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THE RED AND BLACK JOURNAL

by

Nancy Gobatto

**A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research
through English Language, Literature and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor**

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2000

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*For Bekka,
just because.*

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Part One:

Red

I first cut my hair to see if I was really free. Then I grew it back and dyed it red.

(in the front cover) “...we learned from each other...”

It began in his car with talk of effective ways to safely abuse over-the-counter and prescription medication. He told how he found a website that showed you how to separate the codeine from the Tylenol. He mentioned the hallucinatory effects of Adivan and beer. We declared a mutual love for its sister drug Lorazepam. I lamented all the ones I have “wasted”—taking them as prescribed—when they were actually needed. There is no buzz in that.

I was happy in Andrew’s car. I felt crazy every day of my life. I knew that a lot of what I did was inappropriate. We rolled our eyes enough at ourselves. We didn’t need to do that to each other. Finally, acceptance and understanding. One night when we could pretend it didn’t matter.

We joke about suicide attempts and depression, self-abuse, self-esteem and therapists. We do so lightly, easily because there is between us an unspoken understanding.

Maybe we’re still fucked up, but a year ago, we couldn’t even laugh about it.

It’s like the language of the oppressed. You joke to make it easier.

We got to the theatre and he bought our tickets. I felt very young and, somehow, then old when I realized I wasn’t.

“We could play arcades?”

I shook my head, “I don’t play video games.”

“We could go get some cough syrup?”

“Seriously?”

It was six o’clock. The movie started at six-thirty. Back in the car we’d laugh randomly at what we intended to do.

Andrew had talked earlier of the coveted ingredient—DM—whatever that was. We were going to find it, no matter how low-class it seemed.

“This is pure trailer-trash.”

We lamented our almost unavoidable egoism, our subversion of a subculture. Two university-educated highly intelligent persons, driving around in a shiny black car looking for a cheap fix and diverting responsibility by disassociating the behavior from ourselves to a more “deserving” population. But that is the nature of these things. The cognitive dissonance of it all. Adverse behaviors are pleasurable only if you separate yourself from action.

We can drink cough syrup, as long as we are not *people who drink cough syrup*.

We arrive at the Zellers pharmacy at six-fifteen and he purchases two 100ml bottles of generic cough syrup—DM. I grab a can of iced tea from the pop machine.

Back in the car Andrew manages to drink the entire bottle in three swigs. I can only choke down half the bottle before a barely stifled gag.

My mind imagines regurgitated red syrup all over my clothes and the pale interior of his car.

“I can’t.” My hand presses against my mouth. “If I try to drink more I’ll puke it up.”

“Don’t drink more if you’re going to be sick.”

I appreciate his kindness.

Nothing gets the taste out of my mouth. A thick, bittersweet coating. The iced tea doesn’t help. I am reminded of why I quit drinking over two years ago.

I look at Andrew and laugh.

“What the fuck did we just do?”

“I don’t know,” is his answer.

True. It all seemed somehow beyond our control, like something bigger than him or me or us. Our parts played without resistance or excitement. The unavoidable need. The inescapable curiosity. The relief of helplessness, even when self-imposed.

A few minutes later I am surprised to hear him ask for extra butter on our popcorn. No one asks for extra butter on popcorn at the movies.

Except me, but I wouldn't have said anything, but he did.

I pay for the popcorn.

And in the theatre:

"Are you a front or back of the theatre kind of guy?"

"Wanna sit in the front?"

No one wants to sit in the front row at the movie theatre.

Except me.

We bring the remainder of my cough syrup with us in case I want more. It sits next to me in a cup holder stuffed with napkins. I don't know why I brought it in. I can't drink more. My throat closes up around it. I can't get it down. I don't even have to try. I just know.

Days later I'll be able to recall the taste, the texture of it and feel my throat rebel in the same way.

But I want to. I want to drink it all. I am shamed that he could swallow it all in three brief swigs and I could not. It is sheer selfishness. I don't want less of a buzz. I don't want to have suffered for nothing.

I want the freedom. I have given in to absurdity. I have been at least as bad. Quantity doesn't count—except in the end. The moral dilemma is the same 50ml or 100ml. One time or fifty. We have broken the seal.

I await what I have paid for. I await escape.

I don't recognize it while the movie is playing. There is vagueness, emptiness. I can identify the techniques employed to bring me down, to make me cry, but I cannot cry. Me, who cries now at the mention of loss or love, no matter what the plot, does not flinch at the mention of soul-mates or eternity. To me, it seems as though there is something more I am supposed to hear in this contrived dialogue, something clearer I am supposed to see through this giant screen so close to my face.

I feel no *buzz*.

I feel nothing except for a slight pain in my stomach. Only a slight fear of vomit.

An expert abuser of over-the-counter medication, though never before cough syrup, I am no longer deceived by my stomach. The body is stronger than it would like us to believe. I don't deny the inevitable damage I am doing, but I learned long ago that the effects aren't immediate.

You can't die from 50ml of cough syrup. If I can forget about puking, I will not puke. Better to just let it pass.

You learn these things late at night when you've hit the point just before overdose and the freedom becomes frightening. But when it passes, and you realize you're fine, the fear can't come back, until you go farther. Always farther, always wondering: *This time, have I gone too far?*

Not on 50ml of cough syrup. I just needed bread. Something dry to fill my stomach. The popcorn isn't working. It's too buttery.

After the movie, I am not ready to talk.

"I've never felt so...empty," I manage to say.

"That was odd."

“Yeah.” I can hear people around us talking about the movie. Pointing out this and that. Trivial explanations.

“It’s like they saw a different movie than us. We saw through the movie to something completely different.” Fumbled explanations.

We talk like that amidst the swell of people until I realize we are alone, walking in the middle of the parking lot.

“Cars have to get by. Here.” I steer Andrew over to a sidewalk. Walk tremblingly.

“I am so fucked up,” he says.

“Yes.”

Yes, I realized it strangely. I am not sober but this is different from anything I’ve ever felt. I don’t know how to recognize it. How long have I been stoned? It has been hours. When did it start?

Reality always steals you away. This illusion that I am not sitting in my own future writing down biased memories of my life, or someone else’s.

Stolen easily away from movie theatres or cough syrup. Feeling unwell, menstrual cramps, fatigue. Grad school more demanding than I expected. I can’t keep up with my reading. Who cares about proper bibliographic references anyway?

If I cannot “go back” to the movie theatre, does that mean I do not belong “here”, in this writer’s space?

Readers never know what is denied them.

Cough syrup would become pivotal. Everything. The origin. Cough syrup would become my fixation. Not to do it again, but to remember that I had done it.

Why?

There is something of remarkable quality to Andrew. Like a texture that is comfortable, even if not altogether familiar.

He exists almost in a series of continuous déjà vu moments. Haven't we done this before? Haven't I made you laugh like that before? Didn't we always have this *this*?

I ask him questions just to verify my beliefs about what he'll say.

The emails act as permanent conversation. Not the telephone. Not letters.

Email.

The freedom of limited punctuation...working to achieve the perfect union of thought/word/communication.

I fear connection.

I crave connection.

Feminist, lesbian, political rhetoric and I exist in the true centre choking up the residue of half-thought thoughts. Sitting in my own mess, beneath my own carpet. Swept myself under accidentally in the hurried pace of identity formation.

I have forgotten the sound of my own name.

I exist in definitions of myself and he is calmly, unknowingly, picking them apart.

I don't know how to breathe this air anymore. I don't want us to counsel each other. I want us to exist perfectly between the time of thought and communication.

He says, "The only thing worse than not getting what you want, is not knowing what you want."

A subtle variation on Oscar Wilde. Or is it George Bernard Shaw?

But I have never known what I want. An ill fit on every side.

The impossibility of fantasy and reality. Never taught to find internal awareness that "it's all good" until it's too late.

Like an adult trying to learn a second language, I cannot lose my accent. Acceptance. Unconcern. Peace. These will always be foreign to me. They will always be struggles, even if perfectly pronounced, the effort required will taint the achievement.

Andrew emails like he speaks. It's his command of language I suppose. The ability to translate the self into concrete terms. I find it unbelievably endearing.

He told me he likes the thunder. I should have asked if it scared him. That's why I love it.

I envision him standing in the rain.

A long time ago I promised someone very different that we would meet up in the middle of rainstorm and dance, sit in puddles, absorb what little bits of nature we still relate to in this fucked-up life.

Never happened.

I am afraid to promise him anything.

I lost something huge once. Something bigger than I was so I was left more than empty—less than nothing. And all people could do was try and convince me that it wasn't really gone. Better to say it never existed at all.

Did it?

Was it?

Sometimes I don't even know. Sometimes I get tired of trying to remember.

It is not the same.

It is gone.

I am here—flesh, blood, and vomit.

There is darkness in a whisper. The roll of the pen, the smooth flow of ink-

uninterrupted. A painful reminder of loneliness.

A confident reminder of absence.

I leave Andrew for three days.

No calls.

No emails and my skin itches and I make myself sleep so that I feel sick, so that I think less.

I ridicule myself. Ridicule. Ridiculous woman.

I don't want happiness that leaves me nervous in its absence.

I don't trust much.

I want more than I can trust.

I trust more than I deserve.

A little bit of sun comes through the basement window. It is reflected off the neighbor's car that is parked right outside. It is twenty after three but I haven't left the house yet. I am still in my pajamas. Layers of flannel. I've been writing in my head for hours now.

There is an anxiety inside of me. The pale fringe of excitement. Residual effects of anticipated sleep. Subtle happy nausea of fantasy/reality. For the first time in a long time, I wonder which is possible. Which is better. Which is most likely.

Things move in cycles we don't always understand or see. Suddenly I realize that we all have the same lessons to learn. We all go through the same cycles at different times.

I have decided to leave a part of me behind. Though it is caught in the cycle of who I am. It cannot be gone. I have carved it into my flesh.

Re-interpretation.

I do this not for Andrew, but perhaps because of him. Because it was he who pointed

out that it was not life, but myself that held me here.

Anticipation. Vomit.

And I trust him because I recognize the quality of sincerity. There is no promise in his words—only honesty.

I am sitting on Kaysea's bed, that metal framed futon. We've been laughing at a picture of the two of us from high school, insisting I look like I should be working in a bank, wondering how so much can change in just five years, almost without our noticing. We have the endless discussion of how we didn't even hang out until that last year of high school. Timing is the only explanation.

We've been smoking just a little bit of pot each day for almost two weeks.

"Just enough to take the edge off," I say and she laughs.

I am tired of talking about Andrew, theorizing Andrew, wondering Andrew. I am craving the simplicity of the of this grounded, solid friendship, these laughing moments when we plan out television commercials and fantasize about doctoral dissertations and Ph.D.s by the age of twenty-seven.

And this photograph, with me in a plain peach skirt, a too-big white sweater, Kaysea is at least in black, some subtle hint at her adolescent angst. Even my lipstick is too pink.

I look at it and say, "If I had to wear lipstick, it should have at least been red."

Fuck this bullshit. Fuck this preoccupation with Andrew. I'm a fucking lesbian. This preoccupation with sexually ambivalent boys has to stop. What is the nature of womankind? The less that is offered, the greater the desire to give.

Promise me nothing and I will give you more than I am. Need me. That is

everything. Not to need but to be needed. To have value. Worth. Validation. I don't want to need. That leaves me empty and scared, but need me.

Like continuous motherhood. I am scared of my own maternity—to bring forth of myself.

No.

Too much. Vomit.

I can't even imagine the intensity. I think I would combust or there would be nothing left to strive for. To be needed so completely, so unconditionally.

The joy is the anticipation, not of desire, but of need. The day he needs to see me, needs to hear me. How can I need him to need me so much? What happened to self-discovery? Self-empowerment? Autonomy?

I was left less than empty. I have grown from the negative to the positive. That is alone. That was alone. And now I want to merge. I want to lose. Sacrifice for comfort. Comfort for sacrifice.

I am sacrifice.

Woman is sacrifice.

Why does he exist as a single reminder of what was left behind? What fell away, I did not leave it.

The first five times I kissed a woman I was either stoned or pissed drunk, usually both. Sometimes it's hard to remember and it's almost shameful to recall the taste of vodka on my lips, something comparable on theirs. There was the one woman, Carrie who wasn't drunk. In fact she said to me, as we were both leaning over the table, inching closer, "You're really drunk, Sweetie." But she wasn't, I remember that and she still kissed me. The next

day that wouldn't be the significant factor though. No, I would instead ponder why so many lesbians call other women 'Sweetie' when they flirt.

Man. I have left you. You have left me in this softness.

Something lures me away from what I have struggled to achieve.

Identity.

Bullshit.

I am soft weak strength.

I am tired pure longing.

I am flux static unstable.

So I sacrifice identity for confident knowledge.

Re-identify.

He destroys my theories on sexuality. Gender identity. He is not woman, but he is of no man I have ever known.

There is a kinship that frightens me because it is not woman and she is all I have known for so long.

Once before—but this was a boy—an almost-man. I was like mother. But he is gone. Left me to woman.

Chris and I are on acid. Good acid. I am nineteen. He has just turned seventeen and somehow, that night, not altogether different from others we shared, we end up in bed for hours fucking around, but we don't actually fuck. Hours of kissing, stroking, tasting and I find myself looking out the window, wondering if the birds are up this early.

The only boy I have ever wanted to touch me. The sweet, dear, beautiful salvation

who walked into my life just in time to save it. My soul-mate, without a doubt and with his mouth against my flesh, I am distracted, disappointed. I tell myself it must have been the acid. Tell myself that the fact that I was able to let him touch me means that there was something between us. I loved him so much I couldn't imagine that any form of closeness would not be a good thing. Years later I would be forced to admit that I never felt farther away from him than I did that night, not even at his funeral.

Do I betray my sex or my sexuality? If the two have always been so tightly merged? The beauty of woman overwhelms me. Andrew stands alone amongst them in my mind with only the ghost of Chris, an almost-man, beside him.

Sleeping in. Languid in between sheets, refusing to leave the warmth until even I can't ignore that the day needs something besides slumber from me. Though I don't know why. My room is a dark mess. Piles reach the height of the bed and this gives me comfort. A half-empty bottle of water sits on the nightstand but I can't remember how old it is. Could it be from August? Water doesn't go bad. I take a sip.

I can leave behind parts of the pain. Only parts.

"You'll find other friends, but I will never have another son."

Sharon's words echo in my head a year and a half later.

Have I found another friend?

There is betrayal in my happiness. There is sadness in connection that denies the past.

I will never have another son.

Chris was my baby though. Mine too. I felt like his mother too for four years of his

nearly twenty. A mother two and a half years older than her baby.

And I loved you too, Sharon. I loved you too. And I swore I'd be your comfort.

Your understanding. He was ours. How could we replace that?

Tonight, over the phone, your voice made me nervous because I knew I have cheated you—and Chris.

My pain cannot equal yours, except that that itself brings me pain.

Have I found another friend?

Did I step out of grief into something more frightening?

Letting go?

Another friend.

Yes. Andrew.

He is warmth and sincerity and comfort and I have hurt for so long. He has a car and he talks back to me. I have gotten tired of talking to myself. But I worry I am betraying what was for what could be.

Are my past words made shallow? How much can you give until you take from someone else?

And does he think he is a replacement? Does he think they could take each other's place, that I could insult them both by trying?

It's because life can't be simple if it is too profound. Or maybe profound can't be simple.

Profound is simple.

I am trapped in ego.

Gratification.

I quit my job to seal a pact with myself.

I will not hold on to what has already taught me its lesson.

I have a friend Mike that says: "Life will teach you the same lesson again and again until you learn it."

Life is lesson.

Answers.

Brief.

More lessons questions.

So I decided to test Andrew. Test myself. Test my own all-powerful instincts.

Sincerity.

Honesty frightens me, but I controlled the send. I sent the email.

Wait.

Know *know* he'll respond. It'll be okay. He will understand.

Know he might not.

I will have ruined everything.

I will have ruined nothing.

If this disclosure sends him off I was wrong.

We are nothing.

It is a calm euphoria of nauseating anticipation.

He will reply.

If he doesn't there was nothing so nothing is lost.

Except ego. Pride. To be wrong about him.

I could never trust myself again.

He will reply.

Three years ago, I would have played with knives to pass the time. Tiny carvings, scars on flesh. The pinnacle of self-loathing. I break through my own skin like a balloon before he can.

Or is it just a pressure gauge? Something has to give.

Not this time.

Grown up. Don't do that any more.

Instead, count the scars that never healed away and wonder if I could simply cut the scars away.

Old to new.

New scars heal the old ones.

Is new better than old?

An empty laugh. Euphoria.

Euphoria.

I am not wrong. I will not damage. Too much self-destruction *in the meantime*. Not this time.

Hold off. Hold back.

And he replies.

He replies as calmly as I expected. The perfect contrast.

My mind laughs loudly. I trace my fingers across the screen as I read his lines.

He emails like he speaks.

I can hear him.

Here him.

Test one right away. Now I know. Now I know. I was not wrong.

Sometimes, as it gets darker, I can write better. It is all more soothing without the glare. It gets easier to hide that I am transcribing.

“Spaghetti or di other one?”

That’s how my father speaks. That natural accent I have grown up with.

My father.

Exists on a different level of me.

He is sustenance and comfort. Daddy still calls me Cookie and I love him for that alone.

Father.

The water is boiling. I can hear it hitting the burner. I turned it on twelve minutes ago. Salt. Oil. Water.

He sacrificed for his future, but his future isn’t even his. It is mine. My brother’s. My sister’s.

Our future. His future.

Sincere and unintrusive, he knows only parts of his future. Others I hide out of fear.

Out of pity.

“You and Mom, you eat it with vegetables. You better eat it if it have leftovers.”

The sauce. He has made two kinds. One with meat and one without.

He scratches the top of my head like I am still a child.

He knows nothing of emails, literary devices, or VCR recording. He has given those to his future.

And I feel selfish. My future. My future. I won’t give it to children who can’t even show me what it is.

No matter how much they might want to.

I could never understand it to him.

“What you do, homework?”

“Mmm hmm.”

It is always homework.

No Dad, I write. I am writing about you.

You can't read your own future. It's in the wrong language.

This day began too long ago. I have shared enough for one day, haven't I? Sometimes nothing satisfies the need. Sometimes the need seems so distant I ache for it to return so I can feel whole. But there is never any middle ground. I am always either spilling out or choking on language. The stories that depend on me. If I don't let them out, they scratch away at me. If I try to force them out too soon, they lodge themselves somewhere near the base of my throat. Still, I feel they are never truly satisfied with me. I am an imperfect vessel.

