

You were right: I kinda always wanted to see you get hurt, that's true, but I never wanted you to be in actual pain, real pain. I know how contradictory that sounds. You're probably already upset reading this, but please. Please hear me out. Even though I don't deserve it, peacing out the way I did. Explaining my reaction that day isn't easy. The cop out answer would be to say I panicked. I could also claim it was sadism, at least it's a reason, but if I'm being honest it wasn't that either. I didn't enjoy your sudden agony. Sclera injuries don't amuse me. I don't know. I understand if you hate this pussyfooting—even I hate it. I'm off to a bad start, aren't I? Please don't stop reading. Keep reading, baby. Mostly this will be about you, a topic I know you're way into.

I'm not sure how to begin accounting for myself, so let me really start with the start of us. Mutual attendance of Shakespeare in the park doesn't qualify as a meet cute in my book—not quirky enough. Meeting at a public event, bonding over mutual interest, that's like a meet typical.

There were a million people there, lockdown desperate for theater. I immediately pegged you as an intense and not-that-smart butch—unfortunately, my type. You were perched behind me at a social distance, which was close enough for me to overhear you whistling “Easy Street” (whistling is an awful habit by the way).

I spotted the tune right away, you know how much I love musicals. I don't think you saw me check you out. Let me tell you, I went weak and heated with immediate attraction. I acted put off when you interrupted me, but on the inside I appreciated it. I was sick of bitching to my friend about forgetting a denim jacket at an awkward one night stand's apartment. You must have been listening, because you called out *hey* and offered me the black one you had on, saying it was no big deal, it was stolen from Target, and you were feeling too warm anyway. Downplaying your generosity impressed me. When you introduced yourself as Phebs, I assumed your legal name's Phoebe. Forgot to compliment your mask so I'll do that now: that was a fun mask you had on, the one with the airbrush style cartoon of an oversize, warty nose. Relatively safe in the outdoors, the goofy image sagged over your throat. I eyed your beverage, a clear liquid in an open mason jar, garnished with green sticks of mint, and I presumed you, too, enjoyed a discreet cocktail. Did you notice my drink? Greyhound in my teal water bottle.

I was tired that day, that's why I pretty quickly brought up insomnia once we got to chatting after the show, and you could tell—couldn't you?—how well I thought we hit it off. I

shared the evolution of my sleep problem: out-of-body experiences dating back to childhood. In the moment, I was trapped in drunk babbling. I wasn't able to explain what my insomnia is really like. I want to detail here how it truly feels.

My insomnia used to be different. Waiting for slumber to take my consciousness, I would float to the ceiling. It would be like riding a waterslide except upwards. Then I'd look down on a body that was almost myself, and from this vantage point I looked much different than I did in my reflection or in a picture—emptier, soulless. Somewhere around my teenage years, the direction of my out-of-body experiences reversed: instead of floating, my consciousness burrowed, and I sank within with that same waterslide sensation, heavy blackness layered by distracting waves of a crimson vein pattern. You related, complaining of falling asleep against your thoughts, which gravitated toward how unreally fleeting existence is, a kind of terror of self-awareness where you could feel yourself vanishing. I bet you're bothered by my paraphrase. Like me, you struggled through booze to articulate yourself, and I loved the way you slipped on your words. I loved your insomnia even more, a link to hold us.

You were with a friend, who side-eyed me some. You mentioned residing in a group setting, claiming it cured your insomnia, and, crushing, I acted more intrigued and enthused by your living situation than I actually was. We agreed to meet up a week later. You requested a park date, explaining you generally avoided bars and restaurants even before the pandemic undid easy germier fraternizing. You didn't sound snooty when you said this; tone perfectly neutral.

Our first date was on the Mississippi River, east bank, distressingly close to the university but thankfully in the summertime so there weren't that many students crowding. There was a dock nearby and most folk were on the water, boating, not on land with us. Too energetic, you climbed a maple tree right after our greeting embrace, showing off pullups on a sturdy branch. I'm pretty sure you overlooked my gaga expression. Topped off your workout by skipping stones across the river, obsessively determined to achieve more than three hops, but I forced you to stop after one of your skips ended up hitting a canoer's arm, who softly went *ow* and shot us a death stare. You didn't apologize, which was super attractive. I think you could tell I was more turned on than embarrassed, even though I acted embarrassed. We soon made out on a bench, in full view of the various rowers gliding by.

