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Coffee Black & Melancholy Bright

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COFFEE BLACK & MELANCHOLY BRIGHT

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COFFEE BLACK & MELANCHOLY BRIGHT

by

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THESIS

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Lin-Manuel Miranda gets his own nod; thousands of my words would remain unwritten if not for the inspiration that I've siphoned from his music, writing, and creative spirit.

Jules and Sebastian. Ironically, I don't have words to acknowledge the impact you've had on this project, on me. I'll steal from Jesse Armstrong via Tom Wambsgans: I would need the most ludicrously capacious of bags to hold the words and metaphors that would dutifully describe my love and gratitude for you both.

Preface

“Our life stories are who we are. They are our identity. A life story is not, however, an objective account. A life story is a carefully shaped narrative that is replete with strategic forgetting and skillfully spun meanings.” Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* p. 161.

As a mental health therapist, one question that frequently makes its way into the therapy room is some rendition of “why am I like this?” Whether it sounds more like “what’s wrong with me,” or “why did I do that?” so many people have sat in front of me with the intent of parsing out why they are the way that they are; why they attract abusive people, what they’ve done to deserve to be treated in such a way, why they, themselves, treat others badly. Or at times, most heartbreaking, to me at least, why they treat themselves the way that they do. Clients come to me to ask why they treat themselves like broken, awful things.

Most often, in nearly all situations, I am able to reframe their self-accusatory question from “what’s wrong with me” from a different lens, to get them to shift the periscope. “Let’s put aside what you think is wrong with you, or why you think you deserve this,” I’ll suggest, “and instead I want you to ask yourself this: what’s happened to you?”

This begins the work of identifying, exploring, and processing events and relationships, often traumatic but not always, that have impacted the client throughout their lifespan. They tell their stories and we navigate them, take them apart, assign thoughts and feelings as healthy or unhealthy, and I try to support them in developing

new, healthier patterns in order to meet whatever goals they've identified for themselves. It's not a perfect process; in fact, I would argue that it's uniquely flawed. As Gottschall touches on in *The Storytelling Animal*, memory is imperfect, leading us to cast ourselves in certain roles in our own stories, and others in theirs. However, our stories are what we make them, and storytelling is how we assign meaning. Therefore, using our stories to dissect who we are, to find patterns, and more importantly, to break them? It's the system that we have, as flawed as it may be.

Coffee Black & Melancholy Bright is my story, my way of creatively confronting the question of "what's happened to me?" It is a hybrid memoir encompassing a collection of personal essays and poetry that tells a story of depression, grief, and family intersecting in a journey through dismantling, destruction, and healing. The book tells the story from the perspective (mostly in first person, though there are some variations) of a girl who comes from a complicated family background: alcoholism, divorce, husband-swapping (her aunt is her step-mother; watch out, daytime television!), emotional abuse, and mental health issues are the foundation of her family history. As she gets older, her own mental health issues, along with unhealthy relationships and devastating loss, culminate in a suicide attempt at the age of 23. This is only the middle of her story, however; she finds beauty and healing both after and within the destruction of her life and also realizes that time is a non-linear beast. Beauty and pain are eternal, but even eternal things change and grow with time.

Told in five parts, *Coffee Black & Melancholy Bright* explores the impact of family, love, mental health, loss, protective factors, and inner turmoil on one life over time, through the use of a myriad of creative nonfiction formats, including poetry, flash

nonfiction pieces, poetry, personal essays, and epistolary pieces. The book aims not only to create an emotional connection between the reader and the page, but also an understanding between the narrator and the reader; an understanding of how a person can break, and how a person can heal.

Exploring Literary Inspirations, Structure & Format

Nonfiction as a form of creative expression not only never appealed to me until the pandemic in 2020, but it also didn't make cohesive sense as a concept: 'creative nonfiction.' Perhaps I'd only been exposed to the 'wrong' sort of creative nonfiction; read dry, non-engaging biographies, or conflated the experience of engaging with nonfiction as being the same as sitting through my AP US history class in high school. 'Creative' always spurred bright, popping imagery, and feelings of excitement; nonfiction, a dry, beige, weary sense of obligation. Until, in July 2020, I watched the recorded video production of the musical Hamilton.

With the understanding that creative nonfiction might be a stretch for what I've come to consider what is essentially a fanfiction of American history, my first exposure to Lin-Manuel Miranda's monstrously influencing piece of work spurred my creativity in a way that nothing else ever had. Fiction being the only vehicle of writing (and, truthfully, reading) that I had ever fully explored, this felt like permission to amorphize and boundary break. Permission to play. More importantly, this led me to pick up biographies willingly. I learned more about the Revolutionary War after July 2020 than I ever did in high school or college, not only from reading biographies but also by taking a

deep dive into historical fiction and other works, including reading Aaron Burr's published journals, which have stayed close in mind during the writing of my thesis.

Fast forward a year and a half or so, and I am presented with my first opportunity to take a creative nonfiction class. I think not of beige biographies, but rather, this plethora of books that I've been reading about historical figures, wartime retellings, and blended historical fiction. While in retrospect I am grateful that I was spurred to begin taking creative nonfiction classes in this program, I was woefully underprepared for the core aim of the classes: to write about the self.

I was exposed to incredibly enriching examples of autobiographical works throughout the latter classes of the creative writing program that helped me to understand exactly how creative nonfiction works, and works well. There are a half dozen or so that have stuck with me as being stellar, but three in particular inspired this book due to the handling of themes, format, and/or structure.

First and foremost, my understanding of creative writing shifted monumentally when I read Sema Reza's *When the World Breaks Open*. Reza's debut book is a compilation of traditional narratives, flash nonfiction pieces, and a blend of traditional, non-traditional, and lyrical poetry. Reza's story of divorce, loss, failure, healing, and success is told in a nonlinear fashion utilizing this mixture of narrative structure in a way that is at times confusing but ultimately clear by the end of her book, and always emotionally captivating. This book is as close to a template as I would say I am using for my own project; though different in that my book has more of a linear structure, Reza's ability to find success in terms of flow and impact by use of a mix of styles inspires me

to try working outside of traditional format. I would not be doing this particular project if I had not read this book, and it is the one that I come back to as an example of how disjointed pieces can come together to form one picture. It is a goal to be able to create a similar flow and overall theme of meaning as Reza has, even if it means following multiple threads from beginning to end in order to do so.

In the same vein as Reza's book, *A Bestiary* by Lily Hoang presents a collection of fragments, organized by loosely threaded topics as outlined in the table of contents found at the start of the book, ultimately dissecting love and loss, the death of the author's sister, and the ebb and flow of her relationships. If not for the table of contents or the section titles, the reader might be left to decipher or subjectify the meanings of the bursts of one-line thoughts, short paragraphs, or micro-essays scattered throughout the book even more so than they already are. Some pieces/sections of the book are straightforward enough without being labeled; "on Oriental Beauties," or "on Violence," for example. However, others, such as "on my Birthday, Dragons, and Intestines" read more like a tangential smattering of thoughts, a chapter of collections (or a single piece? Hoang doesn't ascribe to a preferential form) that don't seem connected until as a whole, they do. Hoang's collection is made better for its lack of structure and its insistence on immediacy, as though the author could not resist sharing her thoughts the moment they are included on the page. The structure here has inspired my own writing, not to mention Hoang's ability to capture loss thematically, as well as her sense of narrative voice; she's a presence throughout the book, and she speaks to her reader directly. Her narrative presence is something that I kept in mind as I worked on my own project, wanting to be present with the reader as well, consistently from piece to piece.

Though more of a traditional memoir format than Reza or Hoang, Joan Didion's ability to starkly capture the experience of grief and loss in *The Year of Magical Thinking* was an early inspiration for me to build my thesis project around the theme of grief and loss. She writes not only about the experience of losing her husband but also about the year that follows his death, which includes looking back at the man he was and the relationship that they had built together. Didion's memoir is a standout recollection of grief because of her candid portrayal; often straightforward and blunt in her descriptions, she lays out her experiences plainly, conversationally, and the reader is invited into her grief and loss as a voyeur rather than an audience due to the lack of sugar-coating or hand-wringing. In my thesis, loss is a central theme, and loss is difficult to write about due to the fact that it is both so personal *and* universal, subjective and objective. The way that Didion approaches loss, pulling no punches and laying it bare, is an approach that I tried to take in an attempt to present the narrator's genuine experience to the reader. While grief is scattered throughout the pages, I address grief most directly in a series of epistolary letters addressed to my friend Matt, indicated by the dated titles, who died in February 2009 and whose death was incredibly traumatic for me.

In addition to nonfiction literary inspirations, two collections of fictional short stories have also been important resources to me during my writing process. Regarding my goal of truth-telling and narrative authenticity on the page, *Woman Hollering Creek* by Sandra Cisneros uses a multitude of forms, voices, and writing styles to explore the experiences of girls and women on either side of the Mexican/American border. Cisneros' use of close psychic distance between the characters and the reader presents a genuine, honest account of the characters' experiences and emotions, creating

characters that may very well be nonfictional. In addition to Cisneros' ability to create authentic characters, another benefit of this work to my project is the changing tenses, POVs, and storytelling formats from story to story (or even within story) that serve as a guideline to how works of varying format and style can be compiled in a fluid and effective manner without loss of credibility, flow, or tone.

The second short story collection that I referenced is Amy Hempel's *The Collected Stories of Amy Hempel*. This collection includes nearly 50 short stories that cover a plethora of topics, characters, and themes, though sorted into four sections. The organization of Hempel's stories, as well as her use of a wide array of stylistic choices, were beneficial examples for me. Some of her stories span pages, while others are merely the length of a paragraph. Some are presented in first person, others in third, some in present tense, and others in past. As my own collection includes pieces of varying lengths, points of view, tense choices, etc., Hempel's book is helpful to turn to for structure, flow, and readability; her characters and situations do not have to be 'real' in order to serve as an example for how to order works effectively to maximize the experience for the reader.

Thinking of specific pieces included in my book, there are other authors' works that were paramount in simply giving me permission to explore things that I otherwise may not have allowed myself to do while writing my thesis: David Foster Wallace, in his collection of essays and arguments *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, weaves through decades of pop culture and manages to not only integrate his personal views on pop culture matters (delving deeply into David Lynch's filmography, for example), but he also pulls back to make macro-level observations on storytelling and

how it reflects on people as a whole. This allowed me to unselfconsciously write and include pieces such as “JK Rowling and the Act of Moving On,” “Calliope on the A Train,” and “The Berkshires” while being confident that they held the same importance and levity in the overall story as the others.

Both Eduardo Galeano’s *The Book of Embraces* and Sherrie Flick’s *Whiskey, Etc.: Short (Short) Stories*, though wildly different from one another in subject, showcased both brevity and importance of detail; Galeano, with emotional detail, inclusions of thought, reflection and feeling smattered within his fragmented pieces, and Flick with such environmental detail that her fictional short stories ground the reader to place, time, and surrounding. “It’s bitter, grainy on my tongue with the taste that I sneak from the pot. Hot. Burns.” I write in “Sweet Fruits,” and I can see the influence of both fragmentation (Galeano) and sensory detail (Flick) in this one-page story when I go back and re-read; as well as in the one paragraph “Disintegrate.” With brevity being a weakness of mine a few years back, it’s impossible to understate the importance of reading these writers and learning from their craft.

I could continue and likely find reference material/inspiration for every piece within this project, as every piece of writing or art has been inspired by other writing and art before it. However, I will only point to one additional author due to the knowledge that without having read her work, there are pieces that follow in my thesis that would not exist. Without *Fierce Attachments* by Vivian Gornick, I would not have written “Life Shapes,” as the thought of writing directly about my own mother in an honest way prior to reading Gornick’s work has always struck me as sacrilege; her writing showed the ability to observe a relationship from a place of reflection that contained multitudes. I

can't say that I would be able to address my mother as a character as honestly as I have without having read Gornick's work. I also believe it goes without saying that Gornick's ability to craft memoir is inspirational for a reader and writer in its own right.

Through exploring fiction and nonfiction works in my classes, I learned that there were options within the realm of creative writing that would allow me to explore truth and self through a multitude of different vehicles without having to resort to nonfiction. The ease of using fictional characters as a vehicle is, of course, not only an option but at times a subconscious inevitability; autofiction as a way to create psychic distance during the writing process may have perhaps been an easier step; poetry, third-person language, etc. There are many stylistic choices I could have made aside from choosing the more traditional creative nonfiction path that I decided to utilize for my project. I decided to approach my thesis from a true memoir format for three reasons. First, because it would be a novel experience for me and I wanted the feedback in order to learn and grow. Second, I learned that writing myself created a visceral discomfort that I wanted to engage with and spend more time with for my own processing purposes. Lastly, as a fiction writer for my entire life, this would provide me the opportunity to explore what it felt like to aim for a new goal of presenting the truth, as opposed to trying to create something unreal with the goal of making it feel true.

Though not precisely literary inspirations, there were resources that were invaluable to the exploration of narrowing down the parameters of this project. One hang-up as a fiction writer exploring the option of creative nonfiction was: what truths are readers interested in reading? The compilation *Anthology of Contemporary Creative*

Nonfiction: Work from 1970 to the Present edited by Lex Williford and Michael Martone was a valuable resource for me as somebody newer to the genre, as it was comprised of works specifically curated by asking 500 writers and teachers which essays they would like to see included in the anthology, and why, thereby gathering pieces not considered important by the two editors alone, but pieces highly regarded and used as teaching tools across the country. While the pieces were of course valuable to read on an individual level creatively, as a whole the anthology the value it provides cannot be understated when exploring the question: what creative nonfiction do readers and writers want to read? What do they find compelling? The introduction and forward to the compilation challenges the reader to debate what kind of factual truths they find important, and this challenged me to consider which stories I wanted to include in my book, how I wanted to include them, and where.

This was the most difficult aspect of writing the thesis: the which, how, why, where, the choosing of the structure and format. Once I'd narrowed my choice down to creative nonfiction, specifically memoir, I had to decide how to tell the story that I wanted to tell, which was ultimately more difficult than choosing which stories to tell, as there were critical points in my life, beats that were climactic, both positive and negative. As a fiction writer, familiar only with long-form fiction and short story writing, how could I tell these true stories while avoiding mundanity?

I wasn't interested in writing a biography. These were the things that had bored me throughout much of my early educational life, and I didn't want to sit down and take the 'easy' way out (my own prejudiced, subjective thinking). Throughout my life, I have

been in and out of therapy to process my family trauma and grief, which has included ‘telling my story’ numerous times, chronologically and in detail. There was nothing left there to challenge me or to push me creatively. My instincts nudged me toward short-form fiction, collections of short stories ie. Amy Hempel or Sandra Cisneros, disjointed in a linear fashion but connected via thematic structure. This was my traditional fiction-writer voice speaking; once I continued to take additional classes that encouraged true creative expression, connecting to one’s inner voice via meditation and other means, I found myself geared more toward the style of Seema Reza and Lily Hoang. I wanted to include pieces in which the structure and format were best suited to the subject, whether it be an essay, short story, flash, poetry, or a combination. I wanted the narrator, the emotion, and the experience to drive the structure, rather than my analysis of how the book should be structured.

And so, the memoir became a hybrid project composed of poetry, essays, flash pieces, short stories, and letters. I found myself returning to Sema Reza’s work most often, though this book does not emulate her format or structure. I returned to *When the World Breaks Open* for permission, rather, to allow each piece to take the structure that it needed to take, and later during the feedback stage, to adjust if critically necessary. The most purposeful structure throughout the book is the epistolary aspect; there are five letters written to the character of Matt throughout the book. These letters were chosen intentionally to provide the reader intimate psychic distance to the narrator and her grief, her connection with the character, and her state of mind at different points in time. Also, as an author, this format felt the most natural and true way to address Matt as a character rather than trying to simply reproduce him on the page.

The organization of the pieces, varied as they are, didn't fall into place until I decided to write a prelude. The sections were a vague idea; the themes were there, but loosely structured; all I had were the beats of time and life events. A child is born, she struggles, she attempts suicide, she heals. It was the idea of introducing the reader to the narrator, the secondary character (Matt), and a few of the most important symbols and themes within the prelude that preceded the development of the rest of the project. The importance and the power of words; the convulsive and destructive nature of beauty and life. I consider the prelude to be the most important piece in the project, and in a way I think it symbolizes the book as a whole, serving a purpose greater than introducing the reader conceptually to what lies ahead.

The narrative is separated into five distinct parts following the prelude: Harvest, Roast, Grind, Brew, and Savor. Connecting with the overall imagery (beginning with the title) of coffee, the parts are used to signify the narrator's journey of suffering and healing. Thinking of the process that a coffee bean has to go through from conception to serving its purpose, there are certain steps that are more traumatic than others, even violent. Up until the point where the fine grounds of coffee are allowed to rest in the heated water, the bean itself is cut away from its stalk, heated in high temperatures, and at the climax of its suffering, ground into oblivion; however that is not where the story ends. In fact, that is where the trajectory becomes gentler, more soothing. This imagery seemed to be suited to my overall concept of putting the 'climax' of the narrator's suicide attempt in the middle of the memoir, with just as much life to follow as what came before.

One benefit of separating the memoir into parts was the allowance of being able to loosen the rules of chronology. Though the chronology is mostly linear, it is less so linear on a timeline and more so with the narrator's state of mind as her life experiences stack atop one another and layer into a crescendo, building to a climax. There is no need to fit the standard 'when I was six years old' or 'and then when I was 12' when using hybrid formatting and when sorting experiences into parts; these two choices allowed me to utilize a more abstract and tonal understanding of time as opposed to traditional chronology. The sturdiest string of linear formatting throughout the memoir is the dated letters to the character of Matt, which are provided to show the narrator's emotional states of grief and healing at specific points in time, windows for the reader to be able to ground themselves throughout the book, serving as checkpoints.

