The Stars in the Tunnel

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Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

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Two Thorns

I am at college five hours from my family, even though my little sister has a cancer the doctors tell us that, barring a miracle, will kill her within two years. Classes started for both of us this week. My mom would have put on gloves this morning to give her chemo pills that are too dangerous for skin before she got on her yellow bus. I’m working on getting into a routine so I take my meds on time too, but it’s been a stressful few days. Today, the A/C started leaking all over my bed and bookshelf a half hour before class. Picture brown water staining my pictures on the corkboard, overflowing the non-stick pot balanced under the leak, dripping in torrents through my carefully, categorically arranged brown shelves and seeping into my poor, dog-eared orange copy of C.S. Lewis’s *The Weight of Glory*, before finally dribbling all over the mess of pillows I breathe all night. All of this in the exact time frame when I take my morning dose: Lexapro for depression and anxiety and Abilify to stabilize my mood and my propensity for mania and mild psychosis. I was off my stabilizer for around six months, but my depression is cyclical, my sister has cancer, and I had a manic episode a month ago: several hours where my brain wouldn’t shut off, seeing nonsensical imagery branded with neon, chaotic emotions, hearing an endless, frenetic babble of reasoning and screaming. An episode is my brain overheating as I try to process an overload of distress. It’s my brain pummeling itself against God, future, and my paralyzing fear. The long and short is that this summer was a good time to go back on Abilify.

Maybe now you’re dismissing me as unstable. True, some nights I stay up in the dead of night writing back to the voices in my head over and over, trying to outreason a twisted, schismed segment of my imagination. The fight is harder now that Gabby is sick. I catch myself veering. There—you have one of my darkest secrets. Honestly, it’s not a secret that I keep, even though I run the risk of keeping people away. This is because no one came to me when I was diagnosed and said to me—“What has torn up your head has torn up mine. I know the patterns this particular strain of suffering tends to follow. You can walk with me.” Who will say such things if I don’t, who will say that you can live with this, that you can have a life with things like this, that you can snatch a life out of the jaws of a wolf like this? Before you are unnerved by me or for me, come with me. I do a lot of riding the waves as they come. An hour after evacuating the torrential dorm room, I figured out I had, in fact, forgotten to take my meds. I was frustrated and agitated. I was enjoying having better handling of my brain that moves with Lamborghini speed and a snake’s agile turn radius, but now I had anxiety. Whenever my schedule changes I always forget my meds, the two tiny pills which alter my brain chemistry so I don’t hit lightspeed without steering the second I tap the pedal. The maintenance people have been in and out of our tiny little triple all day. My things are everywhere but where they should be, my books are on the floor and poor C.S. Lewis is wet, and now I have nowhere to lay my head because my bed is in the wrong spot. I just moved in, I’d just barely gotten settled.

But the next day, I go to class and I wave at last semester friends. Despite a grand total of five hours of bad sleep and the dehumidifier turning off and on next to my head all night, I will not be making concessions to the shaky tightness in my frame. I’m feeling a little depressed, brain careening, a little neurotic. It’s not helping that the Abilify doses haven’t been consistent. Poor stress-addled brain, it didn’t get its drugs. I’m not abilified. But pitying my brain is different than pitying myself. Quite frequently, human brains do things without any sort of permission. They like to bring us embarrassing memories at inconvenient moments or delight us with sudden epiphanies in the shower. My brain was not having a particularly good day. All I wanted was to go back to my room, vanish the stupid dehumidifier, and collapse on my mattress and chill the hell out in my own space for ten minutes so the stress would recede. But my life is about as controlled as a Cat 5 hurricane, and my sister has
neuropathy and nausea to deal with for her own part. Alas, if I could control my life and my brain, I
wouldn’t be telling you the devastating saga of my drippy air conditioning.

My sister and I both happened to lose our genetic lotteries young. My illness was the more likely
to pop up. When I was diagnosed at seventeen my parents sat down and thought and realized it ran in
the family—a lot of Dad’s side living on the spectrum of one disorder or another, generation after
generation, some diagnosed, some not. I’m twenty now. But Gabby, my little sister—she’s fifteen. She
just turned this August. The birthday party was small, and by small I mean there were forty kids in our
pool and there could have been two hundred if we planned it better. The chances of someone like her—
always healthy—sickening with Signet Ring Cell Carcinoma are basically nonexistent. But genetically, the
odds of Gabby developing cancer were significantly higher. That’s the only way a healthy kid like her
acquires a cancer with only 3 dozen pediatric cases on record in the US. They ran their panels and found
two mutations in her DNA. The way the doctor at Sloan Kettering explained it to us, one mutation hits
the gas on cell reproduction and the other disables the brake, and the cells multiply fast and wrong. The
cancer started in her colon—but we just assumed she got a couple of consecutive stomach bugs and
gained some weight. Things changed when we went to Florida for Easter, and the sweatshirts and coats
were shed. I lectured myself about accepting different body types while I tried not to stare at her
distended stomach. It was taut and rounded like a beer belly on a fifty year old alcoholic, but she hadn’t
gained weight anywhere else. All bodies are beautiful, I lectured myself. How stupid that was, I think
now. I knew it was wrong not only because I saw what it looked like but I also knew what it was
supposed to look like. I saw her old belly every time I looked in a mirror with a shirt off. We’re both built
like my mom, bony with a fast metabolism. I am the most genetically similar person to her on the
planet; my body is the most similar to hers you will ever find. But we’ve each drawn a different short
straw.

In the beginning, when I stared at the wall silently after my parents Facetimed me in April with
the news of Gabby’s diagnosis, I wished it was me instead. Partly because then I could have spared her
pain, partly because I thought my coping mechanisms were probably stronger than hers, partly because
I yearn and wait to go home—to be called through the open gate and leave my flesh in the ground.

But Gabby’s faith is simple. She was baptized after her diagnosis by her own choice. Our
denomination is not one that believes baptism is necessary for you to enter heaven, but she got up on
stage and quoted Paul from the bible: But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is
made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weakness, so that Christ
power may rest on me. This is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in
difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” When Paul said these things, he called whatever he
was going through a ‘thorn in his side.’ Gabby’s thorn is literally in her side, surgeons removed six inches
of her colon. And there she was in the church gymnasium, a music stand as her makeshift pulpit so it
would be short enough for her to see her notes, saying she wasn’t afraid to die because she would see
our grandfather and our three siblings that miscarried in Mom’s womb. She wore a flimsy white choir
gown that really needed a good ironing and her hair in two French braids. My parents asked her camp
counselor—a mentor who called her Gubby and sent her snail mail all school year—to do the baptism.
Gabby went under in the little pool that had been rolled onto the stage’s ugly carpet and came up
shining like a brilliant lighthouse that flares a beacon over the fog and the water where things sink and
drown.

My faith is not so simple. I toe the lines between light and dark, I love and I hate the God that
loves me, who still ensures both joy and agony. I am as hypersensitive as a stalked rabbit. I feel all things
keenly. I feel the way that the world suffers without having to be trafficked for labor or sex or abused by my parents or trapped under the poverty line for so long that I watch my children slip away. I know what pain has done to me. Any number of things can put us under ten thousand feet of water pressure in the dark ocean depths. I know the few agonies that sucked me under and how they unraveled me, and that’s enough. For a year I believed I never would speak the horrible things that surfaced from the trenches in my mind, the vivid visions of abuse and punishment of my flesh, the voices that move like a current full of category five rapids and do not care if your raft flips—they soothe to dash against the rocks, pummeling, I love you, sure I love you, you worthless son of a bitch, I hate you. I love you, I love you. Depression hacks me into something else for hours or days at a time, it makes me know every star in the sky has already died, and that no matter how far I float there will be no land for my raft. My mind will tear itself apart from the inside out, I will sink if I slip. My only defense is praying that my God, who lets me suffer until I’m too traumatized to believe any goodness is genuine, will catch me. Why should I believe that any beacon of light over the waters at night will not fade?

In spite of all of this, I’ve never been properly suicidal. I’ve had a simple instruction put in my base code—I know I am here for a purpose. Some nights I’ve laid awake and asked God to kill me, and God sometimes asks me, I think—and I’m a little psychotic and manic during those times so I’m not sure—if that’s what I want, as if I could make the choice and he’d let me have my way. And my answer, I admit, is always no. I can’t explain why it’s no, it’s just something I know. It’s not time. I don’t want to die, I want to live, trapped in my little boat with the rapids as the water swirls up in waves of suffering and loss.

My mom and dad took me to therapy. They drove me in the minivan while I sat in the grey faux-leather passenger seat, they drove even though I told them to stop trying to understand. They told me not to worry about the cost of the meds and the sessions with a really good therapist who our insurance wouldn’t cover. Mom went to a class from the National Alliance on Mental Illness, now I see the persistent affection in her worry. And even beyond my family, when I sobbed on my first day in a dorm room, my new roommate sat down on my strange bed with her unfamiliar face and voice and life and showed me her square photo album full of her friends and family so I wouldn’t feel alone. I got my hands all wet with my tears and nodded along. Her father, her friends from high school, the soothing in her voice. She sat on her bed with her holy spirit necklace that she never took off, a little dove figurine framed in a heart and she listened to me for the months of the passing semesters as I doubted and cursed and seethed against our God, told her that I might not believe anything by the end of this. But, I did believe in God, at the end of that particular chapter in my life. All of my people, they put too much fight in me for me to hiss out like a candle in the rain in a trail of smoke. I am healing even as I am falling apart. And just last year at a little worship gathering, my voice physically changed. It’s round and full when I sing deep. I carry notes long after they end and sing the harmonies. I hear a peace in my own tone that I do not understand.

