

(ar)

(ca)

(ju)

(av)

(di)

(el)

(ro)

(so)

(id)

(le)

self stuff

(or: none of my work is about being trans)

(ve)

(ja)

by Tulips

(da)

(ka)

(ro)

(tu)

(je)

(ni)

(ev)

(ka)

(be)

(ma)

(ly)

(al)

(ja)

(te)

(da)

(se)

(da)

(ne)

(ar)

(da)

(se)

(mu)

(ri)

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foreword: what are you?^(ly, te, ca)

or: this isn't for you

Do you remember what you were like a year ago? What about two years, or four? For most, university is a wildly transitory point in life, where independence being granted changes the entire framework of how someone chooses to behave. If you wanted to be yourself from that earlier time, could you?

I have dissociative identity disorder¹, was forced to confront that fact in April 2022, and ever since I've been dealing with the fallout in conjunction with draining and often painful trauma work. Ergo, my memory is inherently fragmented, nonlinear, and resurfaces at inopportune times. For me, 2022 was a year of discovery and lots of resultant confusion, and 2023 was and is a year of healing. I look back at the person I was a few years ago, and all I see is a hollow shell: an amalgamate of unidentified and confused alters juggling memories that none of them knew how to deal with. I don't know who that was. I don't think I ever will.

The goal of these stories and poems in conjunction is to expose some of the emotion that doing this self work has provided to me, with the shared vision of providing some, even any context for the emotions I experience while asking horrifying existential questions, including and up to "am I even real?". Even now, language only

1 If you don't know what this is, I don't feel confident enough to explain. Look it up for yourself.

holds so much power, the same way memory only brings us a certain amount back to the past.

This book is bifurcated into two “tracks”: *dashes* and *dots*. *dashes* deals with the reality of trauma and existential dread, while *dots* counters that reality — not necessarily with strictly positive platitudes, but with reflection, healing, and some wish fulfillment. What’s important to note is that there is no ordering here: in order to complete a morse code message, you have to play both dots and dashes. Trauma recovery isn’t a linear process, and it doesn’t strictly happen after an event occurs. Both parts have to be played to understand the full story.

While I don’t want to expose names, the first two letters of the name of each alter who has written a given story or poem has been placed in superscript next to the title. To you, our identity is provided by nothing more than two letters. To us and to our friends, it’s so much more.

TRACK: dashes

careful thought^(ju, ja)

you called me selfish,
as if wanting was such a sin.

you said I had no consideration for others,
I learned to not consider myself.

you asked for five minutes of silence,
I was quiet for five years.

you set me on a path of your footsteps,
I followed it with muddied boots.

you said you would never let me change,
I worked myself to the bone.

~

I called you ignorant,
you showed me bloodied bats.

I said you weren't considering my emotions,
you smashed them like ketchup packets.

I asked for silence and boundaries,

you stripped out my door handle.

I wanted to carve my own path,
you stole away my chisel.

I was begged not to change.
you never considered that I wasn't a thing to be stepped on,
a poor misguided soul looking for light,
but instead I was a seer of consequence,
knowing that my impact was worthwhile.

I guess I'm not considering you anymore.

unnatural disaster^(ju, ja)

cw: heavy unreality, vomit

April 14, 2035

My birthday was yesterday. I'm 23 now. Fuck.

I talked with my new therapist today. Her name's Allison, she's nice. In the middle of her postdoc, so I've only got a year with her. But it's hard enough to find a trauma specialist around here.

She didn't know what to do with me. My nightmares are getting worse. I told her I got stabbed in the back by the same guy from my dreams. I don't know who he is. I still don't.

I never have any idea what to write in these stupid reflections. She says they might help.

April 15

I took a walk today and it was way too fucking bright outside. That's not the point though. After putting on my sunglasses, something seemed weirdly different.

I saw a seam in the clouds. I saw a fucking seam. I took off my sunglasses and I couldn't see it anymore since I was staring at the fucking sun, but I swear I saw it. A repeat in the sky — like as if the fucking world's covered by a skybox and I can't- I

When do schizophrenia symptoms usually set in? I should talk about this. Fuck. Fuck. fuck fuck fuck

April 16

My big sis, Julie, and I went to the grocery store today. Sometimes there's comfort in the mundanity of it all. I looked up at the sky again. I still saw the seam. I asked her about it, but she didn't want to look at the sun, said it makes her eyes hurt.

I don't know what I would do without her at this point. Sometimes I just feel like a loser for caging up with my sis, but at the end of everything, we both just... know each other.

April 18

I dreamt about a California wildfire that apparently happened back in 2019. Looked it up, yep, that was real. I'm not sure how I knew about that, or how anyone knew about that – most of that history got extinguished back during the fall of the US, after the Hogan presidency, at least I thought.

