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*But the Flesh Is:
a collection of essays*

Julia Sanders
Messiah College
English Honors Project
May 2007

Believing that it is with the genre of creative non-fiction that I can most accurately narrate my experience, I use this writing to explore themes of appetite, disability, and desire in my life. Perhaps best summarized as "chasing honesty, in writing," my work seeks to ground abstract thought in tangible moments, treating those moments as key contexts in which to ask complex spiritual questions without answering them.

Aesthetic Statement

The chance to speak to you is precious to me. And so naturally, I freeze up when it's time to write. I called my friend Justin last night and he tried to reassure me. "You're not a real writer unless you have times in which you can't write." I nodded, even though he couldn't see me.

My words seem to come to me in partially obstructed snapshots, like when the photographer has his thumb in front of the lens. This makes for a lousy slideshow, a splintered sort of essay.

In graphic design class, we are working on drawing our own faces using only letters or words. To make my lashes, I typed "my eyes are clogged with stars my eyes are clogged with stars my eyes..." and my professor asked me if I am an English major, and I nodded. "Yes."

I can't play the piano, I've always wanted to learn. But I know someone who can, and a few nights ago I listened as he played strings of hymns, and I leaned my head against the piano and felt the keys striking, the songs more powerful without any words to clutter them up.

There is a picture taped to my window, in front of my desk. It is just a flimsy magazine page, a woman smiling and looking upward on one side, and on the other side, a grilled cheese sandwich. When I first tore it out, I held it up to the light, and noticed the juxtaposition of the two images. Staring at the sky, eating a sandwich. Looking up to heaven, looking down to earth. Soul needs, bodily needs. Spirit, flesh.

I hung it up to remind myself of the legitimacy of both parts of my life, or even, to remind myself that they are not really separate parts, but the same double-sided picture. In looking at it I find validation for my need to focus on the flesh, on my own physical pain and desire, as I address God and ask spiritual questions. The essays that I have written for this project are my attempt to re-create this image with words, to show you my spiritual and physical hunger at the same time.

This semester, I have been volunteering at a credit recovery program in a Harrisburg high school. As I've familiarized myself with the way in which their teacher works with these kids, I've been impressed with the way in which she faces a daunting task with a tremendous amount of creativity. Almost every time I come, she is trying something new, tossing ideas around and brainstorming about how to get her students involved, how to connect with them. I have tried to emulate this in my writing for this project. While I love the *idea* of what I've been trying to accomplish, actually putting that into words is time-consuming, messy, and often discouraging. So I just keep trying to approach these subjects from different angles: sometimes it comes out as poetry, sometimes I write to God, sometimes about God, sometimes I write as if I'm the only one who will ever read what I'm typing.

This project stems from my interest in online journaling. I began posting on my website two years ago, with the basic premise that I was going to write to God – not about God, or pretending that I was hearing from God – but *to* God, with as much honesty as possible. With the opportunity to show my writing to an audience that extends beyond my immediate circle of friends, I've received new confidence as a writer. It is funny what readers respond to, though. I think the most feedback I ever received on a post was this two line declaration:

two things.

I am spiritually *confused*.

I am all out of peanut butter.

I am so grateful that this project has allowed me to expand all of this “writing to God” to include other explorations in essay form. The end result, the essays which follow, are largely about process, rather than completion. I’ve used this writing to try to make sense of that which confuses me, to raise questions I’m usually too scared to ask, to take a step out into the world as a writer and to try to understand myself better. One particular way in which this writing has empowered me is in allowing me to narrate my grieving process after the recent death of my grandmother. Several of the essays revolve around her death, my reaction to it, my attempts to cope and to keep moving and thinking and writing in the midst of an immobilizing loss.

That grief, among other things, definitely felt like a serious threat to this project, as I tried to persevere through a year of writing. Many times, I had to stop and write a few paragraphs in order to refocus myself, to figure out what I was aiming for. At one point, I wrote:

I have really struggled with being burned by the church, or using the church to burn myself. Whichever it is, my goal for this project is to produce a narrative of that journey, of my struggle, for anyone else who might also be going through some of these issues.

As often as I tried to encourage myself, though, I also spent a lot of time identifying my concerns. First of all, I am every once in a while seized by the fear that I have nothing original or articulate to say. I get nervous that this won’t be Christian enough for Christians or it won’t be logical enough for anyone who doesn’t like stream-of-consciousness writing.

Another huge threat is my perfectionism. I tend to avoid doing something if I don’t feel I can do it thoroughly and precisely, which ironically can make me a very unproductive worker sometimes, despite my high academic aspirations.

I found a lot of strength along the way, though, in unexpected places. Several months ago I found a Flannery O’Connor quote that I jotted down on the back of a grocery receipt: “Perhaps you are able to see things in these stories that I can’t see because if I did see them I would be too frightened to write them. I have always insisted that there is a fine grain of stupidity required in the fiction writer.”

Thinking back on all the times I have been wrong about whether or not people wanted to read what I had to say, I resolved to do my best to embrace this “fine grain of stupidity” and to pursue this project with faith – faith that writing is powerful and healing, and faith that my efforts will yield good results.

A final threat that comes to mind is my very underdeveloped understanding of what it *really* means to be a writer. As I reflect on the writing process this week, as I sit at my desk and type for hours, as I hold novels in my hands and think about dialogue and plot, as I try to write my own stories and poems, I am realizing over and over just how *hard* writing is. This is not something that many people understand or acknowledge, especially those who don’t write.

Sometimes I get suspicious of this whole project. And I narrate my suspicion and doubt for a while, let the keys click idly on. But then I hit backspace, then I undo it, maybe I leave one sentence there, and I then I open a new document. Starting over, all the time.

As writers, we *try our hand* at things, we *give something a shot*. Except we find artistic ways to say this, because our pens, if they are swords, are fighting against the enemy known as 'cliché.' We feel around in the dark, mostly. These essays are what has happened to me, and they are true. But they are also false, because the only reasons I can spend so much time trying to be honest is that it does not come naturally. To hide, to skirt around *what I really mean*, to avoid things, is its own art. I am always going to be a little bit false.

Still, creative non-fiction is my bowl of porridge, mythically speaking. It has come to be the writing that is easiest to swallow, the perfect temperature, in the bulk of my writing. I chose to do a series of creative non-fiction essays because my thinking is fragmented. I am a flitter, I flit from thought to thought, I ramble, I nose-dive. It is important for me to choose a style of writing that accommodates this.

I asked a professor what this aesthetic statement is supposed to contain, and he said I should include the reasons why the essay form enchants me, why this is special, why it was selected. Why I selected it. I remember a day when I was in my first college writing class. We had selected journals, promised to fill them, we were poised with our pens, awaiting further instruction.

I had found an old Polaroid of my grandmother and taped it to the beginning of my notebook. It was at the beach, she is wearing a suit, and an annoyed expression framed in curls. Her brother Roy is behind her, playful, was probably kicking sand on her, acting the part of the sibling. She is so young. I was so young, and just young, not anything else. I started the journal, hesitantly wrote *I am a writer*. Period. Now I'm still young, but a writer too. I'm growing into these shoes, as they say. I'm trying to write carefully, and well. My grandmother, now, has left me alone, with all of these words.

The other day, I had some interesting discussion with a co-worker about the "spirit is willing but the flesh is weak" verse. Matthew 26:41. I raised the possibility of Jesus talking about his own epiphanic realizations about the nature of the body – realizing that facing death while encased in flesh is a hard thing to do. Jesus sidling up to us and saying *wow, you do have a tough lot*. Jesus saying that flesh is a powerful combatant to the desires of the soul. But see, already I lapse into this battle language, I hate so much that "the average lay person", as my co-worker put it, frequently pits the body against the soul, sees the body as tugging at the robes of the soul, as holding it back, the body as constraining, as a shell, a temporary storehouse. I told him that I hate that the Church neglects and rejects that which is most *real* and he said that *real* is an interesting choice of words, because he believes that *the unseen* is far more real than our physical selves. So I said, maybe what I meant was the most *tangible*. And he said yes, that sounds more like it.

I think my very favorite realization that has resulted from this project is that as a disabled person, I am *extra* aware of "the flesh," I am more aware of my body, and this is naturally going to inform my posture towards God and spirituality. When I speak about my disability, it's tempting sometimes to broach this subject like a joke, to start with a line like, "So I walked into a bar the other day..." I picture myself beginning this way,

“So I have this disability, right, and I grow up on the sidelines of course, always watching the other kids play sports, not quite tottering around on crutches mind you, but disabled none the less...”

One of the cruelties of young adulthood is not being able to explain or understand the context in which you suffer. Or, I'll put it this way for the few people on this earth who stubbornly claim the title of optimist, one of the greatest joys of becoming an adult, was, is, beginning to understand myself and my personality, my quirks, my thousands of processes, and how my experience differs from that of others.

I am now sometimes able to answer the wondering toddler that still nags inside my head, always pointing at things with an extended pointer finger, calling out ‘why? why?’ It is calming to re-interpret my past into a framework that makes sense of things, so I work at it tirelessly, it is my balm, my relief.

As a teenager, all I knew was that I wasn't strong enough to participate in any sports, not even Phys. Ed. classes. And so I spent my time, and my energy, in my mind. I thought, I wondered, I worried, I fretted, I analyzed, I picked things apart, I picked at the blades of grass, endless on the sidelines of whatever game I was watching my friends play.

It was not until halfway through college that I realized how unbalanced my life is because of my muscle weakness; without having a way to “get outside of my mind,” without having any physical outlet for stress or anxiety, I had been up to that point stuck in my mind to an unhealthy degree. I saw my body as nothing but a liability, and resented its fragility. Now that I know this about myself, I make more of an effort to find ways to be physically involved in my life, to make peace with this body and to pay attention to ways in which I can worship God from within my frame, not in spite of it.

I chose the title for this project very carefully, with the intent of opening it up to multiple meanings. When I looked at the phrase “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak,” I found myself stopping at “but the flesh *is*,” it became something I was insisting to myself, but the flesh *is*, it is real and it is something we will not escape, should not want to escape, in my opinion. Often this verse is used to explain that someone wants to do something holy, or redeeming, but cannot because their “flesh” is holding them back, and perhaps this is true – I am very aware of the longing to transcend the flesh.

But still, the message that is more powerful to me at this time in my life is that I can, and should, embrace what it means to be fully human, to be informed by my flesh. These essays are designed to fit together with the title, so that they read “But the Flesh Is *Appetite*,” “But the Flesh Is *Cold*,” “But the Flesh Is *Aging*,” and so forth. I feel compelled to make it very clear as I close this introductory statement that this writing represents my humanity, it has been used to narrate my flaws, my darker moments, my weakness. But it is also my hope that in this honest handful of words thrown impulsively up into the air, you may find my spiritual yearning in its truest context.

Disability

If you'd asked me to define myself as a child, I might have described myself as a Christian, told you the name of my church. Said things like "My name is Julia, and I like to read. This is a book I'm reading right now, it's called 'The Borrowers,' see?" I might have told you about the computer games I played with my sister, or the pretend news columns Thea and I started to write when we discovered how to use the old typewriter we found in my basement.

"We also like to write plays, and we're putting one on next month. I'm playing Frederick the 14th, we decided fourteenth because thirteenth is bad luck, and it's really funny because I'm so much shorter than her and *I'm the husband!*" You might have found my laugh endearing. But the thing I would not likely have felt the need to explain to you was that I have a muscle disease, and because of this, I fall under the label of "disabled" in some situations.

This concept of being disabled was particularly well hammered into my psyche by the boldness with which my peers would question me. Kids would say what's *wrong with your voice? Are you stupid? What's wrong with you?* The gentler of heart would just ask *why. Why did I sound funny, why was I talking like that.* As if I knew. My mother started a journal for me, when I was in kindergarten. I remember dictating to her while eating a chocolate croissant at a bakery near our house. I still have it, I read my mother's looping cursive handwriting and shake my head.

"Julia came home crying from school today. She said that Andrew stuck his tongue out at her and shoved the door in her face, and Olga would not talk to her." The door thing was especially upsetting to me, because I wasn't strong enough to open it like the other kids were. To have it slammed in my face was to be stuck somewhere.

But one of the most cutting things was when kids would literally throw my words back at me, especially when I got older and was trying to help out with Sunday school or babysitting. "Alright let's put this stuff away, guys." I would say cheerfully, but scared. "Mamight, met's muht mis muff awam, gwoys," would be returned to me. That sing-song mocking gave me chills. It told me I wasn't normal, that I was offensive by just being me. It told me I had no place trying to fit in, that I was stuck.

I went to a Muscular Dystrophy camp when I was ten. At night the hum of everyone's breathing machines was so loud I could hardly sleep. I remember trying to talk to the other kids, and feeling unsuccessful at it. Jillian wouldn't talk back, or when she did I couldn't understand her mumbling, and my eyes traced the thin line of drool that slid down the fibers of her sweater. And it was worse with Dylan – he was going so fast on his motorized wheelchair that I could never catch up to him.

I came back from that week confused, but resolved to not putting myself in the disabled category, if it meant I was going to feel so unlike everyone else. I returned to the world of my own urban neighborhood, where the top priority was building clubs and protecting them. Thea and Meredith and I would build a club on the back hill – spending hours clearing rocks out to make a decent dirt floor, and then piling other rocks around the perimeter to make a wall to protect ourselves.

And then Mark Williams or Victor Paultinas, those devilish boys, would come along and mess it all up; we would wail in frustration, and kick the few rocks still left standing, determined to build a better one next time – we'd show them. One time when

we were building Victor and his little brother Waltie came to tease us. "What's the matter with you, why do you talk funny?" they yelled from their yard. I don't remember how I reacted. I just remember their words.

If we weren't building and rebuilding clubs, we were riding our bikes – only around the block, it wasn't safe to go further without an adult. It took me a while to take on a world in which training wheels weren't there to support me, but I learned it, and spent many afternoons riding up and down in front of the strip of sidewalk in front of the Szatkowski's house. Sometimes, other kids would be playing there, and I remember their words too.

"What are you, stupid? What's wrong with your mouth?" Then Marco would chuck his basketball under my wheels, or Hugo would playfully chase me with a stick and laugh as I ran away. Once, I took it upon myself to confront Mark about destroying our most recently created grass and rock palace. I don't remember what either of us said, but he pushed me away from him, hard, and I landed on my back. And I couldn't breathe. I was so scared, but I couldn't even gasp, I just lay there, looking up at him, and then he ran away, his words streaming behind him, "I hardly touched her at all and she just fell over!"

"You got the wind knocked out of you, honey, you're fine," my mother said at dinner that night. But it was obvious to me. It wasn't safe to pretend to be normal, either. So I turned to adults for refuge. On Thursday nights, my parents hosted a Bible study at our house, and I would wait at the foot of the stairs listening for the moment when the hush of prayer was broken by the clattering of chairs and the sound of coffee cups being collected to put in my mother's sink. Rushing down to talk with the adults as they slipped their huge arms into their even bigger coats, I found sincere audiences.

But even this was not a fool-proof plan. Going to the grocery store was a weekly event for my homeschooled sister and I; Mom would tear the list into two pieces – one for us, one for her, and we knew exactly where to go. "Such good helpers," Mom would say in the check out line. As we grinned at each other in shared pride, watching an employee bag our groceries, he or she often asked me, "what's wrong, why are you so sad?" Confused, I didn't know what to say. Every time I heard "Cheer up, my dear!" often uttered by well-meaning elderly women ahead of us in line, I looked at them and said, "I am happy." But then would follow the inquisitive look in my mother's direction, the "what did she say?" and I soon learned to be silent.

In the years that followed, I retreated, took a few steps back from the world and shook my head slowly, *No*, I'm tired of talking with you. But this could not last. Growing up, turning into a working adult, getting older brings with it a certain need to interact on behalf of yourself.

So the reality I face is that they are still there, in those grocery store aisles. Even though I'm an adult now, dressed smartly, articulate, a purse over my arm, a question carefully asked is still met with the same old turning to whomever I'm with, "what'd she say?" The squinting, puzzled grocery store employee stands before me, doesn't know her reaction will stay with me for weeks, will throw *everyone's* reactions into question, will sting.

My sister tells me that these encounters during our childhood never made sense to her. When presented with the accusation that I was hard to understand, her reaction was always, "...no she's not." Her refusal to legitimize these painful claims is now sweet to

me, and comforting. But it is not that discovering that I am different somehow makes being different any smoother. There lies before me an infinite number of wrinkles in the fabric of my social interactions, I could say, if was feeling poetic and dejected simultaneously.

Sure, an adult is armed with a bit more than a child in the face of these situations. I can fish around in my mind for any number of comforting and intelligent phrases, "she was just exposing her own fears by illegitimizing my claims on normalcy," "we fear that which we do not understand," etc. But it is not *words* that I am trying to reconcile with as a disabled person, it is physical reality of being "like this," of having to work so hard at being understood, fighting daily against feelings of inadequacy, constantly encountering the limits of my own body.

I remember a particular service day in high school, my group was doing landscaping down the street for our neighbors, and I dug and weeded for several hours. I remember thinking, when we'd finished, that I was doing pretty well, I wasn't that tired. But as I put down my tools, and sat down on the ground, I realized my whole body was shaking with fatigue. I remember holding my arms out in front of me, watching them shake, as we rode to McDonalds to celebrate being done.

