

On Longing: A Meditation in Two Parts

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{ I }

From Milk to Bloody Meat

Oh succulent one / it is but one turn in the road / and I would be a cannibal!

- Anne Sexton

When I was a child, my father was a purveyor of meat. The refrigerator was always packed tightly with raw muscle and glinting bone. Opening the refrigerator door overwhelmed the senses with the pungent stench of decomposition, death, spoils of the hunt. My milk and grapes mingled nervously in the graveyard of our icebox, growing sticky from the fluids gushing down.

As I got older, I overheard that red meat and cigarettes are bad for your flavor, that you must eat fresh fruit to sweeten the taste of your cum. After hearing this, I began in many ways to think like food. I was setting myself up to be devoured.

There are many ways one can be eaten alive. One way is by wanting my mother to love me. I want her acceptance so badly that I would give my right arm, and once she had my right arm, I'd be more than happy to let her eat it.

After the eating of my arms and my legs, after she rendered me nothing more than a terrible torso, I'd probably begin a kind of autocannibalism in which, in order to survive, I am forced to devour myself.

We'd begin each bland dinner blessing the blood of Christ. My sister and I would eat the withered protein portions the size of my mother's small fist and find ingenious places to hide the half-steamed vegetables, which even our starved palettes rejected. Within ten minutes of the last morsel, we'd be forced to run the calories off before they had a chance to settle. If we didn't follow my mother's ritual to a T, touching certain telephone poles as mile markers, we'd be required to start over again. This became entertainment for the neighborhood kids, who'd sometimes run alongside us and call us names.

I sometimes felt like a starved captive, forced to count calories, adhere to fad diets, attend aerobics classes, and swallow pink Senecot laxatives.

I was constantly called into the guidance counselor because I could write only of murder. My victims bled brightly from their cradle of delicate bones, chased by psychopaths through summer nights swelling with cicadas. The guidance counselor was convinced I was being abused at home, failing to understand that the girl I kept killing in my stories was the girl my parents expected me to be. My mother became enraged at being called in so often. "You're such a ghoul," she'd say to me. "Must you *always* be such a ghoul?"

By my late teens, my parents paid me to lose weight. The going rate was five dollars a pound. I'd stop eating for a couple of weeks, line my pockets with the greasy bills, and buy teeners of yellow cocaine for my sister and me. The biggest obstacle in converting my hunger into money was that in order to live long enough to receive the money, I'd have to begin eating again.

My mother showed me how, with a delicate finger, I could stimulate my gag reflex, but was constantly serving me up to doctors and concerned relatives as someone with a “problem.”

The longest I’ve gone without eating is 23 days. For a long time it was my greatest victory.

Something strange I’ve come to comprehend: those who choose their morsels most meticulously are without exception the most ravenous inside.

It is not so unusual to drink scotch every morning before junior high school in order to suppress your same-sex longing, or to have the desire to dissect a living thing to see what it's made of, or to make cards for father's day that say "Dad, I love you to death." The trouble begins when you've reached a point of loneliness that only the ingesting of human meat can absolve. Who among us hasn't uttered the words: "I wish I could be with you always"? And yet, it never occurs to us to drop our lover's head in a boiling pot, or filet their heart, or put their tough, partially eaten thigh muscle through a meat tenderizer in order to make our wish come true.

By the time sexual sadist Jeffrey Dahmer was discovered by the police, he had accumulated 83 polaroids of dismembered bodies, 3 torsos in a 57 gallon drum of acid, dozens of mummified genitals, and one perfectly refrigerated head.

The people of Wisconsin were horrified that all this had been happening right under their noses. The only explanation the neighbors could provide was that the smell of a slowly roasting body bears an uncanny resemblance to that of chitlins.

There are so many ways of getting inside a person. Sometimes you have to do it slowly, one tremulous finger at a time.

I am walking through the woods, the day is clear, and the greenery is so fervent, so narcotic, that it causes everything to vibrate. I know, based on the ripeness of the forest, that something is wrong, but some invisible force pushes me deeper. In no time, I come upon a massive oak tree hung with a mobile of bones glinting brightly at each severed slant. Bone dust hovers- in the air, on my tongue. As I walk closer I see organs pouring from the branches into the bright grass, and in that instant I know this is the body of my mother, that I have murdered and dismembered her. The next thing I know I'm awake and emptying my stomach into the sink. For weeks, the dream possesses me- my body vibrates, I taste nothing but bone.

On the 23rd day of my 23-day fast, I was placed in treatment where I was far and away the largest piece of meat. My breasts were enormous, my bones mammoth. No part of me was delicate enough. There was a certain disgust the girls had for me, as though I were fleshy enough to begin rotting, or lactating, before their very eyes. One in particular told me I didn't have what it took, that with my body, I was destined to be a breeder. Recently I found a photograph of myself around that time and remarked to my father that I'd discovered a relic from my anorexic period.

"I don't think you've ever been thin enough to be called anorexic," he said.

The difference between an anorexic and a cannibal is that an anorexic sees the body as a location for every sort of war, whereas a cannibal sees only the soft white shoulders of ecstasy.

The difference between a murderer and a cannibal is that a murderer views the body as the most disposable thing you can imagine, whereas a cannibal sees lush sustenance there, even after the body begins to disintegrate.

When an act of cannibalism is committed, there are some who cannot get enough of it. We want to hear which body parts were eaten-- if they were seasoned with rosemary, or paired with an aggressive red wine. We want to see the photographs of a woman's dismembered head propped up on the autopsy table, even though it will make us sick to our stomachs, even though weeks later, in the moment before sleep, her bulging eyes will enter from nowhere, horrible and expressionless, creating a momentary vertigo. Our hunger for this kind of depravity has convinced some cannibals that the line between them and us is tenuous at best.

The line between mother and daughter is tenuous at best.

I am trying to understand how it would feel to eat my mother, to close her eyes (one brown, one green) with my fingertips, then chew the choicest morsels between my teeth. Even harder to imagine: inheriting her memory, and finally knowing the deep, dank roots of the hundred dark secrets she keeps.

I've never known what to make of my desire for you. I thought, by confessing it, perhaps I'd be free.

Armin Meiwes searched all his life for the perfect mate: a young man with an attractive build who knew he was nothing more than meat and loved that about himself. Meiwes found Brandes through the personal ads, where the two exchanged erotic banter and Brandes offered his skull up as an ashtray. It wasn't long before Brandes sold all his belongings, drafted a will, and drove to Meiwes' residence. I try to imagine the intensity of their first and only meeting in person. Each had spent his entire life lusting secretly, hungrily, for something impossible. Locking eyes that night, were they nervous, or was it heat and appetite and bodies transcending one another?

It is reported that Brandes wanted Meiwes to cut off his penis so they could eat it together, but the meat wasn't tender enough. When Meiwes finally killed Brandes, he serenaded him with music from the easy listening station and placed him in a warm bath to bleed. Meiwes fed on the flesh of Brandes for nearly a year before he was caught and sentenced to 8.5 years on a manslaughter charge. Manslaughter because the act was consensual, no matter how horrifying it seemed to the rest of us.

When tasting your body, and well into the feast of it, I am still aware it isn't you I'm tasting, that I will never really know your essence, which comes from the blood, the marrow, the bone. I want so badly to pass through you so I can know what you're like inside in a way no one else does.

Hasn't all our jealousy led us to this?

The fact that Meiwes relished Brandes until his remains were taken into evidence could be meaningful, part of some dark fidelity. Even Hannibal Lector kept his share of pickled pets. Call them trophies, call them sweet nothings-- it may be more than we'll ever have of one another.

Please know that I'm sincere when I say: I'd eat my way into perdition to taste you.¹

¹ Jeanette Winterson

In *Essays*, Montaigne posits his belief that to study philosophy is to learn to die. But the single modifying agent of death is based on the appetite of what is eating you.

Perhaps I shouldn't let my mother, with her voracious appetite, worm in through the wounds.

Perhaps I should eliminate the nervous component of my nervous breakdown and allow only for the ways it savages me.

The so-called savages of 17th century Brazil loved their daughters so much that they gifted them pale captives for butchering and feasting. But I suppose not everyone knows how to be so nurturing. Some, in their whole body, have not a single nurturing bone.

The first time I witnessed an act of cannibalism was in the seventh grade. My sister and I stopped at a mall pet shop with the intention of purchasing a lizard. We marveled at the tiny lizard clothes on offer: dozens of sweaters and rain slicks and Madeleine jackets dangling from the display. Peeking at last into the terrarium, we saw one lizard in a leather jacket with the legs of another lizard quivering from his mouth. It was such a surreal scene, so unexpectedly brutal and absurd. We began screaming in the store, for which we were promptly thrown out.

The concept of the lizard brain had never occurred to me before. Suddenly I understood survival in its coldest terms, and I felt something akin to panic that I had almost made such a creature my pet. Even more absurdly, I mourned the eaten lizard, who shared the same brain as the murderous one but ultimately lacked the strength to quiver free.

For years I've felt her teeth in me.

Then again, I've taken tentative bites myself.

Instead of writing about my mother, I wish I had the courage to say a single thing to her face.

At the heart of this essay is every essay I have ever crossed out.

Sergey Zhnarev, described by all as a quiet man, murdered his grandmother with the shard from a broken mirror, but not before he plucked her eyes, stripped her flesh, chewed her tongue. It was later determined the mirror didn't kill her, that she died from shock: the shock of unimaginable pain, a cruel death. The worst death we can imagine.

When asked if he felt remorse for his crime, Zhnarev said only that he missed his grandmother's cakes.

When I left my mother's home for the first time I moved as far as I could, all the way across the ocean. It was almost like leaving a lover. There was this very physical kind of grief, as though I might break apart. I was shocked by my feelings-- the sheer magnitude of need. Some nights I wanted only for my mother to rock me, feeling that I might die of something deep and violent if she didn't. Sometimes I would go to the drug store to smell her signature perfume, a scent I'd always hated when combined with her menthol cigarettes, her strange and pungent skin.

Whatever existed between us was fierce, a doubling of the umbilical cord into adult life, the rope that would bind us regardless of my attempts to break free.

To think I once fed from her breast. To know she looked down at me in my first moments on earth thinking *how dare you, how dare you make food of me.*

When I think of my death I feel lonely, but not as lonely as when I think of my birth.

Among the Gimi of Papua New Guinea, cannibalism is a female-dominated ritual in which the mother eats pieces of her husband and children to protect them from the doom of “Mother Deity.” Infertility and failure to lactate are among the punishments “Mother Deity” administers. Of course, these are also symptoms of starvation: the kind of starvation you can’t escape, as well as the kind you select for yourself.

In anthropological terms, cannibalistic acts are broken down into two categories: endocannibalism and exocannibalism. In endocannibalism, one devours familiar flesh in order to seize the spirit that lives inside. In exocannibalism, one devours a stranger, retaining his skull for a trophy. Initially I accepted this categorical binary, but the more I examine it, the more I understand: by committing one type of cannibalistic act, we cannot help but wish to commit both.

