

The Amygdala Era: Emotion and Experience in Memoir

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## Abstract

*Amygdala Era* is a culmination of short memoirs and brief poetry designed to express a stream of consciousness state of emotion over logic. The work utilizes base, primal parts of the mind such as happiness, sadness, and fear, and dissipates into the emotion and memory that is experienced daily. This is achieved through a focus on creative writing theory including stream of consciousness, interior monologue, and free indirect discourse. *Amygdala Era* synthesizes the techniques, strategies, and methodology of these three theories by examining past literary examples from world history. Analysis of the targeted market for *Amygdala Era* is detailed based on the results from similar works. Argumentation for anticipated success is achieved by comparing said similar works to the final product.

### The Amygdala Era: Emotion and Experience in Memoir

Language is a part of the human condition. Since the very start of recorded history, we have attempted to communicate with one another in both certain and uncertain terms, marked by the inscrutable chiseling of ancient rock art to the sweeping lines of the Chauvet Cave paintings. Indeed, "language is defined by which humans and humans alone express and communicate their thoughts" (Harpham, 2009, p.80). According to Geoffrey Galt Harpham, President and Director of the National Humanities Center, language is not so much a tangible object as it is a concept of the human's understanding of self. As such, it become vital for the human to both receive and transmit communication as a catalyst of maintaining their personhood, and subsequent consciousness. One of the mediums often employed to this effect is the memoir, "also called autobiography" (Fitzpatrick, 2017). Beth Kephart, renowned memoir writer and college professor, loosely described memoir as "a strut and a confession. . . memoir performs, then cedes. It is the work of thieves. It is a seduction and a sleight of hand, and the world won't rise above it" (Kephart, 2013). This form of writing seeks to show truth, whether objective or subjective, finite or universal (Kephart, 2013). Those who seek to tell their story through memoir create an "implicitly signed pact with the reader to tell the truth, or at least the truth as they know about themselves (Fitzpatrick, 2017). Memoir writing rouses something deep within human beings, and allows those "who are simply and complexly human, and they may not trust themselves with truth, but they have to trust one another" (Kephart, 2013, p.5). Memoir writing seeks to scratch the itch of truth as it may be viewed in all lives, from a limited perspective (Fitzpatrick, 2017).

This is the intent of *The Amygdala Era*, an anthology of collected memoirs and brief memoir-style poetry. The purpose of each work is to present itself as truth in the author's life, while simultaneously proving universally true in the reader's lives as well. Stories of these natures that aim for universal candor among the highest amount of readers must therefore strive to evoke thoughts and emotions with the five senses, the basics of all human perception. Primal parts of the mind will be allowed to dissipate into the mix of feelings humans experience in their day to day lives, in both communal and personal experiences. The writing should not be used to confabulate any kind of unnatural stimulus or memory from the readers, but rather the emotion of past responses, and the old sting of memories that perhaps have been long buried. With the stories themselves the key is distance, allowing the readers to assimilate their own emotions and memories instead of the author's. This suggests the use of all five senses, hinging the stories around the center points of sight, sound, smell, touch, taste, and other less defined senses. Indeed, the human being is a marvelously complicated thing, built primarily as a storytelling animal. "Differences in how we use or intend emotion language" is yet another point of separation between ourselves and animals (Tarlow, 2012, p.170). Using memoirs of a colorful nature would minister that often ill-fed need of communication, ensuring an appeal to a wide audience of persons. Our need as a people to be heard and understood roots itself in the soul of a man, and is often expressed through emotion, culminating into one of the most powerful organs in the human body.

The amygdala is one of the most heavily researched sections of grey matter in the human brain. No bigger than almonds, the two structures are primarily located within the

limbic system, nestled among the hippocampus and hypothalamus (Nevid, 2015). The limbic system is primarily responsible for both memory and emotional processing, although scientists agree that no one system in the body is capable of producing or managing emotions (Nevid, 2015). These two tiny organs control the more primal and reactionary emotions of aggression and rage, grief and despair (Nevid, 2015). Among many other functions, the amygdala “triggers” the emotional response of fear when we encounter a threatening stimulus or situation” (Nevid, 2015, p.56). According to Nevid (2015), the amygdala acts almost as an “emotional computer” (p.307), deciding whether or not to react to stimuli. This emotional 'binary' makes its way down the brain to the cerebral cortex, the largest part of the forebrain (Nevid, 2015). Here, information is translated, scripted into a plan of action, subjectivity, and even facial expressions (Nevid, 2015). While the cerebral cortex may have more translation ability when referring to brain function, it does not receive the stimulus in the same way the amygdala does. Indeed, the cerebral cortex rationalizes emotion, sterilizes it into a string of monochrome contracts that we read and sign off to. The amygdala, however, springs tears into eyes, rends hearts in two. In the brief millisecond between emotion and translation, there lies a gulf of wet, unprocessed bile that weighs heavy in the gut. The flash of heat, a blue vein, a breath. It comes without heed, unbidden to consciousness, and consumes rational thought. It is immensely powerful, thoroughly universal, and distinctively overlooked. For this reason, the title of my memoir anthology is *Amygdala Era*, for the brief second where emotion is not understood, when instead we know it only as color or sound or

smell. This is something to be shared, easily done through the art and style of memoir writing as fellow 'victims' of the emotional experience. (Dolan, 2002).

These concepts are to be underlined with the overall creative theory and creative methodology of *Amygdala Era*, in an effort to better understand the writing process and style. Further, an emphasis on stream of consciousness, interior monologue, and free indirect discourse will be dissected in order to better see the writing techniques that influence the style of the anthology. To measure the success of a published book of this nature, an analysis of author and project style will be provided to gage marketability. Section two identifies the targeted market along with brief psychographics, mapped out within a marketing plan. This will include a SWOT analysis, time frames, milestones, and points of the success. The third and final section will contain argumentation for anticipated success using the exemplar *Educated: A Memoir* by Tara Westover. Finally, the competitive edge of the project will be detailed in light of previous observations on writing theory, marketing plan and exemplar success.

### **Section Two: Writing Theory and Marketing**

Perhaps the most important aspect of the writing process, style and theory give a piece a color all its own. Beyond simple subject matter, it is imperative authors communicate with his or her readers in a clear and precise way. The writing of memoir has long been a seemingly formless task, the style of work conforming to the individual tastes of the author. Style, however, is not voice. While style fits within a subculture of genre and formula, voice is a conduit to the deepest themes of the story itself. In

*Amygdala Era*, I have chosen to maintain my personal voice while emulating three important writing theories.

The first of these theories is 'stream of consciousness.' This style of writing is marked by its dealings with time in the narrative, and the realization of said time throughout the piece. Differences between the objectivity and subjectivity in art flow together to become a single viewpoint (Mehl, 2015). All of a character's thoughts, actions, and emotions are written in a single flow, like a stream of water (McGilvary, 1907). This means that dialogue, descriptions, foresight and other commonalities of conventional dialogue are pushed to the side to make room for nothing but the constant 'stream' of awareness (McGilvary, 1907). This writing technique makes for highly personal pieces, making the author "both audience and focal point" (Crangle, 2004, p.146). By detaching from the subject, the author becomes an onlooker to his own past, capable only of observing consciousness rather than providing full narration. Stream of consciousness writing hit its peak in the early part of the twentieth century, coined by American philosopher and psychologist William James:

Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself as chopped up in bits ... it is nothing joined; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let's call it the stream of thought, consciousness, or subjective life. (Crangle, 2004, p.149)

James' strategy with this style of writing was to detract from the sense of detached separateness that postmodern literature so often employs (McGilvary, 1907). Further, the consciousness can be used as an association technique, drawing readers into a kind of



trance (Crangle, 2004). The point of the technique is less about simply reading the words and more about being with the writer, experiencing the words. Indeed, it should be "as if each knew its own thing and nothing else" (McGilvary, 1907, 226).

One of the methods to achieving this kind of technique in writing is to change the grammatical correctness of sentences. The stream of consciousness normally lacks normal punctuation and literary form, seen most profoundly in works such as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, but it is not a rule (Joyce, 2018). Another technique is to create long, almost run-on sentences. This excerpt from Joyce's *Ulysses* identifies these methods well: "He is young Leopold, as in a retrospective arrangement, a mirror within a mirror (hey, presto!), he beholdeth himself" (Joyce, 2018, p.385). Here it is easy to see the sentences stringing together like water in a stream, continuing ever onwards. The punctuation is more accurate here than in other parts of the novel, although the sentence seems to encroach 'run-on sentence' territory. The use of parenthesis give the readers a sense of being 'inside' the minds of the characters, thus drawing them deeper into the meat of the story. This deep involvement for the audience is the primary reason stream of consciousness writing is found in *Amygdala Era*.

Another writing technique utilized in *Amygdala Era* is a theory known as interior monologue. Defined as a kind of address to oneself, interior monologue displays private moments of inner turmoil to the audience (Sellew, 1992). Many believe that "the use of this device grants privileged insight into the human dilemma in a fashion not ordinarily available" (Sellew, 1992, 239). While many sources use the term as a synonym for stream of consciousness, there are several key differences to consider. Stream of consciousness

can be thought of as a kind of disjointed subject matter, with interior monologue as the organized medium of presentation. Indeed, interior monologue will always present character's thoughts directly, without messy grammar or broken, run-on sentences. While certain elements such as jumbled thoughts can be found in both stream of consciousness writing and indirect dialogue, indirect dialogue is normally presented in a logical manner.

There are several strategies this literary style attempts to achieve. Interior monologue prides itself on the ability to reveal what is normally unrevealed about characters or people. Thus, it is an excellent technique for the memoir writer. Interior monologue aids in the experience of becoming the character as opposed to reading about them, assimilating our emotions to work in tandem with the theirs'. This style of writing allows for the emotional temperature of a paragraph to change, but maintains a steady pacing for a scene. Motivations and personal failings are stripped bare, which gives the reader an almost reflective view into themselves (Sellew, 1992). Empathy is fostered and allowed to embed within the psyche, which further bolsters immersion within the story (Sellew, 1992). Ideas of false motives and insincere heroism is eschewed for a pure, raw, unabashedly human story (Sellew, 1992).

Indirect dialogue is found in almost every form of literature, including the Gospels of the Bible (Sellew, 1992). The Gospel of Luke contains many instances of this, and follows a guide of two points. The first: "the characters can speak their minds aloud or act in a decisive manner that will itself clarify their feelings or intent; or else (2) the narrator can inform the reader of the character's moods or motivations through third-person descriptions" (Sellew, 1992, p.242). These are not just intrinsic to Biblical

literature, but are commonly found across many ancient texts and historical records (Sellew, 1992). In the Gospel of Luke, statements regarding the surprised, woeful, and baleful are either communicated by the author or by the afflicted themselves (Sellew, 1992). Indirect dialogue has been noted several times even in Christ's work, often present in parable teachings such as *The Foolish Farmer*:

He reasoned within himself, saying, 'What will I do, because I don't have room to store my crops?' He said, 'This is what I will do. I will pull down my barns, and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. I will tell my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years. Take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.' (Luke 12:17-19, Word English Bible)

Here, Christ shows the interior monologue of the rich man, not only reasoning with himself, but reasoning with his very soul. This allows the reader to see a part of the man or character that they otherwise may not have. It dispels the ideas of perfection that may be assumed due to the man's status and wealth, and instead produces a moral dilemma. The audience does not miss this, and instead mirrors the ideas of the rich man into their own souls, cultivating a kind of empathy. This is a strong reason to employ this kind of writing technique, using interior monologue to further encourage and breed emotion among readers.

The final writing technique employed by *Amygdala Era* is free indirect discourse. Known as a kind of mediator between the extremes of stream of consciousness and interior monologue, this strategy "allows a narrator to recount what a character has said while retaining the idiomatic qualities of the speaker's words" (Flavin, 1991, p51).

Essentially, a narrator's careful censorship (interior monologue) of a character's thoughts (stream of consciousness). According to Flavin (1991), it is often used to "create the effect of heightened feelings, intensifying or dramatizing the character's words, unlike direct speech where the words of the speaker stand on their own without narrator involvement, exposing the speaker directly" (p.51). It allows the reader to stay immersed while being told vital information they may not otherwise receive from the passage.

While this is a marvelous technique, it should be noted that it does not come without the invitation of challenges. Free indirect discourse is used often by those who write fiction or historical fiction, but not memoir. This is partially due to the differences in styles and assumed 'audience contracts' the author creates (Kephart, 2013). As stated by Blakemore (2010), "real life communicators produce public representations (utterances) of their private thoughts" (p.576), which allows the recipients to use their respective "linguistic properties. . . and contextual assumptions" (p.576) to understand exactly what was said. In the context of fiction, however, "authors may represent fictional acts of communication in which fictional speakers are represented as producing utterances which readers are meant to assume are interpreted by fictional hearers" (Blakemore, 2010, p.576). Boiled down, fiction assumes that statements made by characters are interpreted by other characters who overhear the statement. With nonfiction, in this case memoir, there are no characters to interpret the statements of the speaking character, which is simultaneously the narrator and author. This means the writer must remain highly vigilant of what they are putting on paper. Intended messages maintain their calculated meaning, unless the author is purposefully writing in a way that

invites ambiguity. Fortunately, *Amygdala Era* is not centered around the success of monochrome, communicable ideas, but a hierarchy of successive emotions the literature produces. This is the area in which free indirect discourse flourishes the most prominently.

Free, indirect discourse is strategized as a sort of "attitude map" in a story, giving readers an emotional quotient to follow (Sharvit, 2008, p.353). The "free pronouns in [free indirect discourse] are subject-oriented" (p.389) which means they are flexible to the subject of the sentence (Sharvit, 2008). This allows the story to be far more flexible and map around major plot points. Further, the bulk of free indirect discourse is centered on the story, not the dialogue of the author or narrator, which allows for total, unscathed immersion on the part of the audience (Flavin, 1991). Readers follow along with the story through what they feel more than what they know. The discontented dread when a character achieves happiness, or a brief engram of guilt when a character dies; each of these are spawned through a careful proliferation of feelings instead of words. The strategy of free indirect discourse is to let the reader discover, not be told. Virginia Woolf, famed writer of *Mrs. Dalloway*, handled the technique very well:

And as she began to go with Miss Pym from jar to jar, choosing, nonsense, nonsense, she said to herself, more and more gently, as if this beauty, this scent, this colour, and Miss Pym liking her, trusting her, were a wave which she let flow over her and surmount that hatred, that monster, surmount it all; and it lifted her up and up when – oh! A pistol shot in the street outside! (Woolf, 1923, p.19)

In this excerpt, the strategies of free indirect discourse are very clear. While the character of Mrs. Dalloway is still talking, Woolf exerts her power over the story to pull readers into the ebbs and flows of her emotions, not the written word. Further, Woolf throws formalities to the wayside to make clear the necessity of the character's thoughts as she goes about her day. Short, brief ideas are given to the readers by Mrs. Dalloway's thoughts, not the reader's personal ones. It is through this mode that free indirect discourse eliminates the distance felt between the written word and the heart.

