

Marmalade

Let's play the game where we all fall in love with a dead person. Where none of us can remember what it was like when I could climb the stairs on my own. Mama calls the neighborhood boys in to lift me from the bed into the car and we drive and drive and drive. There's blood in my lungs and grime on my teeth. There's my dress hiding the broken places hashed out over both thighs. We stop at a red light. Ahead of us is an ambulance and for the first time in my life, I can see inside. I watch the paramedics place an oxygen mask on an old man's blue face. We have the same wrinkles. The same cyanotic huffing to our chests where our bones rip through. The cab of the ambulance spills warm light into the dark like a fish tank. I feel myself rise from the seatbelt, the vinyl going slack against my skeleton as I slip out into the night and swim into the moving box aquarium to float above the old man. My hair, nearly all gone, tangles and flows with the current. A school of goldfish swim by and nibble on the paramedic's ear.

*Let's pretend my mother's tallow hand did not jostle my knee and pull my bone bag back into the car where the heater sputtered weakly. That the light did not change and the ambulance was never an aquarium at all and the old man is not in pain and I am not a disappointment. *That the night is beautiful and I am forgiven.* Mama pulls away as the light turns green. The old man and I are not going to the same hospitals. I hope to meet him in other, farther pools of light. We drive on into the dark through lines of convenience stores leaking neon and freon. Gutter punks my age gather in the parking lots puff-puff-passing and huffing till their mouths are stained silver. We pass a billboard that says, "*I was completely convinced of the futility of science and arithmetic.*"*

The emergency room's light makes me wilt. I cling to my clavicles as mama wheels me in. We wait. Under my stained purple sweatshirt, my furry body shivers. My bones knit themselves

closer together, trying to leech heat from my organs. My liver does not care to share. A nurse calls me back behind a partition to question me about my Reason For Visit.

Mama wheels me over to him. She does not leave this time. If she leaves, I will start lying. He asks me if I have hurt myself recently. I say yes. I tell him my body is a vascular plant with tubes of xylem and phloem running all throughout. The tricky part is figuring out which tubes are carrying the sugar and which are carrying the water. I've been trying to cut out the phloem for years. Sometimes I miss. I'm the reason rhyniophytes went extinct. I tell him the sugar veins are making me fat, fat, fat. That simply won't do. Mama sighs. The nurse types this all into his big computer then switches topics.

He takes my vitals. He uses a child's blood pressure cuff. I love that it is so small. I like the way it squeezes me. The blood pressure machine isn't afraid of breaking me. It trusts my arms to stay unsnapped. They admit me into the Bad At Eating Unit for Very Special Girls and Boys. My roommate has been here for two months. She likes to talk. Listening to her is like rain on a window, I tune in and out but always am comforted by the sound. Mama leaves me with a duffle bag of clothes that the staff searched. I dig out my pajamas. My roommate sees my body and is horrified and impressed. Other sick people recognize the dedication it took to become this ill.

She asks, *What happened to you?*

I say, *I wanted to become Joan of Arc on fire. I wanted to be holy.*

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When the nurses stick the yellow Fall Risk Socks on me is when I decide to pretend there are worse things in the world than having to eat marmalade on toast each morning at breakfast. I don't like yellow. It makes my bruises look garish. I take a small bite and remember I never liked oranges. I eat the whole thing and smile a wide, crumby smile at the nurses. The nurses take notice and press gold star stickers to my cheeks. I get the overwhelming urge to cling to their

scrubs, to let them gather me up into their arms and have them comb their fingers through my thinning hair and say, Yes, pretty girl, yes. So good. You are so good. I imagine being a NICU baby in an incubator, swaddled warm and worried over, touched only through glass and gloves. Spoon fed. Prayed over.

The nurses pour me a cup of apple juice. Now drink this. I no longer feel like a Catholic fasting girl. I go and cry big orange peel tears into my yellow Fall Risk Blanket. My roommate sits with me and rubs my back.

Juice is just so hard, I say tearfully. I don't want to fill my sugar veins.

