

We Are the Thing Itself: Essays

by
Monica Anderson

A THESIS

submitted to
Oregon State University
Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English
(Honors Scholar)

Presented May 26, 2017
Commencement June 2017

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Monica Anderson for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English presented on May 26, 2017. Title: We Are the Thing Itself: Essays.

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Elena Passarello

This collection of creative nonfiction essays seeks to examine my expanding consciousness and the people and experiences that have contributed to it. The first essay juxtaposes competitive running and dancing, the second considers how food choices challenge relationships, the third unpacks an implausible friendship while paralleling an Audre Lorde essay, and the fourth details my experience in Vietnam. Repeating patterns include movement—physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual; relationships to space, others, and myself; and the challenge of narrating any story without necessarily simplifying or altering the details. The driving question behind my writing was about individual relevance and impact. Throughout the writing and revising process, I considered both how I fit into various worlds, and how those worlds have affected me.

Key Words: creative nonfiction, essays, writing, English

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Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English project of Monica Anderson presented on May 26, 2017.

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

Monica Anderson, Author

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PRELUDE

In a memoiristic piece, at age fifty-seven, Virginia Woolf writes, “But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.” Through the process of attempting creative nonfiction about my life—at age twenty-two—I have become less certain about most everything. And especially what it means to write. But the idea that *we are the thing itself* feels intrinsically satisfying. It suggests that anything we create, all choices we make and truths we believe, returns to us, to people. My guiding question for this project was initially, *Do I matter?*, but now I see the more pertinent question is, *Do we matter?* I cannot remove myself from the circles I inhabit, and I cannot help but answer Yes.

Some patterns emerged in these essays: movement stands out the most. Beyond just running, which feels forever relevant to all other aspects of my life, in each essay I encounter fluidity. In relationships (with myself, with places, with others), in levels of control, within my consciousness, across cultures. I learned long ago that stagnation breeds discontent. I hope that these pieces demonstrate motion.

I am drawn to nonfiction because I am compelled to narrate my life, but also because organizing stories allows me to create meaning. Woolf, again: “It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole.” I have read enough remarkable writing to know that the stories most precious to ourselves do not always reach the audience with as much or the same power. But that is the magic of nonfiction: we risk ourselves—our truths—on the page for an unpredictable and often disorienting result. It is an exercise in vulnerability; it is practice for living.

I emerge from this project hesitantly certain that stories matter. That we matter. That the thing we need is us: *we are the thing itself*.

OR ARE WE DANCER

Day one of Christian Leadership Class—high school religion, honors version—my teacher projected a YouTube video: at the sun-drenched Gorge Amphitheater, amid the afternoon lull of a music festival, one shirtless man floats to the edge of the field to boogie. Soon, his hip swishes and finger flicks attract another man, who matches his improvised moves until, inspired, he jiggles, handstands, and kicks. When a third man joins 30 seconds later, two more follow, then three women, then sets of fours and twos and ones, until the instigator is lost in a vibrating sea of dancing. The mob forgets. It pulses and tugs bystanders in. Near the end of the three-minute video, even the camera holder seems to inch closer, itching to engage in the thumping crowd.

In high school, I ran. To run was to control movements, direction, even thoughts. My fears were specific and surmountable, my ambitions linear and just high enough to reach. I used my body to run and only danced at biannual school events. Except for one winter when, burnt out from a tedious, explosive, and disillusioning cross country season, and remembering the previous winter's depressive state, I auditioned for *Godspell*. Somehow, my off-key, acapella rendition of "I Just Can't Wait to be King" secured a chorus role and, rather than running circles and swinging my legs through drills after school, I was singing lines and matching the choreographer through halting dance steps. When I left the theater at seven p.m. each night, the sky was dark and still, but my muscles twitched, remembering the moves.

At the actual performances two months later, in the first song after the intermission, I clutched a microphone for the twenty-second solo I had practiced in car rides, alone. My crackling voice reverberated through the black space to the faceless audience: *We can build a beautiful city/ Yes, we can; yes, we can/ We can build a beautiful city/ Not a city of angels/ But we can build a city of man.*

The following fall, at the Homecoming dance, I planted my feet in one spot and swiveled my upper body and arms to perform the illusion of dancing. I was sacrificing half my

body to keep the lower half rested. By then, my friends did not question the things I did to run faster, and when they all jumped to a song's commands, I pumped my arms in sync. The next morning, I would wake at six a.m. and drive two hours to a cross country race that could be a breakthrough. The course would be fast, the competition fierce, and I would run a PR, 18:52, my first time under nineteen minutes.

* * *

I never wanted to live in Corvallis. As a junior in high school, I drove 45 minutes with my mother from Eugene to drop my older brother off for the start of his winter term. It was January, so wetness squelched the roads, the starless night sky bled grey, and when we passed the fluorescent and characterless Winco, dread engulfed me. I felt suffocated. *This is not the place for me*, I thought. I dreamt of crisp Colorado skies, dry mountain air, and padded snow all winter long—1,195 miles from home. My fantasy lasted up until the partial scholarship offers arrived and the computer screen told me: You cannot afford this. I had only applied to three schools: my top choice, my last choice, and Yale, just to see if I could (I couldn't). My last choice became my only choice—41.5 miles from home.

Now, Corvallis feels essential. Where would I be in Fort Collins? Happy, surely, enamored with nature-soaked surroundings, but would I have flown across the world alone at age twenty, would I have run naked in the middle of the night with 18 teammates, or mastered the slippery step onto a steeplechase barrier to propel forward, landing with a splash in three feet of hose water?

I'm not sure, and it still aches to imagine what might have been, but college can't really be the *best four years of your life*. The world expands and swells far beyond the Willamette Valley I know so deeply. Over twenty-two years is enough time here. I will move on, but the *when* is later than I intended and the *where* narrows as my interests and relationships deepen.

When I started college as an idealistic, ambitious freshman, I knew what my future would look like. I would graduate in four years with a zoology degree, intern abroad at the Cheetah Conservation Fund in Namibia, get at least two minutes faster in cross country and track, date between two and five exceptional and interesting people on the weekends, and maintain a creative outlet with a writing minor. The track to become a veterinarian was clear and predetermined; I did not need room for alternatives. But, after enrolling in both the honors biology and chemistry series at once, I was almost immediately despondent. In practice, science proved my worst and least favorite subject. The foundation of my desired career felt repellent; I would not spend my adult days providing holistic veterinary care to horses. The remaining factors of my life plan trembled without a foundation, threatening to collapse.

Three years later, I gave a presentation, alongside three other upperclassmen, to a group of freshmen about my “story” here, my transformation from a pre-veterinary medicine freshman into a world traveling, steeplechase running, creative writing, double-job working senior. The professor, once we all finished, told the class, “See, the way you spend your time here will define who and what you become. You have the ability at all times to decide what path you take.” I appreciated her sentiment, but even telling my own story, I realized how much I’d simplified it. Really, each day, each decision, each moment, I was drowning in possibilities and could only make choices when I forewent many others. I felt empowered, sure, but also overwhelmed at what I wanted to and could become.

* * *

One night in the first term of my freshman year, I sat in the common room working on my chemistry homework. It was late, around midnight, and I looked up to see Brian, who lived across the hall and was the only boy on our floor to join a fraternity, sauntering toward me. We lovingly called him Bro-tank Brian; tonight’s tank was striped, blue and white. He studied biochemistry and biophysics because it’s the “hardest” major at Oregon State, but he procrastinated deadlines until late into the nights before. His arrogance charmed me.

Brian sat down, stared into my eyes, and said, “You’re wearing makeup. It looks good.” I was flattered. Normally, our conversations revolved around his insistence that plants have feelings or insincere questions about the universe. Once, I showed him a spoken word poem from an artist I admire, and he laughed. Even though I dated the same boy that entire year, I wondered, in the back of my head, what it would be like to kiss Brian. He was far from my type—fratty, insensitive, self-absorbed—but also quite smart. When his roommate Alex wrote haikus about everyone on our floor, Brian sketched portraits to parallel them. Mine was particularly ugly but he insisted—again laughing—that he thought I was beautiful.

That night, we didn’t kiss, we just talked, for hours, about our dreams, our worries, our crises. I spent many nights that year talking with people into the early hours—sometimes with Brian, sometimes with my then-boyfriend, sometimes with Alex—and while this was the worst thing I could do for my running, it was healing in a year full of big questions and few answers. Those conversations are, to me, my freshman year embodied.

The first and last time I entered a college fraternity (not Brian’s), I was sober and dressed in an Ernie Halloween costume with two friends disguised as Bert and Oscar the Grouch. In the basement, red-faced boys prowled near the walls, searching for girls’ backsides to grind on. The room was so crowded that *all* dance moves devolved to jerking and grinding. The stale, sweaty air suffocated me—I never moved my hips. We left twenty minutes later. This was my glimpse of the raging, Thursday-through-Sunday party scene that I have all but missed for three years. People return to this site, again and again, grinding and grasping and growling, but what is it they seek?

* * *

I did my own experimenting, perhaps too much, in that first year of confusion and existentialism, prompted by a complete loss of direction. And my running worsened. If I was to redefine myself, I decided, better to try everything first and then choose. Better to

get it right all at once so I would not need to scrutinize myself again. So, I traded fast times for alcohol and late nights, unsure at the start if this would be the new normal, or if I would return to deliberate diligence. What I know now is that I always had more control than I realized. There was no guiding light leading me to destiny other than the ongoing conversation between my logic and intuition that is my best measure for the value of my decisions. In other words, nothing was meant to be, but when running feels more natural than singing, or when Colorado State promises more debt than liberation, I have learned not to question my instincts.

The first time I drank was also the first time I got drunk. I was locked in a house with my teammates, half of whom had also never drunk, at the end of a hard-fought cross country season. I took six shots of raspberry-flavored Absolut vodka—I know because we kept track with sharpie slashes on our hands—and the world slowed down, but I otherwise felt normal. Then, I heard it: the dance song of my year, the one I saw live twice in a span of five months, the one to which I knew every word, raps and all. “Can’t Hold Us” by Macklemore. I felt my body lose control as I slipped into a trance of shouting along, all the while jumping and spinning on a rug near the kitchen sink. A teammate suggested we move the rug.

“No!” I yelped through slitted eyes at a break in the words. “I like the danger!” And when we arrived at those final, gasping moments of the song’s fade-out, I opened my eyes to a changed world. *This, I thought, is what life has looked like for all the drunk people before me.* I was connected to them, and especially to my brother, whose poorly hidden alcohol bottles had, years prior, disappointed me, the obedient Catholic high schooler, on all levels. Finally, I understood. This alternate world was beautiful, blurry, and so numbed from all the difficult emotions and decisions that plagued the real world. I told him all about it the next week, on our drive home for Thanksgiving, seeping with pride at my initiation into his inebriated universe. A year later, I would try edibles with him and enter yet another world, but one less conducive to dancing and lacking what I was really after: losing myself.

I've learned—I hope. I couldn't remain in that trance forever, but how could I know that in the act of forgetting oneself, the body forgets where it belongs? My place, my purpose, once so obvious, became *too* open-ended, too nebulous. I had to salvage my roots and stop myself before I spiraled into drunken, ambitionless shambles. I have lived without moderation, but I have also lived with intense discipline. Who can say which is better?

Three years later, when I now choose those rare nights, like my twenty-first birthday when I was first to arrive and almost last to leave a dance club, I feel no guilt. I shimmy and strut until the stress evaporates through my pores and the bliss intoxicates me. My purpose is to dance, not to have a purpose for the dance.

* * *

I recently attended my first drag show, held at Oregon State's largest auditorium. In a small college town more conservative than my native Eugene, people of every gender, ethnicity, and sexuality dressed up in the most extravagant, self-indulgent, breathtaking outfits, and performed—they sang or lip-synced, they teased and seduced the audience, and they danced like self-discovered superstars. A whirlwind group opener of Panic! At the Disco's "I Write Sins Not Tragedies" pulled me in tight. In the second act, the unabashed star of the evening, drag queen Carmen Sutra, performed Beyoncé's "Lemonade" with all the rhythm, genius, and sexiness of the original.

"What's your favorite and least favorite part of dressing in drag?" an audience member asked during the post-intermission question and answer session with three confident drag queens—Carmen Sutra, Dharma Prada, and Lucille S. Balls.

"My least favorite part is the tuck," Dharma Prada said, her legs splayed open and forward like her curly mop of hair, "because I haven't felt my testicles in hours. And my favorite part is the tuck, because I haven't felt my testicles in hours."

"You have to be a little nuts to do the steeplechase," my coach told me, weeks before we both decided it would be my perfect event. Illogical and unpredictable, the steeplechase

fuses a run and a dance. I knew from the first hurdle I soared over, early in my sophomore year, that it could save and sustain me. Seven and a half laps to complete, four barriers and one water jump to clear each revolution, and at least ten other young women to beat. There is a rhythm to the monotonous laps, a danger to the static steel slabs, and a meditation to the unraveling of nervous, fiery legs into exhausted, screaming muscles. An inexperienced racer will betray all feeling on her face; her mouth contorts more each time she leaps. Her finish is a collapse, neither glamorous nor triumphant.

