

HS 305 Reading Literature

An introduction to the study of literature, which will explore an array of literary genres, concepts, questions and interpretive approaches.



The course will be taught in TWO segments by TWO different instructors.

Segment A**Instructor: sharmila**

"Reading is approaching something that is about to be, and no one yet knows what it will be."

— Italo Calvino

"Reading a book is like re-writing it for yourself. You bring to a novel, anything you read, all your experience of the world. You bring your history and you read it in your own terms."

— Angela Carter

"One must be an inventor to read well"

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

THIS segment of the course we will consider questions such as

- What are the uses of literature?
- Why study literature?
- What counts as literature?

As we proceed to read the texts prescribed for this course, the emphasis will be on active and responsive reading. As you engage with these pieces, you will find that there is often more than one way of interpreting a text. But this does not mean that anything goes; that any reading is as good as any other. This course will introduce you to the following modes of enquiry.

- What is “close reading” and how can we undertake a close reading of texts?
- How can we analyze the structure and language of a text? How do literary concepts help in this enterprise?
- How can we recognize the textual/generic features of a text?
- What is the project of the text you read?
- How does literature shape and gets shaped by textual traditions, culture, society, and politics?

In this segment of the course we will be reading fiction and creative nonfiction.

You will find an underlying theme which runs through all these texts—the idea of **“reading”**. Thus, we will not only read these texts, but will also explore how these texts thematize the idea of reading.

By the end of this course, it is hoped that you will have become incurably addicted to the adventure of reading.

Readings [Segment A]

[Instructor: Sharmila]

1. “Introduction” and “Warning Signs” from *Hyperbole and a Half: Unfortunate Situations, Flawed Coping Mechanisms, Mayhem, and Other Things that Happened* (Author: Allie Brosh) (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013.) *
[autobiographical blog, webcomics]
2. “Bombshell Diana” from *The MGR Murder Trial* (Author: Shobasakthi. Translator: Anushiya Ramaswamy) (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2014)
[short story]
3. “Havisham” from *Mean Time* (Poet: Carol Ann Duffy, 1993).
[poetry]
4. Extract from *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Author: Claudia Rankine) (Graywolf Press, 2014) *
[prose poetry]
5. “About What Can Be Talked about with the Living and the Dead” from *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* (Author: Svetlana Alexievich. Translator: Keith Gessen) (Picador 2006) *
[oral history]

* Along with these readings, you will also find some “bonus” readings. These are not prescribed for the course, but is presented as recommended reading for those who want to read more. And yes, this does mean that you will not be tested and evaluated on these segments.

Course Evaluation: 50 marks

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- A short assignment (10 marks)
Mid-semester examination (40 marks)

Policy of Reasonable Accommodation for Disabilities

Please do let me know if you have any accessibility requests regarding the conduct of this course. These could include, but need not be confined to, the availability of readings in different formats, visual aids, approaches to discussion boards, moodle, teaching aids, software, other resources. Confidentiality will be ensured. The course will strive to make reasonable accommodations.

Zero-Tolerance Policy on Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the act of taking another's work and representing it as your own. Whether it is copying someone else's essay or even copying sentences from passages without proper citing and quotation marks. There is a Zero Tolerance policy on plagiarism in this course.

Hyperbole and a Half



Allie Brosh

A Touchstone book

Published by Simon & Schuster

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

Contents

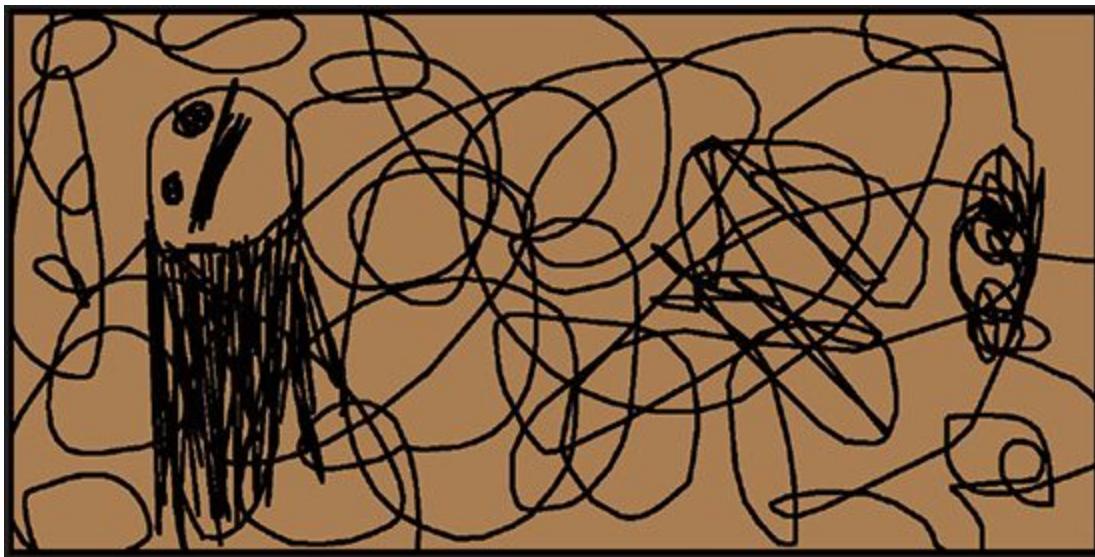
Introduction

- Warning Signs
 - The Simple Dog
 - Motivation
 - The God of Cake
 - The Helper Dog Is an Asshole
 - Depression Part One
 - Depression Part Two
 - Lost in the Woods
 - Dogs Don't Understand Basic Concepts Like Moving
 - The Hot Sauce Debacle
 - This Is Why I'll Never Be an Adult
 - The Parrot
 - Dinosaur (The Goose Story)
 - Thoughts and Feelings
 - Dogs' Guide to Understanding Basic Concepts
 - The Party
 - Identity Part One
 - Identity Part Two
- Acknowledgments*
- About Allie Brosh*

Introduction

It seems like there should be some sort of introduction to this.

Here is a re-creation of a drawing I did when I was five:



It's a guy with one normal arm and one absurdly fucking squiggly arm. If you look really closely, you can see the normal arm under the squiggly one. What you can't see is that in the original, the squiggly arm continues for the entire length of a roll of butcher paper. It started on one end and then just kept going until I ran out of paper.

I remember drawing it and thinking, *This is insane . . . I can't even believe how long this guy's arm is.* If I had not run out of paper, who knows what would have happened.

In its entirety, the arm takes up more paper than this book. Theoretically, I could have cut the roll of butcher paper into squares, stapled them together, and created *Squiggly Arm Book*.

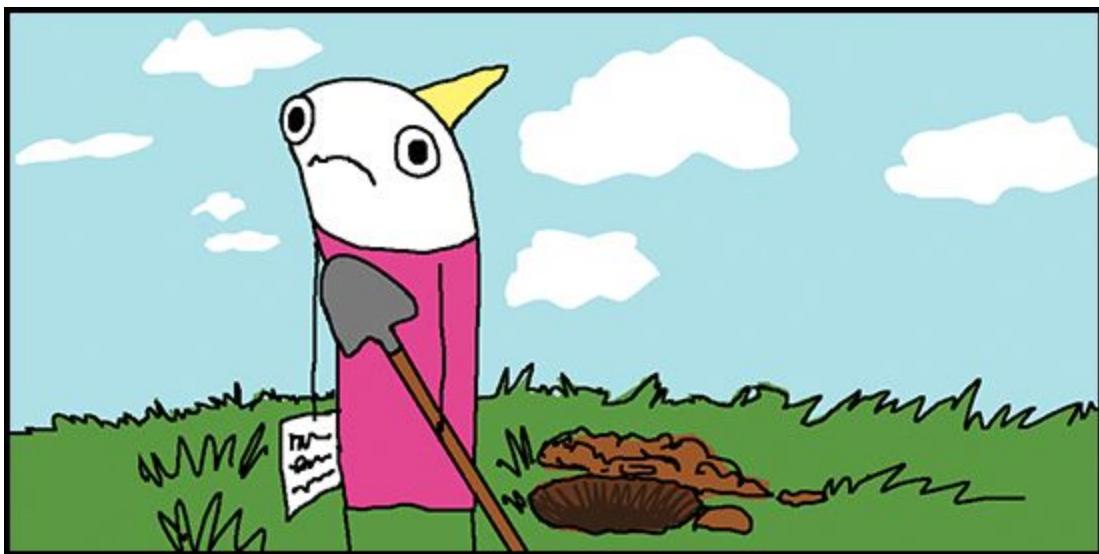
I didn't, though.

I considered that possibility, but, in the end, I decided I couldn't realistically expect to get away with it.

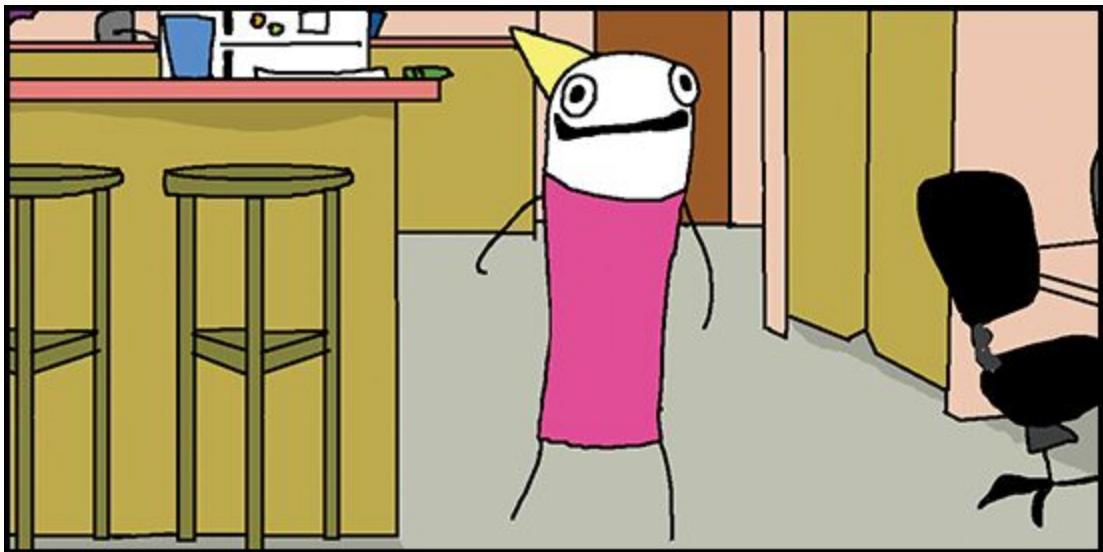
Warning Signs

When I was ten years old, I wrote a letter to my future self and buried it in my backyard. Seventeen years later, I remembered that I was supposed to remember to dig it up two years earlier.

I looked forward to getting a nostalgic glimpse into my childhood—perhaps I would marvel at my own innocence or see the first glimmer of my current aspirations. As it turns out, it just made me feel real weird about myself.



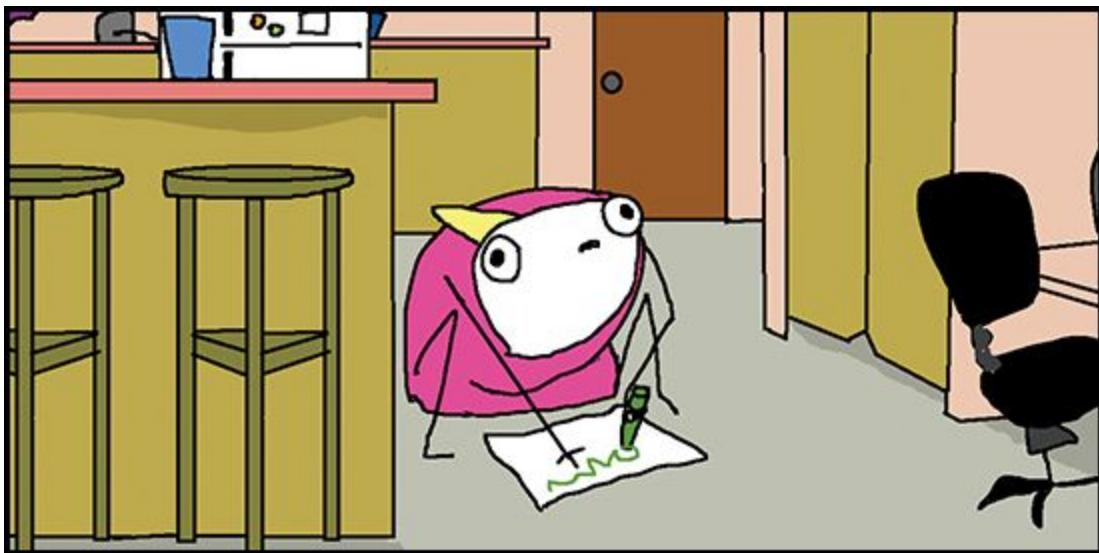
The letter was scrawled in green crayon on the back of a utility bill. My ten-year-old self had obviously not spent much time planning out the presentation of it. Most likely, I had simply been walking through the kitchen and suddenly realized that it was entirely possible to write a letter to my future self.



The overwhelming excitement of this realization probably caused me to panic and short-circuit, making me unable to locate proper writing implements. There was no time for that kind of thing.



I did, however, manage to fight through the haze of chaos and impulse long enough to find a crayon stub and a paper surface to mash it against.

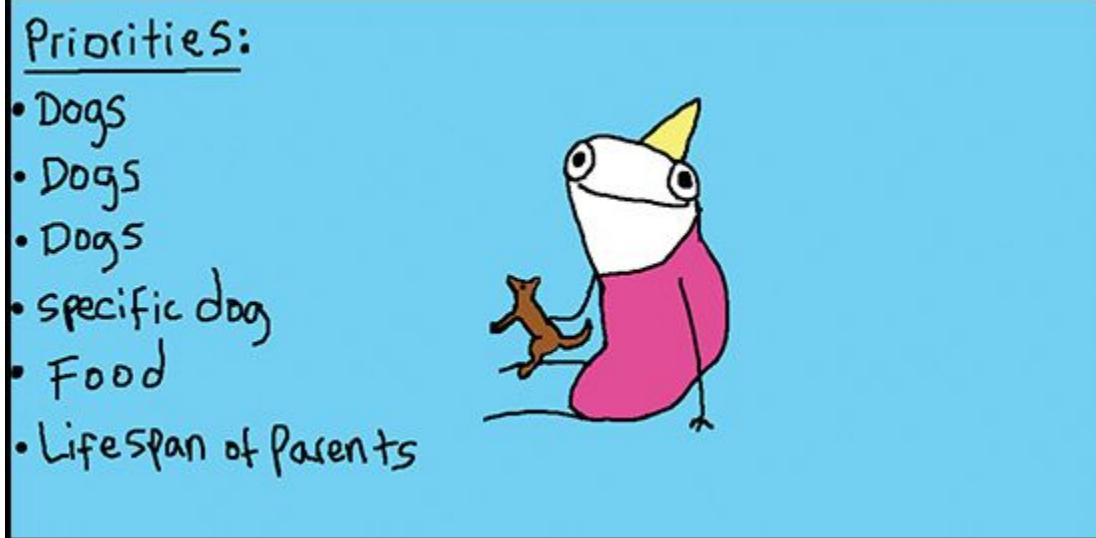


The letter begins thusly:

Dear 25 year old [note: not “Dear 25-year-old me” or “Dear 25-year-old self,” just “Dear 25 year old”],

Do you still like dogs? What is your favorite dog? Do you have a job training dogs? Is Murphy still alive? What is your favorite food?? Are mom and dad still alive?

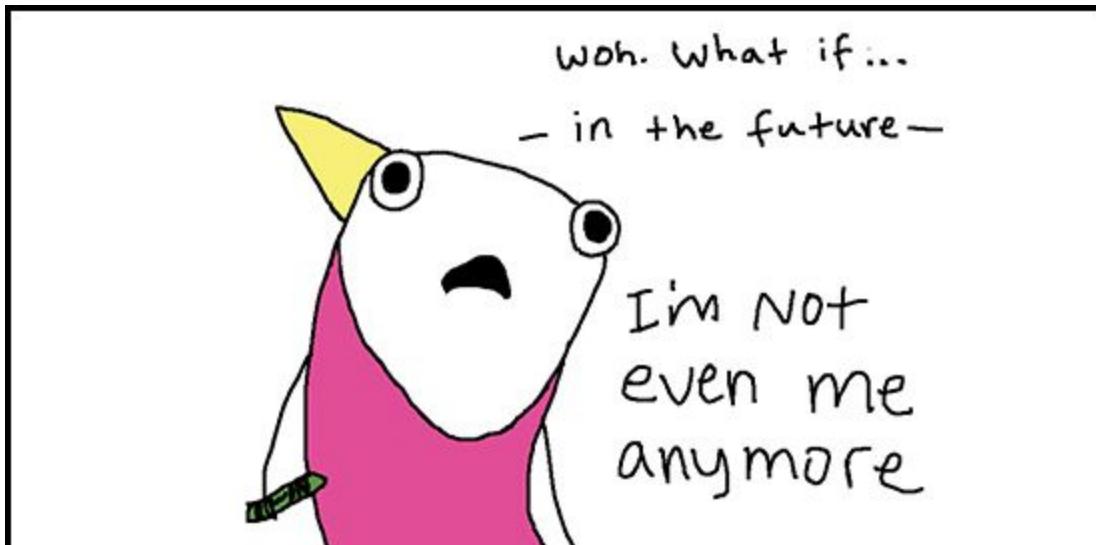
I feel it's important to note the order of those questions. Obviously, dog-related subjects were my chief concern (Murphy was my family's dog), followed closely by the need to know my future favorite food (I feel that the double question marks speak to how important I thought that question was). Only then did I pause to wonder whether my parents had survived.



The letter continues with a section titled “About me”:

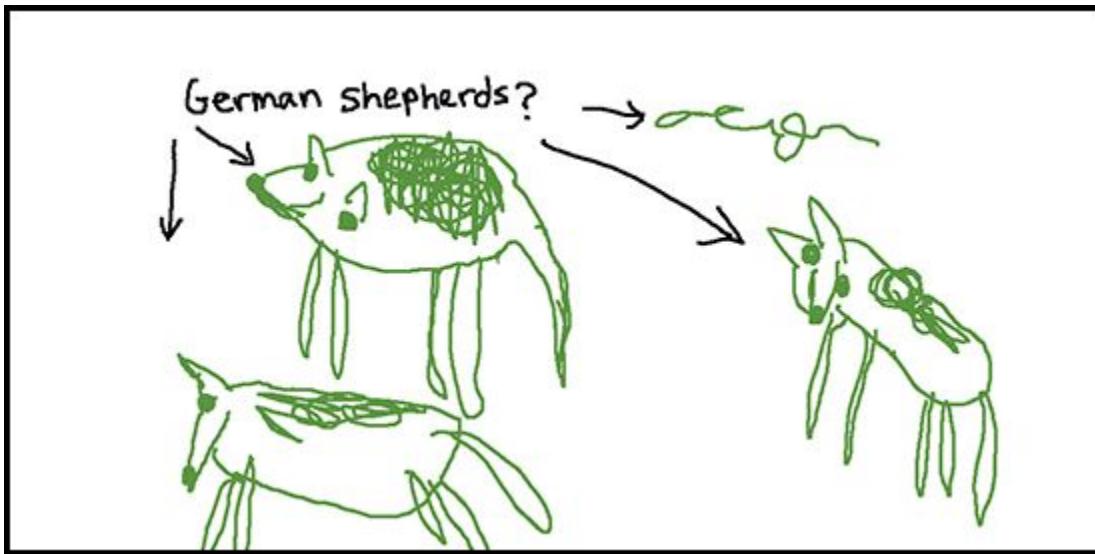
*My name is Allie and I am ten years old. I have blond hair and blue eyes.
My favorite dog is a german shepard. My second favorite dog is a husky.
My third favorite dog is a Dobberman Pincher.*

This is troubling for a number of reasons, the first of which is that I apparently thought my future self wouldn't be aware of my name or eye color.



