

We need more than one term
for these big things.

Donna Haraway: "We need more than one term for these big things", in Ursula K Le Guin debate con Donna Haraway, www.youtube.com/watch?v=59BLzrM2r08I-3714s. Panel discussion, Ursula K. Le Guin, Donna Haraway, and James Clifford, conference *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, Ritz Theatre, Institute of the Arts and Sciences, University of California Santa Cruz, May 8, 2004.

Lilli Thiessen, Louise Lawler,
Trisha Donnelly, Ei Arakawa,
Cinzia Ruggeri, Greg Parma Smith,
Sophie Gogl, Yasmina Haddad,
Andrea Fraser, Tonio Kröner,
Bonnie Camplin, Nicole Wermers,
Miranda July, Ernst Yohji Jaeger
Curated by Melanie Ohnemus

Universitätsgalerie der Angewandten
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The exhibition *We need more than one term for these big things* presents artworks that show tendencies of an already emancipated feminism. This is an exploration of a kind of speculative feminism not derived from a place of lack but rather from the assertion of already emancipated positions standing in equitable communication with other disciplines. This starting point also includes the question as to the representative functions bestowed on the word feminism, and, knowing of the historicity of the discourse, how it can be possible to posit a distinct feminism as an approach within a subjectively informed ethics of adequate behavior. This means not merely negotiating contexts in the light of their preconditions and in symbolic terms, but also including already existing arrangements within different systems and institutions in conceptual and formal decisions, that is, the production of specific formats, and the editing of these, accordingly.

This conceptual context can thus be transferred to other systems too, which would mean that all knowledge, including knowledge of our own symbolically connoted projections, is included in the work at hand. Perception of the format chosen in each case would be subject to adjustment, given the presence of other formats operating within the same field. Representative proxyship and the arbitrary characteristics of conventional ascription would be eliminated. It is the specific advantage and achievement of art to resist such unambiguous or determinate orders and to engage critically with them. The problem here lies with the assumption as to the symbolic value of the exhibition format itself, and the conventional belief that an exhibition can truly represent or make a case for a certain context. This assertion is usually brought in correspondingly organized textual formats that propose contexts and ways of reading, often by drawing on a claim to a popular relevance

that is not specifically named. Here too, it would be preferable to see the structure of exhibiting not exclusively as the result of linguistic orders of representation but rather to consider and create the exhibition entity in itself, such that it becomes its own structuring language and content.

I believe that this would be both possible and do justice to the field of exhibition making. Representation can and must be one of many aspects included in work on this kind of structure. Parallel processes of reflection on representation and on subjectivity, and the materialized decisions that emerge from these, seem to me to be an adequate method. Empathizing in this way with the structures of artistic production means deploying control by means of a selection of already self-empowered positions and claims, making use of the specific quality of art, positing art's speculative evidence in the service of meta-level statements, and guiding art to become its own text in its own format.

As a consequence, the question arises as to how contemporary art production may situate itself between historicity and self-assertion or between the negativity inscribed into it and the possibility of speculative positivity. In particular, it seems important to me in this context to ask how far and in what form artistic strategies make use of the popular and also operate increasingly within its contexts. Can a difference to other areas of social production still be maintained? How far is artistic production, and at the same time the representation system of its dissemination, a lackey of its own dialectic of innovation harnessed to market strategies? From this perspective, conceptual and dissemination systems are always positioned within the bounds of their own indirect reality and the reality they disseminate. It is precisely at this juncture that the inclusion and exclusion of power systems take place. I believe that awareness of all of this,

and the conceptual deployment of this awareness under the premise of a decisive assessment of all the elements available, will lead to a qualitatively more interesting approach. The inevitably deviating concepts and formats that this engenders thus barely seem to be vulnerable to the claims made by conventional agreements.

The graphic concept of this exhibition follows this thinking, using three quotations on the invitation card, poster, and brochure. These are taken from a conversation between Donna Haraway, Ursula K. Le Guin, and James Clifford,¹ and a lecture by Ursula K. Le Guin.² One of these quotations provides the title of this exhibition, while the other two are presented as possible further titles in all the three formats, although the actual title is always present. The visual graphic concept itself is based on the design of an advertisement from the mid-1980s. The individual elements—title, image, footnote, and logo—are presented in various different ways in the three formats. In the brochure, the short texts on the exhibited works are idiosyncratic descriptions of what we see. In some cases, conceptual background information is withheld and in others it is provided. The style varies subtly from work to work, and the proposed format here plays with an allegedly objectifying convention of presentation and its habitual forms of expression.

Melanie Ohnemus

1. Donna Haraway: "Innocence is not even dreamable" and "We need more than one term for these big things," in *Ursula K Le Guin debate con Donna Haraway*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=-59bLqzrM2r0&t=3714s. Panel discussion, Ursula K. Le Guin, Donna Haraway, and James Clifford, conference *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, Rio Theatre, Institute of the Arts and Sciences, University of California Santa Cruz, May 8, 2004.

2. Ursula K. Le Guin: "I am older than a hero ever gets," in *Ursula K. Le Guin, Avenali Chair in the Humanities*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovZ6qgTy-3SE. Avenali Chair in the Humanities Ursula K. Le Guin in conversation with Professor Michael Lucey, Townsend Center for the Humanities, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, February 26, 2013.

Ei Arakawa
Cologne of the Maghreb (Bodyphilia Song), 2016

LED strips on hand-colored textile, LED, LED transmitter, mains adapters, SD cards, wood, converter, cardboard, amplifier, media player, c. 175 × 155 × 40 cm, Courtesy the artist and Meyer Kainer Gallery, Vienna

An installation with an image consisting of LED strips applied to a cloth. This shows a section from a painting by Cologne artist Michael Buthe. The image is placed on a wooden frame on rollers, and is thus freestanding. The installation includes a source of sound, with an improvised and Shamanic-sounding song. This is a homage to the life and work of Buthe, an exploration of spiritual approaches to life, homosexuality, and a critical investigation of the Western canon. Ei Arakawa and Dan Poston are responsible for the text, Louis Zuckermann for the arrangement, and in 2016 this song was performed together with the Moroccan musician Hassan Hakmoun. The recording from this performance is used here.

Bonnie Camplin
Masterful, 2013

Pencil on paper, framed, 21 × 30 cm,
Courtesy the artist, Ebensperger
Rhombert, Berlin/Salzburg, and Cabinet,
London

A pencil drawing showing primarily two elements. In the upper right half there is a darkly drawn cloud, from which a thin tail is hanging, so that the whole thing is a bit like a speech bubble. In the low middle part, there is an object that cannot easily be defined—it might be many things. The tail of the cloud seems to be touching this object very gently at the top, or perhaps it is not really touching it, as the moment of contact is lost in the irregular hatched fields that are striving upward.

Bonnie Camplin
Excessive Grooming due to Noise
Pollution, 2013

Ink on paper, framed, 30 × 42 cm, Cour-
tesy the artist and Collection Roswitha
Wille, Berlin

A stylized head drawn in black ink with very close hatching, and no recognizable facial features. The head seems to be freely floating in a dark space. There is a white line drawn horizontally across the face, with sharp spikes shooting out above and below it. This spiky line looks like an image from an extreme electrocardiogram or a sound line representing very loud music. Where the ears should be, the artist has drawn soundwave-like half-moons, thrusting out to the edges of the picture. The background here is brightly lit, on the left in a circle that pulls outward, and on the right patchier and less well defined. Beneath the head a small oval disc is “floating,” with a crescent moon with lines drawn on it. Above this disc there is a feather, suspended with its tip looking down. This gives the impression that this feather might be the magical creator of all of this scribbling. From the forehead of this “face,” one single long white hair is growing, swinging downward.

