

the
**BALLOON
HUNTER**
A FOUND NOVEL

HUGH HOWEY
+ ELINOR TAYLOR

Dear Apocalypse,
I'm writing in my capacity as
you that, despite your best
As you can see, nothing you
date has been enough, and
have let yourself down.
By my calculations I have
my 127th year, so might
notch before I die of old
From this rooftop I raise
sausages and a beaker of
chance. Bring it on, loser.
I await your response.

Sincerely
Rita

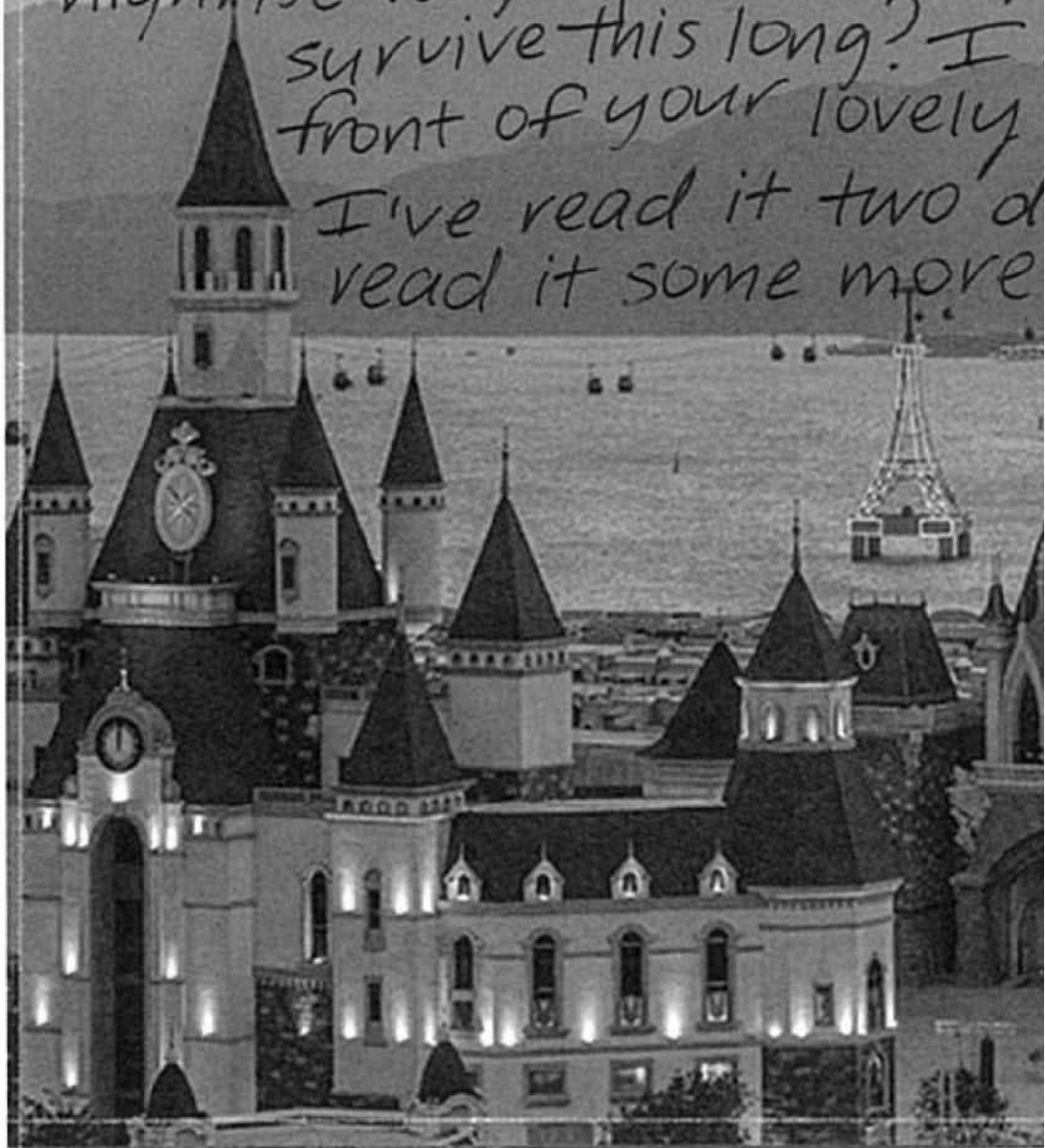
Rita!

I spotted your postcard float
curiosity and good aim, shot
someone's thoughts other than

127 years of supplies, a road
highrise to your lonesome?

survive this long? I
front of your lovely

I've read it two or three times
read it some more



Little brother,
where to begin? I hope you
in the early days, before th
I took Mike's 4x4, Lord kn
and checked all the places
memory: the farm, Grand
Abberley.

Even the tree house.

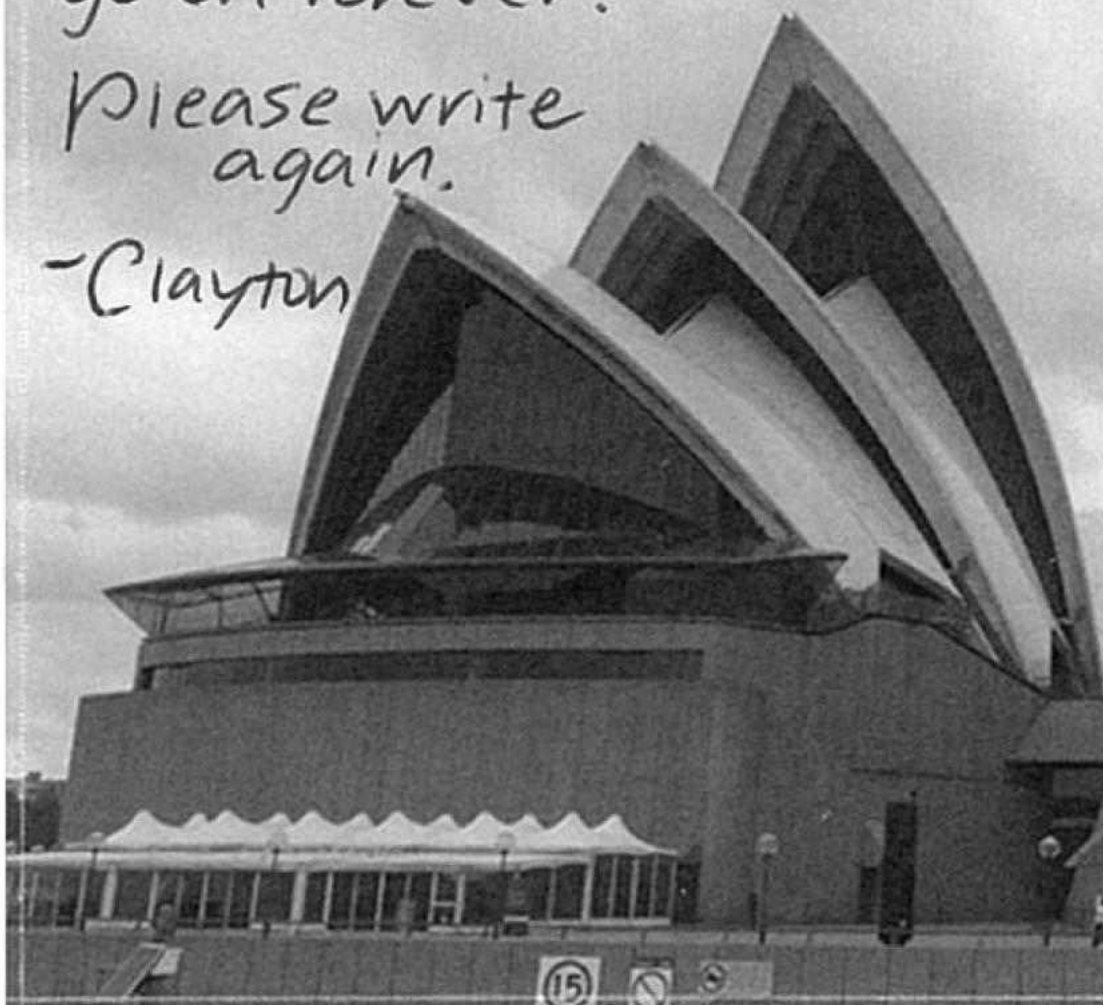
Yes, I climbed that damn
doing it, too. You'd have li
see you there, sitting, lea
wizards, or reading a bo
I miss you. I guess that

Rita

Rita,
Your missive landed like a bomb
I fear that you've sent out
spotted just these two. Ho
better than me? !!
Supplies are thin here (as
week to look for more food.
balloons, will give me stren
the NW. I wish the internet
for a helium party balloon
go on forever?

Please write
again.

-Clayton



Governor,

Today is an indoor day. Just indoor days. The fog rolled in on the world and will likely stay, as it has. Thanks for that.

I do not imagine for a second that you are in office with the Law of Unintended Consequences. Smart as you pair with the event, if you were around, this would be a good thing. However, the fog isn't the only thing. I didn't vote for this. I did

Rita

Rita,
we had a bad bank of fog
when you wrote this?

I'm sad to admit that I do
shit. So you're 20, at least. To
if you were really young or
that matters.

I found this message wrap
sagging and lifeless. Craw
over hand, I thought to v
be when the power comes b
Of course it didn't. I'll n
never vote fo

Hey, World,
How are you? You doing okay?
Been a while since I went out
took a deep breath out there, said
fog and all. Sitting tight down
while it clears, working the
collection. 4.99. Bargain.
Might check outside tomorrow
see as far as the hills, what
more. They look different
now. Do you still do snow
of lost things?

Regards
Rita

Dearest Rita,
Ice cream. Decent Haircuts
Company. - My top 5 list
Dan Brown. He wrote the
Tomtanks movies. I sk
Maybe I'll start.



Sounds like you're in a
miles from hills. I have
map, and I'm wonder
things worse than dying
find you.

I can't be sure, things got kn
months, but I think today is
isn't, I've decided it is. So to
open a tinned ham. Frying it
instant mashed potato, and
sauvignon blanc. (Second to
checkouts. Ask me how I kno
This will be my 100th postcard
definitely 100 as it's the la
floated out into this glorious
for granted.

Is anyone there? Is anyone
Fuck it. Who cares? It's Chris

Rita



Just realized the advance
the fronts of these: no o
I'll never send them. in
to sobbing like a child
Why am I crying?
Memories of Christmas
Dad were still together.
The thought of a home-
wine sitting beside another
95. Ninety-five piece
find.

Dear Fog,
Here's the thing: I don't like
suspect the feeling is mutual
things to hide, to sneak around
iteration you've come up with
Next level creepy.
Also, is it you taunting me with
ones: like whispering voices.
Once upon a time I might've
fox. Not anymore. I've seen
over too many festering foxes
harmless source. Everyone
So, in all sincerity, Fog, ta

Rita

Today is the day
I set out. North
and west. I'm
leaving a lot
behind, mostly
bad memories.
The last of my
food only took
up half my
pack. The rest:

Bedroll.

Two canteens of
boiled water.

My weatherby
Mark V. 300
(closest thing
I have to a
best friend).



Governor,

I found out something interesting about the dead folks at my place in the staff room and I finally finished reading it. A few years before but still. I was bored of Debra. You, Governor, took a trip on a climate rocket launch. They were barely news. Shaking teeth, with one of those scenes when there still was TV. Something about that sits out what it is. It'll come to r

Rita

I shot a child today
the mist.

There are only bad things
the bullets zing by and
and move on, but this
This time.

That's three people I
justify the other two
he had a toy truck and
no one came for him
I buried him shallow
more. I guess some
of mist, and not even
get us

Dear Wes,

I've been thinking about you
truth be told. I know we are
and I'm so sorry about that.
mind quite a lot.

If I'd known the world was
behaved differently. Any of
Sambuca? Bygones?

And I was wrong to say Jean
deserved better from me.
hindsight she's definitely r

Love you, bro
Rita

It's wild watching a ne
jump from house to house
from spreading, so the
highway or rain. I work
on purpose, burning av
the lightning?

