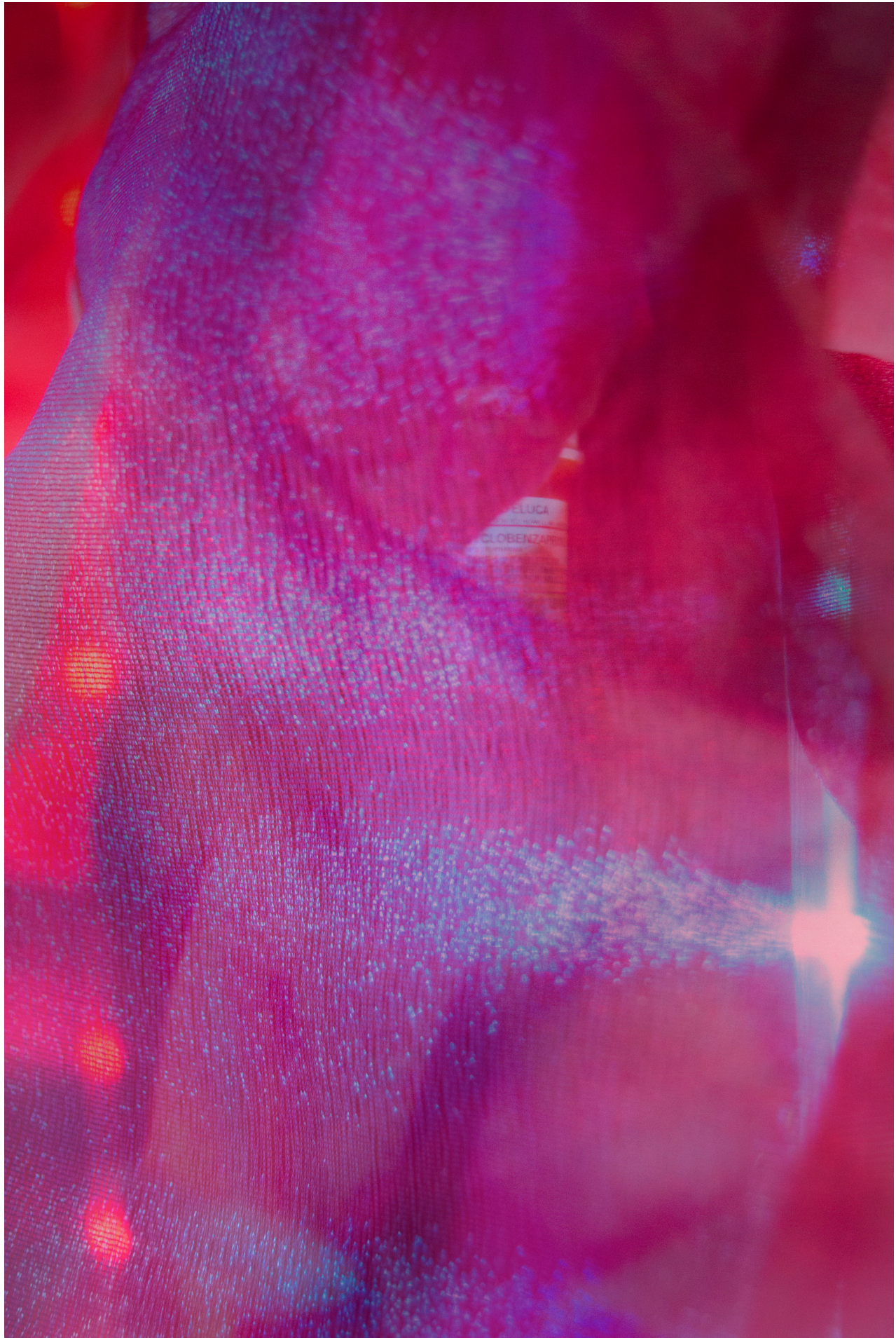




I watch my neighbor who happens to be a young girl playing with her parents in the backyard that we share. They have one child and she is fantastic. She builds forts in the backyard, carves pumpkins on the front porch, and exclaims freely at the wonder of a warm summer. On occasions like these, I think about it. My own inability to build and create another person, with thoughts, feelings, and physicality of their own. It explodes in my head as the giant looming reality. When my partner enjoys the presence of his niece, marvels at her incredible youth and curiosity, it floods me. The flaw that follows me. I cannot give that to him, or to anyone. It's a crushing realization each time. I never really wanted to be a mother. I'm not particularly good at mothering. Then suddenly it wasn't up to me anymore. There was no time to grow around that choice. You might think it would affect me less since it wasn't something I craved, to bring new life into a fragile world. Yet, being confronted with that reality, before I had even entered my twenties, gave new certainty to the rest of my future. It made my agency and my life feel incredibly small.



