



THE BELIEVER

CRUSH

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Can we fall in love completely without completely losing ourselves?

DISCUSSED

Pop Songs, A Drooly Cartoon of Happiness, The Manhattan Bridge, Anne Carson, Eros, Sappho, Barthes, Melting, An Electronic Music Festival, Dissolution, Self-Possession, Engulfment, A Fragrance Diffuser from Muji, Yayoi Kusama, The Obliteration Room, Infinity Nets, Polka Dots, The Hand of the Artist, An Avalanche

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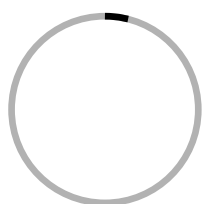
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2,040 SNAPS

Crush

LARISSA PHAM



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“ what’s the point of a crush that doesn’t ruin you

—@clare

1.

To apply Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structural anthropology, a crush is called a crush because it crushes you. A crush is distinct from friendship or love by dint of its intensity and sudden onset. It is marked by passionate feeling, by constant daydreaming: a crush exists in the dreamy space between fantasy and regular life. The objects of our crushes, who themselves may also be referred to as crushes, cannot be figures central to our daily lives. They appear on the periphery of our days, made romantic by their distance.

Crush can act as both a noun and a verb: “You are my crush”; “I am crushing on you.”

Crush can be both subject and object: “You are my crush”; “I have a crush on you.”

According to my Google searches, the first recorded instance of the use of *crush* in a romantic sense, to mean a person one is infatuated with, is from 1884, in the diary of Isabella Maud Rittenhouse. As in: “Wintie is weeping because her crush is gone.” By 1913, it had entered usage as a verb.

2.

Early October. The days are cooling in New York, and I am in my orange skirt, saying to you: I have such a big crush on you. *Crush* isn't a word that adults are supposed to use. But it feels right, because you make me feel like a teenager. I'm listening to pop songs. I'm reading love poems. I'm a dog with its head out the car window—a drooly cartoon of happiness. My emotions feel outsize, unwarranted, when I slow down to think of how little I know about you. Not much. You're five years older than me; six between our birthdays. You keep your hair short, wear plain T-shirts. Somehow, though you don't even believe in luck, you have chronically bad luck. It's OK, I say. I can be the lucky one.

We hold hands walking over the Manhattan Bridge, stopping in the middle to look at all the rushing water. I say: You make me want to make you a mixtape. I say: I want to spend all my time with you. It's a desire so strong it feels annihilating; this part, I don't say. I'm greedy for this contact, want to be filled up with it, but at the same time it's embarrassing—how obsessive I feel. It's too much; I'm too much. I can't tell you.

So I shut up. My hand in yours: this is all I'll ask for. The sun is setting over the East River, the sky bleeding into candy-sweet pinks and oranges and shimmering gold. It's cold now, and both of us are underdressed. Wind whistles through the chain-link fence and I take a picture of the sunset through its mesh.

For the next two days, I repeat your full name in my head, over and over, like a mantra. Like I'm preparing to introduce you to someone important to me. I am crushed, utterly; I am crushing myself, compressed into feeling, feelings for you.

3.

It's a crush because it's not real. Not yet, maybe not ever. I'd be content to spend forever in this liminal, cresting place, the interval before we know each other.

But then you throw a wrench in my plans. You say to me, I like you. This is your way, I've learned: you are honest in all things, and for the first time, I'm incredulous. It seems a small admission, but it's so surprising to me, so open and genuine, that I cover my face like a shy child. You were supposed to be the object of my affection, and I the one projecting feelings—I didn't know how to respond when you turned out to be a subject and showed you have your own.

I'm not normally like this, I want to explain from behind my fanned hands. But you've threatened to see me.

4.

The Greek poets often used melting as a metaphor for Eros, Anne Carson writes. As in: “Eros, loosener of limbs,” Sappho’s phrase, in which the poet invokes both the goddess and the languid, heavy feelings of erotic desire. “Alongside melting we might cite metaphors of piercing, crushing, bridling, roasting, stinging, biting, grating, cropping, poisoning, singeing and grinding to a powder, all of which are used of eros by the poets, giving a cumulative impression of intense concern for the integrity and control of one’s own body,” Carson writes, in her book *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay*. “The lover learns as he loses it to value the bounded entity of himself.”

