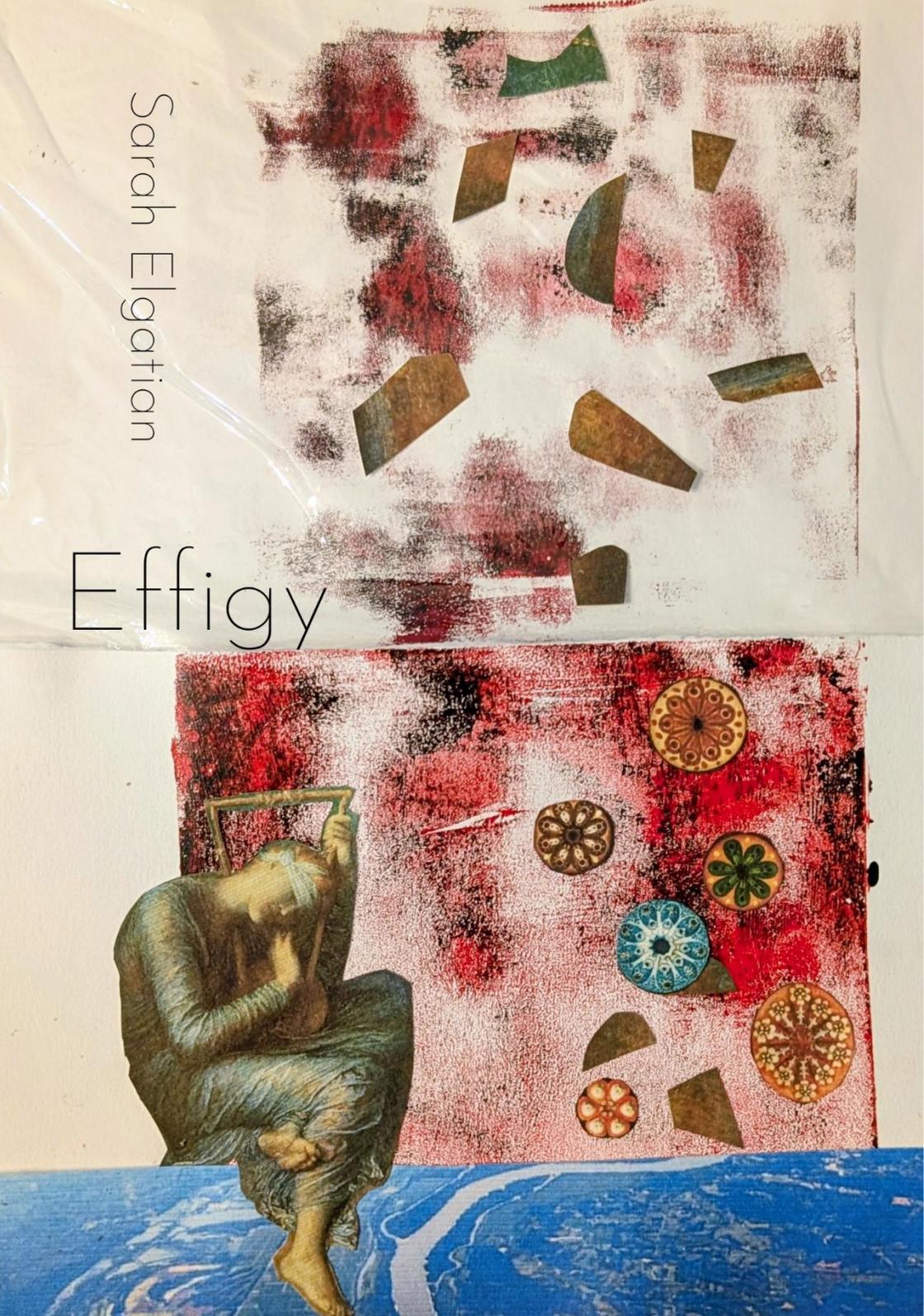


Sarah Elgatian

Effigy



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Sarah Elgatian

Stone Corpse Press

© 2025

Sarah Elgatian

Stonecorpse.com

stonecorpsepress@gmail.com

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Stone Corpse Press





Contents

[This is How You Will Grieve](#)

[Fragments](#)

[Here is the Steeple](#)

[Impossible & Blessed](#)

[Churches in which...](#)

This Is How You Will Grieve

You will be caught off guard.

The call will come while you are busy teaching three year olds the pincer grip.

You will react in slow motion.

Okay, thank you. Are you sure? How can I help? Is there a phone tree? Methodical, zero miles per hour. You are structure and preparedness.

You will be caught off guard.

The call will come while you are busy shopping for a butter dish for your anorexic best friend.

You will react in slow motion.

Okay, thank you. Are you sure? Is there anything I can...? Methodical, zero miles per hour. You are structure and preparedness.

You will fall absolutely to pieces.

Your seams will unfurl, body jello, you will howl on your knees at the knee-height tables.

Why do they have to make kids such tiny tables? People are dying.

You will crawl out of the classroom and need to be told there is snot on your chin.

You will back against a wall and pull your knees to your neck.

You will fall absolutely to pieces.

Your seams will unfurl, body jello, you will howl on your knees under the Anthropologie chandelier.

Why does Anthropologie have a chandelier? People are dying.

You will crawl out of the store, or off the couch, or the classroom and need to be told there is snot on your chin.

You will back against a wall and pull your knees to your neck.

Suddenly, you will remember yourself.

You will be at work and the children might see you.

