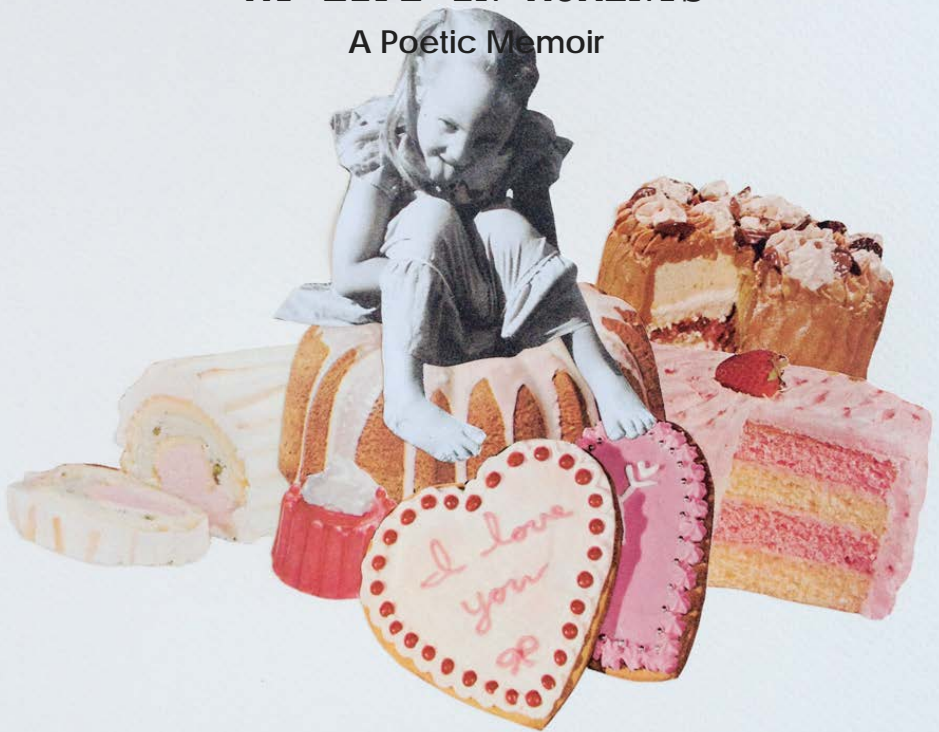


MY LIFE IN MOMENTS
A Poetic Memoir



by Jessica Amos

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I have tried to recreate events, locales and conversations from my memories of them. In order to maintain their anonymity, I don't mention the names of individuals and places. This is an account of my personal experiences, including my memory of stories I've been told by others. My memory of events may or may not reflect what actually happened, as is the case with all memories.

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For
Haven and Brannock

PRELUDE

Whole lifetimes and stories were lived and experienced
before I was born. This is some of what I know from
before I came to be.

Your parents were young.
Only sixteen and eighteen when they had
your sister.
You arrived a year later.

They were always so stylish.
You would watch them dance in the
living room.
Showing you all the latest dance moves.

You were beautiful.
He called you his Playboy Bunny.
You didn't like that.

You started smoking and drinking at the
age of 12.

You would steal liquor during your
parents' parties.

It was a drawing of a flower.
You won first prize.
You didn't call yourself an artist.

Your first time was at a friend's house
during lunch hour.

It wasn't good.

It wasn't special.

You picked out the pattern and bought
the fabric.

You labored away making a completely
original outfit.

You wore it to school and felt proud.

A week later another girl showed up
wearing the same outfit.

She had bought the exact pattern and
fabric as you.

You were pissed.

You were anorexic for a time.
It was your way of having control over
your life.

You were abducted from a street corner
once.

I'm not sure of the details.
The cops said it was your fault for
wearing a halter top and cutoffs.

Drugs numbed the pain.
They made you feel happy.
You weren't so shy anymore.
You acquired more friends.

There were too many lovers to count.

Too many abortions.

It was better not to think about it.

Not to feel it.

Heroin helped.

He was funny and charismatic.
You were quiet and shy.

You came from money.
He came from poverty.
Both of you with equal anguish.

