

Recently, I started teaching a friend of mine to drive at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery, where people drive—not much, but a *wee* bit—slower. We crept by the Cadillac-sized tombstones with famous faces etched into granite lined by remunerative palms. Flowers from strangers line the graves; there's no love like the love for a stranger. Eventually we reached the back end of the cemetery and found a more humble section, where the tombstones sit like crooked little dog teeth. "This must be where the B actors get buried," my friend said.

"Well," I responded, "I guess they made it in, huh?"

MY MEMORY AND WITNESS

Lis Goldschmidt and Dean Spade

Dean—

Hey. How's things in NYC? Tired here. Just home from hanging out with everyone. Feeling really tired of the class stuff we were talking about the other day. Tired of people fronting like they're poor or grew up poor or whatever—like it's cool to be poor. You know the deal. They put it on like an accessory. You know? Just like co-opting any culture. Do you know what I mean? It's like people who wear "native garb" from wherever they're exoticizing at the moment—but the thing is, they take it off when it gets old to them.

I guess I'm just feeling pretty pissed. Like I can't take it off. Like it *is* old. It's always been old. And makes me feel old and fucking tired. And small.

I don't mean to rant.

The main reason I'm writing is 'cause you carry the facts and I feel like I need them. You know the details that I think can help me not feel erased by these kinds of nights. You know how much Mom made. You know the welfare info. It sounds dumb—I know what it was like, but I've spent my whole life pretending it was something else, my whole life trying to pass

as something else—and I need the numbers to feel justified or some shit. I need those numbers to prove me wrong or call me out or something. Does that sound weird? It's like I've even convinced myself . . . also like I want some fact to separate me from those people.

I mean I remember it. I remember what it was like. I remember the shame and all that. I remember that greedy excited fucked-up feeling I got when she'd bring home the groceries. I remember swallowing myself one zillion times. I remember being an invisible eyesore. I remember knowing this couldn't be right. When I think of it now I get that same empty, gagging thing. I remember that heavy fucking cloud that hung around our tiny house. That fog that made it so hard to breathe. That stress that kept us all quiet and angry and sad. Remember?

I'm scrambling to think of something good and light, but it goes back as far as I can remember. It only got darker and heavier.

The end was the worst, right? I guess for me it was the worst because I felt like I was the mom when she was sick. You know? Not that we didn't both have to pick up what she couldn't carry anymore. But I remember doing the grocery shopping by myself. You know, I think it's really only the last maybe five years that I don't have some crazy fear while in line at the grocery store. I think this is actually the first time I've really thought about it. There's the shame of shopping at the discount store. Scared someone from school would see us or something—and scared that if anyone ever came to our house (not that they ever did), they'd see the bags from there. (Not to mention just seeing the house!) But then there were all the times we had to put stuff back—do you remember that? I cringe thinking about it now. It was terrible. Embarrassing. I remember being scared to look at Mom in that moment. How she'd look it all over and have to decide what to put back. How did she do

that? How can you decide what food your three kids *don't* need? Can you imagine how stressful that must have been for her? Ugh. It fucking makes me want to puke. Then there was the shame of using food stamps. It's funny how kids I know now use food stamps with so much pride.

Dean, this sucks. I hate thinking about this stuff. I'm trying to reclaim it or something but sometimes it just feels like Mom trained us so well that passing is easier and the shame is too thick. Sometimes I think I'd make the world's greatest spy because I can pretend so well. Time to sleep.

I hope you're well—

I'm glad we have each other in this.

xo, Lis

Dear Lis,

I took this letter with me to Montreal where I was showing the film Tara and I are making about trans people and bathrooms. While I was there, friends of friends had a "white trash"-themed barbecue. The people I was staying with called the hosts to voice our protest to this theme, and heard that others were also upset, so we went anyway, thinking people wouldn't participate in the theme and that the message had gotten across. Of course, we were too optimistic. Many people came fake-pregnant, with giant Budweiser cans, fake southern accents, and severe blue eye shadow. What to do? I thought about how "trashy" it is for poor people to have children, how differently poor people's substance abuse is surveyed and punished, how easily these white people employed a term that suggests that all nonwhite people are trash while only some white people require such labeling. I thought about the time you were invited to a white-trash event where people were encouraged to black out their teeth, and I thought of how Mom lived her

whole life hiding that she had dentures—like everyone in her family—from a time when “dental care for the poor” was pulling out all their teeth in adolescence. When she died I learned she had hidden this from me (you too?) my whole life—sleeping in uncomfortable dentures all those nights during our thirteen years together when I was too scared to sleep alone—all to hide from even me her poverty and shame. (Meanwhile I dreamt of the braces the other kids at school could afford.) I thought of my own consciousness, starting in elementary school, of the need to separate myself from the term “white trash.” Be careful how you smell, who sees your house. Try to get Mom not to curse or smoke in front of other people’s parents.

But at this party I bit my tongue and turned my head when they arrived in costumes. Couldn’t bring myself to speak on this rooftop full of people I had just met. I spend sixty to eighty hours a week exclusively talking about poverty and advocating for poor people, but I could not advocate for myself, could not give up the small amount of passing, of blending in. We left fast and Pascal, Brianna, and I ranted on the street, wondering how we should have handled it, talking about how girl-social conditioning still operates in our trans bodies, convincing us we shouldn’t confront. With every passing hour I’ve become more irate. No place to put it. More anger to add to the churning crushing pile that lives behind my sternum.

Tired. I hear you about being tired. I’m tired of being diplomatic about poverty. Tired of trying to convince rich people at nonprofits, rich people at foundations, and rich gay people especially to care about and support the lives of low-income intersex and trans people. I’m tired of helping them notice that we exist, trying not to make them too uncomfortable to give money to the struggle that (when we win, which we will) will end wealth and poverty for everyone. Tired of being gentle and

nonthreatening and helping them appease the guilt about their hoarding lifestyles so they can act a little. And I’m tired of hearing that you’re getting paid less than the private-college educated man who sits next to you doing the same job, and tired of seeing all my trans friends without jobs or adequate housing and trapped in the criminal-injustice system. I’m tired of other poverty lawyers (from upper-class backgrounds) telling me I don’t pay myself enough when I make twice what Mom supported four people on in the years she had jobs, and when our clients are fighting like hell for a couple hundred bucks a month from welfare or ten bucks to make a call from jail. I have to figure out how to not get too tired. Sometimes I think that’s what killed our mom. Somehow, you and I got out of there, out of that dirty house, off those gravel roads, out of Virginia, but she didn’t make it. I think all the time of what it would be like if she could see us now—if I could make her a fancy dinner in my apartment (artichokes) and take her to see something city-beautiful; if, for her birthdays, we could fly her to San Francisco and all three of us could have tea in your kitchen and walk around Golden Gate Park and she’d tell us the names of all the flowers. It’s almost Mother’s Day.

