In the beginning, I know I want him before he does. This isn’t how things are done, but this is how I am going to do them. I am at a neighbor’s party with my parents, and I am seventeen. I drink half a glass of white wine in the kitchen with the neighbor’s teenage daughter. My father doesn’t notice. Everything is soft, like a fresh oil painting.

The boy is not facing me. I see the muscles of his neck and upper back, how he fairly strains out of his button-down shirts, like a day laborer dressed up for a dance, and I run slick. And it isn’t that I don’t have choices. I am beautiful. I have a pretty mouth. I have breasts that heave out of my dresses in a way that seems innocent and perverse at the same time. I am a good girl, from a good family. But he is a little craggy in that way men sometimes are, and I want. He seems like he could want the same thing.
I once heard a story about a girl who requested something so vile from her paramour that he told her family and they had her hauled off to a sanatorium. I don’t know what deviant pleasure she asked for, though I desperately wish I did. What magical thing could you want so badly they take you away from the known world for wanting it?

The boy notices me. He seems sweet, flustered. He says hello. He asks my name.

I have always wanted to choose my moment, and this is the moment I choose.

On the deck, I kiss him. He kisses me back, gently at first, but then harder, and even pushes open my mouth a little with his tongue, which surprises me and, I think, perhaps him as well. I have imagined a lot of things in the dark, in my bed, beneath the weight of that old quilt, but never this, and I moan. When he pulls away, he seems startled. His eyes dart around for a moment before settling on my throat.

“What’s that?” he asks.

“Oh, this?” I touch the ribbon at the back of my neck. “It’s just my ribbon.” I run my fingers halfway around its green and glossy length, and bring them to rest on the tight bow that sits in the front. He reaches out his hand, and I seize it and press it away.

“You shouldn’t touch it,” I say. “You can’t touch it.”

Before we go inside, he asks if he can see me again. I tell him that I would like that. That night, before I sleep, I imagine him again, his tongue pushing open my mouth, and my fingers slide over myself and I imagine him there, all muscle and desire to please, and I know that we are going to marry.

What winds you up? That was a question Lesley asked more than once in Craft Class while introducing the techniques Carmen Maria Machado uses in her audacious debut
story collection *My Body and Other Parties*. What winds Machado up is evident even a few pages into the first story, “The Husband Stitch,” excerpted above: Sex! Every story in the collection brims with sex (the corporeal, not ethereal, kind). But this is not pornography. This is an author challenging the long history of women as unequal partners in the realm of sexual passion. She wants to expose it. She wants to correct it. She wants to give women sexual agency. To put them in control of their sexual passion. That’s what winds Machado up.

So, ask yourself. What winds you up? What really gets you going? Whatever it is, that’s what Machado’s example here could help you write about. But not philosophically. Not elliptically. Take Machado’s technique as a challenge to embody that big feeling on the page.

Machado came up with several “ways into” her material. First off, she has created a narrator who is very much in charge. Note the imperatives in the opening section, literal stage directions to the reader. Then, after a page break, the narrator, with a direct and physical frankness, gets right to the point: “I see the muscles of his neck and upper back, how he fairly strains out of his button-down shirts, like a day laborer dressed up for a dance, and I run slick.” And a little later says, “But he is a little craggy in that way men sometimes are, and I want.” That “I want” is so powerful. No doubt in the reader’s mind what the PN wants. The third technical element that Machado uses is interjection of cautionary tales women have been told. (In the first example of these, excerpted above, the PN, not put off by the story, wonders, “What magical thing could you want so badly they take you away from the known world for wanting it?”) And finally, Machado introduces elements to her stories that bump them out of the realm of realism into what
some reviewers have called “feminist ghost stories” or “feminist fairy tales.” These aspects of her stories are deftly, subtly introduced. In this story, we start to sense that the tale is tilting into a different realm (but we’re not absolutely certain until later) with this exchange:

“What’s that?” he asks.
“Oh, this?” I touch the ribbon at the back of my neck. “It’s just my ribbon.” I run my fingers halfway around its green and glossy length, and bring them to rest on the tight bow that sits in the front. He reaches out his hand, and I seize it and press it away.
“You shouldn’t touch it,” I say. “You can’t touch it.”

It is through these other worldly devices that Machado is able to convey the most urgent qualities of her fiction, what truly fires her up, all the while entertaining the reader.

Who knows how Machado came upon these fresh and riveting new “ways into” her storytelling? One thing we can certainly say is that she kept herself open to experimentation. To find your own fresh ways into your material, revisit the Robert Olen Butler quote that Lesley shared in her class: “Please get out of the habit of saying you’ve got an idea for a short story. Art does not come from the mind. Art comes from the place where you dream. Art comes from the unconscious. Art comes from the white hot center of you.”

Assignment: What winds you up, gets you going? Create a bold narrator and place this narrator in a scene where s/he engages with this topic in some embodied, audacious way. Take leaps. Risk being messy, not getting it right the first time out. Make it physical—an embodiment of your white, hot core—through a direct and frank and playful narrator who is in control.