When I race the steeplechase, I slowly lose control of my body. It begins with calculated, expertly executed steps; I rise over the barriers and glide across the water. But somewhere around the fourth lap, one mile down with almost another left, I feel the demons clasp my mind, my legs, even my arms, and on a bad day, it all falls apart. Each descent into the water threatens to ruin me, and I forget the other runners that surround me because the one thing throbbing through my brain is, *This hurts way too much to be worth it.*

In a breathless finale performance of Ariana Grande's "Into You," Dharma Prada welcomed dollar bills from the audience with her caressing touch. When one woman, petite with half-shaved, dyed blonde hair, held out her dollar, Dharma Prada knelt down to kiss her and lingered. Earlier, Lucille S. Balls, too, shared a kiss with an unidentified man from the audience. Both sent shivers up my arms, but this one felt more fervent, more charged. Something about it shifted my perspective of sexuality from an abstract, albeit complex concept, to a tangible, endlessly malleable reality. This was the tolerant world I believed in, bursting forth in glitter before me. It was a *fuck you* to all norms, and I felt renewed.

The danger in steeplechase seems obvious—we are airborne for several seconds each lap—but it is the hidden risk that intrigues me most. One race includes thirty five barriers, but one practice could include several hundred. Before the crowd ever sees us soar or stumble, we have hurdled until the barriers no longer scare us, despite the many times we might have fallen. Our bodies are tested and pressured to the point of breaking. The first year I did steeplechase, four other teammates joined me, and all four ended the

season injured. I survived, but the damage hit me many months later. I knew. I always knew that this event could destroy me, but I persisted because it feels like an expression of myself. Like when I put on my uniform and wet my spikes to race, I become braver and bolder, and the people watching understand that each movement is born from a creative impulse, not an expectation.

Watching the drag show was catharsis, and the performers, too, had their own obvious releases. One person, Julius, was introduced under the pretense that their performance was “an act of self-love, and a reminder that we all need to take time to live, laugh, love, and dance.” They strutted onstage, dark-skinned and clad in a purple shirt that read *Got privilege?*, to Justin Timberlake’s “Can’t Stop the Feeling,” and soon half the audience had rushed the stage, joining the performer in a euphoric, communal dance.

* * *

Often, I must remind myself: distance runners drawn to Oregon State share a desire for order, for moral goodness, for excellence in all things. I will never fill this mold completely. We cannot afford to experiment as much as our peers—though I tried—so we fold into ourselves, our ideas of what an elite runner’s life should look like. And an elite runner’s life looks a lot like a sober, consistent, routine-oriented individual. As runners, we are forced to mature faster, to make fewer mistakes, because if we do not, our performance suffers. If, as two of my roommates did, we came here on an athletic scholarship, we are obligated—and paid—to center our lives around our sport.

I participated in my own communal dance the morning after the drag show, at a gathering aptly named “Ecstatic Dance.” Here, a group of like-minded, organically dressed, free-spirited individuals gathered in the Memorial Union ballroom to express themselves and engage in “movement meditation.” I arrived with my boyfriend three minutes before the start time, where we faced a list of guidelines that we must initial: no booze, shoes, phones, or conversation on the dance floor. Already, lanky and long-haired individuals spread across the floor, many stretched in difficult yoga poses. Colorful and

hypnotic tapestries lined the walls and a few rogue children played with plastic horses on the stage.

Opposite the stage, planted on the ground, DJ Baron Von Spirit, in his blue T-shirt with a DNA double helix and yoga pants, eased into the space with slow-tempo electronica. As the pulse inched faster over the next half hour, the dancers rose from their sleepy ground poses to flow. My boyfriend and I stayed on the ground, stretching, for as long as possible, but slowly, we rose with the others and began to sway. I waited for my self-consciousness to dissipate, wishing I had worn free-moving pants rather than a dress, but right when the beats quickened enough for me to yield, Von Spirit silenced the music, took the mic, and spoke about the function and history of Ecstatic Dance. It started, allegedly, with ancient Greek fire-dancers, but began in Corvallis just a few months before. His speech broke the trance, but also allowed me to re-instate my purpose for being there, which was, quite simply, to experience it whole.

When I'm at my most neurotic, single-minded in my devotion to running, my weekends do not look like this. Instead, I sleep regular hours, complete a long run early Saturday morning, and devote the rest of that day and all Sunday to recovering. In the weekly training log I send to my coach, I cannot write, *Sunday: Danced, ecstatically, for three hours with eclectic strangers*. Instead, it must always be, *Sunday: REST DAY*. So, I often omit what I do on the weekends, and my coach and I are both assured that I am doing exactly what I need to be doing to run my best.

The music returned bass-heavy, energetic, and intensely danceable. My boyfriend, a natural dancer whose rhythm mitigates mine, flowed into it before I did, and I'm not sure I was ever fully immersed, but, as promised, I reached "ecstatic" highs and silenced the chatter in my mind. Around us, limbs flailed, bodies twisted, smiles expanded, cheers released, and one woman, alone in a corner, flapped her shimmering cape. Another woman spent almost the entire two-hour dance on the floor, rolling and stretching and sliding with eyes closed, only once rising to jump and stomp the ground, her feet bare and her yoga pants rippling. Across the room, a man in a kangaroo onesie twirled, grinning at every set of eyes he met.

The closer I get to graduation, the less time I have to be a student-athlete, the more I wonder if I'm right to live so presently, to of course prioritize my body but also to welcome exceptions. Maybe I could have raced at Nationals if I never learned to let go, or to dance freely and lose control, if I kept my high school mindset forever. Maybe I could have been great. Then again, maybe I could have been miserable. Nothing was meant to be, but on the other side of the chaos, at least I can see exactly how I got here.

* * *

At an infamous downtown bar full of grimy surfaces and stories that span decades, uniformed Marines flooded the upstairs dance floor. All except two senior officers were dressed in white and only a handful of women diluted the group. Before, while the Marines surrounded the bar, sipping drinks and eyeing the floor which my oldest brother claims fails building codes, a middle-aged woman moved to the center. She wore a floor-length dress just tight enough to expose her curves and her ear-length salt and pepper hair looked just like my mother's in the strobing lights. The woman twisted and turned her body with closed eyes; she had no companions and she seemed not to need them. I wondered how often she came there alone.

To the side, a female Marine watched the woman. She inched closer, her moves increasing in risk with each step further onto the dance floor, until she stopped an arm's length away from the woman. Then, imperceptibly, they were dancing. The female marine, hair slicked in a taut bun and shaded by her cap, pressed her hips to the woman's backside, who continued unfazed with this new addition to her space. They stayed like this, together, for twenty minutes. Sometimes they faced each other, sometimes away, sometimes with hands held, but I never saw words exchanged. Later, when I left the bar and searched for my locked bike, the middle-aged woman walked ahead of me, once again alone, serene in the hazy June night.

* * *

The year after discovering the steeplechase, and within a six-month span, I spent six total weeks on crutches. To maintain some sanity, I disengaged from my body. I forgot about running, about hurdling all those barriers, and especially about dancing—the movement was too liberating. With only one supporting leg, I could not stand straight, so I hunched over the crutches, hopped around my house, and waited for it all to be over. On Halloween, I got too drunk and the friend who was delegated to track me forgot, until he watched me topple off my crutches into someone’s damp grass.

I do not remember most of that night, but the previous night, we had walked a mile home and I recalled every excruciating, crutch-propelled step. Trapped between metal sticks, I tried and tried to forget myself, but that is precisely why, five months later, I needed crutches again—it is impossible to heal a body you don’t understand.

Maybe it’s also impossible to heal a mind that has lost its focus. When I fail, I often forget that it was not the end, that I am not trapped forever, that focus can transform. So, I need something to grasp, a purpose and order to believe in. A life plan, a future brighter than the present, a religion with all the answers, a sport built on repetition, or maybe just a conversation with someone who understands that my god there are just too many options to know which is right, but we still have to try.

A fiction writing professor told me that our real lives have a story arc. But if I look too closely, if I notice all the details I most often choose to forget, I lose the arc of my life.

Do I regret anything? Yes. Would I change it? Only if I knew how it would end.

The comedown seemed to take ages, each song slow enough to be the last, and yet Von Spirit somehow found another even slower. Once the tempo was near stagnant, Von Spirit and his partner, Oli, moved to the center of the floor, where they struck oversized quartz singing bowls, waited several minutes, then struck them once more. On the second strike, bodies moved, awakened from their trances. Oli invited us all to sit in a circle holding hands and cycled through some gratitudes, announcements, and more dance history. To complete the two-hour journey, we all thanked the dance floor by

pounding our hands against it, dozens of ecstatic adults beating the ground like young children would, trying to evoke the rain.

THE CHALAZA

My mother inhaled and knelt into the dent in my mattress that had formed through years of her and my father's bedtime stories. I was seventeen; it was 2012.

"I'm very worried about you," she said. I faced the wall, lying on my side and trembling. "You're not...*actually* vegan, are you?"

My eyes flamed and my throat tightened.

"Yes," I said, tears flowing. "Yes, I am."

I do not remember the exact day I stopped eating animals, but I have never, since birth, enjoyed meat. When my parents cooked pork chops, I prolonged chewing and gagged on every bite. Each time I cracked an egg the twisted white strand—the chalaza—repulsed me so much that I fished it out with a fork no matter how long it took. Once, I cooked chicken for a religion class assignment: prepare family dinner. Handling the slimy, raw muscle was enough to repel me from cooking anything—meat or otherwise—again. Around that time, two years before my confession, I informed my mother that one day, I would become vegan. She scoffed.

I. ~~Red Meat~~, Chicken, Fish, Eggs, Dairy

Running operates on minute details. Milliseconds separate personal bests, and the ecstasy of finishing three or five thousand meters of sustained effort faster than ever before is also a clear and poignant measure of achievement. You cannot quantify talent in music, art, writing, or even other sports as plainly as in running. *I am as good as my PRs*, you tell the running world. *When I get better, the times will speak for themselves*. You might run a bad race and know that you are better, that in fact you could run one minute faster, but until you run the fast time that you imagine, you are only as good as what you have done, not what you will do.

In 2011, several months before attending my first running camp, my mother acquired a glossy nutrition manual at a conference. As a physical therapist, she works with bodies all day long. If they must see her, then something is wrong. Perhaps there was an accident, some sort of physical trauma, but more often, the problems arise from

lifestyle. A sore neck from straining over a computer. Lower back pain from too much slouching and sitting. Some tendonitis from a limb built rotated too far in or out. She does not encounter a body, take a quick glance, and declare, *No problems here, good to go*. She must excavate the origins of the pain, understand how the body moves throughout the world, touch it herself, and only then can she prescribe the movements that will fix it. Her research must first be personal.

She gave me the nutrition manual to aid my recovery from a femoral stress fracture, which I had sustained in cross country season. Her attempts to help me through physical therapy failed because I refused to trust her, so she used the manual to impart some objective impact. Before, I had subsisted on a diet of honey-margarine toast, Clif bars, and dried Costco cherries because those things tasted the best to me. But once I had the manual, I pored over the information, absorbing and relishing each detail. I learned that sweet potatoes burst with more vitamins than white potatoes, saturated fats and hydrogenated oils might kill me, and not all protein is complete. Nutrition had never seemed particularly important or interesting to me, but the colorful pictures seduced me; I could not resist such a clear handbook to health. I read it at night, treasuring each section and incorporating small changes as instructed: snacking on carrots instead of crackers, adding avocado to salad, using meat as an adornment to the meal rather than the main attraction.

By the time I got to running camp the summer before my junior year, I realized that if I chose not to overindulge at every dining hall meal, if instead I was intentional with the food I chose to eat, the effects would show themselves in my body and, more importantly, in my running. So, I refused the third helpings and the constant desserts; I consumed dinner vegetables over dinner rolls and reveled in the preciseness of my choices. I had never felt so deliberate.

Back then, peers accused me of being a perfectionist, and I always refuted it. I liked control in some realms, sure, but I knew when to stop, and what was too much. I sought excellence, not perfection, but perhaps my desire for success implored me to expect it, and if I did not at first achieve it, I made changes so that the next time, I did.

When my family picked me up at the end of the camp's week, they commented on my leaner build. I had always been *lean*, but lazy nutrition and puberty resulted in a sophomore year where I was heavier than before. With several fewer pounds, I felt more

like myself, but also more empowered—after a year without my brother in the house, my parents’ singular attention was suffocating me. I wanted autonomy. We drove straight to Canada for a vacation, where I continued my new camp habits with glee. One afternoon, we shopped at a local grocery store and I spotted some muffins from the bakery. Before, I would have slyly suggested we purchase the muffins for a treat. But then, I thought to myself, *No*, and felt a euphoric rush. *I love that I can refuse those because I am so dedicated to my running.* At that moment, I realized that the reason I suddenly cared so much about nutrition was running. It was always running. I felt athletic potential rumbling and believed food could propel me to the next level. For a time, it could. Until the details became a bit more complicated.

“Don’t you hate that she can eat all that and still be so thin?” my mother remarked to my cousin one evening at a Victoria restaurant. I had on my plate a pesto-drenched pasta dish (the author of the nutrition manual raved about pesto) that I chose not to finish. Inside, I grinned, delighted that my inner changes were noticeable. Never mind that I also napped frequently—even once on the lawn outside the Canadian parliament—and was often hungry (though I snacked on apples or almonds to combat it). I was veering, but my vision of success was unbreakable.

II. ~~Red Meat, Chicken,~~ Fish, Eggs, Dairy

At the beginning of my junior cross country season, two things happened: I became the best runner in my district, and my period stopped. In a deeply satisfying season opener, I beat Molly, my team’s previous star (and my frenemy), and each race after I ran personal bests. My efforts now matched my results. My focus soon turned to Districts, the second most important race of the year and one my bravest self believed I could win.

