

Unclaimed Assets

a play in progress

in which we try to figure out where and what
is valuable and by whose standards

by Jennie Webb

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Unclaimed Assets

The Characters:

JESSICA

≠ MUCH WAS DECIDED BEFORE YOU WERE BORN
KILLING IS UNAVOIDABLE BUT NOTHING TO BE PROUD OF

THE YOUNG WOMAN

≠ EXCEPTIONAL PEOPLE DESERVE SPECIAL CONCESSIONS
SELFISHNESS IS THE MOST BASIC MOTIVATION

DAYNA

≠ ROMANTIC LOVE WAS INVENTED TO MANIPULATE WOMEN
YOU ARE GUILTESS IN YOUR DREAMS

PAT

≠ ANGER OR HATE CAN BE A USEFUL MOTIVATING FORCE
DISGUST IS THE APPROPRIATE RESPONSE TO MOST SITUATIONS

KRISTIE ANN

≠ AN ELITE IS INEVITABLE
PEOPLE ARE NUTS IF THEY BELIEVE THEY CAN CONTROL THEIR LIVES

GABRIELLE

≠ PEOPLE WON'T BEHAVE IF THEY HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE
HUMOR IS A RELEASE

RACHEL

≠ MURDER HAS ITS SEXUAL SIDE
YOU MUST REMEMBER YOU HAVE FREEDOM OF CHOICE

WENDY

≠ ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE
EVERYONE'S WORK IS EQUALLY IMPORTANT

Unclaimed Assets is performed continuously without an intermission

≠ from *Truisms* by Jenny Holzer

Unclaimed Assets

The performance space is empty. Until a somewhat self-righteous woman appears. She holds a dog's collar or toy. She speaks directly to the audience with great purpose.

JESSICA:

I'm a vegetarian. I don't eat meat and I don't wear leather. I have had more pets in my lifetime than I can now remember, although at one point I could recite all their names alphabetically—and it was over a hundred then.

Yes, I've sprayed paint on furs in Beverly Hills. I only buy cruelty-free products and I read labels diligently, always on the lookout for animal ingredients. Animal experimentation? I've been arrested three times: once for chaining myself to the urinal in the men's room at Proctor & Gamble's Chicago headquarters, once for defacing a department store's "Loreal" display, and once for dressing as a skinned cat and storming into the Department of Defense Wound Laboratory—to protest their practice of firing bullets into household pets to study tissue damage. My Mom made the skinned cat outfit. She's very good at that sort of thing.

I'm a card-carrying member of International Fund for Animal Welfare, Humane Society of the United States, American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Fund for Animals and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. My father once asked me if it's ethical to eat them. Whenever I'm over at his house he tries to sneak meat into my food. Or boil my vegetables in meat juice. Or fry things in bacon grease. But that's another story.

I recently came to the conclusion that it's *life* that's important. Right now I have seven cats and a tank full of fish. Sometimes we have lessons. I put the cat—say, Max—up to the fish tank and talk to him and explain why it's important not to kill another living being. And he understands.

At least Max does. Chumley hasn't quite got the gist of this yet but he's been around for just a couple of months. He only has two legs anyway. Get this: I found him lying, his body half-crushed, in the bushes the day after the neighbor's big-screen TV got delivered. Don't tell me there's no connection there, but do you think they would pay half the pet-hospital bill for Chumley's surgery? No. What a surprise from a couple who barbecues religiously.

Anyhow, I was saying that this *life force* is what counts. I carry on intense conversations with my cats, and my fish, even though the water must do strange things to the sound—not to mention the glass—and they probably miss most of the words.

Okay. Some of you may think I'm nuts but . . . please! Think of how many times you've looked at a dog or a cat or a rabbit or—you know!—I mean, right in the eyes, and they understand!

And if that hasn't happened to you, you can just leave or whatever . . . or stay . . . but you may not really understand the point of what I wanted to tell you.

JESSICA (cont'd):

It's these fruit flies.

Now I am not an un-clean person. I am actually quite tidy even though I do have seven cats and they spend most of their time inside my condo because it really isn't safe outside—there are deliveries coming all the time. Really big, heavy boxes.

Anyhow, as I said, I am not a slob. I don't leave rotting fruit or—god forbid—rotting flesh lying around and my condo has good ventilation . . .

I . . . I don't understand! These . . . these little . . . I tried to reason with them! But there are—geez—thousands of them! Swarms of them! People say it's because of the heat. What heat? And because of the humidity. Okay. But it's like . . . it's like they know who they're dealing with, right? And . . .

At first, when they started . . . gathering . . . I just opened my door. Left it open. I felt sorry for them trapped inside. And then I would take out the trash—once, then twice, then three or four or more times a day. Then on the hour. But they came back. And, you know, it wasn't a new batch, it was the same ones. I could tell.

I know what you're saying: "Fruit flies?" And I'll answer you: "Yes! FRUIT FLIES!"

I told you that I, politely, tried to usher them out. I escorted them out! I didn't even raise my voice. I was kind! But they were just . . . there . . . constantly! And then one day it got too much and I swatted! I mean, with my hand! And it was not so much a swat as a wave, a gentle wave. Only I guess I . . . I looked at my hand and I had . . . got one.

It was an accident! But you can't tell them that. No! I quickly went to the sink to wash my hands, but they knew.

