


poem
poem book II
1992 chapbook
from janet kuypers
scars publications

“addict.”



i was sitting in the front seat of lisa’s car, i can’t remember if it was a rental or her dad’s car. my face and chest were sunburnt, i could feel the top layer of my skin burning. i was wearing a peach shirt with a mini-skirt; i remember that i always had to dress up when i was with her, men always thought she was prettier. i was sitting in the front seat, it was night, lisa was driving, she just finished putting on her burgundy lipstick with her rear-view mirror and she lit a virginia slims menthol with the car lighter. my father always hated her. we parked in front of some strip store, probably off davis boulevard, and david was getting out the back so he could buy a pack of cigarettes, too. marlboro lights. they were the closest thing to those french canadian things he smoked. the ones where the box held two rows of ten instead of two of seven and one of six. the ones that were shorter than marlboros. when he got out of the car, i asked lisa what was wrong with david. he usually loved any opportunity to get out of the mobile home park. but the whole car ride he barely spoke. so lisa said that david was going through withdrawal, that he had no cocaine this vacation and he’s got the shakes or something. i don’t know if it was the shakes; whatever you get when you stop taking coke, that was happening to him. and i was mad because he never told me, and i was mad because he was fucked up from the stuff in the first place. and i had to act like i knew nothing when he got back in the car.

Age

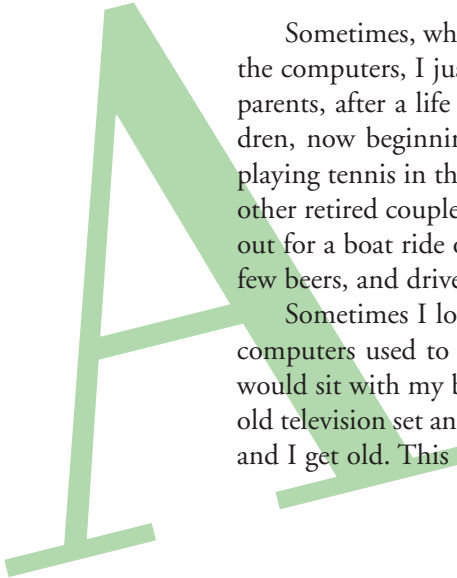
Sometimes, when I get behind the wheel of a car, I feel like I'm at Six Flags Great America Amusement Park In Gurnee, Illinois again and I'm thirteen years old and I'm able to drive one of the bumper cars. And it's such a thrill -- because, I mean, I'm thirteen years old and I can't drive, and I'm now in control of this huge piece of machinery. Granted, there's this wire sticking up from the car that gets electricity from the ceiling, but for once I feel free, that I can just go, go faster than I ever could by running, or even if I used my roller skates or my bicycle.

And when I get that feeling and I'm behind the wheel of my car I want to drive really really fast out on an abandoned road, blare some rock music, roll down my window, and turn up the heat, since it's the middle of winter.

Sometimes, when I go out on a new date, I feel like I'm sixteen again, and I'll rifle through my closet, deciding I have absolutely nothing to wear. And he'll pick me up, and we'll go to a restaurant with deer heads on the walls, and we'll have whiskey sours, and we'll struggle with the lettuce leaves in the salads because they're too big, and when we're done with dinner we'll go to a bar that's so crowded and so loud that we won't be able to talk to each other, but we'll have to stand real close. And then he'll take me home and I'll invite him in, he'll sit on the chair, I'll sit on the couch, and he'll ask for a glass of water. When we can't think of any more small talk, and the clock says 3:12 a.m., I'll see him to the door, he'll kiss me good-bye, and I'll lock the door after he leaves. And when I'm sure he can't see me through the window, I'll turn on the stereo and dance in my living room before I go to bed.

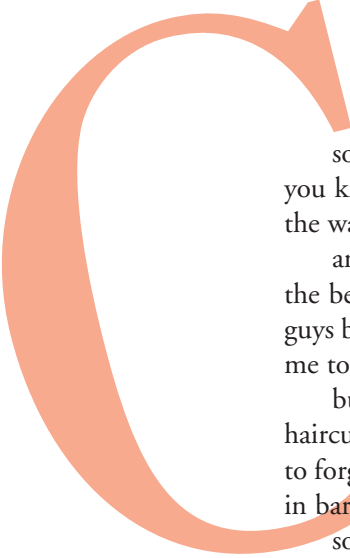
Sometimes, when I'm having sex with someone, I feel like I've done this for years, like I've been married to this man for twenty years, and I still don't know him, but I'm still there, night after night. After the wedding, after the new house, which was a little small, but we'll get something bigger when we

have the money, after the two kids and the fifteen pounds, after I lose my job, after we don't get that new house and after the kids complain about their curfews, after the dog dies, hell, it was only trouble for us anyway, after the sinus headaches, the back problems, that all-over sore feeling, you know, it's harder to wake up in the mornings now, after it all he still has the nights, the sex with the woman he knows all too well but not at all, and we do it, as we always do. It becomes memorization. It becomes like a play, that I act out night after night.

