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Publication Date

2014

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Suicide, Watch: A Mojave Desert Memoir

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Ruth Marie Nolan

December 2014

Thesis Committee:

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Acknowledgements

I must first thank my wonderful committee members who always gave me insightful comments regarding this novel.

I want to thank my parents, Beverly and Joseph Nolan; my brother, John Nolan; my daughter Tarah Templin and son-in-law Alex Templin, and my grandson, Baby Simon Templin.

Thanks also to my amazing professors and guides at UCR, who led me along the writing process in completing my thesis: Tod Goldberg, David L. Ulin, Emily Rapp, Mary Yukari Waters, Elizabeth Crane, Rob Roberge, Deanne Stillman, and many others who teach and lecture in the program.

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"The great Creator told us, 'I'm going to teach you these songs, but before I teach you these songs, I'm going to break your heart.'" - Larry Eddy (Chemehuevi Indian Singer)

"Closure is bullshit, and I would love to find the man who invented closure and shove a giant closure plaque up his ass" – James Ellroy (author of My Dark Places)

"An archaeological feature at a site fills up as the waters of Lake Mead begin to claim the Lost City sites. Many thought that once the sites were covered by Lake Mead, they would never be accessible again; however, there have been large fluctuations of the water level at Lake Mead since its creation, resulting in the occasional accessibility to Lost City sites." – from "Images of America: Nevada's Lost City"

Introduction

Okay. Let's start here. April 9, 2010.

There are enough small minutes for this, and enough hours, too, hung taut across the desert, like an unpainted canvas stretched to its limit, unpainted.

There was a small goodbye that didn't feel much like a real goodbye, at my house in Palm Desert, just a kiss and a little hug I gave my boyfriend, Phil when I left him in the morning to drive to the airport.

There was a small cup of coffee, and the freeway was wide open, and the flight had plenty of empty seats. And after we took off from Ontario Airport, east of L.A., and crossed the mountains, I looked down and saw a rash of color smeared across the Mojave Desert. Poppies, orange poppies, painted across miles of open space. I pointed it out to the man sitting next to me, and we both smiled.

I couldn't wait to tell Phil about the poppies. We'd go there right when I got back in a few days, and roll around in flowers, before the weather turned too hot and the flowers withered and faded away.

That's the way it is with spring wildflowers in the Mojave. They only last for a few weeks at best, and some years, they barely bloom at all. It depends on how much rain we get during the winter, which is measured in the smallest increments, when there is space and time for rain that rarely comes.

Sometimes, rain comes as a flash flood that tears the desert open and leaves permanent scars on the land, sometimes changing the entire direction of a canyon, or perhaps burying a faint oasis with deep sand, never to flow again.

We'd had plenty of winter rain. It was a terrific year for wildflowers in the Mojave, one of the best in memory.

I was headed to give a talk about desert literature for the Western Wilderness Conference at University of California, Berkeley. A book I'd edited on desert literature had just been published, and I was one of four speakers on a panel focusing on Mojave Desert conservation writers and writing, along with my book's publisher, an icon of Bay Area literary lore. He would be introducing me, and I was looking forward to selling and signing many copies of my book, and I'd be reading some of my desert poems, too.

I'd never been so happy in my life, and my flight from Ontario to Oakland was calm and smooth and quick.

I decided to open my talk by describing the surprising sight of the orange poppies by airplane, the way the view had stopped time for me when I looked down from the plane, and forever inscribed itself into my imagination and brain.

As I tell it to you now.

orange poppies

explode in the desert

your suicide

Now, let's go to this: "*I wish my life could go back to the way it was before April 9, 2010*"

Part 1: Spring Break

April 8, 2010 / The Last Supper

Doing the calculations

over and over again in my head

while driving through the Badlands

to sit by your grave again

tonguing the hole of my missing tooth

stroking the impossibly soft kitty

trying to go to sleep alone at 3 AM

over and over again in my head

doing the calculations

Usually, Phil cooked for the two of us. It was one of the things I loved about our relationship. That he took so much care with food, and to shop for and cook healthy meals for us both.

But this night was different. Phil wasn't feeling well. He was in a daze, acting strange, and so I offered to cook dinner.

"I think I have the flu or something," he said. I felt his forehead; he seemed a little pale

and warm, but nothing too serious. I ran my fingers through his wavy blonde hair, lovingly. It looked good, now that it was growing out, about shoulder length, better than the buzz cut he'd had back when I'd first met him a few years earlier.

"Maybe you're just tired from our trip," I said. I was feeling tired, too.

I brought him a warm mug of chamomile tea, but he didn't touch it. "I'm going to make dinner for us," I announced. He didn't say anything, and seemed to be dozing on the couch, and was turned away from me.

I wanted to do something nice for him, especially because I was leaving the next day for UC Berkeley. I hadn't invited Phil to go with me, and I felt kind of bad about that. But now he wasn't feeling well, so it all seemed to be working out. He could stay home to rest, and I'd be gone and back in a flash.

Besides, there was something else.

I was planning to meet another friend of mine there, a longtime friend from Ashland, Oregon named Jason, a journalist friend I'd known for years, who was driving down to Berkeley to meet me. I was planning to share my hotel room with him. We would sleep in separate beds.

Phil had never met Jason, and didn't know he existed, although Jason knew about Phil.

It felt complicated, and so I had decided that it was best not to invite Phil to go along.

It would be a quick trip, and he didn't need to know that Jason would be meeting me there.

And, of course, Phil could take care of the dogs while I was gone. He said he would.

Brindle, my big, loveable, 100 pound mastiff. And Shasta, my ten-year-old border collie mix.

Shasta was fully recovered from an injury to her back she'd suffered a year ago; the scars were fully scabbed over and completely buried beneath her long fur, and it was like she'd never been injured at all.

"Outside, pups!" I opened the sliding glass door, and the dogs loped out to their favorite spot beneath one of the palm trees in my backyard, in a cool spot they'd dug in the sand beneath my landscaping gravel. I turned my attention then to preparing dinner.

I remember what I cooked for Phil that last night, when he lay on the couch, dozing, or so

I thought. Food I haven't cooked since that night. Steamed salmon. Steamed broccoli.

Quinoa. Fresh herbal tea. Organic green salad. We cooked all the time. Really good food.

In fact, we were sort of on our way to becoming vegan. We were sort of on our way towards living a more and more sustainable lifestyle.

One of our dreams was for me to resign from my job, and use the equity in my home to buy an organic lavender farm in the Pacific Northwest, say, or, if we decided to stay in California, maybe an organic avocado farm.

I was excited about these things, and Phil was, too. In fact, it was his idea.

“Just think,” he’d say. “If the shit really does go down in 2012, like it’s supposed to, what better place to be, than away from cities, and on an organic farm, raising our own food?”

I’d nod, and agree, and sometimes he’d go on and on. “That’s why I ordered that canister of non GMO-modified seeds,” he explain. “There are enough seeds in there to plant an acre of food, and we can survive on that if we need to.”

He’d ordered the seeds using my credit card, without asking me, and I had seen the bill for \$292 on my statement. Although I was pissed, I didn’t say anything about it. I could live with that, if it made him happy.

It was important for me to keep Phil happy. I loved Phil, and was elated that after a recent six-month separation, he’d come back to live with me again.

Phil had moved back in at around the same time my daughter, and only child, Tarah, was moving in with her longtime boyfriend, Alex, who was now her fiancé. They were living just down the street from me.

Tarah was 23, two years younger than Phil, and Alex and Phil were the same age. Tarah

and Alex had both just finished college at Cal Berkeley.

Phil didn't want to go to college.

And that night, at our last supper, I was working extra hard to make Phil happy, to nurture him with some good food, because he seemed so run down.

Phil said he felt sick, that he didn't want to eat. He stayed on the couch. He was very quiet, which wasn't normal for him. Usually, Phil talked a lot and in his company, I was the more subdued one.

I sliced broccoli and put it into the vegetable steamer, and closed the lid. Boiling water bubbled up, making the lid dance. I gently laid two salmon steaks into a skillet, squeezed lemon halves on top, and garnished them with fresh basil. I was measuring out the quinoa, absorbed in my work, when a soft voice drifted towards me from across the room.

"I really like when you cook for me," Phil said, in a little-boy voice that tugged my heart.

I set down the bag of quinoa, wiped my hands on a towel, and walked over to Phil. He was looking up at me, face soft and completely relaxed. I was surprised by the tears I suddenly felt coming into my eyes.

"Really? That's so sweet. Why?"

"It makes me feel loved." His voice was so quiet, and he barely mouthed the words. He

seemed so tired, and his lips barely moved apart.

I kissed him lightly on his forehead. He took my hand, held it for a moment, and then let it drop. He turned away, pulled a blanket over his head.

It's the last thing I remember him saying to me. The very last thing.

The Night of April 9-10, 2010

When going over it in my head

again and again, I calculate

that it happened right then,

as I bit into the warm cookie

handed to me by the desk clerk

at the Berkeley Marina Hotel

When my plane landed in Oakland, I tried to text Phil. I hoped he was feeling better.

However, my phone was dead, which was strange, because it had been fully charged when I'd gotten on the plane.

I headed for BART, stopping in downtown Berkeley to meet a friend for lunch, and then headed over to my hotel, the Berkeley Marina Marriott. I got there at about 3 PM.

When I checked in, I was pleasantly surprised to be handed a chocolate chip cookie by

the desk clerk.

“Welcome to the Berkeley Marina Marriott,” the woman beamed at me.

It was no ordinary cookie. It was warm, and wrapped in a paper, and the chocolate chips were deliciously gooey.

It was so good that I ate it on the spot, and asked shyly for another one, which I also devoured.

Jason didn't want one.

After I checked into my room, which had a nice view of the Bay Bridge, I charged my phone, and tried to call and text Phil again.

No answer. Fucking asshole, I thought. Ignoring me.

And so, after a while, I went to UC Berkeley to check into the Western Wilderness Conference at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Student Union Center. At one point in the late afternoon, I stepped out onto a fifth-floor balcony, just in time to see the fog clear across the Bay, and watched as the Golden Gate Bridge emerged.

I didn't know it then, but the Golden Gate Bridge is one of the most popular places for people to commit suicide in the entire country, maybe even the world.

In fact, I recently found a whole book dedicated to that subject: the high incidence of suicides on the Golden Gate Bridge, including interviews with some of the few suicide

survivors.

And that afternoon, the sun was shimmering off the suspension cables, and the bridge glowed its famous rusty red, and I felt a special kind of serenity and calm. I stared at the view for a while, transfixed.

In the evening, Jason and I met my brother John, two years older than me, and his girlfriend Kathleen, my age, who live in Oakland, and we had a great time, eating pizza and drinking beers at a pub on University Avenue.

I returned to my room with Jason at around midnight. I was tired, and felt uneasy about not being able to contact Phil, and a bit angry that he was ignoring me, and wondered if he had somehow found out that I was with Jason, and was trying to punish me.

I knew that Phil would never believe that I wasn't planning to have sex with Jason, even though we had been involved briefly a few years back in a romantic fling that had ended with me deciding that Jason and I were better off as friends.

I was beginning to regret having Jason there that night, even if he was in his own bed.

I managed to fall asleep, but it turned out to be a horrible night.

I had a series of three connected dreams, each one waking me up in dread and anxiety.

In the first dream, I saw Phil walking away from me into a dark landscape. It appeared to be a hilly, desert area and it was a moonless night. I called out to him, but he didn't hear me, and kept walking away, slowly, his back to me. I felt angry at him for ignoring me,

and wondered why he was leaving me like that.

I was so upset by that dream that when I woke up, it was hard to get back to sleep, but I finally did, and had a second, even worse dream.

I know it sounds unbelievable, but in that second dream, I was back in that dark landscape, and a group of people I didn't know emerged to talk to me as I stood there and wondered where Phil had gone, and why he had left. There were no actual words, but they conveyed to me that Phil had eloped with another woman, that he had left me, but that they were going to bring him back.

I remember feeling extremely upset and confused. Why would Phil leave me for someone else? Where was this dark place he'd one off to without me, and most of all, why would these strangers be "bringing him back? Back from what?

After all, Phil and I were planning to get married.

We were planning to go to Las Vegas soon, and he told me he had already been looking at wedding rings, even though I'd have to pay for them, since he didn't have any money, and I had told him that was fine with me.

I had told him that I wanted to get rings made out of Navajo silver, and he said he would look into it.

I woke up sweating and crying after that dream, completely panicked. I looked at my phone. 3:23 AM. I tried to call Phil, over and over again, and texted him at least ten

times. That dream had freaked me out, and pissed me off, and I needed to talk to Phil.

No answer. No returned texts.

I don't know how, but after pacing in the room for a while, trying not to wake Jason up, and then watching Animal Planet on TV with the sound turned down low, I dozed off again.

In the third dream, Phil had returned! We were still in the hilly landscape, and he was over a rise, with some distance between us. He was with a group of people, some of the same ones who had communicated with me about Phil eloping with someone else and going off into the darkness.

“Hey Homie, I'm over here,” he waved. He seemed.....embarrassed. Like he was embarrassed – not sorry or sad – to be there, separated from me like that. It felt like he was ashamed that I had stumble onto his secret. “Come on over here,” he called to me.

But he was sitting with other people, who I didn't know, and he was married to someone else now.

“I can't come over there,” I replied. “You're married to someone else!”

The night faded into dawn.

I woke up, and sat up fast, steeped in a horrible panic. It felt like my spinal column had been electrified.

No answer to my frantic calls, no replies to my agitated texts.

How was I going to get through the day? How was I going to keep it together to give my lecture that night?

All I wanted to do was go home and find out what the fuck was going on.

I didn't tell Jason any of this, although I did tell him I'd had bad dreams all night and not gotten much sleep.

I managed to get to the conference, and although it bothered me all day, I compartmentalized those insane dreams.

I managed to mingle with my publisher, and the others on my panel, and managed to give my part of the lecture, and the reception hall was full, and the audience clapped after we were done.

I managed to smile for photographs.

I managed to say great things about the desert, and I showed people pictures of the dayglo yellow, pink, and orange wildflowers blooming in the Valley of Fire and in Death Valley that I'd just taken the previous week on a trip out there with Phil.

Fuck Phil, I thought, if he didn't want to talk to me. He could just fuck off, and when I got home, I'd kick him out of my house. I hated myself for having been so loving towards him the day before I'd left, now that I was certain he was cheating on me, thanks to those dreams.

He must be planning to break up with me again, I thought, and he'd waited until I left town for the weekend to do it.

I hoped the dogs were okay.

Spring, 2010 / End of the World Food

"A storage bin in the corner of a pueblo ruin would have been used to store a readily available supply of corn used to prepare meals. Storage bins like this would have held a few days' worth of corn, which could be ground into a corn meal and used to make a variety of dishes" – from "Images of America: Nevada's Lost City"

Just a few weeks before Phil died, I came home from work one day, and the kitchen counter was filled with bags of groceries from Clark's, an expensive organic market in Rancho Mirage.

Phil came out of the bedroom, and handed me my credit card. "Homie! Look what I got," he beamed.

"What is all this?" Cans and cans of Amy's soup, \$3 each. And much, much more, mostly food in cans and jars.

"This is our supply of food, to prepare for 2012. You can never be too ready for what's coming," Phil said. I pulled the receipt out of a bag. The total was \$897.

"What the FUCK!?! You spent \$897? With MY CARD?" I threw a can of soup against the wall, but not too hard.

"I wanted to get everything organic, because when we're living on this stuff, we need all the good nutrition we can get." Phil said, putting cans into the cupboard.

"This is INSANE! This 2012 stuff is ridiculous!" I crumbled onto the couch.

"Yeah, and I would've gotten more, but your card maxed out at \$900 so I had to put some stuff back."

There was nothing I could say.

"Anyway, too late now," he smirked. "Groceries aren't returnable."

I buried my head in my hands.

I didn't want to say anything else to Phil, because he would probably start lecturing me

and telling me how stupid I was to not see the signs of the end of civilization that were everywhere. He'd talk about the chem-trails in the sky, or the FEMA camps that Obama was building for when society fell apart, or the banking collapse that the Rothschilds were negotiating. All of this, Phil learned on the Internet. About what was coming: the end of the world, in 2012.

I was tired from a long day of work, and I wanted to fire up the hot tub and go lay out in the sun for a while.

"You're making dinner," I said. "And bring me a beer. I'll be out by the pool."

Before I went out, I hid my credit card and wallet under the mattress on my bed, and made a mental note to myself to never leave them laying around the house where Phil could find them.

I wasn't too surprised by what he'd done. I'd gone through things like this with Tarah, back when she'd been a teenager.

Once, when she was 16, Tarah actually hid my keys – car key, house key, work keys – deep in her closet, because I'd been planning to take her on a camping trip one weekend that she had adamantly not wanted to go on. I'd spent an entire day looking for those

keys, which I didn't find for months, and spent more than \$300 on a locksmith to come out and make new keys for me.

Tarah had also gone on a few online shopping sprees with my credit card, unbeknownst to me, until I saw the bills and chewed her out.

I guess that as the result of having been a single parent, I was used to things like this. I was used to being the head of the household, to these types of random teenage/ young adult shenanigans at my expense, but managed to always take things back into my control, no matter what was thrown at me. And Tarah seemed to understand, and she'd grown out of it.

I guess that I decided to be lenient and forgiving with Phil, because I knew that he meant well, and had my best interests in mind, even if his tastes did cost me a lot of money, and sometimes seemed to be out on the fringe. I knew he meant well.

From now on, we were going to be on a cash-basis, only, and I resolved inwardly to put Phil on a budget.

And so, that day when Phil brought home all of that expensive end-of-the-world food, I stepped outside, avoiding the sharp fronds of the palm tree by the pool; the sun was just

rimming the ridgeline of the San Jacinto Mountains to the west.

One time, I'd accidentally severed a piece of cartilage in my ear while trimming that very palm tree, and ended up having to get 10 stitches and a tetanus shot, all from one razor sharp frond tooth. So much for the innocence of palm trees, I thought to myself, and wondered why people planted them for decoration in the first place. They were awful, the way they scratched against my house and dropped their tiny, hard black fruit into the pool, and stained the concrete patio.

Once I got into the hot tub, I started to forget about the soup.

I resolved to talk to him about it on my spring break, when I had the energy to deal with it. Until then, I wouldn't bring it up again.

"Phil!" I yelled.

He stuck his head out the back sliding door. "Yeah?"

"I love you, Homie."

"I love you, too. Dinner is on the stove!"

