

THE WINDOW



This is the window I was looking through.

page window 1



THE WINDOW, BY JANET KUYPERS

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Previously Published: *Hope Chest In the Attic*, (woman.), *Close Cover Before Striking*, *Autumn Reason*, *Contents Under Pressure*, *the Average Guy's Guide*
Forthcoming Books: *The Key To Believing*

THIS IS THE WINDOW I WAS LOOKING THROUGH. *Dedicated to Eugene*

Thanks to fellow writers like Paul Weinman for the series of response poems and C Ra McGuirt for the poem series. Thanks to writers I have read in the past like Rich, Kafka, and Rand. Thanks to the people who provided me the experiences I draw upon. Thanks to the people in the conversations series, the unknown who suffered so much, the people from the elevated trains, to the two people who opened up to me and told me their dreams. My thoughts go to the people in the rape education series, to the people who wrote names on the wall at Coslow's.

To the residents of Blue Sky's mobile Home Estates. And, of course, to Eugene. You share many of my experiences with me, and in many ways these stories are as much about you as they are me.



A CHILD IN THE PARK

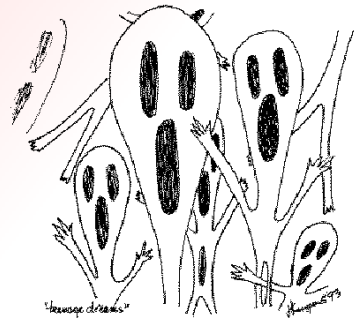
this was no ordinary park, mind you: there were no swings or children laughing; there were different children there. There was recreation: tennis, the pool, and a maze of streets for bicycles and long walks; surrounded by rows of prefabricated homes each with one little palm tree by the driveway. People drove golf carts around in the park, or large tricycles, or older couples would walk together just as it was beginning to turn to dusk and long shadows from tree-tops criss-crossed over the streets. In the afternoons, the women in the pool would wear hats and sunglasses, lean against the sides, swing legs in the warm water. I remember the summer afternoons when it rained in Florida, and after the rain I would go out in the puddles in my roller skates, skate through them, feet soaking wet. There was even a street named after me in the park, and at the end of Jan Drive there was a pond. I spent hours there, playing imaginary games, pretending I was grown-up, feeding the ducks, watching the fish swim around the rocks at my feet, looking for the turtles, listening to the wind. Oh, I remember Mr. Whorall, how he would walk onto his driveway every time I was playing tennis across the street. He would watch me, tell me how I was getting better at the game every time he saw me. And there was also Mrs. Rogers, who lived up the street from me. She saw me riding my bicycle by one day just before Halloween. She invited me in to help

carve a pumpkin. Every year she bought me a Christmas present. The sweetest woman. The most beautiful woman. And there was Ira and Betty Wiggins, who lived on the next street, Sand Drive, with a sign in front of their house that said, "The Wiggins' Wigwam." They had a hammock on their porch, and art so beautiful, so colorful on their walls. They lived in Panama for years, he used to be a doctor. So many things collected from all their travel. They both knew so much, they both loved life. Once they saw me and asked if I wanted to catch a lion. They then went to the side of the road, and with a spoon pulled an ant lion from the top of a sand hill. So many secrets. Every night Ira could be found with cue holder, decorated with Panamanian art, at the pool table, playing my father, or another man who died years ago. I remember that man telling me that when I was younger he would watch me on Easter Sunday, me in my pastel dress, by myself, spinning, dancing in the streets. He remembered me dancing. This is his memory, how he thought of me. And I remember the McKinleys, Pete and Lindy, another beautiful pair who talked of Mexico, of all the places they'd gone, all the things they had seen. So many times I would visit them just to hear them talk. And Pete would try to stump me with an intellectual riddle every time I sat with him; he would ask me about astronomy, what I had learned in my classes since the last time I visited the park. Sometimes they would take me to their country club, play on tennis courts made of clay, how strange it felt on my feet through my tennis shoes. It was like another world there. The park was where I spent my Christmases, my Easters. I

remember swimming in the pool, a week shy of thirteen, when my parents told me I was an aunt. Now I talk to my sister on the phone, she asks me if I remember so-and-so from Palos Avenue, from Blue Skys Drive. The couple that had the ornate rock garden in their front yard, or the snow shovel against their light post with the words “rust in peace” painted in white on the metal. Yes, I say, I remember them. Well, so-and-so passed away last week, she says. Heart attack. This is what it comes down to, I think, all these memories are slowly disappearing. So many memories. Where there are palm trees everywhere. It was my other world, my other life, another lifestyle, another everything. This was not an ordinary park, but the children were so much smarter, and still so full of life. So much to teach. So little time.

A STAND-OFF

Too many things bombard us
we scan from channel to channel
eyes darting, first war, destruction,
then a weight loss commercial.
I know you're thinking society is
ludicrous - and it is - but don't you see
that when I watch that t.v. screen
all I see is that I'm not thin enough?
I've tried to make things right with
us. I've tried to bring us one glimmer
of happiness, I've tried to turn off
that media mudslinging
tried to make things a little better
even if it is only in our bedroom
and even if it is only for one night.
And you, you look away
and think I'm hopeless. I'm grasping
at whatever straws are left.



ACKNOWLEDGE

excerpt from Hope Chest In The Attic, 1993

You're my best friend
my love
you make me feel alive
Thank you
my inspiration
Thanks for going to C Street
so many times with me
Thanks for talking to
strangers on the Quad
Thanks for spilling
your heart out to me
Thanks for being so caring
For buying me a
Dr. Seuss book
for sitting with me
by my Christmas tree
for inviting me to
basketball games
for all the pizzas
for taking walks with me
in the springtime
at three in the morning
I say you can be happy
for someone else's happiness
I feel that way about you

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES ONE

I was in the basement, the playroom
that's where all my toys were, you see
and I had just run in there
after yelling at my family
sitting in the living room
"I hate you"

now, I've never said that before to
my family, nor would I ever say
it again I knew better
and I had just run into the playroom
slammed the door shut

I couldn't have been more than five
and I ran in, and I looked for things
to put in front of the door so they
couldn't open it and find me

I took one of my chairs
from my little play set
and dragged it over to the door
then I took the little schoolhouse for
Fischer-Price toys, the side opened
up, it had a blackboard and everything
I took that little schoolhouse, put it
on the chair guarding the door
patiently obeying my orders
I was running around looking for
something else I could carry
to the door

when I heard the door knob turn
and my sister, with one arm
pushed all of my toys away
and opened the door
I knew I had been defeated

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES TWO

I was in the basement, the playroom
that's where all my toys were, you see
and Sheri was with me
and we were playing house
or maybe it was office, we did that
instead a lot of the times. I had old forms
that businesses were throwing away,
we had two desks, dead calculators
my sister even made a switchboard for me
well, we were playing grown-up, whatever
the specifics were, I don't remember. Why
do children want to grow up anyway?
Because it's a different kind of pain, I think.
Well, we were playing this make-believe,
when I proceeded to go to the toy chest,
pull out my sister's old communion veil,
and walk around the pool table in the center
of the room, take a step, feet together,
take a step, feet together.
What are you doing? she asked. Getting
married, I answered. Chris Caravette and I
were getting married, I said. Chris was a friend
of my sister's, you see, an older man, in high
school, unlike us poor slobs who were still
children.
and she attended the wedding, and I threw her
the bouquet, and she caught it, just like
she was supposed to do, and when the

whole thing was over I walked my imaginary groom to the corner of the room and put away the veil, and that's when she took the veil, put it on, and acted like she was getting married, too.

What are you doing? I asked. Getting married, she answered. To who? I asked. To Chris Caravette, she answered. And we argued and argued, but I just married him, you're not supposed to do that, and before you knew it we were in a shouting match. Why did we want to grow up anyway? Because we wanted a different kind of pain, I think.



CHILDHOOD MEMORIES THREE

I was in the basement, the playroom
that's where all my toys were, you see
and that's also where I kept my bubble gum
you see, whenever I saved money I
would buy bubble gum
and my friends would come over, and
they would ask if they could have some
gum
and I would say that I didn't have any
and they didn't believe me
you see, I hid it
and I hid it so well that even when
they went looking all around the playroom
they couldn't find it
and all the time it was right behind
my play desk on a little shelf
in a little box
with a rose on top
it was one thing I had that they didn't
it was one thing I had that no one could
take from me
they would ask over and over again
I would laugh and laugh
but I just wouldn't give them any

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES FOUR

I was in the first grade, in Mrs.
Lindstrom's class
and every morning, probably
around ten-thirty, we would have
snack-time. And everyone would
get their snacks that their mommies
made for them, and we'd all
sit and eat. But me and Lori
Zlotow, we would take our math
books, hold them up like a tray,
throw a napkin over our arms,
put all of our snacks on our books,
and walk around the room
bartering for better snacks. "I'll
give you this apple for your
candy bar." We'd finish trading,
come back with a quarter of an
orange, an extra piece of gum.
We'd put the orange quarter in
our mouths, peel and all, and
act like monkeys. And laugh.

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES FIVE

I was in the fifth grade, and I had Mr. Roop for spelling and english. He was a great teacher, but there is something I'll never forget from his class. You see, he had this honors spelling team called the "tough ten" and once we had to learn the word "pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis." It was a form of black lung disease, the longest word in the english language, the second largest in the world. I still remember it to this day. And when giving us weekly spelling tests, he would say a word, then use it in a sentence. Whenever the word "doctor" came up, he would say the word, then recite the lyrics: "doctor, doctor, give me the news, I've got a bad case of..." and he'd get embarrassed and laugh and wouldn't be able to say "loving you." And we'd laugh too, write the word down, and wait for him to say the next word.

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES SIX

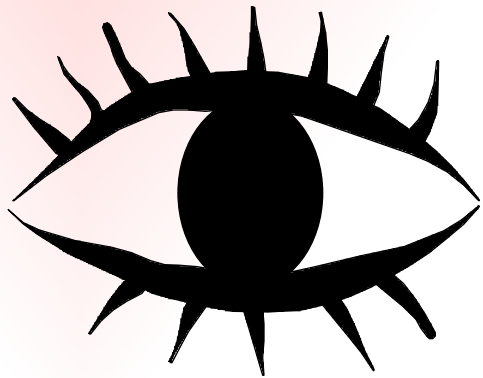
It was Sunday night, I was
put to bed for school
the next day at around noon,
but by now it was already
eleven-thirty,
after a weekend a fun I
could relax enough to go to sleep.
So it was late, and I was in
bed, listening to my clock-radio,
like I always did. And suddenly
there was a news report
and John Lennon was shot.
A few minutes later
and the reports were
that he was dead.
And the next morning I walked
downstairs and my mother
was reading the paper.
And the news was there, it
wasn't a dream, I knew
the news before my parents did.
After he died I remember
in school one of my teachers wrote in
calligraphy on a piece of paper
and put it on their bulletin board,
"You may say I'm a dreamer,
but I'm not the only one.
I hope someday you'll join us

and the word will live as one." *
and my seat, the chair with the little
basket under the seat
for my books, the chair
attached to the desk,
my seat was in the front to the side,
right in front of that bulletin
board.
And every day I would look up
and see it there, my first
brush with death.



CHILDHOOD MEMORIES SEVEN

I was in kindergarten
and we were at our tables
working on an art project
and at the next table
Mike was eating his paste
with the stick that comes in the cap
and I thought
that's strange



CHRISTMAS EVE

we made dinner
fettuccini alfredo
with chicken and duck
vegetables
bread
we ate
couldn't finish everything
we were putting on our coats
getting ready to go
to midnight mass
i decided to pack up
our leftovers
give them
to some homeless people
on the main street
we got in the car
and drove
to broadway and berwyn
i got out of the car
walked over to a man there
asked him if he was hungry
i got the bowl of noodles
and the gallon of milk
out of the car
another man walked over to me
i told them to promise
that they would share
i got in the car
we were just driving

and all i could think of
was these two men
in the cold
eating pasta with their fingers
on Christmas Eve

This is the window I was looking through.

CONVERSATIONS

A DAY OF GRIEVING, 1/22/94

I

my father was a good man

gentle kind

never raised his voice

he was an architect

one day i went with him on career day

he put me in front of a drafting table

with paper and crayons

i drew all day

i thought he had

the best job in the world

he could sit and draw all day

he had everything

and he never raised his voice

he died when i was fifteen

of a heart attack

i took classes later in architecture

i wanted to understand

his love his passion

i wanted everything

he smoked and ate poorly when he was younger

i guess it caught up to him

he was going through a divorce then

mom wanted it

she never even went to his
funeral

they say it was

a heart attack

i say it was

a broken heart

i wish i could have said goodbye

CONVERSATIONS

A DAY OF GRIEVING, 1/22/94

II

the first death i remember
was a friend of the family
i was five
and i always played with her daughter
our families used to go on picnics together
we were never apart
then one day
they told me
the mother was murdered
no one ever talked about it
to this day
i still don't even know why
she was killed
or who did it
but after that day everything changed
we never spoke of her
like she never existed
we never spoke of our fear
of our pain
and we didn't go on picnics anymore

CONVERSATIONS
A DAY OF GRIEVING,
1/22/94

III

my father spoke polish
and so did we
until one day
he decided
“we’re in america now,
they should speak english”
so when he wanted
to tell us something
he would speak in polish
and my mother
would translate
i’m thirty now,
and my father is sick
and dying
and he can’t understand me
he’s here before my eyes
and i can’t tell him
all the things
i wanted to
like i love you
looking back
page window 20

it seems obvious
we never talked
like a family
we never asked
each other
how was our day
so now when i see him
all i can do
is hold his hand
and show him
the emotions
on my face
i think he still understands

This is the window I was looking through.

CONVERSATIONS
A DAY OF GRIEVING,
1/22/94

IV

i was ten
when my grandfather died
we visited him the week before
and his last words to me
were,
“you’re the most beautiful girl
in the world”
i went to the funeral
his eyes closed
dressed in a suit
hands folded
he never wore a suit
and everyone
brothers, sisters,
cousins, uncles
talked about past weddings
other times together
i wanted to tell them
to pay him some respect
don’t laugh
don’t be happy

This is the window I was looking through.

he’s in that coffin
up there
in the front of the room
he’s dead
they’re going to bury him tomor-
row
but this is how things were
and i was only ten

CONVERSATIONS
A DAY OF GRIEVING,
1/22/94

V
i am a teacher
i teach high school in the sub-
urbs
it's not like the city
there aren't gangs and drugs
but it's so stressful
i also try to counsel my stu-
dents
one girl
pregnant by her boyfriend
got an abortion
that night
he raped her
that was his present to her
after she aborted his baby
what do i say to her
and what do i say
every day
when i see
the rapist
he's a student
page window 22

in my seventh hour class
this week alone
i did two suicide interventions
i counseled two teenagers
how am i supposed
to go to sleep at night
i sit in bed
awake
and worry

This is the window I was looking through.

