

**AFTER WE SAW KIDS POINTING  
AT THAT DEAD BABY WHALE ON THE BEACH  
DURING THE MOST ROMANTIC SUNSET EVER  
AND YOU SAID "I GET IT" ALL BITTERLY  
AND I SAID "I'M NOT SURE YOU DO"**

Now that Joni Mitchell lyrics have started to make sense to you.  
Now that your beard is no longer a fashion statement,  
but a crude three-dimensional graph illustrating  
the number of years you pictured her lips while failing her.  
Now that you've cried so hard and long the 4th Street  
beggars are pressing quarters into your palms.

You know how good it can feel, in its own way,  
to be so profoundly disappointed in yourself.  
How strangely magnificent, to be this demolished,  
to have taken it, as they say, like a man—on the chin, to the testicles—  
to have tried to take a bite with your last dangling tooth of dignity  
and come away starving and grinning and sobbing.

'Cause really, how much worse can it get?

Short answer: a lot worse.

Don't think about that right now.

You've broken all the promises you never made,  
and few that you did, and they turned around  
and broke you right back.

So be it.

From here on out you don't have to pretend  
to be perfect, or whole, or even right.

Your eyes can take a vacation  
from being windows to your soul.

You can hang out with the other war torn countries,

who you suddenly share a language with.  
Poland will show you her scars.  
Croatia will teach you card games so cutthroat  
you won't be able to speak for days.  
Iraq will start accepting your apologies.

It may not feel like it just yet  
but you've stumbled upon a kind of freedom.

Your stomach now full of pride,  
you can take your expectations off like clothes.  
Stand outside in the cool night air  
and show off your brand new shamelessness.  
Howl if that's your thing.  
Scare the neighbor's cat.  
Breathe easy.  
Notice the Moon's gained weight.

## TREMOLO

When my father began selling off his things,  
he put off unloading the Steinway baby grand piano  
as long as possible, and had the decency to call me  
when it was time. He was practiced at postponing disaster.  
The piano was the highest ticket item he had. I knew  
how badly he needed the money, so, it meant something.

*The sign of a great piano is how quietly you can play it*  
is what he told me when he bought it, when he was  
at the summit of his happiness and self-philanthropy.  
He had this gleam in his eye back then, when he was  
entertaining guests, that I mistook for joy. He would  
brandish the glossy black back of it like a pet whale, like

an endangered species he had become close friends with.  
He would be sure to point out where Henry Z. Steinway,  
great grandson of the patriarch himself, had signed it,  
just inside the haughty curve of its hip. What is hubris,  
anyway, if not the signal of great imagination? Of someone  
who has let the true self float up like a hot air balloon?

What would you jettison to stay in the soft bright clouds  
just one more day? At the time, I was still in love  
with my father the way children are. The dark  
growth of his mistakes was weighing everything  
down now, and I wanted his weakness to bring out  
something gentle in me. Even though I had learned

the *Pathetique* on this piano. Even though I had  
scaled its fingers with my fingers nearly every day  
for seven years. Even though I could close my eyes

while seated at any table, see the keys take their positions  
like skinny dancers on a chess board, and play the blank wood  
perfectly. I told him, “It’s okay, Dad. It’s just a thing,”

then placed the phone back in its cradle, my eyes burning,  
my hands shaking, my heart hammering out the song  
that isn’t a dirge, but how a dirge begins in the mind  
of the composer, when she is still trying to get a handle  
on the shape of it, the swelling changing shape  
of the loss.

## ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

I would like to thank first of all my asthmatic lungs,  
my inadequacy in the bedroom,  
my dark Texas reckless streak and waning night vision  
that make awareness of my own mortality possible.

Next, I would like to thank my constant nightmares  
for their vivid, arresting creativity—  
their cheerful execution of ritual disembowelment,  
their lifelike rendering of flesh-eating animatronic bunnies,  
and their resourcefulness in general with symbols for personal failure.

I must thank my inability to balance a checkbook  
coupled with my whimsical attitude about money  
and my magically disappearing work ethic,  
without which my debt would be nothing.

And while we're at it, thank you Blockbuster Video  
for ruining my credit with \$17 in late fees from 1996.

Next: a big thanks to my father, the pathological liar  
who, in his way, taught me to be a poet.  
Thank you sanity for being a finite natural resource.

To my crippling self doubt: thanks.  
To my weak left eye, my squishy arms,  
my smaller right breast, misshapen as a Tijuana coin purse: thanks.

Thank you allergic rash.  
Thank you pens which run out of ink when I'm finally being brilliant.  
Thank you humiliation, with a special shout out to Brad Carlson.\*

Thank you to my guts.  
I love your red twistyness, your endless judgmental bullshit,  
your fleshy gears, your broken alarm bells  
that look like little French knots.  
I trusted you.

Finally, I would like to thank you  
for sleeping with that other woman  
who was so much prettier than me.  
For a moment, you really had me going—  
whip cream puppies, slippery cloud sex, forever and ever and all that.  
There was so much sweet hope in my plastic farm heart,  
the ants were building sugarcastles in my ventricles.  
There was so much dopamine sogging my brain  
I thought we had invented flying.

It's so much better here on the ground,  
where the morning light tastes like asphalt and swing set rust.  
Where everything has teeth that glow.  
Where I can afford large grains of salt  
with the money I save  
buying into nothing.

*\* Brad Carlson you know what you did.*