

## Throw it Up

Suzanne Richardson

Heroin made Tristan's breath sweet like mangoes. When we kissed it felt like licking the inside of a kiwi: fragrant, indulgent, the tangy saccharine rolling around my tongue. I didn't know why he tasted like that, but I liked it. At the time I didn't know I was sleeping with a heroin addict. He would sit up in bed and scratch his arms and face for hours. I would call his name, shake him even, but he wouldn't answer. In all four years I'd slept with him, he had never acted that way before. I would put on a robe and pace the apartment, or sit on the couch, and think about my family. My brother. My parents. I had never felt this scared with them despite our differences. Sometimes I would grab fruits or vegetables from the fridge and nervously practice peeling, or dicing until dawn. I think I did this out of some compulsion to better myself even in the darkest of hours. My mother could always chop and dice things perfectly. I taught myself to peel mangoes in one motion so the peel piled into one long strand in the sink drain. I couldn't think of anything that would make him act that way. One night, lying on the couch, staring at the ceiling, I recalled a conversation I'd had at a party with an EMT.

"Heroin makes you so itchy. That's why junkies look flea-bitten, they scratch themselves silly. It's sick shit." I remember laughing loudly at this with a certain haughty superiority.

At work, in my cubicle, I googled and found the condition was called itchy blood, junkies scratched due to a chemical reaction. I didn't want to believe it. I went to the bathroom and had the first of many panic attacks that year, I remember wanting to shove wads of toilet paper down my throat to muffle the sound of my labored breathing because there was a woman from my office in the stall next to me. Blood pounded in my ears. I ran my fingers all over my face and body checking. Something had to be bleeding there was so much pain. When she asked me later in the hall if I was okay, I told her I had cramps.

"Oh Honey, I've been there." She squeezed my shoulder.

*No you fucking haven't.* I smiled weakly, and kept walking.

I was horribly carsick as a child to the point where almost every trip resulted in similar scenes of me vomiting: in a trash can, doubled over by the side of the road, beside a highway, and in Wilco station bathrooms in Sparta, North Carolina. Often, when my father wouldn't, or couldn't pull over, it was me vomiting out the window or into lunch boxes, my game bag, fast-food bags, car-seat pouches, on the floor, in my crayon boxes, on my pillow, in my pillowcase, on my brother, and on myself. Those are some of my first memories of disassociating. I would suddenly be outside the car running behind it blankly, part of me would fly out the window and glide up into the pines away from that disgusting person in the car. Sometimes I'd sit rigidly in my own filth repeating the phrase in my head, my face hot and throbbing from the act: *I'm gonna be sick. I'm gonna throw up. I'm gonna be sick. I'm gonna throw up.* I cried out of humiliation or shock sometimes, but I got to the point where it was a routine. My mother always silently livid about the mess I'd made. My father, incredulous that I couldn't wait until he pulled over even though I'd been telling him for miles. In many ways I still feel like the little girl in the backseat telling my parents I have to throw up. They seem to have selective hearing about matters that are urgent to me. Then, when I make a mess, they point at it, furiously, how could I make such a mess? So eventually I stopped telling them I was in trouble. I learned that sitting in my own vomit and feeling like less than a person was something I was actually good at.

My best friend Elise once told me that you never stop loving people, you just stop being with them. I stopped being with Tristan over a year ago. I don't know when I will stop loving him. I may never stop. When I ended it I told him: "Sometimes love isn't enough. You have to compromise, and want the same things." For a while we did want the same things.

When I was with Tristan all I thought about was marrying him, being with him for my entire lifetime, and having his children. I no longer think of myself as having children, or spending my life with someone. I sometimes think my mind won't let me access that kind of vision of happiness because it went away so cruelly. A domestic life feels like something I'm not allowed to have. It's behind glass. I think of my married and coupled friends that way. They're in a house, and I'm outside on the porch looking at them through the window.

