

Poems and Prose by Meggie Royer

Chapter 1

Miscarriages

Topics:

- [la moitié de moi est absente](#)
- [baby teeth](#)
- [a priest walks into a bar](#)

la moitié de moi est absente

When my sister Olivia had the first miscarriage,
she wanted to file a missing person's report. But the police chief
said there had to be probable cause, and there wasn't.

I used to lay my hand against the warm skin of her stomach,
the tiny heartbeat no bigger than a sanguinella blood orange,
and I could feel its miniature limbs, kicking.

Last year the leaves changed from gold to red and back again
in record time; so many of my nights were spent skinny dipping
down at the lake with my boyfriend Ian. We held each other
directly underneath the waterfall, lit up by moonlight,
his pale shoulders rising like snowcaps through the peaks
of a mountain. We knew which places to put our tongues
to make the other sigh. And all the while as we tangled
limbs together like faulty marionettes, Olivia
was having her second miscarriage.

Two days later when I visited her in the hospital,
I thought, briefly, that her red hair spread out over the pillow
was blood.

I was surprised when it didn't stain my hands.

She never did try to have a third child,
and on her good days when we have dinner together,

I always notice the tattoo inked down the inner side
of her right wrist: *la moitié de moi est absente*,
or *half of me is missing* in French.

baby teeth

When you call your husband to tell him you've had a miscarriage he's not going to care. He ripped your body up
like a lawn mower chewing grass and your ribs expanded to match the slow outward bulge of your stomach, and he
couldn't care less. Maybe you lost it (and you don't want to call it "it" but you never named it, paged through all the
books and never settled on one, but for lack of a better word you've got to call it that) in the bath, or riding the bus or
walking to work. Who knows. But wherever it happened, however it happened, that doesn't change the fact that you
lost it.

When you go in for a routine checkup weeks later and the doctors say there's scar tissue down there, too much to give
it another try, you've got the pills in the cupboard but you're too afraid to use them. You start thinking of your body as
a sinking ship, going down further every second into the dark waters. There's the deck and it's splintered and ragged,
every wooden beam pulsating with grief. And somewhere out there in the distance is an iceberg and you're going to
hit it. It's only a matter of when.

Your husband's not going to give a fuck about the blood between your legs. You're drunk on your own pain; he's
drunk on the real stuff. The heart wants to give in. So do the lungs and the kidneys. Even the throat wants to close.

You can't stop thinking about those tiny feet, those fingers that would have wrapped around yours. The whole upstairs attic is still decorated with the crib and the streamers and the lights and stuffed animals. The crib is still empty but your mind fills it in.

Let's pretend the local museum calls up and wants to know if they can display the bones. Let's pretend you tell them no.

Let's pretend they're already displayed in your heart.

a priest walks into a bar

A mathematician calculates his loneliness but comes to the conclusion
that it is too big for even him to handle. Some nights my sister
stands at the kitchen counter, hand over her belly, wedding ring
digging into the soft skin. She looks like a mermaid beached on land
as she rests there, dark hair over her white shoulders.

I remember how the first miscarriage left her reeling,
and she went out one morning to the pier to go fishing
but came home empty-handed. When my father inquired
why she had not caught anything, not a small blue trout or a catfish,
even, she replied that the hook kept slicing through the water
over and over again, as cleanly as a knife through butter,
yet what lurked beneath the surface
remained beneath the surface.

A chemist measures out his sorrow into a beaker
but realizes it can never be reacted with another substance
because it is too complicated.

The other day I put on a little black dress and stalked the town
to see if I could find a man to hold me, but all the clubs
were full of men with sad eyes who wanted to apologize
for things they'd never done.

Tonight my body is a church steeple and everyone wants
to pray there, but no one wants to come in.

A priest walks into a bar
but there is no punchline.

A priest walks into a bar
because he needs to drown
his sorrows in drink.

Chapter 2

Hoarding

Topics:

- [The Hoarder](#)

The Hoarder

After Neil Hilborn

The first time I went over to his house my hands shook
not because I was nervous, but because even the railings were covered
with trash and there was no way to keep myself from falling down the stairs.

When we went to the bedroom, foreplay consisted of clearing
all the crumpled newspapers and cereal boxes from the king-size bed
before we finally got undressed. On my third day of psych class
when I'd finally gotten up the nerve to approach him, his eyes looked
closed off just like the shades drawn over his apartment windows.

But once he let me in, he said I was the only one
who ever made his brain feel quiet and uncluttered.

I know it hurt whenever anyone teased him about the hoarding,
but once he joked he loved me so much that he wanted to add me
to his ever-expanding collection of junk mail and yarn.

Whenever I left to go back to my own apartment, he'd steal
my sweaters so "I'd have a reason to come back again,"
though the next time I did, I would see them tangled up
in a corner with all the other jackets and dresses,
stained and wrinkled with the smell of mold.

Some mornings I would kiss him so hard he would actually decide
to empty the trash or put away the takeout cartons from dinner.

We were doing good. You could see some of the floor
underneath the mess, and even the windows were open,
letting in the sunlight as we traced patterns over each other's skin.

But last month he said he wanted to take a break,
that I was distracting him, making him feel disorganized emotionally.

Isn't that better than being disorganized physically, though?

Now when I open the door to my apartment to sleep in my own bed
for once, I stumble over nonexistent toys and trash.

I pause a little too long before opening my closet, as if I'm waiting
for a pile of newspapers to fall out and smother me.

None of my rooms hold any secret treasures.

I used to think about his eyes all the time, or the way he could make
me feel safe even surrounded by a mountain of garbage.

I miss him more than words can say.

Now I just think about the new girl I saw him with yesterday,

and how maybe I was just one of the things he hoarded,
put on his shelf. But when he got tired of me, he kicked me out.
Maybe I was the first thing he ever threw away.

Chapter

3

Unrequited Love

Topics:

- on the awfulness of unrequited love
- how to get over him
- when his love for me was unrequited
- the greeks believed in apricots as the cure for unrequited love

on the awfulness of unrequited love

Unrequited love is exhausting, almost physically draining, like teetering on the edge of recovery after being home sick for two weeks. But the problem with unrequited love is that there's no cure, no chicken soup or bedrest to make you feel better again. The heart is a fickle organ, the most unpredictable in the body, and it wants what it wants for sometimes unknowable reasons.

Imagine what it must have been like for Adam and Eve, the first man and woman, just trying out their hearts for the first time. No instruction manual, no step-by-step rules that laid out the foundation and the uses. And if Adam didn't love Eve, or vice versa, there would be no one else to project that unused love onto, no placebo.

When you see the one you love with someone else, it's all you can do not to rip your heart out and throw it on the floor and declare your love to the whole world, to smash every plate in the cupboard or paint the walls with their name. It's gut-wrenching, like asking for the whole universe and only receiving the stars instead.

And of course, if your love is unrequited, you sincerely believe that this person belongs to you, that they are *yours*. That you love them quite possibly more than it is possible to love someone. It's like a Matryoshka doll: you can fit so much feeling inside your own body, again and again, layers upon layers going down, down, into the deepest parts of yourself. If someone were to unpeel you like an onion, they'd find all that unreturned love built up like great yellow reams of fat, insulating your kidneys and lungs, clogging your arteries. You'd never be able to escape it.

Sometimes you lie awake at night in bed and imagine all the things you could have said or done or been, the things that might have changed the course of fate and steered the ship of destiny in your direction for once. But unfortunately, while we have all the maps in the world for faraway countries or oceans or mammoth caves, no one, in the entire course of human history, has ever charted a path for unrequited love and how to find your way out of its forest. The first explorer that does so, and quite possibly the only, would most likely have an entire continent named after them, an entire island, an entire universe. Because the one person who figures out how to escape unrequited love's grasp is truly a genius.

And sometimes you look at their picture over and over again in your school's yearbook, flipping the pages but always returning to that one face, the smile you believe is meant for you, the hair parted just so, the smooth curve of their neck where it joins their collarbones.

You'd write their name upon the stars if you could, but for now you'll just have to settle for jotting it down in your tattered notebook instead.

how to get over him

Maybe even though you saw him with another woman, laughing and joking in a smoky bar with their heads held close together, you still think you have a shot with him.

You don't.

This way of thinking will ruin you; you need to stop looking around corners and walking on eggshells when you're near him. Your chances are slim to none; it would be easier to win a handful of cash on a Roulette wheel than get together with him. The stars have a better chance of kissing the moon than you have a chance of even so much as brushing his hand in passing as you walk across the street.

Realize this. Drill it into your head and into your brain; carve it into your bedpost instead of his initials. Smear it on your bathroom mirror in a tube of the very same Sugar Plum lipstick you bought in hopes you could wear it on a fancy dinner date with him. Scrawl it on your wrist in permanent marker; walk into a tattoo parlor and get it inked onto each hand, each finger, so that whenever you ache to hold his hand, you can look down at your hands and see the reminder instead. Memorize this thought; chant it over and over again to yourself like a mantra.

Let it be your new motto.

Do not let yourself regret him; do not lie in bed in a quivering heap for days at a time; do not mope or hit the snooze button simply so you can drift off to sleep and dream about him. You are not a kicked dog and your ribs are not

showing. If you look in the medical dictionary, lovesickness is not a disease. Wanting someone who is already taken is not a disease.

So don't treat yourself like a victim or a hospital patient. Stop putting Band-Aids on wounds that need sunlight. Stop trying to mend your heart with a splint and bandages; give it some fresh air instead.

Dress yourself up if for no other reason than making yourself feel good. Put on your tightest, tiniest little black dress and some high heels and have a dance party in your own room with the stereo blasting.

Throw away his photos. Delete his texts, crumple up his notes and slot them into the paper shredder like old credit cards.

Thinking about him any more than you already have is dangerous. It is a palmful of lit matches about to fall into a puddle of lighter fluid. It is a warning sign, a canyon of deceit and sadness and regret.

Do not let this canyon become your new choice of vacation.

Hang out at the beach instead. Step into the ocean and feel the water swirl around you; stand among the jellyfish and tilt your head to the sky.

Breathe in the salty air.

This is the very same air he is breathing at this moment, but he is sharing it with someone else.

You deserve to have your own air now. It is yours.

Breathe it in.

when his love for me was unrequited

When I didn't love him, he locked the keys in his car

so I'd have to keep giving him rides to work.

When I didn't love him, he bought himself dinner

for seven nights a week and pretended that the empty chair

sitting across from him was me.

My mother always taught me to never place blame on

the losing party, to always rub honey into wounds instead

of salt, but whenever I caught him watching me with other men,

I wanted to board the nearest bus and drive as far away

as I could from his eyes. When I didn't love him,

he started to believe an aquarium was a sadder version

of the ocean and tried to drown himself at sea.

When I didn't love him, he loved me so much

that his desire acted as a lifejacket and prevented him

from going under. I was the year about to turn over

into the equinox, the fingerprints on the wineglass,

the fog so thick even fireflies lost their way,

the frequency of dogs who could hear a revenge story

from a mile away. I cracked his heart like a glow-stick,

filled his mouth with nothing but my name.

In the end, he had to resort to watching my window
at 3 AM in hopes that it would suddenly light up
and he could imagine me behind the curtains,
undressing, clothes falling to the floor like skim milk.
That was the closest he would ever get to me.

the greeks believed in apricots as the cure for unrequited love

If I can't have the boy, at least I can have his clothes.
They leave their sweaters, their jackets, their blue jeans draped
over my bed like petals, filling the bathtub, rising to the surface
of the water like buoys. Always men have told me
that I don't look eighteen-a few years older, especially
if I have a cigarette in hand; my therapist once pontificated
that loving someone who is already with another
is misplaced energy. She placed an apricot in my hand
and made me roll it between my palms,
its soft downy skin like velvet across my fingers.
The Ancient Greeks believed that apricot pits
were all the words a dead person meant to say
but didn't, hardened into a dense stone
hidden deep within that pale orange flesh.
Today, though, desire renders me speechless.
There's nothing more to say that hasn't already
been said. When they leave, the boys
never exit the normal way: they have to jump
out the window, slide down the roof,
pick the lock on the back door with an extra
bobby pin. Love makes people do strange things.
And the day I held that apricot, I learned
that there's no room for small talk.
If you love someone, let them know.
Even ghosts have things they wish they'd said.

Chapter

4

Alcoholism

Topics:

- we named our unborn daughter moonshine after her father's favorite habit

we named our unborn daughter moonshine after her father's favorite habit

I am thirteen and you are growing fat with the westward expansion
of your alcoholism; your windpipe is permanently filled
with a pint of Jack Daniel's like the gas compartment of a car.

I don't know how to turn the engine off most days.

I am fifteen, learning the sharp angles of my own body
and using them to ward off soft, unwanted men
who threaten to dig out the mine of my vagina
searching for nonexistent gold. You are too busy to care,
double-fisting beers in your bed, falling into sleep
while the moon cracks its knuckles
in an effort to fight off your will to drink.

I am nineteen and still learning.

The storks have started avoiding our house because
they know we will never be able to have children
with your damaged insides. You are spoiled goods,
rusted iron, a pocket exploded with seams and stuffing.

We stand on icebergs for warmth and count up
your rehab stays like lottery tickets; they are the only
consistent thing in our relationship.

I am twenty-three and your liver has seen more fights
than my badass male cousin.

It throws left hooks and punches with vigor,
and lands every single one of them.

Some days the wind blows so hard it streams through
the portholes of your compassion.

I am twenty-seven and learning how to sleep with ghosts
while you are out barhopping.

They say humans are 78% water.

You are 78% alcohol.

In the mornings, I fill your glass bottles with orange juice,
but you never come down for breakfast.

I am thirty-five and you are buried in my backyard,
and instead of flowers on your grave,

I stack breathalyzers like pyramids.

Chapter 5

Long-Distance Relationships

Topics:

- poem for a soon-to-be long distance lover
- long-distance lover

poem for a soon-to-be long distance lover

It's not really any of my business that our cats have sex
with one another when we're not home, but they've shed so much
hair on the upholstered chairs that it's anyone's guess
what they were doing. And next year you'll be in New York
and I'll be in Minnesota, but we can still compare
our favorite brands of soy milk over the phone;
I'll be just a few hundred miles away, remembering
what it felt like to kiss your knuckles during a lightning storm,
and how every bolt of electricity
didn't even come close to comparing how you felt beneath me,
opening like one of Georgia O'Keefe's flowers.
We can still meet up and visit the penguins at the zoo,
feed them bread crumbs from our pockets
and laugh at the zebras galloping inside the fences.
Distance isn't quite so bad once you get used to it;
it'll be just like playing that game of hide and seek
all the time when we were children,
except this time it's not a guarantee
that I'll be able to find you again.

long-distance lover

In June when you moved to New York, I Skyped you
every day from my bed at the crack of dawn, bleary-eyed
and still waking up, just so I could catch you before
you went to sleep. Sometimes our cat, Patrick,
stuck his head in the frame and meowed at your image,
licking the screen just like I moved my tongue
across your thighs all those months ago,
and I could almost smell the ramen boiling on your stove,
your daily staple food since you never liked grocery shopping.
Scientists are still not sure whether dark energy exists,
or what role it plays in the universe,
but whenever you and I went stargazing at midnight
there was nothing surer than the way those constellations
danced across the sky like lovers, joining hands,

and how we laid on the grass beneath them,
or sometimes made love on a picnic blanket
until one by one, every star burned out.
But now I find myself leaving you voicemails
a little less frequently, and usually now when I Skype
it's to talk with my sister or brother,
and sometimes I wonder what the inside
of your apartment looks like now, since it's been so long
since I last saw it, or whether you have some other girl
who knows you as well as I used to.

