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If I Disappear

Sofie Ellen Harsha

Northern Michigan University, sharsha@nmu.edu

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IF I DISAPPEAR

By

Sofie Ellen Harsha

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Office of Graduate Education and Research

July 2015
IF I DISAPPEAR

This thesis by Sofie Ellen Harsha is recommended for approval by the student’s Thesis Committee and Faculty Chair in the Department of English and by the assistant provost of Graduate Education and Research.

Committee Chair: Jennifer A. Howard

First Reader: Josh MacIvor-Andersen

Second Reader: N/A

Faculty Chair: Dr. Robert Whalen

Dr. Brian D. Cherry
Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research
ABSTRACT

IF I DISAPPEAR

By

Sofie Ellen Harsha

This collection of interconnected essays explores the author’s personal obsession with two separate disappearances—that of Amelia Earhart, famous aviator who disappeared over the Pacific Ocean in 1937, and that of 19-year-old Danielle Wright and the crew of The Nina, a sailing vessel that went missing on the Tasman Sea in the summer of 2013. As the author sifts through the remnants of these disappearances, the collection begins to uncover the realities of what it means to disappear—all the many ways a person can, both willingly and unwillingly. The essays explore what it means to be lost, what it means to lose things you cannot get back, what it means to find something you thought was gone forever, and ultimately, what it means to be found.
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SOFIE ELLEN HARSHA

July 2015
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my sisters, Zayda and Alex,
and to my little brother David.

Thank you for never losing sight of me.
I would like to thank my thesis director, Jennifer A. Howard, for her support and continued encouragement, and for being patient and trusting me. I would also like to thank my reader, Josh MacIvor-Andersen, for believing in the project and for being so excited about its possibilities—I was previously unused to that kind of support as a writer. Thank you.

I want to thank my father, Steve Harsha, for always being there and for his quiet strength, kindness, and sense of humor. I want to thank my mother, Laurel Gamm, for her fire as a human woman, and for her unconditional love. I want to thank my stepfather, Charles Stephens, for his letters, jokes, and for always supporting me even when it was difficult, and even when I did weird things like fly a model airplane in his backyard for hours. I want to thank my boyfriend, MG, for carrying so much light around with him wherever he goes, and for sharing some with me. I want to thank my siblings. I wish there was one word for the combined cool they are. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Robin Wright, mother of Danielle, for trusting me with so much of her story.
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INTRODUCTION

About three years ago, my older sister Zayda and I became obsessed with documentaries about people who go missing. We were pulled in by the unexplained. The final hours before they vanished. The items they left behind. The inconsequential turned consequential, turned monumental. Whole hours, minutes, seconds, transformed into artifacts. The way a TV had been left on, a video game on pause, the virtual boxer ready for his next move. Orange slices on a plate. The hardened peel on the counter. Gas station video footage, too grainy to tell.

The way their family members never remember anything bad about them.

*When Maggie walked into the room, the whole place just lit up. She was just so special.*

*We miss her everyday.*

*Oh Jonathan, he was so sweet, he’d never hurt a fly.*

If I disappear, I once said to my sister after many hours of documentaries, don’t say any of that bullshit. Tell them a real story about me. Tell them you hated me or something. Just don’t say any of that stuff.

Okay, she said, and laughed.

If I disappear will you look for me? I ask later.

Her answer: For always.

It was around the height of our documentary addiction (about three years ago) when I began to become completely obsessed with the disappearance of Amelia Earhart. I have no idea to this day where it came from. The obsession grew inside of me organically, like a…tumor.
My family would laugh at me when I talked about it. They’d ask me how she was doing, if they’d found her yet. I’d laugh too, but not really. Because at night I would listen to the final radio transmissions, her voice over the airwaves and wonder what it was like to disappear. How I’d been thinking lately it might be kind of nice.

What I didn’t know at the time was that I was already well on my way to disappearing.

That there are a thousand ways to disappear.

Last summer I had the chance to take a class called Immersion Nonfiction with nonfiction author Josh MacIvor-Andersen. (As a fiction writer, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. The word immersion just sounded really cool.) Josh asked us to come up with a semester project, something we could immerse ourselves in, Hunter S. T. style. Wonderful, I said to myself. I’ll just figure out why I’m obsessed with Amelia Earhart, with disappearances in general. It’ll be a piece of cake. Something light and fluffy to share with the grandchildren.

What I’m really trying to say is that there was a point while writing this at which I thought the whole project was a brilliant idea. There was a point at which I thought my question—why the hell am I so obsessed with disappearances—had a simple, shareable answer. A point at which I believed that the answer, when I found it, would have very little to do with me, with my own personal story. Then I began researching the disappearance of a 19-year-old girl. Then I talked with her mother. Then everything fell to pieces, including my belief that a person can be entirely separate from their obsessions. That a person can hide from their own stories forever. I really want to say that everything that follows is entirely fiction. So I’m going to.

Afford me this one small lie, as I tried not to tell too many others.

THE FOLLOWING STORY IS FICTIONAL AND DOES NOT DEPICT ANY ACTUAL PERSON OR EVENT. –

Law and Order, SVU
I tell people that I can find anything. *The key to finding things*, I say to my friends and family (who’ve heard it many times over), *is to not stop looking*. I even pretend that I have psychic skills when it comes to locating lost items, offering as proof this anecdote: Once upon a breakfast, I found my twin sister’s boyfriend’s phone simply by closing my eyes at the dining room table, putting my fingers to my temples and saying, *your phone is inside somewhere dark*.

The truth is, nothing came to my mind when I rubbed my temples, and everything looks pretty dark when my eyes are closed.
But still, he came bounding down the stairs fifteen minutes later, eyes lit up and wide. *It was in the pocket of my black sweatshirt!* he said, holding the phone in his palm like it’d suddenly made the transformation from a thing that was only ever good at texting to a thing that was now good at a lot of other stuff—magic perhaps. Or circus performing. Or MMA fighting. Or offering no-bullshit advice.

I’ve found other things, too.

My older sister once called me after a run to say that she’d lost her keys somewhere in Saint Paul.

*Have no fear. I’ll be right over,* I said, in my best Batman voice.

After walking for an hour or more, I found her keys. Someone had picked them up and put them on a cement ledge, somewhere near some flowers. We’d been looking only at the ground the first few sweeps. Then I made a tactical decision to raise my eye level a few degrees.

We were ecstatic.

Independent of the reasons for it—whether or not I’m pretending to be good at it out of boredom or to feel useful or for laughs and jokes—finding things is something I love to do. And, because I’m a realist who sometimes trips head over heels on that elusive thin line which separates realism from pessimism, I think my enthusiasm for finding things is how I express the real and true hope that I buried somewhere deep in my chest over the years. Because, in order to find something, you have to believe it’s waiting for you to find it. You have to believe that it’s only a matter of how long you look. You have to believe that the world isn’t really full of black vacuumy holes at all, no matter how much it seems so. You have to believe the things you lose still exist, even when you can’t see them. In this way, searching for something lost borders on being an act of some kind of faith.

In light of all this, maybe it makes sense that I’m obsessed with Amelia Earhart. Maybe it explains why the general concept of disappeared people and big lost chunks of metal bothers me on an uncomfortable and near-silly level.
Maybe it was reading *The Hatchet* in sixth grade.

Maybe it’s because the only thing I can remember about this one movie I really loved but have forgotten the name of is that the car they used for their road trip had a metaphorical hole underneath the passenger seat in which they lost everything that accidentally fell there.

Maybe I’m just mad because I can’t find out what happened to Amelia the easy way--on Wikipedia. That no one can find out. That no one ever did find out.

Maybe it has nothing to do with Amelia at all.

Maybe it’s because I’ve always been a worrier, a dweller. Maybe, as an adult, the subject of Amelia Earhart’s disappearance seems like a safe place to do my dwelling. Safer, maybe, than the places I’ve chosen in the past.

Maybe my day’s long lightrail/busride in the rain to find Amelia’s biography was just another way of distracting myself, of dwelling, of getting lost in something.

Maybe the act of solving mystery, of searching for something, is a kind of willful disappearance.

Maybe Amelia was searching for something too, in order to disappear. Maybe that’s why she loved to fly--to be disappeared for a little while, above the clouds and in the sky. And maybe *a little while*, over time, simply turned into *forever*.

I don’t know.

When I asked my brother a year or so ago what he thought happened to Amelia, he said, simply and flatly, *she died*.

I was upset.

His answer didn’t upset me because he’d said something I didn’t already know, but because he said it so calmly, as if bored with my question. As if he’d already contemplated it forever ago, and had come to the conclusion that the fact that disappearances and deaths and loss are common occurrences in this world is okay. He’d simply come to terms with it. He’d come to terms with the idea that we will never find
Amelia. That some people just go away and are gone forever. He’d come to terms with something I hadn’t yet. And so strong--even to this day--is my rebellion against the idea that I don’t even accept it. I just keep looking, seemingly unaware that some things do get lost into oblivion and into time and into all the spaces where things fall off.

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WHEN YOU PUT ONE HAND THROUGH THE RIPPLING BLACK DOORWAY OF OBLIVION DOES IT DISAPPEAR OR IS YOUR HAND JUST BEING OBSCURED IN A DARKNESS STARK ENOUGH TO ECLIPSE EVERYTHING?

