

WINO FOREVER

LOUISE MUNSON

There's not a lot to do during this part of the day besides stare at the wall. A regular already came in this morning and spent decently. She always smells like a perfumed alcoholic. Her naked body in the dressing room is grotesque, pilates-cut, and buzzing with anxiety and self-loathing. I actually really like her.

I observe her body while helping her with all the various buttons, ties, and folds. Fancy clothes can be very complicated to put on. The store manager says this is because of the *architecture of the piece*. We are supposed to talk about the clothing here like it's art. I don't mind the corporate bullshit too much, I love luxury and I love good fabrics and cuts. Give me this over the thousand-dollar sweatpants those other assholes are wearing any day of the week, as my father would say. Any

day of the week, he would say, not about the sweatpants. He doesn't care about sweatpants.

Anyway, her body: all sinewy muscles, taut but aging skin, freckled from a youth spent in the sun, muscular and small. This is not a body men would want to touch, I think while slipping on her skirt, on my knees, a devotion between client and master I enjoy the steady, boring rhythm of. But women like her don't care about men, they care about women. What certain other women think. Not me, though. I'm a woman — but barely. My father's eyes are so often my own. I don't want them, but he installed the programming very young. I know what most men like and what most men don't. She talks to me about art and wanting to write her memoir about being a strong woman and a survivor, about being wronged by her abusive ex-husband, who pays for these clothes, these thousands of dollars spent on asymmetrical cardigans.

My favorite part of her visits is when I encourage her to follow her bliss, I tell her to read *The War of Art*, and stuff like that, with passion in my voice. She bought a skirt today with a print that reminded her of a *Degas*. A *Degas*. What an idiot.

I'm incredibly lonely here all day, out on the marble floor, hands crossed behind my back like I'm in church. Clothing hangs around my head in Möbius curves, not on mannequins, but simply hung, ghost-like, on lucite hangers. Waiting for a body. Not just any body, a body beaten into submission, a small body. This is the land where the word *tiny* to describe a grown woman is the highest compliment. Even when said in a scolding tone, don't be fooled, it's the highest of compliments for these insane people. I am also insane, which is how I know. And as I stand here,

staring out the floor-to-ceiling windows, my feet ache, in navy suede heels with a strap on the ankle. My uniform is the uniform of a Catholic school girl: black knee-high socks, an A-line black wool skirt, a plum button down. I like to be covered up. Around my neck is a necklace made of walnuts *sourced* from Zimbabwe and purple feathers. I love running the feathers through my fingers since I can't smoke inside.

My roommate recently got a new boyfriend. He's enormous, like a clown. It's not just his size that's enormous, it's what my yoga teacher would call his *aura*. When he's in a room — and now he's always in the room — my breathing starts to get really shallow to account for his enormous presence. You have to get really small. On account of this, most people don't like him, and he feels unloved. But together, he and my roommate plan to take over the world and suffocate us all with their crap. Welcome to Hollywood.

My roommate is one of those people who tells you the truth and is really proud of it. It's her reason for living. Of course, it's *her* truth, but that would never occur to her. She thinks she's God or something. She tells me things like, *You haven't done anything*. And, *You surround yourself with women who want you to fail*. And, *You don't look as beautiful today as usual*. Or, *Is that what you're wearing? You look like a soccer mom*. But interspersed with these she'll also remind me that the only reason she deigns to throw me these scraps of meat, of *brutal honesty*, is because, of course, she *loves* me. She loves me too much to let me fail.

Not only loves me, but once she told me, *I believe in you the most*. That's saying a lot from someone who spends all of her

time believing in her future self, puffing it up, making sure she'll get what she wants, meaning public adoration, some kind of fame or recognition of her *singular* talents. She will get this. It will not help. It will not relieve her suffering. I know this as I sprawl out on her bed, watching her get dressed.

Still, I'm devoted to this axe murderer I live with. I created her, fresh from my childhood suffering. How boring, which is a word she loves. Mostly used as a statement in reaction to my rolling around in my victimhood, which I love to do. I say, *I feel I'm suffocating. I miss home, I miss my brother, why would he leave me? Why didn't he get help?* And she smokes and stares out the '20s-style old Hollywood windows and goes, *I'm bored.*

I know I'm insufferable, but still. Still, I wonder, what kind of reality is it to believe a person, a human being, hasn't *done anything* unless they've been in a movie? A TV show? Why in the world would someone's beauty, talent, humanity rest *unnoticed* if not thrown up on screen, to be forgotten in the strike of a match. The world is upside down. What does it mean to be known? Known to God? To oneself? Logically, if you were known, felt known to yourself, to God, nothing could surpass that kind of peace. The space where you feel infinity, no time. No space. I feel that when I write sometimes. I felt that when I was with my brother sometimes. I feel that under water, in the ocean. But it's oh so rare, like a very particular high. So, it makes sense that the other part of me, of you, would go hunting for a shitty replacement. And make a lot of suffering, a lot of drama around that thing that doesn't even exist.