A few weeks after that, it was time to have my senior pictures taken, for graduation. "A little happier, please." The photographer tilted my head and stepped back behind the camera. Believing that I am simply refusing to cooperate, many photographers will turn to condescension or even mockery, to get me to smile wider. They don't know that they're asking the physically impossible. And even though inside, I'm usually beaming, this misunderstanding often makes me grimace, and the memories of these interactions come darting back to me when I pass by my senior picture framed serenely in various relatives' houses. I stare at my own face and it is so frozen, so unmoving. It lies. This is one of the reasons I am relentlessly transparent, with my thoughts and emotions. I want to be known; being confusing to the general public is so wearisome.

I still have so many days where I slump down into my desk chair, too defeated to reach for the keyboard. Sometimes I step out of all the activity and become passive, watching others, trying to get my footing again, in a world that can become suddenly threatening. I'll curl up in the living room, clutching the remote, blinking at how much perfection and clarity seems to seep out of the pores of every single person on the screen.

Usually when I hit the tv on, late at night, there's not much to speak of. Bad boys, bad girls. "Sex and the City" and "Cops" are hardly my ideal way to relax. But recently I lucked upon a documentary about Alison Lapper, and I remembered seeing a statue of her in London, in Trafalgar square, the pregnant woman with no arms and short legs. And watching this footage of her caring for her baby, she was so intimate with him – because she had to use her mouth and shoulders for so much – she nuzzled him constantly and instead of being strange it seemed like their interaction was more natural than most mothers and their babies.

I went online and began reading an excerpt from her autobiography, (she is not just a model but also an artist herself) and she said that with her work she wished to introduce people to the idea that "disability could be artistic, and even - this was a long shot - beautiful."

Yes.

Aging

I call my step-great-grandmother by her first name. Tonight we went over to Marian's. *He was still holding his toothpaste and his toothbrush in his hand.* Marian said that about Papa. She is alive, he died several years ago. She was describing him the night he died. Well, the morning after, when she found him. She speaks every now and then about how guilty she feels over not hearing him fall, the last time he ever fell in the bathroom, the last time he ever hit his head and felt his long legs buckle beneath him. It happened a lot, I'm told. She speaks of it every now and then, but then again, I only go over there occasionally. Maybe she feels upset all the time.

It is unfortunate that it's possible to be upset far longer than the limited number of minutes you have to talk about what's upsetting you. Those minutes are hard to come by when you're Marian. When you're living in a small, stuffy apartment where your only company is the flicker of the fake fire. She is alive. But she lives with the possibility of death ever more likely, and it shows through the thinning skin that is stretched over her shrinking, ossified bones. When I hug her gnarled frame hello, I am aware that it's the only touch she's felt all day.

Nancy's trying to convince me to get a bird, but uh, I uh, with the way the cleaning girl cleans I don't know he'd get birdseed all over the place and it would just be a mess, you know? This is an excuse, it's an eighty-eight-year-old's way of saying "I'm scared that I can't take care of a bird by myself." Marian continues with other stories, with reminiscing, I prod and nod loudly, but hopefully not so overtly that I make her feel self-conscious.

We talk about Papa, she points to the silk screen hanging above the couch. *Henry banged his elbow into that thing and I'm sure glad it wasn't me because I never would have heard the end of that.* Here Marian chuckles. If anyone in my family chuckles, it's her, that's exactly how I would describe her laugh. She moves from her second husband to her first. She's allowed to talk about multiple spouses because she acquired them honorably, sandwiching a marriage between two funerals.

You know my first husband had a downhill climb too, the last four years of his life. He had uh, he had this Alzheimer's. You'd take him to the grocery store and next thing you know you've lost him and I'm lookin' up and down the aisles trying to find him, oh boy. He got so thin, oh geez, I thought they didn't even make slacks that thin, and I said to myself I'm not gonna go out and buy all new slacks for him the way he's losing all this weight. So I said to him here, wear my slacks. I looked at the pants that Marian was wearing. White, starchy, folded up at the ankle. Remembered that her first husband's name was Jack. Jack, slacks. Jack in her slacks.

Only I couldn't picture it and laugh at that mental image because I don't know that I've ever seen a picture of him. None of it was funny, even the parts we laughed at. Her high-pitched voice was sobering to me, it was heavy with the truth of death and the oppressive weight of aging alone. *Welcome girls, come in and uh, come sit down, choose any of these uncomfortable seats you want.* That was what she said when we came in. Now it's time to leave, and she says *thanks for comin', girls.*

Lydia and I got horribly lost on the way home. It was only two or three streets, it was only supposed to be a five minute ride, and we laughed through the unnecessary K-

turns, the angry drivers around us, the wasted minutes. We are young; we can find amusement in confusion. And it is a luxury, I suspect.

Appetite (three tries)

One.

When I was in high school, while other girls my age were losing their virginity, I lost my appetite. I remember staring at my lunch – a quarter of a sandwich – waiting for something to happen. It's not the food that I swore I'd never forget though. It was that feeling of panic, and that thickly layered guilt – *I don't want to put this in my mouth* – I knew I was different for never feeling hungry. Friends, even doctors, repeated a phrase that came to feel cruel to me, *man, I wish I had that problem*. It didn't seem to occur to people what a curse it is to lose your appetite. The desire for food moves you through the day. Without it, life is never smooth enough. Everything I did was halting, painful. As food moved through my body, knotted me up so fiercely that I had to double over in pain most mornings while picking what shirt to wear, I would grab the closet door in fear. I would beg, and try to remember to end it with *amen*.

Two.

A: I've struggled with something for a long time, and I'm going to call it appetite.

B: Don't make it sound like you have an eating disorder. You don't. You never connected eating to your image, you never looked in the mirror and were pleased with the fact that you were getting thinner and thinner during high school. It only worried you.

A: Alright, I'll be less dramatic. I've had trouble in the past, with hunger, and my lack of appetite for food has persisted for long enough that I'm starting to search for patterns, I'm starting to trace the map of the past several years, its ink barely dry, trying to detect patterns with the finger of memory.

B: It's not like you are just generally apathetic about everything. Your friends would describe you as having a voracious appetite for some things, like deep discussion.

A: Right, but it seems like I am always hungry for the wrong things. Or rather, never interested in the right things. The first thing that comes to mind is reading. I'm always nervous to admit it to anyone, and no one ever believes me because it's such an elaborately executed illusion, but I don't actually *like* to read books.

B: You're an English major. You have spent most of your life with people who love to read and who think you do. These family members and friends give you books as presents, they go to used bookstores with you, they recommend titles, and they've heard you discuss plots and book-lists throughout the years. They are convinced you're a reader, and more importantly, *you're* convinced of it. How are you not one?

A: I don't know, I really don't. I wish I could just let it go, give up on the desire to accomplish something I'll never achieve. I've done that with so many things and it feels SO good. It's really true that you just can't live with a certain amount of guilt. I used to be such a different girl. I was sort of able to pull it off, the whole perfection thing. I pleased my parents, my teachers, straight A's, black and white morals, I lectured

nineteen-year-olds about smoking when I was thirteen, I prayed fervently that God would help me to not swear in my head, that God would help me to not be lonely. I hated things like materialism and relativism with a passion that earned me good marks in doctrine class. I was my work, I was my grades, I was my reputation in the missionary community, I was inseparable from all these things.

B: And now you've given up on so much of this. You don't brush your teeth as often, read the Bible before bed, you don't check your swearing, you never make your bed, your clothes are slumped together in a giant heap at the foot of your bed. You're late for most appointments, you delight in the sloppy and the messy. You've learned there's more than one way to do things, and you've decided to say "fuck the way I used to do it." But you're always a little bit afraid this was the wrong decision.

A: Even though I know this was my only choice, yes. Even though I'm so convinced that this is who I really am, that an honest broken self can stand up to so much more than a false, guilt-driven self ever could. I just worry that I'm not trying hard enough in my honesty, that this word "honesty" is going to be my downfall because I will take it as my modus operandi and then use it to justify anything.

B: You're always trying to keep yourself in check. To the point that you feel oppressed by a sermon for reminding you of the thing you were already worrying about during the entire drive to church.

A: I'm noticing that I use the words "always" and "never" excessively.

B: It's true. Stop that!

Three.

One time I said to my mother, "I'm as flexible as a twist-tie", and my dad, who was nearby, added "and as transparent as a plastic bag." I am writing to you with an interest in being understandable. I celebrate knowing, and being known. I hope you can know me through these words. It is a great chance I have, really, to write to you. None of the usual barriers that come with speaking.

If I didn't tell you, you'd never know that I have a disability, or that I'm short. I don't have to worry about catching your eye or holding on to your interest. You could skip to the next page, cut me off right now, and I'd never know. You're probably wondering what this disability is. I've never thought of it in these words before, but I suppose the most accurate description would be "a paralyzed face" and weaker muscles all over. I use the comparative rather than the superlative, of course. I'm weaker than you, chances are.

But I'm not the weakest thing I've ever come across. I've been told my punch hurts. It's probably mostly due to the surprise factor. Like if I were to tell you that I got my nose pierced at a mall in Quito, Ecuador, you might be a little bit impressed just because you didn't see it coming. Or maybe you're just amused, picturing someone with a melted face full of holes.

But I am not here to talk about any of this. It is appetite I'm after. Hunger, desire, craving. In exploring these themes in my own life I have this sneaking suspicion that maybe I could help you in some way. But that's as long as you're not one of those people who believes that interdependency is to be avoided at all costs. There's something you should know about me. I'm paradoxical. I am a skeptic, I believe almost nothing fully.

But I also have this shriveled little curl of a hope that there is salvation to be found in making my whole life about feeding others and letting them feed me, in that order. Why did I choose a food analogy? Appetite haunts me, even in my figurative speech.

Cancer

This occurred to me the other day: I hear the word “cancer” as often as I hear the phrase “I love you.” One of my friends’ mothers was just diagnosed with cancer, and I can tell he is struck. He wrote on his online journal, that he is angry, that the muscles in his neck are tensing. And he ended his entry with a phrase hurled at cancer: “God damn you.”

To me, this is one of the most powerful expressions of pain a Christian can utter. It is anger and an inability to take action and a desire to incorporate God without knowing how, and it’s crossing boundaries of normalcy, it’s desperation, and it’s sincerity. It reminds me of one of my favorite scenes from the movie “Saved,” in which the main character, ragged from the judgment hurled at her by other Christians, stops at the foot of the large, man-made cross near her school, and finally tells God the worst things she can think of. “Shit. Fuck.” She pauses, and then says, “God damn.”

In her expression there is so much release, so much arrival. She has come to the point where she has to speak words of real anger to a real God. Neither the words or the idea would hold any power in the scene if it was not an authentic collision.

I have had many of my own moments of collision with God.

I used to make it a hobby to classify and categorize the evil I saw around me. At the end of the day, I could stare at a neatly compiled room full of mental images, all filed away.

But it was events like the tsunami in 2005 that brought this process to a halt in my mind. I was flipping through channels on my aunt’s couch one night when I saw the headline “4000 dead in Indonesia” and was interested because my parents work there.

“Oh, God, Aunt Cheryl, look, something happened, I’m not sure...” And the numbers continued to rise. It’s strange to confess that when it was “just” four thousand I wasn’t half as overwhelmed as when people started saying things like *two hundred thousand*. By the time the event reached crescendo in media coverage, there I was, holding “tsunami” in my hand and searching for the right box, but I couldn’t find it. This was a natural tragedy, but it was so horrific, it seemed so unnaturally devastating.

Did God cause it? Allow it? Did God care that children were swept out of their mothers’ arms? Did God have so much as a little finger submerged in the swirling pull and tug of that water? Since being silenced by this and so many other tragedies, I have begun to rip open all the boxes I placed things in, and it all lies unorganized and chaotic on the floor.

Particularly noticeable are the images I have tied to cancer – the early death of countless relatives, prayer requests for friends of friends, and names printed in the “concerns” section of so many church bulletins. Sometimes there’s barely time to say “I love you” one last time, before these people die. And I don’t expect to figure out why this is, any time soon.

Self-inflicted wounds

On bad days, I'm upset, and fretting. On good ones, angry. I recently read a blog entry that reminded me of exactly where I used to be, and I keep wondering, does the average Christian just continue to kick herself for the rest of her life? Did I just crack under the pressure prematurely, was I supposed to be able to continue on this track until death?

This blogger, she is forever chastising herself and others, and she sounds legalistic, she sounds self-hating, she sounds so determined though. It frightens me, that I used to speak in much the same tone. And I fear for her, and for myself. I have reacted so strongly to this old way of thinking that I almost refuse to judge myself like this (and try not to judge others either) but it's so hard for me to imagine retaining any semblance of Christianity now.

Because for me, this way of following God is an open invitation to beat myself and others senseless with verbal, mental, silent, never ending criticism. This idea of sin, and always trying to avoid sin, and focusing an analytical mind so piercingly on one's actions—it's painfully clear cut and it digs deep. I realize (have to conclude) that this is not the case for everyone, I can see how many people are untroubled enough to sort of lamely "follow Christ" for years and years and never feel very shaken by the incredible dissonance that occurs further down the road. They'll never get that far, they're fine.

But if you carry beliefs far enough, if you push, as I pushed, you begin to realize how obsessively guilty a Christian can feel, how wicked everyone is, and you begin (I began) to hate the flesh, the body, to attack that which is "always leading you to sin." It became such a mind game for me, such frantic ping pong back and forth between my eyes, it's hardly surprising to me that I was so physically ill in high school, even if that wasn't the cause, my spiritual frenzy must have at least exacerbated things. I see how much my mind is not hard wired to calm down. Throwing Christianity at me was like giving me an endless knife to lick. The trick is to decide what to do now.

I look to my writing from previous months, in these moods:

"That could really piss you off, though." The guy said this to me today while he was carefully scarring me and listening to me awkwardly say that I was getting it done because I wanted to make a permanent commitment to You.

What I couldn't really explain to him is that while I can imagine feeling like a fool for believing unrealistic ideas, for attending churches teeming with hypocritical people, or for singing "light of the world" three hundred and fifty eight times more than I wanted to, after much consideration I have come to the conclusion that I will *never* feel foolish for trying to believe that You are.

And so "whatever befall" from the hymn *Be Thou My Vision* is on me for keeps. so that no matter what kind of shit goes down from here on out, faithfulness is anticipated.

Writing

Sometimes, this is what it's like to be a writer.

Her job was to scribble names on cups, and she got mine wrong. Grande Gingerbread Latte, Gillian! I looked up, still holding my cell phone against my ear. *Is that for me? Sorry, Lydia, hold on one second. Is this mine?* I clamped on to the steaming plastic cup and examined it as I walked away from the counter. *Fuck them, they always get my name wrong, every time.* Sorry Lydia, no, it's fine, I'm here. Alright I'm going to go sit down.

I have no idea why I'm recording this part of my day. It has no significance, that I can see. It's just an ordinary incident, things like that happen to me all the time. I didn't go on to have some dynamic conversation with Lydia, or some life-changing moment with the barista. I just drank my coffee and left. Well, I didn't drink quite all of it, which is why I'm sitting here staring at the remaining, very cold inch of latte left in my cup, and which is why, presumably, I'm writing about it now. I'll take another sip, and then maybe I'll know why I'm writing this down.

Nope. Didn't work.

In her journal, Sylvia Plath talks about the sexual pleasure of picking her nose. I just picked my nose. Didn't really do much for me. But it was tantalizing to read her write about something so ordinary, so unpublishable. Well, technically not anymore. Strange to think that maybe a writer's status can actually elevate their ideas to a wrong degree – to the point that we become fixated on the fact that Sylvia said it rather than whether or not it's worth hearing and repeating and re-printing.

Reading her words yesterday, actually, just perusing a copy I didn't buy in a bookstore with very creaky wooden floors, I found Sylvia's words alarmingly cheerful, but then as I thought about it, no. Of course she's happy, in fact, she would have been near ecstatic about certain things in her life, because usually to know a sorrow so penetrating that it attracts you to lean over into ovens, you must also know at some point, infinite happiness.

That's how it works. So I am really never out of danger, and sometimes I resent, really fear, that I am one of these people. An artist. It is such a fearful thing, it is ironic really because it's one of the most unfair things, no that's not true. It is unfair, but there are many worse things. But *unfair*, I've always hated that word, since the days of graham crackers and apple juice, unfair has been my mortal enemy, my dread. This tone is well-suited to waving a cigarette around in the air, to see-through lazing gowns and crimped hair. Enough.

When I think of all the mantras I string in the cobwebbed corners of my writerly mind, this one is my favorite: Fear eats creativity for breakfast.

I am surrounded by clutter, on my desk. But I leave things there on purpose. It's like, if I always clean things up, I won't be alive, and shifting, and always making my mark on this space. I want there to be layers of myself wherever I am, coating everything. Not myself, really, but my life, that which I treasure. Right now there are pencils and

photos and phone cords and love letters and candles and chocolate bars and coins and crayons and lotion and unsent mail and glue and cds all fossilizing around me.