Chapter

6

Gender/Sexuality

Topics:

- you can buy nail polish, but not tolerance
- the man who came out when his girlfriend broke up with him
- handwritten apology note from God to a closeted gay man
- Girl Practice

you can buy nail polish, but not tolerance

When we head to Costco to pick out new shades of nail polish
for the upcoming school year, the employee suggests
Raspberry Ripple and Emerald Ebullience. We buy several bottles
of each and take turns driving while the other brushes
the colored liquid on in broad strokes in the car.

My brother is concentrating hard, his legs crossed in the short
denim skirt he picked out at the mall, tip of tongue protruding
from the corner of his mouth.

The cornfields angle away from us on both sides, dark golden
husks waving like fans in the wind. I know that when we get home,
my brother will practice his model walk in the kitchen,
hands on hips, nails painted a fresh coat of dark purple,
glancing at me out of the corner of his eye as I scrub
greasy black debris from the edges of the frying pan,
checking to make sure I'm watching.

I remember his childhood, how he went skateboarding
in baggy black pants and leather jackets and joked
with his friends about how the school's only gay student
was a faggot. I think that maybe we are all just practicing,
and I wonder about all the time my brother wasted
back then on being someone else. But it's a shame
when the one version of yourself you're meant to be
is the version of yourself you always have to hide,
like the way my brother throws the high heels back in the closet
and smears off all the makeup with the palm of his hand
as soon as he hears our father's car pull into the driveway.

the man who came out when his girlfriend broke up with him

The same day my father breaks up with his girlfriend,
I break up with my boyfriend of four years.
As a reward for making it through the long,
punishing day at work without anyone to come home to,
we both treat ourselves to chocolate frozen yogurt
at the corner store and eat it underneath the stars,
Polaris slicing its steady silver body through the clouds

like the prow of a ship. The fireflies are burning holes
 through the night sky, looking for all the world like
 holes in the ozone layer. We ask one another
 what we will miss about our partners;
 my father says her long red hair, even though
 he always had to unclog it from the drain, or the way
 she removed her underwear with one hand
 and shed it like a snake. I tell him
 I'll miss the way my boyfriend skipped our senior prom
 to visit his grandmother in the hospital,
 dying of cancer, and how he stood there
 at her bedside in his tux, my corsage already wilting
 inside his pocket. The neighborhood cats
 meow in the darkness, knocking over metal
 trashcan lids as my father puts his head in his hands
 and begins to weep. My father, who didn't even cry
 at his first wedding when he saw the bride.
 I ask him why the tears are coming,
 and he says it's because he's been hiding
 for the last ten years of his life, and only now
 is he able to spend the rest of his life with a man
 without pretending that his girlfriend was the one
 when he really dreamed about touching men's thighs,
 the silky inner skin there, or kissing them,
 losing himself in something that felt
 like home.

handwritten apology note from God to a closeted gay man

My son, I created closets as a sanctuary for sweatshirts and dresses,
 not to store secrets that have no reason to be kept hidden.
 I allowed human skin cells to regenerate every seven years
 as a way of making them shed all the unwanted insults,
 to come alive in a fresh body, new and untouched, to begin again.
 So now, my son, shed your old body and put on a new one.
 Forests are for hiding in, not closets. Reveal yourself to all.
 Yes, the Bible says man shall not lie with man, but then again
 no book is ever really finished, is it? New pages are written all the time.

So let us turn to a new one and dip the pen in ink.
I am the final author of my autobiography, and no one else.
Let me remind you that when I look down from above
and see you holding hands with a man named Adam, I do not think
of Adam and Steve; I think of Adam and Bill or Adam and John,
or Adam and Jose or Adam and whoever he goddamn wants.
And if Adam's ex-girlfriend Eve ever comes along and slaps him
across the face for "lying with a man," I hope he takes that apple
from her and enjoys every last delicious bite.
My son, I watched your birth from my golden perch.
It was a cesarean section, a bloody miracle.
You were lifted from her stomach like hope itself.
When the doctors slashed the umbilical cord like a kite string,
you wailed at the top of your powerful little lungs.
With a voice like that, there's no reason to remain quiet now.
It's time.
And my son, if you were worried, Heaven is not the Westboro Baptist Church.
Heaven is a place that opens its gates to you like welcoming arms.

Girl Practice

When I kiss her the second time, our bodies meld into
one another like a pear fitting into a cupped palm,
the soft edges of her breasts rising and falling
to the beat of her heart. And when I feel her long red hair
pour in tendrils and waves over my back and into my ears,
I think of all the times when I was younger
and I would press an ice cube from the freezer
to the tender inside of my wrist, testing,
searching for feeling, much the same way
in which my mouth moves over hers now, experimenting,
to see if being with her
is any different than being with him.

Chapter

7

Breakups

Topics:

- “it’s not me, it’s you”
- the breakup anthem
- addressed to the woman who slept with my boyfriend
- poem for the day i cut my hair in memory of you leaving
- for an ex-lover becoming someone else’s
- all these other men, but they are not you
- after the third lover that walked out on me

“it’s not me, it’s you”

Are you sleeping with someone else he asks;
 I shake my head no, but my eyes probably tell a different story:
 that every time he walks into a room my heart explodes,
 and not even a specially-trained SWAT team
 could clean up the mess it left behind;
 his mouth gives me water damage an ocean would only
 dream of. He leaves his underwear wherever he removes it,
 in bed, in the living room, sometimes even in the front hall
 if we’re both in a good enough mood, and I’ll find it
 like a puddle on the floor, a gift waiting to be unwrapped.
Am I too boring, he inquires, but he forgets about the time
 the rainstorm in New York City forced us to run three miles
 just to hitch a taxi, and he carried me piggyback
 the whole way, until we got in the back seat and he took off
 all my wet clothes when the driver wasn’t looking
 and gave him an extra tip when it dropped us off at home.
 Octopuses are jealous of how good a lover he is
 with only two arms; ships would fall to pieces and slowly sink
 at the sound of his voice; peanut butter wishes it could
 stick to the roof of his mouth.
Did I say something wrong, he begs, but the pickup lines
 he scrawled me on the back of a napkin
 when we first met in a bar would put
 even e.e. cummings to shame. (He once brought
 a bouquet of fresh pears to my office and serenaded me
 with “i carry your heart with me” in my cubicle.)
 So when he finally asks what’s wrong, I don’t have the heart
 to tell him that he’s really just too good for me,
 and I’m afraid that one day he’ll wake up and realize
 that he could sleep with so many better women.
 When I leave, I place the box filled with my hair beneath his pillow
 so that he’ll always have a few pieces of me
 to remember me by, and take one last look at his sleeping face
 before shutting the door quietly behind me.

the breakup anthem

When he tells you he's leaving you for the other woman,
 open your heart like a text message and staple it
 to his wall; leave two dozen voicemails on his machine
 in the middle of the night at the exact second
 you know he will be climbing into bed with her,
 as circled in red ink on his pocket calendar.
 Remind him of how deep your kisses
 can be, like plunging down a broken elevator shaft.
 When he tells you, slide your hand between his legs
 one last time, and don't stop until he tilts his head back,
 tender white skin exposed like milk,
 the sound he makes like a cat meowing.
 Then let go at the exact instant he's about to come.
 The next day, pack your bags and leave,
 but not after shredding the two little red dresses
 he bought for her with pinking shears
 before scattering the remnants like confetti in his office cubicle.
 Have a dozen yellow roses delivered to his mailbox,
 but replace the carton with a dozen smashed eggs instead;
 attach a note reading *this is what your heart will look like*
when I'm done with you to the outside.
 Go into the tiny guest room you kept your clothes in
 when you stayed overnight and scrawl your name
 across the walls in Revenge Red lipstick.
 Finally, instead of keying a vicious threat
 in the metal skin of his hot orange Corvette,
 scratch *I had to fake it every time I slept with this man*
 into all four side doors.

addressed to the woman who slept with my boyfriend

I bet he made love urgently, like a train leaving the station.
 Here, this is every ounce of salt I gathered from his hips with my tongue.
 Here is every canker sore he implanted in my mouth when we kissed.
 In Ancient Greece, mourners placed coins over the eyes of the dead
 to help them stay shut in the afterlife. As far as I'm concerned,

I can do the same to you. Last night I saw twenty-seven fireflies
collide in the dark, so hard and so fast that you'd be surprised
the light wasn't knocked out of them.

You knocked the light out of me by taking him away;
now every breath I take is filled with his name,
and you can have this language of scars, this way of struggling
to express feelings, but there's one thing I want you to know:
there are calluses in every place he ever touched me.

I am not soft anymore.

I am rough and toughened and the first time he called out my name,
it was louder than a thousand tsunamis realizing they have far to go
before touching the shore.

That's pretty damn hard to beat.

poem for the day i cut my hair in memory of you leaving

Because you moved to Canada and left me here with the cat
and a few hundred bags of tea, I now compulsively drink two mugs
every day, with the Irish cream that you liked so much.

My mother's left several messages on your voicemail machine,
wondering how you could break her daughter's heart, but I decided
long ago that I would get your heart tattooed to my palm,
although I'm not sure the tattoo artist has the right color of ink
to match your eyes. Tonight I wake up from the throes of a dream
in which I try to kiss you in a place I've never kissed before,
but every spot is covered.

Here is every pair of boxer shorts you once wore
pressed into amber like insects.

The night is still turning us. I imagine you in Ontario,
alone in a high-rise apartment,
another cat from the local animal shelter curled up in your arms,
your skinny legs covered in its shedding fur.

Two years ago when my hair was at its longest
you told me you'd braid all the stars into it one day if you had
the chance; now it's cropped close to my neck.

Today is spring-cleaning day.

I leave the box on my front doorstep for the mail carrier to handle,
double-wrapped in thick packing tape, your address scrawled

on the upper-righthand label. When you open it,
the strands will sift to the floor like snow.

for an ex-lover becoming someone else's

According to Tacitus, a senator and historian of the Roman Empire,
the Great Fire of Rome burned for six days straight.
Three districts were completely destroyed. After you left, I burned
for 234 weeks in a row; even when I swam all the way to Canada
and burrowed under all the lakes there, my flames still didn't go out.
By now, her mouth must be like one of those tiny bees, the kind
that sting almost unnoticeably and leave red welts where the victim
least expects them. Your white shoulders are probably
covered in her kisses, I see you calling her name as the sky
turns to pink ash, the apples on the counter already rotting
with no one left to cut them up. You know what my mother did
when I was a child to keep the uneaten fruit fresh?
She poured lemon juice over it and sealed it in the refrigerator
for a single week. I don't know why, but language always fails me
when I need it most. Well, now you can have the way we fucked
at midnight with my hands between your legs, you can have
the repetition of our history together, the important dates,
the gilded crowns I pressed upon your spine with my tongue.
Here, you can have your heart back, too: you stole it once
and I swore I wouldn't press charges.
Give it to her instead, for she probably needs it more.
Soak it in lemon juice, so it won't rot
when she takes it in her arms, like I once did.

all these other men, but they are not you

After you left me, I drove myself to the bar and looked for all the men
wallowing in self-pity with a few pints of tequila in hand, the ones
who told me how fucking good I looked in my little red dress,
the ones that tried to wipe your scent from my mouth
with their tongues, but only succeeded in burying the wish
to have you back ever deeper in my throat, like coins in a wishing well.
Even now undressing for this long string of goth boys and indie rockers,
the dark-haired poets with trench coats, is nothing like undressing for you-

how every piece of clothing that fell was another reason
for you to call me beautiful, and even the dark red port wine stain on my thigh
tasted like a sunrise, you said. The night you threw your clothes
out the upstairs window, followed by the computer,
I dreamt we visited a French museum and climbed into the glass cases
of dinosaur bones, matching our knobby spines
to the spikes of the stegosaurus, our knees to the wings of the pterodactyls-
brutal, extinction is, almost like leaving a lover
after three years of swallowing their kisses like shooting stars
and having them evaporate into comets in your stomach.

after the third lover that walked out on me

The first time a boy left me, I dreamt of Freud and woke up weeping.
I'd been curled up in bed in the shape of where his body used to be.
In the beginning I even considered filing a missing person's report,
going to the cops with empty hands
in the middle of the night, explaining to them
*This is what happened and I don't know how to go about
this process of finding him again, but I do know
that it's serious enough to warrant a police investigation.*
Seven months later, after an affair with a long-haired poet
who wore skinny jeans and plaid shirts,
I was abandoned again.
My mother always told me I learned to walk
before crawling, but this time it was all I could do
to keep myself from jumping off the nearest bridge.
I measured my level of loneliness in the number of used tea bags
that were left on the kitchen counter.
After 366 days those bags had overflowed into the sink,
spiraling down the drain;
they spilled from the bookshelves and the refrigerator door.
Soon I began to equate the smell of tea with loss,
with an absence, with a lover no longer present.
After the third boy left me,
I threw his computer out the third-story window of my apartment
and watched its glass screen smash into pieces on the grass below.
That day I discovered yet another metaphor for a broken heart.

Chapter

8

Anxiety Disorder/Panic Attacks

Topics:

- [The Planetarium of Anxiety](#)
- [how to let the anxiety attack pass](#)
- [the reasons why i don't drink coffee](#)
- [dear stranger-sorry, i wanted to talk to you, but i have social anxiety](#)

The Planetarium of Anxiety

Before you left for Tucson, you promised the panic attacks would subside, lessen, grow easier, like the weight of a drowned girl coming slowly to rest on the bottom of the ocean floor. But at Costco, looking for travel packs of deodorant and chapstick, you started to shake so hard I could move mountains with the force of your hands, or demolish them at the touch of a fingertip. In the rows of brightly-colored, perfectly-packed soaps, it seemed like every aisle was teetering, waiting to crush you beneath their weight. You said you imagined the light bulbs dropping one by one, descending in slow motion, heavy like the tender flesh of ripe plums, their swollen red skin bursting at the seams, falling open to reveal the inner core beneath. When the manager came and asked if we needed help, I said we were *just looking* out of habit. In Phoenix at the airport, huddled in a raincoat, weighted down by sacks of luggage like Virginia Woolf's stone-filled pockets, you asked me to hold your heart, something we did whenever a new attack came, which involved me cupping the place in your chest with my palms where that beating organ would lie, bare, exposed, if someone were to cut it open. As I did so, every heartbeat spilling between my fingers like honey, I told you about the planetarium we visited in fifth grade- the one with a ceiling covered in stars and shiny, globular moons, and reminded you that even the planets tremble sometimes, or feel dizzy or afraid, but eventually they all wind up back on their axes again, spinning smoothly through the ether of the universe.

how to let the anxiety attack pass

The most calming thing you can do in the middle of an anxiety attack is place your palm over your own heart, or someone else's if they happen to be near enough. The simple act of reminding yourself that you're a living, breathing thing with blood pumping throughout the scaffolding of your body can sometimes be enough to relieve you of dread.

