

Toward the Desert Island

I have spent a great deal of my life dancing between the shadows cast by my weighed down heart. But now I am a metronome for the fire beating inside of me, refusing to stop for anyone. This body knows no prison, and these eyes know no blindness.

I know that love is not slavery— I have always been a force of defiance, moving mountains you can't even fathom to fight for the things I want. I have waded through the filth of men like you, who never wanted to see me for all the things I know I am. I have clawed my way through the days of my depression just to find the will to live. I have searched relentlessly to find my voice, and now that I have it, I will not silence it for your sake.

I am a wild spirit, drifting through the landscapes of this short life, only limited by the bounds of my creativity. I am alive— determined to put all my honesty into every moment I experience. I am defiant and stubborn and headstrong in all of the right ways. Unapologetic in every facet of my identity. So do and say what you want. But know that my mind works without your permission.

Know that in the end,

I will always be free.



You only get to know people, really, by coming off strong and not being afraid to make a damn fool of yourself. I learned this first while standing dumb in my parents doorway, daydreaming of what it would be like if I didn't understand them or their terrible exchanges. I kept telling people my secrets, surprising them, surprising myself with how easily the heavy questions came, like light rain, like a sun shower. I hung around all summer, the concrete roofs rotating and the heat staying the same. At the time, I was living quite contently under the perception others had made of me.

Isaiah asked me my name and in return dealt me my future. Constant writing constipation, pred-destined disaster, and various love affairs I shouldn't hope to enjoy. *If your name gives me any clue, you, as well, may end up with your head in an oven.* I appreciated his honesty.

Months later he introduced me to a friend of his, the only person we knew who totally enjoyed the name she was given. I should have known right then, when she looked me in the face and had not one ounce of remorse but all the reasons for it. I see her only in hindsight, where things were not CLOSER but REALER than they appeared. Her name meant island.

Her name meant island, so I should have known that at the very end she'd prefer to be alone.



The apartment was on Houston St. on the Lower East Side facing the Red Building. I didn't learn until embarrassingly later and when I was very, very drunk that that meant communists. The few of us who were artists painted the wall by the piss corner a week after he died and only once the weather finally permitted. That night the moon looked me straight in the eye and waited till I finished, before handing me a strong sedative, twisting, and finally, the tides began to turn. Snow came in troops over the next two days. The blank slate of sky broke above me, howling through its grief.

That morning I got a phone call I laughed at but shouldn't have, read a newspaper that reported the absolutely wrong thing and got mad at all the right people instead of, like usual, at the universe. He wasn't with his girlfriend, hadn't had one since the eighth grade, preferred instead one night stands with substitute teachers twice his age and triple his body weight. And in my most terror-filled fantasies he was always too smart for it to be accidental.

After— I was so messed up, but still not as bad as J who didn't sell him what he did that night, and not in Central Park and not with his girlfriend and not on his way to meet me—

I was beyond pissed at him for being late, then later, then not showing up, then *not at all*, (and I promise, I really fucking hate telling this story but these days I've been feeling like if I don't get it down on paper or my own skin then I'm gonna forget it or explode).

Expectation without cosmic relief, like a bastard itch under the skin, the kind you'll look everywhere for, hopelessly dissatisfied, knowing you'll never get to, never find,

That's what losing him feels like.

Time is passing. My watch is broken but reminds me anyway of the money I spend and don't have so I don't like to wear it. It's all becoming digital anyways.

No one was listening to me, and then, all of a sudden, they were begging me not to do it, not to go out and spill secrets like magic beans of a time when we were once the people we hoped we'd be, and of how, that too, eventually failed us. Our skin peeling, shedding, just when we'd began to get comfy. And no matter how many books I read, no matter how advanced we got, to the point of almost never dying (but just not quite!), we still haven't figured out yet how to preserve what was stolen by the void, lost infinitely into the chaotic jest of things. I am playing a game of Hide-and-Seek with my memories, and they are winning. I spent every morning recovering from waking up exasperated, too often to the swamplike realization that seasons are never the only things that change when you ask them to stay.

They begged me not to do it, so I hopped up onto the ledge of the roof anyways and tilted my head back, looked at the bright city upside down. Things

always look better that way, even if it's real tragedy. I don't know it at the time, but I will forget this in a month, forget voice in two, forget touch too immediately.

The statue of Stalin on the Red Building salutes me, but this time, I'm not very, very drunk.

So I tell them I saw him move, that I remember it better than they think and not CLOSER but more MORE TRULY. I confide I refused to cry in school because there I felt least close to him, on the deathbed of truth lined with the black pearls of fiction. There, they handed off your name like a cheap plastic baton in a relay race. Running fast, circle after circle, towards short, cheap fame.

Look at me in this given situation:

Broken. Caught off guard. Drowning myself in the thick honey of my wounds. Wiping snot on my sleeve. Ugly-crying on the ABCDF and 1 trains where I deemed most appropriate, Daily commuters didn't give a shit about anything before their morning coffee. Didn't ask if I was alright because fucking obviously, I wasn't. Just nodded sympathetically before politely turning their cheeks away.

Two years go by and signs of spring begin to show and Life, (Without You,) surrounds me once again.

I find myself constantly apologetic, as if there were some grand disservice being subject to life that I am the only one aware of.

I hold conversations with you in my head, half-chuckling at this ghastly terror, sending letters off unaddressed and hoping to find your responses eventually. Right now, I am not yet brave enough—enough to suffer, but not enough to stay lonely.

Right now, my dreams sustain me.



The white orchids stayed on that table rotting for months in the dirtied snow, weeks after we stopped caring about each other and months after we pretended to stop caring about you.

They buried their letters. I kept mine anywhere they'd fit— rolled between cigarette paper and tobacco, between the bed frame and the mattress, braided like ribbon into my hair, held tight by the lint in my belly-button. Every year I made you a resolution:

This year I will get over it,

this year, I will not love others badly and love myself worse.

And as always, a question,

How do people forgive without forgetting?

