

Salem State University

The Graduate School

Department of English

Emotional Flashbacks

A Manuscript in English: Creative Writing

By

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For Braelyn and William

Table of Contents

I. Poetry

PTSD... 7

The Side Effects of Growing Up with My Dad... 8

Kathleen... 9

Depression Teaches Me... 10

Mental Breakdowns Be Like... 11

Sylvia Plath Conspiracy Theory... 12

The Danvers Lunatic Hospital... 13

II. Prose

Through The Gas Lights... 15

III. Poetry

2002... 27

My Tattoos Cover Self Harm Scars... 28

Your Breath Always Reeked Like Whiskey on Wednesday Mornings... 29

Natural Disasters... 30

Are You There Mom? It's Me, Courtney... 31

The Welch Dickey Loop... 32-33

Autumn on the Osseo Trail... 34

Dear Summer... 35

IV. Prose

Welcome Back Josh Gordon... 37

V. Poetry

Fuck the Patriarchy... 56
First World Problems... 57
Thirteen... 58
Bussy... 59
The Benefits of Trauma... 60
Finding Gratitude... 61-62

I.

PTSD

Parts of my brain are

B / r / o / k / e / n.

Overwhelmed.

I

have

Trouble sleeping,

waking up from

V I V I D

dreams

e

v

e

r

y

morning,

Soaking wet,

from flashbacks

that

i/ n/ t/ e/ r/ r/ u/ p/ t/

and

i- n- t- e- r- f- e- r- e-

D e r a i l i n g

My—

Train—

Of—

Thought.

f/- r/- a/- g/- m/- e/- n/- t/- i/- n/- g

t h e s e sentences...

I try to write.

The Side of Effects of Growing Up with My Dad

The brain upon experiencing mental trauma stands hypervigilant. Dependent upon the cause as much as the individual effects, it commands itself to adapt, changing its structure and chemistry. It creates an irreversible impact that disrupts normal function resulting in an abundance of overactivity notifying those parts most essential for these adjustments.

It sends its first message to the amygdala where emotional responses are formed, telling it to be more fearful. Next it advises the hippocampus, responsible for learning and storing memories, to shrink. Last, it cautions the prefrontal cortex to reduce its higher-level thinking and reasoning, making thoughts more irrational.

When experiencing distress in childhood the brain never learns to wire itself in the correct way. Forced to form its own road map suited for the specific strain of suffering it creates unsteady connections only durable enough to ensure an ephemeral existence sufficient in youth. They must be rebuilt and repaired on a constant basis. Unable to withstand the distance, These links break down, forming fractures with age.

Kathleen

When I met her she was only twenty-six,
but had already lived an entire lifetime.
Born to an alcoholic teen mother
and a dead-beat dad, she grew up fast.
And in the projects. A place where hope
has no home and dreams are destroyed
by poverty. She had ambition
like a dandelion. She fell in love with music,
playing percussion for Miss Jeanette's
All Girl Drum and Bugle corp.
She taught herself how to dance,
performing in local competitions
in handmade costumes she taught
herself to sew. But then she fell in love
with the human form of vinegar.
Smothering her, watching her wither away,
He siphoned out every aspiration
she had within her.

Depression Teaches Me

You could be hope/
Ful, and still want to die.
You could be no/
Where, and still want to hide.
You could be peace/
Ful, and still want to scream.
You could be wide/
Awake, and still want to sleep.
You could be any/
Thing, and still want to change.
You could be cheer/
Ful, and still want to cry.
You could be hope/
Less, and still want to live.

Mental Breakdowns Be Like

It starts in my bones as a low cold dull ache,
feverish, and settles deep within.
Moving to my chest it creates an urge to scream
that lingers, burning, begging to be soothed
like an itch that can never be scratched.
I'm angry and sad and I wish to be alone
and comforted all at the same time.
My head starts to spin and the walls
that surround me begin to close in.
I feel trapped.
My legs shake and my breath
turns into gasps as I suffocate on my tears
making it impossible to retain air long enough
for the oxygen to replenish itself within my body.
It never refills enough.
But I'm distracted by the knots
that form in my stomach, tightening, and squeezing
my insides until I'm rocking back and forth,
lying on the floor, trying to find some sort of solace
imagining the relief I would feel smashing every
single object around me, howling like a wild animal
escaped from its cage until my throat dries up
and no longer permits any more noise to emerge,
using all my strength and whatever object I can find
to turn larger objects into smaller unrecognizable
pieces of their former selves, smashing them even more,
until my arms get weak, my body perspires,
and they lay scattered.
Like the chaos in my head.
But instead of violence I choose rest,
grounding myself to the floor long enough for the
spiraling to stop, a momentary pause between breakdowns
that brings me back to the present tense.

The Danvers Lunatic Hospital

The hospital on Hathorne Hill sat empty,
abandoned decaying, boxed up
with boards over broken doors
for fourteen years, daring rebellious teens
to explore its grounds, to break
through the protective layer
of poison ivy surrounding it.
They took back with them souvenirs
in the form of itchy, enflamed, pus-filled bumps,
proving they had been fearless.
They defied signs warning of the consequences
of trespassing and claims from locals
it was haunted by those who once called
this house of horrors their home,
enduring inhumane treatments
that left them lobotomized and alone
drawing on the walls with crayons.
Later, it became a drinking spot
for the underage. Now, suburban luxury
condos offering its residents a swimming pool,
fitness center, and an easy commute.

Sylvia Plath Conspiracy Theory

In the summer, I prefer long days at the beach—
sitting under the hot sun, listening to the sound
of the waves, making angels in the sand—covering,
catching, and collecting granular particles in every
crevice—between toes, under bathing suit pieces—
driving home shoeless, sunkissed and sticky
with sweat using no ac for reprieve—in the car or
at home, rather just the occasional breeze
offered to me through open windows—absorbing
every bit of warmth the season has to offer
to take with me into winter that can sometimes
be so cold that I wish to live in the oven.
Perhaps Sylvia Plath was just trying to stay warm—
imagining an island paradise away from the frozen
tundra outside her door that February morning.

II.

Through The Gas Lights

*“And now, dear little children, who may this story read,
To idle, silly, flattering words, I pray you ne'er give heed;
Unto an evil counselor close heart, and ear, and eye,
And take a lesson from this tale of the Spider and the Fly.”*

As a child my dad loved telling stories. Sometimes these stories were made up, figments of his imagination. Great adventures of characters with strange names trying to escape from evil people in hot air balloons. Other times he would read from a book. When my mom and dad were together, he would alternate, choosing between the always expanding collection of children's books that filled the large brown bookshelf sitting in the corner of the small room I shared with my sister. After she kicked him out and he no longer had access to this small library of literature, he started reading the same story every night during our overnight visits at his new apartment, “The Spider and the Fly,” the story of a cunning spider that manages to charm a fly into walking right into its web. After tucking me, my sister, and my brother into the pull-out couch in the living room he would sit leaning over us, holding the familiar black leather book clasped in his hands. Before beginning he would ask “Ready?”

And we would nod as he opened it like it was the first time he was reading it to us, trying to draw us in with excitement, as if we didn't already know the outcome. He never needed to look at the words printed on the thin paper as he read, relying on his memory, adding additional commentary to certain sections. “Oh no,” he would say at the part where the fly first met the spider. Or “I wonder if he's going to fall for it,” after the spider would make flattering remarks. And we would play along, as if we didn't know how the story ended, “oohing” and “aahing,”

repeating his “oh no’s” when he reached the part where the fly started to fall for the spider’s antics.

I would always imagine my dad as the spider, and me as the fly, despite him always referring to the spider as a “she” and the fly as a “he.” I felt that he was trying to manipulate me into believing something, much like the spider was doing to the fly. The story, he implied, was a metaphor for what was happening between him and my mom, and he wanted to make sure I was on the “right” side. His side. After finishing he would close the book and stop to look at us. He would say nothing, just stare, as if waiting for the words he had just spoken to resonate. For us to have a moment of clarity, some realization that coincided with his reality. After pausing for a few moments, he would speak.

