

Teddy Bears at the Exit Wound

By Chloe Skye Landisman

*For all those who remember the children they once were and wonder who they would
have become without the mass violence epidemic.*

Preface

I have written this because I have been haunted. I have written this because I know first-hand how the trauma of a mass shooting infects the surrounding community with unshakeable fear and despair. It will be nine years since the shooting in Sandy Hook on December 14 but the aftershocks of the event still haunt those who lived it just as vividly as the day it happened. Although this shooting is one of the more well known massacres, it is actually one among many. In 2021, there have been 470 reported mass shootings in total and countless gun violence related deaths; mass violence, significantly, is a problem that right-wing government officials pay little attention to outside of “thoughts and prayers.” In this piece, I frame the “exit wound”, the poisonous suffering that accompanies the witnessing of the mass shooting epidemic, through four narratives that depict separate aspects of that suffering.

The assertion that the trauma of a mass shooting spreads like poison around a community is not new. In *Children under Fire* John Woodrow Cox, *Washington Post* Reporter wrote about the mental damage even lockdown drills can do to children because they reinforce that it *could* happen. Mental health crises are always present in the aftermath of these events. When the shooting happened, there were not enough therapists to cater to the needs of the community. The shooting sent me -- a newly thirteen-year old already struggling with anxiety -- into an agoraphobic/depressive spell. My parents sought counseling for me but the wait time for every local therapist and psychiatrist in the area was at least two years. I was trapped, just as the entire community was.

I have spent years charting exit routes in every public area I enter. It takes a massive amount of energy to push myself to bring my body somewhere like a concert hall. I shudder when I drive past schools. When I was nineteen years old, I wrote a piece (an earlier version of

the “I the Lost” section that you will see below) based on my experience as a child loosely connected to the event. It was then I truly began to put effort into healing my despair. Through a combination of writing, therapy, and research, I have been able to cauterize the wound. It still bleeds sometimes, because it has to, but I understand it with a compassion that I did not have before. I took on this project in an effort to not only continue to help myself but to help a reader grapple with a reality that I still feel is truly incomprehensible.

I was introduced to the concepts of “actors” and a craft that she coined called critical fabulation through author and historian Saidiya Hartman’s *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.¹ Just as Hartman’s characters are “actors”, characters representing real people, beginning with the evidence of their lives and imagining further, the characters and stories in this work do the same thing.

I split this work into narratives. “The Four Horsemen of the American Apocalypse” offers a biblical allusion (albeit, tainted by the phrase “thoughts and prayers”). Each narrative embodies separate elements in the epidemic of mass gun violence in the United States. It is the same story, told from four very different angles. I chronologically fracture and weave together these individual narratives so that the reader travels between them. I have done this in hopes that they will notice how these narratives are inherently interdependent.

“We the Dying” uses actors to imagine the realities of the victims of a variety of mass shootings. The actors ponder spaces where there is no intimate record or interview, the moments before silence that those who have survived them can never ask them about. They seek not to speak for those who have passed, but to imagine what they could have felt or thought before they were taken from this world. Though the characters you read in the text should be considered

¹ Critical fabulation is a technique that intertwines research and narrative writing to retell a real-life event. Hartman uses/invents it in *Wayward Lives: Beautiful Experiments* to embody the lives of black women in the early 1900s largely ignored by academic records.

actors, the realities that they are rooted in are always referenced in the footnotes. “We the Dying” is an exercise of remembrance through imagining the lives of the murdered.

“I the Lost” is a fictitious mirroring of a life similar to the one I lived in the immediate aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting, which took place six miles from my home. A family friend lost their child in the massacre, and I struggled to bear the incomprehensible gravity of the attack. The story emerges from a reality I lived through in the aftermath. The child in the story is an actor seeking to provide you with a glimpse into the anxieties of an American child who makes an internal note of the exits in every room they enter, just in case. This section represents the contagion of shootings from the perspective of physically untouched children who witness them. It is a story that could be about many American children experiencing the impacts of the American gun violence epidemic. I have changed the names of characters, actors, locations, within the story, specifically when it pertains to victims, of love and respect for the real lived experiences they cannot replace.

“You the Killers” ponders the lives of the shooters by using the mechanism of second person plurality. I intend, here, to isolate them from the reader. The “You” in this section is the name for the many nameless actors on their path to commit these heinous acts. I do not address mass shooters by name: research into the lives of the killers has shown that past shooters inspire future ones. “You” are those poisoned into carrying out such a horrific deed. “You” holds these individuals accountable by addressing them directly. A narrative surrounding shooters urges people to treat others amicably in order to prevent future mass murders. While we should absolutely be treating everyone with kindness -- and in doing so, it may beget a more compassionate attitude in somebody who may become violent -- this approach inadvertently places the responsibility on the victims. Ultimately, these acts are the choices of the perpetrator.

Placing *any* blame on bystanders is fundamentally unfair. Though this piece, as a whole, is about compassion, it does not seek to offer mass murders that same compassion.

“Us the Gifts” follows the 65,000 physical gifts sent to Newtown in the immediate aftermath of the 2012 mass shooting at the elementary school that claimed the lives of twenty children and six adults. Many of them were stuffed animals, many donated to shelters in surrounding communities. However, hundreds of the teddy bears placed on the ground at the vigils and mourning services were too damaged to donate. They rotted all over town for months after their arrival. Their condition offered a horrific and accurate approximation of the tragedy, trauma, and abandonment that I (and so many others in the community) experienced as the world moved on. Eventually, the town cleaned up and burned their remains. Ashley Maynor’s web documentary “The Story of the Stuff” documented all the gifts sent to Newtown and the logistics of how they were received; this informed my work.

Please know this section seeks only to critique the systematic offering of material goods that cannot ever replace actual action and legislation aiming to end gun violence by the government. It is not meant to discount the love and thought that was put behind the countless letters and gifts sent to Newtown. Through reflection on the prismatically tainted nature of their own subjectivity, the teddy bears hold the intention of their well-meaning gifters (whose intentions, please note, are meaningful and wonderful). They simultaneously represent the phrase “thoughts and prayers”, a phrase right-wing legislators frequently offer victims and their families to disguise their systematic failure to actually protect them using the law.

The “exit wound” is almost synonymous with the term “apocalypsis”, the Greek word meaning uncovering and is used to describe the vision of the apocalypse. This apocalypsis, and the four horsemen, are the warning. As the oracle Cassandra saw apocalypsis of normal days turned to tragedy; so do we. Seeing children off in book bags, knowing the possibility of them going home

in body bags. Buses turned to hearses, and teddy bears for the long night. I urge you to venture ahead into the exit wound with a sharp mind and a semipermeable heart.

Warmly,

Chloe Landisman

Introducing: The Four Horsemen of the American Apocalypse²

I the Lost

A child on the outskirts of the mass shooting in a fictional small town grapples with grief. Watching the news in the kitchen, seeing the big red letters that read: “20 Children in Elementary School Dead”. Remembering the way their mother’s face contorts as she learns of the death of their voice teacher’s son. Dwelling in that same moment for days and then years after it has passed.

We the Dying

The voices of the ghosts from Newtown and across the country whose lives were fractured by gun violence. The mother and father in their early twenties died shielding their baby boy from bullets. The ballet dancer paralyzed from the neck down with stacks of bills that she cannot physically work to pay. The trans woman who thought she was going to spend the night dancing in the club. And so many more.

You the Killers

Attempts at explaining reasonless behavior. The shadows of the men who pull the triggers. Theories of their motives. Reflections on their childhoods. Grasping at the straws of what they left behind. Every one of them, answerless questions.

Us the Gifts

Materials sent from across the globe to comfort the families of the victims in Newtown, Connecticut. A sentient cohort of teddy bears living in the wake of vigils; polyester fur caked with candle wax reflect upon their subjectivity.

² An apocalypse is the vision of the apocalypse, the warning, this particular apocalypse is prophesies the deadly cycle that we have lived within over the past twenty years.

I the Lost

August 2021

A knot in my chest on the precipice of autumn. My second-to-last semester of college begins in two weeks. I sit by a window on the top floor of my partner's campus science building in a floral chair that supports my lumbar spine comfortably. I stare out a floor to ceiling window. The college grounds sprawl out before me. The green is punctuated by cement paths that intersect and veer away from each other: they're ventricular, pulsing with students on the way to an evening class or the dining hall for dinner. The sky is pink and a clock tower, their campus's unofficial mascot, is level with my perch. I'm making distanced eye contact with a cyclops.

My attention is devoted to sprawl below me. I pick out hiding places my partner and I could escape to if bullets were to fly when we walk through to get back to the parking garage. The brick wall in front of the library is an optimal cover; it's dense enough that a rally of bullets from a semi-automatic weapon won't be able to pierce it. That cannot be said of many things. The picnic tables we could flip on their sides and the glass doors behind which we could duck will become gossamer upon contact with a bullet. Intrusive thoughts plague my mind, images of my sweet partner's face as they realize we're hiding in the soon-to-be exit wound of something too thin to protect us.

