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### Loving You in the Desert: Short Stories

Sam Kass

*SIT Study Abroad*

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#### Recommended Citation

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**Loving You in the Desert**

Short Stories by Sam Kass

May, 2022

## **Order of Stories**

confession

Women's Studies 348: Thesis on Sex & Reproduction

first time masturbating, an elegy for american sex education

How To Be Gay When The Whole World Is Falling Apart

untitled

## confession

i.

at first, it was easy. she didn't love me, and i didn't love her. i was getting over my first real breakup and she was getting over years of men who never fucked her right. she was a good listener, and i was the girl she didn't yet know she wanted. the epiphany.

for my birthday, a week after tyler laurence broke up with me, she got me a candy bra. i shit you not, an actual fucking candy bra. it had little pastel o-rings you could work your tongue through until they melted. and then she ate them right off me too. all of them.

i didn't know what to do. she was one of my better, if not best, friends. i knew it was a bad idea, sleeping with her. but i didn't know if it was *good* bad idea, or a *bad* bad idea. i knew she'd be into it, yeah. she made that pretty clear. said she wanted to fuck me right when i met her. i just wasn't sure i could handle if – when – it all went to shit.

but i also just wanted her to eat candy off my tits, you know?

the first time we had sex, we stopped in the middle of because she was scared to hurt me. i knew she would eventually. i pretended not to care. after that, we gave up and claimed the future had no control over us.

sometimes, we wouldn't fuck. just sit there until the stars started to disappear, holding the plot still between our parted lips. late night moment sitting on the bed, when neither of us knew what would happen next, or we both knew but were afraid, or we both knew but it didn't. we'd count the silent minutes, track our breath and shadows like benevolent ghosts across bedroom walls. of course i was thinking about fucking her. of course she was thinking about fucking me. i could tell when her breath came out in short little puffs. *praise for what is not yet but may become a habit*, i thought. my tongue tracing letters on her clit as she said my name almost inaudibly, an undertone to the midnight wind. praise the permission to mold her back muscles around my hand and neck, to burrow my scrawny mole fingers inside her warmth. even when we didn't fuck, i found even that romantic. the nights she'd touch me only in my mind, nights when the bed was just a bed, a place for resting. i never knew what was coming. she was, simultaneously, the most inevitable and precarious thing that had ever happened to me.

i don't know when exactly i realized it wasn't working. when i got tired of the *almosts*. too many evenings she got to me at eleven thirty, too tired to even strip off her shirt. i tried not to be jealous of the lab equipment she fondled all day.

she was studying crawfish, and i was trying not to think about those poor crawfish, how they get scooped up for scientific research when they're just babies. if they didn't, they have a lifespan of seven years, still be alive when we're almost *thirty*. instead, in the lab, they get killed after the end of the experiment, even the control ones. *nothing happens* to the controls and they still get killed anyway. i didn't agree with animal testing. i didn't agree with a lot of things she did.

*do you want to hear a story*, she asked one night. she didn't always talk to me when she got home, so yes, of course i did. it wasn't about crawfish, but some other small scaly amphibian. *remember when i told you that we sometimes found weird animals in our basement in arizona?* yeah. well, *i didn't go into specifics because i didn't want to scare you. but one year we had a bit of a scorpion problem.* no. yes. fuck, i would've died right there. well, *i was like, seven and i thought it was kind of cool.* of course you did. *anyways, my sister and i would just trap them in jars and let them die.* no. *it gets worse. they would stay alive for like two months. no food, no air, nothing. i'm wondering now if that's super sadistic.* it is. *but the other way to kill them is to pour alcohol in the jar and then the scorpion stings itself to death. which has got to be worse, right?* i don't know, what if you didn't kill them? just took em out in a paper cup or something? couldn't you do that? *no. these fuckers were huge. we weren't gonna let them find their way back into our* – right. yeah. okay, i get it, i think. then i guess the alcohol thing is more humane, relatively speaking. *you'd rather destroy yourself via a thousand stings?* it's gotta be better than months of suffocation.

ii.

everyone *wants* to love me.