He was handsome.
Dark hair.
Clear blue eyes.
Infectious smile.
Magnetic.

You fixed up houses together.
He wasn't always reliable.
But he was handy.

You wanted a baby more than anything.

He was missing a testicle.
He supposedly couldn't have kids.
You thought otherwise.
Turns out turkey basters are for more
than just turkeys.
She was a miracle baby.

You got clean to have her.
You stayed clean for several years.

You ran up and down the stairs to
induce labor.
She arrived on her due date.

She was chubby.

Smiley.

Happy.

You couldn't stop kissing her.

You were smiley and happy too.

He liked to drink a lot.
When he wasn't happy, he was angry.
He threw a board at you.
You were holding the baby.
You turned to protect her.
It hit your arm.

You came home from work.
He wasn't there.
The baby was.
He had left her home alone.

He was drunk when it happened.
The car hit a wall of some sort.
Everyone somehow expected it.

He carried a picture of her in his
wallet.

His baby girl.

He had it with him when he died.

You were raped once while she was in
your room.

Asleep in her crib.

You didn't want to wake her so you let
it happen.

You lived in a car for a while.
She was a toddler.

You would leave her at the babysitters
for days at a time.

You knew she was safe there while you
got high.

It was prison that finally
separated you.
You served time for identity theft.
She went to live with your parents.
The trauma of separation rang in
your hearts.
Never forgotten.

You met Jesus while you were in there.

He forgave you.

He loved you unconditionally.

He saved your life.

You were released from prison.

A new life awaited you.

She awaited you.

LIFE IS A STAGE

Who's to say why some moments are more impactful than others. All I know is life is made up of moments stacked together, creating a life in which we get to actively participate.

You were there from my earliest memory.

Life with you:

My room.

The garden.

The greenhouse.

The river.

My ducky pillow.

Breakfast.

Trips to Mexico.

Neighborhood friends.

Bedtime.

Stability.

You built me a swing.
Tied between two tall trees along the
 river's edge.
With every forward swing I would fly
 over the water.
Suspended above the current.
 Weightless.
 Timeless.

We'd eat Rocky Road Ice Cream and watch
the Cosby Show.

You would put me to sleep by tracing
around my face with your index finger.
That was my favorite.

It was the middle of the night.
We were leaving for Mexico.
I slept most of the way.

We stayed in a trailer on the beach.

It was hot.

The fish you caught were huge.

My cabbage patch kid lost its shoe.

You took tap dancing classes at the
Rec Center.

I'd beg to go with you but you were
always gone past my bedtime.

I imagined you having the best time
without me.

You always brought me back a doll.

Irish.

Dutch.

Spanish.

Indian.

African.

Mexican.

You had shark jaws hanging on the wall
in the basement.
Some big. Some small.
They were awesome.
I couldn't look away.

I watched you slaughter a cow.
You pulled its insides out with your
bare hands.

Intestines, bowels, stomach.
All while eating an egg salad sandwich.
I don't like egg salad sandwiches.

I liked visiting you at the brewery.
The place was huge.
Full of light and dark.
There was a small table in between
enormous vats of beer.
That's where we ate lunch.
It smelled like wood and yeast
and hops.
It permeated everything.

I was pretending the box was a boat.
I pulled myself around the living room,
knees sticking out.

My knee caught on the brick of the
entry step.

Blood was running down my leg.

I still have the scar.

I would try to steal your pickles.
You told me you licked all your food
before you ate it.
Something having to do with when you
were in the military.
I believed you
and stopped stealing your pickles.

Your house:

It rained all the time.

Everything was green.

The garden was huge.

Slugs were everywhere.

The house was Victorian.

Beds were covered with quilts.

There was a blue plastic tea set.

It was my favorite.

The top of your bureau was a
wonderland.

Jewelry.

Perfume.

Lotion.

I loved sneaking in and trying things
on.

I took a photo of you with me to the
airport.

Even though I didn't know you, I was
sure I'd recognize you.

Instinctively.

But I didn't.

We'd have to get to know each other the
old-fashioned way.

It was strange not knowing you.
Most kids didn't have to get to know
their mother.
They just *knew* them.