There will be goddamn snot on your chin. You can wipe it with your arm or your shirt or duck into the staff room, but oh my god, you will need to get it together. People are not kind to an adult crying on the school grounds and every second you stay here, your person's death will become part of a spectacle, a story some horrified parent brings home to dinner and—

You will be caught off guard.

The call will come while you are sleeping or doomscrolling.

You will react in slow motion.

Okay, thank you. Are you sure? Are you okay? How can I help? Is everyone there? Methodical, zero miles per hour. You are structure and preparedness.

Suddenly, you will remember yourself.

You will be on a city sidewalk repeatedly almost tripping whoever the hell is downtown in the middle of the day.

There will be goddamn snot on your chin. You can wipe it with your arm or your shirt or duck into any of the four Starbucks on this block, but oh my god, you will need to get it together. People are not kind to the rando crying on the street and every second you stay here, your person's death will become part of a spectacle, a story some businessman brings home to dinner and—

You will panic, I guess.

Oh my god, who even cares who will see you fall apart in the classroom or playground or hallway or how they might laugh at your tempest after school, *Lecole is dying*.

Involuntarily, your brain will rewind, the Super 8 flashing against a screen in your head, and a highlight reel of your person's lost potential will play—every moment from the first time a teacher rapped scolded her to speak up or her mom stole her birthday money—you will see each tiny tragedy etch into her history like horrible notches on a belt squeezing their waistline ever-tighter until they disappear.

You will need to tell the lead teacher, the principal, your afternoon staff that you have to go. *Now*. Somehow you will be panting, you need to leave the classroom, the school, the tiny town your work in. You have to go. *Now*.

They will panic because you never actually told them what's happening. You just started howling at the handwriting station and scared the nearest children.

It will turn out that you're not panting, exactly, but hyperventilating, and nothing you will say will be clear and when you try to catch a bus home it doesn't come.

You will fall absolutely to pieces.

Your seams will unfurl, body jello, you will howl on your knees of the B&B.

You will crawl out of bed or off the couch or from the toilet and try to go about your day. *Why would anyone travel? People are dying*.

Much later, you will need to be told there is snot on your chin.

You will back against a wall and pull your knees to your neck.

You will panic, I guess.

Oh my god, who even cares who will see you fall apart in Anthropologie or how they might laugh at your tempest at happy hour, *people are dying*.

Involuntarily, your brain will rewind, the Super 8 flashing against a screen in your head, and a highlight reel of their lost potential will play—every moment from the first time a teacher told them to play with the girls or when they stole their dad's secret liquor—you will see each tiny tragedy etch into their history like horrible notches on a belt squeezing their waistline ever-tighter until they disappear.

You will need to tell your friends that you have to go. *Now*. Somehow you will be panting, you need to leave this store, the sidewalk, the impossibly loud city block. You have to go. Now.

They will panic because you never actually told them what's happening. You just started howling in the fake boho superstore and embarrassed them while they were shopping. It will turn out that you're not panting, exactly, but hyperventilating, and nothing you will say will be clear and when you try to catch a bus home it doesn't come.

Suddenly, you will remember yourself.

You will be on your way to your first day of grad school, repeatedly stumbling on unfamiliar sidewalks. You will almost run into strangers and forget to check your directions.

There will be goddamn snot on your chin. You can wipe it with your arm or your shirt or duck into any of buildings on campus for a bathroom, but oh my god, you will need to get it together. People are not kind to strangers crying on the street and every second you stay here, Johnny's death will become part of a spectacle, a story some co-ed brings home to dinner and—

You will get through this. More or less.

You will panic, I guess.

Oh my god, who even cares who will see you fall apart in Anthropologie or how they might laugh at your tempest at happy hour, *people are dying*.

Involuntarily, your brain will rewind, the Super 8 flashing against a screen in your head, and a highlight reel of your person's lost potential will play—every moment from the first time a teacher rapped his knuckles or his mom beat him with his own records, shattering them on his back—you will see each tiny tragedy etch into his history like horrible notches on a belt squeezing their waistline ever-tighter until they disappear.

You will need to tell your new professor and classmates that you have to go. *Now*. Somehow you will be panting, you need to leave this classroom, this campus, the unfamiliar city. You have to go. Now.

They will panic because you never actually told them what's happening. You just walked in howling and stopped them from starting the lecture.

It will turn out that you're not panting, exactly, but hyperventilating, and nothing you will say will be clear and when you try to catch a flight home it is fully booked.

You will get through this. More or less.

You will (try to) go with the flow.

You will find yourself unable to make functional decisions and also very susceptible to suggestion.

You will take the wrong bus. You will go to your ex's place. You will sleep through work.

You will not have great ability to say no.

It is okay to go with flow. It will likely be the only reason you eat. Even if it's a handful of stale microwave popcorn and half a bag of M&Ms that were sitting out at your ex's place. Maybe your ex will coax into you to smoking, maybe that will help.

If you have a routine, you will need it now. If you do not, it will be much harder to survive.

You will (try to) go with the flow.

You will find yourself unable to make functional decisions and also very susceptible to suggestion.

So you will go to lunch. Even though you don't eat seafood. You will follow your friends for a full day of shopping and overpriced food you can't eat. You will not have great ability to say no.

It is okay to go with flow. It will likely be the only reason you eat. Even if it's a lettuce salad and fries on a patio under the half hearted rain at a seafood restaurant.

If you have a routine, you will need it now. If you do not, it will be much harder to survive.

You will black out.

You will get through this. More or less.

