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2018

Thin Places

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Thin Places

By Caity Cook

“It’s a Celtic concept, one that stems from an old proverb that says, ‘Heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in the thin places that distance is even smaller.’ In thin places, the folklore goes, the barrier between the physical world and the spiritual world wears thin and becomes porous. Invisible things, like music or love or dead people or God, might become visible there, or if they don’t become visible they become so present and tangible that it doesn’t matter. Distinctions between you and not-you, real and unreal, worldly and otherworldly, fall away.”

-Jordan Kisner, “Thin Places”

I.

I am walking down Rue des Archives when the sky opens. People say that sometimes—the sky opens and the rain falls out. But this time, I mean it. The sky opens and the rain falls out in a heavy sheet, more water than I have ever seen in one place before. Something has torn that will take a long time to stitch back up. Around me, the people on the sidewalk open their black umbrellas all at once, with a flourish and a twirl: a coordinated dance. Those of us who didn't have the foresight to take our umbrellas with us that morning duck under the cover of the café awnings. We stand frozen and stare at the downpour. The water gushes and splashes in the gutters. To the east, the Seine rises. It consumes the stone staircases that lead down to its banks. Yet more water rushes out from its current and into the streets. Under our awning, we gape at the watershed. We look at one another and inhale together. I pull my denim jacket over my head. And all at once, we push ourselves out into the streets, running underneath the torrent of the rain. I run faster than I have ever run before, even when the rainwater begins to weigh down my clothes, even when the sidewalk begins to curve upwards under my feet like a mountain, even when the lights at the top of the hill begin to flicker and finally to dim. I run until I reach the door of my host family's building. I step inside. The yellow light of the foyer is steady: a welcome respite. I climb the stairs to their apartment, take my shoes off, and line them up on the floor along the kitchen wall. I place the fruit and the milk that I'd picked up for them on the way home in the fridge. I slip out of my wet clothes. I curl up underneath the warm blankets on my bed, and fall easily asleep.

About a decade ago, Israeli professor of clinical psychology Eliezer Somer introduced the term “maladaptive daydreaming” to describe a phenomenon he saw occurring in a few of his research subjects: a tendency to daydream excessively, to the point where the daydreams began to interfere with the patients’ normal functioning, as a coping mechanism or a method of escape. Some people who exhibited maladaptive daydreaming were victims of abuse or neglect, but some emerged from less dramatic circumstances, and were not traumatized in the medical sense, but lonely in the human sense. For people who engage in maladaptive daydreaming, imaginary lives begin to take up the same amount of time as their real lives. They invent full casts of characters and detailed plotlines. A person’s daydream self may continue to grow with their physical self over time. The plotlines might change to mirror the external circumstances of their host’s life, or they might radically diverge from them. The worlds that these daydreamers create are incredibly varied, but a few ideas appear over and over again: the invention of close friends, family figures, or romantic partners that may be absent from the person’s real life, and subtle (or not-so-subtle) “improvements” on the dreamer’s self that manifest in their dream character—they often become less shy, more attractive, more confident. Most of the time, people perform some sort of repetitive action during these daydreams, a visual tic that could give them away, sometimes as small as a repetitive twitch and sometimes as large as pacing through their house or throwing a tennis ball (or a sock tied up into a ball, in the absence of a real tennis ball) at a bedroom wall.

Maladaptive daydreaming is not recognized as an official disorder, nor is it completely understood by mental health professionals—or anyone else, really. It’s definitely not real psychosis—the daydreamers understand that these are fantasy stories, fictional people, made-up

conversations. And daydreaming seems so benign, normal. Of course, it is—this is something that everyone does, something often romanticized and sometimes glorified. But maladaptive daydreaming feels like more than simply having a creative mind. These stories rarely get written down. They are not simply the inner processes of a novelist. They are private, practical, addictive. And can we blame these daydreamers for that addiction? The mind has more than enough power to mimic the addictive properties of a drug.

I usually just call it a tendency to live inside my own head. I can function in the real world pretty well, at least on most days. But sometimes I do feel my brain drawing my attention inwards, and I can't turn myself right side out again. I linger in the imagined for too long. I begin to like it better. I lose my sense of direction. The lights flicker. I feel lost in a darkened room and I can't find my way back out. I don't know what to do with my hands. I stop caring about what's really going on, because the things in my head are really going on too, in some way. At least, that's what I want to think.

I spent Thanksgiving week with her last November, in a one-bedroom apartment next to a highway in Nashville. Flimsy new furniture and hand-me-down pillows crowded her small living room. Two bay windows, one next to the couch and one in the bedroom, looked out onto the small courtyard behind the apartment complex (though this made me nervous, since she was on the ground level, and the windows looked too thin to deter intrusion). The floor was vaguely gritty with cat litter tracked out from the bathroom and over the kitchen floor. A bookcase next to the TV sat half full. I felt like I was far from home. I was far from home, of course. But that had

never bothered me before. This was the first time being with her felt predominantly negative, like an absence rather than an urgently-needed reunion.

One night, I stood in Rachel's shower while she slept in her bedroom on the other side of the wall—trying to shower quickly, as the hot water could disappear any moment—and attempted to figure out when that that negativity had arrived, and why. I wanted to know so that I could try to fix the problem. I didn't want to be feeling this distance from her. I wanted to blame time, and Nashville. This was not the place where I fell in love with her. Nashville was drenched in red and orange tones, a color palette that gave headaches. The weather that week was too warm for November, and the people dressed and acted differently than the people we knew from all of our other homes—too many military jackets and women in cowboy boots. Until now, our natural environment had consisted of late-night Netflix binges on our college campus and walks in the wet breeze of San Francisco, not full-time jobs or utility bills or permanent long-distance. But we wouldn't be going back to any of those old haunts soon, at least not together. I wanted to believe that that was the reason I was feeling so distant—a new living situation and a change of scenery had simply revealed problems that were there all along. But I knew that couldn't be it, at least not entirely. She was never just a convenience, or a way to pass time.

So I stood there as the water started to turn cold in her shower and I feared that the reason I felt like I was slipping away from her was that I could no longer keep myself grounded in reality. For the past week, I'd walked through her neighborhood holding her hand but feeling my eyes slide out of focus. I struggled to keep the thread of a conversation going over waffles at breakfast. I existed on a different plane. That could have been an effect of other problems in the relationship, but it also could have been the cause. And this was what frightened me. That it was

this person in my head—the one who I wanted to be but wasn't—who felt like my relationship was no longer enough, not me. That it was this imagined version of me who wanted more freedom, who wanted to take more risks, who wanted to sprint up the mountains rising at the end of the streets. This was frightening, because if it was true it meant that I had lost control over the stories that I told myself. It meant that I no longer knew who I was or what I wanted, and that the unreal was bleeding into the real and poisoning it. I shivered under the cold water, but I didn't want to get out.

Maladaptive daydreaming is fascinating, because living with it means surrendering in some way to a breakdown of the barriers between what is real and what is not. Even if you understand logically that the stories in your head are fictional, you also believe that they hold real value. The daydreams might not be real, but the comfort and entertainment that they provide are. The memories of those daydreams are almost as important as the events that take place in the physical world (or, for people who suffer more seriously from the disorder, even more important than them). This idea presents us with a huge problem. How do we navigate these unclear boundaries between the unreal and the real? How do we choose what to value most, to trust most? What unreal things do we allow to influence us, and what do we try to suppress?

I stood on stage of my small, wood-paneled high school theatre and tried to keep myself focused despite my overwhelming awareness of my scene partner's breath on my cheeks. I spit Shakespearean language at her, and we began our choreographed dance around the half-assembled platforms dotting the stage. We circled one another, coming together and then

pulling apart in this scene of seduction. I squirmed in my lime green leotard and thigh-high vinyl boots. I felt exposed. I was sixteen, acting in a lead role for the first time (Kate, or Katharino, in this gender-swapped production of *The Taming of the Shrew*). I was trying to learn how to convincingly play a man. The night before, I had prepared for rehearsal by practicing my walk in front of the white mirror above my old dresser. I shifted my weight to my lower body, thrust my hips out, hooked my thumbs casually over my pockets (*Does anyone actually do this?*), and strutted across the plush-carpeted floor. The extra practice had helped: it was getting easier, in a way. As Petruchia and I danced around each other on stage, trading innuendos and standing closer together than we'd ever really stood with other people, I became aware of a particular girl sitting at a table in the front of the house and taking down blocking in her stage manager's script. She stuck in my peripheral vision. For some reason, I couldn't stop thinking about kissing her. I wanted her to see me like this, walking with masculinity, confidence, sensuality. I started practicing on my walk from the theatre door to the parking lot, in the hallways during school.