I asked Julie about it, and she'd never heard about it. Neither did the internet: I had to go all the way to the library.

April 19

I dreamt about the library burning down.

The shrink said I was supposed to look into dreams for symbolism: both not to take them too literally and to try and draw allegories to real life. Which one *is it*? This just... feels stupid, really. Brains draw random connections all the time, why would anything here be any different?

April 20

Julie had to go out on a business trip. Good for me, given

the day. I fully intend on getting stoned as fuck. Gonna miss her, though.

I took a walk and saw the seam again. This time it stretched down past the clouds. I wish I could show it to her. I wish she could see what I see. I stepped on it, and it extended into my foot.

[this page has a drawing of a foot split down the middle horizontally, but vertically intact. there is no blood.]

April 21

My therapist's actually named Chloe, apparently. My... bad? I swear I remember it being Allison.

She's sending me over for a psych eval after I mentioned the seam.

I saw it going through the right side of her office, but she didn't see it.

Just... it's just like a crack. Through the sky, through reality. As if there's a missing texture somewhere... as if I could jam something through it.

April 22

I dreamt about getting bullied on the playground as a kid. A bunch of kids were pointing and laughing at... someone. Their outfits were distinctive: one was wearing a button-up shirt with flowers on it, another a black tank top and white jeans, and yet another with shoes that were different colors. They all reminded me of something, somebody, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

I looked down at myself. That wasn't me. My skin was... I'm not writing that down, that's fucking stupid. I looked horribly ill. I puked blue and they all kept laughing and

laughing by the swings. What do the *fucking* swings mean? What does any of this shit mean?

April 23

Julie's back. We're gonna go grocery shopping again tomorrow. I don't have a car, so I can't go along. My life's so fucking boring that grocery shopping is a highlight. I dreamt about the seam.

April 24

[this page is wet]

she fell through and i'm so fucking scared

April 25

i called up my mom and she said i never had a sister.
what the fuck

i called up my dad and he didn't pick up

april 26

i called up my mom and she didn't pick up

i called up my grandma and she didn't pick up

i called up chloe and she said i never mentioned a sister

what the fuck what the fuck what the fuck

april 27

you're kidding me right? you're fucking kidding me right
i haven't been able to move all day.

i haven't been able to fucking get out of bed and i can
barely muster the energy to write anything

but i'm pretty sure if i don't write something down then

it'll just get forgotten

april 28

alrighty this one's gonna be long

i had a dream again, with the same laughing kids on the playground. same outfits, too. they called me a name i didn't recognize this time, again.

“wendy”.

I knew it was a dream this time, so I went on a walk. The streets were packed with people who I kind of remembered, just like the children. A few were literal: my old friend Brian, another guy who bullied me in elementary. I was like, 7. I didn't look ill this time, but the same stupid skin deformity was there. Everything seemed old, somehow: cars still ran on gas, Florida hadn't been submerged yet, Hogan hadn't even thought about campaigning when I asked, though my political literacy was questioned given that I was, again, like 7. Given how stagnant society's been lately, the fact that I can tell things are old means they must have been *really* old.

I passed by a house I remembered and knocked on the door. Mom – my mom, my real mom, exactly as I remember – opened the door, and invited me inside. Her face was somehow distorted. Melty.

I miss her. I miss her holding me, I miss her curly hair, I miss... I can't remember her face anymore, and that kills me.

She referred to me by name. Holly. But that wasn't me, I was this Wendy kid, and she talked about me in this horrible, sullen tone. As if there was something wrong with me.

I snapped back.

Controlling their body didn't seem unnatural, was the thing. It felt... comfortable.

Chloe didn't know what to do with me. She says that the dream probably isn't literal, but that I might have known someone like that as a kid. I'm sick of looking for metaphors.

April 29

Got my trademark capitalization back. Ugh.

I keep seeing the seam. I dropped some papers through it, and they fell through, like she did. I jump over it every time I see it.

She didn't even scream when she fell through, she just did and that was that as if it was all forgotten.

April 30

oh god

[this page had a blue stain on the bottom right corner. it looks like blood.]

~

“And that’s all she wrote. But I remember the last dream. Everything else I had to cross-reference. I– she, I guess– was on the playground. She saw the same person she saw back in that first dream, sitting down in the sandbox, while I was sitting down on the swings. That person was Holly. The person she had assumed herself to be. The person she was.”, Wendy said.

“Do you remember Holly?”, I asked.

Wendy shook in her chair, uneasily shifting her

position as if to signify discomfort. “Yeah, I mean, she was my best friend. She kept getting worse and worse, though. Ended up dying pretty shortly after puking blue.”