There is a part in the Bible where Jesus puts his fingers in the ears of a

deaf and dumb man and puts spit on his tongue and groans and prays to the sky, "Open Up!"— and just like that, the man is cured. I was thinking about how Jesus's prayer was *open up*, at least in this translation, and not something like, *Cure him*, or, *Let his ears hear, let his voice return.*

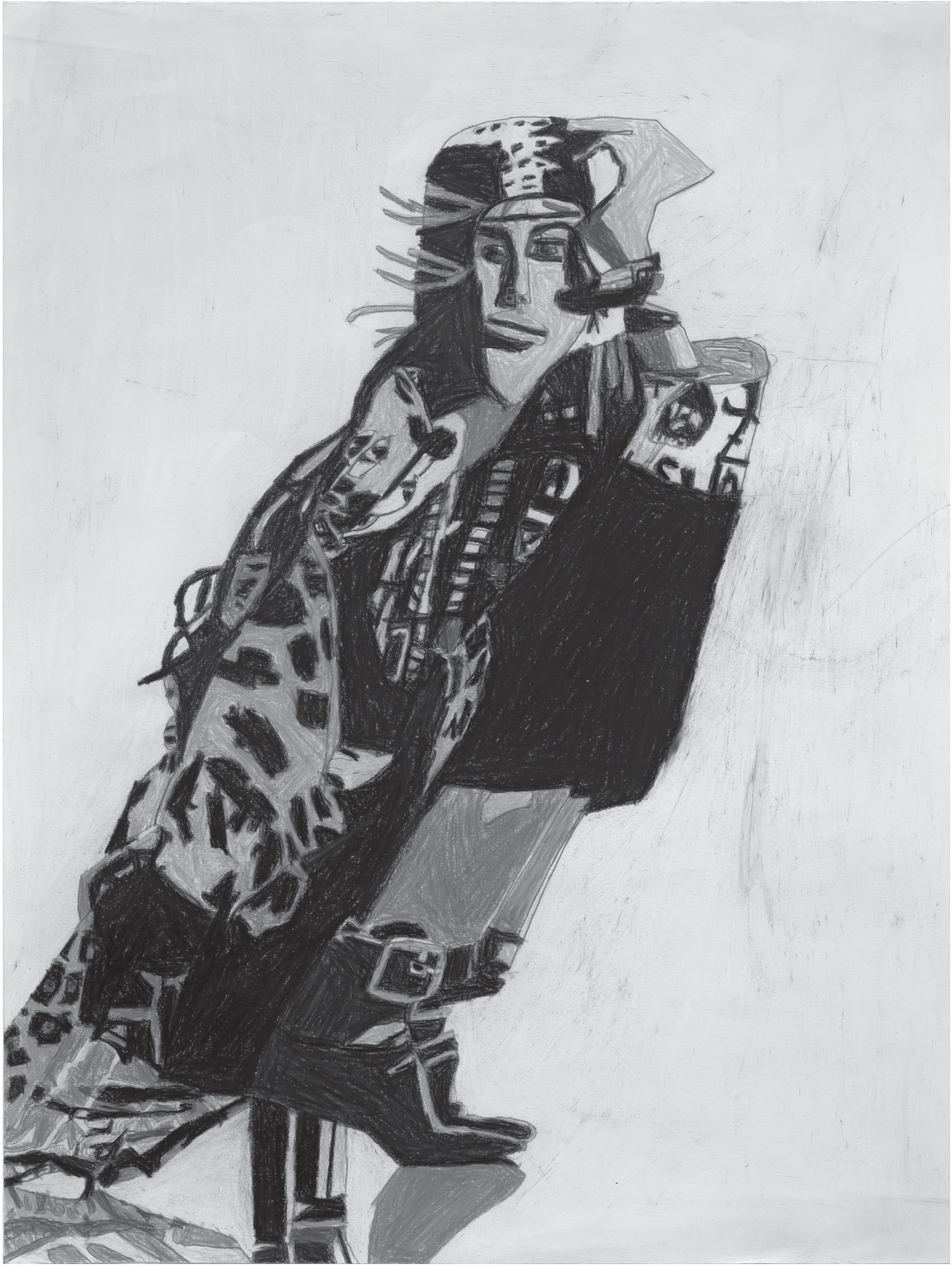
Open up.

Does that mean that all illness, coming from fear or lack, is caused by closing off to God? That insanity is not knowing yourself to be whole, perfect as God created you, and eventually that insanity will get you sick, or broke, or just fucking miserable? So there's only one problem, then, and one solution.