And from that day forward things changed. They weren't on the periphery anymore, settling on an unfinished glass of wine or coffee or dishes or the trash. I would walk into my kitchen and my white cabinets would be literally covered with black flecks. It was . . . an invasion! I couldn't help myself, they were camped in specific areas, and I would slap at them, sometimes squishing them against the painted woodwork. They would simply move to another area. To the walls, or the appliances.

Then I developed a strategy. I would spray them with water from a little . . . spritzer thing. This wouldn't really hurt them, I told myself. But then I began spritzing them, and they would get the water stuck in their wings, making them easy targets. I would take out dozens at once. One day I reached for the Windex, and I sprayed and killed and cleaned at the same time.

I can't even tell you what was happening to me, but it became like a mission. The thorough annihilation of these . . .

I began keeping a tally. I set up traps, just a bit of sticky jam on a knife, or a drop of honey on the countertop, and I would wait until a group of them had gathered and then WHAM!, leaving the carcasses in place as a warning to others.

JESSICA (cont'd):

They tried to retreat, to the living room and bedroom, but I was always one step ahead of them.

And at one point I noticed it . . . when I would kill them, press them against a hard surface until they crumpled under the pressure . . . when I would wipe the pieces of body away . . . there was blood.

Fruit flies. Right.

She purposefully drops or sets down the item she was holding, and is gone. A very athletic, very young woman steps up, perhaps from the house.

THE YOUNG WOMAN:

Hey!

She hurriedly picks up the item dropped. She looks at the item, and then in the direction Jessica left. She turns to the audience.

This is mine!

I mean, it was mine. Or it's just like mine. The one that belonged to my dog, Sarah. That sounds impossible, I know, but things like that happen to me all the time. I run into people in foreign countries who were friends of my dad's, or I'll be at a track meet and look up and there will be like, a car in the distance that's my exact car? Which is not even a great, new car or anything that everyone has; it's a Mercedes, but a really old one, a 1988.

It is so weird.

God. I haven't thought about Sarah in years. She was like the most important thing to me growing up, as far back as I can remember. Because when I was a little kid neither of us could sit still and my mom and dad would want us out of the house and we'd just go and . . . run like wild things.

So, like, she's probably the reason I started running. Ha! A big part of who I am, my entire active, athletic sensibility, I owe to my dog.

Does that make me sound like a moron? Hey! I'm a jock!

Really, though, I've always felt kind of lucky because I was who I was, and what I was, who I am, is contained, physically, (*referring to her own body*) in this.

You all must think I'm totally conceited. Ha, ha, ha. I'm terrible. I know. I drive everyone crazy. I always have. It's how I was raised!

THE YOUNG WOMAN (cont'd):

Okay. I had a great childhood. Really, really great. Our house—the house I consider our house, my house, my home—was on a lake and I went to summer camp and private schools and I was on the track team and the rowing team and played soccer and swam and my mom was great and my dad was great and, okay, I used to love it when my parents would have parties because I'd wander around and listen to the adults talk and they'd a lot of times forget I was there, listening. And I'd think that was, like, so totally strange! I mean, didn't they realize . . . it was all about me? How could they not know that I should be the center of their conversations? I felt like I had some great secret on them, but they'd figure it out eventually.

So to be honest, when I was growing up Sarah the dog was really the *second*-most important thing, because I was definitely the first. My father was probably the third, and my mom was way down the list, after my friends and teachers and the guy that fixed our boat and our Puerto Rican housekeeper—her name was Esperanza.

A couple of years ago in class I learned that “esperanza” means “hope” in Spanish. From the verb “to wait.” That's so wrong. That “to wait” and “to hope” were the same thing.

Because “to hope” . . . is to *do*, to move, to pursue.

There's no *sitting* and hoping. What's that going to get you?

Besides stuck . . . with a really big butt.

Another woman holding a large gift-wrapped package, moving somewhat tentatively, joins the young woman in the performance space. Without acknowledging the young woman she speaks to the audience, although she doesn't seem particularly comfortable doing so.

The young woman backs off, and moves around the perimeter of the performance space during the following.

DAYNA:

When I'm driving I talk to myself. I try to convince myself of things. I try to entertain myself, make myself laugh and sometimes make myself sad when I'm in a really good mood and something awful has happened and I think that I shouldn't be.

But I should stop.

I'm not a very good listener.

As a matter of fact, I'm a really hard person to talk to. Because when people talk to me I'm sort of outside myself watching myself listen and thinking about how I should be reacting and what I should be feeling and saying and . . .

Do you know what I mean? Some people are really good at it, its called "active listening." I learned that when I trained at the suicide prevention hot-lines. Did I tell you that I did that? For about a year, on the late-night shift. We had to take this, I guess it was an oath or a pledge, that we wouldn't discuss the calls when we left the center.

DAYNA (cont'd):

Some people had a really hard time with that.

They would ask me, "Didn't I find it difficult?" . . . "Wasn't it hard?" walking away from the night's calls, not being haunted by the words and images at home, yada yada yada. But the only image I took home was myself, on the phone, giving all the right answers and looking just how I was supposed to look with the receiver in my hand . . . You know, looking concerned and absently directing my gaze at the bulletin boards around me with emergency numbers and stuff.