The struggle to decide what to do with the unreal is not new to me. I've always had a desire to seek out emotion—to seek out truth—in the unreal. Recently, I saw a Broadway show with a friend and realized that I always cry as soon as the first notes of a musical begin to play. Not because they are sad, but because they are big. I sat in the worn-down chair of the theatre and the sound filled my body. I let the low tones dictate my heartbeat. I could see the audience members across the circle from me, across the stage on which an entire island had been built. An act of listening like this—of opening up to let the sound in—always breaks me open. And I want it to. The tears just spill out of me. I used to get panic attacks, though, in these moments when the emotion rose in in my chest and made me dizzy. A girl I used to know named Samantha

would compare that feeling to the phenomenon of speaking in tongues. She explained this theory to me as we lay together on the floor of our same high school stage, the wood planks hard against our shoulder blades: the two events require the same physical openness of the mind, the same willingness to let yourself be taken over by a force larger than you: God, the music. Both carry the implication that you will be changed forever by the experience, despite the fact that it is an inherently transitory one. This is frightening, and it is also beautiful. Theatre sets are torn down and actors move on to new projects. But the invasion of the performance—whether it was acted or observed—leaves a deep mark somewhere inside of you. The mark lasts even when all other evidence of the invasion has disappeared. *No one can tell you it didn't happen.*

I've also paid a great deal of academic attention towards the unreal, in gender studies classes and post-structuralist English courses. I understand that we afford plenty of unreal things a tremendous amount of societal importance. Nearly all of the labels we use to describe our identities, for example, are based on “unreal” facts—race, gender, sex, sexuality. These identities are slippery, indefinite—they all exist on spectrums, and none are necessarily determinable by looking at a person. They hold no deeper meaning than their surface-level designation. Yet these are some of the largest cultural forces that exist, and they all have the capacity to radically determine the course of someone's life. Every defining structure of our society relies on the preservation of these unreal ideas—our governments, our churches, our marriages. If this sounds dramatic, it's because it is—the stakes could not be higher. I often find it disheartening that we let the unreal hold so much power, that the forces that control our lives are intangible and amorphous, and thus difficult to wrangle or contain. The use of the unreal to justify

discrimination is despicable. But we cannot ignore the fact that those unreal factors can also give joy and connection to people, that they can help us find love, understanding, and support. So we cannot disregard the unreal here, either. We're stuck with it, and stuck solving the problem of how to acknowledge our unreal identities without weaponizing them. There must be some way to live inside of this ambiguity, something to grab hold of amidst this slipperiness. I don't know what it is yet.

I remember what she was wearing the first night we went out together—long denim shorts, cuffed above the knee; a sports bra; a grey tank-top. Her hair was buzzed close to her scalp, and she looked strong—this was because, I later learned, she had spent most of the summer going to spin classes at a hip studio in Palo Alto. That night, we walked together along the path that winds through our campus. We circled and doubled back countless times, moving forward in small increments every once in a while. The evening was warm, with only the slightest tinge of autumn cold polluting the early fall air. Somewhere on campus, a concert was happening outside, and occasionally the music wafted its way over to us. I don't know if it was because of the way she was dressed, or because she usually texted me first, or because she was the one who asked me out, but that night I began to think of her in a particular way—as stronger than me, as more capable, as more “masculine.” I must have come to this conclusion almost instantaneously: as soon as I'd met her, I'd placed her within a hierarchy of power, and I'd placed her above me.

I remember what I was wearing then, too: ripped baggy jeans, a white v-neck t-shirt, and a slouchy red cardigan. She made her own assumptions about me that day. But I didn't realize

this until much later, when it finally occurred to me that it was possible we had assumed incorrectly. I don't really know when this realization came—it could have been on an evening when we were sitting on her couch and neither one of us wanted to be the one to decide where we would go for dinner; or it could have been on a night when I desperately wanted to have sex but desperately did not want to be the one to initiate it again; or it could have been on an afternoon when I realized that she hadn't worn my favorite outfit of hers—a green plaid shirt handed down from her dad—in months, and that in its place she'd acquired a collection of new dresses. But sometime along the way I became aware of the fact that maybe we had seen each other as people other than the ones we really are—because that's possible, because these things are not real or set and change all the time.

I don't really know why this particular issue—her shifting relationship to masculinity and femininity—is the one that I'm emphasizing here. It's not like it was a huge issue in our relationship, like I wanted her less when she changed the way she dressed. But her shifting presentation—and my own, for that matter—symbolized for me something larger that was happening in our relationship: we were changing, or we were realizing that we had already changed. We were slipping out of each others' grasp. I'm still struggling to figure out how we're supposed to hold on to people we can never pin down.

Most people with any sort of mental illness have heard a therapist tell them, as they're discussing a particularly frightening or disturbing idea, that it's “just a thought.” The implication, of course, is that thoughts are not real. They hold no connection to who we really are; rather, they are transient things that materialize in our minds and then drift away from us (a process

usually described quaintly by therapists as “floating by like a cloud”). A thought becomes significant only through the attention that we give it. Once it passes through our awareness and out the other side, it means nothing. And yet many of us have trouble accepting this idea. This is partially because mental illness tricks us into thinking that the thoughts it places in our minds say something meaningful about us. But few of us actually believe this to be true in the context of our daily lives. If it were really true that thoughts were entirely disconnected from us, we would never say that “it’s the thought that counts.” We would have to disregard all of our appreciation for intention. We could no longer place so much stock in stable personality.

For a time, I was obsessed with an episode of the NPR podcast *Invisibilia* that focused on the idea of personality, and our overestimation of the sway it holds over our actions. On the show, psychologist Walter Mischel describes an experiment in which he placed children in various situations where they were then tempted to cheat or to steal. He’d expected for there to be some consistency: for some kids to be repeatedly tempted and some to repeatedly resist. Instead, he found that the kids “were not consistently anything.” There didn’t seem to be any pattern across the various situations; he could not predict what someone would do in a scenario based on their actions in previous ones. Perhaps, his results seemed to suggest, the idea of stable “personality” is false. The *Invisibilia* episode goes on to point out that this would force us to confront the fact that any impression of continuity, in ourselves or in those we love, is only a comforting white lie we tell ourselves to feel safe. It would affect everything from our friendships and marriages to our criminal justice system.

Mischel’s work is extremely controversial, though. After the *Invisibilia* episode aired, several psychologists, led by fellow psychologist Simine Vazire, wrote a response criticizing the

misleading way the podcast portrayed Mischel's results. "Personality doesn't 'determine' anything—human behavior is way too noisy for it to be determined by anything," Vazire admits. "But personality predicts, probabilistically, what people will do, about as well as any other predictor." So personality is not stable, but it is a likely bet. Still, I can't help noticing that her statement leaves a window open for people to do improbable things. Anyone could do or say anything at any time. Each of our actions, decisions, and thoughts is individual, separate. Though they occur in chronological order, they are not linear. Each one does not necessarily follow logically from the one before.

Trusting someone—loving someone—requires the belief that they will continue along the most likely path. But sometimes—particularly in moments of crisis in a relationship—we don't. On the CW series *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, Rachel Bloom's character Rebecca Bunch comes to this realization as she hits rock bottom, deep in the throes of her untreated mental illness and reeling from a breakup and frightened by her own attempts to enact revenge on her ex. She walks home along darkened suburban streets after one of these acts of revenge, and instead of belting out a moving ballad like she would have in any other episode of the show, a song begins to play from somewhere else. Josh Groban, breaking the fourth wall to absurdly appear as himself, sings: "Because life is a gradual series of revelations/That occur over a period of time/It's not some carefully crafted story/It's a mess, and we're all gonna die/If you saw a movie that was like real life/You'd be like, 'What the hell was that movie about?/It was really all over the place./Life doesn't make narrative sense."

This is what breaking up with someone makes you feel. It creates a creeping sense that no linearity exists naturally in the world; that we place it there, artificially, intentionally, and

fruitlessly. But we do it anyway, because we need that sense of continuity to continue forward, to avoid becoming overwhelmed with the emptiness of life or the dizzying number of possibilities that are always open to us. We tell ourselves stories in order to live.

I talked with her in my bedroom, over Skype. I leaned stiffly against my headboard and tore loose threads off of the blanket she had gifted me years ago to keep my hands busy. I took deep breaths to try to steady myself, and held the sounds of my words low in my throat so they would come out quieter. I knew my roommates watching a movie downstairs could probably hear me anyway, though. Rachel was sitting in the same position in her room, fiddling with the drawstrings of her sweatshirt. She had pulled her hood over the top of her head. Neither of us could look into the cameras of our laptops for long. Instead, I let my gaze wander around my room. There were still traces of her here: she was in many of the photos on the walls, and there was this blanket, of course. A deep-purple henley of hers that I'd kept for most of the past two years still lingered at the bottom of a drawer somewhere. But there were far fewer traces than there used to be. I'd replaced many of my things since I met her: a new floral bedspread, new soft purple curtains over my window, new posters on my walls, a new lamp beside my bed, new books stuffed onto my overflowing shelf. Later that night, I took pictures of the way my room looked as we talked. I documented which books were out of place, which papers were scattered across my desks, which sweaters were slung over the back of my chair. I wanted to preserve the image.

Rachel shakily told me that breaking up with her in this way didn't seem like something I would do. The corners of my lips twitched upwards. I agreed with her. I had no idea how we got

here. I didn't know why I had stayed with her for so long when I knew I didn't love her anymore. I didn't know when I had begun to feel that she was holding me back. Maybe I had lost time somewhere along the way, and with it, a cause. I could barely remember the past week, let alone the past year. It had only been days since Nashville but I couldn't remember most of what we did there. I could picture it only as a collection of blurry shapes and swaths of colors. The oranges, reds, and yellows appeared behind my eyes again. I started seeing spots. I have always been a little too good at forgetting about bad parts—of relationships, of my own actions. But now I was afraid that the good parts were slipping away, too. We hung up the phone with everything still unresolved. I still couldn't answer simple questions, like “when?” or “why?” with the simple answers they probably deserved. I tried to remember where I was in June, as if that randomly selected time might hold some illuminating revelation. I tried to remember what I had felt, to construct bridges between the self I was then and the one I was now. I tried to reach for a meta-narrative that would reveal hidden meanings in the story, even as I felt certain that none existed. I was supposed to be a writer, I thought. I read stories, crafted them, analyzed them. I had been an actor. I traced my characters' emotional journeys throughout a play. I looked for motivation. I circled the words that provided context and continuity, marked the exact beats where something had changed. Why couldn't I control my own narrative, map out my own emotional trajectory? I did understand that narrative was artifice. I thought about that fact all the time. I studied it. I wrote about it. I obsessed over it until my thoughts spiraled out of control. But still I yearned for the unreal to bleed into the real.