My Army shrink made w
them in a metal bucket,
out there. It was sca
ever

read it.
We keep
utter

become
I never
solid,
saw b

not until
up in horror, I. I watche
they held. edges go

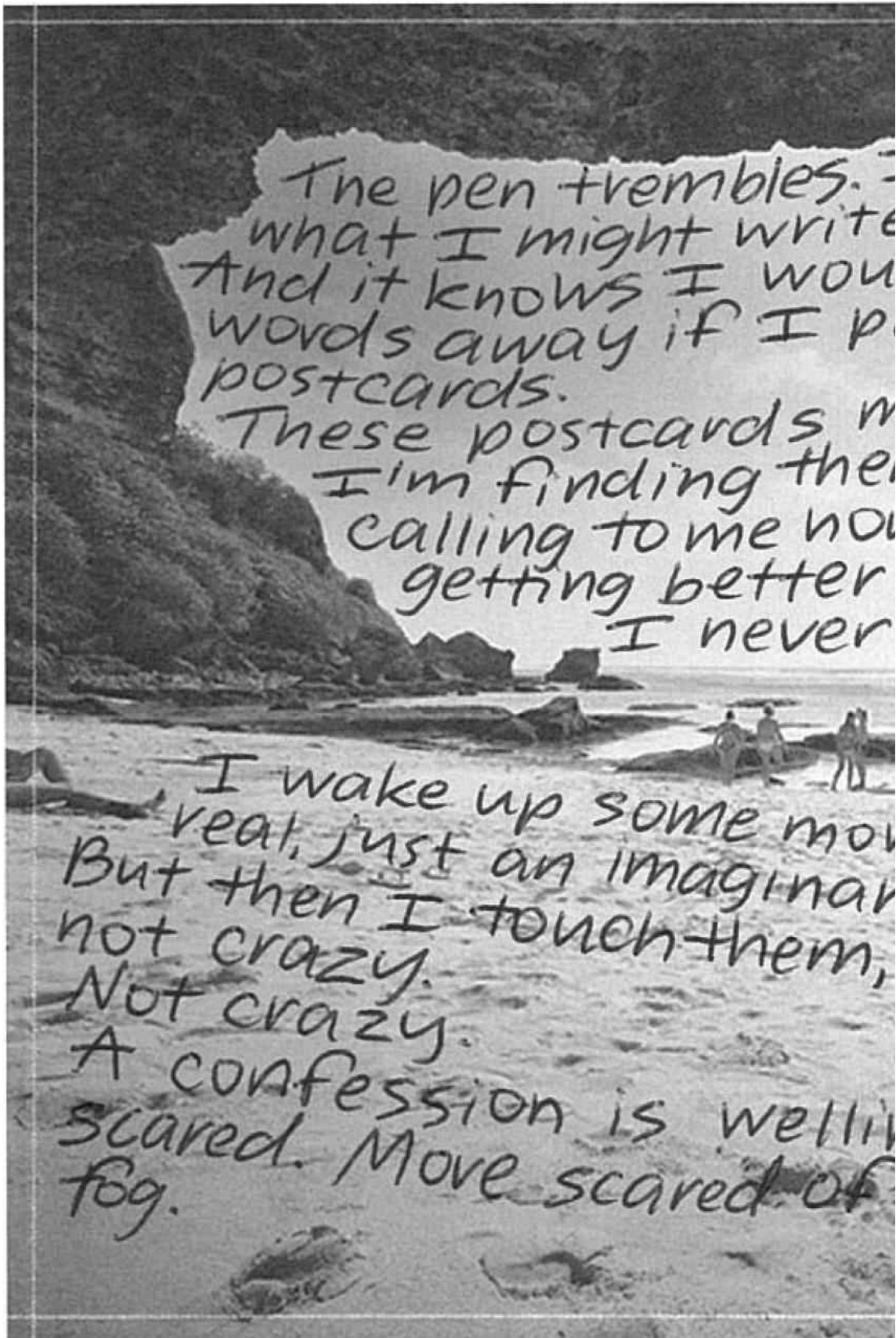
Col. Ramsey. I wonder
this. Probably out the
bad for being itself.

I would like very much to circle the perimeter, but I can't do it. Happy?

I fear death is out there, and I'm still living this long, I could still die. Is that crazy?

When it gets like my chest, I can't look beyond the parking lot. One time squirrels would jump over the fence before they dropped clear. Those trees, those fucking trees, they're better than any of us could ever have. Verdant glory. I tell myself that at least there's that. And it helps a little.

Rita



The pen trembles.
What I might write
And it knows I would
Words away if I put
postcards.

These postcards now
I'm finding them
calling to me now
getting better
I never

I wake up some more
real, just an imagination
But then I touch them,
not crazy.
Not crazy.
A confession is well
scared. More scared of
fog.

Five things I miss:

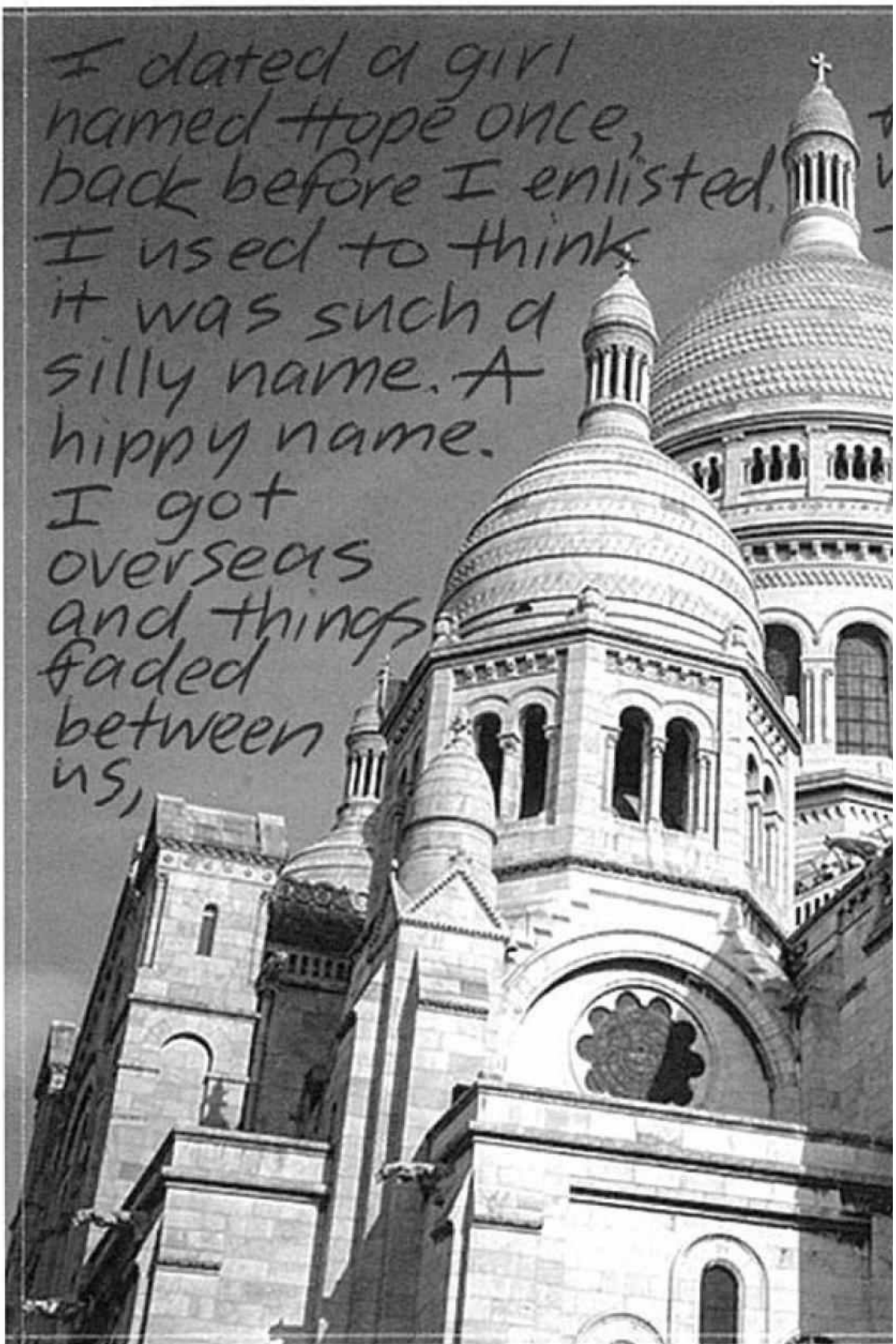
1. Hot running water.
2. Google.
3. The feel of grass underfoot.
4. Eating popcorn in a dark room.
5. Hope.

Five things I don't:

1. Monday mornings.
2. Fox News.
3. Existential dread.
4. Covid.
5. Mike. (Christ, what does that say about us?)

Rita

I dated a girl
named Hope once,
back before I enlisted.
I used to think
it was such a
silly name. A
hippy name.
I got
overseas
and things
faded
between
us,



To anyone or no-one,
I'm up to twenty postcards
No contact. Even the fog has
Thankful for that, at least
The first helium tank is done
abundance of balloons and
a sale on them or something
that'll be the end of that. I'
two more tanks.

This morning, a light breeze
direction of Farley County
there, kept safe down the
Do I want to know the answer

Rita

I'm getting closer. I can't
balloons on the same day.
Just have to guess. Was
little lower on ink in this
purple pen? I think of
time since anyone touched
still works, still has a
to say.

When you write things in
back can you?

I've written lies on the
know why. No one will
I afraid of? Who am I?
I've killed more than
~~those were people over~~
~~those were people~~

Hey, folks,
What are you doing RIGHT NOW
party at mine? Sure you do.
Free booze and snacks, gear
from the 80's and 90's, mos-
guitar rock, which, full discl
You have been warned.
Dancing in underwear comp
crisis talk allowed.
Just knock.

Your buddy
Rita

P.S. Bring weed.

FUCK YES! power ballads
date right there. Trying to
in your underwear... and
make you out to be prett
to care. Sometimes I w
just spontaneously com
Yesterday got a little ho
looking for you will pro
hey, I would've starve
put. The end is coming
But there was a momen
cornered in this old ne
pushing through the
the stairs, and the
a moment there
waiting for it to
move and claim
I wondered what th
life? This running aro
pretending to be who
I laughed when I rea
The joke's on me. One
until I'm black and b

This is my first time writing in
suppose it makes any difference
month, a year. Sooner or later
I'm alone.

Current status is I've not had
full-throttle wasted the other
idiot, in the electrical items
useless junk aisle). Guess I
luck did I not stumble out
The noises have started up
can cope with the stench, I
upstairs for a gun.

Rita

I live three lives,
to write about.

There's the life of me
to sleep each night
in strangers' houses, they
won't flush, but hey I
who gives a fuck?

There's the life I used
forgotten dream these
clocks, traffic, deployment
how I smelled.

And a fantasy life
two. A life with you,
thoughts but above the
to hold a gun and you
where we leave notes to
after day as we grow
letter names fade. Fade
indelible things we've
eventually.

Some day

Greeting from the birthday
Turns out 36 feels much the
matter? If time and age are
isolation, so must be the lan
Before this, my body was a t
collected into a series of re

1-5 Bleed.

12-14 Ovulate.

28 Pregnant?

1 Nope. Start again.

My husband is gone. My body
and my world, no longer mo
the same rhythmic beat.
Who even am I now?

Rita

In high school, all I wanted
one teacher all my life who
taught us chemistry. It
she had us mix in those be
all the colored smoke that
mystery that she made
when she strayed from che
babbling about her favor
black holes and dark ene
My favorite lesson she e
really, but a story abo
Things are probability at
Nebulous things, like the
Until they aren't. Until th
36. A perfect number.
someone you can wrap
know they've been held b
aren't ruined either.
36.

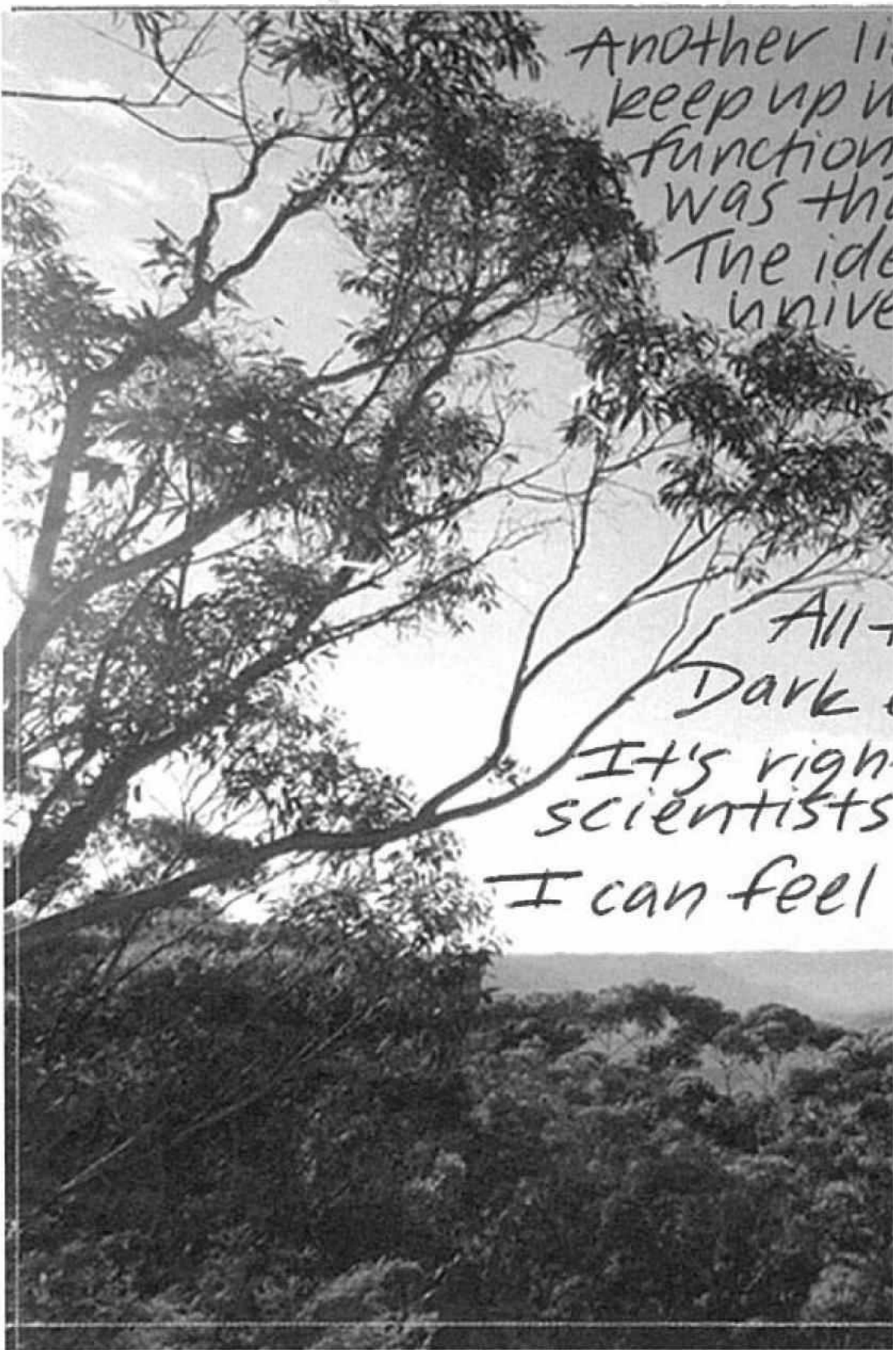
I'm getting closer. Just
now, probably. Street by s

I've lost track. Took my eye off
the life of me remember how
since I last crossed the calendar
So I've done away with the old
day Ritaday.

