System Failure

“Never have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our directions.”

—Bill Wilson, founder of Alcoholics Anonymous,
   The Big Book, How It Works, 1939

A few years later, the text was revised. The beginning of Chapter 5 now reads:
   “Rarely have we seen a person fail. . .”

One Day At A Time

One day I stole my father's keys.

One day the boy said, I will draw you a map to the Castle.

In Media Res

One day, I stole my father's keys. I was not yet sixteen, mostly quiet, occasionally dramatic, but on that day, I didn't slam the door. My father wouldn't know, wouldn't hear me leave because I pulled the knob soft, barely closed.

1. We admitted that we were powerless—that our lives had become unmanageable.

What had he done? I know it was another afternoon when we were trapped together in the house for the few hours between 1. Start in the woods, on the bluffs by the river.

school and when my mother got home from work. He was always home those days. Maybe he yelled or, worse, wept. His still-dark beard dripped with tears. Maybe he ranted: about the father for whom he was never good enough, about the brother who beat him. Sometimes it was just the difference in his voice that set me off, sent me slamming doors. My father's voice was warm and deep and versatile as a bass clarinet, and any subtle change registered instantly in my ear. Right away, I would know: My father was far away, sunk somewhere deep inside the cavity of his chest, his voice a squinty hush, a wet cracking, the too-careful pretense of lucidity before dissolution. His voice was touch that
could hurt me from a great distance. Even if he didn't mean to. He didn't mean to.

When I left that afternoon, I took the car he hadn't been sober enough to use in months, and drove alone for the first time. I took the backroad to the river. I curved slowly up narrow switchbacks.

I pumped the brake before every blind turn. My knuckles clenched the wheel as if ten-and-two would save my life. Each twist in the pavement—a near-miss. Trees pushed in on all sides. I pictured my father as he must have been that minute: heels rigid on the carpet, reaching into the drawer for the bottle of vodka beside the Bible. I pictured him on his knees in thin pajamas. I pictured him unconscious on the bathroom floor.

Maybe, after all, he was dreaming of my mother and me, his sweethearts, in ways we never were. Maybe he dreamt of the three of us, of the bluffs I was driving towards, where we used to walk the dappled trails. Maybe he loved me, urgently. So much so it hurt his bones, as though they were made of glass, and hollow. As though someone had picked up these brittle tubes, and was always blowing through them like reeds, long bursting chilling air, whistling cruelly through his bones.

I made it to the river. Put the car in park. Walked the trails with shaking hands. On the bluffs, where the trees cleared, I looked east. Across the wide Mississippi, the sloshing twilit background to my not-yet tragedies, across the dead-flat of Illinois. I tried to see as far as I could, all the way to my future—an ocean—a blue one—distance made of water, instead of a million tiny steps in different directions.

Making Crises Work For You  

This is bullshit.
Even then, I was reading myself as main character. Even then, I wondered how I would tell this story at the Alateen meeting. Even then, I was shaping a message: Girl rises.

Even then, I was shaping a message: Girl saved from drowning, by self.

My mother dropped me at the first meeting. In a fluorescent-lit room of the YMCA, which shared a parking lot with the hospital, I identified myself as the child of an alcoholic. They passed Al-

Anon-approved literature around the circle of folding chairs. Pamphlets with Schoolhouse Rock!-style characters on the front and slogans we were supposed to repeat when things got tough. The other kids were around my age, between thirteen and sixteen, white and middle-class-ish like most people in that part of south St. Louis County. We all showed up clothed and fed. We all went to public school in poor districts. And these kids were like most of the kids I grew up around but wasn't friends with: I thought they were silly and dumb. I thought the generic slogans were silly and dumb. But then the girl with stringy hair and a roll of pale skin like caulk sealing the hem of her t-shirt to the waist of her blue jeans would say something like: “And all the time I'm trying to explain it to my mom, and she just keeps screaming at me. And I'm about to cry or punch the wall again or my sister or something,

just go off. Suddenly though, I think: We're not talking the same language. No matter how loud either of us gets, it won't make sense to the other person. She can't even hear me. So I drop it, go to my room, do my homework.”

