

“Try to Relax Your Body,” excerpt from book-length essay, *Freak Lip*

iPhone Text Exchange Nov 11th

Julia:

Broke up w The Catholic. I want babies but not praying babies. Unrelatedly, I am hosting a pie-eating contest at my house this Saturday. Are you free to come? Your presence is requested.

Spooner:

How are you faring? Are you blue but holding up ok?

I am very frustrated with religion at the moment. It's annoying how *not* hugely better the knowledge that one made the appropriate choice can make one feel.

I'm sorry. I know the dull ache of another one down. I'll see you surrounded by pies soon.

By then I will feel less daunted. Do you need a distraction as much as I do right now?

How did you know?

Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is to take one photo of yourself blending into the landscape. Example:



Each day I will give you a new mission.



You accomplished this so quickly.

I could have done better, but chose expediency.

My problems: saying too much, acting too quickly.

No, saying much is usually still not enough.

I will teach you how to act slow. That's my forté. That's my pillow fort.

I will submit myself to your tutelage on this matter.

Class held in pillow fort at the Rec Center, Thursdays at 6pm. Tutelage can commence.

Is that a tenure track gig?

Endowed Pillow Fort Professor of Radical Empathy & the Slow Build. That's pretty much how I want to be. Although I'd like to be more fast-acting in some regards.

One of my lingering life regrets is a hand I didn't hold when I was 15. I'm not sure I'm fast-acting.

I have a string of regrets like that. I didn't have sex until I was 22 (*non-religious* reasons, though). Which is SUPER embarrassing & now you're like one of three people who know that.

That is incredibly endearing.

You actually are the only one to know that. Even the two other people I've told I think I said I was 20. Which is a weird lie.

I get the lie. It's a truth-lie.

It still hasn't come out of my mouth. Though even texting, *I didn't have sex until I was 22*, feels like a new kind of opening. The poet Mary Ruefle writes: "The loss

of a secret makes one joyous, if one's intent is toward fellowship." I feel giddy with honesty & want the opening to gather into a continued openness.

At this moment I start to create a fantasy- what if I end up with the first partner I ever actually explain this to? I don't mean *say* this sentence, but *explain* the context, the series of events. So a flirtation begins. A relationship that I hope will unbutton this account. That will show how joy emerges from loss.

At first, I thought keeping an unsaid sentence in my mouth was like sucking on a lemon wedge, a swirl of prickly heaviness on the tongue. But that's too contained of an act. It's more like dough, which first appears as a small moist mound, but once baked, expands, rises. Sliced, it unfolds like an accordion. Each slice doled out for different meals: new unspoken sentences mutate for new occasions. Now, I try to pin each slice across a clothesline from the back porch all the way to the moon.

What kind of breeze can they catch? I line them up to air their evolution, to see how I ended up too embarrassed to admit this to most friends, most intimate partners. There are different versions of this unsaid sentence. They go:

My doctor says the first person I sleep with will 'rip me open'

