

A Portrait of Seasons

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summer comes unexpectedly, and  
it burns  
autumn is brought forth from the deterioration of summer, but it is beautiful in its decay  
it fades  
into winter, which freezes everything, everything  
the ice covers panes of many sorts  
the snow muffles the hope, the life  
spring comes again, bringing relief with each bloom  
it reminds us that the other seasons will not last forever  
it reminds us that summer, autumn, and winter will come again

Those who have gone through what the church calls a “dark night of the soul” know that the agony of grief and depression is often ineffable, residing in a place where human powers of description fail. –Mark

Gauvreau Judge

## SUMMER

The ache in my back need not necessarily be dismissed with stoic fortitude as lumbago; it may be telling me about tension and strain, a signal that it is time to stop and to be kind to my body and my nerves and not make impossible demands on myself. —Esther de Waal

Shine rays of better. Shine rays of better.

There is green grass and there are green trees and the heat beats down. It beats down the desire to move. It beats through my eyes into my mind, but the sun does not lighten anything. It doesn't shine rays of better. The heat is a nuisance in a car with leather seats. It distracts my eyes from the road signs I need to tell me how to get to the hospital. Sunglasses only do so much to make the blinding less. One arm is sunburnt from resting on the window; the other remains unaltered, shaded within the car.

The sun is hot, and it is something to be gotten through. It will end in a few months, and the leaves will begin to change from green to gold, and the rays will not make me want to only get through, to not look into the light.

The summer began with surgery. The summer began with absence.

Some say breast cancer is the “best” kind you can get, but let's face it (let me face it, please), cancer is cancer. It spreads, it contaminates, it kills—no matter what kind it is. When my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer in the spring of 2009, it was easy for

me to at first cling to the Best Kind Theory. For about a day. And then I realized, oh shoot—cancer—no best kind, no cure.

And I now, a full year later, wonder if maybe that Best Kind Theory is what my dad prescribed to, because he sure didn't seem concerned. He didn't come to her surgery. He didn't come to any of the appointments with the surgeon or the oncologist. He didn't go to any of her chemotherapy or radiation sessions. He didn't come to the hospital when she was admitted for an infection. I didn't realize it so much at that point, with all the panic of getting her to the hospital and making sure she had company, but there was a reason she was put in isolation, why there couldn't be fresh flowers in the room, why there were antibiotics continuously pumping through her veins. Chemotherapy kills the cells that kill infections. An infection without something to fight it is life-threatening. But he didn't show up, though she might have died.

I went home for the night after she was admitted to the hospital, and when I woke in the morning and went down the stairs, I saw him sitting at the kitchen island, reading the paper. It was about seven a.m., and he normally leaves for work around four thirty a.m. I thought he was sitting there because he meant to come to the hospital with me.

Dad, are you coming to the hospital with me to see mom?

And he said, I might come later.

I realized later that day that he had a meeting in a different part of that state that day. He didn't have to leave for work at his normal time. He was sitting in the kitchen, waiting until he needed to leave for that meeting. He never intended to come to the hospital. But for a little while I had hope he might be present.

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Wednesday night, sitting in the starbucks parking lot, I press the end button on my cell phone after talking with my mom. Ideally, she didn't want to tell me the information over the phone, but what else could be done? Ideally, she didn't want to have that information to tell. I go into the coffee shop, buy a drink, and sit down in a chair. I take out my journal and begin to write about the man sitting across the room—his striped shirt, how often he leaves to smoke a cigarette. I remember my roommate Rachael asking me the day before if I was scared. Am I scared? I think I'm in shock. What am I supposed to feel? Am I afraid? My mom has cancer. At forty-eight, she's young for this to be happening. How far has it spread? What happens from here? Am I supposed to feel something? I think I feel. I feel I feel. That man is going out for his third cigarette, and the smoke mixes well with the backdrop of rain, and I feel that everyone should be sad.

I went home from college the day after she called me with the diagnosis, and I remember how they met me at the door. My mom, crying, hugged me. My dad looked at me and said, How are you? But he didn't wait for an answer before he turned and sat in a chair.

My mom talked with me about what was going to happen next—more appointments. As we talked about what could be known from the biopsy, my dad sat silently near us.

The conversation began with an explanation of the recognition of a problem:

Well, you know I always drank soy milk, but it made my breasts lumpy. So I stopped drinking it, and over time most of the lumps went away, but one of them didn't, my mom explained. I went to the doctors and then they had me go back for a biopsy.

The doctor called to ask her to come in to discuss the results.

Why can't you give me the result over the phone?

I learned then that doctors will have you come in to the office to discuss bad news.

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At the time of my mom's testing I was in a Bible study with several of my closest friends, and I remember this desire to not tell anyone about the possibility of her having cancer. I remember thinking of not telling my professors when I began to miss class because of going home to be with her and to go to appointments with her. But I did tell them, ThanksBeToGod. And that openness became something which proved to be essential to getting me through the months to come.

There were cards of encouragement in my mailbox. My friend Monica sat and cried with me several times as I told her about my fears of my mom actually having cancer and dying, and when I got the diagnosis, she cried with me as I felt that panic. She prayed for me, as did others. Victoria listened to me as I explained my nervousness about being home for the summer. Professors talk with me about making sure to take care of myself, and they reminded me that relationships are more important than schoolwork.

Instead of being encouraged to push through, I was encouraged to be present with my family even if that meant letting go of other responsibilities. I believed I could do both, though. In my head, there were two competing sentiments:

I needed to make sure to be responsible, to do my schoolwork, to finish the semester, to be a good daughter, a good friend. I needed to maintain efficiency. And

relationships are always more important than tasks. Being present is always more important than being efficient.

I believed I could balance both of these things without one affecting the other. I could be present and I could be efficient. I could listen and I could perform.

In a way, I think this comes from my socialization. Growing up in a culture which segments all aspects of life—the physical, spiritual, emotional, physical, relational, social, psychological, etc—I learned there is a time and place for everything. There is an

hour here for reading and an hour here to work out. This class deals with writing and this one with religion. When I am scared that should not affect my schoolwork. Segment, compartmentalize, disconnect. I tried to keep the different areas of my life isolated from one another.

I live in western time. The day begins in the morning and ends at night. There are weeks and months and years, and there are divisions to make these things manageable. I could give you my chronological history or even the chronological history of this past year and say, this happened and then this and this and this. But that western time lies to my being. It disconnects my body and my soul, and it tells me things can be disconnected, while in reality, nothing exists independent of other things. My context is a conglomeration of events and people and conversation and experiences stretching back to before I was born, and it stretches forward past my existence. I cannot separate anything.

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Reliving all the moments of my father's inaction, of apathy, of indifference—I'm not sure how those things happened. I still question how those actions, those inactions, became acceptable in his mind. Maybe moment by moment. One decision perhaps made the next easier, more acceptable, more expected. His absence, whatever the reasoning, hurt. But that summer, well, I strived to ignore that hurt, that anger, that sense of abandonment. And I didn't listen to my mind or my body. I ignored the calls to rest, to allowing someone else to help.



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*And they say*

*if you pray the right way and confess the right sins, you will be healed. That's why you have cancer and why your marriage has failed, why your son ended up in the hospital with a mass on his brain, why your daughter won't come home. You can fix this. God wants to heal you. You're just doing everything wrong. Sickness is a reflection of sin. This brokenness is your fault. Remember that. Divorce is wrong. Remember that. Remember.*

*And I say*

*they didn't see the absence sitting in the room. And they didn't feel that lump in your body, threatening to spread to vital organs. And they didn't feel the panic. They didn't get the phone calls. They didn't learn it's never good news when the doctor makes you come in to see him to get test results. They didn't see the flowers from the absence's boss, but not from the absence. They didn't see it sit at home during every doctors appointment and surgery and hospital stay. They didn't see. They didn't hear the silence.*

*They say*

*it's all wrong. Remember that.*

*I say*

*they are all wrong. Remember.*

The summer was spent in waiting rooms, mainly, in hospitals and in my head. Waiting to see if the cancer had spread through the lymph nodes. Waiting to see if my dad would change.

The cancer hadn't spread. My dad didn't change.

Chemotherapy and radiation would still be necessary. And as for my parents' marriage, well, my mom decided to wait to deal with that until after her treatment. She recognized that his actions were inexcusable. But instead of trying to address that absence in the midst of chemicals dripping into her body, she decided to get through her treatments first, before addressing the absence and silence.

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It was during the summer that I first began having trouble sleeping. It was during this time that my mind began to fray.

*In my dreams, I sometimes see you as you are, how I think you are, who I imagine is real or possible or hiding.*

*Sometimes I don't know who you are. Sometimes you are father, sometimes you are god, sometimes you are me.*

*Mostly, I think I see you as I feel you. Because in reality you say nothing. But in my dreams you scream. In my dreams you kill. In reality, you barely move. You are not present. You are not awake. But in my dreams, my nightmares, you are dead and dying and yelling and killing everything that should matter, that should make you better.*

*I don't sleep well most nights. Not because these dreams happen repeatedly, maybe a few times a month, but the fear of them reoccurring makes me hesitant to close my eyes, to succumb to rest. So even when I sleep, I am awake so I can step out of those dreams just as quickly as my mind enters them. I am awake. I am on the edge, ready to snap out at the first glimpse of your face.*

*It's not restful. It's not sleep. It's not anything beneficial.*

*I go for drives, usually in the middle of the day, and I'll find somewhere to park and just look. I'll watch traffic or look at houses or trees or buildings. I go to coffee shops and I look at the mugs and the colors and the people. I watch movies and focus on the backgrounds, the pictures, the moments and snap-shots. I look at the yellow glasses case on my floor, and I feel better.*

*One color. One picture. One thing. No noise, no noise.*

*I like to look at things. Buildings, pictures, people. Objects, words, covers of books and pages in journals. I want to see these things. They calm me. Looking at a book, or a mug, or a toothbrush can make me feel better, for a moment.*

*One thing.*

*But in my dreams, there are words. And there are sounds. And sometimes I'm trying to speak, but I never can. No noise comes out of my moving mouth, though I can feel the pain in my throat from the exertion. But there are noises. You are speaking and I can hear but I can't. Because I will wake up. It doesn't make sense, I know. I can but I can't. I can hear and see and absorb these things that you do, but I cannot. I cannot. It doesn't make sense.*

