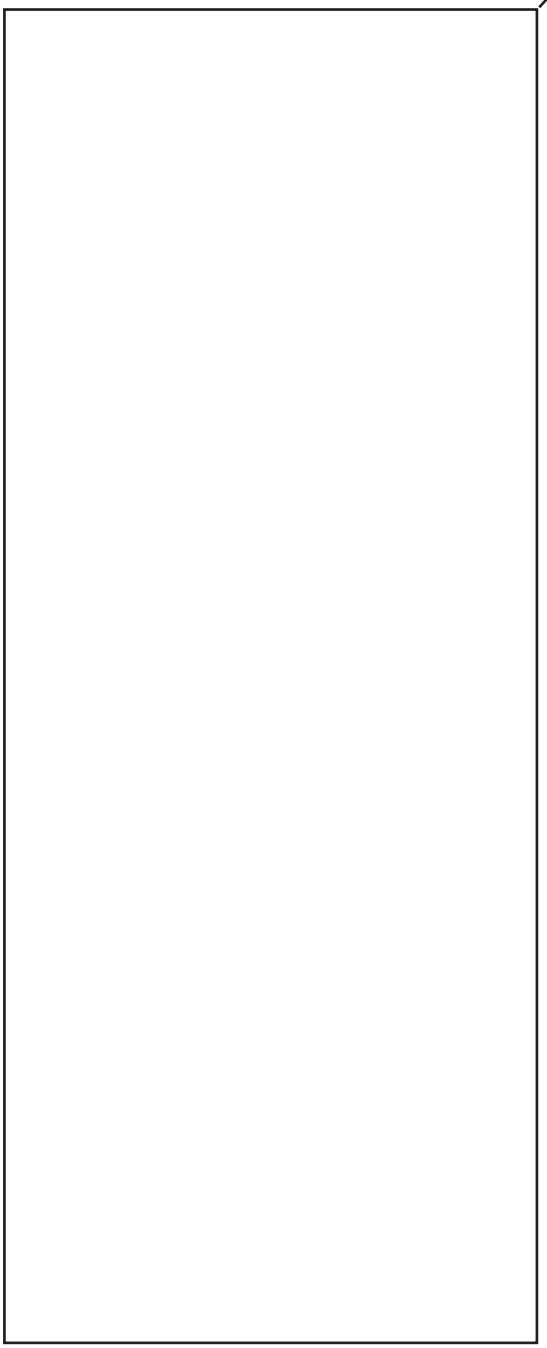
In the Blankness

Stephen Grim

DIAGRAM 12.5, <http://thediagram.com>



Annotation 1

I remembered my sister as being choked to death by her own umbilical cord. Later I found out that she was simply stillborn. No dramatic death; no yellow snake filled with red and viscera, coiling, plotting; tightening around her fragile neck as breath fragments and blurred sight blackens. I don't know why I thought that she died that way. Maybe I wanted her to put up a fight, to try to break through.

I've told myself that I have no real connection to her. She was born and died before I was even thought of, and because of that she should stay sealed within her own time; a distant figure who forces tears out of my mother still, whose dirt-dashed pinwheel and teddy bear-laden grave I avoid going to.

But she persists. In my mother's memory, in my memory.

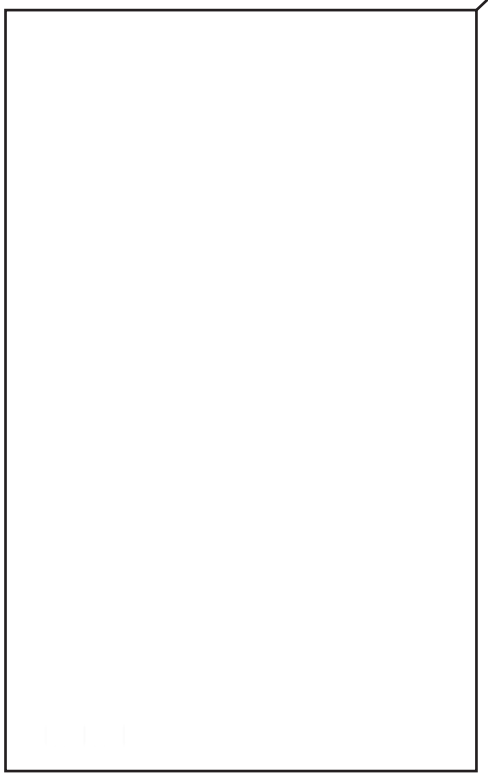
Elsewhere?

