

*Major Arcana*

I HADN'T SEEN TINA IN SEVERAL YEARS when she died in the small town where she was born. She died in her bedroom in her parents' house, maybe the one she'd had since childhood; she was in a familiar place, that town, that house, that room. To me, her life seemed contained, full of continuities, until suddenly it wasn't.

I didn't go to her funeral. It was five hundred miles away and I didn't know her family. But I thought about her often, mulled over what I knew about her, looked for signs of the tragedy that had loomed over her and then befell her.

IT WAS THE BEGINNING OF OUR SECOND YEAR of graduate school, and September was still summer in Virginia. It was humid despite the breeze that whispered in the oak leaves. Our faces shone with sweat. The undergraduates wore flip-flops and sundresses to the classes we taught. We wore our formal clothes, trying to disguise our youth and inexperience with suit jackets and pencil skirts.

Tina sat across from me at an outdoor table; her short, highlighted hair caught the yellow gleam of the streetlamps along the Downtown Mall. MJ, another of the seven members of our fiction class, sat to my right. Between us were the tarot cards and an almost-empty bottle of Lambrusco, light red and fizzy, the cheapest bottle on the menu. Tina turned over the tarot card in sixth position, the future, in the spread she'd laid for me. It was the Tower card, with its image of a lightning bolt striking a tall spire and a man falling from its height, arms outstretched, upside-down.

"Disaster," Tina said. "Visited from above."

"What can I do to prevent it?" I asked.

"Nothing," Tina said. "It isn't a disaster caused by you. It comes from the outside."

"What if I just punched you in the face, right now, and got it over with?" MJ asked me. Tina had already read her cards and found no misfortune.

Tina shook her head. "Nope. Too much intention." I thanked MJ for her offer.

I pressed Tina for more about the disaster. "How soon?" I asked.

"A month," said Tina. "Less. Imminent."

I wasn't sure if I believed in tarot cards. I considered them to be no more predictive than a fortune cookie, a grammatically incorrect sentence on a wisp of paper. A tarot reading felt like eavesdropping on someone else's therapy session and trying to apply its advice to oneself. If something made sense, it was happy coincidence or projection.

Tina made casual references to Greek mythology and spooky, moralistic Victorian novels that I hadn't read. Her stories in workshop were often structured around complex Biblical allusions. Over the summer, she'd gone on a road trip to visit the graves of American presidents and famous writers scattered over several states; she took photographs of their headstones. I wasn't sure what she believed.

That year I lived in a little white house, close to the university's football stadium, with two of my classmates, Anya and Lauren. Our house was furnished with second-hand couches bought off Craigslist and tables inherited from graduated MFAs. It had the bareness of a former family home inhabited by women in their mid-20s; the only crowded places in the house were the kitchen sink and the bookshelves.

We traded gossip from the lives of famous writers as if they were starlets in checkout-line weeklies. "On an average day, Joan Didion and her husband would write in their separate studies in their house until about 2 in the afternoon," MJ, who was often also at the house, told us. "Then they'd swim in the ocean, eat dinner out at a fabulous restaurant, then spend the evening in front of a roaring fire with a bottle of wine. Every single day."

Lauren said that Jonathan Safran Foer, also married to a writer, had an office across the street from his Brooklyn brownstone that he went to each day with his dog. These were our templates for the good life.

When I got home after the tarot card reading, I told Lauren and Anya about the Tower card.

"What kind of disaster?" Anya asked.

"She didn't say." On my walk home from the bar, I'd made a list of acceptable disasters, bad things that I could handle. "Breaking my leg would be all right," I said. "Or my arm. Or if someone broke into my bank account and stole all my money."

“What if someone stole your computer?” Lauren asked.

“Survivable,” I said.

“What if you got kicked out of school?” asked Lauren.

“Or if you got addicted to drugs and then had to go to rehab?” said Anya.

These were disasters that I could imagine, common disasters that I could live through almost unscathed, I thought, and naming them felt good, empowering. It was like naming mountains I might someday climb, reaching the summit, tired and sick with altitude, but alive and closer to the sun.