Carson’s lines suggest that we learn our boundaries by losing them—that the breaches of the body imposed by desire remind us that we have a body at all. But that doesn’t explain my own willingness to give up. Even now, writing this, I read Carson’s list of gerunds and accept what they wager, racing toward Eros headlong; dissolution seems like a reasonable exchange for something destined to interrupt my body anyway. Go ahead and grind me to powder: it hurts to wait.

I’m curious now, though, about a word Carson uses—*concern*—which implies a fear of loss, and instilling that fear, a care for the self I didn’t have when we met. For I was never afraid of dissolution by desire, not the way the ancient Greeks put it—I wonder if they weren’t truly afraid of Eros, but if describing it with violence was simply a way of honoring its power, the same way they venerated their other gods. But I don’t know what comes after, once I decide to let desire have its way with me. How to unmelt the melted? How to turn the ground powder back into a person? This idea points to a knowledge I don’t have: how to love without losing the self for good. It’s this I struggled with when I met you—the reconciliation of those feelings beyond first blush.

5.

The first time I meet you, at an electronic music festival upstate, you’re standing on a hill in the blue-gray light, which is fading. In the dusk, I’m lost, and you look like home—handsome in a denim jacket, shaking the sand out of the bottom of a tent. I’m embarrassed when I finally greet our mutual friends, cold water sloshing in my shoes, explaining that I slipped into the creek at the bottom of the slope. Later, you’ll tell me your first memory of me was of me falling.

One of our friends tells me I have two options for where to sleep. I can sleep in the storage tent, next to the handles of tequila and the cooler full of snacks, or I can share a tent with you. From where we stand on the hill, I can hear the music already starting, a low, intense beat that moves across the water. I ask if I can share with you. Sure, you say. It is what opens the door.

No—not the sight of me falling, but the knowledge that I fell.

6.

Carson theorizes that Eros as the Greeks understood it arises as a product of literate societies; she writes: “It is in the poetry of those who were first exposed to a written alphabet and the demands of literacy that we encounter deliberate meditation upon the self, especially in the context of erotic desire.” She suggests that the intensity with which these poets insist on conceiving of Eros as *lack* may reflect, to some degree, that exposure: “Literate training encourages a heightened awareness of personal physical boundaries and a sense of those boundaries as the vessel of one’s self. To control the boundaries is to possess oneself.”

This makes sense to me—that becoming literate requires conceiving of a self, blocking out the distractions of the outside world to focus on the life of the interior. Suddenly the mind becomes a realm, too, a landscape with vocabulary and topology, and to give life to one’s thoughts means giving them a life outside one’s head.

But I can’t imagine telling you how much space you take up in my thoughts. In these early days, I’m crushing like a lunatic: in my most deranged moments, I believe I would erase my whole future for a future with you. Of course—it seems so easy to exchange one unknown for another. But I can’t *tell* you.

Is that the lack Carson writes of—a lack of expression—or is it something different? Does desire always require relinquishing expressive control? It seems that runs counter to what I, absurdly, want—which is to long for you, silently, until you wake up one morning and know, without being told, exactly what I need and how to give it to me.

If I’m willing to lose myself in what can be said without words, it must be the voicing of my own feelings I’m frightened of. Or, no, it’s the asking, and worse yet, the needing. That’s what paints me as a discrete and vulnerable subject and opens me to disappointment—and to that which is worse than disappointment, the kind of hurt I can’t anticipate.

“For individuals to whom self-possession has become important, the influx of a sudden, strong emotion from without cannot be an unalarming event,” Carson writes.

“...When an individual appreciates that he alone is responsible for the content and coherence of his person, an influx like eros becomes a concrete personal threat.”

7.

On the first night of the festival, close to dawn, after hours wandering the dance floor, I find you on the path to the campground. Now I’m not alone anymore.