 Sometimes, when I get home after 10 o'clock from working overtime on the computers, I just want to retire, to quit the work, to stop it all. I see my parents, after a life of working at the construction site and raising five children, now beginning to relax, buying a small home in Southwest Florida, playing tennis in the morning, playing cards in the afternoon, drinking with other retired couples in the evening. Sometimes another couple invites them out for a boat ride off of Marco Island, where they smoke cigarettes, drink a few beers, and drive slow enough to make no wake when they're by the pier.

Sometimes I look at the computer screen I work at and remember how computers used to mean video games. I remember when I was eight and I would sit with my best friend in the upstairs den on the floor in front of the old television set and play table tennis on our Atari. Times change, I suppose, and I get old. This is my life.

Clay



so I was at this bar, on the coast of florida -- the west coast, the gulf side, you know. it was this place called lana kai, and my friend gave me a ride all the way from naples, which is a good forty-five minutes south of the place.

and so we were sitting there at the bar, which is half indoors and half on the beach, and all these old men kept staring at my friend's chest. a couple guys bought us beer and one guy asked me to dance. I was surprised he asked me to dance, and not my friend -- men were usually more attracted to her.

but the guys were jerks anyway -- one looked like a marine with that haircut and must have been high on something, one looked like he decided to forgo hygiene, another was twice my age. it's not as if I try to pick up men in bars anyway.

so after a while I couldn't stand being at the bar, next to the reggae band that was playing (I never really liked reggae music anyway, I mean, it's too slow to dance to), so I begged my friend to come walk with me on the beach.

christ, I felt like a ten-year-old with a bucket and shovel when I kicked off my black suede shoes and ran into the water. I always loved the feel of sand when it's drenched in water. it feels like clay as it seeps around my toes, pulling me into the ground.

so there I was, splashing in the water, wearing a black sequin dress, throwing my purse to the shore, taking a swig from my can of miller lite. this was life, I thought. pure and simple. an army couldn't have dragged me out of the water.

so my friend found some guy to hit on, as she usually does, and she wanted me to hit on his friend. I found him ugly as all sin, and impossible to talk to. I told him that one of the rafts on the shore was mine, and instead of driving to the bar I sailed. and he believed me. I told my friend flat out that I wouldn't go with him. she was pissed that I didn't find him good-looking.

so then He strolled up from the bar to the beach, an intriguing stranger,

and He walked up right next to me in the water, still wearing his shoes, seeming to know that I needed to be saved. as most knights in shining armor would.

and He said hello to me, and He started talking to me, and He cracked a few jokes, and He made me laugh.

and okay, I'll admit it -- he was good-looking, really good looking. I remember at one point, looking at him made me think of a greek statue, He had this curly hair, this sharp chin, these strong cheek bones. but those greek statues could never talk to me, they have no color, they don't come alive. they're made of stone.

His name was Clay. and when we talked He crept into my pores, the way the sand made it's way between my toes. His voice tunneled into me, boring me hollow, making me anxiously wait to be filled with more and more of His words.

my friend disappeared with her new-found monosyllabic lover, for hours, until long after the bar closed, leaving me stranded. there I was, forty-five miles north of my home at 2:20 in the morning with no means of transportation. it could have been worse, I could have been somewhere other than on the beach, I could have been sober, and I might not have had a knight in shining armor named Clay to save me.

and as He drove me home (an hour and a half out of his way), I couldn't help but run my fingers through his hair, it was an uncontrollable impulse, like the urge to drag your fingers deep into the wet sand. I told Him I was just trying to keep Him awake for the drive.

it's almost better if I never see Him again. then I can always think of Him this way.

Daisy

Every time he invited me over, we'd open the door and there would be that ankle-biting dog barking it's head off. If she was human, I'd say she was screaming bloody murder, but she's a dog, and "barking bloody murder" doesn't sound right. Besides, she doesn't really bark. She yaps.

She's one of those dogs that yaps at everything. We'd always hear her, even before we'd get inside the door. It's the kind of bark that makes you want to drop-kick her across the room.

"Yipyipyip!!!Yapyapyapyap!!!"

Her bark reminds me of Dino from the Flintstones. It's a contrived bark, and it's annoying as Hell. It's a bark that doesn't quite sound like a dog.

Her name is Daisy, but she doesn't connote any of those images of happiness and simplicity a daisy creates. I think any notions of happiness would be too annoyed with her bark to stick around, anyway.

She's a Chihuahua, which makes her look like a fat tan dachshund with big ears. She's no longer than eighteen inches, but I think she thinks of herself as a Doberman protecting her territory. She growls at passing traffic, snaps at an outstretched hand and yaps at a stranger's voice.