In every instance where everything became so bad that I knew I was slipping, freefalling, losing it, I’ve been caught. My depression is cyclical, it will always come back. But I haven’t been through a single hard thing that I can regret at its conclusion. Of course, that doesn’t always make it bearable when it’s happening—then, all I see is the dark water and I want to crawl out of my skin. But I’ve had enough moments of clarity to operate like all my loose ends will one day be raveled. My verse is the sister of Gabby’s verse, another one from Paul. *We rejoice in our sufferings, because suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. And hope does not put us to shame because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been*
given to us. My thorn keeps me too weak: leave me alone with myself and I will self-destruct with the reliability of a dying star, unspooling in the echo chambers of my own mind. I am dead meat without the love and listening of others. I need to be an open book that can be read, critiqued, loved, or I will end up in an asylum. I don’t have another choice besides vulnerability; because I’m psychotic, honesty is my only option. Everything in my brain is so vivid that I lose my ability to see reality, and my judgement and perception wither. I need others as my eyes, my mirrors, my purposes and my loves whom my mind exists to serve in all its neurodivergent glory.

And somewhere along the line, I learned how to be drawn onward. I learned how to stay up late texting with hurt friends who don’t know what is happening to their minds and their lives, how to humble myself and listen to people who irritate me, to stop driving forward and grinding myself for shiny success, how to be patient and stand still in the midst of a hurricane. I am afraid right now. Fear hangs around like a gag I can’t spit out, binding me, making all these words hard. But I can’t worry too much over whether Gabby will live or die. Gabby came home from her first day of school on the bus with her best friend, Alyssa, and had enough energy to put on her bathing suit instead of napping. I smile at pictures on my phone of them in our pool, stuck in a giant pink flamingo float with their hands up. The small things can put us back together. Sometimes love is a fluid shadow, seen only in inconsistencies and negative spaces, my lack of suicidal thoughts, my hunger to live, my sister smiling at a stuffed animal as she laid on her back in the emergency room crying as her lungs lacked oxygen after chemo.

Love is so strong that even suffering, in its full and experienced agony will serve it with broken shoulders. Perhaps the two of us are marked so we could make those who suffer more complete.

A Cold
It’s not the wad of phlegm in my face, the dry red eyes that itch and the swollen sinuses, or the hazy cement block of depression in my head

that’s pissing me off. I swear, I’m quite content. If anything could ever make me upset, it’s not the wad of phlegm in my face.

Though many have lost their composure over less, I am a stoic, and I am not impressed by chapped noses, or the hazy cement block of depression. In my head,

I am as zen as the city of Elysium, enjoying a vodka martini and chatting with George Washington about something important: it’s not the wad of phlegm in my face.

Maybe I can improve my day with a fire drill at 2AM. Better yet, I’ll have the luck to be hit by a train, boat, bus or plane, or the hazy cement block of depression in my head.

If you ever caught me saying I’d be better off dead,
that’s the sarcasm talking. If I would ever whine about anything, it’s not the wad of phlegm in my face, or the hazy cement block of depression in my head.

Sew

It makes me feel better as I sew on the couch, my fingers with red thread through a piece of blue calico, I’m procrastinating but you’re patient. If the thread enters and exits the fabric under my careful fingers, I can watch the pulling strand instead of thinking. You’re present and mild, you say so little, quiet. I’m procrastinating on writing these lines. If I could count on one hand how many times you hugged my sobbing mind like a father holds a child I’d need a million fingers, running my needle in and out with my thread. I feel the tension of the brick in my head. My therapist tells me that I don’t sleep well at night because I’m suppressing my feelings during the day, drowning myself in Instagram and the bright lights of the television, the flickering of the laptop screen. The thread, in and out of the blue calico, it’s red, but I don’t know what it means. In and out, cut the fabric to size with squares and sew, this is how you make me, break me down and build me up, break me down and build me up. In quiet with my calico, build me up and break me down, the sanding of the waves on the shore, one two, I’ve always loved you like the water, in and out. Rhythmically it sands stones to smoothness over time, no hurry, like a gait, and maybe we’re walking instead of procrastinating. Tell me a story about toes in the sand and I’ll tell you about this morning when I shifted my weight across my flip flops to laugh at them squash instead of worrying, dancing by myself in the dorm shower. I can breathe though I’m drenched and I dance to the old radio in the bathroom, rinse and rub my face. Sometimes we are closest when I don’t think of you at all, your rhythm like a backbeat in my life, a beating heart. Maybe I don’t need to worry as much about your quiet. Maybe I’ll start to crack this silence. I think about my sister always and never, I don’t call her on the phone because under ten thousand feet of water pressure it’s difficult to move, to make a move—when I could slip under social media and forget to dial the phone and see her tired face instead. A screen and a shield, wedged between the two halves of my head. I think I’ll sleep better if I call. I think I’d rather the waves than a wall.

Cavity - (noun)

1. This thing in my mouth, swelling and preventing words, causing me pain. Typically found in teeth, f*!*^/g up the enamel like a giant punctuation mark, an unwanted period scooped out of bone by when the sentence should have continued; see also: a conductor silencing the band a beat too soon.
2. Abdominal. The space in the soft bowl of skin stretched around ribs, pelvis and spine and pulled taut in which the organs reside in a squishy, dark sack of wet velvet muscle; like the infant Olympians in the guts exospheric guts of Kronos; also; the flaccid space after they are taken.
3. A divot in the eye that one is strongly advised not to meander too close to, a dilated darkness that one could fall for minutes into without hitting the bottom. I believe I saw a man parachute into one; I did not see him come out. See also: a mineshaft for unlucky canaries, in which the procedure is typically to stand at the edge of the iris and confirm danger by lowering a flight-filled creature in a cage into its grave with a rope.
4. Chest. The place that empties as one stares at a wall without moving for ten minutes after putting down the telephone. The dead, sucking concavity where hydrogen gas used to blaze and give out light to the millions of miles that lined up for a morsel, as if it was a soup kitchen; also; A 100 square foot Victorian shanty that’s all attics, full of invisible, skittering spiders that spin odd telegram SOSes from silk without addresses also; Nothing.

Killing the Child

I was somewhere in my early teens when we went to Downtown Disney. Old enough to be depressed, too young to know it. We’re by the water as the afternoon begins to hint at evening, wandering over cobblestone after a week in and out of Sea World. I am not sure how my self-hatred came on during this time, but it did when I passed a set of light-up Minnie Mouse ears on a cart. They lit bright with LED’s of many colors, pulsing. Some little part of me thought they were beautiful. Like fireflies, they lived to give pure joy for a single night, visceral crowns of celebration. I immediately rejected this bliss. I tried to kill the child in my head whose eyes got caught on such useless shit. The ears were cheap, overpriced, glorified trash that would take up space in the closet after today. The part of me that wanted to crown my head with them was weak. It was a stupid child. Naïve to hell, lowly, vulnerable, so disgracefully adoring as to be useless, so gratuitously joyful. The fucking simpleton liked things simply because they were bright and full, brimming with electric light no matter how common or beneath notice, pressed up against the windows of my skull and gawking in innocent wonder. I pushed the child in my head down, it cried out for help. In my head I kicked it. Locked it in a cage, beat it down, hit it, and tried to choke it out. I saw a small, pathetic body that cried and whimpered under my stronger hands, bruises vivid in my head under images of my fingertips. I knew I was slaughtering a piece of me without a single defense, that was why I wanted it dead. It was the antithesis of a cold, polished controlling creature that grew in me around middle school.

We found a place to eat and I broke, wound up crying and sick through dinner about Minnie Mouse ears and what I didn’t know what I’d done to myself, calling simple hopes stupid, but I felt terrible. My mom went back with me to find the Minnie Mouse ears, but the carts were gone and the outlets were closed. I wanted them, I didn’t want them, my throat hurt with a lump in it. I never found the ears again. It was a short trip, it was late, we had to go. I tried to console myself, encourage myself, hug my pieces, but you can still trace this pattern, this attempt to cut myself down throughout my life. It began as an attempt to control, but as the sickness progressed, I lost control of it. This habit of criticism of myself was like something foreign in me, I was living my own version of Jekyll and Hyde. Sometimes I was this critical creature, sometimes I was its victim. Even when I knew I was doing well objectively, I felt obligated to tear myself down. I acted anxious about schoolwork until I actually felt anxious about school work. When I had a couple pieces place in a tiny art show in our public library, I tried to duck out of the photos of me and my grandparents and my pencil sketch with the ribbon on it, embarrassed and secretly pleased. I’d made something small and good with my hands. I wanted to go out for ice cream with my family, I wanted to bask in their loving approval and my ribbons. Instead, I hid in the car, feeling like I deserved to have someone beat me up for being so happy, for living with a semblance of fullness. I was too young to know what was happening to me, too young to know how to quarantine the toxins in my head, so I was splitting up the seams. I was twisting into two, back into one, back into two, and one hated the other.
My unbalanced biochemistry probably made those moments mildly scarring, but in my experience mental illness isn’t the source of self-criticism, nor is self-criticism exclusive to the mentally ill. I can pinpoint where it started for me in a story. I remember this mistake because I was looking up at the painted face of a woman in my room. Her face was blocked out in many colors, the places light fell designated by flat shapes, each in a new hue. I leaned on this bright, goddess-like image of a woman when I did my homework, as I was just beginning to grow up, sitting on my bed in quiet concentration. Perhaps I saw myself in this exceptional picture, perhaps I wanted to grow into this image. Make no mistake, this was a good thing, a wonderful thing, to dream of having an inherent goodness.

