

Voice. Gaze. Body.

C. LA VERNE

*We, unaccustomed to courage
Exiles from delight ...*

—Maya Angelou, “Touched by an Angel”

The walls remind me of horse dung that dried in the sun, an ugly deep brown that tells you how sometimes you just have to look the other way. I had looked away from so many in my life—my mother on the hospital bed longing for a daughter’s affection, the boy who risked embarrassment for my love, a father who wanted to understand, people who could have been friends, brothers who could have been friends. But I was unaccustomed to courage. I could not take what they offered.

Not this evening. I take it all in—the brownness of the wall, the tangy smell of pine wood, the orange glow of the candle, the form of my lover cutting across the room. Everything brand new. Touch, kiss, me saying *yes*, me not shying away from a gaze. The Rilke-esque moment of unfolding and abandonment. What has unfolded? What has been abandoned?

I watch him put his briefs back on, admire the hardness of his back, thinking how beautiful it feels to be finally not afraid to risk unfolding, to abandon the self used to holding back, to celebrate another person’s body as much as I celebrate mine. In this moment, I feel a voice rising through years and years of silence. I am Maya Angelou’s bird singing, not with fearful but rather ecstatic trill. Days later, I will tell him, “I have written a new story.” “What is it about?” he will ask. “Walls.”

THERE’S A WALL that stretches as far back as childhood in my mind. Blue, like the sky on a clear day. I was five, in my grandparents’ blue house. There was an abundance of Bibles and adults. No television. Grandmother was to teach me how to grow up with fear of the Lord, while Mother had to take care of a new brother back home. There were two aunts. I was five. I was precocious. I

could read as well as a second grader. They doted on me. There was the Sneak. I was five. I was a body. He doted on me. He would come when the lights were out. Always, I would have the view of the wall. Always, he would take me from the back. He would come with the knowledge that I wouldn't say anything. No threats needed, no bribes. And in the morning, the mind did what it had to do: forget. So when he looked at you from across the breakfast table and asked you to lead the prayer or recite Psalms 23, you could oblige happily. You were five. You were adorable.

How did it begin? I cannot remember. As though the story began *en medias res*. The nights had the quality of a ritual, each the same exactly as the other. Any of it could have been the beginning. I have flipped this page in my life over and over a million times in mind. Did I scream? I cannot remember. If I kicked his balls. If I scratched his face. If I said *no*—or even *yes*. Or if I did nothing at all, already knowing fear, already understanding that the only choice was to not talk, already voiceless.

Was this the beginning: The months before I turned five. In the kitchen, facing the blue wall. Shorts down to my knees, my butt exposed. A finger-thick branch cut from a guava tree on Grandmother's right hand, a Bible on the left. Perhaps today I ran around in the church. Perhaps I committed the sin of laziness; I chose to play with my cousins instead of washing the dishes. Grandmother saying God doesn't like lazy children. Grandmother reading that part on the Bible. And then her giving me a little taste of what hell would feel like. Grandmother barely had meat on her body, but she could certainly show you hell in a handful of whips. Five the least, ten the most. The number depending on the nature of your sin, and whether you stayed absolutely still as a wall while being whipped or if you tried to run away. *Whack whack whack* my ass and my thighs would go.

Sometimes things make their mark on your body forever. A scar as thin as hyphen, a scar as big as coin. The Sneak himself gave me two the evening I refused to get his pissing pot from the bathroom downstairs because I was scared of the dark. He held me by the shoulder and hit me with the metal end of his belt. I could not sleep on my back for days afterwards. I *buckled* with pain. The wounds festered, but as all wounds go, they healed.

Sometimes things make their mark on your mind forever, and these are the ones that heal much slower. Our nerves, actually, have short memories. Once the soreness fades or the welt goes away, the body forgets the nature of the pain. If I'd ask my body to remember the sensation of belt or stick hitting

flesh, it could not. But growing up, I became completely paranoid of anything that I imagined would cause me physical pain. When a nurse said she would stitch the wound in my ear I got from a vehicle accident, I darted out of the room and ran home as fast as I could. During a free vaccine campaign at school, I hid the entire morning in the school library. The sight of dogs could conjure all kinds of terrible endings for me. Something else: Every time someone stood or walked behind me, I would be like a boxer before a fight—palms sweaty, heart pumping wildly, all fired up with adrenaline.