In my bedroom, I looked into the camera and told Rachel that I wished I had answers for her.

Our anxieties and phobias can interfere with our ability to see the difference between the real and the unreal. The fear of contagion, so prevalent among sufferers of anxiety and OCD, depends upon the assumption that the boundaries of our bodies are dangerously permeable, and that we could be invaded at any time by illness or infection. We cannot trust our own defense systems. Sometimes this works in reverse, too—we fear that we cannot keep our thoughts inside our heads, that they will leak out through the pores in our skin. Often this fear stems from a desire to keep violent or disturbing thoughts locked away where they cannot harm us or anyone else. But the thoughts that slide out of our minds are not always evil ones. In her essay “Thin Places,” Jordan Kisner beautifully explains the fact that this leakage of thought—and with thought, self—creates not only fear or pain, but also the possibility for the most intimate of human connections. It opens the door for the kind of love that makes you want to merge everything that you are with someone you love, to be consumed entirely by another person, “to lose track of where you start and stop.” If it were really true that these unreal things—our thoughts—had no power, or that the boundaries of our bodies were fixed and impenetrable, this type of connection would be impossible. But it isn’t. Or at least, we seem to all collectively hope that it isn’t, and can’t that be the same thing? Kisner writes, “We trace our fingers over the faces or bodies of people we love as if we wish we could leave unspoken thoughts and feelings behind like residue. We place our foreheads together and press gently, as if to see whether we can merge that way.” Even something as essential as the boundary of the self—that line that separates what *is* you from what *isn’t* you—could be merely a construct, a societal delusion.

Of course, though the hard borders between people may be unreal, they do require attention and consideration. More than once I have disregarded those boundaries in unwise or unhealthy ways. I stayed in a relationship with that girl with the stage manager's binder long after I realized that she no longer loved me, afraid of the vacuum she would leave behind when she disappeared. I sat on the floor with Rachel after only a month together and sobbed because I was jealous of her continued closeness with her ex. I said "I love you" to her after a few weeks because I wanted to push us into the stage of certainty, to feel confident that there was another person beside me and that there was no hollowness left. But the balance between independence and togetherness is hard to strike when the benefits of disintegrated boundaries are so gratifying: shared joy, pain, and achievements; the false but powerful sense that you understand everything another person is thinking; the comfort of having another person's body sitting close to yours.

"The notion of borderlessness, of endless susceptibility to mimetic contagion, is overwhelming," Kisner writes, "But by denying it entirely, by constructing unimpeachable binaries (me/you, mind/brain, illness/self), we create an experience of the world that's soothing but radically impoverished." The prospect of breaking down the boundaries between the real and the unreal is an agoraphobic nightmare: it's like standing at the side of an empty highway, surrounded by nothing but dust on either side. The open air bears down on you, suffocates you with its expansiveness that you can never hope to match. But the world explodes into a more exciting place when we allow ourselves to examine and adore the unreal. We create the possibility for more nuanced understandings of ourselves, with all of our complexities and shifting ideas. We can let our thoughts teach us about ourselves, not letting them trap us or

control us but using them as tools to open ourselves up. We can begin to solve the problems of our fears and anxieties, now that we acknowledge them as valid. We can accept our capacity for constant reinvention as a gift. We can feel more deeply, connect to others more deeply, love more deeply. When we allow the unreal to hold real value, the world becomes more full.

There is another version of me who lives in my head. She looks like me, except her skin is clearer, her hair less frizzy, and her clothes properly fitted. She is captivating, but in a soft way—even as she stands quietly in a corner, her eyes glimmer with a spark of some unknowable thing. She reads a lot. She asks a lot of questions. She is not afraid of the dark, or of falling asleep. She's comfortable with late nights and meeting new people. She doesn't have panic attacks while driving or while watching medical TV shows. She runs. She doesn't let her mental illness tell her that she does not deserve to be happy.

It matters to me that the unreal holds value, because if the unreal is significant then the thoughts and feelings of this second version of me are, too. I want to make those boundaries—between the multiple versions of me, between real and unreal, between present self and aspirational self—collapse into each other with a cosmic boom, and create a more expansive version of me by their merging.

A fact that is true of both versions of me: we relish the moments just after a break-up. I remember the day after my first most clearly. I walked out of my college dorm room and started towards my morning English class. And as I crossed the frosty grass of the quad, I felt the soft cold of the late February air on my skin for the first time in seemingly forever. I marked each sensation of its touch. The blood pulled itself from my fingers, and I could feel my rings

beginning to slip off inside my pockets. My still-damp hair froze slightly. The skin prickled on my exposed ankles. It was as if the two versions of me had reunited, allowing me to experience that moment in time more completely than I had experienced anything in a while. But the reunion was only temporary—by the time I left my class an hour later, the heightened awareness and the sense of wholeness it brought, had evaporated. Still, though, these moments open up a possibility for me. Can I learn to know my unreal self better, to connect with her more completely over time? Can I become more full, too?

II.

I feel that I am not fully here. I sit on the bed of the guest room in my grandparents' penthouse apartment, my face buried in a pink throw pillow while the light of the bright June morning filters in through gauzy white curtains. I have been stretched almost to the point of breaking, my consciousness pulled like putty until it has become dangerously thin. Part of me is sitting here, feeling the ruching of the throw pillow pressing into my cheek and the soft fleece of the blanket underneath me tickling my legs. Another part of me, though, has been pinned down somewhere else, far away. I feel myself tightening when I move. I can't get this other part of me unstuck to fold it back into myself. Not without tearing completely.

When I was sixteen, my life became a series of divisions, of doublings. The first were simple, even naively romantic: a long-distance relationship divided my awareness between two places at once, and my still-closeted queerness created a need for a clichéd, sweet double life. But there was also an internal cleaving that occurred, one that stretched and mangled my emotional state. Something wonderful was happening to me. But something awful was, too. I was beginning to lose track of my own boundaries. Something—I was not yet quite sure what—was invading the territories they marked without my permission.

I got sick for the first time in that bedroom in my grandparents' house. On that morning, the sun was warm but violating. The sickening pastels of the decor formed patterns that repeated every few feet throughout the room: light blue, light pink, light green. A crib claimed one corner, a severed carousel horse another, the mare still prancing on what remained of its chopped-up pole. This was a child's bedroom, though no children actually lived in this house. The morning

was bright, but I imagined dark spots forming on the fatty brain tissue stuffed inside my skull, greenish-black spots that appeared one by one, then coalesced, taking over my brain. Taking over me. Talking to me. I'd been too lucky, they said. The past few months had gone too well—I fell in love with my best friend, came out to myself and then to my parents, spent spring afternoons lying in bedrooms with open windows and drinking iced coffee that left my fingertips wet with condensation. This was my punishment. A reminder from the universe that I didn't deserve to be happy. *Catastrophic thinking*, the book would say.

The sickness had snuck up on me. “The sickness”—that’s what I called it then. It began when I noticed my pulse speeding up. Before long, I felt like the blood was racing through my body at ten times its normal speed. Soon, I thought, its reckless turning in my veins would skid to a stop, and I would collapse like a child who’d been spinning in circles for too long. Then came the tightness in my chest, as if the air had been sucked out of it by a vacuum, leaving a hollow cavern aching from exposure to too much pressure. Next my vision blurred; my eyes glazed over; my mouth dried out; my stomach seized and bile rose up in my throat. A spot on the right side of my brain grew hot, like someone had lit a match inside my skull and was singeing the bone with it. I got prickling feelings up and down my arms and my back, like someone was poking me with a long, thin needle. The sensations came on over the course of a few hours that morning, but they stayed with me for months. So, too, did the destructive thought patterns: the obsessions, thoughts that lodged in my brain, refused to move, and prevented me from doing anything other than attend to them. The thoughts looked different at different times: one month, it was the fear that an infection had slipped through the cracks in my skin to slowly saturate my bloodstream; another, it was a suspicion that my house had been invaded, that someone now

lurked somewhere behind the next door, waiting for me to turn my back. Each of the thoughts felt like a substantial threat, regardless of how ridiculous it was. It became nearly impossible for me to determine what was real and what wasn't.

Of course, this was not actually the first time I had gotten sick. In the fifth grade, I would let my hand linger on my chest after our class recited the pledge of allegiance, monitoring my heart to ensure it didn't suddenly decide to stop beating. As a high school sophomore, I was terrified to fall asleep, afraid that I would disappear the second I lost consciousness. It's also inaccurate to say that I "got sick" at all. The word "got" here implies acuteness and contamination. But this sickness began, inevitably, inside of me. And it did not end after that morning; in fact, it never really ended at all. So that morning at my grandparents' house holds special significance not because it began my first episode of mental illness, but because it was the first moment at which I understood exactly what was going on. (After the incidence of sleep dread, a string of doctors had introduced me to words like "panic attack" and "obsessive compulsive disorder.") But even more importantly, that episode held significance because it was the first one during which I was aware that the sickness might take something from me more permanently.