You asked for the facts. I carry them around like the chip on my shoulder. The most she ever made was \$18,000 one year. Our welfare was less than \$400 a month. We got a total of \$50 when we three spent Saturdays cleaning the glass and mirror store, less when we cleaned houses. The social security survivors benefits our foster parents got for us were about \$500 a month each until we turned eighteen. (It’s sick that she could support us better by dying but there was not money to help keep her alive.) The jacket she always wanted when she was in middle and high school, that all the other kids had but she never got, cost \$7.02 Canadian. The most important fact, maybe, is that if we’d been in the same situation after the 1996 welfare cuts, we wouldn’t have been entitled to the same benefits

because of her immigration status, and, in my estimation, we would have had a much harder time keeping a place to live or staying together as a family as long as we did.

I love you, Lis. You're my memory and my witness, and my only connection to all that we've lost. I love that you keep the sweatpants Mom got in rehab and that I slept in when you were caring for me after my chest surgery. When I'm not biting my tongue, it's because I'm thinking of how quickly you call people on their shit, how vicious your wit can be, and how you always have my back.

Love, Dean

WINGS

tatiana de la tierra

Placing a pink-feather headband in my hand, my abuelita Blanca kissed me goodbye, crying. I cried, too. I didn't know why. The perpetually gray Bogotá skies joined in, sprinkling us with cold rain. I ran up the narrow metal staircase as wind bit my wet cheeks, into an airplane that would take me and my family far from Colombia. It was May 1968 and I had just turned seven years old.

Thick, warm Atlantic air greeted us as we clambered, wide-eyed, out of our metal cocoon. The air in Miami was nothing like the air I knew in the Andean mountains. But being yanked from the love and protection of my aunts, grandmothers, and great-aunts was the most momentous change. It was bigger than air itself. I walked to the market with them, chit-chatted on the sidewalk, made corn arepas at the crack of dawn, collected eggs in the morning, accompanied them in the evening for hot chocolate. They cooked for me, bought dresses for me, introduced me to all their friends. But in Miami, everybody was a stranger.

At the airport I played with stairs that moved and doors that opened magically. A strange twig of a man who wore ripped denim and spoke halting Spanish greeted us. "Yo aquí para ayudarte," he said, offering a warm handshake. Harvey was a friend of a friend of my dad's; they

MY SEASON OF PAPER DRESSES

Colleen McKee

At the South County, Missouri, Department of Health clinic (affectionately known as the DOH), surrounded by that je ne sais quoi ambience particular to government offices, I squirmed in my hot plastic chair, trying not to look at the clock. I also tried not to look at the chairs, which, unfortunately, were puce-colored. The walls, of course, were green, like lima beans. I thought, They paid someone to decorate this room, they paid someone with my tax money to decorate this room, someone who probably has health insurance. But O.K., these people are here to help me, and everyone knows what beggars can't be, so . . . I tried not to think about that, either.

Even though I was mercifully free of female trouble (unless you counted my ex, Antoinette), I was waiting to put my ankles in the stirrups for a Pap smear. Why? Because of DOH policy. Before one could be examined for one's complaint—in my case, a productive cough (now, doesn't that sound nice, "a productive cough," as though my cough was really working hard for me?), one first had to have a blood test, an HIV test, and, in the event of femaleness, a Pap smear. Only then could one make an appointment to be examined for what actually ailed one. When I first called the clinic, in May 1995, I had already had the cough for three months. It typically took three weeks to a month to get an appointment,

and you had to have an appointment for every Pap smear and test. In my case, this included two appointments the DOH had canceled. They had not, however, found it necessary to notify me of said cancellations, as this was not their policy.

Finally, an orderly called my name from behind his cubicle of bullet-proof glass, and I was led to a tiny olive-drab room with a rickety table. I changed into a lovely paper dress in which I resembled a paper-towel roll and filled out a long questionnaire. Then I sat there for an hour, checking out the syringes and reading interesting brochures on sexually transmitted diseases. A very tired-looking blond woman finally entered the room and said, "Hi, I'm Dr. So-and-So." She looked over the questionnaire and asked me a few questions, which, incidentally, were already on the questionnaire.

"Age?"

"Twenty-one."

"Are you sexually active?"

"Well..." I wasn't sure how to answer. Antoinette had just walked out on me two weeks before, leaving me with nothing but a long summer of doctor's appointments and brooding over endless cups of tea with gay men.

"Let's put it this way," said the doctor. "When was the last time you had sex?"

"Two weeks ago."

"A man or a woman?"

Great, I thought, she's not going to assume I'm straight. She's going to be cool about this.

"A woman."

"Did you use a condom?" the doctor asked me.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Did you use a condom?"

"No, ma'am, I had sex with a woman."

"Are you taking birth control pills?"

"No, ma'am, I had sex with a woman."

"Are you trying to get pregnant?" she asked, exasperated.

I wasn't really sure how to tell this doctor that there was no chance that

Antoinette could have impregnated me. I considered drawing her a diagram, since I had all that paper in the form of my dress. Instead, I said, "No, ma'am, I had sex with a woman. I have not had sex with a man in a year. When I had sex with a man, we used condoms."

She stared at me as though I had just announced I had sodomized the Pope.

"Do you mean to tell me," she said, "you had sex with a man and a woman at the same time?"

"No, ma'am. Two weeks ago, I had sex with a woman. One woman, and myself, alone."