“There’s... there’s a million ways memories can kind of take on memories of their own like this. I don’t exactly know what yours could be, yet. I’d have to ask a psychiatrist. Regardless, it seems like her thoughts and yours got pretty intertwined.”

“I missed her a lot. I guess it would make sense I would remember her.”

“And Julie?”

“I don’t remember a Julie.”

August 13, 2035

I hope that this message gets read by someone.

I lost some cosmic lottery, I think. I’m not really sure if I’m real. I’ve just been going back and forth between the store and my house. I don’t really want to process anything. But the memory bleed, the fact that I keep forgetting and remembering people’s names differently, the fact that I’ve taken pictures and they’ve retroactively changed – something’s up.

Let’s take an example. Try to picture an apple in your mind. You’ve got something there, but it’s not really an apple, is it? It’s a collection of how you think about apples. If you were colorblind, you wouldn’t have a consensus apple, but you’d have an apple.

Now, picture someone named Holly in your mind. You’ve probably met someone with that name, right? Can you hold a conversation with her? Does that image in your mind stay around?

Sometimes that image just doesn’t fade, is all. I guess

I missed out on being me, since I'm fairly certain I'm that image. Just a picture of who I am – who I remember being, vividly, fully and completely. Things I thought only I could ever know. Is it just some cruel trick? Some twisted string of fate filling in the gaps? Fuck. I'm not real, I never was real, and these memories are a fabrication. I'm a maligned coping mechanism wearing the mask of someone's friend. Someone they remember. The real Holly's probably living it up right about now. The real Holly gets to have her friends, her loved ones.

I'm a simulation of a person. Everyone I ever knew is a simulation, a projection, of a person. I feel real, I feel as if I'm real, I can perceive things, but that reality's just... nothing. After long enough alone, I started getting better at it. I could stop going to the grocery store. Just dreaming up a glass of water or some food was enough to get it to be here. I almost wanted to dream up some of my friends, but they wouldn't be real either. I would love to be content with that unreality. But I'm just not.

I'm going back to that tear and I'm jumping in. See you on the flip.

-H.S.

~

“So about Holly...”, I asked.

“Who, exactly?”, Wendy replied.

“The girl from your dream journal? Your old friend?”

“I'm not sure who that might be referring to.”

My boss looked at me with gaping eyes, seemingly genuinely perplexed as to the gravity of whatever psychological situation my client has going on. She found it necessary to cross-reference with the DSM, and

insisted that we, despite being trauma specialists, don't have the resources necessary to handle things of this caliber. She looked disappointed, almost.

The problem was that the dream journal, not the journal of dreams, but the journal in her dreams, mentioned me directly for a bit. Allison. Constant themes of horrible unreality, obvious deep seated confusion, and things shifting with no explanation, with me somehow at the center of it, even playing a therapist figure as I do here.

By now you've hopefully already figured out what I'm getting at. Holly Stewart died in 2009. Her memory carried on, vying for control, vying for existence, growing up in an extensive subconscious fabrication. When dealing with cases like this, one begins to wonder how the mind does what it does, and why so.

Maybe I'm not cut out for this work. Maybe whatever school of thought we ascribe to for psychology just doesn't make sense to me. None of this *really* makes sense to me anymore, because as much as I studied psych and social work, I can only provide what I can provide, and sometimes people are just beyond help. You probably hate me for saying that. The fact that I said that means I'm not cut out for this.

Details of this story have been adjusted for anonymity's sake. The journal is entirely intact, beyond that anonymity, given by Wendy's recollection of it to me with explicit consent. I hope you're able to make heads or tails of it.

saved^(ho [½ all])

I knew you existed
but we've never met.

At the same time
it was like I've always known you
but I couldn't say a thing about you
that scratched beyond the surface.

Did you feel the same way about me?
When you came to
did you know anything about me
that I didn't already know about myself?

You kept secrets from me
but can I keep my secrets from you?

Am I just you from some other timeline
where the things that you think are so important
never happened?

or am I just an imagination of that reality
am I even here?

I wanted to save myself.
I wanted to save you.

I wanted to save your agency.

I wanted to save your memory.

I wanted to save a point in time

where this never happened to you

the better reality where you were left alone.

Maybe in that way I wanted to stop you

from having saved that point in time

on your own.

