

Quarantine Notebook

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Abstract

The summer the world collapsed, and I had almost begun to collapsing with it. I would have, had it not been for the sunshine and the birds and the lulling of the river's tide. I would carry a picnic basket to the water's edge, and I sat, all summer, with my novels and my notebooks, and I wrote down all that I felt.

How is one supposed to act in isolation? What does one do?

PROLOGUE

Forever is composed of nows,
and you can fuck anyone, for life

is boring except for the wild and free woman: fluent
in the language of intimacy and passion, silence,
the limitation of language, the body, madness except
for the feral woman: extremely hungry
for something soulful and who knows if she is a child, a beast, or goddess?

But who hasn't occasionally wondered: am I
a monster, or is this what it means to be

a person? The desire to be loved is the last illusion,
give it up and you will be free. Loneliness
is still time spent with the world, and I have done
nothing all summer but wait
for myself to be myself

again. Bowing to the daydreams I buried
myself in, I have learnt something by being

nothing. Nightbeauty, softness and always lie
down by a slow river, staring at the light
of the trees, and sometimes we all drown

together. Those who were seen dancing
were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music.
I refuse to give up the need
to feel beautiful and holy things around me. In the watery

beams of the summer moon, naked, dreaming: no human being has ever stood
so close to my soul as you stand and how I pray
for change! A happy change: a light and the terrible

yearning, for in case you ever foolishly forget, the number of hours we have
together is actually not so large. Please,
linger: quiet, yet wild. Rough, and yet gentle. For like

you, I can't sleep. I love too many things and my heart, dressed like the dead,
overflows towards the universe. How am I ever to apologize to myself sufficiently?

Everywhere, all at once. All the time, I have wanted nothing
as long as we lay together: fresh and young and sweet.

The way bodies fit together:
oh, the Earth was made for lovers.

Mother of Otherness, Eat me,
for my love is my only apology.

I am not afraid. I was born alone
in moonlight shine. The dream of my life is for you
to walk into this room and touch me anywhere. I swear
I would not long for Heaven or for Earth more
then I'd wish to stay there touched and touching you. You:
sunlight through a window, which I stand in, warmed.

A love so big it scares, I tasted under Apollo's lips,
love and love sweetness: so dark, so bright, so hard,
so soft, was she, so astonishingly seductive.
The most ordinary conversation is often the most
poetic, and she tastes like every dark thought

I've ever had. More myself than I: soft,
so soft, so slow. And light. Who are you
who is so strangely me? Darling, you are

an angel—stay longer in me, take roots. For I
am out with lanterns, looking for myself.

I am on an airplane wearing only my grandmother's clothes. Everyone that I know is dead.

PORTRAIT OF WEDNESDAY

It is the middle of the morning, but that feels wrong. The lights in the house are dark, and the rain drums against the window like a lullaby. The clock reads six twenty-six, but my body knows the score. Do you know what I mean?

I roll over and pretend to sleep.

Naked and alone, my bedroom, Texas. The windows cracked at the sills; the air climbs inside. It is hot and wet, and my sheer voile curtains are tinting green at the bottoms, smelling faintly of mildew. They blow out from underneath the window, back in again, tangling against themselves and getting caught in my open fingers. When I sleep, I ignore; I am ignoring; I am asleep.

Somewhere around seven, I roll over and grab my prescriptions from the night table. Penicillin and Vicodin and, sometimes, Prozac. I swallow with my eyes closed. My body remembers.

I am so thankful, always, to live where I am when I do.

The street beyond my window is a busy one, and the cars all lull me awake. I have friends who cannot fall asleep without urban white noise, and although I am not one of them, I understand why. I wake, every morning, to the sound of sirens or horns or laughter. Of branches tapping against my window-pane, of wilted curtains tangling my fingertips.

In my bedroom, underneath the bedsheets, or outside on the patio in the folding chair, I sit and stare at the road; my brown hair tangles. Lately, I've been spending whole afternoons on my front lawn. Legs crossed atop a metal fold-up chair (one that I've brought into the yard from the dining room), I enjoy watching the neighbors. Part of me is searching for your face, and another, quite larger, part of myself is not. As selfish and as greedy as I am, I am always looking for something. If I'm being honest, which is rarely, I can't tell if it's for you or for me.

So, I sit on the lawn with a cigarette tucked behind my ear because I admire the buzz in the morning. I remember a time when we used to sit on the patio wrapped in our blankets and our slippers. The chess board unfolded between our legs, and—breathless—we played. The sound of passing cars and public buses and children laughing on their way to school: this is all we heard, all that I paid any attention to. You held a glass of orange juice to your cotton mouth, and when you sat it down against the chess board, it stained.

Outside, that September, we spoke in hypotheticals and a vagueness that came with our being young. Or, perhaps we were just the only ones awake? In the wake of the morning and the noise, you refused my questions, and I forgot what I'd asked, and we were. We just were. Pink fingers shuffling pieces: I won, and you won, and we both, somehow, lost.

If it rains, which it sometimes does, I'll go inside to sit by the fireplace. Drop an artificial log into the hole and watch it ember. There's a stack of books on the mantle, some yours and others mine, and I think for a moment: how beautiful a combination. To get lost in the tangle of it all. If there's light, I'll sit and read and

in the mornings, I walk around naked. A blanket over my shoulders and slipper-feet. When you're here, you're in bed, and when you're gone, you're gone. I don't know where you go, and usually I don't ask. We both know our speech (or lack thereof) is problematic, but neither of us can fix things with our mouths. In a conversation we've had, once, where you told me that to live too far in the past leads to melancholy and too much the future breeds angst. I do not know which is which – both the melancholy and the angst, but also the past and the future – so I spend too much time in my head.

How do you not?

When I am alone and lost in my books, in my distraction, who am I? The girl in the yard with the sun on her face and her slipper-feet, what does she want from the world? When I met you I was malleable. You knew. And the person you sculpted me into—this she—is she you or is she me? Did you bring out my truest self, or am I still playing roles? Is this me, or is this love: mine, for you?