CONVERSATIONS
A DAY OF GRIEVING,
1/22/94

VI

i sit in my house
i've been so tired
i can't take being alone
i'm too scared
too many things
weighing on my mind
one day
the child from next door
came over
i was working in my kitchen
he told me to look
outside my front window
i didn't want to stop my work
he begged me to look
so i got up
walked over to
my living room
and outside
the picture window
in my front lawn
was a row of little

This is the window I was looking through.

snowmen
"those are little children
out there
to make you
happy"
he said
and they did

CONVERSATIONS

A DAY OF GRIEVING, 1/22/94

VII

there has been a lot of
death
in my family
my brother died
when he was three
i was seven
his appendix exploded
they operated
then they realized
a sponge was missing
it was inside of him
they gave him
some extra penicillin
opened him up again
there was an infection
they removed
the sponge
closed him up
gave him more
penicillin
but they didn't know
he was allergic



he died within two weeks
my other brother
overdosed on drugs
when he was twenty-seven
i was twenty-six
then a year ago
my son died
he was hit by a car
he was thirteen
at my brother's funerals
everyone ended up
going to a restaurant
and getting drunk
for hours
i didn't want that for my son
i made sandwiches and coffee
at my house
in the church it was
standing room only
everyone from the seventh
and eighth grade was there
everyone from every
fire department my
husband ever worked for
was there
there was even a fire truck
for a bed of flowers
there were lines out the door
to the church
there wasn't any drinking
and people flooded me

at my house
all in all
it was a
very nice funeral

CONVERSATIONS
A DAY OF GRIEVING,
1/22/94

VIII

when their mother died
they asked me to
deliver the sermon
i make it a policy
to meet with the family
try to understand the deceased
before i give a sermon
they met with me
told me how she made
ceramic nativity scenes
for all of her grandchildren
i asked if a grandson
could bring me a set to see
i kept them in my office
for two days
when i first picked them up
and looked at them
i noticed there were
no brush strokes
then i looked more closely

and saw fingerprints
at the service
i placed the figurines
on pillars
each with one candle
and said her prints are on
these figures
and her mark has been made
on all of us
two weeks later
they gave me a madonna
with her prints on it
it is a work of art

COSLOW'S

I am back
at my old college
hang-out
years later
sharing some beers
with an old friend
then i remember
being there
with a friend
who used to
work there
she told me about the
women's bathroom
in all my years
I had never
been there
she said
women write on the wall
at the left
of the stall
women write
that they've been raped
they name names
there were arrows
pointing
to other women's
messages
saying

"i've heard this before"
first names
last names
when she told me
of this
years ago
i walked in
read the names
and wrote down one
of my own
i forgot about that wall
until now
and i am back
just yards away
from the
bathroom door
i get up
walk
open the door
years later
all the names are still there
jake jay josh larry matt scott
i can even still see
my own writing
it didn't take long
to find it

DEATH

when he was a child, a little boy, he
would walk through the living room
over and over again
he would see the book on the shelf
a science book, a volume
from a set: a book about
how the world works
once he looked through the pages
found a drawing about the life
of planet earth, how it was
formed, how eventually the
temperature would rise, all life
on earth would eventually die
and reading that it was
millions of years away didn't help
with the fear, the instant panic:
so he took the book, hid the
one volume from the rest,
so he wouldn't have to see it
when he walked through his
own living room

DECORATING THE LOCKERS

Days when we sat in the gold gym,
Friday afternoons, hot Indian summer
days. Days with a pep assembly,
there would be a contest, which
grade could cheer the loudest?

Those were the days when the
cheerleaders lead us on in school
spirit, and we wished the football
country, made it big.

Had a friend from high school visit.
And they drove out on a road together;
could they still hear the cheering, the
screaming, faster and faster, down the
road, they're winning the big game,
faster and faster, then black.

The hero walked away from the twisted
mangled wreck, to find his friend
couldn't hear the cheering. No one
assembles for him now, for the loss
of his friend. Why did the hero get
all the attention?

There was no screaming, just the
low, dull moan in his head



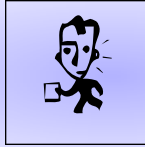
DIVE

The water has always called
to me. I had to go, I know
you don't understand, but
it was the end for me.
You stand on the edges
of the cliff, waiting, hoping,
but I'm gone. I left.
I was gone before I dove into the
murky water.
The pain that was inside
me is now in the water. The
tides are now stronger. They
will pull the next one in with
even more power. It may be you.
The birds are chirping in the
trees. A car will soon drive
by on the road not far from
your path. Life will go on,
even without me. My spirit was
here, in the water, before I left.
I had to go. Try to understand.

HE TOLD ME HIS DREAMS

I

he was walking by the
white hen pantry
on sixth and green
and they turned around the
corner in the car
opened fire on him
he was hit over and over
again; his teeth were
shattered by bullets
he said he died then
and he saw from up above
his bloody body
he even saw his obituary
but then he went back, did it
over again: this time
he was in the doctor's
office. It's always like this,
he thinks, always
running away from death



HE TOLD ME HIS DREAMS

II

he was in bed, but
it wasn't with her, like
he would expect: it was
with her best friend, and
they were making love, in
his bed. he didn't realize
it wasn't her until he
was making love. strange;
where was she in the dream

HE TOLD ME HIS DREAMS

III

he was making love to a woman, he didn't know who, he thought she was blonde. They were in a forest together, he thinks. And when they were done, he was with her later, but she wasn't the same woman anymore; in fact, she was his cousin. Why does he keep having dreams like this, he asks me, am I obsessed with sex? No, I said, just look closely. Why do you think things are never as they seem



HE TOLD ME HIS DREAMS

IV

as he wakes up less
rested than the night before.
I had a dream my teeth
fell out again, he said.
This time they fell out one by
one, first slowly, then faster.
Sometimes they all fall out
at once, sometimes they fall
one row at a time. I try to
stuff them back into my mouth.
What is this supposed to
mean? I don't understand.
I just don't understand these
dreams. What does it mean
when you dream your teeth
fall out, when you dream it
regularly? I think it means
I'm afraid of commitment.
No, I said, it means
you're pregnant. That didn't
go over well with him. And he
walked to the washroom,
brushed his teeth, made sure to
floss, like he would four
more times that day



HE TOLD ME HIS DREAMS

V

they were trying to kill
me again, why am I
always running away
from them? they had guns,
they had pistols, machine
guns, as they always
do, and I only had my
feet to keep me away
and save me. I
could feel the bullets
riddling my body. who
are they, why do I
always have to run away;
even in my own dreams,
who am I running from

HE TOLD ME HIS DREAMS

VI

in the recurring dream during my childhood I was on a sort of game show: and every time I would be faced with three doors to choose from. They always had the same things behind them. The first time I had the dream I asked for door number three. Behind the door was a desolate hill with a tree on the top. I would then climb the hill, climb the tree if I could, just to see if there was something else. Nothing. Just a hill, just a tree. Other nights when I would dream of it I would go back to the hill, find a wooden ladder at the tree, climb it and find a fort to play in. But that was all, still so lonely. On other occasions I

would choose door number two. Behind it was a dark tunnel, a scary tunnel; there was a light at the end of it, but I would never get that far. I would try to go through the tunnel, but I only got a strange feeling. Was there anything there at the end? Sometimes in the dream I would choose door number one. Behind it was a great Walt Disney World amusement park, even better than that. And there were roller coasters, and lots of food. It was my favorite door. But sometimes I had no choice which door I got. Sometimes I'd notice more details, but it was always those three doors, the desolation, the fear, and the rewards. the doors were always the same

HE TOLD ME HIS DREAMS

VII

when I was little
I would have dreams
where I found riches:
a large rare, expensive
gold coin, a pile of
money hidden in a cave.
And the one thing I
remember most is that
I always wanted to take
it back with me; I knew
I was dreaming, and I
would think, "God,
please, I just want to
have this gold coin when
I wake up." And I
would try to hold the
treasure firmly in my
hand, wake myself
only to find tightly
clenched fists. Once I even
remember putting
the wealth under my
pillow in my dream, and
then I would wake

My instinct told me to
turn over my pillow as
soon as I could. There
was never anything there

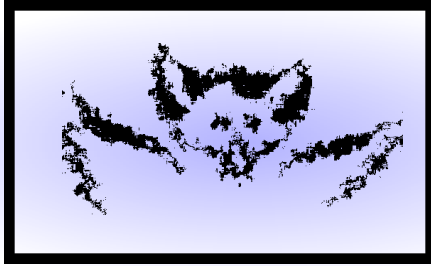
HE TOLD ME HIS DREAMS

VIII

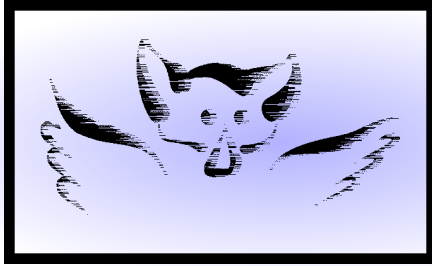
he remembers escaping from prison
he knew he had to escape
he was captured by evil people
he managed to run away
but the more he ran, the slower his steps
slower and slower, he's not going anywhere
the evil men with the machine guns
caught up
why can't he run away
they plugged him with bullets
forty, maybe more
he could feel them hitting him, feel them
he kept trying to run away
and they would catch up to him
take him back to prison, still alive
he lived through it
he was still full of holes
why can't he run away

SHE TOLD ME HER DREAMS

I
—
we were at some sort of showing
some sort of exhibit
where they were displaying the glass
sculpture, it was eighty-three
billion years old, and it was
more smooth than anything
and it went on and on, one smooth
curve after another
it was so old
they displayed it on the water
was it a lake, or the ocean
it rested on the water, religiously
and I was in the water with someone
a man, I don't know who
and we were swimming around it,
touching it
he was on the other side, told
me to swim under it
I didn't think I could make it across
but I went under, across I went
I kept feeling the sides, the smoothness
somehow, transcribed along the
sides of the sculpture, was a
time line, a record of history



there's wasn't much at eighty-three
billion years ago, but there was
more and more the closer we got
to present
I remember reading Lyndon
Johnson's name, and then I saw
information about the future
it was all on the glass, I was
looking at it, but I can't remember
what it says



SHE TOLD ME HER DREAMS

II

The Bulls basketball game
was being aired on television
but I was playing a game
with my co-workers, we were
playing a game ourselves,
and it was being recorded
and being aired over the
basketball game

I remember I was in an
argument with one of my
coworkers at the time, but
they never caught any of
that on television

I remember knowing that
the camera was on me
and I remember thinking
“everyone who is watching
the Bulls game will be
watching me”

SHE TOLD ME HER DREAMS

III

this is my recurring dream:
I am in a garage
with my two brothers, there
is a window near the top of
one of the sides
and one of my brothers is
looking through it. There was
also a draining grate
on the floor of the garage
and my other brother was
looking down into it
and I sat there in the labyrinth
for the garage was filled
with a tall maze
and we all had to get through
it in order to leave the
garage
but there was a dragon
in the garage with us, and
every dream was my
brothers, looking out the
window, looking into the
darkness, and then all of
us running for our lives

SHE TOLD ME HER DREAMS

IV

I was in a shopping mall
with Efi, I don't know why
I was with him, they call
him smelly
and we were walking on
the first floor, and we
were near the stairs to
go down to the basement
and someone came along
and pushed Efi down the
stairs, he must have died
and everyone wanted to
know who murdered him
and I saw who it was
down in the basement of
the mall was a marker board
and I wrote a message
I wrote, "I saw who did
it." And later I went back
to the board and someone
else wrote me a message.
It said, "It wasn't Peppers.
He's a good guy." And I
saw who did it, and I

This is the window, was looking through.

know it wasn't Peppers.
A third person got to the
board before me and
tried to scratch out the
name Peppers, but I could
still read it. No, it wasn't
him, I knew who it was, even
if it was only in the dream

SHE TOLD ME HER DREAMS

V

I was back at my college town
with some women from a sorority
we took pillows outside to the top of
a cliff, to enjoy homecoming
my friends, a woman and her
boyfriend, were at the bottom
of the cliff, at the lake, swimming
one of the women from the sorority
rested on a big pillow on a rock
then the man from the lake came
up the cliff to me, told me the
woman in the lake wanted me to
come down the cliff and swim with
them, and then he tried to drag me
down the side of the cliff
I was afraid I was going to fall
I was screaming, I was resisting
why is he pushing me, why is she
watching



SHE TOLD ME HER DREAMS

VI

I went to visit some old friends
we were going to a party together
I went outside to save a
space for my car
I came back, but they
left for the party without me
I was abandoned

TRANSCRIBING DREAMS

I

I was at a beach, I don't know why the dream was there, but it was, the dream I mean. And you were there, and your family too, and at one point your little sister, the one that isn't so little anymore, pulled me to the side and told me she was pregnant. She loved her boyfriend, she couldn't have an abortion, she didn't want to tell her parents. And she told me, and I didn't know what to do. Later in the dream, still at the beach, she told you, and your parents, and you were screaming that you were going to kill her boyfriend, and your mother was babbling what would the neighbors think and your father was speechless. And I know that all of you were hurting her more, that what she needed most was supportive words, someone to hold her. Didn't you think she was scared enough, I wanted to ask. But I didn't, I watched all of you do this to her, the poor little girl. How scared she must have been

TRANSCRIBING DREAMS

II

me any my sister and my mother were driving at night and we were approaching and s-curve in the street. We had to turn right, drive a half block, then turn left. When we took the corner there was a fire in the building right in front of us, and there were all these fire trucks and ladders and water spraying through the air. And we couldn't turn around and go back, we had to drive past this, and the car got faster and faster, I felt like I was being thrown toward the inferno. And I saw firemen that were on ladders on the second and third floors being thrown away from the building by the flames, falling, screaming, falling to their deaths. And we

falls to the window I was looking through.

sped around the corner, my sister was falling out of the car as we took the turn so fast. She was holding on to the frame of the car and we watched firemen fall from the sky, and I sat in the center of the backseat, not knowing what to think, watching it all

TRANSCRIBING DREAMS

III

I was walking into your living room and there was a ten-gallon fish tank there. You just bought it. You were looking at the fish, that's when I walked over. And I saw a shark fish in the tank, one about eight inches long, and he was at the bottom, killing and eating a four-inch fish. There were other one-inch fish swimming at the top, neon tetras, small things. And I walked over and the shark was just eating the four-inch fish, and soon he was completely gone. And you were just looking, you could do nothing to save the fish. And then another four-inch fish came out of hiding from behind a plant on the left side of the tank, and he darted around. It looked like he was in a state of panic, maybe he breathed the blood of the other four-inch fish, his ally, his family. And he started darting around the tank, and the shark was just sitting at the

bottom of the tank, and the other four-inch fish darted more. And then the shark opened his mouth, and in a darting panic, the four-inch fish swim straight into the shark's mouth. All he had to do was close his mouth and swallow the fish whole. There was no fight, like with the first one. There was no struggle. And I looked over at you, and you were amazed that this shark just ate your two fish, which were probably over ten dollars each, and that they didn't just get along in the tank together. And I looked at the tank, and I saw the one-inch neon tetras darting around along the top of the water. They knew they would be victims later, trapped in this little cage, and that the shark would just wait until he was bored until he administered his punishment. I wanted to ask you why you bought all of these different-sized fish and expected them to live together peacefully. Maybe you didn't even realize that the shark would need more food than he was prepared to but him. Besides, a shark that size shouldn't even be alone in a tank as small as ten gallons. He needs room

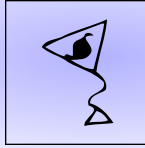
to grow. But before I could say anything, I saw the shark swim to the top of the water, push his head and nose out of the water, open the lid to the top of the aquarium. You weren't looking, so I told you to look to the top, and not to get too close. And the shark just sat there, looking at you, and it looked as if he wanted to show you what a good eater he was. It was almost as if he was looking to you for approval.



