

OPEN HOUSE

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the cerberus comes

and it reaches out with claws to heap on you
finding its treat
a bite like opioid candy
all from you, eating, chewing
something you've taught it, about how to swallow
you never even meant to
you're not a teacher, not a tutor
you're cut from the cloth of a book
Tudor-style anarchy, as the blade becomes another appendage added onto you
like a fourth hip, limb, bend and snake
creak and break
you have to wonder what comes next
when the drive is reared out of you
set out in park like duck, swamp hen
you have to wonder what has become
what little flesh and bone can be scooped into a cone and sold to you
from the stall at the county fair
from the window
where everything has eyes so clung, wrapping gaze round you.
find a curtain.

Reverse Parallel

a monologue by Keeley Young

The side of the road, outside the Department of Transport. Set design wise - a smaller stage atop the larger one, acting as the kerb. ALANA is perched on the "kerb", her head buried in between her knees. She is silent for a moment, until she snaps her head up, staring ahead.

ALANA: Hi. Sorry I was just bawling my eyes out, give me a second to wipe the tears away. You're little and weak if they see you crying, but it was the last thing my body wanted me to try after nothing else seemed to work. I, uh, just failed my driver's test for the third time, and I maybe did the worst I've ever driven today because I've been trying to get out of this test for maybe a week or two, when some part of my brain ticked over and told me to abort, girl, you're nearing the electric line. People - friends, and my sister's friends, and random strangers on the internet - like reminding me maybe it'll take you four tries, or seven, or twenty-two, but eventually you'll have that little piece of laminated plastic in your hand and you'll, what, stop feeling the anxiety of how every little turn and twist and slam is on you. And on them too, the other people I'm supposed to trust won't turn and twist and slam right into me. I swear when I was younger, you would see at least three different ads in one night about the dangers of being on the road. There's the drunken fool who'll run the kids off the road and kill them instantly. There's the texter. Basically all I need to say about that one. And there would always be the accident that inadvertently happened, a vague accident, bruises and bones and blood. The focus of course was on the injured, and maybe there would be a skull-and-bones figure carted off into the ambulance. Oh, they would pray for their miracles, but the camera would pan away from the figure and return to those wrapped up in metallic blankets, breathing, doing their best to force a smile.

Obviously those ads were dangerous, the worst-case-scenario type things. Your parents would drive you around, they have since you were a little baby, and nothing ever happens, save maybe a hassle with someone cutting them off, and them shouting a cuss word at the top of their lungs, even with the windows sealed up. But when you're an anxious person, when you twist the handle three times to triple-check that the front door is locked before you leave the house, those little hypotheticals start to seem like eventual situations I'll land myself in. Start to seem like witch-like prophecies where you replace the cross-and-bones figure with my bloodied, bruised face.

Every time I've sat in the driver's seat to be tested, I do feel tested, I feel graded and judged and criticised and set back. That is the point, I know, but what I'm meaning is

beyond my skill in driving. I'm watching the instructor out of my peripheral view and he's watching how I act, how I sit and grip the wheel, and how I push out half my soul just to be there without swerving into traffic. I lie in bed some nights planning how I could swerve off, break some bones, or break someone else's, and earn some invisible sticker that signifies to the world that I shouldn't be allowed back in the driver's seat. It's a fantasy, with how eagerly driving yourself is the made reality, the direct-from-TV truth instead of the scam. Roads are patched up, bridges expanded, tunnels dug out. It's something I can be grateful for as the passenger, but the pressure that mounts when I feel forced into being a driver to earn my freedom, so to speak, is...overwhelming, really. I keep missing the beats everyone tells me are easy. Or not so much, with how universally-hated parallel parking is, but I freeze up every time, staring in the reflection at whatever may appear further away than it is. Staring at the side of the car. Staring at the door handle, just wanting to open it, even if it isn't mine.

I guess for now I want to sit here, on the kerb. My parents don't understand what pressuring me into trying and trying again and trying again has opened inside me of, like its own little door, and I sound precocious or stupid when I speak up, when I *whine* because I don't know much for my age, for how little I've experienced. I don't want to sound like I know more about the things I don't know about, it's why I've turned down my friends when they've wanted to go to trivia night, because I'll either sit dumbly not knowing any of the sport questions, or try to brag that I know a million things and only get half of them correct. Useless trivia gets muddled up in my head, and I start to get confused about which elements are floating around in the atmosphere and which car should turn first, Car A, Car B, the orange one, the purple one, I don't remember, I don't know - I don't imagine out there on the roads they pause to discuss it amongst themselves, leaping out of their cars to shake hands too. It's always a series of waves and mouth gestures, *you go first*, and you understand it all in the moment. In the moment, people know. But would I?

My point in all of that was that while I haven't lived as many years as my parents, so I won't claim a ranking higher than them, I have a closer sense of my anxiety and my complete mental health because of the generation I'm growing up in. How vividly fucked up I get with my stress and *nervousness* that is far beyond my nerves telling me to run and duck for cover. Honestly, I sound pretentious. But I'm sitting on the side of the road in a shifty suburb I rarely spend more than ten

minutes driving through with Mum, so I don't know how pretentious I can actually be. I just recognise things, freak myself out over the "little stuff". People love to keep telling me they were scared too, scared they would go too fast or mess up their three-point turn and drive up onto the footpath, but the feeling is different, it isn't just a little fear, a little thing, it's every ounce of me wanting to flee and not just with driving, not just when I'm in that other, newer seat instead of the passenger seat I'm so comfortable with. These feelings aren't new to me, or different, I'm hoping with all of my breath that I can leap off the roof and the makeshift muslin wings will carry me, will actually float and flap and fly. But some days maybe I hope to flop, too, for the threads to unwind. I want the thread to tangle up instead. Because then I would ball it all together, and hold it up to my parents, like a proud kindergartner with their macaroni art, and shout "Look Mum, Dad, I'm failing! It's all I've ever felt I could do!"

I think I mentioned I have an older sister, only a couple years older but she's already out there, stamping her card, persevering. Like I'm here with an empty card in life, and I'm giving up, just choosing to be a failure just like that. I'm not. I don't think. I don't know. She passed her test - but we have our differences, my sister and me. I've watched her graduate with perfect grades, basically perfect grades, and sail on forward without much of a storm in her way. But I'm overexaggerating, saying she's not had a single problem in life. It's hard to stare at your sibling and see how unaffected by anxiety they appear, without being able to peer inside their head. I picture my sister driving her car sometimes. That's the image, just her sitting behind the wheel without even a shoulder tensed, or a hand wavering and shaking. She's smiling, listening to the radio on full blast, as she drives down the highway towards her high-paying job, and it's a scene from a dream come true and I keep my eyes glued on it, out of fear, out of desperation too, maybe, because there is a stupid silly part of my brain that wants this, or at least thinks it is possible for me one day, if I can burn out particular parts of my psyche, and my veins, and everything in between.

But my sister. About her. I would never dream of having her life, but something adjacent, something I can call mine, that sounds more natural to me. Unnatural, actually. It's almost more reasonable and normal to just stay the way I am right now, sitting on a kerb. Because at least the anxiety is easing, in this moment, and I'm not stressing so much about how I am going to move from point A to point B... more than

just physically, more than just up and in the world. I know I shouldn't stare at the halo of light forming around my sister, but us moths we're drawn to the flame. Ha. Right, I'm not a moth, they spend days and nights trying to convince us we're all butterflies. When I was little, you'd act outside the borders and you were unique, different, special, but they rewarded the ones who coloured inside the lines more, actually waged a higher bid on the favourite. Sometimes your creative flow paid off, maybe, in the subjects that were worth less. Not worthless, but almost, especially from the guests peering inside the pen. I, uh, remember a business teacher telling me it was stupid, wrong, to be devoting any of my energy to the artsy subjects - I think it was early on in high school, when I realised how much I could find myself in drama, and acting, even with a phobia for public speaking and how weird it is to hear my voice loud and directed out in large, open spaces. The teacher, she handwaved away my interests. Just like that. She told me it was frivolous, what job would it get me, how could I plan the rest of my life around this moment in time - just pause and see yourself in ten years, Alana, if you make this decision or if you don't, and you convert to the dark arts of business class. Maybe she didn't morph into a space opera villain in those seconds, maybe not that - but she seemed to heap so much pressure on me, however young I was, like I couldn't breathe without seeing mid-twenties me standing there in front of me. What am I doing to her? How am I completely shaping her world just by wanting to be myself, just by wanting to take things slow? And then not even slow, not slowly so much as not rushing into a million little and gigantic things that don't align with me. Things that make me feel like a triangle-shaped piece shoved into the circle hole. It isn't comfortable.

Expectations like that, pressures, keep me pressed underneath someone's boot, whoever the someone is, even if they're a collective someone - like the whole of society - for more than just wanting to branch out into things that make me feel like an artist, not a drone. It's the anxiety that's keeping me from coming out to my parents, of course it is. I like to think I'm more than comfortable not making a splash with it, and I am, but I get so tense when I think they'll overhear something and secretly judge me for it, or secretly judge me for not confessing it sooner. I see that hologram of mid-twenties me standing there, however I'm meant to see her, and I can't even tell what has happened to how she feels about her sexuality, how she expresses herself through who she finds attractive and who she dates and who she is. Surface level, I wonder has she achieved something I keep failing. But it's a

weak, boring, useless dream to wonder, every day I can pick myself up and do something differently, I shouldn't matter what the newly changed dream is. Underneath the skin, underneath her older, wiser coat, it's the biting, scarring, virus in the blood of *is it still eating me up?* Am I still letting the fear control the brakes?

My sister, she sometimes takes me for a drive if we need to go pick something up, some form of errand, or if we're just headed to the shops without our parents, or for lunch when they've gone out, too. Most of the time I slip into a form of hallucination, really. It's a comfort, not feeling the pressure of being taught something, or scolded for not doing something. Not doing enough. The one good thing she's good for, that sister. I'm kidding! Of course I'm kidding, but some of the anxiety is gone, poofed out, when I'm sitting in her car or eating lunch with her. The anxiety manifests in other ways, but under the surface, or floats me differently, I don't know. The more I think on it, the more I'm changing the words in my head because it would be wrong to say that being around her alleviates things like having her as a sister, it would definitely be wrong to imply that, but! It's a huge but. But being around just her, no parents, takes away something. As kids we'd always fight, what siblings don't. I think she sensed there was something different and weird with me, so she'd pull at the thread until she thought she'd gotten somewhere in untangling it, or otherwise just pissed me the hell off. But naturally there's a friendship there, underneath everything, some sort of weird sister bond that's tight knit because there's only ever been a few years between us. The gap is never strong, never feels like a gaping black hole. So, you take the parents out of the equation - the people that tear out their hair when you fail - and what's left is, yes, a person whose life is a perfect uphill of win after win, speed boost after speed boost, but that person isn't telling you repeatedly to win at everything. It's a game, sure, where both players with competitive streaks twisted in their hair are gunning to lead, to win, but the objectives are different. Parents want their children to succeed, no matter what. Siblings, like me and my sister, what we want could be success, or it could be to do nothing, or anywhere in between. Take the road at your own pace, when you're inhabiting the body. Maybe that's something I could carry on with me, if I remember it. I guess I always tilt my head when someone says they have a saying, or two, or three, that they live by, and they repeat it word for word without a pause. Like they've smashed words into their memory so violently it feels like it has become a doctrine, more than words of wisdom you hear in

passing. I suppose the anxiety, too, makes me think like that - if I hear the same thing over and over, the meaning becomes lost, like how you begin to not recognise your own name if someone uses it too frequently, or how the word *waffles* stops making sense when that primary school friend sings it loudly over and over, without a breath. With a breath, realistically. With plenty. But the word is fading away into obscurity now. The words do. Words just become nothingness.

All you need to do is look around you and the terror fills in. I know that sounds like clickbait, I know, but there's a bit of truth hiding in it all, when you start worrying about where you stack up against other people. Like my sister, friends, other family members, other people your age, too. Superstars discovered when they were fourteen and now they're massive successes with their own line of clothing and a new song on the radio every other month. You stare back at yourself in the mirror and say, *you can't even get up the courage to drive a car*. It starts to eat you alive, that the anxiety is purely a fatal flaw you need to expose and smother with a pillow. It does you no good to remind yourself that there is no real need to be a driver, be the pilot, when everyone else in your circle, or your far-stretching square, is achieving the sorts of things that the world deems as a success. You're a success for getting your first job, and your second, and learning how to drive and being legally able to, and moving out of home. Friends of mine have ambitions, and plans for their ambitions, and I start to panic thinking about what any part of the future will look like when I'm completely responsible for it. School gives you the template, right, a template you become so comfortable with sticking to when otherwise your anxiety is telling you to turn this bend or this one, or maybe dart over here, or stand still and stay put, don't move an inch or they will see you/notice you/catch you out. One or the other. So, you follow the path laid out for you, as comfortable as you can, because at least the manual has been handed to you. I've tried up until this point to follow the rules of the manuals where my life isn't on the line, or someone else's isn't - probably why I skipped over Home Economics when given the chance - but trusting in myself, trusting I would have read the manual properly, there is too much terror. Someone will get hurt. Even if it is just me, snapping my knuckles, cracking my neck, twisting my ankle on the pedals. Someone will get hurt, and I will be the responsible one, bearing my wrists, wondering why on earth someone passed me however days, weeks, months earlier.

Maybe I sabotage myself, then. Maybe that is all my anxiety is good for, self-sabotage.

It's the wrong way to think, though. I've accepted at this point that there are many things in the world that I will never do - I can't see myself diving out an airplane unless I've been shoved, or it's a do-or-die emergency. But for fun, I couldn't, because the fall would be heart-pounding more than it would be exhilarating. I would feel my stomach flip, too, and start to exit out my stretched-out mouth. But I have made peace with some of those things, some of the never-would-I-ever. Some of them. There is an inherent pressure on any teenager growing up in an automobile-dominant society to, well, go beep-beep and rev your engines and lose some points for going over the speed limit. It's a rite of passage, the same as graduating some form of school, or losing your virginity, unless you're religious, in which case don't you dare think of doing that until you marry Joe or Lizzie from church after a year of over-the-clothes knowing them. Sorry. The weird stigma religious people have around sex is for another day. Hundreds of years ago, maybe. When condoms and the pill weren't available down the road, round the corner.

Nowadays there are speed cameras and those lines in the middle of the road that jolt you upright when you cross onto them. True. Better airbags, hopefully safer. Seatbelts. And maybe, like virgin Christians staying within their bubbles, it would be safer without the idiots on the roads who don't follow instructions, who don't think about the teenager freaked out and afraid, maybe...because more education isn't doing much. More fines aren't changing everything. I'm starting to get sick of explaining myself, and reasoning with my family who don't know any differently. People who don't know how to survive without speed and efficiency and darting from one point to another, always on the hustle, always keeping on their toes. Maybe it says something of our world, the pressures that are put on teenagers to learn how to drive so they aren't stunted. I'm too young to be philosophical. But then again, the world expects me to know everything early, too. You decide your whole future in high school. They prep you when you're younger, ask you what dreams you could have and flesh out, and then with a crash and a bang, in high school it must be cemented with your path. Decide your future, save some money, and learn how to drive. Learn how to get around by yourself, as they strip away your crutches and let you fend off the wolves. Everything inside me is rejecting my future, the future they want for me, at least. And I'm okay with that, almost perfectly comfortable knowing I'll flop around like a fish out of water for a little while longer.