I didn't go to live with you
right away.
You needed time to get back on
your feet.
I needed time to adjust.

I would visit you in your room above
the garage.

You had a mini fridge and a big bed.

You were really nice.

I knew you'd be a good mom.

You met him at a recovery group for
ex-convicts.

You were released from prison six
months apart.

You were both saved in Prison.
You were both recovered heroin addicts.

Your stories were too similar to
ignore.

You became friends.

(He was barely an adult when he went to
prison.

Armed robbery.

It was one of the harshest prisons in
California.

He was good looking.

Sensitive.

You can only imagine what that was like
for him.)

When I first started staying with you,
I slept on a cot in the pantry.
I could feel the winter air coming in
from around the window.
Mice lived in there.
I didn't like it.

He built me a bunk bed in my new room.

I liked it so much better than the
pantry.

I made a castle out of Kleenex boxes.
She-Ra's Castle.

I started to put my shoe on and a mouse
came running out of it.
After that I was afraid of my shoes.

I had a nightmare and wanted a glass of
water.

I called for you because that's what I
did at my other house.

You came into my room completely naked
because he was sleeping over.

After that I got my own water.

I had wet the bed, but he was sleeping
over again.

I didn't want to wake you.

I changed my clothes, pulled the wet
sheets off the bed,
and slept on the mattress.

You were pregnant out of wedlock.
As new Christians,
you had to make it right.
Marriage was the obvious answer.

You slipped on the ice.

I was only six.

I caught you before you hit the ground.

You told me I saved the baby.

I felt really proud.

He took me horseback riding the day you
were born.

It was a really nice gesture.

My horse wouldn't cross the stream.

We had to turn around.

It was O.K.

I couldn't wait to meet you.

I took you to school for Show and Tell.
I was so proud you were my brother.
Everyone thought you were really cute.

I don't remember the wedding.
I remember the weeks leading up to
the wedding.
I would visit you upstairs and watch
you sew your wedding dress.
I loved all the lace you were using.

"You're not the boss of me."
I thought you should know.

After the wedding you said,
"Now I'm the boss of you."

I think you meant it to be funny.
You didn't realize I was serious.

Everything changed after that.

I had a new Mom.

A new Dad.

A new Home.

A new Brother.

I'd never had any of those things
before.

I knew without knowing.
We were different.
Shame covered our household.
Few people were allowed in.
I just didn't know why.

You were ten years behind everyone else
your age.

You were angry.

Prison will do that to you.

I expected you to have all the answers.

You didn't know much more than I did.

In a lot of ways, we raised each other.

We went to church a lot.
I liked the songs and bible stories.
You told me I was born a sinner.

You were the best spot in the yard
to play.

You witnessed all my childhood joy.

With you I was a mommy, a spy, an
explorer.

I was everything.

I was magic.

You were my hiding place when they were
fighting.

I found comfort among all your old
coats and dresses.

Hanging. Forgotten.

You muffled the sounds.

Sometimes I would even fall asleep.

We were riding our bikes on the street
in front of my house.
The kid down the street hit a slow
moving car with his bike and
unceremoniously fell over.
Usually it's the other way around.
We laughed until we cried.

You called me a jerk because I didn't
do what you wanted me to.

I had never been called a bad word
before.

It made me hurt physically, like I'd
been punched.

I stopped being your friend after that.

You taught me new drawing techniques.

You sent me recordings of yourself
telling stories.

You sang songs to me.

You took me on walks.

You wrote me a children's book.

You gained entrance into my world with
your interest.

I knew you loved me.

I invited Jesus into my heart.
I didn't really understand it.
 You assured me:
It wasn't about understanding.
 It was about faith.

You were the biggest two lilac trees on
the street -
the tops of you all grown together.
You were like two lovers who couldn't
stay apart, and I was the child in
between you.

You had her cornered and were slamming
the door into her body.

I abandoned my hiding place to try and
stop you.

My heart was pounding in my ears as I
ran at you.

Next thing, my feet left the ground and
you slammed me into the wall.

I never tried to stop you again.