I move to the kitchen and sit on top of the counter. Holding a mug in my lap, I wrap the comforter around my shoulders and turn on the coffeepot. It sings as I whistle, and I watch the slow drip. I've been thinking about meditation—about slowing down—and I'd like to believe this is it. The forgetting and the focusing and the blocking out. To stare at the drip of the coffee is to slow my beating heart, is to return to my own self.

The blinds on the windows are pulled down, and I am alone with myself in the dark. Pulling my knees to my chest, I sit and swaddle myself.

I think, quite often, about the space in between the hours: what we do when no one is watching, when there are no obligations. I've written once that the person you are at seven in the morning is yourself in your purest form. Drifting into and out of sleep, your mind half-awake or elsewhere, what is there to hide from? Sometimes I am on the sofa, a quilt tucked underneath my chin and my toes sticking out the edge, because my body is heavy and tired and old. Other times, I wake in my bedroom—or yours—with a headache or a bloody nose or an ember of love charcoaling inside my ribcage.

This seven-a.m. self: I'd like to believe this is who I am, really.

No making up or covering or dressing or speaking or smelling nice. There's no effort, and in that, there's honesty. How many souls do you know in the morning? How often do you catch sight of yourself?

When the pot is full and heavy, I pour into mug after mug, hold mug after mug to my mouth. As I drink, I am thinking: I used to believe that waking alone was the detriment to personhood. A lonely body in the morning: this was my failing, or perhaps my damnation. That longing in my stomach: I believed bodies could fill it, and believing a wrong idea is easy when there's no one to argue otherwise. But no one to argue otherwise? There's so much good in that. To decide the mood—the deposition—of the person you will be, of the person you are. We all are prone to carrying around these versions of ourselves – the one made for lovers and the one made for kin and her sister and mine – like they're pieces of script, or masks, or choices. Do we choose the skin we'd like to wear, or is there a single, solidified self that is buried underneath?

As human beings, we are all, more or less, the same. In love and not, happy and not—our feelings are all universal. In my house, I have a room for sitting and a room for crying and a room for reading the newspaper. I shuffle myself often—picking and choosing and mulling over—and end up inside one of them, alone. I lift my feet onto the ottoman (or the bookshelf or the windowsill or the mantle) and close my eyes. There are windows in the rooms and life beyond them: a world beyond myself and my bloody heart and fingers. It is important to pay attention to it, to be all there: somewhere, on occasion.

There was a time—a whole, long time—where I had forgotten this. Love is a self-absorbing thing, (or rather, to be in love is to be self-absorbed), and in love I couldn't see past yesterday. My vision all muddled and cloudy...

Not that I am much older, or much wiser, but I am. I am. We all are. To wake in your own bedsheets and close the window nobody had asked you to open. To fold your legs into the chair you've left rusting on the front lawn or atop the counter that's yours. Watching and meditating and pouring your own coffee from the pot. Drinking with your hands.

BEFORE:

Bare feet on concrete, I am running wild across the tarmac. I've spent forever waiting for this moment, this moment when you pick me up in a pair of black jeans, bare ankles, a black t-shirt, and sunglasses, ringed hands hoisting my duffle bags into your trunk, holding the door open.

It began with a phone call, a mere suggestion of light travel. A sort of what-if: you were a convenience, a stranger's couch to sleep on.

But I was smiling into my cell phone. An optimistic mess, contemplating the idea of *oh shit! this could be love!*

However, I would be a liar if I were to say that it wasn't a little awkward at first. After all of this building – and all this waiting, the anticipation! – we were magically, automatically, reduced to a couple of wet tongues trying to fill silence, two sets of clammy hands so unsure of where to hold.

But I have already written about the hours spent lazy, falling in love over the phone. All summer, I had been dreaming of your morning voice, the pucker of your lips against my skin. I had this wonderful idea of what you smelled like, the way your arms would wrap around my ribcage

and it all felt so suddenly surreal: sitting there with my feet out your window. We sat with the Spanish radio turned all the way up and every window pulled down. I know, and I knew, and I know, but I was falling in love with the idea of falling in love over you.

Timing, then, is a bitch.

You drive like you're happy – down the highway with your windows open and the clouds hung low in the sky – and you smiled as you circled us around to an old, favorite coffee shop – the one with the hammocks, you said. Waltzing towards the register, we ordered chai lattes, and you asked for them dirty. I pulled out my stripper ones and nickels, and you watched.

As the barista counted, you asked about her tattoos, and you sounded like friends. It was so simple, and I was so awed,

and when we were sitting out on those hammocks, I swear it felt like a first date. I still wasn't sure how to impress you, or even if I could, but I was no longer in hiding. I sipped my chai delicately, listened to your childhood memories and stories and friends, and I smiled. Fidgeted. Nodded when I was supposed to and again when I wasn't.

I do not remember if we ate dinner, but I remember falling asleep on your couch. Your fin-

gers rearranged all my limbs, and a movie played, some sort of Japanese indie film. We had suddenly slipped past the awkward stage, around all the blushing.

The details are blurry, but I remember our legs tangling, your lap inside my lap, my ankles crossed over your chest. You rubbed circles into the palms of my feet, and I could not comprehend how I felt.

You tossed me a book of poetry and asked me to read you something. Rubbing your thumbs into the skin of my calves, I found a verse that I liked and spilt a stranger's heart from my mouth. I read and stared at the blades of the ceiling fan twirling, and you asked me to tell you the story of the sweetest date I've ever been on.

I was thinking: now, now, right now, this, you.

But I just laughed and nodded quickly, and I think we doze and then woke ourselves up. You poured me a glass of merlot, and I kissed you on the collarbone.

You picked me up, and my legs wrapped, naturally – automatically – around your waist, your hands on my back, in my hair. You kissed me as you walked, my hands in your hair, our hearts beat in tandem. Let's forget about the ceiling and the rafters, the fan and the curve of the drywall. Let's simply kiss until we fall in love.

