

Hell is for Children: Notes on Young Love

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Abstract

We are inundated with messages about love, but we are never taught how to interpret these messages and have a healthy relationship. This collection of essays interprets common phrases about love. Through analysis and application, common phrases about love are reintroduced with themes of vulnerability, honesty, and willingness to try again. We will look at the phrases: love hurts, love takes risks, wear your heart on your sleeve, we get to make our own rules. Using my own experience, I can only speak to young love, but I hope to have come to perennial conclusions about health relationships. In this memoir-essay of my own romantic life, my aim is to give young readers a roadmap to understanding their desires and offer all readers a glimpse into what love can be. From the perspective of a survivor of intimate partner violence, these essays offer a voice from a dark depth of love abused, emergent into the light of true love.

Keywords: Contact Major, Human Narratives; Love; Young Adult; Relationships

Love and pain can be one and the same in the eyes of a wounded child

'Hell is For Children' by Pat Benatar

*Two or three things I know for sure and one of them is that telling the story all the way through
is an act of love.*

Dorothy Allison

Many questions came to mind as I sat down to write this, namely: what do I as a twenty-two-year-old know about love? What can I possibly say about a topic so vast and so important? The more I learn the less confident I feel that I have anything worth reading, and the more I read about what love is and isn't, the more I question whether I have ever actually experienced it in my own life. Like shadows, concepts lurk behind doors and in corners as I playfully watch and try to make out shapes in them. So, what could someone who has never experienced genuine romantic love possibly say about love? It is this great lack that motivates me in writing this, because I have not always felt this way and I cannot be the only one who feels that there must be something to answer my call to love.

I am writing this from my childhood desk at my parent's house on a Thursday afternoon when I should be at school. A difficult semester led to my return home for a year of rest and internal inquisition as I complete my studies. A professor who came to speak in one of my classes spoke of his sense of responsibility as a Korean author of Asian American literature. He insisted that you must know your history and understand the tradition you came from, because when you are a Korean writer, you become the "voice of the people, even at the expense of yourself." I must take a moment to return to the past to understand my present and give myself hope for the future.

Rummaging through a box of my childhood things I came across a collection of journals that I wrote while in high school. I bought only small black leather sketchbooks across which I wrote the dates of the first and last entries, serving as roadmaps of my adolescent history. The first of the black books begins with an entry detailing the day I officially entered the world of dating.

The facts of my small romantic history follow as such: I have had one exclusive partner who I dated on and off from the winter of my sophomore year of high school to the spring of my senior year. I was mentally, emotionally, and physically abused and the gaslighting and social ostracization that the relationship entailed nearly destroyed me, my family and friends, and all my relationships that followed. I have since struggled to be emotionally intimate with anyone out of fear and lack of trust. I am a believer that every single person deserves and is capable of healing and learning how to love, both romantically and platonically; and I am deeply dedicated to helping others flourish in their experience of love.

My personal journey of recovery has been painful, and I am still deeply entrenched in the thick of it. Although not a religious woman, I have prayed to be saved. I have displaced blame, I have felt numbness, anger, sorrow, and great shame. I have tried to be forgiving and found the hardest one to forgive is myself. I have learned that when you feel you have lost everything, you have everything to gain.

So here it is: a collection of fragments from a girl who couldn't stand up for herself, who thought the world had failed her, and who is now sharing the little she has learned from her own experience. This text is an analysis of common phrases about love. We will discuss their function, their truth, and their application. Please take this for what it is, take it with the little authority that a twenty-two-year-old girl who has never experienced love can offer on a topic older than her own story, old as humankind itself. This is not a final product but a culmination of ongoing ruminations, a brief checkpoint on the indefinite road of healing.

Love Hurts

There was only silence. The empty noises of scuffling shoes, something skittering across the floor dropped by hands leapt up to shield the eyes, maybe a gasp. But for me there was only silence. A tense breath before the blood began to rush to my head. It was a hiccup breath, a crack in time dividing two periods of my life. The waves of blood that threatened to steal my sight rose like walls around the space formed by my ex-boyfriend's gaze. Silence and a look like *I meant what I said*. A lonely heartbeat before I turned and fled. Feeling like I could cry, feeling like I wanted to cry but the tears wouldn't come, and I was left quivering on this edge hoping for something worse to push me off and make this all better in the bliss of the beyond. The girls in the locker room said they would kick his ass. I told them to cool it and went on my way to class. I had gym that period and sat on the bleachers. By the next period I was seated in the dean's office, fifth period, with a fresh bruise blushing across my right cheek.

Fidgeting with a soggy tissue, my face red with shame, hurt, and tears, I tripped over my words as I dodged telling the story that they already knew. I had been dismissed from class and called down to the dean's office, because the dean had heard reports of a student backhanding his girlfriend across the face in the staircase. We were a school with a student body of over 2,000. Witnesses twittered, word spread, and the teachers and hall monitors caught wind of the assault. I couldn't voice my story, my tongue stuck in tears and spit and horror, stuck on the story they had already heard before I could open my eyes to face it myself. The horror that quaked me reverberated against the fact that the person who hit me was my boyfriend—*and he loves me*.

As they tried to coax a statement out of me, prodding me for my opinion on whether I wanted to file an official report with the police, I desperately wished to speak to him. Scared and hurt, I was haunted by the image of his eyes staring down at me after his hand contacted my face. And yet, I wanted to talk to him. He was the only one I wanted to talk to. He was the only one with the answer as to why he hit me and therefore the only one who I thought could have put my malaise at ease.

The school authorities told me that without a statement or camera evidence they could do little other than dismiss me into the care of my mother who could hopefully tease the story from my silence. Without a statement, the deans could not reprimand my boyfriend. After school, he was dismissed, and I sat in the dean's office waiting for my mother. We took a silent train ride home. When I awoke the next morning with swollen eyes and a purple bruise eating the flesh of my right cheek, she told me to go to school, face the noise, and show them nothing could deter me from what mattered. What mattered wasn't my pride or my shame, my body, or my self-respect. What mattered was my education.

I, like many others, had already learned that 'love hurts' from the red impression of a parent's hand. I took this lesson that seems incongruous and let it color the love that I sought and accepted, believing love is supposed to hurt when my partner ignored me, thought myself as too much, my expectations too high and my needs too great for one person to uphold. When he raised fists or spoke cruel words against me, I thought they were expressions of how passionate his love for me was, however volatile. It was almost romantic that he would get so angry he would become violent; he couldn't control himself, his feelings were too large for his body to contain. I felt we had one of the most passionately romantic loves I had ever seen, a love too great for our adolescent bodies. Idolizing movies like *True Romance* or *Natural Born Killers*, I

thought we were a Bonnie and Clyde trope, us against the world—nobody understood a love like ours.

We are taught from a young age that love hurts. Our first feelings of affection are called a crush and we are told that we are ‘crushing’ on someone. And yet we are also taught that to crush is to obliterate, to squeeze something so hard it combusts, to confine something so hard it is annihilated. Ocean Vuong notes in *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* that the childhood song, ‘he loves me, he loves me not,’ sang to the picking of a flower’s petals, teaches us that, “To arrive at love then is to arrive through obliteration” (Vuong, 119). We are told that to love is to maim.

Against the well wishes of my friends and family, I stayed with my ex for nearly three years. Most people thought we had broken up a few months into the relationship, when the abuse first started. For almost three years I hid our relationship from my family and tried not to discuss it with my friends, who were ashamed of me. In the third year of our relationship, shortly before we broke up for good, my ex-boyfriend and I had a particularly violent argument. It was the last time he hit me. And I hit him back.

During that time, I was living with him. I had run away from home. For three months, he and I played house. We rarely went to school. When he went to work, I waited at home for him, making us dinners and greeting him at the door at the end of his shifts with a beer. Although he was my age, seventeen at the time, he lived on his own, in a one-bedroom apartment in Hell’s Kitchen that his father owned. Earlier in the year, his stepmother had taken out a restraining order against him, and he was no longer allowed to live at home. He spent months staying with friends in a Bushwick apartment, where all his flat mates shot up heroin and ate discount bags of fortune cookies from the local Chinese restaurant for dinner. When Child Protective Services

showed up one day, his father was forced to buy him an apartment so he could have somewhere safe to stay.

Our apartment on 49th street was supposed to be a safe place. It was supposed to be the place where he and I found refuge, where he was safe from the behaviors of his friends. I understood my safety in a twisted sense. Believing he was the only one who truly loved me, I thought I was safe from those who wanted us apart, people I now realize were ultimately trying to protect me. Those were the days that I now refer to as my ‘fat cat days.’ Without a key, while he was out, I was confined to the small studio apartment. I had no money, and by then no friends reached out to me. I would sit and wait patiently, wasting days in front of the television or looking out of our one window onto the fire escapes and brick walls of our back entrance alley.

My parents thought I was staying with a friend whose mother was a flight attendant and didn’t mind guests keeping her daughter company. In fact, I rarely visited her, even though she only lived a few blocks away. In *In the Dream House*, Carmen’s Maria Machado’s memoir about her experience in a queer, abusive relationship, she wrote of ‘dislocation.’ This term refers to how victims of abuse are thrown out of their comfort orbit, making them vulnerable to their abuser. Victims often find themselves in a new home, a new country where they don’t speak the language, a place where they have no friends, making their abusers their only ally, a dangerous vulnerability (Machado, 72). I remember thinking that I was destined to be perpetually waiting. Even when I was with him, I felt the gut-wrenching reality that he would move on, and I would forever be invested in his wellbeing.

The last time he hit me, we fought over something arbitrary. He had me held down on the couch, legs pinning legs, one arm on mine and his other pressing down on my throat. That was his favorite—he loved to see me choke. Usually, he would eventually let me go, but this time,

with eyes watering, I stared up at him until I felt the fight leave my limbs and my head grew heavy. My vision started to blur. I thought to myself, *he is going to kill me*. With my one free arm I swung up towards his face, and with a swift blow he fell off me. Without catching my breath, I ran to the door and bolted down the stairs onto our street, freezing in the January air with my bare feet. I had nowhere to go, no jacket, shoes, wallet, or phone.

So I waited outside of our front door for him to come down.

I was determined to escape the pain I experienced in my first relationship and ran from it in the only way I thought I could. Mimi Zhu wrote *Be Not Afraid of Love: Lessons on Fear, Intimacy, and Connection* about surviving an abusive relationship, with each chapter detailing a different emotion in the process of healing. During Zhu's process of healing, they learned that "if I wanted my anger to pass, I had to let it be felt in the first place," but I didn't know this lesson then and I did everything I could to avoid my heartbreak (Zhu, 26). The memories would come back with the rumble of an earthquake, the earth beneath me threatening to crack upon and swallow me whole in a painful reminder of my love's great toll, and I would drown these siren calls out in an ocean of recreational drink, drug, and smoke. Every paycheck was another week of release from myself, another week where I could afford my vices and escape from my world. I would spend the little money I made on packs of cigarettes, tiny button bags of cocaine, drinks which I wasn't old enough to consume, and frivolous shopping trips that felt more effective than therapy. I was blowing through money, snorting it up my nose like it helped me breathe better. Like dreams of gelatinous worlds gluing runners to the spot, I was stuck in a cycle of remembrance and pretermission. But it didn't matter how much I ran; the memories stuck in my marrow and altered my thoughts. I still hurt.

