

**The Real Me (and other lies)**

She wakes up in the morning and decides today  
she will be straight. She will fit  
perfectly, walk the pale yellow halls of her school,  
kiss her boyfriend in public. Today will be  
easy.

Her friends ask, “Are you still bi?  
you’ve been dating a guy for a  
really long time.” This question rattles.  
She regrets the night with the girls, when 3 margaritas  
made drunken confession look good as they spilled from her lips.

She wears a dress. Puts on more makeup  
than usual. She eats toast, drinks a cup  
of coffee. One cream. One sugar.  
She is trying to be

average.

She scrolls through instagram  
like any normal girl at a coffee shop.  
A picture of two women kissing  
slides onto her screen. Her heart

leaps into her mouth. She scrambles.  
Her phone clatters against the table.  
She glances around the room  
a skittish mouse, eyes searching for the next threat.  
When I call my...

When she calls her mother,  
she declares that her new friend is  
bisexual,  
testing the water. Her mother announces, women who  
claim to be bi are just immature. They are  
scared. Her mom says, it’s easier to be emotionally intimate  
with a woman. So they hide in these relationships  
until they are ready  
for a man.

Secrets rattle like a heart  
under the floorboards, like a heart in a stiff  
lifeless body under squeaky floorboards,  
a heart, still warm, blood pooling  
under her wooden floorboards and rusty nails

telltale signs of murder sliced into body.  
She is hearing her own heart rattle its death song.

To her mother, she says nothing.  
15% of people do not believe bisexuality  
is real.

Back at the coffee shop  
she hears someone ask,  
“Would you ever date someone bisexual?”  
Groans. Chatter. A  
boy announces that it’s “just too  
weird.” The girl to her left declares,

“Maybe when they make up their mind and stop being greedy.  
Otherwise, they will definitely cheat on you. I mean, everyone  
is temptation.” Another girl states,  
“I won’t have my man  
checking out other  
men.”

She tries to make herself invisible.

I

try to make myself invisible.  
to veil the rattle of my bones,  
the pulse of chest, the heat of fear  
that you

will find out how wrong I am,  
how my body  
is undetectably greedy, indefinitely  
undecided. I cannot steady it’s  
rattle. But  
I do not  
say  
anything.

## To Be a Woman

I am thirteen years old.  
My mother hands me a book on puberty and  
asks if I have any questions I do not  
say anything.  
I do not know where to begin.

I scan the pink laced pages, their glossy print  
sliding under my fingers tells me I have nothing  
to be ashamed of. I am just growing  
up. But the unspoken words of a stranger  
are no comfort to my changing body.

Now I am 22. All throughout my childhood  
no one spoke of love, consent, or pride. It was always  
secondhand facts, given by textbooks and teachers.  
I learned to bleed without pain,  
and when a boy told me he couldn't tell when I had my period to  
take it as a compliment.  
Our government would rather shut down  
than give women equal access to birth control.  
Some girls still grow up believing that abstinence  
and pregnancy are the only options.  
Robin Thicke dressed in a suit and surrounded himself  
with naked women. He pulled their hair and told them  
how he knew they wanted it. They were *good girls*. He called it  
a feminist movement.

In 8th grade US History, my teacher preached of  
women's suffrage and how far we have come.  
How equal we are today.

I spent the summer in New York. I saw the women  
in heels and pencil skirts, heads held high.  
I wanted to feel that beautiful. Until I heard men on the street  
calling for me like they owned me. What little effort it would take  
their calloused hands to reach out  
and make me  
pay attention. I abandoned  
my dresses, my makeup.  
Tried to blend in.  
1 in 6 American women have been the victim of sexual assault.  
Less than half of those women feel safe enough  
to report it. Of those reported, three percent of the rapists

spend a day in jail.

I was raised to be a woman, but I am ready  
for that definition to change. This body  
I have been blessed with, deserves so much more.  
It is the temple that houses the god within me.  
We all have gods within us. So please,  
Light the lantern by the door. Praise  
in any way you know how,  
dance, sing, speak. Let it shake the walls.  
Tell the world you will not sit by  
and watch these girls learn to carve themselves  
open, the way we did, in the confusion

I am done with what the world wants me to be.  
I am ready  
to be a woman.

**Letter to the Next Person I Will Love**

I want you to know, this is a love letter. I mean  
not that I love you  
or don't love you  
or wherever we are in that process at this moment,  
when you hear this piece.

Fuck.  
I just don't want to screw this up.

I want you to know, I am not lost,  
longing for someone to pick me up, and place me somewhere  
where everything is easy. I do not need  
to be saved, no princess  
in a tower. When I was young, on a bad day, I dreamed  
of being rescued. Gallant prince  
saving the day with his dragon slaying charm.  
And on a good day, I dreamt of being strong enough  
to be the one  
doing the rescuing, on horseback  
galloping toward my destiny, saving  
you. In these dreams, there was no slaying, no bloodshed,  
just the courage to say  
yes, I am broken, and so are you,  
but we are still here, and I will help you  
sort through the rubble.

