Illustration by Natalie Chiovitti (@artbynat)
Wendy Reimer, the protagonist in Casey Plett’s *Little Fish*, is both a transwoman and an ex-Mennonite. She has a history of sexual abuse, recurring abuse in her daily life, violent nightmares, financial struggles, prostitution issues, and she constantly wavers on suicidal thoughts. She suffers from trauma to such a degree that it has made her emotionally numb throughout the narrative. As such, Wendy’s life can be summed up in the drinks she consumes throughout the text: coffee, water, and alcohol. These drinks allow for the flow of her routined life, and Plett presents Wendy through these drinks. *Little Fish* is a novel that challenges the idea of character growth through Wendy, a character who rejects growth. The narrative offers a limited perspective of Wendy to replicate her reaction to her own trauma. The drinks help the reader gain insight into the purpose of Wendy’s routined life. They create a framework, wherein she is able to deal with her trauma, and act as milestones to get her through the day alive. Plett uses the drinks to guide the reader to reveal a side to Wendy that would have been lost under a traditional analysis of trauma.
In the first chapter of *Little Fish*, Sophie, Wendy’s friend, points out that Wendy cannot compare herself to the expectations of her age group, stating that, “age is completely different for trans people” (Plett 11). Wendy’s identity as a transwoman dissociates her from the societal expectations of her age group, as her transition essentially restarts her life. At 30, an age when people are expected to settle down, her transition has left her with existential questions. There is a subtle expectation that Wendy should be able to get her new self and her new life together and follow the expected milestones in order to live a “good” life. Wendy contests this concept because she, despite her stagnant life and sexual abuse history, remains content with her life. Plett challenges what we would conventionally deem as a “good” or “successful” character by contrasting Wendy’s acceptance of her life against its rapid deterioration. By the end of the novel, Wendy has lost her job, home, best friend, and has started to prostitute herself again, yet, ends the novel thinking that “she felt okay about where her life was headed” (Plett 293). This is the crux that Plett illustrates in *Little Fish*. Wendy comes from trauma and that prevents her from functioning according to societal expectations. She retains a routined life that never gets questioned and Plett purposely does that to show that for someone bordering on suicide, making it to the next day is enough growth. For Wendy, living her life through routine is enough and Plett illuminates this condition to the reader using the drinks.

Coffee, Wendy’s first drink of the day, enables her to take on life’s hassles. Most of the time, Wendy wakes up drunk or hungover and coffee acts as her restart button. She demonstrates this when she wakes up and immediately starts the coffee machine (17). Coffee adds structure to Wendy’s life. Its role as a temporary stimulant creates clear lines and boundaries. Plett associates these lines with Wendy’s blurred state of existence as “Wendy knew how to deal with looking
cis and she knew how to deal with looking trans, but she would never, ever figure out how to be both” (125). We can see that, to Wendy, regardless of whether she feels more cis, more trans, both, or neither, coffee acts as a fortifier. In fact, it is the only stable support system she can rely on. Coffee acts as the engine which keeps Wendy going, especially when it comes to being harassed or attacked. When Wendy is sexually harassed, her reaction is robot-like and unemotional. She seeks out coffee to reset her system and breathes “in and out, letting the microwaved liquid warm her . . . [She] tried to say something again, but it was very, very difficult to do so” (95). Coffee not only gives her something to focus on, but prevents Wendy’s mind from dwelling on thoughts and memories that are traumatic and disruptive to her routine. Coffee reveals Wendy’s determination to go on with her life because it initiates her routined lifestyle as a survival instinct.

Drinking water brings Wendy a moment of total clarity as it forces her to confront the reality of her existence. When she consumes water, Wendy is neither alert, nor drunk—just herself. Water highlights the irony in Wendy’s life. She is always thirsty and mainly relies on coffee and alcohol, but rarely drinks water, although water represents what she desires most: normality. When Wendy consumes water, “she [takes] long slow mouthfuls of air and [forces] her body to breathe” (49). Rationality returns to her and she becomes aware of her body, as “it hurt too much to move it” (49). If we are to view Wendy as robotic due to her routine lifestyle, then the act of drinking water is equivalent to her self-awareness. But to Wendy, becoming self-aware is associated with facing, accepting, and dealing with her trauma, and that drives her towards suicide. When Wendy drinks water, she becomes aware of her life, calling it “random” (208). She does not consume water more regularly because water, and any association with it, becomes connected to her suicide
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plan to “go somewhere isolated, near Lake Winnipeg or Lake Manitoba . . . with the Everclear and drink it hard and fast by the lake until she fell down” (121). Despite the alcohol involved in her suicide plan, the focus lies in the act of drowning, where Wendy allows her body to be flooded with water. Since Wendy associates water with awareness, drowning symbolizes confronting her trauma and life head on. She is not ready nor willing to do this, and instead chooses to walk through her life programmed to consume coffee and alcohol, avoiding her trauma.

