

PROLOGUE

The worst silent film keeps flashing against the back of your skull: monochrome footage of a skull cracking open on the ice, your skull on the concrete in the spring, your blood making rivers in the cracks on the street. You tried to stuff every orifice with flowers right before you died there on the concrete, your eyes rolling up into your head like dead planets. You opened your mouth and Juliet was the sound that escaped into the sky. You opened your mouth and said, *ambulance, emergency, Mother.*

JULIET (II)

Sarah Xerta

ACT II

You write in second person because you don't know who that girl is. You call her Juliet because she is dead. You call her Juliet because right before she died you saw a blood-red tree outside of your apartment and you knew it was her, throat sliced open into the sky. You call her Juliet because her father was a man, because her father was a man who once shook her violently, because her father did not like to think of her loving other men, because her father was a man who thought she was something that belonged, because her father thought she belonged elsewhere, because her father used to call her his princess until she started bleeding like a queen.

Then one Sunday afternoon in July you read a story about a woman who was raped by a man she thought was her friend, a man she thought was kind, a man she thought she might like to love, and you have heard the word *rape* before, and you remember how when you were little you thought it meant *to have sex with someone*, and you wonder where you got that idea, what your parents told you when you said that, where anyone got that idea, where did he get that idea, that you were something different than a person, that a woman is different than a person, a different kind of person, that a person is a door you can break into, that a person is meant for you to enter it [even though I do feel like a sort of cave, I am so hollowed with sorrow], and you sit in your t-shirt and underwear and read this story three times and think about violence, his voice that you haven't figured out how to describe but every time you think about it you see him with his black hair screaming across the sky of your brain, you see him with his black hair, you see him and you wonder why the sky doesn't have more holes in it, how that blue stays so blue, the clouds passing through like the sweet sheep that they are, passive because they have to be, like the woman in the story had to be, how her body and brain went dead just to get it over with, so he wouldn't hit her, so he wouldn't hit you, and no he never hit you, he made sure to point this out to you over and over again and you said, *yes, yes you are right, I am so sorry.*

Then it's 4PM on that Sunday in July and you've been crying. You've been sweating. It's really no different than any other Sunday except you have read that woman's story and now you know you've been raped. Now you know it doesn't matter if he hit you or not. Now you know what you've known ever since that night in November. Now you know what you were trying to bury in the garden all spring. Now you know what you have been trying to unearth. Now you press the word *rape* flat against your tongue and feel your chest shatter into fragments, so many pieces of bone you will spend the rest of the night sweeping up with your hands, the rest of your life weeping, for the rest of your life you will always have been raped. You wonder what you are going to do about this. You press the word flat against your tongue and taste nothing. You taste air. You feel air moving through the hole in your tongue, vibrating against the swollen fibers of what used to be your favorite muscle. You taste air and think you hear something, a whistling, no, a song, no. The word lies flat on your tongue. The word lies cool like the blade of a dagger. You press harder. You try to become one with the word but sense its clinical indifference to your person.

You spit the word out and run your hands over your ever-thinning ribs.

You step into the shower and think about how normal it has become for you to think of him in the shower. Even though you cleaned and scrubbed and checked and rechecked, combing the tub with your teeth. Every hair is gone but for some reason there is a bottle of soap you haven't bothered with. And maybe this bottle of soap is why you think of him in the shower. It's the generic brand of soap instead of his regular brand so maybe this is why you have not bothered with the soap. It's not the real soap. Though he used the soap and you used the soap. Probably you used the soap together but you are not sure. The thought feels like a crime against yourself, and you are hesitant to let it unfold. First you said No and now you are only hesitant. You are slipping, you are letting down your guard, you are failing at protecting your person. Didn't your father teach you anything? Why would you let your rapist into your shower? Why would you let your rapist rape you? You wonder if the soap should bother you more. You wonder if maybe the soap secretly bothers you but your brain is trying to protect you. You think of the woman in the story and how long it took her to do the unearthing, how long it takes for a slow death to end. You are only just beginning. You see Juliet's tongue silver against the dagger. You know the soap may or may not be there in the morning. You know it won't make a difference. You will think of him anyway but not because you were raped in the shower. You were raped in the room next to the shower. In the shower you bent over and let him inside.

