

Meditations from My Childhood Bedroom



Christa Vander Wyst

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Garden Party Collective

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“What if we joined our sorrows, I’m saying. I’m
saying: What if that is joy?”

- Ross Gay, “Joy Is Such a Human Madness”

“There are no curses—only mirrors
help up to the souls of gods and mortals.
And so I give up this fate, too.
Believe in yourself,
go ahead—see where it gets you.”

- Rita Dove, “Demeter’s Prayer to Hades”

Learning to Speak

For years I listened
to word after word—
how a spondee roared,
but a dactyl backed down
from the fight.

I studied the ways
in which words
were hacked apart,
rearranged, and sewn
back together.

I learned how to minimize
the seams—how to punctuate
suddenly and completely
—how to slide down a comma
and climb back up.

When I held a pencil
for the first time,
it felt as soothing as a pacifier.
Though, the instrument
didn't muzzle my voice,
but set it free.

Christina

The summer before kindergarten, I spent
every afternoon at the house across the street
sucking on crayon popsicles. She went

by Stina, and I liked that
if we pieced our names together,
we'd get something like Christina.

Her basement housed the Barbies we played with,
dressed up, sent on quests to the shower
where Gartha held them hostage.

We ended the day with rainbow mouths,
linked arms, and a promise
to do the same

tomorrow

came with nothing more
than a parade of moving trucks and the silhouettes
of a girl and her Barbie doll.

The Mermaid and the Nudist

i. [Crayfish Hunting]

I used to bike around Gurnee with the neighborhood boys
and my sister. I don't think they wanted me

along, but moms have a way of insisting (demanding really),
that everyone be included. "But not the weird kids, they're

weird." On the park trail, two doors down
from my house, we took a sharp left—so sharp

that the trail cut a hole in my left eyeball and inserted gems
into my retina, transforming it into a kaleidoscope.

A stream of water trailed down from an unknown source
—a sheet of pristine glass luring me to water.

Stop! Shouted the oldest boy. *If you stick your hand in
too far, the crayfish will get you.* Let them

be my sirens, I wanted to tell him, though, at the time
I had no idea what a siren was—or a crayfish.

From farther up the stream we saw a girl, scarcely clothed,
painting murals in the water. When she saw us she fled,

startled, and I imagined she jumped into the stream, sprouted
a tail, and befriended the crayfish. If I were to go

back to that spot now, take that sharp left,
the trail would smear my eyes with dirt; the sirens

would yank me into the water and let the crayfish devour me.

Before they took that last bite, they'd thrust me

to the surface, make me see the space the way it truly was—
crushed beer bottles, condom wrappers, one of those couches

people kick to the curb, a toilet sitting back
behind the shrubbery—a mermaid's throne. Now I know

she was homeless.

ii. [In the Drainage Ditch]

Her name was Brittany and she'd grow up
to be one of the popular girls. But this was fourth grade,

and no one cared what you looked like
as long as you weren't weird. And you'd know

if you were weird because kids never know
how to not stare. Brittany's mom picked me up for a playdate

on a brisk January afternoon, drove us to the sledding hill
which laughed in our faces, pinched our cheeks, then back

to the car. Playdate over. *I know a place.*

It was somewhere behind the house being strangled

by vines, a drainage ditch the neighborhood boys
shifted gears for before cutting through

a stranger's lawn. She'd put up a "no trespassing" sign
a few weeks later. But this was then and then was

now, so we sled down the drainage ditch
whose deformities lay under the white-out. We ran back

up the hill, and if we uncovered any grass, we didn't see it.
Switching sides to a steeper slope, my eye caught sight

of movement. A girl in the window of the house,
naked, curled up in a ball, staring out at us until

a car door slammed shut, and two men climbed out—
to this day I can't remember the shape

of the car or the statures of the men or
the color of the house. But I remember the white ground,

the boot tracks, how she retreated
from the window when she heard the slam,

and how the vines seemed to follow her.

To look from my window

—For Monica Berlin

is to write a poem
about the beehive that adorns
my maple tree. Even in winter.
I admire the bees' commitment,
but I wonder if they know

their hive's coated in white,
exterior crumbling
like the leaf crunched under the boot
of the five-year-old girl who runs
through the cul-de-sac, unaware
that she *is* the hive. I mean literal.
I mean cancer. I mean
there is a storm coming.

And it's only a matter of time
and place and waiting for the husk
on the bough to lose its footing.
And when *it* happens—
because we never call *it*
what it really is—the tree
will still be standing.

When Dad drives Grandma past her former house of fifty years

and she asks him how the house is doing, he sighs, lets out something between exasperation and a chuckle: *don't worry about it, Mom. The house isn't yours anymore.* But it is hers, Dad's, and mine and will always belong to us.

