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UNDERFED

; THERE WAS THE TIME I STOOD OUTSIDE; it had snowed the night before; a sound in the distance could have been voices; it could have been something else; it could have been machinery; it could have been just in my head; I wanted the sound to be something else: waves crashing to the sand, an ocean I was standing in, an ocean I was drowning in; I wanted to be sinking into sand; but I was standing in snow under a tree; I was standing in my underthings; there was something about just standing there like that; there was something about just standing still, the sky about to turn light; I was not in a state of dire need; but I'd been up late thinking of dire things; I'd been thinking, for instance, of the reasons girls love love; I'd been thinking, as well, of the reasons guys love war; I every day bought the paper from the box on the corner; I every day spread the paper across my bed; I was reading up on various wars; I followed wars in various places I didn't know; I was becoming well-informed on battle; I was becoming well-informed on invasion; because there was nothing going on where I was at all; there was nothing going on where I was but snow; everyone had gone away for the winter; everyone loved to leave for the winter; and yes, I was feeling abandoned; yes, I was feeling melodramatic; then this one friend called who hadn't yet left; and of course he would leave for the winter too; he would leave, of course, like everyone else; but I wasn't yet thinking of him leaving; and that night I was up to nothing; I was all the time up to my ears in nothing; and so he called and it wasn't my fault he called; and so it was completely his fault; look: I want to make a public confession; I want an interrogation; I want a fitting punishment; and where was I on that winter night: I was with this guy in a bar; and who else was with us on that night: there was no one else but us; and did I know that night he had a girlfriend: yes, I knew he had a girlfriend, but I knew nothing specific about his girlfriend, she was just a cutout of a girlfriend, she was just a flattened thing; and how did I feel about this: I felt all right, I felt pretty good, I felt pretty great; so punish me how-

ever you see fit; but know I wasn't all bad; in the bar that night I knew to get this body out the door; so I got this body up the street; I got this body up the stairs and laid it flat on the bed; I was home, safe; I was where I belonged; and I'm sorry my thoughts turned dire; I'm sorry I'd been reading up on wars; I'm sorry for the metaphor; but I confess I was thinking of battle; I confess I was thinking invasion; I knew too much about crossing lines; then I was rushing outside to think in the cold; I can't explain; years before, things with me seemed all right; I was with this nice guy back then; all my friends liked this guy; he would pick me up in his car; he would take me on hikes; he owned things for going on hikes; I didn't know the proper names of the things he owned; I still, years later, don't know their proper names; they clamped to things and heated up and stuck through ice and stuck through mud; the guy and I would walk up hills; we would sleep on wet grass; we would stand there holding hands, staring at some or another sunset; and I would pretend to like the sunset; I would pretend to be a better person than I was; but I would stare at the sunset thinking things like: Tragic, like: Big fucking deal, like: This is not meant to be; it was not, me and him, meant to be; I said, This is not meant to be, on the ride home from our final hike; the radio was up too high; I said, Did you hear me; he pointed to an ear, said, I can't hear you; then his hand was somewhere on me; I said, This is not meant to be; I said, I'm incapable of falling for you; I said, I'm incapable of falling in love; I'm a wreck, I said; I need another wreck, I said; It's my father, I said, of course; It's my mother, I said, of course; I turned down the radio; I said, Did you hear me; he kept on driving; I turned up the radio; I will wreck you, I said; I swear, I said; I was talking at the radio; I was talking at the heat vent; I was talking at my dirty knees; I'd hiked all day through mud; I was scraped all over, dirty all over; I wasn't averse to dirt; I was averse to something else: like the pressure of having to pretend I cared about a bird, a stone, a star: like the pressure of having to be so fucking nice: like the pressure of having to be a certain type of guy when I was just a certain type of girl; I was just two tits a hole and a heartbeat; I'd heard that somewhere, my brother, my father; I'd heard this somewhere too: two tits a slit and a heartbeat; that was this body; and this body was standing in the snow; this body was up to its ears in nothing; this body was thinking of invasion; this body could be a wrecking ball; this body could swing right in and wreck your home; I confess: it could make itself do awful things; it had done plenty of awful plenty of times; just look at it up in that old tree as a kid; just

look at it dangling upside down from the highest branch that could hold it; just look at it dangling by its legs; this was a family trip to the South; this was the trip I learned to climb a tree; and it was on this trip I learned to dive through waves; we stayed in a cottage by the beach; my brother threw bread to birds; my father sat on the sand; my mother slept in the cottage; there was always the sound of waves; I know it all sounds spectacular; and I assure you some moments were; but I assure you some moments were not; nights, I stayed in the tree well after my name had been called; I wasn't hungry for dinner; I wasn't ever hungry; I was underfed and happy being underfed; I dangled, nights, from the highest branch; I waited for my father to come back from the bar; I waited for my father to walk under the tree; from up in the tree I would see him stumble up the sidewalk, shirt untucked; I would see him drop his keys to the grass, hear him cuss, see him stoop to the grass; and on one night I would drop down from the tree; and on this night I would crush my father to dust; because I knew it was my job to crush him; because I was the only daughter of the man; because he was the man and I was the only daughter; but most nights my father walked up the sidewalk; he walked into the cottage; the screen door slammed; the cottage went dark; and eventually I would come down from the tree; I would lie on the grass; I would consider stars; I would consider my size; I would consider how the world began; it began, as you know, as a spark; and I began, as well, as a spark; and then everything grew; and a lot of things happened; and a lot more things happened; and the future was the present; and the present was a battle in my head; it was another line for me to cross; and no, I wasn't terribly cold; and no, the sound wasn't what I thought it was; it wasn't what I wanted it to be; it wasn't waves crashing onto a beach; and yes, I wanted something to come through the snow; yes, I wanted the saviour to come through the snow; and yes, one day the saviour would come through the snow; but no, it wasn't on that day; on that day, I was still unsaved; on that day, I was waiting to be punished for my sins; so punish me however you see fit; I shouldn't have gone with the guy to the bar; we were not supposed to be in the bar; he was supposed to be with his girlfriend; I was supposed to be a better person than I was; I was supposed to be just about as regular a girl as I could be; but just look at us drinking way too much; just look at him looking at me like that; just look at him forgetting his girlfriend; we probably fell in love right there; it was probably total love right then; I was probably totally capable now of falling in love; on our last hike, the guy and I

