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Twenty-Nine Delusions Concerning Love
By Jackie Donaldson

Abstract

Twenty-Nine Delusions Concerning Love is the story of my relationship with a musician I refer to as “E.” I narrate the relationship’s unfolding through the contexts of philosophy and cultural theory, and through artifacts of my own work rendered since the relationship’s inception in December of 2020. The purpose of this project was to identify a gap in the autotheory genre, and to fill that gap with my own meaningful contribution – a book which hybridizes life writing with prose and poetry. This piece is both a narration of my own experience, and an investigation into hookup culture and the way technology has redefined the modern romantic relationship. My inclusion of theory and research allows me to expand on my private experience into larger public discourse and make a statement about societal view, expectations, and institutions which all work to constrain the behaviors, bodies, and identities of women. Additionally, the theme concealment and exhibition is illustrated by my inclusion of actual events, phone, and text message conversations. Through research, I explored these questions: In the wake of #MeToo and the movement towards the naming and shaming of public figures, should writers conceal the identities of the people they write about? Who has access to theoretical discourse and the lyric mode?

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The History of Autotheory and the Lyric Mode

Lauren Fournier in *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism*, defines autotheory as a term which “emerged in the early part of the twenty-first century to describe works of literature, writing, and criticism that integrate autobiography with theory and philosophy in ways that are direct and self-aware” and as “the integration of theory and philosophy with autobiography, the body, and other so-called personal and explicitly subjective modes” (7). Autotheory encapsulates feminism, especially by upholding the tenet that the personal is political and can be traced through the work of feminist philosophers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Sojourner Truth, and Shulamith Firestone, who used theory to reflect on their personal experiences as women in patriarchal and colonial societies (9). Autotheory has evolved alongside the chronological progression of feminism. In the 1960’s, women began disclosing to other women what was once private. In the 1970’s, feminist poets and philosophers sought ways to illustrate women’s bodies through art (11). Feminism in the 1980’s emphasized the role of personal experiences within theoretical material (12). The 1990’s were characterized by multimedia projects featuring self-narration, including Auto-graphics, installations, performance art, blogs, StoryCorps, Facebook, Myspace, Postsecret, LiveJournal, YouTube, and the like (13). Autotheory in the 2000s “took up issues related to gender, sexuality, and the body,” and “issues related to trans and gender-nonconforming bodies and subjectivities, radical sexuality (or those that existed on the margins of the existing queer discourses), and the politics of sex work and fucking” (13). Importantly, autotheorists seek to distance themselves from the genres of memoir and autobiography. Autotheory is different from memoir in that it uses life-writing – “something

active that one does in the present – rather than a genre, which is more static and fixed, shaped by preexisting categories and generic expectations” (14).

Autotheory blurs the lines between genres by hybridizing theory and subjective experience, and it also blurs those around mediums and modes. The lyric mode provides the flexibility to narrate in a way which is academic and personified, fragmentary, intersecting, waning, or opposing – a transgressive way of writing within an intergenre space. Gillian White, in *Lyric Shame*, describes the origin of the lyric poem, which was “derived from New Critical theories and established in American universities in the late 1930s” (2). White also writes that these influential poems “contributed to a view of lyric poems as expressive objects that ‘speak’ to the reader without, paradoxically, the reader’s need to understand anything of the history of the work’s production, reception or circulation” (2). White writes on Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s 1938 book *Understanding Poetry*, which “assumes natural connections between poetry, interpretive mastery, formal control, and a cure for existential dread, a cluster that has come to define both the idea and anti-ideal of lyric in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries” (3). While Brooks and Warren were hugely influential on the way that lyric is read in universities, White points to what lyric has become today: “in poetry circles, [lyric] is a word and concept disparaged, defended, repurposed, and much discussed” (3). White discusses three twentieth-century American lyric poets: Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Sexton, and Bernadette Mayer. She describes the shame projected onto the lyric mode (and poetry which does not conform to conventional subject or style) as being a tradition which has existed as far back as the 1590s (5). Gillian White, in *Lyric Shame*, describes the lyric mode as “a genre transcending time and history, and the lyric poem, as one poet-critic recently put it, a ‘message in a bottle’ that ‘speaks out of a solitude to a solitude,’ mastering the conditions of time and contingency” (3).

According to Shira Wolosky's *Poetics Today* article, "The Lyric, History, and the Avant-Garde: Theorizing Paul Celan," the lyric mode is "defined as a self-referring language artifact," and a "historical reference, which tends to ignore formal considerations" (651). In *Twenty-Nine Delusions Concerning Love*, I write in an autonomous, self-referential way that does not conform to any formal style or convention. Wolosky also writes that works of lyricism refer "to an external reality even as its compositional thrust is the undercut the very referentiality it seems to asset" (654). By recounting my narrative alongside text message conversations, I invite readers to form their own interpretations about the reality of each situation.

Personal Interest

My interest in creative nonfiction – specifically the lyric mode – was first inspired by one Eng-4741 assigned reading, an essay from the *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*, Anne Carson's "The Glass Essay," a lyric essay which "mixes poetry with essay, literary criticism, and other forms of prose" (Kuiper). Carson elucidates on the themes of love and loss through literary references, and anecdotes about her mother, father, and a past relationship with a man named Law. I was especially moved by Carson's visceral descriptions of loneliness and her meditative visions which she calls "Nudes." She writes, "When Law left I felt so bad I thought I would die. / This is not uncommon. I took up the practice of meditation / ... Each morning a vision came to me. / Gradually I understood that these were naked glimpses of my soul" (104). This was my first encounter with the lyric mode, an expressive and emotional style characterized by the abstract way in which subjectivity is projected onto poems (White). My Eng-4761 instructor then referred me to Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, a collection of 240 prose poems about the color blue and work of autotheory written in the lyric mode. At the time of

reading, I did not yet know the term autotheory – a hybrid genre which combines elements of autobiography with critical theory. Lauren Fournier in *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism* applies this term to any “works that exceed existing genre categories and disciplinary bounds, that flourish in the liminal spaces between categories, that reveal the entanglement of research and creation, and that fuse seemingly disparate modes to fresh effects,” (2). I became fixated with Anne Carson’s and Maggie Nelson’s potent and poetic styles of writing and read several of each of their books, which informed the writing of my own.

Style and Conventions

My stylistic choices in *Twenty-Nine Delusions Concerning Love* were informed by other autotheoretical and experimental works of literature. In *Jane: A Murder* – a work which combines poetry, prose, and documentary – Maggie Nelson tells the story of her own aunt Jane’s murder through a series of prose poems and artifacts including Jane’s actual diary entries and the conclusions of Nelson’s own investigations. The use of artifacts like actual conversations, letters, and historical documents is one element which separates autotheory (as life writing) from memoir. Chris Kraus in her autofiction *I Love Dick*, includes the actual letters she and her then-husband Sylvere Lotringer wrote to Dick Hebdige. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick includes actual conversations she had with her therapist in her lyrical book, *A Dialogue on Love*. Muriel Rukeyser illustrates the Gauley Tunnel tragedy through a series of lyric poems containing real interviews and historical documents in *The Book of the Dead*.

In *Things Have Gotten Worse Since We Last*, Erik LaRocca narrates a true crime case using live chats and emails, which is characteristic of the post-confessional technologies of social media. Social media encourages people to share their private thoughts and lives with the public.

Occupying social media spaces is post-confessional because we first evaluate and manipulate our posts to better adhere to the image our ourselves which we want the public to see.

Anne Carson’s work of lyricism, *The Beauty of a Husband*, is written in verse, or “tangos,” meaning, “a numbered, titled section of poetry with very long lines alternating with very short lines, as if shaped by the movements of a tango dancers” (Long). Carson opens each section with a quote from John Keats, whose aphorism “Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty” is central to the work (Long). In *Bluets*, and *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson elucidates on her own life experiences through research, philosophy, critical theory, and literary references. Nelson’s *On Freedom* is a philosophical criticism of the concept of freedom as it relates to art, sex, drugs, and the environment. Her book *Women, The New York School, and Other True Abstractions* is a study of the history of the New York School – specifically women’s roles in the school of poets. Nelson’s *Something Bright, Then Holes*, a book of lyric poetry, is an examination of friendship, heartbreak, and landscapes. What all of Nelson’s work has in common is her unapologetic use of the normative “I.” Gillian White describes the public shaming of lyric poetry: “first-person poetic modes can produce feelings of shame or the possibility of being shamed by others,” (9). White offers one explanation to account for lyric shame, citing Bradley Paul’s “Anybody Can Write a Poem,” in which Paul argues that “some people cannot write poems because they are too ashamed to engage expressive aesthetics: that is, to express themselves would be, in combination, so risky and self-indulgent as to result in something comparable to disaster” (9).

In accordance with this defining feature of autotheory, I include references to other works of literature, philosophy, and theory alongside my narration. According to Fournier, theory refers to “a fundamentally postmodern form that is intertextual, citational, and appropriative in its references and materials,” while “philosophy generates its own monolithic and authoritative

‘truths’ that are not dependent on referencing other texts” (52). Fournier also discusses ways in which this type of theory can be a dangerous exercise in privilege, writing “Theoretical frameworks can be very useful in providing structure for abstract notions, scaffolding developing ideas, and holding fluid concepts. It is when we start to fetishize theory as an intellectual discourse or wield it in ways that are inaccessible and violent that problems arise” (109).

Topics and Themes

No topic is too graphic or taboo in Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*; she writes “the words *I love you* come tumbling out of my mouth in an incantation the first time you fuck me in the ass, my face smashed against the cement floor of your dank and charming bachelor pad. You had Molloy by your bedside and a stack of cocks in your shadowy unused shower stall” (3). I encountered this shameless use of the lyric mode in other works of autotheory, including Paul B. Preciado’s *Testo Junkie* – a philosophical and critical examination of pharmaceutical power told through a fictionalized first-person narrative. Preciado writes, “I slide the dildos into the openings at the lower part of my body. First, the realistic looking one, then the ergonomic one, which goes into my anus,” before diving into the politics of the Pharmacopornographic era (19). Importantly, the graphic descriptions of sex and bodies do not reduce the philosophical, social, or political significance of Nelson or Preciado’s work, they elevate it. Preciado describes his experience transitioning from female to male using testosterone in *Testo Junkie*, just as Nelson describes the physical transformation of her own pregnant body alongside the medical transformation of her fluidly gendered partner, Harry Dodge. Preciado describes the reclaiming of bodily autonomy which has long been commodified:

“Sex has become such a part of plans for power that the discourse on masculinity and femininity, as well as techniques of normalizing sexual identity, have turned into governmental agents of the control and standardization of life. Hetero- and homosexual identities were invented in 1868, inside a sphere of empiricism, taxonomic classification, and psychopathology” (69).

Ellen Miller describes violent drug use and sex scenes in *Like Being Killed* which culminate with her depressed, heroine-addict character Ilyana Meyerovich having her labia clipped open with clothespins while a plumber penetrates her with a gun (273). Ilyana willingly reduces herself to a sexual object, but not because it is a man’s desire—because it is her own desire. Similarly, Chris Kraus’ character (also called Chris Kraus) in *I Love Dick*, writes shamelessly about a romantic obsession with a man named Dick. Kraus and Miller both openly write about female desire and the female gaze, subverting the societal model of desire which places the man as the subject and the woman as the object.

Methodology

Chapter “Two,” is written in the third person, just as Chris Kraus begins part 1 of *I Love Dick*, “Scenes From A Marriage,” with this third-person narration: “Chris Kraus, a 39-year-old experimental filmmaker, and Sylvere Lotringer, a 56-year-old college professor from New York” (19). The narration then switches to first person, which gave me the flexibility to narrate in a way which was personified, fragmentary, and poetic.

I imitate Carson’s style, particularly her titled stanzas and “mostly short, demonstrative statements of fact in the first-person voice” she uses in “The Glass Essay,” within my own lyric essay which underwent several revisions and retitling before its latest version, “Electric Blues,”

which I have included in this book (Rae 6). An earlier version of this essay, titled “E,” was published in *Loud Coffee Press* Issue #9. In this book, I include poems, essays, and fragments of a play, in the multi-genre style of Anne Carson’s *Decreation*. I organize my book into twenty-nine sections, or “delusions,” inspired by Anne Carson’s *The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos*. Other works of lyricism favor this type of stanzaic organization, including Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse*, which is organized into fragments, and Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets*, which is organized into 290 short prose poems.

Because autotheory is characterized by its quality of using theory alongside “lived experience and subjective embodiment,” like Maggie Nelson in *Bluets*, I expound on the real events of my own life through research, philosophy, critical theory, and literary references (Fournier 7). Just as Chris Kraus uses actual letters which were written to Dick Hebdige from Chris Kraus and her then-husband Sylvère Lotringer, in *Twenty-Nine Delusions Concerning Love*, I have included my own actual text and phone transcripts. My work is also inspired by Eric LaRocca, who documents the disturbing online correspondence between two real people in *Things Have Gotten Worse Since We Last Spoke*. Aligned with my unifying theme of concealment and exhibition, *Twenty-Nine Delusions Concerning Love* is in part “Trauma Voyeurism,” which the National Sexual Violence Resource Center defines as “the practice of making another person’s pain, misfortune, or body, public domain.” Social media invites users to post details about their lives to be evaluated and commented on by others. Human beings love internet drama and tension because they view it as a form of storytelling.

Evaluation of the Current Situation

In some writing situations, it is necessary to avoid names and identifying elements to preserve the anonymity of others. Recent events like the #MeToo movements have lent themselves to this new era of openly naming and shaming known public figures. Chris Kraus wrote an entire book – *I Love Dick* – about a man, using his real name without his consent (she only omits his last name). The book’s cult following quickly identified the man and outed him as Dick Hebdige. This public naming and shaming has become a way for women to fight back against the patriarchy. Lauren Fournier describes “Kraus’ disclosing of the bad behavior of men [as] an echo of feminist ‘whisper networks’ and a prophetic anticipation of the ultra-public #MeToo movement today,” which she compares to Nelson’s *the Argonauts*: “In both texts, a female narrator addresses a beloved and the beloved or ‘object of desire’ to whom the text is addressed is a named and known public figure” (16). This is a topic I have encountered time and time again in my work: should writers protect the identities of the people they write about? By not naming their oppressors (or by keeping their secrets) are women writers actually enabling oppressive behavior? By not naming their oppressors, are women reducing their own power as women writers? Fournier writes that “the rise of autotheory is wrapped up in ethical questions around writing and art: Whose story is yours to tell? What are the parameters of your “I” and are you speaking within those bounds? If your truth is your truth my truth is my truth, then whose truth is truth?” and “what stories is an “I” able, or permitted to tell?” Also importantly, Fournier asks, “Can Nelson write about trans subjectivities and politics if she is not trans?” (160). Fournier also describes *Changing the Wor(l)d*’s author, Stacy Young’s, approach to “feminist publishing as discursive politics, reading autotheoretical texts as ‘counterdiscourses’ and as the ‘embodiment of a discursive type of political action, which decenters the hegemonic subject of

feminism’: the ‘hegemonic subject’ here is the white heterosexual cisgender woman with class privilege” (24). Autotheory makes space for marginalized voices, “especially in feminist, queer, and BIPOC—Black, Indigenous, and people of color—spaces that live on the edges of art and academia” (Fournier 7). However, questions of critical legitimacy are complicated by questions such as what constitutes theory and who constitutes a theorist?

