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Holes Where People Go

Lucienne Quirk

Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

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Critical Introduction to *Holes Where People Go*

Holes Where People Go is a short story collection that explores an inaptitude to properly feel and process grief. Each narrator in the collection begins by avoiding the acknowledgement of their own grief and loss, even while they're convincing themselves otherwise. When outside forces arise that confront and challenge their emotional stasis, there is a promise—yet never a certainty—that they may change. The titular hole, therefore, is not just a metaphor for the unnamed places lost people occupy in our subconscious, but also the defensive willingness to keep them there. This is where I feel this collection offers something novel: it is hardly about growth and healing from grief, and much more the inability to address it. Yet it does not frame this stagnation as failure. My intention in this collection is to observe the ways in which we often stay in place, without denouncing or trying to fix that tendency. It's part of human nature to not free oneself from pain—from the unexplored grief, the hole we put people in. And the end of every story has the same promise as every moment in life: that there is an opportunity to start digging oneself out.

My preoccupation with loss is inspired by a small group of contemporary authors. I'd read Amy Hempel's *Reasons To Live* at the very beginning of the writing process, and I was inspired not only by her narrative voice, but the narrator's constant "working through" of grief. "In The Cemetery Where Al Johnson Was Buried" was her most influential short story—I revisited it time and time again to appreciate the way she conveys loss. Even more impressive, however, were the ways she allowed me as a reader to conceive loss—to transact with the text and make meaning from it. She refuses to name characters and describe facial features. More strikingly, her narrators don't indulge in sharing their emotions. It's the reader's task to "co-author" the text through the scaffolding she provides. I realize this ability to summon authorship

in the reader is part of a larger literary movement of writers who, in Louise Rosenblatt's terms, conceptualize readership as a "transaction" between reader and text (xvi). Regina Durig beautifully describes how literature is "porous," and that meaning is often created out of the reader's own interpretation of incomplete parts (312). Inspired, I also omitted the smaller details I felt would get in the way between the reader and their own construction of characters— things like the names of narrators, facial features, and so on. Meanwhile, I tried building up opportunities for scaffolding, where the reader could use what I've provided to achieve their own reading of the text.

I also revisited the work of Haruki Murakami, whose work largely inspired me to write in the first place. Many short stories of his are permeated by loneliness and absence— I think specifically of "Kino," "UFO in Kushiro," "The Year of Spaghetti," and many others. His characters are often haunted by people who've left them. I was amazed that there was a distinct feeling he created through absence— and I tried, despite my limitations, to recreate that.

Writing *Holes Where People Go* was a discovery process, one which I wouldn't have pursued without the influence of Lynda Barry, a graphic novelist I studied this semester. Having little previous experience in creative writing made me wary of freewriting; I thought I'd need outlines, formulas, and fully-formed ideas to support my inexperience. Yet this semester, I was influenced by Lynda Barry's *What It Is*, a multimedia book outlining her theory of storytelling. Although Barry creates graphic novels, her work transcends narrative genres and informs writers of all disciplines on how to let narrative develop organically. She debunks the myth that meaningful and insightful art must be conceived and deliberated upon. Rather, she equates her own artistic process to the untampered exploration of children's drawings: creating simply for the sake of seeing what unfolds on the page, and "NOT KNOWING long enough for something

to take shape!” (135). Her own work, which has merited the MacArthur fellow grant, testifies to the effectiveness of her approach. Reading her graphic memoir *One! Hundred! Demons!* for my senior seminar gave me strong reasons to put trust in the discovery process, and see what I could create.

Characters repressing their own experience of loss manifests itself in different ways throughout each short story. In “Menkaura’s Queen”, the narrator avoids grieving for a lost friendship by preoccupying herself with a new pet. Unable to face that she had lost her best friend, she begins speaking to us by saying that she “got the gerbil three days after Kate moved out”. In doing so, she seems to be cognizant of her own avoidance: there is an implied connection between these two events, and she implies that fostering this animal is an indirect coping mechanism. She also avoids addressing a hole in the wall that she and her best friend used to cover with a wall tapestry. She mentions having tried to fill the hole with spackling paste she bought from Home Depot, but was unable to finish the project. Later on, when the narrator awakens to find that her gerbil is lost, the narrative ends with her looking into the hole in the wall— and imagining briefly that her best friend was on the other side. Though she seems to realize the unaddressed depth of her grief, an assessment of her situation leads us to believe she will continue stagnating: she has not moved out of the apartment she shared with this best friend, nor does she seem to take any actions toward it: the space itself seems to trap her in the stage of denial. Yet her lingering on the hole in the wall opens up possibility for her to begin— and she dreams, illogically, that the hole could be a way out.

The narrator in “King Richard’s Faire”, on the other hand, isn’t distracting herself from grief. Faced with the inevitability that her grandmother will die fairly soon, the narrator launches into an inner monologue on her perceptions of grief during a drive to the faire. But it’s clear

through her tone that there is no air of seriousness: she is constantly imagining and reimagining death as a sort of amusement. Her humor leads her to imagine people dying of eating too many cranberries, of people being sucked into tubes, and of her own grandmother having an unburied grave because she'd like to be "checked on". Throughout the narrative, this sardonic tone affirms to the reader that she has no true encounter with or meaningful perception of grief. Yet a phone call from her mother changes her tone dramatically. She prematurely conceives the phone call as a sign that her grandmother died, and, after learning that nothing had happened, she spirals. This brush with death—however fictional it had been—was far too real and immediate to process. Still in line for the faire—a gaudy, light atmosphere—she leans on her boyfriend for emotional support. We end the narrative with her occupying a liminal space between experiencing and not experiencing loss, with the gates before her promising a "Translation", or change. We stop here and wonder if she will walk through—thereby signifying a new outlook on death—or revert to her old sardonic approach.

Lastly, "Leaves and Rainwater" is told through the perspective of someone whose childhood friend had killed themselves two years ago. The temporal distance between the suicide and the event prompting the narration already signals to the reader that she has been repressing this loss. In fact, it is the actions of her mother—not herself—that confronts her with reality. Yet like the narrator in "King Richard's Faire", she too misses the mark. Her tone and the contents of her recollection of her lost friend fails to strike an air of sincerity; she talks at times as though she's still there—a sign that the grief hasn't been fully processed. There is also a layer of failure—she wonders if it is too late even to grieve, and if she shouldn't simply because it's taken so long. But there is the promise of change towards the end. Sitting with her mother in the dining room, the two think about Rebecca for the first time in a long time. The story ends with the

possibility of opening oneself up to loss: “Is it too late to let you in today? Would we be forgiven if we started?” The questions close the short story collection, and echoes out from the other two narrators: what would happen if we were to let loss in? How would it feel to begin?