Sharon wants to sue the driver that killed her son.

Insurance companies.

"No it is not okay that Chris is dead."

That is all she wants to say, but it feels like no one listens. So she'll sue it out of them.

I will help her if I can.

No one listens to me either.

I sit at her house without him.

She has too many pictures. I am overwhelmed. I am somewhere I don't want to be but am drawn to. There is no escape.

I cry on my bathroom floor and wish I could cut it away. Cut the worst of it away.
Just twenty minutes. The knock at the door, the look on their faces, the sound of their voices,
the loss of my innocence.

I felt it drip away and hit the floor.

Reality.

I have lost my innocence in a car that killed a boy who sang showtunes in the rain.

I said I wanted to be alone.

I said.

I didn't expect anything else so when I found Andrew—connection?

Again?

Who is struck by lightning twice?

Could he be the afterthought I swore would never come?

There are drawers in this desk that I never even emptied when I started working here.
Full of someone else's shit that I never found the time to go through. Newspaper clippings?
Fuck. Who fucking cares? Now I suppose I should clear it out before I leave. I could
always just leave a note:

Dear Worthy Successor,

This is not my shit. I never had time to clear away someone else's. I have left it for
you, in case you have the time to see it for what it must have been before my arrival.

Best of luck...

I am sorting through my past.

Only a year.

Only a year?

I will miss the space that was made mine. I made mine.

I am sorting through and packing away my adulthood. I am leaving it behind.

Can I reclaim my innocence now?

Away from here?

I feel like I am trapped in a movie here. So quiet. All alone.

The pondering collage.

Fade to black.

I never sigh as loudly as at night. The end of the day sigh.

We have acid, but no one's taking it. Too much planning. I used to just take it—the middle of the day. Middle of the night.

You could tell how much rat poison was in it by how much your stomach hurt.

It's been so long.

Can you go back?

It's like the woman at the coffee shop who is always writing something or sitting poised on the edge of her seat listening to who ever she happens to be talking to. A fascinating person.

And now she smiles at me because I haven't smiled at her lately. It has to be.

I visually grope her for months and she does nothing.

Shy glances. Maybe.

So I get caught up in this distraction with a boy and she smiles and strikes up conversation.

I think I missed her. There is something so soothing about watching a beautiful woman talk.

I hardly know her except to say hello. Should say, "you have a beautiful smile."

Painful when clichés are true.

Cooing. I hate it.

Helpless.

The strange thing is I want to tell Andrew about it.

A psychic told me that this is my time to learn relationships.

I noted the plural.

I don't want to learn. I learn everything else.

I have spent a lifetime in liberation. Quiet. Loud. Now. Then. Whenever.

I am free!

I. Am. Free.

I need to free myself from freedom. I need to liberate myself from liberation.

Open-mindedness comes with a price.

Restlessness. More, more, more understanding.

I understand every fucking thing.

Except me.

Only *what* I am not *who* I am.

My mind has opened so wide it has split in two and fallen to the floor.

The peacemaker. Libra trait.

Where do I fit into the political agenda of correct thinking? Do I fit into the political agenda of correct thinking?

Does anyone?

Can you think yourself alone?

I am sad, misty-eyed in love with fictional TV characters in battle fatigues. Hospital scrubs.

I am profoundly unhappy and it leaves me too calm to cry. The realization that it has become part of who I am. And the better moments don't seem happy even. More like a mockery, a reminder that something is lost.

I want to throw up my mashed potatoes corn ham dinner. I don't care about the kitchen renovations, Mother. You don't even see that political correctness is the only thing stopping me from tearing myself apart.

Gut the kitchen.

I have been gutted.

Left for happy, dead.

I tell Andrew I don't need to go back into therapy.

Maybe I am fine.

Maybe this is fine.

It has certainly become normal enough.

I have lost my focus.

The workman smells like cheap cologne. Spicy. Am I a snob because I already know I could never love him? He is no threat to identity.

He is tearing out the cupboards one piece at time. The wood that holds my childhood tears away from the wall.

I can hear it.

Hear him.

And if he were a woman?

That would intoxicate me. Her cheap perfume would entice me.

She would be refreshing, a symbol of struggle. Radical. Gender nonconformity.

Nonconformity, in a woman.

Fantastic.

The noise is unbearable for someone who can lay awake for hours, distracted by the ticking of her watch. I have to hide it in another room or bury it in a drawer then can never find it in the morning once I can't hear it.

There are two men in my kitchen. No, three. Strangers walk into my house without knocking and I don't even move.

"Good morning."

"Good morning."

So what's the line?

Why no fear? No trepidation.

I find it all interesting. Or at least *something*.

There is a spice chart on the inside of the cupboard door, where the glasses are kept. It has been there so long I had forgotten about it, about how I used stand, then kneel on the counter top to count the squares.

It's on the outside now. The inside is on the outside.

On the floor.

I am afraid to flirt, accidentally. Instinctively. I still do it sometimes only to recognize it sometime after.

They turned the water off before I could go to the bathroom.

I was not consulted, but I showed them how to do it, not thinking they might do it right then.

Is this still my space?

I don't even know how many of them are here. They come and go.

In and out.

I haven't even figured out the hierarchy. Who is the boss? Not the first? The second? Not the third.

It's as though I'm not even here. The closest I've been to "a fly on the wall."

He doesn't know the size of his son's skates.

I am watching Bravo!

I can bare my soul—the ultimate cliché—and not even be sure anyone will notice. But that's why you do such things. Like handing in a term paper with "fuck you" thrown in somewhere around page six just to see if the teacher really reads them. I did that once when I was in high school. Then I couldn't decide what would be worse, the teacher actually reading it and consequently the "fuck you" or the teacher not noticing it was even there. In the end, she never said anything. She just gave me an A- and wrote "Some interesting ideas here," on the back page. I never had the nerve to try it in university. Can't they expel you for that?

We sat in weeds, but felt we were in a forest, something that was ours with one thin red weed against the green.

It is the tiniest piece of paper. Melts bitterly against my tongue. Each time you wonder if maybe this isn't what it's supposed to be. How would you even know?

Blind trust in a corrupt society.

Everybody does it in one way or another. At least we can admit it.

Escapism.

Why not?

I want to be free from my own mania.

Andrew and Kaysea, I am glad they are with me.

We watch each other's pupils dilate, take in the light. Take in the sun.

Raspberry lemonade.

Sunset and high school graduation students and parents coming out of cars and we,
three friends walking by, eyes averted.

Twigs and leaves tangled in my hair.

Him, her, and me.

Share.

Share.

I take them into my past.

This was Chris and I so many nights ago now. Over a year now since he died, how long had it been since we took acid? We were children learning drugs and euphoria. Riding on buses. Lying in fields. Dancing in bedrooms. Kissing on couches.

This is not *me* but *us*.

A single leaf of ivy in my pocket.

Resilient.

I plucked it from my father's garden. Transplanted after the funeral after Chris' aunt handed me the sprig from atop the casket and told me, "Put it in water, when it sprouts roots, it will be ready to plant. It will grow."

And Daddy, who never said more than, "Eh, Cookie, what can you do?" as I stopped eating or sleeping or singing, laughing, living.

Daddy would struggle and make that ivy grow, only saying, "I had to put special

fertilizer.”

So tonight I carry Chris’ leaf in my pocket.

Later, I hug a tree. His dedication. Silly things survivors do to believe there is still life in death.

A small tree by the water.

I sing Tori Amos lullabies and cry thinking, *I can’t cry on acid.*

I thought I’d find Chris there, in altered reality. I thought the link would form.

It didn’t.

He is still just beyond my reach.

Just beyond my breath.

I cry.

They come over—flesh and blood friends who do not have trees or ivy.

They offer comfort to mask my emptiness. Warmth to shield the cold.

Is it cheating? To build awareness through neurochemical alteration?

I suffer the paranoia, the edginess, the stomachache, and the headache from over-dilated pupils. I pay the five dollars.

Do I deserve growth?

It is beyond me?

I become beyond me.

I don’t want to come back.

The nature/curse of drugs.

You can’t stay there, no matter how much you might want to.

Eggs on a plate. Andrew picks me up at eight-thirty on a day when I could sleep in.

He does not like runny yolks. I do not drink coffee. I owed him lunch. I bought him breakfast instead. Give and take. I had forgotten that. Although I was usually prone to give more than to take.

For Chris there were always flowers after each performance. I prided myself on the bouquets. They were never previously arranged and I never bought him carnations. The inferior flower. There had to be at least one red rose and one new exotic flower for us to stare at afterwards. So I could say, "Do you like the flowers?" As if he ever said he didn't, "What about that dark purple one? Isn't it interesting? Reddish? I don't know. It looked purple, but I guess it is sorta reddish. Dark red, blood."

Something about actors. That irresistible charm. Just be with me. I'll pay for everything. Give my life meaning and I'll buy some for you.

Truth, he never needed me for meaning. Chris had something golden trapped inside of him. It made him strong, sensitive, aware.

Acceptance I never knew.

Trust—with him, I trusted nothing because I had never had so much.

You come from nothing, you can't trust something.

Something can be nothing in a second.

I bought him more and more things.

Anything to have his life.

I have it.

Returned to me in piles.

Freshly laundered.

Neatly folded.

I would have left him volumes of words.

He left me reminders of my mistakes.

Maybe that's the better gift.

I now pick quieter bouquets for the cemetery. Always a red rose. Still, no carnations.

The inferior flower.

We are hoping to secure a large supply of drugs.

Whatever.

Kaysea suggests selling some to cover our losses. But there is panic about dealing.

It's a fine line. We could never cross it.

Andrew and I just want to get it. Secure the high.

Anything is better than cough syrup.

And we've been through counseling. We are the *well-adjusted*. We have vision and promise.

And we have escape.

Not escaped.

We are still here.

Still and here.

Tell me something I don't already know.

God! People just repeat themselves and I am getting sick. I dream in repetition.

Wake to déjà vu.

Maybe I have lost original thought.

Maybe I repeat myself and everyone else follows suit.

Follow me.

I am tired of crying at TV shows that most people laugh at.

I am going round and round.

There is no life in death.

I live in death because no one has told me where to put it.

On TV they come back or you find another and everything is okay.

In real life, *my* life, when you ask them, when you stutter out, "Are you sure?"

They are.

And if, when you find something good again, you don't forget.

You remember.

I remember and everyone thinks I forget. I remember and no one else does.

I am not allowed to be happy because then they won't know that I remember.

I *am* the remember.

I want to say to Andrew, "Be my friend. Eat eggs with me. Bring me pot. We'll get stoned in my basement. We'll count stars in the sky. We will marvel at the beauty of friendship."

I will choke on my betrayal of Chris. I never had to say anything like that to him.
With Chris we always seemed to know what to do.

Chris, that Golden Boy who would have grieved me so differently.

There is no lesson book and I don't understand how people live at all.

How do you find your way through all this?

When happiness becomes pain.

I want to scream.

I can't help you!

I can't help me!

I am not here for your salvation. I cannot ease your guilt. I am not I was not him.

Don't tell me you loved him.

Don't prove it to me.

I spent days at the funeral home escorting people to his casket.

If you are strong, they'll be strong.

Dab your eyes.

Tears for the boy who sat behind him in math class.

Who can quantify grief?

I can.

I can.

I am in pain.

I have lost everything and you want to cry on my shoulder?

I know. I know, stand back and watch me crack.

Wait for the snap.

Well it already happened. You missed it. All of you well-wishing, pacifying bastards.

You wouldn't know it if you saw it.

You wouldn't know me if you saw it.

You wouldn't know.

Only his mother. Only Sharon.

"What are we going to do?"

That was all she said.

I wish the TV cameras would leave her alone.

She is alone.

I am alone.

But.

Always that but.

The class is always most quiet in the instant right after the teacher introduces me. The actual wording varies but the meaning is the same: "Boys and girls, say hello to this nice *non-threatening* lesbian who has come to talk to you." There is always a lot of chalk dust and if I'm lucky they have a chair set up for me. I usually begin with, "When I was thirteen I had a dream that I kissed Kimberly Brady from *Days of Our Lives*." They laugh briefly before glazing over or fixing their eyes on me, waiting for an opportunity to challenge what I still haven't begun to say. And they are the teenagers. The university students can be even worse. Sometimes I think they've actually practiced ways to challenge me before I arrive. Then I remember that the world really is like that.

I took the job to change the world. I was barely twenty-two and Chris had just died and I didn't know how to be a lesbian without him. He was the *real* queer one. He was the one who was out as a bisexual by the age of fifteen. He was the one attempting committed relationships with men while I got drunk enough to build up the nerve to kiss a woman.

I had just come out to my friends right before he died. I was inching towards empowerment. His death, instead of pulling me back into the closet catapulted me into the sphere of activism. Not only did I have a fun-filled coming out/coming of age story, but I was going to be paid to tell it to as many people as I could. Education. It is time to combat homophobia! The work is exciting and empowering and for me, completely draining. It absorbed me. It enveloped me.

I had to quit before there was nothing left of my story.

So now it is ending. One more time.

Tomorrow and it's over.

I will not tell my story to strangers again.

Only in writing.

The writing doesn't bother me.

Label me a writer. I deserve that. I have worked for that. Everyday, every night—at least five years—consciously.

Know me as that.

Please.

Know me for what I've worked for not for what I suppose or theorize.

Or know me as nothing but someone you could know.

Someone you did know.

Or didn't.

Better still, don't know me.

I'll do better all by myself.

I can't be young again. I may not be old, but I am not young.

I remember cool November nights, leaves and the smell of cigarette smoke. I started so that I could learn how to inhale.

I remember that dark backyard, Emma Ascot's parents gone to bingo, the taste of pot.

I hadn't expected.

Jacques would hold it for me. I hadn't learned how to finger-pass yet. I felt embarrassed by my lip-gloss against his fingers.

Me eighteen.

This conscious, well organized rebellion. The best I could come up with.

Get me some pot.

No, I'm not a nark.

And I loved Jacques. Dirty. Selfish. Dishonest. Sexy.

Free.

With his French name and not-so-subtle smirks.

He was something I needed. A symbol.

But the wrong one. Thank God only his fingers touched my lips.

It wouldn't take me long to forget all about him.

Except the freedom.

I'd thank him for that.

I can't even remember his face. Just the smell, feel, taste of fingers, lip-gloss, and pot
on cool November nights.

Even that is probably more than he deserves.

I can hear voices.

In my head.

It's how I know I am falling asleep. I can't understand them. Not usually. Only
sometimes, a loud one will wake me up.

I wonder what they are talking about, just beyond my grasp, just beyond my
conscious consciousness.

Voices.

Everyone has so much to say. So much to tell me.

So much I don't hear.

So much I don't understand.

“I could really use someone just asking me how it went. Someone to wish me luck.”

My mother has been sick for as long as I can remember.

I have grown so accustomed to hospital visits I forget about them.

I don't want to ask.

So she can complain about my father.

Or tell me what I already know.

My mother is not well.

My mother is weak and that frightens me.

What have you taught me mother, without even meaning to?

Without even trying.

When I was in the first grade, I forgot how to tie my shoes.

They tell the story with affection.

But, how could I forget?

Who was tying them for me?

Who taught me to forget?

You taught me to be helpless, mother.

And you thought you were empowering me. Teaching me how to be a woman in this fucked up world. Teaching me all you knew. It's no one's fault that it wasn't enough for me.

Don't you see, I don't want you to have my opinion just because I state it? I don't want to feel guilty for my strength.

I don't want to be a victim.

I can love you if we disagree.

I can love you if there is no crisis.

I can love you even if/when I'm healthy.

There has to be a bond beyond the pain and sadness.

Please.

Speak.

For the first time, let me hear *your* voice.

Even you must have one.

Dry, cracked for lack of use, but beautiful.

Find it, for you.

Mine can't be strong enough for us both.

You can be right.

I *was* smoking hash in the basement, stealing pills from the medicine cabinet.

If you let me, I will lie because I always have.

You never stopped me.

Kaysea says our friends seem to come and go.

"We are always friends but everyone else seems to only stay awhile."

Chris stayed.

"Well, he was different. He was the exception."

Or maybe he died before he could grow away like everyone else. We'll never know.

And now Andrew.

Another friend.

I'd like to think he'll stay, but I've learned it's hard to trust these things. I wouldn't even fight for him. I know that already.

During the first six months of my friendship with Chris I tried to destroy us at least four times, that I remember. I never loved anyone so much and I knew I couldn't deserve it. The first time I wrote him a note saying that I was in love with him but knowing that he didn't feel the same way about me I was going to stop talking to him because I would eventually screw everything up anyway.

I gave him the note at lunchtime, while he was standing at his locker and told him not to read it before he got home. Made him promise. By ten o'clock that night, when he hadn't called I called him.

"So," I said.

"Um, your letter," Chris began.

"Do you hate me?" I had to know.

"No, I don't hate you, but I haven't actually read the note. My mom washed my pants and it was in the pocket."

We sat in silence.

"Do you think you could tell me what it said?"

"Oh, God, I don't know!" I remember trying not to cry. It is so hard to be a teenager.

"Do you want to re-write it and give it to me tomorrow?"

"I can't take another night of this."

Chris, eternally patient. "Just tell me."

So, shedding only a few tears I told him.

"I don't understand why that means I can't talk to you anymore." Chris was always more rational than I was.

"Because I'm crazy and will start to resent you and then you'll hate me!"

“I won’t let you go my friend. You’re too important to me already.” After he said that I knew it was only a matter of time before I gave in and agreed that I needn’t abandon the friendship.

That was our first ‘crisis’ and they became almost addictive. I would have these sort of panic attacks because I needed him so much. Then I’d start finding fault or cause to leave about once a month just to hear him say he still needed me. It never occurred to me that if I said, “I love you very much” that Chris would say it back.

The last time I came to him with an ill-defined crisis, saying once again that I had to leave before I destroyed everything, he said, “Okay.”

“What?” I was stunned.

Chris told me, “You know that I love you and that I want to be part of your life but if you need to go I won’t stop you. I’ll be here if you need me.”

In the end, he couldn’t let me leave like that. I sobbed and promised to try harder.

The next month, when the panic set in again, I didn’t go to him. That was the first time I cut myself.

When do you cross that line from “call me sometime” to “you didn’t call me today”?

Oh that is just so fucking trite.

I am nauseated nauseated nauseated.

Have been forever.

A headache since I was sixteen.

You don’t just grow up addicted to codeine or painkillers. They start you young enough.

Give a script of Fiorinal to a seventeen-year-old and see what happens.