There are icicles hanging from the lamp outside. We're kind of level with the lamp because we're on the second floor. My jaw is aching because I've been biting down very hard, which I do when I'm concentrating.

Scribbled on the back of one of my grocery lists:

The same things that make you a brilliant/successful artists also make you vulnerable, unstable, insane.

Does the Christian artist embrace this connection? or does she reject it believing creativity can operate independent of suffering/unhealth? I always marvel that "unhealth" is not a word. I use it so frequently.

When I agreed to be the co-editor of a literary magazine I knew it would be a lot of work. I could see it in the eyes of last year's editors when they told me what to expect. I took note of the sarcastic spurts of laughter that prefaced their description of what the job involves, the sad sweep of the hand...*there was so much more we could have done with it if we had time...*

Last night we met to plan and execute the next stage of wrestling this tornado of words into a finished product. We sat across from each other and fanned through stacks of submissions knowing we had more to fear than paper cuts. "this is like children," I noted. "you take the toddler, I'll take the baby", I said as I handed Elizabeth the poetry and gathered up the prose.

I have always suspected that for me, having kids would be exactly like this. I will know what's coming, I will have memorized the anguish and exhaustion written on other mothers' faces, but it will still catch me off guard. I will still find myself lacking sleep, staggering around with a sticky sippy-cup in my hand, and wondering how i got myself into this.

No motherhood tonight. Only a little magazine, blessedly inanimate. There is something to be thankful for.

I tell myself, there are times when it is significant to stop the inflation of feelings by writing whatever is, rather than whatever's true.

"I hope God forgives me, if I'm wrong," I said to Andrew tonight, about salvation and more or less scraping a fear of hell and in some ways, even a hope of heaven. I say the same now, because I must write, but I will wilt without sleep – I hope God forgives me, if I'm wrong to stop writing.

I have been reading this Joan Didion book a lot of the day, and this is the second thing that I've read of hers – the first was just an essay – but the trend I see is that her writing is captivating, without a doubt, but that she takes too much liberty in assuming the reader is happy to endure the intricacies of complex medical explanations. While I see their relevance to the writing, I also feel that she is stepping over a sort of line in much the same way an elderly relative does in telling you more than you wanted to know about

a recent surgery – it's just not polite to do it because you know the poor younger relative has to sit there and listen – they'd be a total shit not to, so you've got them caught, and you should be extra careful not to take advantage of these respective conversational positions. But she started the book off very strong, and it appeals to me for a number of reasons. For one thing she dips in and out of ideas so strongly – her transitions are remarkably fluid even though you're aware of each bead as its own distinct thing, you can feel the beads slipping next to each other on the string, but you're still so impressed with the necklace as a whole, how do all these parts make such a perfect and unending line?

I am always trying to understand who I am, in order to feel safer. I think, if I can just fully explain, predict, document, categorize, the thoughts and pains that come into my head and trouble my body and my understanding of reality...if I could just share this threatened feeling with *one* other person... There are the stories of abusive passion. There are also stories of having someone you can always take a nap with, can abandon the world with. I'm afraid to be alone. So many pretty people are never left alone. I try to feel safe with my friends, with myself.

I try to understand how writing is unsafe, but also beautiful. I try to convince myself that beauty makes things worth it. The way I feel about the world, my life, is constantly changing. Pronouncing it safe and good today means nothing for tomorrow.

Sometimes it just seems like the artist's journey is so lonely, that you know that the only way to get relief from that loneliness is to be very very close to another artist. Like arms pressing against chests, and bangs stuck to lips, and heaving with the same sadness.

Cold (easing into winter)

My parents focused a lot on the word “best” when I was growing up. “Do your best, and we’ll be happy” they said. We sang “I’ll do my best for You” frequently in church. I remember clapping my hands to the rhythm of that song and wanting wholeheartedly to give You nothing but the most energetic effort and attention I had.

I’m doing my best not to mess this up.

I even made a list of things to talk about with them, in case I forget anything. In about two hours, I’m going to try to cram the next year into two hours of time with my parents before they leave to go back to the Philippines to continue honoring and glorifying You and working for Your kingdom and following where You lead them

away from me, for the next nine months.

This cold has me thinking. Pensive, I guess. It increases my awareness of those around me. It feels like the whole world is in a bit of a tough spot, and it just makes me more concerned for everyone in general. Tonight at Walmart the women in front of me had to put back some of their groceries. *What about our snacks, mommy?* Their children sounded disappointed. I don’t know why they put stuff back – I guessed it was because they didn’t have the money. I don’t know. Maybe they just didn’t want that stuff. Maybe they bought things they didn’t need. All I can do is go around hypothesizing about everyone all day.

Tonight it's finally fall. There's a compression that happens when it turns chilled like this, my skin gets tighter and when I walk I fold up inside of myself a little more. I hug whatever book I'm carrying as if its dense pages will really shield me from these newly arrived, searching winds. This season makes me step more quickly and I like that because suddenly my apartment, anyone's apartment, becomes a shelter. Now I can take refuge, instead of just going inside. Now I can hide behind layers and ribbons of clothing, and everyone but You will see, instead of pain, a well-bundled girl. Stepping precisely on each potentially crunchy dead brown leaf.

Thanksgiving. Over the break I found myself crouched in the living room, unsure of whether or not I wanted to go back upstairs to be with the relatives that swarmed around the house.

I decided to google “what holds families together”.

The first thing I found was an article with the headline "MASKED MAN HOLDS A FAMILY CAPTIVE OVERNIGHT."

I drifted back up to the kitchen, and poured the drinks.

Holidays are magical but they also have tremendous potential to disappoint me. I get nervous with all the pressure to have things be memorable and sparkly. In my haste I spill glitter in all the wrong places and during some parts of the day, between certain courses in the meal, I can only sit and blink and hold my spoon still, suspended.

I guess...I guess in celebrating Thanksgiving we're participating in something bigger than ourselves. Part of the expectation, the pressure, comes from the knowledge that this isn't just grandma's pies and a steaming slab of turkey, this is a symbol that we

will look to in our darker moments as representative of family, warmth, security, and feeling full.

When we were all going around the table saying what we were thankful for, I had to nudge my great-grandma, had to pose the question to her again, more loudly.

Her answer was hesitant and frail. "Oh, well, ah, I'm just. I'm just thankful to be alive, I guess."

And then it was my turn.

The snow reminds me of my weakness. It drifts down so lightly, so gently, but once attached to the earth, it sits resolutely in huge, stubborn lumps that grow higher than I can see over, when the snow plows push it around. Snow adds a new dimension of difficult for me in owning a car. Now, I can't even hack away enough ice to open the door handle.

"I should charge for my services," Ben grinned at me after class.

"No. No you shouldn't," I said more seriously than I meant to. I was self-conscious in this new state of dependence. And he didn't. Later, I noticed that his fingers were speckled with cuts, his skin worn clean off in spots by the shovel.

"Thanks," I said quietly, pulling at a thread on my sweater. "I owe you dinner."

When I walk through the snow, I need to step in other people's footprints to navigate. When I walk on the ice, I reach out to grab Sarah's elbow every time, and love is inching along together while eager boys slide by, hooting, because ice is a game. When I walked to class with Ben today, I encountered more ice.

"You've got good shoes for it, though," he pointed at my feet.

"Yes, but," I was concentrating too hard on catching up to him, several paces ahead of me, to talk.

"Here," said Ben, and took my notebooks and pens from my hands to put them in his backpack. "Now you can catch yourself properly."

Christmas. "You going home for break?" everyone asks enthusiastically.

"Yes," I lie. If home is wherever my parents hung their Christmas decorations this year, I'm not there.

I miss being a kid and playing with the nativity set. I was always so pleased with how neatly the baby Jesus fit into the ready grooves of his carved manger. One of the shepherds, the one with a lamb bent around his shoulders, was uneven and constantly fell over. I would just pretend he was prostrate from the shock of it all.

Celebration

Christmas was. I read my aunt the directions for carving the meat (If it's a leg of lamb, he positions the lamb so that the meatier side is facing away from him, and carefully cuts several thin slices so that the...) and holding my grandmother's tattered cookbook, I read it gender-inclusively, and remembered that it was this particular cookbook that my dad had made a cover for when he was a little boy, which said "How to Cook and Not to Burn." Everyone chuckles whenever we collectively remember this detail. My dad used to be cute. Now he's just very mobile, and flying in on Friday.

I sat in the chair closest to Grandma's bed so she could watch me unwrap my present from her. As all four of us girls opened our gift-bags we pulled out scads of love letters, from Nancy to Charlie and Charlie to Nancy. The beginning of the process that led to my existence. "I just couldn't bear to throw them away," Grandma said with a half-smile over the noise of her breathing machine. We unfolded brittle pages and started to read them aloud. "Hey there, hope you're done studying sociology so you can come study me sometime soon..." They were sweet sixteen sweethearts, and separated by death when he was just fifty-five. If I was a different sort of person, I would say with more confidence, that she is going to join him soon.

I got a singingly new kitchen knife from my aunt. I put it between my teeth like a pirate for my sister snapping pictures, and my aunt made a nervous face. My favorite present was two books from Justin, the first several pages of each marred by lovely scrawlings that are worth hiding from the rest of the world.

We stopped opening presents at one point to run over to my great-grandmother's apartment because she was sick and could not join us. We hope you feel better Marian, we said, and handed her a weighty bottle of chardonnay, and some carnations, red for Christmas, and a card with a dog on it because dogs are one of the only things left in her rendition of the world. She tells us every time we see her about Lord Chesterfield, Chesty for short, and my what a good dog he was, yes, she says with a crack of a laugh.

Later, my aunt and my cousin played Christmas carols on the cello and the viola for us, and we never did get around to reading a sermon together as planned, not even the standard stable story. And then not too soon, we blew out the candles, carefully, so as not to spill wax on the holiday tablecloth, and You were done being born all over again, and that was that.

Child

There are days when I think of my childhood, and I see my tinier self sitting on the scratchy carpet of our first house watching muppets sing and dance, below our sprawling television antenna. I remember that Mom marked the *channel up* and *channel down* buttons with bits of masking tape so that I knew what to push to change the station from Popeye to Sesame Street while she napped. I remember that I could never remember which one was masking tape and which one was scotch when I was a kid. Then I unstick myself from that thought and zoom out to consider my entire life up to this point, and I decide life in my family has been very much like the Sesame Street game “one of these things is not like the other.” And I sigh.

I am sitting in the sun, and can suddenly see all the dirt clinging to my living room furniture. It reminds me of the first place I ever lived; there was a standing mirror next to my parents’ bed, and I remember the way the particles of dust would dance around when the sunlight shot through the prison cell windows of our basement apartment in Boston. I thought it was magical, I would reach out my fingers to try to catch the dust, and it swirled faster.

In that same apartment, I remember dancing on my father’s feet, stopping to turn the cassette tape to the other side, curling my toes back over his shoes, which were metal-toed, because he worked in a chemical lab. Things worked for us when I was a little girl. They don’t seem quite as smooth now, as I’m playing adult these days.

Recently, I went to pick my dad up at the airport. He was flying in from Manila, quite suddenly, to say goodbye to his mother, who was about to die. Knowing it mattered to him, I arrived at the airport early, and planted myself at the gate where the bags from his flight were scheduled to lurch around on the belt that snaked through the weary crowds. It was the day before New Years Eve, and arrivals and pickers-up were smothered together into a hungry, searching crowd. Everyone just wanted to find that one face, or two, that was familiar.

I leaned against a pillar, and let my eyes run loose, looking for him. But I saw nothing I knew, only strangers and strangers. I started pacing. I had remembered to check his flight online before coming – where was he?

“Excuse me, how do I page someone?” I asked an employee. I cradled the heavy receiver against my shoulder and tried to understand the instructions scratching into my ear.

A few minutes later, I heard it.

“WILL A MISTER CHARLES SANDERS COME TO THE U.S. AIRLINES DESK, THAT’S CHARLES SANDERS, PLEASE COME TO THE DESK.”

I wondered if he would hear it, maybe I should have used his nickname, he never goes by Charles, only bank statements and telemarketers call him that. I continued to pace. After a while, I asked someone else, and learned that his flight from Manila had been delayed, which meant he didn’t make his flight from Detroit, and had to take the next one. Two more hours to wait. I sat down on a metal bench, and watched relationships bend and stretch as little girls and old men said goodbye to mothers and army buddies; I listened to old college friends reunite, I watched a frenzied family of five try to find baggage claims while maneuvering two strollers.

At last, Dad's flight, and this time, his face. I drew back from our quick hug, and stood in front of him.

"You been waiting long?" he asked.

"Yeah, most of the afternoon, it's ok..." I trailed off, and then added, "I guess it'll be a bit of a large parking fee, but I've got the cash on me."

"Well, just for next time, you might want to check all of the flights ahead of time, so you don't get in this situation again."

I nodded, and looked down at his shoes. "The car's this way, Dad."

Driving him to my grandmother's house, I felt the pressure of time, hoped she was still alive enough to recognize him, kept my foot firmly on the accelerator. We both put our visors down as I turned onto 695, and we drove in silence, straight into the sun.

Grief

yesterday, I wrote:

I was woken with the words 'she might die today' and that's all I've done, I got out of bed and showered and worked to believe those words, all day.

Aunt Melanie just said 'the family's all here' on the phone to Mindy, but I miss my mother and sister. It feels dry without their tears here.

Dad's sleeping on the couch, with his hand covering his eyes. Last night I was on the phone with mom and I was out on the porch for privacy, and I looked in to the kitchen and dad was on the other phone, and he and I were both holding our arms the same way, with one arm supporting the other at the elbow. I was struck with our similarity even in such a time of contrast.

People have been here to see it, to try to believe it, to see what 'actively dying' looks like, Grandma's friends, pastor Kent, Paul the priest.

We wait. We wait and we stare, I've stared so long at her today. I find myself holding my own breath as I wait for her to take her next, it really is the way I imagined it, it is full of suspense and at the same time so ordinary, to wait like this, to watch. I'm exhausted from stroking her hands, from twisting her diamond ring around on her still warm finger, watching my aunt adjust her breathing tube, kneeling against the cold metal rails of her bed. 'Monitor Patient Frequently' says a sticker on the side of the rails. And I do.

Now we're waiting till mom wakes up so we can call her, and tell her that Grandma's song is fading quickly, tell her that we've all got our ears to the speakers and we can feel the music more than we can really hear it anymore.

I remember the feeling of leaning up against our big set of speakers as a child, pushing my palm against the stretched vibrating skin, always surprised that it gave a little under my pressure, always slightly dazed to hear the music normally once I scooted away and got up off the floor.

We are waiting for relief, and devastation in waves, and quietness lapping at our necks as we tread water in an ocean that will be suddenly calmed by death.

today:

I was woken at two thirty this morning with the words 'Grandma just stopped breathing. Come downstairs.' And so we spent the early hours of this morning, shifting, pacing, humming the doxology to ourselves, working to believe those words, until the undertaker came and took her, and left us with the scent of his last cigarette. And a feeling of profound emptiness.

Science

I'm doing some reading for my astronomy class. It seems like these ideas are meeting me out at the brink, the very edge of God, and they're reassuring me I've got reason to stop leaning over the railings, to turn away and to come back closer inside. Because they're quoting all these authors who are trying so *hard* to disprove the idea of a moment of creation, and thus a creator. I love the things these scientists say, the passion that seems behind their words – all these men, Einstein and Hawking, trying to figure a way around God but constantly bumping into God instead.

But of course, I am still cautious because this seems written for Christians who are primed to derive pleasure from a “non-Christian” failing to prove them wrong. That's something I really hate, the way Christians seem to be trained to feel, at best, pity, for “non-Christians” and at worst, just hatred for them. Why should we *ever* be joyful to see someone unable to challenge us? Why should we pretend like we're on some intellectual war-path.

Why don't we have more respect for the suffering behind cigarettes and the passion behind scientific searches for a proof that the universe has always existed. It's not like I'm even saying that “non-Christians” are necessarily miserable – what I'm trying to say is that they're people and they deserve my respect and it freaks me out that the idea of “witnessing” seems to allow me to break all normal boundaries and to impose on someone else's heart with the self-righteous belief that I have something their heart needs?

Well ok, maybe that's too far. I guess I do believe I have something everyone's heart needs. But it's not like I *have* it, it's like I'm clinging to it, I stumbled on it, I'm wrestling with it and unsure about it, and if I share it it's only because I think the other person is wise enough to do the same with it. I don't know. I just hate the idea of Christians delighting in that which is “exceedingly frustrating to the scientist” but I also like the idea of something that is so true, *so true*, that nothing can come up against it, all the ideas and brilliant proposals and handfuls of tears and sweat in the world thrown against the wall of that truth can't make it change, can only stain it and wet it but can't make it vibrate, or chip away at it.

Turning back to my book, I read “in the first moments of its existence the Universe was compressed to an extraordinary degree, and consumed by the heat of a fire beyond human imagination” and I thought that I like that last phrase, it's interesting to think that we came through fire, that was the first thing that happened to us, to this whole thing that sustains me, complex life.

I was on the roof this morning, six a.m. stargazing. And while there, I thought up the line, “dabbing at the sheen below our noses with the fibers of our mittens.”

Death

Last month.