watched a bird soaring over a field; it was a hawk I think, and I wish I'd cared about that bird; and I wish I'd cared about that guy; but I dropped his hand; I sat on a rock; I watched him watch the bird; I'm sure he wasn't thinking the awful thoughts I was thinking; I'm sure he was only thinking of this bird moving through the space through which he was also moving; I'm sure he was feeling connected to it in a way I could not feel connected; but it was beautiful, I confess, the bird; it was spectacular, I confess; So am I awful, I asked the guy at the bar, and I can't remember why I asked; I knew he didn't think I was awful; because he was looking at me a certain way; because he was looking at me like he wanted to devour me; and I wanted, of course, to be devoured; and there was his hand; and there it was on me; and it felt, in that moment, like the world had ended; but the world hadn't ended just because it felt like it had; and so I downed my drink; I looked away; and the door was still there; and the street was still there; and the world was there beyond that; and walking home, I was feeling okay; and I was feeling okay because I was drunk; and I was feeling okay because I knew how to get this drunk body home; and I was feeling okay until a guy pushed a cart into my legs and said, I'll give you a thousand dollars to spend the night in your bed; he was filthy; his clothes were torn; his cart was filled with trash; I said, You don't have a thousand dollars; I said, You don't even have a dollar; I kicked his cart; and I didn't mean to kick his cart so hard; then the snow began; and it would snow all night; look: it started out well enough, this spark; on our family trip to the South I met a girl; her name was two names pressed together, one a girl's and one a guy's; she was missing her front teeth; she said y'all; and she was the one who taught me how to climb a tree; she was the one who taught me how to dive through waves; climbing a tree was easy; I could climb a tree in seconds; I was scared, however, to dive through waves; there was something about the force; there was something about a force coming at me; there was something about the trust; but still I wanted to try; and so I stood one day in the ocean; and my brother was there, and the girl was there; and my father and her mother stood on the shore; my father and her mother were ankle-deep; I screamed to them, Watch me, but my father didn't look up; my brother screamed to them, Watch this, but my father was fooling with her mother's bathing-suit tie; her mother was kicking water at my father; my mother was back at the cottage pretending to sleep; my mother was back at the cottage staring at her hands; my mother was back at the cottage pulling hairs out from her head; I

screamed to them, Watch me, as the biggest wave came rushing up, and the girl screamed, Go, y'all; and my brother and I both dove into the wave; and I could have drowned, you know; I would have drowned, you know; and did I want to drown; well, I didn't, you know; I just dove, felt cold, felt the tug of the world, emerged; I saw my father and her mother in the waterblurred distance; I heard my brother choking beside me; and no, I wasn't going ashore; I wasn't tired; I wasn't hungry; I wasn't cold; I wanted to stay in the water forever; I wanted to travel farther and farther out; farther out in the water, I could hear only water; I couldn't hear the girl's mother laughing; I couldn't hear my brother choking; I couldn't see my father looming how he often loomed; farther out was a world I could be in forever; so no, I wasn't going back; so I floated away, an abandoned boat; I floated, an abandoned shell; but then I felt my father's arms around me; and then I was screaming, No, and, No; and the girl's mother had no right laughing as my father dragged me from the water; and the girl had no right laughing; and my brother, my poor brother; and later that night my father went out; my mother slept in a chair; I climbed the tree outside the cottage; I dangled from the highest branch; and the sun went down; and the cottage went dead; and the blood rushed to my skull; and so what if I crushed him; I would put an end to something awful; I would be my brother's saviour; I would be my mother's saviour; and so I dangled from the branch; and the grass grew below my head; and day spread across the roots; and my father never walked up the sidewalk; and there's nothing much more to say; I dropped to the ground; I brushed off my clothes; I walked into the cottage; and there was my mother; and there was my brother; and this part goes out to the girlfriend: I loved love as much as any girl; I loved war as much as any guy; and I confess I considered swinging this body in and wrecking your fucking home; I confess I knew exactly how to do it; and it would have been spectacular; and I want you now to punish me; because I was being a girl and nothing but; because I was the only daughter of the man; because I kicked that guy's cart as hard as I could; and, fine, I meant to kick it that hard; and yes, there was trash all over the place; and yes, there was a sound like a sound you've never heard; and people were laughing; and the guy, the poor guy: you've never seen a sadder face; not even on my mother; not even on my brother; and it was going to snow; and then it was snowing; my God; I was totally wrecked; but yes, I had left him at the bar; yes, I got this body home; I knew how to do things so no one really got hurt; look, girlfriend; there were times things

seemed all right; there were nights my father came home on time; and those nights, some, we ate at the table; and some of those nights, we stared at the same storm through the screen; and some of those nights, when my mother was sleeping and my brother was sleeping, I stood with my father under the tree;