CREATIVE NONFICTION.



I LOVE YOU BUT

Makayla Sileo

My dad taught me what infinity meant when I was eleven. At the bottom of his birthday card I wrote, "I love you to the moon and back times a trillion gazillion double million," and in parentheses, the number one with too many zeros to count or even make sense. *That is a lot of zeros, my sweetness*, he said joyfully. *Not enough*, I responded, my *hand cramped, but I pinky promise I love you more*. He grabbed a napkin from the table and wrote "I love you to the moon and back times ∞ ." *It means I love you more than the human mind is capable of knowing*. There is a potent unconditionality to infinity, and from that day on I simply assumed that all people knew it equally. But infinity is elusive and most people have never been given a napkin with unconditional love written on it.

Ahmad is, by pure definition, a whole-hearted and unconditional lover of both people and life. I ran into him early one October morning when time was dragging and the air was biting and my heart wasn't much warmer. He said *boo* instead of hello, always playful, always smiling. I appreciated this, as the morning was much too lonely. We were good friends, but not too good, ones that spent hours together but the hours never seemed to add up because of the chatter and anonymity of the group. I liked him though, thoroughly.

As we chatted, I noticed that his eyes smiled even when his mouth didn't and so I stared at the wrinkles that formed where his joy was carried. Around us, life went on. The wind carried fallen leaves and their musty scent around our ankles. The quad had a particular hush about it, as if everyone was too sleepy to ease their wintery loneliness. Time and students passed from this building to that one. Neither of us seemed to notice that we were in the middle of the walkway—not because it was a love-at-first-sight kind of meet cute—but because he was a familiar face and so was I, and both of us were far from home; him from the UAE, me from myself.

He asked my major and my birthday, excited to tell me—an English major—about how he—an engineering major—wanted to write books because his mother loved to read, and I felt embarrassed to know him without knowing him. *I want to write a love story about what happens after love*, he told me. He glowed differently, idling in a fullness and passion that warmed me in the chilly morning air. *All the books we read are about meeting and falling in love, but I want to write about grappling and maintaining the love you are in.* He told me he loved a girl back home, but *that* he still didn't know enough about love to write the story. *My country never learned how to respect women and so I wasn't allowed to love her in public.* The truth was bitter: public love—and public love without conditions—is a privilege, a privilege that Ahmad was not afforded.

As we stood there he told me stories, stories of intricate richness, but his tone remained eerily casual. I held onto his every word, desperate to escape into a good conversation with a good human. He spoke mostly of his younger sister and how he calls her each morning. He showed videos of her dancing or singing, desperate to show off what he loved, desperate for someone to see a piece of his home. He told me how he graduated high school and went into the military where he burned a hole through his hand after swinging into an open window and down a thick rope. He explained how he couldn't dress himself for weeks after simply because he had been scared of the heights and wanted to be on the ground as quickly as possible. After graduating, Ahmad went to Minnesota for a year to learn English, which he arrived knowing nothing of but is beautiful at now. His tutor had a crush on him. *I just needed to get an 80% on the language exam in order to go to university in America*, he went on. His mom wanted nothing more than for her children to study in the States, so Ahmad got an 88%.

Ahmad asked—him being the oldest sibling—if I was spoiled to be a younger sister. As we walked, I thought of my later curfew and gas tank that was somehow always filled. *Yes*, I said, *yes I suppose I was*. He said his little sister was spoiled too. He asked me if American fathers beat their daughters like Emirati fathers beat their sons. *My sister was never beaten either*, he said, *you both are lucky*.

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Fireflies are good luck, my sweetness, my dad responded every time I asked why people caught them in mason jars. At the young age of four, I simply could not imagine how imprisoning anything would make it better. Bugs built with wings lost their freedom for someone else's temporary enjoyment. I turned the page of the picture book for him, indicating that I wanted him to keep reading; I was never the patient type. Most nights went like this. My parents took turns at who came into my room each night and I loved them equally and so every night my room was saturated with love. My childhood bedroom was plastered in purple heart wallpaper that said "love" in different fonts, and before I could read, I was tracing that word and learning it by heart and every night they kissed my forehead I re-learned that word. Night and night again, after my mom went to bed my dad would gather my sister and me on the bed to read "Dads are for Catching Fireflies", and every night my dad would cry. *Why are you crying, Daddy,* I would ask, *It's a happy book!* He always answered, *It is happy, my sweetness, it really is.*

After a bit of time, we walked back to the dorms together, because I was cold and Ahmad needed to go to the dry cleaners to get his suits pressed. *I hate wearing suits*, he told me. When I asked why, he said that he only wore suits on Christmas day, and Christmas was the one day he had to stand next to his father in their family portrait and pretend that they were equally respectable men. Ahmad asked if I loved my father and whether I called my father dad. There is a great distinction in what we value by how we call it.

I call my mom "Mama" and she has a beautiful spirit, one that hugs you no matter what. My dad has a colorful mind, one that is saturated in curiosity and a desire to understand. Not only was I never beaten, but I was often hugged. And I am convinced their love for me is what taught me how to hold myself. I never quite understood how Ahmad existed with such joy, grace, and kindness despite a faulty father. He is proof that a person is as significant and influential as one lets them be.

I was raised by family game nights and home-cooked sit-down meals, I was taken to the mountains to learn about myself, given an education to learn about everything else, and offered an infinity, not of time, but of love. While the most optimistic of people might assume that all people know and show love equally, there are distortions. This is something we cannot ignore, no matter how much we desire to. Love is a necessity, but also a privilege. It is people like Ahmad that are proof that conditional love does not always birth conditional love. It is people like Ahmad that keep hope kindled.

Ahmad and I slipped back into talking about the weather. It was even colder now despite being closer to afternoon. It was time to go. *Goodbye*, Habibi, he said. I knew what that meant, having been told weeks earlier that it meant "my love" in Arabic, and I wondered how a boy could so easily say a word that he had rarely heard himself. I loved him for it, loved him for his ability to love despite his own deficit. He carried on, waved, whistled a bit, and shrugged as he walked away. Another day, another conversation, another story told. His words crept into my being, and I found both a deep sadness and infinite appreciation for the joy that pools in the corners of people's eyes as they speak of what they do have. He thought nothing of it, but I slept differently that night, and I love him for reminding me what a privilege it is to love and be loved.

A SEA OF YOU

Natalie Fischer

I throw my phone across the room, hearing the thud as my door halts its flight. Underneath the sharp sound is something important, something irreversible, something more profound. In the ensuing silence, I hear it. The irrevocable crack that precedes the shatter. A sound that alters this moment, reverberating through my hunched body; a noise that transmutes my world, shaking me to my core. A shift that changes me. I will never be the same.

