

The Blue Route

Issue 28



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Letter from the Editor

This year, *The Blue Route* made the transition to an annual issue from a biannual issue for the first time ever and it has been a wild ride to say the least. Our staff was able to accept more submissions than in our previous years and, as a result, got to read so many wonderful poems and stories in preparation for this issue. We faced a few struggles heading into this change which included some formatting challenges, but they were heavily outweighed by the successes that came with it. For this issue, *The Blue Route* was able to accept pieces representing eleven universities and three countries!

As we began to accept pieces, a theme gradually emerged. Many of our accepted writers created works centering around the idea of identity and belonging. The stories are well written through careful attention to craft and form. Across this issue, we have a plethora of memorable narrators, themes, voices, and lessons for readers to relate to and/or learn from. While we had not created a themed issue this year, we were pleasantly surprised to find that all of our acceptances worked beautifully together to communicate the resilience of the human spirit.

Thank you to the wonderful readers and faculty advisors of *The Blue Route* who made this transition to an annual publication more efficient than I ever thought possible. And most importantly, thank you to everyone who submitted to our journal. Your hard work and vulnerability in your writing is most appreciated. Please enjoy the very special Issue 28 of *The Blue Route*!

Yours most sincerely,

Gabby Norris



Ryley Harris

Trompe-l'œil

Luna Hou

In the wake of the last suicide, Tuesday's cloudless sky feels like an omen. Looks, inexplicably, like something torn from the glossy pages of a picture book—a clear blue orb suffused with light. The warm afternoon sun dapples my roommate's bronzed hair as we trail our way outside; I find myself counting the freckles on her shoulders as we walk, subconsciously averting my eyes from the pavement. As we wind past the basketball court adjacent to our dormitory, my roommate pauses beside the far hoop. Bends down to add a bright bouquet of wildflowers to a steadily growing pile. She doesn't look at me as she rises, hasn't said anything much at all since it happened. I don't mind.

I check my phone as we approach the front of the building. "1:57," I say, digging my thumb into the power button. Watch the screen flicker, on and off. "We're early."

"I'd hope so," my roommate says, her voice the quiet, stone-sharpened edge of a blade. "This better not be the final turnout."

I look around. Take in the towering mass of brick that is our residence hall, the sort of structure designed to make you feel small. I've come home to this building for the past three months without ever really looking at it: at the dark iron railings partitioning each floor's balcony from the sky, the ten rows of windows climbing neatly into the heavens. Glancing up, it's hard not to feel a twinge of vertigo, even with my feet planted firmly on the ground.

The only difference in our residence hall's outward appearance lies at our feet, where several small tubs of chalk have been lined up across the front steps. My gaze lands on the single girl beside us. She's kneeling on the wide brick path leading up to the steps, coloring intently. Her dark hair curtains her face from view. When she stands, she brushes chalk dust from her hands and flashes us a small smile. Her message, outlined in carefully rounded bubble letters, peers up at me from the pavement: *you are not alone*.

A tickle in the back of my throat—like if I opened my mouth, a laugh might escape. The girl's message, printed in pastel pink and blue, is beautiful. A lone affirmation against the backdrop of something too vast and heavy to name. And yet I can still see the rusty color of weathered brick peeking through her meticulous layer of chalk—the places where the slabs jut out unevenly from the ground. How long will it take for her words to completely disappear? To be erased by rain and footprints and time?

How much of an impact could they possibly make before then?

My roommate nudges my shoulder. Her eyelashes are dark and wet in the light. "You okay?"

I start. The girl is gone. It is only us, me and her and all this empty space to fill. I bend down, select a purple stick of chalk from the tub nearest to me. Resolve to find my own space to mark. “Yeah,” I say. “I will be.”

But when I crouch in a corner by the bike racks, chalk poised in trembling fingers, I am not sure what to write, my mind is a bird churning on a spit and I can’t focus, can’t seem to think of anything worth saying—anything that might atone for the loss of a life. The brick is dusty and cracked and solid, too solid, under my hands. I envision myself scraping my knees against the pavement, again and again—wonder if I can paint the walkway in my own blood. I taste red. Imagine the walls of our residence hall collapsing around me to the ground, bones crushed under rubble and glass. I sneak a glance at my roommate: her head bent low, hand moving furiously across the pavement like a pale, quivering fish. Another girl, having arrived shortly after us, already finished with her message, embellishing it with a rainbow of hearts. I can’t write. Have to write. Shakily scratch out the phrase, *You matter. Stay*. I try to believe it. Grip the chalk so tightly it snaps.