The room was dead silent as she continued to stare at me in undisguised horror. In my paper dress on the cold steel table, I felt like some strange specimen at the zoo, one that wasn't supposed to exist. And I wish I could tell you I said something really funny to her. But we both just sat there and stared, I in my paper dress and she in her doctor's cloak. Until finally she sighed and said, "I'll need you to put your feet in the stirrups, please, and then I'll need to do an anal probe." And I just stared at the ceiling, trying not to think about that either. *Quick.*

At last the blood test, HIV test, and Pap smear were over, and it was time to have that cough examined. So on a relentlessly bright August day, my mom grinning schlepped me back to the clinic in her 1973 Buick. "I sure hope they find something out," Mom said. "You know what I been thinking, though?" There was that note of angry suspicion in her voice that always makes my stomach clench.

"What?"

"Well, I've just been thinking about all them years we spent in Times Beach."

"Yeah?" Times Beach, Missouri, is a little town—well, not so much a town as a sprawl of trailers bordered by the Meramec River, a horse pasture, and a highway—well known in Missouri as the first town in the nation to have been completely evacuated due to toxic waste. This was just one more thing I did not want to think about.

"Well, me and your dad moved out there when you were three, and I was pregnant with Alexis... so that was '77. We lived there three years. Now,

they laid that dioxin down in '72, but see, no one on the beach knew that. We thought it was just regular oil they sprayed, to keep the dust down."

"Yeah, but it didn't even do that, did it? I remember it was really dusty there."

Mom snorted. "No, it didn't keep no dust down. Dust got all over everything, you couldn't even keep your house clean out there."

"Right," I said. "Because I remember playing in the dust outside the trailer. I liked to scoop it into my Tonka dump truck."

"Yeah, you did. I couldn't stop you. You were like Pigen from *Peanuts*, always surrounded by a cloud of dust."

I almost laughed at that, but found that I just couldn't. I was thinking about something. There was a tightness in my chest. "Wait," I said. "But what I don't understand is this: They sprayed in '72, so didn't people start getting sick by the time we moved there?"

"Sure they did, lots of people were sick, and the animals were too. I tell you, when I lived there I would wheeze and cough, sometimes until I passed out. And the whole reason your dad and I lived there in the first place is because we thought the country was a healthy place to raise kids!"

"Then why didn't they evacuate it until '82?"

"Well, my neighbors told me they tried to get the EPA and the DOH out there almost ten years before that, when the horses started dying, but they never even showed up. It was just poor people, you know? It was all poor people living out there."

She patted my hand. Her hand was cold. "I don't mean to scare ya, babe. I wish I had the money to take you to a nice doctor's office, but I just don't have it."

"Oh, Mom, that's O.K. You don't have to apologize."

"But," she said, a little too cheerfully, "I did bring you some *Incredible Hulk* comics to look at."

"All right, Mom!"

Inside, Mom and I parked it on those puce chairs and tried to forget about dioxin, the Department of Health, and everything else. She told me about her most recent painting, "The Incredible Hulk vs. the Grateful Dead." I have always wished I could turn myself into the Incredible Hulk.

I think that then I would not spend so much time in waiting rooms. As it was, I waited for two and a half hours that day before I was led to the examining room. Then I waited another hour and a half to see the doctor, this time a Chinese woman named Lorraine, who giggled, "Oh, I didn't know you were in here."

Dr. Lorraine decided I had a cold.

"In August? A cold? For five months?"

"That's right. I give you some Robitussin." (Which the clinic generously supplied.)

After two weeks of slurping Robitussin with no results, I made another appointment, and four weeks later I was back, this time for a diagnosis of the flu (in September? for six months?), for which I was prescribed a course of antibiotics—and a different kind of Robitussin.

I was not surprised to find myself at the clinic again six weeks later, this time for a tuberculosis test—which was negative, thank god, since if I did have tuberculosis, by that time I would have been dead. And six weeks after that, I was told to schlep up to the Berkeley Department of Health clinic for lung X-rays.

And one month later, at long last, I had a firm diagnosis:

"There is nothing wrong with you," said Dr. Lorraine. "You just like to cough."

"I assure you, ma'am, I do not like to cough."

"No," she said, laughing merrily. "You just like to cough."

"No, no no no no. I do not enjoy coughing."

"Here, I give you some Robitussin."

"Ma'am, I already have some Robitussin. I have three bottles of Robitussin. I have Robitussin Expectorant, I have Robitussin PM, I even have Robitussin Extra Strength!"

"Bye-bye. You go home and rest now."

Four years later I found myself in another clinic's emergency room, this time for undiagnosed asthma and a major infection of my skin, sinuses, lungs, vagina, and ears. All at the same time. I was red and white and blue all over, like some kind of patriotic joke. As I had told you-just-like-to-cough Lorraine, I spent my formative years in dioxin-soaked

Times Beach, for which no one has ever taken responsibility—not the Environmental Protection Agency, who ignored the problem for nearly ten years; not the St. Louis Department of Health, who didn't want to get their hands dirty; certainly not Monsanto, who created the napalm by-product in the first place. And why should they take responsibility? What kind of trailer-trash fools lived there anyway? Hell, if the dioxin hadn't given so many of us infected lungs and cancer, we'd probably just have frittered our days away smoking and drinking, eating cheesy puffs and Ho-Ho's, screwing our relatives and giving each other AIDS. At least all that time spent standing in line for food stamps and doctors kept us out of trouble.

So what's the moral of the story, if you're poor and from Missouri? Take two of these, drink two tablespoons of that, don't ask questions, don't screw around, and whatever you do, please don't call us in the morning.

