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Opening extract from

Love Letters to the Dead

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Dear Kurt Cobain,

Mrs. Buster gave us our first assignment in English today, to write a letter to a dead person. As if the letter could reach you in heaven, or at the post office for ghosts. She probably meant for us to write to someone like a former president or something, but I need someone to talk to. I couldn't talk to a president. I can talk to you.

I wish you could tell me where you are now and why you left. You were my sister May's favorite musician. Since she's been gone, it's hard to be myself, because I don't know exactly who I am. But now that I've started high school, I need to figure it out really fast. Because I can tell that otherwise, I could drown here.

The only things I know about high school are from May. On my first day, I went into her closet and found the outfit that I remember her wearing on her first day—a pleated skirt with a pink cashmere sweater that she cut the neck off of and pinned a Nirvana patch to, the smiley face one with the x-shaped eyes. But the thing about May is that she was beautiful, in a way that stays in your mind. Her hair was perfectly smooth, and she walked like she belonged in a better world, so the outfit made sense on her. I put it on and stared at myself in front of her mirror, trying to feel like I belonged in any world, but on me it looked like I was wearing a costume. So I used my favorite outfit from middle school instead, which is jean

overalls with a long-sleeve tee shirt and hoop earrings. When I stepped into the hall of West Mesa High, I knew right away this was wrong.

The next thing I realized is that you aren't supposed to bring your lunch. You are supposed to buy pizza and Nutter Butters, or else you aren't supposed to even eat lunch. My aunt Amy, who I live with every other week now, has started making me iceberg lettuce and mayonnaise sandwiches on kaiser rolls, because that's what we liked to have, May and I, when we were little. I used to have a normal family. I mean, not a perfect one, but it was Mom and Dad and May and me. Now that seems like a long time ago. But Aunt Amy tries hard, and she likes making the sandwiches so much, I can't explain that they aren't right in high school. So I go into the girls' bathroom, eat the kaiser roll as quickly as I can, and throw the paper bag in the trash for tampons.

It's been a week, and I still don't know anyone here. All the kids from my middle school went to Sandia High, which is where May went. I didn't want everyone there feeling sorry for me and asking questions I couldn't answer, so I came to West Mesa instead, the school in Aunt Amy's district. This is supposed to be a fresh start, I guess.

Since I don't really want to spend all forty-three minutes of lunch in the bathroom, once I finish my kaiser roll I go outside and sit by the fence. I turn myself invisible so I can just watch. The trees are starting to rain leaves, but the air is still hot enough to swim through. I especially like to watch this

boy, whose name I figured out is Sky. He always wears a leather jacket, even though summer is barely over. He reminds me that the air isn't just something that's there. It's something you breathe in. Even though he's all the way across the school yard, I feel like I can see his chest rising up and down.

I don't know why, but in this place full of strangers, it feels good that Sky is breathing the same air as I am. The same air that you did. The same air as May.

Sometimes your music sounds like there's too much inside of you. Maybe even you couldn't get it all out. Maybe that's why you died. Like you exploded from the inside. I guess I am not doing this assignment the way I am supposed to. Maybe I'll try again later.

Yours,
Laurel



Dear Kurt Cobain,

When Mrs. Buster asked us to pass our letters up at the end of class today, I looked at my notebook where I wrote mine and folded it closed. As soon as the bell rang, I hurried to pack my stuff and left. There are some things that I can't tell anyone, except the people who aren't here anymore.

The first time May played your music for me, I was in eighth grade. She was in tenth. Ever since she'd gotten to high

school, she seemed further and further away. I missed her, and the worlds we used to make up together. But that night in the car, it was just the two of us again. She put on "Heart-Shaped Box," and it was like nothing I'd ever heard before.

When May turned her eyes from the road and asked, "Do you like it?" it was as if she'd opened the door to her new world and was asking me in. I nodded yes. It was a world full of feelings that I didn't have words for yet.

Lately, I've been listening to you again. I put on *In Utero*, close the door and close my eyes, and play the whole thing a lot of times. And when I am there with your voice, it's hard to explain it, but I feel like I start to make sense.

