

# *Books As Vessels*

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Flipping through a freshly printed novel or touching the spine of a weathered book ignites memories of reading stories as a child. Stories about grand adventures that made you feel as if you were there too, sailing on Viking ships or exploring caves—stories that were a departure from your everyday life. The memories that you have of reading have the ability to become tangible because of the physicality of a book, which allows you to revisit these stories countless times. Books are akin to vessels, a place to hold your own stories. Books carry words, words that you can touch. This sensation makes the words come to life, which for me is magical and cannot be rivaled.

With time a book transforms into a self-portrait, a documentation of your journey. Novels that are read over and over, lined with notes in the margins. Delicate folds left throughout the book, and postcards hidden between the pages. Even the imprints of fingers on pages become a documentation of memories. As you leave your mark on a book, it becomes a record of your time that is replayed each time the book is read. Pages are memory-markers, regardless if the text is about you. Unavoidably, the book becomes an extension of you.

The following vignettes are a collection of my own words, sentences, memories, and history. Which create a fragmented memoir of my short life, which has felt very long thus far. Pieced together, these stories embody significant moments in my life that make tangible. These stories will give you a glimpse into who I am.

## When I was Rather Little

I bit into the peach, the juice burst from its fuzzy skin. It was springtime in Minnesota, which meant the green buds, the little buds, on the flowers and trees were beginning to form. Soon the daffodils would bloom and line our yard in the suburbs. I knew even then, when I was so small like the green buds that somehow; anyhow, I did not fit there. However, when you are young your thoughts are fleeting; and what seems serious one moment scatters away the next. My thoughts of being somewhere that did not feel right would flee.

Though everything felt scattered when I was little, everything felt so simple, like sailing on the sea. Each day I ate my peanut butter and honey sandwich that my mom wrapped in tinfoil that had creases much like her hands. She has thin skin; I have always been able to see her veins. I sat at the little wooden table in the classroom and trace sandpaper letters, to create an imprint of cursive on my mind. Somehow the letters stuck; like the peanut butter on the roof of my mouth.

My nanny, Kathy, picked me up from school each day, in her old station wagon that I still wish was forever stationed outside our house. We sang along to "Cecelia" by Simon & Garfunkel on the way home, and on special occasions we listened to the Everly Brothers. When we got home she read me stories about kids on adventures, creating their own worlds out of sand and sea glass. Then we would join in with our family chef Rebecca who was once on Broadway, and she would sing to us songs from Fiddler on the Roof. I learned to be a strong woman more from them than anyone else in my life. I wish I could go back and map my love for them and read to Kathy about how I know it my heart that she was the grandma I was supposed to have and I would sing to Rebecca about how I am confident because of her fearlessness.

When I was little I was fearless of fear. Now I fear most everything. When I was so small I knew how to be strong. Now I can't help but feel weak.

Springtime in Minnesota meant lots of rain, lots of thunder, and often too much lightening. I would run outside wearing hardly anything and dance till my lungs felt old, which would cause my mom to thunder for fear I would be struck by lightening. My dad was the calm after the storm; he was never worried.

I was never struck.

It was that past winter that I was hit in the face with a sled. I was in the midst of sliding down the icy hill on my belly in the school playground until this boy came out of nowhere and crashed into me with his sled. The sled felt so big and I had never felt so small. From then on I only indulged in my favorite winter activities when there was no one else around. I loved putting on my snowsuit and playing outside, building igloos with my dad. The sweetest part was coming back inside our home and being surprised with hot chocolate that my mom made. My cheeks would be flushed as I

drank the hot chocolate; still my favorite feeling is being both warm and cold at once. It felt like hot liquid was being poured through my veins, though my skin felt cold.

Eventually the snow melted, faster than I could ever realize. I never understood why the season was called spring, when in fact it sneaks up on you unexpectedly. Soon enough I would be sitting at the lunch table in school, adrift while my thoughts were drifting too.

Once I finished the juicy peach, I named the pit and it became my friend. My other friends laughed and told me it was impossible to be friends with a peach seed; I knew otherwise and I knew the impossible was indeed possible. This was when I realized that real friends could not always really be there for you the way you thought they should be. I took the peach pit home with me that day and introduced my mom to my new friend.

Dear Mom,

She asked you, "Why is your daughter dressed like a boy?" I remember you telling her that you did not notice anything different about what I was wearing that night. She pushed the issue further and went as far as to ask you why on earth you would let me leave the house dressed like that. You replied, "Like what? She looks beautiful."