When confronted with even the slightest desecration of the sanctity of the human body, people tend to recoil. Just how deeply are we connected to our physical selves? It makes perfect sense that the thought of evacuating the body, or worse, being violently ejected from the body, would cause some psychic discomfort. But most people will choose not to think about these things, not to seek out the ideas and images that point to the body as something ridiculous.

Ultimately, it is not the weapon, but your body that kills you. It's your body that breaks down and decays, leaving your soul orphaned and aloft.

What separates the ghouls from the normal folk who want to think of their body only in one piece? What drives me to look at pictures of adolescent Liberian boys eating a dead body like a sloppy baby back rib? I keep asking myself, and the only answer that ever comes to me is that I am staring down my fear, that I am confronting death as a reality, and perhaps that because death is inevitable it is equally brutal to all of us. But what if it isn't me being really brave, or really prepared? What if there's something wrong with me? What if I really enjoy violently, mercilessly taking things apart? What does that say about me? And what does it say about the killers I research? Is it only an action that separates us?

It is difficult, when I am filled with passion for your body, to be mindful of its careful anatomy. Not because I wish to be careless, but because I long to be free. Pressing against you is the only way I know to lose myself. But first I need to know your body like the back of my hand, to know what it's like with the skin stripped back, to magnify and label each part in my mind until every inch of you is definable. Then, and only then, can I begin to disappear.

In *The Apology to Raimond Sebond*, Montaigne writes: “There is nothing more horrible to imagine than to eat one’s father.” After reading this I realize I could never eat my father. Even if it were a matter of survival, even if he begged me to, I would probably just lie down beside his body and wait for the ground to absorb me. We are from the same tribe, yes-- from the same family, no question. We share the same dark eyes, the same long, pale feet. And most of all-- I’m partial to my father’s essence.

What we lack in intimacy we make up for in love, but when it comes to peeling the pieces back and putting them into your mouth, there must be a little lust involved, or in lieu of lust, a little hatred. At the very least, a way to make the flesh suitable as something interior, something you can bare to hold against your tongue.

After all, I was not born into Brazilian Wari Culture. I was not raised to chop a putrefied body into one million bits and dine on the sumptuous portions to nourish my inner strength. Perhaps if I ate my father, I would absorb his animal spirit-- perhaps I could even cancel my mother’s spirit out-- but for now, it’s too gruesome for me to think about.

Why then, can I imagine eating my mother? Is this merely an extension of the breastfeeding of infancy?

Or is it perhaps because it’s only natural, when something gnaws you inside, to have the capacity— not the capacity, the need-- to gnaw back.

If you want my mother’s blood to boil, tell her she’s acting like *her* mother. For all the years of my life, my mother’s sole mission was to turn out nothing like her own sorry excuse for a matriarch (read: “Mother Deity”). The trouble is when you let

someone eat at you (according to legend) you become one and the same. What level of hell is this?

Achilles to Hector:

I wish only that my spirit and fury would drive me
to hack your meat away and eat it raw for the things
that you have done to me.²

² (II.22.346-48)

In the dark, head against the pillow, my secrets haunt me like so many floating body parts refusing submersion. There's something I love about starving to this day, the way that as the brain atrophies the mood elevates, finding relief in the almost meditative single-mindedness of what goes in versus what comes out.

I hate your body for all its autophagous qualities, for gnawing you at such a deep, cellular level that there will be a time when I can no longer kiss your eyelids, or take you anxiously into my mouth.

My mother recently confessed to me a recurring dream in which she has killed someone by accident and attempts to bury them on the side of the road. Dripping with sweat, she hacks the body apart and digs deep holes in which to place the parts. No sooner has she scooped the last of the dirt overtop the shallow grave than the parts worm up through the gravel and soil, implicating her. In the dream, she knows the police are coming. She keeps thinking to herself how much better it would be to confess, but instead she hacks the body into smaller bits and deposits them in holes deeper than before, fingers crossed.

On several reality television shows dealing with weight loss, the mother sobs into the camera lens that she's losing the weight for her kids. As she participates in ridiculous challenges, learns how to cook from condescending celebrity chefs, and thanks her trainer for the abuse and humiliation she is exposed to in the gym, she is becoming a better parent. Ask anyone. The television show will make sure that her children aren't subjected to the terrible diabetic fate that seemed to be their birthright.

When I watch these shows, I burn with embarrassment for the children-- slightly pudgy, forced to show their enthusiasm for their mother's journey, suddenly pushed to exercise like an animal before the camera's lens. I understand what it's like to inherit a horrible regime that's billed as an "eating plan," or a "lifestyle change." I know what it's like to hoard a hostess cupcake in some secret place, all the while feeling incriminated by it, worrying over it as deeply as Poe's telltale heart.

The things I failed to swallow are carved across my body in thick white scars. In places it looks like someone attempted to eat me but my skin was too tough. In some ways that's really what happened, except that I was the villain as well as the victim. I was the one with knives but also the one offering up the quivering skin.

It's easy to forget that our parents, whom we only desire to be so many things to us, are haunted by histories of their own. In my mother's case, a schizophrenic sister tortured her all of her childhood. Most notably, she broke both my mother's legs by pushing her down a mountain and, on another occasion, tied her down and carved her up with a circular saw. My mother's body still holds these long ago scars. She identifies them as maps of home.

Because she was carved as a child, my mother knew from the beginning that she was meat, and has lived her life accordingly, with plenty of aggression, with terrible aroma, with closets full of see-through gowns.

There are times that I question why I still bother with my mother, wondering if I suffer from a kind of Stockholm syndrome. Then again, I was a little girl once. My mother painted my fingernails and left them in cool bowls of water to set. She spread picnics on library lawns and leafed through Steven King paperbacks while I turned slow laps in the lake. She kissed my bruises and spit on bullies when they reduced me to tears, which was often.

And even before that, I was an embryo growing inside her. Her hips were too small to birth me, so they ripped me from her body, leaving a Frankenstein scar from belly button to pubic bone that she never complains about. This is how I know that in some deep, primal, irrevocable way, my mother loves me. And so long as she loves me, I'll always love her back.

They say you can't go home again, but I tend to believe the opposite. I believe you can't help but go home over and over, every day, for the rest of your life.

I can't help but notice the aesthetic similarities between the snake of Eden and the umbilical cord, the way that both are offering a particularly potent kind of food.

It has been said every feeling waits upon its gesture.³ So if you're the one that I love, and I want nothing to do with the meat of you, what kind of a gesture is that?

In *Eros the Bittersweet*, Anne Carson writes:

But the boundaries of time and glance and I love you are only aftershocks of the main, inevitable boundary of flesh and self between you and me. And it is only, suddenly, at the moment when I would dissolve that boundary, I realize I never can.

It's strange, this notion that what I crave is created by the lack of you. But it does explain why I'm so desperate to fill you with my fingers, feel the sameness of our breasts, of what is wet when pressed together, the shifting symmetry of our bodies as they mirror before blooming into kaleidoscopes of red.

³ Eudora Welty

The Aghori, ascetics who dwell beneath the lowest caste on cremation grounds, have existed in the same way for hundreds of years. Wandering the countryside naked, alone or in pairs, they fish decomposing bodies from the Ganges River and nourish themselves on the remaining flesh. The Aghori will swallow blood and urine, and also perform sava samskara, (ritual worship that uses a corpse for the altar) to evoke the Mother Goddess. The Aghori sees the flesh of others as a symbol of his own body, and the eating of flesh as an act of meditation, which will help him transcend his lower self and attain universal consciousness. As the Aghori are extremely secretive by nature, there is only so much we know of them. What is certain is the Aghori believes by eating those pale, bloated fish of the Ganges he is building a direct path to Shiva, freeing himself from punarjanma, or rebirth. It is only by miring himself in total darkness that the Aghori is able to perceive the light.

In the Western world it is the wish of many to die in their sleep, to slip away in a dream as though this life never happened. When I go, it will be kicking and screaming, piercing the world with all my brutality. If I am to be devoured, I want to live on the land as a bloodstain that never goes away, a bloodstain so deep and unmistakable that the house in which it rests must be toppled.

No one explained to my mother she'd begin to bleed one day, so when it happened she was terrified, convinced of her imminent death. Riding a bike at the exact moment her uterine lining was shed, she believed she'd pierced her vagina in some irrevocable way, and lived in terror until her mother discovered a nest of bloody garments hidden in a dark closet.

When my period came, age eleven, I marooned myself in the tub for a six-hour standoff. Having had every imaginable talk pertaining to that moment, having dreaded it all of my life, I screamed through the door that I didn't give a shit about being a woman, that all I wanted was to go back.

On a recent trip to the zoo, my mother delighted in calling the animals fat. The hippos in particular heard her marvel over their apparent obesity. It was fun for my mother to learn what foods the animals naturally ate and prescribe which diets would work for them- Atkins for some, acai berry or cabbage soup for others. We stopped to eat lunch near the chimpanzees. As we sat there, my mother taking secretive drags from her cigarette, a baby chimp began to breast feed, pulling hard on the mother's tough black nipple. There was something about the frank intimacy of mother and baby that made our collective skin crawl. We gathered our belongings and moved on without a word. It wasn't until later that I learned chimpanzees are filial cannibals- that they're as capable of breastfeeding their young as they are eating them for lunch.

Sometimes I catch her in a murderous expression, as though with her eyes she is placing sage between my teeth, tucking thyme in my hair. It is best in such moments to remember Robinson Crusoe, nearly crippled by his paranoia, poised against the cannibals he was certain would appear with every fluctuation of the leaves. He made his body a filet, his blood a ruby wine, his soul a 9-course meal spread savagely before his enemies.

A common theme in survivalist cannibalism is the sacrifice of one for the continued existence of many.

I will no longer give her my blood to drink just because it's in her best interest to drink it.

I will not buy her a few more days only so she can die anyway, her stomach plump with my masticated organs.

But most of all, I will not give her cover from the truth that if I hadn't volunteered my life, she would have killed and eaten me anyway.

Once, I knew the wisest woman, and it was she who labeled me, referring to me as a “toxic girl.” At first I was pleased by this thorny mythology, until I realized that it was true, that because of my hijacked girlhood, I’d acted as poisonously as possible, setting a vicious trap for all who would dare taste me.

All this time, I'd hoped you would see me as whole. But even the world wasn't bound by its interlocking continents. Even the earth split apart.

Once upon a time, the apple was forbidden fruit, and Eve set the world asunder with a single bite. All the knowledge of the world was concentrated in the apple's flesh, and the transgression of taking it into her mouth resulted in my being a thinking, bleeding being, or so scripture would have one believe. If I took a piece of you in my mouth and let the taste seep in, would I inherit another world of knowledge? If by eating a part of you I could annihilate this lonely space between us, would I do it?

{ II }

The Quiet Room

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide.

-- Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus"

Write something, even if it's just a suicide note.

-- Gore Vidal

In home movies, my sister seems to me a creature of effortless golden light. She sings, she twirls in my Grandmother's pool- she is a fish, then a mermaid. Endearingly, in a dialect of girlhood, she calls me Pipe-oh instead of Piper, says "geromino" instead of "geronimo" as she makes tiny cannon balls for the camera. Ecstatically, she croons her love of us. She wants so much for us to look.