In the aftermath of the cataclysm, I lay amid the rubble. Broken trust. Broken friendship. Broken heart. Curled in the fetal position, my cheek is pressed against the soft sheets of my bed. My hands push against my chest in a feeble attempt to protect my heart as the dam inside me ruptures, and out pours the dark waters that were locked behind it. A tidal wave of memories, so profoundly mundane, rushes over me, drowning me with its savage force and dragging me out towards an apathetic and unforgiving sea. The jagged edges of my heart impede my resistance—I am so tired of treading these treacherous waters—I surrender.

I let the sea of memories sweep me away from the safety of the shore that day, from the security of ignorance and denial. And I sank. His voice floated to me through the murk, wrapped around me like a constrictor. A voice I loved, a voice I remembered but no longer recognized, a voice that saved me in my peril only to crush me in my safety. The voice of a ghost. *"I think I'm losing my mind," I say to him through my hysterical, unguarded laughter. "Can't lose what you never had," he replies cheekily.* Once and a thousand other times he'd teased me, laughed at me, with me. His voice was a dog-eared novel in the library of my mind. The echoes of it faded with each passing day, my memory of it washed out by time, like sand in the tide. A deafening silence took its place. In this absence of sound, I heard everything I should have said to him. I should have told him, could have a hundred times... My friend, you're scored on my heart...

The lost echoes of his voice drifted down the dark, sepulchral pathways of my memory, conjuring images of snow and ice. *Vanilla ice cream*, *homemade. Two parts white snow from his porch, one part milk, one part white sugar, all pure joy. His house, where I joke with his sister and bicker with his brother, where I play with his dog. Where we laugh together and banter and play Battleship... As the remnants of the memory lingered in my mind, I reflexively reminded myself to never play that game with you because you were a near-pathological cheater... before I ruthlessly righted myself: we would never play Battleship again.*

The tide shifted, and I saw the two of us as we wandered side-by-side through a December morning. Snow decorates the drooping trees. It coats the frozen ground. The bitter chill kisses my lips. We pelt each other with snowballs, laughing, two kids without a care in the world—until he football tackles me into the snow. I am frozen through. We return to his house to watch movies together, arguing comfortably. We speak with familiarity, and share the effortless silences that come with comfortable companionship.

What happened to that companionship? I destroyed it. He always liked me as something more, always wanted to be more than friends, and I knew it. I knew it all along. I encouraged him to move on, to find someone else, because I knew that I'd only ever care for him platonically. I thought it was enough. I thought he was okay. Or maybe that's just the lie I told myself so that *I* would feel okay, that it was enough for *me*. How could I not see the pain I caused him? How could I be so selfish? I took his love for granted. Imprudently, I believed that love was, by nature, unconditional and eternal. Until the day came that I received a message that I (unaware) dreaded all along: he didn't like me in the way that he did before. I should have reveled. I should have celebrated for him, with him; I should have been unconditionally happy for my dear friend. But instead, I turned down a darker path, a road that would lead to a future without him.

Something took root inside me that day, something that metastasized and twisted and bloomed wickedly: fear. The parts of myself that were ugly and broken emerged, Hyde overtaking Jekyll. As the fear of losing him hounded and battered me like a sailboat in a storm, my center of gravity shifted. With the security of his unfaltering love no longer certain, I flailed for an anchor. And as is the law of the ocean, the more you struggle, the worse your situation becomes. Each day, my anxiety increased. I fretted ever more over each minute thing. I fed the fear, the monster within. My insecurities were projected onto him, bothersome and tiring. And he drifted further and further from me.

All objects have their breaking point, can only be pushed so far until they give. I stretched myself further, further, further...until I snapped. I wrote a letter, a letter that contained everything: my pain, my frustration, my excuses in the guise of past experience. A letter that contained nothing, because I didn't say the thing that mattered most. I didn't tell him how I felt about him.

I thought that I could walk away with that goodbye, but doubts plagued me, the what if's piling one on top of the other. What if it wasn't delivered, what if the address was wrong, what if, what if, what if.

And finally I texted him. I asked if he'd gotten my letter. That should have been the end, I should have left it where it lay, but I had to

know. I had to know because that letter wasn't really a goodbye at all, it was a plea for reassurance, a shout into the void, a last desperate attempt to hold on. So I asked him. And when he just said "yeah", I said, "and...?"

And the floodgates opened. Torrents of scathing words and accusations and the most horrible, unimaginable belief, immovably implanted in his mind. My last vestige of hope was crushed that day, the pedestal that I had misguidedly built beneath him felled. "And...?" I type, breath uneven. His reply comes, and with it a world of pain: "*And now I see that you were only using me all along. My family tried to warn me, and I didn't listen to them, but now I see.*"

Using him...to like me? Pretending to be his friend? Pretending to care? All the laughter and love and joy was reduced, mutated, obliterated by a terrible misunderstanding. My careless, foolish words twisted into something alien, a wretched and irreversible conclusion. It was the finality that was so difficult to absorb, the immutability of the outcome—I was helpless in the face of its wrath.

The May flowers bloomed as my heart wilted. The world burst to life in a plethora of vivid colors, but my mind was a study of gray. I tried to remember everything about him, to lock it in my heart, where it could never be lost. I found that those memories were guarded like a fragrant rose, surrounded by sentries of unforgiving thorns. I tried to forget, but that was even worse. An ocean cannot be held back through sheer force of will. And always, at the back of my mind, constant as the tide: What if he was right? What if I only used him, him with his short laugh and quick smile and heart of gold?

The month passed in a thousand agonizing minutes, time stretched and lengthened by the hands of regret. By the time I heard from him again, I was changed. Guilt and pain had eaten me away; I was living, but I was no longer alive. The true nature of his final texts was no mystery to me—the message was anything but opaque. *"You weren't a great relationship in my life," he says to me. "I need time to process."* This was not a promise, not an intimation of a brighter future. It was a goodbye. I knew it even then.

To continue to allow thoughts of him to fill my mind would have been to lose my sanity. Little by little, time and necessity helped me distance myself from my wounds, helped my mind heal. My guilt ceased to consume every waking moment as I gradually restricted thoughts of him to the deepest recesses of my mind, until he was barred from my conscious thoughts.

But my heart was not so easy. It is not subservient like the mind, but rather a rebel in the face of logic and reality. Every now and then, my defiant heart would remind me of this. *He stands before me, smiling. He beckons from the doorway, inviting me back into his home. His life. His heart. I wake slowly, feeling at peace for the first time since I can remember. And then my conscious mind shakes itself awake, and I realize: it wasn't real. It was only a dream. Just another dream.*

I've heard people say that pain is learning in disguise. There was no grand revelation for me, no cinematic 'lightbulb' moment. My lesson is a continuous process, a path without end.