It will be nine years this year since twenty children and six teachers in my hometown were shot dead in their classroom. Each child was shot six to eleven times. Red shadows haunt the kindergarten reading nook.

Nine years in December. I still have a route of escape in every room I enter. I worry about how I will protect my partner on a campus full of thousands of people. Acid rises in my throat when my classmates want to "be the devil's advocate" in conversations about gun control.

Yes, nine years in December and the periphery of the exit wound has scarred over. I still navigate the void it has left within me every time I leave my home. I accommodate the scar like a broken limb. I cradle it, I hide it, and in certain moments, I feel it all over again.

You the Killers

Tendencies towards violence are believed to begin in the early developmental stages of life. Perhaps there was a moment where a shift took place in your mind, like earth sliding downhill in the rain to inhabit a new, darker place, and from then on, you were capable of anything and everything hideous.

Maybe it started when you broke your little brother's nose in a spat over the wishbone from the Thanksgiving turkey. You were somewhere around four years old, give or take. He made you so fucking mad. Waving the bigger half of the bone around like he'd won something. You couldn't help it. You felt like you had to. Like it was the only way to restore your god-given glory. You needed him to know that the two years of age you held over him meant that you were every bit the most powerful of your mother's children. You want him to feel smaller than he is—no, you want to be gargantuan. David and Goliath, but done right this time. The muscles in your arm grow tight, and it's like they know to move before you tell them to, pulling you into action.

Before you know it, your fist is kissing his face.

He's fallen from his chair at the dining room table, screaming. Little boy body sprawled out on the white, laminate floor that you helped your father install a month prior.

You remember how he steadied your hands as you hammered the final board into place. He said you're going to be a strong man someday.

Then you're lost in thought, thinking about how you'll have a family and kids of your own. A little boy who carries your name. Your father's name. You'll teach him how to use a saw and how to fell a sparrow in the backyard with a river stone. The distraction caused the hammer to slip from your grasp and smash your big toe and your face contorted rapidly to hold back tears. Your father laughs at you and tells you to stop being a pussy.

Some of you didn't mean to hurt your brother—you wish you would have been gentler. Many of you are glad it happened just like this. Some of you feel like you've found yourself, that this was better than pretending to be knights in the backyard, and, if given the opportunity, you'd do it again. A few of you rush to his side, apologize profusely, because you're unsure what possessed you to pummel him. You're not quite sure of who you are for a second. That scares many of you.

Many of your mothers leap from their chairs upon hearing him scream.

"You can't treat your brother like a punching bag—he's smaller than you." She looks at you like you'd already killed two people and a puppy. She cradles him with a gentleness that she hasn't offered you since before your brother was born. She'll coo, kiss him on the forehead, and tell your father to call the hospital. You felt something cool and lonely freeze in your gut when you lay in bed that night and hear her read him "The Very Hungry Caterpillar." You don't fall asleep until long after she's left his room and you can't hear her voice anymore.

"You're just like your father... you don't know how much is too much," Another mother says to one of you through gritted teeth. She told you to leave the room once while you were reading a book just because you looked like him and she didn't want to see you.

She sat down on your Raymour and Flannigan corner set and told you to pull your pants down. She bent you over the knee and slapped your bare ass until it was red. Maybe this isn't the first time this has happened to you and you know she'll stop sooner if you don't pull anything. *Just stay still.* You think. Fighting back tears, you push your consciousness away and get lost in your own brain. The Teletubbies theme plays in the back of your head, and before you know it

you're lying stomach on the floor and can't remember your own birthday much less the past five minutes—it'll be fine.³

One of your mothers has already passed out in the living room on the chaise with a glass of wine. She doesn't wake up when your brother cries out for her help. It's only six in the evening. You crouch by your brother and notice your father laugh as he leans against the doorway nursing a Corona. He looks so tall from here, and you can't wait to see the world from five-feet and ten inches high someday.

Most of them will call 911 and you'll spend the rest of your Thanksgiving waiting with your family beside your brother's bed in the ER. Your knuckles are scratched and bleeding but nobody offered you a Band Aid. Many of you think you don't deserve to be taken care of. Many of you think it's a testament to masculinity, your own masculinity, and revel in this your newfound power.

Despite having your mother revoke your Saturday morning Cartoon Network viewing privileges, you grip the bigger half of the wishbone like it's a key to the City of Gold. For many of you it's a trophy, and you've finally proven yourself. You think of that glorious moment when you pried it from his fingers. Others feel entitled to it— your little brother never deserved the wish. Some of you tuck it under your pillow and dream about your hands wrapped around wind pipes—*squeeze*—every time you sleep for the next decade.

Maybe it was that day that something within you shifted and you sprouted the roots of something illicit and poisoned in your heart that all the anti-psychotics you'll take in your teen years won't be able to exorcise. Maybe this is not at all what happened to you. Maybe one

³ Studies show that spanking has a long-term negative impact on the children that receive it. To the surprise of many nationwide, violent discipline begets violent adult behavior. A quote from the article below: "can lead to increased aggression, antisocial behavior, physical injury and mental health problems for children." <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2012/04/spanking>

morning you simply felt the need to shoot up the Circle K, the same one you went to at midnight with your mother when she bought cigarettes and Cheetos for when your dad came home smelling like whiskey.

Regardless, you'll live on for quite a while longer and do oh so much. You'll get lost in Disneyland. Celebrate a decade of birthdays and maybe even enjoy some of them. Maybe you'll go to confession and not know what you're apologizing for. You say your Hail Mary's every night, then leave the house one day and sweep a small mass of lives away with a semi-automatic weapon. Maybe your last thought will bring you back to the wishbone and you will think, *Goliath has nothing on me*. And then you'll hear the pounding of boots on the ground coming to take you out and you'll put a bullet through your brain.

We the Dying

Newtown, CT

We don't forgive you and we won't forget you.

In one of our towns, you put six to eleven bullets in the bodies of each of our six year olds. The carpet beneath them boasted rainbow squares but you'd never know. Bodies blending together in obscene embrace, so torn apart that it became hard to distinguish where one child ended and another began. The first-responders who found them on the reading circle carpet and never went back to work. They didn't tell us how they peeled our children off the floor. A few of them were so unrecognizable that their remains had to be tested for DNA matches. We held a memorial service for every single tiny child, but there wasn't a need for coffins.

Of everyone left dead in the room your body took the lightest amount of damage, a single bullet through the brain. Many of us advocated withholding the most gruesome crime-scene photos from being released in the public report of the crime. Shattered front door windows and bullet dents in sheetrock comprise most of the photos released. There are at least ten photos of your guns. There's a photo of a child's sneakers covered in washi-tape circles—he must have been decorating it to pass the time during the lockdown. Where was the other one? There's a portrait of your black fishing hat with a single bullet hole through the top. It's not even bloody, you must've blown it clean off your head.⁴

⁴ FBI files on the Sandy Hook Elementary Shooting. Source: <https://vault.fbi.gov/sandy-hook-elementary-school-shooting>

Us the Gifts

December 14, 2012

Why were we made?

Who were we bought for?

These questions haunt all teddy bears from the moment they are stuffed and sewn. We internalize the purpose of being made to comfort, play with, and protect people, mainly children. Our cohort of ghostbears know this to be false despite how much we wish it to be true. We can tell you what it means to be made reasonless.

Twenty children and six adults were slain at an elementary school. We came by the thousands. The good intentioned hands of grieving strangers, tucked us into cardboard boxes, paid an extra two dollars for priority shipping, and sent us along. The promise called “priority” informs us that our arrival would be well met and, of course, much needed. They didn’t wonder who we were supposed to be held by when the children they were sending us were to be tucked away in boxes to be put into the earth. If not that, then ash.

We were mostly teddy bears; we vary in size from under five inches tall to two feet tall.

We were brought by Newtown mothers of the children who survived, confronted with the fact that their child’s best friend will no longer come over to her house to play chutes and ladders. One of us was sent by a father from California who said goodbye to his own six-year-old son under fluorescent hospital lights and a flat red line on the screen, just a week prior.

Gloved hands laid us at the base of the Christmas tree outside of their town hall. We were laid against one another, sitting up, and staring out at the throngs of runny red noses and teary eyes. Every teddy bear knows instinctively that their job is to comfort those who cry. The mob won’t pick us up off the ground. We’re sure if they held us close to their chests and held us in a

tight hug, it would ease their pain. Do they think they're too old for teddy bears? Why don't they touch us? They lay more of us down, side by side. They do not pick us up from the ground once we have been placed.

Our fluffy bodies are not gifted with motion. We cannot leave the positions we are placed, so we cuddle with each other as the December wind ruffles our polyester hairs. The warmest of us are at the bottom of the pile. It's dark, but cozy if we ignore the concrete pressed up against our furry backs.