Days and nights in the blue house, until I woke up into my six-year old self that daddy took home to start grade school.

SCHOOL WAS RUN by Catholics, in a town where rape or sexual assault or sexual harassment was unheard of in the first fourteen years of my life. Those were things you see on television or read in the news. Not in my town, where everybody knew almost everybody, and gossip was still the way to spread local news, but as long as you didn't mess up with a married person or wear the shortest shorts, you were fine.

The school was fenced and gated. Our classrooms could fit as many as thirty kids. On the wall was a picture of the Virgin Mary clutching her pure, fiery heart. Our teachers sat in front of the class with their marking pens and their moral sense to turn us into kids with strong moral sense. We learned grammar and fractions, but also prayers, the lives of the saints, and good morals and right conduct. We studied the different parts of hibiscus in second grade; we skipped the female "flower" and male "pistil" in fourth grade. We wrote essays about how we spent our summer and Christmas vacations. We wrote "I'm sorry" letters to our parents. Discipline was rigid, but as long as you tried not to be late too often or get caught climbing out of the school fence, you were fine.

My classmates and I got all along together. Nothing like those in American movies where kids fought in the school yard. We banded together to bully bullies. We played Chinese garter during recess, and we made up things about our bodies. You could tell the size of a girl's vagina by the size of their forehead. You could tell the size of a man's penis by the span of their hands. In sixth grade, we figured out who already had their first blood by their height or by the size of their boobs. The year before, someone left blood-stained underwear in the bathroom during spiritual retreat night. A boy tied it to a stick and paraded it around school like a flag. Everyone was certain

it was R's because her boobs were already the size of a halved coconut. The underwear was mine.

I wasn't pretty, had filthy rich parents, or was particularly stupid so I didn't stand out. I behaved as was expected to, and I was fine.

In second grade, a girl named Sashan invited me for a sleepover, and she became my first school friend ever. We watched horror movies and drank papaya shakes and studied for exams together. Sashan was very pretty, but also shy and not prone to talk like me. Her mother let me read comics at their store for free. I'd hang out there after school with the adult patrons. On weekends, I'd read books at home or play house with a neighbor. On Sundays, I'd go to church, but sometimes I'd skip it and sneak inside the local theater to watch a movie instead, and I was fine.

Sometimes, the family would spend the holidays at my grandparents' blue house where things continued to *happen* until I was ten. Then we would return to our town where, not talking about it, I was able to make things *not happen*. If things *happened* inside my head, I'd curl inside mother's closet or under my parents' bed, and that would make me feel fine.

HIGH SCHOOL. IN our new bodies. Fleshier boobs, curvier hips. Boys a little shyer around girls. "Crush" was the word of the year. You moved from crush to something else when you let a guy walk you home. Although a classmate told me I slightly looked like Kaye Abad, the actress, (totally not true; I thought I looked more like my father's mother, who slightly looked like a heavily botoxed Imelda Marcos). I wasn't the "crushable" kind. Crushable would be Jennifer in senior class, who was truly beautiful, or Roxanne and Annamarie in my class, who were very pretty. I really didn't care because I only wanted to be a girl who knew how to use a semicolon and what happens when light passes through a prism and solve a mathematical problem, even if it would take me ten times longer than it would take my dad or brothers to do the same. Like many loners, I was independent and self-confident. I owned a No Fear Gear cap and, like William Ernest Henley, wanted to be the captain of my own soul.

In February of my freshman year, I danced with a boy. We weren't really dancing, but more like headbanging. He was a dancer; I wasn't. He was into heavy metal; so was I. By the end of the night, he was in love with me. For days and weeks afterwards, he would give me that more-than-crushing-on-

you look that Julia Roberts gave Dermot Murloney in the movie *My Best Friend's Wedding*. That look made me feel self-conscious—not in the way that other girls were self-conscious about how they looked in this pair of jeans or with a ribbon on their head, but more like when you're walking alone at night and your panicked mind tricks you into thinking someone is about to pounce on you at any second. His gaze pained me because it reminded me of the body, and I could not think of my body without being reminded of unfettered desires forced upon it.