You won't remember much from this time. Your memory will skip from collapsing in the preschool to waking up in several days' grime and needing groceries.

Time will blink in and out around you, only that one bleak shower, the first time you went back to work, or the day you ran out of money will stand out in the fog. You'll still be there. But at least you'll forget some of it.

In the movie version, this is a montage.

You will black out.

You will (try to) go with the flow.

You will find yourself unable to make functional decisions and also very susceptible to suggestion.

So you will go to class. You will follow your classmates to the on-campus coffee shop, even though you don't want to be awake. You will nod along with them. You will not have great ability to say no.

It is okay to go with flow. It will likely be the only reason you eat. Even if all you have is a stale \$9 muffin under florescent lights.

If you have a routine, you will need it now. If you do not, it will be much harder to survive.

You won't remember much from this time. Your memory will skip from collapsing in public to waking up in several days' grime and needing groceries.

Time will blink in and out around you, only that one bleak shower, the first time you left your apartment, or the day you ran out of money will stand out in the fog. You'll still be there. But at least you'll forget some of it.

In the movie version, this is a montage.

You will black out.

You will freak out about freaking out

People who love you will tell you to stop talking about it. You don't have to. They will get over their discomfort long before you get over your heartbreak.

You won't see her on the street. Many people walk like that. They do. She is dead.

There will be a lot of coincidences and they will all make you crumble.

It will be tempting to let your friends convince you you're doing it wrong. There isn't a right way to grieve. Don't let them convince you.

You might be doing it wrong. Don't worry. Everyone is.

You won't remember much from this time. Your memory will skip from collapsing off your BnB's couch to waking up in several days' grime and needing groceries. Time will blink in and out around you, only that one bleak shower, the first time you made it to class, or the day you ran out of money will stand out in the fog. You'll still be there. But at least you'll forget some of it.
In the movie version, this is a montage.

You will freak out about freaking out
People who love you will tell you to stop talking about it. You don't have to. They will get over their discomfort long before you get over your heartbreak.
You won't see them on the street. Many people have that jacket. Really. Sasha is dead. There will be a lot of coincidences and they will all make you crumble.
It will be tempting to let your friends convince you you're doing it wrong. There isn't a right way to grieve. Don't let them convince you.
You might be doing it wrong. Don't worry. Everyone is.

You will freak out about freaking out
People who love you will tell you to stop talking about it. You don't have to. They will get over their discomfort long before you get over your heartbreak.
You won't see him on the street. Plenty of people have that haircut. They do. He is dead. There will be a lot of coincidences and they will all make you crumble.
It will be tempting to let your friends convince you you're doing it wrong. There isn't a right way to grieve. Don't let them convince you.
You might be doing it wrong. Don't worry. Everyone is.

Fragments

1. A body can get used to anything.

When you died, I thought I'd get used to it. The weight, the dark, the hole, I thought I knew what was coming. I didn't. My body was used to grief, light emotional abuse, loneliness, long bus rides, poor nutrition.

With you gone I became poisonous, intoxicated by the 73 individual scenarios I had parsed out in which you were still alive *if only, if only, if only*.

I hated you. I hated your mother-father-brother, that god-awful pastor, God (obviously), and I hated myself. So much. I sent you a letter three days before you died. Snail mail on fancy stationery made with flower petals. I begged you to stay.

And I got used to hating you.

I figured you were at home in the damp, bruised basement of your family. I thought maybe you were some kind of martyr whose cause I didn't understand.

It took me years to consider that, *maybe*, you were just sick. Maybe it wasn't preventable.

2. Trauma cannot help but pass itself down.

In a laboratory, scientists used classical conditioning to teach mice that the smell of a cherry blossom meant that pain was imminent. The tortured mice had children who had children who had children and the scientists found that the descendants of that first generation of mice (the only mice abused in this particular experiment) were terrified to the point of erratic escape attempts when they smelled a cherry blossom.

Descendant mice had more receptors in their brains dedicated to sensing specific odors. The actual DNA changed, the scientists found, even in mice with only one abused parent.

We live in a cruel world where people hurt mice in order to understand why the great grandchildren of genocide and slavery survivors are depressed, introverted, jumpy.

We used to say that people who endure abuse become abusers. But—

You had every opportunity to beat, to break, to pass your pain to an unsuspecting neighbor or niece.

You never told me any specifics about the abuse you endured in your home but there were fragments everywhere, falling around your shoulders.

You mentioned in passing, like I was supposed to know, that you did every single thing you could to protect your brother. I know that a family member broke you in private and sacred ways. I know that when I heard the way your mother spoke to you, my body tensed and I looked for cover.

You never told me but I knew: the boy you loved didn't love you well. His love was conditional and manipulative—you couldn't fold yourself small enough for him—but you were relieved just to be loved.

He wasn't at your funeral. I messaged him myself to invite him.

I know that your mom and brother took your meds for fun or for sale and that I was your only visitor in the hospital.

And this is where your trauma was passed down. The children you were supposed to grow in your misshapen, mutinous uterus should have received your genetic memory.

Instead, it will be me. Sober, alone at your bedside, reading your stories and poems, fully aware that as the illness metastasizes, it takes all of you.

So I called myself Atlas. Alone, I thought, to carry you around.

3. Healing is relative.

I wrote the lyrics to “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst” in the letter I wrote you before you died. I begged you not to make me sing about you. You needed to tell your story. No one else *could*. I refused, in my letter, to sing about you. I begged you to ignore centuries of abuse from the medical community and just do what the doctors advised.

