THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL

By Zach Semel

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AESTHETIC STATEMENT

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL

ZACH SEMEL

My project's titular essay describes the day of and the months after I was present at the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombing. This essay uses the form of Progressive Counting therapy: lengthening, reaching the 'center' of the posttraumatic conflict, then progressively shortening again. Such a form demands that: (1) the reader sit with the 'most uncomfortable content' for the longest time; (2) the reader recognize that the traumatic event is not the part of my story they should be most interested.

I sought to curate that unpredictable, fluctuating experience across my book, which outlines other traumas I've experienced since the Marathon Bombing — and describes how I survive in spite of mental illness. I use my focus on 'posttraumatic periphery' to highlight how mental illness affects my engagement with work, school, and relationships.

In addition to the standard fragmented forms utilized by poets who influenced this book through their own 'trauma writing' — such as jody chan, Danez Smith, and C. Russell Price — the book also takes after Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* and Sarah Manguso's fragmented memoir structures. The slashes throughout the book further segment the narrative, depicting posttraumatic memory and identity, as well as invoking the re-assembly of self that was central to my writing process.

I see this book as an exploration of (self-) knowledge that — both a defining of my own personal knowledge via pieces like the "PTSD Diagnostic Criterion" series, and an acknowledgment of the varied personal and readerly relationships that have helped me develop

the self-awareness to survive PTSD. Beyond just actual acquaintances, the book includes quotes from trauma psychologists; other writers interested in trauma and mental illness; and Kendrick Lamar, whose music frequently examines posttraumatic shame/guilt, (hyper-)masculinity, mental illness, and drug abuse. How do video games and television imbue me with self-knowledge? How does someone with PTSD care for themselves/others, and allow themselves to be cared for? What does a severely-mentally-ill person need in a country that fundamentally misunderstands them? What do their loved ones need? These concerns take after the poet Kayleb Rae Candrilli, who often centers love/community as means of navigating crises.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

"Must-See Spots in Boston, MA" is forthcoming in *Salamander*.

"I Tell People My PTSD and I Haven't Been Together Very Long" is forthcoming in *Drunk Monkeys*.

"Diagnosis" includes a quote from *The Year of Blue Water* by Yanyi.

"Acknowledgments of Un \ Safety" includes quotes from *The Only Worlds We Know* by Michael Lee; "Coming Apart: Trauma and the Fragmentation of the Self" by David Spiegel; "The impact of dissociation, shame, and guilt on interpersonal relationships in chronically traumatized individuals: A pilot study" by Martin J. Dorahy; and "Real" by Kendrick Lamar (feat. Anna Wise).

"Passively \ Suicidal Father" includes a quote from "An Ingeneious Study of Intergenerational Transmission of the Effects of PTSD" by David Spiegel.

"Diagnostic Criterion #2" includes a quote from *The Collected Schizophrenias* by Esme Wejiun Wang.

"More Animal" includes quotes from "Passing as Sane, or How to Get People to Sit Next to You on the Bus" by Peta Cox, which appears in *Disability and Passing: Blurring the Lines of Identity* ed. by Jeffrey A. Brune and Daniel J. Wilson; and from *The Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feebleminded* by Molly McCully Brown.

"Diagnostic Criterion #3" includes a quote from "LUST." by Kendrick Lamar in its subtitle.

"Winning Over Death" includes a quote from Jericho Brown's Tin House Live talk entitled "Suicide & Joy."

"Diagnostic Criterion #5" includes a quote from "ADHD" by Kendrick Lamar in its subtitle.

"Six Clarifications" includes a quote from *Concentrate* by Courtney Faye Taylor.

Table of Contents

On My Father's Gaming

My father is a steady man. He doesn't make mistakes when he cooks chicken parm or birthday breakfasts. If your car breaks down, he explains who to call or describes how to change a tire for the 7th time without complaint. When he works from home, he spends most of his time in Zoom meetings listening silently.

I was 18 or 19 when I first noticed how carefully my dad plays video games. Whereas I'd wear out my *Fallout 4* avatar sprinting from room to room — barraging enemies with bullets, quickly scanning for surviving adversaries and worthwhile loot — my dad picks off enemies from a safe distance, then opens up chests and lockers with care. He constantly uses medicine, not wanting to be irradiated or wounded at all. His avatar's head doesn't swivel around wildly, seeking threat after threat.

One Saturday afternoon, I grew angry while watching him play. I pointed and gestured at the TV screen: *Go faster, look there!* I'm not sure if I was imagining or remembering — imagining that someone in our house wants to kill us and he can't act quickly, or remembering how it felt at the Marathon when two of my friends saw that we had to run but wouldn't.

If I feel any guilt today, it's that I didn't trust my instincts, didn't move as fast as I could. Instead, I coaxed and directed and pled, my eyes evaluating each street my friends and I turned onto, my shorts dragging in the wind.

in the occasional nightmare. One funnel, sometimes two, visible from my bedroom window or from the doorway of a supermarket. Always somewhere I'd been before suddenly being tossed into disarray.

At age 8, I wasn't the type to try to hide or escape. I'd stand out in the open, wait to see a funnel towering over me like a massive beast emerged from its lair or a villain shedding their cloak. I'd tuck my head between my knees and let the tornado suck me up.

Now, I spot tornadoes with time to spare and my curiosity for deadly things is satisfied. I sprint past rows of people pulling out their phones for videos. I shut the door to the grocery store refrigerator or shoe store backroom and listen to bodies being thrown against the wall like pebbles.

Diagnosis

Definitions are not static. They are where we begin. For what? By whom? Beginning is not an origin. It is the arbitrary place from which we start one life, when that *becomes* this. -Yanyi

It took two months for me to start sleeping again. Three years to start dissociating. Eight years before my first panic attack. My body is an overcrowded dinner table, symptoms battling for space. For my attention.

Every morning, still close to dreaming, I turn over and find a stranger in my bed — I slip out of the room, careful not to wake him up.

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After several years, I finally pulled the DSM-V off my shelf and flipped through it, wishing it hadn't taken me so long. Wishing someone had put me on their lap and read it all to me like a story, pointing out lines and saying *This one made me think of you*.

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One week ago: I explained to my mother what dissociation is in nearly the exact words I first encountered — but still, in my words.

How fast I run to keep up with my body.

How badly I want her to run with me.

PTSD DIAGNOSTIC CRITERION #1

The Body Becomes a Series of Vignettes

Even under close scrutiny, my scars are nearly imperceptible. Borne of the smallest impulses too close to the stove, toaster oven, knife rack: neurological jolts of un-choice. I don't have a metaphor woven from their locations or their trajectory across my skin. My body is un-mappable. I've squinted at veins for years, never discerning which direction the blood flows. If anything, isn't Madness a cycle — one so hard to interrupt or end?

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When I open myself up for a peek, I don't want to die, but want to know if I could. I want to know dying, then take a step back from it; I want to know what I would need to take that step back, then take another.

Some nights, I don't want to die and still choose to peek longer: the bountiful blue pulsing into red like shivering fingers made warm.

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See these misshapen instincts? This anti-primality? I swear, if I ever get mugged, I'll freeze up. My body torn between handing over my wallet so I can keep almost-dying — or letting the mugger decide for me.

Picture my disparate parts:
My legs arguing with each other about the pros and cons of decomposition. My right arm aching, battle ready. My left arm loose like it's wrapped around a lover's chest.

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At the most urgent times, I gift myself dreams in which I shoot or stab myself. In which gravity seems to empty me out on anonymous linoleum and I spit and swallow and my eyes, searching for color, starve.

On the night I almost-died, I sat at my desk for hours with nothing sharp or deadly in front of me. I fought the image of my chef's knife lazing on its side, pointed

towards my chest, until I could recall a single dream in which dying offered me not relief, but nothingness.

eight times in one night.

That year, I sat next to him in Spanish class.

