She Calls Me Blue

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by

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Artist’s Statement

Everyone loves a good story; this, we recognize and value without hesitation. We often, however, overlook the hidden powers within that story: within its ability to advance or refute a dominant narrative, what those words are actually asserting beyond simple entertainment. This becomes even more pertinent when telling one’s own story. We must consider the social barriers and implications around who is and isn’t allowed to voice her narrative. Telling one’s story becomes a critical means of defying the many oppressing forces that urge us not to. In a society that regularly discourages certain voices, this art of storytelling becomes even more relevant, as authors directly refute those forces by proving themselves worthy of recognition on the page.

This is precisely what I have intended to do in writing my creative thesis. My first-person narrative explores my social location and the various shaping experiences that have enabled me a better understanding of the self in my life thus far. She Calls Me Blue is a collection of inter-related pieces that blend poetry, prose, and short story, each can stand alone, but work together to inform the larger whole. Within this work and from a craft standpoint, I am asking how is the self constructed as a character in memoir, how is “Truth” understood within it? Where is the line between relaying an event exactly as it happened, or altering certain aspects to better inform the narrative? Telling my story this way, in a series of pieces as opposed to a singular unbroken narrative, grants me the creative freedom in what to say, as well as what not to say, while additionally inviting the reader to help tie together each thread. Rather than feeling the need to settle on one specific style, this mode of writing purposely questions how each form can enhance the meaning of the piece, how they can combine to better convey the larger story, and how the work would thus be lacking if written more traditionally. Relatedly, I explore various means to visually represent the coalescence of these ideas on the page. The use of negative space, offset text, and purposeful justification shifts allow me to use the text itself as its own art form and manipulate its layout to best support the story.

In writing this piece, I intend to also challenge the pervading notion that academic and personal are mutually exclusive; the first we consider theory, the latter we often discount. This creative project supports my call for a more inclusive definition of theory that accounts for formats as diverse as the people it discusses. I am specifically interested in this dichotomy from a feminist perspective — how a radical shift in thinking around academia can support a larger feminist agenda, to bridge barriers and advocate for equality. Without the need to cater to a perceived level of intellect or write narrowly for an exclusive audience, knowledge and its pursuit can be ubiquitous.

As someone pursuing a very interdisciplinary degree, this project allows me to speak to each aspect of my studies. As a writer, this work is everything that I enjoy about the craft, and has put my learnings in action, as to how to best tell a compelling story. My background in women’s studies further informs the narrative, as I can view each experience through a critical lens – questioning my positionality in regard to each, as well as where that specific instance lies within a larger society of institutions, and how my narrative could either support or defy it. The experimental format, within both the language and visual makeup on the page, allows me to draw from my most-shaping works across multiple genres, while speaking to my art background with the visual elements of my work.
Over the course of this past year, this project has taken its own shape and has surpassed my initial assumptions of how it would form. Because of the nature of my writing, it is not nearly as prescriptive as other research methods may be. This project mainly involved a significant amount of dedicated time to sit and write and make sense of my ideas on a page. Usually this included far too much coffee, a stacked collection of excerpts and titles from authors I admire, and even larger piles of far too convoluted thoughts for me to sort through. After creating a fairly sound body of work (or so I thought), I decided to step back from it and see if I could still make sense of what I had written. When I revisited the collection after a week or two, the gaps became glaring. All of my unintended oversights and assumptions and borderline melodrama had reshaped my initial attempt at storytelling into something that read like an exaggerated teenage diary entry – perhaps slightly more well-formed than that, but nowhere near what I had sought to accomplish. Though the style of my prose was compelling, and still my preferred way to write, it meant that I had inadvertently left out far too much information and had some serious work to do in order to round out the story. However, part of why I had decided on this hybrid style was to resist the typical point-A-to-point-B narrative; I didn't want to be tethered to chronology or my inevitably flawed memory – which became increasingly more apparent as I continued to write and realized how much I already couldn't remember. Rather than starting over (which I surely considered), I decided to see what insight I could borrow from other authors; how could I keep the successful pieces while still working to better inform the rest.

This search led me to David Foster Wallace, famous for his style of meta commentary on his own writing. Though I was unfamiliar with this approach and had never considered writing like this, I thought to try it. I revisited that first page, reread the first sentence, tagged a footnote onto the end of it that led the reader to the bottom, where I could then express everything I was thinking in trying to compose that initial sentence – why did I begin like this, why is this what I chose to say over the many other options I considered, what are the implications of these words over the ones I decided to omit? I could voice all of my hesitations and questions, sometimes by directly addressing the reader or myself, or purposely blurring my intended audience. After that first attempt on the starting page, I worked my way through the rest of the narrative with this approach in mind, and the collection began to find its voice and its purpose. This gave me the format to express everything I had initially intended to do in this writing, but for which I had previously lacked the structure. I could be blatantly transparent in my knowing, and my unknowing, my telling and untelling; this gave me boundless permission to not know. What began as a series of pieces and stories about my life morphed into a series of pieces of how to write those stories of my life. I believe that is where the core of this narrative lies: in the making of story, rather than simply the story itself.

I found a gift through Foster Wallace’s writing on lobsters and state fairs; I found a roadmap that sanctioned the shape of my words. But he is simply one of the countless other noteworthy authors who have influenced my work. Sandra Cisneros’ vignettes in *The House on Mango Street* initially drew me to this type of storytelling. I read her novel first in eighth grade and have returned to it many times since when in need of a little creative inspiration. bell hooks’ memoir *bone black* is one that additionally helped me concretize my structure, exemplifying the use of short scenes and vignettes, much like Cisneros, to speak to a larger idea or guiding motif. Likewise, her *all about love* and *ain’t i a woman* proved to me that theory and experience belong on the same page. Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* reminded me of the prospects of the visual, how to push my thinking beyond mere language,
and seek out a means to represent my ideas beyond the words themselves. Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing* reestablished the importance of point of view, how to overlap multiple characters’ stories to slowly allow the narrative to unfold, a way of telling and untelling in circles. I was reminded of the heartbreaking and empowering rawness that derives from a deep and vulnerable look into one’s self in Roxanne Gay’s *Hunger: A Memoir of My Body*; it encouraged me to seek a similar level of self meditation. Eimear McBride’s novel *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* resonated in its rhythm, fractured prose, and half-rhymes, speaking to the true potential of language, of how and when to manipulate the guiding rules of grammar if the story demands it. Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche’s writings, along with her famous Ted Talk, reinforced the danger of a single story, and compelled my want to broaden our narratives. *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action* by Audre Lorde details exactly what it means for me to write – to break the many silences that have yet to be broken, to ask what still needs to be said, which identities we still need to speak to, and how we may best honor them. Though these authors may have had the most obvious and direct influence on my writing, there are innumerable other writers and their characters from whom I have read and learned — from Mrs. Frizzle and Nancy Drew to Woolf and Atwood and Baldwin to Steinem to Moraga and Butler and Crenshaw and Beauvoir and on and on… all have guided me through my work and my thinking and my writing; all are somehow present within this collection.

*She Calls Me Blue* is not only an ode to my learning and my growth, but also a gesture to those who have come before, and additional encouragement to those who will follow. To all of the individuals who have fought for our rights and our bodies and our voices to allow for such stories to be told; to my teachers who have encouraged my writing, who fostered my creativity, who saw something in me and invested in my learning, to those who didn’t and forced me to push myself; to the dance instructor who taught me to find comfort in my body and its motions when the rest of the world becomes too loud; to the choir director who fostered my voice and my solace in song and sound; to the photography professors who challenged my seeing, my thinking, who taught me to critique; to the philosophers and thinkers and activists who have transformed the way I walk through the world, the things I question, the things I notice; to the authors who taught me to write it all down; to my friends and family and mentors who have been endlessly encouraging and patient and kind in supporting this process; to all the work we have yet to do and all the accounts that have yet to be heard. This is my first significant effort to speak to that which has shaped me, to initiate the beginning of a series to come.

This is my story, and the making of my story, one that is still forming and still changing and still claiming itself. This is my aim to speak to that searching, and healing, and processing, that attempt *to walk this relentlessly messy path of rediscovery*, as I’ll tell you on the first page – this collection is an inevitable and purposeful dedication to that path.
she calls me blue

lindsay goldman
I am sitting inside a prison, surrounded by my fellow classmates, half of whom are inmates in a men’s correctional facility. It is the spring before my senior year of my undergrad, and I signed up for a course on *writing as activism* from a professor I admire. It is a class that often asks us who we are, how we are different, how we are the same, how we are here.

*Who am I, or more so who do I want to be?* Sitting here, more than any time I can remember, the answer to each is infuriatingly foggy. I see this term, and this time, as an opportunity to explore that fog, an ongoing experiment in trying to let myself fall, and feel, and be, despite the paralyzing voices that tell me otherwise. *How am I here?* In this moment, and the weeks and months leading up to it, I am searching, still searching, and thoroughly exhausted and beyond frustrated that I am still searching. I am healing, still healing, and everyday trying to remind myself that process is not linear, and all too often forgetful and discouraged by every seemingly backward step. I am processing, processing loss and grief, both old and new, and just trying to walk this relentlessly messy path of rediscovery.

This collection will inevitably be somehow dedicated to that path.

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1 It feels wrong to start like this, to use the striking allure of a prison to begin my story. I could just say *classroom*, I don’t necessarily need to involve the specific *where*, but that feels equally as incomplete, like an oversight of a formative aspect of how we all first come to understand one another. But my peers’ experience inside is not mine to tell, and it feels deceptive, nearly manipulative to begin this way. There is a quote from a book on beginnings that I thought to include, but still can’t seem to find, something that speaks to this difficulty of a first. It is honest though—that is where I wrote this, that is what compelled me to keep writing. So I’m torn between my understanding and its potential misrepresentation on the page.
Dear Linds,

Remember to breathe. Remember to pause, to take a moment when the world starts spinning faster than you can manage, to take a breath, it will slow down. Remember you’re loved, crazy loved, and remember those who love you.

I know J isn’t always the big sister you need right now, but she’ll come around. It will take a number of years, but her questionable friends will slowly fade and she’ll start coming back to family dinners and holiday gatherings. You’ll be spending hours on the phone with her before you know it. Give her time.

I know it’s scary when Dad yells; it’s just because he’s scared too, and that’s how he tries to hide it. Like that time he accidentally yanked your arm out of your socket when he pulled you back out of the street so you wouldn’t get hit by a car – he saved you then, and he will continue to as long as he is able.

As for Mom, know she loves you too. In the coming years, it will get harder to remember that, but you must. It’s going to hurt like hell when you stand at the sidewalk and watch her drive away, but she’ll be back for prom and graduation. Let her do your makeup and take you to dinner, and enjoy the time you have together; with her you just have to focus on the good.

I’m tempted to tell you to walk the other way when the girl in the palm tree tank top and maxi skirt walks into class that day, but you shouldn’t, because you would be missing out on a four-year-long love story that will propel you to some wonderful places, and some seriously painful ones too, but they’re all necessary. If I could prepare you for that ache in your heart and pit in your stomach when you walk back into your apartment to find all of her things gone, I would, but I know I can’t – nothing can, and it wouldn’t mean as much even if I could. Don’t hate her. Don’t hold on too hard, but don’t vilify her for too long either. You’ll be better without harboring that hate in your heart. You’ll be okay. Remember that.

Know it is not your fault, your breakup, or your parents’ – yes, that’s coming soon too and you’ll get through it. Don’t blame Mom either, but don’t blame yourself. And on that day you come home from school and don’t understand why it all hurts so much, don’t shave your legs. Just avoid razors for a while. Reach for a paint brush or keyboard or retreat to your bed instead; go somewhere soft and kind. Just don’t pick up that razor; you’ll understand later.

You can still meet her and have your fairytale and experience just as much learning while avoiding a few unnecessary scars along the way.

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2 As one of many writing exercises we explore in this class, my professor asks us to write a letter to our younger selves. It is one of the first pieces I write in a long time that comes easily. I envision myself at ten-years-old, wide-eyed and frizzy haired, and tell her everything I wish I could then.
There will be times when it becomes harder and harder to remember who you are, and that image in the mirror feels blurry and disconnected. Know that it's temporary. Surround yourself with good souls – like I know you do – and focus on what you do know instead of worrying about the many things you don’t. You’re more grounded than you give yourself credit even when it feels like you’re floating in mid-air. Remember that.

