

I.

When I was ten, I loved epilepsy. Or rather, I loved  
Christine, my older brother's girlfriend.

I thought of her as *Chris* on fire, spending  
all of her soft watts in her name.

I could set the word on fire because it was in italics.

The world was a faint inferno, a white nimbus  
I saw around skulls.

This did not worry me more than anything else,  
though I was impatient. People were burning. Couldn't  
we hurry up?

The latest chanteuse lit her torch song in the radio  
night after night,

her cough elegant & slow,

& my fourth grade teacher gave the class

so many scented stickers that we spent  
a lot of time sniffing our books.

Like we were addicted to those calm, reasonable texts.

I kept praying to the maple outside  
my bedroom window.

It was dying. I thought I could anoint it in some  
vague fashion,

& it would work again.

I felt removed, like Chris when she'd forget her meds  
& blur

from sleep to seizure,

& Duncan would send me away.

She got violent. She said things she never remembered.  
They were secret.

They were essentially meaningless.

They seem sexy now. Like the arbitrary evolution  
of *soul kiss* to *French kiss*.

She loved to spoon with us on the floor  
in front of the fire, her in the middle.

I could not imagine

how Duncan felt about this. She had cheated on him  
at his 15th birthday, with his best friend.

Often she would repeat her conditional wish  
to me:

*If only you were older...*

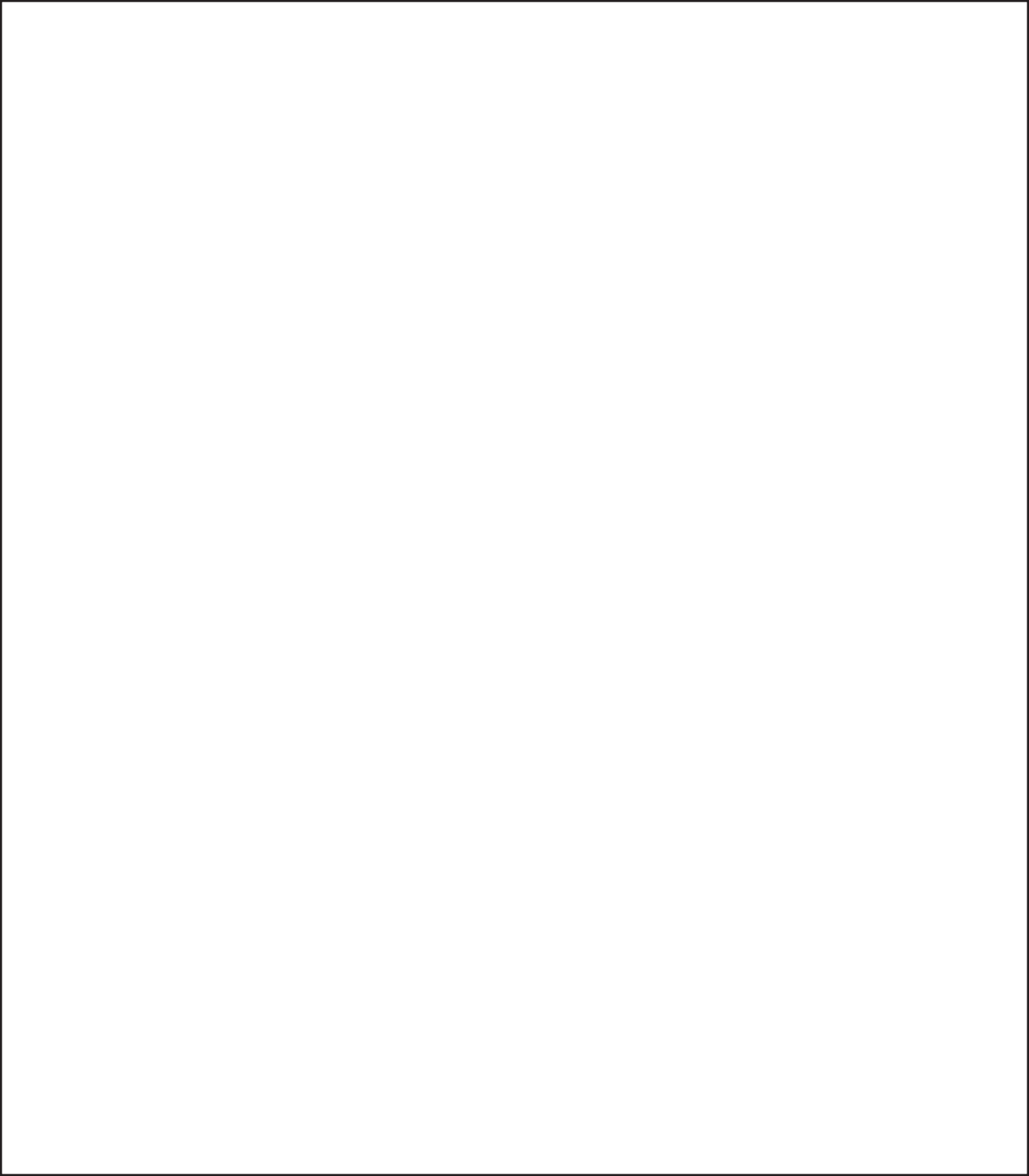
She hid behind my body before I even knew it existed.