Someone else is sitting in an outdated seat on the train, listening to music with their earphones in, counting down to

their station. Stuff like that settles me down. Doing my own thing, not letting pressure dump on me. So you failed your driver's test three times, so what. So you do things differently, so you take longer to get home, or you always take shotgun. So people constantly berate you with the question of when, when will you learn to completion, when will you escape, like I'm crawling desperately to freedom. I just tell myself to sit up, perch on the kerb, and let someone else take the wheel. Let's try to prevent an accident, shall we?

the end

Potion No. 12

on his shelf are potions labelled from one to
one hundred and
twenty-three. on his shelf I've told myself
countless stories
I started at potion number one, up above a
mould stain
nothing happened till day number three,
nothing
till I started clucking like a chicken and
roosting, trying
to lay an egg made of gold. I shook out of it
after an hour.
today I guzzle down potion number twelve
he hasn't come in, scolding me, just yet
teal-coloured liquid drips down my throat
burns my tongue like acid, tastes the way you
are
when you lick silver lamp posts and your lover
kisses you
metallic and simple, grey flavours, yet my taste
buds
they fizzle.

potion number twelve turns sweet, like rocky
road
and drips down out my nostrils like treacle
I hear the lock in the chamber door twist, and
bang bang
the professor has caught me raiding his shelf of
mysteries, sincerely
I wish to apologise, dear professor, sir, I do,
but the lock that tumbles open is inside my
little, knobby head
a door unfurls, a carpet untwists, purple velvet
draping out

and it invites me inside
oh my, it is a carnivale, dear professor
look what you have poured into my head.

potion number twelve has begun to unravel
itself in my head
one duck, dead, two ducks, dead, a clown rears
itself up
on hind legs, a sun bear in drag, face-painted,
ugly
and it nibbles on duck, and it nibbles at my toes
and I reach up for potion number thirteen, oh
quench my thirst
quench my thirst for another sun bear, and
another, and another and –
potion number thirteen tastes of cinnamon.
potion number thirteen tastes of cotton candy.
popcorn, blueberries, dagwood dogs, lychees,
piss.
piss.

I scratch at my headache, shooting stars of pain
in the carnival
I settle myself down, in a grandstand of
ballerinas, in tutus
they smile at me.
I'd bumped my head on the tile of his
laboratory.
knocked myself out cold, from potion number
thirteen
and from potion number twelve
the potion I'll nickname the carnival
a merry-go-round propels round and round
upstairs
tomorrow I try potion number fourteen.

ISBI

{I'm Surrounded by Idiots}

by Keeley Young

The men's bathroom of a department store - represented only by the mop RACHEL grips in her right hand. The set is bare.

RACHEL is wearing the bare bones of a uniform - ordinary clothes and a vest slapped over the top, bearing the logo of the store. Her nametag is crooked.

RACHEL: When I came in, my eyes immediately shot down. Like how a smell can turn your head in the right direction, but I didn't smell the piss first, I saw it, in the shape of a storm cloud. Violent. He'd made a mess, didn't tell anyone. A customer reported it to Monica when he almost slipped over and broke his neck, probably, these tiles can be like walking an icefield with socks on, or butter greasing up the soles of your feet. Monica reckons it had to be that boy - the one whose mum found him in the girls' clothing section, shoving his head between racks. Something he won't grow out of. Probably not.

So, I'm mopping up piss, right, because some idiot kid decided the floor was his urinal, the world his oyster, the store his playpen. It's upside down, working in this place. I don't mean the bathroom. I got this job when I was fifteen, because my parents said I needed to start figuring out how to make an income and support myself and understand taxes and... probably tip me off my high horse a little. When you're younger you can't wait to start earning money, so you can buy a boat. Or the penthouse suite. You treat birthday money like the golden treasure it is, pocketing it faster than your cheeky grandfather can reach over and wave it in the air like he's captured the flag. But then you get a job. Or you get a job you're getting to pass the time, earn the wads, and suddenly you're having period cravings for when they would just hand things to you. Hand good shit to you. Cause you still get things handed to you, like returns that they claim were broken already, the mop to clean up a torrential downpour of piss in the bathroom. Stuff like that, things like that. The story I've started piecing together starts when he walks into the store with his mum, obviously. We've gotta start at the beginning, but not too far - what he ate for breakfast isn't important, nor does what the birth was like, or how his parents met. Shit they always seem to die to include in origin stories for villains. No, we start when he walked in today. If we ever bothered to look at the security cams, I could timestamp him. But it's not the specifics of when, but what - so he would've come in not too long before he precipitated, what with this whole dam filling up and overflowing, so boy and mama would have been browsing first, using the restroom later. Bladder all swishing.

He would've darted for the toys. His feet gliding over the floor, almost hovering, almost catapulting himself from the entrance to the back of the store, stuffed rabbits and sloths as mattresses, soft places to land. Mum would've been the boulder. The tree, the sign, the post, for the out-of-control driver - the kid. You'd think, hey this is normal, a little family filling in as two, or one-and-a-half on the statistics, but I said them coming in was the trigger, them existing.

I don't hate - and before I even finish my sentence I'm pausing myself, because yeah, I do hate customers, I hate their smugness, their know-it-all...ness. Hate's a strong word, Rach, my parents used to pass off when I'd come home talking about how I restrained from pulling on Amber's hair, or purposefully pelting every single ball right at Corbin's balloon-shaped head. Demon child, apparently. *They were*. She'd always seem like an easy target. He'd always tease. But I wasn't a bully, not by teen rom-com standards. I hated them, shoving down the *that's too strong* of it all. You can pick little shits out from the corner of your eye, and if I was twelve again, with bangs that perfectly hid the demon inside me, I would've walked right up to that little boy and torn his hair out. Before he pissed, after he pissed, I'm not picky. On the stand I'd have but one thing to stay, serving as my own witness - "He had it coming."

Everything would have been normal until the blackout. I mean, it was a brief one, lights went down one minute, surrounding us in darkness, then they're back the next with the generator kicking in. But in the heat of it, with a game of murder in the dark afoot, the disaster artist of a kid would've been in here, in the bathroom, with his pants around his ankles. And then there's no light, no halo, he's plunged into limbo. There's a freedom to being ambushed. You never expect the lights to flicker, to falter, but today they did, enough time for the little kid to turn his head, to the left, and to the right, and make a single snap decision - *you know what, with the world ending as it is, the whole world is my urinal*. Here's what remains. A puddle in the shape of a thundercloud, a rhinoceros, and they handed me the mop and said, Rach, mop this up for us and then head on your break, okay? Okay? Don't pull your mask down off your face, though. Don't let the smell sink its way through the fabric and into your nostrils, because thank goodness one of the benefits of wearing a mask is that it blocks out ninety percent of my smell...getting into the nitty-gritty of what this pandemic has done to us, working here, another story completely. Right now just focus on the piss. Then go on your break, Rach.

Sometimes I'll go for my break and sit there, in the tearoom, gripping onto my phone. I've worked here long enough to know the place, as if I'm suggesting I would know how to break in and sneak into the office and steal something important or valuable, if those things exist in a place like this - but I'm meaning I'd know how to go about leaving, even though walking right out the front during a break wouldn't startle anymore. There's a - I hesitate, refraining from calling it cute like this is small talk between Mum's friends - there's a bakery just outside that sells anything from your standard boring choices, pastry-topped pies that smell lifeless if you let them sit out for longer than you should; and there's the more lucrative things too, like this bakery is suddenly the black market. It's an escape, ordering one of their breakfast calzones or one of delicately made vanilla slices. It's an excuse, to leave this place even for ten minutes. Mostly, though, if I'm craving something hot or baked or sliced, I wait it out. I wait it out until the end of the shift, when I can order up and carry it out to my car, slide in the driver's seat, roll down the window, sync up my phone, and take my time savouring every bite. Knowing that I can drive off from this place within minutes. You don't, you can't, have those feelings when there's another two, three, four, however many hours left of the day that are swilled up in mopping in the bathrooms, or fixing up a crumbled display - the scene of a double homicide - or you're waiting for the next customer to scream at you for something they misread, something they misunderstand, somehow mine - and our - fault you whacked your unprotected head against the swing of the changing room doors. I just clench on the case of my phone, sitting in that tearoom, eating whatever I slapped together for some semblance of an energy spike, put together in the little grey-and-blue freezer lunchbox I've had for years now, kept for the irony - I sit there, like that, hunched over at the table, committing with every fibre to not standing up, turning off, and walking straight out that front entrance without a second's hesitation. Call it feeling sick, need to lie down, need to bathe off the smell in a penthouse suite bathtub filled with tomato juice.

But no, I'll be back out on the floor after that tiny break, after I clean this mess up. It pays right, to put up with the daily groaning. Actually pays. I think no doubt things would be backflipped, frontflipped, up, down, whatever, if the power went down and we had nothing to do for it. If the kid saw nothing, not the mess he made, not his mother's face lit by the fluorescents, not his own cheeky grin in the mirror - if not all of that, what'd he do next? Shit in a bin?

It's odd, about the power. I mean it was storming for maybe an hour or two, but you hear the soft crumble of rain from inside here, that's about it. You hear claps. Bangs. You don't see lightning, or how the world looks outside. Sometimes I think it's good to imagine what a place like this would look like if there were windows, not just to the carpark, but to the outside world as a whole - and I get it, I sound like a spiritualist. I'm talking about the people that buy everything they don't need. If they saw the rain, the clouds, the misery, the sulking giant of depression through a window above the checkout, would their view change? Not just their sight. Would the purchases they make change? I don't know, just a thought - some days I go for hours on end forgetting what the sun looks like, I've adjusted so much to the deceptive rays of those beams above our heads, nowhere close to the colour of actual sunlight. It's like understanding how you feel underground, trapped underground, walking down a long hallway. The last time you felt true sun on your skin was when, five metres behind you? Ten? Up a flight of stairs, too? Up two flights of stairs, down another corridor, through another room - all of these places, flaked with little windows, rays of sunshine that dodge you just like that. Could've been half an hour ago that you actually were outside, even if outside was sitting in the car with the windows rolled down. Sorry, I'm side-tracking. We figured out that the storm took over the streets, made them beg. Giving the streets that look of a kneeling, praying hunchback with tears drying in the corners of their eyes - it's a more exciting depiction of events, sure, void of a lot of the realism. But the storm tore down some power lines, bruised up some cars pretty badly - and for this little kid, and for every customer, really, that likes to find moments of weakness to poke at, poke at, poke poke at...the storm was a cover, a faux shelter. Working here long enough you realise, customers won't care how the blackout burns against you, abrasive, hot. That doesn't matter to them.

There's a thrill for them, in watching a place like this stumble faced with something it can't control. I've got a few friends that work at one of our "sister stores" - the supermarket spinoff, but I guess we're the movie about the sidekick. Anyway. When the outbreaks got the worst - wait, no, present tense, get worse - when they get worse, no one can understand one another. Language is useless, I guess. It's not the concept of reverse psychology, so much as it's the concept of people being dumb idiots. The supermarkets overflow with a commodity they can't sell - customers. But the motto only strengthens - in chaos, we trust. Busyness is business. But everyone wearing masks, and staying wingspan apart, and the

fifty-fifty split of people sanitizing their hands - it's beyond not enough. I'm mopping up someone's urine and I'm not even wearing gloves, and I don't even have actual good-quality floor cleaner, because it was quicker to shove Rachel a mop and dangle the carrot of her lunch break in front of her face as the reward - wait *[she turns her head to the right]*
One sec.

[She pauses, dropping the mop as she moves to stage left. She disappears off-stage for a brief moment, then returns, staring at the mop lying in the puddle of piss]

RACHEL: Right. *[she walks over, ignoring the mop]* They wanted to know if I could stay back another three hours, that's all. Someone's called in sick, and somehow that has made my day worse. Somehow. This place, this Titanic, heaves itself aggressively into an iceberg the moment someone calls in sick. Key word here, by the way, is "itself". Suddenly it's frantic chaos when the mop falls into the puddle of kiddie urine. And the blame is on me, now, because I told them I can't work another three hours on top. I, uh, don't give them my reasons, most of the time. I find they don't really listen, so why bother, right? All through high school I always told myself I needed the time to study and do homework and assessment work, and I nailed it, outstanding lead actress in a TV movie or miniseries. Some days sure I have that doctor's appointment I can't miss. Some days I just need the escape, the break. The cut, the bleed.

Now that I have the irrational fear that they hate me hanging over my head, I should just finish mopping this up and get out of here, but the puddle stares back at me like a wart, a wart that keeps growing. Almost like the puddle is taunting me, despite being inanimate, and a puddle. If I had gloves, I wouldn't even care that the mop is dripping wet now.

I think one of the best things you can do, while you work in retail, is picture yourself working some horrible, worse job, or not working at all. Don't give yourself the hope you can find another, more lucrative, comfortable job, when the rose-smelling women stare you in the face, and the world around tells you it's better to be paid, than to try to be paid more, or differently. Look backwards, not forwards.

I'm not saying envision your life the way it has been, though. I pause sometimes, I guess, thinking about if we could cycle back to before the pandemic, before I truly hated working here, and just sit in a time loop of the world not changing as en masse as it has. I started working here with probably that peer-pressure level of excitement, because people told me it would be worth it, and I'd be getting paid so how miserable could it be. I'd never had a job, so I would

be telling myself this was the first step to becoming...whatever I wanted to be when I was fifteen. Your dreams can change so much within years, especially when your brain isn't fully developed yet. Every year is learning a new piece to the puzzle, and how wildly unrealistic it has made the dream you had when you were a kid, or last year, or last week. I used to want to be a pilot, for maybe a year or two. I'd never been on a plane, though, but the thrill was more vivid than any car ride or train ride I'd taken, and those were countless, those were daily or weekly or bumping into my dreams and nightmares like leaves shaken from a tree. I wanted to fly, ride the wind, and then I hopped on a plane, got myself comfy in the window seat that my Dad left for me, nested my shoulders in the creases - and I was thirteen now, still thinking of flying, so rearing to fly and see the world with my head in the clouds - and then...something pinched at my neck, popped my ears, swirled my blood like a cocktail, and the cockpit sunk into its coffin once we landed, and I practically kissed the ground. Dad said, kiddo, first times are always rough and bumpy, and I thought here we go, he's giving me The Talk on the tarmac, lumping those two concepts together like fine wine and aged cheese. But the metaphor only came to me, and he smiled, and said - so what, the first flight wasn't perfect, you aren't ready to voyage from one side of the earth to another with your aviation goggles on, and your cap, and you are suddenly apparently Amelia Earhart now, except with one hundred percent less death and disappearance. Dad said, he said to me, keep giving these things chances - so, naturally, I haven't quit this job, because it does pay, it supports me, like a well-worn neck pillow on the most delayed flight straight through the core of the ground into Hell, but it's that pillow, and I snuggle up to it because my used-to-be dream of becoming a pilot booked a well-needed adventure package.

It skydived. All of my dreams have skydived.

I'd like to take a quick break to rundown a highlight reel of the last, maybe, month or so, just to give you an idea of the sorts of customers that exist.

1. A woman came up to me yesterday wondering if we sell something, something I know we don't sell. I tried to tell her, politely, that we don't - and she sticks to her guns, to her knowledge, that maybe we're just out of stock of it. I glare at her. I move on.
2. This man the other day couldn't afford to pay for his items, so out of kindness I said, would you like me to hold onto these until you came back? He came back, couldn't pay again, said it had to be our machines

playing up. I watched him, half-listening. He checked the bank again, mobile bank, literally your funds in your pocket - and he was \$15 short. Sir, check on that first next time.