Dani had been a surprise. We were friends in the early years of high school, but then we'd become closer, and before I could think too hard about what it meant, I was kissing her goodnight in the doorway of her parents' ranch house and telling her that I was in love with her, too. This coming out to myself is another event to which I've often attempted to ascribe an unreal "suddenly," to transform each quotidian moment into a turning point—a day when I

noticed her walking out of the scene shop in the paint-stained jeans I thought made her look cool, though of course this happened countless times; a moment when she casually wrapped her arm around my shoulders and I got goosebumps, though I cannot place that moment in context. Coming out tends to be a doubling experience: for me, and for many others I've talked to, it allows for the unique sensation of being simultaneously completely aware of your queerness and completely ignorant of it. This contradictory state is a precursor for many of the paradoxical states that queerness entails, or at least entails for me: being completely yourself while also accepting that that self exists in constant flux, being open while understanding that (depending on what I look like that day) my queerness will still remain hidden from the view of most people I pass on the street.

Three months before the sickness came, I was lying in a different bed—Dani's bed—watching her pull a t-shirt back on over her head and cuff the sleeves just below her shoulders the way she always did. While she walked down the hall to the bathroom, I rolled over onto my back and pulled her worn purple sheets over my bare skin. I tried to slow my heart rate and examined her bedroom with a curiosity that felt almost like intrusion. Dani's room was the kind of messy which allows me to confidently assume that even now, six years later, she has yet to clean it up. Elementary school art projects dotted the lavender walls, partially plastered over in some places with posters from our high school theatre productions. Her closet floor was stacked so high with crumpled clothes that its door could no longer shut, and primary-colored blouses and dresses I'd never seen her wear spilled out into the room. A rocking chair in the corner displayed more discarded clothes, these the more familiar khakis, undershirts, and uniform polos.

The wall across from her bed was lined with a long, oversized dresser, and my eyes combed through its clutter: photos of family members I'd only heard mentioned in passing and of friends I'd never met, old journals and school notebooks, headbands and hair ties that she had neglected to throw out when she shaved off her hair. These items felt like remnants of a person who I wasn't supposed to know existed, a life I wasn't supposed to know had happened.

Over the past year, Dani had begun a process of (re)construction, carefully molding herself into someone quite different from the girl who wore the polka-dotted dresses on the floor. She was tough and masculine, with a confident—now I would say, arrogant—swagger and a low, raspy laugh that poured out from the back of her throat. Though our birthdays were only a week apart, she always seemed much older. And yet, Dani made less of an effort than I did to cover up the fact that we still had childhood bedrooms, that we were still children sleeping in them. Perhaps because she didn't need to cover up these facts because she had already begun the internal work of growing up and claiming independence, and didn't feel the need to compensate for lingering immaturity by destroying evidence of the little girl she used to be. Still, she held onto these things, carefully curated artifacts preserved because this transitory state, too, was part of the self she wanted to project. She was someone in the process of making herself into who she wanted to be.

The process she was putting herself through ran parallel to the processes that everyone was going through at that age: the negotiation of puberty, the series of decisions that began to shape, for the first time, how we wanted to be perceived by the world and how we wanted to interact with the people and things around us. Simone de Beauvoir said: "One is not born, but

rather becomes, a woman.” This was the time of first becoming. For Dani, though, it took on a greater importance—it was not just a formative process, but a corrective one. (A doubling.)

In addition to being the person who grabbed me by my collar and dragged me out of the closet (arguably the most influence a person will ever have on my life), Dani was the first person to teach me through example what it means to construct yourself. Years later, I would learn this language to describe what we were doing then (I would not have known to say “construction” at the time), and I would start to be able to explain why she remains so important to me, even all these years later. Judith Butler defines gender as “an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts.” Gender is not something we are, but something we do. What we do, then, *creates* our identity, rather than *reflects* it. Dani taught me what to do; Dani, in a very literal way, made me who I am. When we started dating, I started to dress like her. I would watch the way she walked and sat and stood and try to imitate her confidence, her queerness, her confidence in her queerness. I practiced repeating her vocal inflection and the way she ran her hands through her hair to push it out of her face. Some of these actions I’ve since let go of in the interim, but some of them have stayed with me: the flannel shirts I bought when I wanted to dress like her still show up in my wardrobe at least once a week, that particular method of brushing back my hair has become a nearly compulsive gesture for me, I still sit the way she did, sometimes: one foot propped up on the couch, my elbow leaning on my knee.

This should have been an exciting time—Eve Sedgwick: “an open mesh of possibilities”—but I kept feeling strangled by the netting. As part of me was being pulled in the direction of this openness, part of me was being closed down, shut off by too many panic attacks and too little sleep. The possibility Sedgwick describes became for me a paralyzing amount of

choice. Ultimately, this was a battle between two conceptions of the self. The first was propagated by the illness embedded in my brain, which insisted that my thoughts were the only determiner of my selfhood, seized control of those thoughts, and rendered me nonexistent. The other was asserted more softly by Dani and by my burgeoning queerness, two forces which reminded me that my self is not a permanent and unchanging entity, that just because I feel my control over my thoughts slipping away one day doesn't mean they can never be recovered, and that I retain at least some agency and control over my actions, and thus over my identity. These two ideas battled each other for dominance in my mind for the better part of a year. The majority of the time, the side of open possibility lost.

I haven't spoken to Dani in almost three years. I still don't know quite how to think about my relationship with her, in retrospect. After the sickness came that June morning, another doubling occurred. She remained intrinsic to the formation of an identity that would stay with me for the foreseeable future, but the sinister force of mental illness also began to seep into our relationship, the same greenish-black spots coloring and distorting it. We began to disintegrate, in part because of my constant panic attacks and my inability to determine which of my many fears were real and which were absurd. It became hard for me to leave my house. I couldn't enjoy sex anymore—I could no longer relax into my elevated heart rate, the rush of feeling in my chest. Instead, when Dani and I slept together I clenched my jaw and concentrated on regulating my breath. Eventually, we stopped trying. We became toxic to one another: I put too much pressure on Dani to take care of me, but she lashed out when she didn't understand. We were constantly walking on tiptoes, trying to monitor each word we said to avoid provoking the other. And it kept getting worse, a downward spiral that paralleled the ones brought on by my

obsessive thoughts. Chronology falls away in my memory here, but I can remember a few moments. She threatened to break up with me if I didn't calm down during a particularly intense panic attack. We screamed at each other in a baseball stadium, looking ridiculous in our matching Indians shirts, and I laughed as she squirmed under the gaze of the people walking by. I cried on the sticky floor of a Panera Bread bathroom stall and she walked out of the restaurant because she was embarrassed to be with me when I panicked in public. When it finally ended, much later than it should have, it was a relief for both of us. But because Dani had symbolized queerness for me in so many ways, and because my mental illness had taken away the agency and possibility that queerness offered me, I had to start the process of reconstructing a sense of self, once again. It was almost as if she had never happened.

Healing looks different for everyone. But for me, queerness is an inextricable part of the process. There are many literal reasons for this: queerness has brought me relationships that have begun to heal the chemical burns of that toxic first relationship. It taught me the importance of loving and intimate friendships. Queerness sustains a defining desire in me, one that asserts a once-tenuous identity. But there are more abstract reasons, too. Healing is an amorphous thing, and incomplete. It exists always in the imperfect tense: its timeline is indefinite, and though it may have begun a long time ago, it is not yet complete. To heal, though, requires an acceptance of this permanent continuing. Perhaps, even, this acceptance is the meaning of healing itself. In his book *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz writes, “We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.” I love his definition of queerness as a way of desiring that allows us to see beyond the restraints of the present, and

into an open mesh of possibility that contains hope for another, better world and other, better selves. It is a constant striving, and a constant, performative “*doing* towards the future.” It cannot be held, but it is concrete even in its intangibility: whereas “possibility” might be read to imply abstraction, “potentiality” promotes a sense that the energy required to bring this queer, utopian world into being is already present, just waiting to be activated. Queerness teaches me that leaning into this striving is the goal, even if the goal can never be fully met. It also teaches me that there is not only comfort, but joy, even eroticism in that uncertain state. Judith Butler explains her ecstatic embrace of the uncertainty of identity: “It is precisely the pleasure produced by the instability of those categories [of identity] which sustains the various erotic practices that make me a candidate for the category to begin with.” Learning to love—to *desire*—indefiniteness, process, flux: this is queerness; this is also healing.

Let me explain this another way. When I was sixteen, my French teacher, Mr. Langa, taught us the folktale *Le chèvre de Monsieur Seguin*. The story goes like this: A man named Monsieur Seguin has a problem with his goats. No matter what he does, they always leave him, escaping into the mountains just beside his farm and dying at the hands of the wolves that prowl the rocky forests at night. He loses six goats to the wolves. Heartbroken but determined to try one last time, he buys a young goat named Blanquette. He fences off a patch of land for her, and ties her to a post with a rope, giving her just enough room to graze. For a time, Blanquette is content in her little world, under the loving care of M. Seguin. Eventually, though, Blanquette begins to yearn wistfully for the mountains, for freedom from the scratchy rope looped around her neck. Ennui overtakes her; she can no longer eat, can no longer give milk. Consumed by her

need to be in the mountains, she begs M. Seguin to let her go. He refuses, instead locking her up in a dark stable pen. This is the last straw for our little Blanquette. That night, she spots a small window that Monsieur Seguin forgot to secure. She steadies herself, takes a breath, and jumps out, running full speed until the farm is just a speck on the horizon behind her and the mountain rises up underneath her hooves. She spends a day on the mountain feeling like she's in paradise, overwhelmed by the pine trees, the bountiful grass, the colorful flowers cropping up to greet her. She arrives finally at the top of the mountain, and for a moment she can glimpse M. Seguin's farm down below. She stops, and regards it for a long while. "But it's so small," she thinks, as the Eden of the mountain stretches out around her. "How could that place have held me?"