So much is temporary. Rome burned for six days and seven nights. The stars live silhouetted against the sky until they flare and burst apart into the universe like melted candles into blackened cake. And every grain of sand known to man eventually washes back into the surf and is replaced by a new one. Anxiety may be a permanent fixture throughout your entire life, but its episodes are momentary. And although moments can be captured like photographs against the background of decades, the memories surrounding the image gradually fade, until all that's left is blurred edges and bright lines. Ten years from now, your first anxiety attack won't be as shiny or freshly-printed in your mind as you believe it will be.

So remember this. No matter how badly your body trembles or how short your breath pulls on its leash, this anxiety attack is just a photograph. It will lose some of its meaning as time goes on. It will fade. The album it's tucked away in inside a small corner of your mind will no longer find use for it.

Wherever it happens- when you're surrounded by a sea of people at a party or alone in your room, in the classroom as the teacher scrapes chalk across the board, inside the tiny bathroom of a rest stop far from civilization- remind yourself that whoever is in sight has felt anxious too at one point in their lives. Maybe not to the point of throwing up or shaking like a thunderstorm, but some of their anxiety has sampled a few bars from the soundtrack of yours. "I am not the only one who has felt this" is cliché but true. So even if you're alone during the attack, or at least feeling like you are, you'll realize you're really not. Never have been, not now, and never will be.

The other thing is to find a safety word, a mantra. A word that makes you feel instantly calmer or at least more down to earth. A word that will pull you out of misery and back into reality with just a few syllables. Something as beautiful and long-winded as "ethereal" or "romanesque," or even something as short and brusque as "lemon" or "cat." When the anxiety hits, repeat the word over and over again until it stops making sense. It's like the childhood game of saying "orange" so many times it ceases to be a delicious segmented fruit and becomes a cluster of meaningless letters. No matter how many repetitions have to come out of your mouth, no matter how many people stare or cover their ears, keep saying it. Force it out of your mouth even if you have to practically spit it into the air from between your teeth. Cling onto it until it does the trick and works its magic.

Safety phrases work well too. "This too shall pass" and "It gets better" are classics. Words already scream on paper, so imagine how much power they'll have when they come pouring out of your mouth.

When the dizziness and sweating hits, find a home. Even if it's a person. Find them. Curl yourself into their arms like a spiral sea shell and listen to their heart beat against the sand dune of their chest like tidal waves. Remember what the ocean smells like. Remember that being okay tastes like sea salt and fresh air along the shore. Take a little vacation from your anxiety; you deserve it.

It will end. It will end. And this time, it'll be a good ending.

the reasons why i don't drink coffee

One. Every morning when I get out of bed and even think about walking through my front door and crossing the street my heart starts to pound like a jackhammer without the aid of any caffeine.

There are days when my own bed looks at me with disgust as if each wrinkle in its sheets is ashamed of my cold feet and shaking hands, when every streetlight seems to stay green just for me.

I am terrified of green lights because it means having to control a vehicle when my own body is already enough to handle for one day.

Two. I'm awake enough at 6 am anyway because the weight of all my mistakes is an echo I want to be able to rupture my eardrums to stop listening to. At dawn I concentrate on my breathing because it's the only thing that has never walked out of my life but every exhale is a reminder of the time I had to puff into a paper bag during second grade when my heartbeat was a train I couldn't derail from the tracks.

Three. I don't need another drug, no matter how delicious, on top of the pills I'm already taking. Xanax, Lorazepam,

Klonopin. Their names sound exotic and beautiful,
like the ones my Indian neighbors were introduced with
at our block party seconds before I fled from the room in terror
of having to meet and shake hands with strangers.

Four. Drinking anything hot is an excuse to hurt myself,
to let it burn all the way down my throat like a ring of flame
as an excuse to punish myself for the eye contact
I didn't make with the pizza delivery man after my parents forced me
to be the one to open the door and pay.

Even now I hate anything with pepperoni on it.

Five. Caffeine is just another thing to depend on, a comfort zone
to hide inside of like a circus ring, another daily routine
I'm too afraid of breaking. My spine is already pulled taut
like an arrow, bent under the weight of so many stifling habits.
I just hope that means one day I'll fly.
I'm Starbucks' worst customer. Now whenever someone asks me
whether I prefer decaf or regular, I say regular anyway
because it's a synonym for normal
and that's all I want to feel like right now.

dear stranger-sorry, i wanted to talk to you, but i have social anxiety

I saw you in the deli but I was too scared to say hello. Then again, that's how most of these stories turn out, isn't it? A person falls in love, however briefly, with another person but never works up the courage to utter a single word. It's odd, though, because I'm a writer, a quite prolific one too. You'd think I'd be full of words to hand to you like a bouquet.

But the truth of the matter is that I was anxious. I have this problem called social anxiety, where even going to the local hardware store or ordering pizza over the phone seems like a giant roadblock in the path of my entire day. I dread these things. Interaction is so hard. And as I stared at you, trying to memorize the pattern your eyelashes made on your cheek in shadow, the way you closed your eyes for a few split seconds to decompress, I was scared of all the things that could happen. I could spill my coffee down your shirt, accidentally knock your cell phone off the table, forget my name. I have done that before, you know. Forget my own name. There were just so many combinations, infinite combinations, of things that could go wrong and destroy my one chance of being with you forever.

So, as usual, I didn't say a word. I paid for my sandwich and drink and sat down at a corner table, as far away from anyone else as I possibly could, and ate by myself. Quietly. My mother used to say that you can always feel when someone else's stare is upon you, that it's like a heavy cloak has just been spread over your shoulders, but you were so deep in thought that you didn't notice me looking. At all.

My favorite thing to do is think about time and space and energy. The space-time continuum, space as a kind of fabric punctured by holes and flaws and astronauts landing on the moon. So I thought about rupturing my own personal space-time fabric as I ate my roasted pepper Panini, the fabric I had kept carefully preserved and hidden for so long. I've always had a plan, I've always followed the exact instructions and rules and just once, I wanted to stray from the path and walk over to you, smile, introduce myself. This would cause an unplanned rip in my space-time fabric and I may have spun out of control, but at the time I was more than willing to experience that sensation just for you.

I thought about it for awhile. So little space between my eyes and yours, a few split seconds between getting up from the table, pushing my chair in, and walking over to yours. A surprise, an unexpected event. Something that could change me utterly and totally forever.

But the idea of doing something not already written down in my daily planner was simply too much for me. My palms were already starting to sweat, my breath coming faster. Even being remotely close to you and the other customers in the deli was causing me to panic. It's like the walls were closing in, and I had to get out of there.

So I shoved back my chair and rushed out the door. I barely remember you glancing up as I hurried past, out of curiosity or surprise at the sound my chair made as the metal scraped across the floor-I don't know which. That seemed like the only time in my life anyone had ever paid the slightest bit of attention to me.

On the bus ride home, I leaned my head against the glass and stared out at the people passing by in blurs. I can't walk home because it involves eye contact with too many strangers, and I can't drive myself home because I'm afraid I'll make a wrong turn and someone will notice. The bus is the safest place for me; it allows me time to think.

So I thought about you all the way back to my apartment. I thought about everything I'd given up in the past just to feel less anxious, just to make myself feel more comfortable. I thought about my safety zone and how I'd never once ventured out of it. I thought about the stupid space-time fabric and how I wanted so badly to rip holes in it every day, so many holes that could never be fixed or mended.

I wanted to do things that made me feel uncomfortable, to experience things that made me feel unreal and tingly and wholly confused.

You would have been one of them.

But you weren't, and you won't ever be. This city has too many people in it to find you again, and even if I did, who knows what I would have done, or even if I would have talked to you at all.

We could have gotten married and had kids and a vegetable garden full of eggplant and tomatoes and cabbage, a tiny apartment overlooking the ocean, full of knitting needles and leftover Chinese food and so much love contained in one small space. We could have, *we could have*.

I could have. That's what I say to myself every time I don't do something I know I should have.

But if I could go back in time, it wouldn't be an activity I would redo.

It would be a moment, and it would involve you.

Chapter 9

Abortion

Topics:

- [abortion](#)

abortion

Afterward, your father wants to convict you of murder, to charge you
as a killer. But what he does not realize is that you are only sixteen,
and when you went skinny-dipping three months in, the round pillow
of your stomach glowed in the river like the shell of an oyster,
except you were too young to handle the pearl.

In England two centuries ago, they crowned a young man as a saint
because he prayed over a child ill with tuberculosis, at death's door,
but who soon recovered. The doctor reminded you of this before
the anesthetic was administered, mask placed over eyes,
the monitor flickering its slow tune in the corner,
white walls, fireflies making love so loudly outside in the dark
that every pulse of light stemming from their bodies
was a synonym for heartbeat. The syringe slid in as smoothly
as a lover trying on another body, your red hair spread over the bed,
spilling into the sheets, a vein throbbing in your left wrist
as if grasping for the baby's hand before it was suctioned out of you,
and your father, pacing outside in the hallway,
wondering how to convict his own daughter
of something she was too young to understand.

Chapter

10

My Favorites

Topics:

- [the summer i shrank and you expanded](#)
- [a brief biography of my eighteen years](#)
- [The Hoarder](#)
- [breathing in morse code](#)
- [poem for the day i cut my hair in memory of you leaving](#)
- [“it's not me, it's you”](#)
- [“just friends”](#)
- [not so much falling in love as leaping into it](#)
- [the atheist & the believer](#)
- [Losing Touch](#)
- [Time Machine](#)

the summer i shrank and you expanded

The year we dissected a squid and ate its tentacles piece
 by piece down at the pier next to your house was the year
 you expanded while I grew into myself. We kissed one
 another like good luck charms, like talismans, and used
 our bodies in place of fortune tellers. I read your palm lines
 and came to the conclusion that we would be together forever.
 You hated the word *forever* and settled for *a long time*.
 As we grew more familiar with one another's skin,
 I watched my intake. I wanted nothing but you, would inhale
 nothing but you, counted my calories like sheep before
 drifting off to sleep. The less I ate, the more room I saved
 for you. You wanted to swallow me whole so I fed myself
 to you piece by piece, the tender red flesh of my thumbs
 and breasts until they grew bruised by your mouth.
 In those days I ate nothing but a cup of cold cereal.
 When we watched the whales dive in the surf,
 slapping the water like winners of an arm wrestling match,
 you were almost as giant as their cavernous ribs.
 I was smaller than the smallest school of fish.
 I wanted to fade into you, into the house of your lungs,
 so I spent hours sucking in my ribs in front of the mirror.
 We became opposites of one another.
 But in the end, my wish to become part of you failed,
 and I simply became the skeleton in your closet instead.

a brief biography of my eighteen years

There was a December when my lungs froze over after you stole
 my breath and left me with only fluid running through my bronchial tubes.
 As a precaution against making this a regular occurrence,
 I try to think of you as a handful of cells instead of as an ocean
 in the shape of a thunderstorm that never ends,
 but there's always something beautiful about a man
 whose laugh can get stuck in my windpipe like a thief
 in a laundry chute. You once joked that there were so many
 mixed feelings running between us that we were

like scrambled eggs, although salmonella has never really been
 my top concern so long as we catch it together.
 Forgive me for always being the vinegar to your water;
 I am full of potholes and sometimes
 I have trouble letting people in to my rubble.
 And I have sworn off falling in love with the same man twice,
 but I have never been able to sling curse words
 with enough venom to hit their target.
 Like jump ropes, they trip me up.

The Hoarder

After Neil Hilborn

The first time I went over to his house my hands shook
 not because I was nervous, but because even the railings were covered
 with trash and there was no way to keep myself from falling down the stairs.
 When we went to the bedroom, foreplay consisted of clearing
 all the crumpled newspapers and cereal boxes from the king-size bed
 before we finally got undressed. On my third day of psych class
 when I'd finally gotten up the nerve to approach him, his eyes looked
 closed off just like the shades drawn over his apartment windows.
 But once he let me in, he said I was the only one
 who ever made his brain feel quiet and uncluttered.
 I know it hurt whenever anyone teased him about the hoarding,
 but once he joked he loved me so much that he wanted to add me
 to his ever-expanding collection of junk mail and yarn.
 Whenever I left to go back to my own apartment, he'd steal
 my sweaters so "I'd have a reason to come back again,"
 though the next time I did, I would see them tangled up
 in a corner with all the other jackets and dresses,
 stained and wrinkled with the smell of mold.
 Some mornings I would kiss him so hard he would actually decide
 to empty the trash or put away the takeout cartons from dinner.
 We were doing good. You could see some of the floor
 underneath the mess, and even the windows were open,
 letting in the sunlight as we traced patterns over each other's skin.
 But last month he said he wanted to take a break,
 that I was distracting him, making him feel disorganized emotionally.

Isn't that better than being disorganized physically, though?
 Now when I open the door to my apartment to sleep in my own bed
 for once, I stumble over nonexistent toys and trash.
 I pause a little too long before opening my closet, as if I'm waiting
 for a pile of newspapers to fall out and smother me.
 None of my rooms hold any secret treasures.
 I used to think about his eyes all the time, or the way he could make
 me feel safe even surrounded by a mountain of garbage.
 I miss him more than words can say.
 Now I just think about the new girl I saw him with yesterday,
 and how maybe I was just one of the things he hoarded,
 put on his shelf. But when he got tired of me, he kicked me out.
 Maybe I was the first thing he ever threw away.

breathing in morse code

Today I memorize your heartbeat line by line.
 You once got a tattoo of the spikes of breath that show up
 on a breathing machine in the hospital, on your forearm
 above the tiny red birthmark that looked like the blood
 of a grapefruit shot with a handgun. I once read
 about an elderly man who used to call up complete strangers
 every day before his death, and talked about things
 like their favorite type of pizza, their never-ending loneliness,
 or the rise and fall of the stock market. He did this
 for four years straight, and informed the local newspaper
 that the best calls he ever made
 were the ones in which no one spoke.
 Just breath on the other end.
 And tonight I remember how I used to measure
 all the space I spent without you in the distance
 between our fingertips, until one day you left me
 for some other woman, and I went to bed
 remembering that you were 450 finger-lengths away.
 I didn't know yet that you would come back to me
 again, and leave me three more times
 before the year was over, and all I'd be left with
 was the voicemails I made

of you breathing down my phone line.

poem for the day i cut my hair in memory of you leaving

Because you moved to Canada and left me here with the cat
and a few hundred bags of tea, I now compulsively drink two mugs
every day, with the Irish cream that you liked so much.

My mother's left several messages on your voicemail machine,
wondering how you could break her daughter's heart, but I decided
long ago that I would get your heart tattooed to my palm,
although I'm not sure the tattoo artist has the right color of ink
to match your eyes. Tonight I wake up from the throes of a dream
in which I try to kiss you in a place I've never kissed before,
but every spot is covered.

Here is every pair of boxer shorts you once wore
pressed into amber like insects.

