

INVISIBLE VIOLETS

a Mixtape in Lyric Essays

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Wandering Aengus Press
Eastsound, WA

Invisible Violets: a Mixtape in Lyric Essays

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ISBN13: TBD

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Wandering Aengus Press

PO Box 334

Eastsound, WA 98245

wanderingaenguspress.com

Nonfiction

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data Available.

Printed in the United States of America

An early version of “The Caduceus and the Muse” was published as “Living the Dream? My Double Life as a Medical Student and Creative Writer” Parts 1 and 2 in *Aerial* issue 2 (July 2019) and 3 (November 2020), respectively.

aerialartohsumagazine.com/

Editorial: Julie Riddle

Book Design: Chrys Buckley

Publisher: Jill McCabe Johnson

Wandering Aengus Press is dedicated to publishing works to enrich lives and make the world a better place.

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

And in memory of Chris Cornell.

Mixtape Tracklist

Author's Note i

1. *Invisible Violet:
On Seeing and Not Seeing* 3
2. *Blue Alchemy* 37
3. *The Caduceus and the Muse* 51
4. *August is a Burnt
Burgundy-Violet Haze* 87
5. *Reasonable Doubt* 103
6. *Distant Lights* 143
7. *Can't Change Me:
An Unnatural History of My Names* 177

Acknowledgements 223

About the Author 227

Organizations Spotlight 229

Index of References 233

Author's Note

Considerations of Truthiness and Blindness

Truthiness

Staying true to the stories and experiences in the essay-songs that follow was a guiding principle as constant as the northern star as I crafted this collection. Still, I changed most people's names for privacy reasons, except for those who have creative careers under their real names. I also changed names and minor details of places and institutions, especially those with small communities.

If this were fiction, I'd include all sorts of rich details about all the characters who appear in these pages, making them textured and layered and vivid and alive. But this isn't fiction.

In choosing what to include of other people's stories, I limited it to what was essential to move these essays forward. It often felt like I was doing the people who appear in this collection a disservice in doing so, casting them as supporting characters in my life instead of as the stars of their own. This pained me, especially as 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.

It was hard not to share so much more, go on about all the beautiful and flawed humans in these pages. Nevertheless, I decided to err 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.

For many of the events and interactions described in these essays, I went to great lengths to fact-check myself. I've consulted 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, old 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 other instances that were never recorded in any form in the first place. My collection of old journals is massive and messy, exhausting if not exhaustive, so I wasn't reasonably able to find or verify every detail. I've done what I could, but that effort still has its limits and missing links.

Even if I had it all, 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.

Blindness

Many (but not all!) essays in this book speak to my legal blindness. I'll let you read more about it within them, but I wanted to address one aspect of writing about blindness up front. For many of us in minoritized communities, there can be a pressure to represent and 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 all different. Not only are our forms of blindness, our individual disabilities, different, but so too are our relationships to them and our lived experiences of 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 represent only myself.

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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 as intently as I could, then stretched my own into the same shape. Still my smile was always wrong. I tried to work her corrections—usually full of 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 craft my own, or to know in what exact ways I didn't measure up to normal smiles.

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.

flabbergasted, sometimes disbelieving, when I am not the one albino they know.

In April of 2022, I was back at my medical school building to help teach an elective on disability awareness to first-year med students. I arrived early, and since our room wasn't open yet, I sat on a bench nearby and played on my phone. A woman kept yelling for Alison from a balcony on an upper level. It took me too long to realize she was yelling for me. When I caught on 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 one time 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 loved, Diane Ackerman wrote, "Because albinos lack a dark layer of cells behind their 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.

there'd been a subtle shift, at least for this moment. Now I was in-between, making the transition more than fighting it.

Lidia called it liminal.



There was never enough time to write anymore.

There often wasn't before medical school, either. My schedule as a pre-med was chaotic, a cacophony of classes whose times were staggered and changed each term, tutoring job hours that shifted around my shifting class schedules, clinical volunteering, bioinformatics research, physician shadowing, homework, studying for quizzes and exams and midterms and finals, papers, MCAT prep. Any routine I could wrangle out of all that mess never lasted more than a term and often lasted far less.

To keep my writing from drifting too far from my forefront during my pre-med years, I'd signed up for writing classes most terms. There was a certain beauty in taking Personal Essay Writing with General Chemistry and Human Anatomy & Physiology, Writing Process and Response with Organic Chemistry and General Physics, Writing the Memoir with Biochemistry and Advanced O Chem, Forms of Nonfiction with Spectrometric Analysis, an independent study dedicated to revising one personal essay with Instrument Analysis Lab,² Screenwriting with Research Experience for Science Majors, Advanced Composition with Physical Chemistry. Classes gave my writing work a legitimacy and served as an armament against ceding my creative ground to all the pressures of pre-med life.

