

Perfect Children

I have put off writing a preface to this work for some time, primarily because everytime I confronted it, I seemed to have nothing but internal darkness to share. And whatever it may be, I do not want this work to be a catalogue of trauma porn.

My freshman year of college I was harassed, manipulated, abused and eventually sexually assaulted by someone I trusted very much. I was later stalked by this person for several years, during which I was also abandoned, betrayed or otherwise sabotaged by several people who I trusted as mentors and teachers. I state these merely as facts of the case, and in part to warn you that there are some disturbing moments described, though in truth, these events make up the minority of the content of this work. The world does not need more trauma platformed.

This work began as a method of processing, one step more distant than a journal, one step closer than a therapist. Every night I finished a page of this was a night I cried myself uncontrollably asleep late into the night. While the effect was generally healing, the acute pain of producing a sparse one hundred pages was all encompassing. I teetered at times, perhaps most of the time, on the edge of 'functional.' I spoke with friends who had gone through similar experiences and lost everything, their homes, jobs, even their community and family. I'm grateful that through this all, I was lucky enough to have mentors, friends and my parents who gave their all to help me stay afloat when I felt I was certain to drown.

Life everyday continues to be a challenge. Finding meaning in simple tasks, or joy in my most treasured pursuits; music, writing, dance, are infrequent treats. But this is not a catalogue of trauma. It is in truth, a letter of gratitude, to everyone who has loved me, offered me kind words in hard times, believed in me when I thought I was broken, to my parents, to all of my friends. To you. I am here because of you, and no words I have will ever be enough to thank you. Whatever comes next, know that I love you very much.

It is time to be done being broken.

About My First Times

When he was born, the doctor declared him mother's 'miracle baby.' He is unexpected, three weeks premature, and a complex Caesarean-section operation. Mother had cancerous tumors in both her fallopian tubes, which had to be tied after his birth. She would not have any other children - She shouldn't even have been able to have him, according to the doctors. Some people are born ready, he sleeps for the first three weeks of life.

The first time you get beaten up was in kindergarten. Three children held you down, pulling your hair, biting you hard enough to leave tooth marks. When you can no longer move your arms, you bite one of them back as they put their hand in your face. They cry to the teacher, and you are harshly chastised for biting.

The second time is in third grade, during a game on the playground they grabbed you and took you behind the side of the building while the teachers were helping another child in a wheelchair get out of the lunchroom. They drag you back after, filling your pockets with mud while discussing Transformers. The worst feeling was being scared to tell mother. When she asks, you say nothing and turn out the clumps of grass in your pockets.

You didn't know about the first time you were in love until six and a half years after he left. You still wonder how he's been sometimes, and even when you talk yourself out of imagining what might have been, you still wish he would have told you why. You haven't really loved another boy since. Maybe you never will.

What you recall is puking your stomach dry every night for 3 months after it happened, dehydration the only constant, reliable, companion other than the anticipation of suffocation in the too-short moment before your nose slips under the water and your eyes fill with tepid saltwater. His hands are everywhere you don't want to be, the smell of rotten meat and molding cheese that is his scent is now yours too, a phantom aroma nobody else can perceive, a single moment of absolute heat that leaves you cold at the end of every summer for four years. Every morning you wake up and try to remind yourself that you are not damaged goods like mother and father.

The man from Brooklyn who saved you two summers ago looks you straight in the eye and asks how you can deal with the pain. 'I would have been so angry,' he says over and over again. You tell him you've learned to forgive people, and realize you've lied to him for the first time in your life.

'Tell me something,' she initiates the game as usual.

'What do you want to know.'

'Make me swoon. I'm the right amount of tipsy for this now.'

You give your regular three bad answers before you get it right.

'You are always closer than I expect. It scares me, and I don't know if I could be vulnerable with anyone again if you ever left.'

Heart reaction.

'I'm falling asleep.'

'Go to bed, I'll come up with something really good for you to wake up to.'

The night passes dreamlessly, something that hasn't happened in almost ten years. When you wake up, a second message hides a first. You stare at the screen and do not read the second message for hours. They are four words that in twenty-four years you've heard from mother, once from father and now from her.

I love you, Grover.

You try to have sex three times before she pulls away and tells you she thinks you're not into it. You feel sick to your stomach like when she talks about her exes, not because of jealousy, but because you're afraid you've done something that makes her unhappy. You hate hearing her be unhappy. Everything has to be perfect. The fourth time, you finally fuck. It's not making love like you're used to - unreciprocal, laborious, mostly foreplay and taking care of the other person. There is no room for the empty sweet talk you're so good at. It still takes you a while to get there, but this time it feels good, fun. You both talk in the bathroom afterwards, about how the first time is always the worst. It is anesthetized, clinical talk. You wonder why the experience disturbs and scares you for three days. You hope it happens again.

When your father says he is not coming to hear you sing, and you realize, despite saying he loves you for the first time, he will always choose his father's love over the love you want from him. There is no winning the race to face your father, he will wear that old coat that fits poorly because he inherited it, for the rest of his life. You know that when mother dies, you will have grown close only in the way that a smell can remind you of a time long gone. He is the reason you are desperate to hear people praise your voice, the ugly, strained and nasal voice he convinced you was inherited from mother. When you dream of another father, in Vienna, you begin to realize, he will never hear you sing for the first time.

You will always dream of Vienna, but never know why, except that when they speak about Beethoven in school you know they are wrong. Scared, alone, tortured by doubt, curled in bed with pillows over his head as canons ripped apart the city walls and his eardrums. And always in the background, the face of a father who knows you will never be good enough.

