

A Single Throat Opens

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Black
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Press

Begin with a lie. Small like *I stopped at the gas station* when really it was the park. Small like the cotton-ball dog prancing alongside the jogger. The birthmark on the inside of my thigh. Or *she's a great actress and I loved her in _____*. A lie like a child's thumbprint in a ripe peach, that point of rot. Begin with a lie so fluid it dribbles down our chin, makes every listener thirsty.

∴

Dear M_____,

I want to tell you a story
that never happened. I want to tell it so often
truth won't matter.

This is misleading, however.
Truth never matters.

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Adult children of alcoholics (ACoA) lie when it would be just as easy to tell the truth. This is the third of thirteen characteristics according to Dr. Janet Woititz, who is known as the mother of the ACoA movement.

Others: judges self without mercy (#4); takes themselves very seriously (#6), has trouble with intimacy (#7); feels different from others (#10); tends to extreme responsibility or negligence (#11).¹

When you read these descriptions who do you think of first? When you read #11, that tightrope of extreme behaviors, where do you think we fall?

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From an email I wrote after the first time we met: *I think you must have triggered something because I'm all energized.* This has been the experience consistently, a triggering. Whenever we meet I am a laundry of words. Afterwards I don't know what is clanging inside me.

From an email dated February 12th, 2011: *I should try to sleep while the winds are calm.* Your words or mine?

From an email a year later: *I think since we first started talking I have wanted you to be part of my writing in some way, shape, or form.... Even if you're the only reader of this manuscript, I'd be satisfied.* This is how I write to you. In

almost grandiose ways, in the way alter and altar are linked in our interactions.

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All day I text you about cereal, cat litter, wild flowers. About soup and seaweed and marriage, my mother's complaints about my father's drinking. My father's drinking. My own. Then children, cats, and children again. Now coffee, thrift stores, strippers. Writing, not writing. Often not anything. Movies I think you've seen but haven't. What's happening as it's happening, as if you were watching with me, opening the red curtains to see what I see.

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At any given moment in this piece no one will know if I'm telling the truth. (I want to tell you a story—) But if a reader believes one lie, and you see through it, isn't that a form of intimacy (see #7 above)?

Because I am afraid, I don't want you to know the truth of me entire. Because I am/was found lacking, I want you to know when I'm lying.

∴

Dear M_____,

Have you ever played the ice breaker two truths and one lie? I've played this so many times at different functions, professional or otherwise. It's liberating. To deliberately lie and be rewarded for it.

Here, I'll begin: My father is an alcoholic. And because he never hit me I believed well into my twenties he was a good alcoholic.

Look me in the eyes; tell me where the lie resides.

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Melts wax, burns wick and wood, wounds flesh
in a little circle. Here, where I pressed

a lit match into the skin
of my left forearm.

“Don't cry. Your wounds are
beautiful if you'll love mine.”²

My father, like fire, consumes the thing
that sustains him

until both diminish to nothing. Now,
tell me about your father.

∴

I want the impossible. To know you as a child. To watch you play with mud pies or read books no six-year-old should be interested in.

“I want to study / the same person for 18 years,” writes Hannah Gamble.³ At what precise moment did you become the person I recognize? Could recognition then be undone? Will there be a moment we learn something about the other and think *you are not who I thought you were?*

A terrifying notion—that there would be some truth that changes everything. Altar, alter, etc.

In Japan, there is a cylindrical candy called *kintaro-ame*. No matter where or how many times you slice it, the face of the same boy appears. A predictable and safe sweetness, a familiar face.

I want to trust you enough not to cut every inch of you. I want to believe the face you show is the face you'll always show.

I want to convey such trust, too. I fear if you cut me there will be no face.

But the truth sets us free. What a beautiful and comforting cliché we say to each other. But it is true. Every time I've let someone know the truth, they have set me free.

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My mother refers to my dad's addiction as a thirst. My father is always "thirsty." This is the most honest lie I know.

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My father served in the Navy. His ship is the USS Francis Hammond. *Was* the Francis Hammond. During a writing workshop it was brought up I confused my tenses.

“Can’t repeat the past?” Gatsby says/said, “Why of course you can!”⁴ What great and desperate confidence.

My past corkscrews into my present. Is/was the Francis Hammond. Is/was an alcoholic. It makes no difference.

∴

If one father comes home drunk and asks his son to lay down with him. If one father holds the boy and tells him how much he loves him. If decades later the son has two children. If the son drinks a glass of Malbec in front of them. If he wants to tell them he loves them. If he hesitates, his wine-breath reeking of ruin.

