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Mikhayla Dunaj

Western Michigan University, mejdunaj@gmail.com

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Monkey Mind: Everyday Observations of Mental Illness

An honors thesis by Mikhayla Dunaj

Committee chair: Becky Cooper
Committee members: Issa Lewis and Kenny Jakubas
November 2019

“If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.”

-Emily Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*

“You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories.”

-Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*

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On what followed my first mental breakdown

An empty notebook read,
“Brilliant Thoughts” on the cover.
I read it as a metaphor.

I scribbled life onto its pages,
personifying my stories
by giving them a second chance.

40 MPH

Because a long drive makes more sense than the situation.
My thumbs fidget to an off-beat rhythm while I drive down Lincoln.
40 mph.
I'm not certain if this is the speed at which my thoughts are spiraling out of control —
maybe they plummet faster.

Speaking of control I wish I had some.
I wonder if the girl
at Dairy Queen's drive thru knows
that she isn't helping when she says
she can't add strawberries
to my mango pineapple smoothie
or if she's in on the joke
of defying my plans for the night.

Because I wanted a Brownie Blast Blizzard
and a relaxing drive by the lake,
but instead I'm drinking a mango pineapple smoothie,
asking my best friend to send pictures of her dog before my tears make it to the shoreline.
I'm looking down the beach after sunset,
assuming it feels deserted when everyone leaves.

Because I know loneliness too.

No tourists know I'm here,
no one knows I'm here except for my parents.
I told them I was going for a drive to get out of the house.
They didn't know that when I said house
I meant myself.
To step out of my skin for a second,
be someone who turns the music up
because she wants to sing along to it
not
because she wants to drown out her thoughts.

Easy Saturday

July in the bottom tip of the Upper Peninsula
and I am sitting around a campfire with my brother and sister-in-law
who are still getting used to the fact that I'm in counseling now.
Who are still discussing in hushed tones
the depression and anxiety that
started years ago,
stuffed so far down that some days it went under my own radar,
became a consistent fog.

When you're in counseling and your family knows it,
they'll ask you if there was ever a day when you were so happy,
you didn't notice the days turning gray.
It will come off as,
"Have you ever been happy, though?"

I've asked myself this question before,
often
in the mirror with swollen eyes begging for something to hold onto —
some hope in my reflection.

Somewhere within me is a memory.
I am five or six on a Saturday,
and do not linger.
When I wake up, I roll out of my bed and wander into the kitchen,
feet shuffling over the cracked tile.
In these days, I *wanted* to talk to someone.

My dad makes me a cup of Lipton tea,
and I squeeze four seconds worth of honey into it.
Feeding myself isn't a chore,
and there are three semi-burnt maple sausages warmed for me
at two minutes and fifteen seconds.
I latch to these numbers as a known fact,
an unwavering variable that will eventually become law in my morning routine.

My mom braids my hair while we watch *The Waltons*.
There are no clumps, no loose strands whose grip on my scalp
has succumbed to stress.
The afternoon comes and there are no knots in my stomach
when I walk outside.

As my dad mows the lawn, I wander
in the garage, the side yard,

in the palm of our hand-shaped tree,
without mistaking myself for a burden.
Jimmy Buffet sings “Brown Eyed Girl” off my dad’s shop radio.

We drive by the lake,
and when my mom says the waves are big
I do not wish to see myself in them.

My mom tucks me into bed that night,
with all 12 quilts and comforters that I ask for: a makeshift weighted blanket
that makes me feel “safe.”
My dad says, “Goodnight Bumbles” and
I fall asleep, quickly. No medicated façade, no lingering thoughts
to morph into nightmares.
I am not afraid to wake up the next day.

Pesto

Maybe it was the fact that when I recited my list,
each item already housed in its imaginary cupboard in my mind's kitchen,
and asked you what was on yours
you only listed one item,
and then said, "I'm open to whatever presents itself. Maybe some pesto."

Here in this Costco,
we debate whether or not the Gatorade is yellow or green.
I think
I don't want to be wrong,
but I'm also thinking of ways
to stay in this aisle with you forever.

I think about how many things you grab along the way:
alfredo sauce jars for \$6,
pretzel bites;
"This pasta is underrated,"
you say as you toss it in next to the 2-pack tortellini.

I hope these aren't reflections of the way you love:
I hope you keep looking for the pesto.

Which is to say that in four months
when Tacoma becomes your new home,
and you're at Costco with a cup of frozen yogurt
and can't find me in the food court,
I hope it's not because
you've found something better.

Family Game Night

As Bernise drove down Fairlawn Avenue, she turned down the radio and enjoyed the last few seconds before bombardment. Taking a left at the stop sign she pulled into the first driveway. Sure enough, her mom sat outside on a rusted metal chair with no cushions. Those were buried in a bin somewhere in the garage. A grin spreading across her mom's face, as she approached Bernise's car, opening the driver-side door for her.

"Hi, sweetheart! How was the drive? I lost you on the GPS once you got onto the highway"

"It was fine, minimal construction," Bernise responded as she climbed out and was pulled into her mother's embrace. "Sorry, I forgot to take my phone off of do not disturb mode again."

Her mother shrugged it off, offering to help carry Bernise's pillow inside, already filling her in on what had happened since her visit home last week in excruciating detail. When Bernise swung open the front door, it hit an antique mirror that sat behind it for years. She kicked her shoes off and walked into the living room.

