

5-2016

# Catharsis

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Catharsis

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from  
The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for High Honors  
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April 15, 2016

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Disclaimer: In my first class on creative nonfiction, I learned that the lines are always blurred. Some people think that if you can't remember what shirt your brother was wearing on the beach on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2002, you ought to say you can't remember. That's the nonfiction part. Other people think that if you can't remember, but it feels like red, you can say the shirt was red. I've always been the type to say red.

## A Locked Door

*This is how you bake a cake:*

You find a time when the house is empty so you can breathe out. You start to get the ingredients together, then you hear the garage door roll open and your heart starts beating faster. You mix mix mix as quickly as possible, but it's too late. The door bangs open and you jump, spilling batter onto the tile floor. You act like you're invisible so you can get the cake into the oven before the storm starts. By the time the screaming begins you're hiding upstairs in your bedroom. The cake burns.

*This is how you hide:*

You mouth the words to the song silently, but you still feel the fist connect with your shoulder. You exclaim that you weren't doing anything, even though you know it's a lie. Turns out he can see you in the car's rearview mirror, so he knew you were singing. You try to defend yourself, but there's nothing you can say.

*This is when you realize something is different:*

When your next door neighbor hugs her little brother and he doesn't hit her for touching him.

*This is how it starts:*

You are six years old when you arrive home from a vacation, run up the stairs, pull open the door, and hear screams behind you. You listen as a three-year-old demands that you get back on the plane, go back to Florida, and start over, so he can open the door

first. You hide in your room and you can hear him banging on the door but he can't get inside.

*This is a saying that doesn't mean anything:*

Everyone has their cross to bear.

*This is where it gets difficult:*

Your best friend complains that her brother is annoying and hogs the computer. You think about your bruises and how your brother is big enough now to bust the door open. You know that sometimes she and her brother fight but you also know that sometimes they play catch in the front yard.

*This is how you fall asleep:*

By sneaking into the medicine cabinet and taking some of his pills to drown out the voices that echo so loudly in the foyer.

*This is why you lie:*

Because if you call an ambulance it will bring your brother to the nearest hospital, which is not the one with the best mental health ward. Because if you call the police they will ask too many questions, and yes your mom did sit on your brother that one time but only because she had to restrain him and he's getting strong. Because no matter how many times your parents tell you to dial 911, you know they will never tell you to press send. Because if people find out then bad things will happen.

*This is what they see:*

A polite boy. A little slow, but smart enough.

*This is proof:*

A video of a nine-year-old boy, naked, contorted, and screaming. Labeled “Jack’s temper tantrum” and stuffed in a box. Given to the therapists so they know the boy they met at first is not real.

*This is what fear looks like:*

A little boy with a red red face and long brown hairs clutched in his fist.

*This is a saying that doesn’t mean anything:*

Children do well if they can.

*This is what you remember:*

Christmas when you were eight years old and your brother touched the top of your head and you were so shocked you could barely move. You were ecstatic. He did it again. Your parents took pictures, because they knew it wouldn’t last. In the photos you are in front of the fireplace, grasping his hands. You are both laughing. You are happy because you think everything is changing. You don’t know why he is happy. You don’t know anything about him.

*This is what you remember:*

Christmas when you were thirteen and your parents bought a combination lock for your door so he couldn't get in anymore. The door is dented and scratched. He has a sign hanging on his door, but you don't hang anything on yours because he might shred it to pieces.

*This is when you breathe:*

The summer that he disappears for five whole months to stay at a center for people like him, where they teach him how to be normal and the therapists are better than the ones he has at home. They are the best in the world. That summer, you can sing loudly to the radio. You can have friends over to your house. You can dance, dance, dance. You can say any words you want. You can breathe in and out and the hair on the back of your neck stops crawling.

*This is what healing looks like:*

The doctors promise that they will be there and he will not hurt you. You know they are right, but you are still afraid. He hugs you, tentatively, as you stand there, tense. The gap between you is too big to cross, even now.

*This is how you leap:*

“Shannon, you're not really a bad singer.”

*This is how you fall:*

Fast.

*This is how it ends:*

The fourth therapist begins to tell you that while you are struggling, your hurt is nothing compared to what he is going through, and you get up and walk out. You tell your mom that you never want to go back. She sends you to group therapy instead, where you write your wishes in wish balloons and you want to write “I wish you would shut up” but instead you write “I wish there was a cure for this” and the girl next to you writes “I wish he didn’t torture the dog” and you don’t know what she means until you get your own dog the next year.

*This is a fact:*

He is suffering.

*This is an inference:*

So are you.

*This is what jealousy looks like:*

When you sleep over your cousin’s house, her brother comes into the room and sits and talks with you. She falls asleep, but you keep him up until four in the morning and pretend that he is your brother and belongs to you.

*This is a saying that doesn't mean anything:*

Fair isn't always equal.

*This is how hope starts again:*

You are fourteen when you meet a psychologist called Emily and learn that her brother and her son are like your brother, and she teaches you how to talk to other people about it. You start a support group. You make flyers. You send emails. You meet people who are worse off than you are. You talk to people who actually want to talk about it. You don't feel alone. Then the group gets smaller and smaller, slowly. You get more emails from social workers than you do from the teenagers themselves. You stop trying.

*This is how you fix a broken cabinet:*

Put it back on the hinges.

*This is friendship:*

Someone who pretends like they can't hear anything going on downstairs and continues a conversation with you. Someone who doesn't freeze and look at you with a question in their eyes that you cannot answer.

*This is how you become invisible:*

Have dinner together on Sunday nights. This is important family time. Eat your spaghetti very, very quietly and pretend you don't hear your father and your brother

shouting. Pretend you don't see. Ask very quietly if you can be excused and sneak off to your room very quietly, then turn the radio up very loudly.

*This is a stupid thing to say:*

“Give him to me for a week, I'll whip him into shape.”

*This is how you visit Jamaica:*

Stay at a fancy hotel. Apologize profusely and pay for the floor length mirror that now has a web of cracks running through it. Hope that the walls are thick. Be grateful that there is a porch with a hammock and you have a new iPod. Vow to never go on a family vacation again.

*This is a realization that hurts:*

Your dad wishes he had a normal son, and that is something you can never be for him.

*This is a realization that hurts more:*

Your kids could be like this.

*This is what safe looks like:*

A locked door.

*This is how your mom thought her life would be:*

Normal. Married with two normal children and a loving husband, and no one who had to take medication, and a little house with no special locks inside it.

*This is how your brother thinks his life will be:*

Normal. A wife and maybe some kids and maybe a house. Maybe he's right. You are afraid that he will have the family he imagines. You are afraid for the woman who may fall in love with him. You are afraid for the kids who may be raised by him.

*This is how you purchase a radio:*

Loud enough to drown out any other sounds. Powerful enough to stay on through the night, every night.

*This is what guilt looks like:*

Your father keeps telling you that you will escape soon. You will leave this place and never come back. Your whole life will feel like being in a room with a special lock. But he doesn't want you to leave him. You are afraid that he will get weaker while your brother gets stronger. You are more afraid that you will have kids like this and never never never be able to escape like he says you will.

*This is how life is now:*

Better.

*This is how it should be:*

Better.

*This is what resentment looks like:*

When you do everything right and he does everything wrong and they still love him.

*This is what grace looks like:*

About the same. Something you have read about in the Bible but can't quite feel.

*This is something hard:*

There are no second chances.

*This is what anger looks like:*

Your small black dog hidden underneath your parents' bed, wedged up against the wall, trying to be invisible. He's had less practice at it than you have.

*This is what love looks like:*

Your mother's face.

*This is how you run away:*

Fast.

*This is how you come back:*

## Dinner Time

## Scene I.

Open on family sitting around the granite table on straight metal chairs. Man across from woman, girl across from boy. Girl's head is bowed low as the parents talk and the young boy plays with his food, twirling long strands of spaghetti round and round and round. Neither child's feet touch the ground. Girl looks up, meets boy's eyes for a split second through neatly combed bangs. Bows her head again, so fast her forehead nearly hits the plate. Boy rises and starts around the table, menacing on little legs. Zoom. Face has not quite lost its baby fat but still contorted, reddened, harsh. Pan out. Girl has risen from the table and runs to hide behind her father. Boy pursues. They chase each other round and round the table before the girl breaks away and runs to another room. Pursued by the boy. Follow. Enter through the door and see the girl crouched behind a desk in the corner while the boy, half her height, bears down on her. Man enters the frame, pulls him off of her. Man does not flinch at blows from little fists, one clenching a handful of long brown hair. Girl runs away. Follow. Door closes. Boy comes running up the stairs, pursued by man, pursued by woman, a twisted follow-the-leader. Rattles the doorknob. Pushes all of his weight against the door. It springs open. Cut to black.

## Scene II.

Open on family sitting around the granite table. The lights are dim. Three candles flicker in the middle of the table, the fourth unlit. Boy gets up from his chair, walks to woman, wraps his arms around her. Zoom. She presses her cheek to his. Boy walks to man, wraps his arms around him. Follow. Man holds boy as if holding museum artifact or very old book or butterfly. Pan out. Girl's head is bowed. Boy stands behind her chair.

She does not move. He reaches up to put a hand on her head. The hand is soft; the palm does not make a sound when it meets her hair. Girl looks up at boy. Zoom. He is smiling. Fade.

### Scene III.

Open on family sitting around the granite table. Pan underneath. Everyone's legs are firmly on the ground now. Girl gets up and carries a dish to the sink. Pan to picture window. Girl smiles at her reflection, flips her hair and says something to herself. She disappears from the frame, replaced by boy. Pan over to the kitchen. She has recoiled from the fist and escaped up the stairs. Boy follows. He can take the stairs two at a time. When he reaches the top the door is already closed. Twists and rattles the doorknob. Bashes the door with a chair, leaving dents. Zoom to splintered wood scattering. Cut to black.

### Scene IV.

Open on family sitting around the granite table. Man across from woman, girl but boy is not there. They eat. They talk. Fade.

### Scene V.

Open on family sitting around the granite table. Zoom on reflection in the big picture window. The girl looks up to meet her reflection's dark eyes, no longer hidden behind bangs. Man rises, half-crouched, from the table. Woman pushes her chair back. Boy stands up, large enough that his back blocks the reflection in the window. Pan to

kitchen. Zoom on man's face, contorted, reddened, harsh. Zoom on boy's skin straining against new-formed muscles in his jaw as he yells. When fists connect, see the force jolt the man, see him wince. Pan to girl. She looks directly into the lens, then down at her food. Twirls the long strands of spaghetti round and round and round. Fade.

Scene VI.

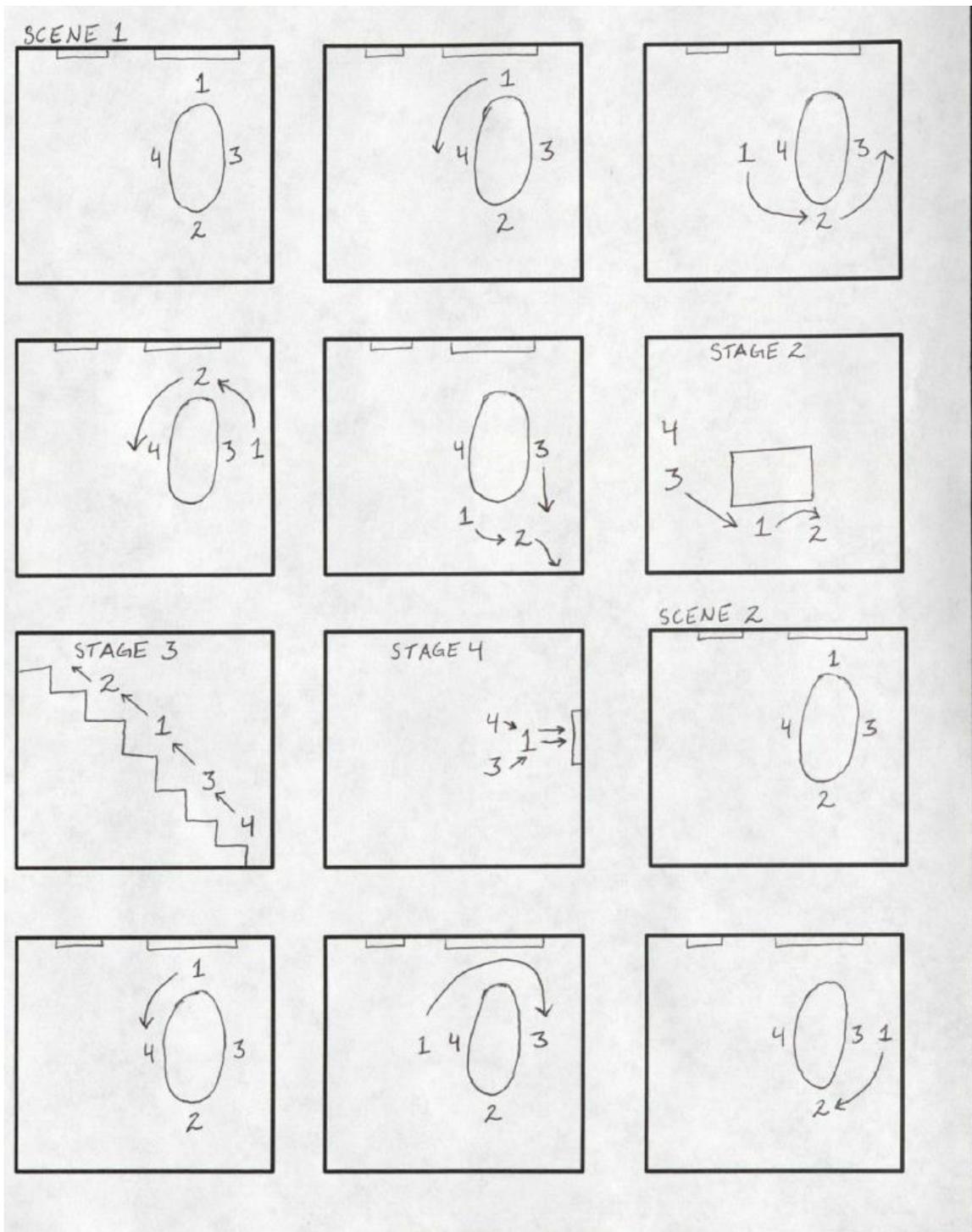
Open on family sitting around the granite table. Man across from woman, plate of spaghetti at boy's empty seat, no plate at girl's empty seat. Man and woman are eating, their food nearly gone. Boy appears, picks up plate. Pan over. Boy walks through a door and closes it behind him. Pan back to table. Man shakes his head. Fade.