Autotheorists aim to differentiate their work from memoir through the practice of performative writing. Fournier describes Maggie Nelson’s process of writing *The Argonauts*: “the distinction between memoir and performative writing comes down to a question of memory. Memory is associated with a genre of memoir, while performative writing approaches memory with a reflexive sense of instability and play. In performative writing, the writer’s memory of their lived experience is one material among others, like the theory and artworks and literary texts they reference” (16). Fournier explores the use of performative citations as both “progressive community building” and something that makes “a given movement or work more insular and inaccessible” because it “excludes a substantial part of the population who might not have attended college or university” (194). Fournier writes that “autotheory has been shaped on the one hand by the discursive shift toward affect and performativity and on the other by the shifting place of the personal in relation to social media technologies and the more widespread cultural tendency to overshare” (16).

As the hegemonic subject of feminism — a white heterosexual cisgender woman with class privilege — I face this question: do I have access to these modes of writing? Fournier writes that “the question of who has access to theoretical discourse, as well as who has access to the ‘I’—an ‘I’ that can speak with agency and be heard—is central” (16). The lyric mode is associated with shame due to its “‘potentially shameful’ associations ‘with the marginal

experiences of privacy, and distracting realms of emotionalism and desire” (White 5). And moreover, “While some scholars—including hooks, Miller, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Jane Gallop—found it useful to directly incorporate personal experience in their theoretical writings, other decried the impulse as narcissistic, charged it was lacking sufficient critical distance, or avoided it as professional risky” (12). Fournier writes that the theory cited in autotheoretical works is “a discourse embedded in academic institutions that might be seen as inaccessible—at best daunting, at worst hostile and violent—to certain publics, including those that are neurodivergent, are living with mental illness, are survivors of sexual violence, or are unable to access higher education due to class- and race-based discrimination” (26). Fournier posits that in order to “consider autotheory as feminist, one must consider the politics of access and power around the production of theory and the reinscription of what constitutes acceptable knowledge in spaces of higher learning” (27). *Twenty-Nine Delusions Concerning Love* is a statement: anyone can write about emotionalism and desire and still be a good Feminist. All writers should have the voice to express their views freely, and have their views be heard.

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Author's Note

This is the story of my relationship with a musician I refer to as E. I reveal the relationship's unfolding through conversations and within the contexts of philosophy and cultural theory.

The text message and phone conversations included in this book have been manipulated and reconstructed. *Twenty-Nine Delusions Concerning Love* is an examination of love as a delusion of the body, mind, and soul.

“Writing, especially autobiographical writing, can be a hothouse of self-deceptions, but it also has the uncanny ability to expose self-deceptions with the formidable exactitude of surgery.”

-Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty*

ONE

I am not in love with a person – I am in love with a letter, a character in the English alphabet, which I have assigned to a person. My love filled these pages. It filled the pauses in our conversations where his words ended and mine began — the seconds between *typing* and *message sent*. It filled one hundred miles between his city and mine, and the inch of space between his right knee and my left. E is the person – whose name starts with this letter – idealized.

My real relationship with E exists inside the romantic narrative I have constructed around it. Lisa Portolan and Jodi McAlister, in “Jagged Love,” write that “When people look for romantic love, they are often seeking to try and kickstart a romance narrative in which they can emplot themselves.”ⁱⁱ Although my experiences were, at times, a significant departure from reality, my feelings are, and have always been, real. There is something about the way that he feels so overwhelmingly familiar to me, and about the way our past experiences are so strikingly similar – like we are living the same life at different times – that I suspect is fate. There is something about the way loneliness waxes and wanes between two people who have been let down, misunderstood, and hurt.

I felt magnetically drawn to him – a magnetism that only grew into an intense, inescapable force as time went on. Anne Carson, in *Plainwater*, describes it in this way: “all I wanted was for the pulling to stop. Pulling pulling pulling. It was pulling on my arms. Pulling on my eyes. Pulling on my lungs. Pulling on the sweat on the backs of my legs. Pulling at night, pulling all day.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And now, just after the tragic end of us, I am left looking at my empty, upturned hands, asking myself, what have I done? Roland Barthes, in *A Lover’s Discourse*, writes that “Two powerful myths have persuaded us that love could, *should* be sublimated in aesthetic creation: the Socratic myth (loving serves to ‘engender a host of beautiful discourses’) and the romantic myth (I shall produce an immortal work by writing my passion).”ⁱⁱⁱ I must write about it because I am trying to explain it to myself.

TWO

December 31, 2020

Two strangers, Jackie Donaldson, a 28-year-old writer, and E____, a 29-year-old musician, sit together on a black couch in a studio above a storefront in Charleston, Illinois at 1:30am. After matching on Tinder, and corresponding via text message for two weeks, this is their first meeting in person.

Jackie wrote to him first; although, she typically never messages first. She usually waits for her matches to initiate the conversation with a generic *what's up* or *how's your night going?* If she feels inspired to respond, the tedious getting-to-know-you questions usually follow: *What do you do you do for fun?* *What do you do for work?* *What are you looking for?* That last question is especially annoying when one or both people don't know what they are looking for, or when they know what they want but are afraid to ask for it, or when they know what they want but pretend it's the same thing that you want, or when *they are just looking to see where things go*. Nobody is honest and everyone has low expectations. Maggie Nelson, in *On Freedom*, writes that "The terms of the #MeToo era at times seem to suggest that the principal way out of the heterosexual sexual malaise is role reversal—that women should feel emboldened to make first moves, rather than waiting for men to be this active party." ^{iv}

What do you want? Just be explicit.

Some Tinder users include their intentions in the bio section of their profiles. Most men never read the woman's profile at all. Men also often are less selective in whom they match with. Some men surveyed said they swiped right on every woman just to see who might match with them. Conversely, women are much more selective. ^v They are more likely to look through the photos as well as read the bios before deciding to swipe right or left, so the bio is much more important for a man looking for a woman than for a woman looking for men. This is what a man should include in his Tinder bio: something funny, an explanation of what he's looking for, and his height – all using correct spelling and grammar. E, in his bio wrote,

Looking for friends or something occasional.

Jackie, a writer, does not include a bio.

A study at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology surveyed 269 students who were Tinder users and 60 percent of those people were women. The study also found that "while men matched with an average of 111 people, and women with 124, only half of the participants met with their matches in real life, and only 25 percent of participants were interested in a long-term relationship." ^{vi}

She likes his photos – they look like authentic snapshots of his life. He's riding his bike under some autumn-colored trees. He's playing piano on stage with his baseball cap turned backwards. He's leaning against a doorway and the blue wool of his sweater matches his eyes. Dating apps make the exchange of admiration and attention feel transactional. Swiping left feels

like an undeserved sense of superiority and swiping right feels like *add to cart*. After they matched, she said

Can I be one of your occasional
friends?

This began what will become years of correspondence which ultimately leads to nothing – a period commonly referred to as *the talking stage*. In the talking stage, both people express mutual romantic interest, and proceed to project inauthentically superior versions of themselves through text message.

Jackie doesn't think she has a type but all her matches on Tinder look like Capricorns, and she tells E – a Capricorn – that he fits this description:

Full face, high forehead, noticeable
eyebrows and teeth, smooth clear
skin, thin upper lips, distinctive
cheekbones, ageless.

That's so specific.
Do people really believe that?
Astrology seems
humancentric.

Jackie enjoys the attention and affection paid to her during the talking stage, knowing her euphoria will inevitably become boredom, and repulsion. Eventually, she will become unnerved by the idea that this stranger just *knows things* about her: her favorite books, what she does for work, what city she lives in. Eventually, she will see something in him that she doesn't like and decide that it's a deal breaker. Eventually, he will ask her to meet in person and she will become afraid decide never to speak to him ever again. This is The Jagged Love Cycle:

A cyclical pattern of 'downloading dating apps (sometimes multiple apps), vigorously swiping, matching, starting multiple chats (with low level personal investment,) becoming quickly bored or exhausted with the process and [sic] matches, deleting the dating apps, and then after approximately two weeks of experiencing FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) and loneliness, redownloading the apps.^{vii}

Dating apps are discouraging because they require users to sort through thousands of potential matches, making it easy to be dismissive of any candidate demonstrating what could be perceived as even the slightest fault – but the fear of missing out is real because there is always the possibility that the stars will align, and swiping will lead a user to just one truly compatible match. All it takes is one genuine connection.

Are you going to ghost me after we
sleep together?

I don't know. Depends if we
vibe.

Come over.

What's the parking situation?

Totally easy and completely
free.

It's farther than I thought. Tomorrow
instead?

I have plans tomorrow. But I
understand. It's far.

I want to see you.

If you're conflicted just come
tonight. Look, I'm nervous
too. We can smoke or I can
make us drinks. We can
watch something.

Okay. I'll be there in an hour and a
half. Do not fall asleep.

This is grossly out of character – this is improvisation, a downstage turn.

I won't.
Wear lingerie.

Jia Tolentino in *Trick Mirror* writes on the modern paradigm in which women must always strive to look their best at all times, because the failure to do so is considered “a failure of the self.”^{viii}

I'll be wearing sweatpants. Is
that okay?

I mean, I'll be wearing
sweatpants.

She takes the ramp off the highway. Her visibility is nearly zero and the road becomes increasingly cracked and potholed.

Go to the corner of 5th and 11th
and park next to my silver SUV
with all of the stickers on the back
of it.

She parks in the spot. His place is a block away. It's freezing. It's New Year's Day. Main street is populated by pretty brick buildings with glass store fronts.

Do you live above a karate studio?

Yes, that's it. Come on up.

A thin glass door between the studio's storefront and the bar to the right. Every resident in the city is jarred awake by the loud screech of this door opening. She climbs the sharp metal staircase that creaks and groans, although she tries to step lightly, and around the occasional sharp nail protruding from the floor. Green wallpaper is flecking off the walls. When she reaches the top, she faces two doors: Apartment A, and Apartment B. She anxiously deliberates. He must have told her which door it was. To her great relief, Door A swings open.

Come in.

His studio has drop ceilings and a round commercial wall clock. Sheer navy and lavender geometric patterned curtains cover long, rectangular windows, stretching from the floor to the ceiling. There is a bust sitting on a piano. The walls are covered in paintings and posters. There are shelves lined with books about music, theater, history, and poetry. A black cat with glowing yellow eyes is hiding beneath a small wooden kitchen table covered in plastic grocery bags. There is a bed with nothing on it other than a gray sheet and a flat pillow; it looks like it folds out of the wall. There is a black couch in front of a coffee table. There is an elaborate glass bong sitting on the floor.

She thinks his life looks a lot like hers – full of hobbies and used furniture. Renting an apartment feels easy and temporary. What else is there to do as a single almost-thirty-year-old? Bake lemon bars in a stoned blur? Dissolve into academia? Trade cryptocurrency? Work eighty-hours per week at your salaried career, or divided between your two minimum wage jobs? Watch whatever you want on Netflix without having to consult anyone else? Swipe through Tinder until you hate yourself? Fuck strangers in your weird fold-out bed with one sheet and a flat pillow?

He was different in person. She was looking at him for the first time – every part of him that was previously concealed with angles and lighting. He invited her to sit down next to him on the black couch, and she did, but she was scared. She wanted to find an excuse to leave because it was 2am and nobody knew where she was. But she didn't make an excuse to leave, because she was afraid it would hurt his feelings (although this is the exact type of thinking which invariably gets women killed). Negative criticisms of dating apps are centered around the physical and emotional safety of its users.^{ix} Sex with strangers is risky. Sexually Transmitted Diseases are prevalent. Users can use location services to access potential matches in any location; it is difficult to differentiate authenticity from reality online – the person you get to know through text message correspondence will not be the same person you meet in real life; it's

easy to disappear. To put yourself out there – to be vulnerable and open to authentic connections – also puts you at risk of being blocked, dropped, ghosted with no explanation.

Can I get you anything? weed?
water? vodka?

Water, please.

He retrieves a glass and fills it up with tap water. She drinks and sets it down on the coffee table. She tries to teach him about poetry but he already knows everything.

It's sin-neck-dough-key not sin-
dough-key.

You just know everything about
everything already.

He looks hurt by this.

I'm sorry you feel that way.

No, I'm sorry. I love that you're
smart.

How many people have you
been with?

You mean men?

Or women.

Four guys, two girls.

Are you lying? I have no choice
but to believe you.

I'm not lying.

She was lying.

This seems like a sensitive
subject.

I guess it sort of is.

He reaches over and brushes her hair behind her ear.

Sorry, can I touch you? I should
have asked that.

You can touch me. That's what
I'm here for. To be touched by
you.

They come together in the slow awkward movement of two strangers trying to figure out how they fit together. She touches his hair, his shoulder, his neck. They kiss, slipping tongues in and out of each other's mouths.

Let's go to your bed.

Okay.

It all happens in a blur – fast and disorientating. His dick is in her hand.

What are you trying to do?

I don't know.
I'm sorry!
I don't know what I'm doing.
I'm going to go home and delete
Tinder.

What? Why?

Look, if you have only been
with a couple people, it's okay.

Dating apps are for meeting people looking for connections – people who are actively seeking love.^x

Naked, he walks to the coffee table and picks up her glass of water and drinks from it. There is something intimate about sharing a glass of tap water with a stranger who has just been inside you. She dresses, he shakes her hand, and she leaves.

THREE

When I made a Tinder profile in the fall of 2020, it's true that I was lonely. I was living a routine and relatively mundane existence; I felt like a supporting character in my own life. I spent all my days in an empty, uninspired blur. I was drinking too much. I was missing my friends – we were losing touch. Every day, I drifted farther from the safe, permissive, refuge of my twenties towards thirty, and I was afraid people would actually expect me to know things and be something by then. I was longing for the exhilarating euphoria of new love. I wanted to feel something besides ennui and existential dread. My first message to E was like an invocation to a muse.

FOUR
Sat, Jan 2, 11:16 PM

Mr. [omitted]

You may contact me via text, Thank
you for your time,
-Ms. Donaldson.

Ms. Donaldson
Thanks for getting in contact.
E[omitted]



What's with you and feet
pics, like unironically?

I don't know.
I honestly don't even have pretty
feet.

Nah I disagree.
Let me see your face.

My current face?

Or old pictures, I guess.



You always one up me.

I made fucking whipped
cream too.

Send more old pics.

You send some too.

And food pics.

When I got my wisdom teeth
out like three weeks ago.



Tbh I just started cooking.
I have dick pics.

Send them.



You are so sexy.

Your turn.



Why does it say NIU?
Dude pretty eyes. More eye
pics please.

At ours we write the college we
graduated from on our door. Thank
you!

Oh nice, that's actually cool.
So kids want to go to college.

Let's see more of you.

People using dating apps during the pandemic express “despair about the difficulties of proceeding beyond small talk to more intimate levels of conversation, and the inability to determine romantic chemistry without physically meeting.”^{xi}

Sun, Jan 3, 7:20 AM

Morning Miss Donaldson.

E[omitted]

Lemme see you



Sleepy

But maximally cute.



More of you please.
Miss you.



Mon, Jan 4, 10:37 PM

Miss Jaquelyn

Did you have a good day today?

Yes! I cooked so much stuff.
A meat potato pastry.
Lemon curd.

Meat and potato pastry?
Sounds so good!

Yes, very good. I'm getting
the hang of what you can do
with puff pastry.

Is it difficult to make?

Not really lol.
But I've learned how long to
cook it and how.

