

Letting Go

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introduction	1
letting go	2
ten years	3
instead	4
the grime	5
into the groove	6
now	8
sextet 2024	10
through the wilderness	12
gravity	15
catch	16
she deserved it	18
frontier discovery	22
worry	24
different way	26
some sundays	28
manners	30
sextet 2024 and one quarter	32
again	34
how to light a match	36

introduction

I wrote the first of these poems (*ten years*) in October of 2023 and the last of them in the first week of April of 2024 (*again*). This time period also marked the start of my second year of HRT and my partner of eight years leaving the house three months after I had ended things.

The next six months were a whirlwind of feelings fully expressed – more fully and honestly than I ever had in my life. More rawly than I had since I was a teenager. These nineteen poems capture and chart those feelings as best I knew how, and the writing of these poems was therapy for the events they reference.

One aspect of starting all this in middle age is that after decades of living a shadow life and absorbing everything I could about transition – I knew all the cliches. Knew the lessons everyone else learned. Knew every pitfall of the heart to come, and yet, I still needed to do it all.

Knowing and feeling are different things. A heart in the harbor is safe but that's not what hearts are for.

Wherever I end up these six months will burn brightly in my memory for years to come.

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April 2024

letting go

how long will I linger here
revisiting thirty-two
trying to cram
decades of lost experience
into a few short years
all of us
understanding things about each other
like no one ever has
but also
a gulf
watching all of you
embrace life
for the first time
and me haunted by the pale reflection
of having been here before
of knowing these lessons
but having missed the mark

how do I let go of the woman
i will never get to be
and embrace the one I am

ten years

as I pickup the pieces
i find
again and again
evidence of us
and grief settles
into my heart
so, as I find them I put the gifts
the notes
the plans
our old future
into a cardboard box
that I'll find ten years from now
and turn my eyes forward

instead

dedicated to my feminist heroes from the 1990s

we should be
on a porch somewhere
sipping wine, or a beer
or tea
reminiscing about
our wild old days
raising an eyebrow
at the youth
while secretly smiling
at the world
we built
for them

instead

i am outside
looking through that ripped
screen
door
that you and your goddesses
would never open
for a woman like me

so instead

i surround myself
with the others
and we will keep building the future
your fear
kept from us

the grime

i want to kneel
on the bed
lock eyes
tentatively touch
without breaking gaze
and wipe away the years
of shame
guilt
and obligation
the cover our
new
impossible
bodies

into the groove

i launch off my left foot
and slide on my right
into the living room turned dance floor
left foot dragging behind me, then up on its big toe
my slide nearly timed to the drop
so I pause, correcting for drift
and then swing my hips down and my arms up
returning to that moment beyond time
that all dancers go to

fourteen, hearing a pop star sing
“only when I’m dancing
can I feel this free”
and thinking “that sounds nice
could it be for me?”

in one smooth motion
I swivel my left foot down on its heel
bend my right knee
and then push down with my hands
palms parallel the floor, perpendicular with my arms
like I saw that drag faerie do
all those years ago
in Seattle at neighbors

I spin, both now
and all those years ago

I look up
and on the the second floor balcony
catch her smiling down at me
the latest of what will be
a pattern of women
who i will choose to love
and who will hold my wrong self
too tightly
breaking our hearts

back in the living room i look down
and see you
smiling at me
from that couch
and then I see her smiling at you smiling at me
and i see all of us
holding on to each other
just right

now

the idea that
i should have known
and acted sooner
haunts me
but
had I acted sooner
i wouldn't know any of you
the way I know you
now
and knowing you all
the way I know you
now
is worth everything

sextet 2024

the sunlight
that was peeking over the valley walls
as we all bedded down
has grown bold
and now peeks through the blinds instead
framing your eyes perfectly
as we all begin to stir
my first night in ages
feeling the warm kind touch
of a friend