“I could get my purse stolen. I could get mugged,” I continued. “I could get a tooth knocked out.” Anya had lost a tooth and she’d replaced it with a fake one that looked real. “I could break my nose.” Someone had slammed open a locker and broken Lauren’s nose in high school, but it looked perfect now. “I could have a bike accident. I could have my identity stolen. I could be framed for a petty crime.”

Over the next few days, as I collected the list of acceptable disasters, a shadow list wrote itself. It tallied the things I truly feared, the possibilities that I did not name because I could not. I tried not to think about it, but it grew longer. What if I failed to write anything? What if I went blind? Or lost someone I loved?

#### THE THINGS I KNEW ABOUT TINA:

She was from Virginia, a small town somewhere in the other direction from Washington, D.C. From Charlottesville, we only ever drove north. We had to drive around Washington to get to New York City, which had a strong gravity for us. We had to drive east to reach the ocean. Tina was from somewhere west, maybe in the mountains.

Of the seven fiction students in our MFA class, she was the only one who had friends in town when she arrived.

She was twenty-three when I met her.

As an undergraduate, Tina had attended a college that still didn’t admit men. She said she’d liked it, that it had been both a challenging and encouraging intellectual environment. Tina dressed in a way that struck me as very girly, very feminine, and I wondered if it was because of her college. Or it could have been her Southernness. Her nails were always painted and her hair was always freshly-colored, usually red. She wore high-heeled shoes and shirts that showed-off her cleavage.

She had a doll-face, like one of those old-fashioned porcelain babies, with wide eyes, round cheeks and a pointy chin that stood out like a punctuation mark. When I tell other people about Tina, I tiptoe around describing what she looked like. In one of Tina’s stories, her narrator describes his wife as “not a little fat; she is not fat like the women in diet pill commercials, who beam with pride as they hold up old pants only three sizes larger than their new pants... She is properly fat, her stomach hanging out from under her shirt grandiose and unapologetic.” Tina was properly fat.

Her body didn’t embarrass Tina; she wore flamboyant colors and shiny fabrics. With her size, she rejected the social expectations that governed so many of us. She wrote sex scenes between obese characters. She described the imprint that a toilet seat left on fat buttocks. She turned her fatness into sensuous rebellion.

After Tina died, I wondered if her size had killed her.

MJ DESCRIBED THE MFA PROGRAM as a place where people who thought too much about their own feelings were gathered in one place, often thousands of miles from their real lives—their families, friends, girlfriends, boyfriends, jobs—and told to delve more deeply into their own psyches than they had before. We were told that our imaginary lives were valuable, or at least worth spending the majority of our hours thinking about. We were thrown together with like-minded people. “Then we are doused with a liberal amount of liquor,” she said. She made a pouring gesture with both hands, then mimed flames, total conflagration.

The first few weeks were like arriving at summer camp; we made friends quickly, almost desperately. We told all the stories of our young lives in one mad rush. We catalogued the details of each other, we wanted to know and be known as quickly as possible. We were all characters of our own creation.

One of the poets climbed onto the roof of the bar where we were drinking. He telephoned us from three stories up. In the courtyard, we tried to find his silhouette against the pitch of the roof. We felt we knew what kind of man he was. We made plans to save him.

We fell in love with each other. We fell out of love with each other. Couples formed at first secretly, but then everyone knew about them. They lasted a few weeks, a few months, a year.

Tina held herself apart. She was sometimes at the big house parties,

but almost never came out drinking at the noisy student bars near the university or the fancier ones downtown.

She wrote stories about Appalachian twins who were psychically connected. In one story, one of the twins was bitten by a brown recluse spider and didn't have to go to Vietnam where his brother eventually died. In another version, one of the twins plunged off a bridge and drowned in the river below and his brother woke in the middle of night shivering with supernatural cold.

I thought about the Tower card and waited for something bad to happen. At the same time, I didn't believe anything bad would happen. That semester, we had workshop with Deborah Eisenberg and we met in her austere but sunny living room. She pointed out that you could see steeples from every window of her apartment. "And the bells!" she said. "The clanging!"