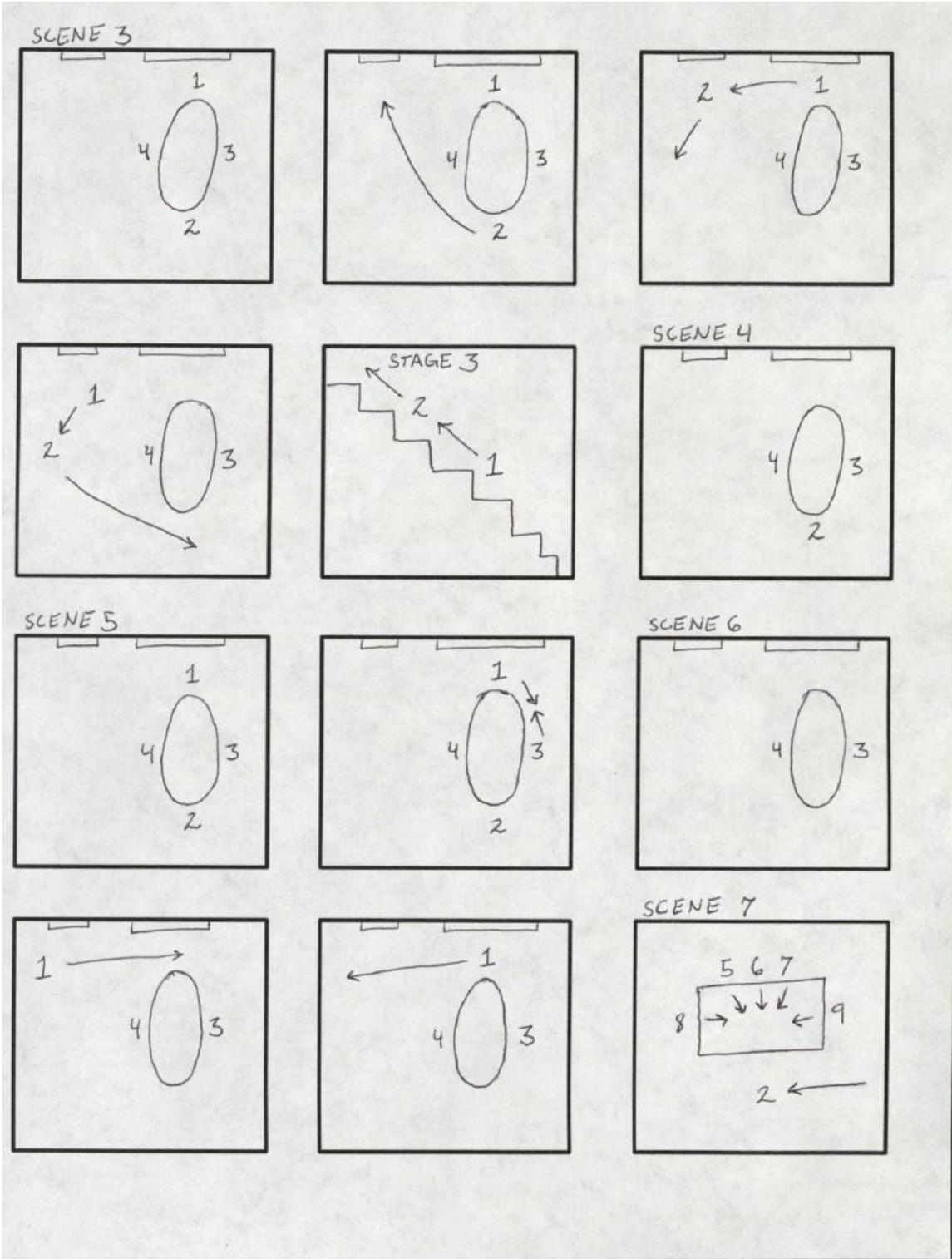
Scene VII.

Open on a different room, a different table. Green and scored with white lines. Ping-pong table. Wall behind the table covered in street signs. Pan across. 25 MPH SPEED LIMIT. SLOW CHILDREN. CITY LIMIT. A sweatshirt draped over the back of a chair says KOLLEGE. Table covered in trash and red cups and in the middle plates of eggs and fruit. Five boys sit around the table. Girl enters, carrying tray of French toast. Sets it down. Pan across. Boys smile. They reach with plastic forks. Easy. Fade to black.

Choreography to Accompany "Dinner Time"

- 1: Boy
- 2: Girl
- 3: Man
- 4: Woman





## Some Formal Arguments, In Response

“You need to stop doing the right thing all the time.”

**Premise 1:** No one who was raised by a person like my mother ought to grow into a person like my brother.

**Premise 2:** My brother was nevertheless raised by my mother.

---

**Conclusion 1:** In the debate of nature versus nurture, nature won out.

**P3:** My brother and I, we are made of the same stuff.

**P4:** I read once that your genetic makeup loads the gun, and your environment releases the safety.

---

**C2:** I’m holding a gun that is loaded and cocked.

**C3:** In other words, my genes are coiled inside me like trip wires.

---

**C4:** Therefore, I am careful never to trip over anything but my own feet.

“I’m glad you’re safe.”

**P1:** Safe - protected from or not exposed to danger or risk; not likely to be harmed or lost

**P2:** Remember those genes like trip wires.

**P3:** Lost – denoting something that has been taken away or cannot be recovered. i.e. “if only one could recapture one’s lost youth!”

**P4:** But one cannot.

---

**C1:** You have nothing to be glad about.

Alternatively,

**P1:** Safe – uninjured, with no harm done

**P2:** I was leaving home after a visit and my brother came to say goodbye. In order to do this he walked into my room. He said that he hoped I had a safe flight. While he did so, I held my breath, cognizant of the fact that I was stuck between my bed and my bookshelf, and there was no way to get to the door except to go past him. He said he would see me soon and I couldn't think of anything to say back.

---

**C2:** How dare you tell me there was no harm done?

“I guess I don't really believe in policing other people's language.”

**P1:** When you use the term “OCD” in reference to your desire to shower every morning, you convey that you take the term “OCD” to mean “generally clean.”

**P2:** When you use the term “bipolar” in reference to the boy who kissed you Saturday night but won't look at you on Sunday, you convey that you take the term “bipolar” to mean “no longer interested.”

**P3:** When you say “I'm suicidal” in reference to the essay that is due tomorrow, you convey that you take the phrase “I'm suicidal” to mean “I'm pretty stressed.”

---

**C1:** When you use a term in a sentence, you convey that you understand its meaning.

**P4:** When you use the term “OCD,” you convey a deep, gnawing, relentless, exhausting, paralyzing fear.

**P5:** When you use the term “bipolar,” you convey a wrenching combination of aching sadness and manic giddiness and unbridled aggression.

**P6:** When you say “I'm suicidal,” you convey that I should call someone, that I should run, that I should tell you instantly how beautiful and valuable you are, that I should tell

you not to go without me and that I should mean it. You convey panic, depression, suffocation.

---

**C2:** It is, in general, bad practice to use medical terms you do not understand.

“Everything happens for a reason.”

**P1:** My mother is the sort of woman who apologizes first, even when the fight was not her fault. She is the sort of woman who will buy three kinds of bread so everyone can have their favorite. She is the sort of woman to whom love is parade confetti instead of an investment awaiting a return.

**P2:** She gave my brother his best chance.

---

**C1:** God gave him to her on purpose.

**P3:** God gives children like my brother to mothers that are good.

---

**C2:** I am scared to be as good as my mother is.

**C3:** This is the error of my faith.

“Your brother is suffering too.”

**P1:** There is a bruise on my wrist.

**P2:** There is broken glass on the kitchen floor.

**P3:** There is a hole punched through the garage door.

**P4:** My mother is locked in her car.

**P5:** My father is locked in his office.

---

**C1:** I know he is suffering.

**C2:** I am too.

“I see these mothers in the grocery store, and I’m just like, get control of your kid, you know?”

**P1:** You think that you have control over how your kids turn out until you have the one who convinces you otherwise.

**P2:** You haven’t had the one to convince you otherwise yet.

**P3:** The woman bearing your judgment has.

---

**C1:** You ought to count yourself lucky.

“Psychiatric drugs have minimal benefits but very severe side effects. Most of the time, use of these drugs could be stopped without doing any harm.”

**P1:** One time my brother took the wrong medication and he couldn’t get out of bed for two days.

**P2:** One time my brother didn’t take his medication and he covered the den with empty potato chip bags.

**P3:** One time my brother went off his medication and I dreaded going home every day that week.

**P4:** Before my brother went on his medication he wanted us to rewind everything in his life.

**P5:** Before my brother went on his medication he had no control over his temper.

**P6:** It hurts when my brother has no control over his temper.

---

**C1:** Use of these drugs could not be stopped without doing any harm.

“You are the smiliest person I know.”

**P1:** You only see me part of the time.

**P2:** The majority of the time, you cannot see me.

**P3:** The majority of the time, you have no way to tell if I am smiling or not.

---

**C1:** Your sample size is not quite large enough to make that assertion.

Alternatively,

**P1:** Thank you.

“Your brother is not evil.”

**P1:** He is plagued constantly by severe anxiety and frequent mood swings.

**P2:** It is not fair that he should suffer these things and other people should not.

---

**C1:** He acts out.

**C2:** He says things like “I want Grampa to die.”

**P4:** Evil – profoundly immoral or malevolent.

---

**C3:** That is an evil thing to say

**P5:** “He doesn’t mean it.”

**P6:** I have found, generally, that it is difficult to understand him.

---

**C4:** He acts out.

**C5:** He might still be evil.

**P7:** Is it possible to be evil if you don’t mean to?

“You have nothing to be upset about!”

**P1:** I have nothing to be upset about.

**P2:** I am upset

---

**C1:** The sadness has nothing to do with having something to be sad about.

**C2:** The sadness is under the things, then, or else arcing over them.

**C3:** The sadness is bigger than any of the things.

**P1:** Emptiness isn't sadness.

**P2:** Emptiness is, perhaps, the absence of sadness.

**P3:** Emptiness is merely absence.

---

**C1:** I have nothing to be sad about.

**C2:** I have nothing.

## Story Collection: Intake Appointment

1) I first knew something was wrong when I was six and he was three and he started asking for anything he didn't like to be rewound, like his life was a VHS tape. He would get very angry when we couldn't go back and start over. He would break things.

- a. Like what kind of things?
  - i. Like doors and lamps.
  - ii. Like the chandelier.
  - iii. Like my Barbie dolls.
- b. How did that make you feel?
  - i. Scared
  - ii. Anxious
- c. Go on

2) I remember when my mom had to brush him every night, in long smooth strokes, and swaddle him in a blanket. He was about nine. I suppose that was when I knew that touching was the real problem.

- a. Touching?
  - i. He doesn't like to be touched.
  - ii. He liked contact, just not human contact.
- b. By anyone?
  - i. By our family.

