sick girl 2005
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sick girl 2005

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Chair: Megan Kaminski

Date Approved: 26 April 2019
Abstract

A collection of hybrid pieces that examine the nostalgia of the early 2000’s while working against the narrative that sick girls lack multiplicities, that their only dimension is their sickness.
sick girl 2005 is dedicated to my mom, Jean McElhattan, who has kept me alive, to my forever-muse, Suzanne Pearman, who I hope would be proud of me, and to every woman who dares to both claim her chronic illness as a part of her identity and refuse to be defined by it all at once.
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hell under the catholic school

i keep drinking the ink from my pen
and i'm balancing history books up on my head
but it all boils down to one quotable phrase
if you love something give it away

-bright eyes
there is no way to convey through a poem what an aol dial up tone sounds like but type that into youtube and tell me you don't feel something <3
took a month to find at marshall’s, but i proudly present my new fake lacoste

at the center of everything,
my locker combination

elusively keeps unhinging me
in all of my forgetting—

prints counterfeit tickets to the
three-ring-shitshow in my brain

(another muscle breathing
before collapsing into itself)

so that, bic-tattooed onto my wrist:
36-8-14 becomes a mantra i recite

walmart flats pressing into
sidewalk cracks on the walk home

shoulders capsizing like brave ships
who wanted valiantly to try and did

the weight of my biology textbook is
real in my tail bone but a flimsy metaphor

adult mouths continue, unkindly,
to remind me of my unknowing

latchkey kid branded by brass, by
locked doors, by i-make-my-dinner

by miss linda the bus driver takes pity,
accepts post-it IOU’s twice weekly
CATHOLIC SCHOOL GIRLS
Dude seriously Get Out While You Can
Haunt Me Gently Jesus Christ Heal My Hair
Heal My Wounded Place Heal my heart
Priestly House I'm Beggin' You
Release me, I'm Restless
Who Are You Washed Up Emo Girl Next Door
Steal everything fuck this OH , i m so bored.
English Class Unravel The Ribbon
My Back My Neck Feel the Pain
Harness Your Voice Write Something.
The Boys Round Here Bad Boys Do They Hurt?
Even My Dad Does Sometimes Voice Feeling
Dont Suffer In Silence My Voice Is Their Voice
BUT Girls Carry The Future Carry The Cross
Carry That Weight It's Okay To Cry
Sad child Let It Be Beauty
nobody ever talks about emily dickinson’s sister here but i have not forgotten

suffering is optional, sure, but
have you ever been a 15 year old
girl and your only armor is maybelline
dream matte mousse foundation

no more emily dickinson or
hallways where boys chug
mountain dew code red and we
keep loving all the wrong people

i’ll see myself into this locker, thanks
been searching for a quiet place
no i’m not anticipating inspiration
just here, and sick, and breathing

leave class to smash my knees
into tile—like, i keep combining strings
of words wrong and it hurts
paints my blouse something yellow

thighs pool sweat into chairs, always
haha what’s it like to feel normal
i ask nobody from the library corner
cross-legged, in keds, just breathing

that one girl whose scars match mine
builds a fortress of books around her
body, shrinks into the carpet
the boys mute the televised war crimes to listen to sufjan stevens

it’s 2005 and the midwestern boys can’t decide how best to mitigate their grief. to throw on a flannel and walk in sweeping strides to a cemetery with a 40 sloshing in their backpacks, or to shuffle into the local guitar center and blow their christmas cash on a black fender squier? how virtuously they have performed their fathers’ masculinity, propelled an “i’m sorry” back down their throats one thousand times.

under streetlights and only then, the emotions in their soft bellies gleam phosphorescent, and the melancholy is lodged so many layers deep into their skin that they can’t tweeze it out, can’t locate it with their fingers.

and then, through an ipod shuffle and over-the-ear headphones, there is sufjan stevens, haunting them with the remembrance of aurora’s smokestacks, billowing carbon dioxide into a clear sky. how the smoke just looked like a cumulus cloud suspended too close to the ground, unmoving. war crimes. unsafe water. “laurel = bitch” scratched into a desk.

it is all too close for comfort, the way nothing ever flowers in a factory town disguised as a suburb. they’re not from chicago but they’re not not from chicago, either. people steal christmas decorations here. a boy with an eighth got murdered two blocks down in front of the park’s swing set. so angelic, somehow, that banjo? and the choir of voices? the violence here is the underfunded fourth installment of a straight-to-dvd action movie. it is the clearance bin at dollar general. it is the boys’ awareness that shoving each other hard into bushes is irrational but yesterday their teacher closed the book on chapter seven: how to be afraid. he pushed it off the desk with a sweeping arm. he threw it across the room, barely missing the boys’ collective heads.

they thought, “what an arm,” and then, “remember when i cried in the backseat?” and then, “how precious is my voice? i do not quiver. i am colossal ruins. there’s whiskey in dad’s
stash. t rl is on at 3:30 and how do you know that? please forget. please do not take pleasure in mainstream joy.”

how ecstatic, to prod the cage in which they keep their secrets. how brave, to learn in science class about alternating currents and then to see it happen when they graze another boy’s arm. a cardinal hits the window, indeed. “i am crying in the bathroom,” certainly, but no snitching.

in 2005, the boys harmonize in basement about girls’ asses in those plaid skirts. later, something much more scandalous: how they felt when the flood broke the foundation of their parents’ house. how it really hurt, thank you for asking, when the family dog died. how they’ve noticed their collective mothers staring into space and the daydream-images that play out suspended over her head: a different husband. mortgage as conceptual. anything but the snow covered in layers of black. no double shifts on saturdays. happiness as a birthright.
stranded, david and i drink arizona

before our cell phones,
former extension of
my arm: an arizona
tea arnold palmer can
be bought for 99 cents so
they litter dad’s car,
david’s glove box, my
bedroom closet floor

we have worked through
rain-turned-hail (licenses
burning through our pockets)
to stand on this snow mound
here in dying madison,
wisconsin which we came
to because we were bored
and hated our bunk beds
and had enough gas and
chicago felt lonely and
just because we could

like michael says ten
years later when i
relay the strange story:
walk in all red-faced,
red-eyed, playing those
keys locked in the car
like we meant it
1990 chevy caprice as escapism

pour one out for the person i was before i crashed my dad’s car

we manifested a shit destiny
now i do as i please and i lie through my teeth
someone might get hurt but it won’t be me
i should probably feel cheap but i just feel free
and a little bit empty

-bright eyes
for when i feel haunted

i am harvesting a memory &&
oh, oh, can't tell you the
hard way it hurts
i am alone
with all the
things i have done