2 In this context the instruments aren't for making music but for mass spectrometry, fluorescence, atomic absorption spectrophotometry, ultraviolet visualization, and liquid and gas chromatography. And don't ever call them machines or you might lose points.

not to your actual body—you try mostly to avoid living in your body anyway—or to your actual you. You pretend until you believe.



At the bottom of my bottommost bin in my storage unit lay two battered one-subject notebooks. One green, the other red with a Nirvana sticker placed vertical on the left side of its front cover.

These were the oldest remnants of my child-self I carried with me in my geographical escape from Sacsville, New Jersey to Portland, a move made up of many smaller mini-moves over many years. The two journals roughly covered early 1995 through the summer of 1996. In a surprise to no one, the entries were framed as a series of letters to the ghost of Kurt Cobain.



The notebooks. Outside cover of red notebook (left) and inside cover of green notebook (right).

TRACK SIX

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, the place where I worked and lived. 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 journal and in my notebooks upon notebooks of half-completed writing projects.

Darvill Farm and Enchanted Forest, if it was dark out, there'd be little lights in houses up on hills directly across the street. Seeing those lights always pulled at me, at some ancient memory from another lifetime or dimension, maybe something I'd once read in a book or dreamt at an age too young for conscious construction beyond imagistic impressions.

When I'd worked and lived at Camp Alvisla, I walked its woods in every season. I memorized the way winter morning light lit the tops of the thick evergreens and alders, the sweet dark woody smell of my favorite stump to sit on deep in the forest, the way tree branches parted above the footpaths to allow in some sky, how to follow that patch of night sky above the trees home in true dark.



Walking the Camp Alvisla woods. Photo © 2005 Diane Richter.

I walked its ocean shoreline in so many circumstances. While stumped on pieces of writing. While overcome with words I wanted to write. While seeking solace and grappling with this ever-ending emotional affair I was having with Jeremiah, a married man I met on the Mind Riot forum who I was sure was my star-crossed soulmate even as he kept disappearing and we kept



Camp Alvisla shoreline 2021.

full or new moon. Once upon a time I would've known which without needing to look it up.

The big rock is fully uncovered, the bottom foot or so of it dark with wet from the tide that went out. I climb the rock—harder now that I'm forty, heavier, and less nimble than I was in my early twenties—and sit up there staring out at the blue water for awhile.

There are no profound fortysomething thoughts.

On my way out, I start out on a forest path that passes some of the cabins in south camp, a path I know passes the old stump, and I lose my way before I get started. I turn back and walk out of the camp on Darvill Farm road, winding my way out to Enchanted Forest. It's way too bright on both sunny days for any soft yellow lights on houses up hills.

This trip was originally scheduled for the third week of March 2020. It was canceled, and then postponed successively. It felt almost cosmic, more so with each postponement, as if

Lotus Moon was the handle I settled on when I decided I could no longer have “child” in my name anymore, 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. There were others, I’m sure, but these are the ones I remember most.



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 last time I 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—and become one of the ghosts I’d most believe in if I believed in any.

Music had fallen away too much and for far too long in sacrifice to my med school dreams. It was April, two and a half months since my official withdrawal, and I was doing what I could to reclaim lost parts of myself. I was going through Chris

4 Since I’m a 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 for 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.

Guide to References and Allusions

This section is for all the readers who delight in fandom culture, love clocking pop culture references and allusions, or just want to see this mad cacophony all in one place. Most of these are direct references but a few are truly obscure allusions, and I hope I'm not the only one who finds that sort of thing to be great fun.

To me, this coda is a messy, glittering declaration of love for all the bands and songs and albums and lyricists and TV shows and books and authors and poets and podcasts that made their way into my psyche and these pages. A final love song in the mixtape, if you will.

People's names appear in a First Last format because this book is in no way formal or academic. Still, everyone is alphabetized by last name, filed under the letter they would be in a record store.

A

Gracie Abrams (musical artist) 84, 225

albums

The Secret of Us 225

Alice in Chains (band) 67, 84, 154, 186–187, 189, 190, 195.