- ii. He's not autistic, stop trying, we already have a goddamn diagnosis.
  - c. Go on
  
- 3) When he was having a hard day, I would do my best to stay out of the house. My mom wouldn't notice I was missing. She'd come into my room at ten PM and ask why I hadn't cleaned it without realizing she hadn't seen me once before then.
  - a. But do you understand why she had to do that? Do you know that she loves you?
    - i. Yes
    - ii. I understand everyone else's problems, thanks.
  - b. How did that make you feel?
    - i. I think our time is up.

## Story Collection: Family Appointment

- 1) The nature of Jackson's difficulties suggests to me that a structured family therapy piece is critical. I believe that due to Jackson's learning and emotional issues, he will do best with a black-and-white, pragmatically-based behavioral system that will help teach expectations in the moment.
  - a. Father: grits his teeth and closes something behind his eyes.
  - b. Mother: "We have been down that road, and it doesn't seem to teach Jackson the skills he is lacking."
    - i. Sister: What she means is, PPLLLLLLEEAAAASSSE!! (I read it when I went through her email.)
  
- 2) Okay. Well, clearly Jackson's difficulties meet criteria for OCD. The nature of many of his obsessions appears to be ego-dystonic and involves sexual and "inappropriate taboo" imagery of some type.
  - a. Sister: So what you mean is, my brother doesn't want to have sick sexual images in his head all day long. Revolutionary.
  - b. Go on
  
- 3) As you are aware, many of these compulsions play out on family members who use certain words that carry obvious sexual tones like "suck" or "rub" and trigger this process.
  - a. Father: nods and uses so many muscles to do it that I'm surprised his neck can move at all.

b. Mother: nods and breaks her own heart because she can't make it better for him.

c. Sister: We are aware, thanks all the same.

i. Now, Shannon, have you ever pushed him on purpose? Said something that you knew would be a trigger to see what would happen?

1. No. Never. Because I know what would happen.

2. HOW DARE YOU?

4) From a pure OCD perspective, his symptoms have been very responsive to exposure therapy. I am concerned that the pervasive nature of Jackson's learning issues is a large part of his clinical picture. I am hopeful that firmer boundaries could short-circuit inappropriate compulsions that involve touching other people.

a. Father: swallows the word "touching" and thinks about how it doesn't hurt the way the touches themselves do.

b. Mother: "I am sick to my stomach. I can't stop thinking about how tortured Jackson feels."

i. Sister: What she means is, you make her want to puke.

Story Collection: Group Therapy Appointment

- 1) Okay, now, why don't we all go around and say a bit about ourselves?
  - a. My name is Katharine and my younger sister is bipolar and possibly schizotypal.
  - b. My name is Tim and my older brother is autism spectrum, NVL, comorbid ODD.
  - c. My name is Shannon and my mother says ODD isn't a real disorder (is something I do not say).
  
- 2) Okay, now, why don't we tell about a problem we've had in the past week?
  - a. I was working on a science project. I had to make a Styrofoam model of the solar system. I was almost done painting the sun and my sister came home and she spilled the glue everywhere and the planets were rolling around on the floor.
  - b. I was playing video games in the basement and he came to the top of the stairs and he was screaming and screaming and I don't really know why. I just wanted my mom to come and move him away.
  - c. Yeah, but you guys don't get bruises and stuff, huh? (is something I do not say)
  
- 3) Okay, now, why don't we all take some of these sheets of paper with the balloons on them? Why don't we write down our wishes for the next week?
  - a. I wish she would stop grabbing the dog.

- b. I wish he would leave me alone while I play video games.
- c. I wish you would stop talking.

4) Okay, now, how about we say that we'll meet same time, same place next week?

How about we hope for a few more members?

- a. Fine.
- b. Fine.
- c. How about you stop asking questions? How about you accept that if all you do is ask it won't take long for me to say no? How about you say what you mean and stop trying to make us say it for you? How about you say something that will help us instead of asking for answers you know already?

Story Collection: Final Appointment

- 1) I took some depression tests.
  - a. You shouldn't take too many of those. Sometimes I'm even reluctant to ask people to take them.
  - b. May I see them?
  
- 2) I don't think I took too many.
  - a. Is this really how you feel?
    - i. Yes
    - ii. No
    - iii. I don't know
  - b. Does anyone else know that you feel this way?
    - i. Yes
    - ii. No
    - iii. I don't know
  
- 3) I think our time is up.
  - a. I would like you to come and see me again, please.
    - i. None of the other ones asked me that before.
    - ii. No.

## Tolerance or Something Else, Part I

1. “Have you ever thought that maybe... he scares you because he reminds you of your brother? Just like, with the unpredictability and everything. I don’t know, that’s just what I thought of, like right away. I think there has to be some kind of connection.”
  
2. I’ve got this friend. His hair is always sticking up and when he talks he never makes eye contact and he takes medication for ADHD but only sometimes.
  
3. One time, he came to meet me in my dorm and he was stopped by campus police. When I got down to the lobby he was crouched on the ground wearing a flannel shirt and sweatpants. The policewoman was reading his student ID number into her walkie-talkie to verify that he was a student at the college. She had his backpack open in front of her. I could see his deodorant and a t-shirt. I walked over and stood in front of him. I grabbed him gently by the hair and tipped his head back so he would look at me. I was looking at him as I assured her that he was indeed a student and that we were just leaving.

**4. Selections from Our Text Messages:**

4:42 PM: Do you want to do something at 6?

7:06 PM: Where r u

8:49 PM: Can I come

9:15 PM: I am coming

9:31 PM: I will come

11:57 PM: Coming

11:58 PM: We are

12:54 AM: Come

That night, he never showed.

5. When I found out that my grandfather was dying he was the one I called. When I'm upset he sits next to me and rubs the tips of my fingers between his own, one at a time, pressing down on the nail. His mother used to do the same thing to him when he was upset as a child. His fingers are very warm.
6. When he was growing up, it was just him and his mom. His father was an alcoholic and then he died, and that is all I know.

**7. Selections from Our Text Messages:**

i always thought u and me would date if i ever became single

shannon. we r luv. right.

in luv

ur pretty

love you. you and I could date right?

youre pretty. im pretty. we're all pretty. lets date.

but u r so attractive.

shan shan. luv u.

8. “Why are you looking over your shoulder? Why aren’t you looking at me? I’m trying to give you a compliment.”
  
9. One night we were walking home and he took off running. He bolted with no warning, zigzagged across the street and into someone’s front yard.  
I said, “I can see you behind that magnolia tree.”  
And he was off again, to the other side of the street, and another front yard.  
I said, “I can see you in the tall grass.”  
And off again, all the way home.
  
10. Late one night, he stood outside my friend’s apartment, yelling at us to come downstairs. It was nearly two. She got up and locked the front door, and I raised the blinds a few inches and waved from the window as he walked away.
  
11. “It just, it struck me when you said that. ‘I wish he would stop trying to date me, it’s making me uncomfortable.’ I notice it now, like when we’re talking in the house, and I’m just like ‘dude, enough, she’s our sister-mom.’”
  
12. I took him grocery shopping and he pushed the cart by getting a running start and jumping on the back. He grabbed a six-pack of soda and said, “Can we get this? Mango Fanta. Can we get it?” And then we passed the Halloween section and “Look, a gourd! Can we get one? Can we get a gourd?” He crashed into the

Doritos display on the way out. I said, “How old are you?” and he held up four fingers and said “This many.”

**13. Selections from Our Text Messages:**

12:43 AM: Shannon. Sad

12:43 AM: I'll come talk to you where are you?

12:50 AM: It would actually be better if I organize thoughts for a little

12:51 AM: Making me get dressed for nothing.

12:54 AM: I never said that you had to do that

12:57 AM: You said that you were sad.

14. I came into my room once to find him there, at noon on a Wednesday, drinking straight from a handle of cheap vodka. This was before he got the third girlfriend, sometime after the one he still believes is his future. He was just lost, is all. He just got lost.

15. “You have this weird like mother and lover and friend kind of relationship with him.”

16. His roommate kisses me on their couch at quarter to six in the morning and puts fingers on my skin and I think about the time he told me that he only wanted me to date boys who had no hands.

17. “We would date if I was single, right? If I was single we would date. Why? Why wouldn’t we date? I think we would date.”
18. “He really asks you that a lot? How do you put up with that? How do you not just get, like, totally pissed off? If it were me I would be so mad.”
19. “And now, I mean this in the best possible way, but you tolerate him. Not in a bad way, just, you’re very generous with him.”
20. After his run-in with the police, we went for a walk. He bought me a peanut-butter-and-jelly flavored soda and told me I’d have to pay him back if I didn’t drink the whole thing so I grimaced and whined and got it down. We walked for hours. That day, he took my picture ninety-four times.
21. For Christmas last year, I bought him a new belt. He gave me one of his old sweatshirts. He picked it out because it has a polar bear surfing on the front and he thought it was funny.
22. When he gets angry, it is in a slow quiet looping way. He doesn’t yell, he just gets stuck. “I can’t believe she stopped me,” and an hour later “I can’t believe she searched my bag” and an hour after that “She just detained me for no reason” and after a while I can’t respond because I have nothing left to say.

23. “No, I don’t think it’s, like, your fault that he’s in love with you, but it’s just...  
it’s different with you than it is with everyone else.”
24. When he tells me about the kind of guy I deserve, I call him “grandma” to push  
the compliment back into a comfortable sphere. I pretend he is talking the same  
way my grandmother does when she asks why I don’t have a boyfriend at  
Thanksgiving dinner.
25. I suppose I am honored in spite of myself, that I am the one he has chosen to love.

## Tolerance or Something Else, Part II

22. My father made us go into four hotel rooms before he found one that he liked.

The first was too close to an elevator. The second was on the first floor. The third had a view of the basketball court instead of the beach. By the end of our stay, the fourth had a broken mirror.

16. The first time my brother ever called me on the telephone it was to tell me not to break up with the boy who didn't love me anymore. He told me that if I wanted him I should fight for him. I don't know how my brother found out about the boy in the first place, I suppose my mom told him. I called the boy after and I didn't beg him to stay with me, but I told him that he was the reason my brother had called me for the first time and I said thank you thank you thank you.

25. I don't want to talk to my brother but I still like that he wants to talk to me.

5. My brother hugs me now, when I get home for school breaks. We barely touch, just enough that I can feel his back against my forearms and his biceps against my shoulders. The points of contact feel like the subtle shock of static electricity, like when you rub a balloon against your head and then afterward you can make it stick to your stomach for a few seconds before it falls off.

23. “Could you please just text him? I know he’s not your favorite person but he really looks up to you, and he has no friends. Just text him that you hope he’s feeling better.”

**4. Selections from Our Text Messages:**

Mon, Sep 7, 7:29 PM: Hey Jack, sorry you’re so sick. Hope you feel better soon!

That message took me one day to compose and two days to work up the courage to send.

**7. Selections from Our Text Messages:**

Tue, Sep 8, 4:20 PM: Hey Shannon sorry I just saw this but thank you I hope you don’t ever get mono cuz it sucks

I read that message five times because he said he hoped I didn’t get mono which meant a) he thought of me and b) he didn’t want me to be sick.

2. My brother always worries about the moles on his face. It’s sad because he is tall and strong and as my parents always say, his looks are probably the only thing he doesn’t have to worry about.

19. When I call my mother on the phone and he is in the room with her I just hang up because I know that most times I will have to hear her yelling at him and that the other times she will put him on the phone.

20. I don't like when she puts him on the phone because there is nothing that we have to say to each other. All I want from that conversation is for it to end.

3. I've got this friend who asked me why I didn't accept my brother's friend request on Facebook and I just shrugged.

“Is it because you're not friends?” he said.

“Yeah,” I said, relieved. “It's because we're not friends.”

“Is he a good person?”

“Honestly? I don't know.”

6. My great-uncle was schizophrenic. My grandfather has been depressed for years. My aunt has OCD and my uncle is an alcoholic. My father is a black-and-white thinker. My cousins have depression and anxiety in droves. All these genes corrode inside me and I've spent my whole life waiting for the moment that pulls the trigger.

24. “But the boys you hang out with are all, like, gay theatre guys.”

15. For as long as I can remember, my father has had dreams about a third child, a normal one. He's wanted it and wondered about it and told me not to tell my mother. Even if I wanted to, I could not be my father's son.
8. The whole family was out at a restaurant when my brother started in on it – “Black lives matter, that's ridiculous. All lives matter. All lives matter!” The waitress looked at us out of the corner of her eye, more polite than the two girls at the table next to us who turned all the way around in their chairs. My cousin, eyes wide, began to give a very reasonable explanation. I shook my head at him, don't even try. “What? What, Shannon, why are you shaking your head? I'm right. I'm right!” My grandmother laughed so loud that more people looked.
17. “In all honesty, am I a bad mother if I ask my 21-year-old daughter for advice on her brother's twisted sexual encounters?”
18. “I know that you're really, really not supposed to talk to your kids about your spouse and everything, but your father just gets stuck on things, you know?”
14. The first time my brother got drunk, he made a recording on his iPhone without realizing that it synched automatically to the kitchen computer. My mother found it and I sat with her and listened as he slurred, “I... am drunk. I had...six Mike's Hard...then I jacked off...” We were halfway through when my father walked in. We thought he'd be angry but he just started laughing along with us. The

recording was almost ten minutes long but we laughed so hard we played it again. We never told my brother we'd found it.