Here we develop a hive-mind, each bear becoming privy to the next's thoughts and memories. We see through each other's eyes. Observing every angle of a moment. We know all the ways light catches on each tear shed. We can see what our kin in stacks across town see. It may be hard to understand if you are somebody who has not been haunted by something. Those who are hurt by something bigger than themselves, something that haunts a community rather than an individual, have language without words. We are definitely not the first to communicate in words that cannot be heard.

The coldest of us is stacked on top of the rest; snowflakes tickle their black button noses. We are unlucky enough to watch the red-nosed procession in their down coats and hand knitted mittens as they clutch skinny candles. Why do they hold them so tight? The crowd is mainly composed of adults; we know they know how the story of the little match girl ends. Warm little fires burn out all too soon. It seems odd for them to cling to wax wishes — they'll just melt away.

A wish is a hallucination your heart brings you when you need it most.

I the Lost

I'm looking for a pair of scissors when I find the funeral pamphlet from our final goodbye to August in the craft drawer in the kitchen a few weeks after he died. It's constructed of blue cardstock and boasts a photo of his face and a delicate cursive inscription that reads: *August Taylor, Beloved Son and Brother, November 28th, 2005—December 20st, 2012.*

He had turned six three weeks and 1 day prior to the 20th, when he died.. Temperance, his mother and my singing coach, had told me that she and Emery gave him a blue Nintendo DSI XL with two accompanying games, Mario Kart and Cooking Mama World Kitchen, to celebrate his turning six. However, August was much more interested in the model lighthouse his grandpa made for him from a "Build-Your-Own" kit that he bought at Hobby Lobby. You see, lighthouses were August's favorite.

"August's got the soul of an old gentleman, I think." I remember Temperance laughing about August's disinterest in the DSI XL as she flipped through the score of "Evita" at my singing lesson. "It's a part of his charm."

I picture her bundling him up in a thick, blue, L.L. Bean down coat to brave the December Connecticut weather—they make you stay outside for recess until it snows. When Anderson Cooper interviewed her, Temperance said that August had a cold that morning, and she almost kept him at home. However, he didn't have a fever so she let him go anyway, after promising to pick him up if he got any worse. I'm sure she wanted him to be cozy so he didn't get any sicker. I wonder if she kissed him on the forehead before he climbed, short-legged, stepping high from the hip, up into the school bus. I wonder if he stood up in his seat on the drive over to Sandy Hook Elementary with the rowdy boys and the driver had to tell him to quiet

down. I wonder if he talked quietly with a friend instead. Probably the latter; he was an old soul, after all.

I was looking for a pair of scissors but instead I've been frozen, eyes glazed over, traveling back in time for at least three minutes now. I don't know what the pamphlet's doing lying buried underneath the post-it notes and paper clips so unceremoniously. It was pinned to the fridge since we got back from the funeral, dressed in winter blacks, before my mother quietly took it down and tucked it away. I think it was overwhelming for her to see it every morning when she trudged over in her slippers to get the milk for her coffee. I'm a little mad at her for leaving it here, where it could be wrinkled or ripped—we're only ever going to get one, so we sure as hell can't lose it. I know it won't last long among the scissors, staplers, hole puncher: he's only paper, after all. I decide to rescue it immediately.

Gingerly, I reach down, pick the pamphlet up with both hands and open it. I run my thumb over the blue cardstock, my eyes fixing themselves on the portrait of August in the center of the page.

August is pictured beaming up at a calm sky as it fades from light blue to violet at dusk like it's an old friend. His eyes are dark brown, nearly, but not quite black, and they stand out against his pale skin. I think they're wide, like old cable TV satellites. I hope he's found some sort of signal from way up there. He's like Snow White— frozen indefinitely behind the thin veil of paper and ink. A casual funeral-goer may not know that it's cropped from a family portrait. A professional photographer didn't take it; the Taylors are musicians, they met in a band in college before retreating to Newtown when NYC became a little too fast and a little too loud for them.

Many of you lived in six-thousand square foot McMansions with cinema rooms and foosball tables. You grew up with fifty feet between your living room window and the street.

One of you timed how fast you could run around the perimeter of your house. 13.4 seconds was your all time high score. Your uncle told you that you could be on the track team when you got older, and you aspired to just that for a long time.

Alas, sometime in middle school you realized you were fast, sure, but you were slower than the taller boys. You tried out for the team, but you were insecure and psyched yourself out? Over dinner on a school night in the beginning of September your parents asked you what happened to your passion for running.

“I got tired of it,” you replied and changed the topic when they pressed further.

You grew detached and started to take your time walking to school.

One of you watched Mickey Mouse Clubhouse every day before the school bus came in to shuttle you grade school, dancing around the living room in your favorite pajamas in front of the TV.

“Come inside, it’s fun inside!”

When you shoulder your M-16 and pocket your 15 Millimeter Glock in your living room, preparing for your final visit to your public school, maybe you thought back to that morning routine. The way she swept you up in her arms when she needed you to get dressed and made you feel at home in this big house. That’s not going to happen again. You shot her in the face as she slept at 5:00AM. It didn’t even wake up the neighbors.

You turn to walk out the front door but pause, walking back to the living room to turn on the Disney Channel. Mickey Mouse Clubhouse has long been off the air, and they're playing a show about a little girl who plays doctor with her injured stuffed animals.

You were disappointed that Mickey wasn't on, but you watch the episode through the credits anyway. You hum the theme song on the way out the door.

Your classmates bullied some of you—and they'll say that's why you did it. Hate speech scrawled in spray paint across the window of your Subaru Impreza. They'll say that's what made you crack—you felt ostracized, socially pathetic. A narrative will sprout around you being lonely and killing people because you didn't have any friends in high school. It's hard to say if that's true because we don't get to ask you why, yet many of us will believe it. Our biggest fear is that you did it for nothing.

Many of you were gifted the guns you killed us and our beloveds with. Mothers and fathers wrapped assault rifles that they bought at Walmart in wrapping paper that said, "From Santa".

For some, the shooting range taped your broken family together. Your father was only ever happy when he mowed down targets from fifty feet away. You learned to be happy only at the shooting range too.

We the Dying
Orlando, Florida⁵
June 16, 2016

One of you targeted our queer sisters in a nightclub in Florida, a refuge for the queer community in Orlando. Most of us were Black and Latin queer people of color.

She was celebrating her fourth month on estrogen hormone medication at the club with a few friends. That morning, she sized herself up in the mirror, in only her tank top, wearing no makeup. She ran her hands over her body. Relished the way it felt closer to fitting for her for the first time.

“Ladies, we're going out tonight!”, we remember her singing voice over the phone in the early evening.

We hoped she danced with someone sexy before you shot her. We hoped she felt young and alive and vivid on the dance floor.

We won't get to ask her.

When she was alive, she told us that at her funeral she wanted to be dressed like Holly Golightly in “Breakfast at Tiffany’s”. Pearls and all, calls herself “a wild thing”. We couldn't grant her wish. There wasn't enough of her body left intact to dress in Audrey Hepburn black. We set a picture of her and Audrey on either side of her urn. We wish we could spread the ashes on the dance floor.⁶

⁵ The shooting at Pulse Nightclub, a haven for the Orlando LGBTQIA+ community, happened on June 16, 2016. The 49 victims were mainly comprised of Black and Latinx queer people of color. It's notable that the massacre happened on Latin Night at Pulse. Source:

<https://remezcla.com/features/music/pulse-nightclub-sanctuary/>

⁶ There is not a singular person that this woman is inspired by. This is because queer life is intertwined with the experience of the closets and we cannot know what closets everyone came out of that night only that they traded closets for coffins.

Us the Gifts

December 14th, 2012

The evening grows colder; the mob thins, and the candlelight that surrounded us dies without the moving bodies that blocked the wind. We want to remember every face but there are too many to keep track of and they move by us too quickly. It is those who lingered with us whose images we remembered the most. Those of us sitting at the top of the pile keep score of the candle flames as they go out. Around ten o'clock, five tall candles in our vicinity blow out. Most of them were lit for a short time to begin with; they burned only halfway down their waxy bodies. Eleven o'clock, twelve more wicks turned from little fire to smoke. Twelve-forty, the number grew to twenty. Fifty-three in a half an hour. One o'clock the crowd was nearly gone, and wind gobbled the candle fire with ruthless hunger. Little flames that went out by the dozens. A chill flooded our stuffing, starting at the tips of our paws and making its way to the core of our bodies.

A graying man with saggy cheeks sits on the bench across from us, huddled over. He mirrors us with his brown wool coat and round belly; red mittened hands resting on his thighs. Gravity pulls at the ends of his lips, unlike ours, which are eternally upturned. That's the magic of a needle and thread to the face.

