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A Letter Would Have Been Fine

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Melanie Fee



I am about to graduate in May, 2004 with a B.A. in English. This poetry represents the culmination of my work as a Gaines Fellow. Writing over the years has become a larger and more legitimate part of my life, and I am very grateful to the Gaines Center for providing a venue for this type of creative work. These poems were written in the fall of 2003 over a fairly short period of time, and are part of a larger group of poems, which I hope to work into a book-length collection this summer, perhaps for some type of publication. This group of poems is a narrative about loss, abandonment, and how the narrator copes with this to become a stronger, self-aware person. All three of my thesis committee members, Professors Gurney Norman, Randall Roorda, and Jane Vance, proved to be extremely supportive and enthusiastic mentors, and their advice was indispensable to me. After graduating, I plan to work on writing and submitting my work to various journals, along with finding an MFA program to attend in the fall of 2005.



Mentor:
Jane Gentry Vance, Ph.D.
Professor, Department of English and in the Honors Program

Melanie Fee's "A Letter Would Have Been Fine," a series of short poems, is actually one long poem in which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. This collection both implies a narrative and explores honestly the deep and shifting feelings of the protagonist (the "I" of the poems), who has been left holding the shreds of a broken relationship. The narrator, through images that place us in her skin, makes us feel what she feels, thus compelling us to follow her into the depths of her pain and, finally, to emerge with her, at the end of the work, into new coherences in her life, the beginnings of healing.

The narrator's voice in the poems, non-rhetorical and human, convinces us that it comes from a real person. The integrity and strength of this voice, along with the realness of the character's suffering and her emergence from it, are the remarkable accomplishments of this poet's work. The strong emotional suspense it creates is akin to that evoked by a good short story.

The poet does not simply describe how her protagonist feels or tell us explicitly what feeling her story should elicit from us. Instead, these compressed, intense poems, in which every word is necessary and none is wasted, dramatize the character's states of mind and body. This creates in the reader a strong sense of her emotions and experiences. This achievement, and Melanie's dramatic, energetic use of language, partakes of the essence of poetry.

A Letter Would Have Been Fine

are we in a decline she said dangling feet	9.17 i see eighteen people with your silhouette every day
into too blue water sometimes i want to go back don't you know	and this is a lot of gasps and startled breaths to keep up with i have
what i mean he tells her that finally	an idea of you maybe just ripping the rest of your limbs off of my body
things have direction they are both moving forward	so that i may stop this perpetual false recognition that by the end of the day
maybe with their faces turned away	leaves me limp do i dare
but no she gets a feeling looking into the tall trees	
crossed by powerlines and knows something is missing	

do i dare
i can't connect
with these
shadows
you send
to torment me
nor
get any satisfaction
from knowing
you are not here you
are not
here

9.18

your phone is cutting
out cutting
me as you are sitting
outside of
the hospital
you won't tell me
why you're there or
what you've been doing for
these weeks of my nonexistence
to you

i guess it's the monitors
heart machines keeping
people alive all pulsing
together in a mechanical way that
causes the
interference
when i keep asking questions
and there's a space where i know
you are talking
saying wonderful things i'm
sure but i just can't hear them
i only am tuned back in for you
to say
i'm here
you of all things
are not here
maybe you're making these silences yourself to
save
thoughts or see me react
i can't react and tell
you nothing

nothing about my
looking around the house
thinking you'll eventually turn
up a lost scarf something exotic
and i tell nothing about
keeping my air conditioner
rattling away all night
drowning out voices and noises both
inside

and out of my head
i certainly can't bring up
how i drove
out of town
into the coolness to the
farm where you lived this summer
one night late music too loud
and what did i expect
a spectre of your previous
self jumping in front
of my car saying
no stop you've missed the
turn and i've been waiting for you so
long my plans were to skip work
and make love to you
all morning

no
i finally had to turn back
out by the interstate
watch degrees rise
as i head back into more
concrete
chiding myself
maybe i just don't have the right senses
you're really
all around me
burying your face in my hair
looking
into me
maybe if i just try harder
you will appear
but now you're saying
you have to go
and i still don't know
why
why you're even there
why i feel

like you're around
every corner
you worry too much you
write i can hear the
tone and it's much too
lighthearted
for my taste