Bad things happened in the stories we wrote, as they had to, because narrative requires conflict. Characters loved the wrong people. Characters broke up. Characters wanted things they couldn't have. Characters were maimed and characters died.

We talked about how to handle the unexpected bad thing in a short story. If it was sudden and unrelated to the actions of a character, it was hard to make it work. It screwed up plots. It was tonally difficult to write about regular life and then senseless tragedy. If narration is a chain of cause and effect, and a good central character is the agent of change, what happens when "disaster is visited from above?" Maybe it was best to put it at the very beginning of the story, and then the rest could attempt to make sense of it?

Tina wrote a story that started after the death of one of the Appalachian twins. The surviving twin went back to the house where they'd grown up, empty but for accumulated objects of a family life now over. Dust motes floated in the sunlight that streamed through the unwashed windows. The lawn was overrun with kudzu and scraggly saplings.

IN HIS OFFICE, MY PROFESSOR CHRIS TILGHMAN and I sat in hard-backed wooden chairs and he filled my hands with books from his personal collection. Alice Munro, of course. *Geek Love* by Katherine Dunn. We discussed a story of mine that he'd read about the birth of a child with no mouth, a mutant baby born to a family of circus performers who were traveling through the sub-continent in an old school bus. "You share a

lot of concerns with *Geek Love*. You'll see how when you read it," he said. "The mutants, the circus."

"Do you ever worry about writing about something like mutant children?" I asked. "I mean, do you worry that you'll write something and it will come true? Has that ever happened to you?"

Chris looked like an archetypal college professor; he wore corduroy pants and tweed jackets, there were even elbow patches on some of them. He had a voice like Donald Sutherland. He lived in a house furnished with antiques and pastoral paintings. He wrote in a study with big windows overlooking a creek. To me, he seemed insulated from calamity.

"Yes," he said. "I have brought things into my life by writing them. But they come in as a slant rhyme."

I WAS WALKING ALONG U.S. ROUTE 29 when I heard honking behind me. I didn't turn around. I didn't want to give whoever was honking at me the satisfaction of my attention. Then a car pulled up beside me. Should I run? And if so, which way?

"Want a ride?" It was Tina.

Instead of taking me directly home, we went to the imported foods store together and Tina looked for the brands of tea and jam that she'd grown used to living in England. She'd done a semester abroad as an undergraduate.

"Did you have boyfriends while you were in college? Despite the all-girls thing?"

She said she hadn't. She said she was still a virgin.

Tina bought groceries. She said she was a vegetarian. "For health or ethical reasons?" I asked.

"Neither," she said. "I deny myself meat as a daily act of faith." I assumed that Tina negotiated her own relationship with God, that her religious practice was a hybrid like her stories. Part Biblical, part prophetic dream.

Later, Tina invited all the fiction MFAs to her house for a six-course vegetarian meal. She gave us paper invitations. We wore our nicest dresses. The menu was printed out on sheets of paper at each of our place settings. There were filo pastry parcels with spiced mushroom filling. Years later, I learned that she'd used the money her parents sent her for Christmas to pay for the meal.

WITHIN A MONTH OF THE TAROT CARD READING, Anya's uncle was killed in a car accident in San Francisco during the week of his daughter's wedding. His wife laundered his wedding suit so he could be buried in it. When she dried it, hundred dollar bills tumbled around the dryer drum. She found other stashes of cash around the house. She found stacks of bills that added up to thousands of dollars. Anya's aunt got a phone call from a woman she didn't know who wanted to come to the funeral. The woman said her two young children were the uncle's sons. He supported them in secret, with cash. Anya's aunt said no.

"Can you believe that?" Anya said. "That incredible bad luck?"

We couldn't.

That same month, Lauren's aunt killed herself. Lauren's mom had gone to the house where Lauren's aunt lived alone, knocked at her door, then let herself in with a spare key and found her. We didn't ask Lauren how she did it. Lauren said that her aunt had been depressed for a long time.