Without you there wouldn't be a "me." At least not the one I have become. I am confident in myself, in my feelings, and what I stand for because of the unconditional love and acceptance you have always shown me. I cannot recall a time where you have ever judged me for being who I am and expressing myself in ways that feel natural. I remember people would tell you when I was younger that you had a cute son, and you would laugh and tell them that I was in fact your daughter. With you I feel like I can always be open and I never have to fear that you will cease to love me. Even the times when I did not use the best of judgment, you supported me through the lessons that I needed to learn.

I know you do not always understand why I am the way I am, or do the things I do, regardless you have always believed in me and that consistency has profoundly impacted my life. The times when I am most insecure about what I look like or scared about something I may have to do, I am always self-assured in your presence. I am unsure as to whether I will ever have words to articulate how much I love you and how grateful I am for having you in my life, but this is the best I can do for now. You have done what is in my inexperienced opinion the best thing a parent can do... which is just to be there for your child no matter what.

Despite this uncharted love I feel for you, I cannot forgive you for not letting me grow up. I know you love me, which is your reason for holding me back. However I do not think it is a justification for not letting me experience life. I feel like you spent so much time trying to keep me close that emotionally I ran further and further away. I have never felt like the little defenseless girl that I believe you see in me. I can recall many times where I have caught you following me when I was out, knowing that you didn't trust me made me lose trust in you. Every time you would search through my things like a kid on a treasure hunt, I felt completely violated and that our bond of trust was broken. Each time you would renew your promise to never do that again, the promise would crumble and a piece of me would break as well. I still feel like I am breaking.

You and I get along in a way that I cannot compare with anyone else. Without you, who would go to Dairy Queen with at eleven at night, or dance with around the house? Without you, without you who would pick me up from school dressed entirely Goth and scare the other mothers? Who would play Janis Joplin on the ukulele for my friends? You see, without you, my life would be far less than complete.

Everyday I am grateful that it was me you adopted, and that you gave me a life that I may not have otherwise had. I have never taken your

generosity and love for granted. I know that I can be a pain the ass to be around, and that we often fight over nothing and everything. However, you have always told me that everything is better in the morning. So, regardless of whatever fight we have or tantrum I throw, we work through our problems and give everyday a fresh start. Things between us can be fucked up at times, but luckily our therapy sessions have helped us work our issues out. I feel really lucky to have a functional and healthy relationship with you; I know not everyone has that. Maybe one day I will find better words for you than just "I love you." I promise to always keep looking.

## When I Was Not So Small

I was extraordinarily puzzled by the idea of wearing a bra, and putting one on was a puzzle in itself. I was far from prepared for the swarm of acne on my face. Nor was I prepared for the swarm of boys like bees that us girls were supposed to like. I much preferred to delve into pre-teenage angst and sit in my room and listen to The Clash and The Ramones. At that age I felt like I was always clashing with everyone, and somehow I could never get it right. But that was the age where I really began to write my feelings down, and save them so I would know they were true.

Throughout my adolescent years I became a list of ever changing oddities: chopped all of my hair off, dyed it orange, wore plaid pants and band t-shirts, started dressing like a boy, liked that I was mistaken for a boy, bleached my hair, refused to brush my hair, wore a red bandana everyday to conceal the disaster, pierced my ears a regrettable amount of times, became girly again, tried to like boys, hated being girly, refused to wear skirts, started wearing skirts, let my hair grow out, began to love that I was girl. Meanwhile, the only consistency I held onto was dancing to Smells like Teen Spirit in my mother's office and destroying her workspace.

Getting my period was a deal breaker, the one part I still detest about being a woman.

Though I would go through daily transformations as a subconscious effort to find myself, I knew there was much more going on inside that somehow my hands refused to pull out. I tried my best to keep it inside for fear I would pull too much out from the inside and there would be nothing left. My family was breaking on the outside and I was becoming bits and pieces on the inside, and at that point, I couldn't have possibly known that there would be enough tape to piece everything back together again. I wish I would've know then that there was.

Living in the in-between of being a child and a teenager left me feeling as if I were on a daily precipice. Yet I was young enough where I was naïve enough not to think that I was actually going to fall. I found there is a drop, and it's called growing up. I have found that that fall is inevitable much like autumn. It is my favorite season. As your adolescences ends it is too late to realize you are standing on the edge and before you know it you have already started the descent. Though I did not realize, the reality was that everyone was falling with me.

