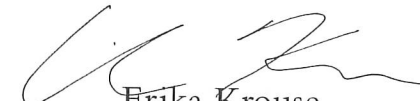


*I take this photo as evidence that, even at seven months, I was thinking about life's greater mysteries. My mother says it was gas.*

**Erika Krouse's** fiction has been published in the *New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Ploughshares*, and *Story*. Her collection of stories, *Come Up and See Me Sometime*, was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year and winner of the Paterson Fiction Prize. She is currently living in Boulder, Colorado, and working on a novel, or another collection, whichever is finished first.

## ALL OF ME

  
Erika Krouse

*You took the part  
That once was my heart,  
So why not take all of me?*

—*Simons and Marks*

About four months after my heart transplant, I came to the door with my towel wrapped around my waist, still wet from an aborted shower. Someone was pounding steadily, like a metronome. Nobody I knew visited me anymore. I was like an old man—suspicious, uncertain. The noise broke off as I swung the door open. A short girl with pink hair and a torn leather jacket stared at my chest with big eyes. I covered the scar as best I could with one hand. The girl pushed past me into my apartment, brushing my hip so that I had to grab the towel before it fell down. Her face had splotchy freckles and a corn-fed look underneath all the piercings. Her age was indecipherable.

“Hi,” I said.

She nodded at me.

“Um,” I said, “who are you?”

The girl walked over to my couch and sat quickly, crossing her legs. She wore red and white striped stockings. The street made noise behind me. There was still water on my chest, and I was getting cold in my towel.

“Can I help you?” I asked, finally shutting the door.

The girl clasped her hands together. A pretty old-fashioned gesture for someone with a bull's-eye tattooed on her neck. I glanced at the pizza boxes in the corner and the underwear on the floor. I hadn't had a woman in my apartment since I broke up with my ex-girlfriend a year ago. This girl followed my gaze and didn't say anything. I picked up the underwear and held it behind my back. "Do you speak English?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. She took off her shoes.

I looked at her empty shoes and said, "Wait right here." I hustled into my bedroom to change into a T-shirt and jeans, skipping boxers in my hurry. When I skidded back into the living room, the girl was spread all over the couch, like a growth. She didn't move when I slapped my hands together and said, "So...your name?"

"Lucy." Lucy balled up her jacket under one shoulder. I noticed a scar on her cheek, and a brownish one on her forearm. She wiped her nose on the scar and sniffled, suddenly. Was she crying? Girls like her didn't cry. She looked like if you punctured her, she'd bleed motor oil. But she was crying.

Her nose stuffing up, she launched a story about her boyfriend, a man named Chucky Thor ("his real name," she insisted until I nodded) who rode a motorcycle. He was my age, thirty-five, a Scorpio. Chucky Thor was a gentle man, she said, but he had a little bit of a cocaine "thing" and a drinking "issue." He also had a master's degree in Chinese Studies and a yellow car, long like a banana, filled with flyers for the cat he had lost the year before. Chucky Thor had insomnia. Chucky Thor had sulfa allergies.

Lucy met him a few years ago at a karaoke bar infested with bikers. He was pissing drunk, standing with a bunch of other wasted Harley dudes. When their eyes met, he had his thin arm around a fat, hairy biker, singing roughly, "I've got a brand new pair of roller skates, you've got a brand new key." She and Chucky Thor fell instantly in love. "Destiny," she told me.

I tried several times to interrupt, but Lucy raised her voice over mine. In December, Chucky Thor crashed on his motorcycle with Lucy riding in back. He landed on his head, exclusively on his head.

The rest of his body was pretty sound, but his brains were mashed potatoes. The doctors in the hospital put him on a respirator. Lucy was also banged up, but she had been wearing leathers and a helmet. His helmet.

Lucy waited by Chucky Thor's bedside for a week, barely sleeping. At first she talked to him, reading aloud or whispering endearments. Then she fell silent near the third day. On the sixth day, she took a safety pin and jabbed him hard in the hand. Then in his leg, his feet, even his neck. His eyelids didn't even twitch.

