When I was a girl by Jennifer Jackson Berry
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sleepovers were: socks stuffed in bras we wouldn’t have needed otherwise & nothing on bottoms but undies, performing burlesque to a rotating group of judges who would soon take their turn with feather boas, who would use the same socks, the attached garage not a gossipy backstage, but a collaboration, not under the guise of anything but friendship. show stoppers, underrated dance moves from chubby girls who knew how to move, who were still years from hiding our bodies, then not caring who saw flesh, not understanding it would ever change
doctor visit was: pride during my pre-6th grade physical when she parted my lips & apologized for pulling some hairs. i was soon for a full bush. hairless was for everywhere but down there. i pressed the electric razor against my shins, but no reason to press so hard it cut me. i shaved my arms when the wisps were like so many question marks, why so much hair? why aren’t you normal normal normal? i hated (not pubic) hair with the same heat i loved my new body (breasts!) but when the doctor frowned, then suggested a 1,200 calorie diet, when she didn’t want to celebrate my hair, but instead reduce my body, that was when everything started to change
trust tests were: not to be trusted, too little strength in too many little
girl hands on a girl scout camping trip, a get-to-know-
you-sunday-school event, a birthday party with the helicopter hands

of an overzealous mother coaxing the exercise, her hands
not supporting the fall. this wasn’t a universal worry, only a little
girl’s with too much on her little frame. i knew

i’d become a little bit older girl with a woman’s body, i’d know
how to fall without getting hurt, i’d always remember the failing, flailing hands
of a mother remembering too late it isn’t just her daughter’s little

hands she needed to hold, but all little girls’ she needed to know
which ones were most likely to fall & reach for them
swimming was: making diane mad at her birthday party when i only went down the water slide once. i didn’t know how to keep from going under. at heather’s pool,

i couldn’t plant my feet in the four foot deep pool & flailed, thinking i was drowning. i looked like i was playing the part of a much older girl in my misses swimsuit, high legs. no others fit. swimming was: trying not make a splash, fat girls are not encouraged to cannonball like the fat boys are. at private pool lessons, i could only sit on the concrete edge & fall, not dive in, part water with hands in a perfect triangle, not overhead but pointing at the pool floor, parting my knees
sleepovers became: dirty dancing & stand by me
so many times we knew every word but still cringed each
time lennie briscoe (before he was lennie briscoe) examined penny

or ray brower flashed on the screen, dead eyes round & flat as pennies,
belinda carlisle impersonations on vhs tape wearing felt fedoras, my
hands flying in choreographed routines with each

ooh baby (back & forth like a sling) wondering do we know what each
of us is worth (thumb & two fingers, cash) ooh heaven (more than pennies)
(we hope) is a place on earth (circle circle circle) she & she & she & me

planning futures (mansions-attics-shacks-houses) spending
each penny on our respective me-s
treasure was: bop, teen beat, tiger beat, posters of the two 
coreys before drugs & death, kirk cameron, ralph macchio, school 
books wrapped in brown grocery bags with penciled graffiti & bubble 
letters 2 good 2 be 4 gotten from best friends, bubble 
gum shared piece by piece, split heart necklaces worn on two 
necks, id bracelets with a boy’s name for the lucky ones, school 
field trips to the aviary & plays & museums, back-to-school 
shopping for erasers stickers scented markers bubble- 
wrapped trapper keepers & pop-a-point pencils. no more trips to 
the back of the school-room to sharpen, to imagine the word bubbles 
above the heads of the bullies: fatso!
fashion was: anything slimming, vertical stripes, black, but nothing exactly like a skinny girl’s because of the inevitable comparisons. puffy paint, jackets laced with novelty pins, pegged jeans, jeans pegged tight with a safety pin so no bending over to fix the cuffs & showing my butt, then sports team shirts, british knights, bugle boy & inevitable androgyny of same. baggy & boyish inevitably hid what everyone else showed. the anti-pin-up. & just in case, sweaters long enough to cover my butt.

fashion makes the woman, but inevitably girls like me are pinned, stuck between butch & a soft place
even church camp was about appearances: when I got bitten on the neck, right where a hickey would be, i didn’t correct anyone who thought it was from a co-camper’s lips.

we had sex in the pines, flashlight-lit talk deep in the woods, lip service for secondary virginity. the other cabin of girls got caught talking about blow jobs & what campers were hot & had to be without makeup & showers one morning, had to be reminded jesus was always watching what they did with their lips. the punishing counselors didn’t understand, only half got it: the bigger sin should have been getting caught taunting those who didn’t use their lips yet

