

Creative Nonfiction

Without Mom and Dad

Alex Adler

Bye mom! I'll miss you! Alright, one more hug. Okay that's enough, I think it's time for you to leave. Yes, I'll call you this weekend. Fine, one more hug. What's that? My neighbors are outside? Alright let's all go talk to them for a while. I'm glad you are here to supervise my first impressions. It's a good thing their parents are also here, helping them move in, otherwise this conversation might have lasted less than twenty minutes. Yeah, the weather here is so nice. And of course we have to talk about the view. Okay, can this be over now? Yes, but no. The conversation 'ending' means it is time for the all important exchange of phone numbers. As the four cell phones are passed around I realize that I'm about to be free from this wonderful company forever. Not forever, I suppose. But at least until thanksgiving. I can't wait.

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It was quite a surreal feeling the first time I took a shower in my own apartment. To walk in and see none of the familiar soaps or shampoos my parents used to buy me felt a bit like I was off in some foreign country. Unsure of the water pressure, the angle of the spray, and especially the temperature range, I tentatively turned the knob and began my mental preparations. I tried to hype myself up, telling myself *it's just a shower, you have nothing to fear and you've taken thousands of*

showers in your life, this won't be any different.

As I slid open the glass door and stepped under the soft, soothing downpour, I felt a sort of universal loneliness wash over me. After spending ten minutes in that shower, I realized that I had been alone for (almost) every other shower of my life, but not like this. I felt like Bear Grylls in the wilderness, with no one to turn to but myself. I stepped out and began drying my hair, unaware of the fact that I wasn't nearly as alone as I thought.

I was feeling chipper, freshly cleaned, just about to leave the bathroom when I spotted a fly, landed on the faucet of the sink, staring up at me with compound eyes. Marvin¹ seemed to taunt me, gently wiggling its antennae as if to say *go ahead, try and swat me*. Naive as I was, and without the clairvoyance to realize what a significant part of my life Marvin would become, I made a feeble attempt on his life. Of course he swiftly avoided my swing, taking flight and making a few laps around my head for good measure. Though I failed in my first effort to rid myself of Marvin's presence, I was optimistic that he would soon be gone, so I casually left the bathroom to go about my day.

I think Marvin liked me; at least I can say he put up with me. I showed him the same tolerance for about twelve hours, after which I was pretty much done with his shit. Which is a bit silly, because 'his shit' was

¹ At the time I did not know the fly's name, but some time after our first encounter I decided I should call it Marvin.

usually just him sitting still on a wall while I happened to be in the same room (and happened to be naked?). I decided that I did not like Marvin and wanted him to leave, even though he'd really done nothing wrong. I expected that Marvin, polite as he was, would notice that I didn't like him and leave me out of sympathy, but after a few more days and a few more showers, it was apparent that Marvin wasn't going to leave of his own accord. One day I noticed a pair of flies whizzing by and realized that Marvin was no longer working alone; that was the last straw. Living with one fly was a burden I could bear, at least briefly, but two or more? Don't be ridiculous. I could no longer sit idly by while these insolent insects acted like they owned the place. I decided to launch a household campaign to eradicate the entire bathroom fly population by any means necessary. I would not rest until I had definitive evidence that Marvin and his friend(s?) were gone for good.

The trouble is, killing a fly is a Herculean task. Don't let anyone convince you otherwise. Have you ever watched someone try to kill a fly? Usually a human's first instinct is to swat. Without proper equipment, or a Mr. Miyagi-esque level of focus, a direct strike will often miss as flies can literally see things moving in slow motion.² After failing a swat, being embarrassed by the tiny tactician, a person either a) surrenders unconditionally to the fly's demands, or b) becomes deranged and manic, losing all inhibition and destroying much of the environment around them as they try with increasing effort to take out the clever avian menace.

I found myself more often in the latter camp when dealing with Marvin, unable to contain my rage on the

battlefield. The specific terrain on which we dueled certainly did not help my case: my bathroom takes up forty square feet and is cluttered with all of the usual water closet accoutrements; standing in the center of the room, I couldn't fully extend either of my arms without encountering some sort of collision. I was always swatting at half mast to avoid knocking over a shelf or putting my arm through a mirror, and Marvin and his friend knew it. Eventually the flies seemed to become excited when I entered, as if our great conflict was the highlight of their day. I was far less sportsmanlike, becoming consumed morning noon and night by thoughts of Marvin and his friend and what possible strategy I could conjure that would rid me of these pests permanently.