i'm tired of people saying they want to love me but they can't. you think it's not hard for me to be in a relationship either? you think i'm ever ready for anything? no, i'm just willing to risk it.

i'm tired of always being someone's wrong timing. i'm tired of being the one they find when they're not looking for anything. isn't someone ready to love me? isn't someone willing to love me even when they're not ready?

i swear to god i didn't mean to start talking to ty again. he was my ex, the one i was actively trying to get over. i thought that being with someone new would make my feelings go away, but instead they just went dormant, lava-like, ready to erupt at any moment. i started texting him when she was busy, only when she was busy. but she was busy almost every night. *come check out my new bedroom poster*, he said eventually, *i think you'll love it*. it was such a line. i knew it was such a line, made fun of him for that later. the poster was of harley quinn. he was right, i loved her. i loved her and him and her. we didn't fuck then, but he cuddled me and it was nice. i hadn't been cuddled in a while.

iii.

so that was weird. you're being weird. did something happen?

did something happen?

yeah, you tell me.

nothing.

something.

nothing. i was horny. i was bored. you were gone.

*you were gone on the alcohol.*

oh, don't start on that. that's not an issue, is it?

what do you mean, *isn't an issue?*

we're just fucking around. we're just fucking around and boo hoo i have one fun night without

you –

fun? you call this *fun?* gagging on the lap of some frat b –

you wouldn't know. you weren't even there. too busy studying the fucking MSAT –

MCAT.

oh, i'm so sincerely sorry. i apologize if i'm forgetting the name of your *faaaaaavorite* activity –  
– just tell me what happened.

nothing happened. i'm serious. nothing happened, you came in wearing your little fucking  
labcoat to rescue me and drag me home –

– what if i didn't show up when i did? would something have happened then?

no.

i don't know.

you can't get mad at me for the hypotheticals.

i drank my alcohol too quickly. that's it.

i ran out of something to put my lips on when i was lonely and cold.

iv.

he taught me how to flick open a pocketknife right after i met him. we were baking in the  
kitchen, his hand was on mine on the knife. *you can eat pine needles for vitamin c, did you  
know?* he said. i thought, isn't that just the sun? *no, that's vitamin d, vitamin c comes from pine  
needles or those little yellow fish oil pills. if you have scurvy in the mountains, that's what you  
do,* he said. *eat the pine needles.* he's never had scurvy in the mountains but he knows what to do  
if he did. i don't know how to do anything i've never done before.

we were in the kitchen flicking knives. i am clumsy. do not trust myself with many things. *do  
you wanna know how many times the point of this knife has been somewhere in my body?* he



asked. it sounded disturbingly sexual. i kind of hoped it was. i hate phallogentric penetration metaphors as much as the next women's studies major but i wonder retrospectively if he is the knife.

*more wrist action*, he says. *like this*. i flick it open. us in the kitchen flicking knives. he says, *no, do it like this*. suddenly, his tongue is all over the knife. his tongue is all over the fucking knife and our fucking housemates are in the room next to us not fucking i mean they are fucking not fucking in the fucking room next to us and his fucking tongue leaves spit-makes on the fucking knife, his tongue that could be fucking – his tongue on the knife.

he stares at me as he slides himself up and down across cool metal, this boy i like more than i should for my own good. i don't know what he's done in the wild, but we were in the kitchen flicking knives.

v.

if i don't fuck him, i am a good girlfriend. if i am a good girlfriend, it is thursday and i am taking you out to savona's for flatbread pizza. if i am taking you out to savona's for flatbread pizza, i can't smell like a festering gym bag. i want to wear mascara. if i want to wear mascara and smell like axe deodorant and dove shampoo, i walk back from hockey practice to take a shower just for you. if i walk back from hockey practice to take a shower just for you, i climb the dorm's field-facing staircase that all the athletes use. if i climb the dorm's field-facing staircase that all the athletes use, there's a chance i might run into him. if i run into him on the staircase to my room, i'll say hi because i am a good girlfriend, but also not a dick. if i am a good girlfriend but