"Don't talk until she sniffs you," he'd always say. "Let her get acquainted with you." Wondering what the appropriate waiting time was for Daisy to get acquainted with someone, I'd get tired of the conversation being stifled and would eventually whisper something to him. Daisy would then immediately start yapping with all the fierceness an eighteen inch Chihuahua could muster up. The conversation would be halted for another five minutes until she was finished with her canine tantrum.

Suddenly I thought of my sister. She always had to have her way, too. And my sister's voice is almost as annoying as that damn yapping noise.

But this time while I was over he told me said he had to run to the store, so he asked me to stay and "keep Daisy company." As I stood in the window and watched his fire-engine red Hyundai Scoupe drive him away, Daisy

jumped on the back of the couch, poised toward the window. She yapped bloody murder.

I sat down in a chair. Daisy sat in the adjacent couch, probably choosing her seat so she'd have a view of the passing traffic she could yap at if she so chose. She stretched out on the couch like a queen, amongst pillows that were bigger than her bed. I thought of my sister again.

She then turned her eyes toward me and squinted, as if to say, "ha ha, bitch, I've got the couch and you have to sit in a chair."

She put her head down and closed her eyes. I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to be her -- to have a couch as big as the living room to crawl on to, to have nothing to worry about but the passing traffic.

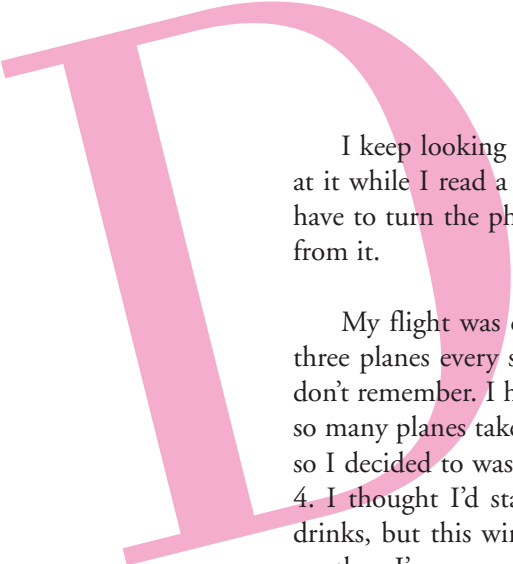
A car turned down the street and started driving toward the house. Daisy picked her head up, looked out the window and started to growl. I attempted to show an ounce of authority to the dog: "Day-zeee," I said, as if I were actually about to reprimand the thing. She stopped growling and turned her head half way toward me, pausing just for a moment before she turned back and continued to growl at the Buick.

I couldn't see her face, but I'm sure it had a look on it that said, "You bitch, how dare you yell at me... Who are you anyway??"

She couldn't even bother to turn her head around entirely to look at me.

I just sat there, looking at Queen Daisy in all her glory. I sat back in the chair and tried to relax. I twisted the ring on my finger. I looked out the window and waited for him to come home.

done this before



I keep looking back at your picture. I'll flip it over to stop from staring at it while I read a page from my book, but a minute won't pass before I'll have to turn the photo over again to see your face. It's as if I can't get away from it.

My flight was delayed, I'm at O'Hare Airport, the airport that departs three planes every second, or is it one plane every three seconds, oh shit, I don't remember. I have to wait at least three hours for my next flight, hey, if so many planes take off here, then why can't I get on one of them? Oh well, so I decided to waste my time in one of the airport cocktail bars, by gate L 4. I thought I'd start with a white zinfandel and work my way to mixed drinks, but this wine tastes so good that I think I might just have to have another. I'm so exasperated, I hate to wait, and all I have is a good book to keep me company. I used your photo from my wallet as a bookmark. I need these things to keep me sane.

It really isn't bad here in the cocktail bar by gate L 4, the chairs aren't that uncomfortable, even though they're a pretty ugly shade of green that doesn't match anything in the room. It really isn't that bad, in a foreign city, in a foreign airport. Not when I've got my Sutter Home White Zinfandel. And my picture of you.

You know, there's a blonde girl dressed well with a bad perm across the bar, and she's smoking a cigarette. I know I don't smoke, but I'm almost tempted to ask her for one just so I can hold the cigarette the way you do. I'd like to taste the tar, the nicotine, the way I taste it in your kiss. You think I don't like it, but I do.

They're playing a song in the cocktail bar, a song that reminds me of an

ex. I wanted to marry that man. He had a knack of being able to envelope me, to take my troubles away. I don't know if I can take away my troubles myself anymore. I don't know if the liquor's helping, or the cigarettes. Your photo helps, my little bookmark. At least for now it helps.