You weren't the first person to leave
me sitting in the backseat while you
rode upfront with your mom.
I hated when my friends did that.
It was always so lonely and
uncomfortable.

To this day you are my ultimate
delight.
I lose myself in you for hours.
Time stands still.

We were in the check-out line at
Safeway.

I was still on the fence about calling
you Dad.

I tried it out.

"Dad," I said.

It didn't make an impact.

That's when I started calling you Dad.

I thought eventually it would make an
impact.

You came in the best colors.

You smelled like fruit.

You made the best sound on paper.

Coloring with you was my favorite
pastime.

Sunday School:

The movie was called Left Behind.

It took place after the rapture.

Christians were being beheaded for
their faith.

A child with a balloon was led to the
guillotine.

There was a slicing sound.

A balloon floated into the sky.

We were terrified.

I wish I could explain the safety of
you -
how I had to crawl on my hands and
knees to get to your center.
You were a delightful shelter.
Dark and light.
Warm and cool.
Floral and musky.

The entire school population was out on
the grass.

The girls did cartwheels and the boys
played soccer.

A boy accidentally kicked a ball
sideways.

It went between my legs as I did a
cartwheel.

I kicked it really hard.

It flew across the field and into the
bushes.

I pretended I did it on purpose.

I was waiting in the closet until I
heard the door slam.
That's when I knew it would be over.
You found me and knew my plan.
I was angry you discovered my plan to
run away.
I don't know where I would have gone
anyway.

You were the first person to tell me
about sex.

We were in second grade.

You had heard the details from your
older brother.

That's what I think of when I remember
you.

You would sit on each other's laps
and braid each other's hair and whisper
secrets.

You would giggle and feel comfortable
with such intimate acts.
It made me question my validity as part
of the female race.

I didn't know how to do those things.

I pretended the wall was you.
I pressed myself into your arms.
You held me and told me you loved me.
You apologized for not being there.
I wished you hadn't died.

I hope you felt more comfortable with
me next to you.
I didn't want you to feel alone in the
backseat.

We kept a bucket of tadpoles on the
back porch.

We forgot about them.

One day we heard a bunch of frogs in
the vents.

They croaked for days.

Literally and figuratively.

You took us out to Chinese food.
Then we stayed at a rental house.
We had so much fun together.
Just the three of us.
I didn't want to go home.
But the fight was over.
It was time to go back.

Going to your house was a lesson on
being a girl.
We would make up dance routines in your
garage.
Wilson Phillips and Paula Abdul were
our favorite.
We wore matching outfits.
Your mom curled our hair.
You did my make-up.

It was my favorite outfit:
Matching tie-dyed leggings and shirt.
The only thing that made it more
awesome was the roller skates.
I could wear them with my sneakers
still on.
You immortalized the moment by taking a
picture.
Thank you.

After you fought, I would find you in
your room crying.
I tried comforting you as best a child
can comfort a parent.
I never cried myself.
You cried for all of us.

My socks slipped on the ladder as I
climbed up to your loft.
I fell and hit the back of my head on
the corner of your dresser.
Blood was everywhere.
Your parents drove me to the hospital
where I had to get stitches.
That was the last time you invited me
to sleep over.

It was the only time you got really mad
at me.

I would have been mad too.

To see your kid throw away the entire
contents of her lunch.

Right in front of you!

As if you didn't have better things to
do than make her lunch.

Your house:

Fragrant leis.

Floral muumuus.

Ocean views.

Elegance.

Mangos.

Geckos.

Beauty.

You.

Hawaii.

You were all over the yard.
In the Spring you would procreate.
We'd throw you to try and break you
 apart.
You never let go of each other.
 Grasshoppers.

I kept out of the way.
Quiet.
Invisible.
In constant apology.

I spent all Summer watching Anne of
Green Gables.

Anne of Avonlea.

She taught me about bosom friends and
kindred spirits.

I knew someday I would find mine.

You would doodle on a notepad while you
talked on the phone.

Now I think of you whenever I talk on
the phone.

I do the same thing.

Even my doodles look like yours.

You had been traumatized during your
first weeks of life.

You hid in the closet when we brought
you home.

I stayed with you for hours in there.
After that you always stayed with me in
my room.

