

Empty Promises and other Coping Mechanisms

Jenna B. Long

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Advisor: Dr. Mark Christensen

Artist's Statement

I burned all of my high school journals in the homemade fire pit of my rental home this summer. There were eight of them, each with a cover full of doodles and stickers and etchings. The mutilated covers concealed countless rhyming, jagged poems about blood and cutting and being buried alive. I carried those composition books with me to all six of my college "homes" and they had always claimed a spot of privilege of my bookshelves, reminding me of my past.

As I grew up and away from the teen that I was when I wrote in them, flipping through my composition books became a lot like going through someone else's scrapbook. The images I created in my poems and the feelings behind them seemed familiar, but I couldn't connect with the bitterness that was so evident on the page. The voice in them was whiney, self-conscious and weak. When I moved out of my one bedroom apartment and in with my boyfriend to a three bedroom, one bathroom house on a double lot, I realized how close I was to being a full-fledged adult. I knew I couldn't hold on to my high school composition books and the person they accused me of being any longer.

For a long time, I thought that the contents of those composition books were both the beginning and the end of my creative writing career. The anti-depressants that made me feel more grounded in reality also snuffed out my creative mind. I spent the better part of two years staring at a blank page waiting to write something that I wouldn't immediately hate. My internal editor was in absolute dictator mode, and I wasn't even aware that he was there. I was convinced that I couldn't write anything unless I was wrapped up in the darkness of my depression. So, I focused on other writing projects instead: class papers, a few different blog ideas, and speech writing. It wasn't until my second deep depression in the spring of my freshman year of college

that I began to write creatively again. This time I escaped the need to self-harm by writing flash fiction and short stories about my past relationships. As I worked on these short pieces, I gained confidence in my ability to write creatively, something that I had convinced myself I couldn't do any longer. It was at this time that I began to see a therapist who further encouraged me to use a creative outlet as a coping mechanism. With practice, I learned how to articulate my feelings through the written word without creating a piece of writing that felt forced or insincere.

For me, depression is much like having pebbles stuck in a pair of running shoes. I go on with my everyday responsibilities, but everything feels much more exhausting and continuing on feels impossible after a while. Depression is exhausting. Depression is painful. It's the type of chronic pain that, regardless of treatment, still makes it impossible to remember a time without it.

Writing about depression, however, is not painful for me. Despite the fact that the topics I choose to write about almost always involve a memory that should be painful, I don't feel any of the emotions that I know should be there. In my short piece "Ritualistic" I know how it feels to go through each step I describe in preparation of cutting myself. I know the anticipation, the fear, the embarrassment, and finally the sharp pain of relief. But while writing the process, I felt detached from it all. The scene feels vivid and real in my head, but it's as though I am watching the scene from the ceiling. Oftentimes, it feels as though I'm writing about someone else, some fictional character who is subjected to the twistedness of my mind. It rarely feels like I'm writing about the woman I am today or even the girl I used to be, the one doodling on her composition book covers.

I took two classes in creative non-fiction writing during my junior year of college, and the workshop environment of the class helped me exponentially. I developed a strong voice and

learned what was working or needed improvement in my writing. I also conquered any fear I had for letting people read and dissect my most personal pieces of writing. It was because of these classes, the professors that taught them, and my peers in the room that I began to realize that difficult topics are often the most beautiful to write and read about. I stopped second guessing the urge I felt to share my stories of not just self harm and depression but also relationships and sex and all that it entails and started writing them in the most organic way possible.

Sharing stories about a mostly secret part of my life is never easy, regardless of how comfortable I may feel at times. Writing is putting a piece of myself onto the paper, where anyone who reads it will pass judgment. In a lot of ways, handing someone a piece of writing is more difficult for me than having a face-to-face conversation with them about the subject. I can't answer their questions or guide their thoughts in the right way except through the writing in my piece. I am proud of how my stories work together to help form a piece of art that sheds light on depression and self-harm.

I rarely meditate on a topic before I start to write. My best pieces come from the sudden strike of an unwanted feeling or memory versus the careful planning and plot building that is a skill I envy in other writers. When I sit down to write creative non-fiction, I go in with a single emotion or specific event in my life and try to get that specific scene onto paper. I have learned over the years that if I allow myself to start thinking about more than one scene at a time when I'm writing about my experiences with self-harm and depression I have a more difficult time getting anything coherent onto the page. Even though I know that my pieces have to work together for the collection of short pieces I'm writing for, I try my best not to think about that coherence until the second or third revision of the piece itself.