“Homie” is what we always called each other. Phil started the tradition, and it came right out of his hip-hop lifestyle and generation, and I thought it was pretty cool.

Sometimes he called me “Home-Slice,” which I especially loved.

I still can’t eat a sandwich without thinking of Phil.

April 11, 2010

I calculate, and estimate

as I go over it again and again

that it may have happened

as I was resting my head

at the Berkeley Marina Hotel.

Here’s how I found out about Phil’s suicide. Two days after he died.

I returned home from Berkeley on Sunday afternoon, April 11.

I checked out of the Berkeley Marina Hotel early, and booked an earlier flight out of Oakland than the one I'd been planning to take.

I gave Jason a quick hug and told him he could stay at the room until checkout time if he liked, and wished him a good drive back to Ashland.

I think Jason was kind of pissed. We'd been planning to go out to breakfast that morning, because he wanted to talk to me about the new screenplay he was writing, and I was bailing on him.

He didn't hug me back, and he didn't say goodbye, and I thought I heard him mutter "fucking bitch" as I closed the door behind me, and rushed to meet my taxi ride to the airport.

I don't remember the flight.

I do remember stopping in Redlands for gas, on the way home from Ontario Airport, and looking forward to getting home so I could resolve my nagging anxiety about the situation with Phil

Where was he? Why was he still not answering my calls or texts?

I bought a bag of pretzels at the gas station, and coffee, and tried to assure myself I was over-reacting.

As I passed the San Timoteo Road exit near Calimesa, my attention was drawn towards the Badlands. It was sunny and the light played magnificently across the tablelands, and I noticed several red-tail hawks soaring above the area. Purple lupine wildflowers graced the view, and the Badlands looked especially pretty, shimmering with a surreal and lonely energy.

45 minutes later, I was home. The dogs came running out to meet me. They were low on food, and their water bowl was almost empty.

Phil's car wasn't in the garage. I decided that he must have gone to his mom's for the weekend, and I was both relieved and even more irritated at him than ever for not returning the many calls I'd made during the weekend to him, and wondered why he hadn't at least sent me a text to let me know what was going on with him.

It was the least he could do. Asshole.

I looked into my rearview mirror, and I saw the neighbors across the street, a 50-

something, overweight couple, standing in their driveway, next to their new Lexus SUV, staring in my direction. Arms folded across their chests.

For once, they weren't flipping me off, or yelling obscenities, which was unusual, because they were always harassing me whenever I was home alone without Phil, over things like my barking dogs or my garbage cans being out of place or my house looking like Tortilla Flat. They were the local neighborhood watch leaders, and they were mean.

But that day, they didn't say a thing.

I also saw my next door neighbor standing in her driveway, looking at me, a worried look on her face. I waved hello, and she didn't wave back, which was also strange, because she was usually very nice.

I pulled into the garage, and closed the door behind me, and less than five minutes later, I heard a knock on the door.

It was the Palm Desert Police. Not just one, but a group of them. They asked if they could come in, and I said yes.

But they weren't the ones who told me that Phil was dead.

Instead, they acted all friendly and nice, and asked if I was okay.

I told them I was, and wondered why.

They told me that had been worried about me, because they'd been trying to find me for the past two days.

They said they were glad to see that I was okay.

And when I asked them why, they just smiled, and asked me if I knew someone named Philip Helland.

I thought then that maybe he was in trouble for doing something stupid, like selling drugs. That he was in jail. That I'd probably be the one to bail his stupid ass out.

I felt angry at Phil then, because it was obvious that he had been hiding something serious from me.

I asked the police if he was in trouble, and one of the officers smiled again and cleared his throat and handed me a card and told me to call the number on it and talk to the

Cabazon Police Office instead.

They left, one of them commenting on the way out that he liked my mountain bike.

So I called the Cabazon Police, and asked about Phil, and then I was talking to the Coroner, who told me there had been a gun accident, and I immediately thought that Phil had gotten shot in the leg.

Suicide never occurred to me.

In fact, when I asked if Phil was okay, and there was no answer on the other end, and then, in a panic, asked the impossible – was he DEAD? – The coroner assured me it had been no accident.

I thought he was lying. I thought he was wrong.

Phil had killed himself. With a shotgun. Two days before. In the afternoon. In the Badlands.

I was alone at my house, and I didn't know what to do, so I started calling people.

I called my daughter, who said she was sorry it had happened. “I know you loved him, Mom.”

I called my brother, who said, “Well, you must have done something to upset him.”

I don’t remember who else I called, but I do remember crying so hard that I was doubled over onto the tile floor, curled into a little ball, and that I rocked back and forth for a long time.

The dogs hovered over me for awhile, whimpering, then pawing at me and licking me, and they finally curled up on the floor beside me, one on each side.

The red Western Wilderness book bag I’d brought home for Phil, full of flyers and stickers and environmental activist handouts and information, and even an organic farmer listing from northern California, stuff that I thought he’d like, sat on the couch, untouched.

And then, after a few hours, Phil’s friend Jorge showed up at my house, and he wrestled the phone from my fingers and held me tight and all I wanted to do was go lay down in Phil’s bed and put my face into his pillows, which smelled like him, and Jorge said he was going to stay with me for the night, that I couldn’t be alone.

Jorge said that Phil's mom, Linda, and three brothers, who I'd only briefly met a few times wanted me to help them plan the funeral, and that he would take me to their house in Moreno Valley the next day, and not to worry, that they didn't blame me for anything.

"The family wants you to come to their house," Jorge said. "They told me to tell you.

That, and they wanted me to bring his things back to them.

Hallucinations

If you could call me one more time

I'd tell you I'm looking at a raven sky

I'd say the crows are holding down palm trees

though you once beat them all away.

Phil had been obsessed with birds. With the chem-trails in the sky overhead. Day after day, he'd say, the world is going to end, and we're all going to be shuffled off to FEMA camps.

He would sit outside at our home in the desert, and watch the sky, so he could keep track of how many birds he saw. He thought he could determine how much poison was being

put into the sky by how many birds were, or weren't, flying overhead or perched in palm trees and the Palo Verde and bougainvillea, singing their migratory bird songs.

Phil wasn't a birder, and he didn't know very many of the bird's scientific or common names, and that didn't matter anyway. But he was very, very interested in all matters related to desert conservation and government conspiracies, and most of all, end of the world/2012 theories. He spent a great deal of time on the Internet, reading about these things, and watching alternative news stories, and he would pass all kinds of oddball information on to me.

"Did you know about all those solar panels the feds are going to start building out in the desert?" he'd ask.

"No," I'd answer, not really listening, just hearing the sound of his sexy voice, and caring only about that any way.

"The federal government is pimping out our public desert lands to corrupt, multinational corporations to build these huge-ass wind and solar farms, and I've been trying to learn as much as I can about it, and one of the biggest things wrong with them is that they're going to slaughter birds. Big birds, like eagles and condors, because they think those huge fields of solar panels are water, and when they try to land on them, they get instantly fried."

“Wow. That sounds kind of outrageous. Are you sure?” Only a small part of my cared, I have to admit, and I hadn’t heard about any of this before, and it didn’t seem possible, really.

But the truth is, I didn’t care about what Phil talked about.

I cared about the size of his cock, the way he felt hard and young and electric and wide inside of me. I cared about the way he would always be waiting for me when I got home from work, sitting in my antique rocking chair, reading a book or with my laptop folded open in his crotch. I cared about the way his long arms wrapped around me in long hugs.

And when he talked, his voice sounded like sex. Like smart sex, which it was. Very smart sex.

John, didn’t approve.

“So you’ve got a young lover. What the fuck. What the hell are you doing? Is he doing drugs? Is he just using you for your money? Does he have a job? Have you lost your mind?”

John, a highly organized person who works in San Francisco as an investment banker, only met Phil one time, for about 15 minutes, and they had talked about their interest in conspiracy theories. It was the only thing they had in common.

When Phil left the room to use the bathroom, John had turned to me and asked me straight up, “Why are you with this kid?”

Kathleen had quickly interrupted, coming to my defense. “I think he’s smart, John, and really cute. So what if he’s younger? If she’s happy with him, does it matter?”

A month after Phil died, John came down to the Coachella Valley for a visit, because it was our parents’ 50th anniversary wedding celebration, which he and Kathleen had coordinated and were hosting.

After the party, where he got very drunk on Stella Artois, John came to my house with Kathleen. He confronted me about Phil. “How the hell did you get into that mess? What were you doing with a guy who was that nuts, who would kill himself?” His voice escalated with every word, and he pointed his finger at me.

That was like asking a bird why it flies. Or how it flies.

Kathleen, a calm person, pulled him back. “Leave her alone, John.”

I didn’t know what to say. I started crying. They left.

I found out later that Kathleen, at age 22, had lost her mother to suicide. But she didn’t want to talk about it with me.

Why did Phil kill himself?

What had happened to Kathleen’s mom?

I am certain that birds didn’t know the answers to these kinds of questions.

Did Phil?

April 7, 2010 / Lies

It's kind of like guessing

the time of my daughter's conception

I can come close

but I'll never know for sure

I was in the kitchen, washing dishes. It was a beautiful, orange-blossom-scented morning.

All three of my orange trees were in full bloom.

Phil stepped outside to make a phone call to his mom.

He always wanted privacy when he talked on the phone.

As if I cared.

But I soon heard his voice, drifting in from where he was standing out by the pool, and

although I didn't want to listen in, I did.

I listened to everything he said, because everything he said was a fucking lie, and it blew

my mind. It wasn't just a small lie, he was fabricating an entire story of make-believe for

his mom.

He was telling his mom that he was living on an organic farm near the town of Escondido, near San Diego, and that his job was picking avocados. He told her that he really liked the work, that he was sorry he hadn't called her for a few months, but he'd been living down there at the farm, staying with some other workers in a bunkhouse, and he'd made a lot of good friends. He said he was making great money, and that he was happy there.

What the fuck?

I could also hear his mom's voice, and she sounded excited for Phil, and asked lots of questions about the farm that Phil had creative answers for.

I wondered if my daughter lied to me about her life like that.

I wondered why Phil had to lie at all, why he couldn't tell her the truth about where he was.

It creeped me out, to be honest, and when Phil came in the house, I confronted him.

“Why the hell do you have to lie like that? Why? What's the point?”

Phil didn't answer, but just stood there and looked down at the floor. Then he walked into his room and shut the door.

I didn't bring it up again.

Our Little Secret

And the moment of your death

is much more of a pressing issue

it's a birth that never delivers

it's a labor that never ends

Phil and I mostly kept our relationship a secret.

That was his idea, not mine. I didn't care when friends of mine, out in public at a poetry reading or art gallery opening, made snide remarks about his age ("Is he even old enough to drink?") or looked at me sideways with a knowing chuckle.

But it bothered him. Not so much because of the obvious age difference, but more because Phil was an extremely private person, and he didn't easily disclose personal things.

Phil was 22 and I was 44, when we first met in the summer of 2008.

We broke up once, and I kicked him out of my house, but we never went more than a day

without talking to each other, and we stayed friends, and then got back together again.

We met at the Monday night open microphone poetry reading at Back to the Grind, an independent coffee shop in downtown Riverside. That was when I was just starting to step out again after years focused on raising Tarah and building my college teaching and writing career.

At the time I met Phil, I was in a year-old relationship with a poet named Jeff, also in his 40's, who lived in Riverside, but was secretly in love with his young niece's best friend, who also happened to be the family babysitter, and was only 18 years old. It was very tangled, and it made me feel sad. And so, when I met Phil, it was refreshing and fun to start doing things with him, instead.

Phil admired me, and he listened to my complaints about the situation with Jeff, and Phil made me feel valued and important, and gradually, I started spending more time with him and less time with Jeff, and it felt good.

Phil and I began as friends, going on hikes in the desert.

Turns out we had both discovered hiking as teenagers, on small mountains behind our family homes. His family home was in the Box Springs Mountains in Moreno Valley; my

childhood home had been near a craggy peak known as Catholic Hill in the Mojave. Both of us had been instantly enamored of that rush you get when you reach a peak, all by yourself, and can look down on everything from your normal day to day life, the houses like tiny tinker box toys; the streets and cars, just playthings.

It was our first, instant and most enduring bond, that connection. And so we hiked.

We hiked to Forest Falls.

We hiked to the Deep Creek Hot Springs.

We hiked far up Whitewater Canyon.

We hiked Ryan Peak in Joshua Tree Park.

We hiked to the top of Mt. San Jacinto, after riding partway up on the tram.

We hiked in the Indian Canyons, we hiked to Pushwalla Palms, and we hiked to Horsethief Creek.

Months later, things took a romantic turn.

The first night we really touched was at the Desert Studies Center in the East Mojave, on ZZYZX Road.

I was there to teach a weekend writing workshop about desert conservation stories, and Phil had wanted to go along with me.

On the first night we hugged and snuggled as a vicious Santa Ana wind ripped through the desert, and in the morning, we learned a huge fire was engulfing Malibu, fueled by the hot, dry winds.

I was surprised at first by his affections, by his pursuit, thinking he was humoring me. But he was not.

In my mind, I was over the hill, old enough to be his mother.

“I don’t care about age,” he said. “I’m most interested in compatibility, and to be honest, I feel older than you. I’m sort of like your bodyguard,” he chuckled. “You’re always sticking your neck out, exposing yourself to risky situations, and you don’t see the bad side of people when you should.”

It was true. Others had been telling me that my whole life.

I was grateful to have Phil in my life, looking out for me.

He said he never told his family or friends that we were lovers, or that we lived together.

He said they would never get it. He made me swear not to tell my family, either. He said my father and three brothers, in particular, would make fun of him.

But of course, Tarah knew.

“Really, mom? Is this for real?” she asked.

“Yes. Phil is a lot more mature than a lot of guys my age,” I assured her. And in many ways, he was. I didn’t hesitate to let him move in with me, never cared that this was the first time he’d ever lived away from his parents’ home.

I worked, and Phil took care of the house. He shopped, he cooked, he cleaned, and he made sure the pool pump and filter were working, he did laundry, and when I came home from work, he was usually sitting in my antique rocking chair in the living room.

It seemed too good to be true, although I had my insecurities.

For example, one night we drank some wine, and Phil, a little giddy, suddenly asked me, "Um, if we get married, does that make me Tarah's step-father?"

"I guess so, but only if you want to be," I had replied.

We both laughed.

I asked Phil one time if he thought I was hot.

He said, "Yeah, and when you were my age, you were extra hot. An extra-spicy enchilada."

And, when I pressed him one night after we'd had too much wine, he said he was still attracted to girls his own age.

And although we had a fantastic sex life, he never slept in bed with me after we had sex.

"Nothing personal, Homie. I just can't sleep with anyone else in bed with me." He would kiss me gently on the forehead, tuck me in, and then retire to the air mattress he'd placed on the floor of my daughter's childhood room.

When he moved in, he spent an entire day cleaning out Tarah's room, claiming it as his now that Tarah was out of the house. It was the best room in the house, he said, and he liked the way the light beamed in with a healing vibration.

Tarah, of course, was angry. "Where the hell am I supposed to go when I come to visit?" she asked. "Mom, how could you let him take my room?"

"What do you want me to do? You've left home, after all." I never told my daughter, but deep down inside, it bothered me, too, that he'd claimed her room so quickly after she'd moved out to live with Alex, but I wanted Phil to be happy, and I sure as hell didn't want to live alone.

When we had sex, it was always in my big bedroom, in my bed, in my room, with the sliding glass door that overlooked the backyard pool.

And Phil would go to his own room afterward.

It kind of bothered me, and I would lie there, trying to go to sleep, a little sad that he always closed the door in his room, shutting me out, but I kept hoping he would change, and start to feel more comfortable sleeping in the same bed as me.

It was ironic as hell, because in all of my past relationships, I was always the one who left the bed after sex, leaving boyfriends and lovers to snore themselves out while I went to sleep on the couch, wanting to be alone to process my thoughts in silence and peace.

I'd never before slept with a guy who turned the tables on me like that.

That's how Phil was. He was different.

Yellow butterflies

cottonwood fluff, deep water

burial at noon

April 12, 2010 / "Who was Phil?"

Dear Phil: I went to a meeting with your mom and brothers and Jorge at the Harvest Christian Church in Riverside, because they invited me and your friend Jorge to help plan your funeral. It was so weird. I could FEEL you standing over my shoulder the whole time, and you were so PISSED. I know, I heard what you said, that you were a hologram, a light beam, and that's how you want to be remembered, and that all of the Christian Fundamental shit is SO not your thing. I couldn't say that stuff for you, Phil, because I know they would think I was crazy, they'd never understand the kinds of things

we talked about, the nicknames I had for you. I DID tell them that you loved holograms, and maybe we could do something with a hologram at your funeral, and I could tell the preacher thought I was nuts. "How about if you just bring some pictures, and we can do a digital slide show at the service?" Yes, I can do that. I have some great pictures of you in the desert. I'm sorry, Phil, so sorry. They aren't going to cremate you and you're not going to get buried in the desert. I know you would've liked your ceremony to be done somewhere like the Zen Monastery in the mountains. I know you hate Riverside, the Inland Empire, but I have no say over anything, because I'm not legally related to you. It's all about what your mom and brother Paul want to do. They're going to release white doves at your funeral, which is kind of cool, don't you think? They're going to bury you at the Olivewood Cemetery. I'm going to give them some of the pictures I have of you from our desert hikes and trips to do a slide show at the funeral.

"Who was Phil?"

"Do I know? Did I ever know? Will I ever know?"

The God Helmet

"The discoveries being made through the excavation of the Lost City Sites led to a thorough explanation of Moapa Valley and the surrounding area in order to discover what other archaeological secrets the area held." --from "Images of America: Nevada's

Lost City”

Phil loved to take drugs, especially hallucinogens, starting at the age of 14. He loved all things psychedelic, had at one time been a major raver, and his favorite book was *The Doors of Perception* by Aldous Huxley, which he'd often quote to impress people.

Phil told me about an exciting and recent neuro-technologic invention called the “God Helmet,” which, when worn, produces hallucinations for the wearer. So does San Pedro cactus, which he and Jorge had experimented with, along with Datura, also known as Jimson Weed. San Pedro cactus and Jimson Weed were easy to get, because they were both wild plants that grew profusely in the Box Springs Mountains.

He liked to smoke weed, and took pride in educating me in the difference between “cush” and “chronic,” marijuana, even though I didn't smoke pot anymore. But at the time he died, he was almost entirely drug-free. Or so he said.

