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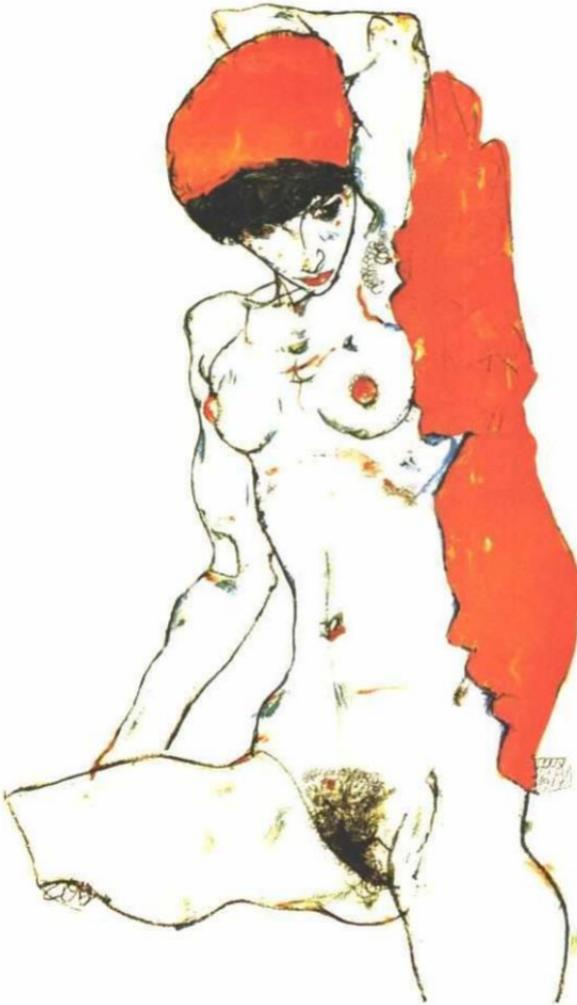
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2021 Pamphlet Series

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SALT





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THE TELEPHONE GAME

Days after being exposed to coronavirus, I question my body as though a stranger has crept beneath my skin, the natural rise of my temperature with ovulation that I am convinced will never fall, my palms to the soles of my feet which bake like cookies. I lay in bed beside my son and wonder, if I were to stop breathing in this bed, would he naturally curl to my side, like a question mark, as he does when we sleep? Would he succumb to the heat, our bodies like two palms pressed to the backbone of the Earth? As I study him in bed, he picks up the cardboard cylinder that he sometimes slips his torso in and disappears. He frames his face to one end, and fits the other end to my temples, as we play the telephone game. He whispers syllables that echo down the cylinder like butterflies, secrets from his oval face formed to the dark tunnel, cheekbones that fill my hands as a perfect heart, his irises that shine like bells.

In such seclusion, we could be underground, or tracing the dusky rings of Saturn, outside the Universe like two guests stepping outside a party, into the evening together. I imagine how I would not let him leave this world alone, his eyes brown as mussels, that reflect even in the dark. I could distinguish their light from any star - even without sight, I could find the forms of his hands, the flesh of their pads that spread like a starfish. Even now, I know if I lay down in our bed with that fever, the cone of my hypothalamus revolving slowly in the folds of my meninges, releasing heat

like the center of the Universe, I would never let him lay at my side. I would shrink back as though set aflame, his blonde curls like ivy that fall to his shoulders, his shimmering pink lips open with words barely formed.

I would tell him to go find the things he needs to still tell, that I would wait for him right outside, as I folded into the Earth like a closed book, to support the firmament upon which he walks.