I am developing photos of my grandmother and they are multiplying, I add one and then one and then another to the bath and the images are floating around, her face is turned in six different directions and it's a kaleidoscope of her eyes, I keep adding pairs, and the cancer in her body is multiplying and making millions more of death's fish-eye fasteners floating around in her body killing her so fast that the increasing numbers are making me dizzy as I let another print pirouette into the bath to wash off, to slide free of a chemical smell, soon to be dried and they're only seconds, not even, they're fractions of seconds, and maybe if I just print enough fragments of her life, but she'll never be whole again I don't care what you say to me about heavenly bodies her earthly one is in black and white, I've printed it carefully so the contrast is pleasing, it does not please You to let just one of her live, so I make many of her and think of myself passing her framed memory and I think of myself becoming angry at a photograph for being paper, sleek with two dimensions and such a poor substitute for a still breathing woman, the prints spiraling away from my reach in the water say: there will soon be no one to reach for.

This month.

"Her passing makes heaven all the more attractive to our family."

"We are sad but also full of hope that this is only a temporary goodbye. She is now living in color while we are the ones in black and white."

These are things my mother has said. They make me want to cry and scream. They make me scared and now I'm thinking about throwing up. I dislike these things because this is what I hear in my head when I read them:

We are not allowing ourselves to be consumed with grief, we are not even going to think about doubling in half with crying, we do not hit our steering wheels in cars with the radio turned up so loud that we can't hear the sound of ourselves sobbing. We will always stop sorrow before it climaxes, because we do not need to go there, we are sure. We are surely sure. We each sure for breakfast, and we'll eat you for breakfast too if you disagree with us because we're right because we're hardworking and make good decisions and trust Jesus as our eternal savior amen.

I feel like a bad person for not feeling God upholding me, not reading the Bible, not wanting to pray, not not swearing, not not drinking, not not not not. Sucking at life.

God, what does our interaction look like? I don't know how WE are supposed to talk. I am typing with my eyes closed, because it's more like praying. God. Are you there. I forgot a question mark. ? There. God do you hate me for who I am now. God what do you think of my decisions. God why am I so upset by Christian things. Don't tell me it's a trick of the devil. Don't tell me it's the gradual descent into the life I never meant.

Maybe her passing doesn't make heaven attractive to me. Maybe death makes me doubt everything because it's so fucking sad and feels so final. So final. Maybe I'm scared for Grandma, maybe I worry that she had to face something really scary alone. That's why I'm scared to die. Not pain but alone. It doesn't matter how many people are at your bedside you're still alone when you die, you have to float away or vaporize away or melt away into something, somewhere else, all *alone*. No one goes with you; there is no one to reach for.

Nighttime (a fortnight of thoughts)

It is past midnight, officially late. At this hour, walking around campus, I can expect to encounter other people only in couple form, usually holding hands. It's senior year. I refuse to be one of those girls who whines about all things dating related. So I'm just silent, and pensive. What are the next few years going to look like? Am I going to be strong enough to continue to remember that a relationship simply for relationship's sake is pure useless? Will I give up and just start drinking like a fish?

(Not likely).

~

They have been painting the insides and outsides of the heavy grey, now black, doors to our apartment building.

The smell of paint makes me think, for a minute, that something is new, that life is fresh and wet, that I should be skipping up the stairs instead of walking up them.

But I am not easily fooled. And in the fifteen seconds it takes me to reach my apartment, I realize the weight of the day all over again, as if I'd just crawled out of bed to silence my alarm.

~

I can't dress this up in pretty words for You today: I am hurting.

~

Peace seems as small as a bug tonight, and it keeps flitting away from me just when I try to close my hand around its buzzing black shell. No peace tonight. I can't catch anything but the nighttime air between my fingers.

(I don't know if it's fair to demand support where it's not freely offered.)

(I don't know how long to sit there with my palms pressed into the gravel, waiting.)

What's the point of You seeing every tear, what's the point of that. If it means I am this empty-handed at the end of a day spent chasing after things.

~

Tonight, I stayed up so late that they started selling miracle prayer cloths on tv. I've been up to no good this weekend.

I look forward to the calming rhythms of church tomorrow, and will try to mean the words of confession. I'm really not sure what things in my life You approve of and which things You snicker at. Maybe You don't snicker at all. I've never been good at pinpointing You. This is where i start to say something, and don't finish. And then start again. And finally I just say, thank You for life today, and for health.

~

It is springtime; there are lovers, and there are short skirts, and long kisses. And there is silence, freshly grown.

I find myself staying up late without really knowing why, writing to You for the same reason, lagging. And the week's about to snap shut. As I'm yawning, and failing to meet all kinds of deadlines,
and blank.

~

It's three thirty seven in the morning, and I'm up for a number of reasons. I noticed some serious grass stains on my pants today, and shoved them into a drawer

under the bathroom sink, vowing to deal with them soon. Seven hours later, I remembered them, and found myself scrubbing with an effort that reminded me of washing my clothes in a basin, on some rocks, in a river in the Philippines. I remember the pull of the current as I held a shirt by the neck and let the soap suds shoot downstream, the feeling of watching one of my sandals float away from my grasp, gone. The sun baking underwear spread out on a flat rock, already caked with new dirt. I rubbed holes into my shirts – the material couldn't take that kind of beating. Such heat, it was always so oppressively hot over there, I was always so miserable, in that place. Right now I'm cold, even in socks and the ugliest, warmest sweater I own, because my desk sits right up against the window so I can watch everyone walking by. Even though no one walks by. Because it is now three-fifty-one.

~

Mom, Dad, Lydia and I just had a conference call. Chicago, Pennsylvania, and the Philippines. All in one jumbled, awkward conversation. Thank You that we're each alive and kicking and are still a family, even stretched so far apart.

[12:58:23 AM] Lydia Sanders says: *it's good to hear you make mom laugh*

~

“Quite a few years ago, when you girls were little, I came home from work one day and told your mother, ‘I just want to unscrew my head from my body, set it down on the couch next to me, and pet it gently for a few minutes.’”

Nights like tonight, my father and I agree that we are both so tired, and we make each other laugh sometimes, and it's golden for a few seconds.

~

Sometimes I see You in the strangest places. (And naturally, I wave hello.)

~

This afternoon while he was leading our poetry meeting and managing the projector, Colin said the phrase “show me your eyes when you're ready for the next page,” and I thought of You. Do You say to us, *show me your eyes*, when wanting to know what we can handle next, and I don't want to look up? And I was thinking about originality, and the idea that the people in the New Testament only had to experience everything *once*, they didn't have to hear it *over and over* again, a maddening number of times, and thinking about how I'm just tired of Christianity on an aesthetic level.

I begin to feel that there are only variations of the same old characters, stories, illustrations, trite epiphanies, etc. and I think, is it good for me to define You in totally new ways for myself? Is it ok to feel that the church's descriptions of You are worn and weather-beaten? Is it holy to try to find my own blind way around Your ankles? I once asked Michael if he thinks there's any room in the church for a non-conformist, and he was quick to say *no*.

~

Justin's words, I could scream, I could absolutely scream with how they make me better, and make me laugh, so hard, so much gasping because it's how I laugh, he's trying so hard and succeeding, at comfort, at reassurance, *you must focus on something outside of yourself* he says, *the world is really fucked up and scary no matter how you approach it. If you're a fundamentalist Christian you believe there's demons all the time waiting to jump out of the bushes at you. And you can go to the other extreme and go out and have twelve drinks and wake up in your own vomit, but. Some of us have experienced both of*

*these things, he says haltingly, and can tell you— the world's scary no matter how you approach it, and I say yes, but then no, I can't bear it, I'm intoxicated by the feeling of just letting go, shaking my head sadly to say I don't care, I'm sorry, I'm not the one you're looking for. I rub the oil on my eyelids and the tears in the corners of my eyes together and they blend on my knuckles, and this is called *tired*.*

~

I was about to say something about how You're wonderful for never getting as sick of my problems as i do, something about You being infinitely patient, but i realized I've already written that before and i'm tired of saying things like that. yes, the irony.

I can't find value in the repetition of my own ragged language tonight, but i can fall heavily back into these netted words:

Almighty and everlasting God, You are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve: Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things **of which our conscience is afraid**, and giving us good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior; who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

~

And the curtains fall with smothering plush, ending another long week of acting capable and unaffected. thank You, thank You.

Coping

A eulogy comes before mourning.

For me, watching my grandmother these past several weeks has been like listening to the end of a good song. Last week I felt like I had my ear to the speakers and was listening for the last few faint, final chords, and now my heart aches at this silence that has followed her death. Yesterday I was lingering in the kitchen and noticed her journal, which she told me I could read someday if I wanted. I flipped to the most recent page, and was surprised to see that the last words she wrote were "but still the song."

As I thought about that phrase, "but still the song," I began to realize the significance of the idea that this silence does not mean that her life, her song, is really finished playing. She has encouraged so many of us to keep singing in times when our voices have faltered or our lungs have failed us, and so now we sing bravely on, remembering her encouragement.

She poured much of her life into the task of spurring us on, and we will each do the same for others in her honor. And I smile now at the thought that through this we are allowing her song to continue on, for it was, fresh in my memory, a stirring and unforgettable tune.

And mourning comes before a return to normalcy.

Because when you are crying and holding a photo, it's hard to set it back down on your desk and keep typing.

I miss knowing Grandma is there.

One night, a few years ago, we took a walk around her neighborhood, at night, after a big snow and then freezing rain, like tonight. And everything glittered, it really did. It was so pretty I don't want to try to describe it.

But we walked together in it. And she can't really be gone.

This sadness is like a sea-salt soak, and my skin is getting softer, and softer still, but existence is no easier to swallow. So I'm sliding back into the water to watch my fingers drip some more, to flick at the liquid surrounding me in defeat some more. And I'm scared mostly only of someone smiling, saying, pull your towel from the rung, and get out. And cheer up.

I just looked out the window and saw two people sharing a scarf.

I chopped some grapes up and put them in the freezer because they were going bad and I wanted to make it stop, and I wrote *grapes* on a post-it note and stuck it on my computer keys and I just came in from the cold and I just saw the note and I just took the bowl out of the freezer and I just put them in my mouth and they are like eating something off of tonight's frozen ground, sweet, even though they rattle around in the bowl like they're stones that would never give way to the pressure of teeth.

I am trying to be brave.

I keep pulling at the neck of this gray shirt. It's becoming stretched out and limp. There is such shelter, and okay, danger, in sitting and staring beyond the walls of whatever boxed-up room contains me at the moment, busy sitting, re-living, swallowing, hesitating, perhaps mourning. And industriously neglecting my work.

I tell myself, of course she's gone, of course she's dead, that's all you been thinking about for the last two weeks, it's the most natural thing in the world. And then I think, but wait, what did she look like? How did her voice sound in the mornings? Did she exist? Did I ever have a grandmother? I swing back and forth between excessive denial and excessive acceptance. I'm waiting for my life, and my mind, to feel like my own again.

But it doesn't yet, and we're already three days into classes.

It's hard to be patient with myself in such a demanding environment.

And there You are, reminding me of an annoying kid who taps people on the wrong side of the shoulder and then quickly turns away, shielding a grin. I'm struggling to perceive You without confusion, and it seems I'm a sucker for that joke every time.

Rambling

It is perhaps the greatest irony in my life right now that I have not picked up my Bible in months, while my parents are working with all these people spending meticulous years translating the Bible for those who are so grateful to have it that they probably kiss it goodnight before they lie down in the deep dark of their jungle homes and talk to You with more faith than I'll ever snatch hold of.

I remember as a teenager wondering *why* You found it necessary to create a personality like mine. Early on in my career as a member of my immediate family I embraced the term "black sheep," and it's still a way that I define myself measured against Mom, Dad, and Lydia.

I wish to speak to you with metaphors and sensual images, I love pulling out my bag of tricks and throwing handfuls of glitter onto the page as I ramble on at You. But there are also times when it's good to be literal with You. Like when I say that I can't decide about heaven and hell.

I suspect that I get through life by ignoring the things that are so bad they erode my belief that the good ever really wins. And I live in fear of these bad things leaking into my mind, such fear.

I want to tell You about the time I found a blind girl in an orphanage and told her she was beautiful. But not today.

I'm trying so hard to figure things out, and it's not working.

Why are we so afraid to die? I sit and wonder about this while I'm watching gaunt, long-dead faces in films in my Holocaust class, or when I'm watching my friends laugh about a car ride that didn't end in a fatal accident. (They pried open the doors with effort when the car stopped in the driveway, because even the driver was drunk, and they were home, and they breathed all night long and still, the next morning).

Today I asked Ben if he'd ever thought he would die. *Have I been near death? Well, when I was being born my mom and I almost didn't make it...but...* (he squinted into his past)...*I don't really remember it, hard as I try*, and then he laughed at himself.

I stared at him and wondered what the world would be like if he hadn't made it. I bit the head off of the stale gingerbread man cookie I held in my hand, and crumbs fell out of my mouth as I spoke: your poor dad, he must have been so scared.

Why did I ever meet Ben in the first place? Friends are like glitter, I find them stuck around in odd places, and I know that no amount of vacuuming will ever completely eliminate them.

Always, the question of purpose ripples in the back of my mind. I hardly am inclined to think that I was meant to meet Ben anymore than Grandpa was meant to have his bones gnawed away by a cancer.

I think I picture heaven as the culmination of a very cruel joke. If things are all right in the end, I'll ask You, then why did You let me be so scared that they weren't? You stuffy old heartless divine being.

Mom told me once that You can take *anything* I throw at You. But I've run out of things. Not because of all the answers that have been thrown back in return; there seem to be none. But because I've thrown everything I can think of, and now I'm staring to all those questions stuck to You like flypaper, and I'm beholding You like an artist before a freshly splattered canvas that's taller than she is, propped against the wall of her

warehouse. I can only twirl the paintbrush in between my thumb and forefinger, and chew on the end of it, and pace in front of You, stretched out and still ready for more.

I sit here and sit here and I cannot think what to say. Lyrics are beautiful, poems click right into the slot, but right now, prose feels like the things I say when I'm drunk. Too much, too loose, words that spill and leave stains on just-washed white pants pages.

I miss You. I really miss You. Is the only way to define You to shut one's eyes, and reach out, as if blind? Is that the only way I'd be allowed to feel Your curves and angles again? I've got my eyes open almost to circles, and I wave my hands out in front of me, but I feel only the wind resisting my fingers, nothing else. Nothing there.

A lot of my mental energy is put into trying to wrestle things to the ground, decide absolutely one way or the other, trying to condemn things or kiss them on the lips. But right now I want to try to invite whoever, however I am right now to speak through my writing. I am listening to a pretty song. *My salvation lies in your love*, it's saying. And I'm remembering how, when I was a young teenager, I would try to take secular lyrics and use them to speak to You. I thought I was so cool, subverting these empty, godless words in order to sing my praises to You. I would get frustrated with certain songs, when it didn't quite work.

Sometimes during my growing-up years, well-meaning Christians would pop out of the shadows with unbelievably wide carnival grins, and try to tell me that I should date Jesus, or that Jesus was my best friend. Now I shudder at the thought of trying to see You as something as twisted as my *boyfriend*. You are huge, You are all powerful according to some, You are sweeping, deathly waves in oceans and You are something I sip while kneeling at the altar. Much more glorious, mysterious, and outrageous than some seed-sowing drip of a boyfriend.

Despite all this, sometimes I make up stories about you, and they go like this.

One night, God sat up with me and watched me dip seven and a half chocolate chip cookies into a glass of milk. He told me about the time he held his breath waiting for a baby in Mexico to be born, and he forgot to breathe himself. "I could have died," he announced gravely. I stared at him and wondered what the world would be like if he hadn't made it. I forgot to dip my last cookie in milk, and crumbs tumbled out of my mouth as I spoke: *sure glad You didn't. Hey, I'm all out of cookies and there's still a little milk left in my glass. Want it?* But God said something about lactose intolerance and shuffled back upstairs.

Saving

My grandmother lived in Peru as a teenager. She met my army-brat grandfather. They eventually married, and then she made him lunch every day. My dad was their second child. If you were trying to explain in thorough detail how I came to be, and how my grandma and I found ourselves sitting in each other's lives, that might be something to include.

But you might also draw the line of connection along the details, not the biographical information. Such as, salt packets. They come with that teathy plastic silverware on airplane trays, or you can grab a handful of them when you dash out of a fast-food chain. I found a bunch of pinched, faded packets rummaging in the tiny drawers of the cabinet hanging above my grandma's sink. I was rummaging because she is dead, and that is what you do when someone is dead and you're in their house, you find all the little things that they tucked away in the countless folds of one life.

I pulled the little ceramic drawer out and sifted through the salt and pepper with my finger. *Look at these things*, I said to Dad, who wasn't listening. *They're from the seventies or something. Swiss Air, Cho Lin Chinese, Delta. I can't believe they saved these for all these years, it's just a handful of salt, that's so crazy.*

A few weeks later I was organizing in my apartment – separating the noodles, pretzels, and Tupperware back into separate shelves. I pulled a plastic container from the back, and it was full of salt packets I'd snatched from McDonalds on a road trip. Dumping the handful I'd been holding into the trashcan, I closed my eyes with missing.