“I'm trying to be healthy, Homie,” he'd say. “Cutting back on my consumption. I don't want to be some wake n' bake kind of dude.”

Still, Phil was trying to find a God Helmet online that he could buy. He was eager to try it out.

He also enjoyed watching every movie about hallucinogens and psychedelic drug he could find online, and sometimes I watched them with him. In particular, he was addicted to one YouTube channel called neurosoup.com, featuring shows like “The Time

I Took a Shamanic Colonic” and “Knowing Your Mushrooms Well Before You Dose.”

Not long after he died, I spent a long, rainy evening on the phone with his best friend, Bryan. It doesn't rain very often in the desert but it was raining that night, a heavy downpour.

"Do you think you were his first girlfriend?" Bryan nervously asked, laughing a little bit.

"I never saw him with any girls, until you."

I had no answer.

I didn't want to think about it.

I would never know, either, because Phil was dead, tucked into the deep ground at cemetery far away in Riverside in a thick casket, too far away, and I was sure it was pouring rain there, too.

"We took acid, you know, the last time I saw him," Bryan said. "In San Diego. Right after New Year's, when he came down to see me for a few days. We spent a whole night wandering around Balboa Park, hallucinating and laughing." It was horrible to learn things like this after Phil was dead, because that meant he had been lying to me about his drug use.

That might explain why he had been so mean to me on our recent trip to the Valley of Fire, and Lost City, and then Las Vegas, before heading to Death Valley and Tecopa Hot Springs on our way home.

Maybe he was having bad after-effects of that New Year's LSD trip. For all I know, maybe he was still taking it as much as he ever had – according to him, he'd once dropped acid at least three times a week – and hiding it from me. Maybe all of the hallucinogens were making his mind fall apart.

That might explain why he had walked out into the night to find a Walmart, leaving our \$29.95 room on the 23rd floor at Circus Circus, just so he could find the perfect pillow to sleep on, even though he had no idea where to find a Walmart on the Strip, and we had about 20 pillows in our hotel room, soft and downy.

That might explain why, three hours later, I'd gotten a disoriented phone call. "I'm walking in a strange part of town. I was on the bus, and I think I fell asleep. I don't know where I am, but I think I'm heading back to the hotel."

That might explain why he had slapped my cup of Starbucks coffee out of my hand the next day as we walked past the shooting fountains at the Bellagio and I asked why he'd been so weird the night before. "Bitch! Fuck you! It's none of your business."

Tourists had scattered away from us on the sidewalk, making room for the argument that followed, averting their eyes, not wanting to get involved, even though I wished someone would help me, rescue me from Phil.

I'd tried to cheer him up, avert an argument, and choking back tears. "How about we go swimming back at the hotel? Maybe get something to eat? Or, we could go to that merry-

go-round bar and have a beer, if you want.”

"You're fucking insane! I don't want to swim in some over-chlorinated pool and get cancer, and that bar is just full of carcinogens from cigarette smoke! I don't know why I came on this fucking trip with you."

"Fuck you, then," I'd yelled. "Fuck you, bastard! You are a fucking prick." I'd dodged into a gift shop and lost him, then trudged back to Circus Circus. He was nowhere in sight, and I let myself into the room.

Hours later, he returned, all full of remorseful hugs. "I'm sorry. A lot of things are bothering me, and I'll open up to you about it. I'm worried because so many of my friends at home don't have jobs and can't pay their bills. I'm also worried because my brother is having another bipolar episode. My mom's been texting me all morning and I'm trying to help."

What? He hadn't said anything about a bipolar brother before, but it seemed rude to ask questions, and I didn't press him. I didn't want to provoke him any more by asking the wrong thing.

Instead, we had sex, and even cuddled for a while as the sun went down and we ordered dinner from food service, turkey burgers with avocado and wheat buns that Phil insisted on. Healthy food. Of course.

I thought all was well again, but it was not. So much was going on that I didn't see, that I

could never have known, that now fuels my endless speculations about what the hell was so damned wrong with him.

Maybe his mind was leaking and pooling into something that resembled Jell-O and amniotic fluid and he didn't know how to swim through that, chlorine or not.

April 13, 2010

Dear Phil: This morning, I forgot to go teach my composition class at 11:00 AM, or even call in, and I was called into the dean's office. I told him what happened to you, and he was horrified, and told me I should take some time off work, but I told him I was fine, that it's better for me to keep working, and that I wouldn't forget to teach again. It was so weird. I've never just spaced out a class like that. Oh well. I had a great creative writing class tonight. I told them what happened to you, and some of them came up and gave me hugs after class. One student kind of looked at me, sort of curious, and asked me how I could just keep going, and I said, it's just what I do. And he stared at me for a minute, then told me I'm a very strong person. That he admires the hell out of me. I told him that coffee was getting me through.

Closed Casket

*"A worker left his hat at a sandstone outcropping that was used as a grinding surface" –
from "Images of America: Nevada's Lost City"*

Phil's family decided, on the advice of the Cabazon Coroner, to have a closed casket funeral. Phil's brother Paul, who was a year younger than Phil and just as cute, told me the family had designated him to pick up Phil's things from the coroner, and that no one ever saw the body, because it was covered in a shroud, and wasn't in very good shape.

The coroner told Paul, who later told me, that Phil didn't have much of a head left.

I guess not. I've never seen it up close, but suicide by shotgun to the head has to be pretty ugly.

I guess it meant I wouldn't be able to see that little crimp in his left ear again, the little crimp I used to gently kiss when I was feeling especially affectionate towards him. Phil told me that the crimp had formed while he was developing in utero, in his mother's womb. I didn't see it as a defect, like he did. I thought it was adorable, and charming.

I guess the little crimp didn't exist anymore. It had been shot to shit. It was gone. Obliterated.

According to Paul, he had taken charge of things following Phil's death, because Phil's father, a doctor named Don who lived in Fresno, was too busy. Don had long been divorced from Phil's mother Linda, and hadn't seen Phil in five years. The arrangements

were too much for Linda to handle.

I had no legal rights to visit Phil's body in the coroner's office in Cabazon, because we weren't married. It's not like I wanted to see anything gross, maybe just a hand, a foot, a toe, and most of all, his left ear crimp. Something to touch, just for a second, my own private way to say goodbye.

I wanted to see if he was still wearing the red Tibetan bead bracelet I'd given him when we first met, the one that matched mine, and if he was, I wanted to take it off and bring it home with me.

I wanted to say goodbye to the strange, hairy mole on his left arm, which had repulsed me when we first met, but that I'd gotten used to. I'd never see it again.

Because then, I would know. I would know for sure. Part of me believed that maybe Phil didn't really die. Maybe it was just a horrible dream.

Phil's body was at the Cabazon coroner's office for almost a week, and during that time, although Paul called and texted me several times to tell me he was on his way there to fill out paperwork, or arrange for Phil's car to be brought back to the family home, he never offered to take me along.

Phil's friend Wade, who I had never met before, and never saw again after the funeral, was there when Phil died. Phil vanished behind a big oak tree, saying he needed to take a piss, and then knelt down over something and looked like he was praying. By the time Wade noticed the butt of the gun between Phil's knees and barrel in his mouth, the shot was going off.

The kiss of death.

And I missed out. It was a kiss not meant for me.

I wanted to say goodbye to Phil's cock. One last goodbye, one last little kiss, for old time's sake. I think Phil would have liked that, a lot.

For weeks after he died, I texted a friend of mine, a schizophrenic artist who lives in downtown Riverside and is up at all hours when he is in a manic phase. I texted him, over and over again, because I didn't think he'd mind: "I worshipped Phil's cock. I really did." He never replied. I guess he didn't know what to say in reply.

And, still missing that final kiss from Phil, is it wrong to say that I felt instantly attracted to Paul? I hadn't met him before Phil died, but in the days following his suicide, I spent a

hell of a lot of time with Paul, driving to and from the funeral home, having beers, and talking endlessly about Phil, about the suicide, about our shock, about how sad we were, about how pissed we were, and most of all, speculating on why he had killed himself. Paul and I temporarily became best friends, and I was kind of hoping he would make a move on me, because it would have made me feel a lot closer to Phil, but he never did.

And I really think I would have felt better if I could have had sex with Paul, because it would have made me feel a little closer to Phil.

If I could have seen the body, or if at least, I could have gotten physical with his brother Paul, I know I'd have been be able to take this better.

And probably what got to me the most, at the funeral, when I arrived, and saw the closed casket, was that someone had placed Phil's favorite straw hiking hat, the one he always kept on a hook by the front door when he wasn't wearing it on a hike, on top of the casket.

It was a hat I had bought for him from the North Face hiking store, as a birthday present, soon after we had met.

I knew I would never see that hat again.

Stories like this, you can never get out of your head.

*When I go over and over it
again and again, in my head
as I do at 3 AM,
trying to go to sleep
I pretend for just a moment
that the cat is a reincarnation of you
the eyes, so much like yours
the aloof attitude, green eyes
the color of "fuck you bitch."*

April 15 / Compositions (Phil's Book)

Letters to Phil: I couldn't help going through your closet today and seeing what you left in there. I was so scared that I might find something in this journal, like maybe that I did something wrong to hurt you, or that you were in love with someone else and couldn't have her and that's why you killed yourself, or something else that would push me over

the edge. But I just had to know what you had been writing about, that last couple of months.

I don't want to have kids because it will rob me of the option of suicide

class schedule: very therapeutic

school: oscar wilde

address: the audience in this order

...along the line of least resistance. If caught in a tide, do not fight against the current directly, instead swim alongside it and gradually edge towards the shore. Learn from flowing water and how its flexible nature allows it to overcome obstacles with ease.

monday / subject

1 relax

2 affirm

3 inform

4 advise

5 conjure

6 suggest

Tuesday / subject

1 hypnosis

2 artists manifesta

3 current events

5 invoke

6 chant

Wednesday / subject

2 manifesta

6 repetition

Thursday / subject

1 muscle relaxation

6 subconscious implant

noise pollution / meme / warriors vs. worriers / Bryan B 522-0570 / alchemical catalysts /
calculated risks / sex, work, fun love, dreams, life, time / joy ride / fresh air/ good tunes /
self fulfilling prophecy / silent hike / windows 2012 / reverberate on / wilfully leaving the
garden of eden / fork in the road / no turning back / spring break / R & R I & I / some
saints say these two demons are a kind of spiritual siamese twin that can never be
separated

my drugs freak out everyone but me / we're great for each other

April 16, 2010 / Funeral

Fan palm oasis

everything stings, stabs or sticks

beauty killed you, too.

It was a day too beautiful for a funeral.

On the morning of Phil's funeral, I left Palm Desert, driving past Odom Hill, a huge and lonely sand dune with half its side ripped out; the sand was used to create landfill for Interstate 10. I drove past the windmills adjacent to Palm Springs, through vicious winds and past tiny Cabazon, where Phil's body had been kept shrouded in a refrigerator at the Coroner's office for the past week.

I drove through the Badlands on the Interstate 60 cutoff, and the hills were covered with their temporary springtime green grasses and flush with orange poppies.

I would've enjoyed exploring out there with Phil, had he still been alive.

Phil had sometimes taken me on hikes in the Badlands with him.

In a daze, on that surreal April day, I drove into downtown Riverside, past the Mission Inn, and onto University Avenue.

I stopped by Back to the Grind to pick up my friend, Wendy, who lived downtown, because she had offered to go with me to Phil's funeral.

She was crying, but I felt pretty calm.

She had never met Phil.

Not too many of my friends had.

The funeral home chapel was full, with Phil's family and friends, most of who I'd never met.

Turns out Phil was a very popular kind of guy, who had extensive connections in the Inland Empire hip hop community.

Everyone was in shock. I talked to a lot of his friends, and no one could believe what he'd done.

I looked for Phil's father. I was looking forward to meeting him.

I asked Paul where Phil's father was.

Paul said, "He's not coming."

I asked why.

Paul said, “He says he’s too stressed out, and too tired from working, to be here.” I could see the pain and anguish on Paul’s face. His lips tightened and his blue eyes flared.

Phil’s father lived in Fresno. He’d called me the night before, and asked me about Phil.

“What kind of person was he?” he’d asked, in a strange, nasally voice. “I never really knew him, as a man.”

Phil had told me that he hated his father, that he hadn’t seen or talked to him in three years. But I got to see a few pictures of his father as a young man, with Phil’s mother, holding Baby Phil.

And that’s another thing.

As soon as the slide show began during the funeral service, I lost it.

I was glad Wendy was with me. I buried my face into her fleshy shoulder and cried and cried.

A lot of the pictures came from me. Looking at those were the worst.

Phil, laughing with a bag of tortilla chips in my kitchen, on a day when we were horsing around with groceries. Looking very cute.

Phil, sitting in front of a petroglyph panel in the Valley of Fire, just days earlier, a bit of a scowl on his face.

Phil, looking out over the desert at Key's View in Joshua Tree, leaning on his walking stick. The one I'd bought for his birthday that year.

Phil and I, at Big Sur, nestled together in a hug, my head on his chest, both of us smiling.

A picture of Phil at Zabriskie Point, his hair standing straight up in a fierce wind, just two weeks before.

Phil, standing in front of a massive mirage at Silver Dry Lake, from miles away, just north of Baker, also taken just two weeks before. It had been the biggest, most realistic mirage either of us had seen, and we'd each been convinced that the dry lake really was full of water, and that we would stop and get our feet wet in it when we arrived.

The closer we'd gotten to Silver Dry Lake, the bigger the mirage had grown, and suddenly, just as we arrived at its edges, the mirage had disappeared.

And then the slide show was over, and the preacher said some words about Phil, and then some of Phil's friends got up and spoke, and so did I.

I read a poem about Phil that I had just written, called "Phenomenal Phil."

Everyone gathered outside, talking in the lovely sunshine. Almost like it was a party, or a family reunion.

I was a popular person that day, because everyone wanted to ask me why Phil had killed himself. Some of his friends told me they loved the poem I wrote for Phil, that I really described who he was.

I was so popular, in fact, that I saw Paul kind of glaring at me.

I remembered that Phil and Paul had not been on speaking terms recently, that last time they'd seen each other, they'd had a huge argument that resulted in Phil being banished from Linda's home. Phil always told me that Paul was a little bitch, a kiss ass who manipulated their mother into favoring himself over Phil. Probably because Paul was

studying to be a doctor, like their dad, and Phil wanted to be an organic farmer.

And then Paul and several of Phil's friends put on white gloves, and went into the funeral home, and came out carrying Phil's casket, and everyone grew quiet as they loaded it into the hearse.

And then we all drove over to the Olivewood Cemetery next to Interstate 91, and I sat up front with the family under a little tent next to the casket, out of the sun, and I felt sick and weak when they lowered the casket into the deep hole in the ground, and I looked away and saw poor Wendy, who had never met Phil, standing alone, off to the side, sobbing, but I couldn't cry.

And then, they released the doves, who flew away when their handler opened the lid to their little wooden box, and then came back when he whistled for them.

Everyone from the family got to pet the doves, except for me. Paul stood deliberately in my way, blocking me out from getting near the doves.

After the doves returned and were nestled back into their box, I heard Paul complaining to someone about how I was out of line. "Who does she think she is," he said bitterly, "sitting with the family? She's not one of us." I felt like screaming back at him, but chose

to ignore him instead.

After the services ended, Linda asked me to come by the house, to visit, and I told her I would. She wanted me to make a list of Phil's things, everything he had left at my house, so she would be able to keep track of everything. Some of his things were at her house, too, in his old bedroom, and she wanted everything to be organized, and so she'd know what I'd be bringing back to her. In particular, she wanted his hiking stick, and his boots, and all the things she couldn't find.

Phenomenal Phil

Dear Phil: I wrote a poem for you, and read it at your funeral:

Phil was phenomenal

Phil was a wild and scenic river in a dry land

Phil was a field of orange poppies, splashing across the face of the Mojave,

Phil was my friend

Phil connected the dots between people and brought all of us together

Phil was an organic farmer, Phil was cool, Phil was original

Phil was a lover, Phil was a rainbow, Phil was a light beam

Phil was a brother, Phil was a son, Phil was a genius, Phil was fun

Phil was brilliant. When he died, Phil was reading Kerouac, Jung, Huxley,

Phil was the moon, the planets, and the Milky Way

Phil was my heart

Phil was my confidante

Phil was a healer and caretaker and lover of humanity

Phil lived with me in the desert, Phil hiked with me, Phil

Phil was a rock star, Phil was a skateboarder, Phil was a man

Phil was playful, Phil comforted me, Phil cooked for me

Phil told me he loved me. I told Phil that I loved him, too.

Suicide Hotline

I calculate, again and again

as I drive through the Badlands

driving 80 mph in the fog

tires clinging to the edge

of death drop curves, guess

when it was that you did it

when it was that you died.

This is how it was, the first time I called the suicide hotline, right after Phil's funeral, and right before I went to Linda's house to gather with his family and friends.

After the funeral, I dropped Wendy off at Back to the Grind.

I didn't want her to see me cry. I told her to walk on home, that I'd be okay. I got in line to get a coffee to go.

"I just went to my boyfriend's funeral," I told the girl at the counter when she asked me how my day had been going. "I'm sorry to hear that, how did he die?" I told her the truth.

"Suicide," I said, a little too loudly.

I could feel people around me cringe, and the girl's cheeks turned red. "It's okay," I said. "Try not to feel bad. It's what he wanted to do." Her mouth dropped open, and I turned to go.

After that, I sat in my car for a long time, feeling like I was about to explode.

And suddenly, I started sobbing. As hard as I could. For a long time. My coffee grew cold.

I called a suicide hotline number, because suddenly, I couldn't bear to be alone. 1-800-

CALL-HELP was the number, I think, something like that. I found the number on my iPhone.

“Suicide Hotline,” I heard a man’s voice say blandly on the other end. “Is this an emergency call?”

“Yes,” I said, crying so hard I was almost incoherent, surprising myself with the projectile force of my words. “My boyfriend, he killed himself.”

“Are you in danger right now?” he asked calmly.

Long pause. Crying. “I don’t know,” I said. “It happened last week. I just can’t handle it,” I cried, so ashamed of sounding like such a little child as I listened to myself speak these words. “How am I going to get through this? How am I going to LIVE?”

“Are you suicidal right now?” the man asked, still as calm as a cool washcloth. Was I? I didn’t know.

“No,” I lied. “I just can’t handle all of this. That’s why I called. Can you tell me what to do? I don’t know how I’m going to survive this.” I hated myself for being like this.