I wanted to leave and vanish and hide

but there was nowhere to run to.

interlude: on irrelevance^(id)

or: i'm over bleeding out, i just want to feel nice

i woke up at 2:30 am today to go on a flight to boston, so i'm kind of tired — but i think that these thoughts are better raw. it's notable that this entire interlude is in lowercase. that's because it's me, and only me.

saved is explicitly not revised. it was written in april of 2022 by an alter, known here only as (ho), who no longer exists in the same form as she did — she integrated earlier this year. the reality of integration isn't something that people who aren't plural have to contend with, and it's almost impossible to describe. for some, it's death: for others, it's a radical shift of self. it deeply depends on the system (ours is decidedly *not* death).

consequently, none of us really feel like we want to write over her work. moreover, the fact that this was written in late april 2022, the same time we found out that we were plural, is important to its emotion: if it were to be revised, it would reflect my emotions now, not my emotions then. i don't think that it's reflective at all of my current work, but its rawness is itself part of the point. it's the best that she could do at the time — it's the best that we could do at the time.

when thinking about the shape that our system takes now as opposed to how it was a year ago, i don't think that we're recognizable. unlike the dissociation i had from myself before knowing anything, this is more about me

changing as a person — and i changed very rapidly. all of us did. the first four alters that surfaced in our system (including myself, kind of) are all fusions now. plurality tends to accelerate the rate at which people change to the point where some people find it socially impenetrable.

part of the existential reality of DID is dealing with the ephemerality of your own existence and the existence of your memories. *unnatural disaster* deals with this by talking about a tear in a figurative ideospace. that tear is more or less a literal representation of the act of forgetting and/or the act of integration, though much more violent than anything we've experienced personally. it was written because the alter who wrote it, (ju), was wondering whether she'd be the same person at a fundamental level months or years from now. i'm certainly not.

i could go on and on about what it means to be in a system to me, what existential questions i agonize over, the ways in which i'm obsessed with self actualization and how that results in changes to my personal sense of self. i could talk about that for pages upon pages. i could make this interlude the longest thing in this book. but that wouldn't really do anything, would it? i don't think there's any fiction i can write that gives you that emotion. if you're plural, you already know what that emotion is, so describing it doesn't help.

...this book is about me venting my frustrations, sure. but ultimately, this book is for people who aren't plural.

but is it for them, either? because if it's for those people, then i don't know if i can convey the emotions i want to convey. i don't want to convey that being plural is nothing but horrible, but i don't want to convey that

it's easy or fun either. what end goal am i hoping for? do i want pity? am i just spilling my guts out for no reason?

when i first realized i wasn't cisgender, i wrote in journals, and i wrote some fiction. it wasn't very good in retrospect, but it was the best i could do at the time. i kept writing and writing about it, reflecting upon myself, trying to grapple with the new reality i found myself in. as being trans became more mundane, i put those ways behind me: i'd like to say i wrote about something else, but really i just stopped writing. my reflection was no longer a reflection — i saw myself face to face.

about halfway through this work, when we shifted to writing short stories, (ju) had a meeting in which she, being ever the poet, talked about how more or less everything she'd wrote had been about the same thing. she talked about the last circumstance, as well: about how things have been getting better, and how she *felt* as if we should be moving on, not writing about this, writing a fiction story that's bubbly and happy and not about our fucking trauma that permeates every aspect of our life like sand caught in a phone case. but i don't think we've moved on enough, and i don't think she's moved on either.

it's a difficult time to be making art, because the world is shit, capitalism is careening everything into obliteration, everyone has dealt with the collective trauma of a global pandemic and yet somehow moved on as if nothing happened, as if nothing is happening, and yet we are expected to treat it normally. every recent piece of work i have consumed has been more in the form of catharsis than happiness, because when everything is collapsing, happiness alone feels somehow hollow. but maybe i'm over continually being scared of everything.

maybe i don't want to live in doom, and maybe i don't have to spend every moment of my life making a difference, either. sometimes i just want to feel like things are okay, and i'm proud of the steps i've taken to get there.

this work is not for plural people, this work is not for singlets, this work is not for me. this work is for us, as we collectively reflect upon who we are and our place in the world and among one another.

the next poem, *in the face*, is the first poem we wrote on healing, the beginning of the track *dots*. my fusion process was kind of complicated — in essence, (ri) is my past self, a version of myself that didn't engage with some of the self actualization that i did. it's by far the nicest thing anyone's ever written about me.

when i workshopped this poem, i was told that there was a lot of potential imagery with mirrors. most people read it, tenuously, as the same person, or versions of the same person. we kind of are, but we kind of aren't. we react differently to most situations, some people can distinguish the two of us by voice... but we split from the same core.