We pass the basketball court again on our way back inside, and my eyes stray a second time to the flowers. Several more bouquets have since been added to the heap—daisies and carnations and sunflowers, white and pink and gold. Yesterday afternoon, less than twenty-four hours after the body was found, a group of boys was caught playing basketball on what everyone else deemed a grave. This was the corrective the rest of us decided on.

In the sunlight, the pile of flowers glows, iridescent. As I hold the door for my roommate, I imagine the petals spreading: hard, rough concrete blanketed in blossoms of every color, cut roots digging into the ground.

*

That night, I can’t sleep. It is two a.m. and I am alone in the fourth-floor study lounge of my residence hall, pacing. I brush my fingers across each worn leather seat as I wind around the room; glance, every few paces, at my fluorescent-lit reflection in the opposite window, wide-eyed and glassy. My backpack is slumped by the leg of a nearby chair, my laptop and textbooks still zipped inside. Only a journal sits open on the lone white table I’m circling—blank.

I have to write. It’s the only surefire way I know how to process tragedy, to make sense of the world even as its seams begin to fray. I remember, not long ago, believing I could straighten any thunderstorm into sentences—that there was no tempest, no cloudburst the current of my words couldn’t drown out. Now, all I can hear is the cracking of the earth beneath my feet. What is there to write about but this? And yet, what is there to write?

A boy jumped from the tenth-floor balcony of my residence hall. He’s gone, and nothing can bring him back. Even unwritten, the words sink like a stone in the hollow of my chest.

I don’t recall ever deciding to take the six flights of stairs up to the tenth-

floor balcony, without my backpack, without my coat. There is no choice involved in the matter: just the burn in my calves as I sprint up and up and up, the loss of breath I only feel when I reach the top. The night sky is an oil spill, a blackness that congeals thickly around me, but I can just make out the white lines of the basketball court, pale and ghostly in the moonlight. I wrap my fingers around the railing, let the cold burn into my skin. Shut my eyes tight, open them. Then force myself to look down.

When you care for a wound, one way to reduce swelling is to elevate it. I wonder if this is what drew him to the tenth floor, to take his life the way he did. If, before the concrete came rushing up to meet him, there was a moment he thought he saw God; a moment the pain dissipated, rose like feathers, like angel wings, into the air. His own version of Icarus, gorgeous in his own destruction. It is almost poetic, and not poetic at all.

As my eyes adjust to the darkness, to the depth it stretches, it is once again the heap of flowers that pulls me back to earth. Since this afternoon, countless students have impressed their own markings onto the pavement; moonlit streaks of chalk now spill from the front of our residence hall to the sides, surrounding the pile like a halo. The words swim at me out of the shadows as if from the blurry tail end of a dream: *you are not alone*. Not alone in grieving, or remembering; in collapsing in and in on yourself and not knowing what to do about it. In reaching, desperately, for a hand, a cheek, a mouth—a glimmer of understanding to tug us from this night. In failing, time and again, to find the right words to say. In trying, still.

The other way you can treat a wound is by applying immediate, direct pressure to its surface—to counter pain with more pain until the bleeding is controlled. Like writing until every part of you aches, until you have crafted the sort of piece that can cut through bone. Like flying too close to the sun.

Maybe this is what compels me to grip the railing tighter—lean my head forward, over the edge. *Is this what he felt like?* The vertigo is dizzying, intoxicating. I reel back. The cold bites at my cheeks and I let it, gulping deep breaths of the crisp night air.

*

In a creative writing class, my professor lectures about *trompe-l'œil*, French for *fools the eye*. In art, *trompe-l'œil* is the technique of adding depth to an image—to depict a scene so realistically it eludes your senses, feels as though it could swallow you whole. He shows us Julian Beever's sidewalk art as an example: vibrant murals sprawling across long stretches of pavement, craters and canyons and glistening pools. Most, to me, are as terrifying as they are impressive. From the right perspective, Beever makes it seem all too easy to saunter off the jagged edge of a stalactite—to stroll into a reality you don't recognize.

One wrong step, and the world might cave beneath you, open up into a chasm with no foreseeable bottom. One wrong step, and you just might fall.

My professor tells our class that this is how we should write. That we must believe, ardently, in the worlds we weave inside our heads, in their ability to consume. Words, after all, are as tangible as anything else—as chalk stains, as scars. Words, even when they fail us, can still matter. Or, at least, I must believe they do.

Sometimes, when I write, I think I cut my hands on the pages. I read my work aloud, curl my tongue around each painstaking sentence and am sure I have stained my mouth red.