This creative project was a form of self-discovery, with the theme of unprocessed loss stemming from my personal experiences. I borrow Lynda Barry’s neologism of the “autobifictionalography” to properly identify the work; certainly there are fictitious elements, with made-up events and places. And yet it is so directly informed by my own experience that it would feel more fictitious to call it a “work of fiction”. To a general audience it could be passed off as such. But were my mother, grandmother, or significant other to read this text, they would see themselves in them.

The self-discovery I experienced was one about grief. Beginning the project, I had a compulsion to create an archive of narratives from when I was a “grief-less” person. I had the feeling that there needed to be some stories I made before I inevitably lose someone close to me. Perhaps so I can look back, as an archeologist does, and piece together what it must have felt like to not know loss. However, while the project was begun on the premise that I was a grief-less person, the stories that unfolded seemed to challenge that view. The first story in the collection, “Menkaura’s Queen”, explores grief as I know it consciously – the experiences I’ve had with losing people who did not die. It is a prelude to grief; we get a taste for what grief is life when we lose our first friend.

The second short story, “King Richard’s Faire”, explores grief as I anticipate it. It follows a character undoubtedly in my own position, one who has her “death virginity in-tact”. The short story reveals the ways in which we know grief before experiencing it – we have an idea of what it is, and that idea shades the event itself.

The last story in the collection, “Leaves and Rainwater”, was a realization of the grief I have experienced and repressed. This final story contradicted my original assumption of my life having been “griefless” up to this point by confronting a major loss I experienced yet didn’t consciously address. The creative process of writing seemed to free the memory up. It’s this quality of writing that likely caused Lynda Barry to title her method as “Writing the Unthinkable”. Hillary Chute, a prominent scholar on graphic novels, surmised that Barry’s writing was a means of expressing what cannot be remembered, yet also cannot be forgotten– the latent trauma that sits within the unconscious (114). If it were not through the direct experience of writing this short story collection, I may have only grasped that idea conceptually and not through practice. The central theme of the work– that we cause ourselves pain by avoiding what is painful– ultimately sprung from a quality of my own character that I did not quite realize until I started writing.

As my first serious foray into creative writing— in my very last semester of my undergraduate experience— *Holes Where People Go* assured me that it is likely never too late to open up. I thank my professors for having supported me throughout this project. Thank you to Dr. Bruce Machart for having believed in me— despite my lack of experience— and being an important resource. Thank you to Dr. Ann Brunjes and Dr. Kathryn Evans not only for reviewing my manuscript, but having played instrumental roles in building my confidence as a student and writer. I am glad to have taken the chance to learn from each of you, and graduate with my first collection of short stories as a result.

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Holes Where People Go Manuscript

Menkaura's Queen

I got the gerbil three days after Kate moved out. I don't know why but it seemed polite to wait to bring it to our...my...*the* apartment. Maybe I couldn't admit that I was adopting it in place of something else.

Kate would have given it a name right away. Tinky, probably, or Button— she always got to name the pets she had at her parents' house, because she was the oldest. I even brought her to the shelter and gave her the privilege of naming each animal. She was good at it. Afterwards, we'd pretend it was all legal, on paper. Besides, the names she thought of were better, more real than the ones the animals were surrendered with. That was the artist in her.

"Did they ever find Two-Beaks?" she had said once while painting. Two-Beaks was a parrot. A new guy had let him out of her cage by an open window. That bird had been there since I started volunteering.

We didn't, I said, watching her dip her brush back into the palette, creating a new shade of blue.

"Where does a bird like that go? I mean— it's so far away from. You know. What it knows." She turned to me with a peculiar look. "Do you think it dies?"

I looked at her painting over her shoulder. It was a blue bird—just like Two-Beaks— on an abstracted branch.

"I don't think they die. But I'm not sure they live either. One day they just-go."

And while I carried the gerbil with me I thought of Two Beaks again, wondered if they found him. I wondered how the hell he carried on.

I opened the door to the apartment. Kate and I would laugh when either of us would come in after a day of work because it was so comically loud. Now it was just loud.

The front of the apartment greets you with a wall which slants awkwardly into the beginnings of what could've been a kitchen but is more so a kitchenette. It had been painted a rust orange as a last goodbye kiss to the 70's, and you can still see the fringes where the carpets used to be— before someone rediscovered the floorboards underneath. The paint had light squarish stains where Kate had framed her art. Turning into the kitchenette, the hallway opened into the living room, which always smelled like burnt popcorn and cigarettes. In the middle was an olive colored couch caving in on itself and a television set we found on the side of the road and took because it was “nostalgic” (The only reason we hold onto crappy things). We thought we were funny and had placed a Beatles tapestry saying “Let it Be” over a hole in the wall beside it. She took the tapestry with her the day she moved out—that was three days ago—, and I think the first thing I did was drive to Home Depot to seal the hole up. When I got back, I had taken the scraper tool in my hand and just by putting the spackling paste against the wall I surprised myself with a sudden burst of sobbing.

I ended up not fixing the hole. Instead, I set up the gerbil's tank there so that it at least wouldn't be such an eye sore. Walking into the living room, I set down the carrier cage on the coffee table and inspected the tank, checking that everything was ready. First there had needed to be a layer of substrate— a deep layer, enough for the gerbil to burrow in. (Mongolian gerbils can make tunnels in the Gobi desert that can span three meters and have over twenty entryways.) Then came the fixtures— there needed to be a drip-resistant water bottle, a food bowl, a box filled with sand, and some hiding places. And at last was an enormous wheel. It seemed to take up half of the enclosure. It was not made of plastic— gerbils can chew through plastic— and on closer

inspection it looked ancient, even though I know it was mass-produced at the pet shop. The color of sand. I spun it gently, and it all blurred into one brown orb. It was funny—I could hardly see it going.