And, as everyone (me) knows
one thing: time trials!

Damn near broke my neck pull
display, but totally worth it,
the store is freaking AWESOME
All challengers welcome...

Rita
BMX champion
of the world



Another I
keep up w
function
was th
The ide
- knife

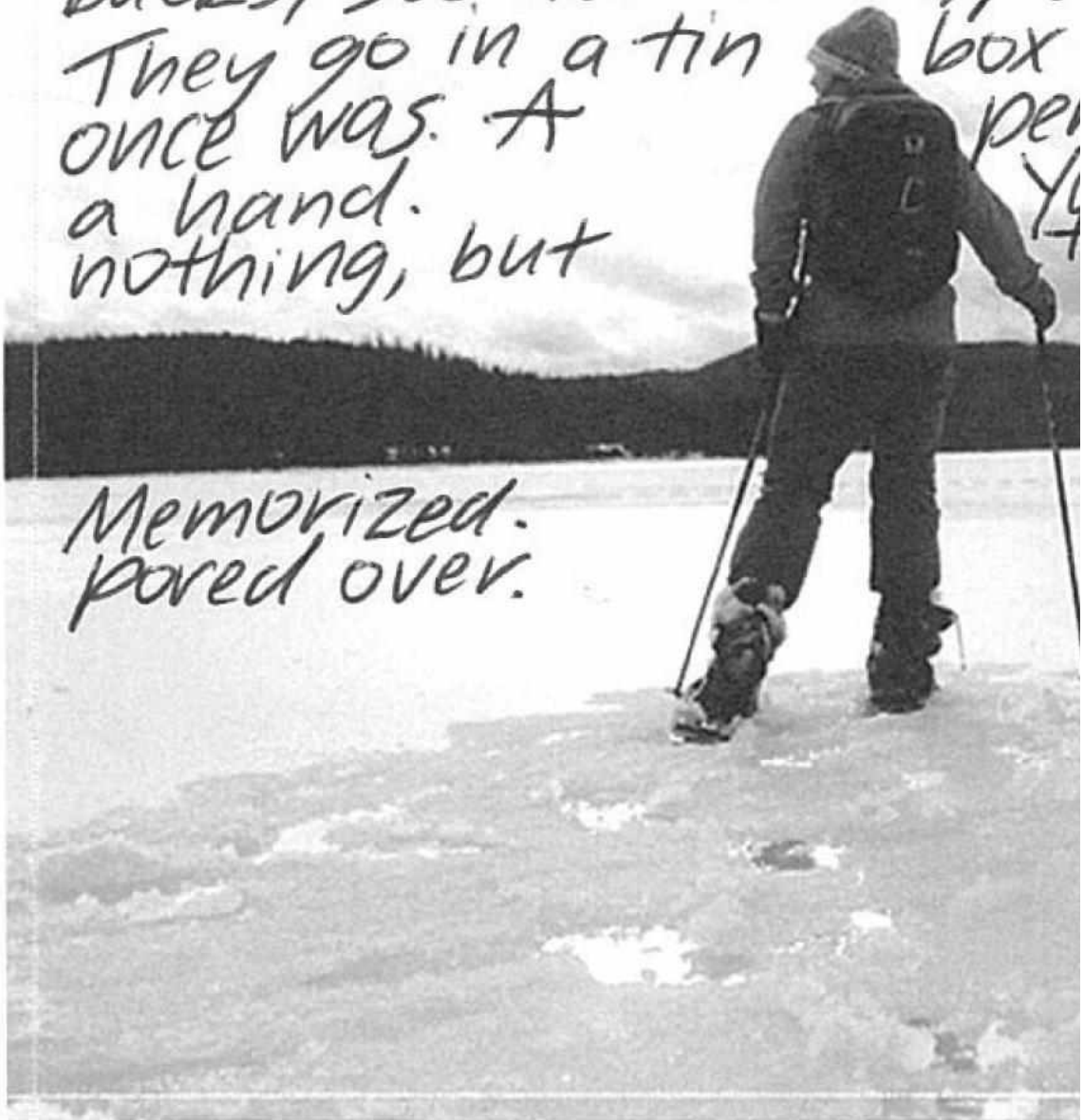
All-
Dark
It's righ
scientists
I can feel

Lately I've taken to watching
across the horizon, or until the
haze above, whichever come
the deciding factor in that.
I have a telescope. It's one of
possessions. Powerful thing it
if there were stars to be seen
follow my balloons, with their
messages - Happy Birthday!
dangling postcard payloads,
What happens to them after.

Rita

I'll tell you what happens
the sky or I climb a tree.
out of gutters hoping to
can't make out every word
end to end right off the
excitement. Then they're
backs, see how a respo
They go in a tin box
once was. A pen
a hand. Y
nothing, but

Memorized.
pored over.



Negative: I'm not alone. Some spoiled crackers in the snack worse, a rat, probably. When likely hundreds.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

sure I saw traps around here

Positive: Looks like the sun ever-present atmospheric but no see.

Rita

Rita
It occurred to me yesterday
harder than being on the
stronger from the walking
rooftops for a better view
get cornered by the fog
I used to think that you
full of everything and
But maybe it's the other
won't get there and feel
you. We'll find a car that
fix the gas, or charge
Teslas that're laying a
you and me.

PS: Found more rounds
ones I went through
PPS: Best part of staying
worrying about everything

PPS: ~~_____~~

I finally moved a few of the bodies
anywhere I had to go, but knowing
starting to freak me out, what was
They had employee badges, so was
wearing rubber gloves, a towel
I wrapped Tomasz, Steve, Le
folded up more compactly than
garden waste bags.

The store has a wheelchair, was
heavy!

One at a time I wheeled them
them off the roof, by the way
that direction. From 40 feet up.

A good day's work, all in all.

More to do tomorrow.

Rita

Every day I have regrets. These days. Maybe I should have needed a composition in the world. It's not like I regret not settling down having kids. Every house I stay in, it's the walls, by the beds, or up the stairway. Birth t



Grandparents. Back when I was a kid, I spent my 20s trying to reduce populations everywhere. I thought that was the big threat in the world. Muslims somehow. What I regretted was that I laughed at environmentalists. Fucking regrets.

Oh God.

Something, or someone, is causing this.
Not the warehouse (which, while it's not ideal, wouldn't be as bad, given the fact that I can close the door to that) but the store. Where I sleep.

I thought it was vermin, but whatever it is clawed a hole through the wall. I've stacked heavy stuff, but I need a permanent solution when I see Jesus, what next??

Rita

Rita,
So you've got them there
you. I really do. Mostly I
stomach. Part of me hope
be safe. No more shooting.
No more bodies. None of
nowhere is safe. Only on.
The Army trained us for
far. But here's another
Part of me was hoping
other way around. It's
There's a shopping mall
that seems a likely target
that before breakfast
nightmare. And every
stay there forever.

* Moving is hard.

Time to move.

Dear Mike,
It's rained here for a solid week
tricks, telling me I didn't come
to weigh you down.
I had a nightmare: the melting
mountains flushed you out,
majorly pissed off.
You kept repeating the same
"Rita", and "Hold me", and "I"
I screamed myself awake,
until morning came.
Stay dead, Mike. Please.

Rita

It just occurred to me today
might be dealing with the same
kicked down in Kabul, someone
right now to find a place to stay
at pictures of someone else's

The first time I got on a plane
another country, it was to see
who lived there. Felt right at home
My god, I thought I was a fuck
the world. Keeping America safe
I thought those people were doing
gonna take over the world.
Used to make fun of people at
ocean because they saw Jaws
Meanwhile, I grew up
playing with my
GI Joes.

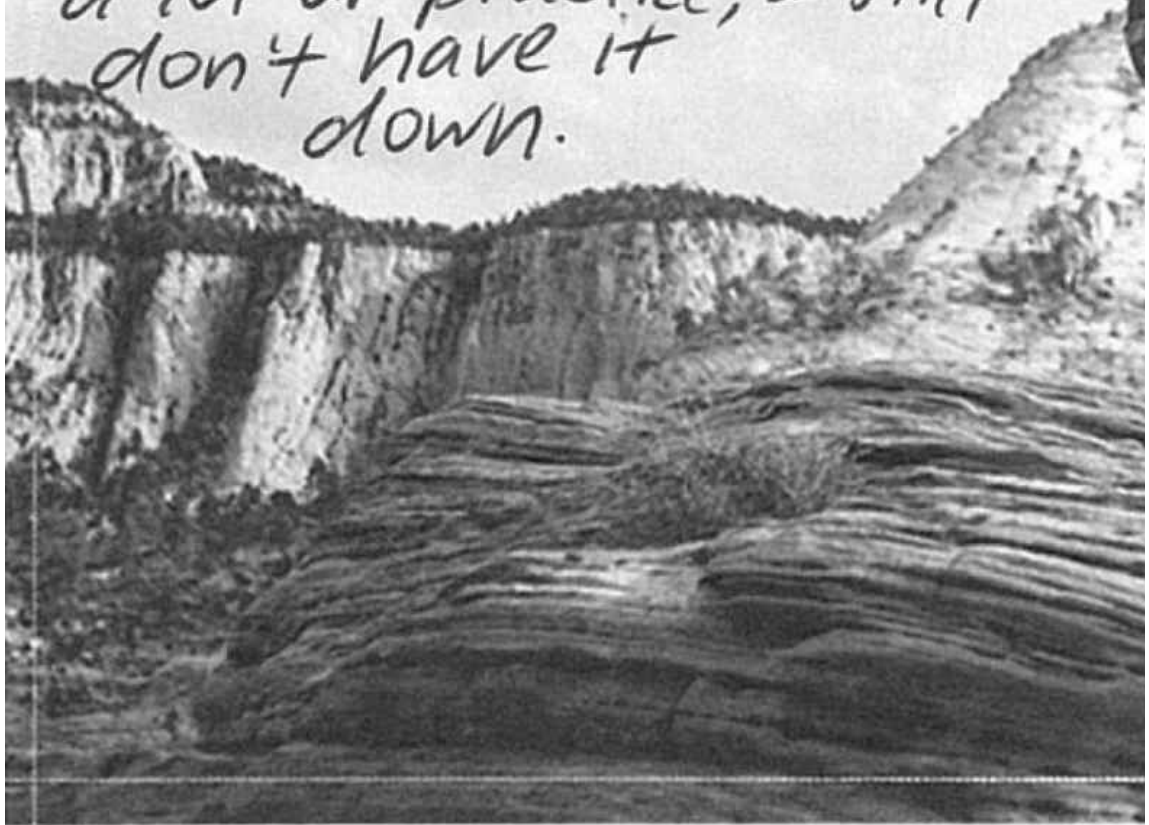
It's amazing the range of th

1. Celestron Refractor Tele.
2. 22" Kettle Barbecue With (in store).
3. Lay-Z-Spa Inflatable 4 p (chlorine tablets).
4. Brita Water Filter & spar
5. Kayak.

I was wrong about not bein
roof. Might have to do some

Rita

It's wild that we both make
imagination? Don't think v
span problems? What do
I've always done things i
any relationship of mine l
got sick of me. How long i
college. Always things in
This is my slow-ass way
a finger on my right han
bit-it-off" story, and mo
a stupid accident.
is an artform. Even with
a lot of practice, I still
don't have it
down.



Guys!

It's official, I'm a goddam
Honestly, I'd already impr
up a tarp to a length of ho
rainwater in my inflatab
the recent storms it's filli
How do you heat large a
electricity for a heater
One word: thermosyphor
Coiled copper pipe + meta
water, flowing into my (C
at this.