"It smells more and more like Grandpa's house every time I come back here," she told her mom.

"I notice that too. It feels home-y doesn't it?"

Giving a half smile, she nodded, wondering if the musty smell of abandoned furniture was from the same cologne bottle as her mother's childhood. She'd learned to disagree silently years ago.

Bernise trailed through the living room as she carried her drawstring bag, backpack, and pillow to the back bedroom. The narrow, and only, path took her in front of her mom's off-brand La-Z-Boy, whose leather had peeled almost entirely. It was slated to be re-upholstered "eventually." The two card tables sat perpendicular to each other nearby, each a holding place for miscellaneous papers as were most other flat surfaces throughout the room. At least three Sunday saver ads stuck to Bernise's heels until she shook them free, knocking her backpack into a pile of papers.

Her mother lurched forward in an attempt to save the makeshift Jenga game, a small-scale replica of the rest of the house.

"Watch it, Bernie! I don't want to have to reorder those."

"Sorry," Bernise muttered back as she continued down the hall. She dropped her things onto her bed.

When Bernise had a boyfriend in town, she came back from school every weekend. Now, it took scheduling doctor's appointments at 8:00 a.m. just to get her to stay one night in her twin-sized childhood bed. With every visit, the clutter and damage of the home stood out to her more, and worse yet, how accustomed her parents had grown to living within it.

A select few remaining memories of preschool birthday parties and catechism gatherings remained from when the house was spotless, but she only recalled them through photos. For most of Bernise's life, the clutter accumulated and was cleaned cyclically. Pieces of the house that broke remained broken long enough that she could hardly remember them unscathed. The middle six white tiles in the kitchen entryway were always missing, the extra four around it always loose and chipping more each day. All pieces were kept under the kitchen sink for when the time came to fix.

The reason for the mess depended on who you asked. Her mother referenced her father's long honey-do list synonymously to his absence on the weekends, choosing golf tournaments over crossing items off. Bernise didn't blame him. Her dad said it had to do with the rate at which her mom purchased antiques and decorations. Always on the lookout for the next live, laugh, or love sign — always ready to defend where it would go as if people ever saw the decorations within the house. Bernise really wished people could see them, too.

Sometimes, the blame even trickled down to the children. Bernise's childhood room was its own disaster showcase at one point. After weeks of not picking up her toys when she was asked, her mom wanted to teach her a lesson and left the five-year-old to clean it. For years, Bernise's white canopy bed became an island in a knee-high sea of Barbies, Play Mobils, and plush pets over a sand bar of loose beads, dust, and Legos. During this time of her life, most breaks from school meant being responsible for cleaning the clutter. An ongoing task that had never been accomplished.

“I had fun things planned for you guys: ice skating, baking, snow forts. Instead, we’re going to clean up this kitchen because we never do,” she could remember her mom saying one January afternoon while Clorox wiping the white cupboards.

Bernise accepted the blame for many years, sacrificing summer vacations to deep clean the living room, kitchen, and bathrooms for visiting family. For \$5 a week, she became an expert at shoving items from one room into crevices of another. When crevices ran out, frustration in the household grew, and allowances were cut entirely. Another Jenga replica started on the Pool and Air Hockey tables downstairs.

“We’ll go through it after our company leaves. For now, get it out of here,” her parents would say.

Bernise always dreaded saying goodbye to family, because it meant she couldn’t pretend her house was always that clean. You couldn’t always walk around the couch from both directions, and two weeks later, even when the plan was to keep up with the chores, her father’s paperwork and brother’s fast food bags littered two thirds of the couch. Soon she would start again, angling her body in just the right way as she stepped onto the front porch so the mailman couldn’t see inside the house.

Over the years, different parts of the house did get fixed out of necessity. When the toilet handle in the full bathroom grew finicky, the sink in the half bathroom was fixed. For a moment, the family would breathe before the next malfunction, always mistaking it for a step forward. Each of the kitchen appliances, original to the 90s, went out of commission before Bernise was 10. Her family solved the broken oven by storing chip bags inside and using the

microwave to make chicken casserole. When the microwave's rotation cycle broke, they started eating out until family dinner was synonymous with "we're going to Chili's." When her brother moved out, Bernise found herself envying the space he would have, even under a lofted bed, compared to what he was leaving behind.

Bernise pictured her future home, always concerned by the knowledge of how many belongings can fit in one room. Always concerned she would test the pre-existing limits the way her parents did. When she packed large suitcases for church camping trips, she still felt like she didn't have enough. She'd add tank tops on top of her sweaters the way her mom bought extra Santa figurines around Christmas, just to be safe. If anyone commented on how much she needed for a weekend trip, she would unload a few items into her car before leaving. Per ritual, they were always easy access pieces like extra sports bras and swimsuits.

By the time Bernise was in high school, she couldn't spend a day out on the weekend without her parents getting upset with her for not helping around the house. With two years left before moving out herself, she started to go through her belongings. Purchasing four grey bins from Target with her minimum-wage earnings, she piled anything she planned to keep inside. The strategy became less about arguing which pieces were worth removing and keeping, and more about forfeiting the game entirely by taking all excess belongings to Goodwill.

The ongoing game of Jenga had only two players left – her parents. Neither of them bothered attempting. After the passing of their parents and acquiring more items, Bernise saw the game was no longer just about the clutter. Her grandmother's room divider, an

antique hope chest, her grandpa's record collection, and a lathe became the pieces least likely to budge.