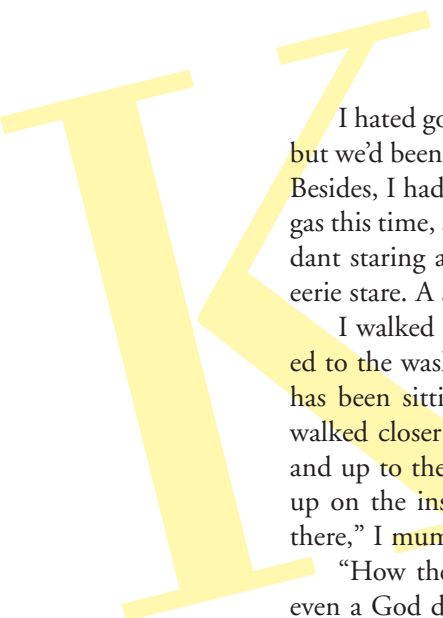
Sitting in this L 4 cocktail bar reminds me of my brother. When I was young he'd always pick us up at the airport, but if he wasn't waiting at the gate we knew to look for him at the seafood cocktail bar. a part of me expects him to come walking through the doorway now, flannel shirt, ski jacket, wind-blown greasy hair, coke-bottle glasses. You know, when I'd look at his eyes through those glasses, his eyes looked twice as big as they actually were. I could imagine him now, I could imagine the smell of his Levi's of dirt from the construction site. I remember that smell from my father; I'd smell it every day when he came home from work. It's my brother's business now, he's got his own family now to worry about instead of a little sister. So I'll just sit here at this airport cocktail bar, remembering the days when I'd sit with him in a place like this and I was too young to drink.

God, I want to see my brother walking in to this bar at L 4, ordering a shrimp cocktail. I want to see you, babbling on about a movie you reviewed or a gig your band had. I want something that isn't so foreign, like this bar. Or maybe I want something that isn't so familiar.

I took your picture out of my wallet, the wallet that has so many pictures of men who have come and gone in my life, men who have hurt me, men who I have gone through like... like dish washing liquid, or like something I use all the time and replace all the time and don't think twice about.

I'll just sit here, in this airport, trying to care just the right amount, not too much, but not too little. So I'll just sit here, in this airport cocktail bar, looking at your photo, and wondering if I've done this before.

Knowledge



I hated going into these God damn gas stations in the middle of nowhere, but we'd been driving for so damn long that I think I lost all feeling in my ass. Besides, I had to go to the bathroom. It couldn't wait. He said he'd pump the gas this time, so I got out of the car and began to stretch when I saw the attendant staring at me through the window from behind the counter. It was an eerie stare. A sex stare. I stopped stretching.

I walked around the side of the building, where the dingy arrows pointed to the washrooms. I really didn't need the signs, for the smell of shit that has been sitting around overpowered the smell of the dust in the air as I walked closer and closer to the bathrooms ... I walked past the men's room and up to the ladies room to find that the door was... gone. It was propped up on the inside of the bathroom wall. "A lot of fucking good it does me there," I mumbled in the stench.

"How the Hell am I supposed to go to the bathroom when there isn't even a God damned door to the damn bathroom??" I thought as I stormed into the store where he was paying for the gas.

He was buying two bottles of Pepsi for the road, to keep us awake. "The door of the women's washroom is off," I whispered with exasperation. "Well, that's no problem, honey -- just go into the men's room. I'll watch the door for you," he said back. The look in his eyes told me that he thought it was such a simple and obvious solution that anyone could figure it out. He thought he had the solution for everything. I wanted to tell him that the women's room frightened me enough for one day, and that I didn't want to risk my life by venturing into the men's room. Besides, men go in there. That attendant probably goes in there. I finally shrugged and waited for him to pay for his Pepsi and gasoline. I turned my head and followed him out. The attendant looked at me as I left. I could feel his stare burning into the back of my head.

We turned the building corner and followed the signs. My shoulders suddenly felt heavier and heavier as I walked. He checked the room to make sure it was empty for me. He even held the door open. What a gentleman.

I closed the door, but I really didn't want to be left alone with the smell.

It smelled like shit. But I could also smell sweat, like the smell of dirty men. I wondered if this is what the attendant smelled like. I lined the toilet bowl seat with toilet paper. I had to use it sparingly -- there wasn't much left. I got up as soon as I could and walked over to the dirty mirror, almost hitting my head on the hanging light bulb. There was light blue paint chipping next to the mirror.

I strained to see my image in the mirror. Instead, all I could focus on was the graffiti on the wall behind me. For a good time call.. So-and-so gives good head... Did that attendant ever call that number? I wondered if I was ever put on a bathroom wall. I wondered if I was ever reduced to a name and a phone number like that. I probably had been.

The floor was wet. I always wondered when the floors of bathrooms were wet if it was actually urine or just water from the sink. Or maybe it was from the sweat of all those men. I didn't know.

