Abstract

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This is what you’ve done to me. No, you would remind me that this is what I have done to myself. I sit here at this desk. The desk faces the door. The phone hangs silently beside the door. The thick enticing smell of warm buttered popcorn drifts through the vents in the door and I want to follow it to another door vent and dig my hand into hot delicious popcorn and eat until I am sick. I was going to make popcorn for you while you were here, while we talked, but you gorged me on steak and baked potatoes, and you never wanted to talk. I was so convinced that I could entertain you for “three fabulous days and three fabulous nights,” just like all those vacation-in-the-Bahamas ads claim. But I hear it is not cold during all the entertainment down in the Bahamas.

You kept asking, Well what are we going to do tonight, What do you have planned, and I kept telling you it was all a secret, because I didn’t know. We were going to do anything you enjoyed, we were going to discover your definition of fun. Since you always ended our phone conversations with “Have fun,” I wanted to find out what goes into your definition of fun. I kept asking. Experimenting. Probing. But I still don’t know. I wonder if it’s true that you must be able to entertain someone for 24 hours a day seven days a week before you are ready to marry. Didn’t you notice that it wasn’t three fabulous days and three fabulous nights? It was cold—before, during, and after—the entertainment. And I will not blame it all on the Iowa wind and the precious Iowa rain.

Didn’t you ever think about taking back all the money you have spent on long distance phone calls in the last few years and going to the Bahamas instead? Or Acapulco? Or even Florida? No. In your eyes I could do no wrong. I never could do no wrong. I’m such boring company, I said. Every time I lay here in your arms, I fall asleep. All you ever said was, “I guess.”
Another typewriter down the hall clacks away slowly. Clack. Clackclack. Clackclackclack. Clack. She must not have something burning a hole in her heart, or as in my case, something crawling slowly, constantly to the top of a pit, beginning to reach up over the edge, flowing one leg at a time upwards and outwards and into the typewriter keys. When we were kids, we would dig in the sandbox and they would ask us if we were digging to China. I would think about a dark black tunnel that went all the way there. A bottomless pit under my sandbox.

I think that you feel that same bottomless pit right now too. You feel this same thing that is crawling up out of it. This same thing that flows clear to the keys on this typewriter so it is no longer clack clack clack, but a rolling steady stutter that makes people walking down the popcorn-smell-filled hall stop and knock, and stare around the edge of the door in amazement. And the popcorn smell flows in a stale wave and soon it is gone. They took it away along with their amazement.

In a few minutes it will be telephone-call time. Five minutes after the rates go down. I could set my clock by it. I used to run and brush my teeth and wash my face and crawl into pajamas and race the clock to telephone time. And it was never because I couldn’t wait to talk to you. It was just because low rate time was already so late that I wanted to go to bed as soon as you got off the phone. Got off the phone. You didn’t sit on the phone. You always sat on the bucket. You would ask what I had been doing and I would usually say Nothing or Studying, but really it had been Something because I never like to do Nothing. You were always sitting on the upside down bucket in the basement in your underwear except when it was cold. And how many winters was it cold? If it was cold, you’d be dripping shower water on the rug upstairs and you would still be in your underwear and we would talk about how your hair was probably longer than mine, and the weather. Or you would tell me what Carlisle the cat was doing, and the weather. You never had anything new to tell me about except the weather. I had so many things happening here. How I felt each morning when I awoke excited about all the new things that were going to happen that day and all the new friends I’d met. And how no two days were ever the same. But we talked about the weather.
I wish I could type with one hand. They are both getting so tired. And I have given up trying to find a pencil in this mess on this desk to mark out all the mistakes I have made. I don't think I could really ever find a pencil eraser big enough to do that. But there is a comforting feeling having all these books and things around me on this desk. But when I think about it, that feeling is not a complete feeling. I cannot picture Emerson at this desk. And I'll bet that Robert Persig can find a pencil everytime he needs one. Authors. I wonder what it's like to really be one. More than once I have convinced myself that I am one. It is good for the morale to convince oneself of that often. More than once I have been in that state of convincation. That is, in the state of being convinced.

