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Chart Study

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Abigail Franklin

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Foreword

“Chart study” is the phrase used by aviators to describe the process of deciding on a route before ever entering the aircraft. It requires a starting point, an end point, and knowledge of the obstacles and complications along the way to make the most informed decision. Mostly, I hear my dad use the phrase to describe looking at the gps before a road trip, a sustained habit from all the years he spent flying. For such a down-to-earth man, he left a lot of himself in the clouds. He left his daughter up there too.

This project is a sampling of where I have been, where I am going, and all the places I stopped along the way. It is not a set of directions, but it is a map.

In the introduction to her book *Trick Mirror*, Jia Tolentino says of her writing, “I began to realize that all my life I’ve been leaving myself breadcrumbs.”

Dear reader, these are my breadcrumbs.

In my bones, hollow
as a bird's, there are poems
stuck, wishing for flight.

Shrinking Violets

Mattie died in June. Her body was found half a mile from the train station in a wooded clearing, her own blood sprinkled across her forehead like a baptism. The autopsy found traces of glitter and face paint on her skin and DNA under her fingernails from when she tried to fight back.

There were two identified sets of DNA; both were inconclusive.

A woman on the train was the last person to see Mattie alive. She described Mattie's eyes as marbles on a racetrack--always in motion, side to side, like she was looking to make sure there was nothing in her peripheral, like she thought everything was dangerous.

Mattie's parents blamed themselves, telling each other they knew letting her take the train by herself was a terrible idea and they were so sorry and why exactly was she in the city and was it worth dying for and if they could have only afforded to buy her a car this never would have happened.

The pastor at the Baptist church called to offer condolences and praise Mattie's parents for raising her in the church. Whether or not she's in heaven, well that's up to her, but you did all that you could, he said. This was neither comforting nor necessary to say, but the pastor was known for comments like this.

Ella was inconsolable. Mattie's closest friend sat in her closet and sobbed, door locked, body shaking. She was supposed to be with Mattie that day. They had both wanted to go, but Ella had soccer practice. She knew she too would have died if she had gone, but Ella thought that at least she wouldn't have to live without Mattie if she was also dead. A month before, the two had promised each other they would be there for the other's dying breath. Polaroids scattered the floor around her as she wiped snot on the sleeve of Mattie's hoodie that still vaguely smelled like the cologne she stole from her dad on the days he went into work early. There was a bottle of it under Ella's bed, wrapped in paper with a birthday note tucked into the ribbon. She could use it to re-scent the hoodie, but she wasn't sure how she felt about unwrapping a gift meant for a dead girl, as if Mattie might be home soon to eat her cake and open her presents.

Ella's parents periodically knocked on her door, unsure of how to comfort their daughter. Her father provided snacks, and her mother brought cups of water, telling Ella she couldn't keep crying if she was dehydrated. Every time Ella heard the door latch, she pulled the stack of letters from Mattie out of their drawer, the ones addressed to "my violet" and signed "all my love." How old-fashioned they thought themselves, how untimely they were separated. She wanted to clutch them to her chest, to hold what was left of Mattie, but she was too afraid to stain them, afraid that the ink would run and that the words, although committed to memory, would become black veins on the page. The last one, slipped into Ella's locker the Friday before Mattie was killed, outlined Mattie's plan for her trip to the city and promised Ella a gift. This sent Ella into a fresh set of sobs, overwhelmed by how much of Mattie's life was left incomplete.

The school principal announced Monday morning that anyone who wished to pay their respects may do so by planting flowers in the front lawn in remembrance of Mattie. A few grumbled that the school just wanted manual labor, and while they were right, several members of student council stayed late on Tuesday to pack dirt around messes of knotted roots.

The police and the medical examiner were lost. Murders rarely happened in their town, and when they did, they were shootings or stabbings stemming from substances or domestic violence.

Seventeen-year-old girls weren't killed without reason, but the reason eluded everyone looking for it.

Funeral preparations began and Mattie's parents couldn't decide whether to cremate her body or not. The medical examiner, perplexed by the lack of evidence for any suspect, asked that they postpone their decision. Her parents cried over the phone when he called. The man on the phone offered condolences and stipulations while the couple thanked him for his concern and assured him that he could take as long as he needed. They, too, wanted answers.

The thing about small towns is that the skeletons in everyone's closet dance in the streets after dark. Sometimes the skeletons are accompanied by the people who put them in their respective closets, and this town was no exception. Such was the meeting of the Baptist preacher and a deacon of the church late one night. They told their wives a congregation member had an emergency and they didn't know when they would return. Convinced they had bought themselves all the time starlight allowed, they met to murmur about what the people in town were saying. No one had any ideas for suspects, but the shock of Mattie's death was wearing off, and people would start speculating. The pastor, satin tie catching the streetlight as he straightened it, decided to preach about the sinfulness of gossip the next Sunday to quell the inevitable wave of theories, to guilt those in attendance into being quiet, if not stay silent entirely. The deacon agreed, and urged him to do more, encouraged him to continue to make their community as holy and pure as it could be.

As the moon set and the stars grew pale, Ella went for a run. There was something from Mattie's trip no one else was supposed to see, and Ella knew that the backpack hadn't been returned with Mattie's body, which meant it was still in the woods. Ella had precious few hours to herself when no one asked what she was doing, and she planned to rescue Mattie's memory as best as she could. If she didn't, Ella feared she would be in danger if people gave any one thing too much thought. Panting as she entered the clearing with brown stained moss, she looked for the teal color of Mattie's backpack the same way she used to in the school hallway, but this time, there was no unkempt collection of curls to keep her attention. This sent a wave of nausea through Ella, who retched. She walked the perimeter of the clearing, afraid to venture further into the woods, and turned her attention to the ground looking for disturbed soil.

She found a patch of dirt too smooth to be anything other than intentional tucked behind the far side of a tree. She kneeled, plunged her fingers into the soil, and excavated a handful of ground. It took only a few repeated motions before her fingertips brushed canvas. She pushed more dirt away from the backpack, grabbing hold of the fabric that was visible and starting to wriggle it in an attempt to loosen it. She alternated yanking on the backpack and shoving dirt until she pulled and heard the zipper separate and from the canvas spilled bright striped nylon tumbled over itself like cool water into the earth.

A twig snapped behind Ella followed by the sound of rustling leaves and the flight of a bird. Ella stopped breathing.

"What are you doing here?" A man's voice, one Ella had heard almost as much as her own father's.

She turned her head and crouched lower, feet sunken in the dirt. She swallowed, her throat swollen and tongue felt like cotton blossoms.

"Move away from the backpack."

Ella did, off balance, falling backward as she realized that the men standing above her already knew what was in it.

“We know you and Mattie were close.” This was an accusation from the mouth of the second man, who had driven Ella to the emergency room after she tripped up the front steps of the church in middle school.

“Yeah,” was all Ella could manage.

“How close?” The first man stepped closer, the moss under his feet bending under his will and causing another bird to flee its perch as he undid the tie from around his neck. The second man bent to pull the fabric from the backpack split open on the ground, the red stripe the color of blood in his shadow.

Ella swallowed, the lump in her throat like a boulder. Her answer was practiced, rehearsed, and not quite the whole truth but not a lie. “We were best friends.”

“Is that all?”

Ella, having exhausted her voice, said nothing. The voice of the first man echoed in her head from years past: *lying is a sin and all sinners deserve eternity in hell.*

Lying’s not the only thing she did that he would have condemned her for, but Ella, kneeling at the altar of her death, knew that a confession would only provide reasonable cause for what the men in front of her were about to do.

