

Lili Reinhart



Swimming  
Lessons

Poems

Lili Reinhart  
Swimming  
Lessons  
Poems

*with illustrations by*  
Curt Montgomery



ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN  
NEW YORK

## Copyright

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in these poems are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

HarperCollinsPublishers  
1 London Bridge Street  
London SE1 9GF

[www.harpercollins.co.uk](http://www.harpercollins.co.uk)

First published in the US by St. Martin's Griffin, an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group First published in the UK by HarperCollinsPublishers 2020

FIRST EDITION

© Lili Reinhart 2020  
Cover layout design © HarperCollinsPublishers 2020  
Cover illustration © Curt Montgomery 2020

A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

Lili Reinhart asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions.

By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the nonexclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on screen.

No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins e-books.

Find out about HarperCollins and the environment at  
[www.harpercollins.co.uk/green](http://www.harpercollins.co.uk/green)

Source ISBN: 9780008365677  
Ebook Edition © May 2020 ISBN: 9780008365684  
Version 2020-06-10

## **Dedication**

To my nana, who always  
loved my voice.

## Contents

Title Page  
Copyright  
Dedication

Introduction  
Begin Reading

Acknowledgments  
About the Publisher

## Introduction

I believe that we read poetry to relate to the world.

We see our lives through the words of a poet when we are incapable of expressing ourselves.

I started reading poetry as a way to comfort myself through spells of depression. Discovering poems that closely reflected the thoughts in my own head became reassuring in a time when I felt severely misunderstood.

It's hard to imagine that anyone out there could possibly feel the same things that you do, to the depths that you feel them. Therein lies the beauty and surprise of poetry.

Once you see that someone understands your feelings, suddenly you're not alone anymore.

I decided a little over a year ago that I wanted to share my own collection of poems in the hopes that they could bring comfort to whomever is looking for it.

The inspiration for this collection came from personal experiences as well as experiences that are not my own. Emotion can be explored and felt through the fabrication of a story, and some of these poems were crafted out of pure empathy for those around me.

Each one of us leads vastly different lives, and yet we can all relate to the fundamental feelings of happiness and sorrow.

I hope that you, the reader, can see yourself reflected in my words.

I can't seem to write  
perfect words  
or make them flow as  
they should.

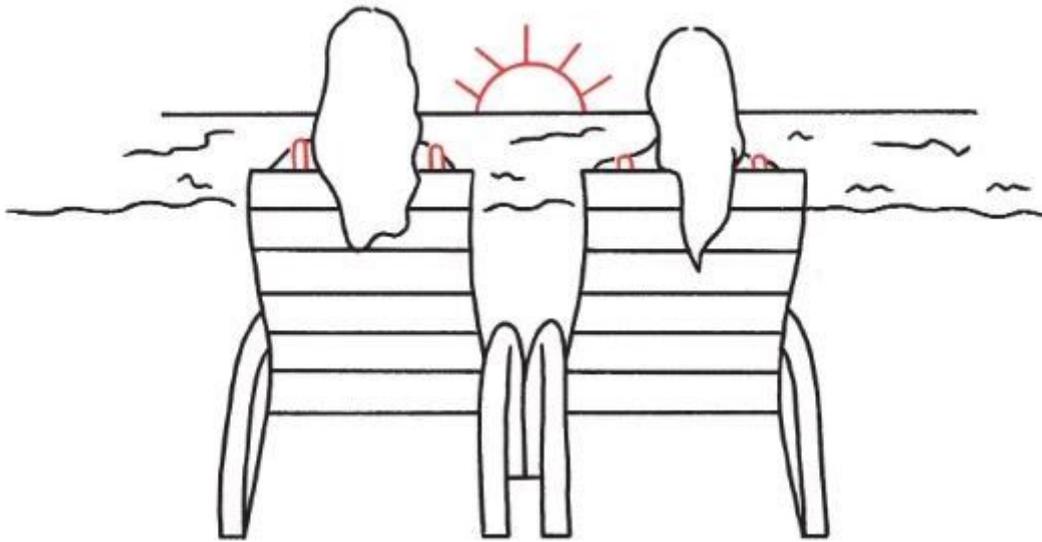
They don't sound  
particularly profound.

I can't paint you  
pretty pictures  
or blend colors like  
other artists do.

My watercolors don't  
bleed beautifully.

But I can say I love you  
in as many languages  
as you need me to.

I can be fluent in  
loving you.



It's been a while since I've had a  
moment to miss you,  
and to cry.

This warm, summer breeze  
on my balcony makes me think of  
Cape Cod,  
and your floral swimsuits.

How you never wore sunscreen but  
always told us we had to.

Even in this loud city,  
quiet moments exist where your  
spirit is present.

And I feel like you're sitting next to  
me on the beach again.

So I'll wait until the sun goes down  
before I go back inside.

For now, we can sit here and listen  
to the ocean.

“I love you, darling,” were the last words you said to me.

And although I don't have a recording of it,

and although I forgot to save your voicemails,

I will never forget the sound of your voice.

I see you in every flower and every hummingbird that happens to be near.

I'd like to think that it's your spirit, just saying hello.

You surround me, always.

I miss you.

And I love you, too.

This is how I know  
I love you so much.

Whenever I see something  
beautiful, I want you to  
see it, too.

I seem to be your new  
favorite novel.

One that keeps you up  
at night,

turning my pages.

Fingers lingering on  
me so you don't lose  
your place.



you'd think the  
sound of this beach  
would give me déjà vu,

but it doesn't.

maybe because it's a  
different ocean than the one  
we used to visit.

maybe because it's November

and I only know the Atlantic  
in the summertime.

I hear things a little differently  
these days.

the waves sound more  
lonely than peaceful.

I'd like to think that  
if you were here,  
the sun would shine  
through the fog  
brighter than  
it does now.

I find myself missing you  
before you're even gone,

Knowing there exists a space  
without you next to me.

A *somewhere* I never want to  
feel too comfortable in.

My Delilah.

I remember her on our porch,

how she closed her eyes in the sun  
as I held her close to me.

I can hear the wind chimes from a  
summer afternoon.

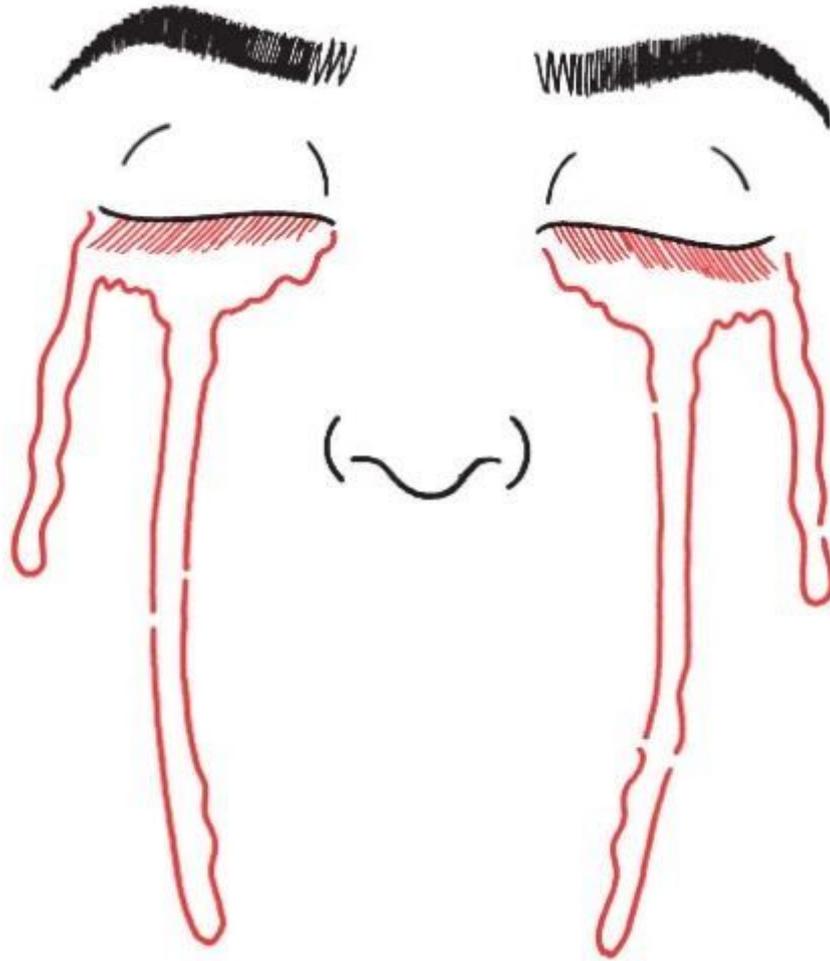
I was always clinging to her,  
trying to savor our quiet moments.

she knew I loved her, without ever  
learning my words

and she loved me right back.

3:24am

The softness of a blink is felt in moments when tears run dry.





July.

I can still see the  
sparkles on the water  
and feel the sun on  
half of my face.

Sometimes I open my  
eyes when we kiss

to see if you're as lost  
in me as I am in you.

I want you  
in every shade  
that you come in.

All the good  
and all the bad.



The memories  
these walls keep,

I wish they  
could speak.

So I could relive  
you touching me.

## DRUNK

I always want  
to make a toast  
before we clink  
our glasses.

It's my way  
of getting to tell you  
that I love you.

A profession of my love  
disguised by a spirit.

Cheers.