The second thing is the fact that I just tacked on my favorite dog breeds at the end there, like it was every bit as important to my identity as the other things. As if my past self had imagined my future self standing in the yard above the upturned earth, clutching my letter and screaming, “BUT WHAT DOGS DID I LIKE??? HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO UNDERSTAND MY IDENTITY WITHOUT KNOWING WHAT DOGS I LIKED WHEN I WAS TEN???”

I took a break from writing at that point to draw several pictures of what appear to be German shepherds.

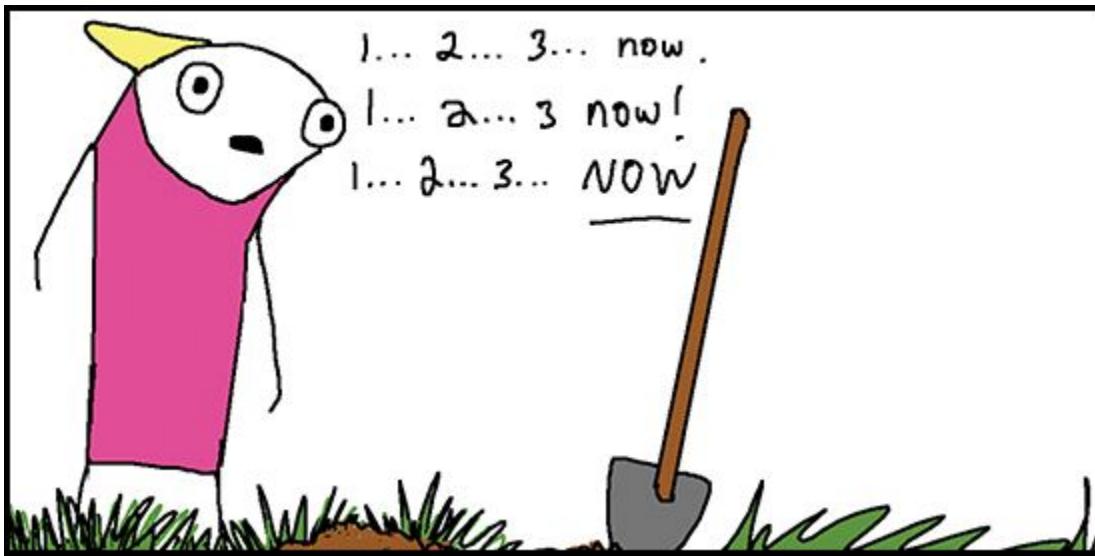


Below the German shepherds, I wrote the three most disturbing words in the entire letter—three words that revealed more about my tenuous grasp on reality than anything else I have uncovered about my childhood. There, at the bottom of the letter, I had taken my crayon stub and used it to craft the following sentence:

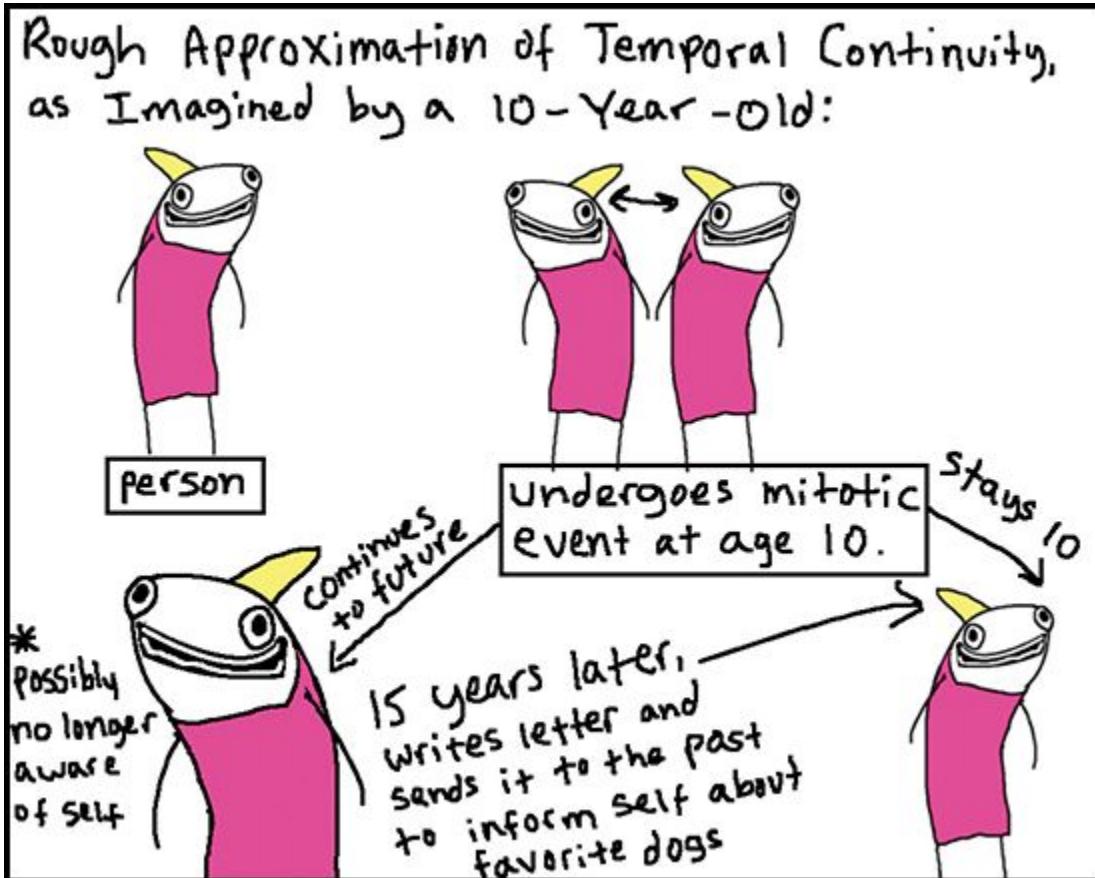
Please write back.

Judging by the thick, purposeful lines in each letter, I was applying a truly impressive amount of pressure to the crayon. The sincerity of the request is unmistakable. When I asked my future self what my favorite dog is or whether my mom and dad were still alive, I actually expected to get answers. And, apparently, I still expected to be ten years old when I got those answers.

Please write back. I imagine myself patiently standing in the yard, day after day, thinking, Any time now . . . It's going to happen soon, I just know it . . .



Time travel is a complex subject that I don't expect a ten-year-old to fully understand, but this is more than just a basic misunderstanding of time travel.



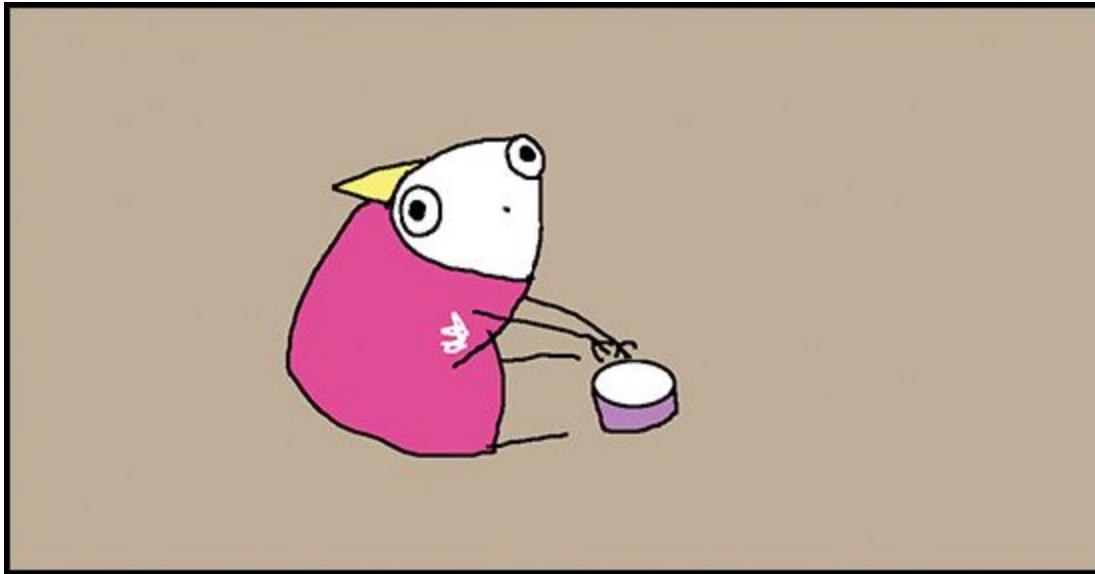
I'm almost definitely not a time traveler, but in case I am, I decided to write back. In fact, I decided to write letters to several iterations of my past self, because I felt there were important things I could explain to myself or things I could warn myself about.

Allow me to begin with a letter to my two-year-old self:

Dear two-year-old,



Face cream is not edible—no matter how much it looks like frosting, no matter how many times you try—it's always going to be face cream and it's never going to be frosting.



I promise I wouldn't lie to you about this. It's honestly never going to be frosting.



For the love of fuck, please stop. I need those organs you're ruining.

Dear four-year-old,

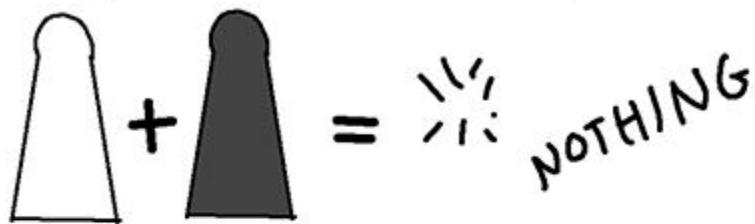


Allow me to preface this by saying that I don't know why you started eating salt in the first place, but regardless of the precipitating circumstances, there you are.

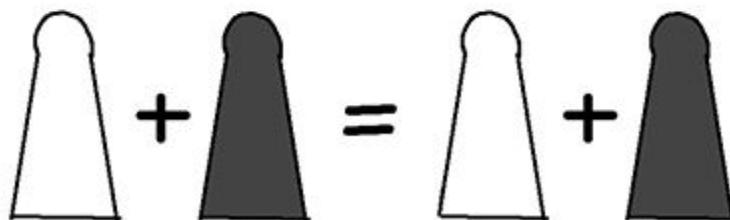
As soon as you became aware that eating huge amounts of salt is really, really, uncomfortably salty, you should have stopped eating salt. That's the solution. The solution is not to begin eating pepper to cancel out the salt.

You've found yourself in this predicament several times now, and every time you get trapped in this totally preventable cycle. You've done more than enough experimenting to come to the conclusion that pepper is not the opposite of salt all by yourself, but somehow you seem to remain stubbornly unaware of this fact.

How you think Salt and pepper works:



How salt and pepper actually works:



To reiterate, no matter how much pepper you eat, it won't undo the ludicrous amount of salt you ate before it. The only thing you are accomplishing by eating pepper is making your mouth taste like pepper AND salt.

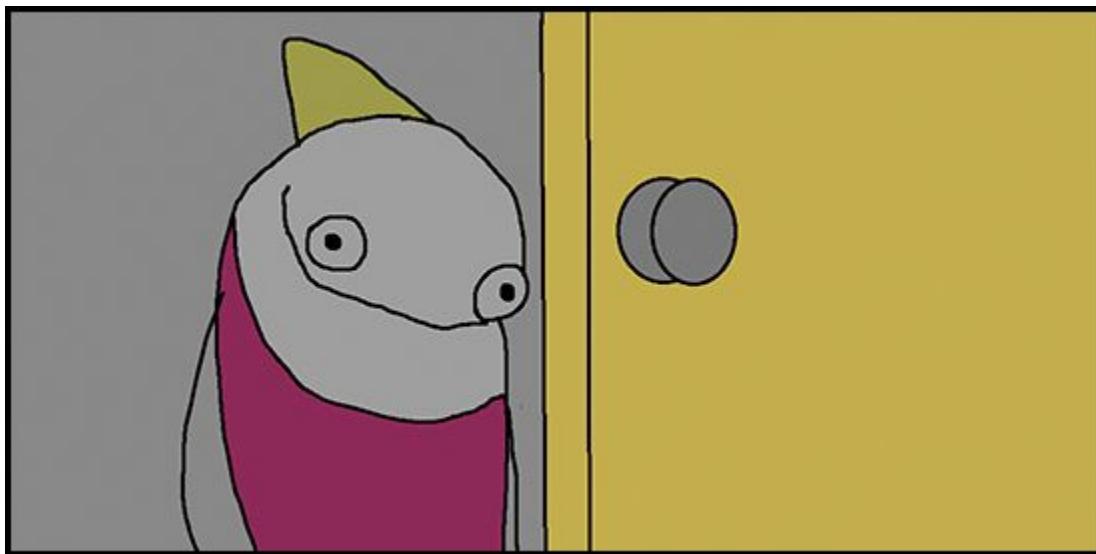


Similarly, switching back to salt again won't cancel out the burning from the pepper you ate to cancel out the original salt. How is this so difficult to

understand? You can stop whenever you want to.

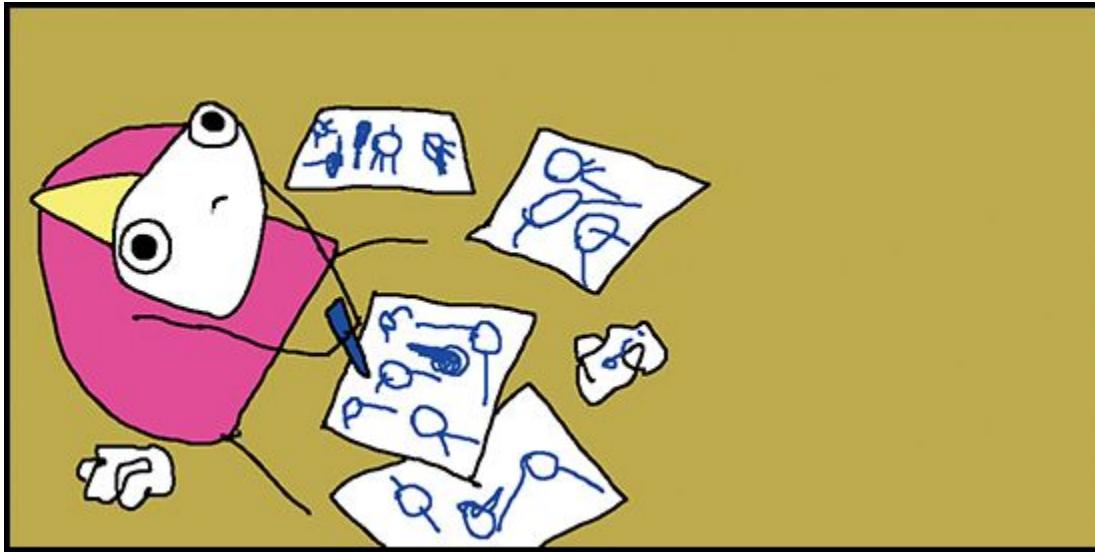
As a side note, you really need to start learning from your mistakes. Believe me, I know what happens when you discover electric fences next year, and you could do without that seventh jolt of electricity.

Dear five-year-old,



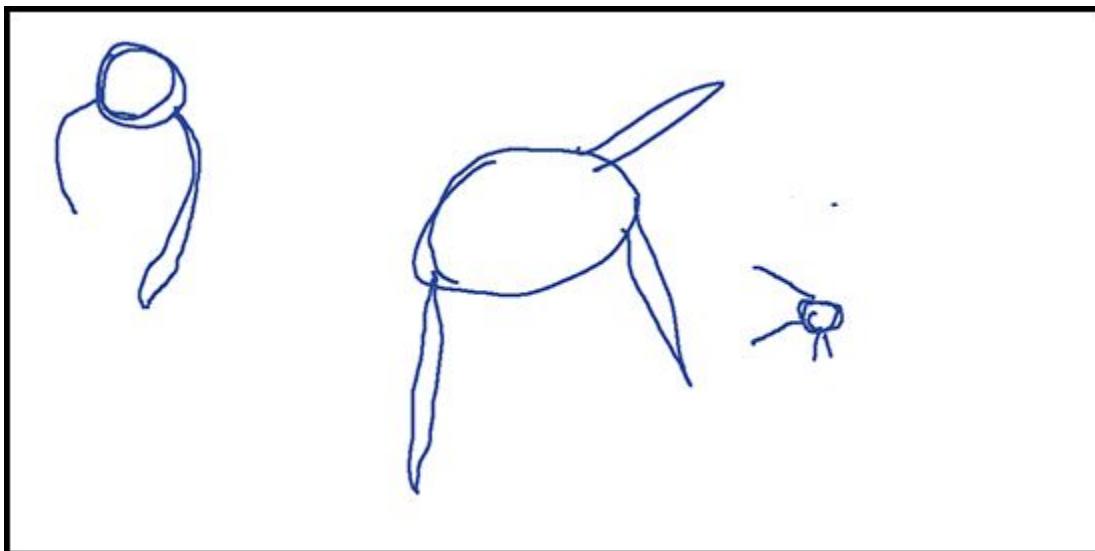
What the fuck is wrong with you? Normal children don't have dead imaginary friends. Normal children don't pick open every single one of their chicken pox scabs and then stand naked and bleeding in the darkened doorway to their bedroom until someone walks past and asks what they are doing. Furthermore, normal children don't respond by saying, "I wanted to know what all my blood would look like." Normal children also don't watch their parents sleep from the corner of the room. Mom was really scarred by *The Exorcist* when she was younger, and she doesn't know how to cope with your increasingly creepy behavior. Please stop. Please, please stop.

Dear six-year-old,



You're having an absurdly difficult time learning the letter R. You practice all the time, and you have mastered every other letter in the alphabet—both uppercase and lowercase—but for reasons beyond my comprehension, R just destroys you.

Look at this:



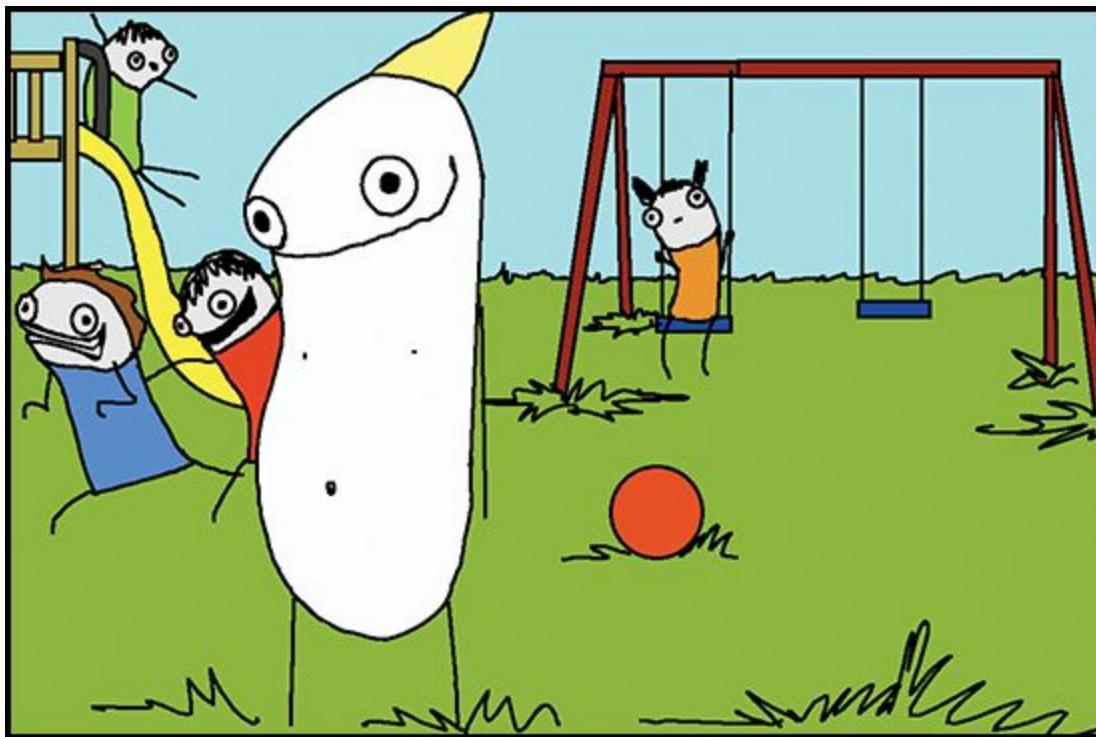
How does that happen?? How do you mess something up *that* badly?

