You and I and Thunderstorms

To my mother,

I remember the times when it would thunder, the air electric with a dark life. You'd drag the two of us out, feet bare against the wet grass, and you'd spin us around, around, around, until our feet left the ground. Two children in our nightgowns, laughing freely all the while. Hair drenched and plastered to our heads. Your smile was the biggest I think I've ever seen it go. You and I have tried to replicate those moments since. But I know we both feel the unspoken gap, and you are no longer strong enough to lift me so my feet leave the ground.

You remember so deeply it cuts into you (I lose memories of her by the day—how much longer until I forget?). You come home and stare out the window, wine glass in hand, eyes wet, telling us how a flashback hit as you saw the apple juice she once drank in the store. The apple juice helped the meds go down. You knew all those medicines and their effects and their side effects and their costs and their benefits, a thousand memorized facts in an attempt to save someone's life. Then one day the reason for knowing all that information was suddenly, jarringly obsolete. But her apple juice is still in the store.

You remember everything—the surgeries, the late nights, the pain, the nurses, the medications. In some ways you never really left. I only remember the beep of the machines, the way tubes look when coated by a child's skin, and reading books in the waiting room. You protected me from seeing the worst of it and bear the price of that to this day, now unable to *stop* seeing the worst of it. I was ten.

You called me an old soul once, and yourself a young soul. You believe in reincarnation, that she is every butterfly that crosses your path. I don't know what I believe. But you looked me

in the eyes and told me I had lived a thousand lifetimes, and in that moment I felt the weight of every single one of them.

Here is something I remember that I think you don't: a recent night compared to the ever receding years of her that haunt the both of us. You'd had a bit to drink. The late hour swirled your grief and PTSD within you to mix like a Molotov cocktail, and the wine happened to be the flame on the wick. My dad and I could do nothing but witness the ensuing explosion. "I was drowning," you cried to us, your lovely face (so much like mine) twisted and your eyes blood red. You were staring so intently at me in particular that it felt like it was just you and I, suspended together alone in time. "After she died, I was *drowning*, and no one saved me. I was alone, I was drowning, and you didn't save me. Why didn't you save me? *Why didn't you save me?"*

When my sister died I was twelve, I was twelve, and I didn't know how to swim either, much less rescue anyone else. I was twelve and already an old soul, and I didn't save you.

Please, let's go back to when she's alive: I was eleven years old, and my dad and I were home in Germany going to school and work. You and she were in that specialized hospital in Cincinnati for six months without us. It was my first week of middle school, and I was a scared little kid returning to the real world after living in a hospital. I didn't have any friends. I wasn't sure how to make them. So at lunch I would find an isolated tree stump and call you to have someone to talk to, an attempt to connect our disparate universes. I was eleven and too old to be calling my Mommy at lunchtime, but you were an ocean away and I needed to pretend I could swim that far. You'd wake up at four in the morning just to be there for me, sitting on the bathroom floor and whispering into your phone—ensuring you wouldn't wake her up but could be close enough if she needed anything. I sat on that tree stump and your voice crossed an ocean

to reach me, flying out of those hospital walls when it felt like you and she were to be bound there for eternity. In those moments, you and I were less lonely.

"Why don't you grieve her like I do?" You sobbed at me, years later, your eyes wide and aching. *"Why am I alone in this?"*

Eventually, you returned home to Germany with her. Less because she was getting better, and more because it was nicer for her to be in a familiar environment with her family when she died. None of us were willing to admit that—I didn't even know yet her death was a possibility at all. In the time that you were gone, I accidentally neglected my long hair, and it became so terribly matted. Anyone with practicality would have deemed it a lost cause and had it chopped. But I begged you not to cut it, and so you would put her to bed and sit on the floor with me to untangle it, a quiet reunion after being gone so long. For three days you worked at my hair, your fingers gentle and the detangler smelling of coconut, countless hours of you painstakingly and painlessly unraveling every knot in my hair and within my chest that had built up over the last six months. She slept fitfully beside us in bed, both of us ensuring we wouldn't wake her up but could be close enough if she needed anything.

