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# Paper Trains

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfilment  
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of  
**Master of Arts**  
in  
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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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## Abstract

*In the end, it keeps coming back to that. How we've got to move past each other. I tell your story in a way that somehow still makes it all about me. I count the trains, burn Bible paper. I'm left inconsolable on the dance floor. I try to paint a bowl of fruit and it always ends up being a self-portrait. I suppose that's life. You reach your hands out for others, but they're still your hands.*

A train is late to the station. Dogs howl in the night. A kitchen tap drips without sound. Lungs fill with lake water. Books remain unread. Words, unspoken.

*Paper Trains* is a narrative-driven collection of poems exploring how people move through grief and the places it can take them. After losing her best friend, the narrator of these poems latches on to everything she can to keep herself afloat. Bad omens, old jackets, blue paper cranes.

We follow her journey as she navigates both devastating loss and the unrest of her early 20s. There are ways to stay busy: house parties, coffee shops, home renovation, self-pity, gardening. She moves through spaces to delay moving on.

We witness the effects that death has on her relationships with others and the burdens that she must now carry. This is a tale of violence, anger, and isolation. Of forgetting and remembering again. Betrayal. Begrudging hope. Superstitions and bad life choices. Trains always running late.

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For Alexander, without whom this would have never been possible.

Love you

## How it Ends

Everyone is doomed from the start.

Enter the theatre. You know how this story goes.

Spine against folding seats, stage lights on dim. Nobody tries to stop it.

Nobody climbs onto the stage and starts waving a gun,

heavy, slick with oil.

Head tilted back, shouting at the ceiling.

*Who do you think you are, God?*

Blood dark on your palms.

He's dead. So, what next?

Leave the theatre, blinking in the sun. Bet on the horses. Rewind the tapes.

Juliet and Romeo both make it out. Take it slow. Stay together a year or two, break up over  
inconsolable differences.

You and I stand on the shoreline, watching the waves roll out. You hold my shoes,

I wear your old leather jacket.

Unfurl my fists, palms facing upward, fingers splayed.

The rain burns on my dry patches of skin.

You press your arms tight against your ribcage, holding yourself together.

Keeping your guts from spilling out.



## The Art of War

I want to tell you a story without having to be in it. Without admitting that my head pressed hard into the pillow until my heartbeat sounded

like your footsteps coming up my driveway.

I lay awake and think about your mouth. I think about my nail beds.

I think about all of the people on the London underground.

How they press the palms of their hands against the sockets of their eyes, their foreheads against glass.

They don't think twice about where they're going.

I think about how I can see my veins through the pale skin on my wrists and how they are just maps I cannot follow.

I want to tell you a story because it is already over. There is nothing that can be done to change it.

I sit up in bed and bite my nails. I read books I do not like. *The Art of War. Hamlet.*

There is something to be said, but I can't say it.

I want to tell you a story where the kitchen tap is

dripping and I cannot hear it at all.

I close my hands into fists. I open them.

I hoard your name in my mouth.

I want to tell you a story where you ask about the wine glasses with purple-stained rims spread across the counter.

I want to tell you a story where I say *Go big or go home!*

and you say *Isn't it kind of nice to just go home?*

I want to tell you a story properly. Where we do it right this time.

Where we lay with our heads against the wall and our feet off the edge of the bed.

Where you say *I don't care if you forget to finish reading those books.*

I sit up. *I care!* I say. *I care if I forget!*

You are quiet. I lay back down on the bed.

I want to tell you a story so that this time, when somebody has to leave first, I make sure it is me.

I wake up. I drink three cups of coffee a day. I make up sentences I think no human being has ever said.

I say them very quietly.

I sit on a bench at the train station and wave goodbye to people I do not know.

I think about where they are going.

I want to tell you a story where I spit your name up into my palms and it is still alive and breathing.

Where I finish your books and highlight all the parts I like.

Where I do not bite my nails. I do not cry.

I get on the train and go home.

## The Last Test and Proof

I dream that I am in my childhood bedroom. There is a layer of dust on the dresser and cobwebs are strung across the ceiling.

We are laying on our backs, our heads tipped over the edge of my bed.

I am reaching out for you.

My hair brushes threadbare blue carpet and your glasses slide up the bridge of your nose.

Your wrist is cold against my fingertips. The house is so quiet.

There is no love inside, but it's close.

It's out in the yard, in the weeds.

Then you start to sit up, and I am crying so hard that my chest rattles with each breath.

This is the worst part.

You look over and say *I'll see you tomorrow?*

I want to plead with you to stay, but I end up nodding my head. You try to move. I am still clutching your arm like a child.

*What?* you ask. *What's wrong?*

The dust and cobwebs are in my chest now, climbing into my throat. I press my fingers against your wrist. So cold.

I am looking at you properly, now.

Your eyes are two shades too light, your smile is the wrong shape. My bedroom door rattles, and I can hear the muffled voices on the other side.

You look at me with your too-light eyes.

*I have to go now, you say. It's time. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.*

When I wake, I press my forehead hard against the wall and picture your face to make sure I haven't forgotten it. Dark eyes. Crooked smile.

I tuck the images into the shelves of my ribcage.

I get out of bed. I go to work. I come home. I fall asleep.

I dream of you,

head tipped over the edge of my bed.

I am reaching out for you.

I am always reaching out for you.

This is the closest I can get to love without burning my hands on it.