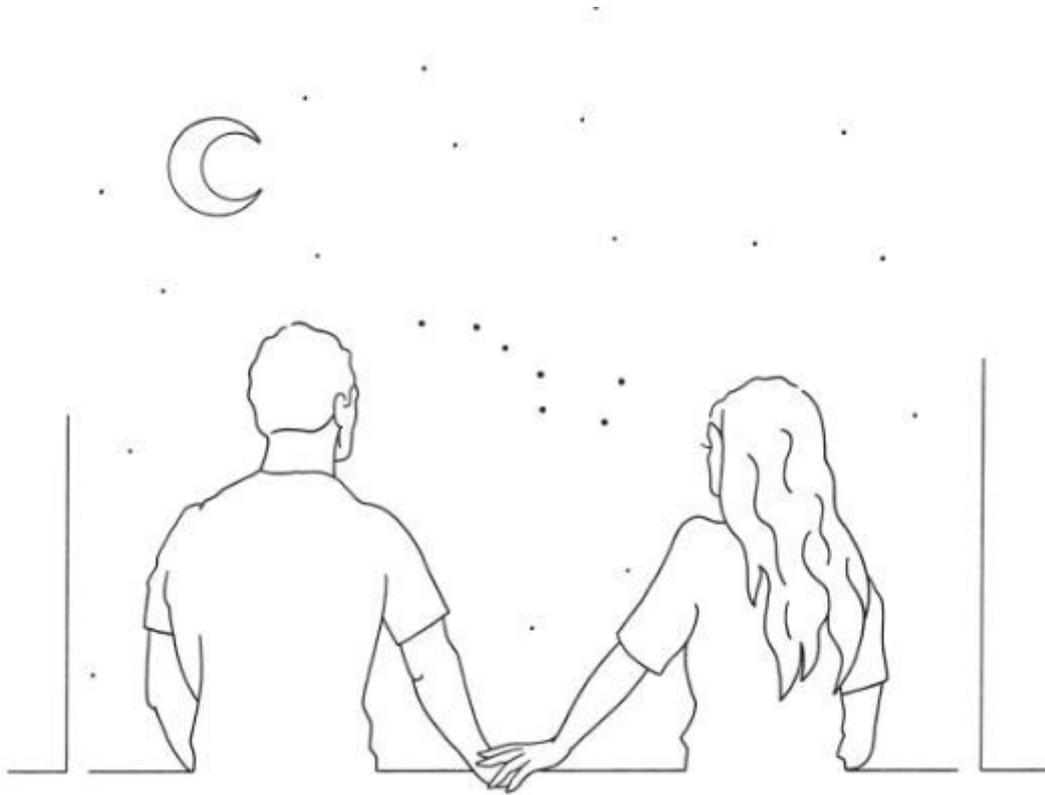


You pointed out  
the Big Dipper to me  
on the balcony  
near the end of summer.

But I'll let myself forget  
so you can show me again.

Just tell me more  
about the stars,  
my love.

Allow me to lose myself  
in your constellations.



You let me lay on your clean  
sheets and wrap myself in  
your damp duvet.

The tumbling washing  
machine mixed with the  
sound of your video games.

An ordinary day,  
an ordinary moment

driving home from work,

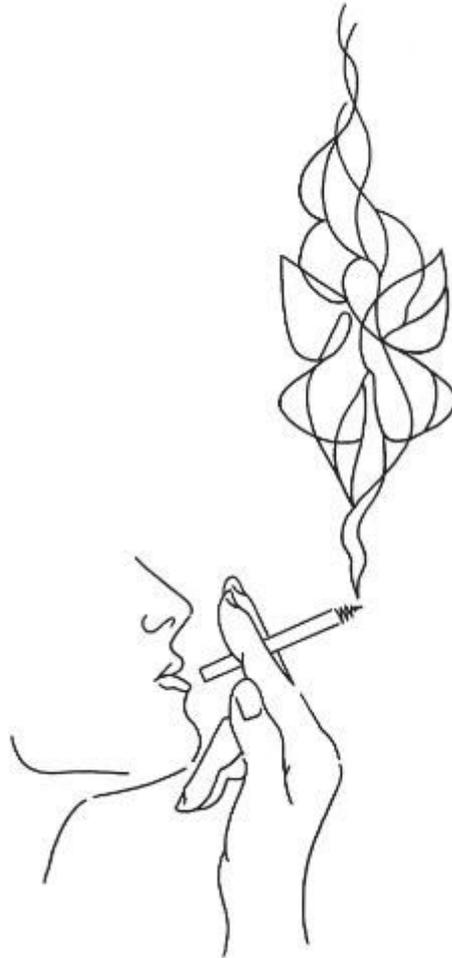
with a yellow setting sky  
and the windows  
cracked open.

I told myself

that I would never let you be  
the one that got away.

it seems to be our winter,

so I'll try to make  
snow angels in your  
cigarette smoke.



he laid down his pen  
after a few quiet moments.

and there were no marks  
on the corner of the page,  
where his hand  
had been resting.

the ink had run dry.

there was nothing.

nothing left.

If you give love and project  
your heart into the world,

you will receive it in return.

Maybe not right away,

but eventually.

I'm living proof.

I kept loving.

I didn't give up.

And I finally got it back.

Don't give up on what your  
heart tells you.

Don't ignore the thoughts  
that keep you up at night.

How is it possible

that the moment your  
breath meets mine

my lungs become so clear,

it's as if I had been silently  
suffocating.

I hope you look at me like  
you do the sky.

Standing,

breathless,

admiring my colors.

My heart feels heavy today

but not because of sorrow.

It feels full

or swollen.

It's like I've discovered a new  
compartment inside myself

with all this room left to fill.

And I'm filling it,

easily,

with you.

I feel you

latching onto a piece  
of myself that will only  
continue to grow,

as I grow.

You are engraved in me,

settling comfortably into  
my empty spaces.

It's easier for me to talk about *forever*  
than it is for you.

You're a present man,

with whom I see this vast,  
extraordinary life.

Part of me can't help but dream  
about the years to come,

because of this love

that I feel for you now.

I'm anxious to keep loving you

and to create more moments of bliss.

My future is beautiful

because I see the happiness that is  
inevitable for me  
with you by my side.

I wish I would've kissed you harder  
before I left this morning.

how can it be love

if you don't fear  
the loss of them.

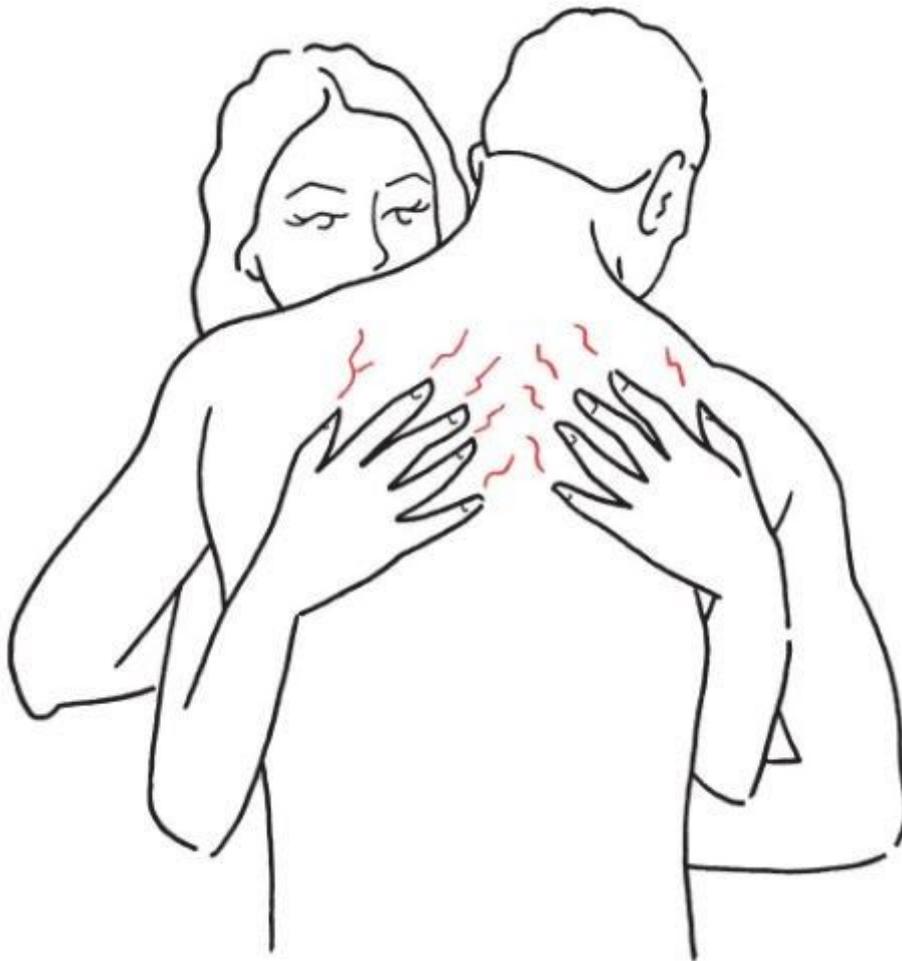
You have the capacity  
to hurt me more  
than anyone in this world.

I know

because I've already  
felt it.

And this vengeful part  
of me wants to hurt you

before you can ever  
hurt me again.





I always end up crying  
at these local cafés.

What once was beautiful,  
is now a somber day.

Driving home with an  
empty passenger seat,  
an aching reminder of  
you leaving me.

You said I had never felt  
heartbreak like yours  
before.

That once I had,  
it would change me.

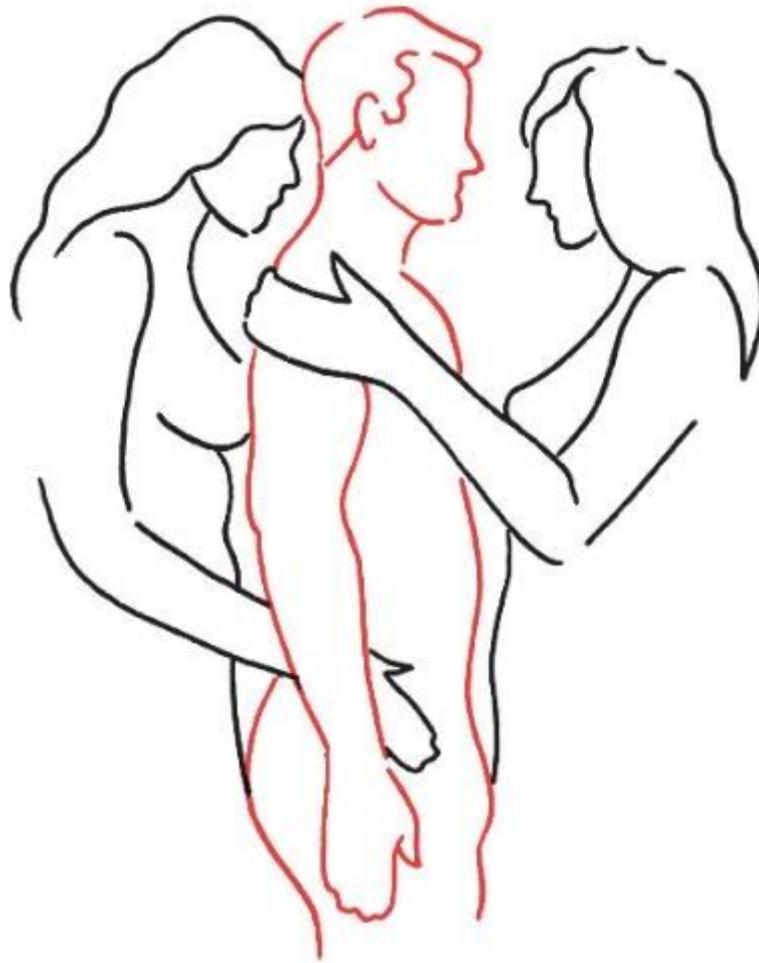
Only then would I  
understand where you  
were coming from.