9.19

so i try to correspond
communicate
reply
and you say
a letter would
have been fine
and i am confused
because this is
what i thought i gave you
but
no
you say
that was a poem
and i am frightened
by this unintentional poem
like maybe
i've given away
more than i meant to
or that this is
the only way
i think anymore
or maybe you're
fucking with my head
because other than
that you've told me
nothing
i don't want to
ask these questions again
it gives you power
i don't know
why i kid myself
like maybe i'm putting
a gauze curtain
between me and the
fact of your power
now it's been
another week

with nothing
and i'm looking
for excuses
and swatting them
away as they come
fluttering round
because really
you should be giving me
excuses
they should
be pouring out of
you like wine
turning my head
making my face redden
you know
you could do it
it would be so easy
and i would write poems
that i knew were poems
to you
if you'd let me
but somehow
i know
you'd think they were letters

9.20

some contour of
cheekbone
is mesmerizing me
a dance of
flesh over
bone
then
a second glance
and all falls away
crumbling and constructing
itself into the un-you-ness
that i find
unbearable

(why am i mad at
all of these people
for not being you
it makes more sense
to concentrate my anger
tunnel funnel it all
into you so maybe

you'll feel a brush of it
all the way over there
and think some small wind
has kissed your cheek
because that's what my
anger dissolves into
when i think about your
cheek slight overlapping
of your front teeth
any part of you
for that matter)

does it matter
i wonder if you know
how finally i had
to put your soap
away
out of my shower
because every time
stepping in
your scent
was making
my insides blink
i would take it in my
hands marvel at the
fact that yes
your damp self stood
in this very spot
yes you were in this house
many hours

sometimes
i look
for some message you might
have
left lying around
it makes me
angry
that there is nothing
nothing of mine
in your life
nothing to inspect
inhale
handle
for hope of grabbing
some small essence
left behind

9.21

i am letting the
phone ring as we
sit at my kitchen
table eating cheap
chinese food for
breakfast on a
sunday morning

we listen to the
message together
on speakerphone
and see what he
has to say something
about

are you okay
and a troubling
dream

i don't know
whether to cry
or smile but we
let it drop you
said there's no
point in jealousy
because if there's a
reason to be jealous
the woman is already
gone at the time this
seemed
enlightened
but now i feel like
it shows your
unwillingness
to fight for things

i'd like to think
that you'd have
fought to keep me
or at least put
in an appearance
at our final moment
but you haven't even
let me know that
much if our final
moment has even happened

i talked about how
 conversational how
 fucking conversational
 that table was
 you and me sitting
 there like a happy
 farmhouse couple
 having an argument
 about whether fitzgerald
 really counts as an american
 novelist since he was an
 expatriate

i remember you asking me
 about virginia woolf the
 night we met i could
 barely hear you
 above the noise but
 you were so impressed
 that i actually liked
 literature that i guess
 you didn't care
 what i answered

i try to have
 talks with the
 book you've left here
 on my kitchen table
 it tells me little
 inside is a folded
 paper
 art in joyce
 joyce—
 woolf—
 very enlightening
 i'm beginning to
 think you are
 really buried in
 some kind of academic
 landslide never to be
 seen again and i can
 see the headlines
 with a grim smile

10.01

i'd like to think
 that soon
 i could walk down
 the street
 you'd pass
 and i wouldn't even see you
 not the kind of
 pretending
 to not see you
 that i might try
 to see how you'd react
 but really showing
 how gone you are
 from my consciousness
 that the images
 that make up you
 don't coincide
 in my eye
 anymore

i want to not
 see you
 in every
 tall lanky
 male
 with defined cheekbones why
 can't i get
 your damned bone structure
 out of my head
 i see you
 from all angles
 know the small furrow
 of your sleeping brow

that
 i think
 is love
 or something
 just as profound
 when your face eyes hands
 are burnt
 into my seeing
 waking self
 so much