On Themes, Symbols & Characters

On the topics of grief and healing, the themes of the book were the most important foundation at the beginning stage of development. Even before choosing to utilize nonfiction as the vehicle, I knew that I wanted grief to be an underlying theme of my thesis project. As is evident when reading, the loss of Matt was the most devastating event that happened in my life, and I have lived the lows and highs of my life looking through the lens of grief since the age of 19. So grief, to me, is the underlying, pervasive theme of the book, beginning with the prelude and rounding out the last piece.

Trauma and mental health overall are also very present within most pieces, whether the trauma is presented as the small, insidious pains that come from unhealthy

family dynamics, or the more blatant traumas such as emotional abuse, divorce, death, family alcoholism, or being rejected due to sexual orientation. As is often the case, traumatic experiences in this book overlap with very real mental health symptoms, including depression, anxiety, self-harm, as well as chronic suicidal ideation and an eventual suicide attempt. I refer to these as themes rather than ‘incidents’ as they are ever present for the narrator and throughout the span of the book; even when not in play in every piece, they are omnipresent and play a role in every event, linear or non-linear in presentation.

It is hard for me to split destruction and healing thematically when discussing this project. As established in the prelude, the overall lesson, if there is one to be learned from the narrator’s journey, is that there is no beauty without destruction. Something must be broken or imperfect before it can heal. Perhaps it is a nihilistic view, but it is one that, through my experiences in life and through writing this project, comes with a deep personal feeling of comfort. There is a thematic ‘baptism by fire’ element to the book, in which the fire comes first and the baptism occurs in a bathtub.

As opposed to the themes, the symbols that appear throughout the book did not originally stand out to me as I wrote and edited; only after arranging and reading from beginning to start, as a whole, did I notice them. I considered this one of the cons of choosing a hybrid format for the project and utilizing disjointed pieces. As discussed above when addressing the organization of the book into parts, coffee is the most prominent visual signal throughout. However, while coffee does symbolize destruction and the healing that comes from destruction, coffee is also a symbol of connection. The

narrator's connection with other characters throughout, including her Mother, her ex-husband, Matt, her wife, and her son.

Water is another recurring symbol that is seen throughout the book, another that symbolizes a variety of the narrator's experiences and growth. Initially, water symbolizes a means of escape; the thoughts of drowning, driving a car off of a bridge, or disappearing into the ocean during times of depression in pieces such as "Quiet" and "Catalogue" bring about water's symbolic imagery of vastness and the ability to envelop and make disappear anything that goes beneath the surface. Even if the pieces were to be read in a backward or forward order, there is a culmination of attempted suicide by drowning in the middle of the book, which I believe would feel inevitable in a way given the prominence of water throughout the pieces. However, as the journey continues, water begins to symbolize healing and hope, a rebirth of sorts, a non-religious baptism as the narrator is able to enter into water without feeling the need to be pulled under, which is also noted in "Homesick," and indicated in the title of an early piece, "Lifeguards," in which the narrator identifies her siblings as reasons she has continued living.

It would be impossible to pinpoint one form of art or creativity as a symbol throughout this project, as writing, music, and even acting as an art form are heavily present throughout. Rather than being simple themes, however, I believe boiling down 'art' to the most basic form of creativity as a symbol for hope in this book would be appropriate. Throughout the ebb and flow of the pieces, there are always moments in time when art or an artist is acknowledged for being just around the corner; in the absence of faith or a deity, as I (and therefore, of course, the narrator) am an atheist, art

acts as a stand-in for faith, for God, and for the hope that words, music, and creativity will always be ever-present, the 'something bigger,' so to speak, throughout the book.

In thinking of the basic elements of a memoir, I have a cognitive dissonance when it comes to thinking of the characters as just that. I find that referring to myself on the page as the narrator is helpful in creating a distance when discussing the project objectively; however, it continues to be a struggle to think of the narrator's family members and friends as characters. There is a level of pressure in creative nonfiction to accurately portray the characters on the page that doesn't exist in fiction, at least in my experience as I have worked on this project over the last year. The benefit of nonfiction in this arena, however, is that so long as I choose to represent the characters as accurately as my memory allows, I am representing them to the best of my ability. There is undoubtedly subjectivity, however, it was my goal to be as objective as possible.

The characters that I chose were included because they are integral to the most important events: the breakdown, ruination, and healing of the narrator. One difference I have found between fiction and nonfiction is that there is no clear delineation between characters as far as archetypes; there are no antagonists or protagonists here, though a reader may see them falling along a spectrum. The narrator's ex-husband and mother may read as more antagonistic forces, while Matt and the narrator's father may be neutral due to the positive and negative impact they had on her life, and her wife and child may be seen as the heroes. In reality, the hope is that all of the characters, the aforementioned characters as well as the narrator's friends and siblings, can be seen more as catalysts, forces whose impact led her to where she is now, which is a positive place.

The Process: Then, Now & Ongoing

Now that I've summarized what my book is; now that I've explored sources and inspirations, organization and format, themes, symbols, and characters, reflecting on the process of bringing it into being is a challenge in itself. I know the following book well at this point and have analyzed the flow, the order of operations so to speak, countless times. I've killed a few darlings and I've birthed many more over the course of the last year. Some things have worked, and some things haven't. It's all been frustrating, and very enjoyable.

The first sets of questions that I posed to my first batch of peer readers when I only had seven or eight pieces total to present, were all based around the formatting of the project itself. *Does the order make sense? Does it flow? Is there a story here?* I prefaced these questions with: "I know it's not fair of me to ask this of you, because there is so little here." Reflecting on this now, I can see that the self that I was when I was asking these questions eight months ago was still very constrained in her thinking, not yet comfortable with stepping outside of the chronological, a-b-c fictional format of storytelling that she was used to. This was the first problem that I had to overcome. How do I make myself comfortable working with a new, non-traditional format?

My first draft of this book included some pieces that I had written for classes that are no longer included. Short, flash auto-fiction pieces in which a fictionalized version of myself contemplated a future where gay marriage was banned, for example. I decided to remove this piece, not because it didn't represent the truth of a very real fear, but because when I read it in conjunction with the rest of the pieces, I could feel the

disconnect between the narrator's reality and this other character. This other character represented a societal fear, a community fear. This spawned problem number two for me: How do I tell an engaging story about one person, yet connect with the emotions of the reader on a universal scale?

I approached my problems in a two-fold, juxtaposing way: I wrote freely and I edited stringently. Unlike my process for writing fiction, I stopped trying to outline and I did very little traditional plotting, instead only allowing myself to keep a bulleted list of ideas or memories that I wanted to include. I started carrying a small notebook with me to jot down errant thoughts when I went on walks, particularly around bodies of water, as I had connected in a previous class that water triggered plethoras of memories and emotional responses. If I could, I wrote whenever an idea formed, rather than during my typical, scheduled evening hours. It was chaotic, emotionally draining, and initially very stressful, as I wound up with a long, nonsensical Word document entitled "Thesis Pieces" that simply continued to grow until it was time to submit drafts for peer critique.

The editing process was far more comfortable for me. At the time of my first draft, I sorted my Thesis Pieces works into five different sections. This was when the allegory of coffee brewing came to me, even though I had yet to write any of the coffee-related pieces that now exist in the final draft. It was a trickle-down effect when editing the first draft: I sorted, I thought of the coffee-creating process, and I was reminded of the Nadja quote that I have tattooed on my shoulder while thinking of the destruction that occurs, simply to make a cup of coffee. "Beauty will be convulsive or not at all." From that, I decided to write the prelude to my thesis as a guide to the reader.

The first edited and curated draft of my thesis contained the prelude and nine pieces split into five sections. Barely anything to go on at all, and yet the feedback that I received was instrumental. I had included music lyrics in each section and was nervous that it wouldn't work; I was assured that they did, but where was music referenced in the rest of my thesis? My readers needed more of the characters to connect to; they were curious about the narrator's ex-husband, her wife, son, mother, Matt. I understood that it was important to anchor the experiences to characters, much like in fiction, rather than simply to thoughts, feelings, and environment. I also had yet to write anything about the suicide event, and yet the feedback acknowledged that there was a critical event missing, and that, to me, was reassuring.

These were the things that I focused on, and while my notes about what to write about became more narrowed, my writing process continued to be unstructured. I included more meditation and walking before writing, curated my music choices, and looked at old pictures, read old letters. It was at this point when I also started reading and re-reading the works cited above and allowing myself to recognize that formulaically, there was no formula to memoir writing. I wrote what I wanted, and my second draft included 22 pieces total, including tighter, clarified versions of my prelude and the first nine pieces.

After the second draft, my two initial barriers had all but disappeared. I had found my structure and organization, and not only had they been found but I was comfortable with them. I was comfortable re-organizing the pieces and where they fit, as well as receiving feedback from others and making changes based on that feedback. Also, I was learning that every reader responded emotionally to different experiences. The

second draft included the letters to Matt, and the grief experience was the most universal, which was my initial goal. I was satisfied with that.

However, as I continue working on this project, even now as it has grown to over 30 pieces, I feel remnants of my initial quandaries. *Is any of this interesting?* Maybe not to everyone, but the themes are universal. *Does this piece fit here?* Well, chronology is relative, and everything is connected to destruction and healing. *Is there a rule against having a personal essay followed by a poem?*

No. There isn't.

Even in a genre that has always felt so structured to me as nonfiction, there are no rules. I have been carefully returning back to the guidance of those who are experts in their craft because I do want the work to be cohesive. When receiving grammatical feedback from my thesis instructor about the repetition of words or structure of paragraphs, I return to Stephen King's *On Writing* to figure out where my word choices came from, to return to the roots of using language that I know and am comfortable with rather than searching for synonyms, and to refreshen my toolkit when necessary to restain the floors of my foundational writing.

Concerning continuing to draft this as my first long-form nonfiction project, I will continue to keep three books by my side that have been very useful: *The Art of Memoir* by Mary Karr, *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative* by Vivian Gornick, and *Method and Madness: The Making of a Story* by Alice LaPlante. Though not all of the guidance in these books was applicable, as most referred to more traditional memoirs, all have offered different flavors of counsel.

Though not as objectively useful in the crafting process, the most subjectively useful guide for this project has been Karr's *The Art of Memoir*, if only because of Karr's recommendations regarding truth-telling. She discusses the concept of recognizing that there is a fraction of truth and a fraction of fiction within a memoir and that there is an understood 'deal' with the reader of sorts that this is the case; there is a callback to Gottschall, here, and most other writers of nonfiction, that the memory is flawed, and if a work is pure, unadulterated nonfiction, written only to include documented, provable things? Well, perhaps that is the 'boring,' historical nonfiction that I was subjected to in middle-high school. Karr's recommendation to confront this is "Whatever the deal with your reader, I argue for stating it up front..." (p. 18). Though I read *The Art of Memoir* when I was halfway through this project, I decided to also make this deal with myself. My book is as close as I can get it; the truth is part memory and part emotion. The emotions are completely true, and I've endeavored to not intentionally fictionalize. Whatever that means as far as a 'percentage,' I cannot say, but I'm content with that deal, both for myself and the reader.

Gornick's *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative* has been the most helpful, even more so than creative inspirations, in establishing the concept of nonfiction character establishment. Her sharing of passages and analysis of characters was instrumental in my understanding of narrative voice when writing nonfiction. Her breakdowns are specific and easy to follow; from how a writer might establish an intimate connection between characters, to the ways in which casual vs. direct language can impact a reader's experience (re: Eiseley), to the importance of tone when a persona/character is *not* central to the narrative. I learn well from examples, and from

breaking things down to their smallest parts, and Gornick's way of addressing personal narrative does exactly this.

Not necessarily nonfiction specific, Alice LaPlante's *Method and Madness: The Making of a Story* has had its place in my writing bag since my second semester in the program, as the book is essentially an instruction manual on how to practically form a story. As all storytelling elements are important regardless of whether the story is fiction or nonfiction, the elements that LaPlante includes in this book are all important and relevant, including but not limited to the process of writing as discovery, crafting the imagery of a story, defining and shaping short stories, balancing showing and telling, plot design, and perhaps most importantly for a collection of short nonfiction pieces, establishing the voice of the narrator and characters. Dialogue and narrative integrity are just as important in nonfiction as in fiction (if not more), and LaPlante's text has been a guide for this project as much as it has been in projects past, and I imagine will continue to be as I finalize the pieces of this book.

It is a strange thing, to think that there will be an end to *Coffee Black & Melancholy Bright*, regardless if any of its contents are to live on through publishing or simply being shared with others beyond my panel of readers. It is bizarre to think in terms of a final draft, a day when the document is no longer a living thing to be altered. I have come to learn, as a writer, a reader, and as a person through the creation of this book, that memories and experiences are ever-present, stretchable creatures, much like books themselves, not to be forgotten with the turning of a page.

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Prelude

When I was a college Freshman, I was assigned to read *Nadja* by André Breton for my honors English Class. It was the first class I took with the head of the foreign language department, Dr. Matthew Hilton-Watson.

Alternatively (affectionately), Dr. Matt.

It was one of those books that I suffered through. The surreal, non-linear structure and the subject matter didn't appeal to me, and I had to come back to it in fits and bouts despite its short length. It was disappointing, as I'd devoured the first book in the class, Émile Zola's *The Masterpiece*. I'd had high hopes and they weren't met by *Nadja*. Still, I suffered onward, studious as I was. I was not, have never been, a SparkNotes student.

It was in the small hours of the morning when I reached the end of the book, eyes drooping and heavy, words bleary on the page before me. I raced toward the last line, aching for sleep, sleep that I would not get that night.

"Beauty will be convulsive, or not at all."

Beauty will be convulsive, or not at all.

I have been a voracious reader since before I started pre-school. When asked to share an interesting fact about myself, for an ice-breaker or some other getting-to-know-you ordeal, I sometimes boast about the fact that I read Stephen King's *It* in its entirety as a first grader (which, upon reflection, is a feat on one hand and also something that leads me to question my parents' decision making tactics). I learned to read not long after I learned to speak, and most photos of me as a young child and throughout the

course of my early life include a book or a dozen somewhere within the vicinity of wherever I am.

I am a human forged by words and stories, paragraphs, letters, and sentences.

All that to set the foundation for what's to come, to solidify the meaning of what's next.

I was nineteen years old when I read *Nadja*, sleep-deprived during the witching hour, and when I reached the final line of the book, it was as though I had uncovered a tenet of a religion to which I'd never known I was faithful. I had read thousands of stories throughout my life, millions and millions of words, but these eight words? These words enraptured me and I read them, over and over and over again.

I spoke the words aloud. Whispered them in the dark.

I cried. Shaking, in my bed, I held the book to my chest, and I cried tears from an unlocked place, tender and new, destroyed.

Words and stories, paragraphs, letters, and sentences.

The following day I put the book in my purse, and I drove to a tattoo parlor across town.

I was the first customer in the chair at eleven in the morning, and less than nine hours after reading Breton's words they were injected beneath my skin for me to keep. **Beauty will be CONVULSIVE, or not at all.**

Next, I drove to campus, even though I didn't have classes that day. Calmly, I was calm by that point, the searing in my shoulder and my ability to carry the words with me having brought a certain peace, I made my way to the foreign language department. I knocked on Dr. Matt's door.

When I showed him what I'd done, I felt a sense of pride when he laughed. *I'm going to have to be more careful choosing what readings I assign if y'all are going to start tattooing them on your bodies*, he said, and he was grinning, pleased. Whenever I remember him now, that smile comes to mind early. Beautiful. Convulsive. (A story for a different time.)

When looking up the definitions of convulsions, there are overlapping themes of things that are violent, uncontrolled. Unruly laughter, fierce fits of the body, or aggressive shakings of the earth. For something to be convulsive, it is to be uncontainable, unrestricted, unable to be managed, predicted, or ruled. Convulsions are traumatic. Convulsions are destructive.

At nineteen, to read that there is no beauty without violent, uncontrollable destruction was perhaps the first time in my life that I had felt beautiful myself. As a young adult whose childhood path into adolescence and then into adulthood was paved with trauma and lined with mental illness starting at the age of twelve, whose family dynamics were grown from poisoned ground, whose body was etched with scars, and whose internal voice was scathing, acidic? The mere thought of loveliness blooming from ruination was a lifeline.

It's all beautiful, everything to follow. When I reflect on the moments of hurt, of anger; grief, joy, pain; love, death, birth, growth; they're all bittersweet, beautiful convulsions, and like the words etched into the flesh of my body, I carry them with me, from the beginning to now.

Part I

Harvest

And sometimes you close your eyes
And see the place where you used to live
When you were young

-The Killers, "When You Were Young"

Sweet Fruits

It's bitter, grainy on my tongue with the taste that I sneak from the pot. Hot. Burns. Mom always tells me no, I can't try it, I won't like it and it's no good for me. It's pretty, though, the way the milk swirls through the murky, muddy brown. I like that part of the morning, like being awake early enough to watch her way through the routine of shuffling through the kitchen in her big glasses, with her big hair, still crunchy from the day before, leftover hairspray. A mug of coffee to heat her hands.

My grandma pulls down a bag of coffee beans from her cupboard one day and I have no idea what they are. They look like candy, chocolate or maybe raisins. She calls them beans and I watch her grind them into a powder and then the smell is strong and familiar. Bitter on the back of my tongue like theft, something snuck.