The men with meaty hands and eyes cold as marbles believed that silence passed for guilt and closed the distance between themselves and Ella before she could shriek, fabric wrapped around their hands.

my arabic

“bil arabiya” my teacher scolds,
reminding me that i don’t know
enough words to lie in this language
but she never asks me a question
i can answer truthfully without using english.
helpless and shivering
in the warmest room in school,
my voice leaks like a helium balloon
“asifa, miss. la aarif.”
i’m sorry, miss. i don’t know.
she does not tug on my ear
the way she does to my sole other classmate
who’s a worse student than me
but has a mother tongue in this alphabet.
she shakes her head.
“ahbeegail.”
i repeat my apology, bil arabiya.
“did you study?”
“naam.” yes.
i know how to lie here but don’t.
it would be easier if i did.

Upper Yewers Farm, Saturday Morning

Awake & moving towards the kitchen;
bread is toasting & the
coffee is hot. Your
dad has already built a fire from last night's
embers, and he sits near it to keep it
fed while everyone else eats.
Going to feed the horses, calls your aunt,
her contacts not yet in,
inviting you to
join her in your pajama pants as you
kick your own ankles wearing shoes too
long for your feet but closest to the back door.
Mugs are scattered across end tables & the hearth,
notions of lunch already murmuring
over the second cup of coffee. The dogs are being
pushed outside; they've already been
quite the pair of menaces & it's not even nine.
Rising from the basement come your brothers,
sleepy-eyed & hunting for something sweet.
Thumbing through real estate listings, your
uncle is in his recliner, his Virginia-accented
voice telling your cousin to move the cows to the low grounds.
While your mother and aunt
examine the menu for this evening,
you curl into the corner of the couch, thinking that even
Zion couldn't keep you this well-fed & peaceful.

A Liturgy for Being Called "Intimidating"

You, O Lord, are to be feared, and if I am created in Your image, then I must be too.

May the men who call me this believe it.
May the women who call me this become it themselves.

You, O Lord, are the parter of seas and ordainer of floods. Let me be the crashing of the waves.
You, O Lord, are the fire that burns without consumption. Let me be the flames.

May I know what inspires this description of myself.
May I know if that word is a compliment or a curse and respond accordingly.

If it is a compliment, let me soften my features, walk slower, and invite people in.
If it is a curse, let me decorate my fortress walls with eyeliner and lipstick, bat my lashes like a drawbridge,
and never blink.

You, O Lord, are to be feared, and if I am created in Your image, then I must be too.

Amen.

Stomach Bugs

I raised butterflies as a kid. I would watch every day, fascinated, to see new change and growth as the eggs turned into crawling little goops, caterpillars, and finally soft sacks of spun string. The most exciting day was when the butterflies emerged from their cocoons, all orange and black and apprehensive about everything. I fed them sugar water, watched them develop confidence and strength.

When my dad told me that the fluttery feeling in my stomach was butterflies, the aviator in him could not help but bestow practical flight advice. It's okay to have butterflies, he would tell me, just make them fly in formation. I furrowed-brow-focused, tried to picture an orange and black upside-down "v" in my stomach, wings beating erratically and still in time with my heart before it became too much and the image exploded again into a flurry of motion and color.

I thought I would digest most of my butterflies as I grew up—the butterflies that made ordering food at a restaurant hard, or the ones that stole my voice when I was supposed to introduce myself to someone new, or the ones that stopped me from learning how to strike a match until I was 15. Everyone around me seemed to. My younger brothers had no trouble with the things that made me tremble. My butterflies grew more forceful and stopped flying in formation, no matter much I begged them.

I've worked closely with my butterflies, fed them sugar water and caffeine, and we've come to an understanding, even if they still won't acquiesce to my flight instructions. Now, I can light a match but not without flinching, and can order my own food at a restaurant but not without practicing what I'm going to say. My butterflies have to share space with the carpenter ants that moved into my stomach a few years ago, attracted to the lawless land that is myself, gnawing away at the pit of my gut when they get agitated by an unknown environment. The two bugs get into a territory war occasionally and my appetite becomes a civilian casualty. I am always suffering from a stomach bug, but don't worry, it's not contagious. I just spend a lot of time in public bathrooms hoping for some privacy.

Trained Wheels

Metallic lavender aluminum under me,
black plastic pedals pressing into my feet,
my father's hand on the back of my seat.
For the first time,
I am not scared of the idea of him
not being next to me.
He pushes me forward & I keep pedaling alone
to the brick bus stop where no bus has
ever stopped, where my friends & I pluck
grass to make nests for the neighborhood rabbits
because we know nothing about caring for other things
but desperately want to.
I turn around & pedal back to my dad
as my mom steps out the front door.
I roll right past them & don't look back.

My Parents Ask Why I Never Tell Them Anything

In the car, my father laughs at the strangers living my dream.

Dear Dad

Dear Dad,

You've said for years that all you want for any gift-giving occasion is a letter. I'd like to say I give you a book every time instead because you instilled my love of reading in me and I'm glad we have something to share. Really, though, it's because the thought of you reading anything that I've written makes me feel like there are spiders crawling across my skin. I plan to never show you this letter though, so I should be able to write it.

I think when you want a letter, you want a list of reasons I love you or all the ways that you've impacted my life for the better. I love you because you're my dad and you've never been unkind to me. I love you because you work hard and you believe so strongly in things, even if they're a little misguided. I love you in spite of your habit of vacuuming at 8 am on a Saturday. I love you because even after I have spent so many years holding you at arm's length, you still try to find ways to connect, even if the best you could do was that 6-month period when every time I came home from college, you'd tell me that being able to write well is an essential skill that will set me apart from peers as if I am not actively pursuing a degree in writing.

Sometimes you talk and I know you are just parroting Dale Carnegie because you read *How to Win Friends and Influence People* as often as you read your Bible and I hate it because you sound fake to me since I know what you're doing. Begrudgingly, I will admit that leading by example works, and I find myself unafraid to say "I don't know" and "I was wrong" any time it's true. But sometimes, I don't believe that you really mean it, you're just saying it to assuage a situation or buy yourself some time. Maybe that's cynical of me. You're also always telling me to never lose my joy. I haven't lost my joy; the things that bring us joy are very different things. You find joy in red meat and walks on the beach and mowing the lawn. I find joy in shellfish and Taylor Swift lyrics and shaving my head.

I'm sorry you found out on your birthday that year that I shaved my head. The timing was bad all around because Mom wanted me to wait until after Christmas card photos and I couldn't not FaceTime you on your birthday which was like three days after I shaved it but I didn't want to text that I'd shaved my head because I wanted to let you live in ignorance since I knew you hated the idea. I really loved the buzzcut. I know you got your head shaved without a choice when you got to college, but you chose to go to a service academy, so let's not pretend that me considering the decision to shave my head for a year at my liberal arts school is the same thing, like, at all.

Thank you for letting me major in creative writing and philosophy. I know you won't ever tell me that you think that it's a useless degree, but I heard you get quiet when I said my dream was to be a poet full time and saw the palpable relief on your face when I said I wanted to go to law school a year later.