By contrast, there is me, heavy and dark, my mother's cheerful voice calling and calling me back from other worlds. It isn't clear where I've gone-- only that, in this idyllic setting, my anxiety radiates. I make the effort to dance like my sister, but really my best trick is Dead Man's Float. No fish am I, no mermaid, but rather a truly credible corpse who calls out, with unnerving stillness, to be rescued.

I try to hide from the world that I am completely broken, but it's funny how things slip through the cracks. While composing an email to my landlord about being out of town, I write: *I've been out of time for so long now* and just barely catch the mistake.

I tell everyone that writing about suicide is purely an artistic pursuit. What that really means is I am deliberating in these pages between living and dying, and if need be, I reserve the right to go off and die *quietly* and *alone*, like a cat. I love the living. I love their bright and clear advice. But I've been dead for some time now, and the more I forget what it's like to be alive, the harder it is to mimic.

At the age of 28 I find myself without a true identity. As though all my life were a coma from which I could not wake.

I've learned, on the outside, how to pass for an ordinary woman.

I feel, on the inside, like a dirty alley the wind whips through.

The first time it occurred to me that I could kill myself was in my grandparents' swimming pool. It was a breezy Florida night, and as I drifted alone at the pace of palm trees I thought: *I could just drown.*

Two days earlier, in the bitterly cold Midwest, my best friend had raped me in my childhood bedroom. I was fourteen years old, and I didn't like being in my body anymore. I felt like everyone could see and smell my hymen ripped open.

He asked me to model swimsuits I was packing for the trip. Instead of saying no, I made him leave the room and I changed into a black and white checked swimsuit with sunflowers.

To this day, I can't stand sunflowers—crops from a wounded season.

I could just drown. The voice so calm inside me.

I couldn't imagine what it would be like to never talk to him again.

It was the first time I understood that there are two people *at least* inside of every one. This creature, this monster, that my friend whom I loved turned out to be—was it there all along? Or was it culled from his body by my body, twirling in my sunflower swimsuit as his finger guided me, tracing slow circles in the air?

Goodbye, my friend, goodbye
My love, you are in my heart.
It was **preordained** we should part
And be reunited by and by.
Goodbye: no handshake **to endure**.
Let's have no **sadness** -- furrowed brow.
There's nothing new in dying now
Though living is no newer.

- Sergei Esenin
Suicide Letter Erasure

The first person I knew with bipolar disorder was Carolyn, the aunt of my childhood best friend. Carolyn was relatively normal until her early 20s, when she was found twice at the airport claiming to be the Queen of England.

When I knew her, Carolyn was always manic. She spoke so quickly and obsessively that she made herself hoarse. At family barbecues, she would climb naked into the Jacuzzi and sit on the laps of unsuspecting guests. The summer I was 12, she presented me with an elaborately wrapped gift containing several used thongs before leaving for Arizona to find love.

Out in the desert, in a time of synchronized mania, Carolyn and her 3rd husband bought a sleek red convertible with white leather interior, and it was in this car a few short months later that her husband blew his brains out. I remember my friend describing how the blood pooled against the white leather. I remember her saying that, although Aunt Carolyn needed the money, no one would buy the car because of all the secreted fragments of skull that wormed up through the seats long after the shooting had taken place.

I'm trying to remember the first time I heard that suicide existed. I'm almost positive it was in church. I remember the pastor saying that all suicides go to hell, that apart from harming children, suicide is the only sin god will not forgive. I remember being horrified by the injustice and intrigued by the weight of this. And I remember how God dislodged a little in my head.

In the movies, when someone is looking down on their family from Heaven, there is an impenetrable force field or dimensional gap that prevents them from touching the living world. Though it would seem that Heaven exists as an *end* to human suffering, those movie souls look awfully sad gazing down upon the life they used to know. I find this to be a horrible idea—that we can feel alone and full of longing even in what is meant to be our beautiful afterlife.

It's enough that the feeling here on Earth is one of hovering vaguely over those I love, willing my tenderness into them from a great distance.

It is enough to walk this city alone where everyone is a stranger, their windows bright holes in the black night.

The seasons pass with clemency, and then it's spring again and I find myself at sea.
In the maritime season, the day is long, whipped by the wind and salted by the waves as
before a funeral pyre.

Often there is no horizon, just the sky wedding the water forever.

In the waves I'm rocked delirious, inventing rocks to dash myself upon.

I am not Odysseus plugged with beeswax and fixed to the mast.

I am not Orpheus strumming my sweet lyre.

I'm alone, my ears red with raw nerves.

And the sirens, oh the sirens, they sing so slow and sweet.

In *The Art of Cruelty*, Maggie Nelson writes:

I believe that the obsessive contemplation of our inhumanities can end up convincing us of the inevitability of our badness... Perhaps the same is true of suicide. Perhaps excessive meditation on the subject of ending your life will focus your energy too far in that direction, or perhaps it desensitizes the energy, lulling the thinker into considering suicide a safe and viable option. I don't believe this is true, necessarily, but many people seem to feel this way.

Invariably, when I reveal that I'm writing a book about suicide, people worry over it, as though just thinking in an extensive way about the topic will surely kill me.

When I ask someone how they feel about the subject of suicide, they're either very opinionated or they have absolutely nothing to say.

When I tell someone I'm *writing* about suicide, they tend to find it alarming, calling my safety and sanity into question. Conversely, my intimate knowledge of suicide discredits me as someone who is able to write about it objectively.

In America, a person completes suicide every 17 minutes. Globally, 2000 people complete suicide every day. And still the subject is approached with fear and harsh judgment, treated as taboo.

The strong reactions and strange consequences resulting from my immersion in this topic have, at times, been shocking to me.

To be or not to be- it's one of the oldest questions known to man.

So why are we so terrified of exploring it?

In her meditative elegy *The Guardians*, where Sarah Manguso writes:

Some people seem to believe that suicide is available to everyone and that only the selfish accept it as a possibility.

I don't believe that suicide is available to everyone.

It was available to me only for a little while, and then a door shut between me and it. The door has stayed shut.

The first time I read this, I felt somehow forgiven. Maybe being diagnosed with bipolar disorder means that I come by my suicidality honestly, that I'm born to it, chosen or expressly permissioned for it.

When I read these words now, I feel only envy. My door has always been wide open, pulling at the hinges. At this point, even if it closed, I'd have my eyes trained on it with suspicion, listening for the sound of the handle, flinching at the slightest breeze.

The pills I used to kill myself in my most successful overdose were prescribed by Dr. Abdul Zahurullah on February 24, 2005, and filled at CVS Pharmacy. There were 42 tablets of Seroquel, 30 Lamictal, 60 Geoden, 90 Effexor, and 90 Topamax. 312 pills in all.

I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, cupping water in the palm of my right hand to swallow the pills in my left. I remember my mouth was dry and the capsules kept sticking to my tongue. I expected to feel something powerful, relief perhaps, fear, or even regret, but there was only the quiet urgency of the alien other who'd taken my place. From somewhere far away, my old self was speaking:

You are killing yourself, she warned. You are killing yourself.

In the middle of this, my mother knocked on the bathroom door.

What are you doing in there? she demanded. You're not trying to kill yourself are you?

I heard myself answer, simply, *no*.

I hid all the vials in a bathroom drawer and lay down on the living room sofa. My parents continued to watch television. My sister continued to shout at me from behind her closed bedroom door. I wrote a brief letter, which my mother would later remark was of poor quality for a writer, and then they switched off the lights, locked the doors, and everyone went to sleep.

Notes: Doctor's Office

~~morning~~
seroquel 600mg
lamactil 25mg
geoden 40mg bid
effexor xr 225mg
topamax 300mg
klonopin 0.5mg

Vials from the overdose



Piper-

You may not remember this - or maybe you remember it too well - but before one of the suicide attempts you called me and you were very sweet but very slow and sad, and you asked me the question "do you think anyone will ever love me?" And I stupidly stupidly answered as if we were having a philosophical discussion "yes, but maybe not the kind of person that you want to love you." You faded off and then I heard you'd done what you'd done...

Upon reading this email from an ex-lover, a fraction of night rushes back to me: the heaviness of my body, the way it shut down-part by part- as though from a master switch. My heart beating brutally in my head, and then the thought, just before losing consciousness, that at the age of 23 I had become irredeemable, that finally I'd made the right decision

When all usefulness is over, when one is assured of an unavoidable and **imminent** death, it is the simplest of **human** rights to choose a quick and easy death in place of a slow and **horrible one**.

-Charlotte Perkins Gilman
Suicide Letter Erasure

The famous line from Miller's *After the Fall*, "A suicide kills two people, Maggie, that's what it's for!"

The most common opinion I've come across is that suicide is a selfish act. I don't agree with this in the slightest, but then, I've never known anyone who's intentionally taken her own life. It's imperative that I look at this from every possible angle.

I want to know: what does it feel like on the other side?

I begin with a French documentary about the surviving children of suicides. Well into their 50s at the time they're interviewed, the subjects still look absolutely gnawed by grief.

A man who has outlived his father by two years says to the interviewer that he feels he has officially survived.

I think of Spalding Gray, whose mother suicided at the age of 52. I remember him believing that in his 52nd year she would appear and lure him into death. And perhaps our parents can do this if they possess even half the power in death they do in life.

My father speaks about my life with gratuitous, almost embarrassing pride, and I think it's because there was a time he couldn't brag to the neighbors, a time it was assumed I'd spend my 20s in a psych ward or a prison, or that I wouldn't make it at all.

But all I can see is how I've stalled, how far behind I am compared to my peers, how even now I squint in the light and return as quickly as possible to the darkness.

My mother changed her will two months ago to stipulate that as she ages, I will have no control over her care. I was very hurt by this but understood that because of my mood disorder, I would always be a risk. Then one night, over an ordinary dinner, she told me: *When you were in the hospital, you told me I put you someplace against your will, and that when I was old, you could do the same to me. I'm going to make sure you never do that to me. You won't be in charge of anything.*

Over the years, I've said many terrible things to my mother, especially while manic. I don't remember making that particular comment, but I have no doubt that I made it. What's strange is the way she's held onto it.

My mother understands when I am in a manic episode I am *not myself*, that I am not speaking from a place of clarity or true intention. But no matter how much people love one another, no matter how intellectually the circumstances are understood, there are always things that can't be forgiven or taken back. And sometimes it is from these things that the myth of who we are and what we mean to one another is built, shaky and gargantuan, threatening to topple us.

This is the way that, even as we live, we haunt one another.

Something I have heard over and over again: I'm not your fucking nurse.

Everyone has a breaking point and everyone, at some point, will say it.

Another common turn of phrase: If you killed yourself, I'd never get over it. You would ruin my life forever.

It's nearly Spring.

When the sky looks smudged in like this, it makes me think of oil pastels, the art classes of childhood where I invented the hazy firmament of other worlds.