Someone got into the car next to me, politely averting their eyes. “How do I deal with

this SUICIDE SHIT?”

A crow, landed in front of me on the asphalt and picked at a piece of garbage, oblivious.

I heard the man breathe deeply, and then he said, “You are going to get through this...one...minute...at a time. Do you hear me? Now breathe with me. One. Minute. At. A. Time. That is the only way how.”

I breathed deeply, blew my nose, and put the suicide hotline on speaker phone, and then I kept breathing and my crying slowed down and the man stayed with me until I was in control of myself, and I said I was okay, even though I was not, and told him I felt guilty because I hadn't been able to stop Phil from killing himself, and the man on the phone said it was okay, how could I have known he was going to kill himself? And then I thanked the man for helping me out.

“Remember this, because you are going to have some very hard times ahead of you,” he said. “One minute at a time. And call back again if you need to.”

I took a deep breath after I hung up, and headed towards Linda's house.

April 17, 2010 / Phone Call

Back to that strange conversation I had with Phil's best friend, Bryan, who lived in San Diego, not long after Phil died.

The night was full of desert thunderstorms and violent rain, oozing up into the Coachella Valley from the Gulf of Mexico far to the south, and as I lay in my quiet, lonely house, looking out the window while talking, I could see lightning flashing occasionally, illuminating the jagged palm trees outside against the black night.

We talked about all of the weird things had happened right before Phil died, that only now seemed weird to us, now that Phil had killed himself.

He'd told Bryan that he thought the streetlights were blinking when he drove under them, that he was convinced that he was under surveillance.

He'd told me three days before he died that he thought he'd picked up a demon out at Tecopa Hot Springs near Death Valley, where we'd recently spent a night, on our way back from Las Vegas. We'd come home that way so we could see all of the spring wildflowers. I didn't argue with him about the demon. Stranger things have happened in Tecopa and Death Valley. The Manson family, after all, staged their last stand out there.

There had also been an earthquake, a big one, on Easter Day, centered south of us in San Felipe, Mexico, right after Phil and I got back from our trip. I'd been in my backyard when it hit, and huge waves of water had sloshed out of the pool as I saw an entire wall

of my house warp outward and then back in on itself. Phil had been out in my car, picking up some green burritos for us at Del Taco, and hadn't felt a thing, even though Bryan had also felt it at his place in San Diego, and dishes had come down off his shelf.

Bryan told me that Mercury had gone into retrograde around the same time, and that maybe Phil had picked up on some strange cosmic energy that warped his mind.

I wasn't so sure, but I do remember how terrifying that earthquake had been, and how strange it was that I felt traumatized by it, while Phil hadn't even experienced it.

Bryan told me that Linda had found a note in Phil's car after it was towed from the Badlands back to her house. In the note, Phil said he was tired of all the lies.

"Do you know what the hell Phil was talking about?" Bryan asked.

"No," I lied.

And then, Bryan had to go, after saying he wanted to come hang out with me sometime soon, and I was alone with the strange desert rain.

I remembered how Phil and I run naked one hot summer night out into the hot rain during a desert thunderstorm, and jumped into the pool.

The light in the deep end of the pool burned out awhile back, and I hadn't replaced it.

Phil had turned off the breaker switch to the pool lights, so that we wouldn't accidentally get electrocuted by a shorted circuit, and said he would take care of replacing the light,

but he hadn't gotten around to it. It was very dark in the pool at night, and that's when I'd swim, because it was too hot outside to go in the water during the day.

I'd have to get used to swimming in the dark, by myself.

Phil's Suicide Cheat Sheet

--for everyone who wants to know, so I don't have to keep repeating myself

1. He did it with a borrowed shotgun
2. He never talked about killing himself before he did it. In fact, I remember when Marie Osmond's son had killed himself just a few months earlier, and Phil was saying how stupid that was.
3. He didn't do it at my house.
4. He did it under an old oak tree in the Badlands, a remote area on the border of Riverside County and San Bernardino County, near County Line Road.
5. At first, the Palm Desert Police thought it may have been a murder-suicide, with me as a murder victim, and they woke all my neighbors up at midnight to ask them if they knew where I was, and they broke into my house to look for me but of course I wasn't there. I was at the Berkeley Marina Hotel.
6. He didn't leave a note. I'm still looking for one.
7. I don't know why he did it. Your guess is as good as mine.

8. We went on a vacation together in the desert for spring break the week before he died, and I didn't notice anything strange about him, except that he seemed kind of tired and withdrawn, and that he picked a big fight with me in Las Vegas.
9. A few weeks before Phil died, I was talking shit about my ex-boyfriend Jeff's 20-something daughter, who I'd heard had tried to kill herself with aspirin for the fifth or sixth time. I remember saying to Phil, "people like her need to just do it and get it over with, or cut it out and quit fucking around – not to mention suicide by aspirin is really lame."
10. Phil was wearing shorts and flip-flop sandals when he killed himself.
11. Yes, I feel guilty as hell. Guilty, guilty, guilty and worse.
12. No, I didn't say anything that made him do it. I don't think so.
13. Believe it (please don't tell me you can't).

Metastasis

I calculate that you killed yourself

the moment that I bit into

the warm chocolate chip cookie

at the Berkeley Marina Hotel,

saw the Golden Gate Bridge

rise through the afternoon fog,

I remember the last time we had sex

how much I loved your green eyes

when you were angry with me,
the cookie from the desk clerk
it makes sense, it was a warrant
for your impending death.

Phil was obsessed with some very strange things.

“The birds, they’re killing all of the eagles and big birds that fly through there,” he had said one day to me after we had made love in my king-sized bed and we were just lying around, side by side, not touching. “Those solar panels. The birds think they are water.”

“Uh huh,” I’d responded absently, thinking instead how much I wished Phil would let me rest my head on his chest, but I knew better than to ask. “That’s really sad.”

“Yeah, It’s tragic,” he said, solemnly. “And do you know how they die?”

“How?”

“They are vaporized as soon as they fly over those solar panels. The heat gets them.”

I didn’t really believe it, and truth is, I didn’t give a shit. I laughed, to lighten the mood, wishing he’d just shut up and let me enjoy the glowing mood of our after-sex.

Phil, however, was dead serious. He was really concerned about how birds getting killed by the solar and wind panels that were starting to sprout across the desert, something he had not only seen for himself on our desert road trips and hikes, but had been extensively researching and reading about on the Internet.

“If the birds go, we go. Just like them. It’s an omen of the end. 2012.” It became a bit of a mantra with him, something that would play over and over again in my head after he was dead.

And it turned out that Phil was right, at least about the bird deaths. Not long after his suicide, I began to hear about all of the renewable energy projects being approved for construction across the Mojave Desert. Big solar and wind zones, on public desert lands, hundreds of thousands of acres, and lots of dead birds.

That, and Phil was also obsessed with a place called Lost City, in Nevada, next to a place called the Valley of Fire.

“Haven’t you heard of the Hopi prophecies?” he asked. “They’re all about the end of the world, and there’s supposed to be some lost petroglyphs out there, in the Valley of Fire and at Lost City. It’s an Anasazi ruin that was just discovered like 100 years ago.” He was adamant about it. “There’s supposed to be some secret knowledge for humanity, to save the world in 2012 so the world doesn’t end.”

Apparently, Lost City got buried in the waters of Lake Mead starting in the 1930s, but there's a museum out there with some of the artifacts that were saved.

There was also a huge salt mine in the side of a mountain, and Phil thought maybe we could go out there and explore.

He was obsessed with Lost City, and read everything he could find about it on the Internet.

He even ordered a book from Amazon, which was full of old photographs, and a disappointing lack of quality information, or research, called "Nevada's Lost City: Images of America." It was one of the series of popular picture books popping up everywhere on cities, counties and places that photographs find interesting.

I never read it, just looked at the photos.

That, and I took him there over my spring break, of course, although by the time we got there after a six hour drive, he was asleep, and didn't seem to care about Lost City anymore, and besides, the museum was closed and all he wanted to drive quickly through the Valley of Fire, which we couldn't see much of because it was getting dark. By then, he was pushing to get to Las Vegas. Once there, we checked in to Circus Circus, because I liked the revolving, merry-go-round bar there, and had fond memories of taking Tarah there when she was a teenager to see the trapeze show.

Part Two: Valley of Fire

Jihad

Me n' Andy drinking

Pabst Blue Ribbon

at Billiard's Bar

Highway 62, 29 Palms

Stater Bros. Strip Mall

May 29 2010,

my boyfriend eight weeks dead

suicide, shotgun to the head

for no reason apparent to me

other than that he misses

forests and rivers and green things

he says he can't wait to get home

he's done his four years

three tours of duty in Iraq

Afghanistan, he's 25, like you

he says, "Joshua trees

*grow between heaven's gates
And the gates of hell. I read it
In the Bible, in the Book of Matthew
They're not even fucking trees
And before I leave, I'm gonna
Take my AK47 and blast one apart
Just so I can say I did."*

*I'm on my first beer, he's on his ninth
and I tell him about the dog,
Tell him that you hit the dog
with a shovel and took her into the
desert and tied her up and left her
there to die, because you were
mad at me, that one day before you
killed yourself - and he laughed*

*he says, "Joshua trees
have bad vibes, they're a dark omen"
he sees Jihad flagellating, planting
IED's when the sun goes down*

*and he hears the call to fight.
“Don’t you get it? It’s fire season
on the Mojave, nothing to burn
but everything, everything to burn
and I’m glad your dog survived.”*

Support Groups and Suicide Junkies

*I’d tell you ours was no promised land
I’d say that I never wanted you after all*

In the days, weeks, months after Phil killed himself, I went to a series of grief support groups.

I went to the first group with Phil’s mom and one of his brothers, because they invited me. It was at a hospital in Corona, and I didn’t feel like talking, and I wondered why I was there at all, because there were several women who were getting a little obsessed, I thought, crying about people in their lives who had died a long time ago, like years ago, and I remember looking down on them for being so out of control. That, and it was way too far for me to drive.

Coincidentally, the week after Phil died, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention was having its first-ever meeting in Palm Desert. The first time they'd made an appearance in the Coachella Valley, in fact. And so, I went.

Great timing, Phil, I thought.

And I spoke, and I was eloquent, and people clapped when I was done, because I spoke like the college lecturer I was and talked about becoming a spokesperson against suicide, and the meeting leader invited me to be a keynote speaker at an upcoming AFSP workshop in the desert, and I said yes.

After that meeting, a woman turned to me, and said that both her teen-aged son and her ex-husband had killed themselves, more than five years ago, and at different times. "You poor thing," she said hugging me. "You are still in shock."

He son had been best friends with Sonny Bono's son at Palm Springs High, she said. Her son's suicide had been the trigger that drove Sonny's boy to his addiction with drugs, according to her.

About a month later, in mid-May, I decided to go to another grief workshop, in Palm Springs. This one was at the Desert Medical Center.

It was full of much older people, retirees. Everyone sat around a big table and took turns talking. It was very sad, because almost everyone there had lost a longtime marriage partner. They talked about things that blew my mind.

For example, one woman said that when her husband of 51 years passed away, she hadn't known how to put gas in the car, because her husband had always done it for her.

One man told a story that was both funny and sad. When his wife died, he had to learn how to cook for himself. One of the first things he had tried to cook was hard-boiled eggs, and he hadn't known that you needed to put water in the pot. He'd turned on the stove, set the eggs into a pan without water, put the lid on, and then next thing he knew, the eggs exploded all over his kitchen.

He was laughing, then crying, when he told this story, and I was also laughing and crying along with everyone else.

The general mood of that meeting was upbeat, and I could see that the group leader wanted to help everyone feel good, and to make people laugh as they shared the stories of their grief. Finally, it was my turn.

I took a deep breath, then told them what had happened with Phil. I could feel everyone gasp when I described how he had put the shotgun in his mouth and blown off a good part of the top of his head. I could feel them cringe when I told them that my family was very angry with me for what had happened, and that my brother, in particular, blamed me for being with someone who he said was insane and violent enough to do something stupid like kill themselves. I told them that I found out about Phil's suicide over the phone. While talked, some I saw people looked away. Some looked stunned. A few had

tears in their eyes, and one old woman cried openly. Even the cheery man who ran the group seemed to be at a loss for words after I was done.

I felt bad. I had ruined the mood, and knew I couldn't go back. My story was too much for those people. It was too much for me, and I didn't want to talk about it.

But when I left, a guy rushed out behind me. He wanted to talk to me.

"I'm so glad there's another suicide in here," he said. "My partner, Curtis Jones, just killed himself, too."

I really didn't want to know; all I wanted was to get the hell out of there and go slam down a few beers, but I listened politely just long enough to let him finish.

"You probably read about it in the paper or saw it on the news," he said.

I hadn't. It was too much for me and it made me feel angry that the guy had cornered me.

"He ran out into the freeway," the guy continued. "He ran out into the freeway, and a truck hit him and killed him instantly." I didn't give a shit.

"I have to go now," I said, and turned away. It was June.

I tried to go to two more grief support groups. Turns out there weren't a whole lot of suicide grief support groups anywhere closer than a two or three hour drive to places like San Diego or Los Angeles. I tried to go to some of the few groups I found a little closer to the desert.

One was in the town Murrietta, near Corona. I forced myself out of my grieving desire to stay home, curtains closed and buried in a pile of blankets in bed, something I was doing more and more of, and I drove all the way across the mountains to find it, and by the time I got over there it was dark, and I got lost, and drove around hours, as lost as I've ever been, and eventually I pulled off and gave up. That was in late August.

Another was in Riverside, and by the time I found that one online, it was October. I called the contact number for that group, another AFSP charter, while driving home from a long road trip to Furnace Creek in Death Valley, where I'd been teaching a weekend writing workshop. Coincidentally, most of that weekend workshop had been dominated by a woman who had talked and cried endlessly about her son's suicide, which was what she was in the workshop to write about.

It made me physically ill to hear about it, and I wanted more than anything to tell her to shut the fuck up, but I didn't, since I was getting paid \$800 to teach that workshop, which was sponsored not only by the Death Valley Historical Society but also Poets and Writers, so I choked down my bile and ignored my migraine headache, and got through it like a true professional.

I felt guilty about feeling so hateful towards that woman, but I couldn't help it. It was just too much for me to bear, to hear all of that.

And the contact number I found for that AFSP meeting in Riverside, which I had planned to attend on my way home, connected me to a woman who told me her teenaged son had hanged himself in his room in 1973.

As I drove past Razor Mountain, and Afton Canyon, and Calico Ghost Town, a distance of thirty miles, the woman went into a nonstop monologue, in great detail, about how she had been the one to find her son hanging from the rafters in the garage. For another thirty miles, from Barstow to Victorville, the woman described what it had been like to pull him down, and try to resuscitate him, and the bulge in his eyes, the knot at his throat. She went on and on, bombarding me with horror, as I continued to drive into a headwind, through Cajon Pass and down into the San Bernardino Valley, too shocked and stunned to hang up the phone or find a way to end the call.

By the time I got to Riverside, where I was scheduled to meet a representative from the California Legacy Series to do an interview about California desert literature, my phone battery had, thankfully, died, and I was so overwhelmed and upset that I drove straight on home.

I never made it to that meeting, and I never went to another grief support group again.

I also stopped telling people about Phil's suicide. I cut back on doing poetry readings, something I'd once enjoyed immensely, because every fucking time I read a poem about his suicide, some idiot would come up to me afterwards and start gushing about someone they knew who'd killed themselves, or worse, about their own suicide attempt.

Even if I didn't read a poem about Phil's suicide, people would still come up to me, and want to ask questions, because it seems everyone who knew me or knew about me knew that Phil had shot his brains out, and they were curious. They were tragedy whores. They couldn't help themselves. I didn't blame them.

I was a suicide magnet, and all because of Phil, and so, I stopped going to grief support groups. I stopped socializing. I started staying home alone.

It's not that I didn't want to get help. I just couldn't handle it.

June, 2010

*I'd tell you that I made a bit of extra cash
from selling your blue digeridoo.*

Linda called me frequently during the month of June, and every time, she asked me to bring his things back to her house.

I told her he hadn't left much, and it was true.

She said that Jorge had told her that he'd seen Phil's room, and that there had been many things in there.

I said that basically there were just a few clothes, and a few books, and a couple of things but nothing much.

She insisted that he'd had a room full of his things, because so many of his things were not at her house.

She wanted to know when I was going to bring his things back.

I told her I was busy working, and that it would be soon.

I'd been to Phil's grave a few times, without taking his stuff back, even though her house was right on the way, and when I got to the cemetery, which isn't very big, I was always surprised that it was so hard for me to find, and when I did find plot 222, where he's buried, I would always lie down on the grass on top of him.

The truth was, I couldn't face the thought of taking Phil's things back to his mom. I couldn't face the idea of packing his things up. It was way, way too much for me to even think of, and the last time I had called the suicide hotline the person on the other end told me to take care of myself, and if it was too much to handle, to take his stuff back, then the hell with it. I had to wait until I was ready to do it.

I just didn't know how to tell his mom.

When I was at her house after Phil's funeral, I noticed that she had his Nike shoes, the ones with the orange trim that he usually wore when we hiked, neatly lined up along with all of the other family members' shoes by the front door.

What a weird thing to do. It gave me the creeps.

I asked to go into his room while I was there, and she said okay.

I know it sounds cheap, and wrong, but I helped myself to a few of his things. A copy of *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse. A few music CD's. A small wooden massage tool. A zip lock baggie full of sage I'd collected in the desert months ago, and given to Phil. It pissed me off that he had stashed it there and not used it, and I figured I deserved it back, since I'd collected it in the first place.

I really, really wanted to take his straw hat, but I didn't dare. It would be too obvious.

I wanted to take more, but I could hear his mom calling out to me downstairs, inviting me to come and eat with everyone. And so, that was all I took. Stashed in my big purse.

July, 2010

I dive to the bottom

Of the deep end of the pool.

In July, things took a turn for the worse.

First of all, I got a call from Paul. He was angry, and his voice was harsh and loud.

“Okay, you bitch. It’s time to bring my brother’s things back! You’ve been stringing us along with two months and you’re never going to do it. My mom is a wreck about this,” he said, very menacingly. “She tried to go back to work, and they had to call an ambulance, because she started having chest pains and thought it was a heart attack.”

Linda was a psychiatric nurse who worked inpatient at Loma Linda Behavioral Medical Central.

I was stunned by his words and his tone. I started to cry. “I’m sorry about your mom. I’m sorry about Phil’s things. I’ve been too overwhelmed to bring them back,” I said, honestly.

