Flashbacks---A memoir

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this memoir is to give readers relatable literature about dealing with being LGBTQ, relationship, and cultural issues. Consisting of 23 “flashbacks” or stories, Part I of this memoir covers these issues through the telling of my personal stories. Although the stories are not in chronological order, they mimic the order the flashbacks or memories would play out in my head.
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Flashbacks---A memoir

Reflective Essay

Tiffany Vu

I am a microbiology major who wanted to write a memoir for my honors thesis. While it may seem strange that I chose to do something completely unrelated to science, it was important that I showed a different aspect of my skills. Having a full range of skills sets me apart from other scientists who are only able to do science well.

Being in the Honors College I kept up with my non-scientific writing in the form of essays, but I wanted to show the Honors College and myself that I could write something literary too. A big part of science, namely research, which is often overlooked, is the fact that a good scientist can effectively communicate her findings with not only other scientists but other people too. I wanted to show people that I am an effective communicator by having examples of pieces of work spanning from research articles to scholarly essays to creative writing pieces, such as this memoir.

To write this memoir I had to branch significantly from the dry writing of scientific research and from the formality of college essay writing. My graduate student mentor Kat Greene provided me with flash fiction stories to get me started with the mindset of writing a literary piece, which helped out a lot because even while I read the stories it felt awkward seeing all these adjectives and metaphors. One of the first problems I had with writing the memoir was being more descriptive in my stories. In addition to reading the flash fiction stories, I tried to reread novels like Gone with the Wind or The Golden Compass to find my literary voice.
When I first started writing and working with the Kat on my memoir my stories were mostly factual and not very descriptive. As we worked on the pieces each flashback evolved into descriptive memories that were easy to imagine. Later, as we gathered the stories and put them together, I found myself with a cohesive working memoir.

Now the memoir is not written in chronological order of the events that have happened in my life. The order of the memoir is meant to reflect the way in which my “flashbacks” occur in my head. Moreover, I chose to use “blink” as a transition from each flashback to emphasize the way in which memories can change in a “blink of an eye.” This order was best since it allowed me to remember in the most accurate way possible. In each flashback timeposts help readers more easily correlate one flashback to the other. Additionally, a common thread runs through each flashback that connects them in some way, whether it be through an image or feeling or subject. Each of these flashbacks is a significant moment in my life that helped shape me into the person I am today.

Through this project I learned that I am a person shaped by the relationships I have made in my life. My thoughts about what’s most important in life, the decisions I’ve made thus far, how resilient I am in the face of adversity---these aspects of myself were instilled in me during and after my relationships with others. My thesis stops at Part I because the length seemed appropriate for a thesis and because I felt these flashbacks covered the topics I wanted to write about for now. Additionally, since I only had less than a year to write it, I wanted to make sure that I turned in a well looked over and edited working memoir. I know that I have much more to write about, especially since many of the relationships I’ve written about in the memoir (such as my relationship with H.) are still evolving.
Writing this memoir was a life goal of mine that I was happy to see to completion. I proved to myself that I was able to write a literary piece well. This memoir is one of the accomplishments of which I am most proud for my years at Ball State. I feel great knowing that by writing this I have given others like me struggling through LGBTQ, cultural, depression, and college issues something in which they could take comfort. There is not a lot of literature that covers these topics, so I hope that the publication of my memoir might encourage others to create more literature about these issues. Moreover, I wrote my memoir in such a way that it might appeal to everyone with the intention of persuading others to read the memoir and possible change their perspectives about the topics I write about.

Although this thesis is only Part I of my memoir, I plan on writing more and having this entire collection published someday. There are many life events I have not written about, like the relationships I have had with my high school teachers that encouraged me to be a great student and my family dynamic with my parents and older sisters. I want to share these stories. Thus, for the future I want to continue writing and expanding my memoir into multiple parts. Then, it’s off to the publication houses to try to have this memoir published.
Flashbacks: A Memoir

By Tiffany Vu
Preface

Growing up I always longed for literature I could relate to about life as a gay woman. I remember perusing my local library for youth fiction books in middle school and high school about girls falling in love or being gay in general, thankfully finding books like David Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy* and *The Realm of Possibility*, Julie Ann Peters’ *Keeping You a Secret*, and Alex Sanchez’s *So Hard to Say*. I read these books at least twice over, waiting impatiently for the authors’ next publications. These books helped me figure out that being gay wasn’t the desolate, solitary life I feared it to be. The books I read didn’t portray homosexuality as some fantastic anomaly or grotesque malfunction of humanity. Instead, these novels tried to be as true to life as possible, making the characters and stories tangible and plausible.

Times are changing now, with more literature, movies, music, and news media for LGBTQ individuals to relate to than during the days I was a pre-teen trying to reconcile my identity and feelings. In writing and publishing this memoir I wanted to contribute to these changing times by giving hopeful, relatable stories to people who are struggling through being LGBTQ, depression, and/or self-identity and cultural issues. I’ve experienced a lot of sadness and heartache in my life that more often than not was alleviated by learning about others going through similar experiences. I was not alone in my pain. Thus, I want to make sure that other individuals will always have someone with them too to help them get through some of life’s most forsaken times and to celebrate with them life’s most beautiful moments.