FORWARD

apparent
web
maze
end
minotaur
center
heart
preys
arms
groping
arms
hide
sky
closer
you
black
black
hope
melt
knives
cutting
slicing
below
down
you
forward
agony
forward
forward

hope
nightmare
desperation
pain



FRENCH QUARTER

blue dog
red cat
painted faces
shaping balloons
red dead crawfish
staring from the plate
stumbling men
streets filled with drink
painted women
on display
there is no sleep
but there are the streets
wear the mask
at night
there are two choices
for pleasure
go out or
go to bed

GAMES

They put in the tape
when dad comes home
from playing cards.
Concentration, Password,
Shop till you Drop...
and when they get to
Wheel of Fortune, mom
has to be quiet when she
knows the puzzle, dad
gets mad when she blurts
it out. How the hell was
I supposed to know that,
he yells.

HE TOLD ME HIS DREAMS

IX

She said: Do you know that feeling you get when you're starting to fall asleep and then suddenly you feel like you're falling very quickly and you instantly wake yourself up? Everyone gets that feeling sometimes when they sleep. Did you know your body does that on purpose? You see, it happens when you're very tired and your body starts to fall into a sleep state at too fast a speed. Your heart rate, your breathing shouldn't slow down that fast. So your body makes you feel like you fall so you'll wake up, feel a little tense, and fall asleep more slowly. He said: No, no, that's not what I'm talking about. I know that feeling, but what I'm talking about is being in a dream and going to the edge of a cliff and jumping.



She said: Well, what happens?
Do you land? He said: Sometimes
I wake up before I land,
sometimes I land gently and
live. You've never had a dream
like that before? She said:
No. He said: Why do I have
dreams like this? Why this cliff?
Why do I fall? How do I land?

HOLE IN THE HEART

night
before
sleep
you
I
light
my
bed
feels
missing
hole
where
is
lay
night
alone
you
feel
am
complete
nothing
matters
you
hand
your
me

sleep
my
bed
hole
through
heart
wish
feel
alone
wish
hole
away



IKEBANA

Rolled up sleeves,
Dark denim, strings pulled
At the buttons
Your hands, the
Rough edges, the nails
Jagged, not cut
Your fingers, I've
Noticed them: one has
A long scar
Along the tip, and
Your skin is rough
Along the nails
Your hands, they're
Skilled hands of an
Artist at work:
And like a
Conductor, you
Orchestrate
Bring beauty
From the dying
Flowers at
The table. They
Line up quickly,
At attention:
Fall into
Place so gracefully.
You create
Symphonies,
Move mountains, Seas
Part for you.

This is the window I was looking through.

You can do
Anything. I
See that now.
You must be
My savior. Let me
Follow you.
Let me create
Beauty in your
Name, let me
Feel your power.
It's all in your
Hands, your heart,
Your mind:
I've seen you stop
Wars, feed the
Hungry. Why are
You so strong? Why
Are your flowers
So beautiful

J'REVIENS

It's harder to find the eye shadow I have always used. And my favorite cologne - J'Reviens - was that it? Yes, it was. I wish I was as beautiful now as I was then. Son, you don't understand.



JACKSON SQUARE/BOURBON STREET

we'll read your palm
we'll sketch your face
we'll take you for a carriage ride
we'll pipe you full of liquor
we'll give you naked women
we'll make you happy
aren't you happy, friend



JAMES

I
you
hours
walking
conversation
think
the
one
pushed
arm
pulled
held
close
think
together
didn't
right
sat
park
expect
sat
talked
future
past
republicans
confused
room
think

doing
know
didn't
know
get
something
want
didn't
know
bother
care

JONATHAN

room
cigarette
smoke
conversation
lights
face
who
envisioned
figure
sensitivy
thoughtfulness
hands
skin
mine
rehearsed
mind
created
dinners
dancing
loving
never
crowded
room
music
shoulder
faces
image
laughing
smiling

conversing
envy
why
me
face
room
dream
never
life

This is the window I was looking through.

page window 61

KNIFE

there
dancing
floor
toys
knife
face
the
wounds
apologies
lips
hard
show
know
notice
knife
bought
myself
proud
sure
knife
think
mine
yours
waste

MASK

masquerade
complied
dress
costume
face
tears
mask
pay
join
say
high
mask
hope
no



MY FATHER, SHOOTING AN ANIMAL

we sat in our dining room, looking out the sliding glass doors onto the patio, the expanse of concrete that led to the pool, fenced away from the ravine. Father had a dislocated shoulder, his arm was in a sling. He had a friend's shotgun, some sort of instrument and he looked out the window, sister and I behind him, looking over his shoulder. And then he saw a small squirrel, walking along the edge of the patio, and father opened the sliding glass doors propped his gun

over his dislocated shoulder, tried to look through the sight and keep the gun balanced. He usually didn't use guns, he seldom borrowed them. And here he stood, in his own house, aiming at the animal at the edge of our property, with one good arm. And then he shot. We all looked; the animal, hit, stumbled into a nearby hole. He hit the animal, despite all his trouble, all his pain. People wonder why he shot the animal. I wonder how. Could I do it, even with two good arms. Could I see through the sight, could I aim well, strike.



MY LOVE FOR YOU WILL STAY THE SAME

everybody's dreaming
everybody's screaming
everybody's looking for some shelter from the storm
and everybody's looking for someone to keep them warm
but I don't wanna play if you're a temporary game
my love for you will stay the same
my love for you will stay the same
(my love for you)
now the tide is turning
the fire embers burning
everybody wants to find a way to shed the shame
everybody wants to find a way to share the blame
but you can put me through the heartache, I can take the pain
my love for you will stay the same
my love for you will stay the same
(my love for you)
the rhythm in your fingers
the memory still lingers
listen to your flowers now, the petals scream out loud
and all these seasons come and go without a single sound
i can hear the flower petals calling out your name
my love for you will stay the same
my love for you will stay the same
(my love for you)

ORION

Winter evenings I would look for you.
Dancing along the horizon. You were
always fighting; the great bear to the
north, the bull in the winter.
You were my favorite. whenever I
could I would look for you: out my
window, in my driveway. I remember
a nebula lived in the center of your sword.
You, spending millennia fighting. You
have taught me well. The other night, I
looked out my window again; you were
there. Receiving strength from me,
as I did so many years in you.



OTHER HORIZONS

I live in the basement
it's all I can afford
nothing grows there
but I would have a little plant
at my office desk
every morning
water it watch it grow
I'd take on all those tasks
I'd even have my own partition
I live in a room
with no view
but I don't need one
no oceans, no skylines
when I make it
I'll look out the window
at the whole damn city

OUR ANNIVERSARY

When they met
to take us out
for our anniversary
oh, it was so
beautiful
the boys are so
thoughtful
nothing could be
better
don't you think so, darling
oh, you boys know
he loves it
you know he does



This is the window I was looking through.

page window 67

PAPER



park
bench
paper
pigeons
watch you
glasses
legs
hiding
know
you
name
face
bench
newspaper
footsteps
story
here
made
move
bench
aloof
sat
away
paper
eyes
burned
pages
breath

streaming
body.
eyelids
open
close
heat
radiated
paper
you
gone

PARANOIA

we sit here at dinner.
I try to breathe.
My hands rest on my thighs.
I must watch to be sure,
everything must be right:
the silverware, small fork,
large fork, plate, knife,
large spoon, small spoon.
Water glass. Wine glass.
I know no one else sees them:
the fish, the red fish, in
the curtains along the wall.
You have to watch them.
My eyes always glance there.
They are evil fish. They sit
in the curtains, they wait,
and then they come out.
And the yogurt, the yogurt
is the only thing that can
save me from them. throw
the yogurt, take a spoon,

use your hands. Anything.
And we sat there before
dinner, and he ate his
yogurt with his first spoon
before I could stop him.
How could you do this? How
can you save yourself from
the evil fish now? Will
I have to save you again,
do you even understand
the danger

POAM: A CONVERSATION WITH JIMBO BREEN

dedicated to Steve, a marine
we sat at the poolside together;
you asking me about how I've been
as the sun beat down
and we talked about nuclear war.
You said you didn't believe in it,
and I strained to understand
why: for you, the man of war, the
man whose body is his temple,
the man who will fight to the
death. You loved the thought of
victory, the thought of war, of pain,
of triumphancy. And I sat there
in the swimming pool while you sat
on the edge. I paused. Then it
occurred to me: you would want
a method of fighting more direct,
slower, more painful, more personal,
than a nuclear war. You'd want to
fight them one on one, man to
man, with your fists. And your eyes
lit up. I was beginning to understand,
now, only years later. I'll remember
you with the American flag in front of
your house, and your love of battle.

POAM: MILITANT MAN WITH SCHIZOPHRENIA

I
the problem with people
in this country today
is they don't love
the US of God damn A anymore
All these yuppie faggots
riding their trains to work
their bmws their jags
and I went to war for 'em
went to hell and back
we chanted
Sodomize Hussein for 'em
and we loved the God dman
wars
WWI, II, Korea, Nam,
Nicaragua, Iraq
cause we were fighting for
something
something real
what the hell
what has this country
come to

II
This is the window I was looking through.

Ha. He thinks he's really funny.
Strong.

I'm Jennifer. I know him. He
hasn't been laid in
years, and most of the times
were with foreign
women. What does it mean
when you have to pay
for sex? It means you're not a
man, and he knows
it.

He doesn't usually let me come
out. But, you
see, I'm really stronger than
him. Oh, and that
kills him, a woman being
stronger than him.

But, you see, he never lets him-
self be loved.

He tries to hide himself in his
stupid war
talk.

But I come out every once in a
while, put on
my little red dress, put on the
lipstick. Mmm, you
know, lipstick feels so good
gliding across your
lips.

III

I shanked a nigger faggot.
page window 71

when i was in the clink
the faggot tried to rape me
but he didn't know who he was dealing with
I'm a man, Goddamnit
I've robbed stores
I've killed men
I've had women
and there's always an enemy
and I can beat 'em all
once
when I was in grade school
a kid called me a pansy
and I beat him so hard
they had to take him
to the hospital
nobody messes with
jimbo breen

IV

I know I'm better looking than all those Hustler
magazines he keeps.
He keeps these old magazines, you see, old
car and drivers, old soldier of fortunes
old hustlers.
Some of 'em gotta be ten years old.
Usually when I take over I just look through
those sex mags and laugh. They don't know
what they're doing. I could make a man happy.
I could give it to him any way he wanted it.
God, I want a man inside of me, in my mouth, in
me now.

I could even climb the corporate ladder, if that's
what would turn them on, if only I could overpower
that bastard's mind. I could be fucking every man
I saw.

I could walk out on the streets and be whoever I
wanted. God, I could be something.

V

women are such bitches
they can't be trusted

VI

Who is he hiding from? Let me come out.

VII

this is a good country
nobody's got no
God damn pride anymore
and I'm sick of
all the faggot yuppies
these God damn cowards
corporate cogs
they don't stand up
for what they believe in
and people
don't fear the Lord
anymore
know who they should
look up to
I have a picture of Ollie North
it's an eight-by-ten

it's framed in my kitchen

VIII

I wish he'd clean this place up. I'm not going to do it. What, does he think I'm gonna cook for him too?

Why doesn't he get a job, one that lasts for more than four months, one that's not in a liquor store so he can get drunk every chance he gets.

Thank God

he doesn't have the guns anymore. He used to have a ton of 'em, keep them hidden in every corner of this one-bedroom hole above some old bag's garage. If the guns were still here, I'd kill him.

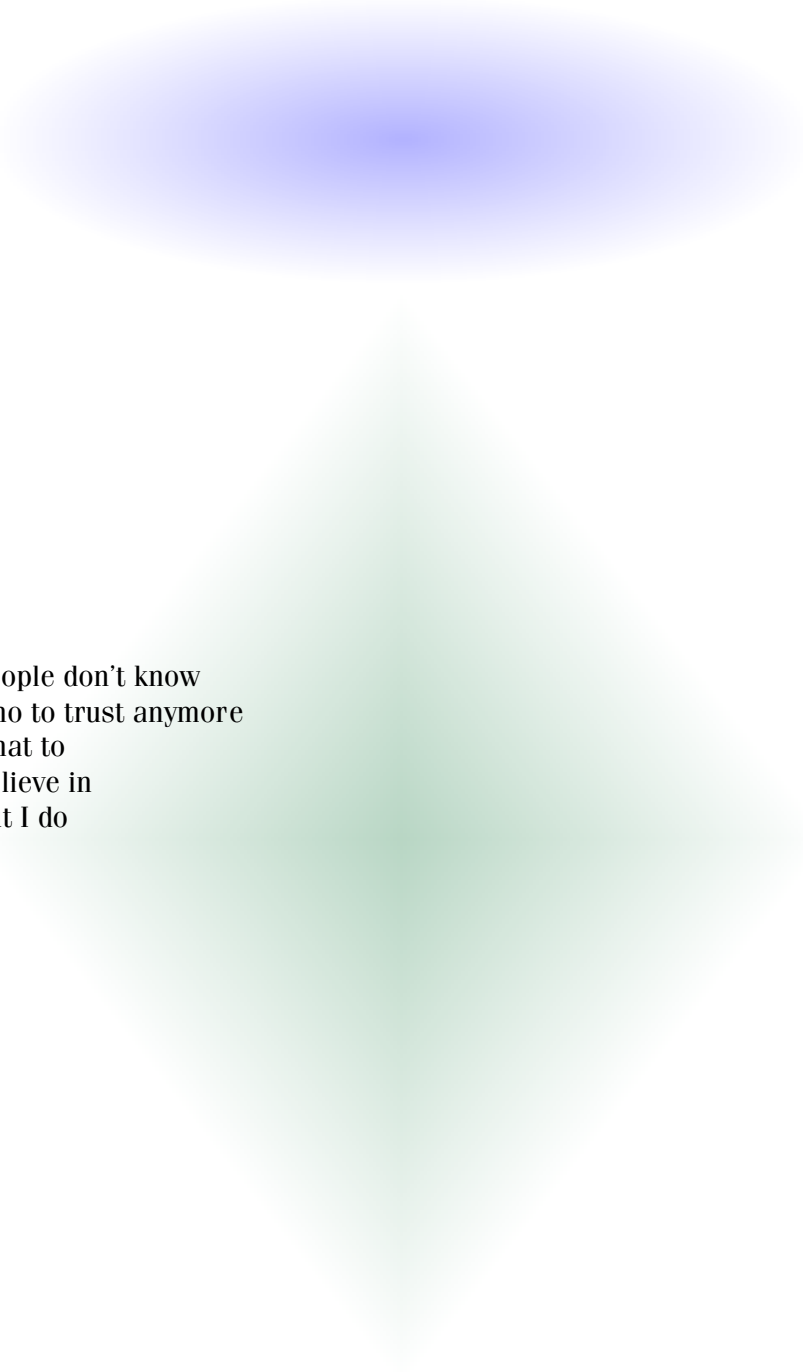
No, I couldn't, I'd be killing myself then. He's all I got. I just wanna get out, I wanna live, I wanna stop hiding.