Lucy spent another week trying to locate his meager family, and then gave up. The doctor told her that Chucky Thor would never speak again, would never walk, think, feed himself, or control his bowels. She said, "Pull the plug," and then passed out.

By now I was just staring at Lucy, who had become animated during this story. I could tell that this was, in some ways, the story of her life. Her cheeks were pink, and she was breathing fast. I said, "I'm very sorry, Lucy."

Lucy said, "Thanks."

"What a terrible thing," I said. "Awful. I can't imagine."

Lucy looked down at her lap.

"Jeez," I said.

She nodded.

"So, um, what does this have to do with me?" I asked.

Lucy's head was in her hands. I listened to her breathing as she rubbed her eyes for a while. Then she looked up. She put her hand on my knee. Her eyes were red, but her expression, when I looked through all the crap covering it—chains, makeup, jewelry—was kind.

"Well," she said. "You have his heart."

This new heart doesn't respond like my old one. With Lucy there on the couch, it still kept a regular beat, while my mind struggled to compensate. I pushed her hand off my knee and covered my chest with my hand, instinctively.

Lucy still wanted to talk. She fumbled with a cigarette, her hands shaking. "At first there was just numbness, you know? Numbness,

with sobbing. Now I can't stop thinking about him. And how you have the last piece of him." Even with a cigarette in her mouth, she had very good diction. Polite. I wanted to tell her not to smoke in my apartment.

"Listen, Lucy? You want coffee or something?"

Lucy shook her head, pink hair flying everywhere.

"This is a little... odd," I stumbled. "I don't know what to say. I mean, how do I know you're telling the truth? I don't know you. No offense, but maybe this is just some weird scam for my... ah..."

Lucy stubbed out a cigarette on my sandwich plate. She glanced at my plywood coffee table, my dreadlocked carpet.

It was true. I had nothing to offer.

Four months before, I had collapsed outside a convenience store. I was unconscious when they wheeled me in, and I stayed that way until after the surgery three days later. I was still fuzzy when they explained the condition to me, post-surgery. After all the talking and diagrams, all I understood was that mine had been a weak piece of machinery, a Darwinian mistake. I had a rotten heart. They helicoptered a new one across town and sutured it into me. Replacement flesh. That's all I knew about it.

Now I told Lucy, "I still don't understand why you're here."

"I wanted to meet you." She lit another cigarette and exhaled smoke. "You're interesting to me."

"What about the other people? Why don't you go find his kidneys or something?"

"I went through a lot of trouble to find you. Besides, I don't care about his kidneys."

"A heart is just a muscle," I said.

"He loved me."

"You don't love with the actual heart, Lucy."

"What do you love with, then?" she asked sharply. "Yeah, Steve, tell me all about love." She looked exhausted.

I opened my mouth and shut it. "Anyway, I... feel for you and all, but it's over. This is my heart now."

"No," she said quietly. "It's not."

"Do you want it back?" I snapped. Lucy slitted her eyes at me. I felt threatened, as if she could reach inside and rip my chest open. We glared at each other for a little while.

"He looked kind of like you," she finally said. "But I think he would have been a little disappointed in your attitude."

I shook my head to clear it. "Listen. Lucy." I softened my voice a little. "I am really, truly sorry." I went to the fridge and took out two beers, holding one out to Lucy.

Lucy accepted a beer.

I did feel bad for her, of course, but after doing nothing but recover for months, I was having trouble concentrating on anything but myself. I mean, that guy, this girl—they were nothing to me. I glanced at Lucy's solid, silent body. She was looking out the window at the brick wall next to my building. Every now and then she would breathe in and out, quickly.

I finally said, "I'm going to watch the game now, okay?"

Nothing from Lucy.

I switched on the television.

Lucy didn't drink her beer. I felt her turn her head to watch me. I watched the screen.

I drank my beer.

After about five minutes of this, I couldn't stand it anymore and switched off the television. I leaned forward and pressed my hands together. "Okay. What exactly do you want, Lucy? Money? Because I don't have any."