*Amygdala Era* seeks to embody this in a careful study of methodology. An application of correct free pronouns must be used to ensure compliance with the style. Due to the memoir 'contract' made between the readers and the story, it becomes the job of the author to maintain communication in the manner set forth. Finally, emotions must be communicated from the character in the memoir, not directly from the writer. Free indirect discourse is a method of freeing both reader and author from the confines of formulaic dialogue and allowing the truly important parts of the anthology to reach the audience.

In all, stream of consciousness, interior monologue and free indirect discourse are three distinct patterns of writing present within *Amygdala Era*. Each is very similar, yet starkly different, providing a necessary presence in the piece. Memoir writing is not based on formless intuition, although quite a bit of creativity is involved in the writing process. With a careful attention to each theory while nurturing the voice of the author, the success of this work is largely dependent on the scrupulous circumspection of the

writer. Indeed, the impact of memoir is only as powerful as the sentences that undergird it.

### **Marketing**

Memoir writing attempts to parallel the crux of human experience. Who we are and what we become is an oft-shared sentiment, and remain very clearly on the forefront of mind and soul. Ideas and emotions are shared over and over in the hope that their roots remain perennial in the makeup of a person. *Amygdala Era* is set to share in this attitude. Stories are a large part of the human experience, and an even larger aspect of what makes man the individual he becomes. Humans make stories in the same way that stories make humans. Indeed, stories "are the last bastions of magic" (Gottschall, 2013, p.xv). As such, when marketing a book of this nature to the general public, harsher parameters are lifted or otherwise temporarily suspended.

### **Before Publication**

The target market of *Amygdala Era* is for men and women of and around the ages of 18 to 25 and up. The subject matter of each story is not necessarily mature, but should be accompanied with parental guidance until the high school years. Further, some of the topics discussed may be cognitively 'out of reach' to students in elementary and middle school ages. Higher education is not required nor important to understand the 'emotional map' of the memoirs. In regard to gender, the anthology does not attempt to separate stories by sex, the gender of the author rarely important to the work itself. As such, *Amygdala Era* is able to bridge the gap between male and female audiences.

The culture of the target market is more nuanced. According to Lesser and Hughes (1986), there are several differing categories of shoppers within the United States alone. For the specific target age group of *Amygdala Era*, this would include young singles or young married couples, possibly with small children (Lesser & Hughes, 1986). These stages of life tend to shop in two distinct ways. Active shoppers operate in a 'do-it-yourself' mindset, spending quite a bit of time out-of-doors and enjoy shopping in and around multiple locations (Lesser & Hughes, 1986). Price is a major factor in their decision to purchase or pass up, and shop at generally traditional storefronts (Lesser & Hughes, 1981). Psychographically, this group of people in the 18 to 25 year-old range are tight on money and related resources. As a collection of relatively young people, time for reading would be reduced to only the works they found to be 'important.'

The second group of individuals commonly found within the target age are called transitional shoppers (Lesser & Hughes, 1986). Transitional shoppers account for less than seven percent of the total population's trend but nearly forty seven percent of young people (Lesser & Hughes, 1986, pp.23-24). They are defined as "consumers in the earlier stages of the family life cycle who have not yet formalized their lifestyle patterns and shopping values" (Lesser & Hughes, 1986, p.23). This group is characterized by similar values of the Active Shoppers, but they are more likely to be single (Lesser & Hughes, 1986). Transitional shoppers spend little to no time comparing prices or 'shopping around,' preferring to stay in one area (Lesser & Hughes, 1986). They are often very eclectic, deciding to try new ideas and products as soon as they have formulized an opinion (Lesser & Hughes, 1986). In fact, they are far more likely than average to try a



new, untested product than any other group (Lesser & Hughes, 1986). The psychographics of this shopping bunch would very much include the youthful expenditures one might expect from single, unmarried persons looking to experience 'life.' A dismissal of price coupled with their willingness to try new things, transitional shoppers are interested in new technology, new foods, and new ideas (Lesser & Hughes, 1986). Of the two groups, transitional shoppers would be the best demographic and psychographic culture to target for the release of *Amygdala Era*.

Knowing specific demographics and psychographics allows the writer to preview the intended message of his or her story to the audience, as well as the basic ramifications of said story upon the readers. In fact, "just as the writer knows that he cannot feed only off himself, so also the product designer and the marketing manager know that they run grave risks when they rely solely on their own assumptions" (Wells, 1975, p.197). It is the job of the writer to analyze and understand the people he or she is writing for (Wells, 1975). After all, without the readers, there would be no writer. The concept of *Amygdala Era* is rooted in the reactions of those who read it, allowing the audience to make of it what they would. While different target markets will feel differently about the intended message of the publication, the base message will be clear: in the age of heart over mind, what shadows are left for a man in which to hide? As stated by Wells (1975), "almost all marketing is communication; marketers are most effective when they know their audience" (p.197).

### **After Publication**

*Amygdala Era* must stay attuned to a marketing plan in order to be truly successful. This includes following a strict marketing time frame, undergoing proper SWOT analysis, and maintaining an accurate budget forecast. Missing even one of these crucial points may inhibit the overall success of the product, and ultimately distinguishes an amateur product from a professional one. The art of what is written is certainly important, but ensuring that the message reaches its target market is perhaps the most important task of all. Simply writing the manuscript should be considered a mere halfway point in the publication process, as the committal of draft to finished copy is a lengthy one indeed (Mulholland, 2014). With time frames clearly mapped, the process is made a great deal less daunting.

Knowing market segmentations for book publishing is an excellent starting point (Mulholland, 2014). One of the first items on the publishing docket is to decide upon and choose a list of publishers that may be interested in marketing the book (Mulholland, 2014). This should be done immediately after the manuscript is completed or slightly before. Once accepted by a publishing company, it is customary to receive editing advice and, in some cases, reader reviews (Mulholland, 2014). These are more variable, but generally occur within the first six months of acceptance (Mulholland, 2014). It would behoove the writer to take whatever advice comes, as gut-wrenching as it may be, from people in the business and members of the book's potential audience. In fact, "negative reports [are] helpful, forcing [us] to assert the scope of [the] project and to explain more clearly what [the] book did not explain and why" (Mulholland, 2014). Following the reports and revisions, a secondary copy is resubmitted to the publisher (Mulholland,

2014). If it is accepted, the publication will move on to final contracts and negotiations (Mulholland, 2014). Most contracts on the part of the publisher are non-negotiable, including royalties, print run, and number of copies printed (Mulholland, 2014). This is more than likely the place where the publisher will discuss printing format and illustrations, such a book shape and cover (Mulholland, 2014). Many publishers will cover the cost of certain illustrations, with the burden of reprint permission left to the author (Mulholland, 2014). Once these are complete and finalized, the book goes into full-fledged production, including proof-reading and copy-editing functions (Mulholland, 2014). The final stage of the publishing process is marketing itself, handled after the book is ready for shipment (Mulholland, 2014). While this may seem a self-explanatory step, marketing is "not only crucial," but should "continue long after the book is published" (Mulholland, 2014, p.23). Many publishers such as Hopkins Press will do small-scale advertising upon the advent of publication, but this is not enough (Mulholland, 2014). Posting the book title on social media, placing it on websites, soliciting attention from media outlets and blogs, and even sending copies to libraries for visibility are all viable tactics (Mulholland, 2014). While the marketing plan itself seems intimidating at best, having a clear-cut and decisive path keeps a book headed towards its eventual end-goal.

The acronym SWOT is best known as the business moniker for 'Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.' In a formal setting, it is used to assess a business model and discover both positives and negatives, pitfalls and successes. In the realm of book publishing, it does much the same. In analyzing the manuscript itself, it becomes important to understand both strengths and weaknesses of the work in order to

correctly match it with a publisher. Further, recognizing threats as well as opportunities in a work will allow the revision and editing process to flow much smoother. It is vital for both author and publisher to consistently seek ways to minimize the weaknesses of the work, and be aware of threats that may encumber its message. This SWOT analysis is also usable in the field of budget forecasts.

Budget forecasts range wildly in the publishing industry. Today's access to self-publishing, Amazon e-books and Kindles have complicated the disparity further. Omary and Lawrence (2017) state that some publication costs can be as high as five thousand dollars, some individuals "budgeting as much as \$10,000 in a grant to publish, for example, two papers" (p.1). There is a vast range of prices available for even journal publishing, from \$85 a page to \$5,200 hundred an article (Omary & Lawrence). Even between physical and digital databases, cost for value does not significantly change. West (2015) states that "the book business, like farming, is always in crisis. . . the price structure of the American book business has never been stable" (p.278). For general purposes, I plan to budget \$2,000 as a failsafe. This includes costs for illustration licensing, formatting and cover, fees and hidden expenses, and general marketing costs. These are based on generic comparisons of publications by Omary and Lawrence (2017). While more money may be necessary, a basis of \$2,000 should happily serve my purposes for the sake of this publication.

### **Section Three: Success**

Argumentation for anticipated success is a tricky business. Indeed, it is impossible to assume what a market will or will not do to a book, coupled with rising costs and

target markets. There are, however, three areas which I believe will reinforce the impact of *Amygdala Era* in the market. As memoir is a unique literary form, it is often heralded in our current 'culture of narcissism,' making it one of the most popular genres to date. To many it is a therapeutic device, acting as a magnet to those seeking healing. Finally, much of memoir is synthesized by teachers, using the writing style as a platform to match modern Common Core Standards.

Upon the rise of social media obsession and the advent of the 'self,' many social psychologists have begun to dub the twenty-first century as the culture of narcissism (Seaton, 1981). Indeed, hundreds if not thousands of articles on the subject have been written over the past two decades. This 'culture' has a significant impact on essentially every market in the United States, one of the most prominent being the book industry. The modern reader will see memoirs as an extension of their own humanity, a look into a story that reflects the inner workings of their own (Seaton, 1981). In recent years, publishers have begun to witness a decline of the novel on a whole, sweeping through many fiction and fantasy subgenres (Kuehn, 1966). Kuehn (1966) sheds some light, asking the question "is it possible that some other literary form is taking over the job that the novel used to do" (p.125)? The answer, as postulated by Kuehn (1966), is mystery:

The fiction writer presents mystery through manner[isms], grace through nature, but when he finishes there always has to be left over that sense of Mystery which cannot be accounted for by any human formula. . . the unaccountable but real.

(p.127-128)

It is precisely the literary form of memoir that has begun to eat away at the swaying foundations of fiction. While the novel will always be in demand, memoir communicates a personal truth, a mystery not quite understood (Kuehn, 1966). It speaks through a persons' 'rose colored glasses' in a way that true fiction cannot with simply with the presence of raw honesty and the pursuit for the truth. Embedded in the culture and time period in which *Amygdala Era* will be published, the work stands as a strong competitor in a market for and by those in the pursuit of the self.

Memoir is described by the American school system as “narrative memories, told through rich description, dialogue, setting, and characters” (Williamson, 2014, p.20). As such, it becomes an important style for students to learn, specifically in high school. Williamson (2014) states that “memoir covers narrative, informative, and persuasive writing, which are described in the Common Core State Standards” (Williams, 2014, p.20). A wide variety of memoirs are used by teachers to help their students study this universal form of writing, including *Night* by Elie Wiesel and Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (Williams, 2014). *Amygdala Era* holds the same potential for success in the classroom environment as it does in the general market, made possible through the technique of the prose.

Personal writing, whether composed by the subject in question or by another, is found to be very therapeutic and even healing for the reader. Indeed, Bibliotherapy is widely recognized as a viable form of healing by many experts (Cacchioli, 2018). According to Cacchiolo (2018), certain styles of writing can issue “an invitation to readers to surrender to the power of another reality in which they can become another

person and take part in any conceivable adventure, reacting to the book personally and emotionally, rather than in a hermeneutic way” (p.146). This is exactly the role of *Amygdala Era*. To reach from the pages and touch the life of an individual with a hand that is more flesh than ink on paper has always been the goal. As the memoir genre has remained one of the most popular since the beginning of the twentieth century (Bloom, 2014), it certainly is not difficult to see this work achieving widespread success and impacting many readers along the way.

Competitively, *Amygdala Era* stands out from other memoirs in its intuitive approach to storytelling. Many audiences value stories told in a way that evokes their own memories, allowing them as readers to become a part of the experience. Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* are both excellent examples of memoir literature, although fictional, that serve as a catalyst for the reader. Both writers are regarded as literary celebrities, catching the attentions of reader and critic alike from all over the globe. While neither work was necessarily a commercial craze, both novels are widely considered some of the authors’ best pieces (Bloom, 2014). The goal for *Amygdala Era* is to be successful among people, not measured in dollar bills but in experiences. With cumulative methods of Bibliotherapy, the anthology is a work for narcissists by a narcissist, engaging audiences in ways that other genres or memoirs merely cannot.

Simply put, *Amygdala Era* will be successful because of its ability to communicate. All people are stories, and seek to ramify themselves in the empathy of others. *Amygdala Era* does not seek to tell, but instead to feel along with its readers. Implementing three different literary styles, the work embodies many of the features that

classical authors once did. The book follows a premeditated marketing plan, detailing factors, audiences and costs for both pre and post publication. It merits success in many forms, both academically and socially, and writes for a specific audience in the hopes it would become a substantially long-term investment. *Amygdala Era* taps into a part of the human condition that is difficult to put into words, and presents itself as a flawed, intuitive, and very human memoir.