A month before Districts, I confessed to my mother that I had not had my period since June. Because I was not even close to being sexually active, her worrying and scientific brain led her to the dreaded female athlete triad: amenorrhea, eating disorders, and stress fractures. They link together to fuck with female athletes’ minds and bodies. The presence of one increases the risk for another—if a girl is diagnosed with a stress fracture, the first question is *Do you get your period?* And the second is *What are your eating habits like?* I am intimately familiar with the triad; almost all of my current

teammates have dealt with at least one of the sectors. I have dealt with two, but not all three. I knew that then and I know it now. But one doctor would tell us I was also in the midst of the third—eating disorders—and my mother would believe her over me.

I knew what eating disorders looked like. One of my closest friends had battled one for most of our sophomore year. My other friends and I attempted to intervene and failed, but she eventually got better. I know what eating disorders look like now—I also know that they exist on a spectrum. My former roommate has a history of disordered eating, and years later she still cannot quite shake it. When the doctor told me within five minutes of meeting me that I had one, I was appalled. Female runners, especially in the early years of competitive running—when their bodies must adjust to this new training load—often lose their periods. But lost periods are silent, almost secret. When a teammate confesses that she has her period every several months at best, we nod, we understand, but we do not remind her, *that shouldn't be normal*. She already knows. We do not immediately assume she's not eating enough, but we consider it. And we absolutely do not—unless we harbor real, tangible concerns—alert the trainers. The connotations are too damning. The lost period is common, but we all know that long term, we need it back. We need more and better language to discuss it without always, always jumping to the triad.

In my case, the doctor could not see that eating healthily (intentionally, for the first time) and consequently losing both my period and weight in the process *for my sport* did not necessarily translate to an unhealthy relationship with food. There were much larger—and smaller, more nuanced—forces at play. I fought back, which only confirmed her diagnosis. She smiled and informed me that I would come back in for weekly, mandatory weigh-ins and check-ups. I waited until I got in the car to burst into tears.

“If you get your period back,” my mother said, “then I’ll believe you.” Her absolute distrust felt like an absolute fracture in our relationship. At sixteen, I was bound to start pulling away from her, but her seeming betrayal forced it before I was ready.

Once home, I grabbed my dinner—salmon topped with cottage cheese and vegetables—and ate it downstairs in the basement room, alone, tears coagulating over all of it.

III. ~~Red Meat, Chicken, Fish~~, Eggs, Dairy

Over the next several weeks of forced weigh-ins—always on the doctor’s electronic scale, always followed by a *tsé* when the number did not go up—I cried a lot, but I also continued to get faster. Despite my consistent eating habits, I did not put on the weight that the doctor wanted. Every breakfast I ate oatmeal, toast, and a smoothie; every lunch I ate leftovers or an overflowing sandwich; every dinner I had salmon or pasta or a rice bowl; for snacks, I ate trail mix instead of carrots. I was always full. But I was also running more than ever before and my metabolism was responding. I refused to sacrifice my newfound health to concede to a doctor I barely knew.

Armed with another aspect of my project to get faster, the mental training (mantras, self-talk) I had been implementing since summer, I succeeded in separating the doctor’s accusations from my actual running. In other realms, for perhaps the first time in my life, I felt confident, even beautiful. I was not unhappy with myself before, but my focus had always been inward, never outward. I spent my childhood wearing my brother’s hand-me-downs, playing every sport possible, and reading anything I could find. My physical appearance had always been an afterthought. I had crushes, but did not date, or even want to date, until I recognized my own beauty. So, as my acne disappeared (another side effect of healthy eating, it seems) and my style emerged, I also talked to more people. Because it was junior year, I formulated an eight-month plan to get Paul—a tall, quiet, privileged, and ultimately dull male—to take me to prom (it worked, but that’s beside the point). I wrote about social justice issues for the school newspaper, planted a doomed garden with the Environmental Club, and excelled in writing rhetorical analyses for my AP Literature class. In my mind, I glowed.

When Districts arrived and I won, my mother’s words (*I’ll believe you when you get your period back*) still haunted me. When I watched myself interviewed post-race on the local news, I could see what they saw—a predictably thin runner, but I was proud, not afraid. Even now, when I look back at pictures from that time, I recognize a smaller version of myself with very little muscle—a typical high school runner. I also recognize the happiness in my face after races; no college race has brought me so much satisfaction. The next week, at State—the pinnacle of the season—I finished six spots out of the coveted top twelve, who earn a trip to a post-season race between Oregon and

Washington's top runners: Border Clash. I could not have imagined, earlier that year, that finishing 18th at State would disappoint me.

When the season ended, the doctor's tone turned serious. Perhaps in the off-season, she thought, I could gain enough weight and body fat to welcome my period back. If only it were so simple. I would not relent my healthy eating, and while I surely gained a few pounds, my underwear remained unstained. At each visit, the doctor seemed more malicious, her belief in her correctness deeper. Here was a high school runner on the brink of a lifelong eating disorder, I imagine she thought, and here was a brilliant doctor to save her life. Finally, I could submit no longer.

"I hate her," I said to my mother on the drive home from one visit. "She doesn't respect me and doesn't care about anything I say." I think my mother sensed the hurt and helplessness in my voice because we never returned to that doctor. Instead, we tried other doctors and even alternative medicine. One woman provided some herbal drops, said to recalibrate my hormones. In the same visit, she noted a heart murmur that I choose not to list on medical questionnaires because it was never repeated. For a few weeks, it felt like my mother and I were in it together, for the right reasons—me and her on a mission against the lost period. But nothing worked.

I should mention the emails. Throughout this entire period of distress, beginning with the loss of my period, my mother would periodically send me long, strongly worded emails, with articles attached, detailing how I was killing myself and why I should acknowledge her correctness. Each time one appeared in my inbox, I felt a deep, enveloping despair. I knew that what followed would exasperate me, disturb me, and more than likely make me cry. I have never read any of these emails twice (I cannot even bear to revisit them now) because it would destroy me. Anything she said to my face, I could handle and eventually forget, but the effects of the emails were visceral. She knew that words could devour or delight me deeper than anything else. That to attack me in writing was to threaten my soul. Something written is more permanent, more unforgettable, than something spoken. At first, I replied, equally upset and malicious, but I learned (much later) that even acknowledging the wound would only exacerbate it. I absorbed these cyber-punches, punches conceived in love but performed with brutality, until slowly, they dissipated.

IV. ~~Red Meat, Chicken, Fish, Eggs, Dairy~~

A few weeks before our track season opener, on a spring break trip to Yosemite, I decided my next mission would be cooking. The travel week of monotonous sandwiches and limited restaurant food inspired me to take more control of my meals—perhaps to become less reliant on my parents. I searched “healthy, easy recipes” and stumbled upon my first vegan recipe blog. I felt like an adolescent boy discovering porn for the first time. I realized that, just as those boys need not wait to have sex to see sex, I did not need to wait until college to act like a vegan. It was all there—recipes, blogs, how-tos, tips—and I could gawk and fantasize in the comfort of my own computer screen. When we returned home, I began cooking vegan food for myself; my parents hovered unaware that my meals lacked animal products.

The real change started with red meat. Still a pseudo-religious person at a Catholic school, when Lent started, I gave it up without incident. Since most people recognize the harms of excess red meat, I met little opposition. My parents also assumed that at the end of the forty days, on Easter, I would eat it again. But every day, I spent hours reading about the horrific realities of the animal industry. I feel stronger connections with animals than humans, so I required very little convincing, even without the gory details. So, next came the lesser meats: chicken and turkey.

Months later, after a track season that featured another victory at Districts and sixth place at State I—still periodless—walked with my mother to the end of our street.

“So,” I said. “I’m going to stop eating meat. I’ve done a lot of research, and I’ll still eat fish, but I just can’t do it anymore.” She was concerned, but comforted by the fish. That night, I even opted to help cook the salmon. The act of slicing through raw, thick, full-bodied fish disgusted me more than I anticipated. I made it a few more weeks, until I read Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Eating Animals* on a trip to Colorado to visit colleges. Foer unpacks every animal industry—especially fish—in meticulous detail, more motivated by his baby daughter’s future health than his own. I still managed to eat a salmon salad in Boulder, but the tiny bones reminded me of what I must do. My mother and I even ate at a specialty vegan restaurant and she seemed receptive to the creative dishes. I wondered if she might actually support me.

The last time I ate fish was days later in Portland, on the return home, when we stopped at my mother's best friend's house for dinner. She had prepared breaded salmon specifically for me and, ethics aside, I could not refuse her kind gesture. I indulged with reverence, understanding that I would never again eat something that was once alive.

The next steps were obvious: eggs and dairy. Dairy is not separate from cows bred for slaughter; eggs are linked to gestation-crate chickens. But I spent much of that summer living in places that made full veganism exceedingly difficult. First, I went to England for ten days, and immediately after to the infamous Steen's Mountain Running Camp, a camp as much about survival and grit as running itself. I had to eat eggs and dairy most of the summer, but I didn't *like* it.

In a London pub, I ordered a baked potato that came smothered in cheese. As I ate around the grease, my peers taunted me.

"Just eat it!" they said. "Embrace your inner fat person!" They thought I was opposed to the fat in the cheese, but the messiness of it just reminded me of the cows that produced it. Later in the week, one of the chaperones—a teacher in her late twenties—lauded my self-control with the mixed nuts on which I dutifully snacked. I ate them slowly and sparsely because I wanted them to last the entire trip, not because I was afraid of eating too much.

While abroad, I communicated with my parents exactly once, to tell them I would not be communicating with them until I returned. Though our actual freedom in the group was limited, the complete removal from my parents' influence felt powerful. I was ready for college. But I still had over a year left in their house and that time would not pass quickly. At first, my polite refusals of milk at dinner seemed benign to them, but when my mother caught on, the scene was dramatic.

"You're not...*actually* vegan, are you?" she asked from the dent in my bed. It felt like coming out. Like I was revealing the most secret part of myself, knowing it would be rejected. She sighed and cited a family friend, who had turned vegan on a whim and within months his teeth turned yellow and rotted. She had "done some research," she said, and this lifestyle was absolutely unsustainable. "What about your running? You need calcium. You only get one set of bones." Since my stress fracture, she had agonized over my bones. Even now, after I've had three more stress reactions, she still worries. And I remind her that calcium exists in foods and drinks beyond dairy products. But we

both share an unfortunate trait: when one of us presents a supposed fact to the other, if she has not discovered this fact on her own terms, then it is, by default, untrue. On my bed, we argued in circles, citing our own facts and ignoring the other's words, until I ran out of tears.

"I can't not do it," I said.

That season, I went on to defend my District cross country title and finish eighth in State—high enough for that year's Border Clash. Before, I would have eagerly told my mother all about my life and thoughts. I would share the most updated version of my career goals (holistic equine veterinarian), athletic dreams (a sub eighteen-minute 5k), and opinions on my older brother (he drops acid to find himself). But now I could no longer bear to confide in her. Like anything I said, she would attack or suspect. Though physically, I felt healthier than ever, glowing and preparing my own meals with confidence, with her I was jaded and wary

In January, my period finally returned. In April, I signed to run with Oregon State.

V. ~~Red Meat, Chicken, Fish, Eggs, Dairy~~

But my first term of college was as I suspect most are: quite difficult. I did not run as well as I had hoped, I discovered the surprising fun that is alcohol, and I entered into a frustratingly innocent relationship. These new distractions and late nights also led me to fail several tests. When I went home for winter break, to the same town as my boyfriend, we entered a routine: hang out with friends in the evenings, then with each other late into the night, when we talked and talked until he mustered the courage to kiss me. I'd get home between one and three most nights, after my mother's texts beckoning me back became more urgent. She could not sleep until I was in the house, she claimed; my absence disrupted her well-being.

One night between Christmas and New Year's, I returned around 2:40 a.m. and saw, displayed on the center of my desk, a very dead, very sad-looking poinsettia. Attached, a note in my mother's handwriting: *This plant signifies my trust in you.*

The next day, without ever acknowledging her gesture, and while a friend stood next to me, ready to leave, she stopped me.

“Wait,” she said. “We need to talk.”

I anticipated an apology, or at the very least an explanation. “About?” I said.

“You know, birth control. You need to be careful.” I gawked back at her, half shocked, half grateful that she would assume I was engaging in sexual activity. In reality, I had not so much as removed my shirt anywhere near my boyfriend. We were both hesitant and inexperienced. The idea of sex was so far removed from my concern and her assumption so wrong that it confirmed the vast distance then between us.

“I’m not having sex,” I said, then left without another word.

I’ve realized, after so much struggle, that all the times she pierced words straight into my heart—through emails, that note, or her voice—all the times she mentioned how much she missed her mother, who had died from lung cancer when I was eight, she was grasping for the survival of our relationship. She had lost her own mother too soon, and she was desperate to keep us together. What had manifested in me as resentment was in fact a fierce and overwhelming love. She fought to maintain the sharing and understanding relationship that had begun with our M&M, Monica & Mommy days—in elementary school, when I stayed home sick, and even in high school, when we planned Wednesday absences so we could take the Hookey Bus to ski at Mt. Bachelor.

But I was consumed by my foray into nutrition and veganism because the results were so tangible and clear to me. I could control what went into my body and everyone could see how I changed. I had never before witnessed such a dramatic transformation in myself. My times were dropping quicker the more I invested in nutrition, and I could not resist taking it to edge. I felt empowered and powerful; I was becoming better and gazing into horizons of possibilities. But my mother saw me teetering, becoming obsessive, physically thin and emotionally fragile, and could not bear to watch her only daughter fall.

