

# Japanese Poetry Never Modifies

August 2011

I remember when you first joined, I used to tell you that the Army would be four years, the way that college had been four years, and that really used to help you. These days, I'm not so sure. You called me this morning on my way out the door. You know the routine, the sun's still not out yet so I go out onto the landing looking down on the parking lot to wait for the carpool of teachers so we can drive the hour north to Clinton. Closer to Mississippi than Baton Rouge, but we don't pick where we're assigned, you of all people know that. I was smoking my morning cigarette—God, I'm turning into my mother—when you called me and told me you'd killed a man. I didn't know what to do with that—I don't know what to do with a lot of the things you tell me. So I told you to wait, wait until you got home. We would deal with it together. You said you didn't feel anything, weren't you supposed to feel something? But then Jimmy and Becky and Mormon Rick showed up in the carpool, headlights jumping at the speed bump and I told you I had to go. You said you knew. Hung up.

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So why did I stay with you? Maybe because I remember the string lights hanging above us like torch flies when we'd kissed. The smell of the East River as you'd walked me to the train. The sound of your voice after midnight, how it felt like biting into something alive. The vacuous kinds of things people with marriages that never last say. Maybe because I looked at you, and there was a sadness on your face that you'd been born with, like the freckle beneath your eye or your fullness of your lips.

You told me about your mother, your father during the war, and I envied them. I thought your parents took up so much space in your heart, and I wanted to take up as much as they did, to be carried as you carry them. Maybe I'm just another white girl with a savior complex, but then, all those Peace Corps kids can always go home. It can't be like that for me; I need you. I'm struggling to figure out why. If you would just talk to me again in that open way you do like when we'd first met and it was like I'd known you all my life, if you'd topple those walls of sandbags and pull away those spirals of razor wire you put up around you, if you'd fucking say just one honest thing to me instead of going out there every day, rifle in hand, and pretending like you're doing something good even though you know you aren't.

When I hear your voice, I know that something else sits there in your heart, beside yours parents' memories. I should've known it was never them—a woman I'd met twice, and a man I'll never meet—who'd, like a festering tumor, plastered itself to that beating organ. It was always war, wasn't it? It grew, it grows, it will grow, and one day it'll kill you. I shouldn't have to compete with something so big for possession of you. Any sane woman would be long gone. But I wonder if that's what love is, a kind of insanity, an irrational urge to never wash your pillowcase and sleep in the dip you've left in the mattress. A mnemonic kleptomania of the way your hair feels between my fingers, the way your sweat smells stuck to all those worn out shirts, the way your eyes look in the sun—not black, but a deep, warm brown masquerading as the absence of color. A manic episode of binging on the way you smiled. A depressive plateau when I realize I may never see that smile again. I hoard these pieces of you and each one slices into me, bleeds me. It's the only thing that's real anymore, the pain of it. And I fear if I ever let go, I'll be letting go of a piece of myself.

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## Things That Quicken the Heart

(After Sei Shonagon)

How fewer egrets there were after the oil spill. Imagining you with an infant on your chest. Laying down to sleep and dreaming about waking up from this life into another. Looking into a broken mirror that splits me in two. A beautiful woman with a simple request who makes me forget you for just a moment. The weight of a camera, to spool a ribbon of cellophane into it and walk out onto a strange boulevard somewhere, and even if I'm nowhere special, I feel a drunken kind of pleasure knowing I can capture thirteen moments in time. After all this waiting, on a night someday soon, knowing that, like the summer rain, you'll come back to me and drown the stifling sun with the heat or cold of your body, making my heart quicken.

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You disappear for days or weeks at a time, and when I don't get an email or a phone call, I'll make whoever is driving us to work or home turn the radio to NPR so we can catch the BBC World Service or Steve Inskeep and Renee Montagne read the news. I'll hear things like, *five dead in Kandahar, drone strike in Helmand, bombing outside the embassy in Kabul*, and Becky or Mormon Rick might say, *oh God*, but I'd tell them it had nothing to do with you—probably. I often stew over their ignorance, tell them for the fiftieth time you're in Wardak province, *Wardak goddammit*, and they forget again the next time, but I guess I can't really blame them. They don't have maps of Afghanistan pinned to the walls of their bedrooms.

There was the week you sent me a short email, told me to check the news, and I looked up the *Times* and there was a developing story about that helicopter full of SEALs that'd been shot down, how it was the biggest loss of life in a single day since the beginning of the war. You called when you got back,

told me how, on the last day there in that valley, you'd killed that dog—a *bitch* you called her. But then you surprised me and said you wished you hadn't. You said there were pieces of men scattered all through the branches like Christmas ornaments; how the valley smelled like raw crab and you didn't think you could ever eat crab again. I didn't know what to say, then. I guess I don't know what to say still.