In the myopic state of mind that angry people tend to have, I refused to differentiate between The Sneak and them. I arrived at my conclusions in a Venn Diagrammatic way. A is a man. A hurt me. B is a man, therefore B will hurt me. For three years, he would love me, and I would answer with silences, as I would to the other boys who would come after him. The nerd who sent love letters for a year. The soccer guy who drew a cartoon or also a version of me on the back page of his notebook. The soccer guy who looked like a teen movie star. The hobbyist who loved capturing “life events” with his camera. They pained and terrified and repulsed me. *Them*. Men and their desire and the things that go with expression of desire—gaze, touch, kiss, hug. Things that affirm you are a physical presence, a body. I could not accept them—not their love, not their touches, not their bodies. My sweet, sweet Apollos, I'd rather turn into a tree.

Things got more frequent in my head, but I got bigger for closets. My parents' new bed didn't have a space underneath. I'd go quiet in a quiet place, but sometimes a sound inside me would want to get out, and so I'd go about banging doors and cabinet drawers. Little things, big things could set me off. My brother lying on my bed. My mom wanting me to go to church. A book I couldn't find. A stain on my uniform. Mom blamed *Sweet Valley High* and those bratty American teenagers in the movies. Most of the time, my five brothers weren't around; they were busy making girls fall in love with them or playing computer games. Or if they were in the house, they mostly ignored me, unless I did something damaging with their things, which I sometimes did. Daddy ignored me, too, but sometimes, when I was done banging with doors and had moved on to sulking inside my room, he would come and give me a little kiss on the forehead. Father's kiss was the only form of human touch that did not make me feel as though I'm on a Ferris wheel as it is making its downward lunge. That kind of panic.

I had entertained the thought of going to a pro bono lawyer, like Mark Sway did in *The Client*. My lawyer would be a kindly old lady like Reggie Love. She would go to our house and tell my parents. My father would be devastated. He would cry and, perhaps, he and Mom would argue, but in the end, he would applaud me for my courage. He would say to me, "See? That's why you must be a lawyer." The Sneak would go to prison where he would be visited by a thousand other prisoners every night for a thousand years. I had other things in my mind for him, too, and they were of the morbid kind.

Daddy didn't want me going out of the house after six o'clock. He said terrible things could happen to me in the dark. "Cover your eyes," he'd say to me every time a love scene popped up on the TV screen. He'd tell his buddies at the coffee shop about me, how good I was doing at school, how I was winning writing contests. He never doubted that I could accomplish anything, even really difficult math problems. I thought of going to a lawyer, and I thought of Daddy, and I just knew I could not break his heart. I wanted to be his pride, not a sword hanging above his head.

Instead, I went to a priest two months away from high school graduation. The priest was young and funny, someone who looked like he could tell you the wise thing to do. I handed him a piece of paper with the words: "I've lost my faith in God." A trick, really. I didn't want a prescription of Hail Mary's; I wanted him to hear my story. (Indeed, I no longer believed in God by then, but not because I thought God failed terribly at babysitting me when I was five. Science simply made more sense to me since I met the Neanderthal men and Homo Sapiens in freshman History.) He picked me up from school the next week. I rode shotgun in his car. We went to a spot a little outside of town. I told him dry-eyed and matter-of-factly. He asked me questions, "Did he penetrate you?" "I don't know." "How come you don't know. Have you looked at your ... There's a hole in there." "No. I haven't looked at it." "Did he put it inside your hole?" "I don't know." I didn't know a priest could know so much more about vagina than me. We met again the next Saturday. His questions became, "Is it itchy down there?" "Have you noticed any discharge?" He wanted to make sure I did not have a disease. He was concerned about the health of my vagina. We met two more times. The last time, he asked, "Are you afraid of being touched?" "Yes!" He said, "Close your eyes." I did. I smelled him lean closer and kiss me. He opened my lips with his tongue, and touched my tongue with his tongue. It lasted about ten seconds. "Are you still afraid of being touched?" It was the grossest kiss ever.

“I think not as much now.” He wiped the sweat off his brow, turned on the car, and drove me home. And that was that.

A STORY I won't forget. A girl from school went out with group of male friends for a drink. The night turned them all into something else. The teachers were quiet about it. The principal was quiet about it. I heard a joke that they “straightened” her out. She only liked girls.

DADDY SAID, “HERE'S the best pre-law course.” Creative writing. What was that? I got accepted. It turned out to be the perfect choice for me. I loved solitude. I loved sitting quietly in a corner and observing people and recording scenes and conversations in my journal. I was perfectly capable of sitting for long hours in front of a computer, and I had that writerly confidence that my thoughts and ideas and observations mattered.