The night is still turning us. I imagine you in Ontario,
alone in a high-rise apartment,
another cat from the local animal shelter curled up in your arms,
your skinny legs covered in its shedding fur.

Two years ago when my hair was at its longest
you told me you'd braid all the stars into it one day if you had
the chance; now it's cropped close to my neck.

Today is spring-cleaning day.

I leave the box on my front doorstep for the mail carrier to handle,
double-wrapped in thick packing tape, your address scrawled
on the upper-righthand label. When you open it,
the strands will sift to the floor like snow.

"it's not me, it's you"

Are you sleeping with someone else he asks;

I shake my head no, but my eyes probably tell a different story:
that every time he walks into a room my heart explodes,
and not even a specially-trained SWAT team
could clean up the mess it left behind;
his mouth gives me water damage an ocean would only
dream of. He leaves his underwear wherever he removes it,
in bed, in the living room, sometimes even in the front hall

if we're both in a good enough mood, and I'll find it
 like a puddle on the floor, a gift waiting to be unwrapped.
Am I too boring, he inquires, but he forgets about the time
 the rainstorm in New York City forced us to run three miles
 just to hitch a taxi, and he carried me piggyback
 the whole way, until we got in the back seat and he took off
 all my wet clothes when the driver wasn't looking
 and gave him an extra tip when it dropped us off at home.
 Octopuses are jealous of how good a lover he is
 with only two arms; ships would fall to pieces and slowly sink
 at the sound of his voice; peanut butter wishes it could
 stick to the roof of his mouth.

Did I say something wrong, he begs, but the pickup lines
 he scrawled me on the back of a napkin
 when we first met in a bar would put
 even e.e. cummings to shame. (He once brought
 a bouquet of fresh pears to my office and serenaded me
 with "i carry your heart with me" in my cubicle.)
 So when he finally asks what's wrong, I don't have the heart
 to tell him that he's really just too good for me,
 and I'm afraid that one day he'll wake up and realize
 that he could sleep with so many better women.
 When I leave, I place the box filled with my hair beneath his pillow
 so that he'll always have a few pieces of me
 to remember me by, and take one last look at his sleeping face
 before shutting the door quietly behind me.

"just friends"

Tonight he leaves you with a pile of his favorite CDs;
 you dream of loading them onto Noah's Ark before the flood,
 along with his 3 A.M. texts and prescription glasses;
 he will talk to you when she is not around,
 look directly into your eyes, until your heart cracks
 and spills into his palms like a weak egg yolk
 ready for the frying pan. Do not wait for his little green Facebook
 symbol to light up or you will be up all night.
 He will kiss her in front of you, a kiss so deep

it could cut straight to the bone like an interrogator
 slowly removing a suspect's finger with a carving knife.
 Shield your eyes and turn away;
 pretend you are casually studying the poster on the wall.
 You will wonder if her body leaves an outline in his bed
 the same way a crime scene is taped off
 around the chalked-in edges of the victim,
 and still he will call you twenty minutes before midnight
 wanting to go out for ice cream
 when you end up comparing the best 90's music
 over his kitchen table instead. When he looks at you
 across this very same table, stare directly back.
 Do not flinch. Do not turn away this time.
 Let the tidal wave of his stare wash over you
 until it drenches your hair
 and he wants to comb out the sadness with his fingers:
 let him. Let him.
 It will take a while to work through the tangles
 but savor this last moment with his fingers
 unknotting you like needles, before tomorrow,
 when he will go back to her again, bouncing
 between the two of you like a yo-yo,
 the kind that returns to the owner
 then moves on to another when it grows bored.

not so much falling in love as leaping into it

In January my older brother Paul came out without even saying a single word;
 I found him wrapped around the body of another boy in the kitchen
 when he thought everyone else in the house was asleep,
 the two of them slow dancing through the light of the open fridge,
 a bag of nectarines rotting sweetly on the marble counter, leaking
 dark red sludge like the inner contents of Paul's heart.
 In New York City last year a woman was killed while stargazing,
 leaning out the window of her apartment to admire the deep pink sky
 at the same time a young girl above her leapt from her apartment window,
 hitting the woman beneath her, the two of them
 plummeting to the earth below, limbs tangled in a lover's embrace.

And that night as I watched Paul tap out a message on the other boy's back
 in Morse code at the rate of one letter every five seconds,
 dash dot dash dash, dash dash dash, dot dot dash,
 I realized that the act of falling in love is not so much a falling
 as a desperate, terrifying leap off the highest building around,
 the kind of jump that ends in not just a single casualty,
 but two.

the atheist & the believer

My older sister once dated an atheist, and said that being with him
 was like jumping off a plane and not wondering if there would be
 some invisible force to catch her fall. The trouble is that no one knows
 who will die first, and I came upon them together a few months before
 they broke up, the two of them naked, standing in the light
 of the refrigerator; she was forming crosses on his back with honey
 from her tongue, and he was absolutely, earth-shatteringly still,
 eyes closed, feeling them rise like Braille upon his spine.
 That was when I finally began to understand that desire, not love,
 is when one person lets go of their un-beliefs for a few seconds,
 just a few, while the other person breathes beside them,
 and they stay like that, the two of them,
 not having to believe in anything in particular,
 not even needing to touch,
 just coexisting.

Losing Touch

The first day of class, the professor tells us about a man who has no memory,
 who forgets something as soon as he sees it. We immediately begin
 to discuss all the particulars, wonder how he could possibly even talk
 if every word vanished as soon as it appeared. And I thought of fireflies
 flashing Morse code in the dark, or how the thunder makes love so violently
 to the lightning that every crash of their bodies can be heard from above.
 How language always fails us when we need it most, like holding the hand
 of a woman just run over by a car, the blood pooling into her skirt,
 her mouth opening and closing like a fish. Brutal, to witness her see
 the world for the last time, to take in the sky deepening into pink ash
 over the horizon, and her lover, two hours away, trying desperately

to make it in time on the subway.

The professor tells us Freud would eat that up, would say something witty
about that man's capabilities for psychoanalytic therapy,
or Jung would comment on the state of his collective unconscious.

But all I can think about is how, unlike the woman whose heart
is slowly failing her, crushed underneath the steering wheel,
everything that man sees

he sees for the first time. Every time his wife steps into a room,
he would be laying his eyes upon her for the very first time.

For him, falling in love wouldn't be a luxury;
it would be a daily occurrence.

Time Machine

Here's what I understand, that human beings are approximately
75% water, and some of us are writing first drafts of our life stories,
but others of us are finishing up our final thesis.

Inserting a finger into the cool skin of a pond leads to a ripple effect,
just as the consequences of me touching my history teacher
lightly on the back of a neck with the heel of my palm leads to profound
variations in the way my life story will turn out-

everything will be altered. It's like that story you read when you were
in middle school, the one where the man goes back in time
in his rickety old machine and tries to save the woman he loves
from falling off her seventh-story balcony, but ends up prolonging
the lifespan of the dinosaurs by fifty million years instead.

And as Newton said so eloquently, for every action
there is an equal but opposite reaction:

late at night I look out the window and see the city flickering,
and my reflection raises its hand to touch the glass,
so I raise my own hand to meet it, thereby connecting myself
to yes, myself with five fingertips, and some woman
on the other side of this hotel is doing the same thing.

Therefore, our souls exchange positions and our life stories
are reversed. Now I love the man she loved, and now
she is the one who will spend countless hours of each day
searching for lifelines in the skin of her wrist
where so many have already been ruptured like a stick

diverting a current's flow to the other side of the river.

Chapter 11

Cancer

Topics:

- [Cancer](#)
 - [cancer statistics](#)
-

Cancer

My friend used to take photographs of cancer
she developed them on her own
in the darkroom built in the basement.
sometimes, when we had nothing else to do
and talking about things like bruises, and not being understood,
and wanting more
were not enough,
we would look at them underneath the covers with a flashlight
I would hold it above her shaking hands
and she would slowly take them out from the pile
there were hundreds, or maybe thousands
a smoker's lungs
a baby's brain
a mother's burnt-up mouth
heads without hair and grimaces that said,
"look at me, why am I on fire from the inside out?"
we spent minutes on each one
dissected every detail
and tried to guess how many cells had multiplied.
sometimes she would choose one and rip it up
because she thought it wasn't good enough.
but I never said a word,
and I never understood.
once her parents almost caught us;
I made some excuse that they were just for art class
in a way, they were
cancer is in itself an art
the very worst kind, but art nonetheless.
and I think that is the one thing we learned from all those photographs
if nothing else.
my friend, she had a camera and she used it against cancer
it was better than any therapy
but in the end, nothing ever survives.

cancer statistics

My five-year-old cousin David thinks one out of every five people dies.

It was hard enough to tell him at three years old that the sky isn't
always blue, but it was even harder to inform him
that actually, five out of five people die.

Sometimes I want to divorce this body
and leave the custody arrangement up to someone else,
just so I don't have to be responsible

for this skin. God knows I could talk about the time

I fell in love with a cancer patient named Michael
and made love to him slowly, at the speed of a tortoise,
for three hours because his bones ached so badly
but he still wanted to hold me.

And I have walked into over 34 bars in the past two months;
each time a drunk man laughed and asked me
what the punchline was. I replied that there wasn't one,
because if there were, Michael wouldn't really have cancer
and David would know the truth.

But I still remove Michael's IV on the good days when he
asks me to, and we ride up and down the hospital hallway
on his wheelchair until he commands me to kiss him
instead of chemotherapy.

Eight times out of nine, my mouth does the trick.

Chapter

12

Sex

Topics:

- [a small fact](#)
- [The First Time](#)
- [sleeping with someone](#)
- [let me tell you something about sex.](#)
- [perhaps](#)

a small fact

out of the over seven billion people in the world,
 at least one
 will press you up against a wall
 and make love to you until your spine hurts.
 it's a small fact
 but something you can carry with you
 like a moon hidden away in the darkening sky
 whenever you're feeling alone.

The First Time

Before we undressed, we watched the evening news, a special about the girl
 in New York City who jumped out the window of her high-rise apartment
 as the sky deepened into pink ash, but didn't look before leaving the sill
 and fell onto a woman stargazing below her, the two of them plummeting
 to the ground at the speed of light, no parachute, just a tangle of limbs
 and dark red hair. Hair that made the horrified passersby below
 certain they were seeing someone burning to death;
 others swore the girl's arms were spread out so far that she was
 a mirror image of Jesus nailed to the cross.
 The package of unused condoms in the bedside drawer
 was ripped open, my dress unzipped. Being inside you was a kind
 of drowning, a man slipping beneath the surface without a life jacket,
 the waves pooling over my head again and again.
 There was blood, dark red like the dead girl's hair, and we ordered
 pizza afterward. Sitting naked in bed, the city lights flickering
 around us, moths burning themselves to death against
 the apartment lamps, you said *Falling in love with you*
was like being tossed off a building: I landed face-first.
And just like the evening news,
there were two casualties.

sleeping with someone

When you sleep with someone for the first time
 you try to get under their skin and pry them open,
 get into the hot red heat of them where the mind ceases

to exist and the heart takes over.

You're always afraid

you'll go too far,

or not far enough.

let me tell you something about sex.

I want to tell you something about sex. It is not about lust or passion or the heat of the moment. It's about tenderness and desire. *You're inside someone else's skin.* Do you understand that? You are exploring a part of them no one else has ever dared to touch. I want you to take a flashlight and a knapsack, and a water bottle too, because you're going to be down there a long time. You need to use this time to discover. Maybe you'll be gone for a few minutes; maybe you'll be gone for a few hours or even days. It doesn't matter. What you choose to do with that time is your business, but I want you to cherish every moment of it.

Human beings are inherently secretive. We're private. We're locked-up. You have to accept that. Not everyone wants to let someone else in. So respect that. You have to. *You have to.* But maybe one day someone will come along and they'll let you kiss the backs of their knees; you'll wrap your legs around them and slide your palms down their back. *Be tender and slow.* Don't let this hurt them. But I want you to know that you will feel it, the moment they want to let you in. Take the key and unlock the door, softly. Don't make too much noise as you enter. Don't leave muddy footprints or dead leaves on the carpet. Open the curtains and windows to let the light in.

Maybe the two of you will start out slow. *And that's alright.* It's alright. Be as delicate as a sparrow and as tender as a dove.

But remember-under no circumstances, under absolutely none, are you allowed to have sex with a person without their permission. That is the one rule you can never break. But listen to me: if you do all of this right, if you love the person you're with and touch them like they're made of glass, you've made it.

You've made it.

perhaps

perhaps it is not so much the sex we worry about,
but whether our body will accept another's
into its own skin.

Chapter

13

Depression

Topics:

- [the handy-dandy guidebook for loving someone with depression](#)
- [How to Find a New Normal in the Middle of Depression](#)
- [I'm in a Relationship with Depression and it's Complicated](#)

the handy-dandy guidebook for loving someone with depression

1. Bake them a cake and for each candle they blow out, give them one reason to get out of bed every morning.
2. Act like their phantom limb: be there for them physically when they need you, and leave when they want to be alone. But always be thinking about them, so, like the ghost of an amputated arm or leg, they'll feel some small measure of your presence still attached to their side.
3. Go to Hallmark and buy them as many cards as you can with your allowance, humorous ones, laugh-out-loud ones, romantic ones, cards with cats in party hats on the front, cards with red balloons, cards with gingerbread houses. But under no circumstance should you buy them a get-well-soon card. Tell them in words, out loud, with your own voice, that you hope they will feel better. Do not feed them some plastic sentiment that is sent out to 24,000 people every year.
4. Dig a hole in the backyard and invite them to bring along a shovel or two. Then step back and watch as they rip their sadness out in handfuls and bury it in the hole.
5. Fill it in. With dirt. Plenty of it. (This is a funeral.)
6. Say a eulogy.
7. Go slow; they're probably new to this.
8. Cook a romantic dinner for two and turn all the lights off. Play the recording that you made of just your voice saying *I love you, you are the apple of my eye*, endlessly, until the needle scratches.
9. Buy one-way plane tickets to Somewhere Else and take them for a long vacation. They deserve it.
10. Spend a few extra minutes in bed.
11. Remember that depression fucks more violently than any sex-crazed maniac. Rub their back.
12. Turn down the new job and stay home with them instead.
13. Fill the bathtub with roses and hot water, light some candles, and remove their clothes one by one, so gently they can hardly feel your touch. Press your fingers into their spine and massage the sad out of them. Then cover their mouth with yours and transfer your love into theirs, as much as they can handle.
14. Take them rollerblading at night, in between the lanes of cars on a quiet night, and feel the wind blow over your skin and theirs. Hold their hand and don't ever let them spin too far away from you. Keep them close by like a satellite.
15. Visit the Eiffel Tower. Stand at the very top and encourage them to drop notes down to the pavement, folded-up scraps of paper full of their worst feelings. Things like *Fuck, I hate myself*, or *I don't want to be here anymore*, and watch them fade out of view.
16. Be patient. Things like this take time.
17. Feed them chicken soup, spoonful by spoonful, until they feel warm and whole again.
18. (Don't forget the bay leaves for extra flavor.)
19. Send them an anonymous letter in the mail that says *Your progress is going swell. And I bet you never thought you'd make it this far?*
20. Invite your in-laws over to dinner and inform them that they've got a lovely daughter or son.
21. Don't spill gravy on your father-in-law's lap this time. Offer to do the dishes so mother & daughter or mother & son can spend some catchup time together.
22. Wait until there's a full moon. Take all your clothes off, theirs too, and lie at the top of the tallest hill you can find. Trace all their scars and for each new one revealed, say you'll stay for another year.
23. Then tell them that even if they only had one scar, you'd stay for the rest of your life.
24. Bring out the telescope.