She didn't move except to push her lip out. She said, "You have Chucky Thor's heart, and I'm going to make sure you take care of it."

I laughed a little, shaking my head. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah?"

"I'm moving in," Lucy said.

Of course I told her no, but Lucy picked the lock the next day while I was at the doctor's office. When I came home, Lucy looked up from the television with a bright "Hi!" Boxes were stacked in a corner of

the living room and a turkey roasted in the oven. I tried to imagine kicking her out, closing the door on her face as she stood there, cradling a half-cooked turkey. Or should I keep the turkey? How long do you let those things cook, anyway? I didn't have it in me. So I said, "I shower at 8 a.m. Stay out of my way."

Lucy took some getting used to. Her habits. I had never lived with a woman before, besides my mother. Lucy not only smoked constantly, she would do things like ash her cigarette into the cuffs of her pants. Her orange pants. Her purple pants, the green cuffs of her shiny shirts. Sometimes it hurt to look at her.

Then there was the cocaine. Lucy snorted it about once a week. There it was on Saturday afternoons, coating the mirror Lucy had taken down from the wall and ripped out of its frame. Her little silver straw poking out of her button nose. I wondered where she got the money for all that cocaine, but she said, "I do trades." I didn't want to know.

Her constant colds. That girl had the constitution of a bowl of soup. She kept infecting me, since my anti-rejection meds reduced my immune system. She sneezed in alarm, opening her eyes right after to check on me. Sometimes I would clutch my chest and fall over, just to screw with her.

Lucy's diet consisted of sugar and caffeine. I've never seen a human being put so much sugar into a cup of coffee. I've never seen a human being eat so many cookies on a weekly basis. But she baked, you know? There was something about seeing an apron on over all that junk she called clothes. I had forgotten that ovens were used for anything other than storage space. I had kept ski boots in there, files, old canned goods. The first time Lucy preheated the oven, my tax returns caught fire.

Sometimes she decided to change all her piercings. She'd attack her left eyebrow, her navel, her lip and nose with a pair of pliers. When she was finished, she looked the same, but a little pinker and worse for wear and tear.

Lucy ate salted Crisco sandwiches.

Lucy drank caffeinated water.

Lucy had an irrational fear of small coins and buttons. "I'm like the Amish," she said. "Except I like zippers."

"Just like the Amish," I said.

Lucy slept on the hide-a-bed couch in the living room. From inside my bedroom, I listened for noises out there, feeling guilty, rationalizing with myself. After all, she didn't even pay rent. She did buy groceries sometimes, and she cleaned the toilet bowl before it even turned orange, which was great.

Lucy worked three days a week at a homeless shelter, making all the Christmas donations stretch the year around. She said it was like putting together a puzzle. She had to figure out how to feed forty people with three boxes of matzo, two cans of peas, and twelve pounds of coleslaw. "What do you do with one can of creamed pumpkin? One? What do you do with wasabi powder? I make a lot of soup. It doesn't taste good, but I think it's got to be healthy, with all the junk that's inside it," she said. Lucy had twelve cookbooks. She read them in the evenings, staring off into space occasionally, adding up ingredients. She rode her bicycle to work with garlic bulging out of her pockets. Garlic made all the difference, she said. They had forty-eight frozen turkeys in their freezers.

I didn't invite Lucy out on the rare occasions I went to a party or bar. I wasn't ready to have a girlfriend. Especially one I had never even kissed. Sometimes I felt a little frisky, and I'd look at Lucy sitting next to me on the couch, watching a movie with her fingers crammed in her mouth. Then I changed my mind.

But she was so small-town, kind of homey. She made butter-and-honey crackers and ate them, honey dripping all over her chin. She never swore. She said, "Shucks." She knitted me a hat out of yarn, although it was early spring. Bright red. I was getting used to her ways.

A heart can live four to six hours outside a body. During that time, what does it experience? Does it know it's been dispossessed? Does it suffer the feeling of abandonment? Does it have any memory at all?

