

**Then, and Only Then:
*Long Sleeves and Endless Dreams***

**by
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Abstract

A two-part personal narrative as an attempt to provide a memoir in letter form, written from my current self to my future self, after time and age have potentially ravaged my body and mind. Part One offers the purpose behind the letters: why they are important and what they purport to do for the intended reader. It also uses authors who have played with the life-writing and memoir/narrative genre and how they influenced my own ideas of remembering. Part Two is a series of poems, followed by letters that detail and chronicle various memories through different points in place and time; an effort to remind myself how I was formed by my past, and inevitably, what I may become in the future. The narrative unfolds while consciously trying to avoid certain moments and accentuating others. It is an interplay between familiar memories, reminiscences constructed over time, and dream-like representations.

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Part 1: Purpose

I.

“The voice of memoir is not an artifact but a surrogate self” – Alex Zwerdling, *The Rise of the Memoir*

I may disappoint. I’m not working up to an ending of any kind. But I don’t suppose that ‘purpose’ must be everything. Upon its first envisioning, it was never supposed to be an easy endeavour. And now I wonder if it ever could have been. I don’t suppose that is the point either.

The reality of the situation is that we are all finite. No more or less than anyone else. We have a snapshot of life that beckons us towards an ultimate demise, but this is not something that is meant to hinder what we have. I visited a café this morning. In the line up, while I was trying to convince myself to buy a cookie, I met a man who told me that he had the same jacket that I was presently wearing, but that he had owned it about twenty years prior. He said it was exactly the same, the fur on the hood, the colour, and the zippers winding around the edges. It may very well have been the exact same garment, though he did seem to have a larger frame than I. He said it transported him back to a different time, and he admitted that he had hated the jacket. He said his mother had given it to him as a gift and he reluctantly accepted it, but never liked it or wore it around much (which made me only slightly uncomfortable for wearing something that he thought was ugly). This foray into conversation got him started on telling me about how things tend to come back around—fashion and even the world at large—wars and political unrest, habits and what I think he meant pauses in time. He told me that tomorrow he would be 57 years old. And then he looked very satisfied with himself and told me that he was also going to retire. He had lost both his wife and a daughter within the past four years, and his other daughter was terminally ill. Of course, I immediately told him how sorry I was. He told me not to be. He was grateful for the time he had and is a fortunate man. He then asked me if I had ever read George Orwell’s *1984*. I replied that I had and he was ever so impressed with me. He remarked that most people he knew didn’t know the book from Adam. I found this rather strange, as I had always assumed that there couldn’t really exist someone who hadn’t at least heard of it. But he said that I must run

in different circles than he does. He believed that the premonition that Orwell had was materializing in contemporary society. The conversation was cut short as I earned my spot at the front of the line. He did, however, come back up to me before he left and told me to have a wonderful day.

I suppose he might be right about all of it. Maybe as I took off my jacket this evening, I had a pang of something that might be called transference. It could have been that in this vast world of everything—convenience and strangeness—that I would end up wearing the very same jacket as a passerby and never know the story that would piece through time and shelter me from the elements. That maybe there was a smell that could linger on for some time afterwards, that I forged into as I zippered it up and crawled out of, when I took out one arm and then the other. This strange coat meant such different things to me than it did to him. I ended up getting the cookie. Least I think so.

I've spent a lot of time thinking about myself, my own form of narcissism. I am loath to say self-absorbed, but I imagine that we all are to some extent. And here is the extension of that imaginary world on paper. The words are meant as more of an exit strategy than a revelation.¹ More lingering rather than pith. My grandparents on both sides, whom I'll tell you more about later, unfortunately suffered from various genetic ailments. My maternal grandfather and paternal uncle both had Parkinson's Disease. My maternal and paternal grandmothers both had Alzheimer's Disease or dementia. Now, while this does not necessarily indicate that I will be fraught with either illness, there are certain possibilities that may lead one to believe that this may become reality. And all I have to ponder are the experiences I had with them while living, along with mediocre online research, which is spotty, at best.

It is simple to believe that the memory we have of ourselves will stay with us because we are transient and fall into the familiar trap of thinking that how we are now is

¹ Alex Zwerdling, in *The Rise of the Memoir*, depicts how the form of a memoir, or life-writing, or autobiography, however you name it, has evolved through time, and how various authors have shaped the genre. His introduction comments on what unites the writers: "a fierce determination in each of these writers to pursue aspects of their own lives associated with loss, solitude, shame, confusion, and discontinuity; an uncertain sense of entitlement to telling the story at all; a pervasive dread that it does not, *will* not cohere, and cannot end; and a lack of confidence that even if it does, an empathetic audience would never materialize. The response they fear is bafflement, or worse, indifference... But for the writers who decided to go ahead anyway, there appeared to be no option. They did not choose, but were chose, compelled" *Rise*, p.4

how we ought to be, and how we will remain. But I have the persistent inkling that echoes inside of me, understanding that this permanency is merely figment until my mind deteriorates into something only vaguely resembling how I once was.²

² Zwerdling quotes Edmund Gosse: "I had the feeling that I could not have died in peace if I had kept all this locked up in me... I did not want to die without knowing that it is *there*." *Rise*, p.51

II.

Therein lies the ‘purpose’ of what I am calling this undertaking.³ I sometimes hate using that word because it always makes me think of the World Wrestling Federation’s the “Undertaker”, a character portrayed by a wrestler who perpetually had a doom and gloom outlook and a funny hat. It makes me think of my brother, when we would watch the show on television together. I can’t, for the life of me, recall why I enjoyed the show other than that I would watch it with my brother. It was entertainment depicted by someone hurting another, but that’s another tangent for another day.

So, why now?⁴ At this point, I am of an age where there is still much more living to be had. I may not have even reached mid-life yet. So this endeavour may be somewhat arresting for me as I continue along an unknown journey and dance around the notion of aging. What could I have within me right now that compels me to truthfully share with myself a proponent in life that urges me to spill onto the floor some regurgitation of flecks of my life that only somewhat resemble what they were to me as memories? The answer is *I don’t know*. Or perhaps the answer is *It depends*. It depends on how valuable these

³ The writings of Virginia Woolf are discussed by Zwerdling and he notes that through her writing, there are various questions that linger: “For whom was the memoir written: for the memoirist? For the nuclear family? For an inner circle or coterie? For the wider public interested in the subject’s achievement? For a literary audience with a taste in autobiographical writing? And to what end: to honour the dead? To instruct the survivors? To make the past cohere? To produce the official record? To amuse and entertain? To illustrate a representative way of life? To confess? To understand oneself? To take control of the family narrative and pay off old scores?” *Rise*, p.61. Woolf finally confirms that she wrote because she had to.

⁴ Interestingly, this project comes sooner than a normal account of life or autobiography may tend to happen. When Rousseau wrote his *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, he had reached an age in life where they were appropriate to him, nearing the end of his life. “I am now in the prime of life and the fullness of my mental powers. I am about to enter my decline. If I wait any longer, I shall no longer have all my powers to devote to my tardy deliberations, my intellectual faculties will have lost some of their vigour and I shall then do less well what today I can do as well as I ever shall; let me seize on this auspicious moment; it is the time of my outward and material reformation, let it also be the time of my intellectual and moral reformation. Let me decide my opinions and principles once and for all, and then let me refrain for the rest of my life what mature consideration tells me I should be.” *Reveries*, p. 53. Though I cannot possibly state that this is the prime of my own life, I know that right now I am at a place where my mind has not yet deteriorated. In Rousseau’s Second Walk, he actually admits that he believes that he took on this task too late in life. Perhaps that gives me reason to exercise it now while I still can. “Youth is the time to study wisdom, age the time to practise it. Experience is always instructive, I admit, but it is only useful in the time we have left to live.” *Reveries*, p.47.

insights appear to me when I am older, and it depends on whether life may take itself without warning to me and cower at who I could have been or who I may never become. But I remain bound by truth, as Rousseau once tried to be: “Let us always act truthfully, whatever happens. Justice is inherent in truth; falsehood is always evil and error is always deceit, when we present what is not true as a rule for belief or action; and whatever truth may lead to, we are always guiltless in declaring it, since we have not added anything of our own to it.”⁵ I bring avowal to this work, as I once promised myself to live rather than perish, and I acknowledge along the way the experiences that may not always be notable, but ones that I choose to divulge, and I trust that you will float along with me, hand in hand rather than lead by leash and collar.

What I must profess at the outset is that my memories expelled are merely that: my memories. They are, honestly, not necessarily how it all actually happened, but my own recollection of how they happened.⁶ I want to tell you what I remember, but I have already been wrong in so many respects, that I wonder how much of my stories are already make-believe. My mother has already told me that there are points in this story that are incorrect, or not how they actually unfolded. But I want to tell you them in a way that binds me to their untruthfulness, so that you can see it now as I saw it all then, perhaps something old but perhaps something new.⁷

⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Fourth Walk, p. 68

⁶ Ernest G. Schachtel, in his essay, “On Memory and Childhood Amnesia”, states that the purpose is as follows: “The categories (or schemata) of adult memory are not suitable receptacles for early childhood experiences and therefore not fit to preserve these experiences and enable their recall. The functional capacity of the conscious, adult memory is usually limited to those types of experience which the adult consciously makes and is capable of making.” *Amnesia*, p. 129

⁷ Schachtel further writes about Goethe: “When, at a party, a toast was proposed to memory he objected vehemently with these words: ‘I do not recognize memory in the sense in which you mean it. Whatever we encounter that is great, beautiful, significant, need not be remembered from the outside, need not be hunted up and laid hold of as it were. Rather, from the beginning, it must be woven into the fabric of our inmost self, must become one with it, create a new and better self in us and thus live and become a productive force in ourselves. There is no past that one is allowed to long for. There is only the eternally new, growing from the enlarged elements of the past; and genuine longing always must be productive, must create something new and better.” *Amnesia*, p. 129.

I watched my grandmothers lose their minds with a much less scintillating fervor. You'll hear more of that later. This project seeks to push my own constrictive barriers and state in some permanent way how I have lived up to this point, setting reminders like an alarm clock for myself when I might need to wake up later on.⁸ In common law procedure, there is a specific place within litigation called the 'discovery' process. Basically, when a court action has been initiated by one party, the other party has the opportunity to respond to the first party's claims, and they can make their own counterclaims if need be. After the commencement of both parties' claims, they must prepare and provide the other with all the evidence they wish to rely on at trial. This could include expert reports or affidavits and testimony. Furthermore, they have the chance before the trial even begins to sit down with various parties and witnesses and 'discover' them. Witnesses and parties are sworn in and sit in a conference room and answer questions relevant to the court action. When all of this is said and done, transcripts of the discoveries are drawn up and retained for the eventual trial.⁹ My project is my own way of discovering myself, writing it up, and keeping it until such time as I may need it to remember what happened; who I am and how I became who I was/am. I am called upon as the witness to where my life has evolved. But at the same time, I am having a dialogical playtime with the memories that I issue to the paper, crafting my words in this way or that, creating or recreating them simultaneously.¹⁰ I am choosing to discard some and emphasize others, perhaps to my own future loss. Because there may be no such way to encapsulate every memory I have into this project, I have to appreciate and understand that there will be shortcomings and

⁸ The conclusion of my letters is that there cannot be a conclusion. As Zwerdling states, "A memoir project is a promissory note with no reliable due date. To write it is to work against powerful inner resistance. Its gestation can however in some instances be closely monitored." *Rise*, p. 5.

⁹ Primo Levi's autobiographical journey presents itself in much the same way. Zwerdling notes that "He is a witness determined to control the proceedings, both questions and answers, though he expects his readers to serve as judge and jury." *Rise*, p. 154.

¹⁰ "Theory can help us read autobiography with more critical awareness... But the answer to the question of why we like to read it, and why individuals sit down at a desk or table and begin to tell their story, lies not in theory but in cultural history. It has to do with where we look when we try to understand our own lives, how we read texts and what largely unexamined cultural assumptions we bring to interpreting them". Conway, Jill Ker, *When Memory Speaks*, p. 6

disappointments.¹¹ This not only follows due to the constraints and hindrances of recalling memory, but also softens my words when my soul begs me to leave out certain tones from those places that I can only call remorse.

I wanted to write about the clothesline that my family had back in our childhood home in Richmond, British Columbia. To me at the time, it seemed to have the largest expanse and careened through the sky. My mother would string the clothes onto the line with wooden clothes pegs and just send them flying down. Then we would go underneath the clean-smelling clothes and run back and forth, trying our mightiest to touch the bottoms of the clothes and blankets with our fingertips as we ran. You just don't see clotheslines much anymore. And ours went down along with the house many years ago now. Nothing remains except the slightest flash in my memory and the vacant touch on my fingertips urging me to forget.¹² I wanted to write about it, but sometimes there seems to be no place for fugitive and perhaps irrelevant grains of salt within a saltshaker that is full. It just makes me think of those times when the lid of the saltshaker was loose and the entire contents spill out onto your food, making the dish inedible.

My combined letters reveal my discovery and are meant as a catalogue to my later and older self, reminding me and even stridently pummelling me to take stock of my present idea of memory. My mind may not survive as long as my body, or neither may survive at all. And ultimately, these letters will reiterate how fleeting and transient my life has become. When I'm older, I may not be anything like I am now, and I want to address how I got to this current place. This narrative therefore plays on the concept of memory and remembering, selective and specific, and offers my future "self" a window into now, and perhaps at the time it is read, when I am 80 years old or so, a way of showing how I

¹¹ Virginia Woolf acknowledges the same feelings of the tensions of writing autobiographically in *A Sketch of the Past*: "There are several difficulties. In the first place, the enormous number of things I can remember; in the second, the number of different ways in which memoirs can be written... Here I come to one of the memoir writer's difficulties—one of the reasons why, though I read so many, so many are failures. They leave out the person to whom things happened. The reason is that it is so difficult to describe any human being. So they say: 'This is what happened'; but they do not say what the person was like to whom it happened. And the events mean very little unless we know first to whom they happened." *Sketch*, p. 64-65.

¹² Zwerdling, quoting Nabokov writes: "The places that we have known belong not only to the little world of space on which we map them for our own convenience... Remembrance of a particular form is but regret for a particular moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years." *Rise*, p. 139.

grew into that person. Of course, I cannot tightly wrap up my disjointed life neatly into a small package and mail it to my future self. The idea should be that this missive will grow through time. I can only hope that myself in one weeks' time, or several years' time, will feel the need to contribute more and feed the journey that has begun through these small words. And re-envisioning myself at those points may cause the urge to change portions of this text that I "re-remember", or "re-forget". I am writing at the very edge of consciousness.

Memory works mysteriously and fails and transforms/evolves through time, and there will be experiences cited that I might rather forget but perhaps unconsciously choose to remember, and it is about how they all build up together to form my character. Saul Friedlander, in *When Memory Comes*, paints an exquisite picture of what experience provides us in times when we may be in pain: "When crises occur, one searches the depths of one's memory to discover some vestige of the past, not the past of the individual, faltering and ephemeral, but rather that of the community, which, though left behind, nonetheless represents that which is permanent and lasting".¹³ It may be contrary to say so, but perhaps he meant that these emotions feel or seem permanent in lasting when one is in time of crisis. And even further, my work is to be a thoughtful and maybe contrived dialectic between selves and imagined future selves. I think of this as a self-interrogation of my personal traits and memories—how they connect and how I wish to preserve them through time.¹⁴ It will attempt to reveal to myself a frozen or fixed point in time, my current self, in the way that I want to imagine myself in the future. The "me" in the future may not even recognize the memories that are set out in these pages, and possible revisions of the same through different recollections are probable, knowing well that what I remember now changes every time I call upon those memories, imprinting the knowledge and the character of whom I have become through what might only be termed as "double- or multiple-exposure". The versions of my past will trigger new memories that

¹³ Friedlander, Saul, *When Memory Comes*, p. 65.

¹⁴ It is appropriate that I have chosen the memoir as my mouthpiece because, as Zwerdling writes, "Memoirs are open-ended, not rule-bound, a flexible form without a predictable terminus, rooted in the accidental record-keeping of diaries and correspondence, and in a life that shapes us rather than is ours to shape. There is an absence of inevitability in the form that captures the accidental quality of life itself and can mirror the struggle to find coherence in the disruptive experience of unanticipated change... The memoir is a form that tolerates surprise because it is not based on the expectation of moving steadily toward an end. It is only a chapter, or a set of chapters. And the author is still alive, not finished living; the click of closure cannot be heard." *Rise*, p.5.

become memories themselves—a metaphysical way of putting it, perhaps. I simply want to consider for now that the seconds give way to further the flux of the memories' own character.

One of the interesting parts of this project is that the story elucidated in the letters is impossible to complete. There is no certainty of an ending *per se*, because I write it from the present, at a time where it is impossible to know where and how my life will end. In actuality, there is no certainty that I will live to read the letter when I am older, so I will be faced with a possibility that the project may never materialize as I intend it to, and may only fall upon unintended audiences.

This brings me to the idea of what I am going to purposely hide and state, for the record, as they say. The selections I have revisited are sometimes conscious and sometimes unconscious as I try to be honest with myself, while maintaining some semblance of integrity and resistance, much like Rousseau with his *Confessions*. His work was an interesting interrogation especially in conjunction with his later *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. Though he has attempted to tell the whole truth, he admits in his Fourth Walk of the *Reveries* that it was impossible to be completely truthful, and that there were points where he had to embellish the truth due to the lack of coherent memory. He also hid certain sections of his life where he thought that putting down everything would make it seem like he was tooting his own proverbial horn. He didn't want the reader to think that he was conceited, and he rather turned more towards his own shortcomings rather than singing his praises. Through this creative process, I have come upon obstacles that have hindered some of the writing. In essence, my story is not merely my own, but includes those others that have visited and/or exited my life, and still others who have been influential in shifting my chronicle in a different direction. To some degree, thankfully, it is not all about 'me'. But in an effort to preserve selective memories I have of others, they may not warrant inclusion, because this is not a 'tell-all' to the detriment of people I still care for.

Some autobiographers wait until they have died before allowing their works to be published, and others wait until at least some of the people who have been included have died. To this, I advise the reader to understand with compassion that deliberate vacancies from my letters only serve to save myself from offering the whole story, and to leave certain memories as they are encased in my mind with the clothesline—something that I treasure

that is not unimportant, but something I want to hold in, like I hold my breath when driving through a tunnel, only to let it out when the timing is perfect (unless I don't make it to the other side in time). But perfection has no place in this project.¹⁵

I also want to highlight those many experiences that I might consciously filter out of the actual letters, and my feelings surrounding why I choose to omit certain things.¹⁶ This will accentuate the paradox that I face in trying to be honest in the work, while simultaneously trying to be fair in what I want to remember or forget and why. This paradox further leads to how we personally construct our memories, and how they are recreated over time, perhaps to a point where the memories essentially become inauthentic as only memories of memories. Every time we reconstruct a memory, part of it fades away and we add other aspects into it that are entirely of our own creation. Perhaps this is not necessarily inevitable, but something that beckons awareness. I acknowledge that there is a controversial dimension to the concept of memory, based on the innumerable works of literature that present themselves, but I am aware that the construction of memory plays a subjective role in my creative work.

What I have noticed in writing these letters is that many of my most pressing childhood memories revolve around the concept and feeling of fear.¹⁷ It is a fear that winded my breath and curled my shoulders, that sticks out so prevalently in my present mind. I can remember so many points in time that were encased in fear and I can

¹⁵ Rousseau himself identifies this conundrum in his *Confessions*, and quoted by Zwerdling: "I may omit or transpose facts, or make mistakes in dates; but I cannot go wrong about what I have felt, or about what my feelings have led me to do; and these are the chief subjects of my story." *Rise*, p.12.

¹⁶ Zwerdling poses the question as a comment on Rousseau's writing: "How can one possibly record 'everything', including thoughts, feelings, and actions? The result would in all likelihood be not a book but chaos, like the formless waste of matter preceding the original act of creation. This is not simply a quantitative problem—the impossibility of recording the mental processes and deeds of a lifetime, or even of a year. It is a matter of stylistic decorum and syntactic coherence." *Rise*, p.9.

¹⁷ Freud thought that the most important memories we have are those from childhood, but noted that those were the ones that were most intangible to us: "we are informed that during those years which have left nothing but a few incomprehensible memory fragments, we have vividly reacted to impressions, that we have manifested human pain and pleasure and that we have expressed love, jealousy and other passions as they then affected us." Sigmund Freud *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*. *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*; Random House, New York 1938, p. 581, quoted in Ernest G. Schachtel's "On Memory and Childhood Amnesia", *Politics*, Spring 1948, p.129.

remember them in a specific and intense way. Those arresting moments when my life or body or mind was threatened, are the ones that so drastically etch themselves onto my soul.