25. Find Mars.
26. Become astronauts and fly to the moon. Touch down on the soft dust and plant a flag declaring your support on the most visible crater.
27. Label it.
28. Make it say: *We were here.*

How to Find a New Normal in the Middle of Depression

It might be a gradual decline like jogging slowly down a hill and getting more tired with every inch of ground covered, or it might be an immediate occurrence like speeding up from that jog into a full-on run and coming to a dead stop right in front of a brick wall. But however and whenever your depression begins, it's not going to feel normal at first, no matter how slowly it creeps up on you.

So you have to find a new normal instead. And that may involve making lying in bed for five hours straight every day a daily routine, or even walking around the house half-dressed, but you have to embrace that normal if you're going to get through this. Because once depression hits, sometimes like a low-level wave and other times like a tsunami, the normal you once knew no longer exists anymore. It's part of the past. And it may never be part of the future. Like an old friend, it might pass by your window every now and then to say hello, but in all likelihood, it will never take the time to open the door and stay.

Don't beat yourself up about this. Because depression gives enough of a beating as is. It can leave you empty and exhausted, a shell of your former self; it can leave you battered and bleeding, wishing you were dead.

And the truth is, eventually depression itself is probably going to become your new normal. It will be familiar, like a worn sweater or a pillow flattened from years of use. Maybe you'll start wanting to leave that sweater on for the rest of your life, or to fall asleep on that pillow night after night. And that's nothing to be ashamed of. Depression will feel like that sometimes- like something you can learn to live with, maybe even love. That can be terrifying like a monster under the bed, but sometimes the very monster you were so scared of as a child will stretch its head up from under the covers and reach out to shake your hand.

Don't blame yourself. Blame is just bad weather in the middle of a thunderstorm: it only makes matters worse. So grip the rudder and steer yourself to calmer seas, wherever they may be. They might not be the same old familiar waters you're used to floating on, and sometimes you'll sink. But if you learn to tread, eventually keeping your head above water will become normal.

And of course it's not the ideal situation. It never really is. But neither is it your fault. Others will, as they always do, tell you to just snap out of it, or to get over it, or to look for bluer skies.

But how can you do that when your new normal only involves grey ones?

So just keep doing your best, because your best is all anyone can ask for, even if your only accomplishment for the day is simply getting out of bed.

I'm in a Relationship with Depression and it's Complicated

Some days it won't let me leave the house, wants me to stay in bed

for hours on end so it can have me all to itself

watches me stand at the window wishing to be anywhere else.

On the rare occasions when it doesn't get jealous of my dates,

doesn't pull me back into the darkness of my room

instead of going out for dinner, it third wheels whenever

I'm about to sleep with another man.

Tells me to leave the lights off during sex, undress in the dark

because that's where I'm meant to be.

But when it's completely gone, I feel my blood curdle with grief.

Miss it so bad it feels like a funeral everyone's happy to be at but me.

It's salt and honey mixed together, the kind of drowning

that feels good when your head finally goes under.

At least with it I never had to sleep alone,

never had to worry about waking up on the wrong side of the bed

because it took up the entire mattress.

Chapter

14

Suicide

Topics:

- when a single year is not enough
- the night i talked my lover out of killing himself
- letter to a lover who committed suicide
- so you want to kill yourself
- why you are not going to kill yourself tonight, butterfly-style
- letter to my future daughter when she wants to kill herself
- you are not alone in the way you think you are
- memoirs of a suicide
- the shortest suicide note in the world
- this poem is not a suicide hotline but it's the best i could do
- there are no beautiful suicides.
- a decision to live
- is that cold enough?
- here's what you tell someone who wants to commit suicide
- virgin trees
- a few reasons to stay alive

when a single year is not enough

After the local police station decides to put a limit
 on the number of suicides that can be committed per year,
 I hold his hand as he listens to the lady on the other end
 of the receiver inform him that the quota for this year is all filled up.
 When he hears the news, he puts the phone down
 without saying goodbye and we sit in silence for awhile.
 Outside our window in the city,
 it is dusk, and our neighbors' lit windows float like lanterns
 in the middle of a dark and unforgiving sky.
 As the year passes, he seems to be adjusting well.
 He no longer practices writing out his suicide note
 in both print and cursive. There are times
 when all we do is just listen to each other breathe,
 and that is enough effort for one day.
 Things seem to be looking up.
 But when the new year comes around, frosty and young,
 he takes his driver's license and method of choice card,
 then packs the noose into a sealed plastic bag
 and walks down to the government building
 to wait in line for his turn.

the night i talked my lover out of killing himself

The psychiatrist says it will take a while for the new pills to work
 so I let him listen to the ocean rumbling inside my belly
 for as long as he wants and when he's sleeping
 I hide the razors behind the birthday decorations
 in the front hall cabinet, where last year instead of celebrating
 him being one year older, we celebrated
 the anniversary of the day he tried to commit suicide.
 Last night I tried to kiss him in a place I'd never kissed him before
 and just as we were about to give up
 we remembered his scars
 so I did my best to erase them with my mouth
 But the cat still meows to be let in every day
 and it still sheds hair all over the carpet

and I remember how last year at prom
 I wore my deep red dress that matched so perfectly
 with the plum lipstick to the side of his hospital bed,
 and instead of slow-dancing in his arms,
 I listened to his pulse beat through bandaged wrists.
 In third grade we read about
 how when bees sting someone, they're really
 trying to kiss that person full of a hidden language
 so I press my lips to the backs of his knees
 over and over again, repeating *Get well soon*
 in lover's Braille. I remember how the sadness
 got caught in his hair and stayed there
 until the evening, when I combed it out
 underneath the deep pink sky
 and that was the evening he went up to the roof
 even when I told him not to
 so I folded my body over his like a safety net
 and wouldn't let him down.

letter to a lover who committed suicide

It feels strange bringing you to life through words, like a distant memory
 from childhood, but some poems are like benign tumors-
 they may disappear but their impact always lingers, kind of like you.
 I'm not nearly drunk enough yet to miss you properly,
 but I do know that I still search the travel websites just to see
 if there's a special plane ticket on sale that will fly you up
 out of your coffin and back into my arms, maybe a round trip version
 so we can go back together when we die of old age.
 My grandfather used to say that love is just a courtesy step
 that occurs halfway in between birth and death,
 but to me, loving you made the rest of the steps worth it.
 Sometimes, I think of our history as a bunch of safety nets
 that tangled together for a little while but still never managed
 to break your fall. And there are still days when I think
 I can hear your voice, but it turns out just to be
 the rain tapping on the roof instead.
 We were not lovers.

We were thunderstorms that collided for the briefest
 of moments, and when we did, our lightning
 lit up the darkness of every town within a mile.
 I hope your ghost is finding its way wherever you are now,
 and that you are haunted only by other ghosts,
 and no longer by your own self-hatred.

so you want to kill yourself

I thought leaving you would be easy,
 but the first time our scars were introduced,
 they shook hands and made a blood pact
 not to lose one another again.
 You wanted to kill yourself.
 I showed up at your house at 2 am with a bouquet
 of flowers and for every second you didn't,
 I tore off another petal.
 You wanted to kill yourself.
 I pretended to be the operator on a suicide hotline,
 and we practiced how to make you stay.
 You wanted to kill yourself.
 I held you up like a moth to the light
 and counted all your cracks, then filled them in
 with my tongue.
 You wanted to kill yourself.
 You wanted to kill yourself.
 You wanted to kill yourself.
 You wanted to kill yourself.
 I didn't let you.
 End of story.

why you are not going to kill yourself tonight, butterfly-style

Look at me now. Put your arms out to the side. Stretch them as far as they can go, until your wingspan is complete. Look at me when you are done. It's time to stop using your arms as balance to walk the tightrope between life and death and start using them as wings instead to fly up from rock bottom.

The worst thing you can go through is a bad day that seems like it will never end, but our biological clocks re-set themselves every 24 hours. Our cells replace themselves every 7 years. Our hair gets longer and longer until we use scissors to chop it off and color it. We find strands of it, greying, between our bed sheets and on our pillow and in the sink. We're always converting ourselves into different, alternative versions, always losing tiny essential pieces of

ourselves. You are not the same fucked-up person you were 24 hours ago. It's always possible for a clean start; you just have to make it through the night.

Look at me. Your veins are not twin dresses to be unzipped or locks to open. If they were, they would come with price tags or combinations, but all they come with is a rush of blood. So stop trying to roll the wheel and guess which hand of cards will be your last tonight; a suicide lottery is one that always ends in loss, and not just of money. You've got more hands left to deal.

Now put your left palm on your right. Bring your lifelines together and squeeze hard. You just brought one half of life together with the second half. That's a whole life right there waiting for you to live it. Now come to me. Put your two palms, still closed together, in mine and watch as I fold my hands over them.

That's two lives.

Let's do the arithmetic. Two is twice as strong as one. You won't kill yourself tonight because when two lifelines that don't want to live anymore join with two lifelines that do, the hate and love cancel each other out and all that's left is commitment.

Don't go. I've never seen someone who wears their own name like a fucking badge of pride like you do. Every breath you take is a victory and I know each one is waving a white flag of surrender behind it but when winter comes each breath will freeze in midair and every ice molecule locked together will prove the strength of your lungs' effort just to keep you alive.

Look at me. Look at me now. Put your arms around me now. Think of all the days your stomach was so full of so many butterflies it wanted to vomit them all out just to get rid of the anxiety. Maybe that's because you've been confusing butterflies with moths. Moths burn themselves to death against lights but butterflies- butterflies fly. Remember your wingspan? That's what butterflies have. So pour all those moths into my ribcage now, because that's my heart beating there behind those ribs, that's my heart, and there's a spark there, so full of life that it's burning up because it wants to live, every beat powers the flames that keep my heart going, and all those sparks will burn those moths up.

Your arms are around me, and mine are around you.

That's what butterflies do. They help each other find their wings.

So come on now. Look at me one last time.

I'm going to help you find yours.

How? We're going to fly.

But not off this building like you were planning to do earlier, not to the ground to hit the pavement below and smack down like a blood orange.

We're going to fly back to your sill and through the window, and put your feet down firmly on the ground until your wings are mended enough for further use.

It'll take one night for the transformation to complete.

But one night is all you need.

letter to my future daughter when she wants to kill herself

Someday I hope you'll remove all the butterflies from your stomach
and count them up one by one, then place them in a manila envelope
to keep for all the times you need to feel something;
then you can let them free again. I wish you knew that loneliness
is a hell of a lot like soft-serve ice cream: it can be soothing
when you get it in small doses, but when you take too large
of a serving, you'll end up making yourself sick.

Sometimes your body feels like a sunrise that hasn't started making its way out of the sky yet, but I promise you that every ray of sun has to start somewhere, even buried in the ground with the dirt and the insects, so deep someone has to dig it out.

But someday someone is going to buy 20,000 shovels and every single one is gonna be for you, and they'll bring every ray of sun, every cloud, to the surface again.

Honey, God himself probably bragged to the angels when he created you, and even Satan would want you to remain on Earth so he could watch you from above and admire your beauty.

I know your heart feels so heavy sometimes that it's weighing down your throat like all those stones in Virginia Woolf's pockets, but that's just the heaviness of a heart that knows how to love pretty damn much better than anybody else.

If there were a crash course in learning how to not hate yourself at school, I'd want you to have the best teacher in the entire world. Every time you take another pill is another second you could have for getting better.

Every step you take to the top of the rooftop is another step you could have taken to get yourself back down.

And I know this self-hatred is luggage over the carrying capacity at the airport, but someday you'll learn how to remove all the items you don't need from its suitcases, and stop breaking your back with its load.

There's a reason God made humans with hands. It's so that every time they fall, they can drag themselves back up again.

you are not alone in the way you think you are

While you are up here, standing at the edge of the roof with the intent to jump off, first look beneath you at the street below and all the people walking along it. There are probably a few joggers wearing backwards baseball caps and sports bras, couples strolling along hand in hand, young mothers rushing with their small children to run errands, even a homeless man or woman sitting on a nearby park bench.

Each and every single person on the street below may be a complete and utter stranger, but if you jump, they will forever be connected to you irrevocably. If you jump off the roof, your body will fall to the pavement below and you

will hit like a smashed blood orange. One of those strangers will watch you fall and will be able to do absolutely nothing about it. Maybe it's the jogger who watches you fall. Then, at the physical moment of impact, another stranger, maybe the young mother this time, will rush to your body, the life already draining from it like water from a bathtub, and will call 911. Her young child will witness your death and will have no idea what is going on.

You may think that the jogger or the mother or the child will forget about the incident, that you are just another body in a long line of bodies that they hear or read about in the obituaries every day, but that's where you're wrong. The jogger who watched you fall also watched you die, and will forever be changed by the fact that they were unable to save you. They may wake up in the middle of the night with a pulsing heart, covered in sweat, reliving the event over and over again, and in the dream they'll be about to reach out a hand to grasp for you, or they'll see an abandoned mattress lying by the side of the road, and they'll drag it over to the spot beneath your body, but the dream will end seconds before you hit the ground. You'll keep dying over and over again in their dreams, and over and over again, they won't be able to do a thing about it. They'll never stop hating themselves for it.

The mother who called 911? She'll forever be changed too. Because she will be with her child, and she will be thinking about her child growing into an awkward, unsure teenager, someone who likes heavy metal and wants to be shut up in their room all the time. She will be worrying that what happened to you will happen to her child too, because her child witnessed it. She will be terrified that one day, her child is going to be so full of pain like a shook-up bottle that they will do anything to release the pressure of that bottle and let the pain out through a hole in the side of the plastic. That mother will spend the rest of her life in constant worry and fear that one day her child is going to be the person you were and will end up like you did.

For the child, it will be but a brief moment in a series of colored flashes that are the memories of children, but this one will stick out more so than the others. It will be what is termed as a "flashbulb memory" in psychology. Years later, they will be able to remember exactly what they were doing and wearing at the moment of your death. They will remember that they were wearing a red short-sleeved shirt, black shorts, and mini Birkenstocks, and that your body as it fell looked like an angel's because of the way your arms were held out at your sides like wings. They will not know, at the moment of your death, what you were doing, but they will figure it out later, and they will know that they saw a life being purposely cut short before their very eyes.

Yes, your parents and friends will have to go to the hospital and identify your dead body, and they will hold your cold clammy hand and marvel at how their child, whom they brought into life like a candle into the dark, has now been removed from it before their time. Yes, your sister will no longer be able to joke with you about dates or her boyfriend's unhygienic habits or her teacher's tendency to chew on his fingernails while his class is taking a particularly difficult test. Yes, your grandparents will not attend your graduation because you will have not graduated, because it is no longer possible for you to walk across the stage and accept your diploma.