“Fuck you, bitch. You just don’t want to bring his stuff home. How dare you treat my mom like this? She’s a grieving mother, and I’ve been reading about what you’ve been doing lately on your blog. You took a trip to Oregon, you don’t miss Phil at all, and you’re just full of crocodile tears.”

“That’s not true,” I sobbed. “I’m hurting like everyone else.”

“Bullshit!” he yelled. “Bring his stuff back NOW or I’m calling the police. Is that what you want me to do?”

“He didn’t even leave that much stuff here,” I said. “Believe me, really, just a few things!”

“You are a lying, fucking bitch! Jorge was there and he said there’s a room full of stuff. How dare you try to steal Phil’s things?” His voice was getting louder and louder. I could hear his mom screaming in the background, too.

“By the way, we’re hiring a private investigator to look into Phil’s supposed suicide,” he said, his voice taking on a much lower, and sinister tone. “You’ll be hearing from him soon.”

Something deep and angry snapped inside of me then. My mood changed.

“So, Paul,” I said. “Is this how you treated Phil? Maybe this is why he killed himself. Because you were always such an asshole to him.”

Paul hung up on me.

I felt a lot better then.

But then, Tarah had come over.

She was very drunk.

She didn't come over often, so I was happy to see her.

And then she sat next to me on the couch, and started to cry, and her snot ran all over me as she leaned against me and sobbed.

“Mommy, I'm so sad about Phil,” she cried. “I really feel so bad about what happened, and I'm sorry for you.”

I held her in my arms.

“It's okay, Tarah,” I said, even though I was lying, and wanted nothing more than for her to leave me alone.

“Do you think I did something that upset him?” she asked.

“Don't be ridiculous,” I said. “He was fucked up.”

“But mom, I think he had a crush on me.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? No, I don’t want to know. Please, shut up now. You’re delusional. You’re drunk.”

“Mommy, please don’t be mad at me.” She blew her nose on her shirt.

“Where’s Alex?” I asked. “I think you should call him to come pick you up. You’re too drunk to drive.”

She had Alex.

I didn’t have Phil.

I feel guilty saying it, but right then, just for an instant, I hated my daughter.

The Suicide Forest / Disambiguation

For most of the rest of the summer and into the fall, which in the desert is actually a continuation of the super-hot summer, I mostly stayed home, the air conditioner on full blast to insulate me from the extreme heat.

I called suicide hotlines frequently, different ones.

I looked at all of the suicide websites that Phil had bookmarked on my PC, and spent hours going through everything in the house and garage, looking for a suicide note.

I went to the beach for a day.

My only social contacts came when I went to Riverside every other Thursday night to teach a community writer's workshop in the basement of the downtown library, and always stayed out late, having drinks with friends afterwards at the Mission Inn or Lake Alice Restaurant, or sometimes coffee and dessert at Back to the Grind.

My writing workshop friends rallied around me. These were good friends. We'd been together as a writer's group for two years. They gave me hugs. They gave me cards. They gave me little gifts, and posted messages on my Facebook wall to cheer me up. And they all wrote amazing stories and poems.

Back home in the desert, I tried to write.

I posted poetry on my blog, mostly about Phil's suicide.

I listened to all of the music Phil had downloaded onto my PC. He had very good taste in music. There was Pink Floyd's entire album collection. The Beatles. Jimi Hendrix. The Doors. Mozart, John Coltrane, NWA and the Sex Pistols. And that's just the start.

I visited Jason in Ashland. He knew all about the suicide by then, mostly from reading about it on my blog, although we didn't talk about how it had happened while I'd spent the night at the Berkeley Marina Hotel. He was cool enough not to ask questions, but he listened whenever I talked about it.

I became addicted to the Internet, like Phil had been, and spent most of my time watching good shows like "Breaking Bad" and "Sons of Anarchy" and stupid shit like "Ice Road Truckers" and "Dateline," and every show on suicide that I could find on YouTube, along with every show I could find about murder and serial killers, and every show I could find about mental illness.

I learned that in Japan, there is actually a place known as the "Suicide Forest" where people go to die. It's a very popular place.

I also learned that in some cultures, suicide is sometimes an honorable thing to do. Kamikaze suicide.

Political protest suicide.

Mercy killing by euthanasia.

I learned that suicide was illegal.

I obsessed over every detail of every high profile suicide I heard about. Not that I wanted to, but I couldn't help it.

I started to read the Riverside County Coroner's report online every night, and the San Bernardino County Coroner's report, too, and scrolled through their archives to find Phil's suicide, but I never did find it. I wondered why it wasn't there, on either site.

Phil had killed himself in an area that was right on the border between Riverside and San Bernardino Counties, and it was possible that neither county could decide who would claim final jurisdiction over his site of death.

Apparently, Phil had killed himself right in the middle of no man's land.

And I also talked to the private investigator who was hired by Phil's family to investigate his death. I think they thought I might have been at fault, somehow.

I met with the private investigator at a Starbucks in Palm Desert, after he called to ask me to meet, and he asked me a lot of questions, and I asked him if I was a suspect in Phil's death.

"No," he said, penciling in some notes, looking down and avoiding my eyes.

The next time we met, he asked me about the dog.

I asked him what he wanted to know.

He said that Linda wanted to know why I hadn't told her that Phil had abused my dog. He had looked up the police report from 2009, when running a background check on Phil.

He'd discovered that I'd called the Palm Desert police when Shasta had been found, miles out in the desert near Thousand Palms Oasis, tied to a pole with one of the bungee cords I used for camping trips. Phil's footprints, from his orange-trimmed Nikes, were in the ground nearby.

That was when Phil and I had broken up, when I'd thrown him out of my house.

I told the private investigator that I hadn't told Linda, because I knew she wouldn't believe me. Besides, I added, Shasta was fine now, and I'd forgiven Phil, and that Shasta had still loved him, too.

The private investigator closed his notebook, and looked at me for a minute, then said he had to go.

I gave him a box of Phil's things to take to Phil's mom. Really, there wasn't much. But I did keep a few things, including his journals, and a few of his clothes, and his bed sheets and blanket. That's all.

I thought about buying a replacement hiking stick to give them, instead of the one Phil had actually used, the one I'd bought for him as a gift, but because they were so adamant about getting that fucking stick back, I gave them the real thing.

And then, Alex joined the Army and they moved to Washington State, and for the first time ever, I was alone. They weren't living just a few miles down the road from me, as they had for the last few years. Now, they were 1,300 miles away.

By then, it was early October, and the weather was beginning to turn, and the days were growing short again, and I was at the start of another fall semester of another school year.

Without Phil.

Just me, alone in that house, with only the dogs, reading and viewing everything I could find online about suicide.

And then, things really started falling apart.

I started falling apart, I should say.

November 13, 2010

Letters to Phil: It's my birthday, and I have a new boyfriend. I hope you don't mind. He's from Blythe. He's about the same age as me, and funny thing, he also has a daughter who's Tarah's age and a son and I sort of feel like their new mom, since Tarah moved away to Washington with Alex. Jesus is a medicine man, and Indian medicine man and I'm helping him and his family with their protests against all those solar and wind farms you used to talk about. Well, that's happening now, those things are starting to go in and it feels like the desert is going to die. It's really sad and it feels futuristic and unreal. Kind of like how you died like you did, without saying anything. My new boyfriend, Jesus, thinks that you didn't kill yourself, that you were killed by the cops, because you knew too much, and sometimes I think he's right. Wish you were here. But you're not. You know I wouldn't be with Jesus if you were still here, no way, you and I would be married by now.

When Rain Can Kill

It's the driest place in the world / come get wet with me over here

the agony of drought / the swagger of flash flood

day after day, no grass / all night long, every night

I hold the empty, bladed heart / let's get down with lawnmowers

my guitar is lonely in its case / I'm a music man, come into my arms

the sheer force of water / I'll love you with my favorite songs

my car begins to move / ain't no lack of love 'round here

the faces of my children rush by / come get wet with me

I know this is my time / see? the clouds are opening

time for rain, the dry wash / it's destiny, I will heal you

I am empty no more / look how white the sky is

the swagger of flash flood / the agony of drought

Mr. and Mrs. End of the World

We could start with this. We could start with rain, and we could start with the desert, and we could start with a vision of the end of the world, in the year 2010.

Just after a poetry reading in San Diego, where I've been the featured poet of the month for a long-running reading series, a man rushes up to me in the parking lot, in the cold

rain, while I'm getting into my car.

"I have to tell you something! It's important! I've seen the end of the world through my hand, and it's important for me to tell you about it!" I politely wait for him to finish, while rain flattens my hair and fogs my glasses up.

He tells me that he recently saw the end of the world flash through his hand. The man says he was a janitor at the Nevada Test site near Yucca Mountain, working in a bunker deep underground.

"I felt the world explode," he says, standing in the parking lot in the rain in the fast-fading afternoon winter light. "Then, there was an intense flash of light. I looked down at my hand, and it was invisible, except for the veins. I could see all of the veins in my hand standing out. I never knew my blood was so red."

Jesus, my new boyfriend, jumps out of the car, and waves his arms in front of the man.

"You have 99 demons attached to you, and I will now remove them for you. I'm a Chemehuevi-Azteca medicine man."

We are planning to drive that night out to the giant geoglyphs near the Colorado River

north of the tiny desert town of Blythe, where Jesus lives. We are planning to spend the night in the desert, and in the morning, we're going to pick up his daughter, Christine, who's 18.

Christine is going through a hard time, because her boyfriend just broke up with her, and she looks up to me as a mother, because her own mother is addicted to heroin and is never around to help her, and I almost feel like Christine is a daughter to me, especially since my own young adult daughter lives so far away now and I rarely see her.

I sit there, thinking about Christine, while the agitated man talks on and on, with Jesus waving his hands all around the man's body and head, removing demons from him.

"The day it happened, it was raining, just like this," I hear the man say. "I wasn't supposed to be down there underground when they nuked the mountain, but I was, because they forgot about me. I have to tell everyone about this! The world is going to end," he says.

I wait a long time until Jesus gets in the car, and he immediately pulled out his small meth pipe.

"Drive! Let's GO! Can't wait to get HIGH," he yelled. "That motherfucker is crazy."

In my rearview mirror, as I pull away, I can see the man, standing in the rain, staring down at his hand.

"Shit. The things I do for love. That one was for you, baby doll," he said. "That man was in love with you, and he just wanted to get close to you. But I took care of him."

He lights up his little pipe, and I can hear the tiny piece of crystal bubble to life as he pulls deep and sucks in the white smoke.

"But that guy has one thing right. It IS the end of the world. We're all going to die soon. And it's all going down in the desert! Just like he said!"

I've only known Jesus for a month, and we've been together that entire time, day and night. He says he has to stay with me or I'm going to die. He says that only he can save my life.

He tells me that I always have many demons hovering over me, no matter what he does, that I'm a full-time job for him, and that I would be dead quickly if he wasn't there, removing demons from me, and that to do this, I must continue to supply him with drugs, which I do.

Or, we can start here. It's 1962, and I'm about to be born, eight months in utero in my mother's womb.

My parents are very young. My dad is 25 and my mom is just 20. My brother John, a year and a half old, sleeps in the rumble seat in the far back of their tiny, rusty red, 1960 Volkswagen Bug.

It's October, 1962, and my parents are driving old, two-lane Route 66 through the California Desert between San Bernardino and Barstow. They, like the rest of Americans, believe that the world will very likely end tomorrow.

The Cuban Missile Crisis is at its height, and it's Sunday, my father's day off. He also has the following day off, so they've decided that they and my brother might be safer in Las Vegas, far out in the desert, should the Soviet Union nuke the United States on Monday, as they've threatened to do.

Years later, my mother tells me, "We didn't know then about Area 51. We didn't know about all of those nuclear tests and bombs out in the desert. We just thought it would be safer than being close to L.A."

I imagine my parents, my mother, so close to giving birth to me, and also so close to the world ending, back in October, 1962.

They drive very near to where Jesus and I drive tonight, on the shortest and coldest night of the year, across the California desert, to spend the night camping by the geoglyphs, which are the outlines of giant human figurines scraped away in the desert topsoil.

We're driving there because it's close to where Jesus was born and lives, and because, his family are the government designated guardians of the site. He's guaranteed me that we will be spiritually transformed if we stay out there on the winter solstice.

"We might even see Big Foot," he says, sucking on his clear glass pipe. "Descendants of the monsters that once roamed the earth. I saw him one night." The inside of the dark car briefly flickers with the sparking of his lighter, then goes dark again.

The geoglyphs are protected by a fence, and listed in the National Register of Historic Places. There are many similarities between the Blythe geoglyphs and the famed Nazca Lines in Peru.

On that night in 1962, when the world is about to end, my very young parents check into

the cheapest hotel they can find, and watch the news, and my father holds his hands atop my mother's hugely pregnant stomach, in which I swim and sleep, oblivious.

I wonder if my father can feel or see my veins through my mother's skin. I've read that an unborn baby can see light filtering through the uterus and stomach wall of their mother.

Or perhaps I see the veins in my father's large hands as he stretches them open atop my mother's belly, lit up by a cheap, bright hotel lamp.

This is only three weeks before I am born.

It might help to give a little bit of direction here. I'm in the Badlands, beneath a giant oak tree.

It's been six months since Philip, put a shotgun into his mouth, leaned forward in a sort of prayer pose, and pulled the trigger.

Flakes of his blood, dark and congealed, are permanently pressed into the dozens of rips and scars on the tree's trunk. Starting a few feet from the ground and progressing erratically up.

I find the tree by myself, based on the Cabazon Coroner's report, and there's a large piece of plywood placed on the ground beneath. When I pry the plywood up to see what's beneath, I'm sickened to see thousands of white worms.

I quickly drop the wood back down, and run back to the car.

And after this, whenever I press my fingertips to my nose, I can smell the heavy scent of those blackened splotches of Phil's blood, even though I don't want to remember that smell. When I remember that smell, I binge on Internet suicide photograph sites. I've seen everything I can find. I always do this in the middle of the night when I can't sleep, but since I've met Jesus, and his family, at a "Save the Geoglyphs from Big Wind and Solar" rally, I've stopped looking at these sites, because it pisses Jesus off.

"Still in love with the dead guy? Don't worry, baby doll. His spirit is still all over you. I can see this, and I'm going to get rid of him. He'll stop coming back. Let me take care of him. I'll kill him. I'll stab him next time he shows up. Because I love you more than he ever did. I am here for you now, until the end."

Jesus knows the whole story, because I've told him everything about this. "You should burn that guy's clothes," he snarled at me once, until I started to cry.

I left Phil's pillow and blankets and sheets on the bed until one night Jesus pulled them off and took them away. I don't know what he did with them.

I kept a tiny zip lock baggie with the last of Phil's pot in it, until one night Jesus woke me up at 3 AM demanding to know where my drugs were. When I told him I didn't have any, he dug through my desk drawers until he found Phil's stash, and when I woke up again in the morning, I found the empty zip lock, crumpled on the floor.

I felt like killing Jesus.

I almost did.

Still, he convinced me to take him along to my poetry reading in San Diego, because he didn't want to leave my side, because I might die, and because he wanted to heal me once and for all out at the geoglyphs afterwards.

The geoglyphs were a place of great power, he said, and had been there since the Aztecs had come through and buried their fortunes of gold nearby.

And so I said yes, he could come along with me.

The sky is crying tonight.

I drive through sleet and slushy snow in the mountain pass on Interstate 8 east of San Diego. I let the car glide in neutral far down to the desert floor, and the sky never clears. Rain, rain, all the way. The moon is gone. The stars don't shine. The pink gummy bear I keep clipped to my keychain glows luminously in the dark.

Jesus continues to smoke meth. Then, he switches to weed. "First the white medicine, then the green," he says.

He talks and talks, about things I don't understand.

I drive and drive, thinking of the feel of Phil's cock inside of me, how we used to have sex in my bathroom, in the hot tub, on the memory foam mattress in the spare bedroom floor.

Jesus isn't always able to perform sexually, because he smokes so much meth and weed, and when he does, he is, at best, just a fill-in-the-blank, although I would never tell him this.

It was more than that, with Phil. He was the only man I ever loved. The carpet on the floor beneath the gas pedal in my car is worn out from the heel of his size 12 shoe. He drove all the time. That's how much I trusted him.

"And then, I became a medicine man, a singer. On the spirit run from Alaska to Mexico. I did it three times and I ran until my knees exploded and I kept running and everything changed for me, that's when the medicine ways came to me. I can heal anyone. I'm going to heal you."

My windshield wipers are overwhelmed. Jesus tells me which way to go, which turns to take.

"Been this way a thousand times," he says. "We're close to where I saw the ghosts of the Spaniards searching for gold, down by the Aztec mines that one time I was out in the desert by myself. I saw them, and they got scared and turned and ran."

"Open me a beer," I say. My fourth. If I smoke weed, I'll want to fall asleep. But beer will keep me going all night. In the wet desert that doesn't feel like a desert tonight, but like something else. Like something heavy and close and spent.

"About two more hours to go, then we'll be there. Then we'll be at the geoglyphs, and

then we are going to get DOWN," Jesus yells. "Don't worry, baby doll! I'm going to heal you once and for all! Those geoglyphs are the center of all of creation! The center of the ancient city of Aztlan!"

In between looking at suicide pictures and reading the Riverside County coroner's report online every night since Phil died, I've learned that General Patton trained his troops all over the desert in the area of the geoglyphs during World War II, leaving tank tire tracks everywhere that are still visible to this day.

Now, the federal government has big plans to cover most of the remaining open California deserts with giant wind and solar technology zones.

This will be suicide, for the desert.

All of the open spaces in the desert where Phil and I used to explore will soon be gone.

And soon, Jesus and I won't be able to come out here and look for the Aztec gold.

I kind of wish we would get to Blythe, because Christine keeps texting me.

She keeps saying she wants to kill herself, and I want to be there with her tonight.

Instead, Jesus keeps making me drive.

"Can I please see some I.D.?"

Jesus is in the driver's seat, and we've been pulled over on the reservation. The Colorado River Indian Reservation. Jesus is driving because I got tired, and he decided he wanted to go to the casino in Parker before we go to the geoglyphs.

His stash is in the glove box, and he doesn't have a driver's license. This, I know, because he told me, and he decided to drive anyway, grabbing the keys from my hand when we stopped for more beer.

I lean over. "I'm a college professor, officer, and my friend here is driving because I have a migraine headache. I am so sorry he ran that red light. Can we just switch drivers?"

