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The Air That Moves Between Us

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the
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Bridgewater State University

May 11, 2021

Dr. Sarah Fawn Montgomery, Thesis Advisor

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Critical Introduction

When I enrolled in my first creative nonfiction workshop my junior year of college, I was immediately taken with the genre. I had always loved writing, but I had never written about myself. Growing up I wrote fiction, and as I got older my writing was entirely comprised of academic pieces only. As soon as the nonfiction workshop allowed me to write about myself, I began using writing as a form of therapy and self-help. I was able to work through my feelings on the page and turn my emotional trauma, my regrets, and my embarrassments into artwork, which has truly been the most liberating experience of my life. I genuinely feel as though this project has encouraged my own growth as a person, friend, and writer more than any other experience I've had.

As soon as I heard about the honors program and the honors thesis, I was inspired to complete my own thesis in the creative nonfiction field and further develop my craft. One of the hardest parts of both starting and completing this project was figuring out exactly what I wanted it to be about. I decided to let my writing speak for itself and looked over past work, as well as the notebook of poems I started keeping as a result of the workshop, and observed a handful of prevalent and repeated themes in my writing. These themes included navigating a secure sense of self-identity as well as learning how to cope with mental health adversities such as depression and anxiety. The consequences that may arise from said mental health issues such as drug abuse also serve as prevalent themes, as well as the hope that can be found through a connection to the natural world. These themes were all transferred into this collection, *The Air That Moves Between Us*.

This collection engages with the existing creative nonfiction canon while also possessing distinct differences in how these common themes are approached. In many of the essays and books I read, the naming of specific mental illnesses is a heavy focus. For example, Kay Redfield Jamison's *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness* names manic-depressive illness as the novel's focus in the prologue, and Esmé Weijun Wang's collection of essays in *The Collective Schizophrenias* obviously zeroes in on coping with schizophrenic disorder. While these are worthwhile nonfiction works and I agree that mental illness should be destigmatized and stated proudly, I wanted to be unique in my writing and describe mental illness in more abstract and perhaps more relatable terms. I am also still learning about my own possible mental health disorders, and therefore wanted to avoid labels as much as possible. I do name depression specifically at some points in the collection because I was very depressed for about two years, but I'm still learning about my relationship with this disease and wanted to avoid labeling any more than that. This also applies to the intense feelings of anxiety I include throughout this collection as I wanted to show the effects of anxious thoughts while avoiding the naming of anxiety specifically as I am still learning about my relationship with this disorder, as well.

Overall, I try to place the focus of this collection on the feelings and emotions these adversities cause rather than labeling and focusing on western medicine's interpretation of mental illnesses and the treatment thereof, as I believe mental illness is unique to every person and some treatments may work better for some than others. A primary focus of Jamison's writing is on the diagnosis and treatment of her disorder by and with medical doctors, as well as Wang who weaves medical jargon and definitions provided by the American Psychiatric Association into her writing. Both authors, as well as others such as Elizabeth Wurtzel in *Prozac Nation*:

Young and Depressed in America, also focus heavily on medication as a topic in their writing. However, it is also important to note that these writers acknowledge the benefits of medication while also stressing the importance of taking care of ourselves holistically. While attending therapy and utilizing the benefits of medication are valuable solutions that most definitely work to cure mental illness, I wanted to focus my writing on how I personally take care of myself to show that treatment varies person to person, as well as to emphasize the strength of a relationship to the natural world.

This collection further aims to differentiate itself from existing creative nonfiction literature through its title, *The Air That Moves Between Us*. This title is representative of a literary strategy employed in this collection to represent people, emotions, feelings, and thoughts as colors that tint the atmosphere between myself and them, therefore altering the air that exists between us. Not only does this relate to my relationships with people, but it is also meant to refer to my relationship with the natural world (another prevalent theme in the collection). It is my hope that readers of *The Air That Moves Between Us* are encouraged to develop new, openminded understandings of individuals who may struggle socially, mentally, and with drug use after reading the following eight essays of various length and style. The collection follows a pattern, alternating between short flash pieces and long-form essays in order to showcase different styles as well as to contrast productive times in my writing with times when writing doesn't come as easily to me. I believe this is the most accurate portrayal of mental health as I am being honest with my readers and allowing them to see this more vulnerable part of me in shorter essays that does not want to give lengthy exposition, but rather wants to be vague and abstract. The long-form essays, however, allow me to truly process my feelings and explain things on a deeper, more tangible and relatable level to my audience.

I was first introduced to the flash essay in the advanced creative nonfiction workshop and was struck with its concision and poetic style. After writing the flash piece “Grave Thoughts” that appears later in this collection, I wanted to explore the style further. I was inspired by several sources that feature flash essays, such as *Brevity: A Journal of Concise Literary Nonfiction* and novels like Marya Hornbacher’s *Madness: A Bipolar Life*, as well as *Brief Encounters: A Collection of Contemporary Nonfiction* edited by Judith Kitchen and Dinah Lenney. *Brevity* features several skilled and unique writers, but specific flash essays from past editions that sparked my interest in the form are “160 Things That Scare Me” by Jill Kolongowski and “This Abortion is an Act of Love” by Amie Whitemore. In *Madness*, Hornbacher separates her collection into four parts comprised of several flash essays that focus on one moment, such as the time she told her father she didn’t feel like going to school in her flash piece “Depression”, which she comes to understand as a representation of repetitive themes of mental illness throughout her life. This is a strategy I employed when writing my own flash essays, like in “Grave Thoughts” when I use specific moments where I’ve encountered the topic of suicide to unravel my own emotions concerning the subject matter. Finally, specific inspirational flash essays from *Brief Encounters* include Martha Cooley’s “What I Hear” for its reconstruction of reality through sensory experience and “Red” by Jericho Parms for its juxtaposition of red in the natural versus material world.

This handful of essays as well as many others served as inspiration for the first essay of this collection, a shorter piece written in the second tense titled “In Search of Scarlet”. This essay touches on several themes present in this collection but primarily centers around the human feeling of being “stuck” or in need of change. This idea of change is symbolized by the color red throughout the piece, specifically red that is found in the natural world in order to demonstrate

another one of my themes—the importance of a spiritual connection with earth. Therefore, change becomes embodied by the fox and the reddening leaves of New England fall. Similar to Parms’ essay when he drives and searches for red along the road (“On my way to work I take inventory: traffic lights, stop signs, a fire engine. A tinsel holiday wreath...” (144)), “In Search of Scarlet” begins with a driving scene in which I search for red along the road as a symbol for the pursuit of change. I also mention seeking the red of the natural world, like leaves or foxes over the manufactured red foxes that I force into my room, in order to show my preference for natural versus material things. Parms’ essay “Red” both relates to and reconstructs this idea when he writes, “I prefer red in its organic incarnations—rust-red creek beds, sea oats and sumac leaves...But the human hand that paints in red or the manufactured, commissioned varieties of red satisfy my belief in the duality of things” (145). While I differ in my own perception of the manufactured in my essay, I find his perspective illuminating and deserving of mention as it heavily inspired “In Search of Scarlet.”

The symbols and themes present in this essay allow the reader the opportunity to engage with the collection as a whole as they appear time and again throughout the collection. I explain the reason for feeling stuck in this essay as being due to depression and a drug dependency, which serve as prevalent themes in the other essays as well. Despite the focus on a feeling of stagnation at the start of the piece, there is a sense of hope also present which I lace through the entire collection to balance out the sense of hopelessness that heavily weights this collection in order to properly translate the feelings of depression to the reader. At the end of this essay, nature reveals that change is inside of ourselves and need not be sought externally. “In Search of Scarlet” also, of course, introduces my use of colors to describe emotional states, feelings, and

people. This sense of synesthesia occurs in some instances throughout the collection in order to show my personal experience with this condition as I feel things in colors.

The next essay in this collection is a longer piece titled “Like Mother, Like Daughter.” Long-form essays that inspired my writing include those in Terese Mailhot’s *Heart Berries*, specifically “Indian Sick” in which she also happens to focus on her relationship with her mother. Skillfully characterizing her mother as a complicated human being, Mailhot describes her toxic behaviors (“she mocked everything. My desire to be normal or sincere made her laugh” (29)) as well as her favorable attributes in order to show the nuances of a mother/daughter relationship. Summarizing the complexity of her emotions for her mother perfectly, she writes “I think she did the best she could with the tools she had...Sometimes she had to lock herself away from the world, that’s all. I have fond and bitter memories of her” (29). Similarly, in *Lying*, Lauren Slater thinks back to her young observations of her mother’s mental illness and uses these experiences to inform her understanding of her own mental health struggles later in life. Like Mailhot, she characterizes her mother wonderfully as a complex, real person with flaws and talents. Hornbacher does the same in her description of her father curled up on the couch and crying when she gets home from elementary school as a child, which she also observes as a single critical moment in her own emotional development. Borrowing from these writers, I tried my best in the writing of this essay to capture my mother as a fully realized human being with positive attributes as well as flaws who I love yet also harbor complex feelings for.

“Like Mother, Like Daughter” follows my mother and I’s relationship over the years. We have a complicated relationship, and I used my writing as a chance to explore my feelings for her as she unconsciously contributed to many of my emotional struggles over the years, specifically my self-esteem issues. Therefore, writing this collection allowed me to recognize the ways in

which I have internalized many of my mother's own mental health struggles, such as her anxiety and anger issues as well as her problems with addiction. Writing this essay helped me to revise my perception of my mother and treat her and her possible illnesses with more empathy and compassion. Telling stories from various points in both of our lives in a nonchronological format, I show how both of our mental health struggles have affected both each other and our relationship. One shared struggle between us that is prevalent in this essay as well as heavily prevalent throughout the entire collection is that of drug use. In the previous essay, I mentioned just "weed" briefly and quickly, as it was not the main focus of the first essay. However, in this essay, marijuana use is focused on and explained in more detail. It is my hope that the reader is better able to relate to drug use, even if they have never used or are against using themselves, because of the emotional distress I describe feeling as one of the catalysts for my heavy usage.

I also introduce the idea of delusion in this essay, which serves as another small theme throughout the collection because it goes hand-in-hand with both mental illness and drug use. This is explained best when I write, "The high is starting to wear off...I bask in the familiarity of the temporary cloud of delusion I have created under my feet. It successfully does its job of separating my mind from my reality just enough to make it bearable" (24). Another idea introduced in this essay that is seen later in the collection as well is the difference in the person I am inside versus the person I show to the outside world. This piece shows how I witnessed my mother showing a different version of herself to others than who she sometimes was behind our closed doors, and I suggest that I internalized this behavior as well. By not expressing myself fully, I silenced my inner voice so often it became unconscious behavior, which is another repeated idea in this collection.