Well I do the same thing to myself. I'm talking to myself—not only in my car but at home and under my breath in stores and while waiting in lines (not out loud, the talking I mean)—and I'm not listening, I'm watching myself talking to myself in the third person. The watching is in the third person, because the talking is in the first I guess to the second person.

And when I'm doing something—just something, like work or something—I'm watching myself do it, it's not like I'm really doing it. It physically gets done, but in my mind . . . no, outside my mind . . . I'm watching myself do it and shaking my head at myself that I'm not doing it faster or better or more efficiently because look at all of the stuff I still have to do. I mean, I'm already on the next thing I have to do while I'm doing the thing I'm doing.

So when I'm doing two things at once I'm really doing four things at once.

But I get them all done! I do! I've arranged my life so that everything that I'm doing for everyone gets done.

Sex can be a little strange.

When you're me . . . when I'm me . . . and outside and inside me at the same time. I mean a lot strange. Just . . . strange. I was married once. I remember at my shower watching myself open up box after box of scanty bras and panties and negligees and silk camisoles and teddies. I never wore them. It would have been like borrowing someone else's underwear.

And . . . Now this gets a little tricky: When I'm watching myself do things or talk or eat or sleep, I can see myself—the one that's watching, the third person—and I'm a tanned, statuesque blonde with enormous breasts, short, stylishly cut hair and brilliant green eyes.

I wish that person would be the one in the lingerie.

Dayna moves to leave, then remembers her package. She sets it down and is gone. The young woman picks up the package.

THE YOUNG WOMAN:

Our dog died on my 13th birthday. I had forgotten that. I mean, not that she died—we were always together so it was like she was my sister, and her being gone was a real trauma, a real loss, but . . .

THE YOUNG WOMAN (cont'd):

I don't remember her actually dying. I remember my party, I think. It was like a teenage thing with boys and my mom got all pissy because some kids were smoking—cigarettes: tobacco, not anything else. I was totally into being bad ass then but we were only 13, you know.

I definitely remember her being dead. Sarah. Her being not there. I had this idea afterward that I would change my name—take hers. Partly because I'd always hated mine and partly because . . . I just thought it would be a really cool thing to do. Not surprisingly, that inspiration didn't go anywhere. I was named after my mother's mother. Who I never met.

I also remember that my dad was really upset that Sarah died. Like hysterical. She got run over, and he blamed my mom. Was a lunatic about it. It kind of freaked me out, because I totally didn't get it! My controlled, powerful dad who always taught me just to maintain and not to care too much, was a basket case and yelling and screaming and . . . I never knew he even liked the dog. So maybe I was more worried about him being wacked than about her not being alive anymore?

And then, one night when he was fighting with my mom, I heard him say, "That was a Two Thousand Dollar Harlequin Great Dane! A Two Thousand Dollar dog! How could you let her off leash in the middle of a Five Thousand Dollar God Damn Birthday Party?"

Another woman appears. As if from nowhere. She appears to be ready for anything, and perhaps carries a variety of objects with her, in her pockets or a large purse. She enters the performance space as if compelled to, as if driven. Her words are measured.

She speaks first directly to the young woman.

PAT:

Right.

On cue, the young woman puts the package down.

Pat directs her attention to the audience.

Well. Let me just say one thing: There are some things that really make me angry.

You look surprised. Well it's true. Sometimes I could just . . . well, scream! I don't, of course, but I could, you'd better believe it!

There was an incident last week, and . . .

I'll be blunt. It's sometimes difficult for me to discuss things like this with perfect strangers, so, here's something I've been working on. With your permission we're going to try a little role-play.

We're . . . (*ushering the young woman off of the performance space, guiding her into a seat in the audience*) . . . all here at a family reunion, how about that? It'll be fun.

PAT (cont'd):

I reserve the right to refer to you by names other than your own, but don't be concerned: my cousins and aunts and uncles are wonderful people and I have all the respect for them in the world!

So, where was I? *(an aside to an audience member)* My goodness, you look wonderful! And is that your new husband? Oh, I'm sorry I missed the wedding; I heard it was just beautiful! The kind of wedding I wish I'd had. But then, your side of the family never did have to worry about money, did you? So nice to see you again! *(back to group at large)* I think part of me was hurt, sure, but the overwhelming feeling was rage. Fury even. I was furious. There's something out of control about that, isn't there?

And that's what it was! Uninhibited fury! I mean . . .

I apologize. It has nothing to do with any of you, but this isn't working. It's rather new, I guess is the word, for me to be addressing my feelings, much less speaking about them. To you, people who are just here, and not asking anything of me or judging me or . . . bless you. Bless you all.

You're not judging me, are you? Because I'm not about to be judged. Not by you, who only moments ago were willing to pretend you were my family at a reunion that never took place, for lord's sake!

If you think this is anger right now, you're wrong. This is dissatisfaction, this is not anger. This is voicing my dissatisfaction with the situation.

I am not incriminating you or myself for the way things are; I am merely saying I don't like what is going on around me and I'm going to change it. I have that power. There are certain things in my control which I can change if I see fit. If I deem it necessary.

You are now children in a kindergarten class. I was a teacher, once. For a couple of years and I loved it. So you are children in my kindergarten class and I am going to explain what it is like to be upset. Quite upset. Extremely upset. More upset than a person should ever have to be. And the fact that some people can't even begin to understand and say "Oh, that's nothing" and question my being upset over what they see as insignificant doesn't matter!