In your face, Apocalypse

Rita

confession time: There are
go back and read over and
them. It sounds too nice. I
haven't had a hot shower
thought of a hot tub - un
Better to focus on getting
thought this would be so
out there, and I've learned
human contact if at all p
yesterday, but could've b
into the mist, who knows?
We built these big concrete
the noise from spilling out
better at keeping other th

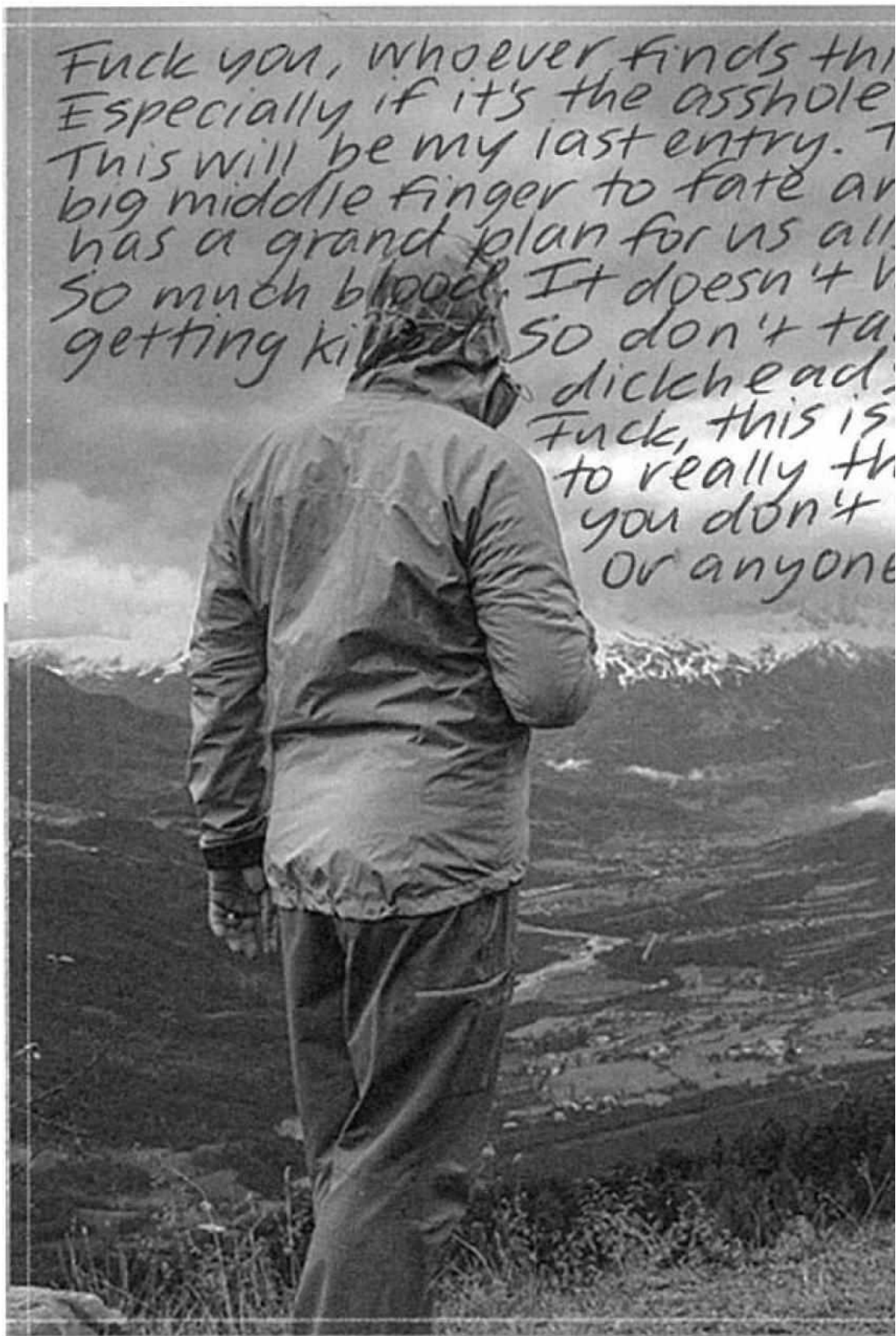
clayton, signing of



I've started locking myself in
fast approaching when I descend
upstairs, which will at least
between me and the shop floor.
For now, though, I'll make do
bike lock I'm using for home
In a bid to soothe my frazzled
Jane Austen audio CDs, through
to sleep. Been a while since
want to draw attention.
I'm either being watched or

Rita

Fuck you, whoever finds this
Especially if it's the asshole
This will be my last entry. I
big middle finger to fate and
has a grand plan for us all
So much blood. It doesn't
getting killed so don't take
dickhead.
Fuck, this is
to really thank
you don't
or anyone



Dear Wes,
Remind me. The weekend before
hitched, we met for breakfast
talked about the government
rocket launch. You had eggs
always do, I had cream cheese
Had they approved it by then
they push it through early
God, my memory is shot to hell
ice-cream melting in the sun
This is all so wrong. A puzzle
Come on, Rita, think. THINK

Two weeks. I'm tempted to
Pathetic. Gonna chalk that
shock. Really didn't think
bodies are tougher than we
Found the convenience store
their home base. And half
Makes me even gladder than
another one here who bit
tucked tail. Or did I write
Holy shit, I thought they were
their boogie man. Crazy
Anyway, I found why -
goddamn bottle of helix
trying to send you a message
Hope that fourth guy is a
dammit Rita, what are you
thinking with these damn
There are crazy people

Crap.

The bodies have gone from
where I dumped them.

Nine corpses. Gone.

I don't know what to do with

Rita

Launched my first message slightly out of the south, push that way myself, but making its way. I sent a think you'll find it. I'm sent just in case. A little intro finds it, good. Let them know still dangerous.

Interesting observation. I from dozens of balloons, trying to decide what kind to get them free, I never were assembled.

Got me thinking: how often such a rush that we have



Hello there,

Not sure we've met, but allow
I'm Rita Stomhold, fuck up of
I write this I'm doing tequila
storeful of ghosts.

Yes, you read that right. Te
I've set them all out in a row
lemons, a dish of salt, and -
they go.

Nobody tell me I don't know h
of course the ghosts are str
them a teensy weensy bit of

Adios muchach

Rita

May have spoke too soon
Pretty sure the exit wound
subsisting on junk food +
helped. If I don't die fr
pretty sure diabetes will

Top 5 things I wish I'd kn

- 1) Drugs aren't all bad. I v
are really, really good.
- 2) The people on TV trying t
really give a fuck about
- 3) Craft beers really do tas
- 4) Cuddling is better than
anyone says. Or if it mak
whatever. Right now, jus
I'd kill for that.
- 5) Disinfect, disinfect, d

Governor,

For a year and a half I slept
shut my eyes I couldn't bear
around me. I needed to close
clicks and scratches and tri
silent darkness conjured th
At night, space was - still i
Did they usher you to a sal
a floating, lead-lined palat
Or did some righteous sou
between your ribs?
Because if they didn't, I w

Rita

A routine is setting in, a
Routines are murder. Got

But until the supplies
run out, it's me
changing bandages,
cleaning a wound that
I'm getting to know
intimately like a damned
wife, sampling candy
bars I was too scared to
stray from Snickers
for, getting drunk on
warm beer, and
sending up party
balloons with greeting
cards and tourist
postcards attached.

If I've realized one thing over time
to get my shit together if I'm
getting through this.

I already have everything I need.
My dad's focus, my mother's
self-belief, and my baby brother
harness them.

So. Yoga. I've taken up Yoga. (The
difference is). I've cleared a
down foam jigsaw mats, and
morning impersonating what
to be. Day 3, and feeling me.
Bring it.

Rita

Here it goes:

First person I killed, I loved it.

Fuck, just seeing that out there, outside of my brain. It's not good. It's really not good. But it's real.

And I've lived with it for a long time. And somehow I've known it was a part of me.

I used to worry it meant I was sick in the head, like the kind of guy who could go on a killing spree. They make you see someone after you have an "event." Talk it thro
Make sure you're okay. And don't think I'm the only one had to pretend like it was traumatic, just to throw th
off of the seat.

Can't be the only one.



My sleep has improved since I scrubbed the place raw with cadaver stink from Tomasz's antibac surface cleaner, to which I've set up a makeshift bed using furniture cushions, Egyptian comforter. It's like a little cocoon. The space is great. It's bright, south and east. What we'd do. During the night, I wrap a leather handle of the double doors. The fog is back. Can't be too

Rita

Continuing from the last thou
They made us think the
enemy were monsters.
Damn, they were good at
that. Made us watch
beheading videos.
GIs dragged through
the streets.
Celebrating when they
got one of ours.
Made my blood boil.
Made me lay in my
cot every night
fantasizing
about getting
them in return.

I could never
write any ~~thing~~ of
this to you, Rita.
We could meet and
get married and
spend the rest of
our fog-ridden
lives together



Where were you when it happened?
Personally, I was underwater
at the bottom of rich peoples' yachts
of course, and here I am, and
I wait for my pasta to cook,
to warm through. Funny how
Man, I used to love diving,
hated it. Then it saved my life.
guessed?

All their money couldn't buy
plenty of that.

Rita

Time to admit that I'm over
helium. Sent out the last of
suddenly my side feels
much power over us. As
learned earlier.
When the fog pulls back
forecasting it will (the d
like it has a plan), I'm p
mall just north of me.
were suicide, the big
for such alluring targ
wrong. Maybe enough t
Two big jugs of lemon-
bar I can fit in my pack
All those wasted years, e

I'm coming, Rita.

Hold tight.

To ???

I saw your balloon this mornin
south. I fell over my own feet
in time to confirm what my in
sure enough, IT WASN'T ONE
There was a message attach
though, would've meant goi
safe haven, and I'm not reac
who are you?

Where are you?

Why am I suddenly filled wit
I shall wait until the wind dir
reply, in the hope it's seen. Bu
that doesn't mean I'm ready
be found.

Rita

Dear stranger,
When I arrived here I was a day
away, maybe two, left in me. If
chances were I'd never have
Then, from nowhere, this place
shimmering oasis, offering
and heal. More than that, it is
I never imagine myself leaving
risk, and for what? The outside
And yet -
All it took was a child's ball
someone else in it. Now I fantasize
at night, of the comfort that
to find you.
But, no. I'm sorry. The fear is
just too much.

Rita



I went outside. Only as far as the
meets the drop-off point, but
hard my heart was pounding
the whole time.

Ground level = vulnerable.

I was out there mere seconds
barricading the doors as I felt
my anxiety, I added extra lock
for good measure.

I keep thinking about what I
'If they want to get in, then
I spend most of my time in
Probably isn't.

Rita

Rita,
I'm convinced that you are
long on your own? Trust me
feel like I know you perfectly
how clever. A real sense of
I haven't allowed myself
until recently, and how
I know you so much better
I'm just a single balloon
me, you are realer than
hundreds of times. I've
you a single line from a
but I can recite Postcard
How will you handle me
you when you don't even
enough that we both e.

I hope so. It's a
me right now, Rita

I'm f

I ex

Life goes on. It escalates.
First, the insects returned,
weeks. No doubt due to the
shift in their ranking up the
obscene amount of rotting
Then there was a resurgen
mammals some months lat
survived somehow, safe a
deep underground. God bl
Now, as I close my eyes, I'r
call of an owl. I need it to b
Though I know firsthand h
enough that you manifest
if only in your own mind.

Rita

Rita,

Plot twist: You don't exist,
both sets of balloons. How
swear I started finding
about to give up. I was
running low on rations, so
I do think we manifest
keep them positive. Found
single day today, can't
zeroing in. Wasn't the most
scenes of horror I found
I'm patient.

I know what I want, and
about it every day. Making
making it real.

- Clayton

Mike.

Is that you?

Don't be ridiculous, Rita. Of

don't write postcards. Whoe

All the same -

There's one caught on the r

A sorry looking balloon sag

I can't bring myself to wall

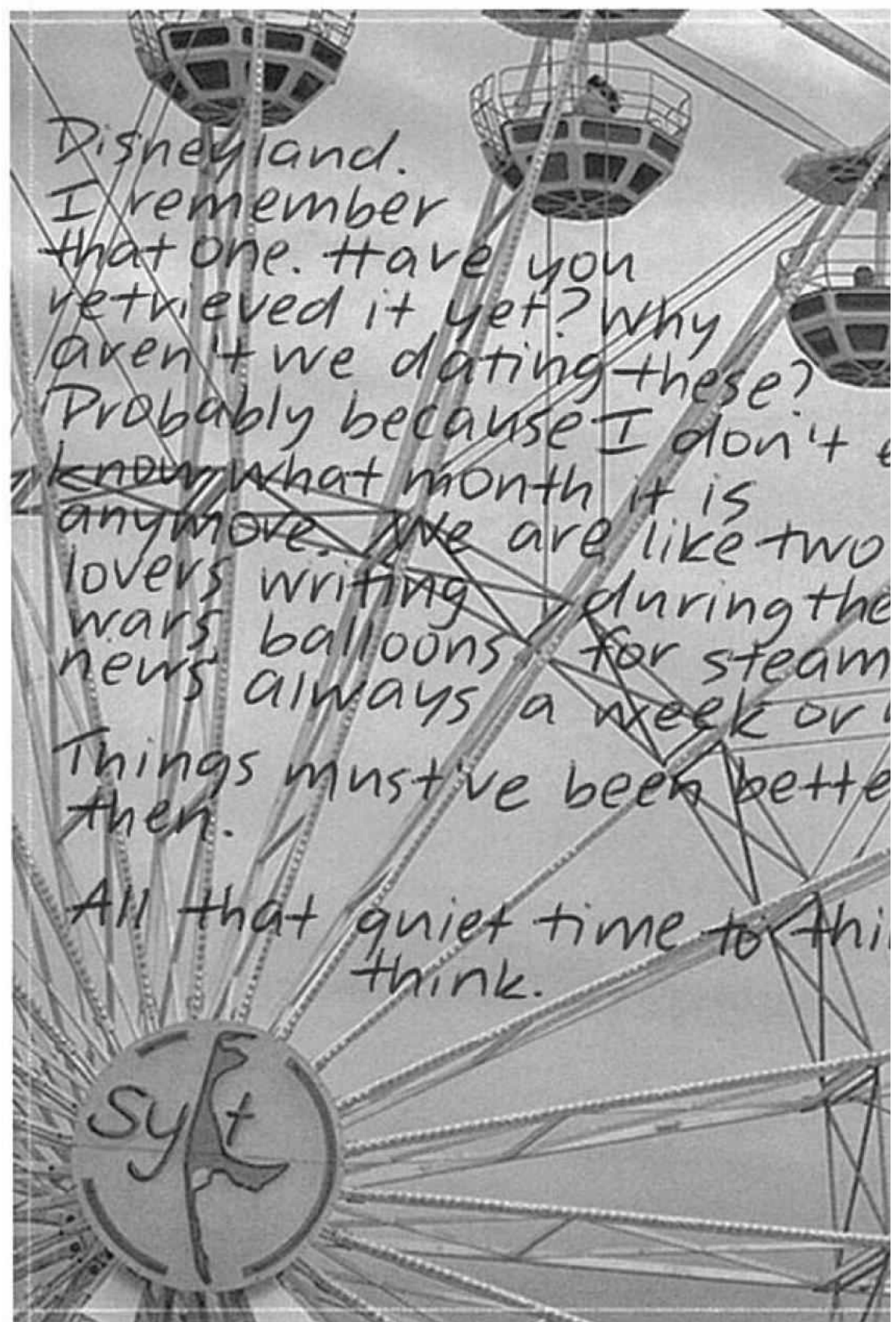
aimed my telescope toward

I can see the image on the c

So you understand, Mike,

You always promised we'd c

Rita



Disneyland.
I remember
that one. Have you
retrieved it yet? Why
aren't we dating these?
Probably because I don't
know what month it is
anymore. We are like two
lovers writing during the
wars balloons for steam
news always a week or
Things must've been better
then.