And then, one day, a voice in my head lied. You know you’re enough, but if you tell yourself you’re not quite up to par instead of being satisfied, then you’ll work harder, and you’ll be even more exemplary. It seemed wise to me. Brilliant. I would trick myself into being better by telling myself I was behind, and then when I ran to catch up, I would be miles ahead, so much better than everyone else. And just like that, I rooted my self-worth in comparison and decided that I would indoctrinate myself about my own worthlessness. I was barely out of middle school. So young for such a fatal mistake. So young to invite a demon into my head for tea and make it a bed in the attic. It birthed a wolf inside my head to tear me apart.

All of us, in a way, are prey animals. Our wellbeing is so easily pounced on and killed by hypercritical self-consciousness, a deep knowledge that you’re never adequate that grows in tandem with pride and facilitates addiction to control. Who hates the child that loves in simple admiration? Pride. Who hates healthy vulnerability? Pride; the desire to be better than that, never need anything or anyone, above the simple pleasures; to be a connoisseur of suffering steeped in worldly wisdom and self-justifying cynicism. We become our own malicious hunters for the sake of our pride, but it does us no good. If one chokes out healthy vulnerability in themself, insecurity is happy to multiply in its plot.

Thus, in high school, I joined the overachievers. A small regiment of never-enoughs that aced out every class, and lived and breathed academic anxiety. It was normal not to sleep, to be depressed, to panic. It was cool, even. If you weren’t buried under the weight of your future, you were already failing. Of course, we were all failing anyway. I walked over the yellow faux-pebble tiles in the halls, past the green and orange lockers and wondered how all my potential had evaporated before I’d even become an adult. I used to be able to do everything. Now I felt like I couldn’t do anything right—I was a dead end. I lived under a vague, heavy idea that I should have my life together and be doing more. I was told I had to work hard so I seized that directive for itself, set it on a pedestal and sacrificed myself to it, cannibalizing my mental health piece by piece so I’d be able to boast of something: I was one of the smart kids. I chose my own fate, pushed myself into too many AP classes.

I chose wrongly. I wound up in therapy, on the cliff of a psychotic break. The patterns that I established in this period are still written in my head for me to overwrite every day, even now, as I write. I bite my tongue and I scorch my reaching fingers and I puff myself up like a silly bird in a cage trying to scare off it’s owner. I boast about my good points and my growth when from that cage, I am just as frightened of being inadequate. I look at my friends as those who will never understand my what astronomical margin I miss the cut, and say to myself, “If anyone in this situation had any self-respect they would put me in a social dead-zone and turn their face from being associated with such a worthless, insecure, grasping prick.” The thing is, in reality, they do know. I couldn’t have written an essay like this unless I talked to my people honestly about the places I struggle, the places I fail.

The depression picks at and fondles imaginary flaws, makes it hard to listen, hard to find healthy vulnerability, hard for me to write these essays where I’m bare as all hell all alone with a keyboard and earbuds screwed into my ears, wishing that I had more support, trepidatious over having them read by someone, hard for me not to assume the worst of what they’re thinking behind my back, reading rejection into inconsequential gestures. In these moments, I can’t feel the love of God for the life of me. It’s hard for me to be quiet or still. I get agitated and neurotic and bury myself into my work—a habit
that functions as an old friend. Sometimes beating myself up makes me feel more powerful. I can be a predator: disowning and destroying my failure of a self. Sometimes I choose butcher over butchered. If I focus on my failure and drive myself into a depression, at least I, the wolf, am in control of what I feel, not at the mercy of the unknown. If I spend all my time focusing on me, my pride is titillated. If I kill my dreams and settle, I have a familiar pain to secure me in the cycle.

But the truth is that I am moving forward. Spastically, erratically, and slowly, I am moving forward. When one is in the thick of our self-undermining cycle, they often fail to give merit to the fact that they have substantial practice in taking steps forward. It is not particularly important if sometimes I only manage to take one step forward before I slip three steps back. That one step sets precidents. For example, I found God, on the night in downtown Disney, and he asked me just what it was that I was doing, killing the child. He loved the child. I, the wolf, was the problem. That was the first time I encountered the idea that it was my responsibility to protect the part of me that was willing to hope instead of tearing it to shreds, even if I was afraid, even if I felt like a fool. I promised, even if I forgot. That small step forward barely qualifies as a silver lining for that episode, it did not make me better then. But I can hardly put words to how much matters now. God must put more credence in our small steps than we do, because things that we try to kill in our anger have a way of coming back. Goodness is resilient, like plants that come back in spring. The transient epiphany from Downtown Disney took at least five years to become one of my solid handholds, one of my central tenets that I hold and take the time to learn over and over, a ghost on the horizon that took on flesh slowly. I suppose it is one of the main impetuses for this whole work you are reading. I am coming to believe more and more firmly that the part of me that chooses how (and if) I will evaluate myself is mine.

I really think that as much as we have the ability, it is our responsibility to reject both pride and shame and allow ourselves to have our socks knocked off by the humble and exceptional joys of life as they come to us. To quote Wordsworth feelings of genuine, wholesome pleasure are “such, perhaps, / As may have had no trivial influence / On that best portion of a good man's life; / His little, nameless, unremembered acts / Of kindness and of love.” It is pleasure and deep feelings of comfort and safety that push us towards healthy vulnerability, that teach us to be grateful, that fill us so that we cannot help but overflow into some action of kindness, or at least give us such a boost in confidence that we are more ready to let go of all the petty pride and shame we cling to and learn a far more excellent way. Letting wonder into our lives is an act of positive moral value. We cannot force wonder to come, but when it does, we must resist the temptation to reject it out of bitterness. We can choose to remember it, to treasure it, to linger on it and value it, to hold it as part of us and embrace the ways it has touched and altered us.

It’s strange at first, but I began practicing. Sometimes I have felt like a fool, still needing three hours to work my biochemical malfunction of a brain out of bed every morning: then messing around with the magic of jewelry pliers and sewing machines and prose upstairs this past summer. But I went out for dinner with my grandmother although I couldn’t pay for my own tacos and gave myself a pass when I didn’t read anything on my summer reading list, and I recruited my dad to get ice cream with me one night on the Jersey Shore. We walked through the dark town after a thunderstorm, the puddles glowing liquid gold with the street lamp’s gaze and I asked him what he liked about me even though the words were hard to force out of my throat.

In the beginning, the wolf slept with the rabbit and all the animals lived in harmony as a whole in the wood. Each and every one of them had a gift: the birds had songs that could wake up the spring, the mice had teeth that could chew through anything, the vicious wolves were given insight and clever
speech, and the great gold-eyed ones ruled the forest and knew truth. But of all the creatures, there was one that did not really need to use its gift. It was the rabbit, who could come back to life from its bones each time it died. The rabbit had little use for this form of immortality, it was living and merry simply because it was fast enough to outrun any bad thing. It was soft with downy white fur that caught the sunlight like strands of opals, wide-set eyes, long velvety ears and a quivery little nose. It ran faster than the turtle and the fish, the mice and the opossums and the lovely little songbirds that played with it in the woods, faster than the babbling creek that ran to the lake in the middle of the woods, faster than even the animals of predation. It was faster than the wolf, the fox, the owl and its best friend of many years, the mountain lion. The rabbit and the great, gold-eyed mountain lion were always playing, wrestling and rolling in the flowers and the grass, walking in the crags near the base of the mountains at the edge of the woods, taking naps and splashing in streams.

But the rabbit began to want to little to do with the slow, deliberate pace of the big-shouldered mountain lion. Even though the mountain lion always waited for the rabbit when they had agreed to meet, and the rabbit was glad to be carried around on its shoulders when it had tuckered itself out, the rabbit regularly abandoned the lion with a quick-footed scamper into a crevice. Finally, in desperation for being constantly left behind, the mountain lion challenged the rabbit: “Aren’t we friends? Didn’t we promise we always would be? Why don’t you want to wait for me?”

“You are slow and I like to go quick. I don’t want to play with you any more, there is so much to see and to do. I want to bound up the mountains and into the rocks and across the streams and across the whole world and be the fastest of them all. I want to run, run, run. You just get in the way.” The rabbit bounded circles around the mountain lion, barely able to stay still enough to look it in the eye for a moment. “We don’t need to be friends. I don’t need you anymore.”

“Because I do not always run fast?”

“Exactly. You can be such a drag, Mountain Lion.”

The gold-eyed one listened, and then gathered a birch stick to be the finish line and it said, “Then we will have a race. You may put the finish line wherever you like, and we will both run to it.”

But the rabbit was clever and devised a trick. It slipped the finish-line stick into a crevice in the crags on the mountains. The rabbit was small enough to fit into the crevice, but the mountain lion wouldn’t be able to fit in more than its nose. Even if the mountain lion managed to keep up with the rabbit, it would be far too big to slip into the small space and cross the finish-line stick. How funny it would be to watch the mountain lion get its nose stuck in the rocks!

