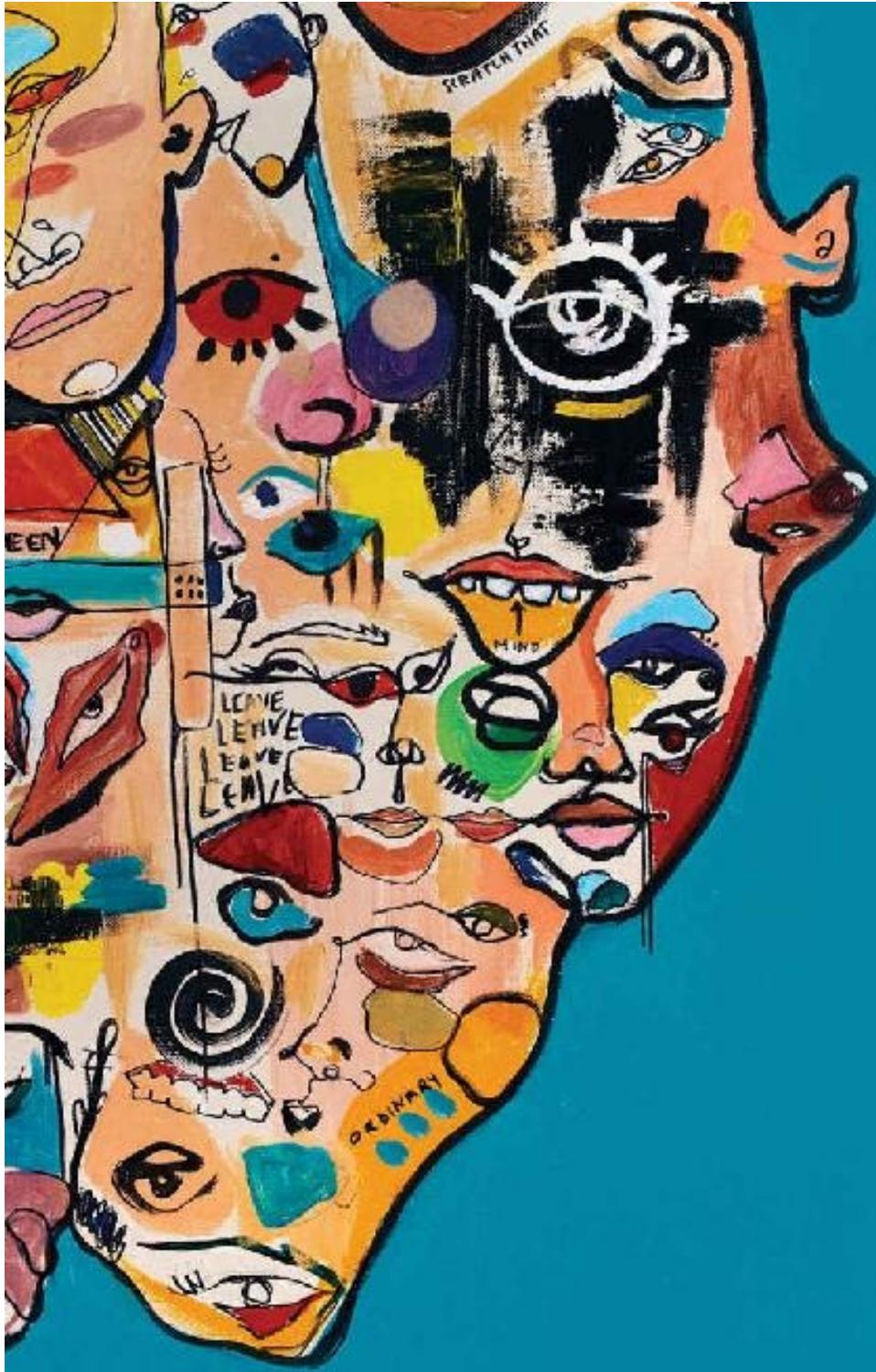


A COLLECTION OF POETRY BY HALSEY



*I WOULD LEAVE ME
IF I COULD.*



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I Would Leave Me If I Could.

A Collection of Poetry

HALSEY



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For my mother—

My favorite writing I've ever read will always be the pages of your journal I used to sneak into my room late at night. I only ever wanted to grow up and love with such a passion as you did.

For Professor Bradford—

I loved writing in your class so much that I dropped out to go love it intensely.

And for the fans—

My capacity to feel has been stretched and molded with each piece of your souls that you reveal to me. I offer this in return.

INTRODUCTION

I've been looking for a place to put these pieces.

For 25 years I have flipped spastically
from FM to AM inside my head.

I am, still,
unaffected by the abrupt static punching through my ears.
I don't mind riding along to fragments and pieces
of the different stations.

I don't mind the indecision of a Motown record
spearheaded by a metal guitar solo.

The classical arpeggio climaxing
into the blue balls of worship music.

You know the sound, right?

An indecisive radio?

I have found a home here amongst the chaos.

The constant.

Every morning the muse puts her finger in my nose.

One, then two.

Sliding into me
pornographically.

She stretches my nostrils wide
until her slimy hand crawls past my deviated septum,
in between my eyes,
and into my brain.

Exploding into a fist
when she reaches the cavity behind my temples.

The muse is bratty.

She is smug.
She wiggles her fingers around defiantly.
She displays her palm expectantly,
waiting for a present I will drop into it.
She brushes and tickles the walls of my skull.
The muse is a flirt.
She'll always tease but never put out.
Fucking bitch.

I so badly want to be liked.
Scratch that.
I want to be loved.
I want her to love me.
Scratch that.
I want her to leave.
I want her to scratch that.
Scratch that itchy itch of my swollen brain.

It's only awful 'cause the muse looks just like me.
Dirty fingernails and gummy smile.
But she sparkles the way only a beautiful woman can.

A beautiful woman is a car crash.

Shiny asphalt and smoking rubber.
Melted plastic and metal edges.
Glimmering glass shrapnel iridescence
scattered across the road.
Haphazard beauty. Dignified and slightly terrifying.

The car radio flips from AM to FM.

The doors are locked and I'm trapped inside. My head bobs against the airbag.
It's calming. Like a mother's bosom. I would imagine, at least.
My mother was full-breasted. But loudmouthed, and sarcastic, and raised her babies

out of our colic with camaraderie.

She didn't hold me close to the muffled beating of her heart beneath a department-store sweater.

She didn't breastfeed.

The nature and nurture in my sternum are arguing now.

My shoulders are held together by two rubber bands pulled tight in a schoolboy's hands.

Sometimes I feel like my spine will unfold and explode like a jack-in-the-box doll. I can't carry all this weight, so I must put it somewhere and somewhere is with you. You will take good care of it?

I want to walk away from my bones and set them down on a counter like my keys after work.

Let my skin sink into the armchair and lose its shape. Lose its form. Collapse into a sigh.

I see all things in this world as more beautiful than I, and I spin the details of their atoms in every paragraph and brushstroke.

I wish I had 11 hands with 55 fingers so I could paint and write and fuck and feed and grab grab grab everything.

I. Want. It. All.

It must be mine.

I want to walk away from the burgundy bags under my eyes and the periwinkle veins in my hands.

I hope you'll stay.

I hope you'll stay.

But I would leave me too, if I could.

DUE DATE

I was born 5 weeks early.
I couldn't wait
to join the rest of the world,
and that is
exactly
the moment
my enthusiasm ceased.
The nurses tried to take me so my
"mother could sleep."
But she refused to let me go.
I'm sure ultimately,
I ended up
in a common room for newborns.
And I'm sure ultimately,
I lay there comparing myself to the other babies.
Wondering if I were as smart as they were.
Or as funny.
Or as beautiful.
The average baby weighs 8 pounds.
I weighed 5.
The average baby is 20 inches long.
I was 14.
And it was on my first day on Earth
that I realized I didn't measure up,
and I never would.

I WANT TO BE A WRITER!

It is not a want.

It is not a wish.

It's simple.

A demon waiting
at the foot of your bed
to grab your ankles while you sleep.
It's a gnat burrowing into your ear
and laying eggs behind the socket of your eye.
It's sitting in your own filth for days,
staring at the shower across the room
while minutes become hours.

It's six months since you've talked to your dad,
And whining like an infant to your lover
begging to be spit-shined
like a piece of silverware,
"I have given so much to the page,
please tell me I am not worthless."

It is not a desire.

It is a clenched jaw and an aching back and a disposition to spite everything around
you.

To find the world not worthy of your words,
and to find yourself unworthy of the world.

It is towering arrogance that says,
"Let these passages be free
in an existence that will cherish and worship them."

It is a terrible self-loathing
that sends your teeth sinking into your lips.

It's a gut pushed out
and shoulders slumped
and a sneaking suspicion
that everything you see is altered through your gaze.

They cry,
"But I WANT to be a writer!"
And my head hangs.

You are asking to be shot square in the head.
You know not what you seek.
You ask for bleeding brains
and carnage that stains your pillowcase.
You ask for jelly
in the place of the cartilage in your spine.
You ask for kindness that is never returned.
You wish to burn alive
in the flame of a love unrequited.

It's simple.
Write.

HOMEMAKER

listen to that
cool
cool
water run
never been good at being alone
say "hello holy father.
where's your daughter?
she could make this house a home."

you got a
new
new
closet
never been good at savin' cash.
chrome on the faucet
and you bossed it.
i've never seen you on the counter before.

listen to that
cold
cold
winter blow
never had time for absolutes.
new steam shower
for the powder.
his-and-her sinks
but
just
for

you.

you got a brand-new bedroom.
a clean set of sheets I've never seen.
thread count's pricey,
for your wifey.
i know she don't make the bed like me.
never seen a Persian rug look so homely
never heard a sadder voice
than when you phone me.
are you lonely?
you said it's time for some renovations.
time for conversation.
but I flipped houses
bigger than you before.

enjoy the silence
in your kitchen.
been watering all these plants
made of plastic
and you think they'll grow.

homemaker.
shiny new things but they're all for show.