Yes, your friends will never be able to laugh with you and go out for ice cream with you, or gossip and relive favorite past memories of childhood and elementary school. Yes, they will move on into their lives with a hole the precise shape and size of you cut into those lives, like a cookie cutter slapped suddenly into dough.

Yes, the people closest to you, people you loved and people that loved you in the most overwhelming, incredible way in return, will miss you dearly. Your death will forever have an impact on them, and they will see your ghost everywhere they turn.

However, you know full well that even with friends and family surrounding you, you can be alone as ever. You can be the loneliest person in the entire world; you can feel as if you are the only person on the planet.

But what you don't understand, at this very moment, as you are standing on this roof, is that you are not alone in the way you think you are. You think you're the kind of alone that means alone in a crowd of strangers, alone in a room full of people you've never even met.

You think no one cares that you are standing up here on this roof, waiting to die.

But the reality is that each and every single person beneath you on the streets and sidewalk right now are living and breathing, and if you jump, they will continue living and breathing, but in a vastly different way than before. They will be forever changed. The jogger, the mother, the young child, the couples, the homeless men and women-their lives will never be the same, because they will witness the ending of a life when they have already been so deeply taught that the beginning of a life is the most precious thing of all.

All these people form a web, an interconnected web, and you are at the very center of it. They surround you like insects, and you are the spider.

You can do what you wish right now. You can catch them or you can let them escape.

Whatever your choice may be, a spider in a web surrounded by insects is never alone. It is connected to them by billions and billions of threads.

You are not alone. You are the furthest thing from it at this very moment.

So step back from the roof now.

Turn around and climb back through the window.

Shut it. Roll down the curtain.

Breathe.

memoirs of a suicide

This morning a woman on the train asked me about suicide,
and all I could tell her was that it was worse
than being stung by a thousand bees
on the tender skin beneath the throat.

I remember how your bones jutted out so far
that I could travel up them like a ladder in the days
before your death.

Even the forks and spoons in your bed
didn't want to kiss you anymore.

Sometimes I think I can see Alaska from your house,
but then I remember it's just the way the light changes
in the afternoon.

I still drink gin and liquor and raid the medicine cabinet
when no one else is home.

You were the one who always had the answers;
now I'm the one who has to ask all the questions.

They say that Braille is the most beautiful thing on earth
if only you can read it.

I always thought the same of your body.

But when the woman asked me how come I knew
so much about suicide,

I said it wasn't me that knew;
it was you.

the shortest suicide note in the world

Screw lengthy suicide notes written on parchment paper
with ink quills and impeccable cursive.

My father drove me all the way to San Francisco
to read me his while leaning against the guardrail
of the Golden Gate Bridge: it was only six words,
scrawled in Bic pen on the back of a bar napkin.

My own existence wounds me deeply.

All the therapists on this half of the globe
don't have enough couches to hold my sadness.
Their kleenex boxes and *So how does that make you feel?*'s
will never be enough.
After years of simultaneously trying to leave and disappear,
I learned that *going* and *gone* are not synonyms.
They were simply defense mechanisms, the kind
all psychology textbooks wax poetic about:
ways of trying to change things
that cannot be helped.

this poem is not a suicide hotline but it's the best i could do

I don't want this to be a careful poem.
Even the word absence takes on its own kind of shape,
like the way in which a ghost materializes in a room
you thought was previously abandoned.
I've seen too many people fall in love with sadness.
They consider it a tangible thing, an object they can hold
in their hands and marvel at
like a glass case full of dinosaur bones
in a museum.
I want this poem to shake those people up; I want it to throw
them against the wall and rip out their heart and stomp on it.
I want it to wake them up.
Sometimes if you touch a person you can burn holes in them
with only your fingers. That's the power of a flame.
Some matches
never go out.
Even the stars feel a certain kind of melancholy every once in awhile;
maybe they think about suicide
the way some trees wish they could hang themselves
from their own branches.

I want this poem to be dangerous. I want it to be
 a wake-up call. If you're in love with sadness,
 I hope it fucks you over and breaks your heart
 so you never have to go back to it again.
 Even empty rooms
 have feelings.
 Pick yourself up, brush yourself up,
 and go on. Go on go on go *on*.
 It's time.

there are no beautiful suicides.

there is no such thing as a beautiful suicide.
 all fingertips cease to touch; all hearts are broken.
 bathrooms lie empty and vain,
 with the blood running down the drain;
 bedroom doors are shut and the sheets tangle
 in the corner like hidden ghosts.
 there is no such thing as a beautiful suicide
 because there are many better ways to die.
 now is not the end, nor the time to cut loose the rope,
 but the time to begin
 all things anew.

a decision to live

i watched you as you drifted slowly down into the water of the bathtub
 almost as if you were drowning from the inside out.
 i thought you would be gone forever, that the blood in your veins
 would never beat again; your eyes closed and i accepted that fate.
 then the surface rippled and you pushed your way through
 up out of the bottom of the deep blue sea
 swimming past every past memory and every mistake
 and broke the thin veil of water lying at the top,
 like a sheet of glass it shattered in two.
 and for the first time i realized:
 you wanted to live! you wanted to live.
 but aren't you scared? for without that sadness
 you might feel quite alone. a different person, almost-

it's addicting.
 but you made it.
 and i think you deserve to know that your decision to live
 became mine too.

is that cold enough?

I used to sleep with scissors in my bed, their cold metal less like
 a kiss and more like a suicide hotline.
 In sixth grade I found a bottle of pills buried in the garden in the dirt
 like a flower bulb, its roots gripping the earth like a lover.
 I took the bottle out
 and downed it whole.
 When my father saw what I had done
 he ran a glass of water under the tap, held it out to me,
 and said Is that cold enough for you?

here's what you tell someone who wants to commit suicide

Here's what you tell someone who wants to commit suicide: The moment that gunshot goes through your head, you'll wish you hadn't done it. When the chair leaves your feet you'll struggle to get on solid ground again. You tell them they've been burning bridges for so long and maybe now it's time to just find their way across. They can use a cane or a walker or a goddamn police escort, but they've got to get over that bridge.

But don't force them to get over that bridge if they don't want to. Never push them any further than they want to go. Be gentle, be patient, be kind. Love them. Stay with them and spend time with them and let them cry. And don't you dare tell them to dry up those tears. Let them fall, and then you give them a list of one-hundred-fifty goddamn reasons why they're too beautiful for tears. Try to make them believe it; show them how much you care.

Tell them you'll light one candle for every night they keep themselves alive. Tell them you hope by the end of the year you'll have a house burning brighter than the molten core of the sun. Take their sadness and give it a good talking-to. Sit it down on the sofa and look it in the eyes, say I want you to give this person their life back. Make it comply. Bind it up with duct tape and tie its hands to the back of the sofa with rope if you have to. Get a confession out of it; play the good cop-bad cop routine if necessary. And you'd better make damn sure that at the end of the day that sadness will be bruised and bloody, broken beyond repair, and not the other way around.

Throw all the plates in the cupboard against the wall. Make this person listen to the sound of them shattering. Tell them you don't want that to happen to them; make them pick up all the splintered pieces with their bare hands until they get the idea. Even if it takes all night. Then invite this person to dinner at your apartment, and serve them a four-course meal on *your* best dishes. Let that metaphor, that analogy, rest in their body till it burns their bones. Say, if you don't kill yourself, then all these plates will be yours. I promise you that.

Take them out to the rooftop of your apartment, and stand as close to the edge as both of you can. Make them close their eyes. Ask them what they feel. And if they feel fear, or loathing at you for making them do this, tighten your grip around their waist and lead them back inside. Look in their eyes and hold their gaze, and tell them this: you were afraid because you still had something left to live for.

Allow them to sleep in. But when they're just waking up, bleary-eyed and tender, and they want to stay in bed under the warm covers, rip all those covers off. Strip the bed til it's as naked as their soul, and then say If you kill yourself you'll sleep forever. Then open all the blinds and let the light in; take their hand and lead them to the window. Look

at the beauty out there, you'll say. Look at the wind and the earth and the flowers in the garden! If you sleep forever you'll miss all that.

But above all put your ear to their chest and listen to their heartbeat. Then listen to their words, and listen to every single one that pours out of them. I don't care if it takes hours, or days or weeks or even years. You need to be there and hear what they have to say. And when all those words are gone and they're left empty and bone-dry, I want you to fill them back up with your love and your willingness to help them heal. Let them know you would walk through fire and swim through floods and journey across barren landscapes for them.

Now here's what you tell someone who wants to commit suicide, and this will be the simplest word of all, but the most difficult to say: *Stay*.

virgin trees

the white ash tree in the backyard
 still curls its bark in winter- pale
 and thin as tissue paper.
 we call it a suicide,
 the way the bark peels,
 leaving behind a new clean husk.
 at midnight you can look outside
 and see its twisted branches extending
 under the silvery moonlight.
 we call that the suicide note,
 how the limbs stretch like hands do
 when the body is discovered.

a few reasons to stay alive

people ask why they shouldn't commit suicide;
 they want a reason
 but they secretly think no reason will be found
 or no reason ever found will suffice.
 well i wish i could tell them,
 choose life.
 choose the first date, the first kiss,
 the first time.
 choose the late nights and cigarettes smoked
 on rooftops,
 the hands held and the good grades and the bad ones
 and the mistakes made and learned from.
 choose the thunderstorms and rainy days,
 the perfect cloudless ones and the dry heat.

choose the sweat after a run,
the long conversations, the telephone calls,
the poems, the love letters scrawled on napkins.
choose your parents, your brothers, your sisters,
your friends. your family.
choose the wedding and the walk down the aisle,
college and taxes and bills and walks with the dog.
music and barbecues and good books
and old films, saying nothing with the lips
but everything with the eyes.
choose the smiles and the long nights,
the wine and getting drunk.
choose the drives alone,
the dark parking lots, the coffee in the mornings.
choose your daughter, your son,
their first kiss, their first date, their college,
their wedding. choose your grandchildren.
choose old age with the one you love,
the gardens and summer nights, dictionaries
and blue ink. choose the hospital visits
and tears and hard times,
the aches and pains and arthritis.
choose the yellow walls and comfy chairs.
choose the love and loss
and learn from them both,
and then accept death with open arms
when it comes for you,
not when you come for it.
choose the beginning of your life,
then choose the rest of it.

Chapter

15

Eating Disorders

Topics:

- [the summer i shrank and you expanded](#)
- [the eating disorder recovery poem](#)
- [the elephant in the room](#)
- [Dear Ana \(an open letter to anorexia\)](#)
- [DISORDER](#)
- [like clockwork](#)
- [bones](#)

the summer i shrank and you expanded

The year we dissected a squid and ate its tentacles piece
 by piece down at the pier next to your house was the year
 you expanded while I grew into myself. We kissed one
 another like good luck charms, like talismans, and used
 our bodies in place of fortune tellers. I read your palm lines
 and came to the conclusion that we would be together forever.
 You hated the word *forever* and settled for *a long time*.
 As we grew more familiar with one another's skin,
 I watched my intake. I wanted nothing but you, would inhale
 nothing but you, counted my calories like sheep before
 drifting off to sleep. The less I ate, the more room I saved
 for you. You wanted to swallow me whole so I fed myself
 to you piece by piece, the tender red flesh of my thumbs
 and breasts until they grew bruised by your mouth.
 In those days I ate nothing but a cup of cold cereal.
 When we watched the whales dive in the surf,
 slapping the water like winners of an arm wrestling match,
 you were almost as giant as their cavernous ribs.
 I was smaller than the smallest school of fish.
 I wanted to fade into you, into the house of your lungs,
 so I spent hours sucking in my ribs in front of the mirror.
 We became opposites of one another.
 But in the end, my wish to become part of you failed,
 and I simply became the skeleton in your closet instead.

the eating disorder recovery poem

I know you hate this body
 so much you'd rather crucify it with juice cleanses and midnight binges
 than remove your brittle bones from the cross of self-doubt,
 but sometimes it's better to cut yourself down from the noose
 than to make yourself smaller just to fit into the loop.
 This is your body
 hidden beneath layer after layer of skin like two thousand leagues of ocean
 protecting an entire underwater city below.
 Don't let your city get rusted; keep it clean.

What I know about love is that sometimes it's directed as far away from yourself
as the earth is from the sun, but all those millions of miles in between
are a journey worth taking, and the jet pack you'll need for the trip
is a healthy weight to put on.

So stop carving yourself into smaller and smaller crawl spaces
and use that same knife to drive your flag of survival into the moon.
Make your recovery sign visible all the way from outer space.

I know you hate this body
but you'll never find yourself in the toilet bowl-
the reflection in the swirling water is as distorted
as the idea that tiny equates to pretty.

What's pretty is a belly full of moonsongs and sunrays,
a belly and soul so full of joy a whale could swim through them
and still not bump its head on their walls.

So keep the fire between your bones lit
instead of making them so delicate they could snap in half like matchsticks.

I know you hate this body
but shedding all this weight like a bird molting
won't give you the power to fly. It'll just turn you into a pair of busted wings
trying their hardest to lift up off the ground.

So stop holding your breath hoping the lack of air will make you deflate-
make you tinier, make you shrink-
and start letting it out instead.

Not just your breath.

All of it. Self-hate, self-doubt, the rage, the grief, the despair.

The defeat.

Keep going.

Until it's gone.

the elephant in the room

My brother is in a relationship with food and it's complicated.
He goes on juice cleanses every other week, claiming the Vitamin C
from all the citrus nutrient shakes are good for him, are a replacement
for sunlight, will prevent him from turning into the vampire he never wanted to be.
We come from a long line of uncles and grandfathers who taught the men
in our family that muscled six packs were six steps to freedom,

that words like “pecs” and “biceps” were the Holy Grail,
 words they led my brother in praying over at family reunions.
 At the dinner table, he pushes around mashed potatoes and collard greens
 on his plate like a wifebeater who’s forgotten how to touch his spouse
 in any way other than with a closed fist.
 Calories are something he spends more time obsessing over than his girlfriend,
 treats them to romantic dates spent leaning over the toilet bowl,
 whispers curses like love poems whenever he’s ingested too many of them.
 My brother’s culinary relationship is the elephant in the room,
 but he won’t stop trying to turn himself into the mouse.
 He counts his bites methodically, chews with precision,
 engages in midnight runs on the treadmill where the number of miles
 his feet travel is more precious to him than any sleep.
 Afterwards, he trains himself to drift off in bed by counting calories
 instead of sheep. This is his bedtime ritual; it has replaced
 even masturbating or brushing his teeth.
 He has been taught by my parents that shrinking like plastic wrap
 is a woman’s job, but he has never backed down from a challenge.
 My brother is in a relationship with food and it’s complicated.
 No matter how many times he tries to break up with it,
 it always slashes his tires and shows up on his backstep
 begging for more.