VI. ~~Red Meat, Chicken, Fish, Eggs, Dairy~~

Around two years into my veganism, on my rare visits home, I noticed alternative milks and fewer meats in the fridge. My mother confessed that she now used soymilk in her cereal and opted for salads over meat most nights. On several occasions, she even

prepared vegan enchiladas or chili, which we all—my Wisconsin-bred, meat-loving father included—ate together.

I often joke that veganism is my religion. But if religion is a guiding set of principles for existing in the universe, then maybe it is. There is nothing I believe in quite so strongly and devoutly as nonviolence and compassion (though perhaps my mother has tested that more than anything). So, somehow, my mother rejecting this precious part of me was like her rejecting the thing that provides meaning for my life. For years, I had quietly gushed about my “Bible,” only to be met with resistance, even dismissal. Finally, my mother revealed that not only had she been recently reading my Bible, she agreed with most of it. I had converted a food-agnostic to a mostly-vegan-believer. That realization was unexpected, unprecedented, and also infuriating. Like she had forgotten our tumultuous past or expected her new accommodations to fix it. Like the last two years had not torn her up inside like they had me. She was trying, but I felt an automatic resistance. How could we move on with all that time—a significant portion of my life—so close behind us?

The real repair of our relationship began when I first intentionally broke with veganism. I was in Vietnam for the summer and soon realized my protein needs could not be met without eggs (and also that Vietnamese coffee, espresso and powdered milk, is uniquely delicious). From that experience, I adopted a philosophy of veganism in the States and vegetarianism everywhere else. While abroad, the emails I sent my mother transformed from short and informative to anecdotal and searching. I wanted her to take part in the growth and maturity I was experiencing, and even craved her input.

When I returned, our reunion was healing. Somewhere along the overwhelm of that summer, we crossed the threshold from a child-parent relationship to a young-adult-parent relationship; I cannot overstate that shift’s significance. I never wanted to live at home again, but I did find myself calling her—something I dreaded in the years before—when I wanted advice or to share big news. Of course, calling one’s mother seems the most uneventful and obvious choice in the world, but I had spent my first two years out of high school avoiding it. To want to simply hear her voice was a new sensation.

According to the Eggyclopedia, the chalaza is not one, but two “ropey strands of egg white which anchor the yolk in place.” Two tendrils, twisted together, anchoring. When an egg is freshest, the chalaza is strongest; it disintegrates over time. My mother and I, two stubborn fibers, twisted back together, moored to each other again.

After I chose veganism, my mother needed time to develop an understanding of why, but more importantly, how it would affect my health. If this was to be my lifestyle, then she needed to ensure that it would not cause me invisible harm, that I would not end up broken and reeling for a cure. My own words at the time were not reliable and could only reflect one element of the truth. Her physical therapy patients describe their pain, but they need her expertise and reasoning to reach conclusions. So, she needed to dig for details herself, even experiment with the food and ethics, before she could look at me and say, *No problem here, good to go*. Even if it took years.

Months after I returned from Vietnam, I was diagnosed with a stress reaction—the precursor to a second stress fracture—in my right femur. As with any running injury, the first assumed culprits are always overtraining or nutrition. The team nutritionist assured me that my nutrition was great, that I was her model vegan student-athlete, and that I did it *right*. But my mother responded to this news with a dozen articles on calcium deficiency in runners with stress fractures and sent them to me in an email alongside worried paragraphs of her own. It devastated me. After all that, when my life was already spiraling into an injured territory which I had not known for five years, I saw the scabs in our relationship peeling, threatening to burst. I read the email once and replied with tear-filled eyes, *Please. I cannot do this again. No more emails*. And that was the last.

EYE TO EYE

“(How do I define my impact upon this earth?) I begin by searching for the right questions.”

-Audre Lorde

Audre Lorde’s essay, “Eye to Eye,” also includes a subtitle: “Black Women, Hatred, and Anger.” The essay manifests as an introduction followed by seven parts. If I parallel her form, what can I, a white woman, add to her conversation, her content? How can I engage with her experiences without ignoring the biggest difference between us? Lorde writes:

It is true that in america white people, by and large, have more time and space to afford the luxury of scrutinizing their emotions. Black people in this country have always had to attend closely to the hard and continuous work of survival in the most material and immediate planes.

Maybe I can best respond to her descriptions of Black female relationships by absorbing and hoping to understand her words. Maybe the necessary response is to let her speak and write for herself; her work is too important to be read secondhand. But one of the essay’s core missions is to unearth the cause and meaning of aggression between women. Why not apply that mission to my own female relationships?

And yet—what of hatred? She writes of a hatred first embedded as self-hate in response to racist aggressions against her, then later as hate for those too much like her because they seem to reflect her own shortcomings and imperfections (as defined by surrounding society). Lorde herself writes, “*I don’t like to talk about hate,*” but of course, she must talk and write about it in order to make sense of her experience in the world. What can I know about a hatred that deep, that inescapable?

If I keep asking these questions, I fear I will give up all attempts to relate Lorde to myself. Why not retract from Lorde, find a writer more like me, and approach an easy comparison without worrying that my methods lack respect? That is not what I want; her words are too valuable to me, despite our differences. Why not engage with what I can

understand? What I hope can illuminate a microcosm of her essay: the specific anger that arises in the paradox of feeling fury against another because she is at once too similar and too different from oneself. She, the other, represents the possibility of an ideal self, but will always fail to fulfill it. (Is latching onto this single thread of her essay enough?) The lens through which I feel most equipped to explore this conflict is female friendship, and more specifically the last seven years of my deepening friendship with Sarah. We are both white, but much—or at least enough—of what Lorde writes about in “Eye to Eye” feels applicable to my understanding of the female experience, and the treacherous balance women often must strike between acceptance and competition with each other. (Was Lorde thinking about other versions of female friendship when she wrote this?) If we can assume that the “truest” version of feminism is intersectional, then I will continue knowing that Lorde can write about Black female relationships because she lived them, and I might then apply her insights to my friendship with Sarah because *I* have lived it. (Have I abandoned the soul and purpose of Lorde’s essay?)

I could write about another friend who, like me, is blonde, tall, and deeply interested in sports. I could write about our friendship, which for thirteen years has been tainted by jealousy and passive aggression. But I do not yet quite know what drives our friendship, or why it has not changed enough. Or if it will, in the end, last. That relationship swirls in confusion and constant questioning, but so far it has survived. I am more interested in the unlikely and perhaps doomed pairing that is Sarah and me. She is Mormon. I am far from it. So what? Her religion—and maybe my lack of it—has informed the trajectory of our relationship and, occasionally, made me question whether I can fully accept her worldview without serious trepidation. And yet, I cannot imagine life without her, though now we talk on the phone or in person every few months at best. Lorde writes:

We cannot continue to evade each other on the deepest levels because we fear each other’s angers, nor continue to believe that respect means never looking directly nor with openness into another Black woman’s eyes.

Can Sarah and I understand each other if we simply approach each other directly, with openness? (Can I apply this quote to our friendship even though it is about a

relationship between *Black women*?) I most fear that if we reached the “deepest levels” of ourselves, if we could see the secrets and, perhaps, judgment in the other’s heart, then we would no longer accept each other. (Have I already failed to discourse with Lorde?)

I. *“I know the anger that lies inside of me like I know the beat of my heart and the taste of my spit. It is easier to be furious than to be yearning...We do not love ourselves, therefore we cannot love each other.”*

In our geometry class sophomore year, sitting in a circle of what was then our complete seven-person female group, one friend raised the subject of premarital sex.

“None of us believe in sex before marriage,” she said. “Obviously.”

“No,” Sarah offered. “Monica does.” I stared back at her. Like most days, her long brown hair fell onto a modest neckline just low enough to reveal the indented dot on her chest. Her freshman year of college, she would refer to herself as a “Mormon slut” because she went beyond “vertical” kissing. I would tell her, over and over, that she was not a slut, and that even if she was, she should not slut-shame herself. Was she then prematurely slut-shaming me? She was not wrong—I had always known I would have sex before marriage—but in the context of Catholic school between friends who had been devout Christians their entire lives, I was immediately made a scandal. Anyone in the class could have heard her. I was angry that she dare reveal something about me that was not acceptable in the Christian world. I was also embarrassed; my cheeks blazed.

“I mean, I’m sure our parents didn’t wait for marriage,” another friend said. The attention diverted, but still I could not comprehend why Sarah would reveal my difference. And for what? To shame me, to confirm the rightness of her own beliefs? I “believed” in premarital sex, but not for me at that time. Not until much later. I was upset at a simple truth. Perhaps I had not yet accepted my outlying views as worthy. In abstinence-only education, males are still expected to *want* sex, but females, of course, do not want sex and so must evade those boys’ desires. That’s why the dress code targets females: our bodies, unveiled, are too distracting for boys. Our sexuality is not our own. To believe in premarital sex, it seems, was to either give up my body or to simply reject all that they taught us. I was not yet so rebellious. Still, it was not Sarah’s opinion to share. If I had said it myself, I do not know how I would have felt. Seven years later,

Sarah is, to my knowledge, the only one among us who has remained true to that pledge of purity, but at the time, I feared exile from the group.

The year before, amid the first few months of our friendship, I learned about her religion by accident. We had left algebra class together to retrieve something from her locker, and, walking in the empty halls, I noticed three letters on her necklace: CTR.

“Choose the Right,” she explained. “It’s just something my church says to remind us to stick to our values.”

“What church?” I asked.

“LDS,” she said. “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”

“Oh, so you’re Mormon?” I was surprised, but also intrigued. My mother instilled in me an early fascination with Mormonism—she studied at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, which has a lower percentage of Mormons per capita—around 40%—than Utah as a whole. Miraculously, my mother had no Mormon friends in college. Her preferred social setting was the bars, and of course, Mormons do not drink alcohol. Still, her stories—along with her devotion to the show *Big Love*—sparked my unquenchable curiosity about a religion that seems most interested in purity and holiness. Perhaps their most repeated phrase, “the Church is true,” consistently amazes and appalls me. How could so many people agree on a simple—but intensely implicative—statement, and speak it so empathically week after week?

I’ve often heard people remark that Mormons always seem happy. I wonder if the kind of happiness they emote is the result of having answers (answers they must perpetually repeat) to the biggest and most troubling of life’s questions—Is there a God? (Yes.) What happens after death? (Eternal life.) What is the purpose of life? (To serve God and family.) If I had a succinct and satisfying answer to these questions, and if I was surrounded by a community who agree with me, and if I could reach the point where I no longer have doubts about any of it, then I imagine I, too, could elicit such a fundamental contentedness knowing that this life is *not* all there is, and that I have a guiding force through all of it. The only problem is that I do not believe in capital G God, or in organized religion, and though I spent the first eighteen years of my life first as Catholic and then Episcopalian, I have emerged with too many doubts and questions to attempt a label any more specific than agnostic. I am neither skeptical nor cynical of

Mormons' happiness and purposefulness; I live in awe and admiration of it. But I will never—cannot ever—take part in it.

II. *“Who is it we must destroy when we attack each other with that tone of predetermined and correct annihilation? We reduce one another to our own lowest common denominator, and then we proceed to try and obliterate what we most desire to love and touch, the problematic self, unclaimed but fiercely guarded from the other.”*

In high school, I asked Sarah many times if she would dedicate a year and a half to spreading her church's message on a Mormon mission. The answer was always no, until she went to Brigham Young University (BYU). I was there when she applied, a six-hour process she procrastinated until the application deadline and then completed with only minutes to spare in a corner of Powell's Bookstore. When she received a response months later and refused to open it out of nervousness, I checked for her and delivered the news: Your dream is coming true. So, in August, when I moved to Corvallis for pre-season cross country training, she headed to Provo to attend a school where she would be, for the first time, a majority. Six months later, I was sipping a cherry beer in Colorado after my grandfather's funeral when she texted me: *I'm 40% sure I need to go on a mission*. A few minutes later, 53%, and then 59%. Over the next hour, I got progressively buzzed at altitude while her certainty crept to 64, 72, 85, and, eventually, 97. Had I been sober, it would have hit me harder. Instead, I watched her slipping farther away from me from a detached distance, as if I had already known this would happen.

Over the next months, she filled out form after form and met with person after person to ensure that she was both prepared and worthy for the mission. I maintained hope that she would change her mind, mostly because I felt uneasy with the concept of missionaries in general, but also because her leaving meant we would only be in contact over email once a week.

In October, months before, she asked me for my honest opinion about missions.

Dear Sarah,

To be honest, the idea of missions makes me uncomfortable. I don't think anyone should try to persuade or convince other people to convert to their religion. Especially using a language they don't fully understand. You will spend nearly two years spreading a message that you think you know is true, but how can you really know? We are both eighteen. I have not lived enough to have something I believe in so strongly that I would pause my life for two years. Why abandon your current life, which is developing anew in college, for something that everyone around you is doing? I don't buy that this is a completely personal decision. I trust you, but the missionaries feel too controlled to me, too limited in what they are supposed to and allowed to do. Maybe I don't know the full extent of what goes into missionary work, but I know that for most of your days and hours, you have little choice in what you will do. You can never be alone. You cannot touch the opposite sex. You have one day off each week, but must use that day as preparation for the week ahead. You are eighteen. If you are looking to serve and help the world, I think your time could be better spent elsewhere.

