



The Self, A Portrait

Isaac Richards

Mounted antler, fox pelt, bison skull—they decorate the spacious art studio. I'm here as a volunteer, not a *model*. "I need to practice," my friend said, "I'll give

you: the sketch." But have you ever tried to hold still for four hours? Hold still. How difficult it is to *hold still* these many trembling members. The artist knows

how to locate me in the light, looking first from the left then from the right, watching me flicker in still shadows. Stare straight ahead. Try not to watch *me* melt, merge

from matter to light, refracting, the upside-down eye, spread like jam, butter on a creamy canvas leaking oil, glitter, reflection, prismatic, color, invisible, a mirror,

transparent, opaque—are these words unclear? Forgive the rich texture. Like electrons, because I am, I change when I am observed. *I am* contingencies converging at

a vanishing point, lines on the horizon, a landscape, a smile so subtle none can pretend to capture. This likeness is no metaphor. In the morning, I am only a

sketch, in the afternoon I am blurry, at night I am as stable as meaning or wet paint, a malleable potentiality or smear of possibility. Four hours of music, audiobooks,

silence. I am the itch you cannot scratch, the quiver you cannot subdue. Who knew that being a statue could be such intense exercise? I ache therefore I am; almost done.

I stand from the studio chair, worried. Will it look like *me*? That darling we call *consciousness*—always nervous, shaking. You are a masterpiece. *I am* a masterpiece. The self is.



It Started with Evan

Dominique G lin

The first time they killed a man and got away with it was an accident, mostly. Someone Lily worked with had been giving her a hard time and one night, he attacked her in the parking lot.

What he didn't know was that Lily had been attacked before and she'd promised herself that the last time would be the last time she'd feel defenseless. One krav maga class turned into an obsession which begat sparring sessions and before long, she formed an informal fight club.

So when Evan held a knife to her throat, she knew how to subdue him. But the more she thought about it, the less she wanted to. Subdue him for what? So he could try again? So he could do this to someone else? Why subdue him when she could stop him once and for all? So she decided to kill him.

They struggled, with their co-worker Olive nearby yelling at Evan to stop, but it quickly became clear to Lily that Evan wasn't expecting a fight. She knew what she was doing and it wasn't long until Lily sliced his throat open. The initial gush of blood sprayed her in the face and his body went limp against hers. She was soaked: her sweat and his

blood made her shirt cling to her like she'd just been dunked in a gruesome pool.

The police came and arrested Lily, who then called her girlfriend, Macie—Mack for short. Mack was always the one who could charm her way into or out of anything. That night, she convinced the cops to let Lily go home and turn herself in the next morning. “Why be white-passing for nothing?” she'd joke later.

Lily disappeared into her thoughts. She'd decided to kill a man and done it. How long had that been something she could do? Was it just the adrenaline? Was it odd that she didn't feel guilty? All were questions she figured she'd never get the answers to, so she focused instead on how she was feeling: strong, untouchable.

She was able to go home, have a shower, have farewell sex with Mack, and the next morning, Lily turned herself in. Her case only lasted a few months and ended with the charges being dropped. Self-defense and all that.

When she returned home, Lily and Mack tried to return to their old routine, but something was off. Lily's unanswerable questions began circling the outskirts of her brain and Mack was being distant but Lily couldn't tell why.

“Can we talk?” she finally blurted out as they were making dinner one night.

Mack sighed and put her head in her hands.

“What gives? I come home and you're different. Did you cheat on me? Are you afraid of me? What—”

“—Are you serious? You think I cheated on you?!”

“So you're afraid of me?”

“Please,” Mack chuckled. “I'm afraid of me.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

Mack hesitated. She stared at the floor, at the vegetables they were chopping, at anything but Lily. She closed her eyes, trying to push the tears back in, but that never worked. Lily held her face and gently pulled her closer.

“Talk to me,” Lily begged, whispering.