When I learned, days later, that you'd died, I was livid. I saw red like Looney Tunes TNT, like Coyote I ran as far as I could before I looked down and just... free fell into this whole new abyss. More than anything I was mad.

I insisted for years that your death was premature, preventable, that you were too stubborn to cut the rotten parts out.

But what if it was just too late? It occurred to me out of nowhere (and six years late) that maybe, maybe this is just what cancer does.

It ate up enough of you, greedy and fiendish, leaving chunks of you missing, concave, lumpy, and it finished consuming you on a date I'd known by heart my entire life:

November 6, my favorite cousin's birthday: we called each other every year, as early as we could, to be the first to say “happy birthday.” I planned to call her during my lunch break that day in that preschool kitchen.

Your birthday, though, that date never quite stuck.

Except, alone in the light and sound booth at the theater where I worked to make ends stretch a little closer to meeting, I decided, for the first time in years, that it might be nice

to hear Kendrick Lamar of all things.

Wearing a black shirt, black pants, black boots, in a tiny room painted black with one lone blue light, I started with track one while I did my pre-show chores. When I returned to the booth to test sound cues, my neck was tense, my eyes hot, and *when the lights shut off / and it's my turn / to settle down / my main concern / promise that you will sing about me—* I did my best to never hear that song for six barren, broken years. And in this cold black room I crumpled.

You *weren't* too stubborn, too scared, too quiet, too poor to survive.

You were just magnificently unlucky.

And I threatened you. I swore I wouldn't tell your story. I wouldn't carry you around.

You were a master storyteller. Half escape-artist, half ghetto-guerilla, you wove lace parables out of cobweb truths.

All you left behind were your stories on a well-locked computer, long ago sold, I'm sure, when money was tight or spirits weren't getting high enough.

That day in that theater was your birthday, I learned shortly after the play started. I took out my phone and opened Facebook. Guess who showed up in my featured memories?

4. Friends just need to show up.

I worked at a Montessori preschool in the eastern suburbs of Seattle. I took two buses, an hour and a half each way, to make \$12 an hour.

Your number called first while I was watching two-year-olds on a jungle gym.

Your mom's phone called a little later when I was microwaving home-cooked meals for four-year-olds whose parents sent hot lunch to school.

One more call came from each number while I rubbed the backs of two three-year-olds in slow circles to coax them to sleep. Then two more calls from numbers I didn't know. After nap time was my break. In an all-white kitchen shaped like a hallway, I microwaved a TV dinner and checked my voicemail.

Voicemails from those last two calls saying that they were your aunt and your cousin.

You're expected to pass today.

Please call cousin Nini. Please come.

I abandoned my frozen meal and half-packed my bag. I told the principal (a kind, sunny white lady who sounded happy even when she was yelling) that you were dying and I needed to leave. *Take as much time as you need.*

Checking and refreshing and rechecking my bus app, I jogged, off-balance, to my stop. I bought gummy bears from the Brown Bear Car Wash while I waited. And waited. I called

my mom. I took a selfie. I got on a bus.

I got off the bus and waited. I searched which buses went into town. I searched which buses came soonest. I checked the cost of a Lyft. Too much. More than I had to my name. A bus came. I got on.

My phone rang. Nini said that I was *welcome to come to the hospital but—*

My hand went numb, phone dropped to the carpeted seat next to me, and all I could see was white like the windows swallowed the bus. The bus lurched in a brake. I squinted to focus and stumbled through the front door of the bus.

It took me some time to figure out where I was. I had 20 minutes until the next bus downtown.

My body a cold, hollow shell, I found my way back to my apartment just before dark.

My friends had watched me grieve many times before you. My boyfriend went to work. My friends came over. One or two at a time, they brought me food or watched TV with me until I fell asleep. For days they babysat me like a sick infant—hovering, but from a distance, just in case.

My mom visited. I laid in her hotel bed and ate caramel apples from Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory, sliced with care and covered in Butterfinger crumbs. We rode the Ferris wheel and paid for photos. In them I look just this side of dead.

My mom left and I went back to work. My friends brought candy and takeout.

My live-in boyfriend, whose father died when he was 14, did not care for me this way.

He did not come to your services. He did not treat me gently.

When you died I broke up with him. After five abrasive, abusive years.

In the time we dated I lost six people.

5. No one is ever alone.

It took two and a half weeks for our friends and I to prepare your final services.

Our friends reserved a reception space and I started a GoFundMe offering crazy rewards in your honor. For \$100 I'd perform a rap expressing my gratitude. I thought you'd like that one, though I couldn't imagine anyone we knew would be able to afford it.

I was wrong. Somehow, we got there. We made it to the world's worst funeral.

Your mom, giving me credit, showed me around to your family, and I gestured vaguely to the palest faces in the church. (I offended our friends—three halvsies and two white women—by repeatedly calling our friend group “the white people” as if we didn't stick out, as if I wasn't saying what everyone was thinking.) I said these were your friends.

And we were. Some of the best years of our lives were spent together, reviewing subpar writing and drinking subpar cocktails. We were like a collegiate Breakfast Club come together to resuscitate a journal. We closed down that Irish bar that charged too much for beer and put potatoes on everything. We walked too slowly, had too many crushes, and talked too much shit.

But, as the fraud of a pastor approached the pulpit I met Nini for the first time. I sat with her and—every time that damn reverend said the wrong name we laughed. We laughed when she said you *had always understood God's plan*. We laughed when she sang your praises. We cried. But we laughed, too, aware of the sick Tyler Perry-esque spectacle we were stuck in.