*I wake up in the middle of the night, multiple times, and I'll look out the window. I'll look at my pillow. I'll look at anything. But there is a difference between what the eyes see and what the mind sees. Even when my eyes see out that window, my mind is playing the dream and the noises and the words and all the real-life things that add to that dream. The yellow glasses case. The checkered pillow cover. The cell phone.*

*Two layers.*

*The dreams, the things. The things, the dreams, the after-effects of the dreams which spill over to the entire day, which change the perspective of my eyes, which make me not trust, no, not even you.*

*Sometimes I can't remember my dreams, and those are the times when my days feel alright.*

*Maybe it's anxiety. Maybe they are repressed memories. Maybe it's stress, fear.*

*I can feel that they aren't true. I can feel that they exist in me. I feel I am not true. I feel that is a lie.*

*I only feel myself in a juxtaposition. I try to work my way out of it, but it's wound too tight around my heart, and if I pull the wrong string I'm afraid it might all fall apart. I*

*might fall apart. I might fall apart more, perhaps to an irreparable position. Do I really believe that? I don't know.*

Looking back on it now, my experiences that summer with love and care, with hate and bitterness, with pain and sorrow, with fear and anxiety, were stunted because in my mind I believed I was capable. I was capable of being the care-giver, of being the emotional support, of making decisions about living wills and treatment options. I was capable. I was sufficient.

My counselor and I talk a lot about the things I've picked up that I never should have been allowed to touch. And about the things I grabbed anyways, even though I knew I should have left them alone.

I can't be my mom's mother.

I can't be my mom's husband.

I can't be the main emotional support.

I can't be responsible for my mom's well-being.

I can't control cancer.

I can't control my dad's choices.

I can't feel guilty about not being able to be and do these things.

I can't require perfection from myself.

The process of identifying those things and processing them and putting them back down is, well, difficult. And right now the farthest I'm getting is setting the things on the ground but never actually removing my hands from them.

Toward the end of the summer, as August began, the stress I had been ignoring began to emerge, along with anxiety, with fear, with bitterness and feelings of suffocation.

I hated the physical presence of my dad. I hated his absence.

At the end of the previous semester, my friends Monica, Victoria and I found out we would be living in a discipleship house together, and our lease started at the beginning of August. School didn't start until the end of August, but the amount of unacknowledged tension I was feeling caused me to feel restless no matter where I was. I was uncomfortable at home, never wanting to be in the same room as my dad.

So I moved out. I still traveled back and forth, from the house in Canton to the house in Medina. But August began a separation of space and time and relationship. I didn't know how to admit I had needs. I didn't know how to say I needed help. Through August and into September, I spent time working and going back and forth to continue helping my mom with her treatment. My brother, Jeremiah, had recently come home from England and was staying at the house with my parents. Only because of his presence in that house was I able to leave. The recognition that my dad wouldn't take my mom to the hospital if she were sick, that he wouldn't cook or clean, that he wouldn't do

anything, made me fearful to leave her. But for my own health, for my own hope of peace, I had to leave. I was no longer capable of being that sufficient person, though I was still striving for control.

And if people were to tell me, at that time, that

the point of our crises and calamities is not to frighten us or beat us into submission but to encourage us to change to allow us to heal and grow. –Kathleen Norris

Well, I would have told them that is bullshit.

When people would express thoughts about bad things happening for a reason or about all things working together for good, I would internally scream at them, while exteriorly nodding. Some of the people at our church told my mom they believed sickness was the result of unconfessed sin. Some said these challenges come to make us stronger individuals, to strengthen our faith. But it seemed all wrong to me. Maybe some of these things will be consequences of painful situations, but I have a difficult time saying the purpose of my mom getting cancer was to teach her about faith.

Maybe things happen. And maybe there is no way to explain the why and how. I think our culture gets caught up in trying to define and understand everything. But sometimes I don't think there is an explanation. Bad things happen, to all people, regardless. There are consequences for good and bad choices. I'm not going to say God gave my mom cancer because of unrepented sin, though. And I'm not going to say He gave her cancer

to teach her about trust and faith and hope and love. I'm going to say, She got cancer. There have been consequences from this truth. Maybe there is no reason why.

For a long time, especially during that summer, when I would talk with family members or church members or friends about my family situation, I would always include the, this is painful *but*, statement. This is painful, but it's teaching me so much about sacrifice. This is painful, but I'm learning what I'm capable of. This is painful, but, but, but.

*But* eventually I got to the point, not until the end of the summer, where I could look at myself, at the dissolving relationships around me, at the deteriorating bodies, and I could say, This Sucks, no *but* about it. I began to step into those different emotions. More than anything, I think I was afraid of feeling them because feeling them would validate them and validating them would make the situations which had caused them true. Feeling anger meant there were failed expectations. Feeling abandoned meant there was abandonment, as hard as that was to believe, to see, to experience. Feeling meant owning up to not understanding. And it meant there would be a process.

It meant that things had changed and would continue changing. Once these kinds of things have been set into motion, it's impossible to still the movement.

*Her skin looks like sunburn. It looks like fire. And she says it feels like pain. There are lumps like cords running down her arm and little dot dot dot tattoos on her breasts. Two scars. Missing skin. Dead veins.*



*Her hair is slowly starting to grow back in patches.*

*There are three eyelashes left on the lower lid of her right eye.*

*I touch her head and say it feels like a baby chick.*

*I look at her sparse eyebrows and remember the time she used to take to pluck them because they were so dark and thick.*

*She shifts to try and alleviate the discomfort. She can't wear a bra now because of the sensitivity. And she drives to the oncology center every day and lies on a table as they target the area and radiate the cancer away. They think they're radiating the cancer away. We hope they are.*

It's a broken world. Bodies break; minds break. We ingest chemicals willingly and unwillingly, and we make ourselves sick to make ourselves well.

I realized that summer that I have the potential to operate for a long time without letting myself feel. But all the while, those feelings are accumulating. Pretending they're real doesn't make them not real. Saying that something didn't happen doesn't make it not true. There are facts, visible and invisible, to verify the truth. Hospital bills and empty closets and scars and birthdays and holidays and pages of written confusion all verify the existence of the feelings and the truth. Looking back over the summer, I realize that I had been lying to myself for most of that time. Oh, there had been many honest moments, but the way in which I had been operating had been a lie; it had been detrimental. I couldn't compartmentalize those feelings and those experiences from the rest of my life. So what was I left with? There was a schism. I was worn thin, fairly

empty, generally lonely, heavily sad. I was and am much bitterer than I used to be. Perhaps I'm more realistic.

*And I watch my joy, I listen to my joy, I hear and taste and feel it, I watch it turn to sorrow. And the sorrow back to joy, an ever morphing joyous sorrow that propels me through my minutes.*

*Each minute. Each minute. Back and forth but over the line to not come back again. Take the step over the line, though it kills you inside. Though it stabs a dull knife into your mind, your heart. And let it bleed out. It will stain your attire forever, but it will no longer be that lump that makes you want to get sick. It will be death. It will be life.*

I can be encouraging and kind and I believe I am those things. But I am also shrewd. I am caustic. I feel harsh, to myself at least. I actually don't appear this way to others, from what I've been told. But I feel it in myself. My struggle to maintain normalcy in my personality and identity has broken me because I no longer feel I am that person. I was so focused on looking at the things changing around me that I failed, for the most part, to notice the changes within myself. The external changes caused pain; I chose to focus on that. But my internal changes—I let them remain unexamined for a long time, which resulted in dissonance.

And this thought about not being the same person anymore—well, I don't know what else I could have expected. No one is static. Unless I was to shut myself off from all

emotions and relationships, it would be impossible for me to know who I am, and in that case, I would be empty. I am always changing. My memories and ideas and truths (little t) are always changing. From the simple things, like how I used to not like hummus and now I love it, all the way through to, I used to believe homosexual orientation was wrong and now I'm not so sure that I do—everything changes. And when I want stability and control, I have to remember that I am in process, which means I am not a stable being.

*The unknown will eventually be the known. The drowning in newness will be hot, searing, as your throat inhales what is unnatural.*

What I hated the most was the silence. Not my self-imposed silence but the silence of indifference. The silence of refusal. And in my self-imposed silence, I realized how much my father's silence made me hate him. There were many things he was supposed to do and say, but for some reason, he found he was exempt from those actions, those words. I am bitter about being left alone. I am bitter about being left. I am bitter about the tension in my neck. I am bitter about not sleeping well. I am bitter about the silence.

*There is this process of continuing that sometimes becomes the hardest thing to do. And there is a process of learning to listen, to be silent, to hear, to recognize, that becomes painful.*

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The value of this great songbook of the Bible lies not in the fact that singing praise can alleviate pain but that the painful images we find there are essential for praise, that without them, praise is meaningless. –

Kathleen Norris

As I go to Taize services on Wednesday nights, I dread the silence while at the same time craving it. As we sit in the white building on the brown pews, as the sun is setting and the light filters through the windows, we repeat lines together, five times, six times, The Lord is My Light, My Salvation Comes From God, and I listen and listen and try to believe. I try to prepare myself for the coming silence. But when it comes, it is never gentle. It pounds into my ears, violently screaming all the things I have been avoiding. But yet I believe in it.

