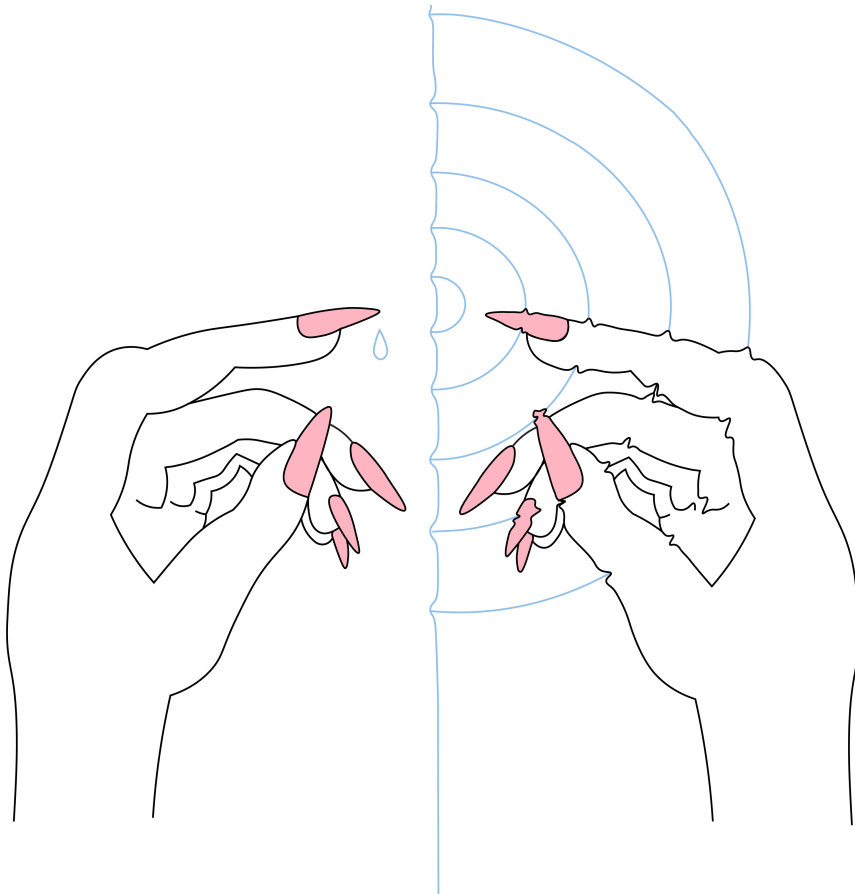


back talk

a collection by the girls
I've been

Brooke Mason Cheney

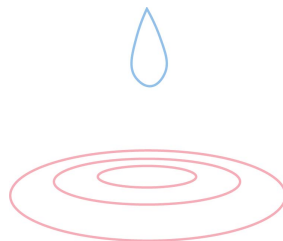


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I came home to Connecticut to learn it was almost Memorial Day weekend. I couldn't believe my luck because I totally forgot about Memorial Day and I would get to see the parade while I was in town. I went with my friend Anna, and we got there late so we actually missed it. By the time we arrived it was like the opposite of a parade—instead of there being something for me to look at, I was looking around to see if anyone was looking at *me*, recognizing me and thinking: “Brooke’s home!” Of course I had to cross the street and say hi, even when everyone was just trying to get the logistics together to leave and I wasn’t in the mood to talk anyway. They all said: “You’re home! What are you up to?” I told them I actually live in Berlin, Germany now. They said, “Really! What are you up to there?” And I said, “Oh, you know...” And they all picked up and left, and I was standing there in a parody of myself: rattling between Berlin and Collinsville, between the girls I’ve been.

It was not only the small talk that gave me such a crisis. Usually, when I come home, I like to torture myself by reading my old diaries and writings. I have always wanted to be a famous writer, and I’ve written the events of my life with real drama and literary flair. This “flair” has made it all so embarrassing to look back on. From the perch of my liberal arts education, I looked down and wondered how I had ever been so overwrought, so caught up on so-and-so, so easily wounded. It was this back talk between the girl I was and the girl I was becoming that was most jarring, that sent me into a real identity crisis.

Part of why I hated reading my old writing is because I was such a drama queen. I'm still kind of a drama queen, but at least now I'm more functional. I used to not be able to sleep or eat when I found out a boy I liked liked me, and this would go on for weeks. Everything was what it looked like and what it implied for me as a teenager. It was not just the thing itself but the idea of it. I would watch someone smoke a cigarette and wonder, are they smoking for the cigarette or to be a teenager smoking a cigarette? I was doing everything to be a teenager doing it. I was so caught up in everything.

This time coming home I was reading through it all, but I found it a little different. I opened up the diary whose spine I had poured perfume into so that it would smell like "me," the one inscribed with Jack Kerouac's "Keep track of every day the date emblazoned in yr morning" even though I only wrote in it when a boy kissed me, the one with the lyrics to a full song hidden beneath the collaged cover. All my old drama wafting up to me, I found I liked the smell, not unlike the way one might like the smell of their armpits or their underwear. It was undeniably familiar.

Five years since I graduated high school, I came back home for my youngest sister's graduation from the same school. I came home to my small town and my family, but also to the girls I've been. I found them all there in my bedroom, in my bookshelf, between the lines of my old

diaries. There we were, all together: the girls I've been and the girl I am. Let me tell you I'm the oldest and coolest out of all of them.