All of it is bound to end *Anyways*, you remind me, all shot to shit, in a voice I expect to be similar to God's but isn't. I find it comforting that you still sound like you did in this world. High, a voice with the brakes behind a five-car pileup, bordering near impossible to listen to.

He killed a cockroach bigger than his cellphone in his first year dorm at Hunter. He got up right in the middle of bad sex to get what was a good, admittedly mediocre, burrito. He stood with me, quiet on the ledge for hours in the biting cold, facing our school and giving it a mittened finger. The night encroached, and then the mourning, and then the rest of it— watching from a distance but together because we both heard the world burping, heard it didn't have the space for us: Him growing, growing larger and greater and me, panicking as usual, asking everyone incessantly how to shrink everything down small so I could swallow it up before it started to disappear.

You laugh at me and at the frantic look of a child in my eyes. I tell you I'm credible, did you forget *I've been here before*? You don't listen, you go about your business. Feels like we're merely children playing in the shallow sand; not

someone who is twenty and might have been twenty-one were he not so cursed,
had he not done that drug,

switched that train car,

been thinking of coming to meet me.

I stood right between the door and the hallway during the eulogy, as if on the brink of being alive and getting to see you again. Stood there sad and meek as a cripple, carrying my swollen eyes, heavy baggage and a body that wasn't gonna take me anywhere. I am embarrassed at my inability to listen to your mother's lie. She made it clear that this was her child she was burying, and, When it comes our time, We can call the shots.

I say back to her, and only in my mind because, after all I am not brave enough, and never wanted to be this mean, I tell her,

If we really got to call the shots, who'd choose to die after their kid?

She doesn't reply.

I keep looking for answers.

I look around, observing and assessing all those who consider themselves blessed and cursed, and all at once. Look at everyone who got to know you, now stagnant in purgatory. I stroked the crater, hoped the world would heal. Looked down at my empty hands, my possessions of nothing—salt, water, or honey. Nothing.

Notice the biggest venue still not big enough. Notice the freak storm being braced by people afraid of their own shadows. *Where are the dangers?*

Never where you'd think. Notice the winding line wrapped so far around the block they had to close off part of Jay St wreaking havoc on those awful morning commutes. So the newspapers reported the absolutely wrong thing and

blamed you one more time, and none of them cared, because after all, you were just another name in the paper. Notice me, quiet on the precipice, teetering. Somehow, after all these years, still unable to believe it.

Eventually, Time, with the colossal force of water, will wash it all away. So it goes. We are left with driftwood, bent and twisted, left telling stories about the forged world beneath the sea. There I stood, cradled and sung to by the Washington night, searching through the sky, ghosts, stars for something that burned like you.



None of us said what we should have, couldn't believe in confessing when it became inconvenient. They sent three guys from security over to your first love, your *Just friend*, grabbed him swift by his trouser hooks, his voice cutting through the air like something I still haven't recovered the way to describe after scouring through every dictionary I owned.

Your mom spoke about the power of Christ and salvation and I prayed to something, not GOD but SOMETHING, that you would forgive her. All that shit—when it's no longer love, none of us believing it, not knowing what to call it, when it's no longer love—

I didn't know how to leave unnoticed, couldn't wrap things up politely if I'd wanted to try, had no idea how to hold your best friend the right way, when she never once came in but sat outside chain-smoking, alone, the whole time. There she is, strong as a bull bowing her head as the ship pulls out into the sea, into the void, into perpetuity and endlessness.

Years later I will find myself there, the Abyss welcoming me home, my given name rolling off its tongue.

What I'll Bring

rosemary, lavender

sleeping pills,

Dramamine, Ativan

bleeding ink pens

two red-leather notebooks,

a history, a continuum,

tobacco, weed

my heart on my sleeve

Questions, Answers, Unsolicited Advice

When you run away for the first time, do not head to your first grade teacher's house. It's unlike her to invite you in let alone adopt you like you've been dreaming about recently. You considered bringing this up to her while the ASPCA commercial played, five minutes of sheer guilt and grief. That's when you're most likely to catch her. She'll call your parents, unamused, upset at the disruption in her dinner, and for the first (but certainly not last!) time in your life, you'll have to face the stinging sensation of what it's like to overstep boundaries that others have dictated for you.

When you find yourself cornered in a public school bathroom, not once or twice, but lucky-number seven times, don't say a word. Not to the bully or the lunch lady or your parents when they ask why today was a half-day. Walk to the sink, cup your hand under the faucet. Aim and spray and while they figure out how to explain to their comrades that they didn't pee themselves, book it. Run like all hell. Run home.

When you make it to high school, (all the way to sixteen!) and your two closest girl friends leave you alone at the party, don't have space in their *cab*, say Sorry, but you *actually can't sleep over*, spend the rest of the night wrecking at both beer-pong and Jenga. Stay till the party ends. Make it a good time. Don't think about the trouble you'll cause, or the reasons you wont. *What's left to face?*

When you think of all that could have been, think once again of all that isn't. Remember the collection of motel soaps that you'd never used but kept in your car as freshener next to emergency packets of ketchup and honey. Razors off the stick in the bathroom, peeling sunburned skin off your back like off the tender flesh of fruit. The night-terrors particular to the holidays.

If they catch you, even if you're laughing, even caught red handed, don't admit it. Act defensive, pretend and pretend until some of it starts feeling real. It's totally obtuse, completely abnormal, but look at you. Check you *out*.

When he pulls off your shirt and presses you against a window, the cool on your back unweathered not matched by his hands zigging and zagging across your front—he cups your breasts, *feels smaller than you said*. No one will ever own you, but that doesn't stop strangers from calling and hanging up and forcing to disconnect. These are the days when it will feel safer underground.

When the guy you lent a pen to find your phone number, calls your house only to ask what you're wearing, tell him the *skin of the last guy who asked me that*. Find their home address, stand outside with a picket-fence protest sign or metal trash-can top cymbals, clanging them together like a monkey blown way out of proportion. Stay until their girlfriends or baby-momma's or momma's themselves come out and scare you straight. Call them back, right at dinner, imitate the FBI, the IRS, Immigration, a pregnant succubus of one-night stand he should never have looked at, let alone fucked with.

