

A Tremendous Way of Being

I. I don't have a therapist, but I might need to get one

What does it feel like?

It's like drinking a lot of coffee. Because every time I drink coffee I want to write. And I usually want to write about him, which is funny because I never used to write about boys. The same way I would always make fun of love poems.

What changed?

Physics class, I think. But it didn't happen all at once. We actually met in seventh grade; he was seated by me. We didn't really talk then, not like we do now.

What do you talk about?

A lot of things. He asked me how I felt about abortion and gun control and cigarettes. I didn't know why he wanted my opinion. But we agreed.

What was the significance of that conversation?

I don't really know. It was just nice that someone felt and thought in the capacity that I did. My geocentric world suddenly and gratefully became focused on something much brighter.

Was that your first conversation?

It was our first *real* conversation. We've talked about a lot of things since then, in person and over text. Sometimes I get so excited I forget to savor it, though.

What do you forget to savor?

Our ideas. My heart rate. His horribly poignant face. But it's crazy. Like here we are, a couple of seventeen year old kids talking about free will and the fourth dimension. He doesn't believe in free will, by the way.

Why did you say you were surprised he wanted your opinion?

I'm smart, which also makes me intimidating; I wasn't used to the attention. But more than that. People always equate beauty with one's value, so I guess I've always felt like I fall short. I have a hard time hating high school girls, you know. Because we all feel the same way, indoctrinated by the male gaze to believe our self-worth depends on our attractiveness. What a bunch of bullshit. I don't know. Maybe I'm just ugly.

Do you feel a sense of validation when he talks to you?

Sort of. But I know validation can't come from other people.

How do you balance that sentiment with your previous statement about self-worth?

What I'm trying to say is that I love myself. And I love myself so much that everyone else must love me too, right? But he likes my best friend, who coincidentally is the prettiest girl in school. Like it's hard to unlearn comparison. I'm working on it, trust me. But fuck.

Has your attitude toward him shifted over the course of your physics class?

When I told him I wanted to be a writer, he laughed. So I wrote two poems about it. And I love these poems more than anything. But a few days later he asked me if I've read Bukowski. Of course I have, I said to him. Of course I fucking have. Then he sent me his favorite Bukowski

poem, and I tried not to care. It's like working on a cool painting but messing up and then salvaging it. Something cyclical. My attitude hasn't shifted because it's never been constant.

How do you manage this lack of consistency?

I don't do anything differently, really. I mean, he's in my head most days. But it'll pass. He's funny too; I didn't mention that. We joke around a lot, which might be the worst part, actually.

Why is that the worst part?

Because nonreciprocity sucks. We're friends, I guess. But when I see him, friendship quickly becomes an inconvenience. It's not what I think about. And I don't even mean to think so much.

How do you clear your head when you feel the need to?

He's asked me that too.

What did you say?

I told him I meditate and write and paint and sit outside. Meditation helps the most. He asked me what I thought about nihilism after I answered. He thinks life is meaningless. Like there's no innate purpose.

What do you think?

I know where he's coming from and all, though I'm not sure if I agree. I mean, come on. There's probably some love. Definitely.

Do you love him?

When we were texting about our classes for next school year, I'd made a joke about him wanting to take this one easy class instead of the one most of us are going to be in. So he said that teaching others is just as important as learning from them. I just want my senior year to be fun, he said. I understand, I told him, to which he replied, You do.

II. If I wasn't a writer, I'd buy a nice house

But I'm going to do both. I'm going to live in Italy for a while. And I'm going to write at a desk or table underneath an open window. I'm going to find a blue feather on the ground, put it in a book or a frame. There will be coffee and pens and handmade coasters. And I'm going to miss my family. Like how I'm going to miss them when I leave for college. But they'll visit; I'll visit; we'll video chat. When they ask me how I am, I'll say the air feels like nothing. Like I'll walk outside and feel only me. But the food will be something, so I'll study it abundantly. Abundant, the poems. And abundant, the poet. My hair will be long, the carbonara longer. The floors will be wood; I'm going to buy a rug from a shop owned by a woman who knows how to sail. So I'll sail too. And then I'll sit. And always, the open window: my favorite time of day.