That's the morning I learn that coffee grows. From it's own kind of tree, my grandma tells me. When the coffee fruits are ripe and ready, they're stripped from their branches so they can be prepared for what comes next.

I look at the dried, brown beans in the bag and I can't fathom them as fruit. I can't imagine them being what they once were, only what they are. Hard, bitter, forbidden. Were they sweeter before they were harvested and made ready for consumption?

I wonder if I'm still fruit, soft and growing, as I watch my grandmother go about making her coffee. Her hands act strong but look brittle, wrinkled like raisins.

Baby Book

My mother added to my baby book until I was six or seven, or whenever it was that I lost my first tooth and adulthood peeked through my gums.

I used to love flipping through its pages, well worn and barely held together. It was a cheap thing with a cracked white 80's vinyl cover and tacky cellophane pages inside to hold pictures, hospital bracelets, and other bits and bobs between pages of off-white paper meant to track the important stuff, the milestones. When I was younger I liked to pull it out and look at the photos of scrunch-faced me, a stranger; liked to pull out the tiny plastic bracelet to see if it would fit around my wrist knowing full well that it wouldn't.

I liked to read the things that my mom had decided were important enough to include. The songs and movies that were popular the day I was born, the cost of a gallon of milk. My height and weight, my first word, how old I was when I crawled and walked. It was all a comfort, a fairy tale in my child mind.

My mom liked to tell the story about how she and my dad had been told, incorrectly, that I was going to be a boy when I was still in utero. They'd prepared for a boy. My name would have been Alexander. I liked that. The name, and that I had been a surprise. A curve ball.

It was all lovely nostalgia until I was eleven or twelve. Until the last time I picked up my baby book. Nothing about the words on the page was different, but the way they made me cry when I read them was new.

It's been too long now to remember exactly how the question on the page was phrased, but it was about my parents' first impressions of me, their first words when I was born.

My mom: "It's a girl"

My dad: "Put her back, she isn't finished yet"

Who knew it was possible to disappoint your parents as you drew your first breath?

Words

I remember bits and pieces of the earliest stories that I ever wrote. First-grade horror stories about little girls in graveyards who broke their ankles, bones protruding through skin; a story about two friends who were separated from their parents at the mall, who wound up taken and terrified. Tragic. I wrote that story for class and received a writing award from the school. I was seven. The teacher beamed at me and gushed about the story that I wrote about the abducted little ones, snatched up by strangers, because wow, what potential!

I was praised for my strangeness, for the tiny seedlings of oddity that sprouted from me even as a little one, as long as I wrote them down in the form of a story. If I expressed my desires in a palatable way, removed from myself. I couldn't say that I wanted to be stolen away, or maybe buried alive for a little while so that nobody could find me, but if these things happened to little Suzie? I would get a ribbon and a sucker.

It's no wonder, then, that writing became what I did. When I wasn't buried in a book, I was either filling notebooks with my horrific handwriting, or single-key typing well into the night what I didn't know then but know now to be self-insert fanfiction on the family desktop. For hours, I traveled around the world with my favorite bands or was slowly driven mad by the One Ring, or sometimes I would be hacked to pieces by a Voorheis, either Jason or his mother, depending on my mood.

Words, I learned, and the sentences they built, were vehicles.

And sure, that metaphor could be synonymous with saying that words are a vehicle of expression, a catalyst for creativity, a way to use language to draw bridges from one idea to the next. Or it could mean what I intend, which is to say that I quickly learned that words were escape pods. The kind built into every sci-fi movie spaceship, to be launched into the blackness of the universe in case of an emergency, when the red lights strobed and the music swelled, *abort, abort*.

I wrote my way into fantasies of other lives, into the clothes and skin of other people. I created breathing, heart-beating creatures from ash and I showered them in love, wealth, suffering, and filth. I played God to them and was their slave; powerless and powerful both, in whichever worlds I chose to build and visit.

Words, the only reliable mode of transportation; there without fuel, without screens, there when all the ink dries and the paper burns at the end of the world.

I escaped then, when I needed to. I don't think I fathomed at the time that I would need to keep refueling my escape pods throughout my life, that words would be my constant. But here I am now, an experienced mechanic, escaping still.

Foregone Conclusion

Dearest Daddy on the weekends

Then every other weekend

And then a few years absent

Back from the dead when I turned 12; the hallowed place fills, still

Stepdad #1 came with an older stepbrother

I liked the trailer, was childishly unaware of the abuse within its walls

Three years as a fake-veneer family

Mom divorced them both - bye, brother, bye

Stepdad #2 didn't even date her first, best friends to the alter

Married - four months?

That's how I learned the word 'annulment'

I cried for months when he said goodbye - he had a kind smile

Stepdad #3 has been around for 20 years, now

I didn't let myself love him fully until I moved out at 18

Didn't convince myself he wasn't already a ghost until then

And someday, perhaps, I will trust that he won't leave me behind

Faith

Twelve years old, new life in my hands.

She's soft and red, breathing quietly, and our blood is the same.

I'm too old to be jealous, to snipe, to want anything other than everything for her.

It's a painful irony to watch her grow, so tiny, into this walking, laughing girl: her

life gets

bigger, brighter, bolder, as mine feels weaker, brittle, tenuous.

But christ, seeing her first steps, chubby hands reaching out to me, curling her

hair

around my finger?

Even as I'm sick and getting sicker, the word 'sister' translates to 'life.'

She buys me time, buys me years; I have to see what comes next.

A strange little tableau, looking back, the power that first words and sticky grins

had

over me at thirteen, fourteen. Lifeblood.

My suicidal thoughts were born in the summer, my sister in autumn. They named her

Faith, and it suited her. Faith was exactly what I needed; a reminder, something to

believe in.

February, 2003

Dear Matt,

We haven't met yet, but I need you now.

I'm fourteen, there's a dance, and I've asked a girl to go with me. Her name's Kristen, she's a friend, and fuck, is she pretty. We're in band together and we've decided to wear matching skirts and our band uniform shirt with black ties; we're going to be absolutely adorable, don't you think? I can't get around my parents knowing that we're going together, is the thing. My Dad is picking Kristen up and dropping us off, and my Mom is picking us up from the dance and taking Kristen home. Not only will we be matching, but also, this is my first dance and I'm excited.

I'm also tired; I've known I was queer since I was young (did you SEE Neve Campbell in *Scream*? Seven-year-old me certainly did), and even though my parents drop casually homophobic remarks like they talk about the weather, I'm fairly certain that they love me enough to keep a roof over my head...or at least one of them will, and that's all that I need.

I do it in the car. Two separate car rides over two days, boom boom. I'll spare you the minutiae of my coming out, because the details are sadly cliché, but here's an overview: my mom? She throws the word dyke around, yells so loudly in the car that I have to

cover my ears, finds a way to blame my bisexuality on my lesbian cousin, and causes me to slip into a shame spiral so intense that the only way I manage to climb back out of it is to lock myself in my room with music, razor blades, antiseptic and band-aids (I'll let you do the math, here).

My dad? He's never been a man of many words, unless he's drunk, joking, or talking about things he likes. The silence that fills the car when I tell him that I'm bisexual, though? It's different. It's intentional; it isn't passive. Rather, it's aggressive, a silence meant to erase the words that precede it. He's good at pretending, my father, and this, who I am, is something that we will pretend doesn't exist for a long, long time.

Where do you come into this? You're not here, you won't be here for another five years. Not until I'm nineteen and engaged to a man, presenting to most people in my life as straight. Back in the closet, essentially. You won't be in my life until seven months before my first wedding, a few weeks before which I'll come into your classroom early, panicking, feet cold, and you'll ask me what's wrong. While I won't tell you that I'm in an emotionally abusive relationship with a man that I don't actually want to marry, I will tell you that part of the reason why I'm panicking is because I'm queer and I'm questioning what that means for my relationship, for my future. And because you are not only my professor at that point but also my mentor and friend, you are going to hug me, you are going to focus on my emotions rather than my orientation, and you are going to advise me to prioritize myself and to be certain that I am in a happy, healthy relationship before getting married.

(And if you do decide to go through with it, I'll be heckling you from the front row. I promise, you'll say, and you'll mean it, because I do, and you are. I have pictures to prove it.)

Do you see, Matt? Why I need you now, in 2003? Even knowing that there will be an adult in this world who will see me, know me, hear me, choose to recognize me, and love me just the same might make all the difference.

If I ever come across this me again, in another time, another place, I'll tell her all about you. I'll tell her what that hug was like, that you didn't bat an eye, and maybe she will be able to breathe a little bit easier. Maybe it'll save her a few scars.

You're not here now, but thank you anyway.

Lifeguards

I don't believe in God, but sometimes I think the universe rights wrongs nonetheless. An only child for the first twelve years of my life, just months after my chronic, relentless, clinical depression started, my first sibling was born. I went wrong, and there she was, right as rain.

All of my siblings are my half-siblings. There are six of them in total, four from my dad and stepmom (Faith, Jade, Elli, and Richie), and two from my mom and stepdad (Zach and Max). As I age, they're born, and there's a mocking sense to things; the more persistent my mental health issues become, the more my world darkens and falls to pieces around me, the number of these tiny humans expands. I want to die, but there's a new baby on the way, and so I have to meet them. I have to hold them, just this once. I have to see how beautiful they are because I know that's what they'll be.

The issue is, I see myself in them. Puzzle pieces, scattered to fit between us.

Here's the funny thing (some would say disturbing, but I'll say funny due to a lifetime of desensitization): my stepmother is my aunt. No, there's no typo, there. My stepmother is my mom's younger half-sister. Her name is Dawn, and she married my dad when she was 20, a year after giving birth to their first child, my sister Faith. We call my sisters my scuzzins (sister-cousins, get it?). It's funny to us, less so to my 8th-grade science teacher who failed me on my family tree because she thought I misunderstood the instructions.

And so, my mother's children and my father's children are also cousins. Part of the family wreath. I'm the only overlap, the only emotional collateral, there; they truly

love being cousins. I have two brothers who were born less than three months apart and as cousins they are inseparable. They both look a little like my mother. I stopped trying to feel mortified by that years ago, because all I can do is awe at the fact that they both look a little like me, too. Are like me, in the ways that force me to see the best about myself.

Faith shares my tendencies toward affection and nurturing.

Jade is like me in every way; looks, passions, personality. My mini-me.

Elli is a weirdo with her head in the clouds, a bit nihilistic.

All three of my sisters are queer.

Richie struggles to stay focused and is amazing with kids.

Zach has the worst sense of humor that matches my own.

Max is quietly smart while being loudly ridiculous.

I have their names tattooed on my back with the inscription “you are my sun, my moon, and all of my stars.” And even with my own child in this world, I find that it’s true.

Without them, I wouldn’t be here to be a mother, and I wouldn’t be the mother I am.

Without their baby hands to hold, their downy hair to pet, their round cheeks and sleep-warm hugs to anchor me above ground, I have no doubts that I would have found my way below the surface long before having the chance to hold my own child, the center of my universe.

I don’t tell them this. I did tell Faith, once, that she saved my life. I wrote it to her in a letter when she graduated high school. I wrote to her that she saved my life twice;

once when she was born and reminded me that the universe still had goodness in store for me, and again when she crossed the room to hug me when I, terrified and sobbing, introduced Jules to my siblings. I'd been so sure that they would hate me, for leaving my husband, for being queer, for rocking their world, and when Faith had stood from her chair and started walking, I thought she was walking away. Leaving the room. But instead, she wrapped her arms around me, all of 12 years old, and comforted me. Reminded me that I was loved.

The same age I'd been when she was born. Look at the universe at work.

I'll save this conversation for the rest when they're older. It's a heavy thing to bear, I think, the knowledge that you saved a life year, after year, after year. As a therapist, I've had people tell me I've done this for them, but I signed up for it. The kids? All they did was come into my open arms, one piece at a time.

Part II

Roast

And it echoes when I breathe
 'Til all you see is my ghost,
Empty vessel, crooked teeth.
 Wish you could see
 And they call me under
 And I'm shaking like a leaf
 And they call me under
And I wither underneath in this storm.

-Of Monsters and Men, "I Of the Storm"

Simmer

They honeymoon in Seattle, and just look at
them, so in love. It's in the way
they can't stop touching each other, can't keep
their eyes off of one another. He buys her coffee every morning and
they sip it as the sun rises over the Puget Sound. It becomes
their dream, to live there one day, to make the city
their home.

They start sweetly, like so many things do.

They meet, she's young, he's lonely. He dotes, she swoons, and
they believe in soulmates. He buys her wine and she keeps him young;
They find balance in
their differences.

They're engaged months before she graduates high school, and
they move in together the day after. Things aren't perfect, but
they manage. She ignores a cruel word here and there and
they'll be okay if only one of them wants a baby, won't
they? He says life will be better if it's just the two of
them. She lets the dream go, ash in air.

They start drinking too much of everything; alcohol, coffee, Red Bull when they don't sleep. That happens too much, but it's not an issue, he says, they're both adults now that she's eighteen. It's them against the world, and nobody will ever love her the way he does.

They get married,
they honeymoon, he works 9-5, she goes to college and works two jobs.
They fight more as she grows up and he stays the same grown-up he's always been.

She realizes one day that she's a frog in a pot of boiling water, and she doesn't know when the water started to boil, only that her skin split open and she's bleeding.

He doesn't buy her coffee anymore, not even when he buys it for himself. He ignores her. Nobody will ever love her the way he does.

She thinks of Seattle. Of the Puget Sound, and she misses
them. She knows
they're dead.

She wonders if this is what it feels like, to be the fruit that's dried and roasted into something hard and bitter from the outside in.

Mémoire

Two weeks before he died, my French professor Matt sat beside me on the steps of a hotel in Montreal and smoked a cigarette.

It was Spring break, 2009. We were a group of a dozen or so, mostly undergraduate students, with three faculty leading the way. We were there to volunteer at a food bank and spend time with little ones at an after-school program. In our 'down time,' we were there to tour the city, enrich our understanding of the culture and language of French-speaking Canada, and get drinks at the pub down the street from our hotel, strapped with our IDs that showed we were nineteen and therefore adults, thank you.

That night, a small group of us went exploring. A few friends, two faculty, and I went out for dinner, and then espresso; we had strayed a bit from our designated four square blocks, but it was fine. "We'll catch the underground," Matt had said. And then we didn't.

Well, the rest of them did; I don't recall all of the details that led to Matt and I falling behind. We watched the subway pull away and shared a look.

"And so we walk!" And so we did.

Somehow, we beat the rest of the group back (I say 'somehow' with the understanding of just how easy it must have been for them to get pulled in by all of the tiny details of the city in their two-block walk between the subway station and the hotel). Matt and I got there first, and though it was cold enough to turn our breath to smoke, we sat down on the steps anyway, a silent agreement to wait for them.

I don't remember talking. I remember rubbing my gloved hands together, the cold of the stone steps seeping in through my jeans, and that there were scuff marks on the toes of Matt's boots. I remember the way his silhouette looked in the streetlights. I remember thinking that his cigarette would fall from his lips with how loosely it hung there, tip brilliant orange.

The thing about Matt was that he always looked like he was running to catch up to something; frazzled, hair unevenly cut, eyes always flickering every which way from behind his glasses. Noise typically trailed him like a shadow: laughter, a lisped, Kentucky drawl, the tapping of feet or hyper fingers. But right then, in that handful of minutes? His drags were slow and languid as he smoked, his limbs quiet. His silhouette was so easy to trace with my eyes as he sat beside me, smoke curling in the air. Still.

After he died, I wondered what it was about that moment that had begged to be committed to memory. I'd made a distinct effort to do so, and when I recall the details now I think of how young, how beautiful, how unbothered and alive he was. Did I think the same when I was living that moment with him? Did a piece of me know that it was important to capture him that way? A lightning bug in a glass jar.

My memories are starkest when they are attached to tragedy; it's a gift and a curse. I savor being able to recall those I mourn; recollection, a brief resurrection, but also a taunt. *This is what you're missing.*

It's all questionable and flawed, of course. When my wife and I went back to Montreal ten years later, I spent much of the trip retracing the steps of my teenage self,

chasing memories, trying to recreate emotions. When we reached the hotel, I could only stand there and stare at the entrance, stomach twisted and hands shaking.

The hotel doesn't have exterior steps.

He Says it as We're Watching TV

"It's so unfair, I'll never get the chance to be with someone who looks like that."

My fiance strokes my hair gently as he says it, his eyes glued to the woman onscreen. I

can't make out the details of her, my vision blurs, but she's skinnyprettybeautiful.

He doesn't notice me crying. He starts talking about something else.

Keeps stroking my hair.

I swallow it down.

XVI & XXIV

When I was a graduate student working toward my Master's degree in counseling, I was required to complete a practicum course in my university's on-campus counseling center. We offered counseling services to individuals in the community for free with the understanding that their therapist would be an unlicensed, supervised graduate student. It was terrifying for all of the right reasons; I was unseasoned, clunky in my practice, a neonatal practitioner who was hyperaware that everyone around me, my clients included, knew that I had no idea what I was doing. I had long since recognized that coming across as inept was one of the worst things that could happen to me.

And yet I survived, session after session, day after day, relatively unscathed. Until a sixteen-year-old girl walked into the office for an intake.

I was twenty-four at the time and though my academic and work life remained somehow intact, my personal life was in tatters. My husband of five years and I had purchased a home earlier that year, a home that I hadn't wanted to buy but one that had been mortgaged anyway as a hail mary, a replacement for a 'save-the-marriage baby' that other couples were perhaps more geared toward. My husband had chosen a house instead because he didn't want children; our marriage needed saving, in part, because I did.