For the first time in your life, be the one who leaves others hanging.

When three different people straight write you as a character in your college literature class, don't get upset, don't feel betrayed and exposed by the sheer force of living. Remember that the biggest form of flattery is imitation. Then sacrifice. Where it aches, where it aches. All I sacrificed. Don't mention it out loud 'cause no one likes to hear it.

When they don't catch you sneaking out a half-dozen times, thank the Lord, thank your brain and pigeon-toed achy-breaky bird feet, thank the darkness. Promise to start doing better by the world you don't quite want to be a part off. Remember the beatings you escaped and the ones you didn't.

When your father hits you, do not strike back.

Don't cry, don't cower under the iron clasp of embarrassment. Follow him down eight flights of stairs and into something predestined but highly complex and just as horrific. Just like your mother twenty-seven years ago. Board that plane and say, fuck you and goodbye to this shithole of a Motherland. Diaspora is

only a word in English, privileged and common as are the things and people you need—where and when we need them least— so in fact, history does tend to repeat itself.

When your lover will only touch you in the dark or in your sleep, don't agree with a pout and your wrists folded together in surrender. Roll away, fart in his direction. Act fucking nuts because that seems to be the end-point of every discussion. What is that, warm on your belly? Who was your good friend that you called you in October, all the way from the looney bin? What kind of long distance is that?

It's pricey.

Someday when you have a daughter you will tell her these stories, your life recorded in between brief moments of clarity sewed together haphazardly to a narrative line. *I was trying to make sense of it, but it got real chaotic.* I will tell her about all of it when she is old enough, when it won't be traumatic. I will have no shame, no disclaimers, won't lie or cover up any of it and end with telling her that over anything else, I am her Mother, and all that means is I want to be close to her. She has to love me regardless. She takes the pressure off likely being nobody with nothing.

When he buys his first gun and won't let you hold it but insists on pointing it at your temple when you two make love, let him. Let him get comfortable. Set an alarm for the middle of the night and break into the lock box, do something for yourself, be Bad for once. Point it's head at his groin and know that with less effort than it takes to smile, you could ruin this man's whole wide world. Take this as your feminist stance over standing on a beach with your nipples exposed. Meaning, always.

Play fighting turns to bruises under your chin and pinning you down while you bare your dogtooth. Kick, pinch, bite, grin, scratch, spit. Spit in his shitty weasel face like the monster you love being able to become.

What'd you get from your momma?

Busloads of guilt and the need to satisfy.

And your father?

Just told me to survive.



“It’s fucking REVOLTING”, he concludes.

I’m a fucking *REVOLUTIONARY*, you snarl back.

Good Girl, with your head hung high and your shoulders low with a steady burden. Slow or fast, *it’s all chaotic anyways*, wailing but rhythm-deaf to what everyone else hears playing. Three years tortured in chorus and you came out a fucking Mute, not speaking, without opinion or heart. *How’d you lose it all so quickly, Girl?* Tried to run, but not to hide. Jokes on you. You’re all found out. So *quiver*. Nobody’s listening to you, don’t matter none.

Don’t you tick the suicide box on the mental health forms.

Attitude? Addiction?

“No, no, I have none of that.” I have nothing.



When you run away, leave with or without a plan, dragging the flag of your identity through the muddied city waters. Neighbors are watching you from their balconies, from their stoops. *Must be on her way to war.*

Four thousand miles isn’t far away enough, when everything costs time and money and outpaces you if you’re not fast enough. I’m never fast

enough. I ran, but I didn't hide. My breadcrumb trail home was eaten by the critters in the forest. I walked around in the woods in the dark, hyperventilating at the thought of danger before realizing nothing, no danger or comfort neither, was around me. I walked towards the light, into my new life that I never once imagined myself living. I got on with it. *Waiting for what?* Learned to drive. Learned to crash even better. Didn't let my fears kill me and I'll declare it on my grave.

I put everything down in writing. I plucked stray strands of hair from couch and carpet and taped it into my notebooks, cataloguing proof like blackmail that I could bring back years later, after returning from having been gone so long.

They all thought you were dead, *Girl*.

I might as well have been.

Honey of the Hummingbird

Thinking about, talking about, remembering it always instills the same cold familiarity. Suddenly I am short of breath, my mouth filled with rough pebbles and the dry choke of cinnamon. I bite down, chew hard, try to swallow and it turns to glass, slicing my throat this way and that. He is preparing me, showing me how hard it will be to contain this truth.

I know there are no right answers, I know there are no easy questions. I have do this, otherwise—

The heroine's fate will remain somewhere between victim and absolutely voracious. *Were she not strong enough, this wouldn't have happened.*

Some things the Gods just want. *We'll see,*

something reverberates, conceals itself in a shawl of echoes—

We'll see if she makes it.

I think, Why was it me? and immediately after,

It probably wasn't just me.

I try hard not to sound too narcissistic before reminding myself that's exactly what I've come here for. To collect. I don't like to talk about myself, will often say the same three things in succession and expect that might be enough. My tight mouth and pursed lips and low eyes have helped me keep secrets so well.

I say, You know, I have no reason to feel you anymore. There are windows and eyewitnesses, I'm taller than you now, know where to kick where it hurts. I am not pink and tender as they com. You order me like meat at the fish market, they lift me onto the cold scale, lay me on the alabaster stone— *breast or thigh, sir?*

Both. You always wanted both, or more. Your eyes are obsidian. You wouldn't know a thing from your hands.



Smith & 9th

4th, 7th Ave.

15th and Prospect

Fort Hamilton

Church

These are the stops I come to know, marking them off in my head as the train goes by. I can recognize strangers on the platform, notice the same tallying marks that I can't quite decipher. Other underground markers. I know this place well. My sister excuses not visiting anymore but only tells me and no one else that it's because of bad memories. I should tell her she doesn't know the half of it, but I don't. She scares me, even after all this time.

