

Excerpt From the Novel *Teenage Wasteland: A Love Story*

You look at the beaten piecemeal wingman, at the obituaries you gathered to create your blueprint for the piecemeal wingman, the one that the girl with the melting face would fall in love with so you and the mermaid can get lost in each other's eyes, hands, legs, and mouths: the track star's legs, the baseball player's arms, the weight lifter's torso, the choir boy's larynx, the swimmer's lungs, the boy scout's heart, the ROTC lieutenant's nerves, the linebacker's skeleton, the boxer's jaw, the goth boy's bottomless yearning, the shoulders of the fatherless boy who had three younger siblings to care for while his mother worked to keep a roof over their head, food in their bellies, clothing on their bodies. You look at the beaten piecemeal wingman, wonder whether he needs all of these perfect parts from these perfect boys to be the perfect boy for the girl with melting face to fall in love with. Maybe, he just needs the right brain, the right tongue to weave a wooing spell around the waist of the girl with the melting face.

Why do you keep doing this, one of your tumors asks. You should be man enough to win the mermaid on your own, without a wingman to distract her best friend, the girl with the melting face. The mermaid needs a man, not a boy. You ask the tumor if it knows what it's like to be a boy, how daunting it is to be direct and courageous, how convolution is the clearest path to love. You cough up something oily into your hand. You look at the fluid in your palm and the flecks of blood are trying to spell "don't" but you ignore the n, the apostrophe, and the t.

You have not spoken to the boy who coughs up oil since his attempt to confront you in the hallway outside of his locker in front of others, in front of the guards who protect and enforce chastity outside of school sanctioned dating events, in front of your best friend, the girl with the melting face. You are giving the boy who coughs up oil time to think, time to reflect on how he can best approach you without taking a bullet. You've seen too many boys who want you take a bullet, thinking they could woo you with a survivable exit wound.