You were a good dog.

The only thing predictable was
unpredictability.
I became an expert at reading moods.

You went all-out at Christmas.
You would spend hours shopping for the
perfect gifts.
Your excitement on that day was
contagious.
I loved seeing you happy.
You had a really great laugh.

We built a fort in your room, between
the bed and the dresser.

We used random objects to hold the
blankets in place.

Then your cat jumped on it while we
were inside.

Your ghetto blaster fell on my head.

I kept yelling, "Brain damage!"

I had a giant purple goose egg on my
forehead for a week.

I asked God to save me every night at
bedtime.

I asked forgiveness.
For what, I wasn't sure.
I just knew I needed it.

You'd sing,
"Hey good lookin'.
What you got cookin'?
How 'bout cookin' something up
with me?"
Then you kissed her.
That was good.

I lied and said I was twelve.
Tickets were cheaper if you were
twelve.

I wore jeans and sorrels.
I was soaked after 10 minutes on the
bunny hill.

By the end of the day I was a
snowboarder.

I sat in my living room.

Bags packed.

Waiting.

I called you.

Your sister said you were in the bath.

You didn't call back.

You never picked me up.

I think our friendship was over.

I had just met you.
You were teaching me to play volley
ball at the beach.
You were being very attentive.
Turns out, my bikini top wasn't on
properly.
Probably from all the overhanded
serves.
I didn't want to play anymore after
that.

The first day of Eighth Grade.
You were the only person I remotely
knew in that class.
We had every class together that year.
We were best friends all through High
School.

You were there the first time I smoked
pot - so cool and so much older.

Months later you died during a routine
operation.

They said the THC in your system mixed
poorly with the anesthetics.

Not sure that is true.

The whole school showed up for your
funeral.

It was open casket.

I couldn't bring myself to look.

I'm not sure why I wanted to be a
cheerleader.

I was bad at it.

I wore jeans under my skirt.

I got stoned with the coach's daughter.

I quit before they kicked me off the
quad.

You picked a fight with me in the
hallway.

I was so surprised I stood there
paralyzed.

You said I pranced around like I owned
the place.

I thought maybe you had the wrong girl.

Then I remembered:

You called me a Jerk in second grade.

I wasn't the problem.

It was you.

I went to a party and lied about it.

I was grounded for two weeks - no
friends or tv or phone calls.

I used my free time to sew vintage
buttons on to my Jansport.

It took a week to cover the entire
thing.

It took 30 minutes to take them all
off.

It was the only time I cried in front
of you.

I don't remember the details.

Except that I was grounded.

I didn't cry again until I was 25.

When Kurt Cobain died, we all sat
around listening to his albums.

It was sad.

I loved him. Still do.

I woke up in my sleeping bag on your
living room floor. Disoriented.
I came to and I threw my head back down
on my pillow.
I hit the corner of my eye on the brick
fireplace surround.
I almost lost my eye.

You invited me to stay with you for
the Summer.

I'd get to spend three months at the
Art College you worked at.

I was beyond excited.

My parents said No.

I was too young

LA was too corrupt.

It was the only time you didn't fight.
I didn't know how to be around you when
you were happy.
It made me uncomfortable.

I was good at lying.
I lied about nearly everything.
Even things that didn't need to be lied
about.

The girls I hung with didn't like you.

I'm not sure why.

I wrote you a really mean letter.

I didn't even know you.

I got in-house suspension for three
days.

It's one of the worst things I've done.

I'm still sorry.

You didn't stop me from dressing like a
boy.

I loved my skater pants.

You even tried them on one time as a
joke.

I appreciated your humor about it.

Two boys were in the pool when I got there.

I felt self-conscious.

Would it be weird to lay out with my clothes on?

Yes.

My bikini top snapped as I lifted my shirt over my head.

The boys started laughing.

I was totally exposed.

The only thing worse would be running away in shame.

I made myself stay.

I was mortified.

Vacation.

We were at our best as a family.

It was good.

I loved the sand and the crashing
waves.

I even ran down the beach.

I felt lighter.

You laughed to see me run.

I think it made you happy to see me
happy.

