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Class of 2022
“Excuse Me”
Nonfiction
Excuse Me

I.

Excuse me, I know you don’t mean anything by it but I’m just not comfortable with the way your palms are on my shoulders with your fingers trailing down towards my chest because I am a small girl in a foreign country who doesn’t speak the language and you are a grown man some thirty years my senior who owns the restaurant enveloping me and you are talking to my professor across the table like everything’s fine. In a way everything is fine because I’m about to drink this delicious mint lemonade you brought out and chat all night with my friend across the table and nothing will happen after you leave except me scooting forwards in my chair a bit so when you have to lean forward the next time your hands will have hard wood to grip instead of bird-thin bones. But I won’t say anything and you won’t say anything and my friend will say something only after you’re gone and my professor’s husband will say something the next day to another student when I’m not even there to hear it except through the grapevine, which is how these things travel anyway. I know they’re all sorry. I know they froze, we froze. But in this moment with your hands on my shoulders and your warm rough fingers dripping onto my skin I am alone.

I’m sorry but I’m not comfortable watching you become a punchline these next few days because I’m part of the same joke in that case. You’re the reason I flinch when my professor taps me on the shoulder the next day and the reason why I’m so much more tense when a drunk man starts following our whole group because the road to hell is paved with guys who didn’t mean anything by it.
II.

I ate freeze-dried raspberries once while camping in a yurt with my Girl Scout troop, a bunch of rambunctious twelve-year-olds comparing tree bark patterns, led by a woman some nine years our senior, a child herself but eager and bright-smiled and warm. I remember being shocked that the berries were similar in taste and texture to Fruit Loops, and when we tried the freeze-dried edamame I spat them out.

She showed me how to turn a penny from copper to silver to gold, and in turn I let her graduate and move away, and I stopped talking to her as she went on with her life. It’s these little decisions we look back on and question. Fourteen months ago in Kansas she swallowed a bullet put there by an ex-lover. She was not yet twenty-eight.

Sometimes I remember the raspberries but mostly I cry when I eat Thin Mints alone and wonder if I will ever give a little girl the world and rip it away in a long-game, one-two punch.

III.

If I go to hell I’ll be sure to greet Brett Kavanaugh there with a swift kick to the nuts before I’m dragged away so someone else can take a turn. On the day he gave testimony I called my mother in tears because I knew him, this man who laughed and held women down, by some thirty different names. I knew the many faces of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, knew the flavor of the tears she shed both raw and stewed. I know what it is to hold a woman shaking in my arms as we both hunt for the words to make things right.

I was fourteen the first time I bit my tongue to bleed. A friend—and not even a close one—had made me her first point of contact. I would later discover that this was my talent,
inspiring trust—I have a friendly face and a burning spirit. The moment she said the word “rape” I was tight-fisted and shaking.

But she asked me to tape my lips shut, so I became all ears and glares and gentle hugs. I learned well what to do, and the next time I was ready. When another friend came forward, and another, and another, and told me, in a stony-faced Greek chorus, about Persephone, I clenched my mind and loosed my muscles.

IV.

When my sister took a self-defense course in college, they taught her to go for the eyes. As a writer I think that’s a lesson I learned long ago.

V.

I was taught to cross my legs at the ankle like a lady. I was taught to cross my fingers and hope for the best. Never put down my drink at a party. Never look a panhandler in the eye. Keep my neckline high and my hemline low. Keep my gaze low—no, lower. Speak rarely, quietly, shyly. Apologize if I interrupt. Apologize when I’m interrupted. Say no once, then acquiesce.

I found out I was a girl on a mustard-yellow school bus that ferried me from elementary to middle school for algebra classes. I was all elbows and knees, joints wired together with gangling copper and not a hint of spare fat for curves. The six boys I had for company on those rides back and forth would talk to each other and rarely to me, spreading their legs wide to claim entire seats, making fart jokes in August, dick jokes in November, pussy jokes in March. They spoke in tongues too large for their mouths of violent acts and degrading deeds while I shrank in
the corner, raised my hand less in class, and stopped outscoring them on tests. It didn’t keep them from turning on me by April. My very presence was an attack.

There are so many rules for being a woman in public, rules that change shape based on the color of your skin or the weight of your body, the prominence of your breasts or the wideness of your eyes. There are so many ways to erase ourselves from hungry eyes that keep uncovering us.

VI.

So when your fingers brush my shoulders, grip my collarbones, graze the skin above my breasts, I cannot breathe because I’m tired of having to make myself small for you but I don’t know how to speak without making you angry and I don’t know how to make you angry without making myself unsafe and I don’t know how to do anything but stiffen and make awkward eye contact with my friend across the table and wait for someone to say something and crumple as you leave.