Each day, our teacher would call out my name, say *Sientate. Be still!*

On report cards, she complained about my *Excessive talking.*

not even when, only a week after it happened, I was back in homeroom at 7:15 washing down McDonald’s hash browns with a liter of Mountain Dew. Even when I was there 7:30 to 2:15 five days a week taking classes only because they were mandatory for graduation or appealing to college admissions counselors. Physics, pre-calculus, concert band. ~~*What’s happening? Do I need help?*~~ No time to think about it. Assignment notebook. Folders. Papers. Put the date on your worksheets so you know later when you were supposed to have done them. No days off — you’ll fall behind. Do your homework or think? Do your homework or think? Report card after report card telling me which had been the wrong choice. ~~*What’s happening to me? Is it normal? Does it have a name?*~~

and what she means is *Would you let me stop you?*

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Once, after a night of drinking, a friend insisted that I stay over instead of driving home. She laid out a mattress pad on her kitchen tile and shut off the lights, placing a thin blanket over my shoulders as I curled up.

After I heard her bedroom door shut, I cracked open the screen door, squeezed through the tiniest gap I could, and pulled out of her driveway with my headlights off.

Acknowledgments of Un \ Safety

The knife / remembers when it was bone, when it lived / inside an elk or man and kept the rind / together until it didn't, until the body / was used against itself.

-Michael Lee

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Cooking teaches me new ways that I wouldn't kill myself. Each becomes a path I'm sure I can walk down at night, a button that won't snap open by itself. It's almost too brutal to slice chicken so lovingly. To grate skin off citrus, glance into the bowl every minute until I decide the pile is large enough. Sometimes I tease my throat with corn kernels and know if I ever suck in a handful of pills, I'll spit them back out.

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I can only examine my dissociating body with suspicion, turn this meat over in my hands, seeking spoilage. Freezer burns. Pale marks left by ice cubes and frozen peas run along veins then veer away. The vital and the pallid tied up in a loose knot. At first, the ice stings, my limbs sizzling in oil. Then I am a plastic spatula, melting. Then, finally, I'm the hands that grip the handle, the fingers that pluck basil leaves off their stems.

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[For the PTSD patient], when interpersonal contact becomes overstimulating or overwhelming, or threat perception (real or imagined) increases, dissociation can become a mechanism for severing the communication and connection.

-Martin J. Dorahy

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Once, I read a poem in which, during an episode, they attack their parents with a baseball bat. Since then, I've often had nightmares in which I hurt loved ones. In every one, at the end, the dream rewinds back to the beginning and there's a pause before it starts again. My brain trying to give my hands some kind of choice.

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Serrated knife as I cut out chickens' veins. As I run a sponge over the flat of the blade. As I place it on a towel, dripping. On a bad night years ago, I decided that knives were beautiful and forgot to change my mind. Serrations became feathers. Thighs became sheathes.

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[Patients who dissociate often] have difficulty integrating their emotions, their sense of identity, and aspects of their consciousness into a continuous whole. They find many parts of their experience alien, as if belonging to someone else.

-David Spiegel

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Depending on the day, I may not speak to myself from within myself. Last summer, I cut my finger so deeply that it gushed for hours as I paced around my apartment alternating between *You've finally done it* and *I wish I'd been safer*. There may be a metaphysical elephant in this room.

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Whenever my mom and I share a kitchen, we are tethered to each other: knowing her cooking will need more salt, and mine will need more calm. My brain gathers such momentum in even the tiniest and quietest spaces. Socks slip around tile; boiling water droplets hiss at my ankles. Mother, is it hard to know a knife is so near my palm, my wrists, and to not even glance at me over your shoulder?

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I'm real, I'm real, I'm really, really real. -Kendrick Lamar

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There's something so safe about a recipe you'll usually fuck up. Repeat: *all that matters is that the chicken turns white.* Drop too much ginger into the pot. Chop that mango too thick; let each piece melt into an ocean on your tongue. Oh, survival's bumpy rhythm. Forward to basics.

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I’ve been misunderstanding all along. Believing that in order to avoid grave danger, I must be dangerous — and in order to be dangerous, I must never be out of practice. But each time I etch holes in my skin, then carefully filled them with Neosporin and gauze, I inch towards telling my body that I love it.

A Question

When I've been in the downstairs bathroom with the four-shelf medicine cabinet long enough that my father is knocking, asking if I'm okay, should I let him in?

Passively \ Suicidal Father

While our genetic code itself may not change [due to trauma], its relative expression does, and this tendency for our genes to be differentially productive can be heritable.

-David Spiegel

Once, a six-year-old boy I worked with looked at me from the top of a playground set, his chubby cheeks crowding his deadpan mouth, and told me he was going to jump off and kill himself. On multiple occasions, I saw him grab desperately at lanyards and pull them tight around his throat. A little girl I worked with last summer told me that one day after kindergarten, she nearly tried to kill herself but had never told anyone.

How soon would I have to describe to my future child how afraid of dying they should be? How afraid I am too.

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I feel truly happy most days; but the last time I went rock climbing, my body calmly, innately longed to move freely between the gym's ceiling and the cement floor. I have to believe that, as I did, my child would feel the harness cradling them and not un-fasten it — that they would grip the rope even more tightly.

PTSD DIAGNOSTIC CRITERION #2

The Soul Floats into Another Dimension

[For severely mentally ill people], the wicked thoughts and behavior that may ensue become inseparable from the person, who is now unrecognizable from what they once were.

-Esmé Weijun Wang

The horror sequel *Insidious: Chapter Two* catalogues Josh's body and mind being gradually overtaken by a spirit that haunted him as a child: his teeth falling out, the overwhelming presence of disembodied voices. Early in the movie, Josh's wife Renai looks at him with suspicion: both wondering if the person in front of her is still fundamentally her husband, and too uncomfortable to even ask.

The plot culminates with Josh becoming entirely possessed and the spirit inside him attempting to murder Josh's wife and two children. Besides newly-pale skin, Josh might not have appeared any differently to his children as he smashes down the door of the room they're hiding in and wraps his hands around Renai's throat. His children watch for the inevitable moment when Renai stops breathing and Josh turns his attention to them.

At the end of the movie, my partner: *Even after he's no longer possessed, how do you look at your father the same way again?*

I imagine a child who looks like me, bony knees enveloping a delicate face.

I don't know.

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The night that I came to believe that my partner had kidnapped me, I could feel something shift in me while we watched the final hour of *Gladiator*. Like the building, lethargic wave of a dissociative episode, but rather than floating out of my body, I was settling into it: eyes narrowing, veins flaring like a volcano pre-eruption.

All at once, the delusion clicked into place. Her apartment became a maze from which I had to plot my escape. When she wasn't looking, I stretched my calves,

took sips of water to prepare for the 50-yard dash down her stairwell. I cracked my knuckles, catalogued knives and vases and lamps hard enough to crack bone.

Even when you've only imagined yourself being violent, the What-Ifs still feel incriminating. Someone tell the judge I haven't been Mirandized. Someone stop me.

What if she'd tried to kiss me one more time? What if a simple swipe of my arm? What if I hadn't only wanted to save myself? What if I'd told her Run?

I Tell People That My PTSD and I Haven't Been Together Very Long

Recently, as I drooled over Gregory Gourdet's performance on *Top Chef All-Stars* — his careful placing of chili slivers, his spoon weaving smoothly through meaty stews like fingers navigating muscle — I had to remind myself that I was equally interested in the lean calves revealed to the audience in montages of his daily jogs. Had to remind myself that trauma is not just the loud, the disruptive, but the instincts I put on Mute.

So I turned up the volume. In a quick Google search, I found Gourdet's new cookbook. On the front cover, he's wearing a thin gray t-shirt and sweatpants: an outfit of morning routines, of fitful sleep with the smell of garlic under nails.