My revision process itself involves editing as I go. While I try not to think about the coherence of one piece with the rest of my collection, I constantly reread the paragraphs of my first drafts as I go to make edits and clericals. By the time my first draft is done, it has already been revised several times and is more refined than a general first draft might be. This is a revision habit that I have tried to break before because I always wonder what my pieces would look like if I let myself “throw up” on the page and worry about the mess later, but I haven’t had success with this method.

When I’m revising I mostly worry that I will leave the reader with too many unanswered questions. When writing about my experiences with self-harm and depression I find it difficult to find the balance between too much and not enough expansion in the story itself. With too much detail, thought, and reasoning the piece starts to sound too rounded or it becomes what I think is too much for the reader to handle at once. With too little detail and expansion, I might leave the reader frustrated or confused; he might miss the point of writing it all together. Finding that balance between enough detail, imagery, and thought is something that I spend a lot of time on with each piece I write. I want to make sure the reader comes out of the piece with the right takeaway.

A classmate once told me that I write pieces that make the reader simultaneously want to know the cause of my pain and pray to never find out. This response to my writing has become a sort of standard for what I want all of my creative non-fiction to do for my readers. I want them to pick up my piece, read it, and then spend some time really digesting what I’ve written. My favorite novels and short stories are the ones that I find myself still thinking of and asking questions about days later simply because the content of the piece touched me in one way or

another. Each individual piece of writing exemplifies a struggle in my life, and I want that struggle to create meaning for each person who reads it. I believe firmly in the power that painful situations hold in creating change inside of a person, and I hope that my writing can affect change in my readers, even in just the smallest of ways.

Unbearable

Skylar snuck over most nights, and we would lie together and talk about all of our hopes. He would run his pianist fingers along my forearm, creating goosepimples across my body. He would play with my hair and rub my scalp. I would make involuntary noises, like a cat being stroked just right. We met when I moved in next-door and the first thunderstorm I spent in my new house he spent with me.

It was somewhere between that first thunderstorm and our first breakup that I showed him my thighs. I was terrified he would think I was a freak. I didn't want to lose the only good thing I had going for me. He was strong and his kisses made me feel like an actual human being.

In all of our nights together he never noticed the cuts and scars across my thighs. He never felt the ridges interrupting my otherwise perfectly smooth teenaged legs, and if he did he never guessed at what they were. He never asked, anyway. It was almost unbearable for my secret to be right in front of him and for him to be so blind.

I showed him in the middle of the day, and I showed him with his eyes closed. Without knocking on the white front door, I tiptoed into the forbidden land of his mom's showroom-like living room; the sun illuminated everything through the picture window. Skylar and I sat on the plush cream carpet with our backs against the pretty rust colored couch that I thought was unbearably uncomfortable. He kissed me and told me about his day. I laughed along, leaning into him. When the time felt the least obtrusive, I asked if I could show him something really bad. He looked as concerned as I was nervous, but consented.

"Close your eyes" I insisted. He hesitated but did what I asked. I lifted up the hem of my dress, inhaled deeply, and forced his fingers to trace the newest lines. I watched as his brow creased in confusion, and then I watched as he opened his eyes and looked down. I looked away

from him. The sunlight was turning into that strange time that's not quite daylight but not yet twilight. It was my least favorite time of day.

"Juice, why would you do that?" He asked, using the name he came up for me late one night weeks ago. He removed his fingers from my thigh, and he hugged me into his chest knowing that was my favorite spot to be. I just shook my head. He didn't pressure me for answers, and I didn't have any to give.

Calm

If I lay really, impossibly still with my eyes shut and my arms crossed tightly, protecting my rib cage, I can focus on my breathing. If I focus on my breathing long enough, holding my breath for four counts and exhaling for four counts, my thoughts begin to slow to a bearable pace.

I last four full inhales before I can't handle it anymore. I have to open my eyes and check the to-do list written on the pink dry erase board posted above the light switch by my bedroom door. There are still seven things unchecked, but at least I can cross off *try to calm down* in a little while. It's situated right between *write three summaries for economics* and *figure out the groceries for next week's lunches*. I close my eyes again. On count two of my inhale, my cell phone vibrates. I try to ignore it, but when I realize it's a call and not a text message, I have to stop calming down long enough to look. It's a number I don't know. Thoughts fly as I stare at the screen.