**This isn't Hell, but I can see it from here**

You left me a folded paper crane. Light blue construction paper sandwiched between books and photo frames.

I don't try to decipher what it could mean.

You were hazy and waterlogged. Moved slowly, spoke to people that only you could see.

It must have hurt. That is the part that I keep coming back to.

The blue paper beak is neat and crisp, the point of the tail is sharp.

It must have hurt, forcing your fingertips to fold and turn and press.

A portrait of your pain I can't discard.

On the boardwalk, you handed me a pocket Bible. We tore the pages out to roll blunts, and I said

*This is the worst thing we've ever done. Are we going to Hell?*

It was one of those nights where the air was warm and you could fall in love with anything.

You laughed and said nothing.

Actually, you said:

*This is far from the worst thing we've done.* You flicked ashes onto the grass.  
*Besides, God is a busy man. I'm sure he gave up on us years ago.*

It was summer, humid and sticky, and I kept wishing that I had met you earlier.

The pages of the Bible were the size of my palm, and I couldn't stop laughing nervously, as if we'd be struck down where we stood.

You weren't religious, and neither was I.

It is not until a few years later that I start praying to a God I don't believe in.

In my dreams, you ask me for a lighter and I give you the sun.

I give you my blood. My teeth. My tongue.

I give you the folded paper crane. I ask what it means.

I give you a bandage. A tattoo. A pocket Bible. I press my palms together and pray til I'm blue.

I give you a switchblade. A pause. A breath.

I give you the sun.

I give you my hands, but the movement tilts us off balance and we stumble into the lake. We will sink beneath the surface where no sound can reach us.

I won't be able to find you again.

When I wake, I am still searching for you, before it is too late.

But I sit outside in summer, when the air is warm and static, and a folded paper crane still holds  
your fingertips.

It's crazy how long love can hold its breath.



## Got a light?

The trick is to keep the knife lodged firmly in the wound. It's the only thing keeping you from bleeding out.

You have to swallow the love while it is still hidden in blood.

I can't let myself bleed out. There are so many ways to twist the knife deeper, keep this love alive.

I can go to the park with the swings. Where we kicked up bark with the toes of our sneakers and wrote our names in the sandpit with sticks.

I can tell the barista at Starbucks that my name is yours,

so I can hear somebody call it out.

I can look at your house on Google Streetview and the lights will still be on. Your car in the driveway, the hedges trimmed.

Praying is different when there is a knife lodged in your gut.

The blood clings to my clasped palms, and all of my t-shirts are stained.

It's a movie where all of the scenes are too dark, too slow. You are the director,  
and I am the star.

I am glowing,

with sleek hair and blood dripping onto my shoes.

I am riding the train and the loudspeaker is saying,

*Attention passengers: everything you once loved dearly is dead and gone forever.*

Platform 12. I get off and walk to the park, then the Starbucks.

I pull up Google Street View on my phone.

Your lights are still on.

I drink my coffee and go home.

Kick off my sneakers, sponge the blood from my t-shirt.

Go to bed.

Dream.

That's the thing about love.

You wake each morning, hand pressed to your abdomen, asking *does it still hurt?*

and the knife keeps saying *yes.*

## **Braced**

Miss you. Glad that I met you.

Glad I was there to see you get your braces off and learn how to smile again.

Never in photographs. Always slightly crooked.

Glad you were there to hold me when I was lovesick all over your bathroom sink. Heaving,  
heartbroken.

Glad you smoothed a palm across my forehead, down my cherry red box-dyed hair.

My face, shining red and prickling with heat.

The black nylon of my favourite party top clinging to my stomach.

Turning my face into your palm, warm skin seeking cold.

Glad you rubbed my back and wiped mascara tears and hot pink puke from my face. Glad I  
didn't feel embarrassed. Just felt loved.

Miss you. Would love to throw up in your bathroom again sometime.

## Talk again soon, OK?

As a child, my mother would take long phone calls. I would compile a list of things in my head I wanted to tell her when she finished.

She'd mention school in her conversation.

I'd been given three stars on the whiteboard today for good listening.

Everything feels important when you're that small.

I'd pull my knees up to my chest and watch her, painted in afternoon sun.

I feel like a child now, breath caught in my chest.

I have so much to tell you.

I dyed my hair. I graduated with your picture in my locket, tucked under my gown.

I saw a cloud that looked like a grizzly bear.

I think our favourite band's new album is their best yet.

My dad called today.

What do you think?

About the album, I mean. Not my dad.

Maybe that too, actually. Do you think I'm too forgiving?

On second thought, don't answer that.

The week after you died, I plunged myself into the sea to try and scrub the grief from my body.

The water was so cold it felt boiling against my palms.

It was a two-hour drive to the ocean, and all I got was saltwater burns on dry skin.

Can you spot me the gas money?

Can you spot me in the dunes?

Among the beachgrass, laying with my head tipped back,

sand clinging to my throat.

Did you see me trip up the stairs last week? Did I look stupid?

Don't say yes. Know you'd say yes.

When my mother finally hung up the phone, she'd see my hands curled into fists,

the air caught in my throat.

*Keep it to yourself*, she'd say.

*You don't have to tell me every thought that goes through your head.*

If you are watching, I want you to see that I am still waiting for you to hang up the phone.

I want you to see that I am still listening, still reaching out for you,

still holding my breath.

## Quickstep

It always starts with blood on the marbled floor.

The balcony, the tennis court, the white collared shirt.