I drove Lauren to the airport in Richmond so she could fly home for the funeral. I told her that her family had always seemed perfect to me—they were close-knit, her parents were still married. Lauren talked to her parents on the phone everyday. Her aunt had been one of seven kids in an Irish Catholic family who all lived near each other in Ohio. "No one has a perfect family," Lauren said.

Driving home from Richmond by myself, I drove as carefully as I could.

After the deaths of Anya's uncle and Lauren's aunt, still nothing happened to me. Another month passed. I began to worry that I brought bad luck to those closest to me. It seemed beyond mere coincidence that they'd suffered such similar family tragedies.

"How's your family?" I asked MJ.

"Good. Why?" she said.

"No reason."

If I brought bad luck by proximity, I should move away from everyone I loved or even liked. Or I should pretend to love people who deserved bad luck. What was the most ethical thing to do if I didn't suffer but rather brought suffering to others?

"If I call you and I'm living in Colombia married to a drug lord who kills people, don't worry, it's all for the best," I said to my mother on the phone.

"What are you talking about?"

I told my mom about Tina's tarot card reading, the Tower card, and about Anya's and Lauren's losses. "What if, somehow, I caused it all? What if it was my bad luck?"

"That's ridiculous," my mom said. "You don't have that kind of power over what happens. You're just indulging in magical thinking."

She was right, of course. Real life doesn't conform to the same rules as a narrative. Just because things happen at the same time doesn't mean they are related.

I wanted to weave a cause and effect chain that could explain why a man died in a car accident on the coast of the Pacific and a woman lost herself in Ohio. I wanted those deaths to mean something to me. I wanted to create a narrative around them. That's what I'd been trained to do. But worse, I'd tried to make myself the main character. It was more contemptible than just magical thinking; it was arrogance.

TINA RENTED WHAT SHE CALLED "A SHACK" on the wrong side of the tracks near the hospital. If I looked directly into the air vents, I could see into the rooms of the second floor. The kitchen was slightly crooked. Tina and her roommate had written lines from Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* in red nail polish on the tiles of the bathroom, the toilet seat, and the underside of the washing machine lid—"I am Jack's broken heart."

"This is your life and its ending one moment at a time," was written on the wall below the shower head.

"You are not special. You're not a beautiful and unique snowflake," was written on the bathroom mirror.

Tina told me that the nail polish could be peeled off easily when she moved away. She told me that she wrote at night and slept during the day. "My circadian rhythm is almost exactly opposite to most people, around 1:00 a.m. is lunch time," she said. Tina told me that she was doing research to write a novel written from the perspective of the collective dead.

Months after my tarot card reading, Tina told me that she had been walking from her door to her car around 2:00 a.m. to drive to Wendy's for fries, and found a very large man lying in her yard. He was bloody. He lifted his shirt to show her stab wounds that slashed sideways across his abdomen. He begged her to drive him the three blocks to the emergency room. But he was a very big man. "Way bigger than me," she said.

“Imagine.”

She was afraid to get close to him, let alone load him into the back of her sedan. She called an ambulance. She told him to stay still. He cursed at her and tried to walk to the hospital. She followed him in her car, still on the phone with a 911 dispatcher and when he collapsed on the sidewalk, she waited nearby until the ambulance arrived.

Police came to her house to ask questions. Did she know him? Who stabbed him? Tina didn't know. The next day she called the hospital to find out if he had lived, but, because she wasn't family, they couldn't tell her anything.

“You did the right thing,” I said. She worried that she hadn't offered the man enough, that fear had made her uncharitable.

I didn't think Tina could have trusted the bleeding man enough to intervene in his fate. She didn't know his story. He stumbled into her life for mere moments, after the main action of his night, but before the night's consequences were decided.

IN THE LATE SPRING, EIGHT MONTHS AFTER THE TAROT CARD READING, we graduated. Lauren's family came to stay at our house and took us out for breakfast at the International House of Pancakes the day of the ceremony. It rained. We received our degrees on a makeshift stage set up midcourt in the basketball stadium.