I understand now.

It's just that  
neither of us knew  
that it would be you.

The heartbreak that  
changed me

forever.



When you told me  
I had won your heart,

I didn't expect that I  
would have to share your  
body with anyone else.

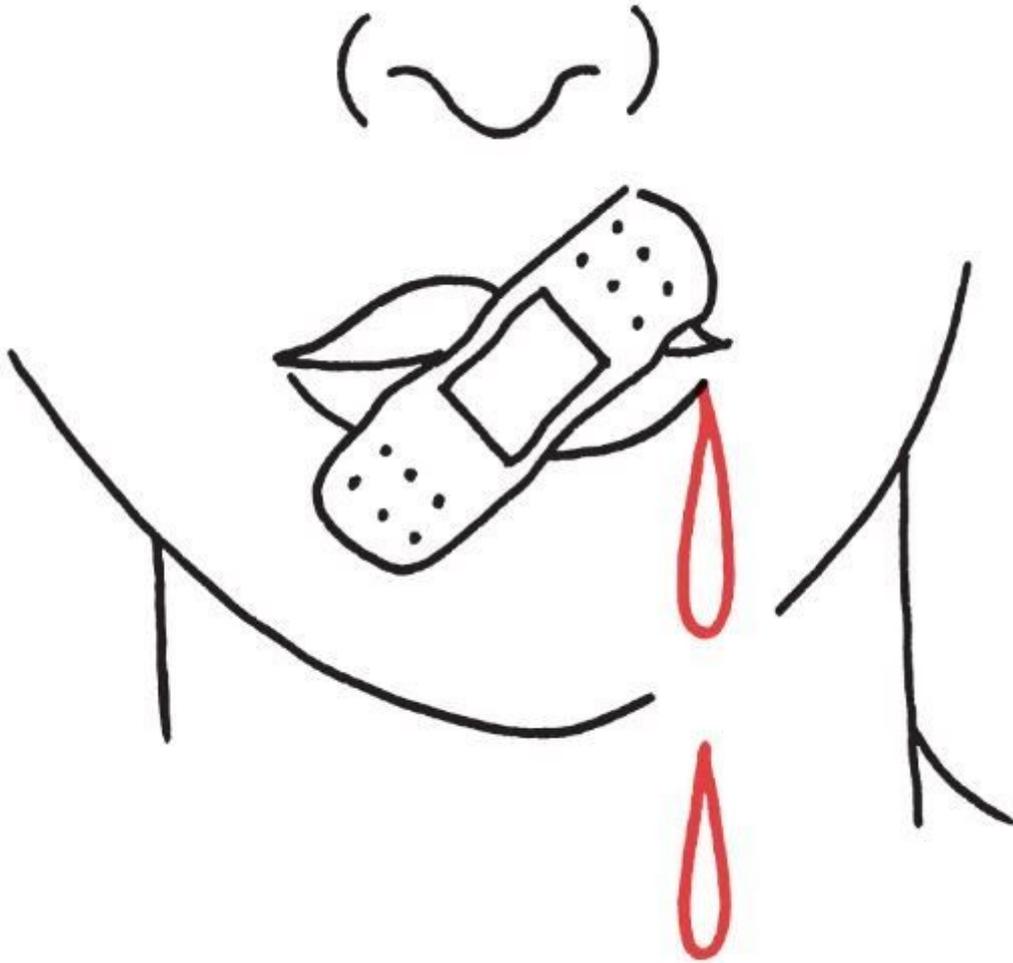
You were mine  
and yet  
you were everyone else's.

I don't need to hear  
"I love you" every day

or wake up next to you  
every morning.

Just tell me that you  
see my face when you  
watch the sun rise

and I'll know.



apologies are  
a Band-Aid.

the wound is still there,  
underneath.

it still hurts,  
it just looks cleaner on  
the outside.

if I apologized ...  
would you be cured?  
or is that just a way of  
hiding the ugliness  
of truth?

the hurt stays.

my “sorry” will never  
heal the way you  
want it to.

so you might as well  
learn to heal yourself ...

without waiting for  
anyone else to do it.

And again

the wind is knocked out of me.

My breath is gone.

It reminds me of a dream I had  
of you the other night.

Which now I see was a nightmare.

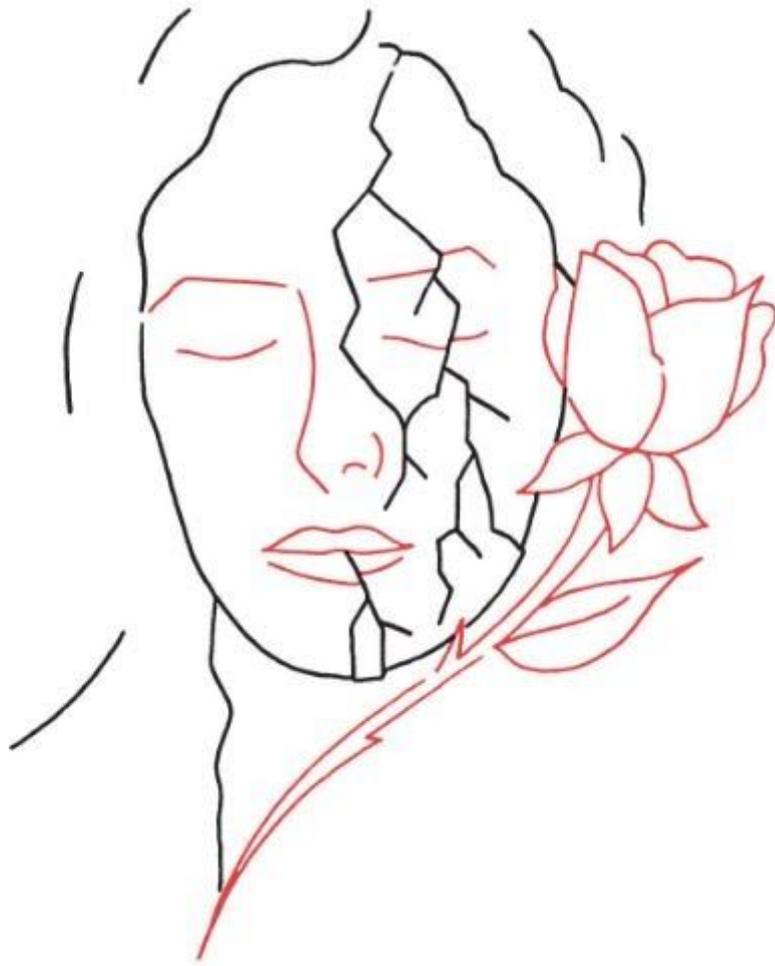
A warning.

That quick, sharp tug that makes  
my stomach turn.

And every fucking footstep I hear  
outside my door makes my heart  
clench and sink.

Because I know it's not you,

coming home to me.

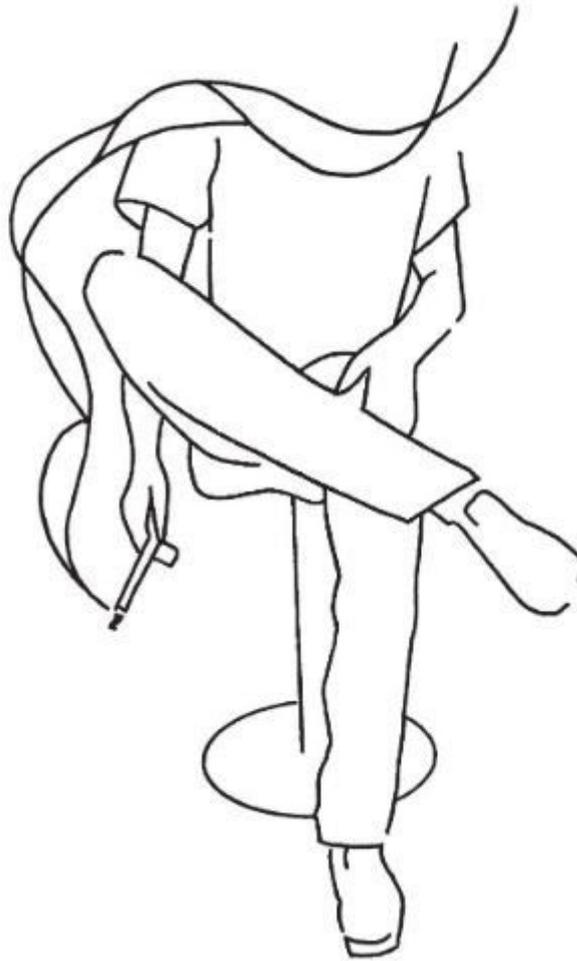


you say that this love  
feels different now.

how could it not?

you've broken me.

and I'll never be put  
together the same way.



I keep reminding myself that we are  
not feeling the same things.  
You said so yourself,  
I'm more invested than you are.  
You're not experiencing this  
rejection.

Sitting with one leg crossed over  
the other, smoking cigarettes and  
turning from me as you exhale,  
shifting your attention away.

I'm sitting miles from you, it seems.

Memorizing the curl of smoke

escaping your lips.

Feeling the loss of you,  
the strain in my chest when you  
forget I'm even here.

And that's what hurts the most.

Feeling this alone.

Mutual heartbreak would be the  
only comforting option,  
but you can't seem to spare me that.

I let my mind escape

and form these flashes of images  
in my head.

Visions of her touching you

and purring at your neck.