Then it is August. The blood in your veins is thick, like molasses. You reach for a book on the shelf and think of all the molecules moving inside you, through you, around you, all the space you're always bumping against. For a moment you feel like Jesus. For a moment you consider death, all those pills swimming in your belly like miniature communion wafers. For a moment you consider stuffing the entire bottle up your cunt, writing *death by rape* in red lipstick across your forehead.

You force yourself up out of the mess you are. For some reason you are determined to want to want to live. You are determined to unearth your dead body, dig your dead heart out of his throat. You go to the store to buy tools. Your gums are bloody but nobody notices. They are too busy looking at your ass. They are too busy comparing their own asses to your ass. You buy a bouquet of white lilies, your mouth full of blood, and nobody notices that you've been raped. This makes you wonder if maybe you haven't been raped. Maybe you made it up. Maybe you really are nothing but a slut. Cunt. Whore. After all he did call you that. After all sometimes you liked it.

You get home and Juliet is already passed out on the sofa. You fucked her there once but tonight Juliet is safe. She took two sleeping pills and now she is safe.

You light a candle, pretend you are holy,
and drift like a ghost
back to the beginning: that burning,
that light, you remember
the purity he pulled
up from the depths of you.

You look at Juliet's ever-thinning legs
and think of the electric
blue neurons pulsing inside them
like the intestines of insects,
strung out and licking
against her bones, your bones, the bones
of all the people in all the wars, all those skulls
crushed in rubble, their brain-dead brains
oozing down into the dirt.
You shake your head. No more tonight.
Tonight you are thankful
Juliet is safe. You take a sleeping pill
and imagine it floating
down into your belly
like Jesus's pinky nail.
You turn off all the lights
and lie down on the sofa, take another pill
and watch it do soft somersaults
like a baby astronaut
down behind your eyes. You close your eyes.
You see a child's severed limb
flung across a field like a dog's chew toy.
You see him masturbating in the bathroom,
until the second pill kisses the first pill on the forehead,
barely touching, like his fingers
on the back of your neck
that first time at the airport.
You see the yellow flowers
he sent you last September
because he wasn't okay with

you not having a sun next to your bed.

Again with the words.

You are such a slut

for men who like to get you high,

all those tabs of acid

beneath their hot tongues.

You see yourself as you fall

in love with this man

who hasn't raped you,

because of course you would fall

in love with a man

who hasn't raped you. Everybody

wants that.

You almost cry but there is nothing to cry about because there was nothing to begin with. Dark sky not even staring back at you. Dark sky looking through you. Dark sky running its hands along your thigh while scooping out your organs with a scalpel soaked in mouthwash. You remember now, how everything gleamed, all the photos of nothing he'd framed on his shelf. You said to Juliet, *Something about this is very, very sad.* She said, *I know.* She said, *That's why I'm here.*

Nine months after that first day in his apartment
and Juliet is the corpse in the corner of your living room,
lips smeared red like an anorexic clown.
Your ring finger is naked
and you know that means you are free:

no more

tiny handcuff

tethering you to his nerves

but sometimes you miss

belonging somewhere

even if it was

a sort of prison, at least

you were guaranteed something

Summer slips away, sneaking out the backdoor like a criminal, pulling your tongue along behind it like a domesticated wolf. You are loyal like a dog. You beg like a dog. You lie at your master's feet like a dog. You are the bitch your father always said you were. But you feel at home here curled on the ground, your insides gnashing against each other like the jaws of demons, like an old habit, you slide into the grip of autumn and let him wrap his cool fingers around your throat. You are so good at being bad. You are so good at being stupid. You are so good at getting raped you might as well be famous for it.

You are dizzy but see Juliet come crawling up behind him on her hands and knees. She holds your tongue in front of your face like an offering, a blood red fish glistening beneath the moon. *Just one more night*, she whispers. You try to mouth the shape for *no* but she has your tongue and keeps begging, like a dog, that fucking bitch, like a bitch you've got your face down in the dirt, mouthful of dirt. You are eating your own grave. You are spreading your legs.