Amygdala Era

By Meagan Shelley

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## Adoration's Ghost

We have fashioned many words for love. There is little wonder in this: man is an inquisitive beast. In fact, some poor souls dedicate their entire lives to categorizing its many names, pinning and dusting words like dead insects. We boast a myriad of witchdoctors, calling into lonely crowds with promises of knowledge and cures. Names of love, types of love, ways to keep and grow love. We tie its wrists to a chair, looking to beat out a doleful confession. Funny, though, how we confine ourselves to the study of love in such monochromatic terms. We study its beginnings, the hormones and flings, and its ends, the death throes of failed relationships. But we do not study the aftermath. Not the heartbreak, no, but the afterlife. The death. A ghost that rises from our stiff corpses, the memories that haunt. Far beyond the first smile, far beyond the searing jolt of broken chest. Adoration's ghost is more, much more, and its silence grows loud amidst the bludgeoning of our hearts. Perhaps we avoid this because we do not understand it, unlike Greek syntax and the five steps to happy marriage. We cannot hide, though, from dreams that creep through walls, desperate sweat that seeps through cold flesh. We each must steward our own. I must steward mine.

Gary was his middle name. White and pressed with dark freckles over the bridge of his nose, perpetually smudged glasses a dirty window to earthen eyes. His knees swung in when he walked, like a giraffe. And a giraffe he was, at six foot six, towering over the other sophomores like a hesitant giant. He was an unassuming boy, loud and exuberant in the fullness of life. Grey sweatpants and too-big tee-shirts with Pokémon logos, hair that split into great slices of slick, dark mounds. We were similar in

personality, shy and distant from our peers. Perhaps that is why I never gave him a second glance. We attended the same, feckless youth group all children raised in religious homes do, and we glimpsed each other in inattentive glances. His name was whispered about me in faint, dewy words, and I grew familiar with its casual intonation. Still, I knew nothing of the boy except that his middle name was Gary. It was so jarring and out of place that it stuck in my mind, forced me to remember him. Perhaps in some way it characterized who he was as well. This is the boy with the middle name Gary; a boy I barely knew.

I wish I could pull myself away from the memories. I cannot tell an unbiased story, not of this. Not of him. A mist rises up between my heart and fingers, a hideous specter of nostalgia, and its fog sends me adrift between the real and unreal. Perhaps the best I can do is make him human, as I am human. It is not a remarkable story; love is the common denominator of all hearts that beat. But this one is my own, and I will not forget. I hold the image of that silly, guileless affection I misnomered love with gentle hands. What callow babies we were.

I am fifteen when I talk to the boy for the first time. My youth group promises a trip to the closest, real amusement park, a good three or four hours away. I am afraid of these churchgoers and their tight-fisted cliques, but I arrive at five in the morning regardless. The air is cool, and I clutch a green backpack to my chest as my father drives away. I wipe my nose on my dark brown shirt and wish I could have gone home with him. Outside the building, four dozen adolescents squeal and pick at one another. I hope they do not notice as my foot catches a rise in the pavement. The youth leader shouts at

us to get into groups of four, and I shake when the tallow-headed girl taps my shoulder. Sure, I say, I'll join your group, as long as you don't mind having me. She introduces me to a friend, a short, mousy-haired girl with a smile that cracks her face in half. We board the bus together, chatting loudly over the shrieks and giggles of the other students. I learn her name is Oksana. One day, we will no longer be best friends.

Behind us sits the boy with the middle name Gary. He taps away at some sort of electronic I am not familiar with, forehead pushed into concentrated lines. I introduce myself shyly, and he looks up. He laughs as he asks about me: 'Brown Shirt,' the girl who came with Oksana. I laugh too. I discover his real name is Jacob, but he says his friends call him Jake. I call him Jacob, then. We communicate in two or three-word sentences for the entirety of the drive. I do not mind. I am with friends, and I am happy. Jacob turns around to speak to Oksana often, and once their hands touch as they twist about in the bus seats. I watch with quiet eyes, as does the mousy girl. A scraggly group of boys and girls just awakening from the maelstrom of puberty, and we were curious.

Affection is a funny thing for the teenage mind to grasp. True, we have heard it said by parents and teachers and the pastors that shout about abstinence, but we do not yet have the ability of understanding it. Oftentimes pubescent inexperience convinces us to write it off as love. But affection is not love. It comes before and after, both an embryonic flutter and aging wine. It is passive, unconscious even, yet it is strong. It cannot be the 'In-Between,' the act of love. That is an action, or a verb. Affection is a noun. Affection creates loving, stabilizes it, and strings the fibers of the heart into purl-

stitched commitment. Who can blame the teenager for not realizing the difference? But this is not a story about love.

I see Jacob more often after the trip, and sometimes we fellowship within the same circle of peers. He invites me to a party at his house, and I go with light heart. I discover he lives five minutes from me, a fifteen-minute walking distance. I did not realize then how crucial this closeness would be. I remark on this, but I know my words fall on disinterested ears. Oksana is here, radiant golden hair fluttering gayly in summertime breeze. She is beautiful, and I am not.

I was not attracted to Jake, not then. He was a friend and nothing more. I held childish crushes on a few young men before, all of which came to no avail. I did not care for affections then, not in the way a woman does. It was a casting about for a mature mind, struggling to understand the nature of post-pubescent attraction. Still, it would take me several years before I truly understood, and I was more than content with my best friends Jake and Oksana. I was happy for what I thought was mutual pursuit, and laughed with thinly-veiled amusement at youthfully awkward behavior. I poke Oksana's ribs when she receives a bluntly worded text asking her to the Senior Banquet in the spring, nearly nine months away. With great fuss and gossip, the invitation is accepted and the rumors begin. Oksana and Jake are going to get married, whisper the halls of the church. Oksana and Jake are in love.

It truly began in November, two dogs and a red coat on Whistling Swan Road. Jake rounds a corner in front of me, and we smile with red cheeks at our coincidence. I do not walk the dogs on this road, and Jake does not walk at all. 'Hey Brown Shirt,' he says.

'Hey Gary,' I say back. Our conversation is halting and brief at first, but slowly time gets longer, and we talk more and more, and suddenly it is five thirty and nearly black. The boy with the middle name Gary is very much like me. I wish him a good night, and walk away. When I get home, there is a message waiting for 'Brown Shirt.' 'Oksana doesn't like me,' it reads. 'What do I do?'

We walk together through blistering cold for months. The dogs come along less and less, and the walks begin to last three or four hours a night. Our words are many and wild. I tell him things I have not told any other person, and he responds in kind. We are inseparable, the best of friends and each other's wingman. I spend weeks gleaning information from Oksana to share with Jake on our next stroll. I advise him with laughing tongue, bewildered by his hungering heart. 'She says she likes Pocky, Jake, you ought to buy some of that for her. She says lilies are her favorites, not roses.' Gift after word after movie is spent between their fencing love, always under my perplexed, inexperienced eye. He wants her, wants her badly, but she does not want him. When March comes, I go with Jake to Senior Banquet.

We remain friends for two years behind adoration's ghost. Jake meets me at our normal place under blazing May sun, and we walk for hour upon hour. 'Your eyes are kind of pretty,' he says. Today is different, and our footsteps stumble and slow as we amble in afternoon heat. When night comes, our lips still quiver with untold stories. We lay together in dewy grass and watch the full moon rise above us like a benevolent poltergeist. My heart is full. It comes to me, all at once and fragmented, that I like the boy with the middle name Gary. I wonder, too, if the vision comes to him as well in the field

under the moon. I lean forward, and our foreheads touch. His eyes are brown and very wide, and we shake with rapturous energy. When it is nearly midnight and our jaws crack with cold and sleep, he journeys alone through the dark to return to home and bed. I watch stars dance with the ghost until I too grow transparent, and fade into mist.

I lost Oksana to my betrayal a month afterwards. It was a bitter August, lessened by the idea I had found love. The boy with the middle name Gary became my replacement. I weeded out friends and family and filled them with Jake. I gave all my free time to him, hour after hour in one another's jurisdiction. We spent time as though we might never lose any. But we were happy. I cannot be certain if this was due to inexperience or loneliness, but both had their part to play. I did not feel the ebbing void I built until much later.

The boy with the middle name Gary was going to marry me. We juggled the subject with tentative fingers, slowly growing warmer with age and drunken, hopeful dreams. Two years we claimed commitment, and two years passed. And we were waiting. When I graduate from college, I promise we can at last begin the process of complete, total commitment. My parents look on with stifled words. They have never lied about their thoughts on the boy with the middle name Gary. He is weak they mumble; a sputtering, inept prop plane in a sky full of dogfights. But they do not cage my leprous affections, only caution against them. They hope for malformed heart to cease its squirming in its own due time. The summer before Jake leaves me, I buy us both a pair of rings. They were once quarters, punched and pressed by steady hand into silver circlets. He wears his only once. I wear mine every day.



Jacob never asked me to become his girlfriend. I realize now this should have been the first warning. The boy with the middle name Gary has never been a brave man, and neither have I. We were children then, and played make believe as children do. The first time we kiss, it is on a rock in a wooded glen behind the neighborhood. I have never kissed a boy before, and my knees are weak as his lips press against mine. 'I think I love you!' is all I can barely gasp out. His stiffened fingers push me away, and he does not look at me for a long time. I swill my toes in the water that rushes by the kissing rock on both sides, and muffle heaving breath. 'Don't tell anyone,' he says quickly. 'You don't love me.' We return to that place many times over the next two years, and we do not speak of the kiss again.

The boy with the middle name Gary is not bad. Bad is a weak description of anyone. Jacob is a boy, and that is why our feeble adoration begins to splinter so vibrantly. As I age, watching the world hue from black and white to grey, I unwittingly dig a ravine in our souls. He is more my son than my lover now, and I watch as he shrinks further and further from my adult life. Jacob wrestles his angel, and does not emerge victorious. He walks with a limp, the mark of maladroit youthfulness, for the rest of his days. Father forgive us, for we know not what we do. We whore out our own weak interpretations of love into all of its demons: eros, philautia, ludis, mania. Our affection is misplaced, growing mold in lukewarm culture. Perhaps, when our ham-fisted love dies, adoration's ghost still lingers.

I did not know what heartbreak is until the week after Christmas. It is the dusk of 2016, three days before New Year, and our adoration is dying. The subject of our

argument is not important. Few arguments are. But it is not until I step into the red CRV and look at him that I realize it is over. He cries for a half hour, sorrowful head buried against my chest, and I cradle him like a child afraid of the dark. I talk for what seems like ages, mouth working with words I cannot make even myself believe. Jake, we can try again, we can still make it last, we can make it last, I swear Jake. His physical actions are what I remember the most. He thrashes about like a thing possessed, squealing like pigs falling ever farther into the Gerasene Sea. I sit very still while I watch love die. When he leaves me, weeping alone in faded driveway, I wonder at how large tears are in dead of night.

My father holds me tightly, set grimace on his face. He smells faintly of earth and deodorant, and his shirt drinks deeply of furious sobs. It was time, he says, it was time. Our affection was green, the love diseased. It must have died somewhere, black and greasy in the grassy field under the moon. I do not bury the corpse.

Adoration is a very different thing than affection. Biblically, it is respect, a reverence. In many ways, it is a form of worship. It is not the butterfly kisses of affection, or the mature passion of love. To adore is to kiss your idols. In the Old Testament, the Kiss of Adoration is a heathen practice observing and praising holiness. This is mentioned a little in the book of Job.

*If I have regarded the sun in its radiance or the moon moving in splendor, so that my heart was secretly enticed and my hand offered them a kiss of homage, then these also would be sins to be judged, for I would have been unfaithful to God on high.*

I have not spoken to Jacob for over a year. I know he is doing well, as friends gather bits and pieces of information for me to nibble. Their offerings fall on indolent hands, though, as they have for many years. I long since let the dead bury the dead. The ghost, though, is another matter.

I still visit the kissing rock sometimes. There are more cobwebs now, a little more graffiti. The water has eroded the stream bed to a comfortable pool, and flora and fauna of all kinds have jubilantly sprung up about it. It is a beautiful place, and memories hang heavy about the boughs of our resplendent trees. I do not sit on the rock, but I dip my toes in the water like a kind of baptism. And I cry. Not because of the strain, or festering wounds, but for something else. Adoration's ghost rests here, and it is peaceful.

Whenever I visit, I write a little poem in the sand for the phantom of this place. I doubt they are very good, and they are eventually beaten away by rain and time and entropy. That may be what makes them beautiful: the graceful death. I will not forget the boy who taught me heartbreak, and I do not want to. Our fields sleep under a dormant moon, now.

There is much more to this story that has gone unsaid. Perhaps that is the mark of a good piece, that it remains free from burdensome detail and extraneous material. Still, I cannot help but wonder how much remains hidden by the mists of time and ephemerality. Too, I wonder how different this lens would be should the story be forged through Jacob's eyes. The mind attenuates these things into thin threads of golden dreams, so compact they become inseparable from one another. I imagine this is the way it must stay. The details of youthful affection blur into seamless fabric, and emotion sings from

our cloth like a lonely siren. The apparitions of Jake and I still linger, but they are muffled, emaciated things. Some things must go unsaid.

I know I have not done him justice. My sight is colored, damaged by time and grief and turpentine infatuation. But it is a beginning. I want to tell the story of a boy I cared about, and I want to make evident that he cared about me, too. It is not to point or jeer, to make light of what once was. We were happy then. Stories remanence on the past and point towards the future. They can be used for many purposes. This story is an evolution. I would like to think I have changed, crumbled into something more than anxious adolescent in a brown t-shirt. I would like to think Jake has as well. I know of some things that have emerged from sacred chrysalis: platonic love cultured from hopeful thoughts, a wariness of heart. These things are shared between us, Jake and I, molded by a misplaced affection we grew into desperate love. I have not done him justice, no. But I hope, when he thinks on the agelessness of adoration's ghost, he smiles too.

## Baby Tears

I was eight when my parents decided we might have dogs. Great, loping things with fur that shed and stuck to anything, even their own tongues. Rescue animals; never caged, but housed on a farm by a willing family less willing now to give them up. This one black with chalk white chest, that one knee deep in red Carolina clay that caked between fingernails and cracked on beveled noses. Slight rustlings in the meadow would send the entire litter into a frenzy of bitten-off yelps, the scrabbling of too-long claws on concrete signaling yet another adventure. One yellow pup returned to sniff the gravel dust on my knees. Sleek and fast, constantly assured of which grassy hill she would mount next; what new, unlucky fowl would be stalked behind drying heads of sweetgrass. I made my pick before the second time the dog returned. The young daughter of the farmers cried. Her tears were small and shapely - baby tears. She did not want to see 'Dory' go. Dory is her friend, she said, and I cannot take her. I name the dog Mary.