You know you need to call your parents and tell them you aren't coming home for Thanksgiving this year, and you cannot lie this time. They don't know you've dated anyone, not the girls and definitely not the boys. The first way you run through the conversation degenerates into accusations, why did they have to pry when you were young, why did they pressure you and leave you feeling like a counselor and confidant and chess piece in their relationship. You know it isn't fair to blame them. You try again, and yell at them in your head again, by the third time your emotions run together like applesauce. Where do mother and father begin and where do you end?

You stare at the phone and think of lies to tell.

'I love you,' mother says.

'I love you too.'

'How is your new home?'

'Still adjusting. It doesn't feel like much yet.'

'I miss you.'

You are quiet for a moment too long.

'I miss you too.'

When you hang up, she looks at you.

'That was a lie.'

'Yes, but you had to do it.'

'I did.'

'She would never have forgotten if you hadn't said it back.'

'Probably wouldn't be forgivable.'

'She's your mother, she'd forgive you.'

'I meant I'd never forgive myself.'

'You really don't miss her.'

'Not even a little.'

She looks at you with the searching-but-understanding look, and you notice for the first time, that her eyes have no reflections. There is only Crystal blue and the frightening intent and infinite tenderness of the girl you love.

You decide to put off telling your parents you won't be home for thanksgiving.

You are beginning to see the patterns, where the questions that will haunt you in the next life form. You've spent this life chasing shadows, answers, memories distantly remembered, wanting always and only to know why.

Why did Jarrett Leave

Why did Sarah Leave

Did you ever really live in Nashville? Did any of it exist?

What happened to Jeremy and Helen, why did they do those terrifying things that left you broken for so long, and will they ever find forgiveness? Do they want forgiveness?

Will you ever forgive them?

Why do you dream of Vienna and Japan

And so much more

Always outside that window

And of all the questions, the most terrifying one is if everything led up to this. Are you to wander the halls of old lives, leaving nothing but timeless, placeless dust, the ashes of sepia-tone emotion, to be found by some other self, maybe tomorrow, maybe in a thousand years, maybe never. This is the legacy of pain that has been passed down through the generations of your family, and you were so convinced you had broken it. Now you have nothing but a quest for answers you will never find.

About Mother

When she was young, mother was the retarded child. One of eight, four brothers and four sisters, who all said their mother dropped her on her head as a child and that was the reason she had to be drugged with pharmaceuticals that have been illegal for thirty years. Her mother said she'd gotten spinal meningitis, a disease with a less than 4% survival rate for children at the time. To this day, she's never said which one she believes.

Your mom insists there will be rain in Texas on her business trip. Everyone says she is crazy, but she purchases three umbrellas. She touches down in Houston and it begins pouring. As she is retelling the story, you experience a familiar sense of *vouja de*, you are reliving the exact moment she described before going to Houston. She lost one on the plane, saved one for a coworker and had the final umbrella for herself. She lost one on the plane, saved one for a coworker and had the final umbrella for herself.

When she tells you to wait to leave the house or avoid certain streets you always listen.

She is the retarded child, who cannot play candyland now because it reminds her of forced visits to abusive 'shrinks' that she insists were not psychologists, the retarded child who always gets the short straw for chores from her siblings, the retarded child who alone can defy their father by laughing when he beats them every morning while telling them 'if you haven't done anything wrong yet, you will.' She says the medicine dulled her nerves, and that she thinks she was her father's favorite.

Mother is also a genius. She spoke full sentences when she was barely two, declaring on one occasion that her diaper required changing to an incredulous, drunk mother. She read impossibly quickly and early, walked with confidence while her older siblings were still stumbling, and until she was four, promised to be among the best and brightest of a particularly brilliant and talented family. And then she was the retarded child, who was locked in her room whenever guests came by because her family was afraid of having her seen.

Her father, his english name was Roland, was born in China as a member of the aristocracy, in the early 1900s. It was an upbringing that did not allow for imperfection or failure. His parents punished the slightest infractions by hanging him upside down by his toes for hours in a locked closet, or by twisting the skin on the back of his knees with needle-nose pliers until it tore and gushed blood like ragged, dry gel.

After they fled the communist revolution, first to Singapore and then to New York, his father became a Baptist minister and sent Roland away to medical school. He fainted at the sight of blood and drank away all of the school money his parents sent him with, and eventually moved to Independence Kansas and became an engineer for Motorola, helping work on projects like color television, the first cellular phones, the sensor technology now used in vehicles for proximity detection and some kind of modern chicken feed. My family likes to talk about how he had over five thousand patents under his name at the patent office. No one came to his funeral.

And then he had eight children, four boys and four girls. Roland, the inventor, named them himself. Their middle names are, Aileen, Maileen, Darlene, Charlene for the girls, Timming, Kimming, and two other names for the boys that she doesn't know, but mother says remind her of the word cucumber. The first time Aileen, who is a conspiracy theorist, had business cards written up, they were misprinted to read 'Alien.' My mother's full name is X. D. Ho. She calls it her comedian name, the faster you say it, the funnier it gets.

Of her eight siblings, mother is the only one to have just one child. She never wanted kids. She says often that she is afraid of what she might do as a parent, that she might end up like her mother and father, or worse, like her siblings. Maileen, the second oldest sister, had a child named A. and when A. was three, she happened to give him a purple popsicle. This was back in the days when purple popsicles were made with real grape juice, which stains quite permanently, and A. happened to also be wearing a brand new white onesie. Mother often says that you can set a child up for success or for failure. In this case, the obvious happened, and when Maileen saw A. with purple stains all over that previously dentyne-white onesie, something snapped. She got a look in her eyes that you cannot quite understand or describe without having seen it in person. It is the definition of 'seeing red,' it is the total absence of the person who was standing before you moments ago, it is a look of pure and total rage, that has no memory of itself after it is gone.