*I believe in silence.*

*To silence the inner and outward tattoos of drivel, to silence the meaningless words that pour out of untamed mouths, like water out of a cracked jar—there could be something meaningful, but the overabundance makes it impossible to capture the refreshing liquid; it streams too quickly. Stop.*

*I believe in letting my words be few; abundance does not equate quality.*

*Listen. The hum of technology is an incessant reminder of progress, of busyness, of quick; don't stop; do.*

*I believe in turning off my cell-phone, in shutting down my lap-top, in turning off my i-pod. Filling my ears and eyes with words will not fill my soul.*

*Listen. Voices spurt anything—everything—anything that enters the mind. Thoughts fly in, buzz through and zoom out of the mouth into the ears of those surrounding. The process repeats word after word after thought.*

*I believe the noise is a safety-net. As long as there is sound, I will not have to face myself.*

*Listen. The tongue stills. The music turns off and the companions disperse. Silence is still unattainable. Thoughts remain in the brain, bouncing off imaginary walls, growing in size as time passes, until the sound internal is greater than all externals could have been.*

*I believe I am too willing to listen to idiocy. Instead of nurturing my mind I numb it with an overload of culture.*

*Stop. Listen. Take each thought and place it in a jar until they all have been collected. Shake the jar; set it to the side. Listen. Slowly, slowly, silence fills the mind. It is in this place that the unnecessary becomes evident. The thoughts are controlled enough to be evaluated.*

*I believe the unexamined life is not worth living, and I believe life can best be examined when the mind is not consistently bombarded with clattering nothings.*

*I believe in silence, for without silence I am destined to live in disorienting cacophony. I believe in learning to practice silence, even in the midst of frittering sound.*

Sometimes people say that silence can be healing. Sometimes I say that, as well. But I wonder if the reason silence is viewed as a positive thing, by some, is because in reality it deals with pain. Because in silence we leave the distractions. We leave the amusement, and we enter into, what? Ourselves, perhaps? And the inside of yourself, well, the inside of myself, isn't the most beautiful place. It's full of little holes and lies and fears. And there are the things I believe I should and could and would be, and the things I actually am, and there are the questions about the reality of identity and of relationship and responsibility, and I wonder are there any answers and why am I in this silence and will it ever end?

Why am I in this silence?

The taize services always end, though sometimes it feels as though the silence will continue and all I will be is existing within that silence. And during the summer, I returned week after week. I would sit on the pew, holding my sometimes flickering, sometimes dead, candle. Sometimes I would join the recitation of the Psalms.

Sometimes I would sing, or arise to go to the front of the church to ask for a blessing, for prayer for my family, my mother and father.

Approaching Harry, the pastor, I begin crying. And as I reach his body, he holds my arms and asks if there is anything specific he should pray for. In these moments, I feel. I feel a common union in that pain and silence, although I also feel alone. Harry prays for me, my mom, my dad, and he blesses me. “Sarah,” he says, “God loves you. He always has and always will.” And on and on, the blessing goes, until, at the end, I stand in front of him in silence, thinking about believing those words.

Throughout the year on Sunday mornings, Harry will often give me this blessing as he passes me while we are taking communion. Hearing those words repeatedly throughout the year has helped to sustain me, just as continuing to arise every Sunday and drive half an hour to church, just as continuing to meet and talk with friends about life has helped to sustain me. There are these repetitive practices, I have learned, that have helped to create a rhythm within me. They exist outside of my mind.

I had hope within those Taize services, for a while. Maybe the hope was in exposure. If I continually sat in that silence, if I continually learned more about that silence, maybe things would feel better. Because toward the end of the summer, I only wanted to feel better.

I only wanted to feel better.

*When you do not speak when I enter the room, when I do not speak when you enter the room, when you leave without saying goodbye and maintain silence for months, it is in*

*those moments I hate the silence. And in my own silences, I am forced to recognize yours.*

And the summer ended with absence, with space, with a beginning of recognition.

*I'm trying to not stay awake when I sleep, though. And if the bad dreams come, when they come, I'll wake up and take a drive and look at some buildings, some signs, some skylines, for a while. But I can't keep staying awake. I'm too tired. I'm too weary. I accept my doubts. I try to hope that a glimpse of truth will be shown to me before too long. I will not lie and say "I believe."*

*I don't understand my fascination with looking at things; I don't understand why that action makes me feel calm. But it is true.*

It was summer and the sun was hot and things were alive. But the sun didn't shine rays of better. I could see things around me and hear things, but the physical world around me and the waiting room in my head were not intersecting. I disconnected the physical from the spiritual; I segmented my experiences; I tried to control my emotions in ways that were contrary to the things which were happening in my life. I lied to myself, and I lived within hated silence.

## AUTUMN

be present o merciful god, and protect me though the hours of this life, so that when I am wearied by the changes and chances of this life I may rest in your eternal changelessness



The leaves snap as I step on top of them, and the sound feels good in my mind. The red and gold and yellows exist in front of my eyes, and I want to ingest that color because I feel lackluster. The air hurts sometimes as it hits my bare skin, and I relish feeling anything at all on the external which takes my thoughts away from the internal. And the words crisp and fresh fold over in my head, and I feel myself folding over and over until I'm an inseparable mass of words and sounds and colors.

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Sometimes you have to go through the valley. And sometimes that requires continuing to walk (or get up out of bed) every day. Sometimes that requires not knowing where you are going or what is surrounding you or why you have to be in that damn valley.

Sometimes you have to realize that people won't always love you the way they should or the way you want them to. Sometimes people won't love you at all, but you'll love them anyways. Not because you want to, exactly, but because you have to; maybe you don't get to choose. And sometimes, someday, more like it, you will realize that love will break you. That's probably one of those times when you'll be in a valley. (But broken is the best way to be, the only way to be, sometimes.)

And sometimes, "nice" isn't good enough. If there isn't anything underneath the nice part of a person, there is nothing to sustain the character. There isn't character. It's just

nice. And nice is a cop-out. There has to be love. And then, sometimes, you love and it breaks you and, hey, you're back in that valley. It's not enough. Nice is not enough.

Sometimes you have to say no.

Sometimes you have to say yes.

Sometimes you're going to have to spend the night on the hospital waiting room floor.

Sometimes you're going to sit at the table and cry while you're trying to drink coffee.

Sometimes you won't be able to say, "I love you," but what matters is that you go back later and say it then. Sometimes you have to try and stutter and start sentences three times before managing to say anything that makes sense.

Some nights you won't sleep. Some days you won't get out of bed. Some mornings will not feel refreshing. Some showers will not make you feel clean. Some pain won't go away.

But sometimes you will sleep through the night with no bad dreams. And some mornings will make the valley seem less daunting. And some relationships will make it worth it for you to keep giving even when you feel like there is nothing left. And some pain won't go away, but some will.

Sometimes you will remember. And sometimes it will overwhelm you. Sometimes you'll think you're drowning, dying, going numb, breaking, healing, rejoicing, grieving. And sometimes you will have no idea what is going on.

Sometimes things will be this way. Sometimes they will not.

Let us not forget.

Sometimes things will always be something.

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In September there was some stability. My mom's chemotherapy was over. I was out of the house, no longer confronting the absence face-to-face everyday. I was living with four other girls in a house near our college campus, and I had a list of positive things.

Like

1. I'm living in my own house
2. I have a great internship dealing with social justice
3. All of my courses this semester seem interesting
4. Mom's chemotherapy is over
5. Jeremiah is living at home
6. I don't have to see dad ever

7. The weather is nice

An enthralling list, I know. Here's another one:

1. I feel every statement I write will be followed by a "but then I also feel the opposite" statement. I suppose I will have to accept that I feel different, conflicting things, and all these things change moment by moment.
2. I don't think I hate dad. But sometimes the only thing I can think is, "I hate him." But more so, I think I am angry. I am sad for him, for mom, for myself, for Jeremiah. I am disappointed that his love for his family isn't great enough to make him get help. I am disappointed that he has left me to deal with this cancer situation by myself. I am grieved for what the state of his soul must be, that he is so dead to everyone/thing around him. I am grieved that he has reached this point of stagnation in his life.
3. If I treated someone the way he treats me, I would hate that person. I would care about them as little as is possible for me. But I don't think he hates me. He is apathetic. Which is worse. The opposite of love is not hate; it is apathy.
4. I don't think he could really love me or mom or Jeremiah, because if he did, he would do more than lay on the couch night after night.
5. He is selfish.
6. He should have done something to try.
7. He should have tried.

8. He should have treated us better. He should have loved us more. He should have looked past his own comfort and needs. He should have been a better husband. He should have.. He should have.. He should have.

The statements about my life, about the good things, were neat and calm and stable. The statements about my life, about the bad things, were not calm.

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Every time I leave to go somewhere, I'm hoping that feeling of going home, of expectation, of comfort, will rise in my spirit. But each arrival is bitter-sweet. Yes, where I have arrived is a good place, but **it** is not here. So I leave and arrive over and again. There is anticipation. There is disappointment. There is a mix of thankfulness for what has been given to me and for where I am and of frustration for where I am not and the knowledge that that particular place may not exist again for a while.

And that is why "going home" is such a painful experience. A house does not equal a home just as a label does not create or sustain family. Titles are empty without action, without soul.

I miss the feeling of going home.

It's a good realization, and I am thankful for it. I'm aware of what I am searching for, and I am aware of the danger of making that my priority. I am aware of the risk of

becoming ungrateful and bitter, of letting myself become consumed with feeling displaced and uncertain.

The naming of things is important.

I miss the feeling of going home.

Home had become a nonexistent place if I removed the word “home” from the physical location. The house was still there. The cars were still in the driveway and the motorcycles were in the garage. The deep red walls of the kitchen did not change, and the fireplace was still made of brick. But that place was no longer home. It had been invaded by newness and sickness and confusion. The house was covered in murky love and irremovable absence. I would drive home, sometimes, to visit my mom, and as I turned down our street, my body would begin to tense. My shoulders would raise, my jaw tighten.

Walking in through the door, saying hello, hearing nothing in return. But then, walking through the house, seeing my dad on the couch watching the television. Awake. Ask where mom is, upstairs, go up the stairs.

Up, up, up. Sit on the bed and talk and cry.

Then I would leave. Sometimes I wouldn't say goodbye. I would quietly exit through the garage, trying to escape without encountering my dad. Because I somehow believed that if I didn't give him the opportunity to not say goodbye, then his ignoring me wouldn't hurt so much. It was faulty reasoning.