At the sundown close of our perfect date, under a violet sky crouching into rose and orange, you explained you needed to return home sans me, which was a disappointment. Our touch was so electric I assumed we were heading into a full night. You said you wanted me to meet your people before we fully lesbian fucked. You waffled on a proper label for your cohabitators. Family, crew, or troupe, you couldn't say. Very annoying, but, like all of your annoying qualities, it transcended irritation into affection. Despite myself, I fancied your unnecessary inscrutability.

A lot of me hoped you wouldn't reach out again. I resented my intensity of feeling, the way it slit from me my comfy usual. I loved you disruptively and I hated it.

I didn't like the way you said goodbye either. Brb, it sounded silly. I later asked why you often dropped that outdated chat room lingo instead of saying something normal. You said you wanted to keep the term in use because it was fading, giving me this spiel about how the youth of today usually don't know what brb means, because the acronym no longer has purpose: texting, always ongoing, always in suspension, instant chat rooms we never exit, no need to say we'll be right back from a place we never leave. So people like you, corrupted by nostalgia, try to chip it into real life. I think it's really silly honestly. You should stop saying brb.

Our second date was an unannounced initiation with your people/crew/troupe. I don't know why you couldn't, or didn't, land on a single term for the group. Once I was in it I almost always heard it referred to as a troupe by everyone else, a fitting label for the theater kid thing it was, which was why it ended up appealing to me. My favorite teenage memories involve my first show, growing an enchanted castle for my high school's *Beauty and the Beast*. I drove this bi girl crazy because she thought I looked hot holding tools and we'd sneak experimental hickeys and horny tight cuddles in the control booth. I was a staunch techie in those days. With that kind of action who needs acting? Some techies aspired to go on stage but never me. Your troupe introduced me to my performative side. I should say our troupe, since I ended up living with you all for months. But it always felt like it was more yours than mine. I was somewhat apart.

Lately, I've been returning to the commons on my restless nights, when insomnia reduces my sleep to frayed snatches, vivifying my anxiety dreams. The commons comes back to me, a low-ceilinged room that felt somehow more open than any other room I've ever been in,

probably because of the big windows. I can recall the itchy fog of shed cat hair graying over the decrepitly fuzzy hardwood floors. Woodsy body odors and astringent cat litter were all I smelled there, and I can smell it still. I stand again at the shiny mahogany table. There's the large jeweled glass bowl of fruit, and I'm sorting through mostly squishy plums and apples. Living off fruit, peanut butter, and water drunk from foggy glasses, practically fasting. I see familiar people sitting sprawled on the crusty paisley rug or one of the air mattresses, thick streams of weed smoke rising from their mouths like cotton stuffing pulled out of puppets. Familiar people napping. Familiar people fucking. Cats indifferently roaming among our reposed forms as if we were the ruins of a lost, unknowable civilization. Crayoning over the walls with song lyric brainstorm. Profusely reproducing spider plants hovering everywhere, suspended in the dandruff-softened sunlight. I feel more familiar with the commons than I do with my current apartment. The commons is more of a home.

I couldn't (and can't) peacefully slot myself into society, certainly not in our miserable city. Retreat craved, and you were there with an ideal escape. You were there with your troupe, and all the thought padding it provided. A blissful slice of isolation in ignorance, or intentional obliviousness.

On my first night there, though, I wasn't impressed. Never would have predicted my hesitant residence. You were amped for my introductory visit, but I wasn't into it from the get go. I didn't enjoy knowing so little of what we'd be doing and who these people were. For me, that was a tense ride to uptown, doubting if it was even wise to enter a group home, comforted coldly by the early summer's covid ebb and the widespread, infectious vaccine chutzpah.

Stepping into the unconditioned warmth of the humid old house, I was most struck by the absence of seating and grotty abundance of stains and dust. You met me at the door after I texted, walking me through to the backyard pollinator garden where we met about a dozen messy queers. Drinking beers in the purple echinacea and pink bleeding hearts, everyone tossed me friendly welcomes, merrily overstuffing my brain with names, many of them novel. Close behind the colorful blossoms, a pale lavender dresser was planted. The furniture had been converted into a beehive weeks earlier. It bombinated like a demon hum, and a dark, drooping monster tongue of commuting bees clumped at an opening in the bottom.