Living in Berlin has made me a lot cooler. It's also made me a better writer, I think, because I'm writing all the time even though I'm not finishing much. I have an "artist" visa which allows me to do freelance work in the fields of art, graphic design, and writing. I haven't been able to make much money yet doing this kind of work, so I thought if I published this "collaboration" between me now and me five years ago I might be able to make some money and get my name out there so I can be on my way to becoming a famous writer.

Joan Didion says that keeping a notebook is important because it allows us to stay on nodding terms with the people we used to be. Here I am, 23, nodding to my 17 year old self, but even more than that, I'm talking back. I'm saying, Hey sister! I can't believe you said that! But I see you. I know what you mean. I remember how you came to believe all those things and how, at that point, could you have known any better? But let's not get into all that—let's party! You weren't so bad after all. It hasn't really been so long since I was you: the girl who never left home, had no sex done no drugs. Now I am Big World girl back in your small town. I'm home! Open the sunroof—let's ride!

In doing this, I give the girl I was exactly what she wanted all along, which is to be seen and to be read. I used to hate seeing this girl because I didn't want to be close to her, let alone be her. But I remember being her, laying it all out, laying herself bare, and I can admit that I still do this. For so long reading my old diary I was saying, this was never me! How dare you show me like this! Now I say...yes, that was me. And more, this is me. The girl I have become is right there, in and in between the lines. Everything I didn't know has informed what I know now.

So I see her and forgive her for getting so worked up and caught up. I forgive her her small scope. I admit I like her drama and romance and drive to do something new. I see the writer I am in the writer she was. I pull from her diaries and writings, tightening it all with the restraint I've learned. I talk back with some writing by the girl I am now. Now it is us, talking to you about what we've seen and who we've been.

This collaboration between the girl I was five years ago and the girl I am is also a love letter. It goes backward and forward. I send it back to who I was, letting her know she is seen. And as I continue to relentlessly bare myself in the hope of being read, I receive the shade of a letter from the girl I will become. It is hard to know, at this point, how she will see me, and with how much grace. But here is something, I see it drifting down from some high-up future—it is the

shade of her, the future of her shadow as she leans down to find me
where I am.

THINKING ABOUT FUCKING PEOPLE IN FEUERLE COLLECTION

When I first went it was Gabe. I was hungover and between the heartbreak and the cold air in the bunker turned gallery I felt like I was coming down. I was thinking, what if he was here too and we were both on molly. I thought I could make him love me again if I took him down: underground. We were existing too high, on the airwaves, above even our bodies, and up there he must have forgotten my body entirely. Or worse, he didn't forget but didn't want it. But here I stop myself because if anything he remembered me wrong. If he saw me in Feuerle he would love me again. Look how I linger by this unsuspecting photograph. Look how I can show you something you haven't seen, and with that, you sense that I see the subtle beauty of the world. I can show you that, too. Over time, I'll unfold for you: I will peel off my layers like a collage. Underneath it all is something so simple, it is something just for you: *Diary, please let him text me!*

SCHOOL SPIRIT

Tommy and I were in math class together our Junior year. Our teacher was a rail thin woman, recently married and renamed to something that wouldn't stick. She was pregnant, which surprised all of us, because she seemed totally sexless. Tommy and I were pretty cruel to her because we never listened to her teach. We sat at the last table with my best friend, Anna. Anna and I had a lot in common. Both of us believed we were really exceptional. For example, both of us believed we would never be raped by a man or mauled by an animal because they would look in our eyes and see our exceptional souls. I'm embarrassed writing this now, but it's true, I wrote that, and it's true, we thought that.

Tommy was a republican and Anna and I were blissfully, willfully apolitical. Contrary to our pacifistic natures, Tommy was a Mixed Martial Arts fighter. He was only 5'6" (1.67 m), but his arms were bigger than any boy's in our class. Anna taught me what a "Napoleon complex" was. Tommy was always talking about his messy MMA fights. Anna and I could hardly believe that that sport was even legal!

Tommy was really fit and he told me he would help me get in running shape. We went running together a few times, and he was always setting finish lines where we could stop, like at the top of the school's long driveway, but they were always too far for me. When I would

slow to a walk he would stand behind me, pushing me forward, holding my waist. He would yell encouragements and I would groan and we would play out the little drama. Sometimes I would slow down just to feel his hands on my waist.

We were always talking about fitness and things like this in class. As the year went on, we covered many large topics: God, college, sex, leaving poor Miss Murphy blushing in the front of the room. We decided the learning we were doing was far more important than math. Plus, Tommy insisted he could teach us the entire chapter in five minutes anyway.

Tommy wanted to study engineering, get a job that he planned on hating, make a lot of money and spend it on having fun and serving God.

“Look,” Tommy would say, “Your dreams are nice and all, but your problem is that you’re hoping to enjoy your job whereas I’m planning to *use* my job as a way to enjoy my *free time*.”

Tommy made Anna and I cry a few times. The real trouble came when Anna and I begged him to tell us about How Boys Work. He told us boys didn’t ask us out much because we didn’t “put out.” Tommy wasn’t able to define this for us except that girls who put out back up on boys. This seemed pretty specific and uncommon, but Anna and I

caught his drift. It was about sex. Where we were really confused was that we weren't *not* trying to have sex. We weren't opposed to anyone trying, but we had been taught to have a big complex about it all and we weren't sure about it yet. And we definitely didn't know how to go about backing up.

