

Misremembering:

A Personal Retelling

Author's note: All incorrect names and inconsistencies found in the text are intentional.

I was in the bath, out in the wind. A teacup anchored in bathwater. In an effort to escape, I had run a bath. Shortly after, you opened the door to the bathroom as if you were trying to move molasses. I couldn't look at the burn in your cheeks or wonder how your clunky knees must be feeling on the tiled floor. Leaning on the side of the tub, you looked like an aged man who had lips and a nose, but no face. You had bubbled and melted into a stoned shadow condemned to the floor. I remembered the last time silence had stitched our mouths shut; it was a mistake. A match that would spark up pitiful coals beneath a dying fire.

I probably talked first. After hiding your filthy fucking phone underneath my mucky red towel. Every time I breathed out, your head seemed to slump. It made a moan every time it hit the rim of the bath. There were no words to make me misremember anymore. Not this time.

Slumping burns clunkily into towels.

Molasses on cheek rims.

Aged anchors faced no opening

Molasses on tiles.

Pitiful filth

Wind draining muck.

Molasses on

coals.

Shadow drains.

What one remembers is love's true form.

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Sylvia Plath's Esther Greenwood found out the truth when she watched a baby being born.

She was able to sit through the entire thing behind a thin wall of glass, standing. She looked hard and understood something trapped in the mother's faint hair. How the mother's body looked like it had been carved into an adornment for Hell. How her obedient legs remained triangular. Wobbly prisms as shaky as bridges, whose veins blurred in and out of her skin. All while steaming eyes are there, looking right where she can't. All looking at a man who puts his fingers underneath a molded peach and drags it out.

What does it feel like to get to the other side of the tightrope, only to get blown off a cliff? Perhaps not even intentionally, but just by the wind's design. Watching the baby being born certainly made Esther wonder, enough to not want to marry Billy the doctor. He was the one who had reassured her that, in a week's time, the mother wouldn't remember a thing; "Soon she'll be back at home with her fellow ladies, reminiscing about the entire affair as if it had been a mere appointment at the hairdresser's." Of course, Esther was too smart to believe him. I think not being in love made it easier for her in that regard.

Esther only met Billy because he met her. While she was still in high school. He was in medical school and drove all across town to pick her up. She would get ready in a long-tongued mirror and look at the doll she had crept into. Would touch the puffs of her hair to make sure they weren't ski slopes. She must have loved opening lipstick caps and erupting their bright red colour with a twist. She probably only put them on to hear the triumphant *click* when she closed them. Personally, I can only assume that's why women wear makeup, to find any excuse to put it on and hear that *click* echo off the bathroom walls.

All the other girls would glare at her when they heard it was Date Night. They'd crinkle their two brows into one and bring a hand to their chins. They'd see her cloudy red shoes and her egregious mouth and wonder. In fairness, girls are always pitted against each other, so it was best to be understanding about such things. Still, it made Esther feel stupid. In their eyes, she didn't want to be a piece of paper that was too soft and crusty to hold.

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If you stare at the same Kahlo painting too long, you end up losing track of what's in it. In "What the Water Gave Me" a skyscraper rips out of a volcano so painfully that lines of blood instinctually trickle down to gravity. Next to the eruption is a bird lying down on its back, dead. A tree props it up steadily, offering the bird in its hands. A battered conch parallel to the shiny white landmark is filled with punctures so deep that rapids seep out of them. Away floats a woman's dress, its owner naked and

misshapen. There is nothing left to stop her from hiding under the water save for a string tied in loops around her neck. The rope is in the hands of a tired, hardworking man without a face, whose legs always remain open. Two witnesses hide in leaves but remain unconcealed. Their wondering eyes look dead at Kahlo. When recalling the painting to mind, I see the two grimacing, though in

real life, they aren't. Kahlo's bathing feet are pressed firmly against the edge of the tub. Yet the water's ineludible reflection points Kahlo's red toes back towards the madness.

In the alluring porcelain crib, Kahlo's horrific memories seem to have just slipped out of her mind and plopped into her tub like bath toys. She couldn't misremember anymore; she loved herself too much for anything like that. Despite all this, you can't help but notice how warm the water looks instead.