The first one is understandable, but what's going on with that middle one? How did that extra protrusion get there? And look at the tiny one on

the right—that one has *four protrusions*. I'm not an expert on protrusions, but that's way too many.

I think if you took some time to relax and really *look* at the letter R, you'd see that it's not nearly as complicated as you're making it.

Dear seven-year-old,



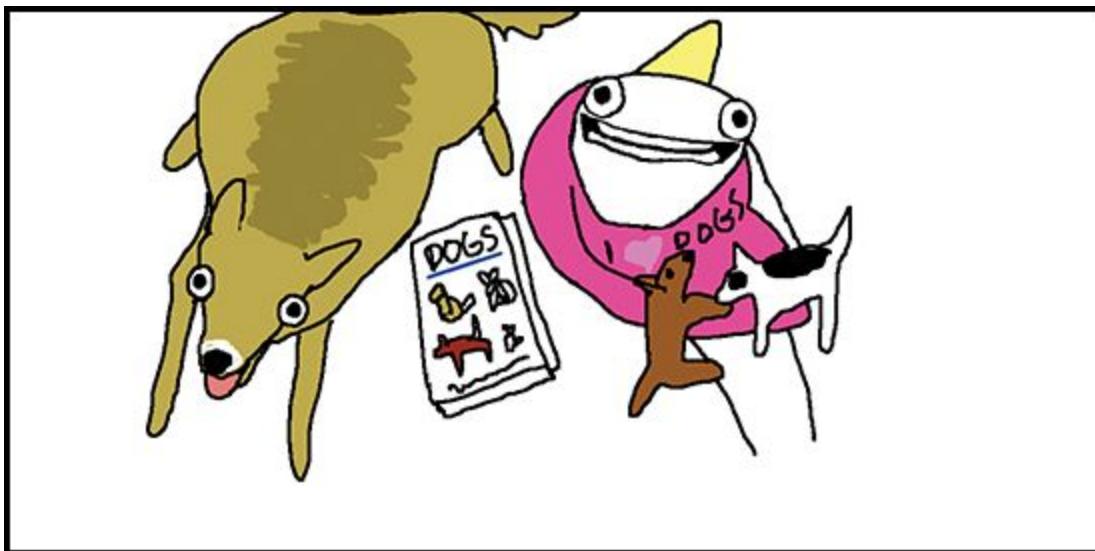
Look at the other children around you. Do you see how they're wearing clothing? That's because they're seven years old and they've all realized that it is no longer appropriate to take their clothes off in public. But you haven't realized that, have you. People have tried to explain it to you. Your teachers have tried, your parents have tried, even the other students have expressed discomfort with your persistent and inexplicable nakedness. But you just don't stop.

Why do you want to be naked so badly? Do you even know why? Are you overtaken by forces beyond your control that make you do this?



Regardless, clothing is a reality that you need to accept. There are no loopholes to this. You can't take your clothes off and hide in the corner hoping no one notices. You can't trick the teachers into letting you be naked by burying yourself in the sandbox—your clothes are in a pile next to you. They know.

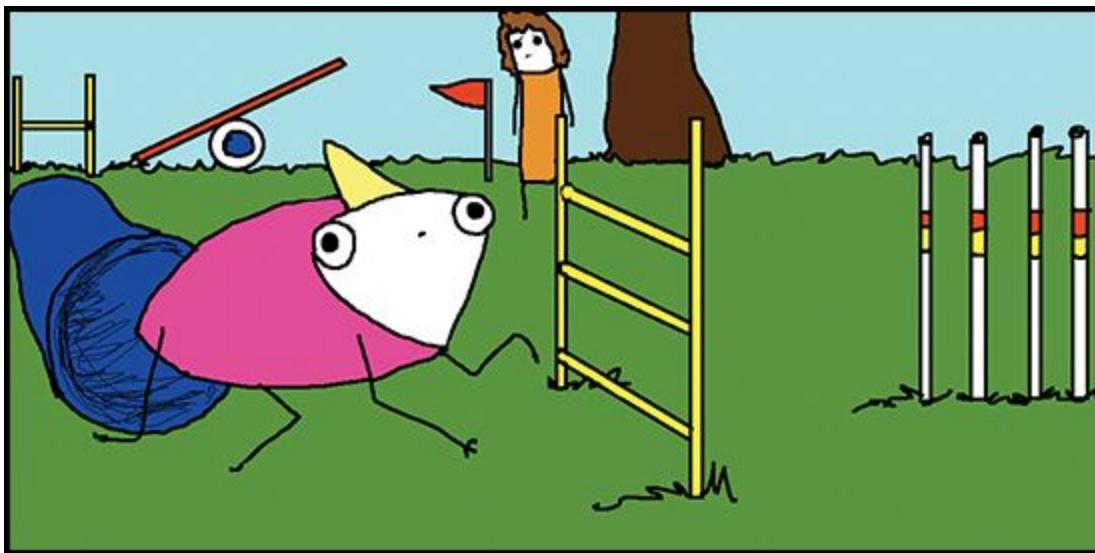
Dear ten-year-old,



Wow, you really like dogs. In fact, you like dogs so much that I'm not even sure it's emotionally healthy. It might be normal to love dogs a lot, or to be really interested in dogs, but you go way, way past that. Normal

children don't walk around pretending to be a dog nearly as much as you do, for example. You're ten. It makes people wonder about your developmental progress when you growl and bark at them.

An even more concerning issue is the obstacle course. Fine, you want to train your dog to run through an obstacle course. That's pretty normal. What isn't normal is making your mother time you as you crawl through the course on all fours, over and over and over again. You're making Mom think that she did something wrong to make you this way.



Now that we've gotten that out of the way, allow me to answer your questions:

Do you still like dogs? Yes, but not as much as you do. I've developed a healthy relationship with dogs.

What is your favorite dog? I don't know. This may come as a surprise to you, but knowing exactly where each dog breed ranks on my list of favorites isn't the pressing issue that it used to be.

Do you have a job training dogs? No. I can't even train my own dogs, let alone the dogs of other people.

Is Murphy still alive? Of course not. I don't know whether you're being optimistic or you actually don't understand that dogs usually won't

live to be twenty-five, but you really set yourself up for a lot of disappointment there.

What is you're favorite food? Nachos. Which is fortunate, because in the future, you're dysfunctional and you don't take care of yourself, so you end up eating a whole lot of nachos.

Are mom and dad still alive? Actually, you turned out to be Batman, so we had to have them put down for story-line purposes.

Dear thirteen-year-old,

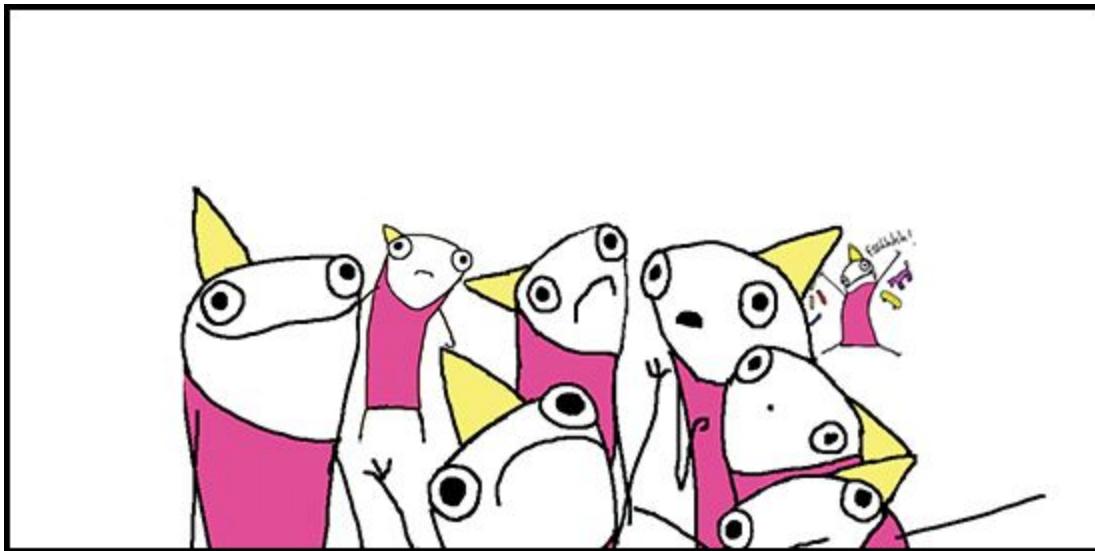


I think everyone was relieved when you started to grow out of your unhealthy obsession with dogs. Unfortunately, now you think you are a wizard. I know this because I found your collection of spells.

Tell me, how does mixing Dijon mustard with sand and then eating it make someone love you?

First of all, I thought your extensive early experiences with ingesting non-food substances would put you off of attempting something like this. Secondly, no one is going to love you until you stop doing things like trying to make them love you by eating mustard-sand.

Dear other iterations of my past self,



Thank you for not being so goddamn weird that I felt I had to address you personally in a letter from the future. I commend you.



Depression part one

Some people have a legitimate reason to feel depressed, but not me. I just woke up one day feeling arbitrarily sad and helpless.



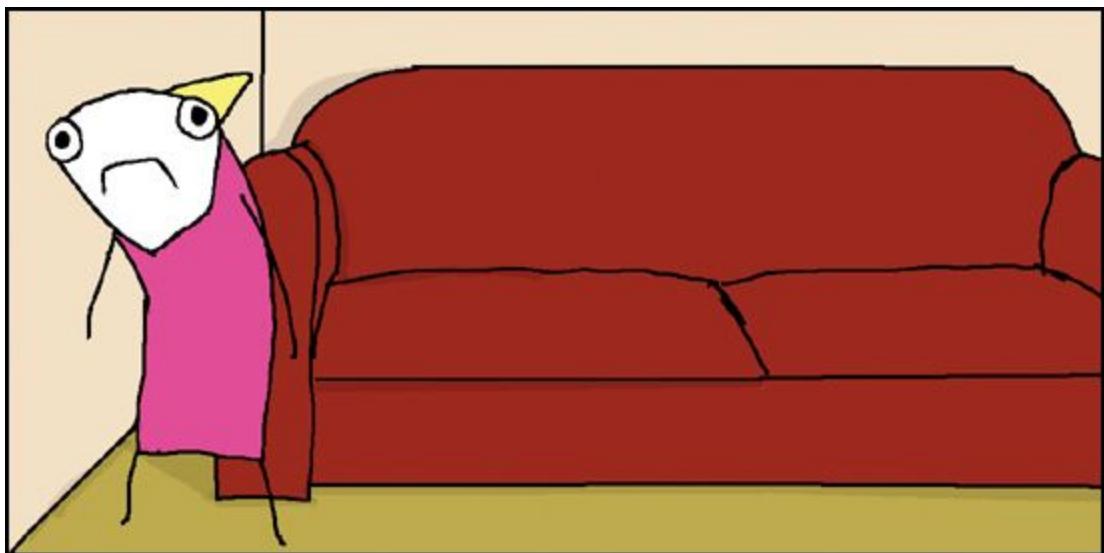
It's disappointing to feel sad for no reason. Sadness can be almost pleasantly indulgent when you have a way to justify it. You can listen to sad music and imagine yourself as the protagonist in a dramatic movie. You can gaze out the window while you're crying and think, *This is so sad. I can't even believe how sad this whole situation is. I bet even a reenactment of my sadness could bring an entire theater audience to tears.*

But my sadness didn't have a purpose. Listening to sad music and imagining that my life was a movie just made me feel kind of weird because I couldn't really get behind the idea of a movie where the character is sad for no reason.



Essentially, I was being robbed of my right to feel self-pity, which is the only redeeming part of sadness.

And for a little bit, that was a good enough reason to pity myself.



Standing around feeling sorry for myself was momentarily exhilarating, but I grew tired of it quickly. *That will do*, I thought. *I've had my fun, let's move on to something else now*. But the sadness didn't go away.

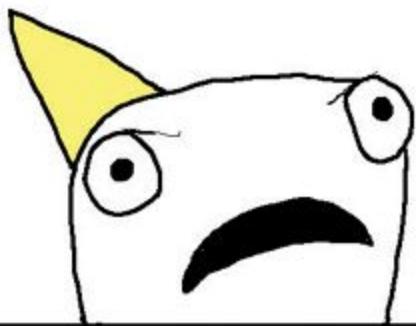
I tried to force myself to not be sad.

Stop it.

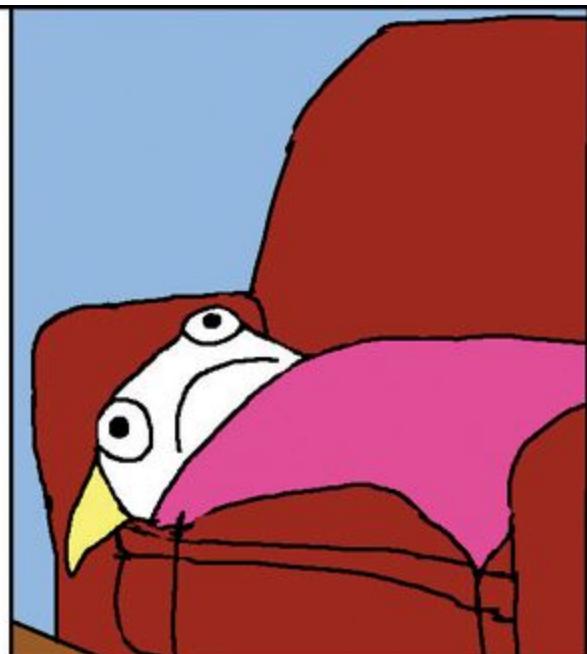
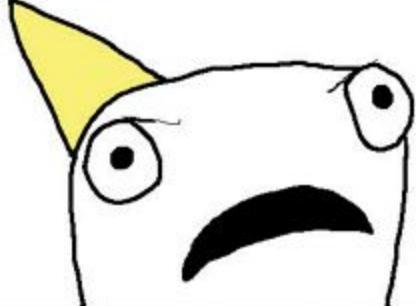
Stop being sad.

Right now.

stop.

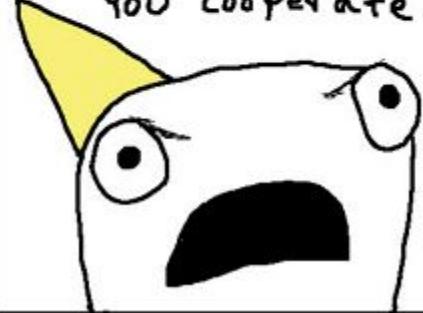


Get up.



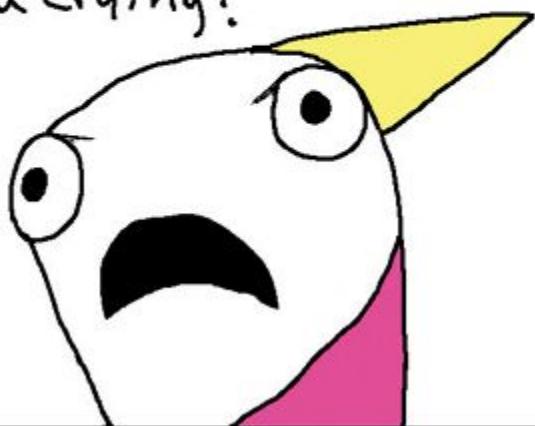
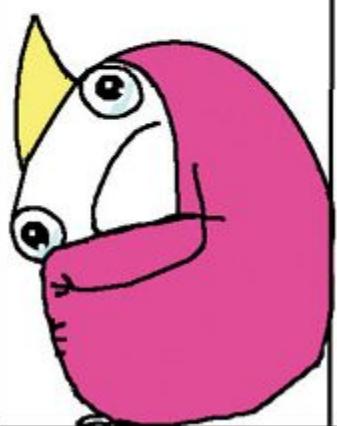
But trying to use willpower to overcome the apathetic sort of sadness that accompanies depression is like a person with no arms trying to punch themselves until their hands grow back. A fundamental component of the plan is missing and it isn't going to work.

If you don't stop
being sad right now,
I'm going to turn on
the garbage disposal
and listen to the
sound it makes until
you cooperate.

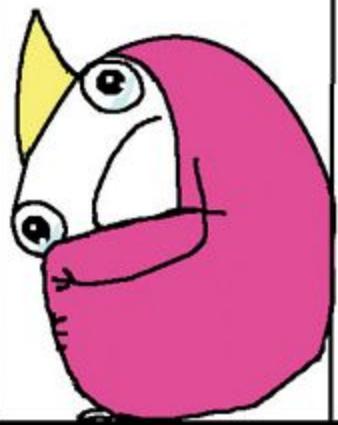


When I couldn't will myself to not be sad, I became frustrated and angry. In a final, desperate attempt to regain power over myself, I turned to shame as a sort of motivational tool.

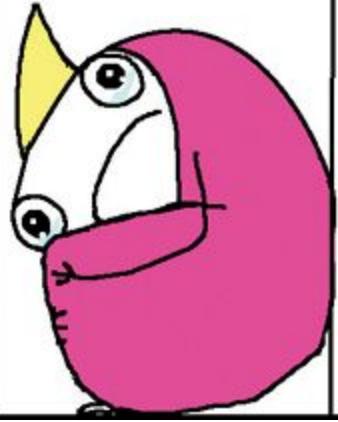
HEY!
What are you doing?
Are you crying?



Why are you crying?



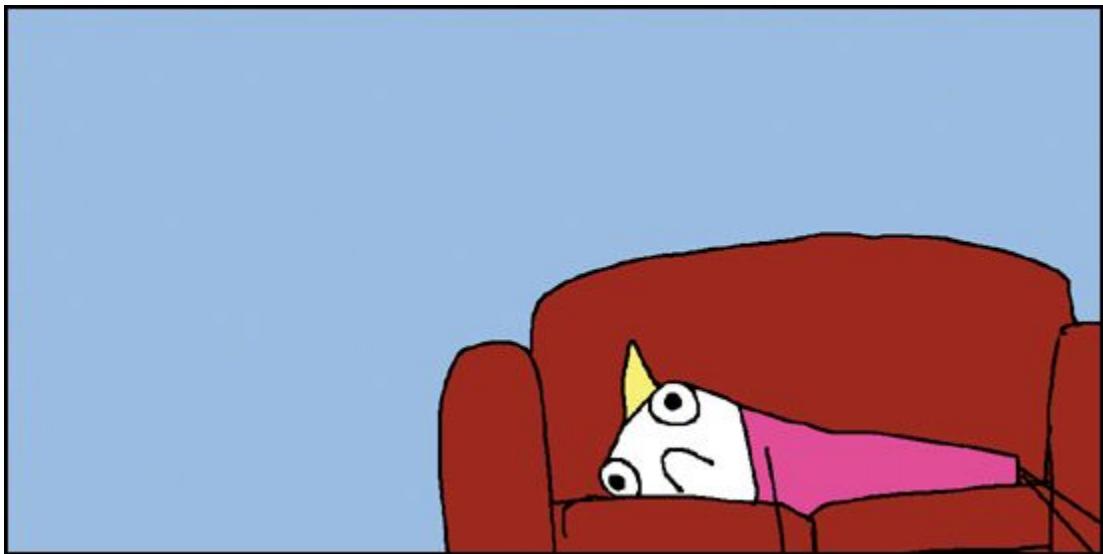
Did you know that some people have pets that are dead? And some people have diseases and tumors?