Then there was the day bin Laden died. I came home, turned on the news, watching those fraternity bros and sorority girls partying in the streets. I thought, they're the ones who should get drafted and they're the ones who should be sent over there, because I wanted you back here with me. It should be them, not you, over there fighting. But you don't know that, do you?

We say so little when we talk, always speaking around and past and between one another. You want to know more about home, and when I tell you what's happening in Louisiana, back home in New York, it only makes you seem further away than ever. I want to tell you, instead, how tragedy magnifies beauty, how this pain stitches us together, how I hope that someday all this distance and lack and yearning will be useful, one day. I want to tell you that you need to survive so we can start a family together, like we always wanted. I want to tell you that I know you'll be a good father, no matter how afraid you are of becoming one. Instead I just talk about the radiators in my classroom cranked up to eleven and phone bills and what so-and-so said at that party I'd half forgotten because I drank too much. If I could go back, change anything, I think I'd like to say what I feel more often.

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At the beginning of your tour, when we spoke on the phone, it felt like you were right next to me. Now you sound like you're on an entirely different planet.

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July 2011

When you told me Sergeant Finley died, I thought of his straw-haired wife, that EMT. I wondered if she would get a flag at his funeral, seeing as they'd been divorced. Or would they give it to her boy? I wanted to give you all the time and space in the world to grieve, I wished you would cry, if only to remind me that the man on the phone was the same man I'd fallen in love with. It's selfish, I know. But you didn't, so I cried for you.

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*There's still time*, that's what I kept thinking the whole time you were on mid-tour leave. Then it ran out and we missed our chance. Now, with all this—a dead man on your conscience, all that fighting, all those moral compromises that have shaken you, I can't help but think of where I went wrong, what I could've done differently to persuade you to run across the Canadian border. Now I worry that even if you make it home in one piece, it wouldn't matter, because I've already lost you.

I know there would have been consequences if you had run. Maybe you would never be able to come back to the States. But it was never your country—not really—anyone could see that. Just a flag and a bunch of stupid rules everyone agreed to. But then again I'm not one to talk, am I? I pay my taxes and have a bank account and drive a car to work every day, I follow the rules just like you, like everyone else. Sometimes I wonder if you think I'm a hypocrite, turning my back on my convictions. You used to say my life was politics, but now, I wonder if you think you couldn't trust a college anarchist who'd once shouted about abolishing the state, only to become one of its many drones. Maybe I'm projecting. Maybe telling you to run was selfish of me, a way for me to stay true to the woman I'd used to be. Or maybe this was a way to keep you all

to myself.

I thought I knew your heart well enough—you were always selfless in a way that you refused to see—and if you didn't do it for yourself (how could I ever believe you'd do something for yourself?), then at least you'd do it for me. I forgot about your boys. You were thinking about them after Finley died, weren't you? What you could have done differently. But if you'd gone AWOL, you wouldn't have been there and it wouldn't have been your fault and you wouldn't have to carry that around with you.

I also forgot about Afghanistan. The first few weeks you were there, you'd write me, saying that you hoped there'd be peace soon so I could see it. *No place as beautiful in the world*, you'd said, *you could understand how people believed in God—just seeing how small it makes a man feel*, you'd said. Sometimes you'd write angry e-mails or be flustered on the phone over how the people around you refused to see the Afghans as people. Mothers and fathers and children just like us. You'd wanted to do everything to help them, and I was proud of you, but now I wish I hadn't told you that, because I know your heart is over there, and not here with me.

Sometimes, I dream that you did run off, go AWOL. I see you rowing the little aluminum boat up Champlain, going north, and I'm worried you'll get lost or caught, but I'll remember that you're a soldier and I should have faith in you. In the dream, I wait months or years—impossible to say in that floating life—but I find you, we start our lives over. I go on teaching, you become an artist, we start a family—in Montreal, maybe. I dream our kids have miraculously red hair and wide smiles and you see them and forget all about that faraway country and the mountains that made you feel small. I dream this dream, and when I wake up, I half expect you to be in the kitchen making coffee, frying eggs.

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I worry sometimes that you'll kill yourself and leave me all alone to put the pieces back together. Maybe you wouldn't do it by your own hand, but let the enemy do it for you. That way you get to die a hero. I think about you, sitting on the bank of the Mississippi in New Orleans, before you deployed. We watched the barges and container ships easing past as slow as honey. You joked that if you were killed over there, I'd be able to pay off my student loans with the life insurance money.

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I've been thinking of writing poetry, like Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*. I like the idea of a book composed of lists. I like the way that, in Japanese, every word stands on its own.

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June 2011

When you were on leave, we developed rolls of your film and I saw all those smiling girls in the school you've been helping to support. I wish I could speak Dari and I didn't have asthma and I could come to Afghanistan and teach in your girls' school. I would teach math, just the same as I do here, teach them to make cranes from square sheets of paper, how to make garlands of them to hang in the classroom. We might have to share the same discomforts and dislocations and disappointments, but at least we would be sharing them together. At least that way, I'd be making a difference. Not like teaching to a test my kids will fail because they've got bigger problems, like grandparents on dialysis and electricity getting turned off and their unemployed parents and the revolving door of principals at the school.