“Sounds familiar, right?” he’d ask as he stood up, tucking in the blankets one last time. He would lean over kissing us each on the forehead, “Goodnight, see you guys in the morning, I love you,” he’d say before walking off down the hall to his room.

For eleven years I listened to my dad’s stories. And not just stories about spiders and flies and fantastic voyages on hot air balloons. But stories about life. My life and the people in it. My mom, who was a whore for leaving him. His mom and dad and their abuse that made him never let us spend time with them. The eight siblings he had, half of whom I never met because they were “assholes.” When I decided I wasn’t going to listen to those stories anymore, I decided to start telling my own. However, unlike his, mine were true. And when I told those stories to my mom, she told them to DCF, who told them to a judge, who told me I didn’t have to listen to his anymore if I didn’t want to. And I didn’t.

So he started sending letters. I never responded to them. They were just handwritten versions of those same stories, never asking how I was doing, but rather telling me how he

thought I was doing. They were actually somewhat accurate. I *was* angry. But it wasn't because I couldn't see him anymore. It was because I had to see him in the first place. In childhood there is often this moment where we see our parents for who they really are, not the perfect superheroes we grew up thinking they were. I never had that moment. Mine was always a villain to me, even in those early days when he read those stories to me. It's a strange thing to hate your own dad. And maybe I'm being too harsh. But I don't think so.

Dear Courtney,

4/4/99

It's been so long since we've been together. Time is going fast. Before long you'll be 15. Our last weekend together was oct. 1995. We were in "Celtics Pride." Two days later you, and your sister and brother were forced to not see me. It's been a long time not being with your dad. You must be pissed. You'll be used a lot more by these evil people, the more you let them. I know you're afraid of them and you feel you can't do anything. Well you can. Say no! Ask why! Demand fairness! When someone tells you no! Ask why! Demand why! Our time will come!

We stood outside the arena for what felt like hours, waiting for my dad to procure tickets for that day's event, much like he did every other time we needed proof of admission to get into something, the good old-fashioned way, scalping. He would argue with random men on the street in front of his kids about how much weed they should accept in lieu of cash for said tickets. He was always determined to find the best bargain, and that day was no exception. He didn't settle until he felt satisfied with the exchange. He hated feeling like he had been cheated or taken advantage of, so he took his time while us kids waited. This day we amused ourselves by kicking wet leaves on the sidewalk and making faces while he wasn't looking. It didn't help that it was

overcast, which made the already chilly October day even colder. I tried warming my hands in the pockets of my blue corduroy jacket. The longer we stood out there, the more nervous I grew hearing the crowd inside already cheering. *Would we even make it in before it was over?* But just when I had almost given up hope, I heard my dad. “Let’s go Court, it’s time to go in.”

The first thing I noticed as we entered the old Boston Garden was the smell of popcorn, a smell so thick you could see it in the air, a large cloud that warmed me as it wafted through the sea of people all dressed in green, settling, and sticking to the hair and clothing of all those in attendance. The crowd was even louder inside than outside. As we made our way through them, our feet squeaked on the shiny wooden floor emblazoned with the Leprechaun logo mid court. I watched as those in the front row all grappled, trying to get closer, hoping for a chance to be on camera for the movie they were filming that day, “Celtics Pride.”

This was a far different experience than the last time I had been to the Garden, many years earlier, for a much smaller event, watching a Celtics practice. I had been able to attend that event because of my nana’s job working for social services. It might have been the only perk of her job, but at least it meant we didn’t have to wait outside trying to get tickets. My mom just walked through the turnstiles, my sister, brother, and me in tow.

The basketball game filmed for the movie that day was simulated, not using any of the actual players on the team. It was a minute component of it compared to the scenes they were filming with the actors in the stands. We were extras, mere background noise, with the director treating us as such, giving us cues to cheer or boo, something I grew tired of well before it was over. My dad, however, ate it up, immersing himself in every bit of it, yelling louder than everyone around us, refusing to sit down. He tried to force his excitement on us, taking out wads of cash secured in rubber bands, promising to buy us whatever we wanted. He laughed as he

handed over \$100 bills to the vendor, “this was getting too heavy in my back pocket anyway, do you think you have enough change for all this?” He got one of those foam fingers. It was green with shamrocks, just like the ones they sell at real Celtics games. Except this one said “Celtics Pride” on it. We all took turns wearing it. Holding it up high, shaking it in the air, standing up, forcing it even higher when the wave would roll through our section. It was the most fun we had all day but grew tiring and after our bellies were full and the charm wore off, we wanted to go home. But we couldn’t tell him that. For all he knew or cared to know was that he was having fun, and for him that meant we were all having fun. He was still waiting for his time to shine, so he was determined to sit there until it was over, believing that day would be the day he would have his big break. “I spent all this money on you, how are you not having fun?” I imagined him saying. “You’re just unappreciative pieces of shit that ruin everything,” And that was just something I didn’t want to deal with, no matter how tired or bored I was. His tantrums were known to last as long as he saw fit, sometimes hours, until he felt as though he had accomplished making us feel as bad as we had made him feel. I think sometimes he forgot that he was the adult.

My dad wanted to be a movie star more than anything. He was always telling us he was more suited for California than Massachusetts, wishing he had moved there, thinking that was all one had to do to become a successful actor. But he never did, no matter how much I wished he did. When we visited him, he would alternate between trying to convince us that he was John Wayne or George Michael anytime either of them was on TV. I would laugh about this later in life after George came out as gay, given my dad’s disdain for homosexuality. He loved old westerns and would force us to watch them often, pointing at John Wayne each time saying, “look at that handsome son of a gun,” turning to the big black iron framed mirror hanging on the

wall in the living room, looking at us through it, saying, “What, you don’t think I’m handsome enough? He wishes he was as good looking as me!” We’d laugh to appease him, but even at a young age I found it pathetic how much my dad loved being seen and how much he required constant validation.

We left the Garden at the conclusion of the filming for that day. We trickled out and down the stairs with the crowd, unaware that would be the last day we would all spend with my dad. DCF had gotten involved months prior, after we began complaining to our mom about having to see him. We told her about how he would spend the majority of our visits talking about her and her new husband. He would tell us they were evil, referring to my mom as “that whore,” and her husband as “chicken chest.” He’d get so mad when he spoke about them he would spit while he talked. We told them about his impatience with us. The hitting and kicking and yelling that would occur when we would do something that he found irritating. Like how he would scream at me everytime I would clear my throat, which was a nervous tick I had developed when I was with him. We told her we were sick of being used as a means of trying to make her mad. As he insisted on always bringing us home late from our visits, forcing her to stay up late and wait.

In response to this she brought these issues before probate court where a judge ordered us to go to a psychiatrist. He was a short, balding man, with glasses, who wore a sweater vest. He was very straightforward and cold. He would ask us questions in a very matter of fact manner; “How often does your dad hit you? Are you scared of him?” He’d write our responses on a yellow line notepad as we spoke, not offering us any comfort as we answered. He asked us what we hoped would come out of this and we made our demands clear to him, "Dad needs to seek help, or we are no longer comfortable seeing him." At that same time, we began seeing the

psychiatrist, DCF went to our school, questioning our teachers, telling them to report any bruises or markings they noticed on our bodies or unusual behavior. They also went to my dad's house to investigate the bag of drugs in the freezer he would brag to us about. He swapped it out for clothes before they arrived, laughing, calling us rats and stool pigeons while he told us about how he had fooled them, "I told them I kept my clothes in the bag so after I went running, I would have cold clothes to put on."