WHAT I ATE WHERE

Diane di Prima

summer 1953—lamb chops, fresh tomatoes, and pepperidge farm bread. this was the time of the chic girl and sometimes she came to visit and stayed to supper and she would eat nothing but lambchops or steak and sometimes a boiled vegetable with a little butter and pepperidge farm whole wheat bread with butter on it. which got to be very boring and i ate a lot more of it than she did because i never knew when she would come to dinner. she used my pad during the day when i was at work and i still remember how it was one day to come home and find her asleep in her slip, the white of the slip, the white of the sheets, and her skin, flushed with the afternoon sun on it.

fall 1953—kraft cheese spreads on pepperidge farm bread for lunch, this at work while doing latin, i was reading vergil i think, i worked in the credit department of a large sugar company.

february 1954—lunch tongues, liver spread, caviar, vienna sausages, anything that came in small enough jars. we lived off what we could steal from the a&xp, sue had a navy coat with big stiff sleeves, i had a trenchcoat with nice deep pockets, and jeri would slip a steak under his jacket cross his arms over his breast and swish out, rolling his eyes at the boys at the counter. we always bought bread.

spring 1955—a lot of scrambled eggs, at other people's pads. lived

could now that i think of it have gone to the russian tearoom, but maybe we didn't have enough money, i don't know, i know i didn't and you can always get a snack at rumplmayer's. what i mean to say is rumplmayer's is sue's idea of someplace festive but not mine at all, it's too much like an expensive luncheonette.

anyway we went there and maybe it was a good idea, yes i'm sure it was. because a high class luncheonette is brightly lit and one cannot begin to weep all over again in a brightly lit luncheonette. maybe one on tenth avenue yes. but not one on central park south and not this one. so then it was what did i want and though it was may i was cold, was freezing cold so i ordered onion soup.

THE LOWER-WORKING- CLASS NARRATIVE OF A BLACK CHINESE AMERICAN GIRL

Wendy Thompson

I made my life from scratch. Built this twenty-two-year-old body from nothing. Just two wires and a burnt-out car, two pieces of tarp, and some scrap metal. And with these I built my bones, my skeleton, and my skin. A home to withstand sleet and rain, drunken assaults, and rape. A space to create beauty and dream, to leave a part of myself behind as artifact.

I came into this life carved out of poverty and half Blackness. Grew up on Lucky Charms and public-access television, I thought, like everybody else. I was cared for by my mother, an immigrant from Burma who shifted from Chinese restaurant waitress jobs to working as a baby sitter. I was punished by a Black father who came home tired and hungry from punching numbers at a shipping company on the Oakland waterfront.

My mother reminded me that it was her idea to wait in line overnight while pregnant with me back in the early '80s to try and get a loan from the bank to buy a house. She asserts (usually implying my father's failures) that without her, our family would be nothing. She wanted to make things work for herself and for her daughter. She needed to prove something to her family after getting kicked out and disowned for "going Black" and shaming the family name.

My African-American father grew up hard. He didn't hustle and was

always intent on making money the "honest" way. He still had hope that this white man's world would be just, that they'd cut a little Black boy from San Francisco some slack. But he was angry and could not change the spiral of his own small life and stayed trapped in the menial-labor pool while his white coworkers got the raises and vacation time slots. All he got was some damn sweater with the company logo on it after twenty-plus years of "excellent service."

So this was my beginning, growing up in a lopsided house with my father's burnt-out anger and my mother's shaky dreams. We lived in Oakland between gunshots and freeway overpasses. My parents always had ambitions of making enough money to buy us out of the urban streets. Of course they wanted to give all three of us a nice little house with a picket fence and green grass to hide our abuse and sadness in. Not with nights of barricaded doors because a boy armed with a loaded weapon was loose in the neighborhood. Not with the neighbors across the street hosting gang parties and someone being fatally stabbed in a whirl of music and beer. Not with prostitution and a stabbing on the corner, a vague picture of a Black man being passed around as the suspect.

But this is the compromise—we were not white, we were not rich, we were not privileged. My mother couldn't speak English and my father was trying to swallow the whole of employment discrimination and a new family. In my own world, I was trying to save my skin from getting beaten up by classmates because of the poor Salvation Army clothes I wore or the way my half-breed awkwardness caused them to feel ill at ease. I got driven to the "good school" in the hills because my parents wanted the best for me. Not for me to break down at eleven and start fucking the neighborhood boys, getting drunk, and cutting school with a baby on the way. No, not that.

My mother wanted me to be a good little Asian daughter; my father wanted me to be able to escape the violence and dejection of growing up Black. They both wanted me to have a "chance" and make it in this world. So my father beat me to make me grow up tall and straight. My mother taught me to stay away from Blackness, to carefully construct myself so that I would not fuck up, and to hold it together until we

reached the safety-of-suburbia and the middle class. Maybe, they thought, the whiteness would rub off on me. Maybe it would save me from cutting my arms with broken glass and running away with drunk homeless boyfriends.

But after all my father's efforts to beat me straight and my mother's insistence that I stop "acting ghetto" (read: an exaggerated performance of what I thought was Black), I ran away anyway. It wasn't the two-story house that I wanted so much, but this was beyond their comprehension.

Poverty and race, then, like stealing napkins from McDonald's for our own kitchen table or buying in bulk when my mother would steal from my father's tight wallet, were one and the same to me. I had grown up half Black and poor and had felt ashamed of myself and where I came from ever since I got thrown into schools with other kids who could afford to buy their social status. Those kids, the ones who were worth being called on, the milky White Rabbit candy-hands raised to a teacher's ambitious question. And the girls—from elementary to high school—always had the luxury of looking pretty, while I had only what I could afford, and even if I could afford it, would it ever be enough?

From this I became the unwanted, dusty half-breed girl from the other side of the tracks. I ate old food wrapped up in aluminum foil for lunch. Sinky food sometimes. Chinese food.

I do not know when I began to relate racism to whiteness, class and poverty to supremacy and economic/corporate tyranny, my family in the bottom of the curved belly of American lies. This kind of consciousness wasn't entirely mine at a young age since I lacked the framework and mental capacity to understand it all, but in the little ways that I could formulate it, I learned that I wielded a power and strength that these little Richie Rich kids would never have. They had all the privilege in the world, all the workings on their side, but I was still standing, still surviving after a thousand-year captivity that their world and their books constantly tried to erase from history, from memory and re-create as myth.

For so long, they—politicians, pastors, teachers, the three-car-garage rich—pushed the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" theory. They said, "You Black people are so lazy. If you got off welfare and worked hard,

maybe you could make something of yourselves in life."

But we Black people have been making something of ourselves in life, not only for ourselves but also for white people, for generations.

They never seem to hear us, though.