In my efforts to avoid pain, I sought only pleasure, yet I could not tie up the ends of my suffering by the lengths of running against which I measured. Like Zhu, “in my refusal to become a victim, I neglected the tenderness of being a survivor” (Zhu, 4). I withheld myself from letting my pain out because of my fears, because of the shame and the memories that haunted me. How was I to admit that I couldn’t stick up for myself? The shame that built around me in the seconds it took for me to register that first moment of love abused, the silence that hung in the air as we all held our breath to let our hearts believe our eyes, has followed me since that day in the staircase that I suffered my first defeat, and my first defeat brought me so low I let the rest roll past.

The silence found me again on a distant horizon of the universe that I thought was the end. The realization of my latent desperation came, in the exhaustion of months of weeping through this text. Through researching and writing about love, I became aware of the great lack of love in my life. I began to be aware of the ways that my behaviors and thought patterns were holding me back from love, and this image of myself made me feel hopeless, like I had abandoned the young girl that had once dove into love wholeheartedly. Discernible only to myself, this picture of my heart—choked, ruined, and wasted—made me aware of what felt to be an incurable condition. Learning about love made me understand just how badly my love had been abused. I suddenly, all at once, felt the years of abuse, externally and self-inflicted, and hated the image I saw. I realized that the love that I received was always accompanied by the precondition of pain.

The day before I was hospitalized, I was inconsolable, paralyzed by emotional weakness in bed during the afternoon. In those hours while I contemplated suicide, I found the world so peaceful, the silence I had looked for, remarked how still it is in the end.

There are no words that can fill the space of those hospital halls and the lights that reflect off of those mirrors in the corners and white sheets and medicated, blank faces. I wondered, does being here mean someone cares if I get better? Does being here mean I am loved? The clothes they gave patients there are so thin you can see your heartbeat ripple through the fabric like a weak rhythm to a song singing, *I am alive*.

My discharge released me into the care of my parents and in those months that followed I reverted into a child that I had never gotten the chance to be. I could no longer avoid the ways that I had been hurt for my sorrow was on full display. My sadness was now no secret. On a particularly painful day I could not contain my outrage at the things that had happened to me, my anger at the people who hurt me, the people who did nothing to protect me, and myself, who hurt my body further trying to run from that which nearly destroyed me. Directing my anger at the person closest to me, I told my mother how I hated the things that had happened to me.

Sitting on the couch I finally shared the filthy details of what my ex-boyfriend had said and done to me. I watched my mother's face contort as I recounted the time when he choked me until I blacked out, waking up in his arms covered by his tears; the time when he threatened to rape me, verbalizing against me all of my fears; the time when a subway conductor had to separate and remove us from the subway platform because he was afraid of me being pushed onto the tracks; the time young students on the street interjected during an argument, said they would take me away, all I had to do was act. These stories came like wildfire, burning my tongue with the bile of their memory. These memories came like stories, almost unbelievable even to me. The severity of their poignance makes them feel unreal, but sometimes I can still feel his hands leaving bruises like grapes on the tawny baskets of my arms, still feel the blood rush to my

head as my face collides with a row of lockers, still feel the hands on my shoulders that dragged me across the floor away from him.

My mother cried. She cried and she pleaded, *why didn't you tell me*. My mother couldn't understand that I couldn't have told her, because in the mess of my manipulated mind, she was my enemy. My ex used to whisper in my ear that everyone wanted to kill me, that my family and friends wanted me dead, that he was the only one who loved me. She does not understand that she was not a comforting front I could confide in, because she was still harboring her own pain from what she had experienced. That night she shared a bit of her own story, of the time her father broke her new Swatch with a golf club aimed at her face protected by her watched wrist. I cried and told her how ashamed I was. I also thought: If anyone could have understood my pain, it should have been her.

For a long time, I felt alone in my suffering, until I read Mimi Zhu's *Be Not Afraid of Love*. In this text they quote Lama Rod Owens, who understood anger to be the "bodyguard of woundedness" (Zhu, 20). Zhu wrote of the 'cycle of punishment' in which a hurt person aims to reproduce the hurt they experience in another person (Zhu, 25). The hurt a person projects is a phantom of the hurt they inflict on themselves, and, though this is no excuse, the cycle of hurt continues to perpetuate through anger's destruction. My ex himself was a victim of abuse—his mother used to send him to school covered in bruises. We both would use this as the greatest variable in our excuses. In *The Sorrows of Love* by Alain de Botton, a text about the natural hardships in loving relationships, he suggested that we may be cruel to those we love because "we feel safe" enough to do so (de Botton, 21). We have the notion that a lover will be devoted to us through thick and thin, that a lover will accept us even when we are cruel to them. This perpetuates the cycle of punishment in a retributive act of displacing abuse and power.

De Botton wrote that in love we often seek the familiarity of the frustrations of love we have come to know as associated with ‘loving’ relationships (de Botton, 30). We become addicted to cycles of neglect when it is the only form of ‘love’ we are shown. In *All About Love*, bell hooks wrote that “love and abuse cannot coexist” (hooks, 6). Telling an elderly woman about this project as we both filled up our machines at the laundromat, I brought up the idea that ‘love hurts’ and all she could say was *no...no...no*. The cruelest and most confusing message of childhood may be that love hurts, but in fact love is meant to feel safe (Zhu, 42). Although we may be taught that love is painful and cruel, love may never consist of abuse.

The phrase, ‘hurt people, hurt people,’ does little to soothe the new pains I carry because of his abuse. But it gives me space for forgiveness, for in the black of his anger, I may see the blue of his hurt. I used to struggle to believe that everyone deserved love because I felt that someone who had abused their lover, who had abused the love they had been given, does not deserve another chance. I used to believe in repentance, not forgiveness, and in no second chances. Zhu wrote, “people cause harm because they have a relationship with harm themselves” (Zhu, 126). I had to confront the abusive behavior that I adopted as a form of self-defense, I had to confront the harm that I caused amid my own heartache. Zhu considered anger to be “an invitation to connect deeper with yourself and to uncover what you are trying to protect” (Zhu, 21). In my anger I was trying desperately to shield myself from the neglect of my ex. I was cold, distant, and unforgiving with the people who loved me. The cycle of punishment perpetuates through our relationships with lovers, family, and others unless we acknowledge the root of this suffering. It is a natural reaction to respond to harm with “the desire to reproduce the wound” (Zhu, 25), but this mutual neglect does nothing to transform the suffering into something positive. Without communication, honesty, and a will to change, we cannot break this cycle.

Someone once told me that love is saying hard things, and maybe this is because sometimes the truth is ugly. Relationships require the sanctity of a mutually formed space, and to maintain the understanding that you will not violate one another, sometimes you must speak truths that are hurtful to preserve the space you have made (Zhu, 42). Hard conversations full of hard truths may be one of the reasons why love hurts. Alain de Botton proposed the notion of ‘Romantic Realism,’ an attitude of accurate awareness of the expectations of love in which we accept that there will be periods of disappointment, which do not negate, but in fact strengthen, your love (de Botton, 9). He concluded that love entails certain sorrows that are worth taking on and inherent in loving someone because “love is inherently hard” (de Botton, 62).

Priya, my spiritual leader, says that all things must come from either a suffering or a non-suffering state. Buddhism teaches us that the root of all suffering is desire. Some say ‘love hurts’ maybe because love is too frequently confused for desire. Desire is the beast of separation, the tension between disconsolation and fusion (Solomon, 68). It always implies that in a relationship of two, the amorous subject’s want of the beloved object invokes the realization of limits, as two separate beings cannot be fused (Levinas, XX). Desire is always yearning for something external, something we believe we deserve. It suggests an inclination for possession of that which is external. Desire implies something separate from you.

Since the loving relation always implies the existence of two, the natural inclination in love is a desperate hope to be fused. The Myth of Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium*, one of the first known texts in the Western canon on love, tells the tale of original creatures and the origin of love. Aristophanes declared that the first humans were composed of four legs and arms, two faces, and two sets of genitals. They traveled across the Earth rotating in circles and were considered one of the strongest creatures. These creatures decided one day to ascend Mount

Olympus to challenge the gods, and fearful of their strength Zeus sent down lightning bolts to strike them down. The bolts split through their bodies, separating legs and arms, until the creatures were left as halves, and barely alive. To exacerbate their torture, Zeus condemned these creatures to eternally wander, searching the Earth for their other halves. The condition of this race was so pitiful, that the gods rotated their heads and genitals so that they could face one another and fuse in an intimate embrace. Although the severed creatures may never truly be one again, they may hold one another closely as women and men. Though this story may enforce the romantic notion of a 'better half,' which proclaims your partner is your divine match, making you whole again, there is another lesson in this myth. Aristophanes' original creatures may have had a divine match, but Zeus's split features do not make less of the person. It is wrong to believe that man is incomplete in his search for his other half; he is still fully formed on his own, although he still feels the painful lack of another, but when united with his lover, they are stronger than the gods.

Eric Fromm saw separation as the root of human anxiety, tracing it back to the removal of the child from the mother's womb (Fromm, 7). He understood love as the only remedy for the anxious human condition and saw the relationship between two lovers as a psychic symbolic union (Fromm, 15). This relationship may mature into 'mature love' in which both parties preserve their individuality (Fromm, 17). In mature love, both lovers entertain the tension of fusion and separation, for love is the child of freedom (Fromm, 24). Love has been written of as the tension between union and autonomy (Solomon, 68). This preservation of the individual spirit allows two lovers to meet as equals.

I learned through a conversation with a friend of the rut in which we were collectively mired, and he taught me that in the play of love and desire, "what feels good isn't always right."

Of the many lies a parent tells their child, one of the most common is that sex occurs only between two people in love. It may be though that “being loved and being sexual may have grown fundamentally opposed” (de Botton, 59). The youthful search for love often confuses the two, and it can be a painful realization that in the hopeful quest for love your body is really just being used. It is in sex that the young lover may feel themselves to be the most intimately fused with their beloved, but the true union is known only in being vulnerable.

Barthes’s *Lovers Discourse* ends with a fragment about the non-will-to-possess, which teaches that love’s sorrows may be solved by releasing the will to possess your lover, to love freely without constraints. Possession implies expectation, and the fantasy of who your lover is. In the throes of desire, we may conjure up an image of our lover that is truly just a myth. Quoting Proust in Amia Srinivasan’s *The Right to Sex* she wrote, “We fall in love for a smile, a look, a shoulder. That is enough, then, in the long hours of hope or sorrow, we fabricate a person, we compose a character,” (Srinivasan, 130). Sylvie Baumgartel wrote “every time I remember you, I alter you,” in a poignant poem revealing the dangerous quality of the mind to create. This strikes me as antithetical to love, because a belief in ownership of what is just a myth is erroneous. Annie Ernaux wrote in *Simple Passion* that it is the lesson of every love to learn that “the man we love is a complete stranger” (Ernaux, 25). Alain de Botton believed in the tension between the absence and presence of novelty in love, writing *On Love* on this pretense that we are all convinced that our love is unique when the reality is that “we need to love and be loved much more than we need to love and be loved by any one particular one,” (de Botton, x). Though it is our love that may seem to make us unique, the lover’s paradox is that “it is in love that we become most ourselves, and most like everyone else,” (de Botton, viii). It is the construction of

love that makes our romances great, and the fantasy of uniqueness, completion, ease, and possession is trite.