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While watching *Moonlight* with my partner, I cried over a moment in which a group of boys chases the movie's protagonist, shouting "faggot" to his back. After the movie, I was silent for ten minutes, thinking of how to describe the sound of a queer boy's head being slammed into a locker again and again. How to measure how long I watched, waiting for somebody to tell the straight boy to stop. How to explain that every morning after I first dreamed of kissing a boy when I was 11, I rinsed and spit out those desires and questions with my bubblegum mouthwash: made my words careful and clean.

After my first semester in college, I brought home wet wipes, a hygienic habit I'd picked up from Queer men in my hall. My dad spotted them on top of the toilet and asked with trepidation *You know who uses those, right?* I truly believe this was a loving question. A soft warning.

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The first time I masturbated to the thought of a man, I couldn't stop sensing the gaps in my blinds: the movement of leaves like green eyes blinking. Each gust of wind a disappointed sigh.

Was my intrinsic genetic makeup somehow primed for PTSD or, by the time I was 17, had my brain already learned too much about what men's hands can do?

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One summer, a boy I loved pulled me off a pool deck into the water by my ankles.

I told him I could've hit my head. *You could've hurt me*.

He dove deeper.

Behavioral Intervention Plan

Client name: [redacted]
Client age: 11
Date: 7/20/2022

Challenging behavior(s): hypervigilance, dissociation

Attempted Intervention(s): When [redacted] pointed at a school bus backing up with a few people nearby, shouted *Get out of the way; it might hit you!* you waved off his thought like a pesky bird, said *Don't worry, that won't* happen. As an errant leg broke under tires in [redacted]'s mind, the camp director appeared in obligatory khaki shorts and didn't throw a towel over his face and call his fear unclean. She took [redacted]'s other hand, whispered *You're right* — and his fist unfurled in her palm, fingers twitching faintly like deep-sleep eyelids.

Proposed Intervention(s): Go kayaking on the Charles River and, at the end, dismount from your five boats arrived while [redacted] screams *There were seven boats before, there had been seven!* — a chorus of adults shushes and shushes him. Soon after, keep your hands ready as [redacted] leans off the dock over the water, having spotted two more boats turn the river bend. Hear the passengers' huffing from a distance then arrive, sunburned and breathless. Join [redacted] in pacing around as those final campers and counselors reach shore, searching for the water he says they'll need.

Reader, I am here in this un-made thing, and I know that if I am to finish this book, I have to believe I'll be alive to feel the breeze of its pages turning.

More Animal

My partner would probably say I'm the human equivalent of a cat lounging on your laptop: rolling around, inventing new words in an instinctive, Freudian flow. For the first year or two of our relationship, her and I would often chat about our days as we went to the bathroom — one person on the tub's edge, the other on the toilet — but we go about our routines separately now, silently passing through each other's left-behind hand soap scent. When asked *How are you?* I try to practice concision.

She often gets migraines, and it's unclear — or unspoken — whether my presence is a key checkpoint in her constant cycle in and out of overstimulation. It used to feel intimate for her to see me at my loudest, pacing around her apartment, worrying about work and whatever we had stewing in the slow cooker. But sometimes, we'll be on the couch, laptop keys clicking in chaotic tandem, and I'll encounter a frustrating email or an idea I can't yet articulate, and my brain will start to imagine the next stressor — the inevitable toppling of the tower. My hands will tug at my hair; my throat lets out a frustrated moan. Sometimes, hoping to stave off another headache, she'll put her hand on my arm and, so softly, *Shhh*. Her fingers like spiderweb tendrils barely clinging to my wrist.

And if I can't be quiet, I'll just leave the room.

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From "Passing as Sane, or How to Get People to Sit Next to You on the Bus":

- *Do not talk to yourself. This includes not mumbling obscenities under your breath about the late arrival of the train or bus or about the incompetence of the driver.*
- *Avoid eye movements that are too fast or slow. Try not to show your agitation by looking repeatedly around the vehicle.*
- *Do not wring your hands or self-soothe. Keep your hands still, though not rigid.*

– Peta Cox

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My roommate, sneering, the few times that she walked past me while I've meditated in the dining room: *What are you doing?*

Me to a teacher who yelled at a neurodivergent student for thinking aloud about his next Wendy's order while doing his homework: *If he's finishing his work, why do you care?*

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When my partner sent me a video of her ginger cat, Gus, about to un-knot himself near the bathroom door then sprint under the bathmat, leaving his white-striped tail swinging and visible, all I could think about was how if I were to behave with such spontaneity, I'd hope you'd never see an inch of me. When I'm on Hour Three of mindlessly humming John Williams' best movies scores and my grand conductor gestures make their way into my home's kitchen, I don't care about our neighbors bemoaning the sound of my orchestral high notes. I worry about my roommate hearing me, then crossing paths with her later. I picture her staring at me through the wall.

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You are not supposed to be afraid of sinners. / You should take off your shoes and give them / to the wretched and the damned. / Hold out your hand to every girl / even if she seems more animal, / statue, or remnant of plague / than lost disciple.
– Molly McCully Brown

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My thoughts, no matter how many times my partner nuzzles close to me while I chatter and wriggle: *Why can't I just stop?*

My professor who talks fast, pivots between discussion topics faster than our sore wrists can write: *I don't think I'm going to try to change anymore*.

PTSD DIAGNOSTIC CRITERION #3

Way Too High to Simmer Down, Might as Well Overheat

Long before I'd had my first satisfying sip of coffee, for the first time, I sprang up to a sitting position in the middle of the night, my brain so full with nightmares that it had flooded my chest too: my lungs feeling like overfilled balloons about to pop. In theory, it is further anxiety-provoking to feel the fierce thumping of one's heart during or leading up to a panic attack, to feel oneself pulsing so explosively; but to me, the worst of it was that no matter how I meditated, walked around, drank water, self-talked, journaled, I couldn't slow myself down, couldn't even exhaust myself back into sleepiness.

When this happens, sometimes a few times in a week, my instinct is to reach for my highly-addictive Ativan prescription. Each time, I have to think about how recently I last took it, how if I take it too much it might stop working altogether. I think of my father yelling at me after I told him my current nightly dosage of melatonin, how if I fail myself, I won't doubt whether I've failed him too.

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I started drinking coffee my second semester in grad school. My brain fog prevented me from meeting the demands of prepping, grading, and teaching class four days a week *and* attending to my own classwork and writing. I would regularly feel ashamed of that; my teaching supervisor would casually chew on dried mango as he chided me in front of my peers. But I soon found that if I drank coffee in the morning, my body, extremely sensitive to caffeine, would rise to most occasions — although I could feel myself shaking with anxiety at times, although my fear of flunking out would now swell with every task on my to-do list, I could usually focus this newfound energy and motivation into survival, into avoiding reprimanding and humiliation.

I confess: I have had panic attacks that probably resulted from caffeine consumption. I have lost much-needed sleep because I had my coffee at noon instead of 9am. But I also remember sitting through most of high school in a broken haze, teachers glaring and shaking their heads — each day, my peers hunched over their desks in some unimaginable meditation, their pencils uncannily swirling from formula to formula. I remember the times my friends assured me I would be able to think and speak clearly any day now, that I would feel like myself again — how for years I said *Yes, yes. Soon.*

Behavioral Intervention Plan

Client name: [redacted]
Client age: 10 (though he insists anything but ten and a half is wrong)
Date: 7/29/2022

Challenging behavior(s): hyperactivity, impulsive behavior, running from classroom, frustration intolerance.

Attempted Intervention(s): As you chased [redacted] around the bus, the classroom, the middle school your summer program was borrowing, you thought of when he was smaller and needed you more. Thought of how he used to run and run and run and forget everything but the heat of the metal playground, his bicycle feet's rolling momentum like bare hands slapping drums. [redacted] would forget to eat and drink; then piss himself; then keep playing. So when you talked to this boy about how fast he moves sometimes, you assumed it was the right thing to do. You asked him about those times: *Do you get tired? Isn't it unpleasant?*

Proposed Intervention(s): Have that conversation again. And when [redacted] says *No* and you can tell he means it, don't just continue the conversation on the track you decided upon the day before. Don't reply *Okay, but this has to change*. Believe him. Ask a question. Admit *I think you've healed since then, but I haven't healed from seeing you that way*. Say the wrong thing, as long as it's anything else.