<> <> <> <> <>

AMELIA EARHART WOULD HAVE FILLED HER SHOPPING CART WITH CLOUDS

Amelia Earhart never experienced the convenience of a shopping cart because when it was invented in Oklahoma on June 4th, 1937 she was trying really hard to fly around the world at its equator and was already in the beginning stages of the long shadowy process of vanishing. The last stage, her full disappearance--the universe’s successful attempt at swallowing up her entire existence--occurred on July 2nd, 1937, somewhere over the South Pacific.

It’s okay that she never had the chance to weave in and out of grocery aisles with a large metal basket on wheels, though. I’m not sure she would have at all enjoyed figuring out how to fill an empty cart. What to fill it with.

A.E. preferred to fly in order to fill emptiness. In the name of flying, she bought a new leather jacket and slept in it for three nights to give it a worn out look she hoped would
appeal to her female aviator heroes. In the name of flying, she took a bus to the very end of its route and then walked another four miles to get to her first pilot lessons. In the name of flying, she married media mogul George Putnam, a man who asked her six times to marry him before she reluctantly agreed, probably partly so he would continue to finance and advance her piloting career. In the name of flying, she put up with her husband and publicist telling her to smile closed-lipped in pictures to cover the large gap between her two front teeth. In the name of flying, she and navigator Fred Noonan attempted an under-planned and poorly executed round-the-world flight in a souped up Lockheed Electra 10E complete with state of the art radio gadgets she had little education operating, only to disappear, vanish, fade, dissolve, evaporate, totally and utterly dematerialize above the Pacific Ocean.

A.E. and her new Electra 10E. c 1937. Notice how, in the picture, she is not shopping.

A.E.’s first experience of flying was in a wooden box off her grandmother’s roof. As she flew off the ramp, and before she landed bruised and still a little shaky, she had a tiny moment of complete terror but would later, while searching for worms, say she had not.

Her father Edwin was an alcoholic who repeatedly lost jobs and moved the family around. Her mother Amy left Amelia in Atchison, Kansas in the care of her own mother, another Amelia, for much of her childhood. A.E. didn’t mind because in Atchison she was free to roam outside and read endlessly.
When A.E. was in high school, grandma Amelia died and the house was sold, dad was still a drunk, and mom moved them to Chicago. A Hyde Park High School yearbook caption reads: A.E. - The girl in brown who walks alone.

Sometimes while lying in bed suffering from chronic sinus trouble, A.E. would open a scrapbook of news clippings of successful women who did more than shop, and she’d snuffle.

She tried college but it never stuck. She worked multiple jobs: Nurse’s aide, photographer, stenographer, truck driver. It was while she was driving the sand and gravel truck she purchased during a construction boom that she realized she couldn’t keep stopping and starting over, failing and pushing on, always two steps forward and two steps back. She’d had to sell her first plane when a family investment went sour and she was exhausted from setback. As she unloaded the gravel onto the site and watched it pile up, she began to picture herself buried underneath the pile. Then, eyes closed and gripping the wheel of the truck, she willed herself to imagine instead standing on top of it. It was then she knew that someday she’d be something, and when it happened, she vowed never to stop again. She would go on forever.

Noonan, a former seaman navigator turned highly respected pilot and Pan Am navigator, sat in a seat at the rear of the plane, on the right side, behind six fuel tanks, next to a window, possibly drunk. Another window of undistorted glass stared down from above his seat so that, craning his neck, he could chart the stars. He and A.E. passed messages to each other by way of a bamboo pole and a paperclip.

Noonan had worked for the Royal British Naval Service during World War I and nearly died three times from three different U-Boats. If asked before he and A.E. fell from the sky whether or not he was afraid to die he would have said no. If asked the same question right before impact he would have been too terrified to speak.
TOO MUCH PACIFIC OCEAN

Midnight on July 2nd, 1937 A.E. and Noonan took off from Lae, New Guinea, with intentions to fly 2,556 miles across the Pacific Ocean to Howland, a small uninhabited island surrounded by miles and miles and miles of deep water.

The tiny landing strip, having been cleared of frigates, boobies, and terns, waits to this day, patiently and in vain, for Noonan and A.E.
A.E.: What is the biggest difference between the sea and the sky?
Fred: Depends on what category you’re talking about. If you’re talking about war, there’s not much difference, planes shoot down and sideways, submarines shoot up and through. Either way, people die.
A.E.: I’m not talking about war.
Fred: I know. I’m half joking. I don’t know how to answer the question is all.
A.E.: I just mean, what’s the difference between how you feel floating on air and how you feel floating on the water?
Fred: I suppose it’s that you can’t imagine very well what’s below you when you’re on the water. When you’re in the sky, you can see the earth below. The roads and the houses and the pools and the people looking up. But we never quite know what’s under the water. There could be sharks. Or sunken ships. Maybe even a torn up fuselage. The water is mysterious, the sky is open. Beyond the sky, though—space— that’s a mystery, I suppose. I don’t know. Why are you always asking me these questions?
A.E.: (no reply)
Fred: I guess there’s never really an edge to anything.
A.E.: Where are we now FN?
"IF THEY’D KNOWN THE EXACT LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE AMELIA EARHART WENT DOWN THEY WOULD HAVE BEEN ABLE TO FIND HER."

-Man sitting in a Denny’s, 1979

The globe’s movements are predictable. One 360 spin takes twenty-four hours. The sun rises in the west, it sets in the east.*

Navigation with the use of the sun and the stars is ancient, and reliable.

To navigate latitude, a pilot puts the blazing sun in his sights and measures the angle between it and the horizon. Latitude at the equator is zero degrees, which basically means that if you’re flying the equator, you’re either going exactly east or you are going exactly west. Much like lines demarking parking spots, lines of latitude are always the same distance from each other. They are consistent. Sixty miles lie between all degrees of latitude.

Measuring longitude is more difficult, but not impossible. Longitude lines are curved around the globe like slices of an orange peel. Near the poles, longitude lines are very close together. At the equator, they are the furthest apart. Longitude lines, in this way, are not at all consistent. One degree of longitude at the poles could mean sixty miles at the equator.

To measure longitude, one must have constant knowledge of the exact time. One hour is the equivalent of fifteen degrees of longitude. (One longitudinal degree = four minutes).

Fred Noonan was an extremely talented navigator and was highly regarded by his compatriots at Pan Am. It was said that he could ‘shoot the sun’ standing on his head.

On his last flight, he used standard navigational protocol. He’d get the weather report every half hour. Every hour he’d shoot the sun. Every two hours Earhart would go down near the surface of the Pacific so Noonan could throw one of two items into the water to measure wind direction: During the day, and if it was clear, he’d drop a glass jar of aluminum powder which would burst when it hit the surface of the ocean. Noonan found watching the explosion and the rising twenty foot plume pleasant. At nighttime, acetylene gas canisters made equally as satisfactory small fires on top of the sea.
Once, he dropped a glass jar at night just because. Sometimes he wished not to care where he was. For instance, two nights before their last flight he got really drunk with some friends after saying he really needed to stop all the drinking. A.E. sent this telegraph to her husband the next day: *Radio misunderstanding and personnel unfitness probably will hold one day have asked black for forecast for tomorrow you check meteorologist on job as FN must have star sights...*

Fred was very skilled in stars. Using an octant and an almanac of the geographic positions of celestial bodies at every time imaginable--days, hours, minutes, seconds of every year--he could shoot the stars for longitude.

For this activity, it was really important that he know the exact time, and for that, he desperately needed the radiomen.

*A.E. and Noonan were flying east. Originally she had planned to fly west, but being spontaneous and excitable, she decided to change direction.** She made the decision to change direction of her flight after a series of mishaps during her first attempt at flying round the world going west.*

**A.E. never felt embarrassed or bad about changing her mind. Once, she broke off an engagement to her first love, chemical engineer Sam Chapman, and then just after, invented a poem about courage.**
Communication problems happen. Sometimes when you’re talking on your phone the other person hangs up or gets cut off and you keep talking for a while, into silence, and later you feel a bit sheepish when you have to ask where you left off. Or sometimes during face to face conversation you say something too quiet for the other to hear, or they misunderstand. You say *I think I’ll have five donuts* and the lady brings nine. Sometimes a tone of voice jars you. *Are you angry?* you ask, and your friend says, *Of course not, why?*

These were not the types of communication problems A.E. and Noonan had with people on the ground during their flight from Lae to Howland Island, nor did they have these types of problems with each other. (At one point Noonan wrote A.E. a paperclip message that contained a joke about landing the plane on a boat they both spotted. A.E. understood the joke completely).

Coastguard ITASCA was stationed just off the northeastern edge of Howland Island. It was ready and waiting for Earhart and Noonan’s arrival, complete with smoke signals that were visible for miles. It had also been transmitting the weather to A.E. every half hour and on the hour. She did not receive those messages.

This was bad news for Noonan. Here’s why:

Imagine you’re driving to work with only the half hour drive’s worth of gas and you’re relying on someone over a Walkie Talkie to tell you the *exact* time so as not to be late. Now imagine that the person you’re relying on to tell you the time falls asleep or accidentally drops their Walkie Talkie into a puddle or that it is broken somehow. So you try to calculate the time by way of your dashboard clock, which is off just a little.