The following essay, “Toxic” is a shorter piece written in letter format. This piece is comprised of four letters that are dated to span one year, but the contents of the letters tell stories spanning years as the main focus is on my relationship with marijuana. However, I personified the drug as a lover of mine in order to demonstrate how toxic my dependency is and how my depression pushed me into a state of isolation where I was replacing social interaction with the outside world with smoking by myself and pursuing solitary activities. The idea stemmed from writing letters to weed in my poetry notebook in my free time about a year ago in order to try and understand my feelings for it. I think from the outside, drug dependencies and addictions seem strange because you wonder how anyone could let themselves go so far, but I hope that the expression of the drug as an unhealthy/failing relationship helps people to understand, relate more, and observe the subject with an open mind. I also hope to make it clear that I do not aim to demonize marijuana as I am a cannabis supporter, but I want to give a voice to other people such as myself who have struggled with heavy marijuana usage and feel as though they cannot speak out about it because many people and users do not believe it is something you can get addicted to. However, I have witnessed the effects on other young people such as myself who take advantage of the newly legalized recreational use and become irritable without the drug, which I believe is a phenomenon that needs to be talked about more openly.

Addiction or even a heightened fascination with alcohol or drugs is something that is discussed in many nonfiction accounts of mental health struggles. In Wurtzel’s *Prozac Nation*, she mentions drugs throughout her book, referencing marijuana joints, demanding cocaine at a party scene early on in the collection, and explaining how her ecstasy addiction got out of hand during her Harvard years: “...Ecstasy was sweet relief for me. On an Ecs trip, I got to be away from myself for a little while” (210), a sentiment I repeat throughout my collection as I reference

smoking marijuana as a way to separate myself from reality. As addiction is a prevalent disease among those plagued by mental illness, the topic appears in several other texts as well, such as Hornbacher's *Madness* when she describes the first time that she drank alcohol in the essay, "The Booze under the Stove": "I do my homework in a flurry of brilliance, total efficiency, the electric grid of my mind snapping and flashing with light. I am in the zone, the perfect balance between manic and drunk, I am mellow, I'm *cool, cool as cats*. I've found the answer, the thing that takes the edge off, smooths out the madness, sends me sailing, lifts me up and lets me fly" (50). Her description of how substances made her feel definitely informed the way I describe marijuana throughout this collection, particularly in my "Like Mother, Like Daughter" essay but also in "Toxic", specifically when I write "I need you and your dopamine rush just to feel normal; otherwise, I feel numb to my emotion..." (36). I also credit inspiration for this essay to Brenda Miller's flash essay "We Regret to Inform You" in Kim Adrian's *The Shell Game*, as Miller writes this essay in a format comprised of several letters to her past self as I structured my essay around four letters written to marijuana. This form allowed Adrian to engage with her readers in a more direct way as she spoke in second person, which I also did in this essay in order to pull the reader into my relationship with the drug rather than try to let my reader observe the toxicity from the outside where they would not be able to understand it as much.

The next essay is "Pieces of Me", another longform piece that expresses the acceptance of one's inability to fit into one neat little box. As indicated by the title, I show the reader different parts of myself in this essay, telling stories of when I was a socially awkward child ("I barely spoke to anyone at this age and if I did, I blushed. At the doctor's, I'd become flustered when they asked me to do simple things like stand on the scale, simply because my Mother and the nurse watching made me feel self-conscious and nervous..." (41) to when I am a young adult

dropping acid with my friends (“An incense burned at our center and we burned our brains alongside it. We had taken the acid tabs just a couple of hours before” (43)). By showing these various moments throughout my life, I argue that society places too much pressure on people to fit a certain mold perfectly as I always had trouble feeling like I fit in anywhere due to the differing parts of my personality, such as my passion for literature and education in contrast with my openness to drug use and spontaneous behavior. Especially as a maturing young person, these social constructs can be hard to navigate as we are trying to figure out exactly who we are and what we believe in. This connects back to my main themes of finding and maintaining a sense of self-identity, navigating mental health disorders that can arise from this confusing exploration of self, such as depression and anxiety, and drug use.

“Pieces of Me” also references the feeling of being split. This is seen when I write, “Twenty-one now, I point my finger at the wall across the room. ‘I feel like I’m there,’ I say as my finger shakes slightly, ‘but my body is here.’ I shift my hand so that I’m now pointing at myself” (43). This idea is seen at other moments in the collection as well to express how often and how powerfully I feel as though there is a wedge between my physical and mental self that I feel as though has been widened with my mental health struggles and drug abuse. The collection title, *The Air That Moves Between Us*, is evocative of this idea as well, with “us” being my two selves and my perceived separation between the two of them. Further, this essay also goes more in depth with the notion of exerting a certain energy outwardly that doesn’t quite match with my internal energy (“I giggle because I don’t know what else to do, despite making some quippy remark in my head. But that’s where it stays, silenced, because I’m petrified of confrontation” (41)), touching on another prevalent idea in this collection of the silenced self. This idea weaves itself throughout these essays in order to show my realization now as an adult that I silenced

myself throughout my childhood and into my adulthood. This collection has helped me realize my own tendencies, such as this one, and while I still catch myself silencing my voice from time to time, I am aware of it now while before it was unconscious behavior. In this way and so many others, this collection has given me a voice.

The next essay, “Maia,” is a flash piece about taking ownership over my name, which ties back to the main themes of recognizing and maintaining a sense of self-identity as well as feelings of anxiety and even gender. This essay also includes the repeated idea in this collection of being silenced, be it by others or by my own anxiety and self-consciousness, which is seen when I write, “Throughout your elementary school career, you’re mortified every time there’s a substitute teacher. They always pronounce your name wrong. Your anxious and paranoid thoughts lead you to believe that the substitute and your classmates must think your mother is stupid for giving you a misspelled name, so you never correct anyone. Your classmates always turn to stare at you, waiting for you to say your name, but you don’t” (50). I also mention my complex relationship with food while growing up; specifically, how my low self-esteem led me to starve myself and exercise nearly all day, which I also mention in the “Pieces of Me” essay. Disordered eating is touched upon by other authors in the creative nonfiction field, specifically by Mailhot in *Heart Berries*, where she is able to shine light on the effects of gender on eating disorders: “I don’t eat for days so you can run your hands over my ribcage”, signaling society’s pressure on women to be beautiful and thin as a motivator for disordered eating in order to fit into society’s mold of womanhood.

This essay also incorporates the collection-wide theme of nature. By writing lines such as, “I am Maia. I am of the spring and soil. I am the flowers and their colors. I am Maia, rooted in and of the earth” (52), I once again draw the connection between myself and the natural world

in order to emphasize the importance of this human-to-nature relationship. “Maia” also touches on the theme of gender in its last scene. Describing a moment with a male professor, I write, “A part of you feels uneasy because he is a man, and you’ve had some uncomfortable experiences with male teachers in your past. Past fears arise; you foresee yourself stumbling over your words in front of him, overanxiously wondering how unintelligent he thinks you are because of your gender” (52). I include these feelings of anxiety and fear towards a man here in order to foreshadow the main uniting theme of gender in the following essay.

The following essay is another longer essay titled “Prey” that discusses the complexities of gender and the unfortunate reality of sexual harassment and assault. This essay relates back to the themes of navigating self-identity as I flashback to childhood when I was still figuring out who I was and who I wanted to be, gender (of course) as I question the societal expectations and treatment of femininity, and the mental adversities and fear that arise from gendered, predatory situations as well as the spiritual maturation that takes place when one questions the social constructs of gender roles. Literature in the canon that touches on gender roles and inspired my own interest in writing on the subject include Wang’s *The Collected Schizophrenias*, which includes the memorable quote: “I’m still asked by a healthy few if childbearing and/or child-rearing is part of my life plan...And there is also the question posed to me by those who seemingly cannot bear the idea of my not having a child in my life” (131), pointing to the everlasting belief system that a woman’s role falls within the domestic sphere and is, above all else, to procreate. I point to this moment specifically in order to show the tendency of society to perpetuate gender stereotypes, even at times unconsciously, which can lead to harmful experiences for both men and women. As I argue in “Prey”, we need to work to stop gender stereotyping and reconstruct society’s understanding of gender as a whole.

While gender is a spectrum and men get assaulted, too, this essay uses my experiences of being faced with predators throughout my life to establish an overarching theme of predation. Similar to the first essay of this collection, I connect with nature in this essay by comparing predators to wolves and cunning prey to foxes. This allowed me to continue the fox symbolism throughout the collection and have a bit more fun with my description of predation scenes than I would if writing about it more typically in just a humanistic sense. Aside from predatory sexual relationships, the essay also uses the topic of gender to comment on the way we tell women to handle harassment, and ultimately argues for societal change. I argue there needs to be a shift in societal focus on how we educate our youth on sexual violence as well as how we teach women how to deal with it, which has historically been by locking women up in the house and making them be chaperoned for “safety” whenever they do leave the house. I argue the goal in our sexual education should be trying to prevent attacks in the first place, and therefore rather than scaring women into seclusion we should be teaching men from a young age about consent and morality in sexual situations. While gender is the overriding theme of this essay, it also touches on the natural world through scenes of me enjoying the quiet of the woods, as well as the idea of being silenced that has been emphasized throughout this collection.

The next essay is called “Tainted”. It’s important to note that while the rest of this collection follows a pattern of alternating between short and long essays, the pattern is somewhat broken here. “Tainted” was meant to be a long essay but is more a shorter long essay that does not quite fit the mold of a flash piece. I imagined placing this essay as the final one in this collection, but I ended up using a different one as the last essay to bring my collection full circle. However, the placement of this essay here works well to disrupt the pattern and the rhythm and offer some sort of varied style before the ending. This disruption can also serve as a metaphor for

mental health, as sometimes we may stumble or feel stuck in the same artistic mode, perhaps, but we can always move on and end on a beautiful and more hopeful note, which placing “Grave Thoughts” as my final essay allowed me to do.

“Tainted” is meant to express the feeling of being “dirty” or unclean because of struggling mental health. Therefore, the essay does not refer to just a feeling of being physically dirty but also to a feeling of being mentally unclean, as well, because of depressed and anxious thoughts. It shares many of the sentiments shared earlier on in the collection, as well, such as the sentence on the first page that reads, “Sometimes, I feel like I’ve been sleeping for two years. I look at myself in the mirror and wonder how I’ve let myself go this far” (60). In the “Pieces of Me” essay earlier in the collection, I open the essay by writing something nearly identical, “Sometimes when I look in the mirror, I don’t recognize myself...My eyes search for something familiar, something to identify with. I begin to wonder when, exactly, I slipped away from myself” (39). I wanted to keep both of these parts in order to write the specific and complex feelings of heavy drug use and addiction rather than just directly state or gloss over them to my reader. Rather, I present these feelings of disconnect from reality throughout the collection because it has been so prevalent in my life these past two years and it deserves emphasis. These moments also reference the feeling of being split, once again relating back to the title of *The Air That Moves Between Us*.

Finally, “Grave Thoughts” is the last essay of this collection. I was fortunate enough to have this essay published in *The Bridge* after initially writing it in my advanced creative nonfiction workshop last year. It primarily deals with the topic of suicide, and is organized into a neat, symmetrical format that moves between thoughts I am having in the present moment and memories from my past that relate to suicide. After telling two stories about loved ones with

close ties to the subject matter, I explain my own inner turmoil and the thoughts I had surrounding suicide before. Like the first essay in this collection, this one also moves from a state of depression and numbness to reattaining a sense of hope at the finish through a connection with the natural world. Specifically, this essay ends, “Now, my view is painted scarlet by a cardinal perched on a branch of the bare tree. And after a moment of confusion, I remember reading somewhere that cardinals are not migratory birds. They don’t escape winter—they survive and triumph through the desolate cold” (67). Here, the cardinal is meant to represent strength and persistence through adversity as well as hope, like the symbol of red in the fox and the leaves in the first essay of this collection. In this way, placing “Grave Thoughts” as the last essay brings the collection full circle and leaves readers with a final moment of connection to nature, which is one of the main ideas I want my readers to take away.