In the spring of that year, I started dating this guy who was a year older named Kyle. The Senior class had this group of people who I thought were really cool, always dating each other in different couples. Kyle was in this group and he had some kind of sexual mystique. Tommy strongly disapproved of my dating Kyle.

"Brooke, hear me out. He just wants your virginity. All of those guys are like that—didn't you hear about how..."

On and on about Kyle and his friends and the leader of the pack, Nick. I left feeling like those boys were the rapists I didn't believe in. And little did Tommy know, Nick was my biggest crush of all.

"Ya, so, you're basically almost a whore." I wrote that Tommy said that in my diary. I remember it vaguely, a shade, though it seems otherworldly now. I think this was one of the times Tommy made me cry. I don't remember what I said back to him, but it probably was nothing much. Even then I knew that he said mean things because he wanted me to back up on him. And Anna and I didn't trust his advice;

we wanted to hear it for fun. It was like watching a movie. This was before Tommy got really wild and it all got even more cinematic.

Things started getting strange at school. I think it started when a boy who graduated a few years ahead of us killed himself. First, he thought God was calling him to take the electronic devices of his classmates, so he stole all the laptops and phones he could find in his dorm, and then we heard he had killed himself. That's how I remember it. A little after this, Tommy started acting strange.

He was sending all these mass inboxes through Facebook. One night it said: "I'm being called into politics." His sister left the conversation. He said he looked at a computer screen and he saw Hebrew, and when he began to write, he wrote from right to left. He was eating a lot, "bulking up." I sat next to him in homeroom and he would come in with a smelly pint of plain Chobani and eat it till his lips went white.

The winter wonderland dance was a pretty sober affair, but everyone thought Tommy was on molly based on our limited understanding of molly. We were all watching him to see what he would do next. He was racing around, playing tag with Mrs. Kay, the dean of students. He was racing after her, and then she was chasing him! It was very strange. Then, he lay on the ground and yelled really loud! But I don't remember what he said. He was sweating through his button-down shirt when he came to dance with me. "1, 2, 1, 2, spin," and so on,

until he was over it, and he left me mid-spin. My friend Laurel asked him if he was sober and he said Ya. Later, running past, he yelled, "It's the *Holy Spirit!*" I knew he was going to say that.

Before the varsity game, Tommy was dribbling two basketballs. He said, "God has made me so agile!"

In English class, we were talking about optimism and pessimism. Tommy interrupted my English teacher—"Pessimism leads to negative thoughts leads to depressive thoughts leads to alcoholism, suicidal thoughts, *uncanny sex*." I still remember thinking, You don't mean "uncanny." You probably just mean "extramarital." We were all excited when Tommy started talking in class. It was like watching a car accident. In Psychology, Tommy said that the older boy's problem wasn't his faith, but his mind. He wasn't smart. This was about the guy who killed himself. Everyone was worried for Tommy, but no one knew what to say.

After this stuff, Tommy stopped coming to school for a little while. Kids are cruel, but I don't remember people gossiping much about where he went. He came back after a while and then he was good. He went to college. I don't know what he's up to now, but I trust he's doing well. I hope he's making enough money for some expensive free time. I don't think of him much now, but a lot of my diary from that year is about him. A lot about him and Kyle and Nick. He might have

liked that, but it doesn't really matter. Now, I hope I was a good friend to him in that vulnerable time. For all the weird stuff, he was a good friend to me. He had the things I like in a friend. He always had something to say and he always entertained me.

GUYS IN BALL CAPS

I love a guy in a ball cap. And those ball pants and the plastic hump they wear over their balls. I like the ones who really move the hump around unapologetically to itch themselves or to remind you that they have balls. Sometimes those guys chew tobacco, tucking it in their mouth pockets for a little rush. Little rush for a big guy. Once I kissed a guy with black bits in his teeth. I knew what that was but he didn't mention it so I pretended I didn't see. I think he didn't want me to know about it. He was protecting me from it or something. Little did he know, I did know. So I just went on kissing big cool guy, tasting his pretend smoke. It was like he was pretending to smoke a cigarette. It was like I was pretending to kiss a guy who smokes a cigarette.

RIVER FLOW

This winter I came home to a Wonder of the World right in my own hometown, Collinsville. The Wonder came out of nowhere, drawing people down the banks of the Farmington River with so many cameras. Now: Collinsville is a small town so this was a secret wonder, or private wonder—a Wonder of the Town.

Collinsville used to be powered by the Collins Company, an axe factory. The factory isn't running anymore, but the Farmington River, which fueled the Collins Company, still runs right through it and fuels Collinsville today. The little town has many of its brick buildings where the axes used to be made. Parts of it are still rough, like an old factory would be—rust, nails poking up through the old wooden floors, broken windows leading into a warehouse, a dam with huge, unmoving gears soaring up in a freaky gearhouse. But I only know these places because I know the secrets. If you're just passing through, you'd feel the town's industrial past in a charming way, a hippy, summer river-life way. The town is becoming something of a getaway from the hustle of New York or whatever other city. Last summer the town put up a traffic light and we all said, How *dare* they! All the townies look down from the best tanning rocks at the newcomers in their rented canoes thinking: Life jackets, ha!