also not a dick, i'll say hi and he might start talking. he'll start talking and i might listen. in the apology i'll promise it's an accident. in this accident we might talk so long my locked knees threaten to faint me, and i'll have to lean against the wall like an unpaid instagram model. if i pose like that, my chest points upward. if my chest points upward his eyes become searchlights. if his eyes become searchlights, i know i am caught and laugh. if i laugh, he echoes it like a parrot. if we are giggling parrots, we are loose and already drunk. if we are already drunk, it is from piss beer and tequila, no lime. if we are drunk, we are sharing. if we are sharing, the germs have already made love anyway. if we are sharing, it is easier for me to just sit on his lap. i can feel him through his silty khakis. if i can feel him, he knows it and squirms. if he squirms, i make it a dance. if we dance, it is already too late. it is already too late and he knows it and i know it and we click our parrot tongues in knowing. i fondle his hair. i play his skin. haven't showered so we're both sweaty by now. it is already too late so we walk back to the same dorm. take the staircase to my room. we do not stop to talk. he's seen where i keep the rope in my closet. been on my bed a hundred thousand times. the air is loose and his tongue silty. we don't lean, we fall. we do not make love, we fuck. absorb each other like neat tequila.

## **Women's Studies 348: Thesis on Sex & Reproduction**

### **or, ghostly judgements from my women's studies professor**

three years in, i still imagine my future with a man.

i want this not to be the case, but it comes naturally, the way i throw a baseball with my left hand or perpetually end up with yellow objects at IKEA.

he is always white. a variation on tom brady. i don't even like tom brady, but for some reason, he does. the patriots, the buccaneers, michigan; he knows all about ann arbor because of this particular affinity. owns an old maize jersey in the back of his closet. when i'm lonely, i smell it to think, *home*.

our home will be mostly my doing. we will argue for some time about the material of our couch until he gives up as long as the tv is at least 64 inches (5'4"). the tv will be a behemoth two times my size.

from then on, i will make all the textile decisions. it will be nice, easy. boys are easy like that. when i take his last name, nobody will spell it wrong. it's johnson, or something else we learned early in sixth grade us history.

here's the thing.

you think i won't want to be with him, but he will want me and that will be enough. the sex will be good as long as i know he needs it. when the neighbors come over, they will be embarrassed by how low my shirt is buttoned. their little boys and girls will slobber popsicle juice all over the easywipe non-leather cushions.

it will be enough to know that the babysitter fancies me. maybe she will come and babysit but we will have no children. this i am certain of, there is no room in my fantasy for children. they would just be props and i am not cruel enough to subject any child to that. a man, maybe, but not a child.

i will, eventually, be in love, i suppose. or we will fuck enough that it doesn't matter. live off steam and sweat like anemic vampires. when i attend the hot yoga class he buys me for christmas, i'll be more flexible than even the instructor. my body will loosen as if i have given birth and he will be as proud as if i have given birth and he will not complain he will –

*it's so fucked up it's almost perfect, right?*

professor rivera looks down at me, sympathetic, skeptical, bored. she too, has been with a man. has actually *loved* a man, but when i ask her what that's like, she smiles and it's scarier than any radical feminist warning.

it's eerie, how quiet she is, outside of class. like the lectures have drained everything from her. it puts too much pressure on me as the subject. i half expect to look up and see her taking notes, preparing for the next big dissertation.

*no, she says. it's you, not me who should be writing.*

it's true, i have been procrastinating.

i go to the library and add citations to my bibliography without reading the books.

i do my grocery shopping lazily, inefficiently, only buying enough for the night so i must return day after day and waste more time. it feels productive, though, when i feed myself.

*just write about what you know, rivera says unhelpfully like she's dictating *writing for dummies*.*

a new woman moves into the apartment next door. she studies the psychiatric effects of the anthropocene. has much more gall than me and invites herself in for a welcome drink. rifles through my absent roommate's record collection to find the sultriest one. i don't tell her it's the album i lost my virginity to with jack mulligan in eleventh grade. she plays it and we fuck on a couch covered in mildly-appropriate mandala tapestries (also my roommate's). after, she says she is in a relationship but it's not working. grad school makes her depressed. in ten years, she will have either won a nobel prize or killed herself, she predicts. we kiss every once in a while, mostly on heavy mondays.

i sleep with two other people in the meantime.

the fourth floor archive librarian and a man from hinge who should not get automatic bonus points just for being a man on hinge but neither of them look like brady, and i count it as a win. i fantasize about rivera's mind casually, the way you forget a celebrity crush until they suddenly appear in an advertisement for a new movie.