Writing this collection has helped me to better understand myself, my own flaws, and ways of thinking, and what I believe in. It has shown me even more the importance of the natural world in my life, as well as always maintaining the sense of hope that I try to lace through the undercurrent of each of these pieces. Hope was especially challenging to maintain during the completion of this project as the pandemic began when I was starting it. Pre-pandemic, I found a lot of my inspiration in the classroom and on campus with my peers or out at cafes in my free time. Therefore, I found the shift to having to write entirely at home extremely challenging as I didn’t feel inspired, and my mental health often felt as though it was struggling more than usual due to being stuck at home. I found myself often not really having hope with all of the political turmoil coinciding with the pandemic, but when I did bring myself to write, it was therapeutic and reminded me to find the artistry in my life in order to *create* hope for myself.

What captivates me the most about the creative nonfiction genre is getting to hear writers openly admit their flaws and vulnerabilities and then attempt to work them out for themselves on the page in front of what is basically a live audience. The thought of readers coming into my mind and personal life through the pages of this collection is intimidating, uncomfortable, and makes me feel extremely vulnerable. However, it is my hope that readers are intrigued by my way of thinking as well as the way I see the world, and are better able to relate to those who may be different from themselves, specifically people who face challenges to their mental health as well as addiction issues. I also hope to be a voice for those struggling who may not know how to properly voice their emotional state or addictive tendencies, as well as an example of how to approach resolving these issues within the self. It is also my hope to have each of these essays published as I plan on sending every single one out for publication in order to kickstart a long-awaited career in writing. I have wanted to be a writer since I was a child, and getting these essays published will allow me the opportunity to further pursue this career path by attending graduate school. It is my hope that I will be accepted into a funded MFA program because of this collection so that I can better my craft and further project my voice into the canon.

In Search of Scarlet

In the morning you drive towards the water in hopes of finding red.

The road leading out of your partner's neighborhood is split in two at the end by a white shack with peeling paint that reveals rusted brown beneath. The rust matches the falling leaves that collage themselves in a scattered trail down the middle of the road. You spot crimson ones dropping themselves in pirouettes into the pile and feel excitement lace its string across your belly. After all, this is what you came to see—red creeping its way into the world.

You've felt stuck in the endless emerald haze of summer for a while now. Stuck physically in the heat of summer with its stagnant greens and unmoving air. Stuck mentally in an emerald haze of weed and depression.

You know you need change, need *to* change.

You need to escape the dying, dried-out grass and the suffocating brick of the apartments surrounding, and so you drive and drive and keep on driving. Past the coffee shops and bakeries with their painted windows and checkered curtains, past the gas stations and breakfast joints and fast-food chains you've driven past for years. Even the cute shops with autumn leaves in the windows don't excite you. You feel stagnant. Like a cinder block of disappointment is eternally tied to your waist, blockading you from a sense of happiness that you sometimes think you've caught and lost, and other times think you never truly had in the first place.

You want to sever the string that connects you to the cinder block. Pressing your fingers to button on the roof, you watch the tan cloth of the car's top fold itself neatly down. Inhale the

cool autumn air that brushes its lips against the bare skin of your arms and your cheeks, and then you feel it—happy—and you smile, really smile. And it's real, and it's real, and it's real.

The entire drive you scan the woods, searching the shadows for scarlet. Some trees move quickly towards death; autumn has already bled her temporary stains into their leaves. Others are not yet touched by her. They remain static, green and unyielding. And yet others are liminal. They waver, unsure, caught halfway between orange and green. Open to change yet too scared to commit. You feel for them, imagining they must fear failure the same way you do.

Eventually, you pass your parent's house. It's late morning now, and you know Mom is just coming home from work. Dad probably made her some breakfast. They're sitting at the table now, you imagine, probably chatting. You think about stopping in, but then you imagine them laughing together. If you're there, you think to yourself, they won't laugh together as much. Dad will talk with you, engaged, looking you in the eye, and Mom will look annoyed at your intrusion into *their* conversation, eyes downturned on her phone screen and ears blocked to the words you speak. You will feel her annoyance in the air, clinging to you, and blue will move through your body. When you talk to her, she doesn't answer, and a part of you wonders if you are invisible. You don't need that tension-filled house of blue. No, you need red. You focus your eyes on the road's yellow lines and drive past them.

But even as you drive past, your thoughts turn to your bedroom at your parent's house. You imagine the puzzles and posters hanging on the wall, the books stacked on the shelves in messy precision. In your mind's eye, you see the ivy cascading down from the window towards your desk, its leaved hands reaching for the small plants resting on the windowsill. Next to the

plants sits a wine glass Mom bought you. Its front is painted with the face of a fox distorted by the glass's curvature.

And there are more foxes, too— a coffee mug shaped like one on your bookshelf, a fox stuffed animal resting on a high shelf, a fox statue by the television that disapprovingly stares at you whenever you turn on Netflix. Each one of them comforts you somehow. You've always been attracted to foxes; Mom says it was that way even when you were younger. Your favorites were *The Fox and the Hound*, the Disney version of *Robin Hood* where all the characters are foxes, even *Dora* with the fox named Swiper. You liked them then because you thought they were cute, but now that you're older, you love foxes because they are intimidatingly wise, cunning, sure of themselves. They are an animal unphased by gender—their women are as colorful as their men, unrelenting in their red.

All the things you wish you were. You surround yourself with them in hopes you'll take on some of their personality, some of their color.

Some of their red.

As you near the water, the air seems to change around you. Maybe it's a placebo effect, but maybe it's your soul stretching far out into the world around you, uninterrupted, making you feel massive and miniscule all at once. The hues of amber and carmine in the leaves of the trees become more speckled and varied, making you feel as though you're driving straight into the center of an impressionist painting. Autumn's scarlet crawling her way into the natural scenery makes you feel closer to change, or hope, or maybe even that happiness you think so much about. You think you feel it now, rooting itself deeply in your belly, branching out and crawling through your veins, warming your red blood blue.

As you drive further down the winding road that sits in the middle of a massive lake, you see it. One side of the lake has distanced itself from you. You've never seen it so far away, so far beyond reach. Where the water usually rests her head upon the sand, she has been taken over by the brown pebbled dirt, so the maroon and copper of the leaves are unable to reach the water. They are unable to reflect themselves off of her, vainly taking in their new red. And that's part of what you were hoping to see. That's why you wanted to come to the water. The string of excitement looped around your stomach wavers and slips, just as the water slipped down the sandy shore.

Every autumn, the stains of crimson remind you of the ability to change. Every autumn, you feel inspired by the moving in of red. This year, you lust after change badly. Even worse than before. Maybe even more than ever before. But this year, you worry that even autumn can't help. You worry that this is the universe's sign to you, that you're the water, that you've slipped too far from the changing colors of the leaves. Perhaps there's no resurfacing, no coming back to red.

You park further down the road, backing into a spot so you're able to overlook the other half of the lake. This half of the water reaches her head farther onto the shore than the other one. Trees stand in your way, so while you can't see the red of the leaves reflecting off the water, you know they must be. You tell yourself to keep doing this. Keep making it a point to see the better and prettier side of things, not to get so disappointed by the ugly half.

Refusing to slip out of red's reach, you decide to retreat into the woods to find more. As you walk, boots crunching the pebbled dirt below, you wonder what you'll find in there. Just leaves? A cardinal singing from a tree? You imagine that foxes *must* roam these woods. Foxes far more powerful than those of ceramic and glass that line your bedroom. You tell yourself that

maybe, just *maybe*, this is it. This is the moment you find a real fox. Not a statue, not an impression, not a faint idea or a memory of red. Not one you force into your bedroom in hopes of forcing into your mind. But one that comes to you willingly.

Moving through the reptilian bark of the trees, you approach the edge of the small cliff that looks down on the lake below. From this angle, the water doesn't seem so far away. Its surface dances in the wind. As you watch it move contentedly, you think you see scarlet reflected in it to your side. You hear a rustle in the woods and immediately you're up and speed walking down the cliff's edge, searching for what you think might be *her*—change. Now you're running down the side of the small cliff, down towards the ground, tawny pine needles spraying out from under you and the ruby leaves smacking your thighs as you chase down what you think is a fox.

But when you get to the bottom of the hill, there is no fox in sight. You look all around and don't find her. Breathing heavy, you decide to sit along the water's edge like you always do when you come here. You're on the side of the lake where the water has retreated far from the shoreline, so you have to walk farther than usual to get to it. Looking down to your side as you make yourself comfortable in the sand, you see something red reflected in the water out of the corner of your eye. You dart your head to the side, looking for its source. You don't see anything. But when you lean over the water's surface, your hair gleams auburn in the sunlight.

Your reflection is tinted scarlet.

Like Mother, Like Daughter

There is a picture of my Mom and I hanging in her room. It's part of a collage, and my eyes always struggle to find it in the beautiful mess of memories. I am probably two years old. I'm standing between her legs as she crouches down behind me, her head close to mine and turned to the side as she looks at me with puckered lips, about to kiss my cheek. I stare at the camera, seemingly unaware of what my mom is about to do.

I wish I had noticed. I wish I had been able to take in the way her eyes looked at me—like she actually loved me. I don't think she's looked at me like that in years. I'm honestly not sure when, exactly, things changed between us. I just know that they did.

I woke up to the cramps slitting my insides open. Or at least that's how it felt back then. My nine-year-old body was still getting used to my period after hitting puberty at the unfortunate age of eight. My stomach wound itself in circles and my legs ached from deep inside my muscles.

I peered into her bedroom. She was gone. It was our weekly grocery shopping morning, a tradition we shared in together, and she had left without me. In retrospect, it's such a silly thing, but as a child, it was reason to be upset. A heterogeneous mix of emotions rushed through the floodgates inside me, turning my blood into an ocean of anger and distress. I retreated back to my bedroom, lied down, and cried.

When she came back, I opened my bedroom door. She smiled at me from the end of the hallway until she noticed the rivers of tears rushing down my face. Her eyes squinted in concern.

“Maia, what’s wrong?” Her voice was warm and caring, like the perfect Moms you see on television sitcoms. In my doorway, mouth pouting and eyebrows angrily furrowed, I started to yell at her.

“You left without me!” My voice shook as I cried.

She walked towards me. She was petite and thin, and much taller than me despite only being 5’3”. When she pulled me into her for an embrace, my head rested perfectly on her chest. I melted into her, reluctantly at first, and suddenly all at once.

“I’m sorry, you were asleep. I didn’t want to wake you,” she rubbed my back and spoke kindly and calmly. Her body was warm against mine. Against her, I felt safe. I couldn’t stay mad at her long; I forgave her.

Those were the good days, before it all got so complicated.

The high is starting to wear off. It’s still there, just not as prevalent as it was. I can still feel it in my mouth, like the strangely good ache in your teeth after you eat ice cream. My stormy blue eyes are hazy, shrunken, and red. I feel an invisible pressure pushing on them from behind. I bask in the familiarity of the temporary cloud of delusion I have created under my feet. It successfully does its job of separating my mind from my reality just enough to make it bearable.