Oppress me, repress me and give me one hazy feeling and see how long it takes for my headache to go away.

I didn't ask for the neurologist, the CT scan, EEG, and X-rays.

Everyone relieved it's not a tumor.

"Don't worry, we can't cut it out of you (no matter how much it feels like we could).

I'll give you a script, but take them only when it's really bad."

Migraine to tension to migraine again.

I was seventeen, summer vacation.

Really bad. Sure.

Take me on vacation so a third cousin can grope me, try and kiss me, scar me. Spend all night hiding in the bathroom because I'm scared I'll get in trouble.

Really bad. Always.

Everyday.

Every fucking day.

Fucking every day over.

And over again.

You don't say to yourself:

"I think I'd like to take handfuls of Tylenol."

Really bad is *really* relative.

I've been really *really* bad for years.

But no one seems to notice.

No one wants to notice.

I don't want to notice.

The evolution of abuse.

I have quit my job and now I know I have to find a therapist.

One free speck of time and I am confronted, bombarded with everything I put aside to get the job done.

The job is done.

Time for personality overhaul.

Things are barely holding together. I'll have duct tape glue stuck all over me when all is said. Personal handy-work repairs.

Time to call in a professional.

The vague half-lit edge of concern.

Their eyes.

She could not live up to her identity.

Is that what they'll say of me too?

I mean, if everyone would just leave me alone, then I could just be me. Except that it is more pervasive than that. They have taught me to doubt myself.

I don't know if I am who I am—who I want to be—who I thought I wanted to be—who I thought I was—who they think I am.

Who will I be?

Who am I?

I ask and ask and no one answers me.

Can someone tell me my name please?

I know it's crazy, but I really have forgotten it.

I don't know. Someone must have shown me how.

How do you learn to forget?

I talk to a pretty girl on the phone.

What is flirting? I mean, what is it really? Where does it come from? When does it start and when does it stop?

Is friendly flirting?

Is flirting friendly?

But then I think I don't even have enough confidence to flirt. Flirting means you think the other person might flirt back.

I don't.

Who knew the time would pass so quickly? That I would forget the tiniest things.

Bonjour mon petit.

Forgotten. Only remembered by the chance opening of a computer file.

Bonjour ma petite fraise.

Now I remember Chris' handwriting and mine, our hands scrawling down these first lines of every letter to each other.

Because Chris liked the sound of my voice speaking French: *Bonjour mon petit* became the opening line of every note I ever wrote to him.

Because of the boy I loved in the eleventh grade, from England, who told me on New Year's Eve, "Actually, you look very nice—like a great big red strawberry."

Years later the story of my naïve acceptance of that bizarre compliment would endear me to Chris and he when he decided he wanted an opening line for his letters to me, he came up a variation of both the French and the strawberry theme: *Bonjour ma petite fraise.*

He could always make my life seem so much better.

I want to promise you only laughter and happiness and that we will endure forever, just like we have so far. But I can't. I know that now. All I promise you is today and tomorrow and maybe next week. I promise that, no matter what, a part of me, a warm and beautiful part of me, will always love you. I will always know you have a beautiful soul, forever.

Doesn't this sound final? It isn't. I just had to say this to you now, in case one day, it's too late.

I wrote that in Chris' birthday card beginning with: *Bonjour mon petit* four months before he died.

Like cheap foreshadowing in a poorly structured narrative.

Life.

But I always knew I'd lose him, from the beginning something inside me said:

"He is beauty but tragedy. This loss will be monumental."

There was loss from the beginning. In anticipation.

Last night I dreamed not of Chris but of Andrew.

A huge room with open windows and white shears blowing.

And I wanted him to walk on my back, as though he had done it before, but he hadn't, it wasn't him who had done it. Had been Chris. Had to explain to Andrew that he had to support himself, that my back wasn't strong enough to support his entire weight.

I just wanted someone to crack my back.

Wake.

The overt symbolism doesn't work with him. Andrew, who is so thoughtful, would never try to overwhelm me.

Never suppress me.

Never crack me.

Or would he? Is he? Chris never drained me so much. Maybe there is too much mutual pain between Andrew and I. Maybe the mutual emotional purging is becoming too heavy after all.

What can it all mean?

All this vague sentiment rests at the corners of my jaw, in the muscle and the bone. I don't know if I'll laugh or cry until it happens. I don't know if I'm happy or sad until it happens.

My mother cries because no one understands her.

No one can.

How can she be fifty-one years old and not know that?

I learned that.

I think I always knew that

We don't even understand ourselves.

Crushes.

I mean in regards to sexual identity issues, crushes can be monumental. Especially in the beginning. The first few, before you even realize why you suddenly need to spend every spare second with her.

Some will always stand out in your mind.

Tabatha, pale hair frail girl. We took acid in your bedroom. You called me late on the phone to whisper stories to me. You told me I was special and no one understood you as well as I did.

Your dad abuses you. You are seventeen with limited options. Parents divorced.
Mother bi-polar.

Me—nineteen with my intro psych courses hoping, thinking, I might be the one to
save you.

Who am I to see what social services didn't?

Leave her with Dad. Mom is unstable.

But I don't understand.

They ask you if you want to stay with your dad—you are five years old—while you
are sitting on his lap.

Can they do that?

I don't ask you. Enough people don't believe you.

I believe you.

I love you.

We are both in love with a different gay boy.

Yes.

Then why do I want to hold you? So small. So pale. Let me protect you.

I go to the hospital with you when you are raped by a cab driver.

I find you a therapist.

I go home and cry and don't even know why exactly.

For you or for me?

And in the end, as I feel a year's worth of \$100 a week counseling slip through my
fingers, I abandon you.

Not unlike everyone else in your life.

But if they all loved you as much as I did, you really have quite a bit.

It's beginning to confuse me—what I dreamed and what I didn't. When the dreams feel as real as this does. When you dream of conversations that just continue when the phone wakes you up. Where is the line?

You can't really ask.

"Did you tell me you loved me, or was that only a dream?"

My sister's dog is watching me pop Tylenol.

I'm not used to animals. Just look at me.

Just look.

Aren't you going to try and stop me?

Bark or something! Don't be so stupid. Don't be kind or ignorant.

At least try to stop me.

No.

You just stare at me. You don't even understand. Roll over. Sigh. Wait for me to turn the lights out.

My conscience.

I feel mocked by innocence.

She is two years old.

Points to my tattoo.

"Tootat."

I do not correct her.

She is the thing that stopped me.

It would have been easier to die than to learn to live again.

But she, who didn't yet talk or walk, just crawled around and looked up at me with those big blue eyes—again a cliché, is something good just because she is.

I wonder if I was ever that.

Just good.

I look at her and think:

“Don't do to yourself what I've done.”

I want to be a perfect aunt. Maybe it's the one thing I can be perfect at.

Or will I fuck that up too?

Right now she loves me.

I don't love my aunts. Not nearly as much as I love her.

Did I used to love them?

Did I grow out of it?

Will she?

Four days after my sister gave birth I drove, with my parents to see her, my brother-in-law, and this new person-child-girl introduced by a late night phone call just one day after my twenty-first birthday.

I had seen my sister probably three weeks before, happily pregnant, flowered short overalls. She handled pregnancy with the comfort and ease I expected. She was thirty-four, eight years married, master's degree (child psychology) and eight years practical experience. Most of all, a sense of self I could hardly understand.

Maybe I'll find it one day far away.

And I say this all with more sincerity than I could try to explain.

That's how my sister has always been to me: So good, it seems sarcastic or exaggerated, but it isn't.

Maybe she had her problems, but I was too young to remember them.

Thirteen years too young.

So to me, she was always a warm lap and a pale blue T-shirt, singing John Denver songs, changing my nightgowns when I wet the bed.

I suppose pregnancy suited her so well because she had already been Mother.

So here is my sister/mother and has *finally* (as much of the family would add) had a child.

A daughter.

Perfect, warm, pink, soft sitting sleeping in baby-seat on the kitchen table.

And my sister pale, colorless, save the many ruptured blood vessels in her cheeks and eyes, who can't walk up the stairs because over twenty-four hours of labor and a forceps delivery have left her unable to do so for the time being.

My little (I stand taller than her in her wedding photos, not quite thirteen) sister...lost?

My selfishness does not affect my love for this child but I leave that day thinking:

"I have a beautiful niece, but I have lost my sister as I have known her."

I was right, but blood vessels heal and so I was wrong too.

My sister/mother is a Mother and without surprise to me, it suits her completely.

Andrew has never ridden a city bus because he is from the county. It is a sunny Saturday with crisp, cool air. We stand on the bus stop for nearly ten minutes.

"I left the rest of it on the couch downstairs. I forgot to put it in the desk. Fuck."

“But it’s in the egg, right?”

Foil wrapped paper hidden in *Kinder Surprise* toy egg.

My mother won’t go downstairs.

Or will she?

My mother will not even know what it is?

Or will she?

My mother won’t throw them away thinking they are old candy wrappers.

Or will she?

A twenty minute delay because I remember what I forgot stalls us long enough to save the trip.

And now I am fundamentally different from what I was just days ago.

I can’t even write it down because it is all still caught inside my chest somewhere.

Now, the next day, I am not stoned, but cannot forget that I was.

And that I was young once.

Once a little girl, who hid in her room when her parents had people over because she didn’t like them, like any of them, just wanted to be alone. Not unhappy just not happy sitting on her bed thinking of far off places when she was older and had friends and houses away from her parents because she must be adopted because she does not fit here never has and never will because all these people make her nervous and no one would ever believe she’d grow up loud and laughing.

Not unhappy.

Not happy.

Little Girl, I have not completely betrayed your trust in yourself, have I? I’ve begun to bring it back full-circle, somehow with these bitter squares of paper, trapped in a stairwell

going down down deeper deeper lower lower.

Help me out Little Girl. Tell me what it is I'm not remembering.

Tell me that great big secret you hid away and swore you'd never tell again, not even to yourself, not even if I'm begging you.

Please.

You left enough to make me wonder. You left enough to fuck me over and I don't blame you—not one bit because we do what we need to. But I'm not a little girl anymore and I promise to protect you. I take the blows this time.

Why are you hiding, Little Girl?

What are you hiding?

Who are you hiding?

I have never been able to figure out this great nameless sadness you have left for me to sort through.

I am too different to be here.

Andrew negates the experience telling me that it was "Just a high." This hurts me deeply and I cry but I don't tell him so.

Fuck Andrew then. My perspective completely lost and I don't want to find it.

Reclaim it.

Can't this be it?

I get lost in the swish of clothes in the hallway beyond the door as real as if I was swishing my own fabrics together.

I am not here. A woman smells of smoke and reads from obscure novels.

Give me scraps of paper, backs of photocopies to scribble—the only thing that keeps

me awake now.

Conversation with myself.

Don't you see, until I sit myself down and sort some things out, I can't learn your jargon. It lulls me to sleep.

Tell me I am the whisper trapped in my own mind. At least I see that now.

They warned me about this.

"Some people never come back."

I didn't think they meant this.

Nausea of denying self-growth.

Pulled away the sticky flesh and no one even sees my skin is raw. I am exposed.

A whisper wanting to sing a yell.

I have warned Them for years.

"I will go insane one day."

And They didn't think I meant this.

A lack of concern must be identified, labeled.

Out of touch.

Reality.

Crazy.

Irony.

I am more real than They are.

I have more in my nothing than they could hope to find in their everything

Important.

I have seen perfection and she has imperfect teeth.

Tell me how the smell of her perfume managed to linger in my hair and all I did was hug her? That kiss on the cheek. I couldn't breathe and I thought I'd be ready to fuck her.

But that's only fantasy.

I am not forward.

It all started say...four years ago. The rare occurrence of good luck and free tickets to a concert. And don't even ask me how we got back stage. Standing around. Standing around. And we must have looked like "nice" girls because she just gestured to us and let us down the stairs.

It would be the same woman the next year that banished us to the cold—standing outside the backstage door, but we saw them again that time.

It was the "back-up" singer that caught my eye this time. Calling me "Cutie Pie," offering to share her orange.

So I wrote her a letter. Casual. Witty.

And she wrote back. I tore the blue envelope accidentally.

So the next year, after a few carefully worded letters and a bouquet of flowers sent backstage, she comes out to find me and all I can do is stare at my feet because I am so fucking infatuated.

So by the next year, everything is in place.

Send a man back to tell her I am waiting to say hello and he returns promptly saying, "She was looking for you."

I walk down those stairs and feel the stares of others.

"Is she coming out?"

It's funny because I hardly care about the "star" right now.

Wonderful show of course but it's over.

I am escorted back to see the other woman who hugs me and calls me “Sweetie” and I feel gloriously helpless.

I walk quickly back up the stairs, a swift gesture to three friends who hurry easily down stairs that took four years of effort to find.

From the first, quick ushering in and out, an act of charity soon forgotten.

To standing in the cold with numb hands.

To finding the obscure friendship with a back-up singer who still can’t take a swarm of us down with her.

To this, me in leather and boots clicking against metal, leading excited friends downstairs.

Me thinking, *I already have your autograph. What now?*

I ask her when she’ll do a solo tour.

Soon.

I want to say to her, as my friends are chatting excitedly with the “star,” “You are so beautiful, so talented. I want to buy you a coffee and get to know you better because something about you moves me and it really wouldn’t matter if you weren’t ‘famous’ because, yeah, because.”

And she is hurried away to a Christmas party.

But she did wink at me and hug me. Quick kiss on the cheek.

“You look beautiful, Sweetie.”

“So do you.” I’m not even sure I said that until a friend confirms it later.

That’s something at least.

I mean, women aren’t supposed to hold sex as the ultimate goal, right?

Sure.

A couple drinks later and I almost believe it myself.

Sharon asked me to be a pallbearer. Standing not ten feet away from Chris, from the corpse of an angel, she asked me.

I choked, literally and said, "I can't."

Prepared for this, she said she'd make me an honorary one.

Walk in front.

Lead the way.

Head held high.

Till the grave.

I almost changed my mind, but it's not like carrying him in my arms or anything.

Like that night I carried him on my back. One step at a time down my street.

That was when he had sprained his ankle.

That was before he had a computer and had to use mine.

That was when Chris used to spend hours on an opening paragraph.

That was when?

Before.

Before the sound of a car door slamming outside my house on a Friday night made me jump.

My heart in my throat.

I mean, I was always a bit nervous, but this is getting insane.

When Chris first died, I thought everyone was dying.

Every knock at the door, every phone call, every missing phone call, must be because something more lost.

That's why I got the Lorazepam in the first place.

You can't sleep if you're waiting for the inevitable loss.

It doesn't matter how improbable.

Inevitable.

Has happened.

Could happen again.

I want to say to people, "Can you promise me that I'll be happy?"

I have all sorts of imaginary conversations with all sorts of imaginary people. I guess I always have, imagined.

It used to be a man, but now it's a woman.

Some perfect, crooked smile saying softly, "Yes, I can promise you. You'll be happy."

And I am always quiet, content, trusting.

That's how I'm sure I'm just imagining it.

If someone really said that to me, I wouldn't be quiet, content, or trusting.

I would give her a perfect crooked smile and say softly, "Fuck you. You can't have anything real."

I can't trust naiveté anymore.

Promise me happiness and I'll know I'll never love you.

I'll just dream of you.

There's an intensity slipping away from my life now.

I'm realizing nothing is the same.

So I find Andrew and at first I am so grateful because there really is something so good, so genuine about him.

But I misjudged the connection between us. After the first month went by I no longer knew what to say to him. Realized he wasn't what I thought. I could never have been. That was why I was never able to throw my head back and laugh. Instinct preparing me for the let down I knew would come.

I used to sit in the sun with cigarettes and smiles. Laughing freely, unconditionally.

I used to be so young.

I used to be free.

Well, freer—at least I remember it that way.

Sort of.

Who the fuck knows?

I mean it's one thing or another.

There's this sort of quirky thing called life that I'm all caught up in.

Maybe everyone is.

Well, not everyone.

But it's different if you don't realize that you're trapped.

Caught.

Held down.

Choking.

Just enough air to keep you from there.

I like to look at the water. I think it looks so solid, but it isn't.

To be like Jesus and walk on water.

Run across the water, home.

To wherever. Whatever.

Maybe that's all life is.

Wishing you could walk on water.

Wasting time.

Why not take a boat, swim, drive? The road is right off the dock anyway.

But it's not always that simple.

Do you ever look at something and just think "wow"?

Ever look at yourself and think the same thing?

I haven't.

Maybe once I do, I'll buy a boat.

Part Two:

Orange

When I was twelve I had an orange sweatshirt. It was the only piece of clothing I could see myself taking into adulthood. The other day I bought a business suit.

The end of his life came with a vastness of breath I'm sure.

I assume that's what happens when you die: You take one

last

breath.

Something sad in that.

It's strange to realize we were really only children. Only barely scratching the surface of the adulthood we thought we had found.

Two days before Chris died, I remember us peering through furniture store windows. I spied a wooden chair with an orange seat cushion.

"That would look nice in our apartment."

We didn't have one, but were going to.

The perfect roommates.

I told him his boyfriends could stay over as often as he wanted them to, but no fucking in the bathroom, unless it was in the shower and they left the door unlocked so I could pee.

That seemed fair.

No rules for me.

I was always the more considerate one.

The accommodater.

I wonder if you remember things after you die.

Andrew doesn't believe that consciousness continues past that last, vast breath. He says this to me after I've spent months telling him how I can still sense Chris' presence sometimes. Andrew doesn't realize that I mark the comment, knowing my disillusionment in

him is complete. It is only a matter of time before he disappears with the rest of the friends I've had. Kaysea is right. They all do just come and go.

But if he's right, that's really sad because that would mean that I'm the only one who remembers that warm night by the river when we picked stars out of the Big Dipper so that no matter where we went in life, all we had to do was find our stars and know we weren't that far apart after all.

But that was only for where we went in life. We were fucking teenagers. We didn't think about what came after that.

I don't even know if there is a heaven, so I don't know if you can see stars from there. And if his state of consciousness was severed with his neck, why do I bother seeking out stars that only I am seeing?

Only I remember.

Maybe those stars exploded that day too and I'm just too frightened to see it.

See myself alone.

I could re-create large parts of my life and no one would notice, except Chris. The only one who knew everything about me.

Maybe I am faithful to nothing more than my own insanity—thinking that something is still here. Maybe being alone again is just too frightening so I pretend that I'm not. Maybe I am nothing but a pathetic shell of a woman popping painkillers and acid pretending, wishing I could sit by that river and trust that not only Chris, but those stupid, fucking stars could actually be there for me. That I won't spend the rest of my life sick to my stomach with grief, sadness, and pain.