MJ and Lauren moved to New York City. Tina moved to Washington, D.C., for a job in corporate communications. Anya stayed in Charlottesville an extra year to edit the literary journal. I moved to Tanzania to live in a spare room in my father's house and write. In September, I watched the BBC via satellite as the American economy collapsed.

Tina sent me a story she was working on that began with a college email informing the university that a student had died, hit by a train. She'd put the tragedy at the start, and the rest of the story was the reaction of another student who lived on the same dorm floor—who erased all the pornography from the dead student's computer to spare his parents—and the dead student's mother. The story was very good. In one scene, the mother waits in the car, while the father of the dead boy is in the morgue, and Tina wrote, “Now she sits in the car outside the hospital, wearing her blue coat over flannel pajamas. Her knees rise sharply in front of her because she is wearing her four-inch red pumps. They were by the door as she and Robert rushed out, but now Laurel wishes she had taken

the time to find another pair.”

Tina had a knack for placing the tragic right up against the banal, where it would shine with awful beauty. The dead boy's parents argue whether or not to provide the funeral home with pants or just the clothing for the top of their son's body. It is absurd and devastating at the same time. In her stories, all the flowers are purchased at grocery stores.

In my notes to Tina about her story, I observed what I felt was an overstated parallel: as a child, the character who is hit by the train fears train whistles. “He expected the train to come through his nursery window,” Tina wrote.

“It seems like he is destined to die by train. Do you want this magical idea of destiny to be in the story?” I asked her.

Tina's company had layoffs and she moved back to the town where her parents lived in Virginia. I was so lonely in Tanzania that I moved back to Charlottesville.

Tina got a job at Cracker Barrel to support her writing habit. I got a job at the alumni magazine at the university. Tina wrote a story about the cook at a restaurant and showed him making batches of twelve hundred biscuits, steak fries, gravy. I worried that Tina was doing grueling work when I read the lines: “He knows it as surely as he knows a thousand recipes. He will die here, baking biscuits, of a stroke or a massive heart attack. He will hit the floor on his back, gasping then going still, and flour will trickle over him like pollen, like early snow...”

Years passed. Lauren worked in publishing. MJ taught fiction workshops in Brooklyn. Anya began her PhD in creative writing in Houston.

Four years after we graduated, in the summer of 2012, Tina wrote to me and suggested that we have lunch in Charlottesville. I wrote back to tell her that I had moved to Brooklyn, I'd left my job as an editor, and I was engaged to a tall red-headed man, who was also a writer.

She wrote back that her parents had built her an electrified writing shack in their backyard for her twenty-ninth birthday. She was still working at Cracker Barrel, but she was working long shifts only three days a week, so she could write.

She also said, “I'm doing fairly well now for the first time in quite a few years. Basically, about a year after graduation I had what was arguably a genuine nervous breakdown and was this close (\*holds thumb and index finger within a quarter inch of one another\*) to being in a mental institution for a while, but preempted that by 'fessing up to my GP and

getting a referral to a good psychologist (well, as good as they get in SW Virginia). I've been in therapy for just over a year, and am finally starting to feel a lot better."

I wrote back to say that I hadn't realized she'd been suffering. I felt guilty. We hadn't been in close contact. Indeed, even when we were in classes together, the time we'd shared was mostly spent at parties. We'd joked or gossiped. The most intimate way that I knew her was her fiction.

She also told me that she'd been dating a woman named Katie for about half a year, who worked as counselor. "A great deal of her cases are just ordinary people whose brains have been fried by meth or bath salts or something," she wrote. "Most of what she has to talk about on dates is work, since she does little else. So we'll be sitting there eating Italian or somesuch, and she'll be telling me about a man who, tripping on bath salts, stole his neighbor's goat, put it in a child's dress, and then ritually sacrificed it on his back lawn. Katie seems to feel profound relief that I find this sort of dinner conversation interesting."

I was glad that she was in love. She told me she'd placed a story in *The Gettysburg Review*. She was writing about the Appalachian twins again, they were asking to be a novel. She'd lost fifty pounds. We corresponded about ambition. She wrote that she wanted to be someone who would be read in one hundred years. She wanted to write a book that every high school student would read to understand early 21st-century America. I had never dared want that. It seemed too big to wish for.