Those building blocks, that bobbin bin, the laundry chute in the coral-colored bathroom where cousins congregated to land bean bags and sock balls in the basket below.

Sneaking onto the balcony with the tar top that turned toes black, in the kitchen with powdered donuts kept on the back burner of the yellowish, greenish, dare I say snot-colored oven, putting up with pounding on the table from card games turned to savagery by Grandma's menacing claws—don't fight that woman at Spoons, it's a losing battle—and that dresser with the all too tacky knitted table topper made by calloused hands belonging to a woman who has started to forget things and who will pass by in five short years. *The house is doing well, Grandma. They're taking good care of it.*

γνωθι σεαυτόν¹

After a car accident, no one tells you
that you'll become a raisin
in the bottom of a trail mix bag. What I mean is isolated
on the median, an entire side of your van t-boned.
And not the good T-Bone from that *Clifford* book
my family lost for two years in a little pocket
behind the passenger seat of our silver Honda.
No, I'm talking about the kind of t-bone that's
so spicy your dad drives five miles to Kwik Trip
to pick up a gallon or two of milk.
At that same gas station, my driving instructor spent
half the lesson ordering me through the car wash; I watched
the mechanical brushes lather us in foam, felt trapped
in that car, that any minute the brushes might spin too hard—
a drill breaking the glass into a deconstructed mosaic.
Looking back on that moment, I felt trapped
in many places: that hill in Hartland with the curve
that came out of nowhere (and the chipmunk
I ran over); the drop-off in front of school
where moms honked at me for going
too slow (or maybe I wasn't in the right lane);
when turning right on red I never knew
if I could go, would rather wait it out
than be torn to pieces like that frog I dissected
in Biology (that was so shredded my teacher made me promise
I would never become a surgeon); every time I approached
an intersection and had to turn left (which arrow
to follow?) Spoiler alert, I picked the wrong one.
And it is not fun crying in the back of a cop car or realizing
you could have killed two innocent people,
and having your mom's ex-friend call her because somehow

¹ An ancient Greek aphorism meaning “know yourself.”

she heard it from her daughter who heard it at school, and
even though they're not on speaking terms,
accidents have a funny way of bringing people together.
And I'd never seen my sister yell at me for a reason
that wasn't about her clothes or me invading
her personal space—space for me to grow into an M&M
that people grab from the bag and hide from the sun
and strap in to the passenger seat, telling you
to try again when the time is right.

The Matchstick

The first time I lit a match
was to warm the sticks of elongated wax
that rested ever so
atop mounds of vanilla icing.

But when I saw the flame's movement—
the threat of it winding up and licking my fingertips—
I hurled the flare across the room
and watched the air devour.

The char landed on a bright white towel,
marking like pen to paper.
Three washes and two days later,
I learned the word *permanent*.

Thing

People will tell you:

*find the symbolism,
examine the angles,
trace the origin
of your “incredible discovery.”*

Maybe you’re just a thing.

What No One Tells You about Being Aro/Ace

As you walk through the cul-de-sac,
dreading the moment when day turns to night,
the house across the street becomes a fishbowl.

A chair pulled out, pushed in,
a seat taken and then another. Two laughs,
two smiles, four legs intertwined beneath a table,

and your reflection.

But you'll never have what they have
because you want to share a house, but not a bed.

You want the sleepovers you had at thirteen,
the intimate talks till two a.m.,
and the best-friend necklace you wore proudly,

daring someone to come between
until it happened—diamond rings, dotted lines,
chapped lips on smooth ones, and you alone

on a Thursday night. Wanting.

Obsessive-Compulsive

i. Sensorimotor

In the silence before sleep, you only hear your breath. *In* and *out*, *in* and *out*, until suddenly there's nothing. You've stopped breathing. It appears you've forgotten how. Your chest tightens and your ribcage becomes two hands trying to squeeze a breath out of your lungs. But your lungs don't feel the squeeze over the pounding of your heart, so you gasp for air and throw the covers from your body. Your vision fades to black and your mind is blank until a single word appears:

breathe.

You know how to do this. You *can* do this. In for two and out for two. And then what? You remind your body to breathe again. And again. And again.

For the next three hours, you will do nothing

but breathe.

ii. Checking

On Sunday night you lean over and set the alarm clock for 7:30. Then you shut off the light and lie down. And then you sit up and get the light and turn to the clock and check that it's set because surely, one extra check is reasonable. Your mom has said so, your therapist has said so. What's a bit of caution before a busy week?

Light off and back to bed and a turn to the other side of the pillow. A scroll through TikTok before you close the app and sit up and get the light and check the alarm clock. You're being cautious, but not overly so.