Special Characters:
%n= Screen Name of Buddy
%d= Current Date
love or something like blacking out and falling off your body: the before

spring awakening happening in my throat
cocoon shells littering my sidewalk
got me like butterflies keep landing on my limbs

like poems pushing their way out of my mouth
and your words are fertilizer so
keep feeding me smooth sentences, sun-boy

hypothetical situation: we both make an honest living
with our hands and at night my honest hands
get to play with you hair when you let me

if we are an ecosystem and my spit is an elixir
you are a fruit i want to cut in half
so i can lick you back together
love except it's a mirage and the wound's started leaking: the beginning

my boyfriend watches MMA fights every night. when we kiss, we both direct our faces forward.
my boyfriend and i are only a one and a half inch difference in height. i don’t need to stand on my
 toes. he doesn’t need to bend his back. he never has to lift my chin. sometimes, i bite my
 boyfriend’s collarbone just because it's there. i never leave a mark. i can suck for minutes at a time,
 but his skin is too strong. still, it’s an effortless hobby at this height. after him, i will only date men
taller than 6’2 until I am 23, and then i will date no one.

my boyfriend watches MMA fights when we get home from school together. i try new experiments
every night before we do our homework. some nights, i take my tights off slowly, and then my
blouse off slowly, and then my bra off even slower. i leave my school skirt on and lay across the
bed. his eyes are glued to the screen. my boyfriend always roots for the smallest fighters.

my boyfriend has the biggest dick i’ve ever seen, and he says things in bed to me that no other
boy has ever said to me before. my boyfriend can finish and then he can keep going. the kind of
sex we have seems impossible in that i want and like it. but MMA is on tonight, and he's all sighs
of “leche, relájate, mami.” he calls me leche because my skin is like milk. once, when my
boyfriend was mad at me, he took shots of moonshine and punched a hole in the wall. then he
was all “leche, relájate, mami” while i sobbed silent in the corner.

my boyfriend likes to say something he heard while watching MMA once. he says, “get so good
at something that your idols become your rivals.” all of my idols are dead or very old. i don’t want
to fight them. i want to smoke weed. i want to peel off my tights and lick my boyfriend's ear.
Currently reading
Dreamland
By Sarah Dessen
Current mood: revulsion >:(

Something's rotting; it is me

Miss Wilson said I have to start drinking my milk. Aaron's dad works double-shifts. He sat next to me awhile. He sat on top of me for awhile. He put his hands up my flimsy tank-top awhile. Stop acting like you didn't wear it on purpose. Stop acting like you didn't look in the mirror sideways, didn't think, "are they really that small?" Aaron says anything less than a handful isn't worth it and I believe him.

I keep crying myself to sleep.

2 Comments - October 5th, 2003
love except i woke up gloriously to an empty bed: the ending

the thing is, i can write you out if i just keep writing long enough. the thing is, you don’t write so i continue to live inside of you. there is a microscopic place in your nose where the smell of my neck stays lodged. i am a rent-free resident living in your cornea.

the thing is, you keep getting interrupted in your forgetting so you tuck me away for later. the thing is, i am alone and nobody interrupts my forgetting, so i’ve erased your feet, your elbows, your knees, your long fingers. when you close your eyes i am a whole person, hair spread out like sun rays, body splayed. think american beauty--camera angles, portrait style, too young but all sex and limbs and roses. when i close my eyes you lack limbs. you are a face missing one ear—that’s how close you are to being gone.

the thing is, my name means “divine” and that’s not something you can stop knowing. late at night, you can’t help but wonder if what we had was holy. the thing is, i’m sure your name means something but i don’t remember what, and that is its own kind of healing.
love but it turns out the ending wasn't the end: (pain redux)

i take a shot glass out of my purse, pour another round, and puke quietly in the bathroom thereafter, shot glass still in hand. fancy symbols lace the side. “for those who don’t read chinese, turn sideways.” i miss the glass when i try to follow the directions, so i opt instead to turn my entire body horizontal. “go fuck yourself,” it says at this new angle. “fuck you, too” i mumble as i realize that my hair is in the toilet, this isn’t my shot glass, and i have no idea why it was in my purse. i’ve never even been to ft. lauderdale.

i stumble through the dark and think about you, and you are there, suddenly, holding my body so i don’t fall up the stairs. changing in the kitchen of a party is a good thing, the best thing, and so i am naked in front of you and you avert your eyes. i know you think this is chivalry.

the night is full of static, like the screen of a television with one bent rabbit ear. small breaks in the channels, and a flash of your face, quick like switch-the-station, and the thunderous effects in my stomach.

a revelation in the morning. “who wants to drink more?” your hand is the first one raised, and the moon shines in your eyes despite the creeping up of a 9 a.m. sun. we forget about our community beer when they head upstairs and the room fills itself with tension.

“tobecompletelyhonest,imissyou,” and your head is on my lap and then my head is next to yours and we’re impossible, these angles and our minds and our situation. your hand is down my pants, and a “do you know how hard it was to resist you last night?” and i can feel you against my skin. like a drug i need attached to me, better than the ones that you and i fill ourselves with each night to forget.

i sit on the porch and stare at a rosebush when you drive away.
the locked door

and when i see you
i really see you upside down

-death cab for cutie
this morning I tied up the phone line and mom got mad but do you know what it's like to reach out for the hand of god and nobody reaches back? :(
now, dear reader: battle poem #1

we must pause the tape a breath—
rewind the track, reverse our
attention to the faded back vocals,
for they are stifled and easily missed:
mothers in the back row, crying.

in cafeterias, men recruit boys
who long to forget their lives and
who are not yet aware that upon
return from a sand pit/a tank/a bunker

they will want to forget that, too.
the boys are every character in the
clash’s “straight to hell”—they wave
so long to themselves through windows.

we were born into a war and
grew up inside it, saw its
wall-notches overtaking ours—
watched it all through channel

seven news, through carefully-
designed first-person-shooter games
that unlocked the curious way even a
child’s thumb can make a gun sing.
by track eight of blink-182’s self-titled album, the mothers have reclaimed themselves

it’s 2003 and the mothers take on the ancient task of understanding their children. they do so by listening to blink-182’s self-titled album through their collective car’s CD player. sounds, they think, like the pulling of adolescence from beneath their children’s fingernails. what a thrilling adventure, to move bountifully and quickly through someone else’s despondency. use me, holly, and the world cracks open like eggshells to a counter—so many midnights alone in kitchens, clichéd clank of dishes.