The man exhales, breath dancing in the air just in front of his face before ascending and dissipating as if it were never there. From this, we learn about dissipating for the first time, but we didn't understand just how dissipation chases us all. It is near impossible to predict when dissipation will catch you, but it will at some point - we will know this in the coming weeks and months.

Save for a squirrel or two, nothing moves. The ambulances came by the town hall without a sound, but their lights still flash.

Oh, the vehicles came so slowly it gave our stuffing hearts a fright!

“They must have come from the firehouse,” the man grumbles. He turns his head to watch the blue and red ricochet across his face and body. Almost like Christmas lights projected on the side of a house, yes, almost like that. The firehouse was where the slain children had been kept in the daytime; the town authorities didn’t want the press to follow them during transportation so they waited until nighttime to move them. Inside the emergency vehicles lay the unrecognizable corpses of the children, pulled apart by gunfire. Six to eleven bullets each.

The whirl of their engines as they drive off informs us without words that we, too, will become ghosts. Their fluorescent lights leave with them faded, and the night feels darker than it was before.

“Haven’t been up this late since my fifties.” The old man puts his hands on his knees. They let out a crack in unison as he stands up. He huffs. He ambles toward us and pinches the last gleaming wick of a steadfast candle that had burned down to the bezel. A candle’s life lived in a single night.

“Don’t want this to catch on your little teddy bear pelt.” He says to us, not knowing that we heard him.

We remember the little girl, no older than four, with rich brown skin and curly dark hair, the one who put that candle in front of the tree many hours ago. She carefully positioned it between the legs of a big pink teddy bear (this protected the candle flame from the wind for all those hours).

“Momma, will you light it, please?” She looks up at a woman who looks just like her in her future, although we are all aware how the future is not at all guaranteed. The mother crouched. She guarded the candle with right hand so the flame wouldn’t catch on the teddy bear behind it as she set the wick alight.

“It’s like it will keep them warm.” The daughter smiles but there isn’t any song in her voice. Teddy bears have evolved to expect laughter from the voices of the children they are gifted to. This interrogates all we know to be true.

“Yes, sweetheart, it will.” She says to her daughter, her words catching and crackling in her throat. Tears waiting in the wings of her eyes; she refuses to let them fall. We remember the way she clutched her daughter’s hand like it was the only thing tethering the girl to the earth.

The old man makes his way to his car and drives to his faraway bed in a warm house we’ll never see.

Despite being surrounded by each other, by our kin, this is the most lonesome we feel since our arrival in Newtown.

I the Lost

I saw this photo of August that I hold now on the funeral pamphlet once before on a broadcast from the high school auditorium. He was armored behind a sheet of glass and framed in twelve-by-fourteen cherrywood. His parents held either corner of the frame. I watched the president extend his gentlest apologies and sympathies to the families of the slain children, being broadcast nationally from the auditorium in the high school. His breath caught in his throat as he said their names, one by one, taking all the time in the world. I was grateful he let each one take up space. My president's mouth quivered, his eyes shut, and he pressed a slow hand to his face. It was then that I saw my president cry.

The families joined him on stage, standing behind him in a horizontal line, holding pictures of their children for the entire nation to see. I saw a father, his name is Tom, who stands at the end of the line alone, clinging to the picture of himself younger and his son as an infant, grinning, big eyed and chubby cheeked. Tom is standing tall and older now, and his face wrinkles and folds. Temperance cradles the portrait of August with both hands, eyes trained on the floor. It seems to shield her body. Emery wraps an arm around her shoulders but she doesn't move into his embrace. The president continues to tell us that he's "So sorry", but she remains still, and I can't take my eyes off of her.

I carefully tuck the pamphlet into the pocket of my fuzzy pink bathrobe, rearrange the drawer so it appears exactly as I first found it, then I press it shut.

I pull my bathrobe a little tighter around my body. It's starting to become a little ratty from being glued to me nearly every day, as long as I'm awake, for the past month and a half. It's nearly the end of January now, I think, cause that's what my google calendar says, and my momma still has the heat on full blast, but I can't seem to get warm. The bathrobe comes in to

protect me from any drafts from the opening of doors that lead outside. Doors that I can't yet pass through, even on my bravest day.

My momma says I'm always cold because my feet are always naked and they need to be covered in order to preserve body heat. I hate socks; they're suffocating and they get stinky. It was just my feet anyway. They're only for walking. I only need to walk from the couch to the bathroom. The couch to the kitchen. My feet needn't be quite so demanding.

I pad, dirty-footed, back to my blanket nest that I have constructed with care on the living room couch.

We the Dying

El Paso, Texas: Walmart⁷

September 6, 2019

The balloons are in bags of twenty, packed in against each other, two dozen empty lungs awaiting inflation. The woman pulls a package from the rack in the party supply aisle in a Texas Walmart. She holds them next to each other and thinks about their hue.

“Do you think she’ll like pink or gold?” She asks her husband, who’s cooing at their smiling baby who is seated in the cart. He looks over at his wife and the balloons.

“They’re two for one so how about we get both.” He focuses on her hands, her rings; a year ago today he slid the gold band down her finger.

“Fair enough.” She replies, smiling down at him and their son. She tucks a strand of her soft blonde hair behind her ear. The husband thinks about the life they’ve woven within the first year of their marriage. His wife birthed their son on a bright day in early May. He often recalls the way she glowed right after, despite how much pain it took; she was angelic. He’s started a business profitable enough for his wife to be able to stay home with their children. They bought a little house with bay windows in the kitchen. They could get a dog when the baby grows a bit bigger, if they want to.

The trio makes their way to the baking aisle. The wife will be making red velvet cupcakes this weekend for their daughter's six birthday. *The pink icing will match the balloons so nicely*, she thinks, looking at them sitting in the cart. They’re having a barbeque on Saturday to celebrate the birthday. For the first time this summer, they’ve been so busy with the baby and

⁷ September 6, 2019, a mass shooting in an El Paso Texas Walmart takes the lives of twenty-two people.

getting their daughter to soccer practice that they haven't been able to host the same festivities that they usually do in the summer.

The FatherHusband moves his body without thinking upon hearing the gunfire not far from him. He jumps in front of the WifeMother, who folds herself over the child in the carriage. They're like a matryoshka doll; the bigger ones enveloping those smaller. They may exchange an "I love you", if they have time, or coo to the baby that begins to cry at the loud noise.

The FatherHusband is killed milliseconds, the bullets lose momentum in his flesh, passing through him and into his wife where they mostly stop. Save for one which grazes the child's temple.⁸

He'll grow up with a scar. His friends will call him Harry Potter, not knowing what happened, and then he'll have to explain how he is in fact the boy who lived.

⁸ Jordan and Andre Anchondo, 23 and 24, died shielding their infant son from gunfire in El Paso Texas. Source: New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/12/us/el-paso-anchondo-jordan-andre.html>

Us the Gifts

December 15th, 2012

The parade of mourners continues in the morning. A woman with short hair and a pointed nose who appears to be in her mid-twenties. She parks in front of the town hall, close to where we lay piled, and opens her trunk with a cartoonish “pop”. She totes a brown paper bag with the words “Big Y” written on the front.

The woman kneels in front of a group of us, setting the bag on the ground beside her. Her breath is heavy and quick. She holds a hand to her swollen belly - does she have fluff in there like ours?

“I’m scared to bring you here.” She whispers, as she leans over, nearly pressing her forehead to the pavement. “I didn’t think this could happen to a child, to children.” She heaves, she cries until the sounds of the town awakening weave through the air. Car engines starting in the distance and the opening of the town hall's heavy doors as the staff trudge inside.

Sitting up, she pulls a knitted hat from the bag, small enough for an infant. She fastens it on one of our heads and ties the wool braids below our chin. Shaky hands wrap a matching blanket around the biggest teddy bear’s shoulders.

We hear her snuffle as she walks back to the car and the stream of mourners return to the courtyard in greater numbers. They bring more of us, teddy bears who were not yet familiar with the feeling of frost on their synthetic fur.

Others never join our fluffy piles on the street. The town tax assessor⁹ procured an eight-thousand square foot warehouse space to store us boxes upon boxes in an industrial silver room that contrasted our warm brown of teddy bear furs and the cardboard walls they were

⁹ The organization of the gifts sent to Newtown became a full time job for Chris Kelsey, Newtown’s tax assessor. Source: The Trace, <https://www.thetrace.org/2017/12/sandy-hook-mass-shooting-teddy-bears/>

tucked within. They tell us it was dark where they were but, like us, they were cuddled in upon each other.

The sun falls low early in the day as we draw nearer to the solstice. The mob shifts its form. The vans, over ten of them lined the street. Crews of humans, red knuckled, brandishing boom mics, and gripping cameras the size of three teddy bears. People clad in black wool coats and big scarves holding microphones to their lips accompany them.