I was seventeen, and I asked for my hair to be shorn, shorter even than a pixie cut. Chopping it all off six years too late. You stared at me in disbelief. "She lost her hair to chemotherapy," you said. "And now you want to do that willingly?" The words were not accusatory, merely a stunned, absent-minded musing. "I don't get it. You once begged me not to cut your long hair when it was so tangled. What happened? What happened to that little girl who wanted it so long?"

I replied that I had changed. That it had been six years, and seventeen felt such a long way from eleven. You went so quiet. "You're right." You whispered. "No, you're right."

What neither of us said but both of us thought is I am leaving her behind against my will. Through the natural process of growing up, I am changing by the day, until I no longer fit the mold of the person I used to be when she was alive. You change at a slower rate than I, though it is still an inevitability. Even if she could come back to life today, what place would she have in our new lives? She will always be preserved in the amber of our memories, unable to grow beyond the age of a sick seven. I was four years older than her when she died. Now I am ten years older than her—even longer than the duration of her life. The not-so-distant future contains a day where we will have mourned her for longer than we knew her. Someday I will be the age you were when you lost her and she will still be seven. We change, and she will not. Whenever you compliment my short hair, it sounds like an apology and an honorific all in one.

"I don't think I'll make it to eighty," you said suddenly one day, your eyes distant—gone away to that place no one else can follow you to. "I don't want to live that long." I imagined being your age and made of memories. I imagined being the only relic left of a time where we were all together dancing in the rain. I imagined being alone in a vast ocean, ghosts wordlessly watching my struggles to keep my head above water. I begged you to live for me, and it felt like desperately reaching for someone already under the waves. You made no promises in either direction.

A few years after her death, you went to see a therapist. She was a kind woman, and gentle with the heart and grief you display so openly. She was the one that diagnosed you with PTSD. You were not surprised. I was, but I did not tell you. The therapist helped you. She taught you how to influence and reroute the waves of your memories rather than drown in them—you sounded like a god of nature when you described the techniques. The process worked so well for

you that you thought I might benefit from learning it as well. You wanted me to see your therapist in particular, and so I did.

What the therapist told me was that it seemed like I was quite settled into my mourning. She told me she wasn't sure why I had come to see her—I seemed simply content carrying my grief on my shoulders. Poking too deeply at what I had so carefully pressed down could stir the silt up and muddy up my whole mind until I left worse off than I entered. I was affronted at the time—she could cure you but not me?—but a sadistic part of me was affirmed by the analysis. Abstractly in my mind, I perversely liked the thought that my grief could be seen as incurable. At the core of it all, I want my sister to have made an impact upon my life. I want to live this life enough for the both of us. I want this unfathomable feeling inside my chest to stay because it proves that I loved her enough for it to resonate even after she's gone. I had no idea how to formulate that to the therapist, and the words that eventually fell from my lips were smooth, distantly polite, and meaningless. At your behest, I've tried to describe these thoughts to you, but I've never stumbled on the right explanation and I'm not sure you interpret it the way I mean. What the therapist ultimately settled on by the end of the second session (the full amount of time I went to see her for) was that since I did not want to rid myself of my grief, it would be alongside me for the rest of my life and there was nothing she could do about that. I did not tell you any of this.

To be fair, if it's the choice between shouldering the weight of grief for life or forgetting her, the therapist is right—I *will* grieve her until the day I die. You don't have a choice: your memories are a knife, flashbacks stabbing into you with bloody precision over and over and over again. But my memories are sand in a sieve, filtering uselessly away despite all my fruitless efforts to stop it, plug the holes. On my worst days I am jealous of you, how you remember her

with that painful, crystalline clarity. If the third stage of grief is bargaining, I would negotiate to bear the bad memories along with the good just to have *memories*. I took you and her for granted when she was alive, youthfully assuming we would have infinite days together. I was wrong. Now, I am scared of losing her a second time, a quiet death within my own head if I do not find a way to stop the memories from draining away. I only hear her voice when I chase it down, but you are chased down by her voice. We will never truly understand how the other feels—you remembering, and me forgetting.

At her funeral, my aunt—your sister—publically confided that my sister came to her in a dream with angel wings on her back, offering comfort and sage advice. My aunt turned to me in front of a crowd of mourners and asked "You must dream of her too, you *have* to. You're her big sister. What does your little angel sister say to you in your dreams?"