21. I talked to my brother about sex one time. It was just before I went off to college and he got the right to drive the pickup truck. I was taking him to his girlfriend's house and at a red light I looked straight at the windshield and said, "If you have sex in my car, you're paying to get it detailed."

"What are you talking about? Who told you...?"

"Jack, you're sixteen. No one had to tell me anything. Don't have sex in my car."

"We'd probably do it in the bed anyway not like in the car."

"Well, then, you're hosing down the bed."

"I'll bring a blanket."

10. "I'm not Shannon, okay? I'm not like Shannon."

"I know, Jackson. We talked about this. I have never compared you to Shannon."

9. Our favorite psychologist told us that he laughed out loud on an airplane after he read an email from our least favorite psychologist that said Jackson just needed firmer boundaries and more discipline in the home.

12. We used to have to walk down the stairs in a certain order. I was third, after my mom but before my dad. He was first. I was young enough to always forget and

have to go back to the top and start over. That, though, was easier than rewrapping a gift, or getting back on a plane, or putting words back into my mouth.

11. “Sister” is not a word I hear very often, nor one that has ever felt like it applies to me.

13. I want to believe that there is love between us. Perhaps it’s a kind that is hard to recognize.

## Empathy

### I.

In the sixth grade, I had two friends who threatened to commit suicide. One of them cut herself on her wrists. She wore short-sleeve shirts and painted colorful scenes of young girls in long white dresses hanging from trees. Her sadness was so ostentatious that the rest of us criticized it when she wasn't in the room. She called me one night and threatened to hang herself from the soccer net at our old elementary school. A college kid had done that the previous year and the third grade gym class found him. I was at an amusement park, and the red and blue lights from the Tilt-a-Whirl blurred in front of my eyes as she spoke. I told her to stay where she was and I called my mom, shouting to be heard over the screams from the rides as I explained what was happening. My mom went to the elementary school and offered to drive her home. She said no, but as she walked home my mom followed her to make sure she got back safe.

The other cut herself on her upper thighs, where no one could see. She wore long pants and kept a jar of pills stashed in her bathroom cupboard. She called me one night to tell me that she was about to take them. I called her mother and her mother told me I was a liar. She lost her virginity in the woods the first time she smoked weed and she stopped cutting after that.

I had a third friend. She bit her nails, sometimes until her cuticles bled. She told us it was a sign of depression and we rolled our eyes and her desperation made us push her away.

## II.

In the seventh grade, I had a friend who was bulimic. When she confessed that she thought she was fat and sometimes made herself throw up, I said, “Oh my God, don’t worry, you are *so* skinny!”

My mom told me that wasn’t an empathetic answer, that I should’ve said something like “I understand why you feel that way.” I didn’t understand why I should tell her that I understood.

## III.

In the eighth grade, my therapist gave me a test for depression. When she told me to please continue seeing her I never went back.

## IV.

In high school, I didn’t have time for depression, just for to-do lists.

## V.

Freshman year at college, my roommate’s boyfriend broke up with her. She handed me a couple jars of pills and told me to hide them somewhere she couldn’t find them. I took all of the pills from her drawer and then I took everything from my drawer that seemed like it could be dangerous or count as medicine: Advil, Pepto-Bismol, a six-pack of disposable razors. I put all of it in a shiny green gift bag and covered it with yellow tissue paper and hid it in someone else’s closet.

## VI.

Sophomore year at college, I went to Scotland and fell in love with a beautiful boy. He was so good but he couldn't see it, so I did everything I could to show him. When he clung to my hand I pushed all of the good thoughts I had into his palm, hoping he could feel them. I knew it was wrong to think someone needed saving but I tried to save him anyway. By the end of that year our sadnesses were so tightly wound together that we couldn't let them go but nor could they grow any larger.

He had green eyes and his smile was the sun and the sun so rarely shone but damn, when it did it lit up the whole world. He had a girlfriend who he loved very much but for a while he needed me.

## VII.

The summer after sophomore year, a friend called me and told me that she had a new boyfriend. She told me that her new boyfriend was depressed, but they were going to try to make a long distance relationship work. I asked her if she thought she could be there for him.

“I know that he loves me. And he's been really good to me so far.”

I asked her again.

“He's been there for me, like I think he can give me the support I need.”

I asked again.

“It's more like, I just feel like while in France I might wanna be single, you know?”

I wanted her to say that she could be there for him, that she could see his needs the way she saw her own. I wanted her to say that she knew what she was agreeing to when she agreed to take care of him, but maybe she never really learned. When I asked her, years later, how he was doing, she said “I don’t know. We don’t really talk about it. It’s kind of on the back burner.” I told her that perhaps for him it’s not, for him it couldn’t be.

### VIII.

At the start of junior year, one of my friends did not come back to school. He confessed that he had spent the past semester struggling with depression and anxiety and that he wasn’t ready yet to be on campus again.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked. His face softened, though whether from shame or pity I could not tell. “This is my whole life, this kind of thing,” I said, realizing as I said it that I did not actually want to explain.

### IX.

In the fall of that year a friend called me and asked me to come sit with him. I ran to his room and sat beside him on the bed. I held his hand. It was hot from being under the covers. He looked at me with a kind of exhaustion I knew, the kind that sank straight to the bone. I told him everything that I was feeling in the hopes that he would recognize it and know he wasn’t alone. As I spoke he plucked out guitar chords in the air with his left hand, a nervous habit he’d had as long as I’d known him. I said, “I get it. I get what it’s like when you want to get out of bed but you can’t and you want to call someone but

you're afraid they'll think you're crazy. I get it when you feel like something you love ought to calm you down but instead it feels like nothing. I get it when it feels like nothing. I know what it's like to look back and think that you've never really been happy before. I know that it feels like you're the only person who's ever been like this, like you're special, like this is somehow part of who you are. I know what it is to feel, not like you want to die, exactly, but like if it happened that would be okay. I know it's every kind of worst feeling. It gets better. Then it gets worse again. Then again it's better. But you have to fight it." I looked into his eyes, because this was the important part. "You are strong enough," I said, "to fight it."

"I just can't imagine going from this," he gestured to himself, tucked under the plaid comforter, "to where you are." I laughed.

"Where I am? Earlier today I was screaming," I told him through a smile. "Just screaming in my room, alone, because I couldn't fucking take it." He slumped back against the pillows. "But it gets easier," I said. "To get from there to here." I might have been lying but if it got him out of bed it was worth it.

When he finally stood up and got dressed I felt guilty for how happy I was. I worried that perhaps I'd needed to save him more than he'd needed to be saved. When his therapist asked if he would please call her the next time he was suicidal, he said, "No, I'll probably just call my friend again." I was so proud that the pride became sinister.

## X.

Also that fall, a friend's girlfriend broke up with him and he started drinking too much. I asked him to stop and he said he would but he didn't. The pain made him drink

and the drinking made him angry. It made him say things he did not mean. It made him say he would be somewhere and never show up. It made him say he was in love and then that he wasn't, first with one girl and then with a different one. It made him yell. It made him, one night, get too close to me and it made me scared. It made a friend of ours sad because, she said, "he's already alienated everyone except you and now he's making you give up on him too."

I have not given up on him. But I don't know if that's the right thing to do because I'm starting to think that if I never give up on him he will never change.

## XI.

The summer after junior year my best friend's boyfriend cheated on her with a boy. He said that he was definitely straight but he was depressed so he craved admiration and it was easier to get from guys. He said that he was definitely straight but he was depressed because his father hadn't been around when he was younger so he needed male approval. He said that he was without-a-doubt 100% straight but he was so depressed that he had to see a therapist, and his therapist had pressured him into it. He told her that he loved her but he couldn't talk about this anymore because it was just too stressful, and then for two weeks he disappeared. She only heard the first halves of those sentences and I told her the first halves didn't matter. What mattered was that he cheated, and what mattered was that he was giving her nothing but excuses. She forgave him. I have not. I should have sympathized but instead it made me angry because I have watched too many people struggle and fight and push all of their energy against the burden of their depression and he had turned his into a wall he could hide behind.

## XII.

Senior year my best friend told me about a girl she knew, who threatened suicide by taking too many Benadryl or stepping into the street when the light was green. This girl called for help too often and she too had a sadness that was ostentatious enough to be criticized. I understood the frustration but I also understood what it was to be scared and sad and lonely enough that you wanted something to be wrong with you so you had the right to do something about it. She's looking for proof, I explained, so she can convince you that she is in pain. It is easier to call a friend and say "I just tried to commit suicide" than it is to call and say "I don't feel much of anything but come sit with me, please, I promise it's urgent."

In middle school gym class I used to pinch the skin on my wrists whenever I dropped the ball hoping my team would see the marks and know how bad I felt for being uncoordinated and losing the game.

## XIII.

Later that year, a friend called and told me she was having a panic attack. When I got to her apartment she was sitting on the white shag rug, knees clutched to her chest with a towel pressed over her face. It was the first time I have ever seen her sit on the floor, and it made it seem like all of the furniture in the room had been rearranged. I sat down and put my arm around her. I expected her to shrink away, because she didn't like to be hugged, but she leaned her weight against me. She was crying and I was wracking

my brain for something to say. I couldn't find anything, so I just held on to her until it was over. I didn't have the right words for this one.

#### XIV.

In the winter of senior year, my mother told me that she knew I'd be around to take care of her when she is old, but only out of familial obligation, because I am not naturally an empathetic person. She didn't mean it to be cruel, just a statement of fact. We were driving in the car and I stared straight ahead with tears spilling down my cheeks because the woman who knew me better than anyone had seen straight through me. I'd spent years working so hard to be the person that my friends called when they needed someone and still she could tell I was a fraud.

She said it again later, to my father. We were leaving my grandmother's nursing home and as I stood in the hallway with the dog on a leash, my brother bent over my grandmother's wheelchair to say goodbye. My mom nodded her head in his direction and said, "We know who will be taking care of us when we're in a place like this." It shook me like an earthquake and I wanted to crouch in the doorway and take cover.

When she realized I was upset, she said, "Shan, you're better than your brother at so many things. You're smarter, and better-adjusted, and you have great friends... He doesn't have many good qualities but he is empathetic. He has this one." I felt like I'd brought an overflowing treasure chest into the desert and he'd brought a glass of water.

When I told my best friend what my mother had said, she started crying. She begged me to believe that I really was a good person and I felt then like I had fooled her also.

### Remember You Are Dust

*Touch me*, I think. I can feel you beside me, the breaths of steam that blow from your skin to mine. The hair on my arms is standing up straight – I wonder if you can feel it against your own arms. I fixate on the inch of space between our knees. Half-inch. Three-quarters, maybe. Could be bridged in an instant, but the clock is sluggish. I know what it would feel like if you shifted in your seat and your knee pressed against mine. I can feel the patch of heat on my leg already, can feel where the hair on your knee would scratch against my skin.

*Touch me.*

The truth is that before I met you I never understood what it was to be stripped down to wanting.

OCD is a disorder characterized by persistent, overwhelming, intrusive anxiety. Constant fear. For my brother, it was touch. He couldn't be touched, or say the word, or read it, or hear it spoken aloud. He had the word "touch" written on a sheet of paper and pinned to his wall as part of his treatment, so he could practice reading it every day.

I put on my purity ring for the first time when I was twelve years old. It is a Claddagh, a traditional Irish ring, two hands clasping a crowned heart. The heart is a purple stone, a false amethyst. Now, it's cracked and missing a piece at the bottom. The silver crown is tarnished; there is grit between the fingers of the hands. I wear it on my right ring finger because when I first put it on I didn't realize they were supposed to go on your left, and now it's been there so long it would feel strange to take it off.

The first time I told a boy that I was going to stay a virgin until marriage he said that we were only sixteen and he didn't want to rush into sex anyway. It was also the first time he took my shirt off, and it scared me so much that he never tried it again. We were on the faded green couch in his basement, and the bra I had on wasn't sexy or anything, it was just plain white. When we were standing we were the same height, but sitting on that couch he seemed much taller.

At that time, it wasn't really a God thing. It was more a terrified-of-sex thing. I was afraid that I'd be bad at it, that it would hurt, that I didn't know enough about grooming down there to pull it off. I already felt like I was behind the learning curve, like I'd make a fool of myself, like my body wasn't enough as it was. I put the ring on because I figured God was as good a place as any to keep something safe.

My brother kept a journal and once I read a page of it. It said, "I dreamed I loved my mom in a weird way."

