
Pale Fish

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Everything I write begins and ends with my sister. She is always there, just behind the words, a dark shadow pacing behind the slim black bars I have imposed upon the page. I can feel her mournful green eyes on me as I write this, and by dragging my pen across this page I am also dragging it across those scars on her wrists and once again letting her dark blood escape.

This is my sister's story to tell, not mine. The story of how I write begins with the story of why I could not write, and that involves a betrayal that I am not sure I am ready to commit. Writing belongs to my sister; her journals formed spiraling piles on her messy adolescent floor, begging me to read them and finally find her cure. Her words mesmerized me; when I discovered notes that she had carelessly left on our flower-tiled bathroom floor, I would rip them open and devour every word like a scientist analyzing her genetic code to find the defect. I knew that if I only understood what was wrong, I could fix it. And then, one day, instead of chatty notes about the cute boy who sat next to her in class, I found suicide notes. I cannot explain why I did not read these. After trying so hard to discover her true self in banal writings on notebook paper, I could not open these tidy squares and see the truth.

The first poem I ever wrote was, in essence, a note back to her. That day I drove around our town sobbing so hard that I was choking for air and pulled into every church parking lot, hoping someone would somehow find me and save me. I do not even know where that poem came from; it was like my tears, and it suddenly welled up inside me and poured out onto the back of a receipt for gasoline:

Dear Sister,

*As I flush your suicide notes down the toilet
they appear like pale translucent fish,
flirtingly chasing each other around their circular abode
before escaping to the sea.*

*I hate myself for seeing the beauty in this moment
as you never could have.*

That day, I chose my fate. I did not talk to a pastor then, or ever, about my sister's secret. I did not tell my friends, because I was afraid they would act strangely around her and make her feel even more isolated. I assumed my mother could be counted on, but when I earnestly detailed a list of strategies for 'suicide-proofing' the house with her, she replied that, "If she wants to kill herself, she can just go right ahead." While I fought for my sister's life, my mouth would stay shut.

Exorcism

*I want to break your heart and leave it bleeding
howling
writhing on the floor*

*I want you to hear the desperate scrabbling on the other side of the wall
as you lie terrified in your bed
knowing that your child sister is trying to hang herself
in her closet on the other side.*

*I want you to hear this for nights
weeks
years*

*until your bloodshot eyes never close
until the sounds become the wild scrabbling beat of your own heart
and you can't discern what side of the wall you are on
and which of you is dying.*

*I want to write about this until my fingers bleed.
I want to go about with scraps of paper stuck to the congealed platelets on my fingertips
I want you to take these memories from me
so that I can finally sleep.*

For over two years my sister was the black hole at the center of my universe, her thick dark gravity pulling me in a frenzied revolution around her. I could not even estimate how many times I hid knives from her, stole pills from her room, or casually strolled through the basement to make sure she was not hanging herself from the beams in the storage room. I became an expert at making up excuses to come into the bathroom when she had been in the tub too long.

It turns out that her saving grace was, of course, not in me but within herself. She discovered that, after all of that journal writing, she had become an extremely talented writer. One day she told me, with pride radiating off of her like sunlight off of the snow, that a poem she had written was going to be published in a teen magazine. I felt like the balloon that had been expanding and expanding in my chest had finally popped and allowed my lungs to fill with air, my heart to beat again. My sister finally had a new secret.

Before I left for college, my sister took me aside and told me something that started that balloon expanding in my chest again. She said that the only reason she had never really killed herself was because of me. I avoided thinking that I would be leaving her alone with only my mother to guard her.

Once at college, I took a class on creative writing because it sounded easier than the other option, which I can't recall now. Our first task was to write a poem, which I had never had to do for class before. I procrastinated, trying to think of what to possibly write about, and once again I felt it welling up inside of me against my own will:

Lullabye

*Your baby daughter
felt so alone
that she took the razor to her wrists
But it's not your fault
You were always a good mother.*

*When she tried again
with vodka and pills
I begged you to remove them from the house
But why should you have to stop drinking
just because she has problems?
It's not your fault
You were always a good mother.*

*When I watched the flashing lights
take her away
and you hugged me and cried
in front of your friends
It wasn't your fault I didn't hug back
You were always a good mother.*

When it came time to read my poem aloud in class, I did so with an unsteady voice. During discussion of my poem, a classmate argued that the speaker could not possibly be a sister because they seemed to do so little to help, and at that point I ran out of the room and hid in the bathroom until class was over. When I returned to collect my books, my teacher asked me if I wanted to talk about it and I brushed him off.

I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to talk about it. But it's all I can think about. The problem with talking about it is that someone has to listen. Every time I have to read one of my poems or turn in a personal paper it feels like I am cutting off her fingers and distributing them to the class. What you hear or read may affect you for a moment, but then you will go eat a sandwich or balance your checkbook and I will be left here, clutching my wilting white sheaf of papers, loathing myself for what I have just done.

Late at night I still write poems after flying out of my bed from sleep, because I can still hear her on the other side of my wall. At first, I was trying to write it all down as a form of exorcism; I thought that putting it on a page would be equivalent to erasing it from my brain. When you are in the midst of something so soul-corroding, it seems that your life would be good again if you could just dig out that part of your brain that contains the memories. However, the day that I realized I was actually starting to become numb to the past sent me into a new kind of panic. It was like I was standing in front of that terrified girl of 16 who had been chewing her lips until they bled, and telling her, "Don't worry, I will forget you." I am so afraid of the day that someone sarcastically complains that they just want to die and it doesn't make me flinch. So now I write as if I am in the middle of a burning room and have to memorize every smoke-filled corner before the whole place collapses on me. I do not know what I will do when I have run out of corners.

I know that I will never be able to really publish anything that I write, because to do that would be to kill her myself. She is the writer. I will never take that from her. Even to write this, knowing that only a few people will read it, feels like a betrayal.

Everything I write begins and ends with my sister. She is the only person I write about and the only one I will never be able to show it to. I should burn this paper and watch the smoke carry her secret back into the air, breathe it deeply, trap it in my body once again. I should douse myself in gasoline and join it, but I cannot. I am not strong enough to do what I should, to keep it inside, and so, instead, I write.