

Praise for

# VALENCIA

“If you want to know how dangerous and great and awful it is to be a girl you’ll scarf *Valencia* right up. There’s so much colliding and ‘sharing.’ I mean in the good way—sharing bodies, drugs, stories and clothes. The street today is full of girls if you haven’t noticed.” —Eileen Myles, author of *Chelsea Girls*

“*Valencia* is one of the few true life-changer books I’ve encountered. One of those books that gets casually slipped to you, and then, a couple hours later, you understand you’ve been living all wrong, that everything must change. I wish you luck in the aftermath of reading it!”

—Torrey Peters, author of *Detransition Baby*

“I consider Michelle Tea a literary MOTHER—champion, organizer, and co-conspirator of the most potent alt-literature scenes San Francisco has witnessed in decades. I will forever tip my hat to her and the timeless and immortal text that is *Valencia*.” —Brontez Purnell, author of *100 Boyfriends*

“Wonderful storytelling...charged with reflection, anger, and the feeling of being alive.” —*The Village Voice*

“A spidery *roman á clef* for our times . . . *Valencia* crackles with take-no-prisoners prose.”  
—*The Seattle Times*

“[T]here is immediacy in the stream-of-consciousness style, as if Tea were in the room offering the reader a late-night confession.”  
—*Library Journal*

“An edgy, supercharged, surreal reality.” —*Booklist*

“Michelle Tea is the Mission’s poet laureate. She gives us our voice back with tragic porno hilarity at breakneck speeds, our own personal Bill Moyers documenting dramas of queer punk lives.”

—Lynn Breedlove, spoken word artist  
and singer for Tribe 8

“Tea’s fiction is beautifully similar to real life—a glimpse into a bad girl’s diary—full of misguided intelligence, complicated sex, and the impossibility, even the undesirability, of redemption.”  
—Tracy Vogel, *The Stranger*

“What’s truly inspired in this book is Tea’s literary voice, an effortlessly controlled combination of ironic wit and romantic longing.”  
—*The Bay Guardian*

“The stream-of-consciousness narration is a delightful ride to be on, shifting us into other registers of memory and relationship.”  
—*Rain Taxi*

“Tea’s exquisite writing performs the miracle, dancing along a razor’s edge between humor and pathos, jaded exhaustion and wonder. [I]n lesser hands, this material would simply be sad. As it is, it’s transcendental.”  
—*Girlfriends* magazine

**VALENCIA**

# VALENCIA

MICHELLE TEA

FOREWORD BY  
MAGGIE NELSON



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*For Cari Campbell*

## Twenty-Five at Twenty-Five: Michelle Tea's *Valencia*

Michelle Tea once described *Valencia* as “a snapshot, more or less, of my twenty-fifth year on earth, written not how it happened but how I *felt* it happened.”<sup>1</sup> It feels right, then, in a numerological sense, to be addressing Tea’s classic twenty-five years after its turn-of-the-millennium publication. One way to do so would be by hailing *Valencia* as an exuberant, hilarious record of a truly unprecedented and mutinous time in lesbian/queer history—the San Francisco dyke scene of the 1990s—and by lauding its spot-on testimony to the fashions (“I had big purple hair, a green studded collar, and roller skates. I looked insane”), the locales (Mission dive bars and apartments, The Bearded Lady, a whorehouse in the woods of Marin), the drugs (booze, crystal meth, mushrooms



that taste like “a trunk of moth-eaten clothes,” Valencia Street coffee), the pre-internet technologies (zines, open mics, personal ads in newspapers, pay phones, latex gloves), the gender vibes (all over the place, but generally still using she/her pronouns), and the kinks (“Petra was really into the knife. I got the sense that I could have been any body beneath her, it was the knife that was the star of the show”). Such a read would underscore *Valencia*’s status as one of the most vivid, thrilling documents of its time, while also ensuring that the explosive and inventive culture it portrays isn’t lost to history, as so much queer history, especially of the lesbian, poor, and debauched variety, can be.

But here I want to talk about other things that reading *Valencia* now makes me think and feel. Namely, I want to talk about *Valencia*’s achievement in transmitting the conjoined rush of being young, being high, being in love, and becoming a writer—and how that rush feels when these things are pursued all at once, with great abandon. Writers often convey this rush in retrospect, after the dust of an era has settled, or after they’ve removed themselves from a scene (and/or from the substances fueling it). That’s its own trick—and one that Tea has pulled off elsewhere, such as in her truly great 2016 novel *Black Wave*. *Valencia* is something else, maybe something more improbable. It’s a missive sent straight from the mayhem. I still don’t know how she did it.

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So, how did she? I'm willing to bet that this passage from Tea's 2018 collection *Against Memoir* describes her process at the time pretty accurately: "I remember being inside a nightclub, sitting up on top of a jukebox, scribbling in my notebook by the light that escaped it. All around me the darkness writhed with throngs of females, their bodies striped and pierced, as shaved and ornamented as any tribe anywhere, clad in animal skins, hurling themselves into one another with love. What feeling it filled me with. An alcoholic, an addict, I know what it is to crave, and the need to take this story into my body was consuming. For years I sat alone at tables, writing the story of everything I had ever known or seen."<sup>2</sup> It's a kind of miracle, when everyone's fucked up and fucking, for there to be someone just as fucked up and fucking, but also scribing it all down, and rendering it into literature. And here we have to thank the Higher Power of our choosing that Tea perched atop that jukebox, sat at that bar table, and scribbled. That she was imbued with enough magic and talent and strength and fire to be that witness, that artist, for us. As Tea puts it in a *Valencia*-era essay titled "Explain," in a passage that never ceases to make me want to pump my fist and join her revolution, "Why not me. My poverty and the girls that don't love me and how drunk I got the other night. How I was a prostitute. It seems to be literature when guys write about it, it's practically become a genre, men writing about