Fine.

Now. How many of you have ever been unhappy about something?

Come on, I bet there are more hands that should be up right now! Things like having to wear your brother's hand-me downs even though you are a girl? Things like having to clean up the house before your folks get home even though you didn't make the mess?

Really unhappy about something? Having to smile every year for a formal Christmas photograph of the "kids" when you hated the dress your Mother made you wear and when you smiled your teeth stuck out? What about that your cousins had better toys than you did, and better parents because they got to live in Australia and travel to China and Tasmania and your Mom and Dad didn't even like each other although they pretended they did for the last year and a half they were married.

PAT (cont'd):

This didn't fool anyone! And you had to move and switch schools and every time you made friends you had to go away and be the new kid in the class and by the time you were in high school you had gone to eight different schools—

You know, my husband and I used to have really frustrating conversations. We got married right out of high school, and he wasn't what you would call a good communicator. A good provider and genius with power tools, but not real good when it came down to dealing on an interpersonal level, one to one: an open, honest conversation. He would blurt out something and then forget, or deny, he'd said it. I would ask him "Why?" and he couldn't tell me. Why he didn't have a tie on. Why he liked wear his underwear around the house. Why he preferred his toast practically raw, I mean, just barely warm bread, in the morning. You couldn't even hardly melt the butter on it, when we were using butter before we switched to a name-brand no-cholesterol, low-fat dairy-based creamery substance.

And I began to address the fact that, well, this lack of dealing with our feelings, our "emotions," was taking its toll on the relationship.

It wasn't easy for me, either! I guess women are naturally more in touch with their feelings, but I found myself testing him, just to get him to react. Trying to make him flare up, get hot, raise his voice. Get to know what was going on inside himself. So that, gosh darn it, he would be able to have even a hint of what was going on inside of me, his wife.

If he had only listened to me.

It was our 5th wedding anniversary. I had prepared a lovely meal of zucchini and roast beef with a dijon-red wine-pepper sauce. I baked him an apple pie, his favorite. We dined by candlelight and my parent's favorite, Frank Sinatra, crooned in the background. And he gave me my gift, my 5th anniversary gift. (*touching, even caressing, the wrapped package brought on my Dayna.*) I unwrapped the somewhat large box . . . and it was a Salad Shooter. Yes. As seen on TV.

Talk about uncontrolled, passionate blind rage.

I killed him.

She pulls out a long, thin box, and like a TV hostess holds it open it to show the audience its contents.

With the tungsten tempered carving knife he'd gotten me on our wedding day.

Pat abruptly shuts the knife box, then hands it to the young woman, still in the audience. Pat turns and marches out.

The young woman instinctively rises holding the knife box. She looks after Pat, then to the audience as if for guidance. But another, rather business-like woman immediately enters, carrying a portfolio and a pen or pencil.

Her first, authoritative statement puts the young woman back into her seat.

KRISTIE ANN:

It really bothers me that my handwriting is changing.

Look. (*perhaps moving towards the young woman and other members of the audience with papers*) This is a letter that I wrote to my mother awhile back, and this is something that I was writing to a friend of mine from college the other day. See how the letters are less defined? Some of the n's and m's are almost straight lines. And I used to loop all of my g's, j's and y's but now a lot of times I just do this straight slash for the y's.

I was writing the new letter last week, and I was looking in the bottom of the drawer for a cartoon I'd cut out to send with it.

When I found the letter that I'd written almost five years ago, but must've forgotten to send. Which isn't like me, either, to forget to send a letter. To my mother. After I've written it. It was even in the envelope with a stamp on it.

And now here's the best part: Look, you can't hardly even read my signature anymore. I'm not talking about on credit cards and checks, either. On last week's letter. Compare this. I can't sign my name so its legible.

Can you read that? Really? Try!

No. Look. I'm trying now, writing slowly . . . and I misspell my name. This is not my name. I don't know what it says. The name of a bakery, or something.

What is the study of handwriting? It's something like "forensics" but it's not that. Or an "ology." "Graphology." But I think there's another word. Anyway. I don't really want to know it because I don't really care. I think that's all bullshit.

I'm lying. I'm afraid it's not.

Because one of my friends who I have consciously avoided since our conversation said that "it's not uncommon for a person's handwriting to change within their lives as the life takes a different course, a different direction!" Well, fuck it, I liked the direction I was going!

I've since looked for samples of my handwriting over the years. I mean, everyone's changes from when they were young, but I was looking through my high school yearbook and I couldn't recognize mine. And I took all my records out. I used to have neat, concise logs and my checkbook was clear—and balanced—and now . . .

You read my letter to my mom, and boy, did I sound happy. I had just graduated and landed my job at the law firm, was chosen as star pitcher of the softball team, and was thinking of moving in with my boyfriend.

Excerpts from my latest letter: "left drained and exhausted from my constant struggle," "questioning my choices," "opened emotional scars." The last, of course, referring to my recent encounter with my not-so-recently ex-boyfriend who I never did move in with. The cartoon I was going to send with it was this: That little bald guy Ziggy is talking to his psychiatrist, saying "I just can't bring myself to believe all of those 'You are Here' signs."