“Yesterday, twenty children and six adults were shot dead in Sandy Hook Elementary School,” One says and then, to our surprise, the others begin to echo him.

“Twenty-six dead in a mass-murder at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut.”

“We’re live in Newtown, Connecticut as twenty students and 6 adults...” They seem to say and say the same thing again. Does repetition help those children? *Never forget; never forget.* They say.

“Newtown locals mourn the loss of children and six teachers in a mass shooting at Sandy Hook elementary school.” A patron of the deli next door rushes by them, pulling his hood up over his head. From a distance, the camera lens follows him until he disappears into the building.

We want to plug our ears with our fuzzy little paws but oh, their repetition is so loud! Don’t they realize it’s disturbing us?

A viewfinder absorbs images of our piles. Those of us at the top of the pile wish they could’ve freshened up for the picture. We feel vulnerable. We’re in varying condition but it’s clear that we could not be refunded to the Targets and Nordstroms we were purchased from. Its lens interrogates our bodies, picking up the signs of stress on our fluffy bodies. We’re all clearly damp and stained with dirt from the recent weather. The bears at the bottom have fared the worst.

The combination of water damage and pressure from those above us has compressed us into unsightly disfigurement. These bears are thankful to be unseen.

We think the camera knows we are like a garden at the beginning of autumn. Our petals are just beginning to wither. It's subtle, but the change is undeniable. However, it didn't tell us that decomposition was the next stage of our fate.

The helpful hearts who sent us here share one crucial thing in common with the reporters: the deep-seated belief that they are helping.

We the teddy bears are still trying to figure out how this strain of help works.

“The president will mourn alongside families of the twenty slain children in Newtown this evening at the local high school.”

We understand what that means after the passing of a few hours. Two Black SUVs with tinted windows darken Main Street. They don little flags patterned red, white, and blue on their windshields. As a collective, we felt these were a touch overenthusiastic. Teddybears are the authorities on joy and excitement.

Several teddy bears that were taken to a smaller vigil outside the high school and saw him enter the building surrounded by a cluster (not unlike our own clusters) of tall humans in black suits. Those of us there saw the photos of the slain children, bright-eyed and full of life, cradled in the arms of their parents. They follow a man they call president. Again, we can't shake the aching feeling that we can't comfort the children in the photos but we hope that he can.¹⁰

¹⁰ President Obama was an incredible ally to the Newtown families and community. He gave a powerful speech at Newtown Highschool on December 17th, 2012. Source: History.com, <https://www.history.com/the-obama-years/newtown.html>. Source: The BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-20752352>.

You the Killers

Many of you fixed your bed on your last morning, running your hands across blue covers to even out any remaining wrinkles and tucking the hem underneath the mattress like a hospital bed.

You folded your laundry from the night before the way your mother taught you to when you were small. You stacked your books on the desk and pushed them against the wall. Hitler's "Mein Kampf" sits on your bed, still open, before you leave with your AR-14 in tow to make the morning service at the local synagogue. Your dad said the Holocaust never happened, and Hitler was a visionary.

Another owned the special edition collection of "The Chronicles of Narnia." You dog-eared the last chapter in "The Horse & His Boy." Forensic psychologists analyze it and speculate that it was your final message to the world, your final statement. Why Narnia?

Many of you left notes. You said this world never wanted you and in turn you made it pay. Some of you left sanctums in your basement filled with your schemes; your life's work. Maps of suburban shopping malls line your walls. You've etched out the most efficient route for your crime in red pen. You plan to start with the Sephora makeup store by the entrance, take out women specifically (they wear too much makeup these days and only have sex with Chads). After that you'll make your way to the food court, where you'll pick off entire families. Counting by fives.

They'll find an arsenal of violent video games in many of your drawers and in a month Call of Duty will be on trial in Congress as the reason for every mass shooting in the country. As if that's the only reason you did it. It never was.

If you did it and you weren't white, Fox News called you a terrorist. Nobody will delve into your childhood backstory. White people who shoot up Gospel Churches in Georgia will get the liberty of being depressed, but you will be dubbed a terrorist because you look like maybe you've been in a Mosque.

I the Lost

The couch is backed up against the wall in the corner of the room. It's been clawed by a number of family felines over the years, and the fabric hangs loose off of the armrests. There are holes in most of the cushions as well, which would be fine if it didn't feel quite so unclean to me. I think about what's in the cats' claws and how the fibers of the fabric are tainted by them with no hope of sanitation. I wouldn't dare sit upon it unguarded. Subsequently, I keep the cushion covered by a sheet at all times. No exceptions. I refrain from tucking it underneath the cushions because I can't fathom having to press my fingers between the couch cushions.

I climb into my sleeping bag, swaddling myself, and pull my computer onto my lap. It's a MacBook Air that my cat knocked off the counter a couple months ago, and now it won't turn on without being fed a special key combination. Nevertheless, I will resuscitate it once more. My browser lights up, bathing my dark corner of the room in blue light.

I watch YouTube videos of people reviewing YA books but never garner the gall or energy to read them. I google questions about things I have decided I need to know in order to build an adult knowledge base, like "Why Do Men Have Nipples?" and "Can Animals go to Heaven?" I prowl Yahoo answers to find out that they actually develop nipples in embryo before their sex is determined, and they're purely an aesthetic feature. I then decided that everybody is kind of a woman. At least, they were in embryo.

I stumble upon pornography featuring women wearing French maid costumes and men who lick their red-toed feet with fervor. I wonder what possessed them to do that. Don't feet smell?

Yahoo News is the first site I visit every morning, around lunchtime, and in the evening. For the first week after it happened articles titled: "Field Ridge Shooting", "Field Ridge

Families”, and “Gun Reform” stained the front page. My town’s name was on national news and it felt surreal but it wasn’t a good thing. As time went on reports on the town waned, and in about two weeks’ time Yahoo was posting about Leonardo DiCaprio’s alleged future Oscar win.

And then it was just me and my head talking about what had happened to August. My mom and I talked about it for about a week until it hurt too much. My younger sister, Lila and I fought like animals whenever we were near each other. I knew she knew what happened but she didn’t seem bothered and that infuriated me. When I began to sequester myself on the couch in the living room, I saw her infrequently.

My dad came home late enough that he got a chance to kiss my forehead as I fell asleep but missed the opportunity to speak about anything deep in detail. My littlest sister Maya was August’s age, and I don’t think my mom told her that she wasn’t going to see him again. They had a playdate scheduled on the sixteenth that was just never going to happen. I wasn’t present when my mom told Maya her plans were canceled. She still asks about August on occasion. “Can I play ‘Super Mario’ with August again?”

My mom brushes it off each time a little bit differently. She says August is just busy with school right now. She says the Taylor’s are on vacation, and she shows her pictures of August in Disneyland in front of Cinderella’s castle from Temperance’s Facebook. Maya doesn’t see that they’re dated a year earlier. My mother says August has the chickenpox, is highly contagious, and can’t leave home; she doesn’t tell her that he had to be vaccinated for chickenpox to go to the school where he was murdered.

The days pass and melt into each other; my circadian rhythm is destabilized. It became homogeneous: sleep, eat, scrub my hands with dish soap, curl up on the couch, and then sleep again. I don’t know yet that I’ll wake up one day, years from now, and realize I don’t have

sustainable memories from the time I spent this way. Mourning all the time, I was lost on the internet on my couch, covered in yellowing sheets.

We the Dying**Newtown, CT**

March 2019

Parenthood transcends the grave. This is true for both sides; that of the child and that of the parent. One of us was a father. He held up signs in Congress just to be ignored by the men who could've changed the course of his daughter's life before it ended too soon.

“Brain Health”, he’s on a TEDTalk stage, explaining how the health of your physical brain impacts your ability to make empathetic decisions. He rents an office in town hall with a big sign on the wall bearing her name.¹¹ It's displayed above the doorway, a logo of a little girl with curly hair, but he carries its weight on his back. How heavy it is to bear.

He travels beneath it into his office every day. Types furiously at his desk. Click click. *Together, we will find an answer to what in the brain makes someone commit an act of this kind.* Click, click. *And stop it from ever happening again.*

Make the world better for somebody else’s child. Don’t let her loss be in vain. Must her loss have a purpose? He can’t free himself from the weight of her name on his shoulders, the sign above the doorway, oh how her name grows heavier in past tense.

He remembers her name. Three syllables dance from the front of the mouth to his soft palette, sometimes catching in his throat on a hard day, and then back through his lips. Leaving his mouth and dissipating into the air in waves. Only ever in past tense.