I stepped on something under the sink in front of the mirror. I looked down. It was an open porn magazine. I looked at it from where I was standing. I didn't move my foot. It was hard core shit, and it looked painful. Women with gags on their faces... I remember someone telling me that porn was okay because the women in it wanted to do it. But there was no smile on this woman's face. I pushed it back under the sink.

I stepped back. I wanted to hit something. I wanted to hit the graffiti on the wall, the porn on the floor. I wanted to smear the urine from the stall all over the place. I wanted to pull the light from right out of the fucking ceiling.

I put my hands up against the wall. I put the top of my head on the wall. I tried to breathe. It hurt. With my eyes closed, I knew what was there, behind me. It didn't scare me anymore.

When I walked into the bathroom, I was afraid to touch anything. But then I just leaned up against the door, feeling the dirt press into my back, into my hair. I wanted to soak it all in. All of it.

I shook my head and realized that he was waiting for me outside the door. I turned around and grabbed the door knob. I didn't worry about the dirt on my back. I opened the door.



Life

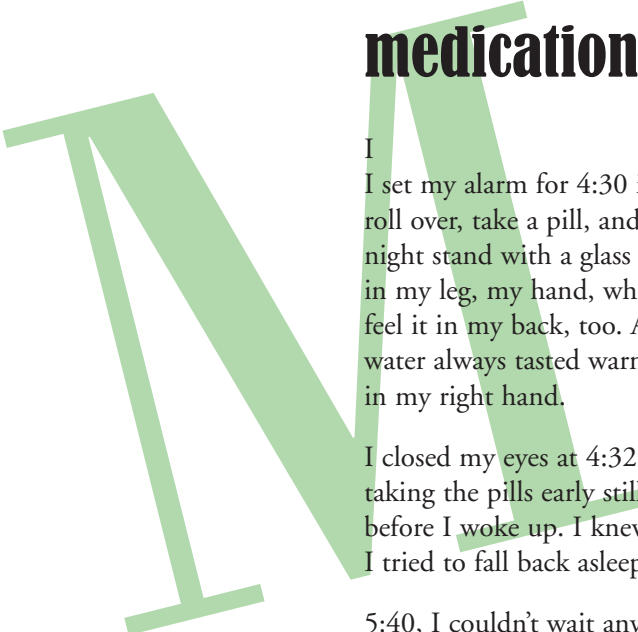
Life is like the universe
endlese
vast

life and the universe
are both everything

Life is like the universe
different
and beautiful
in every way

Life and the universe
are both everything
forever

medication



I
I set my alarm for 4:30 instead of 5:30 so I could roll over, take a pill, and fall back asleep. I'd leave two pills on the night stand with a glass of water every night. I could feel the pain in my leg, my hand, when I reached over to take the drugs. I'd feel it in my back, too. And sometimes in my shoulder. The water always tasted warm and dusty. It hurt to hold the pills in my right hand.

I closed my eyes at 4:32. I hated that damn alarm clock. And taking the pills early still wouldn't make the pain go away before I woke up. I knew that. But I took them anyway. And I tried to fall back asleep. And I dreaded 5:30, when I'd have to move.

5:40, I couldn't wait any longer, I couldn't be late, we couldn't have that, so I'd finally swing my legs to the floor. I'd put on my robe and limp into the kitchen. The trip to the kitchen lasted for hours. And picking up the milk carton from the refrigerator hurt like hell. This wasn't supposed to be happening, not to me. Just pour the damn milk. I'd wipe the tears from my chin and sit down for breakfast.

II
The doctor doubled the dosage, and he was amazed that I needed this much. He told me to follow the directions strictly, STRICTLY. "You can't take these in the morning the way you have been," he'd say. "You have to take them with food." That doesn't help when I'm crying from the pain in the morning. But I could get an ulcer, he'd say. And I wouldn't want that. Of course not. I just wanted the pain to go away.

Take one tablet three times daily, with meals.
Do not drink alcohol while on medication.
Take with food or milk. Do not skip medication.
Do not take aspirin while using this product.
Do not operate heavy machinery. May cause ulcers.

III

All I had to do was get through the mornings. The mornings were the hardest part. Just take a little more pain, and by the afternoon it will all be fine. Just fine.

An hour after the pills, and I'd start to feel dizzy. I'd stare at a computer screen and it would move, in circles, back and forth. I wanted to grab the screen and make it stay in place. But I'd look at my fingers and they would go in and out of focus. I'd feel my head rocking forward and backward; I couldn't hold myself still. I'd sit at my desk and my eyes would open and close, open and close. Before I knew it, ten minutes passed and I remembered nothing. I could have been screaming for ten minutes straight and I wouldn't have known it. Or crying. Or sleeping. Or laughing. Or dying. I had just lost ten minutes of my life, they were just taken away from me, ripped away from me, and I could never get them back.

And I could still feel traces of the pain, lingering in my bones.

