

HOW TO BEGIN

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He sits in a chair. He's leaning to one side, his

left foot tucked under his right knee. The chair brown, wood, a green cushion. A reddish throw drapes the chair—the black fringes of its ends uneven and worn, frayed. The weight in his body worn, frayed. His head down, his hair a blend of yellows and browns, his face hidden by his left hand which is loose, open above his brows, the thumb on one side, four fingers on the other. One arm firm across his body. The toes of his right foot on the floor, a pressure that pulls his calf into the shape of a lemon. The darkest hues saved for the shadows on his right shoulder and the space between his legs. There, a flesh-colored curve, a hint hidden in a hushed canvas of reds and yellows and blues.

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Is this the way to begin—to describe the painting

of a man sitting in a chair?

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In graduate school, I stood in a room on the edge

of campus, posing as fingertips smudged charcoal across

my shoulders. I balanced my body in poses arranged by the professor's direction. Cross your arm, loosely, over your stomach. Stretch this leg away from the chair. Poses of ease, yet uneasy. My legs and my arms, even my head counter to the way anyone might catch me across the way in a window or stepping off a curb onto the street. I wondered at such discrepancy, my figure on each canvas weary, my head bowed as if in apology. During one winter semester, the professor made a bed by piling students' coats on a table. I undid the belt on my blue flannel robe. I arched my back. I dropped my shoulders and handed him the robe. He spread it across the coats. Then I climbed onto the uneven pile and waited for his words to shift my hips, arch my legs, and tilt my head. Leave your hands loose, uncaring. From my position on the makeshift bed, I watched (I couldn't move) fingers trace the slope of my stomach or smear chalk into the backs of my knees. When a man pressed the base of his thumb against the charcoal of my nipple (to smudge its edge), I closed my eyes and worked to slow my ragged breaths.

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I had a friend in graduate school. We did a lot of drinking together, mostly in the kind of run-down bars with a yellowed cigarette machine in the corner. She was married, and every time her husband dropped by the fourth floor to ask for her keys, or when I'd lounge on their sage couch, I marveled at the ease of their exchanges. He always carried a plastic cup (a faded Texas Tech one from a game years before). He had been promising to quit dipping since before their wedding. But since she and I spent our office hours huddled outside the English building tapping packs of Marlboro Lights and cupping our hands around lighters, she couldn't press the void of his promises. We couldn't see the years ahead, when she would discover that void darker than a mere bad habit.

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I imagine the professor who arranged my body on that makeshift bed years ago was shaping a portrait of memory, transforming my form into the woman he had been in a room with once. A fluorescent-lit display. A private longing.

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During workshop in the writing classes I teach in Texas (I moved here in August after having taught in seven other states), I ask students to suggest an alternate beginning for the essay draft we're discussing. Often, the writer hasn't truly thought about how to begin. *Tell us the line in the essay you'd choose and how starting with that line would alter the shape or the direction of the essay.* We sift through the pages for a beginning, think how an essay changes when its opening line does.

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The portrait of the nude male hangs above my bed. It's on a heavy piece of particle board, four feet vertical and three feet across. Years ago, I figured out the best way to get it to stay on the wall is to nail through the board at each corner, and because of all the times I've moved, those edges are fragile, previous holes visible, the bottom left corner

disheveled from an afternoon I pulled at the bottom too quickly and the nail gashed the canvas. I'm not writing worn edges and gouged holes and missing corners as metaphors. I'm describing what happens to a large, unframed piece of art when you move it from one room to another enough times.

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By the time I finished my doctorate, my friend and her husband were living in a small town outside of Vail, Colorado. Once they realized they couldn't keep up with the resort town rent, she asked me to move in to a room on the second floor, help out. I had lived in Lubbock, Texas, long enough, so I packed my Jeep and drove north until I pulled into a gravel drive and stepped out to trembling stars and the gurgle of a river from somewhere behind the pine trees across the road. I found a job waiting tables. I kept my bedroom window open and slept to the whisper of slow-moving water.

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What I really want to tell you is this: I miss the body of a man against my body.

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I remember the chair, the one in the painting. It was unsteady. Its green cushion a threat of collapse, and the throw threadbare, scratchy and dismayed. I know the shadows across the man's shoulders and his outstretched leg were cast by an unshaded light bulb blaring from a brass stand because I once held the same pose under the same light. I imagine he cupped his left hand over his brow as a barrier from the naked brightness, but in the moment of the painting, it's as if he's just heard a voice on a machine or a car door shutting outside—either way, the sound of leaving.