Last year Kate and I were at the Museum of Fine Arts together, in the Egyption section. We were looking at *Statue of Menkaura and his queen*, an ancient couple standing side by side. I was looking at the expression in Menkaura’s eyes; he seemed worried almost. His hands were balled into fists at his side and his back was rigid as he looked straight forward into this museum, two thousand years and miles from home. But his queen put one of her hands behind his waist, wrapping around his abdomen. And she put the other hand gently on his quaking forearm. She too looked ahead. Menkaura had one leg by his side, but the other leg seemed to move forward into us. Stepping right into the museum.

“Cool,” I said.

“Why are you whispering like we’re in a library?”

“Uh, it feels polite.”

We both laughed.

“Hey. Look at this.” I stood in front of the statue of Menkaura and let my face assume a stony gaze. I put my arms balled in fists and stood straight.

“That’s so stupid,” Kate said. She had a shiny way of laughing, sort of like the sound candy machines make after you put in the quarter. Or the bell on your first bike.

She double checked that we were the only ones in the exhibit. Then she went to stand next to me with equal stoniness except she hooked one arm around my waist and put the other over my arm. We stood there in rocklike silence.

I remember that her hair smelled like oranges and matchsticks. And that when she breathed I could almost feel the little peach hairs on our faces touching. And that her arm held me in snug; she was wearing wool or something heavy and rich and I could feel the warmth of it going into me.

I tried to take a step forward— the way Menkaura seems to do— but I felt myself lose balance, and I grabbed onto Kate’s coat. We tumbled onto the tile floor with one of Kate’s silent shrieks and a short dull thud.

“Ow,” she said, laughing. “My butt.” She rolled over onto her side, lying face up on the tile. Her necklaces were falling on her chin like little shooting stars.

I sat up feeling dizzy and a little out of breath. We laughed for a little bit and then we got quiet, just sitting. It was a lot different looking at everything from the museum floor. All the art looked long and more mysterious then, like it was being stretched into time and transported away. Kate looked different too; when she looked at the walls her face got heavy and soft. I watched her eyelashes move and thought about how she too was a mystery to me— a mystery even though we’ve known each other since middle school. Nothing should make me feel like that. I’ve seen her cry more times than I can count, I’ve seen her put on pads, I know how many days she’ll still eat something that’s expired. But when I look at art with her I’m reminded of this pulling thing in her and I know then that I’ll always love her but never know that pull, no matter how many times she brought me to the museum— and tried to show me.

“Look,” she said, still lying flat on the floor. She pointed at the sculpture just in front of us, at the very back of the exhibit. It was called the *Colossal Statue of King Menkaura*.

I scooted closer to the plaque to read about it. It had black and white pictures from when it was excavated in 1907. Apparently his head was found in a sand dune when some people from

Harvard were digging in Egypt. They put together the fragments of him and let an artist named Joseph Lindon Smith make the rest. In 1909 the government of Egypt surrendered him to the MFA. He sat in regal solitude on the suggestion of a throne.

“Where’d his queen go?” she said. Her question hung in the air, and it mystified us both. It was a pretty good one. Had she been lost in the dunes somewhere? It prompted Kate to sit up, and we looked at the statue together. I could feel both of our minds tracing the plaque. And I felt the air whistle and sing like it does in sandstorms.

“If I was a statue and I was lost in the desert somewhere, would you find me?” I asked.

Her eyes widened, light, lofty. Then she laughed, and her gloved hand held mine tight, squeezing. “Even if it was only your head– I would find you.”

I’d never held a small animal in my hands before.

I know that sounds strange since I volunteered at a shelter. But people who volunteer at shelters will tell you there are many different positions. I just fed the animals and cleaned their poop– I was never a handler.

My professor had handled the gerbil for me, smoothing its fur beneath his huge hands, like it were a common housecat. It was just ridiculous, seeing someone that massive handling an animal so small. He had been sitting casually on his office desk, bending his neck awkwardly so as not to hit the dangling ceiling light. He was fat and bald like the giants in fairy tales. His name was Dr. Lambe.

“You know she is going to be nervous,” he said, his voice taking up all the space in that tiny room. With one deft movement, he slid the little gerbil into its carrying cage. I was amazed– it was like watching a magician hide a rabbit in their hat.

How had he picked her up? One hand— underneath the stomach? I gently set the carrying cage on my kitchen table. There was a small hole at the top, hardly the size of a dime, and when I peered through with one eye I could see the creature inside. Its brown fur bristled over its heartbeat; its whole body seemed to tick. But in that motion there was also so much stillness— its perfectly arched back, one black eye in profile, as still as a stone at the bottom of a river. A small shiver— a wink— and then back to that continuous pose. There was motion in stillness, and stillness in motion.

I lifted the clasp at the top, opening up a small door. The gerbil jumped— I was amazed at the height it could reach—straight out. I lurched forward to close my hands around it. I almost thought it slipped through— I could hardly feel it, but within my hands I heard a small squeak. Carefully lifting it up, I could feel its rapid heartbeat— the fur rippling and contorting in the palm of my hand. One black eye in profile.

“Gerbils are a pretty anxious species,” Dr. Lambe reminded me in his office, scratching his belly. “And who can blame them— one day they were in a desert, or a steppe, and now they’re here.”

The gerbil was named F-8 for the undergraduate lab study she had been tested in, according to him— F for female, eight for distinction from other females. The research was testing a new brand of anticonvulsant drugs, for which Mongolian gerbils are common lab subjects. The researchers would blow compressed air into the eyes of epileptic gerbils to induce a seizure and study the drug’s effects. F-8 had to be removed.

The problem in the research design cropped up from an unexpected development between each test subject. The eight gerbils were kept in a forty gallon tank, a good size. But the amount of space within the tank resulted in “clanning”, Dr. Lambe said— “Think of it like the cliques in

Mean Girls”-- and the female gerbils split into territorial factions. During the clanning process, F-8 was ostracized from both major groups, which would attack her on sight. Once she was removed from the study, the department was unsure what exactly to do with her.

“I’m the department oddball,” Dr. Lambe had said last week, on my way to meet F-8 for the first time. “Everyone else is fine with euthanizing it. But I’m not. Which is why we need you.”

We were walking briskly through the Science and Mathematics center. I followed two steps behind because the hallway wasn’t large enough for us both.

“Me, specifically?” I asked, towing behind. The professor’s gait was hard to follow.

It’s not like I don’t need you, Kate had said the morning before.

“Not you specifically, no. We never need specific people. But we need someone *like* you”. Suddenly realizing, he turned around– I had to step four steps back– and stopped by a door on our left.