SALT

At the Southernmost Inn, the pool waits for us at midnight, a lagoon dazzled with fluorescent bulbs beneath the rim. I trace the perimeter that curves like a kidney, the blue enamel tiles beneath my feet, my boyfriend's palms to my waist, honey whiskey on our breaths like a haze of no-see-ums between us, his eyes that deepen green, as though they are dampening, when emotion flushes his cheeks, like my menses in the chlorine as we leap together, our legs straight as knives, soaring to the center of the pool. Later, in the hotel room, his torso weighs upon me like the heaviness of the green water, my ankles on his shoulders, as I remember the drive to Key West, the lightless bridge over the Atlantic ocean, when he tapped my feet off the dashboard and said, *We could get in a wreck, and I like your legs, attached to your body.*

Now, I cry out to the headboard, as my weight is shoved to the wall by the core of my body, the piece of coal buried deep in my pelvis, that sparks to his cock like a match. When he says, *Take it*, I know he wants to be the one to undo me, the tendons behind my knees stretching to his movement like the strings of a cello, the muscles of my buttocks pulled as they were with my heels on the dashboard, my forearms pinned beneath his fists like metal beams, as we fall into one another, the way the car could have plunged into the bay. I push upwards to his body, deciding to unravel for something worthy, my slow collapse like a nebula blossoming outward, his cum that smells like salt, reminding us of where we could have been, the Earth we rose from, and stood to find one another.

SLOW DANCE

In bed, our movements harmonize like two stallions racing to the horizon, the planes of our bodies that sway inward and away as though we are trying to break free, my palm on your buttock as I guide you to my core.

The world has disentangled into elements, the way an atom can be stripped

to its simplest components - proton, nucleus, neutron - the salt on your earlobe, my breath caught between our chests like an echo down an alleyway. Your weight forces the air from my diaphragm, the way a newborn's first breath is drawn

from the guttural squeeze of the vaginal walls, the final push. When you turn me on my belly on the mattress, I gather my own hair like a bouquet at the nape of my neck,

the air conditioning settling between my shoulder blades like dew, before you push down into my body like a spade

breaking the clay of the Earth. Your lips meet the valley beneath my hairline

as though I prepared this space for your breath, as if I could hold us both

indefinitely in this chasm, our motion natural as the slow dance of the Atlantic, and you come with a sound from your throat

as though something has broken, like the rapid expansion of thunder.

Afterwards, you gather my loose necklace from the mattress

for safekeeping, and I whisper, *Thank you*, as your face splits my thighs as though submerging in water,

the rocking of my pelvis against your breath synchronizing with my thoughts, *Thank you, thank you,*

thank any god that gave me to you.

CLUES

In the mornings, I go to my mother's apartment with warm paper cups of coffee. She trades me Newport cigarettes, and we sit on the cement steps that face the alley, stamping the butts into her rose bush while we discuss my brother, his belongings scattered on the couch behind us. The sun pulls up on its rope over the concrete structures, the light shattering in the chicken wire dividing the buildings, and I resign my cup of coffee as though going to work. I pull up the brown leather cushions like soft thick tongues, and sift through layers of fur from a dog that died last year.

I know the drugs better than my mother. The white powders and brown powders, gummy substances in baggies the size of my thumb nail, the pills with inscriptions like apartment numbers: R029, E905, cut in halves like rounded rooftops. My mother remarks how strong our love could be, to still care, and I tell her of the brass urn still in the trunk of my car, from two years ago, when Alex overdosed outside my apartment door, the immaculate white Converse still in my closet, that he never got the chance to wear. In the mornings, I notice the clean white eyelets, the shoe laces never untied. I remember his mother at his viewing, bent over the cardboard casket he lay in before they incinerated his body, the waffle print fabric of his hospital gown, ice packs strapped to his calves for the brief trip. In the mornings, she must rise and search his old bedroom for clues, the empty baggies in his desk drawers, or the halved pills beneath his mattress, the way she traced his scalp for lumps, inspected his forearms for entry points, or bruising that surfaced like little, yawning mouths beneath his skin.

In the mornings, I sit with my mother as we wait for my brother to come home, his figure illuminated

by the rising sun, the way he will lope down the alley
like a stray animal, the long loose sleeves
hanging to his wrists like bells, his hair that thins in patches,
as though it has been scorched by the sun. We build a perimeter
of cigarettes in the dirt, watching the sunlight
cut the alleyway into divisions, the light and the dark,
like the living and the dead.

About the writer:

Amanda Leal is a 27-year-old poet from Lake Worth, Florida. Her work has been featured or is forthcoming in issues of *Levee Magazine*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Beyond Words*, *Haunted Waters Press*, and others.

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