I am learning, slowly, to lick at the paper cuts.

Learning to love the taste of blood.

An Experimentation of “SHEGE” on the Body of a Boy Who Doesn’t Know That Life is Like a Spoon

Hassan A. Usman

shege (n)

/adversity/

Etymology: Nigerian Pidgin

tonight before the witches flash into the darkness / your mother takes
a long walk into your body / there / you know nothing about grief /
about dying / vibrations of unhappiness after blissful moments /
all your life / you were held in God’s hand / constellating the beams
from the stars on the black of your body / once / you were asked to
define loss / & you said it’s when your mother cries over a missing
strand of her hair / i.e. / everything that frightens you is intangible /
boy / how much of this delusion is unintentional? / look out of the
window / tonight / the wind will show you shege / the shege is—
your mother exits your body / and finds the wind at the entrance /
where the wind is a beautiful name for somewhere between life
& death / they hug / they shake hearts / they couldn’t find each
other unwelcoming / boy / look into the mirror / you’ve fallen out
of God’s favour / you’re burning from too much light

Brief Reluctance to Coming Home

Connor Donovan

White-knuckling luggage,
I peek the crimson front door open.
A weathered portico covers my apprehension,
I sneak through the entryway.
Greetings by tufts of charcoal dog
Hair, weakly lit bulbs.

Mom and Dad trade two-word
Replies to each other's bickering,
I settle into my abandoned childhood bed.
A succulent lies shattered by the windowsill,
Innocently murdered by animal
Crusade throughout the vacant room.

The second floor inherits downstairs deadpan.
Hon, why did you move my glass?
An austere
Cleaned up.

Calculated responses heighten tautness—
Heighten humidity-stricken air,
The cracked window breathes out
To breathe in frost.
It is winter but childishly embellished bedsheets
Emulate warmth, sparking an effigy.

I descend steps to greet a pup
Nuzzling a freshly folded blanket,
Slobber sullyng fleece,
Reminder of family sentiment.

Chests clam shortly before a quick release,
Anxiety bowing to dignity,
Will igniting to absolution.

Thank the folk music ambience, my parents' turntable.

Thank the oriental rug, weathered woodwork creaks.

Thank the nightly candle smolder, bourbon neat.



Skylar Hart

Tender//At War with Language

Nnadi Samuel

“your name, immigrating / into another language where hurt

is easy / to pronounce” — Eric Yip

Pa’s beautiful youth had him resolute—stuffing warm bright tea into his lungs, & racing nine stairs down the hallway to defy the long queue of pensioners, brooding over a wreck of a bus.

a glossary of literary terms starched to his breast pocket.
name it ‘consistency,’ I’ll prize each by its ‘cons’:
the way metaphor lives rent-free on his chest.
the way hyperbole exaggerates his walk steps.

the flashbacks, rearranging him in neat reverse.

his face lifts at the wholesome thought of language,
as he mouths the disadvantage to dissonance.

holding the grammar to my lip, I fondle a rough note.
the alphabets—worrying my spit like an oat,
like English itself was a stirrable omen:

this wreck of vowel, handed to our lineage.
the slim weight of its inheritance rubberizing my gum.
ripened verb in brine-soaked font.
tongue, bruised to whitening.

Underwater Pathway

Martins Deep

Standing on a broken bridge, where urban life rehearses the mispronunciation
of your name,
your tender, tired eyes mirrors all your mother shut them against.

You're sixteen & bitter. bitter sixteen, self-loathing & allergic
to chocolate, because its colour reminds you

of the skin you witnessed your lover christen with his milkshake.
Sin so sacred, one would say his bed is holy ground by how you knelt
down before it.

His tongue, not as careless as it is on yours— moonlight-absorbed. fingers
in motion,
like it is seeking— with a scalpel held in his gloved hand— a tumor— your
bond.

You tuck yourself under this white duvet, a body bag of horns
broken from ramming them against walls & the desire of disappearing forever.

& the flashbacks are back; the black boy you call *broda*
whispers your name.
You answer & taste blood, earth & rust in your mouth.

For as you reimagine the story of his disappearance, he dug his own grave
& struck— with an old shovel— a gunman's heart, throbbing

at the spot he kept pointing away his headlamp,
his mobile phone ringing beside. on the screen, the caller ID:
sweetmother.

& there is no sleep for your lovelorn head, only in a confession booth
you go to wait on the ghost of your murdered padre.