Are you coming or going? I ask you. You’re not sure, you tell me. There’s a tiny bit of light in the sky.

Let’s go home, I say, and I don’t know then how many times I’ll say it to you, say it again.

In our tent, we each crawl into our sleeping bags—yours is a spare of our friend’s; mine is one with a broken zipper I’ve borrowed from an ex. We undress without looking at each other, moving clumsily in the dim new light. Something about you makes me shy. I even keep my socks on; it seems all the cold of the night has pooled in the foot of my sleeping bag. None of this is normal for me. I should have tried to seduce you already. Instead: G’night, I mumble, turning away so I can’t see your face. Good night, you say.

In the morning—the sun steaming through the nylon of our tent, so bright I think I can see its heat rise off the floor in waves—I wake to see that you’ve tugged off your shirt in your sleep. You’re curled up, still passed out, a deep red flush coloring your neck. It frightens me to see you so vulnerable like this. To see how quickly you seem to have given up your defenses.

8.

Oh no, I thought then. Here you are, all of you, and before I even knew what I was doing, I'd already let you into my imagination.

Part of me wanted to put up a wall that day, to protect the self-possession of which Carson writes. What I felt for you was cause for alarm, but an alarm that was new and strange to me. I wrote earlier that I wasn't afraid of the dissolution desire promises, and I don't believe I was, so why, then, was I so scared? To be crushed and stung, burned and ground—all those seemed like fair trades for physical intimacy. And if that had been all we'd wanted from each other, I would have gone there gladly, but instead, that weekend, we never even kissed.

Already I could imagine myself disappearing; I could imagine myself changing, rearranging my life to make room for you. But I couldn't imagine you seeing me for me, the way I felt I'd accidentally glimpsed you.

9.

The first night you come over, three weeks after we've met, I'm drunk, too drunk; so are you. We've had too many whiskeys at the bar I picked because it was a fifteen-minute walk from my apartment—that was my plan tonight, to lure you somewhere close to me. But now that you're here and it's no longer a dream, I'm not certain what to do with you. I feel awkward and shy. My saving grace: you go to the bathroom, and while you're away I undress and lower the lights.

Earlier in the day, in an attempt to feel like an adult, I'd bought a fragrance diffuser from Muji, one of the ones that glows gently and puffs sweet-smelling steam. I'd lingered for almost an hour deliberating which scented oil to choose. To pick the one called Love seemed almost duplicitous, like I was trying to put a spell on you, and I wasn't sure I wanted to Love you like that anyway. I picked Smile. It felt gentle and safe.

That night, I lie with you beneath the diffuser in the dark as the smell of oranges and grapefruit floats over us. It's beautiful and lush. It's like we're already dead in heaven.

You want to kiss me and I want to let you but I'm still scared. I keep turning my head, dizzy with the spins, overcome by want and yet unable to articulate it. I don't understand how the night has ended up here. Why aren't you taking me—why aren't you pinning me down and doing whatever you want? Why are you giving me so much choice in this? You're looking at me, your eyes gleaming in the moonlight, and I can't bear you being kind. I tell you I don't like kissing, but I'm lying. What I mean is that I find kissing too intimate. What I mean is I am frightened of descending into that soft, close place with you.

When I say I have a crush on you, what I'm saying is that I'm in love with the distance between us. I'm not in love with you: I don't even know you. I'm in love with the escape that fantasizing about you promises. Poisoned, stung, bitten and bridled. The promise of being ground down until I disappear.

10.

I'm hoping then that you'll touch me, take us to the place I do understand. That you'll fuck me, overpower me—anything to keep that distance intact between us.

Instead, you hold me. I want to get to know you, you say. We don't have sex that night.

In the summer of 2015, there was a Yayoi Kusama installation at the David Zwirner gallery, in Chelsea, New York, called *The Obliteration Room*. This was two years before I met you. I saw the Kusama piece all over Instagram, the installation a prefab house full of white furniture, white textiles, white walls, every surface white as though some designer had clicked “fill” and flooded the whole thing. White at first, I mean. Visitors to the room were given a sheet of stickers, colorful dots of varying sizes, to be applied anywhere in the room. As the exhibition went on, the room turned into an explosion of scattered color, the surfaces confused by the optical mixing of the stickered dots. You could tell who had crested the wave early by the amount of white wall in their post on the grid, and people posed goofily, sticking dots to their cheeks, clothes, and eyelids.