Once they dropped the topic of the clutter, everyone followed. When her mom spent \$45 on 20 small Petoskey Stones at an antique show, her father didn't bat an eye. Now they sat in a bucket along the singular path in the living room. When Bernise stopped in for the night, she ignored the extra items placed in her childhood room, finding her way to a familiar Island through a sea of other rooms' belongings. Her hardwood floor became another crevice to shove things. She ignored the temporary wall in the shower and the fact that some tiles were held in place by Gorilla Tape. She ignored that it was this way for years, and probably always would be.

Her brother, who now lived out of state and was still scarred from not being able to invite friends over, talked about curb-stomping the parts of the bathroom floor that were caving in "just to make them do something about it." When he was visiting, he would poke at a few pieces for removal, starting the game back up. Her parents' reactions always kept things in the same conditions, just a little more unstable. Always on the verge of a big blowout. The last time Bernise tried to play, she showed her mom Marie Condo's Netflix show.

"It just calms me to watch it. I thought I'd show you," she reasoned.

"I know what you're doing, and our house isn't that bad. We aren't hoarders, Bernie," her mom argued back. "Everything has a place and it makes sense to me."

So Bernise and her brother stopped trying to reason. They only talked about the ongoing clutter with each other. Strategizing, but more times than not, retreating. Too concerned by the mess that could be made with the pieces. He accepted a promotion that would keep him from coming home for two more years, and planned to tell her parents they couldn't store things in his basement anymore. His wife of four years stopped asking if she would ever see the inside of the house he grew up in and Bernise avoided overnight visits while looking for anything that would prevent her from moving back in. The build-up of the clutter, the removing of some pieces only to stack more on top, meant a lack of privacy. When no doors can close, the mess starts to consume you.

When she got done setting her bags from school down, she walked back out to the living room, down a hallway stacked floor to mid-wall in clothes. Some of them were folded, some of them had fallen victim to the dust bunnies, and been thrown right back on top of the stack. A cloth version of jenga.

Bernise's mom asked her what she wanted to eat for supper. In this case, "what" meant "where" and Bernise decided on Applebee's. Her father came home from work, and Bernise exchanged some quick wit with him, the currency they used interchangeably with love. Together, the three of them hopped into the car and went to the next town over for dinner.

Bernise filled as many empty gaps as she could with conversation, occasionally her mother chastised her for speaking loudly and reminded her to quiet down — another thing

that made Bernise feel like she took up too much space. When dinner was over, they drove by the lake, a slight tease of how beautiful open space could be.

Although it was 8:00 p.m. when they got home, Bernise grabbed the same pajamas she had been wearing the last few visits and got ready for bed. She kissed her parents goodnight and shut out her light. Even in the dark, she could see the shadows of belongings her parents had set in her room. They created a wall around her, and she knew if she woke up in the middle of the night, she would have to step carefully. As a child, she felt comfortable sleeping with the wall to her back. All night, her body tested, tossed, and turned over that theory restlessly.

On her way out the next morning, she trailed her belongings through the same, and only route, in front of her mother. This time, she was careful not to knock into the piles of papers.

“Do you think when you stop in next week, you’ll stay for the weekend?” her mom asked, hopeful.

“It depends on homework, we’ll see throughout the week,” she said.

“If you have the time, I thought you might want to come to TJ Maxx with me before you go back next time. Even if you get here and change your mind, you’re welcome to stay as long as you want. We’re flexible,” her mother replied.

Though she appreciated the attention, Bernise already started mapping out excuses to be back to her apartment the following week.

“Alright, ma, I have to get back home in time to make dinner,” she said.

Slowly making her way out of the chair, Bernise’s mom followed her out to her car to see her off – a ritual she insisted on years ago that Bernise knew better than to argue with and squeezed her in a half-reciprocated embrace and pecked her cheek, sure to elongate the “MWAH” sound the way toddlers do when they first learn to blow kisses. Bernise patted her mother’s back and started to pull away from a grip that squeezed her a few seconds more and released.

“Don’t forget, home is where your mamma is, not where you sleep.”

Bernise slid into her blue Chrysler Concorde and nodded at the familiar line. As she pulled away from the house, she noticed the trash bag on one of the garage door windows that was put up when she was eight to prevent people from seeing garage sales past and future piled onto tables within.

Today, her mom gave her yet another decoration for her own apartment. Another iteration of live, laugh, and love.

“You just have barely anything in that place,” she argued.

“I prefer minimal decorations in my *home*,” Bernise responded.

“Home is where your mama is, not where you sleep,” her mom said back, slightly hurt, ending the discussion.

The blue-lettered decor sat on her suede passenger seat. This piece was in the upper portion of the stack: easy access, minimal impact. Bernise had no plans for it. When she made it to her apartment lot, she climbed up three flights of stairs and entered her room. The habits that troubled her for 18 years were left over an hour away at her parent's house.

Here, the floors had no loose items. All flat surfaces were vacant. Bernise had plenty of shelf space because she no longer packed heavy for a move. It's hard to pack heavy when you've made sure not to own more than the bare minimum. The sinks in her kitchen both worked. There were no buckets inside to prevent leaks and water damage. The stove was not covered with tupperware bins. She had more than two places to sit, and all couch cushions could be seen in their entirety.

Later on, she got a call from her father.