This memoir is written in the form of autobiographical “flashbacks” or micro-stories. These flashbacks don’t follow a set timeline, much like flashbacks that happen in real life are memories ranging from life experiences that happened a day ago to 10 or 20 years ago. Although these flashbacks do not follow a timeline they are connected, with each story being separated
only by a *blink*. Looking for “time-posts” in each flashback should help with understanding and picturing the characters and stories better, but hopefully the focus will be more on the feelings and lessons from the stories.

All names in this memoir are real names except for H. Because of the intimacy of the stories I write about H. I thought it best not to use her real name out of respect for her and her family’s privacy.

I hope you readers enjoy this memoir. Thank you for letting me share these flashbacks with you all.
*blink*
Her With Him

Duality. He's on top of H., putting himself inside her gently and I see and hear her moan. I'm glad her husband can make her feel good, but at the same time I loathe myself for not having what he has. My heart cracks as I imagine her loving him back, but I am relieved too. At least she is not in a loveless marriage. She told me she tries not to think about me, yet I wonder if sometimes her mind slips while she kisses and holds him. Does she ever have to bite down on her tongue to keep from calling out my name? I hope she doesn't, yet wish she does.

These dual thoughts never seem to stop fighting with each other. It's been five years since I last got to hold her. To be thinking about her after all this time...sometimes it makes me feel like this pitiful, naïve person. She's married for Christ's sake. Has a kiddo with another man. A man.

She left you. She chose him. Yet I still find myself tearing my mind up with thoughts of her. During my first year of college, a few measly months after learning about her marriage and pregnancy, I couldn't sleep at night 'cause of all the thinkin' I did. What if she's making herself do this to please her family? What if she's still out there giving herself up while she still loves me?

The uncontrollable thinking got so bad that I had to resort to making myself believe she had died. She was in a better place, not in the nightmare I thought about all the time. I could concentrate on mourning the loss of her, rather than torture myself with infinite imagined guesses about the pains she might be experiencing or the joys she had without me.
*blink*
Coming Out

My parents were playing Wii Sports when I came downstairs to tell them I was gay. In the living room my dad was gliding side-to-side across the carpet, swinging his arm and moving his body as if he was actually on a tennis court. On the arm of the big, uncomfortable loveseat at the periphery of the living room my mom perched on the edge of the armrest, cheering on my dad. They looked so happy and relaxed, which made my already fast-beating heart beat harder with the thought that I might be responsible for making them feel awful. The week or so before my planned coming out I had been making a mental checklist of items I would take with me to my best friend Salvador's house---my guitar, some clothes, my shoes, my backpack. I hoped my parents would give me time to pack and would let me take these things they bought for me if they decided to throw me out. If they didn't, I knew my older sisters would help me out, but I didn't want to burden them.

Immediately after my mom saw the look on my face, her eyebrows scrunched together, her eyes narrowed, and she asked, "What's wrong?" I remember feeling like a little kid after getting hurt---my mom asking me what's wrong while I tried to hold back tears so I could blubber out whatever part of me got hurt, only this time I was sophomore in high school vs. a little kid. It would take me at least a half an hour and many no's to the guesses my mom threw at me before I pushed out the simple phrase, "I'm gay." I remember my mom getting exasperated with me and remember the dread in my chest pushing down on my lungs with every guess my mother threw at me. She's gonna guess right eventually and I'll have to tell her, panic and sadness meshing together at the image of their concerned faces turning to disgust after telling them I'm gay. Perhaps the combination of seeing me sobbing and the impact of that simple phrase on my parents' hopes and wishes is the reason my dad was brought to tears. Or maybe it
was just the latter. Whatever reason it was I never had to go through with my plan. No packing or trekking over to Salvador’s. No looks of disgust from my parents. Just my dad’s tears and my mom reassuring me she and my father still loved me. She said to me what I only dreamed she would say when I imagined the best case scenario of my coming out to them: “We know this isn’t something you can control. We still love you just the same—probably even more now that we know more about you and you can be comfortable with us. You’re our baby. We’ll always love you.” I was very lucky.
Rage

The pop/clang of the bones in my hands against the metal bedframe is satisfying to my ears. The clang is reminiscent of two swords violently coming together. Pop, clang, pop, clang. I hear the pop of my knuckles cracking a half of a second before the ding of the metal meeting my bones. My punches make my lofted bed hit against the wall with loud, doom doom doom's, reminding me of the bass beats of thunder in a storm. In this moment everything is satisfactory---the loud doom doom dooms, the clangs and pops, the pulsing throbs and the jagged stabs in my hands. This pain is controllable. I can choose when I want to feel it. I can choose the level of hurt the pain causes me. I stop briefly after my middle knuckle fragments under my skin, and then throw a hard left hook to the frame so my left hand matches my right. The physical pain lingers long after I've stopped beating my bedframe and just barely covers up the emotional pain I've been trying to get rid of. So much for those two years it took to stop taking my anger out on inanimate objects. I'm a damn angsty high school kid again. I'm back to hating myself for being gay and for hating others for making it so hard. Would H. still be with me if being gay wasn't so distressing to people? Breanna? Would I not long to be a boy if I and the person I love could love freely? I'll never know for sure. The not knowing, the what if's, that's what makes me so livid.
"I love you's" lingering in the back of my throat

