**Listen**

on the bus in the morning and

my earbuds only work in one ear

which flattens the music out, smashes it

two dimensional thin and tinny in

my right eardrum and not my left.

when I was six I listened to

partially-fossilized kid-song cds my mom kept

in a plastic sleeve on the sun visor of the van.

I listened to little ditties with

questionable meanings and morals and I repeated

their steady rhymes and rhythms without understanding,

*you are lost and gone forever, dreadful sorry clementine.*

on the bus in the morning and

if I turn one earbud ninety degrees and

twist my head, the left earbud pops

into working condition, so I stay like that

tilted at odd angles in the early morning dark.

when I was ten I listened to

outdated tamil cinema songs my dad kept

on sd cards that he’d sing along with in the car.

I listened to a language that

held no meaning to me, my mouth and lips

forming round foreign shapes, soft warm syllables,

*munbe vaa yen anbe vaa, oone vaa uyire vaa.*

on the bus in the morning and

I’ve relapsed into scratchy silence and

I struggle-squirm and rotate my head and

unplug and replug the thin white cord

but the music doesn’t come back.

when I was fourteen I listened to

albums and artists I pieced together and kept

on a chunky old phone in a playlist called Things (104 tracks).

I listened to quiet melodies that

sang of birds, of beaches, of running away,

of being young, of being stupid, of nothing at all,

*nah, nah nah, nananah nahhh, nananah nahhh.*

on the bus in the morning and

the bus groans lowly and wheezes and stops

the doors fold open and I yank myself free from

the earbuds and stumble outside and it’s cold, empty echoing

in my right eardrum and in my left.

when I am eighteen I listen to

I listen

**What they say**

They say I’m apathetic but I don’t really care

They say I’m condescending, that’s a grown-up word, means I talk down to people

They say I have terrible comebacks but they can go, uh,

They say I’m in denial but I’m not

Thwy say I made a typo

They say I’m hypocritical but they’re hypocritical

They say I overreact and why are they so MEAN TO ME

They say I’m annoying but am I? am I? am I?

They say I’m passive-aggressive. k

They thay I have a lithp

They say I’m sarcastic. me? sarcastic?

They say I get distracte— is cereal a soup

They say I’m going crazy and the voices in my head agree

They say I’m simple-minded but what does that even mean

They say I leave them hanging

They say I’m hard of hearing, at least I think that’s what they’re saying

They say I rhyme an awful lot. But not like all the time, I thought

They say I have multiple personalities but I don’t and me neither

They say I’m immature and I am so telling mom

They don’t say I’m a liar

**It isn’t**

It’s said that it feels like burning,

like a fire within you or something noble like that,

but it isn’t really.

It’s heavier, it’s smoother and sharper,

scratching at the roof of your mouth, wet and rushing like rain.

It’s scary. Makes you hold your breath. You hold your breath.

You are mismatched, disproportionate, amalgamated,

itching to shed your skin.

You hold your breath, ripping fistfuls of grass out of the earth.

You exhale.

You breathe out and they breathe in.

And they look up and they look up at you,

and that’s it.

You breathe in and they breathe out.

You’re both loopy and likely desperate,

And it isn’t love, but it has to be love,

you tell yourself,

because what else could it be?

When it’s earth-shattering every time

they move closer

or speak softer

because why would they?

how could it be real?

You’re crying and laughing at the same time,

and their face is wet and their hands are shaking

because they’re doing the same thing,

because they feel the same way about you.

They feel the same way about you.

And it has to be love, because if it isn’t love,

you ask yourself,

then what is?

**Time**

Hey, nerd.

Yeah, there’s so much going on.

It’s good in a way.

Every time I blink I fall asleep for like five minutes, and that’s bad,

but when I’m awake everything’s going alright, yknow?

I’m enjoying the stuff I’m getting involved in.

And there’s been some really good days,

but I mean

every time I do something I feel like I’m sacrificing something else

like I’m making the wrong choice

and it’s scaring me

so much.

stop.

can’t say that.

what am I thinking?

I wish I could tell you everything,

but you are thirteen.

you are thirteen and it is not fair of me to tell you all the things that eat at me.

it’s not okay for me to do that anymore.

I was ten

you were five

and our problems were similar

recess drama, lost toys

mom yelling at us

because we liked drawing and reading books more than going outside.

I told you everything

you told me everything

we were the same person,

the same age

me growing up too slow and you growing up too fast

you’ve stopped telling me everything.

I noticed that, and it’s good because that’s what you’re supposed to be doing

we’re supposed to be growing apart

we grow up

we grow older

we outgrow each other

but I’m not, am I

I’m really not.

I don’t want to be here

forging my future

taking on the world

walking away from everything

from you

I don’t want to be here, nerd,

I want to be home,

watching pbs kids in the living room

jumping on the bed

surrounding the bathtub with plastic animals

reading newspaper cartoons

doing all these things with you.

College is great, I’m having a good time.

Tell Mom and Dad that I love them, alright?

Talk to you soon.

Bye.