I want him to take down his guard for just one minute, that guard of his that is still stronger than his sargeant's from Korea. Damn it.

I wish his mind would just rest, so I could take it over again, but it seems to always be there, on the defensive, darting around, looking for ways to protect himself.

IX

there's a war
behind every corner
you're gotta learn
to fight



people don't know
who to trust anymore
what to
believe in
but I do

PRIVATE LIVES I

THE ELEVATED TRAIN, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

why do these chairs
have to face
each other?
They say Americans
need their space
need their privacy
and here I sit
briefcase in lap
while he sits right
across from me
staring
I can't look I can't
he has to see
my eyes darting
my tension
my privacy
in the edge of my vision
I see his dirty clothes
his dirty hair
dirty mind
will he watch me
get off
note the stop I take
watch me walk too



PRIVATE LIVES II

THE ELEVATED TRAIN, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

the people you see
he was running his hands along the pages
of his large magazine
like petting his cat
slowly, gently
caressing the skin of the animal
back and forth
his eyes staring off into space
was he staring at me
I wasn't afraid to look at him
I knew he couldn't see me
his hands sliding over the braille
page after page
his eyes
fixed
in my direction
I think he knew I was looking



PRIVATE LIVES III

THE ELEVATED TRAIN, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

The yuppies pile on the cars in their morning commute. It's amazing to think that just hours before now these cars were littered, scattered with an occasional bum, or a gang member, a drunk. Just a few hours before this any one of these people would be too afraid to step on this train.

I see two women step on to the car, each wearing full-length fur coats. Now they have to cram into this full car with all these wool coats, I'll bet they're furious. It would be so easy to spill my coffee on them. I'll bet they don't even know what the animals they killed for this looked like. How many animals would that be? Twelve? Fifteen? Oh, no matter, that's what they're there for, just like this

train, serving its function, taking me where I want to go. Next stop. More yuppies pile on to the train. Most stand without a rail to hold. I hear one yuppie girl say to her lover, "we're L-surfing," right before the train took a turn. All the yuppie suits trying to keep balance, trying not to fall.

I hear a yuppie boy say, "It's just like my living room, it's so spacious." You're the life of the party, friend. You're in your suit, you'll go places. I read a sign above my head that says, "Crime Stoppers pays up to \$1,000 for anonymous crime tips."

All the signs above our heads are for graffiti hot lines, pregnancy
clinics, drug rehab centers.
Signs telling people not to carry guns.
I remember afternoons on the train when homeless men would
walk from car to car through the
train, trying to sell a newspaper to the people commuting home.
In a few hours, when the yuppies are safe in their homes, with
their children safe tucked into their
beds, the homeless man will hide home too.
One of the women with the fur steps off the train.

PRIVATE LIVES IV

THE ELEVATED TRAIN, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

you can hear the gears
speeding up
slowing down
I have seen into other's lives
a woman with two children
one sitting in a stroller
one standing
get on the train
she pulls the scarf
from around her neck
the gloves off
she reaches into her bag
finds a square of folded tin foil
carefully opens
pulls out a tissue
folds the tin foil
puts it away
wipes the children's noses
the standing child sees writing
on the back of her Batman doll
"What does it say?" "Made in China."
"Is that his name?"
this was the window
I was looking through

RING

ring
vows
memory
fail you
foreign
frightening
exciting
name
care
ring
thought
behind
dresser
see
tonight
resigned
forgot
with
you
lost
in
you
remember
myself



ROOM

stairs
worn
right
days
hall
hall
around
anymore
couch
facing
room
to
myself
today
snap
open
creak
drawn
light
fear
again
anger
kicked
again
sweat
couldn't
do
bedroom

fists
walls
rage
muscles
eyebrows
lips
sweat
bedroom
stomach
face
arms
hair
apart
again
face
sheets
screams
me
pain
light
bedroom
symbol
ethic
told
society
eyes
mine
Hell
dresser
pictures
me

frame
edges
floor
dresser
down
bedroom

SILENCE

“once”
fact
hand
sarcasm
silence
thrill
breaking
once—
raped
There.
break
silence
weapons
compassion
knowledge
now
help
do
go
away
silence
someone
me
friend
now
find
again



ST. ANTHONY'S MEDALLION

“A father brought his ten year old son to the cemetery where his mother was buried about a month earlier. It began to rain, and lightning struck the boy dead on the scene. It is believed a St. Anthony medallion worn around his neck acted as a conductor.”

The sky is weeping again.
For me. What have I done,
this is my punishment for
what? You did this to me,
didn't you, you unfair God?
Didn't I tell them I loved
them enough? I went to the
school play, remembered
our anniversary. How am I
supposed to go on now? My
wife first, take her from me
first, then take the only thing
in this world that looks like
her. That has her nose. Her
chin. Why couldn't I rip
that medallion off him, set
him free? Did I not watch
him enough? Did I not love
them enough? Why wasn't it
me? Why wasn't it me? Why?

THE BRIDGE TO NEW ORLEANS

you have to pass the desolation
before you get there
long, long bridges
overlooking swamps, decaying trees
occasionally a home
foundation crumbling
wet wood peeling away
what do those people see
the people in those homes
crocodiles, snakes
bugs along the water
a ripple of the murky
water under the full moon
the vultures perched
along the treetops
they have the isolation
the beauty of the solitude
but it's a different kind of
decay they see
a different kind of decay
a different kind

TWIN

they tell me i was born
two months premature
the first of twins
they tell me it was difficult
my birth
i still can't hear in one ear
i have an indentation in my chest
on the right side
where they had to run a tube
in me
to keep me alive
they tell me they kept Douglas alive
for three weeks
but he just couldn't survive
i wonder what it would have been like
to have someone look just like me
we could switch places
fool everyone
we'd be inseparable
my family doesn't talk about
him much
but sometimes
i still think of him
maybe with the medical world
today
he would be alive
sometimes i feel
like i'm not whole



TWO YEARS

rest
anymore
lead
me
anymore
talk
love
past
mind
pathetic
acts
scare
present
can't
push
years



UNDERSTAND

down
in
understand
different
day
life
interrogation
face
change
will
break
day
battle
silence
me
beg
cry
conform
type
them
those
understand
learn
respect
human
me
room
music

shoulder
faces
image
laughing
smiling
conversing
envy
why
me
face
room
dream
never
life

WAITING FOR YOU (2/13/94)

i look out at the evening sky
snow falling out of the sky
star-shaped flakes as big as fingertips
falling onto my face
melting into my skin
touching me sharp and sweet
like your hand on my cheek
in the cold of winter
it almost feels warm

WALKING HOME FROM SCHOOL

once when I was little
I was walking home from school
filled with fear, like I always
was
the other kids made fun of me
they called me names
sometimes they threw rocks at
me
once they pushed me to the
ground
went home, bleeding knees and
tears
but once, I'll never forget, Patti
from 121st street was
walking behind me and threw
her gym shoes at me
they landed right next to me
as I was walking down
that first big hill
I don't know if I stopped
but I remember for a brief
moment
looking up at the tall tree
branches
next to the road
all the entangled dead branches
and I thought

that all I had to do
was pick up her shoes
and throw them
as hard as I could
and she would never
get her shoes back
I looked at the trees
for only a moment
and I continued walking
as fast as I could
as I always did
and suddenly the shoes
were long behind me
and the others were laughing
I look back now
and wonder why I didn't
do it
was I scared of them
was I scared of myself
I still keep asking myself that

WALKING WITH YOU (2/18/94)

It's springtime again
and here we are,
picking flowers from neighbor's yards
at three a.m.
it's still a little cold
it's still only April
as the wind rushes through our clothes
hands clasped walking in stride
lily of the valley,
tulips, daffodils
it's a beautiful wind

WANTING YOU (2/18/94)

It's night again
the candles flicker
I curl up in myself
trying to keep warm
that's when I feel most alone
when I get lonely
depressed
when will this end
the nights the solitude
that's when I miss you most
sometimes I feel
like I'm not whole
soul mate

WATCHING YOU (2/18/94)

a strand of your hair
falling into your eyes
you brush it behind your ear
you move your head
lean over
it falls again
it curls in just the right way
it makes a perfect tunnel
it directs me
my eyes are drawn
to your beautiful blue eye

WITH YOU (2/18/94)

It's Friday again
the birds are singing this morning
the sun is out
it's warmer than usual
maybe it's always like this
maybe it's today
it always seems darker
when you're further away

WITHOUT YOU (1/6/94)

i look out at the evening sky

trees laced with snow
on the delicate branches

glistening in the whiteness
the darkened sky the powdered streets
the trees aren't as beautiful anymore









This is the window I was looking through.





This is the window I was looking through.

page window 101





This is the window I was looking through.

page window 103















WHITE KNUCKLED

The hot air was sticking
to her skin almost pulling
tugging at her very
flesh as she walked
outside down the
stairs from the train
station. Just then a
breeze hot and
sticky hit her
in just the wrong
way, brushed against her
lower neck, and she
felt his breath again,
not his breath
when he raped
her, but his stench
hot rank
when he was
just close to her.
Her breath quickened,
like the catch of her
breath when she has
just stopped
crying. All the emotion
is still there not
going away. She
walks to the bottom
of the stairs, railing

white-knuckled by her
small tender hands,
the hands of a child,
and that ninety degree
breeze suddenly
gives her a
chill. They say when
you get a chill it means
a goose walked
over your grave.
She knows better. She knows
that it is him
walking, and that
he trapped that child in
that grave



A (FE)MALE BEHIND BARS

January 29, production room, *Seattle Magazine*

For only two weeks she had been preparing for this interview. She struggled to get it approved at the magazine she worked for. See, Chris Hodgkins was a flash from the past, there was no current interest, no timeliness in doing an article on her. In fact, she knew from people who have checked on her whereabouts that she was just living in an apartment on her own, occasionally working, usually not in politics or her usual seminars. The public forgot about her anyway - no one wanted to hear what she had to say anymore. Not that she had fallen out of favor with the American public - in fact, she was loved by most women when she decided to leave the public eye. If anything, the American public had fallen out of favor with her.

But Melanie wanted to write about her, find out why she left, why she really left. The editors knew Chris didn't grant a single interview since she decided to leave her work in the women's rights movement. Besides, even if she got the interview, Chris knew how to deal with the media, with audiences, and she would probably manipulate Melanie into asking only what she wanted asked.

But the writer said she was sure there was something more, she could feel it in her bones, and the editors always told her to follow that feeling, so please let her do it now. So the editors and the higher-ups told her to try to get the interview, and get back to them with her progress at that task.

They expected to never hear about the matter again.

But she came back to them not one week later, saying one phone call was all it took. She called Chris directly, and not only did this elusive leader grant her an interview, but in Chris' own home. Editors were a bit stunned. They let her go ahead with the interview, told her

to focus on the “where are they now,” “why did she leave” angles, and they’ll put together a long piece for a future issue. A long fluff-piece, they thought, but they had to let her go ahead with it, after having no faith in her ability to get an interview.

Maybe it was just because no one tried to get an interview with her anymore, the writer thought. Maybe the editors were right, that there’s no story here, at least not anymore. But now, even after feeling this fear which began to grow into a dread, she had to go through with it. She had to research this woman, inside and out, and talk to her. See what makes her tick. What made her decide to give it all up.

And the more she looked, the more questions she had. Maybe it was the journalist inside her, to question everything put in front of you, but she couldn’t get those questions out of her head.

writer’s tape recorded diary entry, February 11

I didn’t know what I was getting into when I decided to interview her, Chris Hodgkins, feminist leader. I did all the research I could, but for some reason I still don’t know where to start, and I have to walk into her apartment tonight.

The more I studied her, the more I was interested. She became a prominent figure in the women’s movement when she wrote her first book, *A Woman Behind Bars*. The theory was that all women in our society were behind bars, in a sense, that they were forced into a role of looking beautiful, into the role of mother for children, servant for husband, employee for boss, sexual object for single (well, probably all) men.

The chapter that interested me the most was the one on how women adorn themselves in our society in order to please men. Women put on make-up, they grow long hair and long nails, both difficult to work with. They shave their legs, they shave their armpits. They tweeze their eyebrows - they pull hair out of their face from the follicle. Perfume behind the knees, at the ankles, at the chest and neck, in the

hair. The list goes on.

But that's not even the point of all of this. The thing is, a few years ago she managed to pull together the majority of twenty- and thirty-something women out there into her cause. Everyone loved her, in a strange sort of way. She had a great command over audiences. She would hold rallies in New York, then San Francisco, then Chicago, and before you knew it, everyone was talking about her, she was running seminars all around the country, she was appearing on morning talk shows. She was the first real leader in the feminist movement, a movement which for years was felt in everyone but laid dormant because it had no Hitler.

Did I say Hitler? I just meant he was a good leader. I didn't mean she was Hitler, not at all, she's not like that, she's not even calling anyone into action, she's just telling people to educate themselves. She's not even telling people to change, because she figures that if she can educate them, they would want to change anyway. And usually more radical feminist and lesbians are leery of that, they want more action - and she didn't do that, and they still supported her. A movement needs a strong leader, and she was it.

Chris is an interesting looking woman. You'd think she was a lesbian by her appearance - she was tall, somewhat built, but not to look tough, just big. She has chin-length hair, which seems a little long for her, but it looks like she has just forgotten to cut it in a while, and not like she wants to look sexy with it. She almost looks like a little boy. Sharp bones in her face, and big, round eyes.

That was all I knew before I started doing research on her. I started looking into her childhood first, found out that her parents were killed in a robbery when she was fourteen, so she started high school in a small town where her aunt and uncle lived. Her aunt died a year later, and she lived with her uncle until she moved out and went to college. Her uncle died a year before she began to gain fame. In essence,

there was no family of hers that I could talk to, to find out from if she played with Barbie Dolls with her best friend in her bedroom or played in the ravine in the back yard with the other boys from all over the neighborhood. To see if her theories were right - even on her. All of that was lost to me.

