

I can't see you anymore. All that's left are two hollow eyes, golden brown.

I can't hear you anymore. All that's left are words, vacant and ringing.

I can't smell you anymore. All that's left is the stench of war: smoke and sweat.

You used to look like the sun. I remember when I was younger, and you would smile.

"Where do babies come from?" I said.

"A special place," was your answer.

"Where?"

"The clouds, Lilah. They float you right on down to your momma and daddy. That's why babies' hair feels like cloud fluff."

"Oh. Can my cloud be pink?"

"Sure, Lilah, sure. Your cloud was the prettiest pink." Then you smiled that smile of music and light. Even with your crooked 12-year-old teeth, it was the most beautiful thing in my world.

You used to sound like the church bells on Sunday morning. I remember when you were carefree, and you would laugh.

"Let's go fishing!" I said.

"Lilah, you don't know how to fish," was your answer.

"Sure I do!"

"Name one thing you know about it, then."

"You tackle the worms until they're dead, and then you hook 'em up with the fish."

Then you laughed a chiming of birdsong and jingle-bells. It was contagious. I bet even at a funeral, if you started, everyone's faces would light up.

You used to smell like spring mornings, damp and dewy. I remember when you would come home from school, and I would hug you.

“I’m home!” was your greeting every weekday afternoon at 3:00. It was my cue to take the stairs 2-by-2 until I reached you on the landing. You would sweep me into your firm, strong arms, and I would nestle there, secure. I would breathe in deeply every time, relishing your smell of outside: pinecones and freshly cut grass, hay and the mustiness of the barn you got it from. When you left a year ago, I would sneak into your room every night and bury my face in your shirt drawer, just to smell you, my big, strong idol, my brother.

One sticky, August night, way after Momma tucked me into bed, the front door opened, and I heard boots clunk onto the landing. My heart leapt with joy: a little bird peeping and flitting about in there, singing its song of relief and elation. You were back! I didn’t even wait for your signature “I’m home” before tearing down the staircase and beaming up at you, waiting for your own flawless smile to greet me. You didn’t smile. I didn’t think much of it, however, because of-course-you-must-be-tired, so I gave myself a boost and jumped into your arms. You set me right back down, though, and even frowned a little bit.

I didn’t like the frown. It was like hearing a cat bark or seeing a horse walk around on two legs: just wrong. It didn’t belong on your face; it was a scar, a mask, something to be rid of as soon as possible. So I smiled up bigger and wrapped my arms around your middle, where I could reach comfortably.

“Not now, Delilah.” Delilah? Since when do you call me Delilah? I’m Lilah! Your partner in crime, your BFF, your little sister! Your pest, apparently. You pushed me away. I was genuinely hurt. My smile disappeared, and tears filled my eyes as I rushed back upstairs and dove under my covers, hiding from your torrent of agitation. I heard our parents gently chastise you, before kissing up to your reign of vexation by letting you alone. No one likes seeing you like that.

Two days later, I heard your scream in the very early morning. The salmons and oranges of dawn were just beginning to seep into our house when that wretched sound woke me up. I sprinted into your room, sure you were dying of something simply awful, but you were just sitting there, staring at the ceiling, and screeching like an owl. Not knowing what to do, I climbed up into your lap and cupped a hand over your mouth. It seemed to work, because you stopped hollering and your eyes focused on me, confused and disoriented, as if you couldn’t remember where you were. Then I caught the reflection of my scared eyes in yours, and I knew you finally saw me, really saw me, for the first time since you came home. Then you started bawling.

Seeing you cry was like seeing you frown: improper. It didn’t fit on your face correctly, a clown nose that wasn’t the least bit funny. I remembered Momma comforting me when I was pensive about you leaving, and I thought what you felt must be similar. Because I could not possibly rock you, I settled with shushing and brushing back your hair, tentatively at first. You didn’t frown at me, so I continued more confidently, began telling you stories of all the things that happened while you were away. I eventually got to how I learned to read, and was telling you

about my favorite books, my favorite stories, when the tears stopped flowing. You took one last gulp and brought a hand up to brush the water from your cheeks. Then you just continued sitting upright in your bed, breathing steadily, and eyes focused on nothing. I was getting drowsy, so I snuggled into the crook of your arm and drifted off to sleep.

Daddy found us the next morning. The sun was already high in the sky, and he said he was beginning to wonder if we had gotten eaten. I smiled, but you didn't. You were laying down now, me on your chest, staring at the ceiling again. Daddy plucked me off you and put me on his back, waiting for me to loop my arms around his neck before carrying me downstairs, to where Momma was waiting at the kitchen table. She looked troubled, and I knew I was getting a-talking-to, the likes of which I have never enjoyed. Daddy plopped me down on a chair, and then went back upstairs, to confront you, I guess. I could tell our parents were getting unhappy with the way you were mopey all the time since you returned.

When Momma started talking, I could tell it wasn't the conventional a-talking-to. It was about you. I listened solemnly while Momma told me about your "condition." She called it PTSD. I call it Petsd, because it is easier to say and sounds less like a disease. Petsd makes you sad, angry, and confused all rolled into one. It sounds horrible! She told me not to talk to you about it, that it would make you feel even worse, although I can't imagine how you could feel worse than you already look. You haven't smiled. You haven't laughed. You smell terrible. You look terrible. I miss you.

It's been a month since you came back. Every day you sit on your bed, stare at the ceiling, and frown. Every day I come home from school, and I venture into your room's dark depths. Every day you refuse to acknowledge my existence. Every day you shut us out. Every day you hurt, and because of that, every day I hurt.