I stayed in an all-female dormitory. The rooms had closets. I could fit inside mine, so I was happy. Nobody was from the same town as I was, so I was happy. Nobody knew me, and that was fine because I didn't really want anybody to know me. If somebody wanted to, I gave out bits and pieces of myself. Like writing a poem, albeit a bad one. A combination of truths and half-truths, so when you assembled the parts, you got a person that resembled me but not really me. Something fragmented, something disembodied. As though I was erasing myself. “Where are you from?” “Some place.” “What school did you come from?” “Some school.” “What's your father's job?” “Garbage collector.” (Fact: engineer.) “How many are you in the family?” “A lot.” “You're lying. I think you're an only child.” “Uh-huh (sounding affirmative).” It was the same with photographs. I hated it. If people insisted, I gave bits and pieces of me: a cheek here, my eyes there.

Talking would often make me go Prufrock: “Oh, that is not what I meant at all. That is not it at all.” Writing was a different matter. Nothing gave me a deeper pleasure. When I write, the immediate world is suspended. Everything expands and contracts to a single point. The room stops becoming a room. There's only that voice inside your head, and you are that voice, and your hand moves to embody that voice on paper. My consciousness expands, and I feel free, and I am not afraid, even when I tend to swing between confidence and self-doubt over the quality of my work. I wrote about the time I used to steal from a local grocery simply for the thrill of doing something terrible. I wrote about the crazies in my town. I wrote about oysters and wormholes and

arson and losing my religion. I wrote about this and that, and I was always in my truest self, even when inventing stories like my ride with Einstein on a *habal-habal* or the circumcision of Jesus. There was one thing I did not have the courage to write about: the tale that was central to my being.

I eventually told Mom about it the year I turned 17. It was unplanned. First, I was up in the roof with a shard of glass. An invisible hand was fisting my heart. I wanted to stab that hand, but the glass wasn't sharp enough, so I went down to find something sharper. The kitchen held sharper things. Mom was there, peeling potatoes. Suddenly I didn't feel like doing the Hamlet option anymore, the one that involved going to an undiscovered country from where no traveler returns. Suddenly it felt more right to hug her, and so I did. "Hmm," she said. I never hugged her before. "Hmm," because I was crying, too, which was as rare as finding a 100-peso bill on the street as she would say. (*Stone*, her simile for me.) "Remember where I was when I was five?" She said yes. And so I went to tell her that five years of my life in something like two minutes. Mom sat down. She looked at me. She looked confused. And then she cried. And then she said, "What do you want me to do? Tell me what to do." And then maybe to console me, "I think he realized his sins already. Your grandmother said that sometimes he would go to his farm and kneel in the mud and pray to God asking for forgiveness." And that's when I stopped crying because Mother could be annoying sometimes.

In telling Mom, what did I hope to happen? I wanted her to share my rage. I wanted her to say something like, "I'll smash him to smithereens, that muckerfuther!" Most of all, I wanted her to be brave for me, to tell me that we will do what is right, and that is we will go to the right people who can make things right for us. I will say, "I'm afraid, Mom," and she will say to me, "You shouldn't be, because it wasn't you who did that terrible thing, and we are in this together." But Mother did not know what to do. There I was accusing someone in her family of doing a terrible crime. She had known this person all her life. She had helped grandmother change his diaper, give him a bath, feed him. She had played with him, eaten with him, went to church with him. What I told her was too much. And I understood that she was just as afraid as I was, not afraid of him, but of the consequences of telling, of how my father would take it, afraid that he would get mad at her and blame her. She did not want to make a decision. She wanted someone else to be brave for her, and there was only one woman who was not afraid of anything: my grandmother.

I went to see my grandmother a week later, the day after mother told her. They had already moved into a new house, and this one was still unpainted. Grandmother was waiting for me in the kitchen. Already 70, she had that calm demeanor of a woman certain of her spot in heaven. She pointed to an empty chair in front of her. Her speech began with a quote from the Bible, followed by a warning that God was really coming soon. A pause. “Your uncle,” she said, “is a man. A man won’t touch you unless you do something first.” I felt the kitchen spin around me. I saw grandmother open and close her mouth, but no words seemed to come out. The room got darker. I don’t remember how our conversation ended or what I did the rest of the day or how I got home, but perhaps I was fine because I did not do the Hamlet option again that year. I could understand mother’s fear, but grandma’s was something else. She always seemed to know the wise thing to do. I guess grandma could not just imagine seeing her son getting poked in the ass with a devil’s fork while she gets to listen to angels play harp in heaven. It had to be my sin. She raised her son a true Christian. My mother birthed me with a vagina between my legs.