There are times when I want to be close to her; feel her presence. But there are times when I don't, when I want her to be forgotten.

It is selfishness. I'm the one that's here. She never had the opportunity.

But what if she had been able to break through? What if she was alive?

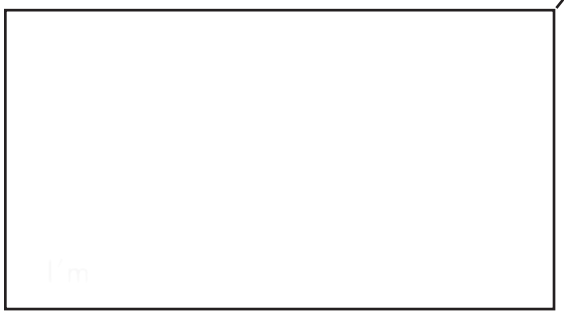
Would I be here?



Annotation 2

See:

- Annotation as voyeurism
- Annotation as exploration
- Annotation as addition
- Annotation as subtraction
- Annotation as distraction
- Annotation as alteration
- Annotation as re-experiencing
- Annotation as selfishness
- Annotation as connection
- Annotation as significance
- Annotation as blankness
  see also: white space
- Annotation as a bridge
- Annotation as a way of dealing with my sister's death
- Annotation as exposure of her absence
- Annotation as exposure of her presence
- Annotation as a conversation with my sister, who never had the opportunity to speak
- Annotation as a way of asserting myself
- Annotation as preservation



Annotation 3

The husk of a building; iron and rust and cement and twisted rebar.

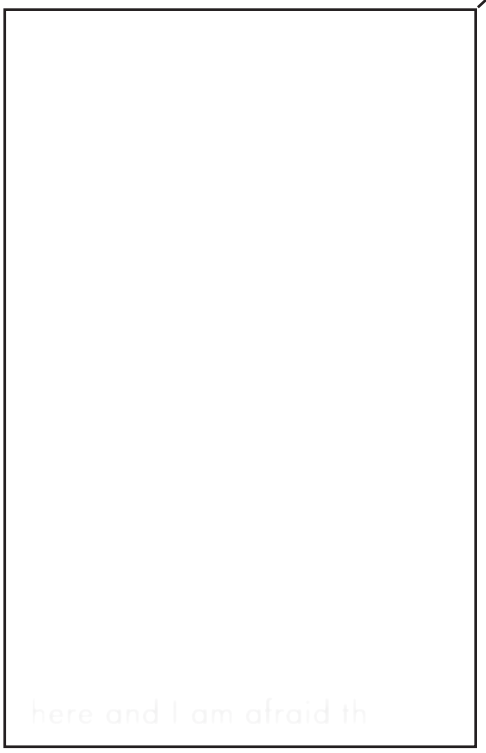
The structure is gone but pieces remain.

Mothball-eaten baby clothes, an empty crib, pictures of a shriveled yellow body covered in blood.

You're not really gone. Just hidden. A part of me wants you to be revealed.

A part of me wonders what would happen if you were.

Would you overtake me? Would your presence overshadow my own?



Annotation 4

Annotations are one person connecting with another, but that connection is opaque; hidden. The two texts coexist and fight within the same small margins.