Now imagine that for every minute your clock is off, you will be fifteen miles away from your destination at the time you’re supposed to arrive.

Your watch is off by two minutes. So, at the time you’re supposed to be at work, you are thirty miles away with an empty fuel tank.
A little over seven hours into the flight, Earhart reported to Lae that she was 4 degrees 33 minutes south, 159 degrees, 7 minutes east. At that rate, they had thirteen hours to go. (The entire trip, then, should have taken them about twenty hours). Seven hours after the report of their only known location (fourteen hours in), ITASCA heard what sounded like Earhart’s voice saying cloudy weather cloudy. An hour later (up to fifteen hours now), ITASCA heard A.E. ask them to broadcast to her every half hour and on the hour.

About an hour later (sixteen hours in): A.E. on the radio, five people listening, nobody understanding.

Twenty minutes later: A.E. says she will whistle into the microphone so that ITASCA could get bearings on her.

A few minutes later: About 200 miles out (whistles briefly into microphone)

An hour later (seventeen hours in): Please take a bearing on us and report in a half hour I will make a noise in microphone about 100 miles out.

Forty five minutes later (seventeen hours forty-five minutes in, sunrise and clear skies at Howland Island): We must be on you but cannot see you but gas is running low have been unable to reach you by radio we are flying at 1000 feet.

Twenty-seven minutes later (eighteen hours fifteen minutes in): We are circling but cannot see island cannot hear you go ahead on 7500 kilocycles with long count either now or on schedule time on half hour.

A little over an hour later (nineteen hours thirty-three minutes in): Amelia receives a transmission, for the first and only time. Earhart calling ITASCA we received your signals but unable to get minimum please take bearings on us and answer on 3105.

Itasca is unable to locate A.E. on the high frequency direction finder.

A little less than an hour later (twenty hours and fourteen minutes in): We are the line of position 157 dash 337 will repeat this message on 6210 kilocycles. We are now running north and south.

This was her last transmission.
THE SEVEN STAGES IN THE LONG SHADOWY PROCESS OF VANISHING

1. It occurs to you while walking alone to the beach that no one has called you or messaged you in two hours or more, nor have you reached out to anyone else in an even longer period of time. Nobody knows where you are. This fact gives you pleasure. You are going to the beach because you like to, because it is more fun than not going to the beach. You are good at going to the beach alone. You consider it an adventure, an escape.

2. At the beach, you notice a boat that is also alone, floating along the shore. It has one oar. You note that it would be difficult to row an alone boat alone with one oar but that you could do it. You have done more difficult things before.*

3. You notice an elderly couple at the beach who have not talked to each other for an hour. You decide that do not want to be them, ever.**

4. At the beach, even while looking at the ocean, it occurs to you that you still firmly do not believe in God.***

5. After two hours at the beach you get restless. The alone boat is still there. Nobody will notice if you take it. It is obviously abandoned. You approach the boat and see that there is a life vest inside of it and some water. You get inside the boat and push off, using your oar against the sand.

6. As you’re moving out past the bay, you realize both that you are tired and that the life vest is a couple sizes too big for you. You throw the life vest off the edge of the boat because it will not do. You drink the water in one large gulp.****

7. When you can no longer see land, you see a storm in the distance fast approaching. Dark circling clouds. Huge waves. You call out into a void of wind and distance for help, but no one comes.
*Amelia Earhart continued her round-the-world flight despite many people telling her it was dangerous, despite a nervous husband, despite an extreme amount of plane malfunctions along the way, despite a (possibly) drunk navigator, et cetera.

**As far as I know, I’ve got only one obsession—a small and probably typical feminine horror of growing old—so I won’t feel completely cheated if I fail to come back. -A.E.

***When Amelia was asked if she ever prayed during bad flights she said, No, I guess I think it would be a little unsportsmanlike, to wait and only send God a hurry call when I was in a jam.

****Among the things A.E. left behind were: Their parachutes, which she deemed would be “useless”, and a radio capable of morse code, which they considered dead weight because she and Noonan weren’t very skilled at using it. One wonders if they thought about the device in the great silences the radiomen were supposed to fill.
AFTER THE FLIGHT SIMULATION WE ATE CHIPOTLE BUT I WAS STILL TOO SICK TO MY STOMACH FROM FEAR AND FALLING TO EAT MY BURRITO

Last summer I went to a place called A.C.E.S. in Mall of America where a set of six or so domed “surround flight” simulators wait for people to enter them in order to experience piloting a plane.

A radioman who was in charge of guiding me through my flight called me “Hollywood” as I sat in the dome, flipping my switches, throttle all the way forward, waiting for the 150 mph mark I needed in order to lift the plane off the ground. After figuring out some small degree of grace in the air, I flew over Las Vegas and into the Grand Canyon, trying to get as close to the Colorado River as possible, sky and land and water and city stretching all around me.

I think Amelia Earhart used the word exhilarating.*

In truth, I didn’t drive all the way to Mall of America, a place that’s so crowded it makes me physically ill, to see what it is like to fly a plane. That I can imagine. I’ve sat in a cockpit of a helicopter in Hawaii. And three or four summers ago I was up in a small plane outside of Minneapolis with an old boss for an employee appreciation day. (He even let me take the controls for a second or two).

I drove all the way to Mall of America to see what it was like to crash a plane. To see the earth coming at me as I fell to meet it.

The first time someone shot me down from their separate flight dome, I spun like mad, around and around, until I no longer knew the difference between sky and earth. I tried to keep my eyes open but it was horrifying, even in simulation. I believe I said over the airways to my radioman a very original I’m going to die.

When I hit the earth the screen went completely black and then completely red. For some reason, these colors felt like a good reckoning of death, probably because my heart, still beating its wings, had truly believed I was going to die. In the seconds after impact, sitting surrounded in red, my heart may have thought I was dead.
The second time I was shot down it was a slow ending. I was a feather floating out of the sky—a very heavy feather going many miles an hour at increasing speeds the closer I got to the ground, but a feather nonetheless. My heart reacted the same as it did during the spinning death, the moment just before impact being the most terrifying.

Before you crash into the ground or the water, you realize there is nothing you can do to stop it. That there was probably nothing that you could have done ever. That you’re definitely going to die.

*It occurs to me now how much the word exhilarate sounds like the word exhale.

<><><><>>

LOST THEN FOUND, LOST THEN FOUND, LOST THEN FOUND

UNTIL FOREVER ENDS

It is strange to go to a museum alone because it is possible to only say one thing the entire time:

When is the next tour?

At the Charles Lindbergh Museum and House I stood in his back porch, in the same place he stood when he heard and saw a plane for his first time. I imagined it coming over the Mississippi River. I imagined him watching it fly over his house—how he probably ran after it flapping his wings.

At his home, I saw how he, like Amelia, struggled with stopping and starting and staying grounded.

I crashed a flight simulator of his plane, The Spirit of St. Louis, into a pixelated Paris.

I also bought cardboard models of both The Spirit of St. Louis and Amelia’s first Lockheed, the bright red Vega. They are propelled by rubber bands attached front to back between the fuselages.
On my drive home, model airplanes in my passenger seat, I thought about how humans never needed to fly. They just saw birds and then really wanted to. I thought of Icarus flying too close to the sun, and of the sixteenth century monk who jumped off a church with a pair of handcrafted wings, and of the first hot air balloon ride. I thought of all the people who died trying to learn to fly. Of the people in Amelia’s day who’d dared to become flying teachers even though one student mistake could mean death. I thought of the four large planes that have gone missing or have crashed or been shot down in the last couple years. Of all of those people’s hearts in the air. Of all of their hearts right before impact.

And then, of course, I thought of Amelia.

I brought her bright red rubber band plane with me almost everywhere I went for weeks afterward. I flew her onto the top of roofs. I flew her into trees. I flew her into garden beds. I flew her into garages, and into electrical wires.

She almost vanished more than three times.

Once, I was flying her in an alleyway behind my friend’s house and she wound up on the neighbor’s roof. I got distracted and left her there, only to come back fifteen minutes later to her complete disappearance. I grew anxious, and after enlisting everyone’s help in the search, eventually found her in between two garages in some bushes. The same thing happened again an hour later. She was trying to use the radio in a bed of flowers.

_Oh Amelia, we all kept saying, you’re always getting lost._

I’ve been flying her since, knowing full well she could get lost and disappear completely. She seems to try so hard to do so.

That same night in the same alley she loved to disappear into one of my friends asked me why I kept flying her when it’s almost certain I’m going to lose her eventually.

_Well, I said, she really likes to fly. And I’m not worried about her getting lost._

_Why not?_

_Because I can find anything._
ACT I.5

YOU PROBABLY WON’T REMEMBER ME
BUT I’LL REMEMBER YOU

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A drunk notebook. Circa years ago.

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The word *oblivion* dates back to late 14th century Old French, and comes directly from the Latin word *oblivionem*, which means “forgetfulness” or “a being forgotten.” Its prefix ob, in this case, means “over.” Its root is *levis*, or “smooth”.

So. Oblivion:

1. A state of being smoothed over.
2. A state of being effaced.
3. A state of being erased.
4. A state of being completely forgotten.

Not just gone. A constant state of being gone. A constant state of being made to not exist.