If we actually did what we said we were supposed to—get kids to graduate and go off to college and rise out of this backwoods Jim Crow town, that'd put this whole white savior factory out of business, wouldn't it? I fantasize about flying

away from this place every time I go to the dollar store to buy school supplies to send you. When I pack boxes full of crayons and notebooks and pens and coloring books, with a carton of cigarettes or a can of shag tobacco on top for you, I feel like I'm sending myself over there piece by piece. I wish that were truly the case; that I could just mail myself out of here.

I used to look forward to teaching, but these days I'm just looking forward to the end of the week. One of my kids has been acting up since her father left, and one day poured a soda out on one of her friends. I didn't want to send her down to the vice principal's just to get smacked around a bit. I told you about the vice principal, didn't I? Has this big paddle hanging on the wall with air holes drilled into it and a handle wrapped in leather. My student's grandmother, who has taken over raising her, told me just to whup her right there in front of the whole class. That's what she'd said, *whup*. Said if I didn't want to do it, she knew enough teachers who'd be glad to. I thanked her and hung up. When I told it to one of the other teachers—a scab like me—she said I should've let the vice principal take care of it. *These kids can be animals*, she said. Her eyelids have become a sleepless shade of red, her skin—I used to marvel over how it was so clear she never had to wear foundation—was caked to cover up the way her skin looks like spoiled milk from all the stress. When she said, *animals*, there was a rusty creak in her birdsong voice. We were all so idealistic when we'd started. How much a year can wear on you.

I don't think you remember when I told you this on one of the nights we talked. Our conversation lasted only a few minutes—you'd just gotten back from a long patrol rotation. You didn't say much, but when you spoke, I heard that creak in your voice too.

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May 2011

After you started helping that Afghan school, I felt something else. A little worse than envy. It seemed like your work was the most important thing in the world and I took a back seat. You, playing the man, the savior, the martyr, the hero. You get to be Odysseus. I'm typecast as Penelope.

You fucker, can't you see how hard I've tried, how much work I've done for you? I do the taxes, I pay the bills, I go apartment hunting, I manage the bank accounts. I'm the one on the phone with the rear-detachment commander every time we get a red message, a white message, seeing if there's anything I can do for the families of those dead and wounded boys. I'm not some shrinking violet in the damn wives club, and even if I were, they've got kids to raise while you men are off playing GI Joe. Can't I be the hero of my own story?

But I don't suppose you know that. A little like how I can't know what combat is like, how I can't feel it in my veins. So how could you ever know what it's like waking up every morning and wondering if today will be the day two men arrive on my doorstep to tell me you're dead? How do we balance the two? How do we reach across these shores?

If I were the hero of this story, it would be the war at home, not the one over there that I'd fight. We'd march on the Capitol, throw off the government and hang the profiteers and politicians from their neckties, line Pennsylvania Avenue with their corpses and leave them for the crows. I'd build schools where we taught girls and boys that life isn't money; it's clear September days and the way the leaves are most beautiful before shedding in death and how finishing a book is as bittersweet as saying goodbye to a friend. If I were a hero, I'd go over there and rescue you, my damsel, and all the soldiers toiling and bleeding and dying. If I were a hero, I'd have a little agency, a choice to make, a journey with arcs and morals and an ending well earned, but this isn't that kind

of story.

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March 2011

Here is a List of Things That Make My Heart Lurch:

- Strangers' footsteps in front of my door.
- The country code +93 before a number beckoning on my phone.
- The word *Afghanistan*.
- The words *America* and *liberty* and *freedom*, and how I don't know what they mean anymore.
- The words *Standardized Testing*.
- How the word *rifle*, which figures so heavily into the stories you tell me, is so violating, as if a stranger goes through my things each time I hear it.
- A scowling parent and/or guardian.
- The sounds of police helicopters overhead and how I look up and wonder if you too are looking up at a metal bird beating its wings.
- The way I sometimes confuse your dismay at what you're doing over there with my dismay at what I'm doing here.
- Other couples with their cliches, couples who wonder if their lovers are looking up at the same moon. For you and me, that's impossible. The moon can't show its face to both of us at once, and my day is your night.
- Sleep deprivation combined the hour long commune to East Feliciana Parish at 5am.
- What waiting feels like.

-What nothing feels like.

-What knowing that no matter how hard I try, I'll fail feels like.

-The nightly news.

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February 2011

There's one memory I save for special occasions. I hide it away, use it sparingly to keep its blade sharp. It comes out when I'm alone and the night is cold like it had been the night we'd met. When I see a couple all tangled up in one another's arms. When the news reports six dead in a suicide bombing at a remote forward operating base. In it, you walk me to the train. I wear your coat. You even swiped onto the platform to see me onto the car. Then I gave you my number. Then the train took me home. You forgot to take your coat back. Then you called the next day. No one does that.

