

Queen Kong

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Contents

Belonging

PART ONE: CHILDHOOD 15

I. Eight / 15

II. Twelve / 17

III. Fourteen / 18

IV. Fifteen / 19

V. Sixteen / 20

VI. Seventeen / 22

PART TWO: COLLEGE 24

I. Freshman Year / 24

II. Summer 1991 / 26

III. Sophomore Year / 27

IV. Summer 1992 / 29

V. Junior Year / 30

VI. Summer 1993 / 31

VII. Senior Year / 32

VIII. Graduation / 33

Outpourings

Outpourings / 37

Stop / 39

I Read People by What They Read / 40

Rite of Rebellion / 43

Escapist / 44

Exit, Pursued by a Bear / 45

Swallowed Whole / 46

They're Right / 47

Why Do English Majors Have to Analyze Everything to Death? / 48

Plants on the Moon / 49

Mediocrity / 50

Labels / 51

Changing Hands / 52

City to Country / 53

A Straight Shot / 54

Ricketts Glen / 55

Polluted Sunsets / 56

Untitled / 57

Wolf / 58

Independence / 59

Totem / 60

Revolting

Revolting / 63

Queen Kong / 64

My God, My God, Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me? / 65

Sharla / 66

Sweet Sixteen / 67

Anne's Death / 68

Playground / 70

Creep Out / 71

Villain / 72

Destitute / 73

Heart / 74

Meditation on a Cutlet / 75

Ouch! / 76

The Machine / 77

At Any Cost / 78

Pills / 79

Mean / 80

Scarecrow Love / 81

To Twenty-First Century American Women / 82

III. Fourteen

Long, blonde curls fly behind as I careen through Plano, Texas neighborhoods, past red brick ranch houses on my blue ten speed, limbs strong and lithe from years of ballet. I begin to taste freedom. My poems begin to flutter into existence. I write them in my rainbow-hearted bedroom, newly discovered Plath my inspiration. I sprawl across my twin bed, swallowing books, soon to be released from braces.

We pack too much luggage for Paris and London. We have to take two taxis to the hotel. I have a suitcase of shoes. We see the *Mona Lisa* and Monet's *Water Lilies*. I am transformed by Rembrandt, by moving among people I can barely understand. We eat escargot in the hotel bar. I am fascinated by Montmartre, the stories of the artists, the histories of romance. My mother tells me not to swing my hips. I see the men watching. I wonder what champagne is like, wine, gin and tonic. My brother and I climb the lions in Trafalgar Square. I admire the poets buried at Westminster. We trudge to the top of St. Paul's Cathedral. I cry at a production of *Cats*, knowing nothing of T.S. Eliot.

At school, I am a nerd and don't mind much except the guys are less likely to notice me this way. Between dolls and dalliance, I begin to realize my body can be a weapon, can be violated, can be impregnated, can make me strong or weak. I start high school. My English teacher says I write well. She says Justin writes well, too. We begin to talk on the phone. I lie on my parents' bed and wind the phone cord though my fingers. I catch myself in the mirror. I can see he makes me feel happy. I feel pretty and smart all at once. This is important to me. "May I have this dance?" he wants to know. We dance to Bryan Adams' "Heaven." He asks for more, but there are rebellious boys who have moved a lot like me, who will take me to OMD concerts and teach me about clove cigarettes. I say no. Instead, I go out with the one who will soon have a mohawk. When I am told we are moving, I grab matches from the kitchen and ride far to a distant park. I strike them one by one, attempting to put them out on my wet, pink tongue, terrifying myself, waiting for cars to pass, till I am alone, before trying again. At last, I succeed. I settle fire in my mouth. I swing upside down from a bar on the playground. I am a fire-eating acrobat with no fear. I can do, I can be anything.

They're Right

My students respect authors who flout systems,
those who move to Alaska to throw fish,
who drop partner and join Hemingway on the Left Bank,
who live in the squalor of basements, driven by craft,
who, raving against injustice, die mysterious deaths at forty.
Even the Emily Dickinsons, the Marianne Moores, the Marcel Prousts
who led secluded and lonely lives—they respect the extremes
of their choices, their corked rooms. It's why they shiver
at the mention of Sylvia or Sexton, of Anais Nin or Colette.
We admire those who take the chance, raise the middle finger.
As I grade the twentieth essay of the day, I pray I am not beating
it out of them with the almighty grade, the careless comment.
They don't know that I, too, long to hop the next train
to nowhere in particular, pen and paper in hand.

Queen Kong

Where is the ebullient, infinite woman who...hasn't been ashamed of her strength? Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives... hasn't accused herself of being a monster?

~Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"
(translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen)

I've been shimmying up skyscrapers all my life,
swatting at airplanes that buzz my massive head.
I have been holding tiny men in my palm, careful
not to squish life from their fragile bodies.
I have spent my rage on the bars of this cage. Ripped
from my native habitat, I can barely remember
I am not a monster. My drives are ancient and furious.
I peer into the tiny windows of your offices
and see you skitter about in monkey suits.
You think you are making the world go round,
mastering complex transactions, but the world
is simpler than that. It is the stench of my breath
roaring at you through fangs clenched in a wide,
diabolical smile, showering shattered glass at your feet.

The Machine

We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance,
you have to work at it.

~Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

“People are not affected by climate change
enough to act,” one student said.
And the class nodded assent.

I try to teach the importance of caring, but
stars in sunglasses sell sex and violence.
But politicians let lobbyists line their pockets,
touting freedom and patriotism.
But televangelists preach following along
in your Bibles, sending money for your tithe.

Go to school. Get a job. Have kids.
That is good behavior.
At the center of it all is “Nothing can be done.”

Obstacles to change pile up like pink petals
behind a bride, like broken toys in suburban bedrooms.

Who will break the machine?