Who is it? What could he want? Is it a telemarketer? Is it a debt collector? Do I have any debt? What kind of debt could they even be collecting? Maybe it's Dad from a cell phone I don't know about? Do I want to talk to Dad? No...yes...I don't know. What if it's an emergency? What if someone died? Maybe it will be a caller trying to steal my identity? Where is the area code from? Would my phone battery even make it through a phone call? If it's important there will be a voicemail. I hate voicemails. Should I answer or let it go?

By the time I choose to answer, the phone stops vibrating and the unknown number disappears. Less than a minute later a voicemail icon causes my phone to vibrate again. My stomach drops. I silence the phone volume and continue breathing. I cannot check the voicemail right now.

One... two... three... four... pause...four... three... two... one.

One... two... three... four... pause...four... three... two... one.

I turn my attention to the remaining items on the day's to-do list, considering myself calmed down enough to move on. It's ten o'clock in the morning and I'm about to read two chapters of *Jane Eyre*.

As I read about Jane's time at Lowood with Helen and Mr. Brocklehurst I have to reread paragraphs frequently. Finishing a paragraph about the Brocklehurst family, I have to reread the description of the ladies' dresses because thoughts about Senate and assignments in my other classes and a movie date I have planned for two days out and how I desperately need clean laundry ran through my head while I was reading. I close my eyes again, counting to four and back down to one. I abandon the required reading.

Looking at Scars

“What’s that on your legs?”

I knew it was coming. I could feel her eyes move to and away from my thighs as I stood talking to my mother about my plans for the night. She was letting her eyes dart back and forth, back and forth, trying to pretend she wasn’t staring. I knew it was coming. But even with all of the well-crafted and honest responses I had spent my insomniac nights constructing, I panicked.

I could feel the blood try to rush both away and to my face, resulting in the sickly pale and blotchy beet redness that only occurs when I’m embarrassed. I tugged self-consciously on the bottom of my favorite light-washed denim shorts. I crossed my arms. I looked towards my mom. My mom looked towards the street.

“Well, what happened?”

My mom’s twenty-something friend just stared at me and took another deep inhale from her half gone cigarette. She was bumming one of my mom’s Misty 120’s, I could tell by the length. Nobody else around smoked the too-long cigarettes except my mother. The friend flicked her ashes onto the red paved patio we put down the summer before and fluffed her bleached hair in the way women tend to do when they are uncomfortable.

“I...I don’t know.”

And maybe that’s the most honest answer I could possibly give someone. *I don’t know*. I don’t know what happened to spur this ache, this need to ritualistically marr my otherwise perfectly normal exterior. I don’t know. My mom was fiddling with her phone. I walked away from the summer day and back into the house.

As Derek and I wait for the lady to put free slot play money on our player’s cards I can’t

look away. The light brown skin of her plump forearms is spackled in scars. The delicate scars that result from holding the razor just right are interrupted by the oblong burn marks that come from furiously erasing the skin. Thick, puffy straight lines collide with small circles that force me to think of cigarette burns.

I'm fascinated.

She hardly looks up as she helps us, and she never looks us in the eye. Derek's hand finds mine and his lips, for just the briefest moment, warm my forehead. He must be worried.

I find myself wishing she would have worn long sleeves to work. I can't decide if I want her to cover her arms because I'm disgusted or because I'm jealous. Her scars are still healing while mine are so close to disappearing.

She slides our player's cards and licenses back across the cheap countertop along with a static "good luck." We leave her alone in her dark respite, apart from the dings and dongs and whirs of the small casino. We sit at the \$5 blackjack table, but I no longer feel lucky.

As we lay in my bed, surrounded by way too many pillows and my fluffy down comforter, Jamie reaches over to trace the white lines crisscrossing my thighs. I flinch away automatically.

"Jam, is that necessary?" I don't look at my best friend as I ask her. She doesn't stop.

"I just wanted to know if they were bumpy or not." She is unapologetic. I roll my head, turning away from the Will Smith movie we'd been watching to look at her.

"Well, these ones aren't. They weren't deep enough," I move her hand further up and inward, to the fleshy part that has become a garden of stretch marks. "These ones will stay puffy forever though."

Jamie traces them, hardly touching the puckered white skin. I turn back to Will Smith

saving the world on the television screen. After a few moments Jamie places her fingers back on her own pale thigh. I pull on the edges of my green and white plaid pajama shorts before burying my body safely in the fluff of my bed.

7 Things I Know About My Father

My father is a smooth-talker.

