

Early Praise for *Invisible Violets: A Mixtape in Lyric Essays*

“I could not put this book down. The essays are impeccably crafted, yet the voice is lively and effortless and reads as if Buckley is confessing to a favorite friend over the kitchen table: generous, intimate, authentic, vulnerable, vibrant, witty, heartbreaking, and hopeful. *Invisible Violets* explores how we see and are seen—challenging assumptions about difference and disability. This memorable collection is an education, a love letter to the power of music and writing, and a fierce manifesto about claiming your own story. This book will change you and linger long after the final page.”

—Tarn Wilson, author of *In Praise of Inadequate Gifts*

“*Invisible Violets* is such a moving and honest collection of personal essays, it made me miss that all-too-brief era of curating mixtapes. The work here is as intimate as one you would make for a dear friend, one full of handwritten messages and inside jokes in the titles, or sometimes painful, unspeakable secrets in the lyrics. As the artist on every track here, Buckley’s voice shines and crackles with authority and grace, widening our perspective and understanding of trauma, disability, and the very science of being human.”

—Stacy Brewster, author of *What We Pick Up*

“Chrys Buckley’s debut memoir is not to be missed! She writes with empathy, grace, and poise about the nature of albinism. The joys of her life come through beautifully in Chrys’s prose, and she doesn’t hold back when addressing harmful stereotypes and society’s assumptions. Chrys’s gorgeous words shine an important light on a community that is so often passed by in the disabled minority. I love her essays and I know readers will embrace this memoir with a rib-cracking squeeze.”

—Annie Carl, author of *My Tropey Life*, *Nebula Vibrations*, and editor of *Soul Jar: Thirty-One Fantastical Tales by Disabled Authors*

INVISIBLE VIOLETS

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Chrys Buckley

Wandering Aengus Press
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Invisible Violets: A Mixtape in Lyric Essays

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*For all the kids who ever were or ever will be
saved by words and music.*

And in memory of Chris Cornell.

Mixtape Tracklist

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Author's Note

Considerations of Truthiness and Blindness

As I crafted this collection, staying true to the stories and experiences in these essay-songs was a guiding principle as constant as the Northern Star. Still, I changed most people's names, except for those who have creative careers under their real names, and changed some names and minor details of institutions and places, especially those with small communities. I erred on the side of protecting privacy whenever I sensibly could without sacrificing too much story. After all, I chose to write about my life, but the people in my life didn't choose to be written about.

I limited including other people's stories to what was essential to move the essays forward. In doing so, it often felt like I was doing the people who appear in this collection a disservice, casting them as supporting characters in my life instead of as the stars of their own. This pained me; there was no one I wrote about without coming away with a better appreciation of their full humanity. Even the people I've lost touch with, accidentally or on purpose. If this were fiction, I'd include all sorts of rich details, making each person textured and layered and vivid and alive. But this isn't fiction.

I fact-checked much of what's relayed in these essays, consulting old journals, text messages, emails, earlier written work that covers the same ground, and other records. Still, these personal archives are incomplete. There are journals I threw away or lost, email accounts and internet sites that don't exist anymore or that I don't have access to, texts from old phones, and so many instances that were never recorded in any form. My collection of old journals is massive and messy, exhausting if not exhaustive, so I wasn't able to find or verify every detail. I've done what I could, but this effort still has its limits and missing links.

Dialogue is as accurate as memory and source material allow.

Even if I possessed perfect records, others would still interpret and remember the same situations, conversations, and circumstances differently. These essays depict my stories, my memories, my point of view, with all the imperfections inherent in first-person narratives.



Many (but not all!) essays in this book speak to my legal blindness due to albinism. I'll let you read more about that within them, but I wanted to address one aspect of writing about blindness up front. For many of us from underrepresented populations, there can be pressure to speak for our whole group.

Ever since I was young, I've been involved in different blindness and disability circles, and one thing I've learned over and over is that we are each different. Not only are our forms of blindness and our individual disabilities different, but so too are our relationships to them and our experiences of living them in the world. Each aspect of my blind and disabled life might or might not resonate with other blind or disabled people.

Although I'm opening a window into blindness in the essays that follow, that window is singular to me. I can represent only myself.