'I knew that child was going to get the beating of his life,' is what mother says every time she tells the story. 'So I picked him up, tossed him in my backseat and took him for a drive. No car seat, no seatbelt, just me and baby A.' And when she returned, as my mother tells it, Maileen had no memory of the event. 'I wonder how many other beatings I *didn't* save him and all his cousins from.'

You are at a toy shop, and find a card game with medieval characters dressed in food.

'Look mom, its the pancake queen, she has pancakes on her hips.'

'Yeah, that's where they go when I eat them too.'

Asian mom burns are the reason global warming exists.

After the darkness of her childhood, her abusive and vengeful ex-husband, the many sexism of her workplace, racism of her birthplace, she has never hated, never hesitated to give everything to you. When they ask you who your hero is, you respond without hesitating. Mother. She has given you everything unconditionally and without regard for herself. She has never been bitter, never angry at life, never shown you what envy or greed look like. You aspire every day to live up to the gift of life she gave to you with infinite compassion - an impossible child she never intended to have, but embraced anyways.

About My Fears and Dreams

When Jonah was young, we weren't sure how long he was going to be around, or if he was going to make it. I've seen some children whose parents will struggle with them for the rest of their lives, fighting against the circumstances of their birth to keep them breathing, because when a baby is born they are perfect.

They are absolutely perfect.

There is nothing wrong with them.

You are sitting across from Jonah's father, trying not to cry. He is a man who has made a life as a salesman, a hustler, a player, and always leaves you questioning whether sincerity is scary or not. But in this moment, you are convinced he has read your mind, because this short, hairy, balding pot bellied man who so effortlessly clings to being hip, is speaking words of healing Roland could never have imagined saying or needing.

When a baby is born, in that one moment, they are perfect. miracles.

You are explaining to her the concept of perfection, she is nodding along like everyone else, the process is perfection, the destination is Wabi-Sabi, you say. She continues the nodding and the sideways look that says 'I'm in love with you.' You know this look very well. In four years she will tell you that she believes Friendship is prayer for others, that we pray by expressing love and compassion, that this is her worship. It is yours too, and you know she understands the thing that nobody ever asks about. You nod along.

Boys are easy. Boys are dumb. Bois suck. You agree with your girlfriends often when they say this, in fact you agree with them so much that you begin to say it more than they do. Who wants to touch a fucking penis again in their lives. Not me. It's just the way things are, like greed and holding the door for people who are too far away, and crying quietly in second semester fellowship meetings because they've dismissed your pain, boys are easy to do and entirely not worth the effort. This is the way things are.
Have I ever told you how absurd vaginas are?

The dust settles and he is waiting for them to tell him they are not yelling at him again. When he gets older, he will not recognize this as abuse, in fact he will work through what feels like an infinity of trauma, what feels like a burden culminating over multiple lifetimes, yet he will never find it in his heart to be angry about it. All he will remember is feeling worthless, silenced and smaller than he is even on the outside. He will feel small for a very long time, he will say 'I'm sorry' too much, he will excuse his presence more often than that, and most of all he will stand by and do nothing while the only two people he has ever loved without having to work at it walk away from him forever.

'Dance with me' she says to you. You have made a profession of telling people you are a writer, and you still do not have words for why you did not. It is the unsteady shiver you get before coming to the edge of a cliff, a moment spent in contemplation of danger. There is terrible danger in love, not because you are afraid of losing it, or not giving enough, but because you are afraid to accept it. You promise to dance with her again, in a dreamland funhouse room somewhere else in the world, where the two of you never have to apologize for the way you look, the way you speak and walk, or the way you receive love with tears in your eyes because when you were young, there were so few expressions of care. And in your heart of hearts, you know that sometimes, even music cannot substitute for tears.

What is the Dream. What is your Story. Where are you going. Where have you been. This is how you have always introduced yourself, and you love to hear what people have to say. Sometimes they are uncertain, or shy, sometimes they feel their dream is selfish, or their story is not interesting - a sure sign they are not selfish enough - they never worry about being too selfless, often they ask for a moment to think, sometimes they say 'good question,' which is a meaningless phrase designed to stall and make them look more composed than they really are, sometimes they are even confident and stride through the answer, wearing assuredness well but never perfectly, sometimes they simply do not understand and leave feeling you must be some kind of fool or false philosopher or psychoanalyst, and occasionally they smile as if they are being clever and counter by asking what your story is. But they never, ever ask what your dream is.

It is slightly too late in April but you are wearing the oversized yellow parka you got as a hand-me-down from mother, and it exactly matches the shade of yellow on the walls in his office. 'Grover, you match the walls!' 'I planned it that way,' you reply coyly. 'Bernard, did I tell you about my zombie apocalypse experience?'

'You had one too!'

'Wait, tell me about yours first.'

'Well, I thought it might be nice to get a coffee last night, so I took a walk and all of the power was out downtown, and there were so many trees split in the street-'

'Yes, there was a terrible storm last night.'

'Was that what it was? Anyways, it looked quite spooky, and it was so quiet, like the apocalypse had come and I'd forgotten to turn out for it. So I went to the hotel, which was the only place that had power. And there were all of these other faculty and staff members dressed so beautifully, asking me if I'd come for 'the party.' They said 'come upstairs Bernard, we've been waiting for you, come to the party.' And I really don't recall seeing anything about a party, I honestly didn't see anything about it. I thought I was being tempted at the Rapture or something, and I was so frightened I ran back home as quickly as I could and pulled the covers over my head and that's why I missed class this morning.'