When I was little, I thought that "virgin" was a synonym for "holy" because I'd only ever heard the word in the context of the Virgin Mary. I grew up learning that the two best things a woman could be were virgin and mother and it's only just started to sink in that there's no way to be both.

My brother wrote out the scenarios that plagued him for one of his therapists. My mom read them, but I refused. They already drove him insane, I didn't want them to become my fears too.

I had to give the therapist pictures of my mom and me in bathing suits. I had to give them recordings of me saying the words out loud: "touch, lick, rub." I had to sing into the telephone. I was about thirteen. I didn't know that what I had was sexuality but I knew that it was something that could hurt me, something that belonged in the therapist's dark green folder.

The first friend that I told about my brother, really told, I met in college. It was three years before he asked what my brother's obsessions were, specifically. I paused and he told me it was okay if I was too uncomfortable to share.

"No, it's okay," I said. I looked at my hands while I told him, pressing my ring into my finger. "They're, um, sexual fears. Fears of sexual abuse. They mostly revolve around, um, me and my mom. Our family, anyway."

"Is he...the one doing it?"

"No," I said. "No, he's the victim. Nothing like that has happened," I was quick to add. "Obviously. Never. But... yeah. That's it."

When I looked up at him again, he had recoiled so intensely that it seemed like he was yards away.

"That's...I'm so sorry...that's... let's not talk about this." He was shaking his head.

“I don’t mind talking about it,” I said. But he was still shaking his head, and I realized then that I should stop talking to protect him, not to protect me.

The same friend was the one who told me that after you met me, you said, “Damn, the things I would do to her...” He prefaced it with the fact that he didn’t want to freak me out, as if I’d be horrified at being wanted by you. But I just thought *damn, the things you could do to me...*

He told me that story because he wanted me to understand why he’d told you I was abstinent. I was angry not that you knew, but that somehow wanting me entitled you to the knowledge. You didn’t have that right because you wanted me – you had it because I wanted you.

I remember when my mom asked me to try on the new clothes she’d given me for Christmas. I said, “Sure. I’ll put on a little fashion show for y’all.” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my brother barreling towards me. He hit me, pushing me up against the kitchen countertop. He grabbed between my legs, roughly but deliberately. He threw me to the ground. It was the first but not the last time I had the feeling that someone had access to my body I had not given them. He was trying to take control of something that scared him.

I once spent five minutes looking at your hands. The hair on your arms was thicker than I had expected, and ended rather abruptly at your wrists. On your hands the

skin was smooth like butter, the knuckles rising uniformly along your fingers without cracks or callouses. You were playing the guitar and your hand moved fast over the fretboard. When your fingers touched the strings the muscles were quick. I knew that your fingertips must be calloused from pressing down, but really it looked too easy for that.

I don't remember what your hands looked like when they were on my skin. I know that if your hands are on me, everything else goes dark. If your hands are on me. If your hands are on me all I think about are your hands. If your mouth is on me all I think about is your mouth. If your mouth is on me.

Sex to me was something far away. The prerogative of therapists with dark folders, of frightened, violent men, of God. I'd only ever fallen in a top-down kind of infatuation, the sort that started with boys who said nice things until I felt that perhaps I ought to let them touch me. The sort that started with a mind that fascinated me, attracted me until I was willing to touch the body it inhabited. I liked sex on network television: a sigh, a head thrown back, hair and skin and fingers and fade to black. Nothing messy, nothing ruined, nothing given.

When you asked me about my brother, I said, "I'm not going into all that right now," and I laughed. I didn't want to tell you about my family. I just wanted to touch you.

I never did anything to set my brother off on purpose. But sometimes I'd be doing it by accident, like when I walked through the house to the backyard in a bathing suit. Or

when I wore something without thinking about how it would make me look. Or when I said something and my mom said, “Well, there is a line that’s like that in his thought-” and I would cover my ears and hum because I didn’t want to know anything about what I said in his mind. I learned to hide my body before I ever really understood why.

You caused an intervention after the second time we kissed. My friends sat me down to ask if I was okay. They told me that you would hurt me, that you didn’t want me, that you only wanted one thing and it was the one thing I wouldn’t give you. I said I knew, and I didn’t care, which was perhaps what scared them the most. It would make far more sense, to them, for me to fall in love with you. I haven’t yet.

My best friend said she was worried, because she knew me, and I fall head over heels, over and over again, hardly pausing for breath in between. I told her that I couldn’t do that again, not this time. I’m too tired. I’m too exhausted from the reaching, from the needing, from too many days spent trying to write poetry that didn’t sound cliché and love letters that could never be read.

I don’t want to hold your hand, I want my nails to leave red lines down your back. I don’t want you to know me, I want you to look at me. I’ve been ashamed for so long and you showed me what the shame is constructed over. It is constructed over something that, though I’ve been taught it should, doesn’t feel shameful at all.

Once, in your bed, you pulled me to your chest and started running your fingers up and down my arm. As you did, I realized we were holding hands. I pulled away. It felt too intimate, too close. The part of me that was beside you wasn’t the same part that held

hands, or fell in love, or went to church or called a friend or did anything good. It was the part that ought to have been silenced. In your bed I was naked from the waist up but I kept my boots on and you joked that I was ready to run. And I was, and I am.

Being with you is like being underground. It is the easiest thing in the world to sink into. Before you, I kept sexuality buried. I kept my body in a photograph in a folder. I kept desire beside God and love in a rose-colored world of water and flame but everything about you is earth and dirt and flesh. I have never wanted so badly to be made of dust.

## He Told Me All the Dragons Were Dead

If my life is a fairytale, my depression is the knight in shining armor. He tells me every day that I am special. I am so special that he will not leave me out in the dangerous world where the dragons live. He keeps me safe in his tower.

One day I stand too close to the tower window. He tries to pull me away, but as he reaches for me, the glass breaks. A dragon bursts into the tower. It is the biggest one, red and gold like flame. The dragon takes me in the sharp grip of one talon and pulls me into the sky. The bitter fall wind chafes against my skin and the claws pinch my sides and it's been so long since I've been outside that the air makes me feel dizzy. I close my eyes rather than look at the ground. Tiny houses and farms sprawl around the castle as far as my eyes could've seen, if they were open. I can feel the air against every cell of my skin.

I do not know that my knight has come for me until I feel the talon release its grip and hear the dragon shriek in pain. I fall into the arms of the white knight. He takes me inside the tower. He tucks me into his bed and lays close beside me. He wants me. He loves me for exactly what I am, and what I am is tired.

I am so easy in his arms that I barely feel them around me. He tells me all of the dragons are dead. I choose to believe him because it is much simpler to live in the gray tower if there are no dragons at all, if there is nothing outside to see. But the dragons were beautiful. The sun reflected off of their skin and it does not reflect like that from the armor of the white knight. He is cool white, the color of a wall that will soon be repainted. Now he is the wall between me and the world outside. His chest plate feels hollow when I push my hand against it, and when I lift his visor I find nothing inside but darkness. Through the window I think I see a glimpse of red.

## Catharsis

## Chapter One

Every time I drive past the New Hampshire rest stop off I-95, I remember the first and only time I stopped there.

My brother was screaming in the back seat and my grandmother was trying to calm him down from the front. I don't remember anything he said but I remember my grandmother saying "Shh, Jack" and "Calm down, Jack" and "Jackson, that's enough" and I remember hearing every word she said with the sound of striking matches.

*Don't you know*, I thought, *don't you know you're only setting him off?* My mother's knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. And then she yelled "Jack, be quiet!" and "Ma, you're not-" and my grandmother said "Well, I thought-" and my brother's face was red and wet and twisted.

The car window was cool on my forehead and the trees blurred together so their tops were one long, unbroken green line pressed against the long, unbroken blue sky. When the car swerved to a stop, my forehead thumped against the glass.

My mother told my brother to get out and he said he didn't want to be in a car with *her* anyway and my grandmother said "Now, Jackson-" and the door slammed and my mother shook her head. I got up and went into the rest stop.

It was cool and dark inside and I wished I had a dollar for the vending machine. I wanted to pour water inside me because inside me was burning up.

I stared at the vending machine and screamed inside my head. YOU DON'T KNOW. YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE FOR US. YOU'VE NEVER LIVED LIKE THIS. YOU DON'T KNOW HOW TO HELP. *Stop helping*, the fire said as it died away. *You don't know. Only we know*, and it crumbled to ash, *only we know*.

Forgive me, for I have sinned. It has been...I can't remember how long it's been. I can't forgive my little brother for what he has done to me. This is my confession. Amen.

I don't mean this to be an excuse, just an explanation.

When I was thirteen, I was in love with a boy. I say in love because thoughts of him were the ones that most often overlaid my sadness and I knew about love before I knew about depression. My best friend started dating him and kept it a secret from me and when I found out I hid in my mother's bathroom and tried to cry. I sat on the toilet and heaved sobs from deep in my throat, forcing them out while my eyes stayed dry.

This is one of the things I have forgiven.

I haven't forgiven my father, either, but that is an even harder thing to say because of the deep and desperate way in which he loves me.

When I first met you, I told you all of the dark things in me. It was like turning over a rock to reveal the nest of maggots underneath. I did it because I am selfish enough to tell you, eventually, that I am in love with you. I didn't want to risk you loving me back.

Maybe if I could forgive them I would be good enough to love you.

I narrate my entire life in the third person. She woke up and fixed her hair. She picked out her clothes and packed up her bag. Like someone is always watching, analyzing, describing. What is the point of being good if no one is looking at you?

Marie Antoinette's famous last words to her executioner, whose foot she stepped on: "Pardon me, sir, I did not mean to do it."

Pray for us sinners.

## Chapter Two

In the town where I grew up, all of the streets are named after trees, Chestnut and Elm and Apple. It is busiest at 11:00 in the morning because every housewife has seen her children off to school and finished her Pilates class and is free to run expensive errands until the bus brings the children home again.

It was at this time of the morning, between a bank and a boutique, that a twenty-three-year-old girl overdosed on heroin. The police pulled from her car and as they lifted her, her head tipped all the way back. Her face was the greenish-white of dandelion milk and death. It was the kind of thing that was never supposed to happen around here.

On my eighth birthday, my grandmother brought a present for me and one for my brother, so he wouldn't have a temper tantrum. I don't remember what she bought for me but I remember him on the kitchen floor playing with his new Tonka truck.

I had a dream about my brother one night. He'll be nineteen soon but in the dream he was about five, which would have made me about eight. I was in my room. This was before I got a special lock, so the lock on my door was the kind that can be unlocked from the outside with a quarter. So my eight-year-old, 60-pound body was pressed against the door while he tried to force it open. I could hear him yelling and my mother cajoling, pleading, trying to get him to stop.

Eventually the door gave, as it always did, and as he burst into the room I fell down at his feet. He started beating me with a tape measure.

The tape measure was made from some kind of metal, I think, tin or aluminum. It was curved and had little metal hooks at the end, to hook over whatever it is you're measuring. The other end was heavy, because it stored the rest of the tape.

So he was beating me with this tape measure, and I could feel the metal edges as it bit into my back. I rolled over and curled my knees into my chest, so the tape measure was hitting the backs of my hands, lacerating my shins. My mother was still shouting in protest in the doorway, but she hadn't made him stop. It was never like that, in real life. She would've grabbed him and pulled him off.

But this wasn't real. So he kept on and on until... I died. Or rather it was as if eight-year-old me died, but in her place instantly sprang ten-year-old me. My mother wailed at each death as the skin tore away and I grew older and older until there I lay, twenty-two years old, curled at the feet of my five-year-old brother. My mother stopped yelling. I stopped feeling the tape measure. And I woke up.

If you type "remember, we are" into Google, the first suggestion is "remember, we are a nice normal family."

The first time I realized something was wrong I was six, and we'd just gotten home from a family vacation. I ran up the stairs to open the door of the house and my brother started screaming that we had to get back in the car, go back to the airport, get back on the plane, go back to Florida and do the whole trip again so he could open the door first. Rewind rewind rewind.

That door is just one of many doors in our house that are banged or scratched or dented or broken or locked.

I don't know why I thought the old man standing in front of the drugstore was you. I was so convinced that I almost ran to you, only keeping my smile and my pace in check so you wouldn't know how happy I was to see you. When I got closer, it was as if you'd suddenly transformed into a sixty-year-old man.

I don't know why, but when I see the trunks of birch trees I sometimes think they are your legs.

I don't know why, but for a moment I was certain I loved you.

According to legend, an angel came to Saint Regulus in a dream and told him to bring the bones of Saint Andrew to the end of the earth. He chose a stretch of windy Scottish coastline and buried them beneath a cathedral. The town that sprang up at the foot of the cathedral would come to be called St. Andrews. It would become the town where I was broken and the town where I was with you.

In this town at the end of the earth, the wind always blew but the clouds never moved. Out here, you said, it's like time doesn't pass like we're nowhere and nothing. I could be close to you nowhere, we could have nothing.