Lemon anything dessert is super
good too.

It's my favorite.
Lemon pastry.

What are you doing?

Lying in bed.
Do you want to cuddle?

I want to, yeah.

I want you.

What do you want?

Your attention.

Tues, Jan 5, 5:53 PM

E[omitted]

Jackie

What are you doing?

About to teach a piano
lesson! You?

Nothing.

Tue, Jan 16, 3:36 PM



This is amazing

It's cool! Have you seen
Westworld?

I have not,
but I heard it's good.

Yes, it is very good and
spooky and cool.

Do you have it?

Only on HBO,
but I could torrent it.

We should watch it together!

Sat, Jan 16, 6:07 PM

Okay, can we cuddle?

Oh yeah.

Can you ride me?

As long as I can still see the TV.

Huh, okay. We'll lay in my
bed and you can ride me

reverse so we can both face
the tv.

Ok yes that makes sense.

Perfect. And I get to view
your booty.

And then cuddle after.

Yes lots.

Invite me.

Come tomorrow night?

Yes,
Okay.

bell hooks in *All About Love* writes that “Enlightened women want fulfilling erotic encounters as much as men, but we ultimately prefer erotic satisfaction within a context where there is loving, intimate connection.”^{xii}

Mon, Mar 1, 10:54 PM

Oh my god, I got pulled over.

Speeding?
Relax it’s okay, they already
got you for the crime.

He gave me a warning.

I’m glad.
Hope you weren’t too scared.

Tues, Mar 30, 2:04 PM



If you still need your vaxxy.

Thank you,
I will do that!

Anytime!

You just want me healthy.

Once we are fully vaxxed we can
legally hangout without masks.

Once we get both doses you
can suck my wiener.

FIVE

E is the church organist. He operates a double-keyboard six-in-one-monstrosity. Depressed keys and corresponding trackers feed wind into pipes and oscillate the air. He kicks off his shoes to play the bass notes with his feet and slams his fingers down on the ivory keys. It's a good reminder of what it feels like for a beginner to use both hands – it's like walking a tightrope. If the note head is up near the top of the staff, the stem points down. If it's near the bottom, it points up (for graphical cleanliness or something). It tells you on the music how many beats are in a measure – you can see it on the page. But if you're listening to a song, you can feel it.

Tues, Feb. 1st 10:55pm

There's a thing among
instrumentalists, musicians.
Where the instrument itself is
musically inspiring.

Fenton Johnson, in *At The Center of All Beauty: Solitude And The Creative Life* writes that “writers and artists took unbreakable vows to their art, dedicating their lives to showing us, their audiences, the human condition” and “the solitude we so fear is an illusion.”^{xiii}

You sit down at the piano and
play a chord, and the
particular beauty of that
piano's sound leads you to
play another chord a certain
way.

A violin reacts a certain way
to pressure and produces a
certain beautiful sound.

It helps you access creative
ideas you wouldn't otherwise
think of, and helps you
perform them.

It's a luxury that writers
don't have with their art.
Unless working at a really
nice typewriter inspired
something.

Maggie Nelson, in *On Freedom*, writes that “one of the most vital things we have to impart, both to ourselves and our students, is the importance of making time and space for one’s art in a world that will always threaten to disregard or diminish it.”^{xiv}

I love that explanation. For writing, I
think your typewriter example would
be most similar to what you’re
describing. Or a really inky fountain
pen – the joy from the physical
process of doing.

It is easy to fall in love with an artist but hard to be in love with one. You fall in love with a player’s smooth, flowing, movements and then suddenly you cannot imagine loving someone who is not a pianist. You bond over a shared desire to make but know that the making will always come first – it will always be the object that is loved most. Nelson writes on being married to an artist: “Although we presumably understand the importance of each other’s work more than others might, the fact that our work consists mostly of self-directed, time-consuming, solitary labor.”^{xv}

SIX

May 2021.

There is rosemary dying in the window. We are two cells in a nine-volt battery snap. Our sheer limbs are splayed out like frayed wires, flexible conduit, unsheathed cables. A conductive path, a source, and a load complete a circuit. We buzz with prickly electricity, again and again. A sulfurous bruise spreads over my heart where he pushed into me with his palm. I like the mark, the only evidence that we are solid things. When we pull apart, my soul is dragged from my body; it drifts up near the drop ceiling and mingles with the diaphanous lavender curtains. My naked body is pressed into his side, amassing clarity in the morning light. I am radiating pure joy. I am high like the bright notes. Laying in his bed, I tell him that I'm not interested in seeing anyone else but him. He says,

Just don't develop feelings
for me if you can help it.

Alexa, play "Breathing
Underwater" by Hiatus
Kaiyote.

In a study of sexual casualness, all 101 informants "discussed romantic feelings in the context of hookup culture. They expressed them, shared fears about expressing them, and encouraged others or criticized them for doing so." ^{xvi} One participant explained that "when you have a hook-up buddy, you NEVER admit true feelings, you say you are [sexually] attracted, it means detachment. Because anything with attachment or clinginess is not socially acceptable... Any show of emotion or even just caring or being a human being is seen as "doing too much." ^{xvii} E thinks I'm just not capable of having a physical relationship with someone without feelings being involved – but that's not true. I like being near him because he feels familiar, like a friend, but he's also so intense and volatile. He's unpredictable.

*The word
hurts, The
word hurts /
The word
hurts,
The word
hurts*

E and I have been corresponding by text message every day for five months. We exchange pictures and messages on Snapchat, and when I see his name light up red or blue with a message or picture, it's like a hit of serotonin. He is inconsistent enough just to keep me addicted to him, always vacillating between giving me tons of attention and affection, and complete coldness. Sometimes he responds consistently. Other times, he opens my messages and then ignores them for hours. Taj W. Makki, et. al, in "The Social Value of Snapchat," writes on

“Maslow’s (1958) ‘Hierarchy of Needs,’ and how the app can be used to fulfill our human desire to be wanted, accepted, and loved.”^{xviii} I am always anxious. I’m always afraid that I will say the wrong thing or be the wrong thing. I’m worried that he will see something in me he doesn’t like. I am convinced that he will eventually trade me up or ghost me.

*In water, in
water / in
water, in
water*

Well we are either going to
be friends forever, or we are
going to drop out of each
other’s lives.

I think his feelings change about me day to day. When I don’t hear from him for hours, I catastrophize. I think he’s gone forever. I think he’s fucking another girl and I feel jealous. I think if I don’t text him constantly, he will just forget about me. I think if I text him constantly, it will somehow prevent him from fucking other girls. I think I should leave him before he leaves me because cycles repeat and everyone leaves eventually. I’m so afraid of this. I don’t know why I feel this way because he was never mine, and I am alone, and I was always alone. Frank Bidart, in “Mourn” writes, “Why so hard / to give up / what often / was ever / hardly there.”^{xix}

*Material
slowly unwind
as I leave
feathers
behind / For
your love, for
your lover to
find.*

Amir Levine, and Rachel S.F. Heller in *Attached* write on two studies which found that “avoidant individuals actually prefer anxiously attached people,” and “anxious women are more likely to date avoidant men.” Levine and Heller believe the reason why “people who guard their independence with ferocity” are attracted to people who are “most likely to impinge on their autonomy” and “people who seek closeness are attracted to people who want to push them away” because “Each [attachment style] reaffirms the other’s beliefs about themselves and about relationships.”^{xx}

Would you sleep with me and
another girl?
She’s very cute and sweet.

No.

*Warm hands
wrapped in
blue linen
from
Torrington /
For your love,
for your lover
to find*

Oh okay.
Not bi?

I'm so hurt you would ask me that.

Oh really?
Sorry,
I did not expect that.

Maybe we should make sure
we are on the same page.
I thought we were doing this
frivolous, mostly sexual
thing.

*Wild rose,
Jericho sun,
arid as stone /
For your love,
for your lover
to find*

I feel upset and jealous that you
would talk about having sex with
another girl to me, but since we are
friends, I feel like I don't have the
right to feel that way.

That makes sense.

It's fine though; you didn't do
anything wrong.
I understand now.

*Breathing
 (breathing)
 underwater /
 Breathing
 (breathing)
 underwater /*

It's valid that you would feel
 jealous that I sleep with and
 appreciate other people, but
 that doesn't really jive with
 our situation, does it?

I'm not sure what has changed.
 In the past you have been very
 reassuring about the fact that you
 were not sleeping with other people
 because the idea hurt me, so the fact
 that you are bringing this up now
 makes me think you are trying to
 distance yourself from me, or trying
 to get me to say that I'm okay with it
 – but like you said, our situation is
 that we are just friends and you can
 do whatever you want. But you
 could at least be nice enough to not
 tell me about how nice and sweet the
 other girls are when I have been very
 clear about the fact that I like you
 and am not interested in sleeping
 with anyone else.

*Pleasure,
 melting your
 snowflake of
 lace down
 your face /
 For your love,
 for your lover
 to find*

I'm sorry; I forgot that you
 don't like it that I sleep with
 other people.

Is that why you haven't wanted to
 spend time with me? Because you've
 had better offers?

I don't know E[omitted], can you
 just tell me I don't mean anything to
 you and never did, so I can like,
 move on or something?

That's not it. You mean
 something to me.
 But do what you want.

*I could call
 your demons
 aside, soak
 them in
 chamomile /
 For your love,
 for your lover
 to find.*

Can we define our relationship and
 have actual boundaries or
 something?

Would you be interested in being in
 an open relationship with me?

We could both see other people, but
 only have an emotional connection
 with each other.

Or would you rather just be friends
 who have sex occasionally, and not
 have any feelings or emotional
 connection?

*Breathing
 (breathing)
 underwater /
 Breathing*

(breathing)
underwater

I don't want any sort of
 relationship. Tell me what
 exactly you want.

Not the strategically hedged
 answer.

What you actually want.

And I'm sorry for the
 confusion.

I want to be exclusive with you but I
 could never tell you that because you
 have been clear that it's not what you
 want, and I hope you don't drop me
 because I said that.

To find, find,
find / For your
love, for your
lover to find

If you want to date me and
 have me all to yourself don't
 settle for something less – it's
 very unhealthy,
 and it makes me very
 uncomfortable

I shouldn't say that I always
 want to be single.
 I could meet someone and
 fall in love.

For your love,
for your lover
to find / For
your love, for
your lover to
find

But I'm pretty open to
hooking up with others and
the people I'm with doing the
same.

*Breathing
underwater /
Breathing
underwater /*

We are pretty cursory and
mostly sexual with each other
and that's what I thought our
relationship was.

*Breathing
underwater /
Breathing
underwater /*

So you're open to a relationship, just
not with me.

And me wanting a relationship with
you makes you very uncomfortable?

*Breathing
underwater /
Breathing
underwater*

I'm sorry, I think I may have formed
an anxious attachment to you.

I wanted a commitment so I felt
secure, like you weren't going to just
abandon me or something suddenly.

I'm sorry I misread everything; I
thought we had an emotional
connection but we do not.

*For your love,
for your lover,
(your love),*

*for your lover
/ For your
love, for your
lover, (your
love), for your
lover*

There is an underlying
emotional connection.
Just not enough of one that I
would want to be exclusive
with you.

Please don't take it
personally.
That's just how I relate to the
world.

*For your love,
for your lover,
(your love),
for your lover
/ For your
love, for your
lover, (your
love), for your
lover*

Okay. I understand now. I'm sorry
too,
about the misunderstanding.

We weren't saying
everything out loud. A
miscommunication was
bound to happen.
I just want to avoid hurting
you most of all.

*I want you to
breathe it in, I
want you to
breathe it in*

Dude you probably do have
abandonment issues.
Our whole generation was
raised by narcissistic people.

This is good though.
Your friendship has been good for
me.

*I want you to
breathe it in, I
want you to
breathe it in*

I don't know if I'm good for
you.
You should probably hangout
with some high functioning
people also.

I'm happy to be acerate about
bad writing,

*The word
hurts, the
word hurts /
The word
hurts, the
word hurts*

and to be a slut for you.
That's my lane

Please keep me but please
don't get attached to me.

*In water, in
water / in
water, in
water*

Attachment is good, just not
to me.

Heller and Levine write on the magnetic attraction between anxious and avoidant individuals:

“The avoidants’ defensive self-perception that they are strong and independent is confirmed, as is the belief that others want to pull them into more closeness than they are comfortable with. The anxious types find that their perception of wanting more intimacy than their partner can provide is confirmed, as is their anticipation of ultimately being let down by significant others. So, in a way, each style is drawn to reenact a familiar script over and over again.”^{xxi}

Avoidant and anxiously attached people are attracted to each other because they confirm each other’s pre-existing beliefs about relationships.

SEVEN

I'm sitting at my desk at work with the last sip of cold, gritty coffee lining the bottom of my cup. The sun is coming through the blinds and casting a white lattice across my face. I'm still hurting over the threesome conversation.

I start to doubt myself. Maybe E wasn't saying those things just to hurt me on purpose. Maybe he was just expressing his desire. Multi-partner sex is perhaps the most common sexual fantasy. bell hooks writes that "Even though sex matters, most of us are no more able to articulate sexual needs and longings than we are able to speak our desire for love." ^{xxii}

I send him a picture on Snapchat – a normally daily occurrence – and he does not open it, but his score goes up (meaning he was corresponding with other people on Snapchat – just not with me). I send several more pictures until he acknowledges me. This is something I do often: I demand his attention.

E[omitted] are we good?
Do you not like talking to me
anymore?

I still like talking to you
Just a little freaked out by the
feelings.

Lisa Wade, in "Doing Casual Sex: A Sexual Fields Approach to the Emotional Force of Hookup Culture," found that "70 percent of [college] students' transition [from a casual sexual relationship] into committed relationships via a conversation," but to do so is unusual, because "failing to perform casualness was a betrayal." ^{xxiii}

Nah no feelings.
Friends.
What was the job?

A church.
I just don't want there to be
any expectations of me.

You mean you don't want me to
have an expectation that you are
going to talk to me?

Look, if it's weird and not fun
anymore we can stop talking for a
while.
I don't want you to feel freaked out.

No that's not what I meant.
I do look at my phone less.
Sometimes I need a break
from people.
I apologize, I should have
been more explicit.

No apology needed.
I like talking to you all the time but
let me know if I'm being too much
and I'll chill out.

EIGHT

June 21, 2021

I am working my shift at the restaurant and it's been three days since I have seen E. Food is strewn across the floor, the walls, and the cooks. The four-compartment hot food-well is covered in chunky baked on spillage. Servers swarm the alley, the highway between the kitchen and dining room, leaving a trail of spilt dressings, dirty dishes, straw wrappers, and nylon napkins. The line is a buffet of oozy sauce covered spoons in half full hotel pans thickly crusted around the rims. A tower of dirty sauté pans is stacked precariously on the edge of the stove. A greasy pile of aluminum sheet pans was lazily cast onto the ground to be picked up by dishwashers. I hold the handle of a sauté pan with my left hand, while constantly checking my phone with my right. E has not answered any of my messages today – he leaves them on delivered.

People with an anxious attachment style are constantly vigilant of changes in the emotional expression of others. They tend to jump to conclusions quickly, which makes them prone to misinterpreting the emotional states of others. When they feel disconnected, the anxiously attached person becomes consumed with the task of reestablishing closeness with their other. Achieving contact is the only way to assuage the anxiety.^{xxiv}

How's work?