Me with a movie star hairstyle and dancing-shoe blisters.

You with the bruised eye and pills in the sink.

Your violin string spine pulled taut.

Outside, the air is cold. Always cold. My breath fogs into a mist.

Droplets of rain cut slices into window condensation.

I twist my rings around, pressing each fingertip against diamonds until I draw blood.

Inside, the ballroom smells like wax and old money.

You greet me with a wince.

Work your fingers into the gaps between my ribs, dig your nails in.

A pomegranate, split open on the banquet table.

The rosary tucked into my blouse, cold against my skin. Against your hands.

Your fingers.

Curling around my wrist, my waist. Left, right, left.

Then you leave. There isn't any way to stop it. You leave me in every universe.

I always picture you with one foot out the door.

I clutch my dress and pinpricks of blood soak into emerald satin. Your top two buttons are undone, collar folded down. Right, left.

You tilt your chin up, straighten your shoulders.

Going. Gone.

I pull my movie star hair into a bun.

I have other matters to attend to.

Someone has to wipe down the tables, mop the blood from the floor.

I am so tired of being the one who stays.

I hope that when you picture me, I have perfect hair and clean hands.

I hope that I am following you out the door.



## Motion Sickness

We can never go back.

The next scene is playing without letting you stop for breath.

The train was running late and I waited until the rain soaked through to my socks.

Love wasn't enough to keep you alive.

But the love was still there.

Smear across our palms. Rolled like perfume along the column of our throats, the inside of our wrists. So sweet, we were sick with it.

White violet, jasmine. Gasoline.

Click through Google Street View, the earth crawling past in pixels. Until rural Texas turns red, turns brown, turns orange.

Until the shape of our love is the resting body of a coyote, sheltered in the shade of a desert willow.

Your flight was delayed. You still cling to the soft skin of my wrist. Pull my flesh together like a suture. Always moving forward.

Thinking of you on the train. You under orange sun. In the lines of my palms.

Running late. Sheltered in the shade.

It wasn't as beautiful as you thought it would be.

All that colour, just dust.

## Haunted House Party

Here's what you've got **to do**:

**list** all good things as they happen.

Gorge on sliced oranges until you burst with **life**,

**dream** seafoam bubbles webbing your fingers.

Arrive late to the **party**:

**bus** running slow, dark insect against moonless sky.

Stir tequila into lemon **soda**,

**pop** stitches open in the bathroom. Watch sink water turn pink.

Sting hangnails with salt & **lime**,

**light** bible paper joints on the back stove element.

Pour a single, a **double**,

**vision** pitched sideways. Washed murky blue.

Let tangerine light flood your veins, little by **little**,

**love** sliced orange thin.

## The Normal Amount

I watch winter pass by from my kitchen floor.

Tap dripping, phone shattered on the linoleum,  
dish soap stinging my bitten down nails.

I carve out a home for myself between the dust suspended in the air.

In the real world, I go forward. It isn't possible to go back.

I sweep the floor, scrub soap from my hands, apply to jobs.  
I wash my sheets. Go for walks. Dream of you in my childhood bedroom.

I have so much packed inside me, pressing up behind my teeth.

I don't know what to do with it all.

My mother once told me that I love like someone who is begging to get hurt.

*You can never love something a normal amount, can you?*

*It's always obsessive, with you. It's scary.*

I clenched my jaw, teeth clicking together. But in the end I said nothing. She was right.

I carry the love with me because there is nowhere for me to put it down.

I think maybe if I loved you a normal amount, it would be easier.

It would be the kind of love that I could reach out and touch.

I could hold it in my palms. Place it down on the bed.

I could get up off the kitchen floor, open the back door and let it inside.

## Space Dog

The first dog in space was a last resort.

The scientists grew too attached to the initial test subject.

It was too playful, too soft. Too small.

Laika was a stray. Bigger than the last. A scientist took her home to play with his children before she was due to launch.

*Laika was quiet and charming.*

*I wanted to do something nice for her. She had so little time left to live.*

Laika's tail wags as she is herded into cold metal. They stroke her coarse fur. Kiss her head as they strap her in.

*Lay down. Good girl, Laika. Stay.*

Small, watery eyes stare into the airlock. Paws skitter across aluminium. This is where the humans left, this will be where they return. They will return.

*Stay, Laika. Stay.*

We form attachments to everything. To anything.

After one year on Mars, the Curiosity rover sang to herself, beeps and clicks. Her rendition of *Happy Birthday* echoed across the red surface.

When the Opportunity rover was caught in a dust storm, her last transmitted message read: *My battery is low and it's getting dark.*

Flight controllers sent her more than 1,000 recovery commands.

She did not respond.

*The more time passes, the more I'm sorry about it. We shouldn't have done it.*

*We did not learn enough from this mission to justify the death of the dog.*

We are pack animals. We aren't meant to be alone. This should be enough to make us kind.

Laika dies after just a few hours in orbit. Chin resting on the coarse fur of her paws.

*Lay down, Laika. Stay.*

From this distance, Earth is just a smudge of colour. A tennis ball against black sky.

Laika breathes in, out. Watery eyes fixed on the airlock. Battery is low.

It's getting dark.

## How to be a Human Being

The first step is to do everything wrong. I'm great at this part.

I start by trying to go through the stages of grief fast. Cycle through the emotions that I'm supposed to feel, move on with my life. I keep getting stuck on anger.

My jaw has been clenched for so long I've given up on trying to pry it open.