I still have days where I hate everyone because of what I went through with Tristan. There are days when I'm angry that I loved someone and he loved drugs, and himself more. There are days when it's hard for me to think about my brother and his happy family, because I feel so far away from that life. On those days when I see anyone holding hands in the street or any happy couple

pushing a stroller through a park I think horrible thoughts. Tandem bikes in particular bother me. The equal weight distribution, that sickening teamwork where at some point one is doing more than the other, but never too much, and you can feel it, physically feel who's doing more, to be sure you catch up and do your share. Maybe I hate it because it reminds me of desperately cycling behind Tristan on 2nd Avenue at rush hour, feeling like I would lose him at any moment while he weaved dangerously in and out of traffic. He often didn't stop at lights, and only rarely checked behind himself to see if I was still there. Sometimes our relationship felt like this. Me desperately trying to keep up, trying to prove my worth, show him I could keep up with him; risk my life by going through lights just to be near him. My bike had brakes, and his didn't. My bike had ten gears, and his had one. Tristan was always going at top speed, only braking when his body created enough backward momentum to allow it. On his fixed-gear bike, he had to decide in advance when he would brake, so he could start pedaling backwards to slow himself down. He was very good at this split-second decision of when to start braking. He was even better at maneuvering himself through traffic to avoid being hit.

Sometimes I remind myself I'm allowed to have good memories of my relationship with Tristan, and this is one of them: he took me to the abandoned cement factory north of Hudson, New York and together we walked up and down the rusted-out stairs, wondering with each step if the structure would collapse. He found a room full of employee time cards, and I took one. Morris, Ralph had clocked in at 6 a.m. and left at 5 p.m. on November the 6th, 1976, and that seemed to matter. When he told me during the car ride home that he shot heroin at sixteen with a friend for a few months it didn't seem important. He was older and wiser, and of course he'd never do anything so stupid again. Our courtship was full of explorations and discoveries. We learned about the world around us, as we learned about each other. The night he took my virginity in his dorm room I was twenty years old. After it happened we realized together it was Easter morning.

I keep the good memories in a separate place. He wasn't just an addict. He was my partner in crime. He was my lover. He was my editor. He was my teammate in two-on-two in Inwood Hill Park. He was the best listener. He was sensitive, articulate, and expressive. He was brilliant with numbers, and language. He was affectionate and passionate. He encouraged me to take risks. He helped me become more myself. When I was sad, he'd make me laugh. When we were alone he'd make me laugh until I got the hiccups, and then he'd try to scare them out of me. Even before we'd had sex, I would sometimes sleep in his bed, and he

would kiss me in the middle of the night when I was sleeping, whisper in my ear that I was beautiful. We drank tea under the large white pines outside his dorm, and we read one another's writing. He wrote the stuff of nightmares, things with strong sense of place that had little narrative, but were haunting. His characters were vagabonds, sad clowns, and sometimes children who were asked to climb subway stairs that led to nowhere. We graduated from college one and a half years later, and I moved to New York City, to be with him. We were together for two more years before he started shooting up.

I went to Tristan's apartment to break up with him. The timeline is confusing to me because I had figured out what he was doing before I confronted him, and I stayed with him after I'd heard it from him. But at this point we hadn't seen each other in probably two weeks, which was unheard of in the four years we'd been together.

I sat on his bed as he stood in the doorway looking at me.

"Are you cheating on me?" My throat constricted as I asked. I knew he wasn't, I almost hoped he was. The alternative was much scarier.

"I love you. I would never cheat on you. I don't want anyone else." I put my head in my hands as he sat next to me on the bed.

In the large apartment he had inherited from his parents, his room had changed several times. When I first arrived in NYC, he put his bed in his teenage room, which was painted an angry dark blue, and we slept there together in the August heat with no air conditioning. We took turns rubbing wet washcloths on one another when it was too hot to have sex. Later, he moved his bed into the bedroom where his parents had slept when he was a child. We once ate pineapple in bed in this room, and watched kids outside sledding in fresh snow. Then, finally, he took the room he had shared with his brother that had a view of the tulip tree in Inwood Park that marked the very spot where Native Americans sold Manhattan to the Dutch for forty guilders and a necklace. His bed had moved around that room many times but as we sat on it that night our backs were to the window with the view. The only thing I could see from where I sat was the front door.

"Are you shooting heroin?" I asked.

"Yes. But I think you knew it the whole time," he said, as if I let it go on for longer than it should have. Part of me felt responsible, but of course none of it was my fault. Maybe somewhere inside of me I had known to an extent, but I also didn't believe it.