"Hey sis, you seemed off yesterday, and I just wanted to check in. Mom said you aren't staying next weekend?"

"I have a lot of homework to do and job applications. It's just a busy time."

"I heard you tossing and turning all night in bed when you were here. Do I need to talk you off of a cliff?"

Bernise felt the blame of their habits being pushed down on her again. There were no easy access pieces, just foundational corners of the mess left to pull at.

"Dad, I don't want to stay at your house because your hoarding overwhelms me."

A long silence followed.

“We’re hoping to have a garage sale soon, it’ll be cleaned up in no time.”

To all the boys who'd never hit me

I'm sorry I decided your good intentions were a facade before I even met you.

And when you tried to make me feel safe,
grabbed my wrist to try to ground me
in that Howard Johnson Hotel in California
I just felt
t r a p p e d.

Put the hallway between us and
started building walls;
no one comes to a midnight chat with wrecking balls.
Just feelings.
And I know I hurt yours that night.

While you asked if we were okay,
I rubbed my fingertips together,
the grime of guilt
l o d g e d
into every crease.

I nodded, looking down, removing myself from the moment without going to my room.

If I don't remember what color eyes your promise had,
then maybe it would sting less if you hurt me too.

Don't sneak a boy into your house

I don't want to admit out loud
how many times
I felt like there was a stranger in my bed
even when I knew I was the only one in it.

monkey mind

my day starts long before I finally lift my weighted blanket off of me. I roll out of bed and into the shower, do three loads of laundry and convince myself to start work. I cook french toast based solely on a memory of my brother making it and lipsync “Build Me Up Buttercup” into the rubber spatula. For a minute, I am my ideal self, which is to say I cannot yet feel the knots; I am not drinking today’s feelings on an empty stomach of yesterday’s words.

Alternate ending for my mental health

I lean on your white door frame picking
at my fingernails while you explain that it's not me,
you just like having space sometimes.

I nod and you ask
what's wrong. This time,
I take my backpack off and walk closer, telling you
it's been more than one rough week. That my mom
asked about your birthday present
when I wanted her to ask
about me.

When you suggest counseling,
I don't defend myself against the idea.
I admit through tears that I'm afraid
of another voice
overshadowing my concerns,
that I don't want to feel the vibrations of my anxiety
as it bounces off the walls of another room.

When I tell you I'll consider it,
you push me a little more.
I'm not afraid to ask,
"Will you go with me?"

Night in St. Joseph

After "Night In Iowa" by Deborah Ager

Freshwater waves collapse at the shoreline
drivers watch, parked, waiting
for the sun to pass the horizon
or their worries to cease
after sunset, they still linger

A week before we broke up

“Atlantic City” comes on,
Bruce Springsteen’s version,
and I cannot stand his raspy voice.
Despite that, you played it anyway
early one morning when you drove me
back to French Hall.

“Get some rest and keep me in the loop,”
I heard as I closed the passenger door.
My first hangover after just
a few drinks the night before.
Keeping my head down,
I locked my door when I got inside
and curled into bed.
Now crying, forced
to reminisce.

The first song we listened to together, and
quite possibly the last.

Rupert’s Pub
seems so close for being
ten months ago.

Uncertainty.
Vulnerability.

Why did I slam the door?

“X, as in ex-boyfriend.”

You said The Boss was classic,
but I’ll never listen to you again.

Our First Date at the Bookstore

The white Sedan behind me lays on its horn forcing me to move forward in a panic, motivated by the American mindset that a second to spare is a second too long. A silver Prius merges in front of me and I slam on the brake. Tears blur my vision as I try to catch my breath. The radio hasn't sung to me in weeks. I got tired of tiptoeing around playlists hoping not to run into memories.

The GPS takes me past my destination three times. I have an unintended roadside tour of the Oakwood neighborhood — first clockwise, then counter. The fourth time I'm told my destination is on the left, I finally see the bookstore's name in white letters. I know it exists now.

Taking off my mirrored sunglasses, I think about how difficult they make it to hide my panic attack. The Equinox's door slams behind me as my purple Converse hit the pavement. I'm not certain if the fresh, red blotches on my cheeks show that I'm embracing the pain or hoping someone notices it, but I want both to be true at once.

“Welcome! Have you been here before?”

I smile politely and nod yes, though it's only vicariously. He once told me about this place, that his friend Dan had invited him to do homework here. I can't remember if he said I'd like it or told me about it hoping I'd be interested enough to show up. Regardless, I've ended up here. I look at the chalk signs above each book case. Scanning, I take small steps forward — the closest I come to a metaphor for the progress I want to be making.

In a corner, I spy a small nook dedicated to poetry — a language we exchanged in different dialects. Safe. My eyes search for a Button poet: familiarity in a new setting, an old friend on the first day. I see *Helium* on the bottom shelf, grab the blue-bound book, and flip to a favorite — a shoulder to cry on.

To Him

*I'm just sorry that
she had to be your
fortune cookie.*

Broken so you could

learn a lesson

you already

should've known.

Poetry: a piece of me I loved before you touched it. This is to say there are still parts of me to be created that you will never get to know, a thought that comforts and shatters me at once, but I walk the tightrope regardless. When I've finished the collection, I place the book back on its shelf and peer around the corner. Loneliness, I've learned, is not going to a bookstore your ex-boyfriend liked when you miss him, but rather standing around in the same bookstore, reading books you already own, hoping you'll find someone to talk to. Waiting on the back deck in a rainstorm determined to find a rainbow. There is no negotiating timing with coincidences.