Mary left one life to ascribe to a similar one. There is more red clay here, and another member of her litter. Fewer chickens to chase. There are fences, too, in this place. Mary does not like them. She grows into them, but does not accept them. The first time she gets out, I cry. The tears are long and flat, purpling lips and swelling eyelids, dripping nostrils just beginning to crust around the edges. They are baby tears. When we find her, she is resting against the cloudless sky of summer, and she is sleeping in the creek bed. I am crying baby tears again, and the salt burns my eyes. I do not care how I look. It is good to weep.

Mary, she was not my friend. Neither was she family. A dog is a dog, baby tears or no. Mary was something more. She was tangible, and soulful, and very alive. We fell upon this truth somehow, in our own time. When we ran together, hunting unseen beasts in the gray woods of late fall, there was no bond of friendship. There was neither master nor companion padding barefoot through the dying leaves of another year. We were children then, and spent time together as children do. Meagre, earnest babies, and we were growing.

We come home speckled with black brown demons, six-legged blood suckers on our feet and ears and shedding fur. Mother takes the tweezers and a bottle of alcohol, and taps the metal against the plastic to shake off lingering drops. The smell of drying clay and astringent surrounds us, and points of metal pinch cold flesh. We cry baby tears, Mary and I. I marvel at how very human dogs look when they cry. I wonder if Mary thinks the same.

Time passes much faster when your eyes are closed. For some time, neither Mary nor I saw the hands of the clock that bound us, nor heard the steady beating of the hearts that timed so well with its second hand. Five minutes ago, we were young, swimming naked in the creek under waning summer rays. Preteens an hour ago, wondering why boys stop a little too long to chat in the snow. Teenagers driving to the park for a game of ball. And then you open your eyes for a stretch or a peek, and you are eighteen, and graduating high school. You are performing tonight; *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. You are dressed for your part, and you are beautiful. You don't think you've ever felt so lovely

in your whole life. You go on stage in an hour, and you are practicing your lines in as much color as black and white letters can provide. When the phone rings, you step outside to the portico, and watch the clouds bulge and swirl while mother tells you about Mary. Liver failure. The clouds pass, and the skies clear to evening blue. She will not survive the night. The sun makes the world glow gold, and the wind smells like coming spring. They can flush her liver so you can see her one more time, but it is expensive, and she will still die. You watch the heads of yellow daylilies and purple crocuses push toward the light. You tell her to pet Mary for you, that she was a good friend, but you know that isn't true. She is something else. You hang up. There can be no baby tears now, no purple lips or swollen eyes. You are all dressed up, now; you are a woman. The show must go on, and you must pretend to be a beautiful stage actress who loves Bert Jefferson more than anything else in the world. The stage lights will shine off your dry eyes like Tiffany glass, and your dress will make children gasp. The baby tears will be gone, and you will never cry them again. Instead, they will shake in your marrow, and pull your tendons tight. You are a woman now, and you cannot cry baby tears on fall days, when ticks burrow into cheek and fur. You are a woman now. The show must go on.

## Eucharist

I am not a pious woman, though some part of me wishes I was. Perhaps it would hide the shame; the constant, collective consciousness of sin that presses its nose into the thin glass of the mind. Perhaps it would bring comfort, or solace. Perhaps it would bring forgiveness. I know for certain, as do we all, that this want after piousness is entirely selfish motivation. It is escapism, a denial of the sense of doom that shades our hearts when we watch others fall to their knees in guilt and shame. We hide not from men, not from God, but from the failures we drape across our chests like gruesome medals. It is an old fear we clamor from, Christian and humanist alike. Man is not good enough. How marvelously simple to write, and woefully difficult to accept. Few of us really do. We have our ways of coping. Part of us drown hesitant heads in holy water, another consummates himself to the religion of self. Some simply hide. What do we know of this poltergeist, this fey beholder of human inadequacy? We learn, in time, of the ravine built into our souls. Age and fear will bend our ears. I am still listening.

My mother left the Catholic Church in her college years. The unrelenting, unyielding expectations of fallen human beings are odious to our happy youths. My father's situation is different. He is a Navy Brat, neither here nor there both in body and soul. Too long had he stared hypocrisy in the face, dark eyes drawing close behind tight-lipped clergy. He grew to hate them, as do we all. What man lives that does not hate our feeble, tactless masquerade? He is not unique. But he is his own man, and with that he was gone. There was little pomp or circumstance to either of my parent's spiritual



departures. Many wars such as these run their course in a hidden place. And they are hereditary.

When I was born, it was 1998. Hot Floridian summers and sweet orange blossoms eat my memory. The wooden fence around my backyard boasts spotted ladybugs and warming lizards, and I reach them easier and easier. America's televangelism tops its glorious peak, and trumpets victory as their curtains draw. Many mornings, I watch Joel Olsten's clean-shaven face bob black and white on glass television. I remember my mother asking my father to come to church, and he says refuses. Most Sundays, we do nothing. Some mornings I sit in a Presbyterian church, watching light kiss the faces of immortalized prophets. Other days we visit the Catholics, sometimes the Methodists. Once we sit in the back of a Pentecostal service, dusty fans beating out of time with shrill voices. I turn to my mother, unsure of why these men and women shake and scream. She smiles and sits me on her lap, dark eyes flickering with a melancholy understanding. She holds my ears until the pious masses stop screaming and falling, and it is over. I grow older. I learn of Jesus, and I do not learn of Christ.

I do not find religion until I am sixteen, a greasy haired adolescent with promises of honey-cruled eternity. I live an unconscious nihilism, a quiet leukemia of unprocessed thoughts in shivering nakedness. It is not from family, who teach morality and human law as well as pastors ever could, or whitewashed peers in robotic formality. I anchor my nihilism in the pitted seeds of mankind. You see it in the blinking, sleepy eyes of Methodist pulpits, hear it in vicious rumor met by smile in Baptist warehouses, touch scaly hands in Anglican prayer. How human are we broken jars of clay. Too, what

lengths and methods we utilize to hide our egregious tongues. Hypocrisy is a common dissuader from the faith; it is not difficult to find. Mrs. Smith, who hates the rich and will not feed the poor. Mr. Scott, who titters at weak willed men and philanders wives on Saturdays. No, these things are not rare. But they remind us of our ever-constant failure; useless, cold fingers grasping at sanctification.

When I step into the heated pool in Bedrock Community Church, autumn had not yet touched cooling maples. The auditorium is filled with men and women, palms poised to clap at the glory of youthful salvation. I shake like the maple leaves, green toothed and soft. I had written my name on the baptism sheet slowly that week. Have you been baptized? asks the receptionist blithely. You ought to, your family are members now. It's a marvelous step to take. I forget this denomination does not consider Catholic baptism a sacrament, and I scribe faint letters on coffee-stained paper. I agree. As I stand in the pool, too-big shorts and high collared shirt choking my shuddering body, all the world falls away. I grow distant behind wild thoughts, nihilistic thoughts. I ponder whitewashed tombs as my body rises pink and freckled to the raucous clapping of a hundred wandering souls.

I do not fault man for being man. How does a shattered mirror reflect what is not webbed with cracks and slivered glass? But by adopting labels, we hold ourselves to greater standards. A little Christ could not call the quiet girl in youth group a 'surefire' lesbian. A 'Jesus Follower' cannot sing worship to their Father then watch their sons touch children on Sunday nights. An apostle of the Christian faith would not raise his hand for confession and reach it back for drink on holy days. This is not Christ, but

humanity in its rawest form. We smear His coagulated blood across our faces like hideous masks, and we cannot atone. We are a lost folk, drowning ever faster in the Sea of Galilee, because we are too proud to admit ourselves. Our sacrifices dry under a pagan's sun, now.

I realize the depth of my sin on a highway, moving seventy miles an hour. It is winter, and stars hide behind oiled clouds, the road stretching before me like a coiled serpent. It is a dangerous thing to let the mind wander. It unfolds itself in segments, fragments of a whole that speak a syllable or two before slipping contentedly into lost revelations. I recount my sins in my head like a tax collector, numbering our sickly, cored apples until I can no longer think. It is a long drive home, and I weep as I pass circlets of yellow lamplight and black patches of wood. Mankind is not good enough, and here I sit, a desecration to the very face of God. My atonement is not enough. I cry until I run out of tears, and use air instead. When I reach home, I watch stars blink away from the light of our pagan sun, until I too blink, and close salted eyes.

I have not called myself Christian for some time now. Religious, maybe. Orthodox, perhaps. But I am not a Little Christ. I cannot escape my nature, nor scrub the seal of perdition from makeshift soul. None of us can. I will not pretend to live in piousness, though my heart cries for it. The faces of hopeful liars will stare back at yours in pew and steeple, that much is certain. There will always be those who find piousness within themselves. There will always be those who do not. Our sin is not fooled. Neither is God.

I stop taking communion when I am seventeen. I sit alone in a small church, congregant heads bowed in silent prayer. My tense knees are white and pressed against wooden pew. I grip my empty hands, and I do not feel His nails. Heart pounds in empty chest. When the line begins to form at a table laden with cups and plates, I do not fall in. I watch with heated eyes as Little Christs swallow bread and wine with hungry mouths.

*But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged.*

It has been almost three years since my last eucharist, now.

Many have sought to convince me of taking communion again. An old friend with piercing eyes leans against the door of his truck, mouth working with words. The summer moon glances down at our lonely figures. I do not remember all that was said, but I remember his passion. He is so convinced of its power, the strength of the Eucharist. You cannot achieve righteousness on your own, you need a mediator, he says. You will never be good enough, you know this. If you take of the eucharist, you are asking for His intercession. I do not believe my friend with the piercing eyes, but I thank him, and drive home. *For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged.*

The eucharist is a holy thing, a divine sacrament of God. It is both a thanksgiving and communion with the Heavenly Father. It is strange how often something so concrete

is whored against the human, trifling minds of a hundred denominations. I have visited dozens of churches, each with their own approaches. Some are mediated by priests, some pastors. Wine and grape juice, crackers and bread. Weekly or once a year.

Transubstantiation or sacrificial union. They are as different as the people who champion them. The core message remains generally the same, however. An expression of faith, of obedience. Glorification to the God who implanted you with soul, with personhood. His spilled blood and broken body is shared with the starving masses, His children and greatest disappointment. It is a beautiful thing, and yet a very painful one.

I leave church two months after I get my driver's license. I hear from family friends that the pastors talk about me often, shaking their heads and remarking on how often youth seem to leave the faith. Their assumption broils in me for a time, and then lies still, dead. Life is too short for bitterness' consumption. The memories hidden within the walls of that church are poisoned too badly, and I know I must seek fertile ground. I go to a different church each Sunday, drifting between pew and pillar like some mournful ghost. The messages are all different, all directed at a different kind of human. It is fascinating to feel the gap between yourself and those tenured congregants, and the unseen distance between your soul and the swelling of the Holy Spirit. I shirk from familiarity, and do not visit a church more than once. My heart seeks a home while my mind works furiously towards vagrancy, and I watch with lidded eyes.

I know I run from more than Eucharist. I find Christ's blood in more than chapels, and His body torn outside of sacred walls. And I skirt about with dread complexion.

Those searching few who join me on my pilgrimage see it embedded in thousand-yard stare. They will come to a church or two, sit beside me in quiet thought, and excuse themselves away the week after. Perhaps their hearts seek home, too, and race like scared children to the cross-bound temple they remember. I do not blame them. They choose to stand on solid rock. I envy them; they are men who accept their imperfect placards. The blood and body are with them. Their hearts fill with a soothing alacrity my hunted soul refuses.

I was raised all denominations and none of them. Undercurrent nihilism snaps at Protestant heel, and agnostic murmurs drone behind Catholic chant. I have sought Christ for almost four years, and still cannot shake my hideous aberration of searching adolescence. The beast I've made reminds me of my imperfection, the total, unwavering depravity of the human soul. It reminds me that I am unrighteous. It reminds me that I am afraid to be a hypocrite. It reminds me that I am afraid to sacrifice my blood and body for The Blood and Body. But perhaps I am Abraham, casting eyes about for a ram in the thistles. I cannot pursue atonement without sacrifice. I must carry my past and my beast and my imperfectness to the Eucharist, burn them like sweet incense. And I must die with Him.

I do not know when I will take of the Eucharist again. I am afraid, I suppose. Perhaps, by placing unholy lips to righteous blood and body, I become no better than the masked evangelist, playing Little Christ on weekends and holidays. Perhaps, refusing the gift, I am emptier than I know. These things are so speculative. The failures of man

weigh heavy on my shoulders, and I weep blood with Magdalene for perfection so greatly lost. To be holy, righteous, perfect once more requires the sacrifice of the Eucharist. One day more, I whisper; one day more. I avert my eyes and laugh and spit reasons like venom. One day. So I will beat on, praying feckless, festering soul higher and higher until Eucharist looks down, and remembers me.

## One of the Boys

I have been one of the boys for as long as I can remember. I laugh at the expressions of those who wonder when I explain I have at least two dozen brothers. For most of my friends, this is unspoken knowledge, accepted by all and mentioned by none. I proved myself through countless sessions of Dungeons and Dragons, hiking mountains, and besting their greatest champion in video games. I am one of the boys, and they accept me. Girls accept me as well, but it is a different thing with boys. With them, there are no boundaries I am chained to. There are no appearances I must keep up. A joke here, a shove and a grin, and I am one of them. My brothers describe it as a snaking line soldered between two iron hands, myself as the weld. I grew up believing that the only difference between myself and the opposite sex were the biological functions we played. Eric taught me that this is not the truth.

Eric is sitting across from me, pressed into the couch against Jared and another boy I have never seen before. Micah and Adam sit spread-eagle on the floor, eyes fixed on the flashing television screen. On the opposite side of the room, Drew is taking bets on how many donuts he can fit in his mouth at one time. Michael, who we affectionately call 'Wolfman,' is scratching the fiery red beard that gave rise to his name. Everyone is talking and regaling with one another, and the air is heavy and sweet. Powdery, complacent fingers leave orange and white crusts on too-big tee shirts. We are brothers, and we are home.

Eric and I make small talk. He is the oldest of the group, twenty-five compared to our average nineteen or twenty. A cybersecurity major. Hates pumpkin pie. Snatches of



our conversation are drowned out by the explosive cries of someone winning a round of Smash Brothers. I remark at this, and he smiles. The corners of his eyes droop down, as though he is waking from a long sleep. He pulls a hat that reads 'Don't Mess With Texas' further down on his head. I do not remember him explicitly, but we are friends, and spend time together when we boys reconvene for our monthly parties.

