

## Splattered Lifeblood and Spilling Ink

### *I.*

My sister keeps a thick journal of her thoughts in her bag at all times, waiting for inspiration or boredom or her day to go to shit, so that she can put words on paper. Mind overflowing, ink runs, thoughts forcibly removed from her brain, forced to find home in the cracks and crevices, the grain of her journal. Without it her head would erupt, spewing potent blackness across the universe, drenching the cosmos.

Maybe she is what dampens stars, fading into darkness.

Maybe she is dark matter.

My sister and I are different in more ways than one, and similar in more ways than I care to admit. I don't keep a journal yet; I have only recently begun to feel the urge to write. Reaching for my pen, I find solace in it. I used to prefer to feel and forget – it was too difficult putting feelings to thoughts to words, and even worse putting words to paper – but something has shifted in these past months. Something about being forced to write autobiographically loosened me at the seams, and all I want to do is write about chaos and conflict and hatred and love and me.

I am becoming my sister; I have begun to seep the same black goo, and I'm not far from exploding – it's dripping out of my ears and eyes and nose and mouth. My apologies for drowning you with my words. And Thank You for reading my spilled ink, for letting me blood-let onto paper instead of stars.

### *II.*

“*Untitled Untitled Untitled Untitled*. Hundreds of thousands of female figures of every race in Western art are titled simply *Untitled*. Double that are named *Anonymous*. You could write the word *Untitled* repeatedly on a piece of paper every day, all day, for the next one hundred years without stopping, and you'd never reach the end of female namelessness” (Lewis, 149).

I've observed this same phenomenon that you speak of, the one where women are painted but rarely given an identity. I like how you put it, female namelessness, because it is true.

In many ways names are our identities. When I first meet someone, I ask their name because it lets me know them. It lets me see them as a person, not just as a body in time. If a transgender or nonbinary person chooses to transition, one of the first steps is to change their name, because without a name that fits, they are not themselves. When somebody hears my name, they

remember bits of me: what I look like, how I act, small memories tucked away in their brain. Names give personhood, identity, and history.

Why are we so unwilling to give women names?

This conversation brings back an essay by Zadie Smith that I recently read called “*Alte Frau* by Bathasar Denner,” which I think you would enjoy. She speaks in great depth about the *Venus of Urbino* and how if you don’t open your eyes and see her first and foremost as an erotic object, you can’t claim to have seen her at all (Smith 176). The *Venus of Urbino* is appreciated for her sex appeal – what her body does to us and what her nakedness makes us feel. We as a society choose to appreciate women this way. We paint them and love them for their female bodies. We love their receptive, listening eyes gazing back at us, plush lips to fantasize about, soft curves to run our hands over. It is a woman's body and her ability to please and her existence as an object to view and use and abuse that we love.

We are so unwilling to give women names because to give someone a name is to give them personhood, identity, and history. We paint women and title them *Untitled*, because it’s not the context or the history or the inspiration or their story that matters – we want to see women as bodies, not people. Who wants to look at a woman as a person when she could be looked at as less than? When she could simply be a sexual object? When she could be ogled without repercussions because she isn’t whole?

She is an erotic object first, person second.

Paintings like *Alte Frau* are so uncomfortable to look at because we are unaccustomed to seeing women with names and having our erotic gaze denied. Looking at her face – angry, harsh eyes, and small, pursed lips – all of her sexual appeal, all of her sexual power, has been drained. She is no longer simply a body to be viewed, but a person to be considered. And that makes us uncomfortable because we have to understand that women are people with stories and emotions, that they should be considered with the same respect as men, and that they are not just an outlet for sexual desire. So we step away from the discomfort because changing habits is hard, and what motivation do I have to change? So women in art are nameless so that they can be viewed and never considered.