3. Mask policy isn't something we enforce on the random. We're following actual guidelines from the government, who you've voted in no matter what you think of their decisions. A woman refuses to put a mask on the other week, and I've just asked her politely, and she stares at me, and she coughs, loudly, a scream of a fake cough. She says I'm abusing her. She says, listen here girl-thing, I don't care that the government says we're in lockdown, I go where I want. I touch what I want, have since I was young. I'll touch you if I want to. At this point I'm not paying attention, she's lost me. But I tune back in at the right time, the right moment. She says, I bet you want to be vaccinated too, so they control you even more - since they've got you out here, praising the *good book*.

I haven't touched anything referred only as *the good book* since I was eight. Like it doesn't matter my religion, whether I'm a woman or a man, whether I like technology or the news, whether I work here or not - some things are just too idiotic, enough for me to push aside something a little kid does in the bathroom. Like he's young, he doesn't know better, maybe he isn't scolded that harshly at home if he draws on the floor with his urine. I can overlook this, and a lot of the stuff that happens while I work here, because it's *all in a day's work* - my dad says shit like that, because he's a walking stereotype sometimes. Blame it on how he was raised. And his father, and his father before that.

I was going for a walk the other day, trying to clear my head, trying to get some fresh air and it was my day off, too, so I had that to be excited for, and it's hard, lately, to walk around the neighbourhood and not be disgusted by the types of people that seemingly have to exist for the world to keep spinning. The kids on their electric bikes now, whizzing past you without even a bell ring. When I'm trying to zone out and destress, starting to think maybe walking in a public place is the wrong answer - everything is startling, loud, and sharp and lightning-fast. And don't get me wrong, I'll get on the highway sometimes and forget the wind as I ramp up my speed with no one looking, but I'm out on the highway, there aren't people I need to make sure aren't terrified of me. I feel yuck saying "these kids" like I wasn't in high school myself like, four years ago, but I'm not staring in a mirror. I was teenager-kid foolish, but I didn't try to steal

someone's car, or pelt tins of baked beans at their front door, or run an illegal ring of selling candy after I've stolen it from the supermarket down the road. I was an idiot because I had a crush on a guy that put me in my place so many times without me truly caring, because you get stubborn in high school, that's what is wrong with all "these kids". It's stubbornness, and truthfully not just the kids, everyone is stubborn, stubborn enough to stop listening to outlines and guidelines and what the government has to say, because for whatever percentage of their life there hasn't been a pandemic, there hasn't been mask-wearing and mandatory checking in and their beloved gyms and shopping centres closing for a week. Before all of this, it wasn't as though stubbornness didn't exist, though. People shunned anyone for wearing a mask during sickness season. It was a form of protection that existed, and helped, but it was ultimately a tool of oppression, an us vs. them thing. *Those people wearing masks, they just don't understand our culture, they think we're infested.* It was disgusting then, disgusting now. I never wore a mask once, though, before this all sprung up. I'd be vaccinated for the flu every year, so I figured, if I caught it, other people around me are spreading it, too. But I'd sneeze into my hands, wash them, then carry on my day, because that was the normal for us. The stubborn.

Mostly, I'm just tired lately. Some days I feel drained entirely of energy, like it has been sucked from out of me with a plastic tube, energy like Augustus Gloop. It sounds like the start to a terrible joke - Rach was so drained of energy, how drained was she?! Some nights I put off going to bed purely because I don't have the energy to try falling asleep. Because there's another thing, it's hard enough for me to fall asleep. I get so jealous of the people that can hit a pillow and drift off. I would be grabbing one from the Home corner, finding a nook out back, and bounding over the fences with the sheep quick smart, not counting them over and over again. I can't blame working here, or the pandemic, or losing sleep the night before. I've been this way for years, slowing, speeding up, reversing and parallel parking. The first thing you crave after a shift here is the longest, comfiest nap, but I go home and lie in bed, watching Veep and grumbling about politics. It's a routine, at least. Until I finish the show. Until I quit this job.

Until I burn all the idiots.

It's a cycle, always, working any job, but specifically working here. You might not clean up a mess every shift, or work through the tribulations of a woman calling for your manager, but you see the same things, do the same things,

eventually, given time. Every week I'll find things where they don't belong, strange things, like kids toys in the men's athletic wear section. Camping gear in the party section, nestled in between a bucket of cheap lollipops and one of those ginormous Toblerones, on, and on, and on, and on. Every now and then you find something opened and gross in a corner. Every now and then you scrunch your hand into a fist and beg to punch something, anything, a wall will do, or a face, or a wall of faces that all scream out at you that they don't care, they don't respect you, who gives a shit that you've worked here for five years that doesn't matter to them, you're not a sign or a catalogue or their eyes, their ears, their hands, their tongue poking out. Nope. You've got that look on your face that says you're bored of being here, tired of it. Somehow in that miniature overture you've forgotten everything you know about working here, and for added measure they've gained the hidden little trait that has no buffer time, no wear and tear - of course they've equipped *the customer is always right*, like it holds value, merit, purpose, outside of the people who crave the attention of this job. Monica and I, we shoot off flames at the types of people you can tell will have something to say, some problem that can't be ignored. Monica is a mop, I guess, as awkward of a metaphor as that is. Takes my mind away from things, but of course because we're always seemingly busy, I can't talk to her too often. We'll try to squeeze in time together when our time off lines up. Go for a drive down to the beach, sometimes take our dogs to the leash-free beach. Watch them prance around in the water, splashing each other, sniffing each other. Closest Mon and I come to sniffing each other is when we're wearing new perfume, or I can tell she's already started pregaming before we go out into the city for one of those nights...we used to do that so much, before, uh, well, you know. Most of the time I just see Mon at work now, when we're rostered on together. Makes things a bit lonelier, but I'm hollowed out on people, lately, I'd be so worried things would be going smoothly until someone bumped into my shoulder or cut us off in traffic or said some bullshit to my face, and then I wouldn't find the control in me, the drive to just bury my head in the sand, so much of that has evaporated lately. There is only so much you can keep in a bottle before the glass shatters, and you've cut yourself on the shards, seemingly left everyone else undamaged. A very individual destruction, then. How it feels, anyway, when the brick walls staring right back at you won't shift from their plane. Won't bat an eyelid at logic, reason, how disgusting it is that a child pissed on the floor of a public bathroom because the lights went out and no one was there to tell him

that he shouldn't throw caution to the wind the moment the world upends on itself and changes. I'm delaying things, I know. Delaying moving on from this job, for one, because that's far more important than the puddle, or going on break. It's normal to feel complacent, and uncomfortable. Customers are stupid fools. I'm a customer, too, though, and I'll slap the badge on and wear it with pride every time I go to a chemist, or to any clothing store where you're scared you'll need blood money to pay for an outfit. All it takes is a glance around and I feel out of place, out of touch. Words for chemicals are jumbles of letters to me. So, maybe I stumble forward without much clarity of anything when the doctor prescribes me something, like a stupid fool. You could give me anything. Tell me it helps, tell me how it helps, I'll listen. Give me a name and I'll memorise it.

Give me maybe five more minutes to mop up the rest of this puddle, walk back out of the bathroom, go sit down to eat, and just breathe. I'm sure by now that little kid has left the store with his mum, who's lugging a few shopping bags by now, probably with something for him stuffed down the side. They will go eat, or go to the bathroom, again, and within hours the kid will never remember that he went to the toilet on the tiles, nor will he feel guilt over it. There won't be an apology note, not even a shameful head bow when he enters the store next time. Cleaning up the puddle cleans up the mess. It's a small puddle, in comparison. It goes away.

Right, sorry, puddle duty.

end.

Hypotheticals

I

I pitied myself for weeks,
thinking you would line up someone else,
like a shooting gallery.
each head another target, each one
another bullseye. you shoot
and the crowd goes wild.
I've spat back up my popcorn.

II

I sold myself for three dollars,
given your low bet of two-fifty.
I snatched up the change,
I sunk down
to the shop, the little corner store we liked
to buy myself ice-cream.
Vanilla, white, pure, making you out
to be some distant memory
in chocolate leather.

III

I read out your texts, one by one
a marching order of your pretty words
step by step,
beautiful words hiding gunfires
in grey bubbles, each one shorter
shorter than the last.
I hated that.

IV

I'd see you out and about,
in what you used to call your better clothes
because you'd slipped out of my rags, I guess.
a fairy godmother hadn't come for me, but still
I wish it could have been you, with the wand.
with the bibbidi-boppidi-boo.

V

I don't have a story like these hypotheticals,
not that I wish I did.
I'm freeing myself out from those palms of his.
I'll be writing poetics and moving onto other
boys,
and he'll be in streets, in shrouds, underneath
clouds
and I've got no clue how he'll handle things.

Chameleon

a monologue by Keeley Young

The waiting room of a doctors' office. A row of chairs lines a pastel-blue wall, littered with pamphlets stacked in plastic sheathes. Sitting in the middlemost chair, flanked on both sides by empty seats, BEN taps his feet in anxious worry.

BEN: Never had a doctor that was always on time, but I suppose that's their job, isn't it? Freeze everything at the drop of a hat if a bigger emergency arises, or your appointment right before mine suddenly engorges your time because the patient didn't let you know how serious, severe, sensitive, how all of that their situation actually is. Nowadays you can pull open the app on your phone, select the reason for your visit, be it long or short, but I need to stop trying to reason with strangers, weird, unusual strangers - it truly gets me nowhere. They forgo being reasonable, more often than not. They think selfishly, briskly, and turn up for their appointment at the time, on the dot, and leave the rest of us in the lurch as we fear, as we stress, thinking everything is so much more brutal than it is. Then you start to think the wait time is on purpose, to make their diagnosis more of a sigh of relief than it would normally be. No, you don't have brain cancer that'll kill you in weeks. You've got *blank*. And there's nothing *blank* can do to hurt you, unless you let it.

That would be something to be thankful for, then, at least the doctor had the perfect dose of medicine without having to lift a spoon of metallic liquid to your lips. Your pain will ease over time, won't it? Will mine? I'm still sitting here waiting, checking the time every thirty seconds, as if a minute has passed instead. Nope. The white noise of the news on the TV bursts out like a Jack-in-the-Box in a horror movie, over and over, and it's a bonus con for this doctors' office waiting room, unlike a few others I've been to in the past year or so. One of them, my last regular doctor until he moved on to a different practice an hour drive away, the little TV screen three-quarters of the way up the wall played a channel that had to be unique, couldn't have been something they played on regular free-to-view TV. But it made you tired and overwhelmed all the same. Kept you in check.

So, you've got the fear of the Grim Reaper in your pocket, burning a hole in your trousers. I've been reassured a couple times now that I won't be dying, won't be needing an organ transplant, won't be needing very many other tests. It's pretty obvious you have anxiety, *kid*. You hear those words and sometimes you wish it was an imploding kidney, or a punctured lung. Something that could be cured with a transplant - not like they can substitute your *emotions*. Unless they dose you

up. Wait for the pills to undo all the damage, to clean up the crime scene, to bribe the witnesses. Anxiety isn't murder, but it's a slow-burn torture, and you're tied down by your hands and your feet. You're stuck. Stuck, too, waiting in a waiting room like this one, waiting for the doctor to prescribe you with the pills that you hope will be the change you wish to see - that sort of wording you see in free mental health clinics, not here, but my head is all muddled around today, and the tension of waiting it all out helps me little. It isn't the anger and the frustration, not at all, just the anxiety and the anticipation. I've always been impatient with a tapping foot and fidgeting hands, but not with a temper and a grudge.

I've got no clue if the pills will be a sure-fire help. Just keep with therapy too, of course, and hope that something will happen, that an imbalance will be set right. Because maybe if I can improve, I can forgive myself for some of the things I've burnt into memory. Every new shell, too, every new skin. Every repeated skin, every flesh I've stepped into to try and settle the anxiety. It's always been there - but, so too, has the need to wear different faces, swap out heads, play pretend. Always felt like it was a burden, though, instead of a fanciful game to look the part of another. Always glanced back at the photograph of whichever version of me had gone and wanted to tear it all up.

When I was younger, it was classic peer pressure, no hidden twists or new variants. You get it wedged in your head that you do what other people let you learn is cool, when you're never the one to originate the definition of cool. When I fell out of line, I was the freak, the girl, the gay. Strangely, the insults were worst when I was younger - or I learnt as I grew up, maybe, to keep more to myself, keep a tighter lip. The insulting in high school was more deceptive, really - it was either behind your back, or it was right in front of you, from the people you'd grown closest to. But before then, before the end of grade seven, I had three skins. Three shades. And then every year passed, and another colour would transform me, another colour would hide me, another colour would do both all at once. There's a revolving closet in one of the rooms in my head just for the skins you acquire when you're the introvert chameleon, desperate to fit in. Unwilling to bury yourself in the jungle just yet.

I don't remember too much of my early childhood, most people don't, my long-term memory kicks in a little later on, but I know I was the kid with all the personality, whether that was good or bad who knows. Maybe it was all a precursor to growing up gay, who can say, but there's a stack of

pictures from that time, could even be the height of little wobbling me, maybe higher, a stack of pictures of me playing in cardboard boxes, slinging my grandmother's old purses over my shoulder to pretend I was grown up, making whatever strange, dramatic pose I could make. I used to love dressing up as a kid. Whatever I could find lying around, it could become costume, couture. I never wanted to dress like a woman, not completely, but when you're younger if no one limits you, if no one slaps the shackles on your creativity, you find the loopholes to bend the normal. Especially if you're born gay, I suppose, there's the tiny voice in your head saying you shouldn't give a shit, pretend this pale blue sheet is a wedding dress, pretend this is the first dance song, and you're in love. Those cardboard boxes could be cars zipping around a racetrack, or they could be inventive bedding, because I'd like to hope little me loved napping, hope that he got a lifetime worth of naps in before he grew up and could no longer sleep during the day unless the room was in complete darkness and a vacuum of silence. I've been wildly creative since I was very little, playing make believe - which, truthfully, has made it very easy to be a pretender.

Peer pressure sinks its teeth into your sexuality even before you notice the shadow. I was pretending to accept what the world told me was the norm - dating girls, having crushes on them, wanting the perfect nuclear family - without understanding what I was costing myself in the process. There is an entire relationship I never talk about, because the skin I was wearing then was shed once and incinerated, as dramatic and slick-with-orange as that is. It was no more a relationship than it was an intense friendship, and watching the flames gnaw on it like corn-on-the-cob would've been like watching an imitation copy of yourself be thrown to the wolves. It is an added bonus, I suppose, that I rarely saw her in the years after that. The memory of it could flicker and fade, and a hanger could swing in the wind in the revolving closet. Because, really, I would never have been able to understand myself more without discarding the parts that were created out of peer pressure. Created to look like one in the herd, the woolly coat of the sheep. The fangs of the wolves.

I mentioned I had three skins before I graduated primary school. I suppose these are the core skins, if you will, that I've had since I started talking, since I started knowing there would be reason to differentiate. Number one is the truth. Number one is me, in abstract as it is, as cheesy and motivational as it seems. Number two became the me I was around my family, the skin I'd sketch in more detail as I grew older, but for now still deserved to be a suit on its own.

