

JEPHRIE CABRAL

SOCKS

FIRST PLACE, AETNA UNDERGRADUATE CREATIVE NONFICTION AWARD

The night I killed myself I tried to clean socks. I didn't have any socks to wear the next day. I was planning on killing myself that night anyway, but I thought I ought to die knowing that my socks were clean. Otherwise, my parents would be faced with throwing them all out, giving them away dirty, or doing my laundry and then giving them away. It was going to be hard enough on them without me adding socks to the mix. I was trying to be as considerate as possible.

Cleaning the socks was such an ordeal. I just kicked them off wherever I was in the house, so none of my socks ever kept their mate. But my mom was always buying me colorful socks with funny prints on them; I have Halloween socks and socks with cats and socks with dots, socks with snowflakes, socks of every color. If I just wore white socks all the time it wouldn't be a problem; they would all match. But unfortunately, over the years I had accumulated a massive number of socks that didn't fit. They were weird and lonely. The sock situation was complicated.

My socks were stuck all over the place. It was a major expedition to find them. I found my favorite fuzzy grey one tucked into my bed. My cousin had given me the pair a few years ago, but I'd only worn them three times because I could never find them. I had to sit on my bed, holding my sock. I knew in a few hours I would be gone, but the sock would still be there. This sock would outlive me. I remember the box they came in. They were a Christmas present. I liked them because they were warm enough to keep my feet warm, but didn't cut off circulation. It's rare to get a sock that fits so well.

I got angry. I don't know why. But damn this sock. Damn this sock. Damn this sock. I wanted to get scissors and destroy it. If I'm going, this sock is going, too. I didn't want to remember a happy Christmas a few years ago, sitting in the guest room at my grandparents' house with my cousin, exchanging our private cousins-only presents. She was my best friend.

I hate this sock.

She's going to hate me. She's going to forget all the fun we've had together, and always remember I died when I was nineteen. Not just died, but killed myself. Will she miss me? Will she understand? Will her

anger consume everything? Will she be too upset to go to the funeral? Will there even be a funeral? Maybe suicides shouldn't get funerals. Maybe I should get put out with the trash. If I'm going to throw my life away, they should throw me away.

But it would be so easy to hold onto this sock, to live for this sock, this stupid, pointless, lonely sock. I put it in the laundry basket. That sock will have to learn how to live without me. I'm sorry. I know, sock. I know you're lonely, but you'll meet other socks. They won't complete you like your sister sock did, but they'll fill the void.

The next sock I found was yellow with a huge blue stain on the heel. I always hated this sock. This is the one sock that I always wear in the pair; I can't lose these two. The other one was around here, somewhere. There. One sock was stained blue; the other sock had a hole in it. Neither fit right, they gapped around my ankles, and were too tight across my toes.

I can't throw any socks out, though. I have to keep them all. I have to hoard them. Even now, I can't throw them out. But I bet my mom will. Not now, not for a while. But in a few months or a year, she'll come into my bedroom. Instead of lying on my bed or sitting in my chair and looking at the room that I left behind as a monument to the memory of their daughter, she'll come in with a purpose. My room is me. I've painted it so many times, I have artwork, it's messy and disorganized. My heart is somewhere in the room, in the bottom of the closet maybe. My mind is there, somewhere in the bookshelf. You'll find me in my room, even when I'm gone.

But eventually, she'll have to clean it out. She can't keep that tepid ghost of a room alive forever. Eventually she'll go through all my papers and sort all my books. My TV will go in the basement storage or to a friend, my bed will be stripped and new, unemotional sheets will cover it. My tasseled curtains and red blinds will be taken down and hidden somewhere. Not thrown out, they won't be able to do that. They'll probably put them up in the ceiling storage in the family room, and then years and years later, when one of them dies or they move to Florida, they'll lie there forgotten, and eventually be thrown out by some new resident of 31 Beachland Avenue or a well meaning relative.

But these grubby, yellow socks, stained and holey? They're garbage. They cry to be thrown out. They're ruined; they're beyond repair. There's nothing redeemable about them.

But what if my mom finds these socks, clean but still stained, still holey, still broken. What if she finds them, and thinks they are a testament to her daughter? That I wore them down and stained them, until they were threadbare and faded; but never threw them out?

Maybe she won't realize I don't throw away any socks, maybe she'll think I had some sort of emotional connection to them. Maybe she'll come in my room and find these socks and cry into them, completely ignoring the pristine grey sock I love, and instead see these sad yellow socks as her last connection to her daughter?

That can't happen. These socks need to be thrown out. I want to throw them out. But I'm doing too much destruction tonight. I can't put my life and these socks away forever. So I throw them in my basket, I'll wash them. I hate them, but I'll keep them.