Every day, some memory of him surfaces, rising like a specter from the restless waters of my soul. His name, spoken on the lips of my friends, crashes against my heart, and it hurts me. His legacy echoes down the carpeted high school halls at a deafening decibel, and it hurts me. His absence is evident everywhere I turn, the hole he left in my heart immeasurable, this hurts most of all. I feel the pain every day.

The pain is what saves me, my light in the darkest of places. I would not, could not, hurt like this if things were as he believed. My mind might be able to convince me that he was right, that I used him after all, that our friendship wasn't real, but my heart doesn't lie. He believed that I used him, when the truth is this: I loved him. He was one of the truest friends I've ever known. My love permeates every bittersweet memory, is evident in every moment of anguish I feel over his absence, overflows in my wounded heart.

Love and pain are two sides of the same coin. It was because I loved him that losing him hurt so terribly; it was the pain of losing him that made me realize how much I loved him. Pain is not a consequence of love, nor an excuse to harden one's heart against it. Pain is a crude token, won by those who have the courage to open their hearts to *love in all its powerful, incomprehensible, and transient beauty.*

But I didn't know any of this the day I threw my phone away from me, desperate to distance myself from his hateful words. The day I heard the crack of my heart shattering. The day the currents of change swept me out to sea. I would never be the same.

THE DANCE OF LIFE: AS TOLD BY CARDINALS

Alexandra Moorhead

Definition

Cardinals are popular songbirds, credited for their beauty. So eye-catching are they that seven U.S. states call them their state bird ("Northern Cardinal: Life History").

Courtship

Courting consists of the male and female cardinals singing softly with their heads held high, swaying back and forth, in rhythm with the song (Kaufman).

Jitterbug #1

BJ and Jim's first date was actually not even a date. Instead, it was a double date. They came with two other partners, who are not important now. It was their first dance. Dancing along to the radio was free so, growing up poor with not much to do, Jim and his sisters were excellent dancers. His date was not.

"Do you know how to jitterbug?"

"No."

Looking across the table, his eyes landed on BJ, with her fiery red hair.

"Do you know how to jitterbug?"

"A little."

Next thing she knew they were out on the floor dancing the night away. Their original dates stayed sitting awkwardly, sullen about their pairs of two left feet.

Songbirds

"In summer, their sweet whistles are one of the first sounds of the morning" ("Northern Cardinal: Life History").

Songs

The next thing she knew, he was calling her and leaving messages with her roommates. BJ worked long hours and did not have an answering machine. She was getting tired of them asking, "Who's Jim?"

Migratory Birds

Cardinals are also one of the only birds in the northeast who tough out the winter, opting out of migrating to Florida ("Northern Cardinal: Life History").

Christmas in New England is almost concurrent with the beautiful red body of a cardinal backed by pure white snow. This wistful image is seen on almost as many Christmas cards as picturesque lighthouses framed by the white of the snow and cool blue of the ocean.

Migration

"You're going to be an old spinster." A taunt that BJ's brothers always launched at her. BJ, unhindered by this threat, decided to go to nursing school.

"When I was out of high school there were two options. Be a teacher or be a nurse, so I decided I guess I'd be a nurse."

The Peter Bent Brigham Hospital is where she went to school and later worked, only leaving in a spur of the moment decision so she and a friend could travel to Europe. As penny-pinching nurses, they took a boat, not a cruise, and decided to vacation until they were out of money. They elongated their stay to 3 months by residing 6 days a week in hotels without private showers, electing to wash their hair in the sinks. After coming back to Boston, they then made a slight detour to San Francisco, then finally back home to Boston, where she stayed, through the snowy weather and cold nights.

Songbirds Revisited

Cardinals attract many people to the bird watching hobby not just because of their bright red plumage, but for their beautiful songs ("Northern Cardinal: Life History").

Songs Revisited

As head nurse of the coronary care unit she was a lot of things. Headstrong, knowledgeable, and determined to name a few. Her most admirable trait was her compassion. The many times she sat by the bedside of someone who was nearing the end of their life, she reassured their families that the last sense to go was hearing. Your dying child, brother, sister, mother, or husband could not taste or smell anything, see you, and could not feel you but, to their last faint beat of heart, they could hear you.

Treats

Long after BJ had ever had a dog, she still carried dog treats with her in her car. That way if she saw any dogs while she was out, she'd always have something to give to them.

Proposal

Their love story was not all roses and butterflies after that first magical not-date. Jim started ignoring her so, in her normal independent and stubborn fashion, she started seeing other people. Then one fateful night he called her, practically begging her to come to dinner with him. She conceded but in protest wore the ugliest dress she could find in her closet. That was the night he proposed. Her answer, "I'll think about it."

Mating Birds

Many cardinals are said to mate for life (Kaufman, Kenn & Kimberly).

St. Louis Cardinals

The St. Louis Cardinals were given the name when "one day, Willie McHale, a sports reporter for the St. Louis Republic heard a female fan praise the color (of the players' socks) as a 'lovely shade of cardinal.' So, McHale called them Cardinals" ("1901 St. Louis Cardinals Roster").

Mates

She did think about it. She didn't have a choice. He'd call every day.

"Hello my beautiful red-head. I thought I'd help you make your decision, so I made a list of pros and cons of marrying me. I have a whole list of pros, but I can't come up with any cons."

Food

Male cardinals represent that "you are what you eat." Their red color is the result of the carotenoids in their diet (Clifford).

Beer

Jim loved his beer, but he was not a drunk. He had at least 2 drinks a night. Evidence of this was found in his leprechaun-like beer belly. However, every so often he'd go a week without any alcohol at all, just to prove, to himself, to the fates, maybe to God, that he could.

Nest-Building

Female cardinals are not as popular on Christmas cards. Their duller plumage doesn't hold a candle to the magnificent red of the male cardinals. However, the female's song is just as alluring, and she is the one who does the most building of the elaborate nest the family resides in ("Northern Cardinal: Life History").

Home-Building

After marriage and their first child, she said she was staying home.

There was no point in arguing with her.

She raised the kids; he raised a business. The bank laughed at him when he requested a loan. They thought never in a million years would that corner of Charlestown, overrun with crime and poverty, ever be an ideal place of business. Obstinate in his decision, he scraped together every penny. The building still stands, in a now flourishing part of town, a testament to their hard work and, more importantly, stands for how they strived to provide a great life for their children.

She did the bookkeeping-all the way up to 6 months before she died.

He was never able to shake off the aftertaste that getting evicted from his home as a child had left. Therefore, he worked for the company he grew from the ground up, all the way until the day he died.