You set me down on your roommate's pool table and onto an old fish-hook. We laughed, and we cried and, together, we pulled the mess apart.

I woke up inside your arms. You kissed my shut-eyes and my scalp, and I wanted to freeze time right there. Remember what you smelled like, what your morning stubble felt like. The way your arm draped across my stomach.

It had been a day or two, and we were living off of peanut butter sandwiches and home brewed coffee. Which you don't drink, but you made some for me and mixed it with melted Hershey's, dripped it into a stein and nudged it across the counter, into my bare, eager fingers. Kissing my temples, you held me as I drank.

I am constantly wondering what would have happened if I had met you differently, or sooner?

But I don't ask, and you don't say. Instead, you leant me your used novels, and I was sitting at the breakfast table, legs propped, reading. Sitting there with my stein full of coffee, wearing your Calvin Klein boxers, you took my photo and will show it to me later.

Blushing, I remember that I never photograph well the first time.

9:18 am:

We smoked our cigarettes

and dropped the ashes

into the field, and I dreamt

we set the whole world on fire.

At the breakfast table, in your boxer shorts, I began reading you my favorite obituary. You watch me from above the STYLE section, and I fold the paper into squares, stuff it inside my leather purse. You ask me why bother keeping it?

And I don't remember my answer.

Maybe I am just pretending?

But maybe that is okay because maybe you were pretending, too. You brought me into the living room and set up your mother's Scrabble board. We wrapped our fingers around the letters and each other. I lost, and you won; I won, and you lost.

Later on, you drove us to the thrift store to pick out dinner outfits for the other. I laughed but obliged, filled my basket with a sparkling mini dress and someone else's collared shirts.

Reuniting at the cash register, you hung my sparkling dress back on the rack and place in a neon pink, ballgown sort of dress in my hands. It was unapologetically ugly, bright, hot pink and falling to the floor; my cheeks were red hot.

You were smiling. You said that I'd look dazzling in highlighter fuchsia.

So, we paid in cash and went stomping down our favorite streets, into the cafés and restaurants and ice cream parlors. You in your black jeans and me in my ballgown, we didn't look like something that belonged, but what did? What does?

In the parlor, on the rooftop, I joked and accidentally asked you to marry me. You blushed – maybe because you didn't believe in my seriousness – maybe because everything was brand new. Maybe I was ridiculous, sure?

But I was convinced that you were convinced, and you were, and we were.

What if!

But the whole time – throughout all of this – I was so careful not to ask the silly questions. I was never going to ask what this was, how this felt. I cannot remember why – maybe I knew, maybe I didn't – but that was never something that we would talk about.

Why?

Instead, you took my hand and led me through the museum of modern art. We saw Frida and Pablo and Klimt and Hopper and Cassatt. You held my hands and pointed; there was a sculpture tucked into the corner of a darker wall. It was luminescent and the light reflected off the windows and the walls and my gown and your face. Suddenly, you were twirling me, and I was posing, and *snap! Snap! Snap!* Your camera clicked.

Back home, later on, you dropped a cardboard box into the corners of my lap. *A gift*, you said. I opened it with wide eyes and greedy fingers. A portable vibrator. I blushed,

and I blushed, and I was still pink as we drove to sushi during the sunset. I wasn't wearing underwear, and you ordered Saki bombs, and together, we shared California rolls. A date. Back home, we played another round of Scrabble, and you won. This time, for certain. I fell asleep between your arms, wrapped in the good side of your sheets.

When I called my sister, she asked if we were playing house?

And I guess that is almost what it felt like. The sleeping underneath your covers, the waking up in your arms. Almost. Leaving my toothbrush on your countertop, razor in the shower. Crawling out of bed in the mornings to pee, letting myself out the front door. Sneaking back in.

On Sunday – Father's day – we went to iHop for breakfast. I do not like pancakes, but you do. We drizzled syrup over bread and dunked bagels into our coffee. You were telling me about your ex-girlfriend, how you like your women crazy,

and I wondered what that meant.

What sort of crazy am I?

You paid the bill and drove us to CVS. I had two twenty-dollar bills, and I spent them on another coffee and a kit of Plan B. You bought condoms, and placing them both onto the countertop, you tried to convince the cashier that our purchases were unrelated. But she didn't smile, and it was still early.

Happy Father's day, I say,

then swallow the pills dry.

I could have gotten used to the creases of your Scrabble board, the stick of your wine glasses. I think I could've lived off of peanut butter sandwiches for the rest of my life.

The night before I fly home to Virginia, you invite some friends over for drinks and camaraderie. I was still homeless and needed your couch to sleep on.

You offer to buy ice cream and again: a parlor. We were a drunken sort of sober and nostalgic and empty and happy. Outside, on the park bench, our cones drip onto our thighs, and you tell me that you know a place.

I am skeptical but would follow you anywhere. We drop our cones onto the concrete and run, suddenly barefoot, around the building's corner. Behind the shopping center, there is a river, which you knew; I now know. You hold your head against my shoulder and wrap your arms around my waist. We stand there, just breathing, and I remember thinking I could've died happy. Right there: with your arms on my hips and your breath in my hair. I do not remember what we said – if we even said anything – but I remember.

And I think, I would tell myself, that I was falling into everything
around and against you. Like the way you tied the bread bag,
how you fall asleep, your breath on my neck, your breath.

You carried me back to the side seat of your car, my toes propped onto the dash.

Back at your house, your friends on your front porch, we pulled kitchen chairs into the backyard and sat and smoked and drank. You threw your chair over the open bonfire, and we all watched it go up in flames.

We played bullshit trivia, and I lied as I asked you silly questions. *Tell me all that's going on in your head! Tell me because this is a game; tell me because I want to know.*

I got up to use the restroom, went inside and fell asleep: my cheek pressed into the seat of the toilet.

I do not know how long I was there – or even if I was dreaming – but you were the one who found me. You held my hair at the nape of my neck and fed me a peanut butter sandwich.