Every summer I use my identity as summer river girl to woo potential lovers. A few years ago my sister Gracie and I were double dating best friends from the preppier town over. They were like, what even happens in this hippy town, granola girls? We were like, come over tonight and we'll make a bonfire. Later, we were scratching little pictures onto river rocks with charcoal and Gracie's date threw a beer bottle and let it smash. The next summer, stoned, I found one of our charcoal rocks right where we left it. Long after Gracie and I stopped talking to them, or they stopped talking to us, it was like the river was still holding us all right there in the warmth from the fire, drunk on the rocks, waiting to kiss.

Another great way to flirt if you have a river is skipping stones. First you can say, Teach me how to skip, and then, once you're good, you can say, Look how many skips I can get. Kyle taught me to skip and then a year later I was showing Nick my skips. It worked pretty well, because Nick even fell in love with me. He told me for the first time while we were right by the river, which supports my river girl theory. It happened right by the old gearhouse.

The gearhouse is above a dam in the river and right beside a concrete wall. We river kids call it The Wall. You can jump from The Wall into the river—it's about 20 feet (6 meters)—so this is another great date spot if you're feeling adventurous. To get to The Wall you have to cross the river. You can walk along the dam a while, which is made of

concrete with lots of spikey rocks in it and a few inches of water rolling over, but eventually you need to jump down into the other side of the river. Then you swim down a little ways and climb up The Wall on a ladder you don't know if you can trust. The key to each one of these steps is just to do them quickly, unthinkingly, and neither first nor last. If I stop too long I think and spook myself. I always get spooked on top of The Wall because it's a long way down and the river is swirling where you jump. So I usually just hang out for a while on the top of it. It's thick enough that you can comfortably sit on it, or lie down with your feet hanging off.

On top of the wall, I start hanging out and I get scared to jump because I'm not moving quickly and unthinkingly. I was on the wall with Nick, doing exactly this, when I noticed he had a booger hanging out of his nose, which can happen after you go swimming. He started leaning toward me, and I was worried he would kiss me and then I would get his booger on me, but instead of kissing, he whispered in my ear. He said, I love you. And then he jumped off the wall into the river.

Because of the booger and the jumping away you might think that Nick was not a smooth guy. At that point I guess he wasn't, but before we started dating he was the smoothest guy I had ever seen. He was four years older than me and he was a ladie's man/man's man. He had a white Camaro with suicide doors. He had a new girlfriend every

month. He'd swoop back into our high school, slapping the cool boys on the ass and making eyes at me and some other girls. I'd blush bright red and not sleep for a week.

Instead of sleeping, I would be daydreaming in my bed about Nick. He was my ultimate dream boy because he commanded all the attention in the room, and then he could direct that attention right at you. That's what I wanted. I thought he could see me. I thought he, more than anyone, could make me feel seen.

Pretty soon after we started dating our fantasies for each other boiled down to our simple selves. Turns out his attention wasn't so shining when there was no one else around. Turns out I wasn't ready to lose my virginity, even if we were "in love."

Thinking about Nick, I am getting all worked up. But what did he take from me? I'm just feeling the injustice of all the imaginary and real hurt I've sustained. I'm thinking about love and getting worked up and cynical, focusing on the come down. Thinking: Let it all boil down. Let that big potential love get tarnished by the simple reality of the two of you there, wearing it down. Disappoint each other in your little known and unknown ways. Love each other in your little known and unknown ways, hurt each other that way, too. I am talking about Nick and everyone else.

How does it all become what it is? Let it all boil down: Find a crush to keep your imagination company—they are a soft pillow to lie back on every night. In your dreams, they make you laugh, make it easy to kiss. It's hard to know, at this point, that they've become an extension of yourself, your desire. It's hard to know, at this point, the ways they are unreal. Sometimes, magic beyond magic, all those times thinking about them in bed becomes being in bed with them. It is all just as full but different. This person so familiar in your imagination becomes so shocking and foreign in life. Both of you are more naked than you imagined. It all feels a little rusty and rough compared. You feel every tissue-level event occurring in your ears and your throat and on your skin. It is harder to say anything, let alone what you feel. And then it's over, and you forgot what you were going to ask for.

But enough of that.

Now, this summer, I had my Farmington River for three weeks but then I came back to Berlin and the Landwehr Canal. It goes right by my apartment in Kreuzberg and I am always there to get some sun or watch the sexy people. The Canal is too dirty to swim in and I am too new to know her secret places anyway. So it is a different kind of river-flow love, but it is love just the same.

I like to sit on the bank of the Canal. You can look across and make out a little bit about the people on the other side. Maybe they're

getting a sunburn. Maybe they're in love. Back in April the bank was covered in beautiful green grass. I came back to Berlin and I thought: There's been a drought! Where there was grass, there is dirt so fine it stains your pants. Cigarette butts and bottle caps everywhere like a party graveyard. I think it's more the people wearing it down than the drought. I wear it down, too, dropping my roach and spying on everyone and wishing I had someone to love.

This morning I waited for him to kiss me, and when he didn't, I got up. He was asleep. Even both awake we don't kiss unless it's dark out. This is fine with me. It might be my decision. In things like this, it can be hard to know who is deciding what happens. The only thing you can know is what is happening. And then only if you're lucky. My friend is staying with me and it's hard to know what's happening. I leave him in my apartment to go write by the Canal. A bike delivery guy rolls a cigarette with his helmet on. I get sleepy after my lunch. A guy with a bottle of Sekt sits next to a couple. They don't know what's happening so they leave. Ciao! He calls. Between two women, a little boy walks by singing. The guy with Sekt sings back to him but the song comes out dimmer. No one says anything. They don't know what's happening. They walk away so it's just me and the man sitting there drinking, and he doesn't even know about me.

