

## ellipse // ellipsis

*Kourtney Selak\**

### short stories

My pencil stares at me like a dagger, threatening me with the words I haven't written.

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The plant on my dresser basks in the sun, taking in warm rays, waiting patiently, for now. I watch its leaves wither and yet I just stare. I know I must give it what it needs, but here I sit, transfixed on the pearly whiteness that is my wall. Not now, maybe tomorrow, I will water it. I'll watch its dusty home turn to rich chocolate brown as the soil expands, filling its ceramic pot once again, finally receiving what it begged for all along.

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I was born into the arms of a mother whose love was never ceasing, always giving. She bathed my little sister and me together and when the bath water turned cold, we stood shivering in the tub. Afterwards she would take our goose bump covered bodies in turn and wrap us in towels much bigger than our small frames. She sat on the bathroom rug, soft and pink, her knees curled under her. Pulling us onto her lap she would rock us and sing, her gentle voice and warm arms drawing out the cold from our pores, from our very bones. "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine."

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My childhood best friend leaned under the wall dividing our bathroom stalls. Our matching plaid skirts dusted the freckled tiles below our feet. Everyday after lunch these stalls became our private cove, our secret conversations becoming exhibitions of our loyalty. We whispered about the boys we laid in bed dreaming about, never imagining that one day their lips would bruise our necks in dark forests and even darker basements, not knowing the marks they left could still be showing up a year later.

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We were never formally introduced. I'm still not exactly sure how you learned my name but I guess it doesn't matter anyhow. It was never words you used to coax me towards you. I could see the dares hidden beneath your heavy eyelids, challenging me. Your blue seas for eyes did the work for you despite the alcohol that clouded them, pulling me in, sweeping me away, ensnaring me even more strongly with their rejection.

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When it rains in summer, it seems as if the sky disappears. The warmth of the air wraps around you and the cool droplets sit gently on your skin, crystal orbs that cleanse you, wake you up. On

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days like this, my mom would take us outside to play. Not just to watch us but to hold our hands and run through the gutters on the side of the street, jumping and laughing, her long brown hair dripping from the shower. Our bare feet splashed through the puddles, dirt clinging to our wet feet and soaking clothes. The sky was a pearly white against the canopy of trees, their leaves filtering the street with their green vibrancy. The sky continued infinitely but the trees held us in, embracing us in their lushness, their leafy arms a fortress of protection.

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My memories of you flash by in a blur, the fragrances of your desire and my desire mixing, different but feeding off each other, needing each other to survive. We were never steady. I will not romanticize us with consistency. But we were hungry, ravenous, I-haven't-eaten-for-weeks-maybe-months-hungry. Stopping on deserted street corners and straying into empty woods, exiting with dirt stains and sweaty bodies. My hands in your hair and your lips on my neck even before we drunkenly got home. Reckless minds and hollow hearts. What else was there to devour but each other?

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The twisting lanes and ramps of the turnpike became entangled in a web of confusion, the city blanketed by fog in the distance. My mother clutched a map in front of her. Frazzled and almost out of breath her eyes alternated quickly between the map and the green highway signs above her. My father's hands tensely gripped the steering wheel. His temper seemed to burn right through it as his insults flew at her, sharp and poisonous, as she shrunk back in her seat. My sister and I sat deathly still, not letting even our breathe disturb the air. We sat soundlessly as my father's angry shouts and my mother's desperate silence circled around our heads.

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What do ants do when it rains, the clouds sprinkling bombs, a waterfall in each drop?

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I wrack my brain to think of a story to fill in this gap but I've done such a good job of blocking them all out that I think they might be erased altogether. All I remember is the feeling I used to get when my father screamed at me. It could have been because I spilled my milk or because it was my fault my team lost the soccer game. I don't think the reason mattered. It is the sensation of shrinking that persists. I figured the smaller I became-- the more invisible, the less yelling there would be. The walls remain, standing tall between my heart and my throat.