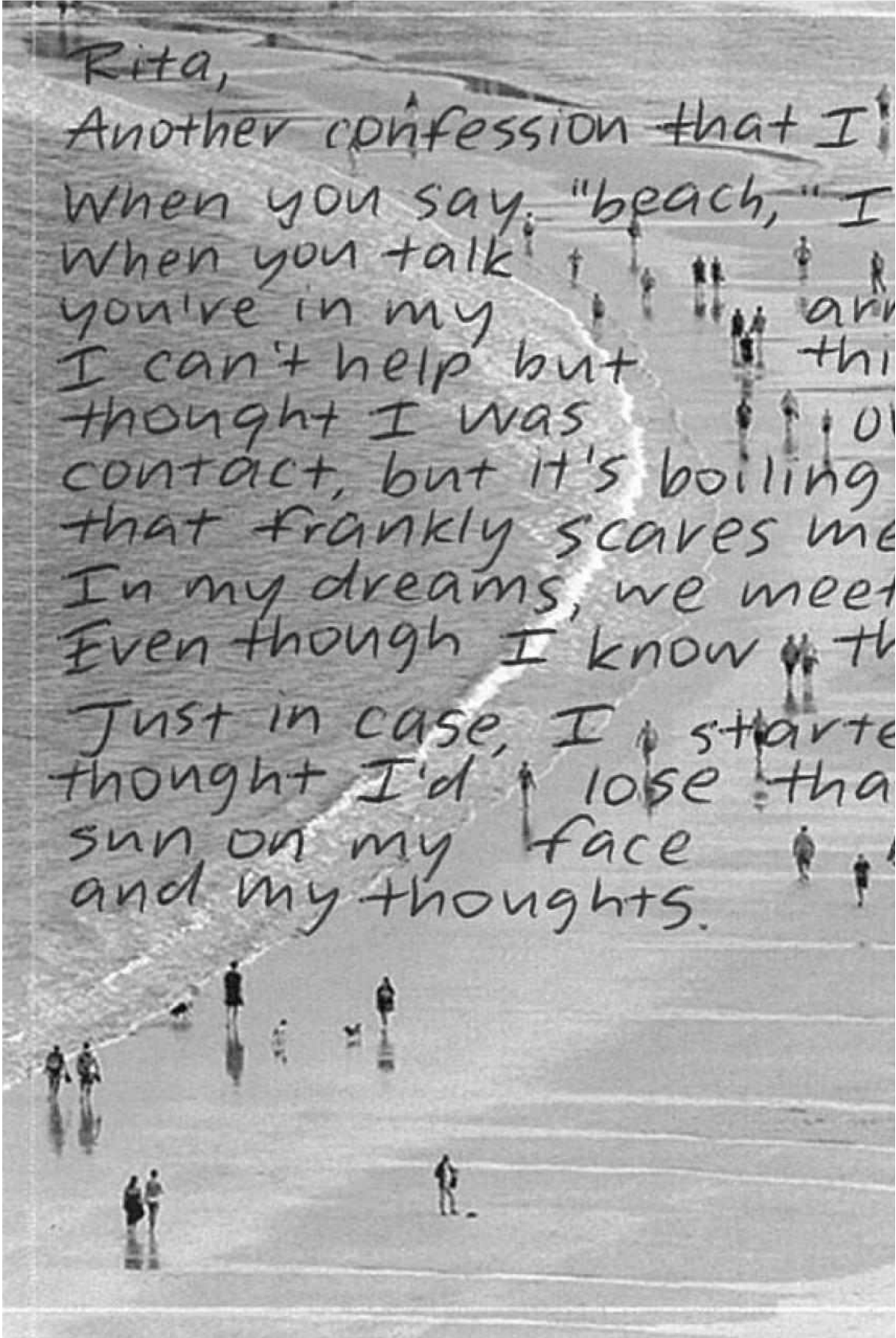
All that quiet time to think.



Wesley (my brother) and I v
summers outside of the us
neck-deep and fearless, or,
surf. Rules were for city folk
There are so many things to
I miss most is the ocean. Th
of possibility.

I've dragged a kayak onto
slow my breathing, there!
my hair, which is drying in
water undulates beneath
I'm far from the land wher
I may stay and drift a whi

Rita



Rita,
Another confession that I
When you say, "beach," I
When you talk
you're in my
I can't help but
thought I was
contact, but it's boiling
that frankly scares me
In my dreams, we meet
Even though I know
Just in case, I
thought I'd lose that
sun on my face
and my thoughts.

Dear Mike,

I still don't know who sent the
I'm working to beat my agoraphobia
currently reading about self-harm
hurt, right?

Twice this week I went outside
further from the door. My heart
terrified the gun would go off
took the bodies of Tomasz
Did I mention I found a gun
I'll try to get further. I need
for the sake of my sanity.

Rita

It's hard to picture you
kayak, a hot tub, on a boat
Not shooting things. How
I thought everyone like
I remember an argument
She was going on and on
wiped off this earth. I thought
Most of everything that
I don't believe this anymore
God's stewards here. Keep
They were ours and we

I was



I was woken early by a loud
but that's crazy, right? I had
person in forever. Not since
Yes, well, best we don't men
My next thought was a car
even crazier, given there is
miles around. I should know
here, to no avail.

Nothing in the store appear
believe me I checked, so I w
as I could in the shitty gra
To nothing. Not even a spar
I guess the latest developm
Fan-freakin-tastic.

Rita

My Rita,

Funny, that's how I think

~~about~~ Confession time - I
dead. You know it, I know
I'm happy about that. I

don't know what I'd do.

Another lie. I know exactly

Mikey-boy wouldn't like

fight for you, Rita.

Saying I'd kick

asshole you can

V

9

T

Motherfucker.

I made it to the car. And then I tried to untangle one from the other like I've never known, so I ran into its mooring in the process. In what was not my finest moment, my ankle good, and only just a clumsy idiot. If it's broken. At least now I know my dead end is under a cold pile of rocks. No one. Someone with the most words. Wherefore art thou, Clayt

Rita

Top five excuses for sobbing
the void, and crying some

1) Holy fuck it worked. So
and it found you. Jus-

2) The relief that you go
please no more risks like
another note. Can't pu

3) That ankle. Please be
injuries for granted, b
get us in the end.

4) You wrote my name.
I've stared at it for G
trying to imagine it f
weird, aren't they? Wh
see them. The most fa
it hits like electricity.

5) The most wonderful v
No words for how th

I'm a mess right now
in my arms soon.

For the record, three bits of

1. My BMX career might be the size of a grapefruit, I can't do it any more, so I'm back on the shop floor (shitty enough)
2. The gun is gone. I dropped it about building up the car. It looked this morning it was gone.
3. I'm down to my last cylinder.

As Ritadays go, I've had better

Rita

Are you a God-fearing woman, Rita? I was a believer my whole life, more or less, until the world got fucked up. Even then ~~and~~ a part of me asked if the annihilation wasn't just our Lord's way of taking care of business.

With hindsight, I can't see the sense in it. Why would God want me to kill children? The one in the fog. The others. How does that fit His plan?

Dear Wes,
Your medical skills must've
accident, broke my ankle, I
really, given the state of t
You never told me it hurt so
the bridge that time. Or ma
I vaguely remember makin
for that I'm truly sorry.
It wasn't getting better (ca
but luckily there's a ton of
using cotton wadding and
of Paris, and a crutch from
Guess we're both doctors

Rita

I've picked up shadows. The
how many. I ducked into
spaces to hide out in this ha
manner of escape routes. I
I've been here before. A hot
firmly in the past.

can't sleep. Desperately he
find me, kill me, steal my gu
mind.

I've got Col. Ramsay on a lo
never happens, Clayton. Mak
Oh, to speed dial her and ha
now, Doc? When the 1% co
I'll tell you what now: you
enemy bullet gets lucky, t
you're useful to them alive
you're useful in other, mor

10% sure a

Dear Clayton,
Sorry it's taken me this long to
I could say I was unwell, or th
convinced myself you weren't
blew north instead of south. A
are true, they aren't the reas
The reason is life was easier -
If you are real then I have d
and I haven't had those for s
out there takes a sledgeham
myself. I'm still not sure that
Forgive me. I need more time

Rita

seeing my name, imagining
thing to sex I've had in y
control terrifies and thrill
it to stop, but needing it v
no idea.

Five balloons - there's the
went by today. My guts to
might have said on those
on. The intimacy lost.

Too many damn ferals co
wherever you are for w
down. I hear them hunt
for rats, but I suspect
prey these days).

From what I hear there
my chances against a h
shot to take down four,
know I'm there, but no
time, maybe pick off st

That's one thing the fog

Seems I lost a number of days
single malt whiskey, and pair
dead man. Which, depending
either don't go well together
too well.

This was all peachy until last
visit from my father. The said
'Little pig, little pig,' he said
'Let me in.' (I had the presence
at least).

Way to sober me up, Dad.
Needless to say, I'm sleeping
on. Stairs or no stairs.

Rita

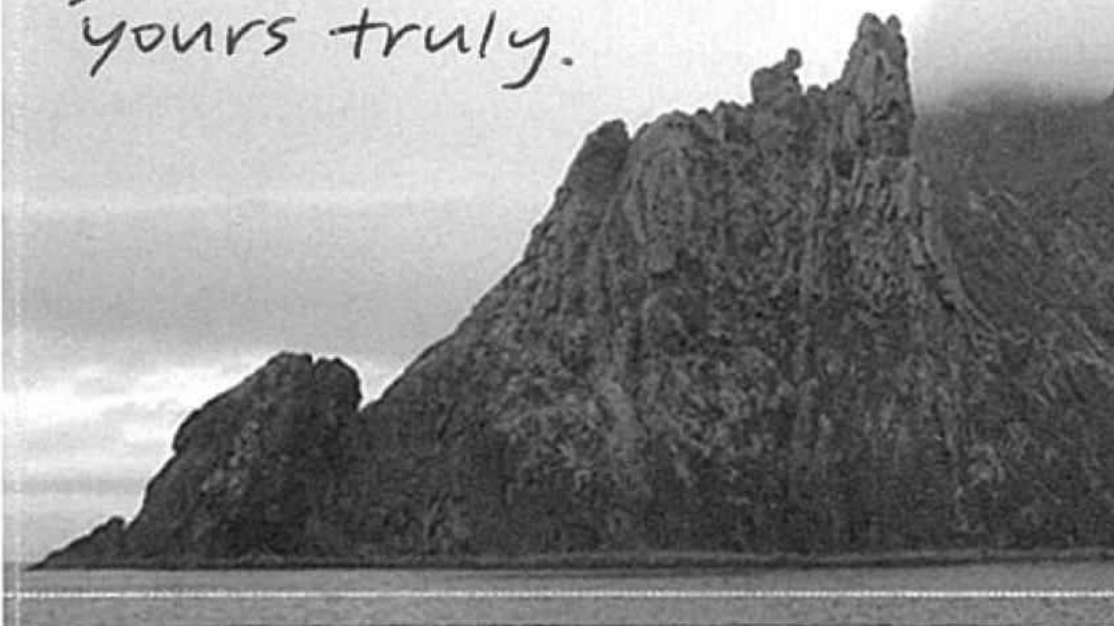
Want to know what my da
now? 'Man up, Clayton!
No, that's not quite it.

He'd say: 'Man the fuck u
head to make damn sure
my thick skull.

And I'd be grateful for
wouldn't have lived this l
right, making me strong.

I've cried more tears th
my whole life. Going so.
But then, he never did.

Tomorrow I'm pushing o
Save some of that swee
yours truly.



Governor,

For a long while I thought it was property, that you had some v project, in the tech, in the out otherwise. Why else would yo through?

Did you know it would go this k from the start?

How you must've laughed wh we bought it without question savior bullshit right up.

So, what now, hero? How long Do you know, or even care?

Rita

I found a half-dead gutter mager or a feral, his plain as day, more bullet badly infected ones. Magg there a while.

He begged me to take him. him I'd never heard the. 'I need Chem,' he kept only one who can help.' 'Not true,' I said. I finished him clean with my knife.



I figured a building inspection using a pair of brooms. I wish a breach has appeared, this is the aisle. No kidding, it's the size of a main building. While I enjoyed my short period of Percocet Airways, something like a warehouse wall, and clawed at the main building.

What could do that? And how? Then again, maybe I did. (L) Must do an inventory to check food-wise. I don't feel safe here, hell else is there to go?