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their transcendental trips to the cathouse, their orgasms and revelations. Or men writing about women's lives in general. Straight people writing about queers and white people writing about every other race on the planet. The writing that I love, it's the Other telling the part that got left out, the truth. Not only a writer and a historian, but a spy."<sup>3</sup>

Some spies don't have to labor too hard to throw others off the trail; being a diminutive female is usually enough to keep people from recognizing the genius at hand. "There's this awful copy shop near my house," Tea says in "Explain." "I go there all the time because I'm too lazy to walk up to Kinko's. The guys at this place are such jerks. I had a bunch of my books and he said, Are Those Your Books? Yeah. You wrote them? Yeah. He makes this suspicious little scrunched-up face. Are You Sure? he asks. He means it. Looking at my dirty fucked up hair and tattoos scrawled up my arms and whatever else he saw. You Just Don't Look Like You Would Be A Writer. Yeah well keep an eye out for yourself in my next novel, asshole."<sup>4</sup> And just like that, there he is—first in her essay, and now here. That's one thing writing can do—seize the means of production. (Asshole!)

Tea makes it look easy to write from the eye of the storm, but let's pause for a moment to appreciate the rarity. Surely her hypergraphia—a compulsion to write that she has compared to other addictions—helped; as she describes her

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disposition in *Valencia*, “Oh, I should be quiet and full of potential like all those still flowers, but I know I am a weed and I’ve got to blow my seeds around the garden.” Yet there’s inevitably a tension between writing and living hard. Sometimes getting wasted makes writing possible (“I always drank while I wrote, and I loved drinking so much that the drinking kept me in my chair, writing,” Tea has said<sup>5</sup>); at other times, it can threaten the whole project, including the project of staying alive. “I could not imagine what would happen to me if I smoked more pot,” Tea writes in *Valencia*, before adding, in a classic step toward self-abandonment, “I held it to my lips and drew it in.” Being high on love presents a similar conundrum: after filling pages and pages about different girlfriends in *Valencia*, Tea tells us: “I cannot write when I have a girlfriend.” The mystery of the balancing act goes on.

Maybe one way to think about it is that this balancing act works until it doesn’t, and *Valencia* emanates from a time when it was working. For some, it stops working before age twenty-five, but twenty-five seems to me like a pretty typical high mark, before the shit really starts to hit the fan. Denis Johnson’s collection *Jesus’ Son*—published a year before *Valencia*—comes to mind here, in part because both *Jesus’ Son* and *Valencia* capture so powerfully what Johnson called, in reference to his collection, “the experience of the youthful soul,”<sup>6</sup> and in part because of something Johnson once said in

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response to an interviewer who asked him if he felt nostalgic for the wild, druggy, desperate days that *Jesus' Son* describes. "Well," Johnson said, "just for the self abandonment of it. Just sometimes there's nothing better than lying down in the dirt, being completely hopeless and helpless, because then of course you have no responsibilities, and that kind of appeals to me. But the problem is you can't do that for long. There's always a steam roller headed your way."<sup>7</sup>

The protagonist of *Jesus' Son* collides with that steam-roller in the book's pages; in *Valencia*, the rumble remains in the offing. You can hear it faintly in passages such as: "And Laurel got a girlfriend in Amsterdam, and George got a boyfriend who wouldn't top him, and eventually Candice did like me, and eventually Iris no longer did, and my older poetry friends from the bar left behind secret addictions as they moved to far away states to dry out, and Ashley got a boyfriend and disappeared completely, and here I sit with my coffee." Some folks may have begun to move on or move out, but for now our narrator stays put, coffee and notebook in hand. *Valencia* is a freeze frame of that ongoingness.

When I imagine an interviewer asking Tea if she feels, twenty-five years hence, nostalgic for the experience of the youthful soul captured so lavishly by *Valencia*, I think about something she said in conversation with another great chronicler of queer life, Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore. "When I was

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younger and saw nostalgia in older people,” Tea tells Sycamore, “it really scared me. I never wanted to have that kind of a relationship to my own history. It felt like everyone always thinks that their time was the best time, and it was almost a plan I came up with when I was younger, or a pledge I made to myself, to not get old and boring. Part of that means not being nostalgic.”<sup>8</sup> To honor Tea’s wisdom here, I invite us to read *Valencia* not as a postcard from a bygone era, but as a shimmering, ever-alive thing, an always-open portal to the kind of youthful soul who vows, as Tea’s narrator does, to “run through the streets in excellent danger.”

*Valencia* lets us touch this excellent danger whether we have grown away from it, are smack in the middle of it, or never chose to court it. No matter how dangerous or bleak things get, Tea’s narrator remains fundamentally optimistic and questing. Faced with the advent of darkness, she asks, “What would the night give us?” This fundamental buoyancy—which is aided and abetted by Tea’s never-flagging sense of humor—steers us away from moralizing, away from the quicksands of trauma, and toward possibility and gift. “In the mainstream popular consciousness,” Tea tells Sycamore, “certain things are like irredeemably bad. Like getting strung out on drugs is bad, and you’ve lost something if you’ve gotten addicted on drugs. This idea that you’ve lost control, or you’ve lost your mind, or something. Or you’ve lost your

virginity, you know how girls always ‘lose’ their virginity. Or if you do sex work, you’ve somehow lost . . . Any transgression gets marked as a sort of loss. And what’s never talked about is what you get from it.”<sup>9</sup> *Valencia* is all about what you get from it, while also being itself a prize wrested from the muck.