If I could reach back through the oil slick of the *I*,  
through the triptychs & ellipses,

I'd say, *Look, I know that it is lovely & only just 1983,*  
*but it's wrong to take this illness*

*as an offering.*





Every morning of senior year, your roommate ensures you awaken to the sound of Elvis grimacing over his guitar strings on the tape deck. He was sexy & contrite, & filled his pockets with kibble for hellhounds.

You get up from your bed as if from river mud & straighten your psychic string tie. Though you will be largely ignored, you are occult with fact behind the scorched creases of your prep school uniform. You can explain anything, except why you stumble back to your dorm bloodied from running through the woods.

Your roommate sighs & unscrews his computer for the gray ganglion of pot hidden behind the circuit board. For once, you spark up that treble clef of smoke & lie back on the ridiculous aqua comforter your mother gave you, holding your breath forever with runner's lungs. It is the only talent he envies you for.

In due course, you go off in ill-fitting tweed to classes where your nervousness makes you seem thoughtful: *So when you think about it... A Tale of Two Cities is really about being impotent. All right, maybe not totally.*

Long silences invariably follow, which you endure by staring out the window at a lawn so deeply green it looks botanically assassinated. Then the discussion resumes as if you had simply never spoken.

Insomnia means you spend a lot of time watching the wind on the moonlit soccer field make silvery math of the grass. You sense that someone—a person with no face—is waiting off-stage, ready to replace you.

This impersonal menace needs to be explained again to the benign x-ray of Cassiopeia, toward which your father says everything anyone has ever felt or spoken is traveling still, broadcast like the sadness of a vaudeville joke on a radio show.

Every night, just before you fall asleep, other voices start talking amongst themselves in the monochrome waters at the deep end of your brain. You try not to think about this too much, as there is nothing to be done that wouldn't involve medication.

Your thesis argues that the astral plane is a theme park for religious hallucinations, & your advisor lets you know the other faculty think you're somewhat *non-traditional* for a scholarship kid. Meaning, *surprisingly weird*.

None of the teachers appear to understand your paper at all, & the white Rastafarian student says they just don't get that you're kind of a mystic. He's wrong, of course, but it's sweet of him to say, so you take him up on his offer of recreational cough syrup before class.

Through the liquefied air, you hear your Classics teacher ask why Odysseus is so pissed, & you diagnose it as: *Too many muscles. Also, there's that other thing.* He's amused: *Oh? Just what would that be?* You shrug languidly. *The dead. They just don't fucking listen.*

You go shopping & make the mistake of buying a box of diminutive Twinkies because they are cheap. You eat four, then can't bear the sight of them.

Matt claims they stopped making new ones in 1978, & they start to resemble tan, spongiform tombs in which your spontaneous qualities are interred.

Jessica slips a note into the chapter on Augustine:  
*I don't suppose that I remembered to tell you that I find you infinitely intriguing?*  
She has not.

When she asks about your family, you say they run a lint collective in Provo, & she nods as if this is supposed to mean something. As if your calm demeanor was not ritually evoked each morning & clandestinely maintained throughout the day.