KRISTIE ANN (cont'd):

Because nothing really is . . . *concrete* to me. I can't keep things separate—everything's connected. I'll be looking at a brief at work and could swear I've gone through it before. I only read magazines because they have those little symbols at the end of each article, little pictures or dots so you know it's finished and can go on to the next.

In the newspaper one story just goes into another and I'll be reading about a judge who ordered a birth control implant to be placed in an abusive mother while the Chippewas are protesting trout limitations on their own reservations and . . . I can't tell where one thing started and the other began.

My life . . . I make my own hours and I hire my own secretaries and I decide which cases I should and should not take and how much I should get paid and people pay me. I don't need to balance my checkbook because there's always money in there.

Which is not to say I don't work hard, I work really hard and I'm really good at what I do. And I like it because it's what I always wanted to do and men ask me out on dates and they drive hybrids with GPS and they want to get married and have babies and my closet's full of designer clothes that I wear when I go out with all of these friends whose numbers are programmed into my iPod in this apartment full of fabulous furniture and I wonder who it really belongs to.

The signature on the lease is definitely not mine.

Kristie Ann shuts her portfolio and leaves, dropping papers as she does. The young woman rushes to pick up the papers but Kristie Ann is already gone. She self-consciously remembers she is holding the box with the knife, and sets it down in the performance space. She looks at the paper she is holding.

THE YOUNG WOMAN:

My parents are getting divorced.

Right. I know. Everyone's parents get divorced, get over it.

But it's just that my parents weren't— I mean, they've been married their whole lives!

Now my mother's going back to her maiden name and wonders if I'm okay with that. She wants me to take her to the gym with me, to meet men. She asks me if she should get a tummy tuck, would that make her more desirable. I ask her to please never give me a visual of her naked in bed.

So last week she shows me a copy of the divorce agreement, like, all proud of it, 'cause she got all this money from my dad. BUT, it was really hers! I mean, look at all she gave up: putting him through school—where they spent a ton of money sending me—and supporting him as he climbed the corporate ranks and raising his child—that's me again—and setting up his house—which we're now selling—and generally "making his life what it is!"

THE YOUNG WOMAN (cont'd):

She went on and on and I felt like saying to her, "Making his life *what it is*? What his life is, Mom, is something he doesn't want anymore! Why should he pay you off because he thinks his life sucks?!"

I don't know. I love her and all and we've always been close, but . . .

Here I am at this "critical juncture" where I'm supposed to be "pinning myself down" and deciding what I'm going to "become" and . . . this sounds awful . . . but all I know is I don't want to become like this woman who at 40 years old has never lived by herself. She's never even picked out a piece of furniture or wallpaper or upholstery fabric, never made a choice she didn't run by my dad! And who is she asking for advice now? OH MY GOD! Is that not pathetic?

Then I've got my father, saying to me, "Well, honey, you've got a lot of decisions to make, but I know that whatever you do, you will be successful."

"Wow! Thanks, Dad!" I'm about to say, when he adds, "You'd *better* be successful! You've developed some very expensive tastes, young lady!"

From the back or one side of the performance space, a bold woman throws—or carries on and drops—a ceramic object, a large pot or vase, which shatters. The new woman smiles confidently, and after a moment the young woman bends down and begins to pick up pieces from the floor, perhaps using the papers as a dustpan.

GABRIELLE:

We need a good earthquake around here, wouldn't you say?

I remember my "first" earthquake: The date was San Fernando, February 9, 1971. I was awakened by a violent shaking I only assumed was my brother recklessly bouncing on my bed. As I became fully conscious, I realized what it indeed was, and I pulled aside my covers, got out of bed and stood in the center of my room. My brothers looked at me, panic stricken—sheer terror in their eyes. It was glorious.

Gabrielle watches the young woman, who is somewhat reluctantly at her task.

Earthquake weather, states of emergency, freak twists of fate people start to call miracles, ordinary citizens becoming heroes or criminals or headlines, panicked newscasters caught on the air ducking under their desks . . . Faultlines, Epicenters, Aftershocks, Tremblors, Tremors, Jolts . . . Life in California, waiting for—almost anticipating—"The Big One."

Whittier Narrows, October 1, 1987. In 1987 I was working in a thirteen story office building bursting with overdressed, overly made-up women in the heart of Downtown Los Angeles.

Unfortunately, the quake hit before I got into work so I could only imagine them all scurrying through the rat-like mazes of swaying cubicle walls to escape, screaming and scratching each other's masked eyes out on the way to the elevators. Yes, I said elevators. In an earthquake. Those were the sort of women I worked with.

A new woman comes onto the performance space with brush or small broom and dustpan. There is something about her which is naked, and soft. She takes over for the young woman, cleaning the broken shards. The young woman moves to the periphery of the performance space.

GABRIELLE (cont'd):

When it struck I was just leaving the apartment, getting into my car. (Thank god I wasn't driving—they say you can't even feel it then!) But after that unrepeatably, unsettling, surreal suspended moment, I rushed into what I oh-so-sarcastically call the teeming Metropolis of Downtown LA with the greatest of ease—the freeways were absolutely barren.

And once there I was amazed to encounter simpering, ineffectual masses standing in the streets, in the shadows of the towering skyscrapers, looking upwards. I silently prayed for a single, site-specific aftershock. They closed most of the offices Downtown that day. Of course they closed mine: I was working for a government agency. I got into my car and went back to the Westside.