“Someone who, uh, works at a shelter?”

“Someone with animal experience, sure. But something else.” He took out his university card and swiped it along some black detector in the wall. A gentle unbolting sound– and he turned the door handle.

“Do you remember,” he said, propping the door open, “when you were in my fieldwork course, and you were studying the pH levels in Raymond’s Pond?”

I stepped through. It was not what I imagined a lab to look like– sterile and white– but in many ways it was a normal room, just with extra jugs on the walls, and some equipment I couldn’t name. At the center of the room was a large glass tank, and in the corner– a small one. I walked towards it.

“When we thought we lost you,” he continued, “you had been squatting in the mud, watching a dragonfly with one wing.”

“You gave me a C in that class,” I said. I approached the glass and tried to see where the life inside was, but I could only parse my own reflection.

“Well—your work wasn’t meeting the course requirements. But I remember seeing you there, and I thought, ‘this is the only one who gets it!’”. He laughed, a rasping noise that tumbled open and shook the air. It was hard for me not to see him as some giant Buddha who could crush me in a second flat.

Then I saw her... her black eye looking out at me.

“That’s why we need someone like you. To care for small things. Forgotten things.”

I ate a bag of oyster crackers and four leftover crab rangoons for dinner, then spent the night sprawled on the couch with the TV droning in the background. I’d been sleeping in the living room ever since Kate moved out so I could turn off the heat in both bedrooms and save a little on my bills. I knew I couldn’t afford the apartment on my own next month— I had to find another roommate soon.

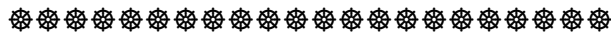
When I opened up my roommate advertisement on my phone, I knew some people had already responded. I saw the notifications. I saw new addresses— all places I could move to. And if I opened them tonight, I could go through that process— that hard-edged, tin-eating process of getting to know someone all over again, all the way from the beginning.

My finger hovered over her screen— maybe I would open them tonight. And then I put down my phone, turned to the side.

Once more, with an air of hope, I turned around and looked at the tank on the kitchen table to look at F-8. For two hours, she didn't move in her cage— she stayed quiet, petrified in the right hand corner of the wheel. Here and there her tail flickered, and her head looked slightly left to right— but hardly any movement.

I propped my arms up over the couch, waiting. I wondered if I had done something wrong— if I had done something to stress the animal even more than what's to be expected. I knew gerbils were prone to seizures. Is there such a thing as a seizure where one stands completely still? Static on the outside, but inside— some kind of motion? I lingered there, helpless, before returning to the couch.

In the morning, I went up to get a glass of water and I heard a skidding sound. F-8 was running on the lattice wheel. I stopped just to watch her go and go and go. It was like she was running for her life.



That day and the days following, I was amazed by how much that little creature could run— how passionate it was, and yet also so distant— that black eye never showing an emotion other than quiet, steady anxiety. She would run on that wheel, sleep, drink, eat, run on the wheel again. Concerned, I had taken the wheel out of the enclosure— just to see what would happen. Nothing did. The gerbil just stood still. Slowly, I placed the wheel back. On it went.

I went to the internet. Maybe there was something I was missing. When I browsed through some articles, I took notes:

- Gerbils are social animals. If they don't live with other gerbils they grow depressed.
- Gerbils can get anxious if they don't have enrichment activities to do.
- Gerbils should be let out of their tank an hour each day for exploring.

- Most all Mongolian gerbils in the United States are descendants of a single lab in 1954.

I wrote these in her journal in lieu of paying attention to my organic chemistry lecture.

I'm going to be behind in this class, I thought— oh well.

The first time I let her out of the tank, she was scared. I had made an enclosure on the living room floor out of cardboard pizza boxes I forgot to recycle and an old blanket. After watching a fifteen minute YouTube tutorial— at half speed around the most important parts— I carefully lifted Effie out of her tank, feeling her heartbeat in her hands. I had learned to try soothing her by combing her back lightly with the bristles of a toothbrush. Then I would kneel in the enclosure space and, with hands as light as dragonfly wings, set Effie free.

Effie at first did not want to explore the makeshift enclosure— she still had the habit of standing still for an odd spell— but I waited. Sometimes I would catch myself whispering to it: *Go on. It's okay*. And I would take out the toothbrush again and gently brush her back. The first few days that's all it was. Then I would place the little creature back in her tank, and right away she would hop on the wheel, and run.

Freedom was not a comfort to animals. And is that really different from people? *I am not comforted by freedom*, I thought, looking around the big empty living room— all to myself. My tank.

Kate always used the living room to bring over her friends from art school. Each of them would bring their supplies and set up camp on the living room floor, the kitchen table, the couch— and there would be a steady hum throughout the space, of people making art together. Kate would usually take up a canvas on the floor with some newspapers and paint with her fingers. Sometimes she would ask for the thumb prints of other people— “Could you put it

here?”-- and she would create fragmentary shapes out of them: the suggestion of a grape vine, a starry sky, the sliver of a face. Two thumb prints side by side-- a butterfly.

Effie would go outside her comfort zone the smallest bit each day. First, she wandered a few inches here and there, sniffing, sometimes trying to burrow into the cardboard. Then she would be a bit more confident-- looking underneath the blankets, climbing on my arm.

And one day I had to gently cup my hands to keep Effie from slipping underneath the couch. *Got you*, I whispered, -- *I’ve got you*.

1935: 20 pairs of gerbils are relocated from the Mongolian steppe to a lab in Kitasato, Japan.

1954: Dr. Victor Schwentker takes 11 gerbils from Kitasato and brings them to the United States.

2022: A gerbil in Boston is relocated after being ostracized from its own kin in a lab experiment.

Generations of movement, of being uprooted, of looking for thick sands to burrow in and stay in the earth-- and then to be taken out. Put somewhere else. All over again, the struggle to find it. The sand keeps shifting.

How did it learn? That little thing, the loneliest thing. That Effie. I held her in my cupped hands, feeling the beating of her heart. The softness of her fur gave off such warmth. When I held her up to my ear I could hear her chitter. I wish she could tell me how she learned. How did she learn to climb off the wheel-- to slide under the couch?

That night I had a dream.

I didn't know where I was at first. In front of me was an endless desert, so wide and flat I could see the horizon curve on the corners of my eyes. It was golden-yellow like it was hot, and yet it was so cold and felt so high. Above me the sky was clean and blue, with only the smallest wisps of cloud— no rain. I wondered how I ended up in a place like this.