it sounds, they think, something like ambition, like the desperate kneeling of their husbands. on concrete. after some boring betrayal. and after everything she said? deep within them or right upon the surface, isn’t there a yearning to be touched by somebody, a little different, today? we know where we go, the mothers sing back to the stereo as they hunt for a sense of identity that belongs solely to themselves. we had that garden apartment on euclid avenue. we held lavender to our wrists. there was a time without a costco. there was a snake plant in the window, an empty stepped-on shiner bock, a bodega, shoulder pads, men whose eyes trailed vertically down their spines.

that new wave turned post-punk melody, tom delonge echoes in the mothers’ collective ’98 nissan sentra: she’s all i need, she’s all i dream, she’s all i’m always wanting and it is about the mothers. it is possible to hate one’s self and be unable to gaze into mirrors yet cherish the things their bodies grew, fashioned out of cells, out of genetics, out of we are so sorry we have collectively passed on that impenetrable ache beneath the ribcage.

the wax of the dining-room-table-apple melts off, oh god bless the choir of children’s bell-voices in the mother-body’s temple. nothing i know pulls at me at all, how imperative to wander through the aisles of a target and land on such a perfect cutting board. the piggy banks are emptied of the loot collected from pulled teeth that once gnawed through a lamp’s wire. they
berate themselves: what poor mothering, but the mothers’ mothers are angels and reach through that unseeable dimension to unplug the things that need unplugging. so wires floss baby-molars sometimes, they whisper in dreams. no harm, really, they whisper in trained ears.

the children’s doors seem permanently closed—thin layers of pine behind which they are unhinging themselves, opening their skin, collapsing into invisible forts they have built for protection. light a candle. travis drums like a quarter-note hammer. *i’m lost without you*, the children whisper through the walls towards their mothers. another eggshell to a counter, all together and a cappella now: the mothers’ collective “i’m lost without me, too.”
technically, i feed fish

dear someone,

i migrated to the basement. i stopped stealing mom's nokia phone to text people in secret. every book is precious.

i locked my bike behind the library in the alley by the dumpster i throw up behind. who has to clean that up, right?

i dropped my bike down into the dirt in the woods. i stood over the river—that one very special tree? i just think about it now, and it comes.

my eyes don't get red.

technically, i feed fish.

it looks like nothing happened here. nobody calls so i don't call back. this is all so fucking boring at this point. my vomit is all over this town.

love, [ ]
origin of my split knuckles

well of course, we might have never been magpies, investigating collarbones like gilded trinkets.
i ectoplasmed last night's quesadillas, pulled cheese-sinews across my tongue. i wrote the poems.
i wrote the poems with blood-ink and i swear to god that i'm not kidding. my pillow met my foot
continuously--polycotton grazing shimmer-toes. of course i had asked him not to touch me there.
of course i dug a grave in the closet. i cascaded violent into plastic shopping bags. i slept inside a
quilted coffin. and chewed the low-fat yogurt fifteen times a spoonful. and memorized bile-
tonsils with the tips of my fingers. and rescued a bird who sidewalk-died, anyway. and stared
into pinwheel-lawns. and vertical-acquainted my cheek with shower tiles. and horizontal-
introduced my skull to concrete. and gulped ozone into my gut. and tripped on a rabbit's jaw. and
drank my spit. and saw a river. and heavy-sunk.
for my father, as stockholm syndrome ends

"you can't do this to me!"
i shout as you do this to me. everyone
asks for gory details, so wrap the cord
around your finger until it violets

the door slams, and my witch hazel tincture
placed precariously on the dresser's edge
crashes to the ground but does not break.

sweet relief! the way you stomp in those boots
just lightly enough that the things i love are unharmed
and the ribs above my heart are only bruised a little.

this feels like last year, father's day.
found grandma's recipe for blackberry cobbler:
kneaded dough with cracked hands,

simmered fruit, lemon juice, sugar—
sliced carefully, topped it with vanilla bean.
"she made hers less sweet." you push the dish away

a millimeter more than what my tender heart can take.
i am in the bathroom, purple-stained finger to my larynx.
i am at the mirror, chastising, making resolutions.

only stupid girls try to be their father's mother.
only stupid girls disappear for revenge.
only stupid girls wait and write sad poems and wait.
CURRENTLY READING
WHAT HAPPENED TO LANI GARVER
BY CAROL PLUM-UCCI
CURRENT MOOD: AVERSION

WRITTEN FROM THE BLEACHERS :/

I just need my friends to understand my mood swings and forgive me for the days I don’t call because I’m terrified of their fathers. I need them to understand why I call days later to suggest we meet at the baseball field to drink the schnapps from my parents’ basement. Let’s make out with the boys. Let’s pretend we don’t know them in hallways. I want my friends to trust that this—the liquor and that loathsome cigarette smell that lingers in my mouth—will pass. I just don’t know when.

4 comments - November 17th, 2004
bad news for fathers who are accustomed to bad news, trucks barreling onward

it’s 2004, but at the beginning of everything, the fathers were the boys and their dreams bloomed upwards. they snuck beer on the green line. they snuck their bodies through the turnstiles. they lounged across tree branches, one arm behind their head—the canvas of their red converse unraveled, worn at the soles. they thought of their own fathers. drafts. war stories. that sway to roy orbinson in the kitchen. that lazy boy leaned back, sunk down to the springs. hoarse voice, like, you kids don’t know hard work.

93.1 XRT FM ends a commercial break and modest mouse’s first notes wail through the truck’s stereo. how they have gripped this steering wheel every six a.m., the palms of their hands cracked, dirt so deep beneath their nail beds even the orange pumice soap can’t get it out. the fathers think, how often have i been sleepwalking? well see what you want to see, you should see it all, and the fathers stare through grime out the window towards the sunrise.

and what is that sad, strange-bricked angel just off the highway but the dunkin’ donuts where employees fill the fathers’ 24-ounce thermoses but only charge for a regular? the fathers drink the inherited forlorn out of their collective bodies, hope for hope by chugging hot hope down their throats. who would want to be such a control freak? isaac grates through static, and while it is about the fathers, their bones resent the concept.

everything is a duty to perform, and isaac sings well take what you want from me, you deserve it all. the fathers’ children love them by unlacing their collective boots, peeling triple-layer socks down their swollen ankles. those toes and the way they pile on top of each other. the tv says some sad thing. the fathers get every answer on jeopardy right. the fathers graduated college and exist permanently, it seems, on forklifts. hang that degree from the ceiling. bury that degree in the attic. the fathers never nick their necks when shaving.
the fathers love their children with sincere paychecks offered up to bank tellers like communion. let us eat this holy and sustaining kraft macaroni and cheese. *well i want a better place or just a better way to fall,* and the fathers’ heels nearly slip off the slick ladder. they catch themselves like always, braid their limbs through the wooden rungs.
taking up space

you should see my scars
you should see my scars
you should see my scars
you should see my scars