I am not there yet. I have no horse. No  
preset destiny that I can easily run toward. I am still  
wandering blind through the forest, in some vague direction  
hoping to find the thing that lights up my soul. So bring the lantern,  
I would love to walk with you.

I know this is a lot.  
I cry often,  
I cannot always tell you why,  
what is taking me over, what I am thinking, why I am  
this way. All the shaking, the lonely, the fear. But on a good day  
you will find me singing at the top of my lungs, hanging my feet  
out your car window, as we drive down main street  
while everyone stares, and I will throw my head back and laugh  
because I know what they are thinking of me. On a good day  
I am a child again, all mischief and  
glowing adventure. The smell of popcorn and a warm blanket on damp

grass under a sky full of stars. On a good day I can feel my body  
the way it really is, I can swing my hips to the music and not  
be ashamed at the way they shakes with me.

So know this, I will love you, deeper than any fairytale stories  
for as long as my heart will let me. But I may need your help, to be the one  
sitting on the floor outside the bathroom  
while I am curled up in the bath tub crying. To sit there  
until I am ready to open the door and tell you  
that I love you. Tell you that I am crying out every  
fear I have ever had. That I am ready to be free of them.

I will do the same for you. Whatever you need, I will carry  
your heavy heart, when you are too tired to go on.

## Consent

It is early. We have both just woken  
up. Across the room  
the sun dappled curtains flutter. I am thinking of  
sliding out of bed, floating  
to the kitchen to make tea when my boyfriend  
slides his hand under my shirt. I do not want this  
this morning. I think of last night  
how he stopped when he realized I had turned away from him  
eyes closed, when he pulled his hands away and said  
goodnight. I wouldn't have minded it then, but I did not  
turn over. I just fell asleep. So this morning, as he  
traces my bare skin, inching farther  
and farther up my stomach, I think  
about sliding out of bed. Telling him  
I need to take a shower, do some homework, go to a yoga class.  
But I don't. I hear the  
kicking inside of me, the young girl  
who knows when to say no but  
I do not love her enough these days. I do not  
pay attention to her, even when she kicks  
and screams. I tell myself  
she is too young to know what's right. I tell myself  
he deserves this. I tell myself  
I should enjoy this. I tell myself  
he has a right to this, I mean, we haven't done it  
in a while. I tell myself  
just let it happen. The young girl inside of me  
spends too much time screaming as I  
search for a valid excuse and usually  
can't find one so I keep my mouth shut,  
my eyes averted. I don't want to offend  
anyone, make them think  
I am a prude or needy or helpless. I care so much about  
what everyone else thinks. As if I need a reason  
to say no, to want to leave, to feel unsafe,  
to have a god damn feeling. Everyone is always  
looking for an excuse so I have convinced myself  
my feelings are not valid without valid reason. He  
is my boyfriend. I  
should feel blessed. I  
should not feel silenced. I should not be the one  
doing the silencing.

There was no coercion. No pushes  
no cries, just  
silence. Just my face tied up in knots  
trying to convince myself that  
he has earned access to this body  
whenever he pleases. Just the little girl in my chest  
begging it to end. I do not know  
what consent means these days. I think it is  
something I need to learn to give myself.

**From Jane Austen to Thomas Lefroy**

*In 1795 Jane Austen met Tom Lefroy and for the only known time in her life, she fell in love. In an attempt to end the flirtation Tom's parents sent him away to school. They never saw each other again. Years later, she wrote him one last letter.*

My darling Tom,  
it has been too long since I last saw your face. I have kept  
my blue dress, grass stained and wrinkled, in the back  
of my closet, just as it was the last day I saw you.  
As we walked back to your estate that evening  
the trees bent down and whispered goodbyes to you.  
You hung your head, eyes never leaving the ground  
a foot in front of you as if trying to memorize every  
step. All the while I tried to memorize you.

I still haven't forgotten.

I have been writing these stories for you. Pages  
and pages of perfectly ordered happy endings  
to make up for the one I have to give up.  
When I am not writing I am all pointless small talk and  
broken tea cups. But I am no longer the girl  
you abandoned in this desolate town. I have learned  
that happy endings only belong in novels.

I have accepted a proposal of marriage.  
You would hate him.

I almost hate him myself.  
But as I have said before,  
*Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor,  
and that is one very strong argument in favor of matrimony.*

But Tom,  
my stomach still ties itself tighter when I glimpse  
that blue dress. I face the world every day  
with closed eyes, shaking hands,  
you are not here to steady me.

As I say all this, I begin to doubt that money is reason enough  
to marry a man. I need more  
than boring walks and continually restrained emotions.  
I need to open my eyes and shake you off.

Maybe I will not get married,  
not just yet. Afterall,  
I have so many more stories to write  
and not all of them can be about you.