

LIGHT AND NOT-LIGHT

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We move the fire by moving its base: poke the white-charred dust with sticks, closer and closer to her sheep-feet, ask the flames to lick her all away. She didn't fit inside the firepit as cleanly as we'd hoped; she was a big one, grown and pregnant with a pair of lambs. The donkey had picked her up by the neck and thrown her as hard as he could, and she was left there, by the fence. She died with her upper spine coiled around itself, like soft-serve ice cream.

My favorite part of first dates is making two dollars in pool; I don't know any of the rules, but I grew up in a house with a pool table and know how to hit seven-year-old-hard, right down the middle. The balls smack apart, ram around like neon gas on its little contained floor. With the vibrations, science textbooks say, it all begins.

I lost my virginity in stages—on the basement bar with *Whose Line is it Anyway?* still playing on TV, on a treadmill on New Year's morning, in the parking garage outside the swimming pool. In this long interim of young-girlhood, my body feels like a wobbly cube of iron that I am whittling down, slowly, slowly.

She's turning ceramic-jade green and bloating, hard. I poke the fire nearer to her belly, full to the ground with new tissue, and it opens, bubbling out like vinegar and Mentos. She is so clearly made of matter in this homemade pit; a crumpled-up map of herself, crinkly and water-stained. The fire builds up to her knotty knees, slowly, incrementally, the sun becoming lower and less until the light is all gone.

It all happens so gradually, so incompletely, this dying. She had left us a lot of mass.

I stand outside at 11:30 p.m., late August, the mosquitoes sleeping in piles. Everyone is here in their rawest form for a rock show, drinking out of pitchers without straws. When the drums pick up, sneakers make the air dusty and smoky, on top of sweaty, on top of already so alive. I like watching him make something and watching everyone else feel it. I like the idea that after he says *goodnight* into the mic, he'll push through this crowd of screaming and twirling, grab my hands, and take me back to his little gray house. It makes me feel like Cleopatra, and the ridiculousness of this is most of the fun.

I cannot recommend googling *what makes heat happen* on your lunch break. I think about the tenuousness of the metal benches. I think about the myth of “stillness.” I think about the sun’s hunger. I forget to eat my rice.

We really wanted to not burn this sheep; we wanted to bury her in the upper pasture, lay the dirt back over her very carefully. From dirt, to dirt: the narrative we wanted to make of it all. But we couldn’t lift her body off the ground.

So many bad things awaited me, so many good things awaited me, I think, wiser now; these thoughts together were like pieces of flint egging each other on, until every moment felt like an open flame.

I remember the exact second when sex became enjoyable: it was a year after that parking garage outside the swimming pool, and he had been inside me for a minute already when it felt like the last piece had cracked. In this moment, it became merely a way to spend time; I put my head on the pillow, tried to really see the stucco.

I’m supposed to fight for the right to do all of this. We all are.

But there are moments when this all works; when the yellow solid glides into the corner pocket and suddenly the movement on the table stops. Moments when a man hands me another beer to shut up my goddamn gloating; all of it pale and thin. I drink half, reset the ecstatic triangle on the felt. In these moments, I find myself wishing I would’ve paid more attention to the materiality of all the chemistry classes I had to take in school, to the stories of how the units of the world came together. To the ways that we can swirl them together in beakers, these wine glasses of cytoplasm and earth, finally. In these moments, I want to understand and diagram the activeness I feel; I promise myself that I will reject any theory of passivity of matter.

But this is kiddie science; we grow up, we graduate to chemicals, to thick plastic goggles, to gloves and skin burns, to distinguishing between what is heat and what is not-heat. To learning the science behind the body-rearranging.

When the farm requires morbid work, I wear kid gloves: as in *made of kid*, baby goat skin. Sheep and goats have fire-resistant skin, and we do not; this is why firefighters wear wool, and why I must spend at least some of my time every day dulling, dulling my intake of the world.

What we are doing to this sheep is one of the ways we dispose of human bodies, too. *We burn them*. There are people on Earth who do this for a living; they go to school, *on purpose*, to do this. It must make their job easier that human skin is not fireproof; that it is so tender, webbed. So combustible.

In far-northern Poland a few years later, my desperate relationship with light returns. I talk about it for hours, its hereness and goneness, and how I feel that I live under a cruel tide of it. I say all these things about abandonment and heat, monologues about the way the lack of sun hollows me out like a drill, and realize partway through that I have, at some point, stopped talking about the sun, and started talking about something else.

A man texts me his love languages late in the night, completely unprovoked (*I respond well to words and action*, he swears), and it reads like the owner of a '97 Camry scheduling an appointment for new brakes.

"Okay," I send back, trying very, very hard to mean even this.

A man and I get home from his show, the after-parties; we fire up the stove, share omelets with every spice from the cabinet. I am so hungry. My ale-tongue tells me it needs to say *This is spicy*. Not as in sharp; not as in needing something cool and smooth to wash it down. *Spicy as in of-or-relating-to-spices*, I say. *High volume. High alert. High sense-materialization.*

It doesn't necessarily want to say, "Let's fuck *right now*"; it doesn't *not* want to say it, either. It's just easier to say it.

I've found the entire experience of romance to be so deficient, so unconcerned with any of the parts of myself that I like. I could've been anyone: I could've been an alarm clock, a meal delivery service, a shoebox full of slips of paper that say, *You just radiate. You will never die. Your father doesn't know what he's talking about.*

I tell men to buy dish soap. I tell men to do their chemistry homework. I tell men to call their mothers.

January in this northern place, the sun begins to slip at 3:45 p.m. When I see the light begin to dim and rosy itself on the walls, I feel a sense of panic as if I have lost a cat. A lot of the day is spent in this blankness.

When I met some of these men, I thought I saw the light seeping out of their pores. I was stunned by them, their eyeballs like Broadway-grade spotlights; everything in my life was, by them, made vibrational, trembling.

It's during this time that I try to confront my deeply transactional definition of love—I have fully convinced myself that if I, with my encouragement and my time and my body, every resource in my little reach, invested in whatever man was standing in front of me (I would have changed cities! I would have changed skin! I would have given it all up!), then I would finally be exactly what I wanted to be: a loved woman. And do I not deserve to be this? To be exactly what I want?

The dark is simply something not happening. The cold has no properties. No thingness, I repeat, repeat, every night.

My friends look at me after I return from the sheep farm, after asking why my couch armrests are covered in mud, as if I have recently turned very callous. I try to tell them that I did this because I *really loved her*; or, perhaps, because I actively grieved for her body, thrown by the fence. I wonder if it would be easier for them to stomach an assertion of sheep-tenderness, rather than sheep-love. I try to tell them this instead—that this feeling is one I have for anything with temporary skin, one that makes me want to flock towards and tend, have something productive to do with my hands. I tell them it has mostly to do with a feeling of responsibility for bodies, but it all just feels like slant-rhyme. Like lazy synonyms for what all my friends, young women in our world, are supposed to call “love.”

The sun has disappeared—the only light now, this eating thing, moving closer and closer to the belly. I can’t stop it, and I don’t try to.

A man writes me a letter, tells me that when I leave, it feels as if his umbilical cord has been cut.

Call your fucking mother, I want to write back.