Following your lead, I uncertainly joined the circle of people lounged on the grass. Swamped with questions, I didn't get a chance to pose a few of my own, like *who owns the place?*

or *how did you all end up together?* or *what do you guys do all the time?* Instead, I divulged stuff like whether or not I was close with my bio family (no), whether or not I believed in ghosts (no), whether or not I was maimed or arrested during the protests (no), and my job (middle school substitute). I was disarmed by the hot interest in my work. “Wow,” I remember some zonked out gay guy gravely saying, “I bet you’ve seen some real messed up shit.” Asked if I ever needed to break up a fight, I shrugged out a “sometimes.”

All I got to really inquire about was the beehive, a question meant for you but intercepted by a blue-mulleted queer who went by Ody (short for Odious). They told me some woo woo which I met with polite, faked consideration. I never believed in whatever worship the troupe thought it achieved with the bees. Ody explained how everyday everyone drank from the same bowl of sugar syrup that would feed the hive, webbing the group with the pollinator collective. I thought skepticism oozed through my reply, which was something like a dry “wow.”

You seemed pleased by my response. You thought I was sincere, didn’t you? I guess to achieve someone’s love, you need to be able to trick them.

“We rehearse out here so the hive can see our show.” Ody told me. “It may sound crazy but I swear they buzz louder if we do well.”

Ody knew it was crazy, I honestly don’t think they believed in it themselves. “Your show?” I asked.

“That’s right.” They said. “We’re a stage instead of a state. We’re done identifying with the ugly fiction that is America.”

Breezing through this idea of statelessness, Ody synopsisized the pirate musical the troupe was workshoping together. Plot specifics sparse, Ody cataloged various pirate characters and the central thematic concern of statelessness.

I hate to say it, but the idea of creating a musical did appeal to the moribund writerly ambitions of my youth. And I was genuinely interested in the historical context inspiring your troupe’s show. I hadn’t known pirates are known to have staged court parodies to entertain themselves on the high seas, basing these improvised satires on actual trials they endured while detained.

That chipper twink named Dex wanted to kick off the rehearsal by practicing his big song, and he was treated with unanimous agreement. Throughout the performance, we each glanced at each other for reaction checks. You laughed along with everyone else at the song’s

jokes, but it wasn't my fashion of humor. The troupe hadn't grown on me, or rather I hadn't yet grown into it. I noted you noted my quiet with disquietude.

Of course I ended up hearing this song many times: all those rehearsals. I recall the lyrics, and I'll transcribe them to help finetune my memory into definition. It's obvious, isn't it: this letter is as much for me and my memories as it is for you. I want to laminate our summer.

Dex played the pirate playing the prosecution. This character, like Dex, was a masochist. He performs this song as an interruptive aside to his graphic opening argument monologue, wherein he details the brutal murder maybe committed by the defendant, your character, Dagger (I find it interesting that in the show's narrative framing device, Dagger was the only pirate playing herself in the mock court).

Increasingly overwhelmed and horny with his own lurid descriptions, the "prosecutor" sings, mugging to the crowd--

Some people are killed in a jealous fit.  
They're caught in bed with their throats slit  
...how much luckier can you get?

I can picture it so clearly.  
Someone who cares so dearly,  
That he knows my routines, when I go where,  
And he catches me unaware--ah, I'm, there!  
In his grip unrelenting  
It's no fun consenting.  
I'm taken, strangled, stabbed, it's fine!  
Because he's my killer, he's all mine,  
And I'm all his, yes entirely his.  
It may sound crazy, but that's what love is...

But nobody thinks of me like that,  
Nobody cares enough.  
Nobody wants to murder me,

Oh god I got it rough.  
I try to be irresistible,  
I try to be irritating;  
I'm stuck here baiting, I'm sick of waiting--  
I'm going for fatal, I'm only fistable!  
Nobody wants to murder me...  
And god I want it rough!