Trisha Donnelly
The Grounding, 2004

RC print, 122 × 120.65 cm, Courtesy the
artist and evn collection, Maria Enzersdorf

A nearly square black-and-white photograph shows a vertical arrangement of archaeological or bone-like shapes that are hard to define. Some of them seem to be covered in fur, while others look like fossils. The shadows in the background are also vague, as their origins cannot be identified.

Andrea Fraser
Projection, 2008

Two-channel HD video projection, color,
sound, 39:39 min., loop
Camera, light, and sound: Ashley Hunt;
production assistant: Wu Tsang
Editing: Andrea Fraser
Courtesy the artist and Nagel Draxler
Gallery, Berlin/Cologne

A video installation showing Andrea Fraser herself on two opposite vertically placed screens. The artist is wearing the same clothes and sitting in the same armchair in both projections. Stools are placed between the two screens, for visitors to sit on and look from one screen to the other. The projections alternate, and when one screen is on, the other is dark. This creates the impression of a conversation, which in reality is not a conversation but rather a mix of systemic knowledge about the process of such a conversation and contents that such a conversation might have, adapted in this kind of context to the art system. Based on intensive psychotherapy sessions, Fraser has developed six monologues that rather have the nature of one-sided dialogues. Thus each of the two persons, therapist and client, has her own script. Fraser is seen life-sized in both projections, directly addressing the camera.

Sophie Gogl
Anna, 2019

Acrylic on canvas, 120 × 80 cm, Courtesy
the artist and Zeller van Almsick Gallery,
Vienna

A portrait of a woman being led into a courtroom, with her hands behind her body and evidently in handcuffs. She is wearing a black evening dress, a black choker necklace, and conspicuously large spectacles with a black frame. Her black hair is worn loose. She is looking straight out of the picture at the viewer. Her right arm is held by a figure that is merely alluded to in comic-like style and seems to be leading her further into the room. In the background there is a half-open door with a fairly massive and bullish male figure, adding to the cramped impression of the scene. The woman is Anna Sorokin alias Anna Delvey, a confidence trickster who operated under her false name and false background for several years in the New York art scene, leaving a number of high bills in several hotels and with her “friends.” Her cover was blown this year and she was arrested.

Sophie Gogl
Lobster, 2019

Acrylic on wood, 120 × 80 cm, Courtesy
the artist and Zeller van Almsick Gallery,
Vienna

The portrait of a lobster holding a ballpoint pen in his right claw, with which it has written “No one cares what my definition of ‘is’ is” in block capitals on a white sheet of paper.

Yasmina Haddad
Quodlibets, 2016

Photo collage, framed, Series of 6, 39 × 26 cm, Courtesy the artist

The series “Quodlibets” is actually a combination of two distinct series of photographs. It is an analogue assemblage. One of these series was made in a sixteenth-century palazzo in Rome, whose walls are painted in a trompe l’œil effect with marble buildings and architecture and landscapes. The other series was made at the premises of a company in Nepi near Rome. Here real Indian air is bleached and treated with artificial dyes, so that it can later be used as hair extensions. The collages are within a red frame.

Ernst Yohji Jäger
3 Stolen Apples, 2018

Acrylic and oil on canvas, 45 × 70 cm, Courtesy the artist and 4649 Gallery, Tokyo

A small painting, the background of which moves from an iridescent bright turquoise in the upper left to a light blue center, and a bright carmine red at the bottom. The two main colors are separated by a comic-like dragon’s claw in bright bilious green, emerging from a “slot” painted onto the picture, and holding up a kind of tag-shadow. In the upper right there is a still life with three Cezanne-style apples, the upper left a stylized and ungendered manga face, and in the lower right corner a frottage-like brown pear.

Ernst Yohji Jäger
mmhmmhmm, 2017

Oil on canvas, 175 × 175 cm, Courtesy the artist and 4649 Gallery, Tokyo

A painting showing a stylized naked figure who seems to be undertaking a walk in an abstract world. A brown mass is falling from its behind in a thin stream, soon becoming a wider and winding path on which it walks. The painting transforms this path several times. It begins in brown, then gains dashes of yellow, then it widens, mainly yellow, and the brown becomes a system of lines that looks like the skin of a snake. But it might also be dried earth. Grasses and plants are “growing” on this path, maybe dandelion. It winds further and further into the deeper perspective of the picture, where it disappears in a kind of “fire” in the upper left corner, a cloudy and smoky pink, orange, and bright red. This structure continues with a turn to the right, becoming a magenta and then pink cloud that spreads out over the whole upper left side of the painting, turning and puffing out, and finally ending up as a cloud or a scent in the nostril of the figure. All of this takes place before a background ranging from evening blue to black as night.

Miranda July
The Metal Bowl, 2017

Short story, read by the author, published in “The Writer’s Voice: Fiction from the Magazine,” The New Yorker Magazine podcast, August 29, 2017, 31 min., Courtesy the artist and The New Yorker Magazine, Condé Nast, New York

A short story, read by the author, in which a traumatic experience that the protagonist had fifteen years ago is merged with the contradictions of a life that is otherwise fulfilled. In a broader sense, the story explores how a woman perceives her own sexual identity in the light of past and present experience, bringing the listener to observe unconscious and conscious aspects of this identity in various interactions.

Tonio Kröner
Dagny, 2018

Polyester, foam, fiberboard, felt, Marabu feathers, REIG Deluxe Saxophone, doll c. 65 × 30 × 30 cm, installation variable, Courtesy the artist

A furry doll in various shades of gray, a yellow nose, wearing a yellow, green, and black striped polo shirt, and holding a small saxophone. There are no eyes as such, as these are merely indicated by white Marabu feathers. It is not clear who this doll is, as it is clearly not a Muppet Show character—or have we forgotten that one? It would be possible to move the doll and bring it to life, by putting your hand inside it.

Louise Lawler
Not Cindy, 2002/2008

Silver dye bleach print with text on mat: "WE HUMANS", 15.7 × 13.2 cm (photo), Ed. of 10 + 2 AP, Acquired by the VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna; 2009, sale by Metro Pictures, New York, Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York / The VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna

A small color photograph shows a woman with dynamic, short-cut blonde hair. She is seen from behind, working at a computer. She is sitting at a freestanding office desk. This room might be an art gallery, as office furniture is frequently placed in such open positions in galleries.

On the back wall there is a work by Ed Ruscha, with the word "Humans" written on it. In the passe-partout framing of the photograph, the words "We Humans" are imprinted.

Louise Lawler
Manet, 1990

Gelatin silver print with text on mat: "MANET", 38.1 × 55.5 cm (photo), Ed. of 5 + 1 AP, Acquired by the VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna; 2009, sale by Metro Pictures, New York, Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York / The VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna

This small black-and-white photograph shows an installation with two paintings by Édouard Manet from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, here hung very closely together. The upper and larger painting, "Madame Auguste Manet" (1863), is cut off, and we can only see the hands resting in a lap, holding something. Perhaps it is a medallion, or a very small book.

The lower and smaller picture, "Chez Tortoni" (1875), is a portrait of a man wearing a top hat, seated at a table, and about to write something while looking directly at the painter. Both of these paintings are within richly decorated and probably golden frames, each with a small badge on it. The paintings are hung on a wall with striped wallpaper.

Greg Parma Smith
Anhinga with Corona, 2017

Oil and rhinestones on canvas, 116 × 116 cm, Courtesy the artist and Federico Vavassori Gallery, Milan

An American darter bird in flight, very elegantly painted in naturalist style in oil. The feathers are in shades of brown, the eye encircled in bright light blue, the bill in muted bright orange. The background is a sequence of bright pink and bright lilac reminiscent of the early morning hours of a new summer day. Around the bird, there is an aureole of various plastic rhinestones.

