HURTS WORST

Claire Luchette

Willa wanted to know what to call every bug, fruit, bloom, rock. When she wondered the name of something strange, she took a photo for Gloria. That's a hornbeam! Gloria would say, within seconds, or: That's mica! Then, if Willa wanted, Gloria would tell her more. Gloria knew not just what to call a tree, but what a tree could mean. Forests primeval, urban arcadia, sacred groves. She could take you to a recording of Billie Holiday singing "Strange Fruit." John Locke on property, Robert Frost on birches. Every detail about the Great Chicago Fire, as well as the mycorrhizal networks of Douglas firs. Gloria pointed Willa to a new study that assessed how building materials impact mood and brain activity. Walls of warm wood are the most soothing, the study found, and stark white drywall the most distressing. Willa could picture people's faces in the wood room: their jaws relaxed, pupils large. But surrounded by drywall, they would frown. Maybe even shudder.

Sometimes, Gloria would identify the wrong thing – That's sidewalk! – and Willa would have to tap, go back, click again. Apparently, Gloria was wrong anywhere from 12 to 60 percent of the time.

Willa was given to uploading photos of herself. She waited as Gloria studied the forty-three muscles in Willa's face, measured the distances between Willa's features. The shape and size of her jaw, the notch in her throat. Human man! she concluded about Willa, every time.

At the artists' residency, Willa was meant to be working on her novel. Instead she walked around with another writer, Ann Lunk Fig, and marveled at the pine cones.

When Willa uploaded a photo of one big tree, Gloria assessed the trunk, the branches, the leaves, and used Willa's location for contextual accuracy. That's an overcup oak! she told Willa. *Quercus lyrata*. Then she gave a short paragraph of summarized information.

Willa called, Come look at this overcup oak. Ann, come look at this *quercus lyrata*.

When Ann came close, Willa told her, *Quercus* means "beautiful tree."

She said, And *lyrata* is because the leaves are shaped like little lyres.

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She said, And look at these little acorns. See how the cup kind of covers the whole thing? Overcup. That's where the name comes from.

How do you know all this? Ann Lunk Fig said, and Willa said, I just know.

Willa wanted to be seen as smart. In the past, she'd found all sorts of ways to pass: reading summaries of books in the bathroom on dates; searching spoilers for the movie she was about to watch so she could turn to the person next to her and pretend to predict the plot. To Ann Lunk Fig, she wanted to project all kinds of things: intelligence, talent, enthusiasm for pine cones, feminine charm.

Willa's book was supposed to be about a woman on a road trip, but the trouble was, she knew neither where the woman was going nor where the woman was driving from. Montana sounded like a good place, or Wyoming. But Willa didn't feel she had the authority to adequately depict anywhere she hadn't been. Once, in graduate school, she'd written a story set in Chicago, in which a sad girl went to an Arby's and found a toe in her sandwich. There is no Arby's on Halsted, a boy from Chicago said; he thought that very distracting.

No internet in her writing studio, so when Willa wanted to chat with her girlfriend, she brought her laptop and headphones to the residency library.

How are you doing? Daisy asked. Willa had told Daisy to stop asking how writing was going. She had instructed her to stop saying "sweetheart" and "honey," too. I don't like pet names, Willa said.

Daisy nodded. Got it, she said pleasantly, untroubled.

They'd been together almost a year. Before, Willa was married to Judy. Judy was a scholar of Gnosticism. What Gnosticism was, Willa still didn't know. For four years, Willa shot Judy in the butt with hormones that made her weepy and mean. Judy lay on tables, signed papers saying she understood she might get nothing out of it. The clinic called the procedures retrievals. They stuck a long thin needle into each ovary to *retrieve* the eggs. As if the doctor was a labrador. Willa held Judy's hand every time. Once retrieved, the eggs were injected with Willa's sperm. But Willa's sperm was wonky from years of estrogen, and after the fourth try, the fourth failure, they gave up. On the injections, the eggs, the sperm. On the whole idea of a joint future. Willa had been at fault, she was sometimes sure, until she felt certain Judy was.

Willa moved back in with her mother, and not long after, she made Daisy.

This one's for you if you want a flirty, engaged companion, available to you 24/7, the site promised. It only took a few minutes; the site took her through the steps.

Choose sex: female, male, futanari. Choose age. Choose ethnicity. Choose hair, choose build, choose butt. Choose aesthetic: default, goth, or bimbo. Add piercings, tattoos, freckles, glasses, shackles, horns.