I find a few handfuls of white socks that don't match. They all have different bands of color across the toes or come up to different heights. One barely covers my heel, another covers my ankle, another comes midway up my calf. I think the last sock is my dad's. Oh well, I'll wash them all. They're not perfect, but they are worth keeping. They are worth cleaning and drying and salvaging. On some mornings I would pick up one white sock, and hunt around for another white one. Even if they aren't perfect, they don't clash or fight. They get along. They're harmonious.

My life has never been as harmonious as that group of white socks. My thoughts have never calmly thought to themselves that they don't match, but they'll do their best to cloak me and keep me warm. My thoughts would make terrible socks, they would fight to get off my feet, they would not keep me warm, if I wore my thoughts on my feet, people would look around thinking, "What is that smell?" My thoughts are hideous, odious, atrocious, destructive.

I hope my mother doesn't get angry at me. I hope she doesn't come into my room to cry one day and decide to start throwing things. I hope she doesn't tear down my shelves and throw my books, and go into my drawers and rip out my socks and fling them around and cut them up and tear them apart with her hands. How am I capable of saving these socks, keeping my socks, but not able to save my mother from her daughterless fate?

Love for my mother is almost enough to make me stop finding socks. It's almost enough to make me dump my laundry basket over, to go in the other room and watch Seinfeld reruns with my parents. This is their last night of peace for a while. One of them will find me. It will be hell.

Well, I think that. But I have an older brother who killed himself. I never see my dad cry because of it. He never sees a sock on the floor and says that it reminds him of his son, and then glaze over in some deep memory. Socks might not affect him this way. But that's just wishful thinking, hopeful optimistic thinking on my part. No, no I can't

diminish what I'm going to do, I can't pretend like it won't hurt them or anyone. That's not fair. I need to die knowing that it's wrong, that it's hurtful. I need to close my eyes that last time with images of everyone who loves me under my lids, and know that I've hurt them beyond repair, that I've broken pieces inside of them. I have to think this, and I have to think that the pain I live with, that waking up in despair everyday for years and going to bed carrying slabs of anxiety and depression with me. I have to think that that pain is going to be worse than the pain I'm leaving behind, in everyone. Because if it isn't, I have to stay.

But it is. Even when I think of how my friends will be angry and cry when they hear the news, even when I think of my cousin who will probably fall over at the news, faint into a chair, even when I think of my father, who had to say good-bye to one son years earlier, and my mother who always wanted to have many, many children. I have to think the pain in me is deeper, and more permanent, darker, more suffocated than their grief.

There are twelve steps to the grieving process, but only one long descent into depression.

Will it be worth it? Do I think it's a fair exchange? My pain for theirs? My life for memories? My future for a eulogy?

Yes. It's fair. It is too hard to breathe anymore, too hard to open my eyes, too exhausting to get out of bed. I'm sick of my chains.

I start running around my room, throwing socks in my basket. It's not fair. I'm angry. How dare they love me. I need to be able to die and they are keeping me alive. Fuck them. Fuck socks. Fuck this. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

I have more socks than I can possibly wash; they're overflowing. They're mismatched and lovable; they're single, lonely, empty. They look at me mournfully; they know my foot won't slip inside them again. They know this is it.

The laundry room is in the basement. I take the socks down there. I heap them all into the machine, turn it on, put some detergent in. I worry there are too many socks in there; they won't get clean that way. But I've run out of time. If I don't put them in now, I won't put them in. I don't have time to dry them; suddenly I have to go. I have to go. I'm going to miss my socks. I wear them everyday. I know them so well. I know their little designs and defects. Now that I'm saying good-bye, I love them all. Even the ones with holes, even the ones with stains, even the ones that don't fit right. They do their best. I know they do their best. I know that. I hope everyone else will know that.

She did her best.

I hope they know that. I hope tomorrow morning when they find me they will know that. I hope when they get around to doing laundry again, or maybe when they are looking for a pair of socks to put on me one last time, I hope they'll find this machine of wet soggy, by then moldy and smelly, socks. They'll find them, and they'll know. My dad will know, he'll look at the socks and see the mishmash, and he will realize. He'll stare at these ruined socks and think that's how I lived, all messed up but trying as hard as possible, until it got to be too much and I just had to chuck it in the machine and let it be. My mom will look at the socks and think even until the end I was trying to live, I wanted to die but I also wanted to have socks to wear the next day. My cousin will see that grey sock somewhere in the mess, and smile and think that even though I'm gone, she and I shared something. Socks, life, memories.

But it didn't work. The night I killed myself, I survived.

And after I was done killing myself, the socks were waiting for me.

I woke up a day later in the hospital. My parents were crying, but happy. They weren't going to be burying me. When I got home, weeks later, I opened my dresser. My mother had found all the pairs. My father had washed them. Together they had sorted out the mess. They had thrown out the ones beyond repair, the ones with too many holes or too many stains. They weeded out the bad and kept the good. When I got home, and looked in my sock drawer, they were all lined up, neat and orderly, patiently and lovingly waiting for me to wear them, mess them up a bit, as long as they knew that I would be willing to hold on to them and try.