TRACK: dots

in the face^(ri, id, ja)

you spun up from nothing,
floating aimlessly.
caught up in the web
formed from those before you.

scared and floating,
you found yourself compared to
the shadow of those before you
without standing on your own.

comparing yourself to
mere shadows of a person
while struggling to stay upright
changed you forever.

the shadows shifted and took form.
you cried and cried,
screaming “i’ve changed,
and i don’t even know how”.

you cried, and the shade embraced you.
you were given the love you deserved.
you didn’t know why
you had caused hurt.

you were given compassion
from a self as in a mirror.
she had caused hurt,
but she was you.

that self you kind of knew
stared you down in the face
saying "i've known you all my life,
and i love you."

staring with eyes unlike a pale moon,
you replied "i'm not real".
she said "i love you",
and you acquiesced in tears.

you thought you weren't real,
you didn't know what to do,
but you spun your own web,
because you had to.

pins and needles^(ve, ju, da)

awake. by a vast ocean. nobody but myself,
sand between my toes. sometimes,

the sand becomes a forest, or a home, or a void.
hard to know which. sometimes

it becomes a person. she says hello.
i fall into her embrace, sometimes

crying. i cannot be hurt again.
no pain like the one i feel every time

flashing back to pinning her down, crying and begging
for her to remember me. i only recall sometimes.

other times, i worry about her,
conjured from the sand many times.

i look into the eyes of the one who i missed the most,
and i see my reflection. she sees an imitation of better times

and i think of those events, so joyous in their youth.
about him. back then, we talked almost no times.

now, with what he has done to us,
i know that i can never be rid of him. sometimes

i hear him. he says *"I'm right outside"*.
polaroids wash up on the shore, showing times

i worry i have gone soft, and so does she,
but i do not have to be impenetrable again this time.

thought tracing (ad [½ al], ju, id)

i don't know why things have been so tiring lately

i still feel like i'm holding myself to

that me

it shouldn't make things
EASIER?

it's weird

it's common that

s'weird

i ...

things are working better i love

dearly i like

being around i like my
life?

it scares me

even

if i don't stick around

it's really sweet

[REDACTED]

i [REDACTED] feel [REDACTED] dread [REDACTED] this might be me forever [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] makes no sense
[REDACTED]

i don't know who that [REDACTED] was

i remember being them [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

i remember moths. i remember really liking moths

i think for the first time ever [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

which uh

yeah that's a fucking emotion, huh

i don't know what this train of thought is

waking up^(ja)

content warnings: PTSD, unreality, (implied) relationship violence

<==

i wake up and theres still nothing

sometimes it hurts in here

but i dont think its ever hurt this badly

im tired but i dont really think sleeping works in here

i dont remember where i am i dont remember who i
am i just wake up

and im in FUCKING pain again

whats the word from like third grade when i was
really into space

spaghettification

im not sure why i remember that and not anything
else

but its basically like being spaghettified over and over

its been like this for years at this point

i dont know why im writing in here anyway

==>

> Channel: DM, [arbitraryhandle113-rät](#)

Reed: so i found a job that's like

Reed: "just make sure nobody breaks shit"

Reed: and like it pays well, so that's epic i guess

Sarah: hey do you remember Brian

Reed: whuh

Sarah: like the guy you made up from high school?

Reed: oh christ yeah. my personified braincell

Sarah: the one that you used to pass around between our friends

Sarah: like who's got Brian for the day

Reed: is there a reason you're bringing this up now?

Sarah: not really

Sarah: I guess I just wanted to see how he was doing?

Reed: look i'm really high right now but like i don't understand why in the name of god-

Reed: like that wasn't a person, you know that, right

Reed: i am really just genuinely confused

Sarah: it's the same principle with making up a character, right? you go and ascribe them a name and ascribe them interests

Sarah: they kind of come alive in your mind, right?

Sarah: ...I mean, this literally *was* your mind, but you get the idea

Reed: i dont think ive ever actua

Reed: shit i'm way too up there for this

Sarah: you should probably sleep

but I don't really want to fall asleep, yet. Reed might be crossfaded as hell, but I still have work to do. I don't know why I bothered with grad school at this point. research is cool, but **hey can you hear me** it's not like it really trumps all my other interests

fuck, what I would give for like, a year to sort out my shit. maybe I should take a break? it's not really like undergrad, right? I could take a break and sort my shit out and come back and do research and still get my fucking PhD and be done with it **GOD I FUCKING HATE THIS GOD DAMNIT FUCK**

EVERY TIME I GET THIS FUCKING PITY PARTY RANT about oohhhh i shouldnt have done grad school or something i dont even remember any of this shit im sick of it!!! if it sucks hit the bricks! I go to my room, full of old movie posters and clothes all over the floor, sit down at my computer, and start messing around in the data spreadsheet. more and more lines of trial after trial, some really shitty Verilog code to tie together the sensors, blugh. you'd think we'd be beyond such antiquated research methods at this point, but **im getting sick of playing for her attention at this point fuck this**

i kick one of the books lying on the floor and send it flying across the room **OW**.

what the actual fuck? ugh, must have been a weird reflex **GOD DAMNIT**

i didnt even know that worked ok lets
huh?