Confidence

Puffing out their chests and standing with heads held high, cardinals can be seen as an extremely confident species (Clifford).

Bullshit

One of the traits Jim Balcam possessed that made him a stellar businessman was the ability to "baffle you with the Balcam Bullshit." He could sell a glass of water to a drowning man. After a meeting one day an adjuster said to my mother, "It's so hard to say no to him when he looks at you with that big Irish smile."

Nest-Building Revisited

The female crushes twigs with her beak until they are workable. She then pushes them into a cup shape creating a four-layered nest. One layer with coarse twigs, then covered in a leafy mat, then lined with grapevine bark, and then covered finally with grasses, stems, rootlets, and pine needles ("Northern Cardinal: Life History").

Origin

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, "cardinal" comes from the Latin word "cardo" meaning "hinge" ("Cardinal").

Home-Building Revisited

She remembered the names of all the people that he couldn't remember.

She used to paint his fingernails with clear polish. If he wanted to be a good businessman and make an impression, he couldn't show up to meetings with chewed-off fingernails.

If you needed someone to make you the best birthday cake, to make a new craft for the church sale, to take care of your kid when they were sick, someone who knew how to do the Heimlich when you're out to dinner with the family (this happened twice)—she did it all.

Territorial Birds

Oftentimes cardinals attack their own reflections in the spring and early summer. This is because they are obsessed with defending their nest from intruders. They'll spend hours fighting these "intruders" in a hopeless battle ("Northern Cardinal: Life History").

Territorial

Her strong headedness never faded either. As an 80-something year old who drove 20 under the speed limit, she only ran a red light twice—both times was when Jim was in the hospital. Hobbling up to the front desk the secretary told her she couldn't go back to see him. Leaning her frail body on her cane for support she said,

"Look, I understand that you have rules but you're going to need a lot more security out here if you don't let me back there." He let her by, apparently worried that this grandma could indeed bash his nose in with her cane, as she insinuated. Leaving the hospital later that day she said thank you and goodnight and, under her breath in an embarrassed tone, "I almost assaulted him on the way in."

Religion

Cardinals in the Roman Catholic Church are high ecclesiastical officials ranking just below the pope (Clifford).

Minister

Jim was a good man; this didn't stop him from trying to secure his place in Heaven. At the nursing home where he spent the last few months of his life, he'd slip the minister a \$20 bill every time he came around, just to be sure.

Superstition

Cardinals are often seen as good luck charms—especially for a family as superstitious as mine. Jim never walked under a ladder, always picked up a penny when he saw it, and always went out the same door he came in. For our family, seeing a cardinal represents that a loved one is still watching over you.

My grandma spent many afternoons sitting in her kitchen bay window, often accompanied by my dog on the other side of the table. From there they had a perfect view of the brilliantly red cardinal who called the top of the tree across from her condo, his home. Day in and day out he'd be there, rain or sun or storm.

Name

Now I apologize because Jim was not even his name, it was his middle. However, I only know the first letter of his first name. My mom only found out his first name when her sister found his birth certificate and she will be taking that secret to the grave. His parents named him after someone in hopes that the person would leave Jim money in his will. According to Jim, the H in H. James (Jim for short) stands only for "Honorable."

Nubble Light

Nubble Light is BJ's favorite place. During the summers that BJ, Jim and their family spent at York Beach she'd walk to the lighthouse every day. Years later, in their kitchen Jim stated to his eldest daughter,

"When I die, have me cremated and hold on to the ashes and then when your mother dies you can have her cremated and then mix our ashes together and spread them in the Piscataqua River."

"Don't you dare Debra. That's not what I want... You can go in the river; I'm going to Nubble Light."

Jim, knowing better, quickly conceded.

"Ok, we'll go to Nubble Light. Can I go too?"

"I'll think about it," she said.

We all knew she'd give in.

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A GLOSSARY ON SILENCE

Ellie Wadsworth

Amplify

It seems paradoxical for the first section in an essay titled Silence to be called "Amplify." And while, yes, 'silence' has the opposite meaning of 'amplify', when you take the time to truly sit in silence, your thoughts and emotions feel as though they're being plugged into a speaker and become amplified inside your brain. The overpowering sound of silence can be enough to make someone's skin crawl.

Brushing Teeth

Camping has many enjoyments to it, and as an experienced camper I know them well, but my favorite of all is brushing my teeth outdoors. The common routine of putting toothpaste on a toothbrush becomes so much more interesting when you are doing it at the foot of a waterfall. Instead of the sound of a running sink, one can hear the sound of water hitting against rocks falling into a flowing abyss. Meanwhile, a bird chirps overhead, soaring through the empty sky. I see myself from the bird's view, standing on an outstretched flat boulder brushing my teeth. I am quiet. I am listening.

Cochlear Implant

A cochlear implant is an electrical device surgically implanted into the ear that allows for the detection of sound for someone who has a hearing impairment.

Cox, Trevor

The author of "Quietest Places in the World," Trevor Cox, argues that the human ear is so sensitive that it can't actually hear silence. Humans can't hear the concept of silence because "the tiny bones of the middle ear, which transmit sound from the eardrum to the inner ear, vibrate by less than a thousandth of the diameter of a hydrogen atom." Cox explains that even in the absence of sound the human ear is detecting the smallest vibrations; therefore, humans cannot hear silence.

Deaf

But what does that mean about people who are deaf? Do they hear the true definition of silence?

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, there are two types of deafness. One is partial and comes from an interruption of sound vibrations through the passage connecting the outer world to the nerve cells in the inner ear. The other type is nerve deafness: "some defect in the sensory cells of the inner ear or in the vestibulocochlear nerve prevents transmission of sound impulses from the inner ear to the auditory center in the brain" (Rogers). Trevor Cox and I would agree that this form of deafness is hearing true silence. But you can't ask someone who is deaf what they hear. You can't ask them to describe the silence. All they've ever heard is silence, and it's not even really hearing.

Emma

Emma was the first deaf person I ever met. As I was going into third grade, my family was Emma's host family—a designated family to welcome an incoming new student. Our moms made us go on a playdate to Water World so that we could get to know each other. Why they thought Water World was a good idea is still a preposterous concept to me. Emma has cochlear implants which are, in fact, not waterproof. With that in mind, Emma had to take off her cochlear implants for the day, which left us with no way to communicate.

Throughout the day we stood in lines silently staring at other faces. While I guess in some interpretations of the word 'silently' you could argue that we were 'standing there in silence'; I, however, would argue that only Emma was standing there in silence. I could hear the murmurs of conversations around me, the sound of people splashing in pools of water, and the creaks the slides made as someone prepared to barrel themselves down the slide. Meanwhile, all Emma sensed was the absence of sound.