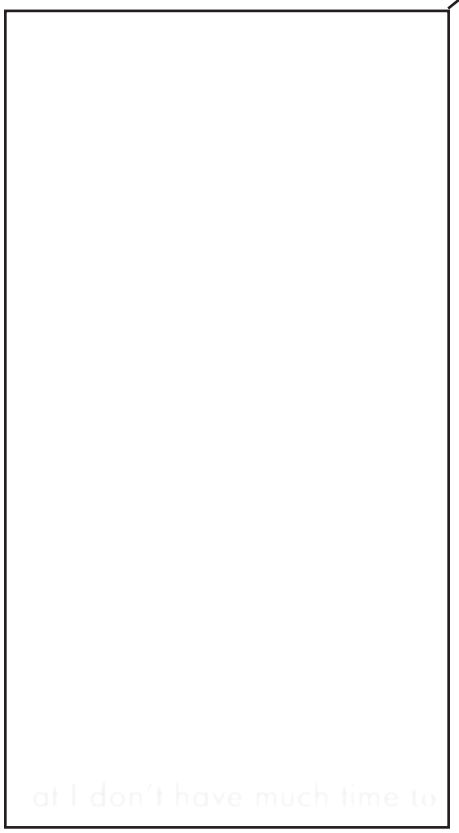
I annotate to remember. I annotate to be remembered. The snap and crackle of spine, that sound, signals a fracture, a forgetting.

It is my way of asserting myself; of making my presence felt, however distant.

The velvety ink scratched onto paper is lasting; the page will survive long after a photograph has yellowed and flaked away, after a memory fades, after a body decomposes.

Annotations are something more. They are an idea preserved.

They are gestures at permanence.



Annotation 5

You come out of the womb bloody and gory and silent; the placenta a monolith [overshadowing]. The air is thick with tears and sweat and your limp body is placed on a cold metal scale. You are wiped off and the cord is cut through; sheared from your belly in a swift motion; sounds of celery snapping. So easily are you disconnected from mom, from life-giving nutrients, from the world.

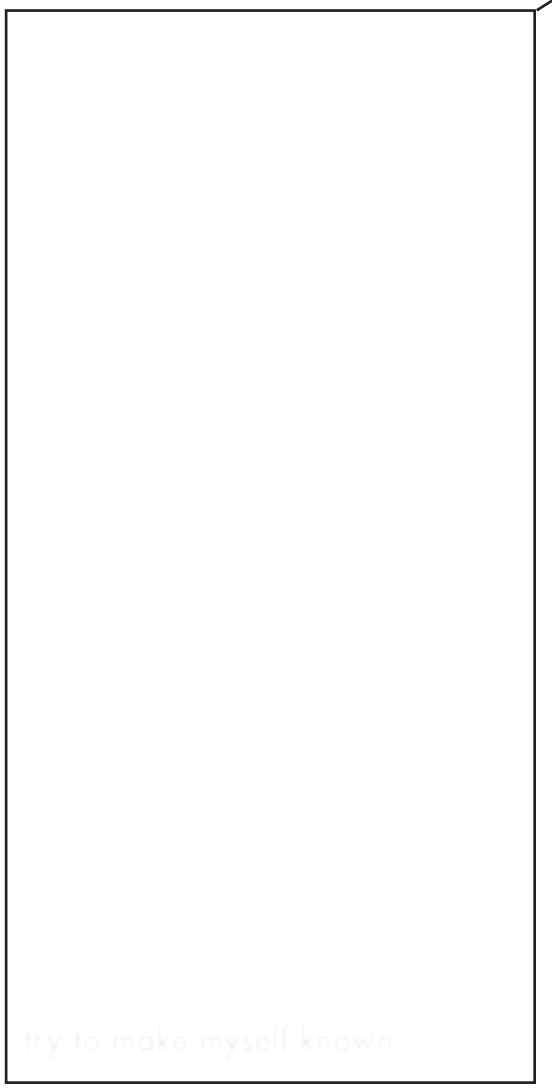
I like to think that I will fight blood-soaked and raw, clawing at the whiteness that will hurtle and gush towards me; the pale solidity, marble and rigid.

There is a dignity to fighting, to the struggle for life. There is agency and blood.

More likely: my thin hair will wisp as my breath shallows, the gown will crisp and crackle as it moves and wraps around folds of wrinkled skin. The fabric and muscle will constrict and retract. There will be ceasing; beeping. Placidity.