Greg Parma Smith
Poseurs, 2013

Oil and gesso on canvas, 162 × 110 cm, Courtesy the artist and Federico Vavassori Gallery, Milan

A female nude in the pose of an ancient Egyptian goddess, very elegantly painted in naturalist style in oil. (Not all gods were presented like this, but certainly the desert god Seth, the sun god Re, and Horus, the god of the sky). The woman is standing sideways on her straight left leg, with her right leg stepping forwards. Her right arm is outstretched, the hand holding an upright rod, and her left arm hangs by her side behind her body. Her face is shown in profile, her eyes are looking forward. She has shoulder-length wavy hair. The color of her face, rump and left leg is dark, while her arms, hand, right leg, and left foot are bright. With its pronounced muscles, her right arm looks like that of a man, while her left arm is more female. Her right foot also seems more feminine, with its painted nails and smaller size, while the left foot looks more masculine. Both of her hands look feminine, although we cannot be sure. All we can say is that this figure includes both sexes and different

skin colors. Looking more closely, the rod looks like a roll of carton. The figure is standing before a very dark (nearly black) background, "illuminated" with bright light coming from the left in a painterly effect. This adds a further element of confusion, as the figure's brightly colored skin may be just a result of the light shining on it. This seems unrealistic, however, as then the whole front of the body would have to be bright, but it is not. The entire rump, the face, and the right arm of the woman are covered in a spider's web, applied to the canvas as thin but bulging threads. The painterly nature of each element that is covered by this slightly protruding web is not in any way disturbed by it, and the threads themselves are painted as if they were part of the image.

Cinzia Ruggeri
Colombra, 1990

Chaise longue, velvet, c. 134 × 377 × 67 cm, Courtesy the artist; Federico Vavassori Gallery, Milan; Campoli Presti, Paris; Francesca Pia Gallery, Zurich

A black velvet chaise longue in the shape of a stylized human body. The figure is stretched out on the floor, the torso raised, arms pointing upwards, the wrists crossed, framing the head in an oval field. The figure is wide open. This chaise longue is not meant to be used. Aged only eighteen, Ruggeri presented art in 1960 at the Milan Galleria del Prisma, but then decided to study fashion design. She later founded her own label and she never stopped making art.

Lilli Thiessen
container (that's what she shed), 2019

Foil and paper on plywood, metal corners, c. 110 × 110 × 120 cm, Courtesy the artist

A large closed box made of plywood boards, with all four sides and the four boards laid loosely over the top to form a lid all decorated with collages of various papers and foils. The images used in the collages range from fashion photography, pornographic images, animal posters, advertising, paper butterflies, to gift wrapping paper. The eight corners of the box are fortified with metal inserts, onto which details of women's faces—or, more precisely, their mouths—have been collaged. The title of the work indicates a specific context it might be situated in. In recent years, there has been increasing interest in a new counterpart to the “man cave”—the “she shed,” also known as the “lady cave” or the “woman cave.”

Lilli Thiessen
hangover IX (it's sunny cause it's true),
2019

Collage, polyester fabric, c. 110 × 90 cm,
Courtesy the artist

A bright orange polyester jacket with short sleeves and prints of lions in the savannah. The sleeves are laid out upwards, and in each of them there are collages with materials from the tabloid press in simple clip frames.

Nicole Wermers
The Violet Revs, 2016

Plastic chairs, leather jackets, lining fabric, denim fabric, studs, fox tails, faux fur, patches, chains and badges, Dimensions variable, Courtesy the artist and Herald St, London

A group of stackable white plastic chairs, with black leather jackets hung over them, the latter with studs, patches, chains, and various badges. These jackets belong to the members of a fictitious gang of women bikers, the Violet Revs. Each jacket is individually designed, according to the owner's personal preferences. The chairs are loosely spread around the room.

Andrea Fraser *Projection, 2008*

1.

RIGHT SCREEN: [*Anxiously*] Is that a question? That's an observation...I don't...I...I...

R: [*Laughs/cries.*] Yeah.

R: Well, I mean, I...I...I do keep these relationships very mediated, and keeping you at a distance, I mean it's...it's partly about protecting myself from people, but I think it's also about...the more problematic part is...protecting people from myself, is thinking that I...I...

R: Angry and critical...destructive.

R: [*Louder, forced*] I've always been very ambivalent about my field, and I made a kind of career out of that, um, ambivalence, to some extent, but in the last couple of years it's just gotten extremely difficult and...[*weeping*] I just don't think that I can do it anymore...

R: No, I feel more loss, now, at the moment.

R: [*Sits up, uncrosses and recrosses arms and legs.*] Sure, that makes sense.

R: I'm convinced...I'm convinced, I'm convinced but I...[*Looks up.*] Okay.

R: I just...I'm not arguing with you, you know, I mean, I...I think you're right, I just don't...

R: It doesn't feel like anger, though.

R: Maybe it's...you frighten me.

R: [*Weeping*] I think it's already in the room.

R: I don't like it...It's violent.

2.

LEFT SCREEN: But...let me ask you again: What is the harm?

L: Yeah, but [*leans forward*] you see, that is a, um, diversion. I recognized the minute you sat down that you have a lot of very positive feelings about all this that are based on the contribution it's made to your life. But we are discussing your negative feelings about this. You're not making the connection on your own behalf. That's why you get stuck in this loop. And now you're here, and that indicates that this is something you want to do. You're investing time, trust, effort...

L: But it also makes you feel less valuable.

L: Are there images associated with that? Do you see images?

L: I understand, but...[*leans forward*] but what do you want to do?

L: You know, passivity is a very, uh, insidious sabotage maneuver.

L: And you're displacing that onto art, and you think that's it? I don't.

L: What do you want to do to me? What do you want to do with this situation that makes you feel so, uh, unloved? If you picture it clearly, what do you see yourself doing, if you don't let yourself be, uh, weakened by this, uh, charisma or whatever it is?

L: And that does what to you? Neutralizes you, seems to me, as any sort of, uh, threat. I mean, it essentially makes you...subordinate.

L: Good.

L: And? What do you perceive?

L: Yes, it is.

L: Oh, I think it's worse than that. I think you actually want to strangle yourself.

L: So you'll sacrifice anything? Any part of yourself? And what do you want in return?

L: [*Leans forward.*] Well, it's the part of you that loves this and thinks that it's more important than you are yourself, so...so anything you feel against it has to be punished out of you.

L: Destroy it.

L: That's the tragedy.

L: The end of what?

L: Well, I think it's only the end of a fantasy, the fantasy that I would be what you want me to be, that this would be what you want it to be.

3.

R: But it doesn't feel like a conflict between affection and aggression, it feels like... [*weeping*] it feels like my ag—...it, it feels like...like losing, like...like it's something, it's coming from y—...like I...like I'm taken over by something and it's coming from...from you and invading me and, and... [*Hand over mouth.*]

R: Run away.

R: [*Looking up, resistant*] Love.

R: [*Sighs.*] Different things.

R: I don't know. I feel like...I feel like...I'm producing this for you.

R: I am trying to figure out what you want.

R: [*Long pause, sighs.*] Well, there's a conflict between... [*pauses, hand over eyes*]...between loving and wanting love and hating and wanting to...destroy, and then there's... [*Pauses, chin in hand.*] It's just that if I do that...I still don't get love, if I destroy you.

4.

L: And if you painted for us an alternative, what would that be? You're observing these mechanisms and relationships here with great clarity. So, what is the alternative?

L: But let's deal with this situation here, because ...

L: [*Leans forward.*] No, no, no, here's what I want to communicate: I became this figure in a flash. It's almost as if you became paralyzed just now.

L: Okay, but you're behaving as if I were.

L: So, what is it like?

L: I mean, here you are, seeking an experience, but when it comes to actually engaging that experience, openly and honestly...

L: [*Nodding*] 'Cause you anticipate a hostile environment, a shaming response.