### ***III.***

Agony

Evening, Melancholy I

I Don’t Know Me Like You Do

I Don’t Know Your Name

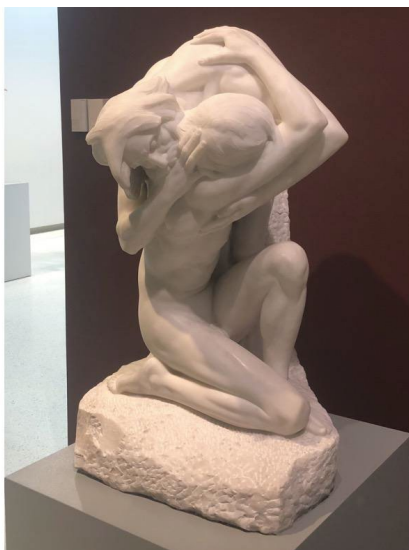
Lady in Black and Rose  
Perks of Being a Wallflower  
Saint Sebastian  
Sleep Apnea  
The Walking Man  
Visions of Gideon

As winter approaches I find comfort in sadness. A sad statement, but anyone who knows, knows that it's easier to fall into a sort of coma when the sun doesn't rise instead of forcing yourself to be happy. And maybe this is a good thing, because there is not only beauty in the sun and warmth and happiness. There is beauty in the dark and cold and sadness, and I am letting myself find it. So I collected my recent favorite works of art – songs, books, sculptures, paintings – that make me feel sad and comforted and familiar and seen.

I sit and listen like *Lady in Black and Rose*. I don't know what I'm feeling, *I Don't Know Your Name*, but then music sets off the sadness – *Agony*, *Sleep Apnea*, *Visions of Gideon* last – and I recognize you as despair. I spend *Evening(s)*, *Melancholy I*, watching my life pass by while I sit and observe, feeling like Charlie, feeling like (*Perks of Being*) *a Wallflower*. And as the winter gets longer and colder and darker I begin to waste away – I am *The Walking Man*, and my soul is crying out like *Saint Sebastian*. This is when I realize that no one will know me better than you do – you know the darkest parts of me, and you know exactly how to bring them out of the depths. *I Don't Know Me Like You Do*, and I'm not sure I want to.

#### IV.

I stood there openly watching them, father and son, in a moment of potent vulnerability and love. They didn't care that I was watching because they didn't know I was watching – they were too wrapped up in one another to glance upwards and see me in a state of crisis, panicking, wondering what it would be like to hold and be held like that. And to love and be loved so dearly.



This is *The Prodigal Son*, sculpted by George Grey Barnard, inspired by a story told in the New Testament and retold countless times through paint and sculpture and art. As the story goes, one of two sons asks for his portion of inheritance from his father, too impatient to wait for his death. His father grants the request. While one son stays home and works under his father, the other son goes abroad, spending all of his money on extravagant and wasteful things, hence the word “prodigal.” He comes back home to his father empty handed,

expecting scorn, feeling unworthy compared to his brother. He comes back to beg to be a servant so that he can live and eat. Instead, upon seeing his son, the father hugs him and immediately brings him back into his home with open arms, forgiving him for his wrongdoings.

It is a story about mistakes and shame and mercy and forgiveness, and it is a sculpture about openness and vulnerability and love.

My father is a gay man. He grew up in a Catholic household, went to Catholic school through high school, and was forced to go to church every Sunday by my Nanny (grandma). My father hasn't spoken about it much, his experience growing up in such an oppressive environment, but I can imagine that he held resentment instead of love and worship for God and His Church. He was preached to every Sunday about love and kindness and acceptance while simultaneously being told that he was a sinner and was going to hell. I think that this is why it took him 36 years to come out, even though he told me that he knew he was gay when he was a toddler. There's something to be said about how the Church breeds fear and repression. Knowing this, it's odd to think about how he asked my mom that my brother and sister go to church when they were born. Why would he risk them suffering through toxic religion as he had? I think that his request had more to do with Nanny than him. She was crazy, a devout Catholic, and I think he was afraid to break away. When my parents separated from the Church, right before I was born, right after my dad came out to my mom, right after they got divorced, my Nanny took my sister away for a couple of hours and secretly had her baptized. I think that this was the breaking point. My father may have taken us to church on the weekends that he had us, even if he felt unwelcome being openly gay, but my Nanny went too far, disrespected both him and my mother, and broke my dad's last ties to the Church. So my mom and dad resolved to never take them back, and to never make me go.