Third time's the charm and off with the light and back to your bed and onto your phone and you laugh and smile and when you're ready for bed you turn off the phone and close your eyes and remember your alarm clock. *What if you set it wrong?*

You remind yourself you've checked the clock three times before, and each check was satisfactory. But three times isn't good enough. So you turn on the light and reach for the clock and check that all's right. *You're okay.* Light off and back to bed.

After the tenth check, you stop counting.

iii. Tapping

Your therapist tells you most people with OCD have a number they prefer: to study on the clock or cower in fear of, or, in your case, to tap out when the thoughts come.

Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap,
tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap,
Tomorrow, a presentation.
5% of your grade.
5% is a lot if you fail.
You could easily fail if you oversleep.
Or get sick.
You should take your temperature.
Are you getting a sore throat?
Current grade in the class?
97% minus 5% equals A-
Into college without a 4.0?
Jobless, homeless.
Destined to become a failure.
tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap,
tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap,

“Forty is a hefty number. Let’s try to lower that.”

iv. Intrusive Thoughts

- a) You never close your eyes in the shower because you want to be prepared for when the man in the black ski mask runs in and brandishes his knife. And tries to kill you. With eyes open, you will see his silhouette through the curtain and have valuable seconds to grab a razor and prepare your attack.

- b) Your culinary arts teacher demonstrates how to cut tomatoes—how to dice them for salsa. You love chips and salsa, so you let your mind drift to a song you play in band called *Chimps and Salsa*. The saxophones have a beautiful melody, and lost in their notes your mind presents you with a scene: the bloody bodies of your stabbed classmates—your teacher yanking the knife from the chest of one you called a friend.

- c) You're sitting on the ugly, tan floor of the bathroom, and you count the tiles because they take your mind off the fact that if you leave the room and try to walk four feet back to your bedroom, something in the darkness of the a.m. will snatch you away and tear you limb from limb.

v. Sensorimotor Pt. 2

During the nine o'clock program that you're watching with your mom, two of the actors agree to have a staring contest. The man loses and the woman whoops in triumph. Your mom challenges you to a staring contest, and you accept. You win. You feel pretty good about the victory and return your attention to the TV. A few seconds pass. You realize your eyes have started to hurt. You shut them for temporary relief. Perhaps there's an eyelash on the loose or a speck of dust.

But when you open your eyes back up, they still sting. And they keep on stinging. It takes you a few minutes to realize your eyes have forgotten how to blink. You try to remain calm. You tell your eyes to shut, so, really, you tell your brain to shut your eyes. But your brain doesn't relay the message. You have to blink manually now.

Five seconds pass. You force your eyes shut. Another five seconds pass. You force your eyes shut. Your body's not picking up the rhythm. After seven minutes, you tell your mom you've forgotten how to blink, and she laughs because she doesn't understand. "Just blink."

At 9:30, you excuse yourself and get ready for bed because your eyes hurt and you're sick of manually blinking. At 9:42, you crawl into bed and close your eyes and feel... relieved. You breathe in deeply. But you shouldn't have, because now you're fixated on your breaths.

vi. Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy

“Did you do your homework?”

“Most of it.”

“—and the alarm clock?”

“Five times on Sunday and three every other night.

“—I closed my eyes in the shower for thirty seconds on Friday.”

“And how did closing your eyes make you feel?”

“Anxious. But I was okay.”

“And nothing bad happened?”

“Nothing bad happened.”

“—Did the breathing exercises work okay?”

“No, every time I try them I just hyper-fixate on my breaths. And then...”

“...You can't fall asleep. We'll have to try something else then. How about muscle relaxation?”

“—I think we can move to biweekly appointments. You're making good progress.”

It doesn't feel like it.

vii. Remission

Some days fare worse than others. On these days you check your alarm clock one too many times or proofread an email five times before you hit send. You remember the threats that could invade your shower. You remind your body to blink and to breathe.

But as you've gotten older, the bad days have become few and the good days plentiful. You haven't tapped in years. You no longer catastrophize or discount the positives. You see an A- as acceptable, though a B+ still makes your heart race. Years of therapy have taught you healing comes with time and serotonin—the latter of which you process just a little bit differently.

The world you live in is becoming more informed of differences like yours. But you still hear a lot of people say they are “so OCD” when describing how they organize their stationary or coordinate an outfit. These people are simply misinformed. But instead of being mad, walk to their houses, knock on their doors, and leave these pages.

Running Out of Tape

It was a Saturday, fall of 2007,
when the lady in Old Navy took the polaroid.

You, in the green Columbia windbreaker;
me, in the pretty pink coat with a too-big barrette.

It's odd the details I remember about that day,
like the gumball machine that churned out Super Balls,

the game of Dots and Boxes we played
in the booth of Applebee's, waiting for lunch.