My roommate is quiet for once. We are all having bad days at the same time. I want to whisper to her, *let's play the game where... let's pretend...* but no words come to me. We sit in our own gentle rain and let clouds brew in the dayroom.

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My therapist lets me put my socked feet up on the couch. I'm still wearing the yellow Fall Risk socks. She also lets me sit in silence if I want to. I don't like to share secrets with her like I do with the other kids in the dayroom. The tricks of the trade, the shortcuts, our dirty get sick quick schemes, if we let those slip, we'll be thrown to the sharks. I'm so scared of being eaten alive.

My therapist asks, *How are you feeling today?*

Fine. Cold.

My therapist says, *Let's do something different today.*

Okay.

Let's pretend you are both you and your mother. Let's have that conversation. I say nothing, but think of my mother. Her long, silver hair and baggy stained denim. Her woman's body that held me in every way you can hold a person and fed me until I decided I never

wanted to eat again. She has blue paint under her fingernails that looks like dirt but never is. She's not afraid of a mess, which I always thought was good, considering she had me... Okay, I say finally.

Is there anything you want to say to your mother, my therapist asks me.
I take a shallow breath. I feel my ribcage expand. I know what that would look like if I were peering down into a mirror.

Mama, I start, Were you afraid I was going to die when you brought me here?

Good, my therapist says, because she has to.

I look at myself as my mother, at my rice paper skin and spider hands. My eyes are flat now, my head swims and tips. I look at myself as a baby that maybe I carried, maybe I loved, and fed, and warmed, and soothed, and rocked.

I'm afraid for you all the time, I say finally.

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The dayroom is full of warm light and shin-high water. I sit on the floor and focus on growing. Girls and boys bring pillows from their room to sit on because their bones ache. They bring cross-stitch, books, art projects. Nurses splash through hourly, pulling kids out by the roots for EKGs or orthostatics. It is those quiet moments I like best: when we all forget we are a group of liars purging out of our g-tubes and putting coins in our socks at the weigh-ins. We can be forgiven. Just like the night I drifted into the ambulance. It was so beautiful my body remembered it loved me. My body is a fool.

I say this out loud. *My body is a fool.*

Why, the boy next to me asks. His teeth are rotten.

It keeps letting me lie to it.

I say this and everyone laughs at my foolish body for believing I could love it enough to save it. I still can't climb stairs on my own. None of this is funny. I don't say this to the other kids

focusing on growing their bodies amongst the mangroves in the dayroom swamp. I don't say anything else for the rest of the day. In group that evening, we write secrets on pieces of paper that are then read aloud.

"Nothing's killed me yet and I'm so terrified that nothing ever will."

"I don't know how to love something gently. How to keep from devouring it whole with teeth and fingernails and mania. It's barbaric but I am so hungry."

"I feel like I've been mourning myself all my life."

"I'll bring this temple down on our heads if they make me eat split pea soup one more time."

We all laugh at that one. Sometimes, we have to decide dying is funny.

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Let's play the game where for one night there are no rules. What, says one girl. There are always rules. No, not this time. There are no police, no nurses, no calories. What would you do? We press together in a circle on the floor of my room, all sitting or laying with pillows under our butts or hips. We are huddled in blankets. It is the saddest slumber party ever. Or it's a seance and the only people who showed up are the ghosts. The lamp on the nightstand has a pillowcase over it for mood. Feet are helplessly twitching. Water is being compulsively drunk. We are all incapably ourselves when no one else is watching.

I'd steal a car and go to Vegas, says a boy.

But you aren't old enough to drink or gamble, reminds a girl.

Good thing there are no rules, says a boy.

One girl says, *I'd never eat again,* at the same time another says, *I'd never stop eating.* I love them for their sickness's honesty.

I say, *I think it is for the best that there are rules.*

Everyone nods, feeling a little small and unsafe under their flannel blankets.

The next morning I think of those girls as I slowly munch my way through my toast and marmalade.

I pretend there are scarier things than breakfast.