I wander to a shelf that reads “books on sale” not because I’m interested, but because it allows a better view of the checkout desk. A place where, hopefully, someone will ask if they can help me. Three books in from the left, I spot a thick white binding with red lettering, *Museum of Broken Relationships*. There is no negotiating timing with coincidences.

As I grab the book from the shelf, an employee passes by. He explains the concept of the book as a way for “broken-hearted people” to deal with the physical pieces left behind after the relationship ends.

“They send belongings to the museum in California with a little story about them.”

I nod, silently thanking him for saying “people” because it reminds me broken hearts don’t only belong to girls tracing their ex-boyfriend’s footsteps. My therapist tells me to ground myself to my surroundings with things I can taste, touch, see and smell when I am anxious. But instead, I’m latching onto his words.

Broken-hearted people.

As in: I am not alone even if I am the only customer in this store. As in, what I am feeling is a side effect of life — an attribute of being a person.

Thumbing through the pages, I think about what I would send to the Museum of Broken Relationships.

His Detroit Tigers shirt has been in the duffel bag under my futon for weeks now. At first I didn’t tell him he left it because I wanted some piece of him still — opting to momentarily pause the break-up and wear it to bed. If I were to send it to the museum, I would also mention that I

never have worn it since finding it. When I'm packing to go away for the weekend and pull it out, I remind myself that I never asked about the significance of the number 11.

If at all possible, I'd send the whole futon too. I'd load it onto a trailer and ship it to California, with a note that the cushion has been cried on. My mom tells me getting out of my bed in the morning is the first step in fighting depression.

"Just sit on your couch, even," she pleads.

She doesn't realize that if I sit in just the right spot, the memory of the break-up becomes salt and I am the puddled remains of an ice cube.

I wonder what my ex-boyfriend would send to the Museum of Broken Relationships, or what he has already sent. I tease myself that maybe he sent the track list he promised to the CD he gave me there instead. Maybe that's why I never heard anything else from him. That would also mean the Kodak Instamatic I got him is there too. Most likely with a note attached to it reading, "Film was her thing."

Closing the book, I decide the last thing I'd send is the letter he wrote to me before he moved. I'd highlight one line of text: "I don't think I could hope to match the level of care you show others."

Next to it would be my side of the story, confessed in Times New Roman.

"I don't think you even tried."

monkey mind (ii)

and then i have a panic attack, the sinking feeling of my lungs disobeying my desire to fight. when i tell people about my anxiety, about not moving for hours, they tell me i'm not paralyzed. i wish i could explain my anxiety in long-form. that when i say i feel knots in my stomach, i imagine myself squeegeeing my insides the way my dad does a car window. but even then there are still streaks of the tests, stories, relationships – the weight. i started calling it anxiety once i realized i would never get rid of it. invited this stranger with muddy shoes into my dwelling and let them walk all over me. when i say i have anxiety, i mean i have never left a hotel room without noticing how quickly my existence ceased to make a difference. i never minded sleeping on the couch until I realized that's where people put groceries they don't want to deal with right away. for me falling in love is like quicksand in that i see people as the nearest tree. i leave my strawberries in the fridge knowing at worst, i can toss the moldy ones and throw the rest in the freezer for later. i do this wondering if i am the strawberries in the freezer; in all of my friendships i feel like i am molding over.

Cornered

I don't know who I feel worse for:
The versions of myself I've tucked away
or the people I've buried while hiding her.

April 28, 2019

I tell myself that silence
is the best solution.
That I do not care for what left me behind.

We both know that people change,
and wished it for each other.
On our last date, you told me
May to December was one
l o n g
conversation that needed to end.

I tell myself that silence
is the best solution.
I block you on Instagram, and
mute you everywhere else.

A crane fell in downtown Seattle traffic.
Two reported dead.
I leave on the traffic updates for your side of the country,
scanning headlines hoping not to see
“red Prius”
or “23-year-old male.”

Which is to say
that even if you’re not talking,
I am still listening.

Archie

I sang her the entire Parent Trap album for three consecutive summers –
the 1998 version, of course,
just the way she likes it.

We took evening drives on Red Arrow Highway.
I waited patiently while she snapped pictures of the sunset,
her Georgia Mud Fudge blizzard melting
as I held it and watched.

She said her favorite weather was rain.
She insisted
we step outside
for every thunderstorm.
She always forgot her umbrella, but I kept her dry.

We took a polaroid together in a half-vacant parking lot
and then she drove away.

Journey to self

It starts with willingness,
recollection of all that is
b e l o w
the surface.

Asking what it felt like
to be silenced
by those you thought least harmful.

Slowly, the memories, flashbacks,
these knots in your stomach
c r a w l u p
your throat.

You are open, but not
empty.

Strangers

When I think about it,
I'm just ten months of your life
and a couple hundred pictures.

Triggers

I have checked out *The Bell Jar* from two libraries, five times total, and never made it past the cover without mistaking it for a gun.

Transactional

After Rudy Francisco's "And Then After"

After I wipe the green shower tile clean,
I stare at the dishwasher-blond mass in my palm.

My mom always told me
to toss my loose hair strands out the window.
"A bird can use it for their nest."