Remember to pause, and to breathe, and to keep breathing, and darlin’ you’ll be just fine.

All my love,

You
I know my eyes are green, but also brown – I call them hazel.

I know my hair is brown, though sometimes blonde – is there a word for that?

I know I stand at 5’5” and 3/4” or 1/2” – somewhere just under 5’6”, just enough below that mark so nurses pause and squint at the measurements on the wall when filling in my chart, but never sufficient to settle in the round and simple number 6.

I know I am a series of boths, of in-betweens.

I know my curly hair and that it looks best when scrunched with too expensive curl gel – the closest I’ve come to mimicking a dip in the ocean.

I know my name, though in full it feels foreign. I know a friend by the sound of it in short. I know Dad by the mess of consonants and syllables shouted loudly in jest as its replacement. I know Mom from Linds, like friends, and Angel, and sometimes Sunshine– but that’s Gramma’s, the name she specifically designated for only me.

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3 They say write what you know; so here goes.

4 Should I also include the section of I don’t know? Though that would be limitless. I suppose one can imply the don’ts from what is existing.

5 Schmidt, Schminz, Schmaaa, Binzy, Binz, Mushmu… Dad and I counted all of his nicknames for me once. I think we neared forty before we lost stamina.
She calls me Sunshine. Like the song.

you are my sunshine
my only sunshine
you make me happy
when skies are grey
you’ll never know dear
how much I love you

…

you are my sunshine.

Sunshine is Gramma with two Ms in place of the N and D. Because that’s how we say it, and in learning to write, we are taught to sound-out our words. And when we did, this is what we wrote.

Gramma – a name, not a title.

my only sunshine.


Gramma with her collection of tiny colorful boxes that hold invisible memories, relentlessly offering us brisket and bagels and pastrami on rye. I think I broke her heart a little the day I became vegan, and continue to each time I have to remind her.

I know Gramma and exceedingly dry brisket and Sunshine and Baroch Atta Adonai like I know lazy Sunday mornings and the comfort in cozy rain-soaked afternoons. I might not know temple or the correct
pronunciation of every prayer at Shabbat, but I know the smell of capers and onions and that deli off Nordhoff street with the freshest bagels, and I much prefer that to a weekly recital of Torah excerpts.

Gramma, with her endless supply of show tunes and smiles.

you make me happy

Whose go-to means of celebration is an awkward pseudo-cabbage-patch dance. My cousins and I each have our own stories of unsuccessful attempts to correct her. After the umpteenth time adjusting her arms and modeling the right coordination, we concede, give her hilarious flailing jig its own name and have a good laugh. That doesn't stop her from turning to one of us each time she tries, and grinningly asking, *is this right?* Both hands in fists with arms outstretched, circling them somehow in opposition to her hips, *is this right?* it never is, which makes it always so.

when skies are gray

With 1000 miles between us now, our once semi-regular visits have been reduced to only the essential holiday gatherings that can justify the plane ticket home. Two or three trips a year at most. Rather than resent our current time restrictions, I resort to the memories I know – my favorites, my go-to’s, my simple self-evident truths that could only ever mean one thing, *Gramma.*

She loves buying watches. She could cycle through a new one each day for weeks without repetition, and yet somehow still insists upon the need for more. I used to love going watch shopping with her. Parsing through gaudy time pieces with colorful false gems and sparkles and every other outlandish feature that is endlessly enticing at eight and thoroughly overindulgent as an adult (until we reach a certain age that is).

Similar to our watch scavenger hunts through department stores, we could spend hours in the Dollar Store – another regular occurrence when I was too young for age to be a relevant memory now…

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6 My hands pause for a moment to grasp at air and extract specific moments in time. My mind runs through archives, disappointed to recall the same tired anecdotes – nicknames, dance moves, brisket – oversaturated from years of retelling. I saw her a few weeks ago on my last visit home during the hurried frenzy we called Passover. It was a blur of matzo and charoset and a potluck of kugels on a menorah-patterned tablecloth – my aunt’s effort to make festive the retirement home event room. It was quite the sight: loads of family members marching in with coolers and trays of Jewish staples, to set up, reheat, eat, and pack up, in less than two hours, and then exit with scraped plates and dirty dishes – our own exodus if you will. That’s how our time together feels now, rushed, taxing, and surrounded by too many nurses.
I hold Gramma’s hand as we leave the parking lot and head towards the store. My sister excitedly races ahead. Aunt P trails behind, fiddling with the car’s remote control lock.

*J, hold on a second,* Gramma kindly shouts in an attempt to reel her back in. *Remember what we talked about,* as she hands J a shopping basket.

*Yes, five things,* my sister obligingly replies. A nod from Gramma and she’s off, sprinting away in a frenzied hunt through the toy isle, the basket dragging behind her like a dog’s floppy ears out the window of a fast moving car.

She tucks a bright blue Hot Wheels car into her basket, hands a red one to me, and begins to shuffle through each rack, pulling packages off shelves without minding to rehang them. A model airplane, a bottle of bubbles, a handful of off-brand barbie dolls, and an assortment of stuffed animals begin to pile into her basket. We run our cars along the shelves as we make our way through the store.

In the ten minutes I spent staring at stickers, J’s basket has tripled. She sits in the middle of the aisle, like a caricature throwing laundry over her shoulders. Gramma peers her head around the opposite corner, *J, remember. Only five.*

We spend another however long searching until Gramma calls *time to go.* J piles her remaining things and hugs her overflowing basket by its base as she stumbles toward the register, peering through her towering stack of items. Gramma, not in the least bit phased, reminds her of the predetermined agreement, while my sister pleadingly pours through each item, defending her need for them all.

*Sweetheart, only five.*

Tears well up, fists begin to shake, feet prepare their stomping; we all know what is coming, and right on cue, the fit begins.

*Every time.*

J plants herself cross legged in front of the checkout line and pulls out her items one by one, reluctantly weathering the selection process. I join her in an attempt to speed it along.

After what feels like an eternity, we eventually determine her chosen five: the blue car, a stuffed dolphin, a dinosaur pack, a blue yo-yo, and a bottle of bubbles, which she places on the conveyer belt alongside my own: the red car, the pack of gel pens, a container of play dough, a set of glow sticks, and a bag of marbles.

We exit the store not unlike how we entered: me attached to Gramma, J racing ahead (running from or towards, I couldn’t tell), and Aunt P fiddling with keys.

We listen to show tunes on the ride home. Our matching Hot Wheels keep time to the sounds of Sondheim.
Gramma, who gets as excited about gift wrap and silly packaging as a little kid relishing in the satisfaction of popping bubble wrap for the first time (this she also happens to love). Whose “from” signature on a gift tag is consistently a creative name hinting at the judiciously wrapped present inside. A CD signed “The Music Man.” A leather jacket signed “The Fashionista.” Tickets to a musical from “Tony” himself. Seven grandkids (sometimes nine), three children and three (and a half) in-laws, one sister, one soulmate, one current companion, and unfailingly a personalized gift and signature for each. Valentines day packages filled with pink confetti, XO patterned socks, and chocolate kisses. Saint Patrick’s Day cards and green socks and four-leaf-clover necklaces. Halloween candies and pumpkin earrings and fittingly fall-themed socks. Regardless of the miles spanning between, every holiday, every birthday, every special occasion, there is a sugar and jewelry and sock-filled package awaiting.

Over the past few years, personalized T-shirts have become the latest Hanukkah tradition. Every member of the family can expect his/her very own, wrapped in last year’s gift bag – which is now part of the joke too. And we will all laugh opening our T-shirt and reading its personally tailored pun and put it on directly over our clothes. It will unfailingly be two sizes too big, so we will wear it to sleep.

I flash on a glimpse of walking through the Skirball, a Jewish cultural center in LA where Gramma used to be a docent. I am young, surveying the scene in awe, following her through the Holocaust display. I am holding her hand, looking up at a heap of playful dyed curls and the warmest smile I know, and some sort of uniform or name tag or item of clothing that indicates expertise. I don’t remember where we stood or what surrounded us. I couldn’t tell you what the walls displayed. I just remember feeling conflicted. Filled with pride and trust in my Gramma and our special permissions because of her position, in contention with the need for sadness – not solely sadness itself, I don’t yet understand it all for that feeling to be authentically fitting, but rather the recognition that this is a place filled with others’ sadness, and the need to replicate it. That is all, then the flash is gone.

A hand, a heap of curls, and a feeling or two.

you’ll never know dear
She’s lived a hard life, but you’d never know it. She is smiles and laughter and show tunes and jewelry and curls and colors and patterns and silver and gold.

*how much I love you*

I don’t know how to react the first time her response to *how are you* is something other than excitement and buoyancy and joy, the first time I notice life wearing in her face and her voice, and her hands. Her hands. They carry so much. When I think of Gramma, it takes pages and hours worth of memories and notes of character and soul before I think of the CMT, the MDS, the cane, the smallness as sickness, the forgetfulness, the stubbornness. She is show tunes. And dry braised brisket. And green beans. Not deteriorating muscles and fragile bones. Not disability. Hands like my dad’s, not limited or strained, but family. Hands like my dad’s.

Dad says she’s getting ready to see Grampa, that’s when it sinks in. The thought of her being just as gone as he is. The funeral, the cemetery, the dirt, the flowers, the Tupperware, the nice outfits and broken faces, the returning to business-as-usual after ceremonies and grief and remembrance and Shiva. Shiva: a week too long to do nothing but miss her, a week too short to then be done.

*so please don’t take my sunshine away.*

7 Her mom committed suicide when she was barely seven and her father quickly remarried the all-too-literal wicked stepmother. Gramma can recount too many times her sister stepped in front to take the hit. I’ve only ever gleaned glimpses of the horrors of her childhood after her mom’s death; she has purposely spared her grandkids the details. We only know her as show tunes; we only know the giddy bubble-wrap-loving side. There are so many stories I haven’t heard, so many things I hadn’t thought to ask. On that Passover visit, I learned of her journalistic pursuits when she was my age. She’s always been a writer,* she wanted to travel, to theorize, to experience the world and immerse herself in it. I like to think my similar aspirations stem from hers. After an acceptance into the journalism program from her dream college, her stepmom instantly objected, and as the professed voice of authority, offered two heartbreaking alternatives: *you can be a nurse or a teacher.* **She chose teacher and made sure she was exceptional. She commuted to school from home and saturated herself in any opportunity to learn, any part of that outside world she could. It was there she fell in love with my Grampa (after apparently playing very hard to get) and immediately after their marriage, was expected to finance his dentistry degree, handed the bill by his parents. However many years and two kids later, they drove from Buffalo to LA with fifty bucks to their names, started a new life, had their third child, and the rest, as they say, is history.

She made a name for herself despite too many deterrents. Despite having her dreams ripped out from under her and then mocked by the same, I have seldom seen her as anything other than intensely happy. She is the manifestation of favorite songs and hilariously inept dance moves; the embodiment of laughter. She is living proof of good in this world, against too many odds... which makes seeing anything less than her vivacious self completely and entirely maddening. She doesn’t deserve to hurt anymore. *It’s not fair.* All of a sudden I’m a tantrum-throwing toddler, screaming at whatever fucked up higher power decided this was how things had to go. *It’s not fair.* She deserves so much better than a failing body and fading spirit. She’s show tunes; just let her stay show tunes.

* another fact I picked up on but hadn’t known first-hand until recently asking to read some of her work

** How easily I forget the recency of this time, where women couldn’t choose, where leaving in spite of familial disapproval wasn’t an option.
I know the little yellow on house on 127th street. The little yellow house that used to be blue,\textsuperscript{8} with an ever-bountiful crooked lemon tree out front whose fruit now matches the paint. I once could name Dad’s apartment barely a mile down the road, or Mom’s grandmother quarters she called a cottage just blocks from the sea.

But those were my parents’ homes. I never knew them as mine. \textit{I never wanted to.}

My sister and I are the only constants to our now-yellow house.

I know it from three types of cat fur that settle like a fine layer of dust across any flat surface. From the pair of tiny handprints molded in concrete in the corner of the backyard. From the outpour of omnipresent frozen food that signifies Dad’s steady commitment to Costco. From the blinds that Mom opened every morning and drew every night – their stillness when she left. From the trash bins out back that when pushed against my neighbor’s wall serve as a make-shift staircase to the roof – my sister’s sanctuary, the best spot to catch the sunset.