We took a survey to find out which role we played in our alcoholic family: the Caretaker, the Clown, the Scapegoat, the Lost Child, etc. I was the Hero. The room was shadowless. I thought, maybe there's something to this—as long as it worked. Somewhere in my chest, I believed Save Yourself =
Save Your Father. Somewhere, too, I believed that I would make it out, even if he didn't.

_The Serenity Prayer_  
One day, the boy said, I will draw you a map to the Castle.

Is that how it happened? In May, new sixteen. Was it English or history class? Was it the boy or his best friend? Either way—

A boy I was just starting to know pushed his pencil nub into my bare back, between my shoulder blades, telling me he would prove it existed. He drew a map: squiggly black handwriting on college-rule paper, two pieces stuck together, not with tape, but only if you held them touching _just-so._

The first time I went with him to the Castle, the boy took me the hard way. At the “No Trespassing” sign, he instructed me to follow the fence along the wooded ridge until it made a ninety-degree turn, forcing us down the steepest slope I'd ever seen. I'd never seen trees grow at that angle before. Far, far below us: the railroad, the river. My thin soles slipped on the loose soil. Tree roots gave way to air. But it was all so easy for the boy. I watched him loop his fingers through the chain-link and slide down the long descent, his body swinging farther and farther away. So I did what he did, as best I could.

When we hit bottom, we walked along the tracks downriver. I remember the sun so bright warping the rusted railroad ties into shimmering horizontal waves. The boy had a smile like a flashbulb and sun-gold hair and tan hands lilting at his sides. I wondered when he would kiss me. I wondered what we would do if a train came just then. We could jump into the sharp grass and gravel on either side. We could drop flat onto our backs and watch the train run us over. I didn't care which.

To our right, the cliff-face changed—crumbly, sheer, treeless. The boy pointed to the top. Above us, on a plateau of bleached limestone, the Castle waited. He made me scramble up this new
slope, gaining purchase on bent saplings and my palms in the dirt. When we ran into a smooth stone wall, he made me go first. The wall must have been at least seven feet, taller than my father. The boy made a stirrup of his hands and placed my foot there, and with one good push, he sent me all the way up. I stretched one leg over, and I was in.

I say he made me because there is an easier way to find the Castle.

4. Go around the No Trespassing sign.

Find the spot where the chain-link has been trampled.

5. Climb over it without using your hands.

The fence will wobble and bow.

Always, I see the Castle first from above, in May.

6. Follow the beginnings of a low stone wall up the grassy hill.

Walk into the clearing.

The Castle begins slowly. From my knees the wall rises to my waist, to my chest. I skim my palm along the surface, powdering it with loose stone. The treeline drops, and then—I'm there again, just—there. I peer over the other edge of the wall, straight down thirty feet into the ruins. From there, I can see the whole courtyard of the Castle: rows of Grecian columns, stone pathways, the fallen limestone pottery and ornamentation. I can picture the sunken gardens, overflowing, the fountains, the telescopes and hurricane lamps. I can see everything as it might have been, in ways it never was. I walk through the high grass and slowly down the fifty steps of the sweeping grand staircase. I trip over the upturned flagstones and reach the gazebo where a century of trespassing teenagers has engraved its names and loves. I pass through. I end up, as always, on the ledge. Hundreds of feet below me: the railroad, the river. The Mississippi, the Castle's
own thick-swirling moat. So very, very close.

That first day brimmed with light—blue-sky light, white limestone light, all the boy's teeth light. We stood on the ledge. The boy held stones in his hand. They must have been the right kind. Not flat and smooth for skipping—we were much too high and away for that. I imagined the boy chose the stones carefully—for throwing, for distance.

“How much you wanna bet me I can throw this rock into the river?”

“The river? You can't hit the river from here.”

“Sure I can. I played baseball.”

“So? I can swim. Doesn't mean I'd make it across to Illinois. No way.”

“How much you wanna bet?”