*tom brady tells me i should buy my shoes from footlocker.*

now, we've been married for three years.

watching the game for two hours.

i tackle my husband to the floor.

he's much bigger than me, this man, could absolutely crush me if desired, but he isn't expecting it so i lock him in a half nelson to the rug.

he doesn't know i did wrestling throughout middle and high school, back when i passed as a skinny boy if i wore a tight enough sports bra, back when the boys were all weak and did nothing anyway. sometimes i miss that, being all muscle and grunt. but then he colors at the peak of my breasts and i know, *this is real power.*

professor rivera watches me, and i can't tell if she's biting her lip to keep from cheering or laughing or grimacing.

my future husband, he the bad boy of my fantasies. he is a bad boy because he is white and cis and doesn't know what to do with his hands.

before my cousin got married, she asked my mom if you can *ever really love a white man*. my mom said *yes, i think*. my father wasn't there.

once, i wrote in a women's studies essay that i am attracted to the power men hold over me and that i like fucking that power out of them. my professor, my famous professor, the one and only leona rivera, said i should probably talk to somebody. we've been chatting in my mind ever since.

rivera watches me. it's not monday, i am caught, not with brady, or a brady look alike, but a guy from my latest women's studies class. she doesn't recognize him, so her opinions on him at least are unbiased. *grade me*, i say. *grade me grade me*.

i want her to tell me i am doing this right. that my life is worthy of study. otherwise, i'm afraid i'll disappear into him.

she circles us, holding eye contact with me as he pounds into the various crevices of my body. there is heat and need and fear and i know even before he asks that he wants to cum inside me. *yes, give me everything*. i remind myself of jennifer.

clench onto him and it's like that illegal move in wrestling, the one they warn you never to do. pressure point. unspoken. beyond dangerous. it can kill a man, my coach told me before asking if i knew what i was getting into.

my fingers sink into his muscle, dense and ropey. i fish through his flesh for the words. then nothing.

where there could be a yell, it's empty.

in his place, a thick copy, already bound.

i cradle it to my chest, tight, and think about how my mother typed my dad's thesis in college.

i am lucky, saving time.

it's cover is glossy and it says a name i never wanna give up.

it's longer than i thought i would write, an accomplishment.

as i caress the pages, i wonder if leona will be proud.



**first time masturbating, an elegy for american sex education**

it is only after i have washed my hands twice & yanked three wire-thin hair elastics (covered in dog-spit & cupcake-batter) from my wrist & taken off my pants & underwear & socks (in that order) (i was never wearing a shirt in the first place & neither were the women in that lesbian netflix movie i just watched) i had to keep turning the volume down cause there's no privacy in this house the walls are thin enough to knock goodnight kisses to my brother & the movie was like 74 percent porn (it was very late at night i hoped everyone was sleeping) it is only after i have listened to the entirety of my good spotify playlist & texted one of the many boys i sort-of like about poetry & finished my embroidery (hands already scarred with needle piercings & dog bites my fingernails bitten all the way down which is a bad habit but sometimes convenient) i check five times to see that nobody is home (everybody's out walking the puppy) (the puppy who humps his bed in the living room with no shame & my brother says he's looking for his balls cus he's a neutered rescue) my brother jokes about emasculation like it's a playground riddle but it's not a playground riddle i'm still looking for my own clitoris & i'm not saying the situations are the same but i've already survived 9 years of ohio public education (which is to say a lot of good teachers & not a lot of sex education) it is only after turing the shower on breath-hot & hanging the polar bear towel on the random wall nail playing my only spotify playlist again real loud & (last night i watched the degrassi episode where lola is convinced there is something wrong with her vagina so it is after thinking about that too) that i switch the water on a little stronger & unclasp the handle bring it lower lower lower hesitate long enough for the heat to run out & only then does my hand finally climb the fold of kilimanjaro venture into the grand canyon land on the moon & then & then & then – that i stick my finger in the wrong hole.