In another life, he must have been a salesman. Regardless of the facts, or the situation, my father has a knack for getting people to believe him. He does not rush his words. He does not raise his voice. He does not blink. When my father *really* wants something, he becomes the most logical and reasonable person I've ever met. It can cause even the most cautious girl to forget about the mountain of lies that preceded the latest conversation with her father.

My father is a fighter.

We were having a sleepover at my grandpa's house. My brother was sleeping on one side of the scratchy blue sectional and I was on the other. Our heads were close together in the middle of the couch. My father and my uncle entered the room screaming at one another, my mother trailing behind them like a sad puppy dog. I grabbed my brother by his shirt and forced him behind the sectional with me, where the spare blankets were kept. We huddled together, hiding from the flying objects and flying words until the fight was brought out to the patio. The noise reached a crescendo and then stopped altogether. My father came inside and my mother drove my uncle to the hospital. My brother and I made a nest behind the couch and stayed there until breakfast time.

My father has gaping holes in his soul.

Religion is what he used to think he was missing. Before that was Meth. Before that was booze. Before that, and always, was a woman who would love and fix him. At one point I was the reason for the holes because I stopped speaking to him. I am not sure how many holes one person can have in their soul before it just disintegrates.

My father is addicted to (in no particular order):

Methamphetamine

Alcohol

Cocaine

Women who take care of him

My mother and I used to get off the phone with my father (first she would talk, then I would, then my brother, then finally my mother again), and discuss if we thought he was sober or high.

Usually, his heavy, slurred words and angry, ill-formed sentences gave it away. If he sounded normal, we would dissect the grandeur of his lies; the bigger and more obnoxious, the less likely he was sober. After 2009, I was a third party observer, taking the evidence my mother collected and rehashing it with her as though I was still accepting calls from him.

My father is reckless.

I think it must be the Irish blood in him. The first winter my mother, brother, and I spent in our farmhouse in Iowa my father came to visit. He had just been let out of prison, and he was hell-bent on visiting us for Christmas despite my mother's threats and my and my brother's pleas for him to stay put in Colorado. In a stolen car and with his friend Stevie, my father drove from Colorado to northern Iowa, taking an extra two-day detour. When he arrived, my mother locked him out, shouting at him through the window to leave and go back before he got caught. He managed to stay hidden in Colorado for a few weeks before getting caught and thrown back into jail.

My father is a stranger to me.

I was sixteen years old and in a hospital gown when I decided to stop talking to my father. I was hours away from a laparoscopic surgery to remove my gallbladder and appendix in the hopes I would be cured from an unidentified illness when my father called. Wheeling my hanging fluid bag into the hall, only vaguely worried about strangers seeing me in a blue hospital gown and fluffy socks with grippers on the bottom, I answered the call in the privacy of the hallway.

Slurred, angry sentences filled my ears. I could feel the tears forming, burning my eyes.

“I told you I didn’t want to talk to you if you weren’t sober. Why don’t you care about me and Connor enough to stay out of prison?”

“Fuck you, Jenna. You are the worst daughter in the world. I’ll be better off without you anyways.”

My father never wanted to be a father.

In my mother’s wedding photos, she never smiled once. I was in my mother’s wedding photos too, hidden underneath the thick lace of her wedding dress. Just like her first marriage, my mother married my father with a baby in her belly and my father married my mother because she let him get away with everything. It was a mistake, I was a mistake, and my father and my mother knew that even on their wedding day.

Ritualistic

I think, or maybe I obsess, about it for hours before I begin. It distracts me from homework, from supper, from answering the phone call from my boyfriend. I just need to make the thoughts stop. I wait until the house quiets down. My mom and step-dad are sleeping, snoring through the movie they started for the fifth time but have yet to finish. My brother is in his room across the hall, yelling at people he will never meet as they compete to see who can kill the most zombies. I retrieve all of the necessary supplies from their respective places: the pink disposable razor from its package in the hallway closet, a towel from the shelf, a knife from the kitchen, a pin from my cork board. I sit on my bed and begin.

The first and most necessary step is to break open the disposable razor. I use the knife and the pin, prying the head of the razor open along the seam, taking care not to break anything important. It's a sick sort of surgery, but I am an expert. The two pieces separate with small *pop* pops and the interior is exposed. My thigh itches through my sweatpants. I have another missed call from Skylar, but I can't let him interrupt the process.

I take the two paper-thin razors out of their plastic coffin, holding each up to decide which to use. I put the reject under the purple fabric covering the top of my bedside table, for emergency use. It is my reserve for when I can't take the time for the full ritual. Like a wishbone, I bend the chosen blade until it snaps and keep the longer side.

