

By Numbers

I was nine when I saw death in purple velvet. It was small enough to be tucked into back pockets with Slobie's white cardboard boxes of candy cigarettes. My parents let me eat them but wouldn't let me smoke them, so I'd suck hard, whittle down edges into sharp javelins, let them snap on my tongue and dissolve like wet chalk. I had told Ian to pick the hamster with one red eye because no one else loved her like we would.

I was thirteen when I saw death in bagpipes. It was unfamiliar faces, dark coats and pitched umbrellas. I was holding the pressure of PopPop's accent in the back of my throat. Aunt Kerry smiled something about looking pretty and I thought about her pool and how she always made dirt for family parties out of crushed Oreos and jelly worms and too much pudding. I gagged. Pudding is for people without teeth. The earth gives us something substantial to chew on.

I was nineteen when I saw death in dimpled cheeks. It was graffitied concrete and town homes on Vandike Street. Kate was too old, but Grace would take me to the horse stables, sit in the shed while the girls smoked in sports bras and cut slashes in their t-shirts. Then it was eight years later, sitting on a dorm bed watching news recordings of her motorcycle marks. I learned how far I could bite my nails down without making them bleed.

I was twenty-one when I saw death in empty bottles. It was quiet. That night I went to a party and drank tequila until I fell asleep on a staircase. A week later my mom asked if I wanted Amu's blender since I'd been drinking a lot of smoothies. The photograph came in the mail two months later with a note scribbled on the back: can't find the other one with Amu and your hamster, hope this is okay.

like perfectionists

the first time you saw it I had
slipped on a patch of ice at the bus
stop & ripped a hole in the knee
of my navy blue track pants. I
remember the way you took
three steps back when you pulled
them off to clean me up & saw
the months of scars before
this. You tried to convince
yourself I would stop & that it
wasn't as serious as you thought
until five years later when I
came running into your bedroom
asking for help because I had
plucked one too many strands &
you were mad until I promised
you that I would fix it & I wanted to
but I really went back to my room
just to pluck more & when you
see me every year you tease the
ends of my hair until it's gone
& I wonder if you will ever realize
that there are some things I
don't know how to fix myself.

Wednesday

Check the light, check the stove, check the oven light under the stove. The stove is off. The stove is off. You can eat now. Two bites of chicken and the stove is on. Check the light, check the stove, check the light under the stove. The stove is off. The stove is off. Eat quicker, bigger bites. Wash the dishes in scalding water. Feel the burning soak through the sponge. The stove is off. Squeeze the suds out onto wetted plate. Feel the heat soak into raw skin, burning heat. Soapy suds. The stove is off. The stove is off. Soap on suds on sponge squeak against the hot plate. Streaks. The dishwasher is dirty. The stove is off. Soap on sponge stroke fork and knife. A knife graded with edges but not sharp enough to puncture or—the dishwasher is dirty. Hot suds on silverware. Check the stove, check the oven. The stove is off. The dishwasher is closed. Check the kitchen light. The light is off and dark enough to puncture.

Under Sheets

I rub a dark gray line of residue off the side of my computer and continue typing thinking, my, how perfect prose poetry looks in a tight little box. Boxed in white out. Can you box in the number of strokes I took to brush my hair this morning? Twenty-three is a lost hour, lost time, a back-to-back pin code in repeated numbers. You said that it was safe to count on numbers. They are kept in line, you know? Unless you get into the other stuff that doesn't make sense—imaginary, real, who knows what is which and which is what I'll tell you what. This box has ends perfect edges perfect corners that keep things separate. I see this box and know what's in it.

I never wrote poetry in boxes until I thought about content. What makes me write in perfect boxes needs perfect boxes. Neat as in cool as in my father's description of my mother on their first date. Slick. Well-groomed and plucked hairs plucked words plucked thoughts smoothed over. Stray punctuation that didn't fit, or I just didn't want there. Impulse. In pulse. Boxed beats kept a tight beatbox we can dance inside the box. Keep in time with a steady beat, dance repeated steps dance. My, how perfect prose poetry looks in a tight little box. Like gaps between words between paragraphs on the page. The page. The page is a box. The prose is a box inside a box. Is my poetry a box inside the prose inside the page? A box in a box in a box. I click send click send click send to get my message out but it's stuck inside my inbox.

Boxes that don't look like boxes. Imaginary boxes blocks of text. There's a box around the text where the text would be if the line hadn't fallen short.

The boy next to me is rotating circles on his chair and tapping his feet and I want

Boxes not circles have a place to hide. Hide this repetition this hunger this beat in a box. Sometimes I do until I forget to comma. What it means to rest. Rest inside a perfect box. Repetition makes me forget to rest, but recollects, convinces, pulsates to the music. I'd say boombox but I worry that dates me. And, my, how perfect prose poetry looks in a tight little box.

Human memory is imperfect so we collect tangible memories and put them in boxes. Memory boxes. Boxes of photographs, of ticket stubs, of postcards. Boxes of words blocked text. See how they bring you back to another time and pull you forward. You are here, your mind is there. It comes back to you. Moves you through space white space page space boxes. Boxes in boxes in boxes.

We cover the strange to forget ourselves. As if my own problems could be tied up and shipped off to someone else. The world would shake the box and find it empty—but even the invisible is aromatic. The room is still blind. It's in the places where things don't fit together neatly that we kick the sheets off.

without handlebars

I felt the taste of you
unblinking
against my fingertips
laughed at the talk that passes
for talk nothing
human is foreign cold toes
on eager calves
the world whirring ticking
faces &
reaching hands

 stale stench of logic
“one of those people”
you said
drew lines along the spine
the body has to hurt
to know it’s living

each coming night obvious
bicycle
I feel the corner
of my mattress cave
in the dark
still pretend to talk
to ghosts & you
behind steering wheels

I’m wide eyes
pushing pedals
& somewhere a clock is ticking