

LEARNING SERIES

I Learn About You

In your historic-landmark fraternity, I am nineteen and nervous. You are at least as handsome as your house: walls paneled in dark Burmese teak, windows of leaded art glass in gnarled grapevine, fireplace of Grueby tiles. You have been listening to a lot of one band lately which packs its albums with muscly riffs and dark synthed vocals, which sometimes makes me jealous or enraged I'm not a man or as pretty. You realize it must work both ways so that a low voice in your head or body's head can strike below the feminine pelvic girdle, but you wonder whether that's a truth or something repeatedly mistaken. By November, a semester-long code-switching courtship still requires developed darkness (gin, the burnt kernel of cigar) to give you the arms to stay me against a wall on your house patio (Honduras mahogany), something you must have refracted off others in practice for *our* collision. You use your knees to pin me, and I'm happy. You do not know I wish I were a painter. You keep your arms.

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Learn My Father

It's human to look for faces in things without faces. A few are grilles of oncoming cars. When I call home to practice German his Afrikaans understands it; we are glad to talk of the Namibian girl on the golf team I am helping with verb tense.

Once I was fifteen and unable to open my mouth when kissed on my doorstep, depressing that classmate, whose friend then drove his failure home. My life clearly over, I caught Dad looking up from the game. *Whatever it was*, he promised, *it's no big deal*. Sometimes I find myself looking around for things to draw from and am shamed by dependency. Typically, I lose and lay down new track without reference to progenitors. I have agile legs built by my father when I was little by the game of grasping objects with your toes like the remote or pencil for his crossword. Last year I got him expensive blonde coffee beans for his birthday, which is the same as Archie Bell of Archie Bell & the Drells who sing "Tighten Up."

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Palm Desert

The sweet light roasts my father made early morning at the condo kitchenette were just as good. My sister and I scaled a grapefruit tree to stealth-access the gated pool. At ten, its sweltering rinds grew too thick to pierce. At noon, my brother was learning to swim and we pretended to drown him. At thirteen, I lay by the deep end and read *Age of Innocence* with an Arnold Palmer and the mercenary fan palms, white carts trundling the fairways.

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Learn My Mother

Mine is the mother of deeper structures than a family value. Sometimes she'll send me a message like *Where are you? I feel chaos* and I'll recognize in my behavior why she's receiving that vibration. Her birthday is the same as Nabokov and Peter Frampton with a rising moon in Taurus. Her ever-going-crazy would involve taking dictation from soil, bushes of lilac in her maniac penmanship (the lowercase vowels of which I inherited). Home for Easter with bleeding gums like diced beets, she indicts me to floss or they'll rot and fall out, which my father denies. I swish with spicy fluoride and ignore them which is normally how home works, and take special cares with my brother who bleats and barks with his video games. And my sister who ruptured the cord early who stays upstairs. I wasn't forceps like her; I sliced and was lifted, 12 days early, in a rainstorm on a Tuesday.

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Spring Break

I'll make a last snack for my daughter *she thinks but the girl jabs at her coffee, packing two bags. Feigning, the great non-achievement. But the first of these is fashion. There stands a wooden bowl of lemons on the round wooden table. She could see from the street that the light was not on in their house.* I got up for a sunrise and liked knowing its secrets. I sat on the back lawn, reliving your assault, wondering why I felt so lonely. I wouldn't realize that those were the terms until I moved away.

Mom adds milk to her tea and takes a call—*nearly nineteen carats—you'd've had to rent an arm to wear it, it's unset.* I shred coconut into steel-cut oats. There was throughout in your teak-paneled room a sense of "Hello. This is my body." *The first year away my daughter stained everything she wore with bleach.* Your bookshelf revealed your Francophilia. This was me with my hands full of ice on a bank of the Seine.

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Daffodil

The experiences I was having felt developed to where there's no fineness of distinction. Or no niceness. Also called Lent Lily (*Our comen daffadil is one kynde of Narcissus*).

It is handsome in the city Childhood. The shoreline has salt baked into it. Even so, I wanted mothers to like me. My works piled up. Mosquito wasps burst out of the garden in fonts, cripplingly, little legs twirling. The women had thought to plant daffodils and they came up in March, dense and predictable as potatoes. I still wanted farmers to feed me though I scorned their old hands.

Solace hates fine distinctions, shoots their leaks, tries to drown them. You might stay convinced of their niceness even to where you become yourself convincing. For the dog out back, when you turn off the big yellow light, the whole yard disappears.