I take a moment, looking up to the vanity mirror attached to the dresser across my bedroom. I need a haircut. I wiggle out of my sweats without standing, knowing the wood floor would be too cold on my now bare feet. I take a moment to assess what I've uncovered.

There are twenty-eight cuts healing. Ten long, fairly shallow ones in a column down my left thigh from a few days before. Twelve crisscrossing one another in a patch on the outside of

my upper right that are seven days old. Six thick, deep, short cuts inside of my left thigh, almost meeting my underwear. They still haven't healed after a week and a half. I touch them all, feeling the heat that comes from skin trying to fix itself. The scabbing ridges of the six are fierce, scratching me, trying to protect themselves. I know they will leave obvious, puffy scars. I'm excited to see how they heal.

I remember the razor, picking it up. I start near the inside of my right knee, splitting the skin open without much effort. My body tenses with the painpricks. The next, just below the first, is deeper and longer, and my thoughts shift from focused excitement to calculated precision. I create several abstract pound marks, like a kindergartener getting ready to play tic tac toe. They bounce back and forth from my knee up two-thirds of my thigh, creating an ugly red mass of heat and pain. I stop and admire the blooming red droplets. I'm not yet satisfied.

I toss the razor in my pink trash bin, letting the blood trickle as I move around. The cold floor makes my warm feet move more quickly. Wrapping myself in a fluffy grey towel, I go to take a shower. I stand in the hot hot water, turning my white skin crayon red. The water stings as it hits the inflamed openings of fresh cuts, washing blood out of my body and down the drain. The irritated, healing skin itches as I douse it in heat, unhappy with the softening of previously hard scabs. My thoughts have slowed, satiated for the moment.

I wait for the water to turn lukewarm before leaving the steam-filled space. I let my hair drip water as I take the few steps from the bathroom door to my bedroom, creating a trail of proof that I was there. Taking the towel from my body, I wrap my hair in it and lie naked on my unmade bed. I can finally return Skylar's call. He answers on the fourth ring.

"Hey Sky, sorry I didn't answer earlier, I was watching some stupid movie with my mom." I stare at the eggshell ceiling, letting my cuts sting in the open air.

Sheep

She was flat on her back at the bottom of the flight of stairs that lead to her bedroom in the basement, and she was screaming for help. Or maybe I should say she was bleating because she wasn't afraid or worried, just ready to get up and go to bed. My younger brother, Connor, shook me awake to help. He was afraid to go down to help her up and I was still asleep enough to not care. Pissed off by my choice to just roll over and face the wall, Connor started up his own chorus of bleats, letting his voice fill the room.

He yelled something about the potential of my mother being hurt, for her back to be broken. Then he stormed out of my room, slamming the door behind him. I exhaled, thinking about the anatomy test I had tomorrow. I could still hear my mother calling for rescue.

I untangled myself from my tan down comforter and went to rescue my mother. She was still lying at the bottom of the stairs, hollering about a broken back and repeating my name over and over.

"Mom, I'm here. Jesus, get up already you're fine!" I huffed and my harsh words were reciprocated with words like 'bitch' and 'fuck' slurred together with a plea for help.

I picked her up, let her use me as a crutch for the few steps to her bed, and flopped her back onto her back. The entire time she was complaining about various pains - back, ankle, head.

"Mom, if you don't shut up I'm going to call the ambulance to come and get you. I can't take care of someone with a broken back," I knew any mention of going to the hospital would get her to quiet down. She would never want her co-workers to see her this drunk.

My mother's nightgown was crumpled near the foot of her bed. I shook out the silky fabric and replaced her black tube dress with the more modest fabric. The black dress read "One Bad Ass Bitch" on the front of it in bold pink letters. I rolled my eyes. *Yeah, so bad ass*, I thought.

After making sure she was okay and giving into a request for water and scrambled eggs, which I knew she wouldn't eat, I left my mom in her bedroom with the blue glow of the television for company. Checking to make sure my alarm clock was still set for 7 a.m., I was grateful that I would still be able to get a few more hours sleep before school.

The next day she slept it off while I spent seven hours learning, and when I got home she was dressed and normal-looking and I was angry. She gabbed on about nonsensical things and I fumed, and when I finally asked about her night she didn't mention how it ended. Maybe she just didn't remember.

I've picked her up off the floor a dozen times. I've plucked a kitchen knife out of her shaky hand twice. I've held her while she cried because some guy broke her heart for hours and hours. And she never remembers any of it.

S.O.S.