I suppose life has left me alone to learn to trust myself.

Or it.

Tell me again there isn't nervousness in your touch.

I can go to the internet and seduce a fifty-year-old ex-cop from Chicago.

Told her she'd have to bust me for possession of marijuana.

There is freedom in language.

Written. Typed. Whispered over phone lines.

Just language.

It's just fantasy you know.

All of it either made up or twisted around so it's worse than made up.

Cheese Whiz is vulgar, violent.

Imitation.

It moves me beyond meaning.

Late at night on carefully browned toast.

Not the same in the afternoon, only in my night.

Cheese Whiz, toast, and television.

Cheese Whiz, toast, and television.

Alone.

Imitation.

I used to dream of prostitution when I was young.

Sixth grade.

There was a teacher we decided must be a pervert. All the girls discussed it. The way he rubbed your back in gym class must mean something.

We called him “Mr. M” for “Mr. Molestation”. Only to ourselves.

Nothing ever happened but I can remember lying in bed at night, imagining that if I could only start my period, he would kidnap me and force me into prostitution.

I would have no choice.

And it’s not so much that I wanted to be a prostitute at the age of eleven, it was just that it seemed so exciting, as exciting as it was horrible and somehow that was better than where I was. Maybe just because it was different.

Maybe it was just to know that someone would want me badly enough to steal me, force me, use me.

And it wasn’t even about sex. I barely knew what that was. Just that you couldn’t have sex until you had your period because kids didn’t have sex, but women did and once you started your period, you were in this small-large biologically complete way, a woman.

And you were taken.

Stolen.

By perverted men?

I can’t believe I saw it that way.

I can’t believe that of all the things that could possibly happen to her, an eleven-year-old girl would lie awake at night dreaming about that.

I don’t know my father’s family. They are an incomplete collection of yellowed photographs. Jaundiced looking, striking figures in black and white. Yellow and black over time.

They are my father’s voice yelling, echoing in the kitchen early on Sunday mornings. Incomplete phone conversations that startle me grudgingly from sleep each time.

They are absent.

Incomplete.

I didn't even see the pictures until I was a teenager when my dad asked what souvenir I wanted him to bring me back from Italy.

"Pictures."

And he was startled, stunned that I even cared, proud and shy that I wanted them. Not realizing that I needed them. Me, wanting to know if maybe I never fit quite right because I belonged with them.

Loud, yelling, passionate people.

I wouldn't know.

I couldn't know.

I suppose this is just family. The amazingness of it. So complex that everyone thinks it's simple.

I don't think it's right that people are automatically family. Shouldn't you have to earn it or something?

I don't want to have to love someone for some obscure genetic reason. I don't want them to love me that way.

I want to earn people's love. I want to know I deserve it. I don't want to have to pretend.

It hurts me.

I'd rather honestly like someone then pretend to love them.

Everything else seems pretend. What I say. What I wear. What I do. I'd like to at least feel with honesty.

I keep dreaming of funerals and cemeteries and of Chris.

I cry to him and kiss his forehead, lie against him in my backyard and beg him to come back. Beg him for five minutes alone and he touches my neck and I know I'd have to snap it first—die.

I wake up wanting to go back to sleep because I haven't been happy in this reality for so long now. My eyes are sore from crying everyday.

I'm starting to wonder about slashing my wrists—even though I probably wouldn't die. At least I'd have scars as proof of pain.

But then they'd put me in the hospital and if I asked for a pen to write, they wouldn't give it to me because they're considered dangerous in psych wards. Then I would probably become really upset and they would feel justified.

"If you don't give me a pen I'll die!"

But they'd think they're helping me.

All I'd want is freedom but they wouldn't understand that.

It's like "The Yellow Wallpaper". I've never read it, but when I told Kaysea all this, that's what she said, "It's like the yellow wallpaper."

But then the question there is: Do you write because you are crazy or does writing make you crazy?

I write because I have nothing else.

There's nothing left inside of me except for this garble of scribbled words. I see them with my eyes closed. Read them then write them down.

Transcribe them.

I am etching out my soul with symbols called letters.

The alphabet.

Who would have thought it began all those years ago with tiny hands just as shaky?

I am falling deep within myself so I guess that means I'm falling away from the outside.

I miss the initial shock of grief.

This is just emptiness and I can't figure out how to cure that. I can't figure out how to fill that.

I guess I thought Andrew would when I found him. I guess it was like: Even a little bit, even if he fills a little bit.

But he didn't.

How can emptiness over-shadow so much that is full?

I know enough about psychology to realize that none of this is very good.

The nausea won't go away now and I can't eat for much of the day. All I do is sleep and then I just sit in near darkness watching television in the basement. I'm trying to remember the last time I took a shower.

I'm starting to think maybe it's time for antidepressants. I made the therapist appointment already, but I feel too tired to fix my own problems.

I need an edge.

What will take the ache away? What will make me whole again?

If I ever was.

Last night I dreamed of half-cooked eggs. Surprised, warm, runny yolks, sticky on my fingers.

I dreamed I told a faceless man we should have sex, but it was really something else I

realized was in the wrong package. Not sex, but anarchy. We needed anarchy masked as, trapped within sex.

So why couldn't I date a fifty-year-old woman? I know I haven't met her yet, but that's hardly the point.

It doesn't have to mean I want to have sex with my mother.

What would Freud say?

What about my unresolved Electra Complex making me a lesbian and acting as the source of my deep-rooted, unconscious resentment towards my mother?

Not much I suppose. Freud never thought too much about us gals anyway, except that we were all hysterical (his word, wasn't it?) and liked to lie about childhood sexual abuse.

I lie.

Not all the time, but when I do, it's complete. There are some lies I've referred to so often, I have to remind myself that they aren't true.

What's so bad about love and happiness anyway? Why do I always pretend that I don't want them?

They're all I think about.

I just don't want to trust them.

But if someone would let me love her, I could do a really good job of it.

Then again, maybe not.

I wonder if everyone isn't fucked up in the end. I'm tired of taking responsibility for everything.

Everything doesn't have to be my fault.

I just want to be me.

No apologies.

No Tylenol.

No Self-Destruction.

Just me.

Me. Me. Me.

Me.

What a relief it would be.

To admit I deserve.

Just deserve to be.

I was born wasn't I?

Something put me here didn't it?

I'm trying to find some room in an empty house. I have backed myself into a corner
and there's nothing else around me.

Emptiness.

Emptiness.

And I have managed to trap myself.

I am here.

I am here.

Maybe that's the only answer I can get.

Maybe it's the only one I need.

Why can't I dance?

Why don't I dance in the vastness?

What holds me against the wall when all I have to do is take one step.

Into everything.

If I know how to walk, why don't I?

The keyboard tray is broken. There's a screw along one of the rails that jams it every now and then. It was just never put together properly.

I wonder if I'm having a problem if I'm dreaming of it.

The Internet.

Only in dreams, it's tangible.

Gray, hazy tunnels.

Static.

Flashes like lightening.

Emerge somewhere else where manicured fingers type sentences for featureless faces that still seem happy somehow.

I am reaching out through the darkness, fingers tangled in my hair.

I binge.

On-line chatting.

It can hold my interest for so long at a time.

Right now, it's holding me.

You can do a lot of other things while you chat. At least I can.

I'd still like to get a second phone line.

See, that's how I know it's bad—when I want to be able to hide it.

Always checking voice mail afterwards.

“Get off the god-damn computer! Anyway, just call me when you're off.”

But it isn't cyber-sex anymore and that's a huge relief. I'm now a noble chatter.

Never did much more than amuse me. I could never understand how people could actually get off while some stranger types dirty shit on the computer. I really did take to 'seducing' men because it was so damn easy. Type the words: suck, tits and/or cock and you're all set. In about two minutes, they can't even type anything back and when they do it's full of typos. I liked to have friends over while I did it. I'd call them over to read along. After about two weeks, the whole idea of it made me nauseated.

Reformed cyber-whore.

I can do my homework, entertain friends, watch TV and chat.

It's a different reality.

I'm a different reality.

Witty, self-confident, wonderful person in a lesbian-chat-land.

Wearing a mail-order bra.

Found it (two of them actually) on my bed when I came home from a weekend away.

My mother.

I'm not talking about the "home shopping channel" or anything. I'm talking about mail-order. Like a paper in one of those envelopes full of coupons you get in the mail every now and again.

Mail-order bras.

The thing is, it really is: "The most comfortable bra you'll ever wear," just like it promises on the mail-order sheet.

"It doesn't really do much for you," my mother says implying it doesn't really enhance the bust-line.

Sure Mom and I've always worried about enhancing this fantastic pair of b-cups I've got. Not since I was nineteen and got a Wonder Bra and all it did was dig into me with the "wonder" underwire.

I gave up on underwire and definition long ago and my breasts have never been happier.

Free-form in mail-order bras.

Tell me where the time goes.

As I sit here night after night writing all this down.

Holiday bliss hasn't crossed my path this year. Dad has found an orange light bulb for the nativity scene. Seems to me, the stable is on fire.

This, the second Christmas without Chris. Almost worse than the first because at least then I had the nervous anticipation of sadness. But the second just isn't like that.

Wishing I could cry, if only for a moment.

Everything tapers to normal it seems.

With him I had such happiness it was painful. The loss was painful still.

Ebbs.

Ebbs.

I am cold.

I am alone.

Sad. Empty. Alone.

Christmas Eve and candles.

Pictures of past celebration no longer move me.

Why am I nauseated?

Again.

What's the bother anyway? Why this excessive need to please?

Feel as though I'm sprawled on that proverbial psychoanalytic couch they talk about.

"You say no matter how much your father loved you, it was never quite enough?"

That's right. Always fell short somehow. No matter what. No matter how hard I tried. No matter what I did or said.

The praise was always tempered with something. A 'but' of some sort.

Often, I could just shrug it off, but sometimes I end up sobbing in the bathroom with the water running full-blast to muffle the sound because I could never let him know that he hurt me because that would mean I didn't deserve his reproach and of course I must have just because I'm me.

Cold water splashing tears from my eyes even before they hit my cheeks.

But I look pretty when I'm crying.

My reflection in the bathroom mirror.

But I wonder if maybe my sister isn't right. Maybe we don't have to tip-toe around him. Why do we? Always have.

I am trying to retreat to the past, to a better time, but I can't seem to find one right now.

I don't understand: If life really does work like they show you on TV or in books, why doesn't it feel like it to me? Or anyone else I know actually?

So if that's not how it works, why do people film it that way or write it that way? And why do we watch or read what we always know can't be even remotely close to true?

“Do you ever wonder what your life would be like if you never tried drugs?” Kaysea asks me as we turn into my driveway.

Kaysea is one of my original drug buddies.

Me, corrupting a bunch of fellow honors students when I was just barely eighteen.

Me, the most far away from it breaking through a mirror with only slight traces of scars or blood stains left now.

Pot shattered a world. They say drugs can do that to misguided adolescents, but they never assume it's for the better.

Pot taught me how to shiver in the cold, see in the dark, sleep in corners with damp desert boots.

Tell me it sounds like a bad thing, but because of it I know what it means to be warm, to see with uninterrupted clarity, to crawl hazily into flannel sheets at the end of these days.

Pot taught me that the mold could very well be broken, that there very well never was one at all.

It showed me that something mainstream was suffocating me. That I belonged somewhere else.

Good girl was a role.

I was a person.

Burn the script and you're left with improvisation.

A little risky but worth it for the times when it works out better than you ever could have planned it.

And it's all in trusting your high so you can learn from it.

I mean, taking the drug is always a risk. I don't deny that and if your concern stops you from taking the drug, I can respect that. I have never pressured anyone into doing

something they didn't want to do, but once you've taken it, why stress?

It's all about letting go or giving in. Part of the reason you shouldn't do drugs with just anyone.

Wonder about never trying drugs.

I would have to erase such a large part of myself.

It's like anything that represents rebellion.

That first gasp of stale air that tells me sometimes, most times, I have to take care of myself.

I think I must be very close to losing my mind.

Inches away from believing songs are messages from the then, from Chris.

For now they paralyze me.

Leave me vaguely nauseated and sad.

But why do I feel beckoned, as if on a weaker day I might get up and do something, something I don't even know or understand right now.

So I wonder: What do the dead beckon you to do and if I really think he is beckoning, that can't be very good, can it?

Not good at all.

What if I don't know him anymore, a year and a half later?

When Chris first died I could feel him surround me. I would breathe him in and gag from the unfamiliar sensation in my lungs.

I could feel him. I would call him to me.

But time evolved him. I felt it. I felt him evolve into something far away and beautiful. Something bigger than the him I knew before.

And I still say I'd do just about anything to have him back but now I think he'd be very changed and wouldn't want this anymore.

I take so much Tylenol in the evening I can taste them once they've had the chance to travel through my system.

This chemical, pasty taste in my mouth.

I suppose it must be what death tastes like.

Lying helpless in a coffin, pumped full of chemicals.

Everyone feels so sorry for you.

I am buried in a coffin.

Trapped in the cold ground.

The best parts of me are gone, buried, dead.

I was beautiful enough to have a fantastic person love me and now I am a disaster and the worst part is that he would be so ashamed of me.

I can see the look on his face.

I can taste Tylenol in my mouth and it's making me sick, but I can't stop.

There is something comforting in the taste of death.

At least there is something interesting in my incompleteness. It endears me to enough people. I am just bizarre enough to keep people around and not frighten them away.

It's hard to watch old movies because I know that one day this will be an old movie. All of it. My breath. My words. The color of my hair. All those shocking, confusing, revolutionary thoughts written in hidden, dim corners. I wait for them to ignite, forgetting that they will go out and I will be cliché.

They bind the trees like sullen people, eyes cast down, averted from the street.

I wonder if they survived the storm, if their burlap dressings were enough protection from the wind and snow that held me there only one day behind schedule.

And the world stops—due to snow.

And I am forced to reconcile feeling cozy with blankets and candles while an old man sits stuck in his car outside our window.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

And no one will help him.

I can't help him.

Can't push him down the street. Every inch another rut.

And the helplessness leaves me cold, not cozy.

Nauseated.

Again.

I guess there was just something about her that initiated sexual advances from all sorts of men.

Tabatha was only sixteen.

Small and blond.

And to say she set herself up that way is a bit of an untruth, though not a lie.

What does a sixteen-year-old know about the conditioning society has subjected her to?

Who ever told her that behaving that way, speaking in that fluent fuck-me tongue that made you popular in school would also suggest promiscuity to older, more assertive, more

aggressive men?

To a sixteen-year-old girl often, the idea of a thirty-year-old man wanting to sleep with you is insane, impossible.

So who has the coping skills at the age of sixteen to effectively ward off mature advances?

Top it off with a touch of guilt, responsibility.

Why did you say those things? Wear those pants? Bend over that way?

And even though she probably has no idea why, she'll accept responsibility. It's not right to expect a thirty-year-old man to restrain himself.

"No one is going to beat you at conversation, so don't tell me that's a problem."

A fantastic man I know that most people just pass by.

I know his name, Mike, his first name and that's it.

I don't know where he lives, his telephone number, how old he is, if he's married, was married. I guess he's around fifty. Maybe older. Maybe younger.

I just have a bunch of assumptions about him. Things I piece together in impromptu conversations in downtown coffee shops.

I know what I need to and ask next to nothing, knowing that he'll share what is important.

I would never want his number—to call him on the phone.

I find him when I need him and I trust him completely.

When Chris died, he was the only one who understood, who validated what I felt around me.

"He's not gone you know. You can find him whenever you need to."

At first he was my only hope.

Now he is the one who calls me on everything and won't let me outwit myself.

Well, not that he stops me. He just points it out so I can't claim ignorance.

Mike can centre me.

I leave his table always a little more hopeful, a little more calm, a little more peaceful,
a little more accepting of things I may not understand.

I am wearing knitted slippers from my grandmother in Italy. When did she die?

Two and a half years now.

But I never even met her.

Every time Dad came back from month long summer visits it was with a bag of multi-colored coarse yarn slippers. They have a pointed toe when not worn. When I was little that confused me because I thought the only shoes with pointed toes were wooden and they were Dutch, weren't they?

Of course I realized, as I grew older, the point is for your big toe.

I had been wearing the slippers crooked.

There are people that you just know you'll always remember, no matter what.

Sabrina submitted a poem about bulimia to be workshopped by our third-year creative writing class; the next week I made a point to submit a piece on self-mutilation. I had hardly spoken to her all semester but I knew that if I had the right fix on her, she would know that I handed in my piece to echo hers. That I was trying to say something like, "Yeah, me too."

It worked.

I don't talk to her much anymore. Not for a couple of years. Sometimes that saddens

me but most times I respect the evolution and appreciate the lingering influence she has on my thinking.

Retro music, especially The Smiths, makes me imagine her youth and I can't say why really. But there is just something so pervasive about her personality, that even though I didn't know her then, I can just know she exists in it. And I think she knows it.

I know that, though most people wouldn't agree with me.

"She is so quiet—so withdrawn."

I don't know what game she's in but I know she's confident enough on some level to keep playing at it for a while longer.

She's hiding away under blankets on couches.

Where she needs to be.

Trapping herself like we all do. I thought about trying to help her but am thinking there would really be nothing in that.

I mean, I'm the one caught thinking about her and youth. Knowing the smooth warm texture of her history because I know her now.

She is spending time in waiting and I think she must know more than any of us who feel concern for her. I think she has known all along what I am just starting to discover. That the pain is too big apart of things not to be embraced.

I remember long walks at midnight.

Okay, maybe not.

Maybe it wasn't like that at all, ever.

What's a 'long walk' anyway? The distance between my house and Chris' and back again? That was a long walk especially on colder days.

And I didn't have a hat.

I remember one time he took a bus, which was really silly. Doesn't cut out all the walking time.

It was only fifteen minutes.

But I was the one who would call a taxi on particularly lazy evenings.

How much time was wasted walking?

How much saved?

Chris always had such a distinctive walk. Very poised and self-assured. I could recognize him from blocks away from his stride.

It's that confidence thing again.

If I could hear better, I'd eavesdrop more.

It's not that my hearing itself is impaired, it's more to do with my attention span.

I'm choking on images again.

How does one say that the snow keeps falling outside the window and looking from this booth it's really pretty because I'm only partly underground so I'm looking up to the ground, that I can't even see really, and there are street lights outside and the reflection of the lights from the inside on the glass and that Quality Suites sign and all together, from this exact spot, in this exact booth it is very comforting to a tired, anxious girl with an unending headache?