The officer looks through my car registration, with a look of disbelief.

"Driving without a license? Why?" His tone is menacing and he shines his flashlight right into Jesus's face.

After a long pause, Jesus says, "my girlfriend here, she's gonna be my wife soon, she's pregnant and she's been bleeding and about to lose the baby and we were speeding to the hospital. That's why I'm driving."

"Ma'am?" The light is in my face now.

"Uh, yeah, I'm not feeling too well."

The officer stares at both of us. "I can smell alcohol on your breath," he says sternly to Jesus. "I know you've been drinking. I should take you in to the station, is what I should do. I recognize you, brother. You've been in jail a few times up at Parker for drugs and theft, right? Always under a different name."

"But our baby. We're trying to save a life. It's going to be the end of the world for that little baby if you don't let us go and get to the hospital," he says, in a dead voice. I can see in the officer's face that he knows Jesus is lying. And Jesus isn't done.

"It's not my baby. It's the baby of a dead guy, from her boyfriend that just killed himself," he said, face as flat as a crushed aluminum can. "I'm trying to help her now, because that guy's dead, and now she's my girlfriend and she doesn't have anyone else."

The officer puts up his hand. "Stop right there," he says. "Wait in the car and don't move, either of you." He takes my license and registration with him and walks away.

The red and orange lights blink on and off, making me feel nauseous. I almost feel pregnant, but more than that, I feel sick because I remember that as a teacher, I'm not allowed to get caught holding narcotics, and meth is a narcotic, and I remember seeing Jesus put the plastic baggie with the tiny little shards of meth in it and his cloudy glass pipe and his lighter into my glove box a little while ago. I'm afraid to say anything about that, but I have to say something, because I'm scared now, and I have never been to jail and I'm afraid I'm going to get arrested and maybe even lose my teaching job once and for all.

"But I'm not really pregnant. I don't even look pregnant. I'm sure the cop knows that," I say in a calm voice. What I really want to do is slap that flat expression off of his face, make him start telling the truth.

He turns, screams at me like a demon, his face twisted and mean in the pre-dawn half-light.

"Shut the fuck up, bitch. I'm about to go down because of you. This is all your fault, and

when this is all over, we are THROUGH. I'm going to go back to Palm Desert and burn down your house. You're nothing but a fucking slut trying to get what you can out of me, just another white bitch out for a fuck."

The police car behind us doesn't move. The red light on top illuminates my insides, alternating yellow, then white, one sickening strobe at a time, and when I hold my hand up close to my face, I can almost see the veins shining through.

I'm at least a four hour drive from home, and in Arizona now. No one knows where I am, and I don't know what things will look like tomorrow, which is almost here.

Out my windshield, I see a glow on the horizon. It's not sunrise, and the moon isn't coming up. It must be Las Vegas. The lights of Las Vegas, just out of reach, but haunting, in the way they dim the stars and corrupt the deep night desert sky, so far from here, and yet, not so far away after all.

And I think about Phil, and wonder if he, too, saw the world flash before his eyes when he pulled the trigger with that gun in his mouth.

We could start here.

On the longest night of the year in the desert in the rain, just before dawn, and it feels like the end of the world.

Maybe, just maybe it is.

October 4, 2011

Letters to Phil: Jesus is gone. He keeps disappearing on me, and it makes me feel like trash. I'm so lonely and sad. My house is trashed, from him being here and having all his friends from Blythe come here to stay over for days and days, and he destroyed my rugs by getting them way too wet when he shampooed them. You would've died to see what's happened here. There's also a lot of rats invading the house. I keep setting traps but more and more keep coming. I think they're coming from the empty house next door. I miss you so much, taking good care of the house, and now it's all gone to shit. Tarah hasn't been here in over a year and I'm here by myself all the time, and the pool guy who was trying to convert you to Christianity, remember him? Well he's been hitting up on me since right after you died and I'm not interested. I think I'm going to move. I think I'm going to sell the house. I can't take this anymore.

Refrigerator Flood

Mija, Mijo, Meatloaf, My Little Home Slice

End of the world soup, expired

broken meth pipe, once air freshener
frozen wedding cake, it's my daughter's
grapefruit juice frozen, from old trees
quinoa from Costco, bought for 2012
Cocoa Krispies from the Dollar Store
your daughter's Cup of Soup, shrimp
Save the Desert flyers, faded now
man and wife statuette shrink wrapped
syringes for liquid B12 prescriptions, mine
Tapatio Hot Sauce for carne asada
wild salmon suffering from freezer burn
four dozen corn tortillas, string cheese
two cans of Coca Cola, no more egg whites
expired chilies in Trader Joe's cans
end of the world vegetable seeds
enough expired food for the apocalypse
new bank account, old deposit slips
old horchata, spoiled greens, rancid butter
your leftover eggnog from Christmas, 2010.
your leftover Vienna Sausage, Hormel Chili
six frozen Pizza Kitchen Pizzas, pepperoni

*cracked 1989 baby cup kept just in case
men's brown sock, size 9, doesn't fit, Phil's
x-large La Coste Alligator windbreaker
the police have been here again
because Jesus almost killed me
when he ran out of drugs and I said no
two dogs, one cat, cigarette burned rugs
rats chewing ceiling lamp wires @ midnight
open the cupboards at dawn, moths fly out
I can't live in this house anymore, it's time
to go, time to go, time to move out*

Part Three: Excavating the Lost City

January, 2014 / Lost City, Nevada

Attention Long Distance Callers: If you are calling long distance you may experience problems getting through to the Lost City Museum. According to the local telephone company they are working with the Federal Communications Commission to try to correct the problem." -- from the Lost City, Nevada Museum web page

Most evenings, I alternate between roaming the desert on Google Earth and playing Candy Crush Saga. I visit the places I've been in real-life, the places I wanted to take my boyfriend, Phil, before he killed himself.

If he were here right now, we'd be out there, and I wouldn't be living in a one-room studio apartment, missing my hot tub, looking for things I probably packed away in storage, living on coffee with extra whipped cream and Nestle's chocolate and crackers and cheese instead of real food. Sometimes, I eat jelly beans while playing Candy Crush. Just once in a while.

Look at Google Earth. Go to the desert southwest. I've probably been there, in places light-blasted with solar mirrors, in places pillared with 75 story high wind towers, in places once filled with sparkling lakes and glistening rivers, places rapidly filling up with massive wind and solar technology.

In Candy Crush, you can earn more lives if you lose too many games. In fact, you can even buy more lives. I'm not a game person, but this is my kind of game.

When I'm thinking too much of Phil, I play Candy Crush.

When I miss my hot tub, when I miss having sex with Phil late at night in the hot tub, when I miss these things because Phil is dead and because I sold the house, I play Candy Crush.

When I am especially lonely, I play game #32 or game #20 on Candy Crush, because those are easy to win, almost impossible to lose, and I earn more lives without even trying.

Candy Crush Saga wasn't invented when Phil was still alive.

Candy Crush Saga wasn't invented when my daughter left home and moved to

Washington.

Candy Crush Saga wasn't invented when Lake Mead starting disappearing into itself and drop to shocking, all-time low levels due to decreasing water flows in the Colorado River during the past few years.

No one ever thinks that a young man in his twenties is going to die. It runs against the course of a river's life flow.

Lost City, Nevada intrigues me. I found it while on Google Earth late one night when I had lost too many lives on Candy Crush and was locked out for 29 minutes, 13 seconds. I switched to my Google Earth, and re-visited Lake Mead.

Lake Mead. I used to go whitewater rafting there, canoeing, sailing with friends, back in a different lifetime, when the lake was always full, with different friends, before the Internet was invented, and long before I ever met Phil.

I thought I knew Lake Mead. So many great memories there. Back when the river was full. So full, in fact, that some years it almost overflowed at Boulder Dam.

The time in 1989 when my girlfriend Korvette and I left our infant daughters with our

moms, and went canoeing in the lower end of the Colorado River, starting at Pearce Ferry. We stayed a night at a place called Scorpion Island, where she gave a cute guy a blow job and I flirted with a guy who had a crush on me.

Or another trip, summer 1992, four days of whitewater rafting with friends from Flagstaff, where I went to grad school. We started at Diamond Creek. There was a guy named John Bear, a stunning river runner, and on our last morning, motoring to our take out point at Pearce Ferry, I sucked on slices of our last cantaloupe, and hated the wedding ring he refused to take off.

Now, it looks like all the places I enjoyed before Candy Crush Saga was invented are basically gone. Dried up. Revealing skeletons of forgotten cities, carcasses of plane wrecks, an old, Anasazi ruins where the Muddy and Virgin Rivers used to flow into the Colorado River, before it was buried by Lake Mead.

Before Lake Mead started to form, after the completion of Boulder Dam in the 1930's, archaeologists had just discovered Lost City, which was adjacent to one of the world's largest, underground salt mines, producing salt for people in the desert southwest and beyond.

Now, when you look at those places on Google Earth, all you see is parched land.

Scorpio Island is no longer an island. The Colorado is a tiny thread of mucky brown, flowing through the remote center of what just a few years ago was the upper end of Lake Mead. I can't even imagine how deep and sticky the mud is, how ugly the exposed bottom of the lake. The man-made lake in the middle of one of the hottest deserts on earth, less than 100 years old, is slowly disappearing, back to a desert I never knew.

The lake was still full and water levels hadn't started to drop when I flew over it on American Airlines Flight 11 in summer of 2001, from Boston to Los Angeles, one of the flights hijacked weeks later and slammed into the World Trade Center on 9.11.

"We're ahead of schedule, folks, so enjoy the view of the Colorado River and Lake Mead," the pilot glowed over the airplane's P.A., and of course, I'D looked down, and Lake Mead had never looked as beautiful as it did that day, from high above in the air. Like a beautiful mirage, but real. Deep. Enticing and picturesque. I had no idea that Lost City was buried beneath all that innocent-looking water. Buried, but not gone.

Phil and I had visited Lake Mead right before he died, during spring break, in April 2010, stopping briefly at various lookouts along the northern shores of the lake before we turned inland to visit the Valley of Fire and the museum at Lost City and then Las Vegas.

Phil and I had been planning to get married in Las Vegas, but not on that trip. We were

still joking around about it then, although it was coming up more and more often, and I kept laughing every time he brought it up. But he knew that I knew he was serious and I knew that he knew I was serious we were just working up to it.

I still get excited thinking about it, and usually when I think about it, that's when I end up playing Candy Crush, because it takes my mind off of that big hole in the earth of my life, where a lake never used to even be a possibility, and had then appeared, glimmering like a desert Disneyland, enticing and soothing, and was now once again disappearing.

Getting married to Phil wouldn't have taken much effort. Las Vegas was just a five hour drive from my home in Palm Desert, and we could take all of the untraveled back roads there if we wanted to, avoid all the traffic on Interstate 15 and not even tell anyone else, if we didn't want to.

Phil's parents had been married in Las Vegas, in fact. Phil thought it would be fun to follow in his parent's footsteps, even if they had ended up getting divorced.

A longshot, and neither of us had a ring. But Phil said he was going shopping for rings soon. We'd get a matching set, he promised. Navajo silver.

And then, our plans went terribly wrong.

Instead of going shopping for our matching wedding rings, Phil went out and killed himself.

That was right when Google Earth was coming along, when Candy Crush Saga was being invented, about nine years after 9.11.

I'm ashamed to admit that I have spent, in the last month alone, \$49.99 purchasing additional lives and booster candies through the iPhone store. This has to stop.

I don't even like casinos. In my lifetime, I've probably put a total of \$5.00 into slot machines. You don't win anything on Candy Crush except to go to the next level of games.

I'm currently on level 49 out of 500. When I close my eyes, and try to sleep, I see rows of red jelly beans, my favorites, exploding across a screen, all night long, until the sun rises again.

It feels good to crush things, to see empty spaces and ghost towns where buildings once stood. Where salt was once mined. Where planes once crashed. One of the best things about Candy Crush is that it makes a great crushing noise every time you line your candy

up just right and press "go."

I wish I could go to Lost City again with Phil, because I've heard that even more of the ruins are exposed now than they were four years ago, and that you can actually see some of the cliff dwellings, oozing out of the mud. It would be fun to walk through ruins the texture of wet brown sugar, and imagine what life was like a thousand years ago.

So much to explore, but Phil isn't here, and I don't know anyone else who would want to visit these ghost towns and old memories that have been lying here all this time, beneath the water, forgotten but not gone.

So I lie awake at night, playing Candy Crush, and running up my MasterCard, buying new lives so I can conquer the most difficult levels and move to the next set of games and geographies.

I love that Candy Crush travels through make-believe lands.

I especially like the lemon and orange jelly beans, because yellow and orange were Phil's favorite colors, and he used to make a special juice out of the lemons and oranges on the trees in my backyard, and it reminds me of him.

We once snuck through a corroded, fallen barbed-wire fence way out in the desert at the Chocolate Mountains Aerial Gunnery Range, going past signs that said “KEEP OUT OR GET SHOT ON SIGHT,” because Phil wanted to explore for peyote, which he had heard grew out there, and we found the most beautiful canyon I’ve ever seen in the desert, instead, and made love in a quiet little cave before hiking back to the car.

Lucky for me, the designers of Candy Crush keep adding new games each week, so no matter what, I'll never run out. And I won't have to think too much, about things like this:

How much lower can Lake Mead drop before there isn't a lake anymore?

Is there still salt in the old salt mine near Lost City?

Where did the Anasazi Indians go?

If we'd gotten married in time, would Phil still have still taken his life?

Short Sale

It was January, 2012.

I decided to sell the house, and move.

I didn't really have anywhere to go, but I knew I needed to move.

I asked someone at work if they knew a realtor who could help me. I told the realtor - a petite woman named Deise from Brazil who drove a BMW and carried a Chanel purse that I didn't care what happened to the house. I just wanted to do a short sale, that I was moving all my things into storage and that I'd be staying at the International Lodge for a while, with a suitcase and my MacBook Air laptop. The dogs would be staying at the house until it sold. I told her that I planned to come by every morning and night to feed the dogs. They were used to spending time alone.

Deise and her husband had lost a small fortune when the economy collapsed in 2008, and she constantly whined about having to sell the Bentley, and having to downsize from their 10,000 square foot mansion into a four bedroom house at a lesser-known country club.

She'd always show up for our appointments wearing tennis or golf clothes, and I'd usually be schlepping around in a bathrobe and sloppy sweats, my hair down and uncombed, because she'd always come before noon, and since Phil had died, I never got out of bed before then.

I told the Deise that it was unfortunate the carpet was destroyed. That past summer, when we were still involved, Jesus had decided one night while I was sleeping at my daughter's house and he was tweaking at my house with a crowd of his friends to clean my carpets,

which ended up warped, drenched with water and shampoo, and destroyed. He'd rented one of those cheap carpet cleaners at Albertson's market and gotten a little carried away.

The pool pump was also broken, the front gate needed repairs, the grout in the living room and hallway tile was filthy, the house needed a new dishwasher, and the hall shower wasn't working. There were also numerous "fuck you's" scratched into the bedroom walls with various kitchen knives, along with half dozen kicked out patches of drywall. "Ruth, what happened? You should cover these up!"

I didn't want to admit to her that it hadn't been my Tarah who'd scratched those "fuck you's" into the wall. It was me. After Phil was no longer died and I moved into her room, sleeping on an old mattress on the floor.

I'd lie in bed all day and scratch those fuck you's into the wall, when I was home alone. I used a bent paper clip, or the tip of a steak knife, depending on my mood.

"Fuck you," I silently thought when Deise chided me for not cleaning up the wall before I showed her the house. "Fuck you, too."

Part of me hated Deise. She had a husband and little boy to go home too. Unlike me, who had no one. But I needed her to help me get rid of that house. I knew I couldn't do it without her.

Once, she told me I should take better care of myself.

"You are so pretty," she said. "Go to the spa for a day. Get your hair colored, and get your eyebrows waxed. Really. You're letting yourself go. Not good."

I didn't care what she thought. The front yard was empty, and offered a clear view of the hostile neighbor's house across the street, which I tried to avoid looking at while Deise's assistant, a bland man, pounded the "for sale" sign into the ground in my front yard.

I didn't tell her about Phil.

The Story of Three Little Trees

This is where you slept

this is where you hid the gun

the house has been sold.

In 2012, the last year I owned my house on California Drive, all three of the giant Palo Verde trees in the front yard died, and they all died, coincidentally, right around the time I decided to sell my house.

Each tree died a different way. And now, if you drive by my old house, you can't tell they were even there at all.

Now, in the front, there's only landscaper's rock and a wall. An empty yard. And if you pressed me, I would tell you how my live-in boyfriend had committed suicide two years before, although he didn't do it at the house. He did it while all of my trees were still alive.

However, if you look past the wall, into the backyard, you'll see a huge pine tree in the side yard. It's over 100 feet high, healthy and growing into the sky.

That's the Christmas tree I planted ten years ago, right after I moved in, and it took root and survived, against all odds.

Pine trees aren't supposed to thrive in the low desert. Summer temperatures soar up to 120 degrees, and 90 degree days in December and January aren't uncommon. In contrast, Palo Verde trees, which technically are shrubs, are more suited to the extremely arid conditions here.

But I lost all three Palo Verde trees, in quick succession, despite my best efforts to care for them.

Technically, the first Palo Verde tree didn't die. Top heavy with summer rain from a desert monsoon, the trunk eventually split in half. One February morning, the tree was

splayed across the driveway.

It cost \$1,475 to have that tree cut up and hauled away.

As I stood in the yard, supervising the tree trimmers, the neighbors across the street - a husband and wife who ran the local neighborhood watch, along with our neighborhood city code enforcement for proper yard and home maintenance, and who had a habit of harassing neighbors they didn't approve of, especially me –stood in their front yard, heckling.

Their harassment had gotten much worse in the two years since Phil died.

"You bitch! Standing there so smug! You murdered your boyfriend, didn't you? Come over here, and I'll beat the shit out you, you murdering slut!"

Instead of yelling back, I dialed 911, tears in my eyes, and asked for help. It took the police 10 minutes to arrive, and until they did, the neighbors continued to harass me. "Fuckin' bitch, with your crappy looking house and yard. That's what whores like you deserve, trees that blow down, ha ha ha! Should've trimmed 'em when you were supposed to! Shouldn't have been screwing your boyfriend so much. Sluts like you drive our property values down!"

When the officer arrived, the wife continued to flip me off every time he looked away.

