

KRISTINE LANGLEY MAHLER

Say No Nice

*An erasure essay from The Seventeen Book of Etiquette (1963),
Chapter 6: "The Art of Saying No Nicely."*

You say no to romance; you no longer care.

Boys seem harsh, directional signals you want to cast out.

Don't people respect you? You learn to guide the way you say it, you change the subject. The kinder approach, like pulling off adhesive tape, hurts.

You refuse easy things, "statusy" things; you favor things that grate. You ask to do emotionally loaded things: petting or necking. Or just a kiss. You adapt; there are a thousand ways.

You say you're whatever, add something that tells him you're a routine. You mean to be cruel, to refuse.

You promise you're waiting, you'd love to—you rush to the floor without explanation. A boy deserves a welcome, even if he has just torn the arms of love.

You need to matter. You find you're a pest. You don't want to see, you don't have to say why. It gets pretty dreary.

Can't manage? You really never fend off too much.

To go steady is like being proposed to—whatever. A kiss under-the-mistletoe? A scene over nothing. To salvage the situation, you start the feminine defense of laughing; it's very hard to kiss a laughing girl. You get a glass of water.

"Look here...haven't you ever kissed before?"

You're acting like an octopus, the real problem for every unattached female. Boys don't really get it: a kiss should have some value. You seem silly to him.

You know you'll kiss him, but you're not too sure of his feelings. You spare yourself the humiliating failure: he's taken with you, you kiss him, persistent, again you kiss him, you do.

You're going to say no to your own standards in some impassioned moment. You betray them, you wriggle seductively, you push yourself, a lot more like Maybe or Please. You enjoy a game. Blank or bored, you look like a fast girl—too pointed, too tight, too short—the obvious need, too much over-use.

You want a good-night kiss, lean dreamily, the boy's car a party with lights dimmed, a make-out session, his manly reputation. You will go solo to a boy's room, too-intimate, avoid situations in which the "no" problem will come up.