I looked down and noticed I had the carrier in my hands— the one I had brought up the elevator with me. It was sandy from traveling for so long. I looked inside and there was Effie, looking at me with her single black eye.

Of course, I thought, this is Mongolia. We are in the Gobi Desert. And I had a parallel thought that went like this: *this is the desert where Menkaura is.* And it made perfect sense.

Then I knelt like I did in the enclosure and took Effie out of the carrier. Gently, I let its feet touch the warm golden sand, and I felt a sturdy, strong feeling inside me—as if I could feel the connection between animal and habitat manifest there, that connection that surpasses generations of domesticity, surpasses time itself. At last she was at home. The little animal moved forward cautiously, found a spot in the sand, and burrowed in.

Then another gerbil came out of the carrier— *this is F-7*, I knew, though I didn't know how. F-7 scurried out quick and went into the sand, burrowing beside F-8.

Then more gerbils came— first F-4, then F-6— and then gerbils I did not know and yet also knew— *these are all the ones from shelters, every single one*— and they came flooding out. Their hides were tan and golden like the sand, and when they all poured out, hundreds of them, then thousands— they made the illusion of moving sand, *as innumerable as the sands of the Ganges*. Their bodies moved and shined like river water, all going in the same direction— somewhere off in the horizon. And as they moved they were moving the earth along with them.

In the thousands of thousands of moving bodies, I knew F-8 was there; she was calm, relaxed, purposeful even— that she had found her place. She knew she would not be scared.



“It’s not like I don’t need you,” Kate had said. I could feel her searching me over with her eyes, soft and heavy. I only looked down at the rug in the TV room and counted the tassels.

“We’re still in the same city,” Kate went on, her voice closer.

“Yeah,” I said, because silence, prolonged, would have been too truthful and cutting. I let myself curl into the couch like a dried orange peel.

I knew Kate’s new roommate. Her name was Maelyn— what a punch in the face that was, that her *name* had to be special and unique. Sometimes I’d roll it over in my mouth and was sickened by the sweetness of it— *I am Maelyn*. And then a second flavor: bitterness.

Maelyn, the art major. Kate showed me her work once. She does interpretive... expressionist... art nouveau. I looked at it and immediately felt I was failing. What is in there that Kate could see— that I couldn’t? “She’ll be in a gallery on the South End next month”, she beamed.

“Her work is definitely better than anything that comes out of a South End,” I said, which in retrospect was an overwrought and very desperate sounding joke. That’s just the person I was in those last weeks.

Apparently Maelyn lived there— she had an apartment on the South End. It was built inside of an old church. In those last weeks, when the only times we’d see each other was in passing, Kate would be going in and out of there frequently. Her face took on an inspired note, and restlessly she would rearrange her art on the walls, look at them for a long time.

By the time she started bringing up the desire to move out, I knew I was in the past already. She was talking about paying her part of the rent until I found another roommate and I wasn't listening. The past around me, casting me in clay and putting me somewhere deep in the dunes of time. I knew the person who I was to her was already gone— lost, somewhere— and in its place I was discovered, hollow, bereft of a history. Some mold of the person who was her best friend since childhood. My hands— the shape of the ones she held. I was displaced.

Every time I tried to speak my mouth was full of sand. It was all too late to say what it was, to give a name to what I had lost— it was already gone. It flew out the window.

She stood— and seemed to stand rocklike—behind the couch, just looking for me. I felt her put her arm on mine, and out of some sick dignity I didn't move.

I was made of stone and I could not cry. She put her art in boxes, and she went.

The next day I woke up alone and felt walls closing in on me. *I can't sleep in this room*, I said. It was so small, so cramped— I can't breathe in this old stale air. I can't take this apartment anymore, with its chipped paint and its metal heater with dust in the cracks, I can't take the soap scum in the bath and the draft from the window. I can't take it. But I couldn't move.

When I woke up from the dream Effie was gone. The fixture on top of the glass cage had been loosened by a quarter of an inch.

Calmly I knew all of the possible places she went— the hollow wood underneath the kitchen drawers. The crack in the ventilator. Under the doorway into the hallway.

The hole in the wall. The one I had tried, heartbroken, to seal when Kate moved out.

I was uncharacteristically serene. Anxiety did not haunt me with urges to look, to turn over pillows or tap on walls.

I got up from the couch, folded the blanket neatly. Looked at the wall. The hole above the empty tank looked wider than I remembered it to be. In the non-morning hours, it seemed bottomless. A blackness in this space that belonged neither to morning or night.

In my half-awake state, all I had done— all I could do— was gently chip away the wall around it with my fingernail. Just blankly chipping, feeling the wall let go of a fine yellow dust that was the paint. Sometimes picking away at the drywall. Sometimes imagining maybe what if Kate was on the other side, what if Effie was there too, and the blue parrot that flew away through the open window. I hoped quietly that the hole would open like some portal to the place where all things lost go, and could fit me through. A place where you neither died or lived— just went.



King Richard's Faire

When the quiet was so big it would explode I walked in to check if she was dead. Just to see. Our narrow hallway ended with her room, and when I opened the little door the wood moaned. Her bed blue and her windows blue, so heavy, and they were always sighing. And there she was, a coiled lump of big quilt. I opened the door slightly further, holding my breath because I have heard dead people smell like the color maroon. But then a snort—a somersault— and she was fine. Which made me feel a lot better about wearing a pirate costume.

On my way to the faire that morning I read a sign at a restaurant that usually hosts dinners after funerals (the funeral home is just down the street from me). They're always rearranging it. And that day the sign said

WE WILL MISS YOU JOE!

GUESTS AND MEMBERS ONLY

I felt bad, but I jerked my car a little to the curb when I laughed. Just at how it was— “WE WILL MISS YOU JOE!”. Like he had been sucked into a tube or had gone to Aruba. Good old Joe. I wonder where he went.

The drive itself was pretty nice. New England was ripping itself open with color; big ripe shades of tangerine dropping from trees and just landing into your eye like a spoon of jam. Little brown shoots of bark peeking out beneath heads of red. Someone had taken a hose to the sky and washed away all the dust there— so clean, that blue.