She took honors classes in high school, kept to herself socially. In fact, most of her classmates didn't know whether or not she was a girl, she looked so boyish. Even the other girls in her gym class didn't know sometimes, I mean, they knew she was a girl because she was in gym class with them, but she never even changed in front of them. She wouldn't take a shower and she would change in a bathroom stall.

So I started hearing things like this, little things from old classmates, but as soon as they started telling me how they really felt about her, how they thought she was strange, they would then clam up. But it was in my head then; I started wondering what happened in her early childhood that made her so introverted in high school. Maybe the deaths of her parents did it to her, made her become so anti-social. Maybe the loss of her aunt, the only other maternal figure in her life, made her become so masculine. It was a theory that began to make more and more sense to me, but how was I supposed to ask her such a question? How was I supposed to ask her if her parents molested her before they died, and that's why she's got this anger inside of her that comes out seminar after seminar?

the interview, Friday, February 11

The apartment building was relatively small, on the fringes of some rough neighborhoods. Not to say that she couldn't take care of herself, she had proven that she could years ago. The interviewer followed the directions explicitly to get to the apartment, and Chris' door was on the side. She knocked on the door.

Snap one, that was the chain. Click one, that was the first dead bolt. Another click, and the door was free. With a quick jerk the door

was pulled open half-way by a strong, toned forearm. Chris stood there, waiting for the interviewer to make the official introduction.

“Hi, I’m Melanie, from *Seattle Magazine*,” she blurted out, as she tried to kick the snow off her boots and held out her hand. Chris nudged her head toward the inside and told her to come in. The interviewer followed.

She followed Chris down the stairs, looking for clues to her psyche in her clothes, in her form. Grey pants. Baggy. Very baggy. Button-down shirt. White. Sleeves rolled up, make a note of that. Not very thin, but not fat - just kind of there, without much form. Doc Maartens. She had big feet. She was tall, too - maybe five feet, ten inches. But her feet looked huge. The interviewer stared at her feet as they walked down the dark hall. I’ll bet no one has looked at her feet before, she thought.

Chris lived in one of the basement apartments, so they walked past the laundry room, the boiler room, and then reached a stream of tan doors. Hers was the third. Chris opened the door, the interviewer followed.

She looked around. A comfortable easy chair, rust colored, worn. Walls - covered with bookshelves. Books on Marx, Kafka, Rand. History Books. Science books. No photos. No pictures. A small t.v. in the corner on a table, the cord hanging down, unplugged. Blankets on the floor. Keep looking, the interviewer thought. A standing lamp by the chair. The room was yellow in the light. Where were the windows? Oh, she forgot for a moment, they’re in the basement. Sink, half full.

“May I use the washroom?” she asked, and without saying a word, Chris pointed it out to her.

Check the bathroom, the interviewer thought. No make-up. Makes sense. Generic soap, organic shampoo. Razor. Toothbrush. Colgate bottle. Hairbrush. Rubber band, barrette. Yeah, Chris usually pulls her hair back, at least from what the interviewer can remember from the photographs.

“Wanna beer?” Chris yells from the refrigerator to the bathroom. “No, thanks,” the interviewer says. She turns on the water.

She wants to look through the trash, see what she can find. No, that’s too much, she thought, besides, what’s going to be in the trash in the washroom that would surprise her so? Nothing, she was sure of it, and from then on she made a point of avoiding even looking in the direction of the trash can.

This was getting out of hand, she thought. There was no story here. Nothing out of the ordinary, other than the fact that Chris decided to give up her cause, and now she’s living life in this tiny, dark basement apartment.

The interviewer walked out into the yellow living room. Chris was stretched out in a chair, legs apart, drinking a beer with no label.

“I really appreciate you offering me this time to talk to you.”

“No problem.”

The interviewer sat there, suddenly so confused. Chris was terse. She didn’t want to talk, yet she accepted the interview and offered her home as the meeting place. They sat in silence for a moment, a long moment.

“What kind of beer are you drinking?”

“My own.” Chris sat for a moment, almost waiting for the interviewer to ask what she meant. “You see, the landlord gave me some keys for a storage room on this floor, so I converted it into a sort of micro-brewery. I’ve come up with this one -” she held the bottle to the interviewer - “and another one, a pretty sweet dark beer. I call this one ‘Ocean Lager.’”

The interviewer felt she had to take the bottle. “Ocean Lager, that’s a nice name,” and she took a small sip and passed the bottle back to Chris.

“Yeah, I used to be a photographer, back when I was in high school and college, and I loved working in the dark, timing things, and I loved

the stench of the chemicals. I've given up on the photography years ago, so I thought that this would be a hobby like that. You know, it smells, it's dark, you have to add things the right way and wait the right amount of time. I like it. And it's cheaper, too," she said, and with that she took another swig. "Cheaper than photography as well as buying beer from the store."

The interviewer tried to listen to her voice. It was raspy, feminine, almost sexy, but it was very low; she didn't know if she'd ever heard a woman's voice this low before.

"I was looking at your great career," the interviewer finally started, "and thought it surprising that you just decided one day to leave. You had everything going the right way. People were listening to you. What happened?"

She thought she had dropped a bomb.

No one ever got a straight answer for that question.

"Well, it was my time to go. I couldn't take the spotlight anymore. I wanted to become who I really was, not what the world wanted me to be, not what the world perceived me as. I still haven't done that. I haven't become myself yet."

"When were you yourself? Or were you ever?"

"I suppose I was, when I was little, but by the time I got to high school, I started hiding from everyone, because no one seemed to want to know who I really was. I didn't fit in as who I really was. So then I started with my seminars, started trying to work my way to success, and people started to like me. But in all of that time that I was working on women's rights, I wasn't who I really am deep down inside. Not that I didn't believe in the cause, but I was doing it because it seemed like the best route to success. And when I reached the top, people still wanted more out of me, more that I wasn't ready to give. I wanted to take some of myself back."

"Have you gotten any of yourself back since you've left the spot-

light?”

“Some.” Chris paused. “I can sit at home by myself and act the way I want to, without having to project a certain image for everyone else. People have begun to leave me alone.” She paused, then looked at the interviewer. “Not that I consider you an interruption; I wouldn’t have accepted the interview if I didn’t want you here. In fact, I think I really wanted to be able to tell someone how I feel, what I’ve gone through. I don’t talk to many people nowadays. This is like a confessional.”

The interviewer wondered for a moment what Chris was planning to confess.

Chris paused, swirled her beer in her bottle, then looked up. “Sometimes I think of getting a pet. I’d get a cat, but then I think of this stereotypical image of an old woman in an apartment alone with forty cats, where she keeps picking a different one up and asking, ‘you love me, don’t you?’ I don’t want to be like that. Maybe a dog. But a pet requires too much care, and I think I’d end up depending on it more than I should. I should have another human being in my life, not an animal. But I’m so afraid I’ll be alone.”

“Why do you think you’ll be alone?”

“I carry this baggage around with me everywhere. People know me as Chris Hodgkins, and that’s not who I am. I don’t want anyone liking me because I’m Chris Hodgkins. That’s not real. Chris isn’t real, not the Chris everyone knows. The only way I could escape her is to go off to another country in a few years, maybe, and start life all over again.”

“Isn’t that a scary thought, though? I mean, you could ride on your fame for a while longer, make more money, be more secure. You wouldn’t have to work as hard at anything. And people respect you.”

“People respect a person that I’m not. Okay, maybe that person is a part of me, but it’s not all of me. The world doesn’t know the whole story.”

“What is the whole story?” the interviewer asked. By this time she

put her pen and paper down and wasn't writing a word. She was lost in the conversation, like the many people who had heard her speak before. Suddenly she felt she was thrown into the middle of a philosophical conversation, and she was completely enthralled. "Can anyone know the whole story about another person?" she asked.

"Do you really want to know my story?" Chris asked.

"I wouldn't be asking if I didn't."

"You realize that if I tell you, it goes off the record. Besides, you won't be able to substantiate anything I say. More than that no one would believe it, especially not your editors."

At this point, she didn't even care about the interview. "Off the record. Fine."

the confession, February 11, 10:35 p.m.

Chris sat there for a minute, legs apart, elbows on her knees, beer hanging down between her legs. She kept swirling the liquid in the glass. She took the last two gulps, then put the bottle on the ground between her feet.

"I wanna take a bath," she said, and with that she got up and walked toward the bathroom. Halfway there she stopped, turned around, and walked to the refrigerator. It creaked open, she pulled out another beer, let the door close while she popped the cap off. She walked into the bathroom.

The interviewer could hear the water running in the bathtub. She didn't know what to do. Was she supposed to sit there? Leave?

Chris popped her head out of the bathroom. "I hope you don't mind, but I really need to relax. Besides, it's cold in here. Sorry if the cold is bothering you. We can continue the interview in the bathroom, if you want," and she threw her head back into the bathroom.

Melanie didn't know what to think. She edged her way to the bathroom door. When she looked in, she was Chris with her hair pulled back, lighting one candle. "The curtain will be closed. Is this okay with

you?” Chris asked.

The interviewer paused. “Sure,” she said. She sounded confused.

“Okay, then just wait outside until I’m in the bathtub. I’ll yell through the door when you can come in.” And Chris closed the door, and the interviewer leaned against the door frame. Her note pad and pen sat in the living room.

A few minutes passed, or maybe it was a few hours. The water finally silenced. She could hear the curtain close. “You can come in now.”

The interviewer opened the door. The curtain to the bathtub was closed. There was one candle lit on the counter next to the sink, and one glowing from the other side of the curtain. The mirror was fogged with steam. Chris’ clothes were sitting in a pile on the floor. There was no where to sit. The interviewer shut both seats from the toilet and sat down.

“Okay, I’m here,” the interviewer said, as if she wanted Chris to recognize what an effort she went through. “Tell me your story.” She almost felt as if she deserved to hear Chris’ story at this point, that Chris had made her feel so awkward that she at least deserved her curiosity satisfied. She could hear little splashes from the tub.

“You still haven’t asked me about my childhood. You’re not a very good reporter, you know,” Chris said, as if she wanted the interviewer to know that it didn’t have to come down to this. “You could have found out a lot more about me before now.”

They both sat there, each silent.

“It must have hurt when your parents died.”

“I suppose. I didn’t know how to take it.”

“What was the effect of both of your parents dying at such an early age in your life on you?”

“I was stunned, I guess. What I remember most was that my mother was strong, but she followed dad blindly. And dad, he had his views

- he was a political scientist - but no one took him seriously because he didn't have the background. He wasn't in the right circles. I just remember dad saying to mom, 'if only I had a different start, things would be different.' In essence, he wanted to be someone he wasn't. He failed because he wasn't who he needed to be."

"Did it hurt you to see your father think of himself as a failure?"

"He had the choice. He knew what he wanted to do all of his life. He knew the conventional routes to achieving what he wanted - he knew what he needed to do. But he chose to take a different route, and people thought he didn't have the training he needed, that he didn't know what he was talking about. But he made that choice to take that different route. He could have become what he needed to in order to get what he wanted. But he didn't, and in the end, he never got anything."

"But you, you got what you wanted in your life, right?"

"Yes, but that was because I made the conscious choice to change into what I had to be in order to succeed. If I didn't make those changes, no one would have accepted my theories on human relations and no one would have listened to my speeches on women's rights."

"How did you have to change?"

The interviewer finally hit the nail on the head.

"I'm not ready to answer that question yet. Ask me later."

The interviewer paused, then continued.

"Okay, so your parents died and you had to move in with your aunt and uncle. How well did you know them?"

"Not at all. In fact, they didn't even know I existed. You see, my father had no family in the States, he moved here from England, and he lost contact with all of his family. Mom's family didn't want her marrying dad, I still don't know why, so they disowned her when she married him. She never spoke to any of them. In fact, my mother's sister didn't even know my parents died until the state had to research my family's

history to see who I should be pushed off on to. When my aunt and uncle took me in, it was the first time they ever saw me. It was the first time the even knew I existed.”

The interviewer could hear the water moving behind the curtain, and then Chris continued.

“My parents were in New Jersey, and my aunt and uncle were in Montana. It was a complete life change for me.”

“How did you get along with other kids from school?”

“Before my parents died, fine. Once I changed schools, I didn’t fit in. I didn’t know how to fit in. I thought it would be too fake if I tried to act like all the other girls, even the ones who were like me, who didn’t fit in. I just didn’t know how to be a girl. I wanted to, and I tried, but it was so hard.

“I just wanted to be looked at as a girl. I didn’t want anyone to question it.”

“Why would they?”

“Because I looked so boyish. Because I didn’t go on dates. Because I was so anti-social.”

“Do you think that has something to do with the fact that your mother died, then a year later your aunt died? They were your maternal figures, and you lost them both at a crucial age.”

“Yes. But my aunt didn’t know how to deal with me. She never had children. She left me alone most of the time. She knew that was what I wanted. I remember once she asked me if I had gotten my period yet in my life. I didn’t, but I didn’t want her to think that, so I said yes, so the next day she bought me pads. I didn’t know what to do with them. The day after that I told her that I would buy them myself from now on, so she didn’t have to, but I thanked her anyway. That way I knew she would think that I was still buying them, even if that box in my closet was the same box that she bought me.

“Relations with her were strange. And when she died, I only had

classmates and my uncle to take cues from. I wanted to be like the girls in school, so I tried not to take cues from my uncle. I tried to avoid being like my uncle. But sometimes I couldn't help it."

"Why did you want so hard to be a girl? Did you want to fit in? Or do you think it had more to do with your mom?"

"No, it wasn't that at all. There wasn't a part of me that said I needed to be feminine. But at that age I knew what I wanted to do with my life, and that was work in political science and sociology - specifically, in women's rights. I knew I wanted that, and I knew that I'd have a better chance of succeeding in that field if I was - well, if I was a girl."

"But you were a girl, no matter how much you didn't fit in."

And that was when Chris decided to drop the bomb.

"But that's exactly it, Melanie - I'm - well - I'm not a woman."

"There are sometimes when I don't feel feminine - when I want to go out and drink beer, I know what you -"

"No, you're not listening to me," Chris cut in. "I'm not a woman. I'm a man. My name is Chris, not Christine. I am a man, I have a penis, I've got testosterone running through my body. Just not a lot of it."

"You don't really expect me to -"

"Look, when my parents died, I knew what I wanted to do with my life - I knew before they died. But I also knew that I wouldn't be taken seriously in the field unless I was a woman. So at fourteen, when they died, I had a clean slate. I told everyone I was a girl. I was given to my aunt and uncle as a girl. I went to my new school as a girl.

"And I went to gym classes and I didn't have breasts, and I had to hide from all the other girls. Although I was boyish-looking, I wasn't manly, so I got away with it. I shaved only occasionally, only when I had to. And once I got out of high school, acting like a girl was easier. No one questioned who I said I was. People accepted me as a woman.

"Then I started doing the work I did, and people loved me. I got a lot more fame for it than I ever anticipated. I was succeeding. It was

wonderful.