I know it from the secrets that lie hidden under fresh coats of paint and newly refurbished floors. The handwritten height chart on the back of the hall closet door, written in a series of colored markers mapping the growth of two daughters with two inches always in between. The L-shaped hole burnt in the carpet upon accidentally setting a paper towel aflame, the hilariously fitting consequence of a childish experiment with fire. The scratches and dents in the living room floor from sisters’ attempted skateboard tricks despite parental discouragement: the older’s knee pad skid marks from successful volleyball digs, the younger’s marks of tap practice.

I know it from the bathroom window just wide enough to shimmy inside upon forgotten keys, what became an improvised front door, a maker of bruises and laughs. Or the outdoor shower near the pool turned vine trestle after years of disregard. The living room television that doubles in size upon each new visit home. The attic that smells of stale moth balls that guards ever-increasing stacked boxes of family photos and holiday decor – the Star of David that annually topped our Christmas tree, a fitting dedication to both.

\[\text{I know our little yellow house from its changes, its secrets, its stories, how it used to be blue.}\]

\textsuperscript{8} The four of us decided our home needed a cheerful update with what we thought was a warm ochre-yellow. Only after painting the entire exterior did we realize it ended up looking more like the cadmium hue squeezed from a yellow paint tube than our intended neutral shade – an amusing result we’ve since grown to love… or live with… or recolor in our minds.
I know ivory and strings above sheet music – the sound, the touch, but not the look. I know shower curtains better than microphones. Though sometimes both; I am a series of boths. I know cameras and shutter speeds, canvases and color blends, that I feel most myself with paint on my hands.

I know the sound of the ocean, the rhythm of the waves, to swim diagonally back to shore if pulled into a riptide, and that there are few things a spontaneous dip in the water cannot solve.

I know impromptu ocean adventures are far more cathartic than planned ones.

I know bridges and rain, their all-encompassing grey, my preference to sunny days.

I know the smell of monsoons on red rocks of Sedona, the dirt that colors my skin and clothes crimson, the stains as an indicator for which shirts to bring camping this year. I know Oak Creek like my backyard, handprints in concrete. The familiar rocks and recognizable bends in the stream, the new growths of plants and trees, an annual height chart, marking time.

I know my body when I am proud of it; I don’t when I’m not. I know its scars on both days: those accidental and those I claim as such. The succession of lines on my left wrist, centered and evenly spaced – I know which bracelets to wear, their correct order to best cover each dash. The stretch marks along hips and breasts, their cause but not their remedy. The waves of raised skin across my lower back, the byproduct of a pit of smoldering coals that consumed my five-year-old body, that I have outgrown somewhat since. I know their texture, their memory – this ocean I carry with me.

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9 The setting of our annual family reunion camping trip – always the same campground and the same row of sites (ours: A19) filled with however many dozens of relatives and friends, and the same camp hosts who preemptively remind us to put the guitars away at 10pm; silly rabbit, haven’t you learned by now, curfews are for kids, and we sound objectively great.

10 I still strive to live up to my five-year-old self, the little badass who stumbled backwards into a fire pit on Day Three of a month-long road trip, and was resolved to keep driving. She knew the impending journey outweighed the cartoons waiting at home. No second and third degree burns could inhibit this little one’s sense of adventure. I often consider the troubling possibility that I peaked at five.
I used to count Mom in glasses of wine, and Dad in business trips. Four in one night. Three in one week. I now know her from quantifiable absences, him from the carbon.

I know her from the words she calls herself – gypsy, spiritual, guru – passionate and unencumbered, the life of the party, leading parenting seminars between AA meetings and impromptu road trips. I know her like a before and after photo with a blurry division line.

I know her from leaving, the negative space easier to name than the thing itself.

11 I have rewritten this section too many times. However I introduce my family (or anyone for that matter) is the lasting image you’ll hold. No matter what follows, the beginning is what lingers. It brings me back to that quote I still can’t seem to find. How do I condense a person into a sentence? What do I want you to think? Am I aiming for objectivity, however false, to allow you to come to your own conclusions? Or am I wholly embracing the inevitable partiality in experience and authorship, and present them to you blatantly through my view? But which view – the angry sixteen-year old? or the still-forming understanding of a nostalgic twenty-something? What do I want you to know? What do I want you to think you know?

12 The before: a pre-K teacher, encouraging exploration and messiness with mud and paint and clay, improvised sandboxes and endless art projects, spontaneous excursions that made Mondays exciting – everything an adventure, every day new inspiration for something to create. The after: blurry, unclear, difficult to place (tied somehow to their divorce, though the line is torn and still being pieced together): when either puberty made me less thrilled about family projects or Mom sank into herself in the divorce, or at some point deemed teenagers able to parent themselves, and so she left, and then came back, and left again, and came back and left and came back and left, endlessly chasing that unnamed somewhere – anywhere other than here.

At the house that used to be ours, Mom had her morning routine: she would open the blinds every day, each one of the five windows along the dining and living room that line the front yard. She would brew coffee, and froth milk, take her time to assemble the perfect balance of both, and finish it with the smallest swirl of chocolate. She would take it outside, to the bench on the front porch and savor it slowly, sometimes with the daily paper, or a book, or simply nothing but the birds and the sun – so that by the time I woke up, the house smelled of coffee, and glowed with morning light, and I knew right where to find Mom, who would greet me with the most joyful good morning angel, and I would make Ovaltine and come join her and we would talk about our dreams. In the after, the end of this ritual was the most striking. I don’t remember the details or when that change occurred, but I vividly recall the closed blinds – waking up to a dark house and an empty bench. No matter how many years later, how many years that Dad has been our house’s sole resident, upon any visit home, nearly every morning, there is still a part of me that expects to walk through the hallway from my bedroom to the front door, and see the top of Mom’s head through open windows, sitting outside with her carefully poured coffee, waiting for hummingbirds.

13 That isn’t fair. She is human first, and parent second, or third. I don’t know the right order, or what to include. I know she can’t win yet. I don’t know how to rectify it. Time probably; isn’t it always time.
I still count him the same: miles on planes, adding phone calls on alternating days. Two in one week, three in the next. Growing steadily, both. I know his unrelenting commitment to work, family, and laughter. I know him from goofy voicemails and belly-aching hysterics. I know him from songs: the nightly recitals, morning wake-up calls, and completely inane musical spin-offs from nicknames.

I know him as my go-to laugh. Steadfast. Reliable. The grounding stone in an ever-changing current.

I count my sister in difference – in opposites and subtraction. Opposite from me, I used to think, opposite from what I thought I knew before. Magnetizing and polarizing. Smaller than last time, still shrinking.

I know this family from boxes, titles, their easy classification, unlike those I struggle to place:

While Mom may be tied to blinds, and floral napkin rings, and wine charms, memories of Dad sing through the house in a different sense, his voice echoing through doorways and book covers. He used to sing J and I to sleep, every night. The same four songs, all from the musical South Pacific, still ring through the hall that connects J's room and mine as he stood right between the two, and told us tales of enchanted evenings and springtime. Gradually, these nightly hallway concerts morphed into Harry Potter readings. I think we made it through the first five or six books in full, only ever read right before bed, and every character had his/her own unique (and often hilarious) voice, that made seeing the movies far more exciting, as we anxiously awaited the accuracy of Hollywood's rendition compared to Dad's original. When the movies came out, the three of us upheld a silently agreed upon contract that we would wait to watch them together – what has since become tradition.

*a fact that wouldn't register until he took me to see the live show as a teenager, and each song transported me back to my five-old-self struggling to stay awake for the last verse

J and I each have our personally-dedicated collection that have withstood the years, and of course the series of those tailored to us both.

We didn't used to be close – well, we did for a time, when we were small, before the world could do its damage, before she became the angsty teen and I the annoying little sister, and we bickered over clothes and stealing each others’ things and who had to do the dishes. Once I moved out, and we didn't have to share a house or worry about hiding our favorite jeans, seeing the other on rare visits home became exciting; suddenly we had news to share, and gaps to fill. Steadily that has grown over the years, grown to regular games of phone-tag, and calling just because, just to say I miss you, or I love you, or I can't wait to hear about your new job, or I had a really hard day and just need my sister. I lost her for a while, we lost each other, and I was angry and envious of anyone with close relationships with their siblings. I sought out too many others who could mimic that for me. My mind was so small, my sense of time, so limited. I’ve always loved her, but I didn’t used to like her; for years, we had little in common and little to share, and she was difficult and I was myopic. But now I get to say that I genuinely enjoy her as a person, as her witty, charming, hilarious self, who is still learning and growing – only now we get to do so together. Ah time. It is always time. Now she’ll call to ask if eggs are really that essential in a cake, or if the soup is supposed to look like that, or sometimes to vent or cry, or sometimes because I’m the only one who shares her parents so I understand, or sometimes to ask for relationship advice, or to see how my paper turned out, or to report good news or bad news, or simply because the sun was out and she had a little time on her walk home; and I’ll do the same. Maybe for some of you this is unsurprising, it's what sisters do, but this is new for us, wonderfully so.

I told you we all have our vices.
Like the school counselor / therapist / surrogate mom. At sixteen, I used the same name for both.

Or stepmom, almost – can I say that yet? Should I? When Dad met someone new we added a ring in the tree, another letter, another chosen family.

The aunt I used to know as friend and confidant, the uncle I considered the same. Their names, nearly unrecognizable now.

Strange what changes as we age. The things we uncover, the mirrors we break.

The crystals that shatter, the ones we grow.

I know her, better than the rest. I know every loop and line in her name, its origins, its past, its foundation – I wish I didn’t anymore.

I know flip flops and flannel, palm trees and pines, thinking and thoughts.

The construction on the 101 – the road that connects the two.

so here we go again, I’ll start once more with you:
I am newly seventeen, sitting in Steph’s office at lunch time, probably eating fruits snacks\textsuperscript{18} from her limitless supply. You walk in. You, with dark silky straightened hair, perfectly applied mascara that make your already dazzling eyes absolutely unreal. You, in your flowing maxi skirt and flip flops and that palm tree tank top I would later claim as mine. Southern California with an edge. I don’t know it yet but I will remember this moment, and continually relive it, retracing your silhouette as you stand in the doorway, effortlessly stunning. I don’t know yet that I am attracted to you, entranced by you. I don’t know yet that you will become impossible to resist, and I won’t have an explanation for why. I won’t confidently call myself gay for another four years, and even then it will sound like a foreign word. But you, you will make perfect sense.

Steph introduces us. I think we shake hands, but that feels oddly formal, maybe we casually and shyly wave – me seated, you standing. I think you sit in the chair beside me, you must have, because we start talking, about who-knows-what, but I remember it is easy. We realize we will both be heading home at the same time, and I offer you a ride, forgetting that I walked today. Mindless of the oversight, we take advantage of the opportunity for time together. You accompany me on the mile-and-a-half-walk back to my car so I can then drive you home. You don’t tell me when we pass your house on the way. We exhaust the standard small talk quickly and naturally move into deeper territory. I was living at Steph’s then, and that explanation opened itself up to all of the secrets in my world I didn’t care to reveal anyone, anyone except you. We bond over feeling like the outcast in our family, over too many households and not enough space to call \textit{ours}; we soon find that space in the other.

I drive you back to the house we passed, both giddy about the inconvenience, both knowing we had ignited something.

The following days and weeks are a blur of accidental touches and purposeful ones we call the same. Around Valentine’s Day\textsuperscript{19} we must have had dates with our then significant others. We eat their chocolate together. We gossip about boys, about the things we’ve done, the things we’re thinking about doing, the things we definitely don’t want to do again. I obligingly fool around with a boy in the cab of my pickup, and then spend the night in your bed. We end up asleep in the others’ arms most nights, just sleeping, more intimate than anything physical. You end things with your whoever. The convenience of mine was which feels hilariously childish, and rather fitting I suppose.

\textsuperscript{18} We each had boyfriends then, or something close to it – I forgot that little detail. I think our mutual disinterest in them became another point of connection.
no longer reason enough to justify how much I hated kissing him, and now with you around, it wasn’t a question, so I end things with him too. You ask me to prom with a message in a bottle, and I had never felt more wanted – even as just a friend. When we say friend, we believe it.