I'm thinking of email and how much I like the feel of a pen in my hand all at the same time.

Does every generation struggle with technological advances like this?

Every generation thinking theirs is the one that will mark all the change from past to

present.

But there will always be something about pen to paper. The transformation from handwriting to computer-generated, evenly-distributed ink on paper. Generic alphabet letters.

My dad writes the letter “G” different from anyone else I know.

Oh I am helpless.

Why not tie my hands behind my back? I might feel a little better.

Sometimes you have to wonder why people tell you things at all. Tell you in that I’m-not-even-supposed-to-know-so-you-definitely-shouldn’t-say-anything tone of voice.

That works okay if it’s nothing more than, “Tommy kissed Sally,” but it all changes that second it’s pointed out that “Sally was only four at the time and Tommy he was, well, an adult, but he was slow, ya know? Almost like a kid himself.”

Well that’s all wonderful until Sally grows up and starts to recall all of this and she doesn’t give a fucking shit that Tommy is ‘slow’. She doesn’t give a fucking shit.

But I’m not supposed to know all of this.

But if I’m the only one who might be able to help?

What do I do? Call Sally up, “Hey, remember all those times we sat on the monkey bars in the school yard across the street from my house and made up all these stories about the boys we were going to marry? Remember the way we used to see how long we could take to eat an orange, ripping it a part, eating one tiny capsule of juice at a time? Yeah, me too. So, I heard you’re having some difficulty dealing with memories of childhood sexual abuse.”

I still really do love her.

Always will.

We grew up together and it hurts me to think that no one is supporting her. That she is being punished even further. I don't understand how people can know so little and hurt someone so much.

Sometimes I want to write my sister a letter. But I don't. It would seem odd to her.

Do you remember the morning of your wedding day? I was twelve years old, waiting for my thirteenth birthday just about one week later. The night before the wedding rehearsal dinner/buffet had been at our house (though you were officially living three hours away then), which had been cleaned and cleaned again in the preceding weeks. Dad had even made me climb in behind my desk and pull out the horde of paper I had shoved there because Zio and Zia were going to be staying with us. You came in and sat on my bed. I pretended to be asleep though I don't know why exactly. You brushed my hair away from my face.

"Poor thing. She's all congested."

You said this to Mom. I could feel her standing in the doorway. And I opened my eyes, as if from sleep. We had to go to the salon. I wanted to be an adult that day. Do you remember that I started crying at the wedding reception once most of the people had left? No one could understand why, not even me. (I would see you again the next day. We would eat leftover veal birds.) Mom had to remind me that once they got me home that night I cried again. I cried myself to sleep. You were only two years older than I am now. But to me, you were everything and nothing scared me more than the thought of losing you and the strange thing is that a part of me will always see you as the one who has all the answers. The only opinion that really matters to me. And my friends can tell you that I have never spoken badly of you. There is no effort required because there is nothing bad I could say of you. I

wonder if you really know how remarkable I think you are, if you'd even believe me if I tried to tell you. I don't want to sell you a Hallmark Greeting. I just would like to you to know what I am because of you. I couldn't dream of anyone else being my sister.

How could I just tell her that?

I find myself wondering if I'll ever fall in love again. It's funny really because I've spent so much time explaining to myself that I wasn't 'in love' with Chris. But with his death I've learned that I don't, I can't respond to anyone the way I did to him. No one moves me with the depth that he did. Perhaps the only real truth is that as much as he loved me, he was never 'in love' with me and maybe I just can't accept that. I can't reconcile why I needed the fairy tale, at least for a little while before coming out and he never did. I can't forgive that. Perhaps I don't blame him for his death as much as for not giving me what I thought I deserved while he was alive. Perhaps that horrible feeling I had in my stomach when they told me was at least part, "He still owed me something."

Maybe all this residual pain is my having to accept, "No, he didn't."

I've spent enough time in ambiguity. I'm still in love with a dead gay boy who was undoubtedly my soul mate. Not much can stand up to that.

I don't deal well with pressure or anxiety or people who evoke it in me. I used up all my reserves a few years back. Everything. Every defense mechanism called upon and taxed to a breaking point. So now I just can't take it. Now I can't stand my ground. Now I want escape.

Sometimes I feel like I live a sort of double life. Maybe that's why I sometimes talk about myself in the third person. I have all sorts of things that I hide from different people.

Who am I anyway?

There is comfort in the control though. I remember when I finally came out as a lesbian to my mother. Suddenly, Mother, knew about this great big secret and I had to grieve the loss of it. I felt so exposed. It was almost easier to lie about it.

Part Three:

Yellow

A nine-year-old girl's favorite color; anything but pink. I'm sure that beneath the faded magazine pictures the bedroom walls are still that soothing yellow. The curtains, freed from dust, still checkered sunshine.

Run into 7-Eleven to pass some time before my bus arrives. Salt or sugar? Chips or chocolate? I can't decide so I grab some Reeses Peanut Butter Cups and some Cheetos Corn Twists. Waiting in line I glance at the magazine covers. This month's *Vogue* featuring a blonde model with large brown eyes, a shimmering lemon tank dress, arms folded across her chest.

So I want to buy fashion magazines? I want to flip through pictures of anorexic, bulimic, drug-addicted adolescents and pretend they might be the ideal woman. I want to watch them. Trace them. Their careers evolve. Why is she doing work with Gucci now? She's put on weight. Can't have that. She better watch out.

I know it's wrong. I know it's bad. Indecent. Hurtful.

Impossible images for woman to live up to. I know. I know. I know.

I taped them to my walls. Every side. Surrounded. Amazed and discouraged in the same breath. Open my eyes every morning to their nauseating beauty and my nauseating self. The body I know best and hate most.

They look like that and I look like this. And I still love them and resent them and love them.

They are unreal somehow.

How does someone grow into something so beautiful while I grow into this?

In truth, I feel half-finished. Half-grown. Half. Half. Half of what they are.

I can pick them apart, deconstruct them. Set them up as victims, failures, shells of abused women not so different from me. But somehow, I still idealize them.

If only.

I would be happy.

Okay, okay so it's inappropriate. It's not political or feminist or strong.

But maybe I'm tired. Maybe I really don't care as much as it may seem I do.

Maybe I don't want to save them. I want to be them.

Oh! I want to be weak, not strong.

I want to be held, not hold.

I want to be comforted, not comfort.

I want to be selfish, not noble.

I want to be objectified and taken care of.

Or I want not to want it.

I want not to be so incongruous.

I want to be valid.

Validated. So I can feel quiet again. Because one time I was. One time there was peace. Before the nameless explosion that left me in the rubble. I have to make sense of it. The wreckage of both sides.

Rebuild the peace.

Still choking.

Chris and I, we were young once and there was sunshine.

I remember the smell of fabric softener on his plain white T-shirt. The smell of antiperspirant. Lying in/on his bed, sun lines our faces through the blinds. Yes. The sound of the blinds hitting the window frame. A CD skipping periodically in the background. Dragging lazily on cigarettes that he'd light for me. Wishing we had pot if we didn't. Smoking it if we did.

I can be sick just thinking about it because it's still so real and still now, so far away.

Everything seems far away.

I haven't spoken with Andrew in over a month. I don't know what that was but it was not destined to endure. He is nothing like Chris. Now I'm left wondering if I wasn't really looking for something of Chris in a different boy.

So I've put myself in therapy (again). I wonder if the goal of therapy isn't to make it all less real. Make it all like the dreams I have of him now. The vague apprehension and excitement of reunion in sleep. I wonder if, as time goes by I'll confuse what was a dream and what was real.

It's bizarre for me to have no one able to bear witness to such a large part of my life. One day, if my mind slips a bit more, I could lose it all. I'm all that's left. If I forget, no one remembers. And on him, the smell of fabric softener was so magnificent.

I feel blessed to have ever smelled fabric softener on his T-shirts.

Perhaps I already am.

Crazy.

I'm thinking of a holy woman I know.

Who can remember her name?

Who can remember?

But, I've never been good with names, have I?

She stays with me, in my mind, because I loved her so much and really not at all.

She tried luring me in to Christ, though I thought Christians weren't supposed to do such things.

I fell in love with the sound of her voice and the way she held a pen—writing notes of Eighteenth Century literature.

I fell in love with her intelligence and her understated wit.

One night, high on acid, I lay on the floor and cried for her to hold me.

It frightened Chris.

It frightened me.

And I still wonder why she had to find God before she found me. And why, if I'm just like her, as she has told me time and time again, she never broke down and took me to bed.

Hide the crucifix under the pillow.

Then I wonder who's in denial in the end. Me really needing Christ or her really needing me.

I told her once, "You want me to pray with you and I want you to kiss me and I'm not going to pray and you're not going to kiss so I guess we're at a stand-still."

What I didn't say was, "I'll pray if you'll kiss."

Two women try to save each other from damnation from God and from self.

Lessons never learned because sometimes it's hard to find middle ground.

Yeah, I remember her name. Hardly worth repeating I suppose. Or maybe worth too much.

I have this friend, Angela, who always, or almost always, falls for straight girls and convinces herself that deep down, they are really gay.

Not me.

I've taken avoidance to a completely different level. I gave up on straight girls after

that red head in first year university. Kiss me once in my parents' bedroom and just happen to bring your boyfriend to coffee with you for the next three invitations. I can read between the lines.

I seem to like women in denial. In all its many forms. Like finding Christ for example. I find the woman that everyone just assumes is queer and I end up the privileged confidante.

Nope.

Self-identified heterosexual, and sometimes Christian too for an added bonus. And it doesn't matter how much she might contradict herself or how much all my queer friends will agree that she is definitely not straight (because you just reach a point in identity-formation where it is okay to judge and stereotype everyone around you because you've decided to re-appropriate it as an empowerment issue).

Until the words pass her own lips, I'm writing poems for some boy's girlfriend.

Preaching to the unconverted in foreign tongues.

Falling asleep alone.

I try to pray for answers, but I don't think I do it enough to be very good at it or I've done it so much it's almost unconscious and I forget that I'm even doing it.

Praying.

The only answer I've ever gotten is that there isn't one.

Maybe I should start praying for acceptance.

That's what that psychic told me too. My lesson in this life is to learn acceptance.

I suppose acceptance would be the absence of struggle but struggle has become the

norm against which I judge my life.

Even falling in love with the impossible is something good because it reminds me that at least I can still feel. Truthfully, I have to force myself not to give in to all sorts of hopeless infatuations. Part of me itches for the crisis.

The crying.

The pain.

The feeling.

Even feeling something bad is better than feeling nothing at all. I'm afraid of really being numb. Really freezing over like I said I would after he died. Sometimes I think I replay the events of that night again and again because it was the last time I actually felt something and anything I've felt since has been dull, not sharp; vague, not poignant.

Perhaps I have not known so much happiness as sadness and I gravitate to the familiar.

In pale revelations, I learn my life.

What was it my therapist said about Jungian theory?

Within the self there exist opposites. With these oppositions comes a certain amount of tension and the self must find someplace to put this tension, thus creating a third component.

And this intrigues me because where before I saw only death to parts of myself, now I see birth of new ones.

With this approach, one is not expected to deny or remove parts, but to find a way for it all to exist in a state of theoretical harmony.

I never thought to think of that.

Let me love her.

I am seeking permission to fall in love again. As if I'm not already.

Something let me live again!

Please.

If I could cry or something. Remember what it was like to be young and naïve enough to believe in vague feelings in the pit of my stomach that make me smile.

I'm too young to be bitter.

I'm too strong to hold so much trepidation inside of me.

Music.

I am choking because I'm finding it so profound.

I can learn so much about someone by the music they listen to. Like Tricia transforms from a classmate I sort of know to a real person hinting at a hidden part of herself just by making me a mixed-tape. It's like an invitation to get to know her. I gave her a mixed-tape back to let her know I understand.

Someone told me that music, art, writing, all these and other creative endeavors are the closest we come to the self or the soul. That what stirs us is this sort of underlying connection of humanity throughout time. Past. Present. Future.

It is the timelessness that makes us shutter.

Pen the notes.

That slight discord resonates inside of me.

I've always felt like part of something larger than myself. Larger than anything I've

yet to see.

Minuscule, but not insignificant.

I'm happy.

If I'm happy about anything, I'm happy about that realization.

The only suicide prevention that ever worked for me.

This blind faith in the gut instinct of a shy little girl who knew how to bide her time.

When did I forget that?

When did I become impatient?

I have no doubt that I'm meant for something, but in the meantime.

I've forgotten how to wait patiently.

Restlessness.

Maybe it's just that I can feel things drawing nearer and I've forgotten how to trust.

The thing about love is really the sincerity of it all.

Honesty.

I feel double-motivated about almost everything. Genuine emotion is startling.

Frightening.

Peanut butter and sticky fingers.

I've always preferred eating with my hands to using utensils. If I could, I'd eat everything that way. I think we lose something. Separate our food from ourselves.

Distancing the experience.

One of the pleasant side-effects of being stoned.

Eating Kraft Dinner with my hands.

At Chris' grabbing handfuls of white rice out of a pot and running upstairs to eat it. I had rice stuck to my cheeks. At Kaysea's it's a different rice dish, bright yellow with green peas. Spooning it into a bowl while her mother watches, eat it one piece at a time back in her room.

I didn't learn how to properly hold a knife and fork until I was nineteen. It amazed me. I had finally figured it out by thinking they are just extensions of your hands.

I have horrible table manners, which is probably not surprising.

I'm having nightmares again. The ones that make me actually elated to wake up but pervasive enough to force me out of bed so that I know I am really awake and will not fall back to the same place, the same dream.

I have grown very tired of seeing the rotting corpse of my best friend when I am supposed to be resting, regenerating, preparing to face the next day without him.

I have so little hope left where Chris is concerned. I don't deal well with the suggestion that in death he has perhaps gone somewhere worse than here.

I am distracted, falling apart. Weak-willed every time. Everything taking longer than it should because I can't stop anything when it should be stopped. I let it go on and on wanting it to fade away, choking on my ironic desire for closure.

I have this thing about watching women make drinks for me. Like at a coffee shop. The more complex the drink, the better. I don't drink coffee but I have actually ordered

expresso or cappuccino just to watch a nameless her make it for me. I was very excited when I discovered steamed milk. It takes time and I really like it, but only with vanilla flavor. I can even tell who is better at it.

Every time I try to explain it, I always think it sounds so sexed somehow but that's not it. It's more like a comfort thing. It calms me down. It's relaxing. Leaning on the counter. Holding my wallet. Just watching.

And that sounds so, I don't know, patriarchal somehow. But I've done the same work. Not at a coffee shop but I've held some less than empowering positions with a less than exciting wage.

It really is just the making of the drink. The act of preparing it.

For me.

My mother never breast-fed me.

How do I do a Freudian analysis of this?

Though I am feeling annoyed with Freud. Though I suppose I always am. But all this reading of his rejection of the seduction theory in favor of the Oedipal complex just reminds me why he annoys me. At least there has been some feminist re-thinking on that.

There's a woman on TV in fish-net stockings and a short black dress. A sort of classy-slutty. A mildly cleaned-up trashy.

Objectified by yours truly.

But she's a red-head and I've always had a thing for red-heads.

Always.

If I think back, all my favorite dolls were red-heads. From that mini Barbie-esque

hand-me-down from my sister (the only doll I remember having a styled cut—1970s slightly layered), to the Cabbage Patch Kid whose birthday I made my family celebrate for three years.

And the girl on that sit-com that I wrote all those letters to in grade school so she'd send me pictures.

The first girl I ever kissed had red hair too.

I could make one up. Create a woman, pen her to my exact specifications.

Make her my heroine.

The unattainable can take form on the page as though it were real, not just someone who moves in my head and wakes me from sleep with her imaginary breath.

Even the unreal is real here.

Even the real is unreal here.

Written down together, here, she and I are both everything and nothing.

Imagined breath.

And in many ways, I am happiest HERE.

My mind is so full. There is so much for me to explore in here. It could spend forever here.

So I'll write my heroine?

Make her as real as I am?

Or maybe make me as real as she is?

Put us somewhere where real doesn't matter anymore?

I see her in comfortable denim. Average T-shirt.

A proper fit. Endearing.

Soft skinned, warm eyed. She has strong hands and a quick but seldom used wit that adds to its strength and her profoundness.

She has a force and a confidence that keeps her silent with knowing glances that tell me I should blush.

I suppose there is a certain comfort in religion—a well-defined faith. Something that has so many answers to so many questions that keep me up at night.

But then you sort of have to take all or nothing and when morality becomes too black and white I get nervous.

Maybe I've been subjected to too much guilt. I always figured it was supposed to build faith but it only raised me to be angry. Feeling mistrusted.

But sometimes I look at people and they seem to have never struggled at all.

Just accepted.

Perhaps I don't accept as is because I'd be damned if I did.

My dreams seem to be taking me back through time so that I can shut some doors I left open. Say good-bye to rooms I had forgotten about.

Doors. Rooms.

Reading too much Cixous. Wishing I could call her on the phone, maybe invite her out to lunch so she could explain it all to me.

"Angst".

First room.

Last room.

All rooms must be taken care of here.

The car accident took Chris and, consequently, his voice.

I didn't sing a note for three weeks.

Seems insignificant unless you knew us.

He was dead for nearly eight hours before news made its way to me. Though I had felt flat the entire evening unable to say why I just said, "I'm half dead," unaware of the prophecy in the flippant remark.

We had been at the mall that afternoon. He found a CD, a soundtrack recording, I had been looking for for years.

Show tunes.

I spent that night listening to it. Learning it. Noting the parts he would probably like to learn.

But Chris had gone away with friends for the weekend. He wouldn't be home for two days! I was frustrated by the wait.

It's not as fun singing duets by yourself.

The night he died, after I'd been to his house and laid in his bed so I could smell his pillow, hugged Sharon, his mother, in shocked, choking silence, I came home and found the CD was still in the player and I realized that these were songs he would never learn.

I almost threw up.

He could sing so well.

He was going to be famous.

For me, three weeks was a soundless eternity.

I sang again, by myself.

I've sung a lot since.

But tonight I really tried to learn a song. Not a show-tune. A simple song. Just guitars and the singer.

And in that—the tone, the resonance, the placement, the hum of proper harmony, me and the CD, I felt more complete, more close to Chris, to music, than I have since that night.

The movie scared the shit out of me. Those freaky psychological thrillers do me in every time.

“It’s like a bad trip—bad drugs,” I told Tricia as she mentioned the shakiness. I was trying to swallow this irrational apprehension.