When I was eighteen, I lived at a Buddhist monastery briefly. In that damp, fertile valley I learned lessons in the confrontation of finitude and humility. Through a prayer to alleviate suffering, I was taught that we cannot truly love someone or something until we accept that it will one day be gone. It is important to remember that we do not need to wait until departure to know and live this lesson in impermanence and appreciation. As the sun set on the blank walls of an old lover's new apartment, I whispered in his ear asking where he thought souls went. Clearing his throat, he said that if the living too frequently speaks the name of the dead, the soul will have trouble ascending, lifting to heaven. It was the last time I saw him and the first time in two years. Two years of letters and voicemails, tender comforts when we thought we failed at our relationship, and somber poems of Tennessee nights and daydreams of his breathing in swampy summer skies. Maybe relationships are the same as his myth, if two lovers depart it is better to forget the kiss. We were very good at performing our love which existed in between memory and fantasy in a liminal space beneath slanted roof skylights blocking out blustery winter white mornings, in bellies warm with Port wine in past-tense desires that never really died. Despite the tenderness of our affections, when we parted I made a choice to not ruminate on our past together. Recollection of the past alters the realness of our history, so I will sit with the feeling it has left for me. We did the difficult thing of parting with nothing but kind words, with kisses and no promises for a future world.

Transient relationships can consist of a lot of love and opportunity for growth, but they do not carry the same level of risk as a long-term partnership. Those who come into our lives for just a short time have the potential to teach us a lot about our desires. The nature of desire is to

be unrequited, for desire exists as a lack and aims for the external. I speak not just of sexual desire, but of all desires, desire for a new job, desire for company, desire to be happy. Desire is always directed at something outside of us that we do not have. Learning to be separated from our desire, we understand the wellspring of being we have internally. This occurs through internal recognition of the desire that resides within us. Instead of directing our desires outwards, towards something we have yet to obtain, we may cultivate our desires within ourselves and let it feed us. Love hurts sometimes because we must learn this lesson from desire. Our love begins to grow when we understand the lesson in separation, a difficult thing, which may be done for the best.

The summer after my ex and I broke up, I met E. Our mutual friend had an extra ticket to a show and invited me to come meet her friends, one of whom I was promised to enjoy. Determined not to be set up with someone, I refused to go if under this pretense, and sat indignantly in my room until she promised it wasn't a set up. The show was in a tiny room in some Brooklyn apartment, packed from the corners to the door, and we all got separated as soon as the show started. In the mass of people leaving at the end, I found her friend, blue eyed and curious, walking alone. Gripping his arm we left the venue, and outside he offered me a smoke, a Japanese cigarette from the trip he just took. We spoke of music and art and books one another knew. We talked for hours in a way, with such fervent passion, that I hadn't known sober. For the rest of the summer, we sat in his bedroom and smoked, talking about life and literature and love and what is new. At the end of that summer, he went to college and the times we have spoken since have been few. The last time I saw him was the summer after my first time in the hospital, after my sophomore year of college.

I went for a walk in the woods the other day and tried to find the rock we found that day when he came to visit me. I searched for hours, went off the trails, came to the edge of a cliff where the woods ended suddenly. I think maybe that is a special place we found in between the spring and the summer when the leaves were thick, and we could walk for longer. I don't know if I will find that special place until the leaves are full again and I can properly wander. I wanted to write to him to say thank you for finding that special place with me and most importantly, for protecting my heart that day. Beneath the shade of our rock, sitting on our coats in the leaves, he had denied my sexual advances, said he didn't think, in my condition, it would be good for me. I am infinitely appreciative of our time together and thankful to have known him and known that place with him. That mystic place has become a totem for me, of the ways lovers must say difficult things to protect the ones they love, of the ways love may hurt when we must part, when we have to make difficult decisions to prevent a greater hurt.

Seven years later, the bruise beneath my eye from the first time my now ex-boyfriend hit me, continues to bloom, to make an appearance, whenever I cry. In my lowest moments, I may turn to the mirror, face myself and my history. I sometimes say that I have forgotten most of my adolescence, but it is not that the events of that period have been forgotten, though days are blurred into the discarded fluff of benzo daydream, the maladaptive coping mechanisms I employed to ignore my own reality. The events of my adolescence come back in flashes, beams of illuminating clarity that sink down my throat to the pit of my stomach, get caught in my gaze, and trip the words in my mouth. I have not forgotten.

It may be true that those who we love have the capacity to hurt us the most. Those we love seem to be bathed in the white light of goodness, and yet this evanescence gives them the power to betray us. It is not the physical pain that my boyfriend inflicted on me that hurt the

most, but the betrayal that someone I loved would hurt me. For a long time, I saw my bruise as a reminder of my weakness, but now I see it as a testament to my strength. Zhu wrote, “what I did in my survival was a testament to the love that endures in my spirit,” (Zhu, 111). Even in the pain of my first relationship and all of its aftermath, I sought love desperately but was too ashamed to look it in the eye. I forgive myself for the desperate ways I tried to bury my hurt.

Love may never consist of abuse. There was no love during those years of abuse, and when I perpetuate self-destructive behaviors in my relationships and activities, I am not showing myself love. Although love and abuse may not exist side by side, love does entail certain pains. When we love someone, we open ourselves to this pain that makes the love all the sweeter. Sometimes love hurts because we must always support the highest flourishing of our admirations. That sometimes means being honest even when the truth is ugly or making difficult decisions to support your own or your lover’s higher being. Love may involve some difficulty and it may hurt greatly, but such is the risk with love.

Love Takes Risks

While amongst friends at a holiday dinner party, I found the bittersweet echo of a memory I could not place. Amidst the laughter, the wine poured, the food shared, and the stories told, my body overflowed with a heartfelt joy. I saw the tendrils of this joy tethered to amorphous memories of my family and wondered whether we had all come from homes where family dinners were insisted upon but ate in silence, had parents who enrolled us in sports but never came to games – wasted childhoods of homesickness for a life never known. I wondered if this dinner was as healing for my friends as it was for me, if it reverberated in their chests against unhappy memories, like the hull of a ship rubbing on a dock until there are no barnacles left to see.

The experiences of my childhood have taught me lessons I drag into my adult life like a photo album of explanations for my proclivities. I am now twenty-two. The images of my childhood come back in phantasmic flashes of melancholy that collide with the healing experiences of my early adulthood. In the fight for life and love, these learned lessons come to bear the test of their certainty. While the future expands before me like a vast horizon of possibility, my past hollers loudly through rules and conceptions that may not be appropriate in the contemporary. The cautionary tales of my early life have reinforced the lessons of trying again and of embracing change. As I surpass the age of my mother when she first met my father, I recognize how I have used my parents' love story as a benchmark for my own. The lived lessons of love flow through me, and I must acknowledge my roots to understand love truly.

As I watched my father doze off during a movie, the image of an ancient tortoise resting its head in its shell struck me. Tired yet content, having seen the many sights of a lifetime, he relaxed in the home he had spent his life sustaining. Does the tortoise still reach forward, or does he reside in the eternal present, contently nestled into the flow of nature harmoniously? Contemplating this image, I realized that I forgot that my parents were aging alongside me. My parents have been fossilized in my mind at the ages they were when I was ten, and the older I get the more poignant the realization comes of how young they had once been.

My mother is the daughter of Korean immigrants. Her parents moved to the States with their young son and a belly full of my mother and eventually settled in Westchester County, New York. Throughout her life my mother has held the pressure of bringing her family success in the States. She studied hard, attended church weekly, participated in extracurricular church activities, diligently practiced the instruments she played, and participated in theatre groups throughout high school. Her life consisted of acts to please her parents. When she turned eighteen, fed up with the life that had been forced on her, she left the church and went to a college as far away as she could get. When my parents first met, they were living in Japan. My mother was a study abroad student in her junior year of college and my father was working for an educational marketing company.

She orchestrated this major life change on a jealous whim. Her then-boyfriend was studying abroad in Japan with his best friend, a woman my mother distrusted. Consumed by suspicion, my mother did away with her studies in mathematics and changed her major to East Asian studies. She enrolled in a summer intensive language course and submitted her paperwork to study abroad alongside him. Their relationship did not last very long. Her then ex-boyfriend returned to the States and left my mother in Japan, on her own. The night he left she found

herself alone riding the last train home. My father, a distant friend of her ex, was riding the same train home that night. Recognizing her from gatherings, my father approached her and gave her his number—*so she would feel less alone.*

My father is a blonde-haired, blue-eyed man born and bred in the idyllic countryside towns of southern England. Contrary to my mother, he never experienced parental pressure to succeed. He is the youngest of three. By the time he was born, his siblings were almost fully grown, and his parents had lost some steam in raising kids. Although he was a rebellious child, school came naturally to him. Opportunities were thrown his way, but he never took them. He led a life of travel and uncertainty. After graduating from college, he moved to a small village in northern Thailand, where he and his brother lived among the village people. The only white men in town, they wrote books, farmed poppy, and helped the villagers build their town. Although his brother stayed in Thailand, and still lives there to this day, my father left and lived in the many various places his heart took him until he settled down in Japan.

My mother and father broke up once, shortly after they met, so my mother could return to the States to complete her studies. For months they exchanged letters and expensive long-distance calls before returning to the lives they'd led before they met. She focused on school and he on his career. After the summer that she had so enjoyed, my mother had a bleary senior year. She missed my father, couldn't concentrate on her studies, and was consumed by an all-around fear. Graduating with no job prospects in the States, she returned to Japan and decided she must make it in life on her own. On her first night back, she decided to walk back to the bar at which her old friends always met. Taking in the sights of the city she had left, she happened to look inside a restaurant. Sitting there at a table, eating his dinner alone, was my father.

My mother was twenty-three years old when my father proposed for the first time. After the first proposal, my mother's mother flew to Japan, traveling for the second time in her life since she had emigrated to the United States from Korea. She left the country for the first time for the twofold reason of finding my mother a church and convincing her to not marry my father. She hated my father because he is ten years older than my mother, not a Christian, divorced, and not a Korean. My father proposed two more times before my mother took a leap of faith and, against her parents' wishes, accepted.

At the time, my parents were unaware of how much of a risk they were taking, unaware of how deep the cultural and generational differences between the two of them were. It wasn't until after I was born, and my mother's family saw how tender of a father he is, that they truly accepted my father into their family. Their cultural differences continue to put up a wall, but they appreciate the differences in perspectives and mannerisms that open their eyes to different ways of living. They embrace their differences as a form of love.

My parents took a risk for love when they married against the better judgement of their parents. They continued to leap, hand in hand, into the future. My parents have always tried their best. Even when it has not seemed like enough, they always chose love. Throughout my life I have mourned the loss of my mother's early adulthood. I have loathed her decision to become a wife, resented my father for stealing her chance at a life, her chance at a career which would have been more satisfying to her and life experiences that would have nourished her spirit, and I have regretted the loss of the brilliance of my mother's youth. Milan Kundera wrote in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, "if a mother was Sacrifice personified, then a daughter was Guilt, with no possibility of redress," (Kundera, 44). My father had already lived a life before he married my mother, but my mother never had a chance. From the tight grasp of her parents, my

mother found herself married and pregnant almost immediately post-grad. She never had the chance to explore, never had the opportunity to choose herself, never was given the space to contemplate what her life could be. I have carried the guilt of my existence as a death sentence of my mother's vitality.

They have always called me their 'love baby,' a child born of no intention other than pure love and desire between the two people who parented her. My birth, unplanned and frequently described as an accident, appeared to me as a short chain tethering my parents to one another and to the life they built, which resounded with the hope that it could have been better. This guilt and resentment oppose a greater feeling that has engulfed me as I mature, the feeling of forgiveness. It is from my mother that I learned that 'love takes risks,' and it is against the story of their love that I have shored myself, learning lessons in fate, pain, and determination.