Then, they stood at the edge of the woods across from the rocks, and the mountain lion shouted for them to go. They raced through the woods, neck and neck. The rabbit veered towards the crevice. The mountain lion saw that the rabbit had hidden the finish line in a tight spot where its enormous shoulders would not fit. It had been outsmarted! It pounced on the rabbit and broke the hip of its rear leg, wrenching it out of its socket. The rabbit tried to wriggle away, but it could not. The Mountain Lion snarled, its jaws packed with massive incisors.

“Are you going to eat me?” The rabbit pleaded, freezing.

“How will I eat what was once my friend? I won’t destroy you.” It let the rabbit up and it wriggled away, feeling as if it had lost something. Suddenly desperate to win something, anything. The rabbit shot into the crevice and across the finish line stick.

“I win! I win! I crossed the finish line and you haven’t! I can finish the race and you can’t! You can’t finish the race unless you give me something! You’ve ruined my leg forever, you’ve broken my bone! How will I go the fastest across the mountains and rocks and streams and see all the pretty things and have adventures?! You said you would finish the race, right? Give me something in exchange! Give me something!” The rabbit cried desperately, its crooked leg throbbing.

The mountain lion gathered itself up to its full regal height. “Very well, rabbit, I will do as I have said,” the mountain lion conceded graciously, “I will give you three things. I will give you eyes to see
beauty everywhere, not just in what is flashy and quick. I will give you a speed that is better than racing along in solitude. And when you want friends that aren’t just toys to be left behind, you will have them, everywhere from the woods to the waters, even to the peaks and the far reaches the sun.”

Appeased, trembling and willing to take what it could get, the rabbit limped out of the crevice dragging the stick, and the mountain lion was able to finish the race fairly. Then they parted ways. Thereafter, even with a limp that ruined its speed, it was very easy for the rabbit to be merry in the woods and forget these words because it was springtime. It fluffed its fur and scampered, it played with its reflection at the edge of the pond and looked at the infinity of sky and clouds in the water.

_Pride will isolate you._

### The Wolf and the Rabbit

A vicious lone wolf, so savage and rabid even its pack drove it out, came and claimed the woods where the rabbit lived as its territory. It ate stones and raw flesh and tore the stems of the flowers before they could bloom. One morning in the woods, the wolf found the rabbit playing in the stream. The rabbit was pouncing over the ripples in the water, frolicking and splashing along with the burbling rhythm. Its fur sparkled with water droplets and its whole body wriggled with pleasure, from its quivering nose to its drippy tail, soaked to the skin. The rabbit cocked its head and rolled over in the stream with a splash. The wolf saw that his breakfast was not at all concerned with becoming breakfast and raged, raged, raged. _What is this? Small, smelly and easy to sever, and it is happy? It must be stupid as a stone. What filthy, frivolous flesh._

“Are you a fish, Rabbit?” the wolf inquired, its ridged, yellow teeth gleaming.

The rabbit paused a moment, its ears perking up. It surveyed the wolf’s sharp, serrated teeth.

“Go away.”

“Oh, come on now. You don’t know me, you cannot say I am a bad wolf. Look at me, I am big and strong and very fast.”

Everything the wolf said was true, the rabbit supposed. It was a good, fluffy little rabbit, and the wolf did look big and strong and very fast, and it decided it would not be hasty—perhaps the wolf’s tone was just a misunderstanding. “Would you like to come play in the stream too? You can see the water sparkle in webs when it flows shallow over the stones. It glints like little pieces of the sun.”

But the wolf demanded again, sharply, “Are you a fish, Rabbit?!”

The rabbit sat, fur wet and clinging to it in the stream, its chin tilted up to look at the wolf in a state of mild perplexity. The wolf was much bigger than the rabbit. The hard edges of its shoulders and its jaw towered over the rabbit, and its thick, spiking fur the color of night and thunderstorms blocked the sun and cast a shadow of the rabbit’s small, water-shrunk frame. Surely such a big wolf could see that the rabbit was a rabbit? Surely the wolf knew what was what, it was so big.

“Are you a fish, sloshing around in that water?” The wolf asked, like a serrated razor.

The rabbit felt oddly like the wolf had put its big, sharp paw on its head and pinned it down into the stream. “Are you a bad wolf?”

“Tell me rabbit, tell me something. You can’t run, can you? You can’t run away from me.”

The rabbit looked down at its gimp leg, sprawled out underneath the water of the stream, the water running shallow over it, the light sparkling over it like a web as it played in the rabbit’s fur.

“You should never touch or drink in this stream again. It isn’t for rabbits with gimp legs.” The wolf said, almost gently. “This is my stream, I am the strongest creature of them all. I am certainly stronger than you, so you should get out of this stream and climb between my teeth.”

“I do not want to.”
“Silence!” commanded the wolf. “It’s a pity about your leg. You must have been very fast before.” The wolf reasoned mildly. “You want to be fast again, don’t you? If you were fast, then you could outrun any bad thing. I could make you fast again, Rabbit. Wouldn’t you like that?”

Slowly, the rabbit nodded. The rabbit hadn’t thought about being fast since its leg was broken, but now it felt ashamed. The wolf was right. It was important to be fast.

“It’s so important to be fast, isn’t it?”

The rabbit started to feel very, very, very small. It was chilly in the shade of the wolf’s shadow, only its leg was still touched by the sun, sticking out to the side where it sat. The rabbit nodded.

“Well, Rabbit, all that needs to happen is you climbing between my teeth. If you climb between my teeth, I will make you fast again.”

“If I climb between your teeth, can you make me fast again?” The rabbit inquired nervously.

“It’s a deal.”

“I didn’t say that—”

“It isn’t fair to lead your fellow animals on. You said it, it’s a deal, isn’t it. You can’t go back on your word. You can’t go back on your word if you’re going to be a nice rabbit, you can’t go back on your word if you want to be able to go fast.”

The wolf pounced on the rabbit and slaughtered it, sealing the deal. It enjoyed neither blood nor water, but every dawn and every evening, it hunted the rabbit. The wolf was fast, even faster than the rabbit had been before it had a limp, but now that its hind leg was out of the socket, the rabbit had no hope of outrunning it. Every dawn and every evening, the wolf caught the rabbit, tore it to shreds, and devoured it, leaving only the bloody remains. And each time the rabbit came back to life because of its gift, the wolf found it and killed it again. The wolf killed all the bright, singing bluebirds, the mice and the opossums and the frogs that the rabbit played with.

_Power does not equal help or goodness._

_Echo_

Stereoscopic anthills trickling up pixelated troops,
syllables and prime-time newsroom soundbytes.
Answer me in your
heatwave radio static, do not leave me
in your black stripes,
in a silent scream,
a tight kink in the piping,
an unfinished telekinesis.
Sound, oh Sound, slamming through this
earthen tapestry,
tell me to whom I broadcast when
I vibrate these vocal chords in hemoglobin hymns or
backbeaten, cranking elegies! How much meaning
has been sieved through
your waves
The Rabbit Races the Turtle

The rabbit hobbled through the woods when the sky reached the grey of dusk, roving, tripping, anxious. It did not know how far away the wolf was and it didn’t like to think about it, its ribs aching, the memory of the cold, cold, cold stream stuck in its head. Every morning and every evening the wolf hunted the rabbit and the rabbit was perplexed and afraid by this pattern. It used to enjoy running, even with its leg. Now it hated its leg and anything that reminded it of it. All that mattered was to be fast in the wolf’s territory, and the rabbit was slow. It used to be fast, it used to race, once it raced the mountain lion and won. Now it was too slow, too slow, too slow. The rabbit was sure even the rocks and the trees could outrun it.

I must prove I am not the slowest of the slow, the rabbit whispered, choosing a hiding place under a root by the lake. If it could prove to the wolf that it was not the slowest of creatures, perhaps the wolf would not hunt it anymore. If it could prove it was fast, maybe the wolf would respect it, and leave it alone. It could once again be the darling of the forest and play with the swooping songbirds.

Then, the rabbit saw the turtle. The only time the rabbit had lost to the turtle was when it had been so confident it would win, it went off in the middle of the race to chase a butterfly. The turtle was ugly and strange, and the rabbit had never had much to do with it. It ate strange, slimy wet plants from the edges of the lake in the woods and its shell was a grimy, shiny brown. It moved rather slowly. The turtle was fine, the rabbit supposed, but never worth much notice. The rabbit had always had places to go, butterflies to chase, flowers to roll in, and bright, beautiful songbirds to play with.

“Turtle, would you like to play?” The rabbit asked casually, as if it did not matter very much. The turtle turned its head slowly, its paddling flipper feet lurching over towards where the rabbit was emerging from under the root, its fur full of dust. The turtle was a little surprised, because the rabbit always favored playing with the prettier creatures. “Well, I suppose.” The turtle said slowly. “What shall we play?”

“We should have a race.” The rabbit wriggled, trying to seem excited. “Well, I suppose, but I am not very fast.”

“We shall both run all around the lake and back to this spot, and see who is the fastest.”

“Well, I suppose.” Said the turtle, starting to lurch towards the root that would be the starting line.

The rabbit did not hear the turtle, the blood pounding in its ears, preparing to run, waiting for the turtle to reach the starting line so no one would have grounds to bring up any sort of cheating. Surely the turtle would not be faster than the rabbit, not even with the rabbit’s gimp leg. The rabbit waited, staring into the thicket ahead and nowhere else, until the turtle was in position.

“Well?” The turtle inquired (rather sluggishly in the rabbit’s opinion.)