"How long has this been going on?" I asked questions in a small quiet tone, and he answered them quickly.

"A month, a little over a month."

"Do you still have needles?"

"Yes."

"Were you shooting alone?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes with Nathan." Nathan was a thirty-two-year-old Australian he worked with as a New York City mover, whom he'd become increasingly fascinated with over the past few months. As we sat on the bed his senior thesis in fiction and Spanish translation lay on a shelf covered in dust above us. What had happened to the person who had written that?

"Did you share needles?"

"No."

"Where did you shoot it?" He pulled up his shirt, and showed me three different spots on his arm. It was strong, not the arm of a junkie. It was bulging with muscle that he was embarrassed about. As a drummer, and now a mover, he was built. He once told me he felt that his upper body strength made him look stupid, because he couldn't hold his arms straight at his sides. He was naturally incredibly muscular, the picture of health. This was one reason his father didn't believe me when I told him about Tristan's heroin use later. *He's so healthy-looking.* I responded that Tristan wasn't healthy inside and if he didn't get help, he would become unhealthy on the outside too. The spots on Tristan's arm were seamless. No sign of puncture. I could almost believe it never happened.

"You're so fucking selfish." I turned away so disgusted by him I didn't want to be near him. He tried to kiss me and I shoved him away. He became more insistent, hugging me tightly so I couldn't move. I felt whatever he was putting into his body was going directly into mine, and I felt dirty. I felt somehow I was on heroin too, by proxy. Like he had made the decision for me, for both of us. I kept telling him I would never do something like this to him, and he shrugged it off. Maybe that hurt the worst, knowing he didn't once consider my feelings. I cried all night as he slept soundly, feeling better since he didn't have any more secrets to keep, I suppose. In the morning I put on clothes and went to work, and felt sick riding the downtown A train.

The first time I noticed Tristan was near the end of fall semester my junior year in college after a dorm meeting. I saw Tristan in the hallway and thought I knew him already. I stopped him. He was shorter than I, but broad across the shoulders, unexpectedly muscular. His shaggy brown hair stuck out in points at the nape of his neck. His smooth boyish face and blue eyes peered out from under a hat.

Tristan tells the story differently. He says we met before then, but I don't remember it. He said I came up to him at a loud party once, and grabbed him

by the collar and told him he had a beautiful soul. He responded with something along the lines of,

"Thanks, but you don't even know me."

That story haunted me. That morning I thought maybe he was right, I didn't know him, even after years of being together, or worse, I didn't understand him, and didn't want to.

I found out my father had cancer the same week I figured out Tristan was using heroin. February 9, 2007, ten days before my four-year anniversary with Tristan, and four days after I asked Tristan if he was on drugs. I was walking from my apartment on Argyle Street to the gym and I got a phone call from my father. We talked for over an hour. I was outside the gym leaning against a brownstone fence, and occasionally crossing East 2nd Street back and forth to stay warm. After he finished asking me questions he said he needed to talk to me about something. I was convinced he had somehow found out that Tristan was shooting heroin, and I froze in the middle of crossing the street. I hadn't told anyone, how could he have known? As I stepped on the broken cobbled path crossing from East 2nd onto Caton Avenue, my father said:

"I went in to the doctor's office for a few tests, and they found something. They found something. It's malignant."

My body made it across the street, my feet kept walking, but some part of me stayed in the middle of the road, and is still there even now. I had shed a skin. I couldn't go back to not knowing about heroin, about cancer. What was left was a person who pretended not to know, who pretended her life was fine, who couldn't admit her father and her boyfriend were very sick. Most of all this person couldn't feel anything and yet felt everything. Her life was somehow simultaneously completely excruciating and completely pointless. Taking one breath concurrently a dagger, and a bore. When I go back to New York City, I sometimes take the Q train to Ditmas Park, walk to Kensington, and as I cross Caton Avenue I visit the parts of me that went away: that other precious self, who hadn't yet felt intense pain, the one who didn't have to make difficult decisions, the young twenty-something who believed if love was present it was always enough. I imagine that phantom part of me floating forever as a gossamer mist there between East 2nd and Caton Avenue. I wave to it, as I walk by. I used to ask myself why these things happened at the same time, and now I know not to ask. I can't think of my father's cancer without thinking about Tristan's heroin addiction and vice versa, they are woven together, braided pain; a man who didn't ask to be sick, and a man who made himself sick.