*Distance. Time. Space. Removed. Absent.*

*Distance. Let's stick with distance.*

*Let's remove absent.*

*Never let me be removed. Never let that happen.*

*Time-I'm not sure how true time is; I'm not sure of the truth of its power.*

*And space, well yes, let's use space in the physical sense. In feet and miles and cities and states. Perhaps the correlation between space and time will make time more true, or perhaps space makes time possible.*

*But distance, yes, distance, is necessary, is possible, is life-giving. Distance in the mental and physical realm. Distance in the heart, the emotions, the will. Please God, grant me distance.*

*And I beg and plead and search for it.*

*Slowly, slowly, I begin to attain. I hate what it does to me; I can't get enough. I feel a part of my life shutting down. A part of my heart turning off. A part of my mind pressing forward, adding enough of something else to put the situation back, far, far away, until perhaps eventually time and space will enter. And I worry about crossing over from distance to removal. It's not possible, though. There are enough ties to maintain my presence no matter how much distance I manage to attain.*

*And the distance, though I hate what it is doing to a part of me, makes things better. I'm able to gain a bit of perspective. I can regain some peace of mind. I can begin to see myself (though seeing myself presently isn't pleasant, for I don't know who I am seeing). Sometimes the distance that is gained can be undone—does that make sense? You're in a meadow and you gain some distance, but then you can turn around and head back to where you first started. Sometimes that's good and healthy and needed. But in this particular case, at this particular time, the distance is irreversible. That makes me glad. And I'm sad that I'm glad about the irreversible distance.*

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I wanted to be careful to not overcommit myself during the fall semester. I didn't want to move through the months quickly and find that I hadn't dealt with anything.



Again, there were competing sentiments in my head. I felt the need to be busy. I felt the need to add distance. I needed time and space, though I doubted how effective they would really be in making me feel better. And I felt I needed to leave.

*I need to be silent. I need to be still. I need to listen. I need to not become removed. I need to remain.*

*I need to leave. I need to remain. I need both.*

In my classes and the books I was reading and through conversations with others, I became aware of this physical/spiritual disconnect that I saw permeating myself and the culture I exist within, which exists within me. Learning about Native American Literature and the differences between linear time and cyclical time helped me to see how I had been socialized to compartmentalize different areas of my life. There were days and hours, and the hours were separated by tasks, classes, meetings, goals.

From 7-8 I would work out—the physical.

From 9-10 I would go to class—the intellectual.

From 1-2 I would have coffee with a friend—the social.

From 3-4 I would go to counseling—the emotional.

From 6-8 we would have our house meeting—the spiritual and communal.

These areas cannot be disconnected in reality, try as we might. I had these things happening which greatly affected me emotionally, and for months I tried to deny that they also affected the other areas of my life. Physically, my body was worn out. Spiritually, I was in denial about the questions which had arisen about God, the church, community, purpose, identity, etc.

I live in a discipleship house with four other women: Michelle, Victoria, Monica, and Rachel. At the very beginning of the year, we sat down together and talked about our expectations for the house. We decided that, of course, we wanted to work on being intentional with our community. We wanted to practice the spiritual disciplines together and decided to work through a workbook by Richard Foster. We decided to let our house be open to others from campus; we wanted it to be a safe place for people to come and rest. Sitting at my desk right now, I can look over my shoulder to our corkboard and see the list of the things we wrote, things like

Loving other and what that looks like

Self-love

Understanding identity in Christ

Sharing stories

Sabbath

Stewardship

Creation care

Praying together on a regular basis

## Accepting grace

I knew I was going to be working on this thesis throughout the year, and I knew I wanted to learn more about simplicity and silence and community and the spiritual disciplines. I wanted to set myself up in a healthy place, and though at times I dreaded meetings because I knew I was failing to live up to the things we wanted from each other, I can see now how the timing of this thesis and my initial thoughts about how I wanted it to look kept me engaged in my community. It has helped me to remain in process. It has helped me to continue examining the things I question. Without this year long project, I think it would have been very easy for me to set aside the disconnects I had become aware of, and I could have chosen to live within them still.

But again, ThanksBeToGod, I wasn't able to segment myself further. My house decided that we would meet together every Sunday night for a meal and communion. We decided how to do our grocery shopping and chores. Victoria talked about how she likes clean areas. Rachel talked about dancing in fields. Michelle talked about liking schedules. Monica talked about book clubs. We talked about expectations, about having guys spend the night, about alcohol.

Even though I was aware of not wanting to over commit myself, that's still what I managed to do. And I think this is a normal thing that happens to college students, and, well, to everyone. So even with my awareness of wanting to practice simplicity, to learn to commit to things in a more than shallow, surface-level way, I managed to overload my

schedule to the point where I was constantly moving, focusing on being efficient, on being “good enough.” Good enough for what, exactly, I’m still not sure. For some standard I sensed coming from society and from the institution called university. Some standard I felt in myself I needed to meet in order to be a valuable individual.

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There was a horrible feeling of brokenness. I can use words like “horrible” and “brokenness,” but they don’t convey much of worth. There was a desperate urge in my mind to withdraw from everyone. The desire to run away was constant. The hope that if I left and went somewhere new, somewhere unknown, then maybe I could begin each day successfully and gradually feel better. Maybe somewhere would become known. Maybe I could enter into new relationships where no one would know how my family used to be, what it had become. Maybe I could be somewhere where no one would know who I used to be.

*I need to leave. I need to remain.*

Living in community, there are choices to be made. There are choices about dishes and groceries and bills. And there are choices about vulnerability and honesty and sacrifice. I wanted to segment my life. There was school work, there was an internship, there were friends, there was family, there was cancer, there was responsibility, there was god, there

were novels and papers and dinners and games. I wanted to segment those areas and I wanted to control everything.

Grocery shopping on Saturday morning and house meeting on Sunday night. Who is going to cook this week? Did anyone clean the bathroom? Who left her books all over the table? Someone forgot to lock the front door. Someone left the garage door open. Could you please take your clothes out of the dryer? How did this glass break? Can I borrow someone's car? Someone's in a pissy mood today. Can we cut the meeting short this week?

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My life is floating around in bits and pieces in a contained sphere. All around my head. What used to be a collective whole has been broken into shards, and now I am looking around at all these pieces trying to figure out how to put them back together again.

And I keep reaching my hands up and pulling pieces back to me. And I say, "God, really. I know what to do with this piece here." And, "God, I really can't afford to let you touch this area right here, because I'm pretty sure I have things under control and you might make things even more out of control than they are already." And so I grab these pieces and hold them close to me and refuse to let go. However, each time I do this, God reaches in and moves things around. He grabs my fist, helps me let go, and I

watch the stupid little pieces float back into the abyss of the stupid sphere that is my internal world. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Not really stupid. Anyways. The point is, I have no control. And in my search for control, I keep trying to put back together pieces of my life that just can't fit anymore. In my search for control, I am destroying myself. I am ruining relationships. I am becoming self-absorbed. I can feel this. I can see this. But in my stubbornness, I believe that I can gather these pieces back together and then I will feel okay again.

I won't. Not that I won't feel okay again; I certainly will. But things won't be the same. And some of those pieces, well, some of them are exiting. Some new ones are floating in. And God is rearranging all the new and old pieces.

I'm still holding some of the pieces. Very close to me. I can't let go of this relationship or this fear or this habit. I don't want to let this person be this to me. I don't want to admit that I need people. I don't want to accept compassion. And I am worried about how hard I have let my heart become.

So I pray for God to soften my heart. And I pray to remember that God loves the people I sometimes abhor with just as much compassion and grace and tenderness as he loves me. And I pray that I will be able to let go, even though that feels contrary to what I should do. I pray for the grace to be kind to myself, to recognize that right now, more than even before, I need others in my life; I need others more than I want to need others.

Much more. I pray to be okay with not being alone, because being alone isn't the best thing for me now.

And about those pieces. I think I'm afraid that if I let go of the ones I am holding onto, then there will be nothing left. But I also feel that "nothing left" is where I need to be right now. I trust that God will continue to put pieces in my life and remove others.

And for now, I'm going to watch the bits and pieces float around for a while.

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I wanted to control anything. I wanted to understand something.

I didn't want to disconnect.

Disconnecting was contrary to everything I believed, about the integration of the physical and the spiritual. The interconnectedness was damnation and blessing. I couldn't separate anything, really, and trying to do so was unhealthy. Unnatural. It would hurt my mind, my soul, more than existing within the damnation and blessing.

...what is possible when we pay attention to the discrepancy between what we want and what we need. –

Kathleen Norris

I think I'm supposed to emerge from this as a less bitter, more graceful type of person. I feel like the possibility of that actually happening is zilch. I think I'm supposed to emerge from this as a more loving, understanding individual. I want to yell at every person I come into contact with, and I want to tell them all to stop being so selfish, so ignorant, so naïve and pathetic and fake. I don't care about his problems with his roommate and I don't care that she is stressed out about her student teaching schedule. I want them to stop complaining and realize that there are much worse things than a flat tire or a broken window or two tests in the same day. I want to yell the same things at myself; I want to shake myself. I keep saying, "Sarah, wake up! Stop focusing on this; look past it, stop feeling it, stop, stop, stop."

Of course, I haven't emerged yet. There is plenty still to happen, still to change. There is time and time and more time in which to sink further, to emerge, to stagnate, to fall and fail and try and try again. There is time. It seems that is all there is, really. Time. The cursed and blessed constant.

Because time will change things. Time will make things hurt less because it will allow them to become numb. Maybe it will allow them to heal, but it will, at least, make the searing pain less. Maybe it's more of a desensitizing thing—maybe the pain doesn't numb, but we live to operate with a new level of that in our lives. Maybe it does mellow out, becoming a dull ache that we don't always notice. I'm not sure. I do know that time will change things, though. Even memories change. The mind and memory are not infallible. Facts shift and things get mis-remembered and altered over time.



And then I think: Shut up, Sarah. You know these things. Other people know these things. You're not saying or thinking or wondering anything new. You just keep going over your own pain. Over and over and over. Shut up.

And then I sit down to a blank document, and I begin to write something new, something fresh, something which doesn't focus eternally on my own damn pain:

*When we were little, my brother and I would swim in our pool every day during the summer. You might say, every day, really? But yes. Well, almost yes. Even in rain, we would swim. Only when there was thunder and lightning would we refrain, mainly because of restraints put in force by our mom. We would begin mid-morning, stay in until lunch, reenter after having eaten, and spend the rest of the afternoon playing various games we made up, making whirlpools by swimming around in circles repeatedly.*

There it is. I will look at one moment. I will refuse to look at what comes after. One moment in time. That moment is good. Remembering the time I accidentally got elbowed in the face and got a horribly bloody nose. One moment. It hurt then, but now it's just a memory. I can't feel that pain anymore. I can't see that blood anymore. One day. One moment in that one day.