Holiness

It ends with amen. But how does it begin? Maybe like this. God is not my friend. God does not accompany me on drives to the grocery store. (So I'm on my own when it comes to finding a parking spot). God is not easy for me to understand; God's kind of hard to peg, if you ask me. So, let's see – holy writing. Holy is “set apart for the worship of God.” I used to think that worship meant empty hands, stretched out, and a few tears, between the chorus and the bridge of my favorite songs. But recently, having accepted this label as a bona fide “writer,” I have to be honest – I'm not all that comfortable without a pen in my hand. And, I've gotten sick of my favorite songs. So I've decided to stop shouting to the Lord, to let all the earth sing on about all that power and majesty without me.

Things have gotten pretty quiet.

It would seem I'm all primed to write something and set it aside for God. But I already mentioned that God slips easily through my fingers, so what to say? If I close my eyes and try to picture holy writing, I can't do it. Should I have left this sheet blank?

Yesterday I was sitting at my computer typing and I looked out my window and saw a boy stop, take a step back, and bend down to gather a clump of snow in his hand. I saw him grin as he began to walk away.

Today, I am sitting at my computer again, typing, and unsure why I wanted to include that image. I thought that maybe if I tried to write first thing in the morning that it might help. I thought about what to say in the shower. But then I couldn't remember if I'd already washed my hair or not, and probably washed it twice. Determined, though, I marched straight here afterwards, but I'm distracted by the fear that my roommate will come back from class and wonder why I'm sitting here, writing in my underwear. I've been struggling to be very awestruck, lately, by anything. Irreverence feels refreshing, and so I keep flicking my fingers in it, and splashing other people with it.

The other day, I unintentionally landed myself in a rather energetic worship service. So I started writing.

God, we're singing the words "better is one day in your courts than thousands elsewhere" – but how can I make this distinction? I know no other way to worship you than with my feet on the ground. I have never been where you dwell, or if we're saying that's the earth, then why make this comparison? I'd rather sing about worshipping you from the beautiful realities of this world, the only thing I know. I'm trying to be a good worshipper here without shedding my humanity. Now we're singing "I'm trading my sorrows" and I again want to disagree. Why is this a trade? I'll probably end up keeping my pain whether I try to give it to you symbolically or not. But God, when I'm in this moment, what I really want to express is just sadness. I don't know whether I'm mourning who I was or just sad that I feel shut off from a culture I used to love. I'm sad that this culture scares me, sad that I can't really play along for old times' sake, not even for a weekend. I'm less sure of what is sacred to me anymore. I guess I just suddenly feel a lot more private about loving you. If loving is even the proper word here.

This is coming out all wrong, these mangled phrases that I'm trying to glue back together on the page. So all I can think to do is to keep disclosing more and more about myself, in hopes that this will somehow show that I hold so tightly to the hope that if *anything* is holy, it is the relationships we have with each other. I'm trying to reach for

You, with these words. There's never enough time to write my mind in this silenced state, and it's time to get dressed, and go to class.

It's very tempting to speak, to write, when I don't actually know what to say, or how to keep going. Maybe I'm not cut out to narrate holiness. I should at least *try*, though, before I run out of space. Ok. This is the truest thing I can say: *God is worth writing about*, and hopefully not too terribly offended by my words. Amen.

Conflict: a conversation within myself (Part 1)

B: Yes, and that is definitely a defining characteristic of some of the depression I experienced in high-school. That irrational feeling of separation from others. Somehow this sudden knowing that nothing anyone else could say or do would be able to reach me. That led me to fear death intensely, because death seemed like the ultimate separation. I would wish so badly that if I had to die, I could die with someone else. I remember getting so upset in church, singing songs about heaven, feeling so unready to go there, hating the enormity of the unknown that death apparently pushes us into.

A: The author says “underneath our fear of being flawed is a more primal fear that something is wrong with life, that something bad is going to happen.” This reminds me immediately of the creative and elaborate ways I often use my imagination to enhance my fear. I remember even as a child, like when it was Christmas time and we had those fake candles in the window, I would fall asleep staring at that flimsy little plastic light so sure that it would start a fire, that I would wake up with my bed on fire, that I would lose all of my favorite toys and books. Or sometimes it was more simple than that, I would just lie awake almost certain that I wouldn’t wake up the next morning. I would fall asleep murmuring shreds of “now I lay me down to sleep” prayers, and then wake up the next morning thanking God that it was all just an unfounded fear. I remember begging God to let me live to the age of 17, to 19, to 20.

B: I look back on these fears, this paranoia, and I wonder where it came from. I hardly expect this book to unlock any sort of deep mystery for me, but as I read I am constantly holding my experience up against “the church” and I have this nagging curiosity to know if being raised as a Christian somehow fueled my self-hatred, insecurity, and fear.

A: I’m suddenly more interested in the fact that this book comes from a non-Christian perspective. Maybe this is the perfect way to come at it in this situation, maybe this will illuminate more for me because it’s not “the usual” Christian response.

B: The basic issue that the author seems to be attacking is the idea of not feeling “good enough” or feeling “undeserving”. Now, think about the language that you *swam* in when you were growing up – the Sunday school songs, the doctrine classes – we don’t deserve what God has given us. The doctrine of original sin. We are sinful, God we are sorry. Every Sunday. It was always about recognizing our sin, dealing with our sin, repenting. God we are not worthy of these gifts you give us.

A: Yeah, it’s like a recipe for disaster. My analytical mind, my desire to please my parents, my efforts to be a good Christian girl.

B: This is making me nervous. I don’t want to end up writing a book called “Why the Christian faith led to my mental deterioration and how walking away from it saved my life”

A: Of course not. I don't think you necessarily have to head in that direction. It could just be that you personally didn't respond in the way you should have. Maybe the problem was not what you were taught but how you responded to that information.

B: Yes, *but* then are right back to the whole "blaming me" idea. That whole "wow I am so screwed up I couldn't even deal with Christianity properly" thing.

A: It is always easier to blame myself than someone else.

B: Damn straight.

A: This isn't getting us anywhere, though. Let's just continue with this exploration and worry about where it's going later on.

B: Ok. One of the reasons I'm so curious how my Christian upbringing plays into this is because this insecurity, wherever it comes from, is *very* persistent. It's something I've tried to shake off for quite a long time. I feel like I've been half-heartedly pulling at stalks and tearing off leaves when I should be plowing around in the surrounding dirt to try to get at the roots. So I naturally wonder if this insecurity is tied to something like my faith, something that is thick and gnarly and will not loosen its grip on the earth without a fight.

A: And here we have the danger of mangling your faith.

B: Yeah...

A: Is it worth it?

B: It has to be. I can't live like I did. Like I still sort of do.

A: I thought it was really interesting, at Dr. Nisly's reception, when he talked about the difficulty of holding beliefs that you're willing to die for, while simultaneously remaining open and receptive.

B: Yes, and if we're going with this whole "roots" idea, what does this mean? How can anyone ever expect to benefit from being at either end of the spectrum?

A: I don't know but being in the middle is often scorned. You're called a lukewarm Christian, or worldly, or relativistic, or...

B: Unworthy?

A: Indeed.

B: You know, even your non-Christian friends say that happiness is not the ultimate goal in life. Is that what this author is after, happiness? Does she glorify that too much?

A: You and your Christianese. "Glorify?" What does that actually mean?

B: Ok, we're getting off track. The thing that I keep thinking about is, what would Dad say to some of this? I think Dad would say, balance. Dad would acknowledge the danger of extremes, Dad wouldn't defend the extreme positions you took as a kid or a teenager. He wouldn't encourage you to continue using Christian ideas to beat yourself up.

A: True, Dad would be all about moderation.

B: But in so many areas of my life, I see this tendency towards extremes. I see a desire for black and white, despite my latest efforts to love "grey." I see this in my friendships – the way I want to clearly label and define them all. I want to be pursuing something, I don't want stagnant friendships, undefined relationships, shallow interactions. Hate all of that. I see these extremes in my childhood search for what is "fair." I still get worked up about things that seem unfair. I want so badly to be able to categorize and understand everything through a rigid lens. I would make a spectacular legalistic Christian.

A: And you did, you little goody-two-shoes.

B: I remember thinking the words "Christianity scares me" during the last several years. Every once in a while, I just remember this feeling, that instead of being a *good thing*, a comforting thing, being a Christian was a burden, a nerve-wracking, heart-pounding ordeal for me.

A: Enter feelings of guilt and inadequacy.

B: I just never could really hold onto things the way other people seem to, I could never "rest" in God's love the way Mom told me to, I could not "rest" in the love of my friends the way Liz told me to. I see in myself the ability to lose perspective very easily.

A: I wonder what the positive manifestation of that is. Creativity, maybe? The ability to engage in an idea and soar with it?

B: You're such a fucking optimist. But without that, we'd be screwed. Continue.

A: A while back I mentioned the idea of "the Christian response." I dislike that response so much. I've got it memorized. The gist of it is, you can look all you want, you can search this world for answers, but you will only find true peace in God. Your insecurity will last as long as your lack of faith will. If you seek God, you will find him. I can just see this image of myself, this "wayward" girl reading some "non-Christian" self-help book, "looking in the wrong place" for the answers. Skipping merrily into the pit of hell. I have never been able to understand why the ultimate answer has to be so aggravatingly abstract. I still don't know what it means to "look to God" and I've been practicing for almost two decades.

B: I don't know that to say to that.

A: Sometimes silence is the best policy.

Church

This morning the first thought that I thought was, *I want to come say hello to You, I do. but I'm so sleepy.*

In the shower, I tried to remember not to watch the water race down my hips, to instead open the shampoo and to keep moving so I wouldn't be any later. Towel, toothbrush, tank top on. Nine forty seven. That clock's two minutes fast, so I'll only be five minutes late. If I hurry. I breathed my perfume for breakfast and started the car.

As soon as she got in, she asked, *what is this thing?* I told Liz it was an extra sunshade. *Marian had like seven of them in the car when she gave it to me, and I tossed most of them out, but I found one in the trunk, and she always complains when I drive her to get groceries that the sun's in her eyes. I know, I know she's so cute, she holds her little hand up over her eyes and I feel bad. So I put that one on there, just rip it off and toss it back there.*

I didn't take my eyes off the road but I could tell that Liz was rubbing blush on her cheeks from the sweep of her arms. If I get pulled over, will I feel lame saying I was headed to church and late for the ten fifteen service? I switched lanes again and tried to ignore blue and red flashing thoughts. I wrenched into the parking lot. One move, I'm impressed, Liz said. I explain intinction to her over my shoulder as I reach for the heavy painted red door.

We were met with an echoing emptiness.

If we had been different kinds of Christians, we might have made jokes about the rapture. But I just stood there, one mitten in my still-mittened hand, trying to swallow *no body of Christ.*

Liz picked up a bulletin. Today only, nine a.m. service, annual meeting afterwards. I stared at all the books of common prayer, sitting next to all the hymnals in all the empty wooden rows. I felt sorriest that I had missed the confession. I had so many things to confess, I had so many reasons to sidle up to You this morning. I got out of bed for You, and nothing.

At the other end of the sanctuary Patrick was instructing two new altar boys how to hold their candles walking down the aisle. When they reached us at the end, they looked up at the flames so many inches above their heads. Now extinguish it, boys, see. *I can't do it*, the freckled boy said, as he grinned at us and blew straight up to heaven. Liz and I smiled at each other. That's why someone's going to help you with it, said Patrick, cupping his hand around the fire at his eye-level and blowing swiftly. We turned away, heels clicking back to the parking lot.

Pulling out, I was stuck. How am I even supposed to? Liz twisted around to look out the back windshield. How did you get in here in the first place, it was so tight? An elderly couple. The lady, bent, with sunglasses and a tan scarf to match her brown jacket, smoother than her wrinkle-run face. I rolled down my window, heard her say *these people are trying to get out, Henry.* The man said nothing. She spoke again. *Alright, I'll tell you. Go back, little more. Little more. Little more. Alright now turn your wheel, all the way now, ok, good, go back, back a little more.* She leaned over to watch my car's curves more carefully. There was no hesitation in her voice, she spoke in a *yes* way. Little more, little more. That's it, ok.

Together we navigated around, around, just barely, and out. Thank you *so* much, I ducked my head for emphasis and waved. They had been headed to church too. So we were leaving together, stepping and driving as far away as possible from a forsaken church building. And joined in the effort of it. Finally free, we wasted the gas needed to get back to life. Feeling less than sanctified. The same old sleepy sinners.

Salvation

It seems like a lot of good writing pares down to stories. What stories do I have to tell? Today is a day where nothing feels particularly profound. My senses feel somewhat dull to this world, and I'm not sure why. I don't feel particularly awestruck or aware of tragedy; I'm just here, sitting in my living room, thinking about deadlines.

This is one of those times where I feel as if I have slammed myself up against Your immovable shape so many times that all I can do is step back and rub my neck for a while.

Alright. Let's be honest. Let's be *skin peeled down to shattered bone and flapping in the wind* honest. I see very little reason behind what goes on in the world. I see the Christian worldview as somewhat easily silenced by handfuls of unexplainable tragedy. Furthermore, the Christian belief in heaven and hell, hell in particular, seems very troublesome in light of the suffering that not just some, but many, endure while they are alive. And not just suffering, but nuanced suffering.

I understand that You let people do whatever they want to do, but why are You represented by so many people who have no room for subtlety in their lives? Why does it have to be one way or the other? As a good Christian, I feel pressured into believing that You are the answer to everything. I don't even know what that means.

You are a being which I cannot detect with my senses. As an artist, I experience the world very chiefly through my senses – I am interested in aesthetic beauty, sexual pleasure, the seduction of language, and in particular, connection with the rest of humanity.

It doesn't do me much good to acknowledge You, this powerful force, if I have absolutely no idea where and why and how and when You act. I feel at the edge of Your very definition, I think that if I were any broader with it I'd just be describing the wind.

And this scares me. Because my aunt, my mother's half-brother's wife, Anne, wrote me a letter one time explaining what she thinks of You, when I asked her to explain her religious beliefs to me. I was concerned that my Aunt Anne might be headed for hell (making a beeline for it, even, along with the rest of my mom's relatives) and felt that I had to attempt to intervene in some way.

Aunt Anne said, "I don't really know how to define what God is to me, but sometimes it's just like a voice, speaking in the wind. I'm really tired of organized religion and I'm a spiritual person but don't really buy into the whole church thing." I remember I shook my head when I read those words. Poor, disillusioned, ignorant soul. She doesn't realize the danger of speaking that way – she doesn't see that she is being led astray, away from God's plan for her life, and that by refusing to acknowledge the one true God, receiving salvation from Jesus Christ, she is damning herself. It made me sick with fear.

And now here I am, less than a decade later, with very little certainty left to speak of, scratching my aching head. I'll be honest. I've got no where to go from here.

Fear

Also, am I not taking You seriously enough these days? Sometimes I get suspicious of the ease with which I can spoon my cereal, the frequency with which I can throw back my head and laugh, the smoothness of certain words as they swan-dive off my tongue.

I wonder if something ominous is coming, to put me back in my place. I watch the skies and hope that the dark clouds I see are bringing more rain to play in, and not lightning to fry my soul crispy.

(It's true, I'm scared of You). And that's a lame reason to keep after You, I know.

"I don't know who to trust," is what I keep saying. And then i say, "well, that's not really what I mean exactly..."

But it is.

I am no longer sure who speaks with authority and wisdom. Talking about this consistently brings me to tears, not answers. And it's just echoes when I call out: what now? (what now?) It's so dark, I'm starting to forget what my hands look like, or if light even exists.

But I won't stop crawling.

On some level, though, isn't everything sadness? When I hold the steering wheel, each swerving turn, is sadness. When I type, all the tittering clicks, are sadness. It's rhythmic, and a force that pushes me along. Dancing is sorrowful, speaking is weeping; crying itself, unnecessarily obvious most days.

In all these things, all I know, is just keep moving.

Today at work Michael and I started talking about Open Theism, but we soon found ourselves discussing Time, and he believes it's a huge chunk of information that we can only see in a linear fashion, like when CNN has a thousand things to report simultaneously but tells us about them on the ticker tape at the bottom of the screen.

That got me thinking about us not being able to handle that whole chunk of information, and what if a whole life could be felt in an instant? What would that feel like, to know everything all at once? It would undoubtedly kill us, but also how would it feel? I just got thinking on this surreal track about that thought – a thousand million words falling on me all at once, my experiences and my own laughter and the sound of my sister's tears just raining down on me in a downpour of reality.

Would it feel like an attack? Would it feel like arrows, or like a crushing smash? Lately, also, I've been feeling hesitant about exclamation points. They seem so loud and abrasive on the page, so over-eager. Yeah? Question marks are better. You need lots of question marks and smiley faces, to show the people you talk to how uncertain and happy you are.

It struck me as odd today, that as soon as a significant serving of pain begins to make my stomach bulge, I suddenly look over at You, and as soon as i look over at You, I feel guilty for not looking more often, ungrateful for only "turning to the Lord in times of need."

But screw that.

The last thing i need when I'm hurting is to shovel another spoonful of shame into my mouth, just for the heck of it. You are a comforter, after all?