You are not.
How can you spread
something that doesn't
even belong to you.
Unless you aren't dead yet
which only means
you can be taken again.

You pick your head up from the dirt and realize you are alone. You pick yourself up from the dirt and realize you have been skinned alive and burned, your face a pile of ashes at your feet. Your cunt a pile of ashes at your feet. You can't tell the difference between your face and your cunt and you know this is how he saw you: he didn't. This is how he saw you: something to be ruined. He made you into his image of you so he could be the last to touch you. And he will be the last to touch you. Now you are so dead not even he will touch you. Not even your rapist will rape you.

You always knew you'd matter more when you were dead. Of course you mattered when you were alive, but only in theory. That is, after all, what it means to be a woman. He didn't want you to matter. He didn't want you to inhabit your matter. Just be the matter. The mass. The body in his body pile. The cunt in the body in the body pile. Don't even be the matter. Just be the hole. Be the space for him to inhabit. Be empty so he can fill you. Be little so he can be big. Be nothing so he can be everything. Just go ahead and kill yourself. If you really loved him you would.

You stumble through the largest cemetery in the world and meet another person who has been raped. And another. And another. And another. They each give you a piece of their tongue and from these pieces you build a new tongue. You sew this new tongue into your skeleton mouth. You are clumsy with your words but mumble *thank you* repeatedly.

You can't decide if you are dead or alive and decide you don't want to be either.
You decide it doesn't matter. You just want to give birth, to empty yourself of a
body. And so there you are, squatting at the edge of the graveyard, pushing
everything you don't want to know out between your legs:

splintered wood

your father's voice

crystal shattered against your mother's face

needles, knives, your ex-fiancé as a child.
You give birth to your ex-fiancé as a man.
You give birth to his rage and now you've got an ocean
gushing out between your legs.
You are an unstoppable woman.
You hold every birth to your chest until it grows big enough to leave you,
because every birth will leave you, taking its sweet time to skin you alive.
You keep giving birth until all your thoughts are stillborn.
You give birth to a dead horse and you know it's time to go home.
You give birth to another dead horse and you know it's time to go home.
You give birth to another dead horse and you know it's time to go home.
You give birth to another dead horse and you know it's time to go home.
You give birth to another dead horse and you keep on giving birth anyway.
You push and you push and you push.
You drive home in a car full of dead horses
and the graveyard gets smaller behind you,
or maybe you are getting bigger, hollowed out from all the birth.
You are filled with loss, a giant mobile cemetery.
You get home and don't even fit in the mirror.
For a moment you wish cocks could give birth

and wonder why you didn't give birth to one that could.
You close your eyes and wait for him anyway.
You close your eyes and write him a letter.

You fall asleep and while you are sleeping he stuffs the letter up your cunt from behind. He stuffs the letter down your throat. He shows everyone the letter and says you are a liar. Even your father believes him. Of course your father believes him. Of course your father. Of course him. Your father. Him. Father. Yours.

It's December and you're trying not to die. You've made a promise. You buried Juliet's body and promised her never again. You buried Juliet's body and promised her she'd be dead forever, dead forever, forever she'd be safe. You buried Juliet's body and now people put flowers on her grave. They tell you how much they love her. They tell you she is real, that she makes them feel less alone, and you know it's the glimmer of the knives, all the daggers forever scraping up the skin of your throat.

December goes on, the sharpest breath. You keep careful watch over your new tongue. You were born here. You say, *You were born here* as if it means something, as if you have a feeling about this. You want to have a feeling about this but something is keeping you from yourself. Part of you is thankful.

People tell you happy birthday and you feel important for a day, but then the day is over and your chest cracks like the trunk of a tree struck by lightning, your chest like a windshield smacked with a bat. Your chest like a fresh dug grave, a gaping mouth, like a black hole you orbit against your will, you never wanted to, you said no so many times but the black hole ate your words and got stronger. You said no and he got louder. You said no and he raped you anyway. You said no and he said, *What the fuck is wrong with you.* You said, *I don't know* and he said, *Fix it.* So now you don't even talk. You just fill the hole with pills because you like how soft and pink they are. You press them on your new tongue like tiny bandages. The opposite of cut.

EPILOGUE

This is how you fix it.

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