He reached back, so sure, and threw. Over the wind and the trees and the distance, I'd swear I heard a splash. I asked him to tell me about this place, the Castle, the beginning of it all. The boy told me the legends though he did not believe them. I wanted to believe everything.

_I once had a girl /

_or should I say /

Even then, I was writing a story to show this boy. To show him how he fit into my larger narrative. How he and my father had the same first name and capable hands. How they both loved science.

4. Made a searching and fearless inventory.

This was important: how I loved to hear them argue with their hands, fall silent. How they tried to map out the universe for me—and failed.

She showed me her room /

My father, forty-six, began to talk about writing his memoirs.

_Isn't it good /_

Another day, he was going to get back to his music, his guitars, compose songs. He was going to be a freelance corporate loss
Norwegian wood / prevention consultant, run a liquor store franchise, publish his
children's stories online, market his homemade soup recipes.
Some of these things he did, part-way. He bought a domain name, for example. With his fingers, he
picked out the opening of “Norwegian Wood.” And some days were soup days. Winter or summer, I
came home from school and there he was, my father, as I remembered him: six-foot-four, two-hundred
pounds, salt-and-pepper and look-twice handsome, immaculately dressed for the job he no longer had
in a bold, collared shirt and Jerry Garcia tie, brandishing a wooden ladle above a steaming pot on the
stove. Sometimes I cringed at this brittle optimism, but a soup day meant he had gotten out of bed that
morning or afternoon.

We sat together at the round kitchen table and sipped the soup. We

There once was a rich man who scuffled over Rolling Stone before he let me read it first. He read
sailed to America to make his The Economist and pushed Discover across to me. I wrinkled my
fortune. And make it, he did. nose and pushed it back. I preferred when we talked rock 'n' roll
He fell in love with a beautiful and books, when he left vintage records and Chaucer on my
woman and decided to build her a bedside table, tucked with carefully-lettered notes about how he
castle. He chose the highest point thought I would “get this.” I did not love science as I did not love
on flat land, so that she could see religion, because I found the idea that there was one right answer
to be tedious, narrow. Still I loved to listen to him explain in firm,
all of America, her kingdom. hushed tones, the beginning of it all. All stories begin in chaos.
Stars colliding, the inexplicable bang. Even light comes after. It

felt right to me.

My father could never answer when I asked where the

5. Admitted to God, ourselves, and universe and all its parts were headed. This was when I loved
to another human being the exact science—and hell, religion, too—when it admitted defeat, when it
nature of our wrongs. proved with all its processes and procedures, systems, figures, charts, its ritual of hypothesis, its dirty clinical words, its twelve or million steps, just how immeasurable the world is. When it

The man bought the best stone to declared without a shadow of a doubt that the universe is
build the castle, hired the best unknowable. I loved that he tried.
mason. As long as it takes, he said. The boy wasn't as smart or as tall as my father. But he was free. He didn't have a rock-laden pit in his chest. He feared drowning, though I knew he would float. He wrestled no desire to stand on the tracks and tempt the train. He could take me away to the Castle.

“Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves.”

—Bill Wilson

I sat on the rug / Have you heard the one about how alcoholics lack wheat in their
biding my time / physio-chemical make-up? Therefore, the abuse and dependency
drinking her wine / flow from a true need for this missing element. Have you heard

how it's a dependence learned in childhood, determined by factors such as environment, parentage, peers? Are you familiar with the term “chemical imbalance”? Apparently some bodies and brains are more genetically vulnerable to sadness. Bad luck. A pattern left unchecked for too long.

I'd heard my father's reasons. I tried to fill in the blanks:

Construction of the Castle went on. My father is an alcoholic because he abuses alcohol.
The man obsessed over plans. My father abuses alcohol because he is depressed.
Head down, he missed it: He is depressed because he is irreparably wounded by the past.

His beautiful wife fell in love with the mason, and they ran away together. He is irreparably wounded by the past because his brother is a brute who beat him.

My father is depressed because he is an alcoholic.