Number three wanted to be accepted in school. He didn't want to be the fairy, as much as he tried to clip his wings.

My parents divorced when I was very young, say five or six, so soon into my life that it almost feels impossible to remember a time when they were together. I've accepted, grieved, tried to move on from the idea that growing up without my parents together is core to why I have a fun little sprinkling of commitment issues, but that's a story for another time. I forced myself to form a shell around certain things, grew incredibly close to my mother over my father, but the thicker skin needed to grow out for what came when my dad moved on and I was a few steps away from becoming my least favourite Disney princess, Cinderella. The stereotype of a wicked stepmother might be rooted in folklore and archetypal stories, but there's weight to it, to a degree. When your parents split up, move on, and you're still learning what it means to be an unfortunate human - out of all the creatures - living on this earth, it's easy to vilify the outsider. For a lot of my life I've felt like the outsider, too, because I can make a habit of standing out like a sore thumb, but I'd hoped I would never be an outsider in my dad's eyes. He's my dad, he's half the reason I'm walking, talking, breathing. I've never hated my dad, never had true reason to, but when he married for the second time, I was on the outskirts of it all. I may not have been forced to clean, may not have found a one-dimensional twink of a man at the ball, but somewhere in the middle of those polar extremes, I hid out in the bedroom I shared with my brother, painting my face.

The second skin was changing, evolving, all because of the new bullies I was living with every second weekend.

I had it lucky, in that sense, that I would only visit my dad and my new stepmother, and my two new stepsisters, every second weekend. Sometimes, when I lie awake at night tossing and turning on some of the blots that ink my childhood on those weekends, I start to panic thinking on how it could have looked if I spent entire weeks in that house. I shared a very small bedroom with my brother, at the front of the house on the second floor. It would've been no bigger than the bathroom, maybe slightly, but the same would've been said of the other two kids' bedrooms. Economically, sure, it was the wisest move to shove the two boys together that would only be there...however many days every second weekend is out of the whole year. But the room started to feel cold and bitter, even during the hottest summers.

I've always loved winter.

I was trying to grow a thicker skin, I suppose, to bear the frost and the blasts of ice-cold wind I was walking

against anytime I opened the door out of that bedroom. Maybe not so generalised, maybe not every time.

I'm a kid who keeps to himself, who likes to treat people how he'd want to be treated because he was raised that way, but I've got a temper when I want to have one. I still call myself a kid, too, because I don't want to see myself as old until there are sharp wrinkles on my face, or my children are holding proper conversations with me and telling me off for calling myself a kid. I used to bite my tongue often enough, mostly when I came home from spending the weekend at dad's. Some weekends I thought I was inches away from tearing apart my room, kicking up a stink, trying to do something to pour out all the emotions battering around in my head. I remember telling my mum that I was tired of feeling like a prop - and the skin came down, for a moment.

I remember, too, that my dad would tell me often to present more of an effort. Moments like those I'd feel like I was letting my father down, but there'd be another hand gripping to the second skin, still utterly convinced that the only way of putting up, dealing with, all the wrung-out feelings I'd have in that house of his was to swing in the limbo. Feeling worthless does that to a person. Makes them tiptoe between keeping their mouth shut or scream it all out from the window in that bedroom on the second floor.

I felt like the worst outsider for a couple of reasons. I only lived at the house every second weekend, as opposed to everyone else who lived there every single day. I was the youngest out of me and my brother, and I'm sure there's some backward logic to suggest the new stepfamily would dislike the younger one, the one who's been on earth less. But that could be a stupid reason, a reason we can overlook, but the next one we can't. I was the quieter one, the introvert. I could stay quiet for hours, and no one would notice me.

I suppose that was how they forgot all about me so often. How they left me alone one morning and didn't say a word until they came home that afternoon, spent a whole day out without me. I'd been Kevin McCallistered without the thrill of pranking random strangers - and I suppose as I grew up, I saw the value in an entire day without a single family member bugging me, but there was something about the loneliness of that house that echoed worse when I felt as if I had been abandoned more physically, too.

I remember being squished in the boot seats of the family car, driving off to some unknown destination, being told once we got there that I was unprepared for whatever was happening. I'd be at a family friends' place without swimmers. I can be thankful, I guess, that I rarely wore thongs - else I would've

ended up at the base of a mountain in the wrong footwear, and they'd be yelling, carrying on. I would learn we have plans for the night and be harassed for not showering and getting ready before they came home. At ten, eleven, right at the start of the double digits, it was becoming more and more *my fault* for not being prepared, as if I was learning the rules of the world the hard way. Come unprepared - be hazed by the very people that were supposed to be your family.

I wish I could have spent less of my childhood hiding.

The closet started to fill out some more when I hit high school, as it should have. I started meeting new people - new friends - and lost friends from primary school because of it. I found new interests, painted a new skin solely for the confidence I started to build once I took up acting and stood there on stage, pretending to be other people, but for a worthier purpose now, for the higher grades I would tell myself too often that I desperately deserved. I went from straight and bland, to confessing I thought myself bi, all the way to coming out to my friends that I am gay, without doubts, without ever thinking again that I could be with a woman. But the anxiety was getting worse. I was desperate to figure out how to be less annoying. I was desperate to be liked, still, to say something funny or keep people interested. I was trying my hardest to not feel worthless again. You try not to be that person, the castaway, you try as hard as possible once you've got that all in your rear-view mirror.

It is uncomfortable, sometimes, to glance back at the time I spent in high school, because some of the memories are direct reactions to how I'd felt living under the same roof as my stepmother and stepsisters. Ex-stepfamily. I hadn't welcomed some people with outstretched arms, or not as wide as I could have wanted, if you take in the idea of treat others as you would like to be treated. But sometimes the tormented are handed the tools they need to become tormenters.

With every day, I tell myself to do better. To make amends with what has happened in the past, to persevere through it. There's no changing the past.

A part of me unclenched when I was performing. In class for drama, you could be whoever it was asked of you to be, whoever you wanted to morph into. For me, I was being graded now on how closely I could slip into someone else's skin. And maybe the fear, the drama of it all, made it more difficult to make the escape convincing - because I was, am, still the same shy, reserved kid - but I'd be learning the script and transporting myself within the same breath. I discovered more about myself by pretending to be other people, and I grew up more, too, finding an interest that sustained me more than

anything I did before high school. I was trying to hide the anxiety. That was the plan, that was the way I would be a different person every day if I wanted to be.

I could be swimming in paint.

I had a crush on one of the other students in that drama class, he was a friend, too, but naturally you act a different way when you've caught feelings for someone. The arrow's been flung in your chest, and you foolishly, stupidly, play the victim of it instead of yanking it right back out. He paid me attention because he was my friend, nothing more. But I thought I should have acted the way anyone who knows what love is does in a square box, on a flat screen - I wanted the feelings to be reciprocated, I wanted to feel like one in a million. I've always been one in a million. The weirdo in a million normal people - there it is. I never really acted opposite him, on the stage, that is. But there's a certain part of the performance when I was around him outside of class, just two friends, that must have been faked, falsified. I could never have flirted with him in person, such a looney tune act to even suggest, really. Looking back, it would've come out like a glitch in the system - that I was trying desperately to force a two in the ones and zeros. Once I told him I had feelings, once I wrote it all out to him with writer's tongue, nothing much ever changed...except the performing, the acting, it washed away in the tide. I remember the day after confessing, I was waiting for him to reply after thinking it all through, because I'd foolishly messaged him such a confession late at night after a night shift. I remember that day because I headed into the city with my mum, and I had such an unwavering sense of optimism. I probably would have bounced up and down on a trampoline if there was one. I'd thought, all this courage and there'd be no outright no so far - terrific, we're getting somewhere, let's do shots of something non-alcoholic because I was in high school, and let's freeze time right here. I convinced myself to be so overjoyed that I wasted the day drunk on the feeling. I didn't buy a single thing. That's a weird thing to note, I suppose, but I remember it so clearly. I didn't spend a single dollar all day.

That afternoon, he confessed something, too. It was my first romantic rejection - but I'd grown used to rejection by then. Adjusted, to a certain degree, a shaky sense. With every year, this heart of mine just grows colder, too. But I remember calling it clarity, that he was able to turn me down after all was said and done, and the crush I had on him was muted. Stabbed gently with a pencil.

Funny how the first person I had feelings for let me down the easiest.

But for a split second, with him, I'd been hopeful. I'd thrown aside the negatives, the possibility for heartbreak and chaos and ruin, and I'd been genuinely hopeful for my future. It would have meant a future with an attractive, ordinary, sometimes-annoying-but-who-isn't, guy from school. I'd see him every day, be like the other cheesy couples that walk the school together and catch each other after class. Something about that thrilled me, sure, but there was definitely something else, too.

I was still in the closet to my family at the time, wearing that disguise. I guess I was dancing around with my masks, playing pretend with them, sleeping on top of them. I'd tiptoe around any conversation about my sexuality, afraid my loving, supporting family would suddenly morph into pitchfork-carrying goblins charging me down if I even whispered a word about wanting to be helplessly in love with another man. But I grew tired of being asked if I had a girlfriend yet, too. It was asked everywhere, by everyone, as if the answer sculpted a person's view of you. You're supposed to be straight and dating someone for your future. You're supposed to be standing ashore, breathing the salty sea air, with everything figured out and sorted. I'm gay, I'm single, alone, I've got no idea what to do with my life.

I'm waiting to see the doctor and waiting for some good news. Because it's been rejection after rejection, or feels like it. And I know I've done some of the rejecting, too, to keep my distance out of the fear of being rejected. You learn to keep tabs on yourself, on others, on how you can just fill in an empty gap in the world and not be noticed. You keep on swimming in all the paint.

I danced around the idea of coming out to my family until I had my first boyfriend a couple years later. Some people like to make a splash with it, film a video, get emotional - but aside from residue anxiety, I never saw the point. Being gay is no different to me than being born male and with the birthmark on the back of my leg. Sometimes I feel like, as a gay person, that I'm not wearing enough of a mask, that it's falling apart at the chin and there are creases around the eyes. I've grown up and pulled away from certain routines that I see a million other gay men engaging in, and I feel off-centre because of it. I don't have any fascinating coming out stories, because I never wanted one - but then I feel like the betrayer when someone asks, someone's curious, and I'm holding the machine gun that's killed them. I don't have any fancy, fun, fabulous story, or stories. I keep to myself, try to be

the most of myself when I can afford to, when I can get alone. It always seems the easiest to adjust yourself to the surroundings, not so much the surroundings to me - but coming out was an exception, I saw no real reason to make it a big fat gay wedding of an announcement. I never wanted to shout it from the rooftops, in part, true, because I'd be waiting for someone to shove me over the edge. But I've always just wanted to be myself. It sounds senseless, after committing myself to all the different times I adopted a new-you, but there always has been that imbalance. Trying desperately to be myself, but upending myself for the whole world to pick out the innards they want for me to keep.

My friends wanted to see me happy, and that's logical, reasonable, all that. Their intentions were valid. But I was young, I'd never been in a proper relationship before, and dating apps were deep water to me. I figured out quick enough that I was unprepared for what it meant to be dating in the gay community, and far more unprepared for what gay sex would look like. But my friends were signing up for dating apps too, my friends were chatting with cute boys, so I should too, so I should find someone to nestle up to for warmth.

But men wanted to pin me down and penetrate me dirty.

Men wanted to take me out drinking, too, and wine and dine me, but fresh eyes like mine back then were unprepared for some of the things I would see floating in my message bank. Going on Grindr is a rite of passage in itself for any gay man with an upright pulse, if you catch my drift, so I found myself there - playing pretend, sooner or later.

I learnt how to flirt, learnt how to seduce people with more than just the cute little profile pic I had posted on there. Despite all the masks, all the pretending, I always seemed to want the men, the (probably) musky-smelling men staring back, I always seemed to want them to see my face. I make small little lies, I make them all the time, but I wouldn't hide behind a grey shadow or a catfish fake. They would see it was this sweet young thing - and it's brought the cattle in droves, but the attention distracts you, I suppose, from whatever parts of you you're projecting and expanding, whatever parts you might in person feel entirely uncomfortable with. Apps like those made me feel like a Maltese with the loudest bark. My bite, well, it can be atrocious.

I pretend like my first kiss never happened, that the first time I actually kissed a man on the lips was my first date with my first boyfriend. Lied my butt off. A couple months before that, I met up with some random stranger, and he was my first kiss. I never mention it, yet another story is tragically unexciting. He didn't take my virginity, that

stranger, but the lonely side of me wishes he had pinned me down and ripped the band-aid off. I've got that day hanging up in the hidden closet like its very own skin, very own flesh. I call him Dick Greyson. I wrote one poem about him, and I bury him every day. I was foolish, I was unprepared, and I hated myself for weeks because I had leapt at the chance to kiss someone who wanted to kiss me, to fool around with someone who wanted me on my knees. I should be overjoyed, still, that someone so attractive had invited me over and kissed me. But it has always felt like a mistake, a wrongdoing, my anxiety spiking with the thought of someone knowing and thinking me a slut because of it. Because I was willing to throw myself at the first pulse messaging me to come over.

All I wanted was to have an experience, feel less innocent than I was. Feel sexy, dirty, hot and sweaty. But those attributes don't linger around me every day of my life, they pop in for a visit from time to time, only that. I wish I wouldn't shame myself so much. I wish I could have been honest.

Once I'd broken up with my first boyfriend, for he drove me insane and wouldn't leave me alone, I started pretending around other men. I'd be blocking out parts of myself, would be what was happening. I was picking and choosing how to act, how to think, how to present, so that I matched up to how the other man was, how he thought. I had a friends-with-benefits type of thing, where I danced around wanting commitment, where I pretended I could be kinky and sexy. I started seeing a guy - we went on three dates - where I pretended to be normal, ordinary, where I tried to be cool and easy-going. Then there was another, another ghosting in a row, when I'd be brash to meet his brashness. He was coarse, loathed many things, and I felt weak for liking too many things. I pretended I didn't. I pretended I could see the world only for the darkness, and only walk the shortest paths, never go reaching out for the scenic route. I let myself be hurt by men I wouldn't even be my complete self around. I tried to settle for someone that I could, I let every single notch and node float out of me for him to be overwhelmed by. But I broke up with him because I knew where the problem was now, I was settling, I didn't find him all that attractive and there was no grand romance - I was still waiting, day by day. I kept inventing new skins, colouring myself in new paint, and nothing would work. Everything would end. My anxiety reminds me to roll along. Search out the new escape, the next chance of blending in, starting all over again. I'm exhausted from being the chameleon. I wake each day with a headache, I want to stay tucked under the covers, where it is safe. Where I don't have

to figure out who to be, what to say, what version of myself will thread the seam today.

Be yourself is a motto for the average. When you're plain and simple, okay, keep on keeping on. Keep on being your plain and simple self, keep on tending to your ordinary crop. If I'm myself, I'm queer. Strange, is what I am. Or I'm annoying, I won't shut up, I will never say the right thing. Or I'm bland, vanilla, plain and simple. The wrong sort of plain and simple. But there's too many adjectives, too many convoluted opposite terms, how can a boy be queer and plain, how can a person be annoying and be themselves?

Can I figure out some way of hiding the anxiety and still stay true to how I've grown up, how I've learnt to change my colours to fit in with the herd? All of this, just from waiting for the doctor. Waiting for more confusion.

It's not even my therapist.

the end.