Ever since the operation, I've had strange cravings. For example, chicken fingers. I can't get enough of them. I always hated them, insist-

ing that chickens don't have fingers. And I drink light beer now. Ever since the arrival of microbrews, I had forgotten that there was such a thing as light beer, "Lite" beer. But I find myself ordering it in bars.

Another thing—women. I threw away the picture of my ex-girlfriend I had been carrying around in my wallet. Kathy. She must have wondered why I stopped calling her, after dialing her number and letting her hang up on me for so long. I even saw her on the street with her new boyfriend. I felt nothing. I asked her, "How about them Broncos?" and shook the guy's hand.

Kathy said, "You seem . . .," and then stopped.

I said, "Oh, I had some health problems. Lost some weight. Gained it back. Back to normal."

"No, something else."

"You look great, Kathy, really, super. Just great. Happy."

Kathy frowned.

As they walked away, I heard the boyfriend say, "He doesn't seem like *such* a bad guy."

Even though I wasn't such a bad guy, I wasn't feeling too good.

Organ recipients usually live less than nine years, post-operation. It's not because the heart dies. A heart is a simple thing. It pumps. It's the meds, the anti-rejection drugs. They kill you. They also make you hairy, with warts on your feet and hands. I trembled. My kidneys hurt. I took twelve pills every morning, and ten each night. Sometimes I'd vomit from all the pills, and then I'd have to guess how much my body had absorbed and how much I threw up, and take extra.

This heart has a couple of dents, but it's a good heart, a fine heart. It could last forever. But I did notice a difference after the operation, even after I healed. My chest felt heavier. It took some time to settle. Kind of the way your bite changes after you get a filling. There was much anxiety over this heart, since it was my only shot. You don't get a freshly killed heart every day. There are lists. The thing is, someone has to be in your spot—dying—except just right before you.

It never escaped me that I'm alive because that guy isn't.

I say it's fate, it's for the best. But just as history is always written by the victor, the words "for the best" are always spoken by the survivor.

Still, I repeat those words often, every time I do some little good in the world. When I pick up litter, or when a baby gives me a smile, or when someone says, "Steve, you just made my day." Then I whisper it to myself. *It was for the best.*

But it doesn't make me feel less strange, like this life is a loaner. I tend not to wish for better things. I have a heart I'm still making payments on.

About a month after Lucy moved in, I got a job with my friend Henry. He was surprised to hear from me after so long, saying, "I can use you right away. A fifty-yard footbridge and a big deck for a rich lady on a ranch outside town. Eight a.m. tomorrow." He gave me the address. Henry's a big black guy who has a pierced cheek because he'd always wanted dimples. He's fattish, strongish. We've been friends for three years. A year ago Henry fired me because I couldn't drive a nail into a board in one blow. He probably felt sorry about all that now.

The next day, I showed up fifteen minutes early with a Styrofoam cup of tea, face raw from a new shave with an old razor. I felt cold and a little wobbly, but okay. It was an enormous place, with a cabin-style mansion, stables, a pristine barn, and acres of high pasture, snow crusting random edges. Nothing looked like it had ever been used for practical purposes. The stables held no animals in them. The fields were fallow. Rich people.

They wanted the bridge to cross a little human-made babbling brook (they had installed a water pump so it would babble), and one shallow corner of a duck pond. They had bought ducks with brilliant jewel-green heads and clipped their wings. I asked Henry if that was legal and Henry said, "Anything's legal if you've got money."

The architect had made a mess. The plans were interesting, mostly because the bridge as designed would never actually hold weight. Henry argued with the lady. "I *like* the design," she pouted. She was wearing an embroidered denim jacket and white cowboy boots, flecked with thin tongues of mud.