I think that's when I learned
that you shouldn't have to
wait
for someone to ask for help
before you offer it.

monkey mind (iii)

right now, i am anxious. i think about all my anxieties slowly filling my body – eventually causing me to rip at the seam where logic meets panic. like a stuffed animal, my insides pour out easily when asked if i am okay. right now, i am afraid of a lot of things. i'm nervous about conversations to be had. nervous about the things I need to accomplish before graduating. moving. working. happiness. i am always two tasks behind on a checklist only i can see. right now, i am trying to take better care of myself. right now, everyone complains about the sound the air conditioning makes in the classroom, but i'm just thankful to actually be distracted by something, so that i stop thinking right now.

What will you do with all my secrets

I stepped outside Brown Hall planning
my words when a snowflake
landed on my nose in March.
I decided to ask you about the weather.

When you get into the office,
you mention it first.
Our first time alone,
but the conversation isn't forced.

It's June 2018 and you just moved
south of Seattle. I ask
you if the rain is really a big deal,
and you said in your two months as a resident, only twice.

We're leaving a play in late October and you ask me
why I'm not walking under the shelter.
"Rain's my favorite. It's the only weather you can really feel."
"That's deep"

You live in Tacoma now,
where it's cloudy often.
"The snow finally made it today,"
you say when I ask how post-grad is.

I can't believe there was a time when I wanted to ask you
about the weather. I wouldn't have
if I knew that one day
it would be the only thing you'd tell me about.

Pharmacy, sanctuary

When my new doctor
gave me a few names
and told me to research

“see what you think would help best”

I scrolled through symptoms and side effects
whether or not I could drink on any medicine
and thought about my perfect pill

if I were my own pharmacist
I'd create a pill with as much understanding
as my dad had when he first held me through a panic attack

it would be as dependable
as my brother, Josh
who always calls back
when I don't leave a voicemail

the pill would soothe me like
my mother's back rubs

It would be willing to give
in the same way my brother, Matt,
sent me a weighted blanket
from Minneapolis a month before my birthday because I told him
I wanted to sleep soundly when I turned 21

and it would replenish my happiness
bring about giggles
the way my sister, Courtney, does
as she fills my wine glass on girls night

Hard Pills

As I walk into the elevator and clicked the button to the upper level, I keep my right hand over my stomach. It's always the right hand. It's always whatever doesn't make me feel off these days. The doors always take three seconds to close, and I always stare out, sometimes longingly, at the first floor of the hospital. Most of the people are here for temporary issues: stomach aches, allergic reactions, strep throat. As the doors close, I decided what type of day it is. Does the deep, empty room feel like a metaphor or a matter of timing? Stepping out, I walk across the hall through the frosted glass office into a room of people similar to me. After checking in, none of us talk to each other. Each fidgeting in our own ways with colored pencils, glitter jars, or our phones. On the days where the elevator feels like a metaphor, the frosted glass doors and lack of conversation provide irony. We're all here, but no one wants to acknowledge it. I pull out a checklist of the things I want to talk about this time and wait for Deb to come get me.

Deb's office is tucked around the corner, four doors down a long hallway on the right. Without fail, every week she talks about the weather or my outfit. Sometimes both. When we get to her room, I put my coat and backpack into the corner and sit in the chair next to her door. She grabs the water off her desk, and sits across from me.

"How are you doing today?" she asks, taking a sip.

I used to be the only one in my family without any medical issues. My oldest brother and mom have bowel diseases, my dad has a blood disorder, and my other brother has Tourettes Syndrome. All of them wear glasses. All of them take medicine. It used to be a joke that one day, we would find something wrong with me eventually. But, that day never

seemed to come. My eye appointments boasted 20/20 vision. When I was diagnosed with a nearly negligible level of Hypothyroidism, I thought that would be it.

I used to play a game with myself where I would think about what genetic disorder I wanted. If I were to eventually be diagnosed with something, I assumed it would be passed down through the genetic ladder. I was looking for similar symptoms, so when I started to experience severe depression and anxiety at age 13, I diagnosed myself with a couple of rough days that would eventually clear up and didn't mention it to anyone.

It's hard to say who identified it first, because each of us tried to deny the issue. When I spent a night crying in my room while studying for a history exam, my dad found me with papers littered around me on my bed, my ponytail loose from running my fingers through it. After I told him I just felt nervous about my GPA, he reminded me that grades are easily fixed with some effort, and it wasn't worth getting worked up over. When I would go to doctors' offices and fill out questionnaires, I'd hesitate over anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. I'd mention to my mom that I did feel those things at times, and she would remind me that my episodes happened after a break-up or when a grandparent died.

"Those are normal feelings to experience, but you don't deal with those the way others do. Some people really feel that way all the time," she would say.

I always decided to check no. I felt I was seeking permission from my mom and checking yes meant the family could not pass a dish to someone mentally ill at the dinner table.

My perception of what was brought on by anxiety and depression existed through gray-tinted glasses I learned to live with. At 14 years old, I had my first panic attack after listening to my brothers yelling at each other. I stepped into the cold embrace of the garage

and cried. I excused it with stress and not over-stimulation. When I started crying every night while falling asleep in my junior year of high school, I blamed it on standardized test pressure and concerns for my future.

I grew accustomed to grabbing two clementines for breakfast to fill in the gaps between the knots in my stomach. Four hours of sleep was considered a good night. I quit soccer because my pre-game anxiety made me nauseous though it was disguised as lost love for the game. Slowly, my life became a tetris board and anxiety had the worst strategy. Small gaps left of myself still existed, but never felt accessible.

