

## *How Female I Am*

1.

That man talks to me about his marriage, the one he no longer has; it is defunct. He tells me about his wife, a woman busy with decoupage and creative casseroles.

He loved her, he says, and watched her as though she were a movie. The marriage survived for three, maybe four years. But now it is finished, and neither of them seems to understand why.

That woman he speaks of now in such a hushed and sacred voice — I do not know her. She is a stranger to me, and yet I am that woman, half a decade later, still threatened by men, still clinging to my freedom to cut and paste and cook what I want.

2.

My lover knows things about me I did not wish to reveal . . . things he pulled from me against my will. I do not know how he did it, I will never understand how he did it.

He knows I do not like the collision of bodies. He pulls me into his bed. When he is finished, he apologizes.

I wish he wouldn't apologize; I must then react — admit or deny. I wish my lover had never apologized; I wish my lover were dead.

3.

There was a professor, now a transparent memory. He held my mind in his hands, as my daughter does silly putty. If you build a tower of silly putty, then leave it — it sinks, spreads out, crumbles into dust.

4.

Nine years old. A dark summer night, made darker by the bushes we hid behind.

"Show me *yours*," he whispered, and I did, quickly. "Again," he said, and I did. And that's when they found us.

His mother said, "That's boys for you."

My mother said nothing, but she hit me until I bled from my nose and my mouth. There is a mark, here, under my skin, to this day. It didn't show, but it's there; I can feel it.

5.

There is a man who lets me come to his office to tell him the truth about me — but, of course, I must pay him. My bill is current. Each week I write him a check, eager to keep our records even. I must owe him nothing; he must have no recourse against me after he has heard all I have to say.

What does he think while I talk? *What's for dinner? Does she dye her hair? When, when, when will she be quiet?*

He is not like other men. He has a face that's, well, kind. It looks younger than I think he must be; a face protected from the erosion of all that he hears. His eyes are kind, too — looking at me with a softness I have sometimes imagined in my own eyes, a softness I have imagined while looking at men I have loved. But he looks at *all* people with those kind and accepting eyes.

I question his innocence. It can't be real, not in this time, this place, this administration. Oh, how I hope it is real.

I tell him the worst, and still he looks at me with those eyes. The kindness of his professional eyes is killing me, slowly, week by week.

He knows, I have told him so he knows, that all of my men have been evil. Why is he doing this to me: showing me a kind, a loving man, like none I have ever had — like none I shall ever have? I pay him for this, I pay him well for this, my undoing.

I watch the slow, precise movements, as he adjusts his body in his chair, answers the phone, moves beside me to the door. Slow and comforting movements I am drawn to, and must escape.

His voice strokes my hair, my skin — the tones caress me into submission. I tell him things I have denied, even to myself, and he does not blink, he does not turn away, apparently he does not even hear. His voice warms me with questions about next week, lulling me into an etherized state that may last the week. I feel I am under water, drowning; giddy with the intoxicating pleasure and comfort of drowning in his voice.

Later, when I am unable to sleep, I telephone his home, awaken him, to hear his voice once more — but I hang up, guilty, when he answers. I have not paid for that.

Every week I have this to look forward to: I shall sit, locked into a room for a full hour with a man who tortures me with this close-up look at what other people have. He has given me all of this; he has taken everything, every hope, from me.

6.

I ended my marriage with a letter, the same device I will turn to to end my therapy. I know one day I will write him a letter, whether I want to or not. Or I will call, leave a message with his secretary, unwilling to give him written proof of my weakness. I will do one of those things: I will write or I will call. I shudder at how female I am.

7.

My father is an old man. People think it is butter, only butter, running down the cheek of a man too feeble to be feeding himself. But I suspect that he weeps, and I suspect that he weeps from an overwhelming disappointment. I have not been a good daughter; I have lived my life as though it were my own.

8.

I am alone in my car. It's late; in the rear-view mirror I see a man in a dark-colored Ford. I turn down a side street, but he follows. At the next corner I turn left; he turns left. I speed up; he speeds up. I circle through the narrow residential streets, back to the highway. I see a patrol car, headed toward me, stopped at the light just ahead. The man moves into passing gear, slips past me as I pull beside the patrol car.

I honk, roll down my window; the policeman is young, grinning at me as though I stopped to tell him a joke.

"A man has been following me," I tell him, surprised I sound so excited, so breathless.

"I don't blame him, lady," the face smirks. The other policeman, on the passenger's side, laughs.

I speed away, fleeing the enemy, man.

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## EVE KELLY

### *Phoenix Exploded with a Big Bang*

The dulcimer had lain dormant for an eon  
but now drips sound  
like honey melting in a cup of camomile.

It sings with the plaintive voices  
of my ancestors  
crying strength to me from the coal dust mines.

It is the vibration of a star that I saw  
trailing illumination across the sky,  
dancing with death  
and laughing in its face;  
it was gone as suddenly as it was born.

It is the singing tongues of God.