Here’s what I remember that happened after: I did not talk about it ever again. Not to my mother, not to anyone. Mother did not ask me about it either. And me not talking must have given her a sense of relief. She could now get on with her life. She didn’t have to answer to father anymore. She remained friends with her brother. Two years later, ever slightly referencing the topic, she relegated that story as nothing more than a figment of my overly active imagination. She wanted me to say something back, to confirm or deny it. I said nothing. She took it as a *yes, I made it up*.

Maya Angelou said there’s no greater agony than bearing a tale inside you. There was. Your audience looking the other way, ignoring the story and what it meant, pretending it did not happen. Both my grandmother and mother were fierce in their own way. My grandmother raised eleven children. When she and grandfather married in 1952, they had very little. She and grandfather toiled in the sun from sunrise to sundown. By the time Mother married Father, my grandparents already owned several hectares of farm. They had one of the biggest houses in the barangay, the blue house. Grandmother never backed away from anything. I heard stories of how she had single-handedly killed a snake. I had seen her treat her wounds with pepper. I had seen her change the dressing of a farm help’s amputated leg. Her voice was soft, but when she spoke, everybody would listen with rapt

attention. As for Mother, I had seen her argue with Dad all the time, and she always sounded emphatic. She could fire a gun, ride a water buffalo, and once, she scoured the town alone at night looking for a son. She did not back away from a drunk aunt who tried to hit another son with a 2x2 piece of wood. Yet, like me, they cowered before the Great Shame. Nobody even confronted him to hear his side of the story. Grandmother, mother, and I—all the same, bound by fear. Of what exactly?

Nothing made sense. As though I was shoved into a room so tightly walled no light could get through and I had to darkly feel my way around. Easier to talk of other crimes, like theft and murder, and condemn people who did those kinds of crimes. But when faced with a tale of man forcing his sexual impulse on a child, we became squeamish because such tale forced us to rethink the person who crossed that intersection between passion and crime—especially since that person was also a son, brother, uncle, friend—and to rethink ourselves. Better to look the other way. Better to deny such thing could happen within our midst. Better to stay within the confines of the walls called silence.

Nobody was more glad our house had doors.

THE WRITER WITH the dance in his smile. He laughed when I blushed. I loved the tinkle of his laugh. I blushed more when he was around. He'd tease me to make me blush. A test: ever so slightly I brushed his hand with my hand. My heart stopped because I really loved the dance in his smile.

Hello Simone de Beauvoir. Hello Audre Lorde. Luce Irigaray, Adrienne Rich, hello, hello. Fearless women, strong women, so glad to meet you. Finally, women I could aspire to be. Women who sought to subvert the existing power structures. Women who believed women should have the same freedom to explore possibilities for themselves as anyone else. Not the kind of women who surrounded me growing up. Not the kind of woman I still was. "Are you a feminist?" Someone asked me. Not until I have found my voice. Not until I have found my courage. "I am not sure," I said.

Lying on my bed. In my mind, the writer with the beautiful smile, and that Maya Angelou line "only / then, can I greedily consume your presence." When he was around, I'd go me: look at my shoes, look at his shoes, give curt answers, stay a good distance.

I explored possibilities for myself. On paper and beyond. I applied and got accepted to writing workshops. I was getting wonderful feedback on my

papers. Team captain, organization president. I was staff writer for the school paper. I felt good. And then I would pendulum to the other end, but only my parents saw the other end. I knew I hit my worst the day my father yelled at me, “How old are you? Seven?” I was a senior. I hit my youngest brother repeatedly on the shoulder, and I was screaming and stomping my feet. When I became calmer, Daddy said, “Life’s too short to be pissed off all the time.” A quote from *American History X*, a movie we both loved. I stopped throwing tantrums after that.

The writer holding hands with a girl who smiled a lot. I thought that when such a thing would eventually happen, I would be sad or angry. I did not feel those things. I was only curious, “Why her?” I shoved him out of my mind as easy as gum machine would a gum. A friend who once told me we would make a good pair said, “You would have made a better pair.” “Hmm,” I said.

