SILHOUETTE

the dark shape and outline of someone or something visible in restricted light against a brighter background.

Love stories lose their middles after a while, the stuff in between the edges and turns. The beginning remains, as does the end, like the damage that lingers, those remain vivid. There are some pivot points that stick, small breakages, honesties that sting, blurted cruelties that can retain their clarity, distorted in the moment but looking, upon later reflection, like the dramatic keystone holding the whole thing up, warnings that should have been heeded, red flags, symptoms, and then there are the contingencies that skid. Beyond those, the days that accumulate, the sex that happens and happens or doesn't happen, the comforts and modest raptures, the small decisions collaboratively made about what to eat, what to watch, where to go—that is a vast, imprecise flatness.

PENTIMENTO

the revealing of (part of) a painting beneath another painted over it at a later time.

I have been in a fistfight with another girl only once. I was thirteen and she was fourteen. I don't remember her name. She asked me if I'd ever been finger-fucked. I said, "Yeah," she said, "By who?" I said, "A boy named Hunter," and she said, "You lie." Then she told the other girls at school about it, and the next few days were unbearable. Finally, I saw her in the hallway and my face heated. I shouted something severe, not really made of words, and ran at her. In my head, I saw a slow-motion blow that crushes a nose, neck snapping back, but ours was a raw mess of clawed fingers and red cheeks and feet that stayed planted. Blood, none. I had too much saliva in my mouth, so I spit it on the floor, my best move.

I've been punched in the face by a grown woman, a lot, but I didn't reciprocate, it was by my mother, that was long ago.

PIETÀ

a representation of the Holy Mother with the dead Christ across her knees.

Her voice hissed through my sleep one morning and I opened my eyes to see her face, huge and an inch from mine. The sky behind her was pale, dawn. It was summer. I didn't have school, or perhaps this was before I was in school. "Quick, come on," my mother whispered. "Get up, hurry." She pulled back the blankets and pulled my arms toward her, putting them around her neck like jewelry. Her eyes were round, black marbles, and she smelled strange, sharp, like burning plastic. We fumbled for my clothes. I said something. She hushed me, finger to her lips, then she called me *darling* and kissed my mouth. She never kissed me, never called me darling. She tasted of tinfoil, and my lips stung, then went numb. She brought her dog, Nyx, a large, silver-and-black German Shepherd. The three of us rode for several hours in my mother's car, a 1974 Pinto station wagon the color of mustard, which she'd named Auntie Gethsemane the Gold.

My mother's name was—is?—Marina.

Marina smoked chains of cigarettes and sometimes sang along to blasts of radio, then she'd flick the volume knob and we'd ride in silence. She'd laugh or shout, and when I asked her what she meant, she shushed me by flapping her hand in my face. We reached a beach far from Los Angeles. It was still morning. A layer of fog has softened the scene in my memory. I remember watching Marina and Nyx walk ahead of me down the gray coast. Marina started to blend in, her blue vanishing, Nyx a smudge of black. I sat in the sand. They came back when the sun had burned away the haze. For the afternoon, I watched Marina build a figure in the sand, piling handfuls to form a body, it became the body of a woman trying to claw out of the earth. Marina laid strings of slimy, brown-green kelp across the head for hair and stuck gnarled pieces of driftwood into the lumps that were the hands, making hooked fingers that twisted upward. Nyx and I were hot under the sun. There was no shade, the sound of the waves unmitigated, crashing, all there was. No one spoke, but I remember Marina saying a few things under her breath, now lost. The sun began to set. The sky was fiery pink, and Marina's eyes went back to clear. We drove home and I fell asleep in the car. She pried me from my comfort and carried me into the dark house. As she put me to bed, she said, "You did good work today. You're going to be a great artist."

Now I pay my dominatrix to whip me as she taunts me with this: "Are you going to be a great artist?" I come best and hardest when she laughs at me for saying yes.

TROMPE-L'ŒIL

literally "deceives the eye," appearance of reality achieved by use of minute, often-trivial details or other effects in painting; a visual illusion used to trick the eye into perceiving a painted detail as a three-dimensional object.

With Zinat, I remember everything, and I remember everything about our time together because though it was my first experience of love, after, of course, my mother, it wasn't actually love. It was something more like a comminution, a defining disintegration, it produced a truth, fundamental to survival, the fact of how easily and reliably the body, or any small thing inflicted by the aim of another thing, can be ground down to nothing. This is love, and this is not love.

Her name was Zinat Fatemah Asgari.

Zinat A was what she called herself. First day of class, professor stumbling over her name, she interrupted, "Call me Zinat A." *Zee-knot Ah.* The professor chuckled, "Well, okay then," and he called her *Zee-gnat Ay.*

When he got to my name, he also mangled me, the Eastern European first name from my mother's mother's mother and my Korean father's last name, neither of which he even tried to get right.