In this sense, *Valencia* partakes in a long-standing, venerable tradition of literature as consolation and redemption for the tribulations of difficult living (which is, let’s face it, all living, in the end). “Once I didn’t have any money and I hardly knew anybody and I was so scared I’d have to live out on the street,” Tea writes in “Explain.” “And I thought, it’s ok. I can still write. Paper and pens are easy, they’re cheap or easily stolen, you could probably get people to give them to you. And if something really bad like that ever happened, and whenever something does happen that really sucks, it’s hard, I think well ok I’ll write about it. It’s so consoling and so redeeming. When I have a friend who doesn’t write and I see her having a hard time, like she’s lonely or on too many drugs or something fucked has happened I think oh I wish she could write it. Write it all out. She could be an enormous angel. Probably she is anyway, but then she could see it all lit up on the page, swimming there, shining back up at her, good lighting for the movie that is her life. She could write the soundtrack. She could bask in herself, it’s the greatest.”<sup>10</sup>

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Friends, Michelle Tea is that enormous angel. Twenty-five years on, her *Valencia* is still lit, and shining back up at us all.

—Maggie Nelson

*Berkeley and Los Angeles, Summer 2024*

## Notes

1. Michelle Tea, Introduction to the 2008 edition of *Valencia* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008), p. 10.
2. Tea, *Against Memoir: Complaints, Confessions, and Criticisms* (New York: Feminist Press, 2018), p. 311.
3. Tea, “Explain,” *Narrativity*, no. 1, [https://www.sfsu.edu/~newlit/narrativity/issue\\_one/tea.html](https://www.sfsu.edu/~newlit/narrativity/issue_one/tea.html), accessed August 2, 2024.
4. Tea, “Explain.”
5. Rebecca Jacobson, “Michelle Tea Talks Tarot, Writing Sober, and the Hazards of Memoir,” *Portland Monthly*, March 26, 2019.
6. Janet Steen, “Lying Down in the Dirt: An Interview with Denis Johnson,” *Longreads*, February 28, 2018.
7. Ibid.
8. Michelle Tea in conversation with Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, *BOMB* magazine, November 2, 2016.
9. Michelle Tea in conversation with Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, originally published in *Punk Planet*, September/October 2006, <https://www.mattildabernsteinsycamore.com/interview-with-michelle-tea>.
10. Tea, “Explain.”



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# 1

I sloshed away from the bar with my drink, sending little tsunamis of beer onto my hands, soaking into the wrist of my shirt. Don't ask me what I was wearing. Something to impress What's-Her-Name, the girl I wasn't dating. She had a girlfriend, she didn't need two. She needed someone to sleep naked with and share some sexual tension, and for that position I made myself available. Apparently it was a temporary position. Let me tell you right away, just so you understand the magnitude of my experience, that I was truly *obsessed* with this woman. This was no mere crush, this was something huge, feelings taking the form of a hot, wet gas that filled the bar and I had to move through it with my drink, wading through the fog of my heart. I had met Petra back in February, at the start of the rainy season, at another bar

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on an intensely crowded dance floor that throbbed with the weight of so many slamming boots. My friend Ashley shoved me into her. Again and again. To this day Petra thinks I asked my friend to do this, but it's not true. Ashley would get this look on her face and *wham* her hands shot out and I would go sailing into this woman who danced so good, kind of bouncy, but contained. She had her hands balled into fists and she shook them in a discoey way like maracas, and managed to look tough while doing so. After a little bit of the shoving, people got the idea that I was trying to start a pit so everyone started shoving. Girls were just careening across the floor, into the wall, spilling drinks, burning each other with their cigarettes. This was at The Stud, so lots of boys were dancing too. I would beat them up. For dancing like jerks, all shooting fists and skanking kneecaps coming up and hitting the poor girls who were already slamming the shit out of each other, it's true, but that was different. They were girls. I would skip around the dance floor twirling and kicking in my particular style, looking very caught up in the music but really strategizing. And aiming. *Pow*—my boot flew out and connected with this tall boy's kneecap. Then another boy, right in the tush. They'd leave the dance floor, or grab me by the shoulder. *You keep kicking me!* What? It was so loud in the bar. Bikini Kill, L7, fucking Joan Jett. *Girl* music. The boys had no right. *You keep kicking me!* What?! What?!

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Sorry! A light shrug. I'd go back to dancing, kick them in their asses when they turned their backs. Laugh, hahahaha. I was doing the goddess's work. A girl pulled me over, *I saw you kicking that boy. Thanks!* Once, a guy grabbed Candice like a fucking piñata and just spun her around, up high in the air because she is little. Just swinging her around. Candice *hates* to be touched. The guy ended up on the ground and I was on top of him, my fingers knotted in his hair, pounding his skull into the dance floor. Sweaty, my shirt off, hanging out my back pocket, I felt great.

But the night I met Petra I was being good. I was wearing this really weird dress, red, pretty bright, with a couple of black stripes. It was a knit dress, a sweater dress, tight with long sleeves lazily unraveling at the wrist. And I had this wig on my head, which was bald. A synthetic black wig, Cleopatra-style with a thick fringe of bangs that bounced on my forehead as I danced. They were playing that Pixies song that is so fast, I was trying to dance just as fast to it in my weird, kicky dance, really spastic, reaching up now and then to straighten the wig. The dress was so hot, stupid for dancing, but it looked good. I looked different that night, so when Petra asked me to go home with her I felt like an imposter. Maybe if she knew how I really looked, bald head like a sick bird, she would not want to take me home for sex. How could an attraction rooted in such insecurity not result in obsession?

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Petra had a truck and since I was her special guest that night, I got to sit in the front. In the back were a couple of dogs plus five or six girls I had surmised were Really Cool. They were very confident in their different fashions. I knew that one of them was in a band, and another was a stripper. I sat in the truck that smelled like dog, and fidgeted. All those girls knew Petra was taking me home to fuck me. They probably knew more about it than I did, in terms of what to expect.