But my mind doesn't believe in these isolated moments. My brain doesn't disconnect that bloody nose from the bloody fist that came five years later. My mind can't see the

pool with the laughing children in it without seeing the empty, unused pool. I cannot look at a box of Kraft macaroni and cheese without remembering the time I puked and Jessica made me clean it up, and I cannot disconnect that memory from the card she wrote me two weeks ago expressing her love.

So I say I want to sit down and write one memory, one moment, disconnected and shining in its entirety, but I do not believe.

I do not believe.

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My mom was supposed to begin radiation on that first Monday in October. On the Friday previous to that, Jeremiah was admitted to the neurology unit at the Cleveland Clinic. There was a mass on his brain, and they thought they'd have to perform emergency brain surgery. After a week of running tests, of not letting him eat because of being uncertain of whether or not surgery would occur, after a week of not being able to walk from dizziness, they decided not to do surgery, though nothing was resolved. There was a mass of nerves. But that mass wasn't causing Jeremiah's symptoms.

I was at the hospital for that weekend. Friday through Monday, before I had to go back to school, I was at the hospital with my mom and other family members as they came to visit. Jeremiah's birthday was that Saturday, so some brought balloons. But to celebrate a birthday in the haze of brain masses and surgery, in the middle of a room full of

individuals who were unsure of whether or not they would exist the next day, seemed blasphemous.

My dad didn't come. And he didn't call.

And we were all scared. Jeremiah was scared he was going to die. I was scared he was going to die. My mom was trying to comfort two of her children, one forced to remain on a hospital bed for days on end, one trying to not appear upset. And she was dealing with her own fears of radiation, of her child's health. And she was forced to deal with these situations on her own.

Well, he eventually showed up. On Sunday night he came to Jeremiah's hospital room. But see, when a child ends up in the hospital for something like brain surgery, and when your wife has to begin radiation that same week, and when that child has a birthday, you can't show up after three days of no communication and expect things to be alright. And the thing was, he worked less than ten minutes away from the hospital. It was the same with my mom's surgery and appointments and emergency hospital stay—the hospital is an hour away from our home, but only ten minutes from his work, where he goes regularly, every day, never taking a sick day. There exists his rhythm.

I don't count his appearance at the hospital during Jeremiah's situation as anything of worth. It was too late. Recognizing that if I were to be in, say, a car crash, he wouldn't

come to the hospital, was heartbreaking. Those expectations for someone can kill if unfulfilled.

I was sitting in a chair across from Jeremiah's bed when my dad walked into the room. My mom was around the corner and couldn't see him. Instead of screaming at him, instead of crying, I stood up and left. I was silent. Down the hallway, down the elevator, through the corridors, into the cafeteria, to a back corner table. And I sat there, staring straight ahead, for minutes. Minutes, minutes, until my mom came and found me.

She had told him he needed to move out.

He said he didn't understand.

The burnt orange color that signifies autumn is spread over my eyes. My life exists inside a perpetual pumpkin, a tree with falling leaves, and spiced latte, and a song about sorrow. Everything is alive and dying. Everything is dying, more than anything. Please, please, don't forget to love. And I tell myself, love is patient; love is kind. And I believe. I just don't know what that belief is. It's there, though. It's as constant as the rising sun, the setting sun, the falling leaves, and the rain clouds.

How could he not understand? I think that is what causes the most frustration inside my head. How could he not understand? Hearing those words, I wonder if I could ever get to the point where I would do and say the same things. Health related problems, things

that cause pain, affect him strongly, to the point where he can't function. Even if these things are true, why wouldn't he try, or say something? How could he not understand? How could he not speak? And I pray, I force out the words, god, please, never let me become him. Never let me not try. Please, please, allow me to feel.

He moved out two weeks later. He didn't put up any fight, really. His words said he didn't want to leave, but his actions had already removed him.

I tell people that he left, though in actuality he was asked to leave. In reality, though, he left.

*It was never meant to be like this.*

*But when do our intentions and ideas and hopes ever truly work out?*

*It was never meant to be like this.*

*And in some ways I think the brokenness feels better, more real, more alive, than wholeness would feel.*

*It was never meant to be like this.*

*But that doesn't make any of what it is feel better.*

*Unfulfilled expectations—but can that be helped? To expect nothing is to not anticipate anything, and the anticipation is part of what moves us through our lives.*

*No, no, it was never meant to be like this. But it is. It is like this, and everything is broken, and it cannot be fixed.*

He moved out on a Saturday. And a Sunday and Monday. In fact, I think he moved out most days, beginning the day he was born. Maybe that's an exaggeration. Let's move it to the day when he forgot to love others and drifted back into himself. Maybe when he was six, and his father hit him. Maybe when he was four and didn't make it to the table quick enough so he didn't get dinner. At some point, he started leaving and each subsequent day drew him a bit further from existence. It was only a matter of time before he physically left.

But as for moving out duffel bags full of clothes and as for shopping for new plates and sheets and fabric softener and light bulbs and hand towels, that started on Saturday. And on Sunday there was the moving of more clothes. On Monday there was no return. I guess that's the day—Monday. The day when he didn't return to sleep on the couch for one more night, the day when he didn't have to ignore people and avoid conversation because he was no longer present—I guess that day would be Monday.

I was there, at the house, while he was moving out. Jeremiah was home at that point, still dizzy, still unable to stand for long periods of time. My mom was driving back and forth to radiation every morning. And I was home for the weekend. I knew he was moving out, and it came down to a decision of what I would regret more in the long run. If I

didn't go home and see him moving out, I was afraid it would never be real. I was afraid I wouldn't believe he was really gone.

My mom and I sat at the kitchen island as he moved bags out to his car. And then he got into his car and drove away. He didn't say a word.

He never told me he was leaving and he never said goodbye.

But I saw him leave. And I heard the silence.

*I go to class. I make it to meetings. I work out. I clean the dishes. I walk; I lift one foot, one foot, one foot, and I walk. Underwear, bra, shirt, jeans, socks, jacket, hat, scarf, mittens. Coffee cup, ring, earrings, backpack, pen, journal, book, binder. Don't forget your keys. Don't forget your heart. Don't forget to call back what's-his-name, knit a scarf, watch a movie, eat a salad. Shower, shower, shower. Charge your phone, call mom, text Jeremiah, drive to Medina, go out for lunch, grocery shop, clean the sink. Try to process, try to feel, try to remember, try to recognize, try to signify, try to cry, try to smile, try to talk, try to be silent, try to be social, try to be alone, try to forget, try, try, try.*

*I lift one foot, one foot, one foot, and I walk.*

It's true that you can't get to the light without going through the dark. But it sure can get disorienting when you're halfway in and can't see light from either side. Sometimes I'm

afraid I'm going to start turning in circles. I'll go nowhere. I'll be in the middle, unable to return because that has died, incapable of moving forward. I know that's not true—I am moving forward. But streaks of darkness from behind me trail along, and I can feel my body absorbing them. I can feel my heart pulling them in, saying, you are a part of me now. I know this brokenness. I know this pain. I know this process of death.

*It is the only way to be alive. To die, you know. You can't be alive unless you are crucified.*

It was never meant to be like this. The process of grieving without having a body to grieve over is unnatural. But the loss is the same. The death is alive, and life feels like death, and all there is to do is mourn.

*My heart is full of ugly things. The distortions of love and purity and grace have become wretched things in my soul. Over the months, little holes have been dug in my heart, and my bitterness has seeped into them, creating a pungent disease of brokenness. The holes erode and grow deeper, until some connect. The casing is falling apart. And You ask me to let you excavate those ugly things, but I am afraid to let You any nearer. Excavate it until it is empty; refill it with something new and beautiful. Make it whole. But I don't believe, don't believe, don't believe; you made this.*

Thanksgiving passes, which much thanks withheld and much given, though with many tears. Thank you for my life; how can I thank you for my life; thank you for my life.



Please let mom stop crying. Please let Jeremiah heal. Please make dad die. Because then I could have a body to grieve over and the ignoring wouldn't be continuous, minutes, minutes, and it would end. And maybe then I could move on. Moving on? If that exists. Much thanks withheld. Much given. Thank you for family. Thank you for making me feel things I didn't think were possible. Thank you for breaking everything apart. Because brokenness is the only way to be whole. But I'm not sure I believe. I love and hate everything.

I had wanted him gone for so long. But I hated that there was a reason for that desire. I hated it when my friends' fathers would come and take them out to lunch. I hated it when people looked forward to going home. I hated it when I heard them on the phone with their parents. I hated any reminder that my life could have been, should have been, might have been any different than what it actually was. I hated hearing my mom speak about her confusion. I hated seeing people's expressions when they heard about what had happened. I hated the emails from people we used to know. I hated the expressions of disbelief, and I hated, hated, hated it when people expected me to explain.

I have no explanation.

I got home from that weekend when he moved out, and instead of taking some time to be alone, to feel that rejection, to absorb some of that sadness into myself, I went out. I filled my time with some new, less-healthy relationships.

At the same time, I stepped down from some responsibilities because I couldn't handle a large amount of things well at that time. I stepped down from my internship. I told people I wouldn't be able to make meetings. I told professors I was unable to get assignments done on time. And that was okay. I was told to take the time I needed. One professor I remember specifically told me that the institution was failing its students if these kinds of things could happen in our lives yet we still feel pressure to perform, to not stop and see what is happening. He didn't know the extent of what was going on, but from what he heard, he told me that it's important to learn that school, meetings, accomplishments—those things are not the end-all. Those things can be good, but sometimes they can create that disconnect from relationship and communion, which are the highest priorities in life.

