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chapter one

Desire, Heartbreak

In February 2014, after finishing my first semester in the PhD program for creative writing at the University of Utah, I began seeing a man who was divorced, nearing forty, and feeling his own clock ticking. I was thirty-two years old and had been single for years. When I read online somewhere that the chances of everyone's first marriage working out aren't great but that divorced men tend to stick with their second wives until the end, I got over the fact of his divorce pretty fast. He had moved to Salt Lake City for a job, he told me, and it paid well enough to support a family.

A few months later, I would turn him into the Portuguese lover, but the Portuguese lover is a fiction. Everything about the Portuguese lover is a fiction.

Everything is a story. You are a story—I am a story.[7]

After an awkward Valentine's Day dinner, we never saw each other again. It was awkward being in public together and having dinner that particular night, when we'd only just started seeing each other. It was also awkward because I was preoccupied with his Sharpie and wondering when he was going to pull it out.

[7] Frances Hodgson Burnett, "Melchisedec," *A Little Princess* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2012), 117.

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The last time I'd seen him, a few weeks before, was at Dick N' Dixie's. He was there for the Super Bowl and he invited me to stop by and have a beer. What I didn't expect was for this doctor, who helped people for a living, who had a real job and a salary and benefits, and who wanted a family, to slip out his Sharpie under the bar counter and giggle hysterically about having just come back from drawing a dick and balls on the bathroom wall. Everywhere he went, he told me, he drew a dick and balls. It was his thing.

I thought, You have got to be kidding me.

I was still meeting other people, but he was the only one I'd been out with more than once.

After that beer at Dick N' Dixie's, I ended up having dinner with another man—closer to my age, closer to my own sensibilities. He was also adjusting to living in Salt Lake City and to his first year in his own PhD program. Not sure you're into the Super Bowl, he wrote, but if you don't have plans I'd love to cook you dinner. So I went to Dick N' Dixie's, discovered a grown man's obsession with drawing dicks and balls on walls, then went and had a home-cooked meal with the man I would end up dating for the next sixteen months.

This man I would turn into the young lover. Not everything about the young lover is a fiction—least of all the way her body existed only where he touched her.[8]

Marguerite Duras says a book will scream at you until it's finished. Emptiness, once it's done.[9]

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[8] Arundhati Roy, "The Cost of Living," *The God of Small Things* (New York: Random House, 2008), 317.

[9] Marguerite Duras, "Writing," *Writing,* trans. Mark Polizzotti (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

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In *Yann Andréa Steiner,* she writes about her lover, Yann, who is enamored of her. He's young. She's old. It doesn't matter. She writes about their affair, about herself thinking and writing about their affair. She writes about writing her own books, past, present, future. She waxes philosophical about women, sex, writing, men, husbands, lovers, death.[10] And Yann?

He wants to put his story next to hers.[11]

I was trying to finish *Desire: A Haunting* at the time—my ghost story/hybrid domestic-gothic romance novel-in-verse that I started early in my MFA program and had brought with me to Utah. In its own way, *Desire* was screaming at me.

It wanted to be done already and needed me to wrap it up. But I wanted to be slow and deliberate, assured that I had a story to tell and characters worthy of seeing the story through. More than anything I was worried about rushing, being too eager to publish another book, and just pushing something out before it was ready.

I see now in my notes about that draft, I was only just starting to understand my story more clearly. I wrote: *Desire* is about loneliness, about friendship and parenthood. It is a love story, and this love story comes after a heartbreak story. It is also about death and second chances. And touching. Being unable to touch. Aching to be touched. Not touching.

Who said this? That the only way to know when you're done with a book is to have two projects going simultaneously. Then one day when you realize you've been putting all your energy into the newer project for weeks and weeks, that's when you'll know you're done with the old one.

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[10] Marguerite Duras, *Yann Andréa Steiner,* trans. Mark Polizzotti (Archipelago Books, 2006).

[11] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1998), 273.

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Once I figured out what *Desire* was about, I put away those notes, those possibilities, to see if they could survive even more time and distance, and I began preparing for a new book.

I already had the title: *Fit Into Me.*

With only those three words to guide me, and the Margaret Atwood poem from which I took them, I faced the blank page the only way I knew how. I returned to something I could count on, utterly dependable, and permanently integrated into my writing process. I developed a word bank.

As a last desperate measure before my first book, *We Take Me Apart*, had been due to my publisher, I had created a word bank using nouns and verbs from Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons.* In early drafts, Stein was in every line. One word per line, ten lines per page.

All I had to do was look at ten random words from *Tender Buttons,* figure out what they had to do with each other, and write a ten-line micronarrative. It didn't matter if they connected. I just had to churn out pages before my deadline, and I did. I cranked out that draft so fast I can hardly believe it myself.

Because that word bank worked so well for *We Take Me Apart,* I made another for *Desire,* taking nouns and verbs from John Ratti's poetry collection, *A Remembered Darkness.*

I'm looking at the contents of Ratti's *Darkness* now: "Touching," "Haunted House," "Literary Allusions." These poems' titles couldn't have read to me then as they do now—post-brain injury, post-*Desire*—but this one must have stuck out to me: "Zepha Had Death." And no doubt its opening lines got my attention, too: Zepha had death with her / in her kitchen / where canaries pecked out their lives.[12]

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[12] John Ratti, "Zepha Had Death," *A Remembered Darkness* (New York: The Viking Press, 1969), 22.

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Anyway, as I write this now I'm realizing that when it comes to these word banks, I seem to have learned early that I would have to work this way for the rest of my life.[13]

So for *Fit Into Me*, too, I began to generate a word bank. This time from Anne Carson's translation of Sappho, *If Not, Winter.*

Why Sappho? Why Carson?

If I had a reason at the time, I don't recall it now. I just set about the business of transcribing its nouns and verbs, cover to cover.

I like to believe these word banks bring with them the souls of the books from which they're taken. Of course, books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told.[14]

But in this context, there's something really lovely and reassuring to me about my process. I'm not alone, writing into a void. The other writer's words are there, guiding, encouraging, leading the way. The result is both a strange, new thing and an extended ode.

Stein's objects, food, and rooms are everywhere, are everything, in *We Take Me Apart.* Ratti's darkness, his winter, his fires, his windows and his glass, his lemons and walnuts and oranges / dipped in red wine,[15] and his light, so much light—light from the tall windows; / light from the frosted glass panels / of the dark oak doors; / light from the glass blossom globes. / Light fell across the floor / and the tan linoleum looked spat upon [...] / Light shone down into the desk / from

[13] Ray Bradbury, "Just This Side of Byzantium: Dandelion Wine," *Zen in the Art of Writing* (Santa Barbara: Joshua Odell Editions, 1996), 79.
[14] Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2014), 549.
[15] Ratti, "The Fire," *A Remembered Darkness,* 47.

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an inverted glass tulip / filled with a bright yellow eye—permeates, floods, *Desire*.[16]

Whatever led me to Sappho, to *If Not, Winter,* remains a mystery.

I just transcribed its nouns and verbs, printed them, cut them up like refrigerator poetry magnets, put them in a giant Ziploc bag, and shook, sifted, swirled, mixing and separating as best I could. Then I pulled them out one at a time to transcribe lists of ten into a notebook.

The first word I pulled was DRIPPING.

In my notes, I granted myself permission.

Go ahead with these words, let them inspire.

See what comes.

[16] Ratti, "Americana," *A Remembered Darkness,* 9.