Love,

Monica

She responded in her typical exaggerated fashion—evidence of her religious devotion, but also of the origin of these words: her deepest, most honest self. On this subject, she has never since been so explicit with me.

Dear Monica,

Disclaimer: I hope you don't think I suddenly feel all of this because I am at BYU. Heck no. I have felt like this since the day we met, every single day/second since then and a lonnnng time before that... Everyone has their own personal reasons for going on a mission but I'd say that the majority want to go for the same reason I am compelled to go, which is to share what brings such complete and fulfilling joy, not just happiness, to my life. I feel like it is selfish to know such truth and joy and not share it. Yes, I understand it isn't for everyone and that you probably feel enough joy in your life or you know there is a God or

whatever, but this is a completely different thing. The daily strength that comes from knowing that I am a daughter of a Heavenly Father who knows me better than I know myself, knows my needs and loves me more than I could ever EVER fathom in a kajillion million billion years is something that literally keeps me going everyday...

I know you don't understand, but ask any Latter-Day Saint and they will tell you something extremely similar. I truly wish that everyone could feel the same contentment and comfort that I do and it is all a direct result of being a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Nuff said.

Anyway, this whole mormon thing that I spend so much time on and so much of my life dedicated to is WHY I'M SO HAPPY THROUGH IT ALL. IT IS WHERE ALL OF MY JOY COMES FROM!!!!!! My siblings wonder where all of my happiness comes from and they just laugh at me when I say it is my knowledge that I am a daughter of a loving God and that I know that Jesus loves me. But honestly, they know something is missing in their lives, and I personally believe it is the gospel of Jesus Christ and the joy that comes from allowing God into their life and recognizing the wonderful tender mercies of the Lord.

Anyway, this whole Mormon thing is just.....IT'S JUST ALL ENCOMPASSING AMAZINGNESS.

Sarah

- III. *“Myths of self-protection that hold us separate from each other and breed harshness and cruelty where we most need softness and understanding:*
- 1. We maintain a discreet distance between each other also because that distance between us makes me less you, makes you less me.*
 - 2. Support against outsiders is very different from cherishing each other...but it is very hard to look absorbed hatred in the face. It is easier to see you as good for nothing because you are like me...When I can recognize my worth, I can recognize yours.*
 - 3. If you are not THEIR image of perfection, and you can't ever be because you are a Black woman, then you are a reflection upon me. We are never good enough for each other.”*

More myths of self-preservation, in other words:

1. The myth of politeness and courtesy. Sarah and I did not discuss religion for the entire first four years of our friendship. The idea was to respect our beliefs, to keep the sacredness of spirituality separate from our relationship, but Sarah still does not know what I believe, which has changed. Though in high school I claimed to believe in God and read the Bible, I probably only attempted to be religious in order to earn a cherished and elitist spot on Retreat Team, a group of upperclassmen who lead retreats for underclassmen and must maintain full abstinence in their own lives. It worked, but when I led a small group discussion designed to be about why we all believe in God and I instead asked everyone why it is hard to believe in God, I realized that I was not the devout leader I had presented myself to be. Once in college, I would reject organized religion without guilt or repercussion, and now I occasion spirituality in nature and meditation. On my yearly church trips to the Christmas Eve service, I zone out; the words no longer mean anything to me. As much as Sarah knows about me, she does not know what drives me to find meaning in life without a God. With her sporadic explanations, I can only begin to understand what God means to her.
2. The myth of defense. I would never allow someone else to persecute Sarah for her beliefs. As much as I talk ad nauseam about the quirks and intricacies of Mormonism, when a mutual friend asked me if Mormonism was a cult, I surged, wanting and needing to protect Sarah's chosen religion, which of course is not a cult. Someone could just as easily call veganism a cult, but I buy into it wholeheartedly. I require moments of challenge from those outside our friendship to remind me that in order to accept and understand Sarah, I must also accept and understand the LDS faith. She claims to not judge me for my debauchorous choices (though the looks she has given me while I was drunk or hungover might dispute this), so how could I judge her for her lack of them?
3. The myth of perfection. Despite all my misgivings, I hold a (false) image in my mind of Sarah as a symbol of purity. She does not drink, smoke, caffeinate, or fornicate.

Her value system is rock solid and though she may sometimes be tempted, she would never follow through. So, when she texted me something that implied that a boy (the one she will marry) had somehow made her orgasm, but would not elaborate on how, it kept me up at night. Of course they had not had *sex*, but I knew, or thought I knew, that Sarah only viewed intercourse as *sex*. I felt betrayed by the contradiction of her supposed morality and the idea that perhaps she was not so righteous after all haunted me for weeks. It still would if I allowed myself to think about it. If any other friend told me their boyfriend had made them orgasm, I would cheer and applaud them for communicating their needs and exploring their sexuality. But because Sarah's values seem so permanent to me, any supposed faltering feels fatal. Like somehow, after all these years, I do not know her at all. Or, she is somehow more human than I could fathom before, and like any human has desires and makes choices that might bring her values into question. But how could I understand religious morality without her as a reference point? Sarah is as far from flawless as anyone, and yet I invest in her morals and expect perfection.

- IV. *“Sometimes exploring our differences feels like marching out to war. I hurl myself with trepidation into the orbit of every Black woman I want to reach, advancing with the best of what I have to offer held out at arms length before me—myself. Does it feel different to her? At the same time as I am terrified, expecting betrayal, rejection, the condemnations of laughter, is she feeling judged by me?”*

One month before Sarah left for her eighteen-month mission to Dallas, Texas and one week after I broke up with a boy I had loved but never told so, we stopped speaking to each other. I was emotional and on edge because I expected to lean on Sarah for full support in my self-induced heartache, and she was emotional and on edge because she had just fallen in love with a boy who she would not see again for at least two years. My sarcasm and coldness increased. I could not stand to hear her describe her longing for this boy who I had not met. He seemed more ready for a relationship than my boyfriend had been for the entire seven months we dated. In a span of a few weeks, I was to lose the close contact I needed from the two people I cared about most. I chose

to sever my *romantic* relationship, but I expected him to continue communicating. When he didn't, I could not bear the thought of being left alone without him or Sarah.

Sarah and I hiked up and down Spencer Butte one evening, unspoken resentments foreboding, without once breaking our mutual silence. My dog trotted beside us undisturbed, ecstatic to walk for an hour in such an exotic setting. At the summit, we usually sat to absorb the view, but this time, we did not stop. Side by side, we descended. The sky swirled with oranges and pinks as she drove me back to my house; the stereo was soundless. Finally, on my front porch, desperate, I asked her why she was not there for me when I needed her most. We both cried. We both accused the other and defended ourselves. When she left we decided to cease communication indefinitely, until *she* felt ready. I was ravaged.

Within the week, she sent me a timid text to say *I'm not ready yet*. I spent those days reeling with anxiety, hoping I would not need to reassess my entire life and every relationship in it. She traveled to Utah for two days to visit this boy (whom she now intends to marry). They could not survive without seeing each other once more before she left. When she returned, there were no dramatic apologies, but it took some effort for us to restore normalcy. I did my best to feel happy for her and support her choices, but some part of me wondered, why not me? Why could I not know so strongly whom I loved, what to serve for eighteen months, and what sacrifices were correct? We were both nineteen, but the questions and anxieties I harbored felt inconsequential next to someone who seemingly already had all the big stuff figured out. Though I felt more mature in certain—really, most—realms, perhaps my subconscious dismissal of her resolve was a product of my own insecurities in lacking a life partner, a life purpose, and a life guidance. Or perhaps I feared that she would judge my difference and view my doubts as somehow less important or relevant. At the same time, I judged her for her seeming refusal to live like a typical (non-BYU) college student. For serving her religion for half of my college instead of experimenting, partying, or even acknowledging that most college freshmen—and all other college freshmen that I knew—would never put their lives on hold in a time of potential revelation for things beyond religion: academics, philosophies, careers, friendships. I know change and growth are uncomfortable, but Sarah and I were changing and growing in such different directions that we—or at least I—found ourselves resenting what the other was becoming.

Throughout those eighteen months, she would send me blog posts and pictures to upload to her mission blog, so I could not help but participate in her deeply religious proclamations and experiences. Though I occasionally did not agree with something she wrote, I had no choice but to still publish it. Meanwhile, I made it *my* mission to kiss a lot of boys and make my heart more vulnerable than ever, which led to more heartache that I needed to share. Sarah was still my best option; she was—and is—still my best friend. Almost a quarter of the way through her mission, I sent her a fourteen-page, handwritten letter detailing a tumultuous two weeks in which I had kissed three boys, dismissed two, and become infatuated with one. I was constantly anxious and wondering how he felt about me, but I was also thriving on the edge of rejection. I wanted the pain of not knowing where we stood, of hoping that it would work out but guessing that it would not. In the letter Sarah sent back, she wrote, *I hope you know that I have nothing to say about most of that.* It stung. My feelings dismissed, I continued to write to her about my escapades, but I no longer expected a response. On her mission, she could not so much as hug a boy, and was always with her companion, so matters of the heart and desire were either too tempting to indulge in, or too far from her focus to care.

V. *“What does it take to be tough? Learned cruelty? ...For we have also been taught that a man acquired was the sole measure of success, and yet they almost never stay.”*

Sarah will get married within the next year. And I am worried that when she does, our friendship will change so completely that any mention of our shared history will spark little more than detached chuckles. After high school, I warned her that if she got married by age twenty, I might not go to the wedding, but what I really meant was twenty-five, when our brains are fully formed. But now she is just barely twenty-two. She will marry the boy she has been with for three months, after both serving their missions for almost three years. When she texted me that it might happen this upcoming summer, I cried more than I had in months. Not just because I worried that they were rushing into it, but also because I grieved what seems to me like a stunting of her life. Sarah, who is vibrant, naively flirtatious, and anxious about most everything most of the time. Sarah,

who has battled depression since her rocky home life, who wants to live in Africa to help women and children, and who has had mononucleosis multiple times because she has never slept regular hours nor managed her stress. Sarah, who will be married at the appropriate age for most Mormons, who for the last four years has followed the appropriate path for a BYU student, and who worries that she is infertile but still plans to have babies soon.

Because she tells me so little of their relationship—private details are private, she claims—and I have not met him, my only response to her mentions of marriage are wry at best and cruel at worst. When I ask her why the rush, why not at least wait until the “honeymoon phase” is over, which lasts an average of thirty months, she tells me that family is very important to their religion and if you know, why wait? But we can never change the other’s mind because my main point is that she cannot yet know, and hers is that she cannot yet wait. Life does not end with marriage, she tells me. No, I respond, but life is limited. Of course, she disagrees, because I suppose married life is less limited than single life for Mormons—married partners can live together, sleep together, travel together. All tempting and truly enjoyable perks, but I can do those things with my boyfriend while evading all talks of marriage for another six years at least. And why should I continue to question her values when I know how much joy and purpose they give her? When I know that despite all the shit she has experienced in her life, she still believes that marrying this boy is the correct step for her and for them? Why can I not help myself but to respond coldly and mourn her impending eternal partnership?

While I harbor concerns about the oppressive and racist history of the marriage institution, in her religion it is not a question of if one will marry (and thus choose to participate in that history), but when. With no other option in sight to pledge one’s devotion and love to another, marriage becomes both practical and symbolic. Sarah’s mother and my father both divorced their first spouses, both before our births, so neither one of us can claim to fully *know* the effects of divorce, but we can claim to know the risks of marriage. My father remarried my mother, a happy marriage, but her parents’ marriage is abusive and has traumatized her. Recognizing that Sarah understands what a bad marriage looks like should give me ease, but instead it makes me worry that she will enter into something that, if the need arises, she will not know how to leave.

VI. *“We will begin to see each other as we dare to begin to see ourselves. We will begin to see ourselves as we begin to see each other, without aggrandizement or dismissal or recriminations, but with patience and understanding for when we do not quite make it, and recognition and appreciation for when we do.”*

There was a time when I considered ending my friendship with Sarah. Our junior year of high school, she struggled. Most days, she came to me worrying that someone in her family would hurt themselves or each other. Her sister had recently had an unplanned child at age eighteen; another sister, in her thirties, could not visit their home without stealing something. Sarah dumped disturbing information on me and I absorbed it because she had no one else to tell. She was erratic in her moods—always smiling, but often it was like I could see straight through to her brokenness—and clung to me before, during, and after school. On the weekends, we sat in parked cars and talked for hours about the terrible things we had seen. The heaviness of her confessions and my inability to filter any of it left little room for me to ever *not* worry about her. I felt so trapped and suffocated by what I hope was empathy that I thought the only way out was to remove her from my life.

I confided in a woman at my church who had known me for years. She had led the past three “mission” trips to Idaho, all of which I had attended, to teach summer school on a Native American reservation. She also, like me, attended Episcopal church while questioning basic principles of Christianity; she once described visions of her own past reincarnations in enough detail that it convinced her (and me) to plunge into Buddhism.

“How can I listen to my friend’s issues without completely losing myself in them and taking them on as my own?” I asked.

“Make a bubble,” she suggested. “And activate it.”

So I did. When I sat down with Sarah to absorb her anxieties of the hour, I faced just away from her to avoid full exposure. I pinched my thumb and pointer finger together to signal to myself that from that moment, all negative energy would bounce off the shield in front of me. Her energy and mine would not intermingle, and I would emerge as I had begun: untethered. She continued (and continues) to unload her troubles

(which have decreased) onto me, but now I can listen without wondering if the next revealed trauma will be the last I can bear. Now I can sustain our friendship.

