We stood in a circle, the five of us, after the poet sang unabashedly into the microphone, making jokes to kill time, carefully not mentioning the song and whether or not we joined in at the chorus as per the poet's request. Someone said, *Intrusive thoughts are an indicator of mental health,* and then someone replied, *Then I'm the healthiest motherfucker any of you know—hahaha*. The song went like this, all high-pitched and warbly and not sounding as a soul-song should: *Where did you go, my love, my dear? I still wait for you; I am still here.* We couldn't look at her while she was doing it; to look at her and to not sing meant we'd have to admit that we're cowardly chickenshits who care a whole lot more about maintaining our self-images and feeling comfortable than taking risks, which is ironic/sad because a central pillar, perhaps the only common one, leaned upon equally among us five was that we took risks and broke conventions and had sex on top of plaques engraved with rules and maxims and made A-R-T. We guess we really didn't. *Not for me,* someone finally said. *Not for us,* we agreed. We watched the screen behind the poet that showed her standing in small waves and kept quiet.

I stood in the hotel lobby bathroom with Amelia, staring at her reflection. She had her t-shirt pulled up snug across her breasts to show off her pale stomach, the kind of white I've only seen on people with families with estates and Ivy League professorships. She'd just finished throwing up her dinner and brushing her teeth and was getting ready to make eyes at the man who'd served us gin and tonics without asking for ID. *Look,* she said and turned sideways. She breathed in and then out, and on the exhale her stomach pillowed like—I'm so sorry, but this is really what it looked like, I swear, especially in the bathroom fluorescence—a pile of rising dough. *You're the only one who I'll let see me like this,* she said. *Like what?* I asked, like I didn't know. *Like this,* she repeated, and heaved her stomach in and out with her breath. *With everyone else, I lie. I let it go only a little bit and say it's the whole thing*. In this moment I loved her so much but not enough to climb out of the swampland that is myself. I pulled up my shirt, too, though I had to tuck my chin down to keep it in place, no breasts to hold it up. I pulled on my flesh. *It's not so bad,* I said. *See mine?* I exhaled halfway.

They said the best way to achieve lasting, long-term results was *Complete Abstinence*, the two words both capitalized like we were living in a William Blake manuscript. It felt that way sometimes: flowers and myth, frozen, mid-gesture, all deep shadows and highlights. It was for this reason, *Complete Abstinence,* we both envied and lived in awe of the girls. Though we could not imagine living without, in *CA,* it was physically possible—at least it was for other people. The girls, though, would have to learn *Moderation*. A key difference between us and them: If they had their way, most would prefer to live in *Complete Abstinence,* choosing to become patron saints of *Refusal*. Many had, which is why we were locked up together. Their illnesses often made them seem younger, eating up their skin and pushing them back into prepubescence. In this, they reminded us of rosebuds in early March in the Northeast: pallid, frail, in danger of the nearly inevitable late-Spring frost that was waiting. By contrast, our illnesses aged us. We were like browned gardenias, spoiling on the bush in the summer heat, giving off a heady rotting scent. If only we'd been picked sooner.

My favorite part of my body used to be my stomach: the one inch above my navel, the two inches below it, the concave planes that sloped outward toward the cliffs that were my hipbones. Lying on my back, I'd slip my fingers into the small crook made between the bone and the muscle and then roll onto my side so that nearly my entire hand was swallowed into the space made by my absence. I once read somewhere that the torso, the trunk, is what humans most identify with; that is, cut off an arm, cut off a leg, cut off both arms, cut off both legs, cut off all appendages, and we are still ourselves. But take away the torso, leave a human with only a disembodied head, and our concept of self becomes shaky. We are made of our lungs, our intestines: breathing, consumption. And so having a stomach that curved in upon itself as if in the act of permanent self-digestion felt like a sign of great energy and capability, nuclear fission in the geography of my body, burning cells creating energy for breath. Sometimes I imagined unhinging at the joint, like I was a door that could be opened to another dimension, like "Miss Expanding Universe" rendered down to her essentials in flesh.

anorexia: /ˈænɒˌrɛksɪə/ from the Greek ἀνορεξία, the latter comprised of two roots meaning "in private" and "to reach after." **anorexia nervosa:** thus, a desire to be thin (read: a desire for perfection through control), acted upon in solitude. binge: /bɪnʤ/ a more recent word, likely created "with a feeling for the initial sound of *bow, bend, beck,* and the closing sound of *cringe*." **binge eating:** thus, an unwilling subservience to food. **bulimia:** /b(j)ʊˈlɪmɪə/ from a hodgepodge of languages, including French, Latin, and Greek, referring to a "ravenous hunger." **bulimia nervosa:** thus, an insatiable emptiness whose attempts at filling are accompanied by guilt and its subsequent effects. **obsession:** /əbˈsɛʃn/ from the French *obsession*, from the Latin *obsessiō*, a noun for "the act of besieging." obsessive disorder: thus, the bombardment of the mind, each thought an oil-tipped arrow aimed at a small heart. **purge:** /pəːʤ/ from seemingly every language that believed in a God of fire and guilt, each root suggesting a ridding of impurities, be they physical, moral, or spiritual. **purging disorder:** thus, the cleansing of the body/soul by the removal of food though unaccompanied by excessive consumption.