Tech

On the train I am listening to the old talk about technology
a present of the young
their messages take time to be heard
take time to blossom out as colourful fruit
and the young ponder over them, unsure
and the young know too well the temptations of forbidden fruit.

On the train I pause from reading,
distracted by humble chatter, by trees,
find myself floating in the mass of technology, the cloud of it
peeking in.
uncovering.
and I give myself an interlude to think.
sometimes we lose our network connection,
sometimes we gravitate to corners of the spider's web
corners that we have refreshed
a thousand times.
Our connections are buggered, nowadays, now and then.

I've been away from trains for a week,
sitting at home in front of my computer,
I'm digesting the pixels in front of my eyes, ready-made meals
because I am a child of this modern world, one of the tadpoles
a tadpole of an electrical storm pond
and I gulp fresh water up not because I have to,
not because I need to,
but because I want to know how live wires taste
I want to know how one tadpole may recognise another
or how a million tadpoles are just today bumping into one another.
someday tadpoles become frogs.
someday I'll become one too, or I'll be stopped before I turn into the enemy
a toad.

I am not one to expel technology, cast it out like it wronged my family
but I understand that it numbs
I understand that from time to time technology is the rotted banana
that we assume will taste like garbage disposal, and shoe
but I ate a black banana last week, because I was told it would inspire me
and nothing tasted like old boot
the banana was not rotten
not like technology can be, in the wrong mangled hands
so be cautious, check wisely, know when a banana
is the wrong colour, texture, whatever
and don't eat it if flies call it home.

It is a matter of how you mould it, that shiny metal
the piece you call your phone, your laptop, your tablet

for some people technology is a pill they swallow to stay sane
I beam when he messages me, easier than waiting in the rain
for a letter from him to be delivered.

I may not fade away with the wind if I am away from my phone
I may not glitch out
I find I am not fused to the wiring of my technology
but if you stripped it from me, for forever,
I may never forgive you.

I suppose technology means I have forgotten a little
about my poetry, in particular,
for I haven't written a poem in a while, in part
because I write my poetry in heartbreak, too,
but never blame a shortage of poetry on technology
because tapping on keys created Fabletown.
and he thought it was incredible.
but I will hold one resolution, for now, for the new year
when I go back to trains, back to people-watching,
I will write more poetry.

chocolate that cares

a monologue by Keeley Young

Empty stage. A spokesperson stands centre-stage, dressed in business casual. Spotlighted.

SPEAKER: Are you ok? Can I get a show of hands?

Allow time for audience to raise their hands.

SPEAKER: It's okay, you can put your hands down now. Is that the second time this year someone has asked you, or thrown it out on the spot? Maybe it's the first. Maybe you have supportive, loving friends that dig deeper than corporations, and your boss, and your neighbour Leslie. I want to hope so.

But once a year, at least, you're wandering the confectionary aisle, and a bar of chocolate asks you how you're feeling. For weeks, truthfully, those bars of chocolate sit on the shelves waiting to slowly be bought out. Are you ok? The wrapper glares back at you. It's a yearly obligation, almost, for that time of year to roll around and your smooth, velvety, wafery treat to be coated with an empty question - *are you ok?* A sponsorship. A day promoted to pause and wonder, is my friend ok? My co-worker? My neighbour Leslie? I suppose the harshest of truths is that outside of this singular day in the 365, asking if someone is ok is surface-level - or that is the suggestion, at least. That you should only aim to understand someone's mental state 0.27% of the year. Fun statistic.

Here's a scenario though. If you call in sick on this one singular day, Mental Health Scream Day, citing your anxiety and depression as the reason you need to stay curled up in bed, what will the reaction be? Will it be sympathetic, will it be fake-sympathetic? Will your boss take the time to ask how you're feeling in the present moment, what the causes of this are, how they can make sure you're not coming back to work tomorrow with residual symptoms? Despite clearly being a health problem, you probably only have that 0.27% chance of being taken seriously for wanting the day off for what they would call "minor issues" - because you're not being carted off into a van, right? You're not being shipped off to the loony bin, are you? *Doesn't look like depression to me.*

I see no evil. Basically the international motto for how people react in the workplace to your mental health. What if I went this entire monologue before telling you I have anxiety and depression, or I'm bipolar? See no evil, right? You can go however many minutes without freaking out or causing a scene - where's your mental illness buddy, where is he now? Not pulsating out your neck like a growth. Most employees fake the smile more than ask for the time off, because when they ask for proof, or a medical certificate, what do you hand them? Do

you write journal entries, unfold your whole life to your boss? It's so much easier to fake the smile, brush the hair, straighten the tie. Pretend. Cheaper, too.

Because on the topic of money, in our beautiful capitalist society, the cost of seeking help for your mental health is not low. Here in Australia, at least, there's at least the support of a *mental health plan*, which makes it sound far more rigid than it is. Getting a decent chunk of the cost of therapy back is a welcome surprise to the shrinking bank account, but the initial cost of therapies - and the total cost, if you unfortunately cannot access the mental health plan - well, it's certainly not marketed to those of us surviving through every paycheck. There is never a wish to strip a therapist of what they're worth - but the horror stories exist, horror stories will always exist as long as we continue to suffer through our anxiety and our depression. Also, horror stories, weirdly helpful sometimes. Maybe all you need is a dose of fear that a hook-handed murderer is killing other people, and not you, to really loosen the gears. Of course I'm kidding, but if you need a list of recommendations for horror movies, I'll be out the back later on with a list. Just go see a therapist to cure your perfectly understandable anxiety about talking to a stranger in a dark alleyway.

Free mental health support is like a mirage in the desert. Anything free nowadays, that isn't free samples of cheese from your local supermarket, is essentially the definition of hope-until-proven-hopeless. Free therapy, in the form of one-on-one support over the phone or in person, will never give you the resolve that expensive, book-in-advance therapy will. Going through a global pandemic, too, has sharpened up the pencil of how many people are seeking for proper, affordable mental health care - and for a lot of people, either seeking out the cheapest option or avoiding their doctor for the plan, people really do be drifting towards those free varieties. But much like the supermarket line for the only check-out open on a Sunday afternoon, you have competition for help. It's hard to find a resolve for how painful the wait is for someone to sit down and listen to you, to talk things through with you - it's difficult to not just say, let's hire some more psychologists. Pluck them from the air, are we? Without much true support for the industry, except for those of us rallying for more funding and cheaper private therapy, public mental health care can feel like a landline that keeps on ringing, ring, ring, ring. I'd love to know how many people ring the Lifeline hotline each day - and you're like, this speech was pre-written, right, why didn't

you just Google that? I did. I just don't want to trigger you by reading out the number.

But maybe the government thinks a chocolate bar can do the work for them. I'll reiterate for a second that my being here is based on the government's support for the Arts, but not so much their support for mental health. I have a therapist, don't we all, in some form, even if your therapist is a brown teddy bear named Chester or a leather-bound journal you bought from the museum gift shop, or even something in the drawer, maybe. Whatever it may be, probably more reliable than a human being. I'm kidding! My therapist is wonderful. My therapist is not free, but I don't mind paying. Because I'm blessed to have the money to pay for therapy. But I still peek at the bank account every time I visit my therapist, to make sure I can afford it, to make sure I'm not dipping into the savings too much if I made one too many late-night purchases that week. Then I wait for Medicare to be an absolute cracker of a legend and drop some of the money back in, and at least I have the comfort of that. We're lucky to be in a country with the support of Medicare, but many people are not, and many people cannot afford to be getting the support for their mental health that they do indeed deserve. Because we all deserve a kiss on the forehead and to be told we're doing okay from our therapist. Even when we're not.

I'm trying to make this fun, enjoyable, like a really positive therapy session where your therapist tells you they are proud of all the work you're doing, or they give you a colouring book to help focus all that overwhelming anxious energy. So, I'm going to ask for a volunteer. Don't worry, I'm not inviting your parents to the stage too for them to criticise how much you've disappointed them, I'll do that tomorrow night, when I go home to have dinner with my parents. I just want one volunteer; you get to leap your butt up here.

volunteer is selected and approaches the stage, standing beside the SPEAKER

SPEAKER: You look like you have depression already, poor thing. I'm kidding! I'm not a licensed psychologist, I have too many issues of my own. Stay standing here for me, I need to grab something.

The SPEAKER exits off-stage, retrieving a magician's wand. They return to the stage

SPEAKER: I'm a magician now! Here to magically cure you all of your woes. Unfortunately, I cannot. [cue boos] I'm not a chocolate bar. But volunteer friend, thank you for coming out tonight, what's your name? [pause] You can be louder than that

- I'm your teacher from primary school and I'm asking you to read chapter two paragraph one to the class. Come on! *[pause]* Beautiful, thank you. I'm going to wave this wand around, do a magic trick, I promise you I will not abuse you with it.

The SPEAKER waves the magician's wand around the volunteer, never abusing them with it once, before booping them as gently as possible on the nose

SPEAKER: And now you have crippling depression. Or you already had it, who knows. Either way, your depression is playing up, it's spiked, and you work a full-time job - do you?

[IF THEY DO]: Terrific! You're fired! You've taken too much time off, the boss hates you, thinks you're a slacker - always has.

[IF THEY DON'T]: Oh, okay. Pretend you do. Just so I can fire you, you're fired! You've taken too much time off, the boss hates you, thinks you're a slacker - always has.

{there's some wiggle room here for the actor to change up the script if the volunteer gives them anything else to work off}

SPEAKER: Your depression didn't implode because of any reason you can request a lengthy spurt of time off for though - your grandmother didn't die, you don't have an incurable disease. Maybe your partner broke up with you and shattered your heart in the process. Maybe it is proving harder to settle into the new house than expected. Maybe your best friend moved out of state. Naturally, every individual reacts to a situation differently, and likely your stickler of a boss decides if you can't *be sad* on your own time, you may as well work somewhere else. But even if we change the situation, say you've caught the Flu pre-pandemic era, you know how frustrated a boss can get over their employee needing time off? Even a casual worker isn't safe. *[pause]* I can understand the workload becomes less manageable in an industry such as a supermarket, but the level of care and consideration can be incredibly intolerable. Say buddy next to me worked in a supermarket with a set roster of shifts every week, and came down with a particularly grotty case of gastro at the last minute. They're out for *who knows long*, they said verbatim, before they hurled into a bucket. I can practically hear the screams of their team manager trying frantically to replace those shifts, grumbling about how affected the workplace will be without them. *How on earth will I find a replacement now, they were supposed to start in an hour?* If the employee was a casual, they'd be shot in the foot for not giving two hours notice. If the employee feels ill all the sudden at work, there is care, there is attention - but your illness must be physical, must be seen. You're having a

hard time outside of work, you can't access decent mental health care because your parents don't believe there's anything wrong with you? Chuck a smile on your face and leave it at the door. I remember that advice, when I was starting out. [pause] Give a hand for our volunteer, let's get them off-stage before I keep going. [pause for applause, the volunteer exits] Thank you again, [name of volunteer].

So often the resolution to any mental health problem is to "walk it off", virtually the resolve for any minor injury you sustained as a kid, like falling off your bicycle or taking a cricket ball to the non-cricket balls. It's interesting, though, to consider how grief is perceived versus depression. The loss of a loved one is given more time and space than depression caused from, say, a particularly brutal encounter with your partner, or virtually anything work-related from a tiring job with no prospects. Yet there is still a window for grief, and a vast majority of people will criticise you behind your back if you grieve for "too long", or even, for "too short". As if there is a universally mandated period of time a person should process their complex emotions around the death of a loved one. Imagine if someone approached you while you were having an anxiety attack and asked you when you would be finished. When you'd be ready to move on and forget all of the anxiety. Mental health is a through process, not an over or under. You work through what walls have been built in front of your bridges, and yes, your goal is to cross the river or the stream, but the pace is entirely for you to decide. Entirely based on how much effort you are willing to give, how much support you have surrounding you, and unfortunately, how much money you are willing to spend.

If we're asked, *are you ok?* and respond with *no*, are we told to just walk it off? Does the chocolate that cares tell us the solution is to ingest the sugar and pretend our problems go magically away? Do these corporations that partner with charities actually donate to the continued support for mental health care, or is it all for show? Companies spend one month a year profiting off their support for the LGBT+ community, and then the first of the next month rolls around and their gates close and we pretend for another year that only one month of support is enough, or only one day is enough to target what needs to be spoken and said. The campaign for R U OK? Day centres on the notion that only this one day is reserved for sitting down and having understanding conversations where you listen to the people around you - should this not be a campaign promoted all year round? I suppose, at the very least, the label on chocolate lasts,

lingers, and hangs around until the last of its kind is bought. At least then the conversation may continue, if not followed by a laughed-off remark about how that particular day is long gone now.

Focusing on an awareness for mental health is important, that much is true. But the questions asked should strive to go deeper, we shouldn't be merely asking if the people around us are doing *alright*. The media relishes in their chance to showcase stories of good Samaritans - *I'm here today because a mate noticed I was down* - and slather the yellow everywhere, because someone or a crowd of someones does believe they're doing their part to ensure a smaller percentage of our community take their lives. But your neighbour Leslie can't ease your depression, unless Leslie is a licenced therapist willing to take a pay cut to squeeze you into their already crazy schedule. Maybe Leslie insists they will support you when they can, have a chat with you when you're both fetching the bins in the afternoon on Bin Day. A benefit of R U OK Day is certainly that it spreads awareness that your friends, colleagues, neighbours, probably even the drive-through employee you harassed last week for giving you slightly too cold chips the other week - scratch that, he definitely has mental health issues, and basically everyone does, we all just manage our emotions differently. So awareness is positive, naturally. But is that all these charity-backed annual days are good for? Mental health care systems aren't changing or evolving. And those of us who can't be the emotionless drones the world wishes we could be, those of us with health problems that can't be explained by any physical malfunctions, those of us who can't afford even a therapist - we're left to join the ranks of the sitting ducks and wait for the next opportunity for someone to laugh at us, ignore us, or fire us.

I hope for the sake of you understanding what you're witnessing today, you don't assume I'm handling this topic from an unbiased, completely-researched-every-word standpoint. As someone who suffers mental health issues of their own, all of this is very personal - and while I may not have written the words myself, because a very many people who are asked to speak do not write for themselves, the words that I've spoken so far - and what I'll continue to speak - are not to be taken as a corporate-drone speech about how we can do better! I speak asking that as humans, humans who will constantly need more care the more we damage our society, that we stop letting awareness be the only focal point of how we are engaging. There needs to be serious change, and not just in how we market our chocolate or how our bosses are forced to ask for one day. I'll also make a brief apology to the *good bosses* -

if you're doing good work out there, being supportive of your employees with their mental health and happily wearing that yellow - thank you. Any support people with mental health struggles can get is always welcomed.

Because at the heart of it all, all we ask for is support. The knowledge that people care, and want to see us evolve as people, much like how we'll hope the same for them too. That we will care right back for them. But we ask for support beyond kind words, beyond pats on the back and encouragement, the *you will be founds*. Do we have much imagination left in us? Of course we do. Imagine cheap therapy, imagine cheap anything, that's the start of a therapy, too. But I suppose you glance out the window that day, too, and you see a unicorn grazing on your perfectly-manicured lawn, too. It feels, after all this talk, pointless for someone like me to bother speaking out on what I could hope for with the mental health industry. What will my voice achieve, when there are louder voices than mine out there, when there are educated people in that exact field constantly speaking on these matters and hearing nothing in return, like screaming out into a void. My voice is soft, the sound of a mouse, but there are mice flanking my sides. Sometimes all we can do is speak and hope there are people listening.