I pull on my black polo shirt with the red cursive stitching on the bottom right sleeve reading, “Trucchi’s”. I look in the mirror at the face I sometimes hate. My acne is flaring up from stress and my blonde hair is frizzy and puffing up near my part. Looking at myself, all I can think is that I should have made myself look better when I got home from class at my university,

but instead I got high to create that comfortable cloud I had come to love. I'm out of time, high, and stuck with this appearance.

I jog down the stairs, yell bye to Mom, and make my way from the front porch to my navy-blue Chevy Malibu waiting in the driveway. The drive to work is thankfully only about three minutes, which was good because it didn't leave much time to dread the upcoming six-hour shift followed by an all-nighter spent doing homework.

When I get there, I take my place at the front of the grocery store behind the front-end manager podium. I had been promoted over the summer, and while I had the hang of my new position down, it was still immensely stressful. My life consisted of commuting to college to pursue a BA in English, going to work, and then stressing over both. Just like most college students, I never had enough time to do what I needed to, let alone take care of myself.

One of the cashiers, Serena, walks towards me about an hour into my shift. She's sweet, but she can be a little much. Everyone else is pretty much always rude to her; they roll her eyes and I can tell she notices. I feel bad for her, so I humor her whenever she approaches me. We casually chat for a bit. And then she says it.

"You're like, the happiest person I've ever met."

My smile slips away for a moment. I don't know what to say. I contemplate telling her that I've actually been struggling with depression for some time now. I imagine telling her that lately, the tears start as soon as I close my bedroom door and don't stop until someone comes in. I ponder telling her that my newfound hobby of smoking weed seems to take away the pain, even if only temporarily, and has therefore come to occupy far too large a space in my life.

But I don't tell her any of these things. Instead, I smile and thank her. I give her a chore and send her away so she doesn't see my bottom lip involuntarily start to quiver and fold

downwards into a frown. I can feel tears start to collect in my eyes and I beg myself not to let them fall down, not at work.

In my head, I imagine admitting that I am ashamed of myself. I imagine admitting that I need help.

But when people often come to you for a dose of happiness, and when they constantly expect your usual smile, it's too hard to disappoint. It's too hard to watch sadness sweep over their face and know that it's because of you. I guess Robin Williams was right when he said that thing about the saddest people always trying so hard to make others happy. Who would've thought he was so funny because he was suicidal? It's like the world's largest cosmic joke.

I guess I'm sort of a joke then, too.

She was always beautiful. Classically pretty, with porcelain skin and chocolate eyes. She had royal cheekbones and chestnut hair that burned auburn in fall sunlight. But there was always something different about her. An aura of rebellion lurking beneath all the pretty, lurking beneath all the bible reading and pink frills of Sunday school dresses. She was a 'good girl', but she had a strong spirit.

Her mother was legally blind and had four children after her. Her father was an exterminator in Boston, about an hour commute from their suburban home on the Massachusetts South Shore. Being the oldest of her siblings, she took care of the others constantly. Her life consisted of private Catholic school, babysitting, church, and little else. She wasn't ever allowed to be out late. She was always expected to be home on time for dinner every single night, no exceptions, no matter what. She had no say over her hobbies, she could barely have them in the first place. She had no say over her life.

God and worship were a priority, there was no say in the matter. To her parents, the word of the Lord was the absolute truth, and anything aside from His word was sin. They breathed His teachings down her throat and whispered their prayers into her ears with so much force, she choked it all up as if she had never even known it, and deafened herself to the singing of prayers and hymns forever. She became skeptical of her parents' beliefs. She became an outsider in her own home.

She was all alone. She was trapped.

My poor mother.

It was a talk about politics. That was it. That was what set her off. I can't even remember what it was about specifically, or what I even said. But the cold, dead, hard look in her eyes. The way her words dropped heavy from her lips and hung, frozen and frothed with ice, in the air between us.

"Do me a favor and don't talk to me." Icicles pointing towards me like daggers.

My lips quivered. Warm drops pooled together and became puddles in the corners of my eyes, clouding my vision.

Only the clouds weren't thick enough to save me from that image of her, my mother, sitting cross-legged on her bed with burning eyes of molten rage.

The clouds were never thick enough to save me. Even then, even at nineteen.

I stormed out of her bedroom and into mine, pressed play on my Roku TV, resumed *The Office* where I had left off. I didn't care to watch it anymore. I just didn't want her to hear me cry.

But it didn't block out her sounds- the sounds I dreaded. The sound of her lighter, made with just a flick of the thumb. The sound of her coughing, destroying her lungs.

I smelled the marijuana seeping from her room to mine. It made it impossible to curb my impulses and stop smoking when I was constantly surrounded by it. I imagined the chain of smoke wrapping itself around me in slithering tendrils and tying me down to the floor, making it so I could never escape.

A tear fell on my bare thigh. I was trapped.

"Your mom is so pretty and nice!" Laura exclaims from the driver's seat. Her eyes are glossed over and turning pink around the edges. They are icy blue. The sunlight on the January snow makes them pop against the pale ivory of her skin.

I squint my eyes as the smoke hits the back of my throat. My hand instinctively passes her the blunt. I watch Laura lift the game to her lips with shaky hands. Her lips are pale. Her words replay in my head. I force a smile as she inhales. She's expecting an answer now.

"Yeah, she is, thanks," I give a small, nervous laugh. I always laugh nervously when I'm uncomfortable. The sunlight catches the smoke Laura exhales and creates a blanket of rainbow fog just inches from my face.

I don't tell her about the version of my mother that exists behind closed doors. I don't tell her how much we fight, how much it tears me down, how badly I want someone to listen and understand. I don't want her to hate my mom, or think any less of her. I don't want her to think she's a bad person.

She's not.

In high school, her family moved towns. She started going to public school, fell in with the wrong crowd. Weed and cigarettes became frequent habits. Her parents sent her to a juvenile detention center to scare her after she had started to 'go wild' in response to their overbearing rules and expectations. Soon after, she got pregnant. She was only sixteen. She was afraid to tell her bible-thumping parents. She didn't know what they'd do about the baby in her belly. She waited. They only found out when she started to show. Grandpa, in a fit of rage, tore down all her posters.

They tried to make her get rid of it, give it up for adoption. A teacher at her school offered to buy it. Another said she'd never come back to school if she decided to keep it. She had the baby, my oldest brother. She kept him. She went back to high school, graduated on time.

She is a powerful woman.

When I think of all she has been through, I am proud to call her my mother.

I could feel the alcohol pumping itself in soothing numbness through my body. It created a plush, fuzzy blanket of delusion right under me. A cloud to sit on, separating me just enough from reality. Those days, at nineteen, numbness was essential. It was a way to survive the torments of life, to make it through the rough times until I got to the good.

It had been a good night with my closest friend, Maddie. We had known each other since kindergarten, and our friendship continued despite her moving ninety minutes away to New Hampshire. She had come down to our childhood town of Middleboro, Massachusetts, where I had stayed through the years. We had some wine, clicked on *The Office*, and were now huddled in blankets in front of the fireplace in my living room. I felt happy, a relief even if only

temporary. Only, her words broke through my comfortable cloud of delusion and reeled me back to reality.

“Maia, your Dad called me.” Her freckled face went serious, her raven black hair drooped about her face in angled waves.

My head quickly turned from its position facing the television. My stomach dropped like a stone in water, plopping around in waves of anxiety.

“Wh-what did he say?” my voice was quiet and unsteady. I swallowed the saliva collecting in the back of my throat as she began to speak.

“He said you’ve been crying a lot, like all the time...him and your mom are worried about you, dude,” she looked at me with questioning eyes. She was concerned, I could tell. My body felt fuzzy. The pool of tears behind my eyes unhinged and ran in rapid streams down my warming cheeks. I stared at the specks of the carpet, too embarrassed to meet Maddie’s gaze as she reached her hand over to mine, resting on my thigh.

“Nothing’s really going on, I just—” I gasped for breath through the tears, “I just hate it here.” My back collapsed forward, hunching me over as I sobbed.

I wanted to tell her everything, but I was afraid to open up. I thought my problems were too small to be upset about. They were nothing compared to what others have to suffer through, especially someone like Maddie. Her parents had divorced growing up and it was incredibly messy— she tried to kill herself when we were fifteen and ended up in inpatient care. How selfish of me would it be to unleash something as small as fighting with my mother on her?

But the pain was too much to continue bearing alone. Maybe my problems weren’t that serious, but the constant sadness I felt was. I was afraid I was falling too deep inside that hole of depression to ever make my way out. I desperately needed help.

So, I told Maddie everything. I told her about how depressed I'd been feeling, I told her about all the fights with my Mom. I told her how terrible it made me feel. I was done hiding behind lies to pretend the truth didn't exist.

And suddenly, everything seemed lighter.

I am driving home from work at Sunshine Daycare after an eight-hour shift spent watching too many children, and my nearly empty stomach groans and churns with hunger. My head aches and throbs as if a balloon has been blown up around my brain and is now pressing on my temples before it pops. Nose running uncontrollably, throat scratching; I am miserable. I mentally go over the various homework assignments I must complete for tomorrow morning, and I am even more miserable.

The only things I look forward to are getting home and eating, changing into my pajamas, clicking on *Parks and Recreation*, and lighting up a bowl before I force myself to start my schoolwork. I think to myself how grateful I am to at least have weed and Netflix for some comfort through it all.

When I get home, the back door is locked, and my mother is nowhere to be seen. This is the new normal. I know exactly where she is.

I walk through the front door and into a dark and nearly silent home. I recall the wonder of earlier times, when coming home meant stepping into a fragrant house with dinner warming on the stove and an incense sending smoky tendrils into the air. Mom would be active downstairs; watching *Friends* and laughing along despite having seen every episode countless times, and there would be several projects around the house that she had started that day and

would tell me all about. But now, there was nothing on the stove. There was no incense. No projects, no Mom. Just the cold, the dark, the empty.

I push open my mother's half-closed bedroom door and catch a glimpse of her. She is curled up in sleep, blanket wrapped tightly around her. I go to slink past and use the bathroom connected to her bedroom. Her eyes slowly crack open, revealing slits of hazel looking searchingly out at me as if in a daze.

She murmurs, "How was school?" Her voice is hoarse and deep, muddled by slumber.

Surprised that she is asking me about my day, I simply tell her that it was good as kindly as I can. She gives a small smile. Pleased, I decide not to push my luck and go to use the bathroom. When I step back out, her eyes are fully open. I can see now that they are red and dulled. Her bong rests on the night table closest to her. It's clear to see where I get my tendencies towards substance abuse from.

The things I hate the most about myself are the qualities of my mother I spent so long trying to avoid, only to eventually fall into the same lazy habits and drug dependency.

Her eyes focus on me as she asks how my test went that day. I enthusiastically begin telling her all about it, as I felt I had done well, and she knew I had been stressing about this one. As I speak, her eyes slowly close and she falls asleep again. It hurts a little, but I have come to expect this sort of thing. Besides, I know she is tired from working her overnight shift. She napped in the morning when she first came home, which was always all that she needed before. But now, it seemed like she was asleep more than she was awake.