INVISIBLE VIOLETS

A Mixtape in Lyric Essays

TRACK ONE

Invisible Violet

On Seeing and Not Seeing

WHEN I WAS MAYBE FIVE, MY MOM SAID I DIDN'T smile right. So, we practiced. Mostly at the kitchen table. Mom put a big deliberate smile on her face, leaned toward me, and said, "Like *this*." I studied her mouth intently, then stretched my own mouth into the same shape. Still my smile was always wrong. I tried to work her corrections—usually frustrated sighs instead of specific instructions—into my face muscles, strained so hard to make my mouth mimic hers. I could never see my mom's smile in enough detail to know in what exact ways my smile didn't measure up.

I have albinism. My skin, my hair, and my eyes are paler than pale, and I'm legally blind. I've never known anything else. What is so striking and different to others looking at me from the outside has always been a given, as ordinary and fundamental as my heartbeat in my chest, to me inside myself.

Albinism as I've lived it has often carried strong emotional currents. Shame mostly. Being and feeling (and being seen as and feeling acutely the being seen as) different, other, freaky. Sometimes inhuman.

yelling for Alison from a balcony on an upper level. When I caught on that she was yelling for me and looked up from my phone, I once again had to tell someone she had the wrong albino. Every time, I reflexively apologize.

When I was a teenager, strangers sometimes asked if my albino friend and I were sisters, even twins. We were nine years apart in age, several inches apart in height, of disparate ethnic origins, and had different face and body shapes. This same friend told me that once when she was meeting her parents at the airport, they didn't recognize her at first because she was wearing a hat.

At a conference for the National Organization for Albinism and Hypopigmentation (NOAH) when I was eleven, I was sitting in a circle of albino girls playing Uno. My dad tapped the girl next to me on the shoulder and told her to go upstairs and pack up because it was time to go home.

I am transparent, at once overly expressive and invisible.



In *A Natural History of the Senses*, a book I otherwise enjoyed, Diane Ackerman wrote in a footnote, “Because albinos lack a dark layer of cells behind the retina (this being the pigmented epithelium), more light travels around inside their eyes and colors often seem to them quieter and more diluted.”

She was wrong, I thought. I knew. I thought I knew. I noticed the most minute shift in hue the way I did inflection in a voice.

I had no idea on what data she sourced this finding (it wasn't attributed) or on what data her sources sourced this finding. My educated guess was some scientist somewhere assumed this was a logical assumption, thought the extra light in our eyes must lead to dulling of colors, and passed it on. Instead of, you know, testing out hypotheses and doing actual science. Then somewhere along the way, that unfounded conclusion got accepted

Because of the missing melanin, albino eyes can be chameleons, looking red in bright lights and camera flashes when the underlying blood vessels catch the light, or hazel, brown, purple. I loved that last one especially as a teenager. Whenever anyone told me my eyes looked “almost kind of violet” it was like a hit from a powerful drug. I desperately wished for purple-tinted contacts to catch and project more of that violet light.

When I joined Mind Riot, a fan-made, unofficial online forum for Chris Cornell named after one of his Soundgarden songs that most showcased his voice, it was the first “place” outside of blind camps and programs where I felt I could be open about my albinism. After my introductory post on a legendarily long “About Us” thread, where I talked about the changing nature of my eye color, a girl on the Mind Riot forum called me “Purple Eyes” then and forever after, even though we both knew it was a color some people sometimes saw and not my literal eye color.

On close inspection, albino eyes are often a pigment-less blue-grey. Ocean-y if you’re looking out to sea on a cloudy day and being extra dreamy about it.

Frank, the same ex-boyfriend whose eye color I didn’t see until we’d been together for six months, was convinced throughout our whole relationship, or whatever either of us decided to call or not call it, that my eyes were red.



Seeing is habit, constant confirmation bias. Sometimes seeing has as much to do with what we fail or forget to see. We selectively see and remember the things that affirm what we already believe. We cease to see how even the people closest to us are ever evolving in tiny revolutions.

There are so many ways of not fully seeing.

I am not immune to these more emotional forms of blindness just because I’m physically blind. Like anyone else, there

spent too sick to do all the things you say you would do if you knew you only had a specific ever-dwindling x amount of time to live.

The problem was we always saw and lived our own lives only from the inside. So all we could do was try to balance what we would do with a short or long life in the tiny, daily decisions and allocations of energy and attention and time. And maybe start wondering if a creative writing sabbatical in a physician life could be a thing someday down the road.



When my feelings about medical school shifted out of the liminal and into a more sustained *I think I'm staying*, it didn't announce itself with a sweeping epiphany or a lightbulb flash of insight. It crept under the surface during our Blood and Host Defense block.