“Seriously, this is what it’s like. Exactly like this.”

“Great.”

Subtle laughter.

She has never tried acid and if she trusts my words, she never will.

She wouldn’t have anyway.

Swallow it.

Swallow it.

I am nauseated.

I should have left before the end but we seem to like to see things through to the end.

Bitter end.

And I’ll be up all night because I wasn’t well to begin with, remember?

I have nightmares of my own but thanks to Hollywood and morbid fascination, I can share in others' as well.

You can share mine but there will be no blood on walls, no catchy rhymes to haunt you. Feel sorry for me. Your fear is not helpful.

That's the difference between Hollywood and me.

Come on Sweetheart.

Come on, someone be my angel. Someone tell me the thought of me makes her smile when she wakes up in the morning.

I'm not that bad, really.

Honest confusion never really hurt anyone, did it?

Could it?

I mean, I'd be willing to find out.

The beginning of friendship is hard because you never know how far you can go, how much you can say. Like with Tricia. If I knew her better there would be all sorts of questions I would ask. But an exchange of mixed-tapes, a couple of movies, maybe coffee or dinner doesn't entitle me to ask all I want to. But I do want to ask.

How much did you love her? Because if I'm reading this right she'll never let you go. She'll always have a hold.

How far would you have gone then for her?

Into the woods. Yellow bandana in her hair.

Oh, I bet she fucked you up.

Fucked you over.

I can see what her devices are.

I used to be the one to ease the transition, answer all the questions.

The one.

But you had a consciousness of it at some point.

Because she pushed too hard and reality can rip through any haze of eccentricism.

Candles, crystals, moonlight can work on summer.

Did the fall frighten you away?

In a heart beat moment I felt my life fall to pieces but it wasn't like it was before.

This time, like shattered crystal opposed to stone. I saw the mess as glorious. The change as spring.

I want to learn what will push you so far you'll never come back unless I'm holding your hand.

You. You. You.

Who are you, anyway?

Everything.

Nothing.

A little bit of both.

All this desire to push, to break, to fall. All this insecurity manifested still in fantasy.

This can be simple or it can be painful.

Simply painful.

Painfully simple.

It's like distraction has moved to a different part of my brain. I feel I am floating.

Drug-free flying somewhere soft and quiet with a dull hum, buzz, whisper that makes my eyes water. Bathe myself from the inside out. Moving through time. The distance between me and myself. The reason I came into this world three months early.

Premature.

Immature, the doctors told my mother.

The timing. Don't you see? It's the one constant. The one faith. Religion. That things will happen and will happen as a result of the happening. Don't you see? It all fits to make a together. It all fits to make a whole.

I am thinking of music.

Music notes.

A whole note. Enough to fill the bar all by itself. The hum. The buzz. the whole.

There is no staccato in the whole. The oval. Clear. Empty. Always complete.

Never full.

The simplest part of the score.

The least memorable.

There is something so far away in this closeness.

Dear Self,

I know life hasn't always been so kind to us. Not kind at all really but we've managed somehow. I just thought I'd take a second to let you know that, no matter what I might say on sadder days, I think you're all right. Actually, I am very proud of you and

everything you have sorted through over the years. And people notice. I know you don't believe me when I say that but honestly, they've told me so. Maybe you're not as fucked as you think.

I figure things aren't necessarily going to get any easier from now on but they can't get any worse than they've been and we made it through that all right. But I'm just thinking of all the credit I give to so many others. I've never once told you that, not only have you done your best, you've done it with a style and charm that forced me to accept that it all must be worth it in the end.

You are my best friend in the entire world and that is something I swore I'd never say.

You're more than all right.

Love Me.

They take too much. The people around me. They are taking too much. Maybe I have offered too much. Everyone turns to me as though my advice were flawless. I'm the one in therapy, running out of money, and all my friends seem unaware of the fact that it takes all my energy not to hate myself.

Can I be taken somewhere far, far away?

On the bus I found peace.

I almost didn't get off. But I knew I wouldn't get away, not really. I would just circle around and around and around. Tracks in the road. Tracks in my head.

Shh!

Who knows when to leave me alone?

Who can see my tears have shattered leaving shards, reminders in my flesh?

Why do they point them out to me?

Why do they drive them deeper?

Why does the bus go in circles?

Convince me of nothing. Just let me rest. All this fairness fucks my balance.

How am I responsible?

How am I reliable?

Someone shut me up. Slap my face. Tape my mouth. Tie me up. Hide me.

Away.

And life will take me by the hand and lead me absolutely nowhere.

Nowhere beautiful.

Beautiful nowhere.

I can breathe in nothingness.

Tricia is a remarkable woman whether or not she knows it. I've told her so.

I want to just sit her down and say, "What's so frightening that you laugh yourself around it? I like you better with tears if they take you somewhere."

No one would know.

I find her attractive somehow. The way she moves, smiles. There is warmth and softness in her hands on my shoulders. Her arm around me briefly—walking down the hallway.

And from her I want nothing more than these common pleasantries.

I don't want to call her.

This is this.

A quick smile across a table.

Seasons change and that's not even a metaphor. Just like it's not always cliché to say bad things happen to good people.

Sometimes sunshine just reminds you of what still remains to be lost. Some days sunshine almost snickers as you wonder where the rain went.

Maybe it's the dark and stormy night that lends itself to closeness while blue skies and cool breezes offer a vastness too oppressive for the indecisive.

I'm afraid of seagulls. Their mouths open. The sound of them, angry. Their color like a gray afternoon that won't even rain to relieve itself.

So Tricia and I sit by the river.

A blue afternoon and the wind did steal the heat from our fries.

The seagulls watched, anticipating our absence.

"They don't even want to wait for leftovers," I said.

"They want the first course," she replied.

They are inching closer.

Waiting.

I think of those British seagulls—the ones I saw on television that actually fly down and steal food from your plate as you're eating.

"No one would find us here either," Tricia dips a fry in my ketchup.

"No."

At home, there is a meatloaf in the oven. I prepared it before leaving, giving my mother instructions on when to put it in and at what temperature.

Funny, she is the one who taught me how to cook. Writing instructions on bits of paper in the mornings before she left for work. My responsibility to start things off after school.

Surely she knows how to cook a meatloaf.

I'm beginning to realize that people start to see us as we see ourselves.

The fries are cold.

The hamburger almost blew away.

It's all very funny. Hovered over fast-food.

The seagulls are getting closer.

I don't want to be afraid.

I don't want to talk about it because I don't even know what it is.

Seasons change.

And sunshine reminds me of a boy who was never even my boyfriend who died on a day that was a lot nicer than this one is.

The sun is as frightening as the seagulls.

I want to hide.

But Chris will find me (he always does) because somehow he still doesn't have his proper place.

Everyone wants explanations.

Answers.

I want to yell.

If I had them I'd certainly share.

"I can't believe you're fucking dead," I said to Chris' tree last night.

The tree is actually growing quite nicely like the ivy next to my front porch.

I can't believe I'm a self-affirming lesbian now realizing, realizing...

Shit.

I don't know.

Maybe I don't want to realize that he was right. That we were meant to be just friends. That we couldn't have been married even for a couple years like I used to insist. That I don't love women only because he didn't love me enough that way. That the times we actually did fuck around were the darkest because they were so wrong on so many levels. An insult to everything else we shared.

All this advice I bestow is still so much for myself as it is for Tricia.

I have realized how much there is to realize.

And I am very frightened because where I seem able to answer so many of her questions, I can't answer any of my own and maybe, just maybe, I am fraud.

My own fabric only partially unraveled. Some huge stain lurking, hidden within myself.

Part Four:

Green

In the snapshot: Me in my M*A*S*H-green T-shirt, dog-tags and all. Her arm around my shoulders as if I can still trust her.

I can feel something beginning to surround me. Maybe I'm just thinking too much. Maybe I can't resist driving myself crazy by thinking and thinking and thinking. Trying to finish up the semester. Taking a leave of absence for the summer term. I can't focus. I can feel that something is wrong inside of me and even Tricia, who has become such a comfort to me makes me nervous. She has darkness too. Or maybe it is all me. Maybe I really have fallen in love with her.

I could turn my hands inside out. Cut a seam around the wrist and peel the flesh away.

Would it catch at the cuticles?

And somehow I see so little blood. Just at the point of incision. The rest, pale, raw pink—moist.

I am imploding.

I went for a walk only to realize I have no where to go. My feet still lead me towards Chris' house and the darkness doesn't frighten me.

But there is no where to go now.

Endless green grass, soft beneath my feet. I threw up in a field.

But I've hardly eaten so it wasn't that bad.

And I hate Chris right now because he left me all alone. Now, when I need him most he is no where to be found.

I am vomiting at night in fields and all I want is for someone to hold my hand and tell me it's okay.

I am looking for happiness in other people. But I am so tired.

I need release.

I am appalled by my own weakness.

I hate the sound of my breathing when I'm alone.

A reminder of something.

When I was eighteen I discovered a little pair of cuticle scissors on my nightstand next to my bed. I suppose they had been there for some time waiting for me.

They were small and silver.

They were there.

And the phone wouldn't ring.

It could ring, but it wouldn't.

It wasn't.

And I was eighteen, already addicted to Tylenol, drinking a mickey of whiskey at a sitting and smoking as much pot as I could get my hands on.

Chris was sixteen, beautiful, bisexual.

I was so fucking confused, everything almost seemed clear.

Or maybe it was that I was clear and everything else was hazy.

Everything was blurred, boundless and I was mockingly intact, inside.

And the phone wouldn't ring and I hated so much more than just myself that day.

I was intact.

Complete lines.

Snipped carefully.

All it took were those pretty little scissors.

Tiny pieces of skin off the side of my wrist.

And blood.

Hazy.

Silver, flesh, and blood.

And heat.

The breath escaped in a sigh.

And it didn't matter that the phone didn't ring.

Two careful incisions that first time. They were beautiful. I was art.

Gouged out flesh.

I bathed them in the sting of antiseptic and carefully taped little mounds of Kleenex over them.

It was only later that I realized. I cut myself.

But I didn't know why.

I started using knives.

I had a favorite.

That was for the quick cuts. They wouldn't start to bleed until I moved the knife away. But the cuticle scissors were for permanence. They scarred.

Removed flesh never really grows back properly.

I still have the cuticle scissors.

But that was years ago.

Why do I wish I were eighteen again?

I want to die.

All the answers must be wrong if they lead me back to this place.

I've already used so much energy to get better.

I feel spent.

Graduate students aren't supposed to want to cut their wrists with cuticle scissors.

I might as well be eighteen and unaware.

What haven't I figured out that I'm still so empty, hollow?

Why does everything seem so hazy again?

What am I standing in?

Why doesn't anyone see me here?

I don't even know what put me here. I feel sick to my stomach.

I think I am going to be sick.

I am out of words.

And I realize I've always preferred the smell and sound of women. Always. But where most little girls seem to outgrow the attachment, I never have and I don't want to.

And a certain fondness for these Mediterranean women, so reminiscent of my childhood. My aunts and family friends. They were different than Canadian women. They were warmer, softer, deeper it seemed to me. And now, often I want to denounce them as reminders of what I fought so hard to be free from. But tonight, a Greek restaurant and the soft, spicy smelling hostess, too old, too much for me today but still, she warmed something inside of me that I had forgotten. Melted something and made me feel little again but certain that I would be safe if she held me against her.

She didn't speak to me but to my mother. Another realization: I like the sound of another woman's voice call my mother, 'My Love'. That I've liked watching my mother interact with other women. Always have.

Sitting in back seats of cars while she chatted happily with who ever was driving.

Glancing back with a smile every now and again.

A calmness. A comfort.

But with my father, always a hint of a struggle. A hint of uncertainty that I could feel in my muscles.

A constant, subtle tension.

I would grow up their mediator in a vain attempt to rid myself of the tension.

Maybe that was the missing peace (piece). The absence of a click that a child can't help but feel. Fear that this is what awaits me, that this should be my goal.

What could be said that hasn't already been said by the way we sip our drinks, tap our fingers against the edge of the glass?

Maybe I am looking for a concrete that doesn't really exist. This continual drive to express what is clear seems like an extension of avoidant behaviors.

My fingertips taste like lime and I really should stop drinking. The only reason the Tylenol hasn't killed me yet is because I drink so infrequently.

I could turn and tremble.

Playing with knives again.

I almost want to laugh at it. The sickening pride. Perhaps it's the only relief.
Release of struggle.

I could turn and tremble before the mirror but the tears in my eyes are betrayed by the smile at the corners of my mouth.

But make no mistake: I am not happy.

Deciding I should be alone. When I am alone I figure some of it out. Surely loneliness is better than this?

Whatever this is.

I never meant to fall in love with Tricia.

For me love always seems to mean hiding. For some reason or another. I wonder what has taught me to be so ashamed of love.

The pale moment of realization fades and shimmers into darkness. Always darker than before to remind me that something was indeed lost to me. That the hurt I knew was enough to scar this unsuspecting flesh.

And they wonder why I still don't trust enough. Why I'm still so afraid.

I told Tricia I didn't feel like writing so it must be a bad day.

To write.

I had my ears pierced the first time when I was six years old--the first grade. I only vaguely remember it. I remember that it hurt and I cried. I didn't want to pierce the other ear. I did, of course. My mother couldn't leave me with only one pierced ear. But she wouldn't let me pick one of the shiny stones, little 'emeralds' like her ring. A plain gold colored stud was what she allowed me. I really don't know why. There was some reason I don't recall. I remember the disappointment of pain and that anticlimactic gold stud in the mirror.

I passed through adolescence without the desire for more. I used to joke that I shouldn't want to ornament this mess that is myself.

Now I am twenty-three and in the span of a week, I pierced my ears three times.

The first—left ear, cartilage. Tricia and I are visiting my childhood friend, Angela who moved away not quite a year ago. Friends since kindergarten, Angela and I decide to get a matching piercing at the mall. I chose a tiny ‘diamond’ stud in honor of April and Chris’ birthday. I was later told I picked the wrong ear to pierce. I should have pierced the right one because I’m a lesbian. But my tattoo is on my right ankle and I insist that I’d feel lopsided with the piercing on that side too. They say that doesn’t make sense. Makes at least as much sense as restricting lesbians to right-side cartilage piercing.

The second (well it’s really the second and the third)—left and right ear, lobe. Six days later.

After I saw the stud in the cartilage, I purchased a pair of silver hoops. I forced them through those first grade holes. I had stopped wearing earrings years ago. I don’t remember why. With the tiny silver hoops and the tiny ‘diamond’ stud I realized the aesthetic of a second piercing on the lobe. It all felt incomplete. The mirror an anticlimactic experience again.

One plain silver stud in each lobe right by the silver hoops.

And it all hurt. The cartilage was the worst afterwards. Like they always say. The cartilage was still hurting when I went for the next two. Now both my ears are throbbing and the mirror is finally not anticlimactic.

Part Five:

Blue

Her room was painted two-tone blue by her ex-boyfriend. A wave divides the light and dark, sky and sea. And now that she has moved I wonder if it isn't the cream colored walls leave her restless.

There are people you've known so long, you just can't see them anymore. That's what Angela became to me. I couldn't see her. I didn't want to. I didn't want to. Maybe it's an instinct towards constancy. And now she has done something that makes it impossible for me not to see her.

At first I felt relief, that I had figured it out, that I was right, that I really was not going crazy. Now, there's just this emptiness. That and the fear that I'll never be able to see anything as good ever again.

I tried trusting and look where that has taken me?

Betrayal.

Angela was one of my best friends for nearly twenty years. Held my hand through a funeral and its aftermath. I held her hand through everything else. Just because she was Angela I forgave almost anything.

And when I thought that perhaps I really had fallen in love with Tricia, of course, I told Angela. And I told her the timing just wasn't right for me to say anything. I was going to wait. I was going to let it unfold and see what it really was, that it felt too important to make assumptions. There is a subtle difference between passion and compassion and I was waiting for some clarity.

Best friend of nearly twenty years seems to think that means she should go behind my back and cultivate a romance with the first person I have honestly loved in so long.

I'm realizing that there is a very fine line between chaos and clarity. They exist within each other. I am moving between them.

Hazily.

But in the calm I'm learning that in goodness, while pain is not eliminated it can at

least pass. The pain exists unto itself.

I am not confused.

I am not afraid.

I am free in the knowledge that I have strength. I have a will and a desire to survive.

I have already been taught that nothing is a guarantee.

The strength has come from within. Only I take care of me.

Unmailed letter to someone I really thought should know me better.

For Tricia.

I hadn't felt so valid in years and that really wasn't about romance so what makes this so different? I don't know.

But now I wonder if my expectations of you weren't too high. Misdirected. Maybe I just valued the wrong things in you. I liked you because somehow we could talk for hours. Because we seemed to laugh so often. Because I just felt comfortable and somehow I could read you so well, almost out of instinct.

I thought you knew me and now I feel like a stranger, like you don't know me at all. Maybe you never did.

I feel like a therapist. A point of reference. What is it you called me so many times? Wise. I suppose that should have tipped me off. But then, if I'm so fucking wise, how did you ever think you could hide something so obvious from me?

I should have known. You still see through different eyes from mine. I'm too old for this kind of crisis. I don't need to flush or blush or tremble at every step. I've already been there. Driven myself to near hysteria over a timely glance or comment.

Maybe I expected too much. For me love has a lot more to do with respect, understanding, and the possibility of calm silence as reassurance. I've lost too much to surrender to giddiness because that never lasts anyway.

How could you have known I loved you? You still can't recognize it in my eyes. I think I always knew that. I think I'm in love with what I know you'll be one day.

One calmer day.

Shh!

Did you know there is wind you can hear with your eyes closed?

Only with your eyes closed.

Did you know I could woo you so easily with a timely exclamation?

Inhalation of breath.

Have you figured out my movements through the sand that inches closer to my throat?

Or only see my breathing?

You are looking down at me, my up-turned face. I have already risen to your heights only to sink back into sand, cool, warm, damp movement.

I don't need to see so much to prove it's there.

I don't need to burn my flesh to prove it is tender.

I don't need to look down on you to recognize your face.

I don't need to have you.

Do you realize I held you on the tips of my fingers?

Do you remember I promised to tie your end around my wrist as you unraveled?

You didn't know you'd forget you said that.

On this path, I am the origin.

Soft sometimes.

The realization of plenitude.

Multitude and awareness being equal and above all else, valid.

**A turned key in a lock—metal against metal. Scraping, grinding, opening,
unleashing.**

**Laughter—pale and soft in the sunshine. It is absolutely nothing that makes
everything something shattered in the beauty.**

Simple.