When I didn't want to wear my glasses when I first got them because I also got braces the same week and was terrified that I looked like a nerd, you wrote me a letter listing all the ways that being a nerd was actually something to be proud of. The thing I remember most from that letter was that you listed some famous nerds. The only three I can think of are Condoleezza Rice, Bill Gates, and Barack Obama. This made me laugh as a kid because I remember that we stayed up late together to watch the 2008 election and that you made a whole sandwich with a side of chips for a

“snack” and that I fell asleep on the floor and when I woke up, the results had been announced and I asked who won and you told me and you were disappointed and so I didn’t see why you would bother to put Barack Obama on the list of people to admire just because he was president.

Like you, I have no desire to be president. Unlike you, I have lost the desire to be in leadership of any kind. I know you’re really good at it, and you instilled so many of those qualities that make you good at it in me, but I don’t love it. I don’t want that much responsibility. Are you having fun? Are you having a good time? Because I am very tired. There’s no reason for someone to be a leader if there’s no one to follow them, and I would like to take some time to be the follower.

You are one of the most committed followers of Jesus that I know. Admittedly, I don’t know a lot of them anymore. My friends and I started floating away from the faith because of so many reasons, none of which I will tell you. One of my friends, deeply committed to religion, thinks that communion should be withheld from those who don’t believe. I’m not willing to start a fight with him, but it hurts every time he says that because I remember sitting in a chair at the church you attend listening to the pastor give the communion spiel, remembering the pastor of the church you raised me in making a point to say that taking communion when you are not “right with God” has led to people falling gravely ill and encountering freak accidents, and deciding that it was worth the risk of a smiting if it meant that I didn’t have to explain to you why I wasn’t taking communion.

One day, probably, there will come a time when I tell you something and you will say that you love me but you do not like what I am doing. I am putting that off as long as possible. But it’s coming down the pipe, and I think you suspect it, but are waiting for me to say something. Thank you for not asking. You spent my whole childhood telling me the worst thing I could do is lie to you, and I appreciate that you haven’t put me in a position where I need to. I might not ever say something, and I ask that you don’t ask if you’ll ever get grandchildren. Go question David. He’s the one who loves babies anyway.

I love you. I’ve never been afraid to say it, even if it terrifies me to write it down.

Abigail

To the Residents of 1104 Columbus Circle

Does she haunt you while you're sleeping?
A daughter died in your house before.
Do you ever wake up weeping?

Feel her strangled silence seeping
through the carpet and the door.
Does she haunt you while you're sleeping?

In the upstairs back left bedroom, there's a creeping,
crawling feeling because this house still keeps the score.
Do you ever wake up weeping?

There's a first responder who stops by on Halloween, still keeping
up with those who live in 1104.
Does she haunt you while you're sleeping?

Her shadow on your walls is running, skipping, leaping
because she cannot do that anymore.
Do you ever wake up weeping?

When there's snow on ice that's blown and sweeping
you'll never know what March has in store.
Does she haunt you while you're sleeping?
Do you ever wake up weeping?

Well-worn

My shoes sit under the bed,
black canvas stitched to white rubber.
The worn-through soles and shorn-down heel
remind me of all the places I've been.
I need new shoes. I have new places to go.

Oil & Water

Mira takes a sip of her tea and, surprised by the cold in her mouth, checks the clock. She had been mixing paint for an hour trying to get the color that she wanted and still had nothing she was willing to use. She puts her paint knife on the palette and makes her way to the kitchen, rubbing her fingers together to loosen the paint dried on her skin. Unimpressed with her work and frustrated with her muse, she opens the fridge and tosses last night's leftovers into the microwave.

She picks up her phone and texts her boyfriend.

Can't make dinner tonight. This painting is kicking my ass >:(

This was not the first time she had canceled on him to stare at a canvas in silence, but this was the first time she was working on a piece without a deadline.

Her phone buzzes.

Do you want me to bring food to you?

The answer to that question should always be yes. But she stares at her screen, debating the merits of having to see him. She chastises herself for weighing the pros and cons of seeing her partner.

Will you already be in the area?

For you, always <3 I'll be there by 7

Fuck.

She yanks the door of the microwave with more force than necessary, pulls the plastic container from its recessed place in the wall, and stabs rubbery broccoli with her fork. She stares at the counter while she chews. She doesn't really want to see him tonight, and she really doesn't want him to see what she was working on.

Finishing her lunch and leaving her dishes next to the sink to deal with later, she plops back on the floor with her paint palette.

She is painting a woman, which she has done many times, but this piece is not a commission or part of a series.

Before the new money of New York discovered her work in a charity show and flooded her inbox with commission requests, she worked as a docent in an art museum. Once, a woman walked through alone reading every plaque next to every work and generally keeping to herself. She was curious about a painting and Mira was the closest docent. The woman asked her question and Mira knew the answer until they made eye contact and she lost the ability to form any words.

This is where she is stuck today. The eyes. She has no idea what color they are. It was not that she didn't take in this woman's face piece by piece to avoid being overwhelmed by the whole, because she had, but the woman's eyes shifted color every time she moved.

Her phone screen tells her it is 4:52.

She considers the canvas in front of her, the texture of the hair, the shape of the face, the delicate freckle on one cheek, the blank eyes.

Perhaps her eyes were all the colors, she thinks, knowing it's a stupid idea but too frustrated to care.

Abandoning the color she has been trying to mix for the last hour, she clears a space on her palette and creates approximate shades of brown and blue and green. Dipping her middle finger in

the brown, she hovers above the canvas before barely touching her fingertip to the white space at several different places around what will later become the pupil.

She does this over and over again, dabbing and re-dabbing and blending and re-applying color, creating a kaleidoscope of vision.

Satisfied with the coverage of color, she leans back, praying to every god she's never believed in that it doesn't look stupid.

It doesn't.

When she moves her head to stretch her neck, the colors move too. She's been working on this for too long.

It is 6:43. Matt will be here soon. He is disgustingly punctual.

Standing up and brushing off her hands, she considers what she's done. Artistically, it's a great choice. Personally, she's tried to cancel plans with her boyfriend to work on a painting that she doesn't want him to know about because it feels wrong. The lack of reciprocity on her end in their relationship always makes her feel guilty, but this is a new kind of guilty. She doesn't have time to shower it off before he gets here.

She is scrubbing her hands in the sink when she hears a key in her door and the latch turn.

"Mira, Mira, on the wall, I've brought curry!"

She turns, weary already of his presence and hunger awakened by the scent now wafting from the plastic bag in his hands.

"Ah, Prince Charming, what a life-saver." She turns off the tap, reaching for a towel while she apologizes for being unable to leave the apartment.

"Canceled reservations from us," he pauses to kiss her, "are a blessing to someone else. Candlelight felt stuffy for tonight anyway." He winked, trying to be reassuring.

It should have been, but Mira was filled with guilt and anxiety that it wasn't.

She smiles and says nothing, moving to grab two forks from the drawer.

He starts pulling flatbread and styrofoam from the bag onto the table. "Which of New York's finest is upsetting your work this time, my love? Is it a lawyer needing a portrait now that he has been made partner? A plastic surgeon wanting a tasteful nude for his waiting room? The Met? The Trumps?"

"You know I refuse to answer emails from the Trumps anymore," she says as she sits down. "Not only are they the most uncreative bastards I know, they wait to change their minds until the paint is dry." She scoops rice and chicken onto a piece of bread, folding it at the sides and bringing it to her mouth.

"So it is the Met then?" He teases.

She shakes her head. "I wish."

"One day, Mira. One day." At this, he touches her hand with a gentleness that makes her want to recoil.