“Here is something fundamental to human need. The Benedictine recognition of the role of stability is not a piece of idealism, it is essentially realistic. Everyone needs to feel at home, to feel earthed, for it is impossible to say, ‘who am I?’ without first asking, ‘where am I? Whence have come? Where am I going?’ Without roots we can neither discover where we belong, nor can we grow. Without stability we cannot confront the basic questions of life. Without stability we cannot know our true selves. For we are pulled apart by so many conflicting demands, so many things deserving of our attention, that often **it seems as though the centre cannot hold**. Simply at the level of working out an acceptable life-style the choices have now become bewildering... I may well end up flitting from one to the other until I have collected a ragbag for myself of well-intentioned but half-thought-out ideals based on a confused and superficial amalgam of some of the more attractive elements in each. The danger then of course is that I too become confused and superficial.” – Esther de Waal

WINTER

What is certain is that it will involve dying, and not only death at the end of the journey but the lesser deaths in life, the dying to live, the loss which will bring new growth. –Esther de Waal

Fall fades through the crunching, dead leaves. Winter begins, with rains that fall slowly, then gain speed, crashing to the ground and dampening the bottoms of my jeans. I trade my brown shoes for the boots and try my best to keep my jeans dry. Then the rain freezes, and there is snow—the white, clean snow which blankets everything, which makes everything look whole, if only for a few unbroken hours.

In the United States, when those hard things happen to individuals, to groups, I think there is this existing pressure to continue on, to push through, to have tougher skin. Your husband left you for a younger woman? Go to the gym. Your sister has brain cancer? Organize a committee. Your brother-in-law was shot? Get back to work as soon as you can, and encourage everyone else to do the same, to step back into life the same, to not let this affect your efficiency.

Okay, those examples, yes, they're a bit bland. But the point is—here in the United States, we don't let our pain distract us. There are too many things to do, too many things to buy, too many people to see and places to go. The best therapy is to keep working. And grief? Well, of course people will go through a grieving process for some things, and of course, that will be difficult for them, but the most helpful thing for them will be to remain engaged, to exist within their daily routines, and try to continue on as normal.

And it's these two words, "as normal," which got me. Because I tried to continue on as best I could. I went to classes and I had lunch with friends. I cooked and cleaned and read and went to church, and I wrote papers and met groups for projects and I *did* all those things just the same as I had done before. Nothing was normal, though. Nothing, nothing, was the same. And those people who encouraged me to push through, who said things on the other side of those bad feelings would be better, those people, maybe they didn't recognize themselves how sometimes those painful life experiences change everything.

In the small book *Mudhouse Sabbath*, there is a section on grieving and Lauren Winner writes about the process and the time that is allotted for this rhythmic grieving. Entire days are given to the process of remembering. There is a communal aspect to this process, too. People take care of one another. The bereaved doesn't cook, doesn't clean, doesn't go to work. He exists within that place of what can best be described as grief. After a period of time, he'll begin to step back into community. After a period of time, he'll begin to "function" again.

Things won't be the same, though. Things can't be the same. And those who say they can be, those who say life will continue on just the same, they're wrong. Life will continue on in that those minutes and hours and days will continue to pass, but life itself, the context of life and the colors that surround it—those things will be different. To not accept this is to harm oneself, I think. Life was yellow but now it is mustard. To say I

can continue on living in yellow is to deny the mustard and what comes along with that. It's a lie.

And as for "normal," no. No, no, no. For a period of time there must be an experience with the unknown. Things change. In my situation, everything changed, and nothing was going to be what I used to see as normal. But all this newness, all these experiences that felt so sharp because they were different, eventually that newness will become the known, and eventually there will be a new normal.

Eventually there will be a new normal.

The Holiday Season—it made me into a lobster. Beginning with Thanksgiving, crashing through my birthday and Christmas, into the New Year and covering Valentine's Day, the Holiday Season made me a lobster. It made me recognize I had been a lobster all along, slowly stewing as inner and outer stresses accumulated. And with Thanksgiving, the stresses fell softly over the edge of the pot, covering the surfaces of my mind and soul in a bubbly, boiling, frothing mess.

I learn to rely on words to get me through the day. One word placed after another, in some semblance of order. Words like art and coffee and circles and cinnamon and hyacinth and magenta. And images move me though, like the image of my bed made in the morning and that one tree with half of its leaves still attached, the candle at church, burning slowly until it will disappear. The four old men at the coffee shop, or the one

solitary man who sits in his chair and stares straight ahead for twenty minutes before arising and exiting. I remember, my pain is not original.

My sorrow is transforming into grief, though I'm not sure what the difference between the two is, exactly. It's more desperate. It pulls at my stomach more intensely. It involves more tears. It kills my desire for food and makes me want to sleep all the time. It makes me want everyone to go away, so as to protect myself from further abandonment. So I will abandon so as to not be left. I hear myself speak, and I wish to be silent. The grief is new. It is unknown but slowly becoming known. My sorrow is transforming into grief; I'm not quite sure what this means or when it will end.

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I lost my appetite. The day after Thanksgiving I was home to see my mom and extended family, and we had to go to the hospital for my mom to have a test done. Before we left for the hospital, we had to drop my car off at a shop to have some problems addressed. Because of the agreement between my parents when they separated, my dad has to pay for everything concerning our cars. Back at home, before we leave for the hospital, the shop calls and says the repairs will cost some \$3000 dollars.

My mom called my dad to ask if he would take care of the problem. And his answer was that, sure, he would take care of it. He would take care of it because there wasn't a

problem. So no, he wouldn't take it somewhere else to get looked at, to get another estimate. And no, he wouldn't go look at it himself.

David, could you please take care of this for me? I have to leave for the hospital in ten minutes.

And on the other side of the phone, a raised voice. I could hear the annoyance in his tone though I couldn't hear the words.

And my mom, So what you're saying is that no, you won't take care of it?

In this moment, I looked down at my coffee cup and began to cry. And she began to cry and she ended the call. There was this amount of stress that twisted something in my stomach, that made it hurt so badly I couldn't stomach the thought or smell or taste of food.

I remember this moment.

I lost my appetite for a few months—the end of November through the end of January. I felt nauseous all the time. And sometimes, well, I would get sick if I ate. Of course, I lost weight. I would try to eat something and would be unable to swallow because of the rushing nausea that existed in my body. I began to drink excessive amounts of coffee to help me function throughout the day and so there would be something in my stomach. The coffee, for some reason, and water, didn't make me feel sick, though I'm sure in actuality it added to the feeling of nausea.

I lost my appetite. I couldn't sleep. I felt the silence and the newness of holidays without my dad. I felt his silence. I felt the anticipation—would he contact us for Thanksgiving, for Christmas, will he want to see me on my twenty-first birthday, will he want to see Jeremiah for the holidays—Jeremiah hasn't been home for the holidays for seven years—and will he want to see his wife, who has finished treatment, who is bald and scarred and beautiful in ways he will never understand?

Who does he spend his days with? Where does he live? What does he eat, and on what does he sit at night? What does he tell others? Does he clean, does he cook, does he talk to others, does he remember, does he care, is he alright, what if he is depressed, what if he kills himself?

December comes in cold. It brings the bitter dregs of November along with it, and it promises to flow into still, harsh January. I hate these days and months. I hate cancer. I hate your decisions and your eyes, and I hate, hate, hate you.

My mom texted me to tell me there was a birthday card from my dad at home and she would forward it to my house in Canton. I'm in class, Dr. Miller's World Religions class, and as I read the text, I think, This is why we're not supposed to use our phones in class. Because these messages come and now I can't concentrate. But had read it, and I sit there in class, trying to not actually cry. And at the end, I walk out quickly, without



saying anything to any of my classmates. Once I'm in my car, I begin to cry and by the time I get home and walk in the door, it's obvious I'm upset.

Monica sees me walk in the door and asks, Oh, are you crying or laughing?

And at that point, I begin to laugh a little as I say, I'm crying. I, I, I got a card from my dad and I didn't realize how much him not talking to me had hurt me, and how much I had built up his absence inside of me. And now there's this big relief and it just hurts because it's not a good relief. He hasn't talked to me since October.

And the card arrived a few days later.

A birthday card with no return address. That's what I got for my twenty-first birthday from my dad. Not a phone call or a visit or a package but a card with no return address on it. This wouldn't have hit so hard, perhaps (or at least I can pretend it wouldn't have), if I wasn't used to my dad spending hundreds of dollars on gifts throughout the year. Or, as in most cases, he would have my mom spend hundreds of dollars on our gifts for birthday and Christmas. But even when he would buy things himself, he was already lavish with his funds.

From the day I got that text through my birthday, I cried all the time. I would wake up in the morning and look out the window, wondering if maybe I should just stay in bed. I would take naps in the middle of the day. I couldn't concentrate on anything. I took a lot

of drives, for hours at a time. I went to coffee shops and sat in them without reading or writing, just drinking brown liquid and watching everyone else. I couldn't eat. I didn't look good or feel good.

*and sometimes there is color*

*and we sit in chairs and on couches*

*red nails and black cups and pink bowls*

*green eyes and blue sweaters*

*but sometimes everything I love becomes shades of grey*

*when all the color leaks through the crack in the window*

*it seeps in and out*

*the vibrant will dull*

*until the pane is replaced*

*and we all exclaim how new it looks*

*the colors shining*

*until we are reminded the glass will break again*

*take it while you can*

*we only know the truth about what we're contexted*

*even then, it's not assured*

*sometimes you lie, you false, you kill*

*eloquent graffiti can convince anyone*

*and it's hard to cover once again*

I hated this Christmas season this past year. I wanted nothing to do with the festivities. Forget about the lights and movies and gifts. Forget about a birthed Christ. I wanted nothing to do with it. I was not happy and did not want to be around people who were celebrating.

I went home for Christmas, but I only managed to stay a week, a week and a half at the most. There was this level of anxiety I couldn't operate within. There was something about physically being in that space that grated in my mind, scraping the walls and making them bleed. There was something about sitting on the couch he slept on, emotion and motionless for so long, that made me hate myself. And hearing my brother express frustration at not being able to understand his actions, and seeing my mother cry, seeing her have to go to family gathering alone for the first time in over thirty years, well, I was unable to be present there. And I couldn't be there.

I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep.