It's been almost three years since we last talked to each other. Every day I wondered if H. thought about me too, and now here she is telling me she has---that she tried not to think of me, but dreams about me a lot. I finally get to tell her I love her and know that she hears it. We start talking more---from messaging to phone calls, to almost every day "Good morning" greetings. For a few brief moments it feels like we’re together again. My filter gets clogged up with all the 'I love you's' I want to say to her and one day I slip and call her sweetheart. She tells me gently that we should stick to calling each other by our names. "Someone has to control the relationship so it doesn't get out of hand." After all, she is still married to him. I start disguising my ‘I love you's’ with her name. How much love can I put into the way I say her name? I try to keep from suffocating from the ‘I love you’s’ I can’t say to her.
Homemade soup

Vietnamese rice porridge. A particularly yummy batch of chao my mom made for my dad and me. A simple gesture, a cliché in the movies type of gift---a bowl of soup for a sick girlfriend. I hold the hot container tightly and guardedly as I make my way up the thin-carpeted stairs to her apartment door, the smell of old tobacco smoke and stale clothes and dust trying to make their way into the broth of the soup. I try to make my way up the stairs quickly so the soup won’t absorb the pungent smells. To my relief she comes to the door not too long after my two knocks. She sees me, then the soup container in my hand and gives me that warm smile I’ve been making my mission to see every chance I get. The way her forehead wrinkles and her eyebrows come together and the way she looks appreciatively at the soup as I hand the container to her makes me feel like I’m giving her the most thoughtful present. *No one’s ever given her a gift.*

Her past boyfriends have given her flowers, *always flowers*, but never anything else.

This makes me want to give her everything. The sweetness of her smile as I hand her the container of soup, the softening of her eyes as she looks at me, the gentle touch and warmth of her hand as she squeezes my own: I want to experience this over and over again.

She pulls me into the sparse living room of her apartment, kisses me, and after grabbing the warmed container of homemade soup we sit in front of the sliding glass door on the edge of the carpet, with the sunlight from the sliding glass door coming in all around her as she eats the soup and smiles and talks to me. I try to listen to what she’s saying, but I’m too distracted by the way her hair gently falls around her face and the way her eyes and lips turn up in the corners when
she looks at me. At this point I can’t fathom why anyone would pass up giving her anything.
She’s so sincerely appreciative of the gift. I could get used to this. I start imagining all the other
stuff I could do for her—clean the house, make her breakfast, lunch, all the meals every chance I
could get, surprise her with cute little dates and love notes. I realize she asks me a question but
when I ask her to repeat herself she just giggles at me puts her hand over mine.

In this moment I realize I want to spend the rest of my life with her. As a 17 year old kid though,
I realize too that I am very young, too much so to be making these kinds of decisions for myself.
That little warning thought dissipates quickly after she pulls me to her for a kiss.
*blink*
The lake

H. and I are at the lake now, sitting near the edge on some thick, uncomfortable rocks in the dark. Everything is shrouded in various shades of night blue, with the moon big and highlighted against the monochrome backdrop, the lake gently making quiet ripples across its surface. There's a chill in the air, but I take off my worn leather jacket and lay it across the rocks so she'll be more comfortable. Before I met her I would come to the lake at night alone, quietly sitting on the rocks and fantasizing about one day sharing this place with someone like her.

She comments on the beauty of the scenery and then I tell her about my long-held fantasy. We kiss and I feel tears on her face, so I pull her closer and ask what's wrong. I'm afraid I've done something wrong, but she looks at me so lovingly that the fear goes away quickly. She doesn't tell me, so I just kiss her eyelids, trying to make the tears stop, and stroke her cheek and hair in an attempt to soothe her. I wipe the shiny, moonlighted tears away gently with my thumbs and look into her eyes for an explanation, but she doesn't say anything and only allows herself to look at me fleetingly. Instead after a while she pulls my face to hers and kisses me for a long time, with silent tears still trailing out of her clenched shut eyes.

Back at the house in my room as I sit on the floor against my bed holding her in my arms she says to me, "I could die right now," which causes me to panic and ask why she'd say such a thing. She turns her face to mine and tells me that everything is so perfect, she feels so whole, as if she has found all she looked for in that time with me. Then she confesses the feeling she has of an early death for herself, a feeling she got at the lake. She tells me that her soul will probably rest at the lake and that I should visit there if she did die. Hearing her say this makes me feel a sadness so thick my heart drops from the weight of it.
She wipes away my tears with her hands and brings my head to her chest, holding me so tight against her I can hear her heart beating steadily. She has no idea how much I want her heart to beat on forever, a feeling so strong I feel my heart beating harder to help hers. I feel her kiss the top of my head, and I move away from her so I can see her face. I look at her and watch as she remembers the lake and that feeling she had of being so mortal. I wipe away my tears and kiss her again. We speak again of me going to visit her there. About how I don't want to live in the town anymore but would stay if I knew she'd be there.
*blink*
Disposable.

H. tells me she can’t do this to her family. It’s selfish of her. Actually, the most selfish thing she could ever do in her life. To be with me and hurt her parents, her parents’ reputation, her friends.