I don't want to know what has started living inside there.

Bargaining, I skip. I'm not too sure who to bargain with. God? The doctors? My mother?

Then I realise I'm not doing the steps right, so I give up entirely.

Instead I stare into pictures of myself as a little girl, small and happy, and try to find a way back to her. Carefully braided hair and a melted ice-cream grin.

But that doesn't work either.

I think it just makes me sad.

I find myself raking my fingers through the soil in my chest, asking:

*Surely things are still able to grow here. Right?*

I cling to everything.

Especially the useless things.



The ones that I should pack into boxes with a blue sharpie *FREE TO A GOOD HOME* and leave on the sidewalk.

I wear rings that turn my fingers green.

I keep the empty perfume bottles and the bobbly sweater and the old takeout menus.

The jar full of hard candy, because you gave me some of them, but I can't remember which ones.

They've been expired for years.

It's good. It's still good.

I wait for the day where I can pack you into boxes. Pry out all the thorns that are lodged in my palms.

But I think at the end of the day, none of those things work after all.

What works the best is just going for a walk with a friend.

We trek through the forest, across muddy ponds and verdant valleys. I play pretend, like you are here and we are children again.

My hair braided down my back, your teeth crooked.

I am a princess and you are a brave knight

and I love you in a way that makes my knees buckle.

I find a branch to use as a walking stick. The mountains basin us in. Wind whips up the leaf litter into little tornados.

Everything is alive.

The tornadoes leap and dance. I unclench my jaw a little, uncurl my fists.

And it feels silly, but I still ask,

*Do you think he would want to play pretend with us? If he were here?*

*He already is, my friend says. He's the wind.*

## Blind Faith

Nobody knows more about the world than a thirteen-year-old girl. There is something about being so young and so hurt. I feel as though I've invented something.

I feel tragic and brave.

Like a war hero or a poet. I am, of course, just a child who has lost her father in the supermarket.

There is no way of getting home. It is dark, cold. My shoes are too tight, my feet ache.

The supermarket is so big and I am so small.

You are the only thing I know.

I am a yearling calf and I'd follow you into the marshlands. Would shadow you anywhere.

The box says *DAMAGED GOODS* and we flood it with lake water.

The page reads *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep.*

*Fragile! Do Not Rip or Tear.*

There is nothing to be done about what has already happened.

No force can erase scars from your palms or fade the memories of smoke and broken glass. Of car headlights and damp gravel. Autumn leaves plastered to your skin. Cold air.

Lord, grant me the strength to never forgive my father.

To look into the mirror and see nothing but myself.

Grant me the gift to revive dead birds and never use it.

The strength to hurt everyone who ever betrayed me. The kindness to stop myself.

Things will change. You will grow into something taller, warmer. I will rent an apartment and paint with oil on canvas.

Buy new shoes and cut all my hair off. Still, I have blisters on my heels. You have scars on your palms.

I have my father's nose.

There is nothing that can be done to fix it. All I can do is pray.

*Lord, grant me plastic surgery financial assistance.*

Trim my split ends. Bandage your hands. Order my groceries online.

## Rest Stop

I'm in the car with the windows down, and you aren't with me, and I'm not pretending that you are.

I have the radio on and the heater turned right up.

The wind sucks most of the heat right out the open windows.

I keep shifting in my seat to stay in the warm parts.

Life always seems to be a mess of conflicting desires.

I'm trying to get better at remembering you as you were, not what you could have become.

I hear a joke and think *He'd find this funny*.

I recite it again in my head.

*Would he? Maybe not.*

And while I'm busy thinking about it, life keeps right on going.

I think my problem is that I'm always getting stuck on the things that don't matter. I don't have any time to think about the things that do.

Like your sister graduating high school

or the books that still need to be packed into boxes

or remembering to brush my teeth.

I guess what I'm trying to say is thank you for lending me your jacket with the deep pockets.

I needed somewhere to put the hurt where it wouldn't find me again.

You were soft in a way that scared me.

It was the sort of love that felt like a childhood slumber party.

Still bodies piled into sleeping bags on the living room floor. All that warmth, quiet breathing.

We aren't meant to be alone.

I think we got so close we passed right through each other.

In the end, it keeps coming back to that. How we've got to move past each other.

I tell your story in a way that somehow still makes it all about me.

I count the trains, burn Bible paper. I'm left inconsolable on the dance floor.

I try to paint a bowl of fruit and it always ends up being a self portrait.

I suppose that's life. You reach your hands out for others, but they're still your hands.

Still. I'm driving with the windows down, and you aren't with me, but I'm getting better at shifting in my seat so that I can keep living

in the warm parts.

Driving with the windows down. Pulling on your jacket. Breathing.

Quiet, on the living room floor.

## Disrepair

The best thing about living in a haunted house is how busy it keeps you.

When summers are hot and days are bright green, the paint on the porch starts to peel.

I brush on a summer coat.

I organise the closet and fold away my woollen sweaters.

The windowpane needs dusting, and the garden is wild with overripe tomatoes. Twice this week

I have repaired the netting that covers the strawberries. Those damn birds.

There is always something to do with my hands. This I am grateful for.

I sit on the porch late into the evening, collecting bug bites on my ankles.

I can hear rushing water, and the air hangs heavy with the scent of pine.

The netting on the strawberries is in good shape. And the paint on the porch is fresh.

Everything is in working order.