VII. *“As we arm ourselves with ourselves and each other, we can stand toe to toe inside that rigorous loving and begin to speak the impossible—or what has always seemed like the impossible—to one another.”*

At the end of our freshman year of college, months before her mission, Sarah and I sat in a parked car, restless and searching for something to exhilarate us.

“You know what I’ve never done?” she said. “I’ve never lay on top of a car while it rained.”

“Me neither,” I said. “But I would wanna do it naked.”

“Let’s get naked!” she joked.

“But actually. Wanna go streaking?” I knew she would say no, but I had streaked for the first time earlier that year, with my cross country team, and had craved the liberation ever since. But then, Sarah is not always as predictable as I expect, and with some prodding, she agreed. We drove to an unlit path, hearts racing, and stripped out of our clothes layer by layer. We both kept our shoes on and at first shielded our bodies from the other, but when we stepped outside of the car, we took off together, shrieking and laughing. Once far enough down the path, we stopped and lay on the cement, gazing up at the sky. I had never even seen her stomach before—she had always changed in bathroom stalls rather than locker rooms—but all at once, we could see the other as we were, not as we presented ourselves to be. The moment felt sacred, like we had finally, after disagreeing about so much, found something at once rebellious and brave that could remind us what it is to feel human, and to feel it not alone. Only the sound of approaching footsteps jolted us back to the car.

Sarah and I did not say much to each other while outside, but when we got back in the car many minutes later, it was like we had finally said to each other, This is me. Take me as I am, or go.

VIETNAM: COUNTRY OF MY DREAMS

I was not supposed to go to Vietnam. Like some idealized lover, the country of my dreams had always been Nepal. Nepal, land of towering mountains and open air, where I would intern abroad to uncover my best self, have that once-in-a-college-lifetime adventure, and maybe even change the world. I had envisioned world travel my entire life, and specifically Nepal for nine months, ever since I learned about the program irresistibly titled Trek to Teach. It would not be the cliché semester abroad in Europe, drunk on wine and carefree living—I would *trek* to a remote, mountainous village and *teach* English to impoverished students.

I was accepted to this program—set for the summer between my sophomore and junior year of college—planning my immunizations and travel dates, when, on the day I prepared to buy my plane ticket, I woke up to a text from my mother: *Did you hear about earthquake?! Really bad. Hold off on tix.*

Eight thousand people dead and another 18,000 injured. The next week, Jessica, my program coordinator, cancelled all summer interns to Nepal. In the aftermath of their disaster, the time they most needed volunteers, I wasn't allowed to go. Of course, I also chose not to volunteer with another organization—or on my own—but, overwhelmed by sadness for the Nepalese people and also for my inability to help, the irony eluded me.

“You have two options,” Jessica said. “Wait until next summer to do the internship, or choose a different program.” There was no other program I wanted. She suggested Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand—all places I wanted to see, but the work would be in orphanages or offices, and what I wanted above all was to teach, and to do so in a rural area. Then, she told me about an internship in Vietnam, a country I knew little about beyond oblique mentions of the war in history classes, but the program had individualized placements for work and fast visa procedures. No one from the northwest schools included in Jessica's company had ever interned in Vietnam; I would be the first.

I remembered what, two years before, my summer coworker had told me. While weeding side by side in an organic garden—that employed us for educational stipends—Megan, who was twenty-six, worldly, and shared my love for Radiolab, said, “When I

studied abroad, I wanted to be uncomfortable. So I chose a country that wasn't easy: Ukraine." Her words felt prophetic at the time, and there I was, two years later, twenty, hoping to become worldly, still loving Radiolab, faced with the most uncomfortable choice I could imagine.

Three weeks later, after a furious night of packing and a four a.m. wake up call, I hugged my parents goodbye in the Portland airport and embarked on my carbon-dumping plane trip to a place I knew nothing about with the expectation only to have my world changed.

The signs before I left were, admittedly, ominous. Many people offered unsolicited advice about a country they had never seen, or not seen in years. Noelle, my brother's girlfriend, insisted that many underground mines from the Vietnam War remained dormant, and because I was to live and run in a rural area, she urged me to stay on well-trod trails, lest I get blown up. Phan, my brother's Vietnamese roommate, warned me about street thieves and scams in his native Hanoi. My parents remained uncharacteristically quiet, but I assume they did their own biased Google searches (*help will my stubborn young adult daughter be safe alone in a Vietnamese village or how to track your child across the world*) and prepared for the worst.

Three days before my departure, I received a second Japanese encephalitis immunization shot from a pregnant nurse. We were stuffed in the cramped back room of the student health clinic. Just returned from a run and underfed, the shot spiraled me into a vasovagal reaction: lightheadedness, dizziness, vibrations in the hands and feet, general panic and anxiety, an attempt to tell the nurse that I'm experiencing a reaction, then an overwhelming nausea that may or may not knock me out completely. This time, I regained consciousness in the nurse's arms.

"It's a good thing you're small," she said, smiling. "Has this happened before?" I nodded. I have passed out, or almost passed out, at shots and blood drawings consistently since junior year of high school. Even earlier, while observing a canine surgery at age fourteen, my vision clouded and before I realized that was the "nauseous" feeling the veterinarian had implored me to recognize and name, I woke up on the concrete floor in the operating room, shocked but concussion-free. Back then, I was

determined to become a veterinarian—had been since age six—and I continued to pursue that for four more misguided years.

When I attempted to donate blood at sixteen, the initial finger prick thumped me on to the bloodmobile bus's dank floor, and the nurse advised me to avoid giving blood for five to eight years.

Most recently, smashed into a tiny chair at an on-campus clinic, where I was to provide three vials of blood, the atmosphere dissolved around me and I had a searing and prolonged vasovagal reaction, worsened because I remained conscious. The nausea lingered and I felt lifeless. It was the antithesis of pre-orgasmic: the anticipation was constant, the climax inevitable, sweet relief imminent, except the all-consuming orgasm—or fainting—never came.

With my hands still vibrating and my entire body clammy, the nurse informed me that he had not finished the sample and would need to draw more blood. Weary, I lay in a room for thirty minutes before he tried again, and this time I closed my eyes, pictured vivid colors, and repeated the most serene mantra I could fathom, *rainbows rainbows rainbows*, in my head until the moment passed.

“Oh, I made a mess of you,” he said, interrupting my meditation. I wondered what could permit such an inappropriate and suggestive statement from this pale, nervous man. “I got your blood everywhere.” I didn't dare look and questioned, for the thousandth time, why my body refused to accept needles.

“I don't get it,” a friend once told me. “You're so brave with everything else.” I had no adequate response other than that it is not the needles or blood, per se, but the atmosphere itself. The streamlined, sterile doctor vibe terrifies my psyche. The blue meant to calm instead activates panic, and each traumatic experience builds on those that came before.

There I lay, in the pregnant nurse's arms, preparing to leave the country for the summer and wondering how I could handle that when I could not handle a microscopic injection. And yet, I was not afraid. I was ready to leave, needed to leave, had to do something that felt important because I had spent the last two weeks obsessing about a boy I knew I would never have. If I stayed, I would disintegrate.

What a first world problem to have, one might say. Look at you, who cannot handle getting a \$700 immunization for a rare disease that kills one in four victims and disfigures two others from that qualified and well-educated nurse in a comfortable, on-campus clinic with fees you can afford to pay before you travel for a flash of a visit to this country where probably none of the locals are immune to that disease and most have never seen a medical facility so nice. Of course you should not be afraid. Your comfort always comes first.

But, I might say, if I think about the negative impact I make every single day in most every second with almost every decision (writing this sentence on my \$1200 laptop, for instance, while sipping clean, filtered water from a lime green Hydro Flask designed in Bend but made in China, all in a house much larger than tiny with a low water flow, but only at the moment, and a plumber will fix that tomorrow), then I become paralyzed with guilt and inaction. Sometimes my (hopefully) intrinsic sense of justice compels me to just *do* things, because isn't it valuable for an American like me to gain perspective of another culture, and a Southeast Asian culture, at that, and can I not use that broadened wisdom to impact those around me? Is that not the least I can do?

Vietnam introduced itself to me at night, in the form of Linh, my assigned program coordinator, Dung, my temporary host sister, and Chinh, one of two program-provided "local buddies," all of whom stood many inches below me.

"When I first saw you in the airport," Chinh later told me, "I thought you looked like a queen." I laughed, until I remembered what I looked like—greasy, unwashed face, sweaty pink T-shirt, and a wraparound Goodwill ankle skirt. The most significant feature: my whiteness.

Which also led to frequent requests for a picture. It didn't matter where—on top of a mountain after a six-hour ascent, walking towards a pool in a two-piece swimsuit, even while under police interrogation. I imagine that with roles reversed, if I asked a Vietnamese visitor for a picture in Corvallis, I would be deemed embarrassing and racist. But I do not believe these people were racist, and I truly did not mind fulfilling their requests. *The celebrity life would not be all that bad*, I had thought, stupidly.

It wasn't just my whiteness. Being American—from the United States, that is—also incited delight. This surprised me. I imagined Vietnamese people might hate Americans for their abhorrent, gruesome attack, but it seems I visited an incredibly

forgiving country. Once, while searching for a motorbike taxi driver to take me to a national park and back, another driver smiled at me, gestured to himself saying “Vietnam,” and pointed at me with a shrug. I stared back, uncomprehending, but this was near the end of my trip so I only needed a few breaths to understand.

“Oh!” I said. “America!” His eyes brightened and his grin widened.

“Yes!” he said, pumping his arms. “Obama!” I laughed, gleeful.

On the delirious taxi ride from the airport that lasted somewhere between ten minutes and two hours, my companions asked about my state, Oregon, and what made it famous. The concept of “Tracktown” is not translatable, but I anticipated more than blank stares when I mentioned Nike. Chinh wore a silver chain around his neck, the same chain I would see on at least a dozen other Vietnamese men, which featured the Nike swoosh on every other loop. Yet no one seemed to recognize the brand name that feels so significant and influential in a college town under its sponsorship. Where was the reverence or disgust I had come to expect when Nike entered a conversation?

The taxi dropped us off in a narrow alley outside of an even narrower alley. Five doors down, Dung jangled through several locks and led me inside, where she instructed me to leave my shoes and slip into plastic sandals several sizes too small. My feet rested on spiky, grass-like material as I passed through the compact living room and met my temporary host mother, who sat slicing fruit in a kitchen overflowing with dishes and packages labeled in unfamiliar characters. She smiled and said hello, but when I attempted further questions, I found that her English was limited.

I soon suspected that she understood more than she would admit. Each morning around 5:30, she would let me out through multiple locks so I could run in circles around a manmade lake for an hour and return dripping with sweat, when she would open the locks once more and usher me up several flights of stairs toward a cold shower. When she learned that I enjoyed beer, she placed a fresh can beside the sticky rice on the breakfast table the next morning. I only lived in her home for that first week, and sporadic nights after that, but there was a depth to our communication that I did not expect between someone who claimed not to speak English and another who failed to learn Vietnamese. Perhaps our shared humanity was enough. My most idealistic self hopes it was enough.

That first night, I slept on a rock-hard mattress, in a room adorned with large pictures of smiling white children, harbored beneath a mosquito net, feeling at once unchanged and eons from home.

I slept beneath a mosquito net all but four nights that summer. Because I traveled to a low-risk area for malaria, I did not take anti-malarial pills, but I was still cautious. One year later, my friend traveled to Kenya, a high-risk country, for eight weeks and chose not to take the pills because she was allergic to the cheapest option, the middle option would augment her anxiety, and the expensive option was just that. She contracted malaria within her first week. She then decided to shorten her trip to four weeks and contracted it again two days before she left. What disturbs me most about her experience is not that she got malaria twice, but that because she refused to invest in preventive medicine, the doctors nearest the tiny village where she stayed devoted their limited resources to help her, a white American there to volunteer short-term at a religious orphanage and leave. Two fewer local people would receive treatment, and she could not even manage the full eight weeks. I feared becoming this kind of volunteer in a “developing” country, one that shows up, demonstrates her privilege, and leaves the locals to once again fend for themselves.

Perhaps you should then move to a country like that and volunteer for more than eleven weeks, you might say. What impact can you make in that short time that will not soon be forgotten and overshadowed by the carbon emitted and the plastic bottles never recycled?

But this is just my start, I might plead. A jumping off point for more, longer trips in the future. And why not now, when I have the resources to leave and the time to fit it into my life?

So this trip is about you, not about the Vietnamese people?

Maybe, but didn't Gandhi tell us to change ourselves first?

He also told us to be humbler than dust.

In Hanoi, a certain scene often disturbed me: hordes of “Westerners,” sweating (a sure sign that their stay was limited; an extended visitor acclimates), dressed immodestly, and tramping through the streets gawking loudly at the scenes around them but ignoring the excited locals. They frequented places built to accommodate them—fast food restaurants, upper-end clothing stores, and air-conditioned cafés—but also ticked off

each tourist attraction visitor guides told them to see: West Lake, Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum, the Hoa Lo Prison, endless temples and pagodas. Their visit felt scripted, detached, and more interested in their own impulses and desires than the people who actually live there. But of course, I was also one of them.