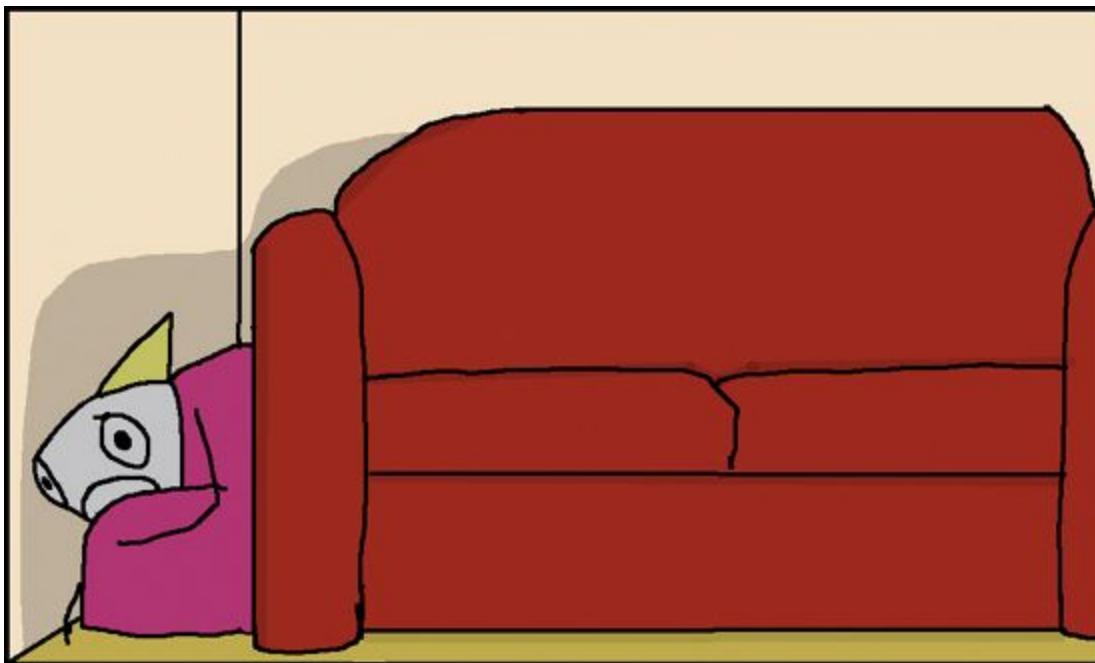


But, since I was depressed, this tactic was less inspirational and more just a way to oppress myself with hatred.

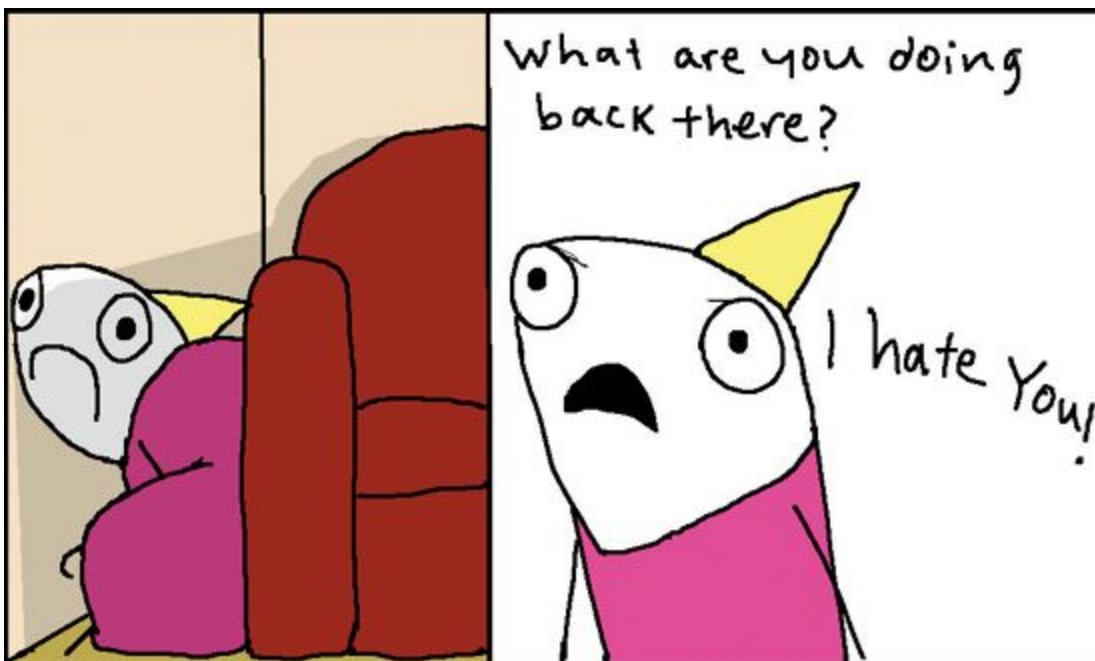




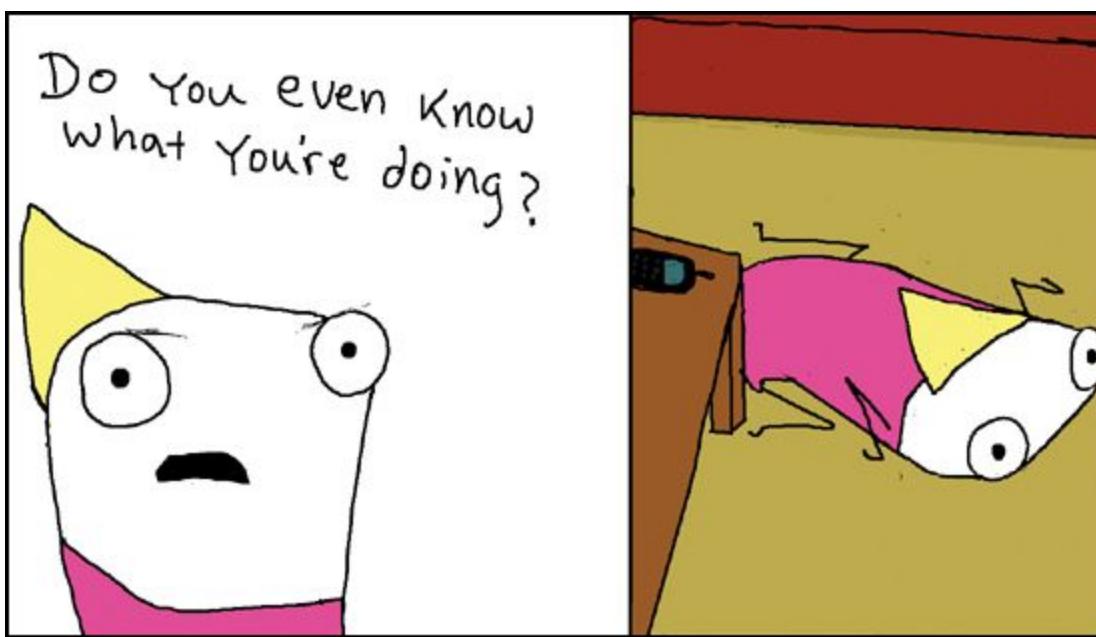
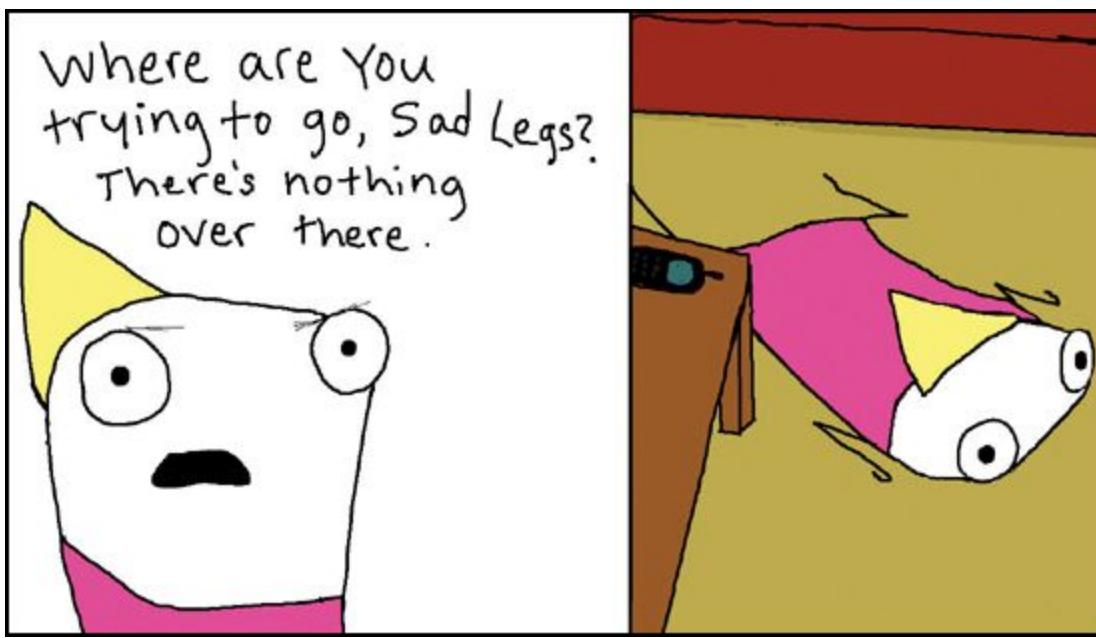
Which made me more sad.



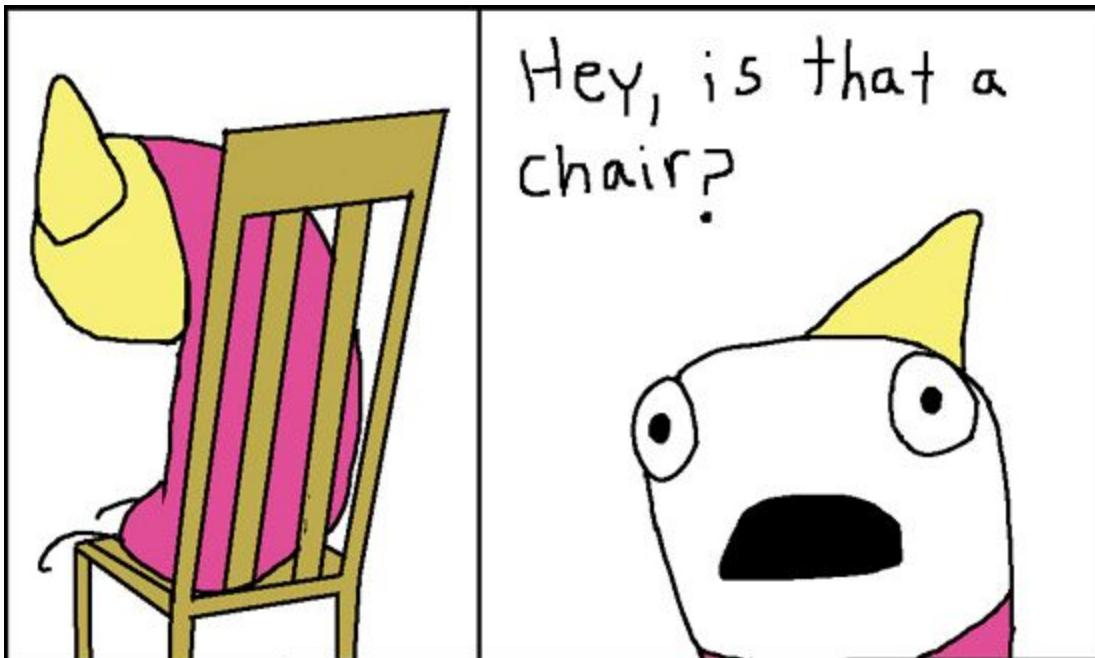
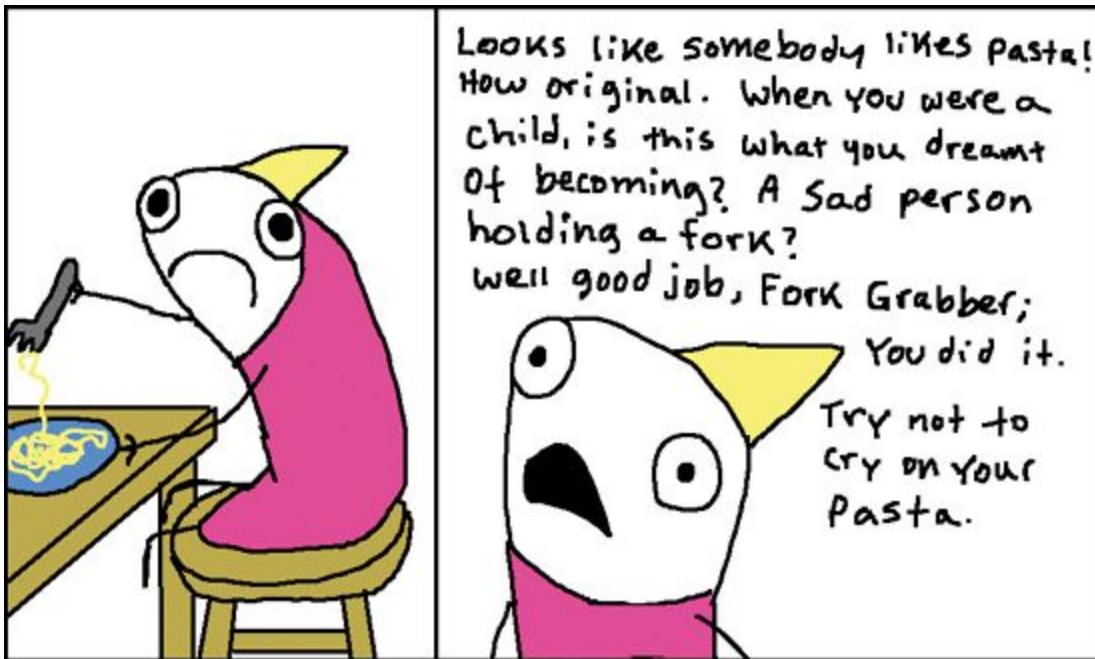
Which then made me more frustrated and abusive.

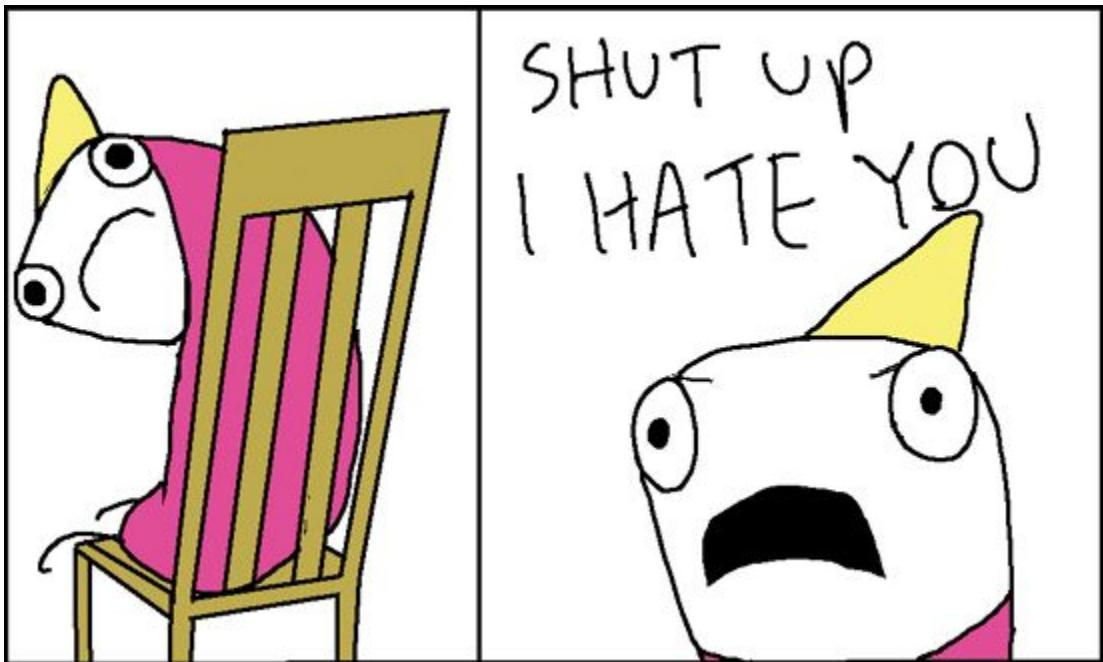


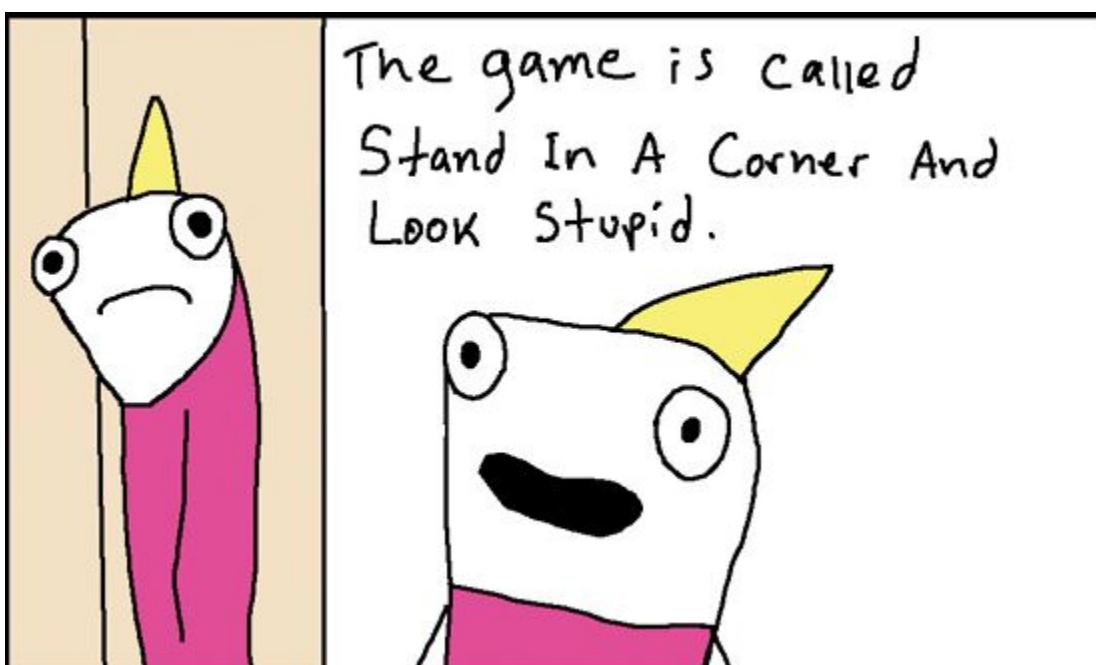
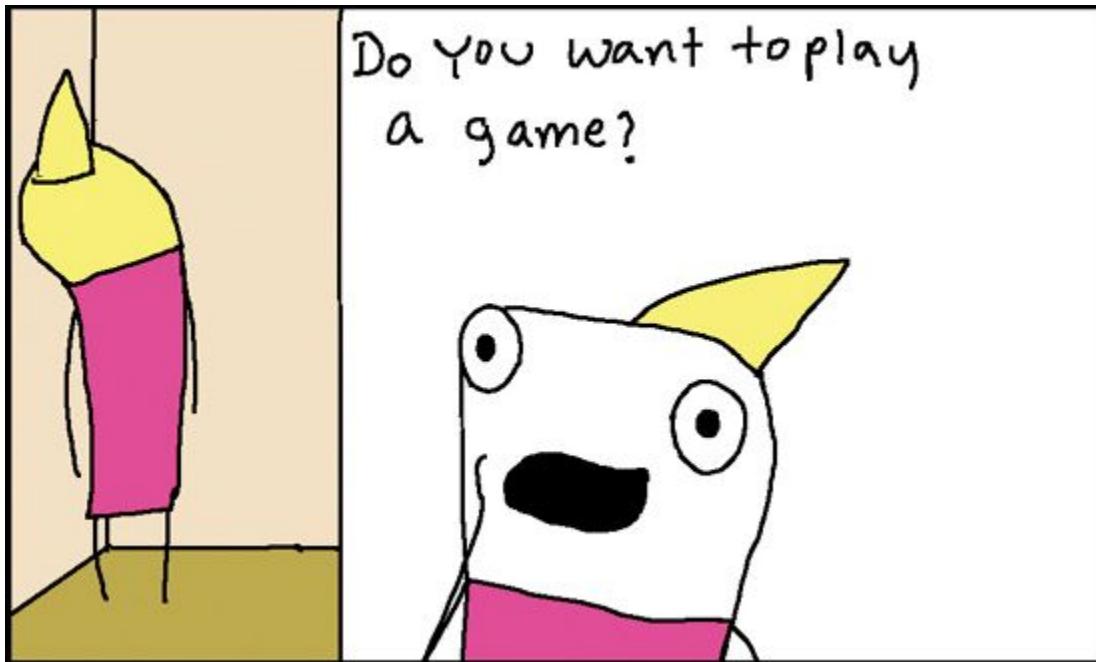
And that made me even *more* sad, and so on and so forth until the only way to adequately express my sadness was to crawl very slowly across the floor.