Since that night I have never been alone.

6. “There is no end and it is unstoppable.”

I took that line from a story of yours that I don't even remember. I just needed something to put on the back of your funeral program. It has been stuck in my head like a pop song ever since. Like a prayer.

Still, in a desperate search to understand, I scoured my computer, the internet, the literary journal we built together, and I couldn't find it. I read over a hundred pages of your writing, my eyes unable to focus, unable to put the sentences together like they were intended, only fragments, sticking unevenly to the page, got through.

Frustrated like maybe I could cry, like if one thing went wrong; if I spilled a drink; or stepped on something foul, I would break down, I found issues of the magazine from before we were friends.

You said *It is uncontrollable and involuntary*.

You said *It is necessary but an inconvenience*.

You sewed a code into your prose for me to find four years later; you comforted me before you even knew you were sick.

Every memory, every screenshot I saved of our relationship, while faded when I try to access it, was built on your own understanding that this *inevitable abyss* would come prematurely to you.

When we met I invited you to lunch during a break in our meeting and you said no. You stayed in our meeting room while the rest of us left, stretched, ate.

The next day you came with me. We walked slower than I knew a body could move, it took us 15 minutes to walk what I thought would take 5. You didn't speak unless prompted, you didn't order food or eat what I offered from my meal.

You did not want my friendship.

A few months later we had a class together and I sat next to you in the weirdly long classroom where we read and discussed the Great American Novel. You didn't speak in class, you sat in the back corner on the same side of the room as the door, but you laughed at my jokes.

I saw you give a reading that quarter—no sign of stage fright—but you swore to me later that you blacked out when you were on stage.

Then, finally, *Fragments* magazine returned. I nagged you into going out for drinks with us at that too-expensive, not-really-Irish pub that opened next door to the pizza place you walked me to last year. You didn't drink, kept your distance, but you opened yourself, then, to the idea that we were potential friends. Your first, I think, with whom you spent time outside of school or work.

When I think about you, you're hiding Papa Murphy's in my fridge and pulling frozen alcoholic juice boxes out of your purse. Your eyes smirking inside of heavy brown lids, your lips, too pink with make-up, are pursed in protest against your eyes, like you don't really believe you're having a good time.

We're driving to Tukwila in your mom's gold Toyota that's almost as old as we are and you're reading MapQuest directions to me. When we park at the mechanic's, you tell me you've never been to a sex shop and we act like children when we walk in, "What on *Earth* do you use *this* for?"

You lend me your earrings when I cut my hair and make up breast-related nicknames for our friends. You smile silent when new boys are around.

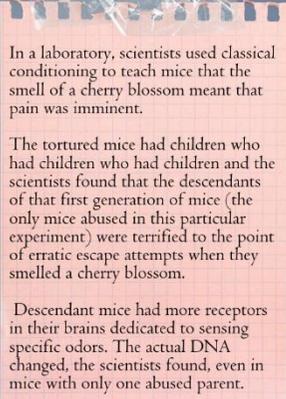
I forget sometimes that your death was final. *Sarcoma* feels too round in my mouth to have sharp edges. Why, if it's over, do I reach to call you, still, when *Twin Peaks* and *X-Files* have reboots, when new friends mix Monarch and Orangina, when I'm on a Spruce Street in a different city?

I see you in things that glitter like the jeweled pen you gave me for my birthday; in things that tinkle like the one-note-at-a-time tiny music box of "Here Comes the Sun" you gave me from your hospital bed, not knowing how this song had healed me once before; in slow walkers; in the smell of new paperbacks; in cocoa butter.

It is uncontrollable and involuntary.

It is necessary but an inconvenience.

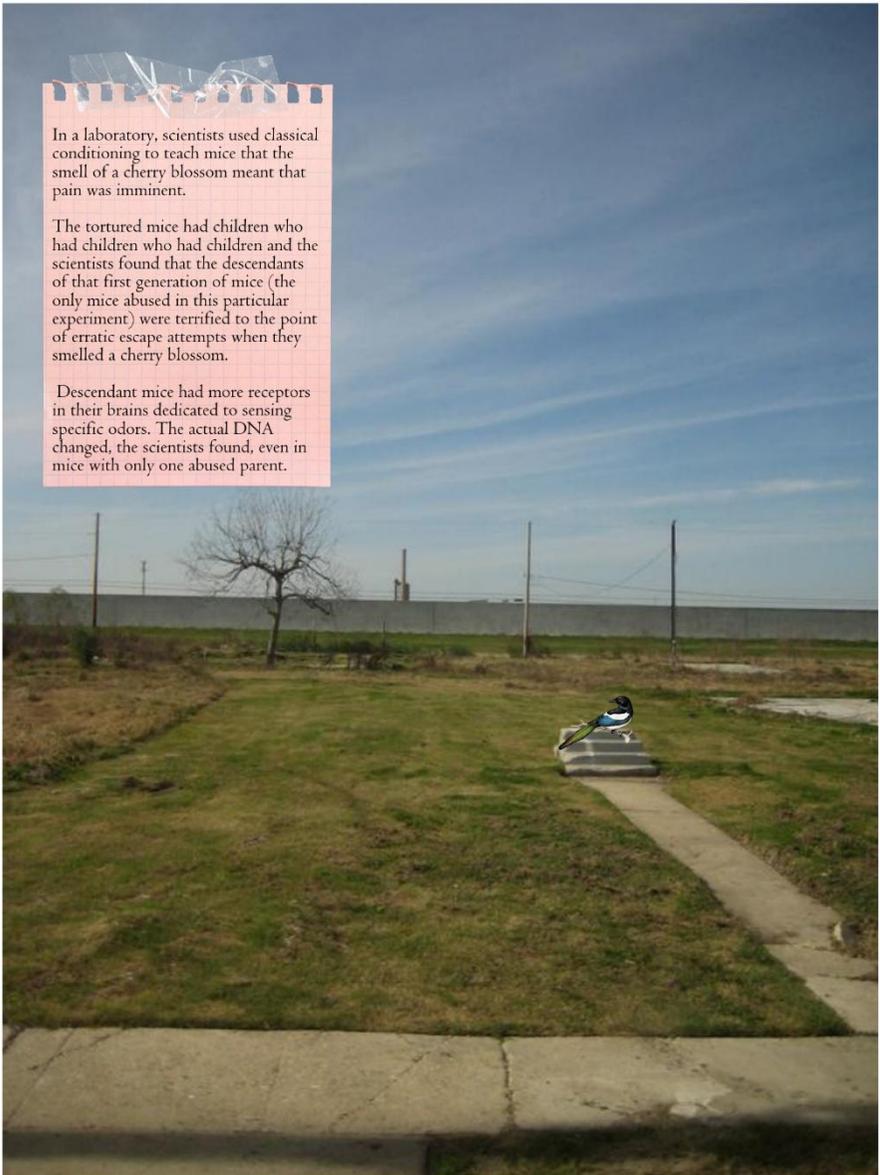
There is no end and it is unstoppable.