Suddenly, he snaps out of his aside and again addresses the imaginary jury with his opening argument, flustered in an overacted hot flash. But in pretty much no time he's back in a reverie, except playing it more bored this time. Starting off more downtempo glum than he was in the last verse, he sings--

Most people are killed bit by gradual bit,  
They spend their whole lives...lying around...waiting for it.  
How much drearier can it get?

I can picture it so clearly,  
The vision is always near me:  
On and on, the boredom persists.  
I simply go on, like nothing exists.  
And when I die, as die I must,  
It won't be much, I'm doomed to a bust.  
Slow painful fade into the void  
Basic, awful, see why I'm annoyed?  
My only escape is my homicide.  
Can't do it myself, I've no dom inside.  
I need someone else to complete this task.  
Put me out brutally is all I ask.

But nobody thinks of me like that,

Nobody cares enough.  
Nobody wants to murder me,  
Oh god I got it rough!  
I try to irresistible, I try to be irritating:  
Everyone's dating, innocent mating.  
You want my love? Make me less existable!  
Nobody wants to murder meeeeeeeeeee  
And god! I want it rough!

Nicely sung, sure, but I couldn't shake an animal cringe reaction. Vimless, I tapped my claps into the group's applause. I think by that point you finally sussed how unimpressed I was. Walking me out, you didn't ask me what I thought about the commons. You seemed afraid to broach the topic. Rightly so.

I should have quit your life for good then. There were a million times I should have quit your life. I wish I didn't keep falling in love with you. The sharper my love became, the more I wanted our unsure union to end. No matter how much I wanted it, I couldn't will into existence a clean finality, the tidy safety of a resolution. Pure addiction, my need for messy, exciting continuance. There were times I believed death, yours or mine, was my only possible way out.

You lobbed a lot of accusations at me during our final tiff on that cursed morning, throwing around words like jealousy and possessiveness. All I did was calmly ask if Slime spoke truthfully when she said you promised her the top slot in your affections, a kind of life partner. You thought me jealous? Really? After all the orgies we participated in together, after how generous we both were with our touch, frequently in each other's presence. I deserved better than that. What bothered me was the itchy web of competition you imposed on me, not jealousy.

I still don't believe you. You like favoritism, live for the idealization. Like your character, Dagger, you concealed your appetite for glory in a recalcitrant toughguy terseness. A central idea in your character's musical number, which I first witnessed a week into my stay in the



commons. In a blink of a month later, I was included in the song, cast as the pirate playing a defense witness who's also your lover, one third of the backup singers.

First time I saw your performance, you were so wrapped up in your character you overlooked my fawns. You glared and swaggered before the troupe assembled in the garden, going for a grand character entrance. You sang--

People say I'm intense to be around.  
Yeah they say my defenses are never down.  
Careful what you say or you may end up drowned.  
Don't ask me to smile like I'm your damn clown.  
People say they see murder in my eyes.  
When I kill no one ever acts surprised.  
And sure I've knived about a dozen guys.  
Adored by some, but mostly I'm despised--

So I don't want people looking at me.  
All you plebs quit your looking at me.  
I won't ask please just don't look at me.  
Look up to me, hook up with me,  
But keep the eyes off of me.

Whoa-oh-ohhhhh, oh oh oh oh oh  
Ohhhhhhh  
Don't look at me!

We later decided here's where the backup singers begin: me, Slime, and another crush of yours (weird I forget their name, because I think we even flirted a little). The three of us accentuated our bit with little hand dances.

No no no, don't look at our queen.  
No no no, she don't wanna be seen.

Look in the middle distance y'know vaguely in between.  
Even during her pissed rants being seen ain't her scene.

We struggled to conceive of a second verse, chewing through unsatisfying lines and rhymes. My heart wasn't in it. You wanted more emphasis on your character's wide sexual activity. Songless myself, I couldn't force myself to care too much about your own number. If I was jealous of anything, it was the fact you had a song. Everyone's character and song was designed to hold their barest essence of self, and there I was unable to sketch a pirate alter ego. I wanted myself condensed into a song, like you and Dex and most of the rest.

The musical was our ship, a vessel meant for holding us, our identities, but it was never meant to reach the destination of completion. That's why there was no real plot to finish off. Acting the pirate, that's all we were doing, and I couldn't even do that all the way.