The doors open, the conductor murmurs something untranslatable and I see the devil again for the first time in ten years. The train car feels like it's closing in on me though I know for a fact it has just been renovated. Silver and modern with an open-concept. Sleek. I am underground surrounded by people I don't know and the one I do, I wish more than anything I didn't. People have scratched their cellphone

numbers in every blank space they found, wrote “Call when you’re lonely.” I was lonely a lot but never called a single one of them.

In a dream I walked through a field full of strawberries, walked alone in celebration with my back tanning in the afternoon sun. For once, I am not anxious. I walk from bush to bush, pluck off any red that I see, restrain from filling my belly. I draw one to my mouth, part my lips. Then the way clears and I see you delivering a straight stream of piss like water to all the plants. I look in my basket, look at my hand. The strawberries have turned to bright poppies now, and I cannot eat them, cannot look at them, cannot celebrate anymore now that you’ve come. Once again, you have ruined everything. Dreams like this always astound me afterwards. This happens often enough to expect, and still, I never manage to do anything but wake up.



“Something drew me closer” he says, with a look I am ashamed to be familiar with. Men with the hunger of a starving dog, and the same terrible inclinations. Oh, sure, I’m so goddamn special that all the bad shit happens to me. The bed always feels too big and I hate the invitation. I need to fix my locks. I make a mental note never to shave or shower again. I want to be hideous as they come, known for being the biggest bitch in town, who fucks everyone’s boyfriends and has no shame, no, not at all, not in that or a face full of piercings over bright brown scars that railroad her face. She’s the most alive woman in the world, I think, even though everyone has told me she’s homeless and crazy and loose as all hell. She’s horrific and I find this satisfying.

The metal under the trail scratches all Hell, his bike wheels click steadily as he moves to the other end of the cart. He pulls the mucus into the back of his throat and the bile travels up mine, trickling down from my belly button. I cross my legs to stop the heat. My legs are too heavy to

stand, I can't admit it here and now, in public. And it's too risky in private with self-harm being thrown around like 911 calls these days. *I've got a bullet to the kneecap. My heart is heavy. Someone has died and no one knows. They'll never be mourned.*

Years go by.

It wasn't all bad. I cut my hair several times, and it never grown back the same. My eyes are much darker, my lips almost raw now. I am not tall for my age anymore and I make up for it with a loud personality. Don't hunch or slouch, but crack my back and neck every five minutes. I almost introduce myself to you, pull mucus into my own throat and consider spitting it into your shitty face. I look at you and understand the death penalty. I look at you and wonder why anyone would want such sad, such sickening attention. I'm bad for the first time in my life. I grew my nails out and practiced self-defense in the mirror. I pulled my friends braces out with a pair of pliers. I chugged a flask-full of rum then aimed my puke over the dead freeway below me. I did this at three in the morning with people who at the time, loved me. I keep myself from thinking about where they are now, if it the triumph I felt comes across when they retell it.

My shirt comes off, my skirt comes down. I stand naked with the shower running and the room filling with steam. I look like a woman now, have grown into myself, it seems. Am not so crazy or uncalculated as I once was.

I run my fingers across my lower abdomen, across my waist and then back up towards my jaw. I stretch my sternum to the ceiling. It is all wonderful until I begin to gag, asphyxiated by the flexing hand around my throat.

How long will this last?

How much can he keep taking?

I have never been so exhausted.

And all of a sudden, the air clears and the lights turn white and I hear a voice giving me some answers, a code of numbers that have been preprogrammed for Getting the Fuck Over it Already. He says,

I left you a minor depression, not enough to kill you.

“You think good writing can come from nothing?”

Your blood is wine,

Your blood is paint,

Your blood running down that drain won't change the color of the ocean at all.



“One in every five girls go through this”, he says. Four out of five will end up unhappy anyways.

“And the one's who don't?” I ask. I dream. No answer.

I know it already. I have filled my house with shedding cats and blamed these allergies for my constant crying. I have shut all the blinds and closed myself in, need the ocean to be produced in order to get any sleep.



Count to sixty before it's over.

Don't open your eyes until after.

I took a bad hit some years back and can't remember things clearly since.

Thought back several times to the Gold Rush and a history I had never lived, my hair orange in the back seat of a convertible winding across a highway right before the sunsets. I want this warmth on my back forever, want to feel this illuminated forever.

Forever? Talking about Forever when the weather says Apocalypse.

Forever.

An assault occurs every hundred-and-eight seconds, but damage lasts *for*—

One-hundred and eight seconds.

He tongues it with his mouth before I can take it away.

One hundred and eight seconds. In that time, I can wash my face thoroughly. I can fix arugula and spinach for the salad. I can pick the phone up and call home, or call a stranger long distance. A train can get stuck underground in one hundred and eight seconds. Twenty seven people might be born. Thirty six will die.

In one hundred and eight seconds, I can turn to a fresh sheet of paper, I can sharpen the four pencils on my table. I put the kettle on to boil. Press lotion into skin, to the knee. To the neck. Roll up a cigarette, or a joint, or all my wishes. In one hundred and eight seconds, I'll check the clock twice and still not understand where I am, or what day it is.

I can no longer see pity or pleasure,

I can no longer tell music from noise.

2 A.M.

There was a time when 2 a.m was ours, yours and mine Summer descended and everyone that came through my hours drew tornadoes on my wall and left me their digits to call when I got lonely. I got lonely a lot and never called any of them. The hour belonged to us and no one else. We stayed up all night talking about things that were improbable but not impossible, listening to the whole world shut down. 2 a.m once watched you walk me home in your worn down shoes with weary eyes. We had friends whose hobbies included slicing their wrists open in dark rooms. My hobbies were my friends, and while they told their stories in blood and sex, at 2 a.m., I retold them through pen and paper. Tried to give their sorrows justice.

I changed names and extracted poetry from corpses—that's what I've been trying to say all along:

Every suicide I've written came from a phone call cut too short, or an unwinding breeze on an emptied block. And everyday now, I'm waiting for a grand finale.

Now, 2 a.m belongs only to me.