I cannot think of them tonight, those far off places, without feeling the terror of the deep.

So I return instead to girlhood, games beginning with *light as a feather* but ending, even then, with the body *stiff as a board*. Games where you harnessed your lifeblood, moved it through your fingertips, used it as food to lure the dead.

Agitated, Seeking Help in Suicide Prevention Chatroom

Anonymous855 Anonymous8552 has initiated a conversation.

2:

Today 7:20

Please be patient until a Chat Specialist can join the conversation.

Jennifer: The Chat Specialist has joined the conversation.

Today 7:21

Jennifer: Welcome to the Baton Rouge Crisis Intervention Centers Crisis Chat.

Today 7:21

Jennifer: hi I'm Jennifer. Whats your name?.

Today 7:21

Anonymous855 i'd rather not say

2:

Today 7:22

Anonymous855 how are you jennifer?

2:

Today 7:22

Jennifer: i hear your feeling hesitant to tell me your name and thats ok.

Today 7:22

Jennifer: I'm good. How are you today? have you been to chat before?

Today 7:22

Anonymous855 I have not. Are you a therapist, a volunteer?

2:

Today 7:23

Jennifer: ok well i am glad you came to chat with us today. We are a cris intervention and suicide prevention service and are here to listen to you.

Today 7:24

Jennifer: what brings you to chat today?

Today 7:24

Anonymous855 right I know but what was your training ?

2:

Today 7:25

Jennifer: It sounds like your concerned about my being able to help you tonight.

Today 7:26

Anonymous855 I'm not concerned. I just would like to know. Are you not allowed to say?

Today 7:27

Anonymous855 2: I assume you're a volunteer and you've been through some form of standard training. Is that correct?
Today 7:28

Jennifer: We are trained counselors
Today 7:28

Jennifer: I am here to help you though. so what brings you to chat today.
Today 7:29

Anonymous855 2: It's so hard to be alive that I can barely stand it
Today 7:29

Jennifer: so you're having a really hard time living right now.
Today 7:30

Jennifer: Are you having thoughts of killing yourself?
Today 7:30

Anonymous855 2: I have bipolar disorder and even though I'm doing everything right it's not under control right now. I always have thoughts. By now my neural pathways are full of suicidal grooves
Today 7:31

Anonymous855 2: I feel like I'm all alone
Today 7:32

Anonymous855 2: my heart is being broken all the time
Today 7:33

Jennifer: So your feeling very alone right now and like there is no one you can talk to.
Today 7:33

Anonymous855 2: unless I am perfect no one cares to speak to me
Today 7:34

Anonymous855 2: no one is there for me. I won't let them be.
Today 7:34

Jennifer: it sounds like you are having a hard time living up to other expectations of you
Today 7:34

Anonymous855 2: if i show the slightest sign of coming undone people stop calling
Today 7:35

Anonymous855 2: the only reason I don't kill myself is because I know it would damage my family and friends. But they don't give a fuck about me in reality. So I have to spend every second of my life in agony just so I don't hurt them- these people who

wouldn't find me until I rotted anyway because they wouldn't care to look.

Jennifer:

Today 7:38

it sounds like your in a lot of pain right now and that you feel like no one really cares what happens to you.

Jennifer:

Today 7:39

I'm wondering have you ever tried to comit suicide before?

Anonymous855

2:

Today 7:40

listen jennifer I appreciate that you're trying to help but I feel like you're just following the most basic prompts. I don't know what I expect from this experience but I don't need my feelings repeated back to me. I'm very familiar with them. Is there another, more honest way for us to connect?

Anonymous855

2:

Today 7:40

Are you ever allowed to say, "that sounds really shitty. I'm sorry to hear that."?

Anonymous855

2:

Today 7:40

Or do you just follow prompts 1-15?

Anonymous855

2:

Today 7:41

I'm really not trying to be rude. I just don't want to waste your time if you can't help me.

Jennifer:

Today 7:43

I'm just trying to understand where you are coming from and understand what your going through. i understand your feeling frustrated right now. what are you hoping to get from chatting today?

Anonymous855

2:

Today 7:44

I don't think there's anything I can get from this. I appreciate your effort. And it's what YOU'RE going through. Not your. Take care Jennifer.

We cannot limit our understanding of eros to that place where my body ends and yours begins as Anne Carson so eloquently describes in *Eros the Bittersweet*. To some extent, our small flirtations with death are also a kind of eros. In fucking, sleeping, smoking a cigarette, not wearing a safety belt, we are actively leaning into the void, and so long as we are leaning, a part of ourselves is gone.

From an early age, I fell in love with women who radiated the death drive. It was like a lyric from Joni Mitchell's "A Case Of You": *I'm frightened by the devil and I'm drawn to those ones that ain't afraid.*

My fascination began with Janis Joplin and Sylvia Plath, whose suffering felt seared into me, and then there was the first girl I loved, who shot enough dope to learn first-hand that she was nine-lived, just barely.

I want her to know that I am, in so many incredible ways, of her making. We spent so much time writing together, and over the years I've written four essays, two novels, and a series of sestinas inspired in some way by her. But she spent the last of her lives nine years ago this April before I knew how to tell her these things, before I even knew how deeply I felt them.

Before I knew how my reverence for her body, and then the knowledge of her body-- stiff and Krishna blue-- would infiltrate and haunt me in ways I never imagined.

My first time in San Francisco, I worried about the Golden Gate Bridge. It was the first time I'd be close enough to jump, and I felt Sirens perched everywhere, draping themselves from the thin cables or hovering just above the bay.

Everywhere that weekend women were overdosing in the street, beautiful women being slapped and shaken and carried out of bars and loaded into ambulances. I could see them collapsing below me from my hotel balcony, limp and underworld white. It was as though the sheer fatality of the bridge was noxious, wafting over the whole city. Dozens of sleeping beauties falling prey.

I do not want to be that woman anymore, and I don't want to be her lover either. I cannot go back to San Francisco, lured as I am by the bridge making its black X's upon the water.

Since you ask, most days I cannot remember.

I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage.

Then the almost unnameable lust returns.

Even then I have nothing against life.

I know well the grass blades you mention,

the furniture you have placed under the sun.

But suicides have a special language.

Like carpenters they want to know which tools.

They never ask why build.

From "Waiting to Die" by Anne Sexton

It was Eliot in his poem “The Wasteland” who taught us April is the cruelest month, but this is not merely a poetic notion. Statistically, more people attempt suicide in April than any other time of the year by an estimated six percent.

This strange truth is mirrored in my own life. All my attempts at suicide have either been planned or executed in April. Spring looms for me. I want to know why it holds such formidable power.

The first lines of *The Wasteland*:

April is the cruelest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

Memory and desire, stirring

Dull roots with spring rain.

I remember the lilac shrubs from childhood, their heart-shaped leaves. Recall that, once planted, they live on hundreds of years past the person who planted them.

In his exploration of Eliot, essayist David Lazar writes, “April... creates confusion because it throws us back, in the direction of memory, at the same time as we are thawing forward- such is desire.”

For those with manic depression, the friction of two opposing states experienced simultaneously is referred to as a “mixed state.” In a mixed state, where the painful depressive feelings resulting from suicidal ideation coexist with the manic energy to carry them out, the desire to die is often fatal.

Question:

How are you supposed to live through April, the season, if it is already and always April inside of you?

In her book *Weekends at Bellvue: A Memoir*, Dr. Julie Holland begins with the danger of spring:

In March and April, our ER becomes crowded with manic patients. For many bipolars, there is a seasonality to their symptoms. Just as more people get depressed in the winter months, increased exposure to bright sunlight can elevate moods.

And then, she makes this fascinating connection:

Also, the air is heady with religious themes during spring, when Easter and Passover coincide. The resurrection is reenacted in the budding trees and sprouting flowers, miraculously coming to life where once lay a blanket of snow. We get multiple Jesuses in the ER this time of year.

Come To Jesus

His given name was Daniel, but on the inside he thought he was Jesus, and no amount of medication or electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) could shake him of this belief. When I was admitted to the hospital I believed, in my manic state, that I could speak to the dead, but even I was impressed by the grandiosity of Daniel's psychosis. He'd only answer to Jesus or J.C., though the nurses wouldn't call him that. At dinner, he'd speak of how it felt to walk on water. He'd say he had come to befriend the whores of the world, and could name every whore he had been with. There were many. He could have been making them up.

I'd been on the outside for three weeks when Daniel called me. I didn't remember giving him my number. Someone had finally convinced him he might be mortal, so he was calling to ask for my hand in marriage. When I said absolutely not, he asked if he could at least live with me for a while when he got out. He would live in the attic. Anything would be fine.

I live with my parents I told him. *There's no way they'd allow it.*

In that case, (his voice full of hurt), could you at least just bring me some books?

If Daniel had any family, he never spoke of them and they'd never come to visit, which meant that Daniel, probably a lifer, had no access to the outside world.

I said I would bring him the books.

But then I thought it might be dangerous for me to be in contact with him. What if he kept calling me? What if he got out one day and came looking for me?

So I stopped answering the phone, and after a time, he stopped calling, and to this day it feels like one of the worst things I've ever done.

Last week, I was relating all of this to a friend.

Wouldn't it be awful, she asked, if he really was Jesus, and it was only a novel between you and heaven, but now you're going to hell?

Prior to 1823, it was common practice in England to bury a suicide at a crossroads with a stake driven through her heart.

To think of this in the literal sense is heartbreaking and shows the sometimes vicious attitude people adopt toward mental suffering. But it is also the truest, most beautiful metaphor, I would imagine, for the way those people moved through the world—wounded, deeply ambivalent, always on the precipice.

Often, the difference between someone who's suicidal and someone who's never seriously considered it is linked closely to the amount of serotonin produced by the brain.

People with low levels of serotonin are 6 to 10 times more likely to commit suicide.

6 to 10 times!

But even then, suicide is an acquired ability. To work against your own evolutionary instincts in order to disassociate from your body enough to kill it is difficult, a skill developed over time.

The inner voice driving this disassociation has been described among psychologists as "the anti-self."

Once the anti-self is strong enough, it will take the average person six times before she succeeds in dying.

How To Make The World Your Graveyard

Rub out your superego like the unsuspecting beauty in a snuff film.

Say yes to everyone, let them all in, let them crawl around and over and inside you until your body is a series of sore holes belonging to no one.

Forget the woman whose body you were born from. Eradicate the memory of lovers who were tender and kind. Slice and mangle your now tough exterior because relief is relief.

Take that cliché of hurting the outside to hush the inside to new levels by filling your mouth with pills and pistols and co2.

Now, you are nothing but a body. Now, you'll go into the ground. And yes, the soil will cover your casket and yes, the flesh begins to fall away, and yes you have wasted your one shot at existence, but the important thing is that your brain has been defeated, yes, the mutiny has been successful, and it is now impossible for your brain to hurt you, yes, there is no way your brain can hurt you ever again.