Henry said, "Then I hope you like swimming." While they argued, I reviewed and stacked the materials. After not working for so long,

the wood felt good through my gloves. Familiar, comforting. When you don't work for a long period of time, the thought of it becomes intimidating. But doing it just felt nice, simple. All the pressure-treated lumber was stacked on a blue tarp, the nasty chemical-green clashing with the pine needles. I organized it, then I scoped out the area. The ground sank under my boots, dead grass rotting under patchy snow. Then Henry called me over and asked my opinion and we discussed the design together, which made me feel good because I'm not a real carpenter like him. The air was raw and damp until the sunshine cleared it out. We revised the plans, arguing fine points, measuring the land.

Driving home that night, I felt normal for the first time in a while. I was tired. I had worked all day long. I was coming home from my job. My job. And there, inside my apartment, was a girl. Technically. Waiting for, well, for me.

I owe the hospital one hundred ninety-seven thousand dollars. With all the drugs and checkups, my medical bills just get worse each month. I send the hospital all my extra money. It's not enough. They send back an invoice, with some of the right-hand numbers crawling ever upward. I worry about it a lot.

Henry says, "Man, let it go. What are they going to do? Repossess?"

Chucky Thor was the only child of dead parents. Lucy said that he was quiet and shy. He loved drugs, but mostly he loved the ritual of drugs—the carving of cocaine into lines, the rolling of the joint. He sometimes crossed himself—forehead, chest, left, right—for no good reason. Lucy said that he had almost gone to law school and was a great believer in justice. He would talk about it the way some people talked about freedom or love.

In my old life, I used to pick up Kathy's hamster Poopsy and throw him across the room. Not at a wall or anything, and pretty low along the ground. But still. Poopsy would roll and roll and then roll onto his feet, and run fast, and maybe lose himself, or maybe just lie there, stunned. His flat ass wiggling under him. I laughed at this. Kathy cried when I did it, when I made her choose between us.

I had gotten fired from every job I ever had. I got fired from a job where all I had to do was chase a broom around. Unreliable, they said.

Once I punched a bartender in the nose because my drink was weak.

Lucy said that Chucky Thor believed that a person only gets so many heartbeats in his life. A fixed number. So Chucky Thor never got angry or exercised. He didn't want to use up his heartbeats.

"But he snorted cocaine," I said. "But he rode motorcycles."

"Yeah," Lucy said. "They're worth it."

Which was weird, because for the first time in my life, I wanted a motorcycle. And I wanted to sleep with Lucy. I didn't know why. I thought about her all the time. She was like a loose tooth to me.

One day Henry noticed my lunchbox lying on the ground. Lucy had bought it for me. It was black, and if I held it a certain way I could hide the King Kong sticker on the front. Lucy fixed it each morning, packing me a peanut-butter sandwich wrapped in wax paper, an apple, a little bag of Cheetos, and a thermos full of decaf. Each thing had its own compartment. Carrying it every day, I felt like a little kid, but in a good, if ashamed, way.

When Henry saw the King Kong sticker, I was worried he would make fun of me, but he just said, "It's cool."

Abruptly, I told him everything. The girl, the confusion, all that. He just listened and nodded his head. I kept talking as Henry poured concrete mix and water onto a tarp. We each took an end and pulled it back and forth, mixing the concrete, then pouring it into the footings. Then we placed the posts in the concrete. We leaned against them, our hands smooth against the rough materials. We got out our lunches, sat down and ate. The whole time, me talking, Henry nodding.

When I finally wound down, Henry said, mouth full, "It sounds like love, son."

"No!" I said. "No."

He swallowed. "A new heart. Wild. How does that feel? Having a piece of somebody else inside you?"

"A little awkward. I'm always kind of wondering what it'll do."

Henry was quiet for a second. Then he said, "I wonder if that's the way women feel during sex."

We both thought about that.

"Anyway," Henry said, "you also got a girlfriend out of it."

"No, Henry. Not her." She was nothing like Kathy. Kathy had floral stationery and wore silk blouses. Lucy dressed like a cartoon character. She bit her toenails. But Lucy's was the face in my head.

"What exactly is wrong with her, man? She seems to like you. Packs you *lunch*." Henry looked at his cold slice of leftover pizza, the cheese hardened into clots. He dropped it into his lunch sack.