“On three. One, two, three, go!” The rabbit sprung over the root, bolted across the autumn ground and dodged through the sticks, stones and brush. The turtle slowly lurched its paddle-like feet up onto the root to climb over it. The rabbit dashed through the clearing, tearing through the tangles of grass that caught on its gimp leg. The turtle’s shell was so low it dragged on the root, which the turtle thought was too much of a climb for a starting line, and it had to tip itself forward, its back legs dangling in the air like a see-saw for its front feet to find a purchase in the other side of the root and the ground.

The turtle looked at where the rabbit was and gave up walking, and decided if it truly wanted to race it would have to swim. The rabbit flung itself forward towards the finish-line root, desperately
slowing with the piercing ache in its weak leg, looking over its shoulder, trying to make sure it was going faster than the turtle, who was swimming around the edge of the lake—the rabbit charged forward, its bad leg spraining. Fast, fast, fast. The turtle heaved out of the water and into the mud, closer to the finish line root than the rabbit, but having to wobble slowly on dry land. The rabbit shot across the finish line root with the turtle’s head close to its fluffy tail. “I am not slow! I am not the slowest of the slow!” The rabbit cried out.

The wolf lashed out from behind the tree where the race had started and snapped the rabbit up in its teeth, crunching its bones. The turtle hid inside of its shell, and even though the wolf snapped its teeth and claws and the sticks and stones into the turtle shell, the wolf could not break it open.

Comparison is the thief of life.

The Rabbit and the Turtle

The rabbit was beginning to enjoy walks with the turtle. When it came back to life after the wolf killed it every morning, it would meander around the lake with the turtle at a pace that was slow enough for flipper feet and gimp legs and not just seeing the sky, but watching the clouds move like the grand train of an emperor’s cloak. The turtle inched along with its glossy, gritty shell, more beautiful than any unliving stone. The rabbit noticed the way the obsidian, dark bone of the shell welcomed the sun on the turtle’s back, held the light like every panel of the shell was a dark, shining bowl. And the patterns of peat near the lake looked like little miniature gardens under the turtle’s feet. The rabbit also bothered to discover that the turtle was quite good for napping with, its shell being a very nice portable heater. The rabbit walked with the turtle, and the turtle with the rabbit.

One day, the turtle asked, “Shall we go for a swim?”

“Water is bad. Water is where I met the wolf. Besides, I am not a fish, and I have a gimp leg. I am not very fast, Turtle.”

“Neither am I. I am neither a fish, nor am I fast, but I like to sunbathe on the log out there. Climb on my back and I will swim you to the middle of the lake so we can sit in the sun in the middle of the water.”

So the rabbit climbed onto the turtle’s back and the turtle swam them out to the dead tree in the middle of the lake. There, the rabbit hopped onto the warm, slimy bark. It might have been a very yucky old tree, but instead the rabbit noticed the grain of the wood, and the algae floating from the branches below the water like whispers. The turtle climbed upon the long, its narrow reptile eyes beginning to close in slow blinks, beads of happy, lazy night, swimming with the shine of the sun like fireflies.

“I feel very majestic on this old log.” Said the turtle, sunning itself.

“You are.” The rabbit replied, admiring the depths where the sun glowed in the dimness of the turtle’s shell.

“You look very well too, next to those the branches of the tree under water.” The turtle said, looking over its shoulder at the reflection. The rabbit felt, with pleasure, a sort of kinship with their napping spot. It stretched out on a branch of the dead tree on its stomach with its legs floating painlessly in the cooler water several inches under the glossy surface of the lake and let the gold sun looking down on it make it drowsy. “I’m sorry I tried to race you.” The rabbit murmured, floating its paws back and forth in the lake with pleasure, making disruptions in the algae that swam back into place when it moved its paws below the surface. “You are very lovely, Turtle. I am so pleased to be your friend.”

The turtle was too asleep to respond, the lazy sun in its shell.
The Stars in the Tunnel

The rabbit realized it quite enjoyed the viridian membrane of algae, and that there were many beautiful little minnows and tadpoles. It laid its head down on the velvety scum on the dead tree and let the lull of the water rock it to sleep.

The small things put us back together

Blasted Season

I need green. I need green, craving, reverent to the window-plants in lines, honoring the ancestors in terra-cotta shrines, pining over crocus shoots where the sidewalk breaks, longing to be licked by sun, begging, pleading, counting down day by day to the equinox, treasurehunting for moss on winter rocks and pavers to kiss-slap my soles to warm ache. I linger on closed buds, praying like a broken saint against the cold, the frost, the grey droning hours, hours taken, hours lost. At hours mad, dark, late, I’m awake—split like an early seed.

Wind beats the window, The plants on the windowsill stay quiet, waiting, bare branches outside groaning with hard shakes. I’m so whipped for spring. I’m still by the window holding my sapling in my hollowed palms, ripple-skinned, sprouted in the grey light.

The Wolf and the Wind

Once, the wolf trapped the rabbit against the coast at the end of the forest and drove it toward the water until it had no choice but to run along the shoreline. The sea spray blew and made the wolf’s coat spike and stick like shards of sharp stone. The rabbit bounded, sending up sprays of sand into the wolf’s face, but it was no use, the wolf still gained, stomping over the rabbit’s crooked tracks. “You should not run, rabbit, then you would not ruin the sand with your ugly, filthy, crooked tracks! You are so slow!” Sheer fear shot through the rabbit, for it could not run any straighter. The rabbit was no good! The rabbit ran crooked! The rabbit would always be caught! What could it do? What could it do? Suddenly, the rabbit spotted an outcropping of rock on the shoreline, a hard silhouette against the horizon where the sea and the sky blurred—a temporary bastion! The threw itself up the side, skittering between the crevices, trapped on the stone, but alive. “Climb between my teeth!” Howled the wolf.

The ocean winds ruffled through the rabbit’s mangled fur, cooling its sweat and the beating of the sun. For a moment, the rabbit felt no fear. The wind was lovely, as was all around it, the sea full of the sun’s fractured gold. The rabbit had an idea. “But Wolf, why would I climb between your teeth?
Surely you understand that as a prey animal, I want to climb between the teeth of the greatest creature.”

“I am the greatest creature!”

“Your teeth are not as big as these rocks, I shall feel much grander if I climb between them instead. You are not the biggest. Look at the sea! Look at the sky! Aren’t they the largest, most majestic, most magnificent things you’ve ever seen? They go on forever, and you do not. I would much rather die up here this time, trapped by them instead of you. They are far more magnificent than you.”

“It does not matter what you feel, you selfish rabbit, wanting to feel grand! You are not grand, you are prey, and you belong between my teeth! It does not matter if I am not the biggest, I am the greatest!” The wolf howled with fury, and earsplitting sound in the ocean air. “You will never be free from me! I may not be the biggest, but I am the loudest! Can your stone make sound? Is your stone as fearful as my teeth and my howls? I can fill your whole head with snarling and noise, and there is nothing you can do to silence me!”

“What?” The rabbit cried.

“I said, I am the loudest! I will always be louder than you! My loudness will follow you wherever you go, you will hear my voice in your head always, and I will tell you what to do and what to be! You are prey! Climb between my teeth!”

“I am sorry, Wolf, I cannot hear you over the singing of this wind!” The rabbit called down from the rocks.

“What?!” The wolf roared in rage, over a gust of ocean air.

“I said, I cannot hear you!” The rabbit screeched, quite loud. “It is no use to talk in all this wind, Wolf! I am not loud enough to be heard over it, for I am not powerful enough to make enough sound! If only you were big enough loud enough to overwhelm all this great wind, then surely you would be the greatest of creatures. I would gladly climb between your teeth, if only you were loud enough to make the wind shut up.” The rabbit began the climb down, so the wolf would be able to hear it a little better. “Then, I would not doubt that you were the greatest and fastest creature, even though I did manage to outrun you to this rock!”

The wolf snarled with rage, dug its claws into the stone, and climbed the rock. But a gust of wind blew so hard that it deafened the wolf and nearly knocked it off the rock. The wolf howled with rage and ran up and down the sea shore, howling and snarling and making as much of a ruckus as it could, piercing the air with cursing and demands and shouts. And yet still, the wind kept blowing. Worse, the wolf knew the rabbit was enjoying the wind, enjoying the sun, enjoying the sticky smell of salt in the air, enjoying the glitter of the sea, enjoying it all. The rabbit would fill the whole wretched wolf with pleasure at this wind that made them small! Abominable! The wretched rabbit, the wretched, horrible, ruining rabbit! The wolf howled until its throat felt like knives. For the day, and then the night, and then the day, the wind blew, until the wolf’s voice cracked and broke and disintegrated from croaking snarls into absolute silence. It lay in the sand with the water lapping against its exhausted paws, breath wheezing in and out of its lungs, wheezing, unable to make a sound besides the hard sucking in its lungs. Finally, the wind fell calm, and there was only silence. Silence, and the rabbit up on the rock, and the wolf’s chest heaving for air.

“Climb between my teeth, Rabbit! I have defeated the wind!”

“What?” The rabbit cried.

“Climb between my teeth!”

“I cannot hear you over that wind that is coming in and out of your mouth!”
The wind was inside the wolf’s very body! Disgraceful! The wolf didn’t need wind, the wolf could do without wind, the wolf was stronger than wind! If the wolf could not live without this wretched wind in its body, it did not want to live at all. It would get the wind out of its body, it would fill it with water instead. The foolish wolf leapt into the water and drowned itself.