If you asked my dad what his greatest accomplishment in life is, he would tell you it was getting his driver's license. And, if you ever sifted through his rap sheet, you would agree. He would complain to us that his mother had never gotten hers, so he began learning on his own long before he was even of the legal driving age, choosing to obtain this over a diploma, dropping out of school in the eighth grade. Being self-taught, he felt that meant he was a good driver, because nobody could teach him better than himself. As a passenger, I have witnessed countless instances of road rage. If we were stuck in traffic, he'd hurl insults out the window at the people in the cars in front of us, or chase down anyone that cut him off, spitting at their car out his window, shouting for them to pull over so he could give them the punishment he felt they deserved. This behavior often resulted in car accidents that "weren't his fault."

He attempted to join the Marines, following in his older brothers' footsteps, but received a dishonorable discharge from the military, for reasons unknown to me, though I could guess. After adding that blemish to his record, and not having an education that extended past the eighth grade, there were few career options available for him. So, he settled on driving a limo during the day and selling drugs in his spare time. When my parents were together my dad was able to separate his illegal activities from his time with us. Driving around for a probably made it easier for him to run his "errands." However, after the separation these "errands" became an integral

part of our visitations with him. After picking us up for the weekend, the first stop would be to Frenchy's, a flower shop, but he never left with any flowers. During the weekends he would take us to meet with his "friends" at Wonderland, letting us bet on the greyhounds while they talked, visiting my aunt at her restaurant in Peabody. I found out later in life it had been, at that time, the biggest coke bar in the area. When we weren't meeting anyone anywhere, he would drive to highly populated areas, parking at gas stations in Revere, leaving us in the car for what felt like hours, while he went to do what he needed to do, assuring us he would be right back.

At the time I understood this involved drugs as he was very open about it, bragging about the wads of hundred-dollar bills hidden in random places throughout his apartment— shoes, boxes under the bed, the freezer. He would smoke weed in front of us like it was something all parents did, laughing about how high it would make him. But I never minded, as it allowed me to use monopoly money at the corner store by mom's house when my sister and I would ride our bikes there to buy snacks because the guy at the counter bought coke from him.

I never understood that what my dad was doing was illegal. He made it seem so normal. And he acted like he was untouchable. "I'm a tough motherfucker," he would brag, though he never convinced me. He was impatient, often kicking me if I walked upstairs ahead of him too slowly. I'd hold in tears, and laugh at him instead, telling him it didn't hurt to enrage him even more. He didn't intimidate me the way he did other people. He was tall, well over six feet, and ready to fly off the handle at any moment. He had dark, deep-set eyes that, when he was angry, would become beady and threatening. I can imagine the people he interacted with viewed him as a loose cannon, causing them to feel uneasy. It showed. They were careful when they spoke to him, agreeing with everything he said to not upset him because once he started on one of his

tirades, he never knew how to stop. He did not like feeling disrespected, and he would make sure you felt the sting if you did.

One day, during a weekend visit with my dad, I convinced him to let me play with the large collection of Barbies he had bought me. Despite buying them all for me, playing with them was something he never let me do as he felt it was too messy. He would often start screaming “inventory” at random increments while I was playing to ensure that every doll and its corresponding accessories were still accounted for and not scattered and lost under furniture. Even the small plastic shoes. I had been using them in the living room with my brother and sister, when there was a knock on the door. It seemed ordinary, and he went to answer it. Upon opening it, however, the ferocity with which the two men entered the apartment, forcing their way in, and the knives they were wielding, made it clear that this visit was anything but ordinary. My dad attempted to push them out but was overpowered, and they were able to enter the living room. Neither of the men looked familiar to me, and they looked just as surprised to see kids in his apartment as we were to see them.

One of the men brought my dad into his bedroom down the hall across from the bathroom. The other, with the long gray beard and denim overalls, stayed in the living room with us kids. He looked uncomfortable, and he tried talking to us, telling us not to be nervous, “They are just talking,” he tried assuring us, “we won’t be here long.”

I was seven, but I was not stupid, and I decided after a few moments that I did not want to be in this room with this strange man any longer, so I started screaming that I needed to go to the bathroom. I didn’t have to go to the bathroom. At first the man tried to tell me no, but each time he did I got louder, until he folded.

“I’ll walk you down the hall, but they need to come,” he said, motioning towards my brother and sister. He had us lead the way, following behind. I can imagine he was trying to ensure that we wouldn’t try to run out of the house. As we walked, he began instructing me.

“Go quick, I will wait outside the door and then we have to go back to the living room.” We all nodded, and my brother and sister seemed nervous. They knew I wasn’t very good at following directions, especially from strange men I didn’t know. So, they knew I had no plans of going into the bathroom. As we came upon my dad’s room, I saw the door was wide open and walked over to it while the man that had been with us started yelling after me “hey, hey!” But he didn’t move fast enough, and I saw my dad standing while the other man held a knife to his throat. My dad was holding a pillowcase, filling it with what I could only imagine was drugs and money. The last thing I remember was my sister screaming. And then they were gone. I was back in the living room on the floor playing with my Barbies while my dad was on the phone yelling “They’re dead.” But I didn’t mind. He was so focused on exacting his revenge that I got to play with my toys the rest of the day.

The last time I saw my dad was at my brother’s wedding almost a decade ago. It was about a month after my son was born. He acted like father of the year, congratulating me on the birth of my son, offering me a bottle of one of the expensive bottles of champagne he had brought. And he gave me a card with two hundred dollars in it. I thanked him and did my best to avoid him. He had met my daughter years before when I allowed him to come and visit at my in-laws house. My ex-husband’s dad had known him from childhood, as they grew up in the same neighborhood in Lynn. His memories of my dad differed from my own. It had been years since I had gotten a letter from him, and I had hoped he had evolved since the last time I had seen him. Upon arriving he was on his best behavior. We caught up and he didn’t mention my mom or any

of the other topics he would address in his letters. He even remarked on how much my daughter looked like me when I was a baby. After that meeting, he sent a letter thanking me, and we kept in contact for a few months, meeting for dinner when I would travel back to the North Shore area from the South Shore where I was living. Then my ex and I decided to get divorced, and this facade of the doting grandfather crumbled faster than my marriage and he again started sending me letters that sounded a lot more familiar than the man I had tried to invite back into my life.

“In 2006, at your brother’s graduation I see you and you don’t say a word to me. Fast forward to getting pregnant and not telling me or letting me see her. I got to tell you that you are only hurting yourself. You are what you were taught. I’ve already been through that with someone. Doing everything possible including lying to destroy a relationship with my own children.”

After reading that it was evident there had been no growth in his life since I had last seen him and decided that I would never allow him near me and my daughter ever again. I guess I should have known better.

Back on that day years ago when we all met that day at the psychiatrist’s office and we told him he needed help, he didn’t agree. “There’s nothing wrong with me,” he said, scoffing at us, claiming he wasn’t the one that needed help. He referred to the psychiatrist as a “shrink.” “Because they shrink your brain,” he would tell us. As far as he was concerned, he was the best dad in the world. But Best Dad’s in the world don’t send their daughters letters that start like this.

Dear Courtney,

First of all, I forgive you. I would ask you to forgive me but there is nothing for you to forgive regarding me.

III.