Being half Black means having thicker blood and bones to withstand breaking, and eyes with a raw, wide-open perspective. (Not all of us choose to live or see, but those of us who do know the difficulties of staying on top and navigating the currents of life.) Being poor is knowing how to make old milk and some bread go pretty far over the course of a week. Being a woman is learning from a young age what you can get in return for sex. So, my mother fed me on what she could make work, and what I didn't get from my parents, I received in exchange for my body, for all I was worth. And it isn't worth too much in this society, Blackness in the female form. Especially when you have to eat and have no skills, or are underage. *Blame it on history.*

For me, being half Black, poor, and troublesome somehow took the crime out of my rape and battery. It wasn't necessarily a legal issue that a young woman from *that side* was out in the streets getting beat up because she refused to give sex without some compensation. It wasn't a crime that she was being neglected in her home, it wasn't a crime that she went into the streets to look for an alternate family system. In that respect, I became a statistic, a government-study number, what talk-show hosts might call "a troubled girl looking for a father figure and love." But it wasn't severe enough for intervention when a young, poor woman who was labeled "gifted" by teachers in school but "mentally unstable" by psychiatrists was being battered and seeking alternatives—but found too many bricks instead that, in the end, created dead-end walls.

Still, I was literate. I loved English and my Anatomy class, even. And I stuck through school and graduated. During that time, I kept in my company a transient boyfriend who was also mixed-race but looked white, the same one who did the majority of the assaults on my body. My liberation came when he went away to boot camp the summer after senior year. At eighteen I was referred, as a "bright and qualified student," to

college, and began yet another adjustment at the University of California at Santa Barbara, the U.C. notorious for being unable to keep students of color at the institution. It was a four-year fraternity party from which I bailed after just two years because of severe depression, alienation, and a climax of threatening to knuckle up with some of the white girls who constantly harassed me in the dorms.

I was not the first in my extended family to go away to college, but coming from an immediate family with a Chinese mother with minimal English skills and an African-American father who went to a city college and hit the glass ceiling hard, my attending a four-year university was not some minor thing. I transferred schools, determined to complete my bachelor's degree, unfinished with the fight.

I was still recovering from the earlier abuse, physical and mental, from boyfriends and other men. I was still trying to find my space to surface and not drown in academia, a place I was not totally prepared for after so many years in the California public school system, where I was channeled into underachieving classes because the school had already filled their "quota" for the honors courses. I was still cutting up my body periodically as my own way of coping, and would sometimes go out drinking to forget my difficulties. When I did study, I had to beg to borrow other kids' books because if I spent my financial aid money on the textbooks for my courses, I wouldn't be able to buy a Greyhound ticket back home to visit my family for the holidays.

I endured financially in school by depending on loans and painful budgeting. Even now, nothing for me is ever a luxury. I learned to stretch money and sometimes starve because something else is always much more important than food, something else always comes first. It's the sacrifice I have learned to live with while my mother supports the two younger additions to our family—two more girls—on minimum wage earned as a cashier at a fast-food restaurant. I used to be very ashamed to admit to people where she worked. Admitting these personal things can still remind me of the hurt I felt growing up poor and being made fun of.

It's our (brown) bodies that this society was built on and is still being

built on, our backs, our hands still in the dirt. And it's easy for someone from outside this "class" to discredit the everyday struggle, simple for them to dissociate themselves from our shame, our labor, our humility, our anger. My mother has never been ashamed of who she is, even after her Chinese relatives cursed her out for going with a "nigger" and having half-breed babies without being able to support them. She fought to stand firm with her choices and stay proud of her work—owning a home and a car, helping one kid through college with two more to go. But what she does is regarded by American society as "nothing," a dirty shit job: mopping up someone else's floor and taking in their shame; probably even serving from a drive-through window some of the people who will read this book. Same as the work done by my father—refilling paper clips, photocopying papers, running Post-it note messages to court superiors—a "go get my coffee, boy." No one seems to notice that my parents, two underprivileged people, are doing the body work, the labor that keeps part of this world functioning.

Some of us survive, even as the world is caving in on us under the spread of capitalism and global industry. Some of us find new ways to pay the rent, pull together a family in a one-bedroom apartment, pay for an education with hope that a back will be spared—and hands too—while dealing with the persisting circumstances of poverty. There is a desire to close the gap between privileged and poor in this country, but it seems that regardless of the amount or quality of labor performed, the demarcations remain. The borders between the upper class and the working class stand to define more than just the amount on a paycheck. They classify language, culture, body, and self. It keeps us apart from each other while also keeping us connected in a never-ending struggle for social and economic balance. The middle ground is where I locate myself.

BLUEPRINTS AND HARDWIRES

Cassie Peterson

"Cassie, I want to know all of you . . . all the stories," she says naively over the phone. It's late at night and I'm cuddled into the receiver. I want to fulfill her request, but I'm scared she'll realize that's all I am—just a tangle of stories. I live these stories instead of a life. The motives get fuzzy.

Post-9/11. People stop buying sex toys. I know this only because I work at the very respectable sex store Good Vibrations. The co-op is cooperatively spooked. Everyone is talking about being "in the red." I imagine that people are still fucking, maybe even more. But it's a different kind of sex. More desperate, less methodical—back-alley blowjobs and hastened quickies. People fear war, the end of the world even. It makes them less inclined to purchase an eighty-dollar vibrator. I'm the new kid at the store—the first to be let go in the company's effort to survive the wintry economic climate.

It's like flatlining, losing your job. From thirty-five hours a week to zero. Zero hours. Zero structure. Zero dollars. I've been unemployed before, but it was always by choice. I was emotionally and financially prepared. But when someone else pulls the plug, it sends you reeling into the now empty seven days of your week. Anyone who's been laid off will tell you that it takes a full two weeks just to get out of your pajamas. You order

a lot of take-out and watch a lot of *Maury Povich*. And then the money goes. And then you get dressed.

I am overwhelmed by the rigmarole of bureaucratic paperwork. I can't keep it all straight—the unemployment forms, the food-stamp applications, the drastically increasing number of ID cards that I am being forced to carry around with me. Being poor is a full-time job. Every minute, the government demands that you *prove* your current economic status, leaving absolutely no time to *improve* it. I have to schedule job interviews between all my other red-tape appointments.

