

May 5, 2015

There was another fire in the news today. I'm sure you heard. I woke up in the morning and the smell of soot was heavy in the air, even though I was miles or even lifetimes away. I took the cat out to the balcony and we watched the smoke gather on the horizon.

I don't know how these letters will find you.  
And by the time they do it might be too late.

Nina

32

April 15, 2015

I feel far away from these letters—like they've gone right through me, worked their way through my bloodstream and passed out my pores. That's not how the human body works.

And it hasn't stopped whatever is threatening the city outside.

Nina

30

March 16, 2015

At the entrance to the Eaton Centre they were cleaning off graffiti that someone had spray-painted on the floor-to-ceiling glass that faced the intersection. It looked like they'd already given it a pass or two with the pressure washer, but I could still read what it said: BLEED THE RICH, in ragged red letters, drips staining the concrete below.

You must find it all so repellant.

Last night I dreamed I was in a room and I was being strangled by someone wearing a gold watch. It was dark and I could see my roommate sleeping on a chair. I called out to her but she didn't wake up, just turned her head, nuzzling the fabric.

I did wake up, fortunately, struggling to get out a few muffled words: Help. Stop. Get out.

I don't know why I think of you whenever I think of gold watches. I've never seen you wear one and I don't think you strangled me in my dream. I'm writing you because I feel desperate, more desperate than I've ever felt in my entire life. And I feel a need to hold you accountable, or to at least try to.

I don't know how, except perhaps to write you this letter, which you will no doubt find puzzling or at the very least unnecessary, provocative.

Nina

1

absentmindedly dribbling a basketball.

My father called them his Air Jordans. He had a dumb sense of humour.

We lived in the middle of nowhere, far from any road, so I never cared if anyone saw me. If a car had stopped long enough to recognize me I would have been terrified, but only because no one ever stopped in that place, not because of anything I was wearing.

It's overwhelming to be surrounded by so many people when I grew up used to being alone.

Nina

3

March 16, 2015 [2]

I feel like I should describe my surroundings. I'm sitting in a chain coffee shop near the North entrance of the mall, where I have my cracked and weathered purse and a new pair of sneakers (the latter still in their box, enclosed within a crumpled plastic bag) on a table next to a cold (not iced) Americano in a paper cup.

Polyester jackets, camouflage pants, tight faded jeans, tan wool coats, burgundy hoodies, dark blue sweaters, leather jackets, black-and-white scarves—an infinite procession of animated material passes in front of me. A stylish woman walks quickly by in rubber boots up to her knees, looking supremely confident even though it's not raining outside and the boots must be hot and uncomfortable. Behind her a man stumbles into a bench and sits down, heavily. He's wearing paint-splattered jeans and is obviously drunk even though he looks like he's still at work and it's just past midday.

Everything seems so stupid.

When I was a teenager my father had an old pair of steel-toed rubber boots, with a removable fleece lining, that he used to keep by the door. If we had to take the dog for a walk, or put the garbage out, or grab the mail, and especially if it was wet outside, all three of us, though of course not at the same time—me, my father, and my mother—would slip the boots on our feet and hurry out the door.

The boots were heavy and clunky and hot in warm weather, especially if I felt too lazy to take out the lining, and they made a “clumping” sound with every step like someone

March 17, 2015

It's St. Patrick's Day, and the streets near my apartment have been taken over by screaming teenagers. There's a tone in their voices I've never heard before. An edge. They closed Bloor at Lansdowne because they're afraid of rioters.

I had to walk home from the station. When I walked in the door, I found my roommate face-down on the couch, one arm dangling to the floor. Her cat was sitting astride her back, like she'd incapacitated her owner and was the new master of the house. She glared at me with squinting eyes—the cat, I mean.

I went out onto the deck and brushed a chair clear of rotten leaves, listening to the cheers and shouts outside and watching cars pass cautiously over the street below. When I was a teenager I'd sneak out of the house at night, after I'd finished my homework, and walk out to the road. I'd sit cross-legged, leaning against the mailbox, and pretend that someone was coming to pick me up—that I had someplace else to be.