People think of Kusama’s installations as lighthearted and fun, which they can be. Many of her contemporary pieces lend themselves well to photographs, like her *Infinity Mirror Rooms*, which use mirrors and light to create the illusion of distance and make the viewer’s own reflection the focal point, or her large-scale sculptural installations, which play with the scale of objects—chromed polka-dotted pumpkins, colorful tentacles, and giant spotted flowers—as they’re set within a gallery or outdoor landscape. Her sculpture in particular feels pop-y at times, outsize and exuberant. Yet in interviews, Kusama—who has lived in a mental institution since 1975—is frank about how her work stems from her experiences with mental illness. “My art originates from hallucinations only I can see. I translate the hallucinations and obsessional images that plague me into sculptures and paintings,” she said in a 1999 interview in *BOMB*. The visual hallucinations, taking the form of dots, are a repeated motif in Kusama’s work. In applying stickers to the white walls and furniture, visitors are reenacting Kusama’s visions in a medium visible to all.

“Is your work a kind of art therapy?” the critic Akira Tatehata asked her in a 2000 interview for Phaidon.

“It’s a self-therapy,” Kusama responded.

Later in the interview, Tatehata asked about the phallus shapes that cover Kusama’s soft sculptures. “Is the imagery of phallus-covered furniture related to your hallucinations?”

“It is not my hallucinations but my will,” Kusama said.

“Your will to cover the space of your life with phalluses?”

“Yes, because I am afraid of them,” Kusama answered. “It’s a ‘sex obsession.’”

Thinking about crushes, I’m interested in this contrast, in the difficulty of squaring the complicated person of Kusama with the Instagram-friendly reception her art generally receives. How something so seemingly light can have the weight of anxiety behind it. I’m interested, too, in the terror she gestures at, the terror inherent even in the beauty of her pieces. How the fear of sex is folded into her work and becomes a hallmark of it; how the fear of disappearing into visions—of being *obliterated* by her dots—is embraced and transformed into something vivid and even more encompassing.

The images I’ve seen of *The Obliteration Room* appear playful at first, especially on social media feeds—the posing figures within the installation give it a sense of scale and humanize the unlikely space. And it’s true that as a project, it was originally conceived for children, a way for even the smallest visitor to become part of an art piece. But photographs of the installation over time chart its evolution from polka-dotted suburban home to a strange and confusing otherworld, as the colorful dots begin to merge into an amorphous, overwhelming mass. The dots flatten the space, confusing surfaces—a chair blends into the wall behind it, and the wall into the floor; even the difference between near and far objects can’t be easily discerned. The boundaries of discrete objects are visually erased: the dots become one shifting, colorful, annihilating field.

Describing this, I think of Carson again—how the lover learns by losing. Does the lack that characterizes Eros appear again here, though the boundaries Kusama disrupts seem different? The colorful dots don't represent the intrusion of desire, which is just one way of breaching the self, but instead, perhaps, constitute a breakdown of the interior and exterior entirely—yielding to a total kind of loss.

I've often longed to be in a room like Kusama's, but I've never had the patience for the long gallery lines. The closest I've physically come to her obliterating fields is seeing her *Infinity Nets*, a long-running series of paintings she began in 1958. Of all her work, it's these I'm most drawn to. Ranging in size from a few square feet to the length of an entire wall, they're meticulous paintings of dense, abstracted nets, the curved, tight strokes seeming to create dots in the negative space between brush-stroke and ground. The uniform width of the strokes and the flat composition—the nets fill the canvas, uninterrupted—speak to an obsessive hand. Yet there's no grid, as there is in an Agnes Martin painting, no regularity even in the repetitive strokes: each mark has its own logic and connection, the surface of the painting seeming to shift and writhe. In the earliest *Infinity Nets*, the nets are all of one value, like white strokes on gray ground or red vibrating against green. In more recent works, like *Infinity Nets [MAE]*, from 2013, Kusama added gradated shading to the foreground, giving the nets a coruscating, organic depth; the surface looks more like lace or coral.