And then—a gust of wind combs through her coat, making her shiver. The sky turns purple. Just like that, it's nighttime. Once again, Blanquette steadies herself. She knows what the night holds. Soon enough, she hears the howl of a wolf weaving its way through the trees behind her. She glances back at the farm below, and sees the smoke rising from M. Seguin's chimney. How safe and warm it is there! For a moment, she wants to return. "Goats don't kill wolves," she thinks. But it's too late now. Blanquette resolves to fight the wolf. And fight she does, valiantly. She holds the wolf off all night. But as the sun begins to rise, and the rooster calls out from M. Seguin's farm below, Blanquette has given all she has. She stretches out on a patch of grass in the sun, her white fur stained with blood, and lets the wolf take her.

The moral of the story is clear: some rules and restraints are there to protect you. Sometimes it is best to listen to those who try to hold you back, because sometimes they are voices for safety, for good. But Mr. Langa saw something different in the story. When Blanquette lies down at the end of her fight, she is not simply giving up. You see, before

Blanquette ceases to fight, she lets out a yell: “Enfin!” she exclaims. “Finally!” That outburst, and the exclamation point that punctuates it, he told us, signals that perhaps the moral traditionally extracted from the story is the wrong one. Blanquette does not regret her excursion to the mountains. The simplicity and matter-of-factness with which she acknowledges the danger of the wolf— “Goats don’t kill wolves”—has always struck me. Blanquette understands the battle she takes on in running away to the mountain. She has always understood the risk. She has never deluded herself into thinking that she can kill the wolf. There are some threats in this life that will always be present, some anxieties we will never fully vanquish no matter how well we learn to cope with them, some warm horizons that we will never reach. But Blanquette undertakes her journey to the mountain anyway, refusing to conform to the rules set out for her. She knows she will never see the sun rise to its peak the next day, but she undertakes the process of the night all the same. And when the wolf comes, as he always does out there on the mountain, she fights anyway.

This is the moral Mr. Langa taught, the moral that I prefer. Blanquette’s time on the mountain is the summation of every goal she has ever had. It symbolizes her claiming of her own goals and desires. When we recognize the strength she shows in making it through that night—despite everything she had to overcome to do so—those hours begin to stretch out in every direction, becoming the representation of a life fully lived; the blood staining her white coat morphs into a badge of her fearlessness in the face of both uncertainty and threat. And so when morning comes at last, and Blanquette’s time on the mountain has ended, she can look out from her bed of sunlit grass at everything she has achieved and exclaim, not with defeatedness but with overwhelming joy, “Enfin!”

The knowledge that a fight is unwinnable does not make it not worth fighting. In fact, this knowledge simply makes the choice to take on the battle with the wolf—the always-incomplete construction and striving of queerness, the permanent process of healing, the daily struggle of living with mental illness—all the more powerful, all the more important. My mental illness eats away at my sense that I control my thoughts, and thus, my sense of myself. Embracing queerness allows me to rebel against that lie, to build instead an existence and an ever-changing identity based on the ideas that desire holds real and positive value, that the self cannot be erased by thoughts that invade your mind, and that we have the capacity and the right to decide who we are and who we will be. I want to learn to live with the splitting and the doubling that has plagued me, to focus not on folding myself in but on striving to stretch farther, to let myself live in dualities of being and feeling.

As I write, I feel that perhaps I am learning to weave the open stitches of this mesh of possibility.

III.

I sleep on the right side of the bed. I think this has always been true, but I didn't notice it until I woke up one morning—too late, the sun already glaring—and realized that this was where I always slept now, and that she was always on my left. I felt like I was waking up from a dream—groggy, trying to sort out the time and place without a real grasp on where I was or how I got there. I didn't necessarily intend to get to this place, to the point where we had sides in each other's beds, where she had her pillow and I had mine (the worn-down one with the indent in the middle). Suddenly, we had taken up residence in each others' lives. The evidence of this merging was everywhere—not just the claimed pillow, but my sweatpants and t-shirts on her floor, her extra toothbrush by my sink, the bottle of my shampoo in her shower. I didn't mind. At the time, these items were comforting, even relieving for me: they were the physical markers of our relationship, obstacles to slow down any future separation. They weighed us down in that space together. A small, internal voice I tried to ignore suggested that perhaps the physical togetherness those objects enforced might heal my split self. But I was a little troubled to find that I had arrived at such an extreme of domesticity so quickly and so early. I had a hard time keeping track of the days, but she had not been there with me for very long. Two months, maybe. Almost three. Depending on how you counted.

I don't actually remember when I heard the phrase "U-Haul lesbian" for the first time. I cannot separate my awareness of the phrase from my awareness of the fact that I absolutely, definitely am one. U-Hauling, as a verb applied to queer women, refers to the tendency that we

supposedly have (and that I very much have) to take up residence physically and emotionally in a partner's life almost immediately after the first indications of romantic sentiment arise. The verb describes the initial, physical merger, but the tendency it connotes extends well beyond that, implying that queer women also tend to be hyper-domestic, hyper-emotional, hyper-committed.

Though the stereotype of the U-Haul lesbian seems to be a permanent fixture on the queer landscape, its dissemination into popular culture can be tracked. In 1993, Lea DeLaria appeared on *The Arsenio Hall Show* and became the first openly queer comic to perform on late-night television in America. This monumental set included the joke that brought the concept of U-Hauling out of the closet and into broad public consciousness:

What do lesbians bring to a second date?

A U-Haul.

In the same year, Leslie Feinberg's novel *Stone Butch Blues* came out, immortalizing the phenomenon in literature, as main character Jess describes meeting her future partner, Theresa. "Within a month we rented a U-Haul trailer," she says, "and moved into a new apartment together in Buffalo." But this stereotype's true origins run much deeper than a joke on a late-night talk show, finding its roots in historically problematic assumptions about women. While writing about lesbian domesticity, scholar Rebecca Jennings pinpoints the enduring phenomenon of "aspirations of marriage and the creation of a 'home' as the feminine ideal," a dominant cultural force in the post-WWII era. In that era, women were expected to be homemakers, to seek out contained monogamous relationships, to prize the domestic. They were denied unfettered access to public space. Some things have changed since then, but some haven't. The ideal still clings.

When I was young, I watched the women in my family inhabit their homes and imagined my own eventual escape from them. I saw my future self as someone who would reject domesticity, treasure her takeout menus as symbols of freedom. But as I got older, I started to watch differently. I am thinking of my grandmother, who still bakes cookies for her grandchildren when we come over, squints to read the recipe and kneads the dough with shaking fingers. I am thinking of my mother, who cooks spaghetti while she cuts out class Valentine's cards for my brother at our kitchen counter. I've been on more than one date that involved baking apple pie together while drinking wine and watching the Food Network.

But am I disappointing someone (even just my past self) if I simply accept this domesticity without question? Am I settling for the confines of Monsieur Seguin's farm and denying myself the ecstasy of the mountain? I hesitate, too, when I consider the emotional aspect of the U-Haul stereotype, that tendency towards being hyper-emotional or hyper-committed. I certainly can be those things. I am guilty of several bad behaviors that fit underneath that umbrella: I like constant company, require frequent reassurance. I depend too much upon the presence of another person in my private space and the objects that they bring with them—I am like an archivist, collecting artifacts that evidence their affection for me. I fall into romantic domesticity as a way to slip out of the rest of my commitments and responsibilities.

But it is almost as if this domesticity is the primary way I can express love and desire. This phenomenon is certainly not unique to me. In "Getting Hitched v. the Trashing of Marriage," Catherine Reid recalls the conflicted but passionate desire she felt for domesticity with her partner: "We want to be bad, and we want to shack up. We like being exempt from stifling codes of conformity, and we want to cuddle and make nests, like the billions of lovers

before us...We even mutter ‘marry me’ in intimate moments, as though the verb were the only word powerful enough to carry the weight of our love.” With *Self Portrait/Cutting*, Catherine Opie craves domesticity so deeply that she carves her dream of it—two women holding hands in the yard of their shared home—into her back with a knife, preserving it not just in photograph but in her scarred flesh. In *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons*, Marilyn Hacker concludes perhaps the most well-known sonnet in the sequence, “sweetheart, it isn’t lust; it’s all the rest/of what I want with you that scares me shitless”; across the page, she fantasizes about what “the rest” could be: “I venture it’s a trifle premature/to sign the china-pattern registry/before you are, at least, at liberty/to hang your PJ’s on my bathroom door./A funny pair of homebodies we are,/ as wicked as we like to paint ourselves: /I kiss you till my clit’s about to burst,/and catch myself reorganizing shelves.” I want to believe that there is something worthwhile in my own domestic tendencies that makes them worth defending. Maybe I enjoy the interior now because I spent so long fearing that the walls of my home would trap me.