When I had to tell my mom about my self-harm, she blamed herself. She accepted my smiles and nods of consolation as she cried into my cream colored duvet and got mascara on my bedding. My sweatshirt sleeves were still pushed up, the small and shallow cuts I had inflicted there specifically because I knew I would need to show her something were still showing. I couldn't face the idea of showing her the real cuts on my thighs, deep and red and criss crossing with the scars from past cuts. It was much easier to pretend my problem was on the surface. After minutes of tears and consolation, my mother ended up letting me get away with a simple doctor's visit and zero therapy. It was a bearable compromise.

As we drove the half-hour to the hospital that was both my clinic and the place that paid her to nurse sick people back to health, we didn't talk. We listened to the light rock radio station and watched corn fields turn to bean fields and bean fields turn to cornfields. We let the farmsteads and "towns" of forty people or less pass time for us.

Thankfully the waiting room was empty save an elderly couple in a separate bank of chairs because when my mother tried to come to the examination room with me I refused.

"Seriously, Jenna? I'm your mother!" Her voice was two times too loud, the way it gets when she knows she isn't getting her way. Her eyes were wide and full of unjust hurt.

"Well it's my stupid appointment and I'm sixteen years old and I don't want you there!" I used the same voice, inherited from years of close proximity. We had a stare off as the nurse cleared her throat impatiently. I won.

I knew this nurse. She took my weight and height and temperature and blood pressure while she asked me about school. I appreciated the effort to make me comfortable. Soon enough, I was alone in a room with a disgusting picture of a person with smoker's lung and a bulletin

board full of birth control options. I was not interested in any of it.

Dr. Cahill walked in. Dr. Cahill was my mom's doctor, not mine. He was always too abrasive and he never really looked at me while he talked. He never even took the time to teach me about the flu or the skin infection I had last year, how in the hell was he ever supposed to help me through something like this?

I did not want to talk to him.

We went through the motions. He asked questions, I mumbled. He raised his eyebrows, I tried to sound more honest. There's no way in hell I was going to tell him anything.

"Alright, show me." He was almost nonchalant about it, kind of leaning back so that his long frame seemed even more intimidating than before. I just looked at him. "It's okay. I need to see what you've done."

I stood up, unbuttoned my jeans, and pulled them down to just past my knees. It was uncomfortable standing there with my biggest secret exposed in such a sterile room with such a sterile man. My underwear had multicolored moose silhouettes on them.

He didn't give me any warning as he touched the brand new cuts and the pink scars. His fingers were too cold and I could feel the goosepimples form instantly in a race up toward my hips. In that instant, I hated him like I'd never hated anybody. He touched the six puffy scars from the time I wasn't careful enough and went a little deeper than I meant to, the ones that almost touch my underwear.

"Yep, you sure did a number on yourself here." His eyes were focused on my thigh, not my face as he says it. I pulled my pants back up and sit down as he washes his hands. "Well, I think that a lot of this is just a phase. I'm going to recommend that you see a therapist and I'm going to prescribe you a mild anti-depressant. You should be feeling much better soon," he said

as he clicked buttons on the desktop computer. I just nodded, not bothering to ask questions.

He left with a curt goodbye and I walked out after him. My mom popped out of her chair like she was expecting someone really important, but I ignored her and walked straight towards the exit. As we got into her silver Grand Am she asked me how it went.

“I just hope you're happy now. Let's go to Wal-Mart so I can get my prescription.” I'm defeated for the moment.

I never had to go to therapy, and I only refilled my pills twice. My mother retreated to her world and left me in mine. We didn't talk about cutting again.

Depression

It feels as though, if my life were a movie, I am just a wisp taking up space in the upper right corner of the screen as I watch my body go through the motions and emotions of any given day. I know what my body should be feeling, and I know what my body is going to do next, and I feel some of that anxiety or anger or joy or tiredness, but not really. I feel those things like one feels someone else's grief, right in the gut but with the sick pleasure of knowing that once the funeral or memorial service is over the pain will stay with it's rightful owner. Not me. I don't remember the last time any emotion actually penetrated me enough to linger longer than a few minutes.

Depression takes me out of myself, let's me watch the moments, both good and bad, of my everyday life as though I'm watching a classmate or a pop culture socialite. I keep watching, wondering what possesses me to do the things that I do but never actually knowing. I have control, yet I don't. Not really anyways, not when having control matters.