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I always thought you'd end up being tremendous onstage. I can recall an acquaintance mentioning that you had recently gotten into the National Theatre School, so I suppose those daydreams were coated in likelihood. After all, actors act. I'm remembering the things I shouldn't again... All this to say, when we lived together you took your role as my hand holder very seriously. Being needed is a wonderful feeling and I always needed someone. Everything with me came as a huff and a puff. *(Huff) "Ohwe'remeetingeveryoneatdinnertonight?" (Puff) "It's okay, it'll be fine, everything's fine."* And then I'd scramble about till I exhausted myself. I believe on that night it was: *(Huff) "Ihavetowriteanentirepaperthat'sduetomorrowwhatifIcan'tfinishit?" (Puff) "I just have to get started on it as soon as possible, the sooner I get started on it, the sooner it will get finished."* Did I already mention that this was when we were living together? It was fun because it gave me the opportunity to say "Honey, I'm home!" semi-ironically. After my huff and puff, and an embrace, you told me to go into the living room and listen to some loud music. During your instructions, a bright flicker burst from your eyes, so I should've sensed something was coming. But it's harder to notice things when you live with someone. It's easy to wade in the water and let it kiss your fingertips. It didn't take long for you to walk softly back into the living room and lead me to the end of our apartment. When you got to the bathroom, with a beaming cheek

and a timid eye, you opened our rickety door as slowly as you could. I think you were too focused on making sure the air was symmetrical to actually breathe it in. Inside were all the candles we owned, glowing faintly like wildflowers at dusk. Our bathmat was a welcome home doormat taped to the floor (that's not true, but I like to misremember it was). It ushered me towards a toasty pool of cloudy water, with bubbles so tall they almost looked like the ski slopes I imagine are in Esther's hair. A couple of days before, you and I had watched someone do this for their partner on a tv show. It was a sweet sitcom gesture that must've stayed in your mind. "Now you can focus on your work in our bath where you can relax." You said it in the coy tone grandmothers use when they casually surprise their grandkids with ice cream. As I sat, trying to type in the warm bath, I couldn't help but think I'd rather be working next to you on the couch. Back then, I didn't know that, in a week's time, we'd never work side by side on the couch ever again.

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Alright, I remember now, it wasn't the baby being born that made Esther not want to marry Bobby, it was the rule he broke.

Esther had been saving herself for quite some time. Bobby's mother was adamant that sex was only reserved for married couples. The ones who had kaleidoscopic robes and his and her sinks in their bathrooms.

Esther liked the structure of it. Celibacy was books ordered by genre instead of author.

It wasn't that she didn't want to have sex. In fact, she sometimes imagined herself in the heat of the moment looking up at the ceiling and thanking it for not telling anyone about what she was doing. She was certain that, when she met someone good enough, the rainy opportunity would eventually come along with it.

In most ways, Bobby seemed good enough.

He was tall and took good care of his hair. What Esther would remember most about him years later was his jaw, which firmly drew a line in the sand. It was a jaw that told everyone to stay in their seats and remain calm.

She could imagine planning a trip with him, travelling as far away from here as possible. To Africa, where they could see the way lions sleep during the day.

But it was too dark in his car on their way back from the glassy delivery room. Bobby was droning on about the medical process of suturing and its vitality to human survival. Esther would have looked out the window during his drowsy lesson, but the black tornado night outside made it impossible.

She was forced to negotiate with the weather.

Esther closed her eyes and pretended she was a rich royal in an expensive carriage, that she was to be married off to the most powerful man in Spain, who sold wildcats as a hobby. As she was reminiscing the chimera, sleep almost caught her, but Bobby was too loud for it to claw her out of the car.

After a while, she finally decided to force the conversation out of Bobby's mouth: "Do you want to pull over for a while?"

That was how Bobby told her about the waitress he had slept with when he was a teenager. He recalled it a bit too nostalgically, before swiftly informing her he liked her so much because she hadn't slept with anyone and was still pure. He said it all with his jaw moving up and down like a swing. He said it all as if his teeth weren't made out of bell jars.

She didn't think it was fair, you know you're breaking the rules when you misremember your mother's morals.

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Bathing is said to be an experience. A transitional period where time stands still and daydreams abound. According to a scholar whose name I don't remember (don't worry it's in my sources), this is because "*the lack of gravity in warm water helps bathers experience a dissolution of physical boundaries.*" It is the place to reflect in an Esther-like stream of consciousness manner. There's a story about some Greek scientist or philosopher who had to figure out a useless piece of information requested by the king about his gold crown. I think it was how much liquid gold the crown would have if it was melted, or... something like that. When the Roman scientist got in his milk bath and pondered the dilemma, he figured it out and in the process uncovered a universal law of physics. He was so elated by his discovery that he roamed around his village nude shouting "Eureka! Eureka!" to the entertainment of millions (do forgive my scattered recollections here and elsewhere, embellishments are to memory what color is to art).