Four weeks ago, Eric began to speak to me as someone else. Not as one of the boys, not as a friend, but as a man to a woman. He asked to watch a movie we both loved together. Alone. I was afraid, and I went. We sat in the expensive theater in the mall, and he grabbed my hand with curling fingers as the monster on screen bit into a screaming child. I held his grasp, and felt my palms slick. I did not want to embarrass him, but perhaps I should have. The question came suddenly, before I was ready for it, and before I knew I could answer. "Do you want to be a thing?" he asks. The words echo like empty glasses. His mouth hangs open like the movie monster's, poised and set and bared. I am the child, opening my mouth to scream, desperately jerking my hand from the teeth of the beast. I say neither yes nor no to his query, but a maybe disguised in flowery terms. Then we are gone, driving home at sixty miles an hour towards our hazy futures.

As I drive home, my car windows are pulled all the way down. I drown pulsing thoughts in a whirlwind of light and sound and fury. Feelings wander just outside the windshield. They move dark and unseen over smooth, dimly lit asphalt, and I wonder to myself if I should scream. 'City of Stars' is playing on a CD I burned, and wind coaxes

my hair out the window. "Who knows? / Is this the start of something wonderful and new? / Or one more dream that I cannot make true?"

I hide from confrontation for several weeks. Do you want to be a thing? His question goes unanswered. I ask friends and family for advice, each reply adding yet more questions and disavowed shrugs. I feel the guise fall down all around me, touch the threads peeling from rent veil. The boys distance themselves from me; unintentionally, but with the kind of space that appears when a woman enters their midst. My motionless iron weld is splintering, giving under pressure. I am trying to understand my feelings, whisper through drying mortar to a man who wants a woman. In some impossible way, I am emasculated, a lost man searching for redemption. My brothers hold their breath, and I pray for things unobtainable.

I tell him in the silence of Liberty Mountain, hidden away by heavy hardwoods that shake their heads at us disapprovingly as we walk. The sky is balling up, tight fisted and dark, and I know there will be rain soon. I have rehearsed what I will say, but the words leave my mind like the startled crows above us. "I just want to be one of the boys," I tell him. Just one of the boys. The air sits heavy on my skin, and sweat slicks Eric's hair black. "I will wait for you," he says finally. His eyes look like the sky, cracked and grey and full. I do not look at them again. The rain begins to fall just as he climbs into his truck and drives away.

I do not know if it is possible to remain one of the boys, but it is something I cannot lose. I will not break my brothers. I cannot be something I am not, and I am

unsure of exactly what this means. The iron weld still holds, but it is damaged slightly, bleeding silver. A hot flame and steady hand may fix it, but it is up to me when, and if. Eric has not stopped waiting, but my heart has not changed. I will not break my brothers. I hear the clock ticking long after I shut my eyes at night and try to beat my mind into silence. My dreams are monsters in the woods, biting arms and shaking heads and rain. It isn't until the clock sleeps, and the moon rises up above the tiled roofs, that I break and sleep too. When the morning comes, I will lay quietly, fingers tangled in my hair, deciding on an answer I know he will not like.

## The Speed of Dark

It is not the first time I have lost consciousness, but this time is different. I feel it early, before the white glaze in sleepy, morning eyes has been blinked away. The February skies are dark and meaningful. Predatory, even. I do not feel the need to look at them again. Even as I stumble into the shower, hiding starry eyes within steaming water, I know it is coming. Knees wobble over stairs well tread, and white teeth cage sour breath. If I can only reach the basement, then I can succumb, and let darkness black out my eyes and ears and heart. I will not let my family see me, worry over what they cannot stop. Homey, wooden chairs seem just out of reach, and the faux leather couch angles close. My resolve breaks. I will sit for just a moment, rest for only a second, then I will go downstairs. I do not make it to the basement before my eyes close.

The times I have fallen unconscious before were mostly on accident. Mostly. The time in my fourteenth year I did not eat for a week was certainly not on accident. But it had been a beginning. One winter I locked my knees, a weak willed sixteen-year-old, and sought pulsing veins with silver knife. That was not on accident. This was not a beginning, but perhaps it should have been an end. Teenagers have a strange quality of not knowing when to stop. I tested my mortality time and time again until I grew old enough to realize the absurdity of suicide, and let murderous eyes clear of red mist. I have long since ceased my own attempts to accelerate what nature completes, but death's shadow lays creased across my brow, waiting. Perhaps, now that it has tasted flesh, the Reaper is hesitant to let me go. It is a desperate game we play now.

I have lied about my blood pressure for a very long time. When I enroll in the acne study the summer of my seventeenth birthday, the nurse will look down at her instrument, tap the glass needle, and frown. This will be our routine every other Tuesday; shaking heads and tapping glass and frowns. I will tell her it is hereditary, that I have always had low blood pressure. There is nothing wrong. She will nod, and I will watch as she scribbles down an eighty-six over fifty-nine.

I will lose consciousness three times over the nine months that follow. Death seemed distant and impossible until that malignant year, when suddenly my blood pressure became a constant, hungry predator. Its shallow ebbs and flows are not of my doing exactly, but a culmination of things beyond my control. They did not seem serious then, when a few moments of dizziness seemed so trifling in the unwavering stream of childhood consciousness. But they became that way, slowly insidious, in the same method a tumor grows or shadow stretches with the setting sun. The spells come faster and faster, with more and more vigor until I do not know if I can hold back the pressure. The black outs come like crows with sleek black bodies and raucous tongues, and they do not tire. They lord over their quarry in the unlit void, dark feathers gradually lifting from heavy eyelids until enough light filters in to stir the dead. I did not fear death, then.

I know fear when the crows wing through early fall cold. This is the first of the black outs, and I am not prepared for when it comes. I am alone, walking through an unfamiliar neighborhood I do not call home. Burnished leaves lay thickly in autumn wetness, and wind scrabbles at immodestly bare trees. It is grey, and thoughtful, and very

quiet. That is how I hear the blood rise to my ears, notice sweat well at every pore. I slide down a grassy hill into the woods that border the road, where I cannot be seen. I do not think to search for help, only hide in the hazy shade of the trees, shivering in damp clothes. The forest is steeply edged, and I am weak, falling until I cannot get up again. I lay very still. Pine and blue spruce swing still-heavy heads in October wind. Runoff from Swan Lake splashes against stone and cheek. A dog barks somewhere, chain rattling against vinyl siding. I lose sight in my right eye, and sound numbs until I am no longer aware of anything but the rise and fall of my chest. The sun peeks worriedly behind spotty clouds as the crows come down.

When consciousness is lost, the body will shut down non-vital organs in order to keep the brain alive. Breathing becomes labored and quick, while the mind floats and yawns. Skin will chill and moisten like ice in glass, and muscles will pull nearly rigor mortis tight. This is called syncope. More often than not, these episodes are harmless; red blips on the sonar of a lifespan, a few moments spent in the dark. Sometimes they can mean other things. The body does not always remember its time in the void, but under certain circumstances, it will. I remember everything.

A silent roar melts into a scream larynx cannot produce. There is throbbing in my skull and tongue and someplace behind my eyes. More than anything I want to sleep, pulled by arms heavy and warm. It is like ambrosia. It is also a choice. Life waits beyond heavy, pink lids, this I know. But death, too, is here in this place. Immortality, peace, darkness, these things are forever yours, oh Thracian Lycurgus! It is a door, and I wobble on the threshold, uncertain. The Choice beckons, waiting, and I hesitate. For all the years

I chased death with tight fists, I am conflicted in absconding with the open maw of the grave. To sleep would be to die. I feel it in the weak bludgeoning of squirming heart, and I wonder what the morticians will think when my body is found, yellowed and ripe with decay and dark maggots.

But they do not find my body. Indeed, no one will find anything at all under pine copse in autumn woods. The crows lift from my brow, taking flight into an impressionist sky. I breathe damp earth and sweat. A curious sun flares eyelids fingernail pink. When I am strong enough to open my eyes, I behold a black world. I panic, holding vapid orbs open with two fingers. A strange thing to wonder what sight is like. Vision eventually returns, but slowly, without ceremony. It is good to watch the forest wink aged red and orange. The dog barks again, and I remember myself. I stumble to my knees, shins sliding through moist leaves as I weigh the heaviness in my chest. The fear of death had come. I shake while I call the boy I think I love, and hang up at the second dial. He never learns of the crows, the thin, feeble blood pressure that dribbles through my body. Neither does anyone else.

Scientists know that light travels at the speed of 299,792,458 meters per second. It is the fastest moving quantifiable substance in the known universe. Or so it was once believed. Naturally, light is non-material, a photon of no consequence. It does not take up space, but fills a room with heat and energy and color all at once. Light dances on the edge of reality and mental construct. It is infallible, incomprehensible in many ways, yet mankind believes it in. Human beings use this light as way of understanding the dark. We, too, believe in the dark, but we shy away from its black cantrips like hogs-eyed

crows on autumn days. Shadows, those garish interpretations of what light makes known, like charcoal black caricatures of reality. The black hole, a pit of crushing force and emptiness, swallows light like air. There, under your bed, is lurking dark matter and skulking quantum forces.

Darkness is the absence of light, like a lidded pan or nailed coffin. When touched by light, darkness ceases to be. They are two brothers that push and pull and tear at one another for dominance. Light, however, will always win. Wherever he resides, darkness cannot follow. Until, of course, fire sputters to blue smoke, and blackness seeps in to consume. Light and dark are well acquainted twins. So well acquainted in fact, that the darkness is fast, faster than any known quantifiable substance in the known universe. The speed of dark keeps pace with its oppressor, its own brother, and it does not slow. The speed of dark is the speed of light. This, the deep fear you carry in the pit of your stomach and notches of your ribs, is why you break into gooseflesh when the closet door reveals inky black. Your pulse that races when burnished candle is pressed between shade and swirling air. Your eye that flickers on the fading face of your mother, watching you sink into unconsciousness at the speed of dark.

My mother does not scream that February morning when the crows pull me under, the second time I lose consciousness and the first time my secret becomes public. This is the black out I remember the most. She knew right away when I stumbled down wooden stairs, printing even, sweaty footprints. I know I cannot reach the basement, but pride does not let me admit it. A kitchen chair supports my body as I rapidly lose sight, mocking open eyes searching February skies like something hunted. My mother puts on a



good front: she is a practiced clinician, and she has seen worse. She grabs my head as my eyes turn back, my body wilts. I can feel her hands shivering through my hair. Something is shouted about blood pressure, and fingers press against my neck. Faintly, I can hear my sister rummaging through cabinetry for something my mother asked for. The sound of pan against lid is far away, hollowly metallic in the void. The crows sit heavy on my brow. I feel sweat run between folds of stiff limbs, heavy and thick like blood. My lips part to suck the air, heaving like a spent beast, and I wonder why my lungs seem so small. In the darkness, I can see The Choice waiting expressionlessly. The speed of light and speed of dark race together, necks outstretched toward checkered line. Once more, I stand on the threshold of life and death.

I hear my mother call an ambulance, and pause at the operator's questioning tone. Perhaps she is wondering if her daughter is dying. I try to move my mouth, to tell her I will be fine. I wonder if I will get another chance to tell her anything at all. A cool cloth dabs knotted forehead, and the smell of Epsom salt and isopropyl singes my nostrils. I hear my sister ask a question and I respond, tongue bending sluggishly in sticky mouth. I force begrudging air from my lungs over and over to respond to their frantic queries. Five minutes pass, then ten. Fifteen minutes tick away. My mother presses something against my teeth, murmuring gently. It tickles rasping throat, and goes down sweet. Perhaps this is what pulls the crows from my eyelids and pumps blood into blue fingers and toes. I learn later that I had not answered any of their breathless questions, did not stir in oaken chair. My sister only shakes her head and says I was grey, like a corpse. My mother says she did not feel a pulse. I laugh, and toss my head, and exclaim loudly if they thought I

would die. They do not answer. I do not sleep that night. In the morning, I make plans to visit a doctor for answers I pray he can provide.

The speed of dark is a contested thing, held up to the light and examined by a thousand pairs of searching, black eyes. Some believe it is infinitely fast, as darkness is immaterial in nature. Some believe the speed changes depending on where you are, evidenced by the way clocks run slower under high gravitational force. Some doubt that darkness has a speed at all. There are those, however, who believe that the speed of dark surpasses that of its twin. Stand far enough away from a shadow, and the shade will sweep over you like a raging spirit. It travels faster than the speed of light. It is instantaneous, and immaterial, and woefully complete. In fact, the speed of dark within a black hole is enough to trap both matter and light for eternity. You would fall forever, crushed by gravity and blackness and the perfect speed of dark.

March winds shake the van as I guide it between the chipped parking lines of the doctor's office. It has been a week since the crows stopped my heart, head lolling in my mother's terrified grasp. Nights are still sleepless. The earth is holding its breath, waiting for the first kisses of spring warmth to coax tubers and bulbs from thawing dirt. I smile at a purple headed crocus stretching beside the office windows. The woman inside is cordial in a chiefly monochromatic manner, and watches impassively as I pass insurance papers across the table. Her fingernails are very clean as she rifles through them one by one, pausing to check for initials and signature lines. Softly, she reads the sloppily circled options on the page: sugar count, red blood cell count, and an electrocardiogram. A fifteen-vial blood draw. She makes small talk as she works. Yes ma'am, I am a

sophomore this year. No ma'am, I commute, I don't have money to live on campus. Oh, I missed a signature, do you have a pen I could borrow? The conversation is tedious, and my jaw cracks with a yawn.

The room where my blood is drawn is bare and soulless, sparsely furnished with two chairs and a cushioned examination bench. The glaring fluorescent lights fill me with scathing, sickly brilliance. A needle burns bright and sharp against my cold skin, puncturing tourniquet-swollen vein. I wonder how long I can take the pressure. The vials are laid out on a paper towel, waiting. Their plastic heads tap together as the woman reaches for the first container, sliding them out of perfect alignment. Some vials are short and stocky, like columnar shot glasses. Others are thin and long and unsuspecting. They each receive their fill.