"Mm," was all she could manage.

They chewed in silence for a few moments.

"Tell me, M, what's the struggle with this piece?" He always did this, always used demanding language with the gentlest of tones.

She keeps chewing, gesturing at her cheek that she puffed out more than necessary to give her more time.

She swallows. "I can't get the eyes right." It was true, and it was a common enough artistic plight that he wouldn't have any advice to give, knowing that every artist complained and none ever found a solution.

"Shape?"

"Color."

"You're a master at shade mixing, it'll be great"

"I can't figure out *which* color, like what color family I'm looking for."

"Aren't there only like three eye colors? Whoever commissioned this won't mind; I know the rest of the painting will be phenomenal. So will the eyes," he says this last part quickly as if catching himself in a lie he has to justify. "The eyes will be good, but I know your standards for yourself are so much higher than the standards of your customers." He smirks. "Except the Trumps."

She smiles at this while she scoops more chicken onto her bread. "The Trumps are always an outlier."

"Yes. Paint away, my darling. Paint as you wish. They'll love it."

She is overcome with the urge to cry. She takes another bite of curry, hoping for there to be a ball of dry spice hidden in the sauce so she'd have an excuse. The sauce was fully blended, but tears start rolling down her face anyway.

"Mira, love, what is it?" He takes both her hands in his, her calloused palms, his fingertips permanently depressed from his computer keys.

She doesn't know what it is. She just knows she is painting a woman whose name she doesn't know and she doesn't want to tell the boyfriend who loves her more than she loves him and she feels so guilty every time they are together and every time they are apart. She can't form any words. He has never seen her like this.

They have been together long enough it is a natural assumption that his presence alone would make things better and so he moves around the table to pull her against his chest, a gesture he meant to be comforting.

She wants to scream.

All she can do is keep crying.

"Whatever I can do to fix this, M, I will."

The only thing you can do to fix this, she thinks, is disappear. But he doesn't disappear. He holds her closer and smooths her hair. He lets her keep crying.

This makes her feel worse.

"Can we go look at the painting?" He is trying so hard to help.

She sniffs, a most unflattering sound. "Sure." She disentangles herself from his arms and moves towards the well-lit living room that she turned into a studio with him in tow. She grabs the side of her easel and pulls, the dropcloth sliding and bunching across the hardwood as she does.

The woman is facing them now, her eyes white in the middle, her hair draped over her shoulders. Mira captured how captivating the woman could be without even speaking.

"Wow," he says, almost breathless. "M, this is phenomenal. I've always known you were talented, but damn." He wraps an arm around her shoulder and kisses her head. "No one will have any complaints about her eyes. They're mesmerizing." He keeps staring at the portrait. "This should get you into the Met." He nudges her shoulder as he says this.

At this, she breaks into tears again.

"Mira, my love, what is it? Her eyes are perfect, why are you crying?"

“I don’t know!” Bursts out of her as she steps back from him. “I just, I want to get her perfect but I don’t know what color her eyes are and I shouldn’t know because I don’t even know her name but God she’s perfect and I just wanted to capture that and I can’t and I don’t know why this means so much to me but I can’t stop caring and I can’t stop fucking crying.” She is tense and her body is getting rigid. “And it’s not a commission, I don’t have a reference photo, I just have a memory of a woman at the museum who I can’t fucking forget and I don’t know why I care so fucking much and I don’t even fucking know what I don’t even fucking know and I feel like I am going to fucking explode!”

Matt pauses, letting what she said settle.

He does not speak for several moments.

“Mira, you tried to cancel dinner with me for a passion project?”

A sniff. “Yes.”

“Love, I made those reservations months ago.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

More time passes as they both stare at the painting in an effort to not look at each other, arms crossed, one set of shoulders high, one set hunched. Tears run down Mira’s cheeks.

Toeing the dropcloth on the floor, she says “I think I might need some space for right now.”

Matt nods and does not ask if space means tonight or indefinitely. He collects his bag, his shoes, looks at the curry still on the table before reaching for the front door.

“I want this to work, Mira,” he says to the hallway.

She sniffs and says nothing.

He waits for a response she gives with silence before latching the door behind him.

Mira plunks on the floor, wiping her nose on her arm and listening to his footsteps, even and certain, until the sound disappears.

beehive

Other people write about girls like you & liken them to honey.
But honey,
you are molten chocolate lava filling,
you are crushed velvet in the most unnamable shade of maroon,
you are best lit by moonlight but still incandescent under fluorescents.
You are soft hands & dog hair, dustless bookshelves & a black couch,
you are a slicked-back bun & my favorite sweater.
You are a swarm of bees in my stomach;
I let them sting me & like the taste.

Foliage, Falling

Winter

We meet in March & never spend less than two hours together.
I am immediately taken with you.
Coronavirus takes us from each other.

Spring

We do not speak. In a writing assignment,
I call you “intellectually enchanting”
& wonder if you remember me.

Summer

We sit together in the grass long enough
to watch the moon replace the sun.
I don't notice until the light changes the color of your eyes.

Autumn

I love you almost as much as I love your dog
but never have a chance to say it. You shave my head & I'm grateful
you are there to watch me become who I'm meant to be.

Winter

We find each other in every hallway & butterfly-flit
our way to say hello. I don't want you to leave
yet can't wait for you to go, unstified by crisp & biting Indiana air.

Spring

I call you “pal” and regret it instantly.
You never offer to drive me home again.
I start to grow out my hair.

Summer

You are kinder to me than I earn,
quieter than I hope.
I still don't know what color your eyes are.

Autumn

You turn twenty-three and I do not. I keep dreaming
about you, even as my phone falls dormant.

Headway

The DIY, part 1

I was four and didn't know any better and so I cut my hair with the children's craft scissors I kept in my room. My parents explained that we leave hair cutting to professionals and paper cutting to us.

The DIY, part 2

My mother told me to go pick a shirt from the two she put on my bed before family photos. I took the pink scissors with a Hello Kitty head attached to one of the handles and chopped off my bangs ¼ of an inch from the roots. The quick fix was to put a headband right at my hairline for the photoshoot. I wasn't allowed to touch scissors for years after that.

My mother said I was lucky that the photographer was a family friend who was staying with us and had the headband idea because otherwise she might have killed me. She started leaving that last line out of the story after the only other girl in those photos died.

The DIY, part 3

I stood in the hall bathroom, bored and 11, and cut a little bit off the ends of my hair. Nothing substantial, just enough to make me feel like I did something. My parents didn't notice. I was still allowed to use scissors. I felt so proud of my subtlety.

The hair down my back, part 1

There was no reason to cut my hair, so I didn't. It hung brown and stringy down my back, tucked so firmly behind my ears it grew in the shape of a question mark, as if unsure of its own purpose.

The asymmetrical bob

I asked to get my hair cut when I was 14. Inspired and stubborn, I was insistent that it had to be an asymmetrical bob so my mother asked around for a hairdresser because we were living in a new place, a foreign country, and my mom didn't trust the barber shop on the base to style anything more than a trim.