It wasn't just anyone that I imagined coming to meet me.

I'd sit there in the perfect darkness and imagine you pulling up in your car, your lights cut so that my parents wouldn't see you from the house. The car would sit there ticking in the darkness and you'd whisper “Nina?” out the open window,

April 20, 2015

My roommate was talking about moving to the country, or to her aunt's in Sweden, somewhere where she could wait out the violence in relative safety. I told her she was hysterical. I was sitting in the kitchen with the cat on my lap, sitting amidst the ivy hanging down from my ceiling and imagining it bursting through the window or out the drain. Taking the whole house down under its weight.

Truthfully I felt exactly as she did.

If my parents were still alive, I would stay with them. But they died, one after the other, years ago. The owner of the house we lived in sold the property, and the new owner tore down the house—now I think the land is going to be developed.

I wish I could fly away with you, in your spaceship, wherever it is you're going.

Nina

April 8, 2015 [4]

Then we left your house and walked around your neighbourhood. My heart was pounding but I did my best to feel a kind of peace. I wanted to.

We were a solemn couple. Like in a movie, I thought. Two explorers standing on the deck of ship surrounded by fog, peering into the pooling white.

When it started to get dark we walked into town and I called my dad from a payphone and asked him to pick me up. When I had finished I turned around and saw you standing across the parking lot, radiating nervousness.

“What's wrong?” I asked.

“I think I have to go,” you said.

“Really?”

Your eyes traced the path of red lights glowing in front of the convenience store. Cars pulling in and out, lining up at the intersection, exhaust ticking into the cool spring air.

You shrugged.

“Okay,” I said. I grabbed your hand and squeezed. It fell limply by your side.

“See you soon,” I said.

“See you,” you said.

I tried to hold onto the distance we had traversed.

“Did you have fun?” my father asked, when we were nearly home. I said nothing. He must have thought that I was angry with him.

Nina

April 8, 2015 [3]

If I concentrate hard enough I can climb into the pain, an abstract landscape of jagged edges, neon shapes. A twisting courtyard that revokes itself underneath my feet.

When we started kissing on your bed I felt myself going there, a kaleidoscope of feeling, fireworks, electricity, discomfort. Your room, inverted. Your compact frame, stronger than I thought it could ever be, pressing me against the mattress.

I thought it was a kind of marriage proposal. I thought we were in love. Why did I think that? I was going to receive my dowry the next week.

You couldn't have known I was thinking any of that.

28 I had never kissed anyone before and it took me a moment to figure it out. You asked me if something was wrong. "No," I said, "nothing is wrong."

I was stalling for time.

When we resumed I thought I had it figured out. If I hadn't, you didn't say anything. Maybe you didn't care. It felt like I was holding on for dear life. Or I wasn't holding onto anything—I was reaching frantically behind me trying to grab something, anything.

There was more blood than I could have imagined. I think it surprised you, too.

Nina

April 8, 2015

At first your house impressed me. Everything was obsessively clean. I couldn't believe that anyone could treat it so familiarly, like you did, throwing your jacket and bag to the floor.

There was someone eating in the kitchen—a large Filipino woman in a housedress I had never seen before. She gave me a dirty look and asked who I was. You told her it was none of her business and she took the bowl of pasta she had been eating and disappeared into another room.

Your family was somewhere else—I can't remember where. Probably another ceremony or dinner of some kind.

26 Your home reminded me of a movie I had watched about a Russian oligarch: a gaudy man who made his fortune through manipulation and greed. I couldn't understand why anyone would want to live among so many movie props: ornately wrought brass metal tables, coloured vases, mirrors, chairs.

What impressed me most was the sterility. I felt like I sometimes did when I walked past stores closed for the night: their floors swept and mopped, props pulled back, aisles serenely empty. Seeing yourself in the reflection from the street, superimposed.