SUMMER FRUIT

I spent springs and summers
as a child
eating the fruit from a watermelon.

Grainy sugar bites
and juice slick up my cheeks
like a Chelsea smile.

My mother used to warn me
if I swallowed a seed
it would get stuck in my belly
and grow a watermelon plant.
My stomach would expand
till I'd combust.
I always spit them out
in horror.

I spent a spring and summer
eating the fruit
from the flesh of your lips.
The bounty of two round mounds,
hard like pink sugar.
Your grip on my cheeks
with a firm hand
holding my mouth open.

To drop seeds into my belly.
To spit a virus in my throat
that grew into a giant "you" plant.
The bunnies

THE BRANCHES

crawling up the walls of my insides
and begging
to claw my mouth open
and make me say things I don't mean.

The dying leaves
flaking off
and swaying to the pit of my stomach
in an imaginary breeze
landing with a deafening thump.

Echoes that bounce up between my teeth.

And remind my tongue there is no more watermelon.

Just empty space.

YOU WERE FIRST

So many men who came before you
So many women, one-night stands
I guess I found it easier
For me to charm a man
'Cause a woman always crumbled in my hands.

Could only act on what I knew.
Was raised to earn it that way too.
I guess I found it easier
to split men at the seams
At least that's what I learned in magazines.

All this
soft skin, soft eyes
All these
Beautiful laughs and beautiful thighs
Always kept me up at night
The truth is I was terrified.

Pink lips, warm curves
All these
Wonderful aching shaking nerves
Heart like it's about to burst
The truth is you were first.

I AM ANGRY BECAUSE OF MY FATHER

I am angry because of my father.
Because he would come home
Wrinkled from work,
And slam the door so hard
the house would shiver.

I am angry because of my father.
Because his furrowed brow
Repeats itself in my Punnett square
And opens the curtains
On my forehead.

I am angry because of my father.
I can hold a grudge like it's a hand.
I throw my watch on my nightstand.

I am a worthless smudge
On the floor, in the rug
In the kingdom of the almighty
God who will judge
Me as hard as She can,
'Cause I won't love a man
Unless he is angry
Because of my father.

LAYERS

Thank you
for stumbling
across the universe
with your confident swagger
and tripping right into my lap.
Wild hair spilling across your eyelids
and nestling into my mouth
with my kiss on your forehead.
Thank you for the freckles on your nose
that keep me
star-crossed,
starry-eyed,
and then cross-eyed
when I'm lying underneath you
and I look up at your darling face.
You're made of everything good in this world.
Syrup-sweet and paining my teeth
dripping from my lips
like honey
from the bees buzzing in my head
driving me crazy, daily,
with the sounds of your voice
echoing through my skull
and the halls of my house
still ringing
from the last time you were here,
the last time it was a home.
Thank you for warming the industrial gray

-Carmen Maria Fracalanza

or my concrete foundation
and turning my bones
from cement blocks
to rich mahogany wood.
Layers.

INVENTORY

He told me
about the women
he had slept with
when we were apart.

He was honest.

And I had asked for it.

He told me stories
decorated with leather
and violence
and anal.

Girls

who relaxed in sweet drunken smiles
and enveloped him in warmth.

Lazily tumbling
through bedsheets,
glowing in the acid hue
of the outside lights.

Girls

who wouldn't ask him
to pick up his dirty socks.
Or turn away from him
on a shared mattress.

Girls

who weren't sad and tired.

Girls

better than me.

Who had learned to turn their trauma
into adventures

Girls who were better than me.

for him to stumble blindly through.

Instead of wallowing
in their brokenness
and breaking everything
in their path
as penance.

BATTLES

Been biting my tongue till it bleeds
cry over things I don't need.

My mother told me
pick your battles wisely
but you made me angry
at the world
so I chose them all.

MEMORIZE

I'm a boyish
mess.

A boasting contest
with an inferiority
complex.

I can't make friends.

I've got an
eager desperation
to be up on
"what's next."

I have too much
sex.

I say it's 'cause

I'm anxious
and I'm

overly stressed.

I can't take blame.

I funnel through
liquor

and spit up my pain.

I'm no good
with fame.

There's a love/hate
relationship

with noise
in my brain.

Except
for when

-----1-----

you speak my name.
Because you take it in vain.
(Take it in vein!)
I could fall asleep
here.
Crawl inside
the sleeping bags
under your eyes.
But I stay
awake
to memorize.

STOCKHOLM SYNDROME PT. 1

I remember
how the sky looked.
Your lips made my mouth numb.
Your face
grew closer to her neck.
It's easy to play dumb.

I remember
all the chaos.
The frantic, nervous sounds.
I don't remember much,
though,
once I hit the ground.

Everything went black.
Everything got cold.
I'm standing
on a sidewalk,
screaming,
"Over my dead body!"

I remember
tender spiderwebs.
All violet,
yellow,
blue.
It seems with one eye open,
still all I see is you.

I guess there was no sequel...

I guess there was no casualty
that could make you refuse.

I hide

behind a strangled mind.

You tell me,

“Winners never lose.”

A hostage situation.

I know I should,

but I can't leave

you

all alone

somewhere.

I know you don't,

but I still care.

This Stockholm syndrome
might just be the death of me.

WISH YOU THE BEST

I hope every single day you put your socks on backward

I hope you cry at night
and can't call me after

I don't hope that you'd die;
just live to 75

And you spend every waking moment
Wishing you felt alive.

I hope that some girl takes a picture
of your sleeping body.

Wish you could go a single week
and not hurt anybody.

I hope your coffee every morning
is bitter and cold.

I hope you're busy Christmas morning
and you miss the snow.

I hope your team loses the finals
I mean they already lost the finals
But the next one

And I hope that you scratch up all of your vinyls.

Hope you drive 80 miles

In your expensive car,
and run out of gas
in the wild.

I hope your knees ache
and your back hurts,

hope you lose your second phone
or can't remember the password.

I hope every girl unites and they decide you're a joke

But I wish you were never here in the first place

but if they are anything like you
then I know that they won't
'Cause their self-esteem levels are fatally low.

So you bury your pain inside them
after the show.

I hope your brother turns out to be nothing like you.

Hope another year passes
and you hurt even more than I do.

Used to live up the street from you
but since then I moved.

My new house is clean
and the sky's always blue.

I sing in the shower
and I walk around naked.

I love my whole body
though you once made me hate it.

I eat lots of pancakes
and drown them in honey.

I've made lots of handshakes
and made lots of money.

I smile and sigh when I crawl into bed
'Cause there's no more scar tissue
inside my head.

I heard what you're up to

I'm glad that I left.

I feel like myself again deep in my chest.

Signed:

Sincerely,

Ashley

I wish you the best.

THE QUESTION

I stand before the mirror
and examine my breasts.
protruding forth from my chest
and demanding kindness, free
ice cream, and violence.
my speckled face, freckled pale
brown like organic eggs,
flushes pink.
my eyebrows unkempt
and short hair untidy at the crown.
I grip my buttocks.
dissatisfied.

I chase the paradox around my head.
The filmy, sticky grain of
femininity slides across my skin.
It twinkles in every stare
and as my weight shifts from hip
to hip, I'm gliding as I walk.
My clenched jaw,
my small lips,
my broad shoulders
like an adolescent boy.
I worship at the altar of
femininity in the women who
suckle the lavender from my breath.
It poses nothing to me
but a question
to which I do not have the answer.

I MET A MIND READER.

I have not seen the Sun in 7 days.

I have seen Frankfurt,

Oslo,

Copenhagen,

Reykjavík,

Helsinki.

5 countries

and 1 planet.

Just Earth.

No stars.

Just clouds.

And no Sun...

Earth is bleaker in the dark.

The gray hazy dark.

The upside-down and sleepless dark.

Not the romantic kind

that fills the gaps in between city lights

and candlelit dinners

and moonlight bouncing off of crystal glasses

filled with champagne, lipstick-stained.

I sat on an old bus,

packed in like crowded teeth in a young mouth,

and I saw a little girl.

She frowned at me.

I began to panic.

They say children can sense dread.

This is the first child who hasn't smiled

when I cast a glance in their direction.
Has my heart,
once so full of love,
finally drained itself like a yellow raisin?
Will the children begin to notice?
She looks at me quizzically and smiles.
Kicks her feet
and then shakes her head no.
As if to answer my question.
I met a mind reader. Aged 4 or 5.
I have seen light burst forth from a magic eye.
From a heart more wholesome than mine.
Astronomic miracles, in an unfathomable form.
But I still haven't seen the Sun.

THE TOURIST

I quite like how these jeans
Look hanging
'round your knees
And I love your dirty sneakers
When you kick them
off your feet

I'd really like to find
The place
between your eyes
Where I kiss you on the forehead
And make you smile
every time

I'm struggling to place
My favorite
freckled space
Between your hair,
hung
like a telephone wire
Swinging
'cross your face

And right now you're inside
My favorite studio
on Vine
Complaining
'bout a violin's
Misrepresented whine

And I can't wait to take you home
Where I can have you
all alone
And overanalyze each part of you
I've written
in my phone

See,
I've started taking down
All of my favorite
little sounds
That waltz around you
in 3 quarter notes
With each word you pronounce

It kills me that you'll leave
Off in a jet
over the sea
But I hope the air in California
Will forever
taste of me.