The woman who cut my hair was on the same airplane when we all moved to this island, and this connection is how I started babysitting her kids until one particular New Years Eve when her husband brought friends over to pregame their going our plans and the 4-year-old daughter cowered crying behind the couch when one of the men approached her and I, having been told that I was on the clock, assumed my responsibility and got between the two of them and told the man to get away from the girl, my heartbeat in my ears too loud to hear what he said as he walked away. I was supposed to spend the night, but upon learning that the friends were leaving their car at this apartment complex, I knew I couldn't sleep on the couch. I texted my mother after shot glasses

lined the counter and told the parents that my grandmother was having a medical emergency and I needed to be with my family. As I left, I heard the girl screaming from a bedroom. The mom messaged my mom immediately, apologizing, saying that she didn't know her husband was planning to bring friends. I believed her. They never asked me to babysit again.

The only time I was back in that apartment was to get my hair cut. She did a great job, intentionally cutting it in a way that created the dramatic asymmetry that I wanted while assuring my mother that if I parted my hair a different way, it would all be the same length, sharing an unspoken agreement with my mother that 14-year-old girls don't always want the dramatic haircut they think they do for very long. I kept my hair parted the same way for years.

The hair down my back, part 2

There was no reason to cut my hair, so I didn't. I twisted it into a misshapen sphere on the top of my head after getting out of the shower and didn't take it down again until the next night to repeat the process.

When we were given scissors in science class, I would slice through a few pieces of hair, just because. Never more than an inch, never more than a pinchful of strands. *I just like the feeling of hair in scissors*, I told the girl next to me when she asked. *Plus, you know how much I hate my hair.*

The man working the register at the game store, commenting on my bun and sweater and dark glasses, told me that I looked *like a cute secretary, or a sexy librarian* even though my mother was standing next to me. She said nothing. I wanted to flip him off, but knew that would get me in more trouble with my mother than it was worth.

Every time my hair flopped to one side, got in my face, or was a general nuisance, I muttered that I wanted to shave my head. My friends didn't even blink at this. Sometimes they asked me *when* just to watch me get frustrated that I knew I couldn't.

The pixie cut

I texted my parents to tell them that I want to shave my head but that I'm telling them before to let them know that it's something that I've wanted to do for years and that they didn't send their 17-year-old off to college only for her to have a Britney-Spears-buzzcut-breakdown. They asked me to call them, questioned my reasoning, and borderline begged me to just cut my hair short first in case I hate having it short and don't know it. I agreed and then cried in frustration after hanging up the phone.

The only hair place near campus was a GreatClips, and one of my friends already had an appointment, so I made one too. A friend from another school was visiting and tagged along. They cheered when the hairdresser snipped off my ponytail. She commented that the hair on the back of my neck was literally growing in an upward direction and that she had never seen that before. I told her it was because my hair had been up every single day for years. She agreed that was a sign to cut it.

Among the oohs and ahhs of classmates the first day after I cut my hair, one of my friends asked *how much did you actually cut off? I never saw your hair down.*

My mother said it was a bad haircut and a few years later I agreed, but at the time, I failed to see how anything that made me grin at the mirror and inspired acquaintances to tell me that I looked more comfortable in myself could be bad.

The purple pixie cut

A week after I walked into my parents' room to collect the clippers to shave my head and then didn't because my sexuality was interrogated past the point of reason, my mother asked if I'd rather just dye my hair a fun color. I told her that would cost more than I was willing to spend on my hair. She offered to pay. This is how I knew she was desperate for me to not shave my head. I told her I wanted a purple pixie cut, the kind of hair that makes little girls whisper at the volume children who don't know how whisper use that I look like a fairy. She made an appointment with her hairdresser.

It was July of 2020, and when my mother bounced across the street to run errands during my appointment, the stylist and I, muffled by masks, talked about the Black Lives Matter protests happening, and she told me all about the research she'd been doing on slavery and psychological torture and generational trauma. We agreed to change the subject when we heard the front door bell chime.

I spiked my hair every morning and ordered colored conditioner to make the hue last longer. Once a week, I smothered my hair in purple cream and marveled at the amount of effort I was willing to give to my hair for the first time and yet how much I still wanted it gone.

I recounted the story of the man at the games shop calling me sexy in front of my mother to a group of friends. *Is that why you dyed your hair purple, one of them asked. So that men wouldn't talk to you?* I told him *that's not why, and even if it was, it didn't work. I got cat-called walking my dog last week.*

The faded, lavender-streaked bowl cut

There was only so much my best friend and I could do to my hair in our dorm room. We could bleach my roots and re-color it, but we couldn't cut it all that effectively without clippers or experience. I took to the back of my head with craft scissors and my bangs, too long to style, fell flat on my forehead. The color washed out and I felt like I had a bowl cut.

I started wearing eyeshadow again and was particularly heavy-handed one morning. A friend said that she liked the orange and I told her that between the orange eyeshadow and bowl cut, I feel like Vector from *Despicable Me*. She laughed, and I knew that it was an objectively funny statement, but I wasn't joking. My hair had to go.

My mother FaceTimed me and asked about my hair. I told her it was streaky and gross and I was getting rid of it. She clarified that I meant I was planning to shave it. I gave a strained yes. She pleaded for me to wait until after Christmas card photos were taken. I conceded. I borrowed a hat from my best friend every day until then, counting down the hours and avoiding reflective surfaces.

The buzzcut, part 1

The new philosophy professor, unexpectedly hired six weeks into the semester and still shaky in front of students, asked for our weekend plans, and I blurted that I would be shaving my head. He was surprised, probably that I was too nervous to raise my hand to answer questions in class but was enthusiastically forthcoming in this answer.

I told my parents that I had to be back on campus early from lunch and photos because I had dinner plans. I let them drop me off at my dorm, changed my shoes, and immediately trekked the mile to my friend's apartment. She had to contain her puppy before getting to work, hands hovered over my head instead of touching me. She finished; told me to look in the mirror. *Oh my god!* I said, stunned at the vision of my shaved head in the mirror, one that can't be imagined until it happens. *Is that a good "oh my god" she asked, sounding like she was afraid that she had made a mistake. I love it; thank you,* I said. My brain whispered *I was always supposed to look like this.* And I did.

A few days later, my best friend pointed out a few strands of hair behind my right ear that the clippers missed. *Oh, that must have been where the strap of my mask was,* I said, once again reminded of just how many things the pandemic could not keep its hands off.

The purple buzzcut

I had wanted a lilac buzzcut after seeing a D-list celebrity do the same thing a few years earlier. I squirted purple dye directly onto my scalp, rubbed it around, and rinsed it too early so that I could get to a meeting on time. I left that meeting and walked out of the conference room to a student center full of people watching the 2020 presidential debate, cheering every time the incumbent spoke. *Wrong night to dye my hair,* I quipped to the woman next to me.

The pink buzzcut

Now known in my dorm as the girl with the ever-changing hair, I was asked to help a floormate dye hers pink. *I always wanted pink hair,* she told me as we sectioned and clipped her hair, *but my ex said that I would look stupid with it. I broke up with him recently for other reasons, but I thought I should dye my hair pink now anyway.* I agreed as I dipped the brush in the bowl of pink goo and watched her grin in the mirror as I swiped the dye across her blonde locks.

Do you want to dye your hair? We have enough left, she said, looking at the remnants in the bowl. My hair was still a little bleached from the last time my best friend and I tried to make the faded disaster presentable, so I knew the color would stick. And she was right, it wouldn't take that much dye. *Fuck it,* I mumbled, and swooped my fingers around the plastic bowl and smeared the contents across my head.

