

*Disclaimer: I am not suicidal.*

I want to skydive with no parachute. I want to feel the wind in my hair and the adrenaline rushing through my veins. I want to plummet toward the earth like a meteor and hear my bones shatter as they hit the ground.

I want someone to burn me alive. I want to feel the heat creep up my skin and sear my flesh. I want to feel the smoke invade my lungs and suffocate me as I watch the world melt away. I want my ashes to catch flight in the breeze and travel far away.

I want to drown in the middle of the ocean. I want to feel the water pressure surround my body, squeeze my limbs, and crush the life out of me. I want my body to sink to the bottom of the sea and for fish to feed on my skeleton.

I am terrified of mediocrity, even in my death. I want my death to be extraordinary because dying is an art, like everything else.

I want to be unforgettable. My life is fueled by my need to create. I crave the thrill of creating something nobody has seen or experienced before. A decade from now, I see myself successfully managing projects and producing immersive experiences. People worldwide will find inspiration in my creations and admire my work.

But with each new mistake, my fear of never reaching that dream becomes more of a reality. A bad test score. A wrong note. A missed opportunity. I fall short, and every time I do, I see a future in which my name is forgotten. That scares me more than death ever will.

I want to die in a way so extreme that people will be forced to pay attention. If my actions in life don't make headlines, at least my death will.

My stomach flutters with nostalgia as I step foot into my elementary school library. I still know every shelf and section as if six years had never passed. The pale fluorescent lights cast a ghostly glow over the wooden shelves, and a thin layer of dust covers everything. There is something strange about the one-room library. Something intangible, like a memory of a dream.

I walk, guided by the instinct of my memory, to the second shelf from the door. Arranged on the shelf is a row of ancient-looking novels labeled "fairytale," with a laminated paper sign. Their spines are broken and fragile, and their pages are yellow with age. I had read them each a hundred times, and seeing them now was like reuniting with old friends.

These were the books I would hide under my desk and read during class while the teacher droned on about fractions and division. With them, I dreamed past Miss Anderson, and lessons and windows, to kingdoms, and royalty, and magic. Classroom walls could not contain my imagination. I would run wild through the pages, explore every syllable, and soar across the chapters. My adventures were limitless because I could turn to page one and experience it all again.

I slide my favorite book off the dusty shelf. The cover is plain and teal, except for a gold embellishment on the spine that reads "Stories of Hans Christian Andersen" in elaborate cursive. The cloth bound cover is familiar in my hands, and as I hold the book, I am no longer an exhausted college-bound adult, but a bright-eyed little girl.

I am the girl who spent her time doodling fairies in her notebook and wishing she could fly. A girl who showed off her ability to swing upside-down from the monkey bars to anyone who would pay attention. A girl who loved to play pretend and twirl around in glittery princess gowns.

A tear falls with a gentle tap onto the teal cover, and I squeeze the book tight, hugging it to my chest as if I were cradling my younger self. My heart swells with longing. I want her back. I want her innocence and boundless wonder to stay with me forever, but I return the book to its place on the creaky shelf and turn away. I walk with heaviness toward the door, away from the one-room library and its echoes of childhood.

I feel called to be a gremlin child again: covered in grass stains and grazes, hair unbrushed with dandelions in knots, halfway up a tree and eating an apple around my missing tooth. It is strange how this sort of childhood feels forever—like time stretches further than the horizon line or the lake shore.

Then, suddenly, you're eighteen, and time is out of joint. The world becomes an hourglass. You are left watching sand pile up on the wrong end. You're thinking of how, when you were just a kid, your heartbeat was like a kickdrum at a rock show. Now, it's just a time bomb ticking out. It's sad, and you want to forget about leaving—mostly, you want to forget about saying goodbye.

The ache of eighteen hangs like a cloud in this space full of people you grew up and apart with. A pang sounds in the back of the car with your mother. It echoes in the marks on the wall long outgrown, haunts your last assignment. When packing your life into boxes, that ache plants itself inside the cardboard. It reverberates: *this will not come again.*

I trace my hands on the bricks of this school often, trying to hold onto something flying past. Some days at home in April are like this: the air thin and eager—something in it sad, nostalgic, familiar. It will be May soon, and no one has asked if we are ready.

After doing the math—the number of hours we have together is not so large. Please linger near the door uncomfortably instead of just leaving. Please forget your sweater in my life and come back for it. Please dance under the garden sprinkler with me one last time.

I feel called to be a gremlin child again, covered in bruises and full of sun-warmed mulberries. This is what it means to be unabashedly ugly, to be unashamedly hungry, to be healthy and hearty and lean. This is what it means to feel time stretch forever, only flying when I fall into books. This is what it means to love summer once more, with her insects and sweat.

Life returns to fleeting moments that must be gripped tightly for fear of losing them. For a second or two, you return to the colorful carpet of the kindergarten floor. The edge of childhood: please take my hand, please don't let go.

I sleep coiled, tightly wound. My fists lay shoved beneath pillows, clenched above cotton sheets. I am at war, even in my dreams, lost in the trenches and raining bullets. Yet, no shell finds easy marks. Like the cat, I have nine times to die.

I have burned through four.

My first life, twelve, is taken in the office with a cross above the door. The distant organ notes accompanying the rehearsing choir echo through the sanctuary. His vestment is embroidered with gold and draped over the chair. His fingers are rough and calloused. He quotes scripture.

My second, thirteen, slips through my grasp in a motel on Federal. He is twenty-three, with oil-slick words and grime-caked hands. The dirt trails on my skin, staining in its wake. He has paid the front desk to ignore the cries for help.

I die a third time at fifteen, my life ripped from me by my most trusted friend. He is wearing his father's anger and his mother's entitlement. I am wearing a green sweater, now buried and unworn in my closet. Betrayal was far harder to swallow than violence.

My fourth death, eighteen, was stolen away on March 29th. I have no words for this yet. Ask again in June.

They take me until I no longer exist—a silent murder.

Each time I die, I am a child again: four feet tall and quaking. She is soft and pale, like the belly of a fish exposed to the knife. My heart breaks for that tiny shadow. Still, I find no vengeance for her. She lingers in my chest, praying for the awful things to end. It never would have ended beautifully, but there was sweet solace in an imagined finish line.

That sugared hope catches on my tongue, rots in my teeth. I was a girl trying to gulp down a woman's grief. It clings to my throat like the confessions I do not make. Each word levied sticks to the roof of my mouth, so sickeningly sweet it aches.

I dream of being god, loud enough to reverberate through mountains. Girlhood is so like godhood: a begging to be believed.

When I am afforded the choice, I do not dream of war and gods. I dream of a different universe. My window is open. I am lying on the floor, twelve years old. Nothing bad has happened to me.