My dad was the one to realize how far it had gotten when after coming back from a family vacation, my phone received six notifications. Only six notifications from work, friends, social media. And I started crying because that was too many. The crying became sobbing, which became hyperventilating. While I tried to keep myself as quiet as possible in the back seat surrounded by suitcases, it felt as though all the knots in my stomach were finally unraveling and working their way out of me. I made eye contact with my dad in the rearview mirror and watched as my fear translated into a language he understood —
heartbreak.

I made the decision to go to counseling two months before I went. The decision to go felt like progress enough. As long as I was eventually going to do a walk-in, I could lie in my bed with the lights off in silence for as long as I liked. My parents told me they wanted me to do whatever would make me feel okay, as if seeking help was the worst-case scenario. Sometimes, their strategies didn't look any good on a Tetris board either.

The day of my consultation appointment, my friend, Olivia, came with me. Having been through the process before, she would serve as reassurance that I wasn't alone. My

appointment started with paperwork. Checking yes to all the things I had checked no to before on a computer screen, I sat hidden behind a brown divider in the corner, another small detail isolating me. I answered 93 questions about my habits, mood, and thoughts while wiping my nose and swollen eyes onto my brown turtleneck's sleeve.

In an office, I was asked to talk about the things stressing me out to a middle-aged woman with brown hair. I glanced at her name tag before speaking, a way of seeking trust. Her name was Cheryl.

“A break-up over distance, a toxic work environment, no joy for my major or future,” I recited with exhaustion the way single mothers recite a grocery list.

“How have you noticed a change in her?” she asked, turning to my friend.

The question never came up between us before. She hesitated and looked at me, before gently nodding.

“How have you noticed a change in her?”

“She used to be light. When we first met, she helped me through a rough patch and got me laughing again. The guy she was dating really seemed to help, too. But then she called me one night, crying and cancelling plans. I couldn't *not* notice the change,” Olivia said.

Cheryl turned to me.

“How long have you felt like this would you say?”

“I don't know, at least the last six years,” came off my lips with guilt. The way you admit how long it has been since your last confession, preparing for Hail Marys and Our Fathers.

Cheryl nodded.

“I really think you should see one of our counselors to work on feeling a little better. You stuff down your emotions and get shaken up like a soda bottle. Then you explode. You just emotionally vomited all over my office.”

I chuckled at the thought of all my words spraying across the room in little caffeine bubbles after too much stimulation, and wiped my tears.

“I would really like to make you an appointment, if you’ll let me,” Cheryl said.

Her words felt like a hand reaching out to help me up.

“Okay,” I agreed.

Today, I tell Deb I’m feeling tired. After five months of meetings, she knows this means I’m not sleeping again.

“Tell me what you’re thinking about when you’re awake,” she says.

“First, I calculate the sleep I’ll get when I put my phone down. But then I think of my last boyfriend. It’s been maybe a month or so since we last talked — I actually stopped keeping track this time.”

“Good for you for not knowing how long it has been anymore,” Deb says.

She continues to listen because she knows more is coming. All of our sessions start this way and eventually turn into me giving an update since our last visit the way television shows recap their viewers each week.

“My roommate Olivia and I are off again,” I say after a while. “I’m starting to wonder if she isn’t healthy for me, either.”

“If that was the case, what would be the hardest about that?”

I grab the small, pink rubber monkey on her table of toys and fidget before looking up and to her left. She always moves her head to where I look so that I can't avoid eye contact. Or doing the work.

"I don't know. I think — not I think, I know — that I'm afraid of how many people I have cut out of my life because I realize how unhappy their friendship makes me. And it's hard not to wonder if I am just overreacting," I say, my voice shaking.

Olivia stopped going to therapy a few months ago. She used the winter weather as an excuse to cancel her appointment, and kept putting off rescheduling the way couples choose divorce over counseling. She internalized her problems and communicated through gossip in our apartment.

"Last week, I had a few grey days," I say.

Grey days is the term I coined for when I feel suicidal ideation come on and just need to stay curled in bed. The perk of having a counselor is having someone who understands your language like a friend would. Sometimes, if you don't think about it too much, you believe they are a friend.

"How did she respond to those?" Deb asks.

"She kept noting that I spent so much time tucked away from everyone, like she has been doing lately. I don't think she realizes that I am mostly tucking myself away from her. When we talked yesterday, she asked about my medication —"

"How is the medication going by the way?"

The decision to go on medication came after the realization that two hours of sleep became a good night. I was lucky if I ate one meal, and I became so scared of deadlines that I couldn't work. They hung over me with doom. Convincing my family I should go on

medication or officially be diagnosed took reasoning. I learned that passing the plate at the dinner table to someone mentally ill was better than passing the plate to someone with severe generalized anxiety disorder.

Deb knew that the process was ugly, that I had a panic attack in the doctor's office. Because if admitting my anxiety was confession, seeking medicine meant I was full of sins. She knew that my doctor covered my eyes with her hand and told me to breathe, giving me the pointer that blocking the light reduced the stimulation. We all knew I should be on medication because my doctor and Deb had agreed that my mind was exhausting itself at the pace it moved. Like Double Dutch on the blacktop of a playground, I never knew where to jump in. The longer I waited, the faster the thoughts moved.