It is sad, that what you'll remember of home, when you flee, is a body
of water, shimmering with the corpses of river birds, on whose bank

teenage boys throw fangs dug out from the gun wounds of their fathers.
See how they skitter, red— ache spreading with ripples & the rumours of
peace

Here, where you've come to clear your head, housekeeping the haunted
house you are—
among the reeds of your childhood river— Enya sings

your grief to sleep in Urhobo; a language you do not understand,
but sleep anyway— your breath, parting the water before you to the city.



Skylar Hart

Three-Fifths of a Sestina for the Busy Woman

Allie Zornes

I.

Life's gone to shit, yeah, but I got a job
to do. I'm ham slicer number one, you know,
and Dillons don't got time for crying over
goth-black urns, brooding caskets, gloomy graves...
Flashy racket, that. I'll dab my eyes when I take my break.
Now, Sir, how thick did ya want this cut?

II.

Grandma's life is cut
short while I'm on the job.
Ask for leave, but the deep fryer breaks.
Scrub the fry box with steel wool and soap and no
gloves. Blood in the sink—a soapy greasy pink-brown grave
for her. Cry. But shift's not over.

III.

Rain-drenched stoplights glisten red as the strawberry glaze over
cheesecake we used to eat, plastic fork cutting
through its supple give like the shovels that dug your grave.
I want the windshield wipers' job:
swipe away silly wetness that blurs the eyes. No
human touch, no heart to break.

IV.

There's a four-second break
between the loading screen and my inbox. Over
those dear seconds I know
ctrl+x to cut, but I can't cut
that scalding memory: you on the gurney, I on spreadsheets. *Job*
well done, you growl from your withering grave.

We Saw it Coming

Allie Zornes

Mom's soft red nightgown swishes
over the threshold while I turn down my bed covers—
our ritual. Goodnight, she'll say,
or *I love you*, or *see you in the morning*.

"Grandma Sharon's passed away," she says.

My stomach twists

like how Grandma used to twist sponges after
washing dishes, suds glittering
on her liver-specked, trembling hands.
Sometimes yellow macaroni sauce spotted her shirt
but we kept quiet; those shaky hands,
they fed us—loved us, but

we saw this coming, so Mom kisses my hair—
Goodnight. Love you—while my stomach
falls and splatters on some hard surface in me.

Her hands shook so savagely, yanked
on unseen wires, that sometimes the sponge
slipped from her grip and wetly slapped the floor.



Ryley Harris

Mushrooms Are More Closely Related To Humans Than Plants

Jaden Lynn

She told me, “all life have souls, don’t you know.”
The Indian lotus sighs open its delicate pink petals
and the horse fly gripes with its moral code, always biting tan
hides in frustrated conscience. Do they have
souls? That would mean they have civil rights in
the United Nations statement instead of poison clamped in roots,

bullets stilling the spotted doe in the backyards of suburbs.
I flap my arms like a wandering albatross. Imagine my
glossy feathers rippling in the breeze, Simba of the sky.
Spot a choir of plumped church ladies, ripe in the sweaty
July sun,
praising me with their stained-glass beads until I dive bomb for
young Margaret’s Cookies ‘N Cream custard. Hear the

hellish shrieks of my coming extinction as I’m damned for
stealing. Knew that whole morality thing would haunt me,
can’t even be majestic without sobbing over melted egg soup
I took from a rich white baby. Glide away to pine over the
love I can’t keep, and the hate I shrink from.
What do I have to fear of these humans who think they’re King Kong

because half of them can pee standing up, and the other
half get pedicures and blow smoke rings? “Smoke
rings are soooo 2000s.” I glance up at the scrape of the
expensive School Outfitters stacking chair to see
Alexis Bledel’s look alike. Stare at her stained
Keds until she tosses her head and leaves...

I don’t understand women. Or men. I guess mushrooms
make sense to the boggled brain, the fruit of spore-bearing
fungus. It is a pure miracle of nature, and it’s only
Aristotelian function is to thrive and mind their own business
with the occasional toxic threat making it a bit
depressed. But they can’t wear Denizens, which might

make it difficult for them to wipe their hands when the
nurse calls the next patient. The name tag spells “Bettie,”
and she must swim across the Atlantic and back because
her lungs are rattling the magazine rack above my head.
Life, National Geographic, and Sports Illustrated: Swimsuit Edition
are glaring at the mistreatment. I can only shrug my shoulders

sympathetically at them. Reach over to smooth the rolled
Birds of America back into its rightful place at the
table. Bettie is making my knees knock together painfully too.