IV

I'd sit up at night and just stare at the bottle. It was a big bottle, as if the doctors knew I'd take these drugs forever. Hadn't it been forever already? I'd open a bottle, look at a pill. They looked big too. Pink and white. What pretty colors.

And then I'd think: If one tablet, fifty milligrams, could put me to sleep in the morning, could make me dizzy, could take a part of my life from me, then think about what the other thirty-six could do. 1800 milligrams. It could kill me. I wouldn't want that. Of course not. But just think, the bottle isn't even full.

May cause ulcers. May cause dizziness. Side effects may vary for each patient. May cause weight gain. May cause weight loss. May cause drowsiness. May cause irritability. Medication may have to be taken consistently for weeks before expected results. If effects become severe, consult physician immediately.

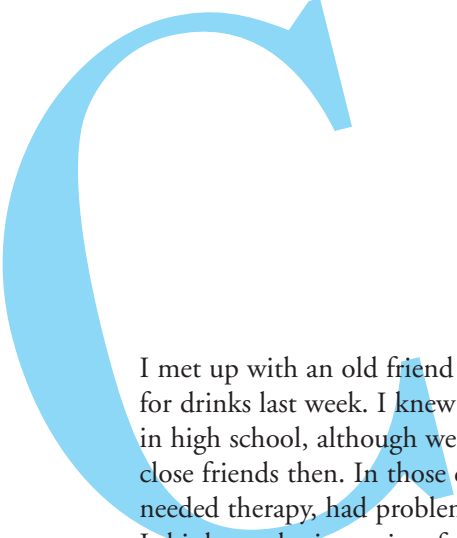
V

I began to count. In the mornings I took eight pills: one multivitamin, one calcium pill, one niacin pill, one fish oil capsule, one garlic oil pill, and one pink-and-white pain killer that I was special to have, because you need a doctor's permission to take those. Then I took diet pills: one starch blocker, one that was called a "fat magnet." As if the diet pills worked anyway. But I still took them.

And then I had to watch the clock, take a pink-and-white at one in the afternoon, a different pill at five o'clock, another pink-and-white at six o'clock, and there was also usually sinus medication that I had to take every six hours in there, too. Or was it eight hours? I started to watch the clock all the time, I bought a pill container for my purse so that I would always have my medication with me.

When I'd feel my body start to ache again, I'd look at the clock. It would be fifteen minutes before I had to take another pill.

Confident Women



I met up with an old friend of mine for drinks last week. I knew her in high school, although we weren't close friends then. In those days she needed therapy, had problems with drugs, I think, or else it was just family problems. I was a bit insecure myself, shy, meek, scared of life. Since those days we matured, we're now more independent, self-confident, self-assured women.

It was good to see her again. She just came back from camping in Australia; although physically I had gone nowhere, we both had our stories to tell over a bottle or two of wine. And we gossiped, she told me of the handsome Australian man she fell for, I told her of the roller-coaster I call my romantic life. And we laughed. And then the gossip changed, her voice lowered, and sounding stern but quiet, she told me of how a man broke into her apartment one night

last summer and he tried to rape her, and after kicking and screaming in her underwear she managed to break free and her attacker escaped. She told me they found the man, and the trial is scheduled for later in the month. And she sat there, with her wine glass in her hand, looking so confident, as if she knew she won this battle. Trying not to sound corny, I told her I could give her a hug. And she leaned on my shoulder, and she cried, hiccupping as she tried to catch her breath. They would make her recount everything on the stand, she said, and the defense lawyers would try to make her sound promiscuous because she slept alone in her underwear. I told her I would go with her to the trial. I told her she is winning by speaking out. Self-assured women. Confident women. How confident are we supposed to be?

The Room of the Rape

For almost two years when I walked up the nine stairs,
held on to the wooden railing whose finish was worn,
I'd pass the first door on the right.
My bedroom door was closed for one year, ten months and seven days.
I slept in the den across the hall.

One morning I woke, walked into the hall
and looked at the door. I turned around,
knowing I couldn't take it anymore,
walked into the den, folded the bed back into the couch,
and then walked into the hall, squarely facing
the door of the room.

A room in my house, that I let him go in to.
But when I woke up that morning, I told myself
that I wouldn't let him stop me today.

I turned the handle of the door. I heard a snap.
I slowly pushed the door open,
slowing it down to hear the hinges creak.
The shade to the small window in the corner was drawn,
so I stepped onto the parquet floor and turned on the light.

I felt the walls jump back in fear,
fear of having to see the light again,
then rush in on me in anger.

I saw the bed sheets rustle, get kicked
and tossed to the ground again.

I tasted the sweat and I wanted to spit,
but I couldn't. Something told me
that wasn't what I was supposed to do.

My bedroom.

I saw the fists reach out from the walls
and thought of the poster I drew
of rebellion and rage
that is tucked in the back of my closet.

I felt the muscles tense behind my eyebrows

I pursed my lips

I swallowed the sweat

My bedroom.