I shook my head. "You've got to see this girl. I mean, she's a piece of work."

"That's right," Henry said, packing up his leftovers. "You never did like work."

I stared at him. "I do now," I said. "I do fucking now."

"Okay," he said, a little sheepish, and threw me my tools. "Prove it."

Anyway, I liked this bridge. It was going to be a long bridge, winding around the property, pretty useless. The lady kept changing the plans. I think she liked having us around. The lakebed was mostly dry in the drainage area, and the ducks swam right up to the barrier as if they were checking on our progress.

I wish I could explain the beauty of it—a hand on wood, fitting two pieces together that have been crafted to match. Finding that some rules do, in fact, apply. That some mistakes can be fixed.

In my old life, I had told Kathy that she should lose weight. I asked her to put on more makeup when we went out with my friends. Sometimes I did this thing where I treated her extra special nice, then the next day I was very polite, so *polite*, it made her cry. I did it to see how much she loved me, and then I dumped her.

These things seemed so stupid now. That night, Lucy fell on her bicycle and needed three stitches. I took her to the hospital and held her squeaky hand while her forehead beaded up with sweat. The mushy skin of her knee wiggled around under the doctor's finger, the needle looping in and out of it.

I wondered what it would be like to be a father.

I wrote Kathy a letter and paid her back the three hundred dollars I owed her. I didn't mention that I owed her money, did I? I thanked her and added an extra fifty bucks as interest. I apologized for everything I had done, listing out everything I could think of. Every single mistake. Then I put a stamp on it and dropped it in a blue mailbox on a blue day. Watched it slip from my hand into the slot, irretrievable. Headed for the world. It didn't feel too bad. No. It felt good.

One Saturday night, I watched Lucy with her new cocaine purchase spread over the mirror, her razorblade carving it slowly.

I asked her, "Why do you snort cocaine?"

"I don't know." She looked up. "It's just something I do. I need ritual in my life."

"You could go to church," I said, and we both smiled.

"It's only once a week, anyway," Lucy said.

"Don't you worry about getting addicted?"

"You can't be completely independent. We're all addicted to food, water." She looked at me quickly and then said, "You're dependent on your meds."

"They keep me alive," I said.

"They're also killing you," she said.

"Yeah." I looked at the cocaine quietly. Then I said, "Hey, forget that stuff. Let's go out on a date." There, it was said and done, yes or no.

Lucy looked up. She had a big pimple on her cheek. "What?"

"Out on the town. Put on your party dress." I was kind of nervous, smacking my fist into my palm a couple of times. "It'll be fun," I said.

"A date," Lucy said. Her fingers loosened on the razor blade. "Okay," she said, setting down the mirror. "Um...you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure," I said, unsure. Lucy shrugged. I went into my bedroom to give her a chance to change her clothes.

I'd like to say that it was like one of those movies where the freaked-out girl transforms herself into something all sweet and sexy, like *The Breakfast Club* or something. But she didn't. When I came out of my



bedroom, Lucy was still Lucy. "That's a cool dress," I said. It was yellow, with green tile-like patterns all over it.

"I think I look like a kitchen," she said, looking down.

"Really? Then why did you put it on?"

"I like kitchens," she said.

We went to a movie, then dinner. A date in reverse. Lucy was quiet, acting strange until she said, right after we ordered our dinners, "I guess I've never been on a date before. A real one, I mean."

I stared. Lucy was twenty-nine.

"They just kind of kiss me or something, first. Or we have sex. Or they fall in love with me. It's never like this."

"Is this bad?"

"No," she said.

Lucy told me that she grew up on a sheep farm in eastern Colorado in a rural town named Nunn. Apparently there was this big water tower with absolutely nothing around it besides pasture and the occasional cow. A stray chicken or two. Stenciled all over the water tower was the town slogan: "Watch Nunn Grow." As a teenager, Lucy would drive out there and spend hours sitting in the field and looking at it. In order to leave town, she had to pass a billboard that said, "Jesus. Every knee will bend, including yours."