Tuck my dusky hands in the armpits of my flannel wool sweater,
to stop my nervous flapping. I wonder if I should call my momma.
Think she’ll be in her pink bathrobe still, sleeping off

the hangover from her endless supply of bourbon she gets
at a 20% discount from the liquor store around the corner
of her boarding house. Mr. Nichols always has a pretty
penny to drop for her. Chortles, “your mother keeps me in
business.” Always had a Hubba Bubba piece to slip into my
dainty hands while momma was sniffing like a hound for

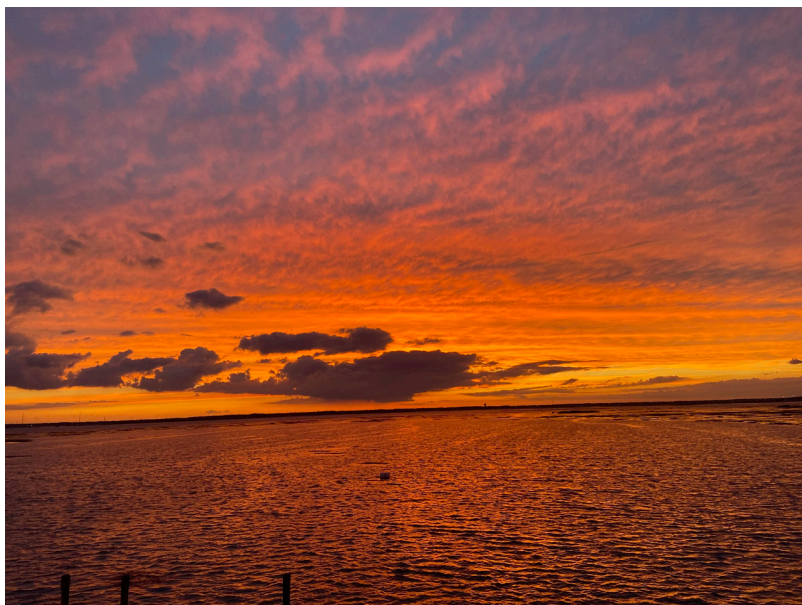
that hard swill cheap stuff. Used to let me behind the counter
when it was just momma, me, and One-eyed Franklin.

Run his hands through my twists, and bounce me on`
his table-like knee. For the longest time, I thought he was gonna
marry my momma. But she only loved the bottle on weekends, and me
during the school days. She’s lovely as a camellia though,

and she sings like Eartha Kitt. Bettie finally belts my name out,
so now my anxiety is rolling like a crazy 8-ball with
unspoken premonitions. Wish I could fly away, but my wingspan
is gone along with my voice. Shaking, shaking, shaking.
Spores spouting into the air with the force of a volcanic
vent that heats the ocean of Europa,

swarming like white fuzzy dandelion seeds. They
don’t know where to go, or what to do when they
get there. My purpose is elusive ultraviolet rays, what
is the right thing to do now? Momma tell me to thrive.
I can stretch until there is no more skin, just a soul,

but I can’t tell if I have one. Let my eyes speak for animals.



Skylar Hart

Hellbender

Emily Noe

Water moves

not as fluid as you

my lady of death

strangle me with shoelace in hand

while your black nails dig into my neck

lodging themselves in my throat

I smile

your amber eyes glisten in the night

I see them perfectly from under rippling water

a cross-hatch of your reflection

Repeating

and repeating

Hush

Hush

shut the fuck up the ties are already too hard to cut

I was so happy caged with you

and somehow still happy as you murder me

under cool April sky

full moon and star splattered
the inverse of your white blouse with my oxidized blood
finally, I begin to gag
expel the emotions I have suppressed
for so long
I thrash under frigid water
silt kicks up in my eyes
blind to your actions one final time
before water floods my nostrils
and rushes into my still lungs

A Self-Help Book

Sydney Fallon

INTRODUCTION

In this book, I'm going to unpack how you can become the most secure, productive, powerful version of yourself. Even if right now they're tucked deep under all the blankets full of sweat and crumbs, they exist.

As your guide in this journey of self-discovery, I can tell you: it is possible to feel confident and secure in your identity. It is possible to not give a shit about what anyone else thinks.

I'm serious. I don't give a shit.

Staying Present: Throw Your Feelings in the Trash!

Here's an exercise one can perform in compartmentalization.

Take a short period of time to be as intensely emotional as you want to be. Set a timer for ten minutes and isolate each of your problems. Focus on each emotion you are struggling with in detail, but only for a short period of time. Then move on.

