
The Writing Scar

Alix Clinkingbeard

When summer drifts in again, another hot and sickeningly sticky Kentucky bourbon summer, it will have been four years. I'm never sure how much numbers matter. I know good writing benefits from specifics, so I try to use specifics, but in the swift current of everything it's hard to find perspective on four years. It's a long time for my generation. Four years at my age will have put me all the way through college, an entire phase of life, walking out on the other end with a bachelor's degree in hand. Four years at age 80 might be no more than a glimmer. Four years at 40-something might be just another four years, but not if every moment is another agonizing moment without your son. Four years makes me check the calendar – it can't have been so long, it doesn't seem so long. There was so much I wanted to do...surely I haven't wasted this much time? It's been three years, four months, two weeks, and four days.

Every year, month, week, day, is another I've failed. I haven't written about you yet. I've tried, I've made so many attempts and starts, but I can never seem to get past first sentences. And I'm so sorry, Sam. I know you'd want me to write about you. No, not out of any selfishness or grandeur, but because you know me – you know writing makes me happy, just as writing made you happy. Like photography makes me happy as photography made you happy. Like music makes me happy as music made you happy. Like the people I love make me happy as the people you love made – well, made their peace. We've all been forced to make our peace. Sometimes all I want to do is cling white-knuckled to grief.

I should cling to a pen, but I, I who am so quick to write, find myself wordless. I thrive in fiction, whittling away at characters and settings and conversations until my own universes (and those I borrow from more capable authors) are perfect. I vent, letting loose my frustrations, in journals and forums and personal essays. I preserve memories of my childhood and of adventures from last weekend by setting them down in either ink or

pixels and bytes. I come back to topics again and again, rewording the same stories and finding new nuances in the events that mean the most to me. But what about you, Sam? If anything in my life has meaning, you do. You mean more than sand, more than clouds, more than moss growing on the north side of granite. You even mean more than the alcohol, more than the fixation on rivers and Jack Daniels. Yet with you my words come out clumsy and stumbled, the m's tripping over the tails of y's. I slam into three new clichés for every one I manage to swerve around and can never seem to pick myself up again. The collection of flawed first paragraphs about you is as scattered as the sentences that make them, but put together they'd fill half a notebook. You halt me.

When you died, when the news reached me, I managed eight words.

16 July 2004 @ 12:12

the world is a really fucked up place.

Mood: crappy

Eight hours after the eight words, I managed something else. Something no one else has ever seen, an online journal entry set to private.

16 July 2004 @ 08:19 pm

[protected post]

It's weird cuz there's no one to talk to and I don't really feel like talking to anyone, but I also really do and I think I really need to. But I don't feel like

calling people up and talking to them because, I don't know, I feel like it would be melodramatic and it's not my place to be this upset. That should be left to other people. I'm just a bystander.

Mood: indescribable

Already I was speechless when it came to you, silent and unsure. Already out of place with so much to say and no place to say it. No place to even write it. I was uncomfortable with everything then, Sam. The other people, the better friends, were already writing eulogies and tributes, and I was locked in my bathroom afraid to let anyone see me cry.

Two days later I was trying to figure out the logistics of traditional mourning black at high noon in the middle of Kentucky summer. There was a storm cloud on the steps of the Baptist Church, hundreds of bodies in dark colors crowding in rough lines, waiting. Your family needed a break. We waited. It seemed like everyone spoke in rehearsal, the same stoic pre-planned lines, the monotony of the bereft. The shade of the atrium offered little relief, only discomfort. That's where they all were, Sam, the guys. Your best friends and some of mine, some band mates I knew vaguely, and my boys, Cullen and Duncan. They cried – my rocks, the boys who got me through so much, my best friend and my savior – they cried. And what was I to say? They knew you intimately and I... friends, yes, I would say you and I were friends, but not like that. I was out of my jurisdiction, once again wanting to hide, and the casket I could see shrined at the front of the sanctuary held not you but a corpse. The last time I saw you, Sam, you were playing a guitar and happy.

We got ice cream afterwards, Blizzards at Dairy Queen, we just had to. Blizzards make everything better. We bought you one, M&M, and ceremonially poured it out on the fresh blacktop. I opted for an empty comment over the gesture because really, what could I say? Later that night I tried again, but I had to borrow my words.