that weeks
 plus months
 are not erasing
 anything

10.29

i climb
 up and down
 the branches
 on my wallpaper
 every night
 to get
 a better perspective
 see
 a little farther
 i just know
 that one of these nights
 upon reaching the
 top
 i'll see your far off
 form
 focusing itself
 into view

you'll be tired
 and dirty
 and i won't
 care that i
 did not hear from
 you the entire
 month of september
 because it's getting
 on winter now
 and it's cold in here

you'll have
 a story
 of where you've been
 for these stacks
 of days
 and i'll believe it

you'll use the key
 that you still haven't
 returned to me
 and

come
right
in

you'll say
 i was keepin it
 all this time
 for a reason
and i'll smile
and hate myself
for not being able
to resist

the last time
i talked to you
i pretended nothing
was wrong
and even asked you
if you wanted me to visit
knowing i would
make that trip right
then you just
say
the word
you said
 no you said
you were going
to sleep
and i had to wonder

if she was there right
then if she was hearing
me plead if she was
the one to watch your
sleeping face
that night

11.03

maybe i'm treading on the
heels
of a goddess
but when i look in the mirror
all i see are fragments

head arms wrists
a person perhaps
but my body can't remember
 decide
whether to take the form
of a desperate lover
or if i should be wading
through the wax of my
past pulling out what i need
melting the rest

maybe i am this type of
mental driftwood to you
balance me on this notion
of yours that maybe you'll wash me away
or either we'll get together
and have a beer sometime

it's the in between
 the memory of you
long flat wrists
that makes me think
all of this was inevitable
 the weight of my hands
 lifting open your eyelids
to see the light

11.04

if i could only get rid
of this skin of mine
forget touch
altogether
not notice
the particular electricity
of a hand or wrist
on the back of my neck
then no one
would have power over me make me
compare
every meeting of flesh with flesh
to how ours in the same vicinity
for so long finally came together in
something like a poem

11.14

i slip through cracks
in vents at night
and try
rearranging myself
again
to see if this time
i'll come out
mad not just with
this thick quiet
that's been hanging around
piled with the books
on my table

somewhere in these
dark spaces
you and i
are dancing
sitting and
not needing
the conventions
of chairs and light
to sustain us

i see each thread
 in cloth
and the different
tiny intersections
are beautiful

i think of us
like this
sliding down the lampshade
just trying
to avoid
the flame of the candle below

11.30

are you
even
still alive?

you become
more my ghost
every day

it's not like
 you're haunting me
 no
 you're some kind of
 loner spirit
 hanging round
 my empty wine bottles
 and
 bellowing your
 silence
 into my night

i don't
 wish
 your absence
 just your presence
 in a different form

i try to lure
 you
 into my bedroom
 but it never works

the clock on the wall
 has stopped
 for awhile now
 and i've gotten
 used to 3 o'clock
 all the time
 i'd like to believe
 that none of
 this time
 is passing

that it isn't
 becoming harder
 to recall
 why it was
 that you
 were my ideal
 of pain
 of everything

i want still
 to feel you like being ripped
 out of my own body

and poured
 into a wineglass
 to swim with you
 but
 it's wearing off now
 a shadow dream
 growing more obscure
 and grey
 as days pile

12.01

what are you
 the dark of an open door
 at night
 or looking through blinds
 into an empty room
 i know not what you
 are or were
 to me her or anyone
 i assume you're still
 flowing
 through your life

sometimes filling
 completely
 then emptying
 some vessel
 like me

i dream now of
 empty benches
 cellophane
 drifting along the
 inside of my mind

and you
 much like this
 here
 and then not here
 almost
 camera flash fast

but an imprint
 just the same
 i still look for you
 not in you anymore

but in myself
 despite this
 poured-out feeling

12.05

maybe you've found that place
 on me
 the skin thinner
 tender
 the blue vein showing through a little more
 i believed in my own strength
 built it up
 surrounded myself
 in thorns
 but now i sit
 i do nothing do nothing do nothing
 shake from exhaustion days blur nights blur
 into siren scream
 my skin shedding itself
 all over falling around me like
 bells
 but you i am still finally in the
 hollow of your collarbone
 the light shines retreats
 and shines again