Later it would seem to me that I had watched myself ascend the stairs to your room, as if I was watching myself in a movie from very far away.

Nina

but I'd already have my hand on the passenger door, which I'd hold close to the car until we were far enough away so I could slam it shut.

Both of my parents were very light sleepers.

Finally, you'd gun the engine and we'd disappear into the night.

But of course that never happened, not even once.

Nina

5

March 18, 2015 [2]

I'd like to travel, but I can never seem to save enough money to do it.

And I'm too old to donate blood, not that I ever would. I'd rather it die and wither inside me.

I haven't left the country in over a decade, and then only once, just across the border, a quick trip to New Jersey for the funeral of my Great Aunt Edna, who had lived alone in Paterson City for fifteen years after her husband died. Alone on a government pension and ten dollar bottles of scotch. Proud, they all said, of her musty apartment and the lifetime of saving that allowed her to live there until the end of her life.

I thought about how if I were you I'd be able to leave the country whenever I wanted, to drop everything at will and spend a week or more at my leisure absolutely anywhere in the world. I thought about how that freedom was like living in a spaceship, like being a member of a future species that never has to touch the ground.

I thought about that while I was squatting over the toilet seat in the Coffee Time with my pants around my ankles.

Unlike many people my age, I've never seen Europe. But I don't necessarily think of it as mine, either, even though there's a lot there that I'd like to see.

Later that day I found myself in your neighbourhood, so blinded by rage that I considered picking up a loose garden stone and smashing in the window of the first BMW I saw.

You wouldn't have been proud of me.

Nina

7

March 18, 2015

When I woke up this morning the shower was already running and the cat was behind the bathroom door, pawing to get let out.

Stupid animal.

I couldn't remember what day it was, only that I didn't have to work—the office was closed. I stood in the kitchen slowly drinking my coffee while my roommate showered and the cat mewed softly from the other side.

What was my roommate doing in there? Sometimes it seems like her showers take hours. Literal hours! I imagined layers of her skin peeling off and puddling in sheets on the tiles.

If we were closer I would've gone in without hesitation and peed while she was behind the curtain. If the fence was tighter on our deck I would have squatted into one of the take-out containers we keep under the sink. But there are huge gaps between the wood which would have made me feel exposed.

Finally, I couldn't wait any longer.

I put my shoes on and slammed the door behind me.

Nina

March 20, 2015

On the news this morning they said there was a fire in Forest Hill—a bloodletting clinic next to a sushi restaurant. No one died, except for a pair of white shepherds that lived in the apartment above the fire.

Arson suspected, due to the presence of several accelerants.

Violence is a dream, an aspiration. It's an exercise of power, a form of repression, an expression of one's innermost thoughts and feelings. But it's not part of me. I'm not capable of smashing anyone's window or burning down a home.

That wouldn't suit me.

I've spent thirty-two years in this body and I have never had a truly violent thought. That's a lie. But the violence that I've committed has always felt incomplete, haphazard, which, now that I think about it, is perhaps worse than if I did something really, truly, intentionally violent.

Only my heart gets sick sometimes and I'm afraid of being alone.

You must not live far from the fire. Even if you live in some other part of the city. I have no idea where you live. A conceptually small distance, that's what I mean.

I can't imagine what you're thinking now.

I still remember one of the last times I saw you: we were standing by the side door in your parents' house and I was watching you put your shoes on. I thought for a minute about how vulnerable that gesture is. Even the obscenely wealthy

April 8, 2015 [2]

Do you notice when you've taken something from someone else? Or are you so accustomed to it that you don't give it a second thought?

Your housekeeper didn't just ask who I was—she gave a warning. She asked in a way that let us both know she didn't approve.

Whatever it was that was wrong with me, she could see it right away.

When you talked back to her I thought you were protecting me. I liked that. I thought she was the exception, not the rule.