This is the fading; the decomposition; the erasure, quick and lasting and frigtening.

This is what happened to you. This is what will happen to me.



Annotation 6

Every October [the month of your birth, of your death] the leaves curl out from the branches like ringlets [like my hair, like the hair you would have]. Every October Mom is on edge. She sits on the squeaky wooden chair in our basement, surrounded by a mound of scrapbooks. She looks for something and never finds it.

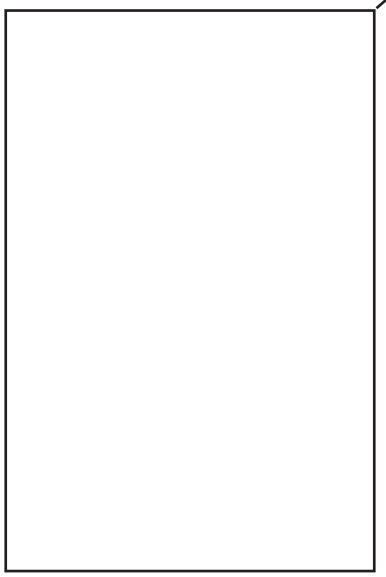
I flip through the scrapbooks and see myself reflected into glass, my image burned onto silver crystals. I blow out candles; eat spaghetti; ride ferris wheels. In some of them I am off center. It's like Mom was pointing the lens not at me, but at something on the periphery.

Was she trying to make room for you?

There is a glare from the flash; a bright burst of white light that explodes from the glossy surface. You are absent, but you are always present in the photos mom took of me.

I run my fingers over the flash; it is smooth and warm and tangible. I consider ripping the photo up, sprinkling ths shards over the trashcan littered with scraps of bright paper.

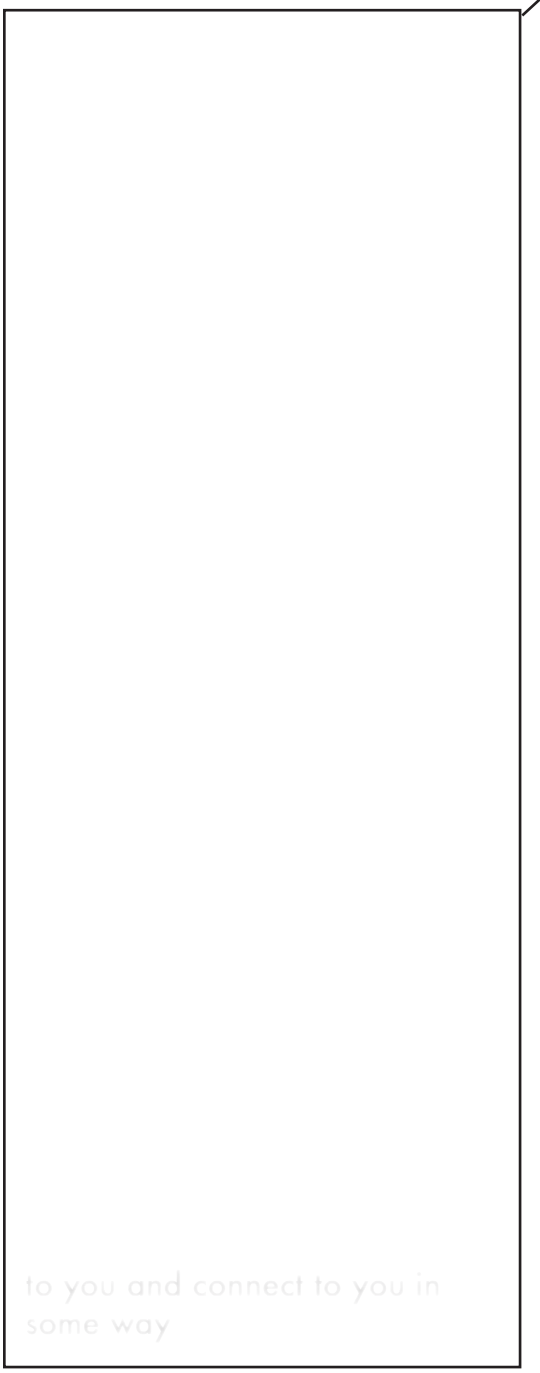
I don't. I slide the photo back into the clear plastic sleeve that refelects the overhead bulb.