I can't believe I was there for months, forgoing my typical summer session jobs, the rent for my empty apartment eating through my checking account. I was stuck in a dazzle of time: days were never day length, if that makes sense. Dreams feel more chronological than whatever that was. No wi-fi, no television. We consumed a lot of books, which felt old-timey. Performed so many poems to each other I forget most of them. The only one I remember is the one where experiencing death is compared to a chlorine tablet. Poets are out here writing about the experiential instant of death a lot more often than the primary moment of being born. Maybe because it's something to look forward to. I could tell poetry isn't your thing. You were humoring me, trying to convince yourself your recitations improved your acting skills. Like a good actor, you prefer a skim to a ponder.

You know what really sold me on the commons? It was that slimemold activity we did on my second visit. I can't overstate the invigoration of inhabiting the role of slimemold, a theatrical exercise in group unity led with delight by Slime. She gushed about the ambiguous classification for slimemold, somewhere between a fungus and an animal. Read all about it in one of her several books on mushrooms. To the human eye, slimemold is immobile, like a garden variety mold, but, incrementally, it pulses. Each component of the slimemold

synchronizes its beat and the whole moldy blotch is able to inch directionally, gravitating toward dank spaces where it feeds off moisture.

Organizing ourselves like a slimemold, we attempted to lose our bodily selves. We tried to move together in the fullest definition of together, without thought for how our movements originated. Without consciously copying. And eventually, briefly, we did it. We moved about the commons as one, limbs wriggling dance-like and similar. We traveled through the kitchen and through the pollination garden, then back into the open parlor of the commons. I wish I could cram it into words. I want to call it magic, but magic feels like a mercantile tool, a word to sell things. Transcendent doesn't fit either, that one's even worse than magic.

I guess I can call it experience. It felt like my first time utterly experiencing the world, ego gone and filters thinned to nothing. There's no explaining experience in truth. Experiencing reality like a slimemold inspired me to ditch my single life, attaching myself to you and the group even though I didn't purely believe in all the troupe's...can I call it practices?

Like, I never cozied up to the morning communion, everyone sipping from the same big bowl of sugar syrup that nourished the beehive. Every sip from me was self-conscious. I did it because residing in the house was conditional on this shared act, but I pretended belief with an itchy heartbeat, feeling culty.

Unlike the most publicized cults, the troupe didn't implode from hierarchical shenanigans, no dramatic swindling or mass violence. It was drama killed the beast. An inevitable conclusion with the tangle of hookups going on: your spats with me coalesced with other spats and we achieved a critical mass of spats.

Upset by the fallout of a lover's quarrel, Dex gave everyone the boot. It turned out he wasn't the hapless masochist his pirate song made him out to be: he was the closest we had to a leader. Apparently, it was him who owned the house, an inheritance. Did you ever even catch that? He did the lion's share of work constructing the beehive, and it was him who handled most chores, like cleaning out the litter boxes and snaking out the nimiety of slimy hair choking up the second floor bathroom sink--at least according to his squeaky meltdown rant he delivered to those of us who lingered (of course by that time you had been carted away in the

ambulance). He may have been exaggerating his work. I never noticed him do all that much, but I guess I wasn't paying attention. Not paying attention was the point of being there.

Do you disagree with calling the troupe a cult? I think cult is universal to anyone well enough off. To me, a cult is any shared perception that fudges logic to construct belonging, arranging our chaotic, selfish psyches into a tolerable shared purpose. Societies run on cults. The more eccentric or gruesome cults end up getting called out, but the rest of them snugly vanish into the social fabric.

We were burrowing into the illusion of a social alternative, none of us calling out the uptownness of it all. None of us pointing out we were dominantly white. Not all of us were white white, like Slime was Asian, but none of us were black. In our racial insularity, we lived the values of segregation. White liberals in a city where white liberalism is represented by a police state internationally infamous for its brutal and public executions of black people. Living examples of the falsity of whites, dishonest promises and unmeant ideals. We were a group more truly fearful of carjackings than the racist, militaristic state. How could we talk so righteously when we refused to live in the city we lived in? No state but a stage. Communion with bees. Classic white, our minds were, and are, steeped in escapist denial.

Honestly, I can't stand my weak, passive self. And, like Cathy says about her Heathcliff, you're more myself than I am.