Rita

I retrieved one of your p
pocket of a corpse. An old
had good intentions, tha
picture of the Eiffel Tower
handwriting, but that's u
by any way we can out b
It's oddly comforting to kn
seeing things. Though I w
on a single soul. If bran
have shares in the comp
Memories or dreams, the
as bad as the other. Both
mess-with-your-head stut
in, makes a home. For son
a bullet to get that shit o
Lock your doors, Rita. LOC
And be careful what deta
out into the world.
I'll be there soon, I prov



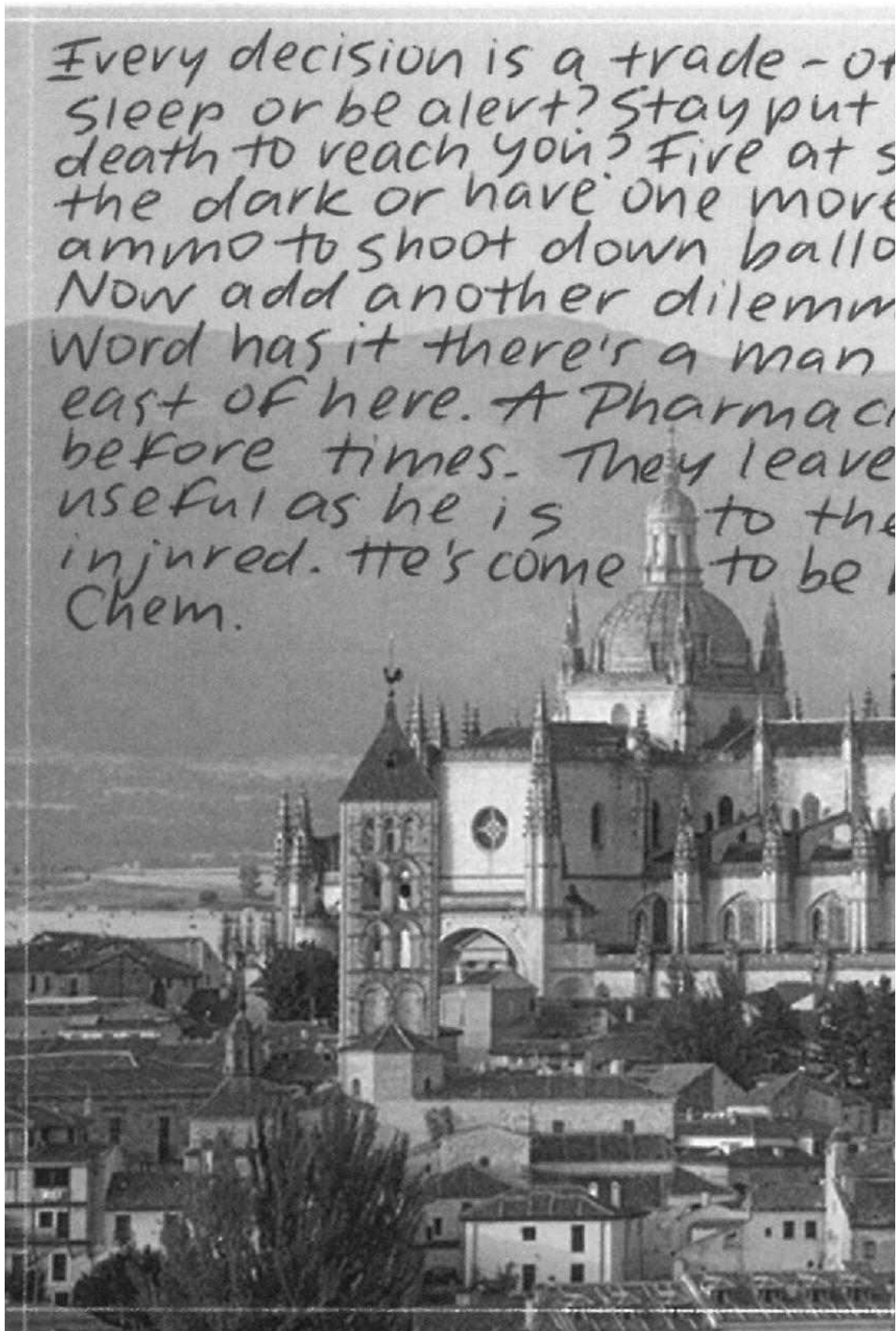
Dear Clayton,

I watch from morning 'til night
On fog-free days I lie on the
in a blanket. I eat tinned pea
landscape for balloons from
hills.

I've spotted two more so far
were out of reach. (I'm inju
near kills me to sit here help
I wonder what you wrote. I
And deep down I hope that

Rita

Every decision is a trade - or
sleep or be alert? Stay put
death to reach you? Fire at
the dark or have one more
ammo to shoot down ballo
Now add another dilemma
Word has it there's a man
east of here. A Pharmacia
before times. They leave
useful as he is to the
injured. He's come to be
Chem.



Clayton,

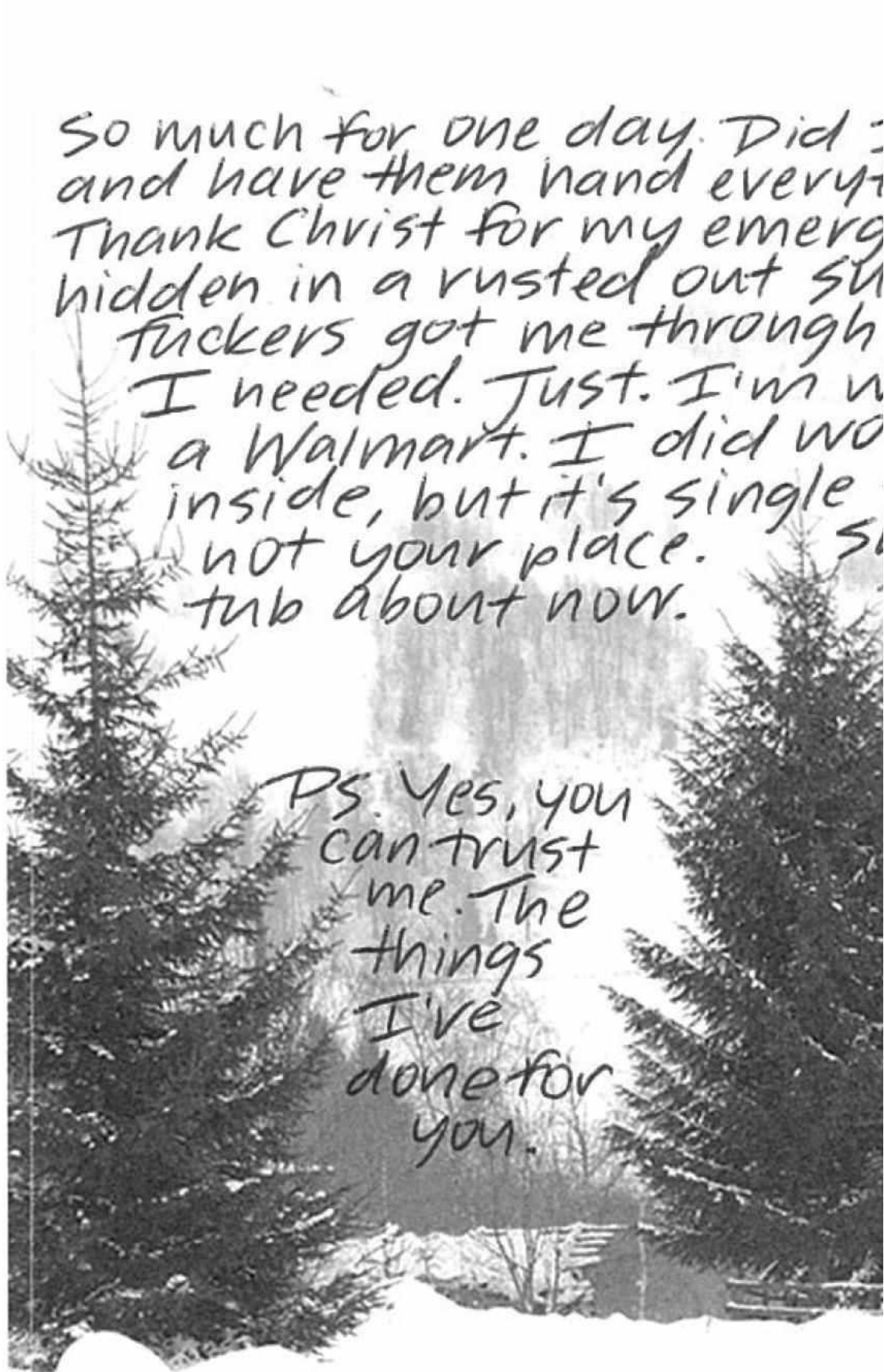
Here's the thing: I'm battling issues right now.

I trusted my husband, Mike, all those 'after-work events that Gov. Merck was trying just his own. I trusted the from whatever is out there Trust is finite, and, frankly

So -

Can I trust you, Clayton? I'm starting to think nothing

Rita



So much for one day. Did :
and have them hand every
Thank Christ for my emerg
hidden in a rusted out su
fuckers got me through
I needed. Just. I'm w
a Walmart. I did wo
inside, but it's single
not your place. S
tub about now.

Ps. Yes, you
can trust
me. The
things
I've
done for
you.

I've set a trap. Fear got me r
or what, keeps breaking in
that bastard down. Nobody
gets away with it.

After dinner, I built a half
across the most recent hole
someone getting in, just en
on top is a basket of the no
cutlery, ornaments, jingle
of a clang as it hits the floo
me knowing about it.

And now to bed.

Rita

P.S. Fun fact: My leg cast
makes the perfect holster
for a carving knife.

There's a scar on my thigh
They said they got all the
me the X-ray to prove it,
Man, is it playing up now
Certain things set it off.
trigger memories of the
dull kick of steel piercing

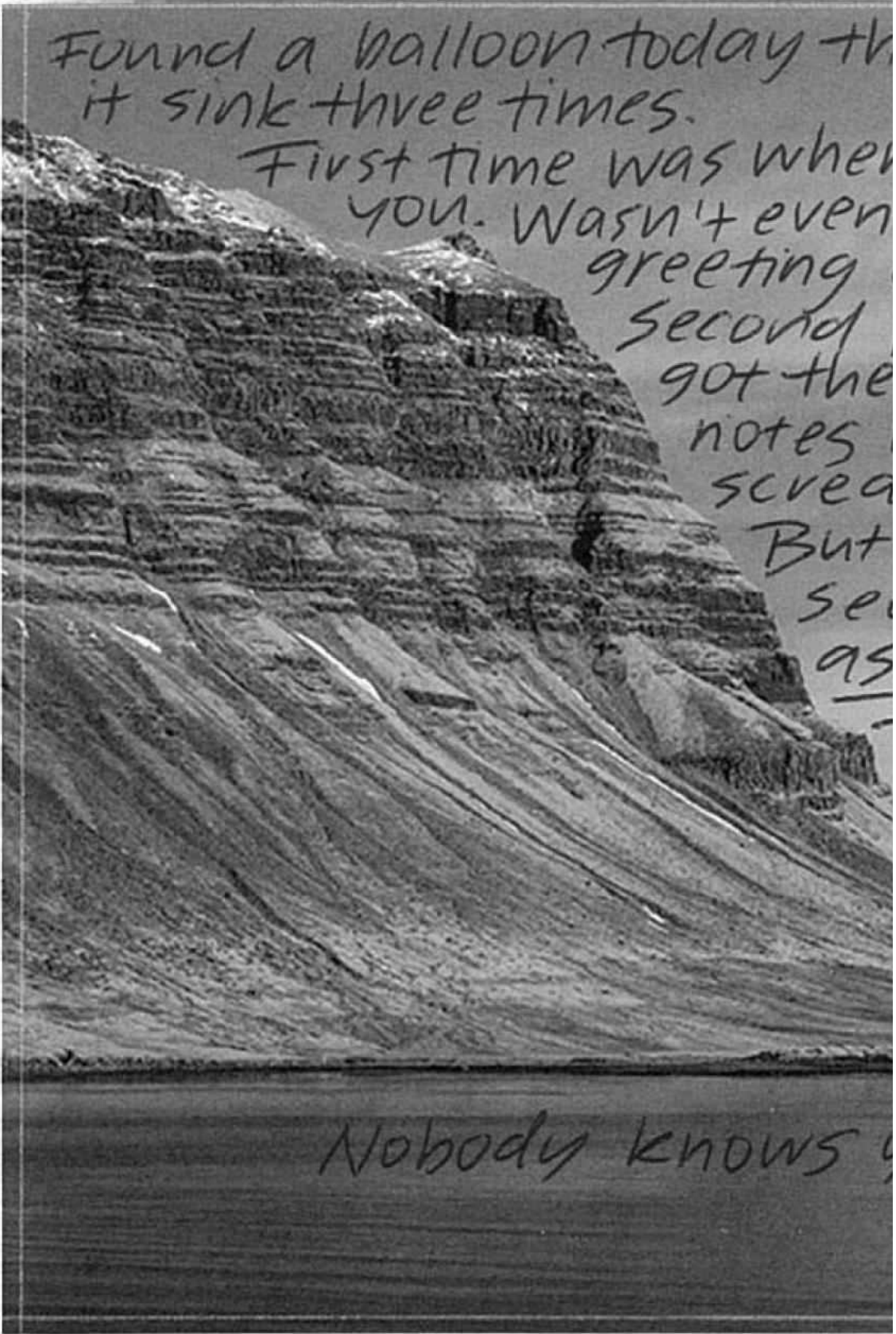
Five statements of fact

- 1) Chem wouldn't give up
- 2) I can't fail another
- 3) Shooting first was the
- 4) I didn't know Chem
- 5) No more headspace for
regr

Do you believe in curses, Clayton? At a price for their misdeeds, do you?
I have a confession: prior to your arrival, I had
for the kind of time and space I wanted
for it. I pictured a world where I could do
anything of me, where Mike could
pass the hours as I wanted.
It might sound strange but I did
before you came along. Really, I
of course, who wouldn't be
sad for myself.

Then, there you were.
You cursed me, Clayton.
I'm to be tormented by
messages, close enough
to see but never read.

Rita



Found a balloon today that
it sink three times.

First time was when
you. Wasn't even
greeting

Second
got the

notes
screa

But

see

as

Nobody knows

The worst things to happen

1. Mom's slide into dementia
2. IVF (the drugs, the miscarriage, the shebang).
3. Dad leaving.
4. The high school years.
5. Mike.

Well, well, Apocalypse, no
How disappointed you must be

Rita

I get it now. Can't believe it
it. What the therapy was for
and how they make us work
just met two months ago
worked.