I like seeing how something is made—those moments when the hand of the artist reveals itself. It's why I painted; it's why I'm drawn to the churning surface of Kusama's nets, the tight, repetitive strokes that speak to the effort borne upon the surface. Like Martin's paintings, the *Infinity Nets* appear neutral from afar, but even more than Martin's, Kusama's gestures are coiled with emotion, with passion and obsession and fear. For Kusama is afraid of the dots, her visions. She chooses to encounter her fear forthrightly: "I paint them in quantity; in doing so, I try to escape."

Describing how she began *Infinity Nets*, Kusama said: "My nets grew beyond myself and beyond the canvases I was covering with them. They began to cover the walls, the ceiling, and finally the whole universe. I was always standing at the center of the obsession, over the passionate accretion and repetition inside of me."

I know Kusama wasn't thinking about the agony of desire when she was making these pieces about obliteration, but I find myself drawing the metaphor anyway, that testing of the bounds of the self. For Carson, desire begets the creation of a self; for Kusama, the fear of shattering the self leads to the desire to possess that fear. As for me, I see how desire could obliterate me; I stand watchfully at its edge.

The crush exists at a point of distance. The less I know of you, the better, because then I can safely project my affections onto you. I can begin to write a story, a catalog of intimacies, a script we will inevitably fail.

12.

“I am engulfed, I succumb . . .” Roland Barthes begins *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*. “Another day, in the rain, we’re waiting for the boat at the lake; from happiness, this time, the same outburst of annihilation sweeps through me. This is how it happens sometimes, misery or joy engulfs me, without any particular tumult ensuing: nor any pathos: I am dissolved, not dismembered; I fall, I flow, I melt.”

When I first read these lines, as a sophomore in college I underlined *engulfed*, *succumb*, *annihilation*. I was never one for fighting feelings, and I recognized Barthes’s ecstatic absorption. Yes, that was it, I agreed, down to the detail of waiting for the boat at the lake—that slim interval between inaction and action, when one’s expectations have yet to be disappointed, is often so much more thrilling than the outing itself. But reading it again, eight years later, I’m surprised by Barthes’s second sentence. His use of *melt* makes me think of Carson’s interpretation of the Greek Eros, but there’s no tumult in it, he writes. He is dissolved, not dismembered—Eros isn’t acting as a mortal threat. He won’t go to pieces, resisting; instead, he peacefully disappears.

Is there a strange gentleness to Barthes’s engulfment, which twins pain and pleasure? “The crisis of engulfment can come from a wound, but also from a fusion: we die together from loving each other,” he writes. It’s as though being a lover is the sole construction that keeps his self discrete. Without an object onto which to project, Barthes’s self dissolves: it is nowhere, no place. That part frightens me—this idea that desiring you might become my entire identity, my basis for a sense of self.

13.

The word *crush* makes me think of an avalanche. How do those start? With a tremor in the ground, some fault in the earth that shifts its weight and sets the side of a mountain tumbling. Or something deep within the snow itself, the load exceeding the strength of the pack. After it’s started, an avalanche quickly gains momentum, churning up snow and channels of air. It becomes a cohesive, inevitable force of its own, the dense head of the avalanche moving quickly across a vast distance, leaving a trail of lighter matter in its wake.

14.

One evening I meet you at your apartment. You’re making margaritas, halving and squeezing an entire bag of limes. This, I am learning, is the kind of person you are.

And in bed I learn more about you. In my body, yes, I’m learning to let you be kind to me. But what’s more important is the moment when you first tell me about you. Your past and how you came to be, all the way to this moment, here, in this room with me, with the parquet floors and the window that looks out onto the street. I listen to your history, freely given. It’s a gift you’re giving me, this knowledge of who you are. I’ve never thought to tell someone about myself like that. But I want to tell you.

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