When my anxiety was the worst it has ever been, I could barely leave my house. I had panic attacks in cars: whenever I turned a corner, I saw myself smashing into a woman walking across the road, running over the little dog she was walking. Anytime I drove through an intersection, I felt the crash of another car ramming into my side. I could hear my ribs crack, feel the air knocked out of my lungs. When I had to drive across a bridge, the pressure of hundreds of feet of water above my head would build inside of me and compress me until I was flattened to nothing. I pulled over into a strip mall parking lot and try to catch my breath. But I wasn’t safe when I managed to get to where I was going, either. At school, the stillness of sitting in class

would give me too much space to hyper-fixate on every sensation in my body, to find problems where none existed. I spiraled too deeply into obsession to pay attention in class. I would have to go to the nurse's office and stuff earbuds into my ears until I could pull myself back up into reality. In stores, too-white fluorescent lights flared brighter and brighter until the colors of the items of the shelves began to blur together in flashing spots behind my eyes.

Eventually, even my own home started to seem too open, too large and uncontrollable. I started burrowing deeper and deeper into my house, until only my bedroom seemed safe. If I had to come home to an empty house, I had a carefully constructed procedure to follow. Come in. Lock the door. Set the alarm. Methodically search the rooms of the house that I needed to enter—the kitchen, the bathroom, the upstairs hallway. Once they'd been checked, I grabbed what I needed from the kitchen and locked myself in my bedroom. I pulled my thin beige comforter over my head to block out the the bright green and blue of my undecorated walls. I came out only to turn off the alarm and let my family into the house when they knocked at the front door.

Around this time, I started having nightmares. The most frequently recurring one went like this: I stand inside my home. It is not really my home, but it is a house I've been in before. Some of the rooms look like those of the house my paternal grandparents lived in when I was young, with black-and-white tiled floors, spiral staircases, rooms hidden within other rooms. I am in the foyer, and the house is crowded. There is a party going on—guests in tuxedos and long gowns swirl around me. I hear music coming from a grand piano that lurks just out of sight. The party funnels into the basement; I need to get there, too. I walk down the stairs to the basement but when I get there, I'm right back in the upstairs foyer. Now, though, there are doors on all

sides of me. I walk through the one I think will take me to the basement, but it opens onto a room I've never seen before. I go back, try another. This one opens onto an upstairs bedroom. I try them all, running from one to the next. I forget which ones I've opened before. I think maybe the rooms are shifting around me. The tile floor of the foyer begins to stretch out in front of me. The sounds of the party are farther and farther away. Will the house trap me here forever? Or is this room trying to take me somewhere else? I never got answers for my questions. The floor was still stretching each time I woke up.

I have not been that bad in years. But sometimes I feel like I carry some of that agoraphobia with me still. I think about the mornings when I felt like I physically couldn't get myself out of the door on the days when I wake up and decide that I would rather stay at home with someone than take them out somewhere.

When I studied in Paris, I was the farthest I have ever been from home. Nothing there that could really fill the role of "home" that had been left open when I came to France. I slept in the back bedroom of a Parisian family's house, a room that was still stuffed with the books and clothes of their son who had moved out a few years ago. My mattress sat on the floor, and every Sunday my host mother would cover it with sheets that had been sporadically bleached from too many washings. During my first week there, I accidentally stained the wooden desk under the window in the corner with a coffee cup-shaped ring. I kept the spot covered with piles of French grammar handouts. This was a family's house, but not my family's—there are few things more mysteriously lonely. The rules I had to follow were unfamiliar, well-intentioned but intrusive. I had friends who were in the same situation, so we tried to find ways to deal with our complete

lack of space that belonged to us. We tried to make private spaces out of public spaces. We'd wake up early in the morning to sneak past our host families and walk from one end of the city to the other, eat on sidewalk curbs and fall asleep on sunny park benches.

If you saw me, you might have thought that I was truly connecting with the city. Some days I felt like I was. I watched my friends move easily through the world, and longed to feel their comfort in it. They ran through metro station tunnels, paraded down busy party streets in high heels, performed enthusiastic dance routines on the banks of the Canal. I tried to pay attention to what they did with their hands when they walked. Was that the key to existing in the world? Would I know the streets better if I jogged through them in the mornings like they did? I didn't find concrete answers to the questions, but following them made me begin to feel at home in public. Still, though, it always got dark. And when it did, my stomach lurched. Had I overstayed my welcome? We would sit by the Seine at night, speaking English under our breaths and switching to French whenever anyone walked by. Men would walk up to us and refuse to leave, follow us into subway stations or apartment complexes, grab at our clothes and pull our hair. These are violations, but some of my friends could shrug them off. To me, though, it felt like the world was trying to keep me from getting too comfortable in its midst. It hissed at me: *Go home. This doesn't belong to you.* And I felt the familiar turning in my stomach, and the city streetlights would begin to flicker, to cloud my vision with swirling, colorful spots as they hit my eyes.

When my girlfriend at the time visited me in Paris, we spent the majority of our time inside her hotel room. I was grateful to have the temporary privacy—the only way to escape from the entire world is to bury yourself deep within it. Still, though, something had changed in

the time since I'd last seen her back in our safe, U-Hauled home. My friends had begun to show me something. Now, I felt a nagging sense that my privacy was also isolation.

Queer domesticity historically served as a survival mechanism, a way to cope with a world that could become too harsh and inhospitable to inhabit. For my queer ancestors, domesticity was a storm shelter. I saw this same trend play out in the lives of the few queer role models I had early in my life. My high school tech director did her best not to talk on school property about her partner; my cousin's partner stayed at home while she and their son came to Thanksgiving dinner. Dani's gay uncles would refrain from showing any affection to one another in public; they stood next to each other at the store like brothers. In *The Atlantic*, journalist Shauna Miller offers a succinct version of this history between queer people and domesticity, focusing on its effects on queer women: "This 'urge to merge' had a basis in practicality in the '50s and early '60s, when gay couples had to remain in the shadows. Back then, if you had the good fortune to make a family, you held onto it. It was a marriage. In the lesbian world, serial monogamy was safe, and also fulfilling." Society has long tried to police queer people, to deny us the chance to display one of the most important parts of ourselves. The privacy of loving domesticity, practiced behind walls that were constructed as protection from these destructive societal forces, became an essential relief. I got to see inside of those shelters, sometimes. Dani's uncles would invite us all to dinner—me and her, her brother and his girlfriend. I'd sit on the bench tucked next to the round table in their warm, small kitchen, munch on the charcuterie that they'd carefully arranged for us, and watch them together. They moved gracefully across the white tile floor, dancing around each other with full glasses and plates of food as if they always

already knew where the other would be. I noticed each time they placed their hands on each others' backs while they stirred the big vat of sauce on the stove.

This fear of showing affection outside of your own constructed shelter is inhumanely restrictive. But it still seems significant that inside of those shelters, another world could exist, with its own rules and standards. Private spaces can be controlled, manipulated. They can become playgrounds, places where people are free to imagine that the world looks different than it really does: kinder, more inviting. Inside of our private spaces, we can disregard the narratives that have relegated us to the interior or forced us to hide, and replace them with our own stories that are more exciting, loving, free. Interior spaces are first and foremost child's spaces: places where imagination can hold real value, can give birth to worlds that had only been desired.

But that safety does not go two ways. Queer domesticity can be truly subversive. Despite the prevalent cultural forces dictating that women should remain committed to the domestic, Jennings says, this “dominant discourse of feminine domesticity was, however, framed in overwhelmingly heterosexual terms and the experiences of single women and lesbians were conspicuous by their absence.” Queer people were exempt from those forces that relegated women to the home in the context of heterosexual relationships; or, to look at it another way, queer women were denied the legitimacy of the families they created for themselves within their shelters. But those families were theirs to claim, just as those spaces were. The presence of queer domestic spaces is a threat, because it produces what McKinney calls “queer moments of excess, impropriety, slippage, or missteps against the idealized norm.” Queer domesticity is an act of deviance. It invades the space of the dominant culture and takes it for its own. It misbehaves. Within private spaces, queer people were able to not only create their own rules, but enforce

them. They could choose who they allowed into their spaces and who they did not. They could decide which rules their relationships had to follow and which rules they did not. They got to be the judges, the lawmakers, the gatekeepers.

Maybe this is what I want from my own domesticity: I want a space where I can be in charge. I want to make the rules. I want a place where no one can tell me that I do not belong. Anyone or anything that wanted to get in would have to earn my approval first. None of the bright, swirling, violent images that clattered around inside my head during periods of anxiety would be able to get in. None of the people who grabbed at me on the street or followed me home in the dark would be allowed in a five hundred foot radius of the door. I would get to decide what is acceptable, what is desirable, what is important. Maybe sometimes I just want to build my own world, to give myself a space where I can have even the slightest bit of control over what happens to me.

A few months ago, I was sitting in a sticky plastic booth at an Eat'n Park off of McKnight Road in the North Hills of Pittsburgh. I'd been stuffed into the far side of an awkwardly long table and trapped there by the bodies of all my aunts and uncles. Six out of my mom's eight siblings were back in town for the weekend, so we had picked up my grandma from her complex and taken her out to Eat'n Park for dinner. As much as I deny it when my mother asks, I hate these family dinners. They are always an ordeal. On this particular evening, we all met in the parking lot of my mother's childhood church, loaded up our cars, and drove all the way down the expanse of McKnight Road, past the car dealerships and the fast food restaurants and the smaller Eat'n Park on the left side of the street that is closer but apparently inferior to the

one we frequented, and then we ended up here, waiting for our food, all stuffed together in this big red booth that we were always assigned. As we sat sipping unsweetened Lipton tea out of sticky plastic cups, we talked about my brother's college search. I tried to direct the conversation so that the subject didn't then veer towards me. I didn't want to be discussed. Not long ago, I had broken up with my girlfriend, and I wouldn't have known how to discuss my life without mentioning her. And I couldn't mention her to them.