He pays attention to the news when shootings plague other towns and somebody else’s children. This headline is a little different from the regular ones. A young woman, nineteen years

¹¹ The Avielle Foundation was founded by Jeremy Richman and Jennifer Hensel, successful scientists and the parents of Sandy Hook victim Avielle Richman. The foundation was located in Newtown, CT for seven year before relocating to the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus under the name the Avielle Initiative.

old, was ridden with survivor's guilt after the shooting at her high school a little over a year earlier. She had recently received a PTSD diagnosis that haunted her ambitions for the future for a career in medicine. She heard her friend's ghost move in the cracks of exploding fireworks, mistaken for gunfire. It was too much. She ended life in the living room of her family home.¹²

Maybe it was her death or the suicide of another student from her high school a week later that was too much for the father to bear. About a week after this, he chose to work late. Kissed his wife and co-founder before she left home to their living child.

The town's janitorial staff found him dead in the morning.¹³

¹² Sydney Aiello, a survivor of the shooting at Marjory Stoneham Douglas High school took her own life in March, 2019.

¹³ Jeremy Richman took his life shortly after the death of Sydney Aiello. Source: NBC, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/jeremy-richman-father-sandy-hook-shooting-victim-aiello-richman-found-n987006>

Us the Gifts

December 24th, 2012

It snowed consistently in the weeks that followed. The wakes overtake the vigils. The steady flow of teddy bears and gifts doesn't cease. We were stuffed in the mailboxes of victim's families. We're piled high next to coffins and against gravestones. We listen to adults recount the brief lives of their children.

This is some of what we hear:

"I told you I hid the Christmas presents in the upstairs closet. I wish you had broken in and pulled the wrapping paper right off your gifts but you didn't."

"I keep thinking you'll jump out from behind the couch to scare me."

"She left her bed sheets messy and I don't know if I will ever bring myself to fix them."

"The dog still waits for you at the bus stop every day at three-thirty. I don't know how to tell her you're gone."

We relive it constantly. We take their pain into our hivemind, whisper with it, let it lament within us. We study all the ways to grieve. We learn how to cry without shedding tears.

At night, we watch the stars above the graveyard. We trace the path of the moon through the night sky.

One family's music studio is flooded with letters, gifts, and many of us bears from around the world. There's a skinny foot path in between heaps of things for them to travel through. We sat on the pedals of their piano without the bodily strength to push down upon them and make unfamiliar sounds. We fear that we are making it difficult for them to craft new songs.

We continued to find ourselves in the tax assessor's warehouse. He treated us with tenderness. Organize us carefully in bins by size. He spent the latter days of December creating a distribution plan; shipping us out to organizations that would give us to families and children who were not receiving gifts otherwise during the holiday season.

Those children would have had nothing to unwrap if we had not been sent along. Why wouldn't those kind-hearted folks from across the globe make sure every child had something to unwrap as they celebrated the holidays with their family? It confuses us because the teddy bear creed emphasizes comfort, not capital. Yet somehow our lives are shaped by being bought and sold.

These teddy bears have the best fates; they live the teddy bear dream; they get to watch over the children they were given to. Even the ones who were eventually thrown out in five or ten years will feel whole because they'll know they did their job. They accompanied them through their youth. That's all teddy bears want to do. It truly will matter.

On the evening of December 24, a father who had lost his child brought his other son to the warehouse for presents. He had not had the time or energy to shop this Holiday season.¹⁴

"We didn't have a chance to buy anything this year. Thank you for doing this for us." The father said to the tax assessor turned teddy bear distributor. He watched his living child climb through the bins. He found a scooter, and he took one of us. A little one, with patchwork on their tummy. Perhaps that teddy bear fulfilled the hope that they were sent to Newtown with. That matters, even if they were one of so many who never have that effect.

¹⁴ Source: <https://thestoryofthestuff.com>

You the Killers

You credit your predecessors for inspiring your violent actions. Cultivate Tumblr blogs filled with pictures of the two young men that reaped death upon Columbine.¹⁵ You trace their plot from its inception to its fateful end. You proclaim it as unbridled genius. You wish you live in a realm where they managed to successfully set off the bombs that they had planted in the school parking lot. You treat them as martyrs and credit them as the source, the first, Adam and Eve.

You believe that they've passed that apple along to you.

In death, they've begotten a genre of literature. Suicide notes turned sacred texts. Lengthy diaries accounting for their plots. Phrases including, "I will rape them as the world has raped me" and "by shooting them I'm saving them". Video journals, uploaded to social media just a day before the attack. Unreported. Reddit pages for the involuntarily celibate¹⁶ with detailed terminology that endows women with the responsibility of making them feel accepted by society. Simultaneously labeling themselves "omega", untouchables. You bathed in that self-hatred and exchanged it among yourselves. You tell each other your penises are too small. You say that you're too fat to be loved.

¹⁵ The Sandy Hook shooter (and many other shooters) curated a blog on Tumblr commemorating past mass murderers, analyzing their writings and plots, and even analyzing movie representations of mass shooters. Source: The Journal for Campus Behavioral Intervention, https://cdn.nabita.org/website-media/nabita.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/JBIT2015_Article1.pdf

¹⁶ "Involuntary Celibate" is term that was coined in 1993 by a Canadian university student under the pseudonym Alana who created an internet community to provide refuge for people who hadn't had sex in a long time and/or struggled socially. In the late 2010s it was co-opted by misogynists called "Incels" who created an entirely new, largely anti-women ideology surrounding the term. The group is known to dwell on the internet forum Reddit. Mass shooter, Elliot Roger who murder 6 people before ending his own life was a known incel. He was also the inspiration for several other incels who carried out mass murders after him. Source: BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45284455>

You pull away from your family. Some of them have said similar obscenities about your person to you. Some of them have said nothing of that kind. Many of you have a younger brother who wishes you would play the Wii with him the way you did when you were younger. Others have a sister away at college, who worries about you being home without her to mitigate the blows from the things your parents say about you. They call. They text you once and then again even though they know you've seen it. It's somehow not enough.

They will confront death after you finally carry out the act you studied in your room. Long after you've been lost to a world behind blackout curtains and overwhelmingly drawn to the purgatorial blue-white glow of the screen, they'll ask: *could I have stopped him? Should I have called more? Did I make him that upset? Was it our parents? The school? His friends? Lack there-of?*

The FBI will confiscate your computer during the investigation. They scour your blog, your email, and your Reddit to curate an in depth report on your internet behavior. Even then it will not be enough to give anyone rationalization as to exactly why you did what you did. Only that you were inspired by your predecessors or obsessed with the prestige that they acquired or believed wholeheartedly that you were saving strangers lives when condemning them to death.

I the Lost

Alerted by nothing and nobody, adrenaline radiates through my body. I feel an urge to look outside the window that I can't resist. It's a repetitive thought that taps my shoulder until I give into its wish, so strong that it feels tangible. If I don't turn around and check, I'm going to fail to perceive a threat to my wellbeing so gargantuan that I won't even know it's there until it kills me.

August was dead within thirty seconds of the shooter's entry into his first-grade classroom. Then there were, moving through them faster than a millisecond. So many that it's unlikely many of them suffered. I wonder if he had time to turn around and see his killer?

I turn around to peer over the sheet-covered couch into my front yard. The same trees I climbed when I was small stand tall like soldiers, casting shadows across the lawn in the five o'clock January sunset. There's a good fifty feet between my house and the road. I train my eyes there. I await any sign of movement. If someone is going to see me through the window, they'd have to be on the road first.

I imagine what the house across the street would look like with its windows shattered and pale blue siding polka-dotted with bullet holes. Mom is jealous of the new tiles on their roof. In the summer, they have potted plants and grass that looks like a golf course. I picture the old couple who lives there lying on the kitchen floor, shaking and crying, as gunshots pierced the air. Their stainless-steel oven lets out a melodic *ding*. The crème-brulee has risen and is ready for supper.

Tonight, they will not eat at the table.

I realize I probably wouldn't be able to see the bullet holes from my window where I sit - too small. I don't know if their oven is stainless steel. I don't even know if they cook much. Perhaps they eat out. I don't even know how crème-brulees are made.

I fly out of my seat when a Kia Sorento carting a family of five whips around the corner of Dunsinane Road onto Banquo Brae Avenue. Adrenaline pulses through my body, and I can feel my heart quiver in my chest. I wait there at the window for a moment and scan the road for activity. Nothing moves. Silence and stillness fold over my street like two hands cradling a candle.

If I sit up tall, the left side of my head is completely exposed to the outside world and whoever is passing through it. Should I be spotted, I'd be such an easy target. Should a shooter spot me from the street, he'd have a clear shot. Right at my head. I long for bulletproof glass. Better yet a shield. I would settle for a thick curtain so at least a gunman wouldn't see me there. *If he can't see me will he still shoot?*

My mom has been meaning to buy new curtains for months. We had painted the room in September, and she had to change them to match the new color scheme. I remember sitting cross-legged in my mismatched pajamas on a sheet of plastic that armored the hardwood beneath it stirring paint.