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I am here and you are there but only streetlights blinking red stand to separate us. Two hours for you, two hours for me, a quarter tank of gas, tops. I'll make the reservation. Meet you at 11. Yes, mom, I'm meeting a boy. No, mom, I'm still a virgin. Four walls. Strange town. Just me. Light through the window. Gravel against your tires. Engine killed. My stomach in my throat. Turn the knob. Real once again. Ripped jeans. Backwards hat. Eyes like the sea. You are here so not just me? Sitting on different beds. Why did they give us two beds? Come here. It's finally happening. Eyelids. Collarbones. Lips. Who are you? Do I even know you? Fumbles, Flashes. Forgotten words. No, I still don't want to yet. This isn't what we thought. See you soon. Here and gone. Four walls. Strange town. Just me. Two hours home. These roads look different. What is this hole in my chest? Gas station. Fill the tank. Yes, mom, it was fine. No, mom, I'm still a virgin.

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You are the smoke from a cigarette, lit after midnight. Smoke I hold hostage in my mouth, now an oven, until my tongue turns black, warm even as it burns.

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The insulation of our house failed that winter, the cold creeping in even though the walls kept out the wind, a cold that had nothing to do with the number on the thermostat in our living room. The first night my father slept in the ground, my sister and I spent the night in the now vacant spot in my mother's bed, our sorry but valiant attempt to fill in the empty spaces.

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Before we were born, my mother hung curtains, mint green, from the two windows in our room. She picked out a pink carpet and painted stenciled animals on our walls, a parade of colorful elephants and lions and sheep. She glued lace on the pictures that hung above our beds and every night before turning out the light she kissed us ten times each. Sometime after my father died, my mother started to let me paint on the walls of our bedroom, never limiting my canvas nor my color palette. Over and over again I would fuck up my creation. She would send me to the hardware store to pick up a new can of white paint. I'd cover up my failed attempts and start again.

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I wasn't sure why you called me that night but I walked in the dark to your best friend's apartment, my hood a shield from the autumn wind. We slept chest to chest on the couch, red and brown and yellow leaves swirling outside the window. We didn't bother to find blankets or change out of our jeans. We huddled together like children, seeking out the warmth in the body pressed against us. Circling the small of my back with your fingertips, you kissed me gently, small sparks cascading softly from an inferno, lightly licking our skin, a rare occasion. I snuck out in the morning, silently.

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I've watched my mother lose herself in men with a fire that burned her alive. A burning at the stake that she hosted herself with balloons and flowers and confetti.

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In first grade art class we made tiny houses out of popsicle sticks. I carefully glued them together and watched my house take shape. Frustrated that I couldn't get the side window just right I threw it in the trash, covering it with old paper scraps, packing up the secret with my folders and crayons at the end of the day.

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I make out with your friends in bathrooms while you are in the next room. The numbness found at the bottom of glass bottles saves me and ruins me. You give me no choice but to stop caring what you think. Your lust for me is a ragged, taking thing that leaves me wondering what it is inside of me I seem to be missing. Why is it that, to you, I am always just a body? I still love your eyes on my back, roaming all over me.

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It finally happens in a bed that isn't ours. The door was open and we took it as an invitation. I was wearing only your hoodie and I'm not sure why I gave it back. I wish I had kept my eyes open more.

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In thirteen days I will have spent two decades on this Earth. I am afraid I have spent them motionless, simply aware of the things happening to my limbs.

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Everyday when I was little, my mother made my sister and me drink a glass of milk, tall and cold, strengthening our growing bones. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner we complied. Tiny fingers and skulls and ribs strengthened so that what? So they may never recognize the spine that supports them?

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Why are we always pressed against brick walls, or having conversations in empty rooms that have already been packed? Ghost rooms that are already vacant, their tenant already moved on, gone before their words are spoken. I'm not sure how I ended up where I did that night, but crying on a bed of rocks was the last thing I remember. Weeping on the stones that cut you is a sick sort of romance.