I felt the fists punching my stomach,
grabbing my face, my arms, my hair,
pulling my legs apart.

I felt my head against the pillows again
as I tried to just push my face
into the salt and the sheets

I heard the screams I never made
echo inside me
the screams that haunted me

I closed my eyes from the pain and the light
My bedroom.

I thought of the fist, the symbol for the
communist work ethic
to do what you're told,
to disappear into society.

I opened my eyes.
The room was mine —
the sheets on the floor, the stains on the bed, the smell of Hell
and the photographs on the dresser.

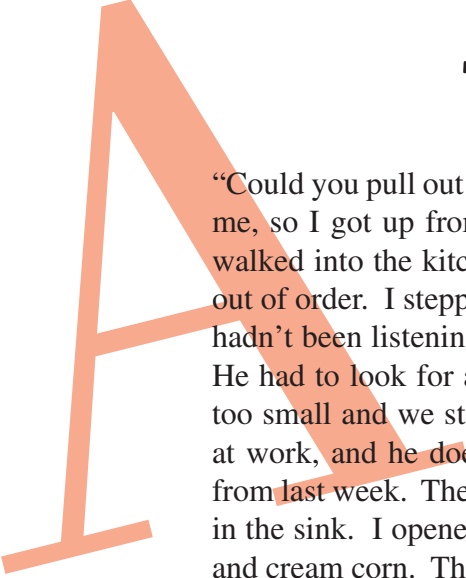
I looked at the pictures
and found one of him, with his arms around me.

I picked up the frame,
ran my hand along the gilded edges.

Flakes of paint fell to the floor.
I opened the drawer of the dresser
and gently set it face down.

I turned around,
shutting off the light on my way out.
My bedroom.

The Apartment



“Could you pull out a can of sardines to have with lunch?”, he asked me, so I got up from my chair, put down the financial pages, and walked into the kitchen. The newspaper fell to the ground, falling out of order. I stepped on the pages as I walked away. I realized he hadn’t been listening to a thing I said.

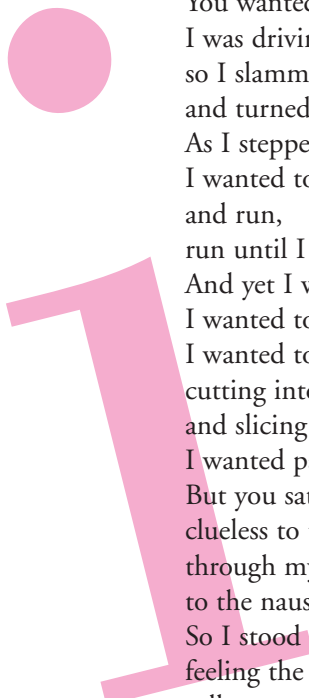
He had to look for a job, I had told him before. This apartment is too small and we still can’t afford it. I put in so many extra hours at work, and he doesn’t even help at home. There are dishes left from last week. There is spaghetti sauce crusted on one of the plates in the sink. I opened up the pantry, moved the cans of string beans and cream corn. There was an old can of peaches in the back; I didn’t even know it was there. I found a sardine can in the back of the shelf.

I saw him from across the apartment as I opened up the can. “We have to do something about this,” I said. “I can’t even think in this place. I’m tired of living in a cubicle.”

He closed the funny pages. “Get used to it, honey. This is all we’ll ever get. You think you’ll get better? You think you deserve it? For some people, this is all they’ll get. That’s just the way life is.”

I looked at the can. I looked at the little creatures crammed into their little pattern. It almost looked like they were supposed to be that way, like they were created to be put into a can. The smell made me dizzy. I pushed the can away from me. I couldn’t look at it any longer.

i wanted pain



You screamed at me to pull over.
You wanted me to stop.
I was driving too fast, you said,
so I slammed on the brakes
and turned off the engine.
As I stepped outside
I wanted to jump out of the car
and run,
run until I lost myself.
And yet I wanted to fall.
I wanted to fall to the ground.
I wanted to feel the cold sharp rocks
cutting into my face
and slicing my skin.
I wanted pain to feel good again.
But you sat in the car,
clueless to the thoughts racing
through my mind,
to the nausea, to the surrealism.
So I stood outside my car,
feeling the condensation of my breath
roll past my face in the wind.
It was a constant, nagging reminder
that I still had to breathe.

Right There, By Your Heart

I

i had a dream the other night that i was in a bathroom, sitting on the toilet seat, i think it was the one in florida, but it could have been anywhere. it was a small bathroom. i was stretched over this seat, and i think the lid was up. i was naked. there was a wall right next to me, and i felt cramped, like i couldn't move. and then kurt was there, with me, in the bathroom, naked, standing over me, screwing me. i was sitting on a toilet seat and he was fucking me, and in the entire dream i couldn't get comfortable, i felt very awkward, it felt like he was pressing on my chest, i couldn't breathe, it felt like there was a rock in my stomach that would stay there forever, but the entire time i didn't complain.