I still don't actually know how many of my family members know that I'm gay. When I came out to my parents, I let them decide whether or not to tell our other relatives, but all these years later I've still never checked with them to ask who knows and who doesn't. In reality, they all probably know, since I've been posting about it on Facebook for years now. But no one has ever asked me about it, and I've never volunteered the information. I don't think they'd be hostile to me, but I do know that they wouldn't have anything to say, so I don't see the point in starting the conversation. But I'm tired of feeling like I have to hide things when I'm around them. I have been out for a long time now, so I should be past this type of lying by omission. But for some reason, I feel an obligation to protect them from the discomfort they would endure in these discussions. I feel the need to respect their beliefs in a way that I'm not sure they would respect mine, were they confronted with them. At the same time, though, I'm sick of being the one who has to make all the sacrifices, and I'm so goddamn sick of following other people's rules. I want it to be my turn to make them.

And yet, I don't want to reject or avoid my family. I'm grateful that I don't actually have to. In all likelihood, I will continue to play by their rules even as they continue to work against me. I will continue to sit alone at the Thanksgiving table each year, the only cousin whose

significant other was not invited, without complaint. But I have a desire to build a family for myself, out of people who I've chosen to love. Maybe that is what domesticity gives me: a place for a second, chosen family, made up not just of myself and a romantic partner, but also of close friends. This desire opens up the home, to expand the definition of loving domesticity beyond romantic love and give platonic relationships the same value and importance that we give romantic ones, is one that I've only developed recently. It came up for me after watching the women I admire extend such deeply felt love to their friends, and to me. It broke apart an instinct that I had been harboring since I began watching my mother and grandmother in their homes during childhood, one that insisted intimate domesticity was something to be saved up and eventually distributed to an immediate family. The refusal to accept the limits of love and intimacy, then, felt implicitly queer to me in its shattering of convention.

One of the reasons why I find myself so drawn to Marilyn Hacker's *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons* is that, unlike most (male, straight) sonneteers, Hacker does not limit her poetic subjects to her partner. The often-domestic, always-loving portrait she paints of her short-lived affair is instead quite wide in scope, incorporating other family—Hacker's daughter and her father—and also a rotating cast of countless friends on two sides of the Atlantic Ocean. They are as essential a part of the life that Hacker's poetic persona tries to create as her romantic partner. Henri Lefebvre wrote, "Space is not a thing but rather a set of relations between things." I want my domesticity to be the outward manifestation of the relations between myself and those I love. I want to make a home with my chosen family where I do not have to hide and I do not have to worry about the outside world invading us. I want to make the walls of that home strong

enough that they can not only keep out the danger but keep in the softness and love that can so easily dissipate outside of them.

A few years ago, a friend of mine knocked on my dorm room door and asked me if she could hide in my room with me. She had come back into our building after a run that night, her bangs clinging to the sweat on her face, to find the man who had assaulted her—who she had expected to be at another school in another state—sitting on the couch in our common room right across from her bedroom door. I wrapped her in the fuzzy blanket from my bed and made her tea. We sat there for hours, and I checked the hallways for her until I could be sure that he had left for good. Like her, many of the people I love are tired, hurt, and out of energy to give to the world. I wish I could give them all a place to go. I know what it's like to feel unsafe in the world, to be afraid of what might come around the corner, to never know for sure who's following behind you. I wish there was a way that I could keep the people I love from feeling that, too.

Our walls are not impermeable and our spaces can be invaded. I want to be a gatekeeper. I want to gather up all of the people I love and help them find a place where the world can't get to them. I want to build a door that only I can open, out of worn-down pillows and fuzzy blankets. Rationally, I know that this would be unsustainable, that we would all get restless in this closed-off world. Avoidance and isolation may be comfortable, but if my anxiety has taught me anything, it's that these tactics rarely solve problems. But still. This impenetrable, handmade home seems worthwhile.

I live in a house with three other women. We are all homebodies, despite ourselves, and you can tell. Our kitchen counters are lined with baked goods, our refrigerator shelves are filled

with leftovers. An overflowing spice rack occupies the corner next to the stove, and we have an entire large drawer dedicated to tea. We covered our institutional green couch with a knitted slipcover, and tossed a throw blanket over the back to cover its holes. We have too many throw pillows: most of them light pink, some light blue or light green. A basket full of extra blankets sits next to our side table, where Rebecca keeps her record player and the collection of records she skimmed from the top of her parents' storage. We hung string lights in a criss-cross pattern along our ceiling and wrapped them around our door, so that we don't have to use the harsh fluorescents. Our window panes are lined with plants. We covered the walls with art: a cartoon drawn by my cousin, a print of apple pie gifted by Katie's family, countless photos that Mira has taken of us. My favorite is of Katie and me: we are dressed up for a party, glitter speckled above our cheekbones. My arm is thrown around her shoulder, and she's holding my wrist. We are laughing. Our purple curtains are pulled back, and reflected in the window is the deflated balloon sign that has been hanging over our sitting area since Halloween: "Beware."

In "Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment," Christopher Reed admits that "queer space is the collective creation of queer people," rather than something definite or concrete. Still, he insists upon its durability: "I am interested," he writes, "in the way our traces remain to mark certain spaces for others—to their delight or discomfort—to discover." My housemates and I have imposed ourselves upon this space, as I have imposed myself on each domestic space I've crafted over my life thus far. And yet, I cannot stay in this space—I have not yet reached the point in my life where domesticity can be permanent. Very soon, I will have to move. But I hope that when I leave this home, someone will be able to find my trace in it, to feel

the domesticity of so many kinds that I enjoyed there. I hope that they will deem that trace a delight to discover. It certainly was a delight to create.

IV.

I'm trying to teach myself how to run. Maybe that's something I should know already, and I guess I do, instinctively. But it's something I forgot. Running seems in many ways to be an activity specifically designed to torture me. Nothing else so efficiently triggers so many of my anxieties: my discomfort with feeling out of breath, my fear that my body will fail me, the unease I feel at being alone and out in the open. When I run, I have to confront all of these things at once: I have to step out of my house and out into the open, either in a gym where I have to try to block out the judgmental eyes of everyone around me, or out into the street alone without company or a specific destination or anything to do with my hands. I have to make my body move in a way that will cause it to ache and gasp for oxygen. I have to trust that my legs will not collapse underneath me the second they start to ache.

I started trying to run for the first time three years ago, after the end of my first long-term relationship. I've written about my first girlfriend many times before. When I do so, I call her Dani. That is not her real name. I don't change it to protect her privacy, though I suppose I do want to do that, too. I change it because it helps me remind myself that I am constructing her as a character—the character of my first love, of my first queer mentor, of the woman who molded so much of who I am. And she was all of those things. I have never lied about her, but I have left some parts out. I have presented her as a fluent narrative when in fact she is a collection of disparate actions and traits. I'm going to try to tell the whole truth now, or at least to get closer to the whole truth than I have before. To do that, I'm just going to call her D. The concrete details

of the left-out story feel trite, because they are: there was D. and I, and then there was D.'s best friend, Samantha. D. and Samantha kept getting closer, D. and I kept getting farther apart. I kept getting jealous. D. kept giving me excuses. It was a standard progression of events. Except, at some point, D.'s rebuttals stopped taking the form of excuses and started taking the form of accusations. If I mentioned something I saw them do, D. told me it didn't happen. If I questioned her answers, she told me I was just being paranoid. If I confronted her with evidence, she told me I was crazy. It didn't happen, you're just being paranoid, you're being crazy. It didn't happen, you're just being paranoid, you're being crazy. It didn't happen, I'm just paranoid, I'm being crazy.

I could no longer tell what was real and what wasn't; I was entirely dependent on her to define those categories for me, even after we broke up. I stayed that way until almost six months later, when I found a letter that proved that I had not been crazy, that I had not been paranoid, that what she told me over and over again wasn't happening was, in fact, happening. The term "gaslighting" comes from George Cukor's 1944 movie *Gaslight*. In the film, a man named Gregory attempts to make his young bride, Paula, go insane, so that he can steal the hidden jewels of Paula's aunt, whom he has murdered. As he digs through the attic of the house the two live in together looking for the jewels, he turns on the attic lights, which causes the downstairs lights to dim. When Paula asks him about the lights, he tells her that she's imagining their flickering. This term stuck to describe the tactic of manipulating someone into thinking that they are crazy, because that's how it makes you feel: like the lights have been dimmed over your world. Everything is in shadow. Movement becomes almost impossibly difficult. You constantly bump into furniture or trip over cracks on the ground. You have to trace along the walls with

your fingertips and walk in circles until you find your way. The darkness eventually seeps into your very being—into your muscles, your blood, your brain. And there's nothing you can do but stay there and wait for your eyes to adjust.