Graduation coming. I heard Daddy tell a neighbor I was graduating with honors. My collection of poems was awarded Best in Thesis. I could not share his joy. There was no sense of celebration. To celebrate was to affirm myself. “I’m skipping graduation, Dad.” That made him really sad.

THEN I WENT to grad school and started doing what I did not think of doing before: I sent out works for publication, and happily, they got accepted. Nothing gave me deeper pleasure: My voice embodied on paper; somebody out there listening. I lived in Makati, although grad school was about a twenty-minute train ride away. I lived far for the train ride. There were no trains where I came from. I also loved the city park. It was always quiet there, even when the rest of the city bustled. When you’re alone though, you tend to get hit on by men more often. Park, cinema, taxi line, street. They want your name. They want your number. They’d catcall. I wished they would stop doing it. They made me want to run back to my room and stay there forever.

My final year in graduate school was when the vision occurred, of me falling. A free fall. A calm fall. My hair was long, and I was wearing a white dress. I saw buildings rush around me. I wanted to hit ground, but I just kept falling. The vision occurred mostly in the morning during that state of sleep and wakefulness, but also sometimes when taking strolls. I understood what it was: Hamlet probing. The existential question ringing in my head: Is it better for the mind to suffer? Every day, the answer was the same, until one night, everything just seemed certain. I was a semester away from completing my graduate studies. I wrote a note to my brother Pierre. I said he could have

all my books, and “please don’t let Mom give me a Christian burial. Please just have me cremated and flush my ashes down the toilet. If somebody asked about me, you could just say, ‘Oh, she went down the drain.’” That would be funny, I thought. I took all the pills left in the bottle, hoping to disappear into Hamlet’s undiscovered country.

Instead, I woke up in my room. Groggy, but fully awake. Everything the same. And that made me cry, how everything was the same. I was still breathing and sad and angry, and then I cried more realizing how sad that I had simply become a person wanting to die. I thought of my mother the night at the hospital when, drug-heavy from a chemo shot, she asked for a hug, but I could not because human touch repulsed me. I thought of my father and the worry in his brow every time I threw a mean tantrum. I thought of the friends I had dropped from my life or disappeared from. I thought of the men who loved me, and who I could have loved but didn’t. I thought of the times I denied myself the possibility of delight. Then I thought of him, my uncle, and how he lived without fear and shame, and how he went on to love the women he loved and eventually married one and had children with her, and how it would have been his shame, not mine, not my family’s. And in that groggy morning, I came up with something like a plan: I will get to know my mother. I will smile a lot. And I will go Baruch Spinoza: I will not weep; I will not wax indignant; I will understand. I wasn’t sure how this would make me not become a person just wanting to die, but I packed my things and booked a flight home.

I DID WHAT I did not do with family before: enjoyed things with them. I talked to my mom about coffees and dahlias and alternative medicine and cancer and her childhood. She told me grandmother used to whip her a lot, too. I gifted her with seeds for her garden. I went on a ten-day trip around the Visayas with her and Dad. I tried gardening. A month turned into months. I failed to return to grad school for the semester, or the next, or the next. My siblings and I organized cookouts at home. We frequented public pools. We doted on my nephew. My nephew had ADHD. He annoyed me sometimes, and when he did, I took deep breaths. My youngest brother would wear my soccer jerseys; it annoyed me so much, but I just took deep breaths. I attended family reunions and two funerals and a wedding: ceremonies annoyed me, so I went to happy places in my head. I climbed mountains with my cousins and their friends. I learned about their heartaches and dreams. We swam in lakes. We surfed. We smoked weed. We traveled to places around the country. My

nephew throwing tantrums: I handled him like a nun. I heard Mom tell Dad I'm the most patient person she's ever known.

In between, I read. I came across stories that resembled mine—Virginia Woolf, Eve Ensler—and their own stories of silence. I wondered how they arrived to that wonderful place called courage. I looked at my vagina in the mirror. It's just flesh and hair, just like my cheeks and thighs. From a certain angle, it looked like a pair of fat lips, and even though there's a play called *The Vagina Monologues*, that's just Eve Ensler being metaphorical. What is it about the vagina that muted us? As though there's an invisible thread that connects our vagina to our mouths. We become mouth-less!