We're supposed to conf
aren't we? Have that one
much we're hurting. I
want to listen. I mean
tell me about your mi
her. Tell me about how
we rock our baby to sle
give you the man you
dreamed of.

I'll share my hurts w
you. I get it now. It's
what it's all about,
isn't it?

Dear Wes,

I'm going to have to let you go
all the wonderful memories I
and pack them away neatly
if there's one last thing I w
you go, it's that I was so pro
damn proud.

You did good, kid.

Oh, and for the record, do
Mom and Dad's favorite. B
favorite too.

Love you alwa
Rita Skeete

The winds are fickle,
aren't they? The fog
has a mind of its own.
I can feel it
sometimes, the totality
of it all, moving like
a giant beast with
beating organs
and limbs like
fat sausages of
gas moving
across the streets
and hugging
these buildings,
and pushing me
a block over from
where I wanna
be, and another
block, this way
and that, like life
sometimes.



Governor,

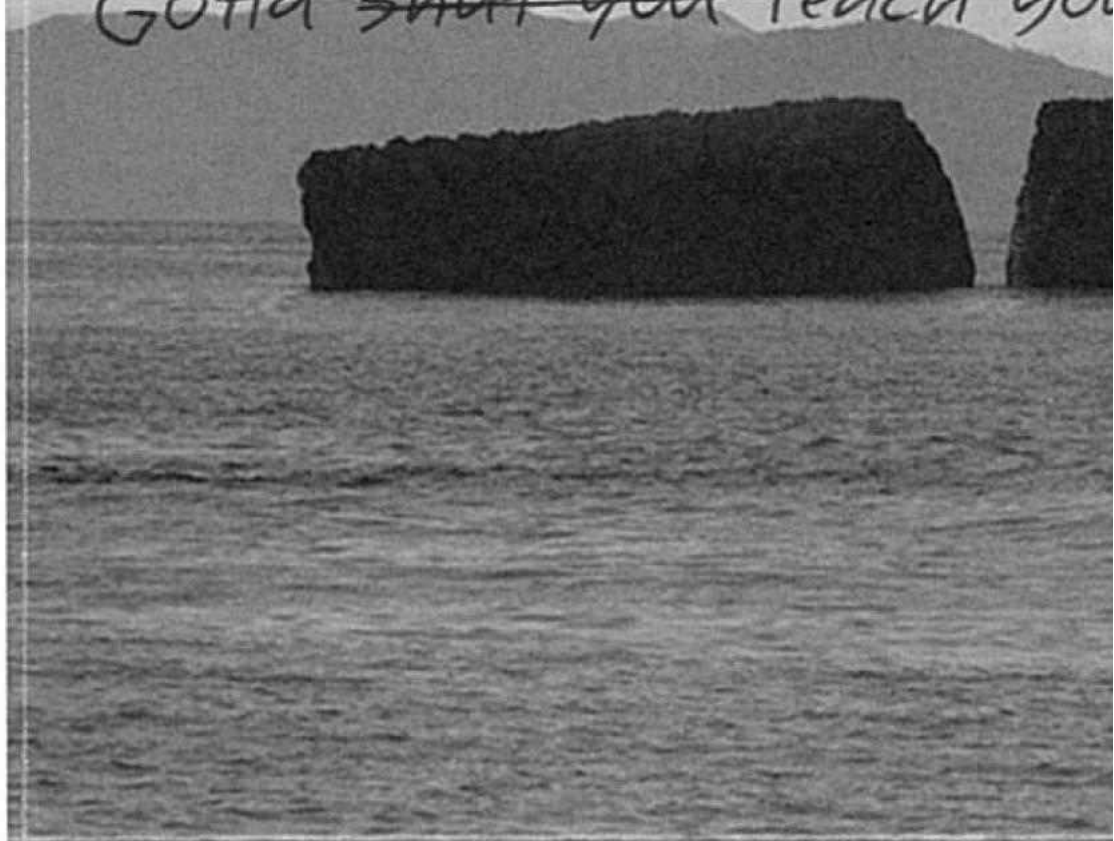
The stories I could tell you a
goodbye to him today. Not in
face, my arms around him
No. My goodbye was scratch
of all things.

A fucking Costco postcard.
He was the last of them. Th
I held out any shred of hope
first days.

But we know in our hearts th
My baby brother is dead.

Rita

HOLY SHIT. I'm such a
past that Costco last week
could hole up in, or maybe
from how I pictured it, or
that parking lot is a fuckin'
Costco. Jesus H. Christ, Rit
letting shit slip like that.
They aren't all good men
all want to take care of
Gotta push harder. The v
Gotta shut you teach you



The fog comes in varying levels
you'd struggle to find your own
hands.

The middling fog, more of a haze
renders even the mundane visible
otherworldly. Quite beautiful.
Then there's this, a kind of heavy
fog. You can feel it when you breathe. It's like
spores and rot. Not thick enough to
stop you. Not weather so much as mood.
I long for a breeze to clear it.

Rita



Dear Clayton,
Just when I feared the ink v
my constant rereading of
should I spy through my te
Yes! Yes! Another balloon!
message! Caught up in the
or so away. Lord only know
for the last fog to clear.
Although it's at the other er
away for me to retrieve, k
of it.
I'd all but given up.

Your frie
Rita

Fuck, this is where the code
did you send this? So much
now:

* I'm reading an old message
gotten pretty good at judging
the weather, but this one was

* You're seeing an old message
stayed aloft these last few
know less about balloons +
months, figured I was an

* The order is all
wrong. Everything
I've collected to now
I know this, always have
but I tend to forget. I keep
them in the order I
found them, and I read
them over and over that
way.

Dear Clayton,
Last night I saw you in a c
identical store to mine, as
as I am to their north.
In every way, we mirrored
doing the same things, fo
neither of us moving from
Both of us died alone.
Is that how it's to be? Or
the other?
Thinking of you (us?).

Rita

P.S. Not feeling great. Will
write more when I shake c
this cold.

I try not to go back and
I read yours over and over
ravings. I don't have wh
handwriting, that gift o
to see anything I've cont
shame that has me avoid
But I went and read the
time, and it's got me think
How we piece it all togeth
life feels like a shattered
me back but all jumbled
Sometimes I feel like I v
even a teenager, like thos

beneath
in my head
came first
Need to s

or stop reading what
don't look back.
Worked so far.

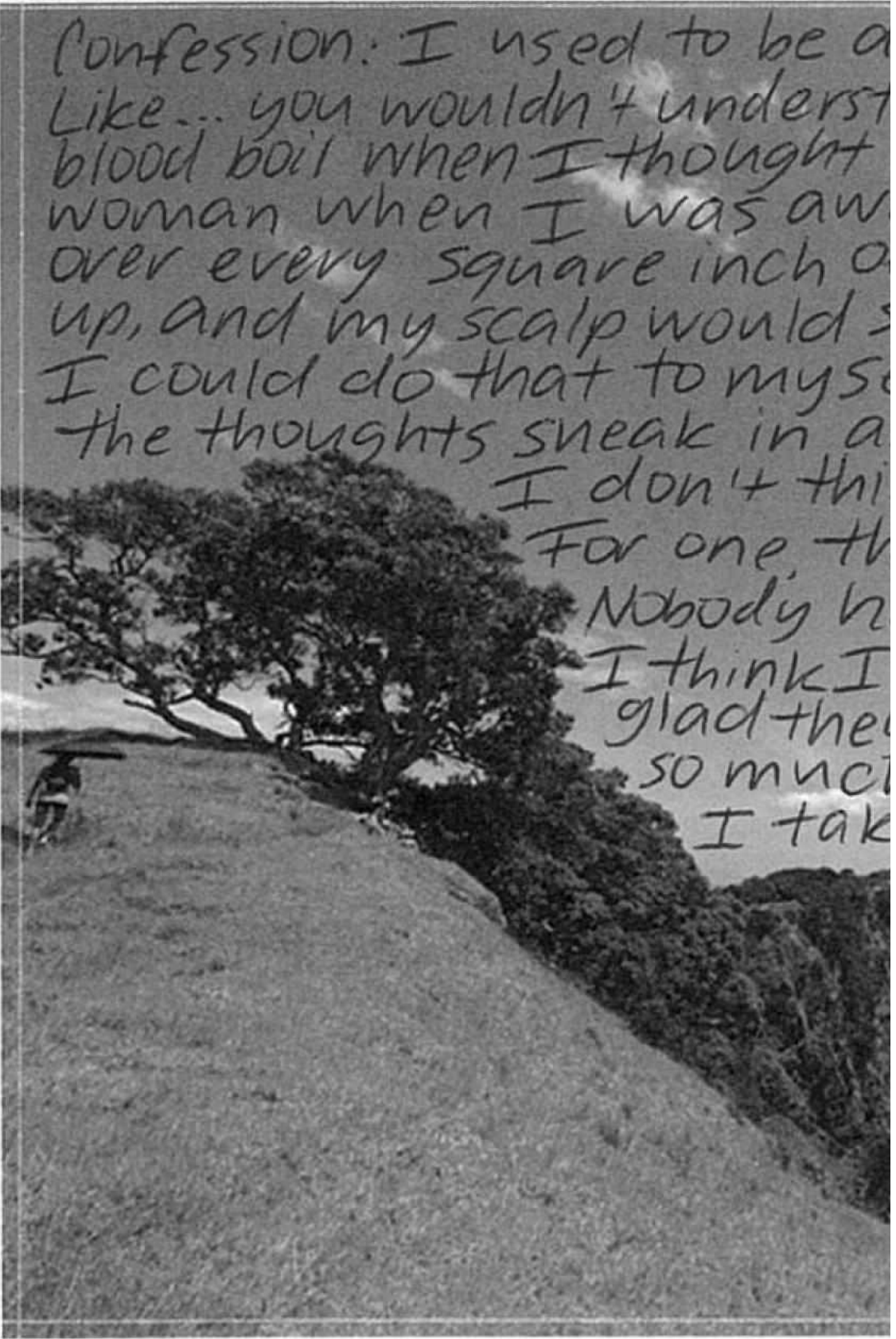
Mike.

That damn secretary of yours
fake nails tappity - tapping. We
needed burying, huh? Fat lot
now, giggling outside my door
Jesus.

In all honesty, Michael, I for
forgave, per se. It was more
it. I couldn't bring myself to
too, eventually.

What? You didn't think I knew
ourselves. Discretion was not
I was going to divorce you
anyway.

Rita



Confession: I used to be a
Like... you wouldn't understand
blood boil when I thought
woman when I was aw
over every square inch of
up, and my scalp would
I could do that to myself
the thoughts sneak in and
I don't think
For one, though
Nobody knows
I think I
glad they
so much
I take

Dear Clayton,
Are you there, my faraway frier
ranks of the dead? Either way
I see them, Clayton, in the fog.
window and I see them, lots of
heavy, stolen pelts, their teet
ready. They're laughing at us
as easy prey.
They don't see me, though. I'n
quiet, that's the key.
Shhhh.
I have a plan, Clayton. When t
just you wait.
Wait, wait, wait.
You'll be good at that by not
waiting.
Never doing.
Never mind. You wait. I'll do
myself.

Rita

So it's not just me they
killed so many of those +
times if they were even red
trying to justify shooting
I've done that before. ~~W~~
else so I didn't have to
There's two kinds of fog
kind making it fucking in
And there's the one we've
we were born.

Confession: I think I lik



Dear Clayton,

I hope you find this message, a
shape. Not sure how much sen
Are my postcards getting to yo
thousands, perhaps.

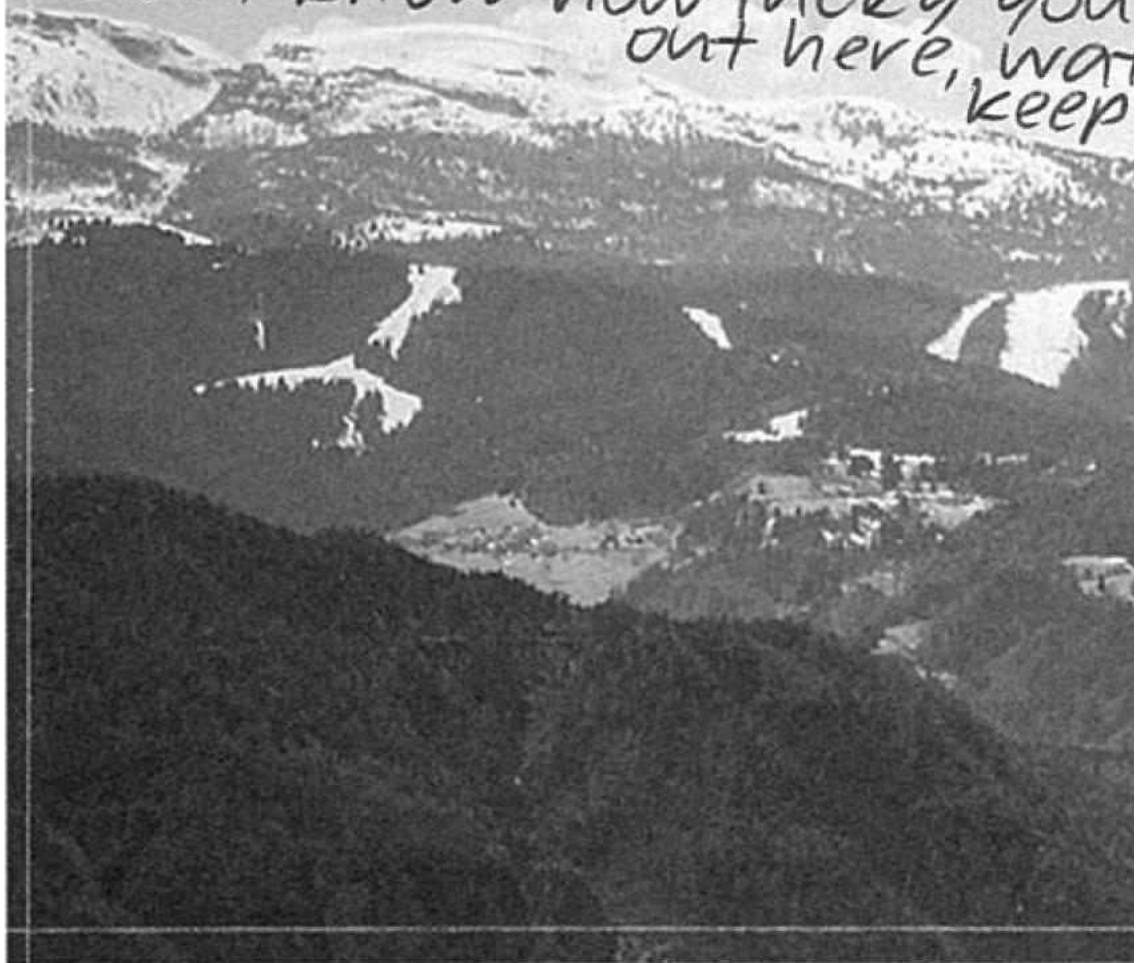
I believe it's 3 or 4 days sinc
(It could just as easily have
so well. But I shall keep sendin
world of ours until my last cu
For what it's worth.