It is not until the needle is forced from my skin the second time and thirteen of the vials have been filled that I feel the light fade. I know the crows are coming, flying at the speed of dark. I do not have time to tell the woman before my eyes gloss and the world blacks and my body begs for sleep. I will hear her call for help, listen as loafer-clad feet beat polished concrete, feel clammy towel press against my face. I know that if I sleep, I will not wake up again. I will not tell my mother I love her. I will not tease my sister about school or grades or boys. I will not sit with my father again, asking for wisdom I do not yet possess. When I lay in the void, overcome by the perfect blackness, I feel the gravitational pull of a black hole. Time slows until it no longer exists. I stand on the edge of life and death, and The Choice is mine.

When the crows take flight at the speed of dark, I cannot see anything for ten minutes. As vision returns, the nurse asks how I feel, and I do not answer. She will tell me not to drive to class, but to go home and rest. She has sad eyes. I will thank her politely and climb into my car, holding a bottle of concentrated orange juice and an off-brand granola bar. They shiver in my hands like the petals of the purple crocus, which I will realize only later I forgot to notice. Briny tears crack my eyes, and the aching pain of my forearm keeps good company. I do not think of dying on my drive.

## Robot

My father has a therapist's face, marked by steady eyes and ridged brows that rarely knot and never betray thought. Not serious, but contemplative, and oddly assuasive. In Occupational Therapy, he must teach his dying patients how to lift their arms to grab a cereal box, or open a can of wet food for the family dogs. There is a certain element of hospice to it, and Pa must approach his assigned men and women with the empty face of a human being. My father is quick witted, and often quips back and forth with those he treats, but the blank face and open eyes always remain. Perhaps, in some way, this takes the strain off dying, and patients fight their fear of death in another man's troubled eyes.

Consequently, few things pull my father into displaying emotion. He has seen many horrors in his line of therapy, things that sober and force bile to your tongue. Things that must keep him awake at night, staring up at popcorned ceilings until crickets blot out his thoughts. He will not twitch when Mrs. Smith dies during treatment. He did not gasp when Mr. Johnson's son called to tell him his father was slipping from earth. He does not blink when confronted by the torn belly of his daughter, raw and gaping and punched with yellow bruises.

He calls me down from my room late on Thursday night. I know my mother has seen the blood dark and crusted on my shirts, and I am afraid. A razor is making simple, fine work of the supple flesh around my stomach, and the gashes bleed red in stretching and showering. I pull my cold feet from woolen blankets, sweaty and white in failing November heat. I am thirteen and still a child, dressed in basketball shorts and a green

shirt twice too big. The shirt is crumpled back toward my face, and the hewn grooves in my stomach look almost orange by the dimmed bedside lamp. I am too afraid to cry, and too cold to feel the throbbing reminders of my furious, oozing threads. My face looks like my father's: smooth and open and indifferent. I am in hospice, a suicidal anorexic, and I am waiting to die. I fight the strain like Pa's patients, looking into the open faces of my wounds, and I do not blink.

My father does not react when he orders me to lift my shirt to my chest, watching raised, angry fissures push and pull and drip. From the couch he reads the words I carved into myself, crudely transcribed but expertly placed. 'God Kill Me,' it reads. There is no patch of white, smooth skin left. This is the first thing he mentions; how clinically precise I am. His face is steady and blank. You know he is looking at you like dying patient, and deciding how he might teach you to reach a book on the counter, or stretch down and tie your shoelaces. He does not react to your tears that leap over pore and crease to splash into raw flesh. He does not stop you when you babble nonsense; incoherent pleas for mercy and forgiveness. He tells you to lower the shirt, to wash the wounds. Then he sits back, closes his eyes, and for all the world looks like one of his patients. He looks like you, lying on your bed in yellow lamplight cleaving words into your skin. You hug him, and smile, and thank him for understanding how you feel. Wash the cuts, he says, and he will tell your mother a different story. But you notice as you leave, thin, pink rimmed lids so lightly squeezed against tears of his own.

I saw my mother the next morning with the smell of eggs and bacon drifting over cold floorboards. I could see she had been crying, too. Her hair was flattened on one side, and her dark curls were only half formed. Her glasses sat uselessly on the counter, smudged and opaque. She did not acknowledge me, but continued to whisk eggs in the customary silver bowl faster and faster until I wondered how they were not yet foam. I tucked my pajamas tightly over burning, swollen lines, and sat in the armchair at the entrance to the living room. It faced the faux leather couch, smoothed by thousands of pressed bodies. My father sat there now, eyes cracked and blushed, cheeks bristling with waiting razors.

You will not be ready when he grabs you. You will not be prepared for the pain that cuts deeper than blades, the words that hack across your belly and cleave into your stomach. You will feel the tears come, and your eyes will be too wide to look away, to fake listlessness. His hand will grip your hair, and shake your head. He will grit his teeth, and shout so loud the spittle coats your chin and lips. You will not have time to think about how hideous his face is, how small the black eyes. He will tell you, over and over again, horrible things you wish you could say were not true. You will seep salt and blood. His words will scaffold from your ears to your heart, and they will not warp with age. *Robot*, he will say, *you are a robot. Do you not care? Can you not feel?* Then maybe, when you look at him again, you will not remember how much it hurt. Maybe then, when you open your eyes, you will only see a therapist.

## His Treacherous Brilliance

I enjoy gardening very much. Indeed, perhaps too much. It is honest work. Sweat grit lines the fur of my brow, and smears of soil remain unwashed from the shallow clefts between nail and flesh. Occasionally, there are thorns. A mosquito pierces the skin of my knee. Hognose hickory nuts sneer from their rooted shells. Honest work, yes, but so physically rewarding. Even in the early parts of spring, when pregnant, swollen buds hang shivering on too-thin branches, I find my mind wandering to the rippled heads of marigolds and itching farmer's tans. In the same way that smell is sometimes tasted, so too is the gardener rooted in the black soil of their labors. I am no spiritualist: I do not believe in connection with the earth, or chi, or karma's wrath. But I believe in beautiful things, precious and fragile things, and my eyes are cast ever downward for the humble dandelion who twirls in her new dress of white and yellow. Being with the earth oftentimes means being forced to understand the earth, and inexplicably reaching out to touch the part of yourself that lights, even for a moment, at a bit of grass or patch of dandelion flowers. So too must we understand its origin, trellising through the scaffolding of our ribs like so many vines, climbing higher and higher to reach the sun.

My parents garden quite a bit when hot Florida days are all I know. Arched, multicolored spines in the front yard, mica and pyrite and biotite on human canvas. Hibiscus flowers yawn bloated with pollen and honeybees at the front door, watered every Sunday morning. Ten thirty, when each plant had drunk itself quite mad, and cereal bowls are licked clean of cold, oily milk, we sit. Mother holds me in her lap while the TV dances with singing people in long white robes. When Joel Osteen smiles at me from the



glass television, he stares straight through my heart, straight through the grassroots of my ventricles and cotyledons of my atriums. Receive the grace of God, he says, a gift to keep you from hell. Hell is a scary place, with white hot fire that licks at your legs and eyes and tongue. Hotter than summer, than the blue Altima with the doors closed. I look at my father in the kitchen, reading a magazine with tired yawns. The yellow light from the living room lays thickly across my tangled legs, and I say a prayer with wide eyes, captivated by the runic chants of the glass man in the box. Mother shifts underneath me, and my skin touches the cool bindings of the faux leather couch. The house grows cold and dark and fearful, shadows stretching into malignant, unseen things. I feel a malevolence, a pain rising in the bile of my throat, and for a moment I think I might cry. But when I hear my father snoring from the kitchen, and my mother turns her body to look, the spell is gone. I pray the prayer with the Glass Man every Sunday, to shoo away the burning sidewalks and sealed cars of hell. Every Sunday, I forget.

They say we are pulled from the womb with six basic emotions: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust. These are seeded within us, untapped by breeding or circumstance or the light of the sun. They grow, yes, but they cannot be spliced into new things. That is not their job. They correct. They govern. They remain uninhibited by the hungry baby, squealing for food or a clean diaper. Each emotion does their own, important work in the countenance of a man. Indeed, for many situations, we must have a great number working together for any obvious result. But they are weak. Composted to earth black as sin, they color us, we wee saplings, into creatures of varying depressions. Happiness, you know, is a thin reward for our five scourges. The shades of

what we experience as taller, sadder babies are only differing weights of these five, hoeing silently onward for a speck of granite or spot of fool's gold. The older we are, the heavier our scales. So we learn to shed, in great clumps of sod and crinkly lichen, our piggybacking weeds. Yet, sometimes the sun is brighter than other days.

I say a prayer, though, when I spill my sister's blood on the white carpet of the living room. Her face looks peaceful as my mother carries her to the car, full of pink vigor and peach-fuzz youth by the light of the yellow kitchen burner. The sun is not as kind. Deep fissures of red jag the top of her forehead, and byways of crimson mat the slender, mousey hairs. She looks almost flower-like, blooming in the picture-perfect Florida lawn, unfurling into bright candy-striped brilliance. I do not remember very much after that. But I watch her go, screaming into the fuzzy seats of the Mazda, and realize in the instant she is gone that I have remained unchanged. My heart does not ache with her suffering, my soul is not pressed for forgiveness. I lay in the grass and play with the clovers under the light of the summer sun until my father takes me to school, tight lipped and silent. Not a soul spoke of it again when she returned, thirteen stitches bolting her brains in place. No person asked the question, venturing to correct. It should have been. Surely Meagan understood her fault in this! And that was the first I felt of guilt.

They say guilt is often tangled in religion. I would say they are mostly correct. Not an emotion in and of itself, guilt is a statement. A proof. The final sentence of a thorough investigation, with one of two outcomes. Yet despite its two-sentence definition, the true form of guilt has evaded scientists and psychologists alike for centuries. Many scholars in both fields don't believe guilt to be a feeling at all, but rather

a moralism pressed into malleable dough-children as they mature. Others believe it is a mix of the 'sad' emotions, like a cauldron of anger and fear. Some question if it is a natural thing to feel at all. There is much to be said about guilt, much that I will not say here. That is a story for another time. Moreover, I cannot say which I theory I prefer. I do know, however, that the seed sits somewhere in our souls, a dormant testament to our mortal strivings. It does not take to the soil at first; not before a long stratification. The first time it sprouts, though, it stays rooted, fastened to the very inner parts of ourselves. Guilt is a vine. It is also a perennial. Vines are not difficult to kill, though they are adept at the art. If allowed to grow, they will clamor through tree and shrub and flower bed, wrapping green sinew around the woody necks of trees and tender throats of buds. And then they squeeze.

The first time I gardened, I was a baby, and grew as the days stretched and swelled into burning, yellow things. I was unashamed, Eve's poster child, and hunted fabled beasts through the woods like children do. The entire world was a jungle, then; a spinning mass of untapped wilderness awaiting her brave combatant to explore her, to dip a finger into ponds and streams and blackberry bushes. I love the wilds. I measure time by the tans on my shoulders, the color of the grass. My mother puts seeds into my palm; tiny, slender dots and fat, striped discs. They need water, child, they need earth. They are not yours, but you must care for them. They need space, child, they need strength. They are not yours, but you must fend for them. Most of all child, they need light. They need heat. They are not yours, but the sun will feed them thick and green.

That year, the pumpkins spilled down the hill and pooled into the brick patio. Basil clumps pressed deer-plagued tomatoes into their bosom. Dark piles of beans and peppers mingled in the spicy breath of the herbs, and their flowers bloomed sweet until October's freeze. I remember playing in the green, crawling through the dirt like a caterpillar. My heart grew tubers, and settled in that valley where the vines tumble over one another, and the magnolias open thick as leather. I watched things come from nothing, from muddy pits of Carolina clay, and dance jubilantly in the relentless glow of the sun. When the green things die, I carve a tiny pumpkin, and set him on the front steps with a candle inside. I see the grey specks come suddenly, crying when the mold rises and bleeds through my gourd with a plague that only sun can bring. It was the first I learned of ephemeral things.

There are pumpkins on the steps when my parents take me to the Methodist church. I do not feel under dressed when the skirts and suits stream past me to the white double doors, guarded by blue-haired centurions. They stare for a moment before stepping aside, a city family stealing the pews of worthy, veteran crusaders. Their children regard me in the same way, open eyes and sneering mouths and sharp knuckled handshakes. There is no sun on their faces like mine. Outside, the last zinnias and coreopsis of the season are soaking in the light of the autumn sun. I can see their colors paint the bottom of the stained-glass windows, scar pinks and royalty purples and treachery yellows. The priest wears all of these, a beacon of candlelight and monotone energy. When I fall asleep in service, my father pinches my arm until I flood blue. You must listen, you must watch. That is not how a Christian behaves. I cannot describe to

you the thoughts that colored within me, blushing my innards with the hues of the church. The guilt. It was not happiness or sadness, fear or anger, disgust or surprise. But perhaps it was all of them. I watch the old woman in the front pew snore until the organ sounds to let us leave, streaming from the building in shades of dainty fall attire. It was two weeks until the first frost.

It is a common misconception that sunflowers turn to face the sun. True, some species exhibit solar tracking, and oftentimes stretch their leaves to tap the light of morning and evening rays, but the plant does not turn. It physically cannot. The fiery light of the sun, frothing and bulging in ill-fitted sphere, would kill the plant in an instant. The leaves are too thin, their stalks too mortal. Instead, they face due east, where their faces catch its furious light and wilt in awe. When the evening comes, they sit on their haunches in surprise, blinking back pithy tears of sap and water. With heavy heads they rest, shivering in half-defeat, before again rousing themselves to the fray once more as the sun cranes its neck over the hickory tree. They must have sun. They need its flaming, destructive fury as much as they loathe it, and sway in submission with the lengthening summer days. That is their curse, to watch with hungry eyes the catalyst of life and death just out of reach. They must step back, and bow their heads and shake their petals in disgust. An arbitrary, militant existence has never looked better in a vase.

The second time I garden, I am in love with a boy who does not understand how. It is a sad year. The parsley dies in its cradle, and rosemary dips its woody branches into cracked earth. The only survivor is a straggly sage plant, rising above the rest like a purple-limbed altar, filling the garden with a heavy, spiritual scent. A close companion to

my hammock, bringing spotted Painted Ladies and the stout bodies of Carpenter Bees close to sticky, barefoot toes. She watches my hurried passing every morning, every Sunday as I breeze to the social gathering called church. She watches my dragging feet as I graduate, and drive to different places, places that are not churches. She watches me water her every morning and evening, now. Sometimes, from very far away, I can hear the Presbyterian church bells ringing. Sage is a long-lived plant. Long enough to see you break a heart. Long enough to see you leave the church. Long enough to see you fill with guilt. I know all too well how the sun's brilliant rays rake across her stringy form, forcing leaves to burst from scabbing flesh until the air is filled with spicy, pressing heat.