Oh, but it's not fair, I say, and sit defeated. All I hear You say in reply is "I am". and I don't want to hear anymore. I'd tell You to go away if I wasn't so busy doubting that there's Anything To Yell At in the first place.

Forgive me if I sin now, here, as I sit.

Poetry (unsprouted essays)

i hope

You will find me there,
my paper-plate piled high with funeral food.

biting into another deviled egg,
i will wonder about the existence of heaven.

another Easter morning

today is a day for wafer thin things
(Your body,
my faith).

so many frilly-socked parishioners,
hunting
for pastel things,
eggs and the lung power to sing
fiercer alleluias,

we all must feign surprise
when You flick the tombstone aside
again,

act like we're not jealous that
those disciples only had to live this story
once.

tragedy

we see our parents up ahead,
motioning with the things in their hands,
hurry up, this way, up ahead
and we look to the side and see what's beside instead
and it becomes us
not to become them,
we turn,
and are suddenly perpendicular to them
forming a T.

Unseen

what was I thinking
of.
the crook of Your elbow – no
a boomerang.

Carrying

I heard in graphic design, twenty people were shot, at least.
I was at a computer.
So I read the BBC.
*A fleet of ambulances ferried the injured to nearby hospitals.
However, rescue efforts were reportedly hampered
by high winds which meant that medical helicopters
could not be used.*
After class, I stepped outside,
I could feel the wind
that kept life
from being saved.
It carried my assignment out of my hands,
just a few paces away.
I chased it. Then I walked
back to my dorm,
to continue living
at least.

If heaven

If heaven is this thing that has started to float away
like a character in a children's movie who has
taken hold of a large bunch of balloons, if heaven's ankles
need to be grabbed at, if jumping higher in a panic is *necessary*,
so it doesn't drift gracefully out of reach, out of sight, such a
beautiful sight but no good if just a speck, no good if up so high,
no good to me if not felt, reached—
If I am standing there holding a sock in dismay. If it is too late.
Then yes.

Conflict: a conversation within myself (Part 2)

B: I like this sentence: “The problem is that the ego can convert anything to its own use, even spirituality” (10). This is like what I was saying earlier, that maybe I have just perverted or twisted my own spiritual journey, and I need to straighten the kinks out rather than abandon it completely. I think that within the church there is a sense that if you ask, God will be there, God will help, which gives a sort of a blanket mandate to anything you want to do or think as long as it seems to fall under the category of ‘seeking God.’ And I wonder if I would actually feel comforted by acknowledging that I, in my brokenness, often misunderstand true Christianity.

A: But the thing that Brach is painting as dangerous, the thing that she blames insecurity on, the crux of this need for radical acceptance, she says, is “striving to be a different and better person” (10). In other words, she seems to be saying that as long as you are focused on this goal, this “game” as she calls it, you won’t get anywhere.

B: That’s...hard to hear. I think that I am *very* driven by self-improvement, and I have no idea how a healthy Christian is supposed to not be. But at the same time, I’m so weary. I’m so scared of saying “that’s it. I’m just going to sit here. I’m going to sit here and think about God’s gentleness.” What if I’m just sitting in my own sin, bathing in it, what if I’m not trying hard enough to overcome my own sinful tendencies towards selfishness, greed, laziness?

A: Brach says “Those who feel plagued by not being good enough are often drawn to idealistic worldviews that offer the possibility of purifying and transcending a flawed nature. This quest for perfection is based in the assumption that we must change ourselves to belong.” (10)

B: That definitely sounds like Christianity. I know that my mother would say that you change because you understand God’s grace, you don’t change out of guilt, you change because you begin to understand how deeply you’re loved. But growing up, that was just another thing to feel guilty for – that I didn’t *feel* God’s love very keenly, or at least thought I didn’t, and therefore didn’t see grounds upon which to change cheerfully. So instead it was a painful, guilt-driven desire to improve myself.

A: Wait, stop. I want to go in a different direction for a second. So I’m thinking about Sue Monk Kidd’s turning away from “orthodox Christianity” and I’m thinking about Brach talking about Buddhism and how great it is, and the implication is clearly that other religions are wrong or at least more easily used to self-abuse, and I’m thinking – why am I not reading a Christian who has gone through this? And I want to write that book, or find it. It is an exciting challenge to me, to stay with Christianity and wrestle with this. I’m not sure quite why I need to stay with Christianity, and maybe my reasons are not entirely healthy, but maybe they are a little holy as well, and maybe I really am in love with God, and I’m stretching away away away but I believe it’s possible for me to reach wholeness and bring it back to Christianity, to merge the two together into a way not just for me to cope but for me to thrive as a Christian.

B: But look at what Brach says next! “In stark contrast to this trust in our inherent worth, our culture’s guiding myth is the story of Adam and Eve’s exile from the Garden of Eden. We may forget its power because it seems so worn and familiar, but this story shapes and reflects the deep psyche of the West. The message of “original sin” is unequivocal: Because of our basically flawed nature, we do not deserve to be happy, loved by others, at ease with life. We are outcasts, and if we are to reenter the garden, we must redeem our sinful selves. We must overcome our flaws by controlling our bodies, controlling our emotions, controlling our natural surroundings, controlling other people. And we must strive tirelessly—working, acquiring, consuming, achieving, e-mailing, over-committing and rushing—in a never-ending quest to prove ourselves once and for all.” (12)

A: Well she just comes right out and says it there. Almost surprising she isn’t bold enough to say “Christianity.” I resent the way in which she quickly ropes the reader into a group with herself: “By teaching us that something is fundamentally wrong with us, our parents and culture carry forth the message of Eden. As we internalize this view of our nature, we become ensnared in the trance of unworthiness. We can spend years and decades of our life trying to be who they wanted us to be, trying to be good enough to reenter the garden.” (15). Now there’s an “us/them” mentality, which seems reminiscent of a gathering of commiserating victims.

B: It’s funny, the whole time I’ve been on this “journey” so far to figure things out, I kept saying well, there’s no one out there that’s going to say, I tried God and God failed me, I tried Christianity and it didn’t work. So when I do find something along those lines its kind of upsetting, it’s very important to me to refute it, to figure out why the person is wrong. Because it goes against what I believe for someone to exist who is somehow not compatible with Christianity.

A: Yeah, I think that what Brach is saying is technically not true, in that, at least the language of Christianity is not quite represented in what she says...it is not up to us to “redeem ourselves” – it is the work of God in us. But what I wonder is, do we just call it God’s work in order to explain away how seldom it happens? I am almost scared in asking that question, it seems so irreverent.

B: Tonight, at the dinner table, I was sitting down to pasta and salad with Liz and Ben, and when Liz asked me to pray I was sooo aware of the awkwardness of praying to a God that Ben doesn’t even believe exists. But I opened my mouth anyway, and I said “God. We need you here in this apartment, we need you real bad. So help us.” I wasn’t in the mood to spew my thanks for the food. In fact, saying words like “blessings” at dinnertime prayers often feels taking a stale, over-chewed piece of gum from under the table and popping it back in my mouth. So I just said the honest thing that came to mind. My point in all this is, I hope that irreverence is redeemable, someday.

A: So the question is, does redemption happen within Christians who choose to adopt the view that they are broken, “sinful”, depraved, and always will be? Clearly there are all

sorts of theological nuances which Brach does not bring into the conversation in any capacity.

B: Oh, you're using your academic writing voice. Good sign or bad?

A: Probably means I'm trying to avoid getting personal about this. Alright, in looking at my life. I'm amazed at what this book is saying because this is one of my core issues with Christianity. I have sidled away from some of it and cannot decide whether to label my relief "sinful" or "natural" – and anyways, most Christians wouldn't see the need to make the distinction. I'm so scared of the idea that commonly practiced "American" Christianity is a perversion of the real thing, that is, the crux of what Christ wants.

B: But it's really scary to confront all of that and say, you're wrong.

A: All I know is that it's getting increasingly difficult for me to talk to Mom and Dad because I feel the widening gap between us, spiritually. And that scares the hell out of me, no pun intended, because these are the people who taught me the most basic spiritual truths, who mentored me, but most importantly, who chastised me. Who have the capacity to make me feel shame.

A: I'm spiritually confused. I'll admit it, I'll proclaim it. I'm confused. It leaks out especially vibrantly when I'm under pressure or feeling attacked, as I felt this weekend.

B: Yeah. It seems so taboo to admit that you're spiritually confused. Somehow that gives other Christians a license to mark you as "wandering away from the fold" and then they get to be super condescending and say "I'm worried about you. I'm praying for you." I wish that the phrase "I'm praying for you" didn't sound so automatically fake to me. It seems to be code for "Well, I've got things all figured out spiritually, and I'm real sorry that you just can't seem to get things together, so next time me and God are having one of our chummy conversations, I'll put in a good word for you, you poor little bugger."

A: Ha! You're silly. And insecure.

B: So I'm projecting my insecurity on other people, when really the problem is me, when really there's a change that needs to take place within myself.

A: Uh...well. That sounds awfully close to the idea of believing there's something fundamentally wrong with you. Christians would say God needs to make that change in you.

B: So if I don't feel better, more secure, after I seek God, then whose fault is it? Did I not have enough faith? I remember in high school being afraid to ask God for things because I knew I'd feel devastated if they didn't happen. And I don't mean like "God can I get an 'A' on this test," I mean things like "God can I just stop feeling so horribly sick right now, I need to take this test." I can't believe I lived through *years* of feeling that sick.

A: Let's try to get back to the book. At the beginning of the second chapter, Brach has a quote about how when we accept ourselves just as we are, then we can change. And I've definitely seen this to be true in my own life. But what I'm really curious about is whether or not this self-acceptance could/should involve *others*. Just looking at my own experience, I see my journey to accepting myself more as being so wrapped up in my relationships. Specific people have nurtured me and picked me up off the ground and comforted me, and that has led to me being more secure. It hardly seems like a process that is entirely up to me. Left to my own devices, for the first several years of college, all I could do was cry, stay home alone on Friday nights, and continue to blame myself for my lack of religious "success". It works well within the church, because the fact that things are going badly can always be easily blamed on oneself. My lack of faith, my sin, my blindness, my unfaithfulness, my weakness. The turning point in my life seemed to come when someone else – not "God" in some mysterious voice, and not my own inner voice – came into my life and told me I was cool, convinced me I was lovable and fun to love.

B: Why do you have to make the distinction between God's love and the love other people have shown you?

A: Well I think we're taught to do that a lot. We say things like, "I have really not been spending enough time with the Lord." We partition off spiritual things as if they have to be separate, as if we can't worship during a walk or a conversation, as if we can't talk with God while we're talking to our friends.

B: Still, you sense that there's something "wrong" about this, that you can't entirely wrap your experience of God in human form. People have to be separate from God, in some way. Because people will let you down, they will scar you, they will not be everlastingly good to you.

A: But what does God's everlasting goodness mean to me apart from feeling it in the form of another person putting an arm around me? It is so much easier to say "other people failed to follow God's call to support me" when I look back on those times in my life when I felt isolated, rather than to say "God failed to support me." And going along with this view of things, then, when I see other people suffering around me, I can blame myself, or rather I can feel that there IS something I can do about it – I can look to Christ's model to respond to suffering, rather than blaming God for the fact that that suffering exists in the first place.

B: And it's not even like you blame yourself for the suffering, exactly, but you see it as your job to provide relief from it. You focus on the solidarity of struggling to hold onto hope with others, you see yourself as part of a massive world in pain, in which joy occasionally breaks through.

A: Yes. And then what role does God play in all that? I can't ever imagine deciding what I think about God's sovereignty. I miss the certainty of my "hardcore" Christian beliefs.

And more importantly, I feel guilty for not believe what Mom and Dad are so convinced of.

B: I wonder if part of the reason that I go around and around with these issues is that spiritual beliefs have had a profound impact on my life, and still do. My parents' beliefs changed my childhood, my teenage years, and I can't help but notice that those beliefs are what have caused my parents to be on the other side of the world right now instead of here, supporting me in a more tangible way.

A: That sounds ungrateful, and it feels like something you bring up too much. Your parents have given you so much – they raised you in a safe, secure environment, emotionally. They have modeled a strong love for each other and for their God, and have not lapsed in that, have not given you a reason to be bitter.

B: It really freaks me out when you say “their God.” God's still your God, too. Right?

A: Yes. I don't know why I see myself pushing, pushing, away from everything I used to be so wrapped up in. It's like I'm embarrassed by what I used to believe, or I'm scared I'll get sucked back in, I don't know. I used to say, even last year, that I had a sense that God was leading me, even though I knew it was on a strange path. I still felt that leadership. Now I'm not sure. I am scared to wonder if I've gone off on the wrong trail.

B: And everyone you talk to about spiritual things just doesn't feel “quite right.” It makes you squirm to talk to your advisors, to your spiritual mentor, to your professors...

A: Maybe it's not them. Maybe the problem is my attitude, my lack of spiritual focus. Maybe I've opened myself up to things I shouldn't have.

B: Look at you, back to blaming yourself.

A: You're exasperating me. Just because I erroneously blame myself sometimes does NOT mean that it's NEVER my fault. Come on, that's just stupid, logically. And dangerous, to not be able to challenge myself to...

B: “become a different and better person?”

A: YES. I will NOT let go of that desire. I don't trust the idea that I have to accept myself, and then I can change. That sounds ridiculous.

B: Because it sounds like a theory wrapped up entirely in yourself?

A: Well, yes. In theory I love the idea of being a Christian, of having this huge, powerful deity who can transform and shape me, basically of being able to celebrate being in process, of having a resource outside of myself to turn to.

B: So the problem is what? That you just can't connect to God?

A: I'm afraid God is not.

B: Not what? Not powerful enough to help you when you're upset? Not willing to chase away the sadness that's already seeped into your years?

A: Sure.

B: My suspicion at this point is that a lot of this is a question of language, and logic. You're angry and insecure and confused, that we know. But I don't think you truly doubt God's existence, or that you're really as cynical as you sound.

A: I just don't know who to turn to. I'm sick of looking for answers in myself, but to date I haven't found many answers in Christianity. Maybe the answers just aren't there, and I have to be happy with that.

B: Let's just slow down for a second, and change the direction again. Brach says that one way to deal with "the trance of unworthiness" is that focus on others' faults.

A: Yes, I am very good at that, and one friend in particular has really helped me to see the connection between how hard I am on myself and how hard I am on other people. I want so much to be that, gentle, loving person who people can come to, someone who sends out a vibe of acceptance. This friend taught me the value of allowing others to feel comfortable in their own skin. And I want that very much.

B: So perhaps a question is, is that compatible with being a good Christian?

A: I know I didn't think it was. It seemed like there was no way for me to be constantly striving to be better, as a Christian, and not notice all the ways in which everyone else needed improvement too. How can you believe in something as serious as eternal damnation, or even be something as hardcore as a pacifist, and not allow those beliefs to illuminate gaping flaws in others' lives?

B: But it's also scary to think about settling down "in the middle", to think of being that accepting person, because you've always been afraid that's a sin, to condone someone else's sin. You'd feel responsible for their actions, or worse, their suffering, if you didn't identify what was wrong in their life and communicate that to them.

A: Yeah, I know I struggle with feeling responsible for other people a lot. It just seems like humans ignore each other so much, I feel the need to make up for that somehow.

B: Now, Brach compares these strategies (to deal with unworthiness) to Adam and Eve's reaction of trying to cover their nakedness in the garden of Eden. That's a pretty strong implication that again, the Bible-based view of the self is going to lead people to be miserable, anxious, caught in this trance permanently. Maybe you should just keep reading and see what else she says before you worry about reacting to every thing.

A: Ok. I like how she talks about how recognizing that “something is wrong” quickly translates into “something is wrong with me.” And then she goes on to say that “Imperfection is not our personal problem—it is a natural part of existing.” I’m trying to think about this in terms of Christianity, and the idea of personal sin. It just seems like it’s hard to deal with the fact that Christians acknowledge that sin is “natural” – that leaves room for us to be so hard on ourselves because we recognize how tied to our core it is. And I think it allows us to condemn ourselves, sometimes, for things that aren’t even wrong. I wonder if maybe the key here is to have a different view of sin. Is it possible to have a collective view of sin, and less of an individual sense of it? I mean, I don’t want to justify the things I do wrong by saying “everyone does it.” I must read on.

Guilt

They would just sit there like they didn't even care who sat on top of whom. But I knew the truth; they each wanted to sleep with me. And those who ended up falling in between the bed and the wall half-way till the morning cried themselves to sleep, invisible tears spilling out of their glassy eyes, staining my flowered wallpaper. It was for this reason that I felt guilty many mornings, at the age of six, rescuing my bears and my dollies from the crevices they had found, so I could make my bed, and make Mom happy.

Now that I no longer live within my mother's walls I leave the sheets rumpled with religious consistency. But I'm not trying to talk about bedding, I'm trying to talk about guilt. I'll tell you right now that this essay is going to end with this statement: I still cannot escape guilt. There. It takes very little.

This is where I'm supposed to talk about various witty and brief descriptions of times I encountered guilt. But I can't do that, because I consume guilt like my life depends on it, I swim in it. Except I can't say that either, because that starts to sound like one of my *least* favorite tones – excessive hyperbole.