I immediately notice that the pink heart next to his name – which indicates that we are “best friends” on Snapchat (because we have sent more snaps to and chats to each other than to anyone else for at least two months straight) has vanished. My “best friendship” with E on Snapchat is the only tangible piece of evidence I have that he even cares about me at all. He has demolished something we've built. He is talking to someone else more than me. He is talking to someone else while he is ignoring my messages. This is the ultimate betrayal. This is proof that he is lying to me. This is proof that he is talking to someone else and he never cared about me. I am frantic and emotional and hurt. I send him three messages that look like this:

We lost our best friendship

Who are you talking to more than
me?

Is it a girl?

[I delete them immediately, so when he opened my message, it looked like this:]

Jacqui deleted a snap
Jacqui deleted a snap
Jacqui deleted a snap

There is a phenomenon called Technology Acceptance which refers to the extent to which a user perceives pressure from his or her social circle to use a given technology and the user's respective willingness to comply with that pressure. ^{xxv}

I think everyone in the restaurant can see the sheer fear and panic on my face. Nobody says anything to me while I frantically clock out and leave the restaurant, phone pressed to my ear. We never talk on the phone and I'm hysterical and surprised when he answers.

Hey what's up?

E___, are you lying to me?

What, no? Why?

We lost our best friendship on snap!
Who are you talking to more than
me?

I don't know?

I do have other friends I talk
to.

It is possible that I was
messaging someone slightly
more frequently than you.

You are ignoring my messages and
talking to other people!

What aren't you telling me?

What? Look, I don't divulge
everything to you because we
aren't that type of friends!
We haven't hung out *that*
many times.

I care so much about you, and
sometimes it's like, you don't even
care about me at all!

That's because sometimes I
don't care about you!
 Sometimes, I don't even care
 about my own *mother*!

I'm playing for *my* team.

This isn't healthy. This isn't
 how you act when you care
 about someone. This is
 jealousy.

Well you've hurt me tons of times
 before!

Oh yeah really? Like when?

There is a long hesitation here where neither of us say anything. I want to say *I'm hesitating because I don't want you to think that I just save up all these things that have bothered me to pull out and use against you in an argument*, but I don't say this either, because it does not seem like a very *just friends* thing of me to say. I want to bring up all the times he was cold to me after sex, like he didn't want me to touch him or go near him, and the time he asked me if *I want to play a board game or something* as a passive-aggressive way to ask me to leave. I wanted to bring up the time he said *there are two women here who really want to have a threesome* to hurt me on purpose. I want to bring up the time he sent me a long and angry message telling me that I need to start being my own voice of reassurance because he would no longer be that voice for me. I remember he said,

You're always doing this
 thing. 'E[omitted] tell me
 what I'm doing is okay,' and
 then I have this project.

He was right, but I still sobbed in a parking lot and texted him an hour later because I didn't want him to feel bad about hurting me.

I wanted to bring up the night we spent together just three days prior to this, when his phone was charging next to my head and he wasn't even considerate enough to turn off his constant Snapchat or Tinder notifications – whatever they were – like he wanted me to hear them, he wanted to hurt me, he wanted to remind me that I am just one of many others. He could have silenced his phone. But I don't say any of this.

You keep saying I'm the only girl
you are fucking. That sounds like a
manipulation!

I wouldn't lie about that!

He is lying about this.

Okay well I understand where we
stand now.

Okay.

Okay, bye.

Bye.

NINE

June 21, 2021

I contemplate leaving. I am tired of being pulled to the left by pain and anxiety, and then sharply to the right by fear. It hurts to be with him; I will fall apart without him. To think that I love E so much I can't live without him doesn't necessarily mean that I love him and can't live without him. I feel like E and I are two halves of an incomplete person. Frank Bidart, in "Writing 'Ellen West'" writes, "Something there is in me that makes me / think I Need this thing. / That gives this thing / the illusion of necessity." ^{xxvi}

Why have I stayed this long? I am emotionally attached to his attention and affection. I am addicted to the push and pull of our relationship. I feel like I need the pain and drama and excitement, otherwise I won't have anything to write about. Philosopher Baruch Spinoza said, "All happiness or unhappiness solely depends upon the quality of the object to which we are attached by love." ^{xxvii}

Although he repeatedly tells me he has no romantic feelings for me, I continue to convince myself that if I can change, his feelings for me will change. If I lose weight, or cut my hair, or become smarter, or cooler – if I can somehow penetrate all his defenses and really know him – I can become what he wants; I can earn his love. Lisa Wade, in her study on casual sex, found that participants "often had feelings for partners," but "regardless of how casual about sex they truly were, or whether they had feelings for their partners, students followed the specific rules for demonstrating casualness much of the time." ^{xxviii} I think, above all, E is my favorite person. We talk every single day. He has become a part of my life, and I don't want to lose my friend. E writes to me on Snapchat when I get home – after the phone conversation.

Hey, my little niece is now
my best friend on Snap
She is the one who usurped
you.

Let me know if you're okay!

I just need some time.

Alright.

I spend the entire rest of the night watching E's snap score increase and experience an insane amount of jealousy. I purposefully send a million snaps to myself – my second account which I made in order to manipulate my snap score – hoping that he was watching it change. The next morning, I am still hurting over the phone conversation; I have a moment of clarity in which I realize leaving is what is best for me. I don't want to feel like this ever again.

I decide to end things before I lose my nerve. I am especially hurt over the fact that E doesn't even consider us to be *that good of friends*. I am tired of my love being wasted on someone who doesn't even consider me to be *a good friend*.

Tues, June 22, 2021

Do you have time to talk to me?

Yeah

So since we aren't 'that good of friends' and we 'haven't hung out that many times' I think we should stop talking, so you can spend time on relationships you actually care about.

Wow. Okay
Sorry
I'm pissed.

Why?

What does that mean? You *do* consider us to be close friends?

Maggie Nelson, in *Something Bright, Then Holes*, writes "I felt it: you don't want me as much as I want you. / Sad as they say, but true. Still you like to hear me / say it, so I'll tell you again: / I want you. I want you." ^{xxix}

Yes, obviously I consider you to be a close friend.

I don't know what else I can do to convince you that I care about you.

This is the right decision.

I block E on Snapchat. I start to panic. I re-add him but he does not accept my request; I text him instead.

Tues, June 22, 10:44 AM

Did you block my phone number?

Do we have to do this?

No?
I didn't block your phone
number.

Is there anything I can do?
I'm having an extremely hard time
with this.

Probably the best thing to do
is find a friend to talk to and
process about this. Or find
some other way to let the
time pass.

You'll feel better.

I know it's hard.

I want you to be my friend
E[omitted].

I'm sorry!

I regret what I said.
Aren't you going to miss me?

I am. But please don't make
this any harder.

I've been in your position
plenty of times. I know your
mind is racing but you don't
need to DO anything.

It's just so hard to accept that you
aren't going to be here anymore. I
know what I said but I wish you
would give me one more chance.

I know you think you're doing the
right thing but please don't leave me.

It will be different I promise.

I think if you got that text
from someone it'd be pretty
clear what the right thing to
do is.

Please take some time.

TEN

We begin a period of no contact. No contact means total radio silence. Following the end of a relationship, both people refrain from calling, texting, interacting on social media (or in any other way whatsoever) for at least sixty days. This is a hard and fast way to recover from a breakup. E is gone and I feel disproportionately devastated by this loss.

On the first day without him, I wake from a nightmarish sleep and the realization that he is really gone comes to me like a stunning revelation. I keep replaying our last conversation over and over again in my head, wishing I could take back what I said, wishing I could say all the things I had withheld.

For many more days, life is unbearable. I stay in bed. I constantly check my phone, wanting a call from him that will never come. I spend this time in a stoned blur, unable to face the fact that he is not coming back.

I read Granger E Westberg's book, *Good Grief*. There is a passage in the book which seems to be directed at me specifically:

The melody that the loved one played upon the piano of your life will never be played quite that way again, but we must not close the keyboard and allow the instrument to gather dust. We must seek out other artists of the spirit, new friends who gradually will help us to find the road to life again, who will walk that road with us. ^{xxx}

Maybe we build our homes in other people. Like Anne Carson, "In the days and months after [he] left / I felt as if the sky was torn off my life. / I had no home in goodness anymore." ^{xxx}ⁱ

But Westberg also writes, "Dark days do not last forever." ^{xxx}ⁱⁱ

ELEVEN

Casual, non-exclusive, sexual relationships are risky and Sexually Transmitted Diseases are common. An old woman is rocking back and forth, shuddering, hands buried in blue jean jacket pockets. She has bright white tennis shoes. She keeps muttering these little cries of anguish.

Ooh!

And whispering

Oh god.

Under her jean jacket are these pink Pepto colored pajamas with white polka dots. I heard the kid say,

I'm here for a Covid test

and then he sits down next to me. I breathe into my book where the air is safe. The lady at the desk keeps picking up the phone and saying

Thank you for calling
Midwest Express Clinic in
Bourbonnais.

We have reached capacity for
walk-ins today, but you can
check our website at Midwest
Express Clinic dot com.

Typing
Typing
Typing

What's your name?

Anthony?

How long?

What's the last name?

Uhm.

Uhm.

It shouldn't be too much longer.

You have just one person ahead of you for the provider that you're seeing.

Oh! Uh.

There is a woman in a black coat with black hair audibly complaining.

We were here at 3:30. We should be first.
Next time I'll go to the ER before I come here!

Ugh.

I'm so sick of this place.

It smells weird in here like fruity cardboard. Eventually a door swings open and a masked man says

Donaldson?

Yes, that's me.

I close the book.

Okay right this way.
You are going to be in this exam room.

We are just going to check your pulse and temperature.

I'm going to put this one on your finger.

Okay, good.

Beep

Temperature is 98.8, blood pressure is normal.

I see you were just here a few weeks ago, is everything the same?

Address? Height, weight, no new medications?

Everything is the same.

Okay, tell me about what's going on.

I am wanting to get an STD test, please.

Okay, was there an exposure that you know of?

No, no exposure. That I know of.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “68 million people were living with STIs in the United States as of 2018” and “It’s likely that many STIs go unreported, so that number is potentially higher” and

Are you experiencing any symptoms at this time?

No, no symptoms.

“Many STI’s have no symptoms or very nonspecific symptoms, which can make them hard to notice. The stigma around STIs also discourages some people from getting tested.”^{xxxiii}

Okay, are you wanting the full exam and blood test?

Yeah.

TWELVE

Fenton Johnson, in *At The Center of All Beauty: Solitude And The Creative Life*, writes “For as all lovers worth the effort and all vocalists know, the mouth and the tongue are the most erotic human instruments.”^{xxxiv} I love the sound of his voice. I don’t care that he’s cold; between his register and range, in the places where he extends his vowels and moves his words together, it is warm and pleasant, fluent, and articulate.

He says things like

Nobody really knows me.

and

Not everyone can be friends
with me.

In *Playwrighting: Brief and Brilliant*, Julie Jensen writes that the best characters are “off balance in some way. They’re excessive in one direction, deficient in another. And they are tenacious; they don’t give up easily on their imbalance.”^{xxxv}

I was stoned, rose colored-eyes fixed on the black typeface of off-white pages, held up to my pallid ennui like a hand mirror, wondering why Achilles wept when he lost Briseis – was it grief that moved him? Did he ache, the way she ached, when she was forced open like a Jericho Rose for her captor, the man who slew her parents and brothers? Was the pain of loss as excruciating as when Achilles learned of the death of Patroclus, and Antilochus clutched Achilles’ hands together to prevent the Son of Peleus from slashing his own throat with an iron blade? Priam knew it was within the realm of possibility that his son would die, but he would not have expected that inconsolable Achilles would drag Hector's body from his chariot, around the city of Troy, for twelve merciless days.

In 1995, there was a bus accident. The Fox River Grove bus-train collision. A substitute bus driver stopped at a traffic light, unaware that the rear of the bus was extended over the tracks. The bus was struck by a train traveling at approximately 60 miles per hour. The impact was so powerful, it ripped the body of the bus from the chassis, catapulting the wreckage into the intersection, killing seven students.^{xxxvi} Whose job was it to tell the parents that their children were dead – because they rode the bus that morning, because the regular bus driver called off, because the warnings provided by the traffic signals were insufficient?

Who told
them?

Grief drags us, like Lena Horne drags the tempo, the way a foot is dragged across the floor to meet the other, like it dragged Hektor’s body through the dust. No matter how many times we face it, it still manages to hurt in new and unexpected ways. The day he left he said

Please take some time.

Rabindranath Tagore, in *Balai*, writes “There is no time, all past and all future is contained in this moment.”^{xxxvii}

I know it’s hard.
You’ll feel better.

I don’t feel better – I feel disgusting. I’ve strung together all these days like a tessellation of blank paper hearts. Goodbye to sex and poetry. I just want what everyone wants: to be seen, and heard, and admired for nothing other than my shining existence; but I am just the foliage in a bouquet of flowers, an abandoned dog waiting for someone who no longer wants me.

I try to focus on the sad parts. He said he felt a connection with me, just not enough of one. He said he could fall in love with someone, just not with me. Anne Carson, in *Glass, Irony & God*, writes that it’s common to feel so bad you think you’re going to die.^{xxxviii}

Like Fenton Johnson in *Solitude and the Creative Life*, “I miss the sadness. And I even miss the arguments, because underlying this bickering was always this taken-for-granted fact: *how much I must matter to this person, that I rouse him to such anger!*”^{xxxix}

Love is always a serious matter for artists and melancholics. My pain is great, but I characterize it disproportionately when I compare it to violent tragedies that unfairly take people’s lives – especially the lives of children. It hurts to lose a friend and unreciprocated love is a bitch, but his life will go on and so will mine. Roland Barthes in *A Lover’s Discourse* writes that real mourning is a test of reality which shows us that the loved object has ceased to exist, and this results in two contrary miseries: the one we loved is dead (to us as we’ve known them), and the one we loved is no longer here to hurt us.^{xl}

THIRTEEN

October 6, 2021.

E and I have been in no-contact for one hundred and six days; one hundred and six days of missing him; one hundred and six days of wishing he would reach out to me. I think it should be him to reach out, since he is the one who severed contact between us, but I know he won't. I wish I could move on and just let it go; and yet, I don't want to let go, I don't want to forget E, I don't want to forget all those qualities about him and our experiences and conversations that inspired me to love him. Maggie Nelson, in *Bluets*, writes that "to wish to forget how much you loved someone—and then, to actually forget—can feel, at times, like the slaughter of a beautiful bird who chose, by nothing of grace, to make a habitat of your heart," and this pain can be converted, as it were, by accepting "the fundamental impermanence of all things."^{xli}

I have nothing to lose at this point. E never blocked my number (but perhaps he should have); he has left that door open. I text him a photo of three books spread out on my coffee table: *On Freedom* by Maggie Nelson, *Counting Descent* by Clint Smith, and a book he will surely recognize because he has his own copy, *Speak the Speech! Shakespeare's Monologues Illuminated* by Rhona Silverbush. I break no contact. It's late at night and I have no expectations. He writes back to me the next morning.

Oct 6, 7:21 AM



Hey, is that mine?

No
I bought one!

Nice, that's a good one.

I thought you would also appreciate
the Clint Smith poems!

I think you have a book of his.

Clint Smith, in "Ode to 9th & O NW," writes "How one can be lulled into nostalgia / by the clamor of an audacious love."^{xliii}

Yes!! How the Word is
Passed.

Are you using them in your classes?