Here's an example:

1. I talked to you on the phone yesterday because I wanted to just hear your voice and you said that you 'wish you knew what to tell me' again and again. You spend a lot of time telling me that. The thing is, I don't want you to tell me anything at all. I don't want you to instruct me or advise me. I don't need you to explain that what I'm feeling isn't real. I just need to know there is someone solid waiting for me at home.

The worst part is that you are as steady as you can be. You are trustworthy, you gave me food and shelter and held me when I cried and did all of the right things.

and still when you call I have to hunt for the energy to stay on the phone a minute longer.

2. I think maybe I am just hungry for a sandwich.

Notice how by the end of the exercise, the writer finds that their emotions weren't so important after all. How silly... and how easy it is to identify when it's all on the paper.

Discipline

“The day you take complete responsibility for yourself, the day you stop making excuses, that’s the day you start to the top” — O.J. Simpson

If you have five minutes of free time, I advise you to think about your personal and professional advancement. We’re all here to be the best versions of ourselves. If you have the time and discipline, take some professional strides.

Maybe you took classes that showed you how to build your portfolio. Maybe you took a creative writing independent study with your favorite English teacher, Mrs. McCalley, who looked like Kathy Bates and was very vocal about her crush on Daniel Day Lewis in *The Crucible*. You were obsessed with her and wanted her to think you are the smartest person at the world.¹ You might have turned in maybe two short stories that you wrote the night before that weren’t very good.

The first one you wrote was about the Kavanaugh hearings and your dad, and she liked it because she had a Republican dad who wouldn’t listen.

She put her hand over yours and told you he would listen if you kept writing. It was corny, and you didn’t really write the piece because you wanted reassurance, but it reminded you that adults are not just authority figures.

A republican dad was not the worst problem in your life by any stretch of the imagination but you let her think it was. You let her take your hand and think that she was resolving something.

Maybe you forgot about writing and came in late every morning because you wanted to use your study period to sleep in. Writing didn’t feel important when your teachers and your parents and your friends were telling you to work on all of the things on paper that would get you into college. Sending in scholarship applications, writing essays that were full of lies about your leadership potential, having horrible coffee interviews with old men who went to Wesleyan 50 years ago and didn’t know anything about what it looked like now but rolled the robin’s egg of your future in their shaking, hard hands. You were too busy juggling that little egg to do the work you actually cared about.

In this case, at the end of the semester Mrs. McCalley’s lips will purse when she hands you a form confirming your passing grade. She’ll tell you not to bite off more than you can chew next time.

You’ll forget to give her a gift at graduation, too (which you really should

¹ I know earlier I said that you have to ignore what anyone could possibly ever think of you so I’m sorry for the contradiction.

have, considering she also wrote your college recommendation).

If you go down this path, you'll realize that wanting to care isn't enough. If you get the chance to try again, make sure you're feeling more actionable.

But hey, I can get you started! I like to motivate myself by finding the smallest step I can take to start and get something done. For example, when I remember something from my past that reminds me I'm a piece of shit, I get up and get moving! Do some exercise. Or write down all of it and then crumple it up and throw it in the trash to remind myself that it isn't real anymore. Whatever it takes to realize that none of that stuff is real.

Attachment

"Now I know the things I know, and I do the things I do; and if you do not like me so, to hell, my love, with you!" — Dorothy Parker (on why you are better off alone)

It is important to remember that you are going to stand and continue standing in the absence of the people in your life, no matter how much you might feel like you need them.

Living in a state of codependency is like having a lifeguard around in your bathroom. It's unnecessary, it's embarrassing, and it relies on another person to always be there for your own sense of security.

Losing someone in your life often initiates thinking patterns that trigger one's need for attachment. You might begin to feel like you are suddenly moving through life without the safety net that you used to have.

One thing you can do is write a journal entry once a month of how you're feeling to track how your feelings change. Use some of these questions as prompts:

When did your heartbreak take place? One month ago. Right after spring break.

How did you feel when it happened? Acidic. It's like you develop heartburn all of the sudden. It all goes right to your stomach. You never throw up, but for the first time, you get so sick with emotion that suddenly you're running to the bathroom heaving and heaving. You never get it out.

Who are you supposed to be able to turn to when you were hurt? There's no reason she shouldn't be the first person you call, after all. She's your mom. She held you every time you've ever needed it. You're able to be safe with her when it makes sense for someone to cry with their mother.

Did it help? You feel safest with your mother in silence. When you get home, you can put your head in her lap and let her stroke your hair while you watch TV, and you're a baby all over again. You can come back to this feeling. You can let yourself be nurtured by hand. You can listen to the hum of her voice without noticing the waiting, the expectation, the knowledge that she's

noting every difference between who she expected and who you became.