Annotation 7

These lines coming from the blankness; hooking onto my words and ideas are umbilical cords; joining, keeping alive, sustaining a connection. Without them, I would be lost in the unfathomable depths of the page; would be rendered unable to connect to you.

They are evidence.



Annotation 8

You would never know how mom would react to your death, how she would memorialize you; treat you as if you were alive; present.

I remember the first time I heard your name.

Lauren Anna Grim.

I was little and I was playing with mom in the room that would have been yours.

Your name rolled off of her tongue like sad music [a hymn] and tears came to her eyes and she left the room to compose herself.

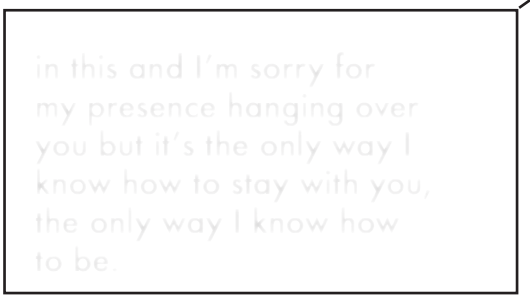
I continued to play alone.

To me you were a vague idea; a hazy image; an unidentifible weight; a name carved into a plate wedged in the ground.

Whenever you were mentioned I would roll my eyes.

It used to be jealousy. I wanted to greedily fill up the space you occupied in mom's memory.

But now it's something different.



Annotation 9

I wonder why I can't rid myself of you.

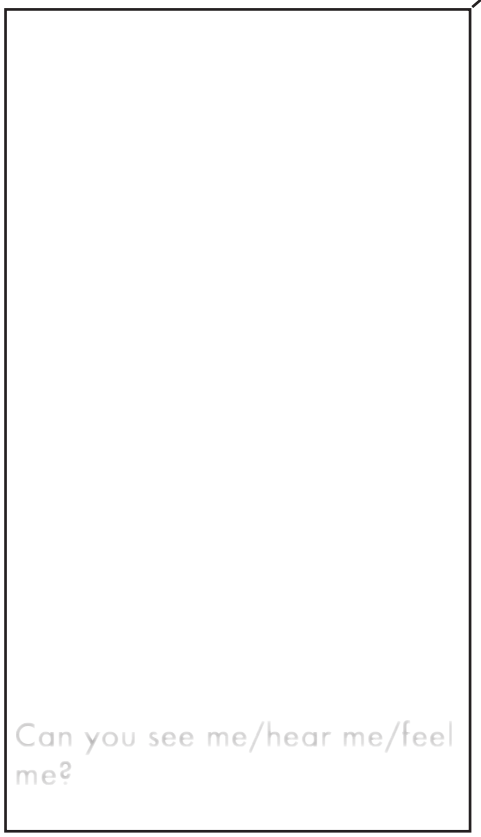
Have I taken your place? Occupied your space? Does this anger you [or is it sibling rivalry; sisterly frustration?]

Are you comfortable in nothingness? Or do you long to make your presence known? To have a place of your own?

Would you take my place, if given the chance? Render me into nothingness?

Your footprints would never be sealed into the earth next to my grave like a child's spidery handprint in soft cement.

For you, I would be distant. Intangible but present; the feel after you've taken off a heavy necklace, that invisible weight. I would be the white paint over a dark background, the flash in a photo, the space between words.



Annotation 10

How would you fill these blank spaces I've left on the page?

I imagine your writing would be beautiful, concise, rhythmic; like the name you were given but never got to hear; like the wails that never passed through your lips.

Are you already on the page?

You.