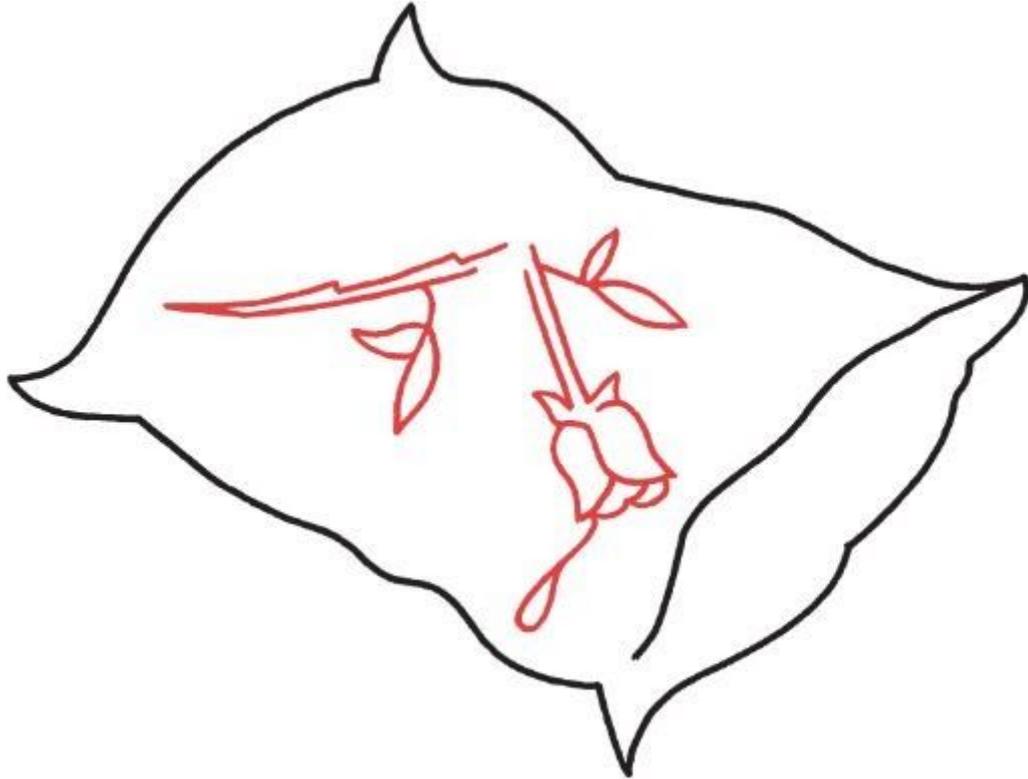
The thought of me crossing  
your mind for one quick  
moment before you shake it off  
and indulge.

Practically drooling at the  
chance to sabotage yourself.

I am the fighter.  
The one who keeps going  
and never takes  
the easy way out.

In time, someone eventually  
gives way  
to collapse.

Just know  
it will never  
be me.



And your lonely, sober mind  
will always come back to me.

When the pillow next to you  
is vacant

and you've exhausted all of  
your distractions.

But keep running.



Brush me off.

I dare you.

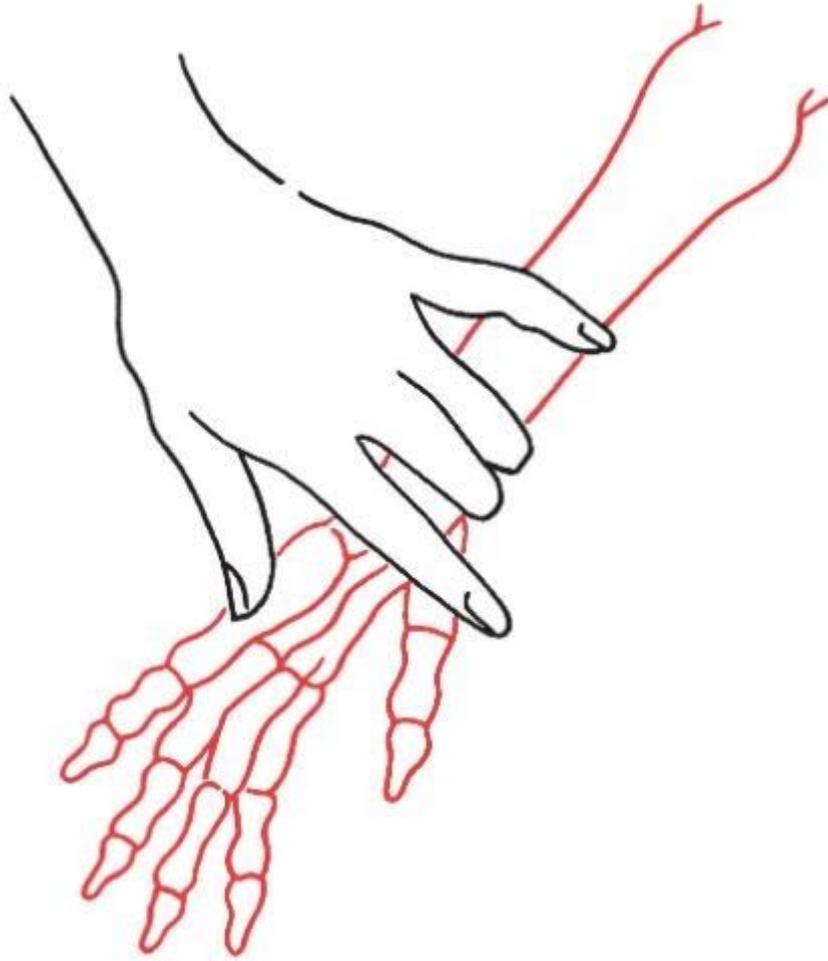
That way

in time,

when you see I was right,

you'll feel a sting  
on your shoulder

where I once was.



In the beginning

I always felt like  
my loving you was

an inconvenience  
to your world.

But maybe

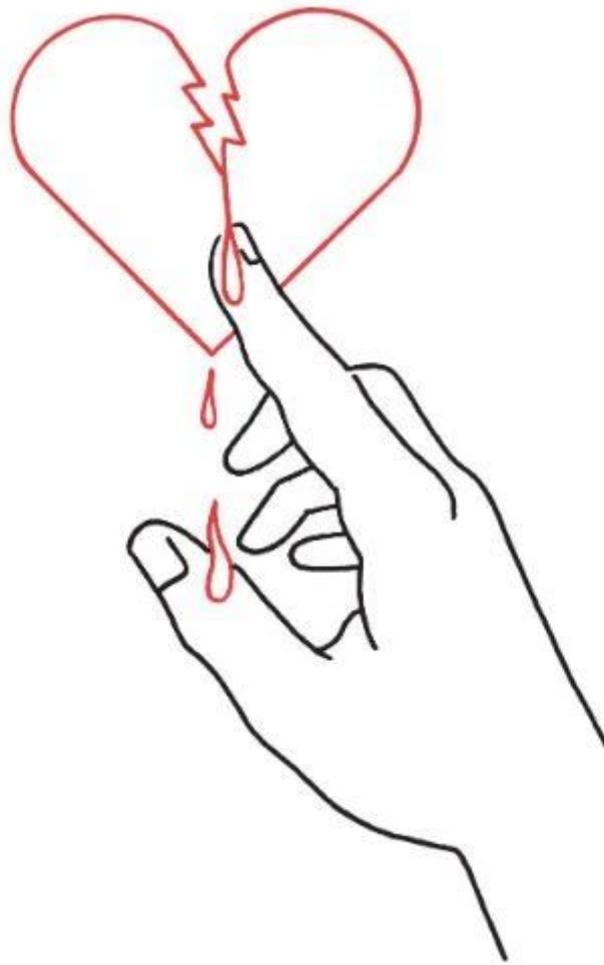
the only real inconvenience

was me forcing your hand

into feeling something  
that you weren't ready for.

I think you might be  
the death of me.

And it's as if I'm running  
at full speed  
towards my grave.



A wound that isn't  
cared for festers.

It deepens.

Spreads.

Like a virus under the skin  
eventually reaching the brain  
and suffocating it.

Heartbreak is a sickness.

A cancer  
already in our bodies,  
waiting to take over.

Sometimes it's an  
inconvenience that can be  
patched over.

Our bodies have the ability to  
adapt and live on.

Sometimes it's as if we are walking  
around with a broken bone

refusing to let it be  
put back in place.

And we can  
withstand the pain.

To secure protection,

the heart forms a barricade.

A double-edged sword,

often puncturing itself

more than the enemies it's  
supposed to keep out.

Puncturing me.

This deep and droning pulse  
to love him wasn't a choice.

It was a need

that led me to pursue  
this beautiful

but broken

person.

This emotionally unavailable  
human being

whose heart was so wrapped  
up in fear.

Fear of being vulnerable

and exposed.

Fear of feeding the ache that  
was already growing.

But I craved passionate,  
overwhelming euphoria.

I wanted that kind of love so  
desperately

that I was willing to hurt myself in  
order to find it.

I wanted to love him

and so I did.

Through the rejection

and the women,

I was there.

Feeling weak.

I kept offering my heart to someone  
who didn't want it.

Humiliating myself within the  
pages of a journal that I filled with  
thoughts of him.

But it was love.

Overflowing.

And that's what kept me coming back.

The faith I had placed in the words  
*your heart will never lead you astray.*

So I kept loving

and I let myself fall.

I welcomed the inevitable  
heartbreak.

I accepted the reality that I was a  
hopeless romantic.

And when I told him I loved him,  
it was because I couldn't hold it in  
any longer.

There had been

so many moments

lying next to one another

with my head on his chest,

my eyes stinging with tears.

I desperately wanted  
to say "I love you,"

but I was scared

that it would push him away.

Until the overwhelming urge  
became too heavy to keep in.

That rainy, gray afternoon

I walked unshielded, under  
the clouds.

I held his face in my hands

and said those words.

Words that felt as if they were  
crafted for that moment.

And it didn't matter if I was  
rejected.

It was pure truth,

whether it was reciprocated  
or not.

I cried when I first heard him  
say those words back to me,

like a confession.

Something that he hadn't quite  
accepted yet.

Something he was afraid to say  
out loud because then it would

become real

and he could never take it back.



You can't deny your heart.

It won't be ignored

and it will kick you in the ass  
until you accept it.

Through all of my tears  
and anxieties,

my fear of never receiving his love,

we came together.

And I believe

I was meant to love him.

To give love to someone who so  
desperately needed it

and yet pushed it away fervently.

I didn't step back.

I latched on even harder

and broke through  
the walls.