I sit on the floor of my bedroom, still my feet out the window and dust the shingles with my toes. I remember the details of your smile, my stomach caffeinated by new excitement. I remember your hand, always so good at holding when I needed my own to stop shaking.

Sometimes,

I'll have conversations with 2 a.m. I bruise it's self-esteem, tell it that I'm both starved and frustrated, not sexually but metaphysically. Tell it that I'm done, I won't be sleeping with it but I don't want to stay friends either. "We've got to

stop meeting like this,” I tell it— *like fairytales and forget-me-nots*, like untied-strings and loose ends left swinging in the dark.

I’ve seen people I love cry for death, and I’m only nineteen. Too old to lock my door and play pretend, but too young to be taken seriously.

Years later, I find 2 a.m curled up in a corner. It is older now, and has no apologies for what it cannot admit it’s done to me: the phone hangs off its cord all night. Insomnias close to killing as cancer. 2 a.m has grown shoulders, strong forearms, a face I might never have been, but certainly can no longer, read. 2 a.m is tired today, hungover and swollen, wonders where all the people who used to keep it company are now.

The truth is they are in their beds, with their books or their cats, their lovers or their dreams. Trying to forget the night in 2000 when they stayed up waiting to outrun the apocalypse. The nighttime laughed in their faces and they never forget what Mama said, that nothing good ever happens after 2 a.m.

I move away. Plant my feet down hard and the shingles break beneath me. I look up at the stars and tell it, “You know, you did this to yourself— you can’t leave people lonely and ask them to keep you company.” But it doesn’t pay attention. 2 a.m. is scanning the streets for girls to take for granted but never back home, for friends to teach then leave in the gutter.

Now 2 a.m. spends the rest of its time wondering why it no longer belongs to us, and why we no longer want it. And I don’t know what you’ll tell it, but I’ll be sure to mention that it never paid attention to how alone people can feel in the dark. Only prolonged pain, and never really bothered to leave us intact for dawn.

So I slide into my unmade bed every night, while lovers crawl into their sterile ones. And I wonder if life is just one big conspiracy, because I could never ask to die, but now, I’m trying to decide if that makes *me* the crazy one.

My friends roll dollar bills into telescopes. My friends high on mushrooms and acid tell me that they understand everything there is to understand.

And I'm sober,
but I understand nothing.

Rally in the Motherland

Grandma sits on the screened in front porch. It's almost unbearable outside, the winds are short and kick up dust. Momma and I haven't come yet, so Grandma is alone. She wonders when she was first left like this, when the farm roads started turning into city streets, if one could do this place justice by even calling it that. At best it was a town in an underwater country, one always wet and flooded. When Momma and I come, all Momma can focus on is how things have changed. All I can notice is the smell of the third world; like diesel, rust, manure, suffering, a likelihood of perseverance because what other option is there, besides to continue living? Livin' 'till you're dyin', then dyin' taking over everything. I throw out all my jeans the first day I get there, the air is too hot. I immediately begin filling my suitcase with fruits and wildflowers.

Over the next eight weeks, I will pick and eat from them, the juices and petals alike staining all my summer dresses. It hurts me not, thorns and all. I am carefree, for once, peeking over the head of a mountain of liberation, too young to have any recognizable responsibilities.

I am nine years old when my luck runs out.

My parents are together and shouldn't be, and all day I cause Momma trouble. That's what she says to Dad when he gets home, *Your daughter caused me trouble*. They pushed possession of me off themselves easily, as if vassally dusting a bookshelf. At the time, we had stray cats taking over the basement. My sister lured them to the door with all the turkey and milk we could afford, and even though I was allergic I didn't care because Momma hated anything with legs that moved, was just

barely getting used to me, and these kits sure were cute. My teachers loved me when I was nine years old, but no one else my age felt the same. I was very aware of this non acceptance.



A rickshaw nearly runs over the stray chickens in the street. They are small and un-American. Outside things are out of order, but Grandma's house is under control. There is a small path connecting this house to Dad's old best friend's. The *kajibura*, the poor old worker woman, fits her description to the bones. Her wrists are thinner than melted candles, her fingers always cold as they graze my scalp as she braids my hair every night. She pats oil into it and everywhere I go, I leave the faint trace of coconuts.

I don't hug her when I leave for home, although I want to. It's not in the manner of things. The worker woman cried most when death came to collect Grandma, walked in all business on a room full of women or men, but never both. My grandma's hair poked out from under a sheet and red powder brushed the fine part in her hair. A bride once again in the afterlife. If the worker woman had died, I don't think my Grandma wouldn't have cried once.

If, what *If?* I have so many questions, so many reasons for wanting a time-travel machine that'll take me back to the time before trouble started, but I'm not sure where that begins or ends, just how it's been playing out. I stop thinking about Grandma. I feel queasy.



Grandma gets a monthly check in the mail and pretends it doesn't hurt her that this is the only severance from a son that might as well have died, he had gone to live so far away. *Alhamdulillah, mashallah, all will be well as long as the family grows in the right ways.* Our children can only

outdo us, even by running. We should all lose each other to something, we hope for death or grand circumstance. But instead, Life comes as a truth, always, always, always much stranger than fiction. What if women weren't wives, or widows? What if women could win, even a little?

Grandma swings her legs back and forth on the front porch and I, being young and not realizing all the things she said (and didn't say, but as a Mother really should have. *I love you still, it's okay if you fuck up, I'll love you still*)— I swing my legs back and forth. She knows I am my mother's daughter but chooses to say nothing, this time, and I am so thankful. I wish she weren't so cold, Grandmas are not meant to be cold. She is delicate with a touch of finality, but her hair has only thinned and not given up on color yet. Grandma worked faster than anyone, had bolognese and salad on the table in twenty minutes flat. Grandpa would lift all his grandchildren by his forearms. They hung like happy monkeys with both arms wrapped around him. Grandparents put money aside for your better future, did not rely, like mine, on their kids for means of survival. And she had the audacity to talk about shame.