I do not remember having even one bite. Instead, I remember being carried into your bed-

sheets, your kissing me goodnight.

And that was supposed to be the end of it. The final night. When I woke, you were asleep on the couch, our phones still out in the yard. It was eleven thirty-something, and my flight had already flown.

“I was hoping we’d oversleep,” you said, “That you might wake up and stay forever.” I kissed you then, on the collar, and I wasn’t even mad at you.

Last night, you said, while you were still outside, eating ham and cheese in the heat, I was spread out across your bedsheets. You said I wouldn’t move, so you slept alone on the couch. You missed me, you said, and I kissed you on the shoulder blade.

We dozed and re-woke: two naked heads and hands intertwined. You kissed my calves as I sat on hold with the airline. I should’ve cared, then, but I didn’t. A new flight all booked for tomorrow; we did not leave bed until late evening, and I was only happy.

So, where else would we go then to a movie?

Driving ourselves down Main Street, I propped my feet on your dashboard and held my sweaty palms out the windows. There was a pair of hallucinogenic sunglasses in your glove box. They were hot pink and twisted – you couldn’t see through the glass – but I wore them anyways.

Arriving at the theater, I walked blindly down the sidewalk. You held my head straight as I bought tickets for two. You with your tattooed forearms, me in my hippie sunglasses – the cashier complimented us both and sent us hobbling into theater six. Our seats were in the very back row, so we stretched our legs wide.

I remember you reaching across the arm rest and holding my hand. You held it there for the entire film. When the credits rolled, our palms both pink, you told me that you had lost feeling thirty minutes ago. I blushed; how simple an offering.

On the car ride home, you played Elton John. Parking on the edges of the train tracks, you told me we’d go dancing. My bare feet atop your cowboy boots, we danced in the grass and on the tracks. You sang *Tiny Dancer* in my ears, and I asked for your very first secret.

Maybe this is all inside my head and maybe this will fall to nothing. But is it so terrible to admit that I’m happy it happened? To have known what it’s like to live beside you?

On our last morning we rose in silence. You threw a bottle of wine and your mother’s Scrab-

ble board into a backpack, and we laid down in the grass and the flowers. Game after game, we couldn't handle an ending. You asked me where I was planning to go, and I didn't know. I still don't.

I kissed you on the cheek, and you told me that you'd like to get coffee sometime in five years, when everything's slower.

I smile and fall asleep on the Redeye, in your Calvin Klein boxers.

I heard that you haven't slept in your bed since I left. And I know that it's not, but what if – for just one moment – we pretend that this was love?

NORTH CAROLINA NOTEBOOK

I remember the summer when it was too hot to eat. Gnats swarmed the heads of us beggars, and the water spewed hot from the faucet. The whole world was leaking out of its pores,
and it was my very first round of life on my own.

So, I packed all that I had – second-hand novels and bathing suits and a couple of pots and pans – into a single rolling suitcase and drove south. I don't know if I wanted the sea, or simply to be alone, but I tucked myself into my parents' summer home.

No one was there, and no one would come; I was standing alone on the edge of the ocean. The sun sunken in the sky and the birds – the birds! – with their song in my ears and my feet in the sand and the bottoms of my jeans damp and heavy and cold.

I was happy, so I thought, and I was. It is easy to stand – on the edges of the ocean, with the salt and the water and the birds – and dream all your idea dreams. It is much harder to get up and go. Convenience, comfort, obligation, denial: there are so many ways to stay grounded.

There are, I've found, so many reasons to stay.

I can't return now; I've already told you that I left. I packed up my single suitcase and stood on the edges of the land with the birds in my ears and the ocean around my ankles. Afterwards, I walked the boardwalk and found a job at the local ice cream parlor. I scooped ice cream and blended espresso and fell into some sort of routine.

I worked with my hands, all day, and came home long after dinner hours. Drawing myself baths, I fell asleep beneath the soapy water. Waking up pruned and soft and clean, I drank wine from the bottle and ate peanut butter toast for every meal. That final night of summer, I picked thirty-six empty bottles of cabernet and paper plates off of the bathroom floor and scrubbed the tile dry.

WHAT IF

she's in the bathtub in her evening dress. Two cold spoons placed delicately over her eyes. Sterling silver, and probably antique. A portable fan sits on the floor besides her, tucked halfheartedly into a back corner, and the whirring is all she can focus on. It's repetitive, soothing, but mostly nostalgic. It reminds her of the little, yellow bedroom of her childhood. The twin bed and the wildflowers hand-painted onto the walls, but she can't remember where all the time has gone.

Can anyone?

The bathtub is in the corner of a room on the fourteenth floor of the second-best hotel in Florence. It's happy hour: outside the neon club-lights are starting to chase the sun from its sky.

Inside, every lamp is switched off. An opened-window welcomes the only stream of light: indigo then orange then a rose-colored pink. But the spoons over her eyes, how could she notice?

Instead of into the tub, water is dripping from the sink's only faucet, spilling over the countertop onto the checkered floor. Unlike traditional black, the tiles are all olive green and the size of American dollars.

But the woman in the bath is ignoring all of this. She's accessorized simply: a black, silk slip and designer shoes. All second-hand, but a label, nonetheless. A gloved hand emerges from the tub and fingers the edge, delicately feeling for the softened velvet, the curve of the shoes' heels. *Voilà.*

Even here; even now.

Fast forward: she is walking barefoot towards the lobby, a velvet heel in each hand. She's thinking about a cigarette or, maybe, a sandwich: whichever she can find first. As the elevator falls, her stomach knots, and she wishes she had a pair of sunglasses to hide behind.

But the doors open, and the lobby is dark.

The windows are covered in black gossamer, and the hotel staff is also wearing black. In the lobby, there is a set of green sofas and a matching armoire, and there is a bar tucked into the corner. She decides it's as good a place as any: dimly lit, scarcely populated, particularly uninviting. She finds an open stool and drops her shoes onto the counter. In the mirror behind the bar she notices a spoon still tucked behind her left ear, and she laughs so loud that it echoes.