So she leaves me.

This is the first instance. You know, usually you’re supposed to avoid making the same mistakes after getting out of a relationship with someone, but for some reason this same scenario plays out again during my college years.

Breanna tells me she can’t do this to her family. If we had met at a later time in her life, she might have been able to. But there is so much she wants to do. Get married. Have kids. Dreams of having a husband. Later she changes her story and tells me she never loved me. All she said and did with me was because of an addiction to romantic love, which she realized after talking with her counselor sister. After we break up it’s as if we weren’t ever best friends or spending our days and nights spouting “I love you’s” or sharing sweet, longing smiles and looks. Like we never held hands in the car or laid in bed together for hours, her head resting on my chest right under chin and my arms wrapped tight around her.

Instead, Breanna talks about her avid attraction to guys and all the guys who like her too. The “I love you’s” and dating part of her life and mine gone in a nonchalant poof. I end up having a
difficult time recovering from this break-up because I’m in utter disbelief that yet again I’ve
been tossed aside so damn easily. *What the hell makes me so fucking disposable?*

Her and Breanna, they both leave as if they didn’t tell me all the time how much they loved me
and felt *good* being with me. The break ups end with harsh verbal jabs and violent shoves.
Breanna with her constant talking about her love for guys and her never existent love for me. H.
with a phone call after months of only receiving an e-mail or two and a couple brief phone calls
(one phone call after I called her mom to make sure nothing bad had happened to her)---A phone
call that made my breath collapse back into my chest and my heart stop. H. was getting married.
H. was *pregnant*. H. was in *love* with someone else. H. spent her time sleeping with some guy
while I waited for her. Has the gall to tell me, “He’s so *tiny,*” and the audacity to tell me, “If
you’re going to be friends with me, you’re going to have to be able to put up with hearing stuff
like that about my husband.”

I mean nothing. I’m trash---an annoying cellophane wrapper or some month-old leftovers gladly
gotten rid of and forgotten about. Maybe reluctantly remembered for the grossness or annoyance
they experienced in their time with me before tossing me out.
The old couple

H. tells me: "I remember going to a shop in Vietnam to buy a present for my Dad. An old couple ran the shop. When it came time to wrap up the present I remember the old woman straining to reach the wrapping paper on a high shelf and her husband rushing over to reach it for her. I remember thinking, 'That's the kind of love I want to have with someone.'"

The old man didn't do anything spectacular or difficult. After H. told me the story I remember thinking that I would always be doing little things like that, that I already do stuff like that for other people. Is love that simple? Helping out someone you care about without being asked to do so.
*blink*
Salvador

We met in an 8th grade history class. He sat across the room from me near the windows of the classroom and I remember glancing over at him every once in while noticing his handsome features and an odd feeling that I had to be his friend. After class I would try to walk with him to the buses, doing my best to get him to talk to me. All I clearly remember about this point in our interactions with each other were the odd looks he would give me as I rambled on about classes or the weather or the way he would slightly hesitate answering me after I’d ask him a question.

Somehow we moved from awkward brief hallway questions to e-mails back and forth going on into high school. I got to know him better and he got to know me, I was able to make him laugh, he understood my humor, and talking came easily for both of us, so one day we found ourselves in love with each other. But what we mistook for romantic I-want-to-date-you love was actually best friend love, which we found out one day after school.

It was nicely warm outside and a couple nights before I e-mailed him asking if he would meet with me after school. Maybe we walked around for a while talking about all kinds of things I don’t really remember, but then came time when he brought up the e-mail and I found myself having to confess two opposing facts: 1) I liked him and 2) I’m gay or bisexual or something other than straight.

So there we were sitting on this curved, tall stone bench in front of the high school with the sun going away for the day, the afternoon air getting replaced with chilly night wind, and me clutching my hands together to distract my legs from wanting to run away from Salvador so I
wouldn’t have to confess. We sat and sat on the bench, getting colder as time went trickling by and I tried my best to avoid telling him I liked him I think? But that I was also some kind of gay.

I remember him looking at me straight in the eye and smiling and telling me that it was okay to tell him, and him looking down at his hands and telling me he had something to tell me too. After my turn at prodding we decided to count to three and just tell each other what we wanted to say. But I couldn’t do it on the first try so we did it again and then Salvador blurted out that he thought he was bisexual. I remember exclaiming, “Me too!” And telling him that I think I like him but it’s a weird kind of like because I didn’t want to do anything sexual with him. He confessed he felt the same way, and so we realized we loved each other but not in that way, but it didn’t really matter because we finally had someone in our lives who knew and was going through the same thing.
*blink*
The secret

I'm the secret she doesn't want her parents to ever find out about, or anyone else for that matter, the unclean desire that she wants so badly yet feels ashamed about wanting. A touch in the sight of other people makes her cringe, but she can't stop the warmth that courses through her body after contact---the safeness and affectionate feeling that comes from the closeness of this person that makes her cringe in plain sight. After too many days of holding herself back she becomes too tired to care about the thoughts of others and allows her body to do what it wants. An intertwining of fingers, an impromptu peck on the cheek. But then it happens one day. An unwanted glare, a mean scowl, eyes brimming with disgust, these all wake up her worn-out mind. So then it is back to darkness, to accidental brushes in the light that quickly make her heart speed up and her body sweat out of pure fear. Instead of holding, her hand is used to subtly push away her lover's touches, and kisses are replaced with stern, reprimanding looks if her lover forgets too that only in the dark can this kind of love be let out. No matter how good it feels in the dark the people in the light remind her over and over again the her feelings are wrong. But every time she looks at her, her heart swells and tries to leave her chest to be closer to hers, and no matter how long she tries to persuade and tell her heart it isn't doing what it is supposed to, it still rebels and goes to her.
*blink*
"My husband"

A simple title, a name, an indicator. A label I can never have. Two words that H. will never use to describe me to her friends, acquaintances, co-workers, or family. "My husband is a doctor."