And things like hallways won't matter, where he and my friend would push each other in that high school-boy-likes-high-school-girl way. Where sighing became a refuge. Where I felt uncool but was happy to be so. Because at least it felt familiar.

The difference between a moth and a butterfly is pretty privilege, he told me once. And it was weird to hear this from him, considering how deeply I resonated with it. In that hallway, glimpses of it in front of me. I wondered what brought him to the realization, but more so, I wanted to understand how he perceived himself. If, like me, he picked himself apart in search of the pearl living at his center. And if he found it, how did he excavate it? What shovel did he use? And if the pearl rolled around on his palm, glinting, how did he manage to hold it up and say, I'm here. I'm here. Startled but also startling.

In some instances I am able to recognize my own maturity. But last year my friend asked me what I liked least about myself. And I was afraid—not of my answer but of vocalizing it. All of my shortcomings are imagined, but speaking them into existence felt treacherous. So I didn't. And it was brutal. And it was beautiful.

And I know I'm melodramatic. But I don't have to explain it away. As if *teenage* is the only adjective belonging to me. Call me emotional but don't dismiss my emotions. If I am the heightened version of myself right now, then I aspire to be the heightened version of myself tomorrow.

It's all so clearly in front of me. I can see art on the walls of my house. Natural light and warm bed sheets. Plants hanging from the ceiling. I know I'll play music when I clean to pass the time joyfully, which isn't to say there won't also be hardship. But at night, in silk, I will sit on my terrace, listening to the neighbors. To the silence of the weather. It'll be very quiet, the sound of my heart muffled only by the occasional clinking of a glass—the noise people make when togetherness has finally overpowered the need to speak.

III. Everything I project onto others is a reflection of myself

Do you overthink, I asked him.

I overthink all the time. Do you?

Always.

Exercising helps me, he said.

I saw this video saying people exercise for the wrong reasons. Like most people only workout to lose weight or to look a certain way. But really people should exercise because of the mental health benefits. It helps you sleep better too, I explained.

I guess it's also about body dysmorphia for me, he admitted.

Have you ever thought about seeing somebody for that?

Yes.

I don't think I believe in God, he told me.

I think you've known that for a while; it's good to accept it, I said to him.

No, I used to believe. It's just that the more I read about it, the less it makes sense. Have you heard of the Egg Theory?

No.

It basically says that a person will be born again as a god once they experience every human life in their universe.

Do you believe in that? I asked.

I don't know. I don't think so, he answered.

Did you know that people don't perceive each other in the present but actually in the past? So if you were sitting three feet across from someone, you would see them as they once were three billionths of a second ago, I texted him.

I do know that, he replied.

How do you know everything?

Time is interesting, so I read a lot about it.

Do you read books?

I read articles. Books are too long.

There was a study about how this one prison encourages its inmates to read because fiction increases empathy. I think that's pretty cool, I told him.

People need to be more empathetic, he said.

I know.

Poetry is the main thing I write, I said.

Can I read some of your writing? I know you really care about it, so I won't make fun of you or anything, he responded.

Sure, I told him. Be nice.

I like the line about not killing spiders. You could really do something with that.

IV. I feel closer to the sentence I've always wanted to write

When I turned seventeen, I stared at my nose in the mirror for ten minutes. A nose with no screen time, no American beauty standard. But I felt sure this was something I would stay alive for. My body saying, You're not here to conform to the conventions that limit you. And again, a poem.

Him.

If loving is harder than being loved, I want in. It's about presence. It's about expanding the landscape of myself. I want to be messy with love when I walk into a room. Eye contact, intentionally. Endlessly. I want to look directly at my life and claim ownership. This is mine and this is mine and this is mine. The siren of my rock.

So if my feelings are unrequited, I am allowed to be purpled by the bruise of it. But I hate waiting. And mediocrity is boring. To be unmerciful in the pursuit of magnificence, I will release what I'm not absolute about.

The theory of him, daring me to choose something real.

So I lift my palms, cupped and squished together, as if to hold flashes of light. To be blind with specificity. To recognize the gladness of my body.

And to show myself how remarkably useless love is not.