Her smell is under my nails when the boy I loved leaves me in the driveway. It is a late winter moon, glinting fiercely off the soft-pocketed bellies of the corkscrew willow and blue cedar. My foot stabs into a maple samara, thin and invisible in midnight lighting. When the salt has dried in my pores, I slip into the garage with a lightness found in detachment, and curl white knuckles on wooden handle. The patch of grass by the basement door could use some work, I reason, and set to work beating the grass with the dull edge of the hoe until my back cannot take the strain. The earth bleeds red with clay around the spikes of early spring grass, gingerly plucked by shaking, tender hands. I rip up a bush sprouting in the backyard and replant it to match the peonies, and lay the plastic drainage pipe to angle down into the soil. The green does not do well that year. This time, I do not crawl through the plants like an insect or small mammal. I do not tend for my labors, nor fend for them when the unseen things make the dog's hackles rise at night. I do not shower them with water as the days grow longer, and the thermometer

reads red. When the sun came up, the light was as piercing as the was night clear, and blew cold, metallic wind through mounds of weeds and julienned earthworms. But my heart was a perennial, and I watered the earth with bitter, broiled tears of isolation.

I have always loved the concept of the artful borrowing. Indeed, no part of gardening is owned. You may fertilize your soil, screw great flanks of pine together, and carefully sow pin-head dots into stirred earth. You may toil for weeks, perhaps years over a single plant in the hope she grows taller, blooms more fully. These things do not belong to you. They are gifts, rows and troughs of children that we enjoy a short while. You give a portion of earth, a portion of soul as they grow. You must know, though, that they could have come up entirely without your aid. It is what plants are meant to do. It is only for a passing moment we are granted the gift of life, to watch as our tiny housemates dig their heels against the odds and rip themselves into the sky like a multitude of exotic serpents. How glorious it is to share the birth and death of something you know, even if for a short amount of time, you can tangibly sense in all of yourself? It is a miracle, a miracle of rebirth and unchanging fact that, for me, will be as close as childbirth can ever get, testified by the fertility of the seed, the breaking of water, and always, always the blinding power of the sun.

Much of life is gardening. Not all seeds will take. Ravenous things come in the night to consume what you have so carefully tended. Disease will whisper death into the wind. And always, always does the sun beat tirelessly upon the earth. The ground cracks at his whim, the panting collective sloppily drinking your evening watering. Bruised paper leaves shrivel under the keen eye, white-hot and glaring until the edge of the earth

swallows his passing. You will learn, in time, there is no fighting him. But this is easier said than done.

The third time I garden, I am a full-time employee of Liberty University. It is good work. In the wee hours of the morning, I rise to care for the plants. When my work is done, I return home to repeat the process, gilded in patchwork khakis and a handsomely decaled shirt. The sun is strong that year. The sweat is immense, and my eyes well with salt and slimy, black eyeliner. I still believe it was the best garden I have ever had. Mexican sunflowers tended rounded marigolds, poppies and giant zinnias. Oregano and lavender snuggled into the mammoth dill, a haven for butterflies. The glass hummingbird feeder caught the eye of many a Ruby-throat, sending inquisitive flyers to trumpet flower and honeysuckle. It was a beautiful year, flawless almost. It was also the year I stopped attending a regular church.

I cannot say what it was that drove me from the pearly doors. Perhaps there are too many things to list. Perhaps there are not enough. Many in the community speak of me in hushed words, the apostate child who once served so faithfully. I knew many people there once. They each have their theories. I imagine it is easy to speculate, to attribute sin or shame or teen pregnancy to the roster of guilt. They would be wrong. Truthfully, I never left. The stories stay with you, the hypocrites and lazy and gluttonous. How can you hate what you are? I need no more guilt. The silent burning of holy ground laps around my toes, the lecherous mosquitos begging for another baptism, another alter call, another communion. I refuse to touch the juice once I realized how hot the sun, how long the summer. But I will not be of the world. The very foundation of the church is



built upon green paper and concrete slabs, begged from the pockets of guilty sinners. I need no reminder of the kind of person I am. Neither does the Son.

When the children's minister at Heritage Baptist asks why I am leaving the ministry, I am partially honest. To explore, I say, to journey. To see what other places The Son resides. I journey some, explore a little. I find the sun is a regular occurrence, the light drifting in from many glass windows behind many snoring women in many old buildings. Too, I find the Son blazing into my twilight places, illuminating the weakness of light and vulnerability of the shallow-rooted plant. Quite suddenly, you realize how great of an extent you must turn to the east, lift your chin to heaven, and allow the unforgiving, unfathomable heat of our closest star to crush our very bodies, to punish and reinforce our very compositions. We need water, Father, we need earth. We are not our own, but you must care for us. We need space, Father, we need strength. We are not our own, but you must fend for us. Most of all Father, we need light. We need heat. We are not our own, but the Son will feed us thick and green.

Guilt is a kind of evening light. Is it not darkness, of this much I am certain. No, it is twilight; just before dusk. The time when the sun sets behind the houses, and the little things begin to yawn more than they did an hour ago. Darkness is the concealment of things done in the dark. Twilight is their admittance. It stews within you, the breeze a sigh of relief as the belt buckle is loosed a notch or three. It allows us to forget. The brilliance, the treacherous brilliance of the Son is, for a moment, unseen to the human eye. All at once, our mortality is allowed to stretch its fist toward God and spit at the cruel standards of Joel Osteen and Methodists and aging children's pastors. For a

moment, in its true form, guilt is a relief. Then all at once, the dawn will come, the blazing eye of piercing, searching light, and again we set our heads eastward, set our sins into the taproots of our feet to wait again for one more sigh, one more breeze. When winter comes, we will rest. When winter comes, we will hide our heads in mounds of frozen earth and weep for springtime rain.

The Son is a strange thing. A man of power, of divine lineage. A man who promises to keep his children from the fiery punishment of hell. But what punishment, what salvation he offers in return. He scalds us with his heat, our east-facing heads bowed in submission. How can we hate what we need? Even now, our leaves fade to paper, stalks bruised with prayers and pinches and untouched chalices. By God, what a treacherous, treacherous brilliance. A light that cuts and kills, that blames and nourishes, that maims and heals and contradicts. The guilt is almost unbearable. It goes to seed in my pockets, resting in the small of my back for those tumid nights when lungs refuse to rise without a sob. Where then do we go, when southern rays sneak beneath our consciousness, and for a brief moment let us breathe? Winter cannot come soon enough. And yet, there is a reprieve. A single, solitary moment, when the morning chorus sounds, and the frogs groan into wakefulness, and the moonflower blushes at her own shyness. The seeds, the saplings, our slim cuttings of tenacious survival are pressed into our palms. They need water, child, they need earth. They are not yours, but you must care for them. They need space, child, they need strength. They are not yours, but you must fend for them. Most of all child, they need light. They need heat. They are not yours, but unto

you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth.

This year, the rains have pulled the garden up beautifully. Marigold leaves are stretching over the weeds, arching up to meet the dill and thyme so closely cropped together. Kale brushes against a forest of lemon verbena and mint. The lavender transplant I purchased last year is beginning to grow seed heads. Some evenings I pause to pluck an invading shoot or two, sometimes to refill the ever-disappearing birdseed. It is good. It is enough.

I noticed this morning that the sunflowers have already begun to come up. A few died on the rocks, some choked by long-eared weeds from wild things. Some could not take the pressure. Their little heads have begun to swing east, now. In a few days, I will not have to water anymore. The sun will be enough.

## Honesty: Do You Bleed?

Part of the joy of writing comes from the initial euphoria of honesty. Like heroin addicts or thrill-seekers, we force ourselves to grind surreal understandings of our actions against their immediate consequences. There is always a little blood involved. The initial sting of pain is flooded by memories, adrenaline, and sudden ephemerality, and suddenly the rush is gone and we are empty and our work stands broken before us like Shelley's Ozymandias. Consequently, there are patterns in writing. Some write and write until their pages are unrecognizably shredded with tortured language. Some toss half-truths and symbolism about like confessional prayer, expecting an ovation for sins. Still others mill out pretreated paragraphs, projecting colorful lives into our impotent ones. All who write find themselves in one or all of these hospices. Much of good writing finds itself at least incubated through these, weathered by time and age and the restless pen. But it is difficult. It will make you bleed. You must be willing to bare flesh, and wait. I am not yet brave enough.

Words build the mind how we want them to. Monochrome adventures and smudged graphite pull us into vibrant worlds of light and color. We subvert our short-term reality for the concrete finiteness of the written word, and we are happy. Sometimes we can even empathize with these symbols, scratches on the well-etched page. Yes, sometimes we feel. But always do we bleed. Perhaps this is a part of being human, to experience truth with such deafening emotion. We understand some of this when we fall in love. It deadens the mind to unnecessary functions, like good sense and reason, and

replaces it instead with a deep, oftentimes selfish understanding of others. It is an exchange; an eye for an eye. Man is a feeling beast, and how. But our purchase still costs. There ain't no such thing as a free lunch. A barter in blood, the leak in our souls must be offered. It is said that to love is to be vulnerable, to be trusting, open, honest. There is a pain in that. A lover once described it to me as a heart pain, like a kind of masochism. Honesty is a sadistic mistress, and like love will deaden and consume and tear its way onto the page like a rabid beast.

Do you bleed, coward? You know the things you've done, the memories that dance just behind trembling fingers. The things that live on and in and through you for the rest of your days. Your parents will never learn your shade of black, and your children cannot hear the footsteps of transgression's ghost. Will they die with you? Do these things die at all? I have not decided. But I know I am not brave enough. I cannot take the pain. The glaring beam of the written word does not soothe the haunted, not always. Perhaps we all have secrets. To call myself a writer, though, means I must take the blood pact, must display my wrists to the sneering dominatrix of honesty. No body of work can remain hidden from her for very long. The ones that do are not immune to her gaze, however: only impotent. She does not waste her time on garbage.

Nothing holding value is truly happy. I have been convinced of this time and time again, in story after poem after memoir. This is not to suggest that value is always tainted in some way. Indeed, most things of value are inherently beautiful or aesthetically

pleasing. Love, for instance. To examine the roots of honesty, however, is to find a kind of value that ends with melancholy bite. The kind that makes you bleed.

## The Tears of Things

There are other kinds of pain that leave no marks. Hair-split fissures in waxen hands, ears chipped like chalky teacup handles. These things are stored in the deepness of yourself, in the reservoir that sees no light. It yearns within the blackness of our shadow, curling around the reefs and coves and bays in sickly, groaning skin. Sometimes it stands for a moment, finding its sea legs in the ever-tossing surf of the heart. Many times, it does not. Man is the sensing animal, the wilting daisy with an ounce of arithmetic in his skull, and what he does and does not do are of very little importance to many. To himself, the world is his ocean, unkempt and undesigned by his perfect permaculture, a systematic growing system of pain and sorrow and a splash of empathetic laughter. We let the salt affront our toes, eating the last of our footprints padded neatly into the mud, pulling at our heels and ankles and stark-white soles. It never begs out loud. Echoes in dark go without saying. But we are content to live along the shore, picking at the refuse and melancholy dead, searching for the hopes of one last ship, one last message in a bottle. Perhaps one day we will understand ourselves, understand the frothing madness that oozes from the scar tissue on cheek and tongue and eye. If we look hard enough, we reason, we will find a clue, a taxidermized corpse with all organs labeled. Some, though, do not stay on the shore. No, these are the fallen, the revoked. There, on the fringes of society, they have retreated into the tree line, backs to the wall of brine and foam that smash against the brittle bones of the beach. We are unique, whisper their drying bodies. We can read them in the evening papers, too. Uniqueness, individuality, narcissism, self-destructive behavior. It makes no difference what syllables you make. The wedding vows

of individuality give us an escape, a reason to hide in the brush and tangle of the jungle trees. There is no need to build a boat if there is nothing to see. We are excellent liars. We are even better mourners. It is what we do best.

The first time I felt sorrow, I was a child in bed. Stenciled roses hung heavy on chalk-white walls, the midnight sun seeping quietly through smudged glass windows. It is a quiet night, broken only by the weeping of my mother. Her hair is short, curled cupidian sprigs of indeterminate age, quivering eyes and lips and lungs. I am quiet, too. Mothers are not supposed to cry. Children do not comfort their mothers. But I yield, reaching a sweaty, soft palm to her back. I have seen my father comfort my mother this way. Perhaps it is the only way it will work. Tears mat yellow bedsheets, and creaking mattress springs mutter their disapproval. I hear my name called, and I look up. She tells me how little I was, how I asked to hang yellow stickers from the end of her nose like precious ornaments. The mud pies and crayons and precious nighttime singing, golden bars of 'rock-a-bye babies' and 'you are my sunshine.' The stubbed toes. Nose freckles that climbed across my face like so many dark, fading stars. All these things were lost to her. Her child was old, that much was certain, and a cloud lifted and again descended to her. Where did my baby go, her voice throbbed, an open wound. Where is my baby? I do not answer. I do not know. I tell her I am still a baby, there is much left in me to be commended. I break the sorrow into parts and fence them in with logic, the slipping reason of eight-year-old charm. She smiles. Yes, I have done something right. I smile too. When she leaves, the room is very still, shards of memory pricking against the roots of my scalp. Sleep evades me. Mother is sad. The sounds of my mind are too loud, too



colorful. I pull my stuffed bear closer, hiding in the synthetic fur so used to my gentle care. I see the deep, now, black ocean surf lapping on beaches too grey for sand. Brain yawns and stretches, muscles grow pink and warm. When I lie down on the grit and mud to sleep, the waters draw my body to the reef, sucking at my limbs. You made her sad, it tells me, whispering, angry. You are a disappointment. You are responsible. I float in the place called sorrow for a long time. When I wake, my eyes are cracked with the ink of the ocean, salt leaking from my lashes. I do not get out of bed. I say a prayer, just as I do every morning, to the man my mother tells me never leaves me. I pray as I normally do, for poppa and mamma, for Sara and Mary and Spike, for Grandpa and Grandpa Shelley, for Pappae and Mammae, for Aunt Betsy and Uncle Ken, for Autumn and Lakin and Abby and Ashley. But this time, I do not pray for me. Father, don't let me hurt any more people. Father, let me hold their sorrows. Father, let me cry.