I hold your hand at Grad Night and call it a joke. The few sips of vodka we snuck on the bus proved to be enough incentive for me to risk your rejection; thankfully you feel the same. I honestly thought it was a gag then too, my mind hadn’t caught up yet. *What if people thought we were a couple*, I tipsily tease. Happy to break off from our group, relishing in the seductive draw of secrecy, we stroll through Disneyland, arm-in-arm, then hand-in-hand – any excuse to touch; I didn’t know I was looking for an excuse then. We are both drawn toward rides that further enhance that closeness – wrapped around the other on the Matterhorn or in the blackness of Haunted Mansion.\(^{20}\) I put my arm around you, still confident in the fittingness of the word *friend.* We huddle against each other in the breeze waiting for the night’s water and light spectacle. I rest my hand on your leg anytime I can. You seem to do the same. I kiss your cheek in every picture. We share ice cream cones and lollipops.

I wanted you; I can’t believe I still didn’t know it then.

Sometime that summer, after months of skirting the friend line – spooning when we slept, purposely undressing in front of the other, regularly walking hand-in-hand with fingers tightly clasped, you spend the night like you do most…

\[\text{Despite all the hurt and grief and rage that is now wrapped around your name,}\]
\[\text{I cannot help but still be in love with this night:}\]

We are laying side by side, heads rested on separate pillows, alternating stares between the ceiling and each other, talking late, per usual. A lull in conversation suggests it’s time for sleep, until you start laughing. Uncontrollably smiling, giddy and uneasy with something that manifests itself into laughter. I know that something but still ask *what?* as I’m infected by your giggles. *Nothing*, as you hide your face in your pillow. We cycle through this exchange a few times. I know what you are thinking; it’s a thought we share, but neither wants to be the first to risk a wrong move. I sit up, overwhelmed by you, bashful and eager, I take a shot, *if you’re thinking the same thing I am, then you should just do it.* I wait. Your head tilts up from the pillow, laughter transforms into a shy smile, your eyes widen, you pause a moment, you lean in. Your lips press against mine and mine against yours, and months of built up tension ease in an instant. We sink into the other, hold the other close – the push, the pull, the same. I feel you against me and feel me against you and am at once submerged in desire and judgment about that desire, judgement I

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\(^{20}\) commonly referred to as the go-to “make-out ride”
didn't know I held. Simple kisses turn to something more carnal, hands begin to explore, our bodies change their motions, and right on the cusp of crossing that next line, I reflexively pull away. You retreat in response and silently flip on your side. We return to our separate pillows, you facing the window, I the wall, and without another word, go to sleep.

I think I woke up holding you; our subconscious selves usually found their way back together. That shy, giddy laughter had sustained throughout the night and we awoke still basking in it. You had to be up and out early the next morning for something that forced a rushed goodbye. You stumble out of bed and I watch you get dressed, only this time it feels wrong because I know the reason. We tentatively approach the subject of last night with our now omnipresent nervousness. We turn it into a joke, another joke, neither one willing to admit to a shift in sexuality, neither one fully aware if it’s true. We were already “touchy-feely,” we just liked being close, so we chalk this up to the same. I think one of us flippantly commented on how this was no different than everything else we already do, merely a tiny step further – no big deal, nothing to worry about, nothing to discuss, we’re just friends – we agree upon our mutual refusal to talk about it. I drowsily walk you to my door, and we hug goodbye when all I want is to kiss you again.

I immediately call my go-to confidant at the time. Confused and surprised and elated and baffled and scared; I am terrified. She asked me a simple question, the only question that mattered,

*Did you like it?*

*Yes, god yes, it was incredible, it was the best kiss of my life — But I don’t say that.*

*I don’t know.*

There was a right and a wrong answer to this question. And my yes was wrong. I knew that much. It was simple: I told myself I had to change my answer, so I did. I text you apologizing, saying I don’t think we should do that again. You instantly tell me not be sorry, you understand, it’s not a big deal, nothing has to change. That was that.

Thus began our Week of Awkward. Everything prior had been easy – every touch, every conversation, every stolen glance – but I had changed the rules, and neither of us knew how to navigate this realm. You didn’t know which of your actions I might consider an overstep, you didn’t want to scare me away. I didn’t want to contradict myself and further confuse either one of us. We tip-toed around the other, left

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21 What lengths must we go to to unlearn society’s inhibitions, for how long must we unravel until we find ourselves?
space that hadn't previously existed, sat farther apart, walked separately, carefully considered our every move. After a few days of this, of desperately missing you even though you were only a few inches away, I knew I wanted to go back to that night, to replay it, to relive it, to see where it could lead – my judgement around my wanting you couldn’t outweigh that want and I quickly realized how badly I craved to return to that unnamed us we had so seamlessly created, and that I had just ruined. You knew it too, and you let me sit in that discomfort; you let me miss you.

At the end of that week, we found ourselves in Steph’s downstairs: its own room, separate from the rest of the house, darkened by blackout curtains, with an L-shaped couch, massive TV and surround-sound – a teenage paradise. We often ended up here, off in our own world. This time we sat too far from the other. I studied your mouth as you spoke, no less distracted by your lips, working up the courage to address the elephant in the room, and you knew it. You knew everything. I don't remember what I said, but it was something along the lines of can we just go back to being us? and it instantly pleased you. You said something in response and I wish I remember how you phrased it because it was exactly the right thing to say. Somehow you made known that you wanted the same, but you’d made the first move once already, and if I wanted this, if I wanted you, it was my turn to step up – only you spoke with much more nuance than that; it was so well played. You relished in this game, and I hated that I did too. So with a deep and pretendly resentful sigh, another nervous and telling smile, and another terrifying moment of courage, this time I leaned, and you let me come to you.

We fell into the couch,
fell into our rhythm,
and fell in love with it,

and soon with each other.
It would be easy to continue with this story, reliving our first official date and vacations with the other’s family, gauging whom to come out to and when. All our time spent in tents or my backyard jacuzzi, cloaked in moonlight. How we arbitrarily chose June 26th as our anniversary because it conveniently didn’t coincide with any other important dates, and we liked the number. How Neverland\textsuperscript{22} became our word for paradise, with flight as our escape. How we lasted through your freshman year in college and drunkenly ran through town in our underwear,\textsuperscript{23} the parties, the liquor, the marks of being eighteen. The emptiness when I left for Portland to pursue my own college fantasy, and how quickly it split me and us. How we recovered, how found each other again, how we outlasted the distance until you could move to me. How we bonded again over our mutual hatred of our different universities. How you came to my city to pursue design and soon called it yours. How perfectly our art forms paired. Our apartment, our decorations, our bed, everything we shared at nineteen/twenty. How I looked at your school on a whim, refusing to endure another year in the same place, and soon called that mine as well. How everything became \textit{ours}, everything became \textit{us}. How the moment we were finally both in the same place at the same time, we broke. How you pulled away, how I held on, how we each continued in our separate directions, amplifying the other. How we wanted to go back to our first kiss and fall in love all over again, for the third time. How we couldn’t.

I could recount all of the magic in a first love, all the magic of you, but this is not our story;

you just happen to be an integral part of \textit{mine}.

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\textsuperscript{22} a fitting dedication to your love of Disney

\textsuperscript{23} “Undie Run” – a good ole’ Chapman tradition, where, during finals week, students progressively lose their clothes on a midnight jaunt around the town center.
It has been nearly four years since I first found myself in you, and lost it somewhere along the way. You are drifting, lying, ready to leave and pretending to stay. I don’t want to admit what I know.

I use one word instead:

fragile

I am a wine glass
balancing
on a counter ledge,
waiting
for someone with a heavy-enough stride
to rattle the floor and
send me off,
an ever-resetting countdown until the inevitable shatter.
I’m sure it would be a spectacular sound.
I am tantalizingly close to hearing it.

But just when I think that hefty-enough step has passed,
the glass teeters,
its base rolling on its circular rim,
toying with gravity
to then settle back into that same threatening position
– the anticipation of the fall is far worse than the thing itself.

Just crash already.
Crash and shatter so I can worry about how to pick you back up,
rather than sitting here,
waiting.
the beginning

the waiting

the end:

the moment I knew it was over,

I stood outside our place fumbling for keys, with hands full of something to important to set down, but I don't remember what. I took a long enough pause outside the door to overhear your voice inside, just on the opposite end of those few inches of wood that separated us then,

but you felt so much farther away than a room and a hallway.

The keys in my hand slowed as they neared the door, stopping just as they were about to enter the lock

wait, listen – they said

I knew it was wrong, they did too, but the keys wouldn’t let me move,

so I waited and listened anyway.
I was livid.

You were crying.

I didn’t feel the need to comfort you this time. I was empowered by my rage and I so preferred this to sadness. This was October. You had been twenty-one for a month, with three left on our lease.

You lied. You continued to lie. I tried. I continued to try. *It isn’t that simple but sometimes that feels exactly right.* You pulled back, pulled away. I held on, accidentally pushing. We both made mistakes, we ran in opposite directions.

You were fine. You wanted this.
I wasn’t. I didn’t.

*I couldn’t see it yet.*

We moved our things in December. We returned our keys together. We hugged goodbye and drove off the same way we ran. I don’t remember where I went. You turned left, which meant I had to turn right, so I did and drove

somewhere.

I spent New Year’s at a house party with a girl I’d met in class. She kissed me at midnight and I let her.
I went back to my newly-found 500-square-feet I got to call all my own. I covered the walls in my photos and paintings, I actively made it home. I celebrated my twenty-first without you, the first since eighteen. You sent some obligatory birthday message that gave me another reason to be angry and I didn't reply. I went out with friends, friends I had forgotten I’d had. We ricocheted through too many bars and too many clubs where I drank too many cocktails in too high of heels with too much ice on the ground. I danced with everyone and sloppily kissed strangers and and remember it only in blurred fragments – a night of excess, a fitting first run. A girl I met through a dating app brought me Gatorade and bagels the next day.

I dated her for a few weeks, and busied myself with anyone else I liked to look at. I talked to everyone. I wore ankle boots and tight jeans. I drank chocolate stouts and whiskey. I wore backwards snapbacks, and slouched down in chairs with arms outspread and didn't think twice in taking up space. I called myself gay, confident now that my attraction to women extended beyond you, and performed how I thought lesbians should. I walked with a conviction that I only sometimes faked. I was hurt, but healing. I felt at home in my walls, my body, my shoes, myself, until the fire in the elevator of my apartment that rendered the whole building unlivable.

Every tenant ran out in time. It was a cold day in January, but the rain and snow had pardoned the morning. The flames never reached the units. Everyone and our things were deposed and jolted, but otherwise unharmed. It was startling, disorienting, and an infuriatingly-timed inconvenience, but physically, nothing more.

I reached out to you with the excuse of needing non-smoke-filled clothes. I cried in your arms in the middle of the street, and you let me for as long as you could. I was afraid, and displaced, and unready to handle a hindrance without you.

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24 I can do this without you.

25 There have been numerous studies and theorists who substantiate the ways society urges women to take up less space; how the world outside our bodies is just as inherently gendered. With a newfound self-assurance in my sexuality, I decided to resist this aspect of femininity. I no longer felt the need to shrink for anyone.

26 It could have been so much worse.

27 It could have been so much worse.

28 Thank you for that.
Renter’s insurance secured my move into an extended-stay hotel and the rest of my things went into storage. Dad and Wendy flew up to help me settle. I quickly bonded with the hotel’s front staff. 29 I took full advantage of endless lobby coffee. I filled the room with the same paintings and photos. I turned the desk into a keyboard stand. I ran on the treadmill downstairs. I found my new routine and it didn’t involve you.

Scouting apartments replaced my dating life. I was overwhelmed by insurance claims and smoke repairs, budgeting and dry cleaning cost comparisons.

I met the girl who calls me blue. 30

I found a new place in February. Mom flew up. 31

I quickly redecorated with the same traveling paintings and prioritized the need to feel at home. I fell into another new routine. I needed structure. 32

I started gaining weight.

I still don’t know why, 33 but fall back on stress, echoing doctor’s explanations. I began to accumulate a number of infuriatingly inexplicable symptoms, out of control in my own body – the one constant I thought I still had. Despite my regular eight-ten mile runs and a steady plant-based diet for the past four

29 I wonder how Andrea is.

30 I’ll come back to her.

31 This was before her sobriety, before she identified a problem, and started working towards recovery. She was sneaking drinks during repeated visits to the bathroom – a fact I didn’t put together until weeks later. This trip could occupy its own novel, but I’ll spare you the details.

32 I am my father’s daughter after all.

33 The start of the ensuing year-and-a-half-long saga.
years, my body continued to grow. I stopped drinking. I cut out gluten. I bounced through too many elimination diets. I spent way too much money and time searching for ethically raised eggs I could justify eating. Food became a taxing and omnipresent thought. No matter my changes or omissions, I was continually growing, continually fading.