## How To Be Gay When The Whole World Is Falling Apart

### TWO TREES SPY ON A COUPLE ON THE INSIGNIFICANT BANK OF A MINISCULE RIVER.

– look at them.

who?

over there, the two on the hill. can you see them?

maybe. i don't know. i think so?

do you think they're in love?

what?

– if not love then at least something that feels like it, i hope.

why –

look at them – giddy, laughing.

clunky, falling.

what do you think they're saying?

i don't know. how would i know?

– i want you and i want you and i want you but i don't know how to tell you.

that's what you think they're saying?

yes.

why?

i don't know.

it's all nonsense. the birds and the bees, that's the way to go.

i'm not so sure. i want to hate 'em but i can't. i can't help wishing for them to be happy.

**TWO GIRLS LIE ON A BLANKET FEELING A HEIGHTENED AWARENESS OF EVERYTHING.**

i read somewhere that it takes trees months to feel pain. trees can feel pain, did you know that? like if a branch falls or a woodpecker – or even when a caterpillar bites on their leaves – they have nerve impulses, like humans. i think they get some sort of signal. it's just really slow. takes a while for them to travel so far up the trunk or whatever. i'm not messing with you. you gotta be careful. like what do you think the trees are feeling right now?

**THE GIRLS UNDRRESS, UNLACE THEIR BOOTS THAT HAVE TOO MANY EYELETS, IT'S A RACE AGAINST TIME. THE NIGHT BLISTERS THEIR SKIN.**

once, i broke up with a boy because i noticed he was always distant when we were fucking. and when i asked him about it he said he was overwhelmed and just too distracted about the environment to really care about things like sex and kissing and all of that.

**ALTERNATIVELY**

when i think of the environment it makes me want you more. or at least desire this kind of burning. the kind where we lie on a blanket in the wet grass & name stars that are dead already & make wishes anyway.

we're losing redwoods in the california fires that are older than christ. i don't know where this leaves me with religion.

tonight the moon shines so bright these new-trees cast infinite shadows. it reminds me of a scene in *melancholia*. you know the one i'm talking about.

the moon looks like it might come to eat us up. if it doesn't, something else will. i am terrified & it makes me want to kiss you. i want to kiss you & that makes me no longer afraid. what fire this gives us, knowing there will be no one left to watch us burn.

#### **NATIONAL INTERAGENCY FIRE CENTER BULLETIN**

August Complex, 739,791 acres, 30 percent contained. August Complex West Zone, 49,009 acres, 0 percent contained. Bluejay, 3,132 acres, 20 percent contained. Bobcat, 38,299 acres, 3 percent contained. Bullfrog, 900 acres, 0 percent contained. Creek, 212,744 acres, 16 percent contained. CZU August Lightning, 86,509 acres, 98 percent contained. Devil, 4,429 acres, 0 percent contained. Dolan, 118,468 acres, 40 percent contained. El Dorado, 16,490 acres, 53 percent contained. Fork, 1,752 acres, 7 percent contained. LNU Lightning Complex, 363,220 acres, 97 percent contained. Moraine, 575 acres, 70 percent contained. North Complex, 264,565 acres, 39 percent contained. Rattlesnake, 1,595 acres, 0 percent contained. Red Salmon

Complex, 91,743 acres, 18 percent contained. SCU Lightning Complex, 396,624 acres, 98 percent contained. Slater, 131,601 acres, 10 percent contained. SQF Complex, 101,420 acres, 12 percent contained. Valley, 17,665 acres, 87 percent contained. Wolf, 624 acres, 10 percent contained. Woodward, 4,920 acres, 96 percent contained.