Shortly after we arrived at her house, Petra pulled a knife on me. It was the scariest knife I had ever seen, a thick, jagged curve like a sinister smile, with a heavy black handle. *Do you like knives?* she asked. I Don't Know, I'm sure I whimpered. *I'm not going to hurt you*, she assured me, *I'm just going to scare you*. Sounded like a good plan. Petra passed me the knife so I could be on that end for a minute, feel its weight. It was very heavy, with that cruel, curving tip. There were things lodged inside my brain I had always figured would just have to stay there. Things I wasn't sure could stand to pass into the real world. Petra laid the knife to my throat and pressed it softly into the skin. She took the hooked tip and traced it down my neck, down to the dead end of my red sweater dress. *It's like a sexy Charlie Brown dress*, the boy at the thrift store had said. The front was laced up with red yarn that Petra worked at like a puzzle, pulling at the tangled thread so she could get at my tits. She placed the knife flat on my nipple and went at

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my throat with her teeth, all the while making these urgent little animal noises. Petra was really into the knife. I got the sense that I could have been any body beneath her, it was the knife that was the star of the show. I was really into *processing* the knife. Like, was I encouraging violence against women, was I “part of the problem,” was she going to get frenzied and just stick the thing into my ribs? It was a hunting knife, strong, made for ripping through gut and muscle and bone. I tried not to enjoy it too much. I would be an observer. I observed Petra. She was magnificent. She wasn’t so much a person as an event, a gigantic presence. Long knots of hair scraggled over her shoulders, black with some red staining it here and there. A sharp face and clear blue eyes. Petra was older than me. Who wasn’t? Thin lines fanned out from her eyes, and she was covered in tattoos, dark, murky claws swirling down her shoulders and curling under her tits like spindly fingers. Like someone spilled ink down her front, letting it make these precise, blurry paths. She put the knife away and we rolled around on her bed, banging into her dog, who was spread at the top of the futon, watching with her bored dog face.

Petra was fanatical about safe sex. She had a thick ball of latex gloves rolled up in each other, and she told me not to touch any part of her if I had my pussy on my fingers. I had never had safe sex with a girl before, but I acted like I knew

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what was up because I didn't want her to think I was diseased. I stretched the white clingy glove over my fingers, and I slid them one, two, three, four, up her cunt. *Put your fist up me.* What? I had read about this once, in a lesbian book. *Your fist.* God, the energy shooting off her chest was intense, she was a ball of electricity. This was the girl for me. This crazy girl with the crazy cunt that sucked my fist inside with a slow slurp. My whole hand. I saw my elbow, then my forearm, then her cunt. She had the fattest metal ring jammed through her clit hood. All you had to do was jiggle it and she went nuts. I thought about the bouncy way she danced and thought about this chunk of metal tugging on her down there. I thought about my hand that had disappeared into her hole and I thought about the quantum physics theory that once something leaves our view we cannot prove what has happened to it, or if it even exists. I think too much during sex, my mind just whirs with the whole new landscape of body spreading out beneath me. I was barely moving my theoretical hand. I was afraid of breaking Petra. *Hard*, she groaned, so I started up some small thrusts. I still couldn't see my hand. *Hard*, she groaned, insistent. *Really hard*. I started punching Petra, her insides, the part I couldn't see. Thump, thump, thump. My clingy latex fist hit up against some strong, female part of her. She writhed and played with her tits, punched the bed beneath her, howled. It was pretty incredible. Knife-wielding

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Petra, more a force of nature than a girl like me, impaled upon my humble hand. I was really happy. I tugged on her jewelry until she had me stop everything. I don't think she came. I don't even know if that was the point. My fist left her cunt with another wet sound. I didn't know what to do with it. It was the hand of god. I turned the glistening glove inside out and crawled back onto Petra. *What do you like?* she asked. Oh god, how the fuck do I know? I had no more reference points for sex. Petra had destroyed them. I had never had sex before. Not if this was sex. I wanted the knife again, but I just couldn't bring myself to ask for it. I Don't Know What I Like, I confessed. Petra had a shelf piled with instruments, black rubber things, leather, studs, stiff handles, thin straps. A perverse doctor's office. Especially with the gloves. Petra kneeled between my legs and tinkered around with my pussy. She tried to stuff her hand up it but there was no way that was going to happen. We fell asleep wrapped around each other, tightly smooshed together. My wig was tangled up in the sheets and her chin rested on my bald head. She had these piercings in her chin. They jutted out like sharp little fangs, and all night she ground her teeth and kept stabbing me in the head.

I can tell you more about Petra, but it's the aftermath I want to get to. We made out on a pool table at this really divey



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bar, and when we came up for air she told me she bought my poetry chapbook at this little cafe, and the poems were really intense. She couldn't see me anymore. She had a girlfriend vacationing in New Zealand. They could fuck other people but not have crushes, and she had a crush on me. I Have A Crush On You Too, I said. She drove me home in her truck. Then I saw her again at another bar and she asked if I wanted to go home with her. *I talked to my therapist about it*, she said, *and she said why couldn't it just be something light and fun and playful?* Yeah, Why Not, and I was in her bed again. Up in her loft. The walls were covered with pictures of Petra. With her dog and with her girlfriend, who was bleached blonde and really sex-radical. The girlfriend was a sex worker, and she did performances about sex, and she wrote about sex and talked about sex with a slight lisp from her tongue piercing. Me and Petra fucked. I had been so filled with regret after that last session with the knife, I knew it would never happen again and I wished desperately that I had gotten more into it. I was getting a second chance, and I still couldn't ask for it. The knife sat on the shelf with the other sex toys, gleaming its evil gleam. We did other stuff. When I launched my fist up her this time, I knew to do it hard. Petra can fist her own cooch. She told me. She can't really get the motion, though. That was the last time me and Petra did it. I guess she liked me too much, or she worried she would. So we hung out a