When she told me these things, pink hair made sense. I told Lucy about my childhood in the South, where I had simultaneously decided, at age eight, to become both a vegetarian and a veterinarian. It was rough. Down there they had this thing called "Meat & Three" in most of the restaurants. You get your choice of one type of meat and three different vegetables, which they also made out of meat. Potatoes and bacon, corn and ham, like that.

"How did you manage?" Lucy asked.

"I scraped stuff off until I gave up at age twelve."

"Sounds hard," Lucy said.

"It was okay."

"That takes a lot of discipline," she said.

"I had good intentions. Originally," I said.

I didn't touch her except for when I was opening her car door and

our shoulders brushed. When we got home, Lucy went to the bathroom and changed into her pajamas right away. They had pictures of Wonder Woman all over them. She pulled out the hide-a-bed. I wasn't sure what to do. Lucy didn't look at me. She got under the covers while I clutched a beer bottle in the kitchen. I decided to err on the side of fear, so I washed a dish, took my pills, and then headed for my bedroom. As I swung through the doorway, I heard Lucy say something. "What?" I asked, doubling back.

"Thanks," she said. "Mumblemumble lovely time."

Then I figured what the hell, and I walked over to the hide-a-bed, the side Lucy was on. I leaned over her. She looked up at me, horrified. I swooped down and kissed her wrinkled-up little forehead. Then I retreated, hands up in surrender position, and went to bed.

The cocaine stayed on the mirror in two little white lines the whole next day, and the next. And the next. Then it was gone.

Every autumn, sap flows out of the knots in the ceiling wood beams of my apartment. It pools on the floor in gummy blobs, or drips on my head. The building is fourteen years old, but the wood still pushes its blood around because, even dead, all it knows is the logic of seasons.

I had begun taking Lucy out more regularly. Weekend nights, and Wednesdays. After the first night, I never touched her at all. We went to a play, dinner, lunch, an indoor skating rink. Lucy could skate like a hockey pro. I was getting used to having her around. I was getting used to people staring at us—me in my short hair and button-down shirts, Lucy in her costumes. I was proud of her outfits, actually. They were nothing I could have invented myself.

Henry joined us one evening. I was a little nervous about them meeting, but it was fine, fun. Henry ate Lucy's limp French fries. Lucy told a really stupid joke, and Henry laughed anyway, his big belly jiggling, *haaaa ha ha ha*.

On these nights Lucy was patient with me when I had to leave early, or when I got sick in the bathroom. I tried to excuse myself discreetly. But she always knew, and she was anxious. The truth was, I was getting worse. One night I woke up and my kidneys felt like hot rocks, poking

everything inside. I snuck past Lucy's hide-a-bed and drove to the hospital. The night doctor pursed her lips and said, "Well, your heart's fine. It's the meds; you knew this would happen. They will ruin several of your organs over the next ten years. Kidneys, liver, digestive system."

"What can I do?"

"Drink a lot of water. There's not much you can do. Without the meds, your body would most likely reject the heart, since the donor wasn't a relative. Just take care of yourself. It's just a matter of time, after all," she said.

I teared up involuntarily, as if she had punched me. "But that's true for us all," the doctor said hurriedly, rubbing my shoulder.

One night, Lucy and I were in the kitchen doing dishes, me washing and Lucy drying. She twirled the dishtowel like a burlesque singer, waiting for me to finish scrubbing. She said that in high school she was the lead singer in a Patsy Cline cover band with a bunch of firemen. I begged her to sing something, so she sang "Walking After Midnight." She sounded warbly, like a singer from the 1920s.

I turned to Lucy with wet hands.

"What?" she asked. "What?"

"Your voice."

"*What* about my voice?" She put her fists on her hips. Something jangled there.

"It's funny. Cute."

She snorted. "It was good enough for Nunn." She stopped. "What? *What*?"

"I can't decide if you remind me of Charlie Brown's Lucy or of Ricky Ricardo's Lucy."