See also Jerry Cantrell; See also Layne Staley

albums

Jar of Flies 190

Tori Amos (musical artist) 48, 67, 84, 99–100, 149, 224

albums

Boys for Pele 99

From the Choirgirl Hotel 150

Night of Hunters 67

The Beekeeper 100

Y Kant Tori Read 67

songs

“A Case of You” (cover) 67

“Girl Disappearing” 152

“Hey Jupiter” 99

“i i e e” 149

“Martha’s Foolish Ginger” 100

“A Sorta Fairytale” 48

“The Beekeeper” 100

The Amps (band) 85

Fiona Apple (musical artist) 84, 171

albums

Fetch the Bolt Cutters 171

Army of 3 (band)

songs

“Somebody That I Used to Know” (cover) 148

Audioslave (band) 85, 100, 144, 194–195. See also Chris

Cornell; See also Rage Against the Machine

albums

Audioslave 100

Out of Exile 195

Civilian demos 100

songs

“Be Yourself” 195, 220

“Like a Stone” 100

B

Julien Baker (musical artist) 85

Sara Bareilles (musical artist) 85

Better Call Saul (TV show) 58–60, 215

Jimmy McGill (Saul Goodman) 58, 60

Kim Wexler 58

Big Red Machine (band) 85

Bones (TV show) 8

boygenius (band) 85

Breaking Bad (TV show) 56, 58, 61, 204, 213, 215

Emilio Koyama 213

Jesse Pinkman 56

Walter White 56, 213

The Breeders (band) 85

Phoebe Bridgers (musical artist) 85

Jeff Buckley (musical artist) 84, 157, 198

songs

“Last Goodbye” 157

Tim Buckley (musical artist) 157

songs

“Once I Was” 145, 157

“Song to the Siren” 157

C

Jerry Cantrell (musical artist) 84, 190

The Chicks (band) 85, 171

- albums
Gaslighter 171
 Kurt Cobain (musical artist) 111, 113, 133, 134, 154, 179, 186, 198. *See also* Nirvana
 Chris Cornell (musical artist)
 Dedication, 13, 42, 82, 84, 99, 100, 144, 174, 178, 187, 190, 194–199, 200, 209, 211, 220, 224. *See also* Audioslave; *See also* Soundgarden; *See also* Temple of the Dog
- albums
Euphoria Morning 81, 144, 173, 190–191, 193–194, 197, 199, 220
Songbook 198–199, 220
- songs
 “Can’t Change Me” Table of Contents, 177, 199, 220
 “Disappearing One” 197
 “Mission” 82
 “Moonchild” 173, 191, 193
 Counting Crows (band) Epigraph, 84, 224
- albums
August and Everything After
 Epigraph
- songs
 “Anna Begins” 38
 “Ghost Train” Epigraph
 “Round Here” 156
 The Cranberries (band) 85
Crime Writers On (podcast) 117, 124, 136
- D**
 Lucy Dacus (musical artist) 85
- Ani DiFranco (musical artist) 85
 albums
Revelling/Reckoning 168
 Dog’s Eye View (band) 85
 Drain S.T.H. (band) 85
- E**
 Eleven (band) 84
- F**
 Fisher (band) 85
 Foo Fighters (band) 85
- G**
 Tess Gallagher (poet, author) 41
Game of Roses (podcast) 163
 Garbage (band) 85
 Gin Blossoms (band)
 songs
 “Hey Jealousy” 129
Good Will Hunting (movie) 197
 Green Day (band) 85, 172, 186
Grey’s Anatomy (TV show) 8, 213, 216
 April Kepner 213, 216
- H**
Happier with Gretchen Rubin
 (podcast) 60–61
 P.J. Harvey (musical artist) 67
 albums
Rid of Me 67
 Hole (band) 19–20, 67, 84, 172, 186, 187. *See also* Courtney Love
 albums

- Celebrity Skin* 67
Live Through This 19
MTV Unplugged 20
 songs
 “Violet” 19
House, MD (TV show)
 Dr. Gregory House 33
 episodes
 “Ugly” 33
- J**
- Jamiroquai (band) 19
- K**
- Mary Karr (poet, author) 137, 208
 books
 The Art of Memoir 137
 K-Ci and JoJo (R&B duo) 111
 songs
 “All My Life” 111, 114
 Maynard James Keenan (musical
 artist) 99. *See also* A Perfect
 Circle; *See also* Tool
- L**
- L7 (band) 84, 172
 Mark Lanegan (musical artist) 85
 Letters to Cleo (band) 85
 Courtney Love (musical artist) 20,
 187. *See also* Hole (band)
- M**
- Mad Season (band) 85
 Malfunkshun (band) 164. *See
 also* Andrew Wood
 songs
- “Until the Ocean...” 158, 163
 Sarah McLachlan (musical artist) 85
 Ingrid Michaelson (musical artist)
 67, 84, 148, 224
 albums
 Lights Out 67
 Mind Riot forum 13, 144, 174, 190,
 194, 200–201, 206
 hijinx 94, 195, 196, 197
 members 33, 42, 99, 146, 195, 200
 private messages (PMs) 144, 159, 164
 screen names 193, 195, 196–197,
 199–201, 204
 Andy Mingo (screenwriter, director,
 film producer) 71
 Joni Mitchell (musical artist) 34
 songs
 “A Case of You” 67
 “The Fiddle and the Drum” 34
 Monica (musical artist)
 songs
 “For You I Will” 114
 Alanis Morissette (musical artist) 85,
 91, 171
 albums
 Such Pretty Forks in the Road 171
 Mother Love Bone (band) 85, 164.
 See also Andrew Wood
 songs
 “Man of Golden Words”
 Dedication
My So-Called Life (TV show) 16
 Angela Chase 16
- N**
- Vladimir Nabokov (author) 94–95
 books
 Speak, Memory 95