Memories get activated and I become someone else. This becomes your childhood home, it becomes a school, it becomes a museum. It's not that you're worried I may be like those people, it's...I become them. So, why don't you want to escape?

L: But everything you've described here is a negative. [*Leans forward.*] If you...if you left this system behind, of being in this world, wanting from it, hating it, what are you losing?

L: [*Interrupting*] B—...n—...no, no, no, bear with me, bear with me. I want to hear, and...and...therefore...What's the...?

L: And the artist?

L: But what are you betraying?

5.

R: [*Shoes off, knees up, feet on chair, turned to the side*] But there's also, you know—I mean, art as we know it exists because of a long history of commitment to certain principles and that often involved sacrifices.

R: [*Pauses; weeping*] I don't know, it feels like a conflict between...between a kind of a conscience, you know, that was formed by my internalization of that history and...and then, you know, these...these wishes to be rewarded and... [*weeping, chin in hand*] and it's left me feeling false and...like...like I'm betraying something, I'm betraying...I'm betraying myself, but...but it's also...it's...

R: Yeah, you know, people who inspired me and...and fought the good fight, people who made sacrifices and...some of them died...and then people I love who...who had ambitions and turned away from them in some way, you know, or...or failed and... [*Weeping.*]

R: [*Looking up*] I don't know. I'm looking at the ceiling.

R: [*Weeping*] Because I...I think that if you failed, I'm responsible for that.

R: It would have put me out of my misery.

R: [*Detached*] I don't know, you get, you know, you...your head gets bashed against the pavement and you break your neck.

R: [*Almost a scream*] NO, NOT YOU! [*Weeping.*]

6.

L: [*Leaning forward*] How does that make you feel?

L: [*Leans back.*] I...I would imagine. For their suffering? For their not having been recognized and valued? That they've lived unfulfilled? That they sabotaged their dreams, failed to make them reality?

L: [*Softly*] But y—...but if I understand clearly, that describes the feeling of love.

L: And that was broken.

L: It's not something I have a magical power to do.

L: That's a fantasy you mean.

L: Here with me.

L: I see. [*Pauses.*] So you weren't guilty enough to destroy your own ambitious self.

L: [*Leaning forward, loudly*] If there wasn't love, there would be no purpose in turning that destructiveness against yourself.

L: And if you sit here and make that unacceptable here, what's the point of this?

L: [*Loudly*] I can't read the imagery in your mind.

L: [*Prompting*] Violently...

L: And...?

L: Please, look at me!

L: And what does a person like you deserve?

R: [*Faces up, shifting in chair, pulling leg up, laughing*] I'm sorry, I was just...

L: [*Pauses; slowly smiling*] I believe this would be funny...if it weren't real.

7.

R: No, I was laughing at myself because of the impulse to dramatize.

R: Shame, I suppose. [*Pulls other leg up, foot on chair.*]

R: Well, weeping in public is also a kind of exhibitionism.

R: [*Looking away*] I mean, potentially there's shame in almost everything. I mean, sure, there's shame in anxiety, there's shame in fear, in...in weakness, in ignorance, in being powerless, being small, being subject, being out of control. I'm not saying there should be. I mean, there's shame in shame. [*Laughs.*]

R: No, no, no, it's fine, I believe you, I'm just...

R: I am taking it seriously. As Oscar Wilde said, "There's no shame in being poor, only poorly dressed."

R: [*Sighs, looking up*] I think it's...I think it's about...exposure, you know, exposing and being exposed, and...and...which is, of course, exactly what I'm doing.

R: [*Yawning*] Well, that exposure is to expose oneself to, you know, to risk or to danger, to abuse, whether that abuse is...whether that danger is external or internal, I mean, is a very old question.

R: [*Pauses.*] I mean, it probably would have, there's also a...[*long pause*]...it's a moment when I, I also, um, I don't know why but...but...it may have had something to do with...with...with not being able, not...not, um...with feeling ex—...ex—...experiencing...a kind of...a kind of inca—...inca—...being im—...im—...im—...immobilized or, kind of, restrained, and...

R: [*Turning head to the side*] We don't have to—I'm not, you know, it's not...I just...it...it...look, it...it...it came to me when I was...so I'm...I don't think I...I have that much to, you know...

R: [*Loudly*] Well y—...you're, you know...what I'm getting from you right now is just consistent incomprehension, okay...it's...it...

R: [*Louder*] It's what I'm getting from you, it doesn't feel encouraging, it feels...it...

R: Well...listen...I'm not, I mean, I'm not...I...I...I just, I f—...[*Covers face with hand.*]

R: [*Hands out*] Okay, JUST...STOP, OKAY, JUST STOP FOR A MOMENT AND SIT BACK, PLEASE!

R: [*Long pause; hand over face*] It felt just now like you were...you were in—...you were forcing, you were being in—...

8.

L: Is that your way of dealing with distress? To internalize it? Silently? So no one can tell.

L: So, here's a situation where you're not being represented. There's no one looking out for you, to make sure you have a seat, you feel welcome. You may be the object of aggression, even sadism. What does that bring up?

L: [*Ironically*] Oh, okay. Oh, I see. So, you're not made to feel of significant value, less significant than, uh...

L: And what is the loss? The loss of someone who cares more about you than about material things?

L: But y—...you see what this is? A lack of a sense of your own value, whether it's me neglecting you here by being unclear, whether I have an image of you as important.

L: And what happens if you not only want but demand?

L: You get shamed, in other words. But what happens to the longings? When they're thwarted? So, you put them into some sort of magical arena, like art, and then, sculpting yourself into a kind of heroic figure, hoping someday to be recognized as someone who is worthy of this kind of...attention.

L: Love? What does that mean?

L: To be treated as though you matter. And every time you were devalued, ignored, intimidated, another one of those wishes was ruptured.

L: Wishes. And behind every broken wish, there's anger.

L: But you have no control over whether I'm, uh, exhausted and generic, or...or have no resources to invest in you, or I'm too self-absorbed, uh, to communicate. You're...you're powerless over this situation.

L: What do you mean, "you've heard"? It's ...

L: [*Leaning forward*] Sure, feeling part of and in control is a very fulfilling fantasy, but if that goes along with, um...um, suffering something just...just...just within your grasp but you can't reach it, that's a kind of cruelty.

L: By who?

9.

R: I don't know. That's a good question.

L: But who?

R: I don't think I'd be convinced by my own arguments in this context.

R: Yeah, obviously, if I could just embrace this, or just reject it, it wouldn't be a conflict.

R: Of course I am. The question is what I'm competing for.

R: That isn't what I want art to be about.

R: Well, no, I don't...

R: No, I don't think that's why they hate us.

R: I mean, there's a long history, it goes back to Romanticism, and...

R: Well, yeah, I mean there's...there's a kind of double game, you know. On the one

hand, I reject a kind of culture of, you know, the gross inequality that it's a product of, and then on the other hand I, like...like a lot of artists, I live in a very, very privileged world that I'm kind of guest in. But we have all these strategies to feel superior to people who have more than we do.

R: Not really. Just in our minds.

R: Well, the envy and resentment that...and shame, at feeling less than.

R: [*Slipping out of shoe and pulling leg up onto chair*] Whatever, you know, comes with being more, getting more, having more, and then, you know, freedom, more...

R: Well, thinking those rewards allow you satisfactions that I'm denied.

R: Ultimately, yeah, to be...to be...to be loved and feel safe and valued and...but it's tragic because the...the competition, the struggle itself destroys that...and I guess that I think that, that I destroyed it.

R: Kicking and screaming.

R: It seems like everybody.

R: There's a—I never, it's like a deep [*gestures*]...you know, I never actually believe that...that...that anyone would really be happy for me [*weeping*]...for what I do. I guess because I can't feel that way.