Dear Al,

I feel like if I were to talk about our past we would just be re-hashing what we have already worked out and have come to terms with. However, I want to have it written down in order to make the words tangible. You were never there for me when I was growing up, and the times you were, I felt like I was not accepted and that the way I am was somehow wrong. I felt like you didn't support me, and your anger and temper scared me more than you will ever know. A knot of hate for everything that was going on around me began to tangle in the summer before 6<sup>th</sup> grade. All of these things that had happened between us started to tangle together, I was at the age where I was able to start making sense of your dysfunctional behavior, and just how unhappy our family was. I forgot how to use my voice, and I needed to find a way for someone to hear me. I found a way and people began to listen, and that is when you told me that I was "the problem" in our family. I know those words of yours happened because that is why I stopped calling you "dad" and that was when I stopped talking to you for over three years.

I built the wall between us because I was afraid of getting hurt. I was young and that was the only way I knew how to protect myself. I am sorry that the rest of the family began to shut you out as well. I think it was because they were hurting too. When we went out for lunch or went on a family trip you never seemed to try to be involved, you were always taking business calls or reading the newspaper when we would spend time together as a family. I had the impression that you didn't care and that you weren't trying to make an effort to help fix our broken family. I began to get angrier and further away from letting go of the knot I had made inside.

Eventually things began to get a little better, once we all were getting the help we needed. I could see you and mom getting close again; it was like you were falling back in love with one another. I wanted to move on but it was a challenge to step down from the role of protecting my family that I took on at such a young age. I wasn't willing to see her treated badly again. Somehow, anyhow, our family started to become functional again, but I still was not able to be safe around you. Our trust and relationship was broken, but it started to feel more like a fracture.

As you know, life went on and so did the healing process. It wasn't till the beginning of my senior that I really began to talk to you again. Many school nights we stayed up late in the kitchen and discussed my future, which became a regular occurrence I actually looked forward to. It was as if we were getting to know each other for the first time, or getting to know each other over again for that matter. I now feel respected when I talk to you and that you acknowledge our fundamental differences and appreciate them. I have discovered that there are things I can talk with you about that I cannot discuss with mom or other family members. Even though we are far from each other on the political spectrum, when we talk, somehow we

find a middle ground. I love having someone to talk about these things with, and I am pleasantly surprised that it is you.

I look forward to seeing how our family will grow, I know it thing between you and I won't always be smooth sailing, but I know things will be okay. Despite everything that has happened I want to thank you for being there for mom. I am happy that you two worked on working together, and actually made it work. I am still not ready to call you dad yet, which I hope you will understand. But I think I am open to the possibility of that changing one-day.

## When I Got a Bit Older

These less than many years have left me feeling strung out, much like the telephone wires strung out between telephone poles that framed the sky as I would watch the sunset on that hill. I will never go back to that hill because even though I have learned how to forgive, I am still learning to give what is inside of me another chance. Since then I cannot help but know that I am growing, but somehow on the inside I feel like I have only been getting smaller. Which is scary because everything in this world seems so big, which makes things even scarier because I thought as I got older I would feel bigger on the inside and everything that felt bigger on the outside would seem smaller and I would feel safe.

I still don't feel safe.

I always knew I would spend a lot of time alone, which I thought was the truth. But as much I wanted that to be true I could not help but reach out from inside and let myself hold her hand or hug him goodbye. The more the doors opened up to the people and world around me the harder it got and I realized that all of the feelings I had were a lot and often unbearable and the weight was often too much. It was far too often than I went around with my heart feeling weighed down by something as unbearably heavy as an anvil or grand piano. Even though it felt unbearable my voice box was dusty. And though my parts felt broken and my words felt lost I knew I was not broken.

It was just that everything was breaking and the only thing I knew was to try and tape everything back together. I realized letters need time to be stitched together in order to create words, and words need time to be strung together and form sentences. Somehow my mom never listened when I said being there felt like a sentence only someone with the harshest of hearts would have given. And each year I have suffered the harshest of winters, however the tress that were weighed down by the snow hung lower inside of me than anyone could ever see. Winter's that split the tips of your fingers and snow that does indeed make your boots impossibly heavy.

I cannot help but take in too much and that too much gets stuck somewhere inside. The red poppies get stuck, the birch trees in autumn are trapped, along with the sounds of the grass as it gets blown by the wind. There are other things that get lost in these drawers inside my chest as well, like the smell of lavender and the sound of rain. It wasn't until I found the "lost & found" that I was able to find the things I loved within and let them out. I let myself out and as unbearably scary as that was; I was willing to bare it for you.

Before I knew it, the tape was holding and though I was not the same, I realized that everything does change and as long as you have enough tape the important things will be held together. Somehow, anyhow, that has made me feel a little less lost. I even feel a bit found on the inside and out. The things that seemed barely bearable I no longer feel I have to

bear. And though I feel naked most of the time, I found that everyone is mostly naked too, and somehow, anyhow, I am okay with that. I am okay.