I'd read all the pamphlets, heard the sermons. I'd begun to notice that nobody in Al-Anon or Alateen ever seemed to get any better. That my father's friends— from AA, then Eric Clapton's exclusive tropical treatment center and then the roadside halfway houses he ran away to—never seemed to get any better. “Don't you think it's disturbing,” my father used to ask, back when we attended church, sticking a finger into the seam of the service program, “that the prayer list just keeps getting longer and longer?”

Remember that you are dealing with alcohol—cunning, baffling, powerful! One day I called the boy from the side of the road. My father and I had fought, yelled and wept, each of us flailing at the other, stranded. I ran out of the house. I watched cars rush by, wondering if anyone could see or hear me over the noise and blur, and asked the boy if he would come get me. He was quiet—I could be heavy, cloudy, tangled, occasionally dramatic. “Please,” I said. “I'm fine. I just—” Finally, he said yes, and this time he took me to his parents' windowless basement, and we made out for hours until he fell asleep.

I told her I didn't and / crawled off to sleep in the bath / The boy's body pressed me into the crease of the old couch, and his skin warmed me like sun-in-stone. I felt his breathing fall away and go steady, and I lay there with the lights out, wondering about that one instant when awake turns to sleep, when sleep turns to dream. When I was small, I could close my eyes and fall through blackness. No walls, no end, and so real I could feel the nothing licking over my skin. Like drowning—a cracked ledge, the give of space
and broken surface. Then the deep-tugging eddy, heavy on my eyes and throat. The next instant: the body is lost to me. The forgetting so sudden it's already forgot. Still, I thought, there must be a moment of conscious letting-go, a turning-over, a decision. I must have drifted off. I woke up next to the boy, in love. And, oh, it hurt.

6. Were entirely ready to have God

When my father turned yellow, my mother took him to the hospital. One day, I went to see him with a square of paper in my pocket. On it, I had carefully lettered four lines of a poem we had memorized in English class that day.

The woods are lovely, dark & deep

But I have promises to keep

And miles to go before I sleep

And miles to go before I sleep

He was asleep when I entered the room, lit by flickering machines. Holograms of fireflies. Bare walls like snowdrift piled in the gutter. Even then, I couldn't see without a metaphor crutch. Even then, I believed I could save us with a borrowed scrap. Him asleep was reason enough not to wake him. I remembered being very small, climbing the wall of his recliner onto the ledge of his lap. I remembered how I loved his closed dark eyes, the first ones that trusted me enough to slip away. “Daddy,” I would whisper, as my mother lifted him to his feet, “it's bedtime.” He taught me tenderness. He was my first subject, the first one who needed it. Even then, I was trying to put him to bed.

Voices in the doorway, overhead lights blinking on. Old neighbors who heard of his condition. He woke up for them, brushed himself off. I smiled and tucked the square of paper into his hospital bedside table. Sure as a promise he would find it when I had gone.

7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Afterwards, I went to an Alateen meeting at the YMCA. I hadn't attended one in a long time. I was quiet throughout, until the very end. I told these other kids that my father was in the hospital
across the parking lot. That they were doing dialysis, that it was because of the drinking. Part of me, I said, resented the attention he was getting. I told them that before this happened, I had sometimes wondered whether everything would be easier for my mother and me if he just went away. If he died. If the pain would end for him, for all of us. Somewhere, I knew my father wondered the same thing.

Now, I said, I wanted to take it back. I wanted my father, I said.

8. **Made a list of all persons we** wanted him there to help me apply to college, to talk music and science, to watch me graduate, to—yes, even though it was silly and dumb—walk me down the aisle. I pictured myself in a ballroom in a white dress, dancing the first dance with my mother, the two of us holding onto each other as we twirled without knowing why. In a circle of folding chairs in a shadowless room, I made any deal I could to take it all back. Afterwards, the girl with too-tight jeans gave me her phone number with a heart drawn under it. A boy who'd never spoken to me before told me he dreamed of flying to Paris to stand at Jim Morrison's grave. I smiled.

I never went back.

*One Day At A Time*  
One day in May, the boy left me.

The next day my father died.

The next day I turned seventeen.