You told me sex was bad.

You told me boys were only after one
thing.

You said it was my fault if boys lusted
after me.

After that I simultaneously feared *and*
loved boys.

"Is Mom there?"
You pressed me to tell you why I was
calling.

"I started my period."

Oh.
We were both sorry you asked.

The title of my paper was "Traffic".
You gave me an A for the entire year.

You said it was so good.

Years later you were fired.

For having an inappropriate
relationship with a student.

I wonder if my paper wasn't as good as
you said it was.

The place was called Aardvark's.
On the corner of Haight Street.

I bought:
Army green polyester pants.
A chartreuse cardigan.
A floral polyester shirt.
I wore the outfit with my
Birkenstock's.

I basically dressed like an old man.

I thought we were just taking a
shortcut through the woods.
Why wouldn't I trust you?
We were cousins.

Cousins by marriage.

Step-cousins.

You tried to rape me.

I think it was your first time trying
something like that.

Fortunate for me.

Not so fortunate for the girls that
came later.

You knocked me down.
I crawled away on my hands and knees
through the bushes.
You had me by my pant leg.
Those green polyester ones.
I demanded to know if you were trying
to rape me.
That stopped you in your tracks.
You conceded to not "go down there" -
if I let you fondle my breasts for 10
minutes.
I negotiated you down to five minutes.

You asked me not to tell anyone.
Who was I going to tell?
It was probably my fault for being a
girl.

I dyed my hair black.
You were mad and said I looked like a
whore.
I wondered what black-haired whore you
were comparing me to.
I was a virgin.

You lit my fucking hair on fire in
Homeroom.
On purpose.

Asshole.

I was 14 and had the biggest crush on
you.

I had never been French kissed before.
It took me by surprise.
I liked it a lot.

I loved Rolling Stone because of the
huge images.
I taped them to my wall as posters.
My walls were covered floor to ceiling
with images of
The Doors, Nirvana, Metallica...
I wasn't allowed to listen to their
music, but I loved them all.

I met you through a friend at the bus
stop.

You offered me a tab of acid.

You were cute, so I figured, why not?

I went missing that day.

You grounded me for going missing.

I tried to keep from smiling.

Everything seemed funny.

Later, when I was alone in my room,
the hallucinations weren't so funny.

It made me self-conscious how you'd
watch me swim during PE.
Years later I finally realized you were
watching my body.
Not me.

You bought me my first snowboard.
It cost you hundreds for all the gear.
I knew it was your way of saying "I
love you".

I asked you to teach me to smoke.

I thought it was cool.

I didn't smoke often, or for long.

But I still crave cigarettes from time
to time.

It was the first time we'd ever hung
out together.

We went swimming at your neighborhood
pool.

You had sex with some guy while we were
there.

Later that night we went to a party.
When we got back to your house you
kissed me on the lips.

I didn't want to seem crude, so I
kissed you back.

I had never kissed a girl before.

We met them at Safeway.

They were cute.

They were older.

They invited us to a party at their
house that night.

Of course we were going.

We snuck out through the doggy door.
We put rocks in our pockets as weapons.
We were picked up by pro snowboarders.
They invited us to their party.
But we already had plans.

We lied about our age when we got
there.

I said I was sixteen.

We got drunk and stoned.

We made it back just before the sun
came up.

I could have lost my virginity that
night.

But I wasn't ready.

He was nice about it.

You found all my mixed tapes.
I recorded them off the radio.
Hitting RECORD when a good song came on.
It required hours of stealth and work.
You threw them all away and turned me
over to Satan.

I understood why you were protective.

You didn't understand that I wasn't
you.

We didn't share the same fears.

Mainly, you had them.

I didn't.

I was sad because I missed you.
I had told you we couldn't be friends
anymore.
I was a Christian now.
For real.
You all moved on.
I never stopped missing you.

I had complete freedom.
I could stay out as long as I wanted.
No one asked questions.
Youth Group kids were good kids.
Even the bad ones were good.
I needed freedom.

I threw it all away:

My vintage 501's.

Handmade sweaters.

Concert t-shirts.

My Birkenstock's.