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January 2011

I wish my great-grandmother Ada were still alive today, so she could tell me what it was like to see her husband enlisted in the Navy and sent off to the battles on the Atlantic. I wish I were as lucky as she; to learn that the war had ended ahead of schedule, sparing my great grandfather, sparing the generations that followed from meeting our ends at the hands of a German submarine captain. I'd want to ask her what was in my great-grandfather's heart when he'd sworn that oath of enlistment to a country that hadn't considered us Jews any more American than they consider blacks or Latinos or anyone or Vietnamese. I'd want to know what my grandfather's skin felt like when they reunited, if the sun had tanned and cracked his face, if ropes had calloused the palms and

fingertips his large hands, if there were other changes—in his heart for instance—which took years to undo, changes which could never be undone.

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November 2010

I sometimes wonder if it was right to follow you to this place. I wondered it the day you left, and I saw you march to the buses that'd take you to the plane that'd take you away. I had to drive the two hours back to Baton Rouge to get to work on time, and I got lost in a cornfield because I couldn't stop crying long enough to notice I'd taken a wrong turn, and I thought why the fuck did I follow you here? I don't mean Louisiana.

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October 2010

I hadn't been able see you when the whole brigade assembled on Honor Field, patchy with carcinomas of dead grass and barren dirt. You said you you'd be in the first rank, and that may have been true, but I didn't see you. You said you saw me there, in my green dress with my Yashica in hand, waiting to snap a six by six of you, my soldier husband. I thought I'd show it to our children one day, and they'd say it was funny how daddy's body blended into the bodies around him, your uniforms melting into the half-dead landscape. A hot day, and the medics had their hands full with soldiers passing out from standing in the sun so long. Everyone wore those bladders of water on their backs, and you seemed less like brave soldiers and more like brigade of hunchbacks. They played some Sousa march from speakers hooked up to a CD player. It reminded me of high school football games. I thought of our future children again, and what you said to me when your orders came through for Afghanistan—there was more danger here, in America. That I ran a higher risk of dying in a car crash than

you did in combat. Look at the numbers, how few people died anymore. Saved by the wonders of modern medicine, all the clotting agents and cargo planes turned into ICUs and little strips of velcro and ballistic nylon used to stem blood from severed limbs. You told me about all these things that were meant to reassure me, but didn't. You marched past and I couldn't find you, so I snapped a photo of a row of soldiers, their heads turned to face the reviewing stand.

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September 2010

At the cavalry ball, you men all wore your ridiculous cowboy hats and silver spurs on your shoes as if they made you like those horse soldiers on the plains, as if they tied you to history. It would've been amusing if I was drunk, but I stayed sober so I could drive us the hour home. I stewed. At our table, Barker kept making jokes about the red snapper, and I told him to shut his mouth. I think his wife, Kelly, smiled at that, but I can't be sure. She didn't say anything all night.

You sang your damn songs and waved your damn flags, and I thought it was all a nice bit of trickery, all this ceremony and pomp. What is it Napoleon said, that he could persuade a man to die for a pretty piece of ribbon? You were getting drunk with your soldiers, who had their arms around you, pulling you towards the dance floor, and I could see how uncomfortable that made you; how you couldn't tell where the line was between fraternal love and fraternization. But they were—we all were—just a bunch of dumb kids.

I didn't talk to the officers' wives; we didn't have anything in common, not really. Tupperware parties and boozy breakfasts and needlepoint or whatever it was they did with their time. The enlisted wives—who were covered in tattoos with jobs as bakers or smile-worn shop girls or soon-to-be de facto single mothers—all reminded me of people back home, a little creased

and windswept, even though they were, for most part, youngish. Two of them were still in their teens; they could've been plucked out of the graduating class of my anemic Upstate high school. They were both knock-kneed and vine-armed and clinging to each other while their husbands—barely old enough to drink themselves—fed them booze for what I'm sure they thought would be a romantic night. They reminded me too much of home, so I kept to myself. I was alone, even then, even with you just a few yards away. That's not why I came to shindig, to sit by myself and watch a bunch of grown men act like kids who'd broken into their parents' liquor cabinet.

You and I used to sit in laundromats and make up stories about strangers passing by the big storefront window or eavesdrop on diners in the restaurants we could barely afford, whispering jokes about their problems and arguments and bougie sensibilities. We'd been so sure we would never be those people. I remember once, it had rained while we were out buying books and it didn't let up, so we'd had to spring to the L and rode home soaked. You put my book—I can't even remember what I'd bought—and stuffed it under your jacket so it wouldn't get wet. We stripped out of our clothes when we got home and you made tea. I lay in bed naked, thumbing through a graphic novel—*The Photographer*—and there was something about all those images, the real contacts sheets and fictive illustrations, and the way the protagonist cried that'd given me the idea to give you a camera to take with you over there. You brought in the tea and we drank it. Got under the covers of your thin twin mattress, and stayed up talking about all the nothing we'd do after you were done with the Army, talking about where we'd live and what our kids might look like—if we wanted them. We'd talked about how, sometimes, the most important thing in an image wasn't its subject, but what lay just outside the frame. We'd talked until we stopped, and we stopped because we slept, and we slept through the soundless night in your windowless room and it felt like the world had ended and it was just the two of us in our abandoned

city. When I woke, I was disappointed to hear your roommates shuffling around outside the door, to hear that life had continued without us.