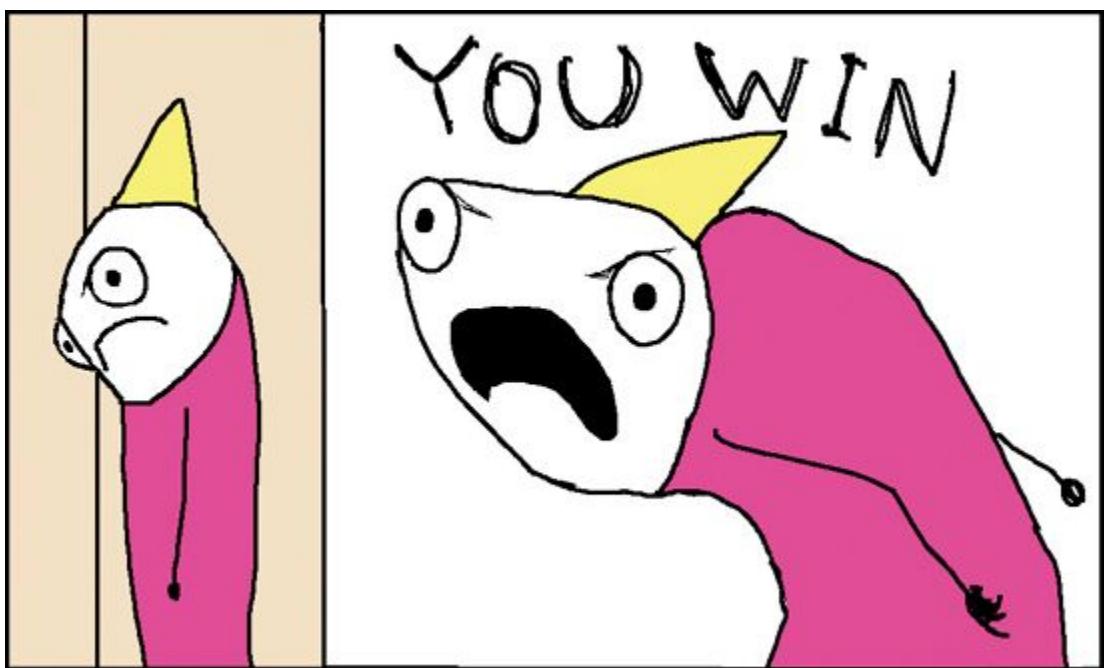
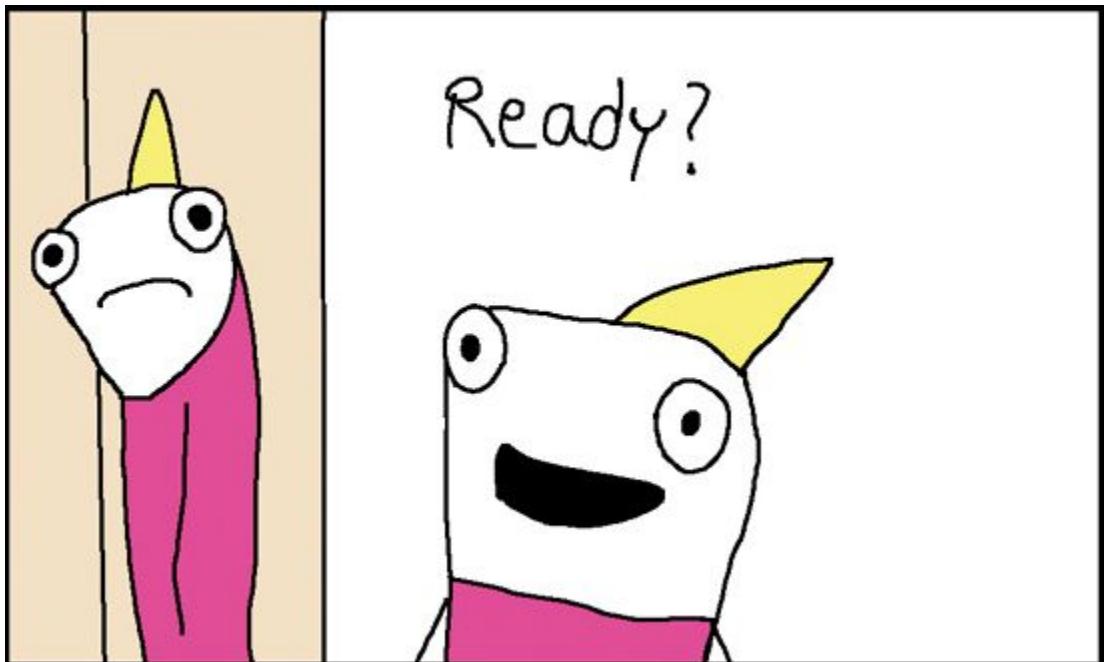


The self-loathing and shame had ceased to be even slightly productive, but it was too late to go back at that point, so I just kept going. I followed myself around like a bully, narrating my thoughts and actions with a constant stream of abuse.



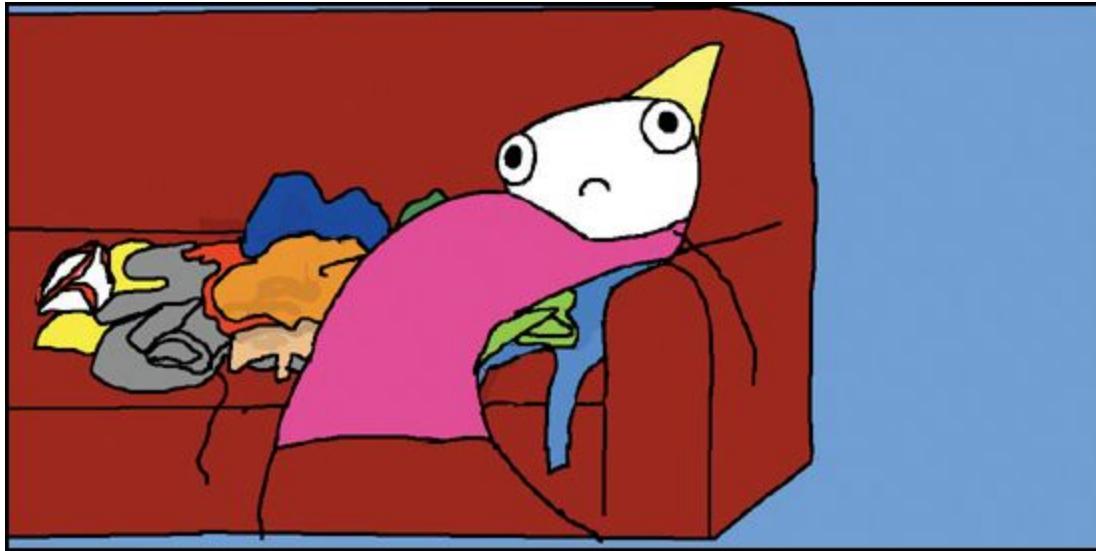








I spent months shut in my house, surfing the Internet on top of a pile of my own dirty laundry, which I set on the couch for “just a second” because I experienced a sudden moment of apathy on my way to the washer and couldn’t continue. And then, two weeks later, I still hadn’t completed that journey. But who cares—it wasn’t like I had been showering regularly, and sitting on a pile of clothes isn’t necessarily uncomfortable. But even if it was, I couldn’t feel anything through the self-hatred anyway, so it didn’t matter. *JUST LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE.*



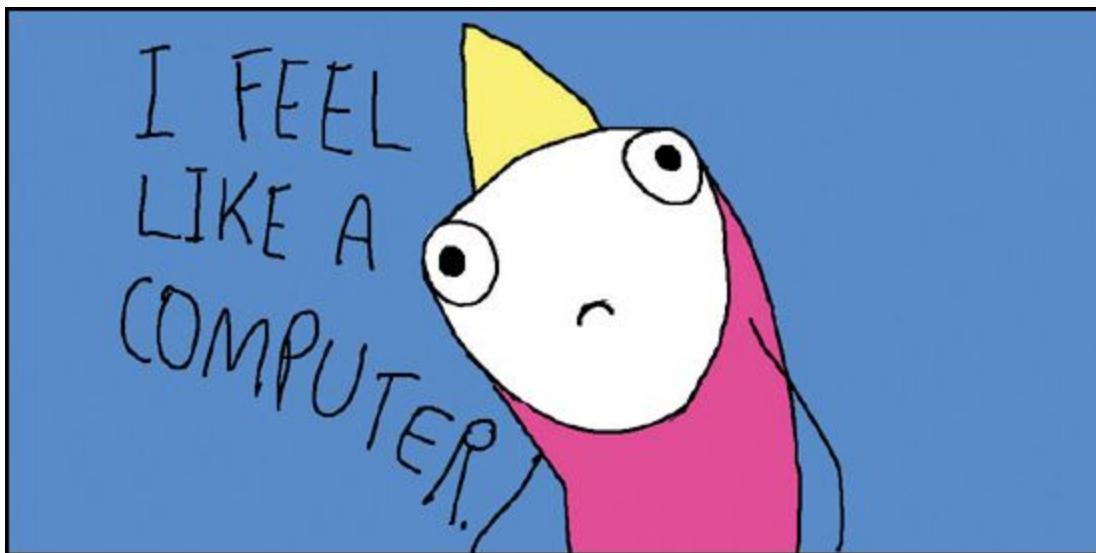
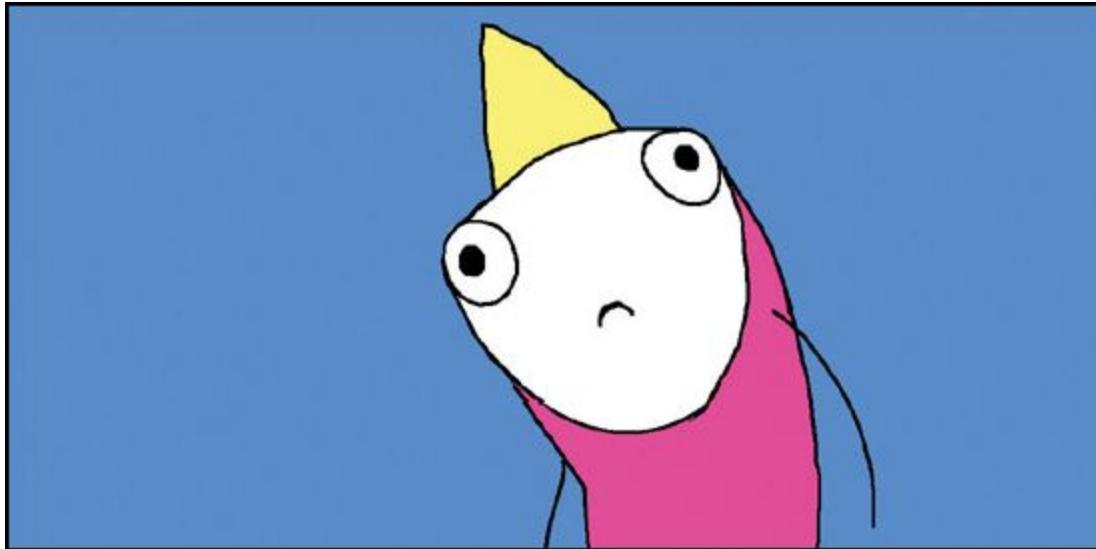
Slowly, my feelings started to shrivel up. The few that managed to survive the constant beatings staggered around like wounded baby deer, just biding their time until they could die and join all the other carcasses strewn across the wasteland of my soul.

I couldn't even muster the enthusiasm to hate myself anymore.





I just drifted around, completely unsure of what I was feeling or whether I could actually feel anything at all.

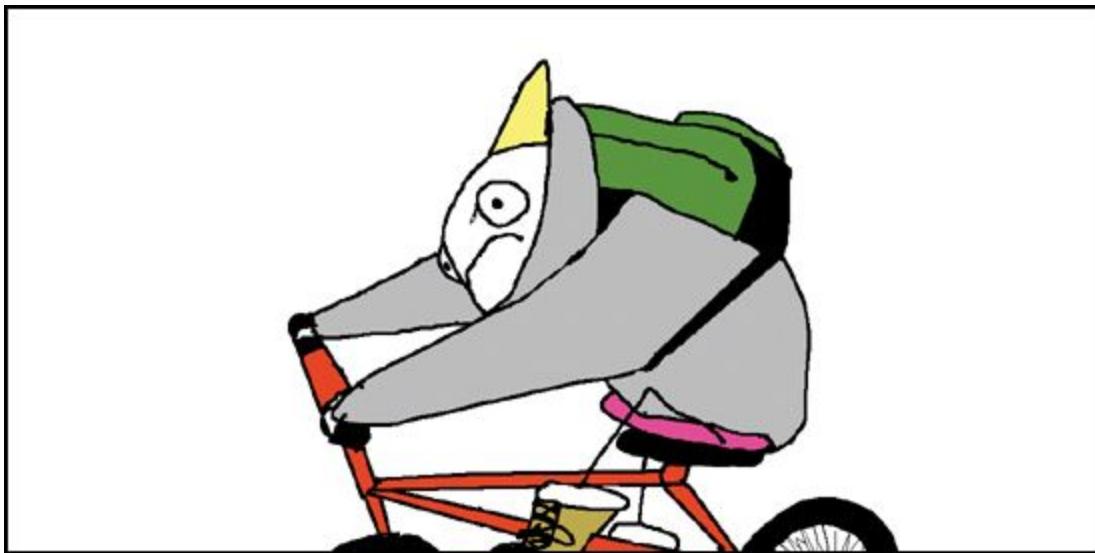


If my life was a movie, the turning point of my depression would have been inspirational and meaningful. It would have involved wisdom-filled epiphanies about discovering my true self and I would conquer my demons and go on to live out the rest of my life in happiness.

Instead, my turning point mostly hinged upon the fact that I had rented some movies and then I didn't return them for too long.

The late fees had reached the point where the injustice of paying any more than I already owed outweighed my apathy. I considered just keeping the movies and never going to the video store again, but then I remembered that I still wanted to rewatch *Jumanji*.

I put on some clothes, put the movies in my backpack, and biked to the video store. It was the slowest, most resentful bike ride ever.



And when I arrived, I found out that they didn't even have *Jumanji* in. Just as I was debating whether I should settle on a movie that wasn't *Jumanji* or go home and stare in abject silence, I noticed a woman looking at me weirdly from a couple rows over.



She was probably looking at me that way because I looked really, really depressed and I was dressed like an Eskimo vagrant.

Normally, I would have felt an instant, crushing sense of self-consciousness, but instead, I felt nothing.



I've always wanted to not give a fuck. While crying helplessly into my pillow for no good reason, I would often fantasize that maybe someday I could be one of those stoic badasses whose emotions are mostly comprised of rock music and not being afraid of things. And finally—finally—after a lifetime of feelings and anxiety and more feelings, I didn't have any feelings left. I had spent my last feeling being disappointed that I couldn't rent *Jumanji*.

I felt invincible.



And thus began a tiny rebellion.





Maybe I'll
rent six
horror
movies.



I would like
to rent all of
these movies
and also
purchase all
of these
Skittles.





Then I swooped out of there like the Batman and biked home in a blaze of defiant glory.



And that's how my depression got so horrible that it actually broke through to the other side and became a sort of fear-proof exoskeleton.

NOTHING CAN DO
ANYTHING TO ME



THE MGR MURDER TRIAL

SHOBASAKTHI

Translated by Anushiya Ramaswamy



PENGUIN BOOKS

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BOMBSHELL DIANA

'I come from burying the dead baby
 Under the *Paalai* Tree
 All through night the tree
 Cries in a thin voice'
 —Tamilnathi

The French judge, Eve Daniel, read each line of Ms Diana's death certificate. When he finished, he rubbed his fingers over the lion symbol embossed on the head of the certificate and, holding the document up, scrutinized it. As the judge played around with the certificate, the refugee petitioner T. Pratheeban looked on expressionlessly. After placing the paper to one side, the judge, rubbing his fat face with his fingers, began to ask Pratheeban these following questions:

'When the bomb fell on Diana Mahendiraraja, where were you?'

'When we heard the sound of the bombing airplanes, we woke up. There was the sound of the bombs falling on the school. Immediately, I ran out to the shelter that had been dug behind the hut under the paalai tree, and got in. All those who

were sleeping in the hut also came out one after another to the dugout. The bomb hit Diana as she was running to the dugout. We couldn't even find her body. In the half-a-well-deep hole that the bomb blast made between the dugout and the hut, the clothes Diana had been wearing were scattered like dust.'

Now the judge's eyes had no expression as they gazed at Pratheeban. Then the thin voice of the judge spread like light into that place. 'What is the relationship between you and the Diana who died in the bombing?'

Pratheeban looked at the translator's face. Even as the translator began to repeat the question in Tamil, Pratheeban's face darkened. His eyes filled the place with darkness. When his chest moved up and down and he heaved a sigh, all those seated in the inquiry hall must have heard it. With his voice trembling, Pratheeban answered the judge's question:

'Diana was my cousin. When we moved from the Allaipiddi Island after the mass murders there, we stayed with her family at Nallankulam.'

'How many bombs landed that day?'

'Three bombs came down. The first bomb fell on the village school, the second bomb fell on a housing colony about half a kilometre from there and the third bomb fell on Diana's house.'

'The village that is mentioned here, Nallankulam. How far is it from Killinochi town?'

'About five kilometres' distance.'

The judge stopped asking questions, and bent down to write something. When he looked up, the refugee petitioner T. Pratheeban's lawyer said, 'My Lord, the Tamil news article about the air-raid bombing on 21 May 2007 and its French translation have been submitted to you.'

The judge nodded and placed Diana's death certificate next to the news article and looked at them both. His fingers kept rubbing over the embossed lion symbol on the top of the death certificate. The lion symbol was the size of a one-rupee coin printed on rough paper, and the judge's fingers slid smoothly over its edges. The judge Eve Daniel had enough experience in differentiating a forged certificate from a genuine one by rubbing the embossed symbol, and he knew that this was a genuine death certificate.