As the war raged on, Marvin gradually appeared weaker and more tired. I noticed after a week or two both of the flies began to slow down, spending more time sitting in one place than zipping through the air. Looking back, it's likely that at this point they were both growing old; an adult housefly's life expectancy is only somewhere between two weeks and a month³ after emerging from the pupa, so they were certainly past middle age by now.

I first thought that this was an opportunity to finally eliminate the flies once and for all, but I noticed that in their old age they had become significantly less annoying to me. I actually grew to appreciate their companionship now that they weren't flying up in my face all the time. Of course they only flew up in my face when I first attacked them, but that's beside the point. They started to spend a lot of time hanging out in the space between the two halves of the shower's sliding glass door, which was ideal because there was virtually

² Johnston, Ian. "Q. Why Is It so Hard to Swat a Housefly? A. It Sees You Coming in Slow." *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 20 Sept. 2013, www.independent.co.uk/news/science/q-why-it-so-hard-swat-housefly-it-sees-you-coming-slow-motion-8818124.html.

³ Sanchez-Arroyo, Hussein, and John L. Capinera. *House Fly - Musca Domestica Linnaeus*, University of Florida, Aug. 1998, entnemdept.ufl.edu/creatures/urban/flies/house_fly.HTM.

no chance of us coming into contact with each other, but I could still acknowledge them and strike up a conversation on occasion. I finally accepted that Marvin was a part of my life.

The next day I found Marvin lying dead on his back on the countertop.⁴ I should have seen it coming, I should have been happy that he was gone, I shouldn't have cared so much one way or the other about a fly. But seeing Marvin belly up that morning hurt like hell. In that brief moment looking down at him, I saw Marvin for who he truly was: a friend. I had tormented Marvin throughout the prime of his life, and he had always put up with me. I finally understood the reason I resented Marvin so much was because he didn't resent me. For all I know, he loved me. He had been the bigger man, always tolerating my outbursts, and that only made me hate him more. I felt terrible for the way I treated Marvin, and I wished I could make it up to him, but of course it was too late. I picked up his body with a paper towel and threw it away.

When I lived with them, I tormented my parents almost constantly, and they always put up with me. Growing up, there were times I resented them, but they've never resented me. As far as I can tell, they love me. They always tolerated my outbursts, no matter how hard I tried to convince them that I hated them. The shower feels mighty lonely now that the flies are gone. The house feels mighty empty without mom and dad.

⁴ Technically I can't prove that the dead fly was Marvin and not his lifelong companion or some other fly, but I could feel it.

Sea of Heartbreak

Kenlie Rohrer

It was what I titled the gown, with its flowing deep-blue silks. I had discovered it thrown haphazardly over a lime-green children's trash can in a Salvation Army downtown. Must've been used previously as a curtain to cover a window. Now it would cover my body and my shame.

As I raised my hand to grab the dress, I caught a whiff of musk, of man, emanating from my now outstretched palm, lingering towards the gown. It made me think of nights and yesterdays, in which I was certain nobody loved me. They had no idea that the night-black velvets that I was folded within actually gave me comfort, the comfort that hid me. My outstretched palm closed around the fabric, pulled the silks and the memories towards me. As I pulled it up and over my head, the gown caressed me like his hands had, and I let myself revel in it, but only for a moment.

I made my way over to the jewelry rack, littered with falling paper cards stuck through with old metal, 99 cents or less, but I picked a pair worth 50. I would've felt self-conscious, if there had been anybody there but me. I walked in front of a mirror, stifling a grin with the back of my hand, and put the earrings in.

I remembered sunshine, a white light bustling against the back of rough scratchy dorm room curtains. I hadn't slept at all, wedged like a little naked clementine between him and the wall, but somehow it had seemed worth it. I smiled to myself, my eyes closed, a drunk and dreaming girl. *Is this what true love is?* I felt myself wondering. It was, surprisingly, the exact

thing I had been thinking a few short hours earlier.