Dear Ana (an open letter to anorexia)

Dear Ana,
 I wonder if you know that yesterday all the neighbors left casseroles
 on your back porch because they thought you’d already died,
 and even the undertaker knows your first, middle, and last name by heart.
 Ana, you poor broken little girl. You’d drop coins into your mouth one by one
 and make wishes to be even skinnier, *just ten pounds more, please God*,
 if only you weren’t so scared that a few extra calories would be hanging off
 that copper skin. This is a hunger strike; you sit crosslegged
 on the driveway holding up your precious sign begging for more passersby
 to buy a little more of your flesh, *My ass is too thick, my arms too flabby*,
Thick, luscious flesh for only 50 cents!
 Ana, remember how everyone used to pass notes in grade school,
 paper scrawled with love letters and smiley faces, slipping

through sweaty fingers? Ana, can you pass notes in your collarbones now?

They don't teach us about you in health class because you are weak,
and weakness is not something to be tolerated. They don't teach us
about you because they are too afraid the pictures of your thighs
will be too graphic. Your wrists like toothpicks,
your ribs like a ladder where all this hunger is trying to crawl out,
rung by rung, and escape from you.

Ana, I've seen you get down on your knees
in the middle of Sunday service and pray for size zero jeans;
I've seen you refuse the Communion wafers and wine
out of fear they'd fatten you up too much. Ana, you
are pushing your luck. Your hair is falling out; so much of it
is already gone that you could wear a sweater made out of
your own blonde strands. Tell me, do you wear it well?

Will the boys swoon over you now?

Today your mother forces you to stand on the scale,
but the numbers mean nothing. Ana, 110! Ana, 105!
Ana, 100, 95. 94. 93. Ana, 86!

I've seen the moon eat more than you do; it swallows the sky
every night and always goes back for seconds.

Even a mouse hoards more cheese than you do.

Dear Ana, yesterday a boy tried to hold your hand on the way home
from school but it disintegrated into dust between his fingers.

The day before that he tried to kiss you on the mouth
but your lips were so dry it was like swallowing sandpaper.

Dear Ana, this is for all the times you tried to hold your own ghost
just to give it a little comfort, but it slipped away in your arms.

I am writing you a letter and in it I am standing on the ceiling
of the Eiffel Tower and screaming *fuck you, fuck you*
at the top of my lungs. Because *fuck you Ana*, that's why.

You're just a poor, scared little girl and you are taking this baseball bat
and you are beating the shit out of yourself until there is nothing left
but blood and guts. But you never had the guts to start treating yourself
well; you only had the blood when the constant throwing up
gave you ulcers. Dear Ana, fuck you.

Dear Ana, I will not stand beside you and watch you wither away
into brittle autumn leaves. I will not watch you do this to yourself.
Your body is a burning building and I will not be the one to fetch

the fire hose. That is your job. Always has been.

Ana, aim the nozzle at the living room.

Hose that sucker down.

DISORDER

Sometimes I want to pull back my hair and lean over the toilet bowl until my soul escapes and swims through the pipes, but then I think of the way your hip bones jut out like handles so I put my soul back in my mouth and I close the lid.

like clockwork

On a night like this, when I still remember how my sister looks
 when she holds her hair back from her face over the toilet bowl
 like a mermaid stranded on the shore, I try so hard to picture
 the silver light that spills through her translucent skin
 and how it burns new life into her with every ray.
 The way the weight of her body seems to slowly drag her down
 like an anchor far out at sea, but how that light
 will always eat holes through her
 until her heart is exposed
 ticking, flaring like a grenade, opening and closing
 a thousand times in the space of one second
 like the gills of a fish that's been drowning just inches
 from the tidepool.
 And I remember holding my sister against the sink
 after she'd swallowed a whole bottle of pills,
 bending her over the porcelain basin
 again and again like a marionette dancing on the string
 held by its puppeteer,
 the sun soaking the window,
 our two bodies rising and falling
 in time with one another endlessly,
 she the piston and I the lever.

bones

she was always folding in on herself,
 like a thin wisp of smoke
 she almost faded away.

the air smelled like oranges
when she walked;
the mirror gave no sign of recognition
when she stepped in front of it.
her ribs were a cavern,
her collarbones: the wind.

Chapter

16

Rape

Topics:

- what the men said to me before it happened
- not a forgiveness letter, but not hate mail either
- this is for you and for everyone else.
- stranger still
- shame

what the men said to me before it happened

You have nothing. We will make you whole.

Put away your keys; they won't protect you. This parking lot is dark for one reason and one reason only. Listen: our hands will light everything up.

Didn't you know? Your body always comes with strings attached. We're here to take advantage of them.

Give me a kiss. Come on, use some tongue. Get us warmed up.

I will pull you out of your skin like an anchor.

Why the heavy heart? You knew this was guaranteed. It's all part of the insurance policy that a woman is born with.

Be still. Be quiet enough that we can hear the cicadas rubbing against one another, and we won't have to cover your mouth.

You're struggling. Listen, even our hearts weigh ten times as much as yours. If your heart is a station wagon, our hearts are Mack trucks. We will run you over and then come back again for a second helping.

I can almost taste you.

Afterwards, you'll replay this moment over and over again in your head so often you'll forget the difference between what we did to you and your favorite song set on repeat.

You look like someone who likes it rough.

What, you thought you'd find love? Honey, this *is* love. We just have a different way of showing it.

Tonight is the best night for doing this since there's no moon, no stars. The darkness will cover everything up. It will erase us like ghosts.

The blood will only make you stronger. You already bleed every month anyway; more blood will change nothing.

Shh. Be still. Don't pretend you didn't know this would happen some day.

We don't have any excuses.

We don't need any.

not a forgiveness letter, but not hate mail either

To the man who raped my husband, the whales still sing every night

in the surf and the slap of their bodies against the shore

cannot drown out my love for him. Yesterday in North Korea

the rockets were tested at a landing site and every explosion

was equal to the force of my heart squared, then multiplied by three;

he still kisses me with tongue on every dinner date

whether it's at the theater for a midnight show

or at home in our pajamas eating homemade popcorn.

He still has nightmares about your face and wishes he could keep

a gun under the bed for you, a special knife just for you,

but he knows that would involve a wife without a husband

and a daughter without a father, so he keeps you alive.

To the man who raped my husband, forgiveness

is not a tangible thing. Like the answering machines of the dead,
 it can be called upon when it wants to be,
 but there is no guarantee that it will be returned.
 He still washes the dishes every night and wears the wedding ring,
 and even though he's more afraid of showing his body to me,
 I am not afraid of holding his hand in public or touching him
 where he needs to be touched.
 He still remembers you every time he walks through a dark alley,
 but the trees still lose their leaves every fall
 and people still jump from twenty-story buildings.
 To the man who raped my husband,
 we still had the wedding,
 and you were not invited.

this is for you and for everyone else.

but how do i explain this to you?
 that the first time someone pulls your legs
 apart, they may not ask you for permission.
 there may not even be any words at all.
 it will hurt and you will close your eyes
 and the stars will glide across the sky above you
 and you might want to die.
 the backs of your knees will be sore
 from being pressed up against the rough
 seat of the car.
 it will be fast. it will not be tender.
 your wrists will crack under his pressure
 and like this you will remain,
 like an insect in a glass case.
 he may never touch your face.
 there will be no apology, no glances
 in your direction.
 when he finishes, he will zip up his jeans
 and shut the door behind him.
 listen to me.
 this may be your first time.
 it may be your third.

it may be your tenth.
 no matter which one it is, know it is not right.
 this is wrong.
 this is your body. these are your words.
 no one has the power
 to do this to you.
 look him in the eye, hold up your chin,
 and tell him,
 you will not ruin me.
 the moon will still rise in the sky
 and the pine trees will still lose their needles.
 winter will still come. the sheets on your bed
 will remain tangled.
 poetry will still be poetry.
 you will survive this.
 do not let him ruin you.

stranger still

Too many of us will lose our virginity
 at age sixteen on a cold bed
 with a stranger who has even colder eyes.
 Let me ask you something:
 who gave that stranger the right?
 No one did. No one.

shame

In Sociology class today we talked about how some men treat women
 like a piece of meat. And there's something so terrifying about that,
 because women are these beautiful creatures that are nothing
 like a slab of steak or a medium-rare ribeye.
 Gloria Steinem once said that *we've begun to raise daughters
 more like sons... but few have the courage to raise our sons
 more like our daughters*. Let me tell you about a girl named Eden.
 And Eden's a fictional character, she's a figment of my imagination,
 but for millions of girls and women she's all too real.
 Eden was blamed for being raped because of the clothing she wore,
 because she showed too much skin.

But when did it become more about the “reasons”
 and less about the choices? A man makes a choice to rape a woman
 out of greed and lust. That’s not a reason.
 Listen to me: *there is never a reason for rape*. There is never an excuse.
 Women are like the moon; they’re radiant, they shine.
 The body is luminous because it wants to be.
 Yet as a society all too many people put a body on a platter
 and stick a fork in it, and call it love.
 That’s not love. That’s bullshit.
 Kitty Genovese was stabbed in New York City in 1964 outside of her apartment,
 and then she was raped by Winston Moseley.
 The attacks lasted half an hour.
 Can you imagine that? I hope you can’t. I sincerely hope not a single one
 of you can, but I know some of you do,
 because you’ve been through it.
 We’ve made our bodies out to be bomb shelters and hurricane-proof glass
 and fire escapes, but why can’t we just let them be temples instead?
 We shouldn’t have to ready ourselves for a disaster,
 because there should never be one.
 Let’s just open our doors and windows to the light. The space between
 our legs is an altar and no one goddamn better pray at that altar
 unless they’re allowed to.
 But no. I’m not finished yet. It happens to boys too. And when it does,
 those boys are called weak and helpless and girly.
 They’re called faggots. Because men are supposed to be these strong
 creatures who can lift two-by-fours on their backs and pull cars
 with their bare hands, but some of them are just as vulnerable
 as the rest of us. Men get raped too. It happens in prisons,
 in alleyways, in dark street corners.
 It happens at home.
 But the sad truth is that men are treated as shameful
 when they’re hurt, and women are treated as if they were
 “asking for it.” In a society like this no one can win.
 The only thing we can remember is that not a single one of us
 is a piece of meat, and not a single one of us has the right
 to touch someone in a way that makes them uncomfortable.
 And that’s not enough and never will be, but it’s a start.

Chapter

17

Self-Harm

Topics:

- [Sewing Lessons](#)
- [language is the antithesis of feeling](#)
- [Jetlagged](#)
- [scars](#)
- [for razorblade lovers](#)
- [to keep yourself alive](#)
- [scars 2](#)

Sewing Lessons

See, the first time you locked the bathroom door your heart was so heavy
 it took me twenty tries and a crowbar to lift it, and even then
 it left bruises on my palms so big an elephant would pale in comparison.
 When you were in the bathtub, practicing your drowning skills,
 the cool porcelain skin resting against your milk-white thighs,
 I caught a glimpse of your right wrist, the steady ladder of red
 climbing up the inside, a rung, two rungs, three, fourteen.
 Remember when we read about Rome burning, and how some soldiers
 held their arms out like sleepwalkers and let the fire come to them,
 like lovers? So I took you into the bedroom, sat you down
 on the bed, on top of the covers, still dripping with water,
 dark hair plastered to the nape of your neck like a Rorschach ink blot,
 and brought out the needle and thread.
 It went in slow and deep, a cigarette in the mouth
 of a dying Roman woman, back and forth, back and forth,
 holding your wrist so tight in my hand the circulation shut itself off
 like a leaky faucet. When I was done you were all stitched up,
 wounds closed, and kissed me naked on the bed,
 hard, harder, hardest, as if you wanted me
 to fuck all the sad out of you
 and make you whole again.

language is the antithesis of feeling

On the first day of creative writing class,
 our professor asks us to elaborate on the connection between
 language and feeling; we go around the room one at a time.
 The red-haired girl in the lacy dress raises her arm high enough
 so that we can all see her scars, the white skin of her wrist
 like the cool porcelain of a bathtub, sliced into with an X-acto knife.
Language is the antithesis of feeling, she says,
 her voice like a deer that's been run over by a semi
 and knows it's not going to make it,
 and the professor nods, spreads his arms wide in front of the blackboard,
 a pterodactyl opening its wings, the sound of a heart being
 cracked open with a hammer, a body falling from a high window

into frozen meadows below. Another boy responds.

No, he says. *Language is a synonym for feeling.*

He pulls up his sleeves too.

Jetlagged

Last year our family got stuck in the airport for two weeks straight,
like in the movie *The Terminal* with Tom Hanks. In the beginning
we moved around in a haze, tired and jetlagged and wishing desperately
that we would be home in time for Thanksgiving.

But then my gay brother Paul
found a black-haired flight attendant with scars running up and down his arms,
and told him *If you show me yours first I'll show you mine.*

The next night I woke up at 3 am and found Paul kissing those scars
with his mouth, counting them one by one
beneath the glowing neon lights of the fast food signs.

And we held a birthday party for a three-year-old girl with cancer
in the lobby, making do with two stubby candles found
in my mother's purse and a package of instant chocolate mix
hastily purchased from a nearby gift shop.

At the beginning of the second week, we knew all the janitors' names
by heart; the daily employees greeted us cheerfully at the counter,
and that was when I realized that sometimes being lost is a good thing,
akin to wandering around the darkened corridors of an airport terminal,
because at the end of the day, you always end up in someone's arms
who will love you no matter how many scars line your wrists.

scars

When we undress together, our underwear and sweaters
falling to the floor like shedded snakeskin,
the moon immediately burns through our pale shoulders.

We compare scars, one after the other,
white traintracks scrawling down our wrists,
both trying to beat one another's stories.

My cat's a little bastard, you say.

I tripped and fell down the stairs, I reply.

*On a walk yesterday in the forest, the sharp branches
snagged my skin*, you retort.

When I respond that I fell in the knife drawer this morning,
we both know it's time to quit messing around.

We agree that we were young and insecure, all shook up
and full of vulnerabilities like a bottle of soda,
but those days are over now.

I kiss yours.

You trace mine.

You place your wrist over my wrist
and our scars meet.

Nice to meet you, they say.

We resolve
to do better next year.

for razorblade lovers

Somewhere in the back left pocket of your childhood,
your mother's tongue is moving against your father's hips.
They are making you, a you that would not exist if she had slit her wrists
like she wanted to when she was seventeen.

Evolution made us all grow up with bones ready for the breaking,
but your weather vein wrists do not have to be perpetually prepared
for a jagged streak of lightning to open them up and spill out red rain.

You have had days where even the worst of the worst
came nowhere close enough to describing how it felt
to walk into a forest wishing it would light itself on fire
or a wheatfield hoping for every yellow blade to thresh itself
or a river wanting nothing more than the water to drown itself dry
just so you'd feel less alone.

But see, sometimes what feels like love is really just something ugly
that starts out as a wedding band and then gradually begins
to suffocate the wearer by growing far too tight.

Razorblades are not love. They were made for whittling wood,
not skin. You are not a demolition; you don't need this tool.

You are a carpenter, so build yourself back up with each bare palm,
cake mortar between every wound so thick
that nothing will ever slice those bricks apart again.

Throw away the razorblade. Throw away the razorblade.