or

My doctor says not even a pinky will fit inside me

or

This might not work the first time

or

I like you, but I'm afraid to have sex

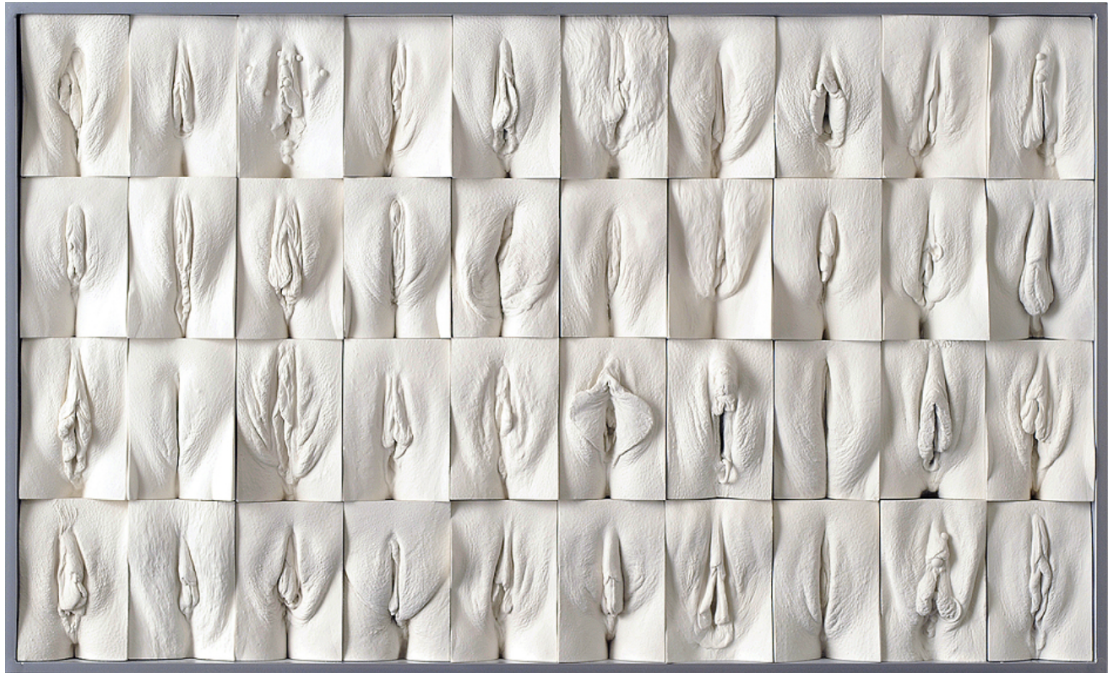
& finally

I didn't have sex until I was 22

In high school, I'm already hesitant to share my body. I overhear a group of guys talking about a girl one of them slept with; the guy discovered she had "a third labia." They were making fun of her, her third, "freak lip."

Accidental eavesdropping turns to fear of having the parts of my body that should attract sexual attention cause repulsion. It isn't even that extreme—fear that my own body parts might be abnormal, mockable.

Now, at 34, I drink coffee & Google, "labia." I find articles & sites titled, "Are My Labia Normal?" "Photo Gallery: Labia Library" "Girl Talk: I Have Long Labia" "Labia: Tumblr" "Large Labia Project" & "Beautiful Labia." I wonder if this is a comfort for young girls- this access. I haven't clicked on any of the links. I remember a few years ago finding Jamie McCartney's 10 panel project that displays plaster molds of women's vaginas. It was the first time I felt like I had access to the varied labia that I didn't know existed. Why do I need art to understand my own sex parts? I remember feeling relief. But stacked in white plaster, I'm still curious about pubic hair & coloration.



I can't remember the name of this project & ask Spooner, who's sitting in the chair near me, "Do you remember the artist who made the labia wall?" He shrugs no & after a moment of research I tell him it's called, "The Great Wall of Vaginas" & he laughs, "Really?" Really. I thought Jamie McCarney would be a woman. Why I am annoyed that a man is giving me access to this, that he's called "a revolutionary with a bucket of plaster"? That I even kick around these binaries.

In high school I overhear another group of guys talking about a girl one of them slept with; when she orgasmed her leg involuntarily twitched. *Like a rabbit*, they laughed. They call her Thumper.

iPhone Text Exchange on November 18th

Julia:

What two literary figures or philosophers would you like to see box it out in a ring (living or dead)?

Spooner:

Let me think on this.

Sontag & Hitchens. Freud & Darwin.

This game has too many possibilities. Question: You are going to receive a gift. You know it will be the following: a) tiny Moby Dick in a fishbowl b) tiny James Joyce who will live in a box under your bed, or c) magic beans. Which do you choose?

It's between Joyce & the whale & this is tough. I mean, a mini whale, regardless of it being Moby Dick, would be very joy-inducing. But, JOYCE! Ok, I choose Joyce. Also, I want Freud & Darwin to have sex together & not box. New mission: you need to acquire a straw & blow bubbles into some liquid that does not normally have bubbles.

I'm laying in bed with my hair all a mess trying to convince myself to get out of it. But I accept this mission.