As I rolled over one little hill to the next, spotty wood houses fixed into shops followed me along: “Dutchie’s Garden Needs”, “Gellar’s Ice Cream and Car Shop”. Ms. Gellar is 93. I remember getting a maple cone with peanut sauce and she was slumped in a rocking chair behind the counter, next to the old fan in the window, all papery and tilted. Scared the shit out of me.

The shops fell away into a gaping cranberry bog— big splotches of brown red in a deep rich pool. It stretched out the entire road with nothing but trees around it and maybe a little red house. Cranberries bobbed on top, a lake of glittering dots. A girl in my biology class told me that cranberries are lethal in huge quantities, that if you eat too much your stomach gets a hole burned in it. That’s a way to go, huh?

Death is a pretty obtuse thing in general when you don’t know them, or even if you do— so long as you view everything from a hideout on top of a hill. Then it’s really like people are being sucked up into the sky. The neighbors? Dead. What happened— how does that work? I don’t know, but we’ll never see them again. Like people are toy soldiers we lose underneath the couch cushions.

The hideout will keep you safe for a while, but then you'll climb down the ladder to pee or take a snack and then you step on something soft, and there it is; it's a dead body. It's right underneath your foot— that's how I've thought of it— and finding out someone close to you died, that's like stepping on their face in the dark. Oh— you're there now.

I mean, that's how I imagine it to be. I have never seen a dead person in real life before; I have my death virginity intact. Skillfully I had looked away from my grandpa's open casket when I was ten. *Save it for later*, I thought.

I think of a million ways I could see my first dead person, but I know it's going to be my grandmother because I live with her. My grandmother who laughs too long and big, and she still does that Chinese accent sometimes that we tell her not to do because it's racist— but we know she was hit as a kid, big Grandma, and so she's always just been a kid in a lot of ways. So we let her be. She sings songs from old wartime cartoons when she washes dishes until it makes you go insane and quilts together loud patterns that square dance. I can never explain to her successfully that I only have a minifridge at school and so I always end up with two heads of squash and a bag of soup or something. "I love you more!" she cries out when I leave. Really— she's just a big kid.

Last night in the living room I showed her my pirate costume. "Ooh," she cooed, flipping together her cat-shaped slippers in her big lounge chair. I knew she was thinking of a saying to go with it, and my expectations were met when she rumbled, "Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!" I did a 360 in slow motion, shaking my butt a little in the leather pants. She laughed and clapped her hands together, her cheeks fat with pink. "You look like— what is his name, from the uh..." She clicked her tongue and slammed her eyes shut. "Oh! Marge! C'mon, I hate when I do this... it's the Disney movie..."

“Like the pirate from Peter Pan? Captain Hook?”

“Captain Hook! Oh, that was him. He was so mean. And that crocodile chasing him— so funny.” Another laugh bubbled up from her robe. Then she took her cup of soup from off her lap and drank.

“The clock in its mouth,” she added many moments later, petting a kitschy chicken she kept on the accent table. “That’s what he was afraid of!”

Sometimes I check on her to see if she hasn’t died in her sleep. *Passed away* comforts me more, but the shortness of “died” has that slam that’ll come when that big woman makes no more noise. It has that abruptness. I keep planning for that *bang— died—* keeping my ear out for the sound. But it will probably happen when I’m thinking about anything else. She has a spectacular way of taking up space when you don’t have the room to fit her. Like when she had called my sister’s bridal shower “my party” when she learned it’d be at her house. I’m pretty sure she wants to be cremated, but I also think she’d be fine with an open-face grave, in case anyone wanted to check on how she was doing.

I can be so mean these days.

The road to the fair wound into a dirt path with trees that were like the ones in town but bumpier and taller. Red oak leaves whipped against my windshield and my tires *ker-chunked* over old river pebbles and plastic nip bottles. Then a green sign so missable that only people looking for it can see: KING RICHARDS— NEXT RIGHT.

I putted past three blocks of cars and stopped in a pitted ditch two inches from a stop sign after some witch came out of her house just to tell me not to park in front of her yard. When I walked out of the car and passed her house to the admissions gate I could see her through the glass screen of her door with her arms crossed, just waiting for the next faregoer to chew out.

King Richard's Faire was a little enterprise started by some couple in Wisconsin in 1982, That is the gist of the plaque that's there. Now the fair is a place for people like me to wear pirate costumes and freeze on one of the eight weekends of the autumn season. "WELCOME TO CARVERSHIRE", it says, though Carver had never been called Carvershire, I'm pretty sure. It's just fictional history made with these fictional houses that mimic a "16th-century marketplace", fitted with baubles that Renaissance people likely never wore, played, or fought with. I genuinely like it a lot; I like that a history buff could scoff at how everyone is wearing heels and that the roofs aren't made of straw. Here we have no concern for verisimilitude.

My boyfriend met me at the wooden admissions gate like we planned. He is a tall guy and all gentle, I had "domesticated him" as my family put it. "Trained him" is what my grandma said, in pleased wonder. But I didn't do any domesticating really. He just happens to be like the childhood trees you climbed and whispered secrets to and put your ear against to listen.

I got into the nook of his arm because it was cold out and wrapped his pirate cloak around me.

As we waited in the long line of costumed people it got really cold. He generously lent me his "cloak" (a blanket from some yard sale that we tied around the neck). Then he asked me how everything was going. I said things were going swimmingly.

"I found a nice apartment near here," he said.

"No carpet?" I asked. That was the first thing I always asked. He said it was hardwood floor.

"Windows?" There are six.

"Pet friendly?" Yes, no dogs— but we can bring Princess Mittens (I named her when I was ten).

“And it’s in our price range, right?”

He put his tongue in his cheek. I pinched him underneath the cloak. “It’s not that much higher,” he said, laughing. “We can make it work.”

People with big gaudy knightly costumes and fake elves ears hoarded together and were moving us all along. Something within me sank when I realized the line was moving far slower than I thought.

“How’s Marge?” he asked. He always called my grandmother by her first name.

The line was moving forward and I struggled against some stragglers to get ahead. I tried to look over their heads and get a good view of the gate. “She’s good,” I said. “Man, it’s cold as a witch’s tit.”

He followed behind me. My underwear was riding up my butt and making this all pretty uncomfortable. I tried picking at my leather pants but it was futile.

My phone was ringing in my back pocket, so I stopped wedgie digging and pulled it out.