-garbage
shaking in these heels

i stand out most when i can't stand up
the sidewalk right here is like heaven
sam reflects on a yellowcard concert and i reflect on her

my best friend sam cashiers at the grocery store,
complains about union dues robbed from her check into
a system that neither of us understands
but which dad tells me, red-faced, is “important”

when sam crushes on the stock boy
we arrange a fever-dream-marriage-plot
picture this: aisle seven, jarritos fantastically
hueing patterns into her bone-straight hair

when i press my lips deep into the rock band
microphone, i can kill at weezer’s “say it ain’t
so”—we’re talking 97% here, okay?
record-it-on-my-razr-phone-level-good

under the fading fluorescence of the stars on
her ceiling, sam says “this really brings me back”
and when i ask her what she means, sam sighs
into the pillow, says, “to that yellowcard concert”

i’ve never loved anyone more than in that moment
and after, i learn how to play “the view from heaven,”
carve postal service lyrics into my wooden bedframe
(in case you were wondering, yes, they stand the test of time)
the new meds kick in during english class, third period
the girls want to love each other but are told this is not allowed: on give up

it’s 2003 and the girls relate spiritually to the postal service’s give up as they dissociate and float above themselves in rhythm with the electronic drums. the notion of being armed to the teeth, they think, is admirable. the girls run their feet through stained bedroom carpets in an attempt to re-inhabit their limbs, hearts beating fast enough to light up all the highways.

the world proclaims the girls’ interests as substandard, but every commercial on mtv is directed at their demographic, so. the girls buy tickets to the shows. the girls hear songs about them but as trophies, as things to take revenge upon, as vehicles through which the boys grow hardened. they are no longer surprised at the ways the scene declares them uninfluential. feels like moving through thickened flour, to uphold the movement that renders them obsession-worthy and expendable all at once?

to be surrounded by the boys who have forgotten or unlearned how to say “i’m sorry” and instead only gesture towards apologies with limp hands? how noble, the way ben gibbard examines his emotions in second person. the girls wish they could do that. how far the girls have traveled from those few brief years of childhood when they trusted no one would cause harm to their bodies.

but here on a water bed, the girls’ synapses synergize such that sights and smells and sounds sync up in a miraculous moment of hearing i know it’s not a party if it happens every night. every night, a sharp object grows duller, draws closer to bone. they chart mythologies, self-fulfilling prophecies into their kneecaps, their lower torsos—horizontal map workings into the girls’ collective forearms.

they hear this place is a prison and it is about their bodies.
kim is roused from painful sleep when our parents decide they don’t want her

the first strange thing was a dream about a bathroom door—
kim worries my mother awake again. on the amtrak,
she withdraws and does so violently. in the website’s
photographs, her slumped body is a backdrop through
which other parents measure their own children’s happiness.

the second strange thing was my mother’s forehead split—
how could she not have guessed what it meant? even now,
nurses think of kim on friday evenings before bed, when
they yank loose leather belts from their pant’s loops.

kim’s burst blood vessels, mouth slumped like road kill:
not dead but barely twitching. in solitary confinement, face
puffy, he still manages to find her. they love across hallways,
days spent flying kites through metal door slits and concrete.

the third strange thing was the snake dancing across the creek—
our naked bodies serpentine. heads disappeared, bobbed
again to the surface. kim, i loved you so much i sucked
venom from your ankle while montana’s sky danced above
us, and still, despite my pleading, it was not enough.
(i’m not done talking about) the girls vs their intuition vs the scene that never wanted them

it’s another chicago summer and the humid air drapes dull and suffocating over the crowd. the girls begged their mothers, worked a week straight, missed out on the other bands to stand where they are now—brand new’s stage, warped tour, 2003. they are plastered to this place, arms braided together such that they have become a singular entity of baby hairs matted to foreheads. the girls’ collective feet are blistered inside their pink and black checkerboard vans. their screams are an obedient cacophony—g minor, b flat, c major seven.

the girls are crucial to the scene the way glue dries invisible.

and then jesse lacey emerges triumphant, croons i almost feel sorry for what i’m about to do, choking the neck of his guitar at a forty-five-degree angle. the song does not warrant a mosh pit but the crowd behind them parts like axed-wood and the mass of bandanna-boys pushes forward in droves. the girls’ hipbones bang violent into the metal barriers. first a bronzed forearm above their heads. next a kick, was it, to their shins? then an armpit cupping their left ears.

this is the way these things happen, they think. fake the way i hold you, jesse cries, but the visceral happenings around the girls cause legitimate pain in their limbs. if god holds me in his hands, they think, his grip is tight. oh, have a sense of humor; they think, are we having fun yet? i will lie awake and lie for fun, let you fall for every empty word i say the girls howl in unison upwards, push the confusing and nagging feeling back down their throats that they are, indeed, being lied to.

the girls’ smiles spasm around the edges until they are fever-frowns, then lip-quivers, then grimaces, then wet tears clinging off the ledges of their cheekbones. if you let me have my way, i swear i’ll tear you apart—the girls sport overpriced merch and oh, how the bruises embellish their bodies, how the bruises decorate their bodies, how the bruises adorn their bodies.
if the girls hide their violence deep in the pits of their stomachs, the boys wear their violence like a crown. “me vs maradona vs elvis” weaves itself through the girls’ bony elbows and they are engulfed, kneecaps buckling under the weight of a thousand boys behind them. this is only practice.
despite dissociating, i become a product of my environment

sometimes when i wear red lipstick
on the train i feel too big.

i’m not sure who’s staring
me down harder—the lip-licker
to my left or the head-nodder
near the doors.

do you know how hard it is to feel like
you don’t deserve space you take up?

when drunk, as a rule, i don’t look
at myself in the mirror. i watch my

hands. they are too big, but more
manageably heartbreaking than the

width of the hips i might glance,
the skin hanging beneath my chin.

when people are concerned about
mixing drinks and tylenol

i am happy. these people regard
their bodies as vessels that

are holy and should not be fucked with—
when did i lose regard for my body?