We got into immunology, a subject I'd loved in undergrad and loved again in the fall of my first year of medical school in even more exquisite detail. It pushed my learning in a way I loved being pushed. Then we got into hematology, and I loved it even more, maybe most. Blood was wild and vital and orchestral and complicated. Then we got into the blood oncologies, and I loved them too. I even found all the slides of blood smears and bone marrow biopsies of different blood cancers—the fried egg look of Hodgkin lymphoma, the rouleaux formations of multiple myeloma, the deranged versions of normal immune cells in the different forms of leukemia, the starry sky of Burkitt lymphoma—to be oddly beautiful.

Both suddenly and slowly, subtly, I loved what I was learning. I loved med school. I began to imagine a Scholarly Project where I could write a story about a blood cancer in a way that avoided all the typical cancer fiction tropes. A way that didn't use cancer as a shortcut for evoking pathos. A way that was real.

TRACK FOUR

August Is a Burnt Burgundy-Violet Haze

THE COLOR OF THE NUMBER 8¹ IS A BLACK-TINGED purple. It's almost more a vibration than a color. *August* as a word is a burning summer sun yellow with undertones of red. August as more than its word, as the concept of the eighth month, is similar in color to 8 but blacker and hotter with some dark burgundy-red undertones from its word added to the dull violet shade. Rather burnt and yet more radiant.

The letters *J*, *D*, *P*, and *V* are shades of green. *D* is pale sage. *P* and *V* are slightly different tints of a verdant forest green on an overcast day. *J* is an almost perfectly middling mix of the minty *D* and the leafy *P* and *V*.

Tuesday is a muted cerulean blue.

These are just words. Approximations. They don't quite capture the precise way color and vibration coalesce to form impressions of letters and numbers in my inner landscape.



¹ The visual forms of numerals inform my color associations—their spelled-out words don't. The word *eight* is white and blue, colors that don't show up at all in my mental concept of the number 8. Throughout this essay, when I mean to signify the synesthetic associations of a number, I'll use its numeral.

papers and assignments. It stuck because I made it stick by brute force of sheer grit or because it was finally right. Chrys looked and felt and was a little more feminine, a little more me, a little more rock star, a little more me as a feminine rock star.

Screen Names

Toward the end of winter break during my freshman year at Chester Elm College, I discovered Mind Riot, an unofficial Chris Cornell fan forum named after the ninth song on the Soundgarden album *Badmotorfinger*, a showcase of Chris's vocal range. I wasn't a total stranger to online fandoms. I'd posted in both the Soundgarden and Alice in Chains AOL message boards and belonged to email lists for Alice in Chains and authors I liked. Mind Riot was an internet site untethered to my AOL email address.² That meant I had to pick a screen name.

It didn't take much time to come up with one. Chris Cornell's first solo album, *Euphoria Morning*, had come out that fall. Its eighth track, "Moonchild," was my song. During my first semester at my tiny Maryland college, chosen because they'd given me a creative writing scholarship, I struggled with my first and worst bout of writer's block, and the only thing to cut through the stuckness was *Euphoria Morning* and especially "Moonchild."

Looking back, it's easy to cast that writer's block more accurately as a case of imposter syndrome, a term I wouldn't learn until at least a decade later. Among so many talented and sophisticated writers in my classes, I didn't think I deserved the scholarship.

Well, and there was also the fallout I was suppressing from the past spring. Purposefully not dealing sucked out a lot of energy I'd otherwise put into writing.

2 Which was JarOfJerry, a combination of the Alice in Chains EP title, *Jar of Flies*, and the name of their long-haired lead guitarist Jerry Cantrell, who I idolized and lusted after in my teenage heart for his guitar licks, lyrics, and rock-god looks.

understanding into their replies to LittleSpark. One woman I met at my first Chris Cornell show who'd been open about how she had struggled with heroin addiction and was now clean wrote a moving reply offering compassion about the challenges of sobriety to my made-up entity. I immediately confessed and apologized profusely and swore up and down, truthfully, that I thought everyone would know it was a joke, and laid off the fake names for quite a while.

Later, when I decided I could no longer have “child” in my name anymore, I settled on Lotus Moon as my handle, the lotus part coming from a seminal conversation with Lacey, the same friend I sometimes posted drunken antics with under a shared secret screen name, the white sheep to my black.



While writing the original vomit draft⁴ of this essay, typing reams of words while on a weeklong “working vacation” at the Oregon Coast with one of my closest friends, I listened to Chris Cornell’s *Songbook* album on my AirPods. It’d been years since I’d last played this record. It was strange listening to Chris now that he’d long since joined the ranks of Nana and my cadre of dead dudes⁵—Kurt Cobain, Jeff Buckley,⁶ Layne Staley, David Foster Wallace, Carl Sagan—and become one of the ghosts I’d most believe in if I believed in any.