Yes.
Students are performing monologues
from Julius Caesar.

The Shakespeare book is super
helpful.

Yeah! It's a good one.



Nice.
Conducive for learning AF.
Kids arrive in 10.

How's your new apartment
Do you love it?



Yeah, I love it.

That looks great! Much more space
for you.

How's your place?

I love mine too.
And much cheaper than my last one.



It's great.
I want it.
How much?



Here's the grand tour:



Here's a dessert I made.



Here's a recent selfie

Thank you!
Mine is \$600. Thank you for the
selfie also, I forgot what you look
like.

In "Something You Should Know," Smith writes, "even now, I can want so desperately / to show you all of my skin, but am more afraid / of meeting you, exposed, in open water." ^{xliii}

Wow, 600 for all that.
Love it.
Garage. Whew

My class is about to start, and I think it best not to accost him with any more messages – I am elated he even answered at all – and thrilled that he seemed happy to hear from me.

It was nice to catch up with you!

Likewise!

In “Chaos Theory,” Smith writes, “but what I mean to say / is that it would have been / such a tragedy / if something happened / that would have prevented me / from meeting you.”^{xliv}

FOURTEEN

November 18th, 2021

E and I share an interest in theater. He is a Music Director, and I am a writer. I write a play called *Threesome* about a cast of actors who gather to rehearse for a performance of *Twelfth Night*. When one actor presents his castmates with a sexual proposition, everyone's true feelings and intentions are revealed, causing their relationships to unravel. I share the character descriptions with E:

BOO: A black cat played by a person. Dressed in a one-piece black spandex catsuit. Has cat ears and a cat tail. Makeup includes painted on whiskers, a black nose, thick, winged black eyeliner. At no point should the actor playing BOO be human in movement or sound.

CAT (Viola): Female, 5'9" in heels, 29. Dressed in a black crop top and black skirt (should not exceed length of fingertips when arms are resting at sides) with black fishnet tights and black heels. Makeup should be caked on thick with black eyeliner, fake eyelashes, and black lipstick.

JAY (Orsino): Male, 6'1", 29. Dressed in a large, vintage-looking knit sweater (he has to push up his sleeves to comfortably play the piano) and black jeans.

CLAIRE (Olivia): Female, shorter than 5'9" in flat shoes, 29. Dressed in jeans and a large t-shirt. Her outfit is comfortable and non-form-fitting. Hair is too short for a ponytail.

Elephant in the room, did I
inspire Jay?
Lol.

I hoped you wouldn't notice.

He plays piano and dresses
exactly like me.
And the play is called
"Threesome."

I can make changes.

No, it doesn't bother me.

Well, thanks for being my
inspiration.

For inspiring the conflict in your
play?
It's nice to be a muse.

I'm always in need of experiences to
use as a catalyst for my art.

Well,
correct me if I'm wrong, but
there were some upsetting
things about our relationship,
and those are the things
you're drawing inspiration
from.

I hope you don't have to go
through more upsetting
things for inspiration.

Yeah, I draw on past experiences,
but please don't think I'm still
hanging on to any of that.

Play is purely fiction.
I have absolutely no negative
feelings towards you about anything.

I believed this when I said it.

I really admire you and I'm glad we
are still friends and we can talk about
things.

I wouldn't blame or judge
you if you had some
resentment, I was (and am)
an asshole.

I'm sorry for how I treated
you. At the end and the
whole time.

But I trust what you're
saying, thank you, and I
admire you too, and honestly
respect your work.

I hope I'm a decent friend to
you now.

Don't mention it!

I promise this wasn't some
underhanded way to try to confront
you about the past.

I'm sorry too,
thank you thank you,
you are a good friend,

our communication has been good!

Oh hmm,
that didn't occur to me but
now I totally think it is.

I'm actually just not creative enough
to invent my own original characters.

Have more encounters!

Sexual encounters?

Including those.

You should find an older man
to wine and dine you.
That would make an
interesting play.

FIFTEEN**Fri, Dec, 7:29 PM**

Ethos

Jasquee

I finished the play

Threesome?

Angels in America

A happy ending!

Prior didn't take Louis back.

Of course not!
Louis is a schmuck.They disbarred Roy before he died
too.

Happiest possible ending!

PRIOR: How did Sheba die?

HARPER: Rat poison, hit by a truck, fight with an alley cat, cancer, another truck, old age, fell in the East River, heartworms and one last truck. ^{xlv}

Nine lives.

Aw,
poor Sheba.

She's just a soft little cat.

PRIOR: I love you Louis.

LOUIS: Good. I love you.

PRIOR: I really do.

But you can't come back. Not ever.

I'm sorry. But you can't. ^{xlvi}

Brutal.

But it's what he deserves.

Yeah, he deserved it, but it's sad
because they are actually in love, and
Louis left because he was really
scared. But on the other hand, Joe
was basically like, 'Harper take me
back because you love me and no
one else does,' and when she said no,
I didn't feel bad for Joe at all.

I don't feel too bad for Louis.
He's profoundly self-
absorbed.

He's weak.

That's fair.
I know Roy is like the despicable
villain, but at least he's fully aware
that he's horrible and he owns it.

SIXTEEN

Tues, Jan 2022

My love for E feels like the elephant in the room that he is too polite to acknowledge, because we both know he does not reciprocate my feelings. I think this is one of the main reasons why he keeps me around. He enjoys all my love and admiration (love he does not have to return). There were at least three times where he explicitly told me he does not love me. Once, he suggested we just eliminate the sexual part of our relationship completely – which is unbelievable, because the only time he spends time with me is to have sex. Without the sexual aspect of our relationship, there would be no relationship.

For the Player

A rhythm meanders from beneath the
 player's hands
 flows
 like dandelion seeds on a summer
 breeze
 over the boughs of cedar trees
 through waves from distant radios.

 He plays well and gives well
 Softness is the darkness.
 He rings the bell and his little love
 takes from his open hands.

He reads and the lilt of his voice dips
 pleasurably
 every word sweet like lemon curd
 dripping
 from his lips.

Love,
 J.

Jan 2022, 7:29 PM

That's wonderful! So
 beautiful.

It's amazing to be seen
 through your eyes like that!

I'm so glad you like it!

I really like it, thank you
What does "softness is the
darkness" mean?

And do you choose "player"
for its double meaning?

I was trying to create an image of a
cat, but also meant softness as in
warm-hearted.

I use player because I've called you
that.
I used memories I have of you.

Radio waves,

I was sitting on the black couch and he was explaining to me how sound waves work. He explained the doppler effect – we perceive sound differently when the source of the sound moves towards or away from us. For example, the pitch of an ambulance siren is constant, but as the ambulance approaches us, we perceive a higher pitch.

ringing bell
before feeding
Tea,

I was sitting on the furry tile floor, trying to coerce his black cat out from beneath the table. She is relaxed, upright, and royal like Bastet. Her eyes were glowing yellow and reptilian. There is a bell on top of the fridge. He rings it, and hands me a treat to feed her. She took from my hand – her teeth grazing my fingertips.

reading *Angels
in America*
together.

He read his lines with an impressive accent. He corrected my pronunciation of a word and I felt embarrassed.

Lemon curd.

E is a hobbyist – he has so many interests and I admire him for this. One of his hobbies is baking. I always enjoyed when he sent pictures of his pastries. Apple pies, lemon bars – lemon dessert (of any kind) is his favorite. I specifically remember a photo he sent me of a pitcher

completely filled with bright yellow lemon curd. He explained to me the difference between curd and custard.

I admit I have kind of a bad
association with the word
player because I've been
called that in the pejorative
before,

I prefer maestro, virtuoso, or
genius.

Thanks for telling me that.
I promise I used it affectionately
here,
But I won't call you that anymore.

Virtuoso is a good one!

Thanks! Cedar trees?

One time, I said
if you were a
candle,
you could be a
cedar tree candle.

SEVENTEEN

Sat, Jan 22, 2022

It has been exactly one year since we began the period of no contact.

Sat, Jan 22, 2022. 7:58 PM

E[omitted]

Sup
Send butt please

I got this cute matching set
Want to see it?

Yes please!



It's cute.
I love your body.
I bet your butt looks great.

Thank you

I like it
Take more???



Those hips and legs.
Take a video.



You're so skinny and sexy.
I love how it fits.
Love how your body moves.

You're too kind
Did you have church today?

Yeah, I did a lesson and then
church.
That's it.

Nice.
I just read some and did laundry and
periodically napped all day.

My laundry machine is
broken.

Oh shoot.
You can use mine.

Okay, I'll use your machine
and use you while we wait.

Okay deal.

Get on birth control!

I am! You know that.

Oh doyyyy
Yeah, I forgot.

You don't use condoms with me.
Wouldn't you be worried if I wasn't
on it?

But we fucked without a
condom before you on, right?
It is a little worrying to do
that,
but I always pull out.

Yeah, you're right.
I wasn't on it in the very beginning.

Risky.

Are you ever worried about having
unprotected sex with people you are
nonexclusive with?

No I don't really do that.
I used to and I've been tested
since then.
But I do have another test
soon.

Have you been with other people
around the times you were with me?

Am I allowed to ask that?

Yes, I want you to feel like
you can ask anything.
And yes...I don't remember
specifics, the last few years
have been a blur

But yes! It probably would be
a good idea to be tested.

I tested after the first time I saw
you again on the 20th,
And I saw you again on the 1st,

Have you seen someone since?
Between Dec 20 and Jan 1?

Can we please talk?

Yes, sorry, sorry!
No, it's just been you since then.
I was making a track for a
student; I didn't mean to ignore
you.

It's only been you since
December.

My test from Dec 20 was clean.

You were always safe with me,
physically.

I'm feeling hurt that you were
putting me in danger by having sex
with other people and having
unprotected sex with me.

I know we are nonexclusive, but for
a long time you were reassuring me
that it was only me,

do you remember that?

Yes, I do remember that.
I'm sorry. I am careful
sexually. I don't remember
putting you in danger, but I
may have.

It's something I would avoid
but I may have.

I know I did not have many
partners, even many
encounters (like 5 or fewer
encounters).

And this was a while ago.
I wish I could be more
specific.

It's okay.
Thanks for telling me.
The boundaries of a friend with
benefits thing just weren't ever
really clear to me.

I wish I could go back in time and tell my past self to get up off her knees and wipe her
mouth.

Well I could've been clearer,
or attentive to your needs at
all.

You don't need to do that.

I reassure him that what I want and need isn't important because I don't want to be an inconvenience.

I feel like I'm asking too much from
you all the time.
My needs or feelings aren't your
responsibility.

Not at all, I'm always glad
when you say something.

I don't think this is true at all.

What else are you thinking about?

What do you mean?

What are you thinking about in
this moment?

Nothing. I'm reading
What are you thinking about?
It feels like that question is
trying to solicit something in
particular
And I want you to trust that
you can articulate things like
that directly. I'll be kind.

I want to know what you think about
this conversation.

And I want to know how you are
perceiving me,
what I'm upset about and why.

If you think I'm being jealous or
neurotic, because I'm not really sure
what is okay to feel in this situation
or say.

He has put me, and others in danger, and I am worried about how this situation is a bad reflection of me or my fault somehow.

Hmm. Not judging your feelings. So I don't know how to answer that. I'm perceiving you as justifiably hurt by my actions.

But a word like jealous or neurotic, I'm not thinking in that direction at all.

And I don't know what to say to "what is okay to feel or say in this situation"

For obvious reasons that I think you fully understand.

I think you're feeling betrayed. I wasn't as cautious as I explicitly said I was. You don't know if you can trust me or what you even mean to me.

Because I say one thing and do another.

Is that right?



This is what I was doing just now. Emergency lead sheet for tomorrow's church service.

Okay
Yeah, you articulated my thoughts for me.
But you've always been clear about the fact that we are non-exclusive and our relationship is cursory and sexual and we are friends and I obviously knew it was within the

realm of possibility that you were
 seeing other people,
 and it's something I don't want to
 think about, but it's something we
 need to be honest about for safety.

Yeah. I'm sorry. I'm glad I
 understand you correctly.

I'm sorry too.
 I've been jealous before and I always
 made you the bad guy and I'm not
 trying to do that anymore.

I just want to have fun with you and
 appreciate what we have.

Thanks, I appreciate you
 holding me accountable.
 It's a balance.

I appreciate the empathy.

I hope you know you mean a lot to
 me!

Thanks. I'll continue to try to
 extend my empathy!! To
 grow that skill.

You mean a lot to me too.

EIGHTEEN

It was easy to feel close and connected with E when we were corresponding on Snapchat because we were constantly sending pictures and messages back and forth. Even if he was not responding to me, the app would notify me that he at least opened my message or picture. Texting feels a little more distant. He does not use read receipts so I am not sure when he reads my messages or if he is available (and willing) to talk. I get into the habit of just texting him his nickname, "E," to show him that I was thinking about him, to connect with him, or sometimes to remind him that he has not responded to me in a few hours.

Jan 29 9:42pm

E

J, I'm banning all E texts
without some conversation
attached.

Except as a follow up text
when I don't answer.

But first E's have to have
content.

Oh, nudes always qualify as
content.



I just mean it as a "hey" but okay.
Whatever you want. Since you get to
decide everything. Like when and
where we hangout, which is hardly
ever. Probably when no one else is
available to fuck or something.

I was just trying to be close to you
by texting. I get scared when I'm not
seeing you or hearing from you and I
just want to know that you didn't
leave.

I should have let him leave.

I'm sorry, you're right. I
mean, not about the fucking
anyone else.

I'm sorry. I didn't mean it;
you can say what you want to
me. I was also sort of trying
to play with you with those
texts, but that wasn't good.

I'm sorry I'm not more
available.

I promise I won't leave forever again,

but I do shut off from
everyone often. It's
something I need to work on,
mostly because it hurts

people. I'm really avoidant
 and that's not your fault or
 about you at all.
 I'm sorry for hurting you.
 I put that doubt and fear
 there.
 I hope it doesn't hurt you
 when I don't answer through
 the day.
 I don't think I can change
 that behavior anytime soon.
 But I'll try.

You don't have to change. Being
 able to reach out to you is important
 to me. I don't even mind when you
 don't answer. What you said really
 confirmed my fears that I'm just
 annoying you constantly.

It's mildly annoying sometimes.
 And sometimes I enjoy it. Don't
 stop doing it please. Not just
 reaching out to me, that's not
 annoying. Literally just the E
 thing. And I'm sorry for not
 telling you before and doing it
 in such an unkind way.

Okay. No more E messages.

I can honestly say I'm really
 glad to have you in my life.
 I'm sorry for what I've put
 you through, I understand
 you being mad at me and I
 want you to be free to tell me
 what you're feeling.

This isn't really true though. Eventually, I will tell him how I feel and he will leave again.

I'm glad to have you in mine. I think
 I like you way more than you like
 me. I feel like I shouldn't be asking

you to accommodate my needs or
anything because our relationship is
casual.

Maybe we need to talk about
what exactly our relationship
is, discuss what we need and
expect from each other.
I want you in my life as a
friend. Maybe we need to
stop being sexual with each
other? I don't mean it as an
ultimatum or something
weird, I just don't want it to
be complicated.

bell hooks, in *All About Love* writes that “We are all uncomfortable with conventional expressions we use to talk about romantic love. All of us feel that these expressions and the thinking behind them are one of the reasons we entered relationships that did not work.”^{xlvii}

I want the sexual part,
safely though.
I want you as a friend and I would
like daily text communication and
occasionally sex.