I am in a three-hour line in the social services building. It's San Francisco's version of a Third World country—a desperate urban underbelly I am surrounded by men right out of prison. Women with three kids and no home. Pregnant again. Shopping carts parked outside. Junkies going through withdrawal right here, they've been in line so long. I am filling out more forms. Always more forms. I use red pen, losing my patience and writing snide answers in the margins, like, "No, I have no new income to report. Don't you fucking get it? I'm broke. Just like yesterday and the day before." The man at the window is not amused. He shoots me a scolding look and hands me a fresh form to fill out. "Just mark the correct boxes," he warns.

I'm waiting for my number to be called with my head between my knees. It stinks in here like dirty feet. The woman next to me is nodding off, leaving her purse free for a swiping. I wonder if I should wake her. A guy in gold chains and slurred speech is passing his time by propositioning every woman in the waiting room. At one point I hear him say, "Hey, what can I say? I make really beautiful babies." The current object of his attention giggles into her hands. I scan the room. I am one of the only white people in here. I am suddenly self-conscious. Ashamed even, as if people are going to judge me because I have fallen from grace, from my privileged place in the social hierarchy. I walked into this waiting room from a world that most of these people have never had access to. This is only a moment for me—an excruciating moment, but still only a moment.

The top of my form reads, *Check here if this is not your reality. Sign on the dotted line if this is ultimately just another story for you to write.*

"Twenty-something white girl goes on government aid in order to find herself." How quaint. Later I will be able to flippanantly say things like, "Oh, yeah, that was back when I was on food stamps." My revelations make me feel sad and heavy. Being here is sad. Being an outsider here is even sadder. I wrestle with the words. Poor. Poverty. I feel unequipped to attach myself to either. I'm "broke," which means now, not always. I have lived paycheck to paycheck for so long that I cannot even fathom another mode of existence. But it is still not poverty. I don't want to romanticize poverty by trying to apply it to my own life.

Today I have a job interview and then another meeting with my social worker. I try to clean up. God, I'm a mess. I don't have money for a haircut, so I'm deluding myself into thinking that I'm growing it out. My eyes are like two piss holes in the snow and my face is breaking out. I look damn near desperate. My interview is for a position as a basketball-camp facilitator at the Stonestown YMCA. The program director meets with me. Her name is Susan. She's from Florida and wears a long, pink cardigan sweater. She's a writer too, she informs me. Everyone in San Francisco is a writer. We're like locusts. "Wow, what a coincidence!" I say with impeccable enthusiasm.

She leads me to her office and I'm ready to dazzle her with the vastness of my basketball experience. But first she asks about my last job. Shit, I didn't work that one into the equation. I think of as many euphemisms for Good Vibrations as I possibly can. I downplay sex and highlight customer service and diversity training. She's visibly unimpressed. I get nervous and suddenly feel less qualified. I fidget with my tie while Susan glares at it, as if it's some intrusive third party. I am subtly indicted for being some kind of creepy, tie-wearing child molester. Wow, this is not going well. I've never had a bad interview before and suddenly I'm feeling really defeated.

Susan feeds me some scenarios. "What would you do if one of the kids in your group needs to use the restroom and you are the only adult on the premises?" I think hard. Then it hits me like a jackpot. My eyes light up and I explain how I would utilize the buddy system. But it's not quick enough for her. She wants those kinds of answers to shoot out of me like bullets from a machine gun. There's plenty of people who have

that child-care lingo crap cued up and ready to go. I just really like basketball. "Do you have CPR certification?"

"Well, no," I say, "but I'd be willing to take some sort of class, and did I mention that I've been playing basketball for as long as I can remember?"

"*Mm hmm.*" She then asks me what I would do if one of the kids were misbehaving.

"I'd tell that little fuck to shape up!" I say assertively. Well, O.K., I didn't actually say that. But I think that's what Susan heard. By this point, we're just going through the motions. I shake her hand and exhale away all my discomfort. Back on the Muni train, I wedge myself in between droves of S.F. State kids. They are fresh out of their film classes. They all look the same—kind of washed out. They wear pins on their jean jackets and talk about sustainable agriculture. I wince at how predictable it all is.

I'm sitting in Clara's cubicle. She's my social worker. She is friendly, but keeps it strictly professional. I like her because she helps me and I don't feel shamed by it. We meet weekly. She always asks, "What are your plans?" I never know. But today I attempt an answer. "Maybe I should go back to school. Or maybe I'll just move to a different city and start over."

"O.K., but you will no longer be eligible for any California state aid if you do either of those things."

"I know," I say, "I was just musing."

"Don't muse in here," she warns. "I've got twenty more people to see before lunch." I relinquish yet another signature and a full set of fingerprints. "California officially owns you," she informs me.

Tuesday night. I stroll into the Lexington bar, city-dyke central. We all look the same—card-carrying members of some incestuous social network. If you put in the time, you gain access to all the perks. It's like a pyramid scheme. I've been involved for about two years and I've dated every cute, brown-haired, andro, five-foot-something dyke in the city. I must have filled out a profile card or something because they get delivered to my front doorstep with thirty-day warranties. But the sacrifice is incredible sometimes. Like tonight. I promised I would show up, despite my own

good sense not to. I've been extremely reclusive since my quality of life started rapidly deteriorating, but I got a phone call. People are worried. I'm nursing a beer in the corner, fighting off feelings of dread. I've had such a long day, I don't know if I can play the part right now. But if I don't, people might suspect that I've been busy living my own life, in my own skin, and I don't want to alienate anyone like that. No, no, I'm here, sucking off the generic group battery. But tonight, it feels like one of those 9-volts that shock you when you put it to your tongue.

One of my buddies shows up. She comments on the startling length of my hair. "I know, I know," I say as I blow it out of my face. She updates me on all the gossip as the bar fills up. I watch her eyes. I watch everyone's eyes. They're in constant motion. Everyone in the bar is looking through everyone else, hoping to see something new. Something better. We're always upgrading. I feel raw—everything right at the surface. I'm ready to climb atop a soapbox and condemn the entire thing—the patterns of behavior we establish under the guise of "creating community." This isn't community. Communities support each other. Communities look each other in the eyes. I feel most angered by my own part in it all. It's just so easy, so comfortable, so . . . inexcusable.