i am on 2+ drugs at all times (yes, now).
i am cliché. i have fucked a boy

for validation. that is a lie.
i have fucked countless boys

for validation.
on the train ride home from the harlem/lake planned parenthood

these days i do everything alone
well, i walk through chicago twice daily
but i said what i said and i meant it

headphones over my ears on the train
feign disinterest in various directions
but the volume’s almost always on mute

i mean, if nobody wants to talk
at least i can still listen, okay?

it took two to get me where i am now
legs in stirrups and naked under cheap cloth
nobody’s worrying for me in the waiting room

my blood on the hospital sheets as a muse
light a cigarette alone, limp, keep leaking
thought somebody usually drove you to these things

my insides were a garden that is dead now—
so sorry that bad metaphor keeps existing

this is the way i live now:
reaching for a tree’s dead limbs
reaching for the hand of god

these days i do everything alone—
god never once reaches back.
drunk & warm-bellied in the basement, age 14
in-patient // what comes after

and your manic depression
it comes and it goes
your parasympathetic nervous system reacts
and you’re in fight-or-flight mode

-AJJ
can you imagine hunting hurricanes? flying a plane into the eye of everything that could kill you just to measure the humidity?
THE PSYCH WARD - EP. ONE AND THERE IS NO EP. TWO - "BEFORE"

*NOTE: Sometimes Sick Girl will talk directly to you. This is because she is a teenage girl. Teenage girls become distinctly aware of how they are always being watched, even if they’re not. Teenage girls internalize their existence as a performance. This is the way the world of a teenage girl unfolds, no matter what.

INT. - FLUORESCENT-LIT EMERGENCY ROOM - LATE NIGHT

This is the Hard Vinyl Chair room. Patients are stacked on top of each other. SICK GIRL (around thirteen, baby-faced, blonde hair hacked off, bones) is in the corner, covered in blankets in the fetal position, fading in and out of consciousness.

INT. - CURVED FRONT DESK - MOMENTS LATER

MOM (mid-40's, petite, let-me-talk-to-the-manager haircut, only partially bones) paces back and forth quickly. Her brow is furrowed and she flits around so fast it seems as if her whole body is vibrating. She places her hand down on the desk and speaks through her teeth in that type of quiet tone that is, somehow, the most authoritative of all.

MOM
Nurse—

NOT-NURSE
Ma'am, I'm not a nurse.

A beat.

MOM
Okay, not-a-nurse, my daughter (gestures towards SICK GIRL) and I have been here for hours. Do you know when we'll be getting in to see the doctor?

Not-Nurse looks up from her stack of paperwork.

NOT-NURSE
Look, a guy just came in with a gunshot wound. We're dealing with that first.

MOM
But...can't you tell how sick she is?

Not-Nurse peers over her glasses towards Sick Girl.
NOT-NURSE
No, not really. She doesn't look sick.

INT. - VINYL CHAIR - MOMENTS LATER

SICK GIRL (TO VIEWER)
Everyone keeps saying that. "Sick."
You see that girl in the corner
holding her burnt hand and crying?
She's sick. She is genuinely unwell.
I'm just tired, you know?
Haven't you ever been tired?

NOT-NURSE
(yells) Not-Sick-Girl, you're up.

INT. - TINY EXAMINATION ROOM - SO NIGHT IT'S MORNING

The room is so full of machines it looks like a factory. Enter DOCTOR (honestly? faceless). He sits in another-fucking-vinyl-chair. Before he says a word, he sticks a thermometer down Sick Girl's throat and holds her limp wrist, staring at a clock on the wall. Nobody makes eye contact—mostly especially not Sick Girl and Mom.

DOCTOR
What's wrong with you?

Sick Girl looks to her left and right like she's confusing if the question is being directed at her before answering.

A beat.

A beat.

SICK GIRL
I'm…really sad, I guess?

SICK GIRL (TO VIEWER)
My voice is pathetic, like a question.
I'm always saying things like they're questions.

MOM
She never eats.

Doctor raises his eyebrows in a way that suggests, "I still have no idea why you are here."

MOM
Look at her arm.
Doctor gently pulls Sick Girl's arm towards him. He pushes back the three layers of sweatshirt sleeves on Sick Girl and looks. Sick Girl cringes—not in pain, but in embarrassment.

SICK GIRL (TO VIEWER)
This is the way the world ends or whatever. I read that in English class. This is the way the world ends. Not with a bang, but a recoiled arm in a fluorescent-lit room.

Doctor moves two fingers up and down Sick Girl's arms, avoiding the shiny purple divots like landmines.

INT. - SOME OTHER EXAMINATION ROOM - EARLY MORNING

Sick Girl is swaddled under those off-white, rough-textured blankets reserved—universally—for every emergency room that has ever existed and will exist in the future. ANGELIC NURSE (mid-20's, brown hair slicked back, face constantly in I-Deeply-Care-About-You state) swaddles Sick Girl further as if she is something precious.

Sick Girl's hands move under the blankets and she holds the surely-fatty pouch of her stomach. She examines her scars curiously, fingering them as if they belong to someone else's body.

SICK GIRL (TO VIEWER)
There's 27 of these. Obviously I've counted. This nurse is nice, right? This nurse is the only person in the world that I trust.

Sick Girls pokes her head out from beneath the blankets, greasy hair wrapped round her head like a sad halo. ANGELIC NURSE checks her vitals.

ANGELIC NURSE
It's time to get up now, Sick Girl.

SICK GIRL (TO VIEWER)
I stopped writing in my journal, you know. I stopped writing because I was spinning like a penny down a spiral wishing well—a sad slot machine? You know those? Forgotten souvenirs? I was like that.

Angelic Nurse puts his arms beneath sick girl and lifts her the way one lifts a scraped-kneed child from the sidewalk. Sick Girl looks obviously annoyed.

SICK GIRL
I can walk.
ANGELIC NURSE
You have to trust me.

SICK GIRL
You're the only person in the world that I trust.

Angelic Nurse looks concerned. Sick Girl slumps over, dramatically blacks out.

INT. - HALLWAY IN FRONT OF DOUBLE-DOORS - TIME DOESN'T EXIST

Sick Girl startles up in her wheelchair.

SICK GIRL (TO VIEWER)
A fucking wheelchair?

ANGELIC NURSE
I'll visit you, if you want.

SICK GIRL (TO VIEWER)
As a surprise to absolutely no one, he never comes to visit.

SICK GIRL
Where's my mom?

ANGELIC NURSE
She had to go.

SICK GIRL
(Disbelief). She just...left me?

ANGELIC NURSE
She told me to tell you she loves you.

SICK GIRL
Did she cry?

ANGELIC NURSE
Of course she cried, Sick Girl.