Here, I am just pretending to want what I know he wants. I am afraid that if we eliminate the sexual part of relationship, we will move even farther away from what I really want. Even worse, if he isn't sleeping with me, I can no longer delude myself into thinking that I am the only one he is seeing. If he isn't sleeping with me, I have to absolutely accept the fact that he has someone else. And above all, I like this part of our relationship. The only times I feel like he truly cares about me was when we are arguing or having sex. I still believe he will change his mind about me.

I would be happy if you would make
time to see me once or twice a
month.

I want to see him much more often than this. I want to see him every single day. He is the one I want to spend all my time with. I practically have to beg him to spend time with me, and it's never at my house. In all the time that I have known him, he has never offered to come to my place – not even once. Even worse, he has never offered to let me stay at his place. I have driven

back home from his place at 2am in the middle of a blizzard because I just don't think he can stand being around me for longer than a few hours.

Deal. That's exactly what I want.

I feel better.

Me too.
Sorry for that.
And thank you.

NINETEEN

March 13th, 2022

March 13th 3:35pm

What up today E[omitted]

Just did church had lunch
with old friend.
What's up with you?

Almost every time I ask E to spend time with me, he is too busy – busy with work, busy with chores, busy with hobbies – and I am always understanding. When he tells me he is spending time with friends, it annoys me because it reaffirms my fears that he simply does not like me. It's not that he doesn't have time, he just doesn't have time for me.

I want to spend time with you too.

Come on over!
I'm definitely not feeling
down to clown though.

I feel really uneasy about this.

Do you want to just smoke
weed and play video games?

Sounds fun.
Why no sex though?
Do you have someone else or do
you just not want to do that with
me anymore?
Honestly.

Neither of those
I just don't feel like it.

I choose to believe him. I think he would tell me the truth about this. I still want to spend time with him.

Okay.

Do you want to hangout actually?
I have weed.

I have lots of weed.
And yeah, come on over.

Okay
I'll be there at 6.
with my Switch.

Okay cool.
I won't help with the fighting
I will only offer wisdom.

E and I play games together – but apart. He plays Elden Ring and I play Hollow Knight. I text him asking for help solving the puzzles and beating the bosses, and he sends me pictures of the monsters he's fighting. After he leaves, I won't touch this game ever again – it just reminds me of him and I can't stand to look at it.

You're going to be so impressed
with my skills.

Probably!!

Here we go again, up the creaking stairs and I press my face into the shoulder of his soft, violet, argyle sweater. His jellied body swells around me. Smooth glass against my lips. My right thumb strikes the wheel, the left covers the carb. The smolder then the taste of burnt dirt. We smoke weed in his kitchen even though he lives in a duplex and blow it out the window at all the residents of Charleston as they walk by this row of haunted houses, filthy white, three stories high, and dilapidated.

He says please excuse the dishes with a touch of shame when I glance over at the sink overflowing with unwashed pots, and it stings a little, so I divert my rose-colored eyes to the mole above his right brow and think about the way they constellate his skin. I like the way he looks, sitting on that bench in front of the kitchen window backlit by the sun, his eyes are a luminescent blue. I can see all the worry in his face.

A prescription bottle in the bathroom. Maybe he caught an STD and that's why our clothes are on. No, it's a steroid. He has tremors in his hands. It's congenital. I can't see the trembling when he plays the keys but when I push my palm against his palm and thread my fingers through his fingers, I can feel it. He asks me if I want to watch something and I said something like

Do you actually want to watch
something or do you just want me to
leave?

And then I was ashamed because he looked hurt by that.

What? No. In what universe
does that mean “can you
leave?”

Well, once you asked me if I ‘want
to play a board game or something’
but I think what you really meant
was, ‘get out.’

You’re always like, ‘what do
you really mean E[omitted]?’
Nothing I say has a secret
meaning.

The way he says this is disarming – it falls weakly off the tip of his tongue. His intonation dips as if he had been startled by the sound of his own voice. I feel bad for being rough.

Okay
I’m sorry.
Yes, I want to watch something.

So we watch this police robot movie and the whole time I’m touching his feet with my feet and trying to be near him and he’s sitting as far away from as physically possible without actually falling off his side of the couch. But eventually puts his arm over me and says something like

Get over here
Bitch.

My face must have twisted up or something in response to that, because he said something like

Sorry sorry,
that felt too normal,

or

it felt too serious
so I had to reduce it
in seriousness.

so I let it go, and I sort of lay on him and pull his arm over me, and just appreciate the moment for what it is. I keep looking up at him and he sees me looking at him and he gets uncomfortable and says

Can you see the TV from there?

And I say

No not really.
I'm going to leave.

Because you're bored.

And I want to say, no I'm leaving because if it were up to me, I would stay here literally forever on this cat-hair-covered rock-hard couch, awkwardly under your arm, in a position where I can't actually see the TV, but I know you probably want space and won't ask for it and it's 9:30 and I won't get home till 11 and it's a school night. But instead I just say

No of course not!

and I sort of lunge at him and give him a big squeeze and my face is pressed against his argyle sweater again.

Are you hugging me because you are bored?

I pick up my switch controller.

This one is mine, right?

Yes, that one is yours. Mine is all black.

And then instead of just letting it go, I press the issue and say something uncomfortable like

I hope I didn't overstay,
I always feel like I do.

And he said,

I hope I didn't do anything to
make you feel that way.

No you didn't.
I'm sorry.

I forgive you.

I drive home and feel awful like I always do after I leave his place. I overthink about everything and try to convince myself that things are going in the right direction after all. Maybe he is trying to make a point that he just enjoys spending time with me for reasons other than sex. And then I remember what he said:

Nothing I say has a secret
meaning.

He says what he means. I know I should believe him when he says he doesn't love me – does not have romantic feelings for me. I should just let it go. So much of our relationship has been me just hoping that he secretly does have feelings for me; or hoping that he was developing them over time.

March 13 10:54 PM

Thanks for hanging out with me.

TWENTY

The room is dark, acoustic, and refrigerated. I am sitting in C9, three rows from the screen. Previews envelop the screen. *Dr. Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*. *Top Gun*. *Marcel the Shell with Shoes*. We watch Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. We are sucked. into. a bagel.

Michelle Yeoh's character Evelyn Wang discovers that she is only one version of herself (the worst version, in fact) among an infinite number of Evelyns from an infinite number of other universes. We are a vessel through which time flows – we are space – the ether contains all possibilities and potential. It is represented by the shape of a black oval – timeless, endless. Evelyn connects with every life she could have lived – every life that she did live. Ke Huy Quan as Waymond Wang says, “Across the multiverse, I've seen thousands of Evelyns. If you can imagine it, somewhere out there it exists.”

I squirm in my seat, wanting to close the space that separates us – the three inches between his right knee and my left. Every time he lifts his hand to bring a piece of popcorn to his mouth, I think about his lips. When he rests his cheek on his hand, I want to slide my fingers up his wrist and thread them through the spaces between his. Evelyn tells Waymond, “Of all the places I could be, I just want to be here with you.”

After the movie I text him:

Are you busy right now?

Not really, what's up?

Question:

Are you dating someone right now?

Nope

Why do you ask?

typing

typing

typing

You're going to give me a
panic attack. What did I do?

No! Sorry it's nothing. I was just
going to say that I want
to be physically
affectionate with you but it seems
like
you don't want that from me.

But that's all.

Yeah...that's true. I'm sorry I should have been explicit about that but I think my feelings have changed overtime.

I don't really want to be physically affectionate with you.

I'm sorry to make you sense it before just telling you, but I didn't really have it figured out.

Okay.

Please delete any pictures you have of me, okay?

Yes! Okay.

I feel bad.

In what way?

Evelyn Wang and her daughter Joy Wang (Stephanie Hsu) have a dialogue in the desert in a universe in which they are rocks that communicate telepathically. Evelyn says, "Joy, I'm sorry about ruining everything," and Joy says, "Shhhh. You don't have to worry about that here. Just be a rock."

I'm thinking about all the times we hung out and you didn't want to be near me or were cold to me and I should have just taken the hint.

And how every hard conversation we've ever had is about whether or not we can be friends when I have love for you and you don't for me. I feel like I'm being rejected by someone I respect and love and admire.

Roland Barthes, in *A Lover's Discourse* describes "The amorous subject's propensity to talk copiously with repressed feeling, to the loved being, about his love for that being, for himself, for them: the declaration does not bear upon the avowal of love, but upon the endlessly glossed form of the amorous relation." ^{xlvi}

I'm sorry
I respect and admire you too
And I want to be friends with
you.

Waymond says, "So, even though you have broken my heart yet again, I wanted to say, in another life, I would have really liked just doing laundry and taxes with you."

I'm sorry too,
for betraying the friendship with my
feelings

What do you mean?

I read an article that said one of the
rules of hookup culture is never
admit you have feelings because it
"betrays the casualness of the
relationship."

Yeah, I suppose. Having
feelings for someone doesn't
fit in a casual relationship.

This probably happens to you all the
time.

Can we talk more?

It doesn't happen to me all
the time.

Sorry I shouldn't have said that.

I meant it like, you're easy to like.

Thank you.
I really would just like to be
friends though.

Waymond tells Evelyn, “Every rejection, every disappointment has led you here to this moment.” Of all possibilities of all the lives we could have lived, we chose not to. Choose to embrace the life you are living now; live it well and live it with others.

I want to, but also, like, the thought
of you not wanting me anymore,
seeing other people; that shit will
fucking destroy me.

I don’t know what to say. I’m
sorry I hurt you.

That’s okay. It was nice while it
lasted.
Are you okay? Am I making you feel
bad?

I’m okay, sorry, I’m just
really stoned.
It was nice while it lasted.

I finished the Saunders’ book.

What did you think??

In George Saunder’s *Lincoln in the Bardo*, Lincoln laments the death of his beloved son: “(So why grieve? The worst of it, for him, is over.) Because I loved him so and am in the habit of loving him and that love must take the form of fussing and worry and doing.”^{xlix}

TWENTY-ONE

Mon, April 18, 2:29

Friend, please forgive me ...
I can't do people anymore
today, my brain just
switched.

I don't want to hang out with
and just be grumpy and mean
to you. I'm sorry but let's
visit once I really get the free
time to do so.

I really do miss you.

That's okay.

I'm a little worried that you haven't
wanted to hang out with me because
you've been hanging out with other
people, which is fine, but I would
what to know just because our
expectation for each other is to
hangout once or twice a month and
it's been like three.

The truth was that I am jealous and afraid that since he wasn't spending time with me, he was spending time with someone else.

But I'm assuming nothing has
changed though because you haven't
said anything has changed, and you
will tell me if anything does change.

I really try not to make assumptions or jump to conclusions.

I'm sorry. I know how I'm
making you feel and it sucks.

You really are important to
me and one of my favorite
people to talk to.
But I really haven't been
doing much talking to people

and definitely not much
hanging out.

I take this as reassurance that he hasn't been sleeping with anyone else.

I think I'm just stressed. I
expected this past week and
this week to be less hard at
work and they haven't been.

Anyway, I'm really sorry.
It'll be better soon, I promise.
I do want to see you.

That's okay, no problem at all really,
thanks for talking to me so much.
You've been there for me when I
needed someone, a bunch of times.
You're important to me too, I'm
holding space for you, I know we'll
hang out once things aren't so crazy.

I appreciate that so much!! I
was worried about what you
might say.

This part stings a little. It sounds like he was worried that I would be angry with him or say something that would hurt him. Maybe I don't give enough consideration to the way I make him feel.

TWENTY-TWO**Sun, May 15, 4:06 PM**

What's up with you?

E and I usually text first thing in the morning. When I don't hear from him all day, I feel anxious.

Can you please respond to me?

Maggie Nelson, in *On Freedom*, writes that "when we ascertain that our well-being is linked to the behavior of others, the desire to impugn, control, or change them can be as fruitless as it is intense."¹

Oh yeah, sorry Jacqui.
I haven't texted anyone back all day. I've been single minded.
Did church, then starting plotting for a 2PM lesson, then that ended up going until 4.
It was fun.

We recorded a fun song. Do you want to hear it?

Yeah, I want to hear it.

You have to know I sang on it,
under duress because he wouldn't.
But he made up the chord progression and we collaborated on the words and melody.



Oh and he played the piano.
But we got to record with real mics and do some legit audio production stuff.

That's awesome
A really cool lesson.

Sorry I didn't respond.
I'm going to get Diablo.

I asked E if he would buy a game and play it online with me. Since we aren't having sex anymore, I feel like I need to come up with other things for us to do together so that we can stay close and connected.

That's okay
Yeah, get it so we can play.

Which Diablo?

3!

Alright downloading! My
first game purchase since
Elden Ring.

This means a lot to me. E doesn't frivolously spend money on things. He bought this game just because I wanted to play it with him.

Yay! It's going to be so fun.

I know nothing about Diablo!

Okay, in an hour and 40
minutes.

TWENTY-THREE

Tues, May 17,

I travel to see E. It's raining a little. I'm worried about our plans. I think about turning around, but I don't want to cancel because I see him so infrequently as it is. When I get closer, the rain dissipates and the sun comes out.

May 17, 6:44 PM

Sup?
Just Finished a lesson

Just got to your place.

Be right there.

Okay.

I park against the curve in front of the duplex and drag my bike out of the back of my Escape. I mount the bike and nervously ride in circles on the street, looking in both directions for E's gray SUV. When he comes up the street, he waves to me and swings into his parking spot around the back of his building. He is wearing a white sleeve button down shirt and khaki shorts that go down to his knees. He says,

Hey!

Your haircut looks so good!

Thanks! It was very much needed, in this heat.

Do you want to come up for a minute?

Yeah, sure.

Okay, you might want to put your bike on my porch so it's *less likely* to be stolen.

I drag my bike up the wooden steps and lean it against the kickstand and we go through the rickety white screen door and up the creaking steps. His bike is on the landing in front of his door. E digs his key into the lock and says,

You know one time, I heard my
neighbor say, ‘one day someone
is gonna steal that bike.’

The door to the building is never locked, so if someone was bold enough to do it, they could certainly just come steal the bike, or the potted plants, or the welcome mats, or anything else in the hallway.

I awkwardly linger near the door while he sets down his things. It’s hard for me to be here. The bedroom door is halfway closed and I’m wondering if the piece of clothing hanging off the doorknob belongs to a girl. I’m looking at the black couch remembering all the times I sat next to him. I take a book out of my backpack – the one I said I would lend him.

I brought the book for you.

I set it on his coffee table. George Saunders’ *Lincoln in the Bardo*.

Thank you!
I haven’t finished
Pastoralia yet.

That’s okay. Take your time.

Do you want some drugs?

He offers me a vape pen.

Nah, no thanks,

Suit yourself.

He hits it.

Exhale

What’s in the backpack?

Uh, keys, phone, headphones.

Are you going to have your
headphones in during this?

No! That would be rude.

Oh, would it be? I brought mine
because I wasn’t sure.

I feel silly for having brought a backpack and headphones. I want to shrink into my outfit and disappear. The sleeveless shirt, the black athletic shorts, the running shoes, the hair slicked back by an elastic rubber headband – I must look so serious, as if I'm about to compete in a triathlon. E doesn't even change out of his business-casual clothes. I sink to the floor to pet the cat.

Do you want to give her a treat?

Yes.