"I want it to feel bright here, Meg." She brandished a paint roller like a sword. Pantone's Honeycomb Yellow smudged against her ripped black yoga pants. She takes a step back from the wall for a moment and sizes up our living room. It's just had a full coat of paint but the rouge from the room's former color is bleeding through. They were painted burnt sienna when she was pregnant with Lila. She claims that her pregnancy hormones were the only reason she chose the red in the first place. Perhaps if I had been a little older at the time, I could've persuaded her into

choosing a more flattering tone for the room. “We have three little women in the family—I think we need to take the territory back, you know, for the divine feminine!”

“I like the yellow more too,” I laugh in return, sitting cross-legged, stirring the paint with two hands around the paddle. I look up at her like she’s the god of all things heavenly and HGTV.

Now, she only leaves the house when the fridge is empty (my little sister Lila and I can sustain ourselves on Lunchables for several days) or she runs out of Parliaments. Mom smokes them as she takes her Ativan with her coffee at the break of dawn. She does this every morning, sitting on the back deck in thirty-degree December weather, wrapped in my father’s camping sleeping bag. She splits the pills through the middle and bums the cigarette before it’s burned halfway down— she needs them both to last.

We the Dying

Atlanta, 2021¹⁷

One of us hailed from China, she had been earning money for her family since middle school. Mid-morning, hands not yet aching from the body work that they are soon to perform. She pours massage oil onto the stranger's back. She's at work at the spa, just as she has been everyday. She's a dreamer, with no legal record in the U.S. aspiring for a green card to protect her from the looming threat of deportation. She stays in the country anyway, enduring a pandemic that some of its citizens blame those who look like her causing. She knows it's not her fault.

She thinks about how she'll afford to go visit, to see her family and the house, as she presses her thumbs into the knots under a stranger's shoulder blades. She was sure it was worth the trouble, the money she earned crossed the ocean and alchemized itself into a newly constructed home for her family in China.

Just that little green card and a little more time.

Untying the pain from muscles Rhomboid major and minor.

The authorities initially couldn't identify her body as she was almost completely alone in America. Her funeral was attended by strangers and volunteers. Nevertheless, they cried for her. This grief transcends family. Ashes sleeping beneath the soil of a country that hesitated to induct her into its American dream. Sleep and dream.¹⁸

¹⁷ Source: "Atlanta spa shootings: Who are the victims?"
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56446771>

¹⁸ Daoyu Feng, an employee at Young's Asian Massage was shot to death alongside several patrons and coworkers. Her identity was shrouded in mystery and it took months for this news to reach her family in China. Source:
<https://www.npr.org/2021/04/28/990956942/in-china-atlanta-shooting-victims-kin-struggle-to-understand-her-and-her-death>

Us the Gifts

December 30, 2012

We are undisturbed for most of the week leading up to the end of the year. The town seems to fall into a slumber. We're visited sparsely, but the tears we entertain are loyal to the magnitude that they held a couple weeks ago. We stay with them (not that we can leave) as they cry on the stone benches and hold each other on the front steps of the town hall.

With each visitor, we wondered when it would get better for them. Our collective mind has become so expensive. We've watched them from every place in town and from angle now, but we still don't have an answer for that question.

"Perhaps it will be better in the New Year." A man in overalls with a fluffy gray-brown mustache says to another, wearing matching garb as they walk past the tree, which is still in its holiday garb, toward the entrance of the town hall. One of them has a trash bag in tow and carries a shovel on his shoulder.

"They said to only clean off the stairs." He speaks again.

"Only the stairs?" The other replies.

"They want to clean everything off in phases; they're not sure what they're going to do with all the gifts just yet." There's a beat as he stares at a pile of us on the stairs (he looks so tall from where we sit) many of whom are buried in snow, the ones at the top are heavily saturated. One of us who arrived with a perky tweed bow tie was in particularly poor condition; the tie has come undone and hangs on either side of his shoulders. The threading that joined his left limb to his torso is loose, and his fluffy insides are beginning to puff out of the wound. "Or at least the remains of them."

The other man hummed in the affirmative; though we cannot talk, we all agree that we don't know what could be appropriately said in response to that statement. Maybe, "rest in peace", we've heard that phrase a lot. Also, "I'm sorry for your loss". Maybe not, "my thoughts and prayers are with you". We watched people say many things to each other over the past week in an attempt to comfort. They seemed to like "thoughts and prayers" for a little while, but as observers we've found it to be a hollow statement. Not one of us would say it. No, we definitely wouldn't.

They make haste with those of us on the stairs. First, they pull the bears at the top from the snowbank. The tweed bow tie flutters off the top bear's shoulders as he's packed away, and it escapes the trash bag on a lucky gust of wind.

They shovel the snow out from around us and to the sides of the steps. Gloved hands, our guardian angels (we've also heard a lot about angels) and lift our saturated bodies from where they lay. Though we're undoubtedly sentient, we know we've only ever been a little alive (can there be life without motion?) but we know this is surely what it feels like to be dead.

Surely, this is what it feels like to be moved from the morgue to the grave. Will we go to a grave? The bears being packed tightly against each other in that black trash bag are scared because we've only known death to be something too soon and too sad to hold comfortably. We've heard so many promises of the afterlife and the phrase "she is now one of God's beautiful angels", so it must be good on the other side. Won't it be good? Won't we be angels?

They handle us roughly, but we don't blame them for it; we can tell that they don't want to do this. They shouldn't have to do this. We would apologize if we could, but it wouldn't be right. After all, we didn't choose to be made, and we didn't choose to be sent here.

Why were teddy bears sent to Newtown shoveled away with the fallen snow? Piles of fluff and frozen dirt.

You the Killers

For most of you, your attack lasts at least a minute and a half to six minutes at most. You kill people fast. Tearing them apart, thinking that maybe you're a god and nobody noticed until now. You'll make them know. Your face will light up TVs across the nation even though you will not live to look upon those screens.

It doesn't matter if I die now; my image is immortal, you think.

When you hear the first responders stomp down the hall, do you wonder if it was a mistake? Was it too little time? Or too little damage done unto others?

When you press the barrel of your Glock—the one you saved to take your own life specifically—to your temples, you feel oxygen flood your nostrils for the very last time.

You look at the inert bodies of our daughters, brothers, mothers, fathers, and lovers that you have butchered. They were your strangers, your meat. Will stillness treat you well? Are you sad that your life is over too? Is this an ending fit for the god you believe you are?

I the Lost

I hope she'll buy new curtains soon. I don't want my brain to be blown up without knowing it's coming. I can't make my mom clean me off the couch. Moms know so much, but they shouldn't know what their children's brains look like. She doesn't leave this house much either, and I wouldn't want to make her feel quite so unpleasant. The little town outside this house is already haunted.

So I slump lower in my seat on the couch until I'm nearly lying flat on my back and I can guarantee my head is out of the line of fire. I pull out the pamphlet and the scissors in my pocket, cradling them in my hands for a moment. The scissors are cold and the pamphlet is so thin. I had gotten the scissors to hide under my pillow—in case of a sudden emergency, a break in, or an attack of some kind in my sleep. A pair of scissors couldn't save me from an AR-15, I knew this. But maybe I could create a diversion for a couple of seconds. My family could sneak out the back door. They could hide behind the Jeep in the driveway and call the cops. I'd die quickly—I probably wouldn't even feel it—quick and clean. Maybe one or two of them could live on in the shadow of the slaughter. Just like Temperance does; just like I do.

I'm not sure what stirred within me that caused my fingers to grip the hilt of the scissor blades in my pocket. For a minute, with the blade in my hand I felt protected. Some semblance of safety and control rippled through my body.

Curiously, I put August's face in between the scissor blades. It would be so easy to snap him in half. Then maybe he'd be free from the page. He's so frail like this, in this form—it's just not fair. I picture his spirit leaping from the halved photo and flying back home to his mother, father, and brother.

I push the handle of the scissors together and the photo is sliced in two. Cardstock fluttering into my lap, light like an abandoned feather.

I'm frozen for a few seconds with my eyes trained on the halved paper in my lap, unsure of why, after such effort to protect Paper August I would destroy him. So quickly, so quietly, so perfectly. Nothing happens, I don't see his soul burst from the page nor do I hear him whisper, *Thank you, I'm free now*. It all means nothing, it was random, nobody got any better or worse. I was alone on the couch staring at the piece of paper that was once August Taylor waiting for something that made sense to happen.

I feel my gut fold in upon itself—I feel so guilty—how dare I kill him again. I pull my legs to my chest and claw at my scalp as my body begins to shake. That was his last link home, and now he's got nothing to rope him by to us like a lost astronaut, and I took away his oxygen. I can feel my nails break the skin on my head and it hurts. I'll have to wash them in scalding water for at least ten minutes for them to be clean. I'll have to pick my own dried blood from beneath cracked fingernails.

I start to sob audibly and hear my mom walk in from the other room to see what's wrong with me. So much is wrong with me. How dare I kill August uselessly again? I have no fucking right to make him die for nothing twice over.

