

From "Ampersand Revisited"

III.

When I first started writing, I liked to think in italics whenever I was at a loss.
Not startled, but *terribly*

surprised or *caught unawares*. Then I could be formally afraid.

Even the last summer when I'd gone into the woods to figure out why I didn't want to have sex with my parent's au pair, I knew

I was watching myself for the slant.

Then I found the shack with the Confederate flag and the centerfolds stapled apart on oak trees and airbrushed with bullets.

Thinly ambivalent women interrupted by accompanying paragraphs of *on top*, *below*, *behind*, *before*.

As if prepositions could get you off.

It wasn't that I was going away to college. It was just the room. Filled with her crossed wrists and a kind of silver grit that tasted of iron and expectation.

It made me feel like I should ask for something. A flat glass of water. A kind word. That was it—it was sex

without words. And it bothered me. Without direct address, I couldn't be sure I was really the one involved.

This made no sense. That year, words were not helping. Whenever I heard one I thought was beautiful, I secretly wrote it in the air down by my side.

I had to get the calligraphy absolutely right, or I'd have to do it again. Up to thirty times.

Now, I like the idea that there was always an unbelievable word a handspan away from my hipbone. Then, it was exhausting.

Au pair means to be treated "as an equal." Like family.

I knew I was in trouble when I liked the reference more than the word: *This foreign phrase has no exact English synonym*

and not every American knows what it means.

I got it wrong.

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