On Being Loved

In the months immediately after the Bombing, the only treatment that helped me was being around friends. I spent hours after school walking to get ice cream, watching movies, sitting on couches and talking. I neglected my schoolwork in favor of friends who'd hug me and play basketball with me and wait while I picked out a Slurpee flavor.

My best friend at the time, Nick, always responded to my barrage of text messages about school, conflicts with my parents, and the awful things I regularly felt and imagined. He didn't try to convince me of anything: always just *That really sucks.*

After those endless hours spent in school — a setting that, via its unflinching rigor, argued against my worth — someone was truly arguing *for* me.

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When I arrived in college eighteen months after the Bombing, I wanted to be enveloped in love. Within my first three weeks as a student, I'd told a dozen people in my dorm what I'd been through. I was picky, and they all asked questions, checked on me — what's more, we checked on each other.

Several times, I read essays about my vivid, violent nightmares at a college open mic. I'd look up every minute or two, tempted to count every nodding head.

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In the fall of 2016, when I first met the person I'd date through the second half of college, we spoke in a language others often didn't understand. We talked openly with each other about the conflicted-ness of suicidality, about the constant fuzzy hue dissociation left us with.

Within weeks, we were regularly spending late-night hours filling up sprawling classroom whiteboards with boxes labeling cognitions, symptoms, and emotions; then drawing entire webs of lines connecting what happened and how it feels now, what happened and how it feels now. We examined the mechanisms of each other's bodies with the diligence of engineers, also using mapping to identify

what we *didn't* yet understand: the few boxes that would lay disconnected, mysterious like uncharted islands.

In a way this book started at 2am one of those nights: me drawing a line between how I shrink and shudder when she touches my waist — and my body running, carrying me as far away as it could. Her squinting at the board, then *That makes sense. That feels right.*

The more lines I saw her draw, the warmer it felt to hold those Expo markers myself.

The Other Side of the Wall: An Essay by Progressive Counting

Progressive counting is an intensive method of psychotherapeutic trauma treatment in which the patient, in a manner akin to exposure therapy for phobias, deliberately relives traumatic memories in order to process them. The patient is asked to visualize the entirety of each traumatic event that has happened in their life. The goal is to expose oneself to each memory until it causes no distress at all.

Beginning with ten seconds of visualization, the exposure times increase in 10-second increments. A highly distressing event might end up requiring over 100-second blocks of sustained exposure.

***

10 seconds

I don't want to say *This thing happened to me and everything since then has come from it*. I want to say it's an object I orbit, drifting close to then away from. Its chaotic heat — then my skin waiting to be burned again.

20 seconds

As I sprinted away, I called my parents, huffing out scattered words, certain that if I moved any slower, I'd die. They didn't believe what I'd told them until they turned on the news.

30 seconds

When I was no longer able to sleep, my brain was no longer able to learn. My grades dropped like limp leaves shaken loose. Years after the last test I took in school, when I feel powerless, I still dream of those mornings I walked into homeroom knowing I had a test I couldn't study for. Knowing that in two weeks there would be another one, then another.

40 seconds

My mom and I sat down to review my first attempt at a college essay, spending the afternoon trimming it of clear descriptions of my mental illness, of how thinking I might die had informed my values. I was proud to have survived, let alone to have learned, but she and I, we willed into the keyboard a sense of power and conviction that was beyond me — one that she assured me college admissions counselors would be delighted by.

50 seconds

The day before my high school physics final, those basic astrophysics formulas had been going in one ear, out the other for months. While I tried to study, my mom and sister were downstairs very-loudly testing out the marimba her school had loaned her for the summer.

I went down to them, explained that I was studying and needed some quiet space. My mom looked up and replied *Oh* now *you want to do your homework?*

I replied *Asshole* and stomped away. The next day, she cried when I refused to apologize.

60 seconds

Soon after going through a dozen sessions of progressive counting, a slew of my PTSD symptoms—albeit more manageable than before—re-emerged. My hypervigilant brain regularly exhausted itself investigating the thumps and slams of my upstairs neighbor. I struggled to find a balance between panicking — over-experiencing my body — and dissociating from it.

I shared with my therapist that something in me was apparently not resolved. She looked at the list of my life's traumatic events we'd made on the fly during one session and furrowed her brow: *But I thought we'd processed it all*.

70 seconds

The one time I tried to tell my dad, a clinical psychologist, about the PTSD nightmares I was having, he squinted at me and interrogated *Well are you using your phone before bed?* The conversation ended when I said yes.

I began to sit in bed for hours, my feet buried in looseleaf, writing poems and essays about my dreams. About walking through the world exhaling through knife wounds, through orifices where fingers once were. After being told that my first severe symptom could be resolved with a simple lifestyle change, I thought that if I took care of myself, by myself, my health would return to normal. Every night, I went to bed with this belief and was proved wrong.

80 seconds

At the time, I felt safe in most places — but especially in the Back Bay area of Boston, a haven for the city's upper class lined with restaurants and high-end shops. Red-brick townhouses with wrought-iron fences run along every street. I'd paced up and down Newbury and Boylston for years at that point, had sat in Copley Square and watched the fountains spew water and swallow it back up.

I more or less understood the procedure: runners, who had to qualify for the Boston Marathon in another marathon, would arrive in waves. The runners with the fastest qualifying times arrive first; then the standard marathon crowds, jogging steadily, feet clamoring for space with each stomp. Far too many runners for each of their times to be printed in the *Boston Globe* the next day, for any of their names to be given attention. My breath cheddar-sour from a Roxy's grilled cheese, three friends and I watched the few fastest runners arrive at the finish line on Boylston Street, then took the subway under the barricades to shop on the adjacent street.

I only heard one of the two blasts and I don't know which — but it was loud, and it sounded close, like something had been demolished a block over, just a wall separating us from it as we carefully shopped for soap. There was a horrible metallic screech like a broken elevator screaming 100 stories downward in an action movie. It was sunny and clear: no chance the boom was thunder.

I wonder if there was truly a pause before the screams started, a moment of disorientation, or if it just took thirty seconds for me to notice. Then a block or two down, I could see hundreds or thousands of people running. We ran to the intersection to get a clear view of the highest building in Boston, the Prudential Center. To see if it was damaged, if there was steel debris and rubble that needed to be sifted through.

Someone in a pink dress shirt, looked like a Men's Wearhouse salesman, was flailing their arms. I asked what happened and they said *Someone set a bomb in*

front of my shop; *you have to get to the river*. One of my friends, Kelly, bolted away with me, the other two straying behind like glitching companions in a video game: sprinting, then walking, sprinting, then walking while we shouted *C'mon*! Would bombs be the precursor to a mass shooting? Were there more bombs lining these streets, meant to harm the fleeing crowds or arriving first responders? One screw in my world had been undone and I had no way of knowing if any others were loose. I was certain that if I froze, that if I didn't sprint down the correct path, I would die then and there.

As I alternated between jogging and keeping track of my friends, I called my parents: *Someone set off a fucking bomb at the Marathon*. I said it again. *We're heading to the Charles*. I didn't say I thought I might die or say goodbye — I didn't know what they would want to hear. Telling my mom and dad where I was and what was happening was the best I knew how to do.

When we made it to the Harvard Bridge, people stopped running — if not for that, I would've kept sprinting until my dad picked us up in Cambridge. As my dad dropped each of my friends off, as we pulled into our driveway, I rapidly tapped my feet, could still feel them clapping on pavement in the middle of the street.[1]

***

When the patient becomes less distressed by the event, the therapist begins to gradually decrease the visualization time. If the patient's distress level drops dramatically, the therapist might decrease visualization time by 20-30 seconds at once.