Rousseau writes, “Actual misfortunes have little effect on me; it is easy for me to accept those which I suffer in reality, but not those which I fear. My fevered imagination builds them up, works on them, magnifies them and inspects them from every angle. They are far more of a torment to me imminent than present; the threat is far worse than the blow. As soon as they happen, they lose all the terrors lent to them by imagination and appear in their true size”.¹⁸ The letters I write come pouring out with these episodes so distinct. It is a wonder that these fearful moments can impress so much, but they feel so easy to recant (though maybe it is more ‘reinvent’). Being scared is a singular state in which we gain experience in the fight. It is the fight for life and for love and for truth that leaves the mind permanently recreating itself to remember, to later on avoid situations that may foster that same fear or anguish. Anxiety only becomes anticipated anxiety.

The letters are written from the present, but will show a life-story being recounted to myself, therefore introducing the static points of the past and flowing into the present. The letter is intended to be a creative expression of memory, as Suzanne Nalbantian defines it in *Memory in Literature: From Rousseau to Neuroscience*. She notes, “in showing the linkage between art and its sources in actual life, I offer clinical proof of the saliency of real life experiences to the artistic work and, therefore, the inextricable link between author and text. Because so much of the literary material is overtly and emphatically autobiographical, it can profitably be explored as a series of case histories of a variety of operations of human memory”.¹⁹ Nalbantian also points out that the images that are found in literary forms of writing “highlight aspects of the memory process that poetic analogy succinctly communicates”.²⁰

The letters therefore become essentially a quasi-ethnographic account of my life, where I am observing and participating in my lived experiences of society and cultural phenomena from the point of view of the person. It is how my own cultural processes develop over time. Jill Ker Conway notes that “Whether we are aware of it or not, our

¹⁸ *Reveries*, p. 29.

¹⁹ Nalbantian, Suzanne, *Memory in Literature: From Rousseau to Neuroscience*, p.5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.5.

culture gives us an inner script by which we live our lives. The main acts for the play come from the way our world understands human development; the scenes and key characters come from our families and socialization, which provide the pattern for investing in others with emotional significance; and the dynamics of the script come from what our world defines as success or achievement".²¹ My memories will cover the descriptions of my social life and how my behaviour has shifted and evolved. It is almost a dream-like representation, collected through memories, told as a reverie that is transient—memories that come back to me again and again under certain conditions. It is transience that is without a name. I think of it as a playful fantasy, imagining that I might want to revisit my life when I'm elderly.

My dreams have always been rather vivid. I speak to so many people who, when they wake, cannot remember their dreams. I wonder what it is that allows us to remember them still, or what disposes of them before they are given their worth. But perhaps I shouldn't just sit on dreams that arrive while in sleep-state, but also those dreams we have in waking life that pounce on us unawares. Easier to remember, I suppose. But those waking dreams lack the abandon that we can enter into while asleep, as we are effortless in our attempt to control the sleeping dreams. I often have recurring dreams, visual nightmares and stressful imaginings; and I am aroused with a usual sense of panic. I find myself in familiar places, but delve into unfamiliar situations, where I try to make sense of a futile world that finds me helpless and scared. But these dreams are worth turning back to once awareness sets in, because they so often shape conscious life by peppering themselves back into reality. What I mean is that dreams are the metamorphosis of memory: they re-envision themselves perfectly between what we are scared of and what we imagine ourselves to be. And sometimes we get caught in the forsaken trap of believing our reality to be nothing more than a dream. Rousseau imagined in his First Walk of the *Reveries* that "I still imagine that I am suffering from indigestion and dreaming a bad dream, from which I shall wake with my pain gone to find myself once again in the midst of my friends. Yes, I must surely have slipped unwittingly from waking into sleep, or rather from life into death".²²

²¹ Conway, Jill Ker, *When Memory Speaks*, p.6

²² *Reveries*, p.27.

I seem to think that if we are able to pretend that something is a dream, we can escape from admitting it into reality. One can only surmise that dreams must be external to the truth and to existence.²³ But similarly, the past is outside of our knowledge of reality. Therefore, the memories that we have and that we cling to may be nothing more than dream representations of what we envision life used to be like, and disconnected from what we can tangibly state is a certainty in the current time and space.²⁴ There is both manifest and latent content to a dream. Memories falter at the sight of the present, and they drop in like nothing more than dreams of dreams, and we recognize them as friends, but even more as spirits from a remote time.

What I notice most is that my dreams are physical. I can feel them happening just as much as I can think of them happening. In a nightmare, I can feel someone with a knife that slits my hand. That pain is real. I can smell myself throwing up into a garbage can. The gut-wrenching discomfort is my stomach confirming that it is happening. I throw up so much undigested food that I can't seem to get it all out. I wake up and what I am trying to do is rid my mouth of my nightly mouth-guard. When I am trying to run, I can feel myself out of breath. I always seem to run faster in a dream when I am running on all fours. When I am close to a fire, the heat on my skin is tangible and existent. I can hear myself yell for help, or at least futilely scream into the bleakness and its own obscurity. And when I am dreaming of sex I feel the arousal build and build. So while these sensual experiences are not actually happening to my body, my mind is conjuring so much that the sensory experience transcends into the dream-state, and the mental body becomes alive. Can I say with certainty that these experiences never happened?

In the psychoanalytic sense, Jung and Freud wrote on the dynamic processes of the mind and how they are characterized by images. They used the term "imago" for this

²³ Nalbantian provides us with a nice reference to the work of Proust with respect to involuntary memory: "he writes 'But it seems to me that there exists too an involuntary memory of the limbs, a pale and sterile imitation of the other... Our legs and our arms are full of torpid memories.' For the narrator, it is first the body which recalls: 'Its memory, the composite memory of its ribs, its knees, its shoulder-blades, offered it a whole series of rooms in which it had at one time or another slept.' This first kind of memory has effects of involuntarism, since his memory is 'set off' by the physical trigger of the body and gives suggestions of being in a semi-dream state." *Memory In Literature*, p.65.

²⁴ "As a function of voluntary, rational thought, memory amends and edits reality by putting the dream state in parenthesis" *Rise*, p.109.

idea that an image, perhaps a dream, or the unconscious, are representations of the clearer picture that is presented in the ego. Configurations of our dreams are ideas that turn into images. “The imago is linked to repression, which in neurosis, through regression, provokes the return of an old relationship or form of relationship, the reanimation of a parental imago. This regression is linked to particular quality of the unconscious, that of being constructed through historical stratification.”²⁵ Our dreams create both resistances and wishful thinking. I constantly grapple with waking up dreading that it was not a dream, and waking up hoping that it was.

Perhaps my only link to an imagined reality can be by way of a dream.

Through these letters I also long to show myself how my life and my character has changed over time. Rousseau said in the beginning of his Ninth Walk, “Everything here on earth is in a continual flux which allows nothing to assume any constant form. All things change round about us, we ourselves change, and no one can be sure of loving tomorrow what he loves today. All our plans of happiness in this life are therefore empty dreams” (137). Through this experience, I am imparting ideals and values on my future self, and even my present thoughts and comments show myself how change has earned itself its rightful place in life. More and more the changes of past and present affect the outcome of where it might all end up in the future. Not only am I intending my reader to be *myself* when I am older; this readership is entirely imagined. I am an imagined reader who is preserving my own memories.

²⁵<https://www.encyclopedia.com/medicine/psychology/psychology-and-psychiatry/imago-psychology>

III.

Voice gives us authority. It is only when we can use our own voices that we can listen to what we are trying to create.²⁶ I understand that multiple voices intermingle with each other to create the sum of my own parts.²⁷ This centers around perspective and I am accountable for the perspectives that only I know are subjective. In these letters, my voices come from various angles: the voice writing the letters, the voice listening to the letters, and the voice that filters through them to finally get at their meaning.²⁸ I am the voice adopting myself through time, and the voice who can discern falsities and authenticities.²⁹ And eventually I am the master who is configuring all of them. I am the poet and the audience. I am here, and I was then, and I will be after all that.³⁰

²⁶ The conjuring of a voice is instrumental to autobiographical writing. Zwerdling's discussion of Levi notes that "Levi also needed to create a sense of detachment, because he could not undermine his testimony's reliability by suggesting that his memories were distorted by anger or a need to get even. He deliberately constructs a persona, a narrating voice made for the purpose, distinct from his actual self." *Rise*, p.156.

²⁷ Interestingly, Zwerdling comments on how Rousseau was fraught with this same challenge: "he was a solipsist: his investigative enthusiasm for fathoming himself was matched by an inability to imagine the actions he narrated from the perspective of anyone else involved in them. His claim that he was presenting his soul 'from all points of view' is unintentionally ironic. Especially in his most confessional moments, his eagerness to tell the world about his failures and transgressions and contradictions seems to blind him to the feelings of others equally involved in them." *Rise*, p.14.

²⁸ Woolf, quoted by Zwerdling writes that "There was a spectator in me who, even while I squirmed and obeyed, remained observant, note taking for some future revision." He then notes that "all of these voices—of memory, dimly understood perception, contemporaneous records, and later analytic theorizing—might be juxtaposed in the text if only the memoir as a container were elastic enough to accommodate them." *Rise*, p.76.

²⁹ Zwerdling identifies this thought: "Perhaps the best starting point for such ventures is one's own thumbprint engagement and curiosity. This kind of writing is personal; it is not the anonymous story, nor the public record, but rather the idiosyncratic, private, anomalous version of an individual history, itself often inconsistent and full of unpredictable turns. Each is written in a signature voice—unmistakeable. The field's fluid identity seems to offer an opportunity for readers with a comparable kind of curiosity—personal, even idiosyncratic—who need to understand how and why a particular life, or kind of life experience, took the turns it did." *Rise*, p.2.

³⁰ Woolf specifically shows us two distinct voices in her work, as explained by Zwerdling: "It was not so much a narrative as a re-enactment, as though she had found a way of re-entering the past by sending her body back up to it. At the same time, Woolf tried to keep her consciousness here, so that the two selves—'I now, I then'—would be able to carry on a continuous conversation across

The poetry that is incorporated throughout my letters preface each with something that has lived through me in life. Poetry is the expression that allows me to hide behind words while expelling all of the emotion contained in front of the page. It softens the reality in the present and poignantly puts a blanket over the truth, simultaneously flowing over myself with authenticity. Nalbantian quotes the following passage from Wordsworth regarding his view of memory:

I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.³¹

The poetic therefore serves not only as a reminder into how my words have been crafted over the years, but also as a refuge where I can place my feelings without any harsh realities invading survival. Baudelaire's "Spleen", 'J'ai plus de souvenirs que si j'avais mille ans' is fitting in this context:

I couldn't hold more memories in a thousand years
A heavy chest of drawers containing scraps of verse
Check stubs, love letters, writs, a summons, a ballade,
I am a cemetery hated by the moon...
I am an old boudoir filled with the faded rose...

This also perfectly transfixes itself into Nalbantian's comment regarding Mallarmé, who "is communicating the fact that the retrieval of memory by the senses involves the participation of the poetic imagination, which fabricates the memory from the raw materials of the past. The poet converts the sensory objects into outright symbols for memory, which incarnate its potentiality".³²

Other aspects I focus on are my letters and narrative, and how perhaps memory and life-writing or autobiography in general, can be used as a tool to restore or to attempt at reparation.³³ While it may not be a cure, I show what it has done for me, and what it

the decades. The audience was herself, or her *selves*, not another who needed to be modified or entertained." *Rise*, p.74.

³¹ *Memory in Literature*, p.35.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³³ Zwerdling provides us with an insight into this healing aspect with his investigation into Primo Levi and his purpose for writing: "But there was also a more urgent and private motive. He wrote the memoirs 'for purposes of liberation'—his own. As he tells the Italian writer Ferdinando Camon, he wasn't sure when he set down his account of Auschwitz that it would find a publisher; and he

cannot possibly heal. Because the narrative works retrospectively, it frames how I might find some reparation at a later stage of life. It may even make the transition less terrifying if I can show myself that this was foreseeable, and something that I have tried to prepare for. The hypothesis is that this kind of writing can assist in the exploration of knowing yourself (“Nosce te ipsum”) and hopefully allow one to deal with the past. I understand that this idea of a therapeutic aspect is controversial, and that there may be limitations and danger to this form of thinking. The point is about where I will allow myself to be led through the writing process, how that will eventually make me feel when I’m finished, and the exploratory nature of this project. This draws on the work by Italo Svevo, where in order to cure himself, he has to write down his story. It will be a way to deal with internal struggles and may serve as a sort of confessional. I am not necessarily looking for answers to life’s problems, but I am examining my own life critically, to assist my imagined future self in understanding my creative self.

considered making copies for his fiancée and closest friends. The motive of producing ‘an eyewitness account’ was secondary; the original need was ‘therapeutic’—to liberate and relieve himself... ‘I was not at peace at all. I felt profoundly disturbed. Some instinct drove me to tell the story... By writing it I felt a sense of healing. And I was healed.’” *Rise*, p.171.

IV.

This brings me to the crux of my purpose. What is it that makes us deserve our memories? Or do we deserve them at all? The superego works to keep the moral condition of our memories like a gatekeeper. The interesting thing about memory is that it dies with our bodies, never to be recreated again. If we take on the task of writing them down, they may live in posterity, but will never live in reality, as the reality has come to a close.³⁴ Perhaps what life is really telling us, is that once our memories have faded or died, that is all we are allowed to have. Just as a second chance on life is an impossibility, so too do our memories cease. Not only that, but memories that we forget over time—maybe we are no longer entitled to remember them. Maybe it is our own dichotomy of real and imagined that fosters our sense of how we can deserve to keep the memories alive. Or it may not be as black and white as a dichotomy—it may stand to reason that we can only remember what we can actually handle. There are certain parts of my life, including early childhood, when my mind had not yet fully developed, where I remember nothing.³⁵ Perhaps this lends to Freud's theory of 'screen memory' and 'childhood amnesia'. Nalbantian writes: "In 1901 Freud gave its definition as childhood memories which hide an emotionally significant event behind a trivial one: 'the indifferent memories of childhood owe their existence to a process of displacement: they are substitutes in [mnemonic] reproduction, for other impressions which are really significant'" (19). The experiences of childhood that I have included in my letters often now seem to have varying degrees of significance when I read them now. I may deserve to remember nothing, or

³⁴ Zwerdling comments on Woolf's intent: "'A Sketch of the Past' is the product of her eagerness to record the contradictions and unresolved mysteries of what she remembered before they evaporated. She instinctively realized that instability was an essential element in the past she wanted to recapture. The lack of pattern was in fact the pattern." *Rise*, p. 74.

³⁵ Orwell expertly captures this issue of childhood memory when Zwerdling writes: "Childhood remains a closed system, not accessible to the adults outside it, and perhaps not even accessible to the child, except in retrospect." *Rise*, p.105. Later, he goes on to say that "The inner self 'knows', through all the confusion, vacillation, and ruinous self-contempt, what the child actually feels and what it must and must not do, no matter what the official sponsors say. It is the embryo of adult independence, barely formed but awake and growing, signaling 'the impossibility of any *subjective* conformity... pointing out the difference between the moral obligation and the psychological *fact*.'" *Rise*, p.106. "It lives—we have lived—in an 'alien under-water world which we can only penetrate by memory or divination. Our chief clue is the fact that we were once children ourselves... Only by resurrecting our own memories can we realise how incredibly distorted is the child's vision of the world.'" *Rise*, p.107.

maybe my brain is not equipped with enough gusto to allow myself to take it all in.³⁶ If we could remember everything, would we not be capable of remembering nothing? And if it is all or nothing, then should we accept what we can remember, or pass it off as something less situated in the present? I believe that we can get stuck in the past, yearning for things that will not resurface. The concept is really about loss, moreover, mourning the loss of objects and place. But I also believe that those memories that I can't get away from are also the ones I should probably nurture. I wonder if I have done all I could to make myself deserve what I can remember. Being deserving of my own memories also makes me solely accountable for them. The knots that run through my veins grow tighter, building up scar tissue to everlastingly position itself at home. And the blood pools around, not being able to pass, hemorrhaging until I can't take it anymore; instigating me to remember and even cherish those unending memories to lift me away from the present tense.

It seems that my own affection for people is connected with this idea. The point is that we have a cultural memory, where we construct our memories within the framework of who we have become together. Memories are actually transitional and there is no real reason, that I can think of at least, as to why they occur. However, they do exist because we are mammals and we create attachments to them by reliving injury and dwelling on guilt and shame. Perhaps through neuroscience we know how memories occur, but why they haunt us is confounding. I am therefore, throughout the letters, coming to terms with my own identity that is formed, or really half-formed, due to the time and space at which I am writing them. The identity that emerges is actually only held together by forces that consolidate. It may only be a self-construction that I am forming for myself, being in debt to what I think I may deserve. Consequently, telling and reminding myself of these memories, I am urging myself to only rediscover that I also deserve the pain that they have caused me. This sublimation translates feelings and emotions into an experience that is actually continuous. Therefore, I am hesitating and waiting for the acceptance from my created future self, which is uniquely a hindering obstacle. I am stopping time for the

³⁶ The things that we forget is elucidated by Woolf when she writes: "These then are some of my first memories. But of course as an account of my life they are misleading, because the things one does not remember are as important; perhaps they are more important... Unfortunately, one only remembers what is exceptional. And there seems to be no reason why one thing is exceptional and another not. Why have I forgotten so many things that must have been, one would have thought, more memorable than what I do remember?" *Sketch*, p.69-70.

moment in the letters and reflecting on what is happening now, and how that was formed, or maybe informed, by the past.

If I do deserve what memories I can conjure, would it not be prudent to acknowledge them as I can, twisting their very nature through and through, and lying in bed with them to soak in their significance through time?³⁷ Memories are an indiscriminate source of conscience. You do not have to earn your right to your memories, but you do have to cultivate them. If I am gentle with them, or passive, they may not remain with me. But if I continuously dwell on them, they may distort or consume. Simultaneously, they take on an involuntary quality that possibly shocks the system when they arise uninvited.³⁸ I don't know whether this is something we can control or deserve, but in their singular tact, we must resign ourselves to memory with more than just a hand signal or nod. And maybe who I will be when I am older may not want to know who I am today, or who I was before. That is something that I will grapple with later on. It might not be that I deserve to read these careful words, but that I would rather not. For instance, I have intentionally not relayed the story of my very first sexual encounter. I have deliberately stayed silent on the matter, though it was of great significance throughout my young adult and adult years. And the reason is that I consider it a tragedy in my life that I cannot bear to revisit.³⁹ I have mustered enough of a shell around that event to attempt to shield it from recovery. It is something akin to shame and disempowerment, and so disheartening that I wish not

³⁷ Woolf puts this idea in quite a lovely, almost solipsistic way, with hope for the future of humanity: "In certain favourable moods, memories—what one has forgotten—come to the top. Now if this is so, is it not possible—I often wonder—that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence? And if so, will it not be possible, in time, that some device will be invented by which we can tap them?" *Sketch*, p.67.

³⁸ Orwell as described by Zwerdling capitalizes on this aspect of remembering events that we might as soon forget, and the impact of truth on our audience: "The narrator is bearing witness and baring himself. He expects to be trusted, in part because he confesses something shameful, an incident of which he has no reason to feel proud and that he remembers reluctantly. He finds himself helplessly caught up in a system that robs him of control, whether or not he began as a willing participant." *Rise*, p.93.

³⁹ It is here that I consciously stray from the work that was brought forward with Rousseau's *Confessions*. Zwerdling notes that "*The Confessions* also offers encouragement to challenge the most immediate impediment to such an undertaking—the reluctance to give up the secrets that make one vulnerable, the whole penumbra of shameful or embarrassing acts, thoughts, feelings, and fantasies that lies between what is plain to see or willingly acknowledged, and the dark recesses invisible even to ourselves." *Rise*, p.26.

to leave it for further consideration of my future self. However, it is this kind of situation that has carved in me certain characteristics that find their way to my present self. It is what has transmuted itself into every sexual experience I have encountered ever since, however distasteful it came into being. It might not have actually been that the first instance was so horrible, which it was, but maybe that I had always wanted it to be something phenomenal. That the anticipation of something that would bring a new beginning could have been so irreparably downcast and injurious. In most ways, all I can say for it now is that I bring it up here only to suppress it further. Admit only to dismiss. Please, please ignore.

Nalbantian sheds light on this sticky situation by referencing Henri Bergson and his idea of the cerebral process of memory:

Instead of conserving memory in a drawer or inscribing it in a register, the brain is a functional processing center which first hides ('masquer') the past or drives it back ('refouler') and then only allows that which can be practically useful to show through ('transparaître'). Such is the relationship that he envisages between the brain and the mind. He also described memory as being hidden under the veil of the brain and then revealed.⁴⁰

So it would seem that our automatic inclination is to cover up our past and only with effort can we revisit it. And there must be selective points of our memory in which we filter through what we will allow back into the mind.