April 2003- Two Weeks Before Suicide Attempt

I am so alone
that if I died
no one would know
my studio would
be thick w/ the
smell of rot before
anyone would even
think to extract
my corpse

And I don't take
those pills anymore
what's the point
who am I getting
better for
what bright future
seems w/in reach
what do I dream
for myself?

Nothing.

I am on loanable
of every attempt
I make at normalcy
exaggerates the
awkwardness

I wish so much that
I could die

One of the most convincing arguments for suicide:

When I die, I will not see myself die, for the first time.

-- Antonio Porchia, *Voces*, 1943

Translated from Spanish by W.S. Merwin

Once, instead of overdosing, I had just enough self-control to go to the psychiatric emergency room, but they refused to take me seriously. So I started throwing things at the receptionist, burning myself with cigarettes right there in the waiting room, and soon enough they strapped me down and shot me full of haldol.

And even though I had come for this very reason, to be strapped down, I wasn't prepared for how it made me feel. *Look at yourself*, I was thinking, *it has finally come to this, you've made it, you are the cliché of a mental patient, you are a trapped animal, is it how you imagined it would be?*

I was twisting and spitting and rocking the cot the best I could, trying to break free. It was one of those things where you leave your body and its violent, you're being violent, but you're doing it from way up there on the ceiling and from there, it's pure cinema as though your strapped down self is Frances Farmer and this craziness, isn't it all so strange? Isn't it all something you learned from a movie anyway?

The Last Time I Saw Richard

Richard was very tall, very pale. Never spoke a word to anyone. But for some reason, he kept falling down. He'd be on his way to breakfast, and out of nowhere he'd start clawing at the walls and sliding, slow and heavy, all the way to the floor.

How many obvious metaphors apply to his situation? His mental anguish was so deep his body couldn't house it.

I remember the nurses were rough with him, that they cursed at him when he began to slide. That every time he reached the floor they threw him in the quiet room like he deserved to be punished, like he'd done it intentionally just to upset them.

The quiet room was developed in direct response to the failure of the straightjacket, which between 1988 and 1992 resulted in the deaths of 18 people in New York alone. In place of the actual bodily restraint of the straightjacket in which the arms are immobilized, patients who are violent, angry, capable of self-harm, or presenting a threat to hospital staff are placed in a secluded room with a mattress on the floor-- the quiet room—where they will be administered sedatives and left to calm down.

Some patients have lauded this change as a good one, saying the quiet room helps them to get away from the stress of the ward and relax. But the reasons a person might be placed in the quiet room are entirely subjective, and in many hospitals, the possibility of seclusion is used as a threat or a way of dealing with patients the hospital staff doesn't have the patience for.

When I think of my own time in the quiet room, of being made to fit in the smallest, most silent space when I was at my loudest and most enormous, it seems like it must have happened to somebody else. It occurs to me, as I sit in the stately classrooms of graduate school, that not so long ago I was court-ordered into captivity, then deemed unfit for captivity. Isolated from the pack. Peered in upon.

To be left in the quiet room is a profound experience, though not at the time. Inside the quiet room, you are no longer human, but a creature. Crying out for help will only result in longer imprisonment, so you are on your own in a way you never imagined. There is nothing to do but abandon your white-hot anger and surrender to the notion you are dangerous and deserving of punishment.

If you cannot accept this and go limp in the face of your fury, you'll be locked inside that room for as long as it takes.

What's more, you only need to be locked in the quiet room once to know, from that point on, some small part of you will be locked away in there forever.

In the canon of crazy, *Girl, Interrupted* by Susanna Kaysen is one of the most celebrated works. In that book, Kaysen makes the argument that encountering the reality of death obliterates the fantasy. But this can only be true for a while. Eventually you will forget what it was like to feel your heart stop, what it felt like to come out of your coma. You forget because you have to forget. There is simply no way to live with that level of anxiety. And the more you forget, the more likely it is that you will succumb again to the fantasy, which hasn't really been unmasked after all.

Nothing short of your own death will unmask it. And this is what we call a vicious cycle.

Manic

Because ultimately
though we have no way
of expressing what the
moment of death is like
having never been through it
I like to think there is
some kind of spontaneous
implosion, a rocket launcher
where our souls are
sent to that dark murky
median of space.

In pretty sure right
before you die, you
feel nothing but
panic. And then you're
gone, that's the note
you went out on.

I'd love to feel human again
like when I went to NY
& craned my neck in every
direction till possibility
gave me palpitation.

A common feature of the psychotic break is that the afflicted person believes she is capable of tapping into other worlds. Nothing in normal society can compete with the conversations in her head, which are often had with christ, or his father, or some variation thereof.

During my worst psychotic break, I remained an anti-theist, but I did believe that I could speak to the dead: namely Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf, who are, arguably, my gods.

When I spoke with Plath, it was always something menacing. She curled around me, shook the bed at night, tittered wetly in my ear with her oven-hot breath.

When I spoke with Woolf, the conversation was cool and languorous, like my favorite passages from *To the Lighthouse*. Most of the time we lay in the dark together and calmly, meditatively, counted the stones it would take to sink.

Tuesday.

Dearest.

I feel certain that I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have given me the greatest possible happiness. You have been in every way all that anyone could be. I don't think two people could have been happier till this terrible disease came. I can't fight any longer. I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work. And you will I know. You see I can't even write this properly. I can't read. What I want to say is I owe all the happiness of my life to you. You have been entirely patient with me and incredibly good. I want to say that - everybody knows it. If anybody could have saved me it would have been you. Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness. I can't go on spoiling your life any longer. I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been.

V.

Tuesday (18 March 1941)

Dearest

I feel certain I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear **voices**, and I can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. **You have given me** the greatest possible happiness. You have been in every way all that anyone could be. I don't think two people could have been happier till **this terrible disease** came. I can't fight any longer. I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work. And you will I know. You see I can't even write this properly. I can't read. What I want to say is I owe all the happiness of my life to you. You have been entirely patient with me and incredibly good. I want to say that - **everybody knows it**. If anybody could have saved me it would have been you. **Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness**. I can't go on **spoiling** your life any longer. I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been.

V.

To combat the airlessness of depression, I've been embracing the role of writer-as- flâneur. My favorite part of the daily walk is the violin shop on 13th street.

From what I can tell, someone makes violins on the ground floor of this beautiful house and lives on the top floor where, through the windows, I see a grand piano, dozens of fresh red roses, even a view of the mountains in Indian summer.

Instead of dying, I leave my life behind for a while, pretend I'm the violinmaker. I imagine the smell of polished wood—Maple, Spruce, and Ebony—imagine my fingers pulling taut the strings which, I learn, are made from guts or solid steel. And then I imagine retiring upstairs and breathing in the fresh cut roses, listening to Bach's Cello Suites as the sun drops suddenly over the mountains like yolk from a cracked egg.

Today, I decided to research the violinmaker, thought maybe I would go and learn the truth about his life.

When I typed his address into a search engine, the only thing that came up was his newly rendered obituary.

It is remarkable to consider that humans are the only creatures in existence who know they are going to die.

Psychiatrist Ron Leifer writes:

When animals experience fear they're experiencing a present danger which is either a predator or a fire or some threat to their life and their response to that is the fight/flight reaction. They either fight the predator or flee from the predator. We also experience fear when we're confronted by a present danger. We can anticipate future dangers and we can imagine future dangers but the physiology is the same fight/flight reaction because the body can't tell the difference between the past and the future.

If we are honest, most of us regard death somewhat anxiously. Very few of us are not afraid to die-- and that fear warps and limits us in countless ways, some that we recognize and some we can't even imagine.

Add to this the fact that death is our only certainty.

William Cowper:

In a fleshy tomb, I am buried above ground.

The girl I loved, nine-lived-- It has been nine years since she died and recently everyone got together and wrote her a letter laying out their worn and despicable tropes. And I thought how strange it is that people clamor to be close to the dead even, or perhaps especially, when they know nothing about them. It would seem, in this context, that we use the dead as a porthole into our own death, that in mourning them, we are safely but viscerally mourning ourselves.

In his poem “We Were Emergencies,” Buddy Wakefield writes:

We can stick anything into the fog and make it look like a ghost.

But tonight let us not become tragedies.

We are not funeral homes

with propane tanks in our windows

lookin’ like cemeteries.

Cemeteries are just the Earth’s way of not letting go.

Let go.

I'm beginning to understand why I leave the people I love. I worry I won't be able to protect them, provide them stability, guarantee them any semblance of a peaceful life. There have been a few, the beautiful-hearted, who wish to stand by me through it all, and I feel fortunate for that. Conversely, it is these very people whom I most want to liberate from my illness. The more deeply loyal a person is to me, the more I feel they deserve to be free of me: my selfishness, my chaos, the highs and lows that have come, more than any other factor, to define me.

No More Games. No More Bombs. No More Walking. No More Fun. **No More** Swimming. 67. That **is** 17 years past 50. 17 more than I **needed** or wanted. Boring. I am always bitchy. No Fun — for anybody. 67. **You are getting Greedy**. Act your **old** age. Relax — This won't **hurt**.

-Hunter S. Thompson
Suicide Letter Erasure

I started dating recently in order to being fresh. I wanted a chance to present myself as someone dependable and true.

This created two separate but distinct problems.

The first of these was that when my craziness was revealed, it became a charming back-story, occasionally a fetish, most often a presumed exaggeration. And I would play into this, offering up my crazy stories, editing the bits too horrible for human consumption. I was good at presenting myself as wild and free or wounded, sympathetic, and on the wrong end of a raw deal. So good that I started to believe it myself.

Then April came, and I started to lose my mind like usual, but in this new life of mine, confiding in anyone was out of the question. Instead, I behaved bizarrely, the secrets adding up until I felt that they could kill me, or worse, turn me into a sociopath.

How is it, I wondered, that I've constructed so many different personalities, and every last one of them feels in the end like dying?

In order to feel truly accepted, I had to make contact with the ex-lover who was there when I went crazy. I apologized, reconstructed, deconstructed our lives together and all the events that led up to us deciding we should never speak again.

To know that someone saw me when I was no better than a creature and to know that person thought it was worth the work to love me still—that was more redemptive than any other kind of progress or revelation, any kind of therapy. It was as though the wounds that had been weeping all those years had sewn themselves tenderly shut.

Letter to the Director of *Suicide*

Dear Sir-

Let me begin by saying that I'm sorry for the loss of your brother. I cannot pretend to know your anger or your anguish, and I won't pretend that I want to know it. Sometimes in life our pain is so unspeakable that there is no consolation we can offer one another that might even begin to let in the light.

I watched your documentary because I myself am suicidal. I disclose this information because as I was watching your film, I felt loathing and disgust toward the people who killed themselves and left their families behind, when the truth is that the difference between me and them is a single haphazard coincidence.

I get the impression that you are a spiritual man, that you believe in the teachings of the Bible, and that you are no doubt deeply ambivalent regarding what is written there about suicides. In your film, you interview a gravedigger who believes all suicides should go to hell, and while I might be very much mistaken, it seemed like you might at least partially agree. And that, more than anything, is why I feel compelled to write this letter.