and you, the evening before
cross legged on the floor
not caring that our limbs
fall casually on to each other
our smiles easy
our bond
that defies a name
growing stronger
with every shared word

and your radiant smile
masking, perhaps, your grief
but you keep moving
growing more powerful
beautiful
and strykingly monstrous
i'm unsurprised
when we realize
it was your hand
pulling my hair
in that pile of
six warm bodies

this isn't our first time
sitting close
but the soft kisses
are new
i ask
what sort of kisses these are
and you show me
less softly
i hesitate
looking at her
you tell me
its ok
and my hesitation dissolves

and finally you
with that sly smile
and those cagey eyes
all next to your glasses on the night stand now
unmasked, a peaceful face
you sleep through breakfast
but the five of us
will wake you later
and give you a smile
less sly and less secret
all of us
our masks gone
radiant in the light
of a new year

through the wilderness

the first time we met
i resisted the urge
to kiss you – honoring my agreements
and as you took your leave
i entered my number into your phone
and described myself as
“the lady from Portland you almost kissed at that party”
and then gave you a look
and you left
an hour later – our lipstick smudged
and had you said the word
i’d have come to your room
and ground my agreements
against your thighs
until they were dust

the second time we met
your city washed clean
by a june thunder storm
diner
your nail
gently scraping the skin
of my middle finger
your wicked smile
as you saw the places
it took me

a block and a half
back to my hotel
high ceilings, tall windows
high enough
that the city
was a din
nervously undressing
my raw body – ten months new
yours complete
you asked about mine
and showed me the
care touch and kindness
that had left the relationship
i was leaving
you knew where I was and what I needed
because you'd escaped the same prisons
then I kissed all your lips
and asked you to stay
and you did

dawn wakes us
me, naked, watching you slide
back into that dress
hoping, one day
I will look half as good
the light caught my naked body
and you took a picture
kisses goodbye – for now
watching you navigate
the street below
back to your car and life

the third time we met
my hand exploring the depth
that was not minimal
hearing your moans
same as mine
on that bridge in that park
as you whispered those things
in my ear
coffee and laughs
on your couch in the morning
after the dawn hours
with your head on my shoulder
crying
as I ran my fingers
through your hair
soothing you

hush little baby/don't say a word

our trip too short
tender confessions without possession

i imagine our fourth time
and smile at memories
waiting to be made
but I do wonder
how all that came next
might have been different
if not for the chaperone
of cities too distant

gravity

there's that thing
where a certain sort of
new kiss
creates
in an instant
a multiverse of possibilities
so large
that it pushes all the air out of your stomach
leaving only room for the butterflies

and days later
as we talk about it
and make the right decisions
most of those universes
fade
not meant to be
but I can't help but feel
melancholy
over the lost chance
to fall into your
or someone's
or anyone's
gravity
regardless of the consequences

catch

i watch my friends
falling into each other's arms
learning
what these new, impossible bodies
and feelings
are capable of
and my heart swells
joyful to know them
to stand with them
comrades
or maybe,
when I want to cry a little
sisters

and then – inevitably
i remember
when I was that young and
learning
what I could settle for
in a body, and mind, that
never fit quite right
and no one to tell me
who, or what, I was

all those men – young and old
who just needed
a bro to love
and a blow job
and how easy I found it
to meet them only half way

and the women
who I would fall into
with no regard
for my own well being
my love and desire
dwarfed by nothing
save
an envy
so large
i could barely see it
what even is water