Whether it was the dead of night or the wee hours of the morning, I could not say for sure, but he was there, and I was rocking back and forth

on the balls of my feet, in the dark, without my clothes and the familiar scent of dread lingering in the air. It was obvious that it was only I that could smell it. He was soft, his words made of light cotton, but there was a part of me that could not trust them.

"I want to," I found myself saying, tears sliding down my cheeks, pooling under my chin. My voice was level, calm, but riddled with pangs of uncertainty and fear. It gave nothing and everything away.

"You don't have to if you don't want to. I won't be upset." He was being understanding, gentle even, his arms tried to pry me apart. I was locked up tight, my arms cracked, a rigid board laid right up against my spine. A straight line, direct, but scared. I knew he was being tender and kind, but the words always got twisted somehow. Lost in translation, or something. The wind through the windows whispered, "He doesn't love you."

I knew it was true and I almost laughed in spite of myself. Angrily, I jabbed away at my steaming tears; incessant leakage! Someone said, "Yeah, let's do it. I'm not scared." "So you're saying yes?" He probed.

"Yes."

I felt as if I had been slapped.

I tried my best but I knew he didn't think I was good enough. And somehow, weirdly, I found myself

not completely depleted by that knowledge. My atoms merged with his atoms, or something godly. An angel, light as a feather, and strangled in phantom rope pearls, a kiss daintily, a hushed word whispered across two lips.

Bites racked up my spine. Bruises and love bloomed.

I am dramatic. He felt none of this, I am sure. I am almost always sure.

You are doing this solely for experience and nothing else played in my head like a lullaby. It lulled me to sleep, my head knocked appropriately on his bare chest. Playing with my hair, drenched in sweetness and tumbling towards sleep, I smiled again. Sometimes I am amazed at how successfully I can lie to myself.

He was tired, but not from lack of sleep. From keeping up the act.

In the morning, I could not help but feel like I was a rabbit ensnared. I wanted to lurch out from under the covers and run for the hills. I wanted to never look back. I wanted to never fall in love. But we still had so long until the night would end. I guess I just wanted him to wake up too. I was tired of being alone.

Twenty minutes later, the alarm went off. We sat up at the same time, awkward and shifty, me shying away from his touch. He got up, searching for his clothes. I was ashamed at how cold I felt without him next to me.

We still couldn't find my missing earring.

"When you find it, you can put it in an envelope and mail it to me," I said, trying to grin. "Okay," he replied.

I wonder if he knew I was joking. *Or you could give it to me. And then you would see me again.*

He said he prides himself on being honest, but I had the strangest feeling he was lying to me the whole time.

He stopped his wobbly truck at the curb. He kissed me on the cheek. A nice gesture, I thought. I got out, swaying slightly.

"Thank you for playing pretend with me," I said.

"Goodbye," he said.

He never found my earring, and I never saw him again.

Out the Kitchen Window

Charlotte Whitney

“So I asked my mother: ‘What would have happened if I had been two or three years older?’” My grandfather pauses, then continues: “She responded ‘well, then your father would have sent you into the total war.’” It’s a cold day in January and I’m sitting at my desk, interviewing my grandfather for a paper on Nazi Germany. I have so many questions, but luckily, he has answers.

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Unbridled fascination with political ideology is a defining characteristic of the Middelmann family. Wolf and Hanna Middelmann, two Germans who grew up under Hitler’s National Socialism and emerged as Social Democrats, have been major influences on those around them in more ways than one: not only has their activism brought aid and attention to underserved Holocaust survivors in the Baltic, their unapologetic dedication to political education has been paramount to my own political growth. As a dual-citizen coming of age in Donald Trump’s America, I’ve observed the wide spectrum of political ideology that is all around me, and my search to find my place within it has been characterized by an exploration into the past and its influence on the present, from the prevalence of extreme ideologies and their opposition to the enduring employment of ideology to define the undefinable.