I don't think I had CNN then, because I remember the coverage being painfully inadequate.

Gabrielle moves toward the new woman, who has gathered together the various objects from around the performance space.

Actually, that was the end to quite a summer. At the time of the earthquake I was living with my then-boyfriend. Not for any romantic reasons, but simply because an electrical fire had gutted my apartment, oh, about a month before. I have photos.

Not of the fire itself, but of me and my roommate at the time—who had only recently returned from a month-long creative visualization retreat and would soon after spend an extended period of her life in a mental institution—sooty and blackened, sifting through the charred remains of our personal belongings that the fireman had thrown out of the apartment into the street below.

The summer of '87 was, to use a well-worn but appropriate phrase, a scorcher . . . No pun intended.

Gabrielle picks up the box containing the knife, and takes out the weapon.

The quaint term "shake and bake" was coined as the post-earthquake temperatures soared. Creating the kind of heat that causes crime waves, the kind of heat that doesn't go away when it gets dark. The kind of heat that's sometimes accompanied by rain, and after it rains everything still feels dirty.

Gabrielle puts the knife away, and unwraps the package brought on by Dayna. The young woman moves toward Gabrielle and the other woman, and watches as Gabrielle begins to remove many small figures from the package.

GABRIELLE (cont'd):

It rained soon after the fire and the earthquake, I well remember, because our few remaining possessions, coated with black ash and grime as they were, we had stored in the garage of an ex-boyfriend of mine. It rained, and rained, and the garage flooded. Our surviving treasures—various pieces of clothing, love letters from high school, scrapbooks, photographs and other artifacts that had miraculously survived the flames—became a water-logged, moldy and mildewed pile of wreckage layered by sodden corrugated cardboard that had once served as packing boxes.

Gabrielle leaves the package and its contents.

And it was that heat, that intense, profound, stultifying heat, that sustained my last, otherwise doomed, long-term relationship. The soaring temperatures, along with the natural disasters in rapid succession, turned what I would eventually, accurately see as a go-nowhere, static, un-inspired partnership into something extraordinary.

The new woman removes the remaining figures from the package, and places the broken pottery pieces into the empty box.

It was another summer, some years earlier, that I went for a walk late one hot evening in an upscale neighborhood after an impassioned argument with a different but nonetheless equally impotent—in the largest sense of the word—boyfriend and was ruthlessly and systematically beaten about the head and neck to a bloody pulp by an unknown assailant or assailants.

I remember only flashes of the incident, at this point I'm not sure whether it's a memory or an inspired re-creation, and I barely recall isolated moments of my two-month-plus hospital stay. Re-learning to walk, re-learning to speak and looking out the window of my air-conditioned, pristine environment at the people below my hospital room, staggering in the sweltering heat. People would come in to visit me, sweat on their faces and nerves on end.

What seems only a short time ago I visited a friend of mine . . . who was dying. It was in the month of July or August and he was having some people over to his house to say "goodbye" before he moved up north to stay with his family . . . to die.

I had found out he was "sick" the summer before. "Sick." Simple words sometimes take on new meanings, don't they? We look at friends who are losing weight and ask other friends who may know, "Is he 'sick?'" and no one asks what we mean.

But at this summer "goodbye gathering" the weather was lovely. Just warm enough; not too dry, not too humid.

A sort of a breeze gently flowing into the room, dusting over people's faces. Nobody was uncomfortable, no one stuck to the chairs, everything was restful. The ice melted at just the right rate in the drinks, glasses of wine stayed cool and cups of coffee stayed hot until they were consumed. Guacamole in the bowl didn't get that black coating and plates of cheese didn't collect those glisteney beads—the edges of the slices didn't harden and curl up.

GABRIELLE (cont'd):

And then when I went up to see him while he was living at his sister's in the Bay Area, we calmly chatted, he in his bed and I in a chair placed within his line of vision so that he wouldn't have to turn his head or strain his neck. The ceiling fan whirred overhead. He had a light blanket over him and at one point he closed his eyes to rest a bit. I slipped off my shoes and looked out the open window at the summer sun setting. Good thing I had a sweater in the car for the drive home, I remember thinking.

He died September 9, 1991.

We need a good, hot summer, wouldn't you say?

Gabrielle leaves, perhaps into the house or via an unexpected passage.

Both now sitting on the floor, the young woman and the new woman are alone on the performance space, and look at one another.

The new woman laughs, then appears to think better of it. She begins to explain herself to the young woman, but mostly to the audience.

RACHEL:

I'm sorry.

I . . . I think that people think I'm happier than I am.

But I'm glad that they do, I think.

Yes. I am glad. I'm glad that I . . . can. Can make them think that.

It's just so unfair that some people are so good at it. So good at hiding things, things that make them . . . themselves, things that make them who they are. I see these people walking down the hall in my apartment building or in the market or at a bar and you look at them, and you've no idea what they're feeling or wanting or needing; or if you do, it's only what they want you to think they feel or want or need and it may or may not have anything remotely to do with, or connected to, who they really are. Their selves.

I just hate them.

This comes naturally, you realize. This ability to hide things and shut themselves off, or a part of themselves that they don't particularly feel that you should be privy to at that particular moment. It's like a tool, or a talent that can be honed through years of . . . contact. But it's not something that takes any effort. It's something that these people, that you people, do naturally. It is.