I called Tristan that night to tell him my father was sick. He was high while

we spoke, and didn't call me back. The next day he wouldn't answer my phone calls. When he finally did answer, two weeks had passed, and he didn't remember anything I'd told him about my father.

To be sick, vomit, eject, expectorate, heave, hurl, puke, hawk, expel, retch, spew, regurgitate (actually a different process than vomiting, it means to expel undigested food), upchuck, barf, throw up. Heroin makes you do all that. So does radiology. Back in North Carolina I imagined my father getting up from bed at two or three in the morning. Long thin strands of peppermint-tinged vomit threading out of his mouth, like webbing from a spider. I was never subjected to this scene, but I know it happened. I don't have to imagine Tristan being sick; I witnessed it. He would run out of restaurants and throw up on the street, bend in half on train platforms, run to his apartment sink or bathroom and throw up.

I took him to the movies and he slept through them. I took him to the Metropolitan Opera and he showed up in coveralls and nodded out within the first thirty minutes of a four-hour show. I took him out to dinner and he would fall asleep mid-sentence. Everyone would stare. Waiters would look at me with pity; customers on either side would search my face for an explanation. I had a few deflections: the embarrassed shrug, take out the cell phone, the "check please." Each time it was unfair to me that he got to be unconscious while I dealt with the waking world and their endless questions. I covered for him, made up excuses, but it was humiliating. I felt that I was so boring, so unimportant to him that he'd rather be asleep or dead than consciously spend time with me. I didn't want anyone to know that I was such a horrible girlfriend, Tristan felt like gaining a drug habit to escape me.

After he told me about the heroin, I kept it a secret and stayed with him for a month. I knew the minute I told someone I couldn't be with him anymore so I stayed quiet. No friend would understand my reluctance to leave him. If I didn't have him, what did I have? I'd been working so hard to make him the only person in my life I didn't have anyone else. I was living paycheck to paycheck at a job I loathed in a city that belonged to Tristan. Every curve of every building was his; the minute I left him I was doomed to live in his city alone. Each street corner held a memory of him. Each storefront we kissed under at a time when we were enough for one another. In a letter to a friend a month after I left Tristan I wrote: *I can't even cross to the West Side where I can see the river; it makes me sick to my stomach. I feel like I've divorced the Hudson River.*

Mornings, at my job, I would get phone calls from Tristan before he had shot

up, telling me he didn't know what was happening to him. Telling me he was worthless. Telling me nothing mattered. He talked as if heroin were something that happened to him, a predator. According to Tristan, there were no choices, no agency, heroin was a natural disaster and he endured it.

At night I would go to bed and wish I would never wake up again. A few times I packed all my bags and stared at my suitcases looking at train times to cities I'd never been to.

I went to a clinic and got an AIDS test. It wasn't my first AIDS test, but it was the first time I was nervous about it.

A man that couldn't have been more than thirty-five walked into the room where I sat. He was tall and tanned with chin-length blond hair. I could tell he was wearing some kind of hippie garb under his doctor's coat, and he wore a silver Hamsa hand around his neck. He took my hand in his, and introduced himself as Dr. Baumer. He sat down and scooted toward me asking me what I needed.

"I need an AIDS test," I said, without any emotion. His eyebrows rose in a question.

"I can do that for you. Why do you think you need one? Have you been exposed to the virus?"

"I just want to be safe," I responded curtly, looking away.

"Do you understand what the transmission routes are? I'm asking because a lot of people don't understand, and then we order tests, and it gets expensive..."

I interrupted him almost exploding. "Look, I had unprotected sex with my boyfriend of four years who recently decided to become an intravenous drug addict." That was the first time I'd said it aloud. Dr. Baumer nodded, checked some things on his chart and looked at me. Then he took my hand again, and looked me straight in the eyes.