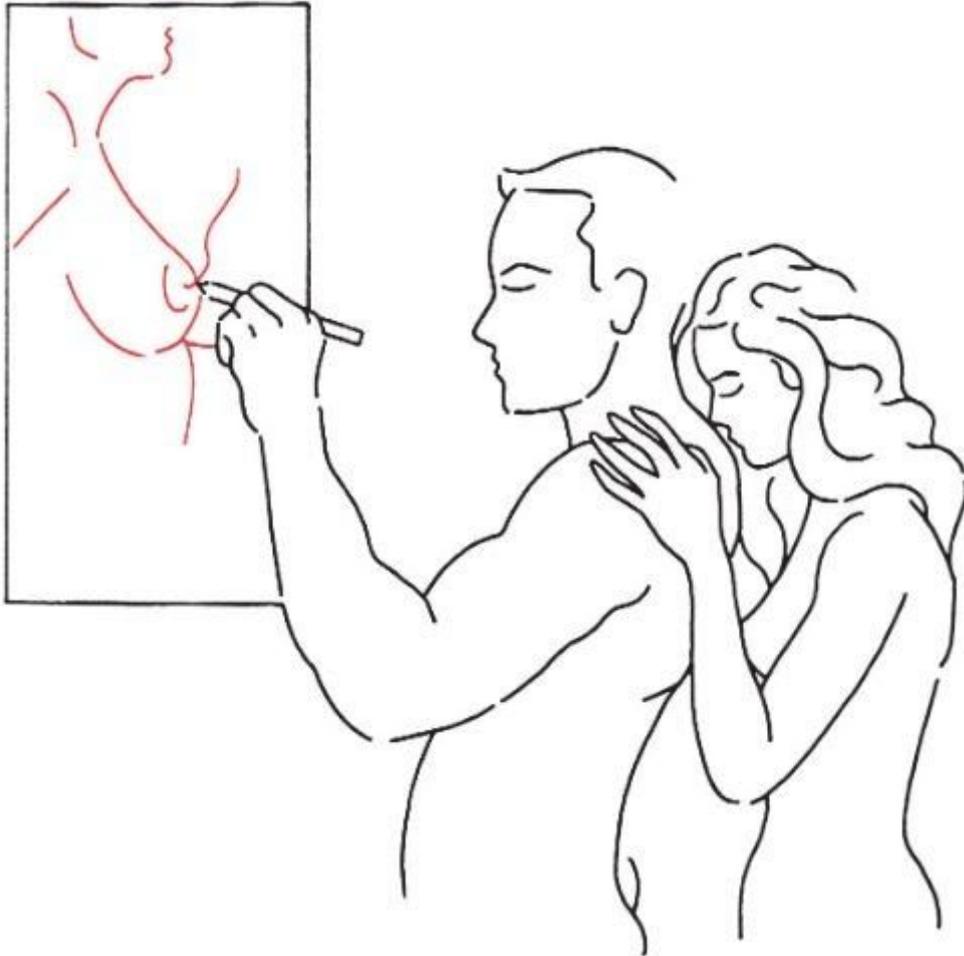
And thank god I did.

How lucky I am to love  
someone so much

and to know I can give so  
much to one person.

A man who deserves  
to be told "I love you," as  
many times a day as it  
crosses my mind.

don't save me from  
whatever universe this is  
that allows me to be on the  
receiving end of your lips.



It was wrong of me  
to think that this was special  
when I wasn't the only one.

I don't know what I thought  
would come of this.

I should've known that  
everything you said meant  
nothing to you  
when it meant everything to me.

I never would've gotten involved  
had I known you were thinking

and saying  
the same words to someone else.

This was a game I didn't agree  
to play.

I was never going to compete for  
your attention  
or love.

And you tried to keep it a secret

as if I wasn't smart enough  
to figure it out.

That's the cruel part.

Making me think  
I was the one at fault

when you were simply  
spinning your wheel  
of choice.

I was a fool.

Unknowingly  
waiting for you  
to choose between me

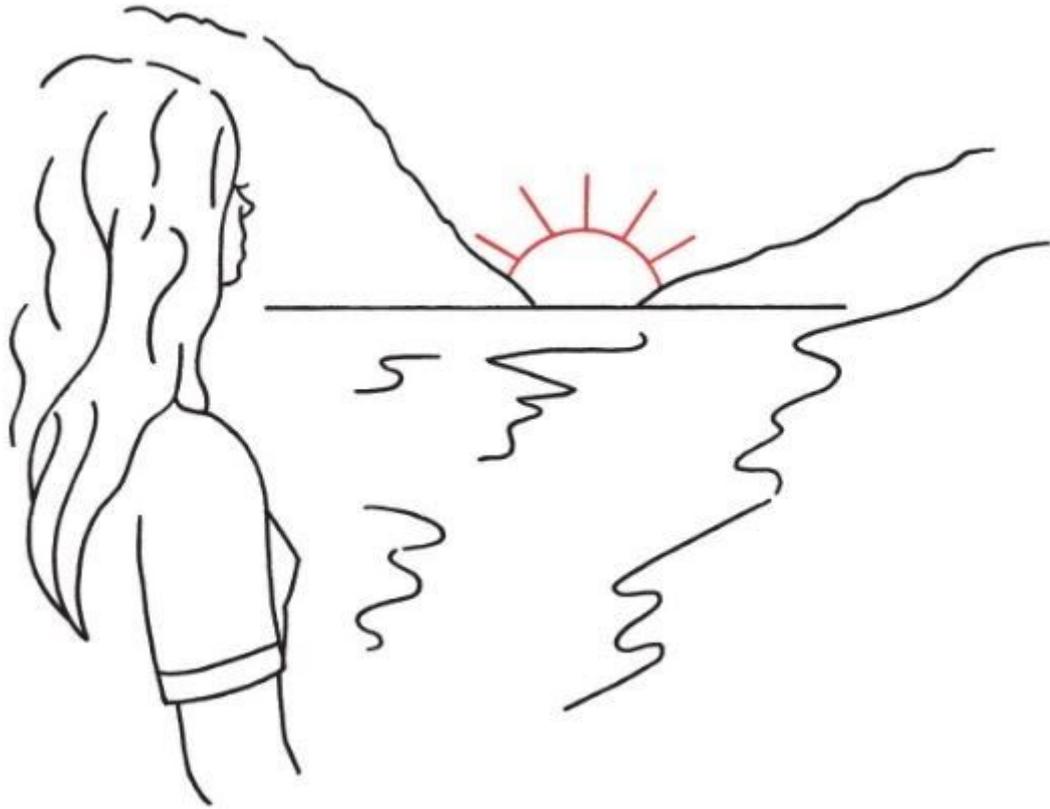
and other women  
with the same  
dazed eyes.

the silence  
between my questions  
and your inability  
to answer them  
is deafening.

and the pillow  
you put between us  
before you fall asleep  
doesn't go unnoticed.

as if there wasn't  
enough of a divide

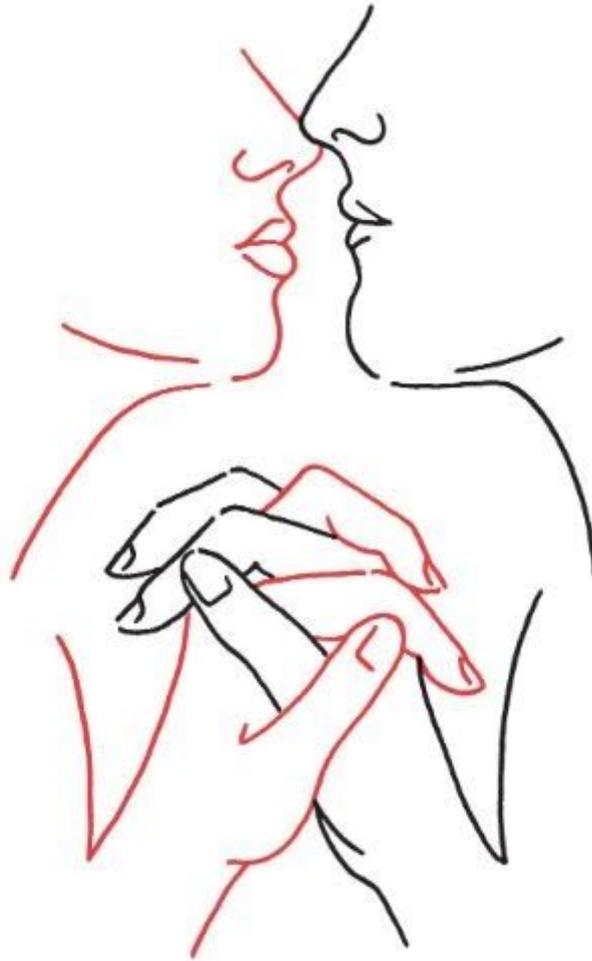
this should do the trick.



I stopped taking  
photos of sunsets  
a long time ago.

I can never  
capture its colors.

The same goes  
for you.



He said “I love you,”  
with his eyes closed,

the tip of his nose  
resting against mine.

backlit by the sun

with small particles floating  
in the air around his head.

our fingers interlaced gently.

I swore I was looking into heaven,

seeing this warm  
bright glow behind him.

It was a feeling I don't think  
I'll ever experience again,

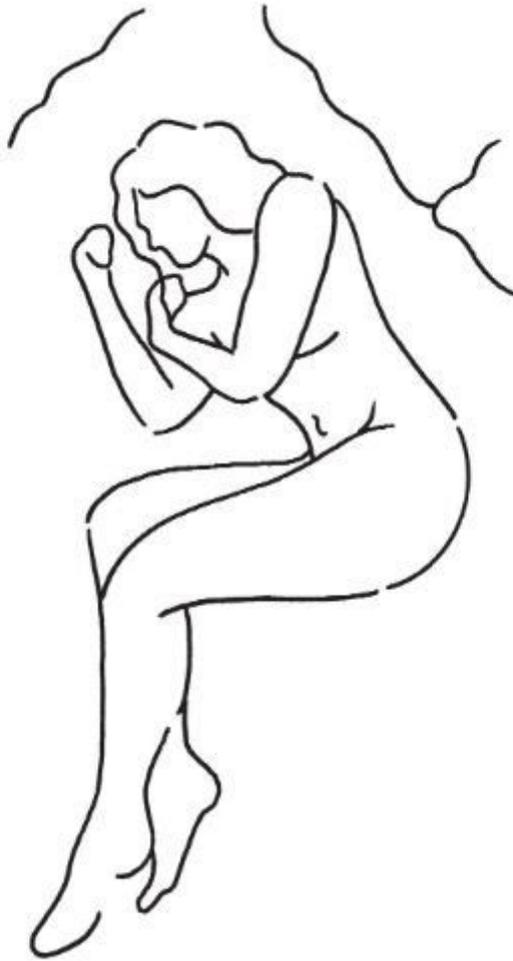
not entirely the way  
I felt it that first time.