"How are you?" my friend finally says.

"Honestly?" I ask.

"Of course," she says earnestly, oblivious to what's brewing under my social veneer.

"I'm scared I'm not going to be able to pay rent this month. I'm scared that I'm losing everything."

"Well, can't your dad just send you some money?" I'm tempted to hit her, just to shake her loose from her own sense of entitlement. She is near-sighted from too many years of having everything she wants.

"Dude, my dad makes less money than I do," I try to say politely. Another story is tickling the back of my throat. It's a soliloquy really, so I move to the corner of the stage and address my audience. "I can't just count on some familial rescue. I'm sorry that didn't occur to you. I'm sorry that I am suddenly too messy to fit into your one-dimensional version of me."

I'm back in Wyoming. High school. My father and I are fighting about money. He teaches creative writing courses at the local college, but he keeps his hours to a minimum so that he can devote more time to his own writing. Our whole life is lived at the bare minimum. "Why can't you just get a real job?" I scream maliciously. "Why don't you just stop whining and work for once in your life?" He recoils. I've just pulled the trigger on the weapon that he's had to protect himself from his whole life. He's gotten it from all directions. His dad, my mother, and now me. He starts to cry, right there. He's a fifteen-year-old boy, fascinated with Ezra Pound, wondering why nobody understands him. "I'm sorry, Dad, I didn't mean it."

I picture him as a real Wyoming dad. He's an engineer in the coal mines. He drives a truck with a shotgun in the back. He silently caves into his recliner after a ten-hour shift and drinks Budweiser. I shudder to think "I mean it—I'm really sorry. It's just so hard with you sometimes."

The story runs its course and I get up from the bar. I cannot be here anymore. I am clearly spilling outside the lines of the identity that affords me a comfortable place here. I'm hiding from ideas that loom in the sky like mushroom clouds. Stalking around my neighborhood in nondescript hats and sunglasses, I am aching for total invisibility.

I'm headed toward the Mission Library. I need to check Craig's List for more job openings, but I panic as I approach Valencia. I can't even get near that street without feeling like I'm in an episode of *This Is Your Life*. There is a constant barrage of familiar faces. A black car is approaching and it looks just like it belongs to someone I know. I spook like a jackrabbit and hop into a thorny row of bushes. The car passes and it's not her. A wave of sanity washes over me, as I become aware of myself on all fours in branches that are scraping the skin off my knees. There is nothing left to do but laugh. I make it home unnoticed. My unemployment check has come. It's a joke, of course, since they have based the amount on some old job I used to have before I was paying rent in the city. I pay my phone bill before I no longer have the resources to do so. There's an envelope from my dad. It's a check for thirty dollars and a note that says, "Cas, I am thinking about you all the time. Sorry this is all I could afford, as things

are pretty tight here as well." It breaks his heart to send it. And mine to endorse it.

Using my food stamps in the grocery store reminds me of buying tampons in Wyoming. There is a great deal of self-consciousness involved. In my town, there is only one store, so there was never any possibility of anonymity. Inevitably all my teachers and crushes were in the same checkout line with me. The kid bagging groceries was always some awkward teenage boy I knew from geometry class. He put his grubby hands all over my box of supers. The next day at school he'd shoot me a chilling look that said, "I know about you. You're the one who *bleezeds*."

Alone now, standing in the Cala checkout line in the middle of the night in order to feel less conspicuous, the implications feel far more serious. I'm being rung up by a middle-aged man with a grocery-clerk mustache. I need him to walk me through this, so I confess, "I've never done this before." I hand him a wad of pink and blue money, shaking. I feel compelled to explain my circumstances to him. "I lost my job, but don't worry, I'm fine. Everything's fine. I promise."

Through the receiver, she's telling me a story this time. More like an anecdote. The punch line is something about how this morning she was wearing Puma shoes with a red button-down shirt and the combo made her feel too sporty or euro or euro-sporty. But it's O.K. now, because she went home after work and changed her shoes. She really dodged a faux pas fashion bullet. I've tuned out. I just nod in agreement instead of saying, "I'm sorry, but I really don't give a fuck."

And just like that, it's the first line of a brand-new story. It's unraveling. I can tell it's going to be climactic by the heat it creates in my belly. I'm completely present in the spaces between the words. It hits me—this is the big scare. This is what everyone warned me about when I was growing up. Having nothing. Losing everything. We learn how to be financially secure, socially well adjusted. We go to school and collect degrees and hoard everything around us so that we can get further and further from the very place where I am sitting. I am drenched in a pool of my own exhilaration. I am en route, aware that this is possibly the worst time of my entire life,

while simultaneously understanding that I have never been more alive. It's like being seven years old and everything around you is vibrating with possibility.

"I'm living really close to things," I suddenly offer up to her.

"What do you mean?" She has obviously not been reading my mind. I wish I could show her everything I've seen. I want to air-drop her into the middle of a previous paragraph. There's a time capsule buried under my numbness and it's resurfacing. In it are all the old blueprints and hard-wires. I remember again what it's like to have no other purpose than to survive. I'm free and comforted here. She's waiting patiently to be let in, but I still struggle to drop all the pretenses. "You know, vanity... it's such a stifling luxury." Great, now I'm speaking to her in aphorisms. Without any context, she's not going to buy into this.

"Thanks, Dad," she scoffs.

I deserve that. It's no secret I'm withholding. I finally just say it. "Right now, nothing matters. I'm not cute or charming. I'm not a storyteller or a writer. I'm wearing dirty underwear... again. I'm a mere number in a perpetual shuffle of human need. And the good days are the ones where I remember that."

She hears me, and that is all I can ask for.

THE SOUND OF POVERTY

Eileen Myles

When I think about the type of poverty I grew up with I'm inclined to call it "enough." We had just enough. I guess we were what they call now the working poor. We weren't really poor, but my parents were afraid of that—poverty. So there were many actions and choices in between us and poverty and we lived in that in-between place where you were always slightly reminded that you didn't have enough or you had barely enough.