Children peeling keys—finding soft green seeds.

Seeds. Seeds. Seeds.

I had forgotten about them.

We called them helicopters. They fell in multitudes from the tree in our front yard.

Pick them up and throw them down again—watch them spiral back to earth.

Helicopters. The keys, the seeds, the pods could travel such distances it seemed.

**I tried to grow one once, not realizing the magnitude of the project. Not realizing the
relationship between that massive tree and this soft green seed peeled free from the drier gold
flesh that protected it. It was as though I didn't even know what would grow from this seed.**

The most obvious mystery.

**That life would continue in a similar way was the greatest surprise. But I am learning
to accept that too as something valid and pure like a little girl trying to grow a dream from a**

tiny seed-pod-key of which there are so very many scattered across her yard.

Her life.

The awareness of the ultimate, understated egoism. This is not all about me. My pain, my recovery will not solve the world.

That my path fixed and steady will still be subject to the whims and indiscretions of others.

Oh my God.

I've been taking responsibility for it all. No wonder I've been so overwhelmed.

Someone raised me to expect a fairy tale. And when it wasn't, when nothing clicked or shone or smiled I started changing it or trying to.

But I grew up and this adult, feminist, intelligent woman said to herself, "This is not about the world. This is about you. This about your misconceptions. Your unrealistic expectations."

And I started deconstructing it. All of it. All of me.

All this pain of my own creation.

Deconstruct it, break it down, tear it away and things will finally shine and smile.

But that was just an extension of the lie, the myth.

Now that I finally have some clarity I realize I can only take care of me, of my role.

There is no happy ending and I'm okay with that. I understand that for the first time.

Things are fucked.

Things can go bad just because they do, not because of me.

I'm fixing my problems and that means, not that the world becomes perfect but that

finally I am able to handle the world's problems in relation to me.

Oh my God.

No one ever told me it wasn't my responsibility.

I don't need to be there any more.

That state of emergency.

That my name and myself are finally the same person is an accomplishment beyond anything I ever really thought about.

Confusion seems irrelevant.

Clarity offers patience.

Perhaps we know everything we are meant to at any given time. Confusion is just us greedy to know what is needed tomorrow.

We sabotage our now.

It's a firm, quiet moment.

In the plenitude of a whisper I wanted to answer.

None of it makes any sense yet, but at least I am calm.

But it will make sense.

Or it won't.

But if I don't care it doesn't matter.

One day, will I sit on television?

Interviewed.

Remember this while you decide on your questions.

That I always knew.

Not that I am any more than any one else, but that, for whatever reason, for my words to reach the place they are meant to, my audience must be expanded.

It's the realization of the young girl.

It's the driving force of the adolescent.

It's the burden of the young adult.

It will be the salvation, the only answer for the eventual whole woman.

Singing show-tunes with my eyes closed. Years later I have finally found that soundtrack recording on CD.

Used \$20.

I remembered all my lines. Not that I ever staged the part, but Chris and I had our favorite moments.

Singing with my eyes closed. I never realized how much Chris' voice had matured to sound so much like the actor recorded here.

Timeless.

That humming tenor.

I've grown so used to the sound of my own mezzo soprano/alto range.

Solo.

With my eyes closed I can see Chris sitting like he used to—non-descript T-shirt, cut-off jean shorts and somehow I remember the feel of his leg against the palm of my hand. The pale blonde hair, though he was really more of a fair brunette.

It's the physical memory that's always the most shocking. Bringing that vague

nausea. Because I think I forget that the Chris that sang show-tunes and the Chris that I talk to in this sort of running monologue day-to-day are the same person.

But then, I feel so changed

It's amazing though, how quickly it all changes. How rapid the evolution of feeling can be.

That we still believe in—that we still trust emotion at all is itself, a small miracle.

Suspension of disbelief.

But it's sad to see how things have disintegrated. I mean, I understand the cycle of everything.

Break down.

Fertilize.

New growth.

But sometimes it's still so hard.

I had a dream Tricia said she wanted to write on my walls. It was a declaration of love, friendship—a pleading from something inside her that's still so familiar to me, a plea for patience because, as she whispered these and other rapid words to me, I was crouched on the floor next to a bed and Angela was with her.

I remember that I started crying. That I was angry and frustrated and relieved all at once.

It was like melting.

And they were both startled to see me cry so hard.

Are my emotions still so invalid?

A dream.

But it still leaves me vaguely unsettled.

“I want to write on your walls.”

It must be an allusion to my mind. The many conversations we had about the mind as a house in need of renovations. Trying to determine the most effective way to implement those renovations.

But this was my dream and if I use the little bit of Jung that I know, all characters in dreams are simply, or perhaps not so simply manifestations of the self.

So then is she simply the part of me that did (or does) have very strong feelings (be them romantic or platonic) for her? Is it a warning to that calm part of me that is in reality very angry with all of this shit not to give in to a bitterness that would destroy everything? If nothing else, what was should remain as honest as I struggled to make it. This strange, intermittent anger or frustration has the potential to destroy these memories. But there is no real point for that to happen.

Slowly, like molasses dripping down the back of my head, what was is paying for what happened after and I shouldn't let that happen. Something inside myself is pleading that that not happen.

Un-mailed letter to the best friend that wasn't.

For Angela,

Looking back, I guess you've never really known what you want or maybe what you thought you should want. That was (is) your perspective. The way you went from one thing to the next. The way you held those around you up as mirrors, reflecting what you assumed

you were supposed to be, telling you what you were supposed to want. But maybe there were too many mirrors. Maybe sometimes it was so very hard to keep up. Turning. Turning. From one to the next but each one seems a distortion because none of it is you. But you don't know where to look to find that. And I let you turn to me. I perpetuated the behavior, but I didn't mean to.

It all started that night we went for coffee. I was ready to let you go. All those years in high school watching you give in to stupid 'popular' whims. Finally I had found something unconditional in that beautiful boy of mine. I was beginning to realize that I was a lesbian and I knew you would never accept that. I thought.

But that night, over coffee or tea, whatever we were drinking, something in your eyes pleaded with me (as if you knew I was giving up on this friendship) not to let you go. It was a cue that only a person who had known you since you were five years old could catch. It was the beginning of a series of cues you would give me without even knowing.

I looked at you and knew that somewhere deep inside you was something real and timid that wanted to break free. And I couldn't abandon you. But I was only nineteen and the only way I knew to help was to let me be the mirror. Up until then, I hadn't been.

Perhaps that was the beginning of our downfall. Ironical since I saw it as our rebirth.

I didn't know what to do for you. But from that moment on, I could never forget that look in your eyes at that coffee shop. And maybe my guilt over almost abandoning you, when you needed your best friend most, solidified my dedication to you and your protection.

Did you know that I was (and still am) your biggest defender? The compassion I felt for you, the love for you was unique. In you I saw so much beauty and potential that lay trapped beneath so much confusion and fear.

Maybe my biggest fault was that I could always see what you would one day become. So the little things you did that didn't make sense to the others, I just accepted because I knew you didn't really mean it.

I guess I saw things escalating. I saw the betrayal coming but I thought in the end, in spite of everything you would be honest with me and when you weren't I was devastated. Stunned.

But I recognize that our friendship didn't provide you the skills to handle it any differently than you did. It was always I jumping in and figuring it out for you. It became a sort of symbiotic relationship. It was how we functioned.

What happened to those girls who walked to the store and bought candy? We were so hopeful.

I remember the sun and the schoolyard. Your hair pulled back in a ponytail. When our curfew was only nine-thirty. How you cried over that first girl you really fell in love with (though at the time you never admitted you were in love). The way you showed up at my house on that first birthday without him with a cake (even though I insisted I didn't want to celebrate that year). The way, when you moved out of town, after living two blocks away our entire lives we refused to say good-bye because that was pointless, useless for friends of nearly twenty years.

I remember it all as good and valid. I remember you as good and valid. But right now, I don't know what to do with you. I do miss you. Maybe I always will.

This is the house that I have lived in my entire life. This is where they brought my premature self home to all those years ago.

Only six weeks after I was born and I was three months premature.

You'd think they'd see that as a testament to my strength. It only took me half the time.

But they didn't.

It seemed it all still equaled weakness.

One day I will leave this house.

One day soon.

One day my parents will leave this house and then someone else will move in and they will make it theirs and they will never know how I used to lie in the backyard on a blue and white lawn chair and read. They won't know that before there was the shed, that my father and his friends built over five years ago now, there was a sour cherry tree that would blossom white and smell so sweet every spring. That there were two tire swings there for my brother and myself.

Will they rip away the grapevines that my father has nurtured and coddled longer than I've been alive? Will they realize that the kitchen was finally rebuilt to my mother's specifications or that my father and his friends also built the basement bathroom the summer before my sister got married? Will they know how my brother and I survived all our high school exams by eating Oreo cookies in the basement or the living room? Or that once there was a girl who grew up to be something no one expected and it all happened while she lived in their house?

Of course not.

I know.

I know that I too will never know what plants they grow or what renovations they

make. What will be the baby's room? When we are all gone who will smoke pot in the bathroom?

\$9.60.

Is that what this boils down to?

My long distance phone bill is a mockery. The chronicle of the death of a friendship. Culminating with a \$9.60, thirty-seven-minute farewell to Angela.

I should have called during discount hours.

I'm still wondering why Tricia just called me and asked if I wanted to grab a drink. And why, when I said I couldn't, she agreed to stop by and keep me company while I cooked dinner. It had been over a month since the two of us had a decent conversation. Almost impossible since I can't understand how she sacrificed our friendship over this infatuation with Angela.

But it was me who found her on the computer last night and messaged her.

How can things so changed revert back to something comfortable?

Is it all part of the foundation I worked to lay down?

But still, even if the real betrayal was Angela's, Tricia acts as a reminder of that. And without the trust we were just starting to achieve, what's the point?

I'm copying out poems in Italian. I don't understand them, but it's as if something in my hands wants to write it because I never have.

There is something comfortable about it—copying it out.

Like trying to sound out the words. The muscles in mouth and jaw seem to know more than my mind does. If I don't think so hard some of the words just flow like I've said them a thousand times. But I haven't.

It's like some part of me is going home. It's like a part of me I never knew existed is reaching out to be recognized, to be read, to be heard.

My father never taught me how to speak Italian. Somehow his learning three languages before English didn't make him recognize what a gift it is. And English, likely the most difficult, seemed worse than the others did. There are memories of confusion and embarrassment, of being misunderstood, being judged, being discriminated against. He always said he never taught my brother or myself because he needed us to help teach him English. Well, that and the fact that my mother doesn't speak Italian.

To me, my father's English is perfect. I understand it as well as anyone's. I forget he has an accent. And perhaps that's what he wanted. Perhaps that is how I taught him 'perfect English'.

But now I am beginning to wonder what I've missed. What little words or expressions can't be translated? What could I have known that I don't because he never gave himself the chance to hear my own 'perfect Italian'?

I wonder if they (if anyone) realizes that I really will be so much more than this. I know it's vain but I also know that one day they will marvel that they knew me at all.

And this isn't delusion.

This is dedication.

This is faith in the one constant in my life: That something in me must be said and

though I've never known what that is exactly, I know that once I've found it, everything, for one brief, timeless instant will freeze.

It will catch in the backs of their throats.

And I will laugh.

I will sigh.

I will be relieved of my burden.

That's all that matters.

The end.

At the airport. My plane delayed one hour. I'm on the verge of tears but not for the reason those happy bystanders would suspect.

It was my brother, not my boyfriend that hugged me good-bye at the gate. And the CD I stare wistfully at, that I hold between trembling fingers, is not love songs but a rock opera that I put far, far away that night Chris died.

But lately the songs seem to be haunting me with the memory of the subtle pleased look on his face when we realized that he had found the recording that had seemed impossible for me to find. His hands holding it, handing it to me. Me rushing up to the cashier.

Had I known he'd be dead within two hours, I might have taken my time.

So today I bought it—again since I gave the other copy away and I'm wondering if I'm ready to go there just yet.

Has it really been nearly two years?

You never know how fast you're going until you hit the ground.

But after you've flown a bit, you usually remember: No matter how slow it seems, something inside of you is racing.

A potential crash.

I think I'm afraid of physicality, the suddenness of it all, and the sometimes-instantaneous reaction.

That the way some woman tilts her head and smiles or runs her fingers through her hair makes me stop and wonder. Stop and smile. I would say it seems primitive but then procreation isn't an issue here. Is it possible that compassion or the need for companionship had its place in primitive times too? Do I underestimate our origins?

But still, it frightens me because I like to know things.

There is nothing to know about a beautiful woman with a smile except that she is a beautiful woman with a smile.

And that hardly seems an appropriate basis for attraction.

There isn't much control in that.

I think of my holy woman as an example.

Yes. She is brilliant and charming but it was something in the tone of her voice and an expression in her eyes and an unexpected, intensely physical response on my part that has locked something about her inside my mind-body link and makes me see her time and time again in other women's tilted heads and subtle smiles.

And I think of her and wonder why. What is it that moves me so? The whole mess of attraction. That you never really know what it is about someone.

I have friends who are beautiful but I've never thought of touching them. Never. Not even in the beginning when I hardly knew them.

But then, attraction fades or evolves depending on the situation. That's how I know my holy woman is more fantasy than reality.

The infatuation has not grown into love or affection. Nor has it dissipated as I see more of her as a whole person.

She moved away and left me with a dream of what could have been. What I wanted us to be. And with every infrequent email the dream perpetuates itself. It nourishes itself. It can not grow, but at the same time, it does not fade.

Standstill.

The Christmas lights are still up. I can't believe it's June already. But they offer a subtle light and I'm so prone to headaches I didn't see the need to take them down. Now I forget they represent Christmas at all.

I don't do much lately.

I'm alone a lot.

I've gotten used to a certain amount of quiet time.

Maybe it's part of growing up.

Maybe it's just that death teaches you that you are the only guarantee.

"You are a world of miracles."

I found that scrawled by my own hand on the back of an old bath-salts envelope. Luckily, I also scrawled a name next to it to remind me who I was thinking about when I

thought it. If I hadn't, I'd never remember it was Andrew—the boy with the cough syrup and the shiny black car.

Perhaps Andrew is a world of miracles, though I'd never think it of him now. Not that there's anything wrong with him. I don't really know what happened there except maybe the inevitable.

He could never live up to a ghost and despite all my protests to the contrary, that was what I wanted him to be.

That I began to feel tricked by him was mostly the illusion slipping. That he was so different from Chris is certainly no fault of his.

And the illusion was a timely one—a necessary one. For both of us I would hope. Though I am not so certain he is clear on when or why or how it ended, it has. For him (because I never really explained it to him like this) part of the illusion may always linger.

I wonder.

Outside of this situation, how much illusion lingers around me? And since I don't know it is illusion, is it real?

I've draped a shirt over the television as if it were a tablecloth and the television a table. I even replaced the clock and vase of yellow roses.

I put it there to mute the screen, not just the sound. Because five minutes into the program I decided to tape it. Instant record. But I don't want to accidentally watch the show. I want to save it for later, for the insomnia hours.

I can still see the picture. Hazy, like a part of the shirt. I almost like it better this way. A little more soothing.

This is a typical sort of solution for me. I mean, I guess I could have waited for a commercial and then set up the timer, but this works.

In the same room with the television covered by a shirt there is a pillowcase hanging from the ceiling. I taped it up there in the fall when I moved my computer down here.

The light is on the ceiling.

It is reflected in the computer screen.

The pillowcase hangs between the light and the computer screen.

It's easier to type when you can see what you are typing.

Once I fixed a leather watchband with a needle and thread just because it seemed easier than going to the store.

And I had a nightgown with a zipper that scratched my neck until I put masking tape over it.

These are just the things I do. I don't often notice them until someone else does.

I forget that pillowcases don't often hang from ceilings or that shirts don't shroud TVs.

But, why shouldn't they?

There is something to waking up in the morning, stretching my arm across the sheets and blankets and realizing that it is in fact my arm. These are my ears that I've pierced. My nails I've painted in various shades of blue.

When I was a little girl (I can remember one instance when I was in the first grade) every once in a while it would suddenly strike me that I was me and not anyone else. But as shocking and amazing as that was, I don't remember being particularly pleased that I was

me, but not displeased. And now that I'm a little bit wiser I realize that's just it. I'm not sad that I'm me nor boastful because I'm me, I just am me and that's enough.

There is so much you take for granted. There is so much that takes you for granted too.

I mean, that's the whole irony, isn't it?

But I'm still tired of feeling second best and it's true that with Angela no longer around that seems like history.

Not that she really was better than I was. She played the game of life and social development better than I ever could. There is just something raw about me, something that always wants to come bursting forward in poised social settings.

Why the fuck shouldn't I?

Finally I dreamed of Angela as she really is. Calm, but frightened. Clinging with that unique poise to false prophets. The subtlest paranoia I have ever seen. The inability to be honest, to stop the game. I could see it in her eyes, in the way she left the table that my presence was not conducive to this fantasy and she had to leave before too much was disrupted.

Maybe that's just it. The reality I have to offer conflicts so sharply with what she has created. She cannot turn to me before she is ready to let the other go.

My father was talking the other day.

He was talking about the ship—the boat that sailed across the ocean and brought him

here. Well, to Halifax anyway.

It took eleven days and cost five hundred dollars. Just about half the cost of airfare.

“Now,” he says with that sort of shy pride, “people call it a cruise. But me, I love it. I love it, Cookie! Food as much as you want it. Dancing every night. Except me, I a little bit dizzy. But you get up in the morning and see the sun come up. Beautiful. You see it. The dolphins, they jump in the water. Yep. Me I love it. Now you pay a lot of money for that. A lot of money. Beautiful, except I a little bit dizzy.”

He means a little bit seasick but I don’t correct him.

I never thought of nausea as synonymous with dizziness.

I forget that he was young once and that with a temperament similar to mine, he still managed to travel across the ocean and indirectly find me here.

I work across the street from a funeral home now—for the summer.

Like the summer Chris died.

I can see the hearse pulling away. The sun reflected off its window left spots in my vision. And the sun seems to be brighter if I remember the feeling of that long black and white dress against my legs that day almost two years ago.

Oh, the nausea. It’s returning.

That’s what it is in the beginning. More nausea than sadness because sadness requires higher cognitive abilities that shock eliminates.

At first.

I am dreading it. The anniversary.

Reading Cather, who I fear I have fallen in love with even though she too is

startlingly dead: "...the dark things, death, bereavement, suffering, have only a dramatic value—seem but strong and moving colours in the gray stretch of time."