So, it was with a nervous and restless heart that I rode the three-hour bus from Hanoi to Luc Nam, the small village within the Bac Giang province where I was to teach English to secondary school students for two months. Once there, Linh and I sat in the house of the school's principal, a man who reminisced the greasy, overly-groomed businessmen in the United States. His wife, a glowing and serious woman, prepared endless watermelon, mango, and virgin cocktails, but she never sat to join the trepid conversation. I wished she would so I could learn their story, what brought them together and what kept them in the village. I wanted to know more about her, what she felt that day and every day, what inspired and scared and saddened her. But the kind of connection I most craved, one steeped in storytelling and shared feelings, was unavailable with her because she spoke no English, and also with others who did because we were forced to speak slowly, to repeat questions and clarify answers. The flow of exchange was stunted.

In the principal's house, like most group conversations that summer, English was rare. Mo, my program leader, knew the principal from English language classes, and had promised that his English was excellent, so I wondered what kept him from practicing with me. Then I remembered the summer before, when I had attempted to put my three years of high school Spanish to use with a native speaker.

"Hablo un poquito español," I assured him. He then launched into rapid Spanish and I understood precisely nothing. Perhaps my Vietnamese principal feared the same.

Once my stomach bloated with fruit and the hours lulled, we loaded my luggage onto motorbikes and caravanned several kilometers to my homestay, where I would live with the principal's parents-in-law. Rice paddies populated with sun-protected women and free-roaming cows expanded to our left while houses diverse in shape and size, guarded by dogs, dotted our right. Children stacked two or more to a bike rode beside the motorbike, brimming with curiosity.

At a tall banana tree, we turned down a driveway, where two dogs—a mother and her kin—greeted us with hostile barks. Their home centered around a large, brick square, always swept and kept in immaculate condition.

“Maybe they can teach you how to sweep,” Linh later told me. Other skills she assumed I, an American, would not have: washing dishes, hand washing clothes, and cooking.

In an L-shape around two of the sides, single-story rooms stood with open doorways so that only the roof distinguished between outside and inside. One corner path led to a foliage-heavy area where chickens ambled and a single cow rested. The opposite corner opened to their back area, a maze that spanned several acres and housed fruit trees, vegetable gardens, a duck pond, several cats, and even more rice paddies.

My eyes sparkled with the charm of it all.

Your eyes sparkled with charm? What is this, your third world fairytale?

That perspective is risky, yes, but also valuable. Of course, it’s easy to speak of small farm homes as precious, but my host parents woke with the rooster call each morning to labor over their crops, animals, and home for hours. Their labor aged them; though the same ages, my own parents seem a decade younger. I was enamored by their simple life, but perhaps I was just seeking an escape from my own busy, over-stimulating world. Retreats take place in nature to convince people that the mundanity of self-sufficiency is equivalent to a more natural and fulfilling life. And I believe them. All retreats I’ve attended, whether the God-heavy staples in Catholic high school or a brief coastal weekend with my cross country team, have rejuvenated me because the environment forces me to confront what matters and return to a simplicity in purpose and focus. I have left feeling more fulfilled, but I have always left. If my host parents had the choice, I do not know which life they would prefer.

My host parents were reserved—perhaps because we could not speak each other’s languages—but their deep, immediate concern for my well-being was obvious. They spoke no English, so Linh and Chinh helped translate while we sat in hard wooden chairs around a matching wood table, sipping bitter tea from tiny cups. This action and setting—drinking tea under the same conditions—would repeat itself endlessly for the rest of the summer. Soon, their son and his wife, a sly woman with an infectious laugh, joined us with their two sons—the older, a quiet, lanky boy who, like my host mother in

Hanoi, understood more English than he would admit, and the younger, a wild troublemaker with concentration issues. Three generations faced me and I could think of nothing to say.

Dinner preparations began soon after. When my host parents' son, a mischievous but caring man, brought a chicken to the bricks, it radiated life. When he took a knife to its throat and drained the blood carefully into a bucket, my vegan stomach turned but the maximum humaneness of it comforted me. If a chicken must die to feed humans, I decided, this was the best possible system—at home, swiftly, surrounded by family.

Another woman joined us and went straight to the kitchen to help. She wore a tight dress and heels, but slipped from those into my Birkenstocks where they lay abandoned. I cringed as animal juices and grease dripped onto my beloved, expensive shoes, but dared not protest it. Later, she introduced herself to me as Chung, one of the school's two English teachers, who would supervise my classes and translate as needed. Her English was good but choppy, with a strong Vietnamese accent. This—and that of the other English teacher, Bich—was the only English these students would hear when they learned it. From the beginning, Chung was enthusiastic and loud, unaware of her large presence but determined to get close to me. She would give me motorbike rides to and from classes each day, and on the rides she would say to me how sad she was that I could not stay and teach forever, how envious she was of my exciting life and my freedom. She had a ten-year-old daughter, who she said was “fat like me!” with the biggest cheeks I had ever seen and a joyful heart, just like Chung.

We talked about how I planned to defer marriage for at least ten years, about travel and my dreams to experience the world, about why on Earth a beautiful white girl like me did not have a boyfriend back home. She had married her first boyfriend, from high school, and now, anchored by family, she rightly insisted that she could never leave. She would pick me up at 6:30 every morning; by that time, I had already run for an hour, showered in cold water, and cooked myself eggs for breakfast (I became vegetarian for the summer, by default). The heat and humidity were so smothering that I could not run any later. I would sit in front of the whirring fan, clean clothes clinging to my still-sticky skin, until I heard the two honks from Chung's motorbike, signalling that our twenty-minute commute would begin.

During the pre-departure orientation, a mandatory day-long event with the on-campus organization that helped us all get international internships—for a “small” \$3,000 fee—our speakers emphasized over and over that motorbike accidents are not insured.

“Do not ride motorbikes in your developing country,” they said. “It is unsafe and you will crash and you will pay for it all. But if you do accidentally ride on a death-machine, wear a helmet.” I rode on the back of a motorbike every single day in Luc Nam. I had no other transportation choice, but I also adored the liberation, the speed and connection with the outside elements unique to the open-air death-mobile. I trusted my drivers and felt suffocated in cars for weeks once I returned to the States.

I only flirted with death by motorbike once that summer. Two North American friends and I spent a weekend in Sapa, an idyllic mountain town full of fresh air and bright colors. Our main event that weekend was scaling Fansipan, the tallest mountain in Indochina and one that we intended to (and did) summit in one day. The day after, we rented motorbikes to ride down the windy, railless, cliff-bordered country road into the lower villages. I could not justify driving a motorbike myself—how could I explain to my coach if I broke my leg?—and opted to ride the back of the more experienced driver and Indiana native, Natasha.

The second the motorbikes started, I began praying to a God I had not believed in for years. I held Alanna’s (the Canadian) Gopro in one hand and clutched the seat with the other. Neither Natasha nor I spoke during the descent. Though she did not admit it at the time, driving a motorbike with a passenger is wildly different from driving it alone, and I was her first. Alanna trailed behind, terrified to go any faster than a pedestrian speed, so it was with patience and excruciating slowness that we reached the villages below.

Grateful to walk on my own legs despite their fierce soreness, we lingered in the area until, regretfully, we needed to return. I anticipated that, much like steep hiking, riding uphill would be slightly less terrifying than downhill, but Alanna spotted a narrower, less paved side road that she convinced us to take. The weight of Natasha and I together could not summit the first uphill, so I walked to the top. Within five minutes, the road turned to gravel and the single side cliff transformed to both sides, leaving us exposed and vulnerable. In that bumpy, endless, white-knuckle moment, death felt

inevitable. I wondered how the rental companies could be so casual about sending cocky foreigners off down mountain roads on machines they had never driven. It would be like telling a teenager how to start a car for the first time and leaving them to navigate whatever terrain happened to be nearest. At the hostel where we stayed, we had heard stories about foreigners renting motorbikes and locals finding their mangled bodies the next day, off cliffs. Perhaps the companies knew we were not insured and just needed the sale.

When we reached yet another impossible hill, shouldered by foliage on one side, it became clear that this path would not connect to the main road. Our only choice was to turn around. Back across the cliff, back over the unpredictable gravel, but this time going downhill. I channeled the meditative mindset I had been cultivating and breathed as little as possible, determined to center myself so much that Natasha would not notice my mass. And then, twenty brutal minutes later, we returned to the road we had taken into the village, and though that road had petrified me before, it felt laughably safe, an easy obstacle between that ride and the rest of my life. The moment I stepped off that motorbike was pure, unsullied relief. We returned the bikes to the renters, who seemed quite neutral about our survival.

“Thank you,” I said to Natasha, boring into her eyes. “Thank you for keeping me alive.” I told people I aged eight years in Vietnam; that ride was responsible for five of them.

Motorbikes seemed like the most “authentic” part of my Vietnamese experience, if authenticity means close to the truth. Everyone, rich and poor, used them, and when I did, I was not provided extra protection—helmets often did not fit me—or treatment because of my identity; I was just as at risk as my driver of an accident. I had paid for travel insurance, but a motorbike crash would not be covered, so I was free, at least psychologically, from my western comforts.

But wanting to strip away my comforts, wanting to dissociate from my Americanness, is also, by nature, a privileged decision. I sought a simpler life because all the noise, technology, and convenience of middle class America was suffocating me. So, I left it all behind—temporarily—only to come back to it, gratefully. Because really, I couldn’t last forever in Vietnam, especially not Hanoi. The pollution, the disorganization, the humidity; I know it would become too much for me. Was my attempt to relate to the

“common” people, then, purely selfish? Was I so willing to hand wash my clothes, to run around a manmade lake at five a.m., to cook with a single electric burner stuffed on an apartment balcony, because I knew I had an end date, that I could return to my worldly luxuries whenever I wanted or needed them?

I did not get a smartphone—a hand-me-down from my mother—until two months after I returned from Vietnam. I don’t mean to sound heroic, but navigating a foreign country without that technology while knowing that it’s available is at once liberating and stifling. Rather than Google Maps guiding me step by step, I had to write out each route, in both directions, and hope a sudden rainstorm wouldn’t bleed the details away. My contact with friends and family was limited to email (and I would not have chosen otherwise, even with a phone). One day, Chinh was dismayed because his own smartphone was not working and needed repairs. I told him I did not have one; he was shocked and, perhaps, a bit offended.

“But it’s so cheap for you,” he said.

“Cheap?” I said. “It’s at least \$500.”

“Yes, but that is nothing for you. You are American.” My stomach twisted. Of course, in context, that does seem like nothing. When college costs twenty to sixty thousand dollars a year, and my summer in Vietnam cost several thousand, why should I not be able to afford a \$500 phone? To Chinh, I was rich, even if here, my family is decidedly middle class. How could I explain that when money is not a constant anxiety, certain things are worth investing in, like college, while others must be chosen carefully? How could I tell him that I could afford my trip there because my parents supported me, my grandfather left a small inheritance, and I shouldered at least a quarter of the cost with my own savings? How could I tell him that when I returned, it would take me a year to replenish those savings (but I would replenish them)? I would still seem rich to him; I would still be rich there. I wanted to defend myself, but I had no place explaining to him that the relative wealth that seemed so obvious to him was the product of careful planning, loans, and choices. I did not have \$500 for a smartphone, but I had three times that for a plane ticket. *It’s not that simple*, I wanted to say, but perhaps in his eyes, it was.

I hesitate to call attention to difference, to describe a scene and say *Look how exotic these people are*, but it would also be insulting to the Vietnamese to pretend their lives are just

like ours. Sometimes the most important perspectives come from a place of difference, of recognizing that there is no singular and correct opinion, lifestyle, or moral code.

I found that what at first seemed chaotic or haphazard often had an intentional, thoughtful explanation; for instance, the beds. In Hanoi, I slept on a mattress, without a blanket, fan whirling overhead. In almost every country bed I occupied, there was no mattress; instead, a thin, woven mat rested on the frame's wooden boards, and there I was to sleep. For weeks, this baffled and impressed me. Here were people so resilient, so tough, that they needed not even the basic convenience of a mattress. Each morning I was reminded, when I woke with the indentations of the mat pressed into my already sticky skin, that there was no place nor need for the plush cushions of home. Even the chairs in which we drank tea and conversed were always wooden, always uncomfortable, and always unproblematic for my companions.

One evening, buzzed from a few *Bia Hanoi*, Hanoi Beers, in the heat, I told Chinh how impressed I was that no one in the villages needed mattresses, they were so tough.

"We have mattresses," he said. "We just remove them in the summer. To keep it cooler."

"Oh," I said. Here, people resourcefully combatted the summer heat in invisible ways. But I still assumed that something about them, something about their culture, allowed them to sleep and sit on hard surfaces without discomfort. I wonder now if that something is the simple fact that there, surfaces are made hard, and people do not need extra cushions because that is not what they know. I learned to use chopsticks two days before I left for Vietnam, and now, despite my first twenty years without them, I prefer chopsticks. They became available and familiar to me. But I also wonder what role access plays, if there is a tangible reason why we have cushy resources in the States and they do not. Perhaps I looked too far into a mere difference in preference, assigning unwarranted and sweeping observations to something that, in the end, does not matter much at all. Or perhaps it matters more than I can understand.

And yet I could barely handle the sheer hardness of it all; I never slept soundly that summer, and never later than seven a.m. Once, I lay on a friend's bed, instructed to take a post-lunch nap, and could not manage a comfortable position. Instead, I played

tetris on the cheap, simple phone my internship company provided me. I was, though I hate to admit it, bored.

Most afternoons of my month in Luc Nam were spent like this: return home from teaching around 11:30 a.m., eat the lunch my host mother had prepared, retreat to my bed and read with the fan blasting on my face until I lulled into a nap, wake one or two hours later, walk ten minutes to my host aunt and uncle's house to use their wifi and lesson plan for the next day's classes, browse Facebook or emails or minimalism blogs, and walk back to my homestay to run or attempt chin-ups from a tree branch before dinner.