You had worn through the treads of your shoes. The bottoms were practically polished, and it always rained at the end of the earth and you slipped. I reached out to steady you. You cursed and flung the offending shoe. It bounced off the headlight of a parked car and skittered into the street.

Once when I was ten, my brother chased me out of the house with a golf club and when he caught me in the front yard he left a bruise on my hip the size and color of a plum.

“Our family is totally dysfunctional, but at least we look good on a Christmas card.” – my mother

People never really say that my brother and I look alike, but I have always thought we do. I’ve always seen myself in his light skin and dark hair, in his tall frame and unruly eyebrows.

I can remember a thousand retaliations but not one thing I did to set them off.

That’s a lie. It took me years to sing in public again.

Reasons why my brother is crying:

1. My mother said, “Shan, you’ve got to finish rubbing in your sunscreen, it’s still white on your cheeks.”

2. I mouthed the words to a song on the radio and he could see me in the rearview mirror.
3. I told my mom I would put on a fashion show with the new clothes she bought me for Christmas.
4. He brushed against me on his way to the snack cabinet in the kitchen.
5. My mother asked me to help him with his math homework.

I have one memory of playing with my brother when we were kids. We were sitting in my pink princess castle and I was holding a stuffed Santa Claus on my knee and telling him the story of the night before Christmas. I was careful not to touch him.

“Children do well if they can.”

Our code word for depression was drowning, remember? We’d type “lol,” which meant laughing out loud but which we thought looked like a drowning man holding his arms over his head. Texting each other the drowning man meant “Come, please, I need you.”

Come, please. I need you.

## Chapter Three

The best moment of my twenty-first birthday party was when everyone gathered in a circle and we all screamed “Mr. Brightside” by the Killers at the top of our lungs (except for you. You were just sitting in the corner). We were all screaming I JUST CAN’T LOOK, IT’S KILLING ME and now I’m thinking about how that song was our favorite, brought us together more than any other song, perhaps because it was full of anger and jealousy and heartbreak and all the things we pretend we feel alone.

“Depression is every family’s secret.”

I started crying as the sun set, even though I knew that tomorrow it would be back.

The town where I go to college is the one that healed me. Here, there are so many trees that even in a very slight wind you can hear them rustling. Here everything moves, everything breathes.

Sometime before I met you, I snuck out with my friends on a Monday night. We put Mardi Gras beads around the neck of every statue on campus. They were gone the next morning when we woke up, all except one, on the statue in your favorite building.

When I told you that story, you told me you remembered seeing the beads on the statue. I still wish you could’ve seen them on every statue.

“To be close to her pain has always felt like a privilege to me.” – Maggie Nelson,  
*Bluets*

When our mutual friend sent me the drowning man I made him come outside because everything is better outside and we sat on a bench in the courtyard. He tipped his head onto my shoulder and I looked up at the sky and thanked God for allowing me to share in his pain. I put my hand at the nape of his neck and I remember the shape of his skull and the feel of his curly hair against my palm. I didn't want him to be in pain but I wanted him to need me, and this is why I am too selfish to love you.

“I would rather he never talk to me again and be happy for the rest of his life.” – a thing you said that I wish I could say.

What I mean to say is, please never leave me.

When I was a child, I used to play a game with my friends in the woods. We would all pretend to be animals, like wolves and bears and deer. I was always a phoenix, but I'd spend all of recess building my nest and never fly.

In the same way, instead of climbing on the jungle gym, I used to drop down inside it and play house.

In the same way, the best parts of my day are often those I imagine.

In the same way, I cannot love you.

I used to lie in bed at night with my eyes closed and trace the shape of your face with my hand. I'd run it down your cheek from temple to chin, carving out an arc that was almost perfectly round. I'd stop at your jaw and think about your sad attempts to grow a beard, the sparse hairs that could only be seen in direct sunlight. I'd trace my thumb across your lips. I'd move my hand across the flat plane of your cheek, my fingertips just brushing your eyelashes. It was all so vivid that when I opened my eyes I'd cry to see only my own hand, reaching out in the darkness for a face that wasn't there.

“Sometimes – there's God – so quickly!” – Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Friends I have had: five depressed, two with anxiety, one with a depressed sibling, one with a sibling with anxiety. Three with deceased parents, four with alcoholic ones. Two who have self-harmed, three who have threatened suicide, one who has attempted it.

What I mean to say is, you're not alone. I don't know if it helps to hear that.

Reasons why I am crying:

1. I gave directions to a family of five but I'm bad at giving directions and I know they'll get lost.
2. A song I don't particularly like is on the radio.

3. It's 4:00 pm.
4. I called my best friend, but she was at work and she didn't answer.
5. My grandmother called and I let it go to voicemail.
6. I drove you home and you told me you'd see me tomorrow.

I know a hundred things, but I have taken all of them. You know a hundred things, but I have given all of them. I had no right to give you the things I can't carry because I am not strong enough to love you.

Writing Advice: Squander. Write it all out, leave it all on the page. It would be good advice if I wasn't afraid I'd run out of things to say.

I want you to remember all the things I said to you about you and forget all the things I said to you about me. To children, authors don't exist. They forget the writers and remember only the stories.

Be not afraid.

## Chapter Four

I heard once that patients with dementia will remember how to do the sign of the cross even after they have forgotten their own names.

My mother always buys a loaf of French or Italian bread for a special dinner. My brother always rips off a hunk of it to eat by himself, before it is served. That used to bother me because bread is my favorite food and I felt like the loaf ought to be mine. Now it's become almost quaint. Look at him, misbehaving like a normal teenager.

The dog won't go near my brother and it hides under my parents' bed, pushed up against the wall and quaking, its little black eyes reflecting in the darkness. It is not a safe enough hiding place to stop my brother from trying to reach it.

I was angriest when they took the dog away because it meant we were definitely Not a Normal Family.

You brought me bread, once. I had been making both of us sandwiches every day and I'd run out. You came into my room carrying the exact kind of bread that I liked. I got the phrase stuck in my head: "bringing me bread." Bringing me bread bringing me bread bringing me bread. It meant loving. It made me love you.

When I first learned how to write a lyric essay, my teacher compared it to a loaf of challah in how it was braided.

My father's mother is in a nursing home with dementia. She doesn't know where she is but when we wheel her into the church, she lifts an arthritic hand and performs the sign of the cross. She doesn't know who I am but when I lean in she kisses my cheek. The gestures of the loving are still there. Muscle memory, maybe.

None of my cousins visit her, perhaps because they think she doesn't know if they are there or not, so it doesn't matter. I think she knows I am there the same way she knows the sign of the cross.

You used to come with me to Mass, sometimes, but the service I keep remembering wasn't even a Catholic one. It was a sunrise Easter service. We stood beside each other in the ruins of an ancient chapel at the end of the earth. Instead of the familiar communion wafer, they passed around a loaf of hearty brown bread. I ripped a strip off and handed it to you and that felt like communion.

"You came into my life

With just what you had:

Things made of

The light and bread and shadows." – Pablo Neruda, "And Because Love Battles"

If I could put my spirit into anything, I'd pick bread and water too.

I would get really angry about being late to church, and my mother is late to everything. I liked to go on time and stay until the very end of the last song. I sometimes felt like I was better than my mother for being on time. I could never be better than my mother; she is the best of people. When she could tell I was annoyed that we were running late, she'd yell, "Go ahead, go alone if you want!" I don't like to go alone because the people who go to church with you are your family. This is why you are my family and this is why I am too arrogant to love you.

My mother and I had to leave my aunt's birthday party early because we had to get home and pour a can of nutrients into my grandfather's feeding tube. When we told my aunt we were leaving she said, "Tell Dad I say hi," and I thought *Come over and tell him yourself* and she said, "What is, like, wrong with him anyway?" and I thought very loudly, *HE HAS STAGE FOUR COLON CANCER YOU IDIOT*. And then I thought a mean thing which was *you are selfish and that is why you are alone* and then I thought a sad thing which was *I am selfish and that is why I am alone*.

"Grief is the worst feeling. Loneliness, loneliness is close, but grief is the very worst." - a professor I once had (paraphrased)

When we brought my grandfather to see my grandmother, he would be out of breath by the time we got through the door of the nursing home and have to sit on the couch in the lobby. But when we wheeled her out to meet him, he would get his cane and stand again so he could put a hand on her knee and kiss her and say, "Hi, sweets." And

when we left he'd do the same thing and he'd say "I love you." I hoped every time that she would say it back.

I don't know much about grief but anything worse than loneliness must leave many broken people.

I sat with my family in the nursing home while my mother clipped my grandmother's fingernails. We were outside so she just let the nails fall. One of them landed on my grandfather's pants. I kept staring at the crescent-moon of it, white against his navy-clad thigh. It seemed to me the most intimate thing in the world.

Nostalgia is a deceptively quaint term, because it means memory + desire and I can't begin to define either one.

There was one day when you were lying in my bed and the depression was heavy on your chest and I knelt beside you and held your hand. You thanked me with tears in your eyes and I just shook my head. You started to fall asleep and your face was so lined with pain that it hurt me. I couldn't help it; I pressed my mouth to your forearm. I did not mean to do it.

I wonder how much you remember.

I found a scrap of paper in one of my old notebooks and all it says is “Does forgetting = death?”

My grandfather was in the hospital for chemo, lying in bed looking quite fragile and thin. His eyes filled with tears and he whispered, “I still feel like I’m thirty years old.” Where did it all go?

I didn’t see this happen. My mother told me the story after.

Recently, my brother asked why the only pictures I keep at school are of him as a child, six or younger. “I was worse back then,” he said, which is true, but it is easier to blur the past than the present and my memory is kinder than my mind.

My grandmother used to play a finger game with me when I was little. She’d chant, “This is the church / this is the steeple / open the doors / and see all the people.” She’d wiggle her fingers on the last line. I once asked her why the people were wiggling their heads in church. She said, “Good point. Stop wiggling your heads, people!” and her fingers were still.

## Chapter Five

A writer's job is to bring the beautiful things.

My mother likes to collect sea glass. As a child, I liked to help her. I could never find the blues or purples but I'd bring her handfuls of earth colors, white and brown and green. Most of them were too sharp to count as sea glass but she put them all in her pockets anyway.

I remember how everyone crowded around the hospital bed on the day my cousin was born. I was the youngest person in the room so I got pushed to the end of the bed, where all I could see of her were her tiny feet. I reached out to stroke them and was amazed by how soft they were. For a second she tried to tuck her feet in, but I kept stroking them until she stuck them back out at me. I imagined her sighing, "Fine, you want to touch my feet, go ahead, I don't care." My cousin is fifteen now but when I think of her I still remember those narrow little feet.

When my cousin was a toddler, she adored Sesame Street. There is one episode that shows a video of families at the beach. The chorus to the song in the background goes "Oh, joy and HAP-pin-ess!"

To get to the beach from my house, there is a long, steep, wooden ramp. From the top you can see the ocean laid out at your feet.

When we first took my cousin to the beach, she crested that hill and stopped abruptly. She pointed out at the water, then turned to us and yelled "Look! Happiness!"

When my cousin came with us to look for sea glass, she found more than I did without help but my mother still made me leave some on the ground for her. My mother would act all impressed at what she'd found, and I still remember how jealous I felt, and that is another way in which I am too selfish to love you.

Once I bought a bunch of sea glass at the store and it cost ten dollars and I thought I'd be able to slip it into the jar, and my mother would think I'd found it and she'd be so pleased, and that is one way in which I am only good if someone is looking at me.

My cousin was terrified of my brother and this was something he enjoyed. When he came for her I would pick her up and carry her to the back corner of my room and shield her with my body. She loved me because I protected her and I protected her because she loved me.

A person with OCD who thinks obsessively about committing murder is actually less likely to commit murder than the average person. They are simply too afraid.

There was a boy at my brother's treatment center who was afraid of killing someone with a knife, so the therapist let the boy hold a knife to the therapist's throat to prove he wouldn't do it.

I would not let my brother hold a knife to my throat.

When they told me he wouldn't hurt me during treatment I did not believe them.

To all the people who have never spent a day in a psychiatric hospital but like to preach about the dangers of medication, I say please fuck off.

To all the people who have never spent a night in my house but like to think that if they parented my brother for a week they could whip him into shape, I say go ahead, I'd like to see you try.

To all the people who have never had children but like to think that a person is a reflection of his mother and a product of how he was raised, I say you better hurry home and thank God you don't have a kid like this. Thank Him for your pure dumb luck.

Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespassed against us.

It was my father who taught me to see the beautiful things. He'd take me outside in the middle of an August night and we would lie on our backs on the dew-covered golf course and spend hours looking for shooting stars. He'd make me watch every single sunset because every single sunset was the best one yet. The sun and the stars were sacred and to spend a moment of the summer indoors was blasphemy.

My best friend lost her father when she was nine years old. She knew her whole life that he was going to die. When she stays at our house, she comes out with us to the golf course so my father can show her the stars.