'Ohmylanta... Bernard, I had the exact same experience, I think I saw you at the hotel, around 10pm, right? I had just arrived.'

'Yes, I was just leaving then, we must have just missed each other.'

We both laugh in utmost sincerity, entangled for a moment, like two souls leashed together by a psychic tether. It is not the first time we've lived in parallel, and it will not be the last, but when he looks at you, you know he can see into your soul. You are stripped bare, and the 21 years you have spent building a flawless facade disappear before a humble and curious gaze. You have nothing to hide before the strange fruit borne of those eyes. You know in your heart of hearts that this man will be a friend and mentor, and you look forward to visiting him in the years to come. You do not realize it at the time, but his true gift was planting a seed which will grow into the truth: you have been lying to yourself for six long years.

When you read the book, it is devastating not because it is a portrait of a stranger, but because it is the Bernard you knew. The little idiosyncrasies, the flakiness, refusing to check emails, the shy but relentless pursuit of honesty in our own work, contrasted with his manicured, casual aloofness, were transformed from sins of omission to the tools of abuse. You realize most of you were always just on the right side of his quirks, and though it does not excuse his actions, you learn later from friends of all the trauma he was holding in. You remind yourself that it does not excuse his actions, you say it in front of friends, who don't really believe it either. We were always just on the right side of his pain. It only took one person who wasn't to...

Now he is gone, and you know you will never see him again. This is something you can feel, from the ends of your fingertips to the deepest cavities of your ribcage. You wonder sometimes where he is, what he is doing, at this exact moment. You still cry, for him, for her, for yourself. You wonder if you are living in parallel, waiting for a moment when your pain will hurt someone beyond repair and all your dreams and demons will collapse together into some horrifying monolith, a monument to the legacy of pain. You reflect on the people you've hurt, and their wounds become gaping holes, their tears blood on your hands, and you wonder if you too are doomed to repeat the cycle of violence. You no longer want to live in parallel with anyone. You will wake up for the next three years and remind yourself less confidently than before, that you are not damaged goods. You have been lying to yourself for six lonely years.

About Me

The summer after sixth grade, you tumbled from your bike, and the first thing you remember is being blind and very tired. You see only the fuzzy colors of TV static as your father pulls you up again and again. You just want to take a nap, just a short nap.

Your helmet broke, and something else. You have trouble remembering where you are, walking straight, speaking complete sentences, your short term memory is gone, you cannot read or write properly.

Finally your Father gets tired of reading the subtitles and tells you to learn to read them on your own. After several meltdowns, you learn to read and beat Sephiroth.

You read War & Peace twice before sixth grade, the second time you think you understand it.
It's overrated, but Tolstoy seems like a good humanist.

When you are learning how to speak correctly again, you pretend you are being interviewed on TV. You speak very knowledgeably on the Swedish Women's Luge team.

Everyone used to mention how quiet you were, now they offer to pay you to shut up.

You realize in seventh grade that you are not an atheist. It's a moment much like all the buddhist sutras describe, the heavens open and a golden warmth envelops you. You feel the gentle chest of the universe breathe through and around you, shattering the clouds of cynicism and revealing the beautiful interdependency of everything. You always believed life was sacred, now you know it too.

After the accident you are more present, more *of this earth* than before. Before it, the world of dreams was real, you were sure of it, and the waking world was merely a dream. Lucid dreams followed you throughout the day, easy to surrender to. A giant stuffed bear, a flaming pup, dervishes in spun hats, your most cherished friends departing in a hot air balloon after the adventure of a lifetime, pacing the streets of Alexandria's cobblestones, being hung as a witch, joy in scrolls at the great library, all of these were your reality. Now they are... only dreams.

You see your own life as if it is before you now, not as though you are watching someone else's documentary. You second-guess your instinct more often. You speak with clarity and see people's facades with greater opacity. Your fingers finally work the way you wanted. You call these your V2.0 upgrades.

You realize we are all lying to ourselves. Many years later you'll find out people pay lots of money at self-help courses to learn this. The salesmen look like they take their hair in to get oil changes at least once a week.

About Father (unfinished)

The stories about father are not stories you laugh at, they are stories you laugh with, because you cannot cry all the time. In your secret time you imagine yourself crying at them. Like when he was beaten by his stepfather by smashing his head into his brothers and declaring the punishment a 'number 5.' There isn't anything very funny about it, but you laugh about it because that is what is expected.

A lonely boy in a robin hood costume sits on the curb of the school parking lot, waiting for his father, for whom he has turned down an invitation to a costume party thrown by the girl he has a crush on. His father is going to pick him up, and take him on a camping trip, something he has promised and reneged on in the past, but this time, the boy is sure, it will be different. When his father left him and his mother six years ago, he always knew his father would come back for the promised camping trip, and now is the time. He has been here for four hours since school let out, and the sun is setting. He thinks of walking home, but he doesn't want to let his dad down - he imagines how sad, how disappointed his father might feel if he were to miss a chance at camping with his son. He sits on the curb until his mother takes him home.

When you move out of the old apartment, you don his motorcycle helmet and beat each other with pool noodles until neither of you can breathe. You thought you gave him a good run. Later you realize you were two feet tall.

Money is scarce. Your parents joke they couldn't afford to put a plastic spoon in your mouth. You sleep in the dresser because there is no crib. But you can see a movie very occasionally. You eat together, read together, mess up your father's Atari together. You are happy, things are warm. You feel like a family. Everything after that is more, yet so much less.