4 Since I’m an unrepentant over-writer, a maximalist at heart, I tend to think of first drafts more as shitting my brains out, but that one’s a little harder to say in polite company. We could just call it catharsis.

5 I loved a long list of women singers and writers, sometimes and in some ways more fiercely than I loved the guys, but my lady artist loves weren’t in the ghost cadre because they were, with one sad exception of Sinéad O’Connor, still living.

6 No relation. That I know of. Though I like to think there may be some distant connection, giving me at least one relative—well at least two because if I was in any way related to Jeff I was also related to his dad—who had a creative career, even if that relative was genetically far away and several times removed.

broken. The day after that, I came home from a vigorous winter walk, raspberry mocha in hand, and saw two huge packages sitting in front of my door. My parents were moving, and they'd said they were sending me boxes of my stuff they still had in their house.

One of the first journals I found in the boxes was from 1997. Just as I remembered, it had a grey kitty with white paws on the front. On the inside cover, along with my first AOL screen name, was my name for myself written for the first time: Chrysean. I was so glad in retrospect that I'd dropped it to just Chrys so quickly. Chrys sounded more me than Chrysean no matter how it was spelled. I snapped pictures of the inner and outer covers of the journal and texted them to Tracy.



Going back to my real name never felt like a decision, though of course it was. It didn't have the solidity of other major life moves like leaving a little school in Maryland and home and medical school, though it did feel inextricably connected to extricating myself from medical education. The choice to use my own name came to me gradually and organically and without fanfare, setting down its roots in slow, successive, crooked steps.

Sometimes, you've just gotta live your own life while you're still alive.

In October 2022, about seven months into my second med school leave of absence and a few months before my official withdrawal, I created a new account on Submittable, a platform writers use to submit their work and track their submissions, under an email address associated with my real name. I submitted work as me for the first time in well over a decade. On a Friday in March of the next year, five weeks after my med school withdrawal processed, I switched my Twitter and Instagram and Goodreads and Patreon to chrysbuckley and bought my

TRACK SEVEN

Distant Lights

Sand Castles at Low Tide

2003

One overcast morning on Avalon Island in northwest Washington when I was twenty-two, I walked the wooded trails of Camp Alvisla. On the dirt path between my employee-housing cabin and the camp lodge, a thought popped into my head in full sentences: *I'm a collector of stories. I find meaning in little things. I am a keeper of memories.*

During the winter before I arrived on Avalon, before I knew Camp Alvisla would come through as salvation with its housing and three square daily meals in its lodge, I was living in Seattle, afraid I'd end up homeless since I was due to be evicted and none of the jobs I'd applied for had worked out.

I was almost more scared about what would happen to my sense of who I was than I was about how I would eat, a notion that strikes me now as so very twenty-two and sheltered. I dug my heels deeper into the bedrock of my identity, listened more intensely to all my favorite albums, wrote frequently and fervently in my journals and in my notebooks upon notebooks of half-completed writing projects.

As I left the ocean, grey and forever, and started making my way through the wooded Camp Alvisla paths to return to the writing retreat, abiding loss and longing felt somehow just right.

Romantic dreariness.

It was afternoon, so when I got to where the long, winding gravel Darvill Farm Road out of Camp Alvisla met the paved Enchanted Forest Road, the little lights on houses up hills were barely visible, tiny faint lights against an overcast grey sky. Not at all like the iconic, alluring lights in my memory of night walks.

That they were different from memory, that they were present and real, that I had to squint to see them, all that was okay, too.

Revelling/Reckoning

2021

It's surreal and not surreal.

I'm on my first visit to Avalon since the writing retreat in 2013. It's been more than eight years since I saw this place that was once my home and haven, a fact that is both true and impossible at once. I'm on-island for three full days, and on the first and third I walk to Camp Alvisla.

It's early April, and it's cold on Avalon, colder than it is in Portland. The sky is cloudless on both days I walk to the camp where I once lived and worked and walked and loved almost two full decades ago.

Most of my memories of Camp Alvisla are overcast since that was the weather most of the days, and since the sunny months of summer coincided with the most intense months of the job and the most crowded months of camp census, when I had the least outside space and time. These current-day treks defy memory by being specific in their sunshine.

Under a blue Alvisla sky, I go out to the ocean, because of course I do. It's late morning and the sun is just cresting the