I’ve never been much for paradoxes. They are confusing and are usually identified overenthusiastically, based on a strange human desire for paradoxes to exist everywhere. But, *oblivion* seems to be our word for *nonexistence*—one that encompasses both the definition of not existing as well as something deeply emotional, deeply human. And, because we have no means to fathom not existing, we have, very naturally, transformed it into an object, a thing, a place—something we can hold, turn over, look at, go to, be cast out to. A dark place in time and space. With the word *oblivion*, we give nonexistence lines and edges. We would map it if we could, fit it with GPS.

The great nowhere. The nothing way out there. The door marked with a question mark that opens to pure nothingness. The bottomless well. As James Thurber, in a 1939 collection of philosophies of “eminent men and women,” puts it: *the soft darkness. The dreamless sleep.*
In the essay Thurber likens oblivion to being on board a train which unloads all of its passengers in the blackest tunnel. When he imagines and describes the conductor kicking everyone off the train into the tunnel’s abyss, Thurber asks the question, “What’s the matter with that? What’s the matter with oblivion?”

What’s the matter with being forgotten? What’s the matter with lights out? What’s the matter with the world continuing its amble toward its own eventual oblivion without you, as if you never existed? What’s the matter with oblivion?

For a few irritating days and nights I tried to answer that question. He’s so cool in his essay, so casually detached, almost like he’s laughing into the void.

My first answer to his question was, “Well that’s easy for a famous writer to say. In a way, you’ll never be forgotten.”

My answer to my first answer was, “Well that’s easy for a writer to say to another writer. Too easy even, and beside the point.” Because when I contemplate disappearances, when I contemplate oblivion, my fear does not peak at the thought of being forgotten. (I am 98.92% sure I didn’t become a writer to leave a paper trail. I have no idea why I’m a writer, but that’s perhaps a different essay.) And my fear doesn’t peak at the thought of lights out, even though I’ve admittedly always, with my bad eyes and worse imagination, been terribly afraid of the dark.

I am not afraid of not existing. I am not afraid of being forgotten.

I am afraid of forgetting.

There have been times in my life when I’ve thought that not being would be much better than being, and I’ve gotten pretty close to forcing my own oblivion. But what prevented me was the fear that I would miss something really interesting, something that I maybe hadn’t seen before, and that wherever I went—heaven, hell, somewhere previously
unimagined, somewhere unimaginable, Nowhere—would be a place of not remembering all the things I had seen.

*Being* always won out. *Remembering* always won out.

When my train stops in the tunnel, I will most certainly be scared. But not because of swallowing blackness of the tunnel. Not because the train will go on without me and does not care about me. Not because the conductor never even knew my name and probably never will. Not because it is possible that my consciousness will never get to learn, before the lights go out, if there ever was a conductor at all.

As I start and stop and stall and nudge forward in order to become brave enough to tell the next story—a story about a girl lost at sea, a story that haunts me for reasons growing exponentially—I am realizing that my question is not just what will happen to each of us. My question is not only “what’s next?”

I’m most worried about the pain of forgetting, in an instant, all of this. All of this *being*. What if we forget it all? Will it hurt to forget an entire lifetime in a long and final endless blink? What does it mean to forget forever? Is that the one true disappearance?

And, if our final destination is infinite erasure, or scarier yet, infinite forgetfulness, then why hold it all so precious? Why grasp so tightly? Why be curious about anything? Why be good? Why be kind? Why do anything at all? Why stick around to withstand the pain of loss and separation? The creaks and aches of the body? The minefield of loving? The tyrannical malaise of the day to day? How should we live? And why *be*?

I know, I know. Blah blah blah. The question *why be?* is a fossil, and though it’s still wildly relevant (because we are alive), it occasionally becomes meaningless. Plus, Shakespeare already asked the question so beautifully it seems like it’s been answering itself for ages. Like some ancient church bell struck once and still vibrating. A still-ringing echo in time.
The answers to *how to live* seem obvious, at least to the optimists and the youthful and the strangely (by my standards) calm.

Rule # 1: Don’t ask depressing questions. YOLO. Exercise three to five times a week. You live, you learn. Never give up. Don’t worry, be happy. Take one day at a time. Be grateful. Find God. Life is one wild ride. Just keep swimming. Everything happens for a reason. Pick yourself up and try again. Don’t cry because it’s over, smile because it happened. God never gives us more than we can handle. What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. When life gives you lemons. When one door closes. This too shall pass. Be the change you wish to see in the world. Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you respond to it. Have faith. Let it go. Whatever will be, will be. Life is a story, make yours a best seller. The sun will come out tomorrow. Don’t forget to smile. Hakuna matata. Life is too short to be sad. You’re much prettier when you smile. Everything will work out in the end. Live life to the fullest. Dream as if you’ll live forever, live as if you’ll die today. Eat, pray, love. #Blessed.

Choose your weapon. There are so many because not one from the lot of them really helps much, and all together they are schizophrenic. How to live is a matter of opinion. I’m with Shakespeare on a lot of things, especially when it comes to being certain of anything: *The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.* There is not much I believe outside of my belief that I know almost nothing. I do believe in kindness and humility, but as weapons they are sometimes like throwing glitter at a tsunami.

I know at least one thing for sure, and it’s not in the least revolutionary. The truth about being is that we have to be because we already are. And once we are, we have to be until we are not. There is no being this without the eventually not being this. There is no here without the over there. Nonexistence exists. Oblivion, in whatever its form, exists. Oblivion exists because Death exists. Death exists because Life exists. And vice versa to all.
Here’s something:

If I cut off the last words of each of the four definitions of *oblivion* I listed above, it would read:

1. A state of being
2. A state of being
3. A state of being
4. A state of being
YOU’VE ONLY LOST SOMETHING WHEN YOU STOP LOOKING FOR IT

I’m missing an incandescent earring. Gone six years and counting. Its counterpart hangs on my wall like a lighthouse for the other, a tiny beacon, inviting it home. Sometimes I still look for my lost earring, hunched crosslegged on the floor of my room, pawing at my four small, disorganized boxes of jewelry, untangling gold chains, muttering to myself like an elderly vagrant after years and years of directionless travel. Where are you? Where are you? Where are you?

Over here, it says, from wherever here is.

My earring is not lost. I just haven’t found it yet.
The truth is nothing is ever lost. Nothing is ever lost because what we lose only exists elsewhere in a constant state of not yet having been found.

Or at least that’s what I tell myself. As I continue the process of writing this, though, I’m not sure I believe it anymore. As so much else that sounds and looks well-meaning, I’m beginning to think it might actually be bullshit. No better than say, some live, laugh, love poster in an entryway.

Because I don’t know why I still keep the other earring—and so prominently displayed, like a miniature metal heartache on my wall, reminding me simultaneously of limitless possibility and wicked, clanging futility. I don’t know why I have this need to believe nothing is ever gone. I don’t know why I mess around with the semantics of the words lost and found in order to make it more possible, more rational, more redeemable to continue the search for everything I’ve ever lost. And then to take other searches upon myself in some self-righteous Nancy Drew-induced haze. First Amelia—legend, larger than life, and therefore, child’s play.

Baby Girl. Baby Girl. I can’t even use her name. Danielle Wright. Legend only to loved ones. Just a baby girl. Danielle Wright, nineteen—maybe twenty-one now, and lost for two years at sea, adrift on a tattered wooden sailboat called The Nina (the little girl). Or finding new uses for seashells on an island, or taken by modern-day pirates, or on an alien spaceship, or, under the sea. Gone.

Where are you? Where are you? Where are you?

Over here, she says, from wherever her here is.

It is really hard to believe Baby Girl still exists in that constant state of waiting to be found. The ocean is unforgiving and thirsty. But it’s possible. And that’s the tangle in it, isn’t it? The clumsy waterlogged knot of possibility. The knowledge that the universe,
though endless, has rules. The understanding that when you peer up over into the deepest darkest well, a bottom to it echoes from somewhere below.

The possibility that Baby Girl is out there disturbs me more than the thought of her being dead. The possibility angers me. It angers me for her mother, who told me three times in her soft Louisiana lilt that her child is alive on this very Earth. It angers me. Possibility can become more suffocating than impossibility, just as vague, unrequited love can be more awful than rejection, just as success can feel worse than failure. Possibility means something must be sustained. The search must continue. Because you’ll know you’ve really lost something the millisecond you give up on it. You’ll know it when you’re knees give out, and your eyes—how you’ll wish everything else would give out too.

After my parents’ divorce, I chose a window at which to sit and wait for my dad’s car to pull into the driveway of a house that at one recent point had also been his. I chose the window of my brother’s room, upstairs, overlooking the street and the front walkway, a bright window at the very upper corner of the house. I’d pretend I was just casually counting blue cars, but inside was death, prolonged and desperate—the feeling of knowing what you need only by the existence of what you don’t. The feeling of going to get something in the other room only to forget what you came there for. The feeling of getting lost while searching for something you lost long ago.