My world went from coffee dates and clubs to apartments and laundry to doctors and mirrors and questions.

And back to missing you. I missed the comfort of someone who knew me, who saw me – the me behind my body. I was tired, and tired of being tired, and unwilling to be the one to pull myself back up.

Missing you and missing my confident self were intrinsically related. The less I recognized my reflection, the more I thought about you, and the version of myself when I was with you – I didn't make that distinction then. I ignored the facets of that past self that were lost and lonely and aching, and focused only on appearance.34

The less answers I had, the more I withdrew, the deeper I sunk.

The pattern continued, cue the new routine:

34 *I looked good; I must have felt good too.*
8am— snooze. Precious few more moments of sleep. Snuggle under warm covers, the comforting weight of heavy blankets.\textsuperscript{36 37} Another alarm. Too many snoozes. \textit{Stay in this world while you can}. Eyes closed, blankets, rain. Alarm. Alarm. Alarm. Reluctantly stumble out of warm comforters and understanding sheets. Bare feet on cold wood.\textsuperscript{39} Slippers. Stagger to the bathroom, avoid the mirror on the closet door when you walk past it. Too vulnerable, don’t look yet. Bathroom, thyroid meds, this supplement, that supplement; all the other bottles have to wait for food. Reach for toothbrush and toothpaste, don’t look in the mirror above the sink.\textsuperscript{40} Stare down at your toothbrush. Turn around so your back is to your reflection if you don’t have the willpower. Brush. Turn back around, spit into the sink. Keep your head ducked below the reflection.\textsuperscript{41} Time to wash your face – open medicine cabinet, bottle of face wash, squeeze a dollop on your palm, keep the medicine cabinet door open, the mirror on the outside turned away.\textsuperscript{42} Wash face, hands on cheeks, feeling for excess.\textsuperscript{43} Eyes closed. Scrub. Blindly reach for sink handle. Cup water in hands, splash, rinse. Grasp for towel. Dry. Shut medicine cabinet door. Eyes closed. Deep breath. Okay, open…  

\textsuperscript{35} I’ve deleted and reinserted this page again and again. Do you need to see this far into my world, into my private hateful morning routine?

\textsuperscript{36} No no no.

\textsuperscript{37} Is it raining?

\textsuperscript{38} Yes, but keep sleeping.

\textsuperscript{39} God it’s freezing. When did it get so cold?

\textsuperscript{40} Not yet.

\textsuperscript{41} Not yet.

\textsuperscript{42} It doesn't exist.

\textsuperscript{43} Is there more than yesterday? Are we back to normal yet?
Dammit.\textsuperscript{44}

Puffy face, drooping skin, nonexistent line between chin and neck, wide and unfamiliar and \textit{revolting}.\textsuperscript{45}

I don’t even know how many months now.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Who the fuck is that?}

\textsuperscript{45} I hesitate to use that word. To say something so harsh that others may read and extend to themselves – that could not be farther from my intent. I would never look at someone else and say the same, I would never use such language, never even think it. And yet when directed at myself, it is an unconscious second-nature. \textit{Revolting}. That is all I could see.

\textsuperscript{46} I long for the day when thoughts about any and everything else outnumber ones about my weight. When I don’t actively avoid mirrors and photos and any form of reflection. Better yet, when I want to have my photo taken. Remember that? When you didn’t shy away from cameras and shutter at the sight of yourself?
I come from a family of obsessions, of addiction—a family of alcoholics and smokers, on Mom’s side at least. A sister who pivoted to exercise and doesn’t see the parallels. A mother who only recently admitted to her dependency on wine and is working to change it. A father who needs structure, deadlines, and checkmarks. All the family camping trips marked by empty bottles of Jack and Coke.

As for me? It changes daily.

First a blade. Then a girl. Then a different girl and a slew of other people and things to make up for the loss of the two, an ongoing series of trials with too many replacements.

Then the health issues that replaced them all, redirecting my focus to my body instead. Weight. Appearance. Every curve, every line, every angle. I never realized how judgmental I could be of my own silhouette. It didn't even need to be in the details, I could scrutinize my shadow the same.

Why do I define it as addiction? Why not present it first as passion—with stories of campfire singalongs, and laughter and love, of closeness and community and belonging? Then, only after establishing the unconditionality of our relationships, introduce the vices, the darker side of passion: the dependence, the volatility, the anger. It isn’t fair to solely present the latter. I suppose I was angry when I first wrote this, angry at family drama that caused a continuously expanding schism. Growing pains maybe. It all seems so trivial to me, foolish to abandon something so special out of petty judgment and blame. Cousins I used to consider near siblings, I now haven’t seen in years. The boy I still think of as a four-year-old tuft of fluffy blonde hair is now eighteen and headed into rehab. Another just graduated from bootcamp and is training to become a marine. I already missed the birth of my cousin’s first son and I haven’t spoken to others in too many summers. I don’t recognize the toddlers who I last saw as infants. How quickly things change. How quickly unconditional begs for qualifiers.

Again, why not mention the elaborate home cooked meals and guitars and drum circles that mark this vacation?—anger is a powerful thing I suppose.

I’m sure I could trace this back to something prior. I don’t know if I’m willing to engage with that level of introspection yet.
I keep forgetting, fading, farther and farther away.

Tell me where you are, tell me how you are here

the forces and furies that have led to this moment with salt in your hair and an infinite sun in your eyes

tell me of the girl who walked on water and the day the bridge collapsed
  when you reached for her hand and touched a stranger
    holding onto a memory
      realizing the spark in her stride
        no longer spoke your name

tell me of the ache, the fear, the rage
  when all the lines pointed to lonely

the fire that broke in your voice and all the shattered windows that night

when the words became a war, and even the pen ran dry

how did it feel to be an island

tell me of that displacement and the yearning to redefine home

did you find it
are you searching
  for that reunion of the familiar and remote

tell me of the forward and the backwards, sideways and diagonal bends
  this linear path you wish to draw and its many ceaseless curves
tell me every fumble and jagged edge
    what happened with each clumsy step

    where did you go when the world grew too heavy to hold
tell me how you found new hands
tell me your soft place to land
tell me how you fell again

remember standing up
remember counting stairs

remember wanting for a secret
    and instead meeting someone kind*
        wading through fog, kissing each scar, chipping away at old paint

remember
tell me

let it bring you home.**

* I’ll get there, I promise

** What happens when home isn’t recognizable anymore?
Dad, when you ask me how I’ve been, and I tell you *busy* – I mean that I turned sad into angry and angry into lonely and lonely into busy. So when I tell you that I’ve been *super busy lately*, I mean with feeling, and thinking, and trying really hard not to do either. I mean I’ve been busy laying in bed and trying to convince myself to get up. I mean I’ve been busy with an endlessly futile attempt to outrun myself, that I don't know how to stop, that I can’t stop,

*and Dad I’m tired.*

But I can’t tell you that because you’ll try to fix it. You are *Mr. Fix It.* You turn water into wine with a screwdriver. You find a solution to everything. You’ll haul out your toolbox of suggestions, that all involve others: joining clubs or jobs or volunteering, more things to keep busy, but you’re not hearing that I can’t make room for all the other right kinds of busy, because I have to keep running – and in this kind of running there is no room for extracurriculars.

Dad, what if the solution to this one is having to sit here and feel and be. I know its hard for you but can you imagine what that’s like for me? Last January when I couldn’t stand from all the hurt, when she left and I shrank into a ball on the floor of our empty apartment without the furniture she took, and I called you to come over but didn’t tell you what to expect,

I couldn’t walk then but I could at least leave the door unlocked, and you came in and didn't even seem shocked. You just lay there with me on the ground while I cried, my body shaking, howling, unrestrained emotion for what felt like the first time in my life —Dad you don’t have to say anything.

You cannot fix me with your collection of wrenches and bolts. I just need you to lie on the ground with me, and tell me its okay that I am still horizontal, that I don’t have to be strong enough to uphold the weight of myself, that I can stay here until I relearn how to walk again. And then when I do, I will go to you for stability and ask for your shoulder.

You taught me how to walk once and I might need a reminder, but I am not ready to stand yet so please stop trying to pull me back up, because I will fall.

Dad I know I will fall, and then I will blame myself for falling, and count the bruises since last time, and hate myself when there are inevitably more.

---

52 with hands thrown in the air and the exclamation “how fascinating!” at any roadblock

53 Our relationship changed after this. After I couldn't fake strength anymore, and I let you in because I couldn’t hold myself together. You were everything I needed, and everything I didn’t know how to ask for, and you held me, so I didn’t have to, and I weeped, and you told me we’ll get through it, that it will hurt like hell but I’ll be okay. You called it the worst kind of blessing and I believed you.

54 I have always been good at that. Comforted by the normalcy of self-hatred. It started a while ago. It takes me back to high school, back to you – but not the you, you’d expect:
I don’t know what to call you. *Steph* sounds wrong. *Mrs. B* is obviously inaccurate. *Stephanie* feels even more foreign. *Mom* nearly fit for a time, but that’s too far, a betrayal of my own.55 *Steph* is the easiest middle-ground that places me in the same realm as others who know you: friends, relatives, anyone on a personal level outside of school. But I don’t want to just be another anyone in that vague domain; you are not just anyone in mine. We give special words to grandparents, uncles, aunts, and the like. The important relationships deserve their own headings; a first name is simply incomplete. But there is no prefix for your role in my world, so we settled on your standard moniker. *Steph*? Does it sound insufficient to you too? I don’t know what would sound right.

My inability to find the right word is fittingly inline with my difficulty to place you; that isn’t coincidental. Our worlds are made of boxes and labels, easily identifiable categories so we know which guide book to reference when need be, but your label keeps changing, and I don’t know how to reconcile my uncertainty. Sometimes friend. Sometimes parent. Sometimes counselor – and sometimes in those moments I am sixteen again, transported back to our meeting place in your office, shamefully rolling up my sleeve, eyes wide and frozen in headlights. And sometimes I want to be there again, back to a time I called *difficult* before I understood the meaning of the word.56

In those days, you were *Mrs. B, high school guidance counselor.*

I knew you from the name tag on your door, and your signature on registration slips. After that first school sanctioned confrontation, your unexpected compassion and support made the rest voluntary. A few weeks of increased visits, confessional conversations, and the beginnings of healing, and your name began to shift. You were *Mrs. B and something else.* A hazy sort of step-parent when my own couldn’t be everywhere at once, when your concern for a student outweighed standard protocol and the scale tipped. You gradually stepped into your own realm, and *Steph* replaced your professional title, which, at the time, also fit. As more weeks and months passed and you gained more insight into my world, that qualified parental role lost its qualifiers, and you became the only voice of authority I gave any respect; I began to call your house *home* and my dad’s *my dad’s.*

55 Why do we associate rarity with importance? More of something doesn't necessarily discount the quality of the first.

56 I surely still don’t know it in full.
Growing up, curfews were nonexistent in my household. I was a good student. I seemed to have a fairly sensible head on my shoulders. I held little interest in most typical rebellious behavior that enticed others my age. Staying out late usually involved wandering along the beach or aimlessly driving somewhere to occupy my mind—usually. Occasionally there were other influential friends or boys involved, but I was a very passive dater, so no one ever worried too much. Since I wasn’t the kid bumming cigarettes outside the 7/11, no one seemed to mind when I stayed out later than a typical teenager maybe should. Dad was routinely asleep by the time I got back, exhausted from ongoing tribulations of trying to corral my sister. Mom—well Mom isn’t really present in any of these scenes; who knows where she was at that point, mentally or physically. And J, she was out doing all the things I wasn’t. I invisibly sunk inward, she rapidly spiraled out, so my parents fittingly focused their concern on her; she needed it more.

I knew how to play this game. I knew I was considered the good kid and I radically exploited it. No one thought to question my intentions, why would they? And they didn’t until you. You exposed all my secrets and I hated you for it then. But you gave me my out, freeing me from myself when the rest of my world didn’t think to look because I’d told them not to.

Dad began to insist upon certain check-in times and hours to be home. I ignored the number the moment it left his lips, nodded in pretend recognition, and proceeded with whatever I initially had planned, thoughtless and unencumbered. I walked in late and nothing happened, so I continued to walk in late. I extended the same thinking to any unwelcome rules he tried to enforce, unwilling to part with years of trusted autonomy. I quickly learned I couldn’t pull the same with you.