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i focused on my eye of god, two twigs, like twin sets of legs caught spread-eagle, spun & bound with yarn
all day,i dream about sex
i dream about all day sex all day
i day dream about sex all day

day i dream sex about all
all about day i dream sex
all day i dream about sex all day

i dream about sex all day
all day i dream all about sex all
about sex all day i dream

dream day i all about sex
fear was: bleeding through the pad, being picked last, taking off my shoes, weigh in with a clueless nurse, repeat of the dodge ball to the gut or running the mile, president’s physical fitness tests, boobs so big running gave black eyes & back aches, removing summer’s last sun-in streaks mid-october with hair dye too dark, repeat of english teacher asking if anything’s wrong, repeat of the visit to the therapist’s office, running through the list of reasons why black hair isn’t a last cry for help: last line repeated to anyone who listened: *I’m always running*
literature was: summer of my german soldier,
lurlene mcdaniels’ girls with cancer & sex,
the house on mango street after a review in sassy,

r. l. stine & christopher pike, their ghosts’s sparks & sass,
catcher in the rye, to kill a mockingbird, soldiering
through the great gatsby, norma klein taught me sex,

faint first orgasm reading her sex
scene with leslie & peter & their family secrets, sassy
feminist ms. finney creates a soldier

in marcy lewis & in me, sassy & sexy soldier with a bookmark
ballsy were: boys who spoke their minds. sociology teacher posed the question “when it is ok to have sex?” to 12th graders. if it’s right, if it’s loving. stupid were: girls who believed adjectives.

nick taught truth to his buddies who caved & attached the adjectives. he answered anytime; i said never unless married, always the teacher’s pet. did i really think admitting desire would affect my grade?

girls aren’t taught to be ballsy. bruce said jeans could be sexy in 6th grade as teacher wrote J E A N S, then filled the board with adjectives. girls giggled, his sexy was not what our mothers taught.

truth: by graduation, any boy could have taught me how to verb his adjective noun
x = feathers, y = boards
english: light as a feather, stiff as a board, she is a feather,
he is a board. logic proof: if light as a feather, then stiff as a board.
what are the conditions of stiffness?

the boy will be stiff if & only stiff if the girl is light as a feather & not bored.
chemistry & sex ed: if the girl is light as a feather,
as air, as feathery as air, then the boy will be stiff as a board.
sexy was: wallet chains, underarm hair, hands,
thick & veined, him leaning against a locker, against anything,
chapstick application with his fingertip,
slick-lipped talk about the exchange student, fingertip
in her mouth, then down her pants both hands
in math class, slick-tongued boasts about anything,
especially about dropping trough, matching her right now, anything
in the pages of cosmo, or passages of v. c. andrews, tips
of the pages folded down, at a red light in mall traffic, hands.

hands, up my shirt, touching the tips of anything that would touch back
wished for: self esteem & self-assuredness, somewhere to go when there was nowhere, virginity lost to ac/dc you shook me, it made clear

i really did know johnny in the summers, clear-skied days of baseball & his dad in the bleachers, sure that i’d stand in as a good girlfriend, where

so many others failed, a prom date so i could wear the purple velvet dress i bought on clearance at the deb shop in january because surely

he’d exist by may. he didn’t.
   i was worn out, cleared out, never sure.
got: giving first blow job to john cougar mellencamp’s hurts
so good, then an empty bedroom for the second
& third tracks, prom night in street clothes with bff’s dumped
bf watching the grand march of couples, the un-dumped
announced by the social studies teacher, hurt
feelings fed with dq cones & second
helpings & delilah after dark love songs, seconds
minutes hours alone in my bedroom dump
site of mismatched socks & candy wrappers & hurt.
dump site of what would have to be second chances
& (probably still) hurt
phone sex was: supposed wrong number move-in week
at the dorms, which led to compliments on my sexy voice, which led
to asking about my boyfriend, no, which led to don’t you get horny?

yes, but i’m a virgin & what do you think you’d like, kiddo? are you horny
now? fantasies, reading from penthouse letters, weeks
of near daily contact until his kid came into the room, which led
to daddy? the phone rang stalker-like during our lapse, which led
to giving in, picking up, but not agreeing to meet in person. he was still horny
for me & asked why? are you really that fat? for weeks

& weeks, i beat myself up for the answer that dropped like lead: yes
surprise was: midnight phone call invitation
to a formal frat party by josh, pledge boy in freshman comp,
i balked, saying all of my prom dresses were at home,

as if it was so far away, my closet in my hometown,
as if this wasn’t my very first invitation,
but fear college really was a sit-com won out & i composed

myself, said no, he lost his composure
& whined he’d even begun calling fat girls, homely
girls. so this wasn’t a pig party invitation:

he was a comparable loser, just trying not to invite the biggest girl home
drunk was: not until college & through the vodka bottle, the deep blue glass, i wanted to see denim, the one thick seam between back packets to my hand

on the bulge of a button fly, my hand searching the last drop, i licked the bottle, neck in & out of my mouth, acting the one sex i knew. i wanted my first real sex to be one body slipping like liquor over the other, his hands undoing my every maneuver to keep it all bottled up: the summer sky, heaven’s pink streaks, being handed every answer, even one answer, in my tingling pink flesh