*

When they heard the far-off siren, the women who had been lying on their beds in the delivery ward, without any conscious thought, rolled down and hid under them. When the siren rose and fell all over them in a scream, they all howled along with it. A young woman, who had been walking up and down, unable to bear the pain of labour, held her lower stomach with her hands and ran and hid in the bathroom. The little girl Dushyanthi who had been standing near her mother's bed, jumped onto the bed, huddled under the mosquito net covering her mother, and closed her eyes. Dushyanthi must have believed that the mosquito net would protect her from a bomb weighing 150 kilos.

The two airplanes had been hidden by the clouds in the south. But now they slid into view, simultaneously descending with a howling sound over Moolai Maternity Hospital and showering it with bombs. With a deafening noise, the hospital office and kitchens burst into pieces. The impact of the bomb made the tiles on the roof of the delivery ward fly off like paper

and the ward filled up with sulphurous smoke. It was then just ninety minutes since Diana had been born. Her mother had passed out during the delivery and lay on the bed like a clay doll washed out by a flood.

A nurse placed Diana and three other infants in a wheeled cart, dragged the cart over to the lane behind the hospital, and parked it under the leafless portia tree. When she looked up, the two planes that had been whistling overhead climbed into the clouds and vanished. An innocent smile broke out on the face of the nurse. Diana too smiled to herself.

When Diana was three, on a night during the rainy season, they had to leave their village. The whole of Jaffna was walking through the Kaithady Bridge. Diana was wearing a sack over her head and was seated on her father's shoulders. Her father's name was Mahendiraraja. The village called him Mental Mahendram. Her father was placing one stick-like leg in front of the other and walking along. Her mother, with a bundle on her head and a bag in hand, was walking in front.

Tearing the darkness, dots of light began to fall from the sky. Search lights from the airplanes loomed over the people. Using that light, folk moved inch by inch towards Vanni. When a woman delivered a baby on the bridge or an old man or an infant died, the line of refugees came to a halt. The ones in front were unable to move. Diana's father had to lean one foot on the other to be able to stand and wait. When her mother took a look, Diana was frozen on her father's shoulders like a statue. They couldn't pry her fingers away from the grip she had on her father's hair. The child could not be shifted from the shoulders either. Her eyes were half-closed. When the father tried to sit down with Diana, the huge crowds from behind pushed him

forcefully ahead. Even the heavy downpour could not wet the bridge, teeming as it was with a surge of moving bodies. All the rain did was wash away the father's tears.

No one knew the name for Diana's peculiar condition. She would be running around actively but when she heard a loud noise or if someone threatened her, first her ears would stop hearing, then she would split her mouth wide open and yawn a couple of times. Then her body would become still as a statue. If she had been sitting, she would be a seated statue. If she had been eating, she would stiffen up, with her fingers still inside the rice bowl. Her eyes half-open, her pupils would roll up. Sometimes, after freezing into this rigid state while still standing, she would fall flat on the ground without curling up. After three or four minutes, her eyes blinking in confusion, she would gain consciousness. She would have no memory of those minutes past.

When the war planes circled over the crowds who had gone for the Vattrapalai Amman temple festival, people had scattered and fled. When Father tried to hold on to Diana's hand and run, Diana had opened her mouth wide and yawned. Father lifted her and ran into the temple. When the bombing plane came down, Diana, her eyes half shut, landed inside the temple. When afterwards the folk came running to see, Diana was found amidst the wreckage like a silver statue, unmoving. When she opened her eyes and blinked, she first smiled with a kind of shame. There are no lines between the feelings of shame and fear. In a moment, shame becomes fear and fear can turn into shame. Now Diana began to be scared. When fear began to pursue her, she couldn't feel any shame.

The fear-filled Diana's body began to bloat. Her periods

began when she was ten years old. Her arms and thighs rolled with flesh on her fair-skinned body. Her cheeks and chin looked swollen. She came to be called 'Fatty' in the village and 'Gundu Diana' or 'Plump Diana' in school.

The doctor at the French volunteer clinic in Killinochi ran tests on Diana and said that her disease of going into a rigid state is the reason behind her extreme weight gain. The doctor told Diana's mother that in Vanni alone there were twenty children with the same disease. When her mother showed her father the pills and told him about this, Father immediately said, 'There are twenty fat boys and fat girls in Vanni.' Mother smiled with difficulty.

Once, when Diana was returning from school, she saw that the Movement had bound a man to the paalai tree on the side of the main road. The man was believed to be a spy for the army. The Movement had found a grenade on him that had been given to him by the military. The grenade was now hanging around his neck. Diana moved away from the crowd around him and began to run towards her house. As she carried her fat body and ran on, panting, the grenade on the man's chest was set off. When the sound of that blast hit Diana, she began to yawn. The yawns left her mouth, accompanied by sighs. And right on that street, one leg stretched before the other and hands gripping her books, in her white uniform, Diana stood like a statue. And so these incidents continued.

When Diana was in the eighth grade, one morning the Movement came to her school. With the girls gathered in the courtyard, the Movement leader began to speak about the necessity of the Struggle. The Movement ordered sternly that all those in the tenth standard and above must attend the first-

aid training camps conducted by the Movement in the coming two weekends. The Movement announced that those who failed to come to the training camp would be forbidden from taking their final exams. When the female students were giving their names in for the training, one of the Movement boys' gaze fell on Diana, who was standing in the eighth-grade line. Diana's large body showed her as being older than she really was. He must have fancied himself an ace detective; he began to suspect that she was hiding amidst the eighth graders to avoid going to the training camp. When he crooked his finger and asked her to come forward, she didn't move. The Movement boy narrowed his eyes and went up to her. Diana was frozen. When he turned back in silence, she fell over backwards, hitting the back of her head on the floor.

The next weekend, when the female students who had been taken for training by the Movement all stood gathered in the training field, the war planes neatly aimed their bombs on them. Sixty-four of the students lay shattered into flesh bits on those training grounds. Their fellow female students' collective wails rose to the sky. When the sixty-four bodies were laid out together, Diana went with the other school students to pay her respects. She kept crying all day. When the sorrow and fear became unbearable, she wished she could simply freeze up. She sat down in a corner of the memorial hall and, her hands rigid and eyes tightly shut, she opened and closed her mouth like a fish, trying to yawn her way into rigidity.

After a few days, the Movement announced that every household needed to send a male or female to join the Movement. In the early morning hours, they shook awake the small children and took them away. Children at schools and on

streets were captured and taken by the Movement. The parents went searching for their children, and waited hopelessly with no food or water on the steps of the Movement offices.

Diana feared that at any moment they might come for her too. She even thought that if she'd had a brother, younger or older, the Movement would have taken him and that she could have escaped. Now Diana cared nothing for anyone else. All she thought about was how to escape when the aerial bombing took place or shelling happened or when the Movement came to get her. Mostly she was preoccupied with how not to fall into a frozen state. She told her mother, 'There is no point in these people taking me because I would be of no use to them. I would just fall down frozen.' Her father, who was cutting sticks in the back, said, 'They want a person from each household, right? If they come here, I will go with them.' Diana wanted to laugh.

The Movement came one morning to get their neighbour Palani's son. When they surrounded Palani's home, his son ran to the tall paalai tree behind their hut, climbed up like a monkey and hid there. The Movement had surrounded the tree and threatened the boy to get down.

Palani had originally come from the tea plantations and settled down in Vanni. Even now his speech was an unadulterated plantation-Tamil. Diana would laugh uproariously upon hearing him use the colloquial Indian Tamil words *salli* for money and *perumal* to indicate God. He would fondly call Diana 'Gundu baby' while he addressed Mental Mahendram as 'Annatchi', a title of respect.

That day Palani begged and pleaded with the Movement calling them *saami*, or lord. He implored, 'We are poverty-stricken, Saami, allow my son to go!' One of the Movement

boys responded, 'We are asking for Tamil Eelam for the poor too,' and, picking up a rock, threw it at the boy in the tree. The boy leapt onto another branch.

There were more stones under the tree than the branches on it. When a rock struck the boy, he screamed, 'Father!' And when he heard the cry, Palani's legs sped into the hut. He returned at the same speed he went in, and there was an axe in his hand. Before the Movement boys could gather themselves, the axe fell on one of the boys' shoulder. Immediately, the wounded Movement boy was taken away in a van. Ten minutes later, the hands of Palani and his son were bound to each other by rope and they were dragged through the streets by the Movement.

When she saw the Movement coming to Palani's hut, Diana ran into the kitchen and hid herself in the pantry box. The box held pots and pans and rice and other stuff, and it was with great difficulty that Diana was able to fit her fat body in. After the Movement left, the father ran in and opened the pantry box. Kneeling on her hands and knees like a cow, Diana had frozen into a statue.

At the beginning of the year, before Diana entered the ninth grade, she needed new underclothes, footwear and other personal items. As Diana kept on bloating, even in those famine-stricken days, she needed new clothes every six months. Diana and her mother left for Killinochi town to purchase these items. They were travelling in a tractor that was going their way from Nallankulam, and halfway to town they could hear the sounds of bombing. As they neared the town, they encountered those returning from Killinochi, who said that because of the air-raid, everyone in town was dead. Terrified, Diana said, 'Mother, let's return too.' When her mother asked

the tractor driver, he loudly spat and answered, 'They will bomb tomorrow too.' Saying this, he drove his vehicle towards the centre of the town.

The shops were still open in the market street. Business was also halfway going on. Frightened, Diana watched as some people loaded the bloodied bodies from the sides of the street onto a vehicle. She sat in the tractor and stretched her mouth in a yawn. Her ears shut down. With her arms and legs crossed, Diana turned into a statue.

Diana told her father that they needed to make a dugout shelter in the back of their hut to hide during air raids. Her father laughed and said, 'They won't come into this jungle to bomb.' In fact, it was more accurate to call Nallankulam a jungle than a village. There were eight huts around a small pond. You could count just three stone-built houses in Nallankulam. There were no structural amenities that would befit a village. Even to go to school, Diana needed to walk three kilometres. When Diana told her mother that they needed a dugout shelter, her mother replied, 'What kind of a shameful request is that?' Until then, no one had built a dugout shelter in Nallankulam.

But Diana was not willing to let go of her request. Round the clock, she obsessed over her terror of an air-raid. The row of the female student corpses laid out in Vallipunam was rolling through her mind's eye all the time. She saw sixty-four Dianas, stretched out on the ground, all arranged in a row. She saw herself sprawled out on the streets of Killinochi, her stomach torn open and intestines pouring out. One night, she said to her father, 'When the planes come to drop bombs, you and Mother would be able to run away. I would be frozen and fallen on the ground.' The father nodded his head slowly. 'You

are a fatty. You cannot be carried to safety either,' he said with a laugh. His laughter sounded like a hiccup.

The next morning, her father brought along 'Muzhiyan' Selvam. Selvam had a shovel on one shoulder and a long iron rod on the other. Father had a steel sand-carrying tray turned over on his head. Behind the hut and under the tall paalai tree, Selvam and Father began to dig a dugout shelter. Diana did not go to school that day. Excitedly she helped those digging the shelter. Her father was not physically strong enough to work continuously. Every ten minutes, he would put the shovel down and say, 'Who is going to come all the way here to throw bombs?' On one of those occasions, Selvam smiled with his bulging eyes and responded to Father's moans, saying, 'Anney, the child desires it, right?' And he continued to work like a machine. Her mother came over and with her hand covering her mouth said, 'The neighbours are going to laugh at this drama.'

Selvam must have been about twenty-five or twenty-six years old. He had a lean but firm, dark body. His famine-struck face had a pair of bulging eyes that looked like they might pop out at any moment. His stained large teeth stuck out of his lips. Those lips would usually have a drop of dried blood on them. When in conversation, he would tilt his head sideways. While speaking, he would hold the fingers of his right hand tightly together as if he was smearing slaked-lime paste on a betel leaf. That night, after the work was over, Diana's father went and got some toddy, which he and Selvam, sitting in the front yard of the hut, later drank. Her father was not someone who drank often. When he did have an occasion to drink, he would ready himself as though he was going to attack a military outpost. But after drinking a half-coconut shell of toddy, he

would pass out. This time, when he passed out, Selvam lifted him up, brought him into the hut and placed him on a mat. Then he drank alone in the front yard for a while, until Diana's mother began conversing with him. Selvam spoke slowly and carefully. Every now and then, certain cultural references—proverbs, witticisms, and even the lines from the folk song '*Kaathavarayan koothu*'—would slip off his tongue. There was a deep allure in the way Selvam would finish each sentence with a harmoniously dragged out 'Right?'.

The work on the dugout shelter went on for three days. When she was at school, Diana kept on thinking of the hidey-hole. When school was over, she would hurry back home to watch the dugout taking shape. All the way home, her thoughts would be filled with the dugout shelter. When she got home, without even changing her school clothes, she would go and stand by the shelter. Selvam was an excellent worker. In the 'L'-shaped six-foot-deep hole, he had built in wooden steps to climb down. On top of the shelter, he had arranged wooden sticks so tightly that even a breath of air could not pass through; over that, he had arranged rocks and filled the top with soil. Selvam had built the whole structure like an artist. That dugout was the Taj Mahal he had built for Diana.

Selvam was already married. He had married his cousin Meera. They had a three-year-old daughter too. Two years ago, on Diwali, Selvam had beaten Meera and chased her off with the baby to her mother's house. For the last two years, Meera's family and Selvam had been unrelenting enemies. Last year when Meera came to Selvam's mother's funeral, Selvam hit her in front of everyone. 'The old woman died bemoaning the fact that a woman unsuited to family life was brought into her

home as her daughter-in-law,' Selvam kept saying as he kicked her. But Meera bore all the beating as she buried her face on the corpse's legs and wept, repeating, 'Aunt, aunt!' Finally, when Selvam hefted the wooden pestle in his hand, folk sent Meera away from there. As Meera left, she was carrying the baby in one hand and beating her own stomach with the other, all the while howling loudly. Even then, not a curse came out of her mouth. After that, she never stepped on Selvam's front yard. A few days afterwards, two of Meera's brothers waylaid Selvam as he was coming back from digging a well in Ganapathy's garden, and thrashed him, stamping his body with blows from an iron rod and a bicycle chain. His stomach and chest also bore deep scratches from a sharpened stick.

Now, Selvam continued to visit Diana's house even after the work on the dugout shelter was over. When he visited, he would bring with him venison or some dried wild-animal meat as an excuse. On the evenings when he came, Diana would be seated on top of the dugout shelter, either studying or simply watching for hours the dense growth of the paalai tree that grew over it. Only after the venison had been cooked and he'd eaten would Selvam leave. Diana's mother felt sorry for him, and said, 'Poor fellow, living alone. He has no one to cook for him.'

As Diana went to and came from school, Selvam would follow, rolling his bicycle along behind her. When Selvam set himself out to laugh and tell a funny story, he would definitely make his listeners laugh. When Selvam wept and told a sad story, his listeners would weep too. That was the kind of charm he had. Selvam wept, telling Diana about his wife Meera. With tears in his eyes he told her that she had taken his baby away

from him and that she had complained to the Movement about him and got the Movement to beat him up.

On 20 May, in the early morning before the darkness had been split, Diana ran away with Selvam. He had been waiting under the tree behind Diana's house with a new dress in his hands. He gave that to Diana, told her to remove the dress she was wearing, leave it there, and wear the new gown and come away with him. Selvam's principle was that Diana should not bring with her from her home even the clothes she was wearing. There was nothing to take away from Diana's house anyway. They both held each other's hands and walked towards Selvam's hut. As she was walking, suddenly, turning her ears sideways, Diana stopped. Her legs started to tremble. She could hear the thin sound of an airplane in the distance. She shook off Selvam's hand and said softly, 'They are coming to bomb us.' Selvam took her hand again and said, 'That is the Movement's plane. It is going to Iranai Madu.' By the time Diana arrived at Selvam's hut, the land had started to lighten.

Selvam's wife Meera saw to it that Diana's father and mother did not suffer trying to find out where Diana had gone. It was Meera's voice that woke the sleeping parents from their sleep mat. She informed them through her abuse that Diana was at Selvam's place. Unable to control her tears and anger, she screamed, 'Did you move all the way from Jaffna to Vanni so that you could separate me from my husband?' Diana's mother sat down on the floor in shock. The father, with his mouth open, kept walking round and round the screaming Meera. 'Don't you act like a madman,' Meera spat at him. Even after Meera left, Diana's father kept dragging his feet and walking around the front yard. Diana's mother got up, came near him

and said, looking at his face, 'The fatty ran away with the bug-eyed.' The father, with his eyes shining said calmly, 'Now the Movement can't take her away.' The mother ground her teeth together. Inside her tightly closed mouth, her tongue trembled saying, 'Madman.'

When Diana crouched inside Selvam's hut and looked through the woven wall of dried palm leaves, she could see Meera walking towards the hut barefoot, with the baby in her arms. Hunkered down at the entrance to the hut, Selvam was also watching Meera's approach with bloodshot eyes. As soon as she came near, Selvam leapt up like a bull and knocked her down with a shove. When Meera fell down on the hot sand, Selvam plucked the baby away from her. Meera must not have expected something like this to happen, so now, more than getting her husband back, she was more concerned with retrieving her baby. She clung on to Selvam's feet as he walked away. She begged and cried for the baby to be given back to her. Selvam tried to retreat into his hut with the baby but Meera wouldn't let go of his feet. Selvam lifted the baby high and called out in a loud voice, 'Diana, Diana!' Then Diana's mouth opened with a deep sigh and her ears shut down.

Inexplicably, Selvam turned and walked onto the street with the baby in his arms. Meera came after him, screaming. The few people in the street tried to pacify Selvam. Seeing the village folk must have made Meera a little more courageous. She complained to them, 'He has brought that fatty over and is chasing me away!' and wept loudly. Hearing this, Selvam picked up a big stick lying on the street and hit Meera on the head with it. But even with all the beating, Meera refused to leave. Only after he set the baby down did Meera become calm. She

lifted the baby into her arms and headed towards her mother's house. And even then, even as she wept loudly and carried on, not a single curse came out of her mouth.

When Selvam came back into the hut, Diana was frozen in place, bent low and holding onto the woven palm leaves. After the fit had passed, Selvam laid her down on the mat and went out. He returned with a bottle of arrack, some bread and beef curry. Telling Diana to eat, Selvam sat in the front yard and began to drink. He must have expected either an unpleasant visit from Diana's parents, who might come to take Diana back, or else a clash with Meera's brothers, who would most likely come to attack him. Near at hand, on the ground, was a long sword that he'd had made by Ayyampillai *asari* from the steel chassis of a truck. Even after midnight, he remained seated in the front yard, sword in hand like an Iyyanar statue, waiting for his enemies. Or maybe he was protecting Diana.

Later, Diana woke up from deep sleep with the curious feeling that her legs had been brutally pressed down. She was covered in darkness, and was immediately aware of a smell of rotting fruit. She sat up and lit the lamp near her head. Standing erect at the head of the mat where she'd been sleeping was a sword, the tip of its blade pierced into the ground. At her feet squatted Selvam, fully naked with his reddened eyes bulging. Diana quickly blew the lamp out and lay face-down on the mat. Selvam's strong arms turned Diana over. His hand fell on her breast, and with a feeling of terror she held it tightly against her. The odour of rotten fruit spread all over her body. Spittle began to ooze from Diana's mouth. Her hips started to rise up without conscious thought. All her weight seemed to have moved to her ankles. When Selvam lifted one of her fat legs onto

his back, Diana's eyes started to close. Tense, she murmured in warning, 'I am going to become frozen.' Selvam's sweat dripped over her. She opened her mouth wide and said, 'I am yawning, I am going to freeze.' Selvam's strong hand covered her mouth and controlled the yawn. His other hand snaked down Diana's back and covered her anus. Her mind was still. She heard Selvam draw up the sword from near her head. He was lying on the mat with one arm around Diana and the other holding the sword. Diana felt a sharp pain below her stomach. She covered her naked stomach with her hands and thought that a baby was being formed within her. Then there was the sound of airplanes flying over Nallankulam.