“Hi Meemaw,” I said, kind of hush and embarrassed. It always makes my boyfriend smile a little and it’s because I sound like some backcountry Appalachian hick, but she was from Appalachia and that’s what she called her meemaw so that’s what she wanted us to call her.

I was surprised to hear it was my mom’s voice. “Hi honey,” she said.

“Hey,” I said, voice quickening. “Is everything okay?”

She was walking around the house or something and it made this rustling noise. “Is everything okay?” I said again. I had moved out of my boyfriend’s cloak and my shoulders braced the freezing cold.

Then there was the sound of some things being moved around— a carpet being dragged on the floor—? A quilt?

“Mom, are you there?” My voice was hanging at the end of a string.

“What? Oh, yes, everything’s good– I left my phone at Richard’s house, so I’m using your Meemaw’s while I’m cleaning up. This kitchen is a mess.”

I was infuriated. “Okay.”

“I just wanted to know how the faire is,” she said.

“It’s good,” I said, “It’s great. I’m in line. I’m cold. I’m just– there’s a lot of people here and I’m kind of busy.” The line was moving forward.

“Oh– I’m sorry honey. It’s not a good time– you can call me back later if you feel like it.”

“Thanks Mom,” I said, flatly. Then a beat later: “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she said.

I hung up first, and took a big breath in and hunched in tight, just looking at the trees around the faire.

My boyfriend had stepped out of the line to put his cloak back around me. “Are you okay?” he said, his cheek against my head.

I didn’t turn around to look at him, words felt so stupid and I didn’t want to say something awful, but I felt it coming anyway.

“Hey,” he said then, and pulled me in closer.

I turned around and buried my face in his chest. He put the cloak over me and I was surrounded in warm darkness, my eyes closed tight and I saw purple-red. I was so angry, my fists scrunched up his shirt and made deep wrinkles and I felt my knuckles getting white. There was a high and roaring feeling in me and I felt the climbing urge to swear, to cuss, to say I didn’t want to be at this faire that was stupid and cold. And suddenly the hotness and the rage in me leapt out

in reddish billowing tears and before I could stop I was sobbing. It was like hiccups, coming out rounded and sudden, I had hit a pipe that burst forth. I lunged forward to hold him in my arms. In a last ditch effort to find my calm, I looked over his shoulder with redness swelling in my throat, and read the sign over the faire gate: “ENTER IF YE DARE! FOR WHEN THY FEET MOVE PAST THIS GATE, THOU HAST BEEN TRANSLATED FOR GOOD.”



Leaves and Rainwater

My mom passed your house today on the drive home from dinner and she sighed for you. Her sighs are always high and long—remember? Like when you had cracked a whiffleball right into our birdhouse and made it completely off-kilter. Don’t you remember her sigh then?

She still wears gray, like when you knew her. Gray is timeless, she says. In the car she wore a gray shawl with small pearlsh earrings and a silver hair pin— the colors of forgetting. She was folded neat and stiff into the passenger seat like origami. I read her hands— glancing from the dashboard— and turned on the seat warmer when she started pulling deftly against her sleeves. That’s how we read each other. Like red light, green light.

I know we haven’t thought about your house for a while, the white fence so tight, holding in its breath. Sucking in the memories of you and I there in the yard— where we ran bases, got dirt-covered, fistfaught laughing. I think the grass still whispers, has footprints.

That sigh. I wondered why, down the street we pass every day, she sighed for you then. Why it had taken two years for it to come, for it to remind us that you killed yourself.

You were so fiery as a kid, so funny. I still see you sometimes on the edge of the lawn looking warlike across the other end of the street, your braids severe like those Welsh ancestors

of yours. One pink nose poised like a bulldog's before chasing a squirrel. Exactly how you would look before throwing rocks at the kids in the fancy two-story house who called you fat.

And since there's nothing you can do about it now, I guess I can say after all that you were pretty big. But I liked your bigness. It scared and amazed me at the same time. When we went down over the big hill your bike would go the fastest, your weight gave you speed that left all of us in the dust. When you'd win, when you'd take off your helmet and slam it on the ground. Your big brother couldn't push you and he couldn't win all the games and you were stronger than him. I wanted to be a warrior like you.

But I wasn't like you at all. You know how I was— tight everywhere and stickish. A whole lot like my mom. Your changeups hit me in the leg more than once and sometimes I knew it was on purpose because I was a pretty small target in the batter's box. I think I deserved it, didn't I? I was a whiner, still in elementary school, hardly able to hold your brother's metal bat.

One time I took a wiffle ball to the arm playing first base. It sang a new note when it hit me and so did I. I was wiggling around in the dirt when you called time. You crouched over me with your hat and glove between your knees. I remember that your shadow looked over me with such realness and intensity that I am fully there again when I remember you. It was mid-day and your expression was cast in shadow over the hot sun and you smelled like sunflower seeds and your mom's car. You were wearing basketball shorts and your softball shirt that had grass stains all over it. You looked at me with the big-eyed wonder kids have at pain.

"Shit," you said, "your arm's like a lobster."

What's that thing that happens to us when we play and someone gets hurt? It doesn't really take us out of the game— instead it adds a sort of layer to everything, like a new depth. In

some way it enriches things, becomes a different part of the playing. Like when I scraped my knee during Cowboys and Indians and my sister made a bandaid out of leaves and rainwater.

We keep on because the blood itself becomes something else— becomes something left behind in a different world. You were always so good at keeping in flow with the currents of pain and play, like they were two in one. You slapped me on the back, told me to get an ice bag out of your mom's fridge, and be back in five.

I wanted to be more like you— so that I didn't whine when the whiffle ball would hit me (because it did happen more than once). I always regretted that I was the runt of our group. I wanted to be older than you, to shoot up tall like you so that I could crack the bat like you, so I could swear like you, fight like you. I had no concept of age. I just thought it would be possible to outrun you someday.

Your fence is holding itself in tight and so are my mom and I when we drive past it.

I am embarrassed because of this, but her sigh made me angry. I felt a familiar childhood rage in me, where I said insistently in my head to her, *you didn't let me play with her anymore*. I always came home with a bruise or a torn shirt and your dog always bit me and besides, you swore too much, you were a butch and you were a bad influence for me. Every day it was a reason to never see you again. Was the birdhouse the last straw? I don't remember. What stands out more is afterwards— the big nothingness between your house and mine. No bikes up and down the street. No cleats.