The mirror makes the room feel twice as large: a mediocre architectural trick, but she appreciates it, nonetheless. With her back to the crowd, she can still examine all their faces. There's a

word for recognizing that every passerby has a world of their own, that there's not a life besides our own where we might play the lead.

Sonder.

There's a young man in a tuxedo and a woman at his waist – here on business, or perhaps to elope – and a bellhop with a poor haircut and a concierge handing a room key to a man with a cigar in his left hand and yesterday's paper tucked under his right armpit and a face—

a face that she recognizes. She blinks once, twice, rubs the backs of her hands against her eyelids, and she's sure of it.

What do you do with that face?

The one you're trying to forget?

There isn't a bartender, so she reaches beneath the bar and grabs a bottle of merlot by its neck. Holding her shoes in her left hand and the bottle delicately in her right, she leaves her purse atop the granite and starts barefoot across the lobby. She's barefoot until he notices, barefoot until she stops directly before him, leaning into his left hand and puffing the cigar that it's holding. Still barefoot when he smiles and says, "I've recognized you by your feet."

She is smiling, stunning. "I'm surprised you recognize me at all," she says, and she can tell he doesn't quite understand her.

He tries to kiss the skin behind her earlobe, and the silver spoon clatters to the floor. Slamming and skidding across the tile, they both watch it go. She glances back at him and offers no explanation, and he can't tell if she's smiled or frowned.

How much changes, then, in the time between hours?

As he's watching the spoon, she's thinking about when she saw him last, mostly thinking about his hair. She remembers it longer then, and blonder, and she's afraid of it suddenly dark. She's still thinking about this when he looks back and asks what she's doing here, how funny it is to run into each other. She nods and says, "Business, you?" Prompting a rambling story about his unwritten novel or his mother's fated marriage, and she doesn't listen.

Once he's finished and quiet, she puckers her lips and asks him if he's ever wondered how it feels to kiss himself. He laughs because he assumes she is joking, and what she doesn't say is something like:

Because I do, far too often. However, the closest I've come is smelling the mouth of my plastic water bottle, for it smells the way kisses sometimes taste. It reminds me, mostly, of the mouths of men, but then there's the realization that it's all mine...my mouth, my taste. Maybe we—the collective human bodies—pretend to be different only to hide the truth that we're all almost the same.

But he'll never hear this because she won't ever say it, and instead he says, "Well, no not usually," and she collects her face into that smile-frown.

"Tragedy," she says, and maybe she is joking but maybe not, and this, perhaps, is the beauty of it. Her asking about kissing is the only way of asking "Will we come out of this alive & in love or will we come out?" and his answer became the answer.

NORTH CAROLINA NOTEBOOK

I am realizing that I haven't spoken in days. Therefore, I sit on the deck with a bottle of tequila and a coffee mug. In my journal, I write "it feels incredible out," and it does. I'm happy in a way that I haven't been, not for a while.

Writing, then, is a way of talking to myself about myself.

Sometimes, I sing inside the shower, and I wonder if that counts?

My only social hour is the one I spent at the ice cream parlor. Broadly, the parlor is a very small part of a larger global studies program pairing international universities with American small businesses. Narrowly, it is a closet-sized room with a drive-through window and electric cooling fans. All of my coworkers are visiting from either China or Jamaica, and only a third of them speak English.

But regardless, on one long Saturday I found myself opening the shop with Orevea. She had already flipped the blinds and was busy scrubbing gnats from the windows.

(I forgot to mention that it was also the summer of the gnats.)

"Baby! You look terrible," Orevea laughed, tossing her rag onto the counter, "What's that on your face? God, Baby go wash!"

I smiled and unlocked the bathroom. In the mirror above the sink, my hair was tangled, and toothpaste had crusted in the corners of my mouth. I ran my hands under the sink water and scrubbed.

It's interesting to think about the faces we put on. Who we are in the mirror

in the photograph in the drive-through window of the ice cream parlor.

Interesting to think of all the people we try to become for other people.

Through the bathroom door, I listened as Orevea started humming to herself. In Jamaica, I learned, she was thirty-two and lovely. She was the mother of a nine-year-old son and a lover of nine years.

But her boyfriend wasn't the father of her child. I knew this but didn't probe.

"Bembe," she said, one day behind the cash register. "His name is Bembe, just so you know."

"Bembe," I repeated. Lovely.

We had been scrubbing gnats together— we were always scrubbing away the gnats — but my back was turned towards her. I turned, and she was sitting on the countertop, besides the register. Her legs were crossed, and the rag in her hands had fallen to the floor.

"And handsome! He's so handsome. Baby, let me tell you," she closed her eyes but was smiling, "Let me just tell you, you would love him."

I smiled: watching her remember.

"Oh?" I said, leaning back against the ice cream freezers. I leaned over and shut the window. "Now, do you really think we have the same taste in men?"

Orevea opened her eyes and glared at me. She slid herself off the counter and picked up the rag. A gnat slammed itself against the glass.

"Well of course. Everyone does," she said, and I smiled. "In Jamaica, all the ladies want him. It's foolish.

"But don't get me wrong, I'm not fool enough to marry him," she said. "I love him, I do, but I like sleeping in my own bed."

I dropped the rag into the sink, started running it in warm water.

"But Baby, let me tell you something," Orevea said, her back now facing me, "when I go to the club, I tell all the men there my name is Samantha. No one hurts from the things they don't know."

A POEM ON THE WEATHER, AND LOSS

I want to stand at motel doors, topless
And opening up to strangers: inviting
Them in with their sockless feet and black
Lipstick, in and out of the rain, of the snow,
Of the sun, of the daylight, No matter the weather,
I will be welcoming. And cold,

They all come, cold and lonely and am I
Really ready for this? I wonder as I pat the edge
Of the bed, draw the curtains to black.
Come here and don't look at me, I say, only sure
Of one thing. *Or do, I don't care*. I have nothing

Left to myself. *Cigarette?* I offer and we'll
Smoke wordlessly: in the rain, in the snow,
In the sun, in the daylight. The smoke between
Their eyes and the filter in my fingers, they want

To know: doesn't everyone, eventually, become
Their mother? I blow and I blow, and I am
She: needy for something to hold. *No*, I say. *No*.