ONANISM

The corner of my childhood bed.
A stuffed bear, color: cherry red.
A toothbrush motorized inside.
A 15-mile dirt bike ride.
A pair of socks, balled up real tight.
A hot tub jet, alone at night.
Your kneecap, cased in denim jeans.
Victoria's Secret magazine.
16 years of bubble baths,
a showerhead that can detach.
A pointed toe,
a cramping calf.
Disgusted in the aftermath.

THE PARTY

Your tongue is in my mouth in the kitchen at the party.

Why the fuck am I at the party?

My dress is too tight for you to get your hands under,
but I left my panties at home tonight
and I'm dripping down my thighs.

My lipstick is smeared and there are people
probably staring
but fuck them anyway.

It's been a year and a half
of throwing glances in hallways,
and my hair standing on every end when you appear
and breathe down my neck
(so tell me, how the fuck I'm supposed to keep my cool)

So we leave for one night and it turns into five mornings.

Waking up and staying in bed for a couple extra hours
so I can see what color your eyes are
in that special light we only see at 6 a.m.

That silver peeking through the cracks
around your blackout shades
and bouncing off your brown eyes
that send me into a fully caffeinated rush.

Like they're soaked in coffee grinds
and I can see the steam rising off of their surface
when your gaze sets me on fire.

So we turn up the heat again.

And your sweat is dripping off your chest

and your open fist is around my neck
and I'm grinding into your lap,
rocking my hips against your weight
to match the ins and outs of your breathing.
(Can you tell that this is the pattern I'm following?
Your breathing quickens...)
Your teeth are in my skin
and you're pulling fibers of tissue from my lips and I wonder,

If I bleed, will you like the taste?

Now we're driving down the highway
and my head is in your lap.
Tasting the salt of your skin
and feeling you grow in my mouth
and the hum of the engine
is like a million fingertips between my legs.
There are people passing by in their cars unaware
and unassuming
but I'm praying they'll look over and watch me worship you.
Watch me work
to assure
that there is not a single millimeter of space in my mouth
that isn't filled.
Your hair falls out of place
and you clutch the wheel
and press your belt into my cheek.

I hope it leaves a mark.
And days later my tongue feels
like it doesn't fit in my mouth the same without you in it.

It's your laugh, and your calculating eyes.
Your wrinkled brows and the static in your grin
when you can't think of the right words to say

when you can't think of the right words to say
and I know it frustrates you
because words are the only thing
you've ever had total control over.
It's the feeling in my stomach
like the moment
you drop a scoop of ice cream
into a root beer float
and the entire thing threatens to bubble over.
Carbonated
and chaotic
in my chest.

It's the sheer comfort.
You're as vibrant as a stranger,
but as warm as a friend.
Like every day
I get reintroduced to someone I've known my whole life.
Like meeting myself in a mirror.
The way you take over my entire body
and mind
like you're putting your own personal filter over the lens of my life
so that I see it in your colors.
And my hands shake
and I swallow hard
when I realize how much nicer life looks in your saturation.
My brain buzzing
like the rattle of a neon light
at odd hours of the night
when I'm pacing
and wringing my hands,
counting the days till I see your face again.
And the irony in how fine life seemed before.
How quickly you made it seem like

nothing
would ever suffice
without you,
a part of it.

Why the fuck was I at the party?

THE BREAKUP

There is no combination of words in the English language,
that slice right between your teeth
with the perfect paradox of hate and love,
the same way as
“I love you,
like a brother.”

THE PROFESSIONAL

I am currently seeking employment.

I am a professional holiday girlfriend.

I have great references

and highly impressive past work experiences.

I have been featured in 7 family holiday photos:

—6 Christmases

—and 1 Hanukkah.

Specialties include

my “famous brownies.”

I will:

—do the dishes

—look through baby photos with your mother

—have a long list of baby names to suggest

for the child we will never have

but your grandmother will pitifully dream about us having
before she dies.

I have:

—plenty of clean, respectable dresses

—drinking games to impress your cousins.

World-class gift giver

and wrapper

(it’s easier to nail it

when you only ever have to give one gift).

In one particularly extraordinary history,

I made a baby blanket from scratch

for a relative who was expecting.

I will never complain

about missing my family’s festivities

C.....

for your own,
and I will accept contract termination by spring.

I am 5'4"

with a perfectly straight smile

(dental records included,

no history of braces)

and I will fill any empty space

in your family photo.

Please respond before autumn.

LULLABYE

sweet thing,
you hang like
a chain
around my neck
like a beesting
in August
in your hollow pain
I sweat
hollowed
we wed
I've gone cross-eyed
and tongue-tied
at the prospect
of your lips.
like a plaid-skirt-fitted virgin
with the devil on my hips
I'd melt like a mint
in the heat of your mouth.
like a hurricane in a dress shirt
headed angry
down south
I would give anything
to be slipping
down your throat.

VIRUS

I once had a fever so high,
I was left to my bed for 7 days.
There was a man,
Standing on my mattress with a shovel
Lifting chunks out of it angrily.
He wiped his brow and his sweat
Collected in the divots of my blanket
And made a little pond.
A scum pond,
With talking frogs and lily pads.
The pond grew deeper as the man dug harder and sweated.
I was drowning.
A goldfish swam up my throat and flopped around in my mouth.
I clenched my jaw and tossed and turned in the scum pond.
White and gray algae blinding me,
And filling my nose with fuzzy mold.
I tried to scream and retrieve the fish from the back of my mouth.
I was choking.
I tried to kick, but the man was standing on my legs.
His weight was too much to bear
And I feared that shovel would dismount onto my head
And split my skull if I provoked him any more.
I tried to yank the fish out again but it struggled.
It attached its jaws to the opening of my throat and it would not budge.
I yanked.
And I screamed.
And my mother came rushing into the room, tripping over her feet.

I was trying to rip out my tongue.

~~She fixed my blankets.~~

She fixed my blankets.

She stroked my hair that stuck to me like cotton candy dissolving in water.

I wanted to cry but feared I'd fill the pond again.

When my fever broke, I realized the man and the fish were all a dream,

And so was she.

LIKELY AS THE RAIN

I've always liked it
when it's sunny and warm.
You like it cold
'cause you're from the north.
Now I'm sitting by a window
watching rain fall down

...in California.

Looks like you always seem
to get what you want.
Even when it goes against
the natural odds.
'Cause it's 7 in the morning
and my bathroom's flooding
hard...

I never knew
what made you do what you do.
Tuck me into bed
and then you sneak off to
be somewhere with another
who's more like your mother
and doesn't expect as much of you.

An anomaly.
I'm not like you and you're not like me,
or how we used to be.

You know what they say.

the all-consuming rage
and unbearable shame,
of you losing me,
was as likely as the rain.

WATERMELON

He loves to bring me watermelon.
Spits in my mouth, seeds.
To grow inside my stomach like
A thing that begs to feed

I lick his lips from watermelon,
Spread across my cheeks.
And that pink sugar Chelsea smile
Is hiding underneath.

Now I devour watermelon,
Bouncing on his knee.
I rock my body back and forth,
So he can feel the heat.

I'm dripping like a watermelon,
Soaking through my seat.
I bite my lip and suckle on
The words between my teeth.

And oh the taste of watermelon,
Subtle but it's sweet.
I kneel down on the wooden floor
And beg him to proceed.
He fills my mouth with watermelon.
No one hears me scream.
To overdose on sugar is more
Painful than it seems.

My tummy hurts from watermelon.

He can be so mean.

But smiles like a gentleman

And licks my body clean.

And when there is no watermelon,

Only vicious weeds,

He puts his fingers in his mouth

To taste the way I bleed.

Now all I crave is watermelon,

Every time I leave.

BLUBBER

You went and caught a whale for me
Seven hundred days at sea
You cut him up in chunks
real neat
Turned him into kerosene

You said it was a present
You told me
to close my eyes
You tied me to a metal chair
And opened up
my thighs.

You rubbed me down in Vaseline
and pressed your body
up
against
me
You soaked me down
in gasoline
Lit me up
And then discarded me.

You said you'd always love me
from my
head
to my
toes
And then

All at once
you loved me to a little death.

PUSSY

Beautifully folded salmon sweater
Cashmere sleeves and slouching turtleneck
I want to slide inside
and feel the hairs on my arms
stand on end
Silver threads and white cotton
spilling from the seams
Japanese pink ginger
toffee and coffee taffy
Velveteen ear of a baby deer
Wrap around me like a ball python
swallow me whole
like a blind baby mouse
cinnamon in the swings
sour peach candy rings
Sweet surprise
She's open wide.
I follow like a moth to the bulb to fry.

THE MIRROR

I'm pulling
funny faces
in the mirror,
wiping down
the glass
so I see clearer.

I'm trying
to feel safe
inside.

My body
doesn't feel
like mine.

I look at who I am.
I think I fear her.

BAD DAY: 1

I'm sorry
I'm having another bad day.
My bones are creaking
And my eyes leak
Like a broken faucet.

My mind is a bullet train
And I can't stop it.

I'm stuck in the middle of an avalanche and I'm not moving.

These things they come and go,
and I mean half of everything I tell you.
I'm half of everything I hate,
and half of anything I create
is you too.
So I start to hate the music when I hate you.