We go into the kitchen and Tea meows and meows at him as he brings down a bag of cat treats from the top of the fridge. He pours a few out into his hands and offers her one between his fingers. She is not interested. He hands me one, which I offer to her.

She doesn't seem to like these ones.

I follow him out into the hallway and he locks the door behind us. He picks up his bike by the frame.

Do you need my help with that?

Nah, I got it.

I go ahead of him, back down the creaking stairs and out the door. He carries the bike down effortlessly under one arm.

Let's go this way first.

We ride up and down the craggy Charleston sidewalks and streets. I think about how my city is much more bikeable, with better views, and lots of stray cats. E constantly directs me this way or that way, out of the way of cars – left or right. He has one hand on the handlebar while the other pulls his vape out of his pocket, puts it to his lips, and thrusts it back in his pocket; his white button-down shirt is slightly blown by the wind – he looks so cool. He shows me a mural painted on the side of a brick building and tells me what it's called.

Painted by Rebecca Sawyer Spoon of Charleston, this mural portrays the Charleston Riot of March 28, 1864. It is the largest of the murals, measuring 40 feet wide by 20 feet tall, and many of the details can only be appreciated with binoculars. Violence resulted when Union soldiers and local Republicans encountered Peace Democrats on the square. The

Peace Democrats, or "Copperheads," represented those who were anti-Lincoln Administration, anti-draft, pro-slavery, and those who favored an armistice to end the Civil War. ^{li}

He points to a building paneled like a barn, the color of robin's egg; on the side in red channel letters: The Penalty box.

Have you ever been there?

No, never. I've been to *a* bar in
Charleston, but not that one.

This is probably the
sketchiest one. I hear the
legal age of consumption
works differently there.

You've actually been inside that
place?

Yes! A few times.

I wince. I don't drink anymore. I sort of assumed E doesn't drink either. He has some liquor at his place – I thought maybe for guests. I can't imagine someone so charismatic, intelligent, and good looking showing up to a place like the Penalty Box to meet a Tinder date. I wonder what E is like when he drinks. He's so introverted, maybe a few drinks would give him the confidence to back up his bravado.

Which bar have you been to?

Uh, I don't remember the name of it.
I just remember that it was near Saint
Patrick's day and everyone was
wearing green.

Probably Ike's.

It was Saturday, March 5th and I invited my colleague Hannah to go see Eastern Illinois University's production of *Little Women*. We got into town around 6pm with an hour to kill, so we parked outside Doudna – the fine arts building, and walked to a bar called Marty's. The music was way too loud and the lights were strobing. We got a little drunk and wandered into some building on campus, which was unlocked, and found a bathroom. There is something

otherworldly about confronting your drunk self in a bathroom. When we finally managed to get to the Black Box Theater, my face was flushed and sweating. We were sitting in Row B – which was way too close, and we were roasting under the stage lights. I threatened to remove my shirt and Hannah laughed. I was sitting right in front of the orchestra pit – right in front of E. I pointed him out to Hannah and she said he was cute. When we got up during intermission, still buzzed and headed to find another bathroom, I definitely made eye contact with E; a clear expression of panic flashed across his face. I never want to feel the way I felt when he averted his eyes like he was ashamed to admit that he knew me. He calls himself my friend, but clearly, we were never friends.

There's a Geocache over
here!

I follow him up the sidewalk to the side of a brick building. I look for anything abnormal on the wall. I touch the outside light and an electrical cover that is unmovable.

If it can't easily move then
you know that's not it.

I look around the side of the building, and up in the wall's high corners. I touch the wall. I look at E.

You're not even *looking*.
What's abnormal?

I notice it then – a black cap in the wall. I pull it out, and it is a tube containing a roll of paper. A log for people to sign when they find the cache.

I don't have a pen to sign.

You'll just have to use the
app.

I put the tube back in the wall and we keep riding down the sidewalk. He shows me a creek running under a bridge.

Why do you think the river is
flowing on this side, but not
on that side?

There is an alligator in the way.

Oh yeah.

No,
It's divided.

We ride some more, out of the gravel pit where the creek is back up on the street. E stops and picks up a folder laying in the street. I stop too and pick up some of the materials that have fallen out of it. They are important documents – medical documents, a birth certificate, a state ID, a social security card.

Oh, we better return this.

E reads an address.

It's not far. This way.

He directs us to the house, only two streets over. He leans his bike against the kickstand and goes up to the door with the folder under his arm. He knocks loudly on the door. I think this is brave. He knocks again. No one comes to the door. He gently places the folder inside the screen door. We ride off.

That was a good deed.

I would want someone to
return it to me if I lost it.

We should commit a crime now, to
balance it out.

I would never!

I guess you are just morally superior
to me then.

Oh right yeah, that's what
I'm going for. Moral
superiority.

We ride downtown. The sun is setting and it's getting cooler. We think about stopping for a coffee but the shop is closed.

Okay, do you think you can
navigate us back to my
apartment from here?

Yes.

I have no idea how to get back to his apartment from here. I hope that my intuition is enough.

This way.

I take a left and he follows me, wordlessly. We ride for a few minutes and I believe things are starting to look familiar.

Okay now this way.

I'm feeling a little more confident with my directional decisions

Okay, now which way?

Uh, left!

Nah, it's right there.

He points to his building, directly in front of us. I am embarrassed. We move towards the building and are greeted by a stray cat – orange and friendly. We sit on the ground and pet it and talk to it.

Do you want to come inside
for some water?

I have a drink in my backpack. I think the correct answer to this is probably no – he has probably had enough of me by now. I want to say yes, and spend more time with him, but I'm nervous.

Yes, I do.

Do you want to put your bike
away?

I struggle a little to put my bike into the back of my Escape, but by the time E moves to help me I've managed it. So we go up. He carries his bike under his arm, up the stairs and he set it on the landing. He digs his keys into the door again and Tea greets us.

She's going to smell the other cat
and feel like you have betrayed her.

I'm going to wash my hands
first.

I stand around in the living room. We don't sit down. I feel like I'm probably overstaying my welcome again. Every musician's apartment has one piano, one acoustic guitar, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, one solitary Kurt Vonnegut book (any), a bed with gray sheets and no headboard; one flat pillow. Once I borrowed his copy of *Cat's Cradle*. Kurt Vonnegut writes, "Live by the harmless untruths that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy." ^{lii}

Do you want water?

No thanks, I brought a drink.

Why did I say that? Isn't that why I've come inside?

Do you want a cookie?

Yes.

Really?

Yeah!

I think he's surprised because I don't eat in front of him. I don't want it to seem like I came inside for no reason. He gives me the cookie. I awkwardly unhook the rubber bands from my braces and set them on his counter. I eat the cookie or try to; my mouth is dry and I'm nervous.

Do you believe in a religion?
You already know that I
don't.

I'm so focused on trying to eat this thing that I'm not sure how we got on this topic.

Well, I uh. I don't consider
myself to be religious. I read
religious books for fun. Like,
Saint John of the Cross' *Dark
Night of the Soul*, and the
Mirror of Simple Souls,

I don't know how to pronounce Marguerite Porete.

I have a friend in Springfield, who
teaches Thee–Theol, Theology?

Yes, Theology

Right. And we talk about the books,
but I don't think I necessarily believe
in what they say. But it's interesting.

I believe in astrology.

I am breaking off pieces of this big, dry, cookie; crumbs are getting everywhere. My mouth is so dry. I'm afraid I have made a mistake. E thinks astrology is humancentric.

Believing in something
makes more sense than not
believing in anything.

Humans think the universe
revolves around them.

That's exactly what I would expect a
Capricorn to say.

Is it really?

No, I'm just kidding, I don't know.

Do you know who Vivaldi
is?

Once, at E's house, he was playing music on an acoustic guitar; popular songs that I recognized but didn't know the names of. And he kept saying

name this song
name this song
name this song

and I kept saying,

I don't know!

and eventually I just said

Stop quizzing me!

And he said

why?

It felt bad – like he was trying to emphasize the parts of me he doesn't like.

I'm going to leave.

Oh okay.

I accidentally smashed part of the cookie in my hand and watched the pieces fall to the floor.

That's okay! Just leave it, I'll
sweep it up later, no problem.

Okay, bye.

I don't hug him because he doesn't want to be physically affectionate with me anymore, and I'm not sure if a hug goodbye would be crossing a line. I leave feeling horrible, as always, and I'm upset about it the entire way home. I probably should have slept on it – but I text him when I get home.

TWENTY-FOUR

Tues, May 17, 10:25 PM

What's up now? Do you have a
moment?

I like that it stresses him out when I ask him if he's busy. He knows it's going to be a serious conversation. I want to fight because I want him to tell me that I mean something to him.

I just got into bed and I'm
going to watch something.
Sup?

Do you not like hanging out with
me?

Because I always leave your house
feeling like you can't stand me.

Yeesh well it sucks I make
you feel that way.

Doesn't feel good.

Yeah, I had fun with you.

I could tell I had done
something really wrong or
something and you were hurt.

Idk what to do with that, I
had fun with you.

Are you sure you like ME?

bell hooks, in *All About Love*, quotes Eric Butterworth who describes true love as “a peculiar kind of insight through which we see the wholeness which the person is—at the same time totally accepting the level on which he now expresses himself—without any delusion that the potential is a present reality.”^{liii}

It doesn't feel good to be
suspected of bad thoughts or
bad intentions.

Such as when I asked you
about your religion. It just
really feels like you fear and
dislike me.

I don't think you are being
intentionally disparaging.
It just feels like you are always
devaluing me in some way, quizzing
me on things you know I don't know
like music or directions. Sometimes
your questions just make me feel like
that.

There has to be another way
to read those sorts of
questions, right?
No I don't know you don't
know.
I like your guesses.
It's playing.
Try to get us home from here.
How does a non-musician
think about music?

Jacqui if you constantly feel
devalued by me, you *do not*
like me.

It's like a switch that happens. Like
after a while, you're just repulsed by
me.

Stop telling me what I feel.

You're wrong.

And it's hurtful what you
think about me.

I had a nice time and thought you did too. And then I'm told I'm actually repulsed by you.

So, so, many times now, you make me answer for YOUR suspicion and insecurity. It's mean. I'm really hurt. I thought we were just being friends, and it turns out nope.

You were suffering my abuse.

I don't think you realize it but you can be cold to me, and I should have brought it up in the moment, but I just really wanted you to like me.

Which moment?? Can you let me know specifically?

I don't want you to think that I've been holding onto things and waiting to pull them out in an argument. I've been too scared to talk to you about this.

It would be a lot easier if you were just forthright.

If I were you, I'd stop trying to guess what I'm thinking.

Yeah, you're right. I'm sorry, I do that.

And trying to protect yourself from me. I am not your friend, that's clear. I'm like,

an abuser you're always trying to humor. Here's what happened tonight from my perspective: You come up for water and a cookie. We chat a bit in my kitchen. We chat a bit in my living room. You become forlorn and clearly hurt and you leave. If you don't like me, then you don't like me. You think I'm standing there pretending to give a shit, pretending to tolerate you, but really wanting you gone. That is so hurtful.

One time we had sex and afterward you swatted your hand away from my hand and told me I shouldn't judge Marie Kondo because she helps people and then you asked if I wanted to play a board game but you really just wanted me to leave. I tell you that I love you and you accuse me of not liking you. I try to talk to you about how you're hurting my feelings and you say I'm the one being hurtful. Why are we even having another hard conversation? You're the one who doesn't like me.

Yeah, Jacqui I guess I can't convince you that's not true. Believe what you want about me. Presume and generalize and guess my thoughts and feelings.

Those things happened though.

I'm sorry for wanting you to leave after we had sex.

I like you, not right now, but
I like you.

Say whatever you want,
believe whatever you want
about how I feel about you, I
enjoyed hanging out with
you, enjoyed our chat, would
have liked to continue
chatting for a bit more and
was surprised and
disappointed to see you leave
so immediately.
I'm sorry I hurt your feelings
by asking you if you know
Vivaldi or if you could try to
direct us home.

100% of the time I'm just
wondering if you know who
Vivaldi is. I don't know what
people know about music
because it's all I know.

It does hurt though, a lot, to
be told repeatedly and
directly that I don't care
about you.

I mean, the way you started
this conversation even. "Do
you not like hanging out with
me?"

Feel free to let me know in
the moment when I do
something that hurts your
feelings. I want to be nothing
but forthright and honest and
I WILL explain what I'm
feeling and thinking.

But you simply assume the
worst.

We aren't having sex anymore and I'm feeling bad about that, like you definitely have someone else. But since we have been doing real friend stuff, like video games and movies and bikes I have felt better; but then when I feel like you're being cold and don't want to be near me, I just feel bad again.

Okay, I understand.

Well

Please stop assuming and imagining.

Just, full stop.

Stop doing that please for the love of god.

Because then for some crazy reason I become responsible for it?

This was so upsetting to me because I had fun tonight.

I was feeling like, okay cool we can just be simple friends and I can be myself.

I never wanted to be *simple friends*. I wanted something more.

I really cannot figure out how to treat you, at all. Having no strategy doesn't seem to work either.

I wonder what strategy he was using on me before.

But you have someone.
I think I'm too jealous. I have too many feelings.

I think he knows I was thinking about leaving right here. This is a reason why many people go no-contact – because one person has unreciprocated feelings for the other and it becomes too painful to carry on this way. E will certainly fall in love with someone else, eventually, and I can't imagine just being *simple friends* with him when this happens. It would crush me.

I don't have someone.

We should go to bed. We don't have
to talk about this all night.
I'm sorry I hurt your feelings.

I have to wake up for work in four hours.

It's okay we'll have this
exact conversation again in
like a month probably.

It's true that we have had this conversation many times. I'm still not sure if he is actually being disparaging and abrasive to me, or if I'm just overanalyzing the tone of his voice and every word he says – but I do know that he was cruel to me in the past, and that's why I don't trust him.

Block my number this time then so I
can't come back in four months
when I miss you.

I say this to remind him of the last time he discarded me for this exact same reason. That time I came back after four months, but this time I won't.

Goodnight, I'll talk to you
tomorrow.

I take this as reassurance that he will still be here tomorrow – that he is not going to leave.

Night.

TWENTY-FIVE**Wed, May 18, 7:05 PM**

E[omitted] will you talk to me?

When I use his first name, he gets a little nervous.

Jacqui I just finished working
since 5.

I'm really sorry about everything I
said yesterday.

I'm the one who always has to be sorry. I have to mend things because he won't.

Well I forgive you but I'm
gonna need some time not to
be put off.

Sorry for being rough.

And I'm not just gonna
callously ignore you. If I'm
not responding I'm probably
busy.

Okay,
I understand.
Thanks.

TWENTY-SIX

I give him some time and space and it's hard on me.

Fri, May 20, 8:59 PM

E[omitted] how are you?

Sat, May 21, 1:22 AM

Jacqui, I've given it some thought. I'm sorry, but I can't keep talking to you. I do truly like you as a person, but our dynamic has remained toxic.

I like so much about you, but I feel deep suspicion, judgment, and jealousy from you. I know you're trying, and as much as I enjoy hanging with you, the dynamic is recurring and it's very bad for me. I'm really sorry to hurt you but leaving is what's best for me. I hope it can be good for you too.

Too much discourse tells us we need to *just focus on ourselves*. It tells us to *drop toxic people and relationships* as if we aren't all imperfect. It says *focus on your own needs*. Should we unconditionally love and accept our friends? What is a friend if it's not a person we unconditionally love? Am I overestimating the void he will leave in my life? One in nine people have no one they would name as a close person they could rely on.