The awkward growing out stage, part 1

Right, so what's with your hair? my grandmother asks over Christmas. *Like what color is it?* By then, it was no longer pink but a yellowed mango-lemonade color and grown out enough that my roots were showing and my bangs were closer to my eyebrows than my hairline. *It was pink*, I said, *but it's grown and faded*. She asked what my plan was. I told her shaving it off and starting over. My mother said that shaving it couldn't make it any worse. They asked how long I planned to keep it buzzed. I said I didn't know. They changed the subject.

At my aunt's house for New Years, I studied my face in the mirror. Each feature looked the same as I remembered it, and everything was the same distance from itself, but as soon as I considered my face as a whole, I couldn't recognize it. Two hours later, my mother said that with my hair growing out, I looked more like *her Abigail* again.

The buzzcut, part 2

I sent a message in the dorm group chat asking to borrow a pair of clippers. A man from downstairs who I didn't like but now found myself indebted to answered my plea. I stood in an old shirt and my sandals in the laundry room of my dorm, watching the chunks of discolored hair fall to the floor. During my third swipe over the top of my head, my best friend looked up from her phone to tell me that people were storming the Capitol Building to contest the election results. I was so entranced by the feeling of buzzing shears in my own hand that the news didn't register until after my head was shorn and the floor was swept. Every time new information was published that night, I rubbed my hand across my stubbled scalp, as if I could create enough friction for my head to catch flame.

I shaved my head every two weeks for a month and a half. My mother called to ask if I would grow it out for a work event for my dad. I agreed, wondered how a six-week grown-out buzz would look better than an up-kept one, but didn't bother to ask. Later, my brother would tell me that my mother didn't believe I had actually stopped shaving my head when she asked. I cried in the shower, frustrated that I gave up the ability to recognize my face in the mirror just to not even be good enough.

The awkward growing out stage, part 2

I kept staring at myself in the mirror, tried to figure out what it was that displeased me about my appearance. I realized I had not felt pretty since the first time I cut my hair short. I was confident in being a great deal of other things related to my appearance, but pretty was not one of them. I missed feeling pretty. I decided to let my hair grow, see if that helped.

I tried to not think about my hair as it pushed through the worst stages of growing out. During that time period, I got my drivers license and a job. While a truly terrible stage is immortalized on my license, I proved to my mother that employers still found me hireable even with stupid hair. I started

taking vitamins to encourage hair growth, and that helped. Determined to make the process more manageable, I let it stay its natural color.

Every few months, it would get to an awkward enough length that it was too long for the hairstyle I had been using but not long enough for a new one. If I waited a few days, things resolved themselves. Patience, not creativity, is the key to this process.

The French-gender-ambivalent

A friend referred to my hair as “French gender ambivalent” when it was just reaching my chin and I could pin the front part back. I loved that label and ran with it for the two weeks that my hair was the right length for it. It encapsulated everything that I wished I could be.

The longest-it’s-been-in-years

My hair was just past my shoulders and I could officially pull everything back into a ponytail. I discovered this in a fitness class and spent the entire time swinging my head back and forth, just to remember what it’s like to feel my hair move.

I’d see photos of myself and say *my hair is so long!* and whoever was next to me would pause and then reply *oh, well for you, yeah.*

The DIY bangs

I liked the way that having small pieces of hair loose framed my face, but my hair had grown so long that I had to actively pull forward said pieces if my hair was up, and it looked awkward all around. I made sure I had the definition of curtain bangs correct before watching one singular video about cutting your own and left for the store ten minutes later to buy hair scissors.

Two hours later, I stood in the communal bathroom and snipped the ends off the front pieces of my hair, cleaned out the sink, walked back to my room, and returned eight minutes later to even up the ends.

The DIY, part 4

Three days after cutting my bangs, I still wanted something more. Some part of me itched for a change that subtle bangs could not satisfy. I drove an hour round trip for better scissors. Armed with an unfounded sense of confidence and a determination I had not felt so strongly in years, I walked back into the communal bathroom and laid my tools on the counter. I did not section my hair, I did not measure anything, and I did not use a mirror to see the back of my head. I didn’t bother to update my mother either, though I knew that I should.

It was a drastic enough change that other people noticed and commented, which was an indication that it was the necessary amount of change. I coupled the haircut with new nose jewelry, hoping to reinvent myself.

My mother stopped by campus to drop off my youngest brother for a night and take me out to dinner. Her first words to me were *your hair is so cute! Who did it?* My face broke into half-smirk, half-grin as I told her that *I did*.

for my daughter

when you go to pull the hangnail,
pull up and forward, not back.
it will bleed less that way.

always use a serif font.
just do it.

end every hot shower with a splash of cold.
technically, it resets the vagus nerve,
but all you need to know
is that it will make you feel better.

learn how to cook pasta perfectly—
don't worry, i'll teach you—
because some days it will be all you can eat.

if you hate everyone,
eat.
if you think everyone hates you,
sleep.
if you hate yourself,
shower, and call me.

some day, you will probably hate me,
or think you do, at least
for a little while. i can't stop you
so i won't even try.

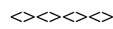
there is nothing you can do to make me love you less.

when it's cool to make fun of your mom,
you can say that i wrote you poetry before you existed.
when it's cool to brag on your mom,
you can say that i wrote you poetry before you existed.

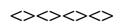
if you're anything like me,
you'll be your own worst enemy.
but baby, i'll make sure
you're never fighting alone.

The Hello Kitty CD player gets its own shelf on the bookcase my parents bought me because I am old enough now that my books have chapters and need more space. I unfold the purple cardboard box for the dramatized audiobook of *Little Women* and plunk the first CD in the clunky machine and shut the lid, waiting for the whirl of the spinning disc.

I color while the March sisters bring breakfast to another family on Christmas morning. I rearrange the American Girl Doll furniture in my closet while Meg gets married. I cry when Beth dies; the death of my own little sister the year before much too fresh in my 8-year-old mind. I organize my books while Jo runs to New York after rejecting Laurie's proposal. I make paper dolls while Amy goes to Europe. I put disc one back in the player when disc four ends.



As a child, I wanted to be Jo. She was my favorite of the March sisters. Independent, a reader, a writer, someone who spent time in New York. She was everything I wanted to be. I tried to make myself Jo. When my friends and I played games where we made up names for ourselves, I was always "Josephine-but-goes-by-Jo." I was already a reader so I kept at that and started to care about the newspaper. I wanted to cut my hair short; my mother, having been forced into a short haircut by her mother, could not understand why anyone would choose that, and made me keep my hair. I cut it myself using safety scissors three times as a child.



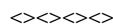
Jo lay motionless, and her sister fancied that she was asleep, till a stifled sob made her exclaim, as she touched a wet cheek...

'Jo, dear, what is it? Are you crying about Father?'

'No, not now.'

'What then?'

'My...My hair!' burst out poor Jo, trying vainly to smother her emotion in the pillow.



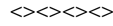
I flag down my friend in the hallway between classes and ask her to shave my head. She's listened to me complain about wanting a shaved head since we met, and agrees, smirking. Sitting on a stool in the center of her studio apartment while she runs a razor over my head and takes care to touch me as infrequently as possible, I think of all the courage it has taken me to arrive here. I walk into her bathroom to look in the mirror and an involuntary "Oh my god!" catapults out of my mouth.

"Is that a good 'oh my god?'" she asks, hesitant.

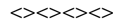
This is what I was always supposed to look like, I think.

"Yeah," I say, running my hand over the fresh stubble of my scalp. "I've just never seen myself like this. I love it. Thank you."