Great Sand Dunes National Park

A friend once told me the Great Sand Dunes "are the quietest place in the lower 48 states." Where he got this information is unclear and it could very well be one of his own factoids, but there was no reason for me to doubt the authenticity of his fact because for the first time, in the Sand Dunes, I heard complete silence.

Seven of us lay lined up next to each other on a tarp barricading our sleeping bags from the sand. I awoke suddenly. The sleeping bag rustled around me as I sat up to stare at the moon-lit dunes surrounding me. The rustling stopped after I adjusted for comfort and that's when I heard the silence. I couldn't hear the congested breaths of my friends or the crickets chirping. I couldn't even hear the constant sound of air. There was nothing. Maybe I was experiencing the sound deaf people hear or maybe the sound a dead person hears. Either way, it was the loudest silence to be heard.

Trevor Cox went to Kelso Dunes (another set of sand dunes located near Baker, San Bernardino County, California) and said he "experienced something quite rare: complete silence."

Hear

Perceive with the ear the sound made by someone or something.

Honor

We use silence to honor the dead. We take a moment of silence to reflect on what has happened to them, to remember them, to honor them.

During the Black Lives Matter movement, we kneeled at the corner of Colfax and Speer in downtown Denver. The streets were blocked off by police officers and filled with attendants down countless blocks. We knelt in silence for eight minutes and 46 seconds. Eight minutes and 46 seconds. The same amount of time Derek Chauvin had his knee on George Floyd's neck. Thousands of us covered the Denver streets honoring George Floyd silently for eight minutes and 46 seconds.

John Cage's 4'33"

American composer John Cage created the controversial, influential, inspiring, perplexing, infamous piece 4'33". It is a three-movement composition of four minutes and 33 seconds of silence.

When pianist David Tudor performed John Cage's 4'33", he sat down at his piano, covered the keyboard, and glanced at his stopwatch. During the four minutes and 33 seconds he raised and lowered the keyboard twice, careful to make no sound, and turned pages of sheet music which were absent of musical notes. When the time was up, he stood to receive applause from the audience.

Was it four minutes and 33 seconds of silence? No. Cage explains that although the composition itself is a silent one, there can be no such thing as silence when there are sounds all around: stirring wind, pattering rain drops, murmuring people—accidental sounds. Cage and Cox would agree that there is No Such Thing as Silence.

You can even listen to 4'33" on Spotify.

Lasagna

A family friend of mine just posted on Instagram with the caption: "Real G's move in silence like lasagna." Not sure what that means, but I suppose silence might have some relation to lasagna.

Moment of Silence

Let's take a moment of silence right now. Stop reading and take a minute of silence to focus on the sounds around you.

Now turn your attention to your breath. Listen.

Reflect. What do you hear? Where have your thoughts wandered to? Did your thoughts feel amplified?

I'm sitting here, writing this essay, silently. The people around me are not silent; they're having their own conversations. They're taking part in their own lives. Each one of us is living our own individual life and we connect with each other in this moment by being in the same space. Is the person sitting across from me aware of the fact that I am now focused on him? Where have his thoughts wandered to while he also sits silently, writing away at whatever it is on his laptop? Are we taking a moment of silence together because we are both currently quiet? I am here having my thoughts wander from one thing to another while maybe he sits there quietly contemplating whether or not to send a text message.

With that moment given to me to sit in silence my mind has entered into a loud world of moving ideas all chasing after each other, endlessly cycling, into a tumbleweed rolling on and on until the moment is broken by outside sound. When the minute is over, the volume of my head balances out with the volume of the world. There is no silence inside or outside of my brain but at least they are at average levels that are maintainable.

Oppression

Although we use silence to honor people, silence also leads to oppression against the same groups of people we're trying to honor.

Before and after the moment of silence at the Black Lives Matter protest, all the thousands of people in attendance marched through the streets of Denver chanting:

"Say his name, George Floyd!"

"Say her name, Breonna Taylor!"

"No justice, no peace! No racist police!"

"What do we want? Justice! When do we want it? Now!"

Our voices don't stop there. Staying silent when we are facing any issue—whether it's political, environmental, health related, education related, gender or race related—is part of the problem.

There are other ways to help besides protests. You can donate, use social media to raise awareness, educate yourself, volunteer, and so much more. But whatever you do, don't stay silent. Use your voice.

Outdoors

The outdoors are my favorite places to appreciate silence. I appreciate it while brushing my teeth, waking up in the middle of the night in the Sand Dunes, hiking, and just sitting on rocks. There's no need to say anything when you're outside. All you need to do is appreciate the fresh air and the beauty of our planet. When I'm silent in the outdoors, like always, I get lost in my thoughts; but, this time my thoughts stay light. The fresh air and primitive feeling of being outdoors allow my thoughts to feel peaceful. They flow smoothly like the river I'm jumping over. They wander to intriguing and inspirational places like my curious feet wander over peaks and valleys.

Outer Space

Outer space is the closest environment to hearing true silence. In space, there are no air molecules to carry the chirping sounds of humans, the hustle of everyday life, or the surrounding vibration of air. Sound waves cannot travel without air molecules thus providing a truly silent place. Maybe you can still hear the inner sounds of your body: the crack of a knuckle or the rumble of a hungry belly. Or maybe you can't hear those sounds either and outer space is the ultimate location to hear true silence.

This, however, would not be a serene way to experience silence. The only way to hear it would be to float through space with no helmet, leading to an inevitable death.

Questions & Concerns

Is it technically correct for me to write 'hear silence'? I know the answer to this question is "no" based on the definition of 'hear' and 'silence', but I can't think of a better way to describe how someone senses silence. We definitely don't smell it. Does saying things like 'the loudest silence' make sense? Can one silence be louder than others? Do deaf people hear silence louder than those who can hear? Or is it also wrong to put 'hear' in the same sentence with the word 'deaf'? Is it possible for a person to experience true silence (excluding deaf people)?

Silence

Absence of any sound or noise.

Vaults of Silence

The anechoic chamber is another way humans can try to sense the idea of complete silence. It is, in its most basic form, a vault of silence. Trevor Cox explains the anechoic chamber as "an acoustically isolated room that provides unchanging, guaranteed silence, uninterrupted by wind, animals, or human noise." It is a room within a room requiring you to enter three sets of doors before being inside the chamber. The room is made up of heavy, insulated walls and is mounted on springs to provide the user with a silent experience. Although the room is silent, Cox reminds us that users can still hear "internal noises that the room cannot dampen."