Open up.

Talking to my mom on the phone, it's not unusual, when discussing a seemingly small thing, that she will say something like, "I'm walking on the blades of betrayal," or, when talking about my brother, "At a certain point respect has to be earned, and the truth is he was given five talents — and instead of doubling them, he buried them all in the ground." This is just idle chitchat where I come from. I didn't know it was weird until I heard other moms discussing logistics and practicalities in a cooing cadence full of gooey affection, or at least the imitation of the *sounds of love.*

I didn't notice the paparazzi gathered outside, their lenses like insects. They're shameless, they just place them flush on the glass of the storefront and start clicking and heckling, like coyotes circling a neighborhood cat. It takes me a moment to register who it is, when I catch a glimpse of her face. Winona Ryder has walked in. Oh, I see. My first thought is that I'm so happy for her that



Helen Rae, *Untitled (November 17, 2019)*, 2019, Colored pencil/graphite on paper, 24x18 in. Courtesy of the artist.

paparazzi still care enough to go through the trouble. Then I'm just relieved to have another body in the space. She looks small, with baggy clothes on and a deer-in-the-headlights expression. A deer that has been told to look pleasant, or kind, or else. Her eyes are blank, scooped out of any thought, like something plugged into a socket. I smile and nod at her casually, then cross the room to fold an already perfectly folded cashmere sweater. It's important to pretend to be busy yet relaxed — to be unobtrusive to clients you don't know, especially if they're famous. The molecules in the air palpably change when they come in, but it is your job to not notice.

I'm never starstruck and am not in this case. It's more an underwater feeling, a time-warp, Twilight Zone feeling because like many other girls my age, I have seen young Winona's movies over and over. I felt understood by her suffering in these movies. Her pretty-enough-to-be-popular, but too-smart-to-buy-into-the-bullshit predicament. The opportunity to be cruel and careless had been presented to her by society on a silver platter filled with colorful cakes, but she still seemed uncertain about it, disassociated from how she looked. And yet, she wasn't strong enough to refuse the sweets entirely. Her intellect and empathy and self-loathing were at war with the expectations of the world.

It was that or I was just projecting. *A Course in Miracles*, another spiritual text I've been reading, says that absolutely everything in this world is a projection. The book itself, Winona, this job I appear to have, money, nutrition, family, *friendship*. Death. None of it is real. And somewhere inside we all know this is true — that's why we feel like aliens, that's

why we make art to speak to what can't be explained in words but we can feel the truth of, that's why we're trying to reach the divine in some way at all times, even if we don't know it. This world and everything in it are the *effect* of the *cause* of thinking we could separate from God. The ego has created a fearful projection of billions and billions of *seemingly separate* pieces. The big bang etc. The good news, according to this book, is that one day you will realize that there is *nothing outside of you*. Meaning you will wake up to the reality of the illusion and Know the Oneness that is all there is, which is love, which is God — that quiet part of yourself that seems to observe your insane thoughts. This is initially comforting, until it isn't. Trapped in a dream you know you made and trying to shake yourself awake to no avail. I don't mean to sound like a downer, I know life is a miracle. I sometimes know life is a miracle.

"Hello," Winona says in a small, robotic voice to the blouse she's gingerly touching across the room from where I am lyrically fussing with the cashmere display. WELL, HELLO WINONA! I think, in a sing-song way, suddenly wanting to burst into laughter. Although her back is to me while addressing me, I pretend she is being normal. I immediately want to treat her with kindness.

"Hi, good to see you! Let me know if you need anything or want to try something on."

I feel immediately close to her. Protective of her. The paps are now just hanging out near the valet, some sitting on the brick curb, smoking, eating, shooting the shit. She's staring at a short-sleeved cotton poplin blouse with the same paint-smear pattern that my client had earlier compared to a Degas. I do really like that

pattern, actually. I shouldn't have been so cruel. Winona holds it up, lop-sided, it's slipping off the hanger, and she turns half to me and half to the emptiness at the back of the store.

"Do you like this?" She sounds meek, unsure.

"Yes, I love that one, actually," I add the *actually* to signal to her that I *would*, if necessary, tell her the truth and let her know that the print sucks and would look horrible on her. It's important to establish trust. It's a good thing that I'm broke, and monstrously depressed. If I wasn't, I'd actually have to *sell* something. This thought in itself cheers me up. Plus, I'm hanging out with Winona Ryder, man. We are having a *connection*. Her connection is now aimed more toward the back door, but that's okay.

I gingerly take the hanger from her, she's acting like it weighs 500 pounds and her sparrow arm might break from under the weight of it.