Here it was again, all this life around me marching forward, but this time I was alone. Your men kept pressing drinks on you, and each time you refused, but took it anyway, and you were all were singing, *I wanna be in the cavalry, if they send me off to war*. So I went to have a cigarette, out in the air, which was somehow as sticky hot as inside, and found a bench out front. I hadn't noticed that Barker had followed me out. He asked me if I was okay, and I just shrugged, and didn't say anything. I gathered he wasn't used to that—not being listened to. He started talking about my dress, if this was one of those ironic things people my age did. Something about making a statement by dressing like a flapper instead of wearing a ball gown like all the other women. It was an A-line, a formal mid-century modern piece I'd found in a thrift store, but I didn't bother to correct him. I was a little afraid of him, the way he looked at me, the way he swayed ever so slightly. He was drunk, and I might be able to throw a mean punch, but he's a large man and we were basically alone. I crossed my arms, like I was cold. He offered me his jacket, which I didn't want. He sat down beside me, fanned himself with his Stetson. He said I shouldn't worry, he'd do what he could to bring me back. He said it'd be hard, what I was about to go through, told me how when he'd come back after Iraq, *things with Kelly, well they'd never gone back to the way they'd been before*. I thought these were just the musings of a drunkard who'd stayed in the Army too long, who'd lost touch. These days, I wonder if he was trying to warn me.

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~~Here is a List of Things I Would Do if I Left You:~~

Here is a List of Things I Would Do if You Died:

~~-Drink~~ Find something less cliché to do, something warm and numbing, something that feels like early-onset dementia—and permanent.

-Find someone new to sleep with and feel nothing.

-Gather up a handful of blow-flowers and instead of doing what the name commands, set them on fire.

-Think about suicide without making a plan.

~~-Eat a handful of pills.~~ I *could* eat a handful of pills, but someone would find me because I'm a broke-ass teacher and we share everything, like cars and bar tabs and apartments and a pool of school supplies which always comes up short when you go looking for another manila folder or calculator battery—and yeah, we share pills too—so that's out.

-Think about suicide and try not to look at the Huey P. Long bridge—the second smaller one, its steel bones oxidizing to death—or the Mississippi. Think about how stupid people are when they believe water will somehow be softer than concrete at that height.

-Go to the funeral.

-Push everyone away.

-Quit TFA and leave all the future politicians padding their resumes and the twenty-two-year-old scabs who don't know better and the white saviors with their Jesus complexes behind.

-Nothing.

-More nothing.

-Enough nothing to get behind on the rent, which, as you know, is not at all like me.

-Live out of my car for a while.



-Consider moving to Arizona like my doctor had suggested when I'd been hospitalized for asthma for the fifth time in a year. Consider doing something with turquoise, maybe. Remember how much I hate sand and heat and the sun and fucking turquoise.

-Move back in with my parents.

-Climb the Adirondacks

-Try not to think about suicide when I make a climb in the rain. Try not to hope for an accident, a slip, a broken neck, a painless death.

-Write poetry, let one be titled: *Here is a List of Things I Would Do if You Died.*

-Write a poem titled: *Here is a List of Things I Would Do if I Left You.*

-Burn everything I'd written.

-Never write poetry again.

-Never shave a hair on my body again.

-Never date another man again.

-Never look at anything that reminds me of you.

-Never start wearing makeup.

-Never date.

-Never say never.

-Drink, and try to think of less cliché things to do with grief.

-Apply to every job that'll take me to the place that took you from me.

-If rejected from every job for which I'd applied: book a

ticket to Kabul anyway.

-Make a list of things to pack. A camera will be at the top of it.

-If visa to Afghanistan gets rejected, buy a ticket to Pakistan, plan to sneak across the border.

-Come home alive or die there or never come home at all or abandon all those plans—I haven't decided yet.

-Buy a hairless cat, name him/her/they Gefilte Fish. (I've always wanted a cat.)

-Live longer than my cat; remember that nothing lasts, especially not love.

-Find the shoeboxes and musk-laden clothes and books and 35mm negatives that remind me of you and start a fire and burn it all and immediately regret what I've done.