Shame on my brother, who in her words, might as well have only had half a brain. Shame on my father, who abandoned her twice. Shame on several love affairs Shame on threatening to leave your children for your gambling addiction with no bread money. Dad had bad habits and I was told never to air my dirty laundry in public. My grandma might as well have pulled all of us to her deathbed before admitting she hated who we were, what we'd become, how we'd ruined the good name of our family. No one could be good enough. She said nothing. She loved not one of us.

I blame her for mystery that stained all the hearts of my pieces: I sewed different anecdotes to meanings that only made sense in my own mind. I was told to quiet down, stay out of sun, sacrifice whatever I could

in the hope that when life has got me down, others will shoulder me as their burden,

Even if I had had told them that I figured it all out: that I knew how much the rent was and why we were fighting about it, why my sister got caught stealing that day, why she was beaten in front of me. Why I was dealt with with a hanger, and my sister the belt. I got smacked around until I was sixteen, until my fifth boyfriend replaced the hand of my father's and immediately after I was crying and confessing how badly I wanted him. I was nine years old when my luck ran out. Grandma was dying and she couldn't let go or forgive, and after all she was my blood, so what have I really inherited?

Throughout my trip in Asia I spent everyday waking up with fifty people surrounding my bedside, whispering to each other, *Look, she is waking up*, and with fifty others eclipsing the lightbulb above me, *Look, she is falling asleep*. Children from the village chased my car, scaled the palm trees to get a look at me over the big, black iron gates. I spent all day sitting on the back of a lazy buffalo, swatting at flies and surrounded by my daydreams. And finally, at the very end of the trip, when her body was losing all sense of control and I could feel the finish coming—coming. Look at it *coming*— I understood what the shame was about.

I was here, miserable, for eight weeks.

They were stuck for a lifetime.

I was sick and she was sick, but I wasn't the one dying. I couldn't keep anything in or down, couldn't think straight, couldn't sit up. Couldn't admit to my mom when she came to me for some truth, and asked me if I knew Grandma was dead or dying (tell me what the Goddamn difference

is anyways—). *Yes*, I knew that and much more. My mother should have known I was more clever.

So, when my mother comes to me, the first time in my life and possibly hers that she is getting down on a knee without her head hung in embarrassment, I lie. I tell her I do not know. I play pretend because it's easier than knowing what to say or risking being caught off guard. At nine years old, I realize I am not ready for the world, too soft, too swollen in an empty heart.

I make my mother explain what she can't and for the rest of my life I blame her for my lack of answers. I am not ashamed. My daughter will do the same to me. It's an endless cycle, but nothing stays the same. Death and disaster or grand circumstance feel no guilt, no remorse. There was a heavy stone of judgment in the place of her heart, and finally she was nothing. Grandma was gone, just skin and bones now, and then eventually a rotting corpse in the ground with living flowers mocking her, their color staring in her gray face as she bled from the crease in her forehead. The flowers laughed, until, they too, died.

Just corpses in the ground, rotting, returning to a better imprisonment than the restrictions of life. Dead in the dirt with no family in sight. *What good are your memories when this is your end?*

After all.

Obits & Orbits

Three Muslim girls drowned (*every* year, according to my mother, being swallowed by the ocean was as common as a cold), *every* summer at Brighton Beach. They walked in with their *burqas* and full attire, the water's heaviness dragging them down, before they got tangled in the mess and sunk straight to the bottom. These girls never had names, but were apparently always on the news. Because of them, when I went to the biggest beach in the world, my mom only let me wade in to my knees, and not at all if it was stormy. Peanuts were sold in newspaper cones, and no brown person I knew ever learned to swim. Throughout my life, everyone would try to teach, certain swimming was a human capability. No one has ever succeeded, and so far, I've just accepted it as another handicap.

Fernando's brother took six tabs of acid and jumped from the seventh floor of a project in Queens. The paper reported there had been a rooftop party, but he was just with his two, maybe three boys, and then he started to wreck shit, so they kicked him out and locked the doors. His friends lived in the basement, so he made it up fifteen flights of stairs before going out the door and off the ledge and into mid-air, where, for a few seconds, he flew, before hitting the ground. That night, I saw Fernando in the Park Slope Five Guys, and because I didn't know yet, I went right up to me, asked him why it'd been so long. Hugged him with his red-rimmed eyes and assumed he was just high but not heartbroken.

A teacher in my high school died before his tenth year on the job. He got close enough. I didn't know him well but looked him up relentlessly on the internet afterwards. Facebook has this new automatism that changes everything for someone who has died to the past-tense. Remembering BLANK. Fuck that. He hung himself in a bathroom while his kids were out with their mother, and

later on, my boyfriend of the time told me he found that to be incredibly pathetic. I broke up with him after this. I felt too bad for the dead guy to be talked bad about like that.

Tommy never wore a shirt, not in the scorching heat or the blistering cold. The husky, Rocco, would sniff me out down the block first, and then Tommy would come out shirtless, winter or summer. He was tougher than any biker I knew, proved it with the gaps in his teeth and twisted braid falling down his back. He wore heavy rings and once confided how much I look like his wife. I didn't know anyone I wasn't related to, and even then, that I looked like. She wasn't buried too far, and he died after I moved away. His death doesn't hurt me to think about, but I am sorry, of course. I don't know if I'd want to say goodbye so much as have another fond day, where it isn't so clear to him how far I am moving on. I hope he is with his wife now, and I imagine they still love each other.

Avi's mother was dying on her deathbed, when she pulled him close to her by the ear and admitted she never loved him. He was my best friend's father's father, and she doesn't even get to spend any time with this grandpa. He was emancipated from the family and is probably still suffering.