After May died last April, it's like my brain just shut off. I didn't know how to answer any of the questions my parents asked, so I basically stopped talking for a little while. And finally we all stopped talking, at least about that. It's a myth that grief makes you closer. We were all on our own islands—Dad in the house, Mom in the apartment she'd moved into a few years before, and me bouncing back and forth in silence, too out of it to go to the last months of middle school.

Eventually Dad turned up the volume on his baseball games and went back to work at Rhodes Construction, and Mom left to go away to a ranch in California two months later. Maybe she was mad that I couldn't tell her what happened. But I can't tell anyone.

In the long summer sitting around, I started looking online for articles, or pictures, or some story that could replace the

one that kept playing in my head. There was the obituary that said May was a beautiful young woman and a great student and beloved by her family. And there was the one little article from the paper, "Local Teen Dies Tragically," accompanied by a photo of flowers and things that some kids from her old school left by the bridge, along with her yearbook picture, where she's smiling and her hair is shining and her eyes are looking right out at us.

Maybe you can help me figure out how to find a door to a new world again. I still haven't made any friends yet. I've actually hardly said a single word the whole week and a half I've been here, except "present" during roll call. And to ask the secretary for directions to class. But there is this girl named Natalie in my English class. She draws pictures on her arms. Not just normal hearts, but meadows with creatures and girls and trees that look like they are alive. She wears her hair in two braids that go down to her waist, and everything about her dark skin is perfectly smooth. Her eyes are two different colors—one is almost black, and the other is foggy green. She passed me a note yesterday with just a little smiley face on it. I am thinking that maybe soon I could try to eat lunch with her.

When everyone stands in line at lunch to buy stuff, they all look like they are standing together. I couldn't stop wishing that I was standing with them, too. I didn't want to bother Dad about asking for money, because he looks stressed out whenever I do, and I can't ask Aunt Amy, because she thinks I am

happy with the kaiser rolls. But I started collecting change when I find it—a penny on the ground or a quarter in the broken soda machine, and yesterday I took fifty cents off of Aunt Amy's dresser. I felt bad. Still, it made enough to buy a pack of Nutter Butters.

I liked everything about it. I liked waiting in line with everyone. I liked that the girl in front of me had red curls on the back of her head that you could tell she curled herself. And I liked the thin crinkle of the plastic when I opened the wrapper. I liked how every bite made a falling-apart kind of crunch.

Then what happened is this—I was nibbling a Nutter Butter and staring at Sky through the raining leaves. That's when he saw me. He was turning to talk to someone. He went into slow motion. Our eyes met for a minute, before mine darted away. It felt like fireflies lighting under my skin. The thing is, when I looked back up, Sky was still looking. His eyes were like your voice—keys to a place in me that could burst open.

Yours,
Laurel



Dear Judy Garland,

I thought of writing to you, because *The Wizard of Oz* is still my favorite movie. My mom would always put it on when

I stayed home sick from school. She would give me ginger ale with pink plastic ice cubes and cinnamon toast, and you would be singing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow."

I realize now that everyone knows your face. Everyone knows your voice. But not everyone knows where you were really from, when you weren't from the movies.

I can imagine you as a little girl on a December day in the town where you grew up on the edge of the Mojave Desert, tap-tap-tap-dancing onstage in your daddy's movie theater. Singing your jingle bells. You learned right away that applause sounds like love.

I can imagine you on summer nights, when everyone would come to the theater to get out of the heat. Under the refrigerated air, you would be up onstage, making the audience forget for the moment that there was anything to be afraid of. Your mom and dad would smile up at you. They looked the happiest when you were singing.

Afterward, the movie would pass by in a blur of black and white, and you would get suddenly sleepy. Your daddy would carry you outside, and it was time to drive home in his big car, like a boat swimming over the dark asphalt surface of the earth.

You never wanted anyone to be sad, so you kept singing. You'd sing yourself to sleep when your parents were fighting. And when they weren't fighting, you'd sing to make them laugh. You used your voice like glue to keep your family together. And then to keep yourself from coming undone.

My mom used to sing me and May to sleep with a lullaby. Her voice would croon, "*all bound for morning town . . .*" She would stroke my hair and stay until I slept. When I couldn't sleep, she would tell me to imagine myself in a bubble over the sea. I would close my eyes and float there, listening to the waves. I would look down at the shimmering water. When the bubble broke, I would hear her voice, making a new bubble to catch me.