It never occurred to me that love should be easy. The love I expected from my parents felt hard to come by, and when I embarked on my first relationship at fifteen, I knew it would in some ways be hard. Even looking at the love between my parents, I felt that love was meant to be difficult. As we love we draw upon these lessons we have been raised by, and in our love, we get to choose how we love, reflecting our culture and the culture we create ourselves (de Botton, 25). My first love taught me the many ways that love may be abused. He showed me that when we love, it is not just your heart that may break, but your body, mind, and spirit, loved ones and friends are at stake. After every time he was physically abusive, my ex would cry. He would tear at his hair and sob, screaming how much he loved me. And every time, I would believe him. I decided to take the risk and stay. I remained faithful that our situation would get better, remained faithful to the love I thought we shared, remained faithful that he would stop hitting me. I was willing to risk my wellbeing for the potential of a more rewarding risk for true love.

We broke up a month before graduation. Holding a cigarette in one hand and my phone in the other, I read the message from him saying we were over, this is the end. Turning to my friends, into the spring air I said, *never again*. I thought the risk in love was always your wellbeing, for that is what I had been taught. Committed to never again taking a risk in love, I sequestered myself to a romantic world that Alain Badiou characterized in *In Praise of Love*, as ‘safety-first love’: love without the presence of risk (Badiou, 9). I condemned myself to the world of secret hookups and casual romances that didn’t mean much to me. For the next few years, I navigated dating from the outskirts where there was no exclusivity or emotional intimacy.

I did not realize that in every ‘casual’ relationship I engaged in, I was searching for something I had missed but was afraid of finding. I put ‘casual’ in quotes because there is nothing casual about planning hookups, phone calls and long late-night conversations. There is nothing casual about sex, yet we say casual because ‘we are not dating,’ we don’t get dinner, don’t share our feelings. With every ‘casual’ hookup my feeling of empowerment was mitigated by a quiet voice saying that there was something I had lost. I thought that my casual, nonexclusive approach to dating was revolutionary. Treating men how men treat women, I thought was the “only type of free exchange,” (Carter, 10). I thought myself to be entirely in control, finding pleasure in the little power I could hold. The relationships we engage in are always reflective of a greater love culture and exist because of the history of love, flesh and sex that generate the social power dynamics we take as normal (Carter, 12). In trying to critique the masculine-feminine power imbalance that I perceived in love and life, I entrenched myself further in the oppressive sexual regime that governs heterosexuality. Although I found myself empowered by my non-monogamous dating life devoid of emotional intimacy, with every

‘casual’ hookup I would imagine we were in love. Angela Carter wrote in *The Sadeian Woman*, “she is most truly subservient when most apparently dominant,” (Carter, 23). In my domination of men, I found myself to be most subordinate to them; in trying to decenter my life from men and my abusive ex, I found myself dependent on validation from men.

During my freshman year of college, a classmate told me that the French word for orgasm is *le petit mort*, a little death. I was smoking a cigarette outside of the library and remember responding that if an orgasm is death, then I want to die a thousand times. I did not ask what is lost in an orgasm—what dies?—for I was consumed by a life that was hurtling towards an early end point and anything that expedited it was surely right. This classmate of mine was not entirely accurate in her translation. *Le petit mort* refers to a lapse in consciousness and is colloquially used to refer to the *post*-orgasm sensation. The French *little death* is a nod at the decentralizing force of an orgasm, that throws you out of the time and space line and into the ether of pleasure.

The relationship between death, sex, and love is well documented. Annie Ernaux wrote in *Simple Passion* of viewing an erotic film which could barely be watched “without dying,” (Ernaux, 2). bell hooks wrote in the introduction of *All About Love* that consideration of death always, “leads me back to love,” (hooks, xxii). Alain Badiou continued Pessoa’s declaration that ‘love is a thought’ by stating that the relationship between the thought of love and the body is, “marked, as Antoine Vitez said, by irrepressible violence,” (Badiou, 87). Without words or thought, my body knew the loss of this little death every time a lover came and left.

The hyper sexualization of young folks has led to a phenomenon that has radically altered the modern dating scene. In Kelly Cronin’s documentary, *The Dating Project* she proposed the question: why are young people more comfortable having sex, revealing our bodies in the most

intimate manner, than having a conversation over a cup of coffee? As a professor at Boston College, her studies have revealed an inverse trend in modern dating culture to the extent that young people are becoming more comfortable with physical intimacy as they become less comfortable with emotional intimacy. With changing opinions and regulations on dating, marriage, and love, we have lost the ‘script’ which guides our socio-sexual relationships. Her interviews note a general sense of fear of rejection, a lack of confidence concerning ability to love or commit, and an overwhelming sense of options. These sentiments counter a prevalent desire to feel ‘special’ and the notion that a romantic relationship validates an individual’s self-worth. To mitigate this trend in emotional unavailability, Cronin’s first assignment in the capstone seminar she teaches is to ask someone on a ‘traditional date’: no sex or alcohol, the date must be proposed in person, and it must not last longer than three hours (because even if you really get along, it is inevitable that someone may get bored after three hours).

We exist in a culture of waste and dismissal, where there is always a plethora of ‘fish in the sea,’ where we can swipe past a multitude of options in our hands, say no because of their hair, skin, bio, or teeth. We are unwilling to accept a person in their whole being, and we are unwilling to accept change, give up the farce of individuality. We are caught up in the fantasy that our love is unique, and forget that love entails sorrows, nuance, and complexities (de Botton, 26, 62). We are convinced that our love could be with no other, but it is less about the other and all about our willingness.

For a long time after my first relationship ended, I did not think I could be loved. I thought nobody would be able to hear my story and appreciate or understand all that my body had overcome. Scared to tell my lovers of my past, I kept my true self a secret. I engaged in relationships built on hidden truths, but the pain and the fear resided in me, and my flashes of

anger, distrust, and coldness pushed my lovers away as painful proof. In not being able to accept what I had endured and love myself fully, I effectively ran from any form of true emotional intimacy.

Each chapter of Mimi Zhu's *Be Not Afraid of Love: Lessons on Fear, Intimacy, and Connection* details an emotion in the process of healing: numbness, anger, anxiety, grief, distrust, shame, and love. This follows my own path of post-relationship survival and reading her book felt like a hug. I didn't realize that in the years during and after my relationship, I had been so numb. I couldn't understand why scenes from that relationship would come back, haunting memories of a confusingly sad and abused love. Zhu considered numbness to be a natural, healing emotion to help us survive through pain (Zhu, 10). Although numbness may appear like a lack of emotion, "shadows do not signify lack, for there is an abundance that lives in the shade," (Zhu, 7). When the numbness that clouded my adolescence passed, I began to experience the pain of the relationship in full force, and I was mad. I was mad at him for having done that, I was mad at my parents, teachers, friends and classmates who saw it happen, and I was mad at myself for not having been able to stick up for myself, I was mad at myself for not realizing that I didn't deserve that, and I was mad at myself for being hurt.

Sometimes I would become riddled with anxiety, scared he would find me and even more afraid that everyone could see the scars across my body, pity me, or find me disgusting for what I hadn't overcome. I felt I could not trust anyone, scared of what had happened to me, and could even less trust myself and feared all that I could not see. I had risked everything for someone who I thought loved me, and was scared to risk anything else again. This anxiety mirrors that which Zhu reflects on in their own life and reveals the dangerous quality of indoctrination in abusive relationships (Zhu, 40). So mired in the abusive cycles that my ex perpetuated, without

the rhythm of pain and pleasure that he instigated I felt lost, empty, and disgusting. And then came the shame, which hung around me in a sadness I could not name—was my abuser’s victory. My body had been used, abused, and it stung, so in the years after my relationship I engaged in behaviors to distance me from my memories, from myself I had to run.

I can’t help but feel I am mourning. In the process of accepting where I have come from, I feel I am grieving someone who I have once been, someone I could have been had I never been hit, grieving my sickness, and hurt, and my little death. Joan Didion wrote in *My Year of Magical Thinking* that the emotive responses to death were most commonly, “shock, numbness, and a sense of disbelief,” (Didion, 46). My past covers me in burns, and I have run out of adrenaline. I cannot afford to be numb because I do not want to forget again. Writing this story, the shock is wearing off and I feel freedom in acknowledging all that I have lost. We must properly mourn our memories or else, “their souls will linger and haunt the human realm,” (Zhu, 71). Grieving allows for a chapter to close and another to open for a new life.

Over a cup of morning coffee my mother taught me the simple lesson of life found in the Sakura blossoms. *Mono no aware*: a Japanese concept that the beauty of life is that all exists to be short lived, transient, fleeting beauty like the Sakura blossoms—lived in a single moment then dashed. The first art piece I ever had exhibited in a museum was a diptych of photos from the moment a cigarette is dragged and then ashed. It was for a teen exhibit on time, and it explored this concept of *mono no aware*. I remember going to the opening show and having the bittersweet feeling of growing old, of pride echoed against the deep feeling of being sorry. There are shoes on the telephone lines. A gentle breeze knocks down yellow leaves. Memories hung to dry in smoked, charred rafters, rippling in the tides of love’s laughter. There is just garbage

wrapped up in the otherwise barren branches, black plastic bags hanging amidst the funny's sections, and love, now just a memory, hangs in the trees.

When we speak of love taking risks, we do not mean forgoing your safety. The risk at stake in love should not be your body, mind, and wellbeing. Love is a process of revealing; it allows us to be known (Levinas, 113). The risk in love is in the adventure of the unknown, of letting your innards be exposed (Badiou, 11). Love is risky because there is an ambiguity to the space between us. Two may never truly become one, and therein lies the risk in love. And you must be willing. You must be open. Love takes risks is an inducement to be unfastened from misconceptions and inclined towards change and new experiences (Badiou, 72). Against any unsavory lessons learned from our past, we may always decide to do it again.

Even as I ran from love, it found me in all the unexpected corners of my life. The saying goes that people come into our lives when we least expect them and that all relationships are either a lesson or a blessing. With my arms crossed I denied the love that came to my door and for a long time ignored the lessons that my love implored. The lover who changed my perspective on love came into my life's stage the summer I walked four miles each morning to the orchard where I worked for just above minimum wage. He came up from the city in August, worked deep on the orchard as a fruit picker and in the brewery making cider. The first time I saw him he was standing outside of the orchard gates on the phone, and feeling some inexplicable pull, I leaned my head out the window to look at him some more. Watching him as we turned down the dirt path he stood, watching me back. Not recognizing him nor the feeling that drew me towards him, I quickly forgot about him and a few weeks later quit my job.

That fall I was invited to a party with some old coworkers and feeling heavy eyes on me as I caught up with a friend, I turned to see my mystery fruit picking man staring. We dated for a

short, cold season before he moved back to the city for a post-baccalaureate program that I had suggested. We had to split up because we decided we must make it on our own. He had to go back to school and get out of our small town, and I had to finish my degree and make peace with myself. I was too young, and he was too unformed, but I think back on our time together and wish we had been ready. It was never a question of willingness, but of preparedness. Had I been more susceptible to another's affection, I would have given him all of my love immediately. Our romance was short lived, and the heartbreak was immense. I still relish the months where we woke together to the season's first snow, ate cheese and olives out of one another's hands, and fell asleep to candlelight and soft-spoken stories of distant lands.

There is a polaroid of us where we sit on the floor with our backs to the wall leaning so our heads touch. I am speaking about something unknown with my mouth laughing in an 'o' and he is smiling brightly with his fingers touching and his left leg bent towards me to meet my toes. It is the only photo of us, from the last time I saw him, and when I look back on this photo (photo of a photo—he has the original) I think back on the years and wonder if he is still single. In these quiet moments it almost feels like we can go back to being nothing. As easily as it happened, I can tell myself I never fell in love. In these quiet moments when I watch the pigeons with wings like oil spills flock and fly, I remember small moments and catch myself in my sad lie. He was a good angel in my life; the one who changed it all. In action we return to our places of distance, but I shall not lie and say I don't miss him.