"I'm sorry. That must be very difficult." I sucked in my cheeks and nodded. His kindness burned. When I received the negative results of my test two weeks later Dr. Baumer had printed out a copy of my results so I could take them home. He said he thought about me during the two weeks, and he was happy to see my results. I felt embarrassed that this perfect stranger cared more about my body than my boyfriend. He told me if I needed anything else he could refer me to a colleague, but that he was going to India next week and wouldn't be back for a while. I carried my test results in my wallet and looked at them when I needed to feel safe. His name was at the top of the page next to mine. I wasn't alone.

For a long time I had an intense fear of passing Tristan on the street and seeing him homeless. Every pile of clothes, every young wandering white man with shaggy brown hair, I would double-take, certain it was him. Sometimes I thought he might hook up with a junkie woman, and they'd shoot up together until they were both dead. Maybe he wished I could have been that for him, a supportive junkie girlfriend who would lie down next to him and shoot up too. As a child I had irrational fears of people forcing drugs on me—I thought men would jump out of alleyways with rusty needles and inject me, and then my life would be over, I would be a slave to drugs, all my potential sucked out the moment the smack hit my blood. What I realized later was that heroin was much more private. One had to leap into an alleyway and shoot oneself up. I'd thought it was for people who felt they had no options in life, no future, no upward mobility, no hope of changing their situation. Not young men who had a family that loved them, a girlfriend that cooked for them, a rent-controlled apartment on the Upper West Side and an amazing college education. This drug, I thought, was reserved for people who needed to escape the atrocities of their lives. Tristan taught me that any life can seem atrocious enough to escape.

I only relapsed once, by calling him in May. I was drunk, and had just moved into a new apartment with two roommates who had gone on vacation together. I called him and cried so hard I thought I was going to break a rib. I told him he ruined me. *You ruined me. Because of you I'm a ruined person.* He didn't argue.

A therapist once told me when I recited this story, "You allowed yourself to be ruined." This made me so angry I left his office on West 4th and walked all the way to Times Square in under forty-five minutes. I shoulder-checked anyone in my way, stepped on tourists' feet, and almost got hit by a cab for blatantly jaywalking. He was right.

I sat at bars and drank whiskey by myself. I did psychedelic drugs urgently searching for meaning in my life but I just felt high. I did cocaine and felt even higher. I orchestrated seedy sexual experiences with male friends who tried hard to reach some part of me that was human, men who told me I was wonderful, and I never spoke to them again. I tried to hook up with strangers and when they didn't give me exactly what I wanted, I treated them cruelly. I once smacked a guy across the face for kissing me poorly in a Williamsburg bar bathroom. Eventually, I hid out in gay bars on the Lower East Side: The Boiler Room, Urge, Cock, feeling I was safe there. I went with friends often, and once or twice by myself. We would dance, drink, touch the go-go boys on the bars, critique the porn projected on the walls. I wanted to be left alone, I didn't want to connect, I didn't want sex, I didn't want to feel anything. Sometimes on the dance floor

men would grab my crotch earnestly searching for a penis under my dress, and I genuinely felt guilt that I didn't have one for them to enjoy. I thought about killing myself. I thought about doing heroin. I thought about becoming a nun. I got texts from men I'd met in bars: "U WANNA FUCK?" at three, four and five in the morning. I never responded – but I felt invigorated: I was finally getting somewhere. I was finally worth something! I was an object of desire.

The last time I went to Cock I was wasted. I had entered by the back door to avoid the \$20 cover with a friend, but we got separated in the dark crowd. I stumbled across the dance floor toward the bathroom. There was no women's room, and all the toilets had no stalls and no toilet seats. The bathroom was empty. Drunk and suddenly lonely, I found myself crying softly while hovering above the toilet. Burying my face in my hands I sobbed and peed. I heard a noise in front of me, and felt a shadow pass over me. Through my fingers two feet appeared. Looking up I saw a man staring down at me. Tall, with dark hair, dark eyes. Our eyes met, and he smiled, but it wasn't kind.

"I like watching you," he said. Something about the way he said it told me he was neither gay nor straight. He was a bad man. Had he followed me in here? Tears ran down my cheeks, one drop of urine dripped down my left thigh and onto the tile. I was afraid my wish for something bad to happen to me had come true. Was this man going to make me feel something serious after all this time? He didn't move, and I didn't move. I inhaled. He exhaled. Music from the dance floor bore down on us, to the rhythm of the crotch-throbbing electronica bass line.