Francois Facchini, Professor of Economics at

the University of the Sorbonne, defines ideology as “a system for justifying the way the world is and/or should be” (Facchini 590). For humans who are constantly left without answers and seek to create their own, adherence to ideology offers simple solutions to complex problems. When faced with unrest, fear, and confusion, the weighted blanket of ideology comforts the individual. While extreme examples exist, ideology doesn’t necessarily imply extremism: religious belief, political alignment, and vegetarianism are all examples of systems chosen by individuals that drive the way they interact with the world.

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I sit up in my chair. “I know people aren’t stupid. They don’t just choose an ideology because it’s there. But I seriously can’t imagine being swayed by propaganda to that degree.”

“You have to understand, it’s not about the propaganda. It’s about the people it’s aimed at, it’s about fear. Fear, confusion, anger. Those are the weapons of indoctrination, and Hitler had them in his arsenal.”

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In a dying Weimar Republic that was overrun with economic and political strife, tension and uncontrolled fear was rampant and manifested itself in political riots

and lawlessness. Extreme ideologies such as fascism and National Socialism feed on fear, telling those in distress exactly why they're upset and blaming a specific population of people for their problems. Europe's history of antisemitism provided Hitler with an obvious scapegoat that the general public wouldn't question: the European Jewish population. What ensued were efficient propaganda campaigns that disseminated absolute morals: Riefenstahl's *Olympia* bombarded audiences with images of the ideal Aryan physique and emphasized German supremacy, Harlan's *Jew Süss* disseminated shamelessly disgusting antisemitism, Steinhoff's *Hitler Youth Quex* communicated to German youth that communism was evil and that martyrdom in the name of Hitler was the highest possible honor to achieve.

These tactics worked. Alongside propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels and education minister Bernhard Rust, Adolf Hitler created with his Hitler Youth an army of boys who were ardently in favor of National Socialism and were willing to die to protect it—even if they had no idea what that meant. In *JoJo Rabbit*, the titular character (whose dedication to National Socialist ideology is personified by his imaginary friend, Adolf) embodies every quality expected of him by the Führer, and he asserts it unapologetically in a speech to Elsa, the Jewish girl hidden in his house: “I am born of Aryan ancestry. My blood is the color of a pure, red rose...” (Waititi 00:38:35).

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“So what caused people to change? Like...you don't just wake up one day and say: ‘I've decided not to be a Nazi anymore.’”

“What caused a whole nation to change their minds? I don't know if anything did. Hitler died, the Allies won. But that didn't necessarily cause people to change their ideology. They didn't automatically stop

believing in National Socialism just because their leader was dead. My own father continued to spread Nazi messages in his internment camp—it didn't matter that the war was over.”

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Ideology is part of a causal system, where looping effects create delusions which form a dependence on ideology, which in turn fosters more delusion (Facchini 590). Facchini interprets the processes that drive the abandonment of ideology as a feedback model with quasi-economic processes that drive change. A person believes one thing, they receive information that contradicts it, causing cognitive dissonance and, thus, a crisis of thought, the response to which being a shift in ideology (Facchini 591). This crisis of thought is governed by a cost-benefit analysis: in weighing options A and B (whether to continue adhering to an ideology or to abandon it) an individual indexes the benefits of each option and chooses one over the other based on how costly it would be to defend either choice (Facchini 595).

In *JoJo Rabbit*, our protagonist performs such a cost-benefit analysis, as represented by his growing distrust of Adolf, who becomes meaner and more terrifying as JoJo weighs his choices. JoJo's blossoming friendship with Elsa and the obvious fact that the Nazis are going to lose the war are his crisis of thought. He chooses option B—abandoning his current ideology—and acts accordingly: JoJo kicks a frenzied Adolf out of his kitchen window with an emphatic “Fuck off, Hitler.” (Waititi 01:39:50).

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In a more contemporary display of an abandonment of extreme ideology, Megan Phelps Roper, an ex-member of the notoriously extremist Westboro Baptist Church, opens up to reporter Adrian Chen about the events

that drove her break from the church. Having been instituted as the WBC's social media contact, Roper spent years tweeting inflammatory comments she knew would publicize the Church's message, which resulted in her heavy involvement in internet discourse with those who challenged her.