I originally started the practice of waiting on my dad at the upstairs window on the days I knew he was coming, but then, in my childish misery, I became a thespian. I’d wait at the window on the days we weren’t scheduled to see him. In order to practice despair. To practice futility. I’d set myself up with the slight possibility of a surprise arrival and I’d wait. When it didn’t happen, as it never did, I’d get off my perch and go to dinner thinking twelve blue cars, secretly clutching with blistered preadolescent certainty that I, and only I, carried within me the universe’s heaviest knowledge: That all had been lost already, long long ago, and life is just a waiting game for it all to be returned.
When I asked Danielle’s mother why she thinks her daughter is still alive, she heard the doubt in my voice and grew defensive. *Well it’s not some stupid mother thing if that’s what you mean,* she said. *Wooden boats don’t sink,* she said. *And I have dreams about her.*

*What kind of dreams,* I asked.

*Oh you want to hear the dreams?*

*Yes.*

*I have one where she comes home pregnant with a look in her eye I’ve never seen.*

*What kind of look?*

*Just sly. Wise. Like she’s seen some things.*

And why isn’t a dream like that evidence?

It seems legitimate to me.
COUNTING WALL TILES IN THE NURSE’S OFFICE. FRAUDULENT FORCED NAUSEA TURNED REAL. GOING HOME EARLY FROM SCHOOL AGAIN. THE PRICE IS RIGHT. THE POWER OF SUGGESTION. SPRAY CHEESE. SUMMER. THE ROCK PILE IN THE BACKYARD. DIGGING FOR FUN. FAR-OFF COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYERS JUMPING HURDLES MAKING MAN SOUNDS. MY BROTHER AND I PLAYING WITH TINY METAL CARS. JUMPING OFF THE HIGH BOARD. RIDES NORTH IN MY DAD’S STATION WAGON. WATCHING HIS EYES IN THE REARVIEW, MAKING SURE THEY ARE SMILING. NOT DOING MUCH SMILING LATELY. DAISY THE DALMATIAN. WORD PROBLEMS. MTV. A SPELLING BEE. MY TWIN SISTER ON STAGE, SMOOTHING HER DRESS AS SHE STANDS. A GAME OF SARDINES. HALLOWEEN. A WITCH. A WEEK AT THE CABIN. SCARED OF SHARKS IN THE LAKE. AN ALLERGIC REACTION. A CRYSTAL HANGING IN MY WINDOW. RESTLESS BICYCLING. MY STEP-DAD’S ORANGE JULIUSES. A SCHOOL DANCE. TERRIBLE BOREDOM. SOUR PATCH KIDS. REARRANGING MY FURNITURE AT THREE IN THE MORNING. AN INTERCEPTED NOTE. A FRIEND TO ANOTHER FRIEND. HOW THEY CALL ME WEIRD. HOW THEY CALL ME UGLY. MY FIRST BOYFRIEND’S FART JOKES. TERRIBLE BOREDOM. ROLLING MY EYES. MY FIRST BOYFRIEND CALLING ME A SLUT, SLAMMING THE Locker. APOLOGIZING. WON’T WEAR A SKIRT AGAIN. A PROM. TERRIBLE BOREDOM. A GIRLFRIEND RUNNING THE BASES OF THE BALLPARK AT NIGHT. NO ONE AROUND. ANOTHER GIRLFRIEND’S SPORTS ANNOUNCER PLAY BY PLAY. OUR LAUGHTER ACROSS THE OPEN FIELD. ALWAYS WEARING T-SHIRTS. NEVER DRAWING ATTENTION. SKIPPING CLASS. BARELY GRADUATING. DRIVING AS SLOW AS POSSIBLE IN FRONT OF ANOTHER CAR JUST TO MAKE THEM ANGRY. 2 MPH. TERRIBLE BOREDOM. CLIMBING THE ROOF OF THE HOUSE WITH MY TWIN SISTER. TALKING ABOUT THE AGES OF TREES. DRIVING ON THE BACK ROAD WITH FRIENDS AT NIGHT. TURNING OFF THE HEADLIGHTS. SEEING HOW LONG WE CAN DRIVE IN PITCH BLACKNESS. NOT LONG. TERRIBLE BOREDOM. RUNNING ALONE IN THE WOODS AT NIGHT. TELLING MYSELF I WILL FINALLY CONQUER MY FEAR OF THE DARK. I WILL FINALLY CONQUER MY FEAR OF EVERYTHING.

RED PLASTIC CUPS. MY ROOMMATE THROWING HER BROKEN CAMERA ON A DRUNK WALK HOME. OUR LAUGHTER. THE PICTURES WE NEVER SAW. PLAYING POOL. PINBALL. THE BEACH. MY ROOMMATE MAKING ME A YELLOW CROWN FOR MY BIRTHDAY, HER FAKE GRAMMA VOICE WHEN SHE PLACES IT ON MY HEAD. A CAMPING TRIP IN THE SMOKIES WITH FRIENDS. MY HAMMOCK. ACRYLICS. MY ROOMMATE YELLING AT ME TO STOP BEING SUCH A FUCKING PAUL SIMON SONG. SAYING YOU ARE
not a fucking island, you are not a fucking rock. Me listening to the song later, pretty sure she’s wrong.


The boy in Montanita who says there is a party down the beach. How when we arrive there is no party. How he has something else in mind. My twin sister telling me to come home, to go to the hospital. How in Quito I try to see a doctor but don’t understand the woman’s reason for why I can’t. Language barriers. The taxi driver from the hospital who won’t let me out until I give him my phone number. How he puts his hand on my thigh. How I want to disappear. How I don’t go home. How I tell no one. Two days hiking twelve miles of beach in Colombia. The janitor at the hostel in Cartegena. His deformed hand. Him and his yellow dog showing me around. How I’m practicing trusting some people. How I don’t trust anyone. The boy in the bunk next to mine finding me in bed for the fourth day in a row reading the Neruda book I stole. Asking if I’m okay. Me laughing. Telling him I’m just lazy. The way he opens his mouth to say something else but doesn’t. How I’m glad he doesn’t. How if he really got to know me, he’d run away. How Johncito still recognizes me afterward. How he reaches out for me. How he touches my face.
How I no longer recognize myself. How I can no longer touch me. How his mother can
tell I’m too drunk to hold him. How she pulls him back when he reaches out. How I judge
me. How I lose me.

My jar full of fortunes pulled from fortune cookies. Thinking I know everything, can
predict everything. It’s easy. Everything is doom. Watching TV. Ads for body lotion. So
much skin. “Hanging in there.” Catching the previews. Misunderstandings. Working the
late shift. The cop calling to ask me if the woman I let stay at the hotel without a credit
card deposit had choke marks around her neck when I saw her. The last one to see her
alive, before she “overdosed.” How I cried. How I said I hadn’t seen the man with her,
sitting on the lobby couch. How I saw in her eyes she was afraid, how I’d wanted her to
be safe. How I broke hotel policy. How I didn’t know. How I called and called her room
in the morning, knowing something was wrong. How a man answered. How he said he’d
be right down. How he never came. How I should have known. The cop calling me again.
Reminding me it wasn’t my fault. How I didn’t believe him. How the man must have sat
with her body all night after he killed her. My boss calling me into the office. Her cool
voice when she says, “I understand that you’re very shaken up, but stuff like this happens
all the time. Especially in hotels.”

Stuff like this happens all the time.

Asking dad to take us to the shooting range. Never going. Sitting in the porch with my
sister, smoking cigarettes, ignoring everything important. Not tending to wounds. Not
tending to anything. Singing my songs in front of my sister, no one else. My shame. The
color of mustard. Imagining ways to disappear. How I want to disappear.

And then how I do. How I disappear completely.

His lost-in-the-dark eyes when, a year in, he tries to suffocate me with a sheet. His
clenched jaw. Him calling me worthless. Me repeating worthless worthless worthless.
Him coolly listing the things he hates about me in front of his friends. My only friends

A boat’s motor over his shouting. His clenched jaw. Telling him I don’t want to kill such a little thing. His clenched jaw. Him saying I would be a terrible mother. Him coming to the clinic to see that I follow through. His money after all. His clenched jaw. All the women waiting at the clinic, the men as good as ghosts. Could have been an all-female dance class. Wishing it was an all-female dance class. Should offer to lead an all-female dance class. His clenched jaw. Waiting for him to come to the motel. Taking a long swim before the medicine sets in. The man in the white chair watching me swim. Selfies of my belly I show no one. Him watching fishing shows on the motel bed. Me in the bathtub. Me in the bathtub. Me in the bathtub. The pain of childbirth. No birth. In the bathtub with the little alien thing in my hand. Wanting to keep it, knowing I can’t. Knowing it’s too late. Asking him if he wants to know what it looks like. Telling him it is scientifically fascinating. His clenched jaw. The tiny alien in the motel trash can. Her miniscule arms. How I judge me. How I lose and disappear at the same time. How I get what I always wanted. How I lose everything. How I disappear completely.

Him telling me to turn toward my bedroom wall. Telling me to close my eyes. Saying he has a surprise. How I close my eyes. How I lie there with my eyes closed for two minutes. Imagining the surprise. Something small would be okay. Hoping, hoping, hoping. Him coming back. Him saying, “Oh, you’re still here?” Him laughing. Him
leaving the room again. Opening my eyes. “Wait. There’s no surprise?” Him on my
couch. My couch. Telling me to relax. Asking why I can’t take a joke. Me going into the
bathroom. My bathroom. Staring at the water stain on the wall. The shape of…a stain.
The shape of nothing.