I have these salt and pepper shakers that look like building blocks – I got them at a novelty shop in Boston, and they stack on top of each other, like the final pieces of my childhood waiting to be put away in a cupboard somewhere so we can finally have naptime. They are labeled “S” and “P” and I always take them off the microwave when I have company, which is often, because you can't expect to avoid eating alone if you're not willing to make pasta for two on a fairly regular basis.

But I always tell my friends, *there's only really salt in both of them. I hate pepper, sorry.* It's the same with hyperbolic writing. While we're on that subject though, my friend Liz likes to use the word 'peppery' to describe strong women, and it is a very enabling adjective in my life. We often say peppery when we're talking about being assertive with men, who are fuckers in my opinion. Fuckers of only other women, that is.

It's a game I play, being independent and confident and “feminist.” I'm just secretly waiting for a man to turn my legs to jelly. When I look at the men in my life, across from me in class, or in the passenger's seat of my car, they just sit there like they don't care. But I know the truth; they each want to sleep with me. I still cannot escape guilt.

Sister

I have been to Chicago twice in the last school year. The first time was with my parents, to ceremoniously drop my sister off for her first semester at college, to stand with her as she transitioned into such demanding newness.

I am in Chicago. I smell like a chain link fence: not because I've been running from the police, but because the guest house we're staying at has water that is some odd combination of iron, sulfur, and wetness.

This morning when my mother woke me up, for the second time, her declaration "we were supposed to leave ten minutes ago" startled me away from my dreams so effectively that I felt as though my mind, an endless roll of ticking film, had been snipped with scissors. I did not know how to orient myself back into my own head.

As we stroll around this campus carrying rolled up, sweaty pamphlets and schedules for freshmen, I find myself anxious on my sister's behalf, I remember shards of my first year at college. It is bittersweet, though, to see that when I look at my sister I see a girl so much more ready, so much more supported than I felt.

But the thing is, if my parents learned something from putting me through college first, then I'm just glad my sister can benefit from that, glad with only a touch of regret at how much more smoothly things could have gone for me.

"You have one assignment, and it lasts four years. To find us the best restaurant in Chicago so we can take you there when you graduate." Dad does a good job at making family moments feel significant, he helps us feel the weight of the milestones in our hands. He is sending her off well, and I'm proud to be in Chicago, in this family, in this moment that belongs to my sister more than any of us.

But I can't end it there. There is so much left unsaid between You and I, that I don't know where to start, so I don't say anything. maybe I'll find the words soon. I don't want to let this conversation die out, I don't want to realize that I'm just listening to the sound of my own voice. That is something I fear, for a number of reasons.

The second time I was alone, five months later, and needing to hold her after the death of our grandmother, whose funeral she was unable to attend, which meant there was an empty space next to me at the receiving line at the wake.

Muffled affection. Today, we rode the brown line into town, chugging through gaps in skyscrapers and almost brushing against the curlicued molding of so-old buildings. The cold was so harsh that we saw people walking backwards against the wind, and everyone looked like a dragon with smoky nostrils. I am in Chicago today to be with my sister. We held mittened hands on the train and, at the coffee shop, looked into each other's eyes and cried tears that dripped on our scones and made them soggy.

It's not that I don't have things to say. But my mind is full of busy. And it would maybe take a day and a half of writing to get to the crux of what I'm trying to mean when I speak, and when I cry, anyways. I haven't got a day and a half. When I flew back from Chicago the clouds looked like Your office zen garden, raked over, too much. Have You been worrying lately? I have.

Disbelief

Dear Grandma,

I just kissed the check you wrote me. Because it was the last one, and I miss seeing your handwriting, and I hate knowing you'll never write me another card. It seems so freaky that you died. It feels different having someone really close to me die. Different than the other deaths that have drawn tears from me, before you, your passing. It wasn't a peaceful passing if we're going to be completely honest. I mean maybe you didn't feel anything, I hope you didn't, but you twitched a lot, and your legs jerked while you dozed in those last hours.

And I closed my eyes when you spit up on yourself. It was so pitiful. Aunt Cheryl placed a washcloth under your chin after that, and rubbed your chest underneath the fleece of your nightgown. I kept trying to think the line "death, where is thy sting," in my head. But it kept coming out, "death, you rob us of dignity" instead.

When I say that your death feels different, I mean that it feels a little bit like something I participated in. Something I absorbed while I watched your fingernails grow darker, your circulation slowing. Something I swallowed when I held your fingers in the casket and they were cold and waxy, like my fingers when I've been out in the snow so long I can't feel them anymore.

I wonder what you felt when you died. I wonder what you're feeling now, not that they have something as frightening as emotion in heaven. Not that heaven definitely exists in the first place. I bet you'd be disappointed to hear me wondering like this. But maybe not. I remember when I was in high school and I'd talk about people's "eternal destinies" like I really knew for sure, you'd remind me, "Julia, you never know. That's not for us to know."

I feel wrecked by your death, Grandma. I've become less effective at life in general. And that includes neglecting to cash this check that I'm staring at. You wrote in the memo line *Blessed Christmas*. And you pulled me aside Christmas Eve, and told me, *now I just want to say that if I die while you are out, that is if you come back and find that I have died, I want you to be happy, I don't want to stop the joy of Christmas for you, I want you to – sing – or whatever it is for you that's happy, ok?*

I nodded and promised, but I was surprised that you were talking like that. I wondered if you knew something I didn't about how many breaths you had left to sputter. I couldn't see any reason for you to die very soon, certainly not that night. And you didn't, you lived through Christmas day, you lived through stockings filled with pears and chocolate and post-it notes, and you lived through unwrapping shirts and ties and earrings and novels.

You lived through goodbye to Lydia, hello and goodbye with Dad, and Aunt Melanie. You even lived on through that intrusive autoharpist's rendition of "Blessed Assurance." And on into the night, until two thirty on Sunday morning.

And then I didn't have a grandma anymore, and I couldn't thank you once more for taking care of me when I got pneumonia freshman year. And I couldn't kiss you on the forehead, and I couldn't tell you about how my classes are going. You never did come and sit in one of Dr. Nisly's classes like you were going to. You said he was such a nice man when you met him at the International Banquet last spring.

I have been a part of your life for several years now. I convinced you to stop wearing your wig and to be proud of your jagged new grey look, you believed me when I said it looked trendy. I walked the streets of Quito with you and you said the best thing you've ever said to me, when we were there. *Walking with you is like walking with Grandpa. You see everything, things that I don't notice, and you make it beautiful.*

I really miss you. And everything feels less right. I don't want to get into bed, because lately I dream of you, and you're alive, and it's all wrong and confusing. And I wake up and you're not there to kiss, just this piece of paper with your name on it. Nancy M. Sanders.

My words are not fully spent. Love, Julia

Parenting

"Spine like beads / Strung on a wire, / Abacus / Of our desire." -A.E. Stallings

I used to think that birth was something I was going to experience someday, for the second time, this time the mother, no longer the child. I had the dream my mother had placed on the kitchen table for me, was watching its steam rise and waiting patiently to take a sip: for the man, then the marriage, the pregnancy. In high school, when I was the only one in my class who actually enjoyed writing assignments, I wondered, "will I be able to write after I have the baby? I've heard it's kind of a 24/7 thing, Mom says "the brains go out with the breastmilk." *Maybe I can work part time once he or she is old enough to go to school? Although, I kind of want to homeschool my kids...no telling what the public school system will do to them...* I quickly went from thoughts of "baby" to "my kids" and planned my entire subsequent future around these non-existent cherubs.

When I started college, I continued in this vein. "Well, honestly my goal in life is to become a wife and mother, I genuinely don't have a strong interest in a 'career,' per se." I can remember myself saying these exact words. I can remember meaning them. But then there would be times, during the summers, that we would visit my mother's old friends. And one time in particular I blinked as three snappy little girls ran in circles around my chair, and I watched their mother trying to un-jamb the food processor while telling mom about how "our Hannah threw up last night, so much laundry I've done today, and..." and I couldn't stomach it, the idea of this being me started to be scary. What if I just can't take it anymore? What if the screaming gets to me, what if hearing my own children cry causes me to weep? What if I'm making a cake or something, and my children begin to fight with each other, and I just slump down onto the floor, drop the spatula, and just start rocking back and forth?

Mercifully, though, as I continued through college, buoyant grades and academic success have led crookedly up a pathway towards an identity that I had not expected to adopt: an artist. And with this title came the unspoken pledge to not only acknowledge my wild and churlishly infinite emotions and ideas, but to run after them screaming "come to mama!" I gave birth to, a self, and had to erase thoughts of children from my life in order to start over again; I needed a blank space to work with, and room to grow.

I baked a chocolate cake the other night, licked the spatula, and threw it in the sink with some passion. "Thanks, but no thanks," I go, to motherhood, to my mother's dream, to interrupting my writing career. And I take a swig of milk straight out of the carton. I'm resolute about not reproducing for many reasons. I'm scared to bring someone new into this aching old world. And for now, multiplying the possibility of pain and heartache, for me, for someone else, seems like the mother of all mistakes.

Flying

Excerpts from notes taken while brushing against clouds.

"Folks, you may have noticed a bit of a river running down the aisle...we're not quite sure what happened there...toilets overflowing...patience...get that diagnosed on the ground..." It's never quite possible to hear every word in such announcements. The captain? The pilot. The pilot has interesting things to say to us.

Justin told me, before I left the ground, not to worry about who will pick me up at the airport if Andrew can't be found. "I'll worry about that," he said. "You fly high...no lie." And then I laughed, and knew we were going to have a good week together.

People have been so kind to help me with my bags. The most recent assistance - from a man with a casted arm. I bought a burger for my trans-national supper. How American?

I'm going to Seattle. Seattle makes me think of Japan, and Japan makes me think of feeling nauseous from the turbulence on that one flight when I was in high school, to Tokyo, with the blizzard outside and the passengers screaming a little bit. These connections are only valid in one sense, because Seattle does not equal nausea. I've done all I can to get ready. I emptied the memory on my camera. I made sure all my pens work. And I borrowed \$20 from my aunt. I'm set?

The man with the cast is reading a carefully highlighted textbook about orthopedic surgery, and he is holding his good arm out to help himself understand - flexing and turning it. I've been listening to the same song for the last four hours straight. I just keep waiting to get sick of it, but I'm not. I tell myself I'm bored with what I'm reading, but really it's that I can feel the words nettling into my heart, and reading on sounds exhausting. Here I am so wrapped up in the fractured relationship between Juliet and Penelope, and they don't even exist. Fiction. There is a very good passage here, though, that I must write down to save:

"He might use the word 'airy-fairy', or claim to have forgotten things she could not believe he had forgotten. But maybe he had. Rooms in his mind closed up, the windows blackened -- what was in there judged by him to be too useless, too discreditable, to meet the light of day." (from 'Soon', p. 114, Runaway, Alice Munro)

It's been around eight o'clock for years now. I keep having to turn my watch back as we jet towards three-hours-earlier. I'm on my second flight now, having transferred in Minneapolis, and the plane's beginning to move. I may not be able to write much during the flight - my arm's never tall enough to reach the reading light.

Remembering

“Is everyone ok if we just poke around used bookstores for the rest of the morning?” Dad looked up from his chocolate chip pancakes to listen for our replies. I swallowed another bite of syrup-soaked scrambled eggs and thought for a while about our family’s eating habits. Last night, we four split two entrees and two salads. Today, we’re splitting two breakfasts. And this meal is counting for breakfast and lunch. I come from a family of small eaters, it’s not just my weight or my appetite. Lately I’m fixated on the family I come from. How am I like them? When I cough, I hear my mother coughing. I hunch down among stacks of cheap paperbacks and see my father in the next aisle in the exact same position. We are intent in our scanning.

We set out in search of an IHOP after efforts on everyone’s part to sway Dad away from visions of Denny’s. He has this thing with frighteningly cheap places to eat, he seems to actually *want* to eat there, like he looks forward to it, he makes it sound as if it will be delicious. This has taught the rest of the family to be wary when we hear words like “Jolibee” or “Arby’s”. Dad emerged from the hotel lobby with an address. Mom navigated us to First Street, where we found, not pancakes, but a residential neighborhood. Had we been a different family, perhaps we would have knocked on a door, made friends with whoever answered, and asked if we could join them for breakfast. We kept driving.

We left the restaurant, having minimized our hunger and the amount of money in Dad’s wallet, and he pointed to a consignment shop across the street. “Don’t you want to go look in there, Julia, before we start on the bookstores?”

No, Dad. I know I used to like shopping as a teenager, but I promise you, I really don’t like it all that much anymore. And part of the reason for this is because your concern with money – your comments about tips and gas prices and how expensive it is to do just about anything, they have affected me. I got to the point where I would agonize over every financial decision, and it got so tiring. Sometimes malls really stress me out, and in a good way, I think I’ve rejected materialism as I’ve gotten older. I wish you were more informed about me – not me three or six years ago but who I am right now, because it changes frequently.

Still, you probably thought you were doing this by imagining I’d like a consignment shop, because I did just tell you that I only like thrift stores now. This. This right here is us in a nutshell, Dad, and I can’t bring myself to tell you so. I’m hurt, I’m suspicious, but mostly I just want your love and attention, and as much as I need to tell you how you’ve hurt me I also need to remain open to however you choose to love me. I’m scared to the core of refusing your love in any form.

I realize over and over again how messy relationships are. There will be no walking away, there will be no platitudes. There will probably not be yelling and I may not feel overwhelmingly good during any point of trying to work things out with you. There’s no one thing I want from you. I know you’re probably just doing what you think is best.

Mom reminds me that you wish Grandma and Grandpa had left you alone when you were my age, that you struggled to separate yourself from them. Mom says a man needs to separate from his parents in a different way than a woman does. So this is very likely the best you know, this distance and this semi-indifference.

Well, as I mentioned earlier, I don't have any more room in my suitcase to bring things back to the East Coast, so I'll just wait until Pennsylvania to do shopping. That's all that I thought, and that's all I said to him.

Soon, I was facing a looming wall of fiction, absorbed in a flurry of authors and titles. Just as I started scanning the *M* section in search of Alice Munro at Justin's recommendation, Dad came up beside me with a huge, sleek Anne Geddes photography book. "Hey, it's only five dollars."

Yeah, Dad. But I didn't hang up Anne Geddes posters in my room this year, which you would have known if you'd been to visit my dorm room even once. I am really not into that sort of thing anymore. I'm looking for Alice Munro stories, because my good friend Justin said I should read them. He knows more about you than you know about him. He said you sound like a pretty cool guy, but I am scared to tell you what he's like. He reads the *New Yorker*. I wish you were in the States so you could subscribe to the *New Yorker* and I could come home on Sunday afternoons and discuss the latest issue with you.

Yeah, Dad, that's really cool. I would have loved that a few years ago... I trailed off and he re-shelved the book. That's all I thought, and that's all I said.

A half an hour later, he approached me again, I could hear him coming from the other end of the aisle, the wooden floor creaking. He was holding out a spine-decayed book, pointing at a passage.

Staring at his hand, I thought of how he'd often used his fingers to smear the crust out of my eyes on Saturday mornings. We would meet at the breakfast table, slowly shovel cereal into our mouths, gaze unseeing at my mother's blank kitchen walls; it was something we shared, feeling foggy in the mornings. I remembered sensing that we knew each other.

I remembered then, that he was still pointing at the quote. I looked down and focused on the text, it was T.S. Elliot. "Men live by forgetting. Women live on memories."

Vacation

I'm visiting Justin for spring break.

This week is strangely empty, but in a good way. Sorrow is absent, and mostly so responsibility too. And twice, I find myself laughing uncontrollably, not thinking about anything, just aware of the quick onset of aching. Such aching, in my middle, I wrap my arms around myself and continue laughing and say "ow" when I gasp for breath. I thought maybe I was trying to cry, but it didn't really come to that.

There really is something sort of blissful for me about this sloppy old bachelor pad. They don't keep it clean, but they keep it clean enough. Mail and empty cans and beer bottles and especially neglected dishes will always be here, yoghurt left in bowls unscraped, spoons still wedged into leftover mounds of cereal – the pots and pans still littered with stray pieces of spaghetti and still coated with pieces of ground beef from the sauce. But it does not get worse and worse – it is maintained just enough that the garbage cans don't tip over with fullness and the kitchen doesn't start to rot with the stink of days-oldness.

This apartment comforts me because I can look out the screen door and see the thickly spread layers of grey clouds, and because I have walked in so many circles around it that I can finally say I'm somewhat oriented to the neighborhood. It is a refuge, always boasting the silver lining of plenty of alcohol and an endless supply of good books, thanks to Justin's unswerving integrity in refusing to buy used books unless the author is dead.

"Today has been a good day," I say, to reassure him that there's still plenty of staying power on my part, and to thank him for his own resources of grace and patience for me. We had a great conversation with Andrew tonight – which I praised at its end by for its effortlessness in containing the phrase "cock pumps" and "liberation theology" – what more could you ask for in a friend, in some late night banter, I submit.