He reads you Harry Potter and The Hobbit in a Poang as the morning light slips through bamboo curtains.

Your father tells you that your body has a complete metabolic turnover every 7 years, all cells that can be replaced, are. When you are going through your botany phase, you get a white orchid, your favorite flower. He flowers the first couple years, then stops, but doesn't die. He is 19 now, and every 7 years he flowers. Whenever it happens your mother texts and asks if you about to fall in love. You always are.

He teaches you discipline, that love can speak through pain and hurt, and being beaten down.
He teaches you aikido, blending with an attack until its energy becomes diffuse and redirected.
He teaches you that love can be strong, tough even.

'People say Kate Upton is fat in this picture because she's eating a cheeseburger, dad.'

You hold out your phone, he turns his head.

'Fat in all the right places.'

'Gross dad.'

They scream and shout and threaten to get divorced often when you are young, and less often as you get older. You feel very much like a good marriage counselor. These days, nobody yells about much of anything.

'Get back down here!' He says.

'Dad it's 2 o'clock in the morning.'

'No, it isn't, now come on, I almost have Darth Vader unlocked.'

Before you turn one, you are trying to pick up the controller, messing up your dad's hockey games. First he unplugs the controller, and once I catch on to that he plugs it in partially, and once I catch on to that I'm old enough not to get 'the guy' stuck in the corner anymore. This is how you bond with him for years, and also how you end up deleting more than a few of his saved games.

About My Loves

The first time you visit Alexandria Virginia, you know it is home. Stepping on to the street, there is a clear, warm light illuminating brick that radiates history like the landscapes in America. This is not an American city as you know it, not the sterile, filthy buildings of Chicago or Los Angeles you will live in but not call home in eight years. It reminds you of your first steps through Traverse Town, the warmth of a saxophone embracing you, a feeling you'll relive this August while listening to 'Sivaya' by Sam Wilkes. The city embraces you, as you stare down a cobblestone road beneath street lamps that have witnessed long lives, short deaths, whispered heartbreaks and solitary I love you's. You are lost in the presence of everything, a feeling, familiar but too-rare materializes, that you are unstuck in time, the world is turning while you stand still. This is a place you have seen in your dreams, you recall, or... were they your dreams or someone else's lives? This place holds the presence of these things, past lives, memories of past lives, distant suggestions of dreams from some other person who feels a more complete citizen of some collective soul you are just beginning to inherit. You wander the colonial streets, animated by the honey-water that pours from between the brick and soft incandescent bulbs, revisiting suggestions of faces you knew. By chance you come upon a restaurant - there is no one inside, but you take a seat anyways. A half dozen tables are crammed in the narrow, claustrophobically cozy space, every one is covered with red and white checkered tablecloths, the forks and knives are plastic and the plates styrofoam. A sign on the table advertises free opera on thursdays. You cannot now remember who served you, if they even gave you a menu, or what you ordered, but the food is the best you've ever had. On the walk back to your hotel, you realize you forgot to ask the name of the place. You don't know it yet, but you will spend years returning there to search for it, and you will never find it. Was it an apparition of the night, some distant memory lived out in sacred prayer, or was it real? You're not sure what is real, but you know the tears you cry when you come here, feeling for the very first time as if you've found home, are real.

You dream of a room with a view, a ball somewhere in Vienna, the top floor of an abandoned warehouse, a pale face with blue eyes that have no reflections, the warm glow of honey-water dripping from street lamps in autumn, losing Sarah as April waits, the final cherry blossoms of your youth before a life of wandering solitude, you are a woman with visions of the divine in music, a woman who has been labelled a witch, you are staring into the eyes of a good man who is afraid, you are telling him what he already knows, that you are human like him, you are sitting beneath a palm tree in an oasis while the night sky whispers its secrets to you in the roaring silence of a desert where no one can hear them, and you are a small boy walking hand-in-hand with a ghost who is everyone that has cared for you. You don't know if these are lifetimes past or future, but the one thing you have always been sure of, is that sooner or later, all of them will come true. In memories, dreams or perhaps as mirages when you wander down a familiar street on an old road in Alexandria.

It sometimes feels as if you are living your life in reverse.

You can remember every dream you've ever had, and the dreams always come true. It used to take years, now it is months, sometimes weeks, perhaps before long it will be days, and you find yourself anticipating the convergence, the singularity where dreams and reality merge together, like when you were a child and the waking world was merely a distant whisper at the edge of your perception. The old friends and loves of your childhood dreams call you, tugging at something buried. You have fought for so long to stay awake, but nothing feels foreign, as the presence of the dreaming world slips between your senses and your brain, all the empty trajectories of hope and discipline grow still, distant, drifting away like memories of a life once lived, but now...

'I feel as if you don't care when I'm here.' You hear her words as though she speaks through an aquarium wall, every pitch is crystalline, distorted, beyond perception. You comfort her and tell her you do care, and you believe what you are saying, but inside you feel nothing. All you can think of is being perfect, you cannot make a mistake, and you comfort her perfectly. Every word is exactly right, and every gesture is non-threatening, but somehow, inside, you know that you will always have to work at loving her, in a way that you did not have to work at loving Sarah and Jarrett. You gave up believing there would be any more easy or permanent love after they left, and you've somehow buried the memory of a girl with blue eyes that have no reflections.