***

60 seconds

A few weeks after the Bombing, when my insomnia dug in its heels, I reached out to people around me for help. Metro Boston was reeling from this event; Boston Strong wristbands and ribbons and t-shirts were ubiquitous; my history teacher interrupted our planned curriculum to discuss the bombing's aftermath; for a week afterwards, everyone I knew tweeted in horror from their couches.

Although the trauma of this event had spread itself widely, it had spread itself thinly. Nobody I spoke to was experiencing the same distress (or was able to talk

about it with me). Most people I told quickly shifted the conversation to their uncle or friend who almost went to the Marathon but didn't, jockeying for space as close to the event as they could get. Some were a little sad or anxious, but those feelings faded as suburbia settled back into placid springtime green.

40 seconds

In the years afterwards, I've stuck to the same vague script: *I was one block away from the first blast, a few more from the second*. I never got better at explaining to people that for a few minutes, I truly thought my friends and I were going to die and that's the simple horror of it. No gruesome injuries or bloody debris, no rushing into sports shops to turn racks of t-shirts into tourniquets. I was glad that I'd been able to call my family without worrying that one less free hand would be the difference between somebody else's life and death. If I had run back to the finish line and experienced true, immediate loss, would I even be able to write this now? I've never felt guilt for being on the other side of that soap shop wall; but I'm still terrified that I might tell someone the story that way, in its truest way, and they would wonder why I still feel so sick nine years later. And I know I wouldn't have a perfect explanation.

30 seconds

On a walk through Cambridge, my partner confronted me about my fear of dogs and its irrationality. I let myself lose the argument, recognizing that to win would entail describing the dreams I'd had, since the bombing, of dogs ripping me apart over and over.

How could I admit that my fear was rooted in something that hadn't even happened to me? That I only survive these dreams by having learned to fly over their hungry mouths?

She insisted *You should talk about this in therapy*.

I whispered *Just because it's a symptom doesn't mean I can change it*.

20 seconds

When I got back to my parents' house, I could hear the local news station broadcasting live from the finish line — my dad hurried me down the hall and sat me in front of our Xbox, where I began clicking my way through *Fallout 3*.

Through the wall, I could hear my dad on the phone with grandparents and aunts reassuring them that I "didn't see anything" before making it out of the city.[2]

10 seconds

I asked my therapist *What do I picture if the event never ended?* and she said *Imagine that it did*.

I Hear a Father Explain to His Son How to Hope

Near the Marathon finish line, there was a particular row of townhouses that, at 16, I wanted to live in. Million-dollar homes. Numbers like that felt like a great distance I could traverse with a reliable car. A Subaru, perhaps? In the suburbs, for cis-men, a plan rarely explodes into something else. Even impulsivity is just an inconvenience. On the SATs, I gambled my way to completion. I never once bet on how fast my legs could carry my torso. Where I grew up, we pack our minivans and drive to Six Flags if we want our bodies to think they might die young. Nothing runs in my family but steadiness — but all at once, I lost my inheritance. Typo in the will. I pull out my magnifying glass and the paper says what it says. Still, I have a faith that cannot be appraised or seized by any bank. A part of me beams at my credit score and thinks *I kept myself safe, so I deserve to forget. Yes, I still have my receipt. Can I talk to your manager?*[3]

as a show about apocalypse. When I think of Mulder and Scully fending off a slow, insidious takeover by an alien race, I also picture the creeping of water up and over once-dry shorelines, a chest heaving out polluted air.

I think about how we want apocalypse to be preventable, to wrestle the controls away from evil-doing forces. How on *The X-Files*, the aliens manipulating and killing are rarely seen — the show's protagonists constantly trying to prove that danger is even there. Or here.

Is it apocalypse if only a select few see it coming? If two friends spot ships blinking between clouds; if a half-dozen men watch a finger hover over a button? Is it apocalypse if humanity lives on, but under others' control?

I imagine an email exchange with my professor in which she questions how *The X-Files* is like *Fallout* or *The Last of Us* or *Terminator*.

My reply: *This show is not about the end of the world. But I don't think it's much different for humanity to no longer be the 'dominant' species — for Earth to no longer be* 'ours'.

PTSD DIAGNOSTIC CRITERION #4

Occasionally Thinking Nyquil Will Keep You Asleep

While playing *Fallout 4*, my avatar reached a ruined building riddled with radiation, dangerous enough to repel any wary traveler. Dust floated in and out of the skeleton frame, glowing green like intoxicated neurons.

My Geiger counter clicked faintly as I stood by the entrance deciding what to do. I thought to myself *If I was here in real life, I'd just hold my breath, plug my nose, and run in.* My avatar fidgeted a bit, but remained upright, imposing.

I went inside, making several attempts to scavenge money or supplies. Each time, my avatar filled his pack with musty dresswear and canned food, his Geiger counter vibrating violently, then slumped over and died of radiation poisoning.

Each time, the exit was in sight.

Winning ~~Over~~ Death

The suicide is, believe it or not, the most competitive person in the world…I had to do it before anyone or anything else did it to me.

-Jericho Brown

While on hiatus from suicidality, I am at my most volatile.

My Subaru hatchback roars at any car that veers close to my lane. I peek out my apartment window at every loud noise, refuse to answer any knock at the door.

I think about how if the violent forces of bad luck re-enter my life, if I am killed young, it will prove that I shouldn't have waited.

On *Dead Space*

Recently, I described to my partner how I spent hours playing *Dead Space* without my heart speeding up or my shoulders tensing.

I told her I wished she could've seen me as a teenager, only able to stand playing navigating the Ishimura's claustrophobic, monster-filled halls for half an hour at a time.

I did not tell her about the one or two times that I yelped as a necromorph's lanky, mangled frame suddenly filled a doorway. How in those moments I fired my Plasma Cutter wildly, every shot a narrow miss.

For weeks after the Bombing, I played *Fallout 3* on my Xbox 360, the dusty-white machine whirring frenetically.

This game's protagonist, an avatar of the player's creation, is placed in the aftermath of a 2077 nuclear apocalypse. America's population has descended into corporatized underground cities called vaults and, with caution, has begun to repopulate cities and towns in the hazardous, irradiated wasteland. In spite of the ubiquity of nuclear waste and mutated monsters, the player somewhat-rarely stumbles across a corpse or skeleton. Besides the mass-death after the nuclear bombs themselves, the post-nuclear landscape can be survived — at the very least, hidden from — in makeshift settlements.

In spite of the near-total lack of economic opportunity, folks are ready to pay the player for countless services. Their avatar, although their combat experience is incredibly limited, fends off attacks from raiders and robbers whose long-term survival has been contingent upon their ability to kill others. The protagonist does not shrink away from pitch-black Metro tunnels, does not fear any monster or circumstance. They can become radiation-poisoned, can break ribs and arms and legs; but they're not at all lastingly affected by what they see, do, or physically endure. Drug addiction is a possibility, but even that can be instantly cured by any of the wasteland's ill-equipped doctors. Trauma to the body or mind doesn't hinder growth; instead, the protagonist's trajectory is always *upwards*.

After the Bombing, I knew for sure I was the type who at least *could* act to save himself. To my re-shaped brain, that ability became not just a point of pride, but crucial to my newly-formed identity. My willingness to jump out a two-story window in a mass-shooting or to fend off an unsuspecting home invader meant that I would potentially survive the violent circumstances I was constantly imagining.

I spent countless hours in these unstable virtual worlds traversing unpredictable landscapes, acquiring skills and weapons and armor: the game's ultimate aim to become an invulnerable character. But, in retrospect, I wish a game had told me that it's okay to not always have control of one's life, that I might exhaust myself worrying about dying. That that exhaustion might become the greater hurt.