At grief camp, there was a running joke about butterflies.

When we spotted one, we would all look at each other.



*Well, it can't be a sign from all our dead loved ones.*

To love is to create meaning. We attach names to things, make them important.

But I'm sure it's you who keeps blowing over the fence posts when I find myself wandering, picking at hangnails. Anyway, message received.

I have a hammer hanging in the shed, and fencing wire to spare.

There is much to do.

## **Dream Journal**

### **Monday.**

The morning is lime green. I wake early, press palms against heavy eyes.

Crush mint and lemon into my water, spit into the sink.

The bitter film lingers on my tongue.

### **Tuesday.**

Deep purple today. The blackberries are plump and fresh. Warm from the sun.

Juice stains my chin, darkens the grooves in my fingernails.

I wait for your truck to appear in the driveway.

### **Wednesday.**

The night has been orange. Like a tangerine, like a song.

Like my sister's hair, braided down her back.

It is so beautiful, my fingers shake with it.

I dance alone. I jump at small noises.

Eyes closed, breath shallow. Glowing copper in the dark of my room.

### **Thursday.**

Red turns pink, turns black. You are here, dusting pine needles off your boots.

It is so hot. There is no breeze. Sweat clings to my temples.

The windchimes fall silent, and I cough once, twice.

You set the first boot on the doormat, unlace a second.

I head over to the garden before the other shoe can drop.

**Friday.**

A custard yellow afternoon. Congealed, cold. Coating the back of my teeth.

There is something to be said. A word, a phrase. To speak would be to break the shelter.

The membrane pulled taut across thick yellow egg yolk. I will not break it.

I'll stay on my side of the couch.

I'll keep my tongue laid flat.

## Golden Hour

You walk backwards into the room wearing your winter coat. The clock hanging on the kitchen wall is melting.

Dripping white and teal.

I am at the table with sunburnt shoulders and a bowl of fresh tomatoes. You linger in the doorway. I speak in slow, measured tones.

*It's called a hedgehog's dilemma. In cold weather, hedgehogs move closer to share body heat.*

*But they can never get close enough without hurting each other.*

A pause. A laugh.

Then for your line, which is always so quiet I can't make it out. A step forward.

The tap is running, water thundering against tin.

The blood creeps out of your nose.

Down your chin, like a spider crawling from its hiding spot.

My knuckles split open. A chair scrapes, wood sliding on wood.

The windowpane is glowing orange. We don't have long left.

I am moving closer to you.

Thunder rolls through my ribcage, flares and pulses. Saliva pools in the back of my throat.

Closer still, until our blood mixes on the floor. The skin on my knees shreds itself into ribbons.

At some point, it becomes more about hurting myself than reaching you.

## Hibernal

I am stuck in winter.

The world gets so cold I forget how to move through it.

Summer is easy. I am hot and miserable, and the fan needs fixing.

Every day there is another orange to split into segments.

In winter, there is nobody to keep me warm.

To tell me what to do next.

I've been doing a lot of walking. Standing around in the garden.

Waiting for some kind of sign that I'm doing things right. That the worst is over. Maybe a sunny day that defrosts the ice that clings to my watering can. A prophetic sort of dream.

But nothing yet.

My hands are cold.

It always comes back to my hands.

The shaking and the picking and not knowing where to put them. The frostbite on the fingertips as I'm pulling you from the lake.

I lie awake at night and trace letters up and down my arms. L-O-V-E-Y-O-U-!

Maybe it's a waste of time. But time will pass anyway.

My therapist suggested reminiscing about the good times, so I've been trying that.

For example, last week I made a cup of rich coffee with thick caramel syrup and cream.

So I've been reminiscing about how the sweetness coated my teeth.

Also about you. Your safe palms. Blue paper cranes.

## Wishbone

Every morning the water falls.

A cold sheen. Window pane cascading silver droplets.

Sparrows peck at thin ice on the birdbath. Sun struggles against webs of cloud, breaking through in narrow daggers.

Lightning strikes the same place twice. Through the chest, through the spine. Splits in half, wishbone thin.

Thunder echoes through this cavernous body.

This sodden wasteland, this waterlogged form.

Dew collects along spider web labyrinths. Wilting, bending.

Beyond the tulip wallpaper, peeling blue. Beyond the gilded picture frames, tilted forward.

Catching morning sun.

You and I, arms interlocked. Hair falling into my eyes. A stain on your shirt.

Suspended.

Beyond the net curtains, tied back with ribbon, the fresh morning sings.



Dragonflies dip low to skim brisk trails along the pond. Blackbirds submerge beaks into strawberry flesh.

There is so much life. Across the pond, over the garden. Through the overgrown grass, bounding across the yard. Towards the back door.

Searching for a way to break in.

## **Last Call**

A man walks into a bar and orders a drink.

I walk into a bar with a knife in my gut and gravel on my palms. I walk into a bar and crack my skull on it. I walk into a bar with split knuckles and ribbon-shredded knees.

A man walks into a bar and asks, *What the hell happened to you?*

*Me? You should see the other guy! He was beautiful.*

A man walks out of a bar, hops on the train, and goes home. I wait on the platform. Counting loudspeaker announcements.

A man walks into the lake and doesn't walk back out. I thrash and struggle and tug desperately at waterlogged limbs.

I walk, and walk, and keep walking. I collapse on the pavement.

Under the streetlights, my blood glows like evening wine.

Like a bowl of fresh tomatoes.