I look to the idea of a New Year, and I want this year to end. I want it to end in a different way than it will, though. Because I want peace. I want to drown in my pain and reemerge, a better, more whole, radiant individual. I want mercy renewed every morning and I want shades of yellow and green and maroon; I want the gray to fade. But really

the gray is everything. It's all of the shades mixed together, all of the things I love and hate, like and dislike. Everything. I just don't know how to separate the gray back into divided sections of color anymore. Maybe the gray can be spread thin enough that it disappears. Or maybe new shades will enter and cover the gray. Or maybe, magically, the gray will siphon itself into the colors and people and events and I will be able to see it and to get out of bed and to feel the mercy. Maybe my heart will be tuned. Maybe my heart will disappear.

People say this new year will be the best yet. And I begin to retort with, "Really? Do you really believe that?" And they say, yes, yes, this year will be the best. And I remember that they said the same things about this past year; it is foolish to anticipate anything will be the best. It may be the worst. And they ask me, don't you believe? I'm not sure. Because reality says that things don't always get better. I recognize I'm pessimistic. And bitter. I recognize that I have lost faith and hope. I recognize that I am drowning myself and have been consumed with death.

*The only way to live is to be crucified. Let me rot inside for a while.*

Sometimes I do have hope, though. Not often. And not in the same way as before.

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When I was younger, I loved the beginnings of weeks and months and years. These were markers for me. They indicated there was a fresh slate ahead; there was a chance to enter these unspoiled grounds and walk on them in such a way that they wouldn't end up tainted. I stopped thinking that way a few years ago, though. And this year, especially, January 1<sup>st</sup> didn't signify anything. It was another day in another year within a conglomeration of twenty-some other years, impacted by the years of too many others to take that impact into account. I didn't make any resolutions.

I didn't segment my time into that year-long divider. I learned about the liturgical year, instead, and I learned about ordering my time around a more natural rhythm. The sun rises and the sun sets; there are seasons; my day doesn't begin at 8:00 a.m. and midnight does not create a division between Tuesday and Wednesday. And I couldn't leave things behind just because there was a New Year. Those events, my mom having cancer, my dad leaving, Jeremiah being sick, going to classes, experiencing relationships, asking questions, feeling sorrow—I couldn't leave those things behind because they had changed everything. They touched every part of my life.

After the short period of time at home, I returned to an empty house in Canton. Everyone else was still at home with their families. Being alone for such a concentrated period of time may not have been the healthiest thing, but looking back at it, I believe I needed it. I would stand in the kitchen after work and would cook something. Rice and vegetables. Pasta. Sometimes I would put a salad together. And I would sit down at the table, the bowl in front of me, and I would try to eat. Just a few bites. Sometimes I could eat half

the meal. Several times I ended up vomiting ten minutes later. A few bites, and that's all I could usually do.

Looking back at that time, I realize it was the most miserable I have ever been. I don't think there is a way I can adequately express how unhealthy I was, how scared I was, how depressed I was. There was a level of sorrow I thought I had experienced over the previous months that I learned through that time over the holidays was nothing, nothing, nothing. I did not understand.

*I begin to observe the wreckage which surrounds me.*

*And I begin to observe the wreckage inside of me.*

*Hope and wait, he says. Hope and*

*Wait.*

*But for how long,*

*And what for,*

*And how, how?*

*By minutes, mainly,*

*And by cups of coffee and days you move past.*

*By leaves missing off the branches and grey light shining through the blinds in the early morning.*

*By pages filled with these same words,*

*By loads of laundry and cookies baked and candles extinguished and novels read.*

*Mainly, by minutes. Wait and Hope. Hope and wait.*

*Little pieces of wreckage fall off;*

*Little pieces of wreckage align.*

*Little pieces of wreckage float.*

*Little pieces of wreckage stay still.*

*The Lord is near.*

*He is in the wreckage, though I tell him to leave.*

*He is the ruins, is in the ruins, is excavating. Is dropping  
and aligning and floating  
and remaining.*

*The Lord is near. Hope and wait.*

*Silently, or with sighs, or with tears*

*And shouts of anger.*

*With feelings of hatred.*

*The Lord is near, though I tell him to leave, though I tell him to stay.*

*Time changes all wounds.*

I don't know what to do with myself, with no schoolwork to distract me. With no one else in this house to distract me, I'm alone to do what I want. I'll watch a movie and then another. And I'll fade in and out of sleep. I'll call into work and tell them I can't make it. I'll sit on the couch and watch the snow accumulate over the hours. I'll make some tea. I won't drink it. I won't answer phone calls.

My mom calls me everyday, Hi honey, How are you?

I'm fine mom, just relaxing before school starts again.

Have you been eating?

I've been trying.

I love you.

I love you.

And everyday when that call comes, I dread it. Because all I speak are lies. And I want that distance.

*And time passes. Not much time, granted, but time. Minutes and segments and hours and days. Days and days, though not many, granted. Solitary leaves are clinging to frozen branches, and it is only a matter of time before the brittle, harsh things are broken off and float to the ground. Things are mostly gray. Sometimes there is snow; but mostly things are gray. There are tears and sad eyes and smiles which sit on faces. In the morning, I turn onto my back and look at the window, and through the slits in the blinds I can see gray. Get out of bed; get out of bed. Get up and shower and dress and go down*



*the stairs. Mainly, get out of bed. Sometimes it takes an hour or so, but eventually I rise. Each morning has become this task, this drudgery, this unending, unsolvable process. Get out of bed. But I can see the gray, and I taste it in my head. It's in my eyes, my eyes, and I can't get the dark circles to dissipate.*

I wanted to be alone all the time. For a few weeks, I was alone. But there were periods when I was still in contact with others. There were friends calling and stopping by that I did not expect. There was no way for me to control their actions, to tell them to leave, to tell them I just wanted to sit and stare at the falling snow for hours.

Those interactions carried me through. Dinner with Lexi after work. Monica coming back for a night unexpectedly. Nick coming into town and spending the day with me, going to the movies and playing games. A request from Joel to meet at a local coffee shop. The community I had entered into at the beginning of the school year became what sustained me through those several months of intense emotion. The grace I experienced in my hatred, in my frustration, in my failings, helped me to accept those things. The hurt I was causing myself was countered by the care I received from others.

I began to go to counseling again. From the end of autumn through the beginning months of winter, I had ceased going to counseling. In part, it was my self-destructive nature of wanting to completely disintegrate and wanting to be immersed in the pain of my situations. If I was completely covered in it, then perhaps I could emerge and it would be

done with. I realize now that it can't be done with. It is an ongoing process of remembering and feeling and not feeling. It is a process. A continuation.

I went to counseling. I went to the doctors. I continued to try and eat, to try and sleep.

*you tell me, you look weary.*

*rest your head for a moment, a moment.*

*shut your eyelids, one, two.*

*and let those thoughts*

*the ones that threaten to pour out your eyes,*

*let them cease.*

*for a moment, just a moment.*

*and your mind will smooth.*

*like a sheet pulled tight over a mattress.*

*and the thoughts will flow down the sides*

*to the*

*floor*

*where you will sweep them up*

*and examine them, one by one, two, three,*

*like bobbypins and buttons and pencaps.*

*you look weary.*

*maybe leave; maybe stay.*

*but, please, don't forget that you can't escape, here or there,*

*and you will look weary and you will feel and you will be.*

*and rest, rest will not erase the lines, the circles, the shadowing.*

*but you will rest, and you will rise to try and pull the sheet tight again,*

*every day.*

*so when your lids close and when they open,*

*the sheet rumples and smooths, rumples, rumples, smooths, snaps.*

*and they open, and they close,*

*and there is rest and weariness*

*and all those buttons, the red one and black one,*

*especially the green one,*

*they hit the ground, clinking.*

*gather them, sweep them, open, shut, rumple, smooth.*

Making it through moments became my goal. Making healthy decisions, in the moments where I could, became my goal. Putting up healthy boundaries, making lists of things I can't control, learning to feel my emotions rather than stating them—these things became goals. I needed time away from my family. Being in that place with those people was unhealthy because of the intense emotions it caused me to feel. I accepted that I couldn't control whether or not my dad spoke to me, though at the same time I realized that I

couldn't say that action didn't hurt just because it was true and couldn't be any other way.

The doctor gave me medicine for anxiety and medicine for my stomach. She ran tests to make sure there was nothing physically wrong.

My counselor and I talked about how I was capable of making good decisions. We talked about my level of self-awareness. And she told me that it was alright for me to be where I was. It was important to alleviate a level of stress so I could begin to eat and sleep again, but it was okay for me to be angry. It was okay that I couldn't handle seeing my family. And she told me, in time, these things will get better. And in time I'll be able to go home and to take slow, small steps toward new normalcy. Those steps would mean encountering the new and absorbing them into my skin and through my eyes and into my blood; that normalcy was not something which existed previously but something presently new.

When I'm not feeling miserable, and when I'm not struggling to get out of bed in the morning, and when I'm not standing motionless in the middle of the room because I can think of no where I want to be and when I'm not crying while blowdrying my hair or driving miles and miles away only to see something new, then I have glimpses of hope. And in those times, I don't wish you'd die. And I don't want to leave in bitterness. And I think there is a chance for my heart to be more better than bad. Sometimes I can see a little speck of light in the gray. Sometimes. And if I can just grasp on to that speck,

maybe it will pull me through and maybe it will distill the gray and maybe, maybe it will turn into more than a speck. Maybe it will be real. Maybe it will be outside of me and in me and not dependent on these things that you have done, and maybe I will feel whole again and maybe I will understand what I means to be broken and alive at the same time.

## SPRING

Pick through what is left

Through the pieces that rose and fell from the depth

From the rainwater well

Deep as a secret nobody knows

–The New Pornographers

In the morning I can hear birds. And every so often, I can see green through the grey mush that still lies on the ground. But those birds, those birds, their songs are small still, but as the days pass, they get stronger and they sustain for longer, until I can hear them in the middle of the day. And that gray mush has disappeared and there are blossoms and blooming plants and scents that had been frozen for months. Warm enough to remove a jacket, the warm air hits skin, and I remember what it feels like to not be buried.