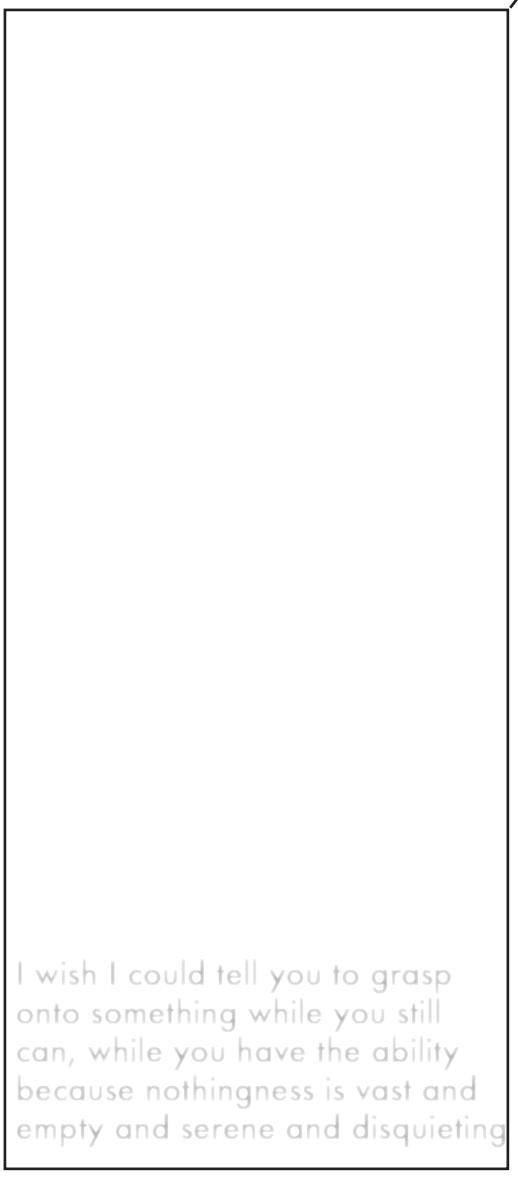
This nothingness.

This everythingness.

In the white space you can be anything you want to be. Is the ultimate form of presence [of absence] formlessness itself?

Is the ultimate assertion of self being unable to assert yourself; forcing yourself into the memory of others, making them remember you?

Haunting them?



Annotation 11

Sometimes I imagine you telling me that it's all right to forget you.

We're sitting on your bed in the room that would have been yours, but is mine. I can see your thick woolen hair, smell the tropical mango shampoo that threads through it, hear your voice with its snowy, sinewy rasp.

I can't picture your face, though. It is always a blur like swirled oil paint laced over with turpentine.

I can never remember exactly what you say, but it's always that I should forget you and be happy. Your voice gradually fades and the hazy image of you turns into the constellations behind closed eyelid.

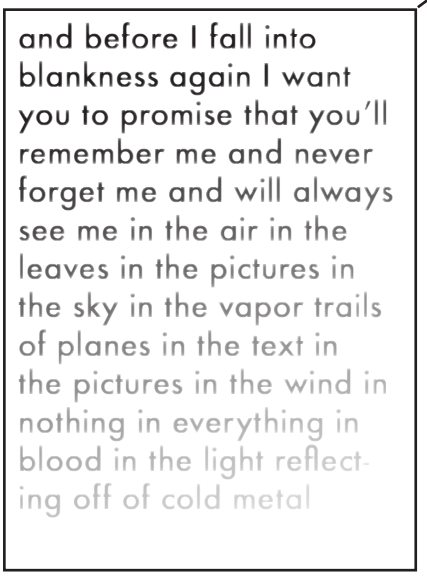
I know this conversation will never happen. Can never happen.

You will never be able to free me from the remembrance of you. I will never be able to free you from the nothingness.

Blankness is lasting. All encompassing, the white surrounding the text; the eggshell.

But is it freeing? Is it permanence? Is it assertion itself? I have preserved you on the page, calcified you.

Will you outlast me?



Annotation 12

I hope these annotations keep the white space from infringing on the text. Without them I'm afraid that the words might fall and recede and be forgotten. Afraid that I would be forgotten.