Wind River Range, Wyoming

The Wind River Range, located in the lower central part of Wyoming, is where I learned to appreciate silence. A group of 14 of us started our month-long adventure backpacking through alpines and lakes chatting daily on our hikes. As the trip went on we became more comfortable hiking in silence. Eventually, we reached the point where we could hike upwards of five miles without conversing. Though there were sounds of nature surrounding us, the comfort of hiking in silence with a group of other silent hikers showed me how to be peaceful with my swarming thoughts.

Zero

How would you describe silence? The absence of sound? The stillness of thoughts? Or the racing, muddle of thoughts that come from surrounding silence? Is silence good? Is it important that we use silence to honor those who we've lost? Or should we never be silent to help those in need of our voices? Where do you enjoy silence? In the comfort of your bed as you fall asleep at night or in the middle of a sand dune brushing your teeth? For people who are deaf, do you ever enjoy constant silence? What does it sound like to you...the complete absence of sound...zero sound...silence?

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GENESIS

Kenlie Roher

In the beginning, there were three witches who spoke to God.

Me, Mary, and Hannah. We were all young witches, hiding right under the nose of the church. We had been baptized not as infants, but as grown women, twelve years old. We had been born with spells lying under our tongues, but first we were taught to speak the words of God. And after we were taught to speak the words of God, we were taught to read them and to follow them, and to stay in our place. And then, very shortly afterward, we were taught to lie.

On the first day, God created me, Mary, and Hannah. He created me, Kenlie, the Standing Pool, Mary, the One Who Wept Over Him, and Hannah, One of the Wives. But that's exactly it, you see; I'm not so sure he created us at all (but more on that later). On the first day, he must've made us witches, or perhaps we fell to the earth like demons... but didn't God create the demons too? So, yes-on the first day, God created the witches.

On the second day, God sent us to summer camp. Christian Church Camp, to be more accurate. We were still too young to process what we actually were, how God had actually made us, and so we thought we would play pretend a little bit longer, whether that was subconsciously or not. We immediately found we didn't fit in with the others, especially the other girls at the camp.

We were interested in the moths, the large, beautiful ones the size of birds that would come out around dusk, when the night was welcomed as a squeezing, see-through mist of purple. We enveloped this time of time, it became us, exactly when all the other campers went indoors. "Too many mosquitos!" they'd say. We would just look at one another-seeing something in each other's eyes, but at the same time not sure of what we were seeing-and then look away, at the gathering milk of the moon.

That particular night, we slung up three papery thin hammocks, all jewel-toned and glowing in the thickness of the trees. There weren't many trees at the camp, as they had all been cut down years prior, but there was a suspicious clump near the edge of the campgrounds by the pool house, where people could choose to get baptized.

But the moths, of course, were attracted to the light and the darkness. And we were attracted to them. So, we went up and away from the slung hammocks, from the thickness of the trees, and near the campsite where the motel was. The motel was a hunk of white cinderblock, crumbling in almost everywhere you could imagine; inside the rooms, there were innumerable types of insects, arachnids.

Every summer, the three of us always came back. We all started in 2008, Hannah and Mary eight years old, me only seven. We knew nothing except that we could recite Bible verses with ease, and that sometimes we found ourselves awake at night after dreaming of the Rapture, unable to recall what the significance of the visions had been, but we would forget them quickly all the same, as if they had never happened.

One day, we were running around in the woods, and dusk was nearing. This was the time of day where the moths would come out. We found a pale pink one sitting delicately against the crumbling cinder block, directly underneath a light. We found a couple of smaller brown ones, a fuzzy orange one, and wrote their descriptions down in a leather bound journal. We drew pictures of the moths; we thought they were so magical, just like us.

While the others were at chapel, 9 p.m., we were inside the cinder blocks, reading Greek mythology story books. We didn't know if they weren't allowed-there were a lot of things that weren't allowed at camp-but we decided to keep them hidden anyway. It was more fun that way. We read about Aphrodite, Artemis, about Hera, Demeter, Persephone, and Athena. We thought the names and the stories were so beautiful, and we often talked about them late into the night. We had already read about all the gods in the book we were supposed to be reading, the Bible. We had already memorized all the verses, read through all the paper-thin pages, but now there were other things that attracted us.

Like the moths! We noticed a particularly large flutter outside by the naked lamp outside the cinder block. We got up from our beds, the springs creaking anciently underneath us, and scurried out into the dim light. The moth had landed on the cracked sidewalk, spilling into a pool of golden light. It was the biggest moth any of us had ever seen; it looked more like a bird. It had furry red wings with the most exquisite black markings. We had never seen such a vibrant moth before. I thought she must've been Athena herself.

We gasped at her beauty, and Hannah hurriedly went back inside our cabin to get the leather bound notebook. We wrote down everything we could about Athena, drawing multiple different pictures just so that we capture every angle of her beauty. Even after we were done, it still didn't seem like enough. We didn't want her to fly away; she seemed like she was one of us. But after a while, the other campers came back from chapel, marching up the grassy hill, the green turned black in the darkening night. We had to act like we had been among them the entire time, and slipped back into the group as if we were made of shadow; no one seemed to notice we had been gone, though, not ever. We just thought this was one of the many different types of power we had over the others, even though we weren't sure what was different about us. Maybe it was something like what the moth had; the beauty, the strangeness, the look of intelligent understanding in her eyes.

The next day, I told everyone to start calling me Athena.

LETTERS FROM PLACES THAT ARE NOT WHERE I WANT TO BE

Javier A. Padilla Gonzalez

Rocio,

I am so dramatic and I think that I am dying with every second that passes, and life is so beautiful.

Hope to hear from you soon,

Javier.

Dear Colorado,

You gave me opium and imposing mountains. You were too cold for me, but I miss the suburbs and their Christmas lights. I am frightened by yucca and I saw a rattlesnake once. You make me feel like I do not belong anywhere inside of your borders, but I also cannot exist in a place where I cannot see the faint blue outline of the Front Range. Frankly, you were my first love, and I resent my mother for anchoring us to your impenetrable red soil.

Take care,

Your son.

Dear Moses,

What else did you expect from your people when you uprooted them and moved them across deserts for forty years? Of course they were going to dance and drink honey wine and search for new idols. A golden calf is appropriate imagery for people searching for home. After all, domesticated animals are part of the reason people were able to establish empires and cities.

Wishing you patience,

Javier.

To my guardian angel,

Do you like it here? It is always raining in this city. I used to love the rain, but now I am always damp and my socks are molding and if I stand in one place too long I am afraid the overgrowth will tangle me into place. I have found purpose in trying to find a place. I pity you.

I release you?

Javier.