⁴⁰ *Memory in Literature*, p.12.

Memory, oddly enough, is specifically not only human but also non-human.⁴¹ Importantly, “memories result from reconstructive processes”.⁴² And our dreams are triggered by everyday life. Freud with his imago idea considered dreams to be figurations, not representations, which try to conceal and reveal themselves at the same time. I heard a story on the radio the other day about how it was spider season. Spiders tend to like the damp weather when summer turns into autumn and they abound. To say that I am afraid of spiders would not be entirely accurate. I definitely don’t *like* spiders, but I am more indifferent than anything. Mind you, if I were to find a spider on my person, I would likely tell you a different story. But seeing spiders typically doesn’t alarm me. So, the radio was going on about the large spiders in the city I live in, which I haven’t actually been witness to, fortunately. They told of one caller who had a spider in his house that was so large, that it made a resonant clicking sound on the hardwood as it walked over the floor. They spoke of wolf spiders with large hairy bodies. I felt myself grow uncontrollably uncomfortable and worried that I might encounter such a creature. That night, when in bed, I had a horrendous dream about all these massive spiders invading my space, crawling on my body and nestling in my hair. It was a nightmare, to say the least, so real and so distasteful that I woke in a panic. As relieved as I was when I woke up, I couldn’t shake the images in my mind that had permeated my thoughts. The day after the nightmare, I found an enormous spider web in the back seat of my car that stretched the expanse from the edge of the back seat onto the driver’s headrest.

These traces of memory that are conversant with our everyday lives sits itself down at the table of reality, pushing our dreams and blending them hand in hand with our own

⁴¹ Victoria L. Templer and Robert R. Hampton, in their manuscript [Episodic Memory in Nonhuman Animals](#), from *Current Biology*, discuss the differences between episodic memory and semantic memory. Some scientists have conjectured that episodic memory only exists in humans, but that has also largely been disputed.

Episodic memory, like other types of memory, evolved not for idle reminiscence about the past but because it promotes adaptive action in the present and future. In accord with this view, mental simulations of future events in humans rely on the same neural systems responsible for episodic memory. Interest in the extent to which nonhumans plan and otherwise anticipate the future has grown with the development of studies of episodic memory... Researchers have begun to develop prospective memory tests to study planning because prospective memory is proposed to require encoding, retention, and retrieval of an intended future action, as when we remember to buy milk on the way home.

[https://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822\(13\)00839-7?_returnURL=https%3A%2F%2Finkinghub.elsevier.com%2Fretrieve%2Fpii%2FS0960982213008397%3Fshowall%3Dtrue](https://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822(13)00839-7?_returnURL=https%3A%2F%2Finkinghub.elsevier.com%2Fretrieve%2Fpii%2FS0960982213008397%3Fshowall%3Dtrue)

⁴² *Ibid.*

truths. It is its own figuration of breathing under water, impossible in reality and yet sufficiently possible through imagination. It is Rousseau's *Reveries*, where we can relive our experiences and anticipate that we will return to them. It is re-entering a memory of a memory. Compounded is the idea of setting out only that which we can handle and we attempt to repress the rest. There is only so much I can tell myself throughout these memoirs and letters, and the rest is an automatic failing of being able to expound on everything.

V.

But who is to determine whether sex or clotheslines are more or less important to chronicle in one's life? It is only "me", and I only speak for and to myself, from the present.⁴³ It is the picking and choosing that is left in such a singular way that I find so difficult to grapple with. And yet, yet, so intensely do these memories startle me or sometimes creep up on me, that their own histrionic essences bowl me right over. I am only alerted later in life to their significance of thought; their own way of preparing me for absolution.

I don't leave these moments out as any sort of excuse. And I do decide to leave in many that still make me feel ashamed.⁴⁴ I imagine that there are no excuses in autobiography since the control is its own prestige. As author we are inventor. As inventor we can only be human: contrite though engaged. The porous nature of sleeping soundly only reaches so far with dreams, but most often, the need of gripping onto something permanent wakes us in the night, and I always seem to remember those dreams. Presumably, the only way I can see it is that I deserve to tell my own story; if not to anyone else, then at least to myself. I want to be a willing participant in how I remember my past, to gently approach my future.

There are so many authors who have grappled with this idea of intention and experimented with memory narratives, some of which I have discussed here, though there

⁴³ Importantly, I must again concede that this entire project depends specifically on myself writing from where I currently stand. Woolf writes, "The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the depths. In those moments I find one of my greatest satisfactions, not that I am thinking of the past; but that it is then that I am living most fully in the present. For the present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so close that you can feel nothing else, when the film on the camera reaches only the eye. But to feel the present sliding over the depths of the past, peace is necessary. The present must be smooth, habitual. For this reason—that it destroys the fullness of life—any break—like that of house moving—causes me extreme distress; it breaks; it shallows; it turns the depth into hard thin splinters." *Sketch*, p.98.

⁴⁴ This idea is derived from Orwell, quoted by Zwerdling: "Autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something disgraceful. A man who gives a good account of himself is probably lying, since any life when viewed from the inside is simply a series of defeats." Zwerdling goes on to comment on this passage that: "His sweeping statement casts doubt on all but the grimmest attempts to record one's life and sets a standard of disclosure that would give pause to most autobiographers trying to write honestly about themselves. It suggests our need to withhold the worst—both from others and from ourselves—even in our most strenuous confessional moments." *Rise*, p.83. We are countless selves all at different times in our one life.

are too many to really recount. Ernest G. Schachtel, in his essay “On Memory and Childhood Amnesia”, speaks of two authors who have done immense study and deliberation on the idea of memory: Sigmund Freud and Marcel Proust. He elucidates the idea of the conflict that memory inherently produces, “between reviving the past and actively participating in the present life of society.”⁴⁵ With reference to Proust, he writes:

He knows that, as the awakening dreamer may lose the memory of his dream when he moves his limbs, opens his eyes, changes the position of his body, so the slightest motion may endanger and dispel the deep pleasure of the vision of the time... He does not dare to stir, for fear that the exhilarating vision may disappear. Bodily movement is the basic and simplest form of all activity endangering memory. Action itself, the attitude of activity, even the activity of enjoying the immediate present are seen by Proust as the antagonists, the incompatible alternative of memory. From here it is only one step to the insight that the memory which reveals the true vision of something past, the memory celebrated by Proust, is different from the voluntary, everyday memory, the useful instrument needed by man every hour and every minute to recall a word, a figure, a date, to recognize a person or an object, to think of his plans, tasks, intentions, the eminently utilitarian memory characterized by the very fact that it serves the purposes of active and conventionally organized life in society.⁴⁶

My work may fit regretfully within this framework, but in some ways melts a bit differently because it is an imperfect game of solitaire, advising myself later on of these precious moments, but understanding that each card drawn can ultimately alter the game in its entirety. The entire work is an exploration of the possibilities that my imagined reader may take in life, and it doesn't really matter how it all ends up for my future self, the fact remains within the pages of the letters—though it is uncertain at best that the imagined reader will ever read them—that truth of the present self is explored as a remembrance. It is a derivation of reality that has been chosen to be exposed. I am creating the author and creating the audience. The voices are suggestively linked. They wrestle with one another silently though pressurized and in forte: a sorrowful elegy, mourning the lost pieces that are without.

⁴⁵ *Amnesia*, p. 128.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.128.

Alas, this is not the end⁴⁷, nor may it even reach out ever further from a dream.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ The innate distinguishing character of the letters is put by Zwerdling: "A characteristic of the memoir as a form, invaluable for recording unresolved experience, is that its last word is not the last word." *Rise*, p.5.

⁴⁸ As Proust has provided in *Remembrance of Things Past*: "And so it is with our past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of the intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling. And it depends on chance whether or not we come upon this object before we ourselves must die." *Remembrance*, p. 47.

Part 2: Letters

I am/we were

A glimpse at an unknown parapet on an empty street
reminds me of the cavernous walls
I've built around my sacred memories.
I watch carefully as they fall, fleeting
and lifeless
beckoning to their confines
to protect them once more.
I am a silhouette that is a permanent fingerprint.

All too well do I know that one day recollections will not be possible.

And I therefore address them simply
as one might to some familiar friend.
Tipping my chin
and pressing their palm
with my palm
forcefully reinstating their worth;
gathering as much of the valued warmth
so that I can hold it in
and squeeze that last semblance of
recognizable tone
from their touch.
I am slowly gaining ground on this empty street
and it will soothe me once more from being a decipherable place
that could easily embrace those erased remembrances.

Perhaps it is not so much empty
as it is
lost.

It was all innately subtle.
I am contracting and collapsing
into that hindered fluent apathy of time wasted
again and again.
I feel like I am still remembering,
but I wearily resign myself to evasive haze.

This morning we were singular.

We were edging across the minefield
with good intentions but heavy feet.
In an instant detonation
will eliminate
the present—
tense.

And we float away

while the vestiges quickly melt,
singed,
and disintegrate.
Our ashes are scattered upon
nothing more than distant memories
and dreams
that we were once something significant.

Dear Stacie:

Recollection is messy, at best. I try to superimpose my own memories upon you, as you are now, reading this, and I just come out more confounded. Perhaps all that I can say to you is what is already there. It is already there—hiding underneath and buried deep throughout the layers, like the rings found within tree trunks. You can only count the rings if you cut it down, somewhat guaranteeing that there will no longer be the opportunity for it to gain another ring in another year. For me to merely guess what memories could be found circling through your body would simply not do. Maybe if I can pack all of these memories away now, perhaps they won't be a constant plague upon my present. Maybe I can compartmentalize them away to remember them upon some day when I won't be a fugitive running from them instead. Must I simply remember that memories are just encoded copies that are symbolic of the event and not the event itself?

I would need to break off those portions of your mind and dig coarsely through specific confines, in order to wade into what can only be constructed remembrances. I always hated wading into water at the beach. Slowly gaining ground with the tingle of fresh water grazing on my legs. And the deeper I got, the more jolting the contrast of my bare skin, with the cold, fluid rapture of the water. For some reason, I would keep my arms above the water for as long as possible. Something about not wanting that sensation on my dry hands was an unconscious but an immediate necessity. It was almost as if the whole experience would be completely damaged if I let my hands get wet. I could keep going as long as my hands remained dry. I would hold up my arms above water while the rest of my body was sacrificed. Knowing too well that there would be an eventual step that would cast judgment upon me and sentence me under water. And it would happen, and it would happen. And when it did, there was no turning back; there was no second chance. The rest of it could have come and gone without notice, but the last step always meant that the rushing sensation of intricate beaded drops would cease. The inundating release of warmth would envelop my frigid body, urging me into the unknown and ashen depths of the waves. It was sick—that figure in the water that remained drenched with a conspicuous element and who was unworthy of staying dry. And it was over. Over as instantly as it started. When my feet would touch ground again after floating along, it meant that safety was near and all was not lost.

You've always done it this way. Arms flapping and waving higher and higher overhead until they get too sore and just give up. I couldn't tell you if it were a natural human response to the water, or if you've just got some mental propensity towards getting your arms wet. Even the slightest accidental graze with the water would send a shock through your system that was different than the eventual wading in with your legs and torso. That reaction would reinstate the importance of keeping your arms held high, while your chin sagged lower and lower into the blue, bent upon looking through the reflective water into what lingered on the ocean floor, carefully attempting to dodge anything that looked like it might scratch your bare feet. Inevitably there was no point in any of it. Shards of shells or coral would send small droplets of blood through the blue water, and pain would push you further in, ensuring that the salty water would cover your tears instead of you showing anyone else that you were crying.

And so I suppose that you're holding on to those memories in the same way—lifting them above your head to reach some semblance of recollection—trying in earnest to make sure they are protected more than those other ones that can fall by the wayside and scatter over the ocean floor. Those footsteps of yours in the sand disappear so quickly as soon as your foot is released from their embrace, filling up the holes leaving nothing much more than a distant groove that is silently swept away with the waves. If you put too much weight on your foot, then the result is being buried beneath the sand. But I wonder whether your recollections can be malleable like that. Maybe they have already disintegrated away and the ones you're keeping locked inside are for posterity or for pride; if they are harbingers of what life is like to come or if they are something darker from the past that you dare not lose.

As children, when we would go camping, there was more pleasure of going swimming. We would say that we were going to "the middle of the ocean", which would be marked by the time that the water went up to our middles. Therefore, to us, the 'middle' of the ocean was really only a few steps away from the beach and into the salt water. But that lasting thought of the vast depths of the ocean still remained an enigma and foreign to me. My mother loves swimming—being free and surrounded by opaque emptiness relying solely upon yourself, is what I like to think attracts her to it. Conversely, I've never in my life seen my father step foot into the water. Perhaps it is not because he can't swim, but that being lost amidst the unknown and uncertainty repels him.

This is an observed story; a mundane retelling of seemingly inconsequential steps along a path. And it can only be truncated renditions of my life as I have prepared them for you now. Entirely subjective, and as only myself as the master of time. The steps keep in time with the looped rhythm I've prepared for them. They chronicle not toward a conclusion but an exposition; a fate but not a destiny. These abscessed sounds reverberate through my chest and infringe on my consciousness. Of course, I won't let you know any of that. But above all else, I will attempt to dust off these sacred vignettes of our life. All the while knowing that remembering costs us dearly, has the potential to break us even so, but can be the only thing that will ever grant us immortality. I want to follow the banal trivialities through to some ignoble place where I can kindly view them from afar. I want to keep them at bay because I know that if I focus on them too closely, they might completely disappear from my grasp.

I was once asked what the very first memory was that I could recall. I can't really say for sure. My childhood memories are mixed together with old stories that my family used to tell me and picture albums that put me into the place where memories are supposed to be born. Going through the albums I try to see if I can force myself to remember posing for the picture, but it seems more and more that all I can remember of who I am, I am leafing through the pages of the book, looking at myself in those foreign places. I wonder if there is a piece of each picture that I can consciously detach from the image I stare at, whether I know what it was like to look out to the camera and its surroundings, or whether the hand-me-downs from my brother that I was wearing were soft to the touch, or itchy against my skin, rather than just seeing that they were too large for my body. I try to imagine that there are parts of that picture that I can't see with my gaze fixed upon it, like what it smelled like where it was taken, or whether I was laughing beforehand or after. If I could only make my transfixion last longer, I might find some way of gaining ground on wilting or fading memories, and I might be able to hear my dad telling me to say 'cheese', or look backwards to see my sister playing behind me. But it all blurs into inauthentic chaos. I can't see any of the negative space in the pictures. I can't think back and remember who was taking the picture, only that it had to be someone that wasn't in the picture with me. Perhaps that is the only thing I can really know for sure. Beyond the artificial borders of the picture there is only that familiar unknown I keep coming back to. The old home videos set me into that exact space of consciousness—repeating back for me my own characteristics and natural tendencies. Maybe a little too much. So much so that I hardly

recognize my own face. It's not the face that I see when I look into the mirror. And it is not the face that I see on you now.

I digress, though I am told that memories are digressions to which we must give permission. Let us go back further.

It's my fifth birthday party. My parents splurge and take the entire gang to Chuck E. Cheese's, allegedly a child's delight. Did my parents know that I was radically adverse to and practically deathly afraid of adults dressed up as animals or characters? I should think so. But whether it wasn't a concern or whether it was more of a utilitarian approach where the rest of the party would have a great time, I'll never know. I've seen the home video of the event, and it will always bring back those feelings of terror when Chuck E.'s band starts moving and playing their birthday song. Chuck E. himself makes an appearance and saunters right up to me. I'm wearing a paper birthday cone-hat and of course, a pink party dress. It all looks like it should have been the happiest moment of my life thus far, until you make out my face in the dim light. Chuck E. is bringing me my birthday cake, all lit up and glorious in its presentation. I am wailing. Tears could not come more readily and I am virtually trying to hide under the table. All the friends and family are singing at the top of their lungs and clapping, smiling and grinning, hoping they are able to give old Chuck a big hug and eat some cake. I probably never felt more scared than I did in that moment, eventually understanding that no one would come to my rescue, and that Chuck E. had won and I suffered the moral injury in silence.

It occurs to me now that perhaps this feeling is how I select memories. It's the fear that embeds itself into the soul that cause it to linger in the mind—urging you silently to forever take heed when a similar experience presents itself. We surround ourselves in layers of discomfort so that it is harder for the fear to seep through. It is at once terrifying and reassuring to know that the feeling of fear will nestle into your bones as a constant reminder of a fleeting hallucination, that carries itself through to grasp that inner self. It is fantastic and illusory in the most reassuring way. And it is how I choose to gauge how human I have become.

There is probably precious little that scared me more as a child than a particular rendition of the Nutcracker, entitled the "Nutcracker Fantasy". It is a very obscure, stop-motion animation loosely based on the original, made in Japan, and was released in 1979. I

remember my family watching it when I was very young, and I can very vividly recall certain sections of the video that we had on Betamax. The interesting thing about this recollection is that though it has stayed with me throughout my life, I have never had the chance to revisit it. There was never a home movie that I could watch that involved the story. There isn't a picture in a family album that could encapsulate the feelings surrounding my experience with the Nutcracker Fantasy. It was exclusively what I could recollect from when I had seen it as a young girl. My evocations of it rested within, and every so often my mind would be flooded with remnants of me reconstructing the images and music that played in my head.

The story first tells the particulars of what they call the "Ragman". If young children were sleeping in their beds after bedtime, then they would be just fine. However, if any boy or girl were ever awake past their bedtime, the Ragman would come into their house and turn them into a mouse. The Ragman would walk the empty streets at night and peer into the houses of children to find them awake. It almost looks like the Ragman is using a taser to zap the young children in their beds. Later in the story, Clara, a young girl, awakens in the night after being given a Nutcracker doll from her uncle. She walks into the hallway and looks at a grandfather clock. She thinks she sees her uncle inside the clock, and she ventures into the clock trying to find him. Instead she is scared by the Ragman whom she finds inside and follows down through the clock into an alternate reality.

And that's pretty much where my memory of the story ends. Other than the eerie music that still plays in my head whenever I'm awake in the night. I never caught on to the name of the Ragman. I distinctly remember watching him walk down through the grandfather clock, and he would say, "tick-tock-tee" with each step. And being rather young at the time, I called him "the Tick-Tock Man".

The Tick-Tock Man petrified me. After watching the movie, it was hell to go to bed each night. I was so scared that I might not fall asleep well, and if I didn't, I was certain that I would end up as a mouse. It was the only thing I could think of every night, and I was essentially frozen with the fear that this would be my reality forever. It used to be that I would wake up in the middle of the night and need to use the washroom. My room was at the end of a hallway, with the bathroom about halfway down the hallway. At night, if I did awake, I would get up and open my door ever so slightly, and peer out down the dark

hallway to see if anything was there. I would tiptoe out of my room trying not to make any sound whatsoever, holding my breath the entire time. The last few steps to the bathroom I would scurry (as a mouse) as fast as I could and close the door, lock it, and let out my breath. The path back to my room was the same.

But the mind wants what the mind wants. It didn't take long until I was creeping out of my room in the middle of the night and I would catch myself looking down the hallway, and there I would envision the Tick-Tock Man walking towards me, an eye-patch and a cane, which was actually an amalgamation of the images in the movie of the Ragman and Clara's uncle. I became the personification of the mouse that I dreaded becoming. It was a sheer delusion and manifestation of my own psyche, but it remained there nonetheless. As a child, I was constructing a fantasy based on anticipation of anxiety and fear of loss. I'm not sure that I was always awake then this would happen, or whether I was certain that I was having a nightmare. It became more and more scary as the time went on. And it finally came to a head when I was so magnetized by fear that I could no longer bring myself to get out of my bed in the middle of the night. I was glued to the bed, safe under the sheets. If I had to use the bathroom, I wouldn't let myself. I would have to wait until the morning because there was nothing more important than staying in bed and being asleep. That was how I trained myself to never allow myself to get up throughout the night. To this day, more than thirty years later, I do not get up in the middle of the night. I use the bathroom prior to going to bed, and I will not go again until the morning. I am a paralyzed mannequin, so that I never have to encounter the Tick-Tock Man. I mean, I don't necessarily think that I am still afraid of him, but I think that the fear played such a dominant role in that important aspect of my waking life, with such durability, that my sleeping life could never be the same.

Fear has permeated my memories. It is so easy to think back to when I was afraid to recollect my history that I wonder where those lost happy moments went. When I was younger I had several nicknames. The first one that I can remember was "Sunshine". This was apparently because I was always smiling. Though I remember the name, I can't think back to always having a smile on my face. There was one birthday where I got a Dairy Queen ice-cream cake, one of my favourites, with a huge face decorated on the cake, made out of that sickly-sweet gel icing. The face had the largest, toothy smile I had ever seen. It was meant to be a portrait of me, beaming upwards, reminding me of how

much I liked to smile. Sometimes I wonder where that little girl went; whether she still resides within me, or whether I have somehow lost her along the way.