The trade-off for having a stomach an anorexic could love was its attendant small breasts. I wished, halfheartedly, when I was thin, that they'd be bigger, and then later, as I was gaining weight, consoled myself with the thought that though I'd be heavier overall, at least I'd finally have this, *these*. Of course, fat does not disperse evenly across the body, but bunches and clumps where it may: the cheeks—face and ass—(whaletail), the lower back (saddlebags), the underarms (batwings). It is easy to disdain the excesses of the body with such animalistic descriptors and metaphors; thus, with the additional flesh comes debasement, a half-step down from fully human. Better always to be light, airy, pale—no, even better, translucent—shimmering like a sprite or a tuberculosis patient, one foot in the metaphysical plane. The kingdom of the sick is most beautiful as an abstract concept. My colon, my teeth, my uterus, my esophagus, are all grateful to me. My insides whir like a hard disc drive in the middle of a movie. My breasts are now my favorite part of my body because they allow me to still fit into a size S shirt. I sometimes grab my sides and pinch until it hurts just because I can.

They said we weren't to say *Anything* about the girls' appearances. This *Anything* included hair, clothing, jewelry, general demeanor as it related to looks (i.e. *You look happy today* or *You look rested today*—either statement would've been untrue, but they preempted our possible generosity of spirit that would come as the shaking and twitches receded), and especially weight. The girls were allowed thirty minutes of exercise each day, exercise as limited to walking around the long oval driveway where expensive cars and large white vans would loop around and around, walking while sometimes lifting small barbells. We never saw any one of them break a sweat, and we weren't sure if it was because they weren't allowed to exert themselves that much or if they were incapable of doing so, their bodies so intent on preserving what they were allowed that no excess waste, monthly bleeding being shuffled into the aforementioned category, so tightly was the body holding on to all its fluids, escaped. On the other hand, we had daily yoga and Pilates and a weekly swimming hour (one-pieces for women) in the hopes that if we inhabited our bodies more maybe we'd get a bit better.

I found a white bottle of pills in John's bathroom, the red, blue, and yellow words reading A-l-l-i. His momma was some type of doctor, and I bet that's where he got the prescription. He thought he was fat. I guess she thought he was fat, too, otherwise she wouldn't have given them to him. Maybe it's unfair of me to assume the worst of her, but she was a reformed drunk and he insisted they got along *Soooooooo well* that I couldn't believe any of it. He wasn't fat. I didn't think so. The phrase used to describe Indiana boys who look like him is *corn-fed,* and he was corn-fed, insecure, Jesus-loving, wholesome like milk. Sometimes he wouldn't eat all day, and we'd be driving around on the icy, unsalted, potholed roads, and he'd announce his woozy starvation as dusk tumbled into night and his headlights cut soft tracks of light in the fog coming off the soybean fields. I'd wait till we parked to let loose: *WhatthefuckiswrongwithyouStarvingyourselfanddrivingaroundJustfuckingtellmethesethingsandmaybeIcandriveforonceYou'renotfuckingfatHowmanytimesdoIhavetotellyouYou'renotfucking fat?* I didn't actually care about our safety. I just envied his self destruction, recognized its casual trajectory.

I never know the right thing to say, the man said. *Oh?* we answered, mostly out of obligation to respond. He didn't get the subtext of our silence, the particular tilt of our heads toward one another. *Yeah, like, it seems the correct*—and we could hear him putting air quotes around the word—*attitude to take shifts so quickly it's impossible to keep up. Like, are you on Twitter?* We rolled our eyes. We demonstrated more silence. *Mmmm,* we hummed finally. *It's just that,* he kept talking, *if art is always a simulacra then isn't everything inherently fiction? Is any one truth more valid than another truth?* A sound: either an American Spirit (yellow) being inhaled, slow-crackling and tightly-packed, or round balls of whiskey ice clacking against one another, moving just a little more slowly through the thick-looking liquid. It was hard to distinguish. Maybe it was a typewriter's ping? Or a black turtleneck embracing the body underneath a draped scarf? Whatever the sound, its effect was like Cinderella's midnight chiming. We said, *Excuse me,* and left the man. We went home, unzipped our dresses, spilled monstrous body parts out of girdles, and threw up the girls we'd eaten for lunch.