Ryan went to highschool with my sister and got run over after his brother dropped him off at a party. Some drunk asshole ran him over, ran him over, ran him over three times before realizing what they'd done, the trouble they'd caused and speeding off. Someone accepted the friend request I sent him and I remember being haunted by that, wondering, *Who checks up on that shit? And when is it gone forever?*

Ingrid's dad drove us to eighth grade prom and I got to sit in the front because I was older. I pretended it was because my dress was more expensive, even though it was a hand-me-down. He drove a Porsche, kicked it to ninety on the freeway, got us to prom in fifteen minutes flat. We waited for Butter Lane bakery to close up for the night and give us the stale cupcake for the next week,

while he gave us our girl space and ate dinner across the street. He was a lawyer who lost his job. An alcoholic who recovered, and had the sparrow tattoos to prove it. He kicked cancer twice, and then over a weekend, while Ingrid was just starting college and her younger brother high school, his cancer came back and his liver failed and he was dead and gone. Just like that.

My grandfather died the afternoon Finding Nemo came out. I had never been to a movie theatre before and kept thinking about how my time was ruined. I'd never even met the guy, only had one picture of him, tall, standing behind a formica counter with a long, white beard and a gaze intense as my father's.

My grandmother died after losing it. Her kids, and then her kidneys. She said some things I hope she didn't mean, but blamed her for anyway. It's not worth repeating, because I know people I love who love her and this isn't a thread I'm willing to pick at.

Heshie's mother could only afford two of the three following things: her son's train ticket to visit her (her was out of work at the time), her medication for the month, or the tools she desperately, it seemed at the time, needed to fix the leak in the roof. Heshie had visited and left, his younger brother stayed at home. His dad was long gone already anyways, and his mother could have asked for some money from him, but she had too much pride. Had raised two tall, handsome boys without him. One of them cut all of high school and stayed home to reach all the classics. He was so wise, and she was so proud.

So Heshie visited and left home, and she bought the materials and was up on the ladder, and started to feel dizzy for a second, so she sent her son to the store to pick up some cheap Seltzer and something small for her head. She climbed down the ladder, her bones brittle now, that time has passed. Her boys are men now, and her husband is nowhere to be found. She'll just rest for a second, on the couch, put her head down on a soft pillow, closes her eyes and returns—

Her son comes back, and though she is still warm he can tell, all the way from the front walk that needed to be mowed weeks ago, has grown over and rotted already past it's time. She is still on the couch, almost being swallowed, undeniably gone. He'd just gone for a minute, and now his mother was gone for good.

Amir, 2001

Summer ends, we have a full house
New family, lifelong, the unexpected,
Lots of anger from the Little One. I was jealous
and he wasn't my brother.
I don't mean that anymore,
and yes, I regret it.

I am standing on the back deck
Looking at the golden sun skirting the
Tops of the trees in Washington.
I am wondering where you are now
in the grand scheme of things. I think of him,
and briefly wonder if he has ever thought of me,
or if even that thought is far too romantic to be real.

I owe him beyond what I can deliver.
Imagine his mother, holding her fault
and her future like his misfortune
Cupped and crippled in the palm of her hand.
This, her baby, doesn't speak, or think, or love.
And therefore he is not spoken of, or thought of, or loved.
And one can only hope that God should play fair.
The Gift of Life (that tormenting phrase), which is-- essentially-- luck
(When it works out), and (When it doesn't)

We bury it six feet below our souls,
We kick over the dirt in anger.
We cry when the snow comes
But are secretly, and disturbingly and disgracefully
Relieved.
Like rain, sorrow washes things away and leaves only slow movement
No momentum, catatonic residue behind.
This is the slug mark of the living, the gestation of guilt,
the harboring on what does and what doesn't, won't make sense
and neither hopes nor pretends to. At this point, it is still braver than me.
Years later, when the family has forced themselves to forget,
as much as they can, which is to say isn't much at all,
Here, only the surface pain subsides.

Now, I come home,
I kneel in the tender ground and begin to mutter all my wishes;
It gets better. miracles can occur
Power of strength, power of love,
Cost of suffering.
It's enough.

They see me from a distance,
With my body tucked inward like the new spring growth on cold mornings.
They think I'm praying, have come around, see a path towards salvation.
the Waiting game ends and finally, I succumb.
I sprawl my body across his, mine caked with filth and sorrow and remembrance
and his, ofey and shock-resistance, silently crushed beneath grand circumstance.

Finally I start with my promise- and with an anchor,
With almost grave open-heartedness-
I search the other world, commit to protecting you
Commit alone to devotion

and giving you everything
we could not in this one.

The Hajj

New York seems prepared for me as I stretch over the lap of the sleeping woman next to me and look out the tiny airplane window. I feel the chill in the air and remind myself it's only February and I know better than to be hopeful during the winter. I leave the airport and don't remember the smells, everything has changed. It's what I expected and still I am surprised. I have not been home for the majority of a year and think my parents only bought me a ticket to make sure I wasn't pregnant when I left and a mother-in-trouble now. This city chews and spits everyone out at one point or another, I remind myself. Not a big deal. I scan the crowd for familiar faces, pretend a casual self importance before popping the aura like a bubble and catching the Q home.

On the other side of the country the weather is thirty degrees warmer. My dogs are playing in the woods but only in separate intervals because when they're together, they plan to run away. I'm not kidding. I practically see it on their faces.

My pigs left themselves in and out in the mornings and have learned to drink from the pond by themselves. These hogs play games. The new chickens lays blue and pink eggs and this year we are planting a plum, pomegranate, and bougainvillea tree. I'm going to paint the house green and blue, green and white if I can get away with it, and the barn a deep red, and I'll park my purple pickup right in front. Home seems picture perfect.

A mean old ex boyfriend of mine wrote to me once, said vindictively I've replaced all my friends with animals. I'm not ashamed of that, I think that's okay. If they've never once dug roots for themselves, never once watched a cycle of growth, they don't understand. And if they don't understand, they shouldn't judge.

It could have been you.

The paths aren't paved, there are no signs to tell you where you're going or what to expect. Chances are the landscape won't be picturesque, but there's a golden hour somewhere, if not everywhere.

Where do the monsters go, when the sun is like this?

Where is the moon, looking into her vanity and freshening up before coming out for tonight's show. I look out over the horizon and want to see mountain or trees or other forms of life and all I see is steel and concrete. Doesn't quite feel like home, but the guilt compensates.