One such challenger, a Jewish Web-developer named David Abitbol, became a fixture in Megan's life: they spoke every day, maintaining a relationship that was rooted in religious animosity but was slowly turning into a real friendship. Megan's friendship with Abitbol is what set the scene for her moment of cognitive dissonance: he posed a question about a contradiction within WBC's doctrine regarding the "sin of homosexuality," a question which would be the first domino in dismantling Megan's trust in the ideological system she had grown up in. All of a sudden, she began the process of questioning everything she thought she believed, resulting in her and her sister Grace's departure from the church roughly three years later, punctuated with a final message:

"Until now, our names have been synonymous with 'God Hates Fags.'

What we can do is try to find a better way to live from here on" (Chen 14).

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"I guess the reason I'm so concerned about all of this is rooted in fear. I genuinely believe that all it will take is one political incident to set America on fire. And I'm scared, because how can I possibly navigate that?"

"Don't let fear govern your actions—that's how regimes win. Instead of being afraid of what the other side has the potential to do, focus on cementing your own side. What do you believe? What ideology will you follow? Figure that out, and you'll have the support you'll need to navigate the world, if America is really going to burn, as you say it will."

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On May 25, 2020, when a Black man named George Floyd was killed by two Minneapolis police officers, a shock wave ran through the nation. That is to say, a shock wave ran through white Americans—BIPOC had known about the pervasiveness of police brutality in the United States long before then. The ensuing protests that broke out in all 50 states, manifestations of a populace's exhaustion, fear, and anger, garnered international attention (Kornfield 1). In a complex melee of clashing political ideologies, everyone had something to say about the protests: from centrist liberals who repudiated violent protest, to passionate activists (with varying affiliations) who were split in their use or condemnation of violent action, to many conservatives and the alt-right who condemned every protester, peaceful or not, as radical hooligans, hell-bent on destroying America.

Amidst a barrage of Instagram infographics about social justice and photos of crowds of teargassed protesters, I did not know what my place was in an issue I was trying my best to understand, that everyone seemed to have a different opinion on. At that point, I was identifying myself as moderate liberal—a decision I had made on the fly in my senior year politics class so that I wouldn't sound too radical to my classmates. This chosen ideology made me reluctant to endorse any direct action, opting instead to take a more moderate path of educating myself and donating to disparate causes. Five months later, this would play out differently.

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"This may sound insensitive. But, like, how come you're such a liberal? I feel like you're part of *the* key demographic for indoctrination in the 1930s—how do you possibly escape that?"

"I don't really have an answer for you. I think

I just got lucky—there were some teachers I had who genuinely cared about my learning. I felt I could trust them even amidst all the brainwashing. Going to college, learning from adults who weren't my parents, that was important. Even if there had been a sliver of Nazi ideology lying dormant in my brain, that was all wiped out by becoming educated."

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In describing antifascism, historian Mark Bray uses a number of specified terms, referring to it as "a method of politics," "a locus of individual and group self-identification," and "a transnational movement" (Bray xiv). Antifascism, and its organized form Antifa, has been twisted by those most threatened by it as an attempt to destroy America and invoked to delegitimize less radical movements such as Black Lives Matter (Mogelson 5). Valid criticisms of antifascist groups exist: especially recently, many white activists have needlessly incited violence and twisted the goals of BIPOC-led organizations to meet their own anarchist urges, causing any social movement to be overshadowed by white, militant antifascism (Mogelson 5). Indictments of antifascists as terrorists, however, are decidedly more inaccurate: to date, there has only been one death caused by a self-proclaimed antifascist, in contrast to the more than 320 deaths caused by right-wing extremists in the past century (Mogelson 1).

The above description is not my endorsement of antifascism as my chosen political ideology, the definitive answer I have chosen to give the questions that drive most of my thought processes. Rather, it represents the event that shaped my own moment of cognitive dissonance, that influenced my own cost-benefit analysis of my chosen ideology. Having started my political science degree and studying Nazi propaganda films, all the while living through one of the most polarized American elections to date, the scene was set for my inevitable questioning of ideology.

It was the discussion of fascism and antifascism I had with my German film professor that served as an inciting incident in my ideological journey. Closely following the political paralysis of the summer, I felt all of a sudden like I had been provided with concepts that verbalized the way I felt about my society better than the label I had arbitrarily given myself as a teenager. Although I knew that I wouldn't find the answers immediately, or even all in one place, I felt mobilized to begin a shift in a different direction, from a moderate ideology to one that I hadn't (and still haven't) found the words for, but one that would be rooted in the empathy and passion I feel should govern political behavior.