In a better, prettier universe, I would have never returned to the commons after that underwhelming first visit. If you didn't give me that second park date, I wouldn't have bothered more with you and the troupe. I wouldn't have done that cool slimemold exercise.

But I was intrigued by your second date invitation, a midnight picnic back at the Mississippi east bank. A lush, fresh darkness, we could smell the earlier midafternoon's rain even though it wasn't that damp. Out in this rich warm air was like existing inside an immersive breath.

We ate a bit of the pasta salads you stole from a co-op, but eating speedily evolved to a fuck. No one around and our blanket tucked away by a small fallen tree, it was private. It was safe. Nothing binds like deep painful sex. You truly excelled at hurting me, harshly stroking, pressing, biting my clit into uncharted tender pain, sweetly merciless against my gasping and

shouts. Quickly, you switched from rough to soft, licking the raw ache you made, nice flickers of wetness chilling the hurt into a dissolving release. I honestly think I dissolved and have yet to wholly recombine. It was like peeing with my entire being. Easily the most intense, weepy orgasim of my tiny insouciant life.

I feel like I've lost my intention. I thought the process of writing this out would float me to a reason for how I reacted to your injury, but I remain at a blank I can't push past. Here's the best defense I've got: I'm haunted by your panting screams. It hurts to think about, so mostly I don't.

Your injury capped out a fully cursed morning. Before dawn, we were startled awake by one of the cats yowling, scunnered from a stickily sharp claw snagged in a curtain. Ody gingerly disaffixed the nail, but the beast, frustrated, ignorant of the help, slashed their arm, jagging the skin with two thin red lines. Less than an hour later, Dex phoned an ambulance for a lover because the P tattoo he applied to his wrist had invited an infection, and the man was pacing, panicked. And then there was you and I, outside to escape the drama, outside for the fresh summer sunrise in the pollinator garden. We devolved into that stupid argument, and then out of nowhere it just happened, the improbable mite assault.

You probably don't want to read about it. I doubt you're reading this at all. If you are, did you look up the words you didn't know, like nimiety? Did it make a difference? I'm ridiculous, applying lovely words to reality like they're fashion trinkets, a vain hope to shape it into something digestible--in truth, reality digests us, but we trick ourselves into believing it's the other way around.

There's no distinct reason why I laughed. My cynicism with the troupe, especially its method of nature devotion, combined with the absurdity of how you got hurt, and your silly, rapid barking: "bee, bee, bee!" In your jarring pain, you probably didn't realize you were yelling a coherent word, but you certainly did notice my laughter. Despite your raw, nervy agony, you managed to flash me a look of disgusted, confused betrayal. Slime ran out to hold you, chastising me. Medical professionals were already on the scene for Dex's lover and they assessed you. You left with them to the hospital, where they could surgically remove the stinger from your eye. Slime accompanied you for the ride, lying to the paramedics and claiming biological sisterhood. While I skulked around. As you departed, I heard you hiss to her, "that bitch always wanted me to get hurt."

I think you wanted me to hear.

I didn't need the EMT's explanation to know what happened. I saw the bee drifting around your face as we argued. Intently I watched it hover closer to your right eye. Focused on it, almost as if willing it to land where it did. Willing the stinger into your vulnerable, exposed bit of brain. That's what eyeballs are to me, bits of brain matter. Spongy and wet, like brains, right? Does this make sense?

It's fucked up I laughed, but I can't say I'm sorry. I didn't choose to laugh, just like I didn't choose to love you.

I don't plan on reaching out to anyone else from the troupe. I'm back to my normal life, eking by on my substitution gigs. Truth is, I'm best as a substitute, a brief fill-in for the real thing. Maybe we're all best as substitutes. Can't do as much damage temporary. You're something of a substitute yourself with your roster of scattershot brief jobs, from dishwasher to professional dancer. Try embracing substitution. Be a substitute friend, a substitute lover. You may think I'm a monster, but I'm not enough to be all that. A substitute monster, at best.

If you made it this far, you've earned the right to read this, my final indignity: I miss you, and—knowing you hate me, knowing you won't take me—I want to continue. That's why I wrote this.

Look at us, technically still going on. Ongoing always, like texting. If you made it here to end: it's too late, I have you baby. You're reading me, continuing us, a cult if there ever was one.