Did you replace the word “girlfriend” to make her more comfortable?

You watch a TV show about a mother with three daughters who all talk to her like she's an idiot except for when they don't. She loves this show. It's not really your thing, but you love it because you love watching her laugh.

You love how the mother is hapless and scattered. You love how your mom smirks at you when the mother and daughters scream at each other. They fight and then suddenly they're laughing in the kitchen making personal pizzas from a kit in a plastic bag.

There is a scene where she takes her daughter to dinner and tells her she is jealous of everyone who will get to meet her after she grows up. Your mom squeezes your arm. *She took the words right out of my mouth.*

At the end of the episode there is a scene (of course, of course there's one of these scenes and of course it's in a stupid car) where one of the daughters and the mother are driving in silence. Daughter looks out the car window and asks why mother cannot just treat her as she used to. Why she has to make jokes.

Mom says sexuality and gender and all of those big words confuse her just like your mom would have said

Usually in these scenes the mom softens and apologizes and says she just wants her daughter to be so so happy. But this TV mom screws her face into the appalled drama mask, the face that says 'I'm scrambling here, I'm trying my best and isn't that enough?'

You recognize that in your own mom.

Oblivious to your gaze, she blinks and keeps watching.

Do you say anything?

Can you explain why it is you feel so sick? Why you feel sick every time you remember the slightest shades of how she receives you? When you were nine she said she didn't think you looked like someone who was gay. When you were sixteen she said she didn't think you should have sleepovers anymore. When you were eighteen she said it wasn't homophobic not to like looking at gay people kissing. She couldn't look at it.

Will she ever need to know about the little griefs, all of the tiny shards of loss that inform who you are? The patterns of hurt she has no idea she wove? No, she won't. No one will. Not your lovers, not your friends, not your family.

I think you will always be the sole proprietor of these little pieces.

Responsibility and Boundaries

“We can’t help everyone” — Ronald Reagan

Let’s talk boundaries. It’s a tough one, I know. Boundaries are a difficult topic to breach for the first time. It’s important to know that we can set our boundaries, that we can navigate what it means to be hurt by someone and to be able to walk away. Without boundaries, we have nothing protecting us in our relationships.

Many of us believe that we will be left if we create boundaries and reveal our needs to the people we love. It’s hard to learn how to speak up for ourselves. We lose ourselves in wanting to be liked. But once we learn to say “no”, our relationships often actually improve because our communication becomes more streamlined. Boundaries are both an act of self-preservation and an act of kindness to those we love. We are not responsible for the emotions or behavior of the people around us.¹

2 There are exceptions to this! There are, in fact, many people whose emotions or behavior we HAVE to take on. Parents, for instance, cannot follow this rule. If your mom had said ‘I am not responsible for the emotions of other people’ when you were three and threw a fit in the doctor’s office and left you there, that would have been outrageously irresponsible.

When you ask her on the way home from her mother’s funeral in the dark of the passenger seat how she is doing, selfishly, you might almost wonder if the Rule of Boundaries applies here. You’re going to have to fight your own instinct to squirm in your seat when she starts stuttering through anger, grief, and insecurity all at once.

“I just always thought that unconditional love of a parent would always be there. And now that it’s gone, I don’t know what to do.”

Parenting: Breaking the Cycles

Attachment issues that develop from our parents can get a little sticky. Everyone wants to be the parent they didn't have, to "break the cycles" of neglect or hurt that our parents often create in us. Our parents are often responsible for the patterns that evolve into the ways we think about ourselves. This manifests in many different ways. If we watch our parents treat themselves with self-hatred, we might echo that in our own thinking. Children learn by mirroring our behavior.¹

3 She isn't crying, but her spine curves over the steering wheel. You think her whole body might crack if you touched her. When you were small and crying in your bed because you had nightmares about strangers coming to take you away, she always bragged about how nothing could ever hurt you because she was "the buffest mom ever". She used to do triathalons. Her arm muscles were tight and taught, always visible in tank tops. She would goof around, shadowboxing to make you laugh, then would rub your back with little circles with her thumb until you fell asleep. You try to pat her shoulder from the passenger seat, but you can't quite reach and your arm is too short to reassure her. You are too small to make it okay. She looks at you sideways for the first time and sort of winces.