NORTH CAROLINA NOTEBOOK

I do not know how much coffee I drank that summer. When I was awake I was sloppy, and when I was asleep I refused to wake up. The pot was always full, and I was always hungry and always tired.

But we all have our own solutions to all our sorry problems.

One afternoon then, I had fallen asleep on the beach – sand on my face and tangled in my hair, the imprint of a magazine on my ribcage – and awoke to a pang in my gut. I don't know how to describe it in a way other than hunger, but whoever wants to admit that they're hungry?

I was a lady.

(As a woman, and a human, why must we label everything and ourselves?

Why can't we be simple?)

But, regardless, I knew that I had to go home.

In the cottage, I stood against the mirror and undressed myself. Inside the mirror, I traced the skin and the freckles and all that was mine and, in the mirror, also not. I don't remember if I was looking for something, or simply looking, but it's all a faded memory now.

My stomach growled, and I found a bag of purple grapes in the refrigerator. I took the bag and my stinging, naked body and lay down on the floor. I stared at the blades of the fan as I popped grape by grape into my pink mouth.

The whole time, wondering: *who the hell am I?*

NORTH CAROLINA NOTEBOOK

This was long before I started smoking cigarettes, and I wanted it to be the summer I began.

I had so many expectations in running away. So many questions I had to answer for myself.

But I knew that little would become of returning home with bad habits, so I bought the pack without a lighter. I threw away all my matches and left it my glovebox.

(This was long ago when I had will power.)

Driving down the coast, I used to hold un-lit cigarettes between my teeth and unroll the windows. I couldn't explain how it made me feel, or why I continued doing it? But I liked the possibility of it all.

After a minute or two, I would drop the cigarette out the window, cough like I wasn't pretending.

I learned, eventually, that that part of North Carolina was known for its horses. How wild they still were, how powerful. I drove the coast because I liked believing in them, and it's easy to believe in what you can see.

(This was my trouble with God.)

But I would lie down along the beach, an unlit cigarette in my mouth, and watch the horses run. They were so far beyond the dune, so wildly uninterested that they did not notice me. That did not matter.

Watching them watch one another, from my small plot of land, I was convinced that they were the only wild thing left on Earth. The only thing worth watching.

They were so strong, yet so graceful, and I loved how they decided and then went. Freedom is a free thing, and they knew this. Can you imagine being so able?

When the last horse disappeared around the dune, I lay backwards in the sand and shut my eyes. *The stallions*, I was thinking, *so beautiful and so unaware of it all. So wild.*

The cigarette fell from my lips, and I buried it in the sand. *The mares, so lovely*

and yet they don't even care.

PLAY, BOY

The construction wakes me up — or maybe it's the doorbell? — I lean against the window that is also my headboard, rub the backs of my hands against my eyelids. The sun is out, but my head hurts, and I'd like to think it isn't yet morning. Mascara flakes onto my skin, and I wipe my dirty hands against my stomach. I rise, I stand, I wake.

Every morning I slip into my father's old bathrobe — faded grey and striped vertically — and braid my wild hair down my back. A small routine, but all mine. With my wire-rimmed glasses, I become recognizable to myself. I go to answer the door.

In my bathrobe and bare feet, my glasses and mascara hands, I stand hesitantly, like a child. The lock undoes in my fingers, and there is a letter at my feet. My road is noisy, always, and even now the sidewalk is busy — mothers dressed in athleisure, pushing a stroller or holding the hand of a small child in a large backpack, behind them all run the squirrels. The letter is not a letter, but a porn magazine blacked out in dull sharpie and *I love you!* is written across the back cover.

I hold it in my hands like something familiar: a memory of something I've done (someone I was?) since forgotten.

In April, in Texas, the weeds look like flowers sprouting in the front yard. The swallows in the trees I can't see but can hear, and I am quiet for a while.

I sit down on the stoop and cross my legs over the other. My head is too heavy to think of any one thing, so I don't. The air around me is warm and dry, and it feels nice against my skin. I am all legs and birthmarks: private yet here: all visible, all show. I peel a scab from the skin of my knee-cap, and when the blood begins to rush, I clot it with the magazine.

Two Septembers ago, I was alone on a park bench. I was a student and a brunette, and I had just taken an oath of celibacy (with myself, for myself). (Nobody knew this, and no one asked, but I was abandoning unrequited love.)

A man entered the picture in the way men suddenly do. He sat opposite me on the bench, did not look in my direction (and I was overcome by the want of being wanted; I was suddenly all-consumed). Out of the corner of my eye, I watched him pull a pack of smokes from his jacket pocket. He folded a leg over the top of another and drew a lighter from his sock or, maybe, from his boot.

I was not yet a smoker and perhaps still a beginner at everything, in every way. The air wasn't chilly, but my arms were covered in goose-bumps anyways. Hushed, flustered, small — I made

myself into something so small and sat still, waiting.

“Would you like one?”

I looked, and his face was young, yet wrinkled, and myself, so naive and so clumsy; I was intrigued. He was tan, like a cowboy, with brown, shaggy hair; he had a mustache and beard and tortoise-colored glasses. His glasses were thick enough that I couldn't quite see his eyes.

That is mostly what I remember.

He was smirking, too, in this off-handed, confident sort of way. He leaned back against the bench and rested his head in his free hand; with the other, he held the smoke to his lips. I watched and thought: who are you? He exhaled, and I wondered: who am I?

“I don't smoke yet, but I'd like to.” I realized these were my own words, and I was suddenly all-pink. He smiled and parted his cowboy lips, gestured a sort of offering. I bit at my cheeks — a child, still — and decided the person that I would like to be. His hand in my hand and the smoke curling around my nose; I began, then, to breathe.