A fun game to play by the Canal is to be a spy. I pretend I am the record keeper. A day later now and my friend left this morning. Sometimes the only thing to figure out is that the other person doesn't know what's happening either. It's fine, it's how things go—things just move right along, the chapter ends and you're still there in the place that someone just moved so elegantly out of. Or you're the one leaving, riding your own wake into the next Big Thing. This time I'm in his wake. So I ride it. Walking through this city of dog shit and broken glass in the street, I love it like it's mine. My party graveyard: all the bottle caps pressed into the black rubber between the cobblestones. A bar called San Diego neighbors a casino called Monte Carlo, and it feels like the whole world could be right here in Kreuzberg.

Now I will finally tell you about the Wonder of the World that occurred in Collinsville in December 2017. It was so beautiful I thought National Geographic might cover it, but it turns out no one did. All the better that it is a private Wonder, my own along with my fellow citizens of Collinsville. The Wonder is this: let out the dam on a frozen thick river, at which point the liquid river rushes out, and the ice on top of it (with nothing left under it) cracks into great uneven slabs, which float on the moving river, drifting to her banks, crashing there and piling on top of one another, ramming under, on top of, over each other like icebergs. And there they rest.

The real sight-to-be-seen is there, on the riverbanks. The ice, like tectonic plates, is sliced fatty. Shards of ice 6 inches thick in piles all in a line. As far as the eye can see on both sides up and down the river. You can climb right down to them, test them with your foot to see if they'll budge. Try to stand on them—river play always require an element of risk. Try to look through the slice of one piece like a prism. Go at sunset so the light plays on them perfectly. There's no snow so it's all just clear, fat ice.

And the river running through it all. Look how smoothly and quickly she goes. They let out her dam, so she rushes endlessly after herself. It is hard to know, at this point, the way this event will change her shape, causing her to run deeper in some places, shallow out in others.

Let it all boil down: let the love shallow, bottom out. Let the fantasy boil down to the person they are, the person you are. Let their desire for you boil down to what they want from you. Let their singular place in your life boil down to them leaving, or you leaving, and them not chasing you like you once thought they would. Maybe not wanting to be chased, or maybe wanting to be chased so badly that you chase them all day in your thoughts—following them around, or following the person they used to be when they loved you.

But that was someone else. I'm letting all of this love and loss blur together. I'm letting this string of lovers pass me by, leaving me lonely

or not, helping to pass the time. Another one goes and afterwards I have myself, almost the same as before, but a little changed for having just come out the other side of this person.

Another cool hangout spot like The Wall is The Bridge. The Bridge is even higher to jump off: 30 feet (9 meters). When you're up there, looking down into the river, the bridge is majorly high. You climb down into its metal cage and jump out the bottom. So there I was, about to jump out the bottom. I started thinking and screwing myself over. I stayed there, thinking about jumping, scaring myself, until I finally went. Thinking about falling through the air while I fell through it—that's how high it was. And then the harsh entrance: the river coming up to meet me, not wanting to make way for me, holding its shape and pushing into me. Finding all my soft spots, my points of entry.

At this point I thought: the river just took my virginity! This was like what I imagined that feeling would be. Oh, it hurt! I thought I would find blood in my bathing suit. I thought, This is kind of poetic. What better person to take it. I always knew the river was part of me, but I never knew it like *this*.

People say that when the dam let out, and all the liquid water rushed out from under, the ice on top made a huge sound when it cracked. I was not there for this. It is someone else's Wonder. But I like to think

about it—to think that for a second after the river rushed under and away, the ice stood there, holding the shape of itself as it was, the river, her shape, remembering her and holding her there just one second longer.

Let it all go, let it all boil down. I am speaking so sagely because of my current loneliness, because I am coiling up like a spring ready to jump off into some new fantasy. It doesn't have to mean much, whatever is coming, but it might keep me company and help to pass the time. It all doesn't have to mean much, but sometimes it still does. Sometimes something comes and some unseen thing lets loose and I can't help but think I'll rush on forever. I move with it all, quickly, unthinkingly, though I must be either first or last when it is only two. It can be hard to know, at that point, all the places it has me going deep, carving down, letting out the banks. Eventually it will all begin to slow and shallow and it will all become something else. The fantasy running under the thing dries up and it is just the thing itself, and what I thought might be a Wonder of the World turns into my own private Wonder. My own private Wonder, drying up. Let it all boil down. Let it all become what it is. Let me ride my wake and settle down into the bottom of it after it all goes. Here, I find my river rocks, my bed. It is all much the same as it has been. When it all goes, I find I still have myself. I have myself, but a little changed for having rushed so much, and a little tired. Now, in my own wake, I can lie on my own bed, and maybe I can sleep.

KREUZBERG DIARY

Wake to a fat red drop on the wood floor by my bed. I bend over and run my finger over it. It's dry and slightly raised in a perfect circle—it came from between my legs when I got up in the middle of the night. I like it so I leave it for the week. Lately, I can't shake that sneaking suspicion that everyone figures it out and makes it work except not me—I am too caught up in whatever, myself, to make it out there with all those successful people, my peers. It's the same feeling that assumes cool people wouldn't want to be my friends and I couldn't be wanted as a hot normal girl when everything all along really showed me that they would and did and I could and was. Walking around yesterday in my grey workout outfit around Templehof and Kottbusser Tor, along the streets, people were really looking at me and I thought, just a bit stoned, if I was wearing a dress and high heels maybe I could cause a traffic accident. How can I be at the same time so cocky and so full of doubt?