One of the things Erving Goffman's performance theory teaches us is that "the representation of an activity will vary in some degree from the activity itself and therefore inevitably misrepresent it." (Tolentino, 19). Against Nietzsche's notion of eternal return, the concept that all that has happened will come around again, an activity may be conducted once,

occur once, and the representation will always fall short. The nature of the experience of love is to be lived, and no two loves will be the same. Eighty fragments and two hundred thirty-four pages of Barthes *Lover's Discourse*, fragments spent dissecting, defining, and understanding love, and he concluded that love must be lived. Love eludes the written word. Love is a lifetime's investment, dear reader. Keep your heart and you will not worry how much you spent.

Our love culture instills a sense that romantic love is the highest reward, that if you have a lover you are set (de Botton, 48). Interviews with friends revealed a poignant trend that supports this notion that romantic love is the highest end. Reflecting on their childhood and adolescence, the conception of love as a conquerable aspiration, a necessary counterpart, and the utmost prized possession was widespread. The avenues explored to obtain such love were tenuous and discreet in their early years, full of experimentation and self-satisfying endeavors. Some expressed a wish that they had waited to begin dating, that they had appreciated their youthful singledom and not spent so much time pining for love. Some took a casual approach to love, saying that it is easier to be loved than to find someone to love, that the decision to love is easier than the actual feeling. All agreed that the butterflies that characterized early romances have seemed to wane as they grow up, but no one believed them extinct.

Although love is taken as a social fact for some, the heartbreak is less easily spoken of. Twice since I last spoke to my fruit picker, I have been hospitalized for my woe over our love lost. He appeared to me in dreams and on sleepless nights, his image trembled across my vision, reflecting off clouds and shimmering in the sun's rays, and the tender words he spoke to me weighed heavily in my brain as I tried to work and in my aimless hours. We used to share a bed and exchange nightmares. Sleeping back-to-back, I would take on his fears. And then we became nothing, and I felt I couldn't survive without again knowing his care.

Twice I valued my life for a love I could not hold on to, and twice I have been given another shot at life. In the cold of the hospital halls, I felt less alone than I did when I was in my own bed and not in his arms. Jeanette Winterson wrote in her novel *The Passion*, “what you risk reveals what you value,” (Winterson, 91). As I valued love above all else, when he left town the cavernous emptiness of his absence was all in my heart I felt. The ethos of one of Winterson’s gambling inclined characters was “you play you win; you play you lose. You play.” To risk a life for love reveals the great gravity and value of love, but forgets the lesson that love tries again. The greatest loss of love is not in heartbreak but in the ultimate existential forgoing of the chance to love again. It is the height of life’s luxury to play at love; win or lose the pleasure is in the game (Ernaux, 61). A spiritual leader of mine once scoffed at the thought that the meaning of life might be to be happy. She said, “the meaning of life is not to be happy; it is *to participate*.”

“Love takes risks” is the decision to try again; is the writer’s hand unwittingly at the end of a sentence repeatedly lifting to paper their pen. It is deciding that here the story will not end. The secret, long lost message in the bottle—is it only found at the end? Is it only revealed at the bottom once the liquid has been drained? The message of the bottle is contained in every single piece of the liquid appreciated. When the beautiful head of the beast of love once again rears, will you be ready to accept love, the good, the bad, and the ugly, and abandon all fears? We may not forget the places from which we have come, though the memory may fade, but the experiences stick in our bones, and from which we are formed. The risk in love is to embrace the unknown, to not let the past distort how you have grown. There is a tradition at the hospital that I was treated at where on the last night before discharge patients pass around a coin, sending prayers and well wishes to the soon to be moving on. The discharged patient is then given the coin and may always look upon it and reminisce about the kind things people have said to them

and remember how far they have come. To forget your past is to ignore the impressions that last, but to refuse to take the lover's risk is to decide to forgo all love's bounty which you will miss.

At 6 a.m. this past September I watched a building burn to the ground. It was the first place I ever ate at with the man from the orchard, and it burned without a sound. I sat in my lawn as the firemen gathered, the glow of the fire against the morning fog burned brightly. I heard no birds singing, though in my head, the song of our love sang mightily. Amidst the crackle of the restaurant's structure, I heard his voice saying sweet things tinged with a lover's anxiety and listened to our love burn with all the strength I could muster. Slowly does the memory of our love fade, expedited only as the beams of the building break. Withered away down to the foundation, I find I still do not have the guts to face him. As the places where our love lived dissipate, I see our separation as the unfortunate yet necessary play of our fate. When we first split, I said, how will I ever love again? And yet the tendons of my heart have begun to mend. Barthes wrote in *A Lovers Discourse*, "why is it better to last than to burn?" (Barthes, 23). Watching the landmark of our love turn to dust, I realized that though not every relationship lasts, it is in the process we must trust.

When my parents first moved into their current apartment, they renovated the whole place. They tore down walls and wood paneling, installed granite countertops and new wood flooring, and as a final touch, the renovators painted over the wallpaper in the bathrooms. They moved into this apartment after I graduated from high school, and I lived with them for a few months while I settled my affairs during my gap year. It is not a large apartment, and during those months I was prone to repose alone in the bathroom. On such an occasion, observing my surroundings, I noticed between hasty brushstrokes a flash of flowery wallpaper beaming. I thought then about the family who lived here before, like ours, also a family of four. The

youngest daughter sold the apartment after her mother had to be moved to assisted living. Her father has long passed. He and her mother had raised two children amongst these wallpapered walls, the remnants of their life standing beneath the layers of thin, blue paint. They had made themselves a home, and now my parents live here, with their children who are adults but not fully grown.

I am back now, living at home after my recent hospitalization. In the weeks preceding it I had trimmed the excess off all my plants and got them set up for propagation. Upon my return I found the trimmings rooted and ready to plant—a pleasant reminder that life goes on and everything steadily grows. With love we may be empowered to take on all we think we can't. The risk in love is to embrace that which nobody knows. It exists in the manifold ways that we may try our hand at new beginnings, embrace the unknown, and accept change. With us we all carry the lessons we have learned in past experiences, and we may embrace these preparations to enjoy a future full of mysterious gifts.

When older lovers speak of risk, they mean it as encouragement. Love requires risks because we must open our heart to another, expose the darkness of our insides to a light that may sometimes falter. We cannot predict how our heart will be cared for, how our affections may be handled or taken. The future expands before us like a vast horizon behind a curtain, its fruits available and yet uncertain. Like the crack in my mother's jewelry box, we may all be appreciated as totems of our past experiences, as the potential for growth, change, and new blessings. We must always try again, embrace change and the unknown. We must always be curious and look behind the curtain.

Wear Your Heart on Your Sleeve

Always at the front of the line when my class would arrange ourselves in height order, with cheeks the teachers would squeeze, and a penchant for pretending to be sick during our weekly Spanish lessons, I was a small, secretive child. There is a photo of me at eight years old on the playground with a hand lifted to shield my face and eyes turned skyward somberly. My mother would take photos of me, develop them at the drugstore, and show me them as an example of how sad I looked. She would beg me to smile, screaming her head off that I was such a disappointingly sad child. Intrinsically pensive and incapable of naming my sorrow, I was also a chatty child. Since kindergarten, I got marks off for insolence, and I won class clown in fifth grade superlatives. My contradictory proclivities filled me with inexplicable pain and frustration. I quickly took to journaling and poetry writing to express what I felt nobody could understand. I wrote about family trips, about the possessions I appreciated, and about the boy in the red vest who sat at my table in my second-grade class. He kept his hair and nails long and had a narrow face from which few words came forth. In my puerile mind, without having the words to understand my feelings, I thought that out of everyone he would understand my sentimentality.

When I told my mother of my crush, she dismissively told me to ‘wear my heart on my sleeve.’ This was my first explicit lesson on love, but what does it mean? I imagined a tiny red heart sewn to my sleeve, the beacon of my hope signaling I was ready. I conjured up images of tearing my heart out clean for all the world to see. I would write him poems that he did not seem to read. I sent him chocolates through the school service on Valentine’s Day, which he shared with the girl who sat beside him. I tried every recess period to catch him in tag. Although my affections remained unreturned, throughout elementary school I pined after the boy with the long hair and fingernails. Without the guts to tell him directly how I felt, I yearned to dance with

him during our ballroom dancing lessons. I laughed grandiosely at his jokes, and continued to pick him for my teams during sports.

I never got the sex talk. Or a love talk, or a relationship talk, but my lessons in love did not stop at ‘wear your heart on your sleeve.’ When in seventh grade a neighborhood mother caught me kissing a boy from the middle school down the road when I was supposed to be watching my brother on the playground, I got as close to a sex talk as my mother could muster. That night my mother called me into her room. In the dark on her bed, she gave her brief opinion on my romantic life-- ‘if you ever get pregnant, I am not paying for your abortion.’

My relationship with my mother taught me that all love came at a price, that if I tried hard enough to be ‘good’ everything would be all right. I subconsciously believed in love’s transactionality; I thought if I gave someone enough of myself, it would make them love me. My mother’s lessons made me believe love was painful and transactional. I often felt that love was unattainable for me. However good I tried to be, it felt I was never good enough to earn my mother’s love. Throughout my adolescence, my mother and I were constantly at odds. Similar to a fault, neither of us could back down from a fight. One night I was arguing with my mother, and she told me I was a difficult person to love. I internalized this sense that there was something wrong with me. I tried to listen to my mother, to wear my heart on my sleeve and be honest with my feelings. But I was so afraid of what was inside of me I avoided direct communication and hoped my actions would speak for me.

When I first began to date the boy who would become my abuser, I felt safe enough to speak freely. He would listen carefully as I spoke about my passions, my friends, or my family. Complete opposites, we connected through humor, and we would laugh uncontrollably at jokes only we found funny. At the time I was a straight-A student, a new transfer to the school with a

lot to prove, taking advanced placement courses and the native speaker Spanish class. He, on the other hand, was not so academically inclined and spent most of the school day selling drugs to other students in school – pills mostly, which he would take and boast about to me. I didn't understand it. My best friend had just gotten out of rehab, and I was scared for him. I didn't understand what he was feeling, why he was selling, and why so many people liked it so much. Curious and young, I wanted to understand the hype and feel less young and left out. When I was presented with the opportunity to experiment with pain killers, I took it.

That night I called him and, in my stupor, told him how much I loved him, oozed affection onto him, and thanked my lucky stars I had him in my life. The next day in school he refused to look at me. Confused as to why he was so mad at me, why he didn't care that I loved him, why he couldn't speak to me, I sent him messages, followed him in the halls, and begged him with tears in my eyes to talk to me. I followed him like a ghost through the halls as he made his way to class, ignoring my plaintive calls. I begged him to talk to me, staring at his face with eyes that could not look into mine. I felt my affections had yet again been rebuffed, that I was yet again left in the darkness of my solitary passions. I cried out to him, *please talk to me*, and he spun around and hit me.

We stayed together for nearly three years, but nothing was the same after that first swing. The resentment and fear I constantly felt spread between us like an insurmountable chasm. He would scream at me, begging me to hit him to 'make us even.' I would cry every day without impetus, sinking into the gulf of sorrow that lapped at the limits of my being. I felt the fabric of my essence to be made of sorrow. I couldn't stop myself from feeling so blue, so disgusted with myself, and so used. My passions roiled beneath my skin; I couldn't understand the merit in being honest. The fear of how he would react to my candor prevented me from being anything

other than an embodiment of his projected desires. I lost all voice to express my own passions and became a conduit for his pleasure. I protected my heart with the cold hands of a woman who has been hurt. I could not afford to be contrarian, I could not afford to be smart, I could not afford to speak up because after the first time the beatings did not stop. 'It was an accident' he said the first time. After the second and third time, he wouldn't deny his culpability. He would tell me: 'I love you so much, you don't understand how much it hurts me to do this to you. I love you; I love you, but you don't love me enough.' Girls would come up to me in school, strangers, and tell me how lucky I was to be so loved.

