October 2015

A Letter Would Have Been Fine

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**Recommended Citation**  
Available at: [https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kaleidoscope/vol3/iss1/5](https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kaleidoscope/vol3/iss1/5)
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.

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

into too blue water
sometimes i want to

go back don’t you

know

what i mean
he tells her that

finally

things have direction
they are both moving forward

maybe with their faces turned

away

but no she gets a

feeling looking into

the tall trees

crossed by powerlines

and knows

something is missing

9.17

i see eighteen
people

with your silhouette

every day

and this is a

lot of gasps

and startled breaths
to keep up with i have

an idea of you maybe
just ripping the rest of
your limbs

off of my body

so that i may stop

this perpetual
false recognition

that by the end of the day

leaves
me

limp

do i dare
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
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
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 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 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 write 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
gravely 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