2002

I met the boy who I thought was going to save me when I was sixteen.
We partied together building a friendship on his ability to drive,
his reliable source for supplying alcohol and his friends hope
that my friends and I would get drunk enough for them to get lucky.
Until that first night we hung out alone. Parked in the woods
behind your parent's big house on Icehouse Lane in the beat-up white Taurus
your dad gave you. In the front seat I rested my head across your lap
becoming absorbed in your blues eyes while we revealed parts of our souls,
trading war stories, your moms drinking problem for my dad's hitting problem.
You were the first person I ever met who was broken like me
and we were the first people we told why. I decided in that moment
I never wanted you to let me go. And you didn't. Letting me scoot up
close to you in the car every time you'd pick me up after school.
I'd wrap my arm around yours like I did in the booth at TGI Fridays
when we'd manage to scrape together a few bucks for dinner
kissing your shoulder while you squeezed my hand three times,
like your mom did when you were a kid. You told me you loved me,
with a claddagh ring that I wore just the way you showed me.
On my right hand with the heart facing inwards. And I told you that even
if we were together forever, it still wouldn't be enough time. And we tried.
Spending every day together in your dad's basement the summer before
you went to college we'd lay snuggled up on the mattress on the floor
watching every single *Friday the Thirteenth* movie until
he left the state to pursue your dreams and I fell apart.

My Tattoos Cover Self-Harm Scars

I collect tattoos like stickers.
Except mine can't be stored away,
hidden in half inch binders,
pressed neatly between plastic pages
for only my eyes to admire.
Mine are always on display.
Visible, like paintings on a wall.
Either eliciting admiration from those
who call me brave, or harsh judgments
from those who call me foolish.
Permanent souvenirs on my skin,
Like looking through stained-glass windows
an outward expression of my soul
receiving compliments as much as criticism.
My left arm dedicated to Poe a raven, a dagger,
an anatomical heart, either disgusts or delights.
I'm often reminded that these images
are a waste of money that will succumb to age
and turn to wrinkles causing them to lose
their shape and color
becoming indistinguishable blots.
But I'll always see them as markings
of strength that covers records of trauma.
A fire breathing dragon on my thigh,
a lady on my back wearing an octopus
on her head, both assigned a price
that could never represent how important
they are— reminders of times passed,
covering places of weakness,
inscriptions over scars. Once white
lines on my arms, now vibrant,
taking the shape of flowers
adorning matching teacups
illuminating areas once flawed
with beauty, creating a memorial
for everything I've ever loved.

Your Breath Always Reeked Like Whiskey on Wednesday Mornings

On Tuesday nights
I'd lie in bed,
staring up at the ceiling,
trying to lull myself to sleep.
I'd focus on the fan,
sometimes spinning,
until the way it curved just a little bit
too much to the left
started to make me nervous,
forcing me to switch my gaze
towards my window.
When it was wide open on a windy night
and the moon would position itself behind the tree
next to the neighbor's house
irradiating the leaves. I'd listen to them move.
The perfect background music for overthinking.
I'd worry if you'd make it home.
If I'd see you the next day.
And sometimes I'd cry,
waiting for a response
long after I texted you goodnight,
hoping that I had sent it
before you were over served
by heavy handed bartenders,
hindering your ability to respond.
I could never fall asleep
until I received relief
in the form of a two-word text,
either "good night"
or "good morning."

Natural Disasters

Hands rub against mine, reluctant, yet willing,
creating tension as they travel. A resistance
impossible to smother. This friction could
cause a fire he said, looking down
his hands on me but belonging to another.
Conflicted for weeks he gives in
sending one of his intermittent texts.
He comes over knowing he shouldn't
have even gotten in the car,
hoping maybe this time he might not
go too far. But his hands continue to explore.
He looks up, staring at me eyes wide open
This friction can cause a fire, he reminded.
This friction can cause a flood, I thought.

Are You There Mom? It's Me, Courtney

My mother prefers
to express her love
through scripture
offering God as the solution
to all of life's discomforts,
blaming me for being
too stubborn to accept
this truth she believes.
She prays for me.
She tells me
if I look to God,
I'll never have to worry.
He will get me through.
But when I go hiking alone,
she worries.
She doesn't like it.
There are bears.
I could get lost.
I tell her not to worry.
If I see a bear,
or get lost,
I'll just pray.

The Welch Dickey Loop

I decided to go only hours earlier, after days of contemplation, overthinking, and anticipation. I considered everything that could go wrong. I stayed up late the night before researching and saving all I could find on my phone—a map to follow and the experiences of those who preceded me guiding me through the cracked screen, informing me where I should turn if I reached a junction and descriptions of what I should look for if I felt lost.

I started up the four-point-four-mile trail long after sunrise. The path I followed was worn-down and well-marked by yellow paint on trees. As I walked, I kicked up dirt, tripping on rocks. Downed trees blocked trails lined with vegetation, wildflowers, and fruit, but I kept on. I was putting my faith in the only pair of boots available for sale at Walmart this morning: brown clunky, made for men but only thirty dollars. They were holding up better than the pair of fashion boots bought for me decades earlier by my dad trying to impress the pretty woman behind the counter at Gap. “We hike all the time,” he bragged, lying, deciding in that moment the quick afternoon trip to the mall was to become an evening journey hours away up Mount Madison.

In the mountain’s dark he had cursed her, shaking his head, raging at the rubber soles that had ripped away from the front of my new boots soon after we began. They mocked and mimicked him with each step I took, getting caught in the roots camouflaged by the night. I ignored his anger and found calm in the chaos, falling in love with the woods’ stillness. I focused on the sound of the trees as they whispered in the wind, my breath increasing as the trail became more vertical, the nocturnal birds coming alive in the darkness, flushing him out.

I wish I had remembered this escape in my teens. I was like a compass without a magnet. I wandered. Lacking no fixed direction, I carried my resentment like an unwanted companion, too scared to find my way alone. But that morning, I woke up determined. I packed like a novice, trying to ignore the what-ifs but preparing for them. Extra socks, Band-Aids, water and snacks, a small pink bottle of mace in anticipation of predators—bear, moose, or human—all stuffed in an army green ten-dollar backpack. I found only skittish squirrels and chipmunks, and fellow hikers passing with big smiles wishing me a safe hike. I’d hoped they wouldn’t notice my own smile,

nervous and unsure. But anxiety turned to awe
the closer I got. Despite dirt paths disappearing, replaced
by steep rock slabs, cairns guided me to my target.
The view, far more beautiful to the naked eye
than what could ever be captured on camera or by words
revealing itself as I emerged above the treeline.

Autumn on the Osseo Trail

Before trees stand bare their leaves must catch fire,
a grand finale of reds, yellows, and oranges, accented
with hints of pinks, purples, and blues before making
their final descent, surrendering to gravity, scattering
upon the once dull dirt trail, littering it like confetti.
A celebration, looking more alive than ever,
despite being closer to death. Turning brown
in their last phase, they succumb to an inevitable decay
in their final resting place, buried under piles of snow.

Dear Summer,

Please come back, baby, I miss you.
Since you've been gone,
the days have been so much shorter,
and the nights are so much longer.
I miss our trips to the beach,
our hikes in the mountains,
feeling your warmth on my skin.
Even those five am runs
when we would watch the sunrise together--
It's just not the same when you go away.
Everything is so cold without you.
Those other seasons mean nothing to me.
You're all I want, forever and always,
eternally yours.

IV.

Welcome Back Josh Gordon

The day after we broke up for the last time in August, I totaled my car. On impact, every single air bag burst out like a confetti popper. This was no celebration, though. Rather, it was a culmination of fourteen months of me blindly running towards a brick wall covered in red flags thinking I wouldn't end up damaged like my car--which was beyond repair, having pinballed off one car into another. I was left with nothing more than a burn on my left hand from the airbag on the driver's side. However, I didn't feel lucky. I felt like how the outside of my car looked: completely wrecked with shattered glass and dented metal, parts of it scattered all over the road.