I Went to the 2014 Boston Marathon

& watched from the 50th floor of the Prudential Center (my friend's mom's office) & a roll of gauze rattled around my knapsack & if I'd pulled out my phone instead of staring out the massive windows or pacing around the carpet I would've come upon a *WikiHow* article on applying a tourniquet in which every picture was an injured person & a pair of hands that in that moment didn't recall how to pluck stray eyelashes or slap at mosquitoes & the healing hands at each frame's edge: attached to a body that constantly chooses between unfurled wings or fearsome talons, attached to a man who thought that returning to Boylston Street would give him back what he was owed.

On March 4th 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court Denied the Appeal of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, Who Was Sentenced to Death

Fallout 4 begins in idyllic Boston suburbia, pastel flowers and bright decor emanating a classic 1950s glow. On TV in your avatar's house, a newscaster describes a distant war, soldiers sweating themselves thin in an obscure Pacific island jungle. Our troops' presence in other countries is assumed necessary, framed as romantic; and in America (particularly suburbia) safety is expected. Via the coincidence of our births, via support of America's self-interested government, we Americans earn our national safety.

When a nuclear bomb is dropped on Boston, the avatar and their spouse and child, Shaun, are among the lucky few to be herded into an underground vault where, without their prior knowledge, Vault Tec freezes the residents in cryogenic pods. The avatar's family is frozen in plain view across a narrow walkway.

Post-apocalypse, the avatar's cryo-sleep is interrupted — a pale, grizzled bounty hunter clad in black is searching the cryogenic chambers. He gestures towards the avatar's spouse and their chamber is opened. Shaun shrieks as he is pulled from his parent's arms; the spouse is shot, and the kidnappers leave, carrying Shaun. The avatar watches helplessly, feebly pounds on the glass — later, when they emerge from their own pod, they pledge to their spouse's corpse, "I'll find who did this, and I'll get Shaun back. I promise."

The beginning of the game's main story is spent in search of Shaun's kidnapper, Kellogg. The player seeks out a half-robotic private investigator and befriends a dog capable of tracking the kidnapper's path across the wasteland — soon, they enter Kellogg's hideout and an inevitable standoff.

Kellogg was never meant to be left alive. His unsympathetic eyes and exaggerated facial scar wield our cultural imagination of pure, irredeemable evil. Kellogg's deviancy, his self-serving nature mean chaos to a stable society.

Before the player's final encounter with Kellogg, you two talk. Although Bethesda's writers are famed for carefully crafting significant player choices — which they also do throughout *Fallout 4* — there is no non-violent option for the encounter with Kellogg. The writers posit: some of the most significant, disruptive traumas can only be resolved by murder.

Post-Apocalypse, I'd Be the Hermit That the Protagonist Coaxes Out of Hiding

I’m sorry, but you and I would make better laser tag buddies than apocalypse comrades. I’m useless without team colors. Not enough expired Ativan to siphon the fuel from my tank. Take one look at me and I board up my windows. Take more than your share of snacks and I never forget. I point my gun in every direction till I prove myself right.[4]

In A Dream, I Stab Dzhokhar Tsarnaev to Death While My Family Stares

Handmaid's Tale, Season 5 Episode 1

After years June finally / beats her rapist / to death / and when she gets home / her knuckles / her face covered / in his blood her husband / Luke follows her / around asking *What / happened? Whose / blood is that?* / then Luke goes quiet / slumps to the floor / and this is what I mean / when I say *wall*: it's that Luke's angry / at her. I mean it was / the best he could do / to scream at the rapist / the one time he saw him after all / sound is the perfect weapon / against what you've heard / not what you know / I mean that Luke and June don't talk / enough for him to ask *Why / aren't you like me / anymore? / Why do you scream / with your hands?*[5]

and if you’d called me “Self-saboteur” from across the quad, I would’ve waved back. If you’d said “singularity,” I could’ve pointed to it on a calendar: the month I’d decided I wouldn’t live past.

Sophomore year, I could finally think and that freedom overwhelmed me, so like a temperamental cat, my grades alternated between swatting me in the face and cuddling up. School and I were reluctant roommates. My GPA hovered below 3.0 but more than ever, near-failure felt like survival.

The next year, I started having panic attacks when I’d dissociated for too long to arrive to class on time. I’d stand by the door, pacing the hallway, unable to convince myself I belonged in that classroom.

The year I would graduate (which I did on time only because my parents paid for summer classes that would make up for the multiple classes I’d dropped or failed or refused to take and because I learned to meditate and journal in the same month that) I learned to drink.

Lush, 144 Newbury St., Boston, MA

When I heard the bombs go off, I was standing in this shop with a tiny box of their "solid toothpaste" in my hand. I instinctively stuffed it in my pocket, unpaid for, when I bolted out the door. A few weeks later, I pulled the box out of my bathroom cupboard and took out a toothpaste "tablet," let it start to melt on my tongue before spitting it out.

That summer, I brought the toothpaste back, explaining why I'd accidentally stolen it, presenting it to the Lush staff like a recovered family heirloom being returned undamaged.

Steve Madden, 118 Newbury St., Boston, MA

Shops selling $400 shoes and $70 t-shirts with uninspiring designs. "New American" restaurants selling lobster, steak, risotto. Frozen yogurt. A few smaller, reclusive venues—a sex shop, comic books store, smoke shop—like scuffs on leather shoes. On this street, you can buy what you want to feel how you want. Lately I don't look at my bank statements, don't want to imagine there's any limit to that possibility.

Lolita, 271 Dartmouth St., Boston, MA

My first flashback was near Lolita, a dark, hidden-away lounge near the finish line, its walls plastered with black skulls with red and orange eyes. Out the window of my Uber, I saw Boylston Street in the daytime, traffic cones and barriers forming an open lane for the runners—and then it was 10 pm again and soon I was on a date, drinking ginger-peach sangrias until I could touch a woman who I didn't want touching me.

Had I been nestled in this bustling bar a few blocks from the finish line, the T rumbling below my table, would I have even heard the sound of a bomb, logged it in my brain like a mysterious but memorable chord? Had I been drunk that afternoon, would the memory of that day ever have hurt, ever been more than a party being broken up?

Casa Romero, 30 Gloucester St., Boston, MA

and MJ O'Connor's, CGK, Joe's American Grille: I really don't mind it when you card me, even when my patchy beard has become a visible mess and I'm chatting with my friends about the plight that is teaching college students. Every time I buy a drink legally, I think of the inconvenience of finding alcohol when I was 17, of driving to strangers' homes to get shitty vodka. I only learned years later about bartenders' careful hands that can make the unpalatable palatable, the punishing taste pleasurable. Had someone put Mules and margaritas in my hands when I was 17 and could only think about the smallness of my future, I would've drank and drank until my present expanded, ballooned in my belly, became an unbridled, bankrupt circus.

PTSD DIAGNOSTIC CRITERION #5

Got a High Tolerance When Your Age Don't Exist

Every time that I correctly tell someone my age

every late-night hour I pinch between my nails

every minute my legs slur across dusty pavement

every second street lamps' heat un-shivers my toes

is time I can finally mark.

Un \ Psychoeducated

Psychoeducation is a common psychotherapeutic technique in which the therapist provides the patient with information on the development, symptoms, and prevalence of their illness, as well as describing potential modes of treatment.

Understanding the nature and roots of my dissociative episodes, intrusive thoughts, and anxiety has saved my life. Reading books like *The Body Keeps the Score* and *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog* have helped me understand what is happening in my mysterious brain, how to treat myself with the thoughtfulness and care of a well-paid employee.

But there is nothing I've encountered in therapy less useful than when I've been told, by percentage, how common PTSD is in the United States. Nothing less useful than when I sat down for my first therapy session and my therapist casually crossed his lanky legs and told me *You know, after the Bombing, I've seen tons of patients who are in distress, same as you are.*

I'm so grateful that he stopped there, went only a few sentences further at most. Had someone pathologized my journey, told me how many patients they'd seen somberly toying with a blue Boston Strong band on their wrist, I don't know that that habit of comfort would've felt at all my own ever again.