"Yeah, that's fine. Just fine," I replied, pulling up my jeans and shoving past him, and I threw up all over the bathroom floor. When I looked up to breathe the voyeur was gone.

Because the experience of puking is so physically taxing it's hard to imagine that it begins in the brain or that the brain actually controls the function. It always seems to bubble up from deep within the gut, an ancient brute force that renders you prostrate in its wake. In one split second you're merely a vessel, a seemingly normal mountain suddenly brimming with molten lava, a kinked hose twisting and unruly in the hands of an unsuspecting gardener. Something will move through you, whether you want it or not.

There are no secrets in puke, it reveals all. If your body has decided to puke, there is nothing to be done but brace yourself, and let it happen. Puking is survival. It's your body telling you, you've been poisoned. It's telling you, you've put something bad inside, or something bad has gotten inside and it must come out. You've lived to excess and your body is not going to take it anymore. When

your stomach is empty, occasionally you continue to retch, even when there is nothing to vomit. I felt like that for a long time, like someone who was still retching over and over again, my body repeating this painful survival ritual that wasn't working.

It was two in the morning, June. It was almost a year exactly since I last saw or spoke to Tristan and I was sitting in Corey's apartment in Crown Heights. I was trying to flirt with him, and we had been talking and drinking wine for hours in his kitchen before he turned to me and asked if I wanted to learn how to "start a line" on someone.

"Are you serious?" I was kind of laughing and kind of nervous. Corey and I had spent months reconnecting, emailing, and talking on the phone until dawn. We met in college, but had been out of touch. This was only the third time I'd seen him in person in years.

"Yeah, it's something everyone should know how to do. Just in case. It might help, with certain fears you have, and yeah any apocalypses coming your way." I rolled my eyes at him, annoyed with his assumptions. He thought I had a fear of needles because I told him a few months ago that I dated a heroin addict, and I'm still sensitive about it. His statement suddenly turned to a dare in my mind. *Maybe he's testing me.* It hadn't yet occurred to me that someone who really cared about me wouldn't test me like this. So much of my relationship with Tristan felt like tests I had to pass, love I had to earn. There's a part of me that likes to give people what they want and I thought this was what Corey wanted. I thought this was a kind of love.

"Yeah, fine, teach me." He didn't answer. He reached behind a bookshelf and pulled out a huge duffel bag. When he zipped it open medical supplies spilled out onto the floor. Corey had been an EMT for ten years, and had been working at St. Vincent's until it closed a month prior. He started putting packaged needles on the table, lining them up with bags of saline. He was quiet while he worked to deplasticize everything. He pulled his chair up to mine and rolled up his sleeve. He placed my hand on his arm and instructed me: *Veins are bouncy, feel them on my arm, that's a vein, and that's a vein. Don't look, just feel. Stop looking; you have to learn by touch. Is that a vein? Good, no it's not. They move but it's okay you're going to put the bevel just so, and push and you'll feel a resistance, and then you'll be in. I trust you. It won't hurt me.* My heart was beating fast, as I placed the needle bevel on top of his antecubital vein, took a deep breath and pushed, but not far enough. I was clumsy and slow and he grabbed the needle and pushed it the rest of the way in. The top half of the needle flushed red.

"Again," he said, "try again." This wasn't how I'd imagined our night. I wanted to be physically intimate with Corey, but not like this. Was this his way of being close to me? He quickly took the needle out of his arm and blood spurted everywhere. He dripped all over the floor, even on his white cushioned kitchen chair. When he went to the bathroom to get his bleeding under control I stared at Corey's blood on the floor. Ahmi, Corey's orange cat, let out a warbled cry from atop a bookshelf. After I successfully hit veins in three spots on Corey we went to bed. Ahmi got on the bed and lay between us.