DIARY OF A "SERVICE CHAMPION" OR CASHIER

I went for an interview at Taco Bell with Swapan, a manager. He referred to me as "you guys." As in, "I'm going to hire you guys." I've lost sleep about it. Think of all the cute boys who eat tacos!

*

Today I met my manager named Tate. He told me he's only a vegan when he eats with his boyfriend. I think he is the feminine counterpoint of their relationship.

While Tate was training me, a very cute boy came and ordered some food. He was probably in his twenties (early twenties of course). When it was time, I asked him, "Do you want to eat in or eat out?"

I was looking in the boy's eyes and I saw a slight shift, but I was thinking that my little slip could be overlooked. Then Tate, over my shoulder, said, "Ya. Let's say that differently next time. Think of what you asked him to do and then, when you're not beet red anymore, then you can take his money." And then he twirled away.

I was so embarrassed! It's hard, but I'm excited to work at Taco Bell!

*

I said, "19.75 is your total, please."

He said, "You weren't even born yet. I was ten then."

*

There's this fry cook named Alex who really freaks me out. He's dating another cashier named Alisa. Today he came over to us and was like "I wonder if you're taller than Alisa." I'm obviously taller than her. He stood us next to each other and then she walked away. He leaned in and whispered in my ear, "Well, *I* think you're taller than Alisa." Ha ha! I said. And then I turned away, wishing for someone to come in so I could take their order, something I wish for a lot. But no one came, and then Alex wanted to measure me against some other things. Like the window, the booth partition, and the broom. I walked around the dining room tragically. Finally he went back to work. Turns out I'm taller than every fucking thing in Taco Bell.

*

April is another cashier and she's old, like 50, and skinny fat. We're supposed to wear these stickers that say ASK ME ABOUT A FREE TACO! I was at the front register and she was working drive thru. She popped out from the office with the sticker on the front of her pants and yelled, "Ask me about a free fish taco!" Robbie turned away as if she had flashed us and said, "Jesus Christ!"

A few days later, the manager ran into the room and asked Sophie, "Do you know how to call 911?"

"Uh. Ya, duh." He didn't ask me because I'm new and pretty young. Then Sophie was calling the police and the manager called the boss. "April passed out in the office. Ya, she still works here."

Then the police were filing in behind me and customers were asking if someone was hurt and I was telling them I didn't know what was going on. It turns out she had a seizure back there. She ended up being fine. She still works here, we were both working today.

*

I cried at work because for the second time, my drawer was \$10 short at the end of the day. I imagine two people counting their change after they gave me a \$10 bill for a taco and I give them \$19 back in change. They must have been like Fuck yeah! At least they were happy. I was crying in the back office and Swapan was patting my back three mechanical times. He was saying I always need to watch my drawer and never let anyone else use it. There are bad people who come here, bad people who work here, he said. This made me feel a little strange. I don't like to think there are bad people around me. Plus, I thought the missing money was my fault. But at least he wasn't firing me. He was telling me not to cry, to go home, to bring in 10 dollars tomorrow. I think he didn't want a crying girl in his office anymore. But I also think we became friends.

*

Last night, a big beautiful blonde came into Taco Bell with her three little blonde daughters. They were ordering take-out from the KFC menu. One of the little girls told me she was going to keep me. "I'm taking you home!" she said. They were really charming me. I liked thinking about what their house must look like. I liked thinking about

going home with them, packed in the take-out bag between the mashed potatoes and corn.

*

Today Swapan came into Taco Bell with two beautiful little girls. He was doing some work in the office and they were playing together in one of the round booths. They were both in dresses and the oldest one must have been five or something. They were really well behaved. When he left, he just walked right out the door with a big soda in his hand and his two little girls followed him out, reaching for a part of him to hold on to.

*

Alex the freaky fry cook got fired for sexually harassing Erin. I can't believe he dared to mess with her. I am almost as scared of Erin as I am of Alex. Alisa is really upset about it, but I feel like she doesn't even know he was fired for sexual harassment. She said he just sits at home and won't even go to the grocery store. This doesn't surprise me. But not for long, she says. He just got his license to drive school buses. Sheesh!

*

Today April and Jordan got in a fight while I was helping a customer at drive-thru. Jordan was supposed to be making this guy's tacos but instead he was yelling at April, and then she yelled, "Fuck YOU! Your girlfriend spat in the food!" This was not good for business. The customer in drive-thru said, "Seems like a positive work environment." Ya. What can ya do.

Later I found April crying in the bathroom. She told me she was in trouble because she threw her ex boyfriend's bike in the river. Newer on the job, I might have thought that she would be in trouble with Taco Bell, too, but now I know these things just happen and people keep working here. I was kind of impressed by how little she seemed to care. And impressed that she was strong enough to throw a motorcycle in the river. But also exhausted by her sadness, the squeeze around the arms after the tears that meant we were friends now, the eventual question: Think you could give me a ride home after work? Sure. Then, in the car, Stop at the packie for a second? It's on the way. Me: Okay. Then I drive her home with her bottle of Jack.