In a laboratory, scientists used classical conditioning to teach mice that the smell of a cherry blossom meant that pain was imminent.

The tortured mice had children who had children who had children and the scientists found that the descendants of that first generation of mice (the only mice abused in this particular experiment) were terrified to the point of erratic escape attempts when they smelled a cherry blossom.

Descendant mice had more receptors in their brains dedicated to sensing specific odors. The actual DNA changed, the scientists found, even in mice with only one abused parent.



Here is the Steeple

Dear—

Our souls are connected.

I don't remember if our first hang out was the day we both remember as the day our friendship was cemented. You kept the lights off in your dorm room, the gray Seattle day kept the room coffee shop dim and you showed me the first TED Talk I'd ever see.

You confessed to depression and I waved it off, "Oh, yeah, same," I probably said—on brand as ever liked I'd never heard of stigma—"I'm on antidepressants. Thank god," and your confession lost its weight. Your body lightened, I imagine, in my total lack of horror. I think that's what did it for you. I think that's when I slid up the ladder from acquaintance to confidante.

It's probably what did it for me, too. I was new to town, tethered to a faraway abuse and lonely after six months of culture shock. Finally, you gave me something real.

We spent a handful of dim afternoons in your single just sort of sharing space, quiet and honest in a way I'd bet neither of us had before.

There's something unspeakably special about sharing space that has no expectations. It has, in the intervening fifteen years, become a priority for me, a measuring stick for the depth of my relationships.

Last time I wrote you a letter it was 2020. Full of desperate admiration I wanted the world to see how good a person could be. I was begging the world to either be like you or live in such a way that respected you.

As a nurse in a city that got hit hard with COVID early, your messages became sparse and weary. Your skin always looked waxy, your blue eyes dull, circles below them where you'd never had them before. And when they asked for volunteers to work in a hospital in Navajo Nation, you were on the first flight.

I know now that a childhood of instability—parents and brother who turned on you out of nowhere, punished you when you asked questions, forgot to feed you while they literally preached God's generosity to an open-hearted congregation...prepared you for your emergency work. Your body works most efficiently under high stress. When it's quiet you hibernate, you're so overwhelmed by the burden of being alone.

When you lived alone in that gorgeous brick building I introduced you to, you'd call me on your days off. You smelled like rotten feet, your hair matted to your face, knotting itself at your neck, clothes stuck to your skin from sweat and survival—you just couldn't get out of bed.

So I sat in your bed and we watched 90s romcoms and ate popcorn until you were ready to shower. Until we could walk to the corner for phở

Do you remember that?

You always hated living alone. I wonder now if you just hate being alone. I wonder if your own thoughts bully you, pull at your hair and pinch your flesh with instances where you could have fucked up. Someone looked at you funny. You maybe misunderstood.

Maybe not. Maybe you're just an extrovert so much that even waking alone is difficult.

But you're always ready to be wrong. When your half-time roommate told you you took up too much space in your full-time apartment, you moved all your books, tchotchkes, and half your décor to your room. She didn't have any décor because she had another, more permanent home. But she asked you to live with white walls so you made yourself small.

Your first impulse has always been to believe that you are wrong, to make yourself smaller. Because you believe you are bad.

Loving you is a heartbreak. Every man you want is unavailable (by design, maybe), punishing. Like catnip, though, you trail these men—tanned and chiseled and entitled and controlling—and then beat yourself up for not being good enough for men who cheat on their wives, who told you from the start that they weren't interested.

Darling, you were never the problem. You were chasing a dynamic that was familiar not knowing that what was familiar to you was abuse.

I think we were lucky. We made a little friend group, each of us trying to be better. Each of us hurting and learning and teaching.

I said loving you is a heartbreak and it really always has been. We called you the Virgin Mary for your combination for goodness and innocence. I prayed to you, the altar still stands in my room. *Holy Mary, show me how to start my day with goodness in my heart. Help me to see signs in playing cards and build faith from the nods of strangers. Heal me of my judgment and the scars of my bad decisions. Make me sweet like you. I want to live in your image. Make me better. Make me good.*

You were my spiritual leader. I was your teacher. It wasn't all one-sided like I was in love and it was unrequited. I had knowledge you lacked (knowledge you coveted) because I came from a different place. Like a yin yang, you grew up in an island paradise with a black hole of a home life and I grew up in a darkness but found solace in the house.