SICK GIRL
Where are you taking me?

Angelic Nurse opens the double-doors with a keycard and wheels Sick Girl into a ward.

ANGELIC NURSE
You're already here.
i’m already on my fifth life & this shit is getting boring

in mirrors, i mutate—
press fingers to tinted glass

anyway, inside these walls
life starts at the edge of me dying

feel “tragic” but the weather disagrees,
bleeds elongated rectangles through metal

bars into tan carpet—no sharp objects
save the peculiarity of my hipbones

must stand on my head to see the world correctly
must stay precise re: my monotone vocal inflection

the thing is, i didn't know i was no longer
performing sickness until you said so,

wrote in a diagnosis in a file in an office
in a sterile place a nurse promised he would
not leave me but did, and in rooms
we can only write with safe pencils

we can only graze hands in the bathroom
leave meals in our toilet like love letters,

like, “if we’re forced to consume something,
at least we can force it back up,” like emptiness

like, i don't care that i’m no longer
speaking, carry silence like a trophy—

a body only eating air and itself, sucked skin
through eroded teeth—nightmare but conscious

i, electrified, never sleep and treasure
flashlights to the pupils every whenever

are we very sure, like, i’m allowed to be here?
are we very sure i might take pleasure in healing?

womanhood said cheekbones were en vogue
but the way you say “lean over and cough twice”
suggests i have overromanticized disappearing.
photobucket, 2004

i am fishing in a garbage dump

i keep pulling out dead things.

someone who is happy

(or someone who is not)

"someone gives one single shit that i'm alive."

there are deodorant stains on my black tank top.

i want to direct traffic with a megaphone.

i am trying to find a semblance of

hook them on to me, wear them like a badge

"hook!" i say, pointing to my badge.

i want to direct traffic head on into my body.
i’m sorry to myself in the future

i.

i am in a different room. i am with a different nurse. her face is unimportant except that it is mean. her hair is slicked back in the type of bun that is a permanent headache. here are the only sounds: 1. “take off your gown.” 2. “turn around. you can’t see this.” 3. a metal weight sliding down a physician’s scale. 4. a sigh. 5. the metal weight sliding further. 4. “squat and cough.” 4. “excuse me, what?” 5. a scoff. 6. a quiet cough.

here are the soundless things: 1. a slip of fabric off a shoulder, then down a waist, then to the floor. 2. a grimace. 3. skin so transparent it mottles. 4. perked ears. 5. a twisted smile. 6. a face of horror. 7. suddenly my mother and a plastic bowl of oatmeal.

i am back again in the wheelchair, spinning a spoon through the oats. my mother’s face looks pained, seeing me without all the sweatshirts. she is crying. i take a bite as a performance i hope translates to i’m sorry. my cheeks are wet. i say “please don’t leave me,” but she is gone, door clicking closed behind her. i never get to open them but know this intuitively: all the locked doors only lead to more locked doors.

i am wheeled into a dark room with two beds. in one, a body is unmoving. when the nurse leaves, i twist my own body around to look at the window. it is steel barred and the last thing i see before falling asleep.

ii.

a quick clap clap. a flashlight to the retinas. a disembodied, toneless voice that says “vitals.” i can’t count how many people have held my wrist in the last 24 hours, but it is a lot. my eyes adjust and i see the other body move. a girl emerges from beneath the sheets and pulls at her eyes
before looking directly into the flashlight. her face is stone. even in the confusion, i think, what a badass. “up,” the nurse says, and the girl props herself vertically on the pillows, looking at me curiously with a smile. the nurse struggles with the flashlight clenched between her teeth. she takes the soaked gauze off and replaces it with new gauze, wrapping it tight and taping it closed. “stop picking at this,” the nurse says through a tight jaw. then she is gone.

“i’m rosaleen,” the girl says through the darkness. “welcome to hell.” i can hear her smile. she rolls over. in the faint dim of a streetlight, i watch her back until it moves rhythmically. i match my breath with hers.

iii.

rosaleen leads me to the nurses’ station so i can pick up the clothes my mom left for me at some point between whenever-that-was and whatever-time-it-is-now. i imagine her gripping the steering wheel of the minivan, unblinking. has she slept? i wonder and push the guilt down my throat. a sweatshirt, jeans, fuzzy socks. at some point later i decide i fucking hate sweatshirts, but for now, it is sanctuary from the hospital gown that marks me, i guess, as Tremendously Not Okay.

rosaleen nudge me. “hey, you made the list,” she says and does a sarcastic curtsy before me. “it’s like you’re famous.” the whiteboard says SUICIDE WATCH in bright red letters. it is not meant to be ironic, but, dear reader, it is okay to find humor in this.

i ask the nurse to erase my name from the board. “that’s a mistake,” i say through a grimace. for some reason, the nurse takes my request and brings the eraser up to the board—does any of this really matter? my name leaves the slightest shadow. i want for it to disappear completely, for some other sad patient’s name to cover it up, be erased, be covered again. i don’t think of a
single other person. i am an asshole. i am, of course, suicidal, but only in that passive way that involves very slowly shutting down your internal organs. fucking duh.

i wish i could have my makeup. the older kids seem uncomfortable around me. the younger kids look at me and do not stop. did i mention all of us are kids?

iv.

how would your actions change if you felt safe?
what color represents your depression?
when do you feel most out of control?
what do you gain when you hurt yourself?

group therapy ends after the boy who told his mom he’d kill her if she didn’t buy him a stuffed pikachu at walmart turns to me and asks, “are you going to die?” they send us back to our rooms to write. one does not walk around in slippers; one can only shuffle forward. rosaleen mumbles that this is bullshit. secretly, i’m happy that anyone is asking me any type of question at all, that someone has given me a pencil with which to write.