My lack of honesty with myself and my lovers during those years was both a disgrace to love and a matter of self-protection. Honesty was a privilege I could not afford. My history is full of tender parts. I have had experiences that have turned to stories that hurt to tell and expose themselves in my body's marks. I had been running for so long that when I tried to stop my legs kept going on. The summer after graduating from high school I went on a trip to California. In the mystic forests and vast plains, I found the reward for the pain that I had tried to escape, and not yet overcome. As I drove down the winding roads of Yosemite, I raced against the night, which was soon to come. Overhead the sky was split between day and night. I wondered to myself: *at what speed could we escape the setting sun?* With this same tenacity, I was running from love.

Honesty, vulnerability, and trust work in symbiosis in loving relationships; honesty builds trust and trust cultivates a safe space for vulnerability. These expressions of safe and sacred intimacy are at the heart of loving relationships, but what do we do when the truth hurts? Although de Botton agrees in *The Sorrows of Love* that, "the relief of honesty is at the heart of the feeling of being in love," (de Botton, 50) the expectation to not hurt one another complicates

the matter of honesty. A loving relationship implies safety. While the truth, which is revealed in honesty and vulnerability, establishes trust, sometimes the truth can be unnecessarily hurtful. De Botton suggested that “repression, a certain degree of restraint... belong to love as much as a capacity for explicit confession” (de Botton, 51). In the same way that a certain degree of our being remains private from friends, family, and coworkers, a certain degree of restraint must keep some things private from lovers.

Throughout most of my romantic history I have lacked both the ability for explicit confession and restraint. Once I had been told that I was loved for my candor, but he had not known of all the cobwebs which I would not show. While being praised for my honesty, I distorted the face which I presented and skirted around the reality of my emotions. On the first night after a prolonged absence, I slept back-to-back with the symptoms of my self-protecting habits. The fruit picker I had spent an autumn with was living in the city that Spring, and we had had no contact since Christmas when I had crept out of his candlelight apartment as he slept. In the early days of spring, when the weather was still biting, he appeared on my front doorstep, gentle and kind with every old feeling still abiding. Just as I remembered him and yet somehow different, older maybe though it had only been a few months, happier with a new charm like there was new life within him residing. That night we could only talk in whispers, sharing heartbeats to music and glances that were so tender they were almost confusing. I thought this was my chance to correct all that I had done wrong, to be open and honest and vulnerable with him, show him who I truly was. I felt that because he hadn't committed to me in the way I had expected, that something was deeply wrong with me. But I was still scared and his silence those months had been like a knife through me. That night I appreciated with cautious footsteps through the sacred space between us.

I awoke with a sick stomach, and a memory in my head. But the memory was not mine. A vision had been conjured above our makeshift bed. In my sleep I had contracted a bitter memory of his ex, and in my dream state I wrangled with the demons he put in my head. I dreamt that he and I slept in a bed, heart to heart with a mysterious woman sleeping on the other side of his bed. When I awoke in my dream, he and I were to care for three young children with gold-spun hair. We played in a playground and rocked on a ship, and by the end of my dream I had watched all three children be annihilated. I had tried, in my dream, to save their lives, but he would not help me, and they perished before my eyes. Andre Breton considered dreams to be a “form of reason that waking lacks” (Gottschall, 66). I was used to dreams that mirrored my reality. When he came to me that night in my slumber, I felt he was disclosing a part of himself that he was too afraid to share. I felt we were enjoining in a divinely ordered intimacy. When I told the man who shared my bed and sleep of my dream, he said that it was in some way true. He and his ex-girlfriend had put to rest three unborn babies, he quietly confessed.

After that night we spent three days together, pent up in his apartment with the windows shut, drowning out the Spring weather. The apartment smelled like a memory of an upset stomach, and I haunted his home like a phantom of a lost love. When I left, we said, “*until next time,*” and then I was on my way, but there has yet to be a next time and he has existed since then as a memory. Our memory often distorts history, making our actions easier to live with, but our memory can also be a gauntlet chaining us to what we miss (Gottschall, 158). In our mind’s eye we fabricate images with, “an ego enhancing bias that blurs the edges of past events, softens culpability, and distorts what really happened,” (Gottschall, 170). I blurred the rough edges of my romance with the fruit picker and believed he truly loved me. I believed he loved me so much that he was afraid of being with me. Even for the biggest moments of our lives, like

traumatic events or love at first sight, the details of such events are susceptible to the fickle machinations of the mind (Gottschall, 163). We would lounge in silence on cold days and eat out of one another's hand, but our separation was unceremonious.

Although we parted ways, the memory of him stayed with me and clouded my days. I couldn't shake the thought of us. In my mind he and I became perfect for one another, and no distance could hold us apart. I ignored his lack of communication; I ignored his disappearance. I held on to the image of us and believed that even in our separation I possessed a great love. A big fan of the archaic, I took to leaving him voicemails. I would call him at all hours of the day to tell him I loved him, let him know how much he is cared for, and to tell him how I missed him. I was often met with silence, maybe a few words following a song I recommended, but mostly silence and the dull tone at the end of a voicemail.

Sometimes I think I learned the lesson of vulnerability too late. A commitment to true love requires a commitment to truth and honesty, and this is the beginning of an avenue towards self-development and prosperity (hooks, 48). A lack of honesty hinders the development of a healthy, honest relationship and impinges on personal development (hooks, 46). In keeping myself hidden from others I was also lying to myself. My shame kept my reality hidden from my own conscience and I amputated any possibility of love in my life with my secrecy. I sometimes get concerned that my lack of vulnerability and honesty has cost me a great love in life, that I have learned too late. Since parting with my memories which kept me chained to a fantasy, I have been blessed with other opportunities to love honestly and fully.

In the summer of unceremonious departures and record-breaking high heat, before the Fall of my junior year of college when I promised myself I would not fall in love, I met the man who would teach me to 'wear my heart on my sleeve.' It was a summer of bravery and testing

the limits of reality. The young and bold people of the town would break into the county pool each night to swim nude beneath the moonlight, and this is where he and I were fated to meet. It was late August, and everything was skin to air. A year later he still recalls this night with the white clarity of a man struck by love at first sight, and if he were telling this story, he would tell you exactly what he was wearing, that it was before his time at the hospital when he still wore an eyebrow ring, and he would reminisce on our farewell amidst the beckoning of my friends when I held back for a moment to give him a chlorine-wet kiss. He won't remember that we spoke of God that night, me treading water on the pool's edge as he squatted beside me playing with the St. Christopher I wore on my neck. In his recollection of the night, he would speak of how he was drawn to me, singled me out amongst the naked swimming bodies, and with a coy voice shimmering like lamp light across the rippling water's face how he called to me.

I was resolute to my conviction that I would not fall in love, and he descended to the background of my mind, condemned to the graveyard of forgotten mathematical algorithms and memories that are just too hard. His persistence is to be admired. For the next three months he would search for me but I, dedicated to changing my life, was trying my best to abstain from the bars, the town's social scene, and had become a bit of a recluse, staying inside baking quiches each morning with the windows wide open and mastering the art of stewing in the summer heat with a pack of cigarettes and cold beverage in hand. By this point in my life, I had recognized a destructive pattern of mine, in which each fall I managed to fall in love and by the end of winter was in a shambles of lethargy and self-hatred. I was convinced that I could break this cycle and was trying in every way that I could.

Meeting a second time at a local bar, we exchanged contact information, but even after that, our communication remained scant. I could not bear the thought of another heartbreak and

was still at a point of reluctance towards all in love that is at stake. My history hung around me like a warm fur stole. It was somehow comfortable to be in pain, to be emotionally unavailable, and to exist in wretched memories that I could not shake. What do you do if you still carry the mark of your first love failed? 'Wear your heart on your sleeve' Well what if you wear armor on your heart and a scar on your cheek?

With patience, communication, and acceptance, he created a space for us to be honest. He taught me to set my armor aside and say "thank you for helping me get this far." He taught me to let the sun touch my heart. He was unconditionally kind; listened intently and made space for me to feel understood. He made me feel safe, despite my natural inclination to feel endangered by intimacy. Determined to be honest with him about myself, I decided to show him a little of the hand I have been dealt. We had been enjoying one another's company for a year. Although we were not exclusive, we were passionately committed to sharing joy. Sitting on his bed one night, the conversation turned to my experiences in high school. I asked him if he was ready to have a serious conversation, and with his permission I began to unravel the long skein of my troubled history with intimacy. Taking care with the tender parts, I exposed to him the damage that has bled my heart. I still remember the rain and sometimes I still hurt, but I know that I have survived the storm before and in the long story of my life it is only a small part.

I never wore any make up when we met up. On the days I would see him after class, I would hurry home and remove any trace of makeup from my face, wash up and be ready to brave our interface. In some twisted sense I wanted him to love me in all my raw beauty, with all my jagged edges, and shocking history. I wanted desperately for him to love me for me, and I took care to be honest and not gloss over the reality of my habits. My commitment to honesty was a reaction to the pain that my dishonesty had caused me. Eventually, my self-protective

habits got the best of me, and I pushed him away out of fear of the intensity of our intimacy. Our ending was devastating, for it was not out of a lack of love, but of a greatness of desire that I could not handle.

Love requires honesty and vulnerability. When we are told to ‘wear your heart on your sleeve,’ this is what others are imploring. Bell hooks wrote that, ‘trust is the foundation of intimacy,’ (hooks, 41) and trust cannot exist without honesty and vulnerability. Trust cultivates an atmosphere of safety which allows relationships to be a celebration of each being (Zhu, 42). Honesty establishes the parameters of a relationship; it allows people to meet each other in their true being and enjoin in a relationship grounded in reality. Love is meant to be expressed, “passion is in essence made to be seen,” (Barthes, 42). Vulnerability and honesty allow for passion to be brought forth into the public eye. It is an act of exposure and love is the ultimate embrace and affirmation of exposure. Alain Badiou defined love as a quest for truth, a conquering of differences, and an acceptance of varying realities (Badiou, 39). To Badiou, love is truth and is established from the moment that love is declared (Badiou, 42). These great lovers teach us that loving is an expression of honesty, vulnerability, and truth.

In that abstract space formed by two hands holding, in between fingers clasped loosely, where you can see the leaves beneath your feet moving, is the space for lies, truth, and vulnerability. When they speak of wearing your heart on your sleeve, they are speaking of honesty. Your heart isn’t worn on your sleeve. It is held in two hands, sometimes both your own, sometimes four or more, in the abstract space where secrecy is formed. In fingers held like a sieve, where the water drips in a quiet remembrance of the sound of the leaves before the rain had fallen for too long. In the translation of an unknown song, whispers the message of feeling less alone: *Let the people who love you pick up what you can no longer hold.*

We Get to Make Our Own Rules

Catching glimpses of dusk through a window, beyond which splayed a riotous garden gently lit by the setting sun, I learned a lesson on letting go. I had found myself before a venerable couple in their dark wooden kitchen, beyond the dining room lined with family photos and a somberly coupled baby grand and double bass, monolithing in a room dark with sunset. Settled in the breakfast nook, a classmate beside me, we faced our couple. They sat solid together, faintly weary and exuding charm, grace, and composure. My classmate and I had driven up to this house on the outskirts of a neighboring town to meet our couple, designated to us for an interview we were assigned to do for class. There was an excitement to the evening; a new school year had just begun, mosquitoes still buzzed in the air, and school still felt fun. During the drive we exchanged our own stories of love and heartbreak, assessed our present positions on love, and voiced twittering anticipations about the couple we were soon to meet.