But I still feel that warmth,  
like a stream of sunlight  
being poured into me

moving throughout my body,

when I hear you say those words.

I love you.



Moving away from a crowd

stepping into an empty room

then suddenly forgetting why I  
went there in the first place.

Standing still

pausing

wracking my brain for signals

waiting to be told what to do.

On the receiving end of static  
radio.

Wandering around slowly

trying to trigger my brain into  
remembering the command.

Letting my eyes land on every  
piece of fabric in the closet.

Staring at the wispy hairs near  
the top of my head in the  
bathroom mirror.

Nothing.

No signal coming through.

Waiting

listening

and receiving

static.

This is my looming anxiety  
manifested into my morning routine.

A new day should be  
a blank slate.

A white room to paint with  
endless colors.

But my chest is suddenly tight  
and my mind starts to unravel.

Something's wrong

and yet there's no reason behind it.

Why is this happening?

What do I not remember?

This crippling sensation

coming from the center  
of my chest

is reaching out for  
something to grab onto

and there's nothing.

An uneasy state of being sits there

nestled in close

right as I wake

with no explanation.

So I go back to sleep

and hope that the answer  
comes when I wake.

In this aspect, I'll probably  
never be like you.

I'll always prefer the familiar  
over the unfamiliar.

I prefer the comfort of soft sheets  
over stumbling on old cobblestones  
through darkly lit streets.

Or maybe I don't.

In truth, I wouldn't know.

I wish I could change

and allow myself to fight  
against my own comfort.

Just give me more time.

Keep pulling me  
into those moments

and I promise,

one day,

I won't want to go back.

It's been said that  
everything you've ever thought  
has already been thought before

by someone else.

Everything you've ever said  
has been said before

by someone else.

I try to be poetic.

I try to come up with  
beautiful words and  
make them mean  
something,

for you.

Make them sound  
as if they haven't  
been spoken before.

These poetry books at the  
library sit there like  
pretentious little fucks  
saying "you're too late.  
We're already here. We beat you."

Some other sad,

heartbroken,

romantic has managed  
to publish their words into the  
form of a book

that will likely sit on a shelf

and collect dust for forty years.

But it doesn't matter.

I want my words to collect dust.

Because even if no one reads them,

I'll know that I got there eventually.

Or at least before someone else.

Graffiti.

Another way that humans  
can say “I beat you.”

Like dogs marking their  
territory.

With so much undiscovered  
earth and space,

how do we all end up  
flocking to the same places?

There are moments where I remember  
that I only have this one life.

Maybe you believe in reincarnation

but even if that happens,

you come back  
as an entirely different being

in an entirely different life.

You wouldn't even remember the  
mistakes you've made as someone else

so how could you learn from them?

A sensation that feels  
like the opposite of déjà vu.

It's not that you've been there before,

but that you're only going  
to be there once.

You become acutely aware of  
how little time you have.

Each day, or month, that passes  
can feel like it has little significance.

Until it's five years later

and the realization hits

that you were waiting for a chance to  
learn from your mistakes

and you ignored it.

You missed it.

And you absolutely will not get it back,

at least not in this life.

If we could experience those kinds of  
moments each day,

where we remember for even one  
*second* how little time we have,

would we live differently?

I would drink more.

Indulge in wild, blurred nights.

Stay awake to watch the sun rise

and learn the constellations by heart.

I'd sing loudly

without the consideration of my  
neighbors.

I'd fly home on a weekend even if  
there were no nonstop flights.

Take beautiful pictures with the  
camera I bought, but hardly ever use.

Tell my dad that in elementary school,  
I used to say my favorite color  
was yellow

because that's what his was ...

and I wanted to be just like him.

I know we wouldn't wait around  
as much.

No waiting for signs to point us in the  
right direction.

Only following our gut.

I wish I could live this way now.

Because my biggest fear

is waking up in another five years

and realizing that I've wasted so much

of what little time I have left.



the tip of your nose  
is cold

and so are your frosty,  
pink cheeks.

I put my hands  
under your knit hat  
and cup your ears,

“these are cold, too.”

you smile  
and give a little playful grunt  
as you shake your head.

you press your nose  
against mine

and surprisingly

it's the warmest thing  
I've felt all day.

Catching an early flight  
and I have to slip away  
from your sleepy grip.

You look so small  
and innocent,

curled around the  
white sheets

in your old man pajamas  
that I love.

I kiss your cheek  
a few times  
and refuel myself  
on you.

*Safe travels, baby.*

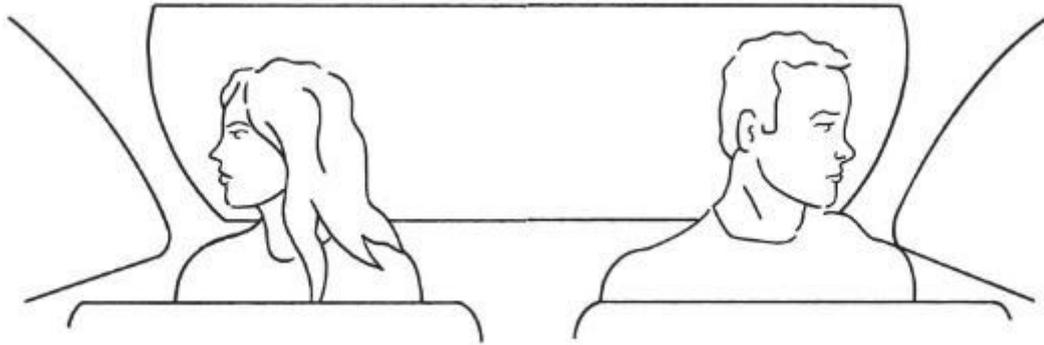


a single flame  
can light up  
a room.

that was you, my love.

But it can burn.

also you.



Nothing is  
more interesting  
than whatever  
is outside  
the window

when we're alone  
in this car.

Silence.

The space  
between words  
is endless

and your eyes  
seem to connect  
with everything  
except for me.



The seasons hadn't changed in years.

And by the time I put on my first  
summer dress

I had forgotten what the sun felt like.

We use people  
whether we want to admit it or not.

We use people for moments  
or months  
or years.

It's a selfish thing we do.

Telling someone  
we'll love them forever.

Until that forever ends,  
after however long.

You couldn't have fathomed an end  
when you were with them,

and now you can't imagine a world  
in which you're still there.

Our forevers are so fleeting  
they almost mean nothing.

So I stopped saying it.

It's enough to say "I love you,"

and have it end there.

I won't spoil already perfect words  
with a time stamp.

Because even forever has an  
expiration date.

No always.

No forever.

Just now.

This is how I explain it to someone  
who can't fully understand.

I speak with my hands—  
they're the most enthusiastic part  
of myself.

And I use my body as a map.

*This is me.*

I hold up my right hand,  
horizontally, as a vocal  
coach does when explaining  
the rising pitches of do, re, mi, fa,  
and so on.

My hand is at the level of my shoulders.

*This is me.*

*On the day to day.*

*Going through the motions.  
Mostly steady. Complacent.  
Low energy.*

*This is you, I say.*

I lift my left hand up,  
to my chin.

*This is you, every day.*

*Generally happy.  
You don't think of each day  
as "getting by."  
You're positive.  
Content.*

*Sometimes we are equal.  
A good day can make us both  
feel like this—*

*I raise both of my hands to the top of my  
head, one on either side of my temple.*

*Each hand represents two different people  
achieving the same state of being.*

*Elated. High. Full of energy. Laughing so  
hard it hurts your stomach.*

*Of course I am able to feel these things. It's  
harder to achieve, but I can get there.*

*It's just that I'll have  
a greater fall back down to reality.*

*To go from here,  
hands at the top of my head,*

*to here,*

*hands at my shoulders.*

*Going from this elation,  
this joyfulness and ecstasy ...  
to this average, mundane state,  
can even bring us lower.*

*I bring my right hand to my chest.*

*I refer to this placement  
as "rock bottom."*

*You can reach the same lows  
as me, of course,  
just as I can reach your highs.*

I bring both hands to my chest.

It's no contest.

Certainly not one that anyone can win.

We are just here.

Some of us living slightly above

or slightly below

others.

my head feels claustrophobic  
resting in this sink.

my ears are ringing inside this  
blue ceramic bowl.

slowly waiting for the water  
to sink into my pores  
and drown out these flashes  
of color behind my eyes.

focus.

for a moment.



then a droning pulse of vibration  
every other second.

the faint feeling of spinning  
like an optical illusion that  
never stops.

parts of my body turning in  
opposite directions,

like a merry-go-round

just breathe.

remember to blink.

flex the corners of your mouth.

up.

lift your chin.

not too high.

don't let them see your  
empty eyes.



when my hand reaches out  
into the empty air,  
I like to think that in some  
other universe  
you're pressing your palm  
against mine

and hugging me gently  
through the breeze.

I think we're scared to say it.

That maybe you and I just  
want different things.

That we are two  
fundamentally different  
people.

We can't fit into the boxes  
that we have drawn for each  
other.

And neither one of us

is willing to bend.

I tried explaining to my mother why  
I was crying this morning.

It's always different,  
the reason or the circumstance.

Today, calling whatever I'm feeling  
"depression" doesn't seem to fit.

It's not the right word.

Sometimes it just feels like sadness,  
like a dark shadow  
mirroring my every move.

I feel numb  
yet emotional.

No balance.  
No spectrum of white to black.  
Just black.

But vast,  
so vast that you can lose yourself  
in it and forget that you're  
staring into a vacuum.

The sun on my face doesn't feel  
warm or soft.

It's hot and it burns.

I'm sweating  
and itching.

His touch isn't comforting or gentle.  
It's unwelcome  
and suffocating.

I want to be alone, unbothered.