So I watch my young friends
falling into each other's arms
and I stand with them
and also, I have laid down with them
but sometimes – despite everything
i'm still afraid
to ask them
to catch me

she deserved it

we're clinging to each other
naked
in that grey morning light
my finger running across your bare shoulders
your smile filling me
and then I start awake
empty bed, the rest of it fading
and I already regret
i feel too timid
to tell you
my dream

it's not that I disagree
when I hear you say
our friendship is
too important

it's that
i wish
i knew
if any part of you
wanted
to risk it
as much as i do

all romantics learn
in our own time
that letting a
heart run wild and free
has consequences
and as hair greys
we temper our hearts
into shapes
that fit
the lives we want

but sometimes that heart
isn't your own
sometimes the world hides
your real heart away
in a box made of tar
so a little girl builds a new heart
from discarded parts
lopsided, charming even
but one that's unable to hold any shape for long

and that girl enters the world
and lets her lopsided heart
run wild and free
and when the consequences
can't temper it
into the shape
of the life
she wants
she moves on to the next one
again, and again, and again
looking for the life
that will never fit
and exhausted
she decides between
accepting her life of quiet misery
or quietly ending it

sometimes
if she's lucky
she finds that heart
that the world hid away
in a box made of tar
somehow pristine and new
she cracks open her ribs
and nestles it in
next to her old lopsided heart
and discovers it needs her
to run wild and free
again
and the old, lopsided heart
looks on with the fear
of a parent
knowing
that the wax on her wings
won't hold
knowing
she will smash herself
against the rocks
because the old lopsided heart believes
that to temper a heart
into the shape of a life
that you want
means breaking it
again and again and again

so I will tell her
about my dreams
and I will tell her
how the world stopped when our lips met
and why the risk is a fear worth facing
but my lopsided heart knows that I need this more than her
and my lopsided heart knows how that story goes
but if the wax on my wings is going to melt
then it should melt
and if a ship smashed on the rocks
can be made sea worthy again
then maybe this will show
my lopsided heart
that it wasn't her fault
and she deserved all the love she needed

frontier discovery

you tell me
that you're often not aware
of your feelings until well after they've happened
and even then they sometimes mystify you

or in my words
"you mean until the circumstances
they've created overtake you and
those around you, huh babe?"

But I bite my tongue and stay silent
and remind myself
that there was a time when the caverns
of my mind and heart were
unexplored territory to me
and I was older then
than you are now

and how
thanks to the pills
and the injections
we have both found
a new forrest of feelings
to explore
and when we stumble
its no one's fault
that's the nature of exploring a forrest
and I'm grateful we're still there
to pick each other up

but unbidden, I wonder
if I was young again
prettier
if my curves were there
but less and smoother
skin free of blemishes
no varicose veins
no eczema scars
if I was more relentless about pursuing
a certain sort of feminine beauty
if this new middle aged body
that I love
had a crown of blonde hair like hers
instead of grey and
faint dishwasher brown, what then

and if, when I was as old then
as you are now
i could have known my feelings
and looked them in the eye
and claimed the body and life I wanted
instead of making myself small and compliant
and settling for scraps

if any of that were true
could I have charmed my way past the frontier guards
stationed outside your heart

could I have made my way inside
taken up residence
like a naive teenage romantic
and waited for you
to discover me

worry

across the table
is the me
i was dreading

middled aged
shabby stubble
kind of charming
over a layer of bitterness
and strong opinions
about girls and scenes
long gone
clinging to a hipster youth
that does not fit
much past thirty two
which for him
was two decades ago

and worst of all
none of this stops me
from saying

“you should take me home
give me your weed
and anything else you want to”

and I worry
about my delight
when his eyes
light up
in thirsty disbelief

different way

we talk again
and when I get to my car
i almost cry
which is a change
from the last time
and the time before that

we have said things out loud
and they're not what I wanted to hear
but they do anchor me to the present
instead of imagined futures
which is why I needed to hear them

i feel
resentment
that you were not
careful with my heart
that you were reckless
in your new embrace of love
and not ready
when a romantic
like me
was there to drink it in

i resent that your feelings
are still muddled
and not known to you
but then what can I expect
from a girl
who was six
the first time my
adult heart was broken

and I grieve
letting go
of the you that never was
the you I was ready
to trust implicitly
with my heart

and I hope
the women that's there
is one
i still want to know
and that I can find
a different way
to love you

some sundays

some sundays I delay my shot
to help me write
the really sad poems

manners

i tell you where
i thought my feelings
had come from
and the distress on your face
your careful words
“thank you for telling me”, you say
stilted
manners
your actual feelings held back
why’s that?