Him telling me to get a job at the hardware store instead of go to graduate school.
Wanting to call him a tool under my breath. Having no breath to spare. Him saying I
won’t be a good teacher. Barely believing him. The secret door in the apartment we
almost rent together. His eyes when I change my mind.

A wind chime I build and give to him before I move away. How I want to keep it.

How I always give the things I love away before I can lose them.

The first day of graduate school. How nobody insults me. How nobody notices that I am
a large terrible thing filled with many small awful things. How I let them believe I am not
what I am. My first day of teaching. My students laughing at a joke. My surprise when
they all come back next class. Walking to the lake with new friends at night. Jumping in.
His anger online later, how I wasn’t around to talk dirty. How he had to watch porn
again. Me apologizing. Me wishing I were still in the lake.

My twin sister on the phone after he pushes me off the bed, after he hits me, after he
pushes me against the wall, against the ground, after I find somewhere by the lake to hide
and call her as he cleans fish, pretending nothing happened. “I’ve never been an angry
person,” he says, gentle now. “You make me that angry. I’m sorry. Let’s go fry the fish.
Come on, it’ll be fun.” My twin sister saying “Get out. Now.” How I say I am so scared.
How she grows so impatient. How she can see through. How I’m lying now. How I’ve
been lying for the last three years. How I’m not that scared. How she knows I know how
small he is. How she knows I know what he is. How I’m just lazy. Too lazy to leave, too
tired to recover. Her voice when she doesn’t believe me when I say I’m scared. How
she’s never known me to be all that scared of anything when it comes down to it. How
she doesn’t believe me when I say again that I’ll leave him. How she’s never known me to leave him when it comes down to it. How I’ve never listened to her before. How even though she sounds so far away, I finally, after over three years, listen.

The silent drive back to school. Driving toward oblivion from oblivion.

How he doesn’t come after me. How he always had others.

How I could have left at any time.

Funny cartoons. Carefully smoothing out tin foil. A walk on the break wall. Imagined trip-wires in the safest rooms. Recurring nightmares. An overly-sensitive motion light on the porch. Crickets ceasing their singing for a few seconds. My roommates on the phone demanding I come hang out for just a little while. Singing to me on my answering machine. To me? Hiding in a hotel room in the town in which I live, scared of the pizza man, scared of my friends, scared of me. My hand shaking as I sign the receipt. Writing to someone too far away to come see me this way. My mom in the bed next to mine telling me it’ll be okay. Telling her it’s worse now. It’s all worse now. Drinking a bottle and a half of wine when she leaves. Spilling. Throwing up. A stain lingering. A stain the shape of…a bird. No. A stain the shape of a stain. The shape of nothing. Saying whoever I once was is gone already, why try to come back? Saying I was lost forever ago. How someone who lost themselves so thoroughly is destined to lose everything they ever try to keep. How I can predict everything. It’s easy. I always lose.

Telling the woman at the women’s center that everything was my fault. Her sincerity when she says, “Excuse me a sec. I need to go grab some coffee.” My dad sending flowers. An email from a student asking me when I’m coming back. How they’ve all decided I should come back. Coming back. Going to a movie alone. Rolling my eyes at everything. At myself. Saying boohoo to the mirror. Putting on tragicomedy acts for my roommates. Renting thirteen new releases in bleak February. Watching half. Never returning them. Not leaving my room. Not showering before class. My roommates in the
morning making exotic bird noises in the threshold of my closed door, forcing me to laugh. My dad texting from mid-winter Minnesota, pretending he’s in Hawaii: “Golfed today! Met some locals!” How I believe him for a week, imagine him there. How I laugh when I find out.

Sitting next to my brother on an airplane, fighting over the window seat. Thinking about asking him how long he thinks Amelia Earhart survived on the island she wound up on. Worrying he’ll say she died on impact. Thinking of asking about the biggest wave he’s ever seen. About asking what he thinks it’s like to be in the middle of the ocean, no land for miles, on a sailboat, in an angry storm.

Realizing I already know what it’s like to be lost at sea.

Thinking about asking if he thinks Danielle will be okay. Worrying he’ll say one sailboat doesn’t matter. Instead suggesting a game of Hangman.


Filming fake Coca-Cola commercials on a glass-bottomed boat with my sisters and brother. Filming creatures below the boat. Only spotting one starfish. Saying it’s going to be our big break for National Geographic. Laughter spreading across the water.

How I’d missed making them laugh.

The guitar picks and Wisconsin pins I find in my wallet when the gas station guys send it back to me after I forget it there on a school road trip. They remember me, they say when they call for my address. They remember me? They remember my bird sweatshirt, the licorice ropes I bought. Remember how we laughed when the licorice didn’t fit in the plastic bag. Remember? How I never tell anyone I lost my wallet in Wisconsin. How I keep the picks and the pins in the fortune jar I hide in my room for safe-keeping. How everyone knows I lose everything. Everyone knows. How I lose. Everything.
A celebratory fire on the beach after my graduation. My mom saying she’s proud. How I ask why. How I scoff. How she retaliates: “You know why.” Flipping through posters at the record store. My boyfriend excited about the smallest things, his glistening eyes, his tall joy. Him saying the least expected most necessary thing again. How I can’t stop laughing. Him handing me the book I’d been looking at an hour before. Him saying “a token of my esteem.” My face immediately buried against him. How I hide my smile in his chest so no one can take it from me. So I can’t take it from me. Him yelling my name when I cross in front of traffic. Him ranting sarcastically about the devil-may-care attitude I have toward my very own life. How I pretend to be mad. How I know he’s right. Me grabbing his hand. How we laugh.

The rain making patterns on the window. My mom calling late again, forgetting the time change, laughing at herself. The tired lull of late afternoon as it turns into evening and I begin the sometimes impossible task of making myself bored enough with the world to close my eyes and sleep. Spiders webbing in surprising places. The window crannies of tall buildings. Floating Chinese lanterns. A card game with friends. Loons at night. Do they love me? How I imagine they judge me. How I imagine I’m losing them. How I lose everything. How I lose.

A man scribbling in an old notebook at the bus stop, shielding the pages from the rain. The billboards, ill-intented and towering like buildings. Neon lights. The bar at closing time, drunks gone enough to finally be not alone among strangers, among friends. Phone lines, seemingly invisible unless you really look at them. Notice how everywhere they are, how low they hang, lazy and fat between houses and trees. A glass of cold milk. Crank toy machines. My sister laughing until she cries when she notices my new pasted on mustache. Finding pennies on the ground. A card in the mail. A picture of Marilyn Monroe I’ve never seen. Candles in the window. Melting wax on my fingers. My mom keeping the light on for when I get home. My step-dad sneezing theatrically from upstairs.
Friends coming to my window after I ignore their invitations. A small conversation. A last chance invitation. A bike ride, a cliff. The lake below. Thinking about falling. Friends yelling at me for getting too close. They don’t want me to fall. Thinking they must really love me. To worry about losing me. Thinking what a thought. Thinking this must be what love is. Thinking I’ve felt it before. Like rereading a beautiful letter I thought I’d lost forever. Finding it tucked in a heavy book I hid from myself.

What a thought. The boats coming in, the boats going out. How from way up above they seem directionless. How they could really be going anywhere. How it’s too hard to tell from here.

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YOU’LL TAKE THE HIGH ROAD AND I’LL TAKE THE LOW ROAD

When Danielle Wright was nine or ten she entered a beauty contest. When they asked her in front of more than a hundred people what she was afraid of she couldn’t think of anything at all. When she paused, when they pressed her, she said finally, “I fear hell.”

When Danielle’s first and only boyfriend broke up with her to move in with one of her girlfriends, she was devastated. When she joined the choir and the same girl was seated next to her, she forgave her immediately. When Danielle’s ex-boyfriend broke up with the new girl, Danielle went over to her apartment and stayed with her until she stopped crying, two days later.

Many girls claim Danielle as their best friend.

When Danielle’s parents decided to sell the ranch she grew up on and take her on a two-year sailing adventure, she cringed. At fourteen, two years is infinity. She didn’t want to be away from friends, from parties, from boys, from life as she knew it, life as she was hoping it was becoming. On the boat she was gracious but miserable. Her parents cut the
trip in half, believing that after all is said and done, love is just one large compromise, warm and wide.

A while after returning from the year on the sailboat, one of Danielle’s friends noticed that the trip was all she talked about.

When family sailing friends David and Rosemary Dyche offered the Wrights space on their boat, The Nina, for their eight-day cruise across the Tasman Sea from New Zealand to Australia, Danielle’s parents couldn’t go. When Danielle asked if she could, they bought her a plane ticket.

Danielle, eighteen and just having dyed her hair a brilliant deep red, left on Mother’s Day 2013. She thanked her mom, her dad, over and over, saying that she couldn’t believe how ungrateful she’d been at fourteen, how immature not to see what an adventure they had given her on the sea. How she was so grateful now, for all the adventures they had given her over the years, for her growing up on the ranch, riding her horse and being homeschooled, for the time they let her go to Japan unchaperoned. How thankful she was now.

The last time her mother heard her voice, Danielle was waiting to board her plane in LA. She wished her mother a happy mother’s day and said she had to go, her phone was dying.