I had just begun my second year of art school. Zinat was in the sculpture class we were required to take as sophomores. The professor who taught it had done so for a hundred years. His name was something sturdy and manly and easy to say, like Jack Potts or Joe Dodge or Bob Mudd. He was tall and Superman-shaped, with a gray bun and beard, in his sixties, and he only ever wore a white T-shirt tucked into jeans and a belt the same color as his tan work boots. He said things like, "It's art if it tells the truth," and, "Duchamp was more of a genius than Picasso." He'd hold up thick fingers to count off the great artists of the twentieth century: Pollock, de Kooning, Warhol, Johns, Serra, man, man, man. He'd been an art star in the 1980s, solo shows at the Whitney, whatever. He'd tell the class, unendingly, "New York—New York or Florence—*that's* where you gotta go if you wanna be a real artist." This was in the twenty-first century in Los Angeles.

On the first day of Jack Potts's class, I stared at Zinat the entire time. She seemed older than everyone else, and she smelled intoxicating, I would later learn it was a musk perfume. Her body was long, rail-thin, and boyish, no curves of any kind, as though someone had drawn two parallel lines to silhouette her shape, and when she moved, she sort of floated and flopped, half ballerina, half newborn horse. I had never seen someone wear a face like hers, the expression a mask of boredom and intelligence. Her eyes were large and black, edged with thick lines that swept off the sides and lowered into sharpened points near her nose. Her hair was so black and shiny it resembled wet tar, and looked just as heavy. As I looked at her clothes, each day a new dress, which I studied every time I saw her, I began to understand that they

were all handmade, not badly fitted the way my mother's had been but custom-tailored for her, elegant, simple dresses of plain but fine cotton, silk, or voile that looked like expensive nightgowns, with a line of stitches down each side and long sleeves. They stopped above her ankles, enough fabric to swirl around her when she walked but narrow through the torso and waist. Each dress was hand-painted in fuchsia, saffron, acid-yellow, cerulean, absinthe green, talon-like flowers, large eyes furred with eyelashes, scraggly looking suns grouped like barnacles, long forked tongues the color of a red stoplight, though some dresses were only patterns, wobbly polka dots and irregular stripes, and others were spans of tableaux with bent nude figures, sleeping, praying, fucking. Some had writing on them, strokes of Farsi that I couldn't understand, the curves and dots exquisite in broad, black paint. Her shoes were also homemade, chunks of heavy canvas sewn together and wrapped in strips of grosgrain ribbon that trailed behind her in many colors. A maypole. She never wore a bra, and her small, triangular breasts were, to my eyes, relentlessly perfect. A single, opaque orb the color of milk and the size of a marble hung from an invisible fishing line around her neck. It rested in the hollow there, like a growth of bone poking through the skin. Later, when I saw her naked, it was still there. I never saw her without it, her own moon.

Within weeks of the new semester, she started hanging out with the group of cool boys. There were about four or five of them, one mixed-race, the rest white, all of them with tattoos of barcodes or words in all-capital letters, paint-spattered jeans, T-shirts of naked pinup girls, logos from the 1990s, money to buy drugs on a regular basis, shitty cars

with good stereos. I've heard that some of them have had bits of careers since then, but mostly they've disappeared into graphic design jobs, branding, posting pictures of themselves with their more successful friends. They made large, arrogant sculptures out of expensive materials that had to be manhandled, metal, neon, so much plexiglass. Against the rules, they installed their work in the hallways, blocked the doors to the building, wrapped campus trees in Saran wrap and duct tape, and when they received a notice from the school of a fine and disciplinary action, they posted this next to the work as its title.

They were Jack Potts's boys. He gave them good grades, even though they never went to class, and he made them tutors to the sculpture studio, giving them keys for all-hours access. Zinat soon became one of them and, by extension, a Potts boy. He allowed her to work in the studio instead of going to class, making her own work rather than the assignments. She'd appear in class only for her own critiques, to present mystifying objects that looked like the stuff decorating her dresses but in loopy, shiny 3D, tubes and masses and coils made of stainless steels and resins, rare materials bent to her use.

She had a massive black dog that never left her side. Without a leash or collar, he walked beside her in the hallways and rested at her feet while she worked. He was sleek and graceful and immense, lion-sized with a proud, knowing face, the kind of dog you imagine will save you from a house fire. He reminded me of Nyx before she was crippled. If someone came near Zinat, he raised his head and fixed his eyes in defensive alarm. Once I was working in the studio on an

assignment where we had to make a sphere out of cardboard, and I listened to her conversation with some of the boys. She had a deep voice, like a man's. "Yesterday I came into my room and there was blood everywhere—everywhere! 'Gohar Taj!' I shouted, but I knew he was hiding under the bed. There he was, one of my bloody pads in his mouth, blood all over his face, and he was *chewing* and *licking* and just like"—she wagged her tongue, drooling—"*loving* it. *Loving. It.*"

The boys made sounds of disgust.

"No, no," she said. "Haven't you ever had coq au vin?"