*

If Alex stood me and Michael, another manager, next to each other, I think we might have been just about even. Michael and I closed together a lot. Standing by the fried chicken aging in the warmer, I thought he was so honorable, probably because of how he talked about his daughters. Somehow we got to talking about God and Jesus, or him asking me about God and Jesus, which I was prepared for, more or less. At school, they told us people would always notice something different about us and they would want to know what it was. It was Jesus. I wrote down some verses for him to look up in the Bible. I wasn't really into the gospels or anything because they were too direct and religious, but I liked Song of Solomon and Psalms because they were poetry. I imagine him looking up the verse, finding: "You are a

garden locked up, my sister, my bride; you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.” And me like: This is what God means to me.

Huh.

A month or so ago, Michael left Taco Bell to work night shifts at a factory. He confided in me that he was nervous for the change, but with the better pay and the potential overtime... it was just that he had never worked anywhere but Taco Bell. I told him he would be great. I think he knew it, too, but he just wanted to talk it through with someone. I understand because I need to talk everything through, too.

Last night he came in while I was closing. We were talking like old times except he stayed in the dining room while I was behind the counter. He said that back then he had asked for a sign and he thought I was that sign. I was his angel. I knew he wasn't trying to push anything on me and he was just letting me know, but I was happy when he left. I was blushing in the back, playing it all over, feeling strange and guilty. Soon I would drive home in the car my mom had bought me. In not so long I would leave Taco Bell for a good school in Ohio and never come back.

I was blushing at having meant so much. And yet I also knew it was just talk and I was making it all mean more than it meant. And since I

was doing this, it must mean it all meant a lot to me. It's just that I felt out of place. Or I felt tied to places that felt so far apart. And I could untie myself so easily from this little franchise with its lagging drive thru. But it doesn't have to mean so much, being a part time cashier. It just helps to talk it through.

SISTER PERSUASION

This morning I was practicing being loving and vulnerable in a conversation instead of being loud and angry in a yelling match. Really, I was trying to manipulate my sister into not seeing her heroin addict loser ex boyfriend today. By saying: "I realize I feel so sensitive about this because..." O ya, I was really on one! I was driving home to see my sister and I couldn't stop thinking about her loser ex boyfriend who was coming over for a walk. I was getting really mad, and when I get mad I cry, so I was about to cry. I was thinking I'd say, You know I'll tell Dad if he steps foot on our property! Instead, back home I said loving, hurting things, and it turns out she was the one who cried. She was sitting down and I hugged her head. She wasn't crying about me, but about her ex boyfriend, because instead of coming for a walk he accidentally took a nap. After a while we were sitting on the deck having a nice time together, smoking her vape, thinking about the guys who have accidentally taken a nap instead of coming to see us. It's happened to both of us. Is fruit punch your favorite vape flavor? I asked. I don't know, there are hundreds, she said. Is that a new tongue ring? I asked. Ya, I ate the other one, she said. We were both thinking about how everything always boils down to what actually happens. She said, It's funny what happens. And then we were cracking up!

RED'S HEAD

I was writing in my diary in the living room when Winston said to my mom: "Mommy. Tavish and I had an idea. We could pull the tube behind the outboard and that way we can go without the grown ups."

"Oh," Mom was looking at the shelf by the wall. "This is your great grandfather. Did you know that?"

"No."

"His name was Sydney. Look at him, all lonely in the corner." She was talking about the terra-cotta head sitting there, a handsome, lonesome head. The head of my great grandfather.

"Yeah. So do you think we could go tubing? We would bring a spotter."

"The spotter is as important as the driver."

"Exactly."

"Who would it be?"

"One of the girls, Mack, Lex or Brooke."

“Oh.”

“Not me! I’m writing.”

“So what do you think, Mom?”

“Did you ask Sayre?”

“Yes, and Danny, and they say it’s okay.”

“Really? All right, but bring a spotter.”

Winston, my brother, got Mack, my cousin, to be the spotter and they all went down to the dock. I wasn’t able to write for much longer because I thought they might be having fun without me. When I got to the door, Mom was there with Sydney’s head under her arm.

“This is your great grandfather.” She let him face me. “He is so happy to be out of his corner! He has been in there for practically a whole century.” She put a sailor hat on his head.

So then we were all sitting on the dock in the sun (Mom, Lex, my great grandfather, and me) watching Winston get whipped around in the tube. My aunt Sayre came down with a drink Danny made for her.

“Do you want one, Lores? Danny didn’t mix one for you but I can skip right back up to the house and make it.”

“No, honestly, I’m happy with nothing at all.” They laughed like crazy.

“Look at Red all dolled up! Lorie, you are too funny.”

“Red is out of his corner! He’s been in there for so many years. Fifty years, at least.”

“You’re right, and now he’s so happy! Out here by the river with his great grandchildren.”

“Wow! Did you know that your great grandfather was called Red?”

“We named the boat after him, Big Red!” Sayre added.

“That’s right. He was head surgeon at Hartford Hospital.”

“Wow!” I said.

“That’s true, Lors. Hey, do you think Red needs a drink?”

“What do you say, Red?” Mom crouched down on the dock so she was level with the head, “Vodka, on the rocks.”

She and Sayre went up to the house and Mom came back with the vodka. She lifted it to Red's terra-cotta lips and they went dark with the wetness. I was a little more shy with Red, but I patted his head. Mom was taking his picture. Then it started to rain and there were polka dots on the dock and on Red's head. Mom ran him into the boat house to protect him. The kids drove the outboard into the boathouse because it started really raining. We were wet already so we jumped into the river and ran around like crazy on the dock. Mom was taking our picture.