R: I think it's not in me. I don't know if it's in you. It's not in me. I guess I must hope that it's in you, and that's why I'm talking to you right now.

R: [*Weeping*] I have to imagine somebody.

R: [*Looks up.*] But if I get that from you, I think it's because you destroyed your own ambitions, because you've damaged yourself and I can't, you know, I can't enjoy...to enjoy that is to enjoy your...damage.

R: If I don't feel love for you, it's not a conflict.

R: [*Looks up, laughs.*] Why, why are you laughing?

R: [*Smiling*] No, because it's not competitive really, it's...it's...it's very sweet.

10.

L: What just came to mind? You had a smile on your face, like...?

R: Well, that's your neurosis!

L: So now the positions are reserved. If we were looking down on you and making you an object of scorn, you know, now you have the upper hand on, uh, society and...

L: Pardon?

L: Well, the irony of that is I keep watching you do the exact same thing to yourself.

L: Well, there—sure, there's the secondary-gain issue, but I don't think that's how this feels. I don't think it's about someone making a profit, it's...

L: You were talking about feeling envy and, uh—did I get that right?

L: [*Leans forward.*] Do you have a problem with making a lot of money?

L: Oh, of course there is, sure, but...but no...but the conflict here is between different sides of yourself.

L: Well, you're going to have to educate me about this. I can tell it's an extremely important topic.

L: Sometimes it's useful to hear your own arguments so you can discern your own bullshit.

L: [*Leans forward.*] No, actually I'm on the edge of my seat right now, waiting for the next...yes! Disclosure!

L: But I'm talking about internal dynamics, okay, I...I don't...I don't consider you a threat to social norms, okay...but you do.

L: So now you feel disrespected, that I'm not taking the artistic struggle here seriously. [*Leans forward, puts out both hands palms up.*] Okay, well, so we have two figures now, uh, in—there are...there are imbalances of power and this is one of those situations. So what do you want to do?

L: But you...you...you see what you do? You're acting as if...as if it's dangerous. It's not, uh...What's the...what's the...?

L: [*Pauses; nodding*] Well, maybe but is it, um, all envy or is there jealousy as well? In other words, what do you have that I covet? Is it, um, physical, psychological, social, or material power? It is beauty?

L: I don't under—...destroyed...? Loved...?

L: [*Pauses.*] So, relationships are ripped apart by competition, and now you have to sacrifice yourself to me because I can't tolerate you, because envy and jealousy make me hate you...or you feel guilty because for you to enjoy something positive is experienced by you as taking from me—which, again, to me represents a kind of love, that... that sadness for unfulfilled strivings and...

L: You are fading, I...

L: [*Leaning forward*] And they don't do harm?

L: I...I couldn't hear, I couldn't hear the answer.

R: [*Sniffs.*]

L: [*Leans back, sighs.*] I think this is a form of ritual suffering. That's how it comes across.

R: [*Sighs.*]

L: Does it truly make you safer? Does it make you feel more loved?

11.

R: Well, you know, I think this has been interesting and productive, but it's just not really what I came here for.

R: You're a kind of surgeon, you know—this is kind of surgery. It's...it's about the mechanics of relations as opposed to, you know, the poetics. It's not about stirring my soul. It's about rearranging my mind.

R: To step outside and leave it behind?

R: To resolve it, oh. [*Laughing sarcastically*] And how do we do that?

R: But that's not what I aspire to do. There are different kinds of success.

R: That isn't what this context offers. You're not consistently there and I'm not consistently here. I will disappear. And so will you.

R: I am aware of using you.

R: [*Sits up straight, cross legs, fold hands in lap, looks straight ahead, pauses.*] Okay, now you're annoying me.

R: That's what I was trying to talk about, that's what I was trying to...

R: No, listen...

R: Well, I certainly don't want to feel close to you now.

R: [*Sighs, pauses, looks up and ahead stiffly.*] In what sense?

R: [*Sighs, pauses, leans on hand.*] I don't know if a sexual response. Maybe just an attentive response.

R: [*Looks up.*] No, I want to hear what you have to say. [*Pauses, begins to weep.*]

12.

L: I'm just wondering: If I were able to give you what you want, would you really want me to do that?

L: And now you're reenacting those dynamics here.

L: I understand there's the longing for that.

L: So, I have a flaw: I lack the quality, the capacity to tolerate this. [*Leans forward.*] So, you move in a little closer, you experience anxiety, you back off and create distance. [*Leans back.*] You laugh, you fidget, you look away...humor, irony, organizing, shifting in your seat. I'm asking you not to do that. I'm asking you just to sit here and endure this.

L: Describe it. Seriously, describe your annoyance.

L: Well, I thought it made you angry.

L: Are there any particular eyes you're looking through right now?

L: So you enjoyed it...at the time.

L: Curiosity, pleasure, excitement...what is the...judgment?

L: That puts you at risk.

L: And, what kind of response are you wanting?

L: May I answer my own question?

L: [*Leans forward.*] And that is...? Something to be...? Proud off?

L: No, not perfectly.

L: [*Leans back.*] I respect your right to privacy, if this is closely held information. I can see you're in a very delicate...

L: [*Leans forward, didactic tone*] Okay, what I see is: You are a trigger for a lot of conflicting emotion. You activate trauma. You trigger that.

[*Loop.*]

COLOGNE OF THE MAGHREB (BODYPHILIA SONG)

INTRO SPOKEN WORDS

1.
HE DIDN'T PREACH TO US, HE JUST ACCEPTED IT.
HE WASN'T TOPPING ON US, HE JUST RECEIVED IT.
[BERBER] TOKERDA N'TADLSA [STEALING CULTURE] SOME MIGHT CALL HIM STILL.
HE WASN'T TOPPING ON US, HE INTERNALIZED IT. (OH POWER BOTTOM)

2.
SHAMANIC ADONIS, NARCISSUS SPRINGTIME BODYPHILIA
COLOGNE OF THE MAGHREB, MARRAKESH: SPIRIT 'N LUST
BOYS BODIES ARE STENCILS FOR PAINTINGS (OH DESIRE)

3.
PURPLE PRISON, FRENCH OCCUPATION
MOGADOR, ESSAOUIRA, NAKED BOY-MAN (ALL WET SINBAD)
ECONOMIC REASON, OR SIMPLE HORNINESS?
[GERMAN] GESCHLECHTSVERKEHR-TOURISMUS.
WEISSGELDMENSCHEN (OH MERKEL MERKEL)

4.
FEMININE TENDERNESS. ATTITUDES BECOME FORM.
CAN WE TRUST HIS SHOWMANSHIP?
OR POST-WAR GERMAN DAD? (WHAT 'BOUT CAMP?)
CAN WE TRUST HIS SHOWMANSHIP?
OR POST-WAR GERMAN DAD? (OR BIG MAMA?)