But more than once I have also sat down and looked at a neatly typed sheet of paper that has my name typed in the corner and remembered how Poe said it was to have been intentionally constructed as a piece of art. But I know that this is not art. It is the "proverbial piece of shit." The sum total of my ability. But I don't throw it away. "When ya ain't got nothin', ya ain't got nothin' to lose," they say. When ya ain't got nothin', ya don't lose what ya do got, I say. But that is the way you talk. Not me. Hillbilly talk. Clumsy, mumbling, fumbling, can't-put-it-into-black-and-white-symbols-on-paper hillbilly talk. I can't put it into words, and all you had to do was be around me for one day, and you put it into my mouth. And then, rather than demanding that you meet my standards of non-hillbilly talk, I lose and talk like you do. Time to go get some vittles, you said, and I hoped desperately that no one else heard you.

You also used to end all your, our, phone conversations with "Be good." And I always wanted to know what you meant by that. When I tell someone to be good, I know of at least something that he is liable to do that one might call not being good. Even if you don't understand that last sentence (Like I said, I can't find an eraser for mistakes), at least you can get the idea that the words "Be good" have some meaning for me. I wanted to know if they had some meaning for you. I wanted to know if there were some things that you really didn't want me to do. Nope. Just a sayin' they use back home, you said. Back home. That's vittle talk. Southern Kentuc' vittle talk, I thought, and I wished I hadn't asked. You would think it
terrible, if you could think that about me, that I would judge on the basis of how you talk. Me, a student at Moo U, actually thinking the cultural level of other students here was too high to accept your hillbilly talk. Incredibly stupid, huh? But, I'm still glad no one heard you talk about vittles.

You said that I was different. That you could talk to me. Yes, I am proud to be different, but you call that communication??? When I had to ask all the questions, and even then, you didn't have answers. When the movie was over and I couldn't contain how I felt and all you had to say was “What's the damn holdup?” when we couldn't get out of the theater parking lot? Communication?

The typewriter clack clack from down the hall has long since quit but it has been replaced by the clank clank of sizzly radiators and my arms ache from being held poised above this typewriter and I try to type with one hand. But that reduces the steady stutter to a clack clack clack and I don't need that with all the clank clank clank I have already.

Back in the state of conviction, which lies somewhere between the state where you live and the state where I live, I was convinced of something else once too. I was convinced that a person's degree of oral non-communicative ability was directly proportional to the degree of verbal pen-to-paper ability. Look at D.L. Doesn't say much, but boy, I wish I could write like he can. But you blew my whole theory. You lacked the pen-to-paper ability. Your letters were sloppier and less frequent than those of my eight-year-old brother. And he writes about more than just the weather. Therefore, you should be more proficient at the art of oral communication. According to my theory, that is. But my questions went unanswered. Scrap the theory.

I don't want to talk about how ill-matched the gifts you have bought for me have always been. You handed me that necklace like it was an engagement ring and I thanked you and showed it to the rest of the family like it was an engagement ring. But it was silly and I never wore it.

And I don't want to talk about the way you said you still thought I could love you. It was as if we stood behind podiums and you had to defend your personality to a live audience who sat like vultures in their chairs waiting for you to give up.
And I don't want to consider whether you will ever call again. I am so tired of the clatter of this machine. I want to stuff all this back into the pit it has grown out of and fill the bottomless abyss with cement.

Telephone time is past. The phone did not ring and part of me feels so awful because I know I am the reason that you feel awful tonight too.

I hope you are saving your pennies and nickels for one of those vacations in the Bahamas. Or Florida. Somewhere that it is never cold.

untitled

by

Jane Freese

Spanish & International Studies 4

so i stroked your hair,
and you knew . . .

thought you were asleep.
thought beer and oblivion held you,
securely protected from knowing

so i stroked your hair,
and you knew all the time.