-Find some small town—preferably in Vermont—with an empty role to fill, a need, a lack. Occupy that unoccupied space, and with time, become a familiar fixture, a woman with graying hair, a woman past her prime and alone. Become someone everyone wonders about, worries about. Become an enigma, a mystery. Let them say, *there's Old Lady Fishman, off to the library/animal shelter/schoolhouse/tollbooth, what a sad story*—even if they can only speculate. I'll put my lights on at Halloween and give out full-sized candy bars. I'll put out food for all the neighborhood strays and the town will try to stop me, but they won't succeed. I'll teach a class to the local kids on how to photograph, just like I'd taught you; I'd teach them to think about the picture plane and what lies outside it and how absence is sometimes more poignant. Maybe I'll find another lonely woman, let her fall in love, never her tell her anything. (She'll leave eventually.) And when I'm in my autumnal years, I'll think of how trees are most beautiful before they die and think about you and not think

about suicide and fade and fade and finally go, and I'll die thinking that if I can let you go in this life, it'll make the next one, our next meeting, our next reunion, that much more sweet.

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March 2010

Our honeymoon was one night in a fancy hotel. The next day, you drove two days south to your new unit.

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Our wedding day, in the living room of my parents' creaky old farmhouse, was a string of mishaps. It was rushed. So much went wrong. My mother was sour that we hadn't asked the rabbi to conduct the ceremony, but a county judge. At least he looked Jewish, she said. When your family arrived, your grandmother brought me a jade bracelet as a wedding present, but it wouldn't slip over my knuckles, not even with a little grease, so I couldn't accept it. Then I heard your little brother whisper to my brother how he'd just enlisted, and to not tell you, because last time you saw him, you'd told him not to join. Then we even saw each other before the ceremony, and my mother rushed you back into my bedroom where you were changing. It's a stupid tradition to keep bride and groom apart, but I guess that's what I'd signed up for. Some anarchist I am. Just to make sure, you practiced breaking the glass under the *chuppa* half a dozen times, and each time you did it perfectly.

But then none of it mattered, because I saw the tears in your eyes and heard the shudder in your voice when you recited our vows. I wasn't thinking of tomorrow or the next day, just this moment together. If you weren't wearing your dress blues, we could've pretended we were just like any other couple in the world. But I hold onto that moment, that idea that a wedding ring represents infinity—I hoped, for once, one of these damn

symbols would hold up. My father put the glass on the ground. You brought your foot down on it, but it slid off, breaking only the stem. I wonder now if it was an omen, but you'd always been the superstitious one, not me.

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After we got our marriage license, we threw ourselves a little engagement party. You were on leave. The old rad crew was all there, belting out *Defiance*, *Ohio* songs and dancing like the tomorrow would never come to that indie electronica garbage you like so much. There were gifts, even—like we were real adults. Sara brought us that Spanish wine that we didn't know would turn to vinegar during the move to Louisiana. Daria brought us pralines from New Orleans without knowing I was allergic to all those tree-nuts. We got a few cards, a leather-bound edition of *Arabian Nights* from Ranya, which, if you're wondering, I call dibs on if we ever get divorced. I don't know why I joke like that. I don't know if I could've stood any more gifts than that, and thank God all our friends lived on day-old bread and bottles of Four Roses and were too broke to give us anything but their presence—or pretended to be that poor, at least.

Everyone marveled at how we were getting married, how young we were—I was 21, you were 22. I guess we're still young, in a way. I know some people judged us for it. Judged me, really. They were my friends, anyway. All those dreadlocked boys with their bandannas tied around their necks like their convictions and girls who'd thought freeing the nipple was the first step towards the revolution. That's the thing, we were so young, believed so ardently that things like matrimony and jobs are quaint antiquities that belong in museums. But that's not real life. They didn't have to worry about the things we did to pay for college like holding three jobs or joining the military, and still leaving with tens of thousands of dollars in student loan debt. If I told them how it is now, waking up in the night, thinking there's a knock at the door, and two men in

their blues are waiting outside, what would they say? If it were them, what would they do? Anyway it was my choice.

Arianna was there. You already know all about us. You already know she was never right for me. But she's loyal, and my friend, and I couldn't just throw that away. She watched the two of us dancing our asses off, dancing and drinking because it all hurt so much was already on our shoulders. I found her crying in the stairwell, her voice bouncing off the breezeblocks. She'd told me she asked you why you were doing this—the Army and all that. You said you had to go. She told me, *he's got you, Mir, and now what're we going to do?* I didn't know what she was talking about, but she was drunk, and I pulled her up and folded her into my arms. She held the hug for a little too long, pressing her nose into my hair. She pulled back and looked at me with her head tilted to the side, her eyes half-closed. I don't know when I'll ever get around to telling you this, Dave, but she tried to kiss me. Like it was the easiest thing in the world to get me back, like real life and marriage and hardship and poverty were quaint things best left in museums. I dragged her back inside, told her she was drunk.