She is everything you are not, short, stocky, resolutely dense and insensitive, her parents were strict hippies, inflexible in their requirements that she subscribe to non-normative norms. No heteronormative, cishnormative, religiously normative, no shaving the hair between your eyebrows or on your legs. Everyone thinks she's a lesbian after she shaves her head because you've rediscovered your childhood buddhist kick after watching avatar the last airbender, and she has trouble saying she's straight. She talks of marriage, having children, being a homemaker. You ask her why nobody knows you're queer, and your fears and dreams of a more compassionate world, and how you hate labels. She is playful when you are melancholy, you are silly when she is sad, you give her massages that make her cry and lash out and retrieve parts of herself from the vicarious dreams of her father, and she gives you the worst head massage of your life. It is like having your scalp accosted by a mannequin. You make love by accident one time, and like most of the girls who are your closest friends, your friendship is better after you break her heart without meaning to.

She is mixed, like you, but indian instead of chinese, the slight olive tone to her skin, the disguised Auburn tone of her hair and the unusual freckles betray no hints of ambiguity to others, but you can see them clear as day, like a symbol of companionship. She asks if you are chinese, and you are delighted she knows. You give her a gift on her birthday, and again at christmas, and she cries because she is so touched. They are copies of books you heard her wishing for one day after class. Slowly, you recognize what you thought was competition, a need to beat her at everything, to sound as brilliant, as insightful in your english class, for what it is. When you were in seventh grade, you said you would only date someone if they could beat you in a fight. You don't need to talk all the time. You intellectualize food, Grover, but I actually enjoy it. I think hope is a triumph of the human spirit. And when she says these things, for all your carefully constructed logic, your charm and ability persuade others, the years spent confronting your own mortality, when she contradicts you, she is always right. She always wins. And, as snow falls on cedars in April, she is gone.

Como Esperando Abril by Silvio Rodriguez is playing when Prince dies after the first snowy April in years. You've been rediscovering his music after your friends warned you not to - they were crestfallen when you went through a Bowie phase and 'killed' him, and before that it was Michael Jackson, just before he died. You've been killing artists when you rediscover them. And you remembering this April Waiting, to see if the pain will disappear like she did. You decide you will only love people you have to work at.

Tell me something, she says. You confess your most horrible truth, that if she goes, there will be no one else. Three times would be too many, and you could not find it in your heart to be vulnerable with anyone if it happened again. You would return to the resolution you had after Sarah left, in which you decided love is like a sand mandala - meant to exist only for a moment, and because of the quotidian, committed dedication to beauty and kindness of the world, and meant to be wiped away when its brief moment is done. Like two ships passing in the night, love, like everyone in your life, would be a monument to transience. Your decision is like a will, declaring your life in service of a dream, a gift, for others. You have forgotten what it means to love one person unconditionally, and there is nothing more terrifying than all the possibilities surrounding it. You have forgotten that it is not a decision you can walk away from.

You say I love you because the sex is good.

You know it makes them happy to feel like you care.

You say I love you because love is like a mandala, a commitment to something temporary, and I love you is a promise to be there, but not forever.

In a room bathed in lazy sunlight, a boy spreads his legs across a small bed, watching anime on his phone. You stare at him, admiring his messy blonde hair, the softness of his arms and legs, and the way the light reflects off his translucent-golden body hair. When you dream of this moment, as you will many times in the years to come, you will remember him as an angel, but with all of his parts adding up to make something more beautifully human than any perfect being. He looks up, and says 'hey' casually, before returning to his video. You feel something inside your chest cavity resonating like a monolithic, procrustean chime, it is a sound you do not yet recognize for what it is. You make a wish, that neither of you will grow up.

He will forever be 16 in your memory.

It takes you 8 years to understand that your love for him was more than platonic.

Regrets are mistakes you didn't learn from, you enjoy telling your friends this because it makes them happy when they feel bad about screwing up. In your childhood memories, you were always afraid of growing up, and now you feel small and helpless.

You will forever regret your wish because it came true.

About him

He slaps you, and you don't know what to do. Mother is a survivor, Father is a survivor, and now you are a victim. You don't know yet if you will be a survivor, in fact you don't even know you will cry yourself to sleep most nights for the next three years, wishing for someone to tell you that you did survive. You feel no pain on the outside when he hits you, only shock. He does it again and your discipline is screaming so loudly that it cannot be understood, and you are still frozen. He kisses you, he hits you. He touches you, and you are convinced the whole time he looms over you and for years afterwards, that you are hurting him.

You are broken for ~~six years~~. Seven years.

God is a gay man who denies he is gay. America's closets are full of skeletons and children, but you repeat yourself. And for six years, though you are not a christian and never have been, God rules your life. God is the one whose breath smells of rancid cheese and who slaps you when you disagree with Him. God is the beginning and end, alpha and omega, the arbiter of life and death, of power and of sex, which is power. And when god is dead, a small emaciated child stumbles out of the closet, looks on the world of men and wonders what his... (they're?) place in it is.

She looks directly at you, this incredible woman who only sleeps two hours a day, this woman you respect for fighting so fiercely for what is right, for bending the rules of Tai Chi to suit her, who uses the language you use about fighting evil with love. She is a mentor and a friend. She looks you in the eyes, points to you and says,

‘you have been my enemy for so many years. People like you, are who I’ve fought so hard against all these years.’

And she does not know you at all. She sees a rich, entitled trust fund kid, living off the intellectual dividends of more brilliant predecessors. She does not see the shy, sensitive child, grateful for parents who broke cycles of violence, fighting every step of the way for sanity, humanity and ultimately to be seen and embraced for the expression of boundless love.

There is no trust and no more mentors after this.

He stalks you, through the forest, as you walk alongside a new acquaintance. Your friends tease you, saying you had a romantic frolic in the Arboretum. Your heart is racing, the base of your neck is slick with sweat and you feel that familiar claw grasping your heart with an iron vengeance. Hollow animal urges and the need to vomit fight for dominance in your gut. Your breaths are as ragged, like knees torn by needle-nosed pliers. What explanations you can muster are dismissed by everyone, because they are friends with Him.