"My husband absolutely adores our daughter." "My husband is very good to me."

I will always be her "friend". This person she used to know. Maybe to some people close to her I will be known as her ex-girlfriend, a past lover, a brief adventure or experiment. But never her husband. Never her wife. A secret hidden in her heart only she and I can ever find. Five years apart and we still love each other.
A painful buzzing

is in my chest. It crescendos to my throat and forces its way back down to my chest via sharp, ragged gasps. As the gasps scrape through my body my eyes start to water. Salt on skin. Imaginary fissures making their way across my chest. The buzzing pauses but never stops. One after another the memories flash by. Can’t stop them now. Cringe, but still see the memories as if they were happening all over again. I shut my eyes tightly to black out the images, but regardless of how much I strain they still make themselves known. Like the blare from an alarm going off in the solid quiet of the morning, un-ignorable and invasive. Five years apart from H. make no difference. The buzzing is familiar. The fissures very real.
Being occasionally amorphous

It happens every once in a while. As I said, ‘occasionally’. I will emphasize parts of myself I think are appealing to whoever it is I’m trying to impress. Usually girls I have crushes on. She likes music? I’ll pick up my guitar and play it every day. I’ll even start making mixed CDs again. She likes animals? I’ll volunteer at an animal shelter. She doesn’t like cussin’ or accents? I’ll replace my drawl with polite English. Am I not being myself? It’s a little bit of cheating, really, because these traits I’m emphasizing are or have been a part of me at one time. Present-me though? I never really know. I’ll get so engrossed in the transformation. Be yourself. That’s how people started liking me in the first place. “Be yourself”, on repeat in my head from the on-set of the change. To have someone dislike who you truly are---that is unbearable. A shield made up of ‘that wasn’t me’ protects a person from feeling the hurt of not being accepted.
Last time I saw her

Today H. is leaving for her home in Vegas. But right now at around five o'clock in the morning on a cold spring day just getting ready to start she is still here, far away still but not across lands and lands of states. I walk past the receptionist at the desk, who gives me a curious, guarded glance, but something about the way I look, or maybe what she sees in my eyes, makes her put her guard down and let me pass without a word. When I get to her hotel door I knock cautiously, expecting her to be asleep, but to my surprise she responds quickly to my knocks asking, "Who is it?" In reply I give a vague, "It's me," which in turn is answered in a brief moment by the opening of her door. I see her face first, then the light glow of the lamps she has on, and then her laptop that lays open and running on the edge of her hotel bed. I realize she has been awake and ask if she’s been up all night. In reply she tells me that she’s been talking to her friend about how an ex-lover from his past is suddenly talking to him again. I assume it is that one guy, the one who deceived her girlfriend, stirring up trouble again, but she tells me it's not him--- it's the other friend she told me about. I go through a list of guy friends' names I've heard her talk about but forget the man your father introduced her to, the man who is now her husband. With a look of guilt she tells me it is him she has been talking to all night. Back then I briefly found her expression out-of-place. Now I guess that she felt guilty because she knew he considered her more than a friend---that she felt as if it would hurt me. For a few moments she sits wordlessly against the headboard of the bed, typing away at the computer, periodically stopping to read some text. Then she closes the laptop lid and puts it on the ground next to her bed, looks up at me and gently asks, "Why are you here so early?" I take a moment to answer because something about her voice makes my heart ache and reach out to her.
"I wanted to spend more time with you before you leave," I tell her. Her face falls, but she quickly changes her expression and yawns in an exaggerated way and says she is so tired, then makes her way to the right side of the bed, turning her back to me.
*blink*
Dealing with depression can be an intense experience. It turns all thoughts into hateful, stringent sneers.

*Get your fucking lard ass out of your bed and do something for once*

*Why are you so sad that someone doesn’t want you to really give a damn?*

*You will never get anything done*

Being completely livid or sad for no apparent or relevant reason occurs weekly (or if depression has been sucking at you for a long time, daily). A constant mental bombardment of the most defiling insults you can wreck your mind with.