Modern psychologists say that cognitive dissonance is regularly rectified by two common approaches. One aspect is simple enough, readily available to most. Behavior and attitude is amended, pushed together to destroy the gap of unknown in between. After all, if it cannot be justified, we run. We are unique, we yell once more at the shadow, we are our own person. I choose to believe this, I choose to beat my fists against the wall. We can justify killing things if we can sleep at night. But some are not content to fix the rift. There are those who feel the weight amidst the fault, the strain of time and willful negligence. So they let it fade away, ignoring the rift in the hopes that it will go away, or simply cease to be. It slips to you from an idea of your own reckoning, a single thought borne from sand, and time, and long, painful loneliness. To reach across yourself for

something different, something that brings you completion. Very rarely is this good, or healthy. Character assassination is done best as an inside job. And I am its king.

A lot of pain comes from simply being. Two is twice the charm. It is built into us, the need to hold someone else's feelings as our own. Some learn to put it all behind them. But I, in all my frugal understandings, take everything. When I am sixteen, I latch to a boy I do not love and teach myself to love him, teach myself to sorrow in his sorrow. I will make things better. When my father tells me he will send me to an institution if I don't start eating, I do. I will make things better. When my sister comes to me for help, calling for an ear to be lent, an incantation spoken, I do. I will make things better. I soil myself in fear and insecurities and painful, makeshift splints of inordinate sufferings. I got what I wanted, Father. You gave me your gift. All the world seems dark down here, where the ocean never drinks an ounce of sunlight. I write stories of beautiful things only to pervert them into memoirs of my own choosing, into words that serve more as therapy than story. I suppose I am not entirely alone.

There is a famous painting by a man who lived in Spain. Born at the height of romanticism, his paintings had a kind of drama and humanoid figure that few of his contemporaries could match. He was a gifted man. Somewhere in the middle of his life, a specter of illness slid its way up to his ears and slit his nerves, leaving him deaf for the rest of his life. He took a woman to stifle his pain, a woman who produced seven children and kept alive only one. The ocean of sorrow swelled deep, ravenous dogs of heartache bursting from the waves. When he was finally alone, son and wife lost to age and colonial doctors, he heard them at last. They spoke to him, the voices from the ocean, in laughing

tongues and jeering swipes and murmurs. *The sleep of reason produces monsters*, he titled his paintings of monsters and witches. They spiraled to black, the realist painter falling into impressionistic, large swipes of dark swatches. At seventy-five, completely alone, accompanied by the shrill voices, he completed his fourteen ‘black paintings,’ completed as oil applied directly against the crumbling, plaster walls of his home. These are almost medieval in feel, depicting ghosts and creatures and the dying. The ocean must have broken its bay. *Saturn Devouring His Son* is thought to be the greatest of them all, painted in the dining room above the painter’s table. The titan Chronos, in order to maintain his kingdom over Olympia, must devour his children one by one, as the prophecy foretold. The painting shows a giant, a monster, a crazed old man crouched wildly against stone floors, holding the broken, bleeding body of his son between his knuckles. I will spare you the details. But Saturn, in his mournful, crushing graze, lips parted to accept his meal, is the only way the painter knew how to humanize him. The Ocean, her dark waves spilling from Saturn’s eyes, the painter’s eyes, tell a story we do not want to hear. It is not difficult to understand, peering shyly, ashamedly into the sorrowful eyes of Francisco Goya consuming the children he never could raise. Goya died alone in 1828, the watchful eyes of Saturn a witness to his passing. The Ocean’s tide took him home, into the deep. He knew he was ready to leave.

When the spring grass crusts to waxen, earthy brown of summer, I know I am ready to leave, too. I plan for weeks, obsessively counting the minutes that separate me from the Ocean, the pitiless, black mouth of Saturn preparing to devour its child. I am kept from it. A bible camp, nine hundred and sixty miles away, uprooted my toes from

the Ocean. I am dropped off in a hurry, camouflage backpack and a yellowed pillowcase my only valets to the unknown. The trip is long. The girl in the seat beside me will not stop singing, and the runny-nosed boy in the back of the bus isn't allowed to watch anything besides *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*. It smells of feet and uncleaned bathrooms, made worse when the sheepish youth leader creeps out of the silver painted stall and announces no one go back there. I hate every part of it. I drag my feet into the cabin, a mix of girls who are nothing like me. I stumble into Bible meetings and quiet time studies, ruddy-cheeked adolescents confessing their sins of stealing makeup or staying up past curfew. I do not want to be held here. But I acquiesced, carefully. That is of no importance to this story. When I arrive home, I celebrate with the church. I proclaim my success to the ocean in the deep quiet. For a single, fleeting moment, the omen flits from my finger, and the shuddering horror we sometimes call contentment. It is not the same when I arrive home. They tell me I have embarrassed them, that I will never get a job with words like that. You live in a new age, you must watch what you post. A tight fist closes on the nape of my neck, red and purple veins, screaming. You will not do that again. When the woman from church offers to help, suggesting a Bible study, the words fall upon her as well. You will not do that again. The sorrow comes, and I sit against the shore and watch the tide rise with perfect diligence. I have made the wrong choice. For what I am not sure. To die, to stay alive are flawless cognates of one state of being, a decision unchanged by mortal sufferance. The outcome would be the same. But the sorrow, the weeping, the bowl in your stomach that can hold no more water, can only be felt in one place.

A man named Virgil knew this once. A proud man scraped through his drying pen, ink blotting into shapes and scabs and waves. These tell of a hero, a mighty warrior, gazes at a painting slathered in a Carthaginian temple, sopped up with the sanguine bodies of friends and countrymen and supine women. He feels their weight against his chest, bodies rising to the surface of the cold, black ocean. Perhaps his screaming was our screaming, too, when he opened his mouth with monochrome spoon-feed. *Here, too, the praiseworthy has its rewards; there are tears for things and mortal things touch the mind. Release your fear; this fame will bring you some safety.* Then he is gone, rushed away from the horror and madness the Conradian bleakness bred so easily, paddling away from the shore as a dog in a pool. A dog he was, a murderer of children and women, of husbands and sons and fathers. He killed the immortal, the mortal with the same sweep of his hand that might have pushed away a tear, a line of spittle from his cheek. Yes, what excellent liars we are.

We do not hate who we know. Parents, siblings, family, friends. They cause no more harm than they try. We do, though, hate who we are. How could we think otherwise? Sorrow is a part of us, an entity who feels no remorse nor sympathy. He cannot attribute outside influences to our internal wrongs. He will not wash away your guilt when the man calls you a whore. He will not close your eyes when the woman tells you she is disappointed. He holds you like a match to a candle, burning who you are against the flame until you secede. I have made it a sacred ritual, the hate and I. Dancing, twirling with something not quite fury, not quite remorse. You feel it in the cartilage of your skull, pulsing, searching. Smoke choking all living things from their houses, the

smell of oak and burning insects. There's no place left to go but down. We descend, at different rates, to the belly of the Ocean. We wait out the firestorms, treading ink and scaly, forgotten things until it is safe to come out. This is the greatest burial of all. We become our sorrows, in one way or another. By blood, by adoption, by glimpsing into Nietzsche's ravine a second too long. Few nights go by without a quick prayer, much different from the ones of my youth. Father, don't make me stay here. Father, please let me go on.

Longing is a terrible plague. The clouds are heavy this side of Eden. We are men of sorrows, acquainted with iniquity, or so we were told. From our mouths violence is born, all the sins of the world sloppily christened across our lips. Virgil called it *lacrimae rerum*, the Latin form of 'the tears for things.' I think I call it that, too. When I wake in the summer to go to work, an hour before the sun rises, that is what I call him. First, the beeping, the alarm that neither startles nor truly alarms. The bed making. The shower. The khaki pants, the undershirt. Deodorant first as to not sully the work shirt. Sticky, black paint rubbed into oily eyelids, perhaps a swipe of cherry Chapstick. The Process, step by step, pace by pace, keeps the sorrow down. The nature of my work keeps the water still, eyes fixed. It is good work. College is much the same. How can you mourn when there is no time to rest? The peace is what will get you.

Lacrimae rerum is taken out of context by those who wish to explain away their tears. A brief, unmitigated quote about inescapable, unavoidable pain of life. But Virgil already knew this, as do you. Yes, life is sorrow, but in a different way. When Aeneas weeps at the painting, he sees not the pain of reliving, nor the deaths of his brothers, but

sorrow. He can see the specter, twirling itself around the strings of his heart, and realizes that he need not fear for his safety. Aeneas is among compassion, the very things that show to us a glimpse of human sorrow. We, at last, can stare through the window to the ocean, and allow ourselves to mourn. Aeneas, scarred by the losses that swept his spirit into black, mourned with the mural, not because of the mural. It was already something he kept in his heart. He ripped his clothes and hair for the definite, expressive emotion that billowed from his chest. He could speak the language of sorrow, and it felt good. The black, empty eyes of Saturn grieved with the soul of the painter, lost amidst the deafness of his misery. And he could finally rest, swept into eternal peace by his own tears. My empty, open sores leak pus and blood onto white page, scribbling achromatic, unrealized pain onto sheet and spine and gold stickers on noses who will never hold them again. And at last, we can mourn. Left alone, we can feel the shivering through our very skin. There are tears for things and mortal things touch the mind. Now, we have our mourners. We have our burial rights. We may slip the corpse from our backs and send them, thankful, into the deep. What's more, we may smile. Release your fear, now. This pain will bring you some safety, in whatever manner it chooses to come. The ocean will leave you be. Virgil knew this. Goya, too. I am still swimming.

I wanted to be both. The daughter of a man who has no son, the child of a musical mother who could pass on no music. The sister of a girl who I could not protect. The lover of men who splice my nerves into soft heaving. The friend of those who have no one to mourn with them. I want to be all, inexplicably ground into charcoal by their words, their spectacles of gory executions. I mounted their sorrows like a cross upon my

back, wicked, and bleeding, and screaming for the water; that cold, salty ocean where all things die at last, where they are dead and buried and will not rise again. The swim is slow. My breathing is labored now, and thin, like air in a tube, air in a mother's throat. I pray I can carry more. Suffering provides excellent acoustics. Will I stay? That is a question for another time. I doubt I truly know the answer, even now. But the Ocean, though, our bleak destination, is not so rough now. The shore will call me home when she sees fit. Soon my cross will be lifted, a shallow pit unearthed and refilled with the able hands of sack-clothed bodies. Mourning is just, brother. *Lacrimae rerum*, friend.



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king indomitable

spread your eyelids to the brick  
like molting bees or autumn husks  
i pawned off the last of my words  
for a pat on the head  
for the last bite of fish

i crossed the vowels in the woods  
sunk consonants, a bitter vial  
forgot my songs  
forgot the melody  
how does the tune go?

closed up the writing place  
at the shadow on the ridge  
arms, legs mangled in the void  
a vacuum soliloquy in red

i laid the book to rest somewhere  
where he can die in dignity  
apart from me  
where all good things go.

but for me  
the pill, bronzed prefect  
simmering in that final way:  
intellectual property law  
requires security

The end of the world

it's darkling this year, beloved,  
when letting curls come to,  
rocking, frothing, unbeknowing  
clicking of an ill-fate growing  
snap to, coward,  
do you remember the blush?  
heat that rose to your lashes, hushed  
like napalm, like  
napalm.  
go back to sleep, little one.  
dream the paint thinner off.

Gabriel isn't afraid of death

he flew to gethsemane  
from sticky eden shores,  
where moth and dust devour  
a god before the war.

the plastic atrophy, boy,  
ears from pagan heads, them  
who snip pretty waxen charms,  
latent, saccharine bethlehem.

how soon dark splinters enter  
what sweat and blood consume,  
red-eyed lycanthrope, my love  
consumes your body, too.

my dress has gone and torn again,  
the trumpet bleeds the wall,  
but when you came again my dear,  
not a soul recalled  
at all.

## 1. Novice Phase: the dream

A novice phase, the dream,  
It grew small and greasy  
like your unseen sins,  
The cornrows of perdition's way,  
Let die, now, before salt and blood do wean  
From heaven's grasp, a promise wrote,  
And carried by last premonition,  
In sleek black words of rock they smote  
At terraced mountains' dereliction,  
To crash upon her waiting disciples,  
A wizened bunch of newborn kings  
And queens, so trifle –  
As to laugh at wombs that sing.

Serpent

Flee from me  
pagan boy.  
I am  
the tireless song  
that comes in the night  
to drink of your ineptitudes  
and pour the blood  
from your palms  
into wine glasses  
for those who deem themselves  
worthy.

Flee from me  
righteous one.  
I am  
the burning refuse of  
your grand offerings,  
set aflame on open graves  
you polish with white  
recycled from those you maim  
to please more yourselves  
than the creed which binds  
souls.

Flee from me  
apostate.  
I am  
the nameless blight  
that opens beating hearts  
besetting death  
once eyes fade to quartz  
and mouth slit,  
to honor crimes committed  
in your cruel  
birth.

Flee from me  
little gods.  
I am  
the great robber,  
I have stolen  
Life, and what future you  
may have as more  
than men, then mortal,  
laugh and be glad,  
you will smile for me  
one way or the other

v. 23 – 24

Are we all such scared children,  
You, and I,  
To thresh the seed before  
We die.

Yet to hide in autumn's wood,  
A liar's den,  
To clothe yourself before you  
Bleed again.

Arch striped back in pagan sun,  
Little one,  
Pray to God that they can't  
Hear mortal tongues.

The Farmhouse

histamine theodicy  
two giants bridge the gap  
built upon the backs of many good men  
dead men  
whose brothers killed their mother's sons  
whose fathers stole away their children  
like drying frogs on summer days



untitled

tungsten-plated autumn day;  
summer's donned her widow weeds  
grasping, scratching, waving at  
red earth natives once run free,  
three sisters piled toward heaven  
in calligraphy cut green;  
now bare, brown quicks exposed to  
nature's cruel offensive play,  
crow's feet too softly joining  
bleak october to the spring.

The promise of the church

when the ears of the saints grow silent  
a hummingbird comes to the window screen,  
panting, hurried, beating wings delighting  
on misty air pregnant with stillborn clouds,  
hungry orbs roving, an iridescent flash,  
and he is gone.  
somewhere, far away,  
where the little things wait like hurricanes  
where the hand of god breaks the weary  
in heavy oaths of scab and bone;  
to one day bury me like broken plates,  
to one day scatter me so far from home.

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