There were other reasons our marriage was falling to pieces that August, a few weeks into my practicum. Never mind that it was nearly a year to the day after I had spent hours in a pool of tears on the floor of our rented condo, pleading with my husband for a divorce because I was so deeply unhappy in our relationship that I

couldn't see a way forward, and (obviously) that divorce hadn't been granted to me, but I was also in love with somebody else. He knew it and I knew it; it was a fact unhidden, something that couldn't be smoothed over by renting a U-Haul and moving our belongings from a condo to a house that I never wanted.

He had promised, that day on the floor of our condo, in no particular order, that we would do the following: go to marriage counseling, move to Seattle, have sex more frequently, talk about maybe having a baby after I graduated if I still wanted one, *but don't expect me to help you take care of it*. He had promised, that day on the floor of our condo, in no particular order, that he would do the following: make an effort to pay more attention, make an effort to help me take care of the house, make an effort to drink less, make an effort to get his hormone levels checked since it had been months and months since he'd shown any kind of interest in me, make an effort, make an effort, make an effort.

Instead, he bought a house five minutes down the road. We didn't see a marriage counselor, and when I mentioned that I had a crush on a woman at work, he egged me on and asked when I was going to *make a move*.

I lit my share of fires in our relationship. There were things I could have done differently had I wanted to. I was quick to anger and tears, easily swallowing and internalizing any offhanded comment or slight that he would make, and even ones that he wouldn't, ones that I would imagine in his tone or in the way he wouldn't look away from his video games when I was trying to demand his attention. I was a needy thing, desperate and wanting, not knowing how to balance two jobs, grad school, a raging

sexuality crisis that had started when I was a child, and bone-deep trauma that my husband liked to gloss over because it made him uncomfortable.

It didn't help that we started dating when I was sixteen and he was twenty-four.

These qualities of mine; the immaturity, the neediness, the inability to fuse real-life needs and responsibilities with my own skill-set at the time, must have driven him fucking insane. That August, months prior to our separation, I was twenty-four and he was thirty-two. I was still forming, and he was rigid and set. My disintegration, I figured then and even somewhat now, must have seemed petty, pathetic, small.

However, nothing changed the fact that when I was a twenty-four-year-old practicum student, that sixteen-year-old girl came into my office, and a switch flipped inside of me that I was never able to flip back to a place of neutrality. It was a chemical reaction, a causal nexus. The girl in front of me was a child; small enough in stature to still be comfortably wrapped in her Mother's arms, with big wide blue eyes that went red around the edges as she cried about being worried over school, and her friends, all of the stressors of a teenager that I wrote down on her intake form as I watched her from some fuzzy space on the ceiling where I had drifted.

As she spoke during that hour, I saw myself at sixteen through my husband's twenty-four-year-old eyes, and I never looked at him the same. I couldn't, no matter how hard I tried.

Maybe it's unfair. It likely is. Maybe my view of him was so easy to sour because I was so densely unhappy in our marriage, a love story that started with intense declarations of love, passionate sex, promises that would make any teenager's head

spin, a story that wound up being no more than screaming fits and a breadcrumb trail of broken vows and vitriolic sarcasm. Even now, at thirty-four, two years older than he was when we separated, I find myself defending him and believing it when I say “he wasn’t a bad guy, we were just bad for each other.” And maybe that’s the truth.

Or maybe my family should have stepped in when I was nineteen, marrying the twenty-seven-year-old. Or eighteen, engaged to the twenty-six-year-old. Seventeen, spending every weekend at the twenty-five-year-old’s house, the one that he owned. Sixteen, going on dates with the man that I met on the internet from four cities over. Maybe it is fair that I flipped the switch and couldn’t look back. Maybe it pangs so badly, still, because I wish someone would have helped me to flip it sooner.

I’ve been a licensed therapist for nearly ten years now, and I think about that sixteen-year-old from time to time. About how she never knew that two weeks after she walked in for a session I tried to kill myself, and how after I failed, I sat in a room with her three days later as her counselor, met her big blue eyes, and did my best to be her person. My husband and I separated officially less than four months later and would be divorced within the year, and while the failing of our marriage was inevitable for a variety of reasons, I can’t help but wonder how much longer it might have taken if our paths hadn’t crossed, her at sixteen, me at twenty-four, both of us crying out for help.

quiet

nineteen, early morning puget sound

honeymoon water calls for me

would feel so lovely

november water, even, cold

quiet

sixteen, bright hot beach california sun

grandma's ashes in my hand

would feel so lovely

wash her away in the pacific

quiet

nine, five, three, florida georgia family visit

big atlantic beach vacations

nothing keeps me from the water

hermit crabs in sandcastle moats

laughter

two, tumble into the hampton mall fountain

they tell me that i almost drowned

would feel so lovely

even in so little water

quiet

Melodies

Eleven years old. Grass beneath my feet, hot summer air, jostling in the crowd, never knew music could feel like this; in my ribcage, in my heart, vibrations instead of heartbeats. Blink 182 vibrates under my skin and I am exposed, transfixed, flayed open. Eleven years old, my first concert, and I am brand new.

Twelve years old. Past midnight, I'm still awake in the living room on Dean street. MTV2 plays low; a new song starts. I am awash in light I do not blink I cannot breathe.

Crawling in my skin/these wounds they will not heal... Linkin Park. Linkin Park, I don't know it then at twelve years old, will cut me open and heal me, a vicious cycle, into my thirties. Until now, still.

Thirteen years old. I lay in my bed carving shapes into my wooden bedpost, nonsense shapes. Sum41 plays on my 5-CD disc changer, "Am I Still Waiting?" For no reason I commit this moment to memory; I'll remember this moment, I tell myself. I won't let myself forget it. The bed sheets are scratchy and the air is hot, I'm carving with a small pocket knife, and I'm wearing a Ryan Newman t-shirt, #12. I haven't forgotten, I won't.

Fourteen years old I meet Kurt Cobain and the world shifts beneath my feet. I am never quite the same.

Fifteen years old a friend plays me a song by a Japanese band and they are background sound while we read comics in his room. Haunted melodies and nonsensical words that visit me in my sleep in twisted reds and yellows. I download the albums illegally until I work enough shifts to buy all of their albums from Japan for hundreds of dollars and I listen over and over and over until I know the words if not what they mean, in a matter of months and adult me will see them whenever they come to the United States, traversing miles, traveling to Chicago by train. I shake their drummer's hand, dainty and small in mine, and bow to their bassist when I meet him in a sticky summer, eighteen years old. Their lead singer meets my eye as he screams out my favorite song, twisted dead trees and green lasers. Dir en Grey becomes the meditative space, the escape I need when I don't need to think, when I only need to feel.

Nineteen years old. Matt should turn the radio down, it's snowing so hard he can barely see, but maybe it's just me that needs quiet in the car when I'm trying to focus? I won't complain, won't say anything because he's singing along and I don't know it yet, how could I, how could I know that he'll be gone in two months and I'll never hear him belt Tricot Machine again in that Kentuckian accent, *tu as mordu dans mon cœur à pleine bouche/et t'y es installé.*

Twenty-one years old. Thousands and thousands and thousands of people; my voice blends with theirs and we are all one frenzied, beating heart, with Eminem and Jay-Z in the middle on the stage and christ am I glad I am alive to be a spark in this explosion.

Twenty-six years old. My kid sister Faith sings my wife and me down the aisle on our wedding day, sings our wedding song and I'm crying without knowing. *Hello I've waited here for you/everlong...*we play the same song in the room on the day of my IUI, the day our son is conceived, and even though I know he can't hear it when I look at him sometimes I think to myself *and I wonder/if everything could ever feel this real forever/if anything could ever be this good again?*

Thirty-one years old. A musical revolution; I have the time. People are dying, the world is screaming, I am in isolation and I can't breathe...and it trickles in, the music, it throws me a rope in the same way it always has, as though it knows. *There's a million things I haven't done/but just you wait* Lin-Manuel Miranda breathes life into my collapsed lungs...*I took it to the head/it was that or take it to the heart* Daveed Diggs and Rafael Casal sweet me away from mundanity and open my eyes to new worlds and words and possibilities...*how could you leave me here?" you'll scream/and louder, I'll scream back to you from that unknown/and say/I know you're strong enough/I know you're strong enough/I know you're strong enough to do this on your own* The Amazing Devil reaches through the ether and pulls me from the dirt again, and again, and again.

Twelve years old. I think sometimes about which song I would listen to if I were to kill myself. It changes over time... "Adam's Song" by Blink 182 (*I never thought I'd die alone...*) "Breaking the Habit" by Linkin Park (*I don't want to be the one/the battles always choose*), "Pretty Buildings" by Paper in Planes (*I don't wanna feel this low again/I ain't gonna steal your flame again/I don't wanna feel*). None of these versions of

myself, the one who takes the time to curate the song she'll die to, knows that she'll eventually wind up with several song lyrics tattooed on her body, none of them as hopeless as these. I only take solace in the fact that she continues to listen, to hold on, to let the music take her where she needs to go long enough to ink them into her skin.

we laugh
and we cry
and we break
and we make our mistakes
but with patience and faith
we remain unafraid

-Lin-Manuel Miranda, "Wait For It" (*Hamilton*) & "Finale" (*In the Heights*)

Skin the sun
Fall asleep
Wish away
Soul is cheap
Lesson learned
Wish me luck
Soothe the burn
Wake me up
-Kurt Cobain, "Dumb"

March 17, 2009

Dear Matt,

It's St. Patrick's Day, and Karen Palmer is crying in my arms. You know Karen; she was in my freshman honors class, the first class that I had with you. She sat behind me every Monday and Wednesday, was always in a group with Angela, Lauren, and I. Sweet girl, long brown hair, the loudest laugh in the class. She recorded all of your lectures, you know, and oh, I'm going to have to ask her to send those to me, later. Fuck, I'm glad she did that.

Her tears won't stop coming and my jeans are cold and wet where they fall. She's on her knees beside the chair where I'm sitting, her head in my lap, and I'm not sure when I started to stroke her hair but it's soft and it's nice, it gives me something to do, something to look at. Because I don't know where to look, you know? The classroom is full, packed with students, but we're all avoiding the same thing. It's almost macabre, having us meet here, but where else would we go? It's the last and only place we want to be.

It was worse walking to the classroom, actually. Walking down the hallway in French Hall, the same hallway where you and I talked yesterday, was unavoidable and unbearable. I pressed myself as close to the wall as I could coming here today because I figured that if I got too close to where we talked and laughed and made dinner plans in

the middle of the hallway between our two classrooms yesterday I might disintegrate.
Again. Disintegrate again.

(Hey Lisha! Hang on - Matt, I have class - Yeah, me too, but listen: We nailed down the dates. Tricot Machine is coming to the school in April! - Oh my God! That's amazing! - I know! And we're all going to have dinner at the house, you, Bronwyn and Lauren and anybody else, we'll pack you guys all in - How am I supposed to focus on anything else now?! - I don't know, not my problem - Ha, thanks! - You got it, we'll plan it all out later! - Awesome. See ya!)

Later. Liar.

It's not the first time you lied, you know? A few weeks ago, you messaged me and promised that we would make it back to Montreal. You knew how absolutely heartbroken I was, how whiplashed I was to be back home after being abroad, and so you promised. There would be another group, another Spring break. Something to look forward to.

And now Karen is crying in my lap. The only thing she's said in the last twenty minutes was my name. She walked into the room, her eyes met mine, and she said "Oh, Lisha," and I still don't know if she was pleading for my comfort or if her arms wrapped around my waist, if the anguish in her voice stemmed from empathy. It's probably both, I imagine, because everyone here is crying, holding each other, giving and receiving

comfort. I can feel the shock in the air beneath it all, and I know that every “I can’t believe this is happening” that I hear being whispered around the room is true, real, honest.

We disband after some time. The chair of the honors program, Dr. Thum, e-mailed us the night before, offering this space for us to gather if we’d wanted. I think most of the honors students from all four years are here, crammed into a room meant for sixty, max. I’m not sure where to go; I think about texting you to ask if I can come to your office. The thought is automatic, and the wave of pain that crests over me feels brand new, even though it’s been happening over and over and over and over again since yesterday afternoon.

I’m going to make myself look, Matt. I can’t not, right? I don’t know if it’s curiosity, or grief; disbelief, or a deep-rooted need for confirmation, but I have to look. I’m going to look before I leave the room, I promise myself that I will, and people are leaving. It’s going to be soon.

You know, this morning when I woke up, there was a moment when I thought that it was all a nightmare? All of it. Bronwyn and Lauren walking to my house yesterday after the ambulance left campus; Lauren getting the phone call. Getting blackout drunk on the front porch with the two of them and eventually even Renee; yeah, I got your best friend drunk, isn’t that funny? Are you jealous? It would have been more fun if you were there, I bet, although there would have been no cause for any of it then, I suppose.

I remember screaming. I figured it was part of the nightmare. It turns out that it wasn't; it started again, the screaming, when I woke up and checked my phone for the time and saw all of the notifications. It's amazing how many condolences can fit on such a small screen.

It's time to go, now. There's a class coming in. Some of them look confused as to what we're doing here; there's not usually a class at this time. They don't know, then. A part of me hopes they don't ever find out. It feels too personal, like it belongs to us.

Karen stands up and she pulls me up from the chair by my hand. Her grip is cold, clammy, and iron-strong; it's like she thinks I'll fall over if she lets go. You know, she might be right? We're leaving, we're walking out of the room, and I feel anxiety creeping up my spine because I've been staring at the door, tear-slick faces, the overhead lights, Karen's hair, my hands - anywhere else. Anywhere else, but I have to -

I look at the spot on the floor where you died yesterday. I don't know what I expect to see; I know what I heard from the freshmen who were in the room with you.

(he stopped talking, he put his hand over his heart, he said "oh, dear," he fell backward, he hit his head on the ledge of the whiteboard, he seized for a minute, he stopped breathing, he was blue before the paramedics came, they didn't turn on the ambulance lights when they drove away)

I stare at the light blue carpet like it will tell me something different, like I'll see you there. I've both tried to imagine it and tried like hell not to; I've pictured you dying, gasping for breath. I think suddenly, violently, of your silhouette on the hotel steps in Montreal and for a moment I wonder if that's how I'll find you there, laying on the carpet, bundled in your coat and scarf, smoke curling in the air. Quiet. Still.

But I don't. Where are you? Matt, where are you?

Karen tugs at my hand, tells me it's time to go. I tell her that you were supposed to have me over for dinner to meet Tricot Machine.

I don't know what's after this, Matt.

I disintegrate.

Tu me manques X

Part III

Grind

Nothing really bothers her,
She just wants to love herself.
I will move away from here,
You won't be afraid of fear.
No thought was put into this,
I always knew it'd come to this.
Things have never been so swell,
I have never failed to fail.

-Kurt Cobain, "You Know You're Right"

Disintegration

The grade of the grind of coffee determines how long it should steep for maximum flavor. The finer the grind, the less time it needs to bathe in hot water; this is why coffee meant for espresso is ground so fine. It's easier, really, to extract from something that's been pulverized into nearly nothing; with no structure left to speak of, it dissolves, compresses under pressure. There's less of a fight from anything that's been broken down to its paltriest particles; so let's, shall we? Grind her up, grind her down, toss her in the water. Watch her dissolve.

dawn

it started the way all things do

small

12 years old - my eyes opened to a new morning and I had a new thought

(everything would be better if you weren't here anymore)

Something in the Way

I fall asleep on my mom's fiancé's living room floor. It's supposedly my living room now, too; we've been living here for a few months, since I learned that she was engaged to nearly-husband-number-four. I have my doubts about the whole ordeal, and so for the time being, it's his living room and my things are just here.

The TV's on and I'm being serenaded into consciousness. Someone's singing to me and his voice is haunting; pained, cracked, and out of tune in a way that pulls me awake. I want to look and see who owns the voice because it's hurting me, it's making me want to cry, and I want to burrow into it as deeply as I can.

By now, I'm fourteen and I am a combat soldier when it comes to battling my own mind. The last two years have not been kind to me, and I have not been kind to myself. I am fourteen and I have been on antidepressants and antipsychotics; in and out of therapy (currently out of, given that I haven't been actively suicidal for a year or so); and I have learned the best and most discreet places on my body to cut myself with the thin blades of the disassembled shaving razors that I keep hidden inside of my mattress so that my Mom doesn't see the scarring during body checks (my inner thighs, my scalp, and anywhere my body creases and folds naturally).

I imagine that this is why I know who is singing to me before I see him, even though I've never heard this song before. Because he was a soldier, too.

The memory is there, but it's fuzzy. I was five when Kurt Cobain killed himself, too young to have an attachment to him as an artist, but old enough to remember my dad's reaction when the news broke. He was an MTV addict, my dad, a music junkie,

and his relationship with music was something that always held my rapture, my razor-sharp attention. When I was in elementary school, my dad sat me down and played songs and albums by KISS, Megadeth, Metallica, the list is endless. He would start the song over if he felt I wasn't paying attention, if he didn't think I was "feeling it."

My dad's love of music seeped into me like water in dry, thirsting soil. There are hundreds of stops along the way, moments that dot my life, where this hereditary passion likely saved me from self-immolation.