I used to, and still do, look upon groups of friends with envy. I want to know how it is that they can trust another human being so openly. How a group of people can be so simultaneously happy, and laughing. How they can somehow turn off all of the negative things and live in the moment. How they can live. I've never understood that. I've never trusted that when I desperately needed someone, I would have anyone other than myself.

Therapy

I walk in, familiar with the clinical space and the directions I will be given. The receptionist knows me, knows I'm here every Tuesday morning at nine. I let her know whom I'm here to see, and I move to the computer kiosks. I answer the dozens of questions quickly, trying not to over-think.

How have you been performing at work?

Do you feel like harming yourself?

Do you feel angry enough to do something you wouldn't normally do?

Have you been sleeping regularly?

Have you noticed a change in your appetite?

Have you had any suicidal thoughts?

Do you want to die?

My answers change rarely from week to week. As I click the correct bubbles, I wonder if I'll ever change. I submit the answers and sit down to watch HGTV for a few minutes. I'm always too early. I'm always waiting. On the end table next to me is a small wicker basket of condoms and lube. I wonder how many people sit in this exact black seat and consider taking a condom. I never touch them.

I see my therapist coming down the hallway. My heart picks up its pace as I stand, not waiting for my name to be called. I walk next to her as we retreat down the long hallway. We don't speak.

Her office is dimly lit and full of rich furniture. I take my customary seat in the corner of the deep brown leather couch and focus my sights on the globe in the center of the coffee table. The continents are made of different stones, with a small square under the model Earth for

reference. It's my favorite thing in the office. We exchange some niceties before she looks right at me, ready to get down to the therapy-ing.

"How did you do this week?"

"I dunno...okay I guess..." I look up because I can feel her watching me, trying to find my tell. I'm not sure I even have one, since I've been telling the same lies for so long.

"Well, what happened?" I'm unsure that I want to tell her. That I want to talk about any of it anymore. I'm not sure that talking helps. I talk anyways.

"It's just been a bad week. I left work early. I was checking people out and it was too much. They were all asking me the same questions, and I was asking them the same questions, and it was so stupid because nobody tells the truth. I had to get away from them all or I was going to explode. I turned off my register and hid in the bathroom until a manager found me. Then I went home." I kept my eyes on my hands, where I was twisting my hair binder around and around, creating shapes just to collapse them.

She was waiting for me to say something. I was waiting for our time to be up, but there weren't any clocks in the room to tell when that would be.

"How was school? I know you had that paper to turn in?" She breaks first.

"I just didn't turn it in. I'm pretty sure the prof will let me turn it in late. Oh, don't look at me like that. I tried to work on it all week, but I just couldn't." I didn't need to tell her that every time I sat down to write it I started crying. She already knows how my anxiety manifests.

"Okay, well what I need you to do is try harder. You have to put one foot in front of the other. Just tell yourself over and over you have worth and eventually you'll start to believe it."

"...okay, I guess."

"You don't seem like you really want to get better, what is it going to take to make you

happy?"

"If I knew that I wouldn't be here. I just feel so awful all the time. I feel worthless and like I don't deserve anything. And even when I do have good times, like when my boyfriend makes me laugh or something, I almost immediately feel bad about it because I don't deserve that moment of happiness. I just don't care anymore and I don't want to be here. I just want to be done." I make my hands stay still. She is just looking at me.

"I know that depression is shitty. I know you feel shitty. But you need to do what I said and just tell yourself over and over that you are worthy or lovable and that'll help."

"Mmm..okay."

"I need you to promise me that you'll try harder. And that you'll tell Derek what's happening," She says it harshly, like I did something wrong.

"I promise."

The hour finally turns and I leave, telling her that I will schedule my next appointment online. I walk down the long hallway by myself, peeking into the empty rooms. They are always empty.

I feel like I'm stuck here and everyone around me can see that and wants to help but I can't give them proper instructions. Which is my fault. And I just don't see how I can ever be 100% okay. I just don't see how I can ever feel happy and not feel guilty about that.

Final Goodbyes

I am throwing up on the ground, right into a bucket that someone so kindly put in between my spread-eagled legs. The siding of the garage is cold against my back even through my sweatshirt, and even if it weren't black as all hell I wouldn't be able to see through the alcohol clouding my vision.

"Jenna. Jenna are you okay? Do you want to stand up?" The site of the blond but balding man who was now demanding my attention is too much. I am too drunk.