The stalking continues for months, and then years. Just when you think you are free, you regress, and the cage around you grows enormous again, yet more claustrophobic than ever.

The sensation of suffocation becomes just another hazard of being alive.

You cannot remember what He said, only that every inch of you is trembling. You are putrid, fetid, of rotting flesh and burned alive, consumed by slithering millipedes and every other horrible sensation - they're all happening at once. You are dirty, irredeemably, unwashably dirty. He has chased you everywhere that is safe. You think you tell him to leave, but you cannot remember. You only recall feeling helpless and pathetic, as though all the teeth in the world are grinning down on you, salivating in anticipation.

You are nothing but a meal.

Aftermaths

There is no tree and you spend Christmas Eve working. You listen to John Denver and the Muppets sing carols as you have every year, and wait until your mother and father have gone to bed to wrap their presents. Once upon a time this was your favorite time of the year, a time of love and joy, of timeless memories and gatherings of friends, a time when, no matter where you came from, you were surrounded by family. You were home.

Your cup is empty. Everyone has always told you how wise you are, how perceptive and sensitive. You reflect on how shallow life has been for the last two years. You speak regularly with no one. You text occasionally and often contentiously with two or three people. There is no tree, and you spend Christmas Eve alone, working, listening to the carols from your childhood, carols that celebrate the beauty of the forests and dreams of peace on earth. They come from a time you've missed, because you never had it, and you understand that more acutely than ever right now. Tonight you are in the house you grew up in, and you could not be farther from home.

Entering your old room for the first time, an emotion flashes past you only for a moment, like the mention of a misremembered daydream. It is the specific emotion of wondering at how differently you arrive home than how you intended - you are not accompanied by the girl with blue eyes who has all your secrets - knowing that you will never really see her again, and that you return to this house having fulfilled the pledge you made but hoped you'd never keep.

After you are done crying, it occurs to you that walking a lonely path is common for those who live their lives in service of joy. Beacons of light, consumed inside, not by darkness, but by the blue-midnight riches of the tides that understand our desire to drift away into the gentle, infinite everywhere that is our only constant companion.

You are standing there, alone once again. She has left, and she takes all of your secrets with her. Whatever the reasons were, you know what you have always known - this life is not one you live for yourself. You told her this before she left, that no one would get all your secrets again. You see her one more time before she is gone forever, and feel nothing at all. You gave all of the love and care you had to give, there is nothing left. You made a promise to yourself once, that if they left for a third time, you would not fall in love again, but instead give yourself fully and totally to The Dream. Somehow, deep down, you thought you could escape the fate you dreamed of ever since you were a child. You tell people who ask, that you are married to your work.

Saturday March 28th, 12:25am
The Anza-Borrego Desert

It is a solitary night after everyone else has gone to bed. You have not written here for months, when the evening melancholy that used to smother you every night as a child descends again, like an old friend's embrace, unexpected and yet totally welcome at all times.

You wonder if you will ever feel this comfort again.

The way you felt in lazy summer afternoons with a blonde boy beneath the oak trees and chatoyance of the sun.

How close and how easily she occupies your space when she whispers in your ear in french, and the hard words of her sister when she asks why you never kissed her.

You've told yourself that you've been acquitted, emancipated from romantic love, and yet you reason, this shouldn't mean you don't deserve to feel safe, loved, at ease. You can recall far too clearly that with just the right company you did know true peace, and yet you are acutely aware that the sensation remains foreign, as it has for most of your life. Just in this moment, when everyone is asleep and you are awake, you relax the invisible fist twisted around the inside of your chest.

You submerge yourself in memories of lying next to him in that sacred and simple bedroom, her touching your cheek under the stars in the Canadian wilderness, a clarity of purpose in the eyes of two dear friends who painted stories and radiated temporality like angels of immediacy.

Once, you could tell those stories, until The Purpose called you to walk a path alone. Simple stories of love, loss, the heartache and sweet pain and joy of being alive, stories that have no place in a life of compromise, altruism, and ideals. You have always told yourself those things were selfish, and yet... friends and lovers seem to slip through your fingers like water and glass, crystalizing only in your memory.

You think of a girl from Prague who wrapped her arms around you behind a sofa without you noticing, a total comfort special for its pedestrianism. You should like things to be this easy again, even though you know this is how a frightened and lonely animal thinks when it is trapped in a cage.

The thing I think I notice the most in the aftermath is that imagination is difficult. To feel safe enough in your own internal world to give birth to things of which you are the caretaker and over which you hold absolute power - your characters and stories - is both a luxury you do not have, and another opportunity to find out you are not in control enough to be free. Nobody is safe with you as their caretaker. Creation becomes an act, a fixation, rather than a way of being, and you are left grasping at memories of joy and the relaxed, liquid focus that accompanied the rich internal life that has been taken from you. In the aftermath of recovery there is no sudden triumphant return to wonder. Peace of mind becomes stasis, and while you can refine, regurgitate and play with ideas, you cease to generate them. When you are alone, your mind is empty, a prisoner of its own defense mechanisms and emotional autophagy. In the aftermath, you are alone in the way that a grain of sand is alone. Against all odds, after unconditional heartbreak and with the total effort of your being, you have achieved mediocrity.

Recovery

Healing is not Recovery. Recovering is being ok, functioning. Healing is reclaiming the wonder, the joy in your internal life. And more than that, healing means that feeling frustrated or tired is not always accompanied by the overwhelming fear of failure and powerlessness. One day, they might just be... passing challenges. Or at least that's what you hope for in moments when you feel like you have merely Recovered and not Healed.