I don't know if my dad was actually as grief-stricken about Kurt Cobain's suicide as my memory serves, or if the ordeal reminded him of his best friend Randy. I was young (too young) when Dad told me about Randy. "I stayed the night at his house," Dad would tell me, often when he was drunk and feeling wistful, eyes glassy, "and he gave me all of his records. After I left the next day, fucker shot himself." Even as young as I was, he never had to say what he would be thinking afterward. It was plain on his face, beneath his blank, faraway gaze; the what-ifs and the I-should've's and the anger. "He was a coward," Dad would say. "Fuck him for doing that." They'd both been seventeen years old. My dad was a pallbearer at Randy's funeral.

So at fourteen, when I see Nirvana on my TV, I think about how upset my dad had been when Kurt Cobain had killed himself, and I think about Randy, all before I realize that oh, the man singing this beautiful song is dead. He shot himself, I think, and then I am enraptured. Horribly, obsessively enraptured.

I finish watching the showing of Nirvana's 1994 MTV Unplugged performance and then I use the computer in my mom's fiancé's house to read about Kurt Cobain online. I use Limewire to illegally download every Nirvana song I can find. Over the next

few weeks, I order old Rolling Stone magazines with Kurt on the cover off of eBay, as well as autographed 8x10 photos, biographies, posters. I am every young adult in 1991, trapped in 2003, idolizing a man who managed to do what I hadn't figured out how to accomplish: put what I was feeling into words.

I have always been an obsessive person; hyperfixation is encoded in my neural pathways. I am months into my one-sided love affair with a dead stranger when I become convinced that he didn't kill himself after all, that he was murdered, that there was a conspiracy underfoot. I find and read police reports and spend hours upon hours studying the way heroin doses incapacitate addicts on a toxicological level because, as I tell my high school boyfriend, "If he felt the same way that I do and he figured out how to say it, and if he made all of this money and millions of people loved him, and if he had a wife and a kid and made this beautiful fucking art and he was still miserable enough to kill himself then I don't stand a fucking chance."

It's a funny thing, to be fourteen. The duplicity of meaning is so overwhelming as I lose myself in music for hours, struggling to make sense of how Kurt Cobain could make music to heal me while being broken himself as I conflate it with the idea that he represents me, that if he found himself lacking then surely, I can never measure up, either. Struggling to understand how my father could love his best friend and hate his suicide simultaneously. Struggling to come to terms with what it would mean for my father to feel the same about me when it was all over, when the same end that came for Randy and Kurt inevitably came for me as well.

Catalogue

Thoughts turn into
yearnings sprout into
ideas grow into
plans blossom into
failures.

Thoughts

Everything would be better if you weren't here anymore
Everyone only pretends to love you but they hate when you're around
You'll never do anything with your life
Worthless, fat, ugly, stupid, queer, unfinished waste of space

Yearnings

I would give anything, anything for this to stop
All I want is to go to sleep and never wake up
Please give me the courage to do what I know is right
I want to do this. I have to do this. I need to do this

Ideas

Push harder next time; one artery is all it would take
Dad doesn't lock up his rifles during hunting season

Medicine goes down so easy; it will look like you're asleep

You drive across two bridges every weekend; the wheel is in your hands

Plans

I'll buy an exacto blade from JoAnns tomorrow and I'll do it in the parking lot

I'll load the shotgun and take it into the woods before everyone wakes up

When mom goes to sleep I'll take my Zoloft and her heart meds and the Aspirin

It's snowing tomorrow, slick roads, I'll make it look like an accident

Failures

I can't bleed all over every memory my friends have with me in my truck; the ones where we're laughing, and screaming along with the radio, or driving home after a school dance.

I can't destroy Dad's love for hunting and the peace he finds in the woods; he always looks so calm in nature. He has a crooked smile that I love so much.

What if Mom needs her medication and they won't refill it for her? What if I do this and it damages her heart? I don't know how that works, oh, god.

It's snowing tomorrow; the kids might want to build a snowman. Will Faith want a carrot nose? I wonder if Jade is tall enough to put the head on this year. Will they need my help?

March 16, 2010

Dear Matt,

People ask me about you, you know. And when they don't, I can see it in their eyes that they want to. And I guess that means that while some things have changed immeasurably with time, there are other things that remain fixed. Because I could say that it started after you died, when I needed to take time off of work. Who needs to take time off when their professor dies? It's sad, sure. Shocking, perhaps. But it sounds like a grift, like a piggy-back of grief. "My teacher died and I'm really bent out of shape, can I take some time and get myself together?" Especially now that it's been a year, and I had to take even more time off. Happy anniversary.

No, they didn't start asking after you died; it started before then. And really, it's because you were an undefinable thing. Did I make you that way? Probably. I probably got in my head because you were my professor first, and what would it mean for you to also be my friend? I've always cared too much about what other people think. I have to stop explaining my grief, don't you think? See, there I go again. Caring what others think, even answers I make up in my own head, imaginary answers from a dead man.

I'll just start telling them that my friend died and it really fucked me up. It's the truth. My grades tanked for the first time in my life; I started cutting myself again. Still am. I haven't done that in a couple of years. But what else am I supposed to do, Matt, when

you were the one I would talk to for guidance when I needed to know what to do? I can't call you for this. I can't text you anymore, either; at least Sarah warned me before your number was deactivated. I wasn't the only one still texting you, still calling to hear your voicemail message. At least it's not just me.

There are two roads in my brain that are supposed to connect, but the asphalt in the middle has crumbled and the two sides don't quite touch. One side of the road holds the information that I've lost something, someone invaluable, irreplaceable. The other side of the road recognizes that that person is you. I feel like I won't be able to function until the road gets fixed somehow, but I don't know how to make that happen. Where is my acceptance? When does that happen for me? Is this what dying feels like? Constant convulsions, with none of the beauty?

I probably shouldn't ask you that. I think that's probably in bad taste.

Anyway. Tricot Machine came to the school and put on a killer show, as you promised they would, and you know what? We all went out to dinner afterward. The band, Bronwyn, Sarah, the kids and I. We left a seat open at the table and your absence was as noticeable as your presence would have been. The French you taught me was still there; broken, but there, so we suffered through the language barrier just enough to understand one another. Every bite of food felt like swallowing glass. I wanted to tell them that the last conversation I had with you was about them, but I didn't know how.

I sat with your family during their show, right next to your son. He looked so much like you that I couldn't look directly at him. I hate you. I hate you. You left me here and I hate you.

I left my bed today to get a double shot of espresso and a bottle of chardonnay. They both taste terrible, but I'm toasting to you anyway.

This one's for you.

Cheers, asshole.

On the Third Day

Here's what I've been told and what I remember about the day I tried to kill myself.

After spending the morning at the Renaissance festival with your husband and your friend Ryan, you went back to your house, where you proceeded to drink a fifth of Jagermeister in under twenty minutes before filling the bathtub, stripping off most of your clothes, and attempting to drown yourself. Your husband found you underwater in the bathtub; he tried to pull you out. You screamed and fought, slipped, hit your head, and blacked out. At some point, he called 911.

Here's what I remember:

Running into Jules at the Renaissance festival *she'll never love you nobody ever will*

Arguing with Greg about having too much to drink *I need more I don't want to feel*

Not wanting to go home *it's empty there I'm empty there every room is filled with lies*

Staring at the bathtub before going back outside *it's so hot out wouldn't it be nice?*

Deciding more alcohol might finally make me brave enough *get the Jager, in the fridge*

Thinking about the bathtub while I drained the fifth *there, I'm numb now, it won't hurt*

Walking past Greg's office to get to the bathroom *no stopping for goodbyes no time*

Room spinning, water cold when I stepped in *god the water is so loud so loud*

Seeing my reflection in the faucet *what took you so long? don't cry sweetheart*

Opening my eyes underwater, gulping *are you breathing or drinking, it wasn't supposed to hurt*

“Goddammit Greg, put me back, put me back, let me die, let me die, please, please, just let me die, let me die, please!”

There’s a flash memory of being strapped to a spinal board by the paramedics and realizing in a moment of clarity that nobody had covered my bare lower body, *how many people are looking at my pubic hair, how fucking embarrassing*

Everything fades for a while after that. There are still nights, a decade later, when I startle awake to echoes of my own voice, screaming to be put back in the water.

I woke up in the hospital hours later with alcohol poisoning, hooked up to an IV. I insisted that I had been drunk and that I wasn't suicidal, and they released me into my husband's care. In reality, I was embarrassed that I'd actually, finally worked up the courage to try, and I had failed. I had fucked up killing myself, how useless was I?

And once I'm home, once he's asleep, I'll get it right.

My husband called my parents from the car and told them what happened, and could one of them come get me? It was his first day at a new job the next day and he couldn't stay home to babysit me. He passed me the phone.

No, Mom. I was just trying to take a bath. I hadn't eaten and I was in the heat, I had too much to drink. It was a misunderstanding. It's all fine, everyone is overreacting.

She didn't buy it. Said that because of the alcohol poisoning, someone should be with me the next day, regardless. And so my stepdad made the two-hour drive to pick me up, and the two-hour drive back to their house.

It was a quiet ride. I was seething, and he bristled the entire drive as though he could feel it. When my Mom saw me, I could tell that she was seething, too. Angry. Annoyed.

When I went home the next night, 24 hours after, my husband and his mother berated me. "I can't believe you pulled this shit now, when Greg is dealing with the stress of starting a new job."

The next night, 48 hours after, my friend Ryan who had been there through the whole ordeal showed up with a fifth of liquor and a box of wine. I nearly laughed at the absurdity, but all I could do was cry. Cry, and drink.

And the night after that, three days later and still 'not allowed' alone, Jules came over after work. She walked into the house, came down into the basement where I was curled up on the couch, and sat beside me.

"Dude, are you okay?"

I remember her words, crystal clear. Remember feeling as though the day I'd tried to die had finally ended the moment someone looked at me and noticed that I hadn't stopped drowning.

Are you okay?

And I could breathe.

Part IV

Brew

I can't do this (you can)
I can't do this, you don't understand
"Oh sleep now," oh, she pleads
You're not a coward 'cause you cower
You're brave because they broke you
Yet broken - still you breathe
So breathe, breathe, just breathe

-The Amazing Devil, "The Old Witch Sleep and the Good Man Grace"

Trinkets

I look at my wife before she's my wife and, like a crow dropping keys in her lap, I hand
her a coffee.

A treasure. Shiny and sweet and *I know your order, see how I've paid attention?*

She drinks it, her vanilla chai latte.

We've exchanged jabs: *it's not real coffee, it's all sugar*, I've said, making a face.

She tells me coffee tastes disgusting and pointedly eyes my iced americano, black.

(in my mind, Matt cackles as he shoots back his double espresso, dauntless)

And every time I tease her about drinking fake sugar-water coffee, even when she is my
wife, even now, she shrugs and tells me; She needs the boost. She likes the taste.

It always takes me aback a little bit. The simplicity.

Double shot espresso.

Iced americano.

Vanilla chai latte.

I need this.

I like this.

A treasure.

Office Romance

I became a sordid stereotype when I was twenty-three and in a joyless marriage to a man I'd met on the internet at sixteen.

I fell in love with Jules during a closing shift at work. She was polishing the fingerprints off of the jewelry cases, talking about a movie that nobody else I knew had seen. My favorite movie, unbeknownst to her. Her hair looked so fucking soft.

The money that I was supposed to be counting was forgotten in the till.

The ferocity with which I wanted her overtook me; I was twelve all over again, doodling her name in the margins of my notebooks during grad school lectures.

I was married. I was also her boss. I ached for ten months, hidden declarations screaming within me. And then my marriage imploded, and Jules was promoted.

The first place I kissed her was the inside of her wrist.

Though we've been married for nine years, I think it impossible that she could know the true depth of my desire for her. It's a truth that remains unspeakable, damned to be a lifelong secret. An ache I am grateful to bear.

Unshareable, as all words in every language fall short.

Sutures

“When the memories make you smile, write them down,” my therapist says. “Or maybe you should write them down anyway, even if they make you cry. It’s been years; give yourself permission to grieve fully.”

“Moving forward doesn’t mean you love him any less.”



January 2008 - March 2009



He walks into the classroom like a baby giraffe with a bad haircut. Gangly, glasses askew. We think he’s a grad student, and when he introduces himself as the professor, some of us laugh. He wears jeans and an unbuttoned plaid shirt over a plain black t-shirt, a scarf wrapped around his neck that he wears through the entire hour.

Matthew Hilton-Watson, he introduces himself. *If you have to call me Dr. Hilton-Watson because your great-great-grandmother will roll around in her grave if you don’t, that’s fine, but you can call me Dr. Matt. I prefer that, actually.*

He has a lisp. I learn later that he’s from Kentucky but lived for years in France. His voice sounds like wind chimes. I am as smitten as I am amused.



He wants to take me to a conference downstate to present one of the papers I’ve written in his class. It’s a deconstruction of feminism in Emile Zola’s *The Masterpiece*.

I argue with him. I don’t think it’s good enough. He argues back. *It is.*

This is where my new friend, Bronwyn, finds me; arguing with Dr. Matt in the hallway. She comes up. He gives her a hug. She tosses an arm around my shoulder; he lights up like he's won something.

You two know each other?

"We do."

Good. That means I can bully you into doing this, then. Bronwyn will help me, won't you, dear?

Dr. Matt is the head of the foreign language department and mainly teaches French when not moonlighting as an Honors English professor. His best friend of a decade is the only German professor at the university. Her name is Renee. She's Bronwyn's Mother.

"He's practically my uncle," she tells me later. "You're gonna love him."

I go to the conference. His pride is palpable from across the room.



Everyone does wind up calling him Dr. Matt. I speedrun past this informality and straight into calling him Matt on a Tuesday evening in March. It's snowing, I don't want to walk home, and so I've crammed myself into a student booth in the French Hall commons with my homework.

Dr. Matt walks by. He's bundled in layers upon layers, the same scarf he always wears wrapped around his neck and hiding half his face, satchel slung over his chest. It's white, brown, and navy blue, the scarf. I still look twice at anything with a similar pattern. He's heading home until he sees me.

He stops. *Hey. Why are you drinking coffee at seven p.m.? That's problematic.* He unbundles. Sits across from me. Asks how I'm adjusting to school. Takes an interest. *I hope you know that you're taking my French class next semester.*

"I am?"

Every honors student needs two years of a foreign language. It'll be fun!

"Yeah, okay."

Let's see how long it takes me to talk you into a minor. Now stop caffeinating and go home.

"Eventually. Thanks, Dr. Matt."

Matt's fine, kid. Get home safe.



His wife Sarah is the administrative assistant of the Honors program. She's kind, funny, nerdy. I know of her before I meet Matt, and she knows of me after.

"You're Bronwyn's friend! Renee and Matt think the world of you. We love our girl, we're so glad she's finding other weirdos to hang out with. Is Matt already trying to recruit you for French?"

"Haha, yep."

"Is it working?"

"Yeah, I'm taking 111 in the Fall."

After that, Sarah is another friendly face. Another set of arms that I would fall into a year later.



Take these CDs. Tricot Machine and Josianne Paradis. They're French Canadian, it's all in French, you'll like it.

"You know I already signed up for French in the fall, right? You don't have to convince me."

Oh! Cool. Take them anyway.

I learn every word. I still know every song by heart.



The wedding gift from Sarah and Matt comes wrapped in silver wrapping paper that I unwrap with shaking fingers.

He worries about me, I know by the way his brow creases when I pace his office and talk about my future, my fears, my doubts, and yet. A gift.

An antique vase, dark violet glass, delicately painted.

"To the coolest bride we know!"

He's the first one to sign the guest book at my wedding.

There when my mother couldn't be bothered to show up.

This is a memory that hurts.



In October, I get my first text-capable phone.

"Can I meet you before class to give you your birthday present?" *since when do you text??* "Since now! Congrats, you're the first person I've ever texted." *I'm honored and sure, let's do early, wouldn't want people to think their grades can be bought with gifts* "I would never!"

I wait for him outside of the classroom. He sits down beside me in the hallway when he gets there and when I hand him his gift, a French cookbook from the early 1900's, the first page he opens to is a recipe for coq au vin.

What kind of risque gift is this?

I laugh. This is a memory that makes me laugh.



My mental health is better, but it's not perfect. I don't cut myself, I'm not suicidal, but I'm still always anxious, afraid to make mistakes, a constant, wound up ball of panic.

The benefit is that I'm too anxious to fuck up in any of my classes.

In November, Matt hands back the most recent quiz in French class. I don't get mine.

Take five, everyone. Lisha, can I see you in the hall real quick?

Oh, god. Oh, no. I'm numb when I follow him into the hall, my quiz in his hands.

I know you, and I know that even though this is an excellent grade, it's not up to your standard. I just wanted you to have some space if you needed it.

I take my paper. It's a B. The first B-grade work I've ever done in his class.

You made a common tense mistake. Your overall grade is completely fine. You are an excellent student, and your worth is not determined by any grade on any piece of paper.

Do you hear me?

I start to cry. I nod my head.

What do you need?

"Can I just have a minute? I just need one minute."

He squeezes my shoulder and, unlike my parents or my husband or most of my friends or my therapists, he listens. He gives me a minute.



For Christmas, he takes a small group of us to see a presentation by a Quebecois delegate on campus and then we all have cake afterward. I can't stop laughing about the fact that he's stolen one of the small, chincy Quebec flags off of the presentation table.

I gift him a set of books about World War II. He has a thing about that war in particular, a history nerd thing, I don't get it.

It's too much, he says, but he smiles.

This is a memory that makes me happy, until I remember what it felt like to see those books, displayed in his office, the day Sarah took me into his office after he'd died.

"Take anything," she'd said. "Anything you want."

I left the books. I took the chincy Quebec flag from his desk.