Strawberries, pecked apart by birds.

A man walks into a bar and orders a drink, then a second, then a third. Floods his stomach with vodka and lake water.

A man drowns his grief until all that's left is love.

## War Story

Listen. I'm at the station watching the trains pass.

Sad music playing in my headphones and smoking a cigarette because the only way to do this  
whole grief thing is to lean into it.

So I'm watching the trains pass, and the people pass, and the time pass. And listen, I have an  
idea.

Let's go back for a moment.

Let's say it isn't cancer. Let's say it's something bloodier, with more gunfire. Less starch and  
antibiotics.

Less of you in the hospital.

You in the cotton sheets. At the window, watching the rain. Back in the cotton sheets.

Say it's a war. It's a war and here you are in the reeds. In the trenches. In the belly of the thing.

Let's say it's me at home clinking silverware and nodding, solemn in candlelight. Saying adult  
phrases like *You're right, things have taken a turn.*

My hands turning your letter over and over under the table.

And yes, you still die and I throw up roast chicken dinner into the sink.

But that part comes later.

So, here you are taking cover and the mud is so thick and cold on your skin. The air is humming with static.

It's raining, thunder booms above. And you're sweating and aching and hoping you don't catch a stray bullet.

The bullet is coming, of course. I'm getting to it. Be patient.

I'm crossing my ankles, smoothing the letter down on my lap. Eyeing the flames as they shrink lower. Ignoring the thunder outside.

Your head tilted up, watching the storm clouds. How they pass by.

The rain against the window, against your skin.

My hands turning a cigarette packet over and over.

Watching the trains leave and hoping the next person I love will be the last.

## Red Click 20s

White entrance doors are blinding in morning sun. They leave me with a pounding headache. A man in a neon orange vest holds the lift for me.

Floor 2, 3, 4, 5.

Click.

Room 17, you are sat up in bed. Sunlight through the blinds casts stripes of shadow over your face.

There is a stack of light blue construction paper on the table.

*Good morning.*

Click.

*When I get out of here, I'm going straight to the seaside.*

Sweat beads along my palm lines. I glide my hands along the bed, smoothing the sheets. Loose threads of white cotton catch on my hangnails.

*You hate the beach.*

A dot of red pools at the corner of my index finger. I suck it into my mouth, nail clicking against my teeth.

*Well, people change.*

Click.

The taste of raspberry jelly and disinfectant clings to the back of my throat. I rub my thumb over the back of a white plastic spoon.

*Want the rest of mine?*

You are holding a lime green cup of jelly in shaking hands. The blinds are open now, a perfect square of sunlight stamped onto the wall above you.

*I can't steal from a sick person. I'm not that morally compromised.*

*Go on, take it. I'm not hungry.*

Click.

There is a large yellow poster on the wall displaying the symptoms of a common cold. Runny nose, fever, cough.

*My nurse is coming to get me in ten minutes.*

*Right. I'll head off then.*

The boy on the poster blows his nose into a cartoon tissue. The orange glow of sunlight reflects off his laminated figure.

*Are trains even running at this time?*

*They're always running.*

Click.

The blisters on my heels feel prickly and damp. Bleeding, probably. Ruining my new white socks.

I wiggle my toes inside my shoes, shifting my weight from foot to foot.

The train is late, again.



There is a buzz from my phone, screen lighting up blue and white.

*see u tomorrrw?*

*of course*

Click.

At two in the morning on the day of your funeral, I climb out my window onto the rickety fire escape. It's raining.

I shuffle carefully, hands scrabbling against wet metal,

pack of Marlboro Reds tucked into my pocket.

The light takes a moment to catch in the damp air.

The city hums around me, alive.

I suck in the smoke and hold it in my mouth, not inhaling all the way.

*Waste of a cigarette, you would say. Do it properly or don't do it at all.*

When I dial her number into my phone, it goes straight to voicemail.

*Hi! Sorry you missed me. Please leave a message.*

I end the call. The plume of smoke I release drifts up, stings my eyes. I dial the number again.

*Hello?*

*Hey.*

A pause.

*So. How's having a dead best friend going for you?*

*Not great. You?*

*Not great.*

Another pause. An exhale.

*Are you smoking?*

*...No.*

A rustle as I reach for a second cigarette.

*Don't light another one.*

*Sorry.*

*Did you eat?*

*Yes. Are you still mad?*

*Yes.*

*Okay. I'm sorry.*

*You didn't have to tell me how long he had left.*

*You could have just told me it was getting bad.*

*Click.*

*It was his decision who to tell.*

*That makes me feel worse.*

*Right. Sorry.*

*Whatever.*

Click. Click.

There must be a layer of damp on the second cigarette. The flame won't catch.

*What are you doing?*

*Nothing.*

*Are you outside?*

*Why?*

*Are you safe?*

Click. Click. Click.

*Are you?*

*God, I'm not going to kill myself.*

*You sure?*

*I don't want to die.*

*Okay. Just checking.*

*Well, don't.*

An exhale. I tip my head back against the wet brick. Thumping bass carries through the night air from somewhere in the distance.

A car honks. The dim lights of office buildings and gas stations glitter below me.

The world is laid out, cold and wet.

*Call me tomorrow.*

*Will you answer?*

Click.

## **Hit The Ground**

Running and looking

and running

and running.

Until the grief catches up to me.

Until I find you.

On the train platform.

In the reeds.

Under the orange sun.