All I want is to see you again, to hear you again, to smell you again. But I don't know what to do. You've been bringing me down with you, and all I have left are my fantasies. The stories I told you about that one night when you cried, I read those over and over, get lost in their depths, steal artificial happiness from the words on their pages.

"This is a story about something that happened long ago when your grandfather was a child. It is a very important story because it shows how all the comings and goings between our own world and the land of Narnia first began." *Chronicles of Narnia, Book 1, The Magician's Nephew, C.S. Lewis, Chapter 1, The Wrong Door, Paragraph 1.*

I love this story. Of the few books that I own, it's the only one that makes me feel like I am a true part of its words. I wish I lived with Polly and Digory, partook in their adventures, lived in that in-between land with the silver pools and infinite worlds. I wish I could jump in one of those ponds with you, transport you away from your Petsd, your anger, and your sadness. I wish you would be happy.

“It wasn’t a human. It couldn’t be. It was four times as tall as the tallest human. It was so tall its head was higher than the upstairs windows of the houses. Sophie opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out. Her throat, like her whole body, was frozen with fright. This was the witching hour all right.” BFG, Roald Dahl, Chapter 2, Who, Paragraph 1.

This part scares me, no matter that I’ve read it 4 times. It sends a spike of adrenaline through my veins, so powerful I get wonderful shivers on the backs of my legs. I wish I could lend you my feelings, so you could feel this, feel alive again. Lend you my feelings...Maybe I can. The words, they are my feelings. They are the indescribable invigoration that rescue me always. Can I bring them to you? Is it possible? You don’t read anymore. You say it’s boring, that nothing can ever amount to the reality you felt overseas. But you don’t have to read *all* the words, just the special ones, the ones that help, that inspire, that fix you.

This is my idea. It’s been long enough, and you need to live again, so I’ll bring you my world. I rush to my library, the chest under my bed, and with me, I bring a giant roll of paper, scissors, and paste. The Petsd Project has begun.

I love these books, but I love you more, so I bear down on them with the scissors, merciless. I begin with cutting out the first and last pages of every chapter. It has come to my attention that these particular sections tend to be coated with fresh drama, exhilarating cliffhangers, and uplifting conclusions. I find spooky descriptions, like “milky-white” and “misty,” and mysterious object, like “something.” This latter one may not seem interesting to the naked eye, but underneath its exterior is a glorious enigma. “Something” can mean anything. It can mean a dark and evil person, a magical object, or an unknown and frightening creature. Open-ended.

“Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you’d expect to be involved with anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn’t hold with such nonsense.” Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone, JK Rowling, Chapter 1, The Boy Who Lived, Paragraph 1.

I start on the first page of this book, because its story is filled a whole array of fresh, inspiring words and double-meanings. I decide to take the entire first title of the first chapter, because it sets the mood for the entire story. “The Boy who Lived.” I snip carefully along the edges, trying to make it straight as possible, and leave a little space of white underneath “Who.” In that space, I write in my jaggy, unsure scrawl: “You.” You are the boy who lived. You need to understand that.

“Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, ‘and what is the use of a book,’ thought Alice ‘without pictures or conversation?’” Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll, Chapter 1, Down the Rabbit-Hole, Paragraph 1.

This book is almost as good as Harry Potter when it comes to its word-bank. I like Alice’s collection of made-up objects, some silly, some admirable, some just plain wonderful. I choose a smattering of words from this introductory monologue, including “peeped,” “reading,” “sister,” and “conversation.” I gingerly clip them out and slide them into an envelope already full of scraps of stories. Then I move on to the next page.

“Tom!”

No answer.

“Tom!”

No answer.

“What’s gone with that boy, I wonder? You TOM!”

No answer.” Tom Sawyer, Mark Twain, Chapter 1, Tom Plays, Fights, and Hides, Paragraph 1.

It’s been a week of cutting, gathering, and blistering, and I’m finally on the last book. I decide to cut out these entire first few sentences, crossing out each “Tom” and replacing them with your name. You’re like Tom, hiding from me. I hope you get the hint.

Finally, it is time. I stare down at the sheet of paper I have rolled out. The butcher paper is stretched across the width of my room, and entirely coated with glue, hungry for my input. The bulging envelope is in my fingers, and with a shaking hand I gently tip it over, letting the words fall like snow from its depths. I run alongside the paper, and let the snippets splash across the white canvas. It is joy flooding the world, peace raining down, closure emanating from each gift.

“Jump,” “wizard,” “blubbing,” “moonbeam,” “Diagon,” “wand,” “magic,” “marmalade,” “Longitude,” “Dinah,” “grand,” “curtsey,” “cake,” “hookey,” “adventure,” “trick,” “pantaloon,” “Expelliarmus,” and many other gorgeous words grace my presence as I take in the completed masterpiece. And it really is a masterpiece, I think. I hope you think so, too.

I wait until the whole house is asleep. I had to sit in front of my door to ensure Momma and Daddy didn’t come in and see my project; it’s your surprise, not theirs. Now I slink down the hall, to your room. I ease open the door, ever so slightly, trying not to rustle the paper that is rolled up under my arm. It looks different, your room I mean. It’s cold and pale, lacking the luster I used to associate with it.

The time has come for me to bring you back. I unroll the scroll of words and take two of the thumbtacks I took with me. Shuffling to the wall opposite your bed, I pin up my present. Tomorrow morning will be different.

I awake to a figure standing in my doorway, blocking the hall light. It's you. There are tears in your eyes, but this time I know they're not from bad dreams, because you're smiling. That smile of music and light. I run up to hug you, and you don't push me away. I breathe in; you smell like the outside again. You nudge my side with a book, one of yours. "Find me some more words, Lilah." I look into your eyes, and you laugh. Chimes. You're back!