I always think of the powdered milk. What kid didn't like to drink milk, tons of it—a half gallon was plunked down on the table at supper and at lunch. But sometimes my mother sank down a pitcher and there were tiny bubbles at the top of it and we'd scream: No, Mom, it has bubbles. It's powdered! It's not, she'd insist. Then she'd give in. O.K., she'd admit. It's half and half. Everything was always stretched a little bit. At a moment when everyone was proudly aware of the pop glamour of American products, we didn't use Welch's grape jelly—we used Ann Page, the A&P brand. Or Finast from First National. When it came to ice cream it was Marvel, whatever that was, and it was also neapolitan so that nobody could have their favorite flavor, everybody could have striped ice cream or nothing. Neapolitan is strawberry, vanilla, and chocolate. You probably know that. We didn't have Kool-Aid, we had Cheeri-ade, our supermarket's brand. I loved when we ran out of something just before

supper because I'd jump on my bike and go to the Monument market in the center which was run by some Italian guy who wore a straw hat and the Monument only carried brand names, we were locked in to something known. But usually we weren't. As a result, there were certain things that actually seemed disgusting to me. Like butter. Too rich. I preferred margarine. I had to develop a taste for butter in college so that I wouldn't embarrass myself by my preference for blandness. I'm afraid to taste margarine now because I think I would still like it too much and I would think about home. Growing up poor—growing up anything other than middle-class situates you strangely in the culture. For instance, I don't like television. Unlike every middle-class girlfriend I've ever had, I watched it plenty growing up. No one ever stopped me. Also, it was the sixties. TV was like a national sport. Those people who were questioning whether it was good for kids were total outsiders. Conceited and rich. Probably the same people who were willing to put their entire family on TV, like the Lounds. My family would eat supper and then my mother would make about three dozen chocolate-chip cookies and we'd watch TV until it went off. We'd watch Johnny Carson and then we'd watch American jets fly over Buddhist temples and "The Star Spangled Banner" would play and we'd call it a day. Nobody did homework. Nobody asked. There was no future. We were just there. My brother was considered a brain and he got good grades somehow and I didn't but it didn't matter, because I was a girl. So right from the beginning it seemed that being female was another occasion of poverty. In fact there were two of us in my family. We were referred to as "the girls." Immediately I was part of a group. It's been pointed out to me that in photography kids of color are generally photographed in groups rather than in individual portraits like white kids. In general, it seems to me, girls are less white than boys, or white in the wrong way. And again, there were two of us, so the more, the worse. And I was more a part of the group of my family than the group at school. My family was kind of Old-World. If all the females were getting permanents, I would get a permanent. There was no personal self, no point of resistance. Whatever style was tearing through the legions of other girls at school had no effect on the fashions of my family. Since there were two girls we would often get

the same thing: two dresses, identical. My brother was a little different from us. There was the sense that he would go to a brand-name college, and my mother helped him buy a car in high school—a Volkswagen; yet still in the most basic ways he was just like us. He watched TV and he went to bed. He got up and the jelly and the margarine were there and—let me show you our lunch boxes. It was cool to have your sandwich on a big bulky roll—but of course instead I had Wonder Bread—oddly one of the brands that broke through to the working class. Everyone had it. I think Wonder Bread was considered good because of all those ways it built the body and it was also great to have a Drake's cake in your lunch box, but I did not have a Drake's cake, I had an apple with a bruise. It's better for you, my mother would defend it. And she was right. But still I couldn't believe those lucky kids would open their boxes or their bags and a product in cellophane would gleam out at them. And they would fear it open and the whipped cream would be stuck to the paper and it was theirs.

In school there was a band. I dreamed about it—a marching band with drums and clarinets and saxophones—the best. I desperately wanted to join the band and play music with everyone. But my mother simply said no. We couldn't afford it. My brother had a paper route so he could afford it, but Terry didn't practice. Why would my mother waste the money on a horn I wouldn't play, she explained snootily. She actually had distaste for the idea. But I would, I believed, my hopes fading into the wallpapered walls of our two-family house that we owned. See, we weren't poor. We were World War II white average. My parents bought our house on the G.I. bill. Obviously other guys went to college on it as well. Not my father. My father decided to drink himself to death and die instead. When we wanted something my mother would immediately compare her experience— orphan, to our experience—lucky ducks with two parents, and then even one. It was easy to say no to me. She would think of what she had had—what they had taken away from her. At the point at which both of her parents died, there was a pianola in her house and she believed it was hers and the Polish relatives came and carted it away. People take everything. That's what my mother believed. I think we kids were "people"

too. By the time I was eleven and had given up the possibility of ever playing the trumpet, or the clarinet or the saxophone, and merely sat on a chair in the parlor tooting on my harmonica, my mother would lean in and say, You know, I always wanted to play the piano when I was a child. She looked at me sadly. We were a couple of kids. So it's really difficult when I think about growing up without money, not much of it anyhow—to figure out what in fact was the weirdness of our exact economic situation and what was the kind of mourning that people endlessly express through dollars. My mother couldn't let me replace her loss with a living kid with a horn. I had to stay empty too. And I did. I really think of language as a replacement for everything. Sitting here at my computer it's like the revenge of nothing. I make my constant claim in silence. I toot my horn.

DIRTY GIRL

Tara Hardy

"When the ax came into the forest, the trees said the handle is one of us."

—bumper sticker

The dispute between femmes and feminists is about class. We get stuck with one another because we disagree about which practices feed, or are born of, the patriarchy. Feminists judge femmes from the perspective of class.

My personal experience with feminists has been complicated. One of the complications involves how quickly feminists attempt to snatch the ideals they espouse out of my hands when I apply them to my right to express femininity. I get asked a lot by feminists, either out loud or with the nonverbal once-over, "Why are you wearing that skirt, that make-up, those shoes?" More than once someone has actually said out loud, "I thought you were a feminist." When this happens, I pause to think about my aunts and cousins, my hometown friends who still don't look like the girls at college did when I got there. I remember that at one point, neither did I. And what I want to say is, "Because I'm homesick."

In spite of what anyone might think about the whys and ways of femininity, I have to be honest: I don't feel cleaner when I'm unadorned, scrubbed, uncovered. I feel dirty and ungendered. I feel like the animal of