But back to the fear. I will never forget my frightful memory of the big pole at the playground. I can't recall how old I was when I finally mastered it, but suffice to say, I was still rather young. Ages don't seem to make much sense to me these days. I can remember certain things about certain times, but I can't trace back the dates enough to figure out ages at specific times. I imagine that I was around seven when I had my encounter with the big pole. The little pole was a piece of cake, and I relished going to the park to go down that little pole time after time. It was easy and it was mine. This was way back when the playgrounds were made out of wood, holes cut into the wood, and metal pieces holding everything together. The wood was smooth from use, and splinters were not prevalent. But they were also not designed in the way they are today, namely, as safe as they are now.

Being the baby of the family was a hindrance for me. I always had to be the last to do things, have the last privilege after my brother and sister. It's interesting that in different contexts I can feel like a different person altogether. In my immediate family I will always be the baby, and will always feel small. In the confines of other circles of friends or relationships, I can feel like an elder. But with my brother and sister, I didn't want to be left behind, so I would try my best to be as tall as they were, and to think as big. They were going down that big pole for what seemed like eons before me, and I just couldn't stand it. So one day, I shimmied up the wooden playground, and I sat at the very top, inching my way towards that big pole. But I couldn't do it. I was panicked. I wanted to do it so badly, but I couldn't bring myself to face that defining moment when I would have to sail down. I don't know if I was afraid of being hurt, or if I was just afraid of what unknown feelings would rise up within me if I took the plunge. I sat at the top of that playground, straddling the wood beam, for hours. The park was just across the street from our house, and my mother would come out and beckon me to come in. But there was only one way down from my stoop, and it would have to be down the big pole. I couldn't turn back because I was actually too frightened to look back down the other way. I sat. I could not move. I wanted to get down but I couldn't, so I sat more.

All I could do was count-down in my head. I kept counting down from ten, and when I reached zero, I was frozen. I was trying to push myself outside of where I might feel

comfortable, knowing that it was possible to take the step, because there was evidence that this was supposed to be fun, but I couldn't risk it. And after it was getting dark and my mother was sternly speaking to me to come inside, I did it. I grabbed hold of the cold metal pole and I slid down it. It was exhilarating but even a bit underwhelming. I had built it up so much in my mind that the actual thrill of it had escaped me before I had even set flight. I went down it at least a dozen more times before I went back home, to make sure I had conquered the foe, and to feel that rush of wind against my skin. But in my mind, for the rest of my life, I have been continuously counting down from ten.

The countdown was especially conscious when I was enrolled in gymnastics. It was a childhood that was purely based upon the scores gleaned from judges on a painstaking performance. Every little mistake was highlighted so as to make me more and more ashamed of imperfections. Moments were spent dwelling on pointed toes and perfect balance. Every fall a reminder of withered pride.

Gymnastics is characteristically an aggressive sport, but I have always had trouble with confidence. When I would have to learn a new element or maneuver, it took me an excruciatingly long time to work up the wherewithal to try it. I would have to persuade myself to try, and the image of me sitting on the top of that jungle gym, forcing myself to go down that big pole, constantly showed up to greet me. I had so much fear engulfing and stifling me that I could not force myself to move. A useless, all-encompassing reverence commanded my being, urging me to go against what nature should be telling me is safe. And I would have to push such rationality from my mind and press myself into that undying mould. I would start at ten, and each sequence of numbers would have four beats before changing to the next number. 10-10-10-10, 9-9-9-9... and even four zeros. The fourth zero was meant to be the instant that I would cast away the fear and plunge into the unknown. That was the idea of it anyway. Most often I wouldn't go after that last zero. And then I would harshly criticize myself and berate myself for not mustering the courage to go. I never knew that the countdown was that inner sense of disillusionment and that I could not replace such trials with demons. I was a coward and I knew it.

Life therefore passed in such a way that there was only one thing to be cognizant of: doing better. So consumed by sport, it was a crime to occupy precious minutes that could instead be spent perfecting myself. I would do the visualization techniques of routines

and skills, imprint them on my mind so as to permanently burn them into fluid muscle memory. I was striving to be a carbon copy of a pure form.

It became overwhelming, since the futility of perfection is self-evident. I wanted to finally be able to end the countdown on the fourth zero and not have to reprimand myself to start over at ten. The desire to become a muted machine carried with it only grief. I look back on this and remember that in the end, it was about overcoming humiliation or at least the perceived fear of humiliation. Growing up with stringent tests and harsh punishment developed me into a human who valued structure and strength, with an exaggerated sense of right and wrong where only perfect was also right. The idea of death reminded me of gymnastics: a countdown to an unknowable end that presented itself with potential pain and infinite mystery.

Forever yours,

You.

You

Last night I had a dream about you.
You were a tiny shell, so small and reserved.
The mask was of me –
alabaster
apostrophes
anomalies
and too scared to recognize any epiphanies.
So we walk hand in hand
but slower than I'd like
because I can't seem to tell,
(fragility
falseness
femininity)
... you balk at me thinking too much. I would rather
encase you and that shell
with the underwhelming story I like to tell
over and over again
and again.
For it is possibly you
looking back over at me
before I can even reiterate
that I am who you once were.
Still, you don't trust me. I don't seem familiar
and I'm too brazen
or abrasive – not
eloquent
erotic
elegant
– that's our middle name, you know. Elegant.
There's beauty in there too,
though sometimes it's hard to tell.

And I wonder if that smiling face is there for me
in remembrance of those past days
when laughing was laughing
and rumored transgressions
could be chalked up to youthful, languished mistakes.
I want your smile to remain there still, amongst
trivialities
toothaches
traumas
boldly misshapen semi-colons.
I'll laugh beside you
looking back and seeing forwards.

Dear Stacie:

For the first ten or so years of my life I thought that my maternal grandfather's first name was "Pet". That was all that my grandmother ever called him. My little world that comprised my immediate family only called him "Grandpa". It seemed so strange to one day to hear someone call him "Willis". I guess that sometimes our sentiments trickle over to our reality, and we only recognize what the ideal should be. I actually don't remember much about him at all other than that he was tall, quiet and slight. And I suppose that relatively speaking, I don't really even know how tall he was, since I was still under five feet when he died. He never said much, from my recollection. But perhaps all I know for sure was that he was devoted. Only someone wholly devoted would be endearing enough to allow themselves to be known as Pet, and answer to it, for what seemed like a lifetime. I imagine that is how I should now describe love. That it is the deafening sound of tolerating yourself to succumb to only to that one person who calls you Pet, and for you to radiate it back to them.

There was one night when we were sleeping over at my grandparents' house. I can't recall if I had any history of sleepwalking, but it happened that night. I got up from the bed my sister and I were sharing, walked down the hall (I must have been sleepwalking, else I would have been too terrified of the Tick-Tock Man), and I walked down the stairs that led to the basement. I went into the cellar and stood in front of a structural pillar that held the ceiling. It was a wooden pole, square in shape. And my grandparents found me there, repeatedly bashing my forehead onto the pole. I honestly can't say what I was dreaming about that led me to that place or to take that action. I will never know. I just remember them shaking me awake, surrounded by preserves and feeling the cold of the cement on my feet, tears clouding my vision, disoriented. It must have scared my grandparents, perhaps even more than it scared me.

And that was the first time that my troubles with sleeping life surfaced. There was always something on my mind that distracted me from staying asleep. I remember one time when I was extremely young and had just learned how to pick my own nose. In the middle of the night, I ran into my parents' room to wake up my father to show him what I had excavated. It was much more important than sleeping. And I think he humored me enough to congratulate me on it too.

In elementary school, my paternal grandmother came to live with us. My father was not ready to admit her to a senior's care facility, though the time for that was steadily approaching. My grandmother, who could only speak Chinese (or who at least pretended to only speak Chinese), appearing sagacious through the lines on her face and her old country mentality, went through periods where she lost all sense of lucidity. Her mind was being slowly taken over by the clutches of disease, and she was drastically slipping away from reality.

Elementary school was the first time that I had massive bouts of insomnia. Maybe I dared not close my eyes at night lest I might never wake up. Or maybe I was still frigid from imagining the Tick-Tock Man coming to an imminent close. And maybe still it was because I longed for a fragile place where I could be in control of my decisions. Darkness was the unknown creature that promised a place of hiding, but also eclipsed a foreshadowing of death. It seemed at the time that there was nothing that could quiet my mind enough to allow me into a slumber. It was an over-active imagination where over-analysis on every minute detail of every day wore through me, until I could no longer stand it.

My parents were distraught by my condition, but they refused to shove me towards a doctor to tend to the issue. They were determined to solve the problem. Instead of sleeping pills, every night they put me to bed alongside my grandmother. She snored as loud as a train engine reeling down rickety tracks, blaring all through the night. The thundering noise and the closeness of comforting love was what lulled me into a peaceful slumber every night. I slept with my grandmother each night until the day that she left our house. I still miss that intimacy of someone cradling me metaphorically while I could allow her to hush my distrusting mind. So many years went by where I could find peaceful rest beside someone who loved me without language.

Of course, after my grandmother died, I reverted back into my own world. I was wrought with utter anguish and could barely surface from the dejection to calmly fall asleep. These days, so many years from when she died, I unfortunately still rely heavily on sedatives to coax me into sleep each night. And every time I think that my addictive personality might withstand a night's reprieve, I am transported back into those days where insomnia was my bitter friend, inviting me to while away hours only with closed eyes, and never a closed mind.

Both of my grandmothers ended up having some form of dementia in their later years, Alzheimer's or otherwise. And this is one of the reasons why I solemnly write to you now. It might be that genetics will get the better of me and force me into the same disease that fell upon my grandmothers. Time itself may be but a mystery that pervades deep into the outer recesses of my mind, urging me to turn away from my familiar sensibilities and burrow in my memories. One can never know for certain, but this is perhaps something in store for me, for us, and this elegy will be my own imparting of gathered up memories that might lull you into the darker days.

It happened to my paternal grandmother first. It somehow crept its way into all of our lives, not just affecting my grandmother, but simultaneously making us unrecognizable and her unfamiliar. At times she would fall asleep in an armchair watching television, and would wake up thinking she was back at her village in China, being so lost and not knowing who we were, who she was, and what was happening. It was frightening to me, and must have been an absolute terror to her, strong though she was. It was unnerving to see someone that I loved so much, lose their own identity in such a pronounced way. There was nothing we could do except to witness it happen.

Chinese culture demands that family look after their own. They take care of their young and support their elders throughout any strife. This is an unspoken rule of treating family with such high regard that it takes priority over everything. If adults looked after you when you were young, you had the familial obligation to look after them when they are old. It was a responsibility and duty of being raised. We therefore kept our grandmother with us at home for as long as we possibly could, even though we didn't have the ability to provide her with the proper care that she needed.

She would wander around the neighbourhood while we children were at school and my parents were at work. She would ring doorbells of neighbours and be unable to communicate with them in English. She would walk into their homes without consideration. Sometimes she would pack up as many belongings as she could carry with her, and try to leave. Once she had multiple suitcases and blankets and even a footstool with her. In her frailty she couldn't have lasted much more than a block, and she would fall down at the side of the road, collapsed from exhaustion. She had no clue about where she was meant to go. I wondered whether she was trying to leave a life that she despised and scared her, or whether she was trying to leave so that she didn't burden our family with

her delicate state. She would tell my father that she hadn't known even a moment of happiness since the day she was married.

My father tied a rope around the outside of the door handles to try to keep her inside during the day. One day when my sister and I were being bad she chased us around the house and we kept her inside the rope around the door. She came back with a heavy cleaver to try to chop the rope to bits.

My speculations upon the matter are rather paradoxical, knowing that I possess the capacity for reflection as such on the very thing that her mind was unable to comprehend. It was the expelling of reason from the faculties and replacing it with a blurred, opaque, unknown substance that infiltrated her knowledge with unending anonymity. She was adrift and vulnerable, dissipated into a brittle memory.

Thinking back on those times, it was incredible how much of a difference my grandmother made in our lives, even with the language barrier. Though she endorsed corporal punishment in her treatment of her grandchildren, it was taken more as a sign of affection and love, than anything violent. She had the old Chinese culture mentality, and that was something so foreign to us, yet so evident through her actions. Even being so young at the time, we were inextricably bonded to her. I, through sharing my long nights sleeping beside her, my brother, whom she favoured being the only boy, and my sister, whom she would sit and listen to when she played the piano.

She would go outside when my brother mowed the lawn, and hold onto the cord for him while he made the lines up and down the grass. He might have been 12 years old at that point. She wasn't helping him at all, likely more of a hindrance, but she thought that she was providing an essential service. As with most mowers, every once in a while the grass would get clogged in the blades. My brother would turn off the mower, get a small spade, and clear the clog. Once when this happened, the mower got clogged, so he turned to grab the spade and shut off the mower. Little did he know that my grandmother had her own idea—that she would just cut out the supposed superfluous steps, and stick her hand in directly to clear the clog before my brother had the chance to stop the power. Of course, as she did this, the blades struck at her hand. She didn't scream, and she didn't cry. My brother came running up the stairs in the house calling to my mother who was in the bathroom my sister's hair. He screamed that granny had stuck her hand in the lawn mower. She followed him up the stairs, holding up her mangled hand, laughing. My

mother panicked and drove her straight to the hospital, where she needed a significant amount of attention, stitches and the like. She didn't seem to care a lick that she had permanently damaged her hand. I think the most important part for her was that she was helping her grandson while doing it.

My brother was really the only one old enough to try to learn her language and communicate with her. My sister and I were spending countless hours at gymnastics at the time, and were probably of the mistaken mind that having a grandma was more of a permanent thing, rather than something that could be considered fleeting.

I don't think there was ever a time when she didn't look like she was a thousand years old. She had skin that looked waxy and unreal, as though it might fall off if shifted a certain way, and slits, as though from a paring knife, where her earring holes were, making it impossible for her to wear a pair of studs without them simply falling out.

My brother grew very attached to her. There was one day, a Saturday, when my parents brought my grandmother to one of our gymnastics competitions. My brother would have been around 14 or 15 at the time. We left in the early morning and were at the gymnastics competition for the better part of the day. When we came home, we found my brother in the attic above my grandmother's closet. He had woken up in the morning and not known where any of us were. His mind went to a dark place and he convinced himself that my grandmother had died and that we had all left the house without telling him or waking him up. He thought we had perhaps gone to the hospital or the morgue or somewhere and she had left us completely. So, he climbed up to the attic alone, crying profusely, and sat up there, above her clothes and belongings, smelling the mothballs and remembering her. He was so upset that as he sat up there he kicked in the entire opening of the attic, crushing the drywall and ripping cracks throughout the ceiling. We all came home and found him there, him thinking the worst, and seeing the change in his facial expression when he set eyes upon my grandmother. I had never before and have never since seen my brother exude such emotion. I still don't know how he could have arrived at the conclusion he did; that he honestly believed that my grandmother could have died and that we didn't rouse him. But I suppose I know more than anyone that the mind can do terrific things without our own provocation.

Keeping my grandmother in our house proved to be unmanageable, and we had to admit her to a nursing home. It sounds like she was a chess piece being moved and that it was

a tactical decision. But I had never seen my father so beaten and dismayed. And I could tell that the rest of the extended family somehow blamed him for failing in this pursuit.

The worst part of it now is that I don't even know how bad it was for her. And I'll never know that. Writing all of this makes me realize so much more how much of life I don't know. I couldn't communicate with her, and for the most part, I was too young to really understand how it all came about. She couldn't share with me her thoughts or her experiences, and I, regrettably, did nothing to remedy that situation. And I didn't know her well enough to see that she was really just biding time, trapped in a mind and body that she couldn't possibly understand, and living in a world that couldn't accept her, trying desperately just to feel familiar.

My maternal grandfather died less than a month before my paternal grandmother. He had Parkinson's disease. I was never very close with him, Pet, mostly because he was so quiet that he never really made that much of an impression in my life. I wish I could have been older and asked him about his time in the war, and had talked to him about his experiences. Another regret that impedes my memories of him, with distaste for myself. I suppose that I should ease up and understand that I was only a child, and I couldn't know any better. But I lost a vanishing person, never quite knowing what pained him and captured him. Forever distant as you are to me now. Maybe this is what I am trying to offer you: a steady hand when my grandfather's were ever so shaky.

With my maternal grandmother things were different. I was older when she succumbed to dementia. She had already lived a long life, and had lived to see her husband die before her. Though I have felt loss in many different ways, I don't quite imagine what that will be like. Perhaps you have already felt that where you are now. If so, I grieve for you.

When my maternal grandma's mind started to deteriorate, it was clearly evident. It could have been because we had all experienced it already with my other grandmother, that the signs were so obvious. Sometimes I now marvel when I meet someone at an elderly age and they don't have any signs of dementia. I think somehow I trained myself to believe that everyone will experience dementia in their lives. I guess it shows how little I actually know outside of my childhood microcosm. We started taking her to appointments where they would test her memory, and to be fair, there were times when I didn't get all the answers correct. There were still times when she would surprise us with her wit, and with

all the songs she would sing. She could remember lyrics and tunes like there was no tomorrow, but unfortunately, there weren't too many tomorrows left.

I must get the musical bones from her. Music is something that has warmed me throughout life. I could always memorize songs over anything else. I have such a catalogue in my head of lyrics and melodies, that the leitmotifs consistently prop up my life in ways I can't fathom. Maybe where you are now, you can still remember all those songs in your head, even if the rest is foggy. I can't think of any day that I lived where music was not part of it. I know my mother would sing to us as babies any chance she could. We have a home video of a bath time when my mother was singing to us in the background, "I'm Just a Little Black Rain Cloud" by Winnie the Pooh. Wherever I am at any time, there is a song playing in my head. I have still never left the house without headphones. I grew up with a walkman, then a discman, then an ipod, and I'm sure whatever other music devices they have come up with, I will have embedded them into my life. I could sing forever and it wouldn't be long enough. There was a time when I couldn't be in a room if there weren't a way to play music in it. Growing up, I had a stereo in the bathroom. From the first moment I awoke and walked into the bathroom, a tape or a compact disc or even the radio would be turned on—it would be an essential part of my morning routine. And the songs played would dictate how the rest of my day would go. Even still, I have an ever-present need to hear music. It might have been one of the only things that could calm my racing mind and soothe me when ravaged by anxiety. It mended what I thought was broken, and it remedied the times when I was lonely. Even now, I can remember every song that commemorated every trip or holiday I ever went on. There would be a particular song or artist that I would be obsessed with at the time, and I would play those songs while I wandered around an unfamiliar place, or looked out from a hotel balcony, burning the notes that played within me until they were scars on my memory.

When I was old enough to learn an instrument in elementary school, I was determined to play the saxophone. I told my parents triumphantly that I was destined to play the sax. But we were too poor to purchase or even rent one. My mother had picked up an old trumpet from a garage sale a number of years earlier. Why she might have done this is beyond me, no one was able to play the trumpet in our family, much less my mother. But it was probably a real bargain; I can't imagine her paying more than five dollars or so for it. So they laid it on me and told me if I wanted to play music, I was to play the trumpet.

Which is odd in retrospect, because I was a shy, timid girl, and a trumpet is a loud, obnoxious instrument.

But we found out very shortly that I could really play. It came so naturally that everyone was shocked. To be honest, with the characteristics of the trumpet on my small body, I didn't even really want to be good at it, but that didn't matter. Soon I was playing in multiple bands, and I went on through high school playing lead in at least nine different bands at one time. I never needed to practice. I could read the music and just play it. I don't know if I'll ever understand how I could play, but I do know that playing music was something that was in my blood. And I sang in choirs and I reveled in music of any sort. Singing, even more so than playing, was what really became my passion. I am hard-pressed to actually sing in front of many people, but even still, I take great pleasure in singing. Just like my grandmother. She would take any opportunity she could to sing. We would often find her in the nursing home singing and dancing, and it was something that made me want to cry, because it was so touching and endearing.

It started getting worse after I graduated high school. One thing she tried to do before she died was take each one of her grandchildren on a cruise in three consecutive years. It started with my brother the eldest, moved to my sister, and then it was my turn. When my brother went with her, there was an incident where my grandmother put on her bathing suit backwards, and had no idea until my brother informed her of such. By the time it was my turn, my grandmother had fallen too ill to care for her on my own. So it was arranged that the three of us children would all go on the cruise together. We went to Alaska, and we all had a pretty good time. My grandmother wanted to enter the lip-syncing contest on board, and she went out there in costume singing and dancing along to "Splish Splash" by Bobby Darin. My brother did "I Heard it Through the Grapevine" by Marvin Gaye, and I did "Where the Boys Are" by Connie Francis. The opportunity we had to bond with my grandma on that trip was the best present that I could have received from her. Sure, she was slowly losing her own mind, but we had those moments together and it was something precious that I will treasure always.