I met my ex at a dive bar in the town I grew up in. It was April, playoff time in the NHL, and the Bruins were playing. A friend suggested we go out somewhere and watch it, and as a means of putting off all the homework I needed to do, I agreed. We arrived at the bar halfway through the first period, and as fate would have it there were only two stools left open. They were next to a group of guys. My ex was one of them. I noticed him right away. He was tall and big, the human version of a teddy bear, with a tattoo on his right bicep. He had a thick dark beard and was wearing a flat brimmed TB12 hat. I told him I liked his hat and flirted by asking him stupid questions about hockey. He laughed at my questions, something we joked about throughout our relationship. He had a great laugh. You could tell when he laughed if he meant it or not. I think this was the only real part of him he ever let me see. We talked the entire night. He told me I had beautiful eyes. At the end of the night when we parted, he mentioned that he was a cop. He showed me that his silver Ford Taurus had a button that would set off a siren and a swirl of red and blue lights.

The morning of the car crash I woke up startled. I was in my bed and not on the couch I had passed out on. I felt restless. I was shaking. My head felt like it was spinning even though I

wasn't. My teeth were chattering, like I was cold, but I was sweating. Nothing felt real. There was no trace of the two friends that had driven me home the night before, except for the Bud Heavy sitting alone in the bottom drawer of the fridge. It was all the alcohol they had left in the car when they came to get me, offering it to me as a source of comfort. I declined, deciding instead on a shot of whiskey at home out of the glasses my ex had just bought me while on vacation in South Africa. They had elephants on them that were so cute it made me sad knowing I was going to throw them in the trash right after I used them.

At some point that morning, I decided to go to the hospital. I couldn't stop shaking. I felt like I couldn't breathe. I couldn't do anything but pace. I couldn't find comfort in anything. I tried eating breakfast, drinking tea, but I felt nauseous, and my throat hurt. I was desperate to relax but I couldn't stop thinking about everything that happened the night before and what was going to happen; Was he mad at me? Would he try to contact me? Was this really it forever? It was a continuous loop of worry in my head. I knew I needed to go to the hospital. I had been there before for the same reasons, and it was the only thing I knew that would help.

The first time was in December. I awoke to the sound of my ex mumbling something. It startled me, forcing my eyes open. But I saw only darkness and it made me feel like I was still asleep and dreaming. I tried to listen to what he was saying. I was able to piece together that he was annoyed. I heard something about keeping him awake and if I was going to keep doing that I needed to leave. I looked up at him. I thought maybe he was talking to someone on the phone, which he was holding, but he wasn't talking to anyone. He was playing a game, the one I referred to as the one with the villages and bombs. He would play it every night before bed. And we'd laugh about how childish it was. This time though he didn't look happy. I thought maybe he was losing so I refrained from poking fun at him. He was tense. He noticed I was awake but refused

to look at me and break eye contact with the game. I tried to ask what happened or if he was ok. I tried sitting up, moving closer, trying to comfort him. He became defensive.

“I can’t sleep,” he screamed, this time looking at me.

Then I felt him push me. I was off the bed before I could even process what he had just said. I fell back, but sideways, my shoulder taking the brunt of the hardwood floor. I felt pain but the shock of it all overwhelmed me more. I couldn’t tell if what had just happened was real or not. I didn’t understand what was going on. I picked myself up and tried to climb back into the bed. I wanted to get close to him, but I was met by his hands again pushing me back onto the floor. I wanted to remember what I had done to make him so mad, but I couldn’t think of anything. And he wouldn’t tell me. Only saying that he wanted me to go home. I picked myself up again and started collecting my clothes. I grabbed my phone using it as a light. I started crying. I didn’t know what to do. He stood by the bedroom door as I dressed. I walked over to him. I pleaded with him to tell me what I did wrong.

“Get out of my face,” he screamed, pushing me back on the floor.

I tried getting up again but this time he was standing over me. As I stood up, I tried reaching for his hands, anything I could hold on to, but not because I needed the assistance. I thought maybe if he felt my touch, it would calm him down, or snap him out of whatever mood he was in. I still didn’t know what I had done but as I stood back up I kept repeating “I’m sorry,” until he slapped me in the face. Once then twice. I stood shocked, unsure of what to do, while he stared at me.

“I’ve been up for hours because you won’t stop coughing and sniffing,” he finally revealed. And because he couldn’t sleep, he decided to go through my phone, discovering that I had lied to him. And he had taken screenshots to prove it.

A few days earlier he had been away for a fishing trip to Florida with his friends. While he was gone, I hung out with a woman I had met through him. Her boyfriend was also there. He didn't like me hanging out with this friend without him and I knew it would anger him even more that her boyfriend was there, so I didn't tell him. He was angry, even though he had decided before leaving for vacation that we shouldn't be in a committed relationship anymore. He told me I gave him too much shit about his drinking. I didn't think it was appropriate or healthy for him to get blackout drunk just about every time he drank. He didn't agree. He insisted that he was just fine the way he was and wasn't going to change anything. He always had an excuse for why he got so drunk; he had a bad day or a busy day and didn't have enough time to eat, or the bartender that was working was the one that made his drinks too strong. He hated my constant nagging about it. And my threats. I would tell him that if he continued to drink, I couldn't be with him anymore. He said that it wasn't fair for me to keep threatening to break up with him. He said it made him feel insecure in the relationship.

"I'm sorry," I continued crying, sobbing, "can we just lay back down in bed?" I asked.

He nodded "yes" and seemed calmer after telling me why he was upset.

"I'm so sorry, I love you so much I'll never hang out with her again," I promised him.

"It's ok," he assured me as we lay back down in bed. He insisted that we have sex and I consented under the assumption that everything was better, and we were moving past it all. But soon after he decided that he was still mad, and I needed to leave. It made me feel used and I started having panic attacks as I got dressed.

He offered no sympathy, only saying, "You need to hurry up."

On the drive home the panic attacks only got worse. I felt like I was in shock. I was upset. I needed to tell someone what happened because I didn't know what to do. But I didn't know

who I could talk to. I wanted him to call me or text me and tell me he still loved me and wanted to be with me. But at the same time, I wanted him to stay away from me. I wanted to go home and cry and drink a giant bottle of wine and forget everything that had just happened, but I decided instead to go to the hospital.

The first thing the woman sitting at the ER registration desk asked me was: “what’s wrong.”

I told her I was really stressed out. “I keep having panic attacks.”

After getting my information she directed me across the hall to the small triage room to get my vitals checked. The nurse asked me what was going on as she walked in. I repeated to her what I had told the registration woman. But she wanted to know what happened. I told her I couldn’t tell her, and she nodded, asking “Are you injured?”

I ignored the bruises on my knees and shoulder and told her I wasn’t. After taking my temperature and blood pressure she told me to follow her, leading me down the hall, scanning the card around her neck as we reached a set of doors. She had me lay on one of the gurneys, just past those doors, explaining that she would give me some Ativan to help relieve my anxiety and a prescription for a few extra. “Just something to help you get through the next few days.”

Those next few days were worse than the event that triggered the anxiety— as a battle between my head and my heart ensued. I tried to stay strong, confiding in some of my friends about what happened. One of them was a cop from a neighboring town. He told me I needed to stay away from him and not contact him. He also offered to talk to my ex’s Captain, in hopes that he would tell my him to stay away from me. I tried to follow his advice, blocking him out of my life in every way possible. The rational part of my brain understood that the relationship was toxic, and that as much as I wanted it to work out, it would never get better.

I had seen my mom go through the same thing with my dad. During the first five years of my life that they were married I had witnessed many situations that, even at such a young age, I could easily decipher as bad, situations that I hoped I would forget; the violence that my dad would inflict upon my mom every day, usually at nighttime, after dinner, before she would go to work. During those times my bedroom was my asylum. I'd sit on my bottom bunk, with my back pressed up against the wooden bars, and I would squeeze my eyes shut so tight that they would sting as I'd fake cry as loud as I could to drown out the sounds. I don't remember when I had to start pretending to cry. but I remember thinking to myself that I needed to keep doing it, whether real or fake. This would last until either my mom or dad would come in. They would put on my favorite tv show, "Fairy Tale Theatre." I would watch it, pretending nothing had happened, hoping every time was the last time it would ever happen. But it never was, and my mom would always take him back even though she was very aware that he was being manipulative. "He's the type of person that could sell ice to Eskimos," she would always say, falling for his tearful apologies and unkept promises hoping he would change. She would disregard his controlling behaviors like only being allowed to leave the house when she would go to work. Even running daily errands would elicit an interrogation. She would ignore the guilt trips and restrictions like forcing her to homeschool my older sister and me when we were old enough to start going to school, rather than giving her that much needed time to catch up on sleep.