But it should have been obvious that wasn't true.

Nina

mother, who perhaps was with you—a Filipino woman I sometimes saw waiting for you in the parking lot at school.

She pulled a chocolate bar out of a bowl and dropped it in my outstretched bag.

"Thank you," I said.

She shut the door without acknowledgment.

A curtain swayed in the window near the doorframe. I felt like I'd just touched a ghost. I ran back down the driveway and asked my dad to take me home.

He seemed surprised, and asked if I wanted to go to another neighbourhood. But he didn't push it when we got in the car and drove away.

Nina

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25

April 6, 2015

There weren't any homes near where we lived, so on Halloween when I was younger my parents would sometimes drive me into town.

One year, as a joke, my dad drove me into your neighbourhood. I was Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz, wearing a blue checked dress my mother had sewn over an old white shirt, heavily altered. We parked the car along a meandering street, beneath a row of towering cedars, neatly sculpted, evenly spaced, that marked off someone's backyard.

I think we both knew, when we got out of the car, that we were doing something wrong. It's hard to explain the feeling, but it felt like we were trespassing. I'm not sure why that was—it never felt that way in other neighbourhoods, other neighbourhoods where there was no one else we knew.

I walked up one or two driveways, knocked on the door, received a fistful of candy (nothing as elaborate as I had hoped), and returned to my father waiting by the side of the road, standing sheepishly in his plain green jacket.

He always stood sheepishly—if he wasn't bored or angry he mostly looked out of place.

Even though on the surface everything was fine I was still eager to leave.

No one looked at me, even when they were handing me candy, even when they looked me directly in the eye. I could tell my father could feel it too.

We came to your house. I know it was yours because I recognized it later. A woman answered the door—not your

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March 28, 2015

I want to state for the record that I don't think you took advantage of me. That if you're reading these letters out of a sense of guilt you can stop.

Which doesn't mean you're off the hook.

I don't know why I feel so much anger. You'd think by now I would have gotten over it. If you took anything from me it was only a kind of innocence that I was always destined to lose. But maybe I could have lost it in a nicer way.

I went for a run around the neighbourhood today. My neighbourhood.

I tried not to look for you.

22

Nina

(to me, everything you do or own is obscene) have to put their shoes on, have to turn away, bend close to the floor, expose the slight curve of their back, their spine rising minutely in ridges underneath their shirt.

I take it back. I'm the most violent person I know.

Nina

9

March 21, 2016 [2]

After I wrote the previous letter I found my roommate's cat knee-deep in the toilet, its little muddy paws tracing a circle around the rim of the bowl. In retaliation I opened the door to the deck and threatened to throw her outside—not just out onto our patio but to the street below.

I would never do it.

She strutted haughtily past me and leaped nimbly onto the railing, the little bell on her collar trilling in response. She took three steps, tail twitching, and then gave up all pretense and began thoroughly cleaning her paws in the sun, hot and clear as the light over Arizona. I imagined a thousand suburban homes glinting in the desert, like a river of shingles and bricks with fibreglass minnows darting through its currents.

But I felt lucky that I was living in Toronto and watching a cat clean itself in the first light of spring.

11

Nina

March 21, 2015

I dreamt that I married you and the reception was held in a coral-pink ballroom in a nineteenth century hotel.

I was worried about the preparations. “Who is going to wash the floors?” I wondered. “Who is going to polish the mirrors? Who is going to clear all of the dishes and scrub them clean?”

I was almost giddy with relief when I realized that the answer to all of these questions was “Someone Else.”

There was a crowd of people prowling outside, like a pack of mountain lions. I thought whoever would have to clean up would be one of them, only I didn’t want to let any of them inside.

10 Your family was miserable, standing off to one side and acting like the ballroom was sinking into the earth.

“She’s not going to come out in any of the photos,” your mother complained. Like my skin was only partial.

We took several turns on the dance floor, and then I left to say hello to an old teacher from elementary school, and when I returned I discovered that you were gone.