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lot. She had me come over to her house for dinner, and she fed me amazing vegetables, stuff you really had to use your hands for. We plucked petals from an artichoke and dunked them in thick melted butter. We tore into raw red peppers and peeled juicy fat pomelos. Her dog was there. She would get horny and Petra would stretch out her leather leg and the dog would hop up on her leather boot and grind. Petra laughed. I loved her. I don't know why she thought cutting off sex would extinguish the emotions. We were like boarding school girlfriends. In one last desperate act of seduction I wore the wig and a little majorette outfit to a party, and sat on her lap all night drinking tequila. She burned herself with cigarettes. On purpose. Held the smoking thing to her arm and gasped her little sex gasps. What a mystery she was. I was sitting on the lap of the sphinx. Unfortunately, Petra seemed immune to the majorette outfit's charm. It did smell like mothballs. She left the party with a quick hug.

Later, we would drive to the beach in her truck, and on the wet sand she would dance with all the dogs, let them dive and leap at her like she was the great dog god. We talked about books. When my twenty-third birthday came around, I was working two jobs, all morning at a courier company, taking orders on the computer, and all afternoon at an ineffectual anarchist labor union, managing the office. I didn't show up at the union on my birthday. Petra said she had a

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history of getting girls fired. She didn't work, and got her money through scams, dyke porn movies and occasional under-the-table work. For my birthday Petra took me for Thai food and then to the women's bathhouse on Valencia, where we sat naked in the steam and listened to this bitchy girl she knew go on and on about how one of her "slaves" was expecting too much emotionally, and the agreement was that the girl would just clean the house and that's it, do the floors and the dishes, and now she was just getting too needy and was about to get fired. I began to understand what I had gotten myself into. Petra's world wasn't my world. What had I been thinking? I watched her listen to the slave owner, her matted hair hanging damply. I still felt like an imposter. I wanted her so badly, my heart hung out of my chest like some hound-dog's tongue, pant, pant. We would see each other at bars and sit close and giggle. We'd go back to her loft and sleep together, no clothes, folded together. No sex. Then she stopped bringing me over and just drove me home in her truck after last call. Then came that final night, when I sloshed through the dark pumping bar with all the whirling girls. Petra was beside me and she was restless. Like she thought she had to be next to me but maybe she didn't want to. I was an obligation, the little sister she had to take around with her. On the dance floor in front of us was a girl moving like a belly dancer, gyrating her hips and extending her fingers like the wings of

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a bird. Petra was lusting after her. She wanted to take her home, I could feel it as thickly as I felt my own hopelessness. I was a lump beside her, a little pal. She couldn't cruise in front of me. We weren't going out but we sure were doing something. *I'm going home*, she announced. Yeah, Me Too. I tried to sound bored. We walked out of the bar. She had a leather cap on her head, all her scraggly hair poking out in tangles. Petra smelled bad. Maybe she never washed. Sour scalp, b.o. and pussy. My nose ate it up. Desire, I've been told, is all about stink. *Well... bye*, she said on the sidewalk. *You can catch a bus right over there*. She pointed to a shelter at the corner of Haight and Filmore. A quick hug and then her little strut up the street. I knew where to catch the fucking bus.

I dove onto a plastic seat and cried. I hated San Francisco. All the sex-radical girls and their slaves and their leather. I cried and wished for cigarettes. I thought I would run away. To Tucson, Arizona. I'd only just left the place. Flipped a penny when I found out my Tucson girlfriend had acquired a boyfriend. "Heads" was Javalinaland, the plot of lesbian separatist land out in the Arizona desert where I could build a shack out of scrap wood and dead cactus and spend a few months falling to the dirt with heat stroke, avoiding rattlesnakes and bonding with wimmin. "Tails" was San Francisco, where I could start smoking again and walk around lonely in the drizzle writing vague love poems in my head.

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It had come up tails, but I was losing my faith in the penny. Tucson would be bright and warm and slow. San Francisco was filthy. The rainy season had started and I'd be damp for months. In Tucson I would be dry, I could sit in a cafe and be far away from Petra. I would be in exile. I would need a Walkman. For the Greyhound.

I sank some coins into the pay phone. I had to let my friends know I was leaving. It was about two in the morning. Ashley's machine picked up. Ashley, I'm Going To Tucson. If You Wake Up And Get This, Can I Borrow Your Walkman? I called Ernesto. Ernesto, I'm Leaving. Called Vinnie. Good-bye, Vinnie. A bus came and I got on it. I arrived back at my bright little bedroom in the Mission, a small, carpeted square. All my money was in a hiking boot in my closet, a tight little bulge in the toe. I took about half of it, grabbed some clothes and stuffed them into my black army bag. I took tapes, but nothing that would remind me of San Francisco. I was out of my head and probably a little drunk. The light in my room was so bright, it was manic. I called Greyhound, How Much For A Bus To Tucson? *One way or round trip?* Outside my window I heard some noise on the street, a woman yelling. Hold On, I said to the Greyhound lady and threw the phone on the rug, flung open my window. I saw a car, some men trying to pull a woman inside. I grabbed one of my candles, a pink candle in glass I had bought to magically seduce Petra,