The thought of exposing yourself or your creative work has always been terrifying, but now it's as if there is an invisible force smothering the constellations you used to see in your dreams. Every Time you have an idea, your muscles and thoughts become heavy, you feel a forceful, emotional suffocation. You cannot pinpoint a doubt, you have always taken responsibility for what you know you can control, no matter how small, but in the face of this, you give up. You hate yourself a little more every time it happens.

After six and a half years
Every night filled with tears
Perhaps you've been lying to yourself
That you're really all better.

Will I ever be whole again.

You're pretty sure that you're not broken, but you feel more like a collection of pieces than before.

Misery loves company, but at least misery knows how to love.

You reached for the stars, and the stars reached back.

When you were young, your heroes were James Baldwin and Frederick Douglass, two men who were shattered and built themselves up, repaired themselves, from nothing and as many times as it took to become whole. And in doing so discovered that deepest secret of humanity and compassion which you have discovered in yourself. Your other hero is your mother, who like those two brave souls persisted past all bounds, past all pains and betrayals, and without fully realizing it, made you holy with love.

Ceaseless, inexhaustible child, there in the farthest reaches of the mind, in between the spaces of night amongst the field of stars, where time is an emotion rippling, humming through Elysian Pools, you are lost in the presence of everything you have lost to be present.

There is a moment at the edge of consciousness, not everyone gets it, where you must stand truly naked before yourself and confront the inevitable fact of your humanity. It is exultant, a marrow-deep resonance, a vapor ringing in your essence, the sweetness and pain and joy of what it means to know that every story that ever was, is or will be... will end. And you realize that to confront one's own death must be the ultimate act of unsullied and selfless humanity, because in it you discover the truth, fragility and permeability of the human condition is not yours alone. It belongs to all, a joyous dripping infinity which is the effervescent, permeating mortality of *life*.

You are a guest in this house, this body which has been graced, when you feel good, cursed when you feel bad, with a gentle, inescapable clarity that everyone around you has always seemed to be playing catch-up to. You have known since you were young that you are very alone, and it is the most terrible and comforting thing you have ever known, so that sometimes you feel as if it will always remain the primordial fact of your existence. This is as inevitable as architecture. You are the ceaseless, inexhaustible child. Yet somewhere, in the deep reaches of your being, you feel an old, familiar tiredness settle into your bones. After fleeing from it, fighting it, accepting it, you know that somehow, in some whole and flawed way, you are the imperfect child of imperfect children. This is home.

There is a kind of smothering sense of the infinite, a heartbreak-time-loop that explodes in the ever-expanding space between you and everything else, clutching your heart at the beginning, the end and in those careful, holy moments in the middle when you pause long enough to realize you are in love.

Mastering the fear of death is, you realize, still a basically selfish endeavor.

Life reveals itself not in opposition and acquiescence to death, but survival through the loss of things you believed you could not live without.

At the beginning and the end, we are alone.

Loneliness is a badge of hopelessness. Solitude is the measure of how we wear it.

The naming of everyday marvels becomes the most restorative task in the age of miracles. When Magic is everywhere but here, only pointing out its simplicity and subtlety will restore its power.

The Beginning of The End

What follows your demons? Days filled with doubt, and most of all, the feeling that you are all used up, that every ounce of your potential has been spent fighting invisible enemies, and now that they're gone, your hopes and dreams are spent too, and you only wish you could rest.

The events of the past dwindle into a single finite moment, their complexity reducing from months of hell, to days, to hours, to a single moment dimly recalled. Hindsight has been mined of its healing and harming potential. You realize quite suddenly, that you aren't exactly broken, but neither are you whole, and ever since then you've been staring down the barrel of a long gun.

In your heart of hearts, you know- well, you hope really, knowing has been poisoned - that what comes next is... joy? Building? Rising? Something other than recovery, you're done, tired of recovery. Perhaps this is when the true healing begins, or at least, a re-becoming.

Some days are better than other days, but every so often you choose living over survival.

You know, but are working on believing again, in that love which is given unconditionally.

It is even harder perhaps, to receive love unconditionally.

When you were little, you dreamed of showing the world everything it could be, kinder, more caring, more just.

'You show me how hope makes people beautiful,' they tell you.

Maybe that is enough.

Grace makes beauty out of ugly things.

A perfect world is one which acknowledges its flaws.

You resolve to go home for Christmas and see your mother more often...

I lost who I am, but I hope I become someone who loves as fiercely, and lives as sincerely in service of the human condition as I like to think I was, and as I know my mother and father are.

Someone very dear to me once said that when a child is born they are, in that moment, absolutely perfect. I believe we are the perfect children of perfect children, and if we have forgotten this fact, it's not so much because we have failed, but because we have been failed.

After all, we can only do what we are taught. I know that the people who hurt me were also hurting themselves, and so the story goes that the abused become abusers. If it's love that breaks this cycle of violence, then it is the love of our community which keeps the peace. In the spirit of this thought I encourage you to embrace those close to you, remind them (or tell them for the first time) that you love them, and perhaps even solicit a reciprocal confirmation of that care. This book began as a tool for recovery, a catalogue of sorts of darkness and the attempts to cope with it. It has since morphed, grown enormous, come to life and eaten Tokyo. In the process I have discovered my power in the most unusual places, and so I hope, if you're looking for it, you can too, remembering always that we are, deep inside, perfect children. If this book can offer some small light to you in whatever darkness you face, then I know fighting through these long years has been worth it.