I was devastated. I looked for you everywhere, while your family watched with growing satisfaction.

I felt so hungry. Like a mountain lion starving in the woods.

The stupid part is that I don’t even want to get married, least of all to you.

Nina

March 22, 2015

I shouldn’t be ungrateful. But sometimes I blame your mother—for what, exactly, I don’t know. But for something. Some feeling. Of incompleteness, I think.

It’s not like I didn’t graduate. It’s not like the money didn’t help.

I guess it was only that it wasn’t enough. That it had been calculated so neatly. That it ended. And that it barely made up a third of what I needed. (I borrowed the rest.)

You don’t care about any of that. Have you ever worried about money? I mean in the way that normal people do: that it could run out.

12 Not squeezed or procured for some adolescent scheme, which is the relationship I’ve always imagined you have to money. A substance to be extracted. Manipulated. Coerced.

Maybe it’s different now. I have no idea. Perhaps you earn it yourself.

Or maybe it’s not different at all—even if it comes from somewhere else.

Nina

All of the TVs on the subway this morning were talking about the car bomb that exploded in front of the Royal York hotel. Thirteen people killed, mostly commuters.

Idiotic. You might have read that an incomprehensible letter was mailed to the police, taking responsibility—something about a class war. Something about anger, the nature of violence, disassociation, a broken heart. I watched the prime minister give an address from Ottawa: “Love can’t be taken, only earned.”

The letter included an illustration from an old science magazine: elderly mice receiving blood transfusions from adolescent mice in the anti-aging experiments that precipitated the bleeding.

It’s true that it feels so much crueler knowing you could live forever.

But everyone agrees it’s too much. My roommate is terrified, even though they aren’t coming for her. Even though she would be invisible in all revolutions. But maybe that’s what makes her vulnerable—or dangerous. Whichever. I guess I’ll inherit her cat—that’s what I keep telling her.

A joke. But she looks at me suspiciously, as if that’s what I wanted all along.

Sometimes it’s hard to focus on these letters with all of the violence ringing outside. A kind of high-pitched whine interrupting my thoughts.

There’s something I feel like I need to ask you, only I can’t remember what it is. When I try to think of it pain shoots through my occipital nerve and I have to put down my pencil and shut the curtains and lie in my bed and close my eyes.

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Nina

empty-handed, explaining that they’d shut it down just as he’d reached the counter with his order. The permit had expired. We thought it was funny that the only people without drinks were the honouree and her family.

Now I see that was by design.

Nina

21

March 27, 2015

I keep thinking about your mother and the last time I saw her.

Before the ceremony I remember looking around at the wait staff, the plates of appetizers, the bar in the corner, the elegantly laid out settings, and realizing that none of it was for me. Even though I thought I was the reason we were there.

Your mother stood on the stage and spoke about the necessity of funding the next generation of artists and intellectuals. About how the economy of the future will be built on the backs of creative visionaries—a utopian vision of a middle-class aristocracy. About how important it will be for the future that this “creative class” is as diverse as possible.

I don't know anyone who actually lives that way. The work that I do is essentially anonymous, undervalued, just like the work of everyone else I know.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a letter that outlined my academic and extracurricular achievements. Then she paused. She said my name as if it was a surprise, which it wasn't, though it might have been to her. I ascended to the stage and accepted my award, calculated down to the penny, and looked out into the crowd, beaming, and saw you. You looked happy for me—but you might have been smiling for your mother.

In any case I thought I was in love. Even then.

My parents congratulated me after the ceremony and my father went to wait in line at the bar. He came back to us

head. I pushed her off and to my relief she disappeared into a dark corner of my room.

I read another eighty pages and finally felt sleep coming. Just as I was about to slip into unconsciousness, the cat jumped from the floor to my pillow and startled me awake. I threw her off the bed, but of course I couldn't get back to sleep.