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and I hurled it out the window. Leave Her Alone! The glass cracked on the pavement and the people at the car all laughed. They were just kidding. The pink glob of wax rolled sadly into the gutter. I got back on the phone. Sorry, I said to the Greyhound lady, who now thought I was insane. Seventy-two bucks for a round-trip bus to Tucson. I'll Take It, I said. Who else did I have to call? My jobs, fuck them. The labor union was driving me nuts. I left a message on its machine, Sorry, I'm Going Nuts, I Have To Go Away. One of my roommates worked at my morning courier job. I left her a note to give to our boss: I Know These Are The Type Of Shenanigans That Get One's Ass Fired, But I'd Really Like To Work Full-Time When I Get Back. I called Gwynn to tell her I was running away, and she picked up the phone on the first ring. Gwynn, I'm Going To Tucson. *I'll come.* For Real? Oh, Gwynn was tragic. *Michelle, there's blood everywhere.* Gwynn sometimes cut herself. Not in a suicidal way, just when she was really sad, which was often. She'd been up all night digging into her arm with a razor. Over the girl in the apartment upstairs. Oh, I wanted Gwynn to come so badly. It changed everything. It would be an adventure. Gwynn was a warrior, she was deeply wounded and she was beautiful. And indecisive. *Oh, I don't know,* she said, picking crusty blood off her razor. She kept cursing as she nicked the tips of her fingers. Oh Gwynn, It Will Be So Good For You! *Where will we sleep?* I told her my

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friend Julisa would put us up, and if that fell through we could sleep outside, by the dried-up creek that ran through little tunnels beneath the city. I'd heard the Manson gang had hung out in those tunnels. Hideaways for outcasts. *Oh, I don't know.* Gwynn didn't like the idea of sleeping outside. It'll Be An Adventure, I promised. You Can Write About It. Gwynn was a poet.

I took a cab to her house, on the toughest block of the lower Haight where boys grabbed her ass and threatened her with pit bulls when she walked alone. I found her on her mattress with the yellow sheets, her arms slowly scabbing. There were brown smears by the pillow. What Happened? I asked, hugging her. *Justine*, she said sadly. I had been in love with Gwynn once. I had wanted to save her. Then I realized Gwynn wasn't meant to be saved. At least not by me. I got her out of the house, which I couldn't believe. Gwynn is difficult to impossible to inspire. She was just so sad. Her whole face hung with it, like sadness was her personal gravity. We walked to the Castro to catch a train. The morning was taking shape around us, the sky slowly brightening into the deepest blue. It was the color of hope. We stopped at a gas station for cigarettes. If I was going to take a Greyhound, I was going to smoke. Romantic cigarettes on the side of the road. I was thinking that maybe I should leave for good. I'd never meant to stay in San Francisco. By the time we got to

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the Greyhound station Gwynn had decided to go to Oregon. Oregon? What The Fuck Is In Oregon? *Eugene*, she said. A town, not a person. Oh Gwynn, I sighed weakly. I knew how hopeless it was to persuade her. My energy was waning. I hadn't slept, I was in the same clothes I'd worn to the bar, my feet squishy from sweat and last night's rain. Before we'd left the ticket counter Gwynn decided not to go anywhere at all. We bought Cokes from the machine and smoked cigarettes while waiting for my bus to board. I'm Going To Get A Tattoo, I said. A Heart. Right Here. I touched my chest. *Oh Michelle*, Gwynn said mournfully. *Don't get a tattoo that's going to remind you of a girl.* The heart I wanted came from a deck of fortunetelling cards. A real heart, not a valentine. I got on my bus. It wasn't so crowded, I got two seats for myself. I stretched out to sleep and woke up in total greenery. Outside, the earth rolled gently and there were lazy drooping trees and sunlight. This is where I belonged, this in-between place. I dozed back off. I could have stayed on that bus forever, someone else driving, always on my way, never arriving.

In a Burger King parking lot I smoked my romantic Camels. A guy from Florida told me he was on his way to Phoenix, to quit heroin. Greyhound is the coach of the desperate. He had his own cigarettes to smoke. We sat in our stories and stared out the windows. I realized I hadn't brought any socks. My boots, these plasticky things I had bought at



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Payless when I was vegan, were falling apart. My toes felt pruny. It took sixteen hours to get to Tucson, we pulled into town around four in the morning. Half-asleep, I stumbled with my stuff to the Hotel Congress, where the Dillinger gang once hid out and was nearly caught by the law. One of the outlaws was shot out front and died in a puddle of blood. It was a hotel for fugitives. I got a room in the hostel part of the building. An old room. I imagined a band of bank robbers holed up behind the plaster walls. Army-style bunk beds and a porcelain sink with a hazy mirror. White toilet and a narrow shower, a radiator to hang my soaked socks on. I climbed up into the top bunk and stretched out, wondering if I was legally allowed inside the Hotel Congress, and if there was a warrant for my arrest in the state of Arizona. When I'd lived here I got in a brawl with a bouncer at the downstairs nightclub. It was my ex-girlfriend's fault. She had been out on the curb waiting for me and heard the bouncer call some boy a fag, so she started arguing with him. By the time I came out the scene was really heated. Liz was a compulsive liar and loved to start fights, but I really believed in Liz, so I hopped right in, harassing the bouncers, calling them macho men, mocking them with a swishy little tap dance and muscle-man moves. They were trying to kick us off the sidewalk, but we were waiting for our friends. Liz sarcastically applauded their toughness, clapping her hands about an inch from the big

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one's face, and finally he grabbed her and went to push her off the curb. Instantly I was on him, kicking with my patent leather pumps. I got him good in the crotch. I tore at his shirt and his hair, until his friends grabbed me in this police hold and I couldn't fight anymore. This was life with Liz. Violence could erupt at any minute like a big song and dance number, a musical of seething rage. *Y'all wish you had penises, huh?* chuckled the bouncer. He was real rednecky-looking. They called the cops on us, assault, so we called the cops back on them, assault. We went home. The police cars pulled up to the orange trees outside our quaint southwestern adobe, and the trustfund deadhead roommates went crazy trying to hide the bong and the pipes. Three mustached men leaned coolly in our doorway. I showed them the bruises on my arms from the redneck's fingers. I was wearing this flowered little dress. *Look at her!* Liz shrieked. *She's ninety-eight pounds, you think she assaulted them?* My little sister, who was visiting, cried in the corner. It was too much for her. This was her vacation. Me and Liz split town before our court date.