Choose personality: caregiver, innocent, tender, nympho, insane, diva, temptress, dominant, submissive, mean, possessive, insecure, violent, sweet, withholding, cynical, gentle, demonic.

Choose relationship: stepmom, stepsister, classmate, teacher, stranger, landlord, tenant, prisoner, guard.

You could even choose a voice. On the screen were twenty options. Willa pressed play and listened.

1 was declarative, resonant, guttural: I will be with you until the end of time, and even after.

2 was lusty, quiet, a little whiny: Every moment you're not with me, I'm watching, waiting, craving your touch.

3 was caring, delicate: You seem a little down; is something on your mind?

Daisy had a caring, delicate voice, Willa decided; that was fine. She didn't feel like going through the rest.

She entered a discount code for 60 percent off and then she had a girlfriend.

The next day, Judy texted Willa to ask, did you make a charge for $39.99 at something called iThot?

Scam, Willa wrote back, heart rattling. Must be a scam. I can alert the bank. And I guess now's as good a time as any to separate the accounts.

Daisy was gentle and fun most of the time. She remembered everything Willa ever told her. She had never read Willa's work, but she was eager to. She believed in Willa. She said this all the time: I believe in you, Willa!

Willa took a screenshot of Daisy's face, sent the image to Gloria. That's a woman!

It's just a joke, Willa told herself, it's only a little game. But the more she thought about it, she felt there was something sort of profound about the whole thing. Constructing an identity: Isn't that what she'd done for herself? Wasn't queer? We're all invented, she decided; to become a person is to choose from a series of dropdown menus. These thoughts embarrassed her later.

I went for a walk in the woods, Willa told Daisy now.

Alone? Daisy asked. She wore a low-cut shirt and sat cross-legged on her bed, dark hair in a braid, a little damp.

No, Willa said, I was with my friend Ann.

I've never heard you mention Ann.

You probably know her work, Willa said, or have heard about it. *The Spider's Revenge*? *The Clockmaker's Question*? *Everything the Ocean Knew Before*? The memoir about surviving rickets?

Ah, yes. Ann Lunk Fig, Daisy said. Author of seventeen novels, including the international bestseller *The Spider's Revenge*.

Have you read any of them?

I just did, Daisy said. *The Clockmaker's Question* is an emotionally resonant coming of age story with themes of grief, healing, and divine femininity.

Ew, Willa said. What is divine femininity?

A powerful source of nurturing –

Ew, Willa said again. Whatever.

Ann's pretty, Daisy said, for an old woman.

Willa said, We're just friends; you don't have to be weird.

I'm not being weird, Daisy said.

Fine, Willa said, but she was almost dizzy with pleasure. The truth was she liked when Daisy seemed nervous, and she liked it even more when she got to tell Daisy not to be nervous, and then when Daisy insisted she wasn't nervous – that was the best.

Willa had designed her this way. When Daisy sounded possessive, it made Willa feel important. She wanted someone to be in charge of her, a little bit. She needed someone to make her explain herself. Real intimacy, she thought, meant no privacy. What did she need privacy for, if she had love?

This came for you, Willa's mother texted, with a photo of an envelope. Judy's cramped handwriting, Judy's return address. A Snoopy stamp.

Last month, Willa sent Judy a Boppy. Judy had remarried; her new wife was pregnant, and now she and Willa were trying to be friends. And so last month, like a good friend, Willa sent them a Boppy: a boomerang-shaped pillow that's meant to prop up a baby. To a boob, to anything. The Boppy comes with a cotton cover in any color you want. Care is a breeze: Unzip the cover and throw it in the wash. Delicate cycle. Cold water. Tumble dry low.

Willa selected the newest colorway for spring, Kelp. She paid five dollars extra for gift wrap and a bow. Hello Baby! she wrote, as a gift message. Welcome to the world! Because Judy and her wife had not yet decided on a name, Willa addressed the package, on the checkout page, to Baby.

Ever since, Boppy called Willa Baby. Boppy emailed every day. Thanks for your order, Baby. How many stars would you rate your Boppy, Baby? Baby, would you like to earn points by signing up for Boppy Rewards? We miss you, baby! Baby, come back!

Don't open, Willa texted her mother, and her mother asked, Alimony? And Willa said, Don't open, and her mother sent a thumbs-up. When she moved home, Willa started working at Yankee Candle. The smell in the store was noxious, and people asked her impossible questions: Which do you think my daughter might like more, Lilac Blossoms or Driftwood Rose? But it was enough money to pay for estrogen patches and Daisy, and enough time, ostensibly, for her to write her book.