Outside, on the stoop, it begins to drizzle, and inside my head, it is already raining.

I go inside and light a cigarette. In the cupboard, there is a loaf of bread and a jar of apple butter, and I eat a bit of both. I sit at the dining room table with my legs crossed and the landline connected to my Internet. Between bites, I hold the receiver to my ear, just in case it's stopped working.

It hasn't, so I put it back down.

The last time I saw him — the cowboy — he left and did not tell me where he was going. That was last May, I exhaled, and it is now September. He left all his papers and his novels, and there isn't any room left on my shelves for other things. I have considered, several times, throwing them out or giving them away. *But he'll come back*, says the voice behind my eardrum, *he's coming back for them. He'll come back.*

Historically, I am the faller, and he was no different. I fell in love on the first date, and it was the happiest moment of my life. Before, I had been floating — walking, sludging, trudging — through a routine that I was unhappy with. I had a pet cat named Myrtle, and she was all I ever cared about.

But on that very first night we rode the train into the city, and he held my hand the entire way. We drank wine and ate oysters and went dancing and got sweaty. He sang *Tiny Dancer* in my ear as we sashayed around the dance floor, and I forgot about everything I had ever thought about.

Later on, after he walked me to my doorstep and kissed me on the temple, after I had finally gone inside, I realized Myrtle had run away. I blame my leaving windows open, but instead of anguish, I felt free.

Suddenly, I was free of everything

except for what I wanted; all I wanted was him.

So, I called him to thank him for the evening and to tell him about Myrtle, and he offered to throw a going-away party. We never did, but it was the sentiment that mattered, and that is what I tell myself still: the sentiment is all that matters.

Why do I wonder, then, what mattered when he was grabbing my wrists, kissing my neck, before twisting both my wrists? The same as when he called from the train station, and it was thunder-storming, and we kissed in the rain before sleeping out underneath Brooklyn Bridge. I woke to birds in my hair, and it was okay because he loved me. He loved me, and he meant it, and the sentiment is all that mattered. The sentiment. The birds and the hunger and the blood;

the ring he was supposedly saving for, the ring he was talking about when he said, "Stay baby, just stay." What else was there to matter?

At my dining room table, I read the newspaper like I do every morning, just in case I see his picture. Dead or sick or alive or healthy, I don't care as much as I simply want to know. I want an address to send the box of neckties in my closet, the razor in my shower caddy. I squint and read with my finger dragging underneath the words, and I do not find him. I put the newspaper in the pile of others and burn the sheet that's on the bottom. The headline reads, "Notorious Female Convict Leaves Behind a String of Dead Lovers," but I do not seem to notice or care.

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We sit at the table with our feet on the top. There's a plate holding a half-eaten carrot cake and another platter of fruit; I am eyeing them both, my stomach churning.

"You're the only adult I know who isn't married," my seven-year-old cousin looks up at me, blinking. I look back.

Together, we are alone in her house; our family has all left us for the sun. We sit with the shades drawn, but the windows underneath are open. She thinks this is odd – to have closed the blinds but not the windows – and I suppose it is. But when she asks me for an explanation, I ignore her.

She’s picking dirt out from underneath her fingernails, pausing occasionally to suck on loose hangnails, chapped skin. Her mother doesn’t approve, but I don’t care.

I am. I know.

“Why?” she asks, and I pause. I stand and walk to the bathroom, close the door, and climb onto the counter, fitting as much of myself as I can into the sink. I press my forehead to the mirror and ask myself the same question.

Whywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhy.

I wipe my hands and return to the table.

II.

I sleep until I can’t. Once I can’t, I don’t sleep. I wake myself up between the hours of two and five, and five and seven, and seven and ten in the morning. Always: I am a sweaty tangle of unkempt hair and heavy eyelids. I finger the mess of bedsheets, refusing to find them so empty and so full and so lonesome.

III.

How much time has passed? Where am I now?

IV.

When I was little, we’d go on family vacations. Once a week, every summer, my father would pile us all into the Suburban before sun-up, and we’d drive and wake up on the road. Sometimes we’d end up in the mountains, or by the ocean, or in a field of tall grasses and one, single birch tree.

We were looking for black bears, he said, and we were all quiet. Holding our breath, we squatted in the bushes and waited.

Many years later, I read that bears are the most solitary carnivores in the world. Besides mating or raising young, they have no use for companionship.

V.

Sometimes around three in the morning, when I'm awake but also not, I wrap my legs around an enlarged maternity pillow that I bought, years ago, at a yard sale.

All of my friends think this disgusting. To be truthful, I don't care.

I don't. What does it matter?

There are men who love women who say that they feel like they've been replaced by her pillow. I don't know how to tell them that both is and isn't the case.

VI.

There is a whale in the wild who has a name. It is 52 Blue, and this all has meaning. Blue whales normally vocalize at a frequency of 15 and 20 Hz, and this frequency is their communication. Remember this.

VII.

Everything is easy, and everything is okay until somebody asks. I've learned how to un-think about you, how to be fine.

But everyone wants to know if I'm okay, how I'm doing, where you went, where you are, where you go. I have gotten so used to these questions; you would have thought, by now, I'd have an answer. I make appointments with my shrink. I wear black, arrive, and speak. But everything I say is a lie and the lie becomes truth. Is this fate? Or self-mutilation?

Yes, she says. Yes!

VIII.

I don't care, quite at all, for alpacas: but I read that they can die of loneliness. They'll start walking in circles, make themselves sick, if taken to live by themselves, if they haven't anyone to stop them.

IX.

52 Blue: the whale in the wild with a name. Blue vocalizes at a frequency of 52 Hz, which is 32 degrees higher than every other of his kind. What this means: it is impossible for another whale to hear him.

X.

We talk – all the time – over the phone, never in person. Whenever I don't answer, you leave me a voicemail. The latest rings from Colorado Springs. You're out, I can tell, from my seat on the kitchen countertop. I listen in replace of answering.