#

November 2009

I decided we'd get engaged, there in the whispering gallery with all those Metro North commuters buzzing past. We were going to my Aunt's place in Westchester. You were on pass; flown in from Armor School for Thanksgiving. I was thinking how we had so little time, how fast life was moving—and wasn't it crazy that two kids had to rush like this? But it wasn't rushing, it was the right time. How we knew, and couldn't explain it, but we did. I was thinking, *at least if he gets hurt, I'll get to come to the hospital. At least if he dies, I'll get a folded American flag. A Gold Star in my window. The excuse of a lifetime.* I was thinking how I'd look in a black

dress and a black veil and what it'd feel like to watch your body lowered into the ground and how selfish I was—that's what came to mind, selfishness—to fantasize about your death.

And/or I was thinking of simple things—the ways your eyes snatch the light out of the room, how your face opens up when you see a film, the way your hair feels between my fingertips. How our words curl and nest into each other's and I feel like something missing had been found. Does that make sense? Let me try another way of saying it. When you speak, I can't help but listen. When I talk, I can't help but feel heard. And without you, I'm mute to the world, deaf to its music. How no one else in the world can do that to me. Fuck me, I'm drunk and you've got me talking all purple. I've always hated over-qualified language. But it's always the small things, the details.

I thought these things, and decided—in a split second—to tell you to stand in one corner and press your ear to the tiled wall. I hushed my words up the vaulted ceiling and over the bustling commuters' heads and into your ear. I slipped those words in like my tongue, and I could almost taste the bitter wax and delicate hairs when I said *marry me*. I thought about how I could stick my tongue in your ear, and that's all I needed to get you going. I was thinking how much like foreplay it was. How our children might look, what features they'd steal from you, from me. What your body would look like beneath a closed casket, because I can't imagine it being anything but closed. How there'd be a hunk of me carved away and how I'd wake up each morning you were gone and be surprised that I'd waken up at all.

#

October 2009

As a birthday present, I sent you a copy of Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*. You said it was the best gift you'd ever received. Then, you sent me the diary you'd filled since you'd

started training. I was dismayed at how often you'd sketched scenes of your own death.

#

August 2009

You went back and forth between the city and all those joint bases and forts and posts where you'd trained. Each time, you'd come back to me a little changed—though I don't think you'd noticed. After Fort Benning, your manner had stiffened. You told me how one of your training sergeants said you were too polite, that it just wouldn't do in combat. They asked which branch you'd been assigned to, and when you told them Armor and Cavalry, they laughed. No room for good manners among tankers and scouts, they'd said. Still, you spent nearly all your pay on flights back to me when they gave you the rare weekend pass. I thought that'd be enough to keep us—this—going.

#

July 2009

There's a photo you took of me in Montana, on the first leg of our cross-country road trip. That was supposed to be our send-off. The last hurrah between college and the real world. We'd agreed that this was how our relationship would end. I look at that photo now; I use it as the backdrop for my computer, and sometimes I think it's a kind of self harm, like I'm carving hatch-marks into my skin every time I set my eyes on it. I'm the subject in the photo—a strange sensation. I'm wearing your plaid flannel, cleaning my camera. There's a layering of images—you're on the other side of the motel window, the reflection of a parking lot of cars superimposed on our room, the ghost of your silhouette imprinted on the pane of glass. I see me as you see me, and that makes the distance harder. Don't ask me to explain how that works. I'm looking at the photo, and it's only been a year, but I'm already thinking, *I*

*used to have such good skin, I'm already thinking, we used to be so young.*

We went out to dinner that night at the motel bar, where they served us steak and fries, and when we were done, we got a six-pack of that skunky beer they called Moose Drool, which I hated, but which you liked just fine. When we finished it, we had sex on the motel bed with a movie flickering on our bodies, and it felt desperate, like something out of a neo-noir film, like we were on the run from gangsters or cops or both, and of course they'd all have ridiculous accents. *Cawfee. Shawtgun. Brawd.* I wished it was real—that we were on the run, I mean. And if the villains caught up to us at the end and we made our last stand in some seedy parking garage staring down a dozen goons with automatics, that would be fine by me.

At the time, I was thinking about how far we'd come to just end it. It couldn't; I couldn't. We saw Ohio and all that flat farmland, Chicago on the shore where you reached down and dipped your hand into Lake Michigan, the Twin cities where we imagined ourselves settling in a brick house if New York ever sank into the Atlantic, the Crow Reservation where I wanted to go one day, to teach, and past Billings and Bozeman and Butte and Missoula and into the Rockies. How much further we'd go. Past the mountains, into Idaho, through Coeur d'Alene, where you'd be terrified of the way down, coasting the whole winding descent. We'd strike forth into the Eastern Washington scrublands and desert, into the Redwood forests and onto the coast, the briny-aired Pacific coast. And I'd imagine it'd be a new beginning, just the two of us. I would've let that air stay in my lungs forever if I could, but it wasn't the start of a new life, just a brief interlude.