I brush it off with just a tinge of sadness remaining, and go into my room to change into my pajamas. Suddenly, from the other room I hear a yell: "Maia, I asked you a question!" Agitation rises within me, but I try not to let it get the best of me. I walk back into her room and

explain that she had fallen back asleep, so I left, but she claims that this wasn't the case.

Regardless, she tells me to repeat myself. I tell her, "I'm fine," because I have reached a point where I have started to give up on her and our relationship altogether. I don't want to pretend everything is okay and have a conversation with her. A screaming match follows. I start to cry, like always, as my mother yells at me for getting upset and claims that she doesn't understand what I've been so depressed about lately. I hadn't told her about any of my personal feelings in years, so she doesn't know how broken our relationship is to me now. And at the same time, I love her so much I don't even have the heart to tell her.

She continues to press me about why I don't want to talk to her, but I still hate the thought of making her upset. I remember what Maddie said when I unloaded the truth to her; she told me to talk to my mother and just be honest. I am reluctant to do so, until, finally, she gets me to crumble. I tell her about every suppressed, angry thought I had concerning her that I had stuffed away and tried to ignore for so long.

She stands in front of me, face to face, wearing an expression of horror and despair. "Do you think I don't love you?"

Tears stream down her face, which is contorted by sobs. My heart aches for her, and yet I take small pleasure in knowing that she finally understands how strongly she has impacted me over the years. Sobbing, all I can do is nod- *yes, I don't think you love me*. Immediately, my mom wails as if in pain and pulls me tightly into her embrace. I cling onto her desperately as our bodies heave together in emotional agony.

Pulling away, my Mom looks me in the eyes. "I do love you," she gently yet forcefully tells me, loving yet firm. The Mom I had always known.

In her bittersweet chocolate eyes, I could still see parts of her old self. I could also see her own pain, her own depression. It was impossible to hold onto resentment now that I understood the internal turmoil she was up against, the internal turmoil I had become all too familiar with myself.

Beneath the pain that clouded her eyes with redness, I could still make it out. There it was. Love. Love for me, her daughter. Love like in the picture that hangs in our beautiful mess of memories on her bedroom wall.

Toxic

January 01, 2020

Mary,

I've started this letter at least ten times now. No matter how I arrange the words they just don't say what I want to say because things with us have been so fucking complicated. But so far, in all the beginnings of all the letters I've started to write you, I haven't started with this—I'm sorry.

I've spent a long time now feeling sorry for myself, assigning my problems to your name when I should have been attaching them to my own. I took advantage of you, abused you. I'm coming to terms with my problems, the way I self-destruct with your aid.

You've been my comfort. A thin cushion of delusion separating me from my own life.

And how can you blame me for becoming obsessed? I loved you from the moment I met you when Owen, my high school boyfriend, brought you over, towing your natural beauty in hand. We inhaled you, earthy sweet, deep into our lungs where you planted yourself, a small seed, soon to grow into a tree absorbing my mind. I didn't know then that trees could become parasites.

You were his tree then. You hadn't yet gripped my arm and pulled me into you.

I don't resent him for introducing us. I resent myself for never letting go of the thought of you.

Mary, I mean it when I say it's not you it's me and I mean it when I tell you I love you but Mary I'm sorry I just can't do this anymore Mary I'm sorry.

January 29, 2020

Mary,

I know I apologized already when I saw you in the coldness of my family basement, but I want to tell you again how sorry I am about what I said in that last letter. I didn't mean it; it was crazy talk. I can't live without you.

I can't stop thinking about last night, how good you made me feel. The frigid air around us was made warm by your fire in my belly as I clutched you in one hand, tie-dye printed lighter in the other. I breathed you in deep, willing you to stay inside me forever, in hopes I could lock you away for myself. I have become selfish in my love of you; I would burn you into charcoal just to have you.

Without you I am bored by life, immune to happiness. Food becomes unappealing, music dull and poems rhythmless. I need you and your dopamine rush just to feel normal; otherwise, I feel numb to my emotion or feel too many negative emotions all too strongly. I wonder what it's like to feel normal, try to think back to before you.

I want to remember what it felt like, but I don't believe I am strong enough to live without you. So for now, I'll take comfort in you.

You tasted so good, Mary.

That was the best I ever had, Mary.

You always keep me wanting more, Mary.

January 01, 2021

Mary,

We've made it through another year together, practically joined at the hip. I can't help but feel like something's wrong. Things don't feel right with us anymore. I don't feel anything when we're together.

I even leave you feeling numb now, droopy-eyed and body weighted. You don't flood my brain with serotonin anymore the way you used to.

The way you used to, like that first year of college when I saw you with my friend Alice all the time. You were nearly always on her hand, and when you weren't there you were at least on her mind. I started asking her about you, ignoring the way Alice seemed to be getting more and more tired and less and less joyful, and the three of us started to hang out more. Alice and I were crazy about you, even trudging across campus through whipping winds to light you up behind the football field, cowering behind a sheet of metal we found to protect us from the winter wind. We passed you between us, taking turns with you until we felt you deep inside of us. I don't even talk to Alice anymore now that you're not involved with her. As if the sole purpose of our friendship was you.

I should have paid better attention to what you did to her, how persistently tired and irritable you made her, because you're doing the same thing to me now. And it's confusing, feeling empty and heavy all at once from you.

But that's how you make me feel, Mary. Like I'm floating between physical states. Like the web of roots that connect me to the earth is severed.

I miss the feeling of my feet planted deep in the soil of the earth.

February 5, 2021

Mary,

I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss you sometimes.

Sometimes I imagine inhaling you deep. I picture my lungs, burnt balloons, swelling with you. Try to feel you in my mouth, sweet and piney, tasting of the earth.

But I've learned that I don't need you.

I've been listening to this new podcast. It studies the science of being happy. It sounds sort of like an oxymoron, I know. I always thought happiness was supposed to come naturally.

But I'm learning now that happiness takes work.

That's why I haven't been in touch. Instead of picking you up in the morning I go on walks now. I paint when I feel anxious, try to talk to Mom without letting myself get annoyed. I visit my grandparents. I bake. I run my fingers across my bookshelf and find a book binding that feels like home, absorb the pages the way I used to absorb you. And when I think of you, when I want to see you, I don't run and get you right away anymore.

Instead, I sit with my feelings. I let myself feel that I miss you.

I let myself feel, because for a while now, I've been avoiding my feelings by using you.

Instead of staying inside with you all day, not leaving the house until 2 o' clock in the afternoon, eyes hostile to the sun and turned down, I wake up early. I zip up my Doc Martens and enter the world, eyes not downcast but upturned, cheeks swelling with an involuntary smile.

Snow floats down around me. I stick my tongue out, spinning around as the flakes fall into my mouth and melt there. I swallow the water, thank the sky for this gift.

And then I thank you, Mary, for reminding me to look up.

Pieces of Me

Sometimes when I look in the mirror, I don't recognize myself. I gently place my glasses down next to the bathroom sink and I lean over until my nose is inches away from the cool glass of my twenty-one-year-old reflection. My eyes search for something familiar, something to identify with.

I begin to wonder when, exactly, I slipped away from myself.

"Looks like it's the pothead hour," the Walmart cashier motions in our direction. His coworker laughs. Her gyrating mouth swallows my nineteen-year-old pride in chunks. Sam and Laura don't notice, they're too oblivious. Or maybe it's just that they don't care. They don't mind passing the blunt around on the highway in daylight. They don't mind skunking up the store with their smell.

But me? I care. I'm more cautious, anxious, fearful. I watch people, I listen to them. I soak their words in and let their suppositions gnaw at my brain, where they plant worms that crawl for days until they die.

Sam and Laura walk together in front of me, their shoulders touching as they lean into each other and giggle. I walk behind them like a sort of sad snow sled, kept close behind them only by a thin rope they clench tightly in their fists. If they were to let go, I would be free to be me, and I'd move away with the wind and imprint a solitary line in the snow, away from all the other sleds, towards the deep woods or blue water. But instead, I'm someone else, and that person is high as shit and walking around a store they don't even want to be in.

I know that I'm just scared. It's pathetic to admit, really, when you're nineteen and still don't know how to handle being alone. I admit it internally, persistently acknowledging the fact that if I wasn't scared of solitude, I wouldn't hang around with Sam and Laura.

I watch as they pay for their snacks at the self-checkout, smiling and giggling at their jokes even though I don't find most of them amusing. I opt out of the snacks. I've been eating vegan for a few months now and I've come to enjoy the feeling of being hungry. Just like when I started losing weight as a kid and every day was a competition against my previous self to see how little I could get away with eating.

I had always been on the heavier side growing up. Or at least that was my perception. When I say this now, my mother assures me that I have constructed a different version of myself in my head. One that doesn't match reality. On my memory's canvas I paint myself the size of the moon, belly arched and eternally swollen. Reality, on the other hand, will show a chubby eight-year-old who saw herself as the size of the moon compared to her shiny star-like girl classmates. I started running around my neighborhood persistently and barely eating, convinced that if I lost weight, I would sparkle too.

Eleven years later standing in a Walmart line and I'm still chasing a shine I feel I'll never acquire. Sam sees my empty hands and throws me a questioning look.

"You're not going to get anything?" He sounds accusatory. I feel nervous and I'm not sure why. Sam is good at making me feel this way.

"Yeah, I'm good," I wave my hand at him and his food dismissively. "I'm not really hungry."

"Oh my god, skinny legend," his nose slightly crinkles as he says it. I hear the undertones in his words and wonder if this is the accent of passive resentment. I giggle because I don't know

what else to do, despite making some quippy remark in my head. But that's where it stays, silenced, because I'm petrified of confrontation.

We walk outside and quickly through the parking lot, the cold New England winter prickling the pieces of our skin left exposed. When we get to Laura's car and open the doors, we are met with the sweetly rancid smell of freshly burned marijuana. Tendrils of smoke escape, their fingertips pulling us inside by our jacket collars. We obey them and light up another blunt.

We've just come in from recess. I take my seat, internally excited for the next half hour of "sustained silent reading" time, or SSR for short. Being in third grade, I was one of the mere handful of students who actually used the time to read. Others would simply hold a book up in front of their face while they dozed off or doodle on paper that they secretly placed in the folds of the book pages. The boy who sat behind me was one of these people. He was constantly fiddling with something, and I was constantly annoyed with him for it. But I was also constantly too afraid to ever confront him over it.

I barely spoke to anyone at this age and if I did, I blushed. At the doctor's, I'd become flustered when they asked me to do simple things like stand on the scale, simply because my Mother and the nurse watching made me feel self-conscious and nervous. The classroom, then, was a similar experience for me. There wasn't a single day during my childhood that my stomach didn't writhe in anxiety, or my cheeks didn't warm when I spoke to someone.

During this particular SSR period, the boy behind me seemed particularly fidgety. I was inserting myself into the life of Anne Frank, trying to imagine the horror of living in an attic, when his tapping fingers intruded on the scenes I pictured in my mind's eye. The serenity one

feels in the pages of a book was lost. Annoyed, I simply tried to reinsert myself into the quiet state of the mind when it reads, when thoughts turn from scattered to singular and focused.