I was getting better. I told my parents I was going back to school. Instead, I went to a place in the mountains that a cousin told me about. My first night, I wrote down three things that I wanted to happen during my stay: to smile, to say yes, and to use my real name (I would always use a fake name when traveling). And so I did. During my first two months, I trekked in the woods and camped in the mountains, alone most of the time, but when I got an invite, I said yes. I said yes to a couple who wanted to walk around town during a storm. I accepted a glass of wine from a French guy who said I looked pretty and sad at the same time. I explored caves and climbed a rock wall with a gay couple. I walked two hours with a programmer to see this Japanese girl who caught his eye. I went on a food trip with a gamer from Makati. I said yes to my hotel proprietess to attend church with her. I listened to them talk about their wonderful lives. Goodbyes ended with hugs, and they all left me feeling like I just got off a Ferris wheel, and that was the only part I didn't like. "I like you," said a Swedish writer who I went out with for a week. "I like you, too," I said, although frowning, because of the weirdness of me saying words of affection I wasn't even sure I truly felt. On the level of weirdness, that would have been like seeing Mike Tyson in a pair of heels.

In a way, saying yes was how I met Alex, a coder with green eyes, a touse of curly hair, and a love for *Star Trek* and Christopher Hitchens. He dreamt of flying as a child; I dreamt of disappearing. He was excited by the promises of the technology of the future; I was bogged down by memory of the past. He wanted forever; I got Hamlet in my head. The first night we met, he excitedly told me about this technology that would allow us to live forever as virtual beings. Something about our brain being uploaded to a computer to give us digital immortality. "Do you think we'll have it in our lifetime?" "Yes!" he said. I thought, "Immortality sounds like a tall order, but interesting."

I could not get it off my mind for days afterwards, the idea of humans living on and on and on as virtual beings. Isn't that what I wanted? To not live in my body? I pictured myself as a consciousness living forever. In theory, it would still be me. It would still be my memories and personality, but in an artificial body, say a computer. My body a configuration, an assemblage of computer codes. In my virtual self, would I also shy away from virtual touch?

Those questions were still in my head when Alex asked me a week later to hang out with him, and we ended up trekking to a lake. When he returned me to my hotel a strange thing happened: I did not get a panicky, sick feeling in my stomach when he gave me a goodbye hug. Not when he kept touching the small of my back the next time we hiked together. Not when he gazed at me. Not when we were alone in his room. Not when he kissed me in places. Not when he entered me and I felt the most terrible pain in my life. Something had unfolded; something had been abandoned. Do you know how beautiful it was to be not afraid nor repulsed by another human being? It was like that moment when you write, when everything else is suspended, except that you are not inside your head. You are only aware of your body, the way it responds to his touches, tiny rivulets of currents running inside you; and you are aware his body, the way it dips and arches, the smoothness of his skin, the way he scoops you for a final shudder; and how you feel so *present* and how amazing it feels to be present, and you think, *I don't need forever*. Later in the shower, I shed the tears that I kept Alex from seeing, even as I watched blood trickle down my legs, not from the physical pain, but how beautiful it felt to be, *finally*, unencumbered; to see my body not as a source of pain, but something that men and women before me have already known: that it could be a source of pleasure, that it could sing, that it could accept.

A brown wall building up, unbuilding a blue wall in my mind.

Some weeks later, I asked him, because I did not know how to answer it, "What did you do? How did you do it?" He said, "Why me? It was you." I want to say that it was only me, that I was already in a place of acceptance before I met him. But that would be dishonest, because I wasn't quite yet, because it was also him and the person that he was, that perhaps in a way I did not see it, he had made me unfold myself. Isn't that how it works? I'm still in a place with no clear light, but here somehow a glimpse of an answer. My grandmother, mother, and I chose silence because we were afraid to abandon our places of comfort in order to look at the sordid and the terrible, and name the crime for what it was. And if we didn't wish the larger world to know,

it was somehow because we thought the audience could not be trusted: that they would understand, that they would react in a way that is accepting and courageous.

Still, it took me some time before I turned on my stomach for Alex, and when I finally did, I was a bundle of nerves. There was he was staring at my ass, all its scars both visible and invisible, all its pained histories and shame. And when he did not look away and walk away, all I could do to keep myself from crying on the bed was to make sounds, deep sounds of delight, of celebration of my body and of the beautiful man behind me.

My vagina is a mouth. I am speaking.