In many ways, the film you made was a brave one. You examined the aftermath of suicide at its most gruesome. Perhaps you made the conscious decision that showing any sympathy for the suicidal state would be a kind of permission you were not willing to grant. Perhaps you yourself are working so hard to survive that your anger toward the dead necessarily buoys you up.

But what if the only grace is that which we grant one another?

If your brother could speak, I know he would be sorry for the anguish he has caused you. I wanted to tell you something Thoreau said: The gun gives you the body, not the bird.

For what it's worth, I'd like to thank you for making that film and providing me with another crucial perspective.

I do not believe in hell, and I don't believe in prayer, but I do believe the survivors of suicides should qualify for sainthood, no matter how angry they feel.

You can bet I will be thinking of you.

Most Sincerely,

Piper J. Daniels

February. The nights are cold and wet, though not nearly so inhospitable as last year's winter. The Sound seems to be calling me, leaching the salt, the sweat, a rocking motion I invented to curb my sorrow.

When I moved here from Chicago, I remember driving through the mountains and feeling, as they hung just over my head, like I was the god of low clouds. I was at my most literal then: *I could find heaven here.*

I didn't know then about the unrelenting darkness of winter, the whirl of construction around the suicide bridge, how you're driven into all the lonesome bars, the palpable disappointment of just barely enough crystallizing at two a.m., making something hardened of your heart.

I keep thinking of Midwestern summer, those snaking roads where the husks, woozy with heat, hold you in place, and the sky is so far and so faded, there's no question whether you belong to the dirt.

It feels sometimes that all my recollections of childhood can all be reduced to omens.

For instance, fishing those cool June mornings with my mother: the horror of hooking nightcrawlers. It wasn't much to cash in their souls for bait, not so unthinkable to murder them either. It was the way they split in half, both parts writhing away from the whole, the depraved race of it, ending always at noon, when the day was hot enough to crisp the setae and mucus of each, and each would lose to the sun.

On our third date, Sarah tells me she saved her mother from a suicide attempt in the bathroom of her childhood home.

What did it feel like? I ask.

I don't know, she says. I guess it made me feel like my loving someone could make them disappear.

Night after night, I dream I am being held captive. Feverishly, I beg for my mother to rescue me, but she can't hear me. Somehow, I can sense that she and I are no longer part of the same world.

Eventually, I come to understand I am dead, that I never made it out of my coma to begin with. And now I'm a prisoner of limbo, which is nothing more than a claustrophobic room heavy and dark with rot.

It is so strange in limbo that I don't know how to escape. It's like living in a Kathy Acker story.

Tied to the radiator, I learn how to sing.

It has been said of the sirens that if we could only find a way to sail past their sweet music, they would fall lifeless into the sea.

Having passed them once, I believed wholly in their defeat.

Now I know they move from rock to rock, amending their bruised melodies. Like all great sopranos, they're saving their voices for the next big performance. Hoping to never again find myself under their spell, I listen for them closely, expecting swelling melodies to assail me everywhere I go.

In *The Silence of the Sirens*, Kafka writes:

Now the Sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence. And though admittedly such a thing never happened, it is still conceivable that someone might possibly have escaped from their singing; but from their silence certainly never.

Tonight I'm listening to Nina Simone's "Lilac Wine" on repeat. Here is spring as hypnosis, a dark, hallucinatory haze:

I made wine from the lilac tree

Put my heart in its recipe

It makes me see what I want to see...

And be what I want to be

Perhaps I am biased, but I tend to believe that only someone with manic depression could sing so alluringly of delusion.

When I think more than I want to think

Do things I never should do

I drink much more than I ought to drink

Because it brings me back you...

The "you" there is so much more than any lover. The "you," could be hypomania, the "you" could be nothing short of death. It's as though we're witnessing Simone at the height of a woozy, white-hot fever, moving toward that terrible thing lost inside that she can never recover.

Listen to me, she demands, why is everything so hazy?

And then her voice gives way to something unbearably soft, and she asks, *isn't that he, or am I going crazy dear?*

Thick-tongued, light-headed, she asks if she is crazy like someone who knows, someone who has always known, the answer.

When I am dead, and over me **bright April**
Shakes out her rain drenched hair,
Tho you should lean **above me** broken hearted,
I shall not care.
For I shall have peace.
As leafy trees are peaceful
When rain bends down the bough.
And I shall **be** more **silent** and cold hearted
Than you are **now**.

- Sarah Teasdale
Suicide Letter Erasure

This past year, my friend Christina was killed when a stage collapsed at the Indiana State Fair.

It's all on video. I've watched the video over and over. How quickly and forcefully it happens. One gust of wind, and then my friend is dead, and it's almost as though a giant strolling god kicked the stage over with his big toe, then clapped delightedly as it all fell down.

The only place I can see her now is her facebook page, where it's hard sometimes to believe she is no longer living. I see the number of times she has been spotted on the bus, or drinking blueberry vodka in some faraway town. I discover all the people to whom she appeared in a dream. I read about girls who send her their mothers once their mothers are gone, and I see how movements spring up along all the land she ever touched because people were so moved by her courage.

She still receives a daily horoscope:

Aries: This is a terrific day for just getting out and being seen.

-It's an incredibly romantic day for your sign.

-You may find you are making social connections

Because I miss her, I pretend these horoscopes still speak to her wherever she is now. I pretend they are codes forming the narrative of her afterlife.

And I still write to her as though she receives my messages.

Dear Christina,

*I have a photograph of you taped over my writing desk, and in it your eyes are like the
Mona Lisa, following me everywhere.*

When I speak with other writers about suicide, men in particular tend to be concerned with the question of creation. As in, how could someone who loves making art be so intent on destruction? And after all, isn't suicide the antithesis of creativity?

A paper published in the *Review of General Psychology* posits that poetry is likely to draw in unstable characters, and that unlike other forms of writing, poetry does nothing to alleviate mental illness. Additionally, the paper argues, poets are expected to be insane- in fact, they are rewarded for it. And finally, it is stated that poets tend to peak at a younger age when the onset of mental illness is more likely.

The paper further concludes that of all writers, female poets are the most susceptible to mental illness.

This finding by psychologist James C. Kaufman is quite literally called "The Sylvia Plath Effect."

I feel her inside me at four in the morning: Sylvia, that silent sifting other.
Often, I am fresh from the nightmare where I realize the typewriter keys are really the
tips of her fingers, all bone, the flesh falling away.

Why do I feel as though I exist in the cold soil of her crawl space, our bodies
parallel in the darkness, waiting to be emptied of all their furtive confessions?

This is a cliché, my love of poetry's great suicidal WASP. Sylvia's daughter,
Frieda, has written about it extensively:

They can die through her

Without ever making

The decision. My buried mother

Is up-dug for repeat performances.

But I do not love Sylvia for dying. I want no part of her great tap root, or of mine.

I hate to imagine that February morning when the oven hummed like one of her
father's hives, drawing her in. When I do, I am aware that poetry is a poltergeist, that it
can enter you like electricity at four every morning until the manuscript is through, and
then discard the husk of you.

Dybbuk: The soul of a suicide who is issued a second chance at life through the occupying of a human host.

Sylvia wrote to her mother that she was thus inhabited. Sometimes, I feel I might be too. It is a more interesting way of explaining that silent, sifting other inside who insists on seeing all the world as a graveyard.

Of my momentary death, I remember this:

I did not enter a gilded tunnel flowing
with harp crescendo and alabaster light.
My dead Grandmother did not glide in
and lead, with her lovely white hair,
to a heaven.

Over the years, tiny slivers of memory have brought amnesiac events from that time to the surface, but of my 60 odd seconds of flatlining, still nothing.

To some, the idea that nothing is waiting on the other side could be devastating, but I find it incredibly soothing. Heaven and Hell are, at best, two halves of another excessive polarity, and polarities, after all, are what drove me to death in the first place.

In my mind, there are two girls, light and dark. But I know this isn't the truth.

I know that even though I tried to die over and over, causing my family
unspeakable pain, it was my sister who tried it first.

On her 16th birthday, my sister went out for a family dinner. On the way home, she asked my mother to stop at the local CVS, where she bought four boxes of sleeping pills. Once home, she locked herself in her room, laid in the closet she and I had covered in pink handprints when we were kids and waited until everyone went to sleep before swallowing the contents of all four boxes. My father found her the next morning, seizing and foaming at the mouth in the corner of her room, nearly dead.

My sister was never sent, as I would be so many times, to an inpatient psychiatric ward. In Intensive Care, they hooked her up to an IV and a catheter and “monitored” her for 72 hours, during which time, from shock or trauma, she reached a sharp, frightening lucidity, unleashing years of pent up hatred on my unsuspecting parents in what seemed almost like an act of possession.

By the time I arrived, my sister was home. My mother had taken her door off the hinges and removed everything from her bedroom but the mattress. If they weren’t going to admit my sister, my mother was going to create her own little quiet room. For much of her 16th year on the planet, my sister wasn’t even allowed to go to the bathroom on her own.

It was the night of her 16th birthday. She’d gone to Olive Garden with our grandparents and stopped on the way home at CVS, where she bought four boxes of extra strength sleeping pills. She locked herself in her room, which once contained the wallpaper of bright clouds in blue skies but had since been covered with hundreds of photos of Kurt Cobain, and she laid in the closet and swallowed the contents of all four boxes.

When my father went to wake her for school the next day, she was seizing in the closet, foaming at the mouth.

For some reason, no one thought it was necessary for her to go inpatient. They held her for 72 hours in intensive care, and during that time she exhibited a lucid rage that seemed more like possession.

The Pact (for my sister)

Between the white and the green winter,
between the two of us,
who is the fugitive?
It has been snowing.
Our cigarettes fall from the balcony
like wounded captains.

The moon is of the moor,
my head something like heather.
How long ago was it we bloated
our dolls, blued
their lips, buried them in
shoe boxes beneath the evergreens?

It seemed we were always
shivering then.
What was that Stein
said about queens,
that they open and shut
like shutters?



We had a death

pact,
I have **to** keep
my half of the
bargain.

Please bury me
PTO

Next to **my baby**
Bury me in **my**
Leather jacket
Jeans and motor
Cycle boots

Good bye.

-Sid Vicious
Suicide Letter Erasure

I know my mother feels a tremendous sense of guilt that both her children are would-be suicides. She tends to be very defensive about it. *Your father and I gave you a beautiful childhood*, she'll say. And really, she's right, though we both know it's not so simple as that. It's only after everyone has gone to bed and we're sneaking cigarettes in the lake-dappled darkness that she'll say it has all been her fault. She'll say it so quiet that it's swallowed immediately by the enormity of night and you can't be certain whether she said it to begin with.

For a long time, I made her the villain. But the truth is, it's my mother who found me, drove me to the emergency room, and knelt on the floor to pray when I flat-lined. It was my mother who camped bedside all through my coma, and my mother who celebrated mother's day in a psych ward protecting me from the wounded look I had given her.