I still taste the cheddar of the mac 'n cheese;
I still smell the fresh crayons that accompanied

the kids' menu. But most of all, I remember the protest
the Polaroid made when, two weeks later, I tore it in two.

I'm sure I had a juvenile reason—denied a toy, extra cookie—
but that reason won't ever erase the look on your face

when I told you I hated you. Now, every time
you wear that green Columbia, I think of all the times

I meant to hurt you. I want you to know
I still have the photo; I taped the jagged edges together

the next morning. The photo isn't quite the same, but
it's trying to be. Which is to say, I'm running out of tape.

In the aisle at Walmart Sam ponders

the bottles of lube
I admire the *Toy*
Story 4 LEGO set
she settles for Queen V
because she'd rather

have that than Monistat
but that's another story
I won't be telling
today in this Walmart
one girl throws
a *Frozen 2* costume

at another
you know you want it
no I don't need
any condoms
thank you very much
for the Nerf gun
and the bullets

Altered Bonds and Then the After

—*For Monica Berlin*

A curl springs forth and then another,
a bit of heat and a spritz to stay,
“no shampoo for at least 48 hours,
priming allowed.” I give her \$20 extra and

out the door, and I think I finally understand
the phrase “spring in your step”
‘cause I’m skipping across the pavement,
and I’ve looked in about four store windows

to see myself, and goddamn do I look good, and
goddamn do I feel good, and goddamn,
there’s not a cloud in sight. When an old man stops
for me at the crosswalk and gives a wave,

I imagine five curls extending, linking together,
waving back. And then I see M’s studio.
But now it’s... a pottery shop. And the books are gone.
And her coffee mugs aren’t hanging there. And the place

where I stood and spoke and found myself
is hiding under a table. I walk to the stairs,
let my foot hover over the first step
before drawing it back, turning away.

And then I hear a giggle coming from within
the shop. I glance back to see a woman M’s age,
and a young girl carrying a box. They set it on the table
together, and once it’s open the little girl starts popping

at bubble wrap. The sight makes me smile, and laugh,
and breathe, and wrap my fingers around a curl,

making it go *boing* and *boing* again. I leave
the two of them to unpack the box, and I make a promise
to myself to find a new spot. Until that spot's covered
by a table, and that table's covered with _____.

Notes

The structure of “The Mermaid and the Nudist” was influenced by John McCarthy’s poem, “Flyover County,” in his book *Scared Violent Like Horses*.

“To look from my window” is dedicated to my professor and mentor Monica Berlin who passed away in November of 2022. Her influence is especially present in this poem, but remains a constant throughout my writing.

The aphorism “γνώθι σεαυτόν” can be traced back to several ancient Greek scholars and writers, with perhaps the most well-known being Sophocles. I attribute my translation to my undergraduate education at Knox College.

“Running Out of Tape” was written after I attended the “Seamus Heaney Listen Now Again” exhibition at the Bank of Ireland Cultural and Heritage Center in Dublin, Ireland in the fall of 2021.

The play and humor in “In the aisle at Walmart Sam ponders” were influenced by Mary Ruefle and her book, *Dunce*.

“Altered Bonds and Then the After” was written to remember Monica Berlin’s studio space in downtown Galesburg, which she cleverly named “The Space.” Several events took place in “The Space,” including writing workshops and poetry and prose readings. “The Space” will forever be remembered by the students at Knox College who had the privilege of visiting it.

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Catch: “Learning to Speak,” “Christina,” “The Mermaid and the Nudist,” “When Dad drives Grandma past her former house of fifty years,” “γνώθι σεαυτόν,” “Obsessive-Compulsive,” “Running Out of Tape”

Quiver: “In the aisle at Walmart Sam ponders”

Cellar Door: “Thing,” “Altered Bonds and Then the After”



Christa Vander Wyst graduated from Knox College in 2021 with a BA in creative writing. Through her poetry and essays, she commonly reflects on themes of childhood, mental health, self-discovery, and growth. When she's not arguing for the importance of the Oxford comma, she enjoys reading, thrifting, and drinking mediocre decaf coffee. This is her first chapbook.

The char landed on a bright white towel,
marking like pen to paper.
Three washes and two days later,
I learned the word permanent.



Christa Vander Wyst's writing invites us to gaze into well-tuned memories, cleverly arranged so that we too can remember how technicolor childhood felt. By the end, we are asked to share a lost love for the places and people that are no longer, but we are also welcomed by the chance to find a new beginning.

- Jaime Lam, *Winner of the 2021 Davenport Prize in Creative Nonfiction*

Vander Wyst sets herself before these pages as before a window. Sometimes the light bends back into memory and refracts what she thought she saw; sometimes it reveals who she might yet be.

- Beth Marzoni, *No Shape Bends the River So Long* (Parlor Press)