Womb Envy

What about the *man* and *girl* distinction? I wanted a hit. I made, got, and took one. In 1591, Bo Cheng-en led a military uprising on Ming's northwestern frontier and was hacked headless. He had been having some doubts about the female race. At the time of his death, my Baltic ancestors in what is now Lithuania foraged wheat rye and barley. Our gold eyes go all the way down. I paint my fingernails lavender and bite you with them. Slash and burn validated the coincidence of late last night: heat removed your black clothing.

Vasodilation plants departing flush. Why should a girl get womb-envious if she's going to be a prude? Yet female orgasm has not been proven to serve *essential* purpose in human survival. Nulliparous women contest this and the whole coital imperative. Newer research papers largely rule out the vacuum energy explanation; I have misled men by not speaking purely (of emissions of short bursts of light).

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Nachtlied

Now it's dark and there's someone in it – Lyn Hejinian

Meanwhile I work to burn feeling back into my hands, grasping at hot water. Is this disdain normally otherwise or inverted? Or is there no normally. On a continent a day and a half ahead basks the heat of some sun. *A moment*, cites the newscast, *where you realize everyone else is as or more scared of progress as you is when you start to breathe again*. Pope wrote obsessively of drawing breath and having subcomplexes of Napoleon; take violet, daisy, rue, narcissus, fennel. One of these worse-than-senseless things is not like the others. Drawing blooms out obviates how meanings stop holding water. The *transversus* fibers run horizontal, which lump lures the painter, who beds her model. Who presses a hand to her belly so cold it's like dissolving an invisible baby. Which tickles but renders her sullen for the duration.

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Late Apology: Café Arcangel

I want a movie that ends with the young, hip, self-motivated partners terminating the relationship because one of them moves to Cuba, and nobody harboring resentment or feelings of love. I want a culture of consent. I still want you to love my body like it's the only body. *I did not know what I was doing; I had come to your country alone. I had only trained a plant to hug a wall.*

511 Hill Street, #313

Or interrupting someone crying. Later translations include night-owl, night-spectre, night-monster, vampire, night hag, Lilith, Lillith, lilith, lillith, night-creature, nightjar, and nightbird, but remember to filter all divinations through personal experience and standards. Mine the Empress. Osiris the Hanged Man. My father in Los Angeles for the 1984 Olympics: *I went down to watch the marathon and got pushed around a lot. Guys ran by in a flash. I think Mohammed Ali lit the torch but I can't remember.*

In some ways, I misunderstand, for Aristotle, perfect meant unchanging. Jupiter rules 3, 12, 21, 30. Extravagance is a type of eccentricity: take Theo van Gogh, who shoots a TV series *Medea*, which airs the year after his murder. I move to quit after a basic coldness sifts in, but reluctance kindles. Reconcile this with my friend who likes to choke me in jest, how I still entertain it.

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The Painter, Nonresponsive, Still

Who is she? Me, but gorgeous. Possibly traumatized from the blackening night spent in the East Bay bungalow. Probably a real trooper, though. In spite of *every last cabrón*. I want to talk to her. I feel us starting.

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Learn My Grandfather

Born Pittsburgh 1911, veteran, not buried in the rainy church where he was confirmed. At the viewing I first refused to see the corpse (in his makeup), but could not go outside unsupervised (wet February), so I had nothing else to do (and was embarrassed by my mother's altered breathing) when a cousin dared me to go see what it was holding. It's just a necklace, I reported. It was around Easter. It had been a long time since I had seen my cousins and I felt stifled by adult grief and huffy in my pastel tulle. The boys did a tumbling game in the hall. I sat in a big chair after arranging the top plume of a box of tissues to look like a tulip. My shame was in not crying. Benny Goodman had fed through my aunt's rooms on Orchid Lane while Larry Sr. gently deteriorated there. I got snapped at for leafing through the brown and blue volume of Japanese nudes my aunt kept beside her bed.

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Skill Share

South House living room proved a safer space down the road from the frats. Jorrit demonstrates patterns, circles the drums like a ring of sharks. He gets stuck a lot trying to reflect on things that have yet to pass. This is more than a “history of the wheel” or carrying whisper. He later said *I meant it*.

I read a little, to applause. *There once was a woman who herself was not a chiral object—though often confused for one—who feared bearing children. Behn sprang, punk and slut evaded. A small man was turned to a fish and a small fish turned man again.* Desires are dreams in their holography, not in their persistence; here they are more *I don’t know why we did that*. I always glom on to that reading once I separate from events to preserve levity, confer resonance and sonoluminescence. Endorphin crush as cavitating bubble. To sleep with me he lied I had good Danish. Naturally the race of immortals is in on the secrets.