I did not and I do not dream of my sister. I certainly don't dream of angels.

I didn't know how to say that so bluntly—all eyes were on me and it was clear I was designated to be my heavenly sister's earthly emissary. Old soul, won't you bring us a moment of comfort in our grief? I didn't know how to be what they wanted, to speak in a dead girl's voice. I doubted the crowd wanted to hear about playing with baby dolls and laughing at video games, though that was the only sister I knew. The wise, divine angel my aunt dreamed of was alien to me. I stammered uselessly.

Then you, *you* stepped in like some kind of guardian angel yourself, and told everyone what I couldn't: knock it off, stop pestering me, I was a kid, a kid, a *kid*. Find other outlets for their grief than me. They listened to you, obeying the gravitas of your motherly protection, the indignant rage held just below the surface. You listened to me when, years later in the solace of your company, I ranted and raved against it all—strangers coming up to me to say that death was

the meaning of her life, she was an angel sent to earth to teach us about love and leave when her time was up. How *dare* they make her an angel, a martyr, I said to you, she was a *little girl*—how dare they erase the tragedy by convincing themselves a seven year old was divinely designed to withstand pain. She was not some ultimate being sent down from the heavens to die in front of us, she was my little sister and she pouted when I beat her at cards. Your eyes were wet and contemplative when I finished. “I see her as an angel,” you admitted, and I felt something drop in my stomach, afraid of an insensitive blow I had unknowingly committed. “But that’s okay,” you went on, half to yourself. “We can grieve her in different ways. That’s okay.” You hugged me tightly and we did not bring it up again.

I’m taller than you now, even in your heels that make everyone think you’re taller than you are. These days I wear heels too, but less often than you. Our feet are the exact same size, so you lend me your shoes anytime I ask. Every school dance I have been to, I have been dancing a mile in your shoes. You love shoes. I think I might too.

“Why don’t you talk to me about your grief more?” You once gently asked. “When we do talk about it you’re always so serious. You can cry to me, it’s okay.”

“Please cry to me the way I cry to you,” was the unspoken message I heard. I tried to explain that the weight is easier to bear when it is unperceived, that I can’t abide doing my sister or my grief the injustice of misrepresenting it. That I do cry, I promise, I mourn with the same anguish as you despite my instinct to hide it away. As per my fears, I think I misspoke. You looked at me like I was speaking a different language, but we held hands anyways. “How are you so wise?” You asked me, a tone of defeat in your voice, and I didn’t feel wise at all.

When I was little, before she was born, I would get scared of monsters or the dark. I’d creep up to your bed in the middle of the night, always on your side, and you would hold me,

your cheek pressed to the top of my little head. Now when you are drunk, after she is dead, you lie on the floor and reach for me—wanting me by your side, to hear the thump of my heartbeat and blood beneath my skin. These days, I hold you, my cheek pressed to the top of your head. Floating together side by side.

You move me into my first dorm at college. I am eighteen, and once more an ocean away from you. We cling to each other like drowning men to driftwood and cry the same ocean salt. When you call a week later, we are in different timezones. For you, it is early in the morning on the seven year anniversary of her passing. For me, it is the evening before, and I am sitting with a new friend at a fountain watching the sunset. It is the first year of the rest of our lives we will not be together for this occasion. You tell me softly about the mundanities of your week—workplace drama, going to the pool, visiting the dentist, making new friends—the makings of the lives we are both living. What makes it *worth* living, even if we don't make it to eighty. I love you so much I feel it pressing against my ribs, and you love me so much I feel it continents away. It's the anniversary of her death where you are, and you start to cry deep, cleansing tears. As always, it is us against the world, which has always meant us against our shared ache, which has always meant us, cradling a phone against our similar faces, speaking in gentle tones until we both smile.

You hang up the phone, ready to sleep once more, coaxing me to return to my friend. She smiles at me when I sit with her again, and we look at the sunset together, speaking of our own mundanities and novelties. We are blank slates to each other, and that excites and scares me in one. She knows none of my memories yet, and I none of hers, though I want to learn. Who knows what memories we may soon layer together on top of the old ones? The sound of the

fountain beside us reminds me of the rain from my home, stark against the desert I live in now. I see a dark cloud in the distance, and I hope it will thunder.