I suppose I must thank you all for staying seated when you could have all hopped up out of your chairs and vacated the building. While the monologues that flank this on either side are more personal, emotional, and reflect on experiences that the writer connects to his own mental health, what I've just run on about is the outlier. A piece of work that aims more than any of the others to show how important it is for mental health to not only be spoken about, to be reflected on and predicted from, but to be given more consideration than the efforts of slapping a phrase of support on a bar of chocolate. It was important, too, to straddle the line between sounding like a boring, monotonous speech delivered straight into your ear hole, and sounding too emotional or building off too many anecdotes. In that sense, I wasn't given a name. Perhaps I asked our volunteer for theirs for the chance to steal it. I'm kidding, of course not. I hope I haven't come across sounding too bleak, too much on the offensive, when my intention is only to bring a focus to what many have already spoken on, perhaps even more well-spoken than I have. All I ask is that you don't let a single day define when you stay in-tune. Or not a single month, either. Keep evolving as a person, at whatever speed may prove comfortable for you.

Take a break, as they say.

Thank you for your time, have a more-than-OK night folks.

a change will do you good

stomach tells you about your eyes
how big they are, grandma,
bigger than your stomach.
your head is swelling with what happens
when suddenly $2+2$ equals -2
or you work
you work yourself over the cruise-ship edge
head keeps spinning, eyes keep bulging
stomach spills out over mountain-top rock
and you think about last year
when all you could think about
was a boy, a boy with hands around your throat.
sometimes you itch
sometimes things go bump in the night or
you wake and it's 4am and groan
and there is an elastic band tight to your head
but there is a smile
but your head is still spinning
and there is a smile
the sort of smile that people don't recognise
is faked
but not always faked
you pause: it depends on the day,
for the smile.

I have spent my share of days this year
having anxiety attacks over going to the doctor
but you catch the news for even half an hour
and see I could be sitting in a waiting room,
where there should be pastel landscapes
painted on the ceilings
just for a change of scenery to the morbidity
that I could die of this strain of influenza
or pneumonia or HIV
but my head is just strapped in
some days too tightly in this roller coaster
or is that my stomach
or is that my stress
he tells me not to worry
I listen for a day, maybe,
no more waking, no more 4am
he says you're fine
I take two swigs of lakeside suburb air
I give myself that smile.

Head, Shoulders, Stomach, Woes

a monologue by Keeley Young

A singular chair is positioned onstage, somewhere in the middle, haphazardly placed without precision. In the chair, TAYLOR (gender unspecified) is perched, staring ahead, uncomfortable.

TAYLOR: You're born screaming, crying, most of us are. Some of us are apparently pure angels without a sound, but maybe there's something hidden beneath that, as if the calm at birth is before the storm later in life. Maybe the child will get hardcore into heavy metal and scream their feelings over the thud of the bass every Saturday night, or threaten to blow up an entire building. No matter what, there feels like an overcoming need to scream. I'm simplifying things, because screaming isn't limited to one emotion or one life stage or one anything - anyone can scream, scream for whatever reason, everyone does scream. Inside their cobbled heads, too, a wail just as boisterous and wrecking-ball loud.

Can't you hear mine? Let me set the scene for you. First, what time do we have here - alarm clock please. *[an enormous alarm clock appears behind TAYLOR, displaying the time - 2:45am]* Now I'm not the late-night type, not the nightcrawler like some of my friends can be. I crawl up under the covers at maybe ten, ten thirty, eleven if we feel like pushing the curtain that little bit further. *[the clock is removed]* I conk out, most nights, after the no-man's-land time of rolling from side to side, a million and one thoughts in an array like an overgrown veggie garden, but I conk out - that's the important part. Out like a dead lightbulb. Until sometime in the morning, the sun clinging to the sea-sky already, I'll wake then, and only then. No pitch-black stumbles to the toilet, well, not typically. But I've forgotten now how many nights it has been since I slept through without an interruption. It's sporadic, waking up whenever my body snaps out of the slumber, waking up to nothing but immediately knowing I was asleep a second ago, and I won't be getting back to sleep for at least an hour or so. The nights I just lay there, staring at the ceiling, or staring at the back of my eyelids, my body is achieving almost nothing. There's no sleep, no shifting force to stumble back into it, but the body isn't vacating. The brain is in an endless debate with the heart, and you've heard it before, the ways overthinking keeps people from calming themselves, keeps them from escaping whatever overdone pattern you cannot help but spread the discourse for, over and over, over and over. It's like the mantra of a theocratic cult, sometimes, crammed inside your brain with no other choice but to listen. So, I can't get back to sleep, so I get out of bed and find something else to do to change speed, so as to not waste the time. Here I am in a chair, then.

There are monsters at my sides, flanking me like the cannons on a ship. Firing inwards, though. It's something like an insomnia, but I know how brutal that can be, throwing you overboard without warning, cannonballs bombing your limp body floating in the water. It's not a complete insomnia, more an ill-fated curse brought on from a chest opened before I was even born - the anxieties creeping out with the fear, the dread, the last droplets of hope. Putting it back in normal words, because I've been an anxious wreck for all of my life, I've started on antidepressants - we've been trialling them - and they keep me awake when I want to sleep. They shake me at two in the morning, as I open my eyes up to blank darkness, or dimness, the snap flash of the phone screen, after. I'm checking the time, groaning sometimes, mostly now just inside my head, a wound being poked at. At this point, maybe I'm losing my train of thought, rolling back over something I've already covered, but I feel exhausted at this point that repeating myself is the norm - you look so tired, you look so greyed out, not getting enough sleep, are we?

The important thing is the meds I've been taking. I'm on my third trial of a different antidepressant, begging on my hands and knees for some sign of a good, positive change. Or I was, I'm not so certain now where I am, other than sitting in this chair, in the physical. Maybe curled up on the floor, tight in a ball, maybe stiffened up with my hands in the prayer pose, like The Fool. Fool I am. When the second trial upended sleep, threw me out for a loop, it was crucial to believe in change, in miracles, in yet another drug. Crucial, necessary, too. You lie awake some nights dreading sunrise. Like an inverted horror movie, the true monsters are lurking when there is nowhere to hide, where the sunshine outlines each and every pooling shadow underneath your eyes, and see, you're the toxic vampire caught without sunscreen. In darkness, at least, you have a perfect reason to waste away your time, and it pains you less to keep your eyes open, staring out at the dead horizon. I lie there, patient when I can be, to fall back into that slumber, and drain the hope of its last droplets of blood praying that I will have enough energy for whatever waits for me during the day, when it could be all steam ahead, or you keep on lying still, tossing your time and your day away.

Third trial. Stats so far: hasn't changed how I sleep, check. Terrific. Hasn't quelled the anxiety, the depression, any of that. Kept that fire roaring, check. It's a few weeks in, so you don't need to worry that I haven't been giving this time to approach its conclusion. So far, nothing much. But we will persist a little longer - everything is always about

time. But has it done anything, this trial? Changed anything with the headaches, and the stomach pain, yet? Empty box. Empty, empty box. But it's where we've been trying to target, what our whole purpose is here, barring trying to stop me from tearing my hair out with the anxiety and gluing it back in place lopsidedly for the depression. I went to the doctor with the aches and the pains. Said help me, doc, while chewing on a carrot, I suppose. Of course not. I'd been having headaches each day, surely there was nothing natural about that - so my apologies if you're stuck thinking about cartoon rabbits and comic hammers banging in my brain. I waited for some terrible diagnosis, something like a cancer, or an incurable brain disease, anything to explain, anything to settle the fear, in some twisted way. It's almost as if, with anxiety straddling you, you wait for the news - the definitive news - that you are dying, on the last of your days, to sight the conclusion down the track. Just there, within arm's reach. But then your doctor tells you physically you seem fine, healthy, normal - and you're confused, because your body aches, at least your head does, and your stomach, too, sometimes your back. Parts of your body are writhing in their own pains, internal pains, things they won't talk about in church. Only in confessional, then. You start seeing your therapist.

I used to be on the fence with therapy, worried the person that was paid to listen to me would chew me up like raw steak and spit me back out, disgusted by the grit in between their teeth, or whatever they had stirring in their brain they wished to dump on me. I would think I was walking into a bear trap on purpose, if I just happened to find the wrong therapist from the limited choices. But there's a strange sense of courage inside you when nothing is going right, and your head is in the throes with the tightest elastic band, so you agree to go see a therapist. You want to find someone that can help, someone you think can help, so you rise on your hinds and roar back in the face of the other sense, the one telling you - scaring you, really - into believing that a therapist will just embody the little screeching voice inside your head.

I like my therapist, the backward and forward motion we make in our little, spicy, mental health tango. But foolishly I thought a semblance of an escape route would be clear from our early sessions. Thought that my therapist would see how to help with the headaches, and the stomach aches, and how lethargic I could become in one day with the dials cranked up, my body rolling me over onto the concrete. My therapist was starting to hand me tools, true, and I would smooth my hands over them, but you smash a hammer against a screw you wish

would be loose and there is no real change, the tool is wrong, incorrect, keep on fishing around in the toolbox. Because for as much as this mental health toolkit started to help me emotionally, helped me sort through the dirty laundry pile of feelings rattling around like lottery numbers, the physical refused to catch up. It runs its own race, plummeting downhill. So, you try changing the scene. Spiking your drink with your doc's poison of choice. Antidepressants.

When the first trial started waking me up in the middle of the night, I was certain changing the meds would be what sets me right again. Certain there was something chemical there that wouldn't be clinging forcefully to me if I bunny-rabbit from one drug to another. But the torment has bullied me over all three trials. The waking is never the torture. It's the tireless staring out, staring at something, even with eyelids shut as tight as they could be. I have gotten comfortably friendly with waking up, stumbling in the dark to the little lounge room we have behind closed doors, where I can shut out the glow of the TV screen as I watch some campy reality show or whatever is keeping my attention in the middle of the night. It's a comfort, watching something other than the ceiling, or the curtains. Delaying the inevitable. But when I stumble back to bed, after I gave myself an hour or so, or more, however long I wanted to escape, at least I had given that time over to pooling in more exhaustion. Or the inevitable feeling of it, at least, when I wake up again in the morning, properly.

I miss sleeping through the night. An odd request, an unexpected one, like someone asking for the most obscure song from an artist having a resurgence. Because I only stir once, maybe twice. Calling myself an insomniac feels out of place, awkward. Giving myself another title, another name, feels wrong and out of touch. But maybe the medication wills me to become an insomniac without telling me - who can say, I suppose. Without the words passing a doctor's lips, I can stay comfortably wordless. Stirring in the night.

The therapy, the pills, no change with the pain. There's the sharp cling of the elastic band round my head - a doctor early in, I can't remember which one, offered the metaphor and I've gripped tight to it like a stuffed animal you were given as a baby, a safety blanket, in an otherwise sea of not being able to describe anything in words, beyond *pain, constant*. Like a spy thriller. *Pain, constant pain*. Some days a distraction can help, allow me to float a few inches from my body. Other days, I describe the punching in my stomach like an alien lifeform gnawing on my stomach in its ravenous attempt to flee my body. The meds do nothing.

I don't want to be on them if I gain nothing from them. No change to my emotions, except I tear up quicker in emotional scenes, emotional movies. Still just as anxious, if not worse because I'm caught blaming myself for the flat, for the same old peaks and valleys. I remember how it was when I tried those lozenges, supposed to calm your nerves in stressful situations. All that glory in one little purple bead. But nothing ever happened. I was driving myself up the wall with panic and fear, waiting for a change, waiting for a moment, and nothing. Too much anxiety to even breathe for a second and consider that I was damaging myself. Hurting myself. All over a little dot, little blip, that I saw as a medication, not a distraction.

So I sit around without much of a cure, trying and failing to compare myself to someone with an incurable disease. I know it isn't that bad, that I can force myself through every day without spending every day in bed or hunched over the toilet, and it can go unnoticed, that I'm over here cursing out my head and my stomach. My shoulders, my woes. But the forcing part is like a splinter and a splint, with everyday I'm pretending to be okay to everyone around me because the alternative is giving up. The alternative is pitying myself every day, giving up the opportunities I have already, like a half-stable job, a roof over my head that I don't suffer week by week to afford, a support system, too, that can at least listen when I complain, when I moan. I get myself out of bed whether it is a slide or a heave, and I go about my day, waving to the bumping in my head, and the wrenching in my stomach, waving to them both, and everything in between and around, accepting it. Playing it off like the part of my life it is, as much as the anxiety and the loneliness has been before it. Like how a clock has all of its cogs. It keeps on ticking, keeps on counting the time as it passes, until the battery runs dead.

Just recharge your battery when you can.

Everything changing on me like this, as if I thought I would have a choice, has paid right into the hand of the devils under the surface. Anxiety, depression, the things that keep me from going out and having the time of my life being surrounded by people, or even a handful of friends, sometimes. It's no form of agoraphobia, no fear to lock the doors shut, but when your body aches, isn't the natural next best thing to slipping off in your sleep that you cut back on your ambitions? Pain and panic telling you to stay this side of the river. Stay behind the guarding Cerberus, with its three heads, that of your heart, your brain, now your entire body joining in on the ride. Your outer shell catching up with your

inner organs. You start to cut back on who you see, where you go, maybe take some time off studying at university. It's the constant feeling raging through your body, even when you aren't paying it any attention. Easier to accept that how your past few months have played out, the next few won't be any different. These are the things you think of when you lie there late at night, unable to keep your eyes closed, unable to fall back asleep again with dog slobber dripping down on your chest. You hyperventilate, or bawl your eyes out, hating yourself. You curse the meds, of course you do - their fault, their fault, you're waiting for the day you tap your feet in the waiting room of the doctor's office, twenty minutes late again, waiting. Just waiting, again, to be off the excuse. To be able to freely blame yourself and only yourself for the problems!

I strangely miss it. Less than the sleeping, less than the hope, but I do, strangely, miss turning on myself when there were problems. I guess in truth the three trials failing so faultlessly can be cast back to me, too, some sliver of my DNA to blame for rejecting what the doctor prescribed. I watch a lot of television, and as much as mental health is only slowly, more recently, getting more headway on the small screen, sometimes you notice a character start medication and it works perfectly, not a single side effect, not a single flaw. Maybe in the past it gave me so much hope. Look at that, how easy it can be - they're cured in a breath. But now it leaves me hollowed out, wondering what world I have to be born into to be the lucky one that can immediately find their happy little pill. But I shake myself out of the dream, staring up at the ceiling again.

Sometime in the future, maybe, I'll find something that works for me. Maybe a pill, maybe something natural, maybe a needle in the brain. Or I settle the relationship, build back some trust between brain and body, settle the positive and negative. Recharge the battery, properly. Not going to dwell on anything like that tonight, no. I'm halfway through an episode of 90 Day Fiancé, so I want to return to that, snuggled up under a blanket. And then get right back to sleep.

end.

snow white

I will be happier someday,
little words written in chalk
I will get myself together,
stitched up neatly without flaw
I try to keep the words from just evaporating out of me,
lake-tide lapping in
but imperfections straddle me.

prince charming will come someday,
some nerded up dork with brown hair
but he won't be perfect, he won't be textbook-ready
you know that.
he will make your heart soar, roar, slam against your chest,
but he might just stare at you, smile at you
when you do those things he can't obsess over like you do.

there is a lot of talk of will, won't, sometimes might
another thing you can't predict – it might not be so black and white
I could spend weeks in bloodshed, in tear-rivers,
soaking in sunshine where I can
I could meet a million men that make me giddy
make me twirl around in dreamland with fairies,
but I could, maybe, never meet the one that wears a crown for me
I talk myself down
I keep myself on the ground.

the wind dies out, making room for crickets
for cicadas, and toads, and the hoot
puddles dry up,
tissues wreath around the cardboard box
I take the breathing seriously, the thinking of streams a life-or-death
I will be calmer, I will be better, I will keep what matters in a lock
it is myself.
sometimes left for vulture-feast when clocks hit ten
I will be happier/give him a chance/give myself a chance
breathe in.
breathe out.