After living with depression for so long there comes a time like in a waking dream when you are completely conscious of the fact that your mind is trying to kill itself. You try to stop it or you try to wake up but it is like your brain won’t listen to you, which is a crazy thought because you pretty much own your brain so you can’t figure out why you can’t get it to shutdown or think other thoughts, so you drink or smoke or pop or sleep or throw punches or cut to distract your brain to maybe get it to shut up for a moment so your heart can take a rest from all the bullshit smack talk it is getting from your brain that you can’t control which makes you feel weak and stupid and even more worthless and susceptible to believe the loathsome observations your mind is making about you, and you want to cry because the situation is so frustrating but you can’t because some part of you wants to show your hateful brain that you have some semblance of strength and to prove the deprecating comments wrong. But the battle in your brain is more tiring.
than doing hard manual labor and now sleep doesn’t come easy at all and the frustration grows and froths like a pot of water boiling over and scalds your worn out mind and
you just want it to fucking stop but insomnia has creeped in and the brief respite from sleep is no longer there and the cutting and punching and drinking and smoking and pill-popping has lost its luster and only fuels the insult machine that is your brain on depression but you want it to fucking stop and so you think of death and the nice peacefulness of stopping and forever rest and nothingness but then you have to do everyday things like go to class or interact with family or your significant other or go grocery shopping, and you see all these people who seem perfectly fine and normal and happy and mindless and you can’t fucking understand why you can’t be together and functioning like these other people who are so much better than you and so the anger building in your chest shoots up to your brain---and now the personal insults are mixed with this pervasive buzzing red noise that makes you feel absolutely insane and maybe you giggle like Christian Bale in American Psycho to yourself about how godawful everything is and how you honestly think death is the only way to make your brain stop and how you are extremely conscious of this epic thought war going on, but can’t do anything at all to stop it and so dying sounds like paradise and living looks like death but you’ve been taught this isn’t true.

Then one day something turns off your brain and smiling comes easier and touching insanity is just a memory, and everything is fine.
*blink*
First Reunion

I’m so, so nervous. *Will H. think I look different or bad?* I haven’t seen her in months. The anticipation of being able to see and touch her mixed with the nervousness is making my heart beat so violently that it’s a struggle to concentrate on anything else. By the time I pull into the driveway, I realize my hands are shaking. I call and tell her I’ve arrived and wait in the car, glancing every few seconds at the walkway to the driveway. When she turns the corner and comes into view I feel my heart leap up in my chest. She’s shyly looking down at the walkway as she makes her way to the car. I quickly open the car door and dash over to her, immediately pulling her into a sloppy embrace. I pulled her over to me so fast that I accidentally pull her face into my shoulder. I apologize and laugh a little and hug her tighter to make up for hurting her. Then I feel the warmth of her and the softness of her hair against my cheek.

She affectionately scolds me and puts her hand against my chest, saying, “Oh honey, not here. They can still see,” referring to the couple she’s living with. Once we make it around the corner in the shadow of the garage I pull her to me again, wrapping my arms around her tightly and kissing her on the top of her head as she rests her cheek against my chest. She lets me hold her for a while but then breaks the embrace to go into the car. Later in the car big tears are streaming down her cheeks. I panic for a moment because I’m afraid I did something wrong.

She cries for a bit, keeping her eyes down and swiping her tears away quickly with her fingers, I sit silently, raking my brain for possible reasons she’s crying. Finally, I just ask her why she’s crying, but instead of explaining she scolds me for not starting the car to drive to our movie. By the time we get to the theatre her face is devoid of any signs that she had cried. We end up watching *The Road*, which is a terribly graphic and violent depressing post-apocalyptic movie. I don’t exactly remember why we chose to watch *The Road*, but a part of me now thinks
she chose it because it was the longest movie at the theatre. Luckily we have the theatre mostly
to ourselves, with only about a dozen others scattered in the rows below us. She rests her head on
my shoulder early on in the movie, but ends up curled up across the cushioned theatre seats with
her head laying on my lap for the rest of the movie. It is cold in the theatre, so I drape my heavy
black peacoat over her, accidentally waking her, but she goes back to sleep after she realizes
what I’m doing. I hate the extreme violence and cruelty in the movie and get scared at lots of the
parts, but I don’t move or wake her so that I can still be near her for a while. I refuse to sleep
because I want to be able to savor her closeness to me. I get to run my fingers through her soft
hair again and intertwine my fingers with hers. I get to see the gentle rise and fall of her chest as
she breathes, and get to stroke her arm and side and kiss her on her cheek and forehead. I get to
love her again. In that theatre full of agonizing wails and terrible images from the movie, I still
felt a sense of rightness with the world.
*blink*
That look

I held H. pressed up against me, my body outlining hers, my arm wrapped tight around her body. With every breath I took in the scent of her hair, wondering if death came then and there if I would even care. Now she turns around and looks me in the eye as we lay side by side on the tan, fuzzy carpet, my hand resting on her soft cheek as she tells me, "I don't want to do this with anyone else. I just want you. You're always so gentle." I kiss her on her cheeks, her lips, and reassure her she doesn't have to do this with anyone else. She doesn't have to do anything she doesn't want to do. Her eyes and forehead crease together and the corners of her lips fall as she looks at me, as if something has broken her heart. She buries her head into my chest and pulls me closer to her. Instinctively I kiss her cheek and forehead and try to sooth her. It hits me that I could never leave her. Not willingly at least.