Mission accomplished! What is that, coffee? It's beautiful.

Blue dish soap. Got the soap at the market along with bread for toast-making: kimchi & avocado.

Wait. Kimchi & avocado can go on toast together? Is this a thing I've been missing out on?

I've been particularly kimchi-compulsive of late.

I've been avocompulsive. What's a meal you loved as a kid that you haven't had in a long time? We could make that for dinner on Friday.

Oh, I love regular mashed potatoes. With white gravy. I miss my grandmother's spaghetti, too. Her everything. She was a great cook.

Aw. Can we channel her? What's white gravy? I wanna learn the vegan gravy version of it.

What *don't* you want, Cohen?

Anxiety.

Fear, it's cousin.

Guilt, it's head-hanging neighbor.

Shame, who looks into your window at night.

I don't have a lot of shame. I live on the 4th floor so it can't be a creeper to me.

I have momentary shames. But I've learned not to take them too seriously too much of the time. Slow learner.

Back to embracing the way of the Slow Build. We can cook your grandma's food & talk about her. Whatever you want to share.

I don't feel like I'm about to have sex. I mean, there is no one I'm eager to sleep with & am quietly grateful not to feel pressured. At 16, I'm more preoccupied with finding time to drive around backroads between diners in a hotboxed car & watch movies with friends. Writing poems in journals I've decorated. Watching Nellie take slow drags from her cloves. Trying not to fail trigonometry, trying not to get sick as much as I usually do, ping ponging between episodes of bronchitis. I'm not sure why my mom makes a gynecology appointment for me but it's with the same pediatrician I've had most of my life. I walk into a waiting room filled with plastic toys. I sit next to coughing kids & colorful Band-Aids, wait for a nurse to call my name. My mom's there with me. I have a learner's permit but no license.

My doctor asks me if I'm sexually active.

I say, *No. Not at all.*

My doctor says, *Well, these visits are a good habit to form when you're young.*

I agree.

My doctor explains what will happen & why. How cold the speculum, how “uncomfortable” the pressure may feel when she opens it inside me. How it’s helpful if I can try to relax my body.

I say, *Okay.*

My doctor says, *Here we go.*

My doctor tries to give me the exam.

My doctor “turns pale.” Her freckles look darker. I think to myself, *I don't know if I've ever actually seen someone embody that expression before.*

My doctor says, *Excuse me, I'll be right back.*

My doctor leaves the room.

I look at the grinning giraffe & elephant decals on the wall. The cloud & balloon decals. I want to peel them off. I think about the wallpaper that still covers my bedroom, small green wreaths with pink bows, that my mom let me pick out when I was six. I used to count the rows to go to sleep. Now large swaths of wreaths are plastered over with posters of The Cure & The Beastie Boys.

It does not occur to me that my doctor's gone to talk to my mom. I would have said no if she'd asked. Privacy dissolves like a napkin dropped into the water glass. I'm lying on the table, covered in a paper robe. Naked besides socks.

My doctor returns. She says something about vaginal walls being too tight.

My doctor says, *I can't do the exam. I couldn't even fit my pinky inside you. I don't want to rip you open.*

My doctor says, *Unless you actively work on widening your vagina yourself, with tampons or by other means, it's going to be really difficult to have penetrative sex the first few times.*

How Difficult? I ask.

You could have an operation to expand your vaginal walls. Otherwise, you have two options: either explain to your partner what it may be like beforehand, or have sex with a stranger & not explain. My doctor pauses, Until one of these happens, you can't really have an exam.

I think to myself, *These are terrible options.* I begin to believe these are my only options.

My doctor tells me I can get dressed now.

iPhone Text Exchange on November 28th

Julia:

Your mission for today: while taking your dogs for a walk in the snow, you must pick a flower from someone's garden & wear it behind your ear.

Spooner:

I may have some trouble with the flower-acquisition as it's mid-winter but I have a plan....

I'll try and make future missions more winter-friendly [she writes while wearing a coat in bed].

Winter-possible is all I need.

How was your academic dinner last night with the visiting scholar?