We had met in a course I took my junior year of college called ‘Love and Heartbreak.’ It was an interdisciplinary seminar on relationships, Our first assignment connected us to a couple to interview them to garner their love story, thoughts on love, and experiences. Our assigned couple, who we will call Marigold and Richard Hudson, had an unconventional love story. They met while attending college in the Hudson Valley, through a work study program. Cultivating a platonic relationship while schoolmates, they reconnected later in life and raised three children together. Their romantic relationship began after Richard’s divorce, when he became the sole responsible guardian for his son, so they always had to prioritize the wellbeing of other parties. Now that their children are adults, they are now living together as a romantic couple on their own for the first time in their relationship, which has now spanned over twenty-five years.

Their coming together as a couple took risks and leaps of faith, required vulnerability and honest communication, and overcame moments of painful circumstances and realities. At a point before their marriage, when they were separated by distance, Marigold took a spontaneous flight on a rickety, teacup of a plane to visit Richard. Her fear during her flight awoke within her a sense of urgent responsibility towards herself and their relationship. Mutually committed to their individual flourishing and self-discovery, Marigold and Richard had spent a summer intensely preoccupied with their reciprocal self-evolution. They were growing together. Having watched friends marry, divorce, and remarry over the years, Marigold wanted clarity on the relationship's direction. She confessed her desire for a monogamous relationship, and they decided to commit exclusively to one another in a decision that they referred to as a "leap of faith [that] worked out pretty well." Both believers in fate and cosmic relationships, they felt that their relationship was a gift from the universe and maintained faith in the universe's path for them.

Of the lessons they taught me, the one that has stuck with me the most is that in love "we always get to make our own rules." They let go of their preconceptions about relationships, releasing confining or archaic notions of romantic progression, and chose what allowed them to flourish within their loving relationship, even if it meant moving against the grain. They were equally committed to their mutual well-being, to cultivating internal self-filled happiness, as well as sharing mutual joy. This lesson in letting go and making your own rules, carving out your own path and allowing yourself to be in alignment with your cosmic order, has followed me and convinced me of the expansively nebulous nature of relationships.

We can learn a lot about love, but in practice, all relationships will look different. When we speak of love, we reflect the culture of love that we have been inculcated in. The axioms of love emerge out of social, political, and cultural circumstances—the way we love is not free, we

are beholden to the lessons we have been taught, which have been passed down through lived and learned experiences. We are social creatures, the basis of life is fellowship, we are born to have relationships, but we have lost our language to love, our maps have been burned and our timeline distorted. Dating has changed a lot in the past few decades. We have dating apps and hook up culture and marriage is no longer seen as a question of *when* but of *if*. Women are no longer bound by the necessity of marriage for property, money, rights, or respect. We may live prosperous lives without a husband or wife, and yet the desire for one still remains for some. Without the preconceived notions of what a relationship is supposed to look like, we may take our lessons on love and allow ourselves to fall onto the right path.

When I began to work on this text, I committed my life to love. But even then, the task felt to be too great a burden to bear. I was still scared, my past still haunted me, and I didn't have the courage to change what I felt was permanently engrained. This despair left me feeling hopeless about my life. Desperately wanted love, yet felt I was incapable of receiving it. I thought I had ruined my one shot at true love. Feeling I had never truly been able to appreciate the fruits of love, I resigned myself to an early death. For the second time since my first attempt, I was hospitalized. When I was discharged from the hospital, my father drove the five hours to come pick me up. After a long ride home, the elderly neighbor my father and I bumped into in the elevator said, not knowing the circumstances of our day, "Once you wake up, the rest of your day is easy." Speaking in the honest way that only the semi-senile may, his encouragement to embrace the day has stuck with me. Sometimes life is as easy and hard as waking up.

I thought that when I left the hospital I would be cured of my malaise. Quickly, I learned that I had not been cured. I had only gotten a second chance at life, but unlike a cat I do not think I have many more left. I thought that the episodes that landed me in the hospital were over, that I

had hit rock bottom and from there could only go up. Not all of my days have been easy and sometimes it is hard to even wake up. I wonder how literally he meant his comment. What will it take to get me to wake up? What will it take to get me to change?

At the end of my freshman year of college I was walking through the city and standing at a crosswalk, waiting for the light to turn, I decided that I must make a change in my romantic life—or I realized at least that something was not working. But at what point do we fully understand that we deserve better than we have been allowing ourselves? At what point do we decide to change the behaviors that have been holding us back? I knew that I was doing something wrong because loving someone always hurts. Although I recognized that something was wrong, I couldn't put my finger on where my fault was. I wanted to make a change but didn't know where to begin, and so I was stuck in a limbo of knowing my behavior was off but still perpetuating a cycle of self-destruction. When you're young, how can you make your own rules when you don't even know what game you're playing?

I once slept with someone because he had the same name as my first boyfriend. It felt like a full circle moment, and my competitive nature told me it was worth it for the books. The morning after we were speaking casually, getting to know each other though we had already been so intimate. Looking at me carefully, he told me that he thought I was emotionally unavailable. This comment wouldn't have hurt so badly if the previous weekend I hadn't been told a similar comment from someone else I was sleeping with. The people I was intimate with were noticing a trend in my behavior, a tendency to close myself off, be dishonest in the ways I didn't show people my true character, revealing only what I thought they would want. These comments floated through the ether of my mind for months, coming to me in dull moments in class, reverberating through the empty chamber of my skull as I cleaned my room. I was hurting

the people I was intimate with because I couldn't confront myself. I was sleeping with people casually because I couldn't allow myself to love.

I was celibate for six months after getting out of the hospital. My relationship with men and sex had become so self-destructive, and hurtful to the people around me, that I felt it necessary to abstain from my desires, at least for some time. During this period someone told me that it is not the presence or absence of desires in your life that matters, but the way they function in your life. I considered this comment for a while and took a look at my desires and their relationship to my life and wellbeing. My sexual proclivities were a mask for the love that I truly desired, and my desire for love did not disappear, although I abstained from dating and sex. In my abstinence I came to appreciate the love that I found in so many other corners of my life; I learned to appreciate love without sex, and the romance of friendships.

As young ones who are getting old, we put so much weight on our romantic relationships and it may appear that through love our selves are formed. Yet we try to love and ignore that it is our lovers with whom our insecurities take hold. Through love we may become more fully ourselves, but it is important to remember that love exists in various capacities throughout our entire lives. We may receive love from our family, friends, lovers; we may receive love from ourselves, be nourished by our love for our passions and pursuits, and feed our own desire for love by showering ourselves in the love we hope to give someone else one day. The wellspring of love that we hope to share with another may serve to nurture our own spirit, in moments when it feels we are alone in our passions. Audre Lorde wrote in her essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" that the erotic is a source of power for women. She defined the erotic as "the measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings." In this sense, the erotic is the space between ourselves and our desires. Once we understand how to

harness the erotic that is intrinsic to our being, we may strive for the inner excellence of our spirit. Becoming one with our inherent eroticism makes our lives more full, more satisfying, more empowering because we embrace the natural current of our lives, desires, and curiosity.

I have never known a greater love than that from my friends, who have loved me and supported me through relationships, hardships, and joys. When my romantic life has soured, it was my friends who picked me up and showed me that life could be sweet. The unconditional love from my friends has saved me time and time again. Without their unrelenting support I would not be here to write this. I have experienced such love with my friends that sometimes I wonder if a romantic partner could ever match it. The truth is, they don't have to. Our love may be nebulous, not singular, and we may be fed through various channels to our satisfaction.

The lesson of making your own rules in love is an urgent message to renounce preconceptions of what love *should* look like and to focus on how love works for you. We have learned that love says hard things and makes difficult choices, that love takes risks, and that love requires vulnerability and honesty, but there is no formula for relationships that works for everyone. Taking these lessons on love we may embark on relationships, and it is in relationships that we may make our own rules, decide what works best, and follow the individualized courses of life that the universe allows.

The term 'relationship' tacitly refers to a romantic relationship. We culturally and linguistically choose to refer only to romantic relationships as 'relationships' and this means millions in the ways that we value different forms of connection. The Buddhist story of Indra's Net teaches of an infinitely large net composed of reflecting jewels connected by thin threads. Each jewel infinitely reflects the other jewels in the net, and all are connected. This story is one of interpenetration, conveys the notion that we are all in relationships with everyone and

everything to varying degrees of closeness and context, even if it means the terms of our relationship is not yet knowing one another. Although we prioritize romantic relationships, we are in relationships with every single being and may nourish them with the same fervent passion that we express to our lovers.

Lacan's mirror stage theory refers to an infant's recognition of their own reflection in the mirror. The recognition of the reflection is followed by the realization that we are whole, autonomous selves. This realization is later shattered by the realization that other people have an impact on our self definition. Since our reflection is the only way in which we may perceive ourselves, this realization begins the search for answers to explain our existence. In this sense, it follows that our experiences and our relationships are to an extent a reflection of ourselves. The mere notion of feeling implies the existence of some *thing* to be felt, so one can never be empty, full of hot and cold air maybe, and do you know what happens when hot and cold air meets? What makes the clouds?

I am learning to live for myself and yet there is still a part of me that desires to share my life with someone else. Getting drinks with a friend I spoke of this desire. *Something is wrong with me! How can I be single for so long?* Taking a contemplative moment before responding, she countered my comment with the remark that I have 'blockages' on my heart. And I agreed. My years of abuse have built walls around me that make it hard for me to accept love, engage in any true form of intimacy. It has taken me too long to figure out that my lack of emotional availability is holding me back from love; I couldn't see the behavior that I had adopted to protect myself was hindering my ability to move on. My manipulative withholding of affections and honest intimacy was complicated by a feeling of deep loss once my lover left. It seemed I could only love in absence, once the possibility of redress was eradicated.

One of the most commonly used literary narrative shapes is the rags to riches tale. We love stories of trial and triumph, where the man finally gets the girl, and the kid wins the golden ticket, and everyone lives happily ever after. Tales of triumph show us that we can win too, that there is hope at the end of the line, and that our stories can be wrapped up in a big red bow like a new Nissan in a car commercial. Research has indicated that in our own lives, the capacity to integrate difficult moments into a narrative of triumph is an important indicator of “mental health, wellbeing, and maturity,” (McAdams, 2013). Quoting Dorothy Allison in her book *In the Dream House*, Carmen Maria Machado wrote, “two or three things I know for sure and one of them is that telling the story all the way through is an act of love,” (Machado, 219). In literature and in life, the ascription of redemptive meanings to difficult experiences is an important facet of growing up.

There is no redemptive arc in this story, no triumph where the girl gets the guy, where she is cured of her condition, and the girl lives happily ever after. In the many plot points of my story, we are still in the middle; I hope it’s the climax, the scene where the girl finally sees herself clearly in the moment before everything changes. Here we are in the middle of a long story about finding your way home, a lesson really, in learning to walk hand in hand and yet still alone.

At the pinnacle of a not so long story (in the anticipated ‘grand scheme of things’) is a heavy-hearted smile and a breath that fades over the body like a warm breeze on the last day of a too long beach vacation in which it rained for days. You find yourself grateful for the newfound sunny weather, half wanting to go home and half wanting to stay. The return from an unholy paradise is capitalized by an unusually light heart on a quiet morning. Days like heavy bookends

on a fragile shelf dedicated to loving, or more accurately, to the vices enjoyed to mimic true vulnerabilities, I finally find the unbearable light at the start of a new chapter coming.