But now when I try to imagine myself over the sea, the bubble pops right away. I have to open my eyes with a start before I crash. Mom is too sad to take care of me. She and Dad split up right before May started high school, and after May died almost two years later, she went all the way to California.

With just Dad and me at our house, it's full of echoes everywhere. I go back in my mind to when we were all together. I can smell the sizzle of the meat from Mom making dinner. It sparkles. I can almost look out the window and see May and me in the yard, collecting ingredients for our fairy spells.

Instead of staying with Mom every other week like May and I did after the divorce, now I stay with Aunt Amy. Her house is a different kind of empty. It's not full of ghosts. It's quiet, with shelves set up with rose china, and china dolls, and rose soaps meant to wash out sadness. But always saved for when they are really needed, I guess. We just use Ivory in the bathroom.

I am looking out the window now in her cold house, from under the rose quilt, to find the first star.

I wish you could tell me where you are now. I mean, I know

you're dead, but I think there must be something in a human being that can't just disappear. It's dark out. You're out there. Somewhere, somewhere. I'd like to let you in.

Yours,
Laurel



Dear Elizabeth Bishop,

I want to tell you about two things that happened in English today. We read your poem, and I talked in class for the first time. I've been in high school for two weeks now, and so far I had been spending most of the period looking out the window, watching the birds flying between phone wires and twinkling aspens. I was thinking about this boy, Sky, and wondering what he sees when he closes his eyes, when I heard my name. I looked up. The birds' wings started beating in my chest.

Mrs. Buster was staring at me. "Laurel. Will you read?"

I didn't even know what page we were on. I could feel my mind going blank. But then Natalie leaned over and flipped my Xerox to the right poem. It started like this:

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

At first, I was so nervous. But while I was reading, I started listening, and I just understood it.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
*though it may look like (*Write *it!) like disaster.*

I think my voice might have been shaking too much, like the poem earthquaked me. The room was dead quiet when I stopped.

Mrs. Buster did what she does, which is to stare at the class with her big bug eyes and say, "What do you think?"

Natalie glanced in my direction. I think she felt bad because everyone was looking not at Mrs. Buster, but at me. So she raised her hand and said, "Well, of course she's lying. It's not easy to lose things." Then everyone stopped looking at me and looked at Natalie.

Mrs. Buster said, "Why are some things harder to lose than others?"

Natalie had a no-duh sound in her voice when she answered. "Because of love, of course. The more you love something, the harder it is to lose."

I raised my hand before I could even think about it. "I think it's like when you lose something so close to you, it's like losing yourself. That's why at the end, it's hard for her to write even. She can hardly remember how. Because she barely knows what she is anymore."

The eyes all turned back to me, but after that, thank god, the bell rang.

I gathered up my stuff as quickly as I could. I looked over at Natalie, and she looked like maybe she was waiting for me. I thought this might be the day that she would ask if I wanted to eat lunch with her and I could stop sitting at the fence.

But Mrs. Buster said, "Laurel, can I talk to you a moment?" I hated her then, because Natalie left. I shifted in front of her desk. She said, "How are you doing?"

My palms were still sweaty from talking in class. "Um, fine."

"I noticed that you didn't turn in your first assignment. The letter?"

I stared down at the fluorescent light reflected in the floor and mumbled, "Oh, yeah. Sorry. I didn't finish it yet."

"All right. I'll give you an extension this time. But I'd like you to get it to me by next week."

I nodded.

Then she said, "Laurel, if you ever need anyone to talk to . . ."

I looked up at her blankly.

"I used to teach at Sandia," she said carefully. "May was in my English class her freshman year."

My breath caught in my chest. I started to feel dizzy. I had counted on no one here knowing, or at least no one talking about it. But now Mrs. Buster was staring at me like I could give her some kind of answer to an awful mystery. I couldn't.

Finally Mrs. Buster said, "She was a special girl."

I swallowed. "Yeah," I said. And I walked out the door.

The noise in the hallway changed into the loudest river I've ever heard. I thought maybe I could close my eyes and all of the voices would carry me away.

Yours,
Laurel