And no matter what you do you're bound to get better at it. Yes!

You have no idea what it's like to be . . . I am an emotional petri dish. Doesn't that just make you want to be warm and supportive, loving, nurturing, doting, full of compliments, so that you can slap me in the face with "You've lost weight, haven't you?" "You went to college?" "What did you do to your hair?" "I can tell you were an only child."

RACHEL (cont'd):

You know that feeling when you're in bed and talking to your boyfriend, and you don't even have to be fighting. You're just talking, and it doesn't even have to be about something important, you're just talking.

And then a feeling starts to come, and you want to hold everything inside of you perfectly still and not even breathe in order to identify this feeling, as if it's something new, something you've never felt before. As if you've been able to live your whole life and this is the first time you've ever felt this . . . very familiar feeling.

You are motionless so you'll be able to tell one way or another: you have to let yourself feel it so that you'll be able to tell if you're wrong, even though know you're not. And something deep inside of you, in a space in your chest, up by your heart, starts to move quickly, to tremble, and you must speak so that nothing breaks: you say, very quietly, "Are you asleep?"

And he says nothing. But you know he heard you.

And you get up on your elbow and look at his face which looks . . . it looks too asleep. And his breathing is very regular though not quite as deep as it should be: he forgets that you've seen him asleep, that you've watched him sleep.

And that space moves higher, between your breasts, toward your throat; it tightens and what's quivering inside scrapes against the edges. You ask him again, a bit louder and as totally devoid of emotion as you can possibly manage, "Are you asleep?"

And without opening his eyes his mouth turns down into a deep frown and this pained expression comes over his entire face. His body shifts slightly—either in terrible, exaggerated slow motion or with a sudden, jerky movement—and a thick groan escapes: a questionably negative "nuh-uh." He opens and closes his mouth and when his lips touch each other they're covered with poison; he grimaces horribly, then lets out a most pathetic sigh, in anticipation of some unknown, nightmarish torture. He is still in deep slumber, you see.

You watch his face for a moment longer, and you hate it as much as you've ever hated anything. But your waves of hatred have no effect, and you move to lay back down with a pouted "Goodnight."

Only this last, single word isn't at all what it was supposed to have been. It was somehow spoken by Donna Reed. It has betrayed you.

You quickly move away from him. The sheets underneath you are cool and you can still feel the warmth of where you were between you. And you know that it is this warmth and that loving, wife-like voice that he takes with him into his non-sleep sleep; he is soothed and cradled by these while you stare into the blank ceiling but see nothing. Your whole body is rigid and you open your own mouth which you find is not soft and desirable anymore but merely a . . . hole.

RACHEL (cont'd):

You don't have lips now, so you can't form words, you have only jaws, hard pottery ridges out from which come all that has been trapped in that space inside you. But there is no sense of release, as these very physical movements are now transformed into a motionless stream of energy that just hangs, frozen in the air, choking you

And you have to tell yourself to breathe. And tell your heart to start beating again. And you feel your tongue in your mouth and with it you feel your teeth and lips. You press your lips together and move them apart to make sure there is no sound. And you swallow.

After awhile you get tired and turn on your side, probably toward him—his back is facing you—being sure to keep the space between you. Then you realize that this is silly because he truly is asleep now. So you move next to him, your body touching his. He is warm and solid and doesn't move. Not even a bit. Which makes you think that he probably isn't asleep after all, only now it's too late to take it back.

I find myself feeling like that a lot.

Rachel starts to leave, but stops herself.

And it's not fair. None of it.

Sex isn't fair. A boyfriend once told me that for guys it didn't matter what it was they . . . entered. That they could have an orgasm into a hole in the wall. That really sticks in my mind. Not that guys can, or would. What I think about is that this guy would have said that to me. What sort of thing is that to say to someone? To your girlfriend?

He also used to tell me how damaged he was, how he had been wounded in so many relationships, how protective he was of himself and his emotions. Why would I find that attractive?

She again turns to leave. But she doesn't.

I'm not in a relationship now; you may have guessed. I spend a lot of time taking baths. Long, hot baths. With the door open.

She looks at the young woman, at the objects on the floor, and at the dustpan and brush which may still be in her own hands.

I'm glad that I'm not frightened of metaphors.

She sets down the dustpan and brush, and leaves. Still sitting, the young woman picks up one of the figures, which is foil-covered chocolate. She begins to unwrap it.

THE YOUNG WOMAN:

What I said before? About me being the most important thing?

Here's what I really think:

THE YOUNG WOMAN (cont'd):

I am probably the most . . . stupid. I mean, not stupid. I'm not stupid, but . . . it's not like I matter? Me. This (*indicating her body*). There is nothing special about me. There is nothing amazing about my life. I've got friends who have done great things or want great things or can say great things, have had great—or at least horrible—things happen to them. They have passions. They have direction. They know that they *can* do something . . . extraordinary.

I'm not saying I'm a failure or anything. I'm a goal setter. I'm not a half-assed kind of person, I set goals and I go after things that I think are—

What? Who really cares if I get good grades or the guy everyone else wants or first place?

I mean, I pretty much always do. But when I've gotten whatever it is, when I've arrived at my goal, I always feel like there's something . . . else. I've been running around the past 17 years with this “wonder girl” armor on, and nothing's sunk in. Like my mom suited me up to be a TV super hero without telling me who I was supposed to save?