Fact is, my leg is pretty band
an infection and, frankly, it's
antibiotics, which have helpe
clearer now. God willing, I'll
Send good vibes.

Rita

There she is. I can see the
highway sound barrier. I
pushing in a straight line
is risks. Think I'll set out
first light. something to take
care of first.

Probably think they're safe
up a campfire in the middle
Think their numbers will say
think they're coming for you
don't know how lucky you
out here, wait
keep



- ★ Updated★ List of things I miss
- Rooftop hot tub (plaster)
 - Music played LOUD (music)
 - Why tf am I even hiding
 - Knowing I'm alone (yeah)

- ★ Updated★ List of things I don't miss
- Hallucinations (not fun)
 - Hangovers (solution: drink)
 - Mike (still)

Not dead yet, Apocalypse.

Rita

That was the most beautiful
Right after dawn, the sun
through, the underside of
lifted up from the roof, and
it through my scope to be
hands. I can picture your
crutches and cast, sending
smile on your face.

The golden hour, we used to
call it. This time of day.
Wish it could last longer.

Tucking this away knowing
it might be the last time
I write before I'm talking
to you in person. Voice to
voice. Man to woman.
For real this time.

~~I love you~~

Clayton

Hi Clayton. A quick update -

- The customer wheelchair is invention ever. Not up to time improvement on dragging me the floor.
- No further break-ins as yet. Not sure what they're waiting for.
- Your postcards brighten my cushion, to read when I want that hangs tantalizingly far from me. I see in the sky, passing by another?
- I'm all out of antibiotics.

Rita

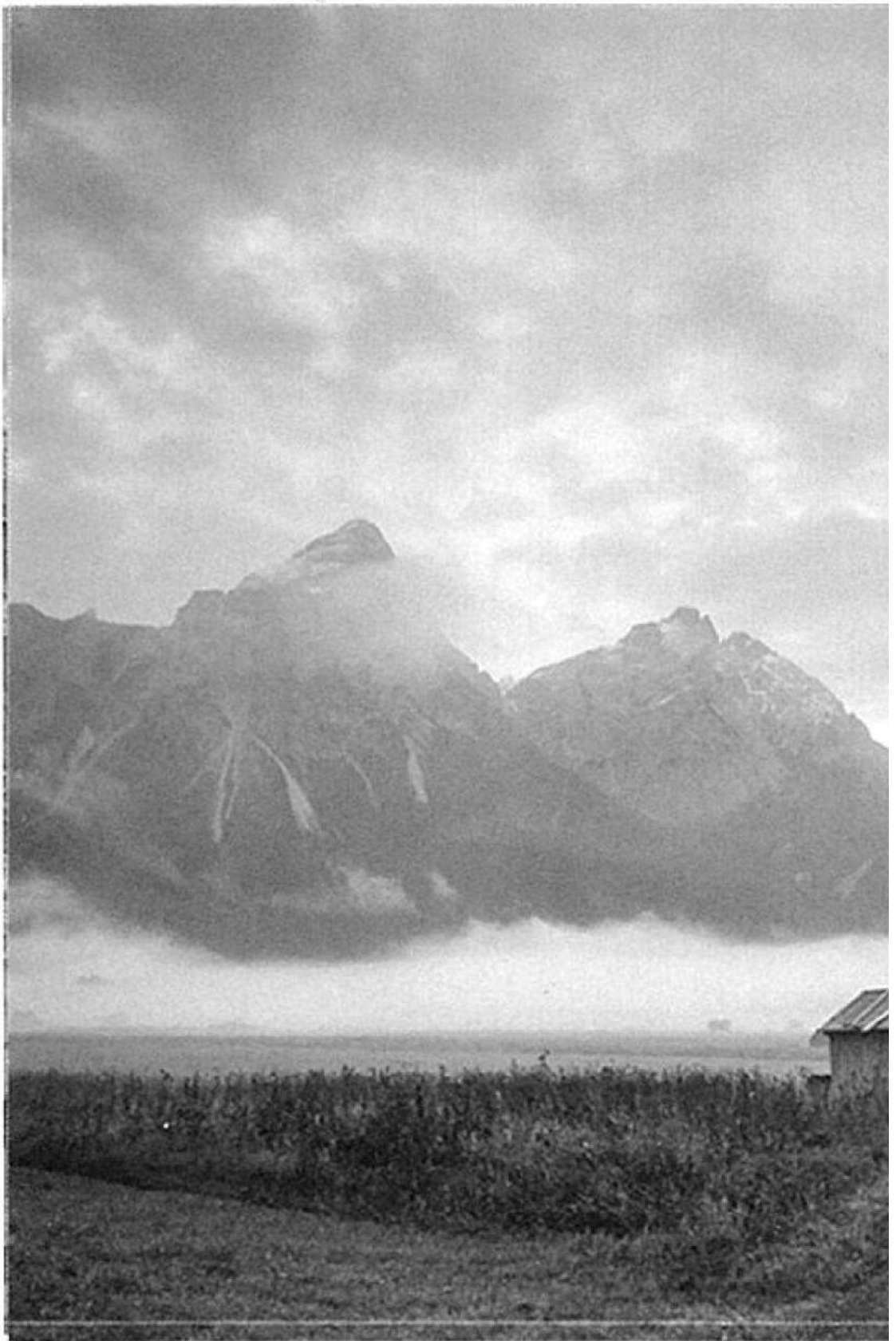
I've got your antibiotics!
but ran into some trouble:
at first, but probably older
Didn't get me but got me
you've been able to hold on
these cars is a minefield.
Sleeping in a FedEx truck
back, so I can set up my
campsite, this. And if the
we could take the puppy

Most of the packages have
through, nothing much of
in the clutter. I'll bring
won't see all these broken
about them. I'm going
you, my dearest Rita. I
all down. Even better to

Dearest Clayton,
while I had hoped you might find
infection in my leg might resolve
to pass. It is therefore time for
Were you to arrive too late, all
Take this postcard as notification
Enjoy it. I'd sooner it go to you
bitches out there. I'll do what
If not all, I'll take down as much
on that.

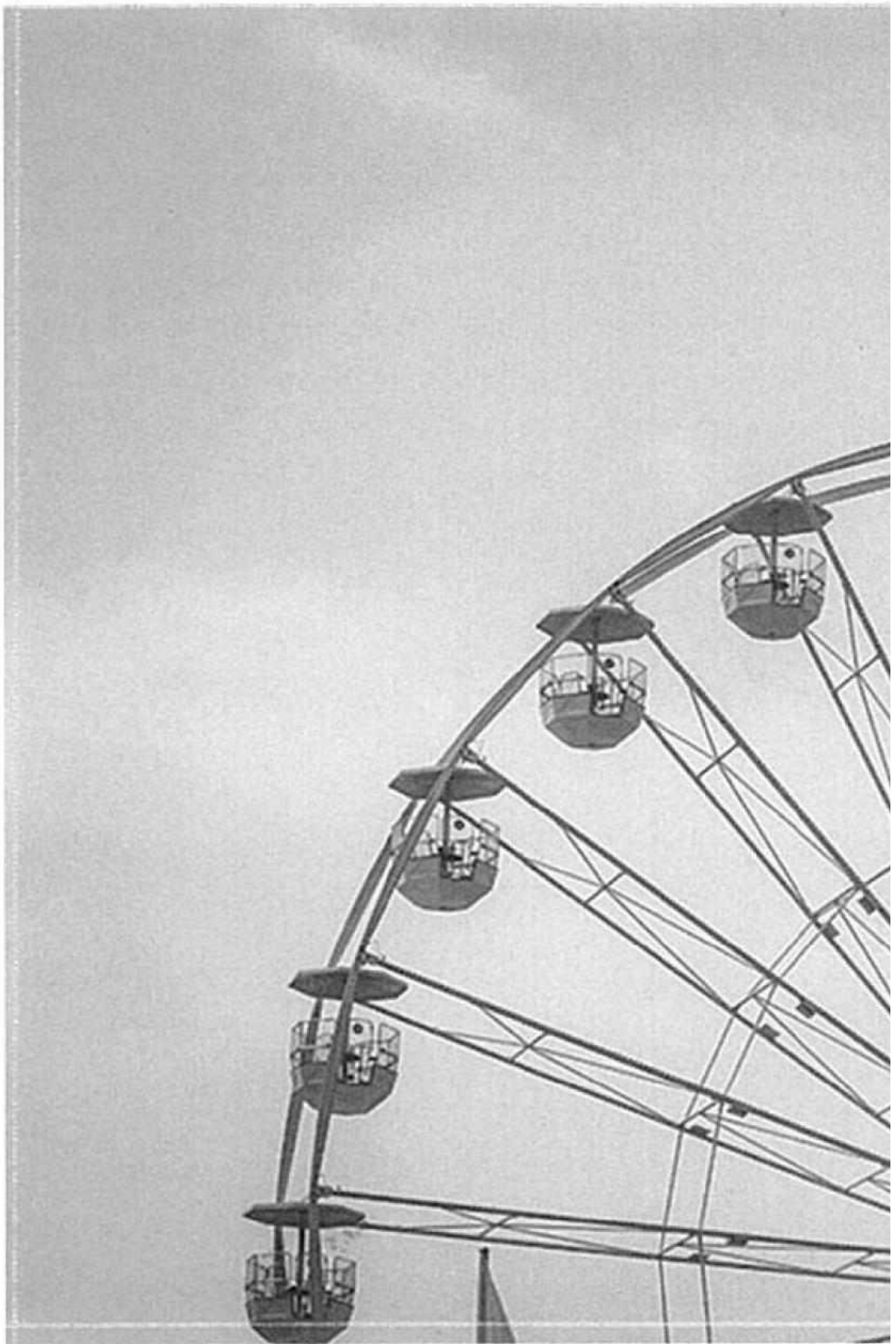
I'm not getting better, Clayton
and how much longer I can last
don't feel bad, this is what I
I say, if I'm going out, it'll be
safe travels.

All my love,
Rita



universe,
This may come as a shock to
as all-encompassing. In fact
down for it.
Ready?
You do not get to break the I
will not be broken. Do you k
in me? Do you have the fair
Clearly not.
Oh, but I know you, all too v
anymore.
That's what you cannot sta
You prefer us to be in a cor
in the dirt.
Well, fuck you, Universe. T
Do your worst.

Rita



FAO: Fog Demons.

You are cordially invited to a
Season Finale Party.

"If this store's rockin', ya be

Tonight.

After dark.

Follow the sound of disco.

I'll be waiting.

Rita

P.S. Bring your karaoke
A-game, you big beautiful
hairy bastards.



1/3

Clayton. It's Rita. I'm in trouble.
This won't all fit on a single call.
a set of 3.

My plan was to entice them into
the warehouse where there's
the fuckers to the ground.

I was very, very wrong, Clayton.
They're smart, way smarter than I
knew about my trap (that's why I
was working out the best way to catch them).
Thank Christ for the
wheelchair or I'd never
have made it out.

(Cont...)

I don't know who you are
thought I knew was bullshit
exist. I know you'll find
a sad stack of her cards -
Maybe you thought you were
yourself. What a joke.

Did your heart sink when you
busted in? The shelves bare -
second that you were me
Rita's death was on your back
about the rage you felt, but
how long did you search
before you realized the Co
been ransacked months ago
when the snare caught you
and hauled you up... is that
you figured it out? Did it
you while you were hanging
upside down



2 / 3 (... cont)

I tried to hold them off, threw € them, but there are just too m stronger than I am. They've trapp Christ knows how I managed to g Amazing what's possible with th The door won't hold forever. barging at it, weakening it, t Really scared.

Look, I shall tell you what I cards on a balloon out of th head the right way). What I do with the knowledge is up to you.

(Cont...)

I loved her too. The idea of
The cage stinks of their blood
came before me. And now
little tin box among the debris
of Rita's missives. Nearly
of the sky, risked my neck
county to get to the source
He won't say a word, then
what he's waiting for. Waiting
Waiting for my skin to lose
scared. Just tired. Heartbroken
all the other saps out there
her first. I was just like
danger to myself.

I see him at his desk with
six canisters of helium
balloons. If I could get
between these bars, I would
to warn you...



Dear Apocalypse,
I'm writing in my capacity as
you that, despite your best
As you can see, nothing you
date has been enough, and
have let yourself down. Ti
By my calculations I have
my 127th year, so might I
notch before I die of old a
From this rooftop I raise a
sausages and a beaker of
chance. Bring it on, loser. B
I await your response.

Sincerely
Rita