"I don't feel the anxiety in my stomach anymore, but I do feel depressive episodes worse now," I tell her. "I usually wrap my weighted blanket around me, and stay away from Olivia."

"And why is that?"

I bounce my right foot, and interlace my fingers around the rubber monkey. Deb notices all of this. I am transparent to her.

"Because the last time I told her I wasn't sure if my medication was working, she said I should ask my doctor to put me on something that won't make me act up as much," I say, tears falling this time.

Handing me a Kleenex, Deb sits back and nods her head. After a pause, she speaks.

"There is no such thing as the misery Olympics. You're not getting anything for your suffering. Why make it worse?"

I nod in agreement.

“You can hold two things at once. On one hand, you can admire that she helped you to where you have gotten now. On the other, you can acknowledge that who you are now doesn’t line up with who you were when you first started coming. That’s okay. We call that improvement. You don’t have to be as close to her as you once were if it makes you uncomfortable,” Deb says.

I nod again, because Deb is hardly ever wrong. I just have a hard time accepting things are they are. She likes to tell me that I do my best with the available circumstances, and I like to remind her that the available circumstances suck.

“In the meantime, I want you to try thinking of your ideal day when you’re falling asleep. I know meditation will keep you awake and thinking. There’s obviously no stopping that, but this upcoming week, give that a shot. We’ll evaluate next week. Let’s schedule you another appointment.”

I gather my things and put on my coat. Deb hands me a Ghiradelli chocolate for mindfulness. I’m supposed to let it melt and not think about anything while I do it, but we both know I just eat it. Today, I comment on the new bowl on her desk.

“Is that beach glass?” I ask.

“It is! Would you like some? I’ve been having everyone pick a piece and imagine a memory in it. Then carry it with you wherever you go,” she says.

I grab one piece, swap it for another, then grab the original piece. Choices are never good for me. As I head out the door, she stops me.

“You’ll adjust to your medicine soon. Think ahead, graduation is soon and that’s exciting. Find the highlights too, I miss hearing about those. You have been *through* it.”

I do my best to smile and walk out of the office, take the elevator down, and walk to my car. Sliding into the driver's seat, I rub the green beach glass for a second and place it in my coat pocket. My drive home consists of the same song I have played on loop for the last 15 hours: "Changes" by Langhorne Slim and The Law.

There's many reasons / we are / what we've become / I'm going through changes / ripping out pages / I'm going through changes now/

Once I get home, I put my turquoise skullcandy earbuds in before heading upstairs. When I open the door, Olivia is in the living room.

"Hey, how was counseling?"

"Fine," I say.

"Any word on the medication?"

"I'm staying on it," I tell her as I close my bedroom door.

I walk into the bathroom and open my medicine cabinet, pulling out my orange bottle of white pills. Lexapro.

We want everything but/ what we've got/ I'm going through changes now

Bracing myself for the bitter taste, I tip my head back and swallow the pill.

Ode to Lake Michigan

Salt-free therapy:
the sun bids the day farewell,
waves crashing ashore.

Lilac season

Purple lace around the Island,
or so it will be.

A festival dedicated to a flower not native,
a reminder that you, too, bring something unique,
something worth celebrating.

And there are those who say it will never be on time,
but they will come around,
like the Lilacs on Mackinac,
they will always come around.

Healing

means admitting
you were both quicksand
and the nearest tree

Trust the process

After Blythe Baird's "Theories About the Universe"

My worst habit as a Betta fish owner
is leaving my small son, Killer,
sulking in three-week-old water.
To feel better, I prepare a fresh
habitat for him,
place it next to his tank, as if to say
"Tomorrow is your day, I promise."
And while he waits, victim to my laziness,
I know how he feels.
At least he knows his fresh tank is coming soon —
I can only trust the process.

Strangers revisited

My mom likes to tell me
circumstances are temporary.

All classes I've stayed up late for
only add up to a few hours of my life.

I suffered through the stomach flu once,
but never had it again.

Maybe when I tell my daughter about you
you'll just be a couple hundred photos
and ten months.

Easy Saturday revisited

It is October
and I am back downstate
adjusting to a routine that will end
in three short months.

I visit my counselor, Deb,
at Sindecuse Hospital for our second meeting this year.
We talk about life on Lexapro,
about my isolation habits,
how sometimes I forget I don't have to be an Island.
I tell her I don't feel the knots in my stomach anymore,
but still toss and turn all night.

She asks me to visualize my ideal day,
a question I don't recall asking myself before.
Always forecasting rain before checking the weather.

Somewhere in my future,
sooner rather than later,
I wake on a Saturday morning by 10 a.m.

Wandering into the kitchen,
I cut up strawberries
without negotiating with a moldy container.
Feeding myself isn't a chore,
and my appetite doesn't depend on routines.

I want to do more with my hair,
than dress it in a ponytail with a blue scrunchie
because there are minimal loose strands.

I walk outside before noon,
and find myself near a body of water,
watching the large waves – homage
to a decision long ago to see
peace where turmoil is also present.
I thank myself for never letting go, even
though I sometimes mistake myself for a burden.
When it happens, I turn the volume up on Spotify to hear
Jimmy Buffet sing "Brown Eyed Girl."

I tuck myself into bed that night,
with an 18-pound weighted blanket
that makes me feel "safe."
I fall asleep quickly, in the arms of Lexapro,

because I learned to accept the help without lingering guilt.

I am not afraid to wake up the next day.