When we moved her into the nursing home it was long past time that she couldn't take care of herself. She rarely knew who we were. My mother, of course, visited her every day, or at least almost every day that she could. That is one of those things about my mother that will always ring true to my own heart. She is consistently caring, and she will

gladly sacrifice all she has for another that she cares for. She was always the one who would take the food that no one wanted, like the bum of the bread loaf, or anything that had been burnt during cooking. And she was happy to, if it would ensure that everyone else had a really good piece. But my grandmother was also losing valued time and would often forget who my mother was. On one visit, my mother informed my grandmother that it was September 29th. She asked her plainly if she knew what was on September 29th. And my grandmother thought about it really hard, and looked all around, and finally said, "It's my birthday". I know that one answer that she gave my mother was some sort of misshapen hope that perhaps she hadn't fallen as far as she could go. However, while my grandmother knew that it was her birthday that day, she couldn't recall that it was also my mother's birthday that day as well. But one out of two at that time was pretty damn good. Because rapidly after that, things grew much worse. One day, my mother returned and tried asking my grandmother what her own name was. She replied with "Shitty".

Losing my grandmothers bore within me a saddened and shredded heart, losing the sacred blessings upon me that they somehow silently conferred. I used to rely on those connections as a foundation to myself. Now it seems that they can only be imagined, and not tenuous like the tangible smoke that curls its way through my lungs. The links can only be fraught into existence now, by seeking out a quiet dusty glimpse into weathered immortality. I invariably become lost and naked, without those comforting layers surrounding me. And I suppose I just get angry with myself knowing that their memories only pass through my thoughts from time to time, trying to suffuse them onto my heart in a permanent way. But presence has a remarkable instinct of opening our world to possibilities, while absence briefly pauses our lives to bitterly escape from awareness.

I'd actually like to remark that my childhood was actually happy. Though I had these fears that struck me in the nights, I don't mean to diminish that I was fortunate and to use the word again, happy. It's distasteful that when we look back on life we tend to dwell so harshly on the negative. It would be a misapprehension to describe a life that didn't have its share of baggage, but I must always remember that life was never dull, and that I took solace in having a family that would stay as a unit and smother me with endearing love.

The reason I come to this conclusion is several-fold. I never really knew that my parents were in dire financial straits. It never occurred to me. It seemed like we had everything we needed all the time. I didn't understand when we had to move the piano over to my

grandparents' house that it would have been repossessed if we hadn't. I just thought it was fun that we got to go over there every evening for my sister to practice, and I would get to eat my grandmother's homemade bread with her homemade preserves. I would get to run around in the large expanse of a backyard that is unheard of these days, and I would eat snap peas off the vine, and stare eerily at Sandy, the errant dog in the yard adjacent. I did get spanked one time for eating all the viable peas in the garden, but that is truly beside the point. I didn't know that my mother sewed our own gym suits and scrunchies because we couldn't afford them. I just thought she liked making them for us because she was industrious and creative. We never really had any of the trendy suits and clothes, but we had unique ones. My sister tells me now that she felt how poor we were from a young age, when she would be insulted every day in elementary school by a bully who made fun of her clothes.

Every weekend, my mother, grandmother and I would go sailing, which sounded so grand. It was actually "saleing", a term they used for going garage "saleing" every Saturday. We would drive all over the city in the small nooks and crannies of lost streets and have a newspaper clipping of all the ones that had been advertised in the local paper. But we always kept our eyes peeled for the odd sign here and there, handwritten on old cardboard, to spot the garage sales that weren't advertised. We woke up as early as possible because we knew that the early birds were always more successful. And we would stick our noses up to the regulars we always came across each week, and be secretly upset if they got to the sales before we did. It was unfair of them to arrive to the sale before the actual advertised start time, and we would always be offended for this breach of garage sale etiquette. We found treasures that couldn't be found in stores, and most would cost a quarter or less. Eventually when I was in high school, I admittedly became embarrassed of the things I wore from garage sales. People would compliment me on my clothing and would ask where I had acquired it. I then called it "the GS Store". No one really knew what I was talking about, other than my sister, but it didn't really matter anyway. They wouldn't likely have cared, but I did. Presently we live in an age where it is 'cool' and 'chic' to buy things used or on consignment, so I'm applauded nowadays when my old habits creep into my contemporary ones.

My sister and I were enrolled in gymnastics, my brother played baseball and football, and we had games and treats, so I never really knew that we were part of the 'have-nots', because it never felt that way. I would sometimes complain about the games we were not

allowed to own though. They all had to be something that would enrich our minds. Number games or word games, anything to further our intellect. All I ever wanted to have was Hungry, Hungry Hippos, but that never came our way. I learned how to play Blackjack when I was still a child, because my father was teaching me how to add.

My father had a superior intellect, and might have been some sort of genius in his time. He was incredibly bright and clever, something he never ceased to remind us of. I imagine that he could have had a brilliant career if he had had the opportunity. As it was, as soon as he graduated from university, he had to take over the family business as a grocer. He came to own the Shop-Easy in East Vancouver, and that grocery store was partly where I was raised. My father employed all of the family—my mother and her mother and friends were cashiers, and my maternal grandfather was a butcher. We would play in the store and on the conveyor belts though we were reprimanded when we were caught. I remember finding a rat in the warehouse upstairs and my sister bringing it down onto the floor and showing my mom, who was flabbergasted and quickly tried to hide it away from the peering eyes of customers. I remember the ice cream store next door to the grocery store, where we really only got to go on special occasions, but waited there for us, chiding us when we knew we couldn't indulge every day. The rest of it doesn't come together all that easily. I was still so young when we lost the store after big box stores rummaged through the city and inserted themselves into the lives of people seeking nothing more than more convenience.

From here in the story I can see small glimpses of hummingbirds trying to feast on young saplings. They flit so fast that there isn't really any way of focusing on them for very long—precious little makes them pause even for a moment. The course of their wings coincides with my own flickering moral consciousness—I am never so much aware of what I feel as what I pretend is okay to feel. And truth be told, the truth of it is that I am afraid of finding out the truth at all. I want to remain in this naked world where I can create figments of how it all began and how it all might end up without having to regain any sort of consciousness that will beckon me into reality.

Yours again, ever so truly,

You.

That Old Watch

As I recall,
prudent lies weave back onto themselves
and tuck away their straggling tails
between webs of misfortune.

But perhaps that is too unrealistic.

It's a promise
that unfailingly goes awry
under a palpable swallowing of tongues.
It's that secret that lies behold so endearingly,
our promises sing to us as though that could ever be enough.

The feet of the fallow;
the formation of fortune,
can only be warranted at the sight of beauty.
And beauty can only be slighted by
that old watch: ticking effortlessly
and sacredly beating down on each second.

Maybe I'll see you again.
I mean you, that solemn lie
that I kept telling myself when I was much younger.
I can't seem to recall if I ever believed it
as much as I do now.
You'll smile to me in that familiarity
that only you and I know,
and I'll undo the strap of my watch,
pulling it tight around your wrist.
I will leave you then
knowing that it is keeping time
between those promises that you gave me
and the gratuitous lament
of the weakening that fades and surrounds us.

They say it's wrong to tell lies.
That they further complicate and
accentuate the truth lying in wait.
Perhaps instead they should say
that without lies, our truths are merely
caricatures or substitutes or
alabaster stones;
statues forever shaped as the first time they were chiseled.

I can be replaced.
And I think I'd like that.

Dear Stacie:

I don't think it's so much as me trying to make sense out of my life for you. That's not exactly what I'm trying to do here. Seeing you, as you must be, is but an impression. For all I know now, these librettos may never even reach out to you as they're meant to. The way I blink is an example of this weakness in the footholds of perception. The unconscious action of blinking is a necessary function to moisten the eyeballs, sure, but I realize now that when I blink, I am closing my eyelids for merely a brief instant, then opening as soon as possible. I see darkness for the shortest period, and then fix and adjust my stare with the lightness and visibility of the world. I know that I would rather be able to see something tangible that I can accept as familiar, and subsequent truth, than be exposed to something dark and essentially unknown. There could be eternity in the unknown if only we could accept it. The darkness to us is appropriated by our experiences of it. It may exist as another dimension or the opposite of lightness, but in the mind it exists nevertheless. Lightness cannot exist without darkness—presence requires absence.

When looking straight on, lights in front of your face appear solitary and ever-present. When looking from some distance, they tend to glimmer and flicker so. Across an ocean you can barely see the lights from afar, but they still emerge, wavering unsteadily.

Maybe all I ever needed was you to talk to.

I once visited a psychic. Try not to dismiss me as some sort of spiritual, hokey, believer, if you can. I don't know still if I can trust in these mindful mysteries, but I do suppose that curiosity takes the forefront of my mind at times. I am now living in an era that has spawned the culmination of curiosity altogether, not perhaps out of necessity but out of boredom. Mystery isn't the same anymore, and I find that rather depressing. I remember being young and pondering various things about life, asking questions to people who were older and smarter than I. It sparked dialogue, and questions were something that was an instant where knowledge could be gained, acquired, and treasured. One could go through an encyclopedia to gather bits of wisdom and try to memorize it so that it became some part of yourself. People would turn inwards, try to come to conclusions, and delve into unknown research in a quest for betterment and awareness. These were days where one could dream of what the other side of the world looked like and we would need to read books in order to find certain answers.

And now, and now, we have technical instantaneous devices, on our person at all times, that give away any answer one might seek. We are an instant away from being inundated with information and images that we never have to remember since they are seconds away from us at all times. I used to have maps gridlocked into my brain so that I would always know how to direct myself through cities. There is no need for this anymore, with maps being updated as often as they change, and we now live in such a crazy world that we can essentially never get lost. Lost, in the directional notion of the word, perhaps not in the mental notion of the word. However, maybe that is slowly fading away too, with our electronics able to tell us a simple diagnosis at the click of a button. Sometimes there is no need for buttons at all, they are being abolished too, where we only need to speak the words of what we're looking for, and the answers appear just as readily. We no longer need to store images in our minds. We have cameras built into our pockets that can immortalize any moment immediately, without thought of whether it *should* be something permanent or not. Ah, the end of curiosity.

I remember when the only way you could hear a particular song would be to wait to hear it on the radio, unless you had purchased the record or the cassette tape. Well, young as I was and poor as we were, we didn't have the luxury of the real deal. If I heard a song on the radio that I enjoyed and I wanted to hear again, I would have to keep listening to the radio until they played it again. And I would then have my "ghetto-blasters" (they don't call it this anymore, for obvious reasons), and at the right instant I would have to put in my blank cassette tape, and hit the 'record' and 'play' button exactly at the same time, let the song play out and then stop the recording as exactly as I had started it. Invariably, I would get some of the radio personality's voice at the beginning or the end of the song.

Sometimes I would lose bits completely. Or the tape would be eaten in the player. But after I had that small recording, I could play it again and again as many times as I liked. I could memorize the song and sing along to it. I would cherish these times. These days, you can hear anything you want, whenever you want. It is all so easy. You can hear something from eons ago that was never played on the radio at all. Lost vestiges of different times, alongside modern popular tunes that everyone knows. It doesn't matter in the slightest, as they are all awaiting your listening pleasure.

Similarly, this concept holds true even without the sight of our technological age. It has been said that as adults, we have lost the childlike compulsion to see everything as new

and experience life for the first time. In 1948, long before the rise of the internet, Ernest G. Schachtel explains it quite clearly, and also says that adults initiate the child into the lies:

No wonder that the child shows an insatiable curiosity. He has the whole world to discover. Education and learning, while on the one hand furthering this process of discovery, on the other hand gradually brake and finally stop it completely. There are relatively few adults who are fortunate enough to have retained something of the child's curiosity, his capacity for questioning and for wondering... He has ceased to wonder, to discover. He knows his way around and it is indeed a way around and around the same conventional pattern, in which everything is familiar and nothing cause for wonder.

I'm sorry for wandering through that tangent (is life a tangent?). So, this psychic. One of the first things she asked me as I sat down was whether I had a photographic memory. I mean, I never really thought that I did, but I'm told that it works a bit differently than others. I told her that no, I didn't think I had a photographic memory. She looked at me and said, that if I didn't, then it was pretty damn close. I've thought about this a lot since then, wondering about whether I was truly unique in this sense. I know that I can remember situations and experiences in a vivid and almost eerie way. I know exact conversations I've had, verbatim, and not only do I know what was said, I remember what we were wearing and the song that was playing in the background or in my head at the time. I can know where to find an exact quote that I'm looking for on a certain page, despite whether or not I can remember all the intricacies of the book. I do sometimes wish that my memory were better, but at least I can relay what I can to you now, before any rough winds or wild horses can get the better of the mind.

I suspect that this short account of my life makes me worry that by the time you are ready to hear it, I will have lost the voice to tell it, like snow melting before it has had time to hit the ground and cover it. It renews itself as rain.

A counselor recently asked me what I wanted for my life. Oddly enough, this is a difficult question, which is inevitably rife with further questions.

We know that everything is relative; we know that everything is transient; we know that everything, including ourselves, our environment, and other people, change. These multicolored circumstances, these fleeting moments, and these uncontrollable alterations, make everything inherently relative.

I know that life is not always kind to crystal-balling. I am loath to delve into vicious circumstances that begin with some sort of natural disaster and end with amputations or blindness. I therefore put forward a filter of 'under ideal circumstances' and subsequently evaluate what I want my life to look like.

I add this section of my life into this letter because I want you to know and understand where all this kind of thinking comes from—how it began and how it was cultivated within me. I think of these ideas that have become values and I feel shaken to permit myself to share them with you, to garner some sense of how lost I have found myself through various stages of life. I know that in my own microcosm, I can attempt to rationalize anything, but I should recognize that only through my own ideals and evolution can I become what I have set out to be.

All the muddling through these ideals ends up back where I started: these conclusions of what the best possible scenario of my life would look like can only be thought of in relation to others. Indeed, not merely other people, but other communities, other environments, other practices and other politics. Voltaire expressed this very notion in *Candide*; even in the most fortuitous of circumstances, we may place so much value on the one, singular item that is not present, that we can reject perfection altogether.

Perhaps the best way to put it is this: my answers are automatically going to adjust depending on whom I'm talking to. I will modify and cater my specific, personal desires to my audience. As I sit writing these words, it occurs to me that it could not matter less how I feel about these words, or what intentions I have tried to manifest in them. The only real notion that will be of importance after I write these words is the effect they will have on the reader, and subsequently, how the reader then feels about me. Our curse as rational beings is that we relate our experiences by placing them somewhere in between two poles on a scale that establishes our actions as positive or negative, good or bad. The reasoning for this is easy to understand: we want to be able to evaluate our actions and produce meaning in our lives. This is the problem: how do we interpret what is favorable and what is distasteful?

With eyes open, I struggle to accept those pieces of the world that I cannot influence. We are living in an impossibly rushed world that insists on convenience. I want to ignore that part of the collective that posts their lives on social media as a way of personalizing themselves and offering others a superficial façade of ideal extraneous values. And while I don't *think* that I identify with these imaginary creatures, I long to be and strive to be part of the collective world that could potentially foster change as a global community—a collective that garners sustainable hope while facing the flagrant evidence of depletion and extinction. I want to be part of that collective imagination that questions how we exist, and for what purpose. Reluctantly though, in order for me to do so, I must be able to identify with all of it: with misuse of information and maintaining hope for the future; with Facebook and genocide; with Instagram and hunger.

Exploitation has become such a fun game that we can take people and use them for our own purposes, to a point where they don't even seem real to us. We can see them only as pixels rather than as flesh and consequently treat them as though their entire lives are lived behind the bars of media manipulation. The ever-curious public is thirsty for fantasies that make dealing with their own seemingly mundane lives easier. They can ply their images to appropriate favourability. This is the reality that we are constructing for ourselves. It is the contingent reality of appearances. It is the reality that we live as long as we believe that we are being watched and accepted by other people. And perhaps it is all of this cold un-reality that pushes me forwards to cling more to dreams.

This same notion, regarding the way we live for how (we think) we are perceived in the minds of other people, Blaise Pascal identified clearly in his *Pensées*:

We are not satisfied with the life we have in ourselves and our own being. We want to lead an imaginary life in the eyes of others, and so we try to make an impression. We strive constantly to embellish and preserve our imaginary being, and neglect the real one. And if we are calm, or generous, or loyal, we are anxious to have it known so that we can attach these virtues to our other existence; we prefer to detach them from our real self so as to unite them with the other. We would cheerfully be cowards if that would acquire us a reputation for bravery. How clear a sign of the nullity of our own being that we are not satisfied with one without the other and often exchange one for the other! For anyone who would not die to save his honour would be infamous.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Pascal, Blaise. (translated by Krailshaimer, A.J.) *Pensees*. Penguin: London, England; 1966.

If only Pascal could see how cogent and poignant his statement proves to be today. We replace the self with a façade that we put on for the camera (or the external eyes, or our online presence). We believe that the person we appear to be, we really are, which may force us to lose all sense of an authentic identity. This mistake essentially functions as a trace of the palimpsest truth that is underneath the lies we post online. I desire to be underneath the social norms—where the unintelligible truth lies, and where I can be covered up behind the constructed reality I want to reject. At the same time, I suppose that this rejection is superfluous; that the conditioned reality steeped in kitsch and based on falsity is ultimately unavoidable and inescapable. Perhaps authenticity never existed.

Perhaps even more consequently, presence for the purpose of others requires absence of the self.

In Milan Kundera's novel *Immortality*, it feels as though humanity is uncontrollably devolving into this very problem:

A person is nothing but his image. Philosophers can tell us that it doesn't matter what the world thinks of us, that nothing matters but what we really are. But philosophers don't understand anything. As long as we live with other people, we are only what other people consider us to be. Thinking about how others see us and trying to make our image as attractive as possible is considered a kind of dissembling or cheating. But does there exist another kind of direct contact between my self and their selves except through the mediation of the eyes? ...our self is a mere illusion, ungraspable, indescribable, misty, while the only reality, all too easily graspable and describable, is our image in the eyes of others. And the worst thing about it is that you are not its master. First you try to paint it yourself, then you want at least to influence and control it, but in vain: a single malicious phrase is enough to change you forever into a depressingly simple caricature.⁵⁰

However, I believe that there is still merit in introspection and gathering collective knowledge as power. Faced with our generation and its increasingly exploitive default of sexualizing the self, only by critiquing can we invest some sort of meaning in our impressions of life. We can acknowledge the contingent and fabricated nature of our current world, and that is what gives us the power to transcend the supposed uselessness of life itself. It is our will that becomes ingrained into our immortality, and this can result in

⁵⁰ Kundera, Milan (translated by Kussi, Peter) *Immortality*. HarperCollins: New York; 1990.

the act of others being influenced by our interpretations. This is the path to becoming the masters of our own existence. By the simple action of choosing to gain a better sense of reason and questioning our current veracity, maybe we can slip away from the convenience of actual reality and attempt to think for ourselves as deeper humans. We have the ability to create worlds, instead of just accepting blindly what is placed before us.

And this is what I have set out to do, even though it is just between me and you. I yearn for this life I have laid out for you to mean something more than just effortful scribbling of a different time. I want these pieces to digest and fester into some purpose that will allow you to retain more of what you are than just what you have previously been.

Respectfully yours,

You.

Loss

I don't know what I used to believe.
It seems as though there was never a part of me
who hadn't been exposed
to the unadulterated pain of a sudden ending.
It happened so progressively
that there couldn't be any mistake.
And yet, and
yet,
I woke most mornings
knowing
but hazy;
burgeoning with simple fear
that another day
could signal a thrashing defeat
and again
I would have to face forward
face inward
because it was just too much to
face
backwards.
My tender age
was fantastically vulnerable;
so much
so
that I plainly misunderstood that death was
my forefather
when I said goodbye
to the grandfather
I had never met.

My old friends eddy around
the stream of remembrance
that I suppose I call home.
Those vehicles that deafeningly collided with fate
left lovers to lament
in silence.
And that building that he stepped off of
ever-still towers over
the city
of lost seraphs.

I used to try to bridge
that gap between
waking life
and memory.
To imagine that if
I just thought
hard enough

that
my grandmother's smell—
mothballs and sandalwood—
would run afoul though my mindfulness.
But it was harder than I thought.
And it would merely
generate anguish amidst the longing.

If I could only know
how to remember their faces I would—

And I'm at a loss.

Dear Stacie:

My paternal grandfather, whom I never knew, and who died before I was born.

Sid, a close family friend who would babysit us from time to time, and I don't know the cause, though I'm told it was cancer.

Krista, in grade seven, when she was riding home on her bicycle and was hit by a car coming out of a driveway.

Nathan, in elementary school, who was a local hero in his childhood in our community. The whole city was trying to raise funds to help him get a kidney, and who had had several surgeries and transplants.