Hi mom,

I am just writing to tell you that I am feeling sentimental, and I miss you. I am not sad and I don't want you to worry. In fact, the world is so big and so full of people. I am certain there will always be someone around to carry my feelings.

Love,

Javier, far from you.

Hi mom,

The world may be too big

Sincerely,

Me.

To all of the gas stations along the road from Colorado Springs to Jalostotitlán,

Have you seen Santo Toribio stop in to refuel? He is about my height, with black cropped hair and blue eyes. He was last seen wearing a singed black tunic. He smells oddly of gunpowder, and there are usually two or three wanderers trailing closely behind him. He might be my uncle (great). I am afraid that he is lost, but he is guiding a group into a harsh heat that will incinerate flesh. I have some questions to ask him about my family's situation. I am afraid the immigration lawyer that I previously contacted speaks a different language. I have enclosed a couple of relics that he might want back.

I appreciate your assistance,

another traveller.

Dearest Mimi,

That night that we were dancing in the cabin that your grandpa built, when the molly started wearing off, I became melancholic because I was jealous. I was jealous that you felt so entitled to a property, or that you could love it so much. It was obvious how much you cared when you started the fireplace, or when you remembered to put it out, or the way you brushed your hand over the gaudy wood paneling when you first opened the door. You sat outside in the snow for two hours and stared at an aspen tree that was due to be cut down soon. I was jealous of how powerful you became in that cabin, or the way you could relax on the garish leather lounger in the living room. You could go on for hours about the time that your sister peed herself in that room or the couch that your mom fell asleep on when she was going through her divorce and she got too high. That night that we were dancing and there was a blizzard outside, I was praying that the snow would cover the house and block the exits and we would become trapped. I did not want us to die, or develop frostbite. I was just praying that if I spent enough time there, it would also become my place. Maybe I hoped that if we got too cold we could both cut down that old aspen in the backyard for warmth, and you could tell someone else about that time we cut down the aspen in the backyard for warmth. That is, if your mother does not sell the cabin to pay for the divorce. In any case, my jealousy has subsided.

Thank you for sharing your place,

Javi.

To the mosquito in my room during a full moon,

I wish that you would die outside with my blood still inside of you.

I hate you,

Me.

Severin,

I should have told you that I was not looking for a relationship with you. I cannot admit to myself that I will never be comfortable in one place, and being near you could be considered a place. I find myself replaying the music and noise I heard in Calle Jesús Maria in my head. I enjoyed our first date when I was rolling too hard, and I lost my debit card, and my head felt like it would fall onto the turntables. I miss the chaos, and I never wanted to cook minestrone with you because it takes too long. I would have felt restless.

You should read this,

Your Cicciolino.

Dear Canyon de Chelly,

You felt very close to divinity. The cottonwoods were in bloom and the early morning light illuminated every white cotton ball and they all looked like sprites. I was told a story about scorched peach trees, and the sprites fell into ashes. I wanted to leave and I wanted to stay. I wanted to hover near the tip of Spider Woman's leg.

Respectfully,

Javier.

To Tswana, my love,

A magazine that we should care about is having a party this weekend, and I have four pairs of shoes. The boots are muddled and scuffled, the other boots are knockoffs, the loafers were 200 pesos, and the converse are covered in dog shit. My lover invited me or demanded that I attend with her, and I feigned disinterest when I accepted her invitation. My boyfriend is out dancing with my friends, and they love him, and I feel like I am cheating on all of them. They believe that I am staying in because I have to write. My best friend's girlfriend wrote to my Mexico City roommate from Chicago: "Jav can be flakey, so IDK." I have a growing suspicion that he is only my 'friend' now. I am playing with the thought of texting my Colombian lover, and telling him that I am coming to see him later this month after all. It will probably all end the same. I will move and restart and pillage and run. It is what it is.

I hope you can feel that I miss you,

JavlexP.

Severin,

You make me feel less restless and that is enough for now.

Love,

Your Cicciolino.

To the border crossing in El Paso or Juárez,

I always looked forward to seeing you. It may have been masochistic, naive or alchemical. You were change. I was either going to become brown or American. I always wondered who I was when I stood right on top of you. I could have lived in one of the border patrol checkpoint booths—the really cramped ones where the officers are always smoking. I could live in constant excitement and fear.

Loosen up,

Javier Alexandro Padilla-Gonzalez.

Pedro Padilla,

You used to be a reference point for my life. An amazing stela carved with the cardinal directions, rooted deeply into sand caves. Since your pulmonary embolism, you are a point that I try to avoid. I know all of your riddles, and I don't think that you know that you keep repeating the same riddle. Maybe you cannot recognize me.

I hope your life was enough,

Alex.

Hi mom,

I met a boy and he is really sweet. Unfortunately, I am trying to get out of this relationship. I have been cheating on him with a girl who hates me, and it is fulfilling some stressed desire or prophecy. I would move to Switzerland with him and have his kids, and that scares me. All of my friends say that he is not cute enough to be with me, but I think they are jealous that I have found a place in someone and I could die tomorrow. He hates ice cream just like me. How is dad?

Honest,

Your son.

Hey Tony,

I still love you, and I never told you how you made me feel that night that you picked me up on the side of Powers Boulevard. My parents were angry that I was spending time with you, someone that my brother had outed to them. I wanted to get dropped off at home so you could pick me up as we had planned, but they refused after they heard that you are gay. When I jumped out of my dad's car and he drove away, I felt very lost. I could see the faces of some drivers, confused as to why I was potentially homeless. I dressed in a very preppy manner in those days. The mountain was silhouetted, and I could see the lights from a few homes blinking at its crest. You were so happy to see me that night. Your pimp-my-ride Honda that you love to talk about was my home. I am still trying to find another neon home outside of my family.

I hope that I am not outing you again,

Jav.

Hi Elliott,

Thank you for driving me to the beach on my twenty-first birthday. I hope that someday a luminous, prophetic angel can wake you up drunk to the sight of searing white sands and sharp crystal waters in Pensacola, Florida. It was all so new and shiny and pure and everything unlike me that morning. I loved spending time in New Orleans with you and CJ, but it could not compare to the salt of the ocean in my tired lungs. I know we do not talk that often anymore, and that you are anxious about talking on the phone, but I still love you. New Orleans was nice, but your stepdad might be a little racist and I think your stepbrother was hitting on me. It all washed off at that beach.

Javi.

Dear Saint Isidore,

I moved to Jalos right around the time that you were supposed to bless that desert with flooding showers. You might have taken a break that year, but I could still feel you holding your breath. Everything was tense and muggy and my grandpa started dying. I wish the dam would have broken. I wish you could have released me, and I could have floated south, to something else. But the dam held dry mud, and everything was stagnant. The donkeys were all awake at night, and tired during the day. My other grandpa's mule got cancer, and her unfortunate diagnosis dashed her dreams of pregnancy. It all made no sense and nothing seemed natural. Some days it was so hot that it made me wonder why anyone would live there, let alone die there.