MIDDLE SPOKEN WORDS

5.
[GERMAN] DIE GESCHICHTE DER EMPFINDLICHKEIT
BOWLES, SAN LAURENT, FASSBINDER, GENET, PASOLINI (ALL POWER BOTTOM)
EONS OF HOMOSEXUAL, FUTURE HOMOSEXUAL
COLOGNE OF THE MAGHREB,
MARRAKESH: WORMHOLE STARSHINE (WARP WARP WARP)

6.
A CATHOLIC MAN ALL HIS LIFE. HE LONGS TO BE MUSLIM.
ESCAPE FROM POPE? ESCAPE FROM MAMA? (OH MAMA-PAPA)
ESCAPE FROM POPE? OBSESSED WITH MAMA? (OH POWER BOTTOM)

MIDDLE LONG SPOKEN WORDS 2

7.
“OUTSIDER” AS A MYTH. THE MARKET ATE IT ALL. (EXCEPT HIM)
END OF TOTAL MESSY BIG WORK.
GALLERIES WANTED SOMETHING ELSE. (OH MAKE IT MAKE IT)

8.
WESTERN IDENTIFICATION TAKING OVER THE WORLD
COMING AIDS CRISIS. EVERYONE TAGGED “GAY”. (WORLD-WIDE-WEB)
COMING AIDS CRISIS. EVERYONE TAGGED “GAY”. (WORLD-WIDE-WEB)

END SPOKEN WORDS

9.
HE WASN'T TOPPING ON US, HE INTERNALIZED IT.
BOYS COME AND GO, HAVE A WIFE AND A CHILD
[BERBER] TOKERDA N'TADLSA [STEALING CULTURE] SOME MIGHT CALL HIM STILL.
HE WASN'T TOPPING ON US, HE TOOK IT IN ALRIGHT (OH POWER BOTTOM)

10.
AGE OF HORNET. AGE OF GRINDR.
PAINTING CALLING AND ANSWERING. UNSPOKEN LOVE. (UNDIALED INTIMACIES)
THIS IS GNAWA TAKING OVER PAINTING.
PAINTING CALLING AND ANSWERING.
NO ONE ON THE OTHER SIDE. (EROS REVOLVING ROUND.)

[BAMBARA] CHALLABAN TITARA DIFOU LI ALLAHI
CHALLABAN TITARA LAAFOU LI ALLAHI
CHALLABAN TITARA ZOURO JANA
[CHALLABAN, INCENSE THAT SMELLS LIKE HEAVEN, WHAT A CREATION OF GOD.]
[CHALLABAN, INCENSE THAT SMELLS LIKE HEAVEN, SO GOD FORGIVE US.]
[CHALLABAN, WE ARE VISITING HEAVEN, GOD IS WELCOMING US.]

MUSIC: HASSAN HAKMOUN
ARRANGEMENT: DAVID LOUIS ZUCKERMAN
LYRICS: EI ARAKAWA & DAN POSTON
(EXCEPT IN ARABIC/BAMBARA: HASSAN HAKMOUN)

He cupped the two halves of my tush and spoke directly to them. “Run away with me, girls,” he whispered. “She doesn’t understand our love.”

I lay still, staring out the window, letting them have their time together. If I protested, I’d only make his case stronger: I’m less fun than my own butt. Which is not untrue. In my essence, I am a stone, unmoving for ten thousand years, unless picked up and moved. It’s not just sex; I find this whole experience—life—gratuitously slow and drawn out. See it crawl, second by fucking second. If I’m a workaholic, it’s only because I hate work so much that I’m trying to finish it, all of it, once and for all. So I can just ride out the rest of my life in some kind of internal trance state. Not a coma but, like, a step above that.

Our son, Sam, trotted in sleepily, and I warned him not to get in the bed: “It’s all bloody.” Alex quietly removed his hands from my body; he hadn’t noticed that I was bleeding. Sam pulled back the sheets and studied the mess, smiling giddily. “You got your period.”

“Yes.”

“You said it was coming soon and you were right!”

“Yep.”

This new generation of men has been taught (by me) to feel excited about the menstrual cycle. It’s like tadpoles turning into frogs or the moon that follows them wherever they go. I’ve been waiting a long time to have my period cheered on. More and more women my age have given up on our men and are getting together with millennials, youngsters raised by women who were born in the sixties, rather than the forties. I hear it’s great. Not a lot of hang-ups. But that isn’t an option for me because I need a man with a historical perspective that encompasses my whole lifetime. If anything, I regret not having met Alex sooner. If we had met at my birth and I had been able to assess how narcissistic my parents were, I could have left the hospital with Alex and got started on our relationship immediately. He would have been eight years old—young, but not too young to keep me alive. I need that in a man.

Sometimes my love for him is so intense that I want to crawl inside his body. I want him to be pregnant with me and never give birth, just

hold me in. At other times, I wonder, Who is that guy? And why is he in my house? When I get that look on my face, he sticks out his hand and says, “Hi, I’m Alex. Your husband.”

Sam used his small pointing finger to tap each old bloodstain on the sheet; they dated back more than a decade, a disgusting constellation. It was one of those things you didn’t notice until suddenly you did. Like ants. Like everything.

I dressed and brushed my teeth. If I went to the mall immediately and got a new sheet, then the chore wouldn’t have time to gather weight. Once a task goes on the to-do list it settles in, grows roots—the trick is to preempt that. I could get a tent light while I was there. We were going camping the next weekend with another family, although unfortunately I wasn’t sure I would be able to join. Too much work to do.

“I can get new sheets,” Alex said, slowly climbing out of bed, limb by limb. Sam asked if we would be watching TV today, yes or no.

“Not sheets—just one fitted sheet. There’s only one place that sells Cariloha-brand California-king sheets individually. What is it?”

“Macy’s?”

“Nope.”

“Amazon?”

“Definitely no. I told you about my bad experience—”

“You did. I forgot.”

Bedding is an unregulated corner of Amazon, where companies charge radically different prices for the same bad sheets. You can’t even get nicer sheets by paying more—money has no meaning there. And don’t bother typing in words like “Egyptian cotton” or “thread count”—you’re just offering them more precise ways to bamboozle you. Get up, find your keys and your purse, and go outside. I hate it as much as anyone, but sometimes you just have to.

My plan was to park on the street and walk into the mall, get the sheet, and go. By not parking in the parking garage, I would outwit the psychology of the mall designers who wanted you to sever ties with the outside world. But walking in off the street was disorienting. I entered through Bloomingdale’s and had to wade through the store; it was like pushing through coats to enter Narnia. Once I made it into the

mall, I had no idea where I was. It took me a long time even to find a map, then I traced my finger back and forth between You Are Here and the Low Cost Luxury Sheets Kiosk to memorize my path. The man standing next to me took a picture of the map and then trekked on, studying his phone. Pretty clever. As I walked, I glanced sideways at his tan, brawny body and floppy brown hair, just to confirm. Yes. He was a famous person. An actor. Or maybe a hotelier. Maybe this was André Balazs or whatever his name was. No, an actor. Electricity revved through my veins for no particular reason, just as a courtesy to his stature. I kept an eye on him as I walked toward the sheet kiosk, bracing myself for the moment when he would peel off in another direction. But he didn't; we continued walking alongside each other, and I began to feel that we were together. And he kept looking at me, out of the corner of his eye. This couldn't be true but it was. Somewhere between BabyGap and Lady Foot Locker the tables had turned. Now he recognized me.

I was twenty-two when the video was shot. I needed quick money so I could get out of a bad relationship—not a lot, just first and last and a security deposit. I couldn't admit my plight to my parents, because I had already done this and they had written me a check, with great relief, and that was what my quasi-abusive boyfriend and I had been living off for the past six months. He had come up with the ploy.

"Make it sound bad but not too bad. Don't say I hit you. Say I threw a chair at you or something."

"You did throw a chair at me."

"Obviously I wasn't fully serious when I did that."

I felt obligated to stay until my parents' money ran out, since asking for it had been his idea. Then he punched not my face but the wall right next to my face and I had to move very quickly from terror to concern and rush him to the emergency room, where a young, temporary doctor said that we could either wait four hours for the real doctor to arrive and fix the bone in my boyfriend's hand or let him "have a go." The temporary doctor high-fived me after he'd popped the bone back in.

The next morning, I woke up early and walked down to the cluster of newspaper boxes in front of the old people's bar, and discreetly pulled out the sex-themed paper. I'd always known that this option would be there for me if I really needed it. Just as my parents were there if

I really needed them, except for this one time.