Danielle turned nineteen in New Zealand, on May 18, 2013, ten days before she and six others set sail. At her seafood celebration she sang for all of her new friends, a song her college choir had just learned. How everyone was amazed by her soprano, by her curly red hair, long and wild. How everyone was amazed by her grace, her poise. How some people sing so beautifully.

You’ll take the low road and I’ll take the high road and I’ll be in Scotland before you.
THEORY OF DISAPPEARANCE

“This is the first poem in my collection, Portal, which in large part elegizes my brother who drowned in a freak tugboat accident about 19 years ago. His was a very abrupt disappearance. "Theory" began as an effort to capture a number of the disparate images I was thinking about shortly after my brother’s death—things, sensations, memories, some of which I could place, some of which I couldn’t.”

-Author Mary Pinard, email exchange

Danielle’s mother watched her pack for her trip. In a hurry, the night before she left. The days prior, Danielle had been finishing exams after her first year at University of Louisiana. She hadn’t had any time for the task. Danielle bounced around the house, giggling, so excited. When her mother, nudging her child toward getting it done, asked her if she wanted to be left alone to pack, Danielle was adamant. No mom, stay. Sit down right here, she said, pointing to her bed. Smiling.

Danielle held everything up for her mom to see. They discussed what was suitable for a trip across the Tasman. You don’t need that, her mother remembers saying, It’s not like you’re going to Mexico. It’s going to be cold.

Danielle’s mother remembers so much. She remembers all of their laughter. How Danielle always tells her everything, even the stuff she doesn’t want to hear. Her kindness. Her eyes. How much her friends love her. When Danielle was packing, her mother was focused on her. The infectious way she flitted around the room. Her smile. She only remembers a few things that actually ended up in the bag.

Items she brought with her:

2. Her bible. As they walked out to the car to go to the airport, Danielle stopped abruptly. Wait, she said. I forgot my bible.
3. A large worn gray sweatshirt. Owned by her best male friend. When her mother said it was too big, that she was drowning in it, Danielle said she’d wear it and think of him.
NINA: AN INCOMPLETE LIST

Nina.
1. Spanish for “little girl.” (niña)
2. Born in 1928 in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. 87 years old now. Not so little anymore.
3. Won a race from New York City to Spain in July 1928, just after she was born.
4. Won many, many races after that.
5. 59 feet long with tan masts. Her floor is sleek and wooden.
6. Likes her current Floridian owners, David and Rosemary Dyche, and their son, Davy. They keep everything just how it always was. They don’t even fit her with GPS.
8. Doesn’t understand why everyone says she is missing. Knows exactly where she is.
On May 29th, 2013 The Nina set sail from Opua, New Zealand, with plans to reach Newcastle, Australia on June 8th. Her only reliable form of communication was a satellite phone. She had just been given a new engine, a Cummins 4B 150 diesel, fitted by David Dyche III, who was not concerned when the suppliers wouldn’t sign off on a warranty because they had noticed the installment was a little off kilter. They cited the fact that the misalignment would cause “abnormal engine vibrations” and possible safety issues.

On June 3rd, retired meteorologist Bob McDavitt received a call from Evi Nemeth, who asked for advice on a “best passage” around some rough weather they were experiencing.

At 9:30 am on June 4th, she asks again:

*Any weather for Nina*

At 11:25, he replies:

*Stay hove-to until around 6pm Wednesday. SW wind peak at 45 to 60 kts was around 6am today. Peak swell 8 significant around 9pm tonight*

She replies:

*Thanks storm sails shredded last night, now bare poles. Will update course info at 6pm*
No one receives the final message until a month later, on July 3rd, when the satellite service provider, Iridium, finally releases it to the New Zealand search authorities. Nina’s last attempt at communication was lost in transmission. If Bob had received the message, it is likely authorities would have been alerted earlier.

When Bob sent messages again on June 6th and 7th, he got no replies.

Nina never made any distress calls.

It is not until June 14th, six days after their intended arrival at Newcastle, that the Rescue Coordination Centre of New Zealand (RCCNZ) was alerted.

It was not until June 25th that the RCCNZ agreed that a military aircraft, the P3K2 Orion could search for The Nina on its way back from a mission. They found nothing but yachts with other names.

On July 4th, 2013, RCCNZ called off their search. They were certain The Nina and her crew were lost. The crew especially. RCCNZ is not in the business of searching for 87-year-old wooden sailboats with no passengers, adrift across the Tasman. By the 4th they had covered nearly 600,000 square miles, visually or through military-grade radar. When the Wrights, after putting on their own extensive search, show RCCNZ a satellite picture of what looks like The Nina, the RCCNZ refuses to send a plane to check. Ricky gets his pilot’s license so he can look for her himself. When Ricky and Robin fly over the Tasman looking for their daughter, Robin has the realization that The Nina is drifting, that the gridline they’d flown yesterday could be where The Nina is today. She feels sick to her stomach. The futility, she tells me, the futility. I want to tell her that during the Fastnet Race of 1979, fifteen sailors died in a freak, force 11 storm. I want to tell her that of the 306 boats, five sank, 100 were knocked down, and 77 rolled. (Turned over so that the hull—and everyone in it—is underwater.) I want to tell her that not a single one of the sailors who died in 1979 were in a boat that adopted the storm-weathering tactic of heaving to.
THINGS DANIELLE MIGHT HAVE SAID DURING THE STORM

“I don’t think she was crying or anything. She wasn’t like that. She was probably scared. And sick. They all probably were.”
-Robin Wright, mother of Danielle
phone interview

It’s going to be okay.
I love you, Mom and Dad.
It’s going to be okay.
Come here, there’s room over here.
The Lord goes with you. He will never leave you nor forsake you.
It’s going to be okay.
I think it’s getting quieter now. It’s going to be okay.
Do you think we’re going to make it?
It’ll be okay.
My mom’s mom, my Grandma Rum, when she was alive, was full of God, and not even five feet tall. Her faith was so strong that I can’t even describe her as “religious” because I don’t want to misconstrue “church-going” with what she was. Yes, she went to church. Yes, she made us memorize bible verses for Christmas gatherings. Yes, she sent us churchy news clippings in the mail. But she was something more than religious.

Let me explain. Growing up, my mother brought us to church every Sunday. A Lutheran church, blue and unassuming, with tall banners surrounding the altar that said words like Praise Him. And one that simply said Love. The services were mostly music, and the pastors never scared us with hell or damnation. If Catholicism is PG-13, ELCA Lutherans are G-rated. The message was simple: Be kind, Jesus was. Or, at least that’s all I could get out of it. Even as a kid, I remember chewing on my nails during services. Making jokes with my brother and sisters. My mother shushing us. Paying attention, but not believing. I didn’t believe it. I couldn’t make myself. Father, Son, and Holy Ghost? How could I believe it, when so much of everything and everyone seemed false? When my dad seemed so sad? When at eight years old, a kid in my Sunday school class told me he’d like to shove a broom inside me?

I worried for days about what it was like for him at home.

Because that’s what Jesus would do.

The fact that the only music store in my hometown was Christian made me secretly mad.

I thought of the bible as stories created to teach us how to be, none of it real. I certainly never believed in hell. And I never believed in heaven. I never believed in God above. But I wanted to. And as I looked around the church, it felt like most everybody was in the same boat.

My grandmother was different. She actually believed. She was not pretending. You could see it all the way through her and around her everywhere. I called it her “grace cloud.” Everything she did in life was for God. The worst sin she ever committed was dumping syrupy pancakes on my grandfather’s head when he was being stubborn.

She was good.
Every time she saw me she said something intense. *You’re growing into a beautiful flower. God loves you.* Once she asked me to name which of the seven deadly sins was my true vice. She tried to guess it. *Pride,* she said. I thought about it, sitting in her kitchen overlooking the quiet suburban lake. The bridge in the distance I always swore was part of a painting, never having seen it up close. The bridge I wanted to walk to in the winter across the lake but never did. I stared and thought of the bridge and my one true vice, pretty sure I was only remembering six of the seven. *Envy,* I said. *Envy.*

*Oh,* she said. *That’s your mother’s too. Mine is pride.*

I did not want to think about my one true vice. I did not want to know my mother’s. All of this thinking. All of this thinking my mother’s family was always doing. My intense Norwegian grandmother most of all. Spending most of my childhood trying not to be intense like her. Like my mom. Failing. I was scared of my grandmother. She wanted so much from me. She wanted whatever she thought God wanted from me. *You have so many gifts. Don’t forget that. God gave them to you for a reason.*

I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t believe. I was always losing the things I loved. I had no gifts. I couldn’t believe.

When she was dying in the house I grew up in, it got worse. It got worse because her faith was getting stronger as mine was diminishing completely—an unraveling already tattered rug. I would come home about once a month from my junior year of college to see her.

It was a particularly difficult winter. I’ll call it *The Winter I Couldn’t Sleep.*

The drives home were full of my dread.

Her on the hospital bed my mom brought home for her. Her asking me to read her the news, to stay on top of things. Her with her tray. Her asking me to bring her to the bathroom. Her soft veiny hand reaching out for toilet paper. Her dictating to me the grace-filled cards she wanted to send to friends. Me writing it all down, my sleepless hand shaking, the letters strewn about like seeds in the wind. Her asking me to read to her from the bible.