Matthew, who in late elementary school took his own life.

My maternal grandfather, to Parkinson's Disease.

My paternal grandmother, less than a month later, when I was in grade eight, to old age.

Danielle, when I was in grade nine and she in grade ten, a childhood gymnastics friend, when she was sitting upon a street curb waiting for a ride home, and a drunk driver struck her.

My godmother, Auntie Yolán, who had a whole wealth of medical problems, but who was one of the most gracious and exuberant people I've been fortunate to know.

Uncle Soo, some time when I was a teenager, to Parkinson's Disease.

Auntie Susan, again, sometime when I was a teenager; liver cancer from hepatitis C, but the death was hidden from the family for months.

Ian, whom I'd known since he was first born, three years after me, when he was around 20, riding in a car with a drunk driver.

Amber, a childhood friend who was on my elementary school softball team, from cancer just after high school.

Vicky, also just out of high school, who died of toxic shock. With my mental illness at this time, my mother refused to let me attend the funeral.

Zeyn, the most brilliant singer and performer I've ever known, when he was in his twenties, by jumping from a building and taking his own life.

Ian's father, Louie, who succumbed to cancer.

Daniel, who died in a snowboarding accident when he hit a tree.

My maternal grandmother, when I was in my twenties, sick from the flu shot and went into a coma, and in her old age never recovered.

Lois, our old neighbor from childhood, to old age. She was a ferocious person, always protesting and having a licence plate that read, "No Nukes".

Life has been scattered with several others, and it hurts me to lose them in this list, to think that they didn't warrant mention in something so personal. But try I must to be authentic and show the meaningful history of the heartbreaking and poignant memory of people who have embraced me throughout life, to whom I must pay homage to their memory.

Saul Friedlander comments on the effect that death had on him as a child, in his book *When Memory Comes*. He remarks that the ceremony of attending a funeral for his school director stayed with him and it was the first time that he had heard of the act of cremation: "For a long time the director's cremation haunted my nightmares. The mind of a child interprets the world in its own way, especially when that child is aware of a growing anxiety round about him which is still, however, difficult for him to identify" (14).

In sympathy,
You.

Daily Devotional

I keep trying to get off the elevator
between floors.
I swear that's not a euphemism;
it's just that I can't seem to see straight-ahead
so the ups and downs don't make any sense.
Perhaps this is why I prefer to sit backwards on the train;
so that I can watch the world funneling away,
speeding into a blurred post-life
of straight lights, or, as my music instructor might say,
straight eights.
Don't tell him I never learned classical music theory –
I can't discern what notes should be played in an F sharp minor chord
progression,
and I couldn't tell you
why the notes harmonize the way they do;
but I can play them as though second nature,
and for whatever reason
after I've played them, I never forget them
(third nature?)

I digress.

Those people I see when I'm backwards on the train,
standing on the platform
melt away
fade away (how cliché of me to think!)
tango away with their empty hands
asking for forgiveness
from skimming through the daily newspapers
which end up bunched and torn under the feet
of God.
A morning cup of coffee
translates to the blood of Christ in that language we call commuting.

Question whether or not feeling is relative;
whether its probative value indicates stitches of past forgetfulness
that intertwine with our own humility and reason.
Is it that needle that pushes me past
quilted sorrows,
mending incantations of an inner monologue
that only seems to taunt me?
Can we uselessly consume medication/pixilation to chemically integrate
the perfect amount of dopamine?
My 'enhanced' state forces Kundera out of my consciousness

and the wherewithal of faded pencil sketches
curling their way through leavened bread from the Eucharist of the Orthodox
Church.

Take one tablet
twice daily
until

gone.

And maybe;
just maybe –
the next time that I
dream of a medium rare steak
pressed between my lips with its juices
anchoring themselves between my teeth
so that I can
save that taste
for more than just a few minutes,
Kafka won't turn in his grave.
And I won't wake in the night
ensconced in what I can only call
shame.

That bite is called violence.

Or violets.

Pale purple violets
of the variety that occur when
knives pierce flesh.

They say that I am a warrior.

I stand corrected.

A worrier.

"We've got an opportunity to do something great", they whisper.

I take a short, last drag.

"What?"

"There's a moment
when all of it comes together;
and it sings out,
and it harmonizes.
Some call it 'fate'".

"I would tend to call that 'synchronicity.'"

"Either way,
it's almost all over
before it ever began".

"That's neither here nor there, then."

I was broken apart – like the remnants of a
three
hole
punch

turned into confetti...
and subsequently decentralizing into mulch;
a forgotten, left-over celebration of well-wishes and
good intentions.

So commute
I will.
Until this once-burned book of Goethe
nestles properly into my stream of serotonin.
What a far better way
to cure that uneasy breath of surrealist realism?
I'm playing a tune
that I remember so well. The intonation and
consonance furl around but
I can't tell if
the melody
escapes through a door of a
diminished seventh chord that
builds a stack of
minor thirds.

So I decide to get off the elevator
in between
repentance
and
acceptance.

This is where I usually cut myself
– off.

Dear Stacie:

I went insane for the first time when I was eighteen years old.

I can hear the voices coming from every direction now. They cling to me as though they may die tomorrow. And it's a funny thing—that I know them so well—that I could in turn never imagine a life without them. It wasn't until I was around seventeen or eighteen years old that I really started noticing them. I suppose I just thought that inner monologues (plural) were human nature. They are, indeed, but I didn't realize until later that perhaps mine manifested themselves differently than others. That was how I fell. And I fell so deep that it couldn't make up for the aching in my bones. Instead, I became hollow. Hollow and succumbing to that hint of a different life where I could take it all in, and transform into despair personified.

It's exceedingly difficult to think back on the whole thing now. It's not that it was so long ago, but in a way, I guess it was. It was a different life, and a different history. It was really the medication that makes the whole thing rather hazy. I so wish that this story were something that I could hide away from these letters to you—that it could be more of a haunting ghost story rather than a tomb or a mausoleum that I visit from time to time. Perhaps better left unsaid, it is a truth that has fallen so much by the wayside, that I fear if I don't revisit it that it will leave me, and I'll have nowhere to hang my hat. Nowhere to understand that from which I came and that which cradled me so much into who I've become, that justice must come of it. Nothing can counterfeit who I once was. So I presume that the best way to impart it to you now, is just trying to make sense of how things were then, and attempt to convey some impression of how my mind turned from something to nothing, and then back to something else entirely.

Early on, I was looking out of some windows, seeing trees that were almost bare. It must have been late autumn, and that beauty of new beginnings was all fading and melting away with the cold. I remember focusing on a single leaf that was hanging onto a small branch. It moved slightly in the wind, and I closed my eyes in order to watch it dance freely, so that I could revel in it all by myself, without harsh winds to knock it around or crush it. It was devoid of people or other leaves surrounding it, away from crowds of unknown things. Perhaps all others could possibly do was ignore and disregard it. The leaf was this perpetual spinning angel, and it was something that I could witness just as it

was. Inclusion in that moment was only mine; mine and those other incantations of voices that made me complete.

I could see the leaf cling to the tree with everything it had, trying so hard not to let go and die. I could see why the leaf would want to fight so hard—it never had a choice. It was the natural inclination of its being to use all its power to stay attached to that tree branch, and ultimately, the tree itself. Fluttering in the wind was the only way it knew how to live, connected to a greater and larger foundation. But, I wondered at the time, which was better: to stay attached to that tree for as long as possible? To live for that completely until it finally had to give in? Or to just let itself loosen its tight hold on the tree and fly far away and slowly travel down to the earth to be eventually consumed by nature itself, and find its resting place in the ground?

Everyone has different sides. We try so eagerly to hide these parts of ourselves that we don't want others to see, or that we don't want to see for ourselves, or that we simply deny that we possess. We are an everlasting race of soldiers that canvass the earth in search of something special within us, who try to be the captains of our own identities. Maybe it can be found within the gratification of others, within a shred of fortune. Weakness bears heavy upon us, that we can think of nothing that would be worse than to allow others to find. So we pull it away from our shells, piece by piece, and throw the pieces into that jigsaw puzzle box, hoping upon hope that either it is too difficult to put back together, or that just enough pieces fell by the wayside that a complete picture could only be impossible. I guess I make it sound like it's all just a game. And I suppose in many ways, that's exactly it. I am the leech clinging on which ruptures the authenticity of my own life.

I'll try to be more explicit. My life was consumed for many years with relatively dire mental illness. I had various selves twisting through my body that I could not control or contain. There was a foundation of hopelessness inside me, a voice downtrodden and hurt, broken and beaten. That voice sought the pointlessness of situations, and never failed to remind me that I was insignificant. The only reassurance to that voice was that I knew that compassion was futile. Sometimes I would be startled by her cries and plummet into despair. They are thin bullets that fly through my ears and shatter their shells in my mind. The shrapnel stings, but I realize it is only her, and that she is just scared. And I am the only one who could ever hear the shots and pains. The voice would try her utmost to be heard outside, but I could never allow that to happen. It was a weakness that could not

be revealed. It would blow any cover that I ever had. I would long for solace within myself, to find who I am that includes all these moving parts and be comfortable enough to feel some degree of normalcy. Hanging branches periodically struck my face while passing by, since my gaze was permanently fixed downwards.

It started out honestly enough. There were moments in high school where I could have caught glimpses into what was happening in my mind, but I didn't know enough to pay them any mind, or think that they might warrant any attention. The end of my high school days presented the most problems. I could not live without retreating into myself. I remember being so ashamed of my face that I couldn't bear to take the school pictures. When my class was called to sit for the pictures, I hid in the girls' bathroom, never wanting to immortalize myself in that moment. I thought that I would only look back at myself in disgust, and therefore there was no point in me sitting for a photograph that would only cause me great anguish. I don't regret that decision and never have. The only thing that plagues me now, is that I can still remember feeling that way.

I've known life by keeping to myself. It almost pains me sometimes to be jubilant around others. It may be a trust issue, but I do realize that it might just mean that I don't expect others to understand or love me when I find it so difficult to accept myself.

In my final year of high school, I began showing the larger warning signs that something might be wrong. I went inside my head too often, and paid no attention to much else. I rarely went to my classes in school, instead just returning home once my parents were at work, to go back to bed. I slept most days away and cared nothing for thinking about any future for myself. I had no dreams or aspirations. I floated along in depression, clinging only to the voices in my head that beat me down further, and stilted my imagination. I would take tests and do well enough to graduate, but I never read the books I was assigned and I defiantly became rebellious. I remember the very day that I took up smoking. It was when I was seventeen years old. I wanted to find a way that I could hurt myself without hurting others around me—without anyone knowing that I had this one thing that might hinder my life in such a way as to delve inside and rip through my lungs, potentially offering a way to die more quickly. I didn't do it to be cool or to look like I was cool. I hid it from the world for months. There was only one person who could know, and it was my friend who was old enough to buy them for me. Little did I know at the time, that the addiction would ravage me for decades to come, always gently reminding me of who

I once was and the slavery that became me. It turned from a sadistic ritual into an embarrassing rhythm that taunted me wherever I turned.

If only I could know now that you have ceased being tethered to this wretched habit, I could perhaps rest with some greater ease.

And it happened without me ever knowing it. I couldn't have known what I had in store for me, and if I had known it, I wonder if I ever would have tried to stop it all before it even began.

I barely remember the first time. I remember the subsequent days but I don't remember what it first felt like. I must state of my own behest that I have never tried to kill myself. Pain, yes. Death, no. And I mean this seriously—I did not intend to ever commit suicide. I may have wanted to, and I may have liked to, but I never attempted to do the deed myself. I fancied that it would just happen on its own; to no end did I entertain my mind with such thoughts. But there was never once in my life to this point that I tried to do it myself.

The cutting was so easy. I felt nothing, and I wanted to feel something. Something worth more than superficial dramas and faceless immature thoughts. People describe it as being numb. I can't say with any certainty that this was how I felt, because I think that being numb might have been preferable to what I was going through. To me it was deafening. It was a whirlwind of thoughts and screams running through my head simultaneously. It was me attempting to soften their voices without tearing my scalp from my head. I wanted it to calm, and I wanted it to matter. I wanted anything but to feel that agony that was my own. The blade of the knife was cool on my skin, but it didn't feel the way one would think it would. It wasn't an easy feat to just swipe it across the flesh. It took more force than that—more sawing really, than just a clean sweep. And I could feel each layer of skin through each motion.

It subdued the voices some, all except for one. The one that harvested the seeds of my failure and watered them into ideas of madness and futility. The curses ran through my blood and crawled under my skin, making their way to my nerves and attaching themselves like stitches, forcing them to heal together until they were scars. But they couldn't loosen my clenched fists. It was then when I came to the realization that the voice

wasn't my own. It was outside of me and the words were not mine. They were never mine.

The cut was only the first of many. Countless and shameful, ordered and contagious. At the time I didn't think there was really anything I could do about it. The slave that I was to cigarettes was not the only thing that I was chained to. I remember the day after that first cut, I put a regular old band-aid on it and went off to work. It was on my left arm, and I didn't even have the wherewithal to make up a good story about it. My friends asked what had happened and I don't even recall what lie I fed them. And I could tell that they didn't believe me. But what could they really say? One of my best friends at the time told me it looked as though someone had taken a knife and cut my arm. I laughed this off somehow, not thinking that it could really matter at all. If I could have worn the pain that I had in my heart on my sleeve, I think my face would shove what was left of my gall into my own shoe, waiting for me to tread on it further.

It wasn't too long after that first cut that things started to spiral downwards and pick up speed. They say that 'the first cut is the deepest', but I know better. Once I had the stomach to withstand it, I couldn't be stopped. Obviously, this was one surefire way to get noticed, rather than me hiding all my pain inside. Which, to be fair, I wasn't exactly wanting. I don't believe that I was crying out for help. I honestly think that I was trying to wallow, and I didn't care much one way or the other whether people came to my rescue or not.

I ended up cutting myself so deep that stitches were required. And that was the day that I ended up in hospital for the first time.

There are so many depictions of psychiatric wards in mainstream media. I really can't say whether they are all accurate or not, but I can only tell of my experience within them.

I want to pause here for you. I've waffled around the notion of authenticity in these letters to you. And I've struggled with the impact this may all have on you. Perhaps these are memories that are better left unspoken and unremembered. I really can't say with any certainty whether it is advantageous for you to know and understand these recollections with any degree or measure of acknowledgement. Writing out these words feels like pain personified. Importantly enough, these are the years of my life that I remember least. I attribute it to the medication I was being fed, or perhaps that I would insulate myself from

going back to those days when I couldn't be real enough to warrant permanency. The entire time is blurry; foggy enough to see some outlines of obstacles in my path, but not enough to pinpoint anything. And really, the only things I have left are the scars I carry on my body, covered up by long sleeves and long pants.

I feel that I want to protect myself from the harsh realities that will come through on these pages. But then again, you are I: me in a different body, and in a different time. If I could somehow show you eternity, I would gladly risk these sheepish meanderings and prove to you that we are the same. That no matter what comes before us, the resilience that was built up, layer upon layer, can be enough to sustain us. As I behold you now, I want to say that life could never have been the way it was, and the way it is, without certain drops of water that resonate with rings around them, enough to fill up an entire ocean. You must know that every droplet found its own way, and garnered strength out of something so small, so weak, that at the time they all seemed so insignificant. You just need to know that all these tiny bits of you are something that commanded an altogether imperfect person, and you can flood yourself with tears, and they will eventually fall into that ocean as well. I have been told that not knowing is the best place to start. Here goes nothing.

I was my own natural ecosystem, thriving inside my own world. There was a pulling within, contradictory in essence, perhaps, that would force me to escape from reality. I never knew what was happening as it was, but I would come up for air every so often, and realize that I was broken. The disassociation muffled out even the whitest of noises. I am the cassette tape that I used to use when I would record songs off the radio. Whenever I close my eyes, the tape goes into the player and, being fallible, the tape gets gibbled—eaten up no matter what function you try to put it on; fast forward, rewind, record, play... pause. These long thin lines of brown, shiny tape, tangle themselves all up in the cassette player, and if any sound does happen to come out of the stereo, it is mangled and terrible to the ears. When I open my eyes again is when someone has taken the cassette out of the stereo and found the tape in utter disaster. While my eyes are open, I am perpetually trying to unravel the tape without damaging it too much. Untangling all the knots and mess. Then I must try to spin it all through again, hoping that the folds and bends in the tape won't ultimately hinder the way the song is supposed to sound. When my eyes are closed, there is no telling how bad the damage can be. The voices scream and goad inside my head, and everything is spinning faster than I can control, pulling in different

directions. It all goes this way until the tape eventually snaps, playing distorted and garbled sounds that try to force themselves into tunes. I wonder if the borders of my thoughts will ever be able to reach the actual recesses of my mind.

That first time I was there, it was already so familiar. I wasn't even surprised when a faceless nurse came to give me my meds. There was an empty feeling inside me that made me realize that I had almost no memory of what had happened before that time. They were all questions that summoned no answers. All that was in front of me was who I was, stitches and tears, hopelessness and some measure of forbearance. I was the faded Polaroids that were contained in my baby book, sometimes with a smile on my face and sometimes looking off into some remote distance, that must have continued on somewhere, in some other reality. It must have been possible that I had this disease the whole time; I just didn't know how to authenticate it. I would periodically shift my body in that plastic and hardened bed so that a different portion of my skin would feel the coolness that emanated from it. It was like I was waking up each time; each time was a deep breath in, and I held it until the bed began to warm under my body heat.

I finally stood up on top of myself. I gazed into my glassy eyes. It was the mirror of me, the clone. And so I closed my eyes and fell. I went right back into myself and fused us together. All I could ever have hoped for was a peaceful feeling, where the one of me that was able to stare out of my own eyes could weld into those other ones who were twisted and gnarled. And we blended together and collapsed into something resembling reality. It felt so different for me not to have hands in fists, sweating and pressing my nails into my rough, calloused palms. This is disjointedness at its fullest: this is the way that my mind was calm. I desired disenchanting vulgarities that swim and stitch their way through my brain, and this is the only thing that I could ever learn to call normal.

The girl lying in the hospital bed is me, and the girl that fell into her is me. And the girl spitting out these words is me, and the girl watching and reading it all from afar is me. The evaporation of myself was slowly easing away. It reminds me of the song my grandma would sing while she was wasting away in hospital, waiting to die: "Show me the way to go home. I'm tired and I want to go to bed..."

Through all the pain on the inside, I feel transformed to become something different in the eyes of other people. It is something that I want to cling to—something that will not be

warped by what it is that makes me horrible; what makes me vulgar and disturbed. I want so much to be admired and safe, but that too is fleeting, and the pangs of inner control seize my being and knock me breathless, once again. I had believed that I was something that could acquire indestructibility. I was an outcast of society; but not caring is not caring.

I was shut away from the world for a length of time that I cannot even remember anymore. My first stint wasn't exceedingly long, several weeks perhaps. The other times were generally longer, with the longest being sometime around three or four months. The doctors thought they were helping me by feeding me medication after medication. What they were really doing was marinating the vapid imagination that I had already initiated. They had locked me inside of myself, and that, in essence, is exactly where I needed to be at that time. Instead of trying to get better, to get well again (if that is such a thing), I relished the different perspective that my medicated mind adapted to. Within the secure confines of the brain, there is no outside force that can hurt you. Only the manifestations of the inner workings could dictate what would become of my life.

Maybe there is hope for those of us who suffer from mental illness. Maybe we are just the lucky ones who will be able to see the world as it should be—untainted by the materialism and superficial personalities that we all adopt to be a part of what is considered reality. I now treasure that I was able to believe in myself enough to admit that I was trapped inside my body and mind, and that I was lithe and a permutation of a human. But I had to live with that consuming and ever-present truth, that for everything I had done, I had done to myself. Every time I was rejected, it was I rejecting myself. But inevitably these feelings fade, and we eventually reconstruct the images in our minds, as I am doing now, and they loom over us until we believe we have reached another one of those terrific instants. We sometimes travel great distances to believe that we have changed, and that we deserve something more. In the end, we do deserve something more, but that place that we have found is naught.

My mother came to visit me every day. She was the only one. Others may have come periodically, but she was constant. And I was despondent and didn't value her presence the way I should have.