"No Steve. Go away." Steve doesn't go away. I can hear other people around us, outside of the narrow slice of world I can see through mostly closed eyeballs. "You know what Steve? I'm sure you're real glad to see me this way. It's exactly what you expected, right? Since I'm such a fucking bad influence on your perfect daughter?" My words come out as venom, and even through my stupor I know they were words I should not have said. Steve kind of shook his head.

"No, Jenna. I always expect more from you than you let yourself give." And with that, Steve left my vision and I was free to close my eyes. My head rolled back, and I tried to remember for a moment how I ended up sitting on the side of the garage to begin with.

The unbearable dryness in my mouth mixed with the nauseating taste of puke and cheap rum wakes me up before the sun can fully saturate the tent. Even the soft glow of sunrise causes my head to pound, though, as I peel my boyfriend's arm from my waist and crawl into the dewy May grass. We set up our tent the evening before, knowing that we would be staying at Brooke's dad's farm overnight. That was Steve's rule for Brooke's grad party. If we all wanted to drink, nobody could go home. Around our tent I see only three others, but there are more than half a dozen cars still in the drive so I assume everyone else found a spot of carpet inside. Stumbling to the front door, I open it quietly and pray that nobody is awake.

Being inside of the house makes my stomach turn all over again, and I squeeze my eyes such in hopes that the somersaults will stop. It's just a stupid house, Jenna, I think as I make my way to the faucet. The cups are still where I remember them being, in the cupboard to the right of the sink. I take down the pink plastic cup that I always used to use when I stayed the night. It seems like decades ago that I spent every weekend in this house, with this family, in this kitchen. I let the water run cold from the faucet, fill my cup, chug the water, and then fill my cup again before turning the faucet back off. I turn to face the rest of the house, resting my butt on counter. Brooke's room is just through the dining room and to the right. She's probably sleeping on the bottom bunk of the bed she's always had, sleeping and not even thinking that I could be standing in her kitchen right now. Every inch of my body wants to crawl into that bed with her and pretend that we never stopped talking to one another. That I had never trusted Steve with the secret of my self-harm so that he would never have thought we needed to be separated. Every inch of my body wants to talk to Brooke, to rely on her, to confide in her. Instead, I take a notepad with roosters on it from the junk drawer next to the refrigerator. The same notepad that I used months ago to write Steve a note explaining that my self-harm is why I acted the way I did sometimes. Why I was mean, and short-tempered. This time I address it to Brooke. I write "Happy graduation, Brookie. I hope you know I'm always here if you ever need me. Love you always, Jenna." I untangle my keys from all the others in the bowl on the island counter top, drink the rest of my water, and walk back to the tent. The sun is now completely above the horizon and the entire yard looks like it's sparkling because of the dewdrops.

Better

For me, depression and anxiety and the need to self-harm are not a neat set of triplets, knocking at my door and asking to play. They are the wild-haired, dirty-faced children of parents who spend too much time at the bar. They are the children throwing rocks through church windows and breaking playground swings. Ruthless and untamable, yet deserving of the slightest amount of pity. I hate them. I can't make them go away, either.

"But you're better now, right? So it's okay to talk about it."

I know that my well-meaning classmate is responding to the nervousness I've been expressing to her while in line for coffee. This bout of anxiety is stemming from the fact that I've just turned in another creative non-fiction piece about cutting. It was hard for me to release the neatly stapled copies to my peers. After years of therapy, I've become decent at figuring out where my feelings are coming from when I can. My classmate tells me I'm better like it really makes a difference, because to her it probably does. It makes me feel so much worse.

I am not better now.

I will probably never be better.

"Better" isn't in my grasp.

I am broken.

Smile and nod, Jenna. Looking her in the eyes, I smile and nod. I can't remember a time that I've been brave enough to tell someone that I'm not this "better" version of myself. I can't remember a time that I've been brave enough to *not* smile and nod. The truth only makes people worry.

The truth is that self-hatred is an amorphous thing, impossible to pin down and cure. It comes in waves, a whelm dark blue-grey. It's the color of lake water in the suspense of a coming

thunderstorm, flooding the fledgling foundations of my rebuilt life. I always know it's going to happen, and I always know there isn't a way to stop it.

The last time I cut myself was during the spring of 2012. Two years. Two years is nothing, or everything, depending on who's asking.

It has been less than 24 hours since I have wanted it, needed it.

It has been less than 24 hours since I have seriously considered it.

It has been less than 24 hours since I hated myself for being strong enough to say no.

I keep thinking that if maybe, someday, I can figure out the "whys" then the needs will just disappear. I keep hoping that someday I really will be able to smile and nod and believe that I am better, in whatever form better comes in.