I was able to enter that space for a while. But then, a sharp and quick *snip* came to my ears. I felt something graze the back of my neck. I swiveled my head back to find the source and there he was, smirking. My face and body felt hot. Why was he laughing at me?

On my shoulder, a thick, short rope of honey golden hair rested apart from the other strands. The boy behind me had cut off a piece of my hair.

As he laughed, I picked the hair up off my shoulder. I even laughed with him for a moment, despite feeling like the skin in my chest was going to tear as a result of my heart pounding so hard, because I was that scared of confrontation. Being desperately afraid of drawing attention to myself and getting made fun of for being angry, I sat there for a few minutes in silence. I wondered if I was overreacting, if it would be mean to the boy to tell the teacher on him. I was so insecure I didn't even feel confident in my own perception of moral rightness, and spent minutes wondering if what he did was worth being angry over. So many thoughts were going through my head that even trying to vocalize them mentally had me feeling like I couldn't breathe. At the same time, I was afraid of somehow getting in trouble too. My teacher would think that I was a bad kid, I thought, or that I was talking to the boy behind me during reading time and that's why he cut my hair off. Maybe she'd think that we were goofing off and I provoked it. Unaware of my illogical thinking, I could only think of what could go wrong.

Eventually, I told my teacher. She was an older woman, and her already slightly bulging eyes grew wide when I told her what happened. I waved the rope of hair in front of her face as I spoke, her face soon growing to match the color of mine. Only her cheeks were red in anger at the boy behind me, not in embarrassment at having to speak to someone like mine were.

When she asked me why I waited to tell her, I simply remarked, “I was afraid of getting in trouble.”

Twenty-one now, I point my finger at the wall across the room. “I feel like I’m there,” I say as my finger shakes slightly, “but my body is here.” I shift my hand so that I’m now pointing at myself. Andrew sympathetically frowns at me and tells me he’s sorry. We’ve been dating almost two years now, and he’s grown accustomed to my perpetual existentialism. He asks me if there’s anything he can do. He’s good that way. Sometimes when I feel particularly depressed, I genuinely feel like I don’t deserve him.

I tell him no, that this is something I have to do for myself. He nods and tells me he understands, says he’s here for me. Somewhere inside myself, I feel a twinge of comfort at this sentiment as I walk away, preparing myself for the walk that I just told him I was leaving for. But overall, I’m frightened. I’m frightened because my emotions have become mere twinges emanating from a source that I’m unable to pinpoint. They no longer pulsate through my veins or reverberate in my chest and stomach as they once did. As I crave for. No, my body feels foreign, other. Empty. Like a shell I slipped out of long ago.

I am split from myself.

And on this walk, I’m determined to start mending the tear that severed my soul from my body.

The first time I took LSD, we drove to a lighthouse and painted under the stars.

I was nineteen and hanging out with a handful of friends, Laura being one of them. All of us formed a circle on the red, fringed blanket. An incense burned at our center and we burned our

brains alongside it. We had taken the acid tabs just a couple of hours before. We were a bunch of artists, writers, and film students, so we were excited to create during our trip. We pulled out drawing pads and watercolor paints and got to work trying to capture the magnitude of our trips in miniscule 8x5” rectangles. I smacked my paintbrush against the paper without intention, casting stripes and chunks of color carelessly about the page. The simple act of painting amazed me, and I felt like my soul was being awakened to the true beauty of life after a lifetime spent numb and searching for something that I was unable to identify. Each and every one of my actions were producing feelings inside of me, like individual butterflies flying through my organs with each movement of my hand. My stomach and soul warmed at the tickle of their wings.

I felt more than alive. I felt my feet sink into the soil. I felt Earth’s roots tattoo spiderwebs about my ankles, so She could plant me in her power and let me feel, really feel.

The water lapped against the rocks behind us, whispering Her secrets to me. Midnight beams shone down on my skin and I smiled at the moon’s embrace.

Observing this moment now two years later, it’s quite sad despite its beauty. I haven’t felt that intense level of connection, that level of happiness, that level of knowing who and what I was ever since then.

Now, two years later, I go on walks to find just this. To find the real me, the real Maia. Not drug-induced or inauthentically crafted for false friends.

Just Maia.

When I was twenty, I bought a self-help book to start “getting better”. It’s a year later now, and the last hundred pages still remain untouched.

Around the same time, I wrote numbers on the backs of index cards and pasted them to my bedroom wall. Their black outlines were shaky and uneven against the teal blue of the paper, as if I was unsure from the beginning. The numbers deescalated from thirty to one. They were a countdown to stop smoking weed. I thought that breaking off my friendship with Sam and Laura would break off my relationship with weed, but it didn't. I had just falsely placed my addiction on their shoulders as if it had been entirely out of my control. As if I hadn't been the one to buy a pipe and rolling papers and weed, as if I hadn't started smoking by myself more and more, leading to a marijuana dependency issue that would prevail months and years even after terminating the friendship. But I recognized my dependency, so my logic had been that I would ween myself off of smoking, slowly. I had joined a page on Reddit for people who struggle with marijuana dependency issues, and many of them said that weening was often times far more successful than just quitting cold turkey, so I made the plans to try.

But I never ended up stopping. I took a break, and then when college classes stressed me out, I picked up the pipe again. I still pick it up now, when I feel unable to reel my emotions in. When I feel powerless. Drugs have a funny way of doing that to you, of slashing your willpower into nothing and making you feel weak. Even when you want to stop, even when you know you should, you don't. You're stuck in the bottom of a ditch, but the ditch gets comfortable. A part of you comes to like the grime and the dirt, despite seeing bright colors and light above you. You're torn between comfort and color.

Around the time I tried to quit smoking, I also made a workout plan. My college years had turned my small amount of muscle to fat and my energy to apathy. I did my research on the best exercises. I organized lined paper into steps and reps and diagrams. I started going to the gym again. It felt good to sweat. I did research on the healthiest diets. I bought a book on

Mediterranean style eating. At the grocery store, I bought non-dairy coffee creamer and loaded up on vegetables. I made it a point to drink more water, to go on more walks.

But then I hurt myself by accident. Got a slipped disc in the neck, so none of it stuck. Right back to a messy life.

This is a pattern I've come to recognize in myself. I often become too comfortable in my life and reduce myself to a series of bad behaviors despite knowing that they're bad for me. I tell myself that it's fine, that I'll get better one day. I even imagine the Maia that will be there this "one day"—she is pretty and successful, likeable yet eccentric. Sometimes she's a badass lawyer, other times a philosopher who speaks fluent French. Sometimes she is an acclaimed spoken word performer who spent years backpacking across Europe, living life on a whim.

She is always who I am not.

I don't spend my free time learning French. I've thought about law school, but it's no more than a thought. I'm fearful and anxious and scared to travel on my own. And how would I ever perform my poetry with no confidence and a fear of public speaking?

The feats that future, imagined Maia achieve may be exaggerated, but they are not impossible. And a better Maia could do it, I know she could. Like high school Maia, who was President of National Honors Society and secretary of her class all four years. She was motivated and driven.

I know I still have some of that locked away somewhere inside me. But I'm not fully there yet.

And sometimes I don't think I ever will be.

“Yeah, my dick is huge,” the words felt strange falling out of my mouth. Robert turned from his locker, just a few down from mine, and looked at me with the face of amused disgust.

“That’s something Alyssa Leeney would say,” he told me, contorting his face before turning and walking away. I could feel the scarlet in my cheeks as I took my jacket off and hung it up in my locker, horrified at what had just happened.

Robert was my closest male friend. We had met two years earlier in our fifth-grade class, and I pretty quickly developed a crush on him. He was one of those skater boys with long hair who wore tight skinny jeans and Fox Racing shirts. He brought his skateboard to school and rode it home instead of taking the bus. Robert rode dirt bikes. I never had. I started hanging out with other boys who skated, too, so badly wanting to be one of them.

I had only said what I said to impress him. I thought he would find it funny. He was completely right; it was something Alyssa Leeney would say. That’s why I said it. Alyssa was what I wanted to be. She was tall and played sports with the popular jocks. She wore basketball shorts and backwards baseball caps. Her ponytail was long and swayed when she walked. From my place on the outside of the popular social sphere, she seemed well-liked. To me, she bled cool into the air. I wanted to bleed cool, too.

I shut my locker quietly, hoping no one else heard my conversation with Robert. Hoping he hadn’t told anybody about it, I walked into my homeroom. He was already there, sitting at his desk directly in front of me. I kept my head down as I walked to my own and sat down. Relief seeped through my veins when Ms. Hudson started to speak. I didn’t have to worry about Robert turning around and saying something. I zoned out through her discussion of the day’s schedule and went away for a while to distance myself from the morning.

When the morning announcements came on over the intercom and we all recited the Pledge of Allegiance, Kelsey walked in. I watched her hang her bathroom pass up on the wall and bend over the desk next to the door to sign back in on the bathroom sheet. Her dark hair was half-up with bobby pins while the rest hung over her shoulders and back in waves. I wanted to feel how soft it was. What would it be like to have such gorgeous, rich hair? To be so beautiful? She sat down in front of me, right next to Robert. I felt a twinge of jealousy flutter through my stomach despite knowing we had assigned seats. He had to wonder what her hair felt like, too. I so badly wanted to be her.

As Kelsey sat, I watched Robert say hi. She said hi back and they started laughing about something. My attention strayed from Robert's words to Kelsey's outfit. She wore blue jeans and a black lace shirt that traveled halfway down her forearm. You could see through the shirt, but she wore a black tank-top underneath it. As she talked with Robert, she reached behind her head with long, pretty hands and moved her hair from one side to the other. They stopped talking and she looked forward. The upper half of her back was exposed through the black floral lace. I traced my eyes over the pattern, admiring her smooth olive skin peeking out from underneath.

Now, in retrospect, I understand that it was a mixture of both wanting to *be* her and simply *wanting* her. I wouldn't come to voice my bisexuality to anyone else until my junior year of high school when I sobbed as I told my then-boyfriend, scared of what he might think of me.

I had a teacher who once told us to pick a side on a particular political debate.

“Don't be one of those people who says you can see both sides because that's useless,” he motioned with his hands as he spoke. “It's got to be one or the other, black or white, you can't always be in the gray.”

I felt my stomach sway. I was always one of those people. I never knew which side to pick because I would think too deeply about both. I would put myself through mental simulations and hear my mother telling me that you never know what you'd do in someone else's shoes unless you took a walk in them.

At the time, his comment made me feel sick because I was led to believe that standing in the gray is bad. But when you stand in the gray, you see everything. I can see all the gray and white and black shades in between and even other colors, unimaginable, far out in the distance. I can be everything and nothing. I can take bits and pieces from any color I want.

I can even mix them together to make my own shade.

Maia

Your mom says she named you to be different but there is another girl with the same name as you in your second-grade class. People refer to you as the “other Maia”, and you wonder if there’s a main one or if you’re both just others. You imagine the latter is the case—you’re both far too mousey to be popular among your classmates.

Despite having the same name as you, she spells hers differently, Maya, and you insist to your friends and family that yours is the superior way.

You’re particularly annoyed with her one day when she wears the same sweater as you to school—yours red, hers white. When the teacher points it out that morning, your classmates turn to stare at each of you. You watch their eyes trail over you and tug at the ends of your sleeves as if covering your forearms will make you thinner.