“But then it hit me - I’m all alone, and I can tell no one about who I really am. I’ve been doing this all my life, and people would look at me like I was a freak if I went out and told them the truth now. I’m a man, and I like women, I’m not gay, and I could never tell any women that exists that has ever heard of me the truth, because then they will no longer trust me or anything I have ever said regarding women’s rights. I would take the whole movement backwards if I told the world who I really was.”

“That you were a man.”

“You still don’t believe me, do you? I’m telling you this because you wanted to know, you wanted me to tell you this. And because I needed to tell someone. But I can’t destroy women’s chances of being treated with respect in this country by telling everyone.”

“So what you’re telling me is that at age fourteen you decided to become a woman so you could do the work you wanted to do in your life.”

“Yes.”

“But that’s a lot to do to yourself, especially at fourteen. What made you decide to do it?”

“My mother’s strength, but her submission to my father, made me want to go into the field. My father’s desire to do what he wanted, but his failure to achieve it because he wasn’t what the world wanted, made me decide to become a woman. I realized then that I could never succeed in this field if I wasn’t one.

“And look at the success I’ve had! Look at all of the people I managed to bring together! I was famous, people were reading my books, people wanted my opinions. I was succeeding.

“But even with all my success, people still expected a messenger for the welfare of women all over the world to be a woman - even the other women expected this. No one would have listened to me for a

second if I was a man.”

“And so you stopped because -”

“Because there’s a price you pay by becoming what the world wants you to be. My father knew that, and he didn’t want to pay that price. He didn’t, and he failed at what he wanted to do. I was willing to pay the price, I made the sacrifices, and I actually beat the odds and succeeded. But then I realized that I lost myself in the process. I’m a man, and look at me. People think I’m a woman. I wear fake breasts in public. I have no close relationships. I have nothing to call my own other than my success. Well, after a while, that wasn’t enough. So this is part of my long road to becoming myself again.

“I’m going to have to change my identity and move to another country, I’m going to have to start all over again, I’m going to have to more completely separate myself from working on women’s rights, but it’s the only way I can do it. I’ll know I did what I wanted, even if it cost a lot. The next few years will now have to be me correcting all that I changed in myself in order to succeed. Correcting all my mistakes.

“I want to have a family someday. How am I supposed to be a father? There are so many things I have to change. I couldn’t go on telling the world I was a woman any more. But I couldn’t tell them I wasn’t one, so I just had to fade away, until I didn’t matter anymore.”

The interviewer sat there in silence.

“Do you have any other questions?” Chris asked.

The interviewer sat there, confused, not knowing if she should believe Chris or not. She could rip the curtain open and see for herself, she thought, but either way they would both be embarrassed.

“No.”

“Then you can go,” Chris said. “I want to get out of this bath.”

Melanie walked out of the bathroom, closed the door. Then she started thinking of all the little things, not changing with the other girls in school, looking so boyish, the low voice, the way she sat, her feet,

the razor, the toilet seats. Could she be telling the truth? Could he be telling the truth, the interviewer thought, is Chris a she or a he? She didn't know anymore. But it seemed to make sense. Her birth certificate would be the only thing that would prove it to anyone, unless she somehow got it changed.

She could have had her birth certificate changed, the interviewer thought, and therefore there would be no real proof that Chris was lying, other than looking at her naked. It was such a preposterous story, yet it seemed so possible that she tended to believe it. It didn't matter anyway, because she couldn't write about it, proof or not, she offered this information off the record. She grabbed her pencil and note pad from the living room and walked to the door.

Just as she was about to leave, Chris walked out from the bathroom. She walked over to the front door to open it for the interviewer. Melanie walked through the doorway, without saying a word, as Chris said, "Good story, wasn't it?"

The interviewer turned around once more, but didn't get to see Chris' face before the door was shut. Once again, she was left with her doubts. She walked down the hall.

- note: this work is fiction. Any correlations between any part of this story and events that have taken place in real life are purely coincidental.



GABRIEL

She had lived there, in her fourth floor apartment on the near north side of the city, for nearly three years. It was an uneventful three years from the outside; Gabriel liked it that way. She just wanted to live her life: go to work, see her new friends, have a place to herself.

But looking a bit closer, it was easy to see what a wonderful life she had. Her apartment was impeccable, with Greek statues and glass vases lining the hallways, modern oil paintings lining her walls. She was working at her career for a little under two years and she had received two hefty promotions. She served on the board of directors for the headquarters of a national domestic abuse clinic and single-handedly managed to increase annual donations in her city by 45%, as well as drastically increase the volunteer base for their hotline numbers. She managed a boyfriend, a man who was willing to put up with her running around, working overtime for her job, visiting clinics. A man who loved and respected her for her drive. Not bad for a woman almost twenty-five.

Yes, life seemed good for Gabriel, she would dine in fine restaurants, visit the operas and musicals travelling through the city. And she had only been in the city for three years.

Eric would wonder what her past was like when he'd hit a nerve with her and she would charge off to work, not talking to him for days. She had only lived in the city for three years, and he knew nothing about her life before then. In the back of his mind, he always thought she was hiding something from him, keeping a little secret, and sometimes everything Gabriel said made him believe this secret was real. She told him her parents lived on the other side of the country, and even though they dated for almost two years there never was talk about visiting them. She never received calls from her old friends. There were

no old photographs.

This would get to Eric sometimes; it would fester inside of him when he sat down and thought about it, all alone, in his apartment, wondering when she would be finished with work. And then he'd see her again, and all of his problems would disappear, and he'd feel like he was in love.

One morning he was sitting at her breakfast table, reading her paper, waiting so they could drive to work. "Hey, they finally got that mob-king guy with some charges they think will stick."

Gabriel minded her business, put her make-up on in the bathroom mirror, hair-sprayed her short, curly brown hair.

"Hey, Gabriel, get a load of this quote," Eric shouted down the hallway to her from his seat. He could just barely see her shadow through the open door to the bathroom. "'My client is totally innocent of any charges against him. It is the defense's opinion that Mr. Luccio was framed, given to the police by the organized crime rings in this city as a decoy,' said Jack Huntington, defense lawyer for the case. 'Furthermore, the evidence is circumstantial, and weak.' What a joke. I hope this guy doesn't get away with all he's done. You know, if I—"

Gabriel stopped hearing his voice when she heard that name. She had heard Luccio over and over again in the news, but Jack. She didn't expect this. Not now. It had been so long since she heard that name.

But not long enough. Her hands gripped the edge of the ceramic sink, gripping tighter and tighter until she began to scratch the wood paneling under the sink. Her head hung down, the ends of her hair falling around her face. He lived outside of the city, nearly two hours. Now he was here, maybe ten minutes away from her home, less than a mile away from where she worked, where she was about to go to.

She couldn't let go of the edge of the sink. Eric stopped reading aloud and was already to the sports section, and in the back of her mind Gabriel was wondering how she could hurt herself so she would-

n't have to go to work. She would be late already, she had been standing there for over ten minutes.

Hurt herself? What was she thinking? And she began to regain her senses. She finally picked her head up and looked in the mirror. She wasn't the woman from then, she had to say to herself as she sneered at her reflection. But all she could see was long, blonde straight hair, a golden glow from the sun, from the days where she didn't work as often as she did now, when she had a different life.

She had to pull on her hair to remind herself that it was short. She pulled it until she almost cried. Then she stopped, straightened her jacket, took a deep breath and walked out the bathroom door.

Eric started to worry. As they car-pooled together to work, Gabriel sat in the passenger seat, right hand clutching the door handle, left hand grabbing her briefcase, holding it with a fierce, ferocious grip. But it was a grip that said she was scared, scared of losing that briefcase, or her favorite teddy bear from the other kids at school, or her life from a robber in an alley. If nothing else, Eric knew she felt fear. And he didn't know why.

He tried to ask her. She said she was tired, but tense, an important meeting and a pounding headache. He knew it was more. She almost shook as she sat in that car, and she began to rock back and forth, forward and back, ever so slightly, the way a mother rocks her child to calm her down. It made Eric tense, too. And scared.

Work was a blur, a blur of nothingness. There was no meeting, the workload was light for a Friday. But at least the headache was there, that wasn't a lie. She hated lying, especially to Eric. But she had no choice, especially now, with Jack lurking somewhere in the streets out there, winning his cases, wondering if his wife is dead or not.

She never wanted him to know the answer.

Eric called her a little after four. "Just wanted to check if we were still going to dinner tonight. I made the reservations at the new

Southwestern place, you said you wanted to go there. Sound good?"

Gabriel mustered up the strength to respond, and only came up with, "Sure."

"Do you still have the headache, honey? Do you want to just rent a movie or two and curl up on the couch tonight? Whatever you want to do is fine, just let me know."

She knew at this point he was doing all he could to make her feel better. She didn't want to put him through this. He shouldn't have to deal with her like this. She searches for her second wind. "No, Eric, dinner would be fine. We can go straight from work to save the drive. Thanks, too. You really have a knack for making my days better."

Eric smiled at the end of the line. And Gabriel could feel it.

They got off the phone, she finished her work, turned off her computer, started walking toward the elevator when it finally occurred to her: Jack might be there. She can't go. Even if he's not there, she could see him on the street, driving there. She just couldn't go.

She pressed the button for the elevator. And he could just as easily see me walking out of work, getting in Eric's car, she thought. I have to stop thinking like this. This is ludicrous. And he won't be there, he won't see me, because, well, the chances are so thin, and Hell, it's a big city. I have to try to relax.

But she couldn't. And there was no reason she should have.

At the restaurant, they sat on the upper level, near one of the large Roman columns decorated with ivy. She kept looking around one of the columns, because a man three tables away looked like Jack. It wasn't, but she still had to stare.

The meal was delicious, the presentation was impeccable. She was finally starting to relax. The check arrived at the table right as the place began to get crowded, so Gabriel went to the washroom to freshen up before they left. She walked through the restaurant, feeling comfortable and confident again. She even attracted a smile from a man at

another table. She walked with confidence and poise. And she loved life again.

She walked into the bathroom, straight to the mirror, checking her hair, her lip stick. She looked strong, not how she looked when she was married. She closed her purse, turned around and headed out the door.

That's when she saw him.

There he was, Jack, standing right there, waiting for a table. He had three other men with him, all in dark suits. She didn't know if they were mob members or firm associates. Or private eyes he hired to find her. Dear God, she thought, what could she do now? She can't get to the table, he'll see her for sure. She can't stare at him, it'll only draw attention to herself.

And then she thinks: "Wait. All I've seen is the back of him. It might not even be him." She took a breath. "It's probably not even him," she thought, "and I've sat here worrying about it."

Still, she couldn't reassure herself. She took a few steps back and waited for him to turn around.

A minute passed, or was it a century?, and finally he started to turn, just as they were about to be led to their table. She saw his profile, just a glimpse of his face. It was him, it was Jack, it was the monster she knew from all those years, the man who made her lose any ounce of innocence or femininity she ever had. She saw how his chin sloped into his neck, the curve of his nose, how he combed his hair back, and she knew it was him.

By the washrooms, she stared at him while he took one step away from her, closer to the dining room. Then she felt a strong, pulling hand grip her shoulder. Her hair slapped her in the face as she turned around. Her eyes were saucers.

"The check is paid. Let's go," Eric said as he took her jacket from her arm and held it up for her. She slid her arms through the sleeves, Eric pulling the coat over her shoulders. She stared blankly. He guided

her out the doors.

She asked him if they could stop at a club on the way home and have a drink or two. They found a little bar, and she instantly ordered drinks. They sat for over an hour in the dark club listening to the jazz band. It looked to Eric like she was trying to lose herself in the darkness, in the anonymity of the crowded lounge. It worried him more. And still she didn't relax.

And she drove on the expressway back from dinner, Eric in the seat next to her. He had noticed she had been tense today, more than she had ever been; whenever he asked her why she brushed her symptoms off as nothing.

The radio blared in the car, the car soaring down the four lanes of open, slick, raw power, and she heard the dee jay recap the evening news. A man died in a car accident, he said, and it was the lawyer defending the famed mob leader. And then the radio announced his name.

And she didn't even have to hear it.

Time stopped for a moment when the name was spread, Jack, Jack Huntington, like a disease, over the air waves. Jack, Jack the name crept into her car, she couldn't escape it, like contaminated water it infiltrated all of her body and she instantly felt drugged. Time stood still in a horrific silence for Gabriel. Hearing that midnight talk show host talk about the tragedy of his death, she began to reduce speed, without intention. She didn't notice until brights were flashing in her rear view mirror, cars were speeding around her, horns were honking. She was going 30 miles per hour.

She quickly regained herself, turned off the radio, and threw her foot on the accelerator. Eric sat silent. They had a long drive home ahead of them from the club, and he knew if he only sat silent that she would eventually talk.

While still in the car, ten minutes later, she began to tell him about

Andrea.

“Three years ago, when I moved to the city, my name wasn’t Gabriel. It was Andrea.

“Seven years ago, I was a different person. I was a lot more shy, insecure, an eighteen year old in college, not knowing what I wanted to study. I didn’t know what my future was, and I didn’t want to have to go through my life alone. My freshman year I met a man in the law school program at school. He asked me out as soon as he met me. I was thrilled.

“For the longest time I couldn’t believe that another man, especially one who had the potential for being so successful, was actually interested in me. He was older, he was charming. Everyone loved him. I followed him around constantly, wherever he wanted me to go.

“He met my parents right away. They adored him, a man with a future, he was so charming. They pushed the idea of marrying him. I didn’t see it happening for a while, but I felt safe with him.

“And every once in a while, after a date, or a party, we’d get alone and he’d start to yell at me, about the way I acted with him, or what I said in public, or that the way I looked was wrong, or something. And every once in a while he would hit me. And whenever it happened I thought that I should have looked better, or I shouldn’t have acted the way I did. This man was too good for me. And I had to do everything in my power to make him happy.

“Less than eight months after we met, he asked me to marry him. I accepted.

“We were married two years after we met; it was a beautiful ceremony, tons of flowers, tons of gifts—and I was turning a junior in college. My future was set for me. I couldn’t believe it.

“And as soon as we were married, which was right when he started at the firm, he got more and more violent. And instead of thinking that it was my fault, I started thinking that it was because he was so

stressed, that he had so much work to do, that sometimes he just took it out on me. I was no one's fault. Besides, if he was going to climb to the top, he needed a wife that was perfect for all of his appearances. I had to be perfect for him. Take care of the house and go to school full time.

"Money wasn't a problem for us, he had a trust fund from his parents and made good money at the firm, so I could go to school. But he started to hate the idea that I was going to college in marketing instead of being his wife full time. But that was one thing I wasn't going to do for him, stop going to school.

"He'd get more and more angry about it the longer we were married. After the first year he'd hit me at least once a week. I was physically sick half of my life then, sick from being worried about how to make him not hurt me, sick from trying to figure out how to cover up the bruises.

"I'd try to talk to him about it, but the few times I ever had the courage to bring it up, he'd beat me. He'd just beat me, say a few words. Apologize the next morning, think everything was better. I couldn't take it.