I learned to believe in the universe and the science of creation and was taught my morals by my parents instead of the Bible. And I was okay with this, with being raised atheist, but others were not. In first grade, a group of notorious, bible-thumping, Christian girls came up to a friend and I while we were standing outside of the library. They asked us if we believed in God, we said no. They told us that we were sinners and that we were going to hell. I used to think that it was unprovoked, but now I think it had something to do with the fact that I was completely unashamed of my dad and would speak about gayness often. They were scared of me, and they were trying to scare me, and for a couple of months, it worked. Almost every day I would run around my backyard singing songs to God, hoping that he would forgive me and my sins. In a way I was like the prodigal son, knowing that I had done wrong, committed an ungodly act, and was in need of saving. Like him I was in a vulnerable state, desperate for reassurance, wanting someone to tell me that I would be okay, that I hadn't ruined my life and afterlife with one mistake. Then I began to question why I had to ask for forgiveness in the first place. Why forgiving myself wasn't enough? Why a man I had no connection to was the one to decide if I

went to heaven or hell based on if I believed in Him and prayed to Him? If heaven and hell were even real? So I found comfort again in atheism.

I choose to look at *The Prodigal Son* outside of its religious context, partly because I struggle with a feeling of resentment when I talk about Christianity, and partly because this sculpture isn't changed with its context. It is simply a father loving a son, and I don't need to consider the Bible to understand that.

George Grey Barnard said that "Only through delineation of the nude human form can great emotions be shown. You cannot drape a symbolic figure in an overcoat and expect it to be anything but a marble dummy," (*The Prodigal Son* (Barnard)). I could feel because I could see unobscured arms clinging to each other, heads buried in skin. Instead of looking at this sculpture, I was looking into it, peering into an intimate moment, observing it as if it were happening in real time. This is what peaked my attention, but what kept it was the raw vulnerability and the consuming love in their pose. It was so unlike anything I had ever felt, and I couldn't look away. It was so unfamiliar to me because the son was willing to be vulnerable, and the father loved him unconditionally through it.

The son sits there, knees curled, on the floor, trying to make himself appear smaller because he feels ashamed and unworthy and scared and small. Even with his face tucked into his arms, hiding himself away, I can feel the tears rolling down his cheeks. As he protects himself he also opens himself up, allowing himself to be vulnerable so that his father might understand. And what a feat that is! To recognize his shame and show it so that he can be rid of it. And then you see his father, who could be upset, but is instead so relieved to have his son home, so he tries his best to make him feel loved. He folds himself over his son, protecting him from the harsh reality of the world and his own destructive thoughts. He closes his eyes and cradles his son's head, holding him like he's afraid it's his last chance. I can imagine the father whispering reassurances into his son's ear, helping him fight through his pain, loving him as a parent does.

So often I wish that this were me – that I were the prodigal son and his father was my mother, or my father, or anyone wanting to love me – but the defining moments in my life, the moments that decide how I love and accept love, are the moments where I have felt like the antithesis to this sculpture. Too much time I've spent crying alone, scrunched up in the covers on my bed, desperately needing a hug from my mom, but finding it impossible to go downstairs to find her because the prospect of being vulnerable and feeling loved made me nauseous. One loving touch would send me running, purging the toxic waste that is acceptance. Too many times I've struggled to hug my parents: on my birthday, at my graduation, leaving for college. And though I hug them, I tuck half of me away – the half that matters, the half that makes me human – and choose not to feel. I am not a person embracing a loved one, I am a human with my arms wrapped around another human, mimicking some pose I've seen before but never living it. I

cannot bring myself to show my love as fiercely as the father and son do – one can only hope to be so unafraid.

To love and be vulnerable are learned skills. It took my father 36 years to let himself learn how. I think that it all got to be too much to handle on his own – the fear, the shame, the hiding – and he let himself open his heart to the world and learned how to love and be loved proudly.

I am not as brave as the prodigal son, nor as willing as my father. I can't bring myself to be them. It is simply too hard. My brain is fighting with itself, wanting to give into the need to be held but being repulsed by the action, feeling shame because I ever wanted it. If I can't turn to the people I love the most, who do I turn to? There is no God here to offer me comfort, I don't want there to be. There is only me. I love that I find comfort in myself, that I don't have to turn to anyone else, but there is a thin line between love and hate, and sometimes I hate that I'm this way, that I've forced myself into this position. I often wish that I were the prodigal son, but I am not.

Why does it have to be this hard? Why can't I open up my arms without feeling afraid? Maybe if you open yours first, and you ask to hold me, and you want to love me, I will learn to love you back, just as my father did.