At night, seven-year-old you wishes to be invisible so people will stop comparing you to her, or to anyone, or really so that that they would stop seeing you altogether.

Throughout your elementary school career, you’re mortified every time there’s a substitute teacher. They always pronounce your name wrong. Your anxious and paranoid thoughts lead you to believe that the substitute and your classmates must think your mother is stupid for giving you a misspelled name, so you never correct anyone. Your classmates always turn to stare at you, waiting for you to say your name, but you don’t.

You’d rather feel erased by the mispronunciation of your name than embarrassed by the correction of it.

At night, you wish you had a different name, like Sarah or Haley like the pretty girls in your class, or maybe even that you were nameless, or maybe that you didn’t even exist at all.

In fifth grade one of the football jocks is assigned as team captain. You've lost weight after a summer of running three times a day and seeing how little you could get away with eating (you had taken pride in getting yourself down to one meal a day), and you imagine this is the only reason he picks you halfway through his choices instead of last.

When he chooses you, he calls you Mayo. You're not sure whether to laugh or be embarrassed, so you decide on your usual reaction as you walk over to his team: appearing amused to be polite and nonconfrontational while also being extremely embarrassed internally.

You begin to resent your name even more. At a thrift store with your Mom and grandparents that summer, you find a book with your name as its title. The illustration on the book cover is a blonde and blue-eyed woman, a Taylor Swift look-alike that eleven-year-old you wants nothing more than to look like. The back of the book says she is a fantastic heroine, and you never read it for fear of finding otherwise. You unknowingly erase the real Maia of the novel in favor of an idealized version of her, just as you do to yourself. You prefer the thought that someone with your name is heroic, and that maybe you are heroic then by extension, too.

In high school you learn about Maia, the Greek goddess of Spring. You feel a connection to this character—following the death and depression of winter, a piece of you blooms alongside the flowers every year. Invisibility no longer seems intriguing when you can take on the flowers' colors in spring.

And so you begin to like your name, telling people its history whenever they comment on the way you spell it.

At the grocery store you work at the old men especially seem to struggle with it. One of them pronounces it completely wrong as he leaves your line and catches glimpse of your nametag. He proclaims how strange of a name it is and asks you if you're Hawaiian. You smile

out of politeness and tell him no, you're not, without telling him how to say your name. When your coworkers ask why you didn't correct him, you tell them it's not worth it. Your name is a part of you, and you're in charge of who is lucky enough to know it.

It's the first day of your senior year of undergrad, but you sit in the bedroom of your childhood home due to the ongoing pandemic. You log into your virtual class and the professor begins taking attendance. A part of you feels uneasy because he is a man, and you've had some uncomfortable experiences with male teachers in your past. Past fears arise; you foresee yourself stumbling over your words in front of him, overanxiously wondering how unintelligent he thinks you are because of your gender.

You take a deep breath, try to silence the anxious thoughts that eat at you if you let them.

"Maia Daschke? Mia? Is it Maia?" The professor's soft voice echoes through the Zoom call.

"It's Maia," I smile, speaking loudly to insure he hears me. My other classmates are all women, and they smile at me in sisterhood and kindness. The professor smiles back at us, too. I feel comfortable, supported. I don't think about turning invisible or changing my name.

I am Maia.

I am of the spring and soil.

I am the flowers and their colors.

I am Maia, rooted in and of the earth.

Prey

I'm jogging down the streets of my rural hometown when, out of the corner of my eye, I see it. Cherry red.

A sportscar with a middle-aged man at the wheel. He flashes his teeth at me in his side mirror as he bites his bottom lip, straightening his back until he's fully erect in the driver's seat. He sticks his head out the window to get a better look at me. The sunlight throws white and gray specks onto his head of thick black hair.

I make eye contact with him as he stares. I feel his eyes pass over me the way a child eyes their birthday cake, greedy and lusting. Suddenly self-conscious about my bouncing chest, I stop running. I even pause my music as if I can hear his desire in the still summer air around me, it's that palpable.

I'm thirteen. I had to work hard to convince Dad to let me go running by myself, but my small Southeastern Massachusetts town is safe and altogether uneventful, so he ultimately gave me the okay. Now, a part of me wishes he hadn't.

Luckily, a woman across the street is unloading her car. She turns to face the road and sees me, cowering on the sidewalk as far away from the predator in the road as possible as he scans the roadside for his prey.

The man sees the woman watching us. He abandons his chance at a meal, knowing he's been outnumbered and surrounded. Tail between his legs, he steps on the gas pedal, growling with hatred as he leaves.

Relieved, I look over at the woman in the parking lot and wave in thanks. Shaking her head at him, she waves back at me with a disappointed smile.

I understand, then, that Little Red Riding Hood is more than just a fairytale, and that women are accustomed to fighting off wolves.

“Damn, look at this girl’s ass,” the boy behind me on the stairwell of my middle school says to his friend.

I blush and look down at my feet. They can’t be talking about me, I reason, because I’m the weird nerdy goth girl who wears Slipknot shirts and doesn’t talk in class.

As the line in front of me moves, I take a step up and feel something graze my backside. I spin my head around in confusion to find the boy, smiling wide, as he waves his arm back and sends it forward again and again, repeatedly smacking my ass. Hard.

But him and his friend laugh even harder than his hand hits me.

I stare at him, open-mouthed and red-faced. Sixth grade me is too scared to say anything, to tell him to fuck right off the way twenty-one-year-old me does now when men on the subway stare at me even just a moment too long.

I even start to giggle, partly because I’m shy and awkward and I don’t know what else to do but also partly in disbelief, as if to separate myself from my body through the trembling of my stomach in hopes of escaping their ravenous laughter.

I had never been taught how to stand up to a predator because society doesn’t prioritize teaching little girls how to defend themselves. Society’s focus on the education of girls centers around them being sweet and nonthreatening, obedient and polite. And worse, society is obviously still failing at teaching consent. Up until this point in my life, I had never been taught about consent in school. It wasn’t until years later when I was a freshman in college that I sat through my first presentation on the subject matter.

We try to attack this problem from the wrong angle. We pretend the solution lies with women; we tell them to stay inside behind locked doors, tucked safely away from the predators roaming the midnight streets.

But for some strange reason, we don't focus as much on telling the predator to stop preying on the innocent.

That same year on that same stairwell, I am again made to feel ashamed of myself.

I'm wearing a fitted lime-green t-shirt tucked into a black tutu with torn white tights underneath. My emo phase is at its peak, but I feel amazing. I take pride in being the "different" kid in my grade, and I make it a point to not wear the same mainstream clothes from Hollister that my classmates wear (until I, of course, succumbed to this very habit a mere two years later in a desire to not attract as much attention to my body following my middle school experiences). But apparently, my male history teacher did not approve.

As I walk up the stairs after lunch one day, he glares at me from the upper level. His eyes follow my chest as I move up the stairs. Turning to the puffy-haired music teacher beside him, he asks her with a smirk, "Would you let *your* daughter go to school dressed like that?"

"Definitely not," she raises her eyebrows up in emphasis as she speaks. Together, as if choreographed, they shake their heads side to side, moving their eyes over me in disgust.

Despite my shirt reaching my neck and my tutu nearly touching my knees, I am offensive to them.

Because I had the audacity to grow breasts earlier than the other girls in my grade, and because I had the audacity to wear a fitted t-shirt over them, I am offensive.

Because a forty-year-old man feels he has the right to sexualize my body despite my being a *child*, I am offensive.

Because the woman next to him feels the need to go along with what he says the same way women have been pressured to do for centuries, I am offensive.

In that moment, as I walk past them and hear them say these things about me, my stomach lurches forward with such intense shame, sadness, and embarrassment I feel as though I have leapt outside of my own body.

But I am glad because I don't want to be in my body anymore. He took part of it with his words, left me with a body tainted by an opinion I didn't ask for.

The image of him tracing his beady eyes over me in that moment has replayed in my mind many times over the years. I've imagined what I would say to him if I ran into him now. I picture a braver version of myself cussing him out, telling him the only thing he ever taught me is that a woman's body begins being judged when she's a child.

I'm twenty when we're walking down the cobblestoned sidewalks of Boston in winter. The streetlights are bright and city life is at its peak—it's Saturday night. We feel safe. My best friend Maddie and I are making our way towards the shuttle that will deliver us closer to the House of Blues concert venue to see the Menzingers. I had bought her the tickets for her birthday. Suddenly, as we near the shuttle bus, we are interrupted by yells emanating from the darkness of the sidewalk where the streetlights don't quite reach.

The yells include obscenities, phrases like "I'd tap that" intermixing with lots of "damn girls" and more vulgarities. They speak specifically of my friend's ass, and I watch as she tenses

up in fear. I feel the anger overtake me, my whole body burning scarlet with molten fury. I turn around towards them as we walk past. There are about four or five of them. Grown men.

“Stay the fuck away,” I raise my eyebrows and enunciate each word, hoping to scare them away with the sharp glass of my diction. But instead, they leave the darkness they have come to love, where they howl and snarl at us with pointed teeth, and follow us down the sidewalk. A part of me wonders if their animality continues existing in the light, or if they are like werewolves who only grow claws for groping when the moon rises. The other part of me knows the answer, but shies away from the unfortunate truth that predators often hide in plain sight.

Once we’re safe on the shuttle bus, my best friend tells me I shouldn’t have said anything, that I riled them up.

As if I asked for us to be followed, to be cat-called. As if it was my choice to be stalked by a predator.

As if I am an animal up for eating if you can catch me.

As if my yelps of defense are worse than their howling.

“Can I sit here?” His mouth scrunches up one cheek in a half-smirk. My stomach drops.

I’m nineteen, and from my position on the ground cross-legged on a blanket my Nonny crocheted, the strange man towers overhead. I’m in my “happy place”, a spot in the woods that overlooks an expansive pond. I was introduced to it by Laura when we would go and smoke there, and since we’ve stopped hanging out, I have adopted the place as my own mental sanctuary where I am able to be alone with my thoughts and free from the pressures of society and social interaction.

Despite the fear-induced goosebumps on the skin of my forearms, I can't help but think that he's so tall he blends in with the trees behind him. The trees that have become strange sorts of friends during the year-long intense depressive state I've been stuck in. And suddenly I'm forced to acknowledge how much bigger he is than me. How easily he could hurt me if he wanted to.

"Sure!" I tell him, unsure of why I'm saying it even as the word drips out of my mouth. I move over on the blanket, making room for him. A complete stranger. Cigarette in one hand, he uses the other to lower himself casually on the ground next to me. He's bald with black facial hair speckled gray, looks like he's in his thirties. I'm watching his every move, and he smiles at me when he notices as if to assure me that he means no harm.

But I don't buy it.

I start to panic as I realize I've lost control of the situation. Jumbles of parts of true crime podcasts play in my head, stories of rapes and murders and dead bodies found in woods. I begin to curse myself for coming to this spot in the first place, as if I asked to be harassed by wanting to read a book in a pretty place free of people. And as he sits there smoking his cigarette next to me, occasionally stealing glances he thinks I don't notice at my body, I begin to nag myself for letting him get this close in the first place.