And then I feel guilty  
for being cold,  
for not letting in any warmth from  
these outside sources.  
Innocent volunteers that I'm  
shutting down.

It's as if I'm a small, withered person  
inside a shell ... running on old  
fumes and recycling old smiles.  
Waiting until my limbs stretch out  
and fill my shape again.

Can you just be with me?  
Be content.  
Lay with me for a long while  
without getting bored  
or restless.

Find a way to be present in our moments  
without a beautiful backdrop,  
without a landscape to distract you.

Can you just be with me?

Say “I love you” in a moment that isn’t spectacular  
just because you want to,  
without letting a rare picturesque scene say it for you.

Life doesn’t provide a perfect stage.  
You will be left longing for moments  
that were right in front of you  
because you couldn’t see how special  
something ordinary could be.



She's beautiful.

And her legs  
are wrapped around him  
more tightly

than his arms  
ever were  
around me.

I've had days of loneliness

where I barely spoke

because I had no one  
to talk to.

The sound of my own  
voice would surprise me,

remind me,

that I wasn't a ghost  
floating through the city

going unnoticed.

I was there,

just silently disconnected.

The voice in my head  
becoming more familiar  
than any of the faces  
around me.

We waste so much time  
waiting for things to get better.

We pay little attention to the  
hours winding down.

The hours we'll want more of  
in the end ...

hours that we wish we  
hadn't taken for granted.

The idea of complacency  
has always terrified me.

I've always been impatient.

In middle school,  
I wanted more friends.

I wanted to be better liked  
and by more people.

I wanted to be less anxious  
and more social.

I wanted to be like  
my best friend.  
You could pick her face  
out of a crowd,  
she always seemed to  
be shining.

I wanted to move away.  
I wanted to be on my own.

Looking back, it seems like  
I spent the entirety of my  
teenage years in waiting.

There was always something  
*more* that I wanted.  
And it was always  
out of reach.

I felt out of control  
in my own life.

My anxiety steered me in  
whatever direction it wanted,  
regardless of how miserable I was  
and how often I prayed  
for it to get better.

But it did, eventually

When I took my life  
into my own hands  
and steered it towards  
my future.

Not to say I didn't  
crash-land at times,

but that only pushed me  
to fight harder

and never settle for anything  
less than what I  
wanted.

When we throw away our  
old bouquets,

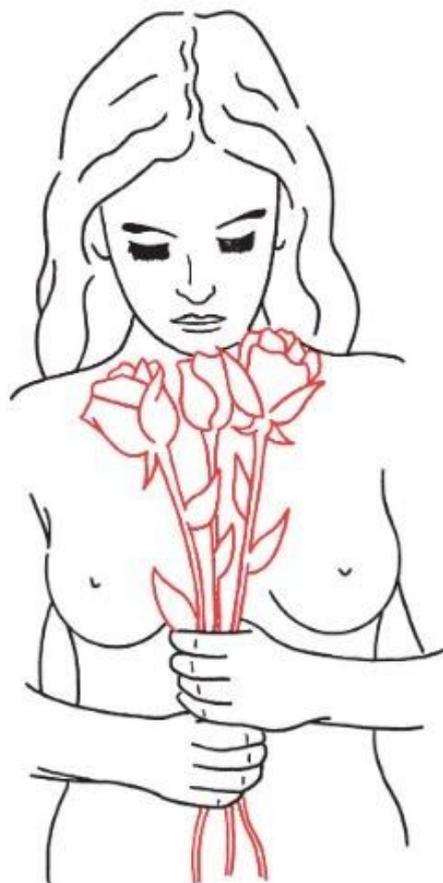
we don't regret buying them  
in the first place.

We live knowing that there  
will be an expiration date.

We don't let it stop us from  
accepting the beauty that  
lives in small doses.

Nothing is ever wasted.

The beauty of something  
doesn't cease to exist just  
because it ends.



I was trying to sleep.

I could see the sun  
through my closed eyes,  
falling on the pillow next to me.

The city's voice outside  
mixed with the white noise  
of my bedroom.

The stillness of everything.

I remembered an  
unremarkable moment

of similar stillness  
from a younger time.

The sound outside aligned me  
with a former version of myself.

And I suddenly felt the gravity  
of my being.

There was a realization of  
how much we take in

or rather,

how little of our lives  
we actually remember ...

and how many small moments  
we lose over time.

We're here, every minute,  
every hour.

Yet we only remember  
fractions of our lives.

I don't know why this particular  
feeling made my heart heavy.

But I found comfort in knowing that  
I can find this connection  
with myself,

a reminder of my own gravity,  
even when I'm not looking for it.



I don't know if I believe in meditation.

I think it's kind of bullshit  
but maybe that's because  
I've never been able to do it.

How can anyone possibly turn off  
their mind and just be?

How do you find a quiet moment  
inside of yourself?  
Let alone in this loud city.

I try to picture my mind

as being empty.  
Tumbleweeds.  
White walls.  
With no swirling emotions  
or rapid heartbeat.

But I still see flashes of thoughts,  
like lights turning on and off.  
Anxieties, that I quickly try  
to push away  
only to have them reappear  
seconds later.

I can't seem to drop  
this acute awareness  
or get my footing on this  
peaceful ground.

Whoever preaches  
meditation as a way of  
combating this marathon of  
ideas must be lying.  
Or else their mind is built in  
such a radically different way  
than mine.

Someone with my mind has  
to take pen to paper to get  
the thoughts out,  
otherwise they're ricocheting  
across my brain  
with no pattern and no  
brakes.

Many of them are  
unreasonable,  
as anxieties tend to be.

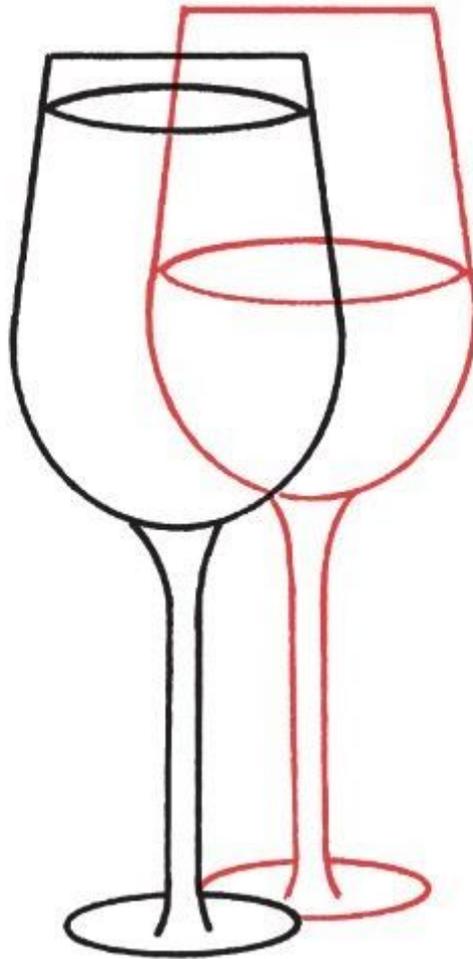
Projecting emotions that  
I think I might have.

Terrified of things that  
may never come to  
fruition.

Worrying myself to death  
over possibilities that are  
more fictional than real.

Perhaps, someday  
I'll find *somewhere* quiet  
enough to drown out the  
loud noise that  
only I can hear.

Or I'll find *someone*  
to help me shut off  
my mind.  
Rock my anxiety to sleep  
and tuck it away  
safe  
and sound.



I don't know why I came  
to this place alone.

I can feel myself slowly  
getting drunk.

I feel the burn in my stomach  
as the alcohol tries to sit nicely.

I don't even drink,

I only started because of you.

I ordered your favorite food.

I don't know why.

Maybe to summon you,  
to feel like you were here  
with me.

But the uneaten plate  
looks pathetic.

Or maybe that's just me.

I'm getting the two confused.

Maybe I'm just sad and drunk

They seem to be one  
and the same.

Maybe each bottle  
behind the bartender's head  
represents some other sad  
person in the world trying to  
summon someone

or something.

But the plate stays untouched.

Wasted.

Both of us.

4am.

I built a wall around myself  
as our conversation spiraled  
and my hope faded.

I wrapped myself in a  
blanket

like a shield

and felt the concrete blocks  
of the freshly paved wall  
around me start to harden.

I slept at the edge of the bed,  
far away from the stranger at  
the other end.

I'm being turned inside out,

forced to scrape the bottom  
of the barrel in order to give  
you more of me.

But what happens when you  
already have everything?

And you still want more.

What shall I do then?

And how long will it take for  
me to lose myself?

when did you become this hardened?

using aggression instead of love.

you've always been strong

but this is different.

this is survival.

this is from being torn down into  
rubble and building yourself back up,  
forming bricks from crushed  
fragments.

who made you this fighter?

who took away your loving self?

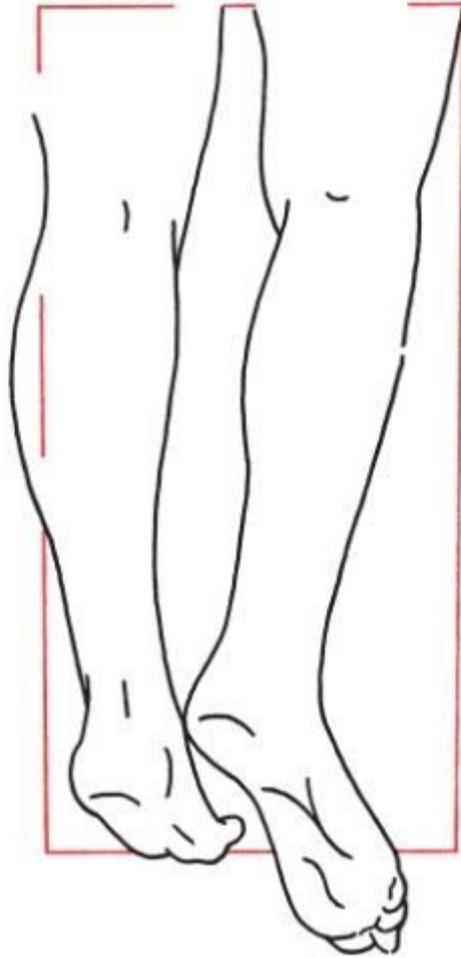
It's sad leaving these  
places behind.

It's as if I've buried  
pieces of myself here,  
tucked away in the sand.