"I can't decide if you remind me of...um..." She stopped. "How come I can't think of a single Steve besides you?"

"Because you like me," I said. I took a step forward, toward her, watching myself do it. I said, "You have a thing for me."

"I do not."

"Come here."

"No. Steve Martin," she said. "Steve Jobs. Steve McQueen." But she didn't move away.

"Come here."

"Yikes."

"Come *here*, Lucy."

"You're not the boss of me," she said.

I grabbed her roughly, wetly. I kissed her, my mouth prying hers open. She clutched my head. She was surprisingly strong under my hands. Like a steel wire, my Lucy. I left wet patches all over her shirt. I felt like I was starving. I didn't let her up for air.

Then Lucy's face mashed up and she turned away, gripping the counter with one scarred hand. "Lucy?" I put my hand on her shoulder and bent down to catch her eyes.

Lucy looked up with wet eyes and blotchy lips. She reached for me. She was so small. I felt like I had to be very careful, touching her lightly so she wouldn't shatter. She was doing the same thing to me, laying the side of her face gently against my chest, like she was listening, waiting.

One night we were lying in bed. It was perfectly dark, the way Lucy likes it at night. The meds were giving me the shakes and I couldn't sleep. I let my voice float out, disembodied and temporary in a place where there was no light to track events.

"I love you," I said.

Silence from Lucy. She didn't touch me.

"I can't help it," I said.

More silence. I couldn't see her.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Lucy didn't move.

"I haven't always been a good person," I said.

Lucy was asleep.

"I'm better now," I said into the dark. My body shook on its own accord.

Can you undo the past with the present? I am not a religious man. Even remorse doesn't cut it—there is always devastation somewhere. Sometimes all you can do is an even exchange.

I started shaking harder and harder. Lucy woke up. My body shook

so hard, the headboard rammed against the wall over and over. It was loud. Lucy held me down with her arms. She said, "Stop it, stop it. Please. Steve." She started crying, but I couldn't. I couldn't stop.

I had my operation almost one year ago. Funny that I have no memory of the one event that changed everything. Last Saturday, Lucy asked me about it while we lay on a blanket in the park, her head on my stomach. I traced the road scars on the back on her hand. We tried to piece the events together, the timing of everything, her tragedy and mine. But then we just gave up and watched the clouds push the world around so gently, we couldn't even feel it.

It has been twelve days since I stopped taking the anti-rejection medication. I flushed the pills down the toilet, emptying bottle after bottle. I feel great. I've stopped trembling. I have laughed hard. I went running yesterday after work with Henry, and left him bent over, panting, his fat hands on his knees while I ran next to the creek, beating that, too. I rub the heart through my shirt. It thumps back at me. When I touch Lucy, I feel my pulse in the tips of my fingers, pressing against my skin.

Lucy hasn't done cocaine in months. We've hung the mirror back on the wall. She says she doesn't miss it, any of it. I know she might mess up, but that she'll keep trying. She's a human being and she loves me, all of me, in all my components. That's no small thing. She wakes me up in the night and asks me to hold her hand. She puts my hand on her head and goes back to sleep, and I wake up in the morning with my fingers still knotted in her scratchy hair. I say, "I love Lucy," and she hits me.

Yesterday at work, I stood still and closed my eyes, holding some stray piece of wood. I just stood there over dry land on the foot-bridge I'm still building. Across the barrier, the ducks swam next to me and I heard them plunge their heads under the surface, just to get wet, just to see what life is like down there. Henry didn't tell me to get back to work or anything. He just watched. I thought about how you take a tree. And that tree has a shape, and you cut it down, and you slice it into parts. Then you combine those parts with the parts

of other trees to make this completely new shape. And you hope it holds up.

This is my life. I build things out of fragments. I love a strange girl.

Sometimes I look in the mirror and suddenly beat my own chest with my fists. I'm a better man. There's a miracle happening right now inside me, in the blood pushing through my veins. This heart beats faster than my last one. I'm still alive. Every second is a mystery. 