Defining Moment  
*Liz Ahl*

“Television, that final light that saves you from loneliness and from the night, is reality. Because life is a show, the system promises those who behave themselves a comfortable seat.”

--Eduardo Galeano, *The Book of Embraces*

Those supposedly *in the know about moments* say this one was ours -- the televised explosion just after lift-off, a million round faces rounding a million mouths into rosy o-rings of shock, the teachers panicking and fumbling for the remote. The principal over the P.A. system. The aftermath of group counseling and memorials.

I know this moment is supposed to be mine, and I’ve tried to own it, like we try those things we know we should try: like loving the right person, like being yourself, like discarding self-destructive habits, like starting the project early instead of late.

I’ve tried to cultivate it, like plants inherited from friends who’ve moved away. I’ve tried to invent it and believe it, fusing TV with memory and fiction . . .

Picture this: pan across a classroom -- desks filled with pre-teens, all eyes glued to the tube on the AV cart. Maybe it’s your seventh grade biology class, and it’s not clear just now whether you’re remembering it, or remembering something you saw later on TV, or both . . .

And maybe that’s your teacher watching TV with you, leaning slightly against the chalkboard that will leave its telltale chalkprint on her shoulder, the mark that always made you think Miss Kellogg had a friendly ghost-guardian. So maybe that’s Miss Kellogg watching TV with you and seventh grade biology.

Me? We weren’t watching TV that day,
or if we were, I don’t remember -- don’t remember what class we did or didn’t watch TV in; don’t remember what grade, don’t remember when you ask me to remember. You should know I’m always faking when I nod my head and widen my eyes, pretending to share a vivid memory. And you should know: I’m not the only one.

But I suppose we should take what’s offered -- our Titanic, our JFK, our “where were you?” -- and I suppose we should all agree not to admit we can’t remember whether it was Mrs. Beardmore and Algebra I -- the mess of equations on the board and the glint of her metal chalk-holder; or Mr. Mueller, who made us square-dance; whether it was Marine Biology or the purgatory of study hall, or gym class; whether it was TV real, real real, real TV, or just another collective dream, which is to say mytho-national mini-series, which is to say

I’ve loved the wrong person in the worst way. I’ve smoked things. I’ve had both the cheapest and the most expensive vodka in embarrassing excess, and I have killed every plant ever bequeathed by every friend who trusted me and left.

Don’t ask me about the Challenger, don’t tell me that was you, that kid in the front row, that kid in that desk turning left and right for conformation, for comfort; and don’t you tell me that confirmation is comfort. And don’t make me name my moment.

The thing is -- I missed it.