EIGHT

There was a mailman
I loved as a little girl.
He would stop at the communal mailbox
On the street
In the center of the apartment complex
And begin sorting mail away
Into 150 different little boxes
We lived in 1202
I would rush from my house
To greet the mailman
And he would talk to me as he worked
Filing away bills and cards and coupons
He would ask me questions
Quiz me
And give me a piece of Bazooka gum
For every question I got right
I would spin around and crush my sneakers
rocking up and down on my toes
I would curl one piece of hair
Around my finger while I thought of the answers
I would slide my tongue between my teeth
and the windows where they were missing
And between every mailbox
The mailman would look at me and smile
He'd pat me on the cheek
And tell me
That I was as smart as he was.
As smart as any man.

^

And I believed him.

Because why wouldn't I?

I was 8.

I knew that George Bush would win the election.

I knew the Pythagorean theorem.

I read 300 books from the public library

And I could draw every animal by memory.

I liked him 'cause he gave me chewing gum

And talked to me in his low voice

Calm and soft

Not the shrill, high-pitched voice

They would use on my baby brother.

One day the mailman didn't show up for work

I ran out and stopped in my tracks

There was a different man there

I asked if my friend was sick

The imposter ignored me

The new mailman showed up a few days in a row

The kids in the neighborhood said

The old one had a heart attack in a bowl of spaghetti

And died with noodles up his nose

I cried

One Wednesday I ran out to the new mailman

And asked if he had any gum

He told me to stay away

Because he didn't want to get in trouble like Charlie

I didn't know my friend's name was Charlie

And I didn't know how I could have gotten him in trouble

So I asked my mom

How you could give someone a heart attack

And she rubbed her head

and stretched her feet across the couch and said,

"It feels like you're gonna give me one right now."

I didn't want my mom to die too.

So I hid in my room

And I cried

Because I was 8

And a murderer.

IS THERE SOMEWHERE ELSE?

You arrive late.
Half-smile on your face.
Your tongue is thick,
I love the taste.
“Welcome to my new place.”

Haven't seen you in a year,
you come out of your skin.
You're tripping on your sneakers,
beg I let you in.
I say,
“Where have you been?”
You answer,
“Where do I begin?”

You're coming early.
I mean this
figuratively.
Demeanor is cautious.
Unprovocative.
You're still
so fucking talkative.

“Haven't told you in a while,
but you're the reason for it all.
You're a vital complication
I never seem to resolve.”
I say,
“Why all this silence?”

You answer,
“Mind’s been so violent,
a tyrant.”

You’re boring me
with stories
of your unproductive glory.
You say the only thing
as good as that
was me.

I put you in my bed
again.
I take you down
like medicine.
Revisit the same old
regimen.
Just substitute
the gentleman.

WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

I am not allowed to want to die anymore.
Believe me, I have tried.

TONGUE TWISTER

Peter Piper
picked
a peck
of people
he could utilize.
Built
a better
batch
of music they could advertise.
But Peter
never learned the way
that people compromise.
His only method to communicate
was to harmonize.
He never
ever
spoke a word
when we were feuding.
Major to minor
like the color of a mood ring.
I only liked him
when he'd play me something soothing.
Could understand him perfectly
if he did it while producing.
Emotions come and go,
they're either lovely
or abusing.
Maybe that's the reason

..11

all my records are confusing.
We met in a studio and I couldn't break the silence
'cause he was raised
a Socialist
and I was raised on violence.
I had to be the best
and he was fine with trying.
Sometimes he built me up,
sometimes I was declining.
We got an apartment in a valley,
it was low enough.
Just like the song,
but we were far away from blowing up.
We fought like animals
and did the same when
making love.
I know that it seems crazy
but I really couldn't make it up.
The only time that it was easy was in transit.
I'm quiet in a car
'cause I was on another planet.
Felt like he didn't listen
and I couldn't understand it.
It was more than different languages.
I took it all for granted.
The summer killed me,
skin was crawling,
couldn't stay still.
A suicide
inside my body
(went onstage still).
I hear it echo
through the arena,
"Du er

et minne.”

AMERICAN WOMAN

My insecurity
hurting me
all these boys gonna flirt with me
But my head down
on a mattress
famous actress
and she skrrrt'n me.
There's too much space
between her skirt
and
me.
"Let's take some tabs of acid
at Lake Placid,"
I say certainly.
Still too afraid to touch her
but it's
urgin' me.
She says, "You're staring
and quite frankly
shit is irking me."
I'm feeling hatred from the waitress as she's serving me
She thinks I'm spoiled
probably thinks I'm some suburban me.

Thinks I'm a child of a
Money-hungry
Prideful country
Grass is green
And is always sunny

Hands all bloody
Tastes like honey
But we're finding it hard to leave.
I got no space in my memory
Just some pics
of a friend and me
I got a mailbox
and a mansion
But no letters that you send to me
That house has haunted me for centuries
Should take a rock
and throw it at the windows
but they bend for me
I want to break some.
Ache some.
Feel like I'm awake some.
Meet with all my issues
And then
finally
handshake 'em.
And eventually when you tell me
all the reasons that you're leaving me
I have to hide them
so the people still believe in me.

THE FUNERAL

I finally killed my pride.
I saw you yesterday
and felt a funeral inside.
Like someone I love died,
and they asked if I wanted to see the body.

I know it won't be the same.
It will hurt me so badly
I'll choke on your name.
But how could I let this go?
I love you more than I love anybody.

This must be a nightmare
it couldn't be a dream.
I'll watch you in the shower
I'll rub all your limbs clean.
I'll rinse off all the wounds we caused
when we were being mean.
I'll dry you off and hold you
and kiss you in between.

Your friends will all be happy
and mine will wonder why.
Your mother will start to worry
why you made your lover cry.
My father will be angry
and you'll be left
alone.

HEREDITARY

I don't look much like my mother

But I know my kid
will look just like me.

With eyes that gleam
and razor teeth,

And Jordan 1s
on two little feet.

I'm impatient
and passive-aggressive
compulsive
obsessive

But mostly poetic

I'm whatever I've seen
on a movie screen

I grew up banging
on a pinball machine

I spent a lifetime
trying to wake up
and be mean.

But I will
never

believe

That I belong to the side
with the guillotine.

(You should eat the rich
Even if that includes me)

I still run
on gasoline

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but my insides

are gooey

Like gelatine

I've got:

1. Cellophane in the place of a windowpane
2. A mixtape where I used to keep my brain
3. Daydreams running like an Amtrak train

I'm sunbathing in the door of an aeroplane.

Imagine if I weren't always busy all the time.

I would love to get a tan line

and call you from a landline

and maybe

hold

your

hand,

crash-land

In a land mine.

DRAMA QUEEN

Can you hear the silence of being alone?
The deafening stillness
of everything you've ever known?
Put on pause like a VHS tape
A full-on heartbreak
And you whine
and cry
and it echoes through the static of a television set.

Can you see the darkness of this void?
Bewildering emptiness of knowing that he had a choice?
Pause
like a checked cassette tape
An empty slate
And you scream and cry and it shakes
through the static of the radio waves.

Can you feel the fabric of being alone?
The rush against your skin
that vibrates all along your bones?
Pause like a broken zipper
A sterling silver whisper
And you shake and shiver from a velvet shimmer
(will you pull it down just a sliver?)

Loneliness never made for a good song
You've been singing on your own
all along
Writing records in your bedroom

since 15

Drama queen

Well you're older now it seems

Loneliness never made for a movie

No blockbuster Oscar, no silver screen beauty

Behind a Technicolor lens since 19

Drama queen

Well you're older now it seems

Why is everyone so mean?

TERTIARY

Peach clean
on a silver screen
He goes lime green
at the thought of me
He's got big dreams
like you can't believe
Been mean
since 23

Dark blue
like a deep lagoon
3 girls
in a hotel room
Missed calls
ringing to the tune
of dark tones
in your attitude

Soft gold
like a centerfold
He's got
no taste for the rock and roll
He's so
uptight and I'm no control
No reason to let it grow

Chartreuse like an aging bruise
He speaks
soft words but it's still abuse

I forget
when you sweet-seduce
We're in love
but it's no excuse

Tell me nothing changes when you leave me
But I been making changes, please believe me.

TELLTALE

I think it's for the best
if I should open up my chest
and mail the contents to your hotel room
to wake you while you rest.

BAD DAY: 2

I'm sorry
I'm having another bad day.
I'll yell and scream
and tell you things
like "I hate you."

My mind is the only place
where I can take you on.

I'm stuck in the middle of the ring, but I can't fight today.

These things they come and go
and I mean half of everything I tell you.
I'm half of everything I hate,
and half of anything I create
is you too.
So I start to hate the painting when I hate you.

TORNADO

I can feel it burn in my nose.
I can feel the tears swell
like raindrops in the corners of my eyes
until they get so fat
they threaten to slide down my face.
My fingers graze your arm
and I can feel little electric volts
wrapping up and around my wrists
like a spiral staircase
like a static handcuff
holding my hand hostage to your skin.
I can feel my heart climb into my throat
and curl up on the carpet
with its head between its knees,
to hide from the
beat
Beat
beating loud
like a thunderstorm outside.
I can taste the salt of your sweat
on the roof of my mouth.
I can remember the taste
like it's still on my lips
even when I am 3,000 miles away.
In my head,
I replay a mixtape of your laughter
sounding off from my phone
and I call you every 20 minutes.