You surely remember that infamous night:

I stay out far too late with a convenient boy, fooling around on his couch with his parents asleep in the next room and Lord of the Rings playing in the background as our defense. We lose track of time—no, that isn’t right, that makes it sound like an accident—I know what time it is, I just don’t care; I expect the same lack of response, as I purposely ignore your many persistent calls. I think myself untouchable, until a text from Megan, “Mom’s pissed Linds. Get your ass home. Good luck.”

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57 or I performed as such.

58 I wouldn't realize for another few years that my indolence was rooted in unknowingly pursuing the wrong gender.

59 I’ve resented her too long for this. There was no good answer.

60 He called it home then, I didn’t.

61 He was fighting a losing battle.

62 She wouldn't still be awake unless someone was yelling.
I shove my bra in my bag, pull back my far-too revealing mess of hair, attempt to clean up smeared eyeliner, and roll through every stop as I speed home, still smelling like cologne and self-loathing. I nervously open the door to find you quietly fuming on the couch, awaiting this moment. I don’t remember how long you sit there before finally saying something, how long you make me wait, as I stand in the doorway, debating my getaway options. I don't remember the particulars of what you say whenever you eventually say it. I just know I sink with your every word, getting smaller and more ashamed as you yell, scolding me for my irresponsibility and betrayal of your trust. It stings, I remember this much. You say your peace and make clear the ramifications of a next time and I believe you. You end things on a still seething but sincere I love you Bug… but you could have at least hidden your bra – slapped in the face by the fully visible bright pink straps hanging out the side of my backpack.

I immediately creep straight into Megan’s room for that sister consult that follows any incident, and open another door to the same quiet, impatient waiting, this time fueled with a bursting amusement. She breaks out into that rapturous laugh of hers like any little sister would after eavesdropping on an hour-long reprimand of the older. I don’t know how late we stay up in our individual retellings of the evening’s events.

We still joke about that night, that cliched sixteen-year-old night. I genuinely hope you're laughing now too.

In those moments, I called you Mom, because it was all that made sense.

With her, I called you nothing at all. My lack of adequate language compelled me to avoid addressing you as anything, since it was easier than finding the right word, and somehow more palatable for my girlfriend. Her misunderstanding of the complexities of our unnamed relationship convinced me somehow that it was wrong. That I was wrong for wanting to be a part of your world. That you were wrong for caring too much about someone else’s daughter. You didn't deserve my walking out like that, no reason, no warning – I packed my things and left, like the dramatic apex of a bad movie; that’s how I thought the world worked then. I’m sorry. I know you know that, but years of silence warrant more than just a few apologies.

I found my way back. You graciously let me in. And now we find ourselves here, and I am again in that place of needing to call you something, as you deserve far more than the lack of an address, and still am unsatisfied with my limited vocabulary. Friend. Confidant. Parent. Steph doesn’t exactly convey that. Am I asking too much of one word? To represent someone whom I have chosen as family. Someone who has chosen to let me into theirs. Someone whose role now feels as consistent as it is pliable.

Someone who still needs the right name.

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63 What is it about that still and silent anger, the anticipation far worse than the thing itself.

64 an accurate title for each other then
An erasure of the one before:

cologne and self-loathing open the door to find you
you: still and silent anger
you sit, saying something
I stand, I sink
you say next time and I believe you
you end, still, quiet, impatient
I don’t know how we stay – it was all that made sense

I called you nothing
compelled to avoid since I was young
wanting too much silence

again in that place of needing
am I asking too much
of someone still

---

65 Sometimes we have to come back, revisit, read within the lines to extract all we meant to say without the muddy in betweens.

Erasure poet Mary Ruefle describes the process like this: “...the words rise above the page... and hover there in space, singly and unconnected, and they form a kind of field, and from this field I pick my words as if they were flowers... And that, my friend, is the art of erasure, as it is enacted in your own life, and all lives: life is much, much more than is necessary, and much, much more than any of us can bear, so we erase it or it erases us, we ourselves are an erasure of everything we have forgotten or don't know or haven't experienced...” (“On Erasure”)
Am I asking too much? Am I expecting too much?

Too. Much.

I know that pair well.

A lot is nearly the same, but it gets to lose the qualifier:

You’re a lot, she\textsuperscript{66} tells me often.

You’re a lot,\textsuperscript{67}...
and I love it all.

\textsuperscript{66} I told you we’d get there.

\textsuperscript{67} A lot of words, a lot of thinking, a lot of feelings, a lot of energy, a lot of anxiety, a lot of movement… a lot of love and compassion and spirit and heart; she was my reminder of the latter.
Two whiskey cocktails: hers – something foreign and fancy that I can never remember nor pronounce, mine – whatever the bartender with the vest and kind eyes recommended, because I’m new to this and have yet to discover my own preferred drink whose name I don’t yet know; I probably won’t be able to pronounce it even when I do, but she surely will.

Sitting there, in this library-themed bar, exchanging stories like those surrounding us in hard-cover, I know this is the start of something good.

You call me Blue and it is a name not a color and it feels like a homecoming, let it bring you home

a name I recognize at its first call, but only in your voice.

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68 I don’t remember the origin of the nickname anymore, but it fit; that’s what matters.
I don’t know where to start. I am overwhelmed by you – in the most wonderful way, but it makes nearly impossible this attempt to consolidate you into words.\(^69\)

You walked into my world at the best and worst time, Dickens-esque in your entry. We bonded over a mutual interest in our styles of photography, in a class of hilariously strange characters that comprised the Art Department. I strongly considered dropping that course after an all-too-telling Day One, but then there was you, and I told myself I had to know you.

I was even more overwhelmed by you then. You were the essence of cool, calm, and collected, and it was so fucking sexy. *What is it about confidence.* That magnetizing pull. I was instantly drawn to you.

I misread confidence as lesbian at first and saw you as a possibility. My initial attraction to you made me obnoxiously clumsy – it’s comical now.\(^70\)

I try to maintain some semblance of composure, but surely fail to do so successfully. I can talk to strangers for hours, can smoothly strike up a conversation with someone new and make it last. I am easily social, but from a distance\(^71\) the moment feelings are involved, the moment I become attached to the outcome, I am an awkward and bashful disaster. And the same was true with you.

You spoke of Hawaii and Indonesia and local Portland secrets, hidden gems with the best Spanish coffees. I could legally drink for all of maybe a week, and pretended to know the bar. *Oh yeah, they do make the best cocktails, we should go sometime* – never mind that I had no idea what even went into a Spanish coffee then, this was my best attempt.

We laughed our way through that first assignment: *photo as object.* Each less sure than the other of what exactly we were expected to turn in, resulting in a series of humorous brainstorming sessions, finding the most absurd sculptures that blended photographic elements with physical materials – our favorite: a cut off doll’s head attached to some kind of wire with scissors as the body and a torn magazine photo as shoes. This, what looked like something found in a serial killer’s basement, from a renowned artist and sold for millions of dollars.\(^72\) This piece was objectively hilarious and it became the other’s mission to find something equally as inane. We related to the other’s humor and from there, we were off. A dynamic duo of likeminded creatives, photographing their way through protests\(^73\) and whiskey bars in search of

\(^{69}\) In a writing workshop, I once referred to you as the witty partner-in-crime whose trusted and enduring friendship abate the decade between us – I think that is the closest I’ve come yet to giving you a fitting and resonant description, but a single phrase is far from all-encompassing.

\(^{70}\) You noticed right; you must have.

\(^{71}\) Like the time I shared a joint with a stranger on the first sunny day in months. While walking his dog through the park, he paused at my blanket to ask for a light. I handed him my lighter. He offered me a hit; I offered him a seat. He spoke with a thick accent from somewhere I haven’t been and recounted travels to all the places I long to visit. He offered the name of a website that scouts cheap flights, which would later provide my ticket to meet you in Barcelona. We sat under a foreign sun for an hour, romanticizing far away lands, dreamily dazing toward worlds we want to know. He hugged me goodbye, no number, no name — the beauty of a moment that will only ever exist in that moment… or on a page, if recreated successfully.

\(^{72}\) *Ah the art world;* I love it and hate it equally so.

\(^{73}\) At the height of election season, we were grateful to have a likeminded buddy to navigate the intensifying political climate in our attempts to document it.
prime rooftop vantage points, chatting up strangers and spreading laughter— it’s sexy, composed, badass detective meets loud, frizzy-haired, spirited young sidekick, who bring out the best facets of the other to defy the status quo. 

I quickly realized that closeness I felt and sought with you was much more akin to family than anything potentially romantic, and renamed those misread feelings. That sense of home, that comfort in knowing one another, I found with you. You were the tangible promise of life and love beyond hurt, beyond romance, beyond my body. You saw me – this version, still learning, still stumbling – and loved me anyway.

We.

She and I sliding in socks around her kitchen floor with a sloshing mug of coffee in hand, and I’m smiling. The sounds of a three-year-old’s bedtime echo from the rooms above, as her sister and niece continue their nightly routine, tonight with laughter and the house is overjoyed by infectious youthful giggles. Her blonde hair wisps by, following our dancing socks, and my curls do the same. If socks and hair and coffee could smile, they all would tonight – there is no moment more catered to grinning feet than this.

Hold onto this, I tell myself. This moment where your hair and hands and teeth and knees and clothes all can’t help but laugh along with the chuckling little girl upstairs, this moment unhindered by self-conscious thoughts of body and skin and numbers and waistlines, this moment in focus on what really matters, devoid of the petty ramblings that typically fill your mind. Keep this tucked away for the inevitable nights when you only see flashing numbers and excess and ever-shrinking clothes. Like a note from a friend secretly passed in class, and safeguarded in your back pocket, collect instants like handwritten messages to reread at lunch. Place them in a box on your nightstand the second you get home. Forget their specific contents so you may re-experience each sentiment as fully as the first.

Relish in dancing socks and smiling coffee, then allow it to fade, so you may rejoice in remembering for the times when you need it most.

comic book to come

for times like these:
I don’t want to say it out loud. That makes it too real. I don’t want to write it down. That sets it in stone, in ink, forever in the memory of a hard drive. Too real.

I don’t want to write about gaining over fifty pounds in just a few months. Or was it sixty? I stopped counting a while ago. Because I still don’t know why. I don’t know why and I can’t write about something without knowing the reason, without having some semblance of an answer. I refuse to carve a question mark in stone.

I don’t want to write about that feeling when I tried on my favorite jeans and couldn’t get them past my thighs. My favorite jeans that look good with any pair of shoes and make composed outfits easy. That I turn to in a rush when I am late for class at 8am, brushing teeth while pouring yesterday’s coffee into a to-go mug, comforted in knowing I need not put additional thought into my clothes. Except now I do. I know its a silly thing to worry about, such a privileged problem, relenting the burden of choice – god, do you hear yourself? That’s why I don’t want to write about it. I am far too affected by this. I shouldn’t care this much. I hate the word should. It follows me everywhere. Shouldn’t is maybe even worse.

I don’t want to write about my relationship with mirrors. Or skin. Or muscles. Or bones. They are all one and the same. Well, the first involves only looking. I suppose, looking that leads to feeling for the rest. Skin under chin, under arms, within thighs. More or less than last time? It better not be fucking more. I don’t want to write about the feeling of more. The heaviness of more. The weight of it all.

I don’t want to write about the series of doctors, their bills, all the expenses I don’t have to fund and yet still cannot manage to organize. Again, are you really complaining about this? How the crumbling of one thing is directly tied to the next. How much the look of my hands and my chin determine the rest. How I am a stranger in a body that people tell me is mine, when everything I own suggests otherwise. I don’t know how to write about that feeling – that distance from myself, that refusal of myself. That blazing anger at the lack of an answer. How do I even begin to write about that?