Mack took a deep breath. “I loved it when you killed Evan,” she confessed softly. “When I walked into that interrogation room and you looked a mess, I thought ‘my God, she’s never looked hotter.’ I loved that I could taste his blood when I kissed you. I love knowing you can kill someone. I wished I’d seen you do it.”

Lily thought back to the night she killed Evan. She was sure she’d been quite the sight, but Mack hadn’t cared: she’d kissed her anyway, as grisly as she’d looked. What an odd taste that kiss had been. When they’d gotten home, they’d showered together and Mack had placed a kiss on each stubborn drop of blood before scrubbing it off. And yes, they had had farewell sex, as they called it, but it was also more than that. Lily had hardly noticed, being in her own state of confusion, the first of her questions nagging at her that night, but she *had* noticed.

“And I don’t know what you’re going through,” Mack continued. “If you hate that you did it, if—”

Lily interrupted Mack’s ramblings with a kiss so gentle they almost forgot they were talking about killing. Mack pulled away first, bewildered. Lily chuckled.

“I don’t hate that I did it,” she said plainly. “And I guess there’s something I should tell you, too.” She hesitated, but only briefly, with a smirk playing at the edge of her lips. “I also loved it. I wish I could do it again.”

“So do I.”

They stared at each other, tickled and in shock. How many people find themselves to be aroused by murder? And what are the odds that those people find each other only to have this dormant realization actualized? It breathed new life into their home and their time together—it was like they were newlyweds. And it wasn't long until they were.

That conversation did beg another question: was it something to act on? For Lily and Mack the answer was yes, and it became something of a routine. A birthday here, an anniversary there. They made sure to vary things enough that they didn’t get a *modus operandi* for detectives to connect their murders. There was the time they lured a pedophile into the woods and bludgeoned him. They took a machete to one guy for calling Mack a bitch at work. Corrupt politicians, rapists, anyone

who ignited their righteous anger. The list went on. Mack would usually do the research and the set-up while Lily would deliver the final blows. And then they'd make love.

They slowed down as they got older and busier with kids and grand-kids. When they reached their seventies, Mack passed away first, and Lily a month later. It was only then that their children found Mack's old journals, turned them in to the police, and helped close nearly two dozen cold cases across four states.



To someone unapologetically true to herself;

Alistair Gaunt

Who am I, if not a ghost in my own home? A stranger to my most beloved; a version of the past. My shaking hands are of dusk, my spine a cylinder of cracked glass. All this anger and all this grief: I do not know what to do with it. Perhaps, I will bury it in a sunset-laden yard and pretend loving you did not feel like being skinned alive. The coffee shop reeks of the echo of your laughter—the afterglow of your gold-speckled eyes a mere memory that continues to haunt my rainy summer afternoons.

I used to dread the day you would be gone. I saw it coming with the way you faded like the last strike of lightning amidst the turbulent storm. *“Please linger a little longer”*, I used to say before, back when your name was not carved in the shape of my deepest pain. Back when I believed in the type of love sprawled within the ink of the letters you sent me. How marvelous was it, to love and be loved by a heart that always wants more?

Dear god (*I am not sure if you even exist; do you?*), I worry love is fear and violence. I worry I will ruin gentleness with my rage for softness is a distant memory. I worry I will run the moment I am faced with altruism—all I have ever known is the selfishness of desire. I worry I will be swallowed whole, bones and all, with no space left for defamation. I worry I will be stripped bare, naked from skin to flesh; I worry to be seen for who I am: the embers of a blazing flame, ashes rather than stardust.

Perhaps, healing never was linear, but always a goodbye circling to the end of a beginning. You said you would never leave—only leave something behind—so that you could come back for it later. Leave your books at my table; leave your pen in my case; leave your words, let them hang in the air and be whisked away by the night-stricken sky.