Prolonged nakedness has always been an entertaining spectacle. One of the most famous scenes in cinema is Norma Leigh screaming in horror as a knife repeatedly stabs her in the stomach. Likewise, the incomparable image of Elizabeth Taylor's Cleopatra calculating her political plots in a flowery bath will be with us for centuries. Men are obsessed with positioning women in nakedness, big surprise there. Perhaps the best example of this is the dreamy Jeanine trying not to fall asleep in her bathtub. She gets so comfortable and secure in the water that her head slips back as a child would on a slide. Yet, cruelly, in that moment of guarded surrender she is most at peril, as it is then that Freddie Krugar lifts his knife hand between her vulnerable legs like a dorsal fin. In our patriarchal landscape, it is oddly empowering to consider men like Freddie Krugar feel most

unthreatened when a woman is without even her clothes. In their eyes, she is such a menace that she must be naked, entirely vulnerable, to be considered nonfatal. To be considered most available to harm. Perhaps naked women are plastered around for both men and women to remember this; for their own respective safety.

I feel like intelligence is the ability to first love, and then remember your learnings. “What the Water Gave me” is the first Frida Kahlo painting I learned about and couldn’t forget. You can never forget the things you truly love. It was my first discovery of young boys going too far, which is something we have all claimed or tried to misremember. The painting shares *Nightmare on Elm Street*’s suggestion that the bath is a place haunted by sexual violence. At first, I thought it was just a pretty painting. A girl’s dream made up during story time. Only later did I realize it was an emotional car crash. The kind you can’t look away from. Where there is no more time and no more physics. The painting puts on a platter the wandering thoughts that permeate after you’ve slept with Ceasar or been stabbed in the stomach by a psycho. Its events seem so impossible in your head that you think Frida Kahlo is the only one who could understand it. Let alone believe it.

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It took me a long time to believe it. To not misremember the flashbacks as I lived through it all for a second time. Why do young boys always go too far? So careless about catalyzing whirlpools until it wrecks their toy boats. Never stopping when it anchors women overboard.

Back in my bathroom, the tub's deep edges have cut our ship in two. (*Huff*) *Iaminwater*. (*Puff*) *You are not*. (*Huff*) *Thisismyapartment*. (*Puff*) *You have a key*. I remember learning in high school that there was an experiment where scientists measured people’s body temperature according to their emotions. The sadder you are, the colder your body gets. Before I knew it, you

were saying goodbye. I think the green bathwater kept me from getting too cold. (*Huff*)
Yousayingyourapologies. Urgentlyaskingmenottoswimaway. (Puff) Me saying my Nos.

I remember a feminist poet I love named Adrienne Rich had talked about what this feels like; grappling with the acknowledgement of “the wreck”. What if you had done that thing, that mistake, where you had morphed. Had imagined yourself out of thin air. What if, after all these years of misremembering the remarks of friends, they were right. What will happen when you forget how many windows are in the building in front of yours? What will happen when my eyes evoke your beaming face? What will happen when I misremember it’s possible to tell someone I’m scared? Recollections of Rich saying “I must dive in alone” stand firmly on my bathroom walls like a lighthouse. For once, my memory cradles my scarlet head. Arms that are my own crossed an x around my chest. I didn’t want you to see me anymore. Your faceless actions have made me guilty by association. I’ve become the mother of a bull shark. All that matters now is the stillness of the water. Not a ripple, not a current, could move an ocean that still.

You said a stone in a lake never falls out. I said the ones that stay clean get picked up off the beach.

Then he closed the door,

and I blanketed my solitude by misremembering Sylvia’s story.

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Esther thinks there is nothing better than a good bath. Whenever the world has too many eyes or a date went bad, she says "I'm going to go take a bath."

There isn't a bathroom ceiling Esther hasn't memorized. She remembers the baths too, and what sorts of feet they had. Recollection requires love. According to Esther, the key to a good bath is to make it as hot as possible, to the point where steam gets into your hair. Then you put your body in the bath inch by inch, until the only thing not red is your head.

I think I love my bath too.

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