1. i can’t remember the last time i felt safe. i do not feel equipped to answer that question.
2. my childhood bedroom walls were yellow. i picked out the color. it was called “sunflower.” so many bad things happened in that room.
3. i control the only thing i can control—myself. this seems very textbook. this seems very cliché. this seems very fucking boring.
4. control.

v.

rosaleen is here because she cut herself so deeply that she tore through muscle. (i’m sorry this is so much). she unwraps her bandage and the wound is gaping wide open, layers of fat torn apart from each other. it is hard to witness, still harder to look away from. rosaleen says it’s “to the bone,” but i’m not sure i believe her after going through the ward’s library and researching in an
old encyclopedia the word “skin.” we have so many layers of skin, did you know? i stare at my inner-forearm and can’t fathom all the layers. how could i be so translucent? i could see every vein in my forearm. i thought i wanted to be like rosaleen and then i knew that i didn’t.

rosaleen’s presence makes my own seem unnecessary, like i’m not sick enough to walk the same halls she does. rosaleen doesn’t seem like she wants to get better. she seems okay with getting worse, does things i’m too afraid to do. at breakfast we both order french toast and oatmeal while the nurses stand in the corner and talked not-quietly about their diets. dear reader, i swear to god this was really happening.

vi.

the nurses send us back to our room and i am aware that this seems extremely negligent. doctors keep talking about my arm; doctors talk less about my weight. nobody mentions numbers. i start to become increasingly confused about why i’m here and relay this to rosaleen from my perched position on our sink. had they no idea what we were capable of? rosaleen, who has never mentioned an eating disorder before, sticks her fingers down her throat and the french toast comes up in chunks.

we couldn’t lock our door, but we had our own private bathroom. what the fuck kind of logic was that? rosaleen looked from the toilet to my face, traced my line of vision with her own back down to the toilet. i try to look bored, rest my hand on my chin, tuck a tuft of her hair behind her ear. she is daring me with an invisible match. it is an invitation to light myself on fire.

finally, a way to hurt one’s self that i am more skilled at doing. i don’t have to put my fingers down my throat or put my knees to the ground. i can stretch open my throat and cough once, think about something terrible the way i always do, and it all comes up. i know it all comes up
because the oats are last, the thing i had eaten first. isn’t that very sad, that little trick, that not-so-cunning hack?

we run our mouths under the sink and rosaleen complains about the front desk holding our toothbrushes. “as if we could kill ourselves with them,” she whines, and i start imagining the ways. “you can’t brush your teeth for a half hour after you do that,” i say like it’s some ancient knowledge, some secret i have always known and that did not come from the very real and visceral experience of watching my own four front teeth rot.

our mirror was not a mirror but a sheet of metal that could be punched but not broken. someone had tried, pushed the dirty steel into a concave square. my face is obscured, which i am used to.

vi-subtext, a note:
(dear reader, i do not want you to use this as an instruction manual. i have spent fifteen years resenting a body that has thrived despite the ways in which i have abused it. i have wasted so many years of my life, which we are only given one of. there are much better things to write about; there are so many beautiful things left to do.)

vii.

my jeans sag and nobody cares. most of the time, and especially during study hours, i don’t wear shoes. i feel sorry for whatever teacher tried really hard and instead ended up here with us. this room is composed entirely of fuck ups. that is wrong. this room is composed entirely of children who are hurt.

in the library, i find an illustrated book of fairy tales that are all very depressing but i am drawn deeply to “the nightingale and the rose.” here is how it goes: a prince wants a princess to love
him, but she’s into all the other fucking things women do besides pay attention to men. the prince becomes convinced that the only way to win her heart is with a red rose, but, what a shame! his garden blooms only white roses. all of england and not a single red rose to be found, but i suspend my disbelief. hark, a nightingale approaches, and she is a fool for love. “have you heard me sing to you each night?” she asks. “oh, yes, and i love the sound,” says the prince. he tells the nightingale all his problems and she listens because she is a woman. the nightingale stabs herself in the heart with a thorn and bleeds out red onto a rose. with her dying breath, she sings one last song before drifting off to that special place dead birds go. the prince gives the princess the blood-rose, but she is a real asshole and tosses it into the street.

i am the nightingale. i am okay with dying for all the wrong reasons.

viii.

when they don’t know what to do with rosaleen and me, we are allowed to take puzzles back to our room. we sit together on the floor. she talks about her brother’s suicide. we don’t talk about our fathers but admit we flinch when they enter the room. when we are sure nobody is watching, we link our bodies together and hold each other in ways i am almost certain neither of us has been held before. she is not like the boys who stick their clammy hands up my shirt. she is softer than she lets on. she is a warm body and a soothing voice when she wants to be. she is not my little sister grabbing on to my legs in fear.

we touch each other’s scars gently. it hurts that she seems unimpressed with mine. technically, we are not allowed to touch at all.
we search our room for fun because everything is so bare. i find pencil-etchings beneath the desk. maria. help. we stand on our heads. we pull at the bars on the windows; they do not budge. we search for things to hurt ourselves with; this is just a little game girls play sometimes.

i give up and sit cross-legged on my bed, which is made very precisely because they have ordered me to do so and because that’s the way i like to do things. i run my fingers along the wall and read the message on a small metal box near my pillow. “press for emergency,” it says.

suddenly it is obvious—a rusty screw just loose enough to stick my long fingernail into and twist out. i sit curled over the box, turning my hand in circles until finally the screw falls to my sheets. i turn to rosaleen and hold it up victoriously, like a joke, waving it in the air. i stand up on the bed and bow. this is just a little game girls play sometimes.

rosaleen pounces on to my bed, grabs the screw, and pulls it across her wrist. i watch, stunned, contemplating how someone could fall so deep into their own self-destruction that they’d do it so out-in-the-open. but roommates do not betray each other. dear reader, what would you have done in a place where the only rule is do not tell?

ix-subtext, a note:

after Everything Happened, i didn’t take off the white hospital band until it ripped apart. i hid it under my sleeves with everything else and sometimes slipped it off my wrist and on again just to make sure i could. i’d look at it from underneath my desk and admire it like a trophy. i had made it through something. i didn’t care if my poems rhymed. they were just out there floating in the universe, like me, not conforming to planetary alignments. but they survived. they survived. they and i survived.
we were both trying to get better, whatever that looked like. i knew it didn’t look like this, rosaleen curled so deep inside herself. i looked at her and back the emergency box. we stared each other directly in the eye as my hand hovered over the button. her mouth started to form a sentence but i could not hear it over the alarm. it was the ultimate betrayal.

and it felt something like healing.
at work ten years later, the restaurant manager asks about my arm

"why so many?" he asks.

the manager is touching my wrist lightly and without permission, pushing my bangles back and forth—something like music. i hate when he grazes my body, evidenced by my time-and-again non-verbal communications. personal boundaries evade him. he no longer brushes my ass gentle-like with his fingers during our busy hours. i am trapped/crammed into the service station, diet pepsi dripping through my palms. this is, i guess, his form of self-restraint.

so, i wear eleven silver bangles, which replaced the eight+ "live strong" bracelets that went out of style circa 2007. i never take off my bangles—they are extensions of my veins and tattoo green circles of oxidized aloids into my skin. this story is similar to the one my cousin told me in the dark basement of our aunt's beach house, flashlight turned up to his face. a woman wears black lace around her neck until her husband gets curious and unties it one night in her sleep. her head falls off. do you see the parallels? anyway, this story is similar to that.