My father was not there for those things. Not because he didn't want to be, but because he was working, is always working, absolutely had to work. That's the story we've all agreed upon, and I never questioned it until one of those rare nights when my mother wanted to confess and she kept using the word "*alone.*" *I prayed on the hospital floor "alone."*

So what is it about our family that causes young girls to suicide? It's true that in our youth our parents somewhat abandoned us, but their greatest fault, it would seem, would be the combining of their own faulty genetics. Sarah has major depression, I have bipolar disorder, and at the end of the day, that's really nobody's fault.

Over the years, Sarah and I have talked endlessly about our experiences with suicide. Sometimes, we have gone too far. Sometimes we've said unforgivable things. But we are in many ways bound together by this strange knowledge only we can share. Nowadays, we even joke about it.

Like the cat, we say, like the cat I have nine times to die.

We don't mean to, but we do it anyway: we make Werthers of one another.

Predictions of the Magic 8-Ball

Will I commit suicide? *Definitely.*

Will I jump from the Golden Gate Bridge? *Absolutely!*

Will I die in the next five years? *Outlook not so good.*

Will I die in the next two years? *Absolutely!*

Am I going to lose my mind again? *You may rely on it.*

These answers seem as reliable as any.

A black box records pilots' voices in cockpits right before they crash, and when they're recovered, all that was said can be analyzed for future use.

Sometimes it's as though a black box is lodged in the center of my body. Had it dislodged after I died for that moment, it would have been discovered in a field or the ocean, containing the details of my suicide.

It feels to me like my black box stopped recording that night, designed, after all, to survive a single disaster. And now it plays the same emergent event on a loop in the hollows of the same vessel, and now it's all that I feel or know.

And these pages are the transcripts of my big crash, before they are expunged of all emotion and released to the public as a helpful example of what not to do.

To have a black box is to have a witness to your terror.

It is not the same thing as having a heart.

It is exhausting to speak solely of depression: all the pain concentrated like amber, and me singularly obsessed with harvesting it from the bottom of the Baltic, casting my net obsessively, no matter the storm.

What is to be gained by looking at pain this way- outmoded, fixed, fossilized against new meaning? It is the safest way, the coward's way, of remembering all that came to pass.

Here is what the distillation of pain excludes. Here is what I've neglected to mention: the ecstasy. Uncontainable, irrational, overpowering ecstasy. How I loved it and I feared it. How I didn't know at first that those feelings of wonder and beauty were really terrible omens masquerading as grace.

And finally, to come full circle, how it feels to fall from grace and realize at the very bottom it was never grace to begin with.

From an interview with Dr. J. Holland:

Like being high on hallucinogens, mania can provide a sense of wonder and awe at the realization of how the universe works. It's easier to access the macro, to pull back and see the big picture. Often there is a feeling that "everything is connected," a realization in common with experiences on psychedelics and with mystical religious epiphanies. There are likely neurochemical similarities between the mystical, psychedelic, and manic states.

Chicago, 2003. I am looking out the window of my studio apartment when the knowledge of pleasure drops so deeply and suddenly into me that I lose my balance.

I rush out into the street, where the trees are so lush, so narcotic, that song rises from the branches like steam. For the first time I fall in love with the rats obese from summer scavenging, and I am no longer afraid of the homeless man on the corner who hisses vulgarities at me from the mouth of his vagabond canine puppet.

I walk into a bar, order a double whiskey, and move alone the way I would against the bartender's body, using my eyes to annihilate the space between us. For years I have wanted to take her shirt in my teeth, push her into the street, rock my fingers inside her right there at the corner of Belmont and Clark. And that night, she asks me to stay until closing time, presses my body into the alley, fucks me so hard that as I come, I tear all the ivy down.

From that time, I remember everything:

The taste of my sweat commingling with her sweat.

The lingering aromas of motor oil, sewers, cigarettes, and perfume shifting as one neighborhood gave way to the next.

The precise speed of the aroused orbit of my hips.

The agony of ice cubes plucked from the glass and applied to the neck while a beautiful woman holds my damp, dark hair in her fist.

This is how hypomania begins. This is how it takes root in your heart.

While it is true that human beings can only bear so much reality, we're not supposed to experience otherworldly rapture either. Which is to say, the pleasure of hypomania is not organic, not something the earthly can earn. There is no euphoria that contends with hypomania- that beautiful country between depression and mania, proper. Similar to the ecstasy of heroin, hypomania always comes with a terrible price. Once you have known it, your time outside of it feels like being scorned, flung like an oozing insect back to the spoiled, scorched earth.

At the beginning of my illness, I was innocent. When hypomania hit, I assumed that somehow, I had finally joined the living, that this sense of joy was actually how normal people felt all the time. But I know better now. I know that feeling is brief- its aftermath brutal. I know that hypomania is your disease sweet-talking its way into you.

And still, by drinking and drugging and titrating sleep, I try to wring the hypomania from my brain. I love it so much that I will do almost anything to feel it.

What if all your desires became warnings?

On Vertigo

It is not the woman Scottie wants-- never the woman-- but rather the woman who runs beneath her. With traces of Kansas still coarsening her, it is by no fault of her own that Judy cannot satisfy Scottie. His macabre cravings create their own current. This is why Madeleine moves beneath Judy and Carlotta beneath Madeleine, and this is the way they swim together, the women and their underworld counterparts. Judy knows never to ask the necrophile why he pretends each kiss is the last. She simply accepts it is her fault, acknowledges that she is not enough. Because she is inadequate, Judy will borrow Madeleine's golden hair, her table at Ernie's, her paranormal emerald light. Judy knows that in loving a necrophile, it is best to play Eurydice, to draw Orpheus out of her lover slowly as though extracting a thin splinter. She is waiting in the garden of Cerberus, bursting with poison, hoping for nothing so much as sleep.

Do you believe that someone out of the past, someone dead, can enter and take possession of a living being? Elster asks Scottie, and though at the time Scottie is skeptical of the question, it becomes a kind of ontology for his desire. Scottie will go on to kill the girl he loves repeatedly because "love" and "mourn" have become hopelessly interchangeable. In order to express affection, Scottie must say: Judy, I mourn you.

I would love to say that if I were Judy, I would embrace my gifts as a grifter and wear my hair loose and black. But I know how it feels to never be Madeleine. I know, as Kundera writes, that vertigo is not the fear of falling, but rather the desire to fall, the lure of the emptiness below us that thrills and terrifies as we lean into the

precipice. I know I would be the girl who falls from the tower as someone else, consumed by her own inelegant terror and the knowledge that no matter what, she will never be enough.

Recently, I met a girl who lost her mind last June. She's taken to following me, and some nights, I can taste her mania in the air: something like freshly sawed sheet metal, that coppery taste of blood, singed smell of electricity.

She wants to sleep with me, and there was a night, a while back, when I'd had far too much whiskey, and she seemed so willing, and I wanted very much to touch her, if only just to hold her still.

I nearly did to her the terrible thing that was done to me: used her because she was vulnerable and difficult to be around and in some horrible way, I considered it the price of my company.

Even if it's just as simple as feeling flattered by what is actually a symptom, her manic libido, how did I become so callous? Why wasn't my first instinct to protect her?

It was scary at first, her following me. I couldn't decide if she was a person who needed my help or an omen, a dark figure from the past intent on stalking me down and dismantling me.

Not to mention that here I am, tunneling to the core of my Great Manic Episode, tunneling because I've lost every trace of craziness along the surface, and here she is: glowing with it, smelling of it, in the throes of it.

A girl who is truly crazy carries the look of someone who is at once lit up and brutalized by the thing inside her. She may not have bathed, she may have shaved her head, or perhaps her hair is falling out from medication and ECT. Usually she'll be fattened from lithium and hospital food, mutilated from head to toe by her own knives and cigarettes. Certainly, she will be helpless, but also so feral that, to look at her, you would never know it.

The mentally ill woman as portrayed by Hollywood is derived from the Ophelias and Medeas of theater past. Psychiatrist Sharon Packer describes that the appeal of such a woman is derived from a combination of feminine insecurity and male heroism. Packer writes:

“Women can console themselves, thinking, ‘That woman is really attractive, but she's crazy, so I'm better than she is,’ while men get ‘the Sir Lancelot feeling. Men might be more attracted to someone who has a degree of helplessness: being crazy is being helpless.’”

Aside from its decidedly heterosexual trajectory, Packer's assessment of crazy-girl-on-film pathology is well taken. But her assertion that “being crazy is being helpless” misses the mark considerably. True craziness isn't being helpless; it's being so profoundly sad or viciously manic or frighteningly psychotic that it renders everyone around you helpless. So helpless that they have no choice but to lock you away where you can't hurt yourself or anyone else. I've certainly known people with the “Lancelot feeling.” I've even seriously dated one or two. But in general, when I've been manic or depressed, no one has considered me helpless. They have either been irritated or utterly terrified.

As for the idea that sane women use crazy women as a scapegoat for their sexual insecurities... All I have to add is that everyone knows crazy women are better in bed.

The last time I was in the hospital, I wore the same blue t-shirt every day with no bra because bras were not allowed. I wore pajama pants that were bloody with the drawstring ripped out and hospital-issued socks. I was dirty and scared, and my body was bruised from being pumped and intubated. Because of the lithium, all my eyelashes had fallen out. It was a time of total decreation.

I couldn't shit and I couldn't come. It was like squatting in a building long evacuated. The person I saw in the mirror looked like someone who had never been.

When I see this look reflected in others, there *is* something strangely magnificent about it. Sometimes I think the people who tried to touch me were trying to touch that, but safely, very safely, with only the tips of their fingers.

I've been living with manic depression for 15 years come April, and it has taught me many invaluable lessons, some that are hard to bear. And the worst of these is that, when I feel a surge of happiness or inspiration, I react with terror. In light of my propensity for mania, all joy is necessarily suspect, a foreshadowing of the life-destroying episode that could, and most definitely one day will, follow.

I cannot trust myself. My brain is a murderess, charming, so charming, until she's close enough to stick in the knife.

People will always tell you that you should be proud to have survived those difficult times, but that's only because they don't know what you had to do for survival.

In any other age, I would be dead already. A physician would have tapped the back of my skull for demons until my brain leaked out like so much batter. Sometimes I think of this historical lottery as a sign I should be dead. Other times it creeps up on me, the thought that maybe I was born in this time for a reason.

The trouble is that the first of these thoughts is symptomatic of depression and the second, indicative of the fantastical thinking of mania.

Both thoughts fail to grasp the actual: that I am alive in this time of lithium and psychoanalysis and I'm living a perfectly ordinary life, whether I like it or not.

It is not the emptiness, the ambivalence or indifference. Rather, it is the white-hot pain that turns each minute into its own inscrutable year. For it is possible, within this period of pain, to begin and exhaust several lifetimes, and decide that enough is enough, that there is no way to continue on, body and spirit intact, when the only reward of survival is the next brutal moment.

In the occupational therapy room of the hospital, there was a sign that read: *Take care of the minutes, and the hours will take care of themselves.* Often I would wonder, who wants to live this way, bearing down as they are carved from the inside by the slightest increments of time?