In my dream I am in a dark room with a needle in my arm. It's attached to a long cord that dangles out in front of me like it's being pulled to the other side of the room. I can't make out what it's attached to, until I squint, and it's Corey holding up a bag of saline tugging on it so the tension on the line undulates like a twisted plastic umbilicus. He is giving me saline and in the dream I fear he will drop the bag of saline on the floor, and we will no longer be connected. I reach out with the connected arm and beckon him. Suddenly he's less than a foot away, lips moving, but looking through me as though I'm just another slab of meat to gurney away. Lying in his bed I was suddenly awake because Corey touched my forearm, stroking it, as if looking for a vein. Ahmi walked over and put his face on my face. I got up and went to the bathroom, and stared at the blood-soaked paper towels in the trashcan. My mouth went dry. *How did I get here?*

To me, homes are now spaces of deep pain. Without that pain, it's not a real place yet. My friends tell me I've made New York City a big bad wolf. They tell me I keep my pain there, the pain of loving a sick man, the pain of my father being sick. I tell them I've relocated the pain down inside me. Sometimes I wake up afraid the pain is coming out of my mouth like a thick black tar and whoever is sharing the bed with me will suddenly realize I have something dark inside me that can't be contained. Flying into New York City these days I put my armor on, and I stomp my way down Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn telling myself I can make it out in one piece. In New York every face morphs into Tristan's and I round corners cautiously, like a woman who re-identifies her attacker on a street in some terrible cop thriller. I'm afraid I'll start screaming and pointing. *That's him, that's the man that hurt me. Someone do something!* My father gets checkups. They scan his body every three months looking for signs, a blip on the radar. *That's the thing that hurt my father. Someone do something.*

I'm afraid that I won't know good love if it smacks me in the face. I'm afraid I won't know how to be with someone who isn't an addict. At the only Al-Anon meeting I've ever attended a middle-aged woman in blue jeans with

dark hair and dark eyes stood up and said, "I love addicts. I do. I love them." Her admission scared me so much I walked out.

I'm afraid I haven't learned how to stand on my own yet, even after all this time, and that I'll end up giving so much of myself that I'm totally unrecognizable. Some days I wake up in my home in New Mexico, and think I can't live here, because I haven't felt real pain here. Until I feel the pain, I won't believe it's a place.

I want the fact that I've been in a relationship with a heroin addict to not be a large part of my life anymore. But there are aftershocks, or triggers as they say. I went on a date with someone who kept laying his head in his hand when we spoke at the table, and I kept thinking he was nodding out. My heart started racing so fast I had to go to the bathroom and splash cold water on my face. The longest relationship I've sustained since Tristan ended in my mind when the guy told me, "You've got to get over this whole heroin-boyfriend-thing." I once saw a twenty-something white man nodding out in a Mexican restaurant while his girlfriend sullenly ate tacos. I glared at him so much that when he got up to leave he grabbed my shoulder and told me he was sorry. For a long time I kept that *sorry* as if Tristan had said it himself. He's never really acknowledged what he put me through. Still, on bad days I convince myself I gave up too early. Whenever an interaction with the opposite sex goes sour, or nowhere, I'm suddenly back in Tristan's apartment watching him scratch in the dark. I'm afraid I only want what hurts.

My father's cancer has been in remission for two years. But like my father's cancer there is a waiting with heroin. Wait and see if cancer may grow back. Wait and see if the urge to shoot up creeps back in. Wait and see if something within you decides it's time for you to die, and begins growing. I wonder if the men I've loved the most in my life will die from the diseases they've fought so brutally in their lives. I worry I'll get a phone call in the middle of the night.

Corey and Tristan become blurred together: Men who hurt themselves. Men who hate themselves. Men that want you to hurt them. Men haunted by their inability to act. Men who finish me off, but can't finish a thought, can't finish a project.

When I asked Tristan over and over again why he decided to shoot up again all he could say was, "I just wanted to."

I thought if I sat here and wrote this all down I would get answers. I thought if I threw it up on the page I'd know more about who I am and where I'm going. I wrote Corey an email after that night in his kitchen: *I want you to know—I'm*

*not afraid of needles—I've never been afraid of needles—I'm afraid of people who hate themselves—Were you trying to ask something of me that night? Were you trying to push me away? Did you think I'd be so scared I'd leave? Did I call your bluff?*

Corey never responded.

Tristan and I had a running joke at the beginning of our relationship. When we would say sweet things to one another, we would follow it with a "puking" noise, and say that someone somewhere was throwing up from how sickeningly sweet we were being to one another.

After you throw up, endorphins are released into your bloodstream, and you feel a euphoria wash over you, you immediately feel much better. This is your body telling you the work has been done.