Wendy ends her day with her predominant beverage, alcohol, because it gives her the ability to blur everything. Whenever she faces any trauma, pain, stress, or memory, she always resorts to alcohol to avoid self-awareness. Her addiction to alcohol can be seen as giving her a sense of belonging. The Manitoba Liquor Control Commission in *Little Fish* “pulled in a profit of close to $276 million for the province last year. Only 1.2 million people lived here. And $276 mil was the profit” (Plett 198). Wendy’s identity as a transwoman and an ex-Mennonite makes her an outcast. When she drinks, not only does she avoid her problems, but for a while, she feels like she belongs in the society. A city of 1.2 million people is an alienating community, but with a common hobby that Wendy also partakes in, the mass feels like a community she belongs to. Wendy can drink alcohol without her identity as a transwoman getting in the way. Wendy believes that “drunk guilt was childish, and worrying about it didn’t make things better. So she didn’t worry about it anymore” (49), but Wendy is almost always drunk and attempting to live a worry-free life, whatever the cost, which we see play out in the novel. Throughout the novel, we see how her identity as a transwoman has led to verbal, physical, and sexual abuse, as well as consistent rejection. With the added experience of her trauma, Wendy is teetering and the only way to steady herself is by drinking and ignoring
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the trauma and instability of her life. Alcohol numbs and represses her trauma, allowing her to move through life by displacing her emotions and awareness. For Wendy, it is okay to live her life in this beverage-controlled routine because this is what survival means to her. Alcohol, despite its ability to make one unsteady, gives Wendy a stable rock to place the pebbles of her chipped life on.

Wendy suffers from cumulative trauma, which differs from the standard understanding of trauma, as cumulative trauma is trauma caused by micro-aggressions over a long period of time. It is not caused by a single traumatic event, as is standard, but can produce the same psychological effects in a person. Based on Ann Cvetkovich’s theory in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Wendy suffers from cumulative, or, everyday trauma, a type of trauma that Cvetkovich argues “resists the melodramatic structure of an easily identifiable origin of trauma” (Cvetkovich 32-33). Wendy’s character supports Cathy Caruth’s explanation of trauma, as defined in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, as something “much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche” (Caruth 4). This is a direct contrast to the Freudian model of treating trauma, which would involve associating Wendy’s nightmares with her trauma. Under the Freudian model, coffee and alcohol would be seen as detrimental and inhibiting a proper analysis of Wendy’s trauma to her dreams or memories because they alter her sober state and affect her rationality. Caruth argues that trauma “is always the story of a wound that cries out” (Caruth 4) and that “truth, in its delayed and belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what is unknown in our very actions and language” (Caruth 4). Wendy’s “action” is to continuously suppress her trauma through coffee and alcohol. She suffers the repercussions, physically through the side effects of alcohol, and mentally
by not confronting her own trauma. Yet simultaneously, those drinks and her routine consumption, reveal them to be her safe space. Coffee and alcohol act as Wendy’s safe space, allowing her to be removed from her everyday trauma in order to feel safe and secure. Cumulative trauma often reveals “the need to change social structures more broadly rather than just fix[ing] individual people” (Cvetkovich 32-33). Plett associates Wendy’s everyday trauma with the way people respond to her identity and physical body as a transwoman, transforming her into an object. But the drinks give flow and structure to Wendy’s life, allowing her to feel “normal” and integrated within society, in spite of their consequences. At the end of the novel she is content because she feels she can continue a life of normality despite her past. Wendy’s routine lifestyle gives her the illusion of being human that society has denied her.

In order to keep herself alive and feeling human, the structured flow of liquids remains consistent in Wendy’s life. It is the only help she can give herself because she deals with a continuous form of trauma. Wendy is a unique character because she does not demonstrate growth in the novel. Plett reveals Wendy’s character as someone who persists through traumatic situations and hollows themselves as an act of survival. Wendy keeps everyone away from her thoughts to protect herself, including the reader, and we can only understand her through linking the drinks to trauma. *Little Fish* seeks to challenge our conventional understanding and treatment of trauma. Wendy uses the drinks to treat the wounds of her trauma, but the wounds continue to cry out through the scars they leave in the narrative. By analyzing trauma in this alternative way, we can unearth a deeper understanding of how characters exist without the need for growth. Traditional analysis of trauma cannot be applied
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Here because Plett does not display Wendy as a character who needs help, but as a character who has figured out, for now, what allows her to keep going.

Works Cited