The relationship with my body has become so complicated. The constant care that it requires operates my life. I cannot touch the outside, press into my skin without thinking about what lies underneath. I know that beneath my hand, going through the layers of fat and muscle, my organs are slowly being welded together. That there is an entire world that nobody can see. There is a web of scar tissue and disease that is slowly progressing, marching against me. Even if I could cut it out, it wouldn't cure me. I wonder how long it will take for my uterus to be fully inoperable. I wonder if it's already too late. By the time someone cuts me open, will my pelvis be frozen? Will I become a wheelchair user? Will I need a catheter? Are they going to say this is all my fault? Or is that a foregone conclusion, orchestrated by the inaccessibility of medicine? That health is something you earn, and I am not yet deserving. Most terrifying is the possibility that they find nothing. If they go in and see none of the demons I'm sure are inside me. I send tiny messages into myself every time I massage, scrape, or inject into my skin. I try to commune with the disease that eludes me. During my confession I plead for relief, asking the thing that is alive inside me to find peace.



The first prescription drug I was ever given was a muscle relaxer. Getting my first bottle made me feel vindicated, seeing it sitting in my cabinet. I'd been dismissed so many times that getting to the point where someone was willing to give me a few pills seemed like a victory. I chose not to remember the begging it took to get here. It didn't take long for the pride to wear off. When I got to the point of actually taking one, I realized once again that there is no honesty or dignity in this experience. That night I crawled out of bed after midnight, awakened by the powerful ache in my abdomen. My stomach was red hot and swollen, from my heating pad and from the swelling that had persisted for days. Kneeling in front of my pill basket, without thinking I popped one of the pale pink pills. I laid on the wood floor waiting for something to happen. Relief never comes. I crawl back into bed with a TENS unit strapped to my stomach and I imagine the electricity flowing into my body and zapping the pain away. I dream of heat lightning. Far off light in the sky. I wake up in the early morning, mind foggy. There is a curtain of mist between me and the rest of the world. Like so many times before, I feel close to the other side of life. I am made aware of the thin veil between here and there. Being so aware of my mortality never stops being exhausting. I have Motrin for breakfast and try not to vomit. Soon I have nothing but a dull ache in my uterus and a head full of cotton. I walk into my day, and I forget the rest.



There are three blocks between me and my house. My jeans were cutting into my stomach that had decided to swell after my lunch of almonds and coffee. My pelvis is already on fire and I haven't moved. I've stopped trying to understand what will be a trigger on what day. I can only blame myself so many times before I self destruct. We arrive at my stop and I slowly rise from my seat, drawing the stares of strangers. I begin the long walk to the gallows. By the end of the first block, the dull pain has turned into a sharp stabbing. Each step worsens the pain as it travels down into my hips and ends in my thighs. I'm horrified by block two when a new pain appears, for the first time. I think I must have sandpaper in my underwear. With each step I feel like I am ripping myself open. I can see the door to my house as I make my way onto my own street. I've unbuttoned my jeans under my jacket and I'm taking small steps, trying to put some space between the seam of my pants and my body. Walking up my front steps is harder than it's ever been before, each body part screaming at me to stop for a different reason. I open the door with a sob, feeling overwhelmed by how quickly everything changes. I rip off my jeans before taking another step. I crawl upstairs in my underwear, drawn by the prospect of a scalding hot bath numbing my lower body. I start to laugh while the tears still stream down my face. Through blurred vision, I'm staring at the jeans lying next to me on the bedroom floor. I wonder if they know the consequences of their actions. I put them away for the last time.





I'm afraid of my body. I've thought about this since I was a little girl. About all of the things living and growing inside me beyond my control. I had an intense fear of the unknown world inside me that never went away. Over and over again I thought about being able to get into a machine that would show me each crack and dysfunction. Someone could tell me what it all meant, all of the discomfort I was feeling. I didn't even know what I was feeling was fear until I was an adult. Consumed by a loneliness I didn't understand. Disconnected from my own body. I still feel it sometimes, and I'm transported back to my childhood home, in the bathroom, doubled over by a pain with an unidentified source. Repeated trips to the bathroom with a confused bladder. Leaving school early because it hurts to sit through class. I wish I could talk to myself, the self I was years ago. Sitting uncomfortably in the nurses office, ruining my brothers graduation with a bout of illness, getting sent home from volleyball practice because I couldn't stand up. From a young age I wanted them to just take it out, whatever it was. I still can't convince them to go in to find it. To cut it out. Each doctors visit ends with a different reason to avoid investigating my symptoms: too young, low chance of conception, difficult patient. Most often I get labeled as anxious, a label that is exacerbated by my long history of mental illness. I always leave thinking about how it felt to be a child. I see my small child's face clearly in my hindsight. Terrified. I had to be an adult when I was so young. Or maybe now I am just an old child.