I walked in and she was crying yesterday. I've never seen her cry. She didn't look like her. She looked like pictures of her when she was . . . my age.

And I didn't have any idea what to do.

She looks at the unwrapped figure in her hand, and the others on the floor.

Dare me to eat all this chocolate.

She starts doing just that. Another woman walks on with great purpose.

WENDY:

It wasn't until I had his dick in my mouth that I asked myself, what the fuck am I doing?

And that's just about how it went, too. I asked myself, and I answered myself: well, I've got this dick in my mouth and I'm doing what one does when one has a dick in one's mouth.

Sometimes my days are just like that. I think that it's maybe I'm just that kind of person. The kind of person that sticks with what she's doing, does a job, finishes things, sees things through. The kind of person that can answer her own questions and isn't going to question the answers. At least not for the moment.

It's the later that always gets me. When the altogether more tricky and sticky and messy and icky questions come. Questions that come too fast, bitter questions that make me gag.

Later things look coarse, jarring, hard. Later things slap you in the face, demanding that you feel. Forcing you to feel. Making you admit that they're real. Later, when you're wrapped in the blur of nicely fuzzy voices and moments, there's that occasional, sudden flash: some sound or picture which must've happened, must've been there, right? or it wouldn't be able to knock you down now, right?

WENDY (cont'd)

Only, I swear to you, it wasn't really like that. I wouldn't have done that. I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't be there. Doing that. With that person, of all people. That's not the kind of person I am.

And then I go back into my life where, if I thought about it, everything is covered with kind of a . . . filmy fur. So that when you touch it you don't really touch it, you touch a soft sort of outside. Which makes everything much more approachable, don't you think? And when I say things it's kind of like . . . I've got just enough peanut butter in my mouth to give the words a coating. Which makes them easier to mold into something else, you know? If they're questioned? Or rejected? Or picked apart and analyzed? :

Why, that becomes quite impossible, really. Just about the closest you can get is to spread them very, very thinly so that there's just a hint of flavor and absolutely no chunks at all.

I sometimes use peanut butter to hold things together. Smooth, creamy peanut butter. You'd be amazed how it helps certain recipes, especially the ones with a lot of layers.

There are times when I'll try something and the next instant I'm in the middle of it, with the ingredients and utensils all around me and I'm a mess and nothing looks at all like it's supposed to at this stage in the game, let me tell you!

And suddenly the instructions don't make any sense. I mean the recipe is these letters and figures glaring up at me and it makes no sense. It's like they left out a line or a paragraph or a whole bunch of steps or printed half the stupid thing in another language, I swear!

But then, when I close the damn book, I'll find a way to make it work, and it all turns out fine!

I seldom make the same thing twice. It's difficult for me, repeating things.

You know those days when the doorbell rings and you answer the door and you know who it is, because he called to tell you that he was going to "stop by." Not come over, not visit, but "stop by." And it's the middle of the afternoon and you say, "sure," "okay," "great!" and then hang up the phone thinking that it's not particularly great at all, and maybe not even okay but since you didn't happen to say, "I don't think so," it must be, right?

You answer the door and it's him, just as you expected, looking just as you expected, wanting just what you expected, and you begin to do just what you expected you'd do. And say just what you're expected to say: "oh," "yeah" "great!" And you're saying it so it must be, right?

The smiles and moans and penetrating glances rub against each other and slip into each other and the daylight spreads a hazy, velvety sheen over naked flesh and soon you don't even have to think of the answers to his questions, spoken or unspoken: the answers are all "yes!"

And then: What the fuck am I doing with this dick in my mouth?

Wendy moves to the back of the performance space and watches the young woman as she speaks to the audience, visibly shaken.

THE YOUNG WOMAN:

My father started running. Ha ha. With his new girlfriend. She's barely older than I am. Guess she knows what she wants!

What I want, is to run away from home. Go to a really great party, where no one knows me but everyone pretends to. Too bad I don't have a home anymore to run away from!

Fighting tears, she places the objects onstage—the dog's toy or collar, the boxed knife, the papers, the dustpan and brush, and the remaining chocolate figures—into the gift package and closes it or re-wraps it.

Okay. Here goes. For the first time in my life, I feel like I am looking at the whole world and it's unbelievably huge! It's full of these overwhelming things I can't get my hands around, and people I can't . . . get inside of.

So where is it that I have been? Why didn't anyone let me know about this! No one told me it was so damn big! And that I was so small and ill equipped, like a little blind crippled thing with no sense of direction.

It's like the enormous universe is playing a joke on just me. And everything I've ever known is upside down and there's no room for me anywhere. I know this sounds lame, but I'm afraid to take a step because the floor is going to fall out from under me. And I can't tell who's behind it all. Or maybe there's no one.

Maybe I'm all alone. And I'll never be able to find what it takes to move again.

I want to scream, "I'm just a girl! It's just me! I'm just a girl! I'm not enough!"

Jessica, Dayna, Pat, Kristie Ann, Gabrielle and Rachel have now joined Wendy, and all stand at some distance behind the young woman.

If my mom was here, I know what she'd say . . .

The young woman closes her eyes and with her arms wrapped around the package, stands very still.

"Shhhh! You'll see! It'll be okay. Just . . . you . . . wait."

End of Play