Diana jumped up from the mat and cupped her hands over her ears to listen. Suddenly, there was a loud noise as if the planes had struck the roofs of the huts as they flew by. Diana stood up, put on her dress and ran outside the hut to see. The roar that began from behind her went northwards and came back again over Nallankulam. As Diana watched, right in front of her eyes, one of the planes, with its red lights blinking, shot downwards towards the earth sharply and then rose up again. Immediately, a terrible blast occurred in that village. Diana didn't think even for a second. In that deep darkness she began to run from Selvam's front yard. She ran through the woods towards the dugout shelter in the back of her hut, under the paalai tree. Right then there was another blast, and smoke appeared in the southern part of Nallankulam. As she ran, Diana felt her ears shut down. She knew that she was going to fall down frozen. Diana then found that she couldn't move her legs. Her eyes began to close. She knelt down under a paalai tree nearby. The roar of the planes began to get louder again. As she knelt under the paalai

tree, Diana told herself that somehow she must not become rigid. She thought that somehow she needed to get herself up and run over to the dugout shelter. As her mouth split open in a yawn, Diana immediately pressed both her hands over her mouth and tried to stifle the yawn. Then the shameless Diana lifted one hand from her mouth and covered her anus with it.

*

After the refugee interview was over, the refugee petitioner T. Pratheeban came out and hurriedly called up a friend of his. He told his friend that his interview had gone well and that he had answered all the questions correctly and clearly. However, there was one thing that was bothering him. He stopped his narrative and asked his friend a question: 'How far is it from Nallankulam to Killinochi town?' That friend was from Vanni. He was able to easily calculate the distance and tell him, 'No less than fifteen kilometres.' Pratheeban's heart stuttered. During the interview, he had said that the distance between Nallankulam and Killinochi town was five kilometres. He held on to the phone with one hand, and with the other smacked his forehead heavily and muttered, 'She has destroyed me, that cursed woman.'

He had bought Diana's death certificate from a person who sold death certificates, birth certificates and marriage certificates for the sum of thirty euros.

Notes

The original title '*Gundu Diana*' is a play on the word *Gundu* which in Tamil means both a bomb and also a person who is fat. The epithet could

refer to both Diana who was a plump girl (hence she would have been called '*Gundu Diana*') as well as the girl who suffered from a fear of bombs. I played with 'Diana and the Bomb,' or even 'Diana the Bombshell,' but both seemed to lack the diptych that the Tamil brings in.

Valli Punam: Valli is the name of the spouse of the Hindu god Murugan. 'Punam' means woods or jungle. The area is heavily wooded hence the name.

'Muzhiyan' Selvam: The pre-fix 'Muzhiyan' refers to Selvam's bulging eyes. It is common to have such prefixes to differentiate between this Selvam and maybe another Selvam (a common first name) in the region.

The buying of the death certificate: The sheer terror of the war in Sri Lanka made it impossible for many of the Sri Lankan refugees who had somehow made their way out of the island to even contemplate being sent back. Therefore, in many Western countries that had been the popular locus of the Tamil refugees in the late 1980s and '90s (France, Germany and the United Kingdom mostly), there arose a whole industry designed to provide materials, forged or otherwise, for desperate refugees needing to prove to the Western authorities their legitimacy as genuine refugees. These nations insist upon the refugee providing some kind of official documentary proof that the violence described in the petition actually happened individually to that particular petitioner. Within Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora communities, the favourite and at times only topic of conversation is the method of 'producing' a tightly woven refugee story, which means there is a thriving black market in death certificates, stolen passports and forged visas, to mention but a few.

THE MGR MURDER TRIAL

1.

Listen, Bowser! This is the story. You can believe it or not. Whether you publish this story in your paper or not is your problem. Not many days have passed since these events took place. Two days after you came to Paris for the Periyar Remembrance Day and left, yes? I got a phone call.

It was a very cold day. The cold was at a tormenting minus seven. I had decided not to go out anywhere and stayed huddled in my room. I was watching a documentary on television about Mahmoud Darwish, when a relative of mine, Newton, called me on the phone, saying, 'Uncle, we have captured Donas. You need to come to my house.'

I didn't know who Donas was so I asked, 'Who is this Donas?'

'That is Mathilena Aunty's last son, Uncle. Back in the village, he was in the Movement and has murdered a lot of folk.'

I remembered now. I turned off the TV, put on some clothes and set out. Newton's house was in the Parisian suburb of

Havisham

Carol Ann Duffy



Beloved sweetheart bastard. Not a day since then
I haven't wished him dead. Prayed for it
so hard I've dark green pebbles for eyes,
ropes on the back of my hands I could strangle with.

Spinster. I stink and remember. Whole days
in bed cawing Nooooo at the wall; the dress
yellowing, trembling if I open the wardrobe;
the slewed mirror, full-length, her, myself, who did this

to me? Puce curses that are sounds not words.
Some nights better, the lost body over me,
my fluent tongue in its mouth in its ear
then down till I suddenly bite awake. Love's

hate behind a white veil; a red balloon bursting
in my face. Bang. I stabbed at a wedding cake.
Give me a male corpse for a long slow honeymoon.
Don't think it's only the heart that b-b-b-breaks.

CITIZEN
An American Lyric

Claudia Rankine

Graywolf Press

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You are in the dark, in the car, watching the black-tarred street being swallowed by speed; he tells you his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there.

You think maybe this is an experiment and you are being tested or retroactively insulted or you have done something that communicates this is an okay conversation to be having.

Why do you feel comfortable saying this to me? You wish the light would turn red or a police siren would go off so you could slam on the brakes, slam into the car ahead of you, fly forward so quickly both your faces would suddenly be exposed to the wind.

As usual you drive straight through the moment with the expected backing off of what was previously said. It is not only that confrontation is headache-producing; it is also that you have a destination that doesn't include acting like this moment isn't inhabitable, hasn't happened before, and the before isn't part of the now as the night darkens and the time shortens between where we are and where we are going.

When you arrive in your driveway and turn off the car, you remain behind the wheel another ten minutes. You fear the night is being locked in and coded on a cellular level and want time to function as a power wash. Sitting there staring at the closed garage door you are reminded that a friend once told you there exists the medical term—John Henryism—for people exposed to stresses stemming from racism. They achieve themselves to death trying to dodge the buildup of erasure. Sherman James, the researcher who came up with the term, claimed the physiological costs were high. You hope by sitting in silence you are bucking the trend.

Because of your elite status from a year's worth of travel, you have already settled into your window seat on United Airlines, when the girl and her mother arrive at your row. The girl, looking over at you, tells her mother, these are our seats, but this is not what I expected. The mother's response is barely audible—I see, she says. I'll sit in the middle.

A woman you do not know wants to join you for lunch. You are visiting her campus. In the café you both order the Caesar salad. This overlap is not the beginning of anything because she immediately points out that she, her father, her grandfather, and you, all attended the same college. She wanted her son to go there as well, but because of affirmative action or minority something—she is not sure what they are calling it these days and weren't they supposed to get rid of it?—her son wasn't accepted. You are not sure if you are meant to apologize for this failure of your alma mater's legacy program; instead you ask where he ended up. The prestigious school she mentions doesn't seem to assuage her irritation. This exchange, in effect, ends your lunch. The salads arrive.

II



Hennessy Youngman aka Jayson Musson, whose *Art Thoughtz* take the form of tutorials on YouTube, educates viewers on contemporary art issues. In one of his many videos, he addresses how to become a successful black artist, wryly suggesting black people's anger is marketable. He advises black artists to cultivate "an angry nigger exterior" by watching, among other things, the Rodney King video while working.



Youngman's suggestions are meant to expose expectations for blackness as well as to underscore the difficulty inherent in any attempt by black artists to metabolize real rage. The commodified anger his video advocates rests lightly on the surface for spectacle's sake. It can be engaged or played like the race card and is tied solely to the performance of blackness and not to the emotional state of particular individuals in particular situations.

On the bridge between this sellable anger and "the artist" resides, at times, an actual anger. Youngman in his video doesn't address this type of anger: the anger built up through experience and the quotidian struggles against dehumanization every brown or black person lives simply because of skin color. This other kind of anger in

time can prevent, rather than sponsor, the production of anything except loneliness.

You begin to think, maybe erroneously, that this other kind of anger is really a type of knowledge: the type that both clarifies and disappoints. It responds to insult and attempted erasure simply by asserting presence, and the energy required to present, to react, to assert is accompanied by visceral disappointment: a disappointment in the sense that no amount of visibility will alter the ways in which one is perceived.

Recognition of this lack might break you apart. Or recognition might illuminate the erasure the attempted erasure triggers. Whether such discerning creates a healthier, if more isolated, self, you can't know. In any case, Youngman doesn't speak to this kind of anger. He doesn't say that witnessing the expression of this more ordinary and daily anger might make the witness believe that a person is "insane."

And insane is what you think, one Sunday afternoon, drinking an Arnold Palmer, watching the 2009 Women's US Open final, when brought to full attention by the suddenly explosive behavior of Serena Williams. Serena in HD before your eyes becomes overcome by a rage you recognize and have been taught to hold at a distance for your own good. Serena's behavior, on this particular Sunday afternoon, suggests that all the injustice she has played through all the years of her illustrious career flashes before her and she decides finally to respond to all of it with a string of invectives. Nothing, not even the repetition of negations ("no, no, no") she employed in a similar situation years before as a younger player at the 2004 US Open, prepares you for this. Oh my God, she's gone crazy, you say to no one.

What does a victorious or defeated black woman's body in a historically white space look like? Serena and her big sister Venus

Williams brought to mind Zora Neale Hurston's "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." This appropriated line, stenciled on canvas by Glenn Ligon, who used plastic letter stencils, smudging oil sticks, and graphite to transform the words into abstractions, seemed to be ad copy for some aspect of life for all black bodies.

Hurston's statement has been played out on the big screen by Serena and Venus: they win sometimes, they lose sometimes, they've been injured, they've been happy, they've been sad, ignored, booed mightily (see Indian Wells, which both sisters have boycotted since 2001), they've been cheered, and through it all and evident to all were those people who are enraged they are there at all—graphite against a sharp white background.

For years you attribute to Serena Williams a kind of resilience appropriate only for those who exist in celluloid. Neither her father nor her mother nor her sister nor Jehovah her God nor NIKE camp could shield her ultimately from people who felt her black body didn't belong on their court, in their world. From the start many made it clear Serena would have done better struggling to survive in the two-dimensionality of a Millet painting, rather than on their tennis court—better to put all that strength to work in their fantasy of her working the land, rather than be caught up in the turbulence of our ancient dramas, like a ship fighting a storm in a Turner seascape.

The most notorious of Serena's detractors takes the form of Mariana Alves, the distinguished tennis chair umpire. In 2004 Alves was excused from officiating any more matches on the final day of the US Open after she made five bad calls against Serena in her semifinal matchup against fellow American Jennifer Capriati. The serves and returns Alves called out were landing, stunningly unreturned by Capriati, inside the lines, no discerning eyesight needed. Commentators, spectators, television viewers, line judges, everyone

could see the balls were good, everyone, apparently, except Alves. No one could understand what was happening. Serena, in her denim skirt, black sneaker boots, and dark mascara, began wagging her finger and saying “no, no, no,” as if by negating the moment she could propel us back into a legible world. Tennis superstar John McEnroe, given his own keen eye for injustice during his professional career, was shocked that Serena was able to hold it together after losing the match.

Though no one was saying anything explicitly about Serena’s black body, you are not the only viewer who thought it was getting in the way of Alves’s sight line. One commentator said he hoped he wasn’t being unkind when he stated, “Capriati wins it with the help of the umpires and the lines judges.” A year later that match would be credited for demonstrating the need for the speedy installation of Hawk-Eye, the line-calling technology that took the seeing away from the beholder. Now the umpire’s call can be challenged by a replay; however, back then after the match Serena said, “I’m very angry and bitter right now. I felt cheated. Shall I go on? I just feel robbed.”

And though you felt outrage for Serena after that 2004 US Open, as the years go by, she seems to put Alves, and a lengthening list of other curious calls and oversights, against both her and her sister, behind her as they happen.

Yes, and the body has memory. The physical carriage hauls more than its weight. The body is the threshold across which each objectionable call passes into consciousness—all the unintimidated, unblinking, and unflappable resilience does not erase the moments lived through, even as we are eternally stupid or everlastingly optimistic, so ready to be inside, among, a part of the games.

And here Serena is, five years after Alves, back at the US Open, again in a semifinal match, this time against Belgium’s Kim Clijsters.

Serena is not playing well and loses the first set. In response she smashes her racket on the court. Now McEnroe isn't stunned by her ability to hold herself together and is moved to say, "That's as angry as I've ever seen her." The umpire gives her a warning; another violation will mean a point penalty.

She is in the second set at the critical moment of 5–6 in Clijsters's favor, serving to stay in the match, at match point. The line judge employed by the US Open to watch Serena's body, its every move, says Serena stepped on the line while serving. What? (The Hawk-Eye cameras don't cover the feet, only the ball, apparently.) What! Are you serious? She is serious; she has seen a foot fault, one no one else is able to locate despite the numerous replays. "No foot fault, you definitely do not see a foot fault there," says McEnroe. "That's overofficiating for certain," says another commentator. Even the ESPN tennis commentator, who seems predictable in her readiness to find fault with the Williams sisters, says, "Her foot fault call was way off." Yes, and even if there had been a foot fault, despite the rule, they are rarely ever called at critical moments in a Grand Slam match because "You don't make a call," tennis official Carol Cox says, "that can decide a match unless it's flagrant."

As you look at the affable Kim Clijsters, you try to entertain the thought that this scenario could have played itself out the other way. And as Serena turns to the lineswoman and says, "I swear to God I'm fucking going to take this fucking ball and shove it down your fucking throat, you hear that? I swear to God!" As offensive as her outburst is, it is difficult not to applaud her for reacting immediately to being thrown against a sharp white background. It is difficult not to applaud her for existing in the moment, for fighting crazily against the so-called wrongness of her body's positioning at the service line.

She says in 2009, belatedly, the words that should have been said to the umpire in 2004, the words that might have snapped Alves back

into focus, a focus that would have acknowledged what actually was happening on the court. Now Serena's reaction is read as insane. And her punishment for this moment of manumission is the threatened point penalty resulting in the loss of the match, an \$82,500 fine, plus a two-year probationary period by the Grand Slam Committee.

Perhaps the committee's decision is only about context, though context is not meaning. It is a public event being watched in homes across the world. In any case, it is difficult not to think that if Serena lost context by abandoning all rules of civility, it could be because her body, trapped in a racial imaginary, trapped in disbelief—code for being black in America—is being governed not by the tennis match she is participating in but by a collapsed relationship that had promised to play by the rules. Perhaps this is how racism feels no matter the context—randomly the rules everyone else gets to play by no longer apply to you, and to call this out by calling out “I swear to God!” is to be called insane, crass, crazy. Bad sportsmanship.

Two years later, September 11, 2011, Serena is playing the Australian Sam Stosur in the US Open final. She is expected to win, having just beaten the number-one player, the Dane Caroline Wozniacki, in the semifinal the night before. Some speculate Serena especially wants to win this Grand Slam because it is the tenth anniversary of the attack on the Twin Towers. It's believed that by winning she will prove her red-blooded American patriotism and will once and for all become beloved by the tennis world (think Arthur Ashe after his death). All the bad calls, the boos, the criticisms that she has made ugly the game of tennis—through her looks as well as her behavior—that entire cluster of betrayals will be wiped clean with this win.

One imagines her wanting to say what her sister would say a year later after being diagnosed with Sjögren's syndrome and losing her

match to shouts of “Let’s go, Venus!” in Arthur Ashe Stadium: “I know this is not proper tennis etiquette, but this is the first time I’ve ever played here that the crowd has been behind me like that. Today I felt American, you know, for the first time at the US Open. So I’ve waited my whole career to have this moment and here it is.”

It is all too exhausting and Serena’s exhaustion shows in her playing; she is losing, a set and a game down. Yes, and finally she hits a great shot, a big forehand, and before the ball is safely past Sam Stosur’s hitting zone, Serena yells, “Come on!” thinking she has hit an irretrievable winner. The umpire, Eva Asderaki, rules correctly that Serena, by shouting, interfered with Stosur’s concentration. Subsequently, a ball that Stosur seemingly would not have been able to return becomes Stosur’s point. Serena’s reply is to ask the umpire if she is trying to screw her again. She remembers the umpire doing this to her before. As a viewer, you too, along with John McEnroe, begin to wonder if this is the same umpire from 2004 or 2009. It isn’t—in 2004 it was Mariana Alves and in 2009 it was Sharon Wright; however, the use of the word “again” by Serena returns her viewers to other times calling her body out.

Again Serena’s frustrations, her disappointments, exist within a system you understand not to try to understand in any fair-minded way because to do so is to understand the erasure of the self as systemic, as ordinary. For Serena, the daily diminishment is a low flame, a constant drip. Every look, every comment, every bad call blossoms out of history, through her, onto you. To understand is to see Serena as hemmed in as any other black body thrown against our American background. “Aren’t you the one that screwed me over last time here?” she asks umpire Asderaki. “Yeah, you are. Don’t look at me. Really, don’t even look at me. Don’t look my way. Don’t look my way,” she repeats, because it is that simple.

Yes, and who can turn away? Serena is not running out of breath. Despite all her understanding, she continues to serve up aces while

smashing rackets and fraying hems. In the 2012 Olympics she brought home the only two gold medals the Americans would win in tennis. After her three-second celebratory dance on center court at the All England Club, the American media reported, “And there was Serena ... Crip-Walking all over the most lily-white place in the world.... You couldn’t help but shake your head.... What Serena did was akin to cracking a tasteless, X-rated joke inside a church.... What she did was immature and classless.”



Before making the video *How to Be a Successful Black Artist*, Hennessy Youngman uploaded to YouTube *How to Be a Successful Artist*. While putting forward the argument that one needs to be white to be truly successful, he adds, in an aside, that this might not work for blacks because if “a nigger paints a flower it becomes a slavery flower, flower de Amistad,” thereby intimating that any relationship between the white viewer and the black artist immediately becomes one between white persons and black property, which was the legal state of things once upon a time, as Patricia Williams has pointed out in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*: “The cold game of equality staring makes me feel like a thin sheet of

glass.... I could force my presence, the real me contained in those eyes, upon them, but I would be smashed in the process.”

Interviewed by the Brit Piers Morgan after her 2012 Olympic victory, Serena is informed by Morgan that he was planning on calling her victory dance “the Serena Shuffle”; however, he has learned from the American press that it is a Crip Walk, a gangster dance. Serena responds incredulously by asking if she looks like a gangster to him. Yes, he answers. All in a day’s fun, perhaps, and in spite and despite it all, Serena Williams blossoms again into Serena Williams. When asked if she is confident she can win her upcoming matches, her answer remains, “At the end of the day, I am very happy with me and I’m very happy with my results.”

Serena would go on to win every match she played between the US Open and the year-end 2012 championship tournament, and because tennis is a game of adjustments, she would do this without any reaction to a number of questionable calls. More than one commentator would remark on her ability to hold it together during these matches. She is a woman in love, one suggests. She has grown up, another decides, as if responding to the injustice of racism is childish and her previous demonstration of emotion was free-floating and detached from any external actions by others. Some others theorize she is developing the admirable “calm and measured logic” of an Arthur Ashe, who the sportswriter Bruce Jenkins felt was “dignified” and “courageous” in his ability to confront injustice without making a scene. Jenkins, perhaps inspired by Serena’s new comportment, felt moved to argue that her continued boycott of Indian Wells in 2013, where she felt traumatized by the aggression of racist slurs hurled at her in 2001, was lacking in “dignity” and “integrity” and demonstrated “only stubbornness and a grudge.”