"I threatened with divorce. When I did that I had to go to the hospital with a broken arm. I had to tell the doctors that I fell down the stairs.

"A long flight of stairs.

"When it was approaching two years of marriage with this man, I said to myself I couldn't take it anymore. He told me over and over again that he'd make me pay if I tried to leave him, I'd be sorry, it would be the worst choice I could ever make. This man had power, too, he could hunt me down if I ran away, he could emotionally and physically keep me trapped in this marriage.

"So I did the only thing I thought I could do.

"I wrote a suicide note. 'By the time you find my car, I'll be dead.' I



took a few essentials, nothing that could say who I was. I cut my hair—I used to have long, long hair that I dyed blonde. I chopped it all off and dyed it dark. Then I drove out to a quarry off the interstate 20 miles away in the middle of the night, threw my driver's license and credit cards into the passenger's seat, put a brick on the accelerator, got out of the car and let it speed over the cliff. Everything was burned.

“So there I was, twenty-two years old, with no future, with no identity. My family, my friends, would all think I was dead in the morning. And for the first time in my life, I was so alone. God, I was so scared, but at the same time, it was the best feeling in the world. It felt good to not have my long hair brushing against my neck. It felt good to feel the cold of the three a.m. air against my cheeks, on my ears. It felt good to have no where to go, other than away. No one was telling me where to go, what to do. No one was hurting me.

“I found my way two hours away to this city, came up with the name Gabriel from a soap opera playing in a clinic I went to to get some cold medication. I managed a job at the company I’m at now. Did volunteer work, rented a hole for an apartment. Projected a few of the right ideas to the right people in the company. I got lucky.”

She told him all of this before she told him that her husband’s name was Jack Huntington.

She brought him home, sat on the couch while he made coffee for her. He tried to sound calm, but the questions kept coming out of his mouth, one after another. Gabriel’s answers suddenly streamed effortlessly from her mouth, like a river, spilling over onto the floor, covering the living room with inches of water within their half hour of talk.

She felt the cool water of her words sliding around her ankles. And she felt relieved.

Gabriel, Andrea, was no longer Mrs. Jack Huntington.

Eric told her that she could have told him before. “I’d follow you anywhere. If I had to quit my job and run away with you I would.” It hurt him that she kept this from him for so long, but he knew he was the only person who knew her secret. He smiled.

There was a burden lifted, she felt, with Jack’s death, the burden that she didn’t have to hide who she was anymore. She didn’t have to worry about public places, cower when she felt his presence, following her, haunting her. It’s over, she thought. She can walk out in the street now, and scream, and run, and laugh, and no one will come walking around the corner to force her back to her old life, to that little private hell that was named Andrea.

But sitting there, she knew there was still one thing she had to do.

She put down her coffee, got on her coat, told him this was something she must do. Gabriel got into her car, started to head away from the city. As she left, Eric asked where she was going. She knew she had done what she could for the last three years of her own life to save her-

self; now it was time to go back to the past, no matter what the consequences were.

He thought she was going back to her family. She was, in a way.

She drove into the town she had once known, saw the trees along the streets and remembered the way they looked every fall when the leaves turned colors. She remembered that one week every fall when the time was just right and each tree's leaves were different from the other trees. This is how she wanted to remember it.

And she drove past her old town, over an hour and a half away from the city, passing where her parents, her brother could still be living. She didn't know if she would ever bother to find them. Right now all she could do was drive to the next town, where her old friend used to live. Best friends from the age of three, Sharon and Andrea were inseparable, even though they fought to extremes. And as she drove toward Sharon's house, she knew she'd have to move quickly, if her husband was still there.

She double checked in a phone book at a nearby gas station. And she turned two more corners and parked her car across the street. Would she recognize her? Would she believe she was there? That she was alive?

Gabriel saw one car in the driveway, not two; she went to the window, and looking in saw only Sharon. She stepped back. She took a long, deep breath. She was a fugitive turning herself in. She was a fugitive, asking people to run with her, running from something, yet running free. She knocked on the door.

Through the drapes she saw the charcoal shadow come up to the door. It creaked open. There they stood, looking at each other. For the first time in three and a half years.

Sharon paused for what seemed a millennium. Her eyes turned to glass, to a pond glistening with the first rays of the morning sun.

"Andrea." She could see her through the brown curls wrapping her

face. Another long silence. Sharon's voice started to break.

"You're alive," she said as she closed her eyes and started to smile. And Gabriel reached through the doorway, and the door closed as they held each other.

They sat down in the living room. In the joy, Sharon forgot about the bruises on her shoulder. Gabriel noticed them immediately.

They talked only briefly before Gabriel asked her. "Is Paul here?"

"No, he's out playing cards. Should be out all night."

"Things are the same, aren't they?"

"Andi, they're fine. He's just got his ways," and Sharon turned her head away, physically looking for something to change the subject. There was so much to say, yet Sharon couldn't even speak.

And then Gabriel's speech came out, the one she had been rehearsing in her mind the entire car ride over. The speech she gave to herself for the years before this very moment. "Look, Sharon, I know what it's like, I can see the signs. I know you, and I know you'll sit through this marriage, like I would have, this unending cycle of trying to cover the bruises on your arms and make excuses—"

Sharon moved her arm over her shoulder. Her head started inching downward. She knew Andrea knew her too well, and she wouldn't be able to fight her words, even after all these years.

"I went through this. When Jack told me I'd never be able to leave him, that I'd be sorry if I did, that I'd pay for trying to divorce him, that's when I knew I couldn't take it anymore. No man has a right to tell me—or you—what you can and can't do. It hasn't gotten better, like you keep saying, has it? No. I know it hasn't. It never does.

"I know this sounds harsh, and it is. If I was willing to run away, run away so convincingly that my own family thought I was dead, then it had to be serious. Do you think I liked leaving you? My brother? Do you think this was easy?"

Gabriel paused, tried to lean back, take a deep breath, relax.

“No. It wasn’t easy. But I had to do it, I had to get away from him, no matter what it took. In spending my life with him I was losing myself. I needed to find myself again.”

They sat there for a moment, a long moment, while they both tried to recover.

“You don’t have to run away,” Gabriel said to her. “You don’t have to run away like I had to. But he won’t change. You do have to leave here. Let me help you.”

Within forty-five minutes Sharon had three bags of clothes packed and stuffed into Gabriel’s trunk. As Sharon went to get her last things, Gabriel thought of how Sharon called her “Andi” when she spoke. God, she hadn’t heard that in so long. And for a moment she couldn’t unravel the mystery and find out who she was.

Sharon came back to the car. Gabriel knew that Sharon would only stay with her until the divorce papers were filed and she could move on with her life. But for tonight they were together, the inseparable Sharon and Andi, spending the night, playing house, creating their own world where everything was exactly as they wanted.

And this was real life now, and they were still together, with a whole new world to create. They were both free, and alive, more alive than either of them had ever felt.

“I want you to meet Eric. He’s a good man,” Gabriel said.

And as they drove off to nowhere, to a new life, on the expressway, under the viaduct, passing the projects, the baseball stadium, heading their way toward the traffic of downtown life, they remained silent, listened to the hum of the engine. For Gabriel, it wasn’t the silence of enabling her oppressor; it wasn’t the silence of hiding her past. It was her peace for having finally accepted herself, along with all of the pain, and not feeling the hurt.

Andrea. Gabriel.

The next morning, she didn’t know which name she’d use, but she knew that someone died that night, not Jack, but someone inside of her. But it was also a rebirth. And so she drove.



HOW YOU LOOKED THEN

I take snapshots of these things in my mind. I rifle through them.

I never told you that I loved to watch you in the bathroom, getting ready to go out. It would usually be after you shaved, or even after you dressed, when you were almost ready to go but had to fix your hair. And you'd look in the mirror, and you'd be brushing the sides of your head with your curved fingertips, and you'd be scrutinizing yourself, eyes just slightly squinted. I always thought you looked most handsome when you did that with your eyes, squinted like that, like you were looking for something, searching.

When I'd see you in the bathroom mirror like that, I'd usually wrap myself around your arm, lean my head on your shoulder, and just stare. I don't think you ever noticed how I'd look at you at those time. Like you were my mentor. My savior.

Or when we were at that restaurant and you were sitting across from me, wearing the denim button-down shirt I bought you, and you were eating, and you were slouched over your plate, elbows on the table, and you were just eating, not paying attention to much else around you. And you hadn't shaved in a few days, and the copper-colored stubble was every once in a while catching the light. And in between bites you kept combing your hair back with your fingers, because it kept falling while you ate.

While you were eating, I just had to stop, lean back, and stare at you for a while. I don't know why, but I'll never forget how you looked then.



STALKER

And she got out of her car, walked across her driveway, and walked up the stairs to her porch, trying to enjoy her solitude, trying not to remember that he had followed her once again. She thought she was free of him; she thought he moved on with his life and that she would not have to see his face again.

Why did he have to call her, on this one particular day, years later, while she was at work? Maybe if she could have been suspecting it, she might have been braced for it. But then again, she didn't want to think about it: she was happy that she was finally starting to feel as if she had control of her life again.

It had been so many years, why would she have expected him to follow her again? Didn't she make it clear years ago that she didn't want him waiting outside her house in his car anymore, that she didn't want to receive the hang-up calls at three in the morning anymore? Or the calls in the middle of the night, when he'd stay on the line, when she could tell that he was high, and he'd profess his love to her? Or the letters, or the threats? No, the police couldn't do anything until he took action, when it was too late. Why did he come back? Why couldn't he leave her alone? Why couldn't it be illegal for someone to fill her with fear for years, to make her dread being in her house alone, to make her wonder if her feeling that she was being followed wasn't real?

All these thoughts rushed through her head as she sat on her front porch swing, opening her mail. One bill, one piece of junk mail, one survey.

It was only a phone call, she had to keep thinking to herself. He may never call again. She had no idea where he was even calling from. For all she knew, he could have been on the other side of the country. It was only a phone call.

And then everything started to go wrong in her mind again, the bushes around the corner of her house were rustling a little too loud, there were too many cars that sounded like they were stopping near

her house. Her own breathing even scared her.

I could go into the house, she thought, but she knew that she could be filled with fear there, too. Would the phone ring? Would there be a knock on the door? Or would he even bother with a knock, would he just break a window, let himself in, cut the phone lines so she wouldn't stand a chance?

No, she knew better. She knew she had to stay outside, that she couldn't let this fear take a hold of her again. And so she sat.

She looked at her phone bill again. She heard the creak of the porch swing.

She swore she heard someone else breathing.

No, she wouldn't look up from her bill, because she knew no one was there.

Then he spoke. "Hi."

She looked up. He was standing right at the base of her stairs, not six feet away from her. "What are you doing on my property?"

"Oh, come on, you used to not hate me so much." He lit a cigarette, a marlboro red, with a match. "So, why wouldn't you take my call today?"

"Why would I? What do I have to say to you?"

"You're really making a bigger deal out of this than it is," he said, then took a drag. She watched the smoke come out of his mouth as he spoke. "We used to have it good."

She got up, and walked toward him. She was surprised; in her own mind she never thought she'd actually be able to walk closer to him, she always thought she'd be running away. She stood at the top of the stairs. "Can I have a smoke?"

"Sure," he said, and he reached up to hand her the fire stick. She reached out for the matches. "I'll light it." She put the match to the end of the paper and leaves, watched it turn orange. She didn't want this cigarette. She needed to look more calm. Calm. Just be calm. She remained at the top of the stairs, and he stood only six stairs below her. She sat at the top stair. "You really think we ever got along?"

"Sure. I mean, I don't know how you got in your head -" "Do you

think I enjoyed finding your car outside my house all the time? Did I enjoy seeing you at the same bars I was at, watching my and my friends, like you were recording their faces into your memory forever? Do you think I liked you coming to bother me when I was working at the store? Do you - "I was." She paused. "You were what?"

"I was logging everyone you were with into my head." She sat silent.

"At the bars - I remember every face. I remember every one of them. I had to, you see, I had to know who was trying to take you away. I needed to know who they were."

She sat still, she couldn't blink, she stared at him, it was just as she was afraid it would be. And all these years she begged him to stop, but nothing changed. She couldn't take it all anymore. She put out her right hand, not knowing exactly what she'd do if she held his hand. He put his left hand in hers. "You know," she said, then paused for a drag of the red fire, "This state would consider what you did to me years ago stalking." She held his hand tighter, holding his fingers together. She could feel her lungs moving her up and down. He didn't even hear her; he was fixated on looking at his hand in hers, until she caught his eyes with her own and then they stared, past the iris, the pupil, until they burned holes into each other's heads with their stare.

"And you know," she said, as she lifted her cigarette, "I do too."

Then she quickly moved the cigarette toward their hands together, and put it out in the top of his hand.

He screamed. Grabbed his hand. Bent over. Pressed harder. Swore. Yelled.

She stood. Her voice suddenly changed. "Now, I'm going to say this once, and I won't say it again. I want you off my property. I want you out of my life. I swear to God, if you come within fifty feet of me or anything related to me or anything that belongs to me, I'll get a court order, I'll get a gun, I'll do whatever it takes to keep you away forever. Now go."

He held his left hand with his right, the fingers on his right hand purple from the pressure he was using on the open sore. He moaned while she spoke. She stood at the top of the stairs looking down on him. He slowly walked away.

She thought for a moment she had truly taken her life back. She looked down. Clenched in the fist in her left hand was the cigarette she just put out.



FISH

It's a pretty miraculous thing, I suppose, making the transition from being a fish to being a human being. The first thing I should do is go about explaining how I made the transition, the second thing, attempting to explain why. It has been so long since I made the decision to change and since I have actually assumed the role of a human that it may be hard to explain.

Before my role in human civilization, I was a beta — otherwise known as a Japanese fighting fish. Although we generally have a beautiful purple-blue hue, most people familiar with different species of fish thought of us as more expensive goldfish. I was kept in a round bowl, about eight inches wide at it's longest point (in human terms, that would be living in quarters about 25 feet at the widest point). It may seem large enough to live, but keep in mind that as humans, you not only have the choice of a larger home, but you are also able to leave your living quarters at any point in time. I did not have that luxury. In fact, what I had was a very small glass apartment, not well kept by my owners (and I at that point was unable to care for it myself). I had a view of the outside world, but it was a distorted view. And I thought I could never experience that world first-hand.

Previous to living anywhere else, before I was purchased, I resided in a very small bowl - no longer than three inches at the widest point. Living in what humans would consider an eight foot square, I had difficulty moving. I even had a hard time breathing. Needless to say from then on I felt I needed more space, I needed to be on my own. No matter what, that was what I needed.

I lived in the said bowl alone. There was one plastic tree in the center of my quarters — some algae grew on it, but that was all I had for plant life in my space. The bottom of my quarters was filled with small

rocks and clear marbles. It was uneventful.