Running

until the stairs collapse in.

Family car on the highway.

Farm horses.

Beetles.

A kitchen tap.

No sound.

Running late.

Unexpected rainfall.

Wet sneakers.

Running still.

Broken elevator.

Stairs collapsing.

Running.

Looking.

Find you.

In the lake.

Wet jacket.

Cold hands.

Late for the train.

Doors closing.

Running out.

No time.

Cold air.

Old country.

Dogs howling.

Sharp teeth.

Bible paper.

Blisters.

Searching.

Cold trail.

Running

on empty.

## **Black Flag**

This is a sad poem where you laugh so hard you snort milk all over my new green sweater.

Where I frame ticket stubs from every movie we see.

It's a sad poem where you sleep on the sofa  
because a spider has moved into your room and you're out of bug spray.

Where we sit by the second-floor window and watch teenage boys spin burnouts across the  
tarmac.

Rubber peels from tires, tucks itself against the kerb.

In this sad poem, I slam three tequila shots without wincing. Barely taste the salt/lime/bitter.

Call over the music: *It's not even that strong! I feel nothing!*

This is a sad poem where I am a teenage girl for the rest of my life. Where everything that  
happens to me is for the better.

You look so dumb in this sad poem. Button-up shirt and glasses. I love you like we share blood.



I love you backwards, all the ugly parts first.

This sad poem tastes like tar and kerosine. Folds us together like paper cranes.

Slip-stitches you into the lining of my sweater.

This sad poem doesn't hurt me. It's not even that strong! I feel nothing.

This is a sad poem that gets put on hold because *Come On, Eileen* starts to play and you drag me onto the dancefloor. Spin me like tarmac burnouts.

Until all my rubber peels off.

This sad poem is two stories high and six feet deep. It loves you beyond language. There isn't a Thesaurus.com synonym that could do it justice.

It sets your glasses on the side table.

Drapes a blanket over your sofa-sleeping body.

This is a sad poem that will kill all the bugs you are afraid to touch.

## **Sit, stay**

I am your childhood dog. Made out of love & bones & fur.

My waiting post front door is tall and dark. All lights are off.

I run in circles. Chase my tail.

I'm predator & prey & you're the only thing I've ever known.

I spin. Make myself dizzy. Wait & wait & wait.

Jump at the smallest of sounds. Listen for your key in the door.

Press my ears flat. Listen harder.

There is a frequency that nobody else can hear that is your voice calling my name.

Your footsteps crunching up the drive.

I'd follow you anywhere. Into every universe, even the one where you never come home.

I'll abandon my front door, slink down the steps.

Hunt & smell & listen so hard that I'll find you no matter what.

I'll sleep at the end of your bed if it means I get to be on it.

A good dog is patient.

A dead dog is just happy to see you again.

## State Highway 8

We carry September with us. Bundle it tight in old tea towels, carry it to the rooftop carpark where sunlight can reach it.

That's how we save you.

Into the story where the pylons fade to a hum and the cars on the highway crawl like shiny beetles. Shellac glossed scarabs branch along tarmac roots.

Move with me through this still air.

Where I think you're fine but you know you're sick.

Where my skin smells of exhaust fumes and sweet almond oil. I'm seventeen floors up and still climbing.

You're falling behind.

There is a way out of this doomed narrative but we have to want it. We have to reach out for it.

We have to keep climbing until we see the light.

Until we hit Deadman's Point.

Our footsteps wash echoes against concrete walls, paint shadows into the cavernous spaces between floors. Stair rail static zaps open palms, worn sneaker soles on metal grates.

There's a moment, a line break

where I can see through the smokescreen.

Where I know your lines before you say them. And I'm breathing slow, through my nose. Like any movement will splinter this air. Like there are teeth at my throat.

All the blood I've spilled is rushing back into my veins. Wasps flooding a hive.

There is nothing new under the sun so we live without. Start the scene over before we emerge into bright heat, the big finale.

The beetles zip backwards along their sprawling branches, the sun pitches below the mountains.

We are on the ground floor, lifting our feet, taking our first steps.

## Black Dog Furniture

Eight years old and carsick in the back of a white Toyota, my best friend plays with my hair.

The world shutters green/brown/yellow. Fields dotted with turquoise bale wrap. Horses running for the sake of running.

Fingers curl at my scalp. I keep my eyes forward.

*I can't look behind me. I only feel sick when I'm looking back.*

*What else helps?*

*I feel better when I start seeing signs.*

She points out a stop sign, a furniture billboard. Black Dog.

*There you go.*

*No, I mean signs that tell us how long we have to go.*

*So I know it's nearly over.*

Her hand returns to my hair.

*Signs are signs.*

I carry them with me now. Curl the columns of my fingers over monarchs and paper cranes.

Press myself into stairwell graffiti.

*Why keep it from me?*

She is waving an empty vodka bottle in the air.

*Why let me be so fucking happy and oblivious when you knew I was just going to be sad later?*

*Because you were going to be sad later.*

The world shutters, pink/red/white. The room smells of stale water. I hope that she can find it in her heart to hold my hair back for me when I puke.

*Right. Go fuck yourself.*

I'm alone in the room.

I keep my eyes forward.

I only feel sick when I'm looking back.

## Chapel Hill

The thing that kills you dies with you. The thing that loves you is left on the platform.

Body as country.

Walking home.

Body as sacred land.

Rain on the crosswalk.

Body, invaded.

\$23 Uber ride.