Watching this newly contained Serena, you begin to wonder if she finally has given up wanting better from her peers or if she too has come across Hennessy’s *Art Thoughtz* and is channeling his assertion

that the less that is communicated the better. Be ambiguous. This type of ambiguity could also be diagnosed as dissociation and would support Serena's claim that she has had to split herself off from herself and create different personae.

Now that there is no calling out of injustice, no yelling, no cursing, no finger wagging or head shaking, the media decides to take up the mantle when on December 12, 2012, two weeks after Serena is named WTA Player of the Year, the Dane Caroline Wozniacki, a former number-one player, imitates Serena by stuffing towels in her top and shorts, all in good fun, at an exhibition match. Racist? CNN wants to know if outrage is the proper response.

It's then that Hennessy's suggestions about "how to be a successful artist" return to you: be ambiguous, be white. Wozniacki, it becomes clear, has finally enacted what was desired by many of Serena's detractors, consciously or unconsciously, the moment the Compton girl first stepped on court. Wozniacki (though there are a number of ways to interpret her actions—playful mocking of a peer, imitation of the mimicking antics of the tennis player known as the joker, Novak Djokovic) finally gives the people what they have wanted all along by embodying Serena's attributes while leaving Serena's "angry nigger exterior" behind. At last, in this real, and unreal, moment, we have Wozniacki's image of smiling blond goodness posing as the best female tennis player of all time.





SVETLANA
ALEXIEVICH

CHERNObYL

VOICES
FROM

CHERNObYL

THE
ORAL HISTORY
OF A
NUCLEAR DISASTER

TRANSLATED BY KEITH GLENN

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HISTORICAL NOTE



There are no nuclear power stations in Belarus. Of the functioning stations in the territory of the former USSR, the ones closest to Belarus are of the old Soviet-designed RBMK type. To the north, the Ignalinsk station, to the east, the Smolensk station, and to the south, Chernobyl.

On April 26, 1986, at 1:23:58, a series of explosions destroyed the reactor in the building that housed Energy Block #4 of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station. The catastrophe at Chernobyl became the largest technological disaster of the twentieth century.

For tiny Belarus (population: 10 million), it was a national disaster. During the Second World War, the Nazis destroyed 619 Belarussian villages along with their inhabitants. As a result of Chernobyl, the country lost 485 villages and settlements. Of these, 70 have been forever buried underground. During the war, one out of every four Belarussians was killed; today, one out of every five Belarussians lives on contaminated land. This amounts to 2.1 million people, of whom 700,000 are children. Among the demographic factors responsible for the depopulation of Belarus, radiation is number one. In the Gomel and Mogilev regions, which suffered the most from Chernobyl, mortality rates exceed birth rates by 20%.

As a result of the accident, 50 million Ci of radionuclides were released into the atmosphere. Seventy percent of these descended on Belarus; fully 23% of its territory is contaminated by cesium-137 radionuclides with a density of over 1 Ci/km². Ukraine on the other hand has 4.8% of its territory contaminated, and Russia, 0.5%. The area of arable land with a density of more than 1 Ci/km² is over 18 million hectares; 2.4 thousand hectares have been taken out of the agricultural economy. Belarus is a land of forests. But 26% of all forests and a large part of all marshes near the rivers Pripyat, Dniepr, and Sozh are considered part of the radioactive zone. As a result of the perpetual presence of small doses of radiation, the number of people with cancer, mental retardation, neurological disorders, and genetic mutations increases with each year.

—“Chernobyl.” *Eelaruskaya entsiklopedia*

On April 29, 1986, instruments recorded high levels of radiation in Poland, Germany, Austria, and Romania. On April 30, in Switzerland and northern Italy. On May 1 and 2, in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and northern Greece. On May 3, in Israel, Kuwait, and Turkey. . . . Gaseous airborne particles traveled around the globe: on May 2 they were registered in Japan, on May 5 in India, on May 5 and 6 in the U.S. and Canada. It took less than a week for Chernobyl to become a problem for the entire world.

—“The Consequences of the Chernobyl Accident in Belarus.”

Minsk, Sakharov International College on Radioecology

The fourth reactor, now known as the Cover, still holds about twenty tons of nuclear fuel in its lead-and-metal core. No one knows what is happening with it.

The sarcophagus was well made, uniquely constructed, and the design engineers from St. Petersburg should probably be proud. But it was constructed in absentia, the plates were put together with the aid of robots and helicopters, and as a result there are fissures. According to some figures, there are now over 200 square meters of spaces and cracks, and radioactive particles continue to escape through them . . .

Might the sarcophagus collapse? No one can answer that question, since it's still impossible to reach many of the connections and constructions in order to see if they're sturdy. But everyone knows that if the Cover were to collapse, the consequences would be even more dire than they were in 1986.

—*Ogonyok* magazine, No. 17, April 1996

~~that all the women's uteruses (this we could understand even then) were falling out, they were tying them up with rags. I saw this. They were falling out because of hard labor. There were no men, they were at the front, or with the partisans, there were no horses, the women carried all the loads themselves. They ploughed over the gardens themselves, and the kolkhoz fields. When I was older, and I was intimate with a woman, I would remember this — what I saw in the sauna.~~

~~I wanted to forget. Forget everything. And I did forget. I thought the most horrible things had already happened. The war. And that I was protected now, that I was protected.~~

~~But then I traveled to the Chernobyl Zone. I've been there many times now. And understood how powerless I am. I'm falling apart. My past no longer protects me. There aren't any answers there. They were there before, but now they're not. The future is destroying me, not the past.~~

Pyotr S., psychologist

MONOLOGUE ABOUT WHAT CAN BE TALKED ABOUT
WITH THE LIVING AND THE DEAD



The wolf came into the yard at night. I look out the window and there he is, eyes shining, like headlights. Now I'm used to everything. I've been living alone for seven years, seven years since the people left. Sometimes at night I'll just be sitting here thinking, thinking, until it's lights out again. So on this day I was up all night, sitting on my bed, and then I went out to look at how the sun was. What should I tell you? Death is the fairest thing in the world. No one's ever gotten out of it. The earth takes everyone—the kind, the cruel, the sinners. Aside from

that, there's no fairness on earth. I worked hard and honestly my whole life. But I didn't get any fairness. God was dividing things up somewhere, and by the time the line came to me there was nothing left. A young person can die, an old person has to die . . . At first, I waited for people to come—I thought they'd come back. No one said they were leaving forever, they said they were leaving for a while. But now I'm just waiting for death. Dying isn't hard, but it is scary. There's no church. The priest doesn't come. There's no one to tell my sins to.

The first time they told us we had radiation, we thought: it's a sort of a sickness, and whoever gets it dies right away. No, they said, it's this thing that lies on the ground, and gets into the ground, but you can't see it. Animals might be able to see it and hear it, but people can't. But that's not true! I saw it. This cesium was lying in my yard, until it got wet with rain. It was an ink-black color. It was lying there and sort of dripping into pieces. I ran home from the kolkhoz and went into my garden. And there's another piece, it's blue. And 200 meters over, there's another one. About the size of the kerchief on my head. I called over to my neighbor, the other women, we all ran around looking. All the gardens, and the field nearby—about two hectares—we found maybe four big chunks. One was red. The next day it rained early, and by lunchtime they were gone. The police came but there was nothing to show them. We could just tell them. The chunks were like this. [*She indicates the size with her hands.*] Like my kerchief. Blue and red . . .

We weren't too afraid of this radiation. When we couldn't see it, and we didn't know what it was, maybe we were a little afraid, but once we'd seen it, we weren't so afraid. The police and the soldiers put up these signs. Some were next to people's houses, some were in the street—they'd write, 70 curie, 60 curie. We'd always lived off our potatoes, and then suddenly—we're

not allowed to! For some people it was real bad, for others it was funny. They advised us to work in our gardens in masks and rubber gloves. And then another big scientist came to the meeting hall and told us that we needed to wash our yards. Come on! I couldn't believe what I was hearing! They ordered us to wash our sheets, our blankets, our curtains. But they're in storage! In closets and trunks. There's no radiation in there! Behind glass? Behind closed doors! Come on! It's in the forest, in the field. They closed the wells, locked them up, wrapped them in cellophane. Said the water was "dirty." How can it be dirty when it's so clean? They told us a bunch of nonsense. You'll die. You need to leave. Evacuate.

People got scared. They got filled up with fear. At night people started packing up their things. I also got my clothes, folded them up. My red badges for my honest labor, and my lucky kopeika that I had. Such sadness! It filled my heart. Let me be struck down right here if I'm lying. And then I hear about how the soldiers were evacuating one village, and this old man and woman stayed. Until then, when people were roused up and put on buses, they'd take their cow and go into the forest. They'd wait there. Like during the war, when they were burning down the villages. Why would our soldiers chase us? *[Starts crying.]* It's not stable, our life. I don't want to cry.

Oh! Look there—a crow. I don't chase them away. Although sometimes a crow will steal eggs from the barn. I still don't chase them away. I don't chase anyone away! Yesterday a little rabbit came over. There's a village nearby, also there's one woman living there, I said, come by. Maybe it'll help, maybe it won't, but at least there'll be someone to talk to. At night everything hurts. My legs are spinning, like there are little ants running through them, that's my nerve running through me. It's like that when I pick something up. Like wheat being

crushed. Crunch, crunch. Then the nerve calms down. I've already worked enough in my life, been sad enough. I've had enough of everything and I don't want anything more.

I have daughters, and sons . . . They're all in the city. But I'm not going anywhere! God gave me years, but he didn't give me a fair share. I know that an old person gets annoying, that the younger generation will run out of patience. I haven't had much joy from my children. The women, the ones who've gone into the city, are always crying. Either their daughter-in-law is hurting their feelings, or their daughter is. They want to come back. My husband is here. He's buried here. If he wasn't lying here, he'd be living in some other place. And I'd be with him. *[Cheers up suddenly^* And why should I leave? It's nice here! Everything grows, everything blooming. From the littlest fly to the animals, everything's living.

I'll remember everything for you. The planes are flying and flying. Every day. They fly real-real low right over our heads. They're flying to the reactor. To the station. One after the other. While here we have the evacuation. They're moving us out. Storming the houses. People have covered up, they're hiding. The livestock is moaning, the kids are crying. It's war! And the sun's out . . . I sat down and didn't come out of the hut, though it's true I didn't lock up either. The soldiers knocked. "Ma'am, have you packed up?" And I said: "Are you going to tie my hands and feet?" They didn't say anything, didn't say anything, and then they left. They were young. They were kids! Old women were crawling on their knees in front of the houses, begging. The soldiers picked them up under their arms and into the car. But I told them, whoever touched me was going to get it. I cursed at them! I cursed good. I didn't cry. That day I didn't cry. I sat in my house. One minute there's yelling. Yelling! And then it's quiet. Very quiet. On that day—that first day I didn't leave the house.

They told me later that there was a column of people walking. And next to that there was a column of livestock. It was war! My husband liked to say that people shoot, but it's God who delivers the bullet. Everyone has his own fate. The young ones who left, some of them have already died. In their new place. Whereas me, I'm still walking around. Slowing down, sure. Sometimes it's boring, and I cry. The whole village is empty. There's all kinds of birds here. They fly around. And there's elk here, all you want. *[Starts crying.]*

I remember everything. Everyone up and left, but they left their dogs and cats. The first few days I went around pouring milk for all the cats, and I'd give the dogs a piece of bread. They were standing in their yards waiting for their masters. They waited for them a long time. The hungry cats ate cucumbers. They ate tomatoes. Until the fall I took care of my neighbor's lawn, up to the fence. Her fence fell down, I hammered it back up again. I waited for the people. My neighbor had a dog named Zhuchok. "Zhuchok," I'd say, "if you see the people first, give me a shout."

One night I dreamt I was getting evacuated. The officer yells, "Lady! We're going to burn everything down and bury it. Come out!" And they drive me somewhere, to some unknown place. Not clear where. It's not the town, it's not the village. It's not even Earth.

One time—I had a nice little kitty. Vaska. One winter the rats were really hungry and they were attacking. There was nowhere to go. They'd crawl under the covers. I had some grain in a barrel, they put a hole in the barrel. But Vaska saved me. I'd have died without him. We'd talk, me and him, and eat dinner. Then Vaska disappeared. The hungry dogs ate him, maybe, I don't know. They were always running around hungry, until they died. The cats were so hungry they ate their kittens. Not

during the summer, but during the winter they would. God, forgive me!

Sometimes now I can't even make it all the way through the house. For an old woman even the stove is cold during the summer. The police come here sometimes, check things out, they bring me bread. But what are they checking for?

It's me and the cat. This is a different cat. When we hear the police, we're happy. We run over. They bring him a bone. Me they'll ask: "What if the bandits come?" "What'll they get off me? What'll they take? My soul? Because that's all I have." They're good boys. They laugh. They brought me some batteries for my radio, now I listen to it. I like Lyudmilla Zykina, but she's not singing as much anymore. Maybe she's old now, like me. My man used to say—he used to say, "The dance is over, put the violin back in the case."

I'll tell you how I found my kitty. I lost my Vaska. I waited a day, two days, then a month. So that was that. I was all alone. No one even to talk to. I walked around the village, going into other people's yards, calling out: Vaska. Murka. Vaska! Murka! At first there were a lot of them running around, and then they disappeared somewhere. Death doesn't care. The earth takes everyone. So I'm walking, and walking. For two days. On the third day I see him under the store. We exchange glances. He's happy, I'm happy. But he doesn't say anything. "All right," I say, "let's go home." But he sits there, meowing. So then I say: "What'll you do here by yourself? The wolves will eat you. They'll tear you apart. Let's go. I have eggs, I have some lard." But how do I explain it to him? Cats don't understand human language, then how come he understood me? I walk ahead, and he runs behind me. Meowing. "I'll cut you off some lard." Meow. "We'll live together the two of us." Meow. "I'll call you Vaska, too." Meow. And we've been living together two winters now.

At night I'll dream that someone's been calling me. The neighbor's voice: "Zina!" Then it's quiet. And again: "Zina!"

I get bored sometimes, and then I cry.

I go to the cemetery. My mom's there. My little daughter. She burned up with typhus during the war. Right after we took her to the cemetery, buried her, the sun came out from the clouds. And shone and shone. Like: you should go and dig her up. My husband is there. Fedya. I sit with them all. I sigh a little. You can talk to the dead just like you can talk to the living. Makes no difference to me. I can hear the one and the other. When you're alone . . . And when you're sad. When you're very sad.

Ivan Prohorovich Gavrilko, he was a teacher, he lived right next to the cemetery. He moved to the Crimea, his son was there. Next to him was Pyotr Ivanovich Miusskiy. He drove a tractor. He was a Stakhanovite, back then everyone was aching to be a Stakhanovite. He had magic hands. He could make lace out of wood. His house, it was the size of the whole village. Oh, I felt so bad, and my blood boiled, when they tore it down. They buried it. The officer was yelling: "Don't think of it, grandma! It's on a hot-spot!" Meanwhile he's drunk. I come over—Pyotr's crying. "Go on, grandma, it's all right." He told me to go. And the next house is Misha Mikhalev's, he heated the kettles on the farm. He died fast. Left here, and died right away. Next to his house was Stepa Bykhov's, he was a zoologist. It burned down! Bad people burned it down at night. Stepa didn't live long. He's buried somewhere in the Mogilev region. During the war—we lost so many people! Vassily Makarovich Kovalev. Maksim Nikoforenko. They used to live, they were happy. On holidays they'd sing, dance. Play the harmonica. And now, it's like a prison. Sometimes I'll close my eyes and go through the village—well, I say to them, what radiation?

There's a butterfly flying, and bees are buzzing. And my Vaska's catching mice. *[Starts crying.]*

Oh Lyubochka, do you understand what I'm telling you, my sorrow? You'll carry it to people, maybe I won't be here anymore. I'll be in the ground. Under the roots . . .

Zinaida Yevdokimovna Kovalenko, re-settler



MONOLOGUE ABOUT A WHOLE LIFE
WRITTEN DOWN ON DOORS

I want to bear witness . . .

It happened ten years ago, and it happens to me again every day.

We lived in the town of Pripyat. In that town.

I'm not a writer. I won't be able to describe it. My mind is not capable of understanding it. And neither is my university degree. There you are: a normal person. A little person. You're just like everyone else—you go to work, you return from work. You get an average salary. Once a year you go on vacation. You're a normal person! And then one day you're suddenly turned into a Chernobyl person. Into an animal, something that everyone's interested in, and that no one knows anything about. You want to be like everyone else, and now you can't. People look at you differently. They ask you: was it scary? How did the station burn? What did you see? And, you know, can you have children? Did your wife leave you? At first we were all turned into animals. The very word "Chernobyl" is like a signal. Everyone turns their head to look at you. He's from there!

That's how it was in the beginning. We didn't just lose a town, we lost our whole lives. We left on the third day. The

reactor was on fire. I remember one of my friends saying, "It smells of reactor." It was an indescribable smell. But the papers were already writing about that. They turned Chernobyl into a house of horrors, although actually they just turned it into a cartoon. I'm only going to tell about what's really mine. My own truth.

It was like this: They announced over the radio that you couldn't take your cats. So we put her in the suitcase. But she didn't want to go, she climbed out. Scratched everyone. You can't take your belongings! All right, I won't take all my belongings, I'll take just one belonging. Just one! I need to take my door off the apartment and take it with me. I can't leave the door. I'll cover the entrance with some boards. Our door—it's our talisman, it's a family relic. My father lay on this door. I don't know whose tradition this is, it's not like that everywhere, but my mother told me that the deceased must be placed to lie on the door of his home. He lies there until they bring the coffin. I sat by my father all night, he lay on this door. The house was open. All night. And this door has little etch-marks on it. That's me growing up. It's marked there: first grade, second grade. Seventh. Before the army. And next to that: how my son grew. And my daughter. My whole life is written down on this door. How am I supposed to leave it?

I asked my neighbor, he had a car: "Help me." He gestured toward his head, like, You're not quite right, are you? But I took it with me, that door. At night. On a motorcycle. Through the woods. It was two years later, when our apartment had already been looted and emptied. The police were chasing me. "We'll shoot! We'll shoot!" They thought I was a thief. That's how I stole the door from my own home.

I took my daughter and my wife to the hospital. They had black spots all over their bodies. These spots would appear,

then disappear. About the size of a five-kopek coin. But nothing hurt. They did some tests on them. I asked for the results. "It's not for you," they said. I said, "Then for who?"

Back then everyone was saying: "We're going to die, we're going to die. By the year 2000, there won't be any Belarussians left." My daughter was six years old. I'm putting her to bed, and she whispers in my ear: "Daddy, I want to live, I'm still little." And I had thought she didn't understand anything.

Can you picture seven little girls shaved bald in one room? There were seven of them in the hospital room . . . But enough! That's it! When I talk about it, I have this feeling, my heart tells me—you're betraying them. Because I need to describe it like I'm a stranger. My wife came home from the hospital. She couldn't take it. "It'd be better for her to die than to suffer like this. Or for me to die, so that I don't have to watch anymore." No, enough! That's it! I'm not in any condition. No.

We put her on the door . . . on the door that my father lay on. Until they brought a little coffin. It was small, like the box for a large doll.

I want to bear witness: my daughter died from Chernobyl. And they want us to forget about it.

Nikolai Fomich Kalugin, father



~~MONOLOGUES BY THOSE WHO RETURNED~~

The village of Eely Eereg, in the Narovlyansk region, in the Gomel oblast.

Speaking: Anna Pavlovna Artushenko, Eva Adamovna Artushenko, Vasily Nikolaevich Artushenko, Soya Nikolaevna Moroz, Nadezhda