II

have you ever had that feeling before, you know, the one when someone is telling you something you don't want to hear, like if someone was about to tell you that someone died and you knew what they were going to say and you still didn't want to hear it, or if someone did something to you you didn't like, like when you were little and the kids at the bus stop shot pebbles and spit balls at you every day because you were smart and you still had

to go to the bus stop every morning and just try to ignore them? and when that happens it feels like a medium sized rock just fell into the bottom of your stomach, and you don't want to move because you're afraid that the rock will hurt the inside of your stomach and so you just have to sit there and hope the rock goes away? or else you get the feeling in your chest, right between your lungs, it feels like someone is pressing against the bone there, right there by your heart, and you've got to breathe, you're not going to be able to take that pressure, that force any longer?

III

it had already been a long day, sitting in the back of someone else's car for two and a half hours, knowing that if elaine's dad wasn't such a slow driver it would have taken less than two hours. I was trying to get home so i could make it on time for the christmas party but still have enough time to pack for my early flight the next morning. airports have become a second home to me. so i walked in through the melon doors only three hours late, those melon doors that scream of the perfect fifties home, of the perfect fifties family that everyone believed we were. i walked through the doors, sarah hugged me, and dad walked into the hallway from the kitchen. wait a minute. he was supposed to be on the other side of the country... well, don't ask questions, just act happy to see him. so i smiled and laughed, until he hugged me. then the rock settled

in. he didn't have to say a word. my mind started going through the checklist: okay, what would have brought him back here? who was the one who had died? i said 'grandma' before he did. i cried for fifteen minutes, wiped the tears from my neck, my ears, and i got ready for the party, trying not to move too quickly, so not to disturb the rock.

IV

i got the mail, like i do any other day, and by then i had almost forgotten about waiting for the test results. i was just getting the mail, like normal. when i saw the letter from the hospital that day in that little metal box the pressure on my chest came rushing back like wind when it rushes around the side of a building and it takes you entirely by surprise and you lose your breath trying to live through it. what if the test results said i was sick, and i wasn't going to get any better? i had too many symptoms, the results had to show something. something, damnit. maybe if i never opened the letter, i'd never have to deal with illness. maybe then i'd live forever. but i opened the letter. it said the doctors still know nothing. i just wanted to know what was wrong with me. why i wasn't perfect. the pressure on my chest didn't go away when i threw the envelope on the ground by the mailbox. i walked upstairs.

V

i needed to talk to someone, so i threw my bathrobe on the floor, pulled on some sweats, and walked over to his apartment. steve was supposed to be coming home from work soon, and i needed to talk to somebody, i couldn't keep everything bottled in. i must have looked like an idiot standing on his stairs looking like i was about to cry. i felt like an idiot there, too, not knowing why the rock in my stomach wasn't going away. i wanted to ask him if he ever felt that rock, felt that pressure, even if there didn't seem to be a reason for it at all except for maybe life itself, which everyone was supposed to manage through anyway, i mean, everyone has stress, what's your problem if you can't take it? i wanted to figure it out, whatever the hell it was that was bothering me, i really wanted to. this panic was driving me crazy, and i couldn't even explain why i was panicked in the first place. i didn't tell him i wanted to light a candle and some incense and just curl up in the corner of my bed, holding one of my pillows, probably the black one, and cry for a very long time. i sat there in his apartment when he got home, but i didn't speak. what could i say? that the rock in my stomach wasn't going away?

VI

i don't know how many times the idea of seeing him went through my mind. at least once a week i'd imagine a scene where he'd confront me, and i'd somehow

be able to fight him back, to show him that he didn't bother me any more, to show him that the rock wasn't there any more. to somehow be able to prove that i wasn't a victim any more. i was a survivor. that's what they call it now, you see, survivor, because victim sounds too trying for someone who has been raped. so i keep saying i'm over it but i keep imagining mark all over again, not raping me, but following me on the street, coming to my door with flowers, or sending me a valentine. but once, when i saw him walking out of a record store as i was walking in, the rock fell so hard that i thought i was going to be sick right there by the cash register, right there by those metal things at the doorway that beep when you try to take merchandise out of the store, you know what those things are, i just can't think of what they're called. but if i did that, then he'd know he was still winning, to this day. how many years has it been? how many years since he did that to me? how many years since i've been wanting to fight him, since i've been feeling that rock in my god-damned stomach? i managed to hide my face from him in the store so he didn't see me as he walked out. when i saw he was gone, i wondered why i still felt the pressure in my chest. i thought the pressure was going to turn my body inside-out. i reached for my heart, grabbed at my shirt. maybe the pain was always there, right there, by my heart, but i try not to think of it until i go through times like those.

poem book II

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