i never wear bangles on my right arm. my right arm is strong. my skin knows this. my left arm knows this, and unfortunately so. these days, i don't mean to be so depressing. it is okay to laugh at my pain, i promise. am i being clear enough in my remembering?
after work, i reflect on the restaurant manager’s question

my skin longs to morph into a flawless surface. it i were a microsoft paint document, it'd hit "undo" 27 times, move the eraser horizontally. but i am not a pixelized canvas. i am—painfully—a woman marred by childhood decisions, by impulsivity in fear, by maladaptive coping mechanisms.

pale is my "aesthetic." i know you might think i'm vapid for saying so. i want to lie in the sun, and that is the truth. but skin turns gold-kissed while scars stay pink, white, shiny. if someone had told me on my thirteenth birthday that i would have to wear eleven bangles forever haunting empty air with a racketing kind of melancholy sound, i would have put down the razors, would have hidden the sharp objects. i would have been so over it, you know? dyed my hair black, related spiritually to linkin park instead. maybe had a friend pierce my septum with a needle sterilized on a kitchen stove, whatever.

how do you reclaim your body when it's not something you want back? "keep it," you could say to the world. "i will most assuredly fuck it up. and, listen closely, life, i never asked to be born. think about that." well, it's true. let me be a tree if you insist on recreating me. a mountain. a cloud. this way i can float past my parents' window to see how they are doing on stormy nights. check on my dog. that sort of thing.
december 24th: by “reckoner,” the family decides momentary eye contact is okay

it’s 2007, christmas eve, and the family is winding their sludge-splashed minivan along the stevenson expressway ten over the limit. perpetual lateness lingers in the rearview mirror, threatens to catch up with each lane change. the children have convinced the mothers to push radiohead’s in rainbows down the CD player’s mouth.

mariah carey’s “santa baby” is cut short and the children stare out the window, oh that pathetic fallacy of those first, soft notes circling around the minivan like the fat snow outside.

unbeknownst to them, the family is playing the game of “i-won’t-be-the-last-one-to-speak,” for words hang in the air and ring, ring, echo off the polyester grease-spotted seats. thom yorke’s voice tears through the fabric of the girls’ uncertainty and fills the mothers’ ears—i’m an animal trapped in your hot car. the fathers can relate and they love it. how rare, the way the children reach forward to pat the fathers’ shoulders, like, we don’t know hard work but we know you work hard. how unusual, for a whole family to like the same music together.

uncomplicated beauty, an i am holidays that you choose to ignore and it is not about the mothers, who worry their crows’ feet a bit deeper. they think, will what we brought be enough? is the bread still soft, the checks surely will not bounce? the mothers straddle a cracked crockpot of pasta sauce between their weekend-job feet.

back home there is a kitchen table and, on it, an array of wrapping materials—the tape, the magic marker, the scissors, those flimsy boxes. and who won’t sleep tonight? a new song, now: this will be on my videotape, my videotape, years later VHS-filled boxes in back closets housing sepia memories. and who will busy themselves around that old scene, fold tissue paper over sweaters, check the envelope for gift receipts? was this for child one or child two or child three, and how did each of the mothers’ siblings marry into money—how did they make fiscally
responsible enough choices that their homes were each two stories? that their children had separate bedrooms?

and i have it all here in red, blue, green, red, blue, green like the strings of lights adorning those sprawling, fenced-in mini-mansions. someday, think the fathers, an in-ground pool. no, no, an above-ground pool would do just fine. owning two-of-nothing could become three-of-everything. one can only ignore water damage so long before it rots through the drywall. cobblestone walkway to the mothers’ gardens, that raise sure as sleet is coming. oh, oh, the electric bill’s been paid.

are we more, think the children, than our hunger for everything? do the mother and father know their lack-of-worry would be the greatest gift? return that 40 shade eyeshadow palette—it’ll only weigh us down, the children think. the yellow paint of our bedroom walls is okay a few years more, my god, so sorry we were born expensively. the family’s shoulders are adorned with marble slates, but they are all together, and that is its own greatest miracle. no matter what happens now, you shouldn’t be afraid, the wheels spin madly on and the mothers/the fathers/the girls/the boys, oh they sing and they sing and they sing.
healing mantra #1

just because the feeling of your knees on the bathroom tile feels familiar does not mean that it has to become your home. you have already lived there once, and it was not very hospitable.

(rip out this page and glue it in your journal)
healing mantra #2

if you care more about the stains on your towels than the fact that you’ve been bleeding, remember you can buy new towels but you cannot buy a new body.

(rip out this page and keep it in your pocket)
it was a dream, sweetheart. it was just a bad dream. now, fix this in your mind: you grew up and left.

(rip out this page and tuck it under your pillow)
healing mantra #4

you have never once in your entire life been someone’s burden.

(rip out this page and tape it to the ceiling above your bed)
healing mantra #5

despite everything, you have managed to stay alive. carry this proud in your hands like a trophy.

(don’t rip out this page, but think of it sometime, like when you look at a bird in a tree, or look at the way a child dances, or look at food you are afraid of eating, or look at yourself in the mirror)
(post)script

there will come a day when you can hear the name of the acts that were done to you without a lightning-sear through your temples. do not be fooled into believing all at once after you are done whispering this word, you will be able to scream it. sometimes you will scream it and sometimes you will not leave the place where you are sitting for three days; this is only one part of the process.

you will recognize traits in others: they chew their food many times before swallowing. they avoid looking in large bathroom mirrors. they talk about their partners as family but avoid conversation about their fathers. in the sweltering air of a kansas summer, their arms are exposed and the arms look like yours.

on that so-hot day in the slightly-cooler grass on the ant-covered blanket in the nearly-empty park, remember every time someone asked what was wrong with your limbs, grabbed them, held them up on display for the others. or when you leaned over in a sundress and they traced a finger down the ribcage on your back. or they heard someone in your house whimper “please” and they called the proper authorities who did nothing over and over again.

on that day, sweet girl, when you see your friend’s arm and they notice where your eyes have fallen, do not ask all of the questions. billie holiday plays from the portable speaker. if you are hungry, say so. say watermelon, say green juice, say things that are not scary. do not go on tracing the patterns.

say listen to that little bird, can you hear it? listen to that little bird, you are more than the things that have happened to your body. listen to that little bird, there are many days when my heart is so heavy. (listen to that little bird) well, we decided to keep living. listen to that little bird, it is you & me & our voices.