I manage to get her into the dressing room. She's trying on 10 pieces: mostly blouses, knits and one pair of navy trousers I love. They're made of a thick, futuristic fabric. Heavy but cut away from the body to feel like luxurious armor. The pants barely graze your skin when you walk. When I think about stealing, these are what I think about. They will make me into a different person, I swear. I'm standing outside the dressing room, my hands still folded behind my back, heels crossed. Occasionally glancing outside at the paparazzi. Some of them seem to be genuinely friendly toward each other, like construction workers gone morally bankrupt. Or, what the fuck do I know? Maybe they're putting their kid through college without breaking their backs hauling cement. I know nothing. A sharp

pain shoots through my heel, I shift my weight. Finally, she emerges. Back in her regular clothing. Her hair is even more fucked up than before and she has that same half-smile, dead-eyed optimistic robot expression on. She's holding all of the clothing she tried on and hands me the rumpled pile.

I take it and smile the same kind of smile back at her. This time, she looks straight at me, without altering one muscle in her face, her expression identical. She's as friendly to a door as she is to me. Perhaps she's enlightened, I think.

"Okay ... so you want these? Yes?" I ask, using my most soothing child-talk.

"No. Thank you. Nothing today. Thank you."

"Oh. Okay. No problem." I nod at her, mimicking her staccato cadence. Not to make fun of her, but to please her.

She turns and slowly makes her way toward the door. This is when I notice that her right pant leg is bunched up all the way up to her knee. Outside, the paps yell at each other, and train their cameras on the glass, some in the street, ready to shoot. I think of the photos, with her messed up hair, and her pathetic pant leg.

"Wait!" I call to her. She slowly turns and smiles at me blankly. "Your pant leg," I say.

"Hm?"

"Maybe you want to put it down before you leave."

"Oh! Thanks!" Then she opens her purse, and starts rummaging through, as if looking for something specific I had just mentioned.

"Fuck me gently with a chainsaw," I say, in homage and exasperation. I realize I'm going to have to fix her pant leg myself whether she understands what the fuck is



Helen Rae, *Untitled (August 6, 2019)*, 2019, Graphite and color pencil on paper, 18 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist.

going on or not. I walk over to her, and gently but firmly take her by the shoulders and look deep into her eyes.

"I'm going to fix your pants, okay?" I say, now with more of a dad-vibe in my voice. Like, we're going to fix this, and it might be uncomfortable, but it'll be okay and I'm here to catch you. Let's tell the teacher what you did, but don't worry, it'll all be okay in the end.

"Okay," she says after a few moments of blinking, her voice softer and seemingly filled with meaning. Like she's acting a scene. Like she was waiting for this all along. Someone to take care of her. So I bend down, like a handmaid, and I adjust her pant leg, smoothing it in place with motherly care. And I don't stop there, I stand back up and try to put her hair back into place. She closes her eyes, enjoying the sensation of my fingers in her hair. I tuck the last strand behind her ear. There. She opens her eyes and looks slightly, just barely, more alive, or human, or whatever, than before.

"What happened?" I ask. "You were like my favorite."

"Oh, I just got old." She sighs, looks down, and laughs a little. The robot moves!

"You're so tiny. I thought you were sort of normal-ish? Like skinny but normal."

We're standing very close together, I am a little taller than her in heels. There is nothing outside of us. I feel I am talking to an oracle. I feel here is the answer to some things I don't understand.

"Oh, no. None of us are normal." A hum of truth goes through my lower belly. A thrill of knowing, almost sexual.

"I'm like a giant next to you." I say and smile, so she knows it's okay, I don't mind being a giant next to her. She reaches up and touches my hair with such tenderness I feel tears spring into my nose.

"You have such beautiful hair," she says.

"Thanks. I pull it out strand by strand because I hate myself and I want to die."

"But you're so pretty."

"I know. I think it's one thing I have so I ruin it."

"I'm addicted to oxycodone because I can't handle aging in the spotlight."

"Yeah, must be hard."

"I feel really close to you."

And then she goes to take off her purse.

Before I realize what she's doing, she says, "I want you to have this," and holds it out to me.

"No way, I can't," I say, shaking my head, taking two steps back.

"It's a Chanel 2.55," she says.

"I know," I say, with respect.

"Johnny gave it to me, it's a talisman. Keep it, for good luck."

"Are you sure?"

"It's time to let it go."

"Wow. I don't know what to say."

I take the purse, the buttery leather lambskin already tainted by my sweaty hands. And then she hugs me, the purse crushed between us. It's a good hug. Not the hug of a robot-woman. A real hug. And then just like that, she swiftly walks out the door, into a waiting car. The paps snap snap snap. And I stand there, looking out, having told the truth to someone, possibly for the first time in my life. A burning comes into my cheeks, then after a few minutes everyone's left, the red and heat drained from my body, cool once again, silence once again, and alone.