**POST-SKINNY-DIPPING. THE GIRLS SHAKE BARE AND NAKED IN THE WIND,  
LIKE TREES ALONG THE BANK OF THE WATER. WE DOESN'T DESERVE ANY  
BEINGS THIS BEAUTIFUL.**

the water

the water's cold

so cold

my bones forgot

hands numb

legs numb

so numb

here, will you feel them?

your bones

my hands

you're cold

feel right here

everywhere

your bones, everywhere

ice

cold

it was hot today so i took the coldest shower imaginable, so cold i was gasping for air

in the shower

in the shower, gasping for air

it felt so good

i was worried one of my hallmates would come in and think i was

mastrubating

i've always thought of myself as bold

but, really, i'm so afraid

me too

afraid?

yes

afraid?

yes, yes

yes?

yes

here, touch me, i'm on fire.

**untitled**

*i love the desert, because everything that's alive should be dead already, but isn't.*

we watch *don't look up* on a dust couch in a tan apartment, and the whole time, you assume they'll be able to save the world. you really don't think the asteroid will collide with the earth, and your hope makes me feel unstable, demands itself into space the way i imagine a floundering meteorite would.

i lie on the floor like a flounder. body tired. we walked to the mountains yesterday. actually, we took a van to the basecamp and then hiked for just over an hour, but it sounds so much cooler to say it like that, *you and me walked to the goddamn mountains*. there were rocks in every direction, i didn't even know that was possible. you paused and i saw the need. hands, twitching to sample. touch. take. *it's okay*, i allowed. *i'm sure the desert can spare*.

you should know by now that i am not the arbitrator of how to act well on this earth, i believe too much in the superiority of ephemeral love. i'm drawn to sin and illegality and romanticized destruction the same way i am drawn to your body. before we inevitably fuck, i will wonder briefly if it's only happening now because it's illegal. it's not the first time we break the law together, but the act with the most consequences, and that's kind of sexy. then you purr and the doubt becomes a stray cat and crawls out the double-locked blackout window.

we watch *don't look up* on a dust couch in a tan apartment as the lusty night coughs against the glass panes. i wear nylons, but no skirt. a tired, late-day attempt at sexy. you wear a keith haring shirt from tk maxx, the british version. your ass cheeks stick out below the hem like two peaks from the atlas skyline. a successful non-attempt at sexy. you remind me of jlo with your bangs.

jennifer lawrence, who is acting really well. we are not. i tell you about a carmen maria machado story i know you would hate, two women who accidentally create life. *fuck a child into me*, i think, and you shudder.

we watch *don't look up* on a dust couch in a tan apartment, the nosy city groveling at the door.

you being a geologist, i ask you to explain everything, even the things you don't know. i only took half a semester's worth of elementary earth science, quit the class when you quit me. you like things that are hard, stable, lasting. i am afraid i am too alive for you.

the whole time, you really thought the asteroid would be stopped from colliding with the earth.

soon, you'll travel back to scotland. i am happy that what you love will last forever. calcium and quartz and sulfur. i hope you find it comforting.

the whole time you really thought the asteroid wouldn't collide with the earth.



*take me to your best friend's house*, grouplove sang the night we decided to live together. it was about five weeks after we had broken up and you said we should probably stop kissing if we were to be roommates. it almost worked until i said *this song reminds me of you*. it was only sort-of a line, i swear. we looked at each other too long. *who doesn't love some good irony*, i thought. you were sitting on the pool table with your legs open.

i love the desert, because everything that's alive should be dead already, but isn't.

like *us*.

the movie ends and now, we're listening to lorde. we listen, scared, until the cheap speaker cackles, embarrassed. finally, you grab my hand and our backs metamorphosize into scorpions.

the whole time i really thought –

you unclip vertebrae one by one from my spine. lorde never stops singing. i become the unidentified fossil. you hum. i fall apart on a bed that holds us like an ocean, dry. slimy rain. you slurp and suckle for life. teeth playing groves in my chest like a washboard.

i hover above over you, grip a hole in the headboard. my voice is heavy with filth. beetles, maggots, fossils, germination. it holds everything that is, and ever was, alive. your exhales are volcanic. my tongue works a valley into your shoulder. my hair clouds over your face for a terrifying moment. i can't lose sight of you again so i beg.

*juno*.

*juno.*

*juno.*

look at me, *juno*, please.

your eyes flick open.

up.