I will hold your hand till my fingers are cold
and bluer than a Picasso
till the blood has left them.
I will kiss your head
and rub your shoulders
and bring you ease and ecstasy
till your foggy head stops ringing like a car alarm.
I will wipe every tear.
(I like everything about you,
even the things you give away.
Like tears
and laughs
and yawns
and lost eyelashes.)
I will be there when the sun comes up,
curled in your lap
shivering
rubbing my eyes and smiling softly.
I will listen to the same sad songs
over
and over
and over again
till they vibrate in my skull
when the volume ceases.
I love the sun for shining on your skin,
I love the wind for blowing through your hair,
I love the coffee for staining your teeth
and warming your palms in the morning.
I would protect you till the end of time.
I would lie down
in the middle of a tornado
and cover you.

and bleeding sores
leaking yellow-orange pus,
from him reopening the wounds
he had burnt into his airways.
He would pace the room in circles,
with his T-shirt sticking to him
in a cold sweat,
and cry.
A cry full of pain and loathing
that twisted his face
like pottery on an unmanned wheel.
He would punch himself in the head,
banging his fist
against his forehead
and temple
until his fingers
full of rings
left pictures on his skin,
and his knuckles burst open.
He would put his bleeding hand around my neck
and press me against the wall.
His eyes would flicker back to life
like a film projector malfunctioning
in a pitch-black cinema,
and before the title card ran,
he would stare
at the space between my eyebrows,
too cowardly to make eye contact,
and say,
“I’m going to fucking kill you.”
And I would believe him.
So I would take his hand
off of my neck gently,
and wrap my arms around his head

like I was cradling a newborn
and stroke his hair
and whisper that it would be okay
and again
he would cry
that Siren's cry
like a warning to all ships at sea.
We'd resign into a damp bed,
and his knuckles would stick to the sheets
as the blood dried
and clotted
and scabbed
and I would lie awake as he slept
snoring through his coagulated nostrils.
I would stare at the ceiling,
too afraid to let a single tear escape
lest the subtle movement
be enough to wake him
from his docile state.
When he was sleeping,
he looked beautiful.
Like an old Hollywood star.
And with his eyes shut,
and the Siren scream no longer sounding off
from his slack mouth
in the master bedroom
detached from the home,
I became a lighthouse.
Dim glow beaming from my eyes,
a man in my arms,
kerosene running low in the tower.
Praying the gods would unleash their fury
and send waves so strong

they'd crash through the hills of California.
And the ground would collapse
and bury us both in the rubble.