\

In a recent therapy session, my therapist asked me why it doesn't help me to hear statistics about my illness. Afterwards, as I crunched on a croissant at the bakery across the street from her office, I thought about how my common, culturally-prevalent illness never felt understood or seen by anybody, even in the wake of a local terrorist attack. My parents knew I had been there and hardly ever asked me about the wound, hardly ever asked me what it was like to hurt and hurt and hurt. I've often judged the world for not forming itself around me — rather than learning how I might re-shape it.

Playoff \ Run

The Crowd at TD Garden

Years ago, at my first Celtics game since the Bombing, I thought of the gleaming Garden court as a lit-up surgical field; the Jumbotron a lamp spewing crisp white light; the 20,000 spectators jumping, throwing up their arms like a patient's wriggling body. What is a wound if not thousands of cells vibrating in awe of an empty space? Scaffolding, wires, all running back to a humming mind: the lens that notices pain and archives it, at once. A stadium full of hands doing what they're told: flooding torsos with cheap beer in $15 cups. Bumping shoulders and mumbling our East Coast apologies like passersby in a therapist's waiting room. After it happened, in 2013, I should've dragged every neighbor into my weekly appointment — in the grand Boston nervous system, I was a fingertip's neuron surrounded by biceps' and I thought there was nothing they could teach me. Now, I worry I've waited so long that I've become right.

Fans at Home Yelling at their TV's

In 2022 when we barely won Game 7 against the Heat and made it to the Finals, I watched the last minute of the game — Jimmy Butler, the Heat's star player, rushing down court and pulling up for an open three-pointer to put the Heat ahead by 1, but missing it — like I do when my brain wishes it didn't have to process what I'm seeing: pumping my eyes and ears full of fog. Even on the big-screen TV my parents just got, the numbers on the score display looked like a poorly-wrought ink blot exam. When we won and, based on the players' reactions, I was sure that we were going to the NBA Finals for the first time since I was small, my mom asked me how I felt and for once, I didn't know what to do except be honest: *I'm so happy and I'm so tired*. She nodded and, as a kind parent does when their child says something strange or contradictory, she just let it be.

Post-Game Interview

Q: When my mother stayed up after me to see how Game 4 of the Finals ended — did she wish my trauma had only ever been her up till midnight, texting me *Here's what's coming when you wake up*?
Q: When I made that call to my parents from near the finish line, did I disrupt a sacred balance?
Q: When I knew better than them, insisting *I'm sure it's true, I'm sure*.

Q: A few months ago, during a fight with my mother, she suddenly paused for what felt like a minute — then she cautiously asked *Do you remember it was me who suggested you go to the finish line with your friends?*

A: My mother and I — our silence is like a crack blooming in a window pane.
A: A crack I can put my finger to: touch and touch.
A: One on which I can place my palm and push.

because I finally knew that if the world was willing to envelope me like a blanket, I could finally lie still and let it.

End of Summer Report: [redacted]

The first time I met [redacted] through my work with the summer camp, in 2018, he was five or six years old and we played freeze tag at a park by the Charles River in Cambridge. I was hesitant to touch him[1] but over and over, he'd hold out his hand, grinning, and urge *Un-freeze me, un-freeze me!*

Once, while I was It, I cornered [redacted] by the swing set and his face grew serious. He pushed the large, heavy baby swing at me as hard as he could. Later, my boss told me he would need me to explain things to him, help him understand how often he was confused — and how the world around him was, for the most part, safe.

\

The one summer that I worked with [redacted], I spent the first few weeks at his side, coaching him through interactions with other kids, steering him away from fistfights and screaming matches, letting him know that we were sticking to the schedule and doing a great job. Observing him hesitantly interact with kids he didn't know, attempt intimidating activities, breathe deeply after jumping at loud noises, I learned what it looks like when someone desperately, forcefully wants to become happy and comfortable in the world.

Unlike many children at this camp, [redacted] wouldn't show that he believed positive feedback at all, couldn't understand how he was a good, worthwhile person. Once, while [redacted] was trapped in an hour-long state of rage — flipping over the child-size tables in our classroom, throwing chairs so hard that the legs cracked the drywall — I told him we're going to get through this, that he was strong. Expressionless, he'd say *No I'm not, no I'm not* and throw a box of markers, dump out a board game's pieces. I didn't want to create an argument, but each time, I softly replied, *You are, you are*.

Eventually, as [redacted] held over his head the only chair he hadn't yet thrown, I impulsively insisted, *You're the strongest person I've ever met*. He paused, put the chair down, then walked out of the classroom to rejoin our group elsewhere.

[1] As is common practice for working with kids, especially kids with trauma histories, and especially the most volatile of those kids

I'd never said something that so quickly and simply reset another person. I hadn't known that words can direct someone down a different path — or teach someone to form an entirely new path themselves.

\

A month into camp, I watched an inexperienced counselor impulsively grab at [redacted] as he primed to sprint towards a group of friends on the playground. Perhaps she thought he was angry at them, was running to start a fight (as far as I could tell, he was not), but when she lowered herself to wrap her arms around his tiny chest, he bit her forearm hard enough to break skin.

Afterwards, I sat with [redacted] playing Connect Four when my boss walked in and locked eyes with me. I knew that, in a punitive measure rare for this camp, she was going to have to suspend him.

When the news came, [redacted]'s chubby cheeks softened, his taut mouth contorting into a wail as he fell back on the carpet and sobbed. I'd learned that arguing with coworkers in front of our kids only yields chaos, so I didn't protest, didn't say my coworker never should have touched him that way. I'd spent weeks ingraining in [redacted] that it mattered that he was doing the best he could; but this suspension told him that the best he could wasn't enough, that the things I'd say were no longer trustworthy.

When [redacted] returned to camp a day or two later, he started tuning me out. For weeks, I'd been able to lay out choices for him, guide him through each day with a custom schedule that we'd follow with diligence. But now, he'd walk away without saying a word to me. I'd ask him what he wanted to do from 1:00-2:00 and he'd stare blankly or stomp into another room. I'd tell him that that boy who was swearing wasn't mad at him, didn't want to fight him; then he'd tell me I was wrong and run away, his fists flailing like num-chuks.

Within another week, [redacted] was getting into several fights a day. He tried to kill himself at least twice. As we were now unable to account for his safety, [redacted] got suspended for the rest of the summer.

To my surprise, [redacted] showed up with his grandma on the last day of camp for the all-camp breakfast. I asked him how he was and he didn't respond.

Follow-Up Report

In a dream, [redacted] and I hid underneath the slide during an intense game of playground tag. Neither of us had been tagged all afternoon.

I told him *I think I might survive if you survive too*.

He nodded solemnly, said *Okay I will*, and held out his pinky.

I Strongly Consider Touching the Bald Spot on the Man in Front of Me

and it's probably because I miss touching my partner all over and this nakedness could be a breast or a belly or a butt. It's not just prodding a stranger, but the idea of contact itself that flouts its tempting shape. I bury my hands in my pockets.

\

In college, someone's hand on my shoulder or thigh would make me flinch and shudder. Muscles twitching like a sprinter at the block. I perfected a well-timed *I have to call my parents* or *I have to pee*, routinely masking my body's instincts as choice.

My friend recently asked why sex feels unsafe to me. To many of my friends — including those with trauma histories, who mostly lean towards *hyper*sexuality — this tension is confusing.

I told her how uncomfortable it is to see so much of my own skin, let alone to be expected to be loving and focused when all I can think about my vulnerable body is that I must defend it.

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In college, one of my creative writing teachers advised us to touch our writing daily. I think she meant to frame touch as a matter of agency-seeking, as an ability to cross one's own internal barriers. To touch, to be touched. To feel touched, to touch oneself.

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At a bar the other night, a friend clutched my ass like a Christmas ornament and I considered this *practice*. I want my body to be handled while my jokes and gestures continue to flow.

I want to never stop for anything.

Buzzfeed Quiz Results:

Based on Your Favorite Snacks from College, Will You Think About Terrorism During Your Next Sexual Encounter?