We grew up fifty feet away from each other, but by high school I had no idea the person you'd become. For all I know you changed completely. Maybe I could look up the college you went to, the clubs that you did or your name in the papers, but really it wouldn't change anything

for me. I'll always have this image of you standing on the edge of your yard, pink and full of fire.

Because it doesn't make much sense that you would change. You always loved fighting. When did you stop?

I haven't thought about your house because I didn't want to think about your house. Besides I had this empty feeling about it that was wide but shallow, like it was everywhere but I had no idea how to get in, so I stayed out. I was afraid of your house.

Letting my mom out of the car in our driveway, I felt something substantial change but I didn't know what it was.

Then it came when she slammed the door. I realized that I was older than you now.

At first it made me laugh in a way that made my mom look at me funny through the window.

"Are you coming in?" I saw her mouth move.

I shrugged and mimed holding a cigarette to my mouth. She turned away, saying nothing. She hated that I smoked. It was a bad habit I picked up from you, somehow, without even seeing you do it.

When she turned away, I laughed again. I laughed until it punched me in the gut and it burned. Until the play and the pain were all one. I'm older than you now— a childhood dream come true.

Something suspended you in place when we stopped playing and then something else suspended you forever. Both of those things are hard to understand. I was hopeful that maybe it would come out of me somehow like I was an effigy, that I could burn myself down to some solid truth, a pit at the center of things, and that's when I reversed out of the driveway and went

back down the street. Aimless and burning. I realized I was driving back to your house— your parents' house. I had no plan. I figured that the impulse would overcome me to park in the driveway and ring the bell, to have them open up, and for me to implode and turn new colors and tell them I'm so sorry that you lost your only daughter and that I'm sorry because I knew her as a kid, we played together and we imagined pain together and she showed me what warriors are like, and it's painful that she's gone.

The white fence down the street peeled into view. The sun had just set and cast the trees behind in black. The grass was mowed evenly, there was a tired sense of pattern everywhere— the same car, the same Christmas decorations on the lawn, with the same airy jingle that the holidays were coming— that it was time to be merry and bright. I parked on the side of the road, and with some weight I didn't know could propel me, I got out of the car.

When I got out, I felt unsteady and obtuse in the cold. I realized I was underdressed. My hazards on by the roadside seemed loud despite making no noise. Something planted me there, unable to move, so I just looked in.

The lights were on in your house. They were yellow. I paused to see maybe if there was a sign for some celestial timing, if tonight had been the night that I should come.

The baseball game was on the television. Inside I could see your brother and your dad watching it, their heads away from me. And in another lighted window, your mom was taking something out from the oven. There was a fourth person I didn't know. He was watching the game too. On the mantle underneath the TV there was a picture of someone with red hair and a diploma. I knew it must have been you— the you that I never got to know— will never get to know.

I got back inside of the car. I started the engine and like a coward I drove away. How else could things have been? I had waited too long, I had shut it out, and now I was nothing to this house, this yard— I passed it, years ago. I guess I'm telling you now because I don't know where else to go— I guess I wanted you to know— that I stopped at your house, Rebecca, and I knew I was too late. I stopped at your house and I have no one to tell about it but you.

It was a cold night out. The drive back to my house was brisk and ended in seconds. I cut the engine. Getting out, I was surprised to see my mom had been looking out through the kitchen window. Her figure shuffled away.

When I walked into the house, she had disappeared upstairs. She left her heavy grey shawl over a dining room chair. Her earrings were on the table. I heard the shower faucet turn on above me.

I wrestled with my incompetency alone. I pulled out a dining room chair, sat there wordlessly. Jeopardy was playing in the background.

My mom came back downstairs after showering, a gray gown with hints of periwinkles on the hems. She was holding box that I haven't seen in a long time and set it on the table, where I had been staring at a corner in the wall obliquely. It smelled like mothballs and baseball cards and other scents that so completely transported me but so difficult to name. She took out a polaroid photo pile stuck together by a big rubber band. Sorting through them, she finally took one out of the deck and gave it to me.

I looked at her distrustingly.

"It came to mind," she said, with dignity, sitting rigid with her leg crossed over. *I saw you*, is what she meant. *I saw you from the kitchen window*.

I looked the polaroid over. It was me and you. We had just gotten our first skateboards at the mall and our helmets were too big for us. You had a devious smile like always, and your flung up the “rock and roll” sign with your left hand. Your right was gripping me tight. I shyly raised my skateboard in the air. I had lost two baby teeth that month.

“Huh,” was all I managed to say.

My mom gave me a terse smile and slowly rotated through more cards in the deck. “Blasts from the past,” she ventured quietly.

We looked at the photos for a long time.

“In the last few months before, Carrie told me that she was barely talking to her anymore. She’d just go up to her room, shut the door.”

“Sounds normal enough,” I said.

But we both knew that it wasn’t normal. It was a different kind of living— a living that is closer to playing. There is a sense of fiction all around it. I’ve known life like that, sometimes.

A tear came down my mom’s eye. At first it made me feel out of place and intrusive. I’ve hardly ever seen her cry. Although I tensed up immediately, I also saw a flash of an opportunity lost, and awkwardly I scrambled towards it. I felt desperate; but words still didn’t come out. Uncertainly I reached my hand out and put it on her shoulder.

“She hid it away,” she said. “The way she felt.”

“I know,” I said, and I felt a sort of caving in then. I felt the weight of all the past times I had hidden away. I thought about how I was eight years old and didn’t let myself cry when I watched my dog being put down. I remember being ten years old and I didn’t let myself cry when I was separated from a childhood friend. I thought about two years ago when a childhood

friend of mine stopped existing and I didn't let myself cry then either. Because I wanted to be strong. I wanted to be a warrior. I knew you always wanted to be one, too.

For the sake of my survival I closed my eyes tight and I tried to let tears come forward, give it space, let it in. But I knew I really couldn't— not that fast. I was thinking too much about it, everything felt stiff. My mom straightened up again, wiping the corners of her eyes. She and I sat like stones, comprehending each other quietly. Comprehending you, too, Rebecca. We saw you as something else for the first time, slowly you came together in your later years right in front of me. Not as the kid that I knew but as an emerging figure in the room, one who I suppose was always growing alongside us both— between us both?-- and my mom and I felt you completely. I knew she never let you in the house, Rebecca. Your cleats were always dirty and you talked too loud. Is it too late to let you in today? Would we be forgiven if we started?