*No Situation Is Truly Hopeless*  
Or did I return, just once? Did I wait until the end of the meeting before speaking? Before announcing to these hurting, unsuspecting people that my father had died? That I had infiltrated their ranks with the news that actually, there is no hope? That, twelve steps or not, *Easy Does It* or not, *Let Go and Let God* or not,
we're all f***ed. Some people are already lost to us, just—

_The man's heart broke._

gone. None of it—the how, the why, the reasons or legends—fits or make a difference. They never come back.

_He looked out over the beginnings_ of his half-built castle, empty. _He_ But no, that can't be how it happened. Memory is an im-

_looked at the river. He stepped to_ pulse towards organization, remakes itself as narrative, and there-

_the ledge. He cradled stones in his_ fore, is another failed system of meaning.

_palm. He jumped._

Add it to the list.

“The five stages of grief should not be interpreted as complete nor chronological.”

—Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

My father is dead because: why.

My father is dead because: “system failure.”

My father is dead because: his body stopped working.

My father's body stopped working because he was an alcoholic.

My father was an alcoholic because he went to meetings and called himself one.

_One Day At A Time_ One day I sang Beatles songs off the edge of a cliff.

One day I wrote a story about my father's brutish brother and buried a fish hook in his eye.

_When I awoke /

_I was alone /

One night I sang “Norwegian Wood” off the edge of the cliff. Is that how it happened? At seventeen, did we sneak to the Castle in the dark, to drink and sleep among the ruins and river ghosts? Or was it somewhere else in the
woods, or in the cheap motel with the owner who rented us rooms and didn't ask questions as long as we filed through the back door and kept it down? Either way—

*This bird had flown /

I was singing alone, a song too old for me. Pressed a palm flat against a jaundiced wall. To steady my body. Which slipped down anyway. My fingers slid down, picking up dust like grime from the grooves of a ribcage. Against the wall: burning spine, tilted skull. At least I knew where they were, these parts of me. Somewhere nearby: the others, my friends. Among them, the boy who wouldn't love me anymore, yet bound still, to eventually come looking for me. Somewhere over the edge: the wide black river turning over, and my mother, pulling half-empty bottles from under mattresses, half-expecting me home.

Kneecaps the color of pencil shavings. They lolled back and forth in my view. They didn't belong to me.

*So I lit a fire /

The boy, a faraway voice, said, “Those lyrics are nonsense.”

*Isn't it good /

I wanted to say, They feel right. But they didn't. Nothing fit.

*I'm sorry, I lost the thread. That's bullshit—there was never a thread. Except I loved my father, and he drank until he died, amounting to a slow suicide. To sleeping on the train tracks. To sleeping in the bath.

*Co-dependence

Forgive me. Even then, I tried to make my body a poem. Tried to make my body a black hole. Grant patience here—not with the willfully-numbed seventeen-year-old—but with this blown-out memory. This consciousness who watches the river jumping its banks and does not run. Instead—shimmies out, stares down into the churn. The one who no longer wishes for escape or
invincibility—only closeness, the better to see itself destroyed.

**Excessive loyalty**

The one who drowns taking notes, carefully lettered.

**Bargaining**

The boy never fought or cried when he drank. Not like the other boys, hanging themselves on the nearest warm body. I'd seen him stay up steady all night, so long as there was some game to play, something to laugh about. If these last months had been just one long hangover, I thought, the boy was the last thing I remembered from the night before. Somewhere, I smirked at my pat metaphor. Too easy, sure. But clear.

“Easy does it,” the boy said and pulled up my arms like sandbags. I could count every blond hair on his tan hands.

**Denial**

“I'm fine,” I said. “I just—” My head: heave and froth.

“I believe you,” he said and let go.

**Anger**

One day I wrote a story about my father's brother and buried a fish hook in his eye. It felt right. Then one day he died, just like I said.

**Depression**

In the dark of the Castle, the beds of sunken gardens never planted, a circle of cigarettes like fireflies. I was trying to think of ways to keep the boy close to me, and we listened to the others talk from a distance:

“Naw, man, his wife never left him.”