Response #1: You selected "Garlic Butter Ritz Crackers."

You spent years cutting yourself off from women hard and quick, needing your love-life, at least, to be in your control. When that friend you'd talked to every day for months started sending you heart emojis, you didn't respond for three days. One woman known for sleeping around messaged you incessantly on Trivia Crack to no avail. One woman for whom you spent hours learning to slack-line, carving bizarre and painful shapes into your feet: she tried to hold your hand, and you pretended not to notice, not to need to make a choice. You filled your first dorm room's twin-size bed with crumbs, hoping that might solidify your resolve that nobody be let in it.

Response #2: You selected "None of the above."

It was 5am and you two hadn't eaten anything in twelve hours, were too sober to ignore your aching stomachs. When she told you to kiss her, you said no in words as stale as your early-morning breaths. Though you would soon stop seeing each other, she stayed with you that night. You barely slept, your body activated, vibrating, as the space in which you'd combatted bad dreams and intrusive thoughts was no longer entirely yours, was no longer entirely a battlefield.

Response #3: You selected "Utz Cheeseballs."

Your first lengthy conversation with her was about how, when people talk about PTSD, the sheer discomfort of dissociation doesn't come up enough. The first several times you two tried to have sex, it was if a ghost had been inhabiting your body and suddenly decided to jump ship — you froze, staring at the ceiling for 45 minutes. She cozied up against your emptied-out chest for hours without complaint.

After your first year together, you started to plot out a post-college life — and started to fight more. You both cycled in and out of states of insomnia, depression, panic. Neither of you had the energy to deeply support the other, and

you grew frustrated at your inability to rapidly heal yourselves. Rather than surviving school and severe illness because of your mutual care, your respective instincts kicked in, switching gears to surviving *in spite of* your relationship.

Even when you two met a year after breaking up, you argued constantly, still looking for reasons to be resentful, to not need each other anymore.

Response #4: You selected "Bananas."

Soon after graduating, you met your now-partner. Almost four years later, when you two fall asleep together after not seeing each other for a few months, you still dream of someone hurting you. The antagonists' weapons of choice vary: knives, guns, a military helicopter once or twice.

In a recent dream, you were eaten alive: sharp nails and teeth stripping layer after layer. In the moment before the first bite, you thought that your hand or your forearm might be worth kissing.

Your results: Yes. And dearest *Buzzfeed* patron, it comes down to this: someday soon, your life will whirl around you, propelled by someone else's energy. You will wake up to open shades and the sound of shower water humming through your bedroom wall. You will hear your front door open and close. The clacking of keys and dress shoes. Soups you didn't prepare will bubble on your stovetop and you will have the choice to stay in your bedroom, lock the door — or to join your partner in the kitchen. To fill a spoon with searing-hot liquid, then hold it to your lips and cautiously blow.[6]

Dissociating When Close to Orgasm

My brain is a runaway balloon. A mischievous glint above pavement. Surely, you've seen this scene before: a child cries, and someone with longer arms and quicker thinking jumps and reaches through the wind and suddenly the world is simpler. The child learns that misplaced puzzle pieces can find their way back into the box, learns to ask for help when a need is still in sight.

I've resisted the temptation to have my brain scanned. I don't want to be told this stale ball of clay behind my forehead needs reshaping. I want every inch of my anatomy to pass, to hold powerful yet imperceptible flaws.

So I don't ask my partner how it looks when my consciousness drips out of my ears; I don't ask if it stains the sheets or floats up through the ceiling. All I know is that when my partner is close enough to feel the air around me thicken, she holds out her wrist and tells me to tie the string around it.

Six Clarifications

[1] Reader, I would argue that even if I did not lose a leg on Boylston Street in 2013, I deserve space to speak. At the same time, as I've written this book, I've found people living with PTSD post-Bombing who were given a fleeting sound-bite that my younger self believed no one like me would ever get. This book isn't just rife with such gaps and contradictions — it is built upon them.

[2] Please don't see me as unloved by my family. Thinking you're going to die creates a great divide between you and people who haven't. Thinking your son might die creates yet another. After such divides form, you have to find new ways to love each other fully. For a long time, we couldn't.

[3] I don't want to say if I was poor and had PTSD, I absolutely wouldn't survive it. People so often live through what they're forced to. But I've still learned that, in America, even when you can't buy a cure to illness, you can buy a tolerable life in spite of illness.

[4] In her book *Concentrate*, Courtney Faye Taylor argues, "Rape is a room within every cishet man. It's either locked or onerously doorless." I'm not heterosexual, but this applies to my own repertoire of smaller potential violences: the sharp and insensitive, the harsh and cranky. This past year, I have been more irritable than since I was a teenager, and all I know about my behavior is that it happened because I've been hurting. That does not explain why I've let it happen.

[5] In high school, I moved between boy and girl friend groups every other month. In spite of my desire to hold a variety of relationship styles in my life, I tend to be all in or all out. Still, my lifelong hiatus on sleeping with men has often hurt — Queer is how my body feels, but not where my body goes. But I know that if my fear of a man hurting me is made real, even once, I am right to be afraid of what I might do to keep myself safe.

[6] There are mistakes — along with many other kinds of realizations — that I am admitting to for the first time in this book. I've allowed for gaps not just in my writing, but in my life. I am trying to fill them.

I Was a Kind of Silence

One night after the Bombing, I dreamed I was murdered so many times that I felt for years as if it had really happened.

What are the stakes of one's life after that? How could anything matter more than avoiding lethal harm?

All those years nearly failing high school, college, hardly able to complete a worksheet or read a book — I didn't spend that time planning how I would eventually re-construct myself. I didn't believe it was possible.

In my night table, I kept a yellow plastic folder filled with ragged attempts at starting this book. Vague, gap-toothed poems. The ruins of incomplete essays about how dreams would never again point me towards safety or realization. My entire imagination was disrupted.

Yet I was mere years away from knowing that revising a draft into my exact truth would allow me to accept that truth, to click the facts of my life into place.

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While on lunch break during the summer of 2020, I parked my car in a secluded lot near Central Square in Cambridge and Zoomed my therapist with my cell phone. We had spent the past few months working our way through my list of traumatic events. During our past few progressive counting sessions, I had become extremely upset, so she'd suggested that I visualize the presence of a comforting loved one. My routine, up to that point, had been to picture myself sitting in a small, indie movie theater alone watching things happen to me on the screen — I'd adjusted by imagining my partner in the seat next to me, holding my hand over the armrest.

My therapist and I devoted the entire appointment to the Bombing itself, requiring me to visualize my entire experience for 10, 20, then up to 120 seconds. As strangers in dress clothes sped past me on their way to cafes and back to their offices, I talked my partner through what we were watching: explained what was going through my head when I heard the boom, laid out what I thought was happening, what my choices were.

After that session, the constant choking cough I'd had for two years stopped entirely and hasn't returned to this day. I pictured my partner in the passenger's seat, waiting patiently as I stared out the windshield for five minutes. I pictured her opening her door when I opened mine. I pictured her walking with me to grab a cookie at a café on Massachusetts Avenue. She didn't mind that the better I felt, the less I knew what my life could become.

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In a recent journal entry, I write:

I know you died in your dreams but you are alive.

I know you died in your dreams but you are alive.

I know you died in your dreams but you are alive.

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I deposit checks and pay bills. I take melatonin but far less than in years. I eat bananas and drink water. I spit out gum rather than swallow it. I forgive every clock for how out of touch with each other we once were. When my therapist asks me questions, I detangle knots with my practiced fingers. I buy premium ice cream with my credit card and think about someday paying it all off. I curate a shelf full of books I will read — will, will, will. I replace batteries and refill my meds and answer my phone. And one night, during a class in which we all sit at desks as if locked in meditation, we're given a break. I lie down on the floor to stare at the black-speckled ceiling and a friend joins me, and each time I point out a shape the dots make — a drowsy cockroach, a stern face — they slowly nod and say *I see that too*.