This small moment  
is ending,  
and I'll never have it back.

I'm lucky enough to have  
had it to begin with.

It's a bittersweet ending  
when you remember that  
time doesn't repeat itself.



There are once in a lifetime chapters that are finite.

The specificity of these last few days are only lived once.

That's what makes them beautiful, I suppose.

The exhilaration in arriving, knowing new experiences await you.

Then a somber departure, knowing those firsts are over.

So here's to making

your mark

and leaving traceable  
footsteps behind as you  
continue on.

I want to frame that  
picture of us,

the one with your hands

wrapped around my waist.

as if we're two dancing  
figurines

sculpted into one.

The sound of rain  
ceased to exist

and all I felt was the breath  
from your lips

like warm summer air  
on my neck.

It will always seem  
strange to me

to see the flushed faces  
of the people who meet  
him.

I always notice their  
hands trembling,

most too shy to even  
look in his eyes.

I can't blame them.

He's beautiful.

Which I call him,

often,

much to his dismay.

"You're so beautiful,"

and he gives me a look  
before he smiles in a way  
that people do when  
they're bad at accepting  
compliments.

With millions of  
admirers

you'd think it would be  
hard to be with only me.

If you could have  
anyone in the world,

why would you settle  
for one?

But it's not like that.

It is rare to find  
someone who sees past  
the sea of people who  
follow your every move  
and hang on your every  
word.

I see how rare it is to know  
him,

truly know him.

And when he turns from  
them  
after however long,

he puts his hand into mine.

It's just the two of us again

and I know him better  
than anyone in the world.

You are the treasure  
I have earned after  
multiple lifetimes of  
good behavior.



he falls asleep whispering  
sweet nothings into my neck.

if his words left their mark,  
I'd have no blank space left.

of all the elements,  
I'll say that I'm snow.  
melting on impact  
from your warmth.

I can hear the  
piano keys from the  
instrumental song  
that I love,

when you look at me

with your soft eyes.

The sun came out for us  
that day.

After we walked the shoveled path,  
elevated above the frozen lake.

My feet sank deep into the snow  
and I laughed.

Losing my balance in the  
high altitude

with my bare fingers prickling  
from the cold.

I didn't feel beautiful that day,  
stumbling in front of your lens.

But you capture me in moments that  
I've never noticed before.

I see myself through your eyes.

Red cheeks and messy hair that  
I'm always moving out of my face.

And the light

from the sun

that came out just for us.

you were a rose  
without thorns.

a straight stem with  
smooth edges.

poisoned petals were  
what you kept from me,

in place of not allowing  
my fingers to bleed.

These days I startle so easily  
from my sleep.

My body reacts violently  
to waking up, as if it was never  
intending to do so.

It's like that falling nightmare

falling

falling

waking up with a sharp breath  
before I hit the ground

and realize that I'm safe.

But maybe I'm only safe  
in my dreams

and the real fall  
begins when I wake.

how do you answer your  
body's distress call?

how do you drown out the  
sound of your own voice?

from a glass, a quarter full,

rolled into thick paper,

or perfectly parallel lines.

how do you self-medicate?

how do you resuscitate  
your droning pulse?

standing naked in the  
cold air,

lungs hot and screaming.

or with hands up  
in some fast car,

blurred red lights  
dyeing your skin.

a sense of longing becomes  
overwhelmingly present  
when I am surrounded by  
all of these people.

have I always been  
unhappy?

or is it just now?

all of a sudden,

as if I should've seen it  
before.

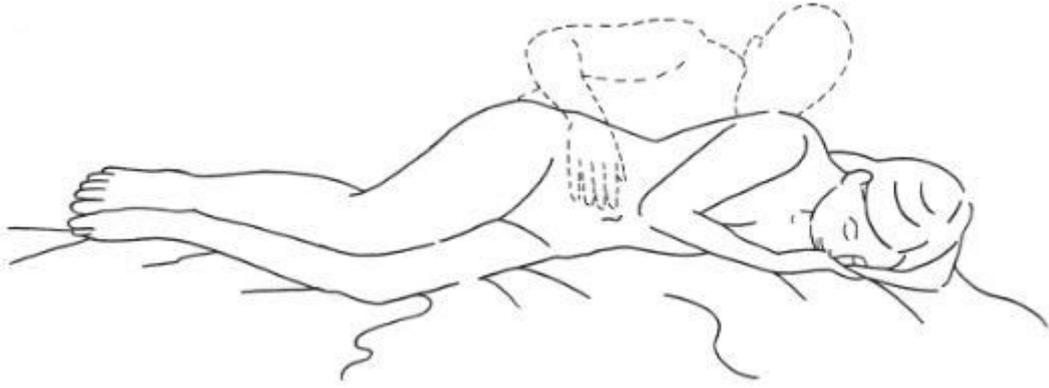
and I'm wondering why I  
didn't recognize the long  
line of unease.

a string that's been there

all along

underneath

finally becoming untangled.



I feel your phantom hand  
resting on my waist.

I have to stop myself  
from turning around

so as not to confront  
your ghost

and the weight of  
missing you.

I can feel your breath on  
my cheek.

with eyes closed I tilt my  
head up towards you

expecting to see your  
sleeping face.

but when my eyes open,

the recycled air from  
dusty vents  
is all that's left to breathe  
on me.

for a while I considered you  
a misguided step.

until my feet got  
comfortable slipping  
through the cracks

and I found myself settling  
into the grooves of your  
worn-out cement.

and I fall,

like a shunned angel  
who's been disgraced

back into your folds.



nothing compares to  
the hole that I feel

when it hits me  
again that I can't  
make you happy.

and even my  
everything will not  
fulfill you.

From the outside

it's hard to imagine why  
anyone would stay.

How can she survive  
being torn in these different  
directions?

She doesn't bend that way.

And yet, she will.

For him.

with our backs  
facing towards each other

she could almost pass for you.

I keep thinking that she is.

the tossing under the sheets  
sounds the same.

in the dark,

I can't see who's moving anymore—

me or her.

all I know is,

it's not you.  
and she never will be.

I never felt  
claustrophobic in  
crowds until I was  
forced into them.

I used to feel like  
part of these people  
among the masses.

Now I feel like a  
rock in the stream

that everything  
works its way  
around.

I'm still

and unmoving.

Stuck.

While everyone else  
is free.

let me be this poem,

this paper lying  
unassumingly on your desk.

the napkin for your morning coffee,

to gently graze your lips.

It is a privilege to know you  
in such a way that no one else does.

To be the someone who sees  
your intimate self so completely.



use my chest  
to rest your head

I swear I'll never move again.

People wish for me to be this  
trailblazing girl.

The one who has marked out a  
path for others to follow

on how to be happy,

how to fight when  
your limbs feel broken.

Sometimes I feel like a fraud.

But then again,  
I never said I was happy.

I've never advertised a cure.

I've only told the world  
what I feel,

not how to overcome.

It feels fraudulent to be given  
a pat on the back  
for simply telling the truth.

Take care of the people  
you love

without expecting  
a reward

for being a giving and  
caring person.

Otherwise you will end  
up living in your big,  
beautiful house

alone.

Unknowingly homeless.

It's strange to see the world  
move on

when someone you love gets  
taken from you.

The small space surrounding  
you is stuck,

frozen in a moment

of loss

and shock.

Yet the people passing  
are continuing on at their  
normal pace.

Did they not feel the earth  
shake? Or slow?

Can they hear the thoughts  
screaming in my head?

Their name.

Their face.

Memories.

Flashes.

Of a friend.

A lost friend.

We always expect the earth  
to stand still—

for the universe to grieve  
the loved ones we have lost  
along with us.

But it keeps moving.

Maybe as a sign that we  
should, too.

The movement of strangers,  
like a wave, taking us with  
them.

So we ebb and flow with the  
passage of others,  
coasting off their energy  
while preserving our own.

Because it's too hard to give  
anything right now,  
to anyone.

Except for them,  
the one we've lost.

And we pray that they're  
silently moving in  
tandem with us,

guiding us through the  
waves when we  
can't swim.

Love is the only thing  
we can offer one another at this point.

So love really fucking hard.  
Always.

## Acknowledgments

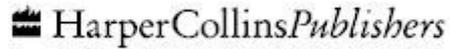
First and foremost, I want to thank my beautiful family: Chloe, Tess, Amy, and Dan. I couldn't ask for more supportive parents or encouraging sisters. Also to my grandparents, Rodney and Corinne, and William and Madeline. Of course, I couldn't have made this book without the fans who have rallied around me. I am blessed to be on the receiving end of such passionate, encouraging supporters.

To my sweet Delilah, for having been such a source of light in my life.

Thank you to Danie Streisand and Dara Gordon for being the powerhouse duo of agent and manager that you are. Thank you to my entire team: Michael Mahan, Jodi Gottlieb, and Meredith Miller.

Thank you to my team at St. Martin's Publishing Group, and to Sarah Cantin, my editor, who believed in me during the earliest drafts of this book. You took me seriously as a writer and guided me into writing the best possible version of *Swimming Lessons*. I am incredibly grateful for your faith in me.

Thank you to my close friends and loves of my life, you know who you are.



## **About the Publisher**

### **Australia**

HarperCollins Publishers Australia Pty. Ltd.  
Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street  
Sydney, NSW 2000, Australia  
[www.harpercollins.com.au](http://www.harpercollins.com.au)

### **Canada**

HarperCollins Canada  
Bay Adelaide Centre, East Tower  
22 Adelaide Street West, 41st Floor  
Toronto, Ontario, M5H 4E3  
[www.harpercollins.ca](http://www.harpercollins.ca)

### **India**

HarperCollins India  
A75, Sector 57  
Noida, Uttar Pradesh 201 301, India  
[www.harpercollins.co.in](http://www.harpercollins.co.in)

### **New Zealand**

HarperCollins Publishers New Zealand  
Unit D1, 63 Apollo Drive  
Rosedale 0632  
Auckland, New Zealand  
[www.harpercollins.co.nz](http://www.harpercollins.co.nz)

### **United Kingdom**

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.  
1 London Bridge Street  
London SE1 9GF, UK  
[www.harpercollins.co.uk](http://www.harpercollins.co.uk)

### **United States**

HarperCollins Publishers Inc.  
195 Broadway  
New York, NY 10007  
[www.harpercollins.com](http://www.harpercollins.com)