12.06

if we could sometime return
 to books and arguments
 to the farmhouse where we
 never wrote and lived
 would it be a protection
 against the chance of
 never feeling like this again
 like i'm wrapped down to
 the core in some
 thick amber glass air bubbles
 getting through but not much else

i didn't go out today but
 rather sat with a blanket on my
 legs and imagined your eyes
 i thought of stairs not climbed and
 glances not averted and smiles
 not forced steps not forced everything forced
 now

thinking i'd
probably be smoking cigarettes drinking
red wine every day instead of
trying to
breathe my life in through a straw
or suck some part of you back
into my lungs like you've
left your scent in the next room

if we could sometime
return

would i change back into
flesh
wrapping around
you again

1.01

i like it best
when we're sitting up
arms legs wrapping a full embrace
kind of like we're talking things out
and in the light in the dimness
the red or silver or moth
colored threads that connect
our eyes tighten and stretch
drawing us up & i don't remember
you moving me from lying
down
but i just followed
your eyes
and i know there's coins in the
bed falling out of your pockets
but they'll be warmed
by my back or thighs and become
small flat fingertips
letting me know we are
we are both two here

1.02

in my memory-visions of you
you get blurred
i see you
drinking red bottles of luna di luna
and sitting
smoking on the porch while
i wait inside in the bed
you've been washed over
with a clear golden wax
stopped
so now i can't remember how
we switched sides in bed
or you walking holding my hand in the
car so i could just drive drunk with one
hand instead of two
why do all of these images exist
in half darkness shadow
flicker so hard to call up
in the daylight i'm tracking thru
the rain hoping to leave a clear enough path
for you to find me or write you a love note
in raindrops

1.03

you laughed while your heart
was still pounding
(i could feel it pulsing into me)
and said it's been long
since i'm waking up alone
this morning i'm confused by
my nakedness
like everything that
happened in my vision
impaired state became
myth and (running thru the
house to turn on the
furnace) i did not see
my old lover's face
somewhere over
your left shoulder saying
rearranged
and something about
a girl in a different light
(what kind of light i see you in

is reddish and fading
which is flattering
but not enough to change my mind)

1.04

i have visions of
small couches
and squeezing onto them
because it's more acceptable than lying on the
bed
to not mind that closeness
to feel breath
in my ribs
to breathe breath

but now
i thrash in your bed at night
writhe when you come near
and suffocate on your air
i run out of the house into the
cold rain at 5 am
on the road thinking about the
people who are just now getting up

i call when i'm finally home
to let you know i'm okay
which is more ridiculous than anything
my happiness translated into
yes i'm in my own house
garbage truck slamming
loud echoes into the night/morning

1.10

if i could send you a picture
it would be
i get undressed with
the window open so i can
feel a breeze
while i slip
into water trying to wash
everyone off of my skin
i try to write poems to
you in the shower
i get weak in my knees
and have to stop

when i hear a loud crash thru
 the water i hope it's you
 finally gone crazy tearing
 thru the screen of my bathroom window
 maybe you know i was gone all night again
 i can't sleep there anymore
 i wake from the water and
 know this
 but you haven't appeared
 should i keep torturing
 try to channel you thru some
 gravelly tattooed songs

(you were reading ulysses
 that summer and
 when you left it
 by the bed
 i thought how many books
 we'd have lying around in our
 house not realizing the seriousness
 of this thought told you anyway
 and you didn't even look at the clock
 but agreed)

i feel dented
 like something
 vital is rusting me away
 from inside

mourning the loss
 of a hand or edge of hip
 gone to your grasp

1.30

i'm no longer relying
 on my legs to hold me up
 more like a dependence
 on the sidewalk
 to unbuckling
 catch my
 drifting along as if i'd been
 walking this stretch all my life
 somewhere
 in the corner of my mind

i see my hair spread over
 the spaces between your
 fingers until
 we are so entangled
 now like a reliance
 a promise not to snap my neck
 i stop holding up my head
 waiting to see if it will fall