"Don't laugh, it encourages them," says Justin, when I cackle at the stupid commercials in between the March Madness games, which are a few of his favorite things, his spring break, his love, and he just scared me so badly I screamed when he slammed his hand down without warning on his partially collapsed lazy boy, the brown leather *cracked in all the right places*, he says, with a beer balanced back against his lips, and because watching these little men run around on the screen is not my first choice I lean against the chair and read Joan Didion, and also I laugh, to encourage him.

This is good, to sit, to read together, stopping for sips and quotes read aloud and to occasionally curse one another's existence, to spar through the afternoon full of steaming tea and clogged with famous letters clumped together into the books we are ingesting together, so not alone, and so comfortable, and so pacified into venturing to say that anything can be, that something was once, that this is, good.

Soon we'll be back to phone conversations, I'll be back on the other side of the country, with an aching right ear from pressing so hard to hear every word, glorified string and tins, strung, bending with our nodding, taut with listening. No longer on vacation.

Between friends

I will be somewhat glazed over when I get back to my apartment from spring break. I will change into shorts immediately, I will listen to my phone messages, I will wade through my emails. But I will also just stand there, smelling what's left of this week in the wrinkled clothes I'm unpacking. And I'll be trying to convince myself that this is true: just *yesterday* I was at the sculpture park with Justin, yesterday we were mocking modern art together.

And Michael tickled me so hard when we were leaving the pizza place that people were turning in their booths to stare at me, gasping.

When Justin and I were walking around in the park, he kept asking me what I thought. And we can barely hear each other because of the wind, and our height difference, and the fact that Justin clogged his good ear in the shower somehow this morning. But we listen to each other, and speak the same things over and over, as much as it takes, we persist.

I kind of like this one.

Yeah, what's it called?

I don't see a title for it. I think it looks like rusty waves.

Yes.

He bends down to hear better, and we try to read each other's faces. We share the habit of covering our mouths with our hands when we speak. It's what feels safest.

My favorite sculpture is by Alexander Calder, and such a bright red that we can see it when we turn back to look behind us after a long while of walking.

"What would it be like to look at something like that and to *know* that *you* had made that?" I ask him. He answers with a quote from Finding Forrester, something like "maybe you too will know someday, how it feels." And we keep walking, as I take pictures of our shadows overlapping.

This morning when I was getting dressed he said he thought the way I wore my necklace under my collar was awesome.

Justin, don't mock me.

I'm not.

Last night when I was drunk I told him, what if my plane crashes tomorrow? And he promised, *it won't*. I'm on the plane right now, and trying to skim along the surface of those words. It won't. It won't. While we were boarding, I heard a husband say, "you're the boss...and the sauce." He sounded so affectionate, and silly.

When I was struggling in the dusk on the hill back to Justin's apartment, Michel picked me up and ran with me, up and up, for both of us. And I caught my breath with an arm around his neck, and then he set me down.

In the car ride to the airport we were talking about earthquakes. The boys said Seattle gets quite a few, ("we're in the ring of fire," Andrew reminded me) but the only substantial one was when they were juniors or seniors in high school – they couldn't remember – and Justin had been in math class. And he said it was over before they remembered that they were supposed to get under their desks.

And Andrew said he got gypped, because he was on a band bus at the time and they all thought it was just the percussionists getting the instruments out of the back, "until we saw the poles swaying in the parking lot, and realized."

Then I said, "I was in two big earthquakes in the Philippines, and they were gentle but also kind of strong."

"Like Justin," said Andrew.

"Yes," I laughed, "and I was in the mall for one of them and everyone started screaming and running."

"That's not true." Andrew interrupted me. "They don't have *malls* in the Philippines, Julia."

I responded "oh, I'm sorry, what I meant to say was, the breasts of all the bare-chested women at the local vegetable market started swinging back and forth from the force of it."

And I love when I can make him laugh that hard.

I've been in Seattle all week. Now I'm going back to Pennsylvania, to Messiah, where I have a different set of nick names. What I hate are these moments when I'm suspended between the two and I am no one's, and nothing, just a fellow traveler, just rocketing above reality, just fighting back tears. It's always bumpy when we sift through layers of clouds. I hate this also.

After the sculpture park, we walked all the way across downtown, parallel to the water, and my legs were so ready to sit down when we got to the bookstore. Elliott Bay Book Company. One of Justin's favorite places, which meant we had to come back again before I left. I ordered a small hot chocolate again, and he chose a table in a dark corner again.

We talked about my sister, his brother, hell, grad school applications, our mutual fear of heaven, my aunts, his father. When we were lulled into a silence, he said "meet me upstairs in five minutes, ok?" I recognized the way his voice sounded, it was the way he spoke when he was trying to do something nice for someone, but quietly. Like last year, when he tried to anonymously give Andrew some money to help pay for that unfair parking ticket.

And upstairs he handed me *God's Silence*. Poetry from an author which he knew I'd been wanting. Which he introduced me to in the first place, last year. And the plane is shaking so goddamn much. *It won't. It won't.* Every morning I woke up this week to Justin, in his sunken brown chair, reading. If I woke up before he was there, I always fell back to sleep to wait for him to come. And we were reading together all week – I was reading Didion and he was reading Murakami, and the best part is that we finished within minutes of each other. He put down his book, and looked up at me, and I raised my fingers and said, "two more pages," and then I put my book down on the coffee table too.

"He feels so responsible for you, you scare him when you get so upset, and he can't help," Andrew had said last night, as we sipped gin and tonic through thin grey stirrers.

"Yes, I can see that," I had replied. But maybe, as long as Justin's a little worried about me he won't be able to completely collapse in on himself this summer. And maybe, knowing I can always call him, my life will continue to expand into more than it is just now. And even if we can't make each other much happier, we can keep each other from becoming sadder, which is important. "Come down here," I whispered to Andrew as we clutched our goodbyes. And he did, and hugged me better then, and also, I should have held on to Justin for a few seconds longer. I don't want to try to sleep now, but there is such a full long day to live tomorrow, beyond this darkness.

Television

"Metal detecting is America's fastest growing outdoor activity!"
I'm watching late night tv, in Liz's basement, and the only one up.

When I was a kid I *did* always want a metal detector.

I am watching a documentary called *Tokyo Girls*. Anthropologists, gender studies grad students, authors, and naïve Canadians are commenting on the semi-prostitutional career of "hostessing" in Japan.

I'm remembering Asia, I'm remembering the feeling of wanting to scream while walking in the street. I'm remembering the smell of open sewage, and fires that used to be the neighbor's trash, then ashes floating through our backyard. Into our windows.

"They have to work very hard like machine, too much stress, especially for a man, and they can't get long holiday." says a woman involved in this business.

"I can't do anything about it, and I forgive it." Says an elderly Japanese woman interviewed on the street.

"...and we speak of nothing to do with wives." the hostesses say.

I was watching Benny Hinn earlier, a show called "This is your day." And it wasn't him, it was a special guest, and he was saying *the Bible says* and *in the Bible* so much, and I hadn't heard of the phrases he said at all.

"Why are some of us flypaper for losers and jerks?" says a girl in blonde highlights. Now I'm watching a show called "The Rub," *about sex, relationships, the stuff we really want to talk about*.

"I've been blessed, I've been blessed." One of The Rub's co-hosts says she's had fairly good boyfriends and relationships, she's telling us how lucky she is. Us. Audiences watching tv at two thirty in the morning. She's sitting on a couch on the stage with her male co-host. He's wearing a black shirt with white Japanese characters on it. I don't know what it means.

"Go to your local church," the co-host advises the audience member who complains that she keeps "moving from one loser to the next, doesn't know where to find good men."
The audience laughs.

Why am I so fascinated with this? Every show that I've watched tonight is total trash.

Now a commercial advertising the book of Mormon. "It's a companion to the Bible...I feel so peaceful when I'm reading it," says a pretty girl in a brown haze. *Her teeth are so very straight*, I think.

Back to Tokyo. "I always say yes, because it's not good to say no."

"It's not emotional at all, it's only monetary." Eleven thousand hostessing bars in Tokyo, the camera pans through the crowds, so many people living in Asia, and I don't think of a single one of them when I picture the world, when I put my hand on the curves of a globe or spread it across the flat surface of a map.

"In fact, I detest the job of a waitress," says the ever-smiling Canadian with the tumbling hair, in French, so through subtitles.

I have all these weird thoughts and associations with the idea of being trapped in Asia, of being unable to leave, I see foreigners living voluntarily in Asian countries and I feel immediately sorry for them, or I fear for them, or detest them for being so blind.

Earlier there was an ad for the Army, and it directly linked itself to videogames, didn't skirt at all around the idea, *come find yourself a real challenge*, the two boys open mouthed, interested, still gripping their gaming controllers.

The number flashed across the screen, at just the right point in the Benny Hinn program.

I wonder about the people behind things, all the time. When I watch the Cosby Show, like I am right now, I wonder who painted the cabinets of the fake kitchen set. Who picked what clothes they would wear? How did the person who decorated the kitchen *feel*? Did they worry that it would distract the audience from the actors? Did they remember kitchens from their childhood when they created it? Did they feel unreal? I watch Raven Symone play Olivia and think about how she's big on the Disney Channel now. I think about the inevitable shift all these girls make when they "grow up," the decision to reject themselves as a pre-pubescent action figure, to become a sex toy. This is the scene with the vacuum effect, where Cliff tells Olivia it's really hard to leave the house, she's got to try hard. She's clutching her little blue suitcase and wearing a polka dotted headband, and her clothes remind me of my childhood, and it's one of the last episodes they made of this show, I know, because I've watched almost all of them.

Now it's commercials, and this Lays advertisement is full of sunflowers, and I used to like sunflowers right before I was a teenager. And Anne Geddes pictures, and Winnie the Pooh, and jewelry from Claire's. Chintzy stuff. I don't think much about what I used to like, what I used to do and say and worship. But when I do remember it, it's a bit of a shock to take stock of things now.

It's Maundy Thursday, it's Holy Week. I went to see Marian for a few minutes tonight before I came here. She told me she was so happy to see me, and she looked good, *the shingles are getting a little better, I guess*. She commented on the ferns in the liquor store, *these are so nice here, Mama would have loved these you know*. The man at the cash register was unaffected, as if he'd sold the chardonnay and gin to two pieces of dull cutlery.

There's an ad for the funniest moms in American contest. I immediately wonder how many kids have been upset by their mothers competing in that sort of thing, the odd dynamic of a mother freely expressing sugar-coated bitterness, telling stories that are funny but true. Traumatizing?

I wanted to at least tell her that I loved her, to at least take her to get some more wine, *just come in and talk awhile*. "I saw Mr. Kroehler on my way in here," (I said, facing her, in the elevator), "and he was waiting for someone to come and pick him up and take him to communion, but they didn't, such a shame, I was sad to leave him just waiting there, he said they'd probably forgotten to come for him." *Oh yeah, that's terrible, it's Holy Week, isn't it...well, we'll have our own communion here I guess, hm?* That was on our way out. Coming back from the store, the bottles in my hand swinging from double plastic bags, I was convinced there wasn't a more Christian thing I could do than this. And I hugged her again twice more before I let the heavy door close between us, and promised her yes, I'll drive safely.

Driving here I hit the seek button on the radio, drifted in and out of conversations and shitty songs. A woman on a talk show said China's in place to take over soon, our downfall is coming, *China will have its prom night, its grand beginnings, in 2008 when it hosts the Olympics in Beijing*. What does it mean if we pretend this isn't true? Will I live to see this downfall?

The man on the Benny Hinn show kept talking about 2007, sevens, this is the year of blessing, the devil knows this is a *powerful* year, why did Jesus use *seven* things to feed the 5,000, why are there seven lines in the Lord's prayer, *why* I ask you? When our savior was on the cross, even, hanging there, why did he say *Forgive them, father*, and this was the seventh phrase? It's interesting to know that Jerusalem is seven hundred and seventy-seven feet above sea level. Benny Hinn wanted to know, *where'd you learn that, that's fascinating?* His guest kept going on about sevens and then about Job, and it was horrifying, I looked at him and thought, you're an asshole, and his eyes kept flicking back and forth and I wondered if that was because he knew he was eloquently (or come to think of it, not so much) preying on the innocent. Being that way overtly is one thing, but preying when you *say* that you are praying. Makes me unable to switch the channel, because I want to hear what he'll say next. The more I know of God, the more I see things like this as opposite of God. He started talking about Job, and all the wealth he had, and he said things like "and he had three thousand camels, which in modern day terms is tractors." He sunk deeper into this way of speaking quickly, continuing. "And then he had so many combines, which is translated donkeys in the Bible of course..." I knew it was coming, I was just waiting. And soon he said, after taking quite some time to build it up, after saying that God was reaching right now, right this moment through the screen to you, my friend, praise Jesus, God is reaching and has a special message for you, in this year 2007, after declaring almost angrily that he had THE RIGHT TO SAY with his own FAITH THAT you WILL be healed, *God is speaking through me, friends*. This offended me immensely. I kept watching. And he ended his discussion of Job with the conclusion that God will give us back whatever we lose *two-fold* if we have faith and if

we do the right thing. The right thing, friends, pick up that phone – and tell the good people on the other end of the line, tell them you want to give three monthly contributions of *seventy-seven dollars*, right now, do it right now. I smiled. Seventy-seven dollars. You are knowingly taking this money from people. How do you sleep at night. I certainly don't. I'm up at four in the morning watching you dumb fucks broadcast a robbery taking place in a room with gold-trim and praise Jesuses.

It's Holy Week. Easter is a loaded holiday. It's thrown me into a sick panic in past years. I'm greeting it with a fairly indifferent posture this year. What is this *it*? Christ? It's a matter of approaching the same God in a different way, I tell myself. The same God. The same God Benny Hinn is praying to? The same God who tells people to give our family money. The same God who lets tragedy bloom all around me as I blink through life. It's four twenty. Much too much too late for more.

"My brother says, if you can't do somethin' nice for a neighbor, don't bother livin' next door." –Kenny, from the Cosby Show.

Giving

On Thursday nights, mom makes an assembly line. She ties bags of rice, canned sardines, and peanuts together, to make bundles for the Friday morning crowd. I don't understand the mechanics behind it, but I talk to my mother once a week, on the telephone, and somehow my voice reaches all the way over there, to the Philippines. I'm not even sure – do the wires run through the ocean? Is it a signal in a satellite? So far away that I wonder if blown kisses can reach her. Yet we talk.

“This morning I was busy; the usual beggars came, there are so many of them – I make forty bags and have none left over now. There was one man today, he usually rides on a bicycle – it has a side cart – you remember ones like that, they sell slices of mangoes or rides around the city. It was sad, because he said that someone stole it.”

I imagined him, pittering in fluent Tagalog, our maid Gigi translating his complaints into careful English: “my bike was stolen, it was stolen and I think maybe one of the other men took it, a man who comes here and gets food every Friday, just like me. Do you know where I can find him? My cart, it's gone. I have to walk. My chinelas, they will wear thin.”

I looked down at my feet on the carpet and twirled the phone cord through my fingers. My mother had already moved on to another person's plight.

“She was asking me for money, and I kept saying to her that I was sorry but I don't give out any money, I only give out food, and she took the bag that I offered her but then she came back later, and she said she just wanted some money for the bus, so that she can ride to her husband's work and pick up his paycheck. He is in the hospital, that's why she wanted the money. He usually comes with her, I remember him.”

“Well good, Mom, I mean, I know it's really hard, but yeah, if you gave one person money it would just open things up for so many people to...come and, it would just, yeah. I'm glad you were able to say no. But that is really hard,” I said. “Did she leave after that?”

“Actually I ended up giving her the bus money. But I told her not to tell anyone about it.” Several seconds later mom added quickly, “it was only a hundred pesos.”

“Mhmm.” I raked my fingers through my bangs and stared at the poster on my kitchen wall, and my eyes began scanning our shelves of food. Ramen noodles, tuna fish, pasta sauce. A bag of jasmine rice, still unopened. I bought it a few months ago, plotting with Ben to borrow Sarah's rice cooker and make a meal sometime. Rice here, rice there. Rice on my shelf, slumped in the bag. Rice hanging in plastic bags held out to men and women with their hands gripped around the brown painted bars of the gate to our house in the Philippines.

I remember the way that gate sounded when it swung shut to lock; it shuddered. I remember the sound of a man's voice thanking me one time, when I handed him food through those bars, when I still lived in my mother's house, and could kiss her every morning before school. “Salamat, mama,” he had said, with a slight nod of his head, with a smile fractured into his aged face.

I held the phone closer to my ear as my mother's voice continued on. “How was your day, honey?”

I can always tell, at times like that, neither she nor I really know what to say after such a sober subject. Yet we talk on.

I am always trying to understand who I am, in order to feel safer.

I think, if I can just fully explain, predict, document, categorize the thoughts and pains that come into my head and trouble my body and my understanding of reality...

If I could just share this threatened feeling with one other person...

There are the stories of abusive passion. There are also stories of having someone you can always take a nap with, can abandon the world with.

I'm afraid to be alone. So many pretty people are never alone.

I try to feel safe with my friends, with myself.

I try to understand how writing is unsafe, but also beautiful.

I try to convince myself that beauty makes things worth it.

The way I feel about the world, my life, is constantly changing.

Pronouncing it safe and good today means nothing for tomorrow.

Sometimes I try to understand. Sometimes, I'm just quiet and afraid.