I freak out a little bit with visiting faculty dinners for different reasons, although I do an excellent job of keeping it together externally.

Why do you freak out? Because someone else is coming in as a fancy expert or something?

No, just entirely my own silly internal drama—plagued with self-doubt, feelings of fraudulence, but I also always compound it with being “too old” or having started “too late.” A bunch of nonsense.

Right, our intellectual selves know it's a bunch of nonsense as we continually prove to ourselves over

and over that we can, in fact, do. But our emotional selves brush accomplishment under the rug & don't let us hold on to the validating things.

I can make myself feel so bad, but the good stuff, the successes, never feel good at all. Like, they barely seem to register. But also the older I get, the more annoyed & bored I am with my own bullshit.

I barely remember the car ride home. I don't remember who drives. I'm sure my mom assures me, *It will be okay*. I'm sure she reminds me, *Your doctor says you can work on stretching out your vagina with tampons. I'll buy you the smallest size there is. You can work your way up.*

I'm sure I nod. I've never used tampons. Touch my fingertips to the window. Look out & see the maples blurring into a green season that feels nothing like me. I point at nothing. Everything is outside.

I wish my mother didn't know. I wish I had a conch shell on my back. To press my cheek against the smoothness of my own cold home.

Sex feels impossible. I can't imagine sleeping with an anonymous stranger.

I can't imagine myself having this conversation with another teenager. What sort of warning label I come with now. I imagine making out with this someone. Stripping off our clothes. How a moment of fiery intimacy suddenly turns to an awkward experiment.

The ride home is ten minutes. I run up the stairs & shut the door to my bedroom. I can't imagine putting someone else in the position of having to deal with this. I am not even sure what "this" is.

I lie on my bed, try guessing exactly how many wreaths are hidden behind my posters. Then I rip them all down to see if I was close.

I can't imagine telling any friends at all about this visit- what words would I even pull together? Alone in my room I mumble, *Vaginal wall*. I mumble, *Hymen*. I feel like an unsolvable problem, a burden. All of the words used to describe what I've discovered about my own body are clunky. I'm trying to string phrases together inside myself like lights along a tree branch but the bulbs are too dim for anyone else to see. What is unseen becomes a secret.

Mary Ruefle questions: "We speak of secrets from the point of view of the teller or keeper, but what of the listener?... The listener is made *uncomfortable*." I picture my friends looking at me alarmed, baffled. My sentence has too many words outside the vocabulary of high school friendship.

I look in the little drawers of my nightstand for tape. My posters lie curled on the floor. I pick them up & try to re-align the torn faces of band members & album titles. I apply the small strips of tape on the back of the posters to hide what's happened.

Nellie starts having sex with Geoff. I listen to her talk about it. He doesn't like any pubic hair. Asks his girlfriends to shave it off. I tell her she should do whatever she feels comfortable with. But she says she doesn't mind, wants to please him. I think it's creepy. Nellie already looks so young & Geoff's repeating senior year.

Celine has sex with Marnie. Separately, I listen to them talk about it.

Ben has been fooling around with Kip but they haven't slept together yet. They sneak off to a clearing in back of the high school called Eden. Their fingers smell of cigarettes & cum. Ben is slightly baffled that Kip reciprocates his feelings, he's used to feeling alone & misunderstood. Used to blasting punk & scribbling poems in notepads. He calls me to read drafts of poems & the play lists of mix tapes he's making Kip. We debate certain lyrics & whether she'll read too much into them.

Chloe has sex with Carmen-Leah. She talks about doing it loudly in the shower or quietly under the blankets when her roommate is in the room. Chloe has a confidence I'm jealous of, like she knows what she's doing & you can take it or leave it.

Shannon starts having sex with Sam. She talks about losing her virginity in his car. I think it sounds like a ridiculous movie.

Fiona starts having sex with Dan in his dorm room. They are always worried about getting caught & suspended. We talk about it a little, how much she loves him. He's a senior & she's a junior.

Shira has crushes on older girls who don't like her back.