When you reported to your first duty station—a temporary posting to train cadets, just like you'd been a year ago—I flew back to New York to my para job at PS 21 and the ICP gig. You'd given me all those rolls of film and all those moments



from our trip, and when I developed them, I was surprised to see how many you'd taken of me. That image of me in your flannel, the ghost of you on the window. I thought about asking you to marry me.

I'm thinking about that damn photo, and thinking about taking it down, replacing it with a black field, because when I look at it, I remember that what I'd felt when we drove across the mountains and forests and plains and cities of this God-forsaken country, how I felt like the last woman alone left on Earth with the only man in the entire world, and that hurts, Dave, you can't imagine how much that hurts.

#



May 2009

I gave you my dad's old 35mm before we graduated, and we went out into Carroll Gardens to practice shooting. You didn't load the film right—the sprocket holes hadn't lined up. I took it

to the dark room and found one long, empty strip. I still have photos of you from that day—you on top of a traffic light control box, you at the edge of the F and G train tracks, you in front of Rocketship Comics aiming your lens at me. You thinking you'd captured all these moments.

#

I try writing about things, like they'll make them easier to say. All that comes out is bad poetry, fragments of memories.

#

Do you remember how you'd been saying that you knew distance was hard? You never said you were thinking about your parents, about the day your dad had left.

#

Do you remember our first date, not the time we met at the Waverly, but our first real date? Film Forum was showing *Sans Soleil*. You left the theatre in a haze.

#

I can't seem to describe a sun as a sun unless it's radiant. A spring is not a spring unless it's limpid.

#

I remember the first time you said, *I love you*. It wasn't when you thought, not at the top of the Williamsburgh Savings Bank, but in your sleep when you came to stay the night in the dorm where I RA'd.

#

January 2008

I follow my friends to your place for a party, a rent party they called it. There you are, thinking you're so smooth, but

you're drunk off your ass. Handsome in your own awkward kind of way, and not stringy like all the beanie bearded hipsters. At least you're not dangerous. At least I've got my friend around me. You ask if I'm Jewish, and I think that's an odd kink. I want nothing to do with you; I'm looking to hook up with another girl. I'd broken up with Arianna a few days before, but I won't mention that. And you're still here, acting like a schmuck. The music's playing, some David Bowie cover band. You pour me a beer that's ninety percent foam, grinning at me the whole time.

A few minutes later, I witness you making out with someone else. (Did you forget you'd been hitting on me?) You had the nerve to come back, trying your bungling German pickup lines (I'd told you I spent a semester in Berlin). I was a little down, and hell, you ask nicely, so I let you kiss me. We make out, and it's nice because I can forget about my two jobs and student debt and financial aid and Arianna. I can forget, and you've got wide, soft lips, and the press of your fingertips just wrap me up in this second. You try to convince me to stay the night. I laugh, tell you I've got work in the morning (I lie). Just a little make out session, that's all it's supposed to be. That's all I need. But you sober up. We talk a little, dance a little, there's a DJ on now. When I want to go home, you offer to walk me all the way to the train in the snow. It's not snowing, but it's a nice flourish, and that's how I'll choose to remember it.

You wear your flannel shirt, and I wear your workman's coat. The streetlights all take on fuzzy haloes and toss our shadows far ahead and behind us. You tell me you listen to electro-clash and hip-hop and folk music. I stare at the warehouses that go for blocks, the ones under demolition and the fishbowl condos taking their places. You tell me how when you hear Pete Seeger play Frank Proffitt's "Going Across the Mountain" the banjo sounds just like a *dan nguyet*, how that song about the Civil War might as well be a Vietnamese song. We're all

wrapped up in history, I say, and you ask me if you can hold my hand and I say yes. A hipster dive is still open on North Fifth. A Polish bar is still open on Bedford Ave. But they'll be closed soon. We're racing daylight for a few hours of sleep. The warehouses end on a block of vinyl-sides row-houses and shutters shops and restaurants. I expect you to leave at the corner of the station, but you walk down. I expect you to say goodbye at the turnstile, but you swipe in. We wait on the platform and I tell you about folk-punk, which you think sounds a little funny, but say makes sense anyway. You apologize for being so forward at the party, and ask to see me again.

The train won't be here for another fifteen, and you tell me about your future, what the next couple of years hold. The Army. I write my number in the notebook I find in your coat pocket, a fresh one with a few sketches—a dead rat, a woman holding a child, the facade of a brownstone being demolished, but the rest is still fresh, blank. It's the empty sheets of paper which appeal to me the most. I say I'd like to see you again, but what I say is overpowered by the announcement that the train is here. It howls into the station and the doors open and I enter and you're on the edge of the platform and I'm on the edge of the car and for a moment that's nothing between us and you ask to kiss me and I nod but the doors close. I try to tell you that we have all the time in the world for a kiss, but the announcer is too loud, the doors too thick. Then the train takes me away.

*"Japanese Poetry Never Modifies" first appeared in the [Columbia Journal](#), November 12, 2018.*

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