I started shopping at The Gap.

I liked attending the retreats with
you.

It was "our thing".

We needed that.

I was on my knees on the floor.
A dozen of you surrounded me.
You were laying hands on me.
You were praying in strange languages.
You said to talk like a baby.
"Goo-goo, gah-gah," I said.
I never received the gift of speaking
in tongues.
I thought there was something wrong
with me.

I would babysit you during the Summer.
I mostly watched tv while you played
outside.
Sometimes I'd take you to the beach.
I loved that time with you.

I answered your question honestly.

I was tired of lying.

It didn't go well.

The lecture lasted over an hour.

Followed by my plans being canceled.

I stuck to the lies after that.

You were good at apologizing.
I wish you hadn't needed to so much.

You woke up at 5am.

You read your Bible.

You prayed.

You made three homemade meals.

You ran your own cleaning business.

You cleaned 5 to 15 houses a day.

You did the family shopping.

You volunteered at the nearby prisons.

You washed and folded all the laundry.

You dropped the kids off.

You picked the kids up.

You went to bed at 10pm.

It started all over again the next day.

I don't remember being depressed.
I only remember you talking about it.
You were really worried.
I didn't feel a thing.

You sat on my bed and tried talking
to me.

By then it was too late.
Too many parts of me were shut down.
I didn't know how to talk to you.

Not safely.
This hurt your feelings.
It wasn't personal.
It was protection.

I did make-up for the church play.
We performed at juvenile facilities and
homeless shelters.

I wondered:

Did the kids at the facilities accepted
Christ out of sincerity?

Or were they just afraid of being
dragged into hell,
kicking and screaming, like the play
implied?

At the homeless shelter, guys jerked
off in the front row.

It's hard to know the impact we had.

I tore all the pages out of my journal.

They were full of angst and anger.

They were full of promises I made to
myself.

Promises to grow up and be different
from you.

I was ashamed.

Anger was bad.

I needed to be good.

I didn't finish my dinner.

I wasn't hungry.

You said it was a waste.

You said it was an abomination.

You turned me over to Satan.

You called me into your office.
If I didn't start doing better you
would fire me.

You were really nice about it.
You single handedly improved my work
ethic.

Things didn't add up.
No one seemed to notice.
Doubt wasn't cause for intervention.
I kept my questions to myself.

You fell asleep during a prayer circle.
When we nudged you awake we accused you
of sleeping.

You denied it by saying you were in
"deep prayer."

You were instantly one of my favorite
people.

I had heard it before.
People thought I was a bitch when they
first met me.
You said I acted like a rich snob.
I laughed.
Seriously?
That's rich!

You said I had the gift of healing.
God told you.

You lead me to her so I could pray
over her.

The next day her injury was completely
healed.

That was impressive.

"When I die I want to be cremated.
I want my ashes scattered off a cliff
by the ocean.
I know it sounds cliché, but I want to
be remembered in a place that is full
of life and beauty, not death.
I want you to be able to walk along any
shore and remember me."

To which you said:
"That's an abomination."

You showed me your penis.
Right there in the coffee shop.
Supposedly it was pierced.
All I remember is seeing your penis.

It was my favorite class.

Art class.

You sought me out after graduation to
give me a gift.

It was a sketch book.

On the inside cover you wrote:

"Never stop drawing.

Someday your sketchbook might be worth
something.

Like da Vinci's."

I knew what was expected of me.
I told you what you wanted to hear.
Of course you were surprised by my
 behavior.
You didn't really know me.
 How could you?
Not even *I* knew me.

You walked into my coffee shop.

A grungy snowboarder.

Older.

Nonchalant.

Quiet.

Magnetic.

We talked.
We flirted.
We played coy.
We fell in love.

It was a whirlwind.

You told me I was beautiful.
It was the way you looked at me when
you said it.
I believed you.
You saw me.

We stood hugging in the entryway.

I suddenly wanted to flee.

I felt sick.

I forced myself to stay in your

embrace.

If I didn't take a chance on love,

maybe I'd never find it.

It was a risk.

I let you love me.

Your love taught me to love.
Your love coaxed me out of hiding.
I was ravenous for more.