The line goes static. You slur, and it sounds so happy.

XI.

My grandfather used to memorize constellations. But he's since died, and I'm left with a memory of us on the back porch. I -- at age eleven or twelve or so -- and him sit in Adirondack chairs and matching sweaters. He shows me Orion's Belt and the Little Dipper, and then I close my eyes and find them again by myself.

He tells me that there is a robot up there named the Curiosity Rover. It had been up there, all alone, for something around four years, and I was glancing upwards, cocking my head, squinting my eyes: trying to find it.

XII.

I'll relisten to the last voicemail, sometimes. There are habits I cannot seem to shake, and the distance is becoming recognizable. I start to anticipate the curves of your voice.

You laugh and tell me that I'm pretty, that you miss me. Someone shrieks and your voice muffles. It sounds happy and far away.

The phone clicks, and I rewind. I am not sure what I am convincing myself of, but deep down I know this is how I'll remember you.

XIII.

I don't remember how long it has been since you left. When was it? And why?

XIV.

I wasn't upset about the lonely sky-robot until my grandfather told me that, every year on its birthday, the Curiosity Rover sings happy birthday to itself.

My twenty-year-old body remembers this, and then she begins to cry.

XV.

Drunk in my kitchen at one in the morning, I sit on the countertop in my underwear and my sunglasses. I am drinking a bottle of red wine; I am slowly finishing.

I tell myself that I am fine, just fine! But when the bottle becomes dry, I send you an email before I can stop myself.

Where'd you go? is all that it says.

XVI.

Brigham Young University named loneliness a "major health issue" that poses a greater health risk than obesity. Being alone is as destructive as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

XVII.

Lately, I've been spending whole afternoons on my front lawn. Legs crossed atop a metal, fold-up chair. I enjoy watching the neighbors breeze by in their pastel golf carts (I'm ashamed to admit that I come from one of *those* neighborhoods). Secretly, I'm fascinated: how many hands dangle delicately out the sides, smoke dragging from their pretty fingers.

If not the nicotine, then I'm addicted to this simple watching. The second-hand curve of lips around a filter, those graceful flicks of ash,

And I remember, quite exactly, when and where the watching all began. Six months ago: I had a friend, back in London, who always asked me if she smoked alright.

We'd be standing on Waterloo Bridge—late, after the clubs all had closed, somehow just the two of us—spinning inside our own heads. We were watching the lapping of the Thames (because the Eye was too boring), and suddenly I'd turn to her: so young and drunk and beautiful.

Her voice was soft and vulnerable, her eyes questioning. Stomping mine out with my combat boot, I remember standing back—arms folded across my freckled chest—and watching:

the gentle lifting of her fingers, that raised pinky, the little cough.

I smiled.

She was stunning. Absolutely stunning.

I don't remember if I told her so.

A WOMAN'S DIARY

I just had the most horrifyingly wicked thought. I am thinking about death, about dying specifically, and the day on which it happens.

Will we know?

Surely, we will. I am currently sitting in an air jet flying across the Midwest; I suppose this is why I have kept busy thinking. In my journal, strewn out across the tray table, I write "today could be the day" because it could be. I check to make sure my seatbelt is fastened.

It is.

I am a window-seat passenger. My knees are tucked underneath of myself, and the tray table has fallen atop them. The seat beside me is empty, but there's a man fallen asleep in the aisle.

On the tray table, beside my journal, there is a Styrofoam coffee cup filled with milk. Slowly, I take a finger and swirl what's inside. Once, twice, and the coffee-milk starts spiraling around itself. With delicate eyes, I watch it. Suddenly, a fly drops, wings-first, into the cup. Its limp body begins to spiral.

I quickly remove my finger and suck it dry.

There are so many ways to say the same thing. I'll start with yesterday.

I am sitting on my best friend's kitchen countertop, wearing my best pair of jeans. She hands me a Tupperware full of ash and an un-lit cigarette.

I flick on the stovetop and use the burner to light my cigarette; she pours us both a glass of rosé. It catches, and I am about to suck, when my best friend suddenly bursts into a sob.

"I am no longer in LOVE," she says, before stepping outside and slamming the door.

The fly in my coffee cup is presumably dead, and I consider asking for a refill. There is a button to my right that rings the flight attendant, but she's pouring champagne, and the man in the aisle is still asleep.

And I am passive, so I don't.

My flight will land in an hour, and I am used to putting things off. The jeans that I am wearing are the same as yesterday's, and the smell of ash wafts every time I cross or uncross my legs.

How much do we change over a night's sleep?

Are we all the same as we were yesterday?

An even scarier thought: how are we not?

I had just poured myself a second glass of wine when my best friend came stomping back into the apartment.

Without hesitation or comment, she had lit her cigarette with a pocket lighter and was sitting on the couch with her feet on the coffee table. There were tracks of mud on her slippers, but she didn't seem to care or notice.

"I realized I've given too much of myself to a sorry bloke that won't ever care," she said, tilting her head back against the sofa, both of her eyes closed,

and I had to remember who, exactly, she was talking about.

"And what is wrong with me," she went on, "to think that I'm better off with someone like that? Why don't I just be alone?"

She can't, I wanted to tell her, because she's already tried.

Or was that myself? Before I said anything, I wanted to remember.

"No," she said, and on the plane I begin looking out the window. The sun's set, and the world below is a smudge of neon and fluorescent light. I've never liked thinking about what's below and my flying self and all the space between. I've never liked it, but I look anyways, and whenever I look, I stare.

"Here is the problem with us," she continued, her cigarette burning down to the filter. "We listen to the movies and read the magazines, and we all play our parts. We're supposed to rather die than be left alone, right? And would we? Do we?"

And it would be dramatic, then, to end with the plane crashing,

to kill all of our selves.

But it doesn't. The plane lands, and we all grab our bags and carry them wherever we're going. We carry them off and walk away, forget about each other.