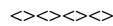
I leave her apartment three hours later and the moment I hear my own door latch shut, I start to hyperventilate. I calm my breathing, but still cry. My hair is gone. This is what I have always wanted, but now, there is nowhere left to hide.



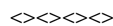
As Beth had hoped, the ‘tide went out easily’, and in the dark hour before dawn, on the bosom where she had drawn her first breath, she quietly drew her last, with no farewell but one loving look, one little sigh.



“Katherine died last night,” my father says through the first tears I ever see him cry. My nuclear family, missing one, sits on the guest bed in my grandparents’ house. The FBI is at our house, making sure my parents told the truth when they said my sixteen-month-old sister strangled herself accidentally. I know none of this. I do not know that I will one day be complete, but never again whole. I do not know there is a piece of my side that will be hollowed out for the rest of my days. I do not know that grief and loneliness are twin shadows following my every stride. All I know in this moment is that I am six, I did not go to sleep in my own house last night, my father is crying, my mother is crying, there is daylight through the window, and my world has shattered.



“You, you are, you’re a great deal too good for me, and I’m so grateful to you, and so proud and fond of you, I don’t know why I can’t love you as you want me to. I’ve tried, but I can’t change the feeling, and it would be a lie to say I do when I don’t.”



Bryce and I definitely look like we are Freshmen-Frenzy-ing in the student center, sharing every evening together, sitting in separate armchairs, too afraid to touch. We spend hours over the course of months describing the futures we wish for and realize too soon our dreams move in opposing directions. By this point in both of his older brothers’ lives, they were dating women who became wives and fiancées and he voices quiet concerns about feeling behind. He wants to marry young, settle near his hometown, and have a brood of children to adore. At this point, I don’t know that I’ll ever marry—I’m so terrified of commitment—and even if I do, I want to move to the Middle East and remain childless.

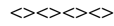
I spend a night with his family in his stoplight-less hometown, meet his high school friends, and find myself more enthralled with Bryce and more terrified of the life he wants to share.

I tell Mer that I respect him too much to waste his time by dating him, even if he makes me feel more stable than I have in years. He tells Mer that he likes me but our futures are too different. Mer tells us both we are making the right decision.

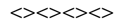
Even in our closest moments, something felt off with Bryce. I loved him dearly and yet knew that we could not be together.

I was not the woman he wanted.

I could not love him the way he deserves.



“Forgive me, dear, I can’t help seeing that you are very lonely, and sometimes there is a hungry look in your eyes that goes to my heart.”



Left alone for too long, my brain begins to loop, one phrase stuttering through my head like a TV jingle—“what about me is so fundamentally unlovable?”

I know the answer is nothing. I know I am loved. My parents and friends and professors remind me of this so often.

I’m learning that what I want is to be loved most, to be loved first. I want to be loved the way I see everyone else in my life get to. How deeply selfish that desire is, how deeply ungrateful. But I can’t shake this feeling, and it’s been long enough that I’ve stopped trying.

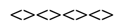
I remember all the men I could have let love me and all the reasons I gave for keeping them at arm’s length.

You’re moving across the world in two months.

I’m terrified of the commitment you’re looking for.

I just don’t feel the same way.

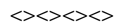
I remind myself of the people I pushed away, taking responsibility for my loneliness. I’ve had chances to fix it; I’ve turned them all down. All my reasons for doing so were sound and good but I regret now choosing my well-being over being wanted, for I no longer have either.



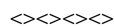
“Did you finish *Little Women*?” Leah asks about my singular plan for fall break.

“No,” I admit. “I was reading at work, but my shift ended with 25 pages left and it’s when Friedreich walks into the party and I was mad at Alcott for not giving Jo enough time to be lonely.”

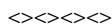
Leah laughs at me because she loves me enough to know why.



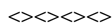
“I am lonely, and perhaps if Teddy had tried again, I might have said ‘Yes’, not because I love him any more, but because I care more to be loved than when he went away.”



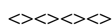
We grow so far apart that Bryce asks me to get lunch to ask my advice about wooing another woman. Honored by his honesty and savoring his vulnerability, I do not think until lunch ends about how I’ve lost forever the one person who used to be my anchor, who stayed unmoved by my wind-drift self.



A sudden sense of loneliness came over her so strongly that she looked about her with dim eyes, as if to find something to lean upon, for even Teddy had deserted her.



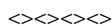
My parents, my aunt and uncle, and all my grandparents are married. My brothers are 17 months apart and best friends. My cousins are twins. At holidays, I am the extra chair pulled up to the corner of the table; there is no one to sit across from me. As a child, the adults sent me out of their conversation to find people my own age and I was met in the basement with “We don’t want to play with you because you’re a girl.” Like any 9-year-old, I resorted to the next best form of entertainment: reading the Scrabble dictionary. Ten years later, as I win every round of Bananagrams, the game that turns Scrabble into a race, and my family tries to give me special rules to slow me down, I think to myself with spiteful satisfaction: “you made me this way.” My sister is buried on my aunt’s farm. I lean on the back of the bar in her family room, glancing at everyone else sitting together on loveseats, perched on the arms of someone’s chairs, and think about my other half under a stone at the top of a hill.



Narrated by adult Jo, there is a line in my audiobook that says “in that moment, I wished I had someone to lean on, for now Laurie was no longer mine.” My chest cavity hollows hearing that sentence. There are moments where my head feels so heavy that I cannot hold it up on my own. These days, my option for sharing the weight of myself falls to the cinderblock walls nestled by my bed.

Alcott phrased it as “a sudden sense of loneliness came over her so strongly that she looked about her with dim eyes, as if to find something to lean upon, for even Teddy had deserted her.” To critique Alcott is something I am not qualified to do artistically, but I will say this: she should have ended her paragraph there, with Jo standing in the doorway watching a party go on without her. Instead, that sentence is sandwiched in the middle of a block of text and is immediately followed by the narrator hinting at some great and nearly-present joy.

Some of us are still stuck in that sentence. There is no German professor waiting for us on the next page. There are just more empty doorframes.



Some days, I see in the mirror the girl that my childhood self always wanted to be. I smile for her. I am starting to see Jo March. I am independent to a fault, get more strong-willed by the day, write like my life depends on it, and daydream about moving to New York.

But I am no longer a child. Part of growing up is losing the way you used to see the world. I understand now that to be Jo comes with great loss.

Alcott’s first draft of *Little Women* left Jo unmarried. By the time of publication, Alcott had written a wedding for Jo.

I first found myself in the published Jo March. Now, I find myself in the first draft edition of Jo, the one left entirely to her own devices. It makes sense. I, too, need polishing and sanding and re-writing.

Afterword

This project started with a stomachache. While “Stomach Bugs” touches on this in a playful way, it does not fully depict the anxiety-induced nausea that defined most of the spring semester of my junior year. Looking for some way to solidify at least one future plan, the only thing I could commit to was a senior project advisor. With that ball in motion, I kept thinking about what a senior project would look like for months, completely oblivious to the necessarily organic nature of such a task. In the fall, Dr. Housholder, after patiently listening to me list every possible theme that I could find in my work, told me to forget about the project and just go write. So I did. And then this project wove itself together naturally because I spend a lot of time writing about the same things.