My inability to believe the words I was reading.
How I sat crying in my dorm-room windowsill watching a very still rabbit after she called to ask me to read aloud the two-page poem I’d written for a class and sent my mother.

*Read that line again, please.*

How all she’d wanted that entire day was to hear me read it.

Why?

How she died soon after. How my mom said she was so peaceful. How she was never scared at all. How she believed until the end.

How at the funeral “celebration” one of her friends read one of my grandmother’s cards. How I remembered writing it down for her. How my jittery sleepless hand knocked over a glass of water when the friend asked the crowd which one of her grandchildren had written it down.

Staring at the water pooling on the table and eventually spilling off.

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At the ER I believe I am 300 years old. I believe I have seen everything: past, present, and future. I hear voices. I hear my dead grandma. I hear my sisters, who I know are nowhere near me. I hear my brother. I hear my mom. I run out of the ER, past the nurses, screaming that they are incompetent and that I asked for a sandwich ages ago. That the main problem is that I haven’t eaten. A woman follows me out and stops me. I stare past her at an open field and think of the days when trains were king. I forget she is there until she asks me where I’m going. I say I’m walking home. She asks me if I know where that is. I pause. I point out to the field behind her. She tries not to laugh. She brings me back inside.

When they come in to examine me and try to open my legs I scream. I panic. I scream and scream. I flail at them. I shout that I know what they want from me. What they all want. The ER makes a bad move. The ER calls the police. A woman officer comes to talk to me. I tell her the obvious things. That everyone is trying to kill me and take out parts of my brain. What do they think those trays are for anyway? That it’s obvious what is going on here. That I haven’t had my sandwich. That I need to sleep.
That I need to eat. That no one is listening to me. She asks me if I’ve taken any drugs. I
scream. I already told them I’m not on drugs. Don’t you people talk to each other?
Somebody help me. I scream and scream. She looks at me like I’m a criminal and I can
tell in her eyes that she’s thinking the word bitch. I tell her that I am a bitch. I tell her that
I’m fixing to punch her. She handcuffs me to the bed. When I calm down after an hour I
drink tea and stare at the sandwich I asked for. I’m 300 years old again.

The phrase angel, look up keeps singing in my head. It’s a soft voice. It could be
my grandmother’s.

Angel, look up.

A woman comes into the room and starts typing. I ask her what she’s doing. She
doesn’t answer me. I ask her if she’s writing down everything I’m saying. I tell her loudly
that I’d like to be credited. I ask her to please tell me what she’s writing. She doesn’t look
at me. She doesn’t talk to me.

I start screaming again.

I am sitting in the back of the cop car asking the woman police officer where I am
going. She doesn’t answer me. The male officer in the passenger seat doesn’t answer
either. I keep asking where I’m going. No one answers. I talk to myself the whole ride.

Angel, look up.
Angel, look up.
Angel, look up.
Angel, look up.
Angel, look up.
Angel, look up.

I believe everyone in the new hospital is my family and the other people on the
phone saying that they are my family and are coming to get me are not my family. My
hospital family members give me medicine that makes my jaw twitch and lock. When I
go to the phone in the hall and hold it to my ear for two minutes without dialing a
number, a woman comes up to tell me to call someone. Angel, look up. I don’t know who
to call because my family is already everyone in the hospital. But I don’t trust them.
Angel, look up. I call my dad. He tells me he loves me. I tell him that I must retreat now.
The word retreat is added to the repeated phrases in my head.
While my mom, brother, and dad are driving to come get me I’m asking one my hospital family members seated at a desk what to do with my toothbrush. Put it in your room, sweetie, she says. *Angel, look up.* I carry my toothbrush around with me for a while, waving it in my hospital family member’s faces, asking them what I should do with it. I have nowhere to put it. *Retreat.* I go to the room my hospital family members put me in. I sit on the bed. I place the toothbrush down. *Angel, look up.* I sit quietly. One of my hospital family members comes to get me. *Retreat.*

My hospital family members and I are sitting in a large room at a big oval table. Everyone is looking at me. *Angel, look up.* I have this covered. I am at a meeting and it is my turn to speak. I forgot my notes but it will be okay.

I know why I’m here, I say.
You do? they ask.
Yes, I say.
They don’t ask me to tell them why I’m here. I’m okay with that because I don’t know why I’m here.

A hospital family member at the head of the table asks me if I’m very smart.
I tell her I don’t know how to answer that, so I am probably not.
She smiles.
*Angel, look up.*
Do you consider yourself creative? Do you have racing thoughts?
The oval table could be floating. It could be a boat. I see what’s happening.
They are going to diagnose me. Perfect.

When my non-hospital family members come I realize I made a terrible mistake because when I see my mother, I know she is my real mother. I cry and I hug her and I say that I’m sorry I went crazy. She tells me it’s okay. When my brother, my dad, my mother, and I are sitting in the “family room” I’m embarrassed about my twitching jaw so I don’t say anything. With my head on the table I hear my brother ask, “When is she going to be back?” I want to tell him it’s the nicest, most precise question I’ve ever heard in my entire godforsaken life. Instead I keep my ear against the table and listen to its particles hum, wondering when I’m going to be back. If I’ll ever be back.

*Angel, look up.*
When I text a friend from my senior year of college a few months later I ask him if he thinks I’m screwed for life now. He says, Well, does anything seem different? Do people treat you differently?

I look around the room I’m in. A boring party. People on the couch next to me playing guitar. A guy trying to impress my friend. My friend placing someone else’s hat on my head. My friend laughing. Resting her head on my shoulder.

I text back: No.

Angel, look up.

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I didn’t know how to talk to Robin Wright about religion. It’s hard to tell someone with so much faith that you have so little. They might think you find them silly. Or worse, they might think your lack of faith represents something sinister within you, like a rotted out core of a soft peach.

I didn’t know how to talk to Robin Wright about religion because the only time I’ve ever come close to believing in God was when I was handcuffed to a bed in an emergency room hearing my recently-dead grandma’s voice say angel, look up. And even after that experience, after knowing full well that the phrase saved me and brought me back, I can’t say I’m sure there is a God. I’m only certain it’s possible.

Robin Wright believes that God speaks to her. He told her once that her brother would be saved near Christmastime. Her brother committed suicide for Christmas. She believes God has him now.

When Danielle was a girl, a prophet came by the house and laid hands on her head. He said:

“She will travel the world and people will listen.”

Robin Wright believes that if her only child drowned, she is in heaven. She believes she will see her again in this life or the next.

Robin Wright believes. She believes that when something horrible happens you can either “get bitter or pull closer to God.”
Robin Wright pulls closer. She takes care of Danielle’s friends, some of whom are still reeling from the loss, after two years. She hasn’t given up sailing. She recently bought a business: Dip n Dots, because she likes to see happy children and it keeps her focused on something. She is grateful for the time she had with Danielle. She is grateful for her husband. She tells me she doesn’t have Danielle to love on right now so she loves on whoever is around. I can’t believe her strength. It reminds me of my grandmother. So much grace.

I’m angry I can’t believe. I want grace so much. I want so much grace.

During our conversation, Robin told me of a movie she went to with Ricky, Danielle’s father, after their daughter’s disappearance. She told me how she was crying as she left the theatre. She told me to watch it, so I did. The movie, Heaven is for Real, is based on a true story of a little boy who has a near death experience and comes back to describe the details of heaven.

Robin Wright believes.
I’m angry I found it hokey.
I want to believe too.
If only the kid and his family weren’t making millions off their story.
If only there wasn’t so much terror and greed and selfishness.
If only every miracle couldn’t be explained.

*Angel, look up.*
FOUND

One month after writing about my missing incandescent earring in relation to Danielle’s disappearance, I found it in the middle of my newly swept floor while I was moving out of my apartment. It was the only thing in the entire room. I have no idea where it came from. I found it on May 28, 2015, one day before Danielle and The Nina set sail two years ago.

Lost for six years.

I don’t know what to make of it. The possibilities of what it could mean are endless. But it’s hard not to think it is a message from God. It’s hard not to think it means Danielle is alive. It’s hard not to think it’s a sign for myself as well, a message to keep going. Something telling me I’m going to be okay. Something saying I always was.

The desperate need to assign meaning to it at all. The possibility it all means nothing.

My careful joy when I see the earring on the ground. Opening the small box inside the bigger box in which I packed the other earring. Whispering to myself: calm down, it might not be it. Knowing that I’d found it. Holding them both in the palm of my hand.

The thought of losing it again already swelling inside me like a faraway oncoming wave.
How I never really believed I would find my lost earring. How it didn’t matter what I believed. How it happened anyway. How I put the reunited earrings away for two weeks. How I hid them from myself.

How it hurts so much to hope. How it hurts so much to love. How it hurts so much to lose. How it hurts so much to find. How it hurts so much to be lost. How it hurts so much to be found. How it hurts so much to believe.

How it hurts so much to be reminded there are reasons to believe.

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THE WORLD IS SO BIG. THE WORLD IS SO SO BIG. DON’T EVER WORRY. THE WORLD IS BIG ENOUGH TO CONTAIN THE THING YOU LOST AND THE POSSIBILITY OF YOU FINDING IT AGAIN.

ACT II.5

IF I DISAPPEAR

you’ll find me somewhere.
REFERENCES


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