I wrote to her about how difficult it was to be in New York City, a place I felt that I should love because it had been loved by so many of the writers and artists I admired. She wrote back that she felt alone, artistically. "In fact, to the best of my knowledge I am the only writer of serious intent or ability in Wythe or any of the surrounding counties, save perhaps a few undergraduates or teachers at Radford University or Virginia Tech. Unless you count Sherwood Anderson, who is buried about a half hour's drive from my trailer." She attached a photograph of Sherwood Anderson's gravestone. It was a large stone cone that had been broken off jaggedly at the tip. She also sent a photograph of her writing shack, dark brown with white trim.

Tina gave me some advice about prioritizing my writing ahead of the work I did to pay the rent. And she signed off with the sentences: "After all, each day—free agent though it be—is a precious thing, since you never know what could happen. Sherwood Anderson died in Panama, from swallowing a toothpick embedded in a martini olive."

IN GRADUATE SCHOOL, I OFTEN WOKE UP IN MY ROOM in the little white house excited about the work I would do. It was the first time that I felt like a writer. People addressed me as one. Writing fiction felt like a noble cause; we were philosophers trying to make sense of the world and our tool was narrative. Deborah Eisenberg told us to write right up to the edge of mystery, to use our writing to find its outline.

I was in a process of becoming—all of us were. On the phone, MJ said, "It feels like nothing is wasted, that every experience, good or bad, is useful to a writer. We can use it to mean something."

But, in the years since, I struggled with what it is that I want to mean. Writing turned out to be harder than I'd hoped. I, at times, felt defeated. I worried that an unmet intention to write and the imaginary books in my head were a way to trick myself into thinking I was leading something other than an ordinary life. Maybe the real gift of my MFA was the friends I made, and not, as I'd assumed, the first steps into the life of a writer.

On the phone, I told my mother that I was considering nursing school, so I could be more immediately useful. I liked the idea of being responsive to action happening in front of me, instead of being alone at my desk. Someone is bleeding? Bandage them up.

"When do I know that I should give up?" I asked her.

"You'll just know that you've already given up. And you'll feel ok about it. That's how you'll know," she said.

"So not yet?" I asked.

IN TINA'S STORY "GOD OF DUCKS," the main character learns that a young sous chef he's grown fond of has died in a car accident when the restaurant manager gets a phone call:

Bart lowers the receiver and looks down at it in his hand like it is foreign and confounding. Moving very slowly, he hangs it up, then rubs his smooth cheeks and adjusts his glasses. "Luke's dead, Chuck."

In Tina's story, "Not Apple Trees Were There," the parents also learn of death from a phone call:

She was sleeping when the call came, and Robert shook her. Laurel, Laurel, he said, pulling her from a dreamful dark that trailed images

into her wakefulness: the curled skeleton of a dolphin in shadowy algae, the face of a man she dated in the seventies, a length of yellow yarn strung with martini olives. These and more pictures were launched into the unlit bedroom to spread out like smoke as Robert said, Laurel, it's Chaz.

I learned that Tina had died via a text from Anya. I received it while walking through Brooklyn Heights carrying the baby I nannied. In front of us, children were spilling down the front steps of an elementary school. I hugged the baby, buried my nose in his hair and took a long breath. I thought of the Tower card, the lightning strike, the falling man.

That night, I met Anya, Lauren, and MJ at a Brooklyn bar. We'd checked the news in Wytheville. There was no news about Tina. We'd all received the same email from an administrator at our old university. There would be a funeral in Virginia. He gave us Tina's parents' address so we could send cards.

We talked about aneurysms and pulmonary embolisms. We talked about the danger of losing weight too fast. We talked about pills, whether if one took too many it would be obvious. Everything we said was conjecture.

Once, when MJ felt like we had pressed her to tell us a secret that she hadn't wanted to share, she said that we didn't really care what had happened to her. We just wanted to know the story.