In theory, I was content. This was what I wanted—solitude, simplicity, immersion—but I was also lonely. I couldn't help but think this was not the adventurous existence I had imagined, full of local friends, family bonds, and immersive excursions. Instead, I was almost militant in my adherence to routine. No matter what, I would sleep by nine p.m. so I could wake before five a.m. and run. No matter what, I would return from Vietnam in shape for cross country season, to prove to my coach that I could train anywhere, even when it seemed impossible. But I wonder if my renewed obsession with running was just an attempt to grasp something I knew I loved in a place full of unfamiliar sensations. In my journal, I wrote about my worries that the food they fed me did not have enough protein, or that they fried the tofu too much, instead of recounting the funny, surprising, or brilliant thing one of my students said that day. Instead of examining my reality, my response to the sensations I encountered. I claimed to be ready and willing to give my entire self to the experience, but it seems obvious now that I kept some parts of myself withheld. That I used running to distract from the moments I felt inadequate, out of place, or unneeded.

Even when a morning thunderstorm forced me to delay my run, and the local police chose that day to examine my visa and passport for two hours after class, I returned home at 12:30 p.m. and ran, hard, in the heat of the day, because I could not bear to miss a workout. Afterward, I felt light-headed for hours and could hardly stomach white rice. I feared that if I allowed myself to miss one run, the excuses and skipped days would pile up until I took the entire summer off. It did not help that many books I read in that month (*Once a Runner*, *Lolita*, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*) explored

obsession as a life force. Like it has at various times for the past eleven years, running sustained, grounded, and shackled me.

One afternoon, eager to discover that I did not miss the boy I had barely known and recklessly wanted before I left, I proclaimed an epiphany in my journal: when I was focused on running, I was hardened to any romantic or sentimental feelings. It was only during breaks, or immediately after a horrible race, that my hormones flared and I softened into a lovesick lump. *I do not need anyone*, I thought, *as long as I have running*.

So, I was desensitized to all residual feelings for that boy, and, incidentally, for most daily struggles I faced. It was not until, on that day the police came to my school, and I later traveled to the province's city to meet with more police, that my hardening began to falter. In an unexpected and heartbreaking encounter—an encounter I need not unpack in detail—with corruption in the local government, they questioned the validity of my visa. Negotiations with Mo only complicated the situation, and it became unsafe for me to stay in the village. On a Wednesday night, I packed everything into my suitcase, and the next morning I took a bus to Hanoi. Before I left, I called Jessica in the United States, who commended me for my calm and class, and then my parents, the only time I heard their voices that summer, and bawled. I could not say goodbye to my students or my teacher colleagues; only my host family knew of my departure. Had I been able to explain myself, to see the students one last time and apologize—though it was through no fault of my own that I left—I would not have felt so shattered.

I moved to Hanoi, but I considered going home. I did not believe I could *run* (i.e. survive) in the city. When I had lived there for that first week, I had to run a concrete 900-meter loop around a manmade lake, at least twelve times, and each time I felt my sanity loosen its grip. Did I allow running to impede my openness to new experiences? Perhaps, but I promised myself I would prioritize running. It became central to the summer, and also to my grounding in something I believed was *real*. Linh, my assigned program coordinator, but also my friend, saved me. She found me an apartment near West Lake, a reservoir which was seventeen kilometers around (I completed the entire loop on three separate long runs) and the best possible place to run in all of Hanoi. Without her, I would not have bounced back from the sting of leaving the village, and I would not have allowed Hanoi to teach me just as much in that month, if not more, as

Luc Nam did the month before. She did not understand my obsession and impulse to run, but she recognized it, and that was enough.

I had never lived somewhere larger than a few hundred thousand people. I decided early that the only way to survive the metropolis was to immerse myself. That was the month that I deemed myself a born-again minimalist, that I made action plans for my return that went beyond just running (black-studded earrings, self-help books, room purging), and that I became empowered to plan trips and explore alone in a massive, intimidating city. The son of my landlord, who went to college in the midwest, had visited Oregon, even Eugene, and impossibly, I felt closer to home and less alone surrounded by seven million people than I had in the tiny village.

I visited a war museum, where the first and most celebrated display is the destroyed remains of an American fighter jet. It parallels a golden statue of Vladimir Lenin standing mightily across the street. I explored Hoa Lo Prison, where the Vietnamese imprisoned Americans like John McCain—they proudly featured his commandeered uniform—and where the museum curators tell you, again and again, that their treatment was humane, empathetic, that the Americans were even a bit sad to leave. They all called it the “Hanoi Hilton,” but the Vietnamese insist this label was genuine. When I found wifi, I searched for McCain’s account of his imprisonment, and read about his alleged cruel, terrible experience, how he was tortured and neglected, essentially opposite of the museum’s story. I’m sure neither version is completely true, but if I compare the pleasant, genteel demeanor of Vietnam with the United States’ violent, nationalist tendencies, I form my own biases.

Wait a second, you might say. You visited their museums. You lived through their propaganda and bribes. But what of their government? What does a Communist country look like? Should we Obama socialists not be striving for the same?

Well, I might say, I can only recount what I observed. In Hanoi there is an eleven p.m. curfew, there are loudspeakers vibrating with constant propaganda during national events, the police stop the motorbikes that look the richest rather than those that break the loose laws, and most generally people with money have access to English classes, and thus access to a life beyond Hanoi.

Ah, so their country is deeply flawed, not great like our own?

We have systemic racism that leads to countless deaths, capitalism and consumerism so ingrained that children are assumed to possess tablets for school, and in the States, I am afraid to sit still in a crowded movie theater for two hours because I expect a gunman to appear and release fire. In Vietnam, as a young woman traveling alone, I never felt unsafe. Even on the backs of unknown motorbike taxis, even on a day-long solo trip with a guide I found online (who later invited me to his home for dinner), even when a taxi driver tripled the length of the drive home to charge me more, even hopelessly lost and wandering the dark streets on an electric scooter without direction. Perhaps I am naive, ignorant of the deeper flaws and risks in Vietnam—perhaps their propaganda worked too well on me—but there I could confidently cross a street buzzing with streams of cars and motorbikes that did not stop and expected me to maneuver across by faith alone. I did not allow myself to feel afraid, but I was also not surrounded by stories meant to instill fear, or at least not that I could understand. In the States, I worry about sleeping in my house alone because I have myself broken into it so easily every time I forget my keys. How many days have I gone *without* hearing stories of rape or violence? How can I compare two different worlds?

For all my self-discovery, introspection, and adventure, I cannot help but believe my actual humanitarian impact in Hanoi was almost obsolete. I was the first native English speaker to ever visit Luc Nam, and perhaps the only one many of the students would ever learn from. These kids were not privileged, and despite my inexperience as a teacher, I knew that at least my American accent would bring them one inch closer to knowing the language enough to have the option of a life beyond their village. I will not pretend that I gifted them English, or that my influence somehow *saved* them from a life they may or may not want—because many, I'm sure, do want and love their life in the village.

I do remember one girl: she was in the seventh grade class but sat in with the eighth graders, too. She wore wayfarer glasses any Portland hipster would admire and sat in the front row, always eager to raise her hand even when she did not have the answer. When I assigned presentations about holidays—both American and Vietnamese—she prepared one about Halloween with two hundred orange-soaked slides of pumpkins, ghosts, and creatures. She clicked through them compulsively for her entire six-minute

speech. I could tell she was intelligent and ambitious, and the gleam in her eyes whenever I mentioned America conveyed an obvious desire to explore. The only obstacles between her and any path she wanted were resources and opportunities. One of a hundred students, I cannot even remember her name, but if nothing else, I hope that she and her classmates at least *believe* they have access to the world, and that someday those who want to will see it.

In Hanoi, I worked at an English language center, where wealthy kids who already take English classes pay to receive extra lessons, taught by native speakers in classes of no more than twenty students. Of course, these kids deserve to learn English as much as anyone, and most of them will likely go on to be successful. (The employed teachers, from Europe and the United States, also have a high paycheck and flexible hours—comfortable living in Hanoi.) But the difference between a humid, peeling room of forty students and a soundless projector and an air-conditioned, shiny, feng shui room with Smart Boards, pre-planned lessons, workbooks, and even company-stamped backpacks is the difference between imperceptible and consuming guilt. How could these students have so much while those in Luc Nam had almost nothing? I was not even allowed to teach in the language center—I did not have the necessary qualification, so I TA'd for four hours a day and tutored for two hours a week. My presence was insignificant, short-lived, and inessential. I do not believe I made even a ripple of difference in the language center's self-sustaining universe.

Each morning of my last week in Hanoi, I woke with chest pains. It felt like my lungs were deflated, and it took several minutes of running before they filled up again. On the last night, I woke around three a.m., gasping and horrified at the pressure in my chest. Only then did I remember that chest pains were serious, and that patterned chest pains must be worse. Panicking, I thought, *What if I can't go home?* That entire week, I had only thought about home, about leaving all the pollution, the seemingly worthless job, and the language barrier. Blinded by my cravings for familiarity, I did not even care that my lungs might implode.

I left Hanoi like I arrived—at night, accompanied by Chinh and Linh to the airport. Many hours later, I stopped in Narita, Japan for a ten-hour layover. I left the airport via train to explore Narita, a peaceful and deliciously cool-aired town that features a sprawling pagoda, endless shops, and the training track for the United States

World Championship track team. I walked up and down the town's hilly streets, sauntered through the pagoda's natural areas, meditated by a garden pond, and almost fell asleep watching Japanese people run around the track. I was not even halfway home, and when I returned to the airport I had only 45 minutes to spare before my flight, but I felt intense relief that despite everything, I had somehow *survived*. I knew that I never had to go back to Vietnam, but that I would want to, and astonishingly, my conscience was clearer on the flight home than on the flight there.

I'm still not sure which month mattered more. The first, a painfully simple life filled with daily challenges and extremes of solitude with a pure mission and an at least tangible impact on one hundred students in a rural area. Or the second, an introspective life full of adventures and possibilities for a female solo traveler, yet shaded by an unimportant job in an unfair environment. Both seem more about me than anything, about how I changed and responded throughout the summer, not about all the people I met, connected with, and left behind. Is it all still selfish if what I wanted was not only to change myself, but also to make a positive impact on others? I do not think I can even say, with certainty, that I succeeded in that.

And yet. Perhaps self-empowerment is essential before any outward change occurs. Perhaps I was, or still am, too young to understand what it means to be selfless, or to ignore and repress personal failings for the benefit of other people. I worry, often, that if I obsess too much about the method and extent of my impact—good or bad—I will either do nothing or give up on all my attempts to be a decent person. I became vegan to help animals and the environment, but what about all the water that almonds consume? Must I boycott those too, and with them avocados, tropical fruits, quinoa?

In retrospect, I could present my decision to intern abroad as a purely humanitarian and harmless—even *beneficial*—endeavor, an exercise in discovering myself while simultaneously inspiring students. I could insist that I needed some hope, a consequence of living in an increasingly disheartening world where tragedy and cruelty stalk every corner. I could claim that I required maturing, that the boy I had fallen for left me feeling lost, that I had dreamed about leaving the country forever and it was time.

But to say all that would ignore something obvious: not everyone has the privilege to spend a summer abroad in a “developing” world on a self-indulgent quest to expand one's mind and perspective. Not everyone has the money, resources, or time to

make a most likely miniscule impact in a country semantically deemed less-than. And for most people in the world—especially women—that country might be their home, and they might never leave. Beneath all the clichés and romanticized language, there is little glamour in teaching English in a small Vietnamese village for eleven weeks—or five—and even less when one has no experience teaching and despite all her promises to return, she might never see those students again, and perhaps not even her local friends. Her effect might instead be insidious, and with her carbon footprint factored in, she might depart having left far more harm than help.

Maybe it's about doing the best that I can, in my circumstances, and treating others with respect and kindness. What could be more obvious, or less complex? Maybe real impact and service come with time, and though now I am blind to so much distress and tragedy in the world, I can only control my response as my awareness expands. Even if resistance is never pure, it must be better than complicity. After all, I am privileged with so many resources and opportunities; the least I can do is use them well and be grateful that I even have the time and ability to ask these questions.

What I will remember most about that summer are not reminders of my privilege, or moments of loneliness, or extremes of adventure, or even runs in suffocating heat. What I will remember most are flashes of connections with people. When Bich, the English teacher, invited me to sleep at her house, and the next morning biked alongside me for my entire ten-mile long run, even though she hates exercise.

When Chung took me to her friend's wedding and confided in me that she was jealous that all the tipsy adult Vietnamese men seemed so enamored by me, that she felt ugly, and I assured her it was only my unfamiliar skin and if I was absent, they would surround her in admiration.

When Chinh and his cousins took me to sing karaoke in the village, where we drank Bia Hanoi and serenaded each other with ballads in English by artists I had never encountered before, and never have since.

When the boy in the local pool who could not have been more than eight asked me, in timid English, "Do you have boyfriend?"

When Ngoc, a local friend, rode an hour on a bus with me to visit the pottery village, where we threw haphazard clay pots and I found, after years of searching, the perfect Buddha statue.

And of course, at the airport, before I left, when Chinh was too shy to hug me goodbye but I did it anyway, and he told me he could not believe I had to leave, that his life would never be quite the same without me and I agreed, and we promised to meet again soon to tour the rest of Vietnam on motorbikes.

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