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"What if I choose wrong, what if that puts me in danger?"

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My grandfather doesn't have an answer to this one. It's been almost a year since his passing, and I still can't help but look to him to help me navigate the terrifying world I live in. It frustrates me to no end that I can't just turn on Skype when I have a question, can't send him a letter when I'm confused. So I make up his answers in my head, a little pseudo-ideology of my own, my system for justifying the way the world is or should be.

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Dysphoria

Rita DiSibio

Language is a funny thing, you know? Different “conglomerations,” I like to say, of spaces and letters mashed together to indicate what’s this and what’s that.

I wonder if all the people squished together on the bus this morning are a language. What would it sound like? Would it be nice? Or would it sound, I don’t know, German?

I laugh as I step to the ground, imagining myself as a letter breaking free and floating away in the wind.

Or maybe I am a space.

What would I be a space for? Or for whom? And what kind of space? An apologetic one, probably. I feel like I always hear people say “take up space!” but really, they mean “you may only take up space if you fit into my picture perfect ideal of humanity.”

Sometimes these combinations of spaces and letters, these “words,” have what I call hard meanings. They mean exactly what they say they mean, what they are told they mean: chest, t-shirt, hair, etc. I also have what I call soft meanings. These are the words pulsing with subtext, the words meaning more than what’s been given to them: alive, happy, pain, etc.

And sometimes, actually sometimes more often than not, I find myself realizing it’s rare to find a truly hard word that isn’t secretly soft in some context or other. And I think sometimes words are taught disguised to us, as if learning the true softness of the word will somehow break the fabric of society.

While I walk to class after stepping off the bus this

morning, I am pleasantly surprised by an image. No, not an image. Reflection. I am pleasantly surprised by a reflection I see in the window of some science building I never cared to learn the name of.

I am distracted by the way his faded orange t-shirt accentuated the flatness of his chest, the way the bottom of his boxers pushed against the blue of his jeans. I like the way his backwards baseball cap hid his unwashed hair.

Three letters popped into my head:

B O Y.

See this, this is why language is a funny thing. Because in the dictionary, reflection just means an image seen in a mirror or a shiny surface. But it’s more than that. It’s a feeling, a memory that isn’t a memory. It’s reaching out into the darkness and finding a heart I forgot is mine beating *home home home*.

In the dictionary, hair just means any of the fine threadlike strands growing from the skin of humans and other animals, but this definition doesn’t capture the euphoria of my first hair cut, the euphoria of actually being able to wear a hat backwards.

You know that feeling of running down a hill in the middle of summer, wind in your face, blue skies and green fields forever? Yeah. Imagine getting that feeling from a backwards baseball cap. The dictionary could never capture that. But that doesn’t make it less real.

Right?

I sit down in my seat after walking to class after

stepping off the bus that morning and I am late. I can feel everyone's eyes on me, burning through me like they're trying to pry me open so all of my secrets fall out. I try to ignore all of it by focusing on the blank page of not-yet written notes in front of me.

But sometimes, God, sometimes, when I try really hard to focus, my thoughts get really loud, and I can't quite hear the sounds of the real world around me. The teacher asks a question, and I am dreaming about the boy in the science building window. But the teacher is asking me a question, and the moment of euphoria turns sour, shocking me into sticky sleep paralysis. I watch someone else answer for me and I am assaulted by a different three lettered word:

S H E.

I know that "she" is pronounced like the quieting of a room, but all I can hear are alarm bells ringing in my ears SHE screaming SHE red lights SHE I couldn't think SHE I can't think SHE is it hot in here SHE is it a lie SHE am I real SHE how do I get out of my skin SHE I hate this body SHE I can't see SHE I can't move SHE no no no no no SHE I'm not SHE I don't pass SHE I can't pass SHE I can't think I can't think I can't think

Am I breathing?

A far away voice that doesn't seem like mine asks my body to smile and nod. Pretend you can hear, pretend you are there and maybe they won't notice.

But they don't notice. That's the problem.

I smile.