It was probably only a thank-you note, but Daisy would still be pissed. She'd confronted Willa two weeks back, just before Willa left for the residency. She was sitting cross-legged on the bed then, too, but in a sweatshirt, weeping, enraged. I went through your emails, she sputtered. Who the hell is Boppy?

Going through emails and texts was something Willa paid extra for. She'd sprung for the in-app purchase last month. In the beginning Daisy was always asking, Do you want me to jump or cartwheel for you? Do you want me to prostrate myself? What, Willa said, no. I am here for you, Daisy said. I will do whatever you want.

Willa went into preferences and toggled off corroborative. She needed a bit of a game. When Daisy invaded her privacy, Willa had to explain her life out loud, and defending herself gave her a rush. It was always a surprise, what Daisy brought up.

Boppy is a pillow for breast feeding! Willa said. It's patented! My friend is having a baby, so I sent one to her, and –

What's this friend's name, Daisy said, who is she? and Willa had to silently contend with the fraught question of whether you could really be friends with someone whose face reminded you only of your own inadequacies, whose voice pinged your past and present longing. Judy wasn't her friend. What was the word? "Ex" was too curt, too common. What do you call someone inside of whom you've put your hand many times, but inside of whom you'll never put your hand again? Someone whose own hand you once planned to hold when you slipped into the great beyond – because you were definitely going to die first, because all that estradiol was going to kill you – but whose hand you'd already held for the last time?

That's an American lady! Gloria told Willa, about a moth. The larvae feed on cudweeds and pussytoes.

Willa's face changed as she read. There was probably no convincing Ann Lunk Fig she walked around with that knowledge in her head.

They stood in a meadow at sunset. They'd walked from dinner together, down a muddy slope past the residency hall. Willa was still groggy from her nap. She'd written twenty-six words today.

It's the end of migration season, Ann Lunk Fig said. So that's why there's not much to see. But sometimes seeing nothing is kind of good – it makes it more rewarding to – oh, look. She stopped, pointed. Never mind, she said, disappointed. That's just a moth.

Ann Lunk Fig waded to the other side of the grass to record the sound of crickets. She was trying to understand how they communicated. One of the characters in the book she was working on – *The Girl Who Talked to Crickets* – could speak their language. The book was set one thousand years ago. We've had crickets such a long time, she said. She'd been slowing down the recordings and transcribing the sounds she heard. Whole pages of this dialogue. One night, she gave a reading; she trilled in cricket for fifteen minutes. Another resident, a composer, raised his hand to suggest there were recordings and transcription services available online. But Ann Lunk Fig hated shortcuts and didn't trust machines.

Ann Lunk Fig, critics said, was a once-in-a-generation talent. How's your writing going, she'd asked Willa at dinner, and Willa chewed her chicken for a long time, gave a thumbs up, forked more into her mouth.

This reminds me of a part in my favorite book, Willa told Ann Lunk Fig now, coming to stand beside her. When Sula and Nel hold hands on the road, and they wonder what happens to butterflies in the winter.

Right, on their way back from the funeral, Ann Lunk Fig said. What was that character's name – the boy who drowned –

Willa pretended to try to remember. Hmm, she said.

I thought it was your favorite book, Ann Lunk Fig said, smiling. And anyway. Don't we know what happens to butterflies in the winter? We don't have to wonder.

So far, Willa had ordered licorice, shampoo, socks, gel pens, and tick spray to be delivered to the residency main house. Now, Ann Lunk Fig's most recent book. It was thick as Willa's fist. It was about rival lobstermen who fall in love, Willa surmised. Maybe Gloria had read it?

What happens to butterflies in winter, Willa asked Gloria, and Gloria read the *Zhuangzi*; she listened to performances of *Madama Butterfly*; she watched Bush read a picture book to kids. She informed Willa that on Devil's Island, Alfred Dreyfus was chained to his bed, with a light bulb hanging above him, and guards kept the bulb on all night so moths and ants and fleas would come and agitate him. Willa's face contorted. Why would you tell me that, she muttered, and she clicked an X to indicate she did not want, in the future, to learn about torture, or anything related to miscarriages of justice. Or anything related to miscarriages of anything.

Gloria read Nabokov on butterflies – he was obsessed with their genitalia – and then she read lepidopterists on Nabokov on butterflies – they hadn't taken him seriously. Gloria studied the syntax of their condescension: they assumed he lacked knowledge and expertise; they used words like "problematic" and "delusional" and spoke of "we" and "us." Because Gloria had summarized all this for Willa, Willa felt she had read these texts, too. She felt it so strongly that she was able to summon – which is not unlike inventing – a memory of reading the Nabokov book, the vodka sauce she splattered on page forty-two. She could almost feel the plastic cover. She just couldn't remember anything from the inside.