Explain yourself,

A loyal dissident.

Chavela Vargas,

Did you miss your hometown? I wanted to say something about your liver, swollen with Mexicanness and mezcal, and your lungs coated in tar and mexicanness. Was everything you exhaled Mexicanness and the souring flesh of a donated organ not accepted by the host? Or was your liver bloated with a painful tequila? Was it trying to dislodge itself from under your cage, and forcing itself to crawl East? Maybe it wanted to be outside of you: not East, and not West, and not South, and certainly not North. I saw your custom-made chair at a museum nearby recently.

Congratulations,

Un fan.

to the vegetable vendor in Mercado Los Alamos,

I do not know your name yet, but you are not my usual produce guy. I hope you can forgive me this one time. It was late and you were one of the only stalls that had not packed their crates for the evening. I know that your shop is the first produce stall to the right of the East entrance. I also know that you were trying to overcharge me for those champignon mushrooms last Saturday. The price difference was about 40 pesos a kilo. It is petty, but I cannot help thinking about how you referred to me as a "guero" when I walked up to ask for the price. I noticed that you looked at your coworker, and you both looked at me, and decided on your price for a guero. I could have afforded the price difference between my usual mushrooms and your mushrooms, but I chose to buy huitlacoche. From you. Why did I purchase produce from someone who had offended me with his price-gouging plot? I bought huitlacoche because I wanted you to know that I live here, and that I think I know how much a kilo of champignon mushrooms should be worth. I can also pronounce huitlacoche impeccably, and I kind of know how to cook it. Maybe I wanted to act strange so you would somehow reflect on the way that your well-intentioned, colloquial Spanish slang makes me feel like I will never belong here. Maybe I am writing this to myself. I will be back one of these days to confront you directly about this pressing matter that you probably do not remember. The huitlacoche is still in a Ziploc bag in my fridge.

A Guero A Pocho Hi mom,

I still haven't found a home, and I think I may have to come back to you soon. I know the story of the prodigal son by heart, but I do not remember his fault. I have seen Oklahoma and New Mexico. If I do not return to you, then you can assume I died peacefully. You don't have to slaughter your best goat for my funeral.

P.S. - I am just scaring you into missing me more. Neither of us are permanent, and I am scared that one day I will miss you more than you miss me.

Ana Mendieta,

How did your body feel encased in all of those irritating, repulsive weeds, sliding in that intoxicatingly fragrant mud?

Let me know,

Javier.

Dear Kansas,

You are so small and flat, and I could have just driven through you. I stopped at a Subway in Abilene, Kansas, and the workers all seemed very content to be living there. Maybe they were just smiling at my cropped sweater. I always wear that sweater during road trips. You are so small and flat and boring and lonely, and I want to move to you. I want to stop moving with you. I want to be the tallest object for miles, and I love dandelions. My friend Melia told me that I just like it when people talk about me. I think I have been writing a story ever since I saw the brown-gray expanse of your horizon.

Sincerely,

Javier Padilla-Gonzalez.

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Honestly,

Resting in Peace,

Javier.

Dear God (Judeo-Christian, maybe even Muslim),

I have entered every one of your churches, and if I am lying then you will just have to forgive me. I will never find you inside your house. Sometimes there are mosaics and sometimes there are baroque wood carvings laminated in cheap gold luster. It's tacky.

God Bless,

Javi.

To the girl in my third grade class,

I am sorry that you had to go to school that morning. It was some morning in the spring, and you had joined Mrs. Panos' third grade class late in the school year, when everyone had already chosen their best friend. I think you explained later that your family had just moved to America from Ghana or Ethiopia. You were wearing a beautiful white lace dress and bloomers and matching lacquered Mary Janes. Shana and Jessica were picking at your clothes, and I don't think you understood their words but you knew they were not kind. They must have been afraid of you, because people don't usually dress like that in the United States and you looked so beautiful. You started crying and you looked so lost and your dad had just driven away. I think you knew a few words in English, so you couldn't defend yourself. You stopped showing up to class a couple weeks later and Mrs. Panos told me that your family had moved again. I should have defended you, but I was scared of Jessica and I had been in your place before I learned English. I am sorry and I hope that you are happy in whatever place you are now, but we both understand that it is not easy or maybe impossible. Do not resent that dress or your mother for making you wear it. People can be cruel.

Thinking of you,

The little Mexican kid in the pink polo shirt.

Dear Javier,

Do you remember the other night when you were in the ocean, and it was very dark and it was a couple of nights after the full moon? The tide towered over you and there was no sea foam. The waves traveled around your body and it was peaceful, and warm, and inviting. The violent waters chose not to shake your rib cage and kick in your knees. You were with your boyfriend, and he audibly feared for your life, but you were being so stupid and selfish and you couldn't hear him over the calls of a siren. The horizon was indistinguishable from the sky and the moon was splintered over battered waters. You spun around to orient yourself by the position of the sea cliffs, but they had disappeared. The earth inverted and everything was black matter. You thought about drifting out to open waters, where no one lays claim to what is essentially nothing.

Take care of yourself,

You.

Dear Mexico City,

I was growing tired of you before the earthquake. Thankfully, you responded to my apathy. I had that feeling where my nostrils cleared and my stomach felt uneasy. I started fearing for my life. I rarely fear for my life. It was incredible to see your streets rolling under my feet and the power lines swaying next to me. The whole city felt it, and we all poured out onto the streets and I found Naomi and hugged her and I really loved everyone that had survived. There were no casualties that night, but I didn't know that yet.

Respectfully,

Un Extranjero.

Mom,

When you realize you have been sequestered, do you look to the lush lawns shielding your 1000-square-foot suburban home and feel some freedom? Do you also look to the mountains and imagine sprouting feet so long that you could sprint along the ridge for 20 minutes and find yourself lost in the Sierra Madre for the first time? Has English scalded your tongue so severely that if you try to roll your R's on the roof of your mouth, it stings? Do you like to receive my letters during my quest to find a home, when you consider yourself home? Do you miss your parents enough to stay with them forever? Do you want to keep moving? Do these questions make you wish that the earth would open up and swallow you whole?

I think that it is important to stage a pantheon of nameless, famous, unimportant and unmentioned ghosts that continue to guide and misguide me. Imagine yourself, walking along a strip mall during the first snow, huddled by some ubiquitous purple majesties. It is all I can imagine when I am far from you.

Love,

Javier.