My best friend does not think I am selfish and I want to be as good as she thinks I am. She has tried for years to set me up with her cousin and once I asked her why.

“You have the same kind of sadness,” she said.

When two people who are drowning cling to each other they go down twice as fast.

They do not go down alone.

I called my best friend on one of the bad days and said “Talk to me” and I love her because she told me about her day until my breathing returned to normal and then she let me hang up.

She is in love with a depressed boy and I’m watching it drive her crazy and that is why I cannot love you.

I like when the night is warm. I like the feel of grass on my bare feet. I like the sweet smell of rain. I like that the sky is so deeply blue. I like me and I like that I’m walking and I like that I’m breathing. I like the slight breeze and sometimes I even like what’s in my head.

The problem with making myself clean is that without pain, what is left to write about?

What I mean to say is, the things that hurt bring the beautiful things, and that is why it's so hard to let them go.

## Chapter Six

There are many factors that affect the flavor of a whisky: the type of grain, the material of the cask, the number of distillations. The first whisky I ever tasted was made on the island of Islay and convinced me that all whisky ought to taste of sea salt and smoke.

On my last night at home before I went back to school for my senior year, my father surprised me with a bottle of Lagavulin and I stood in the kitchen in my pajamas and we drank a toast out of paper cups.

Before I got a special lock on my door, one of the better places to hide was behind my father's desk. My father was usually able to get between my brother and me and I loved him because he protected me. The danger of hiding behind my father's desk was that if my brother did happen to catch me there was no escape route.

When my brother is told to do his homework, he says, "Boys don't need to read. Boys play sports."

When my brother is told to wash the car, he says, "I don't have time. I play football."

When my father is asked to help with the dishes, or the homework, or running errands, he says, "I can't. I have to watch the game."

I never wanted to ask my father for help buying a car, but he came to one dealership anyway. When I told him I didn't want the car he liked he stormed out, cursing loudly, in front of the salesman and everything.

Once, I asked my mother if he was like that when she married him. She said no.

My brother threatened to hit me, made a fake lunge and I yelled "Ow!" too early. My father wheeled around and grabbed my brother, who cried and said he didn't do anything. My father was furious because he was ashamed and he gripped my bicep and dragged me forward, growling a reprimand in my ear. I don't remember the lecture but I remember his fingers squeezing my arm and I remember feeling like the world had somehow flipped.

"The world breaks everyone, and afterward many are stronger at the broken places." – Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*.

Maybe love comes from the broken places.

My father likes that I am writer because he is writer. The only parts of me he understands are the ones that came from him.

"Hemingway was a better writer than he was a man." – a professor I once had (paraphrased)

My father is the type of man who will never even pretend he is interested in hearing the other side of a story.

My father is the type of man who, if a woman disagrees with him, will criticize her weight.

My father is the type of man who continues to believe only the things he learned as a child.

“Everyone has their cross to bear” is one of my father’s favorite sayings. He’d say it whenever I complained about my brother’s behavior. As a child I felt like Jack shouldn’t be my burden or my trial or my cross, he should just be my brother. It was not until much later that I thought about how he felt about being a cross.

My grandfather gave my father the family Bible, a huge King James that is almost completely free of its binding. It has a thick ornate cover and a family tree and some old pictures inside. My mother told me that it is a family Bible and so it goes to boys and after my father my brother will get it. I was ashamed to have such an ugly jealousy so close to a Bible.

Immanuel Kant believed that our true motives are a mystery even to ourselves. There is no way to determine whether we are doing the right thing because it is right or because it makes us feel good. Our behavior in both cases looks exactly the same. Kant

thought the person who was truly good did the right thing only because it was right, without any concern for how it made him feel. How one feels, then, is no guide for whether or not one has done right.

I still feel like I deserve more than my brother does for being better than he has been which is why I am not good enough to forgive him and not good enough to love you.

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. – 1 Corinthians 13

My grandfather was my father's hero and I adopted him as mine before I really knew anything about him.

The first time I visited my grandfather in the hospital, I came home and my father asked how he looked. Without thinking, I said, "Like a corpse." It was true, but I wish I hadn't said it.

A few days after my grandfather moved in with us, I told my brother that we had to leave the beach to get home to feed him. My brother said, "So what? I don't care if he dies." I asked my mother to explain why this didn't make him evil.

“You are a story you tell yourself.” – David McRaney, *You Are Not So Smart*

On Father’s Day, the whole family came to see my grandfather while he was living at our house. My aunt asked, “But why can’t he go home?” and my father started yelling. When my aunt stormed out she left my cousin behind and I wasn’t there to pick her up and carry her somewhere safe.

My whole life, my father kept telling me that I could go to college and escape everything. He was jealous, he told me. He would be stuck at home forever.

What I mean to say is, I don’t know if I’m a good person or not.

When I moved out, my father gave me a copy of an article called “The Journey.” At the end, it says, “Stop pacing the aisles and counting the miles. Instead, climb more mountains, eat more ice cream, go barefoot more often, swim more rivers, watch more sunsets, laugh more, cry less. Life must be lived as we go along. The station will come soon enough.”

I don’t mean to suggest that my life has been made only of painful things. Only that I was raised to run and now I don’t know how to come back.

## Chapter Seven

We were in my room at the end of the earth, and you sat on the floor with your back against my wardrobe. Your legs were splayed out in front of you and beside them was your cell phone. It buzzed and buzzed and you glared at it like it had burned down your house with your family inside. I sat down next to you and together we waited for it to stop ringing.

The next night, in the same place, you got drunk-but-not-that-drunk and you asked if I like-liked you in the kindergarten sense. I said, "I care about you a lot," which was not a lie. I was shaking, vibrating so hard I had to wrap my arms around myself to keep from breaking apart. I asked why you wanted to know. You said because if I did like you, you had to make sure I knew you were in a very committed relationship-

I cut you off and laughed and said oh, don't worry, I know and I was sweating and blood was pounding in my ears and I didn't sleep at all that night.

I am one of my mother's miracles. I happened by accident and took her by surprise, because I was meant to be (she says). I was born three weeks early, on President's Day, because I was meant to do great things (she says).

You saved my life, you know.

What I mean to say is, if all I was meant to do was save you back, that'd be okay.

“The possibility of you has become very distracting for me.”

I am sometimes scared by my own imaginings. Or rather, by my own ability to imagine. I can imagine, among other things, a world without me in it, a world that does not end when I am gone.

In the summer, when it gets so humid as to be unbearable, the heat breaks with a thunderstorm and torrential rain. It only lasts a few minutes. It's a break in the tension, a powerful, thrumming release. The thunder cracks and echoes and the rain pours in fat drops that churn up the mud and the sky goes almost black. The worst is when at the end of all this, the heat is just as intense, nothing broken, nothing changed.

I always sat behind the driver's seat on car rides. If a bolt of lightning came and split the car in two, I wanted to be on the same side as my mother. I'd picture it, the car cracking straight down the middle and the half with my brother in it careening away to the other side of the highway, separated from us by lines of speeding cars.

One time, my mom hid from my brother in the clothes dryer because she couldn't lock the bathroom door fast enough.

I can imagine a room full of official-looking dark green folders. They are labeled with the names of everyone I have loved. When I open my brother's, hundreds of pages fall out. The essay I wrote about him in the tenth grade, and a screenplay from ninth, and

a poem, and they keep coming and pile up around my ankles. I can see your folder, stacked thick, and my mother's, and family's and friends' and all around and around the little room. I pick up the folder with my own name and I shake it but it is empty.

I ran after you down the street, shouting your name. You stopped walking when I drew level with you and I stood in the middle of the road and gasped, "Are you okay?" My breath crystallized in the freezing night air and you said "I don't know." We stared at each other for a long minute before you turned for home and I fled to the pier. I stood on its end and stared at miles and miles of dark ocean and let the wind beat against me. I thought about the place where the trees always moved and how very far away I was from healing.

One night my mother came into my room and locked the door. She got into my bed and pulled the covers up to her chin and fell asleep there where she was safe. I was reminded of creeping into her bed as a child to hide from the hooded monsters in my nightmares. I woke her gently and sent her back to her own bed.

When I first told you about my brother, you didn't say anything. You sat in silence and stared at me. You did that whenever I mentioned him until I stopped mentioning him at all.

“You are, in part, not only persons you once were, but also persons you have tried to be, persons you have avoided being, and persons you fear you might be. All these are people you know.” – Jerome Stern, *Making Shapely Fiction*

My brother has asked several people over several years why he and I do not have a relationship. He asked my mother and he broke her heart. Or I did.

I still believe in my mother’s ability to keep me safe because she loves with all that she has. She is savior and sacrifice.

You joked once that I was meant to be a trophy wife and I played along. But as I was laughing you said, “No, you don’t want money, you just want to get married and love your husband and your kids.” I don’t remember telling you that.

Is the idea that everything happens for a reason cruel or comforting?

I wrote once about the resentment, about how my hatred had turned from fire to ice. I wrote “No part of me is in him, and praise God no part of him is in me.” I wrote, “I don’t have a brother.” I didn’t mean for my mom to see it, but I found it last week in a drawer in her desk.

I had written BREATHE across my notebook and you pointed to it and said “Important?”

When my brother saw my mom's Facebook post for National Sibling Day, he asked, "Did Shannon post anything? I don't have any pictures of us." She had to tell him no. She told me about it on the phone and I had nothing to say. I should have apologized for something; I'm still not exactly sure what.

One time, my mom called me while I was 3,000 miles away in the town at the end of the earth. My dad wasn't home. She was safely locked in the bathroom (for now) and she'd called my uncle (who was on his way) but she was still frightened. She hung up when my uncle arrived and I sat there crying and feeling helpless. I called my best friend 3,000 miles away and she called you and asked you to find me. You came and held me and I told you the whole story and you didn't say a single word. You stared at me and didn't say anything and that is why I cannot love you.

## Chapter Eight

I can imagine a whole room, full of things that have come with you, full of throw pillows and lumpy quilts and stacks of books and overflowing boxes of snacks and ribbons and belts. Full of clothes and words and empty suitcases, mirrors and chests of drawers and funny little end tables and letters. I wonder how long I'd be able to live in such a room, trapped and surrounded by the things, until I'd have to either die or clean it.

My aunt lives in such a room, in such a house, where she keeps everything and it fills all of the space and it fills her car and her daughter's room, and there is no place for either of them to go and worse than all of that is how it fills her mind.

Have you ever felt your thoughts bleeding?

Suffocating smells sickly sweet. It smells like roses and cough syrup and this smell had permeated my entire house and spilled out onto the cul-de-sac. The white furniture in my bedroom was too big. The bookshelf had long since filled, books were spilling out onto the floor, the bed, the surrounding shelves. Papers were jumping out of the desk. Clothes pressed out of the closet, gasping for air.

Depression smells like suffocating, like things that rot and fall apart.

It sounds like a construction site, trucks backing up and jackhammers and wooden boards slamming together. Loud and jarring and monotonous and overwhelming and endless.

It sounds like a music box theme, a couple of notes that thread through synapses and wind round and round temples over and over and over and over.

It tastes like mud and black currant and molasses, thick and cloying and sweet. It fills mouth and throat and veins.

It feels like cement, like bricks and mortar, and it crumbles and seeps red-orange blood and everything broken, ravaged, burned. Have you ever seen a scar so red and raw and raised and braided you can't bear to picture the wound it must cover?

It feels like pressure.

It feels like nothing.

Writing is the bleeding. You can feel your heartbeat at a wound and perhaps that is what it means to be stronger at the broken places.

I can't stop thinking about you but mostly I can't stop thinking.

I say love when I mean to say sadness.

I say love when I mean to say fear.

I remember standing at the kitchen counter when my brother would pass by, and I would press my whole body to the counter, and the lip of granite would cut across the bottom of my stomach and the knobs on the cabinets would press into my thighs. I would feel his arm brush against my lower back and suck in my breath and wait for his hands slam into my shoulder blades and make my hipbones scrape against the countertop.

“Everything ravaged, everything burned.” – Wells Tower

Only once, I tried to explain that it didn't make sense to hit me for touching him, that two touches can't cancel each other out.

I skipped church to be with you because being with you is prayer.

There was only one time as child that my brother touched me in a way that wasn't violent. It was Advent when I was eleven and he was eight. The first night, he walked around the table and hugged both of my parents. The second night, he tapped me on the head when he passed my chair. The third night, he hugged me too. He felt soft and small in scratchy flannel pajamas. I hadn't expected him to feel soft and small.

“Have you ever been hungry for a person?” – a professor I once had (paraphrased)

It is possible to have a craving for a person, and it happens when they've pressed into your heart so tightly they leave an imprint and anyone else you press against it is the wrong shape.

It is possible to have a craving for a person, and it happens when their presence catalyzes a series of biochemical reactions in the brain that signals the reward centers and at its core it's nothing but a drug addiction.

