to find you something near.

But I will call all the shelters—all the ones near us full. I will call you back and hear your voice alive with anger. I will hate myself then—the way that every judge of my own houses hated me once, my own houses unbuilt and escaped. I will hate myself for letting houses go on this way: for being a flimsy house, a shy one, until I go home to my own. But I will forgive myself later (forget).

Around us, the night. Around us summer night waits on the town. Last night I read a white Buddhist who said, this is how you meditate: breathe in the suffering of the world and breathe out, from yourself, lightness. I read her in a state of wretchedness, my own life wrecked around me. This is not this story's subject. I told my friend Blu about the Buddhist; Blu furrowed their brow and asked: have you read the feminist critique of empathy?

The other is not knowable. I know. And yet I wonder if this is right to say, because who wants to be the *other*, to stay the other?

If you are another, would you rather be known?

Around me in my own bed, in the house I bought because my family has money, the night waits. It waits outside the safe house too. The night slips into its gender and leaves it. The night slips through the safe house too. The night is heat-clenched with your anger—and mine too, when I think of you.

A house like this is a stranger house than we know. A safe house: is a house devoted to the idea that the patriarchal order has failed us. The heterosexual order has failed, the nuclear family has failed, and capitalism has failed: they have all failed to make a home safe to live. The idea of a house has failed. The safe house is thus also the opposite of a house. "House" is a danger. "Safe house" is a remedy. The safe house is no house.

Two forty a.m.: after you call, I must log your call in the database. First I must rescue the slow, slow computer, which is locked in its own thought: a frozen screen stares at itself. It is black plastic and smells of old shoes, donated long ago from another government office. I press the small square in its corner; it is slow as prayer muttered to the dust in a corner. From the bulk in its heart, it shudders in stillness, then darks. Then it fires into being again. Its screen blacks, flashes words. Then it draws up the world that lives inside it: mild landscapes of blue. With the dusty mouse I furious-click on the picture of a circle that means the Internet is here.

Then I am in the database: like walking in a shuttered exurb of white walls. To them I must utter your name. I must select from a menu: "Crime Type Experienced." I must answer this

question: “Caller in Danger?” I must select from a menu: “Refused.” I must enter your race; I must tell them whether you are a veteran; I must tell them whether you are urban or rural; I must tell them your address, and your income’s percentage of the poverty level, and your social security number. I have not asked any of these things, nor would I ever, and so I select from each menu: “Caller Refused,” for there is no option that says: “I didn’t ask.” There are 176,486 fields. While I am inside the database, the world grows old; the paint in the safe house flakes and the walls crumble; everyone dies; the world ends. I stay wandering the database streets.

Three a.m., the phone rings again.

“I need a place to stay. Do you have room?”

I am supposed to say this: “Tell me what’s going on.” I am supposed to find out if the situation is domestic violence. The rules: if it’s not domestic violence they can’t come.

“I’m in the car with my two kids. We’ve been in the car for a week.”

In our town is one homeless shelter that takes women and children. It is not a safe house. It is always full. I ask her if she’s called already.

“It’s full.”

A safe house is made of paper. It is a drawing of a house on a notebook page. If you are outside the safe house, you scratch at the drawing of a house until it tears. I must shred all paper in the office shredder, which, unlike the computer, is new—quick silver teeth in its shiny dark case. I have on the paper your name and birthdate. I will shred how we reached for you and failed. I will shred how we reached—how I reached my pale fingers into the genderless night. How I reached in my sleep. How sleep in my ear muttered its names.

I am the kind of person who is always coming to a precipice in her life. She must sit quietly there. The idea of herself, the person she needed herself to be in order to be okay, has fallen apart. In the last seven or so years I have come to this precipice over and over again. I wanted a different kind of life, a life as fortress. My mother wanted me to have this kind of life: she wanted me to be safe.

So I am at home in the safe house, which is not my home. The safe house is no one's home unless it is everyone's: unless it is for everyone excluded from home. The safe house throbs with the houses it is not—it is an endless place of no houses.

All night in some safe house, others are awake. If you need someone awake, call a safe house. Someone, bleary-eyed is there; someone is there with caffeine in her teeth. The worker has come to the precipice of her life; the worker has come here.

One day the child will find the right safe house. No one will assume that the child is a woman. The child will step from the street—on the long journey away from the judge's house, away from the judge who stood in every house. Away from the long exhausted eyes. The safe house large as a city, large as a world. And tangled by grasses, the quick hot green of the grasses. In the low, hot country where I'm not from.

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