Sat, May 21, 8:11 AM

Outgoing call

Can we talk about this please? I just
read this.

Outgoing call

Sat, May 21, 11:04 AM

I'm sorry but no. We've talked
about it many times. There's
nothing left to go over. I know it
hurts but my mind is made up.

I will respect your decision but I just
don't feel good about leaving things
like this.
Can we please talk?

When someone needs you, it's often from a low place. Give people an opportunity to explain themselves – to apologize, with the integrity that the friendship deserves. If a friend needs you, and you're able to be there, then I think you should be there.

Sat, May 21, 1:25 PM

Can we take some time? I know
I hurt you and made a mistake
but I don't think I deserve to be
discarded over a text like this, I
don't think this is best for either
of us. I didn't even get a chance
to say goodbye or anything. I
love and care about you and I
want to work through these hard
things with you and not just quit
because you're so important to
me and I will miss you so, so
much.

I'm sorry but no, Jacqui. I can only say, I know it hurts, it hurts me too, I'm sorry you don't get more of a say, but my mind is made up. It's not about what we deserve. Of course both of us, everybody, deserves nothing but easy times and happiness. This is simply a recurring pattern that is unhealthy for me. We've tried and tried again. Please don't call it quitting, discarding you. If you have to think of it that way, I'm sorry. I can't say anything that will give you closure or make it feel better. And I'm sorry but there is no chance at all of being persuaded.

I'm truly sorry Jacqui, I wish you the best of luck but I know deeply that you'll be just fine, better off.

Please think about it. Our relationship hasn't been this entirely bad toxic pattern. We fight but I think that's just evidence that we really do care about each other.

Don't I bring value to your life?
Don't you remember how hard it was the last time we stopped talking? Weren't you sad??

Please

I know you probably feel relieved right now, but it's going to hit you eventually.

Genuine friendship with someone who is willing to work

through things is hard to find. I
 want to be friends and share
 music and writing and care
 about you and hear about how
 things are going with you, this
 seems so sudden.

Can you please just take some
 time and think about it?



I really exposed myself here by sending E everything I've ever written about him – this was a mistake. I just wanted to throw it all in his face – every awful thing he's ever done to me that I'd forgiven him for.

This feels manipulative to me
 in all honesty.

Asking, 'don't you bring any
 value to my life,'

sending me pieces you've
 written about me.

Please respect my decision,
 and do not try to persuade
 me. I HAVE thought about
 this.



okay
 I'm sorry.
 Thanks for everything.
 Thanks for being my friend.

Sorry about the writing.

Like Roland Barthes in *The Lover's Discourse*, I “know that one does not write for the other, to know that these things I am going to write will never cause me to be loved by the one I love.”^{liv}

I don't know how you thought
I'd react to copy and pasting my
texts into your published poetry,
but it's very creepy.

He doesn't want me to write about him – he doesn't want me to write to him. So what if I cut his words out of me and put them in that poem? What else could I have done? He would have me hold onto all those things that he said and let them corrode me. He should understand, he, too, is an artist.

Sorry.

I feel like a coveted object,
not a person.

When you discarded me last year I
went through a period where I wrote
about you a lot.

I encourage you to write
about you.

You're not really writing
about me.

You're writing about the
object, + you.

Maggie Nelson, in *Bluets*, wrote “When our companion fails us we transfer our love instantaneously to a worthy object.”^{lv}

Yeah, I guess so.
I just love the idealized version of
you that I invented.

Something that you
needed/need, that you put
onto me.
Please take care of yourself.
So long Jacqui.

I'm still going to miss you so
fucking much E[omitted].

I'm sorry for ruining everything. I
hope you'll reach out to me if you
ever change your mind.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Roland Barthes, in *A Lover's Discourse*, writes that "In those brief moments when I speak for nothing, it is as if I were dying."^{lvi}

Sun, May 22, 5:30 AM



Sun, May 22, 9:05 PM



bell hooks, in *All About Love*, writes that “Love knows no shame. To be loving is to be open to grief, to be touched by sorrow, even sorrow that is unending. The way we grieve is informed by whether we know love^{lvii}”

Thurs, May 26, 11:47 PM

E[omitted]

Roland Barthes, in *A Lover's Discourse*, writes that “Like desire, the love letter waits for an answer; it implicitly enjoins the other to reply, for without a reply the other's image changes, becomes *other*.”^{lviii}

TWENTY-EIGHT

Fri, May 27, 9:53 AM

Jacqui, I won't respond to any messages, I'm sorry. I really hesitated texting you back, but I needed you to know that, so you would stop trying to reach out. Please. I don't want to block your number; I need you to just respect what I've told you and not continue to message me anyway.

Roland Barthes, in *A Lover's Discourse*, describes the lover's anxiety as "the fear of a mourning which has already occurred, at the very origin of love, from the moment I was first 'ravished.' Someone would have to be able to tell me: 'Don't be anxious anymore—you've already lost him/her.'" ^{lix}

I know I'm an asshole and it hurts.

Why is he always saying that to me? *I know I'm an asshole. I know it hurts.* He says these things like they are immutable. Anne Carson in *Men in the Off Hours* writes that "a primary characteristic of pain is a demand for an explanation." ^{lx}

I don't know why you keep messaging me, obviously you're trying to get me to talk to you, which I clearly stated is not what I want. Maybe it's simply that it hurts and you want to talk to me about it—I know firsthand how much that sucks,

He knows firsthand. I wonder if he is talking about some past relationship he's left. He thinks he knows how I feel. It seems silly now – to have ever believed that he would stay. He is someone who has walked away from a person he loved

and I expected him to stay by *my* side – someone he never loved; could never love.

but you can't just keep
reaching out to me, that's
what your other friends are
for. Whichever reason,
you're reaching out because
you're hurting and I'm sorry;
but it's still yet more
disregard for my boundaries
and doesn't shake my
decision at all.

Please, I did think about this,
I know what I want and need
and what's good for me.

I'm not what he wants or needs. I'm not good for him.

PLEASE respect it.

Any further messaging will
only be to reiterate my
decision like this one.

He can say whatever he wants to me, but I can't say anything to him or I will be blocked. Anne Carson in "The Gender of Sound" writes that "It is a corollary assumption that man's proper civic responsibility towards woman is to control her sound for her insofar as she cannot control it herself."^{xi} I hope it rains every single day in Charleston.

TWENTY-NINE

A bird's eye view of a black altar cloth with a pentagram stitched into the middle with white thread. Green, purple, gold, and quartz geodes; a bowl of marbles; a golden bowl; a wooden wand; a deck of tarot cards.

Hello Jacklyn.
Okay, right. Let's start.

The sound of shuffling. A wooden drawer opening and closing. Metal trinkets rattling. The striking of a match – crackle, smolder – and a stream of smoke. She lights a white tea candle. The jangling of jewelry.

Okay. So. Uhm. What we're going to do, because you have *very limited amount of questions*,

The shuffling of cards.

we are going to open him up *a bit deeper* to see what is really going on.

She wrings her hands over the altar cloth. Her nails are pointy and soft red color like flower petals. She has silver bracelets and rings with colorful stones. She turns a pack of tarot cards once in her hands. She opens the box and slides the cards. She divides the deck in half and shuffles – folding the stack in her right hand into the left. I like watching the effortless movement of the cards and listening to the satisfying papery scrape of cardboard.

Right, so his name
E[omitted].

First of all, what we're gonna do, is we're gonna check what he's thinking about you and how he's seeing you.

The shuffling of cards.

She slides cards off the top of the deck and places them on the cloth one by one until there are twelve.

Right, okay. Before, because
of your fights – you're
absolutely right,
communication stopped
because of it.

He used to value you a lot,
you were a very special
woman for him – as a friend,
as a lover, everything.

It's changed.

When he said he does not
have feelings for you – you
can believe him in that.
In fact, at the present time,

She says this reluctantly.

The way things are, he
doesn't want to talk to you
and this will continue for a
while. In fact, if you try to
contact him, he might not
even reply.

Right, okay, let's see what
else.

The shuffling of cards. She lays down six more.

Right.

She exhales.

Okay, this is not the end. But
uh, *later on*, we can talk

about the space of three months, maybe even longer – your connection can be restarted but that connection is not gonna be *serious*. It will be, maybe, you know – meetup, have fun, and go separate ways. At the moment, and for quite some time, he's not gonna contact you. He is *afraid* to contact you – there are lots of fears coming from his side. Things will get better, but I want you to understand it will take like, three, six months. It will take a long time for him to overcome his fears – his feelings that *he doesn't want to know you, he doesn't want to see you*.

She picks up the cards in the spread.

You need to be ready for that – if he is worth it or not, it's up to you, you know him better than anyone else.

The shuffling of cards.

Okay, let's see if he will ever contact you again.

She lays out eleven cards. She begins thumbing through the cards on the top of the deck. One, two, three, four, five – all the cards picture women.

Okay.

A long exhale.

At the moment, the cards are not showing any indication of contact. The pause between you will continue. There is a possibility of both of you seeing each other somewhere.

It could be a nightclub, or, if you know some people for example – it could be a birthday where you will have the opportunity to see each other, but it's very interesting because he's not going to take a first dramatic step; he will remain in his comfort zone. Even if you see each other again, or contact will happen, it will be through other people, or it will be accidentally.

The shuffling of cards. She lays out eight more cards.

Okay, there is another woman.

She lays out three more cards.

Yes, there is another woman. She might not be there yet, because this is the second spread, but he will have someone else. He might tell you, or you might find out somehow that he has someone else.

This will break your heart and the way you see him will change.

She lays out three more cards.

You might even know this woman.

She lays out another card.

Yes, you might even know this woman who is gonna be with him. One second, let me see.

The shuffling of cards.

Is it your friend, or the one E[omitted] is gonna be with?

She lays out another card. She moves the cards around.

In fact, you know, it's not necessarily gonna be his woman. One of your friends, who is female, will tell you something about him, which is going to be shocking – and like I said, will break your heart and change your attitude towards him.

The shuffling of cards.

Okay, what news will it be? What kind of news?

She lays out three cards.

Yes, that he's with another woman. Whatever way I'm reading it, the news will be that he's been with another woman, but the message is not going to come directly from him, it will be from one of your female friends. Yeah, he'll have another woman darling – whichever way I dress it up.

She picks up the cards in the spread.

Okay, so, will he love you back?

The shuffling of cards. She lays out eleven cards. Exhale. She points to a card with a wooden wand. It is a woman in an orange dress.

So this is you.

She points to the card to the direct right.

This is your friend.

She points to the card beneath the woman in the orange dress.

This is his other woman. If we're talking about, will he ever love you back? No. It's simply not showing. It's not like he is forgetting you, he's still thinking of you – but in his opinion, it is best that you go your separate ways.

He used to love you darling, he
used to – but not anymore, and
it's not going to change now.

The shuffling of cards. She lays out four more cards.

I want you to know that he has
his choice of woman.

She picks up the cards in the spread.

It's not like he's sitting and
crying or anything like that.
He's flirting with girls, he has
attention from girls – and not
just one, but many.

The shuffling of cards.

Should you keep waiting for
him to come back, or let it
go? The decision should be
yours; the cards can't give
you that advice. It's truly
your decision. But what we
are going to do, is we're
going to check what his
intentions are.

She lays down eleven cards.

His intention is to stay away
because he does not want to
hurt you.

She lays down three more cards.

Yeah darling, things are over.

Another card.

You're done.

She picks up the cards in the spread.

Let's see what will happen in
the future between you two.

The shuffling of cards. She lays out eleven cards.

It seems to me that you will
make a few attempts to reach
out and contact him – or at
least, like his status, or make
some moves and they will be
unsuccessful. It's very
interesting because he is
coming up here as an
Emperor and you are coming
up as the Queen of Cups –
the woman in love. With
time, so it's more than three
months, you and he come
back to be friends, or you see
him at the party and you will
have a conversation;
something unintentional will
happen.

The shuffling of cards. She lays down eight more cards.

But he will choose to stay
away. You might even have a
good time at this party, but
it's not going to lead to
anything.

She picks up the cards in the spread.

Let's see advice from the
cards – let's see what the
cards advise you to do.

The shuffling of cards. She lays out eleven more cards.

The cards advise you not to
do anything towards him.
Don't try to contact him,
don't try to call him, don't try
to text him, don't try to win
his attention back – it's not
the right time for that. And if
you're waiting for him to try
to contact you – if you think
things will get better, they
will not; try to find your
peace. You are a strong
woman, try to forget him and
remove him from your
memories.

She moves the cards around.

He's in the past.

The shuffling of cards. She lays out three more cards.

He's not going to make any
moves towards you darling;
he has lots of girls around
him.

She fans out the cards in her hand – all with pictures of women.

But like I said, he did have feelings for you – he did, but it's gone.

She picks up the spread. The shuffling of cards.

Okay, last three cards.

She lays out three more cards.

You know, you will meet the right guy. Very soon. With whom, you will be happy. And deep down, you have this feeling that it will happen pretty soon.

She lays out four more cards.

Yes. You will meet the new guy – this new guy will kind of, tick all the boxes. So here you go darling. Hope it will all work out for you.

She picks up the cards in the spread.

Even though sometimes it's painful – we want one guy and it's not working out – we understand our mistakes, but it's too late.

The shuffling of cards. She lays out a card.

And in this case, it's simply too late.

She lays out two more cards.

But you will be with another
guy – so don't worry about
that, you will meet him pretty
soon. All right darling, thank
you.

Notes

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- iv Nelson, Maggie. *On Freedom*. Graywolf Press, 2021, 95.
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- ix Portolan and McAlister, “Jagged Love”, 365.
- x Portolan and McAlister, “Jagged Love”, 364.
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- xii Hooks, Bell. *All About Love*. HarperCollins, 2018, 176.
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- xiv Nelson, *On Freedom*, 54.
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- xvi Wade, Lisa, “Doing Casual Sex”.
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- xviii Makki, “The Social Value.”
- xix Bidart, Frank. *Half-Light*. 2017, 519.
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- xxii Hooks, *All About Love*, 76.
- xxiii Wade, Lisa, “Doing Casual Sex,” 197.
- xxiv Levine and Heller, *Attached*, 80-81.
- xxv Makki, “The Social Value,” 412.
- xxvi Bidart, *Half-Light*, 35.
- xxvii Levine and Heller, *Attached*, 71.

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- xxviii Wade, *Doing Casual Sex*, 197.
- xxix Nelson, *Something Bright*, 24.
- xxx Westberg, *Good Grief*, 54.
- xxxi Carson, *Glass*, 16.
- xxxii Westberg, *Good Grief*, 31.
- xxxiii Healthline. "STD Testing."
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- xxxviii Carson, *Glass*, 8.
- xxxix Johnson, *At the Center*, 198.
- xl Barthes, *Lover's Discourse*, 10
- xli Nelson, *Bluets*, 79.
- xlII Smith, *Counting Descent*, 19.
- xlIII Smith, *Counting Descent*, 9.
- xlIV Smith, *Counting Descent*, 55.
- xlV Kushner, *Angels Part Two*.
- xlVI Kushner, *Angels Part Two*.
- xlVII Hooks, *All About Love*, 177.
- xlVIII Barthes, *Lover's Discourse*, 73
- xlIX Saunders, *Lincoln*, 157.
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- li Draper, "Localities."
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