If the thought doesn't terrify you, want to come to this with me?

He messages me over Facebook and includes a link to a Matisse exhibit coming to the Detroit Institute of the Arts the following weekend. I love the Impressionists. It's a no-brainer.

It's January, a few weeks before my birthday. The exhibit is fantastic, but the highlight is everything else, every other moment. Watching him brighten like a child under the lights hanging above the Medieval armor; listening to his endless knowledge about all French, Italian, and Spanish art; talking about my academic future over the lunch that he buys, despite my insistence that I can pay since he drove us.

You'll get us next time.

Fuck. It hurts.

When we step outside, it's into a blizzard. The usual 40-minute drive takes well over two hours, and with Matt's crazy-driving ass behind the wheel, it's a white-knuckling two hours.

It doesn't stop him from pulling off at Starbucks for a double shot of espresso.

It's tradition.

We make it back to Flint, and when another blizzard hits two weeks later, he texts me.

Wanna go to a museum? Weather's perfect!



I don't know about the Spring Break trip to Montreal until the first week of February, three weeks before the one-week trip. Matt's the lead, one of four administrative chaperones, and there are four student spots left.

Bronwyn, our friend Lauren, and I sign up to go. He pretends he's not thrilled. Tells us to shut up when we remind him that we know we're his favorite.

It's too much to recount all at once; fourteen years later, I can never think about that trip too closely.

That week alters my life; it expands my world, and a depression like I haven't felt in over a year washes over me once we come back home. When I tell Matt what it feels like, being back home, he understands.

You remind me of myself when I was first learning the language, the culture. I wanted to jet set anywhere that wasn't here. This is normal; you'll adjust, and all of us are here for each other until we do. We will go back; I promise. If not next year, the year after.

There's always more volunteer work to be done.

It takes me ten years, but when I do go back on the ten-year anniversary of his death, I imagine that I can see him there, just there, in my periphery, the colors of his scarf against the backdrop of the sky.



He dies two weeks after we came back from Montreal. He hasn't been feeling well; pneumonia, the doctors say. Sarcoidosis in reality. Misdiagnosed.

Perhaps the most bitter-sweet memory I have is how, in the weeks following, people check on me. Ask how I'm doing, how I'm holding up. Teachers, students. Sarah. The school holds a memorial, and people come to my house afterward to eat, drink, share memories and photos. My friends. The other chaperones from Montreal. A friend of Matt's from Quebec and his pregnant wife who had come for the memorial.

I don't understand for the longest time that it was because I was important to him.

"He loved you so much."

That will never not hurt.



All of it makes me smile.

Homesick

Jules and I get married twice.

The first time, we elope to Indiana in April. It's a courthouse wedding, just the two of us. The ceremony is over in ten minutes, and we spend the night in the hotel room watching an Australian horror-comedy movie.

Gay marriage is federally legalized in June, and already being legally married takes some of the pressure off of the September wedding. We exchange our vows, littered with nerdy references, in front of our friends and family. We dance, we eat tacos from the taco bar, we have cupcakes. Our second wedding is different from our first; crowded, louder. It's wonderful in a new way.

We honeymoon in Florida; it's vastly different than my first honeymoon, which was in Seattle, but it doesn't escape me that it's also coastal. I've swapped one ocean for another to celebrate this life-altering event. Matrimony, swearing myself to another person. Where my first honeymoon was November in the Northwest and frigid, too cold to go into the water, the second is close in date, but Halloween in the Southeast is warm on my skin and humid in the air.

There was a feeling of longing, in Seattle. Of staring over the roof of the Pike Place Market in the early morning, watching the early sun reflect on the surface of the water.

Water too cold to touch; the Puget Sound, Kurt Cobain's voice singing sadly in my mind. There's something missing, even with my husband's hand in mine, pulling me along around the city. I just want to watch the water, dip my feet in. It calls me home, and I am homesick when we leave.

In Florida, Jules pulls me into the ocean. The water is frigid even though the sun is hot, and I'm not sure who shrieks louder; our voices blend in the air, our laughter coded into the waves. We play like children, and there's sand in my hair from being dunked under, baptized in the salt and seaweed. I take the sun home with me on my skin.

It's different when Jules and I go to Seattle together years later. It's spring rather than fall; still too cold to dive into the ocean, but this doesn't stop us from going to her, anyway. We drive, away from the city to the coast. We stop in Aberdeen so that I can touch the water of the Wishkah river, beneath the bridge where Kurt Cobain slept. Jules stands by while I weep, while I mourn for what feels like a parallel past.

When we make it to the ocean, the wind whips. It's freezing; there's so much sand, miles, and it's just us. We leave our socks and shoes by a log, and we run. The sand doesn't burn in the sun, here; it's cold, hard, the water numbing up to our ankles. We stand there, in the ocean I've longed for. And when it's time, Jules takes my hand. The water, the home that's always been carved out for me there, lets Jules take me away.

The siren song is quiet. I am called home.

Life Shapes

It's my mother's 25th birthday, and I realize that she's going to die someday.

I'm seven years old, lying on my back in the middle of the living room floor. They're watching TV, my mother and her second husband, who is lying down half asleep on the couch beside her. It's late, and Mom wants to watch her favorite movie, so that's what she's doing. She's watching, he's nodding off, and I'm staring at her face, upside down from my crooked angle on the carpet.

Her features distort in the light of the TV and I notice for the first time the shadows, like bruises, beneath her eyes. She looks tired; the bright smile and light in her eyes from hours earlier have dimmed, there is no birthday-cake energy left. She looks sleepier than I am, even though I'm up way past my bedtime, and I think that it must be because she's getting old.

Old things die. Everybody told me as much when my grandparents had to put their dog down when I was six. The circle of life, they said, as they explained that burying the golden retriever in the ground meant that he would turn into food for worms and plants. Living things ate dead things. That's what I learned when Shaggy-Dog died.

Mom looks tired because she's getting older. It's her birthday, and she'll have another birthday next year, and then another, until she dies and goes into the ground and turns into food.

I start crying and my mother looks concerned. She joins me on the carpet and pulls me into her arms. "What's wrong, baby, what's wrong?" she's asking, but I can't tell her. I can't say anything with how hard I'm crying, thinking about how much I'm going to miss her holding me like this.

The moment doesn't haunt me; I forget the moment when I recognize my mother's mortality and I go on living my life, moving on to other tragedies and realizations. I only remember that night sporadically as I grow up.

When I'm twelve and she's stumbling into the house drunk, on the arm of some new guy who is even drunker, I think about how it's a miracle that she's still alive. I remember being seven and terrified of her death.

When I'm fourteen and she's yelling at me for being queer; when I'm sixteen, I call her a bitch and she slaps me across the face; when she skips my wedding; when she skips my college graduation.

In these moments a small, ugly part of me wishes her dead, and then I think of how much older she is than she was when she was twenty-five and I realize, with ferocity, that I'll be lost when she's gone.

When I'm twenty-eight I give birth to my son and begin to think about my own impending death; after all, I'm older than my mother was when she became a dying woman in my eyes. I wonder, as I hold him, screaming and new, if he already knows that I'll leave him someday. Something inside of me cracks, wide open and cold, newly exposed.

I think of my mother and wonder: Is this how she felt? No wonder she's always been so tired, knowing that one day she'll leave me. All this time, I thought it was only me who recognized her inevitable abandonment, who feared it.

In that moment, holding new life in my arms, I forgive my mother. For living; for the day to come when she dies. For everything. And I love her anew, the same way I loved her when I was seven, crying in her arms.

J.K. Rowling and the Act of Moving On

My wife is 33 years old, and she's never read the Harry Potter books.

This may not seem like a cardinal sin to many, but those who know me well tend to respond similarly when it inevitably comes up in conversation, not only because I've surrounded myself with fellow Millennials who were self-professed 'Potterheads' as children and therefore my wife's lack of engagement with the source material might just be ludicrous in their eyes, but also because the magical wizarding world has seemingly permeated our relationship in significant ways. We both ended our nerd-reference riddled wedding vows with the infamous "Always," and our son's baby shower and nursery were both Harry Potter-themed.

"I liked the movies," Jules has always said, very nonchalantly and in a way that lets everybody know that in reality, visiting the Wizarding World of Harry Potter for our honeymoon was mostly to please the child that lives inside of me. Reading has always been difficult for her; we joke between ourselves that it's because of her likely as-yet-to-be-diagnosed ADHD. The movies were fine, but not engrossing enough to make her want to sit down with the task of reading several thousand pages.

And so, Jules is 33 years old, and she's never read the Harry Potter books.

She is also transgender.

When I was ten years old, Harry Potter became the focal point of my life. The boy who lived in a closet under the stairs, abused and unloved, othered and freakish, whisked away to a magical land where he was embraced for being different and loved by all. I

was a young child who already knew I was queer, and this child's story embodied everything that I dreamed about, namely getting away from my parents who made gay jokes and had no qualms about using words like 'fag' or 'dyke' in casual conversation. Golden snitches covered my bed sheets until I was a freshman in high school, and I went to every midnight book release up until the very last book came out when I was in college. I read it in one sitting, neglecting to sleep until it was finished, and then I cried in a way that I had never cried before, in a way that I didn't believe I would ever cry again. I didn't believe I would ever re-experience the tangible feeling of my childhood dying.

Over the last two years, however, I've learned that I was wrong. A childhood can be revisited, altered, and maimed in a multitude of ways.

On June 6, 2020, JK Rowling tweeted "People who menstruate.' I'm sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?" My first thought when I read this was not that she hated trans people, but rather that it was an ignorant thing to say. My wife menstruates; she is not a woman, and unless someone were to ask her specifically about her biological sex, she wouldn't identify as one due to being non-binary.

No, it wasn't until Rowling posted on her website days later what became known as her 'manifesto' that it sank in for me that at the very least, the creator of my childhood safe haven does not validate trans identities, and appears to believe that trans women come along with the asterisk of threat. On June 10th, on her website, she wrote "So I want trans women to be safe. At the same time, I do not want to make natal

girls and women less safe. When you throw open the doors of bathrooms and changing rooms to any man who believes or feels he's a woman...then you open the door to any and all men who wish to come inside." *When you throw open the doors of bathrooms and changing rooms to any man who believes or feels he's a woman.* That sentence burrowed inside of me and burned into my mind; she couldn't bring herself to label a trans woman as a trans woman, not even within her own example of how they may pose a risk. Had I tricked myself as a child into thinking that the world I'd escaped into would have been a safe refuge for everybody? That sentence made me start to ask myself these kinds of questions.

I often wonder what Rowling would think about Jules. My wife of seven years, with her curvy hips and a chest that she struggles to flatten with even the most constricting of binders. There is no doubt that Rowling would look at her and determine that she is female and therefore belongs in female spaces based on her body alone, though Jules is not always comfortable in women's spaces. Are nonbinary folk considered a threat to women, I wonder? On days when Jules feels more masculine or wears her binder, is she more of a threat in female spaces than on days when her breasts are unrestrained and she's menstruating? I know the answer to these questions, of course, but if trans women are a threat in the eyes of J.K. Rowling, what does that make Jules?

There, *right there* is an example of the perpetual death of my childhood. There are times when I wonder if the creator of my childhood safe space would shun the partner who has become my home, simply because of who she is. The ten-year-old inside of me burns long-disposed-of sheets at the thought. The betrayal manages to

travel through time, stripping my bedsheets and the warmth they once brought with them.

Would Rowling disagree with Jules' identity, I wonder? Or would she even know what to make of her, this beautiful human who is comfortable with all pronouns because sometimes she might feel like all of them apply and other times none of them? I tear up, not with sadness but rather with pity and rage to think that someone who doesn't know her might decide there exists a space where she does not belong, or rather, decide that there is no space in which she does. The pity is not for Jules, but rather for the willingly ignorant who create barriers to open and free expression because my god, how exhausting it must be. How exhausting it must be to be J.K. Rowling and put effort forth to argue against the scientific and healthcare communities in order to increase human suffering.

Jules doesn't need my pity; she needs my rage, my anger, and my action.

My wife is a better and less rageful person than I am. In Summer 2021, during the never-ending throes of pandemic boredom and social starvation, and in between Rowlings' seemingly random bursts of anti-trans social media pop-ups, we made a choice to try to be the people who could separate the creator from their work, and I started to read the books to Jules aloud. Every time we were in the car, or at night in bed. We made our way at a decent pace through the first three books, and it was somewhere in the beginning of the fourth when I stopped.

I've realized that perhaps I'm not the person who can separate the creator from their work; not when I'm reading as an adult who has healed from my own trauma and

lacks the excuse of youthful ignorance to be able to ignore racist, fatphobic, sexist, xenophobic, cis/heterosexist worldviews in favor of rooting for good over evil in a binary world. Not when I'm an educated adult, ever-evolving ally, mother to my own child, and wife to a trans human.

The sound of the pages rustling as I close a Harry Potter book for the final time is the death rattle of my youth. However, my wife finds a way to apply a balm, and I think it's better this way as I find it in me to laugh when she says "It's not like she's even that good at writing, anyway."

Other

Even still, there are mornings where I am other.

Separated by panes of grain and glass, I make myself small on one side of my bed and feel myself move slowly with the Earth's rotation. The world spins, and I am left behind.

Beneath the stagnant sky

that lingers beyond reach

on the other side of my window.

And I wonder why there remain mornings like these
when I have anything I could ever want.

Astounding, the shame I feel. As though my depression is selfish.

Calliope on the A Train

Muses are faraway concepts to a writer like me. They belong in time-brittle, yellowed pages in used book shops. Muses are broken statues, folklore, recycled and sanitized myths that I have no time to dwell on because I barely have time to write. There's a child to nurture, a wife to dote on, clients to counsel, dogs to feed, a house to clean, a body to water and rest, the list is endless and everlasting and so please tell me, when there are ten minutes within the minutiae to focus, to write, how am I to consider a muse?

Perhaps I'm thinking too literally. Take a step back, wave goodbye to goddesses and transcendence, to the idea that art is gifted upon those of us touched by Erato or Melpomene. To be frank, I'd like to err more toward the side of Stephen King; your muse is a bit of a rude man in the basement who holds the magic, and you do the grunt work. It's a bastardization of his description, but it's the gist, and I agree with the message. There's never been creative fairy dust lain upon my crown; writing has been hard. Sleep-depriving. Done in stolen snatches of night, the process is a battle between versions of myself.

It was worse before I found my creative muse.

Let's resort to a more modern stereotype for a moment, and turn to Oxford rather than Zeus for definition:

muse /myōōz/ a person or personified force who is the source of inspiration for a creative artist.

I suppose it's appropriate that I found the time to consider being creatively inspired when the world screeched to a halt in 2020. When the walls of my home became both sanctuary and prison and my wife and son became the only people I saw on this side of a screen. Reality slowed and stretched, the days pulled like taffy; my depression deepened like a gaping well despite being surrounded by the beauty of rural Virginia and the time that I had to explore my first summer there. Stunning sunrises across rolling hills, vast skies filled with stars, dew drops stuck to leaves in the woods around my house did nothing to quell the sadness, the panic, the fear.

I couldn't sleep. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't write. Months and months. Life slipping through cracks like water.

There's a turning point approaching. The introduction to my modern-day muse.

But first I feel it pertinent to share something about myself: I don't like musicals. I've never been a theater kid, especially musical theater. It's my own mortification that creates a barrier, my own empathy; I can't help but put myself on stage, and the thought of eyes on me, so many eyes, is mortifying. The thought of bursting into song in the middle of a school hallway, or busy street? It's enough to make me divert my eyes even when watching a film, when my disbelief is supposed to be suspended. I've never been able to get out of my head enough to follow the story or the narrative, rather than being so entrenched in my own secondhand panic about those eyes, the imagined judgements.

Now. Not being a theater kid was never an issue until I was an adult, more specifically a therapist working with teenagers. When it hit 2016 or so and my clients started asking me “Do you know Hamilton?”

The question threw me at first. It wasn’t “Have you ever seen Hamilton?” or “Have you ever listened to Hamilton?” It was simply “Do you know it?” And I didn’t. It was a musical, and therefore something that I wouldn’t like by default. I understood what it was, the story of it, the phenomenon of it. I was familiar with the creator, a fan even, of his acting and his online presence. But no, I didn’t *know Hamilton*, and it created a lost opportunity between those clients and me in those moments, but that happened at times; I also didn’t know shit about Call of Duty, Taylor Swift, or football. The Hamilton moments passed, I forgot about them, and eventually, the question stopped coming altogether once the initial wave of popularity crested.

So, when July 2020 rolled around and it was the height of COVID and my depression, I had absolutely no idea why I was so inclined to watch the recorded version of Hamilton being released on Disney+. I kept making unnecessary justifications out loud to my wife leading up to the premier weekend. “We can finally see what everyone’s been yammering about for years,” or “I really like Lin-Manuel Miranda, he’s been a great Lee Scoresby and he’s fun to follow online,” or “What else are we going to do? It’ll kill a few hours.” Unnecessary justifications in that she enjoys musicals and needed no convincing, but I needed to make them simply because I was spurred to watch this *thing*, this thing that I was programmed not to like and should have no desire to engage with, and yet whenever I saw the advertisements I felt flush with excitement, a near yearning pull as the day of release got closer.

Watching that musical changed my fucking life.

There might be a more poetic way to say it, a less vulgar phrasing, but I'd rather put it plainly. Even now, just acknowledging the impact of that day more than three years ago, there's a burn in my throat to match the sting in my eyes. I am overcome.