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Not long after I settled in Colorado, my friend told me her husband knew someone who might be moving in to the room next to mine. He had a tool belt

and an empty wallet and liked the idea of good-paying construction jobs in the Vail Valley. One afternoon I pulled into the gravel drive after a breakfast shift to find a large, bearded man, squinting and smiling as if he had been waiting all morning for me to come home.

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In blind contour drawing, the artist draws the

contours of a subject without looking at the paper. In Colorado, I resumed my work posing for Life Drawing classes when an opening came up at the community college where my friend taught painting. I showed up on a Wednesday night, and a woman with long gray hair and silver dangling earrings greeted me at the door with a hug of relief. For the rest of the summer, I posed on a small platform or sat in a rickety wooden chair with a green cushion and a reddish throw. The students, mostly women, kept their eyes fixed on my form while I watched lines curve across thin pages. I lingered in my exaggerated dimensions, watched my body disappear into edges.

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Who knows how we end up in the rooms we do,

pressed against someone (sweat and moan) we won't see or touch again after a year or two? I've kept myself out of such rooms for years, sharing my bedroom with a silent man and shadows.

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At the end of every hour, I'd step down from the

narrow platform, my feet cold on dull tile. I'd pull the belt of my flannel robe and step between the easels, my head down. It's strange, but when I was naked, I felt as if I disappeared. I was nothing more than the line of a collarbone or the edge of an elbow, but the moment I stepped down and re-robbed, I became someone, a person who walked through the room and out the door on her way to somewhere. The robe long, to the floor, a little large so that if I stood with my arms down, the sleeves fell past my hands. For a long time, I hung it on the back of whatever

bedroom door I had, but I couldn't bring myself to wear it. On this last move, I didn't even pull it out of the box. It's in storage along with so many other things I don't have to see to remember, like the photograph of him holding her the day we brought her home from the hospital.

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Every last thing, you know, is connected.

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Every last thing you know is connected.

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He sits in a chair, his hands splayed on the

armrests as if to brace himself against a tide he can't measure from the shore. The chair in the corner brown, a thrift store accent. We had been moving through the heavy rooms of our apartment like ocean waves, as if a white foam followed our movements, spreading out behind us before dissolving, the imprints of our steps retreating like water, heavy and dark. The hours in his body worn, frayed. His head down, his hair a blend of reds and browns, his mouth open in weeping. Both feet on the floor, a pressure pulling me toward depths, murky fathoms. The darkest shades saved for the shadows on his shoulders, the dimensions of what he announced he would no longer bear. That morning, I stumbled, soaked and gasping for air.

But this was much later. I haven't yet told you how we began.

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I don't know who the man in the painting is or

who painted it or if it's any good. It hung on one of the walls in the art studio in Colorado, and every time I held a pose, I stared at the man in it, a comfort of blues and yellows and dusty reds, and I wondered how long ago he had sat where I stood, still. I always imagine it was a woman's hand that pressed a brush into his elbows, dabbed a bit of yellow onto the top of his left knee. I see her

glancing up from her canvas, brows furrowed, a palette of her own worry in that dark corner behind his head. What secrets did she smear into his body's shadows? And which ones of my own do they carry?

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That summer in Colorado, the four of us played

poker at the kitchen table when I had the night off, and when I worked the closing shift, they'd show up and sit at the end of the bar, where he would smile every time I nudged the kitchen door open with my hip. He and I were nothing more than furtive glances for a while, grabbing each other a Shiner from the fridge or laughing on the sage couch while we watched MTV's *Global Groove*. Marlboro Lights on the back porch. This was before any of us knew that the lives we were waiting to live were never going to rescue us from the ones we were living.

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I don't paint. I've been in art supply stores,

walked the aisles of silver tubes and different sized brushes, frustrated by what I don't know how to use, or why. If I knew the difference between acrylic and oil, I'd paint this: The middle of a July night, my hands sifting through the Eagle River to rearrange a mosaic made by moonlight, while his silhouette leaps onto a boulder that breaks the shh-shhing current in two. One of us leaning against the river's pull, the other casting an invisible fly, pretending to unfurl a silver line.

