

Emilie

PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

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There was a girl I met—the first day of my first year of high school. She drew hearts in my lab notebook. She made it hard to breathe.

I entered into a lesson in permanence with flushed cheeks and fidgety hands; I was an awkward, clumsy thirteen-year-old who got turned around too easily in the hallways.

I knew this girl—at the dawn of fall, silent at my side in the grass. She taught me how to stargaze. I still feel her head on my shoulder.

A strange thing bloomed in my chest, like a flower. I was a vivid, flourishing garden. My hair was growing out, and I was growing into my smile.

I loved this girl—as the colder winds painted winter into the sky. The sun rose and found her a lesson in stillness, in suicide: breathless, silent, leaving me wondering what the sound of her flatline was. Was it a single note, held out in mourning like a strained birdsong? Was it soft, was it shrill? Did it sound like her laugh? Was it cool and clear like her eyes?

Grief, they told me, would be ugly. But grief visited me in the nights and in the mornings, and grief wore her face. Grief had her sparkling smile and rosy lips; grief was pretty like the girl who loved me.

I lay awake a lot after she died.

And for all the talk I heard promising otherwise, I never dreamed. She never came back, like that. Instead, I'd stretch out the nighttime hours conjuring up her ghost myself. I'd turn the picture of her over and over in my head, I'd lay still until the silence turned to radio static, and I could tune it to her laugh. She lived again in the pitch-dark space between myself and the ceiling.

There's an area of about two square feet on the popcorn ceiling of what will shortly come to be known as my childhood room that's reserved for sleeplessness. It's reserved for ghosts.

Sleepless, I pulled her back from the dead to me.

Sleepless, I made her a waking dream.

My life became a dedication.

At fourteen, I decided myself to be a monument.

I was a monument to the things she told me, to the things she taught me, to the things buried somewhere without a gravestone. It struck me like lightning—she was a bright, fleeting thing. There and gone, torn from the world before it got to see her shine the way I had.

At fourteen, I raised the dead. Pen in hand, crouched by the light on my bedside table, I poured the memories from my head as grief stood by with her hands clasped. Word by word I rebuilt her: the way she spoke, the way she moved, the things she thought that died with her. Onto the page spilled a portrait of the girl I still loved—

I was Victor Frankenstein and I was Carmilla's heartsick lover, I was Sappho by her seaside. I was necromancer and voyeur and I was her casket; I became that intimate knowledge of her closed eyes and pearly bones.

And when I started, I couldn't stop.

Stories bloomed inside me, giving new life to those flowers in my chest. A memoir gave way to poems, which gave way to stories and epics and sprawling tales of made-up places and people that always,

somehow, had an element of her. Unable to stop, I wove chronicles of far-off adventures and victories and failures and futures that I found her in again and again. And people wanted to hear them.

Page by page, I became a storyteller that wrote with ink bled from tragedy and changed instead into something I could dedicate to her. Every first chapter, every heading, it all began with her. From the adversity of a freshly tilled grave blossomed something new and vibrant, crackling with electric potential.

Novel after editorial after poem after story, the monument far outgrew her. I wrote day and night; I found expression, I found solace, I found a future for the first time since my hands clasped outside the funeral's doors. It was sunshine after a pouring storm—it was a never-ending search, to create something so unforgettable that she would live forever.

I am no longer a stony monument, a gravestone; the slate sky has been cut with lightning, the spark of stories in me has grown to a blaze. I write, and I write, and I let it become a bonfire. ■