3 It never occurred to you that your mom lied to you for years for your protection and not her own preservation.

When you were in middle school you learned the word 'bulimia' from an outdated movie in health class about teens. It was always some blonde girl with a furrowed brow and condescending voice: "*Carmen, you need help from a trusted adult. I think you have something called bulimia.*" They never told you what to do when the trusted adult is throwing up behind closed doors and every other trusted adult wants to talk about how she looks *soooo amazing now*. The rest of your family looks quizzically when you ask questions, so eventually you accept that Moms don't eat dinner, they only drink soda. Moms don't wear a bathing suit on the beach, they wear sweats even in 90 degree heat.

You learned that you were lucky to be skinny by the way your grandmother marvelled at your legs and hips when you were nine.

Under 100 lbs was good. Sandra Bullock says she is 99 pounds in *The Blind Side*- impressive. Andi is a size 6 in *The Devil Wears Prada*—not quite good enough—but then she goes down to a size 4 which everyone cheers for. You learned that other moms were jealous of how fit your mom was when you were eleven, even though she came home and ran on the treadmill until she couldn't.

To amend this cycle, you could start by planning how you will tell your daughter she is perfect. You might write plans about ways that you can change the generation you create.

You are going to raise someone special. Her baby face will be soft and moldable under your fingertips like sweet-smelling rose clay.

You could look in the mirror and mime confidence. Move without makeup until you start to recognize a face underneath. Let her believe that it's enough to let textured skin sit and to let a body just be a body. A machine that eats, moves, functions.

She will be the friend who cocks her head and says 'I just don't see how someone so beautiful couldn't see that about themselves.' Even if she is not the most beautiful girl in the room she will sway in elegant skirts as if she is. She will be naive in that way, the way you always wanted to be. Naive in a way that you're not sure anyone is.

You might wonder whether your child will see through your pretending, whether she will notice the crease in your brow or the unnecessary apologies on the tip of your tongue. She will.

Healing Routines and Practices

I need a sense that things are going to be okay, even when I am alone with my life — as I'm sure you do, too. I struggle to remind myself that I am worthy of a life that makes me happy.

Something that often benefits a person's sense of stability is establishing consistent self-care routines. We are animals who thrive off of routine.

You know this already. You know the things that keep you safe better than I do. I'm just giving you the language you need to articulate it.

1. Keep doing the hardest routines- even when you don't want to. Trick your brain into believing this is your life.

2. Allow yourself to feel your feelings deeply, until it becomes overwhelming. ⁴
3. Then turn it off. Go outside. Go do the dishes. Give yourself time to think.
4. Listen to your body. Did you eat? Did you drink enough water?
5. Forgive yourself.⁵
6. Let yourself start over at any point.⁶
7. Go for a walk on your favorite trail, squinting all the way because your eyes are far too sensitive to sunlight.
8. Watch two dogs chase each other around a playground. Think about the way you used to race the kids in your neighborhood, breathless. Recall what it feels like to accelerate beyond your own ability to stop yourself, head over knees, moving with no conception of how or when you will stop.
9. Run. Even though you're wearing a sundress. Slam your feet against the dirt path until your breath breaks.
10. Find a no trespassing sign and climb under it. Take off your shoes because you want to remember what it feels like to wiggle your toes in even the coarsest of grass.
11. Play a song you found all on your own. Maybe it's a cover of Both Sides Now, which critics (and Joni herself) hated because it turned such an emotionally wrenched song into something contrived and media-friendly, but you love it anyway because it reminds you that it's actually a good thing that you really don't know love at all. A silly shrug instead of a mourning cry.
12. Listen to the kids in the yard across the street. One little boy is a ringmaster. He's standing in front of his younger sister and thrusting his arms up and down, yelling *come one, come all!* Watch how he throws his entire body into his little performance. Remember how you used to yell and dance at dusk just like this with your little sister.

4 Another contradiction: previously I said that you should not feel your feelings. This is also true. I don't think that you should give into these feelings as much as your instincts would tell you that you should. But you are going to go ahead and feel them anyway, aren't you?

5 This is debatable.

6 Not sure about this.

13. Curl up and smush your face into the grass like it's your bed, the way you used to when you were a little kid in your Belle nightgown. You used to do this when you were catching fireflies in your grandmother's yard. You felt time stretch out and swallow you up for the first time. You remember how you used to feel so much older than you were. You felt like you had uncovered secrets in the scent of soil.

14. Stand up barefoot in the grass on feet that haven't learned the weight of caretaking yet. Wonder if your mother could still loosen her feet from the ground and run if she wanted to.

15. Break into a race again, this time for her — just in case she never remembers how to run without folding your knees in and waiting on someone else.

16. Walk uphill with grass stains on your elbows and privately declare to yourself that you will run barefoot at least once a month for the rest of your life.



Ryley Harris



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