**Rosé**

A heart drained of all its blood is pale white, almost translucent, nearly unrecognizable. (Can I replace translucent with invisible?) I cut my finger while slicing bread and the thin opening of skin reveals a pink pulse. A spot of vulnerability amidst the numbness. I imagine tiny cuts on each of my fingers as I lift plump raspberries to my mouth, one by one, their soft flesh giving in to the contours of my mouth as they turn to pulp. I experience this as healing. When I picked out sheets for my bed I chose plain white. They match almost anything. When the depression gets really bad, I stop seeing in color and the girl who lives in my body goes somewhere else. The curtains stay pulled shut for days. The flit of bare feet across dusty earth is her fondest pleasure. She never tells me where she runs off to. My mother worries about me but I swear I don't need to break my own skin to see life spill from me. I still see life spill from me. I cannot even convince myself to step into the shower, where I can watch the dirty water circle away down the metal drain. I've already been absorbed into the empty canvas sheets, but no blood stains blossom. When I leave my bed all I hear is the rattling of bones. I don't leave my bed. I force myself to drink an entire glass of water. I ask for patience as I wait for the girl who lives in my body to come back.

**October 30, 2015**

This is not a landscape  
of love. This is the space

that contains all the ways  
I'm afraid of losing you.

I kiss your right shoulder  
again and

again. I feel the curve  
of your bone against my lips.

I graze the closing wound,  
your slowly forming scar.

Today marks eight years since  
I've seen the irises

of my father's eyes. By now,  
another year gone, the empty, cavernous

sockets must have turned back  
to dust. I used to think of death

as a crisp coal black. I learned young  
it is rather a strange yellow, skin

molding like a rotten lemon,  
the wasted meat of a healthy man

lying useless on cold metal. I walked  
out of a hospital room and buried this

truth in the depths  
of my belly: no one is ours to keep.

And so when I say I want you  
I am also saying I am afraid

to lose you. Know this: I want you  
in excess. I want the too much of you.

When the coyotes' howls wake us, you  
sit up, raise the blinds like the

opening of a mouth. We listen and I  
imagine only one, her neck pulled

taut, she stands alone, her moans  
billowing out, overlapping

until her voice is an entire  
pack. I want this

ache for you. I want you  
in places that have no names.

So, tonight, please,  
dream slow. Let me memorize you

before the departure. You won't stay  
for me to watch this scar heal.

**Nausea**

The last time I visited my father, there were ants covering his gravestone. I tried to smash each one, but they kept emerging, darting in every direction, unafraid of my anger. Every year on Memorial Day my father brought us to the cemetery to clean my grandparents' headstones. We brought scrub brushes and a bucket we would fill from the faucet next to the road. He would lift each stone and sneak mud and grass we had collected underneath to raise them higher. My mother put together a pot full of red and pink geraniums to place between their heads. Now, we still bring the scrub brushes and the flowers and trim the invading grass but we are not strong enough to lift the three stones. Each year the dirt swallows them a little deeper. Sometimes I visit alone, sit crosslegged before his name, the pesky dates written around a tiny hyphen. I thread my fingers through the grass, press my palms to the ground above his chest, whole feet of earth between us. I think about the shape of his nails or how we ate entire bowls of pistachios together on the porch. I feel comfort for a moment, then stand. I never know what to do after I leave. The rest of the afternoon lays like confetti on a grave. Floats light and heavy, like a dead man's balloons.



**Return of the Girl Who Lives in My Body**

She came home today, no  
shoes, a single  
inhale  
and I almost forgot  
she ever left. I wonder  
if you can write from happiness.  
I wake,  
shaking in fear,  
that I cannot.

**To the Girl Who Lives in My Body**

I don't know which book you are reading right now or where you are sitting in your room and I don't know where you put your love when it isn't with me. But you leave the biggest hole. I never thought of trying to fill it myself. I can let it be an expanse of pain but let me focus on the open space instead. Let my helium thoughts drift to the limitless anythings that can now occupy this body.

If I could go my whole life ignoring the pain, I would. Not just any pain, but that which reverberates from a wound that exists at my center. Other pain I'll dive into gladly, as it acts as a distraction. I try to pretend I'm not choosing it on purpose.