I think of my friend who once told me he sometimes comes to this very spot in the early morning hours, when the world is still and quiet, to meditate in the serenity of the water and the woods. I told him I wished I could do that, too, without fearing the consequences. He was confused at what I meant, and surprised when I explained myself, as if I was telling him fairy tales.

If only he could see this now, I think.

I turn my attention from my thoughts to the predator sitting next to me. To win this, I know we have to be playing the same game. I have to stop overthinking and reduce myself to my animalistic instinct like him.

If he is a wolf, then I am a fox.

I refuse to fall into the role of prey.

I am an equal opponent in this war of gender.

He continues barking questions at me, leering at me with his hungry eyes. He thinks he has me cornered, ready for the kill.

Only I've been waiting for my moment to outsmart a wolf.

I answer his questions in purrs. I wag my tail in false obedience and adoration. I move closer and closer, let him think that he is just about to take a bite.

In a flash, I lunge for my belongings, swipe my blanket up with groping claws. Bare my sharpened teeth at him and run away before he can swallow me.

I emerge from the woods, a vixen burning scarlet in the sun.

I am empowered, but I am not unscathed.

Just because the wolf didn't get a chance to bite, just because he didn't break my skin, I am not unscarred.

Tainted

Floral printed dresses and striped sweaters hang neatly in my childhood bedroom closet. Twenty-one now, I've just gone through all of my clothes and reorganized them. I open the dingy white closet door to show my brother.

"See, I have clothes," I tell him, correcting his accusation from the previous drunken night that I don't have good fashion sense. He scans them quickly, barely looking at them, because it doesn't matter what he actually sees in the closet. Michael has always seen what he wants to see and nothing else.

"So then why do I always see you in that?" his eyes scan over me now, and even though he glances over me as quickly as he does the garments in my closet, I can't help but feel as though he's seen every one of my flaws. Skin textured with acne and pit marks I despise, my overgrown eyebrows. My greasy bangs because I've yet to shower despite it being well into the afternoon. The weight I've put on since the pandemic started because instead of using the time to work on myself, I became stuck in time itself.

I look down at the clothes I'm wearing. Gray sweatpants and my boyfriend Andrew's hoodie, the one we got in Newburyport last year before the world stopped. My brother's right—I do wear this a lot. I've bought three pairs of sweatpants since the pandemic started, thinking I might as well be comfortable in my home, and I've just been cycling through them. Wearing baggy shirts to cover myself. I know this is common among most people since the pandemic started, but sometimes, I feel like I've been sleeping for two years. I look at myself in the mirror and wonder how I've let myself go this far.

“Heyyyy,” I jab playfully at Michael’s arm, frowning. I chuckle a little despite taking it to heart. I know I’ve been slacking with my appearance for a while now. I just don’t ever do anything about it. Like everything lately, I just avoid it.

Michael laughs at me and runs down the hallway to his room like a child. It’s fun in that strange familial way, but as he disappears into his bedroom, I can’t help but wonder when he’ll grow up. He’s ten years older than me but still lives at home because he doesn’t think about the future. He never has, he only focuses on the present moment, a luxury that women don’t have because we are constantly forced to acknowledge the ticking of our wombs and the aging of our skin. His presence weighs on my parents, taints the atmosphere of the house with gray moods and thunderous yells. Verbal abuse becomes commonplace.

I leave whenever I feel the storm of my family brewing in the still air of our home. Their emotions cling to me, coat me in their filth. So, I spend my time running from it, from them, seeking the clean air of meadows where flowers dress the grass in hopes their yellow will rub off on me.

Smoking with Laura one night early on in our friendship, back during our freshman year of college, she tells me how horrible she feels. She ashes the blunt we share on her dashboard and passes it to me. I inhale as she tells me about her depression, how it’s consumed her since her assault.

She tells me that she forgets to eat so she never feels well. If she does eat, she eats McDonald’s after getting high. Laura says she’s been getting high all the time, too. She sleeps all day instead of going to classes but then is up all night and irritated. She says hygiene is an issue—it’s hard for her to shower because she barely has the energy to get out of bed. I nod at

her as I smoke the blunt, frown at her in sympathy, tell her I'm sorry. And I really am, but I don't fully understand it. Not caring about personal hygiene seems crazy to me. I had been wearing a full face of makeup since eighth grade, and showering every day was necessary for me to even consider leaving the house without feeling disgusting.

Now, I realize that this was always partly due to my own low self-esteem, but it's also due to the extreme expectations we hold women to. What's especially interesting is that these expectations are often enforced *by* women. Especially in modern times with such a prevalent focus on makeup, any woman without a perfect complexion is deemed as being less than. The shift to popularizing plastic surgery and fillers further perpetuates the idea that women should look a certain way. And aside from looking polished, we are expected to act polished as well. Women are blockaded from a state of messiness both physically and mentally, both by society and by ourselves.

As Laura and I continue talking, I genuinely feel for her, but I don't fully understand what she's going through because I haven't been through it myself yet. As she continues to tell me of her darkness, I only half-listen. I want to hear her fully, but my mind is distracted by this notion of uncleanness.

I'm cranky when I wake up for reasons I don't want to try and understand. I'd rather drink it down with coffee and a morning joint, even now at twenty-one, even after the past two years of struggling with the drug. It builds up the mental dam between myself and my emotions one inhalation at a time. A part of me knows that the chaotic waves will inevitably crash through, but for now I contain them to do what I have to do.

Leaving Andrew asleep in his bed, I enter his apartment kitchen to make coffee. We've been dating almost two years and I practically live with him considering how often I'm over. We're comfortable enough in our relationship to be less than perfectly clean, and while he's not a filthy person, he doesn't keep his home as clean as I'm used to. My mom was a compulsively clean person prone to outbreaks if we made messes. She tended to our house in ways she forgot to tend to herself internally.

The clutter in his apartment makes me feel lazy, dirty. I clean it up until it's good enough to write in without feeling weighed down by it all. Before I pour my coffee, I rinse the mug with soap and water as if it will make me feel cleaner, too. When I sit down to write at the small wooden table by the window, I am suddenly aware of the way the skin on my face feels grimy—as if a layer of dirt is covering it. I walk to the bathroom where I pour a cleansing water on a cotton pad and dab at my cheeks, pressing to lift the filth that has collected on my face overnight. The woman in the mirror is someone I don't recognize. She looks worn, drained. Gray with fatigue and stress. Tainted by an internal storm of depression, self-doubt, and what feels like an eternal fear of change.

It's been three years since I sat with Laura in her car and listened to the symptoms of her depression. The pessimistic part of me finds it somewhat funny that I used to struggle to understand her, and now I'm going through exactly what she did. Sometimes I believe this is the universe's way of getting back at me for being so perplexed by her condition, for daring to fall into a cold judgement of her that I'm now ashamed of. I was naïve enough, then, to fall into my parents' perception of depressed people as "not trying hard enough". I couldn't understand why

she wasn't able to do her homework or clean her dorm room. In my ignorance I was unable to realize that she stopped seeing herself as worthy of her care.

I understand that now that I've experienced it. And I also understand the strangeness of seeing oneself as worthy while also actively doing things that suggest otherwise. I know I need to treat myself better, but it's hard to break habits. To make change.

If you had asked me what the ending of this collection would look like last September when I was only just starting to piece it all together, I would have told you about a lake. The lake would be beautiful and glimmering, and I would slowly move through the woods to reach it. And when I make it to the shoreline, I would observe the careful lapping of the small waves upon the shoreline, and I would take my socks off. I would dip a toe in, and then all ten, and then suddenly I would strip down to my underclothes and slide in, becoming one with the ebb and flow of the water, sharing bodies with the earth.

I would have created some metaphor for the reader about the cleansing nature of the water, both physically and mentally. I would have offered some sort of ending, some sort of closing to this chapter of my life. But there is no definitive "end" to one's struggle against mental health or addiction, no simple solution that is meant for everyone.

I don't want to write that type of narrative, the kind that ends with a straightforward answer to a question posed at the start. There is no clear-cut ending, no simple answer when dealing with these issues.

I just want to tell my truth, the truth of depression and addiction, and that truth is cyclical and repetitive.

Grave Thoughts

Wake up.

Scroll through phone notifications.

See Daily Mail's announcement that another girl my age has killed herself.

The word is bold in the headline: SUICIDE. It shovels a pit in my mind. It digs up once carefully buried memories.

The memory of when I was twelve and my best friend called one night and I didn't answer. I was tired and falling asleep and assumed it was something about Alkaline Trio that could wait until morning, but when I woke up and listened to her voicemails I really wished I hadn't waited until morning because it sounded bad, it sounded so bad and I wished that I could have been there to stop the razor from breaking her skin and when I found out she was still alive I remember thinking I had never been more thankful. And when we were fifteen she really went for it and washed down too many pills with too much booze and got too close to death before she realized she didn't really like death after all and so she called 911 and went and lived in an inpatient hospital for a while, while outside the hospital walls I lived in worry and guilt.

Roll over.

Spot the self-help book strategically placed at eye level on the bookshelf.

Remember what the book says about feeling emotions instead of killing them.

Force myself out of bed and try to clean through the slideshow of other memories playing in my mind.

The memory of when I first started dating my boyfriend and he told me about what his grandpa did to him when he was young and he said it wasn't until years later that he realized what had happened and when it hit him it really fucking hit him and he never told anyone out of fear so years later when his brother came forward with the same story he spiraled downwards into a horrible depression. I remember so vividly the way he looked away from me for a moment and said, "I almost..." his lips puckering out and his fingers straightening until his fingertips touched the tip of his chin, forming a gun. That wasn't even how he planned to do it, but any gesture was easier to make than telling your girlfriend, "I almost killed myself."

Walk towards the window.

Tend to the plants and take in the sunshine.

Remember what else the book says and open the window to let out negative energy.

Spot the tree straight ahead in the backyard, notice how pale and dead it is. The way its dull gray twigs paint the January sky with spiderwebs.

The tree inspires the memory of last January when I hit the worst point of my depression, which entailed a heavy marijuana dependency, a habit of always crying the second I found myself alone, a constant sense of existential dread. And even at that point I wasn't at *that* point—the point of suicide. *Suicide, suicide...* the word seems to bury itself deeper in my mind as if there are more unwanted memories to dig up but I don't know why because I have dug them all up now and I can't think of what other terrible things I have to process until I remember the conversation with my mom during that really bad point when she asked me if I wanted to and I told her no and that was true but I admitted to her that sometimes I wondered if people would

care if I did. I remember the sudden paleness of her face, the trembling of her lips, the pain in her glossed-over eyes. I recognize the same pain now in her texts when she sees me share something about mental health on Facebook and it still worries her even though I've been doing so much better so she asks me if I'm okay and I'm glad she cares but I feel so guilty for giving her that thought and pain in the first place.

It hurts, it all hurts to remember, but I let it.

And when my eyes start to brim over with tears of pride for my growth and for *our* growth, I close them and smile. When I open them again, my view is no longer just wooden spiderwebs in the sky.

Now, my view is painted scarlet by a cardinal perched on a branch of the bare tree.

And after a moment of confusion, I remember reading somewhere that cardinals are not migratory birds. They don't escape winter—they survive and triumph through the desolate cold.

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