Thinking of using Zinat as a model prickled my scalp, that someone looking at my paintings of her would see my bald desire, a record of my sucking inspiration out of her body. This was my first taste of such a thing, and the prickly heat pushed around my ears and behind my eyes and went into my stomach enough that I finally did it.

I found Zinat's email on the list of sculpture tutors in Potts's office. I wrote something timid and overly sweet, the way I used to write to my muses then—*If you don't want to or are busy I totally understand no matter what thanks anyway.* Now I write with a vagueness that protects me, at least on the surface. I know how to wrap up my words indeterminately so they have a sheen of importance and mystery, that my work is so very important and this invitation for them to participate in it is an extension of my graciousness, but beneath it all, I'm still petitioning, so familiar it feels genetically coded, my mother tongue.

She responded in lowercase, no punctuation, not even words:

funfun / have
u n i
coooo
kiss
z

Zinat and I were never in a relationship the way relationships tend to be defined. We were not a couple, not girlfriends—at least, Zinat would have never said we were. We were, though, together: naked in each other's rooms as we got dressed for parties, openings, school, drunk and high, tired and hungry, we slept in each other's beds after we'd talked until very late and fell asleep like children at slumber parties, we left notes, bits of twigs, pieces of cloth under the windshield wipers of each other's cars, we brought each other gifts of flowers, books, pages of articles, shells, we knew each other's dreams because we told them to each other, and we shared with each other the secret opinions that made us bitches, the wickedness we felt for "them," the other women in our program who we felt made women artists look bad, the girls who painted sad-eyed self-portraits of their skinny bodies with sharp elbows and knock-knees and called themselves the muses of Egon Schiele, whose eyes frightened and mouths closed when Zinat or I talked during critique about feminism and political lesbianism and how the clitoris has twice as many nerve endings than the penis.

And we especially hated those art boys who Zinat regarded as her foolish servants, who stank of their plexiglass and hangovers, who spoke the loudest and the longest in critiques, proud of their complicated and unintelligible sentences with

references to Deleuze or Badiou or whoever, who all said we made "angry" art, art that was "too insular" and therefore "pretentious," or "too bodily" and therefore "emotional," or "too emotional" and therefore "just therapy." They accused us of being lesbians but framed their accusations as a rhetorical question, "Well, aren't you?" as if it were a polite gesture on their part, to reveal to us our error in judgment, so we'd sloppily grope each other's breasts in response and feel pleased with ourselves for our performance of transgression.

How cliché of me, I know. It's perhaps the most universal story for a queer girl, to fall into the hole of a straight girl and not be able to get out.

We'd meet in dark, quiet bars that had candles on the tables and languish in gossip and insults. Zinat drank sangria, I Baileys with one ice cube, this was our earliest ritual, indulging our eccentricity. The first time we met was for a drink, to talk about her modeling for me, so I could explain her purpose to my work, which was what she called it, "I want to know my purpose to your work," and I was born into something when she said that. She chose the bar, which had no name or sign, just an address and a closed door. She arrived in a long, beige trench coat that hugged her lithe waist, and it was the first time I'd seen a sophisticated, womanly garment being worn by someone my age. We were all scraping by on student loans and here was Zinat, wearing something that must have cost more than rent. In that instant, I noticed my obliviousness to my own body, to the fact that I'd always slouched, kept my hair flat, long, and plain, like my white mother's thin mane, wearing thrift-store dresses two or three sizes too large for me, the silhouette another thing I'd inherited from my mother. At

the sight of Zinat in her fine coat, and, when she took off the coat, her smart tits unembarrassed through the thin fabric of her dress, the dark circles of her nipples showing through, and the sight of her ordering her drink, barely looking at the waiter while I gave him my politest regard, and his eyes fastened on to her and not me, I saw the power of the artist for the first time. It was a power different than my mother's—who, yes, was a painter, like me. But my mother was monstrous. Her power seized attention with its tumult, the hysterical woman artist channeling some supernatural vision, a pretty banal archetype. But Zinat's power was magnetic. It put something together instead of blasting it apart. It was a performance she was in control of, it wasn't a mask she wore but rather a kind of glamorous mask she slipped over the face of whoever was watching her. It gave her dominion over what *she* saw. She could transform what she was looking at into what she wanted to see.

Of course, this power came from money. Zinat had it, had always had it, and I didn't. Even though Zinat was Iranian and did not remotely pass as white, she acted like a white girl, not just unaware of race, class, and how she was read or not read but bountiful and extravagant with all the freedom afforded to her, with how the entire world belonged to her. If a stranger stared at her on the street, it must only be because she was mesmerizing, not because she was a brown woman dressed in bizarre clothes. If people desired her, she simply accepted it as the natural order, of course you desire me, of course you can't stop looking. Without hesitation, she conflated this with her art, of course you can't stop looking at it, of course you want it, and this conflation didn't bother her because her art and her self *were* the same thing.