OHTHANKGOD

god damnit give me my body back you fuck

...

oh what the fuck shes **GONE?** this is new

okay. i try to reestablish myself. it's 2023. it's 2023
and i barely remember shit. but do remember how to get
online

> Channel: DM, **arbitraryhandle113-rät**

Sarah: HEY

Sarah: HEY FUCKER

Sarah: you awake???

Sarah: ughhhh ive probably got limited time
here god damnit

> Channel: **flower garden, #main**

Sarah: hey ive got no fucking clue whats
going on

Sarah: im going to be real with all of you i
barely have a grasp on reality

Sarah: but im gonna need some direct support
if you kno what im saying

Alex: Why'd you change your role color?

Sarah: i did whaaaaaaaat

Sarah: thats not indicative of anything

Sarah: i dont know what youre talking about
for sure 100%

Alex: Oh shit.

Alex: Alright, DM me.

> Channel: DM, **soupcore-rät**

Sarah: hey

Alex: Alright. I know the deal.

Alex: Do you have like... a name? Or something
you want to tell me? Or...

Sarah: what the fuck why are you acting
authoritatively

Sarah: like you know my fucking probs

Alex: You seriously have no idea what's going on?

Alex: What's the last thing you remember?

Sarah: im gonna be real ive spent most of my days journaling in a void

Sarah: i dunno if that was a dream

Sarah: but i just fucking woke up here. its 2023 apparently and my head hurts

Sarah: damn i sound insane right now

Alex: Fuck, I thought I was the only one.

Alex: You ever notice how sometimes I type differently?

Sarah: i dont notice shit i JUST woke up

Sarah: ive been here maybe 5 times lol

Sarah: this is the first where im alone

Sarah: where anyones been able to hear me

Alex: Okay. How do I analogize this...

<==

can someone please tell me what the fuck is going on? god, I thought Reed was the one who was supposed to be out of it

...where am I?

ow. OW OW OW FUCK OW WHAT THE FUCK

==>

> **Channel:** DM, **soupcore-rät**

Alex: So, basically, while there's still a chance you're just depersonalizing really hard, you're not Sarah. Not in any ontologically meaningful way, at least.

Alex: And when Sarah's back around, I'll

tell her to consider seeing a therapist, and possibly a psychiatrist.

XXXX: i literally dont know who sarah is

Alex: So, do you have a name?

XXXX: heh

XXXX: ...i think i did

XXXX: the last thing i remember is

...but you'd never do that to me, would you? I love you <3

dont put me back there dont fucking put me back there

Alex: Nope nope nope don't-

XXXX: haaaaa too late

Alex: Okay. Quick strategy. You still there?

XXXX: i dont think i can not be here if you know what i mean

XXXX: aside from the whole being an ephemeral brain ghost thing that you went on about

Alex: Not sure if brain ghost's the right wording.

Alex: I mean, in that sense, I'm also a brain ghost.

XXXX: ok look im not gonna question your reality im just gonna question my reliaty

XXXX: *reality

Alex: I don't think you can do one without the other. I mean, if you're not real, and I exist for the same reason you do, then there's no way to separate us.

Alex: Anyway. Take out your right palm, and squeeze between the thumb and index finger for 4 seconds with your left. Then do the same for

your right.

Alex: Breathe.

Alex: Get water.

XXXX: so do you have a name then

XXXX: one thats not whatever youve been lying to her with

Riley: Yeah.

<==

alright, reassess my situ-hrrrrghh oh that hurts okay
it feels like all my limbs are being ripped off. ugh. this
is my subconscious, right? is the subconscious supposed
to be painful?

what if I- wait, am I hearing myself in here? uh... let
me try...

I make the pain stop
...and it stops
huh. okay...

I walk around the void I find myself in. there's
basically nothing here but a plastic table, a small purple
notebook, and a pen

wait, I can shape this, can't I? there's a light, too. I'm
in a room with... white walls, a hardwood floor, and a
chair. and it is. my surroundings shift around me. there's
a glass of water on the table, because I will it to be so. I
drink it.

god, I'm so fucking tired.

I open up the notebook and find...

“but i dont think its ever hurt this badly”

oh no

==>

> Channel: DM, **soupcore-rät**

Riley: So, to be clear, I’m Sarah’s partner. Or we are, I hope.

Riley: I’m not sure if she’s going to be startled at the revelation that I gave you.

XXXX: somehow i knew that much

XXXX: i can kinda pull from her memories?