I chose the job that seemed to offer the most money for a one-time deal. I thought that they would shoot it in a hotel but it happened in an apartment, on an old couch. I wasn't directed so much as given a series of props to make my way through, like an obstacle course. A turquoise Teddy bear, a pillow, an empty beer bottle, a metal bowl. Not everything was clear to me (the bowl), but I was too nervous to speak; I just laughed again and again to demonstrate consent. My biggest fear was that one of these men, the man with the lights or the cameraman, would misinterpret my nervousness and halt everything, shutting down the set on the ground that I was being objectified against my will. At that age, I assumed that everyone, deep down, was a feminist. So one had to be careful not to trigger feminism where one didn't want it.

I was waiting for a costume, something black and sexy or pink and trashy that would help catapult me out of myself. Instead, a man with a baseball cap, who was maybe the director, just said, "O.K., we're rolling." I was in shorts, a T-shirt, and sandals. I looked down at my shirt. It was from a sushi restaurant in my home town, but if you just glanced at it you might think it was racist, because of the fake Asian lettering. I imagined thousands of viewers waiting for this racist girl to get herself off. I quickly undressed and made a scissors gesture to the camera to indicate that this first part, the part with the racist shirt, should be cut. No one acknowledged this suggestion, so I rubbed against the Teddy bear, and rode the big pillow. I held the bowl, uncertain, and then set it aside. I put the beer bottle into my vagina. With all this moving around, it was impossible to become even slightly turned on—back then I had to shut my eyes and make my body completely stiff to generate any feeling. But no one said anything until after I had heaved my last fake orgasmic sigh.

"O.K., we got that," a woman with a clipboard said. The man in the baseball cap gave me a firm nod, like a satisfied coach. I understood then that the five-hundred-and-fifty-dollar fee was not the price of my beauty or my sex appeal; it was my naïveté that I'd sold. Every person, no matter how plain, has one great erotic performance in her—the one in which she doesn't know what she's doing and is desperately trying to save her life. A second performance would be a copy of the first, which would require skills I didn't have.

My face wasn't anywhere you could see it

unless you entered a credit-card number and clicked past dozens of professionals—"college beauties," "hot Korean girl," and so on. But a few people made it through the gauntlet. The first time I was recognized was at a healthy-Mexican restaurant; a pale man in gym clothes stared at me for a long time before making a scissors gesture in the air. It was electrifying, as if all my clothes had fallen off at once. I looked away but there was no denying our intimacy; he'd come while watching me. The next one was a father with his family; he scissored his fingers down low, surreptitiously. The last was a butch lesbian teen-ager; she just walked right up to me and asked. Each time, I'd hurry home and enter my credit-card number, clicking quickly past the college beauties and the hot Korean girl. Though I'd felt nothing at the time, seeing myself through these people's eyes was profound and overwhelming. I'd cry out with abandon; my body would shake and shiver as I came. Then I'd sleep, immediately, for at least two hours.

The video shoot became the central sexual experience of my life; to this day, I can't orgasm unless I imagine that I'm the pale man, the dad, or the young lesbian watching it, sometimes all of them together, crowded around one computer screen. I'm them, I'm me, I'm them, I'm me, I come. I showed it to each boyfriend I had after that, to blow their minds but also to explain my sexual orientation; I was oriented around myself in that video and anyone who'd seen it. There was only one boyfriend I didn't tell. He was a very classy man, emotionally speaking, and I didn't want to give him any indication of basket-casery. After I married him, I kept meaning to bring it up, to draw him into the fold of my sexuality, such as it was. But I waited too long; we were so close now. And after the butch lesbian there was a lull, a seventeen-year lull, in which no one recognized me.

I arrived at the Luxury Sheets Kiosk and the brawny man with floppy brown hair idled a few feet away, trying to decide what to do. The scissoring gesture didn't seem to occur to him. I ran my hand over the sheets while the cashier rang up a tall woman who kept adding one more thing. His eyes met mine, and I gave him a secret little smile. Truth is, I wanted to collapse with relief. Though a lot had happened in the past seventeen years—marriage, a child, my career—it was suddenly clear to me that I'd only been going through the motions, an exhausting simulation. I wasn't a stone. I was

one of life's biggest fans, the best example of a living thing. The amateur sex video was like a seed I had planted in my youth; it would always sustain me. Not financially but by sending me these messengers when I was most in need. My blood moved around in my body; I felt the purpose of every muscle. I was ready to dance. And just then a beat began, so I rocked my hips and pressed my wrists together, swinging them like a girl in bondage who nonetheless wanted to party. The beat ended abruptly; it was the tall woman's ringtone.

"Hello?" she answered impatiently; she had enough going on with all these sheets. I couldn't believe I'd danced to her ringtone. Maybe it was O.K. Who knows? Who can really see themselves? He was approaching. He was nearly beside me, his face open with surprise. I opened myself, too.

"You're my neighbor," he said.

"In what sense?" I said, my eyes twinkling.

"Well, in the sense that I live in the house next door to yours."

"The house on the corner?"

"Yeah, it's a duplex. We live in the apartment that faces Amador Street."

"Oh. Do you park on Amador?" I was bringing up parking just to hurt myself. I hated this conversation.

"I park on Amador and my wife parks in the garage," he said. "Although lately we've been trying to ride our scooters more. I'm Joel."

I thought about bringing up my husband, tit for tat, but I was too tired. The previous few seconds had taken everything out of me. We parted, saying that we would definitely see each other soon, ha-ha.

I drove the long way around the block to avoid Amador Street on my way home. I parked and turned off the car. It was hot but I left my seat belt on, folded my hands in my lap, and took some slow breaths. Before Joel, I had still believed I could be recognized. Now I knew I was too old. How do you mourn that kind of loss? It just pulls your whole life down. My phone rang: Alex.

"Are you home?"

"Yes. I'm in the driveway."

"Yeah, we heard you drive up. You coming in?"

"In a sec. I need to pour my heart out to someone so I can be empty and unburdened when I come inside."

I waited for him to say, "You can pour your heart out to me," but he was quiet and we got

off the phone. He never takes the bait. Which is good. It teaches me to be more direct in asking for what I need. Or does it? So far it hadn't.

We'd been tunnelling toward each other for years. It was hard work, but the assumption was that eventually our two tunnels would connect. We'd break through—Hallelujah! Clay-encrusted hands finally seizing each other!—and we would be together, really together, for the remaining time that we were alive. So long as we both dug as hard and as fast as we could, everything would work out. But, of course, neither of us knew for sure how the other person's digging was going. One of us might have been doggedly tunnelling toward the other person, while the other person was curling away in another direction. That person might not even have been aware of how off course he or she was. One of us might have tunnelled straight down for a few weeks, in anger, and then tried to get back on track, but now honestly had no idea where to go. We might break through—Hallelujah!—only to find that we were seizing the dirty hands of a stranger. What to do then? Or we might simply get tired, and stop digging, decide that here was good enough. All the while saying things like “We must be getting close!” and “I can't wait until the day finally comes!” We might never meet up at all; we might die before it happened. Or worse: maybe there had never been any hope of our meeting up, because what was that even a metaphor for? Oneness? A child's dream of love? I got out of the car and went inside, carrying the new fitted sheet and the tent light.

The next weekend, I was unfortunately not able to go on the camping trip. I stood in the driveway and waved goodbye to Alex and Sam, tearful for no reason. Then I went inside and walked around the house, room by room, looking at all our stuff through the judgmental eyes of a monk or a nun. I did my work, very slowly, over the course of the day. At 8 p.m. I started watching TV and at 2 a.m. I turned out the light. Then the earthquake happened.

I flew out of bed and moved down the hallway like a person on a wobbly rope bridge. I lurched out the back door and along the side of the house to the sidewalk. The shaking stopped. The street lights were off, no moon. Car alarms were beeping in syncopation. A huge branch was draped across my car. Someone was standing on the corner, waving. It was Joel. I had successfully avoided interaction all week. Now I ran to him through the dark.