THE next day, my front driveway and car had been egged, sticky, yellow yolks crusting in the sun.

I washed egg off my car the best I could, sobbing, and thankfully, the neighbors were nowhere in sight. If Phil had been alive, he would've taken the car to the best carwash in town and had the car detailed, just to cheer me up.

The demise of the second tree started with rotten limbs. Termites. No way to exterminate them without killing the tree, so I just cut away limbs and branches, slicing my arms on the unforgiving razor needles, until the tree was dead.

My pool guy, Dave, offered to help. It was March, already hot in the desert, and the tree limbs were buzzing with wasps.

"I'll bring a chainsaw. By the way, are you sexually active? Since your boyfriend died?"

I pretended I hadn't heard him.

"Thanks," I said. "Let's get this tree done!"

Together, we finished off the second Palo Verde tree and he hauled away the remaining limbs and logs in his pool service truck. I paid him \$100 for helping, and I managed to avoid having sex with him.

While we worked, I could hear the woman across the street yelling at me.

"What a slut! Your boyfriend's still warm in his grave, and you're already hooking up with the pool man! Unbelievable! Bitch!"

I tacitly ignored her, as I always did, and decided not to call the police this time. Instead, I went into the house, closed the garage door, and locked up the house.

The third Palo Verde tree didn't really die. It was severely injured and uprooted by a freak, late night windstorm, to the point where it had to be taken entirely out, root ball and all. I thought was the healthiest of the three, and most likely to survive. It was also the one tree in my yard that sheltered my living room window, which faced the street, from the neighbors' stares.

Then, in April, on a very hot night, there was a drive-by shooting across the street, right in front of the house of the neighbors who hated and harassed me.

On the night of the drive-by, I was in my garage, folding a load of laundry. I heard a brief commotion, and then a car door slam. Six shots were fired, sounding like fireworks.

I saw a man lying face down in the street, and a woman leaning over him. "Help us! Help us," I heard the woman yell. I grabbed a towel and ran outside, joining one other neighbor, who came running from down the street, in helping the man who had been shot.

He was lying face down in the street. The woman who was with him screamed for help.

Nobody else came out. I saw the neighbors across the street look out their window once, and then pull the blinds shut before their house went dark.

The other neighbor who was there to help was a young Army veteran who, as it turned out, had been a medic in Afghanistan. He pressed the towel to the man's bleeding wound, while I held his hand and tried to comfort him until the ambulance arrived.

I don't know if he lived or died.

And then, my remaining Palo Verde tree was uprooted in that freak windstorm three nights later. I called my former sister-in-law, Estrella, who had a new boyfriend, a soccer

player named Angel, and asked for help. They came over, and for \$200, Angel cut the tree into pieces. In the morning, I had to call the landscapers to haul the tree remains away, at a cost of \$350.

Estrella didn't see Angel give me a kiss and a lingering hug in a back bedroom before he left. He handed me a little slip of paper with his phone number on it. Maybe she did, and maybe that's why I haven't heard from her in almost two years.

After that, my front yard didn't have any shade, and every passer-by could look right in.

And when the realtor came to pound the for-sale sign in the yard, I could hear the neighbors across the street yelling and laughing, "Hurray, hurray! She's moving, at last!"

It makes me feel better to remember that I planted the Christmas tree long before suicide became a part of my life. Before the other trees died. Before my daughter Tarah grew up and moved far away. Before I tied a few outdoors-durable ornaments, left over from my daughter's childhood years, onto some hard-to-see buried limbs of the Christmas tree, before I sold the house and moved away.

The House on Birdie Way

Phil once wrote a poem about a hummingbird.

I'd share it now, but I can't find it.

After living for six months at the International Lodge, a seedy hotel on Highway 111 in Palm Desert, surviving on Junior Mint candy and lots of beer, I asked Deise to help me find a rental to move into, and she did. It was time to pick up the dogs, so I needed to find a place with a yard, and a place where dogs were allowed.

The place I found is on a road called Birdie Way. And next to the front door, there is a full sheet of glass, with a big hummingbird cut into it.

I immediately knew that this was the place.

The White Box

I've kept a box full of Phil's things.

It's a white box. It has a lid. It's from Office Depot.

I used to have a big green garbage bag, extra double strength, with some of Phil's clothes and his matching blue fleece blanket and sheets in it, until my boyfriend Jesus threw them in the fireplace at my old house on California Drive, sprinkled BBQ lighter fluid all over everything, and burned it all up, bag and all.

Jesus was jealous of Phil.

Jesus didn't know about the white box, and he never found it, during the times he scoured my house and garage looking for drugs and things he could take back to Blythe to sell cheap or exchange for drugs, probably because I didn't mark it and he probably just thought it was some of my books, which he had no interest in.

I always keep the lid on the white box. I might open it up now and then, look inside it, then put the lid back on.

I'm looking through the white box now. Trying not to hold my breath, and giving myself exactly 10 minutes, because if I don't close that lid exactly as planned, I don't know what will happen to me. How I'll feel. How I might act. Where I might end up.

I also have a garbage bag with the clothes Phil left behind along with the dark blue sheets, pillowcase and fleece blanket that were on his bed.

The box has lived in several places since Phil died.

First, I kept it in my garage by the garbage can full of dog food.

When I sold my house and moved, putting most of my hundreds of office boxes full of books and various papers and what not into my storage shed, I took the white box with Phil's things in it along with me to the International Lodge.

I stored the white box in the bathroom next to the cat litter box.

I snuck the cat in, because I wasn't supposed to have animals. I left the dogs living at my house for two months while it was in escrow, checking on them every day, and then stashed them with a friend who lived on a ranch in Thermal, out by the Salton Sea.

The rental I had was on the second floor and recently re-modeled, with stylish Ikea furniture, and a balcony; floor to ceiling windows and sliding glass door, Palm Springs style, overlooking the pool. I never went swimming in the pool at the International Lodge.

I think the managers, Leo and Clive, were drug dealers, because they would come and go day and night. So would my next door neighbor, who also left piles of fast food bags full of trash outside his door, day and night. Some very sketchy people lived, and came and went, at the International Lodge, day and night.

There was a full solar eclipse one afternoon while I was living there, and while it was

happening, it looked like the sky turned to ash, with the eerie shadows of palm trees sketched against the building.

I've been renting this duplex on Birdie Way, which is located in the mid-century Silver Spur neighborhood of South Palm Desert for the last year and a half, with the cat and the dogs. Bing Crosby was one of the developers of this neighborhood, and used to own a house in Silver Spur, and he named all of the streets.

The white box was the first thing I unloaded at the place on Birdie Way. I found a dark shelf in the laundry room, high above the washer and drier, and I put it there. It stays there most of the time.

Now, the box is on a high shelf in my laundry room, and I notice it every time I throw in a load of clothes, or pull things out of the drier.

Sometimes I bring the box into the house, but I usually keep it in the back room and try not to look at it.

It's been in the living room a few times, but not more than a few hours at a time.

It's better to not open it.

But sometimes, I do, and I look inside, and then I feel sick.

Nobody knows about this box but me, and no one else has ever seen it.

I wrote Phil's name on the top in black Sharpie Marker, in letters fairly large but not too big.

Most of the time, I just forget about the box.

But that's a lie.

And there's another box, buried somewhere deep in my storage unit. It's very heavy, because it's filled with 26 boxes of shotgun shells that Phil left hidden at the back of my bookshelf in the house on California Drive.

There was also a gun. A shotgun. Brand new, the price tag still on it, that I found hidden at the back of my closet one morning while looking for a pair of shoes, a few weeks before Phil died.

"We might need to use this someday," Phil said when I confronted him about it. "Society

is falling apart. We're almost in the year 2012. I might have to defend us if the shit really hits the fan."

After that, I pretended it wasn't even there.

It was easier just to not think about it.

The weird thing was, that Phil took the gun back to the Palm Desert Gun Store, where he'd bought it, and got his money back, before he killed himself. I don't know why. Maybe he needed gas money.

I only found this out because after Phil died, I asked Paul what happened to the shotgun, and he said that it wasn't at the scene of the suicide, and so I went to the gun store, and they told me that someone matching Phil's description had returned an unused shotgun the day before Phil died.

While I was at work, teaching creative writing class, I guess.

When Phil killed himself, he did it with his friend Wade's shotgun. That's what I heard.

Something to Put In Your Mouth

I don't know if you'd call them affairs. Phil was dead, after all. I didn't want to be with anyone, didn't want to let anyone touch me again, but I didn't know what else to do.

But that's a bit of a lie. In truth, after several respectable people, longtime good friends, un-friended me on Facebook, because they were tired of my posts about suicide, I felt I was a marked woman. Marked by suicide, by tragedy, by something so awful and heinous that decent people, professional people, wouldn't want me around, especially not the kind of men I should be seeking out. And, not only was I stigmatized by Phil's suicide, but by his young age.

After Phil's suicide, I didn't feel I deserved anyone decent in my life. The shame, and guilt, were and are overwhelming. And so, I began to slum it, as they say, not too long after he died. I felt like I was living a secret life that was too embarrassing to talk about.

Suicide, the word that no one wants to bite down on. Or even taste.

Mostly, by then, I just wanted to get back out into the desert, as I'd done with Phil, to hike, to camp, to explore. Get the hell away from that house. I felt like an interloper in my former life, and it was unbearable, an insult to what my life had become. Because the truth was I could no longer, didn't want to, take care of that house, and I had let things

go.

Everything would have been okay, if Phil hadn't killed himself.

But it wasn't, and I was in a new life.

I was living in a place called Suicide Country, and there was no way I could go back to the way things were before April, 2010.

I was in a club I didn't ask to join. The Suicide Survivor's Club, with its own private membership. I was marked and scarred, an invisible "S" on my chest, which I just knew everyone could see, a modern-day scarlet woman.

And so, a series of new and highly inappropriate men began to trek through my distorted life.

There was Andy, the blonde, blue-eyed Marine from 29 Palms. He was 24 years old, from a small town in Minnesota. He said he likes his girls corn-fed. We only had sex one time, because I just thought 'what the hell, why not?' He told me afterwards that I was a whole lot of woman for him to handle, and that I didn't have much hail damage, and I looked great for a woman my age and that he admired the hell out of me and he couldn't

wait to tell his dad that he'd been with me in my bed.

I told Andy that I admired the hell out of him because he had read *Johnny Get Your Gun* while sitting on top of Artillery tanks when he was stationed in Iraq. He moved back home last year after he got out of the Army. Sometimes, he still posts messages on my Facebook wall, and I only feel a tiny twinge when I see photos of him with his new girlfriend and their baby boy. In his most recent message to me, sent just recently he said, "Word up! I miss the hot professor. Cheer up. I hope you are okay and getting over your boyfriend killing himself."

The next one was Jesus. After his last angry disappearance to go on another meth binge, swearing that he was going to return in a few days with some of his Mexican Mafia friends to burn my house down and kill me, I became so distraught that my brother John called the police and had me forcibly committed to a mental hospital in West Covina near L.A. on an involuntary 51-50 for three days.

Right after I sold my house, I met Tony, a construction worker, through the Triple A battery replacement technician who came to my house to replace a dead battery my car. After Tony and I got involved, I learned that is married to a drug counselor who worked at Betty Ford. I also learned that he is a former meth addict and dealer and spent eight years in prison, and in fact, knows Jesus from their childhood days, being from the same

neighborhood in Blythe, the Barrio Cuchillo. I was sad, horrified and hurt by these revelations, and told him to leave me alone but he texts me every now and then with messages like “I’ve got something to put in your mouth, sexy,” which I ignore.

Then there was Lindzell, a young football player from inner city New Orleans who was enrolled in my basic writing course at the college where I teach. He was there on a full football scholarship, and his skin was the color and texture of smooth dark chocolate. He started following me on twitter and begged me to take him on a hike in the desert, and when I did, he somehow managed to seduce me after getting me high on some chronic weed on a beautiful night out in the open desert near Pushwalla Palms under a full moon. Lindzell had the most amazing, physically sculpted body of any man I’ve ever known. But that’s not why I slept with him.

It’s because Phil and I loved to hike to Pushwalla Palms. It was one of our favorite places, and having sex with Lindzell made me feel like I was a little closer to Phil.

Some of these guys are platonic friends, and these are the only men I stay in touch with now, even if they resent me for not having sex with them.

There’s Mike, a middle-aged, clean-cut, stay-at-home virgin who gets by on SSI payments for having obsessive compulsive disorder. He is a member of my Riverside

writers group, and is always hovering in the background, of my life. The movie "Forty-Year-Old Virgin" could have been written about him. He is an expert auto mechanic when I need him to, as long as long as I text him a semi-naked picture of me every now and then. And after he works on my car, Mike goes back home and tells his mom everything about me, and she doesn't like me, according to Mike, because she thinks I'm just using him.

Sometimes, Mike sends me angry emails, long rants, in which he tells me he knows I hate him, and that he knows I think he is a loser, but that he loves my dogs and will be happy to dog sit for me anytime.

And Jason. What can I say about Jason? He's too polite to ask questions about Phil, and too shy to even think about making a move since I changed our relationship into a platonic one five years ago, long before I met Phil. Jason's like a brother, and I think that secretly he hates me, but still wants to be my friend, and so he is. I like going to visit him in Ashland, because it's a beautiful town and there are the Shakespeare plays in the summer to go see, and it's far, far away from here.

I wish it wasn't like this. I wish I had a normal relationship. A stable husband, children at home, something safe, something predictable, something recognizable to showcase to the outside world so that this suicide tattoo I didn't ask for would disappear.

I just don't know how to get a passport to that from where I am now.

February, 2013 / Faces of Meth

"I am not the enemy," I boldly say, not even sure why.

I've been hanging out with Jesus all day, and evening, ever since I ran into him earlier today at a solar protest in Searchlight, Nevada, sponsored by members of the Mojave Indian Tribe, some of who are friends of mine, people I've gotten to know in the past few years in my work to save the desert from turning into a big solar and wind technology zone.

Jesus's father and sister were there at the solar and wind rally, too, because they are political activists, and besides throwing some hard glares my way, they ignored me. I know they hate me, ever since I called the police that night two years ago when Jesus threatened to kill me, because they sent me a string of texts and emails, telling me so. It makes me sad, but I pretend I don't care.

Jesus, on the other hand, doesn't seem to care much about what happened between us in the past. He's genuinely happy to see me, just like when we'd first met in late October, 2010. He still has the charm. He can still melt my heart with just a few songs and a guitar. He asks for a ride back to Blythe. It's all just like it was before. Nothing has changed.

Christine has been texting me, too, all day, since Jesus texted her to say he'd found me in the desert again. I haven't heard from her in so long, ever since I split up with Jesus two years ago. I heard that she moved to El Paso with some guy, but now she's back in Blythe and trying to get in touch with me.

She's been texting me and saying that she wants to kill herself.

I want to help her. If only I could find her, but with Jesus everything seems to be taking forever, just like it used to. Taking forever to go anywhere, to get from point A to B, to get anything done because there are always so many detours to endure.

I think it's somewhere around 2 AM, and all I have done is drink four Bud Light Beers and shared a blunt that may have been laced with a little bit of PCP. I'm not smoking any meth.

He, on the other hand, sucked down the six-pack of 6.4% Bud tall necks that I bought for him, smoked 1/2 pack of unfiltered Camels, and now, he's smoking his meth and we're at someone's house and there are a lot of people here and they are all very wide awake. It feels like a party, but it's not.

He sucks in a deep puff, and I can hear the melting rock bubble with the comforting sound of a humidifier. Then, he holds the bubble-ended glass pipe away from himself in a deliberate posture and glares at me. White smoke, the texture of a ghost, floats in the air.

"Don't talk to me like that! If you say that again, it's all over. You'll have to leave."

The guy across the table has stopped talking and looks up at me. The guy standing behind him, who wears baggy sweatpants, a hoodie, an Angels ball cap, stuffs his hands into his pockets and stares. The tough-looking Mexican lady, the one with a short shirt and an awful muffin-top spilling out above her jeans, looks in on us. My ex-boyfriend Jesus has that look, that look I used to know so well, his glazed, bright eyes appearing to swim in their own, upended fantasies with the energy from some dark world.

"I was just saying...." I clear my throat. "I was just saying, in the spirit of everything we already talked about in the car, that I love you, I'm your friend, and I'm not your enemy. Just in case you thought I was."

"Don't say that! Never again. Quit saying that." It's so dark in here, and not just because it's dark outside. I look around and see for the first time that there are no windows in this house. Where the windows should be, cardboard or blankets or aluminum foil, or some combination of all three, fill in the gaps. The Grammy's are on TV in the background, and my eyes wander to Katy Perry's ugly sea foam dress. Flowers around her neck. The sound turned on extra loud.

"What is she talking about? What happened?" The guy across the table massages his curly black hair and raises an eyebrow at me. He doesn't look too happy, even though he's been super friendly all night. He isn't what I'd think a tweaker would look like, or talk like. For one, he isn't missing any teeth. He doesn't look like the pictures on the "Faces of Meth" posters circulating on the Internet.

He says he's impressed that I'm a college professor, that I don't come from or live in Blythe. I just read him some of my poetry, because he asked me to, and he was asking all kinds of questions, and said something I thought was a great metaphor, about how the Internet is a big tattoo and once you put something on there you can never take it off again. He talks on and on, telling me about the jokes he played on the heroin addicts in rehab center in San Bernardino, something about freaking them out by blowing a foghorn in the middle of the night, then laughing at them when they tried to crawl from of their rooms.

I'm thinking its fun to be here, to be around people that are so animated, even in the middle of the night, and he's telling me now that his 22-year-old son is on the wrong track, that it's out of his hands, that there's not a whole lot anyone can do to pull him back. "He came up to me the other day and said that he wants to know what it feels like to murder someone," the guy told me.

"Hey, where's the blowtorch?" The guy I call Larry the Lawn Mower Guy rushes into the room.

"Hi," I say, happy for the distraction. "Remember me? The last time I saw you, you were mowing a lawn, and you wanted to come to Las Vegas with us, and Jesus wouldn't let you. I'm sorry about that. I wanted you to come, but he said no."

"Yeah, hi there!" He gives me a hug. It's like I'm his long lost friend. I don't get up from

my seat. "Ah, there it is, in the kitchen sink." He rushes from the room, blow torch in hand.

Barbara is looking at me, curiosity in her eyes, wondering, I'm sure, what I'm doing out here. She's Jesus's other ex, the mom of his two young adult kids, and she is waiting for me to take her out to look for Christine. Methadone. Oxycodone. Whatever the guy at the apartments who was helping her out gave her out of his prescriptions after he got shot in the leg by some blacks. She's been sleeping in her mom's car with her mom for the last few months.