Or the accompanying anxiety? The flash flood of panic that drowns every pore, that swallows me and points to urges. Make it stop. But I don’t know how because I don’t know why, and I don’t do well with not knowing, so I turn to things I know I shouldn’t (oh yes, shouldn’t is definitely worse). My body is betraying me for things I haven’t done and my mind has apparently decided to follow suit. I must sound crazy; I feel a little insane – like trying to write without words.
Stress. They say after all the tests come back normal. *The picture of health,* they say. *Stop worrying, just live your life,* they toss into the air with a dismissive flick of the wrist and the tongue. As if it is ridiculous

I hadn’t known that all along –No, that is not an answer. That is not an answer. That is the problem, the result of something deeper, not the answer. *Stress? Fucking stress? However many plus pounds of just fucking stress?* Which translates to something about Jess –No. In this far too coincidental timeline, that gives her too much. She can’t take that too. She can’t still be the reason I fall apart. Not again. I don't want to write about Her.\(^\text{76}\)

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\(^\text{76}\) So I start writing about rain, because today it falls differently than most – softer, quieter, like snow. No pitter-patter on tin roofs or audible splashes in puddles. Soft, quiet, nearly weightless. It feels like this is my default subject of prose, but sometimes that’s all this city demands. *Write what you know* right? I know this rain; I’ve fallen in love with it.

I stand under an awning to finish a cigarette and watch a car get towed. The man in the truck continually readjusts his angle, stepping out to asses and and mumbles *fuck* three times to himself when he thinks no one is looking. Someone in the apartments above peers out his window to ask a question I don’t hear. *Loading zone* the man responds from below. Another man with a backpack passes by with raised eyebrows, a tight smile, and a nod of solidarity, and mouths *damn* as the two cars drive away from a now empty spot along the yellow painted curb.

Even this exchange is quiet, like watching a crackling reel of a silent film. In this snow-like rain, everyone walks like poetry. I don’t know how to write a tow truck to read as a dance but that’s how it moved; that’s how everyone moves today. Except for the man in this coffee shop behind me whose voice is too loud. He is a child learning to play cymbals at midnight.

I want to be outside in the cold and the grey and the quiet, without getting wet and without the tether of an umbrella. I want to be walking and moving while able to sit and write, and am consistently met with the infuriating inability to do both at once.

I don’t know how to be still. Unless I’m holding something. But even then, I’m moving. My fingers rest around a thing I know is toxic and my lungs reluctantly inhale it so my breath forms a cloud and my mind knows to watch it disappear into the wind. Every part of me understands its place and its routine in this exchange – the closest I come to stillness, quietly poisoning myself under a guise of calm.

*There is no poetry in this.*
I am from curls. Blonde tangles of ringlets and frizz, chubby cheeks and big bones. I grew up safe in this body, called it home.

Sun in my hair, salt on my lips, those waves gave me my first kiss—and second, with that boy I thought I knew at thirteen, at sunset on a surfboard, like a movie reel, *summer dream*. He was innocence and lust and that thing I so desperately wanted to call love, and clearly knew nothing of. He was the fourth of July, *am I supposed to act shy*, under that cloudless blue sky, *bittersweet* apple pie, because something tasted wrong.

I recognized the melody, but this wasn't my song. I just assumed I was supposed to sing along.

I didn't know then that seventeen would be when I could pinpoint that unease, with the shaking in my knees and heartbeat that rhythmically mimicked her name.

My body knew to call her home before I could make any sense of it in my brain.

And all at once that disconnected melody rang true in the cadence of her breath, the music of her subtleties. Every slight variation in tone that signified bad dream, *hold me, kiss me – no don’t I’m too angry*, and that vulnerable sigh, pleading, *wait... come back... stay with me.*

I knew it all, built a life decoding the writings on her wall.

She was Sundays in bed, spilled coffee, fresh tea. We made the best shortbread cookies. Road trips and bonfires – ones I didn't think would burn – we wrote our own story, eagerly awaiting the next turn. She was like opening your favorite book to the most fitting page. Every day.

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77 Where do you start when you try to force yourself to stand? Where do you go? Back to what I know, back to where I’m from. Restate the basics, take them with you, and move on.
Wrapped in her skin, I decided to move in. Wrote my name on her heart, changed my address, unaware of what I’d soon come to suppress – she was all I could ever know.


I am from feeling _everything_ at ten thousand percent. From turning to your favorite page every day to relentlessly being faced with the words that demand you not stay, nauseous and aching and overwhelmed and shaking and _how long had I let this go on?_

I am from a refusal of stillness since the time I was young. Tapping feet and fingers and hands, drumming and snapping and clicking – anything to make a sound, to occupy, my limbs, my mind,

> keep moving, keep making, keep rhythm, keep time.

From carefree and _I believe I can fly_, trampoline platforms and towel capes. From _I can do anything, I can be anything, just you wait_. Five-year-old hands on hips, defiant _yes I can_,

when did that change?

_Yes_ turned to _no_. I stopped before I even gave myself the chance to go. _She could_, I’d say, _but not you_. Five-year-old daydreams to self-sabotage. I’d handed her my score. I’d let the music stop.

I am from insecurity. From _god I love you so much_ but don't know how to love me. Wrapped in her skin that I called home, I abandoned my own.

_Everybody needs a place, _they say _it shouldn't be inside somebody else._

Because now I don’t know this body that’s mine. I don’t recognize this face, or this round convoluted vessel to project my mistakes. And I find myself in panic over nothing, time and time and time again. I’m so tired of hearing myself say _it doesn't make any sense_

> – _come on Linds, you know better than that._

There isn’t always a red arrow blinking, that warning sign, or catalyst, its just you fucking thinking. And you go back to tapping like you have since you were young – head pounding, heart sprinting, hand shaking, _keep moving, keep making_ 

---

78 being Richard Siken
—inhale:

one

two

three

four

five

remember believing you could fly?

Think of something good. Somewhere safe —no not her, she’s some one, not some place. Go back to that kiss, from the waves, not the boy. Ground your feet in warm sand, let that sun bring you joy.

But I need her
—no you don’t.

Feel the sun. Feel the sand. Find that trampoline springboard. Put on that old cape. Transcend this land.

Tell yourself you're good.

Tell yourself you can.79

79 Remember all the things that make you you.

In my last draft of this section, I wrote “still working on this” as a note to myself for revision. I went to change it and realized that said it all, no lengthy description necessary – I am still working on it.
Today I am twenty-two, and this morning, I woke up as twenty-two for the first time. I suppose we are always a new age for this first time, even when we don’t commemorate it with candles and cake, but this feels even more of a first, perhaps more so than the year before. The rest of society acknowledges the milestone in twenty-one, but twenty-two is seen as yet another in-between – you’ve been able to drink legally for long enough that its initial excitement has begun to fade, you are most likely still in school, somewhere in this vague adult-ish realm, gaining more responsibility while still secured by some level of parental support, and it will be another four years until you can rent a car – the next societal age achievement; it is the beginning of a series of years in-between. At least for me, this is twenty-two: student, semi-recent whiskey-enthusiast, almost graduate, mostly safeguarded by a father’s financial support, while precariously navigating the quickly-approaching world of independent adulthood. In-between.

And yet, I cannot help but think that twenty-two feels like the beginning of something more, something better, marking this period of growth and transition that is not succinctly identified, my own unnamed milestone. As if there is a word on the tip of my tongue and I am searching my mouth for letters I cannot yet find… yet.

Perhaps it is naive to wishfully believe a single day will serve as a complete reset, but isn't that what every day is, if we choose to make it so? Today I am twenty-two, continually coming back into myself, on the cusp of something worth pursuit.

In my fifth term at this university, and my fourth and final year as an undergraduate, I feel even more thoughtful about my education, purposeful and deliberate in the choosing of my classes, my work, how I want to spend my time. Why is that only once we’re near the end of something do we seem to truly appreciate it? The end and the beginning I suppose; I am overwhelmed by the feeling of both.

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80 if following the “typical” college trajectory – but what is typical?

81 I read a letter I wrote you a few months ago. I never sent it, I never intended to. And I don’t know what compelled me to return to it, but tonight I wanted some kind of closure. I reread all the things I still have yet to tell you, everything I hope for you, for both of us, not in an us-way, just what you’d hope for anyone you wish to succeed. My eyes start to fill with tears, heavy with something I couldn't yet name. I’m not missing you, I’m not sad – I’m smiling. Is this happiness? Is this closure? Is this healing? Is this what it feels like to be whole again? To be able to love what we had and who we were without wanting it back? …Is this relief? I feel like I just took my first deep breath in nearly two years. Finally letting my lungs fill with air without forcing it back out. And more tears follow. And more breaths because its been so long I forgot how this should feel. I forgot how heavy it all was. I forgot what lightness is like. And so I sit here, weeping and smiling and laughing at myself, overwhelmed and overjoyed by release.

82 I hear Adrienne Rich telling me to push myself, to welcome criticism, to be active and engaged, for, “Once we begin to feel committed to our lives, responsible to ourselves, we can never again be satisfied with the old, passive way” (‘Claiming an Education’).
This is before.

Her name shares the first four letters of mine: Lindy.

I am sixteen. She is my older cousin’s roommate and close friend. I spend the summer at their house in Arizona like I do most – the place the same, now someone new.  

This is before. Before everything.
She tells me she is planning to commit suicide the day before I have to fly home for the first day of my junior year of high school. She tells me she has decided, she has a plan, it is just a matter of when. She tells me I am the only one who knows.

My family thinks our friendship is strange. They judge and condemn it the same. Why are a twenty-two year-old woman and a sixteen-year-old kid so close. Why am I sleeping in her bed instead of my cousin’s. Why am I spending my free time at their house instead of my aunt and uncle’s, instead of with other cousins my age. They think she is unhealthy for me, unstable, a bad influence, insert chosen word here. My family, immediate and extended, all come to the same conclusion: she is just not an appropriate friend.

Everyone made assertions and assumptions that could not have been farther from the truth. My closest friends growing up were all at least a grade level older, usually more. Why was this so shocking. This was in keeping with the rest of me. Nobody sees me. No one would listen. She and I became the outcasts; it only fortified either side.

I beg her not to. I say all the things we instinctively say and nothing she needs to hear. I fly home, because I have to, and drift through my classes. I call my cousin, explaining what I know. She and Lindy’s dad hold an intervention. I wait anxiously to hear the result.

Lindy stops talking to me, enraged that I could ever betray her trust, filled with that anger I now recognize as fear.

This is when it started.

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85 My close friend a few years prior said something far too similar and I don’t know how to hear it again.

86 She had dated women in the past. Apparently that signaled something too.

87 Now I can’t help but wonder… Were they right, everyone who questioned the nature of our closeness, seeing something I couldn’t yet see in myself? I hadn’t yet questioned my sexuality; I confidently thought I was straight. I didn’t think I was lying in denying their assumptions. We fit; our sleeping made sense. That was all – a want for closeness, not a sexual desire. Could it have led to more? I don’t know. I can’t harness my teenage mind pretending not to know what I do now. Does it matter?

88 Thinking I’d lost her catapulted the rest.
More than anything, I am relieved she is out of immediate danger, but terrified it won’t be enough, terrified something will happen, and I won’t know, won’t be there, won’t be able to save her, so no one would. I thought I was the only one who could.

I withdraw from classes, my attention unfailingly elsewhere. My nearly untouched straight-A record begins to slip as I stop completing assignments, stop trying, stop caring. My friend needs me and hates me and I can’t stay in either place. School becomes futile; who cares about AP Bio when someone you care for is five hundred miles away continually deliberating her own death. I turn in blank tests and drop classes and meet Fs with indifference.

Mom and Dad are in the heat of divorce logistics at this point. Dad is getting ready to move back into the house after buying out Mom’s share. J is beginning her sophomore year of college in Santa Barbara, the distance between us steadily growing. Mom is still “sick” in bed for days on end, routinely. I bring her soup and close the door and drive myself where I need to go.

My family eases, clandestinely grateful for our disconnect, performing consolation as a front for relief.

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89 She will soon come home after realizing that wasn’t her place.

90 Again, I could fill another manuscript with writings about Mom, but I think I’m still too close to shed any necessary insight on that aspect of my life. Maybe I’m still angry; maybe I still want to be. I wrote a pantoum in an introductory writing class that still resonates. I suppose I could lend you that for more context:

* I don’t remember thinking anything of it
* I don’t remember minding
* she was gone for so long
* but we called it normal

* I don’t remember minding
* she would lay in bed for days
* but we called it normal
* I brought her soup, I closed the door

* she would lay in bed for days
* I don’t remember how I got to school
* I brought her soup, I closed the door
* I wonder how often

* I don’t remember how I got to school
* I’m sure Dad picked me up
* I wonder how often
* that’s when I learned to cook

* I’m sure Dad picked me up
* I often forget
* that’s when I learned to cook
* something to show her when she came back

* I often forget
* that it’s hereditary
* something to show her when she comes back
* somewhere to start.
—I didn’t know that then.