“Sure she did, ran off with the foreman.”

“No, no, no. See that gazebo? That was a well. The guy's little boy was running through here playing, and one day he fell down the well. Dead. The wife goes crazy. But she plays it off. Waits a few days, for the funeral to be over and everything. Then one day she says she's going for a swim and
walks down to the river. She walks right in and drowns herself. Never comes up again. The guy is standing right here, watching the whole thing. He goes crazy—lost his son, now his wife. So he up and throws himself off this cliff.”

“Man, you're full of shit.”

The boy laughed in the direction of the other voices, began to move away. So I scrambled up onto the ledge, rising from my hands and knees to my feet. “Remember when we used to come here,” I said. “Hey.” The boy turned.

“Whoa, get down,” he said. He reached up a hand.

“She asked me to stay, and she told me to sit anywhere,” I sang.

“Seriously,” he said.

“Look what I found for us,” I said, swirling vodka in a crinkled plastic bottle, the label peeled off. The river, long lashes, blinked up at me. The wind whistled down my spine.

Was that my giggle? See, I was saying, I can be clear. I can be easy.

He was looking at me. “Where'd you get that?” he asked and smiled.

I didn't steal. I found this one on my own: standing on my tiptoes, sticking my hand into a pile of towels on the top shelf of my bathroom closet. My fingers stubbed on hard glass. Nestled in the folds. I drew the bottle out by its neck, see-through. Stared. I didn't put it under the kitchen sink with the others my mother collected and never threw away. I didn't tell her at all. I just walked into my bedroom, opened a drawer near the floor, placed the bottle carefully under sweaters, and pushed it shut again. Later, I emptied a water bottle, poured in the vodka, and drove to the river.

Inability to differentiate self

When the boy finally touched me—this was when my body split, the different pieces torn and gone their separate ways, perhaps for good. Blackness, give, rock. The boy pressed against the wall. Limbs
fell apart. Felt my weight, felt it disappear. The boy was warmth and silence and I was want. And pulse. And want.

Acceptance

I wrote the story about my father's brother again, but this time I put in a character who applies the logic of legend and fairy tale to explain the cruelty and blood and tragedy, a daughter who attempts to see the world through a lens of justice. She fails. It doesn't fit. People get hurt without rhyme or reason. In this new story—make no mistake—I still blinded my uncle. But it doesn't matter. In every story I write, my father still dies.

The Return

I sprawled on the bathroom floor.

“You can't do this,” my mother said. “You know why.”

Children of alcoholics are four times more likely to abuse alcohol. “Being young is getting old,” I murmured and tried for a smirk, but my mouth was slack and exhausted. I remembered him in fragments, the boy, hours away. Before. Not my first boyfriend anymore, still the boy I loved. How could he be both? I remembered kneeling at the bottom of the Castle's grand staircase to nowhere, my face inside an empty beer box. It smelled rank and I swore I was fine. The others told me later I vomited on every step of the way up. Not to mention the porch where they dropped me, where none could meet my mother's eyes.

I lay limp on the linoleum, washed-out light filtered through the window. My mother sat on the edge of the tub. She had been kneeling beside me, but she was too tired to stay there.

“Was it vodka?” she said.

Always. She knew.

I couldn't see her eyes in the dark, but I knew she was trying to make me out in the shadow of the toilet—my face, my figure. I didn't know if she could see me there, see the bile on my chin, smell
the boy on my skin, feel my eyes dark like him who gave them to me. Was I rising or falling? Was I just spinning? When would this body and I give each other up? I didn't know. But I knew this—that whatever my mother saw, she did not see me alone. I was sure she could see me past, present, me future, father, daughter, in ways I would be or never was. It was me all at once.

*One Day At A Time*

*Grant me the serenity to accept*
*the things I cannot change,*
*the courage to change*
*the things I can,*
*and the wisdom*
*to know the difference.*

One day he died.
One day he left.
One day he died.
One day I didn't.
And he died and he died.
And I didn't, I didn't, I didn't.