If this story was a fairytale, the ex would be cursed by a grotesque witch or maybe die a gruesome death, the girl would get the prince and they would live happily ever after. This is not a fairytale. At times I think the past has cursed the girl and the ex is living happily ever after. They say karma sinks her tendrils into everyone and everyone gets what they eventually deserve, but I have yet to reap the fruits of my efforts, so screw what you heard. Every story may have minor subplots, and so goes the stories of our lives. It is important to recognize the triumphs we enjoy, to have gratitude for how far we have come, and to appreciate the blessings that have come our way. This text is a testament to the places I have been and a vow to continue moving forward.

Trauma theory delineates three phases of post-traumatic experience: *victim*, *survivor*, *thrivor* (Dillmann). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which is the standardized manual for mental health practitioners, defines trauma as “actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence.” Whenever a traumatic event occurs there is a victimization period for the individual who suffers. It is inevitable that when a trauma is enacted there will be a victim. The *victim* period is identified by an inability to resurface from the traumatic event, the victim is stuck in the cycle of revisiting the trauma, which continues to negatively impact their life. Flashbacks are common. It is marked by an avoidance of emotional reaction to the trauma while experiencing an overwhelming sense of “helplessness, vulnerability, fragility, self-pity, numbness, defeat, shame, self-hatred, and discouragement.” The victim struggles to plan for the future and may engage in reckless behaviors out of misapplied anger or frustration. The victim becomes solidified in the past.

Once the victim works through their trauma, they begin to enter the *survivor* phase. During this phase, the individual has learned to separate themselves from their trauma, they are released from the grasp of the past and may now embrace their present and future. It is common to feel stronger and more confident in themselves, the resources around them, and their ability to conquer that which set out to destroy them. The fundamental turning point of this period is the realization that the individual has grown through their trauma intact, or at least mostly. It is during this phase that the individual may begin to integrate their trauma into their life story with the potential for growth. Coping and healing become the predominant focus of this phase, and the individual may begin to notice an abatement of the more difficult emotions that characterize the victim phase.

The final phase in post-traumatic healing is the *thrivers* phase. This phase encapsulates the healing and growth of the survivor phase and allows the individual to partake in genuine enjoyment for life. There is a commitment to forward movement, to self-care, an investment in the future, and strong feelings of, “strength, empowerment, compassion, resilience, and self-determination.” Long term consideration is made possible, as opposed to the short-term thinking of the victim phase, and the individual may connect with others and embrace a newly transformed life. A thriver is able to cope with their history in healthy manners and recognizes themselves as being worthy of wellbeing. Taking in this information I may say that I am a survivor, and one day I too will thrive.

My victimhood was contingent on escapism—drugs, sex, and self-destructive behaviors—but my thriving is dependent on self-love. Self-love allows me to accept where I am in life and who I am, accept my past and my present, and gives me the space to also hold the truism that I can love myself enough to want to change. A big teaching in dialectical behavioral

therapy (DBT) is ‘radical self-acceptance.’ The notion of radical self-acceptance urges us to wholly embrace our current condition, for all of its perceived flaws and shortcomings. Through radical self-acceptance, these shortcomings become no longer detrimental to our character and cease to be shortcomings. It is not a tool to erase the trauma or suffering that one has endured. Radical self-acceptance is a tool to make our past more bearable, our present more livable, and our future more beautiful.

Self-love proclaims that I may love myself in my entirety and still want to change the self-destructive behaviors that have kept me stuck in a period of chaos. I have worked through the rules about love that I have encountered throughout my life—love hurts, love takes risks, wear your heart on your sleeve—falsified them, applied them to my own romantic life, and found new meaning in them. Doing this has allowed me to dismantle my preconceptions about love, which have distorted my approach to people and relationships. This final lesson in love – love makes its own rules – is an encouragement to consider what rules we can to maintain and uphold in our own love lives.

I was recently introduced to a friend of a friend, who we will call N., with the promise that we would get along well. And we did. Instant attraction and dynamism, we got along swimmingly. We spoke for hours each day, sharing the intimate details of our lives, the inner workings of our minds, chatting about everything under the sun. Being with him, I felt more than full, I was stuffed, like a Thanksgiving turkey, for the first time in a long time. It felt redemptive that he left me little bruises with the bites of me he took out of love. With the awareness that my romantic history has been troubled, I decided that I would put to work the lessons in love that I have been gathering and made some rules for myself.

Last fall I made a commitment to a rule I decided was important: honesty. I decided to be honest with myself, honest with my lovers, and realistic about myself. I have kept this promise to myself since. This decision was inspired by my relationship with the fruit picker, who praised my candor while I shielded him from the inner workings of my being. The guilt that followed from not being honest with someone who seemed to love me so fully persuaded me to be more honest with myself and others moving forward. With this new relationship with N, I decided to be forthright about my mental health and experience at the hospital. He listened and was kind and understanding. We discussed how to work together to make us both feel safe, secure, and validated.

Another rule that I uphold, which goes hand in hand with self-love, is to always prioritize my health and wellbeing. If we were to imagine a cup within us, a wellspring of life that nourishes us, we must fill this cup, cover the cracks, and take care to make sure it is full. We may feed our own cup, and be fed by our experiences, but we must always take care of our internal cups wherever the source of comfort may be. Sometimes events in our lives come to play and our cups may spill, but we may always refill our own cup with the self-love we shower on ourselves. While walking with a friend he expressed a desire for someone to fill his cup. I told him I hoped to fill my cup on my own and have grand wishes for a toast with someone who makes my cup overflow.

After leaving the hospital I realized that I had no idea what it looked like to live for myself. I had been pouring on empty and struggled to fill my cup. I had been completely dependent on others to give my life shape and meaning. My time at the hospital felt like a radical shift in my life. It felt like I had been given a second chance at life and I didn't want to waste it. I began to work out every morning, slowly, following YouTube videos in a trance of

determination; I took walks every afternoon, circling the pavilion in my local park and contemplating the content of this text, admiring the birds and the roses which persisted against the late November rain; I made big pots of soup and stock, carefully cutting each vegetable, tasting gratefully along the way; I went to museums and galleries with my friends who knew to be gentle with me. Methodically, I began to rebuild my life in ways which nourished me.

My final commitment to myself is to embrace change. As much as my past has hurt me, I hold on to those memories of reckless abandon in which I was so unhealthy and thought I felt so free. But the reality of such a period of my life was that I was not free, I was incredibly beholden to my addictions, my desires, and my escapism. Yet these memories are still romantic to me, and I have struggled to accept my healthier lifestyle. Discussing our relationship over coffee one morning, N and I decided to take a break. Despite the richness of our relationship, we had a mutual concern for whether we could meet each other at the same place romantically. He is still heavily involved with recreational drug use and self-destructive behaviors, and I am adamantly trying to discourage such behaviors in my life. Never have I been broken up with because I am ‘too healthy.’

My first instinct when N and I parted ways was to relapse into self-destructive behaviors. I wanted so desperately to be with him, to be like him, to be ‘cool’ enough for him. It took careful consideration to conclude that I was not willing to sacrifice my personal development for a relationship. It was difficult to admit to myself that I have changed from who I was once, but through radical acceptance I was able to come to terms with how beautiful my change has been. I am not the person I was once, and that part of me will always be a part of my history. I am in recovery, and I am proud of the changes I have made in my life. I am no longer addicted to

drugs, I no longer use sex as a coping mechanism for self-validation, and I no longer run from myself. I embrace myself.

Change has been the hardest thing to accept, and every instance may be a practice in accepting change. Life is about the changes that occur that help us develop into who we are. We carry tacit expectations of what our lives are supposed to look like, how they are supposed to develop, and are thrown when our lives turn out to be more nonlinear than we expected (Feiler, XX). Embracing change allows us to accept the turns our lives may take and still find joy and pleasure in the unexpected. These rules in honesty, change, and safety are applicable in every relationship whether it be romantic, platonic, familial, or otherwise.

The ambiguity of making our own rules in love allows us to decide what works best for ourselves. Making our own rules means we do not need to compromise integral aspects of ourselves, our self-development, and our lives unless we choose to. We are free to love in the many forms that our love may adapt to, and our love need not be confined to a linear timeline, as linearity is a farce of comfort that our lives do not ascribe to. Our lives and our love will take on various shapes, go through changes and difficult times, but we may always choose to fill our own cups and find nourishment within ourselves. No person will fill the space within us and make us whole, because we are whole in our present form always.

Author's Note

This is not the end.

Let us return to the Dorothy Allison quote that prefaced this story: "Two or three things I know for sure and one of them is that telling the story all the way through is an act of love." I have told this story as far as I can go, but this is not the end. This is a brief history, a recounting of facts, a checkpoint, an intermission before the next act. Barthes wrote that, "I myself cannot construct my love story to the end: I am its poet only for the beginning; the end, like my own death, belongs to others," (Barthes, 101). I cannot write to the end because the story is continuing out of my hands. Although the end is not in my control, I may take some liberty in where my path goes. Taking these learned lessons in intimacy, vulnerability, courage, and self love, I am slowly constructing my ship for the rest of my journey.

During this brief pause I would like to pay respect to all those that have made this text possible. This body of work would have been impossible without consultation with Lisa Phillips, my thesis advisor and mentor, who diligently and tirelessly edited, provided feedback and resources, and informed my approach to love and life. Enflaming my passion for love with her course "Love and Heartbreak," she opened my eyes to the need for more attention to love and healthy relationships. It took an immense amount of bravery to pen this story. I was hesitant at first; I was scared to dedicate a body of work to a situation that I have tried so hard to recover from. Professor Phillips gave me the confidence to share my story. She showed me that this story is not about my ex nor the many people I have encountered- this story is about a pure love that yearns to be known, this story is about all of us. Without her unwavering support, crucial insights, and unending kindness, I would have never had the courage to share this story. Her work on love and relationships motivated me to add to the growing discourse about love and to

continue this work on intimate partner violence advocacy postgraduate. She inspires me every day.

Consistent displays of care, affection, and love from my friends and family have continued to fuel me as I wrote this story. It is through conversations with them that I have worked through challenging concepts, crystallized my perceptions of love, and begun to know and accept love in my life.

I went for a walk the other day and was reminded of a verse from Proverbs that a friend shared with me: “Keep thy heart in all diligence for out of it are the issues of life.” The proclivities of my heart have led me to dangerous places in my life and out of my desires have come many issues, but I must give thanks to the heartbreaks, the long nights of ambiguity, and memories of tenderness that I can’t shake. This story is not about my ex or the people I have loved, but without them this essay would be nothing. In a masochistic act of gratitude, I must thank my ex, for without the horror of our relationship, I would not be as committed to advocacy, resource support, and healthy relationships for all. For better or for worse, he has changed me.

There is a concept in Korean called ‘han’ which refers to the collective suffering of the Korean people as imposed by the years of political and military oppression. According to Minsoo Kang’s essay “The problem with ‘han’”, ‘han’ “denotes a uniquely Korean sense of profound sorrow, regret, resentment, rage and other negative emotions that are all bound up inside an individual as well as the people as a whole.” You have read my story of suffering as well as my survival, and I wrote this to show that we may conquer the things that have once destroyed us. I wrote this story with the hope that for someone I could provide some comfort. I wanted to show that we can make it out alive and still love again. I wanted to offer some hope.

At the beginning there was only silence, the empty echo of violence.

The end (that is not really an end) of a story about what once was, is my act of love.

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