Dying doesn't scare me but getting older does.

I was, in any case, prone to epiphanies that rarely lasted until the next morning. They all looked something like: "I am in pain, and in order to end the pain, I will - !" and then I turned off my cell phone or planned a fitness routine or stayed in bed or went to a farmer's market or drank a glass of wine or wrote a story or called a friend or tried to smoke a cigarette or got in the car. I wanted one of them to stick and I didn't much care which one.

I question always what it means for love to be love but perhaps it's time to stop questioning and start giving it away.

Writing Advice: Squander

I can imagine dropping down and curling up on the hot bricks and sweating but not caring and weeping but not caring, and passersby look at me the way they'd look at a deer carcass on the side of the highway, and I am covered in the red-orange blood and I disintegrate, dissolve, disappear, perhaps I'm swallowed and bake into the earth and for me this imagining is pleasant.

The person that I am is fractured.

## Chapter Nine

In the place where my brother stayed the hallway had a green carpet and smelled like sour lemonade. His roommate wet the bed. Some doors were always locked.

I spoke once on a panel of Siblings of Children with Behavioral Challenges. A parent asked about hitting and they all looked at me. The chairwoman, the facilitator, the older boy next to me, they all nodded that I should take this one. I felt proud for a second to be an authority on something. I answered, “Well... my brother does hit me... a lot...” and I forget what I said next.

I knew a girl who called the police on her brother once, but he lied to them and said his mother hit him with a closed fist. They believed him. Now her mother can no longer run a daycare center and that is why no matter how many times I dialed 911 I never pressed send.

I don't know if he really lied. I don't know if that changes how I feel about it.

“Fair isn't always equal.”

I knew a girl whose dad didn't believe that her brother needed medication. Her mother knew that her brother did. The fight ended in a divorce and whenever she and her brother went to visit their father, she had to bring the medication in a little cooler bag hidden in her duffel and convince her brother to take it after their dad had fallen asleep.

When I get married, I will make sure I know exactly how my husband feels about medication.

Strange carnage:

- Five empty bags of chips
- Ten pieces of an apple
- One broken mirror
- Two doors off the hinges
- Six strands of my hair

I remember going to my pediatrician with a red bite mark on my wrist. It was a day old but still so bright that she thought it was a stamp from Gymboree.

I used to run in the pouring rain. I remember pounding the street and gasping, soaked to the skin and blinded with shimmering water. The light from the streetlamps reflected off of everything, the puddles on the ground and the dark windows of the closed buildings and the raindrops clinging to my eyelashes, and everywhere I saw the light I saw your face.

When he completed his in-house treatment, my brother got to do a ropes course. I remember him standing on top of a high platform. My mother was crying and shaking so I took over filming, and big drops of rain were splattering the camera lens. I forget what

he said to my parents but to me he said, "You're not really a bad singer." I suppose I thought something was changing.

I am getting rid of you by draining you onto the page. First it felt like bleeding you out, brimming with you, flooding you over. It has started to feel more like pushing you on, spitting you out, digging you up from a dry well because I'm starting to see fresh water underneath.

No matter how much I spit you out, I can still taste you on my tongue, feel you against my teeth.

"this note is attached to a plant  
i've been waterin since the day i met you  
you may water it  
yr damn self"

-Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is*  
*enuf*

I do not think my mother ever imagined her life this way. Me, I refuse to be caught off guard. Seeking a mate with no history of mental illness.

That is why I cannot love you.

## Chapter Ten

I remember when the grief counselor explained to our family about the stages of death. I was sitting on the couch and holding my younger cousin's hand. I thought about "cruel kindness" and "beautiful agony" and "alone together" and "only choice" and "noticeable absence" and I thought that none of those pairs could ever be more incongruent than "active dying."

The priest who gave my grandfather his Last Rites did not hold his hand during the Lord's Prayer. No one held his hand. He was still awake, still saying the words, and we all stood around his bed and held hands but no one held his and I was too far away to reach him.

I made everyone come and say the Lord's Prayer with him later, while I held his hand. But by then he couldn't speak any more.

When they carried his body out of the room we said the Lord's Prayer again, but to me it seemed futile to pray over a corpse.

My grandfather's last words were to my brother.

When my grandfather entered the phase of active dying, my mother and I were the only ones in the room. It was just beginning to be morning, and watery sunlight trickled through the window. His eyes were closed but his mouth was open, and slow breaths pushed through his cracked lips. The seconds between his breaths lasted hours.

My mother spoke to him, told him we loved him. She asked me to hold his hand. When I gripped it, it was cold and waxy. He smelled like sweat. I dropped his hand and walked into the next room. My mother was alone with him when he died. I should have stayed.

My grandfather always wore a scally cap. At the funeral, his pallbearers wore them as they carried him into the church. The priest looked at them like they were insects. Later, over the grave, he told my father, “Do not wear black hats into my church. Your father respected the church, he would’ve wanted you to respect it also.” My cousin grabbed my father’s arm before he could wind it back. The priest sneered.

Joke’s on him. Grampa was wearing a cap in the coffin for the whole Mass.

After that, my father was disillusioned with the Catholic Church entirely, left his faith at the gravesite beside his father and his family. More surprisingly, so did I.

There is a picture of my brother and me hugging each other, taken the day after my grandfather died. My mom made a frame – it says “Sometimes when one person leaves, it brings two people closer together.” On her part, it seemed like wishful thinking.

Things like brothers are always there to drive me away and I guess I thought things like grandfathers would always be there to pull me back.

## Chapter Eleven

I tried a Random Plot Generator on the internet and the prompt I received read, “A werewolf realizes she is God before her time runs out.” It wasn’t the werewolf that interested me but the idea of a mortal who realizes she is God. There is a scripture in the Quran that says God is closer to man than his jugular vein. God is something in the body and in the mind, something that is human and more than human (like a werewolf, perhaps).

It is easier to examine and describe each facet of sadness – they are much clearer than those of happiness because happiness shines too brightly to look at directly.

Talking to my brother is like talking to a friend of a friend I don’t particularly like who keeps saying “remember when...?” and I don’t remember anything. I’m wrong-footed because I usually remember everything and “wrong-footed” is a word that does not feel as heavy as it should.

I like that my brother wants to see me, even though I don’t want to see him. I don’t know if that is cruel or hopeful.

There is a tree outside my house covered in pink flowers. When the wind blows, thousands and thousands of petals fall down and cover everything, the lawn and the driveway and my hands and my hair.

My brother used to have a sandbox at the base of that tree and once he tried to chop it down with the sharp edge of a metal shovel. He left long, shallow scars in the base that grew sticky with dark red sap.

To be safe every day is a feeling I've begun to take too much for granted.

Recently, my brother made a joke that ended with "so look out or I might start hitting you again." He jokes because he doesn't understand what he has done to me. He doesn't understand that I still tense up when he enters a room and flinch when he gets too close. This is part of why I cannot forgive him.

My brother sent me a friend request on Facebook and it has been sitting there for over a year.

The ancient Egyptians buried their dead with the possessions they'd need for the afterlife. I wonder if they ever wrote letters. What if you wanted to write someone a letter but you couldn't think of what to say? And what if, once the words finally came, you hurried home to scribble them down? But what if you were too late, and they sealed the tomb before you could get your letter inside?

As far as I can tell, writers cannot live in the present. We choose to reside in the past or the future or the imagination because it is next to impossible to capture meaning

in the moment. Perhaps people can't really live in the present either. If we could, it would hurt a whole lot less.

I suppose I just have to realize I am God before time runs out.

## Chapter Twelve

I've started asking, "What would the person I want to be do?" and for starters, she's had enough of thinking about you.

You mattered more than I did. You mattered more than anything. I loved you so hard it left flowers in my mouth and callouses on my hands. I loved you until I was out of breath and exhausted from the effort of wanting you to be happy. From the effort of wanting you at all. Now, I love you cautiously and kindly and quietly and it doesn't feel nearly as important but I can finally hear myself think.

I kissed a boy I didn't love who wasn't you and I felt strong. That was living in the present and I was right, it did hurt a lot less.

The start of Antony Tudor's ballet *Pillar of Fire* is traditional, with a set and costumes and dancers that tell a story, but as the main character disintegrates so does the ballet. By the end, the audience is inside her mind. I suppose I am trying to do the opposite, to gather up my vast, glittering collection of broken pieces.

The lyric essay is a lesson in putting the pieces back together again.

"There comes a time when you look into the mirror and you realize that what you see is all that you will ever be. And then you accept it. Or you kill yourself. Or you stop looking in mirrors." – Tennessee Williams

The person that I am is fractured. I may let it stay that way. I haven't found the good yet so maybe it's time to take a break from searching.

“It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.” – J.K.

Rowling

I was talking with a friend around two in the morning when he said, “I just wanted to tell you, because I know you worry about this, but you are good. There is nothing wrong with you.” He thought for a moment. “There is nothing wrong with you except that you think something is.”

I pressed my palms to my eyes and was silent for a long minute. Once I mastered myself I got up and hugged him. “What happened there?” he asked.

I said, “I went a lot of places.”

I went to the beach, to the trees, to the end of the earth. I went to the jungle gym and to my bed. I went to church and to you and home, a thousand times home, and I am happy.

What I mean to say is, by the time you are reading this, I will be whole again.

Jack,

I am struggling with how to write this letter. That seems strange, because I have spent so much time talking to other people about you. I have talked about you in front of a room full of strange adults and in a circle of teenagers I had just met. I have talked about you to my friends and written about you in my college essays. I have alluded to you and talked around you and talked at you, but I have never had a real conversation with you. I don't know how. I can rattle off your diagnoses like I am about to be quizzed, I can tell counselors and support group members and English teachers exactly how I feel, but for some reason I cannot talk to you about anything.

So here is a start, I guess. I am sorry. I am sorry for all the times I lost my patience with you for no real reason. I am sorry that I cannot ever understand how your mind works. I never gave counselors a chance to explain to me exactly how you are suffering, because I was too preoccupied with how you made me suffer, and it was not fair to you. I am sorry for the times Dad called you a burden, and I am sorry for the times we all lost our tempers. I cannot imagine how alone you must have felt.

Secondly, I am proud of you. You have tried, most of the time, to overcome your challenges. Look at you now compared to five years ago, ten years ago. You do not hurt people so much anymore. You have started to control your impulses. Our family's bruises, at least the obvious ones, have faded. I am so proud of you for that.

I have a confession. Every single time I prayed, or wished upon a star, or tossed a penny in a fountain, I always wished for you to "get better." When I was younger, that meant that you would wake up one day, totally normal. As I got older and Mom and Dad started dabbling in new treatments, it meant that one of those all-natural supplements or

experimental therapy sessions would be the breakthrough that would make everything okay. Now that I think about it, you must have wished for the same things. But just the other day, I realized that what I was really wishing for came true: you are safe, and so is our family. You are in high school, and you are getting the support you need. You're going to go to college. I can walk around the house and not get hurt. You still say too many things you shouldn't say, but you're learning. A cure is, as we know, impossible, but I'm amazed at how much you've improved.

I do not think I can talk to you without anger. You changed the way I live my life. I cannot think of a single thing about where I am right now that would not be different had you been different. If you were a "normal kid," you could fulfill Dad's dream for a child that tosses the baseball with him, or plays a musical instrument, or likes Bruce Springsteen. You could have been the smart one, or the sociable one. Whichever one you were, that would be one less that I have to be. One less dream that I have to fulfill, all on my own. As it is, the only space you filled all the way is the one that belongs to "problems." I was never allowed to struggle, or to fail. You had a monopoly on that segment of childhood.

I could write a letter to make you feel guilty, or to make you feel better, but I do not want to do either. I want to tell you my truth. You deserve to hear it, and I deserve to tell you. If you ever read this, I want you to know that it captures a snapshot of a feeling from a time that has already passed. I want you know that I am sorry, and that I am proud of you. I am trying to forgive you. I am trying to love you.

Shannon

## Acknowledgements

Dedicated to all of the people who created these stories: My friends, past and present - Michelle, Richelle, Molly, Minali, Sam, Evan, Jack, Sarah, Joe, Richard, Brooke, Mary, Ashley, Ben, Patrick, Henry, and Lily. My cousins, particularly Erin and Peter. My grandmothers, Pat and Irene, and my late grandfather Gerry. My teachers, most especially my advisor Chelsey Johnson. My loving parents. And of course, Jackson.

The following works were consulted in the making of this collection:

Alice LaPlante, *Method and Madness: The Making of a Story*

Amy Bloom, "Silver Water"

Ann Patchett, *This the Story of a Happy Marriage*

Bill T. Jones, *Story/Time*

Justin St. Germain, *Son of a Gun: A Memoir*

Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*

Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*

Mary Karr, *The Art of Memoir*

Ntozake Shange, *For colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*

Phillip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*

Susan Minot, "Lust"

Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story*