Azar Nafisi (author)

books

Reading Lolita in Tehran 94

The National (band) 85

Nirvana (band) 68, 84, 111, 113, 134,
154, 186. *See also* Kurt Cobain

songs

“Montage of Heck” 68

O

Sinead O’Connor (musical artist) 85,
198

O.J.: Made in America (ESPN 30 for
30 documentary series) 124

P

Pearl Jam (band) 85, 99, 187

albums

Riot Act 99

songs

“Thumbing My Way” 99

*The People v. O.J. Simpson: American
Crime Story* (dramatized
series) 116–117

A Perfect Circle (band) 34, 84, 99,
195, 200. *See also* Maynard
James Keenan

albums

eMOTIVe 34

Mer de Noms 99

songs

“Judith” 99, 200

Liz Phair (musical artist) 85, 114

R

Rage Against the Machine (band) 100

R.E.M. (band) 84, 103

songs

“It’s the End of the World (As We
Know It)” 103

Damien Rice (musical artist) 84

Olivia Rodrigo (musical artist) 85,
89, 99, 224

albums

Guts 224

S

Screaming Trees (band) 85

Alice Sebold (author) 41, 46

books

Lucky 41, 45

Serial (podcast) 110–111, 114, 116,
131, 140

Silverchair (band) 85, 189

Sleater-Kinney (band) 85, 171

albums

Path of Wellness 171

Smashing Pumpkins (band) 85, 114,
186

Danez Smith (poet)

poems

“waiting on you to die so i can be
myself” 217

Sonic Youth (band) 85

Soundgarden (band) 13, 84, 100,
144, 178, 187, 190, 200. *See
also* Chris Cornell

albums

Badmotorfinger 190

songs

“Beyond the Wheel” 178

“Black Hole Sun” 178

“Mailman” 178

“Slaves and Bulldozers” 178

“Ugly Truth” 178

- Layne Staley (musical artist)
 154–155, 187, 195, 198.
See also Alice in Chains; *See also* Mad Season
 also Maynard James Keenan
 songs
 “Jimmy” 168
 “Sober” 178
- The Starting Line (band) 85
- Taylor Swift (musical artist) 65, 67, 79,
 84, 99, 126, 129, 171, 218, 224
 10 Minute Version 67
 albums
 debut (self-titled) 67
evermore 172
Fearless 79
folklore 171
Lover 65
reputation 99–100
Speak Now 67
The Tortured Poets Department
 225
 Eras Tour 100
 From the Vault 68
 songs
 “Call it What You Want” 100
 “Love Story” 129, 140
 “Mean” 126
 “New Year’s Day” 100
 “Soon You’ll Get Better” 65
 “This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice
 Things” 99, 100
- T**
- Tegan and Sara (twin sister indie pop
 duo) 85
- Temple of the Dog (band) 85, 200.
See also Chris Cornell; *See also* Eddie Vedder
- Janet Thomas (author) 45, 47, 48,
 207, 223
- Tool (band) 8, 85, 99, 178, 200. *See*
- U**
- Undisclosed* (podcast) 116, 140
- V**
- Eddie Vedder (musical artist) 187.
See also Pearl Jam; *See also* Temple of the Dog
- W**
- David Foster Wallace (author) 94, 198
 books
Infinite Jest 179
 The Who (band) 85
 Hayley Williams (musical artist) 84,
 171
 albums
Petals for Armor 171
 Tobias Wolff (author) 46, 73
 books
Old School 73
 Andrew Wood (musical artist) 164.
See also Mother Love Bone;
See also Malfunkshun
- X**
- The X-Files* (TV show) 16, 93
 Dana Scully 16
- Y**
- Lidia Yuknavitch (author) 51–53, 223