it’s been a month
since I told you
i wanted to fall in love with you
on that false February spring day

are you worried about hurting me?

or my hurting you?

or is it just your texas born shame
that clouds everything?

or are the clouds my shame
having dared to ask someone to love me
the way I wanted be loved
and the answer was no
again

my codependent heart torn
between wanting to give you
everything you need
and learning that this does not include me

we've always been two girls
trying to think our way
in and out of our feelings together
and as I work through my grief
i hope that you're able to embrace
whatever it is
your manners are hiding
and tell someone

even if
that someone's
not me

sextent 2024 and one quarter

we have kissed once since
birthday fun and conspiracy
discussed art
in a week you will tie me up
and I will lose myself for a bit
with you watching over me
but most precious
is that day
at the museum
and that thai restaurant
when I left, somehow realizing
that timidity was no longer
serving me

and you
a solid friendship
close enough for me
to buy your drugs
and discuss our exes
who seem to have gone
to the same
shitty school
priestess and hedge witch
comparing survival notes

the sly one next
who helped buy me a crown
who painted my nails
and knelt before me
as I lay a sword on her palms
conspirator zero
collecting us all
under her roof

closer now
to the hard one
but another friendship
separate from her
your bursting laugh infectious
your advice invaluable
only compassion
that I almost
fell in love
with your wife

finally you

“defies a name”
is that what I said?
the sly one accused me of
catching feelings from sex
but I had already let
the feelings catch me
waiting for you to catch up
only to realize
i was suddenly on the track alone

these are not the lessons
i wanted us to learn
the grief comes in waves
not really about you anymore
instead – all the wasted years
and the things I’ll never have

eventually, when the moon’s at apogee
low tide will let me
leave this beach
but for now
i’ll linger
and add
my tears
to the waves

again

as our relationship
disintegrated around us
i told my now ex
who I still loved
that I would only live
these first few years
of transition
once
and they were precious to me
and I would not sacrifice them
for anything or anyone

and I did not sacrificed them
and I've seen and gained so much

and now my friends
who started before me
are beginning
to hit two years

the early chaos
where everything is up
for reconsideration
fading
and I too am beginning to feel
the rest of my life
tug at the hems of my new skirts and dresses

an iris and chrysanthemum
may spend time in the garden together
but two spring blooms
do not face a fall flower
the same way
they look
at each other

eventually
i will need to let go
of this dream
of a young woman
and accept
the life
of an evening star
and maybe

that's already upon me
and the grief I feel
is knowing
the precious years
are ending
and that it's time
to start again
for real

how to light a match

that rough spot on the side of a matchbox
is made of ground glass and red phosphorous
and when you strike a match
the heat from the friction is enough
for a small bit of the red
to transition into white

but white phosphorous
can only exist next to oxygen for a moment
before its atomic bonds break
releasing the energy of the universe
into a tiny point of space and time

and the heat
in that tiny point of space and time
ignites the sulfur and ground glass
in the match head
and
for a time
it flares
gloriously and pungently
before igniting the wood or paper of the match stick
and then the flame burns as long
and as slow
and wherever
as it is meant to burn

these years will not last forever
but they will propel us into the lives
we were always meant to live
and we will live those lives
for as long
and as slow
and in whatever way
we're meant to live them

...

how many of you will I know in five years
and how will we know each other
or will I just remember you
as the ones who were there, bearing witness
when I let my heart run wild and free
one last time

it's hard to see that far ahead
with the smell of smoke and sulfur thick in the air

but also it's hard to imagine a future
where you're absent
when you all have taught me
so much
about how to start
loving
myself