Sad thing, poor beggar always looking for bread

With a prime rib tucked under your arm

Where is everyone I used to speak to right at dawn after winding nights like these— *I am sick of love, sick of infanticide towards my real feelings*. No one has apologized for what they cannot remember doing.

There's the Big Dipper, the Little One, Orion's Belt. I drew these constellations on the back of my hand, then hold up my palm to compare notes. I spy the moon, who is all ready now in her made-up fashion, all glitter and no gold. She taunts me, howls in laughter that startles the coyotes for miles around the island back home. Here, the engines rev up and she spits, aims right at my face, asks me, *You wrote a hundred letters and sent not a single one?*

"I'm sorry," I say. "I never meant to send them."

When did I learn some things are better left unsaid?

Those who are weak shouldn't bear heavy burdens. So keep your mouth shut and remember your mother who said the morning of your twelfth birthday that a girl's first blood comes not from between her legs, but from *biting her tongue*.

So I bite my tongue, bite your tongue too, bite my cheek, hold it all back in.

Let him think I am thick headed as long as he doesn't think I'm weak. Make tea for one, rice for one, pleasure all alone with a thick book below my waist, the candles melting near my head as I try to sleep the day away.

Some people feel sorry for themselves, sit at home and only think about making big decisions. But look at you, making them willy-nilly, left and right, acting before you think, playing with fire and life and stone like it's all just yoyos. Toy it, finger it, embarrass it, abuse it, the pleasure never comes when you want it to, where it is intended.

Time will slow down, and this is how to expect the crash. Watch very closely, listen to the silverware shaking against each other in the drawers. In the disaster zone, don't dream of exhaling, just hold your breath tight in the chest and keep your eyebrows raised like you are perpetually startled. Only then will the Moment take you, swift, all at once, holy, leaving you drenched in your own sweat, basking in a sickly glow,

your fists clenched, a grimace painting all your features opaque.

Your mouth curls around a name, around an answer and then you yawn, and you've lost it.

Same, Same, But Different

I get it. She put it in better words than I think I am able to do, but I felt different in the same ways, the hesitancy about my skin grower darker or my thighs getting bigger, or not losing my baby fat until I was seventeen and on the brink of my fourth year with an eating disorder. Everyone says New York is a melting pot, but this little corner of Brooklyn was mostly desis and other variations of Muslims. My block specifically had several kids in my age range that would play together outside. I always watched my hours, when I was younger. I knew I tanned badly, if you could even call it tanning. My skin would get this burned orange Auburn color, though I wasn't, I looked like I was constantly sweating after a particularly eventful summer. As I grew up, playing outside escalated into concerts at Prospect Park for celebrate Brooklyn, and later on I would make sure to cover my legs in white, light cloth. I knew all the tricks to stay cool and white as I could for a brown girl during troubled times.

I remember coming home as the sun went down; cool outside and unbearably suffocating in the house. That sort of summer was usual back then. I would come home and as I walked towards my room, my sisters would jeer at me and call me Mexican and make clucking noises at me. For an hour or two afterward I would be treated like their slave, they thought it was a clever joke on my darkness. I don't even know why I played along with it then, I remember feeling hurt. Maybe I thought laughing it off and pretending to enjoy it would make it more tolerable somehow, or that my sister's would see I was capable of taking a joke and they would stop making them so much. Maybe even back then I knew the problems would stop in our Kensington apartment, but extend and follow me throughout my life, wherever I went. ABCD was the term I picked up from my siblings and their peers, which I assume now was to make light of our shared situation. American Born Confused Desi.

That's the thing I started to realize over time, and that I am still working to grapple with and be blatantly honest with myself about, no matter how disgruntled I may be about my falling into the trap. The natural world doesn't judge you, I realize, but is it fair to say that the world is not unfair? There are certain genetic lotteries, ones that go beyond appearance and attraction and actually concerning health. A large part of our histories are written before we even enter the Earth and we spend our feeble little lives slowly uncovering the secret like peeling a clementine, slowly and with great tenderness. So that's survival of the fittest. The most beautiful, agile, cutting edge. And over time what the people say get to you. Through osmosis or absorption or metaphysics or *whatever*, they decide your fate and sick it upon you like a hex. Any girl with blonde hair and blue eyes and her long gazelle legs can make a weasel out of you or me. To them you are different. Too fat, too dark, too thin, too short, too loud, too nasally, too much for them to be held accountable. Too grey, your skin gets orange in the winter and grey in the summer. At least grey's not black, right? At least brown's not black, *right? Whatever*, same thing. Close enough. The locals in Thailand say to the tourists ordering food and asking about the specifics, *same, same, but different*.

Here's my contention with the next step: What if it's not up to me? I'm hardly capable of standing up for myself let alone changing a stigma that I can't help but feel in my gut is unfair, but perhaps true? What a disgrace I am to my mother and her mother, and how much I resent them both for putting this wretchedness like a disease on me. People have a way of making you feel like a sack of shit with just their words, like you've been festering in the corner for weeks without notice. You're like gum stuck to the bottom of someone's shoe, back in your living room now, suffocating.

Well. *Who do you owe it to?* And is it worth it *in the long run*, to fight here and now and hard and long? You've got to pick your battles. Admit it. You are not displeased always when men watch your brown ass sway in a miniskirt, jeans or your period sweatpants. Exoticism isn't so bad, everyone's got their

fetishes anyways. It might be worth it to assimilate, to straighten your hair and only let it curl back up a little. To pluck your eyebrows thin as the girls on Cosmopolitan. Maybe in a few years you'll be lucky, and their fascination with you will come back. Maybe it will be worth it, all the hiding, for someone who falls in love with you anyways? For that boyfriend, or that outfit, or for simply not trying to draw bad attention to yourself- it might be worth it, to suck it up and admit you fall short. To keep your mind and body running until you catch up or fall so far behind you fool yourself into thinking you are in the lead.

Where's the integrity they ask? My self respect?

I must have burned it away playing in the raging sun.

I must have finally scrubbed myself raw and clean in the shower, cleansed for once from dirt, grime, history, convention .