Before my ex was ever violent with me, I experienced similar controlling behaviors. I suffered from anxiety and depression my entire life and my ex would use that against me. When I would get mad at him he would tell me I was being crazy. I heard it so many times I started second guessing my reaction to his behavior. So, if he wanted to go through my phone, or tell me I couldn't go out with friends without him anymore, I would allow it. I had nothing to hide, and I

didn't want to make him think I did. I was always worried about doing something that would make him mad at me because despite his drinking and lying I wanted to believe he would get better so our relationship would get better. And I thought none of that could happen unless I did better. And compared to what my mom suffered; it wasn't as bad. I had been through worse. I had seen worse. This wasn't bad enough to end our relationship.

Within a couple days of the first fight, it was New Year's Eve, and we were hanging out again. I saw that he had tried calling me, despite having him blocked, a terrible feature on android phones. So, I unblocked him that night and begged him to meet up with me. He was mad at me for telling people what happened, but he agreed to see me, and when he did, he told me I looked like a whore. I laughed it off. I decided that what happened was just one fight and it was never going to happen again. But nothing ever changed, and he kept drinking and lying, I kept getting mad and we continued the pattern of breaking up and getting back together over and over. By June, he started hitting me again.

He decided that after work he was just going to get dinner. Nothing crazy, he promised. He had the next day off and he had been good about drinking that week, so he wanted to reward himself with a low-key night out. About ten percent of the time when he would tell me this, he did just get dinner without drinking too much or at all. This time, however, he ended up meeting up with some of his work friends and as the night went on his texts grew more and more incomprehensible. Around ten, I got concerned and called him. His words were even more indistinguishable than his texts. I begged him to let me come get him. I was scared he would drive home in that condition. He had done it many times before. And on many of those occasions, when he'd have me come over after one of his "lowkey nights" I'd often find him parked in front of his house, passed out in his truck with it still running. I worried that one day

he'd get into a car accident, hurting someone else or himself. That night was no different, and instead of understanding why I was so concerned he told me I was being ridiculous. "You're just being a bitch," he said telling me there was nothing to worry about and that I should just meet him at his apartment. He would be leaving to go there soon, getting a ride home from one of his friends. But he disappeared and stopped responding to my texts soon after I got there, and I fell asleep in his bed waiting for him to get back.

Around five in the morning I awoke to the sound of him stomping into the room.

"Are you just getting back? What time is it?" I asked.

"I was at the bar," he told me, slurring his words.

"All night?" I asked.

"Yes, the bartender kept the bar open all night so we could drink," he insisted.

Him and his friends were all regulars at the bar, knew the owner and were cops, so this excuse didn't sound as crazy as it would have coming from someone else. However, I still questioned him. "Why would anyone want to stay up all night so you guys could get drunk? Isn't that illegal?" I yelled.

He didn't care to clarify. Instead, he flopped onto the bed beside me, pushing me off, deciding I'd asked enough questions.

I fell far and hard. I ended up in the hallway, a few feet outside of his room, about a yard or so from the bed. As I tried to stand, he got up from the bed and continued to push me down until he grew tired, and relented, laying back down in the bed. I got up and walked over to him yelling. I was crying. None of it made any sense. He had disappeared, but he was mad at me? Before I could figure it out, he grabbed me, and forced me down into the bed with him. He got on top of me and pressed his left arm against my throat holding me down while he tried using his

other hand to take off my blue yoga pants. When I tried to resist these attempts, he would remove the arm he had on my throat just long enough to punch me in the left side of my head. He hit me so hard one of the times that my vision got spotty, and there was a ringing in my ears.

“Is this what you wanted,” he screamed at me.

“No,” I sobbed, managing to get my left arm free so I could punch him, hoping it would compel him to get off me. But it just made him angrier and more determined.

After few hours, he fell asleep, and I was able to leave. A few hours after that he texted me that he was done and wanted me to return the key to his apartment. Within a few hours after that I got the “I miss you text.” I told him what happened was “fucked up.” I told him he gave me a black eye. He told me I shouldn’t have asked him so many questions.

He argued that he was tired and needed to sleep. “You made me late for my parent’s anniversary party, and you hit me too. My head still hurts from that, you know.” Within a few days I was apologizing for making him mad and we were back together and the whole thing was nothing more than a joke to him. He called me from work after checking the police logs from the morning of our fight. He worried about how loud our fight had been and found that multiple neighbors had called in noise complaints. “They said they had heard something so loud it sounded like a car drove into their house,” he told me, trying to laugh it off like it wasn’t a big deal. Like he hadn’t done anything wrong. I felt bad and worried about him getting in trouble because of it, even forgoing the hospital that time, despite days of non-stop panic attacks for fear that the black eye he gave me would give him away, and my usual excuse— “I’m just really stressed out” – wouldn’t be believed.

I wasn’t ready to reveal the truth behind my occasional trips to the ER, to confirm what the nurses already knew. And knowing the implications of revealing the source of my suffering

made me want to just pretend like none of it ever happened. Protecting him was more important to me than protecting myself because even though he had given me a black eye, he didn't hit me every time we were together. My dad had given black eyes to my mom several times a month. This was enough to convince me that he was a different person than my dad. He was a cop, he was supposed to be one of the good guys, not like my dad, who was a criminal. His job was to uphold the law that people like my dad violated on a regular basis. That's what I would tell myself when I would start to miss him. I would ignore the reality of the situation, coming up with excuses to justify his behavior, convincing myself that we could make it work. And the toxic voice in my head would use this weakness as a means of trying to convince me that without him the sick, empty feeling in the pit of my stomach would never go away.

I tried refuting these thoughts. I reminded myself of the first year after my parents divorced when I was five years old. It was a memory I will always regard as one of the best. Even though they never sat me down and told why they were making the decision to divorce or even that they were doing so I understood why. They had one last screaming match in the driveway surrounded by family who were not leaving unless she left with them, and I knew that it was a good thing. My mom was granted primary physical custody of my sister, brother, and me, and she was awarded a lifetime restraining order against my dad. We moved out of the apartment and into a complex, where I would spend my days playing outside until the streetlights came on. My neighbors were the cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents that my dad had banned us from seeing while my parents were together, and they welcomed us into their lives without hesitation.

It was the first time in my life I was not living in fear. I could breathe without worrying about angering someone. I was allowed to go to school and make friends. I would spend the

warmer months swimming in the public pool with cousins or riding our bikes to the convenience store. In the colder months we would sled down the hills that surrounded the complex or take refuge from the cold in our homes watching movies, having sleep overs. On Sundays during football season, when the New England Patriots were playing, we would all go to my aunt and uncle's to watch the game. We would sit around the living room with family, friends and a life-size cardboard cut-out of Drew Bledsoe, the Patriots quarterback, eating party pizza from Fauci's, doing more booing than cheering. When there was a big play, we would all hold hands pleading for the best outcome, taking turns punching the Bledsoe cut-out if it didn't go our way. But on those rare occasions when they would come through, we would join in a giant huddle in the middle of the room, screaming and shouting as loud as we could. I loved every minute of it, even when we lost, which at that time we did a lot.

There were still times that were difficult. I was still required to see my dad every other weekend, and he didn't make my mom's new found freedom easy, having her car repossessed one morning before school and refusing to pay child support, but it was never as severe as it had been. The sense of relief we all felt outweighed any of the struggle because even when times were challenging, we were surrounded by people we could go to that would make it better.