I wanted to know what had happened to Tina, but I was suspicious of my own curiosity. What could I learn of importance about Tina by learning about her death? Placing a narrative around her death felt like asserting an understanding of it that I couldn't honestly claim. Yet, I wanted to make sense of it, to fit each of my memories of her together, to find a hidden unity among them.

One of our classmates and one of our professors went to the funeral in Wytheville. Our classmate said that Tina's coffin was collaged—letters from loved ones, photos, poems, small drawings, rhinestones. She said that Tina had been happy in the days before her death. She and her family had gone on vacation together to Myrtle Beach. Her girlfriend was adopting her cat.

Later, I wrote an email to two of Tina's close friends and asked about Tina's writing. I imagined that there might be a lot of it, mostly unpublished. I told them that, in 1979, Breece D'J Pancake was a student

at the University of Virginia when he committed suicide. His collection was published posthumously. He had a literary executor who saw that it stayed in print. Tina's friends didn't write back.

Tina's story "God of Ducks" in *The Gettysburg Review* was awarded a Pushcart prize and republished in the anthology. I picked up the thick volume in a bookstore in Missoula, Montana, and found her name.

TINA WENT TO SLEEP ON A SATURDAY NIGHT early in December. The next morning, she didn't wake up. Our classmate who went to her funeral told us that there had been an autopsy, but she didn't know its results. That's all I know.

I don't know how to make sense of what happened to Tina. I don't know how to make it into a story.

Part of making sense of a story is figuring out how it matters. What's the universal truth sheathed inside the particulars of a plot? Tina wrote to explore what her life meant, the small town she'd grown up in, the jobs she worked, the body she inhabited. It scares me that her work was left unfinished.

After Breece D'J Pancake died, our professor John Casey wrote about him and described an experience of what he could only call Breece's ghost. John wrote that once, walking home late at night, "I smelled something. I tasted metal in my mouth... It was a smell I'd known years before. Gun bluing. But inside this sense of taste and smell was a compelling sympathy, beyond the sympathy of *that's what it smelled like to have the muzzle in his mouth.*" John heard Breece's voice sometimes, even years later.

I haven't heard Tina's voice nor felt her presence. But I feel that compelling sympathy.

TINA WROTE THAT READING KIERKEGAARD when she was twenty-one brought her back to Christianity after a period of atheism. I wonder if her belief in writing came from that experience, the transformation of the reader. I admired and envied Tina's faith in the project of writing, certainly, but also the meaning with which her religion could imbue the chaos of our lives.

Since her death, I've wondered how she herself would make sense of it. In a poem she wrote from the point of view of the biblical Abraham, she ends with the lines:

...Your voice  
comes through the evening, leaps crackling over fact and  
the coming hush, echoes back from the universal wall,  
from Your dry, warm skin at the end of things:  
I have promised you, it goes, it is never finished.

I hope that Tina took pleasure in the perpetual state of becoming that is necessary for creation, that in-between place where the work happens, after an idea but before all the words are down on paper. Not only writers live in this twilight. We all do.

RECENTLY, MJ TEXTED ME, "Remember when Tina sang karaoke?"

We'd gathered at a bar near the train station, one of those places where the floor is sticky and most of the patrons look ten years older than they are. We flipped through the book of songs, trying to find ones we knew. We ordered pints of domestic beer. A few of us sang, muddled our way through Fiona Apple or Pearl Jam. When Tina and her housemate took the stage, no one knew which song they'd picked, but we all recognized it from the first few notes: "The Phantom of the Opera." MJ caught my eye and mouthed, "What?"

Tina sang Phantom's part and she had a big, round, ringing opera voice. Conversations stopped. Drinkers turned their heads toward the stage. The aesthetics of the song choice were all wrong for the bar. Who listened to musicals? The song was too dark, too dramatic. But Tina's voice was strong.

Afterward, a man approached Tina and asked her if she'd sing on some tracks he was working on. Tina laughed, demurred. "You should do it!" I said. "You have a good voice."

"I know," she said, shrugging as if it were of no consequence to be able to make something beautiful.