The wolf’s corpse was carried out by the autumn sea, a pinprick in the vastness of the ocean. After watching the sky change for a long time, the rabbit slipped off the rock and cast a look over it’s shoulder at the corpse. It was a small black splotch against the sun setting, streaking the sky with color over the water. The wind rippled itself through the rabbit’s mangled pelt, a good friend. The rabbit limped away from the big and wonderful ocean and back into the trees.

*To know your enemy is to win the war.*

**Crows**

Those crows on the roof, silhouettes of small gods, lurking on the wires like stones, black quarter notes blotted against staff-paper sky.

Minor key. Still as holes in a blinking pupil:
that’s to say, they’re not.

Birds are saccadic.

They twitch, flicker, hop, glitching software,
a flittering head suddenly cocks, popping in and out of the blank,
shadows lilting and streaking against matte blue,
flickering in and out as clouds rage past, cloaking and uncloaking the sun.

You wouldn’t think anything had a hold on them until they glide down to two feet.
Their relationship with gravity is like ours with God.
Spit-balled, elusive, tensioned, tautologous,
an invisible calculus of arcs and rays jerked into the fourth dimension before it can be scribbled down, swallowed in the gap of space above the ground
Breaking Hope Out of the Story

Sometimes, the limiting factors of my mental health smack me. My uncle has a big house full of small rooms. Every Thanksgiving they explode with people in each other’s personal space, stray emotion and erratic noise. This year, I huddled in the corner of a brown couch, in a sitting room that was empty because it was cold. I listened people yelling at each other over decks of cards; I could hear them through the walls while I was trying not to cry. Dad came to visit me because I was acting strange. He didn’t really know what to do, listening while I grasped for words to explain what was happening. I told my Dad that I’m like a computer with a limited amount of memory. When people have a conversation, they download the person’s feelings like a compressed file. I get the uncompressed file. I read between the lines, I notice the sounds in the room, I notice all the details and colors of the room décor. I notice that person A is emotionally exhausted by what person B is saying and that person B is just desperate to connect to the family. It weighs on me and my head is full of sensory details. And in the background, I remember my existential dread, my sister Gabby’s cancer, my unfinished homework, the fact that I don’t know which couch I’m sleeping on tonight. I can’t close all these programs and think about something else, or relax like a normal person. The computer’s memory is ninety-nine, a hundred percent full. The machine begins to stall and act up. I can’t handle light, I can’t handle noise, I can’t handle people in my personal space, I can’t handle people in the same room. And so I curled in the corner of the couch in fetal position away from my family who I loved on Thanksgiving, and said to myself if I had known how all this traveling would skyrocket my stress levels, I would have stayed at school all break. I told my Dad that I felt like I was high maintenance.

Dad sat on the couch with me and said gently, “Sometimes you can be. But it’s not like you’re doing it to be selfish. I genuinely think that there are some things that are harder for you.” It’s true, some days my tendencies towards depression, anxiety and associated problems gets the best of me. We are all are imbedded in the lives we’ve been given, imbedded in their problems. We are limited, and sometimes, we uncover with bitterness that the ceiling of our actual possibilities is incredibly low. In these moments, hope seems unreasonable and the future appears rather bleak. I find myself wanting to get out, to break loose and run. Can you blame me for wanting to pull a sly one on the small realm of my feasible prospects? Can you blame me for making up stories?

But alas, we are more cynical about real life than we are about fiction. When we stop with only our indirect meaning making, we isolate hope in a fictional world. Stories with happy endings are nice, they’re even comforting. But is not enough to escape into a story for a few moments of emotional relief. Comfort in fantasy must become encouragement for progress in real life. If we want to do ourselves any good in the real world, we must consider the real world directly and hope for our futures. We must bridge the gap, we must pull the potential from making meaning in fiction into actual life. Hoping is not wishful thinking, it is believing that the object of desire isn’t out of the question and acting accordingly. There is a concrete regard for the real world involved. It is much easier to fantasize than it is to hope. But I cannot just dream of rabbits that outsmart their wolves, make starry-eyed wishes on birthday candles, and fondle the idea that my weaknesses will make me stronger so I will feel better. I must hope for this if I want to make any progress, and that is considerably more difficult. I live imbedded in the real world day to day, inundated by its pain, mundanity and inconvenience. Sustaining hope in the midst of the small, terrible moments on unfamiliar couches can seem a little delusional. I need stories, as we all
need stories, in a whole different way. We must approach them and delve into them for the sake of our actual lives, our actual selves.

Fortunately, C.S. Lewis can help us to analyze how “fairy stories” can “steal past a certain inhibition...” when it comes to all sorts of unapproachable topics in our lives (“Fairy Stories” 37). Once we know why stories help us, we might adapt their helpful features into direct discourse about our real life experience. Lewis implies we don't consider our real difficulties directly because of “reverence” (“Fairy Stories” 37), or the psychological pressure that prevents us from considering deep sorrows because the stakes are high. We go to stories because “by casting all of these things [problems and losses, for our purposes] into an imaginary world, stripping them of their... associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency” (“Fairy Stories” 37). When we strip our associations, the knee-jerk, implicit assumptions we make, we begin to see our losses the way really they are. We must enact a suspension of disbelief towards the initial, distress-controlled ideas we form about hardship or tragedy, (i.e. “happiness is impossible,” or “my life is tainted by my hardship from now on,” etc.) the same way we suspend disbelief in a book full of magic and elves. When we have left behind our low expectations, we are free to live in hope. We escape the claustrophobic mindset of worst case scenario thinking; we live expectant of resolution and meaning-making. This is the beauty of fiction as a genre. This is fairy tale thinking, this is hope: we borrow the wellness of a future happy ending as strength for a difficult present. Even while the details of the last chapter are unwritten and unread, we approach hardship from the same position of sureness and emotional leverage that we have when we are sure the main character will make it through the eleventh hour. We can begin to calmly, properly judge how to react to hardship when we have the patient receptivity that we bring into stories.

And we cannot dismiss the world of the fairytale as being completely different from our own. Here, Italo Calvino says it best in his introduction to Italian Folktales: “...in the lives of peoples and nations...folktales are real.” They examine real, repeating human tendencies, they are “a catalogue of the potential destinies...” condensed into simple stories (“Introduction” xviii). For Calvino, and perhaps for us all, they are our traditional wisdom of how to deal with our universally difficult lives, how to overcome “the common fate of subjection to spells, or having one’s existence predetermined by complex and unknown forces” (“Introduction” xix). Fictions have truthful, life-based premises. We would do well to be instructed by fiction, rather than fleeing into it or dismissing it as childish or unrealistic. Thus, it’s helpful that Calvino has some ideas regarding how spells, these limits set by “complex and unknown forces” are broken in fairytales: “...we can liberate ourselves only if we liberate other people... There must be fidelity to a goal and purity of heart, values fundamental to salvation and triumph... and above all there must be present the infinite possibilities of mutation, the unifying element in everything: men, beasts, plants, things” (“Introduction” xix). We must not be picky about where mutation occurs, which window that last-minute plot twist crashes through. After we suspend our belief in worst-case scenario thinking, we must prioritize our goals, our attitudes, our belief in possibility, not an immutable plan or sure knowledge of the future. We must embrace Calvino’s lightness, that sudden reconfiguring of the dreary reality, where we can find it.

Take, for an example of lightness, the life of Jorge Luis Borges, a writer and librarian who went blind. He reasons, “when something ends, we must think that something begins... we only know what we have lost, not what we will gain. We have a very precise image... of what we have lost, but we are ignorant of what may follow or replace it” (Borges 380). He is aware that the shape of the hole that hardship or loss opens in our lives is specific, but considers it fluid—something can and will “follow or replace” (Borges 380). This is what I mean by patient open-mindedness to positive outcomes. His
approach instructs us in the mechanics of lightness following loss: Borges quickly takes us around the tight turn of a plot twist in his difficult situation. “I made a decision. I said to myself: since I have lost the beloved world of appearances, I must create something else.” (Borges 380).

He chooses actively what will fill the gap where his blindness has disconnected him from the world. He starts studying the writing of the Anglo-Saxons, his “distant ancestors” (Borges 380) with a group of students, reconnecting with the unseen world by learning its history. And behold when they read Old English: “Each one of the words stood out as though it had been carved… we were moved… we found two words [which we understood]. And with those two words we became almost drunk… Those two words were the name of London, Lundenburh, and the name of Rome… I think we left crying, “Lundenburh, Romeburh…” in the streets” (Borges 380-381). I laughed when I read this episode. I loved the happiness he nurtured in an activity we’d consider ordinary, boring, and fusty. I was also painfully envious of his sense of wonder. I lost wonder at around thirteen or fourteen, at the very advent of my adulthood when my depression really started to set in. But Borges found it again, late in life and in the midst of his infirmity. Borges enacts Calvino’s advice for breaking spells. He “liberates” himself while he liberates “other people” with him (“Introduction” xix): I very much doubt his students were expecting to become elated over old literature that day. He demonstrates “fidelity to a goal,” working to learn and reconnect with the world (“Introduction” xix). And in his wonder is “purity of heart” (“Introduction” xix). Borges embraces “the infinite possibilities of mutation” (“Introduction” xix). Hope was not constrained to fiction or even history for him, it bled into his real life. His change in perspective let him leap his obstacles like they were obsolete. I am convinced that his horizon of possibilities was broader than most of ours, even though his eyes were taken from him.