I remembered all this and told myself if I could just get through one day without talking to him then the next day would be a little better and that each day following I would feel empowered and strong for deciding to rid him from my life. I hoped the longer I went without contacting him the less likely he would be to contact me or if he did I would be strong enough not to respond. But it never worked, and he'd always contact me right about the time when I'd give up trying. He'd feed me excuses that made my memories of our fights distant and distorted, promising me that he would be better, telling me that maybe he did have a problem. And I'd

forget the reasons why I chose to stop talking to him in the first place. When he would tell me he only hurt me because I made him mad, I would blame myself and completely forget and redirect my anger towards myself. I thought I was in love, and I wanted to believe that was because there was a goodness in him, something in him worth loving.

The longest I went without talking to him during the duration of our relationship was twelve days. This had been about a month before the car accident. He had gotten blackout drunk at a fourth of July party and wanted me to come see him. On every occasion before then, I would go running to him. This time, though, I followed through with what I had told him many times before. He responded by slurring something over the phone to me like, “you’re just a bitch and a whore anyway.” After those twelve days of me ignoring him, he found me on snapchat and sent an “I’m sorry.” He was due to leave for South Africa the next day, and he was going to be gone for almost three weeks. Knowing this I succumbed to his requests that we meet up and talk about what happened. I convinced myself that this time things would be different, even though he was just repeating to me the same thing he had said every time I tried to stop talking to him: “our relationship was too special to end that way.”

I let him come over in the morning before he was supposed to leave. He said he was sorry. He promised he would never drink like that again, and insisted that when he got back, he was going to start studying to take the lieutenant’s test in September. He had to stop drinking to do that. He begged me not to hang out with any other guys while he was gone. He said he only wanted to be with me, that he loved me, and even though he hadn’t been saying it as much since the last time we broke up, he was going to tell me he loved me all the time. I just had to prove to him that I wasn’t going to be with anyone else while he was gone. And just saying that I

wouldn't, wasn't enough. He wanted proof that I would follow through with this promise, deciding that not shaving my body hair until he got back would suffice.

A week after the car crash, I saw my ex again. This time he was sitting in the courtroom, wearing a suit and the same sad, pathetic look I had seen the morning before he left for South Africa, the one he gave me when he begged me to take him back. That day however, there was no taking back anything. I was there to extend the restraining order that had been previously granted. Upon arriving, I was told that I would need to testify against him in a dangerousness hearing because based on the nature of his crimes, the district attorney was seeking to have him put in jail. I immediately started shaking. As the day progressed, I sat waiting, reminding myself to breathe, meeting with the DA and the victim advocates. Halfway through the day my name was called. I sat on the stand. I wanted to run anywhere but where I was, to revert to the quiet girl who hid behind my mom's leg, refusing to speak, when encountering others. But there was nowhere to hide, and I knew if I didn't speak, he would get away with what he had done. I was the only person that could hold him accountable. I had always been able to be strong for the benefit of those around me, but not when it came to myself. I grew up the middle child, sandwiched between an older sister and a younger brother, I played the role of the protector while also the peacemaker. I was the one who would finish their dinner without taking time to remark on my distaste for that evening's entrée. I knew any complaining would set my dad off. I was also the one that my mom would be find at the bus stop pummeling boys in snowbanks for teasing my brother.

The interrogation was surreal. It lasted ten minutes that felt like forever. I answered all the questions from the D.A. and my ex's lawyer as well as I could. They wanted me to tell them everything that happened the last night I saw him. I tried to remember every detail; We went out

to dinner that night with a couple of his friends. After that we went home. We were snuggling on the couch watching tv when she texted him. I knew they were friends. I had hung out with her and with him on many occasions. She seemed nice and we got along well. He told me she had wanted to hang out with him that night. It was nothing out of the ordinary. But then he told me what she said when he told her he was hanging out with me; “that’s lame.”

“Why would she say that?”

“She’s just joking.”

I told him that seemed weird. Then he started back tracking and making excuses. He had always insisted they were just friends. “She’s my best friend's ex, I would never do that,” he would tell me. And he would offer to let me look through his phone anytime she or any other woman he talked to did something that seemed inappropriate. Like when she asked him to move in with her, or when his ex-girlfriend would call over and over again until he answered, or the time I caught him sending kissy face emojis to someone he never told me about. But I always refused. I wanted to trust him. This time however, I demanded it. And everything I had thought and feared came true. All the nights he claimed to be working a detail, he was with her. Having “sexy time” as she referred to it in her messages.

On the stand I recalled how sick it made me feel to read those messages. I told the D.A. I threw his phone. I tried to remember how many times he grabbed me by the throat and threw me to the ground after he picked it up. They asked me why he called the police and told them I had tried to kill myself. I explained that all the medicine bottles from the cabinet were empty with their contents scattered on the floor because I was throwing them at them, not because I was trying to ingest them but because I was scared. And when they asked if I had any injuries, I showed them the cut on my right knee and how every single one of my glittery nails had been

broken. I told them about the panic attacks and the car accident and how I hadn't been able to eat since the day before that night because my throat hurt. I told them how it hurt to talk louder than a whisper and about the CT scan I had to get to make sure there hadn't been any structural damage done. I reminded myself to keep breathing and not to cry. I didn't want him to see me cry. I didn't want to let him think I was weak or that I regretted what I was doing. I wanted him to know this was it. I did not miss him and I would never take him back.

Fifteen minutes after I got out of court, I went to my first graduate class. I hadn't expected to spend the whole day there, and I arrived at school unprepared. Still dressed in the clothes I wore to court, no books, paper, or even a pen, I sat through class in a haze. Half of me was still shaking, still reminding myself to breathe, while the other half was still processing everything that had just happened. I was granted the restraining order for a year, and despite the judge's decision not to put my ex in jail or on house arrest, he had implemented restrictions that I thought would keep me safe. My ex was told not to drink, and he would be monitored to ensure he was refraining, but most importantly, he was told to stay away from me. I felt a naïve sense of closure. He was still living minutes from where I lived, and I had not considered how much of an effect his position in the community would have on the situation. After returning home from school that day, I saw an article in the *Salem News* about it, which eventually made its way onto social media. My name was not mentioned, but everything I had said in court, everything that I had kept secret for so long, was sprawled across the internet for all to see. It felt intrusive. It was embarrassing. And I worried that despite my not being named, people who knew that we dated would know it was me.

My mom has a stack of restraining orders that were acquired during her relationship with my dad. All of them were violated, as he would take unscheduled parenting time any time he

chose. One time he broke down the door to the apartment. I remember how she tried fighting back but he grabbed her by the throat, holding her up with her feet off the floor, until she became unconscious, and my little brother intervened, jumping on his back forcing him to stop. He brought us back to my aunt's house, where he had been staying, and we played Duck Hunt with my cousins. I don't think my aunt was aware of what was happening until the cops arrived. And she watched in disbelief as my dad was forced into the cruiser wearing cuffs, yelling at the cops for coming and disturbing his time with us. We were placed in another car, unchained, causing my brother, who was only two at the time, to start crying. The officer soothed him by telling him that he needed to shut up. As his older sister, I did what any five-year-old would do. I responded by telling the officer that HE needed to "shut the fuck up."

For a long time after that my mom would sleep with a butcher's knife under her pillow and a tire iron under her bed. Following the breakup with my ex, I opted to sleep with wind chimes on the doors of my apartment and a small bottle of mace next to my bed. I knew he would attempt to contact me in some way. He always did, no matter how bad the fight was. Friends and family would try to reassure me; "only a crazy person would do that." Or they'd argue; "he's a cop, he knows the law." As if he would follow it. "I know," I would say secretly hoping that if I agreed with them, they would be right. But they could never understand. I knew what he was capable of. I knew how reactive and vengeful he could be.