*Who the fuck are any of you to tell me who I can and can’t have in my life. Mom is absent. Dad isn't here. I have been doing this on my own for years without your input or guidance and now everyone decides to chime in? Bullshit.*

At least that’s what I told myself.

I am furious with anyone who now intends to voice their opinions, fed-up with what feels like selective-parenting. *And very much sixteen,* with all its stubbornness and indignation and shortsightedness; good luck trying to tell me what to do.

Too many prolonged weeks pass. Lindy reaches out. Now regularly seeking help, seeing a therapist she trusts, she is apologetic and thankful. We reunite in secret, talking daily. She keeps me from my cousin and everyone in Tucson. I keep her from my parents and everyone at home.

My house becomes an intensifying muddle of everything I don’t want to face. We move furniture and dishes from Dad’s apartment, somehow making room for them at what used to be Mom’s, while packing Mom’s things for somewhere – she decides she doesn't need a new place of her own. She’ll adopt that gypsy lifestyle she has dreamily considered for so long and feels untethered to anything here – a fact she reminds us often, hoping we will echo her enthusiasm. We don’t say anything. She wants to go, so she does. That is that. Her things go into storage, and into the garage, and the living room, and the family room, and my room, and J’s room, and my Nanna’s house, and anywhere there is an inch of available space. Dad moves back in and he and I clumsily must relearn how to navigate each other among too many couches.

Not wanting to live in what must feel like his ex-wife’s house, Dad goes into re-modeling-mode. The floors, the walls, the tile, the lights, the moldings – everything has to change, everything needs an update. *It’s a project we can do together,* he tells me, desperately trying to create the trappings of family in his literal attempt to rebuild our home, repairing every cracked wall and bending floor board. *He’s trying.* But I have no interest. Everything’s changing, I don’t need my room reworked too; no matter how chipped the paint may be, it’s mine and I like it that way. I am comfortable in my normal, no matter how flawed; it is all I know and all I want to know.

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91 especially for a teenage mind

92 This sounds bad – like there really is something innately going on here, like I’m trying to make you believe it was all innocent, when it actually wasn’t. But it was. We are friends, that is all, and it never changes. This isn’t a pattern. Trust me.

93 I don’t remember all the details or the timeline. No one does anymore. We are all trying to traverse new terrain, trying to stay afloat in our own modes while avoiding any unnecessary crossover. *Confrontation* is not a word we know. *You do your thing, I’ll do mine.* It’s far easier than making waves. We live in separate houses that only sometimes share a roof.
Lindy is my outlet, my escape, the promise of something better, in a world wonderfully away. Maybe misery loves company and that’s all we are. Maybe we are pulling each other down in our disguised attempt at support. We diagnose each other and ourselves, with A Day to Remember and The Pretty Reckless and blessthefall as our soundtrack.

We are standing in quicksand.

. . .

I don’t do well without control. No matter how false any previous sense of it may have been, I feel like I am losing my grip and reach for anything in its place. Anything I can see, anything that makes sense. Anything that gives me a cause and a remedy and a procedure to follow.

I don’t remember the details of the day or what brought me to that place.

I took the razor from my shelf and didn’t use it to shave.
Prompt the first new normal – the heavy black eyeliner and ripped Ts with bands whose music I barely know, studded jackets and combat boots and too many bracelets.

For however many months.

Until it is too warm one day to be wearing long sleeves, and I am brought a note in third period that calls me into the guidance counselor’s office, the box checked *immediately*.

Enter Steph.

Then enter Jess.

I jumped from one to the next to the next…
This is my girl Blue – a now common introduction whenever I’m with her, one that I love maybe a little too much. Sometimes, I’ll extend my hand with a correction, I’m Lindsay, nice to meet you. Other times, I’ll leave them with the color. There are definitely a handful of people who only know me as such. On the days when I feel the need to add Lindsay, it’s because the first feels deceptive, a misleading assertion about a person I have yet to become.  

94 Blue is Mom’s free and adventuresome spirit paired with Dad’s loyalty and my sister’s charm. The appreciation of good booze and good food without the addiction. She is a writer, and a damn good one at that, and she doesn’t give a prelude before saying so. She is an artist, a painter, musician, photographer, poet, whose world is mirrored in creative projects that fill her apartment – which is exquisitely decorated and alive with thriving plants that she remembers to water. She is a performer, with a stage presence, and a resonant voice. She is a storyteller – first and foremost.

She doesn’t hesitate before singing, or sharing work, but she doesn’t need the spotlight. She knows when and how to help others embrace theirs, but she doesn’t consider herself wiser.

She is humble, but not self-deprecating. She knows when she has accomplished something worth recognition, and she allows herself to be proud. She recognizes the opposite and welcomes its criticism. She walks with confidence, a steady swagger non-reliant on curves or shoes or mascara. She wears the same four necklaces every day; they never tangle. She doesn’t smoke.

When she walks into a room, people notice. She does yoga and takes as many long walks as long runs, and kick boxes after class. She is strong. Fierce and grounded.

She is an exceptional friend who gives more than she takes. She is the same as a daughter or sister granddaughter or aunt or cousin or niece. She regularly sends hand-crafted cards to loved ones, just because. She sends them to strangers too. She is full of love and warmth, the kind toddlers cling to. She is generous and thoughtful and kind and people say so.

When others compliment her hair, she compliments them back.

She rehangs her clothes immediately. She separates her laundry. She donates what she doesn't need, and she doesn’t need much.

She is frugal but not to a detriment. She pays her bills on time and uses her credit card sparingly.

She can dance, and she does. If she dances with a man, it’s because he’s a great partner, because their bodies move to the same rhythm, because it’s fun, never compulsory. She’s knows she’s worth more than convenience.

She makes sweatpants look purposeful.

She isn’t afraid of her bikini.

She designed the tattoo on her forearm.

She makes her own coffee, drinks it slowly throughout the day, and doesn’t buy another cup after depleting the first. She braises mushrooms in red wine and drizzles balsamic over fresh strawberries. She offers the same amount of care to meals she prepares for herself as she does for others.

She takes her time. She stops to smells jasmine and climb trees. She walks with no destination in mind, just to take in the sun; it shows on her skin.

She gives fitting nicknames, and plans surprise parties, and gives the best gifts.

When she says she will do something, she does. She honors her word. She lives by it.
Some days I am Blue.

Other days I’m Lindsay. Or Linds. Or Dad’s mess of syllables. Or something entirely unnamable because she’s someone I don’t want to know.

Most days I am everyone at once.

But some days I am Sunshine – an eight year old searching for dollar store treasures, one mop of smiling curls guiding another, sharing in music and laughter and learning.

And some days, for all those who don’t know me as granddaughter,

I’ll call her Blue.\textsuperscript{95}

\textsuperscript{95}How do you end something that is still ongoing? Any final page implies I have said I all I need to say, when that couldn’t possibly be true. At twenty two, it would be foolish to suggest anything final; I’ve barely lived enough to know this much. Do I stop mid-sentence in an attempt to convey that incompleteness? Do I write fin or the end in an effort to create an ironic mockery of this entire project? Do I lay out my plans moving forward, or lack there of, or insert a page with nothing but my graduation date? I decided to “end” how I began – with a letter, not again to myself, but to perhaps the most important recipient of any of my ramblings. No additional commentary necessary; I’ll let this one speak for itself.
Baby Girl,

I don’t know what you’ll call me – Mom or Mama? One m or two? I don’t know which will be more fitting, or feel right to you. How you’ll discern between me and her, but I am told it will come. Perhaps it will be the tone of your voice or those extra curves of an m. Despite the sound, you’ll say my name and I’ll know just when, and I’ll be there. And you will inevitably be a nightmare, and the best blessing, all we’d hoped, and it will make sense that you will embody those two because you come from a family of boths.

I don’t know if you will look like me, if you’ll wear this hair or these eyes. I don’t know how we will bring you into this world, but you’ll be born to thrive, and you will know that you are not an accident, 

Baby Girl you could never be an accident.

The world has stood against us, made us mean to fight for you, and because of it, from the moment of your birth, you will know, as best you can, the extent of your worth, and your mom and I will spend a lifetime reassuring you.

And while everyone else will be out accomplishing their dreams, we will be reaching ours too just by looking at you. But that will come after years of romping through jungles and waging wars, writing about the best and the worst, so that when you look up at these faces, all you see is possibility, an evolving map of places to roam and two fiery women here to welcome you home.

And so when you ask us what the world looks like, we’ll have something to say, something to pique your interest from New York to LA, for your endless skies, fourteen hour flights, and rich Sundays.

Baby Girl, when you first meet someone who makes your heart skip a beat, and makes the words disappear in the back of your throat, give into that moment. Let yourself float. And you won’t need to change the pronouns in your poems to read them aloud. No matter m or r or e or i, darling we’ll be just as proud, just as gratified. We’ll set another place at the table, pour another glass of wine, and we won’t need to threaten or forewarn because love, you’ll hold your own just fine,

you’ll have known how to say no from the moment you arrived.

And we’ll encourage you to feel, but not sink.

If you’re anything like your mom – and I don’t know if you will be – you may have the urge to let go and fall hard and not think, and if you do, I will understand better than anyone that intoxicating want to dash and I will have chocolate and pillows ready in case of a fairly inevitable crash and I will teach you how to
pick yourself up, and create a mosaic out of the pieces. And you will learn that you are not broken. That no one can break you. That you are this endlessly colorful, ever-learning being whose value never varies depending on its shape, but some days may look a little different based on the angle of the sun.

And you will know you are strong, and competent, as well as beautiful – that Baby you are a kaleidoscope, and even on your worst days, I will teach you recognize it and be your relentless reminder for the times when you can’t.

Baby you will grow so tired of hearing us tell you how loved you are.

We come from a family of people who love to love things, be it others or cigarettes or alcohol, and part of me hopes you don’t look like me so you won’t ever have to climb that wall.

And when you start grasping at air in search of reasons, I will remind you that the only constant is change and I will tie those words in a bracelet so that when everything around you feels foreign and strange, you can hold your own hand,

and remember to breathe.

And someday you may notice the lines on my wrist.
I hope you have to ask me what they mean.
I pray you won’t already know.

Because darling I will have written love across your mirror for each and every glance, to imbed it in your reflection so you never think twice before giving yourself a chance, and so that it will be easily found upon every search, and you’ll think back to your purposeful birth, and never need question your worth.

Baby you will get knocked down. Life will throw its punches and just when you think you can’t handle another, you’ll get kicked in the stomach. And it will hurt. And you may bleed but you’ll know that it’s coming and think,

they’ll be days like this my mama said
(or mom, since I don’t know what you’ll call me yet).

And you’ll collect scars and turn them into constellations, so the next time something stings, you can look up at Orion and trace it in your freckles, unafraid of the sword because you already know its name.

Darling you will accumulate a succession of firsts and seconds and fourths and string them together as your compass north. You will live in a world of stories, and your mom will write them down. And paint those words on your hands, so when you look at your palms, you’ll know where you’ve been and where you belong. You’ll see a sculptor, a teacher, a historian, an architect – we won’t mind the medium, as long as you explore how to use them best: in a way that still aligns with your definition of the word,
your finest self you have to offer this world.

We’ll tell you to try everything and anything and everything again. To enjoy the falls as much as the flights. To live in it all and never wish to skip or rewind. I hope you never have a hankering to travel through time, because today is just too damn good.

Darling we will teach you that you never need shrink to make room for someone else.

You will know the history of women who’ve had to make themselves smaller so you may one day outstretch your arms, and you will be grateful but not identical. Because you will know this world is plenty big enough for us all. And if ever someone tries to convince you otherwise, you will upturn those painted palms of yours as invitation to learn, or, last resort—

you’ll tell them to come talk to your moms.

And we will praise your art projects as much as your research papers and embolden you to create and to make and to follow that thing that drives your soul no matter what brand – be it music or theater or math or church… that one may be a little harder for me, but Baby I’ll support you regardless of whether or not I agree, and you will learn

that difference does not mean separate,

that sameness does not mean only.

We will raise you to speak. To know the power of your words as well as your pauses. You’ll know how to look to another and recognize the same, to stand not only for that which you love and can claim, but what others weather too. It will be written on your bones

that you not need live it to empathize,

that you not need share in experience to know when to rise,

and Darling you will rise. With Maya and Gloria and hooks and Lorde up your sleeve, you will be righteous in your thinking, in how you give and receive. You will be fire and water and know when to harness the two – because you come from a family of boths,

a family built for you.