Early morning grocery trips. Blue knit sweaters. Drinking apple juice through a paper straw.

Orange sun.

Breakfast eggs.

Through trees.

Job interview.

All dust.

*Doctor Who* reruns.

Moving out of apartments or moving into them. Alone. Cardboard boxes on the 7:30 train.

Butterflies.

Therapy sessions.



Fence posts.

Wonton soup.

Wind.

Chest cold.

Crying in the used bookstore. Planting chili plants. Overwatered. Soil trekked through the house.

Yellow moon.

Half awake.

Black dog.

Drive-thru.

Lime jelly.

Self-pity.

The one thing they don't tell you about grief: you'll try anything once. Anything to stop it.

Bad omens.

Community church.

Farmhouse.

Facebook weed dealer.

Dripping tap.

Skincare routine.

The thing that loves you is left on the platform. The thing that kills you dies with you.

## How to Inform Someone a Loved One Has Passed

How can I tell you about the scene in the stairwell?

How she is pressing her palms against her eyes and how my tongue rests heavy in my mouth.

Her asking me *what happened?* but there are no words left inside me.

There is graffiti on the hand railings that will be there long after we are gone. Me, pressing a finger against a splinter of wood. Her asking *how long have you known?*

I swallow.

There is nothing I can tell her that will fix this. I press harder, blood beads on my fingertip.

*How long?*

Walk with me, now. We are in the car and she is crying so hard that her whole body curls forward over the steering wheel.

When she looks up, I cannot tell if she is searching for me or for God.

I am saying *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry* like my life depends on it. Maybe it does.

How can I tell you that she wants me dead?

She does, because that is how the story goes.

There is no other way to tell this story.

And this is the scene where I ruin everything. I close my eyes and imagine that blood pools in my mouth and floods my throat until I lay limp against the dashboard.

Let's move on.

We are at the party where the bodies move too slowly. The streamers hang across the ceiling.  
Pink, white, pink, white, red.

You didn't live to see the party, but everyone around me wears your face. I open my mouth to speak, but somebody cranks the music up.

She moves her arm as though she is going to reach out to me, but stops halfway.

The bassline thrums like a prayer.

How can I tell you that I will spend the rest of my life loving a version of you that only exists in the palms of my hands, or pressed up behind my teeth?

*Don't be an idiot, you would say over synth-pop. You're at a party.*

*For the love of god, stop crying.*

Now for the part where we are sitting in a diner and I am rolling a straw wrapper between my fingers.

The lights are so bright in here. I didn't think it would feel this way.

Anyway, she is saying, *don't be a stranger*.

The straw wrapper is torn to shreds. I don't know what to do with my hands.

How can I tell you that this is the last conversation we ever have?

If I told you, you would say:

*One door shuts, another opens. That's a philosophical quote that I just came up with.*

It would be easy. Quiet and soft.

I would press my palms together in the mockery of a prayer, and you would smile and push your glasses up on the bridge of your nose.

I dig a fingernail into a groove in the wooden table, carving out a name. I wonder how long until they replace these tables.

I hope they never do.

Isn't that the point of graffiti?

So there is something left after we are gone.

The thing about this story is that if you tell it enough, it doesn't end. Not really.

Not when she gets up and leaves me alone in the diner booth.

Not later, when I put my headphones on and catch the late bus home.

When you tell the story, it's all still happening. Everything is suspended.

Right now, we are in the car.

Her, curled over the steering wheel. Me, limp on the dashboard.

We are in the stairwell, my finger pressed against the wood on the hand railings.

In the diner with the bright lights.

Me, pulling a straw from its wrapper.

You, pushing your glasses up.

We are in the middle of the party,

and she is reaching over to touch my hand.

## **Begin/End**

It can begin with you.

Pull off your winter coat, unwind the woollen scarf.

I can tell the story in a way that softens the blow,

Make it easier to swallow.

I speak about death softly, to smother the panic.

It makes us go on and on forever.

I've been reading about reincarnation, and listen,

It doesn't just end.

Don't worry.

You become a heron, or a monarch, or a stingray.

Skim the pond, flutter over milkweed, hug the ocean floor.

We go on and on forever.

We go on and on forever.

Skim the pond, flutter over milkweed, hug the ocean floor.

You become a heron, or a monarch, or a stingray.

Don't worry,

It doesn't just end.

I've been reading about reincarnation, and listen,

It makes us go on and on forever.

I speak about death softly, to smother the panic.

Make it easier to swallow.

I can tell the story in a way that softens the blow.

Pull off your winter coat, unwind the woollen scarf,

It can begin with you.

## Augury

So sorry:

to the black dog & the broken mirror

& the omens that weren't omens at all.

The bird trapped inside the house.

Wings beating a rhythm on plywood.

Huddled against floral wallpaper.

Hollow bones thrumming.

Sorry for chasing you out. It wasn't your fault.

There is nobody to blame. It was always going to end like this.

Wish I knew that. Wish I could try it again.

Again, with less nail biting and averting my eyes. Holding my tongue.

Wish I could tell you all the jokes that I'd saved up.

Echo dogs howling in the night.

Dirty punchlines in sterile rooms.

Open all my umbrellas inside.



Never felt like the right time.

Crush eggshells in my hands.

Always thought I'd get around to it.

Every ladder I walk under is just a shortcut home.

Wish I could cup the shaking frame of a fantail, warm and wriggling.

Carry it out the door.