Hard as you can, till it lands in the trashcan

and hits rock bottom instead of you this time.
Until your mother can hear the sound all the way in the other room
and remember how glad she is
that she threw hers away too, seventeen years ago.

to keep yourself alive

we counted all the bruises on your neck
and the bloodstains on your thighs
and figured out it takes more than getting hurt
to keep yourself alive.

scars 2

how the hell can i have so many scars
but still be just as eager
to give myself more?

Chapter

18

Shyness/Loneliness

Topics:

- on being alone but not being lonely
- on not being able to say “I love you”
- how to skip the party and stay home instead
- on loneliness and the powers of observation
- on being considered shy

on being alone but not being lonely

My parents tell me that I spend too much time by myself, upstairs in my room, alone. But what they don't understand is that being alone is different than being lonely. The distinction between the two is like the separation between the ocean and dry land, the line between loving someone romantically and loving them as a friend.

Being around too many other people makes me feel almost claustrophobic, tense; at times I get the urge to break through the crowd of people, shoving them apart with my elbows without apologizing just to get away from them. In a sea of living, breathing people, talking and eating and laughing, there are so many gestures. Every second someone blinks or touches their mouth or brushes their hair back; the next second someone else is licking their lips, adjusting their shirt, swallowing. When I'm in a sea of people I fidget awkwardly; I don't know what to do with my hands.

Where do hands go? Do I shove them in my pockets, cross my arms, put them on my hips, clasp them in front of me? What am I supposed to *do* with my hands? I don't feel lonely by myself; I feel lonely with so many other people packed in tight like sardines around me. But sometimes I even feel like my hands are lonelier than the rest of me; they're always trying to find something to hold onto, but they never quite can.

My father once told me *You spend so much time upstairs that it's like you're barely even here*. But spending time by myself is like a ritual, a slow dance in the middle of the kitchen at night when everyone else is in bed. Being alone is like peeling apart an orange and finding all the hidden layers inside it, or stargazing with the most expensive telescope in the world and even being able to catch a glimpse of Mars while I'm at it.

When I ascend those stairs to my room and shut the door, when I break through the crowd of people and escape into the hallway, when I leave a school program in the middle of the presentation, I feel like a huge weight has just been lifted off my chest. The clock's hands unstick and time begins to move again. The world starts spinning once again on its axis, its edges caressing outer space like a lover. It's as if the whole world had been holding its breath, and then, with an audible sigh of relief, all that pent-up breath is let out.

So whenever anyone asks me *Why do you spend so much time alone? Don't you get lonely?* I want to tell them that the two are separate, pro and con, black and white, light and dark. I want to tell them that alone tastes so sweet it's better than the last chocolate éclair.

It's every single slice of banana cream pie left in the world. It's every triple-layer wedding cake ever made, complete with whipped cream and a cherry on top.

It's fucking gold.

on not being able to say "I love you"

I can never say I love you. Saying those three words is a monumental task for me, something akin to studying particle physics for seven hours straight or running a full marathon. As a child whenever I went to a friend's sleepover I was amazed by how easily they could speak that phrase, breathe it, let it fall from their mouth like an exhalation. I love you, they would say, pressing the weight of their tiny bodies into their parents' skin, hooking themselves into their mother or father like an anchor. I tried to observe them intently as they said it, all the minute details of the phrase, all the meticulous gestures they used. I studied the motion of their hands, the curve of their cheek, the way their tongue hit the top of their teeth, the soft s-shape of their body like a comma dangling at the end of a sentence.

Yet when I returned home I could not replicate the phrase on my own parents, no matter how I tried. For days after I would find the alphabet letters in my soup rearranging themselves into those three words, the trees outside singing them whenever I walked past. And each time I would feel a sudden pressure in my chest, as if my heart were on an elevator and rising to the very top floor where it would suddenly leap off, eager to arrive at its workplace. And then I would think *It's time, it's time for me to say it*, but when I opened my mouth to speak the words all that came out was a rush of air, empty, misunderstood.

My parents lived off of Goodnight, I'll miss you, See you soon, Be careful, okay? instead of I love you. Sometimes I wonder if they ever kept a jar underneath their beds that was filled with all those replacements, all those phrases that were meant to convey love but never quite did, and if they kept a jar for the I love you's they never received. I truly wish that second jar hadn't remained empty for all these years, but it has. I just simply cannot say those three words.

Even to this day I find myself struggling to form the vowels. My tongue just won't cooperate with my mouth; it's like when you're at the dentist's office and he or she asks you a question while some sharp metal tool is being injected stealthily into the space between your teeth and all you can manage for an answer is something along the lines of Aueurue, suuqqrsslja. Well of course the dentist can't possibly understand that. Same with my response whenever an aunt or uncle says I love you to me. Sometimes I stare at them and nod politely, other times I laugh, for reasons unbeknownst to me. Love is not a silly concept; it's a tragic, painful, wonderfully glorious thing, yet I laugh as if the funniest joke in the world had just been told! It makes me ashamed; they must think I have an utter disregard for those three words, but in fact I hold them in the highest regard.

It's just that I am terribly afraid of saying I love you and meaning it and receiving nothing in return. What if I pour my whole soul of my mouth in the shape of those three words and it is unrequited? What if I can never get those three words back? It has nothing to do with being shy; it has everything to do with fear. I'm a terribly romantic person. I want peoples' minds and their bodies; I memorize their thighs and the napes of their necks; I remember the length of their fingers and the shape of their hips. Yet those three words! They elude me every time I go to say them.

Can't I just have a lasso, or a hook to pull them in with? Can't it just be like fishing, where you send out bait and the lure and something comes back on the line? I'd fish forever if it only meant I could capture all those I love you's and say them over and over again to the person I love the most.

Sometimes I wonder where all the unsaid I love you's in the world go. Perhaps they float in someone's bathtub on top of the water, struggling to stay afloat. Or maybe there's even a special landfill in New York for them, a huge mountain of them, stacked millions and millions of miles high, so high that it towers above the moon. What painful deaths they must die, what lonely, sad deaths.

So now, in an effort to get myself to say those three words, I write them down on an index card whenever they pop into my head and hand them to the nearest person. The result is a few befuddled strangers every day who thank me, a bit confusedly, and continue on their way. I give them to elderly women toting heavy shopping bags full of soup and bread, young joggers running past, pregnant girls pushing already-full strollers, lonely men with their hands in their pockets and their heads down. I think the world would be a better place if I could say I love you out loud, if we all could, every single one of us, but for now I suppose this is the best I can do.

how to skip the party and stay home instead

There are going to be some night when you don't feel like going to the party. So don't go to the party. Let everyone else have their existential discussions about free will and the decay of the universe over cocktails. Stay home and read through your book collection instead; you'll have more fun getting into Fitzgerald's head than making awkward small talk with your nearest conversational partner.

For God's sake, people at the party will be talking about how Sally hooked up with Andrew but Andrew already made out with Valeria from Italy and now Sally isn't sure whether to tell Andrew that the baby is his. You'll be relaxing at home in sweats and eating microwavable stew straight from the container. There's nothing wrong with wanting to stay in and stay away from the world. You're not an introvert just because you want some alone time; there's no shame in needing quiet.

There will be days, too, when the alarm clock goes off on a Saturday morning at nine and you were supposed to weed the garden or go jogging or something of the like. Hit the snooze button. It's alright to sleep in once in awhile, to press the pillow over your ears and roll over. Or maybe your mom wanted you to meet up with her and some of her business partners to discuss your plans for law school. Screw that. If you don't want to go to law school, don't go to law school!

Maybe you want to go to art school instead and make drip paintings like Jackson Pollock or smear the canvas with beautiful, colorful oils like van Gogh, minus the sadness. So go ahead. There's nobody in your way but you. The people you meet at art school will wear paint-stained jeans and messy buns, or scuffed-up Keds and heavy metal t-shirts. You can hold conversations with them for hours about Georgia O'Keefe or mixed-media, found object art, instead of sitting in a tight suit at the head of a conference table with four men and women twice your age. Don't get me wrong, there's nothing wrong with law school, but screw law school if you don't want to go there.

When the neighborhood kids ask you if you want to go out for a few drinks at the downtown bar, maybe you'd rather curl up on the sofa with your mom and watch reruns of Friends. So skip the offer. Say Hey, that's okay. Maybe

another time. Your mom will be glad to spend a little more time with you before you go off to college. And breaking news, you can actually have more fun sober with your own mom than with a bunch of kids who don't even know your name.

It's okay to want to smash the mirror in every time you look at it, or have the urge to swallow every pill in the medicine cabinet. It's okay to stay in bed for twelve hours straight, to stare out the window at nothing. Everybody has bad days and everybody feels things. Feelings are, apparently, a radical notion. Most people haven't heard of them. If somebody's having a bad day they call them selfish, when maybe they're just having a bad day. If someone's quiet in Philosophy class the teacher automatically labels them as an introvert, when maybe they just don't like the teacher. *Maybe Philosophy isn't their thing.* And that's completely fine. There's nothing wrong with feeling crappy and miserable and pent-up and bored and anxious. Don't let anyone judge you as anything less just because you feel things.

Remember that this is your life and these are your things and this is your room and your guitar and your bed and your teddy bear from second grade. This is your camera and your sweatshirt and your Black Keys poster. Nobody can ever take this away from you.

This is your life and you can choose to live it how you want to. The world's not going to end if you do; there won't be another Maya apocalypse prediction. An asteroid isn't going to hit earth; there won't be any swarms of insects to infest your town and kill off half the population.

Do what feels good and the rest will come.

on loneliness and the powers of observation

I used to be afraid that I would grow up to be one of those "crazy cat ladies" with 50 cats and baggy dresses who drink tea every day, the kind of woman who lives by herself in a tiny, cramped apartment and knits all the time. It took me a long time to realize that loneliness does not necessarily strike a person when they're alone—it can strike them in a room full of people. And then I realized that while I like cats, I would never want to own more than one, and I love dresses but not baggy ones, and I hate tea because it makes me want to throw up, and I have no idea how to knit and probably never will.

But I've always been billed as the shy girl in class, the kind who should "raise her hand more" or who "needs to participate to a greater extent in class discussions." Or at least that's who I used to be. But I think those demands are shit, to be honest. If you are considered shy, you're probably not shy; you're an observer. You see things and you notice them, then you hold them inside you. And like that you keep them alive. Sometimes when I introduce myself to another person at school, I pretend not to know their name, when really I've known it already for a few years. I don't want to be misconstrued as creepy, but I can't help it. A name is just a detail, and details are something I'm good at.

Some people can't remember what they ate for breakfast that very day, or even what color of shirt they were wearing the day before. I ate two slices of toast this morning with peanut butter, and had a bowl of Cap'n Crunch with milk. I wore a white sweatshirt yesterday. Being an observer is sometimes much better than being a participator, because it allows you to stand away from the action and begin to understand it. Observation is a kind of science in and of itself, almost a philosophy. It's a way of life. I study human beings and I like to get inside their heads and figure out what they're thinking, but more importantly, *why* they think the way they do. And there's nothing wrong with that. It doesn't mean I'm shy; it means I understand people more deeply than the so-called "normal individual."

Maybe I got it from my father. He always talks about wanting to know what peoples' "stories" are, where they came from, how they grew up, what happened to them, etc. Whenever he drives by a stranger in the car, whether they're jogging or lugging grocery bags or walking along talking on their cell phone, he always turns his head literally ninety degrees or more to stare at them. The staring part bothers me—because some people can feel that stare from outside the car windows, and some people notice the staring. It makes me uncomfortable. I don't like being looked at, even for a few brief seconds. Whenever someone makes eye contact with me for an unnecessarily long period of time, I turn away.

Yet I love to look at other people. But only when they're not looking back.

Strangers fascinate me. I could dissect them all day; put them under a microscope like a fly's wing on a glass slide and study them for hours. Each and every stranger has their own history; some are more intricate than others'; some are 50 pages long while others' are 1,036. The life history of a single individual should be offered as a course in college.

I'd take it in a heartbeat. Human beings are fascinating creatures because they live inside their own heads. They make their home there, sometimes without even realizing it.

But you can't pay rent on the mind, or hire someone to keep it clean. You can't make its beds or close its cupboards or sweep its stairs. The mind gets rusty and dirty sometimes, and it grows weak and tired and afraid. People don't just break sometimes; they shatter.

I once read that "real loneliness is not necessarily limited to when you are alone." And that's true. Because even when I'm surrounded by crowds of people in the hallway, even as I'm noticing their clothes and hair and the way they snap their gum, or how tired they look to be lugging that heavy backpack around, I can still feel as alone as if I were sitting in the middle of a completely white room. No windows, no doors, no exit. No other person in there with me.

Observation really is a lonely science, just like photography is a lonely medium. They both consist of capturing peoples' souls and essences. So while I've gotten over my fear of ending up as the crazy cat lady, as some may call her, I've never quite been able to rid myself of the fear of being alone. It's an innate feeling. I don't think it ever goes away. But it's made me who I am today, and for that, I am grateful.

on being considered shy

People tell me that I'm shy. And I immediately want to grab them by the shoulders and shake them hard, say No I'm not shy, I'm just so full of everything and all these feelings are threatening to spill over and out between my ribs. I want to tell them, I'm quiet even though I have so much to say; I just don't know how to say it.

Some days I feel as if the moon lives inside my skin. There's all this luminescence, this brilliance inside of me struggling to get out. And my skin is just splitting at the seams all the time, stretching and tearing and breaking, but the moon can never get out. My heart is just a satellite traveling on a constant orbit around and around the cage of my bones and every night all I want is for it to run out of gas and crash so that all the feelings will spill out like fuel. The moon is there and it's burning white-hot like a cigarette, it's made of molecules and blood and it's consuming me like a fire. I want to grab a complete stranger's body in my hands and kiss their mouth till we both turn numb, look into their eyes and see their soul.

I'm not shy; I just sit down at the dinner table and forget what to say. I can pass the mashed potatoes or the butter but I can't put my feelings on a platter and pass them to my father, and I can't ask for my mother's in return. I can ride a bike and take a photograph and write a poem, but I can't look someone in the face and say, I love you. I always have and always will, and I am so in love with you I can barely speak. And I can play the violin and run through the streets at midnight without caring who sees me, but I can't tear apart my soul like an orange and rip all the layers off or expose all the tendons and muscles beneath the skin.

My teachers tell my parents I could benefit from raising my hand more in class. I want to tell my teachers they could benefit more from trying to get to know me. Ask me who I am and I'll be yours forever. Hook your arm around my neck and bring your mouth to mine and if you kiss me a paragraph I'll reply with a novel. I speak in touches and quick glances and smiles, not words.

My heart's on an elevator and it doesn't know what floor to get off on. My heart's locked up in a cage and someone's thrown away the key. My heart's a willow tree that sobs gently in the rain until the birds move amongst its branches.

Sometimes I want to get drunk and there's vodka in the cupboard and whiskey too, and I want a gin without ice and a scotch on the rocks but there are plates in the cupboard too and I want to smash them, I want to throw every single one against the wall until they shatter. I want to shatter too. I want to disappear.

I catch snow in my mouth in winter and try to braid snowflakes in my hair. I want to run until I'm out of breath. All these things I can do, but I can't speak to you.

I'm not shy; I just don't know how to tell you that I am so full I might burst. And I am not shy; I just have more feelings than there are languages in the world.