If sex was a sin then I was the devil
incarnate.

My decent to hell was one of passion.
The passion of a lifetime.

My first time was good.
I still felt like myself afterward.
I had even enjoyed it.
More than enjoyed it.
Sex was *good*.

We decided to get married.
I didn't want to tell them.
I kept putting it off.
They heard the news from someone else.
That didn't go well.

I was nineteen.
My wedding day.
My parents weren't in support.
I didn't care.
I loved you.
You were the One.

We moved away.
Despite our youth, our love remained
strong.
We followed the rules.
Did what was expected.
We could have continued on like that.
But not really.

You saved my life.
You were so small and helpless.
I was split wide open.
I didn't even know I needed saving.

All those promises I had made
to myself.

They were for you.

I wanted your life to be different.

If I was to give you the world,
I would first have to claim it for
myself.

So I did.

I don't remember where I was.
I remember the thought:

This is my life.

MINE.

I can't keep looking to others for who
I am.

I need to figure out who I am.

(Shit)

Who was I?
There was no one to tell me.

I needed to reach into my past.

I needed to face the truth.

Only then could I start to know myself.

With shame,
I recounted the events of the
past week.

The events of a lifetime.
You looked me in the eyes and said,

"You know that's not okay. Right?"

I said, "Yes, I know. I shouldn't have
done that."

You said,

"No. What he did isn't okay.
You did nothing wrong."

No one had ever told me that before.
I always thought it was my fault.

It wasn't my fault.

I didn't lie this time.
I told him the truth.
"You hurt me."
I needed time and space.
Years.
A Lifetime.

I isolated myself.
I needed to be alone.
To hear my own voice.
No external input.

My fingers flew over the keyboard.

Night after night.

I was angry.

I wrote for the girl who was abandoned.

The girl who was scared.

The girl who was ashamed.

The girl who was alone.

The girl who was oppressed.

The girl who couldn't cry.

I wrote for myself.

I taught myself to cry.

It wasn't easy.

It took years.

Eventually the tears came.

I sobbed for the first time in my adult
life when I was 25.

I cried for the loss.
The fear.
The shame.
The secrets.
The loneliness.
Myself.

I would hold you and cry.
Your unprotected innocence was a
reflection of my own.
I absorbed your warmth and light.
The ultimate healing salve.

Most losses were recoverable:

Music.

Swearing.

Curiosity.

Optimism.

501's.

Joy.

I watched you.
Your tenderness toward our children.
Your patience.
You created a new context:

A loving Father.

I lay on the bed in our dark bedroom.

I was crying.

Again.

I hated myself.

Then it dawned on me:

I'm tired of hating myself.

Exhausted from it.

I'm going to love myself.

I told my young self she is loved.
 She is valid.
 She is seen.
 She is beautiful.
 She is smart.
 She lights up a room.
 She isn't alone.
 I would protect her.
I encouraged her to ask questions.
 And I answered:

 You. Are. LOVED.

Endlessly. Abundantly. Joyfully.

LOVED.

You said:

"We're all doing the best we can with
what we've been given."

That became my mantra.

For myself.

For others.

Forgiveness was inevitable.

I forgive you.

Me.

You.

All of it.

POSTLUDE

There are more lifetimes in this one life than I can count. Every moment is a lifetime, eternity. And that's how we make our way to the end. Moment to moment. From one eternity to the next eternity...

We were in a bowling alley.
Of all places.
I could have wept with gratitude.
My joy was overwhelming.
This was just the beginning.
Every moment was a beginning.

My story has made me the person I am
today.

I am grateful for every moment,
remembered and forgotten.

If not for suffering,
I wouldn't know compassion.

If not for pain,
I wouldn't know healing.

If not for imprisonment,
I wouldn't know freedom.

If not for fear,
I wouldn't know peace.

If not for shame,
I wouldn't know love.

If not for mistakes,
I wouldn't know grace.

If not for sadness,
I wouldn't know joy.

If not for self-hate,
I wouldn't know self-love.

If not for ignorance,
I wouldn't know acceptance.

"Here I am. Where I ought to be."

- Louise Erdrich