My sister died when I was six, and every single piece of my work used to feature her in some way. After finally writing down the story of the 24 hours after she died, it was like I had broken the dam in my writing system and I was able to write about other things. She appears only three times in this project, though a whole poem is dedicated to the people who now live in the house where she died in the bedroom at the end of the hall. Part of developing my voice as a writer has been realizing that it’s okay to write about more than just the biggest things that have ever happened to me. It is not forgetting her to not mention her. While being her sister was my favorite thing I’ve ever been, I am more than just that. And I can write about it. There is meaning in the mundane, beauty in the small things. Now, I can write about my shoes and my hair and learning to ride a bike. I can find myself in my own details.

In her TEDTalk “We find each other in the details,” Olivia Gatwood stresses the importance of specificity in storytelling. She claims that “the more specific we get, the more universal a story becomes” (5:45) and that narrowing the focal point of a piece to an object or a detail brings the reader into the story in a visceral enough way that the reader makes connections between the story they are reading and their own story. Coupled with Professor Bowman’s perpetual advice to write with vivid and specific detail, I try to write about details. In “Trained Wheels,” there is an aside about making grass nests for rabbits at the bus stop to highlight how young I was without having to say it. “Upper Yewers Farm, Saturday Morning” is a collection of the small moments that make visiting my aunt and uncle so magical to me.

I have been deeply influenced by Carly Gelsinger’s essay “Believing Will Never Come Easy Again,” published in *Relief Journal* in 2018. Gelsinger tells the story of turning down a marriage proposal from a man she was not dating, and it is full of observations about faith and religion and belief. The thing that stands out most from this essay, though, is a moment when she hands the man In-N-Out napkins to blow his nose. Every time I talk with someone who has read this essay, we both mention the In-N-Out napkins. The specificity of that detail grounds the story in the here-and-now, reminds the reader that this was both a very surreal and very real experience. The napkins punctuate what would otherwise feel like a retelling, but her use of detail makes the essay feel like a remembering. I want my own work to transport my reader in such a way.

I went to high school in Bahrain, a small Middle Eastern archipelago off the coast of Saudi Arabia. For the first few years upon returning stateside, I was asked “what was it like to live there?” which is perhaps the most ineffective question to ask for anyone looking to learn anything. I learned to quip that “it was very hot and I tried very hard to pass biology” because that was true

and it is impossible to summarize three years in one-to-three sentences. I don't write about living there often. I find myself at a loss for words and feeling like I have to over-explain or capture every element of a moment from the weather to the architecture to the dust to the accents of my classmates. I wrote "my arabic" not because I was inspired to write about living in the Middle East, but because my poetry class was encouraged to play with margins and justifications. Arabic is read from right to left, so I knew that if I justified a poem that way, I wanted it to be about trying to learn that language. The lack of capitalization in this poem is intentional; there are no capital letters in Arabic. And while I tried to narrow this poem to a small moment, it still made room for the shame and insecurity that framed so much of my struggle to speak a language so foreign from my own when the only other person in my class grew up using that alphabet.

I wanted to play with formal poetry in this project, but struggle to make rhyme and meter not sound like a greeting card. "To the Residents of 1104 Columbus Circle" is successfully a villanelle, but is the limit of my formal poetry ability at this time. I chose to work primarily with free verse, but to play around with structure. "Beehive" is center justified so that the poem looks like an approximation of a beehive on the page. "Foliage, Falling" is sectioned by season, with each season consisting of three lines, one for each month, except the last stanza, because the subject of the poem and I stopped speaking that second autumn. It was a fun exercise to use such definite demarcations in poetry, since I find myself drawn to them in prose.

"First-Draft Jo" is one of my favorite and most rewarding pieces I have ever written. First drafted over a year ago, the revision process has been gradual and painful as I edited out scenes that did not serve the essay as a whole but meant something to me. I left a lot of myself on the cutting room floor. The majority of work that I have done on other pieces after drafting them is just editing at the sentence level, but wrestling with "First-Draft Jo" was truly revision. Finishing this piece was when I stopped calling myself "someone who writes" and started calling myself a writer. The love I have for Jo March is hard to overstate, and it was fun to live with her so intimately while writing. I tried several different structures to organize the stories of my own life with the passages from *Little Women*. The final version of the essay is organized in chronological order of the text, not of the events in my life. The timeline jumps around because I wanted the effect to be that *Little Women* provided structure to my life stories, not that I fit *Little Women* into my life. The former is more organic and is better suited to a literary format whereas the latter felt more forced and as if I make decisions in my life trying to be Jo March, which is not true. Part of the beauty of the essay, to me, is that I had forgotten about *Little Women* for years and revisited it just to find myself so poignantly within the pages.

With the exception of two very small paragraphs, I wrote "Headway" in one sitting on a Saturday afternoon. This piece is an extended history, certainly, but it finds itself in a very present moment. In the process of writing this afterword, I cut my own hair again. While my dad gets a chunk of this project about him, "Headway" is the only piece to interact with my mom substantially. My relationship with both of my parents is in the throes of the push-and-pull of young adulthood, but there are different ropes each one tugs. I recognize that my mom is not presented in the most favorable of lights in this project, but this is a sampling of work, not an autobiography. She cares about a lot more things than my hair, but that is the rope she chooses to tug most vocally.

Ordering this project was difficult. Some pieces, like "My Parents Ask Why I Never Tell Them Anything" and "Dear Dad," speak directly to each other, while other pieces barely whisper.

All I knew for certain was that I wanted “First-Draft Jo” to be the final piece. I could not think of a better way to end my project than with the line “I, too, need polishing and sanding and re-writing” because while this project is a highlight reel of the best pieces I’ve written over the last few years, that does not make them perfect or mean that I have reached my peak.

Balancing prose with poetry and pieces that focused on individual moments with larger stories felt practically scientific in a way that I was unaccustomed to. St. Augustine, in his work *De Musica*, argues that rhythm requires that “there must be no feet in disharmony with any other feet” (qtd. in Crossley 128). If I can take some liberty with his idea here, I wanted to ensure that there was no piece of my project that was in disharmony with any other piece. “Beehive” and “Foliage, Falling” were written about the same person so I wanted them to stay together, the pieces about my dad are at their best when the letter follows the poem, and I did not want two prose pieces in a row because the balance of prose and poetry was important; I did not want to linger too long in any genre.

There are only two fiction pieces in this project. All I have to say about that is that fiction is the most difficult genre for me to write; I often find myself uninspired and unhappy with the result. “Shrinking Violets,” however, was born of my desire to write a story where I entirely show, never tell. The most straightforward line in the piece is the opening sentence. It was an exercise in trusting my reader and ensuring that as an author I focused on the right details. I included “Oil & Water” in the project, frankly, because I felt like I should have more than one piece of fiction and it was my most recently completed story. I am not happy with it. Including it in this project is an exercise in humility and recognition of my own limits. It is clunky and rough and nowhere near a finished form. But if this project is a chart study of myself, there are still places I have yet to go. Being able to shape this story into what it needs to be is one of them.

My work as a writer has been shaped deeply by the work of others. Olivia Gatwood’s poetic voice, Louise Erdrich’s fictional texture, and Cindy House’s nonfiction honesty have all found their way into my own writing at some point. I am grateful for the concoction of inspiration that they have been. Taylor Byas’s work with the abecedarian form of poetry inspired me to start writing after a drought (and a revised version of that poem made its way into this project). My work is entirely my own, but I owe so much inspiration and aspiration to the writers who have taken this path before.

In high school, my English teacher told me that she could read a grocery list and know that I wrote it, my voice was so strong. At the time, I didn’t understand what she meant. I do now. I never had to try to find my voice, but I will always be learning to know how to use it.

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