Enough time has passed for me to have gone through my stage of obsession with that musical, that particular story. Long past the stage where I listened to at least a few songs every day, my relationship with Hamilton is like my relationship with most beloved books or albums in that I revisit it when I am in a mood to embrace nostalgia or to visit a specific character, or when a hook won't leave my head for hours. "Hurricane" or "Non-Stop" may come on shuffle on my drive to work and I will belt along out of tune; I haven't forgotten one of the 20k+ words and doubt I ever will. It's not the musical itself, necessarily, that has continued to be a force of creativity for me, though the lyrics to "Wait For It" are inked into my body beside a deep green quill.

It's the creator. The lyricist; the writer. The muse. Mine; *my* muse. Christ, it feels like a corny thing to write, but it's a difficult concept to avoid, referring back to trustworthy Oxford. Because it's undeniable, really. On that night in July 2020, it was the moment I realized that I was sobbing, breath hitching, hands clutched to the skin of my throat as I drank in Angelica Schuyler's heartbreak during "Satisfied" that the thought struck me. *Lin-Manuel Miranda did this. He made me feel this way, and he used words to do it.*

I wanted to do that. At that point, I had been writing in some capacity for 25 years and I had never felt the flame of desire that I did in that moment. Three years and an

entire creative writing MFA program later, and that feeling still hasn't left me. If anything, it's grown stronger. I've grown stronger; the ferocity with which I've been writing, painting, consuming music, literature, and yes, even theater since that night has undoubtedly played a hand in leveraging my mental health, helping me build a coping tool kit from foundational creative grit.

When asked who my favorite writers are, Lin's name is the first out of my mouth with consistency, every time. It's a non-traditional answer but it's the only truth I can give. It's in the way that he approaches writing, the way he talks about it. It's in the care he takes with his word choice and the way he paints portraits with layers, callbacks, rhythm, and emotional connection. Whether it's his productivity that spurs me to write one more goddamn page before going to sleep, or repeating a line about writing from one of his works when I'm struggling to remember what writing means to me (*I picked up a pen/I wrote my own deliverance*), I find that there isn't a moment when I'm stuck creatively that pulling from the well of his work or work ethic can't unpin me, if only to scramble to a ledge by my fingertips.

I wrote him a letter that autumn. It felt like a shameful, youthful thing to do, writing to a celebrity, to someone whose name everybody knows, because who am I? It had to be done, though. Where writers of the past perhaps built an altar and prayed in thanks, I typed a one-page letter and put it in the mail, addressed to a Broadway theater. I promptly tried to forget about it, figuring that it might make its way to him, he would or wouldn't read it. All I wanted was for him to know, somehow and someday, someday, that I was grateful. I knew the words I wrote were words he'd likely heard thousands of

times, but it was still important to me, saying thank you. I didn't write it down, but the thought crossed my mind as I wrote, the sentiment of *where would I be without what you've made?*

He wrote me back in January 2021. Amongst gratitudes and platitudes in his slanted handwriting, he wrote "I was delighted to read how the music has impacted your life in such a positive way. May it continue to bring you joy and offer you solace when you need it most." Acknowledgement of his impact and gratitude for my recognition, touchable and opaque. Those who cried to the gods in the sky have nothing on me.

I put the letter between panes of glass, a framed thing that I touch when I'm stuck in my head. Acknowledgment beneath my fingertips that my inspiration is a person like me, a pen-wielding person, a parent, a spouse, someone who must struggle at times to balance worlds and still make space to write, a demand the same as breathing.

That's what a muse must be. What a muse is. Not a goddess spilling words into my head or a force that I must focus or meditate on. For me, not Stephen King's cigar-smoking asshole in a basement. It's a creator on the A train, writing a story he wants to see and sharing it with the world. It just so happens that the words in his story found their way to a girl and spurred her out of a cave and back into the light, where her words sprang from the soil, birthing bouquets of stories.

And so it goes, blossoms and blossoms of words. Joy and solace.

Part V

Savor

There is an answer in a question,
And there is hope within despair.
And there is beauty in a failure,
And there are depths beyond compare.
There is a role of a lifetime,
And there's a song yet to be sung.

-Death Cab for Cutie, "Black Sun"

Bitter-Sweet

“Mommy, can I try your coffee?”

My son is five, nearly six, and he’s asked me this question at least a hundred thousand times since he’s learned how to talk. The first time was less eloquent, of course; there were no complete sentences to be heard, just chubby toddler hands trying to swipe my Cafe Americano from my hands, demanding “Toffee? Toffee!”

Being told ‘no’ has never been a deterrent for him. That’s not to say he doesn’t listen; he does. Bash (my wife’s brother bestowed the nickname to him when he was two months old, and it stuck immediately, as we found it much more fitting than the typical ‘Seb-short-for-Sebastian’) is a great kid. He’s respectful, charming, funny as hell. He’s slowgoing with his reading but whipsmart with numbers; his creativity astounds me to the point of envy. I like him. I mean I love him, of course, but to genuinely like my kid at this age feels like a privilege. He makes me feel lucky.

When I say that ‘no’ has never been a deterrent for him, what I mean is that his acceptance of the word is fleeting, momentary. His determination is languid and patient, the kind of determined that doesn’t mind waiting. He asks with little to no expectation at every opportunity for something he wants, and he shrugs it off when he doesn’t get it.

It’s why he asks for a drink of my coffee every single time we stop at Starbucks on a Target run, at every cafe we go to, during every gas station road-trip snack load up, and even when I make coffee in the kitchen in the mornings, even though in every one of these situations, he has something of his own. Strawberry milk, apple juice, a fancy new lemonade that caught his eye. It’s inevitable that, before my coffee is gone,

he'll pipe up with his tiny voice from somewhere in the car or room: "Mommy, can I try your coffee?"

'No' is usually enough. Sometimes I'll decide to toss in something I remember from my childhood, things my mom used to say to me when I would ask: "It's no good for you," or "It'll stunt your growth." I'll tell him that it'll keep him awake all through the night and that he'll get so bored when everyone else is asleep. I tell him that it tastes disgusting and he'll hate it. I tell him it's bitter.

Today, he asks why I drink it if it's disgusting.

"Because," I say, stupidly, thrown off by the retaliation. I can tell by the squint in his eye that he's caught me out; he knows that I secretly think it's delicious. I've been outsmarted.

"Here." I hold my coffee out to him. It's an iced americano, my go-to. The coffee is dark and a bit watered down; no cream, no sugar, just espresso and water. "Try it, if you don't believe me."

It feels wrong somehow, to let him take a sip. Like I'm breaking a million rules in every book that tells someone how to be a good parent. But it's worth it, I think, and it's two-fold; first, there's a gorgeous look of shocked delight on his face that is equal parts heartwarming and hilarious, and two, I think that maybe this will be the thing that finally gets him to stop asking for a drink of my coffee every damn day.

I watch as he leans down and takes a long sip from the straw, and I wait. I can almost feel the transference of delight flow from him to me as his face screws up in disgust; his nose wrinkles, his Springtime freckles disappearing as it does.

“Ewww!” he exclaims, loud in a way that only a five-year-old can be. “That is so disgusting! Why do you drink that?!” There’s betrayal on his face, and absolute confusion. He’s looking at me like I’m a freak, and I don’t even realize that I’m laughing until he starts laughing, too.

He likes my laugh, that’s something he’s always told me. He’s also a stickler for repeating compliments, or making sure Jules and I know when he likes something. “Mommy, I think your eyes are so pretty,” or “Mommy, your laugh is so funny!” are things I’ve heard as many times as I’ve heard him ask for a drink of my coffee, or a bite of my food, or for a new toy from The Red Store (Target). When I laugh, when I really get going, it usually gets him going, too, and that’s what happens now. I’m laughing, he’s giggling, and even though I’m aware he might not remember this moment the way that I do a day from now, a week from now, a month, I cherish the absolute hell out of it anyway.

And this is what coffee will taste like to me, now, I realize as I take a sip once he’s wandered off to do something else. Childish determination, Springtime freckles, and the shriek of giggles. Bitter and sweet.

June 23, 2017

Guess what, Matt?

I have a son. He's asleep, just there, wrapped in a swaddle that's too big around him. He's so small, isn't he? Six pounds. Fits in my hands like he's nothing but oh, god, he's everything. He came out with these big, wide blue eyes, calm as anything as soon as they put him on my chest. Like I was the only thing he needed.

And you see her, over there? That one, asleep in the chair. That's his Mama. Her name is Jules, and she saved my life.

You've missed so much.

I can't sleep. I hurt, but it's a dull ache. I'm mostly just tired, an exhaustion I feel in my bones, my eyelashes, my toes, everywhere. It's a good tired. My life is in this room, and they're both safe and asleep within arms reach. There's nowhere I'd rather be. Such a strange feeling; for the longest time, alive was the last place I wanted to be.

You were the first person who helped change that, you know? Who showed me unconditional acceptance. I didn't know what that meant before I met you. Thank you.

I've been so fucking angry with you for leaving me, but lately, the anger has been quieter, and the gratitude overwhelming. I don't think I'd be here if you hadn't lived, and my life would not look like this if you hadn't died. I don't know what it would look like, but all I know is that knowing you was worth it, regardless of anything different that I've told myself over the years.

As much as it rips me apart to know that he'll never know you the way that I did, before I go to sleep, I wanted to introduce you. Matt, I would love for you to meet my son. His name is Sebastian Matthew McCurry.

He'll meet you one day, too. You never got to know the part of me who loves to tell stories, but Sebastian will hear so many of them; I'll tell him everything about you. About how bright and beautiful you were.

Goodnight, for now.

XO

He Says it as We're Watching TV II

"Mommy, I think your eyes are handsome." Apropos of nothing.

Sticky toddler hands on my cheeks, big, round blue eyes staring into mine. And that's it; he goes back to his cereal, and the teenager within me covers her mouth in shock at his easy affection.

He doesn't notice me crying, tears slipping between the cracks of a smile.

He sings and bounces along to Sesame Street, none the wiser.

I breathe it in.

The Berkshires

I'm driving on I-87 in New York when I come to the mouth of a bridge.

It's all unfamiliar to me; the highway, the state, my surroundings in all directions, for hundreds of miles. I wasn't expecting a bridge here, but here it is, and it's gorgeous. Huge and looming as I get closer, as the trees part to reveal the view of the water below (so far below) and the forests of hills and trees on the other side. My breath is stolen from me and, out of nowhere, tears. The entire drive after getting past New York City has been unexpectedly beautiful, but the scene in front of me now is unreal, one of those glittery moments that reminds me that I'm grateful to be alive.

As I drive across the bridge, trying to take in the trees and the water and the mid-morning, perfect-palate blue sky, a flashing sign to the side catches my eye.

THERE'S ALWAYS HELP.

SUICIDE HOTLINE 988.

YOU ARE LOVED.

It tracks, I think, as I make my way toward the end of the bridge, leaving the view behind. I didn't catch the name of the bridge on my maps app, and I didn't see any signs, but I can only imagine that multiple people, if not dozens, have chosen this spot to end their lives over the years. Nevermind wanting the last thing you see to be proof of unobfuscated, simple beauty, but on a more cellular, personal level, I can understand wanting to return to a cradle of water, to the call of waves and lulling tides.

I push aside the thought that, if it ever gets so bad, maybe this would be a nice place to die. I'm not there anymore, so pondering is useless, and I'm grateful that the

thought trickles away easily rather than soaking in deep. I try to focus instead on where I'm going and why: to the Berkshires, to see a play. More specifically, to see a play that one of my favorite actors has written and will be performing. I try to use the fact that I'm less than two hours away to shake the remnants of the bridge away, to conjure up the feelings of joy that I know are just below my skin, but it's a struggle. I'm distracted.

Bizarrely, fucking ridiculously, I keep looking over the side of the bridge, and standing next to me in my mind's eye is Kendall Roy.

Here's the thing about fiction and the characters birthed from its flames: when written well, the genre becomes unimportant. The qualifier of 'fiction' in itself is meaningful only if it's important to the consumer to know whether or not they're engaging in something historical. 'Real,' to me, is a misnomer when discussing stories. If they are told, no matter how well, they are real. If the character is on the page, no matter how dimensional, well, there they are.

I've considered myself a reader since early childhood, but it wasn't until high school that I started paying other methods of storytelling the same level of respect. Television shows, movies, live performances. I don't know that I can pinpoint the first performance on screen that captivated me, or the first character that burrowed themselves into my mind in the same way that countless book characters had, but I remember that my obsession with actors as storytellers started when I was 20 with Robert Downey Jr.

I like to think that my hyper-fixations on performing artists started as an organic, naturally occurring respect for the arts, an evolution as a creative myself, but that would be taking a blindfolded approach; it was about four months after Matt died when I

watched *Iron Man* for the first time. I liked the movie well enough for not being a comic book fan (at the time; 15 years later I sport three Marvel tattoos and countless superhero displays around my home), but I really liked Tony Stark. He was smart, funny, dry, sarcastic. Something about him was familiar, safe, and comfortable.

When I looked into the actor, I remembered a movie from the 80s that my dad had owned on VHS, *Less Than Zero*. I remembered liking it, and so I rented it, and damn, that actor was incredibly talented, I thought. He could make me believe in these characters so seamlessly that I lost myself for just a few hours at a time in their worlds, attached myself to these self-contained stories in order to meet, learn, love, and lose these familiar characters over and over again.

Within a few short months, I had purchased every film and TV show that Downey Jr. had ever appeared in. I knew most of them by heart. I became that person who could spit out facts about celebrities on a whim, but I didn't have time for that; I was a college student, married, working two jobs, with deteriorating mental health. I didn't have time for real relationships or to process my grief and loss through real means, but I had characters, and I had the person who brought them to life.

I think of this period of time as a springboard into a broader realm of creative exploration for me. Through these films, I found other actors that I greatly admired, other characters that I bonded with, found comfort in, projected my emotions and my stories onto and through. In time, my collections grew. Mark Ruffalo. Matt Damon. Adam Driver. And eventually? I realized there were molders of stories that I liked more than others. Directors who took me on journeys that I would have otherwise never experienced. Tarantino. Del Toro. Nolan. Scorsese. These names started coming out of

my mouth as familiar as friends and family, their bodies of work more easily accessible to me than authors and the books they had written.

Ah. The writers. It took my hyper-fixated brain an unfathomably long time to get to the screenwriters, but I got there in the end as well. It's always a full circle, back to the foundation, back to the words on the page. Because there is no standing on the edges of sanity with Kendall Roy without Jesse Armstrong, and there is no drive to the Berkshires without Hamish Linklater and Mike Flanagan.

My favorite writers are not novelists. Well, maybe some of them are or have been, but it's not what they're known for.

When I think of pieces of writing that have changed my life, I don't immediately think of books or poems. The stories I think of are told on screens, on stages, and on albums. When I was younger, was I profoundly invested in *Harry Potter*? Yes. I read *The Catcher in the Rye* obsessively in middle school, consumed everything Stephen King ever wrote, and continue to have authors whom I revere. And yet I don't know, aside from one or two significant works (beauty will be convulsive, after all), if there have been literary pieces that have haunted me in ways that screenplays or performed characters have.

I saw Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* in 2006, with little to no expectations other than needing a way to kill time on a Friday night. Though it may sound hyperbolic, those two hours altered my perception of cinema and the impact that visual storytelling can have on an individual. Even now, nearly twenty years later, I think about whether I believe the little girl in the film died a princess or a victim, whether an afterlife of beauty

and grace awaited her following a life of trauma and war-torn abuse, or if she simply perished, an unnamed and forgotten body like most of us will. What I believe depends on my day, my mood, and my life circumstances at the time. But the fact remains that the story stuck with me, and I return to it often when I try to parse myself.

Pan's Labyrinth was my favorite film until Rafael Casal and Daveed Diggs wrote a movie called *Blindspotting*. Released in 2017, I didn't see it until Daveed Diggs' *Hamilton* connection led me to the rest of his work in 2020. It was a revelation to see how poetry, music, performance art, acting, and gut-wrenching, relevant political topics could be enmeshed together to showcase a macro and micro-level story of struggle, persecution, and isolation; how the writers and actors managed me make me feel seen in characters worlds removed from my own. But there I was, in a man who felt as though he was being pushed out of his own home, and in another man, who felt as though he was being singled out, targeted in his.

There were other screenplays, of course, that sucked me in. Movies, shows, skits over the years that led me to proclaiming myself to be a cinephile, whatever that means (I feel snobbish even using the word, but if the shoe fits). My impulses want me to keep going, to keep writing about every single show and film that sent me into near-manic spirals of obsession, but that's not the purpose, and so I'll do the thing most difficult to me as a writer, and I'll refrain. I'll limit myself to just one more because it's the most relevant.

In 2021, Netflix released a mini-series called *Midnight Mass*, created and written by Mike Flanagan. By the time this series was released, I was already an avid fan of Flanagan's work, to the point of referring to him by his first name in casual conversation

with my wife. “Did you see that Mike’s working on adapting a prequel to *The Shining*?” “Did you know that Mike originally started *Midnight Mass* as a novel?” A master of horror, a title bestowed upon him by nearly every critic or magazine journalist, Flanagan is a writer who instantly managed to capture my attention and my affection through his seamless ability to create empathetic, layered characters within my favorite genre, a genre where characters typically lack depth, warmth, humility. Flanagan, to me, has always been a master not only of horror but simply of craft.