18 July 2004 @ 11:06 pm

It's not enough to ignore it
so I floor it
get away
for today

Spent the evening over in Indiana sitting at the falls and thinking and letting myself cry out and dry out.

Quote of the day comes from Fitz "It's amazing how many lives have been touched in 18 years"

That was the last of it for months. No more livejournal entries, no blotchy pages written in sharpie in my Curious George journal, not even a scribble in the margin of a notebook page.

I left on my collegiate adventure that fall, along with hundreds of other 2004 graduates of duPont Manual, the Magnet High School. I thought about you then, thought about how you would have been getting your education at Bellarmine University, wondered if you'd already been registered for classes and if your parents had already paid some money. Several times that year my pen touched to paper in fruitless attempts to get to you, but soon summer carried me home again without so much as one well worded sentiment. A year had passed me by and I had created novels worth of new writing. Your name was too fragile to pass the tip of pen or lips.

They had a concert for you about a month after you died. It was the weekend before I left for college. I remember being bitter because some people came just for the free music and not for you and Jenny. But I guess that wouldn't have mattered to you. It was always about music anyway. My Olympus camera cradled perfectly in my palm, like always. I saw you so often through the eye of that lens, framed in by black borders and crystallized by the focus ring. I hoped for a ghost on that night when I turned my SLR eye to the stage. I wanted to see you once more. I never said goodbye because, like so many others, I never imagined I'd have to. I drove home with the windows cranked down and the stereo cranked up, your voice ringing in muted echo from my botched speakers. "Is innocence over?" And again, driving through the park at night, wind muffling every sound. "An onslaught of lights and twisted metal. The last thing they saw was their hearts in their eyes." I remember that one tear got swept back to my ear as I took a turn. "The end is happy. The end is sad. The end is an ending, can it be all that bad?"

The summer that followed freshman year I was unpacking and the photographs from that memorial show surfaced. They were as I'd left them, cut and cropped and pasted with rubber cement to white cardstock pages. Nothing was connected but they lay stacked in order with red suede covers on either end, waiting for the day when I found the motivation to bind them all together. Only one page had text, the first, bearing a dust speckled photograph of you holding a rubber duck. You remember, from photography class. I keep a small version of it in my wallet, behind my driver's license. A generic dedication in generic font. I wanted to add ghostly text on vellum between each page of photographs, and then I could finally bind it all together. The stack of silent pages still hides under my bed.

Time passed, as I've learned it does. Another summer. I had big plans and even bigger dreams and still certain things dragged at my ankles. One night I drove away from home and found myself on the waterfront, shivering in the chill of the evening and clutching a notebook in my hand. I was delirious. I remember writing about how much I wanted a taco right then. I remember staring at the water, the Ohio River

moving sluggish and brown between its banks. I wondered to myself how cold it was, how fast the current was, what it would feel like to be dragged under and if anyone would jump. It wasn't desire, you understand, just curiosity. I cried, I know that, and I came home having written circles around you and nothing about you. I made a list of seven things on my mind that night when I was warm in bed. You were number five.

25 June 2006 @ 11:43 pm

5) I feel guilty about my grief. I will probably never come to terms with how much I cry over the loss of someone I wasn't even that good of friends with. I will never feel like I'm allowed to be this upset.

Mood: blank

When I stood at the counter of In Cognito Ink in Pasadena second thoughts still clouded me. The artist found, the appointment made, the price agreed upon, and Mojo needed to see my ID. You were there, you and that rubber duck, smiling up at me from my wallet. It was all right after that. It was zen.

15 August 2006 @ 06:05 pm

Tattoo is awesome and I love it. It's beautiful and meaningful and honestly, I feel some immense sense of comfort and... closure. Not closure on Sam being gone but closure on my whole inability to deal with it, and the uncomfortableness I've always felt about my grief.

I had to use your words, Never Stop, because I couldn't use my own. Somehow you managed to say in two words, two words now forever etched under my skin, more than I've managed to find the strength for in almost four years. But then, you always were the poet.

I wonder if I'll ever manage it. And I wonder if maybe I already have. Maybe this is it, Sam, maybe this is all I've got. Writing comes so easily and yet with you it's the toughest battle, with no end in sight. Maybe all I have to give is that I can't find the words.