I was thirteen and it was just like any other Tuesday. I hugged my dad goodbye, he kissed my head saying "Papa loves you very much," and I took the bus to school, my head banging into the window every time we hit a bump. The day went on normally until the principal interrupted my lunch to tell me my mom was here and I needed to pack up my things. I left my half drunk chocolate milk on the table and met my sister in the principal's office. My mom refused to tell us what was going on, leaving us frantic to understand what had happened, knowing that it was something serious. She finally conceded to tell us my dad had a heart attack and we needed to go see him in the hospital. I remember praying the whole way home, begging a god that wasn't there, to make sure my dad would be okay. I soon realized that we were being driven home and not to the hospital. My mom made up some excuse for why. She called my sister and me into the living room and sat us down and the rest feels like something I watched from above: "Daddy died." The first thing I remember is a bubble of shock, a small window of incomprehension and then a peek at hurt so great it turned into an almost instantaneous wrath: piercing screams that went on and on and on, broken vacuum cleaner, upturned treadmill, Halloween candy scattered across the floor.

When my dad went on business trips, I hated it almost as much as he did, even though it was only for a few days. While he packed I sat on the edge of the bed and watched as he folded his polos and dress pants and placed them in his suitcase. We would drive him to the airport and stay until his plane took off, waving as it got smaller and smaller. "Sweetie I miss you very much. It's 75 degrees and it is only 7 o'clock in the morning. I have a beautiful view of the mountains outside my window. I went for a long walk last night and was thinking I can't wait to see you when I get home..." The end of our driveway was a crumbling mess and one particular loose piece of cement made a distinct noise when driven over. My mom, sister and I would be eating dinner and when we heard my dad's red pickup truck pull in we would jump out of our seats and hide behind the door or under the table or in the pantry. When he came in the door we could barely hold in our giggles. He was wonderful at playing along. Some days when he was especially exhausted from work and I especially excited to tell him about my day as soon as he walked in the house, he would say something along the lines of, can I just relax for one second.

I entered high school understanding the fullness of my father's absence. But once we are outside the fog of grief, it is hard to remember what it feels like in the very pit of it, that split second of cracking. Four months ago, I walked out of a bathroom to see the boy I was in love with lying next to another girl on the couch, after leaving my bed less than 24 hours prior. I was hammered but I blacked out from rage, not the alcohol. I vaguely remember punching him in the ribs and screaming in his face while she lay there and laughed. I screamed at the moon the same way I had when I was thirteen because there was nothing else I could do. My distraction had backfired. No matter how badly I had been hurt or how much I needed for things to be different, it was all out of my control, the feeling of pure helplessness. But now that I was 21 and not 13, screaming at the top of my lungs in the middle of the night made me look crazy, scary even. Eventually public safety found me barefoot in December, standing in a pile of mud because my roommate called them for help. I wish I would have ran before the man could yank my arm

behind my back, claiming any control I may have had over my body. After refusing to go to the hospital, I was handcuffed and carried by my arms and legs behind me into the ambulance.

I do not wish to compare the severity in which these occurrences affected me but after eight years, the same wound ripped open even though I had tried so hard to ignore it. At thirteen, I did not know and I still do not know who or what had the power to take away what I loved most, but I loathed it and I was terrified that it was outside of my control. This situation with the blue eyed boy reminded me that at any moment I can be faced with a loss that I feel unable to cope with. I feel crazed as I wrack my mind for some sort of relief. If I am not in the middle of the street than I am in my shower and I am twenty-two or I am in my living room and I am thirteen and I can't seem to breathe. What the fuck do we do with our desperation?

I did molly recently and two days later I was faced with the darkest come down I have ever felt. I always thought of depression as the opposite of joy but depression was not what I was feeling. It was sharper and it was scarier. If loss is always felt as violence, then the opposite of joy – the collection of abundances – must also be violent. The opposite is not the numbness and passivity of depression. When I am depressed I have escaped the acuteness of violence, of loss, of joy. Death seems like a close friend. My inability to enjoy the things I love and my failure to function normally do not seem that different from death anyhow. But it is not my desire to be dead. I desire to face and feel my life. The split second of cracking; the dancing with my hands pressed to my chest after swallowing the powder; the feeling of being whole, sitting at the kitchen table, four of us; the crouched position on the floor, arms wrapped around myself, gasping for air; these are not sustainable. I can not live my life here, at the center of the wound. I must be content existing on the hovering edge where I can still feel the pulsating center. This space will always have to be enough.