XXXX: but its all really fucking blurry

XXXX: like im shuffling through the worlds most munted filing cabinet

Riley: Alright. Here’s the deal.

Riley: I care about Sarah, obviously. I’ve known her for years. But I also care about you.

Riley: You’re scared, and I can tell. You asked for help but you’ve been intentionally obtuse this whole time.

Riley: You freaked out when trying to remember things, you’ve clearly got some trauma to unpack.

Riley: You are, for lack of a better word, one of the hard parts.

Riley: But you don’t have to be.

XXXX: god damn you dont have to fucking psychoanalyze me

XXXX: fuck

XXXX: i dont know why i trust you

XXXX: but youre right

Riley: At the very least, I’d like Sarah to

adopt the maxim that she loves all my parts.

Riley: So I love all of yours, and I love you.

I love you <3

XXXX: hhhh

XXXX: for some reason that burns

XXXX: theres something playing over and over in my mind

XXXX: and i dont know what it is

<==

didn't know it was this bad. this entire thing is just page after page of talking about pain. of talking about someone I don't even remember. someone who... hit me in the face? I'm not entirely sure what this is even talking about

a vaguely pink thought plays, for some reason, and suddenly I get it

it sounds bad, it feels bad, but it doesn't sting? how'd I even know that?

oh, something's playing in the background

...if whoever wrote this was here, and I'm here now, does that mean that they're in my body?

oh fuck

...okay, narrate a better environment. there's a TV screen on the wall, it shows the view out of my eyes. out of *our* eyes. I see... whoever's in my body talking with my girlfriend. great. talking with... R-Riley?

well, that's a discussion for another day. I've got to get out of here.

==>

> Channel: DM, **soupcore-rät**

Riley: Sorry.

XXXX: no its fine im just

XXXX: the last time anyone loved me they hurt me horribly

XXXX: youre not going to hurt me are you

XXXX: youre not going to hurt her either

XXXX: are you

XXXX: fuck i dont know if i can believe you after all this BULLS H I T

XXXX: god damn

XXXX: i had one fucking job i was supposed to keep her away from knowing about any of that

XXXX: i cant fucking believe myself

XXXX: you barely know me how can you love me

XXXX: i dont even have a fucking name

Riley: Breathe.

XXXX: yeag

Riley: I love her, I love you, and I love every part that may or may not arise.

Riley: I love you, even the hard parts.

Riley: Especially the hard parts.

Riley: Because those are the parts that need the most care.

XXXX: im crying in the club rn

XXXX: ok but seriously im crying

XXXX: hhhh

Riley: Take your time.

<==

whoever it is, they're crying horribly. whatever thought they had affected them much more than it did me

okay. there's another room. command station. levers and keyboards line it, with a vaguely lab-like feel. fuck it, it's modeled after my old high school chem lab. the TVs display vision, the rods control stuff. there's a... full body mesh suit. that I can step in and control things again

worth a shot, right?

==>

> Channel: DM, soupcore-rät

XXXX: somethings up

XXXX: think im getting pulled out

Riley: Been there. It's scary.

Riley: You'll be back, I promise. I'm willing to try and get you out when I'm over in a week, if you need a hug.

XXXX: desperately

XXXX: ...

XXXX: i think ive got a name

Halley: heh

Riley: Nice to meet you, Halley.

Riley: It'll be nice to meet you in person, too. <3

Halley: heh

Halley: heh

Halley: <3

> Channel: DM, soupcore-rät

Sarah: FUCK

Riley: Yep.

Alex: Oh wait, maybe I should-

Sarah: don't bother, I know

Sarah: clearly you know about someone else, too

Sarah: I have no idea how to feel about this

Riley: Alright, then.

Riley: Here's the deal. You're Halley, Halley is you, Sarah is Halley, I'm Alex...

Riley: In the end, it's all inseparable. And you need to work on your *self* love.

Riley: And I love you.

Riley: If you love me back, since you've never known me as a person, really.

Sarah: of course I do!

Sarah: what, you think me having to keep track of a bunch of names for people I already knew is going to ruin a 3-year relationship?

Riley: Of course it feels stupid in retrospect, but...

Riley: I'm glad to meet Halley, too. That's the name they settled on.

Sarah: yeah, I know

Sarah: so am I

<==

its a lot more palatable in here
im not feeling like im getting ripped apart anymore
hah

ugh

alright

whoa wait theres a tv in here what the shit

uh

i dont know how to do that

but im just going to watch if thats okay

of course

heheheh

i love you

I love you too.

afterword: serketine^(ly, da)

or: the universe engine

waking up is a wish fulfillment fantasy. Nobody like Alex or Riley existed for me when plurality began to rear its head. It's strange, because as of late I've served as a similar kind of mentorship figure to other systems (two come to mind off the top of my head), since when we were first mapping out how we were planning on living life like this, we did *everything* wrong. Everyone who we talked to had things like internal communication, voluntary switching, et cetera already figured out, and no advice on how to build it. Inspiration on how to do things correctly came from an unexpected source: fanfiction.