With *Midnight Mass*, Flanagan managed to upheave me, and others, in a multitude of ways, primarily through the dissection of religious trauma and Catholic guilt using the framework of horror. The show was relatable to throngs, and was discussed on the basis of his decision to utilize the horror genre (more specifically, the vampire genre) to observe this specific real-life trauma. For me, however, the connection came with one of the central characters, the priest, Father Paul. A priest who, with the best of intentions, sees himself bring about the destruction of everything that he holds sacred due to selfish sentimentality. A deeply flawed character, filled with love, who highlights within the story that there’s nothing wrong with him, exactly, but with his village; death, destruction, and horror could have all been avoided if he had been allowed to love who he wanted to in the first place, without judgment. And as a queer person, I was demolished by this nuanced writing, the trauma and the guilt and the fault of it all, within one character who wasn’t real, until he was, thanks to Mike Flanagan and the artist who so brilliantly brought him to life, Hamish Linklater.

This piece of writing? This character? They are the reasons I’m crossing the bridge.

My wife and I finished watching Succession just days before my trip to the Berkshires, and I am still a complete mess when I leave home. I almost wish we'd waited to finish until I came back, because of how compromised I feel, and I deal with the self-flagellating inner litany of *what did you expect, you should have known better* as my thoughts about the show swirl around my head during my drive.

I'm always like this in that I become hyper-fixated and obsessive over media that draws me in, shows or movies that I adore. I'm to the point in my adult life now where I'm comfortable in the knowledge that this is in part a trauma response, the way I attach to characters and fictional worlds, and also it's part of my particular brand of neurodivergence.

With Succession, it's in how I will stim and flap with joy when I remember a particularly cutting or hilarious remark made by one of the ruthless siblings, or how I will tear up in the middle of the day when I think about a betrayal or the depiction of generational abuse and negligence on the screen. It's how I will hide behind my hands when I even think about Kendall on stage rapping, or Shiv dancing like an idiot, or Tom doing...anything. It's in the way that I will read every magazine article, listen to every podcast, and watch every interview featuring Jeremy Strong, because he helped bring to fruition a character who, despite being an egotistical, emotionally stunted billionaire, is also longing for connection and affection, to do something good, to be seen for who he is, who lives on the edge of suicide and is always on the brink of literally and figuratively drowning.

Jesse Armstrong, the creator and main writer of the show and of these characters, is also on my mind as I drive toward Massachusettes, toward the

Williamstown Theater Festival which is my final destination. I think of Armstrong as Kendall Roy's father in a way, essentially as a god. It is during this drive that I realize that truly, storytelling, acting, writing, all of it, have become a ball of symbolism in my mind, the replacement for religion in my life, a thing I lost in totality when Matt died in the middle of a classroom floor. And these creators, these writers and actors, are gods, or disciples, forces for which I don't have language, but they are something other than human to me, and always have been. I've pedestaled them; they are worth worship.

This knowledge, knowing that I do this, is part of the reason why my feelings of panic and anxiety are growing the closer I get to the Berkshires. It's why I can't stop thinking of Kendall Roy, pathetic and debating on going over the rails. I'm wracked with self-doubt, with imposter syndrome myself. I mean, for fuck's sake, I'm driving to the Berkshires. I've just stayed at a cheap, ratty hotel at the halfway point because I couldn't take the day before off of work (I'm too broke for that), I had to drive because I couldn't afford the train, and I'm there alone which means I will feel out of place, alone, because I am not someone who belongs in the audience at a theater in the Berkshires.

Worse yet, I know that the seats are set up on the stage for the festival. A small, intimate show, which means the possibility is high that the performers will see me. That the writer might see me. The writer, who is the lead actor. The writer is Hamish Linklater, and the thought of being in a space with a god who has gifted me a character is nearly enough to make me turn the car around, to head back over the bridge and home.

In the end, of course, Hamish is just a person.

Better yet, Hamish is just a *writer*.

I think of the countless hours that I've watched him in various roles, most frequently as Father Paul in *Midnight Mass*; I think of the fact that I know his lines in that show by heart, Mike Flanagan's lines that Hamish has so fiercely brought to fruition. I think of that character when I'm standing outside of the theater, early, only to be five feet away when Hamish pulls up to the curb in his van to unload his things, costumes, and the like. He walks right by me, and my worst fear comes true; he sees me.

His hair is askew and the top two buttons of his shirt are undone. He looks harried. He is a man. I shake, and I cry a little, and I am ready to sit on the stage with him for two hours.

The play reading is good. It's the first time his play has ever been performed in front of an audience, and it's done with a small cast using music stands. I watch them all, and I follow the story. I laugh, and I cringe at times when I know I'm supposed to laugh but don't, nobody does. I watch Hamish watch the other actors when he's not speaking; I watch him watch the audience, watch him make notes on his script. I watch him as the writer, small smiles flitting across his face when the emotions of the audience make their way to him and it's *exactly* what he wanted. I see the pride, the relief, the anxiety, the fierce fucking joy in his eyes at the end, and I realize: we're the same, aren't we? Writers, in the heart of us. All or none of us gods, humans, or maybe both.

When I drive back home that night, making the five-hour drive in one haul, I'm far less distressed when I cross the bridge from the other side. I'm replaying moments in my mind; not only of being so close to Hamish and the other monstrous talents on that

stage, but I'm also thinking of trading jokes with Rafael Casal online via Twitter, thinking of the handwritten letter I have from Lin-Manuel Miranda, thinking of how I'll be seeing Jeremy Strong on Broadway in the spring. Thinking of sharing small human interactions, and how that doesn't happen with gods, does it?

I'm feeling far less consumed by the angst and pain of Succession the further I get from Massachusettes, a little farther removed from the heaviness of the characters. I'm able to more fully enjoy the green and gold view from the bridge, and I think that maybe my wife and I should plan a weekend in the Berkshires with our son, maybe in the fall, when the leaves turn. I make a promise to myself to come back to the Berkshires next year when the festival runs again, to continue embracing the humanity of creativity, to remind myself that I am not imposing myself amongst artists, lest I start to forget.

thoughts while alone in a school supply closet during a 40-minute high security lockdown

did i lock the staff room door - what did alana say she said they always announce if its a drill - i have to text her - i have to text my wife - should i text my wife - ill worry her shit - no i have to - oh great i was right they always announce a drill this isnt a drill it isnt a drill - why is this happening - why on a day when im alone - i wish i wasnt alone - test the lock test the door - no dont someone will hear - its so fucking quiet - my breathing is so loud - too loud - i didnt see sebastian in his spring picture outfit before leaving for work this morning - oh god what if i dont get to see him in his outfit - what if im not there to pick him up from school - i have to text jules - footsteps are those footsteps - oh my god who is that - my heart is beating so loud can they hear - my hands are shaking theyre shaking i can barely send a text - why am i alone - i wish i wasnt alone - at least there isnt a student here - childish gambino this is america dont catch you slippin now dont catch you slippin now oh fuck dont hum be quiet - my legs are going numb how long has it been - 20 minutes how has it been so long its so quiet i never knew 1800 kids could be so quiet - oh my god the kids they have to be so terrified how am i supposed to counsel them when i cant stop shaking - an email theres an email a threat but what kind of threat what does that mean - i cant crouch like this anymore but i dont want to stand dont want to move - was that the doorhandle who just shook the fucking doorhandle or was that my imagination - will jules remember that sebastian wants a spider-man cake for his 6th birthday - will he tell her - i hope he tells her - i should text her - i just want to go home - wait theyre making an announcement - police on the scene just a few more minutes they hope - i hope - thats good right - i should write about this for my thesis if i make it out of here - maybe it will just be a page saying I DONT WANT TO DIE I DONT

WANT TO DIE I DONT WANT TO DIE - and given the theme of my thesis isnt that kind of funny - alanis morissette isnt that ironic dont you think a little too ironic wait its still not safe dont hum - was that the all clear - oh thank god its over - now is the time to cry - now is the time to hum - i cant wait to see sebastian in his pink polo shirt

Meridians

It's 1:09 a.m., and I'm on the verge of panic. It could be anything: school (my thesis is due soon, graduation fees, student loans, all a mistake, fuckfuckfuck), work (was that the right referral? I hope they use their safety plan. God, I hope the program gets funded for next year), home (did Bash seem quiet after school? I wish he and Jules spent more time together. She might get pissed if I say anything about it). It could be nothing. It could be that the world feels like it's on fire, literally, metaphorically, politically, all of the above.

I have one friend in Delaware who I've known for four years, even though we've only lived here for 16 months, but it's after one in the morning and Kat works a school schedule, like me, so she'll be asleep. My friend Katie in Virginia also works school hours (how did I collect so many teacher/school friends? I just now realize the overlap), so she's not an option, either.

There are two friends in my timezone who are possibilities, because they might be awake, their sleep schedules just as fucked as mine. Jared, my friend since the day I dropped my pencil in shop class in 7th grade. He picked it up for me and my 12-year-old, eager, starving-for-affection brain latched onto him, the weird, quiet boy in class, and I spent that afternoon going through the phonebook and calling every house that bore his last name. I eventually found him, and though I could tell that he found it beyond odd that I was calling, that phone call blossomed into hours-long phone calls

every night for the next three years, followed by patterns of silence and reconnections, friendship as easy as riding a bike, all the way until now, when I am 34 and anxious, debating on texting him at 1:09 a.m. because he might just respond.

The other option is the newest friend that my wife and I have made here, a co-worker of hers named Myles. Whereas I adopted Jared as my friend as a child, Myles adopted Jules at work, deciding to bother her until she relented to his friendship. This led to a proposal to start up a DnD campaign at our house, with Myles as our dungeon master. As these things go, and by these things I mean the best things, the easy things, we've gone from the first visit during which I had to take medication and use CBD to ease my social panic, to last weekend, when Myles stayed the weekend with Bash and me while Jules was out of town so that I didn't have to be alone. We drank and watched horror movies and plotted to find him a girlfriend who wasn't a psychopath, and going a week without having him walk into our house has felt like a lifetime.

I blink as I consider this, as I lay in bed and breathe through my panic. Jared and Myles, who might be awake but maybe not, one my friend for 22 years and the other for one, both as commonplace in my life as breathing by this point.

My anxiety starts to ratchet down. My heart beats a little bit slower.

I open my phone and go to my clock app. I scan the list of cities and times, too keyed up to do timezone math, too self-aware to assume that I can deal with this shit on my own,

too respectful of my wife's schedule to turn over and shake her awake, too nervous that my other friends may actually be asleep to reach out to them. Options; who are my other options?

Anchorage -4h: 9:09 PM (Kory's at work for another two hours. Dammit.)

Vienna +6h: 7:09 AM (Sandy's already on the train for work, another teacher. Another strikeout.)

Melbourne +14h Tomorrow: 3:09 PM

3:09 p.m...Monica. Another teacher (*what the fuck, Lisha, are you collecting school employees like infinity stones?*). This thought nearly makes me laugh, and the crashing waves of panic ebb a bit further from shore, my amusement pushing them back. I know the school where she teaches drama has already let out for the day, and she's either home or on public transit back. I nearly cry with relief.

I click out of my clock app and switch over to Skype. I type a message to her, something short but honest, about not being able to sleep because of my anxious brain.

Within the minute, she responds by sending me an old picture of David Tennant as Hamlet, meant to comfort, with a response of "tell that anxiety to fuck off, mate!"

And it strikes me, the ridiculousness of it. Not only her response, which is so perfectly tailored to me that I'm core-warmed and near tear-stricken, but also the absurdity of the

notion that it's 1:09 a.m. and somewhere in the world there is someone, awake, who loves me. That if it were 3:09 a.m., Kory would be home from work, and I could text him instead if I wanted. If it were 9:09 a.m., Sandy would be out of work in Austria, and she would respond in a heartbeat, and as long as the sun was shining outside of my window, I would have a collection of people who, on my whim, would be there to help if I needed it.

My anxiety crests, the overwhelming love I feel a crushing balm. I savor the moment, this gem of a moment, wishing so badly I could wrap it gently and gift it to myself at seven years old, at fourteen, at twenty-three.

Post-panic attack adrenaline crashes are better than Ambien, and I start to drift off, my phone still in my hand. I'm nearly asleep, eyes slivered, when my screen brightens.

Myles, texting me about wanting to hang out soon to paint DnD miniatures.

It's 1:20 a.m., and I'm on the verge of tears, thinking of the friends I could have missed loving, nearly missed being loved by, the melancholy sweeter than the panic.

Gallery

My mother, throwing eggs at my father, screaming that he is a piece of shit, not good enough. The yolk drips down the flimsy, fake wooden walls of our trailer. I poke it with my chubby toddler finger.
Don't eat that.

Age 3

Domestic violence on paneling

I see my father on the weekends sometimes and then I don't see him at all. I don't know until much later that he's only allowed to leave during the week because of a work-release program and they won't let him leave on the weekends. It's his third DUI. Meanwhile, my mother drinks until she passes out, some man in bed with her. I don't know his name. It's pointless to learn it.

Ages 8-13

Parental separation and neglect, iron bars and aluminum cans

I tell my mother that I'm bisexual in the car so she can't escape the conversation.
She calls me a dyke. Yells it, spittle flying.
I tell my father that I'm bisexual in the car so he can't escape the conversation.
He goes quiet. I am erased.

Age 14

Razor blades to skin, bloody band-aids hidden under pillows

I meet my future husband online when I'm 16. He's 24.
He complains about my fat body, laments about how it's unfair that he'll never be with a skinny, beautiful woman.
Regardless, the adults in my life clap when I marry him.

Age 19

Flower petals and veiled regret

College.
My french professor is in my best friend's family. Dr. Matt.
He shows me acceptance.
Care, love, humor, friendship.
This is what it's like to have a mentor, I learn. Someone to look up to. A role model.
I come out to him, crying. He hugs me and loves me anyway.
He has a seizure and dies in the middle of teaching Honors 252.

Age 20

Grief and endless vodka on canvas

I meet death on a Sunday.
It lives at the bottom of a bathtub.
I try to drown myself.
It's a hard way to die, the EMTs showed up too quickly, and I cry when I wake up in the hospital.
I cry because I wake up.
I've never been great at accepting failure.

Age 24

A new beginning on scratchy sheets

Jules-
Her name is Jules.
I scribble it in the margins of my grad school notebooks.
Perhaps because I'm willing to die and fear means nothing, I kiss her wrist on the couch.
Her lips cauterize.

Age 24

Divorce papers, sealed

Sebastian Matthew
but Jules and I call him Bash.
6/23/17
I am not my mother.
I am not my father.
His eyes are blue, hair curly, this creature that spent nine months kicking around inside of me, reminding me that had I not failed at the bottom of the bathtub, this is what I would have missed.
This is what I would have missed.

Age 28

Baby socks and golden locks on cotton

I sit in a rocking chair, in a home, in a state that is new to me.
Therapist, wife, mother, student, sister, daughter, survivor.
Tired, hungry, healthy, alive.
Reflecting
Time traveling
Curating
This gallery is mine to own.

Age 33

Exploration of meaning, digital media

March 16, 2023

Hey Matt,

Fourteen years today, and I haven't cried. Or at least I not until just now. Dammit. It's the way of the thing, I guess. The way it goes. Because I closed my eyes and imagined you sitting in front of me, cross-legged on the ottoman directly in front of the armchair where I'm writing, and it occurred to me for the first time that when I picture you you're still forty. Your hair is still choppy and bright, you still wear the same chuff-toed boots, and you have all of the same faint laugh lines that you did the last time I saw you. But me? I'm fourteen years older than I was that day. Thirty-four rather than twenty; only six years younger than you, now. My laugh lines are deeper, my body stretched and warped from giving birth, the life behind my eyes telling a different story. I realize that I looked older, changed, more like I do now than I did then, even just one day after you died. Would you have recognized me?

Today, I keep to my usual ritual. I just finished my double shot of espresso, and white wine is chilling in my fridge. But (are you ready for this?) I've made some changes. I ordered my espresso over ice, and the white wine is a riesling rather than a chardonnay. I know, I know! I can hear your voice from where you sit in front of me, the teasing chastisement. *The cold ruins the taste! A sweet white, what are you, twelve?*

The espresso is still bitter on my tongue, but it's more to my liking. The wine later will be as well, when I toast to your memory before bed, when I put another March 16th to rest. And for the first time in over a decade, I will have given in to the notion that everyone has pushed on me for years, that you 'wouldn't want me to be sad like this'. That you 'would want me to move on'.

Your eyes are crinkling in the corners now, smiling your crooked grin in my head, in front of me, in the past, because sure, you would mock me for my plebian palate, I would call you an asshole, and then we would laugh about it. But you would be glad to see me choosing what I liked. Living for myself. Not moving on, but growing into something new.

So cheers, asshole. This one's for you.

And for me.

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Curriculum Vita

Lisha McCurry is a licensed professional counselor by trade, who dreams of being a writer. With a bachelor's degree in clinical and community psychology from the University of Michigan-Flint and a master's degree in counseling from Oakland University, Lisha has presented numerous research and literary papers at both undergraduate and graduate-level conferences on topics spanning suicide rates in Japan, to analysis of feminism in 19th century French literature, to presenting independent research findings regarding how gender impacts memory for one's surroundings and survival instincts. More creative endeavors include poems published in independent anthologies throughout elementary, middle, and high school, an article titled "Loki: God of Mischief, Representation, and Hope" published in the Michigan independent newspaper Watershed Voice in 2021, and an independent novel co-published with her wife Jules in 2020 called *Key Element: Ephemeral*, the first of a planned trilogy. When Lisha isn't working as a therapist in a high school wellness center or writing one of many simultaneous projects, she's being a wife, a sister, and a mother, or she's recording a movie-review podcast with her wife called Screen Tea Podcast, and is generally loving life as she pursues her second graduate degree in creative writing.