Putting all of this down on paper and unravelling through the memory of weary days in this tumultuous endeavor has been harrowing and sad. I see how my days spent retreated

inside my head were excruciating for my family. It embarrasses me more than anything else. In a way, you could say that my family was keeping me subdued more than anything else. I didn't want them to feel worse, and I wanted to try to keep it away from them, so that they didn't have to recognize that their daughter and sister was insane. And even though they tried, I know that they will never see me in the same light. There were times when I was allowed out to go home for a specified time-period on a supervised pass. I remember that I had to take a bath with my sister so that they could ensure that I wouldn't do anything to myself in that should-be private time. My mother says now that she had all but given up hope for me to ever live a normal life. The pinnacle of the time spent in hospital was the day my doctor decided that I needed to be transferred to a permanent residence in order to get the help I needed, rather than staying in the temporary psychiatric ward. I was to be sent to a place called "Riverview", known around the area as a mental hospital, and in the minds of others, a horrifying place akin to the sanitariums shown in movies. This prospect terrified me, but since I was a certified patient, there was nothing I could do. On the day that I was to be transferred, another doctor intervened in my case and asked to provide his own evaluation and assessment of me to provide a second opinion in the matter. I met with this doctor for at least an hour and he interviewed me in detail. At the end of it, he convinced the others that Riverview was not the right place for me. That was the only time I ever spoke to that doctor, but somehow, I know that he saved my life. If I had been transferred, deep down I know that I would likely still be there, confined to live without society.

They call it schizoaffective disorder. They say it is a combination of schizophrenic behaviours, with delusions or hallucinations, and a mood disorder, such as depression, or manic episodes. The manic thing never suited me, but the depression was almost always prevalent. The delusions and auditory hallucinations would come and go in episodes. The one voice that seemed to pervade was a booming cleaver in otherwise calm exteriors, though I begged for it to stop. And I blamed my behaviours on it, never taking accountability for myself. It would be as though the commands took over my body, and I had no choice in the matter. When I would come to, I could barely remember what had happened before, and would only have trace elements that I could use as clues into what I had done. On the ward, I would get creative without access to sharp objects, and would bite or scratch until I would bleed, forever hoping that it could be enough to appease that voice in my head.

I forged through for years, in and out of hospital and weekly doctor's appointments. I cycled through medications to try to land on the correct regimen. I would sometimes stay in group homes for people with mental illness, if it was determined I needed a closer watch than what I could get at home. There were some nights in the hospital, when they had to take the bed outside of my room so I would sleep in front of the nurse's station, to ensure that I wasn't harming myself.

But it wasn't always bad. I did make friends in the hospital while I was there. None that hold the same weight for me as Gentle Ben. He was schizophrenic and in a bad condition when he arrived. His brain apparently produces too much dopamine. He was sweet and kind, and we would walk around the ward together every night, sometimes up to fifty laps. We would hold hands and talk softly to each other and tell of our stories, fears and dreams. Ben will never know how much he assisted me in recovery, or how important his friendship was to me. It was never a romantic relationship, but it was a nurturing friendship that was so necessary at that point in my life—it brought me closer to myself in a way. I was able to talk to him like no other, and by doing so, I could put myself back together in a comprehensible way, slowly learning to understand myself amidst the horror that I was experiencing.

And therefore, this is probably the biggest aspect of myself that I hide away from others, whether it be by wearing long sleeves or by presenting in such a way as to divert attention from the obvious signals that appear in my personality. I have learned how to shake those signs off and project a different demeanor, in order to implicitly advise people that I am one of the 'normal' ones, despite better judgment. It's this crazy (I use this term very loosely) paradox in life, that external pressure tells us we are supposed to be ourselves: genuine and honest. But no one actually wants all sides of their personalities to be shown all the time. We have to hang on to our 'other' selves, and can hardly think of ourselves without thinking of what the 'other' thinks of us first. This silly game creates the world for us, rather than us living inside it.

I don't really think that I need to say anything more about it. A resolution, perhaps.

I know that one day, not unlike any other in context, when my mother visited me. She told me on that day that I was different. She said that I was more like myself (whatever that means). I couldn't see it myself, and honestly couldn't understand what she meant by

that. But I suppose that I remember that day so well because I was different. I was ready to take responsibility for myself and force myself to ground and pursue a life that I could own. I will never know if the medication was what helped me heal, or if it was a change in my own chemistry that shifted. It wasn't that I was miraculously better always, because I still had divots that would cut me back down along the way. But it was a moment in time where things changed for me. I began thinking about a future, and caring about what that future might entail, rather than layering myself in seclusion and dark thoughts. I got out of the hospital that time and started working towards accepting my illness and using it to play into my own strengths.

I do, however, still need certain medications for daily life. I am not blind enough to think that my illness has gone away completely. But it is manageable, and for someone with this diagnosis, I am extremely high functioning—which is something that I am now thankful for. It used to really bother me that I was fettered to pills to get me through the days. I would think that I was never actually myself; that I was just a chemically-enhanced version of myself and that I could never know my true self without the crutch that I had assimilated into my life. I've come now to accept this and consider that I am a lucky one. One who has seen the perils of what life can be like inside myself, and one who can be shared with the world. I still have moments where I can see symptoms of the illness and I try to nurture those aspects of myself with love, and without judgment or chastisement.

Looking back on it now, sometimes I wonder if it was even real. Symptoms I had at the time do not feel the same as they do now. And some professionals I have seen still wonder if it ever really was "schizoaffective disorder". Perhaps the entire thing was an adjustment disorder while I grew into the person I was to eventually become. It is entirely possible. There may have never been a psychosis and there may never have been any of the afflictions that I thought I was going through. And maybe, and this may be the scariest thing of all, maybe I made the whole thing up. Maybe I wanted so badly to be sick, that I prepared myself an identity of that makeup and perpetuated it. I may still be perpetuating it now. We will never know for sure whether this is who I am, or who I have been, or who I may become. I will always second guess the whole existence of it because I honestly can't remember much of what I felt, and sometimes I don't understand what I feel now. It is unfortunately possible that the whole affair may be conjuring of how I wanted to feel, because I couldn't grapple with who I actually was. Again, I don't know and I don't know. I know that I made it through and I know that there are still times where I can't feel myself

enough to control a flood of emotions. I know that the voice is there and the monotonous shifting of my positions as I lie in bed won't change that.

I don't have the answers that I was ever looking for. And I know that I write this all very matter-of-factly, but I think I'll stop here. There is no way to convey to you now, what it all felt like, and I don't think I'd be able to articulate it even if I could. Just know, that you're safe now. And always try to remember that the voice is merely one more part of you that needs soft compassion. I will keep these memories safe and secure, tucked away inside my heart, and only try to look back onto them with that same benevolence.

Lovingly,

You.

I want to move on

It's twenty after two.
Or so we initially thought.
The permanence of herculean fixtures
where we hang our smoking jackets and egos,
eventually shy away
into the periphery and sink lower than we'd like to believe.
When we put our hands out to lift off the jackets and egos
we must grasp at the child-like height
and cower our shoulders
to safely encase ourselves inside.
And those crevices deep in our pockets,
smoking jacket or otherwise,
hide the lint and misgivings and crumbs
from former lives
that drown in cotton
and ruffle certain spinelessness
in an effort to win foot-races.
We wait patiently,
though nervously,
thinking that a moment will softly arrive
where we can illustrate that smile
and shave the corners off
with an inkling that a natural forbearer
might give us a healthy name.
When we were led into temptation
all thought dissipated
to revel in clear-cut dimensions of trees
who could no longer sway
and no longer tell us
of their infinite forays into that great past life.
Oozing centres of sap
where droplets could see themselves in each other;
amber-ridden and sticky sweet,
following a closer hidden essence
and chasing and racing each other down coarse bark
until they couldn't keep up anymore.
I'll allow it; even if just once.
A small shudder encourages disavowal
of small iron railings that we drag our hands across
just in case we falter slightly.
That ring upon my finger makes the softest sound;
tinny and with furry echoes
reminding me of gentler times.
Coerced as they might have been,
lovely leanings bunker down into
empty honesty.
And now it is a twenty to nine—
minutes have fallen off the page

to settle sullenly and forgotten into the past.

Dear Stacie:

I have always claimed that I am a person who is constantly changing. I couldn't possibly have any idea as to the person who you are now, the person that you have become. What I know is that through my formidable years I have changed with such defiance at times, with such subtlety at others, that it is increasingly difficult to transport myself back to where I once was. I try furtively to imagine what I must have been going through back then, and I can barely muster enough gall to think of who I have been.

I was asked recently to come up with a list of adjectives to describe myself. The list that I came up with was this:

Responsible
Consistent
Predictable
Reliable
Punctual

For fun, I asked Darin which adjectives he would ascribe to me. He said:

Pedantic
Timid
Quick to panic

I asked my mom what she would say:

Straight-arrow
Overly sympathetic
Honest
Loyal
Very funny
Deeply thoughtful
Sensitive

When I offered the adjectives to describe myself to the person asking, she asked me if I ever 'let my hair down'. She said that the way I described myself was 'boring'. She wanted to know if I ever allow myself to just live with reckless abandon. I have thought about this for some time now. I used to let my hair down. I don't much anymore. What is it that has changed within me that I have forced myself to become so much more of a rule-following and steady person? I'm not ashamed. I feel comfortable and secure in the person I have become, though I can't figure out just how I got here. And I do let my hair down (usually not literally), but it depends on the context in which I will allow it to happen. When I am

with Darin, I will spontaneously break out into dance or song. I will laugh wholeheartedly when I think something is funny, even if the other people around don't think it's funny (which I believe shows great character). And I will say those things that are on my mind that I know for sure will make me sound dumb or silly, just because I can. I'm like this because I do not feel judged and because I have a steadfast love. But I'm like this because, perhaps, so much of myself I directly try to hide from the outside world, that maybe I sometimes forget it's all there. I need to placate the external to prove to them and to myself that I am 'fine' and 'normal'. I feel the need to trust myself that I can come across as someone who is genuine, all the while holding myself back in so many ways.

But I'm talking about change. Which also means that I'm talking about remorse. I've told you about how the world has changed, how that has made me feel. And now I turn inwards.

I was not always a straight-arrow. I spent a lot of my time trying to rebel against anything that I could. I rebelled against being anything like my sister, because I felt at the time that I couldn't relate to her at all, and being only one year younger than her, I always felt as though I were living in her perfect shadow (she really was perfect to me at the time—vastly intelligent, always excelling in school and music and sports; and she was/is remarkably beautiful—always winning the hearts of whichever boy she happened to choose, and of course all of those whom she did not. I thought that if I couldn't be perfect, which I knew I was not, then I would put in effort to be the opposite). I rebelled against society and what societal norms were urging me to do. And I rebelled against my family in general, thinking at the time that I was some sort of different person who was clearly misunderstood. What I realize now, is that I misunderstood myself and how I worked in all these different environments. I was actually another cog in the wheel, and once I learned to accept that, things turned out very differently for me. I don't know if everyone has these times in their lives when they think that their situation is unique to everyone else, and that if only someone could just understand them, that life could make sense. I suppose in the end, what I had to realize was that uniqueness does not depend on an outward approval or recognition, it lies within the bounds of our own imagination—spurting out pieces of ourselves that eventually fold and cling to others, balancing out in an array of what other people are grappling with themselves.

I was in grade seven when I really started to rebel. It was after the loss of one of my dear classmates, who had been killed by a car striking her when she was bicycling on the sidewalk. I don't know whether that has anything to do with me rebelling or not, but part of me thinks it significant. I fell directly into the wrong crowd, and I was a follower because I just didn't really know any better. I was one of the mean girls and I don't remember enjoying it, but I remember sticking to it because it was where I felt I belonged at the time. When I look back on it all now, it is embarrassing, and I feel ashamed for what I did. If I had only known how I would have turned out, perhaps I would have made better choices. And I suspect that is why I am telling you all about it now, so that hopefully, against all else, you remember how it must have felt to be so unacceptable and awful. Saul Friedlander captures this sentiment accurately, when he describes an incident in his past that he felt remorse later on:

Each of us has certain secret shames, those brief instants buried in forgetfulness that provoke an immediate burning sensation when an association brings them back to conscious awareness, an instinctive disgust, immediately followed by the desire to see those memories blotted out forever.⁵¹

It started out when we were milk monitors. One would think that a school milk monitor would be very nerdy and responsible. Instead, we used this time as our own way of being bad. We were able to leave class early before the lunch break to organize all the milk that the students had ordered into crates. We would take them around to each classroom to distribute the orders. Simple enough. I was still poor at that time, so I never had any milk delivered to me. However, when we would organize the milk before it was distributed, we stole some of the milk. Mostly the chocolate milk, but we weren't very discriminatory at the time. I don't recall even liking milk that much, but it was the excitement of stealing someone else's milk. We would sneak into the back of the cloakroom and drink the milk. It seems so absurd to me when I spell this out for myself now. That was the first foray into stealing that I had. But on top of that, there was one time that I will never forget, when I was a telephone monitor for the same elementary school. I would sit in the office at lunch time and answer the telephone while the receptionist was on her lunch break. If anyone called I would have to go onto the public announcement system to page the person who was needed. Again, I didn't take the job all that seriously. One lunch-hour, I was looking in the desk drawer for something that I needed, some sort of office supply, and I noticed

⁵¹ Friedlander, Saul, *When Memory Comes*, p.115

a two-dollar bill. This was all the way back when two-dollar bills still existed. I took it. I was so audacious that I just took it and didn't really think twice about it. What it meant to me was candy that I could buy at the corner store. It didn't mean responsibility or kindness or privacy or theft or even evilness. Those words didn't enter my mind, and I was selfish and corrupt in believing that maybe they wouldn't notice. It was utterly humiliating.

The kids that I was hanging around with influenced me in ways that I cannot fathom. We were total clichés of young hooligans who had nothing better to do than make those around them miserable. We didn't usually have access to any cigarettes or drugs at the time, so we rolled up tea leaves in thin paper and we would smoke tea leaves. If we could get our hands on cigarettes, we would smoke those. This was what we imagined was "cool" to do. Sometimes now when I smoke, I have a faint whiff of something that resembles what it was like back then, smoking tea leaves and being cool. That might have been the only time in my life when I actually thought I was cool, and the funny part of that now, is that I look back and think it was the only real time in my life when I was a complete idiot.

The very worst of it, after the smoking and stealing, was that we ganged up and bullied other girls from my class. And this, this, this, is what I will never get over and that I will never forgive myself. I am fraught with shame when I come around to think of it, which I do very often, because I am still forever plagued with how perfectly and terrifically shameful the whole experience was. Once, we wrote an entire booklet to one girl where all we did was write mean things to her and we left it on her doorstep. I was such a distasteful person and I wish that I could have relived these moments of my life so that I could come out a better person. Eventually, and not long after we had done these regretful things, I broke off from the gang of nasty girls and I went and personally apologized to everyone I had offended. Of course, that will never be enough for me to retain any semblance of absolution. Sometimes I still think that bad things that befall me now are left over remnants of karma for what I did when I was younger, and the bully in me who has subsequently left without any trace, other than the memories that remain in my mind and my pathetic sense of longing for never having done those acts.

I remember my mom trying to intervene in my behavior, even though at the time, she had no idea the extent of my bad ways. She tried without success to stop me from being

friends with the girls that I was around. She told me at the time that they were bad influences to me, and her reasoning was that they all came from broken homes. I was the only one who still had parents that were together. I was so offended by this comment at that time. I will never know for sure if that were anything that could have instigated these young girls to act out, and I suppose the generalization is a bit bellicose now, considering how far the world has come in terms of broken families, but I wonder how much value can be attributed to it.

We also hung around the other bad kids at school, and those that didn't even go to school at the time, but had been expelled for whatever reason. There was a notorious bad apple who lived around our neighbourhood and everyone knew his name. He was an adopted child and he had been kicked out of every school he had attended. He was known to be violent and involved in drugs. To us, he was someone to be feared, but we grew further and further into his circle. To be honest, I don't remember much about how it all happened. One day, we were hanging around the local park and there were two young boys who were walking through the park. This bad apple went up to the two of them, pulled out a knife, and asked them for all their money. When I noticed what was happening, I realized that the two young boys were friends of my sister from high school. One of the boys quickly bolted—he ran as fast as he could across the park in an effort to get to safety. The other boy was trapped and was trying to empty out his pockets. He was telling the bad apple that he didn't have any money on him, and he was trying to show him that his pockets were empty. I quickly went over to them and I told the bad apple that I knew this guy, and to leave him alone. The bad apple instantly listened to me, sauntered off, and left the young boy alone. Though I think I felt some sort of pride at the time for saving these guys, I look back on it now and am again, embarrassed that I was part of something so grotesque as to be the intervener in a jumping that probably scarred these boys for some time to come.

I suppose it is true that those people who are rebellious have a certain impulse to automatically rebel against anything that tries to cookie-cutter them into a certain way. It need not matter what that certain thing is, but just that if life is trying to sway them to become something, they purposefully and specifically defy that pressure and go the opposite way. And I confess that I am not like that anymore. I want to follow convention. It is interesting, because in a way, the rebel is actually being controlled by compulsion to

do the opposite of what they are rebelling against, and therefore they actually do not have control of their life. It is more the people that are not rebelling that are only actually free to decide what they want for their life. Rousseau commented about this rebellion in his *Sixth Walk of the Reveries of the Solitary Walker*:

I have never been truly fitted for social life, where there is nothing but irksome duty and obligation, and that my independent character has always made it impossible for me to submit to the constraints which must be accepted by anyone who wishes to live among men. As long as I act freely I am good and do nothing but good, but as soon as I feel the yoke of necessity or human society I become rebellious, or rather recalcitrant, and then I am of no account. When I ought to do the opposite of what I want, nothing will make me do it, but neither do I do what I want, because I am too weak.⁵²

It took me a long time to learn this. All apologies that I have offered were likely more selfish than they were anything else. I don't pretend that they were ever enough to suggest any kind of repentance for me—they never will. I live with the knowledge of myself as the bad girl who keeps these secrets to herself, behaving as though there were some part of me that could forget and relieve that burden that I carry alongside my shadow. I still now run the bath water as hot as I can possibly stand it, or a titch more than I can stand it, until it is almost scalding. I like the way the heat feels on my skin, but perhaps in some way I also want that touch of pain to keep sinking in.

Sincerely,

You.

⁵² *Reveries*, p.103.

Farming Absolution

The washing machine is on.
I can hear the faint din of the water splashing from the other room.
It may be better to know that the cycle
is on repeat
repeat
since these dirty things in life
never fully make it very far
without needing another wash.
But I was never obsessed with cleanliness
(though I present that way)
for no other reason than perhaps laziness.
And perfection was more of a cloud of pretentious pandering
than that ugly yoghurt stain
that shows on the lapels of my green coat.
Far better to loosen the claw-like grip of transience
than to waver alarmingly when a leaf blows across the road.
Boorish and uncouth
I lift my gaze to uncover that which seemingly
we discover when children.
Because what we know
we know better
we know better than most
and what we think we ought to know
scrapes by without alerting us that things might be improved
should we question those ideals we know not why we held.
A smallish flight of sorrow parades down foolishness, and
lithe figurines of animals that I played with when younger
curtail and prance through lost time.
I think of them now, once more so loving
and respectful
than I once was when ignorant.
And the cycle has finished.

Dear Stacie:

Though in many ways I would rather forget some aspects of this story, the conclusion is more important than the journey. The long and short of it, is that I was one of the many unfortunate women who has dated an asshole. But it ended up altering my being to make me more human. I thought that my love for him somehow dissipated the fact that he treated me poorly. I don't want to use this sacred time I have with you to dump on a man who tragically hurt me more than I'd care to admit. Suffice to say, perhaps if he read these words now he might know that the demons I faced needed to be embraced, rather than judged and criticized. Perhaps he would realize that he was loved and accept it just at that, a distant past where I cowered and curtsyed to him, browbeaten and fragile. He never knew all these past memories that I stored up inside myself, and he never asked.

The first time that he saw my scars he didn't really say much about it. I had hidden them from him for so long that it was a surprise to him when he finally noticed. And I said nothing about it, because I didn't want to admit frailty and because I was ashamed. At one point in time he told me that we would eventually need to talk about it, and I said, why? He didn't have much of an answer for that, and that was pretty much how it was left for the rest of the relationship.

It was one night when he told me on a busy, downtown street corner that he had gone against his own morals by dating me, because I owned a car and I ate meat. And while this statement was filled with hatred and judgment, I re-evaluated the person I wanted to be. I was ignorant for most of my life, aimlessly meandering by without much conscious thought about the environment, sustainability, and what life could look like outside of my own microcosm. I only later discovered that I had all the fragmented pieces that would solidify who I really was, and who I am now. I needed to reach that point in my life where I could intentionally live with purpose.

And I therefore evidently remark that my journey to become a vegetarian was rather backwards. I didn't realize that I was a vegetarian, or why I was a vegetarian until after I became one. Yes, my relationship with this man instigated a desire to prove my worth, but still long after the relationship was over, I have never looked back on this as a regret or a poor choice. I have only ever grown further into loving myself more for living with this purpose. My veins slightly protruded from my small frame and weaved their way around

my bones, constantly reminding me that taking care of them was a priority, and subsequently, my connection to nature was all interrelated. From a place where I was suffocating to be autonomous and loved, a place so terrifyingly small, I evolved into kinship with the world around me.