I get mad at myself for not being older and able to take care of her properly. Barely finished with high school, only inklings about the careers I want to pursue after graduating. She deserves my best for the way she’s loved me and appreciated me. But there are all these milestones I have to pass through first before I can even get close to my best. While I soothe her I think of these things and start feeling one the first, most significant thoughts about me deserving her. What if she is settling for someone less?
*blink*
Blackouts and memories

We've been asleep for some time but I wake to H. moving away from me, frantically going to the door and opening it to use some light from the hallway. I hear her gasp and see her look back at me, then run to the bathroom still naked. Quickly I get up feeling the coldness of the room against my skin, and the hot panic of worry that something is wrong. When I get to the bathroom I see her reflection in the mirror, a frightened look in her eyes I've never seen before as she stares at her hands above the cold sink. I look at her hands more closely and see the red tint of blood coloring her fingers to the knuckles and realize it was from our lovemaking. I take her hands in mine and tell her it's okay, I'm not hurt at all. She doesn't speak or look at me, just continues to stare down at her hands with that same scared look in her eyes. Turning on the faucet I wash her hands gently with my own under a warm steady stream of water, watching as she continues to stare at her hands as my dried blood washes away from her shaky fingers. Finally, she asks if she hurt me, and I assure her that she didn't, that it felt really good. While I was washing her hands I see I have blood on mine too. She goes to the shower now, getting in and turning on just the faucet fixture.

As she washes herself she tells me she has blood down there too. She asks again if I was hurt by her and again I tell her I wasn't. I get into the shower with her and wrap my arms around her to comfort her and tell her again I wasn't hurt.

When she and I get back into my room she tells me the story of when she was younger, about eleven or so. She tells me about her lonely reclusive cousin, how he rarely talked and always kept to himself in his room. Then she tells me about the day she ventured up the stairs to his room, feeling sorry for him because she thought him lonely. Later she tells me how she would go up there every day, about that memorable time when she and her cousin watched as a
bright red black-spotted ladybug made its way slowly up a dark green plant leaf. About how fascinated her cousin was with it. Then she tells me the dark part: how she and her cousin would play tag, how he would punish her when he caught her. Back then she didn't think anything of it; it was something she and her cousins always did. A playful teasing sort of thing.

One day, though, it was much different. She was on his bed and she remembered feeling a pain she never felt before from him. Next she recalls blood, lots of it coming from her, remembers him telling her to leave and her going downstairs into a bathroom to clean the blood off of her body. She tells me that after that she never went up there again. I ask her the usual questions, like what exactly did he do to you but she only remembers him sticking his fingers inside her prior to that, something that she hadn't recalled in so long and back then believed to be just another little teasing punishment like tickling. A blackness is in her memory; she doesn't recall anything else. When I try to probe her for more, she winces, telling me that she doesn't want to remember. She then tells me how he was the years after that, how he was always very nice, sticking up for her when her family members made snide, rude comments about her dating a much older man, just for sex or money they said. I can’t forgive him, but she does.
War stories from my mother

When my mom talks about the Vietnam War it's as if her experiences were casual events. The most feeling I see from her while she tells the stories is when she talks about her father leaving her and the rest of her brothers, sister, and mother behind to save himself.

*My dad panicked when he saw the ship trying to leave. They were lowering a net from the ship that people out on the boats had to grab onto and climb to get on the ship. I remember him jumping from the boat and reaching for the net, pulling himself away from us and climbing up the ship. Some people couldn't hold onto the net. A bunch of them fell into the water and got caught under the moving ship. My dad made it onto the ship though. Everyone was scared. After that my mom and your uncles and aunt had to run to a relative's place. The ship your grandfather got on ended up getting turned around. He never got out of Vietnam. We made it on a ship a while later, to an island somewhere.*
*blink*
Church Bells

My heart stopped beating after I processed what H. said. Getting married. Pregnant. Later when it started up again I felt a pain so sharp tears pricked my eyelids. With every ragged, irregular beat my chest ached. Now I know it was because my heart broke and diligently played out its rhythm despite the fact that cracks and crevices distorted it. For months afterward my heart beat in an irregular pattern. At night I would feel it beating at such a rapid pace I thought my heart would explode. Sometimes I felt it delve out double taps, then slow beats, all sorts of variations. It no longer had its true rhythm---steady, strong, regular. It was broken, weak, trembling almost from its feeling of cold loss.

When I felt my heart at night beating so violently I mentally tried to calm it down. Pressing her pillow against me in my dorm room bed I would feel and hear the beats and try to make it obey a rhythm going through my head. It never really listened until I thought of her, remembered her, and began to cry. While I was crying I didn’t really know if my heart's rapid beats abated. All I felt was the sadness, the loneliness, and sometimes the anger. Then, that tired relief from crying to which I would fall asleep.

I know a part of me will always be loving her---holding her close to me, kissing her face, comforting her when she is sick, listening to her thoughts, dancing with her on the patio, making love to her gently. Sometimes I miss her so much I feel my heart start to pull its way out of my chest, longing and reaching for hers. I have to keep a clenched hand tight over my heart to keep it from leaving me.