And in moments like these, where I'm sitting in a coffee shop, listening to music, drinking cappuccino, I remember who I want to be, and I can set my mind on that path again and begin to move forward, slowly. I'm reading the Psalms. And I'm reading books. I'm watching movies. I have painted more. I'm working out regularly. I'm

writing, though not as much as before. I make plans to go to Colorado. I make plans to go to D.C. for a few days next week. I begin to lose my constraints. I begin to step outside of institutionalized Christianity, and it is freeing. Professors tell me to find my center, and I'm realizing the center I've been clinging to hasn't really been mine—it's been what I thought it should be. It's somewhat the same as what my counselor told me—to be responsible to working out my own salvation, with fear and trembling. To stop looking at others. To find my center, whatever that looks like, and find what it is that sustains me. And that's what I'll do. I will find my center, what I need, and I will incorporate that into my internal and external self.

In one of my classes during the spring semester, we talked about living in perpetual uncertainty. There is a process of learning and cultivating one's mind that requires this existence within the unknown. I believe this. It's the learning of the How that becomes difficult. At this point in my life, all I want is for something to be stable. Nothing is stable. My thoughts about God, religion, faith, family, friends, love, hate, pain, sorrow, joy—nothing is stable. I feel incapable of fixing on one thing. And I think this is why I fixate on objects. This is why looking at one thing has the ability to make me feel better inside. It doesn't necessarily make anything stable, but it helps me to feel stable.

And as I emerge a bit from the intense emotions of winter, as the trees begin to bloom and that horrible stench begins to emanate from the white buds on the trees on campus, I become more comfortable with remaining in uncertainty. I remind myself to make lists of the things I can't control. I remind myself to make healthy decisions. And when I get

frustrated with the instability and uncertainty of continuing situations, I let myself feel panic for a while. I let myself cry in frustration and fear. I listen to the people who tell me things will be okay. I listen when people tell me things will not always feel this sharp.

At our Sunday night meetings, we try to listen to one another about what has been happening in our lives. When I really look at these women and listen to their words, I know that they are not unlike me. At our last meeting, several of us were talking about the amount of schoolwork we had to do before the end of the semester, and we were talking about what we were willing to sacrifice in regards to grades. The whole school aspect becomes a juggling act. We can all say words about an education versus a degree, but it's hard to keep those dividing lines from smearing. It's the same with other words and spheres of life. C.S. Lewis writes in *The Screwtape Letters* that whatever our bodies do affect our souls.

So when I get five hours of sleep or drink so much coffee that my hands shake in order to complete readings and papers for classes, I am foolish to believe the rest of my being is not affected by those actions. When I look at the things I've learned about this past year, not just those things about relationships and expectations and grieving, but about the ethics of food and globalization and the spiritual disciplines and my connection to the ground and practicing simplicity and silence and the liturgical year, I can see how my socialization has trained me to act contrary to the values these things are built upon.

I've been taught that it's important to consume and to be able to consume. I've been taught that it's important to be efficient, to not need rest, and to always push through, even when things are rough. I've been taught that I can always be better; I can always do more.

But this past year, I've learned that I don't want to do anything more, and I'm not sure that I can really be better. I think I can be more aligned with the things I value. I do believe I can keep learning and relearning and returning to my questions.

Most predominant right now, though, is my belief in community. This year was marked by a strong desire to abandon others, to leave my home, to leave everything known. I still feel those urges frequently, but along with that urge is a desire to lean on those around me whom I have learned to trust. When I feel myself clenching inside, along with that voice that tells me to leave, I also hear a voice saying, why don't you call someone? Victoria, Monica, Michelle, Rachel, Nick, Lexi, Marcia, Alex, Phil, Luke, Julianna, Rachael, and the list goes on.

Honestly, I haven't actually called anyone very often, but the thing about living in a college community (much less a house with four other women) is that I can't move very far without running into someone. So I try to be honest when people ask me how I am. And sometimes I try to watch others interacting, and I try to listen to their words, because doing these things reminds me that I am not alone in my frustrations and confusion.



Ask a question and receive no answer. Maybe that's a blessing. I can learn to live in the uncertainty of not having answers. I can remember that those around me and I myself, we are always changing; humanity is in flux. And not having an answer will not cause me to stop asking. Those questions will remind me of all I do now know. They will remind me to remain in process.

I hoped it helped just a bit, to remind people that when the tragic, inexplicable events come, one of the hardest things to accept is that we don't have answers or explanations to cover the way they tear us up inside. —Kathleen Norris

There is no way to love perfectly. And there is no way to love safely. Sometimes I found myself refusing the love of those around me because it wasn't from whom I thought I should be receiving it, and it wasn't being given in the way I wanted it. When a friend would ask me to go out for coffee, I would cringe inside as I agreed because I knew they wanted to make sure I was alright. And most of the time I wasn't alright, but I was tired of saying that. I was tired of being honest and of feeling unstable and of struggling to make it through moments.

But I would always go. And I would make more plans. I would make myself remain in those relationships. Never perfectly, of course. And sometimes I lied. Sometimes I told the truth. And most of the time I don't think I knew which was which.

*My love offering will be to tell the truth.*

*I don't think I love you; in fact, I kind of hate you.*

*I'm not using these words lightly. I'm not talking about "love" in the way that I "love" the color green. And I'm not talking about "hate" in the way that I "hate" olives. No, I mean love and I mean hate in the sincerest way, the truest way, the most complete way.*

*But then again, I think I'm projecting. I don't think I actually hate you. I don't understand you, and right now I feel a lot of hurt and anger and hatred, and I have no where to place all of these feelings. They are sitting in my mind, like dead-weights, like immovable bags of sand. I kick them and scream and try to edge them out of existence, but they're too heavy for me to budge. My frustrations at my inabilities spill over to you. Because I know you can move them. I know you can. But you don't.*

*I make you the cause. I turn on you, though you are the only one who understands and the only one who can help me understand. I know, you could help me begin untying those bags and emptying the contents. One handful at a time, we could work through, until the feeling of death is replaced by something new.*

*I'm not willing.*

*My love offering will be to tell the truth.*

*I'm not willing, anymore.*

*Maybe I do hate you. You are at least the person and object at which I am directing my hate at this point. I think I understand that it's foolish to hate you, but I'm going to do it anyways.*

*You keep trying to take steps inside, to touch things, to heal things. And every time you place a foot inside, I shove you out. I do not want your help. I do not want you to touch me. You break everything, all in the name of healing. You take everything, all in the name of giving.*

*You did this. You did this. You did this.*

*You fashioned those burlap bags and you filled them all to the breaking point. You sealed them and dropped them, with a heavy thud, into my life, my mind, my heart. And now you want to come in and disassemble. You want to open the bags and examine the words and thoughts and actions. You want to touch the pain and the brokenness. But you already touched it all; you did it.*

*You cannot be my breaker and my healer.*

*I know I'm ascribing things to you which are not true. I know I'm making you into something you cannot possibly be. I know I'm pushing you out. I know. I am aware. I am conscious.*

*My love offering will be to tell the truth.*

I can go back and forth quickly, snapping thoughts about truth a reality around like a dog toy. I can see these overlapping themes and ideas and feelings, and I can see how even when I try to order anything to make sense of it, I can't. My tenses shift and my sentences don't go in the right order. What happened in the summer is changing what I see now, and what I see now is changing the way I interpret the winter. I don't know where a line begins and ends and I don't see those colors individually. The seasons exist, but if I go somewhere else, they will be different.

Originally, this project started with my intention to focus on the spiritual disciplines and life within a community house. And I think, in a way, this is still my focus. My understanding of these things has changed. My appreciation of these things has changed.

My words are more intentional now than they have been before. When I express compassion and understanding, there is a depth which I couldn't attain previously. When I say I pray for someone, it is guaranteed. Because it is painful for me to pray now. It requires an amount of faith which is physically difficult for me to accept. While I pray, there are questions and statements. When I look at the church, there are questions. When I go away to sit in silence at the monastery here in Canton, sometimes all I am is frustrated. And when I sit to read my Bible, I feel confused.

But I continue to try. And I begin to look for new ways to find my center. My understanding about truth is shifting.

I've come to a point in my mind where I can say, I need time and space.

How is that space to be gained? And in what way? Physical or mental. Spiritual or emotional? Which contexts correspond with which realms of being? I think I need the physical space. And I need relational space, while at the same time achieving new levels of depth. I need familial relational space. I need new relationships, possibly. Spiritually, I am angry. I am frustrated with the church and with Christians, and I'm potentially frustrated with God, but that remains to be seen because I don't really know who God is anymore. Not that I did before, but everything I thought I knew has dissipated until I am left with a blank face promising something about love, but I don't understand and I don't care enough to search most of the time.

But then all I care about is searching.

Emotionally I need space. In every way, I need time. And I guess that's not something I need to worry about because I can't produce or destroy time. It will happen to me, whether I need it or not.

A few months later, the beginning of March, still cold, still grey, still broken. But I'm beginning to think of things less, to feel them less. But at the same time, I'm withdrawn.

I'm overtaken with a sense of solitude, a feeling of sadness, but there is a coexisting hope. It just looks and feels different than I ever could have anticipated it would.

I'm eating regularly again. Sleep is easier, better, though still not completely restful. When I wake up in the morning, my mind immediately begins to race, going through situations and what-ifs and the daily schedule, and it's too much. So I stop. And I remember, to just be. To lay in bed and try and not think anything, to place no restrictions or requirements on myself.

I have a deadline for this thesis, and its sundown today, Saturday. And I'm sitting here looking at this document, and I reread some of these words and I think about changing some of it. Of adding more or taking away, of making things more or less clear. But this is my mind and it is my soul and it is those external things which can't be removed. There is only so much that language can express.

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Victoria and I signed a lease for a duplex the other day, and there is no air conditioning in our new place. I look forward to sitting in the heat, to sleeping in the heat, to sweating and feeling the laziness that comes from energy being sapped by those hot, hot waves.

I look forward to feeling. To sitting in. To not focusing purely on getting through.

Shine rays of better. Pain, bloom. Grief, bloom. Hoping and waiting, blossom and  
grow, green and white.