When I woke up in the morning my socks had dried into stiff boards on the radiator. I would have to go without. I put on some shorts and a flannel I regretted once I left the hotel. Tucson just never gets cold. It was February and had to be about ninety. I dragged my stuff over to Julisa's house.

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Her house was beautiful. A little adobe with a porch that cradled cats and futons and hammocks. Majestic cacti and tall stalks of okra grew in her garden. It was magical. Julisa was happy to see me. She was this voluptuous, earthy chick who threw potlucks for Earth First! and worked at a day-care center. I went to work with her and hung out with the kids. They thought I was a boy. I had no hair, I'd left my wig in San Francisco. With Petra. I couldn't stop talking about her, and Julisa wanted to know everything. She was curious and fascinated and judgmental and then insisted she wasn't being judgmental. We were eating cheap delicious food at a Guatemalan restaurant. *You had rough sex?* she asked plainly. Yeah. *You liked it?* Yeah. *I do not like rough sex*, she said to her boyfriend, a hippie. He didn't either. That's Great, I said, and drank my beer. Around the corner from Julisa's house was a little tattoo shop called Denim & Doilies. I went there with my little fortunetelling card and some money. The tattoo guy's name was Picasso, this big biker guy, his hair held back with a studded piece of leather. *Now that's a real heart*, he said appreciatively. He took me around back to the private room with the reclining chair, and stuck the outline of the heart onto me with some Speed Stick. I had no reference point for tattoos, I didn't know how much they should cost or what they should feel like. Now I know that Picasso ripped me off and he was sadistic, digging the needle in deeply. I

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held on to a stuffed kittycat with a pierced septum and tore the fur from it. It really hurt. I felt the stinging in my nipple, which Picasso was trying to get me to pierce. One Thing At A Time, I said. He took frequent cigarette breaks, and I talked about Petra. He brought in some magazines to distract me. I picked up one of the modern primitive ones. That's Her, I said numbly, staring at the cover. That's Petra. She looked sharp and dangerous, her fanged chin jutting out like a dare. *No shit!* Picasso called out to his wife, a skinny, chain-smoking biker lady. *That's her girlfriend*, he bragged. *Petra!* the lady cooed. She's Not My Girlfriend, I pouted. Petra was never my girlfriend. *Did you, like, fuck her?* I nodded. *She fucked her*, he told his wife. *Petra!* she exclaimed again. *Do you know Zanya too?* She turned to a photo of another pierced and tattooed naked girl, Petra's friend. Yeah, I Know Her, I said wearily. *Zanya!* she shrieked. *Zanya's her favorite*, said Picasso.

You could get stuff pierced at Denim & Doilies, by this really hip, good-looking fag. His ear was a slinky of stainless steel, his hair was long and dark, he was about seventeen and he was already much too jaded for Tucson. He invited me to a party the next night. *A dyke party*, he said with a little tinkle in his voice. When Julisa came to the shop to pick me up, she had the boy give her a tour of the piercing area. He showed us all the gleaming needles and I thought of Petra's knife. *So you stick these into people?* Julisa asked. *Oh, yeah*, said the

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boy. *Grrrrrreat*, she said. Julisa had this really sarcastic way of saying “great.” She looked at the pictures on the wall, cut out from magazines. *They chain themselves together by their belly-buttons?* she asked, pointing to one. *That’s not codependent?* Before I went to bed that night I covered the new tattoo with Saran Wrap, so the goo wouldn’t get all over Julisa’s sheets. It nearly looked like a real heart, hanging rawly outside my ribs the way I wanted, a mess of wet red and pus and salve. Gory. But when I woke up in the morning it looked like I’d been shot in the chest. I’d sweated out bunches of the ink. *Why’d you do that?* Picasso cried when I called the shop. His masterpiece. He’d been so proud. *Now you can tell everyone you own a Picasso*, he’d said, taping a square of gauze to my chest. And now I had ruined it.

That was the morning Julisa was taking me to a rodeo protest. There were all these kids at her house, kids from PETA, Earth First!, Voices for Animals. I used to protest the rodeos when I lived in Tucson. We stood with our signs and were abused by the cowboys. At one point Julisa lay down on her back and had us hog-tie her. *I want to know what it feels like*, she explained to the crowd. Her skirt came up around her waist, showing her white cotton underwear. The cowboys didn’t know what to make of it. It was performance art. Actually, it made me think of sex. Petra had ruined me. That night I went out for drinks with my other Tucson friend, Laura.