I clutch the scissors in my right hand and train my eyes on his paper remains in my lap.
August Taylor, I am so sorry that this happened to you.

My youth lies with you, August. Somewhere that we both know; between the glass classroom door the killer shot through, and the door to my house that I cannot yet find the gall to walk through anymore.

Us the Gifts

October 2013

Those of us who were kept at the warehouse and never put on the street are briefly moved from storage for reasons that we couldn't have predicted. One at a time; we are sat on a white screen staring at a wide camera lens. Our embroidered smiles reflected at us in the camera's lens.

“We'll remember you.” The woman who holds the camera says. We feel grateful to hear her say that, but we don't know why. Light flashes from her camera; we wonder if this is what it feels like to take a breath. “Documentation” and “preservation”, were what she says this act is. We aren't sure what that means.

She gingerly tucks us back into our boxes, one on top of the other. She has a frown etched into her face that we couldn't make melt away.¹⁹

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Those of us who were removed from the memorials around town spent the next nine months in that same darkness. It was a long slumber. It was gestation.

We feel ourselves being moved. Where to? We don't know; we are only sure that we're moving. The hum of machines, the sigh of pistons, and the smell of steam.

Our bags and boxes are stacked on top of each other. Eventually, the slams of metal doors and the ground beneath us vibrate; we think of its wheels. Where are they taking us?

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The doors of the vehicle groan as they open once more. A metal claw grabs our bags, squishing us in on each other. The plastic tears as we're lifted and through those openings we can

¹⁹ Ashley Maynor documented the gifts sent to Newtown in her web documentary, “The Story of the Stuff”. Source: <https://thestoryofthestuff.com>

see industrial gray walls. It's dim in this place but feels bright as this is the first light we've seen in several months. Through the frame of a window, the early morning sky is pink.

The machine's grip loosens, and we fall into a heap in a giant concrete gutter. Paper hearts and folded cranes flutter down around us as we look up at the gray ceiling. Pretty little birds. There's residue from trash, food, and other waste on the surfaces. It stains our pelts.

The machine continues to drop loads of us on top of each other and only now are we able to conceptualize how many of us there actually are. It appears it will never stop. We're together in this pile, embracing each other, and we imagine we must look monstrous to any onlookers. Some of us are headless and others have grown mold. We accept each other as is and we can feel the collective good intentions of the thousands of souls who sent to Newtown's aid. We truly wonder what good it did, what good we did, and if it had any impact at all.

We don't stop holding each other as the claw finishes, dropping us on top of one another. We hear a door shut, and the room grows warm. We're set alight like the witches in Salem and just like the women that burned, we're not at fault in the slightest. The handwritten letters and paper cranes catch fire first. Kindling. The strings of paper hearts run all throughout our assembled, collective body like veins. They circulate the fire until it's touched all of us, until it spreads to all of us.

Even now, as we burn, we hold each other. Even now, as we burn, we are grateful for the end, grateful for the release.

We the Dying Address You the Killers: Epilogue

Newtown (2012), Aurora (2012), Gilroy (2019), et al.

One of our daughters was found beneath the carnage unscathed. She walks out of the school flanked by two six-foot tall men, armored in bulletproof vests. Her hair was caked with the blood of her friends. Her favorite t-shirt was so soaked that we could barely make out the Hello Kitty graphic in the middle of her chest.

We sobbed and ran to her, picking her up in our arms and kissing her face.

“Oh my sweet baby!” We sob but our daughter does not cry.

“Mommy! I pretended I was dead too!”

We clutch her closer to our chests, we didn’t know how blessed her heartbeat could sound.²⁰

Her classmates aren’t so lucky. Many of us wait in the fire station, hoping that someone guides our children back into our arms.

Some of us are reunited. We take our children home and tuck them in bed. We wait by their beds until they fall asleep. Afterwards, we lie in bed and stare at the popcorn ceiling all night.

Many of us see our children lying on silver tables. Their bodies are so shattered. One of our daughters is intact from her cupid's bow and up, if her jaw wasn’t shot clean off she’d look like she was smiling.

²⁰ A pastor disclosed the story of a girl who survived the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School by hiding beneath the bodies of the other victims in her class.
<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2249186/Sandy-Hook-elementary-school-shooting-Ho-w-girl-sole-survivor-class-playing-dead.html>

One of us went to see “Batman: The Dark Knight” with her friends on a whim. She had popcorn in her mouth when your bullet grazed the side of her head. She spends her days in a hospital bed. Her sister sold her house to pay for her treatment.

Make no mistake; she is not alive like this.²¹

You took away our little boy at a spice festival. He bled out on a hay bale. We held him in our arms and sobbed.

“It’s going to be okay baby, help is coming. You just gotta see the doctor!” We know he doesn’t believe us, but he doesn’t say it. We don’t stop looking in his eyes. He doesn’t cry.

“I’m gonna be just f-fine.” His eyes glaze over and we know that he’s lying, but we try to believe him. We wanted nothing more than anything to believe him.

The smell of iron blood and artisan pepper were not meant to blend.²²

You left so many of us dead that you couldn’t fit all of our inert bodies into an Olympic sized swimming pool.

It doesn’t matter why you did it. We don’t care who fucked you up as a child. We can speculate all we want, but it doesn’t matter.

You deserve nothing close to redemption. We don’t know afterwards where one like you burns, but it hardly matters to us anymore.

²¹ Shooting in Aurora, Colorado in 2012 at a showing of “Batman: The Dark Knight”, <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/the-aurora-shooting-victims/>

²²Stephen Romero age 6 was murdered in a mass shooting at the Gilroy Garlic festival in 2012. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/29/us/gilroy-california-food-festival-shooting-victims/index.html>

Us the Gifts: An Epilogue

A little girl in head to toe L.L. Bean finds the tweed bow tie woven into a fallen bird's nest near town hall. No bird in sight. No eggshells.

How did it get here?

Whose neck had it adorned?

Are the questions she asked.

She holds the assemblage of twigs and twine with both hands. She assumes its residents have flown somewhere warmer — she learned about migration in her first grade class last year.

Going somewhere warmer sounds nice, she thinks.

Those of us who weren't burned or archived or given to loving families but weren't completely cleaned off the steps still linger as ghosts. We watch over the local hiking trails and those who traverse them. We revisit the front steps of the town hall that we once knew as home when we had physical bodies. The school was leveled and we watched it fall to earth and ash from the parking lot. Ghostly paw holding ghostly paw.

Though the humans cannot see or hear us we're sure that they know we're here. They feel us while they wait for the school bus with an overwhelming feeling of loss. We want to hold their hand when their child gets on the bus, but we can't. We wish we could take some of that weight of fear off their shoulders, but our realm cannot physically affect theirs.

They feel us at the General Store by the deli counter when their child begs for a sandwich. They know we sit in the empty seats in the old theater inside Edmond Town Hall.

They know we weep with them. It doesn't do any good.

We are long gone from the streets of Newtown but if you look closely you can see their shadows on the bench in the park dedicated to a victim, cast upon the new bullet-proof

elementary school, and in the sacred soil, the ash, that will become the memorial for those 20 children who were lost.

The torment sits here in the exit wound. We were given as something of gifts, became something to be set alight, and have become something that haunts. We weep with those who survived, from the baby born on the fourteenth of December to the elder who lost their grandchild on a Friday morning. Haunting is just another way to remember: remembering is just another reason us ghosts have chosen to stay. We are open wounds who know how to become scars and yet we will refuse.

Acknowledgements

Without the ceaseless encouragement of Lyde Cullen Sizer, my incredible thesis advisor and Don, without whom this thesis could not have been completed. In my moments of fright, you pushed me along and reminded me that I have something important to say. I truly cannot thank you enough for your support, edits, and compassion for my work.

Thank you Professor Mary Porter, my second reader, for your encouragement and insight on this project. Your support has been cherished and I'm so grateful to have had your input.

Thank you Devan, my beloved partner, for your endless love, patience, thoughtful beta-reading, and countless coffees brought to me in bed. You make me want to succeed.

Thank you to my grandparents, each of you, for the endless resources you have provided me over the years and throughout my education. I would not be here today without you.

My mother who has read my writing (even the first drafts) since I was six and didn't give up on me in middle school even when teachers deemed me a lost cause. You have never steered me wrong, thank you. My father who read me stories every night before bed after your long commute to the office. You taught me how to make my darkest moments bright, which has been a key to my writing craft, especially when writing something like this, and I am grateful. Thank you both.

The Author



Chlo Landisman is a New England based and an up-and-coming author whose poetry and prose has been published in *Iō Literary Journal*, *Fearsome Critters*, and *Ruminate Magazine*. Chlo best defines practicing writing in the words of author and poet Dorothy Parker: “I wake up in the morning and brush my teeth, and then I sharpen my tongue”.