You asked sweet, ignorant questions with an eye toward being a better friend, a better nurse, a better citizen and I answered. I created for you a scaffolding of cultural competence and you, in turn, built a steeple. I looked toward the sky for guidance. I looked so high for you.

Your questions, however ignorant, were so genuine, kind-hearted. There seemed to be no sense of entitlement, just an altruism that wanted education to hold itself up.

In early 2021 you asked me for permission.

It wasn't the usual thing—why can't you ask a trans person if they're pre- or post- op (their genitals aren't your business; not all people want surgery; there are many different gender affirming procedures that exist; surgery has historically been used to gate-keep trans identities...) or why you're not supposed to touch Black people's hair (it's fucking weird and invasive—no, you would not be fine with strangers touching your hair). You wanted permission this time. Not answers.

I am not the pastor, though. I am the teacher. So instead of giving you permission, I gave you homework.

“It—” I paused for long, being on the phone for this conversation was a torture. My breath changed like the air was thick, I couldn't inhale right, “It isn't up to me what you do. But if you do go there—and I think, I guess, that you do know or you wouldn't have asked,” my mouth sucked dry, “If you go there, every dollar that you spend—no matter how you spend it—is funding the,” I couldn't say the words, “is funding the ongoing,” cleared my throat, “is funding the ongoing ethnic cleansing of my people.”

I don't know what you expected me to say. You were quiet for a while. I think I added more specifics about the government, about the massacres. Tried to fill the silence. I think you attempted to rebut.

I couldn't quite figure out the sickness that buzzed dully at the bottom of my stomach. I asked my Hyestani group chat how they would feel confronted with that question. They agreed that it was respectful from an acquaintance and gutting, dull and serrated, from a friend.

You asked again some months later, when the question had finally nestled against your offer of donating to charity every time you ate Chik-Fil-A. It was complicity to bigotry but at least you felt guilty. You yanked a vulnerability from hibernation this time. I gave the same answer.

What longing, I wondered, put this question in your head? You who travels like I doom-scroll, who has access to everything. You wanted permission and I asked you if you could stomach the consequences.

I think you stopped telling me about your trips to Chik-Fil-A. I think you quit asking me for help finding ethical retailers because Amazon is an easier, faster dopamine hit than my lectures on wage theft and human rights.

Once, in college, we went out to our dive bar with some friends. I had a funny thought about our shared name, funnier, I thought, if I seemed drunker than I was. I told you the *H* is for fucking shit up.

I meant it playfully. I was a rascal and you were prim. But I think with time I've come to fuck up your carefully constructed paradigm with each question you ask and each answer I provide.

You wanted walls of prisms in your sanctuary, imperfect glass walls that bounce colored light endlessly.

I remind you that sometimes light distracts us from the shadows it creates.

When you go to the place where my grandfather's siblings and parents were killed, left dead in a pile on an unholy walk to a predetermined torture and death

When you practice the dances of an indigenous culture that is neither your own, nor does it belong to anyone who has ever lived on that land

When you take the collage of knowledge a white woman packaged for you—calling it *delicate* and *sacred*

When you spend thousands of dollars on a spiritual vacation—arrogant enough that you believe these movements are yours and that you can give them to the poor “spiritually hungry” middle easterners

Remember this: while you are literally dancing on the dust of my family's bones

You are funding my extinction.

You are killing me.

signed,

Impossible & Blessed

Hovhaness "Johnny" Elgatian
Bettendorf, IA
Musician, city worker

His mother was young. He was her third child, first to bear her second husband's surname. A significant moment for the refugee couple. And he was born sticky and screaming—and deformed.

His mother's English limited to greetings and his father not permitted in the women's space of obstetrics, Hovhaness was born into a horror scene. In 1954 in rural Iowa, alone with a white doctor and white nurse, hemorrhaging blood and fear, his mother prayed desperately for her tiny son's safety and survival. She had lost so much already—her whole family, two countries, her first husband, one baby, and many pregnancies. *God, please bless my baby.*

Hovhaness would be blessed. His cleft lip and palate would be repaired early with state-of-the-art procedures and he would grow up to be a gifted musician and doting father.

Hovhaness was born impossible. He was blessed. And he was robbed.

In 1959 in rural Iowa—brown and destitute and misshapen—he would be placed in a special education program at a time before oversight or empathy made their way into traditional pedagogy. What he endured in those classrooms is, mercifully, lost to history.

His siblings Vahan and Katrine turned Hovhaness into Johnny when he entered the school system. Sometime in the next couple of years, his Type-1 diabetes was discovered and again, in this time and place, treatment was iffy and his outlook was bad.

But like I said: Johnny was blessed.

He learned to play guitar by ear, using the radio as a guide. An autodidact, he first taught himself to repair the radio, then turntables, then affixed them to car dashboards, then he fixed up cars and pinball machines.

His poor socialization and health made it difficult to navigate friendships and romances but he was a brute and a genius and his seven siblings relied on him. He could make a dollar faster and easier than anyone and in whatever environment he might find

himself in. His memory was nearly eidetic and his prospects were low. Boredom and poverty inspired wild innovation.