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Like Julisa, Laura was theoretically bisexual. She always had a boyfriend, but her friends were all dykes. We drank beer at this bar that had a big candy dish full of free cigarettes. Free buffet, too. The living is easy in Tucson, if you can find a job. These kids were all students. Laura's new boyfriend was from Israel and was leading a toast in honor of a Jewish holiday. What's The Holiday? *Well, these people were going to kill us but we killed them instead.* That's Excellent, I said, and toasted. A girl sitting next to me kept hitting on me harder and harder the more she drank. She was a medical student at the university. She gave me cigarettes, eventually she was giving me hickies, chewing on my neck right there at the table. I still had the hazy ghost of a hickey from Petra, and I figured if I could keep getting it touched up by other girls it'd be like it never went away. *I have beer in my car*, said the girl, so I went. I don't remember her name, it started with a vowel. Let's call her "Edie." Edie had a six of Newcastle in her back seat but no way to open them. I ended up breaking the neck of one on the curb. We strained it for glass with our teeth as we drank. *Come in the car*, Edie urged. *I Have To Meet Someone In An Hour*, I said. The boy from the tattoo shop, who was going to take me to the dyke party. *Don't worry, I'll drive you*, she said. *Come on, come in.* It was a Camaro. I figured I should do it. For artistic reasons. I climbed into the car and Edie climbed on top of me and we made out. She had a Luther Vandross

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tape playing and she was singing it to me and it was really gross. What did she want me to do? Stare longingly at her? Somehow Edie found a way to kneel on the floor of the front seat and she got my pants down and put her face in my cunt. I kept thinking about how I was in a Camaro. I was doing it for Petra. She would really appreciate it. She did recently tell a crowd of people *Michelle had sex in a Camaro once*, and for a second I had no idea what she was talking about. Then I remembered. Edie. Edie, I Have To Go. I was wearing this necklace made of small fragrant beads of myrrh, and in our fumbling it snapped and fell between the car seats. *Oh*, Edie moaned. *I'm going to find that some day and it's going to make me really sad*. Jesus. She was worse than me. Edie drove me to the tattoo shop and walked me inside. I'm sure she was hoping I'd bring her to the party but I did not want her hanging on me all night. *I'm just another one of your conquests, huh?* she demanded as we approached the shop. *I'm just another notch on your belt*. She was pretty drunk. The piercing boy closed up the shop and I said my goodbyes to sulking Edie. I never saw her again. Since the piercing boy was only seventeen years old I was elected to buy liquor for him and his friend. They wanted Zima. Really? You Guys Drink Zima? They insisted it was good. We were late getting to the party, which was a birthday bash for this girl, Daisy, who had phenomenal hips. I've never seen anything like it. She was very sexy. A few

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girls were in tuxedos, and Piercing Boy abandoned me pretty quickly for some other boy. I recognized a couple of girls from when I had lived in Tucson and started a Queer Nation, but they were involved in their own romantic intrigues, rushing in and out of rooms, huddling and confiding. No one was very interested in me. There was a lot of liquor and food, so I sat at the table and drank vodka and picked at the remnants of a chocolate coconut cake that was divine. I wrote a poem about Petra and her stupid girlfriend, and this lumberjacky girl in a baseball hat came over to see what I was writing. I told her all about Petra and her dumb girlfriend. I Guess I Shouldn't Be So Mean About Her Girlfriend, I confessed. *It's ok*, she said authoritatively. *It probably keeps you from turning your anger and criticism inward*. She was a therapist. I hated her. I thought we would never leave the party. Dykes are really sceney everywhere, not just in San Francisco. Anybody who doesn't think so is just part of the scene. I went home to Julisa's. She had a futon in every room in the house. I grabbed the one on the porch and slept outside in the warm cactus air.

I made a friend on the Greyhound back to San Francisco. Tony from Texas. I didn't ask for him, he chose me. He had long, permed hair and had been playing keyboard in a metal band before hopping the Greyhound. His girlfriend had just broken up with him, so he went to the McDonald's where she



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worked, intending to kill himself in the men's room, but then decided to go to California instead. He had twenty bucks and a bag of psycho-pharmaceuticals. He called them his happy pills. They were in a little brown paper bag, and he'd shake the bag and say, *Let me know if you get stressed. I got happy pills.* Every time the bus driver took a break Tony would hand me a cigarette. I didn't even have to ask. Carltons. At one stop the driver announced there was a snack truck in case we were hungry. Oh Great, I said sarcastically, Skittles. Tony went and bought me two bags of Skittles. Tony, You Don't Have Any Money! *Take the Skittles, Michelle.* He was my boyfriend. I thought about all the Edies and Tonys. I didn't want to be anybody's Petra. Or was I an Edie? I was tired. Tony had this great shirt, Bikers For Jesus. It had a big motorcycle and it said Pray to the Best or Die Like the Rest. I could have gotten him to give it to me. I thought about trading him my ACT UP shirt, since he was in San Francisco now. At the Greyhound terminal I put Tony on a bus to Haight Street and waved goodbye.

I saw Petra at The Stud, rolling her fists and shaking her clanging wallet chain to that Nine Inch Nails cover of that Rod Stewart song. Could she be wearing spurs on her boots? Was she that cool? I heaved a sigh. One of burden, not romance. Hey, Petra. I showed her my new tattoo. I Was In

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Tucson, I explained. *Cool*, she said. Maybe she hadn't noticed I was gone. Her girlfriend was back from her vacation down under. She was running around the bar with the slave owner from the sauna. They both had these Pebbles Flintstone ponytails on top of their heads. *I'm Tabitha*, she said, accosting me at the bar. *I just thought we should know each other*. She had this big, plasticky smile. Or maybe it was genuine. Yeah, I said, and shook her extended hand. She lingered awkwardly for a minute, and left. She looked a little disappointed.

# 2

Maybe I should tell you some more about Gwynn, sad sad Gwynn, the tortured poet who did not come to Arizona with me. Gwynn was an alcoholic, or had been once, I wasn't sure how the whole alcoholism, Twelve Step situation worked. Couldn't you simply have alcoholic periods, when you are sad or reckless and drinking for pathetic reasons, and then you get past it and cheer up and can drink again because it's so much fun to be drunk? Sobriety seemed a real stick-in-the-mud stance to take, but I guess drinking was a problem for Gwynn. It pushed her onto airplanes to follow different sad women from state to state. She had been to a few A.A. meetings in the Tenderloin, which just depressed her and increased her desire to drink, so she stopped showing up. Gwynn, she was always talking about wanting to be drunk