Changing our perspective is a habit of agile thinkers, not just something for desperate optimists. So yes, my mental health is chronically sketchy and yes, I am frequently so heavy I’m close to crashing, and yes, I can feel myself wearing out like a cheap shoe sole. It is not likely I will make a full and permanent recovery from depression. Such things are largely out of our control, I can make good decisions, but I cannot alter my biochemistry with a magic wand. I lived under the low ceiling of my dubious mental health for most of my budding adult life. My depression brought on a fearfulness, like an enchantment that kept me from considering my future might have potential. My depression would have me mount my future like a dead head on the wall, heavy and still, a taxidermized specimen of immutable mediocrity. But in reality, Borges’ blindness was overwhelmed with lightness, the Jackalope’s dull facts were leapt over and outrun, and my depression is becoming more and more obsolete as a limit.

At the end of last summer, I was concluding the angst of my lovely brain adjusting back on to Abilify. Going on meds makes life more difficult before it becomes unequivocally worth it. I expected to be impaired for about a week, I was basically non-functional for two. I was constantly exhausted, too loopy to carry a train of thought, rambley, hyperactive, and nauseous. I sat at the granite breakfast island in my grandmother’s kitchen, about as sentient as a bowl of oatmeal in the morning light. I’d been living with Gram all summer, because Gabby and I always shared a room. Now Gabby needed the space and Grandma and I needed each other. I rambled that I was thinking about Gabby, and healing. She asked me if I thought God would heal Gabby. I said “I know healing will come to her one way or another.” I know it from personal experience. I’ll probably have mental health issues my whole life. But the places where that would hurt me continue to shrink and heal. Perhaps the places where the loss seems set in stone and we are left with the aftermath—perhaps those places are where we can divest ourselves of our knee-jerk visions of fire and brimstone. In the midst of lacking a stable brain, I
remember that my losses are not the most important thing about me. Perhaps being mentally ill for the rest of my life is my happy ending, because I don’t just dream of horned rabbits. I live in this real world, where spells can be broken, cynicism can be forgotten, new worldviews can be formed, and wonder can be rediscovered. In the midst of being curled up on a couch on Thanksgiving, I can let go of the idea that no one will understand, and I can speak. I can reshape a silence: first into an utterance about a glitchy computer to a parent, then into one more small text searching out perspective on hardship. I can hope that this weak, strange mind can become complete in its vulnerability and bring as much good as it has pain. I do hope.

**Deck Stacked Against**

Lovely, we play across the kitchen table, slapping cards like snapping firecrackers, we snark a back and forth over the jokers. You don’t know, but I’d do anything I’m able for you. I’m slate and tiredness, you’re hazel eyed, live in the moment, an ace hog, a grinner, you’re chill. I think too deep like bruises, blacker over your dates with operating tables. I wish I spoke your sunshine tone, you got a sheen around you, gold. Maybe this halo like a bulls-eye, like a flare, like a knot, hangs around you because I’m scared you’ll go. Or maybe it’s just you, and who cares whether the docs prognose three months for us together?

**Gabs Needed Another Surgery**

She’s been in the hospital For four days squeezing my mom’s hand every time she feels pain. My feet are on the ground without socks. My toes are melting into the grass outside with acorn shells pricking into them when the small diamonds of the dew in the grass are cold, catching the sheer white colorlessness of the sun.

x

Yesterday I went to the hospital
for about an hour
because my mom can’t drive herself home—
“I’ve slept a grand total of ten hours in the past three days!”
My feet are in boots on the gas petal.
And then I am inside the house
staring into an aquarium
a fish tank with blank LEDs
that I pulled a dead fish Gabs named
out of that morning
when I hear someone crying in the shower.

x

She’ll come home from the hospital
tomorrow, we’re hoping.
My mom made her empty bed
which has been empty, silently driving me crazy.
My feet are crossed under me in a lawn chair
and I am outside as the birds chat in whistles, waiting.
when I am listening
there are pansies in the lawn,
paper-petaled, purple and white maned lions,
and a lone white and butter-colored daffodil
roaring a velvet salute for her re-entry.

Arrived.

I saw a bumble bee looping the hazy circles of a treasure map,
and the sparrow skit low over the asphalt,
felt spring through the holes in my sweater
I saw the pale body of the spider lace over the mud,
several shades lighter
than the burying earth
staining my heavy, many-mile calloused feet.

The haughty orange of the female cardinal’s beak
is squeaking imperially from the taller dogwood branches
like the impetuous height of a traffic cone blocking the way.
She is young because she is small and bold
flits and arcs around the feeder tree at first occasion,
even though I, a slow golem, still lurk in the shadow of the front steps.
She is not afraid.
Perhaps I could learn a thing or two.

Watching out the Window

I am trapped I’m in a room of glass watching all of this pass by. Watching a populated locomotive slalom across the rain-slick rails through its headlights to the missing track, watching the meteor fling into earth’s orbit like it wants to swing dance, watching the frenetic screech and grind of an iceberg against the hull of a ship in a dark sky. I am framing Odysseus’ white-hot iron in gilded rectangles for museum walls, cutting cross-sections for the blinding slides of the microscope, coding it into images like a castle’s south tower splintering into a megaphone of debris when the flaming projectile bashes through it. I am videotaping the supernova as it dies, running my tongue through the sounds of a language whose speakers are disappearing like tally-marks on chalkboard. I am trying to parse the pronunciation of that unspeakable black hole, listening for an echo in its yawn. If I drop enough rocks down the mouth of the cave that goes straight down, will I find a plink, a splash, a jump up in the water, ripples and little waves that move the air, that answer, a gossamer lifeline strung taut by the eldest silver spider floating down, an orange carrot torn from the fist of the ground.

Dark Poet

As a writer, I have an MO. I write about things that suck. My fictional characters have traumatic pasts to overcome. The terrible cliché of the traumatic backstory has grown and matured with me instead of getting the heck out of my writing. My essays are about mental illness, disease, trauma, and internal turmoil. Even in my lighter stuff, even when I’m talking about love and hope, spring and pet fish and female cardinals, there’s usually a tint, a strain, something heavy or sinister lurking in the background that makes my workshop groups a little uncomfortable. I am not as light as the cardinal, my narrator is usually the oafish alien who witnesses the spring from the outside, at least in the beginning. Even when I focus on the small things, my sweet little fish will attack any other creature in the tank, like a microcosm of nature that looks beautiful being vicious. I am a dark poet. I have a writer’s fascination with the things in life that are hard, with the wounds of life. I look for wonder in years of depression, in cancer diagnoses and hospital beds, in a world full of sweatshops and apathy, in the cycle of life that regularly trips and dredges into the valley of death. For me, the lines between joy and pain are usually a little bit blurred.

Perhaps, all I’ve done at this point is convince you not to read any of my writing, but you’ve made it this far, so that’s something. I started studying darkness because I was trapped in it, but as my depression became manageable, as my mania ceased to rule me, and as my outlook shifted from pessimism to giving life a shot, my works on the hardships of life actually became all the more prolific and detailed. I spent hours, over three years after my first appointment with a therapist and first dose of mood stabilizers, slamming out papers on topics I’d rather forget. I wrote about my visions of self-harm that filtered through my head because I couldn’t work through my feelings of worthlessness, I wrote about anxiety and what it will do to you when you’re trying to drive a car, I wrote about trying to overachieve because I carried a sense of shame all throughout high school. I sat on my bed in my dorm room in my third year of college, after my psychosis had died down, and tried to re-create the insecurity of having voices that wouldn’t shut up in my head on paper. And then I wrote about my little sister being diagnosed with cancer, and hearing her two-year prognosis. I frightened my parents, because when I showed them my paper, they saw a matrix of anxiety, loss, and hopelessness. I was confused, because
what I was actually talking about was finding hope in the midst of them. I was interested in how I survived. How I became kinder. How I came not to regret any of the shit I’ve been through. My fascination isn’t necessarily with the things that are hard, with the wounds of life—I am interested in the goodness that comes in and through the unbearable. So I study the dynamics of the dark.

There’s a reason dark poets are out there. The truth is, in life, the lines between joy and pain are often a little bit blurred. We don’t like this fact, but we have many truisms for it. “Nothing worth doing is easy,” and “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” and so on. The world has pain in it, and enduring the pains we come across is part of life, part of survival, and necessary to any sort of joy. What I say isn’t pessimism, it’s a willingness to face a world in which people starve, people abuse and are abused, people get sick, people ignore the needs of others and are ignored. I dearly love poetry about spring and fairytale endings, but we must be realists when we acknowledge that in our world and lives, not all seasons are spring, and not all endings are happy. Anyone who is willing or compelled to acknowledge this is a fair way toward being a dark poet.

Every dark poet is groping their way through their own tunnel, but the particularly good ones are trying to equip others for when their lights in life fizzle out as well. They know that everyone will go through something, they want help to be available. A dark poet who is making good use of their time is looking for or embodying the redemptive traits of phenomena in which everything seems to be falling apart. They are witnessing. They are facing the pain. Maybe they’re lamenting, going through hurt and even showing it so others will not be alone in it. They are searching for the light sources that the nights cannot extinguish—which must exist for us to see any shadows in our lives. They are looking for the stars in the tunnel. They return to these tunnel experiences again and again, sometimes without a choice due to life circumstance, sometimes by circumspection, because the stars are worth seeing. The constellations must be mapped and shared (whether through writing or other means), because small, self-evident joys that exist and are sometimes only revealed in pain can save people from hopelessness, inanity, dysfunctional coping mechanisms, and suicide. Reconciling ourselves to wholeness and wellbeing because getting through hard things is a communal act. The work is hard, but it is good.