And he was handsome. Sure, he was brown and unkempt, sure the bottom half of his face was scarred. But those cheekbones, that skin, those bright brown eyes somehow always peeking and always upturned under a near-black mop of hair. Shortish, broad-shouldered, eyes actually twinkling, you saw his leather jacket and red sports car and you knew he earned it.

When he was well.

One winter morning when I was in elementary school, begging the heavens for a snow day, I felt dizzy with pride knowing that my Uncle Johnny was out there, alone in the purple snow-lit morning clearing streets and collecting garbage. I imagined riding along with him, alive with the secrets of a sleeping town. I thought of him like Francine's dad in *Arthur*, making an adventure park out of trash at the landfill.

My dad, usually still asleep when the rest of us were getting ready for the day, hurtled into the kitchen pulling mismatched socks onto his feet. Mom didn't have a chance to ask him what was going on. He just said *Johnny fell off the truck*. And moved as a blur out the door.

I don't know the details but I think this is when Johnny's diabetes started to get really bad. I don't think he ever worked again after that.

Sometime in the next year, we learned that Johnny had a son. We learned that Johnny learned that he had a son: a gorgeous, chubby-cheeked, walking-and-talking five-year-old.

I heard rumors about my cousin's mother, about the nature of her relationship with my uncle, about her many children of different parentage. Then heard nothing about her again. Johnny got full custody and he and my cousin became a formidable team. Both geniuses, both shy and stubborn and good. In my first interaction with my new cousin, his kindergartener wrists twisted once and reached toward me in a loud pizza joint. Mute, handed me a completed Rubik's cube. He picked up every instrument he saw (many in his own home, many more procured out of curiosity), learned both my uncle's first language and Japanese with no teacher.

They were a perfect match. They understood each other: quiet and observant and impossible.

There is something so tragic, without question, about the potential stolen from my uncle by the circumstances of his birth. In every interaction, Johnny made me the star of each moment. He saved things to his memory to share next time. He called just because. Present, curious, engaged with everyone he met. When he shared his knowledge it pertained to your interests.

He'd turn you into the whole world for a conversation.

He would. Before.

Before he started working kidney transplants into conversations with strangers, just in case they knew someone. Just in case they were a match. Before he waited so long on that list that dialysis finally failed. Before he shrank into the indentation on his hospital bed, words slurring together, skin loose and taut in the wrong places. Before he asked for his son. Before he asked for his son to make it stop. Before he asked for his son to let him die.



His mother was young. He was her third child, first to bear her second husband's surname. A significant moment for the refugee couple. And he was born sticky and screaming—and deformed.

His mother's English limited to greetings and his father not permitted in the women's space of obstetrics, Hovhaness was born into a horror scene. In 1954 in rural Iowa, alone with a white doctor and white nurse, hemorrhaging blood and fear, his mother prayed desperately for her tiny son's safety and survival. She had lost so much already—her whole family, two countries, her first husband, one baby, and many pregnancies.

God, please bless my baby.

Hovhaness would be blessed. His cleft lip and palate would be repaired early with state-of-the-art procedures and he would grow up to be a gifted musician and doting father.

**Hovhaness was born impossible.
He was blessed.
And he was loved.**

Churches in which...

god will consistently be found: the moment muscle reaches from tension to stretch, an onion's translucence with the aid of fat and heat; a beloved's first mouthful of food prepared for them with heart and intention; when a cat starts to purr; a child sleeping, cheeks slack and lids light; carefully pouring hot water over dried and crushed plant matter; smell of fabrics dried by sun and wind; the act of creation: live music in a room of waiting congregants, when pen meets paper, ink soaking into pulp, pinky fingers of nervous admirers brushing lightly, the first squirt of thick pigment from a tube, a seed widening with sprout, identity realized and spoken; place in the woods in which all that is visible is woods; indulging in a hobby once shamed; hot water (see: tired feet in hot water; sore muscles in hot water; water heaters; water kettles; fire that warms, cooks, cures); reverberation from: string of a bass guitar, surprised laughter, hands clapping, relieved sigh, engine igniting, pulse affected by adrenaline; playing catch for no reason except that a ball and a couple of people are present; fantasy play (see: costumes, make up, theater); a child's discovery (see: a first understanding, hand-eye coordination, object permanence); a poem; the face of a beloved, far away, appearing live on a small screen; trampolines; the color changing shell of a bean plant; the shell-trading system of hermit crabs; freckled skin; a dog's ears perked in anticipation long before evidence of its person's arrival are perceptible by humans; the breaking of rain clouds: liquid splitting sticky, humid air (see: weather, seasons); tiny things; the anxious pacing of: worry, anticipation, problem solving; worn carpet; inland bodies of water; navigation by stars; soft fabrics on fragile bodies; soil, skin, fur, and/or water warmed by sun; private traditions; the naming of things



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For the people whose absences created the contents herein:
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Biography

Sarah Elgatian is a Quad City native and mixed-identity writer whose cross-genre work has appeared in journals including *Beholder Magazine*, *BRINK*, *The Quad-City Worker*, and the Iowa Writers' House print anthology *We The Intertwined*. In addition to her work to make writing accessible and joyful at the Midwest Writing Center, she also hosts the bi-weekly literary webseries *Write More Light*. Sarah is an MFA candidate at Regis University's Mile High MFA and has been teaching writing and storytelling for over a decade in literary and social justice settings. A grandchild of genocide survivors, Sarah stands in solidarity with oppressed people at home and abroad. Likes: bright colors, dark coffee, loud music, and long sentences. Dislikes: meanness and corporate farming.