When I was finally confronted with proof, I felt first the overwhelming relief that I was right; then the deep hurt that she had lied to me; then the fear as I realized that I had no choice but to learn to navigate this dim world that I lived in now. And finally, there was the anger that she made me feel those things: the hurt, the fear. The anger was the last emotion to come but the hardest to deal with. It was not the quiet kind of anger that simmers inside of you but allows you to continue to go about your daily life. This was a messy anger. I was not strong enough yet to house it. It boiled over, foaming white running over the sides of the pot. It melted the stovetop, warped the counters and the floor. It filled the room with scalding steam. I couldn't stop it from overflowing: if I tried to cover it, it burned my skin. I hoped that I could somehow reach through the skin and the bone of my skull and clog up the stream at its source, stopping the flow of the uncertainty and the instability that D. had placed there.

Running began as a way to try to live with that overpowering anger, like taking a big dog to the park to tire it out. In the mornings, my legs would shake, waiting for it. I didn't know how to run yet then. I climbed onto a treadmill in the back corner of the gym and pushed myself as hard as I could for the few minutes it took me to panic, then I rushed down the fluorescent-lit hallway to the bathroom and collapsed to my knees on the tile floor. I pressed my hand to my chest and tried to bring my heartrate back down. But I kept doing it, despite how much I disliked it, despite how much anxiety it gave me. My strides became a little more steady. I learned how to breathe in through my nose, out through my mouth. My entire body would be sore afterwards.

The pain in the tops of my thighs was proof that the activity had taken place, one part of my history that I could be certain of. The deep aches in my calves were a reassurance: *You can't tell me it didn't happen.*

And then I stopped running. I don't know when, exactly. That kind of anger is unsustainable; and inevitably, it runs its course. Without the anger, I had no more motivation to run. I was back where I started. I missed the anger. For a while, I tried to muster it up again. I scrolled back through old photos of D., thumbed through the letters she gave me. But it was too late; too much time had passed. Now that all the anger had run out of the pot, I was left with only the effect that proved hardest to shake: a vague sense of deep distrust, an inability to tell what is real and what isn't. The anger had made me secure in the knowledge that something had really gone wrong. Without it, certainty became harder to find.

To this day, I have a hard time talking about that period of my life. As I wrote out that paragraph describing the events, I felt a familiar unease somewhere in my gut. I still can't bring myself to be completely sure that it happened. I still feel like I'm being too sensitive, or unfair to D. I feel like an imposter, like maybe I just wanted to be traumatized, so I told myself I was over and over again until I started to believe it. Once, a therapist asked me if I thought I was afraid to be happy. I played with the strings on the edge of the throw pillow on my chair and avoided her gaze, nervous that she would see the shame in my eyes. I understand what she meant by the question: she was trying to point out my tendency to soften the blow of upcoming disappointment by bailing early on people and situations. But that therapist's question always pops up in my mind on the rare occasion that I decide to talk about what happened with D.

Maybe I am just afraid of being happy. Maybe I am afraid that I won't have a story to tell if I don't have a past trauma to draw from. And yet. Just like that initial anger was a kind of proof, there has been other evidence of the gaslighting's occurrence, too: most of it came when I fell in love again.

The first time I took Rachel back to my hometown with me, I drove her downtown to see the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, because that's one of the things we do when people come to visit Cleveland. It should have been a pleasant trip: the day was sunny and un-seasonally warm; the city looked clean and uncharacteristically alive. But I'd never driven myself through that part of town before. The highway exits were unfamiliar and the various lanes insufficiently labeled. I couldn't read the signs fast enough, and I couldn't slow down without being honked at by the cars zipping by me for blocking traffic. I missed our exit, doubled back on the service road next to the highway, then missed the exit again. Eventually, I managed to find my way towards the correct street, only to drive into the wrong parking garage and have to circle through the one-way streets yet again. I began to fear I would just have to drive around in circles for the rest of my life. At one point Rachel offered to drive, but that just made me more upset: this should have been something I was able to do. When we finally pulled into the parking garage, my head was spinning and my hands were shaking. I was furious at my complete inability to navigate the city I'd lived in for so many years. Rachel put a hand on my shoulder to comfort me, but I flinched away from her. I asked her to get out, then sat in my car alone and sobbed into my steering wheel. I felt guilty for ruining our day together.

At the beginning of my relationship with Rachel, I was a hoarder of sorts, or an archivist. I collected objects—the deep purple henley of hers I’d started to sleep in, the sweatpants she kept on my floor, the extra toothbrush she placed beside my sink. I displayed them in plain view, touched them as I walked past them to make sure they were real. I saved screenshots of nice texts she sent me so I could scroll back through them when I began to doubt that she wanted to be around me. I tried to hang onto the feeling of warmth that entered my fingertips as I traced them across her skin. I tried unsuccessfully to hide those behaviors from her—I knew I’d look crazy. At night, I counted over and over again the bruises she left at the base of my neck, down my stomach, on the insides of my thighs—bruises that I asked for, that I needed. *You can’t tell me it didn’t happen.*

The second time I tried to run, it was with Rachel. When we lived together in California, I decided I wanted to try to join her when she ran. We would drive out to the trail by dried-up lake in the center of Mountain View and I would try to keep my muscles moving underneath the pounding heat of the unbroken sunlight. It never went well—my lungs rejected the warm air, and my legs would slow down from lack of oxygen and air conditioning. Though in the early days Rachel held herself back so she could run beside me, pretty soon she got tired of stopping and starting every few minutes when I needed to catch my breath. I could see the question flash across her face, though she tried her best to hide it: *Still?* I couldn’t blame her for asking, or for running ahead. Before long I stopped tagging along with her when she went for runs. She continued offering to take me, though—right up until the last time I saw her. I’ll always be grateful for that.

I went back to living on my own long before Rachel and I officially ended things. I lived in new cities, and I found myself having to leave my house alone with no one to regulate or guide my movement. I tried to solve that problem by finding new friends whose movements I could mimic: I let my summer roommate drag me on her hikes through the Adirondacks, straggling behind her as she deftly maneuvered the rocky ground; I ran alongside my abroad friends as they barreled through Paris metro stations like they knew where they were going, even when they didn't. I have always hesitated to admit that I need help to get better; I suspect that I have to do that on my own for it to be real. But muscle memory is a strong force, and involuntary; and one day I looked up to realize that I was leaving my house more easily now, going for solitary walks with only my keys in my hand.

One night in Paris, I walked home after picking up dinner on my own from my favorite vegan burger place, and I realized that I knew where I was going without having to check the map. As I started down the steps into the metro station, I heard the train beginning to rumble down the tracks below me. I sprinted down three flights of steps, around the sharp corner, and down the hallway to the platform. As I came through the opening of the tunnel, the door closing tone chimed, and I pushed down harder with the balls of my feet, running just a little faster so I could slip through the closing doors and onto the train. The other passengers looked at me for a moment, but then they looked away. I felt my heart beating in my chest, but I didn't feel the need to slow it down. I leaned panting against the back door of the train until I saw the familiar blue letters indicating my stop.

I run 5K a couple times a week now, sometimes, on a treadmill at the gym. When I'm not too tired or too sick, and when I have the time. Though I had been trying so hard to learn to run, I missed the moment when it actually happened. I went to the gym one morning, and I could. I know that by any real runner's definition, 5K is not very much, but it's more than I've ever been able to do before. I keep track of the miles I run on my phone: I am trying to find healthier ways to store evidence until I can learn to live without it.

Last week, my friend Katie and I felt the muscles twitching in our legs. We were both sad and angry at the world, and we needed to move to distract ourselves. There were no mountains close enough for us to run up, so instead we got into her car—a little blue VW bug—and drove. As we circled Saratoga Springs, we watched the rainwater from the storm earlier that week run along the shoulders of the road. We got on the highway so we could move faster, and I turned up the bass on her stereo so that the low notes rattled through our bodies, dictated our heartbeats and sent jolts of energy to our limbs. We drove until we saw a Trader Joe's, and we decided to stop. We walked slowly through the aisles together, disrupting the flow of traffic. I thought about how similar we looked, like dual selves finally reunited: both of us with our rounded glasses, our curls half pulled back so they wouldn't fall in our eyes, our hands in our jacket pockets. Our shared name, which has become such an essential part of our friendship that it feels visible, as if we have matching tattoos. I watched her examine the cookie boxes she picked up off the shelves and thought about how many times over the past four years we'd watched each other fall in and out of love—I don't think Katie remembers this, but years ago I cancelled dinner plans with her to go on my first date with Rachel, and Katie was one of the first people I texted about it the next

day. That night, Rachel and I had walked around our campus for hours, staying close enough to each other that our arms brushed occasionally, and we talked in circles about our lives: one of the first times someone showed me that slow, wandering movement can be as powerful as running. Now, as Katie and I dug lazily through the freezers of prepared dinners, she talked to me about her recent breakup, and asked me for the hundredth time if I thought she was crazy for feeling so sad. I told her no—that it was normal for the people who invaded our boundaries in such deep ways to leave lasting marks—and pulled her along with me to circle the aisles again.

I bought a half gallon of milk, because we were out and because I knew Rebecca would want some for her coffee the next morning. As we stood in the checkout line, we watched the mothers juggling fussy toddlers in their arms as they unloaded their shopping carts full of reasonably-priced organic vegetables. I wondered out loud if I'd ever have a place to put that much produce, or any idea what to do with it if I did. Katie said that she couldn't imagine it. But as soon as we got home, we re-organized the take-out containers and tupperware on our refrigerator shelves so at least the milk would fit, then we stretched out together on the softness of the light blues, greens, and pinks of our couch. I had to squint against the late afternoon sunlight to see our TV.

When I left her to go out that night, I ran down the hill from my apartment to the parking lot, and only tripped once in my heels.