But she is so right. Dear Willa!

The drama, the sensation. Seems my strongest memory is that of sunlight reflecting off the metal of his casket. It was only later that everything turned gray.

Maybe like a blank slate.

Dust settles after an explosion. Everything is gray.

On the surface.

That's sort of what I told my therapist. When she had me sum up my life from the first thing I remember to the present. I think it took me over three sessions. When I reached his death, after I explained the funeral I said to her very slowly, "And it all starts over."

But it's not the blank slate, if there ever really is one, like birth. There is no return to innocence.

Remember it is gray not white.

It is dust. Drag a lazy finger across the surface and you find what was merely clouded over. But you have to be ready for it. Your eyes need to adjust. Clear away too much, too quickly and you'll be blinded by the colour.

If it's too soon, you'll be forced to turn away.

Curves, winding. Whispers running down my ear canals.

The other night (as I was falling asleep) I thought I heard someone rattling pill bottles in the kitchen.

I thought I was dreaming but once I was more awake I realized it was something in

my head. A throbbing, rhythmic pounding that echoed against my pillow.

My ear drum?

A pulse point?

Regardless, a headache.

That our bodies make so many noises that we simply ignore. That it seemed more probable to have intruders in the kitchen than blood coursing a little too intensely through my veins is a statement on my relationship to things.

Kaysea and I were hit. Rear-ended.

My sunglasses, poised ever ready atop my head (even if it was much closer to midnight than it was to noon) flew off and landed somewhere at my feet.

The clip that was holding my hair back in a simple twist came loose as my head landed sharply, solidly against the headrest.

I was thinking about motorcycles when it happened. We had stopped a little farther back because of them. They seemed to need their space.

It would seem we needed it a lot more than they did.

It's amazing how quickly you assess that you are okay. And that the other person is okay.

Than an unsteadily exhaled breath and you land again from this hazy, instinctive, seemingly timeless instant back to reality.

"Shit! I hope the car's not too fucked up. We're gonna be here for hours now," is thought not spoken.

But there is no damage.

Not to Kaysea's car anyway.

So I think of how Chris died in a car crash and I hope that if he had to die, he at least died before that rapid, overwhelming but not frightening adrenaline rush had a chance to pass.

That he died realizing he was alive.

I don't know what to say any more. My life is making me dizzy and so very, very nauseated again.

Maybe it isn't good that my therapist goes on vacation for the two weeks before the anniversary of Chris' death.

I could use some debriefing that's for sure.

That's for sure.

Maybe she could cure this incessant headache.

The Tylenol sure as hell isn't helping.

I feel very small and very sad all of a sudden.

I feel lost and don't know where to find that part of me that has found strength in the hardship, developed courage to withstand the changes.

This small, sad part only knows how to go backward. To fall, spiral down to something that disappeared a long time ago.

Maybe 'wellness' is accepting that there is this sad small part that cannot simply go away. This part that is too frightened to be left alone needs careful consideration and concern. She exists too close to the foundation of things. To deny her, I risk a crack in my origin. She must be protected and loved even if (especially when) she insists she doesn't

deserve it. That she wants to collapse inwards and die means she has been neglected in the excitement of self-enhancement. But the thing is, she too has her place in the order of things. She too must exist and cannot simply be healed-over. In her pain and confusion, in her sadness and her heartache, she is the beginning of this eventual recovery.

Validate her purpose.

Validate her tears and her vomit.

Tell me something warm and soft, sweet and quiet.

Independence is a good thing. I'll agree that every decision has its good and bad points.

I'm pleased to be alone. To be free and not held back. Boundless—or is that the wrong word?

Sometimes, I can't help but feel a little bit lonely.

Part Six:

Purple

Bruises never scar. The purple mark is only a temporary reminder of what one should avoid the next time.

The laundry is on the floor waiting to be folded, which is at least a change from waiting to be washed. They'll be wrinkled I know. But I need to go to the store because I am craving plums and rice cakes. Need to see if we're still out of peanut butter. Should make a list so I don't forget anything. I could always grab some chocolate too.

I've bought some Tarot cards.

The set is actually a variation on a traditional Tarot set. It's a Celtic Tarot set and I'm very drawn to it.

Somewhere I have another set of more traditional Tarot cards but I don't think I ever used them. I found them daunting and confusing. The book that I had put me off. I didn't feel connected or perhaps, worthy.

But these cards attracted me right away. I connected very strongly with them, the feel of them. I have made a little box for them and glued an ivy leaf on it.

Readings are complicated but somehow I have much more patience with myself than I used to. I can appreciate that greater understanding will come with time.

Already I'm tired of the misconceptions.

It's not to tell the future but to help clarify what is there—to help pull out the important points.

Like showing me how much pain is still inside of me.

I've managed reconciliation with Angela who I still don't trust or forgive.

That's not a basis for much, yet I still expect healing. Perhaps it is time to accept the loss as it is. I am not forced to compromise myself. If I do, I do so willingly and must accept those consequences without further blame.

Late night television. When did movies from the 80s become old? Infomercial tempts me to buy a fruit dehydrator. I don't like dehydrated fruit but I might if I had my own fruit dehydrator. *Babylon 5* will never be the same caliber as *Star Trek*. *The Brides of Christ*, an Australian mini-series about nuns. One actress is kind of cute. *Personal Best*, the ultimate lesbian athlete movie. I purchased a copy last year. *A & E Biography*, I wonder what they will say about me some day.

I'm tired of this cult of innocence. This praise of naiveté, this conditioning that is supposed to make you strive for helplessness. But only in certain situations.

These waves of feminism have left me in a lurch.

Preaching freedom on one front. The lash-back on the other.

That we are to be independent in this sphere, meek in the next.

That a woman can go to a therapist (a female therapist) and be snippily told: "It seems as though you want it all," because both her career and her child are important to her, sickens me.

I have so much anger around being raised helpless but I'm beginning to wonder if the pain I remember came more from the realization that I didn't know how to be helpless—at least not in the way they wanted.

By the time I was twelve, there was nothing meek about me.

But over the years I have conformed in ways even I don't understand.

Like refusing to learn how to drive. Self-inflicted helplessness to make up for the other things?

Like sex.

From the time I read my first risqué novel or saw my first porno flick, both when I was thirteen, it all seemed simple enough.

Although the porno did make me cry when the only scenes that seemed at all endearing were the lesbian ones, hinting at things I wasn't able to understand let alone confront.

So, I never felt naïve and no one ever treated me that way.

My lack of experience wasn't even an issue. In high school I could be trusted to listen and give good advice.

Why should I play the timid virgin?

I was never ashamed of it. Just never met a boy that moved me enough to risk STDs or pregnancy. That repressed lesbian thing again.

Is it rude to say that fucking is fucking?

Why make more out of it than we need to?

You can fuck people you love, people you like, or people you don't really know.

And we all have different comfort levels and we all take something different away from the experience.

Pardon me if I gag at the expression "making love" which seems to me a patriarchal tool used to lure confused girls and women past their own comfort level.

If you want to fuck me then you present me with a clear decision.

I decide how much I like you. I decide if I'm ready.

But if you want to make love to me then I wonder why you can't love me enough without it.

If you want to fuck me even though you don't love me, that's fine. I'm potentially

flattered—to a point. But don't you dare imply that fucking can make you love me because that's bullshit and we both know it.

Now, having declared my not so subtle manifesto on the rights, or perhaps the importance of women (and men) having the freedom to be comfortable with their sexual choices, I want to qualify a few things. Before I'm ruthlessly declared a hypocrite.

I personally have a very strong romantic streak and often envision scenarios of candles and soft music. But I assure you that the words that precede my exercising my adult free-will never be, "Make love to me."

I've just had to find more appropriate, alternative expressions. Something like, "Turn off the lights."

I held something so tangible, it wavered in the air, it trembled all around me until I let it enter my lungs. It twinged the muscles around my mouth, making me smile softly, but smartly.

And for the first time in so long it is not drug induced.

It's something I thought I had lost.

I woke up without it and never thought I'd return to bed that evening having found what I had forgotten all about.

Hope.

There is the sound of cars driving by outside the window.

I am in the bathroom. Staring at an African violet.

Eleven at night but it may as well be four in the morning judging by the silence of this

house.

I have an upset stomach and the sleepiness that plagued me earlier leaves me once I am left alone to unwind.

My sister's home is very calming for me. Even with my almost three-year-old niece. The purity of her enthusiasm is cleansing.

But there is so much at the back of my mind.

The bullshit: That escapism doesn't really exist.

Tomorrow I go home.

I've spent too long blaming Chris' death for my lack of trust.

I guess that's not the issue.

I didn't trust him either.

He always seemed like a miracle or something. Like a gift I wasn't sure I deserved.

It's not that I have to learn to trust *again*.

I just have to learn to trust.

I have to learn that trust isn't absolute and that sometimes it is misplaced.

You know, I don't like secrets or lies. I really don't.

I mean, I admit to being a horrible gossip but I usually prefer to receive rather than share information and even then it's only trivial information. Nothing of substance.

I can be trusted with confidences.

I can be trusted with secrets too but I don't like them.

It's a subtle difference in my mind.

A confidence involves a broader situation. Advice. Sharing.

Secrets are smaller, pettier. More deceptive somehow.

They make me uncomfortable.

A girl takes too long to wash her hands in the tiny public washroom. Her friend speaks to her from behind the stall door.

“They’re playing our game now,” is what she says.

“Yeah,” She is still washing her hands.

It’s only later that I’ll wonder what they’re talking about.

At the time all I notice is the shimmer of her headband, that mauve looks good on her, how tiny her hands seem, that the soap smells like almonds.

She leaves the washroom without saying a word to her friend.

Back at the table I continue debriefing my life for the third day in a row. Angela is in town for the week. It had been over three months since I last saw her. I had only spoken with her a handful of brief times over the past month.

Maybe we’re getting to the heart of it now that I finally let her see me cry. Even a little bit.

I’m just still a little bit scared.

This isn’t how I pictured it. I don’t know if I did picture it. There was too much bitterness maybe.

It’s different than it was.

Like before we were children and it took one betrayal and separation and recovery to act as the marker.

It isn't the over-zealous fourteen-year-old with a bag of Doritos that sits across from me now. It is a chain-smoking twenty-four-year-old. Maybe she had been there for a long time, but I couldn't see it.

I wonder how long it had been since we had really seen each other.

This is the new beginning.

Innocence was what was killing us. Living with our eyes closed. Pretending we could see. Determined to prove we could see no matter what.

We hit a wall.

Come on. Now, surely there must be something at the bottom of the barrel. Just a little something left for me. I've waited around while everyone else has their fill and obviously all this self-empowerment I preach doesn't stop me from scrounging around in the dirt like the swine I must still think I am.

No, no, no.

Can't let one vaguely depressive state announce the downfall of all my self-improvement.

They trick you I think.

Those of us who've hated ourselves so completely begin to trust the illusion that self-acceptance is a one-time deal. You cross over and the bridge burns behind you. No turning back because everything is better and brighter in "Love Yourself Land".

So right now I'd say I'm standing somewhere around the mid-point of that bridge I thought I'd burned. The saddest part is that it seems as sturdy as ever. Like I could cross back and forth again and again for the rest of my life.

Notes on my best friend, Kaysea for her graduate class.

Something about postmodernism.

There's something about the way your pants are frayed at the bottoms. That they have to be just that length. Never shorter, even if that would save the hem.

I suppose that without fray you'd never know when to throw them away.

And if modern is today and post is after (this is not my class. I am allowed to indulge in wimpy, inept definitions to make a point. I claim creative liberty) that suits you perfectly. One step ahead since I've known you. Everything before anyone noticed it should be there.

There was something about that kindergarten class. Setting things in motion. Sending you to Malta in the second grade. I cried in my big sister's lap.

But you returned.

It was the summer we graduated from high school. My hair was tied back with toilet paper as I threw up that mickey of whiskey. You sat on the tub. And we began debriefing.

There is something about the night Chris died—how the first thing you said was something like, "I want to be with you. I'm coming over." The way your tiny frame was able to support me at that casket when I was certain I would melt away.

It's the mutual dedication to 'higher' education that we further in each other.

The way you always get your work done.

The way you're so much more prepared for your GREs.

My father can't make a vegetarian dish without saying your name.

And when everyone left for the summer all that mattered was that you were staying.

This understated co-dependence. But don't worry; I have a therapist.

There is something cool about the air that surrounds you. This crisp, veiled tension.
Like changing from summer to autumn. That moment before you're certain it's time
to bring your sweat shirt, something to cover your flesh that can burn through the summer
but can't handle the least little chill.

What is thicker, the rain or the darkness?
But it comforts me, this sad autumn smell. Like coming home to something familiar.
I have been anticipating this return. I thought perhaps it was school, structure, hectic
grad school existence that I craved. But maybe it was just this. This safe muddy, ruddy,
damp season. With its muted colors that appease these tired eyes and give me nothing to
strain against.

It's the feeling of the beginning of comfortable conclusion. Before we are bathed in
light, white haze.

I have anticipation now. And calmness. Reminded of the cycle.
Let me know there is something in you that won't fade away and I'll stand by that
faintest point of clarity.

Stability doesn't necessarily mean the brightest, just the one that endures.
Let me crawl beneath your bed of leaves before they dry up and scatter in the wind.
Cocoon, incubate me like the premature infant I will always be.

Did I ever tell you I hear voices in my head, feel fingers across my skin? I think it
was the nurses, the ones who took care of me. I think they marked me. I can feel them in my
flesh. Their large eyes drowning me as I lie naked and helpless. I still dream of that ironic
glass barrier.

Who tied me down like that?

Who separated me?

How can they all still watch me so intently?

Is this why I feel most alone amidst a sea of faces?

It's a beautiful day today. The kind of day born of incessant, chilling rain that saves us from the humidity.

I watched the clouds as I waited for the bus. It's funny because my friends who so often retreat from the city to be closer to nature think I have so little appreciation. Yet I can stand there, breathing the fumes from cars and see a single cloud that remains gray against a pillow of white that tapers away revealing blue. And it might not be as clear as a Northern sky-line but it is all I need to remind me that perfection is not something we will attain. Rather, it is the state in which we constantly exist and we spend our lives trying to recognize the magnitude of that. We struggle to prove that we deserve to be what we by nature are.

I'm starting to forget the little things about Chris. I could only keep them alive for so long.

I feel as though if I started right now, to write it all down, all of him, I'd still forget it all again and the words would be hollow to me because I don't remember.

There is a tenderness that is slipping, leaving me agitated, lonely, and sad.

I don't know how much longer I can maintain this vigil.

And my father is talking about zucchini again. At least it's not eggplant. That eternally bruised vegetable.

Tomorrow is my birthday, the day after that, my niece's birthday.

Tomorrow, whenever I manage to get out of bed, I will sit at the kitchen table while he stands at the stove. He will have cut the zucchini into length-wise strips before I am awake. I will beat an egg with milk and some mild seasonings and dip the zucchini into the bowl and then into flour (not breadcrumbs as my mother would have done) and he will fry them and lay them on paper towels in a futile attempt to drain the grease.

We will eat some off the paper towels. I might burn my hand or tongue. He will reprimand me with a smile for putting too much salt:

"Be careful, Cookie! You gonna get di blood pressure like me when you old. How hold you are now, 26?"

"No, 24," I will correct him like I always do.

"Eh," he will continue cooking, "It can't be just me to get old. You get old too."

The zucchini will get cold but I will still eat it until he puts it into the fridge. The next day he will layer it into lasagna to cook when my sister and her family arrive, when my niece arrives for her third birthday celebration. And when we all sit down to eat he will wait for compliments before saying:

"Well, my Cookie, she help me. But we no let Mom help. We do it for us. Right, Cookie?"

And I will only nod then because it won't be just us anymore. Something will seem different. It always does. Nothing translates itself properly in the move from one-to-one to group conversation. Something is always lost in the expansion.

Part Seven:

Black

Colored filters, like the ones that cover stage-lights. I layered them one against the other trying to invent a new color. Eventually, no light could get through at all. A re-interpretation of black.

“But would you stay even if I left the light on?”

For a long time I forgot she ever said that to me. That was years ago now. A lifetime ago.

Denise. I still remember the first time I met her, the way she was sucking on a piece of lime before she said, “You’re in my psych class.”

She was right, though I hadn’t recognized her.

God, she scared me.

Funny how I never talk about her. Never did. At first, I couldn’t. She was married and I wasn’t even out to anyone but Chris. I didn’t even tell him, keeping this as mine in the only way I knew how. Now it almost seems too late to bring her up. Too much time has passed.

She belongs here. Not in conversation.

“How can you be so shy but still want to stay?”

I thought she was being hard on me. I couldn’t understand her. I knew I couldn’t *hide* forever. This wasn’t about that. It was about something else.

She hid. She was the one with a husband that she insisted she couldn’t love as much as she loved me. Though in the end, only a month after it all started, she proved quite clearly that she loved him much more by leaving town with him and never calling me again. That was my first lesson around saying “I love you” to a woman I just met.

Maybe we just hid differently.

When you talk as much as I do, people assume they know everything.

They don’t.

She marked me more than they know.

Maybe the holy woman only happened to look so much like her, especially once she was gone and seemed more like a dream than anything.

People think I have no secrets. I'm just a better liar than they would expect.

Some things are just meant for a different space.

Sometimes there are things we may not regret but don't want to share.

Fuck you for not believing me when I said I was losing my mind.

Fuck you for believing me when I said I was learning to love myself.

Fuck you for thinking I could or would or should be more than this.

This *is* me.

Resisting the urge to play with knives after swallowing enough Tylenol to leave me nauseated.

Fuck you for ever expecting a happy ending. I've only ever tried to give you something real. Give you me in all my imperfections and failings, only hoping you might understand. Thinking maybe someone will get it. Hoping I'm alive to see it.

I've gone away for awhile.

No, I didn't really *go* anywhere. I just didn't bother with *here*.

I don't even know how to pen my own decay anymore. A year ago, the pain flowed like ink. It seemed only natural that it end up here.

Now it is lodged in my sullenness. Now it won't let me go.

This pen on low-grade paper. A dollar-store journal—random birthday present.

A red and black journal inseminated my words and together we have created. I have given birth.

I don't think I can go any farther than this.

I have given a year and bit and it seems that's all that was required to prove to me that it all ends at the beginning.

I've drunk almost a full glass of iced tea. I wonder if I will need another or if it will only sit half-empty, like the can of Coke on the desk.

It has long since gone flat.

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