Leave your love behind: *you beckon me to do the same.*

Nautical

Tempest Miller

Bring Lola that hot lemonade
boiled in the sun by the pool
she is reading an 1898 novel
the man wears a swimming cap black
as he turns over turns over
his legs a wheel a dog
dogleg in his streaking car carrying home a tired a thin body
as dark as blackberries
Lola is Lola is in the bath
the passage is narrow
the aquarium is swirling
water in glass
water in tanks
cut my nets let me bleed to the ocean
where planes fall like moons hurled
in murder-suicide
raise my altitude
lock the controls
make me breathless
my teeth will shine
Lola was nowhere to be seen
I saw her adorned in her short stories five years later



nu-metal cds, 4 for \$2.00 rack

Liam Strong

he would steal things i had meant to sell anyway. i wonder if this is a definition of trivial, unintentional petty. it must mean replacements, too, are expendable. unsealed, naked lumber, moist with basement. we fought mainly about music on the subaru's stereo until we didn't. twenty matchboxes is a kind of equivalent, a ratio—eighty minutes collectively, more or less. we never fucked until after the fact. if we had before then, i wouldn't be buying parts of me, a ten-day refund receipt in my cup holder. if we had.

GEARS

Abel Johnson Thundil

I'm a man stuck within rusted gears
Of this giant machine,
Turning slowly...
And the rusting slows down
As my blood lubricates these metal teeth
Open to air
For ages.
I'm a man stuck within rusted gears
Of this giant machine...
Drops of blood drips to the floor
Like water from a dirty pipe on the wall of a dirty building.
And from those drops
Arise blue butterflies;
More and more of them,
Encircling to cushion me...
Getting crushed with me
Under these gears;
These nicked skulls and steam-breathing teeth...
This one's on top..
That one's on top...
Like some bloody waterwheel.
I'm a man stuck within rusted gears
Of this giant machine,
Being squeezed to fit into the gap...
Not able to fit into the gap...
Gone forever.



M@rcel D┘ch@mp's Mannequin

Ruth Towne

Cross the line, thin as a metal hanger.
Say the word—

as a girl, refuse to play the part even in the mind,
abandon once and for all, the crib's bars, wood and wire.

Know there are many garments to hang other than gowns,
an opal-sequin cape, a pilot's uniform,
a mermaid's glamorous clamshell with pearlescent contours.

It pierces want, or right, or loss of any kind.
The hanger is a small sword.

Body as Habit

Meeni Levi

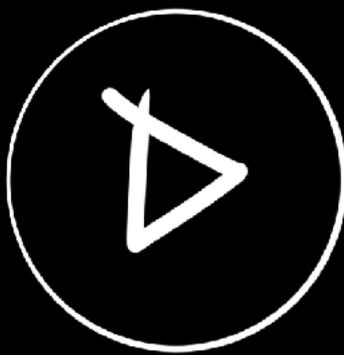
The paradox of this trans-enough body
Is that's its been out for 10 years
And the only thing
It has showing for it
Is sunburn

I was a teen when I put
My fingers between my legs
Dizzy with guilt more than arousal
Shoved my hand all the way inside
And pulled back a broken heart

I think it was my parents'?
I am now in a committed relationship
With both anxiety & silence

I let my name stumble around
Unsteady in so many mouths
My body too weak to catch it
So we watch the bruises bloom
Like dandelions

Me & my body
We have a thing for asphyxiation
It's not a sex thing
(god I wish it was a sex thing)
But this coping mechanism
Involves no aftercare
If we go to sleep afterwards
It is only out of habit



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“nu-metal cds, 4 for \$2.00 rack” by Liam Strong
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“To someone unapologetically true to herself;” by Alistair Gaunt
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“GEARS” by Abel Johnson Thundil
Twitter: @abeljthundil
Book: Wilted: Poems of Modern Tragedy
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“Nautical” by Tempest Miller
Twitter: @ectoplasmphanta
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Book: JARGONISED

“M@rcel Duch@mp's Mannequin” by Ruth Towne
Book: Resurrection of the Mannequins (Kelsay Books, 2025)

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