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There are other ways to disappear. After he left,

grief etched me to shadows—my hips dissolved to sharp angles, my breasts pulled taut, my spine emerged as a rutted road beneath my skin. I wore button-up shirts, sweaters, thick pants and boots, not one mention of skin, and at night, I hid in thermals and sweatshirts, even socks for sleeping as if submerging myself in the murkiest of waters. I walked by mirrors and windows with my head turned away.

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We took turns moving out of that house in

Colorado. I was the first to go, leaving him where I had found him, squinting in the gravel drive, both of us sure it would only be a matter of time before I returned. I drove back to Texas, and a few months later, my friend came to visit. I saw her blue truck pull into the drive, and through the window, I watched her struggle with something wedged behind the seat. When she pulled out the painting of the man, I gasped. So many times that summer I had stood on the back porch describing the painting, its soothing colors and the way the man held his head in his hand. She had asked the silver-eared woman if she could buy it, but the woman said she had no idea whose it was, that it had been done in another class and the instructor no longer worked at the college. My friend pulled it down from the wall and carried it to her truck. Now I carry it, everywhere I go.

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Sometimes there's no need to tell the whole

story—only its ending. There's always more truth in what happened than why. My friend and her husband split up. Eventually, our friendship fell, too, perhaps into that chasm between who we had been and who we had become. And after four years, he sat in our living room chair one morning and made the sound of leaving.

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That summer in Colorado, the rooms grew smaller

with each day. He took long showers, and when he did, I'd lean against the locked bathroom door, sometimes pressing my body into its frame. The steam seeped from the space at the bottom of the door—a spiral of heat rising between my legs. One night, I stepped from the bathroom in my blue robe, the light behind me a whisper. He moved toward me, a silhouette sudden in the dark. I arched my back. I lowered my shoulders. I let the robe fall to the floor. In the narrow darkness, we gave in to one another (sweat and moan), and when I cried a release, it rushed through the house and out the door until it trembled the river.

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My daughter, our daughter, will turn fourteen in

a month. When she was born, we placed a photograph of the two of us in her nursery, and when he left months later, I put the photograph in a box. Through the years, I've lugged that box from city to city whenever any university would offer me a year or two. When she was eight, she asked if I had a picture of him. She keeps it in her room on the top of a yellow bookcase. Every once in a while when I pass it, I'll say something simple and soft to it under my breath. I've never heard her speak to the photograph, but she told me once that sometimes she stares at his face; then she goes to the mirror, leans in, and looks for a very long time.

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Maybe all I ever want to say is this: he meant

something to me.

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Sometimes my daughter and I lie side by side on

my bed, our legs toward the pillows, our feet propped on the wall beneath the painting. We stare, searching for what we've never noticed, or one of us points to a silvery line and we find every place that color was used, or I tell her about the last apartment her father and I shared, when he refused to hang the painting above the fireplace, or hang it at all.

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The university where I teach only gave me a one-

year contract, so my daughter and I are once again looking toward a summer move. In a few months, I'll pull the boxes out of storage. I'll make moving van reservations. I'll carefully nudge the nails from the painting, then watch out the window while two movers prop it against the truck and mull it over, obviously wondering what and who and why. I'll watch them until they carry the painting up the ramp, until I know it's safe between the mattress and the box spring, where I always ask them to set it. My daughter will pack her own room, stay embedded in her closet for days at a time, and when she's taped up the last box, she'll bring me the photograph. The first time she did this, she

told me she worried something would happen to it. I wrap it carefully each time, tuck it into a small box, knowing she thinks of it as a kind of self-portrait.

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He sits in a chair.

If I began, *I had a friend in graduate school*, the essay would be about friendship, the past tense hinting at its loss.

If I began, *At the end of every hour, I'd step down from the narrow platform, my feet cold on dull tile*, the essay might focus on how I sometimes worry I have disappeared.

If I began, *What I really want to tell you is this*, the essay would be a direct address to you, Reader.

If I began, *My daughter, our daughter, will turn fourteen in a month*, the essay would be about the difference between *my* and *our*.

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If I began.

If I began.

If I began.

It's been almost fourteen years, and I still haven't been able to step away from his memory and toward another man. But I have been thinking about it, about how to begin.

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Maybe it's living back in Texas after all these

years, maybe it's the warm winter, or maybe it has just been long enough, but in the past few months, I've started disrobing completely before I crawl into bed so that I can feel sheets against my skin, remember the feeling of my own form. Sometimes, just imagining a man's body against mine causes me to crest and fall (ragged breath) like an ocean wave. **JT**