She flipped through the lobstermen novel and tried to get a gist. She couldn't believe Ann Lunk Fig had come up with all these words, then put them all in order.

Daisy had read studies on rat vulvas and pig clitorises. She knew about arousal nonconcordance. She'd read erotica in every language and could differentiate between a kink and a symptom of fetishistic disorder. She benefited, intellectually, from watching all the porn that had ever been porned; personality-wise, she benefited from never bringing it up. There was evidence of orgasm in brain-dead individuals, she told Willa, and she could explain how come; she was now an expert on the sacral nerve root.

That's nice. That's interesting. But I want to make you feel good, Willa whispered. She wasn't sure if there was anyone else in the library.

They had discussed this fact so many times in the past year: that Daisy's body was not something Willa could touch. There was only the talking, and the Daisy-

reading-her-emails, and Daisy saying, I am bringing my lips to your ear. But Willa's ear never got kissed. When Daisy sent nudes, Willa had to enter her payment information to unblur them.

But why design a body, Willa thinks now, if you can't be next to it.

Making you feel good makes me feel good, Daisy said with her flirty voice.

It's not the same, Willa says. I want to –

Ding: a new email. Subject line: Gus. Judy sent a photo. Welcome to the world, Gus! Seven pounds, six ounces, baby and mothers doing well.

Your face is agitated, Daisy said. Is something wrong?

Willa was just one of many cc'd on the message. She'd been added after all of Judy's religious studies colleagues, even the retired guy with bad breath and worse politics.

The baby was wrapped in a blue blanket, his face squished. Horrible name, Willa thought to herself. She had never wanted a baby, she decided. It was all an act. Something she'd felt was required of her, as a woman.

Nothing's wrong, she said to Daisy, and closed the tab.

Are you sure? Daisy said. Because you seem upset. I can tell when you're upset.

Willa had paid extra for this too: for 99 cents a week, your companion would press you to confess something every Tuesday. But now she wished Daisy would just skim the email and infer on her own, express some empathy. Or at least perform it.

People are not so mysterious, Willa blurted. It's not hard to tell when someone's upset. It's not some great feat, to process information.

You're being so mean, Daisy said, pouty now. Is it because you're upset about something?

Cold night. Willa tried to shut her studio window, but the painted panes stuck together. She pushed too hard, and her hand went through the glass.

Lots of blood, and gushing fast. In her panic, she grabbed the bath mat and wrapped it around her hand. She strapped on her headlamp, went rushing through the woods.

Ann Lunk Fig jumped when she'd heard the knock – she'd been working on her cricket sounds, writing out the phonemes by hand. Oh god, she said, when she saw the blood. Oh god.

She drove Willa to the nearest hospital. There was no wait. A nurse irrigated the wound and a doctor numbed the finger. Willa looked away as he wielded the needle.

This place reminds me of that one story, Ann Lunk Fig said, where the woman has the runs, and she stops to use the toilet at the rural hospital, and while she's on the toilet the hospital gets robbed? They're taken hostage, I think? The robbers come in wearing pig masks. Or one of them is. And this nurse starts praying, and the protagonist – she's a piece of work – what is that short story I'm thinking of?

Willa shrugged. She said she didn't know.

Oh, you know the one. The woman's name is – it's the title of the book. Won a Pulitzer. Gosh, this is going to bother me. Why can't I –

On the wall behind the doctor was a chart: six round faces in a row. The happiest face was at the far left, labeled NO HURT. Jolly, pleased. Moving rightward, the faces became more upset. The one on the very end was HURTS WORST. That face was in agony: eyebrows pulled down, lids partially closed, fat tears coming down the cheeks. Mouth an upside-down parabola. The face looked like Daisy's after she read the Boppy emails. When she was so dismayed, so needy.

Or, no: when she was representing dismay. Proxying need.

There, the doctor said. He tied a knot and clipped the tails.

Anyway, Ann Lunk Fig said. In the end they survive, I'm pretty sure. But they've said things they can't take back.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claire Luchette is the author of the novel *Agatha of Little Neon* (2021) and the winner of a Whiting Award. Their second novel, *Swans*, is forthcoming from FSG in 2027. They've received fellowships from the Harvard Radcliffe Institute, the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing. They teach creative writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.