THE PAINTER

My aunt had a tenant
who lived in a one-floor addition above her unit.
He had a fat red face and a heavy brow
and an accent that sent splinters underneath your fingernails.
He was a painter
who specialized in pointillism portraits of cherub boys
with Fuji-apple-red cheeks, dimples, and ivy leaves between their legs.
Hours of detail and perfectionism spent focusing his attention on every little inch of
their baby skin and baby limbs.
My aunt hung one in her house that I would find myself staring at.
Half intrigued by his talent and other times to sit in the stillness of the stirring in my
chest as if I were looking at something forbidden.
I dreamt about his studio often.
Sometimes the screen door would hang open and the smell of oil paints and
turpentine and expensive ink pens would waft down the stairs.
On hot summer days I would lie in my tank top and shorts,
my tight curls tangling themselves like a frayed rug edge in a washing machine.
I would stretch across the carpet with cheap pastels and printer paper and draw girls.
Mostly faeries.
Naked and freckled with long straight flowing hair.
I drew what I wanted to be, and what was forbidden to me.
I wondered if all artists did the same.
I would lie there and the fragrance of his studio would travel beneath the door
through the crack where the draft came through in the winter.
I was never allowed in the painter's studio.
It was a dream that was separated from me by a dark staircase that bled into oblivion
like a nightmare where you couldn't move.
My eldest cousin strictly forbade me to enter the dark chasm.

~~~~~

I never saw him look the painter in the eye.

The staircase to the studio loomed like a stranger in a subway station.

It was a yawning fissure that I believed, if I could simply cross,

I would become a real artist too.

My family fought about the painter.

I would hide under the table in the spare room, while angry voices took the shape of shadows and bounced off the tile in the kitchen. I heard some strangers' names.

We didn't know much about the painter,

But we knew he had 3 children.

An older daughter named Rebecca who was born addicted to heroin, with longing coursing through veins that couldn't recognize what was absent from her new life.

Too young to understand why she had an erratic aching wound in her heart.

We knew his other two children were about my age.

But they never came around.

One day I was playing in the yard alone.

Kicking pebbles with my Skechers and pacing between the broken basketball hoop and the fence that curtained my aunt's dead-end road from a used-car lot, he called to me from the roof.

He was working in vanilla-ice-cream-colored dickies, covered in haphazard smears of color, and holding 2 dirty glasses of sweet tea, and invited me upstairs.

So with the conviction of a child exploring terrain formerly unavailable to her,

I accepted the invitation and began the approach up the stairs.

This would be it.

I would burst through the door and run my fingertips across the glossy tubes of oil, and feel the brush hairs separate and fan out across my palm, and I would unlock the secrets to becoming a real artist. Like the painter.

But artists love what is forbidden to them, a fact I learned too young; too early.

I don't remember being in his studio.

It's an empty cartridge in my memory. I just remember walking down the stairs like I was holding a basketball between my legs in a relay race, and crawling back onto my aunt's carpet in the corner like a dying dog who didn't want to be seen.

Years later I was a 15-year-old on Christmas vacation when he came downstairs to our unit to make a plate of old ham and cold mashed potatoes.

My aunt was a kind woman who always offered her leftovers.

My eldest cousin sat in an armchair across the room and I watched his eyes follow the painter's journey to the microwave.

I saw the darkness of the staircase, and the emptiness of a memory erased in my cousin's eyes. The same foot planted, firm stare I gave the painter when his back was turned.

My cousin and I had many things in common.

The same furrowed brow, the same short temper, charming gummy smile, and aversion to touch.

And in all of these things I could finally see the difference between what is the blood and what is learned.

I knew my cousin had walked the same stairs, he had smelled the oil and touched the brushes, and now we both sat on an antique carpet, cursing the same thing the painter stole from us.

I looked up at the wall, at the little naked child made of tiny tiny dots still held captive behind a glass frame on my aunt's wall, and I wondered what the painter had stolen from that little boy too.

MIND THE GAP

Flying above the quaint little houses under Heathrow.  
London looks dirty,  
but I keep this epiphany to myself in the baggage claim.  
I land to a red-faced drunk at an outdoor pub.  
He swaggers with unwavering confidence.  
The brewing tension of a street fight.  
Each step is like broken glass exploding on cobblestone that has  
seen quarrels centuries old.  
Slated in nostalgic hubris.  
A nation birthed the oldest child.  
It's too cold,  
and too mean.  
But poets,  
they hate everything.  
So I keep calm  
And  
FUCK OFF.

## GUTS

I got this bad habit  
where I don't think before I speak.  
I fall in love like every week.  
I keep a pistol when I sleep  
inside my mouth  
so I don't fight my tongue  
for saying all these things,  
like how I saw you in my dreams.  
(I really did)  
I'm getting bad at it.  
So I just numb myself instead.  
I'll cut my hair and dye it red,  
and hope you get it through your head  
that I'm in love  
and it's bleeding through my skull,  
but I've been hurt before  
so I can't tell you  
that I  
keep this image  
in my mind  
of you sleeping  
late at night.  
I count the lashes  
on your eyes,  
keep my legs  
between your thighs.  
I could never tell you,  
even though I'd like to.

I swear this never happens.  
You know I've got a way with words.  
I'd put a million in a verse,  
but still can't bring myself  
to face what I feel.  
I'm scared of something real.  
I should spit it out  
and maybe get the guts to tell you.

## LAUNDROMAT

My mother would round up my brother and me,  
Laundry baskets on her hips,  
Like the *National Geographic* portrait of a mother  
Carrying water  
And her babies  
We would march foot by foot  
in the scorching heat  
to the Laundromat  
At the bottom of the hill  
Of the apartment cul-de-sac.  
The hill was massive.  
It would be slick with ice and snow in the winter  
And the big kids would sled down it  
On homemade toboggans  
Made of cardboard boxes  
And laundry baskets.  
Little rocket ships  
For the poor kids.  
We'd dive to the bottom  
and ricochet across the parking lot  
where the hill opened up into lawless concrete and pavement.  
The wind would slice our cheeks raw red like sushi.  
And beautiful girls  
with beautiful button noses  
turned pink like peppermint candy  
would cheer from the landing.  
In the summer the hill wasn't so charming.  
My little brother is dragging his sneakers across the curb

nasty little thumb-sucker  
He used a pacifier till he was 5  
And even as he slept,  
his mouth would pucker and suck on nothing  
Oedipus baby. Mama's boy.  
I spit mine out the first time someone tried to put it in my mouth  
I wouldn't be silenced  
Infanticide!  
We are marching  
To the Laundromat.  
We arrive and immediately  
I run to a familiar friend.  
A big black cracked leather couch  
with yellow stuffing seeping from duct-taped holes.  
It looks like a giant monster  
in the dark corner under the decaying lights.  
I stick my arm inside  
And fear large teeth will bite it off at the elbow.  
I imagine myself pulling out my arm  
and it bleeding like a stick of salami.  
The first time I ever saw a whole lot of blood  
was when my babysitter Jessie  
invited her friends over to my house  
while my mother was at work.  
She told me to shut my trap  
and she'd let me watch any movie I wanted on TV.  
I picked *The Shawshank Redemption*.  
They sat outside the apartment complex  
and 3 boys arrived and smoked cigarettes on the porch  
One girl came inside.  
She was bleeding between the legs.  
Dripping in thick strips like the syrup  
I used to make strawberry milk  
She asked to borrow a pair of pants

I was half her size  
I pictured her bleeding legs  
and imagined my arm dripping with the same crimson.  
I waved my pretend amputated stub around  
screaming for my mother.  
She didn't turn around.  
She threw our still-damp clothes in the basket  
And we marched back up the hill.

## THUMBELINA

I am so thankful that your mouthful of 88 piano keys  
charmed itself into my ear.  
I am so lucky to have a handful of chocolate brown hair  
in a bushel,  
bunched up,  
brushing my fingertips when you lie in my lap.  
Your mouth slack and your pink lips parted ever so slightly.  
Your rose-colored cheeks  
and green eyes  
and tan nose  
and chestnut freckles  
and blue-violet veins beneath the skin;  
all the good colors of some angel  
in a Renaissance painting.  
Your eyelashes so soft and long  
I close my eyes  
and imagine them  
brushing up and down the length of my body.  
If only I could be so small  
to lie in your eyelashes  
as a hammock.  
Swim in the whites of your eyes.  
Dive off the Cupid's bow of your lip.  
Hang with two hands  
from the corner of your smile  
like Peter Pan from a clock tower.  
Dance and splash  
in the tiny brown puddles

or every singlereckie.  
Crawl into the lobe of your ear  
and hide in the seashell cavern  
where I can hear the ocean  
and whisper it back to you.

Your face brings me all the joy of the entire world,  
right to my bed.  
Right to my hands.  
Right in the breath like a tide in your chest.

STUDIO CITY

I can't tell how to condense my life into 100 words  
For a piece of paper  
For someone to hold and have and abandon.  
Really does a number on your identity.  
It's not hard. It just hurts.  
Because it bursts out of me like hot lava.  
I find a million dandelions blowing through my head  
and they are beautiful  
But when they come at you like one furious wave  
(a few times a day)  
They stick in your nose and eyes and ears  
You explode from the inside out  
Like a time lapse of a decaying animal.  
I don't want to walk around department stores  
that smell like wax crayons  
too bright  
so everybody looks like a cartoon  
Bleeding colors  
And breaking the fourth wall  
and I fucking hate parallel parking  
the silence of Hollywood is deafening  
and I will die if I keep eating every meal purchased from the store.  
I feel like I'm made of plastic  
I breathe and it doesn't reach my lungs  
I eat and I don't taste  
I cry and there's no burn in my nose anymore  
I'm standing in the middle of a 4-way intersection  
and a car is coming at me

and i nave no 1dea wh1cn way to go.  
Is this how it was supposed to feel?

EVERYTHING

Before I knew we were poor,

Everything

was magic.

An empty fridge  
meant freezer-burnt Popsicles  
for dinner.

Purple-blue mouths  
and toothless smiles  
calmed the torment  
in my mother's crux.

Everything

was an adventure.

A shared bedroom  
with my little brother  
meant an eternal playmate.

A warm tent,  
closed off by a blanket  
hung from a bunk bed  
and a hair dryer  
snuck under the sheets to keep warm.

Arctic explorers  
waiting for a rescue unit.

Everything

was a mystery.

Voices resounding from the living room  
vehemently snaking  
through the short halls  
of the apartment.  
And then one day,  
I had

Everything

And

Everything

was over too soon.

## TRAVIS

Travis was a junkie  
All my friends were  
I was a wallflower  
I watched them tie up their arms and collapse onto couches  
I was never high,  
and always on the same strange slow ride with them  
Travis rode a fixed-gear bike  
He had nowhere to live  
But never went without somewhere to sleep  
Travis was handsome  
He had a backpack and an iPad  
And nowhere to take a shower  
He would meet old ladies  
Whose husbands had moved on or passed  
He would make love to them  
For a week or two at a time  
Hold them in his arms  
And stroke their thin hair  
Kiss their lips, dissolving vermilion ridges.  
He would paint their fingernails and take baths with essential oils  
They would give him somewhere to stay and a few hundred dollars  
And by Sunday, Travis would tuck a perfumed envelope into his  
pocket  
And ride off on his fixie  
To score  
And he would come meet us  
With department-store lipstick on his collar  
And a pocket full of sour candy and dope.

Travis was a junkie

I asked him now he did it.

How it didn't rip his heart to shreds.

"I really do love them,"

he told me.

"All of them."

ANTAGONIST

Does a ghost  
know that he's a ghost?  
Does a saint  
know that she's forgiven?  
If no one knows,  
then I don't know  
if I might be  
the villain.  