“I didn't get my shoes!” I yelled dumbly, as

the pavement trembled again.

Joel thought it was safest to stay outside; I thought so, too—less stuff to be trapped under if it fell. He called his wife, who was in Sun Valley, Idaho. I didn't call Alex, since I was safe and a middle-of-the-night call is always alarming. Joel's earthquake-survival kit was more elaborate than ours; we spread out high-tech blankets and pillows on the lawn on his side of the duplex and lay down, waiting for dawn.

Once the car alarms had been silenced, the night was strangely quiet. The freeways were almost empty. Without the lights or the hum of cars, the sky took its place as the foremost thing. Joel and I stared up at it—an enormous gray arena we could fly around in just by lying there.

“Looking at the sky should be a ride at Disneyland,” Joel said.

This was such an accurate way to describe it. I thought about the accuracy for two or three minutes and then said, “Yeah.” We squinted at our houses in the dark and saw that they were leaning; they had shifted. I thought we'd probably move, rather than repair ours; Joel's was a rental, so he said they'd move for sure. Maybe to Ireland. I said we'd probably move to Ireland, too. The chances seemed high that we would be neighbors again, in Ireland. We scooted toward each other, for warmth, and when I turned on my side Joel spooned me, very innocently. All bodies were good, I realized. Joel's stocky form beside me was unfamiliar, but good. Hugging. It hit me like a ton of bricks. Hugging was so moving, so basic. Why had I ever taken pride in not being a “hugger”? Two people embracing was the very building block of life.

“Hugging is the building block of life,” I whispered. Joel was quiet and this was exactly right; more words would just take away. I pressed my hand against the lawn, palming the whole earth like a gigantic basketball. Warm tears ran into the hair at my temple, one after another after another. Hello, stranger, I thought. And by “stranger” I meant not Joel but myself. My blood moved around in my body. I felt the purpose of every muscle. It didn't matter that he hadn't seen the video.

When I awoke, it was light out and I was lying with the next-door neighbor on his lawn. I could tell right away that our houses were fine. It took only fifteen minutes to straighten up the books and the dishes that had fallen. The earthquake had been big, but no one was saying that it was “the big one.” When Alex and

Sam got home, I told a story about hiding under the dining-room table. Our earthquake, the one that Joel and I had survived, was private. I friended him on Facebook the next day and we started e-mailing. Mostly we wrote about details from that night—the silence, the sky, how time had seemed to stretch out. I didn't have any specific or adulterous plans; I was just wholly open. I saw us going on a road trip. Or maybe taking ayahuasca and throwing up in buckets. His penis was moving in and out of me most of the time. Sometimes I made it very small, like a finger, so that it wouldn't distract me too much as I worked or emptied the dishwasher. Just a little thrusting tick-tock that drowned out the real sound of time: 7 a.m., 4 p.m., 6 p.m., the most brutal of time's representatives, but hardly the whole battalion.

I was waiting for Joel's response to my last e-mail when Alex and I stumbled on him, almost literally. We were coming home from a date night; Joel and his wife were lying on their lawn, staring up at the evening sky. They'd brought out the same pillows and blankets, and a bottle of wine. It was adorable in a way that people like us find cloying, so Alex raised his eyebrows at me before calling out to them.

“Sorry! We usually park farther up but the trash cans are out.”

“No, no,” Joel said, rising to his feet. “We're good.” He swept his hand toward their reenactment. “It's a lot more fun without all the shaking!” His wife raised her glass toward me and smiled; she knew the whole story. Alex nodded, cocking his head curiously in my direction. I stared at the familiar blue geometric pattern of the pillowcases. Joel had taken the exquisite energy of our experience and plowed it back into his marriage. How wise. This option had never occurred to me. I had always detonated each thing in the very place where I found it.

Even after I acknowledged that I hadn't hidden under the dining-room table as I said I had, Alex was still confused. We'd been reading in bed for less than thirty seconds when he started up with the questions again.

“It's just so unlike you. You hate camping.”

“I know. It was an extreme situation.”

“And you've never once said hi to the neighbors.”

“And I still don't want to! Joel is a completely uninteresting person.” This was now true again.

I turned out my light. He left his light on and lay next to me, waiting. Leaving a space for my confession. I had done nothing. Nothing! My

heart pounded nonetheless, the dumb beast. Just as I started to roll over, Alex turned to me and used his big hands to pull all my hair back, stretching my face into surprise. He held me like this, studying my posture of alarm, then let go abruptly and fell onto his back in frustration. We embarked on a silence. It grew and grew until it was a sort of god that we could only submit to. After fifteen or twenty minutes I almost giggled—somebody say something!—and then I realized with horror that he was probably asleep. This wasn't our silence; it was mine alone. I lay paralyzed as it hollowed and darkened, expanding in every direction with a familiar cruelty. Hello, stranger. Once, many years ago, Alex had saved me from this black hole with the kind of understanding that makes everything else in life possible. Even ingratitude.

He shifted under the covers and I held my breath. If he was awake, I would try. If he was asleep, I would sleep, too, and probably forget to try, or forget that it mattered, or what I meant by try. Try to be brave.

“Are you awake?” I whispered.

“Wide awake.”

I sat up and told the story of the video, starting with my quasi-abusive boyfriend and ending with meeting the neighbor twice. Alex was mostly quiet, only asking a few questions (“What was the bowl for?”). I left out the hugging and the e-mailing and the tick-tocking tiny penis, but, still, when I was finished he silently walked out of the room. I took a breath and held it. I had made a terrible mistake. Why had I done this? My mind stopped, poised to shatter.

Then he came back, holding his computer. He solemnly opened it in front of me, like a violin case before a maestro. I typed in the URL. The Web site looked a little different, but the major landmarks were still there.

“You need a credit card to get to it.”

He left and came back with his wallet. He typed in his credit-card number and I clicked around. I wasn't sure where to go because the college beauties and the hot Korean girl were gone. It was all new girls. They looked extremely young. I scrolled in a daze. Brunette. Underage. Small tits. I stopped clicking.

“When was the last time you saw it?” Alex said quietly.

“I don't know. I have it pretty memorized so I don't need to. . . . Not since we've been together.”

“Oh. I think they update. . . . you know, just. . . . for the viewers.”

It seemed obvious now that they wouldn't still have a video from the nineties.

"Yeah, of course. I just thought maybe they had a section for . . . alumni or . . . I don't know."

I shut the computer. It was too bad. Really too bad. How bad? The consequences would be enormous, I felt.

Alex was in the kitchen now, opening cupboards.

He came back with a Teddy bear, an empty beer bottle, and a bowl. He picked up his pillow and pulled the comforter aside, arranging everything along the foot of the stripped bed.

"I can't re-create it, if that's what you're thinking. It was true amateur porn, not fake."

"I understand—the real deal."

"The people who saw it . . . they were really overcome by it. It was their top video to watch, porn-wise."

As we talked, Alex seemed to be riding the pillow slightly, maybe unconsciously.

"You're talking about the pale man—"

"The pale man, the dad, and the butch girl. Yes."

Now he was rubbing the Teddy bear against his crotch. He slid off his boxer shorts. Well. Well, now. I sat back. He was very much an amateur. He didn't know what he was doing and he was desperately trying to save his life. I'd never seen him move his hips like that. It was funny, or no, actually not funny, just disorienting, slightly grotesque. He picked up the beer bottle, and, after a moment of honest hesitation, sucked its mouth and then—I reached under my nightgown—began slowly working it into himself. I had never wanted to see this, but I came immediately, and hard. He brought himself to the end of the show, manually. I held my breath, waiting for him to come on the new sheet. I'd have to wash it again. Who cares? I do. Just a little. Just enough to ruin each day. And then, with a swift and professional gesture, he grabbed the bowl and came into it. That was what the bowl was for.

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Credits

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