∴

My neighbors were addicts. Are—a present existence. Addiction mutates the very idea of tense. It alters identity, exalts a substance on the altar of the body.

Our families played together until they were evicted. I knew their children, even now can name them. Of course, I won't. But I'll give you these letters. C, P, K, T, D, G. This is what addiction does. Reduces the user to one trait, reduces children to one letter.

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When my father drinks he's an alcoholic. But what about the days he goes without, or even just those few hours while he visits our house (this, too, a rarity)? During those moments I make-believe he is not an addict.

I wish I could see your face when you read this. And I wish I could believe your face was the true face running through your entirety. If not, I would slice and slice until I found the one expression that could return every missing tense.

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I was born with liquor in my blood. Though my mom has had maybe a handful of wine spritzers with cute names, I was born with the taste of whiskey on my

tongue. Even the feel of the word as it whispers off my tongue is delicious and warm.

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Not a lie: my parents are not alcoholics.

How does one reconcile with blood? There is a tic in the collective body of my genetics. It walks, stumbles, falls into the glass.

My daughter isn't of my body, but she is born to the blood of addiction too. What to do with all these breaks?

And me? My own addictions.

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*Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.*⁵

Here I will act as a replacement for the ones who cannot, will not, will never admit to any of this. Not as a sacrifice of self, but as a selfish attempt at reconciling—isn't that what language is?

I cannot control alcohol or the power it has. How's that for admittance? Do I gain access to some club?

If it doesn't hurt, I want no part in it. Running, short fingernails, loud music, _____, _____, whiskey, love. Theodore Roethke said, "Those who are willing to be vulnerable move among mysteries."

Here's a mystery for you: I've just had a beer. Two.

Step 2: Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

I do not believe in sanity. To be sane is to be rational and who among us can claim that for ourselves? If we've never had it, there is no restoring.

Step 3: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

I am addicted to getting rid of things. People. Places. Things. I keep nothing. My email inbox is limited to current emails. I throw away birthday cards. I toss pictures if it suits me. I am addicted to being unattached. I throw away my husband's things sometimes. This is the turning over of my life.

I will address nobody by name. Not even you. Just replace all pronouns here with the idea of God.

Step 4: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Sometimes I believe that being honest with ourselves is telling lies. It's a protective coat we admit to. Raw wounds need not be on display. Sometimes the lies are more important than the truth.

What does a moral inventory look like? Now I must admit to a Google search, a moral transgression?

“In Step Four we call it a ‘moral’ inventory because we compile a list of traits and behaviors that have transgressed our highest, or moral, values. We also inventory our “good” traits and the behaviors that represent them. In our life’s moral inventory the defects or dysfunctional behaviors might include some that once worked; some dysfunctional behaviors may have saved our lives as children, but they are now out of date, self-defeating, and cause us a great deal of trouble when we use them as adults.”⁶

Step 5: Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Admitted—here we mean confession, or perhaps we mean allowed in. And I want to be allowed into God the way I allow all manner of drink inside me, eagerly. Because it brings out my truth and in the same way I can be a certain truth in God and one day I hope I am confessed from the Great Bright Mouth.

I cannot tell intentional lies. Since childhood, I smile and blush when I try to lie. So I gave it up. But still, I lie. And usually it has no large bearing on life; it's the only type of storytelling I know how to do.

My brother had (has) the same smile and blush when he lied (lies). Except his came (comes) with perfectly-placed dimples. But he has never had to lie—he lives on the surface, often the surface of cheap beer or moonshine. Not the kind with the graphically designed label, but the kind that sits in an old, giant pickle jar with the label half peeled off. My only consolation is “I never lied in my heart.”⁷

Step 6: We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

“We were entirely ready...” but then we changed our minds? Why is the language of the 12 steps in the collective? Can a group do any of these things? Can an individual?

Step 7: Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Shove the words I speak back into my mouth then remove the mouth itself. Remove the moat of a stomach and the throat like a castle tower rising from it. Siege me.

Addiction: being what people want. Being what I perceive as needed. A behavior that saved me as a child and is now outdated and self-defeating? Let's rewind: I'm still a child.

Step 8: Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

If I start this list, it will shock the people on that list. I can't remember them all. And the harm was probably good in the long run. I apologize constantly. About everything, for no reason at all. And it ceases to mean anything to the people I want to apologize to.