

It's been long since I've seen you last.

I was sick. There was something in the air, it lingered around you, it soured the breath in my lungs. I didn't know what it was. I was afraid of what the future might bring, but I remained. It always got worse before it got better, when it came to you.

But I loved you, still.

It was like I was no longer there. Just another number in the headcount. I was drifting away. None of you reached out to catch me. You only cut away at my strings with every ultimatum.

Not good enough.

Everything you loved about me was no longer good enough. Everything I worked for became background noise you couldn't make sense of. You didn't want to make sense of it. You shouldn't have to. If you don't understand, then it's not clear enough. Not good enough. And I believed you.

But I loved you, still.

February 21st, 2024. It felt like a weight off my chest. I did what I could to make a silent departure. Avoid commotion. I know how much you dislike commotion.

I felt alive. The sickness was receding. I had a new lighthouse to part the fog you created. But like jagged rocks concealed in that mist, you've broken me.

No longer could I speak, could I breathe, could I *live*. No longer could I utter a word without fearing its consequence. Late in the night, I lie awake dreading the misinterpretation of my words that never came. The retaliation I came to expect. Perhaps then, it wasn't normal. Not something friends do.

But I loved you, still.

You never truly feel the absence of something until it's truly gone. But were you gone then, or even before? Perhaps even while breathing the same air I've already lost you.

And I missed you. I grieved. I cried and I sobbed and I wished I could scream because I never truly wanted you gone. I promised myself I would cry no more. That I already shed enough tears for you. Tears you ignored. Tears you wanted me to forget. Tears you didn't deserve.

What was I to you? You, you, you, you who I saw as my blood, who was I to you? Who was I, that you could turn against me so easily? Perhaps I was nothing. Perhaps I always knew that.

But I loved you, still.

Not a day goes by that I do not think of you. Not a moon shines through my window that doesn't see me question if I'd done the right thing. Perhaps if I tried harder. If I fought for what you wanted me to throw away. But I never was allowed to fight, was I. Only you were allowed to stand up for yourself.

You came looking for me, after you slammed shut the doors I left open in my exit. I ignored you. I wished not to participate in the abuse you'd prepared, organised, and planned to unleash upon me in a cacophony of broken voices you dared call an intervention. I was both the victim and mediator of one too many. I wished not to see any more.

But I loved you, still.

My bedroom is littered with reminders of you.

I want it gone. I want it all gone, because every memory is a twist of the knife you stabbed in my back on the day I tried to put myself first for the very first time. At every glimpse of a familiar name on a list you hadn't yet removed me from, I am shook with grief. I silently beg for you to acknowledge my existence. Just the one of you. Just once, so I may know. So you may tell me. So I might finally understand what I meant to you.

You had a witness. A soul you hurt as you did I. They spoke to me of the words you said. How you tore me apart. How you belittled me, even before I was gone. Is *that* how much I meant to you?

You, who I pulled from the pits more times than I care to count.

You, who I lent a shoulder to at every turn it was needed.

You, who I've given *everything*.

I wonder what you call me now. What names you have crafted, like you have for the ones before me. I wonder if you miss me. Because damn it all, I miss *you*.

And I *hate* that I love you, still.