Once they put another beta in my quarters with me — wait, I must correct myself. I thought the put another beta there with me. I must explain, but please do not laugh: I only came to learn at a later point, a point after I was a human, that my owner had actually placed my quarters next to a mirror. I thought another fish was there with me, following my every motion, getting angry when I got angry, never leaving me alone, always taking the same moves as I did. I raced back and forth across my quarters, always staring at the “other” fish, always prepared to fight it. But I never did.

Once I was kept in an aquarium for a short period of time. It was a ten-gallon tank, and I was placed in there with other fish of varying species, mostly smaller. I was the only beta there. There were different colored rocks, and there were more plastic plants. And one of the outside walls was colored a bright shade of blue - I later came to discover that it was paper behind the glass wall. Beyond the other fish, there was no substantial difference in my quarters.

But my interactions with the other fish is what made the time there more interesting. I wanted to be alone most of the time — that is the way I felt the most comfortable. I felt the other fish didn't look like me, and I often felt that they were specifically out to hamper me from any happiness. You have to understand that we are by nature very predatory — we want our space, we want dominance over others, we want others to fear us. It is survival of the fittest when it comes to our lives. Eat or be eaten.

I stayed to myself most of the time in the aquarium; I occasionally made shows of strength to gain respect from the other fish. It made getting food from the top of the tank easier when no one tempted to fight me for the food. It was lonely, I suppose, but I survived — and I did so with better luck than most of the others there.

Then one day it appeared. First closed off to the rest of us by some sort of plastic for a while, then eventually the plastic walls were taken

away and it was there. Another beta was suddenly in my space. My space. This was my home, I had proven myself there. I was the only fish of my kind there, and now there was this other fish I would have to prove myself to. Eat or be eaten. I had to make sure — and make sure right away — that this other fish would never be a problem for me.

But the thing was, I knew that the other fish had no right to be there. I didn't know how they got there, what those plastic walls were, or why they were there. But I had to stop them. This fish was suddenly my worst enemy.

It didn't take long before we fought. It was a difficult battle, all of the other fish got out of the way, and we darted from one end of the aquarium to the other. It wasn't long until I was given the opportunity to strike. I killed the other beta, its blood flowing into my air. Everyone there was breathing the blood of my victory.

Almost immediately I was removed from the aquarium and placed in my other dwelling — the bowl. From then on I knew there had to be a way to get out of those quarters, no matter what I had to do.

I looked around at the owner; I saw them walking around the tank. I knew that they did not breathe water, and this confused me, but I learned that the first thing I had to do was learn to breathe what they did.

It didn't take much time before I was constantly trying to lift my head up out of the bowl for as long as I could. I would manage to stay there usually because I was holding my breath. But then, one time, I went up to the top in the morning, the way I usually did, and without even thinking about it, I just started to breathe. I was able to keep my full head up out of the water for as long as I wanted and listen to what was going on outside my living quarters.

Everything sounded so different. There were so many sharp noises. They hurt me to listen to them. Looking back, I now understand that the water in my tank muffled any outside noises. But beyond that, no one in my living quarters made noise — no one bumped into things, no

one screamed or made noises. But at the time, all these noises were extremely loud.

I then knew I had to keep my head above water as much as possible and try to make sense of the sounds I continually heard. I came to discover what humans refer to as language only through listening to the repeated use of these loud sounds.

When I learned I had to breathe, I did. When I understood that I had to figure out their language, I did. It took so long, but I began to understand what they said. Then I had to learn to speak. I tried to practice under the water, in my dwelling, but it was so hard to hear in my quarters that I never knew if I was doing it correctly. Furthermore, I had become so accustomed to breathing air instead of water that I began to have difficulty breathing in my old home. This filled me with an intense fear. If I continue on with this experiment, I thought, will my own home become uninhabitable to me? Will I die here because I learned too much?

I decided that I had no choice and that I had to ask my owner for help. I had to hope that my ability to produce sounds — and the correct ones, at that — would be enough to let them know that I am in trouble. Furthermore, I had to hope that my owner would actually want to help me. Maybe they wouldn't want me invading their space. Eat or be eaten.

But I had to take the chance. One morning, before I received my daily food, I pulled the upper half of my body from the tank. My owner wasn't coming yet, so I went back down and jumped up again. Still nothing. I kept jumping, until I jumped out of the tank completely. I landed on the table, fell to the floor, coughing. I screamed.

The next thing I remember (and you have to forgive me, because my memory is weak here, and this was seven years ago) is being in a hospital. I didn't know what it was then, of course, and it frightened me. Doctors kept me in place and began to study me. They sent me to schools. And to this day I am still learning.

I have discovered one thing about humans during my life as one. With all the new space I have available to me, with all of the other opportunities I have, I see that people still fight each other for their space. They kill. They steal. They do not breathe in the blood, but it is all around them. And I still find myself doing it as well, fighting others to stay alive.



CRAZY

This dialogue is transcribed from repeated visits with a patient in Aaronsville Correctional Center in West Virginia. Madeline*, a thirty-six year old woman, was sentenced to life imprisonment after the brutal slaying of her boyfriend during sexual intercourse. According to police reports, Madeline sat with the remains of the man for three days after the murder until police arrived on the scene. They found her in the same room as the body, still coated with blood and malnourished. Three doctors studied her behavior for a total period of eight months, and the unanimous conclusion they reached was that Madeline was not of sound mind when she committed the act, which involved an ice pick, an oak board from the back of a chair, and eventually a chef's knife. Furthermore, she continued to show signs of both paranoia and delusions of grandeur long after the murder, swaying back and forth between the two, much like manic depression.

For three and a half years Madeline has stayed at the Aaronsville Correctional Center, and she has shown no signs of behavioral improvement. She stays in a room by herself, usually playing solitaire on her bed. She talks to herself regularly and out loud, usually in a slight Southern accent, although not in a very loud tone, according to surveillance videotape. Her family abandoned her after the murder. Occasionally she requests newspapers to read, but she is usually denied them. She never received visitors, until these sessions with myself.

The following excerpts are from dialogues I have had with her, although I am tempted to say that they are monologues. She wasn't very interested in speaking with me, rather, she was more interested in opening herself up to someone for the first time in years, someone who was willing to listen. At times I began to feel like a surrogate par-

ent. I try not to think of what will happen when our sessions end.

* Madeline is not her real name.

I know they're watching me. They've got these stupid cameras everywhere - see, there's one behind the air vent there, hi there, and there's one where the window used to be. They've probably got them behind the mirrors, too. It wouldn't be so bad, I guess, I mean, there's not much for me to be doing in here anyway, but they watch me dress, too, I mean, they're watching me when I'm naked, now what's that going to do to a person? I don't know what they're watching for anyway, it's not like I can do anything in here. I eat everything with a spoon, I've never been violent, all I do, almost every day, is sit on this bed and play solitaire.

Solitaire is really relaxing, you know, and I think it keeps your brain alive, too. Most people think you can't win at solitaire, that the chances of winning are like two percent or something. But the thing is, you can win at this game like over half the time. I think that's the key, too - knowing you can win half the time. I mean, the last four rounds I played, I won twice. Now I'm not saying that's good or anything, like praise me because I won two rounds of solitaire, but it makes a point that as long as you know what you're doing and you actually think about it, you can win. The odds are better.

I think people just forget to watch the cards. Half the time the reason why you lose is because you forget something so obvious. You're looking for a card through the deck and the whole time it's sitting on another pile, just waiting to be moved over, and the whole time you forget to move it. People just forget to pay attention. They got to pay attention.

You know, I'd like to see the news. I hate t.v., but I'd like to see what acts other people are doing. Anything like mine? Has anyone else lost it like me? You know, I'll bet my story wasn't even on the news for more than thirty seconds. And I'll bet the news person had a tone to their voice that was just like "oh, the poor crazy thing," like, "that's what

happens when you lose it, I guess.”

But I want to see what's happening in the real world. I just wanna watch to see what, you know, the weather is like, even though I haven't seen the sun in a year or two. Or, or to hear sports scores. They won't let me have a t.v. in the room. I think they think that I'm gonna hot-wire it or something, like I'm going to try to electrocute the whole building with a stupid television set. They let me have a lamp in the room, like I can't hurt someone with that, but no t.v. They won't even let me have a newspaper. What can a person do with a newspaper? Light in on fire or something? If I had matches or something. But it's like this: I've never been violent to nobody in all of the time I've been in here. I haven't laid a hand on a guard, even though they're tried too many times to lay a hand on me, and I haven't cause one single little problem in this whole damn place, and this is what I get - I don't even get a t.v. or a newspaper.

You know, I don't really have a Southern accent. See? Don't I sound different with my regular voice? I picked it up when I started sounding crazy. See, I'm not really crazy, I just know the kind of shit they do to you in prison. I think it's bad enough here, I would've had the shit kicked out of me, I'd've been sodomized before I knew what hit me. I think this voice makes me sound a little more strange. I'm actually from New York, but I mean, changing the voice a little just to save me from going to prison, well, I can do that. Here it's kind of nice, I don't have to deal with people that often, and all the crazy people around here think I'm some sort of tough bitch because I mutilated someone who was raping me. Oh, you didn't hear that part of the story, did you? Those damn lawyers thought that since I wasn't a virgin I must have been wanting him. And he wasn't even my boyfriend - he was just some guy I knew, we'd go out every couple of weeks, and I never even slept with him before.

What a fucked up place. You see, I gotta think of it this way: I real-

ly had no choice but to do what I did. In a way it was self-defense, because I didn't want that little piece of shit to try to do that to me, I mean, what the Hell makes him think he can do that? Where does he get off trying to take me like that, like I'm some butcher-shop piece of meat he can buy and abuse or whatever? Well anyway, I know part of it all was self defense and all, but at the same time I know I flipped, but its because of, well shit that happened in my past. I never came from any rich family like you, I never even came from a family with a dad, and when you got all these boyfriends coming in and hitting you or touching you or whatever, you know it's got to mess you up. Yeah, I know, people try to use the my-parents-beat-me line and it's getting to the point where no one really believes it anymore, but if a person goes through all their life suppressing something that they shouldn't have to suppress then one day it's going to just come up to them and punch them in the face, it's going to make them go crazy, even if it's just for a little while.

Society's kind of weird, you know. It's like they teach you to do things that aren't normal, that don't feel right down deep in your bones, but you have to do them anyway, because someone somewhere decided that this would be normal. Everyone around you suppresses stuff, and when you see that it tells you that you're supposed to be hiding it from the rest of the world, too, like if we all just hide it for a while, it will all go away. Maybe it does, until someone like me blows up and can't take hiding all that stuff anymore, but then the rest of the world can just say that we're crazy and therefore it's unexplainable why we went crazy and then they can just brush it all off and everything is back to normal again. It's like emotion. People are taught to hide their emotions. Men are taught not to cry, women are taught to be emotional and men are told to think that it's crazy. So when something really shitty happens to someone - like a guy loses his job or something - and he just sits in front of a friend and breaks down and cries, the other guy

just thinks this guy is crazy for crying. Then the guy rejects the guy that's crying, making him feel even worse, making the guy bottle it back up inside of him.

I think people are like Pepsi bottles. You remember those glass bottles? Pop always tasted better in those bottles, you could just like swig it down easier, your lips fit around the glass neck better or something. I wonder why people don't use them anymore? Well, I think people are like Pepsi bottles, like they have the potential for all of this energy, and the whole world keeps shaking them up, and some people lose their heads and the top goes off and all of this icky stuff comes shooting all around and other Pepsi bottles want to hide from it and then the poor guy has no Pepsi left. And how can you do anything when you have no Pepsi left? Or maybe you do lose it, but you still have some Pepsi left in you, and people keep thinking that you don't have any left, and then they treat you like you shouldn't be allowed to tie your own shoelaces or you should be watched while you're getting dressed.

Can't you turn those cameras off?

I heard this story in here sometime about Tony, this guy that was in here for murder, and after he was in here he went crazy and cut off his own scrotum. I don't know how a man survives something like that, but I guess he did, because he was in here, and from what I hear he was using the pay phones to call 1-800 numbers to prank whoever answered at the other end. Well, I guess he kept calling this one place where these women would answer the phone, and they got fed up with it, I guess, and traced it or something. They got the number for this hospital, and talked to his doctor. I think he told them that Tony cut his balls off, now I thought doctor-patient records were private, but I suppose it doesn't matter, because we're just crazy prisoners, killers who don't matter anyway, but he told these girls that Tony cut his balls off a whole two months ago. And then he called them back, talking dirty to them, not knowing they knew he was a murderer with no balls and

they laughed and made fun of him and told him they knew, and he hung up the phone and never called them back. True story, swear to God. Can you just imagine him wondering how they knew? Or were they just making a joke, or...

Did you know that I write? I figured that if they won't let me read anything, maybe I could put stuff down on paper and read it to myself, I guess. I try to write poetry, but it just don't come out right, but I've been trying to write a thing about what I went through, you know what I'm talking about? Well, I just figure that if other people that are in prison can get best sellers and make a ton of money, then so can I, I mean, my story is better than half the stuff that's out there, and I know there are a lot of women who have a little part of them that wants to do what I did. I think all women feel it, but the most of them are taught to suppress it, to keep it all bottled in like that. But now that I think of it, what am I going to do with a bunch of money anyway? I'm never going to get out of here to enjoy it or anything. Anyway, how would I get someone to want to read it in the first place, now that everyone thinks that I'm crazy?

Sometimes I get so depressed. It's like I'm never going to get out of here. I think I wanted to have kids one day. It's easier, I guess, not having to see kids, I guess then I don't miss them too much, but...

For the longest time they tried to get doctors to come in here and talk to me, and you know what they did? They got men doctors - one after another - and then they wondered why the Hell I didn't want to talk to them. Amazing. People really just don't think, do they?

I guess it's hard, being in here and all, I mean. I was going to go back to school, I had already taken the GED and graduated high school, and I was going to go to the local community college. It was going to be different. Sometimes I wonder, you know, why this had to happen to me, why I had to snap. I really don't think I could have controlled it, I don't think any of this could have happened any other way. It's hard. I

have to find stuff to do, because otherwise all I'd want to do is sleep all day and night, and I suppose I could, but then what would happen to me? At least if I write a book about my life, about this whole stupid world, then maybe everyone would at least understand. It wasn't really my fault, I mean, I think we women have enough to deal with just in our regular lives and then they keep piling on this sexism crap on us, and then expect us not to be angry about it because we were taught to deal with it all of our lives. Maybe this guy was just the straw that broke the camel's back or something, maybe he was just another rapist, maybe he was just another drunk guy who thought that he could do whatever he wanted with me because he was the man and I was his girl, or just some chick that didn't matter or whatever, but shit, it does matter, at least to me it does.

I know I've got a lot of healing to do, but I haven't really thought about doing it. I mean, what have I got to heal for anyway? To get out of here and go to prison? Then I'll just get abused by guards over there, have to watch my back every second of the day. At least here people watch my back for me. They think everything and anything in the world could harm me, even myself, so they're so overprotective that nothing can go wrong, unless it goes wrong in my own mind.

A handwritten signature in green ink that reads "Janet Fingers". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.