Heart

On a Train

In a Hearse

monologue by Keeley Young

A train carriage, one of the carriages where seats line both sides, facing inward on each other, the wide gap walkway in the middle. LOEL sits somewhere in the middle, a stuffed overnight bag on the chair beside him.

LOEL: We just left Elimbah station, where I'd watched an older couple sidle onto the platform like snails, clutching onto each other, the galling wind making cowlicks with every strand of their hair. I like to think they've been in love forever, to keep that illusion up that love can last forever. I, uh, am going to stay the night up the coast with the guy I've been seeing, insert the small talk of introducing him - he's a decent, genuine, nice, kind, friendly, approachable, absolutely bonkers guy, he is - I'm going to stay over, for the first time actually. I get to meet his parents - dating while you're young and you haven't bounded out of home yet is like that, like rushing the milestones people in movies pretend are big deals. Meet the parents early, once upon a time having sex early was crazy, too.

A milestone for me, my relationships, is something like lasting two months. I'm kidding. It's three.

I was hesitant, for no real reason, to meet this one. Let the talking stage linger for a while because as much as I wanted a relationship, I had to be sure I was barking up the right tree. There were a couple other guys, there are a couple other guys, I guess, just nipping in the shallows, waiting to see if things with Nick bellyflop, in the worst way. Worst for me. Cause I like this guy, enough for the hour-and-a-half train ride. Trying to make that all seem worth it. It is worth it, tell yourself that, remind yourself, meet his parents and things will be worth it. I'm excited, isn't excitement the tradition, the ritual, the rhythm and ebb and flow?

Stupidly, I've always been excited. There goes that kid, Mr. Excited - probably no one ever said that, but I remember being younger and having so much optimism and hope for everything, and I mean every single thing that crossed my path. School, hope. Grades, optimism. The chance that everyone wouldn't just abandon me/leave me/hurt me, hope and optimism. All throughout school, from preschool to Grade 12, that excitement and thrill only got me so far, I guess, because I never turned out to be the kid that found success in everything, or found the right result for thinking the world was made of butter and not grease.

For one thing, really, I didn't have a school whirlwind romance, and turning back to look at those pages, maybe that was for the best - but you feel incomplete, almost, with all of your firsts being after the uniform is torn off and burnt

in a bonfire in the paddock of your friend's acreage property. Learning everything came later, and it crushed your windpipe.

My first real boyfriend came after high school, when I thought I was starting to get my shit together. For the record I was still the same child wandering around the supermarket looking for a familiar face, but the place was just more crowded, no matter how tall I thought I was, no matter how much I strained to see over the heads of the other giraffes. He was real nice, huh. He got so convinced I was changing his life, he'd plan the cutest dates for us and get flustered at the last minute thinking wherever he was leading me would let me down, acting as if I was the most important person he would ever impress, ever, ever. No matter what I would say, or feel - sometimes the feeling would be there, but I struggled to articulate it without wondering if I'll offend him, because he put so much effort in - no matter what, he would be like an elaborate mouse trap that needs to be reset completely each time, every little notch perfectly set back in place before he could snuggle up to me again and accept that he had done the most illuminating, perfect *job* right from the gate. Job because he would sweat, pour his lifeblood into worrying about me. It started to loom over me like a thunderstorm. My ideas were exciting, but he frowned on the execution. Or it was always when he had the energy. When he wanted to move. Our breakup was sudden and like a dune buggy smashing right through the glass panes that overlooked the beachfront porch. No breakup is ever pleasant, sure, but everything with him kicked off my weird obsession with staying friendly with every person I date - started with him, sure, because he came first, and I never hated spending the time with him, but as you light a candle underneath the romance between two people, burning it all down, you're trying far too hard to protect half of everything. Half of your face, your grace, your mutual love of Star Wars movies, your mutual trust. You're using your own body as the shield between the fire and the dry. But I guess, thinking half of a person could be dry after a breakup is wrong, entirely incorrect. The full force of my first boyfriend was miserable and wet after that day, and I thought we could make it work as friends. And the pattern keeps repeating, like I'm over here trying to perfect a quilt that I'll toss over my bed at the end of the night, why, to feel warm and protected? To feel like I didn't ruin their lives by being in them? I try to keep the quilt up to my neck. Like I'm always tugging on the blanket at night.

Anyway. Every person you meet is different, something you have to remind yourself. Not like you yourself can change, but they have, the stimulus. Crazy I just started running through

the ways you can compare a boyfriend to those sheets of paper you'd be handed during a writing exam, those ones you did in primary first, before you reached 12 and all of your stress was lumped onto a three-letter exam that boosted you onto one number - sorry I'm losing track of myself, like I lost track of myself under pressure, *that burns a building down*, and all I was thinking about was trying to be the best...stupid bloody perfectionism, every single day. I want every relationship to be perfect. To be like a snapshot, taken at the split-second right moment.

In the rubble of everything, of course I run. Or, if my leg is twisted, broken, the bone meerkating out from the flesh, of course I hobble away. I can't be perfect and broken.

Nick's told me he's got big, bright, beautiful plans for the future. Nothing crazy in years, even months, just what he wants to wake up and do in the next few weeks, first. But naturally everyone has the grandest things somewhere in their heads. My first boyfriend really liked the idea of getting married. So did the third, actually, but for different reasons. One couldn't wait to know they were settled into the comfortable, like life had perfectly altered now to fit them in the equation. What it meant to be in a relationship now meant having the glossy touch of a legal bond, of actually having the hand to hold at the end of the day. It scared me, the legal jargon of marriage. One hand, one heart. It scares me, still, I can't lie on that. Anyway, the other one, the other one attached with thread to the idea of marriage, and the wedding, well they wanted the wedding - they wanted noticeable things, I think, always. Public displays of affection. Grand gestures. I'm sitting here on a train trying to constantly be the smallest thing making a journey, smaller even than the bugs and the bites. I'll shudder when I see flash mob-type proposals on something I've been watching on TV. I'll close myself off, as if I'm in the crowd there with them and all I wanted was a quiet, simple day without an interruption that could make headlines. I thought with him, if I stick around for too long, let myself grow so fond of him, that my guard will fall and he will burst into a tone-deaf rendition of *Something* by the Beatles and the blood will stop circulating through my body, the blood will just...stop. Hesitate. Blood will drain to the base of my feet. Weigh me down, think the only escape is down and out, seeping, finding whatever vessel more like a submarine it can find. But when it all ended, I gave that as the most logical notch for our incompatibility. I'm the small mouse he'll squash with his peacock plumes. I couldn't trust him, couldn't trust that he would listen when I brushed off his extravagance. Thought how

could someone be selfless for their partner. We are selfish people now, by nature. He can't help a mouse. He can't help a helpless mouse, how the hell could he?

The train takes its pause at one of the stops along the way, and I look out the window for a second, see if I can catch a style different to mine, something I could emulate, or find a face similar to mine - something I wouldn't dream of copying, no, it would be a face I would close behind the doors of the train and slink away from, wheels grating against the tracks. I don't see either, actually. I see an emptied-out train station in the middle of nowhere, how it feels, as we move further away from home, and I sit here thinking about what I'll do when I see Nick next. Cause the natural response is to hug him, kiss him, wrap my body warmth around him and crumble into how lucky I must be to have found someone that wants me, and not purely for the thrill of my body, or the thrill of the thrill, whatever. I tell myself, that's how you should react - then why am I thinking all about my exes, thinking about what I would do if I stepped down from the train and saw their faces leaning against their Suzuki, or whatever, what would I do? Bat an eyelid? Probably not.

I told them we could be friends, didn't I?

Every single one of them.

Give or take how long it took to get there.

It's complicated. Heard that one before? Yep. I wanted desperately to let my first boyfriend know that he was choking me out with his affection and attention far too aggressively, but then, on the flipside of everything, I wanted nothing more than to make sure he never left my life in a finality sense, that the things we have in common shouldn't outweigh the fact that, I, uh, broke his heart and told him I didn't love him *that* way. I thought we could be friends.

A goth girl goes into the bathroom, and stays in there for a while. Someone check on her?

I don't know why I thought he would ever be able to look at me and not see Judas and the biting of the apple and throwing the baby in the Nile and every other symbol of evil and neglect and pain and misery ever written in literature. Both feet sliced off cleanly with an axe. My vision for moving forward, moving on, has become so warped by what I watch and what I read, warped to not only a reflection of all that, but an attempt, too, to avoid some of the shattered-glass bullshit we're so used to seeing. On any given TV show, any given hour, a main character's ex... vanishes. They become a word in a conversation. Another actor moving onto another project. I thought, maybe, I could be the cringe, be the "change you wish

to see". Becomes a little tougher when most of the time you are the one deciding what time it is - the time we rise, the time we fall, the time we start to loathe each other.

Three days ago, I was talking with my first ex, I don't even remember who started talking, or what we started talking about. The start isn't the important part. We talk sometimes, getting into a new relationship never halts that, I suppose I'd like to think that's the respect we've attempted to glue together like our friendship was the cracked, mutilated corpse of Humpty Dumpty. But the glue is runny, some days. We're incompatible in many ways, might be the easiest way to explain things without spending an hour talking about him - because, I guess, after what happened three days ago, I really couldn't bother to. We work each other up, we should've given up after one of the earlier fights. But they say you never stop loving your first love. You never stop giving a shit about how they look at you.

The argument was stupid, pointless, not like we're together anymore and we need to chart a course forward to keep the boat steady, keep it from rocking back and forth. But we rile each other up, flash tomato-red flags with every conversation, he's the bull I'm the bull, get heated talking about yet another thing we disagree on. This time it was something political, a subtle difference since we both stand for similar things, truthfully, I suppose we just vapidly believe in them in different ways. Sometimes I hover over the block button. Some days I want to cut him out for good, but then I roll over in the middle of the night and suddenly all I want to do is be there for him, discuss things over and patch things up, hell some nights I'm lonely and I want to hold him again, even briefly, even for a second, to make sure what I have is what I want or what I've lost is what I miss. Some stupid nights I'll try to flirt it all back. But things with Nick are stabilizing, moving forward in the right direction instead of halting at every station, instead of screeching on the breaks for a jumper, so I can put him behind me, that first ex of mine who keeps lingering in my head when I have no one else. I tell myself I have no one else, to conjure him up. I lie, an unhealthy pastime, because I've kept him in my life as an added appendage to the shrinking list of people that are now merely just names and faces, ever since I graduated school and some of that perfectionist manifesto has been sucked out of me, unwillingly, or willingly, depending on the day. Dependent on whether I want snake venom coursing through me, sure, someday all you want underneath your skin is the reminder that you've fucked up again, and again, driven every boyfriend away because they become a burden - they're the

burden, not you, never you, what with your anxiety running a mile a minute, and the depression like a cheesy 90s rom-com bad boy but thrown violently into the world of an 80s slasher movie. I snicker at myself for so often being the bad guy, the boy with the blaster. Too much boiled rage for someone who just wants the company and the attention, who just wants to feel loved and not feel smothered. I guess you could just take the cue and wonder what day, what month, when, when will I get so burned out from Nick I'll prove that all of this was useless with him...that I'm travelling all this way, excusing the wait and the train, just until the romance is gone, from my eyes, and he'll fall in line like a friend should and I'll rarely see him, rarely look in his eyes for all the pain I've just flushed out of me onto him.

I'm a fuckup and a half, then.

Say I get off at the next station, turn back around, tell him to not bother with me. Say I do that with every guy I start to catch feelings for, tell me to just put the stupid net away and lock it up in the attic, throw away the key, make me believe it will be winter year-round with no butterflies in sight. Tell my heart the hearse is here. In every relationship I have, the eventual weak link is me, no? Even the douchebags that won't tell me I'm coming on too strong, or wanting them and not someone else, the problem is me, no? Because I don't take the hint, because I don't open my eyes, because I don't settle for the undeniable chemistry I have with being alone and miserable. I used to dream up as a kid that I could be something mythical, if I believed it hard enough and stumbled onto something hidden in plain sight. I would lurk near wooden wardrobes in places I'd never been to before, blame that on an early obsession with the lore of Narnia, how an entire world could be hidden behind two doors that swung shut. I'd be alone in the fantasies, and it was okay, it was normal. It was normal to explore by myself. If I fell from some incredible height, I fell alone. I broke my bones, my limbs, shattered my spine, all by myself. I guess after years of journeying alone there's something thrilling about someone standing beside you, with the bravest face you've ever seen. It makes you want to spend however many minutes it takes to travel on the train to see them. You sign off on something, trading something up. It's like falling. You start dating, maybe both should be more wide-eyed, take smaller steps near the edge, because from that height, bones, limbs, spine, all that - things will break in the fall.

I don't want to grow accustomed to how many bandages I'm wrapping, unwrapping, passing over to the boyfriends I outgrow. It's just pain, and fear, over and over.

I've taken the risk to be on this train, to be opening my heart up to Nick like a madman plotting for how he'll rob a bank, or blow up a freight train. There's a bomb on this train. There's a kid screaming *run, run, run away*, but nobody listens, nobody even hears him, he's screaming in his head down this track or that, finding his way around in darkness. There isn't a bomb on the train, don't worry. Don't panic. Don't call for someone to strip search me, pat me down. Do enough of that to myself. Checking for hidden weaponry. Checking for whatever could have been planted on me, by myself.

I'll be staying over at his place, meeting his family, trying to adjust to what could be if I stick around in his life for longer than a minute. The beginning of any relationship, at least mine, do feel like minutes torn out from hours. Days, even. You learn the important, early details. What does he do with his time, is he studying, has he studied, how many siblings you got? Is there a big ambitious dream in that head of yours? Sometimes the spark fizzles, a lot of the time it does. A more accurate assessment, really, would be that the spark will always fizzle, because it always has. The constant is the fizzle; it is just the length of time that changes, how long it takes for the hapless fella to become hapless...or for me to make him feel hapless, and hopeless, as is virtually inevitable the more trains I leap and bound onto, the longer I watch the shrubbery pass on by, and the cars I cannot drive, and the little places I'll not visit until lucky fella no.6, or 7, who finally agrees to meet me at the nearest station with a plume of flowers that will wither. Everything with the guys that I date has withered. Maybe there's truth there, in how I never want someone to buy me roses. Their stereotype of pure, romantic love. Maybe a farce to predict for myself.