Even my experiences with animals seem stunted to me now. We grew up with cats—first it was Puddy, and then it was Thomas. I don't really remember Puddy very well anymore. But I can summon up the feelings I had when we had to put her down after she was attacked by a raccoon. This was probably one of my very first experiences with death, if I think about it. Thomas, also a female cat, I remember much more clearly, and I was much more affectionate with her. She was part of the family, had a stocking that hung next to ours at Christmastime, and I would make up songs, her favorite being "Midnight Tuna", and sing them to her. I guess I did this because my mom did this. Maybe I should attribute most of my good ideas to things my mother has taught me.

Thomas wasn't really therefore considered an animal, but more of a sibling. And this intimate union with an animal brought me forward later in life when I started really becoming an animal person. I tried to save animals that were sick and needed caring for, and I would find homes for animals that needed them. When I lived in South Korea, I saved three dogs from certain death. I kept one and brought her home with me, Waffles, and she was everything to me.

Instead of a sibling, she was more of my child. She was a different sort of dog, in many ways. I suppose most people say that about their dogs, since their own relationship with their dog is unique from that of what they see of other dog owners. But they're right, in a way, because only by spending the amount of time in connection with that dog, can they really know the idiosyncrasies of their particular pet. The way I would describe Waffles is very subdued, docile, timid, gentle, and sometimes almost stoic. People tell me that she takes after her mother. She doesn't get all that excited about things, maybe certain treats sometimes, rarely barks, unless she happens to come face to face with a crow, and is generally warm. She doesn't eat like a dog. I am hard-pressed sometimes to force her to eat anything, and I often end up hand-feeding her the entire meal. Other dogs seem to eat anything and everything. But she never really seems very interested in eating. Similarly, it is hard to take her on walks. She will dig her heels in and refuse to go.

Stubborn but tender, calm but coy. And oh! Her snoring. She snores as uncontrollably and lovingly as my grandma used to snore. Darin leaves the room. I breathe it all in.

It pains me to think of you now, not having known Waffles in the way that I have.

After I became a vegetarian I discovered all the many reasons why I should actually *be* a vegetarian, and became much more resolute in my decision. This was also more of the time when I uncovered my attitude with respect to sustainability in our modern society. Though I can't say that I have done absolutely everything I can to assist in the harrowing endeavour to save the environment, I am at the very least more conscious and mindful of what I should be doing to take part.

I have to relinquish and forgive myself for opening my eyes late and experiencing a so-called love that served only to wound my being. In actuality, these fragments of life over time have formed themselves into the semblance of life I now own. I have impeded the dominance I have over animals by reflecting back upon the voices that are stifled over a non-linear time. Though I am not immune to the disheartening plague and genocide, the crevices of my soul still cry out at the thought. My denial now falls short of being convincing. The new avowal of care haunts my decisions and disintegrates through my own hands, sprawling through the connections and branching out to that which nature silently imposes.

Even still, I am distraught over seeing animals suffer. When we watch movies or television programs where an animal is hurt or dies, I cannot help but cry or be so emotional that I cannot bear to watch. Darin says this is odd for me, since I never seem to be so moved when something similar happens to a human. Maybe it is the thought that the animals are so much more vulnerable than humans, and that they don't have the same ability for choice or fate that we can so readily assume. I don't know what it is that makes my heart cry out for them. I often have dreams at night where I accidentally eat meat. And my first thought is: did anyone see me do it? And only secondarily to that is the shame my mouth feels pressed against something dead that was once alive. I hope soon that it will have been so long that I will not have to think first about whether the outside world has 'caught' me in the act, but that the second natured thinking will only be of the personal choice that interrupts my thought pattern.

I hope that you now have still never allowed another animal to pass through your lips and into your gullet. That grace that you expected would flow and supersede what lies you had told, should await you now. And I thank you for it.

Compassionately,

You.

Darin

The trees are markedly aghast
with the cold that fills them asunder.
Will it be my love, who
carefully calms them just so?
I root down, and I come to. He may be
periodically reaching down to tie his rogue laces,
or searching for the right word
to make him sound the slightest bit
more knowledgeable than I (which of course, I can
neither confirm nor deny).
All I can muster is a glint in my eye,
reserved just for him
that he mistakenly calls a 'scowl'. And I would
never presume too much,
for the bark on those trees can only
sweater the wood for so long—but
I secretly pause extra hard when I know that
parting is nigh and second glances
stray
before
they
are
memory.

And there are so many synonyms for *memory*.
Like hunger. Or correcting grammar.
So far it seems
that those words of his are slow. That
even though try as I might, I cannot
somehow make them into
perfectly folded paper airplanes
to flit across endless depths and
challenge the stars. He will fill the water
on my bedside table and allow me
to warm my cold hands under his shirt (sometimes).
Paper cuts. Unshaved legs. Waiting in traffic lights
in silence.
And still.

I hope I never have to clear my head and get away from it all.
That this suitable ballet shakes those trees
until they no longer have leaves to spare. And life will meander along,
my love endlessly undertaking the weight of his body
when he unconsciously shifts down the bed late into the night
so that I have to reach over and touch his face
just to make sure he is there.
I thought of another synonym: vacancy.
I dance and sing a little ditty for him when he's a bad day.

And still.

I will barricade myself in this fraction of a second
to gauge the surroundings and make sure it's safe.

Maybe next year the falling leaves
will pad softly along the ground until we can't bear
to laugh anymore.

Fiercely, my love. Fiercely now.

Dear Stacie:

I would be remiss if I didn't impart to you the experiences you've had in and out of love. I can't say with any degree of certainty how much you will have grown through the years and what time may have offered to you or intervened when appropriate. And this is exactly where I cannot claim to know what to say. Like a duck that is seen above water careening effortlessly, but unbeknownst to us underwater his feet are flapping and pushing against the current with strength. I have been fortunate enough to have been in love, and to have been hurt by love. But to be honest, I don't think that illuminating each one here is just. Failed relationships have nurtured my heart and built up strength within me, by revealing those aspects of me which were weakened each time.

Darin was the one who saw my scars and loved me for them, not in spite of them.

I met him without warning, though it took a rather long period for us to *really* meet. This was something distinct for me—that I was unable to comprehend my feelings towards him for quite some time. After meeting him for the very first time where it was happenstance that my sister and I were at the grocery store where he worked. My sister introduced me to him there, and I didn't think much of it at the time. Shortly after that he came over to our house to hang out with my sister and he brought me a compact disc that he had made for me, a new album that had just been released by the Prodigy, which was a relatively obscure band, not mainstream music by that point in time, quite heavy, alternative and electronic. This is the strange part. Anyone who had met me at that time would never have guessed that I would be a fan of the Prodigy. How could he have known, from meeting me for a brief few moments at the grocery store, that I would have enjoyed listening to this band? How could he have known that not only did I like the band, but had several of their albums, but not the latest one that he had made for me? I don't know other than to say that he had some magic insight into myself even before we knew each other at all. He could somehow know what I might enjoy or how I might enjoy it without ever having asked me. Maybe there was some sort of connection, even in those early days, when I never could have known what was before me and how it might mature over time.

Early in the friendship, we were driving in the car and singing along to music coming from the stereo. How odd, that I could have been brave enough at such a premature stage in our relationship to actually sing in front of him. This was something that adhered to my

mind. He was hugging me without ever even touching my skin. I gained a sense of undignified and newfound confidence with him, that was immediately reserved particularly for the times I was around him. I tried to resist it so much that it pulled me tighter to him. I never wanted to allow the festering of my conscience to escape from such a tall chasm. But with him, I had to make the exception and plunge into the uncontrollable existence of love, perhaps even the ultimate mastery of death. The viscosity of my thoughts would blur the lines of passion into an unacceptable race against the inevitable. Once you choose to accept one, the other is short at hand. I refuse to jaywalk, and he calls me pedantic.

Nevertheless, he automatically walks around the long way, in order to find a dedicated pedestrian crossing for me. He apologizes for not reaching the phone right away, but reaffirms my scared mind with updates to ease my conscience. And he offers support when I get overwhelmed with it all—when I can't seem to bear living in a perpetual state of doom. He soothes me. He appeases me. He lies down beside me every day, holding my anxiety in his small hands, keeping it with him through the night so that I can be afforded at least a peaceful sleep. I take it back each morning, without a word, but at least knowing that it has been cared for in my absence. And my infallible tormentor willingly goes back to me to keep me company day after day.

When we are together I am like a contortionist, able to bend and meld into something of myself that I don't recognize, something that jousts with intricate inflection until my body is in various shapes and positions that are seemingly unnatural. It was no longer a vacillation in between the concepts of love and death: it was the nexus exploding between the two.

I know that I have fallen in love with Darin and that I intend for this love to outlast my own life. But the disaster is when I lose myself and am no longer me. Maybe it is you now that I will have to come to know, and maybe Darin has become faceless to you, just as my grandmother couldn't remember her own name. And though I will stay by his side for the rest of my life, I tell him that I can't break apart into sullied pieces when time will ravage us both. One will die before the other, and maybe if we just cauterize the wound the pain won't seep out. But maybe the scar would be worse. And a January would come next, beckoning its newness and fresh awakenings, all the while sinning by leaving December behind.

His persistence in pursuing me is something that he will never let me live down. He says from the moment he met me he had known that we were meant to be together. This all sounds so cliché. I suppose that clichés exist for a reason. I was always hesitant with him though, trying to disregard any feelings I might have had for him. I'm not at all sure now why it took me so long to realize what had been sparked in me so long ago, but in hindsight, I think it was that I wasn't ready for what was to come. Romantic relationships scared me. Just another one of those things I can mark down on that list of fears that I have cultivated. I hadn't had much success in love, and I couldn't allow myself something real without the terror of somehow losing myself in the midst of it all. Keeping my feelings at bay was easier than turning towards a deep cavity that I couldn't see clearly from the outside.

I would never say that our love is perfect. We have felt tribulations as well as jubilations and those other pesky things in between. But it was long before we got together that I told Darin about those little flecks of my history that I tend to cover up so seamlessly and so absolutely. I told him about my mental afflictions willingly, not like how it was with the other relationship, where I continued to hide myself further and further as the days went on. I opened to Darin and he acknowledged what I was and who I was without question or judgment. He told me that he thought my scars were beautiful. It might have been at this point that I knew that I would marry him. I believed that with someone so caring and someone who made me strive to feel better, that I couldn't be left wanting. But perfection is not what we strive for, and we have felt those potholes that we run over with our wheels that softly or harshly knock us around on the road, until we forget about them completely. And it is this very notion of the possibility of impermanence that scares me more than anything these days. I always pressure him to keep the light off because perhaps I am frightful of what future I might see with my eyes open, and uncertainty is never a delightful friend. Those recurring dreams I have are often about Darin. They reveal so much insecurity that I am wont to even repeat them to myself. I tell Darin about them, that in the dream he left me or he cheated on me or he hurt my feelings or somehow ruined what we have. He tells me that I always think the worst of him. I say this is untrue. I actually think so much good of him that I can't possibly cohere any further, and I am scared of when things could crumble down. I am the vulnerable animal in this situation and I feel without control of my own body.

Yet, when we were first in the beginning stages of our love, a friend told me that I looked taller. She had seen me when I was in a relationship with the man who knocked me down, and when she saw me again later on, I had grown. Of course, figuratively, but it was enormously poignant to think of myself where I became a person who could present myself to the world with head held slightly higher. I had become a person who knows where everything in the kitchen is. Rather than a stranger in a strange kitchen where you have to constantly open each and every drawer and cupboard in order to find a fork.

The day we got married was inordinately perfect in many ways. We couldn't have asked for anything better. When the commissioner was speaking to us, she told us to take a moment to think about what we envisioned our lives looking like in twenty years. She said that both of us would have different images in our heads of what that might look like; how our relationship may have grown or what new elements might have evolved with us. She said though they may not be the same envisioning, they would be complimentary.

Later that day I asked Darin what it was that he thought of in his mind when she had asked us that question. He told me that he pictured us sending our daughter off to university. He said that in twenty years that our future daughter-to-be would be around eighteen years old, and we would be saying goodbye to her as she went off to post-secondary education. He then asked me what I had thought of when the commissioner posed that question to us. I was almost a bit embarrassed when I told him, because his seemed more logical and conventional than what I had envisioned. I quietly told him that I imagined us lying in bed watching a television show; me sipping my nighttime tea just having taken a bath, and with some potato chips at my side. This is something that we do most nights. I have a nightly routine that I strictly adhere to, and my hope for the future was that it would remain the same as it has always been with us. I hoped that we wouldn't change so drastically that we could still enjoy these things in life, routines and such that are small, everyday-type experiences, but that we spend together. In essence, I was saying that I hoped that our future together would remain steadfast and familiar.

But trust I will that the love will persist and dock itself in the calmer waters, floating along through unknown ways and resting silently still in time.

Warmly,

You.

Fire

Two apples sit side by side on the hearth.
I know it's not cold enough for the fire. I light it anyways.
The apples! One deep and rich and blood-red, the other
more faded and subdued, freckled and poised.
I can't see any bruises from where I'm sitting,
though I don't suppose that means there aren't any there. Regrettably, I can
only know under scrutiny and examination.
But do I know enough to check for imperfection before
taking that first, shameful bite?
I won't attempt, as I don't want the other to be lonely.

And true terror
could never really come into this room slowly warming;
I expect and anticipate it much too much.
Too much that I'll not answer the door
if they come for turn-down service, regardless of the free chocolates.
It's good for posterity, and I severely rather
that the sides of the duvet are tucked in when I slip through the
sheets. I want it constricting as possible and try as I might
not to disturb them once inside, they pull against my will.
Move this way and that, but don't pull too hard.
Edges escaping their tight boundaries
don't bode well for womb-like safeguards.

Come to think of it, I have a bruise on my toe from
last night
when I accidentally dropped a book on it.
I thought it was broken (the toe, not the book). But surprisingly,
it wasn't.
There was a time when I would have welcomed bruises
as badges and barnacles and blue-green blossoms to make me
look tough. Or weathered.
Or beaten.
I'm just not so sure about it all anymore.

I shuffle in my chair that I keep coming back to.
Waiting for the blood to recirculate just so.
Just so that I can readjust once more carefully. Pain-staking,
but not really. At any one point in the room you can see
everything else waiting there for you, save and except
for those parts I tucked away. But sometimes
I do trust much too much.
And I can't tell you why it seems so nice
to take stock of what I have here: the apples remain
beside the tall glass bottle of water. Two glasses
likely meant for scotch rather than water
both endure untouched. I wouldn't want to disrupt them.

Despite my self-scolding, I know that I'll eat in the bed tonight.
(not the apples)
And I know the phone line doesn't let me call home
without charging me extra.
But I can keep the fireplace going on all night and sink
my feet in the bathtub more than once,
all the while thinking back again
to those I would phone if I could.

I still can't feel the heat.

Dear Stacie:

This is somehow a way to conclude something that is never-ending.

I used to have a litmus test that I would ask all the people that I was meeting for the first time. I did so for quite some time whenever I met a new person, and it gave me some insight into who they were and how I might get along with them. The question was this: if you had to choose, would you rather eat human poop, one time, or, have a long tail for the rest of your life. Sometimes people would answer right away, and other times they would ask me questions for clarification. So for example, I would tell them that the poop wouldn't be much, maybe just one bite, and it wasn't necessarily their own poop, but might be someone else's. But if they would rather it were their own, then that was fine too. More questions came about the tail really. They wanted to know if it would be hidden by their pants, or if it would have to hang outside. I told them that I would describe the tail more like a kangaroo tail so that it would be quite noticeable. They wouldn't really be able to do much in life without having it really get in the way of things, or other people observing it. And the tail would be forever. The poop was only a small moment in an otherwise long life. So the long and short of it was whether they would actually rather live a lifetime with something abnormal and embarrassing, or whether they would be uncomfortable for a temporary amount of time and do something disgusting, but have it be over shortly.

Time and time again, the vast majority of people told me that they would rather have the tail. And every time that someone told me this, I believed that they were lying. I thought that for sure, if anyone were actually faced with this decision and that they had to choose one, that in the end everyone would rather just eat the poop and be done with it. I thought that the people who told me that they would rather have the tail were people trying to prove something to themselves; that they would not debase themselves in front of other people to do something utterly disgusting, but would rather martyr themselves than sink down to an animal-like level. I thought that it was just because of what other people might think of them that they would choose the tail. I don't know if I still believe that anymore, but I am still honest enough with myself to know that I would rather eat shit.

I can only ever wonder at which answer you would give now. Maybe in your older years, the prospect of having a tail for a shorter amount of time isn't really as bad as having to eat a piece of poop. Maybe Darin would be okay with you having a tail.

Growing up, you get into the rhythm of finding your way based on your parents. My parents would always take certain streets when driving us around, and I got to know the roads of our city through the backseat of the car. I would know exactly which streets to turn down, which way to turn, sometimes even the moment I knew they were going to change lanes well in advance of the turn, just to make sure they would be in the right one. My mom used to say that she would turn on her 'auto-pilot' whenever she drove because it was just so automatic to know where she would end up. So whenever anyone would ask me directions, of course I would tell them the way that I knew to go, based on the way that I had always gone previously. It was only when I became older that I would find myself in the car of a friend or someone else, even a taxi driver, where they would take a different route to my house. And naturally, I would almost jump—I was so taken aback, witnessing this strange occurrence of actually arriving at a location, using a route that wasn't known to me. It was fascinating, when I realized that in fact, there were alternatives to the directions that had been taught to me and fostered throughout my childhood. Even more freeing, were the moments when I would take myself down a road I had never been before and still knowing where I would end up. Liberating! Now I can see maps in my mind, that gridlock and twist, and hold infinite treasures of possibilities. It is remarkable, when I think about it.

I'm thinking of that daughter that Darin imagines we will have in twenty years, going off to college. When I went to the psychic, she envisioned a daughter for us, one that had raven black hair. By this time, she might be older than I am now, writing into my late thirties. Will she have read my words here, trying to identify with my past and contributing to my future? Will she be loved and treasured, as you have doubtlessly been so, so that she never knows the feeling of despair and loneliness? To her, and to her potential siblings, I say this: Please accept these meager words as my love and compassion to you. To know that memories are what I am made of, strange and seemingly detached as they may be. May they be a prism of light that glides through angles that I have yet to discover, so that you may carry forward your own history and continue to foster and use your own words in the vernacular that you choose. I offer you this legacy to defy mortality, and to expectantly bring you some comfort if you ever feel lost. I want you to know of the experience of remembering, rather than the recollections themselves. And that the more I think of them, the more they change, shift and develop. Hopefully, you can turn to these letters bearing new milestones at heart, returning and reinventing as needed.

And so these secret hiding places of recesses in your mind will always pose an enigma to me, until such time as I ultimately become you. I could never guess how this might all end up, and playing hide and seek now in the form of these letters to you, is really shrinking those memories which I fear may cause you pain, and enlarging that which I think you might need to know about us, before you subsequently collapse and crumble. This ephemeral experience is a small attempt to guide you through those meaningful and less meaningful borders of insecurity that I feel, when I think of what must have become of you. Within the bounds of what you need to know, I feel as though this is the cover story of the newspaper, with the smaller, less important items left inside for you to read on and discover. Somehow, this sacrosanct exercise leaves me feeling stray and lost; the guessing game of whether you will ever actually read these words, and what sort of meaning they might have to you now.

When I was sick and never imagined a future for myself, I would always make a specific point to ensure that when I parted ways with someone—even if only at the end of the day when surely I would see them the following day—that I would leave them with careful and caring words in case I never saw them again. Sometimes I still have a tendency to do this. Or I will dwell upon what I last said to a person if I regret it, thinking that it is possible that either they or I might die before I see them next, and how I could repair what had passed between us before that might happen. So this is how I leave you now, not knowing if I will ever see you again, but hoping that I have provided enough love within these pages for you to know that I have only intended to be a friend to you. And just like when you hear someone talking without seeing their face, you can tell if they are smiling or not, I am content to leave you now knowing that whether you live to read this, or live to revise this, your life has been meaningful.

Those same familiar leitmotifs settle themselves within the melody, urging their way forward and reminding me that maybe I am already enough. My memories remain my attachment to the past, but I reveal them here as a bridge connecting me to the future.

I am finally resigned to paint these ghosts onto the outer unknown, haunting my own self while picking up smooth white rocks to place on select gravestones, letting them know I was there and that I still think of them. I jump back and forth among the empty bodies resting in the cemetery, too morose to read each headstone, and too egotistical to shed a tear. So I rest beside this graveyard in mourning, dwelling on the situations that refuse to

go away, and immersing myself in my own shame and guilt. Meanwhile, those droplets of rain coursing down the window pane, racing their way to the edge, eventually eddy into one mass and disintegrate into the air, never being able to retrace their steps.

Resting for now, and love always,

You.

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