2.01

if you were still around
 i don't think i'd be
 worrying
 that i'm gaining weight
 that i might just chop all of my hair or
 burn it off
 like the burn on my arm

i wake up with tiny cuts on
 my hands and i don't know
 what i've been doing in my
 sleep cutting myself on
 bad dreams of you or roaming
 the streets sifting through the
 fur and broken glass at the
 edges of the road looking for
 the note i know you've sent me
 damn it you said you were coming and you
 didn't
 even call

i kept myself busy the whole time
 sleeping in other people's beds and
 looking out the window
 with every car door slam

i'm sorry i'm too busy sleeping all day
 to see you

my hands won't get warm
 i sit at stoplights reading books
 i watch the people in cars talking
 whenever i'm in the car with someone
 i'm always being driven like i can't handle
 being responsible for both

you used to pretend you were scared
 of my driving which made me mad

but god
 i liked the looks of your hands on my
 steering wheel

2.05

my version of the story
 is that the corduroy
 was not rough on your elbows
 that you're just not
 here because you've hopped
 a train to go around
 the country collecting
 all different kinds of wood
 build us a cabin
 that beds
 are not cold
 are not full of pieces of skin
 touches
 that are not you
 the aloe plant did not die
 and moreover i just
 found a chair at the
 vintage store so nevermind
 bringing over the plaid one
 i'll get the mattresses moved
 somehow truckbed
 full of junebugs
 and no matter the bed is an island
 anyway
 back beside the grass road
 dodging the mudhole
 feeling the sound of cold and the
 silence eating up my grief

2.18

i don't check my mail
 for days
 and whisper sick breaths
 into the seam of the pillow
 transition standing sitting talking
 oblivion
 (i am) turning into wisps of
 pale green fog pulsing and
 receding around the
 shining eyes and candleflames
 of a former self
 make me vapor and rattle my
 wineglasses
 all filled at different levels
 just waiting
 to find their own voices

2.26

if i could hover
 in the small of your
 back
 curve
 with your spine flexing
 and moving
 i could be a presence
 that you couldn't
 even detect
 just ride along the
 back of your consciousness
 collecting pieces of your
 life
 to turn over in my hands
 at night
 watching them
 lose their glow

2.28

it's the initial plunge
 like a separation from the self
 that is the most painful
 even knowing
 cold doesn't seep in
 heat just dissipates

and the smell of flames
 only warms back to the
 idea of july
 and leaves an expanse
 of crushed leaves & pieces of
 cold
 to navigate

3.02

my right hand is
 feeling my face trying
 to feel neck and shoulders as
 you touched them
 it occurs
 to me that i've been so
 aware of your cheekbones
 or whatever it is
 about your face that i have forgotten
 my own jaw chin and skin
 covering it more thinly now
 so i feel like i might just
 burst open at any moment

time for a breath
 i've been breathing all
 along now without you sometimes
 too hard sometimes guilty

your face appears on the wall
 over the shoulder the neck of a
 bottle of the one dancing making
 me feel
 like a person again

he said he's been painting a lot
 of bulls a lot of powerplants maybe
 that pales to your knowledge of
 aramaic

i'm figuring out that like anyone
 you did your seeing with your eyes
 what could i expect

i'm sticking the coathanger
 down the drain and coming out
 with nothing and i'm getting

used to this so maybe it stays clogged
 this time letting nothing by at all

my mind moves around the words
 we are at an impass
 and now i know
 there is never really
 an impass
 just you
 in whatever city you're in now
 and me stepping through the leaves

the one
 cupping her ears listening
 for footfalls and regret
 has nothing to do
 with you
 she sits
 venetian blinds slitting the world into
 one-inch horizontal slices
 she bites the thick skin around her fingernails
 and feels
 the cold wind
 sneaking itself in two for one through
 the window air conditioning unit
 she is not
 thinking about
 chicago
 drafty apartments peeling paint
 or any
 of dreams
 of farms
 but more
 of a bird
 it seems now
 migration
 is essential
 instead of dropping out
 the bottom of things
 catches her
 rises
 like water