Return Artist

Josephine is hateful when her model lights up and makes a little look-at-me noise. *The longer I sit here the worse it gets.* She paints: Nude grinding blonde beans in kitchenette at dawn. Nude stretched like taffy across sundeck at dawn. Nude blacked out on pineapple gin on white sofa at dawn. Nude hurting spine of a library book with misplaced foot at dawn. Nude clothed. Josephine's apartment is small, for not much more than her beauty routines resides there. Tomorrow she lies all day in bed with a stomachache, which results from a test of the opposite of will-power.

You are ambiguous, the four men clarify, *when you say she; which one paints¹? It is only a question in the name of clarity. Otherwise we think you will lose listeners.*

¹ Josephine's is obviously a male model, but my Friday-afternoon all-male cohort of course thought it was a woman. And didn't they harden watching my roommate kiss me at our house parties. And aren't we proud to leave them out.

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Period

You're mine, and I'm allowed not to do you justice. *There's* a cliff from which I will not be talked down. Josephine wore black to the beach but took it off in the water. She was bleeding and dizzy as she felt herself mixing with all that salt. She fantasized hammerheads, swallowed a naproxen. *If pregnant or becoming so discuss use with your doctor* — smothered pain would deform babies, maybe.

But you read in a magazine that Jupiter was in your house at birth, which makes you noble. It is intoxicating to be free-agent nobility. Back upstairs, Josephine fills the marbled column with clear water, fits a filter up top, shakes grounds in, closes the lid, presses START and flirts with a small convulsion, contracting for fake birth. It makes her knees stutter. A month ago the dateline swerved around Samoa at midnight, also when she was bleeding.

Café Transcription

I was reared by the women adjacent to a sun-stroked boys' club and labeled precocious; necessary measures were taken. *The force which opposes scopophilia*, Freud writes, *is shame*. But Childhood is a culture of looking and wanting to look. Picture a child in the mirror at morning recess, tonguing a welt in the mouth, prying the lip out to see all its colors. Or fanatically counting the times the tether chokes the pole, gaping at the lost game. In fifth grade I was perfect: smooth, athletic, blissful. Deformed by seven decades, picture my hag buying coffee: *It's good here. You can't say that about everywhere in Oakland*. Next comes her old man, who says to his accomplice at the window table of some earlier chimera: *Jesus Christ, I told her, I know this is the worst line you've ever heard but there aren't ladies like you in Buffalo New York*. Before this, in a Renaissance survey, comes Joanna's abbreviated final lecture: *It's breaking my heart but I am impressing myself*.

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You Learn About Me

There is barely anything to strip; I wonder why you came here after such deliberation. I want you to look at my poems the same amount as I want you to look at me naked: on some days less, on premenstrual days more. The ice tray in my freezer, in this order, offers cubes shaped like moons clubs diamonds hearts spades and stars. When they melt into our glasses of fluoridated water they de-form and un-individuate. Mine is the same birthday as Miss Thailand Universe 1997 and Emily Brontë. When I crouch on the roof of our friend's house nobody watches except your other friend claiming to be a painter for a magazine. The sun cracks over the East Bay on the weekends; our skin adapts. Coffee is better than ice cream and other stomachs resist comparison, turning. It is not a matter of not wanting him to paint me for his work but of wanting on some days *you* to paint for more. In that way I can be secure in my choice to fly to Havana to become a native speaker despite my nature as transplant. If your history disassociated from its accent, the remainder reads *why shouldn't I?*

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Model

Keith is blonde; this cornsilk needs a haircut. Greasy on his artist's unmade bed, he sucks popcorn out of a blue Solo cup like the ones she uses to store paints. It smells cheesy and salty and his skinny body likes it. In school Keith had a phase where he liked men but it didn't last. For now, he targets artists. *And what about experience? Oh, I believe in that.*

Don't you also think of it in terms of targeting? Josephine pinioned him, faithlessly, and saw how he did not like it. One theory's she needed a Muse, which is a shame, as he could only dog her. Still, something inspires somebody off stage, or in the wings, and this flits unseen into the upper air. In a historic house, stretched and sweet as taffy, how much safer could she be? In the dark teak-paneled hall curls tape from a poster that must have been long rent. Keith learned from her secret thoughts that everyone's selfish, that that's what it is to have a self. And that she won't recognize such pearls of template selves when she sees them; or that by painting, she might cease to feel that need.