Nina

March 23, 2015

I had to go off my anti-depressants because I could no longer afford them. They closed the loophole that allowed me to access them from my parents' drug plan.

I should have married you. Not because I loved you, even though I did, for a brief hot instant, but because your drug plan would never have run out. Because we might have spent our twilight years blasted out of our minds and baking in the harsh Phoenix light, with IVs strung up on poles beside us, full of new blood. And then lived our lives in reverse.

That's not why I started writing you these letters.

Contrary to most people you know, I don't want to live forever. That's not pettiness, either.

In fact I find the very idea abhorrent.

Nina

March 25, 2015

I'm sitting up in bed, with a clipboard propped up on my knees. I have just a single lamp on over the night table, which gives me just enough light to see.

Last night I slept with a man and now I feel nervous, like I'm going to slip upwards and rise off the earth. I'm not sure why I feel that way. It wasn't the sex: average at best, not traumatic, frantic and desperate and maybe a little cold.

Maybe I shouldn't be telling you this. Not that you'd care either way.

I was alarmed at how barren his room was, a large room that he told me he'd lived in for three years. Just a dresser and a bed and a single chair. Almost no books, or very few.

Afterwards he went to the bathroom and came back with only a single glass of water, for himself. I was annoyed by how much that bothered me. After all, we'd just had sex, I wasn't staying at a hotel, and I could have asked for water if I really wanted it.

But I thought later that there was something about the way he acted with me which presumed something more had transpired between us. We'd spent the whole night talking but nothing serious had passed between us. And when we ran out of things to say we went back to his room, which was just around the corner from the bar.

I don't know why I'm so nervous.

I'm taking shallow, rapid breaths that do nothing to calm my nerves.

It's three o'clock in the morning. Yesterday an attacker

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March 23, 2015 [2]

I know you didn't want to marry me. That you couldn't have even if it was what you wanted.

I know it wasn't ever up to me.

Nina

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killed three and wounded five with a knife before being shot in the lobby of First Canadian Place. That's far from me—so far, in every conceivable way—but it's tied to these letters, I think, in a way that I'm still figuring out.

I tried to sleep, but I kept fidgeting, turning constantly in bed. My hope is that writing this letter to you will calm me down.

Nina

16

March 26, 2015

I spent the whole day in a trance, moving very slowly at my desk, wincing in pain when I caught the light peaking in through the blinds. Everyone assumed I was hungover and I didn't bother to correct them.

I should stop reading the news. It feels to me like it doesn't do any good—like paying attention to it only increases the violence. Because tracing a path between the two worlds—yours and mine—is the only way to make sense of it all. And that path doesn't end, it can't—instead it leads somewhere else, much worse.

It's like the two cities are finally embracing after years of being apart.

Nina

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March 25, 2015 [2]

So far, no luck sleeping. It's past five now and I briefly put away the clipboard and turned on rain sounds on my phone. Then I picked up a mystery novel I'd purchased from a second-hand store years ago when I was visiting a friend in Hamilton.

I've read it several times now, but I needed something I could read without thinking. A procession of images that are meaningless because I know them so well that I see them in and out of sequence simultaneously—practically unintelligible, no longer signs of rising action, rhythm, atmosphere, plot.

Clues spread out laterally before me, an unbroken instant in time. Dark hallways, disguised footsteps, a silver blade, a puddle of blood on checkerboard tiles, and a stained red envelope; the killer, victim, detective wrestle on every page in the moment of anticipation, struggle, reward, punishment.

Even reading the book, which always puts me in a kind of trance, didn't help. The mystery takes place in an unnamed Latin American Republic, shortly following a revolution and preceding another one. Crowds chant in public squares, or outside the estates of the political elite, threatening an ambiguous yet ever-present violence.

After I put the rain sounds on my roommate's cat started scratching at my door, because she knows that means I'm not sleeping.

She jumped up on my bed and walked up to my pillow, where she collapsed and dangled her fluffy limbs over my

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