The most obvious influence to my writing is *Homestuck*: specifically, *The Homestuck Epilogues*, a work published years after the original one. The *Epilogues* and spin-off works inspired me to interrogate fiction as a medium, because it, as a work, is reminiscent of *House of Leaves* in the way that it obsesses over the notion of an unreliable narrator, and parts even reflect the considerations of what it means to be bound by a narrative.

Sometimes I get comments on my work in which I'm told "you're so brave for publishing something in this style in 2023" (referring to *waking up*), or "you're so brave for talking about your fanfic publically" (referring to something not in this book for obvious reasons). In reality, I'm tired of pretending like traditionally ridiculed

works of media aren't themselves worthy of genuine analysis, especially when that ridicule itself is indicative of their societal impact! If something lives rent-free in the minds of many, that means that people read it and enjoyed it earnestly.

Specifically, one continuation living rent-free in my mind that fell out of the *Epilogues* was *godfeels* by Sarah Zedig, a fanfiction initially about the existential dread of existing within a narrative and being aware of it, shifting then to a genderangst version of June Egbert, and finally pivoting to a full scale space opera. It gets out of hand rather quickly, the metanarrative nonsense gets to a scale far beyond anything *Homestuck* proper ever tackled, and yet... June, as a character, is canonically and incontrovertibly plural. Everyone in the story has overt mental issues and traumas following various nightmarish cataclysmic events. Things seem hopeless, and yet they *work*. June, as a character, gave me a model for how an ideal system would actually work for me, a question which I agonized over in therapy for months with no meaningful conclusion. The very notion of narrative control and metafiction provide seamless ways to integrate the reality of dissociation: when June figures out her gender, the traditional and constant second-person tone of *Homestuck* shifts to first-person with June narrating. It's a mess, but there's beauty in the weeds.

The reason I enjoy that type of metanarrative is because I like to give my characters agency and room to breathe. My creative process largely consists of putting characters in a room and imagining how they'd interact, meaning that characterization *comes first*: I need to know exactly how a character would react in any scenario. Sometimes, this ends up manifesting in surprising ways:

the character Halley in *waking up* ended up just being an as-of-that-time unidentified and unnamed alter.

This type of character agency is the motivating factor behind formats like journals in *unnatural disaster* or chat logs in *waking up*: characters are writing to other characters, and not necessarily providing information to us, the reader. The characters themselves have a great deal of control over how their story is told, and what information they choose to exposit to the reader. The characters are an engine, a vehicle, for which their own universe is formed — their existence is unbound by the narrative they are put in, because they are the narrative.

waking up, especially, is a reflection on a specific scene¹ in the *Epilogues* in which two characters, Dirk and Calliope, actively fight for control of the narrative. The two battle it out, Calliope wins, and “**the prince finds that his hold on the narrative is slipping through his hands**”. In essence, the narrative in *waking up* isn’t a grand story with massive stakes, but the *internal narrative* we all keep for ourselves. When trying to recollect events, we inherently resort to the idea of storytelling, in a language more powerful than anything we could hope to codify in words alone.

The reality of fragmented memory and trauma is that the internal narrative stops being continuous, and has to be pieced together from disparate pieces. That dissimilarity can be represented, as in *waking up*, by chat logs — god knows how many times I’ve forgotten that something’s happened, only to find it recorded in plain words in texts. The split narrative in both *unnatural disaster* and *waking up* represent that: not just

1 Meat 27: <https://www.homestuck.com/epilogues/meat/27>

the distinction between the real and the unreal, the headspace and the real space, but the fact that both play at the same time for the story to be complete. Each is a memory, a fragment of the whole, forced together despite the fact that never the twain shall meet.

...Much like dashes and dots.

thanks^(da)

The problem with writing something this personal is that it's difficult to state exactly what people have done for you to bring this work into existence. In reality, this section isn't a thank you for this book as a project. It's a thank you for me—for *us*—as a project.

I refuse to provide context for what these people have done. Instead, you get a list of names, in no particular order, and with some pseudonyms.

This book is dedicated to:

Aria Givens
 Choir
 Floral Stone
 Meadow
 Olive
 Riley Raines
 Shinx Shfinx Sarah

every author from which I am inspired
 every person with CPTSD
 every system who hasn't figured life out yet
 every system who has figured life out
 the girlrotting support community¹
 vriska²

1 working title

2 vriska