About a month prior to our break-up, my ex had an altercation at a bar with a fellow first responder. He had been in more fights in his life than he claimed he could count, except this time the man he assaulted filed criminal charges. He was seeking damages in the amount of \$1800, claiming that in the scuffle his tooth had been broken. My ex was livid. He was eventually able to work out a deal with the man, paying him off to withdraw the charges, but he would speak at

length to me about how he was planning to get back at him. He would wait, but he would do something. He argued that this man tried to get his job taken from him over a fight, and he would not let that go.

The day before the court date to extend the restraining order I had watched a Pat's game in which Josh Gordon played, having just returned from taking a "mental health break" the previous season. He scored a touchdown, and I couldn't have imagined his return any better. He was one of my favorite players, and despite his constant inability to pass the NFL's substance abuse tests, he had a lot of potential. I posted on Facebook "Welcome back to New England, Josh Gordon." On my son's birthday, five days after I posted this, and four days after he was arraigned and told to stay away from me, my ex changed his name on his Facebook profile, deleted all but two pictures, and "liked" my post. When I saw it I didn't know what to do. I wanted to be sure it was him so I texted a mutual friend that had him as a friend on Facebook and he confirmed that the "Brian Smith" with the same picture of a lake as my ex was indeed him. He told me I needed to contact the police. I agreed. However, there was still a tiny part of me that wanted to text him, to ask him why he had done that. Was he just trying to trick me into dropping the charges? Did he think if he did that I would forget about everything that happened and beg him to take me back? Of all the posts he liked, that one seemed personal. Like he was trying to tug at my heartstrings by reminding me of the "good times" we had. He had been just as much of a Pat's fan as me. We had watched many games together. And when we weren't watching together we were texting each other about them. We even going to the parade together when they won the Super Bowl.

I did what my friend suggested and went to the police station to report it. They couldn't believe it. One of the officers who was a close friend of his apologized, "I don't know why he's

doing this,” he told me. They filed a report and called him to come to the station. They told me to leave and that they would call me later. After he arrived, they questioned him. He denied it, claiming he had no idea what they were talking about, but they didn’t buy it and arrested him that day. He was in jail for thirty-six days. Around the time he got out in October, Gordon was put on the injured reserve and soon thereafter was released by the Pats.

A week before the judge let my ex out of jail the D.A. had assured me that, he would serve a minimum ninety days. I don’t know why but knowing a set time frame for when he would get out made me feel better. More prepared. Instead, he was released much earlier and put on house arrest at his parents’ house. He would now be a fifteen-minute drive to my house, rather than two, but that didn’t make me feel much better. He was going to continue to be drug and alcohol monitored, and was also ordered not to leave his house for anything aside from pre-approved doctor’s appointments and meetings with his lawyer, to stay off any and all social media, and to stay away from me. The D.A. said if he was to leave the house when he was not supposed to or if he removed the device there would be a warrant issued immediately for his arrest. I have no idea how long “immediately” is. I’m hoping it’s less than fifteen minutes.

V.

Fuck the Patriarchy

When she was nine months old
and was placed on her belly,
her eyes would fill with tears, pouring out
over her chubby cheeks, red from anger,
refusing to move, or prop herself up
onto all fours into a crawl. She'd roll over,
and sit up to show her insubordination.
I'd watch, laughing at her stubbornness.
I felt proud, like I was watching her find
all the self-assurance that had been lost in the
generations of women that came before her
I felt relief thinking she would be different.
She preferred to be stood up
on two feet, hands holding on to furniture.
The crying would stop, and she'd smile
and look around, proud of herself,
slapping the table, Giggling, standing
like she was bigger than me.

First World Problems

I look down, catching blue eyes on a small freckled face fixed on me. She's frowning, disgusted by my audacity. Her glance alternates between me and the white lump surrounded by chicken nuggets shaped like dinosaurs, still steaming, atop a white porcelain plate placed before her, moments earlier, on an oval shaped wooden table, where she sits in a matching chair frozen and motionless imprisoned by cauliflower mashed potatoes that she decided from only a quick glance, never having tasted were not fit for human consumption.

And would not be ingested no matter how many nutrients they contain or how many starving children there are in the world that would be overjoyed with this offering, asking for seconds after devouring every bit of food on the plate.

Thirteen

Upon turning thirteen
something incredible occurs.
An array of special abilities
appear that allow the newly
anointed teen to gain a wealth
of knowledge far superior
to any adult.

Bubsy

My beautiful blue-eyed blonde-haired boy sits,
hypnotized by flashes of gunfire on the tv screen,
he screams “Don’t kill me,” into his headset.

I stand in the kitchen watching through the doorway,
different dinners cooking on and in the oven.
He comes in for hug breaks between his matches.

He tells me, “You’re just so comfy.
I could hug you all day.” And he tries,
setting his alarm for four every morning.

“I need snuggles before school,” he demands,
coming into my room. I oblige.
I need them, too.

He says school days are cruel, they keep him from me,
and cries most mornings on the drive. I tell him
“We are so lucky to have each other to miss.”

He nods, understanding. I open his door,
and he jumps out, eyes still wet. We kiss and hug,
I watch him walk off biting his nails, turning to wave.

Now, from the kitchen, I hear him yell “You killed me.”
I peek in watching him get up from the floor.
He removes the headset walking over to me
to redeem more hugs as the timer on the oven beeps.

The Benefits of Trauma

I tell her she hasn't been through any trauma
and it shows.
She tells me I should be happy about that.
And I am,
more than she could ever know.
I tell her she should be, too,
but she still complains
about everything she thinks she doesn't have.
Like when she tells me there is nothing to eat
when the cabinets are full.
I tell her these aren't real problems
and she's lucky to never know
what it's like when the only food
in the house is expired
and shared with four other siblings.
She tells me that sounds like a you problem.
I tell her maybe she's too picky.
She tells me I'm being insensitive.
I tell her maybe she's being too sensitive.
She tells me that's not fair.
And I tell her that's life.
And we go back and forth,
fighting like the sisters
she doesn't have,
that I had too many of.
Until I remind her,
that every day she reminds me,
of how lucky I am.
And while we may not have much,
everything we have
is from the hard work
I wouldn't be doing
if she hadn't come into this world
and saved my life.

Finding Gratitude

I'm grateful for the mess of toys,
clothes, paper and plastic piled
and scattered throughout
the house, never cleaning itself up.

I'm grateful for the constant chaos
taking over my day, trying to figure
out how to be at two different schools
at the same time for pick up and drop
off, always disappointing one.

I'm grateful for never being able to
do what I want, having free time, going
for long drives, hiking tall mountains,
taking long uninterrupted showers, spending
beach days sitting in my chair, soaking up
the sun, out of the cold water.

I'm grateful for the tears that always
flow the hardest at bedtime,
remembering every last-minute task
that should have been done hours
before, suddenly developing an abrupt
yet extreme thirst and hunger,
begging for just a few more
minutes before I turn off the light,
coming into my room and
trying to sleep in my bed.

I'm grateful for the tantrums that
come from not getting every single
thing they want or think they need
exactly when they think they want
or need it and the hugs that follow
the inevitable realization that this
behavior will never result in anything
but ten minutes in time-out.

I'm grateful for the relentless
repetition of my words when
ears stop working and I'm met
with an unconvincing yes and a nod
Every time I ask if homework
is done and teeth are brushed
and flossed.

I'm grateful for playing the referee
trying to mediate and diffuse,
refusing to pick sides,
when they fight over who ate
the last cookie, yet always
getting ganged up on by allies,
sworn enemies moments before.

But most of all I'm grateful for
those moments that make all these
challenges disappear. The real smiles,
the laughter over jokes
only the three of us will ever understand,
and the best cuddles, kisses and *I love you's*
of all time ever.