Everything's been moving at the speed of continental drift, yet here is the shock of Autumn returning. I can feel the trees shake free of their leaves: confetti of scarlet and goldenrod, and I can taste the temperate air creeping toward winter. I've been in hibernation for a spell, and time works differently there. Like the weather in limbo, it's yearless, stagnant, and gray. How to adhere to the world now, where nothing will be as I left it?

What does one think about while hibernating? I remember almost nothing but my own curled shape. I know there were suicide bridges, and overdoses, and the sunburst pattern a brain might make upon a wall. Were there people there? Surely there were people, but I hardly knew them. They moved in and out like ghosts.

I have known Elizabeth since September, and in knowing her there has been great hunger. She said when we met she had nothing to offer me, but I would count the nights we kiss and argue over whiskey as among the best of my life.

Have you ever felt that you wanted to die? I ask one evening. For me, this has become the basic language of getting-to-know-you.

No, she says, and then:

Everything I feel I put into reading books. I only feel it there, in those pages.

The only time I'm even afraid of death is when I walk into a library or a bookstore and this panic comes over me just from looking at all those books and realizing there's no time, no way I'll ever be able to read them all.

It is possibly the most beautiful elegy I have ever known.

It feels like everything brutal inside of me singing.

I imagined once that the soul was enormous, that it floated up from each of us into the ether where God could hear it and tend to its weeping. I remember this murmured in church's bleakest chambers:

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord;

Lord, hear my voice!

But in darker moments, I knew the soul could not be so. I knew by the muted quality of my sadness, by the way prayer could move from conversation into an unrequited, inveterate cry.

I trust in the Lord;

my soul trusts in his word.

How a psalm becomes nothing more than the sneer of its own emptiness.

How faith brings out what is most bitter in the believer when the waiting becomes too much to bear.

How you learn, over time, to relinquish the lamb inside, return to the certainty of your body, your chemistry, your hardened vermilion heart.

It is indisputable that our attempts to make sense of a senseless world do constitute a heartbreaking absurdity, as Camus argues in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. And it is also true that just because we know our existence to be absurd does not mean we should necessarily end it. We are “to live in revolt,” says Camus. And there is something about that word, “revolt,” that feels like the most vital, satisfying battle cry.

But then Camus writes: “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” And let’s face it—Sisyphus is particularly doomed, the central figure in what is hands down the single most depressing metaphor of all time.

Isn’t it true that to imagine him happy is to lie, and be content with our lying? To accept that hellish monotony is the best we’re ever going to get?

Since when has wishful thinking been enough to sustain us through our darkest hour? And most crucially, where is the revolt in that?

Susan Sontag has said that we live in “an age of extremity” characterized by “the continual threat of two equally fearful but seemingly opposed destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror.”

This is an exact description of what it feels like when you emerge from your most serious bipolar episode into “stability.” The days are long, dull, and lonely- the emptiest you have ever known. Agonizing boredom and the terror of relapse take the place of your manic/depressive binary.

There are many ways of killing yourself. One of those is to become less than you are.

When I first became stable, it was a relief to be well. I learned how to establish normal routines, comply with my prescribed medication, and spend the meager sum of my disability check with caution. If something was off with me, it was easy to decipher. I could hear depression howling or mania chattering from a great distance. If I wanted to talk or fuck beyond reason, or if I felt sluggish getting out of bed, I could trace the subtle symptoms that led me there and suppress them with an increase in medication.

After I'd been well for some time, my routines and my even mood could feel like a prison sentence. It wasn't enough to be well anymore. Now, like everyone else, I'd have to find a way to be happy. Happiness, it seemed, should be an easy thing in this new life of mine, that I should feel grateful to be alive. But gratitude, like epiphany, is comprised of a certain sum. It has the tendency to thin as you spend it.

Nothing is less passive than the act of fleeing, of exiting

--Paolo Virno

When you establish sanity, the life you lived when insane is the life a dead girl. You have mourned that life, forgiven that poor soul her sins and indiscretions. The new you, the sane you, does her best to afford clemency to the girl who is dead. For a time, it's possible to forget that you lived desperate and hungry on the edge of the world, grifting and stealing, indiscriminately fucking people you couldn't pick out of a lineup, alone alone alone. The new you marches forward with optimism and a little condescension for the girl you have miraculously managed to discard.

Piper-

You should have been more honest; I would have understood. I've seen you at your worst and your best and loved you in both. As it was, the way you acted translated into the feeling you didn't care enough, over and over and over, to the point it was toxic, a grievous insult. I can't live my life that way. I'm left looking for glimpses of light in the façade that show you care, and it's desperate and humiliating. I'm capable of great love and imagination and compassion, and eventually that re-asserts itself. That's how I survived this long, but it's too lonely to continue.

I think when you finally do understand how other people feel, you'll be a force to be reckoned with. You need to understand and feel the terror of something like last night from the view of the other person. I think it'll make you a better writer too.

I'm staying in San Francisco. It's a lovely city, my kind of place. Not the kind of place to kill yourself. The kind of place where you get reborn.

Stay safe.

Love,

X

This letter, written by an ex-lover who discovered my plan to jump from the Golden Gate Bridge three hours before I was to carry it out, has served as a turning point.

I will never believe that committing suicide is an intrinsically selfish act. On this point, I will not be moved. But I have learned that *I* am a selfish person.

I'm always putting my agony first and believing, because it is white-hot and blinding, that I have the right to do it. I have caused pain, real pain, to people who tried their best to love me. I have insisted, even as they held me, that I was alone in my illness, alone in my grave.

Perhaps it is natural, even for the brave and balanced, to fear the one who loves you, to doubt their love will persist when they discover you truly and darkly in ways you didn't want.

I cannot lean into love as I do into death.

It's time I aimed for homeostasis.

Not as a myth or a fluke, not as a frightening platitude,
but as the miracle of metal and salt in a pale yellow pill
which, if I am faithful, will make a way for me.

I thought that the closer I came to reviving, the less I would think about suicide. But the truth is, I have risked so much in thinking about it, writing it, attempting and failing at it, and recovering from it that if I had to let it go altogether, I wouldn't know what to do with myself.

Jenny Bouilly writes that poetry *will never be read by the one for whom it is intended*.

The same is often true of the suicide note.

In these pages, I am writing to everyone I have ever known, and I'm also writing to myself.

In *Nox*, Anne Carson:

One who asks about things—about their dimensions, weight, location, moods, names, holiness, smell—is an historian. But the asking is not idle. It is when you are asking about something that you realize you yourself have survived it, and so you must carry it, or fashion it into a thing that carries itself.

It has been important for me to realize that the reason I'm still here is because, deep down, I want to be. If I can find a way to balance all that is lethal and hopeful, I might just find my way through this. I might create the kind of understanding that will allow people to forgive me. I may even forgive myself.

The act of taking my own life is not something **I am** doing without **a** lot of thought. I don't believe that people should take their own lives without deep and thoughtful **reflection** over a considerable period of time. I do believe strongly, however, that the right to do so is one of the most fundamental rights that anyone in a free society should have. For me much **of the world** makes no sense, but my feelings about what I am doing ring loud and **clear** to an inner ear **and** a place where there is no self, only **calm**.

Love always, Wendy

-Wendy O Williams
Suicide Letter Erasure

Small Miracle

Korine attempts to kill herself by combining hundreds of pills and some insect poison with a bottle of wine. She's discovered- blacked out and foaming at the mouth- on her kitchen floor.

The next thing she remembers, she's being loaded into an ambulance, and one of the paramedics is saying, *jesus, honey, you could've at least bought a better bottle of wine, ya know? One to suit the occasion!*

I appreciated that they made a joke of it, she says. I think being able to laugh at that moment is ultimately what saved my life.

I have learned, from a psychobiological standpoint, that thinking about suicide releases endorphins in the brain, forming neural pathways best compared to ruts in the bedrock made along the Oregon Trail. Suicidal ideation in the brain is that permanent, that deep. The more you think about it, the more likely you are to get stuck.

This means, on the one hand, that the damage is done, and I will never be free of the impulse to solve conflict with self-annihilation.

On the other hand, it means my suicidality is nothing to be afraid of. It is a signal rather than a sentence. The more aware I become, the better I'll be at deconstructing why these impulses occur when they do. Over time, I can strengthen my resolve to address them, then dismiss them, before they become dangerous.

In *The Guardians*, Sarah Manguso writes:

I say I'm interested in life, but really I want to play a little game with Death. I want to lie down next to him and smell his infected breath.

After he pins me with his rotten arms and burst knees, gray bone showing at the joint, I want to wake up alone with bruised eyes, his hair in my teeth.

And then I want to whisper a little story about it inside the safest locked room in the world.

I keep returning to what I now consider the central question: How can I make use of my pain? Or rather, if I can make use of my pain, will I be able to endure it in the end?

In the Tenth of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, he urges us consider our pain an integral season, a home away from home.

Nothing has ever sounded so much like a battle cry:

Let not even one of the clearly-struck hammers of my heart fail to sound because of a slack, a doubtful, or a broken string. Let my joyfully streaming face make me more radiant; let my hidden weeping arise and blossom. How dear you will be to me then, you nights of anguish. Why didn't I kneel more deeply to accept you, inconsolable sisters, and surrendering, lose myself in your loosened hair. How we squander our hours of pain. How we gaze beyond them into the bitter duration to see if they have an end. Though they are really our winter-enduring foliage, our dark evergreen, one season in our inner year--, not only a season in time--, but are place and settlement, foundation and soil and home.

There is something beautiful to be made from all this pain.

Something beautiful could very well come of this if I let it.

Today on a popular daytime talk show, footage of a body being exhumed. There are machines to help with the unearthing of the burial vault, and tools to break its seal, revealing a cherry colored casket still draped in withered white roses. The shock of these bright colors coming out of the dirt makes it seem as though the casket too could be pried open to reveal a girl who is more like a Russian doll than a decomposing body or even a girl who would open her eyes, like the suicide never happened, and speak the famous line: *I feel like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth.*

I spent long hours studying Gauguin's *In the Waves* as though it might prepare me for drowning. I loved the painting so much because I felt a kinship with its subject, the woman whose shock of hair stood blood red against the tide. There was something so brutal and turbulent in Gauguin's sea the color of oxidized copper, and something so eerie about the red raw buttocks and bruised lower back of the woman, whose name, I would learn, was Ondine.

Ondine: a water sprite who charms a knight into marriage so she may be granted a soul. But despite her assiduous seduction, the knight deserts Ondine for a human. On the day of his wedding to the human, Ondine emerges from the sea and kills the knight with a single kiss.

According to the Symbolists, the sea is the giver and taker of life. What then, shall we make of the kiss? Of the woman who rises with her red hair?

Gauguin paints the waves as though each crest is a ladder's rung fit for climbing. Ondine's legs are caught in a pocket of current, but otherwise the waves refuse her amalgamation.

I once believed that Ondine was drowning. Then one day I recognized the refusal in her long, sallow arms, the conflict in her curved torso. Ondine was clawing her way back from death. She refused to be sucked under.

With or without a soul.