I don't trust the author anymore.

BAD DAY: 3

I'm sorry  
I'm having another bad day.  
My tongue is twisted  
my words come out  
like venom.

I only use my armor when you frighten me.

Stuck in the middle of "I love you" and "I can't take this anymore."

These things they come and go  
and I mean half of everything I tell you.  
I'm half of everything I hate,  
and half of anything I create  
is you too.  
So I start to hate the poems when I hate you.

## THE BAKER

I baked him a cake,  
and now I watched him cut it open.  
The first slice always falls apart.  
I winced, as the pieces crumbled like a landslide.  
No matter how many cakes I bake,  
the first piece that's cut  
always falls apart.  
The inside was cherry red.  
Globular, bulbous chunks leaked from the center.  
Like giant blood clots, bathing in buttercream.  
I imagined I had taken my still-beating heart from my chest  
and baked it into the middle.  
He took a bite, and grinned at me.  
His teeth stained like a row of garnets.  
Now he could have it,  
and eat it too.

## ORDINARY BOYS

There are ordinary boys.  
And then there are boys  
who stick an arm down your throat  
and grasp your heart.  
Digging through your entrails  
while your teeth rub  
against the socket of their elbow.  
You drool and it pools around your lips  
and drips  
to their armpits,  
tickling down to their ribs.  
There are boys  
who you will write poetry for  
as an offering  
a gift  
an insecure gesture, to say  
“Please like me,  
for I have gilded you in gold,  
and therefore  
you should love me  
for the sheer fact  
that I love you.”  
Then there are boys  
who demand poetry.  
Who keep you awake  
at all hours of the night,  
purging your brain  
of their details.

hoping  
you can capture them on a page  
and then capture them in the world.  
You are choking  
with his hand in your neck  
and his fist around your heart.  
Your aorta pulses.  
And so does your aching pussy.  
You write to calm the craving.  
To corner them in fiction  
And say  
Finally,  
I have conquered you.

## FUN GIRL

I am the fun girl.  
I am the spit hanging down from your tongue girl.  
I'm the choke me as hard as you can girl.  
I'm the give it all up for a man girl.  
I'm the plaid skirt and white knee-high socks girl.  
I'm a pistol that's loaded and cocked girl.  
The don't mind when you call me a slut girl.  
I'm the smack her real hard on the butt girl.  
I'm a swallow my feelings and lie girl.  
I'm a lie there and let him inside girl.  
'Cause I don't wanna make him get mad girl.  
I'm the better off being bad girl.  
'Cause then nothing hurts when they leave, girl.  
Except with his grip on your sleeve, girl.  
You say yes to the threesomes and drinks girl.  
'Cause you still really care what he thinks girl.  
You're not boring or mean like his old girl  
she was crazy, or that's what you're told, girl.  
So you'll get further if you are the fun girl.  
But you'll never be the only one girl.  
You'll get older and wish you had known girl.  
'Cause you gave way too much of your soul, girl.  
Now you don't expect men to be kind girl.  
You just use them and leave them behind girl.  
It's so hard to grow up as the fun girl.  
You'll be trapped in your days as a young girl.  
A memory, for men you loved girl.  
"Oh! That fun girl!"

POWERLESS

I'm locked in the bathroom on a  
commercial flight.

Hilary Swank in a butch haircut  
sends a hijacked plane  
through my cerebellum.

I am sweating.

I pull my lips apart from my  
teeth like a dental diagram  
and I display my gums.

I sit to piss and roll my eyes.  
cuff my jeans 2 times, 3 times.

I am in my memory.  
riding a man on a mattress,  
back arched like a prize horse.  
grinding and grinding.  
tossing my hair around  
and gripping tight the ropes of ecstasy.  
pornographic cries echo through  
my head in the airplane bathroom.  
they key-change, minor 5th to  
humiliation.

I shift gears.  
a woman beneath me, squirming like  
a slug under a magnifying glass.  
my veiny arms and slender fingers  
graze across her like velvet.  
why is the straight part of me

powerless?

LET'S HAVE BREAKFAST

The light is creeping past your curtains,  
playing shadows on your head.

I wonder how much

I would have to beg  
to stay till half past ten.

You won't notice  
that I've overstayed my welcome  
once again.

All great conversations

seem to

start in a

king-size bed.

DNA

My heart swings  
in the balance  
of this longing.  
it is suspended here,  
anxiously awaiting  
sweet release.  
tightly wound tension  
throbs in my core.  
swells  
like an angry ocean.  
rises  
like warm bread  
rich with yeast.  
I tumble  
weightlessly  
through daydreams  
of your skin.  
the surface of which  
bleeds  
seamlessly  
into visions  
of your bottomless eyes  
and the curve of your mouth  
matching perfectly  
the curve  
of the small of my back.  
I am spiraling  
down a staircase

- C. L. ...

or rust  
and comfort  
and withdrawal.  
I will lie back,  
and slide through  
the tunnel between  
your double helix.  
I will dive in your DNA.  
I will stay here,  
patiently,  
comatose in the wake  
of your everything-ness.  
Your all.  
I will make permanent residence  
right here  
in your acquaintance.

16 MISSED CALLS

It's another Monday morning  
and you still haven't slept in your bed.  
It's only been 3 days  
but I'm told that  
Jesus did a lot over the weekend  
when we thought he was dead.

FOREVER... IS A LONG TIME

I spent a long time  
watering a plant made out of plastic,  
and I cursed the ground for growing green.

I spent a long time  
substituting honest with sarcastic  
and I cursed my tongue for being mean.

Weightless, breathless, restitute.  
Motionless and absolute.  
You cut me open,  
sucked the poison  
from an aging wound.

And now 50,000 war cadets  
would cower at this small brunette.  
To my surprise,  
not 6 feet high,  
who'd reach and grab the moon,  
if I should ask, or just imply  
that I wanted a bit more light,  
so I could look inside his eyes,  
and get the colors just right.

I spent a long time  
calling all my parts by evil nicknames,  
and I told myself they hate me too.

But you spent a long time,  
tending to a home that's burning in flames  
and your nation made me love you

and your patience made me love you.

Build love, build god, build promises  
build calluses, then build provinces  
'cause I have found  
somebody who would build life,  
then demolish it.

And we could simply hit rewind,  
to live it all a thousand times  
find views in fucking Kathmandu,  
to watch it from a different height  
(and we'd comment how the sun shines)

I searched the world  
to find  
you hiding inside me  
the whole damn time.

Weightless,  
breathless,  
restitute...

BAD DAY: EPILOGUE

“Swallow your apologies.  
None of them mean shit to me.  
And all you have these days  
are bad days.”

These things they come and go  
and I mean half of everything I tell you.  
I'm half of everything I hate,  
and half of anything I create  
is you too.

So I'll start to hate my future when I hate you.



like sharp snears through parchment.  
Your pen will hit the paper  
like a body hitting pavement  
and you will scrape your knees red  
over  
and over  
and over again  
across the fine lines.  
You will shut your eyes to the world  
and retreat within yourself.  
You will wait there.  
Patiently.  
Languid in the wake of your potential.  
And then one day  
You'll explode.  
You'll shake your head  
and laugh  
and scream  
with hysteria.  
Every single eye  
will focus on you  
with laser-sharp precision.  
You will have them in your grasp.  
And your fingers  
will fold  
around them like shelter;  
a dark ceiling closing in,  
and you'll keep them there,  
in your kingdom.  
One day you will explode.  
And your pieces will scatter  
to far corners of the world  
never to be found again.  
You will trade these pieces

for that thing.

That thing you wanted.

You traded Everything  
to have it.

HIGH-FIVE KIDS

Back to where it all began,  
this time with another man.  
'Cause mine has found his place  
amongst the fountains.

One-hundred-dollar wine to drink  
The blood pools in the kitchen sink,  
and buildings line the windows  
like the mountains.

Stuck in limbo,  
I'm bent backwards.  
Crooked spine,  
and broken plaster.  
Tell me, do you know the password?  
We're denied by heaven's master.

Back to where  
the pavement breaks.  
Lined all along tectonic plates.  
The stars soaked in the sidewalk  
spell the message.

When all your lovers  
start to die.  
You wake alone  
and wonder why  
they left you here  
to document the wreckage.

They tell me that it's art I make,  
in all this chaos I create.  
They tell me that it's much too late.  
To rectify all my mistakes.

The kid is dead and gone  
back to the  
Kingdom.

HAVING

How strange to write about  
“having”  
when for so long  
I’ve drawn inspiration only from  
longing?

Pink cheeks.  
Stubble ripples across them  
like a flower  
still clinging to the earth  
it was plucked from.

Your eyes are static electricity.  
You’ve missed me.

A STORY LIKE MINE

It's 2009  
and I'm 14  
and I'm crying.  
Not really sure where I am,  
but I'm holding the hand  
of my best friend Sam  
in the waiting room  
of a Planned Parenthood.  
The air is sterile and clean.  
The walls are that  
"not gray but green."  
And the lights are so bright  
they could burn a hole  
through the seam  
of my jeans.  
My phone is buzzing  
in the pocket.  
My mom is asking me  
if I remembered my keys  
'cause she's closing the door  
and she needs to lock it.  
But I can't tell my mom  
where I've gone.  
I can't tell anyone at all.

You see,  
my best friend Sam  
was raped by a man  
who we knew 'cause he worked

in the after-school program.  
He held her down  
with her textbooks beside her.  
He covered her mouth  
and then he came  
inside  
her.  
So now I'm with Sam  
at the place with a plan  
waiting for the results  
of a medical exam.  
She's praying  
she doesn't need an abortion.  
She couldn't afford it.  
Her parents would "like totally kill her."

It's 2002  
and my family just moved.  
The only people I know  
are my mom's friend Sue  
and her  
son.  
He's got a case  
of Matchbox cars  
and he says that he'll teach me  
to play the guitar  
if I just keep quiet.  
The stairwell beside  
Apartment 1245  
will haunt me in my sleep  
as long as I'm alive  
and I'm too young to know  
why it aches in my thighs

but I must lie.

I must lie.

It's 2012

and I'm dating a guy.

I sleep in his bed and

I just learned to drive.

He's older than me,

and he drinks whiskey neat.

He's paying for everything

(this adult thing is not cheap).

We've been fighting a lot.

Almost 10 times a week.

But he still wants to have sex

and I just want to sleep.

He says

I can't say no to him,

that this much

I owe to him.

He buys my dinners,

so I need to blow him.

He's taken to forcing me

down on my knees.

I'm confused

'cause he's hurting me

while he says "please."

And he's "only a man"

and these things he "just needs."

He's my boyfriend

so why am I filled with unease?

It's 2017

and I live like a queen.

And I've followed damn near

every one of my dreams.  
I'm invincible!  
and I'm so fucking naive.  
I believe I'm protected  
'cause I live on a screen.  
Nobody would DARE  
act that way around me.  
I have earned my protection,  
eternally clean.  
Till a man who I trust  
gets his hands  
in my pants.  
But I don't want none of that?  
I just wanted to dance?  
I wake up the next morning  
like I'm in a trance.  
And there's blood.  
My blood.

Is that my blood?

Hold on a minute...  
You see  
I've worked every day  
since I was 18.  
I've toured everywhere  
from Japan  
to Mar-a-Lago,  
I even went onstage  
that night  
in Chicago  
when I was having a miscarriage.  
I pied the piper!  
I put on a diaper!

And sang out my spleen  
to a roomful of teens.  
What do you mean  
this  
happened  
to  
me?

(You can't put your hands on me?  
You don't know what my body has been through.  
I'm supposed to be  
Safe  
Now.  
I've "earned it.")

The year is 2018  
and I've realized  
that nobody is safe  
as long as she is alive  
and every friend that I know  
has a  
story  
like  
mine.

(And the world tells us  
that we should take it  
as a compliment.)

But heroes like Ashley  
and Simone and  
Gabby,  
McKayla and Gaga,  
Rosario,

All.

Remind me  
this is the beginning,  
it's not the finale.  
And that's why we are here,  
and that's why we rally.

It's about Olympians  
and a medical resident.  
And not one  
fucking  
word  
from the man  
who is president.  
It's about closed doors  
secrets  
and legs  
in stilettos,  
from Hollywood Hills  
to the projects  
and ghettos.

When babies are ripped  
from the arms of teen mothers,  
and child brides globally  
cry under covers,  
who don't have a voice  
on the magazine covers  