So when my little sister’s cancer recurred and spread a few weeks ago, just like the doctors said it would, I left college where I could live a normal life like it wasn’t happening. I knew it would be harder to be home, but I went home to be with my family. It was time to face things. I was—and I am—in the middle of my last semester. As I write this, I am exactly a month from graduation. We’re going through it. I keep a journal because my head is so hazy with grief and disbelief and emotional weight that I find it hard to keep my head in what’s going on each day. People come. People go. We go back and forth to the hospital when she’s doing really poorly. I’m home alone a lot, as my parents take turns sleeping in the hospital rooms overnight with my sister, and then come home in the morning too tired to do much more than eat and go back to sleep. We don’t know why this is happening. She’s in so much pain. My dad and I run errands back and forth to the drug store for pain medications. We have a standing prescription for her nausea meds. I don’t sleep too well at night, I keep having nightmares. I’m sleeping in my brother’s bedroom, because I used to share my room with her—but now she gets up in the middle of the night and sleeps late into the day and my mom needs to stay in my old bed in case something goes wrong and she needs help. She’s been so tough. She’s been so strong. But she’s so tired. We’re all so tired. I stare at the plastic stars on my brother’s ceiling in the dark and sometimes they seem like a bitter metaphor for any sort of light being fake. I can’t get school work done. I have no motivation. This essay will be at least a week late for my professors.

But I regret nothing. I am glad I came home, it was the right move. I am glad I’m going through it, instead of pretending I’m not. Because my mom is so happy that I’m in the house. Because there’s someone for them to come home to and go to dinner with when they make it home from the hospital, and there’s no more having to face an empty house while she’s still in her hospital bed. Because there’s someone to run errands and do dishes when Dad needs to sleep, and sometimes we still laugh and crack
jokes over dinner, just because we can. Because when my sister has a good day, she’ll laugh with me over the jokes that the students in her school send her in sympathy cards, and try to hog all the aces and jokers when we play war with a deck of playing cards. Because my family is together, and I love them, and cancer cannot change that.

I witness the dark over and over because I’m simply unwilling to believe that there’s absolutely no light to be seen in it, and every last fragment of goodness in this world is worth finding and dwelling in. I’m waiting for the moment when despair itself rings hollow, starts to smell as fishy as a big fat logical fallacy. I know it’s coming. My form of dark poetry embraces a sort of ecclesiastical vision. Through the process of living, I began to believe, against all that seemed possible, that everything is coming to be grace, whether ecstasy or mundanity or torture. My experience has been that events of a trauma can’t be changed, but the trauma itself comes to have a very different meaning and loses its power in the life of a survivor when the untruths it’s hammered into us are exposed and demolished. The deep untruths of trauma—that we’re worthless, that there is no goodness for us, that we’re meant for harm, that we are screwed by pain and a lack of stability, that nothing will be okay, that the ones we love will be gone—are just that—lies.

As I processed my mental illness, I discovered something shocking. I was wrong about myself. I wasn’t worthless, I just felt that way because I was afraid. Anyone who would harm me was deceived about my worth, they were the ones with misinformation. All my visions of self-harm and being abused were nonsense that wasn’t based in what’s actually true and real. So I went and played in the creek and told one of my best friends everything I was afraid to say about my mental illness. We hung in hammocks, we got our feet wet, we saw a giant, beautiful snake swimming in the water. I began to see that there was goodness out there. And that stability didn’t come from days when I felt good and got to play in the creek—stability was something that could run even deeper than what was going on in my brain or my life, that I could rely on God, (who I believe is real and stable and made creeks and all other good things—I’m a Christian,) for that.

It has been my experience that once we express what has happened to us, it comes to have less of a hold on us. That is why writing, and art, and conversation is so important. I engage in dark poetry. I write and write until I see the untruths become garishly bold, and begin to seem incongruous and phony. Then, I begin to be able to re-arrange and re-frame our suffering into an image that has different meaning. The truth that was hidden in the negative space of the picture becomes a natural focal point. The pain can be undone. Today, I can say that going through mental illness has increased the total amount of happiness I have. To say that in another way, I am a happier person because I went through an extremely painful experience. I’m happy in a way that’s deeper and more lasting, my pleasure in the world is like an ocean instead of a puddle. It’s hard to say exactly how it happened. By some odd grace, somewhere along the line, I began to be present and aware of myself in my suffering. My desires. My being. I became a living being that could make decisions against the current of the pain, as opposed to life’s punching bag, a sack of pain nerves that could feel but do nothing. At some point, I ceased to be erased in the torrent of helplessness that overwhelmed my life when I almost had a psychotic breakdown in high school. I didn’t think I’d like who I’ve become, I didn’t think I’d ever feel safe or secure in myself or my faith, but I learned to do these things, deliberately, because the challenge was placed before me. I didn’t think I’d begin to love the world and the people in it, but the thing is, I’m starting to. I was taking a walk around campus earlier this semester, three years out from when I was diagnosed, when it occurred to me that often suffering functions as a window which opens to show joy that was previously invisible to us.

I think all traumas, if good is objectively real (and it is) can function in this way, even if it takes time, even if it’s not until kingdom come and the end of days. Frankly, I don’t know how this hell my sister is living in and this nightmare my family is going through will become a window to joy. But I know it will. I’ll be patient if I have to. I’ll go through the mess of working through all the trauma illness inflicts
on our lives as much as I can. I wish I could give you something more resolved, tell you how, but the nature of life is that we’re in the middle of it. I don’t have the details of a resolution, just a vague vision of the light at the end and snapshots of all the stars in the middle.

A Note on Genre

This project began as a genre study, proceeded as a genre study, and became much more than a genre study. If there’s anything I’ve learned, it’s that multiplicity of genres is a friend of expression. Each genre lends itself to a different kind of thinking, a different kind of telling, and of course, finally, a different kind of being. I don’t think it would have been possible for me to write about mental health, the bright points, and finding ways to move forward towards the light at the end with the same depth of feeling and understanding if I hadn’t employed multiple genres.

Writing essays allowed me to pull together the disparate in a way that was concrete. Essays are logical, they locate one in reality, they demand rational progression. As a writer with a “Lamborghini brain,” I tend to jump around and write fragments that feel connected without exactly explaining to myself (or anyone else for that matter) what is going on. Writing in this genre forced me to flesh out connections between my ideas. They impose a rigor on feeling, demanding to know how, demanding to know why, insisting on relevance and fleshed out meaning. They do not merely feel, they make points and they argue. For me, they became essential places to hash out philosophy and create an outlook for moving forward through hardship. They also forced me to think about persona and narration, how my tone would change the meaning of my content. In the essay, the speaker is the lens to the information and experience within it. Essays (or at least the personal or creative essay), insists on having a storyteller, a voice presenting the information that makes it approachable and palatable. They place more focus on a storyteller than stories themselves. Essays are built for raising one’s chin, for manifestos, solid walls of texts on how we can be in the world.

Poetry is built for moments. Fragments. Feelings. It works like a pendulum, defying gravity for moments before it swings back down, because its prone to leaps even while it sticks to a rhythm, changing direction fittingly and without warning. Although poetry can flesh out ideas, it does so intuitively. Rational progression lives only as means to the ends of feeling and intuitive leaps. Poetry is a place to be, more than it is a place to analyze. Its brevity creates focus and emphasis. The beauty of poetry is how much it packs into the words it says. In this project, I had two criteria—I wanted poetry that ‘sounded like it felt,’ that is to say, the syntax, rhythm, and arrangement accentuated and embodied the concepts being presented. I think this creates a body of work with a more experiential element. Which leads into my second point: I wanted poetry that allowed people to dwell, to feel the feelings that I felt when I was writing and processing, to engage and captivate the emotions.

Fiction is a different animal, because it requires a suspension of disbelief. It creates a break, a distance from reality, but it is this distancing that allows for intimacy with ideas that really matter. Besides creating some semblance of reality, there is nothing to stop an author from creating a situation that will make them (and hopefully their audience) think deeply about the themes that have been bouncing around their head. You can read more about the nature of fiction for processing ideas and its role in this project in my essay “Breaking Hope Out of the Story.” In this project, I focused on fables as a site of experimental fiction because I was interested in their straightforwardness—how they were so clearly ideologically focused, and yet still found the need for character and plot. I was also interested in what would happen if the language in them became more vivid, if they were given another dimension of reality through description and attention to character—it created greater aesthetic pleasure, greater feeling, and gave the readers reason to be emotionally invested in the stories and their morals. This was by far the most interesting experiment. I initially had a much larger chronology of fables that were
functioning as a larger allegory for my experience with mental illness. However, we soon reached the limits of the genre. Fables strength is in their simplicity, layering multiple narrative tracks into an allegory to explain complex thought on life quickly becomes more of a brain-bender than an explanation. I found myself having failed and succeeded, but I am still pleased with the final outcome and everything I learned along the way.

Originally, I hoped to illustrate and illuminate this text, but as conditions with my sister worsened, I was not able to do it within the time frame of the semester. I hope to explore illustration as a genre of expression as well as I continue this project into the future.

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Works Cited