Maybe I drive myself to misery without even giving the chance, because Nick's somewhere in yellow light waiting for me, standing in the sun, standing too close to it. I, uh, read a lot of Greek mythology as a kid, but I seemed to skirt around the story of Icarus, not on purpose by any means. I was so obsessed with Poseidon and Zeus and Hades, the brothers that split up the world and split up their hearts, so obsessed I paid no attention to the wings that flapped too high, the man attached to them with such great ambitions. He just wanted to fly. He just wanted to find, and hold, the greatest love that would make up for being that gay teenager who didn't want to date *just* anyone. He wanted, he wants, to set aside the fear, and the pain, of being ordinary, and flawed, and complicated. He wants to be on this train and not think about

one, or two, of his exes, and how it was his ordinary humanity that pushed him to call it quits when he wanted something else, something different. Something closer to the sun.

I know how I sound. If I could find a way out of my own mind, I would take the largest steps I could and move, move forward. After every breakup there's eventually that saving-grace period when you realise it is for the better to move on and start dating again, because the right man will stand in your path with his fruit offering and you will accept, because you're weak-kneed and he is standing right there, go get him...but ease up, on yourself, just for a moment. I'm going to spend the night at Nick's house, getting introduced to his life. I'm not moving in; I'm not marrying him. I'm eating dinner with greens, buttering bread and his parents. I'm sitting on a train. Goth girl comes out of the bathroom, she's okay. Makeup looking a little darker though.

I'm sitting on a train. Sitting in the carriage, waiting for my stop. We zip past another station. I plug the earphones back in, scroll through one of the longer playlists, something without much of a theme. I'm not looking for anything specific, any one song or any one artist. But something catches my eye and I press play, and I let go. With my back pressed against the chair, the uncomfortable square of these older, wiser trains, I give myself over to song. To sound. I'm hearing the two minutes and thirty-five seconds of another person's story, and every now and then, a lyric sounds like it could've been mine. If I ever did one thing differently.

the end

I Stumble Upon Mondays

I have not seen you in months, when months do feel like lifetimes
the colour of your hair changes in my head
last time we met, did I paint your face with rainbows – or was it thunderstorms?
something about hail kisses your neck now
something about me makes you quiver
I've changed, I guess
you've made the effort to forget me
I am but a sliver creeping in your head now
snake time for a penniless charmer
no, never me, rising out of ash
I am your clout.

anyway it is a Monday, petals are haloing around our heads, but what –
the colour of your crispness is autumn leaves
strange for our overwhelming season
strange for the blue-grey tinge of your lips, malformed grapes
it's Monday here, and beneath us, in dirt crumbling like crust of us
I've changed, I guess
janitor closet mops mope out from behind brooms,
dripping in your saliva
in mine.

I'm sorry I called, I've changed
I guess.
burn me off of your flesh, burn me
otherwise let me crinkle

what is it, though, that you seek out with tumbledown eyes,
eyes like mine, eyes brown
eyes like mine.
oh.

we endanger each other, funeral home each other, and yet –
yet there are clouds, or the mush of s'mores, with our names crusted into them
the crunch of crust – toast crust – one morning in late January
the month of what beginning, we spin ourselves up with winds
but a broken toy wound up will squeak, creak
a bird chews through no scrumptious food with no beak
I distract myself from myself
with the crunch of toast crust, back in time,
I'd have distracted myself with you
wake me in birdbreath, would you?
oh, your ankles, your thighs, they will not shift from tin-man stature
your jaw is snapped shut, turtle
this time I will call down rains of oil
instead of slitting my own throat, a vessel for oil thicker than water
I am known for the drowning of children.
I've changed, I guess.

I cannonball myself back from you, afraid to shatter
another season or twenty-eight can pass before I find you again,
curling underneath the leaf of a fern, swimming in shadow
no I hope you never read a word lurching from my lips and stop
no never stop to think the words are about you, not from this mouth now
with ensnared snowstorm, dangling in the lip of my trap from the night,
I will set all free, I am no more hungry
not for icicles
though a sight of snow, real snow, would warm my insides, strangely
I have not seen you in months, when months feel like lifetimes
the music swirls me away from the frost pavement
why reserve a hello for a guest that will not show?
give such a table to a bowl of ice cream.

I Think I'm Alone Now

a monologue by Keeley Young

The stage is bare, almost. CLAY sits cross-legged in the centre of the stage, a few packing boxes set around the room behind him. He's alone.

CLAY: Finally started going through more of the boxes now that I have all the time in the world on my hands. I found something I'd been looking for, tossing some papers over my shoulder, making an absolute mess at my feet. Even a gust of air can crumple a stack of papers, you throw things funny, you look at someone funny. Sorry. I found something, yeah, right at the bottom of one of the boxes. Sophie, my roommate, she comes home most afternoons at five, stares at a couple of the boxes in the unused third bedroom, this one, and then finds me hunched over the computer in my room, and she goes, someone else moving in, are they? Finally? We've, what, posted ads for months trying to find someone. I've asked my brother, my cousin, your friends, mine, my mother, my grandfather, that kid down the street, the dog, the mailman - the cashier that told us it would be \$105 for our groceries. She wants someone else, balance the rent a little. *You don't work anymore, Clay.* I quit my job a week or two ago. I'd be helping a customer, or talking to another employee, and suddenly one of the lights would fall on my head, or someone's child would poke a broom into my chest, and everyone would be staring at me. Everyone stares, people like to look at each other. But people like noticing things, you notice. When I was living with my parents, they had close friends, lived about a street or two away. Always walked past our house in the afternoon, walking their dogs. Two things that looked like they would trick you with licks, before they chewed on your ears, first just a bite, and then a gnaw, then half your ear is gone, and then one side of your head is battered. Bugged. Not even an artistic statement too, people just stare, notice, walk past you every afternoon with their dogs.

Right. So, my parents had these friends. Lovely people, but not lovely neighbours. What's that a reference to? Right. I used to like keeping the curtains open in the afternoon, and with my room right there at the front of the house, close enough for them to peek in, uh, some afternoons they'd want a chat. It's the boy! In his natural habitat! It's extraordinarily rare to see such a specimen sitting there, at his desk typing on his computer, his fingers moving so fast because he's mastering the art of touch-typing so that he doesn't pause as much, so that he doesn't keep jerking his head back and forth. Quick, George, snap a photo of me and the boy. Their dogs bark. Or piss on the garden, the lime tree we have growing out front because Dad thinks if we get fresh

fruit from home, it's like saving money that he can then put to buying beer, or other alcohol, and there he's already got limes ready for the squeeze. Thought about keeping a bowl of cut limes near the desk, with the window wide open. When those neighbours came around, I'd lean down, pick up one of the halves, squeeze. Squeeze it right into their eyes, throw the curtains shut, just run out of the room and lock myself in the bathroom. *[he laughs]* But it was only a matter of people thinking they can notice, and stare, at the boy in the window like they notice and stare at my parents, and my younger sister who'd give those dogs head scratches and lift them up into the air like a child just been baptised. The boy, he's elusive, doesn't chat to us so much. He's keeping up the mystery.

I always just wanted to stay in the between. Between school and home. But it was a walk, a short one, probably only fifteen minutes, and I'd either be following behind kids, or pacing ahead of them, or both, some kids having louder conversations now that there weren't teachers to scold them. I'd walk in silence, not living near any of my friends. Sometimes I thought about turning a corner, a different one, and just keep on walking until I hit another corner, and another. I didn't hate my family, and I don't - but I couldn't teleport myself from the front door to my bedroom, like I couldn't close the curtains and still see the screen with the light of the sun or feel the warmth of spring leave a handprint on my cheek. The first week living with Sophie, I saw her when I wanted to be seen, or we would bump into each other in the kitchen, and we'd smile a hello, or wave a goodbye, and she didn't say those phrases that haunt the graveyard in your head - how was your day, buddy? I'll leap myself off a building if there's another reaping of small talk day in day out.

And now I sit at home by myself, talking to myself. It's not like I need to check in with how I'm liking the weather, or whether I learned something special or useless in one of my classes. I can sit down and shush myself, if I want to.

She said, aren't you going to be bored, not working anymore? She likes weekends out of the apartment, slipping her feet into tight kitten heels or having a morning coffee with someone she met doing yoga, or in university, or while ordering coffee. I can spend a whole day, the complete thing, pacing around from room to room, doing things like watching a movie for two hours, eating lunch, reading a book, watching nature documentaries on tv. But she's out there. Always, unless she's down and out, but the door isn't ajar anymore,

it's closed, and she's ordering in and not even considering tipping the driver, because she's already paid enough for the food and the money's already dripping from the account like spilled wine from a thousand-dollar bottle. *Money*. I quit my job. And the first thing people want to say is, so what now? Do you have another job lined up? Or, maybe not, maybe they want to jump to pitying you. *I'm sorry to hear that - what happened? If you want to talk about it.* I must have been wronged if I wanted to quit, in some way. The people you work with suck, do they, darling? Or is it the boss? Did he act too forcefully around you, stick something too far in you, boil your insides up for you, like soup? Something had to have happened, for you to be sitting in a room like this, twiddling your thumbs, talking to yourself, terrified of leaving the house - but it wasn't one thing, or one someone.

Like I said to her, I said, something I probably can't repeat verbatim, but the meaning is there - I don't see the point. In explaining myself, in unpacking these boxes if I don't need to, in leaving the house - what's my point. Why is it my damage? I nearly get run over crossing the street. A customer will look at me with the beadiest devil eyes and tell me everything is my fault, you freak. Freak-of-nature. Your hands start shaking when we talk at you. You nearly get run over crossing the street, and there's a dull groan in your head as your co-worker walks up to you, holding a pair of scissors over their head, and you pierce skin just to blink twice and realise you're going insane, picturing scissors, using the word insane even in a sentence like you're no longer one of those people in the crowd who likes to tack the word after things like *how*, like *that's*, how insane that's insane. So, the door locks. You quit your job, because they're still treating you like a robot, too, throwing you from side to side. But that breaks the circuit - *say, do I care, do we look like a charity for health, wellness, keeping your hands from shaking...* I don't like going back there. There are ways I can make money from home, be resourceful, stay inside because it's an environment I am comfortable with. The things stay in the boxes because it's where they should be, packaged, not laid out on the floor like they've been collected, or they are to be counted, or sold, or stored somewhere else. This stuff doesn't belong on a shelf. Material possessions that live hermit crab existence in their boxes. She doesn't get it, why would she get it? She doesn't get the point, like she's pricking her finger on nothing. Stay away from my point, if you don't want to get it.

I, um, have an education, at least. I mean nowadays your degree doesn't mean much if there isn't work, or you're too shit scared about the world outside your door, but whatever, I've made peace, I guess, that I can make rent money at home, with work being so digital nowadays anyway. You become a name and a face, right, so I can pretend to be a businessman in a suit for when they call me, check in with me, or if I find some sort of a following, though what content I'd push sounds like something I need to think about, sleep on, ponder. Too ugly, look at me, to be an influencer that profits off being attractive and having the right sense of what an angle is, and having nails that don't look bitten - you know, last time I was at my therapist's, she goes, I see you've taken up a new hobby, poor dear. Apparently, she thinks I'm a chewer. So, I can't pose with the newest skin care brand in my hand because the nail beds look torn up like a rat was set loose - they'd want me trying product, anyway. Trying to make my skin look flawless. Like, I was always the kid with acne and scars. I scratch. I told her, I said, I'm a clawer, not a biter. A regular Freddy Kruger. The idea of stuff in my mouth is hit or miss, I guess, and I guess it's been a while since any sort of shift from just shoving food in there, barreling it in like my life is some sort of 8-bit Donkey Kong game, but the fat little plumber just sits down, pulls a clean white napkin out of his pocket, and eats, and eats, like he's always had a hunkering for wood... it doesn't even matter the end goal then, why not, was he supposed to be saving a princess? Oops, was he? Lemme just wipe the splinters off on my overalls and show you, I don't give a damn.

Sorry, no, uh, if I can't make money I get thrown out on my butt. Then it's like the train tracks can only veer off one way, and it's back to my parents, back to sitting in that window, although I guess with whatever money I have left I can cry over the dream of buying curtains that block out the sun and haven't been fished out of a bargain bin. You can't even find a bargain bin with curtains. It's splash out and find something nice, but not crazy, or you're buying cheap blinds that crinkle when they move and slap each other and wrap around each other and suddenly you're in the middle of a crowd of people that don't know how to keep from bumping into each other, and touching each other, and touching everything around them, and you just want to stay in your room where you already have curtains and things that just stay in their place, or in their box, whatever, and just - the worry fades when you stay at home, watching the same tv show again because you remember the first time it cured your break up, just like that.

Fuck's sake, you miss having a person without bad intentions.

Rent isn't going to come in. Like it's a digital age, sure, but not one built for a kid like me - fuck, I still call myself a kid because I haven't grown up, I can't, because growing up looks like just accepting you'll be shoved in a box with your name marked on it, and whatever, you accept being a statistic and a demographic and a number and a word. I'm not plastic barbie doll built for digital world material, I might post a picture of the kookaburra that flew in and landed on the balcony ledge, and I get like, ten likes, from a bunch of friends that would just be scrolling - maybe they don't even see it's me who posted, when would the last time have been that they saw me?

I can't sell my body, my heart, my soul, anything, I can't sell it off. Half of what I own is my *this* - the body, mind, organs, everything, it's half. The other half is the things I collect like pretty shells, my books, old movies I watch when I'm sick, which is every third day, at this point - everything I have to offer, to give, has to stay stuck in my orbit. Some nights I'll sit up late, pull out the old laptop that still runs fine, and I almost go looking for a new job, or something new to believe in. I could go back to studying, invest some actual belief in one of the trillion obsessions, like what if I studied history again, pretend the past is more important than it is. But then I freeze. I'd have to speak, huh. I'd have to research and write, hey. I'd have to sit in a crowded lecture hall and listen, think I'm finally going somewhere, while everyone else around me does the same thing I do, but better, adapting quicker, knowing their worst quality is trusting in people too much, or loving a good bargain just too much. Their depressions last an hour, maybe. It's a heavy cry, red puffy cheeks, and then they go to work. Oh, first, they leave the house, too. It isn't hard. They don't check the locks three times over. They don't spend the car ride manually overriding all the fretting in their head, no, the toaster is off, you didn't even touch the iron this morning, or the TV in your bedroom, of course you turned the shower off and locked the back door after you ate, you moron, dingus, settle down a burglar doesn't think you're the right one for him to hack, slash, beat, bash. Stop. The car speeding around the roundabout might just kill you. Maybe let it. Maybe let your reasons to keep living go, there's never been enough of them to outweigh every fear. Elevators dropping. That rules out your roommate. Never finding yourself, you've heard how potent it can be, finding yourself. Just cross out your hard work, your passion. Stuff it in a box, maybe. Stop leaving your house because the wolves are hungry. Fear, and fear, and get tired, and sleep, and sleep. Listen to the voices in your

head. Stuff other things in boxes. Never the voices. Put them on shelves, put them on display. Stop leaving the house. Tell your roommate to leave you alone, and she's threatening something, but you block out the last part, because you're stuck on her passion - her *I will*, her *have no fear*, the way she just moulds herself right, she's made growing up look so easy. But nothing moves for you. I've been distracted, not bored, by digging through the stuff I have in these boxes. For a few minutes, I thought I was looking for something to watch. Having another one of my sick days. But then just sitting on top was a book I read in high school, one of the books they make you read but then you end up loving, so you buy your own copy, dog-ear a couple of the pages. You hate that, now. Hurting something you love. Half of what you love is something you grab hold of. Something you squeeze, break. It's easier being used to your surroundings. Forgetting about a book because it's been in a box. And when the wildlife photographers come, they come for something to gawk at. But they stop seeing the show when the trained animal does nothing.

end.