and you can't walk anywhere  
if your legs aren't covered,  
they tell us  
"take cover."  
But we are not  
free

until all of us are  
free.  
So love your neighbor.  
Please treat her kindly.  
Ask her her story,  
then shut up  
and listen.  
Black  
Asian  
poor  
wealthy  
Trans  
Cis  
Muslim  
Christian  
Listen.

LISTEN.

And then yell  
at the top of your lungs.  
Be a voice  
for all those  
who have prisoner tongues,  
for the people  
who had to grow up  
way too young,  
there is work to be done,  
there are songs to be sung,  
Lord knows there's a  
war  
to be  
won.

STOCKHOLM SYNDROME PT. 2

Abandonment  
is a complicated complex.  
You're longing  
for somebody who will leave.  
I walked into a promised land.  
A decorated,  
perfect man.  
With something vile  
hiding up his sleeve.

I wonder  
what I'll ever have control of.  
Rejection breeds  
obsession,  
so they say.  
I left my heart  
and all my hope,  
my vindicated tales of woe  
in Sweden  
on a freezing winter day.

LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIP

that fleeting moment  
at 4 a.m.  
when I am shaken from a deep sleep  
because I can't feel your skin  
against mine.  
when my entire body hangs  
suspended  
in that silver sliver of time  
is a tiny speck of fear  
that reminds me  
that I love when you turn over  
and kiss my neck

two feet of space  
2,753 miles

any distance becomes too much to bear  
a warm bed as wide as the world.

## SMOKE

It's funny, the human fascination with smoke.  
Every writer has flexed  
and fucked  
and abused the metaphor for centuries  
"It vanished like smoke"  
"Her body wound like a thin stream of smoke"  
"I inhaled his presence like a cloud of smoke."  
We are enamored.  
Schrödinger's element.  
It is there when we restrain ourselves from touching it,  
And it disappears when we reach for it.  
It looks solid, it holds form,  
and then evades our grasp as if to taunt us.  
Not transparent, not opaque.  
Is it arrogance?  
Smoke, the reminder of the fire we started?  
The flame that humankind willed into existence in desperation.  
Or is it fear?  
The remnants of something we need to survive,  
but could die in the thrashing embrace of.  
Does it arouse us,  
to watch the smoke?  
The lingering aftermath of the thing that we feign control of,  
But are at the mercy of?  
Do we envy the smoke?  
(If I could disappear as quickly as I appeared,  
I would.)  
In my 65-degree bedroom,  
On a damp evening in the fall

On a duvet covered in dog fur,  
She puts her cigarette out by smashing it between two fingers.  
Like a final period placed on a hand-penned letter.  
I reach out to touch her,  
But she rolls over and her mind escapes  
to an empty corner of the ceiling.  
Knee-deep into my own cliché,  
I sink.

ABSENCE MAKES THE HEART GROW FONDER

When he is away from me,  
my heart reaches from my chest like a wet toddler in a crib.  
His voice fills my ears like brown whiskey in a crystal glass,  
occupying every single tessellate crevice.

When he is away, his smile shines like sun on fresh snow,  
And his eyes flicker like chunks of glitter  
falling through the clear goo in a snow globe.

When he is away,  
His touch seems hot and scarlet red.  
Feverish and desirable.

When he is with me,  
My heart retreats like a salty oyster into its shell.  
His voice rips through me like a scissor in a seam.

When he is with me,  
his smile is so loud I hear it with my eyes shut  
And his nose drips  
and his mouth drools  
and his hands are clammy and awkward.

He is gilded in light from 5 feet away.  
He is bothersome from 3.  
Why can I love him,  
only when he leaves?

READY

I knew I was ready to forgive you  
When I wrenched the knife from my back  
I held it up high  
and it cast a menacing shadow  
over the face of the young man in front of me.  
Its shiny metal gleamed and glistened.  
I stood heaving  
and the veins in my face erupted  
like tree branches gnarled into the forest floor.  
I held the weapon  
retrieved from my own back.  
I gripped it once,  
twice,  
and then  
  
I put it down.

REFRIGERATOR BLUE

2 eyes  
the cold comfortable blue  
of a refrigerator light  
glowing in the temptation of a midnight snack.  
How I rub your head  
with my fingertips  
and press my open palm against your skull  
like I could push right through the bone  
and grab a gushy handful of your brain  
and take a chunk of it home with me  
to devour later.  
In my underwear,  
off a plate,  
in that refrigerator light,  
like cold Chinese.  
Grip my face  
and scold me  
for taking more than you wanted to give,  
and I can feel my smile rising  
push my cheeks through your fingers  
like a handful of clay,  
malleable in your grasp.  
I'll miss your lap  
and the heat between my legs  
and showering off my sticky thighs  
in the quiet when I get home.  
Oh will I miss the stern, saccharine voice  
melting from your lips

1. ... ..

novering over my open nungry mounth.

THE CAVE

I don't suppose I really know you very well—  
but I know you smell like the delicious damp grass  
that grows near old walls  
and that your hands  
are beautiful  
opening out of your sleeves  
and that the back of your head  
is a mossy sheltered cave  
when there is trouble in the wind  
and that my cheek  
just fits  
the depression in your shoulder  
and that is all I need to know.

PARASITE

I thought I knew what a muse was until I met him.  
I'd been inspired before.  
I'd been intrigued.  
But I had no idea what a muse was  
until he put his pink lips to my neck  
and spit parasites into my ears.

Let them climb in and make a home  
in the soft tissue of my brain.  
Bred  
and multiplied  
and bit into my mind  
till the memories of him opened  
like sores  
and festered in the heat of my anxiety.

I opened my mouth  
and Times New Roman print flew out  
like a plague of moths from its depths.  
For 48 hours I was held captive  
by the college-ruled lines  
of a composition notebook.  
Wrapped around my wrists  
like the leather-bound work of a dominatrix.  
He cracked a whip against my skin  
and sliced my flesh open,  
scarlet  
like the margin taunting me.  
The violet bruises on my neck,

my chest,  
could hardly compare to the scar  
that rose when he petrified me.  
He shocked me.  
Terrified me.  
Because he inspired me.  
I wasn't prepared  
for the chaos that would follow.  
A muse.  
A parasite.  
A symbiotic relationship.  
Feed his hungry mind from my open mouth.

FOREVER CURSED IN LOVE ARE THE OBSERVANT

My mouth tastes like cinnamon whiskey  
and menthol cigarettes.

Cabernet Sauvignon,  
spearmint gum  
and your hot heavy breath.

My mouth tastes like all the things  
I should have said.

I don't want to be this way,  
but I have been since you left.

I should have never counted your eyelashes  
when you slept.

I should forget the way you take your tea,  
but it haunts me.

2 sugars,  
please.

## THE PATTERN

What will be left  
when I have broken all of my favorite things?  
When the glue of sweet apologies  
and bat eyelashes no longer repairs them?  
What will be left when I have shattered it all?  
Carelessly, it will evade my grasp.  
And I will have  
nothing.

I WOULD LEAVE ME IF I COULD.

This must be a nightmare.  
It couldn't be a dream.  
I'm washing in the shower,  
my limbs clean,  
until they bleed.  
I sometimes miss the quiet;  
the chaos of the streets.  
I keep it all inside my mind  
and every night  
I scream.

I can't remember  
what it's like to smell the ocean.  
I can't remember  
what it's like to feel the sea.  
I can't remember what it's like to face a mirror  
and not hate the person staring back at me.

I wish that I were dead  
or at least somewhere else.  
I try to keep the riot quiet  
like a diet  
for my health.

Stealth.  
It's moving silently.  
It's heavy.  
It started from my knees  
and now it's creeping up already.

Just another second now,  
'cause here comes the confetti.  
Please, hold the camera steady.  
I encore 7 more  
and everybody's like "That's plenty!"

I would leave me if you'd let me  
I would leave me if you'd let me  
I would leave me if I could.

## BRIGHT EYES

They told me that she's beautiful  
with bright eyes and fair skin.  
She's from a city off the coast somewhere  
where the girls are "made for men."  
Is she a naked mess in underwear  
on a dirty bathroom floor?  
Do you look at her disgusted,  
thinking that you deserve more?

But does she scream at the top of her lungs  
praying you don't leave her?  
Does she scream from an open mouth  
begging you to feed her?

Will she set alarms obsessively  
to check in on your breath?  
Does she know the ways to touch you  
with her lips upon your neck?  
Is she agreeable and careless?  
Does she answer all your calls?  
Because I know you needed someone  
who was fine with feeling small.

But does she scream at the top of her lungs  
praying that you'll need her?  
Do you scream at the top of your lungs?  
Do your veins bleed her?

DEVIL IN ME

I won't take anyone down  
If I crawl tonight  
But I still let everyone down  
When I change in size  
And I went tumbling down  
Trying to reach your height  
But I scream too loud  
If I speak my mind.



it isn't so bad.

Keep drinking keep dancing

Keep hopeless romancing

They say that keys open doors

But you handed all your keys

To your friends and they dip 'em in a powder sack

Screaming, "Bring on the black!"

And every single second is like late-night TV

A Skinemax freebie

Watch the night sweats

drip down his back

Yelling, "Bring on the black!"

My father said,

"You'll never belong to a man till I'm dead"

So we just belong to a bag instead.

Winners don't lose, right?

Except sleep.

Counting sheep.

Relentless beep.

Of the hotel TV.

Too high to react.

So I'm up late begging,

"Lord, bring on the black."

SOMETHING FOR THEM

This is to remind you that you are a lover.

That you melt at a glance  
at a touch.

That you are a baby.

You are soft and fragile  
and you need someone to tell you  
that everything is going to be okay.

That you are an idiot  
and you are going to fuck up  
1 million more times the rest of your life.

But this is to remind you  
that you are a statue, gilded in marble,  
and there is white lightning in your eyes.

Change shape.

Give in.

SEVENTEEN

It was cold for California  
when my phone rang half past 3,  
my little brother's on the other line.  
He's shaking like a leaf.

At 17 years old, he lost his  
best friend on a field.  
There's no battle in our history book  
compared to how he feels.

Alabaster faces,  
all lined up, turning gray.  
I watched my brother hold a casket  
before his graduation day.

The boy's poor mother cried  
with screams that echoed through the town.  
Like a Siren on a shoreline,  
begging God to let her drown.

So my brother crawled beside her  
and he got beneath the sheet.  
He let a woman hold him,  
so that she could make believe.

She said, "Your arms are a bit smaller,  
and your hair has got a wave,  
but you smell just like my little boy.  
You've almost got his face."

So he lay there on the couch  
until the sky turned red and tan.  
And in a full-grown woman's arms,  
my little brother was a man.

## I LEFT THE PARTY

I looked through the window and saw the lights flicker  
like salt and pepper flakes across the Tokyo skyline.  
I saw the amber glowing from the floor lamp in the corner,  
warming the room with its thick embrace.  
I saw the pink in my lips and the orange in my eyes  
and the blush across my chest.  
And I wondered how could I have not noticed  
the ways in which you dulled my senses  
and stole the color from the world right before my eyes.  
Of all the wrongs you committed,  
the worst was keeping me from the beauty  
in anything  
that wasn't  
you.

I WISH THAT I WERE MANIC ALL THE TIME

Be patient with me  
When my limbs become trees  
And my roots become reeds  
And the sounds from my mouth start making sense

My mind is messy but it's beautiful  
like I'm in utero  
I don't say it often,  
but I'm proud of the woman that I turned out to be

You might think I'm crazy  
Wild and young and free  
But really I'm just:  
careful  
quiet  
overthinking  
analyzing like  
It's logic  
over loving  
and emotion  
brought me nothing  
but disaster  
so I hold my drink  
and sit right in the corner  
smiling.

Wish I were a wild child like I say I am  
Wish I really meant it when I say  
that I don't give a damn

Wish that I were *manic all the time*.

Think I like me better  
when I'm all outside the lines.

But my colors bleed  
And they bleed bright red.  
I keep this pistol near my bed  
Inside my mouth  
so I can keep my tongue from tearing up my head.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

HALSEY, born Ashley Nicolette Frangipane, is a Grammy-nominated singer-songwriter. She lives in Los Angeles, California.

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