And then, out a little ways in the river, a rainbow appeared! It was so strong it was practically vibrating. The great grandsons were being so sweet:

"We're in heaven!" Winston said.

"This is a dream!" Tavish said.

We could see both ends of the rainbow going down into the river. The rain was still coming, and the rainbow began to fade. Then a clap of thunder so loud that it vibrated us! Lightning was coming! We scrambled up the ladder onto the dock. Mom grabbed Red's head and four generations of us ran up to the house. On the covered porch,

Sayre and Danny were dancing to a song playing inside. Maybe “Fly me to the moon!”

DEUTSCH CLASS

It took about three days of Deutsch class to realize I had a big crush on my Deutsch teacher, Martin. He's from Deutschland but he looks like a surfer from California. He wears a necklace on a leather chord. His energy is very youthful and healthy and strong, like a ray of sunshine.

Our class time always starts by giving each other compliments auf Deutsch. When we first began, my classmates stuck to complimenting each other. But we only know how to say a few things and there are only five of us in the class. There is so much to compliment about Martin, so I quickly paved the way for the class to include Martin in our exercise.

“Martin, dein Hund ist sehr schön und schnell,” I say. (Your dog is very pretty and fast.)

“Danke dir. Aber ich habe *kein* Hund.” (Thank you. But I do not have a dog.)

“Ah!” And then I put my palm on my forehead, because pretending is part of the exercise, too.

“Ein verwirrter Kompliment.” A confused compliment. One of Martin’s favorite sayings in German and English.

I am always learning new things about Martin and they are all sexy. He has a nice roadbike. (“Martin, dein Farrhad ist sehr schön and schnell.”) He cuts his own hair. He buzzes it. He lives near where I used to live in Prenzlauerberg, but I don’t know exactly where. Even the things I don’t learn about Martin are sexy. He lived in Spain with his ex girlfriend, which was like a 15 month intensive course in Español. He does meditation. He puts honey in his coffee. During break, he asks if I want some honey in my coffee and I think of doing this with him on a rainy Saturday morning in his apartment. I say yes.

One day we do an exercise where we write about someone we know and the class guesses our relationship to them. I write about my friend Gloria, whose apartment I’m staying in for a few weeks. I write: “Sie ist schön und intelligent and sehr chic! Sie ist intuitiv und sogar magisch. Ihr Zimmer ist ein bisschen chaotic aber schön.” (“She is pretty and intelligent and very chic! She is intuitive and even magic. Her room is a little chaotic but nice.”) I make this exercise difficult for my classmates because they can’t know that the woman I describe is my friend who I’m renting from. My classmates write about their brother (“Er ist den Sohn meines Vater”) (“He is the son of my father”) or something easy. I tell them it’s my friend Gloria.

I see Martin's ears perk up like a sportlich hund. Martin asks, "Does she speak Deutsch?" I know what he's getting at. I tell him Nein. "You should tell her to take my class," he says, raising his eyebrows. I think he likes Gloria because I called her "magisch." He's the type to like a woman like that. But maybe it's because he thinks she must be cool and hot if she's friends with me. Just like that, I turn Martin's interest in my friend Gloria into Martin's interest in me. Kind of like a confused compliment. A compliment from Martin, just for me.

CAT LOVE

He has a cat and she likes to sit in the shower after he's done. I found her there just sitting and smelling him I guess and feeling warm. He's used to love like that so what's a girl to do. In bed, he was scratching me under my chin.

PRENZLAUERBERG DIARY

In my twenty second year, the sickness of my infancy returns to me with little to no pain. Here in my cave apartment that is in Prenzlauerberg, Berlin but is also an island in Nowhere. My depressive room. It isn't all so bad but when I think what if it were warm out/I had a lover then it gets bad. All my own filth around me. All my week-old mugs of instant coffee that I only clean when I run out. Even in my filth, I refuse to think I'm filthy—I like to think I'm sexy the whole time I'm living in my mess and going through whatever shit. Even when I'm wearing all my underwear on second repeat and leaking brown fluid out my ear. The ear infection is my returning affliction. I fortune tell its meaning, this thing that I still remember itching in my kiddie middle ear, sickly tickle—now, it is a leak and a clog. Those afflicted by ear infection are good listeners but unreliable advisors, known for their lack of self-restraint. Ear infection: eat your penicillin and try not to touch, but smell your finger after when you do.

SWEET TALKING MYSELF

A few years ago I got a message from the editor of the college blog I also edited about something I forgot. Not the first time I forgot something big, like to tell writers they should write something for the blog. The emails and appointments of the world fly over my head or crash down on me. When I realized that, in her message, she didn't call me "Brookie"—she called me "Brooke," my name, it almost made me cry. This was strange because why would she have called me "Brookie"? Basically just my family and old friends and me call me Brookie. Why did "Brooke" scold me? I felt hurt and scolded. I didn't realize how much Brookie meant to me. It also made me realize that whenever I'm a little anxious I talk to myself in my mind slowly and repeating. Like on the busy tram I say: "Now Brookie, what if we just get out at the next stop and walk the rest of the way? I think it might be nicer to walk so we don't have to stand between these two men on the packed tram. Ya, Brookie, let's just walk—it's even sunny out—and now the tram is stopping, and now we can get right off." And with that, I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear like a lover might. It's okay now, Brookie. Now we're out in the sun. Look how freely you can move your arms. Look how softly I can say your special name.