When Nellie & Geoff break up, Celine starts having sex with Nellie. Celine is bilingual, wears leopard print thongs & steal toed boots. She threatens to kick boys in the crotch whenever she's in a fowl mood. Celine & Nellie make flashcards on which they've written endearing phrases to each other in French & hold them up when they are at different sides of a room, or pass cards to each other in the hallway. I know Nellie is going to get hurt.

There is a silent alliance: Alexandra doesn't have sex with anyone. We don't talk about it. London doesn't have sex with anyone. We don't talk about it. Carlos doesn't have sex with anyone. We don't talk about it. Eliza doesn't have sex with anyone. She talks about hating everyone. Our inexperience sets us outside the center of gossip but we can still be apart of the conversation without having to reciprocate our own tales. What's expected is support, plotting, commiseration— not mutual sharing. It's okay to not-talk about the no-sex

we're having & talk thoughtfully about the sex some of our friends are having. I feel curious but not left out. Not *behind*.

But, I wish I had my own flashcards that I could hand Alexandra or Nellie, each one with a phrase my gynecologist told me, like *Not even a pinky can fit inside you*, so I could see how they would react to the same news.

Instead of flashcards to share with friends, I write poems that mainly exist within the walls of my journals unless I'm swapping a few lines with Ben. The poet Louise Gluck asks & answers: "If courage informs a poem of personal revelation, what, or who, is the adversary? What is at risk? & the ready answer is: the possibility of shame." The poems I write in high school don't seem propelled by courage. They exist in a realm of pre-courage, outside of shame. I can't yet recognize my unsaid sentences as anchored to shame because risking sharing them, even in writing, doesn't even occur to me as an option. I accept the internal life of my sentences. Isolation negates even the desire for courage.

iPhone Text Exchange on December 8th

Spooner:

If you had to have one part of your body be HUGE, what would it be?

Oh yeah, very good.

Julia:

My eyes.

Giant cartoon baby eyes.



If you had to have one body part be really small, what would it be? Also, I missed out on an easy “my dick” joke before. Apologies to all.

Was thinking of a way to make the same joke about smallness. Well, I like being a large-handed man, but it would be interesting to temporarily have tiny hands. I could make tiny little clay sculptures!

The Catholic guy I dated had tiny hands & it always creeped me out a bit.

I dated a really tiny person. She was a horrible person, which isn't something I can say about most people I've dated. So horrible that for a little while after, I would see a petite person and be actively repulsed.

Why did you date a horrible person? Was she super attractive to you?

She was cute, but that wasn't it. I just got snowed. I've never so thoroughly misjudged someone. I have good instincts about people!

Why did you misjudge her?

I thought it would be fun to grossly misjudge someone.

No!

In retrospect, I totally deluded myself, which is just about my number one fear. She was a joy-killer. She liked to deflate people, to find the kernel of a joyous moment & then sully it for any individual or group.

Oof. She does not sound like a very good person at all.

In high school I get really good at listening to my friends. I learn that nodding shows empathy while also hiding that you have not lived through a similar situation. It is a slight of face. *Yes*, my nod communicates. *Yes, I get what you're going through. I'm here for you.*

I am. We analyze why Ben smokes so much & whether he cares if he gets caught on campus, which would jeopardize his relationship with Kip. We analyze why Celine is pushing Nellie away, has returned her half of the French flashcards. We sit on the grey slate steps between classes. Our backpacks piled together. The cuffs of our baggy pants cover our shoes, drag on the ground.

Every few months my mom pops her head into my bedroom & asks me if I'm using the smallest-size tampons when I get my period. I shake my head, *No*. I feel like the wreaths on the wall have wrapped themselves around my chest, are squeezing my lungs.

But I will next time, I promise.

I know my mom's trying to help me. She lingers in the doorframe but I can't even look her in the eyes. I can't even shape a sentence inside of myself. Like my chest is filled with the darkness of a thousand closets.

I open the tampon box in case my mom checks. I pick one up & hold it between my fingers. I am afraid it will expand inside me & get stuck. That I won't be able to pull it out: a little white bullet, a cotton fingertip.

I drop it back in the box.