Jesus says to me, "Well, you'd better tell them. Speak up. Now."

Katy Perry is done. I'm glad I don't have to look at that ugly dress again.

I take a deep breath. It sounds like someone is fighting in the other room, screaming and calling someone "bitch." No one else seems to notice.

The front door whooshes open. Even from here, in the kitchen, I can feel the cold winter air rush in.

"We had a little falling out..."

Curly-head butts in. "It didn't involve you calling the po-po, did it?"

I shake my head slowly. "Well, yeah....."

"That is NOT good. Not good at all." He looks at me and then looks down.

The guy who's been standing shifts to his other leg, and pulls his hands out, folds his arms across his chest. "That is really bad," he adds.

No one makes a move. No one says a word. Taylor Swift is singing now. The living room light goes off.

"Well, Jesus and I had a good talk today, and I told him how sorry I was. It was wrong of me to call the cops."

I have a sudden flashback to another time, when I stopped by the apartment, looking for Christine. I remember knocking, because the door was locked. "Who is it?" She'd called out. "The police," I'd yelled. The door flew open, and there was her brother Freddy, fire-eyed, a 9 mm pistol in his hand aimed directly at my face.

"Whoa, whoa, just joking!" Instantly realizing how stupid it was, what I'd just said. In this place.

I look over at Jesus now, and he looks angry. His long, dark braids reach all the way to his belt, he's bending towards me, urging me to come clean. He says he's a Chemehuevi Medicine Man, and half Chicano, too. Two minutes ago, he was kissing me profusely and telling everyone how beautiful I am, how in love with me he is, how happy he is that I came back, how NO ONE has ever come back to Blythe after getting thrown out. No one has DARED. I'm a one of a kind. An Angel. A Ghost. And we are Mr. And Mrs. End of the World.

"It was very wrong of me. I fucked up. I never should have done that and I'm sorrier than any of you can ever know." I really don't regret it, but I'm terrified. I try very hard to sound sincere.

Curly-head isn't convinced. "Calling the police...is the worst thing you can do to people like us. The very worst thing."

"What the hell. Pass the pipe."

Barbara jumps up and rushes out of the room. "Gonna play some online poker for awhile," she says.

"You're still my Baby-Doll," Jesus says, after a very long pause, breaking the ominous silence. Leaning in towards me. "Give me a kiss! Ain't no one as crazy as you. You are CRAZY! My parents and sister think you are CRAZY to come back here! They can't believe you did that, after leaving that phone message making me out to be some kind of monster. My sister kept that on her machine and listened to it over and over for months. They're not like me. They never forgive. They never forget."

His eyes are crazier than ever, and I remember the day he turned on me, ripped the rearview mirrors off my car, crushed my iPhone with his boot, put a rope around my throat and pulled it tight until I screamed that he was right. In a meth-deprived rage, he was convinced that I was fucking other guys, including the pool guy at my house. He wouldn't loosen the rope until I screamed that yes, he was right. Then, he fled into the

night. I called the cops. They picked him up. He went to jail for three days, then blocked me on Facebook. That was a year ago.

"But you are going to have to make it up to me! \$500. You have to give me \$500."

"What?"

"Yeah, we'll just go to the ATM, and you can pull it out."

I hear people talking in the living room. "She called the COPS on him." I start to wonder how I can graciously make my exit, without Jesus.

Suddenly, Freddy busts in. "Let's get WET," he yells.

"Hell, yeah!" Jesus yells back. "Bring it on in." He seems to have forgotten the whole thing, me calling the police, and he's onto something, someone else now, and there are fresh drugs. Green medicine, as he says. To balance out the White.

I look up. Three new people crowd around the table.

"Anyone want to go to Parker to the casino?" Larry the Lawn Mower Guy jerks around, his eyes audibly bugging out from behind his sweaty glasses. The meth pipe is passed around again, and white, ghostly smoke fills the room.

"I do," Barbara yells. "Wait for me!"

What about Christine?

Melting bubble sound, the smell of weed. The comfort of that spooky smoke, cluttering the emptiness. Jesus's hand is on my thigh. I feel like I'll never get out of here, because he's holding on tight. And it feels good, too good, his fingers moving an electric lightning rhythm on my flesh like the guitar player and medicine man drummer that he is, and my body turns to a fluid mush. I'm not really drunk, I'm not really high, but I can't move, and I'm in trouble, because I called the cops, because I followed him here again, even though I've never been to this house before.

Time for Beyoncé, wailing at the top of her lungs, doing a nasty dance. Not my favorite singer, but I'm entranced, can't take my eyes off of the TV screen.

"Baby Doll. You crazy bitch. I love you."

"Love you, too. I'm glad I'm here. I guess I can give you \$100."

"Hey," Curly head shouts. "I found one of my poems. Can I read it to you? I really want to publish a book and maybe you can help me out."

Melting bubble sound. Freddy punches me in the arm, "Hey there, how are you!?"

Someone's started a dice game in the living room, I can hear the dice tumbling in a cup, being thrown across a table.

"I knew you'd come through, and I forgive you," Jesus says, tipping my chin up with his finger and thumb, then cradling my face with the opened palm of his hand, so gently, that

I almost start to cry. “Don’t worry, Baby Doll. We’ll always be friends. You come here any time you want. You passed the test. Goddamn, you are the only white girl to pass the test and you made it through. There’s always a place in the Barrio Cuchillo for you.” He wraps me in his arms, and I have to be honest. It feels good. It feels damned, fucking good.

Then, he says, “When you feel better, we’ll go find her. Don’t worry. We’ll find Christine. And you can take care of her, so she don’t end dead. She loves you like a mom. She looks up to you. And you’re gonna save her life.”

I push my face deep into his shoulder, and I cry.

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“The Muddy River had been an ideal waterway for the ancient farmers of the Lost City; it had low banks that made diverting water into irrigation ditches an easy project, and it flowed into a valley of fertile, level land that enabled the Ancestral Puebloans to thrive as farmers in the desert” – from “Images of America: Nevada’s Lost City”

This is me, and I’m writing about someone else. It’s not really me. It’s not really my life. It’s about someone else.

Consider her my symbiotic twin, an alter ego, a ghost fetus, an amputation, an appendage, an entity with a life of her own, but haunting me with stories she wants to

share. It is only through me that her ruins might be excavated and placed in the museum for visitors to see. Through me, she hopes to live again.

She's looking back, over the past three years, back to April 9, 2010, when her boyfriend Phil killed himself. It was Easter season then, and it's Easter season again, and she's flying from the desert, again, like she was then, to Oakland to visit her brother John.

It's been three years since she went to visit her brother. Things haven't been too great between them since her boyfriend killed himself, and it feels like her brother still blames her for that, because he thinks she never should have been with the guy, especially not having him live with her at her house, if the guy was unstable enough to do something like that.

Here is what she didn't lie about, ever. Would never lie to anyone about.

She was 49 years old. And it had been three years. Three years, to the month, that boyfriend had been dead.

She took Seroquel, 50 milligrams, as prescribed by her primary HMO doctor in late April, 2010, to sleep. Sometimes she only chipped off a sliver of a pill, and sometimes she took the whole thing, and sometimes she ground some up and force fed it to her dog, Shasta, who was growing a little elderly and insomniac, so that she wouldn't be awoken during the night.

Shasta didn't seem to mind. And she slept better, too.

Her other dog, Brindle, didn't need Seroquel. He always slept soundly through everything.

Her primary doctor, who never asked questions or required her to come in for a physical exam, kept refilling her prescription, month after month, including the prescription for the anti-depressant Cymbalta, and she kept picking both prescriptions up at Rite Aid, month after month, and she kept swallowing all of it, as prescribed.

She always took her Seroquel, no matter what, and she tried to always take it before 2 AM so that she would be able to wake up the following day by noon.

She took her Cymbalta in the mornings, with or without breakfast, but of course, that didn't affect her sleep.

It did make her stop thinking about suicide. Most of the time.

It was no lie. She couldn't sleep without taking Seroquel.

But she had lied to her brother that night back in early October, 2010, after her boyfriend Jesus had abandoned her again. She had texted her brother, and told him she'd taken an entire bottle of Seroquel pills, enough to kill a small farm animal. He had immediately called the police, who had come to her house, and forced her into the back seat of the police car on a very hot desert night, and she had sweated in the back while the officer consulted with her brother on the phone about whether or not to let her go, or to take her in on a 51-50.

If it had been the old days, when they were college kids at UC Santa Barbara, back when they'd been close, her brother would've immediately understood that she was just pretending to be in a Salinger novel, like *Franny and Zooey*, a book they'd both loved back, that she was lying, that maybe she was bored, that maybe she ran out of tabloids to read on Friday night and she was angry and feeling abandoned because her daughter had recently moved far away with her new husband, and hadn't called in over a month. The woman also might have told her brother, if she could have talked to him that night, that she had recently been beaten up, and her house vandalized, by the man she'd been dating for the past year, and that she was hurting, and that she was scared, because the man, who'd she had instantly kicked out of her life for good, had threatened to come back with a gun and finish her off.

She would've, could've, told her brother all these things, and maybe they could have laughed about it, if they could have talked, and maybe he could have helped her make sense of it all and made her feel a little safer than she did.

But her brother never answered the phone when she called. All she got was his voice mail message, and he never, ever called her back. The most he ever did was text her back when she texted him.

And so, she'd texted him that night. She texted him a lie, about what she really felt doing, although it wasn't really what she had done.

He would have probably understood that she kept getting visited close-up by hummingbirds every time she stepped outdoors, day or night, and that these hummingbirds, big and small, fast and paused, were visitations from Phil, that it was his spirit checking on her.

But, knowing her brother wouldn't want to hear any of this, she didn't bother to try to explain.

The Chumash Indians of that area believed, she'd learned, that dolphins were the spirits of dying humans, coming back to life, reincarnated.

It was no lie. Her dead boyfriend, Phil, was there, returning to visit her through those hummingbirds. That was a fact. And she was going to write about it someday.

Someday, when she wasn't too groggy from Seroquel, and it wouldn't sound like a lie at all, even to her brother, she might try to talk to him about it all, and explain it to him once and for all.

She'd tell him the truth about that sneering cop who had taken her in handcuffs in the back of the cop car to the emergency room at JFK Hospital in Indio, through a roomful of people who started and pointed as they walked through, and then stood at the door watching her undress while she put on oversized paper hospital scrubs and then took away her real clothes.

She'd tell him about how she was put into an ambulance, shackled head to toe, still wearing those paper clothes, and taken all the way to West Covina, near L.A., to the lockdown ward of a small hospital, where a crude man had hit her up for sex and cigarettes, where she wasn't allowed to open a window, where she wasn't allowed to use the phone.

Worst of all was a big poster in the common room, where all of the patients there were forced to gather for meals, for lectures, for group therapy. That poster, decorated in cheerful colors, meant to be inspirational, which had said, "51 Famous People Who Suffered from Mental Illness." She was educated enough to recognize that many of the names on that list were literary figures and artists. She'd read most of their works, studied their art. Most of them – Virginia Woolf, Vincent Van Gogh, Anne Sexton – had also killed themselves.

Some inspiration.

She'd tell him how horrific it had been, to be taken in on a 51-50 arrest, all because of one, stupid text, and how she was having nightmares about it ever since, with or without taking her nightly dose of Seroquel.

That cop who took her in, he was a real dick.

He was worse than the headmaster in *Catcher in the Rye*.

She'd tell her brother about it, the next time she flew up to see him in Oakland, as soon as he invited her to come.

She hadn't visited him since April, 2010.

Excavations of the Lost City 2

“The man in the photograph is standing on the top of House 50, which was covered by a sand dune. Sand served as a protective cover for some sites, helping to preserve them for scientific research” “Images in America: Nevada’s Lost City”

She could see it now, what Phil had been talking about, in the days before he went out in the Badlands, the day she had flown to Berkeley to give a presentation at the Western Wilderness Conference speaking about western literature, the day he had blown his brains out.

When she lay there alone at night, in her own bed, in her very, very empty house, she could see these things, while she waited for her Seroquel to take effect and sucker punch her into long sleep.

She could see the chem-trails in the sky, fattening the desert horizon like drier lint, like a fattened rattlesnake, like cotton candy at the fair. Phil was right. There were tons of chem-trails, and they had brought rain. They had made it rain in the desert, where it wasn't really supposed to rain, and that's why it was so dry in the Bay Area now, and in the northwest. Everything was upside down.

She could see the big birds – eagles, and Canadian Geese, and falcons, the red tail hawks, and other large birds of prey, diving down towards the lying solar panels in the desert, proud as ever and certain in their ability to find water wherever they flew. Only to be incinerated on impact. Forever erased, forgotten, dismembered. Like her mind, when she was slammed into a white Seroquel fog.

And she could also see the hummingbirds crowded around the red liquid in the feeder she hung outside her bedroom door, in the palm tree next to the swimming pool where she and Phil used to have so much naked fun, where they used to pretend they could fly when they dared each other to jump from the roof of the house into the pool.

And she dreamed of many things. She dreamed of the desert, and she dreamed she saw a sign that said “Spirit Run: Ivanpah Valley. Please help us save the desert! Come and join our protest against the Bright Source solar farm.” And there were many protests: at Corn Springs, at the Blythe geoglyphs, at Searchlight, Nevada and at Stateline.

She dreamed about the spring break trip she’d taken with Phil across the Mojave Desert, all the way from Joshua Tree up to the Valley of Fire and Lost City and over to Las Vegas and then down through Tecopa Hot Springs and through Death Valley, seeing wildflowers and mirages all the way.

Excavations of the Lost City 3

“Many of the Lost City sites are located on ridges and terraces above the fertile valley floor” – from “Images of America: Nevada’s Lost City”

She was remembering how something she had written on Facebook that day in October, 2010, on the six month anniversary after Phil died, had led to her being placed by her college on a forced administrative leave. She had never been on a forced administrative leave before 2010, in all her years of teaching. She had been a college professor for 15 years, and before that, taught high school English for five years.

It had seemed innocent enough. Back then, Facebook used to have a posting option that aid, “What’s on your mind?” She had been honest, and written the word “suicide.”

And from that one little word, her Facebook page blew up immediately, with comments ranging from “are you okay?” to “I can’t believe you’d write that, what’s wrong with you? How selfish of you” to her own daughter, posting “Mom, don’t kill yourself!”

Unfortunately, she’d gone off on her mountain bike for a little ride to the park right after posting the word “suicide,” and by the time she returned two hours later, the police had already been sent to her college workplace, looking for her, and the administration was NOT happy about that. Not at all, even when she followed through immediately with a call to say that she was fine and that her daughter had misinterpreted the post.

She WAS thinking about suicide. Phil’s suicide.

So, there was that curt email the following day from the division dean. Citing a clause in the collective bargaining contract. Page 41, section 22.a., she was informed that effective immediately, she was being placed on a three-week administrative leave. “If an employee is deemed to be in any way, shape, or manner to not be reliable or clear in conscience, morals or behavior,” the letter had said, “ administrative leave is left to the employer’s discretion.”

She didn’t understand it. She wanted to scream. She had wanted to punch out her dean, a man who had once worked alongside her as a professor before rising to the administrative ranks. In fact, she’d been on his hiring committee. Now, he sat there looking smug, and kept looking at his watch. “I have a class to teach,” she had protested, so conditioned to her 20 years of teaching that she couldn’t comprehend what was happening. Going to teach a class. It’s what she did. It’s how she coped. It’s all she knew how to do.

“No. We want you to take the rest of the semester off,” he said. Cold, feather-blank syllables, measured against the impossible lake-sky-void of what the dean was telling her.

She was also supposed to be the invited guest speaker that fall at the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention’s first Suicide Prevention Day event in Palm Desert.

But, a week before the event, she suddenly realized she wouldn’t be able to speak.

She, the confident professional and public speaker, realized that she would not be able to do it, after all. It wasn’t because of the administrative leave, though. The AFSP

coordinators didn't know about that, and she wasn't about to tell them. She wouldn't be able to speak at the Suicide Prevention Day because, quite simply, she knew that she wouldn't be able to stop herself from talking about how angry she was that Phil was gone, and that nothing she could tell anyone at that AFSP event would make suicide okay.

She couldn't give anyone hope when it came to the topic of suicide. She just didn't have it in her to do that. She felt guilty about it, but that was the truth. There was no way she could fake it.

In her imagination, just thinking about it, she had wished she just could pass out bullets at National Suicide Prevention Day. She didn't know why, but just thinking about it made her feel better.

And somewhere, deep inside, she knew that if she did that, she would probably get arrested or maybe really mess up someone's day, and she didn't want either of those things to happen.

So she had just stayed away. Stayed home, on her administrative leave, sitting alone at the house day after day and night after night. Thinking about suicide, and not writing about it on Facebook anymore. Just sitting with it, alone.

Then going back to work, back to her students, and ignoring everyone at work but them.

Excavations of the Lost City 4

She lay on the air mattress in the tiny upstairs bedroom of her daughter's military housing, the mattress half-sagging from cat claw punctures.

She could see these things, while she waited for her Seroquel to take effect and sucker punch her into long sleep.

That night, she could hear her daughter crying downstairs, and complaining to her fiancé.

“My mom doesn't love me. She only came here to eat all our food! I want her to go back home. This is OUR house, not hers!”

She took a deep breath, and looked outside, into the last sliver of light.

She thought about sending her brother a text, telling him how she really felt, and asking if he remembered how much he had loved Salinger's books.

Then, outside, there it was. She saw the bird. A Robin Red Breast, in the naked, wintery sketch of a tree outside the window. She looked again. Another bird, and another. She was certain of it. It was true. It was a tree full of birds, full of Robin Red Breasts that should have been somewhere else, because it was winter in the northwest, but they had stayed, instead.

Maybe they hadn't wanted to fly. Maybe they only wanted to stay in that tree and wait for the rain to arrive, and until then, they would stay, feathers tucked in neatly, and they would stay dry, while the seasons turned themselves inside out, so they wouldn't crash.

The birds. They always knew what do to. And if the rain never came, maybe they'd turn into something or someone else. Maybe they'd end up in California. Maybe not.

She opened the bottle of Seroquel, and prepared to swallow. But instead of taking out a single pill, she shut the lid tight, tucked the bottle under her pillow, and closed her eyes and hoped she wouldn't dream about Phil.