On rare occasions I am able to dream of her. I’ll catch a glimpse, it seems, of her face, or be able to see her leaning against me in my arms again, her soft hair brushing against my cheek. Sometimes I’ll be running away with her, our hands linked tightly together, smiles on our faces.
Other times she'll be explaining why she had to go, how she really felt and how she missed me so. I think I am not able to dream of her as much because my heart knows that one day I won't want to wake up again---that I'll want to stay with her there. I know deep down that I would if I was able to, if I knew she'd be there.
Babies

“She also is asking for a guitar and she wants to fly a kite. She wants to surf the waves too. Don't ask me how she knows these things. I have no idea.”

Absolutely adorable. Two and a half years old. H.'s daughter.

I see babies everywhere I go. Smiling babies, crying babies, sleeping babies, cooing babies.

Babies with light curly hair, no hair, thick straight black hair, barely there blonde strands.

Chubby babies, old man babies, big-eyed babies, long eyelash babies, wrinkly babies, squinting babies. I love every single one. But I wonder every time I see one if I will ever get to have a baby of my own with the girl I love. Ask myself if I would actually be okay with adoption or donors.

Of course you would. You love all these babies that aren't yours.

“She sings a lot.”

My older sister Trinah tells me on the phone one day, “Hmm, I forget what you did as a baby. It must have been because you weren't bad like your sister Ashley. You were so smiley and easygoing, like a little hippie baby...Oh, I remember! You sang a lot when you were little. It was so cute.”

I try to see myself in her---in the curve of her smile, in the crinkles at the edge of her eyes, in the way she talks and acts.
“I’m okay with her having my brains but my husband’s looks. Actually, she looks exactly like him.”

Just a glimpse of me for a moment is all I want to see. Instead, I see your contemplative oval eyes and cute, distinct nose, a hybrid of your smile and his, his thick eyebrows, and your soft, straight dark hair. Your daughter’s smiles reach her eyes like mine do, and for a second I forget that your husband’s do too.

I’m not a part of her. But when you tell me about her, I can’t help but smile and feel my heart swell like it used to when I was with you.
"I chose him"

That’s just now sinking in. She’s said it plenty of times since we started talking again my second to last semester of college. *She chose him.* She could have been with me but she chose him. The depression she went through after I told her I couldn’t talk to her anymore, missing me and her 3-month old baby, could have been avoided. Her doubts about wanting to be with her husband cause she never loved him, *at least not like she was supposed to.* She’ll give me all these reasons why we couldn’t or can’t be together:

1. *I’m too young*
2. *I haven’t had time to mature*
3. *I couldn’t support her and her baby financially*
4. *Not being in love with him isn’t a good enough reason to divorce him*
5. *I was only 17 when we started dating. It would have never worked out.*
6. *She has to keep her family together for her daughter’s sake.*
7. *What would she tell her parents? His mom?*
8. *She was raised in a different culture. She was taught not to do things for herself all the time, to think of others.*

I’m like okay, these are good reasons. Then again, there was always that other choice in the very beginning. Me. But she didn’t pick me. She knew I loved her, but chose someone else that could give her a sense of security. In a way, I can’t blame her because it would have been a huge gamble staying with someone whose future wasn’t established. She told me she knew she would never love someone like she loved me after we started talking again. At the same time though it makes me question whether or not she actually loved me like she said she did. I can’t wrap my
mind around why even while knowing this she chose security versus a once-in-a-lifetime, universally-sought after kind of reciprocated love. When she tells me about all the stuff her husband does for her I know in my mind that I could/can do all of that for her too. I would try to give her everything. I think she knows this too. For whatever reason though, she keeps herself from being with me. I used to long to hear the things she tells me now---about how difficult it is for her not to think about me, that she dreams of me a lot, that she loves me still after all this time. But I'll never understand how someone feeling this way wouldn't try. So I doubt her feelings. Does she really love me like she says she does? Or am I inspiration for a character in her fantasy world?

I try to tell myself that she didn't choose me for all those reasons she said and not because I wasn't good enough or won't ever be good enough for someone like her or any other girl. But I can't shake the feeling that I'll always be missing something. My heart gets a little weaker each time I think of the possibility that I might never be able to love someone like I want to, or that someone will always find something missing in me.
*blink*
Dream a little dream

In H.’s fantasy world she’s living in some quaint, warm place. Worries about finances washed away with the steady stream of money coming in from her job as a doctor and her sweetheart’s job doing who knows what—whatever it is it’s a good job. Hot sunbeams caressing her face as they come through the window above the sink of dishes she is washing, which overlooks her neatly trimmed, green backyard and thriving fruit and vegetable garden, her little girl smiling and giggling as she plays on the sturdy wooden swing set with her small, sweet best friend. She hears familiar footsteps on the polished hardwood floor through the clang of dishes, then feels a set of strong arms wrap gently around her waist—The comforting smell of clean clothes and sweetness slipping passed the scent of dish soap to her nose. She leans back into the warmth standing strongly behind her, feeling as she does so the soft cheek against her own as a chin rests lightly on her shoulder. A kiss on the edge of her cheek, another on her neck. The arms around her waist unwind and are replaced with graceful, determined hands. They trace her sides as more kisses dot the back of her neck and shoulder. A metal spoon she was washing silently slips out of her hands into the soapy dishwater, but is quickly forgotten. All she can concentrate on now is the feeling of warmth spreading through her body and the way the vibrations of my “I love you” whispered sweetly in her ear feels against her body.
End—Part 1

*blink*